



A NOVEL

Exalted

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The Unnamed Press
Los Angeles, CA

AN UNNAMED PRESS BOOK

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ISBN: 978-1-951213-48-0

eISBN: 978-1-951213-49-7

Library of Congress Control Number available upon request.

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Designed and Typeset by Jaya Nicely

Manufactured in the United States of America by Versa Press, Inc.

Distributed by Publishers Group West

First Edition

“Veronica, you look like hell.”

“Yeah? I just got back.”

—*Heathers*

Part 1

DAWN.

I'm watching a *48 Hours* episode I've seen probably forty-eight times when Tara texts me.

Babe, I hate to do this over text ...

I knew the text was coming—we had a fight—and I know where it's going. I am “too much.” My “moods,” my “rages.” Nothing I haven't heard before. It's not the first time I've been broken up with over text either. My girlfriends often claim they're scared of me.

I think they're weak.

At times like this I miss men. It's been decades since I kissed a man, but I look back on it fondly. Not the kissing part, but having men wrapped around my finger. Men are simple, easy to control. Women are demanding and unpredictable, and I'm no exception.

The old me would have immediately responded to Tara's text, rapid-fire sent off the meanest things I could think of. I would have told Tara she has halitosis and her labia looks like something from a horror movie. I would have said no woman will ever love her again, that she's making the biggest mistake of her life, that she's going to die alone in a puddle of her own sweat. Perhaps I would have even threatened her family. But I have learned to curb these sorts of reactions, mostly because I don't want to go to jail again.

Also, I am tired.

I am forty-eight years old and sick of breakups. Don't I deserve to be taken care of? My son took care of me. Then he left, to *Hollyweird*. Everyone leaves me. Without Tara, I have no one.

“Abandonment issues” is what the court-appointed therapist said after my first girlfriend called the cops on me. That was a long time ago. Dating women unleashed an aggression in me I didn't know was there. The therapist used the phrase “borderline personality disorder.” She said it was a diagnosis, but I thought it was bullshit. My personality isn't disordered. Everyone loves my personality. I said to her, “Borderline what? Borderline *fabulous*?” and

then I winked, and she looked at me like I had three heads. But *she* was the freakish one. If I had gone to high school with her, I would have bullied her. And she had no idea what she was talking about. How was it *my issue* that everyone always left me? Starting with my dad when I was sixteen—who, mind you, was *rich*. I was the victim here. I was left with nothing. Tara was paying my rent, and she promised to take me to the French Riviera.

I can't go back to the Blind Pig, where I wait tables in between financially solvent lovers.

I reach over to refill my cup, but the Cook's is empty. I kick the bottle and it flies across the room. A little bit of the "old me" coming back to say hello.

I try to calm myself down by remembering I don't even like Tara that much. Her labia *is* weird, and she has white-heads all over her back. But she makes me laugh, or at least laughs at my jokes, and she is rich from her settlement with her ex-husband. I am too old and too pretty to be waiting tables.

This is something I have been telling myself for three decades.

I pick up a Marlboro Ultra Light and go over to the window. My neighbor who always complains about me smoking inside won't be home for a few hours. She also says Tara and I are "too loud," a complaint that typically comes after our three-day sex marathons. Tara called her a "homophobe," which she probably is, but I am one too. I don't like lesbians. They are so masculine. I like femininity—long hair and painted fingernails and dancing in my bra to Madonna. I like to be frivolous and free, and for someone else to get the bill.

I slide open the window and light my cigarette. Hot air rushes in my apartment. I love the heat; I'm a fire sign. Inhaling, I block Tara's number. She will inevitably ask for me back, only to again come to the same conclusion: I am too volatile. I may as well save time.

I open Instagram on my phone. My son says I'm too old for Instagram, but all my friends are on it. He doesn't let me follow him, and I pretend not to care, but it bothers me. I'm always better at pretending not to care with men.

I check Exalted. This is my favorite account. It's all memes about astrology. I have always been proud of my zodiac sign: Leo. We are the leaders of the zodiac. We are ruled by the sun. We are often "too much" for people. People are jealous.

I scroll through for the latest Leo meme. Nothing new. Exalted has been

slacking lately and it's pissing me off. I wonder who Exalted is and whether they are going through something traumatic. I wonder if they are single and/or rich. But mostly I just wonder when they're gonna get over this slump and create some fucking memes that make me feel good about myself.

Exhaling, I unblock Tara's number. I really don't want to go back to the Blind Pig.

EMILY.

I stop believing in astrology for good and for real less than an hour before I see Beau's birth chart.

It's a sweltering-hot October afternoon, not uncommon for fall in Los Angeles. I spend the day as I've spent every day for the past few years, reading birth charts online for \$200 a pop, making memes, and writing dumb listicles—"90s Sitcoms as Zodiac Signs"; "Disney Princesses as Signs"; "East Asian Cities as Signs"—for online-only publications.

For a while, astrology paid the bills and more. But affording my meager lifestyle is becoming increasingly difficult because of a few circumstances beyond my control. I can't technically afford the rent on my sun-bleached studio in Thai Town. It is just a white box with white carpet, white venetian blinds, a white fridge, a white stove, a white bathroom, and a white mattress pushed up against the wall. All the white means it is dirty all the time, a sort of dusty off-white. But I chose this apartment because it's on Winona Boulevard. There is a *Girl, Interrupted* poster above my bed, and I named my cat Lydia after Winona Ryder's character in *Beetlejuice*.

I also picked this apartment because it's down the street from the Mirror Box, an iconic burlesque dive. I typically go on off-hours, in the early afternoon, right after I finish my work for the day. There isn't much to do in my apartment aside from look at my phone and refresh websites. I got Lydia for something to do, but she has no interest in me. I crave affection, a humiliating human impulse, so I go to the Mirror Box every day as soon as it opens and throw money I made lying to people online at women pole dancing to Radiohead.

Today I don't have much work. Just one birth chart, which I finish quickly and robotically. It's a boring chart—mostly Sagittarius, the least interesting sign—but I like to gas people up. I tell her she is a *star*. Everyone just wants to hear they're special in very specific language, and astrology is a perfectly nebulous vehicle for this.

Afterward, I make and scrap a few memes for my astrology account, Exalted. I can't get into a creative flow. I drink a blue Gatorade and eat a few slices of turkey standing up with the fridge door open. I reorganize my Juicy Couture tracksuits by color. I bought my first Juicy tracksuit as a joke a few years ago and then realized they are by far the most comfortable thing to wear. I got one in every color and style, and I wear one almost every day.

At 3:07 P.M., I start to feel unbearably restless. I suck a steamy hit from my sparkly blue bong and walk outside.

This is usually my favorite time of day. My first breath of fresh air. I walk slowly and pause to watch the tall palms sway, stoned and pleased, thinking, *How lucky am I to be living in Hollywood?* But I haven't felt that way—grateful—in a while. Today I just feel hot. I look up at the bright blue cloudless sky and my stomach sinks. A bead of sweat drips down my arm.

I get to the Mirror Box at 3:15 P.M. It isn't technically open, but the door guy likes me ever since I made out with him after too many Mountain Dews one time. Only a few of the dancers are here at this hour, the rejects. That's why I like it. No lurking sleazeballs or girls with bodies that make me envious. I admire the women who perform at this hour, dancing not for an audience or tips, but for pure seductive expression, impervious to market expectations. When I started making money it was very much by accident. And after that I started coming here more, throwing petty cash at rookie dancers in exchange for a lap dance or at least a sliver of attention. It's easiest in the daylight when no one else is vying for it. And without other patrons, I'm less aware of my own sleaziness. I can trick my brain into thinking the dancers are legitimately interested in me.

While I'm waiting for my Mountain Dew and enjoying the ruby darkness, my least favorite dancer, Cinnamon, comes up and tries to talk to me so that I buy her a drink. I can tell she's fiending for alcohol from the way she's tapping her pink acrylic fingernails on the bar. She has sleepy eyes and is wearing a chemise, a word I know only because last night I hit the bong and followed an Instagram ad to an adult women's sleepwear website.

"Wow," she says, getting close to my face. "Your eyes."

This happens to me all the time. In fact, Cinnamon herself has said this to me before. Everyone is obsessed with my eyes, which are an arresting ice blue, like a husky's. I ordered an ancestry report from this website called ChromoZone in hopes of discovering Finnish or Estonian blood, something

glamorous to explain my cosmic irises. But no such luck. I am 98.9 percent Irish. ChromoZone really fucked me. I am still not over the fact that I paid seventy dollars and generated twenty minutes' worth of saliva for ChromoZone to tell me I am Irish.

"They're like a husky's," Cinnamon says.

I nod weakly. I have a complicated relationship with my hypnotizing eyes. They are the reason I was scouted as a kid, tempted with a Nickelodeon show, only to have it snatched away by my draconian academic parents. I will never forgive them for denying me the chance to become a starlet. I'm starting to think it's better to not attract attention, which seems to invite only disappointment—at least in my experience.

"So, what do you do that lets you be in a bar in the morning?" Cinnamon asks me.

I eye the clock behind the bar. "It's three seventeen."

She just looks at me absently, no light behind her eyes. I wonder what she is on. A downer, obviously. Ketamine. Xanax. Maybe opiates. Whatever it is, she doesn't seem happy. She is projecting the opposite of what I want to project. She is so helpless and doughy. Real *I'm baby* energy. Late at night when a predatory bro grabs her ass, she never reacts or even seems to notice, and if she does it is only to unleash a breathy giggle. I prefer the dancers with chutzpah, with sauce, a violent attitude, who will slap the bro's hand, at least make him work for it. But not Cinnamon, who's happy to give her shit away for free. She is just goo-goo-ga-ga-ing her way through life. It's revolting.

"I'm an astrologer," I say, mostly to give voice to my experience. I spend so many hours alone, inside, typing, opening and closing the venetian blinds, refreshing websites, typing, refilling my glass of water, refilling Lydia's water, eating slices of turkey with the fridge open. I want someone to confirm that I exist. Obviously this downer-ed babydoll is not my ideal audience, but at this point anyone who acknowledges me will do.

"Cool," she coos, leaning on me a bit, as if she's too weak to hold herself up on her own. I move back to establish a boundary, and she almost falls over. "Read my chart?" she asks as she steadies herself on the bar.

Ever since astrology became my job, there has always been that edge of annoyance when someone asks me for a reading. It's like demanding a joke from a comedian. But it also puts me at ease. I never quite know my purpose in a social situation, so I enjoy having a task. And astrology gives me one

that's just the right amount of challenging. It's like rolling a pair of dice, receiving a random set of information, and being forced to make a coherent pattern out of it. It calls for equal parts analysis and creativity; it is both a science and an art. We use the sun to tell time and the moon controls the tides, so it's not outrageous to think the planets would impact who we are.

But sometimes I think it *is* outrageous, the idea that the place and time I was born can in any way impact my personality, make me magnetic or vindictive or give me dark hair. The thing is, I have a Gemini moon, and that allows me to hold two contradictory ideas at once. I both revere astrology as among the oldest belief systems in the world, a cosmic tool kit to realize our best selves, and find it a trendy new age crutch, a way to justify bad behavior. *Sorry, I was rude ... such a Virgo moment!* No, Allison, you're just a cunt.

When I could afford her, my therapist told me I have OCD and that astrology is the primary way it manifests. She said this after I told her I can't look at someone's face without thinking of their sign. If they seem to have their shit together, I guess Capricorn or Cap rising. (I have no Capricorn in my chart.) If they are shouting, I guess Sagittarius. If they look confused, then Libra. If they are a dark, sexy bitch, I know Scorpio is in the mix. I even categorize inanimate objects and places. My apartment is a Virgo—stark and minimalist, but secretly messy. The Mirror Box is an Aries—hedonistic and a little dangerous. Los Angeles is a Leo—vain as hell, but you have to love it. Astrology gives me a clean system where everything fits.

I didn't feel great about the OCD diagnosis. As far as mental health issues go, I'd always seen myself as more depressive. Winona Ryder suffered from depression. All the greats did, from Virginia Woolf to River Phoenix. But OCD is not chic. OCD is a sweaty man in a too-tight tie, turning the light switch on and off. OCD is a sorority girl who painstakingly organizes her ballet flats by color.

I read online that OCD is characterized by persistent, uncontrollable thoughts that are disturbing (obsessions) and repetitive actions (compulsions) that attempt to relieve the distress. My thoughts about astrology are persistent and uncontrollable, sure. The other day I caught myself googling the zodiac sign of a cartoon beluga whale I saw on Instagram. I was guessing Gemini (it blew these sassy, skillful bubble rings). But, obviously, Google could neither confirm nor deny, as it was a cartoon whale.

But these types of diversions are annoying, not torturous. And I don't

perform any repetitive actions to relieve the distress, because there is no distress—just irritation. When I said this to my therapist, she said that the thoughts need not be disturbing but can be merely “unwanted.” And regarding the compulsions, she cited a few, including my throwing money at strippers every day.

But the Mirror Box isn’t a compulsion; it’s a *lifestyle*.

“I’m expensive,” I tell Cinnamon. “Overpriced even.”

I often read the Mirror Box dancers’ birth charts for free or sometimes for a lap dance. But I need the money right now and I’m bored as hell. I think about Cinnamon giving me a lap dance and feel repulsed, despite how desperately I need to be touched.

“Yeah?” she says. I was expecting her to ask how much, but she’s hardly here; maybe she even forgot what we were talking about.

“Two hundred,” I say.

She laughs, exposing a childish gap between her two front teeth. Then she pulls out a wad of cash from her thong. A few Benjamins fall on the floor. I wait for her to pick them up, but she doesn’t budge. I lean over and grab them, put them in my pocket.

“I want the reading first,” she says, suddenly morphing from a baby into a sophisticated businesswoman. “To prove you’re worth it.” She removes the two bills from the pocket of my Juicy shorts.

I want to argue, but I don’t have the luxury. I need to pay rent.

“Fair,” I say.

She coos her birthday, morphing back into a baby just when I was starting to find her moderately less repellent. She doesn’t know her birth time, but that’s okay. People think the birth time is crucial, but it’s only necessary to determine the rising and the houses. People are also obsessed with their rising sign, probably because Chani Nicholas is obsessed with the rising sign, and she is a respected astrologer, not a con artist meme-maker like me. My take is that the rising sign doesn’t mean much. It’s how we appear on the surface, not who we are. But then again, I learned astrology mostly from Instagram. And my rising sign is the same as my sun sign, and my Mercury, my Venus, my Mars. All Scorpio. So, what you see is what you get: a horror film of a human being.

I load the information on my phone. I just type people’s information into an online calculator. My clients act like I’m doing something obscure and

divine, like they wouldn't be able to just input the information into the website themselves.

As the chart loads, I try to guess her sun sign. She's giving me Pisces energy. Helpless and in another world. An alcoholic and a pillhead. Weak as hell.

The chart loads and I gasp. She is a Scorpio stellium as well. Scorpio sun, Mercury, Venus, and Mars. Gemini moon. Exact same as me. Revulsion blossoms in my chest. Is this how I come off? Like a total waste of space? What can I possibly have in common with this incapacitated baby? Astrology is bullshit. I stand up and walk out of the bar. I doubt she'll remember the interaction anyway. The sun is still bright and burns my eyes. I lower my head and charge down Winona.

Back home, I have a request for a reading. People normally DM me on Instagram for readings, but this request is in my email. Exalted is pretty popular. I came up with it four years ago after a massive bong hit, at the precipice of the astrological-industrial complex. I've always been obsessed with exalted placements, placements where the sign can achieve its highest potential, offering gifts and blessings without much effort. I love the idea that certain people are blessed by the stars. The name Exalted also confuses some people into thinking it's a Christian account, which translates to more followers.

But the astrology craze is fading, a fact reflected in my bank account.

I don't want to do this reading, feeling strongly now that astrology is a hack science. But I do it anyway because I'm not sure what else to do. I have no hobbies. I used to love film, but I haven't been able to watch one since I quit acting. If an actor was talentless, I'd become furious at the unfairness of the world. And if they were good, it was even worse—I'd see red. For a while I watched *The Bachelor*, because there were no actors, but eventually that became depressing too. Astrology is a scam, but love is the biggest scam of all.

The only media I can consume without an unpleasant emotional reaction is a podcast called *Precious Starlets*. It's run by these East Coast rich girls named Hazel and Camilla who met studying theater at The New School, an acting program I would have killed to attend. They grew up with silver

spoons in their mouths but are still kind of losers like me—in their early thirties and without boyfriends or IMDb pages. They are off-putting and scathing and hate everything. When I had friends, these were the type of people I flocked to: aristocratic bitches who came with the promise of access.

But there are no new episodes of *Precious Starlets*, and I've listened to every episode they've ever released up to five times. Since my OCD diagnosis, I've been trying to be less of a crazed fangirl. *Trying*.

So I open the email—from someone called WtfBeau@ [gmail.com](mailto:WtfBeau@gmail.com)—and pull up the chart on Astro.com. As I wait for it to load, I dangle a piece of turkey above Lydia so she'll like me. It works momentarily; she dances for me with a sparkle in her eye, not unlike the dancers at Mirror Box. Then I drop the slice in her mouth, and *boom*, I'm invisible again.

When I return my face to the screen, I gasp. Before today I'd never gasped at a chart—most are unremarkable, a random smattering of placements—but now I've gasped twice in just a few hours. And this time it's significantly more pleasant.

WtfBeau's birth chart is *beautiful*. Perfect interwoven lines, a tapestry, a spiderweb. Two grand trines (lucky) and a kite (extremely lucky). It's elaborate yet perfectly balanced. An art piece. His birth chart belongs in the Met, or maybe MoMA. Definitely an art museum in New York. It's too sophisticated for LACMA.

Aries sun, just where Aries is supposed to go, where it is *exalted*.

Moon in Taurus, where Taurus is supposed to be. It's also exalted there.

Mercury in Virgo, also exalted.

Mars in Capricorn. Exalted. I've never seen anything like it.

It continues like this as I go down.

Exalted.

Exalted.

Exalted.

I don't believe in astrology, but I believe in this. It feels like a sign. I need to know more. I need to meet this person, this man—

I look back at the email and there is a simple signature at the bottom.

Beau Rubidoux.

A French name. A regal name. A fancy name. The name of a king or a god. The name of the person who will save me from my sad life.

I don't know Beau Rubidoux, but I love Beau Rubidoux. And I have so

much love to give. That's what my therapist said before I couldn't afford to pay her anymore.

DAWN.

I am smoking my third Marlboro Ultra Light out the window when I see my neighbor's Honda Fit roll up to the carport. I drop my cigarette into the empty Coke can I'm using as an ashtray, then light a match to mask the smell. I wave the air with my hands. When I hear her car door open, I shut the window, then run back over to the couch.

I spin my toe ring and stare at *48 Hours*—these rich sisters killed their parents for the life insurance policy. I feel like shit. I'm out of Cook's and therefore annoyingly sober for a Friday night. I want to go out or at least get drunk. I've just been broken up with. I pick up my phone and there is still nothing from Tara. I type, *You evil alcoholic, I hope you like the heat because you're going straight to hell.* Then I think about that grimy jail cell, about that freaky court-appointed therapist, and about having to go back to work at the Blind Pig. I just shut off my phone, grab my wallet and my keys.

"Hi, Dawn," I hear as soon as I step outside. It's Karen, my neighbor. "You haven't been smoking inside again, have you?"

"Of course not, Karen," I say.

"I just got a big whiff when I got out of my car."

"There were some boys partying next to the carport earlier." I've used this excuse before. Exalted always says Leos are natural liars. "I called the cops, but you know how they're useless ... unless, like, a young blonde is murdered or something." This is something I've learned from crime TV.

Karen looks at me quizzically, and I have a sudden and intense urge to hit her.

"I wonder where they come from"—she puts her keys into her door, still staring at me—"and why I've never seen them before."

"Oh," I say. "You know teenage boys. They run as soon as they see someone who looks like their mom." I say this just to be a bitch. Leos are natural bitches. I can be really sweet too. I'm a great friend. I've always been popular and not above using intimidation to get there.

“I guess,” she says. “I just hope it didn’t get into my apartment.” She clocks my wallet in my hand. “Going out?”

“Just to the store,” I say. “I’m out of milk.” Another lie. Karen is judgy. She doesn’t need to know I’m going out to buy alcohol. And more cigarettes. She doesn’t understand the concept of TGIF.

“Be safe,” she says, then disappears into her unit. I stick my tongue out at her closed door.

When I get to Fourteenth Street, I light a cigarette. I’m glad I left my phone at home. I don’t need to be reminded of Tara’s idiocy. Instead, I’m happy to look at the purple sky. The air is warm, hot almost. October is our summer in Riverside. They call it “Indian summer.” My son said that was offensive to say. Ever since he went to that fancy art school, he thinks everything I do and say is offensive. I never understood why he was so desperate to leave Riverside. It’s clean and the people are nice, minus Karen. I told my son about my shitty neighbor, and he said something like, “Mom, you’re on Instagram too much. How do you know what a Karen is?” And I said, “Huh? Her name is Karen.” He just laughed. I never got what that was about. Ever since he moved to Los Angeles it feels like we’re speaking different languages.

I don’t recognize the 7-Eleven attendant.

“New here?” I enjoy chatting with shopkeepers, especially now that most of my friends are busy with their kids. I had my son young, when all my friends were partying, and I started dating women when they were all getting married to men. My life has never gone the way it’s supposed to.

“Second day,” the attendant says. She has a fresh round face and shiny black hair. I stare at her youthful skin. I want to touch it.

“How do you like it so far?” I pick up a baby-blue lighter and put it next to my Cook’s.

“It’s okay,” she said. “Time goes by quick.”

A weird mushy feeling washes over me. “Don’t let it slip by too fast,” I say. I remember being her age, eighteen or nineteen. I was pregnant, and it feels like yesterday.

“I won’t, ma’am,” she says. “Is there anything else I can get you?”

“Marlboro Ultra Lights,” I say.

She walks over to the wall to grab a pack.

“Actually, make that two,” I say. *TGIF*.

She swipes my card. "Have a good evening, Ms. Webster."

"Call me Dawn," I say with a wink.

On the walk home, I gaze at the darkening sky and smoke another cigarette. Back at the carport, I drop my cigarette butt on top of Karen's Honda Fit.

EMILY.

In bed that night, I google Beau Rubidoux. The info he sent me says he was born in Los Angeles, but I had assumed he'd moved somewhere posher, like Paris or London or New York. I am thrilled to learn from his website that he currently lives in Los Angeles. He is based in Echo Park, which is only about fifteen minutes from my apartment. He is a photographer, an artist—a successful one, it seems, as he can afford to live in a bougie gentrified neighborhood. Either that or he has family money; maybe he is a descendant of French aristocrats. My stomach dances just thinking about it.

I click through his portrait portfolio, consisting mostly of dreamy, atmospheric photos of sinewy blondes. I worry I'm not his type. I have jet-black hair. I'm not thin, at least not in a chic way. I consume too much sugar and processed foods to be thin in a way that begs to be photographed. Despite that, I've always felt most myself in front of someone else's lens. This is why I want to be an actress. Or *wanted*, I suppose.

Beau seems to photograph mostly musicians. He's shot lots of album covers and photographed for publications like *Fader*, *Esquire*, *GQ*, and *New York Magazine*. I've written dumb astrology listicles for some of these places, so maybe we could talk about the freelance hustle. I'm not entirely sure what future hypothetical conversation I'm thinking about or why I'm wondering whether I'm his type. I don't date and I hate love. But there is something pulling me toward Beau. Something cosmic. I need to know more.

Unfortunately, there are no photos of *him* on his website. But there's a link to his Instagram, *WtfBeau*.

Before I click, I try to imagine what he looks like. I picture a head of thick golden curls. Hazel eyes. Strong arms. Maybe a classy tattoo to highlight his bicep—something related to his French aristocratic heritage.

I take a deep breath. Lydia jumps on my dresser to snatch a glimpse at critter moving outside the window, probably a bird or squirrel, maybe something nocturnal like a rat. Beau is that critter for me. Another breath. I

open the page.

I have to scroll awhile to find a picture of him. Most of the photos are of women, blondes, faces obscured by lens flare. A few group shots where no one is tagged, captioned, “The boys.” Scrolling, I robotically begin guessing people’s signs. I mostly guess Leo, Gemini, Aquarius—popular signs.

Finally, I find an image of a man curled up in a velvet chair with a tabby on his chest. He has black hair like mine and he’s thin like the models he photographs. My gaze lingers on the faint outline of his biceps under his skin, which is very fair, nearly translucent, like Winona’s. He almost looks like a male version of Winona Ryder, and I can hardly breathe.

Beau Rubidoux looks even better than I imagined. I shouldn’t be surprised. I knew there was something special about him. My gut was telling me, or maybe it was God.

DAWN.

I can hear Karen blasting *The Office* through the wall as I empty the rest of my Cook's into my cup. It's my second bottle of the day, which is fine for a Friday. I wish I had more. I want a cigarette, but I don't want to leave the complex. The street will be littered with college students at this hour, and I don't want them to try to flirt with me. Or maybe I do want them to flirt with me, but I'm afraid they won't.

I want a lot of things I can't have.

I want to be young and shiny like the new attendant at 7-Eleven. I want Tara to text me and say she made a mistake. I want Karen to turn down *The Office*. I want new episodes of *48 Hours*. I want to smoke a cigarette on my couch. I want more Cook's.

Tara has this app on her phone to order alcohol. She is savvy like that. She's a few years younger than me and has a lump sum from her ex, and she can do a lot of things with the push of a button. I think about downloading one of those dating apps, swiping the night away, maybe meeting someone who can bring me a nice bottle of champagne and make me come. But as soon as I pick up my phone, something else happens.

I hope you're happy, T.

I'm having an amazing Friday night without your rotten breath in my ear.

Are you drunk yet, glassy-eyed freak?

You could never love me or anyone like your old friend Tito.

Did you get another DUI yet? TGIF, baby!

I can't wait to be fucked by someone who can find my G spot.

You never could, ha hah!

I stare at my phone at the texts I had apparently sent. This always happens to me after a few bottles. I leave my body and text things I don't remember. It was even worse before cell phones, because I would actually yell these things, on the landline or in people's faces, and I still do that sometimes. I look back down at my phone and there's another text in the type box, a text I

had apparently written. Without thinking, I click send.

I hope you rot in hell you evil cunt.

EMILY.

Beau Rubidoux's Instagram quickly becomes my *raison d'être*. I begin to mold my days around it. One morning, there's a blurry photo of Beau and a woman whose handle is Vagablonde outside of a neon-lit taco truck. I saw on Instagram that Gen Z thinks blonde is "cheugy." I make a mental note to cyberstalk this cheugy woman. Later that evening, the photo is gone.

He deletes a lot, which irks me, but luckily he's an avid poster. If he was anyone else, I might see the overposting as a turnoff, consider him a toxic narcissist. I might find his abundance of front-facing selfies emasculating, his use of emojis evidence of a lack of critical faculties. But because I'm convinced he is divine intervention, I let these would-be turnoffs slide. I find it generous that he is letting people into his life, showing us his face from all angles and lighting conditions. It's admirable, really. He doesn't have to be so open with laypeople like me.

My main concern is all the women he photographs late at night, often gone in the morning, as though they never existed. I feel gaslit. I am both envious of these women, because of their proximity to Beau in the dark hours, and worried one day I will be one—*poof*, gone, discarded.

I know I'm behaving strangely.

My instinct is to cite my Scorpio possessiveness, but my therapist would probably cite my OCD. I read on Instagram that being in love causes a sudden rise in dopamine, which triggers an increase in cortisol and norepinephrine, which in turn causes a sharp drop in serotonin, and the new serotonin levels match those with OCD. So being in love gives everyone OCD.

Is it possible I love Beau? I've never met him. But in high school I was in love with Edward Scissorhands, and I never least Beau isn't a fictional character.

I don't care that my obsession looks pathological. Therapists don't know shit anyway. I went to one only because I was making a lot of money and

therapy felt like an indulgence I deserved. I'm not mentally ill. I'm just alive. And being alive mostly involves pain and suffering and disappointment, and the only thing that makes it tolerable is a distraction from all that. And Beau is that glorious distraction.

This morning I am behind on my readings, even though I only have a few, and I haven't pitched any editors in weeks.

Normally October is *my season*. I eat candy corn and write articles like "The Signs as Halloween Costumes" or "The Signs as Horror Movies," or make a BuzzFeed quiz called "We Can Predict Your Zodiac Sign Based on Your Favorite Halloween Candy." But I'm not feeling it this year. Everyone knows astrology is on the outs. I'm making less and less money every month. Exalted is dropping followers like flies. I had 780k for a while. Then it was 620k. Now I'm lingering around 500k.

Also, there was that minor scandal. It wasn't a big deal. My Instagram Explore page is always filled with astrology memes—usually shitty ones—and I occasionally scroll for inspiration. A few months prior I'd found this meme from an astrology account with only a few hundred followers. I took a screenshot and posted it to Exalted. This isn't illegal; it's fair use. But it's frowned upon. The woman who ran the account freaked out and wrote a goddamn *think piece* on Medium about having her "art stolen." The gall! It was a *meme!* And it wasn't even that good. But the whole thing fueled my haters and created new haters.

The hate emails have mostly stopped, but my bank account is dwindling. I haven't exactly looked at it. But as a Scorpio stellium, I don't need to look. I don't need concrete evidence to know what's happening; I can *feel* it. I also know I haven't paid rent this month, or the last month, and maybe not even the month before that. My landlord is kind of senile, so I'm not convinced she notices. I'm planning on not paying until she says something. But eventually she will say something, and I don't want to move back to Riverside, my hometown, which is like Palm Springs but a thousand times more depressing.

I grew up wanting to be a star. My parents—both teachers—didn't get it. I was discovered on my elementary school playground, which in retrospect seems criminal. But I'd always drawn attention, with my husky eyes and jet-black hair and my Scorpio stellium. Scorpions are famously magnetic. Not a warm magnetic, like Leos, but we have something that keeps people intrigued

and a little afraid.

When my parents denied me the Nickelodeon project, I was furious. I think that's when everything changed. I became depressed, isolated. I did nothing but watch movies and fantasize about being the writer, the director, and the star.

At eighteen, I moved to Hollywood. I didn't need to go to college if I was going to be a star. I was so confident, so convinced it would happen for me. But nothing happened. For years, I went to, like, ten auditions a week. I rarely got a callback. I never booked a movie. I never even booked a commercial. Soon I was more of a bartender than an actress. A tired cliché.

On day shifts, I'd chat with the drunks. I was the only one who didn't mind working during the day. Fewer tips, but also fewer idiots. I don't really drink, but I like drunks. They're loners, freaks. Sometimes, I'd ask them their birthdays, which turned into impromptu astrology readings. Astrology was just something I picked up over the years. It was impossible to ignore growing up online in California. Astrology was a second language I never chose.

And there were things I liked about it, still like about it.

I like that astrology transcends gender, class, and race. The stars don't care that I grew up in a shitty suburb and didn't go to college. The point is I'm a Scorpio, the same sign as Winona Ryder. I also like that astrology allows me to skip the bullshit and dive right into the mess of the human condition. I mean, astrology *is* bullshit. But it's a more interesting type of bullshit than the average bullshit—your job, your car, your siblings ... like I care. I want to know if you struggle with control issues or are prone to hysteria.

And once I know someone's chart, I have a rubric for interpreting that person. They become less mysterious and, more importantly, less frightening.

I was getting ready to throw in the towel and leave Hollywood when I had an idea. I could charge people for readings. A few dollars at first, hook them, then raise the price. I didn't go to college, but I also wasn't an idiot. I saw what Uber did.

Soon people were paying me at least \$200 to read their charts. I started Exalted, where I paired viral images with captions like "When you're a Cancer." It was mindless and asinine, and people ate it up. My Instagram followers skyrocketed daily, and my inbox was suddenly full of requests for readings and magazine editors asking me to write astrology listicles. I posted

my Venmo account on my Instagram page, and people would just give me money. For years, I almost felt rich. I could afford therapy and Juicy tracksuits in every color and groceries from Gelson's and generous tips at the Mirror Box. It all felt too good to be true, and it turns out it was.

I'm back to dreading the first of the month, ready to give up. And I've completely let myself go since I stopped going to auditions. I don't exercise. I eat processed foods. My skin has taken on a grayish tint. I can't audition like this. Maybe for an indie horror movie, but those don't pay anyway.

I think of Riverside, its tacky-tacky homes and charmless monochrome landscape, and feel ill.

I have to figure something out.

Beau seems rich. I just have to meet him. I'll charm him with my husky eyes the way I'd charmed that casting scout on the playground when I was eleven. I'll charm him. I know I can do it.

Beau Rubidoux will save me.

DAWN.

“Dumped again?” is the first thing my former manager says when I show up in his office at the Blind Pig.

Roberto is a jerk, but I’ve worked for him on and off since I was eighteen and he’s never once groped me. And he always lets me have my job back. He knows I’m a good waitress, which is like the most useless thing to be good at, but at least I have something.

Also, he’s right. I was dumped.

“Fuck you,” I say.

“What a way to speak to your boss.” He swivels his chair to face me.

“So, I have my job back?”

He nods and I feel relief. Then dread. I have to wait tables, but at least I can pay rent.

“This new girl just quit. Millennials are such babies.” He swivels back toward his computer, moves his mouse around, stares at the screen. “But she was hot and the customers loved her.” He says this to the screen.

Jealousy rattles inside me. Does Roberto think I’m hot? Does he tell people the customers love me? Because they *do*, minus a few bad eggs.

“Luckily you got me back,” I say with my trademark wink.

He looks up from the computer and nods weakly. My feelings are hurt, but I’m going to keep my cool. I have to keep my cool.

“I don’t want any trouble from you, Dawn, okay?”

Before Tara started paying my rent, about a year ago, I had a small altercation with this rude customer. She wouldn’t look me in the eye, so I called her on it. She got aggressive, and things escalated. But those sorts of incidents were rare. I don’t like that Roberto isn’t acknowledging all the times I had been great with the customers. I am sick of being judged for how I behaved at my worst. I’m very sweet most of the time. In high school I was voted “Most Likely to Brighten Your Day.”

“I’ll be on my best behavior,” I say.

“You better mean it.”

He’s looking at his computer again. I wonder what he’s doing on there. If I asked, he would probably say arranging schedules, but he’s probably playing online poker, maybe looking at porn. The restaurant industry attracts the dregs of humanity, at least that’s what Tara said before encouraging me to quit.

“I’ll see you Monday,” Roberto says to the screen.

Outside of the restaurant I light a cigarette and try to remind myself this situation is only temporary. I have a knack for seducing rich women. My first girlfriend, the one who called the cops on me, lived in a house with a pool.

I scan the plaza beside the restaurant. Lots of college kids. We’re close to Riverside City College, where I went for one semester before dropping out. I didn’t like school. I don’t like being told what to do. Besides, none of the rich people I know went to college. Education is a scam. That’s what I told my son when he wanted to go to that fancy art school, but he didn’t listen to me. He never listens to me. No one listens to me.

I want a sugar mama, but it’s not the easiest task. There aren’t many gay bars in Riverside, and the only ones that exist are filled with men. Nothing worse than gay men in my opinion. I am invisible to them, and I *hate* being invisible. Taking attention from a Leo is like taking a fish from the water or a bird from the sky. I think Exalted said that in one of their captions.

I met Tara at this fancy restaurant on the other side of the plaza called Chez Pierre. It was my typical pickup spot. I’d sit at the bar and stick out my big naturals and wait for someone to buy me a drink using a heavy Amex. It typically worked, but I was in my early forties, and most people thought I was in my mid-thirties because of my youthful energy. I don’t think I can pass for thirty-three at forty-eight. Whenever I think about my age, my throat starts to close up.

I don’t have any plans until Monday, so I put out my cigarette and walk over to Chez Pierre.

In the bathroom, I reline my lower eyelids in black. I apply light pink lip gloss and flip my blond curls from one side to the other. I spray some Ralph perfume in front of me and walk through it. Then I pull down my tank top, just a little, to expose a classy amount of cleavage.

When I return to the bar, the light outside the windows is already gone. It’s only around 6:30 P.M. It always depresses me when it starts getting dark

early, and it's only going to get worse. I live for the summer, with its pool parties and live music, sundresses and flip-flops. My birthday is at the end of July, and I always throw a big bash. Everyone loves my birthday.

The bar is empty except for one older-looking man. He's wearing what looks like a Rolex, so I think he will buy me a drink. He *has* to buy me a drink, because the drinks here are so expensive. So I sit right next to him, super close, up in his personal space, and ask in a breathy voice, "What's good here?"

He sort of backs away a bit—*rude*—and says, "I don't know, this is my first time here." Then he returns to looking at his phone. He seems like he's from out of town, probably the East Coast. I've never been to the East Coast, but that's fine by me. Why would I travel when I live in Southern California, the most beautiful place in the world? My son once showed me pictures of this beach in Italy on his phone, saying he wanted to go there. I told him it looked just like Laguna Beach, which is only fifty miles from Riverside, and he got all huffy—I think because he knew I was right.

I look at the man's wrist and notice his watch is *not* a Rolex. It's some brand I've never seen before. Probably some snooty East Coast brand. Either way, he isn't picking up what I'm putting down. I wonder if I've lost my charm. I'm always worried about this. Since I first realized I had sex appeal, probably around the age of thirteen, I've been afraid of losing it. I told that to Tara once when we were high out of our minds, and she said, "That's just the female experience." I miss her for a brief second, then shove it away.

The bartender walks over, and I say, "Rum and Coke." If Mr. East Coast was buying, I would have gotten a fancy cocktail or an expensive glass of champagne. But rum and Coke will do. It's happy hour, so the price is fine. I'll just finish this drink and leave.

"Do you have a preference on rum?" The bartender is likely in her early thirties and has a nice, symmetrical face

"Well is fine." I feel ashamed. I am forty-eight years old, and I want to order something fancy. Tara would have gotten me whatever I wanted.

When the bartender hands me my drink, my phone lights up with a text from Tara.

My heart starts to race. I'm afraid. I know I was completely out of line the previous night. When I was younger, I would have felt my mean texts were justified. But at forty-eight, I know they're "inappropriate." The court-

appointed therapist said I learned bad behaviors from my childhood. But I thought my childhood was great. We lived in a nice house with a cherry tree, and my dad bought me every doll I wanted. It wasn't until my dad left that things got, well ... annoying. I don't like to dwell too much on the past.

I take a big sip of my rum and Coke and then open the text.

It's exactly these types of texts that I cannot handle. I would have ended things in person but frankly I'm scared of you, Dawn. I hope you get the help you need. <3

How condescending. I don't "need help." I need someone to accept me for who I am. I am volatile, sure. But I have a good heart, and I'm really fucking fun—the life of the party. And I have perfect tits. Anyone would be lucky to have me.

I gaze at the bartender. I can't date a bartender, but I can flirt.

"How's your night going?" I ask when she walks over to wash a glass.

"It's okay," she says. "Pretty slow."

"I know what that means," I say. People who haven't worked in service think it's more relaxing when it's slow, but it's way worse. Time moves at a glacial pace. When it's busy, time flies and tips flow. "I wait tables over at the Blind Pig."

She smiles a sweet smile. "I just really want a new Coach bag."

"What's it look like?" I ask. I don't actually care about the bag, but I want her to like me. I'm a people pleaser. All Leos are.

She pulls out her phone and leans over the bar, almost touching me, and I can smell her perfume, which is flowery. She shows me a photo of the bag. It's cute. Baby blue, my favorite color, and a nice classic shape.

"I love the color," I say. I pull my lighter out of my purse and hold it up to the phone. "Almost the same."

The bartender laughs. "I've always wanted a purse the same shade of a Bic lighter."

I figure she's being sarcastic. I'm not a big fan of sarcasm, but I laugh regardless because people like it when you laugh at their jokes. "*Très chic*," I say.

"*Très*," she says. She's flirting.

Before long I'm taking shots with the cute bartender, whose name is Nicole.

She comps my next two rum and Cokes. The bar is completely empty, just us, and I decide I will give her a fat tip because I know what it's like to work in service. It's shit.

"How do you like the Blind Pig?" Nicole asks as I sip my drink. "My boyfriend and I love the burgers."

She's cute. Of course she has a boyfriend. Tara had a boyfriend when I met her. Men aren't really a threat. Only on *48 Hours*.

"What's your boyfriend like?" I lean over the bar to emphasize my cleavage and am pleased to see her sneak a glance.

"He's nice," Nicole says. "He treats me well."

I smile. Nice. I'm not afraid of nice. Nice is nothing.

"He *should* treat you well," I say. "Look at you." She looks at me a little funny. "Oh, and the Blind Pig is fine." I slurp down the last sip of rum and Coke. "I wish I didn't have to wait tables, but my rich girlfriend just broke up with me so ... back to the drawing board."

She looks at me funny again. She probably assumed I was straight. Everyone thinks I'm straight. And I appreciate that. I don't want to look like some creepy dyke. I want to be beautiful.

"My shift ends soon, so I should probably close you out," she says.

Wait, I thought my drinks were comped. But Nicole's energy has shifted. She brings over the bill for three rum and Cokes, and I feel that familiar sensation of blood boiling. The check looks blurry. I sign, weakly, but don't leave a cent of tip.

I pick up my purse and head toward the door. Over my shoulder I call out, "Homophobic bitch."

I don't wait for a response.

Back at home I smoke a cigarette out my window, completely unconcerned about Karen, and begin texting Tara.

I'm not the one who "needs help" you creepy alcoholic.

I wish you had given me the decency of a respectful breakup but apparently you're just a weak bitch.

I have moved on and it's sad that you haven't.

I've fucked 4 people since you dumped me and they've all been better than your floppy ass ... Ur like fucking a dead fish.

I hope you die alone in a pool of your own filth.

EMILY.

When Beau emails me back about his reading, I jump.

People often email me to tell me how much they love my readings, to say they feel “seen,” to say I’m creative and insightful and made them “LOL.” But I’ve been slacking recently. I use fewer words, and I copy and paste entire portions from other readings or astrology websites. I used to make them all original, but then I got tired.

But with Beau, I had my old creativity back. Like, times a billion. I felt like I was writing a screenplay that would surely win the Prix du Scénario at Cannes. Lydia kept trying to paw me for attention—cats always want what they can’t have—and I kept swatting her away. The words flowed out of me so quickly I hardly had to think at all. And they looked eloquent and beautiful on the page.

I open Beau’s response, excited for his reaction, expecting him to be wowed and awed. To my dismay, it’s just a few words.

What’s your Venmo?

I am crushed. He didn’t even acknowledge my artistry. He didn’t acknowledge how *special* I thought he was.

Maybe he’s busy.

I try to admire his economy of words, but I am still disappointed.

I spend the next few days in a depressive haze, listening to *Precious Starlets* episodes I’ve heard a billion times and not leaving my bed, not even going to Mirror Box.

Then one morning, the universe gives me a gift: Beau geotags one of his posts. Finally, I know where he is. If I left the house more, I might be able to recognize his locations. But I haven’t been to a restaurant or bar other than Mirror Box in, like, a year. Maybe two. Besides, Beau mostly posts on street corners and in houses, places I don’t recognize.

But on November 16—precisely nineteen days after I started monitoring his Instagram obsessively and, not coincidentally, I don’t think, my birthday

—he geotags a post at a bar called the Big Sleep. The photo depicts him and “the boys,” all blurry on a crowded dance floor. I look up the Big Sleep and click through every single one of the 134 photos tagged on Yelp, mostly looking for photos of Beau, but also trying to feel like I am there with him.

A few days later, Beau geotags a post at a coffee shop/ restaurant/bar called Subtropical. I’ve been there before. Before my cousin Rachel moved to San Francisco, she used to make me “cowork” with her there occasionally. She was a freelance publicist who introduced me as a “journalist” to her friends. She clearly hung out with me because my aunt made her, and I hung out with her because I knew it was good for me—medically speaking—to have some social interaction. But I couldn’t stand her. And she was horrible to work with. She’d just drink three to four margaritas and “hop on a call” and annoy everyone around us. I eventually told her I only felt comfortable working places without alcohol (I lied about being in AA), and she said she understood and then stopped asking me to cowork with her. And then she moved to San Francisco. And I was relieved. I officially had no one asking me to do things: a dream.

I don’t know if the photo is fresh, but I am overcome with a strong urge to get to Subtropical—immediately. I begin frantically rummaging through my closet for something other than a Juicy tracksuit. I sold most of my clothes in the past year, but I saved two plain black dresses in case I ever audition again.

I pull out a black dress from the corner of my closet and run a lint roller over it. Lydia looks at me quizzically, probably because she’s never seen me in a hurry before. I am nervous and jittery, but it feels exciting to have somewhere to go.

I order an UberPool because my car died a few months ago. Inside the Uber, I keep refreshing Beau’s Instagram, hoping for an Instagram story, some sort of clue, but nothing appears. Then I go back and stare at the Subtropical photo. He’s with one of his blondes. They’re all starting to blend together, but I think this is the suspected Aquarius. I thought about dyeing my hair blond when I first moved to LA, but then a casting agent said my black hair was exotic.

I didn’t get the role.

As the Uber crawls down Sunset, I begin to devise a plan. I can’t just approach Beau like a stalker. I can’t pretend to recognize him from his Gmail

either because he has no profile photo. Also, that would be beyond creepy. I'll just get a table in the corner and try to gather clues, figure out what he's like and how to enter his orbit.

When the UberPool drops me off, I brush off my dress, take a deep breath, and walk inside. I'm too nervous to look around the room. A bit dizzy, I plop down at the first table I see. I open my Lisa Frank notebook and start drawing flowers in the margin. I got the notebook around the time I got the Juicy tracksuits, back when everything felt *ironic*. This was about four years ago.

The waiter asks me if I want anything and I jump.

"Sorry," he says, "didn't mean to startle you."

I glare at him. He is very "hot." Everyone who works here is "hot." And by "hot" I mean classically attractive in the least interesting hipster iteration. I hated this place when I used to come all the time. It made me feel like my soul was being stepped on by one of those clunky sneakers all the "hot" people are wearing now. But I will give it another chance for Beau.

I sip the water the hot waiter gives me and try to calm down. Eventually, I gather the courage to scan the room. I look methodically, starting in one corner and moving my way diagonally to the next corner and then the next and then the final corner. I look and I look. But I don't see him.

Maybe he's in the bathroom or on the street smoking a cigarette. So I order a black coffee—the cheapest thing on the menu—and wait. But I can't drink the coffee because I am too on edge. I can't come up with any ideas, so I just keep drawing flowers and looking up periodically. I do this for an hour and a half.

"You okay?" The hot waiter is hovering over me.

I glare again, throw a five-dollar bill on the table, and leave.

I decide to walk home because I don't want to pay for an Uber. Also, I have a ton of energy. According to my phone, the walk will take one hour and eleven minutes. This will be good for me. I need fresh air and exercise. Well, the air isn't exactly fresh; it's filled with exhaust. But the walk might help my figure.

I put on an old *Precious Starlets* episode in my headphones and begin to pump my legs. At first my body feels stiff and my chest hurts a little, but by the time I reach Silver Lake, I am high on endorphins, a foreign sensation. As the sky turns pink and my heart beats strong in my chest, I feel a sense of hope and promise. I have received a divine gift in the form of Beau

Rubidoux. It doesn't matter if I don't see him today. I will see him eventually. I will charm him, and he will change my life forever. And I will finally know peace.

Soon I'm walking to Subtropical every morning. The days are getting cooler, so it's pleasant, and the endorphins energize me. I don't see Beau for the first few days, but I don't mind because I'm feeling alive and creative. I bring my laptop and begin making memes that are better and funnier than anything I've made in months. I post one that generates 70k likes— more than I've gotten in a year. It's an image from *Clueless* where Cher Horowitz looks at the camera with judgmental eyes and says, "Do you see the distinction?" As a caption, I add, "A Virgo 12 seconds after vowing to be less condescending."

The nice thing about posting Virgo memes is that no one attacks me in the comments. Virgos understand and accept their flaws, unlike most other signs, especially Gemini and Leo. My lilith—or *dark side*—is in Virgo, meaning I have the negative Virgo traits. I'm OCD, hypercritical, a control freak. It's not great, but it's also not the worst. Leo liliths tend to be pedophiles.

One morning at Subtropical I get an email from my BuzzFeed editor asking if I want to write an essay called "The Signs as Thanksgiving Dishes." It isn't an exciting topic, but I need the money.

I have to google Thanksgiving dishes on my laptop because I haven't gone to a proper Thanksgiving in years and frankly food just doesn't excite me. So I google away and, fine, maybe I browse some other listicles and become depressed by how many times this article has already been written. I scoffed when my mom said millennials had triggered the downfall of modern civilization, but at this moment I'm convinced she's right.

Also, these other listicles have it all wrong. Virgo is *not* stuffing. The most extra, maximalist dish? And there is no humor in any of these articles. This is why I make the big bucks.

I open my Lisa Frank notebook and start making notes:

Taurus: Mashed potatoes. Comforting, classic, a BIT BLAND.

Libra: Cranberry sauce. Elegant, aesthetic, doesn't even seem like a food.

Cancer: Pumpkin pie. Sweet, cozy, will ruin your digestion for

days.

Sagittarius: Stuffing. Extra, just so so much, honestly wtf is this food even?

Aries: Turkey. Necessary, the most important, big dick energy.

I get distracted and start drawing hearts around “Aries” because it makes me think of Beau. I look up to see if he is here and am assaulted by a terrifyingly familiar face. I feel suddenly ill, violently nauseated, and not just because I am writing about vile foods and haven’t consumed anything all day except for black coffee.

It is Thomas.

Thomas is the last man I fucked. Unfortunately, we have incredible sexual chemistry. But I hate him. I hate him more than almost anything, and I hate a lot of things. He is so corny and embarrassing. Of course he is hovering over my table with his big, overeager eyes.

“Emily!” he says with his repulsive Sagittarian enthusiasm. I’m also sickened by the sound of my name. I haven’t heard it in so long I almost forget it belongs to me. My parents named me after Emily Brontë because they are insufferable nerds. To be honest, I kind of like *Wuthering Heights*—it’s a very dark book—but Emily is just such a blah name. Couldn’t they have named me Charlotte? Or Catherine? Something classic and elegant and not a shitty suburban ‘90s name? Hell, *Heathcliff* would have been better than Emily.

“I thought you left LA!” Thomas says.

“No one calls me that,” I say.

“Calls you what? Emily?” He tugs at the bottom of his shirt like a little boy with ADHD. He’s tall and thin, but not in a graceful way. He’s nervy, awkward, restless. Like his body is this terrible accident. “What do you prefer to be called?”

“Nothing,” I say. “Please do not address me.”

He laughs so hard I feel acid rise up in my throat. “I’ve missed you, Em.”

“If there is anything worse than Emily,” I say, “it’s Em!”

He laughs again, then sits down across from me—so presumptuous—and I curse myself for not having made up a lie about how my friend is in the bathroom and needs the seat.

“I have some dank weed if you wanna smoke,” he says. Fuck. This is

always how he gets me. Thomas has amazing weed and he laughs at all my jokes, and unfortunately, he is mathematically good at making me come. I look around the room, desperate for Beau. If he was here I could scream “Rape!” or something and maybe he would save me. But he isn’t here. I am really in the mood to smoke expensive weed. And I haven’t had a real conversation in so long. I haven’t had sex with someone other than myself in ... well, time is a construct.

“Fine,” I say. “I only have time for one hit.” I pause. “One to three hits.”

Thomas laughs again, and my eyes roll into my skull.

We light up in the parking lot of the combination Pizza HutTaco Bell inside Thomas’s heavily air-conditioned Volvo SUV. Thomas has rich parents, which is part of the appeal. He pays for everything and always has the best weed. He is a self-proclaimed “cannabis entrepreneur,” which is a disgusting way to define oneself. As far as I can tell he doesn’t work. He just sleeps with vacant women and shows up everywhere I am. Part of the reason I stopped leaving my house was to ensure I wouldn’t run into him.

But now I am back in his dumb Volvo, taking a deep hit and feeling sort of momentarily happy. Grating music travels through the car and snatches my bliss.

“What is this shit?” I ask, pointing to the stereo.

“Vampire Weekend,” he says.

I make a hacking noise, and he laughs his cloying laugh.

“Their new album is pretty good.”

I can’t think of a single thing to say to that.

“What would you prefer?” he asks.

“White noise,” I say. “The sound of myself talking. Cats screeching. A woman in labor.” I reach for the stereo and turn it off.

“I’ve missed your negativity,” he says. “It’s refreshing in Los Angeles, the city of unchecked delusion.”

“Is it ‘refreshing’?” I stick my tongue out at him, then I worry it is too flirtatious. “I should go soon.”

“You said three hits,” he says. “So far you’ve just taken one.”

“You’ve always been great at monitoring my movements in a borderline criminal way,” I say.

He laughs again. “So, what’s new with you?” He passes me the joint. “Any exciting auditions?”

“Oh, god no.” I inhale. “I haven’t auditioned in years.” I try to remember the last time I slept with Thomas. Two years ago, maybe three. The last few years have been kind of a blur.

“Why not?” he asks. “You’re so talented.”

I want to be aloof, but his words feel good. I want so badly for someone to tell me I am talented. And I am beyond grateful he didn’t mention my flagging career as an internet astrologer.

“Hollywood does not agree,” I say.

“Hollywood is trash, no taste,” he says. “You’re a star.”

And just like that, I decide to let him go down on me.

The nice thing about Thomas is he never expects anything in return. He makes me come in his Volvo in the combination Pizza Hut–Taco Bell parking lot and I hardly have to touch him. Afterward I feel disgusted and ashamed and say I have to go. He insists on driving me home, but I can’t stomach being in a car for twenty minutes with the gross reminder of how low I’ve stooped.

“I need the exercise,” I say.

“Your body looks great to me,” Thomas says.

I furrow my brow. “Did it ever occur to you that I might want to exercise for peace of mind?” This, of course, is not true; I want to look fit for Beau. “That I am not a body fascist like everyone else in this fucking town?”

Thomas laughs. “Fair,” he says. “Get your Zen on.”

Thomas tries to kiss me, and I turn it into a handshake.

He laughs. “Take care, Em,” he says.

“Don’t call me that,” I say, then slam the door.

As I walk back toward Subtropical, the sky is turning purple. I see a group of boys gathered outside the entrance smoking cigarettes. Then my heart skips a beat.

Beau Rubidoux. In the flesh.

He is wearing a thin white T-shirt and black skinny jeans, talking and capturing everyone’s attention. It’s as if there is a light from the heavens shining on him and everyone can’t help but stare. I stand there,

dumbfounded, along with the rest of them.

“You okay?”

I jump. It’s Thomas again. He’s looking at me out the window from his Volvo on the street.

I want to scream, *LEAVE!* but instead I take a deep breath and I say, “Yeah, I just remembered something.”

“I hope it’s an audition.” He winks, then drives off.

What a scumbag.

I refocus my attention on Beau. He throws his cigarette on the street, and the other boys throw their cigarettes on the street too. He’s obviously very influential. Beau heads into the restaurant and the boys follow him. I am glad to confirm his divine presence in the flesh. I don’t even feel the need to follow him. I will see him again, I am sure of it.

DAWN.

I'm not surprised when Tara blocks my number. My court-appointed therapist said to expect this sort of thing if I couldn't learn to control my rages. But I didn't understand why it was all on me. Maybe if people stopped leaving me out of the blue I wouldn't be so angry.

Being back at the Blind Pig is depressing, but it's nice knowing I can still get tips—big tips. I just have to reveal the right percentage of cleavage and perform the right combination of cheerful and unobtrusive, and of course keep reminding myself that this situation is only temporary.

When my friend Steph calls me after my shift on Thursday and asks if I want to go to Jay's Bar in Long Beach, I say yes right away. Steph is my *only* lesbian friend, and I like her because she is pretty and has slept with a lot of men, like me. Luckily, we aren't each other's types at all. We kind of look alike—blond hair, blue eyes, nice rack—and we both tend to go for brunettes. I haven't seen her in a while because she has a serious girlfriend who isn't exactly a fan of mine, but on the phone Steph says she's dying for a night out.

"Beth is okay with it?" I ask.

"I didn't tell her I'm going with *you*," she says, then cackles. "I'm getting dinner with my cousin in Huntington Beach." She winks.

"You're bad!" I say, and I feel delighted, like a teen again, sneaking out to get drunk off Purple Passions in someone's basement.

"I *know*," she says.

Steph picks me up fifteen minutes later in her white pickup truck. She's blasting Journey out the window, and I feel like it is summer and we are going to a party in a backyard with a pool.

"Hi, doll," I say. She wraps me in a big hug that feels more familial than anything I've experienced in a while. I've known Steph since we were in high school, when we were both cheerleaders, the two most popular girls in the school. We would steal her dad's Chevy and drive to the beach with water bottles filled with cheap vodka. Boys adored us, and we could get them to do

whatever we wanted.

We started dating women at around the same time too, in our mid-twenties. I met my first girlfriend, Jen, because she worked at my kid's school. Soon after Jen and I hooked up, Steph confessed to me that she'd "experimented" a few times. And once she saw how in love Jen and I were—and in the beginning, we were disgustingly in love—she said she wanted to try more than experimenting. Jen had this whole crew of lesbian friends who partied hard, and Steph and I fit right in. Steph was dating one of Jen's friends before long. Things got complicated when Jen and I fell out, but that was a long time ago.

"You look thin," Steph tells me inside her truck. She always says this, mostly because she knows it's what I want to hear. But it is also possible that I have lost some weight. I haven't had much of an appetite since Tara broke up with me. Mostly I've been drinking and smoking and working. "Numbing out," as my son says.

"Thanks," I say. "Your hair looks incredible." Her hair looks the same as it always does—champagne blond in tiny ringlets—but it's important to repay a compliment with a compliment.

"Thanks," she says, then revs the ignition. "I need to get it colored." She peers over at my roots. "You have no grays, Dawnie. How do you do it?"

I flip my hair. "Blessed, I guess." I am lying. I colored it a few weeks ago. Tara took me to her fancy salon. But they didn't do much, just touched up my roots. My hair is naturally very blond. When I was a child it was nearly white, my eyebrows too. Steph's hair is similar to mine but curlier. My curls are a little looser, more like waves, like the ocean.

"How have you been since the breakup?" Steph asks, and I frown. I don't want to talk about being dumped. I want to go to a gay bar and flirt. Also, I don't even remember telling her about the breakup. But I know I have a tendency to call my friends drunk and cry and scream and remember nothing.

"I'm great!" I lie. "Not my first rodeo."

"Definitely not," she says, then cackles. I cackle too.

I watch Steph merge onto the freeway with the grace of a Southern California girl.

"Honestly?" she says. "I never liked her."

"Really?" I thought everyone liked Tara. She was the "good one" and I was the "bad one."

“She was pretty but dull,” Steph says. “You’re much more fun than her.”
I smile. I needed that.

Jay’s Bar is not technically a gay bar, but it has a strong lesbian presence, more lesbian than most gay bars in the area. It has bloodred walls, which we always joke are the shade of period blood, and leather booths and a killer patio for smoking. Most of the lesbians hang out on the patio, so Steph and I bring our drinks out there. We park at a high-top table beside a heat lamp and scan the yard. There are a few cute women, but they mostly look too young for me. It takes years to generate wealth. I think. Clearly I have no idea. I’m forty-eight years old and drinking a four-dollar well drink, surrounded by twenty-somethings.

“How are things with Beth?” I ask, then light up a cigarette.

Steph unleashes a strained sigh, and I giggle. “Women are exhausting,” she says. “I mean, me too.”

“Amen,” I say, and we clink glasses. Beth is hot but controlling. She doesn’t like Steph to hang out with any lesbians. I’m pretty sure Steph hasn’t been to Jay’s Bar since they started dating a few years ago. At least not with Beth’s permission. I kind of understand Beth’s possessiveness. I can be like that too. Steph is pretty and flirtatious, and if she were my girlfriend I would probably be the same way. Tara was always talking to her ex-husband, which I couldn’t stand. She claimed they were best friends. I didn’t trust that man at all.

“God, Dawn,” Steph says. “I miss this.”

“Me too,” I say, and for once I’m not lying.

Steph takes one of my cigarettes from my pack and lights it. Steph identifies as a nonsmoker, but she always bums off me when we’re out, and I don’t mind. I like having someone to smoke with. And she always buys me drinks to make up for it.

“Can I borrow your lighter?” a woman asks Steph. She looks like she’s in her late twenties or early thirties. She has long brown hair and is wearing men’s jeans with a black tank top. I am jealous she is talking to Steph and not me, the owner of the lighter.

“Sure,” Steph says, and hands her my baby-blue Bic. I remember the homophobic bartender from Chez Pierre and feel sick. I can tell Steph is high

from the attention, which also makes me sick. I take a big sip of my drink to steady myself.

The girl says thank you and lights her cigarette.

“How’s your night going?” Steph asks. It is a boring question, not a great flirt. I feel determined to refocus the brunette’s attention onto me. Steph has a girlfriend. I am the one who hasn’t had sex in nearly a month.

“It’s okay,” she says, and exhales smoke over her shoulder. “I’m here with my friend Erica.” She nods her friend over to the table. The other girl looks shy. I don’t like timid women. Maybe Steph can talk to her and I can talk to the brunette. That’s my goal anyway.

“I’m Steph.”

“Lily,” says the brunette. It’s a pretty name.

“I’m Dawn,” I say, maybe a little too loudly because Lily’s cigarette goes out. I relight it and Lily smiles gratefully. I feel Steph’s eyes on me. We’ve been here before, fighting for the same woman’s smile.

“Dawn is a nice name,” she says.

“Thanks,” I say. “I used to hate it because I’m not a morning person.”

Lily giggles and Steph glares at me.

Soon the four of us are seated at a booth inside. I am sitting close to Lily and I want to put my hand on her thigh, but I also want to make her wait, tease her a bit. Steph is chatting with Erica, apparently having accepted the fate of the evening. She seems to enjoy monologuing about herself to the quiet girl.

“Let’s play a game,” Lily says suddenly to the table. She is fun, which is my second favorite quality in a woman, after independently wealthy.

We’ve already discussed our zodiac signs, the first language of both millennials and lesbians—Lily is a Gemini; Erica is a Cancer—so a game seems like the next logical place to go.

“Truth or Dare?” I pose.

Lily frowns. “Too basic.”

There was a period when my son called everything I did “basic.” I didn’t love that. I think it’s a millennial thing.

“Fuck, Marry, Kill?” Lily says.

“How is Truth or Dare basic and Fuck, Marry, Kill isn’t?” I ask. “They’re the two most common party games.” I am being a little difficult and women

seem to like that, so long as the cops aren't involved.

"Truth or Dare is for children," Lily says.

"Or maybe you're just afraid of a dare." I finally put my hand on her thigh and squeeze it lightly.

She folds herself into me and giggles. "I am *NOT*."

"Okay," says Steph, plucking the attention away from my flirtation with Lily. "Fuck, Marry, Kill—Pamela Anderson, Cindy Crawford, and ... Daryl Hannah."

"Who is Daryl Hannah?" Lily asks.

Steph's eyes widen and I laugh on the inside. She is embarrassing herself, asking these millennials about an actress who was popular before they were born.

"Are you joking?" Steph asks. "You've never seen *Splash*?"

She is digging herself deeper into an ugly hole, and I am enjoying watching it.

"No!" says Lily.

"What about Never Have I Ever?" Erica suggests. "It might be more ... democratic." I don't know what she means, but I'm glad the girl is finally speaking up.

"Do *you* know who Daryl Hannah is?" Steph asks Erica.

Steph has a lot of trouble letting things go. So do I. I'm glad it's her and not me this time.

Erica shyly shakes her head.

"You all are crazy," says Steph.

"You all are old," Lily says.

I jab her lightly in the rib cage and she giggles. Steph looks annoyed.

"Okay." Lily puts up five fingers, and we all follow. "Never have I ever slept with a man."

Steph and I immediately put fingers down and laugh. Erica and Lily keep theirs up.

"Wow," says Steph. "Gold stars!"

"Are you all straight?" Erica asks Steph and me. And we both laugh very, very hard.

"No," Steph says.

"But thank you," we say at the same time.

"Thank you?" Lily echoes with confusion. "Why would you want to seem

straight?”

My son always says people his age are all a little gay and that no one cares either way.

“Lesbians are kind of gross,” Steph says. “I mean, not you ladies of course.”

Lily and Erica look strangely at Steph.

“That’s kind of an archaic position,” says Erica.

I’m embarrassed for Steph.

“Not to mention offensive,” says Lily. “And we identify as queer.”

I shiver at this a bit. I hate the word “queer,” which my son says is more common these days. I don’t like the word “gay” either. Or “fag” or “dyke.” Tara said she liked the term “lesbian” because it’s the only word for homosexuality that isn’t rude. It comes from this Greek island where a famous ancient lesbian poet lived. Based on Tara’s description, Sappho seemed like a real player. Maybe I was born at the wrong time. I should have lived on this Greek island in ancient times and had a harem of women. I smile thinking about how tan I’d be.

“I’m a dyke,” says Steph. “I can make fun of them!” She pauses. “Or *us*.”

“It’s sort of counterproductive,” Erica says.

I am sick of this dumb debate. “Okay, Never Have I Ever.”

“Thank *god*,” says Lily. I am glad she is over that discussion as well.

“Never have I ever ...” I look at Steph. It’s fun to play this game with people you know and target them. I’ve known Steph for decades, so I have lots of material. I am trying to think of something that Steph has done and I haven’t. I take a sip of my drink, and then it hits me. “Never have I ever ... slept with siblings.” I giggle watching Steph put a finger down.

Shockingly, Erica puts a finger down too.

“Okay, Erica!” I say. “I know Steph’s story, but I must know yours.”

“I don’t know Steph’s!” Lily yells. “I want to know. I feel like a prude; I have all my fingers up.”

I squeeze her thigh again, and Steph happily takes the floor. “So,” Steph says. “It was *ages* ago.”

“When Daryl Hannah was famous,” I add, and both ladies laugh.

“High school, actually,” Steph says. “I dated the quarterback of our football team.” She waits for the girls to react, to be impressed, but they remain silent. She’s fumbling the ball, not unlike our quarterback, who

everyone called “Butterfingers.” I stifle a giggle.

“I caught him cheating on me”—Steph puts her arm around me—“so I went with *this* troublemaker to a party to get my mind off it.” I snuggle into her embrace, happy to remember our golden years, when our boobs defied gravity. “His little brother was at the party, and I saw my opportunity for revenge.”

“Savage,” says Lily with a monotone voice.

Erica looks alarmed or something. I can’t tell exactly what she’s thinking, but I can tell she isn’t impressed by Steph’s story.

“What about you, Erica?” I ask.

“Oh,” she says. “Twins at Burning Man.” She is very matter-of-fact.

“Don’t be fooled by Erica’s innocent façade,” Lily says. “She’s a real seductress.”

“*They*,” Erica says, “seduced *me*.”

Maybe Erica is more confident than she seems. I like when people surprise me. Maybe I will go for Erica instead of Lily. Maybe I will go for them both. Maybe they are sisters, and I will be able to put my finger down next time I play this game.

“Okay, Casanova,” Steph says.

“I prefer ‘femme fatale,’” Erica retorts. She doesn’t smile or anything when she says this, which I find attractive. Tara once told me she didn’t want to be the immediate hottest girl in the room; she wanted to be a “sleeper hit,” someone people didn’t notice at first but captured everyone by the end of the night. I thought that was smart at the time, and now I think Erica might be one of those—a sleeper hit. I imagine Erica having sex with twins, who I know are women because she said she’s a gold star, and get a little excited.

“Okay, femme fatale,” I say to Erica. “What *haven’t* you done.”

She smiles to reveal two dimples on her cheeks. Definite sleeper hit.

“Never have I ever,” she says, “thrown up from alcohol.”

Steph and I look at each other, laugh, and immediately put fingers down. Lily puts a finger down too and says, “*Finally*.”

“You’ve *never* thrown up from alcohol?” Steph asks Erica.

“I never get to that point,” says Erica. “I prefer psychedelics anyway.”

“Okay, cool girl,” I say. I am flirting a little bit. I like the idea of psychedelics, but I’m probably too “basic” for them. I don’t want to take a drug to make me feel weird. I want to feel *good*.

“Your turn, Steph,” says Erica.

“Okay.” She looks right at me. She’s going to target me, I can tell. “Never have I ever ...”

I’m kind of excited but also a little scared, like I am at the top of a roller coaster about to drop. Steph knows *a lot* about me. Too much, probably.

“... destroyed my girlfriend’s property.”

My stomach drops. That’s not a very fun one. I put a finger down as inconspicuously as possible. I glance around the table and notice I’m the only one. I was hoping Erica was a crazy bitch like me.

“Did you just put a finger down, Dawn?” Erica asks.

I nod. “Steph and I know too much about each other.” I try to laugh it off, then sneak a mean look at Steph.

“We need the story,” Lily says.

“It’s not that interesting,” I say, then slurp up the remainder of my whiskey and Coke. “Does anyone need another?”

“Dawn set her girlfriend’s car on fire,” Steph says, “after she looked through her phone and saw her flirting with someone else.”

I can’t believe Steph is doing this to me. I was about to get *laid*.

“Holy shit,” says Erica, the most animated she’s been all night.

My cheeks heat and my skin starts to sting.

“Wait, Dawn ...” Lily says. “Did you date Jen Strati?”

Uh-oh. The Southern California lesbian scene is *way* too small.

“That was Dawn’s first girlfriend,” Steph says. “It was wild.”

I am so angry I want to punch Steph. I get that blood-boiling feeling again, the one I always get before I do something bad. I wish I had more to drink. I try to steady my breathing.

“Jen is my neighbor,” says Lily. Her body language is changing. She backs away from me. “I know all about you, Dawn.”

This isn’t the first time this has happened to me. Lesbians all know each other. Jen is popular and always cockblocking me, pussy-blocking me, whatever, even though we haven’t spoken in over ten years.

“I hope it’s not all bad,” I say, trying to keep my voice cool.

“It’s all pretty bad,” says Lily. “Erica, you wanna head?”

“I thought you’d never ask,” says Erica.

“But we aren’t done with our game,” Steph says like the dumbass she’s been all night.

The girls ignore Steph and get up. “Have a good night,” Lily says weakly, and they walk away.

“What the *fuck*?” I say to Steph as soon as they’re gone.

Steph cowers, looking afraid. She knows how scary I can get when I’m mad.

“I’m sorry, Dawn,” she says. “I really messed up. I thought they would think it was funny.”

I throw my glass of ice in her face.

EMILY.

Beau is the first thing I see when I walk into Subtropical. I feel calm, like everything is how it is supposed to be. Just like Beau's planets. Exalted. Everything in its right place, like that Radiohead song I loved in high school and never stopped listening to.

I sit in my normal spot by the door, and the hot waiter gives me coffee without me even having to ask for it. He knows by now not to address me or ask me any questions. I am starting to like it here. They know their customers. It is much better here without my cousin Rachel.

Beau is sitting across the room from me, in the lounge area in the corner. When I look up from my laptop, casually of course, I have an unobstructed view. He is with a man, which relieves me. I saw on his Instagram that he was at the Big Sleep last night with that Vagablonde girl. I am starting to feel threatened by all these blondes who look nothing like me. I stalked Vagablonde's Instagram, and I'm pretty sure she is a Leo—cocky as hell, a true solipsist.

I am working on my Thanksgiving listicle, but it is hard to focus. I am mostly just writing mean things about Leos. Are Leos gravy? A gross goo ruining all your food? Are they jello salad? Just overly accessorized?

I keep zoning out and drawing knives and swords beside my notes. Occasionally I look up at Beau. He and the man he is with keep laughing hysterically. I wonder what's so fucking funny. I've never laughed that much in my life. I don't have a great sense of humor. Everyone says my memes and my readings and my articles are funny, but I'm not trying to be funny. Maybe I am good at things only when I'm not trying. Maybe if I'd tried less hard to be an actress I would have gotten a role. I wonder if Beau has any Hollywood connections. The man he is with looks like a power player. Also a Leo, probably. Beau is surrounded by Leos, and I'm jealous of all of them.

Beau looks up and we make eye contact, for a brief second, and shivers go down my entire spine. I bring my pen to my notebook and draw little droplets

of blood trickling from a sword.

When I look up again, Beau is on the phone and heading out the door. I try not to stare at his body as it moves, his torso slithering like a snake's. I feel an intense jolt in my abdomen, then return to my notepad, to the sword spurting blood.

Beau's energy changes after the phone call. I wonder if he received bad news. I worry for him. I hope his family is okay. They are probably thousands of miles away, in New York, London, or Paris. But they are rich and therefore have the resources to handle anything.

Beau and his friend keep going into the bathroom, maybe because they are drinking so much orange juice. At first I think they are drinking mimosas, but then I decide Beau is too tasteful to drink so early in the day. He is just passionate about vitamin C. Or maybe he is worried about scurvy.

Sadness hits my gut when the boys ask for the check. I was feeling so at peace, casually catching glimpses of Beau's sculpted cheekbones and the little dimples that form when he smiles.

The boys get up and head toward the door. Beau and I make the briefest eye contact as he passes my table, and my chest feels floaty. I feel invisible strings attach on to me and on to him and pull me toward him, phantom forces so powerful I nearly follow him out of the restaurant. But I practice self-control and wait five minutes after he leaves. Then I put four dollars on the table and walk home.

My black dress is starting to smell. I've been walking six miles daily for the past week or so. I don't have laundry machines in my building. This is one of the reasons I stopped exercising. Sweating just means more trips to the coin laundry, among the more depressing places in the world. For a while I could afford the wash and fold, but those days are long gone.

I put on *Precious Starlets* and listen to them talk about their recent trips to Europe—Camilla, to her family's house in the French Riviera; Hazel, to Berlin with her DJ boyfriend—in monotone voices. They both complain that Europe is "tired" and "over," and I envy them for having the luxury to have such opinions.

At the laundromat, I keep refreshing Beau's Instagram page to see where he's gone. Nada. Instead, I get a text from Thomas. Seeing his name on my screen

makes me want to throw the phone against one of the metal machines, or maybe bang my head against one. But I am bored and lonely, stuck in a laundromat with nothing to occupy myself, so I open the text.

J?

That is all it says. Unfortunately I do want a J. Since I haven't been working from my apartment, I've been smoking less weed and having more vivid dreams. I dream mostly of Beau. I dream of his face, of him holding me. I dream of us at the top of the Eiffel Tower, eating foie gras with Winona Ryder.

Meet me at Wash on Western, I write back. Then: *I don't have much time.*

Thomas arrives as I am moving my clothes to the dryer. Perfect timing, really, even though he is still a miserable cuck.

The inside of his Volvo smells like expensive weed. Thomas always buys top-shelf shit from fancy dispensaries, and I still buy shake from a drug dealer.

"How are you?" Thomas asks when I hop in.

This question is impossible for a Scorpio to answer. Our feelings are too layered and intense to reduce to social niceties. "Where's the J?" I ask instead.

"I like how you get to business," he says. "No bullshit."

"I'm an internet astrologer," I say. "My whole life is bullshit."

"Oh," he says. "You're still doing that?"

I ignore him and light the joint, take a big inhale. Music plays again, and this time it is even worse than the last. Guitars and twee voices.

"Is there some kind of simp music site you get recommendations from?"

He laughs. "It's my Spotify Discover Weekly playlist," he says. "Normally it's pretty good."

"Algorithms are demonic," I say. I really do feel this way. They take the art out of everything. I hate that I participate in Instagram culture. I hate that I'm not in the same room as Beau anymore. I hate that I have stooped so low as to go back to Thomas, the biggest embarrassment of my past five years.

Thomas keeps talking about the playlists, defending algorithms like a freak.

I inhale the smoke deeper into my lungs and wait for my ire to fade.

Soon enough, Thomas's monologue becomes funny to me. Something about his cadence. His cuck cadence. *Cuck cadence.* I giggle to myself.

“Did I miss the joke?” he asks.
“You always miss the joke,” I say.
And then I push his head down.

That night in bed, I am staring at the plastic stars on my ceiling and thinking about how sad it is that I am nearly thirty and have plastic stars on my ceiling. I look at my clean duvet cover sitting on the floor, doused in artificial light from the streetlamp outside my window, and think about how hard it will be to put it back on and how I will put it off for days, and it will be dusty by the time I do it, defeating the whole purpose of cleaning it. I think about letting Thomas go down on me, my robotic orgasm, and how both of us are losers with no dignity whatsoever. I look at Lydia, angelically perched on the windowsill, and think that she doesn't deserve to be trapped in this hellhole with me. I've made all the wrong decisions. I should have gone to college. I could have gotten a scholarship to USC—I always scored off the charts—and wooed the son of a director or the next Tim Burton. I would be making auteur cinema now instead of being trapped in this dead-end life. I think about Riverside, its dry monochrome expanse, and I jump out of my bed. I almost tip over my Gatorade but catch it before it spills blue all over my clean laundry on the floor.

I put on my burgundy tracksuit and grab my wallet and phone and head to Mirror Box. I rarely go at nighttime, but I need to do something. I need to talk to someone who isn't Thomas.

Unfortunately, Cinnamon is the first face I see when I enter. She is wearing a baby-pink negligée and her hair is in pigtails.

“Long time no see, babydoll,” she says. I guess it has been a while since I've been here. I've been so busy looking for Beau.

You're the babydoll, not me, I want to say. I wonder if I hate Cinnamon because I hate myself, since we are basically the same according to the stars. But as Paris Hilton wisely said, “The stars are blind.”

“You're the astrologer, right?”

I nod.

“You never finished my reading,” she says. She seems more lucid tonight. Maybe she's sober, or maybe it's just my depression throwing everything into sharper relief.

“You never paid me,” I say.

She pulls some cash from her bra.

“I’m off the clock,” I say. I need the money, but not *that* bad.

“Maybe another time,” she says.

“Maybe,” I say.

I pace around a bit, smile weakly at dancers and patrons I vaguely recognize. I can’t sit in the front because I have no money. So I sit in the corner and stare at people staring at the dancers until I finish my drink and go home.

DAWN.

I can't believe it has been over a month since Tara dumped me and I still haven't gotten laid. I am starting to panic. Not only do I have what my court-appointed therapist called an "outsized libido," but I crave companionship. My days are so depressing. I try to be a positive person, sunny and upbeat, but there is no escaping it: my life right now is very grim.

It's fall and getting dark before 5:00 P.M. Steph and I aren't speaking. I'm still furious at her for selling me out at Jay's Bar. I could have taken both of those women home if not for her. Steph reminds me why I don't have lesbian friends. I am trying to think about whether I have any friends at all anymore. I think of myself as popular, but I am spending all my nights alone, with Cook's and *48 Hours*, trying to hide my indoor smoking from Karen.

And just when things can't get any worse, my high school enemy, Lisa Kennedy—not *those* Kennedys—shows up at the Blind Pig and I have to wait on her. She is comically condescending. "Oh, Dawn!" she says. "You *still* work here? What a riot ... some things never change!" I want to throw her glass of wine in her face, like they do on those *Real Housewives* shows, and tell Lisa she's still a cunt with an underbite, but I've used up all my opportunities to be bad. Roberto wouldn't have it. So I swallow my pride and say, "Great to see you, Lisa."

After work I am so upset I have no choice but to get shitfaced. I am too scared of rejection to go back to Chez Pierre. So in a moment of extreme desperation, I go to Riverside's only gay bar, the Purple Parrot, which is always filled with fat gay men with gray hair and beer bellies. I am that desperate. On the walk I pray that I will find a newly bicurious woman who stumbled in by accident.

The bar is dark and mostly empty, with string lights that illuminate purple parrot figurines that hang from the ceiling. A few fat men linger at the bar. I almost walk out, but then I see a girl sitting alone and feel a glimmer of hope. I walk over. I hang my purse on the hook under the bar and sit right next to

her. A lot of my female friends, gay and straight, tell me they have trouble approaching people. I've never had that issue, which gives me a leg up. I have a harder time keeping people, stopping them from leaving me.

"What are you drinking?" I ask the girl. She turns her head toward me timidly. I can tell she was waiting for someone to talk to her. The cat is in the bag.

"Vodka cranberry," she says. "Kind of basic, I know."

God, another millennial. Oh well. At least she probably hasn't been pregnant before. Her body looks much better than mine, at least what I can see of it under her pink tank dress. This is the great lesbian conundrum. At the same time you're lusting over a body, you're also comparing it with your own, hoping it's not as good. And either way, you lose.

"You know," I say, inching a bit closer to her, "I don't mind basic."

She giggles. "Me neither." Her lips are full and a little dry. The apples of her cheeks glint under the tea lights.

"I don't get why it's an insult," I say. "Isn't basic, like, classic? Like Chuck Taylors."

She removes a foot from under the bar to reveal a black high-top Converse.

"Basic," I say. "And *fabulous*."

"Exactly," she says. "I'm Naomi."

It's a very cool name.

By our third drink, Naomi and I are sitting close and tight in a booth in the back, the rest of the bar completely irrelevant to us. I'm reminded of the night at Jay's Bar and feel grateful that Steph isn't here to ruin it. I'm glad I came here alone. Lesbians are not to be trusted. I am not to be trusted.

"What's your sign?" I ask Naomi, my in with millennials and lesbians. Thanks to Exalted, I am fairly knowledgeable about astrology. Exalted has been posting more recently, apparently out of that annoying slump, thank God. I wonder if Exalted is a Leo. I'm curious about this person. With all those followers, he or she must be rich. I wonder if he or she is single. I make a mental note to send Exalted a DM the next day. DM is short for "direct message," which Tara taught me.

"Aquarius," she says. This excites me because I know from Exalted that

Aquarius and Leo are a good match. I don't know many Aquarians, though.

"I love Aquarians," I say, which is true enough. "I'm—"

"Wait," Naomi says. "Can I guess?"

"Of course," I say. Naomi is much less shy than she was when I first walked up to her. Another sleeper hit.

"Aries?" she asks.

"Nope!" I say. "My son is an Aries, though. I have a few Aries exes as well ... I don't feel as fondly toward them." I sip my drink. "Why did you think Aries?"

"You're bold," she says. "You approached me. You're confident. You have good hair."

I smile. "All true."

"My next guess was Leo."

"Bingo!" I say. And like that, I know I'm taking her home.

Naomi knows her way around a woman's body, which is a relief. I've slept with a lot of straight women, and they tend to be stiff and inactive. They're used to having sex with men, who don't expect much. But Naomi knows exactly what to do.

In the morning, I wrap my arm around her torso, and she turns around and kisses me hard. Her morning breath doesn't bother me, which Steph says is a sign your pheromones are compatible. Naomi slides her fingers inside me, and we start going at it again.

After we both come, I ask if she wants to go to brunch. I don't have to work today.

"Why don't we order it?" she asks. "That way we can have more time in bed."

"I wish I had Bloody Mary mix," I say. "And vodka."

"We can order Bloody Marys," she says.

"Really?" I ask.

"You're so cute," she says. "How old are you?"

"Thirty-nine," I lie. I've been lying about my age since I was a teenager. First, to be older. Now, to be younger.

"You're so hot," she says. "I love older women." She runs her fingers along my leathery forearm. Lesbians love older women the same way straight

women love older men. In this sense, I am lucky. As a straight woman, I would probably have less luck getting laid.

I giggle to myself that she considers thirty-nine an “older woman” and imagine how turned on she would be if she knew the truth, that I am nearly ten years older than I said I am. I wonder how old she is for a second, then decide I don’t want to know. I’ve slept with a few women who were younger than my son, but I try not to think about it. The truth has no relevance in matters of the heart.

Naomi hands me her phone, which reveals a digital menu. Tara was always ordering food and things online. I have no idea how to do it, but it is nice when it’s done for me.

“Pick whatever you want,” she says.

Ah, music to my ears. I can’t remember who got the tab last night. Maybe Naomi comes from money or has a fancy job at a start-up. I assume we talked about jobs, but I don’t remember. I just remember that she is an Aquarius, which is Leo’s best match.

“You can just Venmo me,” she says.

I don’t have Venmo, but I know it is a money-sharing app. Tara uses it. “I don’t have Venmo,” I say. “But I think I have cash.” I grab my wallet from the bedside table.

“You can pay me later,” she says. “Just pick! I got the French toast and a Bloody Mary. I’m starved.”

I feel rushed, so I pick the same as her. I make a note of the prices so I can pay her back. I don’t want her to think I’m cheap. After I hand her the phone, I pick up my wallet again. I fish out a twenty and a ten and hand her the bills. She throws them in the air, then tackles me. We fool around until Naomi gets a text indicating the food is a minute away.

“Fuck, I can’t find my ID,” Naomi says into her purse after she gets the text. “Can I use yours? For the alcohol?”

I feel nervous for a second. I am worried she will look at the age on my ID and see that I lied. My, well, “lack of truthfulness” has been an issue with women in the past. I like Naomi, and I don’t want to ruin it already. But I also crave alcohol, so I hand her the ID. She probably won’t even look.

Unfortunately, she starts examining the ID as soon as I hand it over. “Cute photo,” she says.

I smile, relieved. “Thanks,” I say. “Leos know how to photograph.”

She is still staring at the ID and her expression changes, which makes me nervous.

“Isn’t the food here?” I ask. “Shouldn’t we go outside?”

“Wait.” She pauses, seeming suddenly anxious. “You’re Dawn Webster.”

“Yeah,” I say. Now I’m even more nervous than if she’d noticed my age. When lesbians say my full name like this, it tends not to be a good sign.

She peers at me. “I do Tara Milken’s nails.”

“Fuck,” I say. I know how much Tara loved the girl who did her nails, which were a source of pride for her. (Some say lesbians can’t have long nails, but Tara proved that wrong; she had long nails and she used them with finesse.) I’d always been a little envious of her nail artist. She never said her name, just “my nail girl.” That’s what concerned me, that she could never say her name. Tara had a crush on her, I knew it, and she’d probably told Naomi everything about me, how terrible I am, about my moods and my rages.

“I should go,” Naomi says.

“Wait.” I reach for her arm, but she pulls away, like I’m a dangerous animal. “Wait, Naomi,” I say as she backs away from me. “At least stay for brunch ... Tara says a lot of crazy things.”

But she’s already at the door, turning the knob. I feel that familiar heat rising, my blood beginning to boil.

“I hope you enjoyed fucking the love of my life, slut!” I shout.

But Naomi is already gone.

EMILY.

I wake up to a loud banging on my door and grab my phone. It's 12:30 P.M., and I have four missed calls from my landlord. Fuck. I jump up and pick up a clean dress from the floor, quickly throw it on. The banging continues. I never normally wake up this late, but I couldn't sleep. I kept hitting the bong and refreshing Beau's Instagram. He posted a blurry photo of "the boys" smoking cigarettes outside of the Big Sleep at 3:00 A.M. I'm sure he's deleted it by now. I thought about going, but I worried that by the time I got there he would be gone. I also worried I wouldn't be able to get in. The place looks exclusive, and I look like garbage. I didn't drift off until probably 5:00 or 6:00 A.M., when the light was turning blue outside my blinds.

The knocking continues. I put on my slippers and open the door.

It's my landlord, Marta, and she does not look happy.

"Where's your rent?"

"I put it under your door on the first," I lie. My heart is beating fast, but I try to ignore it and practice the Lee Strasberg method—an acting philosophy espoused by the likes of Angelina Jolie, Hazel and Camilla, and (last but certainly not least) Ms. Winona Ryder. I just have to become the character I am playing. I slow my breathing and start to believe my role: *I am a responsible tenant who pays rent, who always pays rent. The issue must be hers. Marta is disorganized. She lost the check.*

Marta looks down at a crumpled paper in her hand. She *is* disorganized. And she is wearing a nightgown in the afternoon. "According to my records, I'm missing September and October rent from you."

I feel relief. According to *my records*, I haven't paid August's rent either. So she isn't keeping the best track of things. "I don't know what to tell you, Marta," I say calmly, embodying my role. "I slipped September's and October's rent under your door as I always do. Is it possible you accidentally threw them away? Or they slid under the carpet or something?"

She narrows her eyes at me. "I don't know," she says. "I'll double-check."

She seems to believe me, and I feel great. Not just because I might be getting out of paying rent, but because I can still act.

I spend the next few hours finishing the BuzzFeed article, struggling with Virgo. Nothing about Thanksgiving seems Virgo. Thanksgiving is all about excess, and Virgos are spartan. Ultimately, I make Virgo ice water.

I don't think too hard about it. I just need to hand in the article so I can get paid and cover December's rent. But I need more money in case Marta follows up on the previous months. I can't get evicted. I can't go back to Riverside. My parents might not even let me back. I haven't spoken to them in a few years.

I could end up on the streets.

I refresh my Gmail and check my DMs to see if I have any requests for readings. Nada. So I post an ad for chart readings on my Instagram page, which normally opens the floodgates. My rent is \$750 a month, a major steal thanks to ten-plus years in a rent-controlled apartment, so I need to do only four readings to make rent. I am starting to relax. I can do this. I'll cut down on expenses. No spending money at Mirror Box. I won't buy weed; I'll just smoke Thomas's. I will eat very little and lose a lot of weight. Maybe I'll get so thin I'll be discovered on the street and cast in a movie, just like I was discovered on that playground. I take a deep breath. Things are going to be okay. Ever since I saw Beau's birth chart, I've been convinced the universe is looking out for me.

The only expense I won't give up is my three-dollar daily coffee from Subtropical. I need to go to keep an eye out for Beau, and I once watched a hot waiter kick someone out for not ordering anything. Also, the exercise is doing my body good. I am starting to feel less tired all the time. My skin is getting some color. And I've been more creative; my followers are steadily climbing again.

I grab my headphones and laptop and start walking to Subtropical. Hopefully by the time I get there, I will have some reading requests. On the walk, I listen to *Precious Starlets*.

Hazel booked an off-Broadway play, something written by a Mamet. She is blasé about the whole thing, despite, according to earlier episodes, being cast in a Mamet play was all she ever wanted, the only thing that would make

her *not* blasé. I'm reminded that getting what you want isn't necessarily all that great. Maybe if I booked a Darren Aronofsky movie I would be depressed because it would mean that someone as lame and talentless as me could be cast by a legendary auteur director, and everything I previously believed would be a sham.

I understand where Hazel is coming from, and I'm grateful that she doesn't pretend to be grateful. Gratitude is for cucks like Thomas, for whom everything is "sick" or "bomb" or "dope." He has no critical faculties whatsoever. I'm reminded why I didn't go to college. Thomas has one of the least impressive brains I've ever encountered and I'm pretty sure he went to Penn.

Camilla is in a fight with her brother, a communist who lives in a van. She thinks he is a cliché, and he thinks she is being cliché for being a judgmental urbanite. I wish I had a brother with whom I could argue over who is being more cliché.

Subtropical feels different today. I don't recognize any of the waiters, who are even "hotter" than normal. Maybe because it is nearing evening and I usually arrive before noon. Maybe this is when Beau comes, before he goes to the Big Sleep.

The vibe is different at this hour too. There are candles on every table. Future is playing and bass shakes the room. It feels less like a coffee shop and more like a bar. My eye catches a man in a bedazzled Tupac T-shirt.

I take my typical table by the door, now illuminated by a black candle, and open my laptop. One of the "hotter" waiters shuffles over and says, "Just so you know, laptop hours end at five."

I check the time: it's 4:37 P.M.

I glare at him. I wanted to get at least an hour of work in. I recall Marta looking at that crumpled piece of paper on my doorstep. I need to make money.

"Why?" I ask.

"Because," he says. He's wearing a tight black shirt and sturdy denim jeans and his hair is greased into a wave. "Boss's rules." He walks away.

I open my Instagram DMs. I have just one request. I can read a chart in seventeen minutes. I can make \$200 in seventeen minutes. I am going to be fine. Especially now that I have Beau. He doesn't know who I am, but that's okay. He will.

The chart is easy because it has a few stelliums, or clusters of planets in the same house or sign. Stelliums make things quicker because I don't have to write a separate description for each placement. I have a Google Doc where I have descriptions of all the stelliums, so I can just copy and paste. I save every description I've written of every placement and aspect, so I copy and paste those as well. I haven't written all the combinations yet—there are millions of possible permutations—but with each reading, I build my arsenal and make future readings faster. No one has yet called me on the fact that I am constantly plagiarizing myself. And everyone thinks that their reading is so special and unique, even though for each I use the exact same language I've used for potentially hundreds of other people.

Then I recall Beau's stunning, blessed birth chart.

Astrology is a con, but it's also divine. My Gemini moon is holding both conflicting ideas at once—duality, baby.

"Laptop hours are up," says the wavy-haired man as I start the last sentence of my chart on the lilith, the dark side, my favorite.

"I just need a minute," I say, still typing, not looking up. "Sorry," he says. "Boss is strict about the rules."

"Are you kidding?" I say. "It's just one sentence."

"Not kidding," he says.

I pick up my laptop and walk outside, sit on a bench in front of the restaurant, and finish the sentence. Luckily, I can still pick up the Wi-Fi out here. I'm obsessive about finishing the tasks I start. It is my Virgo lilith, or, in medical terms, my OCD diagnosis. Either way, I can't just leave a chart and pick it up later. I have to finish it.

I complete the sentence, tell her she is potentially a sex addict (lilith in Scorpio), remind her of my Venmo, and press send.

And when I look up, Thomas is exiting a black car with a group of girls. He is always surrounded by women.

"They kick you out?" he asks me.

"Do you have weed?" I ask.

Thomas makes me hang around for a bit with his dumb friends before he lets me hit his joint. We sit at a table in the corner, and everyone orders drinks. I loudly announce that I am broke, hoping someone will offer to buy me a

soda, but no one does. So I just sip water and tap my foot and pray no one tries to talk to me.

“So, how do you know Thomas?” the girl on my right asks. She is dressed like the girls who work here—black athleisure, tiny gold hoop earrings, copper hair parted severely down the middle.

“We ...” I pause, thinking. I was going to tell the truth, but I decide to lie instead to work on my acting skills. I did such an amazing job this morning. I am exercising now, I even noticed some muscle definition on my calves, so I may as well start auditioning again. “We worked together,” I say. “For a cannabis brand.”

“Cool,” the girl says. “What did you do for them?”

“I ran their social.” God this is boring. Socializing is so boring. Maybe I should just become an alcoholic like everyone else. “But I’m out of work right now and was hoping Thomas could spot me some bud.” I pause. “I need it for medical reasons.”

“Glaucoma?” she asks.

“Glaucoma? I’m twenty-nine.”

She laughs. “I don’t know. I just always hear that as being the medical reason for pot,” she says. “I don’t smoke it.”

“I can tell,” I say.

“Really? How?”

Like a thousand reasons pop into my head. She speaks too quickly. She clearly lacks originality. She thought a twenty-nine-year-old had glaucoma. But there is the most obvious one. “Because you called it pot.”

“I’m visiting from New York,” she says.

I know for a fact they don’t call weed “pot” in New York, because the Precious Starlets smoke it and call it “weed” like normal people. This girl is just a dumbass. This is exactly why I don’t socialize.

“That sucks you’re out of work,” she says. “I lost my job last year. It’s the worst.”

I wish she would stop speaking to me. I jab Thomas in the rib. I just want my fix. But he is busy yapping with another girl with tiny gold hoop earrings.

“What kind of jobs are you looking for?”

I see an opportunity. “Social media,” I say. “But in the meantime, I’ve been doing chart readings. I’m an astrologer.”

“Wow,” she says. “So LA.” Then she giggles as though she’s made a joke,

which she hasn't. It is such an unimaginative thing to say. Also, it is wrong. LA didn't invent astrology. And people are into it everywhere. I know they are into it in New York, because the Precious Starlets talk about astrology all the time. Hazel is a Gemini and Camilla is a Leo—an understated Leo, a quiet Leo, the best type of Leo.

“Do you want a reading?” I ask. This girl is nice, a pushover. Probably a Libra. I assume she will feel bad for me and say yes. Libras will do anything to avoid a conflict.

“Sure, why not?” she says, then pauses. “How much do you charge?”

“Two-fifty,” I say. She lives in New York, so she is probably used to things being overpriced.

“Damn,” she says.

“I'm really good,” I say. This isn't a lie. I've been told I changed people's lives, gave them self-esteem and the insight to take control of their destinies. Mostly when I hear these things, I just feel sad.

“For two-fifty, you better be.”

I force a smile, for business purposes. “Do you know your birth time?” I ask. “I also need the year, place, and date.”

“Hmm,” she says. “I'll have to double-check the birth time with my mom. I think I was born at three A.M., but I'm not sure. It might have been four.”

“An hour won't change anything,” I say. This isn't entirely true, but I want to do the reading now because I want the money. “As long as you know within a three-hour time frame.”

“Great,” she says. “October fourth.”

I smile. I am right—a Libra. Astrology is wrong, but I am always right.

“1996.”

I swallow. I can't believe Thomas is hanging out with a twenty-three-year-old. Actually I can. He's desperate, and these zoomers probably stroke his ego because they don't know any better.

“Ridgewood, New Jersey.”

I stifle a giggle. The Precious Starlets often talk shit about New Jersey suburbs. They say it is very “new money” and tacky there.

“Let's say three A.M.”

“Cool,” I say. I open my astrology app and type in the info.

“Wait,” she says. “I'm paying you hundreds of dollars to read something off an app?” She uses a polite voice, but this is a bit confrontational for a

Libra. Maybe she has a Sagittarius rising.

“I don’t read it off an app,” I say. “I use the app for the planetary calculations, as that’s how we do things in the modern age, and then I will use my brain to interpret the calculations for you.” I pause. “Do you know how to interpret a birth chart?”

This shuts her up.

“Okay,” I say. The information loads and I delight in being correct. Sagittarius rising, like I expected. A bunch more Libra. Nothing too interesting.

I proceed to tell her what it all means. I try to be polite, to gas her up. I don’t tell her about all her planets in fall, which is the opposite of exalted—not good.

“Wow,” she keeps saying. “This is all so scary accurate.”

I get this kind of reaction all the time. Most times, actually. People are just so stupid. Especially this girl, whatever her name is. I guess I’ll find out when I get paid.

When I’m done, I show her my Venmo page.

“You mean business,” she says, then laughs—another nonjoke.

“Gotta pay rent somehow,” I say, then swallow.

Thomas asks me if I’m ready to smoke, and I practically jump out of my seat.

“You hang out with twenty-three-year-old women now?” I ask, inhaling.

“*Pardon?*” he says in a bad French accent.

I pull out my phone. Thankfully, I have a Venmo payment for \$250 from someone named Jessica. God, such a suburban name. Almost worse than Emily.

I wave the phone in his face.

“Why did Jess pay you two hundred and fifty dollars?”

“I read her chart,” I say. “She was born in 1996.”

“Oh,” he says. “I always forget you do that.”

“Lucky you,” I say.

He takes the joint from my hand, and for a second I remember that he had those very fingers inside me less than thirty-six hours ago.

“Hey,” I say. “So I need you to spot me some weed, like to take home.”

Work is tough right now.”

“Okay,” he says. “I can spare you a few nuggets.” He pauses. “But you’d have to come home with me.” Then a terrible wink.

My high hits right then, so I agree.

Back inside, everything is more bearable. I enjoy watching the hot waiters march around, and I don’t even mind that Drake—my least favorite Scorpio—is playing.

When I sit back down, I take a big gulp of water. My mouth is dry as hell.

“Oh my gosh,” Jess says. “Your eyes are so red.”

She is all up in my face, and I lean back and look at my phone, ignoring her. “Must be the pot,” I say without looking up, and she laughs way too hard. One thing I’ve noticed about being an unpleasant bitch most of the time is that people will laugh extremely hard at your jokes because they’re desperate to relieve the tension.

Without thinking, I open Beau’s Instagram page.

“Is that your boyfriend?” Jessica asks.

I can’t afford acting lessons, but lying is free. “Yes,” I say, looking up at her. “Yes, this is my boyfriend.”

She starts to hover over the phone. “He’s really cute,” she says.

“I know,” I say. Then I put the phone back in my bag. I don’t want her getting any ideas. There are no new photos anyway.

“How long have you been dating?” she asks.

“Um,” I say. “Like six months.”

“Wow,” she says. “That’s not nothing.”

“Not nothing,” I echo, then turn to Thomas. “Wanna get out of here?”

The girl he is talking to looks at me like I just slapped her in the face.

“Let’s do one more round,” he says.

I roll my eyes, then realize I want a soda. “Can you get me a Sprite?”

He nods and flags down the waiter.

“And fries?” I need to stock up on fat while Thomas is paying. I can go long periods without eating as long as I get enough fat. This is basically keto, right?

“How did you meet your boyfriend?” Jess asks as soon as I turn back around, like a little fly in my ear.

“Church,” I say.

DAWN.

I'm smoking a cigarette out my window, looking out for Karen's Honda Fit and scanning Instagram. Exalted posted photos of various celebrities, most of whom I do not recognize, with text that says "Dating a Cancer" or "Dating a Taurus" and then various attributes.

I scroll for Leo. I don't care what it's like to date the other signs. But I pause on "Dating a Gemini." That woman Steph scared away from Jay's Bar—Lily—was a Gemini. Tara was a Gemini too. Leo and Gemini are supposed to be a good match, but it hasn't worked out so well for me.

I scan the traits. The first is "Chats on chats on chats." True. On our first date, Tara and I talked at the bar for five hours. We completely lost track of time, and she accidentally missed dinner with her dad. I remember being jealous that Tara's dad took her out to dinner. But I was happy she skipped it to spend time with me.

The second is "Legitimately curious about you." That's also true. Tara always asked me about my day, my interests, my dislikes. No one ever seemed to care that much about what I thought or what I was doing. She gave me the attention I deserved.

The third is "Sex!!!!" Ugh, our sex *was* good. I can't even think about it.

The fourth is "Sassy & sarcastic." Finally, something I don't miss. Sass is fine, but I don't get sarcasm, and it was Tara's first language. I like to mean what I say and say what I mean. Unless I'm lying to get something, but that's different.

The fifth is "Won't text you back for 5 hours." Another thing I don't miss. Tara was flighty. She would go out with her friends and completely forget about me. I hated that. Good riddance.

Sixth is "Will dump you out of the blue." Another one that stings. I take a sharp drag of my cigarette and flip to Leo.

There is a photo of Madonna. Only a Leo could pull off the name Madonna.

The first trait is “Laughs on laughs on laughs.” True. I’m fun and I’m funny. And I don’t need to be sarcastic.

The second one is “Killer fashion advice.” Also true. I loved to take Tara shopping. She had a great body, and I would always encourage her to buy the most expensive dresses. She would pay, of course, but I would encourage her to buy things she normally wouldn’t. I picked out matching Juicy Couture tracksuits that we would wear around the house and feel like those Hilton sisters who were popular when my son was in high school.

The third is “Wants you to shine.” True again. She said I made her better.

The fourth is “Seductive as hell.” Exalted is so good at making me feel good about myself. I want to know more about her. I decide she must be a woman. Men aren’t this observant. I wonder again if she is single.

The fifth is “Rage!!!!” I hear Karen’s Honda Fit and crush my cigarette in an empty Red Bull can and start spraying Ralph perfume. I run over to the couch and twirl my toe ring. I try to remain calm. No rage tonight.

I open my phone again and decide to DM Exalted. She probably gets a lot of DMs, but maybe she will open mine. Maybe she will look at my profile and think I am sexy. Maybe we will fall in love. Maybe she will take me to the French Riviera.

EMILY.

We get to Thomas's at around 8:00 P.M. As soon as we're inside, he tries to kiss me. I pull away.

"First things first," I say.

He flicks on a minimalist light tube thing on the floor. Everything in his apartment is stark and contemporary, Swedish looking, a glorified Ikea catalog. It's bizarre being here, jolted back in time, to when I was younger and the world was slightly brighter, when I was making money and I had color in my face.

Thomas has a fancy record player like a real douchebag. He walks over, and I skip over to stop him in his tracks. At first he seems excited, like I'm making a move.

"I'll pick," I say to clarify.

I start flicking through the records, one embarrassingly over-hyped band after the next. Finally, I land on something I can stomach.

"Do you listen to anything other than Radiohead?" he asks when *Kid A* starts.

I shrug. "I like Counting Crows." I am kind of kidding but not really. "Hard Candy" always sounds perfect after a bong rip.

"You're really something, Em."

"Don't call me that." I plop on the stiff minimalist couch. "Everything in Its Right Place" cloaks the apartment in a sinister mood. "Where the weed at?" I ask.

Thomas goes into his bedroom, and I open Instagram. WtfBeau has the little pink-and-orange circle indicating a new story. He doesn't normally post stories, so this feels exciting. I make sure the sound is off and open it. He's at the Big Sleep with the man from yesterday at Subtropical. They have their arms around each other and are dancing to Drake, surely an ironic act.

When Thomas comes out of his bedroom, I put the phone facedown on the couch. He walks over to the kitchen and puts a few nugs in a Ziploc bag, and

I practically start drooling, like a heroin addict or something. Maybe this is part of my OCD. When he comes back into the living room, I snatch it from his hand and put it in my bag.

“No ‘thank you’?” He sits down way too close to me on the couch. I don’t want our legs touching, so I hop up on the ledge.

“Do you ever go to the Big Sleep?” I ask.

“Yeah,” he says, “I love that place.” He starts to untie his shoes—hideous burgundy sneakers that resemble overpriced bowling shoes.

“Can we go?” I ask.

Thomas laughs. “You want to go to a club?” he asks. “Where people dance and have fun?”

“I love to dance!” I say. I get up and start shaking violently to Radiohead’s “The National Anthem,” jumping around like a maniac.

Thomas hops up and starts dancing with me, and I want to sit back down but instead practice my acting, pretend to enjoy Thomas’s obsequious company. We dance and laugh and shake our hair.

“See?” I say, out of breath. “I love to have fun.” I put my hands on my head to open up my lungs. “Let’s go to the club.” I am heaving.

He leans over to kiss me, and this time I don’t pull away. I go with it. I am *acting*. And I am amazing at it. Maybe there will be a director tonight at the Big Sleep who will see me kissing Thomas and know I am just acting because no one as alluring as me would kiss a loser like him, and he or she will cast me in a film and I will become the next Tilda Swinton.

“I thought we were gonna stay in and hang,” he says, and slides his hand onto my waist. The primal part of me likes the feeling. But the thinking part of my brain does not.

“But how fun would it be to go out?” I ask. “I might even drink my one cocktail of the year and give you a blow job later!”

“Let’s go out!” he shouts.

“Let’s!” I say, playing the excited party girl, Thomas’s delighted lover. I skip into the bathroom to examine my appearance. I look a bit slovenly, wearing a black T-shirt for a dress and no makeup. Everyone in LA is fairly haggard, but I’m not twenty- three anymore. I can’t get away with that off-duty cokehead look anymore. I need some makeup. I look in the drawers. Surely some girl left her mascara here.

In the mirror cabinet, I find both mascara and eyeliner and apply them

heavily.

“You ready?” Thomas asks, peeking in the bathroom. For a second, I feel like we are an actual couple, and it’s gross but also nice to feel like I am sharing this wretched life with someone.

“Do you have anything I could wear?” I ask. “Hasn’t some rich girl left a designer dress here?”

“You know I only have eyes for you, Em,” he says.

“For real,” I say, breaking character for a second. “I know you’re a whore and I want to look good tonight.”

“Who are you trying to impress?” he asks, leaning in the doorframe.

“You!” I say, back in character.

Thomas smiles. “I’ll look.”

He comes back with a purple velvet Betsey Johnson dress. I nearly squeal. It looks exactly like the dress Winona wore to the *Age of Innocence* premiere. It’s like the fancy version of my Juicy tracksuit, and purple works well with my hair.

“I’m so glad you like it,” Thomas says.

There is a huge line outside the Big Sleep, which bums me out, but Thomas sneaks us in the side entrance. He hugs the guy at the door, then introduces me.

“What is a beautiful woman like you doing with this guy?” the doorman jokes.

I smile. It has been a long time since I’ve been called beautiful. He probably says it to everyone, but it still feels nice, to be wearing an expensive dress and receiving empty flattery. I feel like Winona Ryder in 1993.

“Heyyy,” Thomas says. “Easy.”

“I’m just messing,” the doorman says. “Have fun.” He opens the door. “And if he gives you trouble, you know where to find me.” He winks at me, and—shocking myself—I wink back. My flirty Gemini moon is out tonight.

I feel eyes all over me as we make our way inside. The place is smaller than I imagined—just a packed candlelit bar and a small dance floor with couples swaying to R&B slow jams. My whole body vibrates knowing Beau might be here. Also, the bass is extremely powerful, so I might be vibrating from that.

“I have to run to the bathroom,” Thomas says once we reach the bar.

“Give me your card,” I say. “I’ll get us drinks.”

Thomas hands it over. “Keep it open,” he says.

I want to break my promise to get a cocktail and get a soda instead, pretend it is vodka. But I am so jittery at this point, I might actually need a cocktail. I like the way martinis look, but they are too strong; I could pass out. I order two glasses of champagne.

“Chic,” Thomas says when he sees the champagne glasses.

Everything he says and does embarrasses me, but I am trying not to break character, so I say, “*Très chic*,” and clink his glass.

“Hey,” he says. “I saw my coke dealer in the bathroom.” He pauses and puts his hand on my waist. I take a big sip to steady myself. “Any interest?”

I pause. I had a pretty serious coke phase a few years ago, one that experts would likely call a “problem.” It was when I was making good money. I liked that coke made me talk to people and made me interested in going to parties, where I met more people to give readings to, translating to more money. For a while, I even had something resembling a “social life.”

I met Thomas on cocaine, and he was the reason I stopped doing it. I woke up one morning with him beside me, and I was coming down and he’d sweat all over my bed. The sheets smelled like shit. I went into the bathroom and threw up, kicked him out of my house, deleted his number, and vowed to never do coke again. I haven’t done it since, and I haven’t felt the urge. Having no social life is better than having a fake social life that involves sleeping with Thomas. Then I remember I am sleeping with Thomas again. Well, I’m letting him go down on me in exchange for weed, an important distinction.

“Anyone home?” Thomas asks, tapping my forehead.

I chew my lip. Beau is here tonight. If there is a time for a little synthetic confidence, now is it. “I’m down,” I say.

Thomas opens his phone and shoots off a text. He seems pretty eager. I wonder if he has a problem. Everyone in LA, it seems, is a cokehead. This is probably why everyone drives like a maniac on the freeway—they’re all either coming up or coming down. I don’t miss driving at all.

While Thomas texts, I scan the room. It’s crowded. People keep bumping into me, each time splashing little bits of champagne into the air. I don’t want to ruin this dress, which I do not plan on returning to Thomas’s closet. Also, I

have my laptop in my bag. So I chug the champagne in one gulp, put the glass down, and drag Thomas by the arm onto the dance floor.

“She’s on one tonight!” Thomas shouts to no one.

On the dance floor, Thomas checks his phone. I scan the room. No sign of Beau.

“Oh man,” Thomas says. “He doesn’t sell anymore.” He pauses. “His shit was so good. That sucks.”

“Too bad,” I say, but I’m kind of relieved. I’m feeling the champagne, and if I add uppers into the mix, I might end up actually giving Thomas a blow job.

Thomas takes my hand and spins me in a circle. I pretend to enjoy dancing with him and with every turn I scan the room for Beau and my laptop hits me in the rib cage.

“You looking for someone?” Thomas finally asks. Then: “Am I not enough?”

“Sorry,” I say. “I just haven’t been out in a while. I’m just taking it all in.”

“Do you wanna sit down?” It’s loud as hell, so he leans into my ear to talk and gets a little spit on my cheek.

“Sure,” I say. Maybe this way I will get a view of Beau. Walking to the side, I notice a few guys in Dodgers hats checking me out. I haven’t gotten male attention in forever. At Mirror Box, no one is ever looking at me. They are looking at the dancers. Growing up, people were always looking at me. My jet-black hair stood out in the suburbs. I had a kind of morbid Wednesday Addams look. And then my freaky blue eyes were the icing on the weird cake. A word I got a lot in Riverside: “striking.” When I told my parents this, they said I should spend more time reading. They said I should think about my future. They said my physical appearance wouldn’t get me anywhere.

I said I’d prove them wrong, but I never did.

When I moved to LA, no one ever noticed me. “Striking” girls were a dime a dozen. The only ones who seemed to get anywhere were either daughters of directors or excellent at schmoozing, and I am neither.

Thomas squeezes next to some girls in shiny body-con dresses. They look like they could be from Riverside, not chic at all. This place is grim. I am not at all surprised that Thomas likes it here, but I am surprised that Beau likes it.

“How does it feel?” Thomas asks. He puts his hand on my knee. This acting job is becoming increasingly difficult. “Being out in the wild?”

“I have to go to the bathroom,” I say. Thomas tries to show me where it is, but I don’t want to know. I want to get lost and maybe run into Beau. I check every corner of the room that probably isn’t the bathroom. No sign of Beau anywhere.

On the toilet, I refresh his Instagram. Nothing. He must have left. He’s probably sleeping right now. I imagine his long black eyelashes fluttering on his pillowcase.

“I feel sick,” I say when I get back to Thomas. “I just threw up in the bathroom. I really can’t handle alcohol. I’m going to go home.”

As I head toward the door, Thomas grabs my arm. “Are you serious?” he asks.

“Yeah,” I say. I shake him off. “I’m allergic to alcohol.”

And then I leave the bar. Outside, the sky is dark and the air is cool. I feel relieved to be alone again. I take out my phone and type my address into Maps. It’s a forty-five-minute walk, which sounds perfect. People always say I’m courting danger walking alone at night in LA, but they watch too much true crime. I’ve been walking alone in LA at night since I was a teenager. Nothing bad has ever happened to me. The city is the least scary at this time, when it isn’t bright and noisy and aggressive, but rather cool and calm and quiet.

I put on *Kid A* and start walking.

I wake up with a headache. I can’t fucking believe it. One drink and I have a hangover.

I feed Lydia and grab a blue Gatorade from the fridge. I have just one left. And no turkey or crackers. Luckily, I’m not hungry at all because I’m still full from the fries at Subtropical.

I chug the Gatorade and make my way back to my bed, where I put my laptop on my thighs. I consider checking my finances but decide against it. There is no need to look at my bank account directly. Money is coming in, I know this, and I’m being good. I have free weed, as long as I keep up the acting job with Thomas, which also amounts to free acting lessons. The check from BuzzFeed will come in soon. I will surely have more requests for readings.

I check my Gmail. Nothing.

On Instagram, I have just one DM, from someone called BreakofDawn. *Hi! I just wanted to let you know I love your account so much! I hope you're having a fabu day :)*

What would be *fabu* is if she could pay me \$250 for a reading.

I heart her response—for business purposes—and reply, *Do you want a reading?*

Typing bubbles appear immediately. *I'd love one!*

Great, I write back. It's \$250.

Wow! You must be good. :)

A tiny rage blooms inside me. Why must everyone comment on the price of my readings? People love my account, eat up my memes, then act shocked when they find out I need to make a living. Living ain't cheap.

I see her typing again.

I'm a little low on cash right now, but I'll see what I can do. I'll be in touch.

Ugh.

Let me know, I respond, then add a smiley face—again, for business purposes.

My business is shit.

I have to make another viral meme. I will make a viral meme and then I will advertise my readings in the same post. This will work.

Subtropical has been a great muse recently, so I decide to head over there. Walking will probably spark my imagination. Walking does good things for the brain. All the greats walked: Thoreau. Virginia Woolf. Beethoven.

Me.

I kiss Lydia on the forehead and head out the door, scurrying quietly past Marta's unit.

It's cloudy out, which thrills me. It's never cloudy in Southern California. I often fantasize about moving to Portland or Seattle, where it's cloudy all the time. But I can't get cast in a movie in the Pacific Northwest. Although it's not like I am being cast in LA either.

I turn on *OK Computer* and think about what type of music Beau listens to. He photographs musicians, which I know from his website, which I've now visited a freakish number of times. He seems to photograph mostly hip-hop artists, and I hate rap. But maybe I could learn to like it. Walking down Hollywood Boulevard, I wonder what happened to Beau last night. He

probably just got tired and went home. It's not like we had plans to meet up or anything. I keep having to remind myself we've never met.

I start thinking about memes. My most popular memes have all been kind of cruel. Most successful memes are kind of cruel. I try to lean into my hangover and think mean thoughts. I laugh thinking about how Thomas thought I was going to give him a blow job. I will do a mean meme about Sagittarians, the most delusionally optimistic sign in the zodiac.

I sit at my normal table at Subtropical, and the hot waiter brings me a black coffee without me having to say anything. I open my laptop and start scrolling my Instagram Explore page. I won't steal another meme—not worth it—but I will browse for inspiration. Just as I am starting to zone out, I hear my name.

“Emily?”

I look up. It's the girl from the day before, the Libra. I smile weakly in her direction.

“I can't get over that reading from yesterday,” she says. “It was so freaky accurate. I sent it to my boyfriend, and he was *shook*.”

“Does he want one?” I ask. “Maybe I can shake him too.”

Jess cackles, then says, “I'll ask him!”

“Okay,” I say. “Let me know. I'll just be working.” I put on my headphones to signal for her to stop talking to me.

On Instagram, I search the hashtags #dumb and #idiot. I'm not finding anything too inspiring. Teens being “goofy.” Florida Man memes. Some sort of “fail” involving a tractor.

After fifteen minutes or so, I feel some taps on my shoulder. It's the Libra again.

“Hey,” she whispers. “Isn't that your boyfriend?” She points at someone on the other end of the restaurant. She is right and wrong. It's Beau.

My stomach fills with adrenaline.

“I recognized his bone structure.”

“Yeah, that's him,” I say, trying to remain calm. “But we're in a fight. We aren't speaking.”

“Oh,” she says. Her face falls.

“Did you hear from your boyfriend?” I change the subject so she stops prying into my fake relationship.

“Not yet!” She says this as though she is delivering good news, which she

obviously isn't.

"Okay," I say, then put my headphones back on and browse Instagram. Inspired by Jessica's tapping, I decide instead to do a mean meme about Libras—always so peppy and confused, very "dropped on their head" vibes. Airheads. They don't get enough shit from the other online astrology accounts, who instead always come for Leos, Geminis, Scorpios. It is so obvious people attack these signs because they are threatened. Of Leo charm. Of Gemini genius. And of Scorpio sorcery. No one wants to be seen the way a Scorpio can see them.

Libras, I decide at this moment, are the true antagonists of the zodiac. Libra represents the beginning of the sun's loss of vitality into the winter season, and therefore the sun isn't happy there. Venus, which rules Libra, is considered an enemy of the sun. So Libra suns are basically cursed. It's a placement "in detriment"—the opposite of exalted. But I don't need to get into all of that for my meme. I just need to make people laugh and feel seen, maybe even vindicated. I need to give them an outlet for their rage. I need to let them hate without feeling like bad people. That is all anyone ever wants. And this is why memes are so popular.

Surely everyone has been subject to a clueless Libra like *Jessica*.

I look up and watch Beau walk to the bathroom, then feel those prickly fingers on my shoulder again. Jessica.

"Can I ask what you're fighting about?" she asks.

I feel my eyes begin to roll. Then I remember my acting practice. The Strasberg method. Immerse myself in the character.

"I can't keep up with him"—I lean toward her and lower my voice—"sexually."

Jessica's eyes widen cartoonishly, and I start to wonder if she actually was dropped on her head as a baby. Then I wonder if she's ever had an orgasm. It seems like she hasn't. A lot of women haven't had orgasms. As a Scorpio stellium, this is not my plight.

"How often do you have sex?" she asks.

I blow on my coffee and steam rises. "He wants it, like, five times a day."

Jessica's eyes widen even farther. "Five times *a day*?"

I nod casually. Libras are always flabbergasted by the most innocent information. Very naive sign. So I decide to lean in. "Yeah," I say. "I mean, I'm really good in bed."

Beau exits the bathroom, but obviously he has no idea who I am or that I am talking about him, so I don't stop. I am addicted to Jessica's attention. I feel like I am auditioning for an auteur director who's letting me improvise with the script.

"Men are always comparing their dick sizes, but no one talks about how they are also constantly comparing our pussies." I blow on my coffee again, watching Jessica watch me. "And mine, I've been told on numerous occasions, is exceptionally delicate and smells like a rose."

I notice that I am having fun making things up. My therapist, whom I can no longer afford, taught me to notice when I was enjoying myself. This might make it easier to enjoy myself more often, she said. I didn't believe her. I didn't really believe anything she said. I went to therapy for an audience, to workshop my one-woman show. I just wanted attention. I went to therapy for the same reason I go to a strip club in the daytime.

Jessica looks down, and I know she is thinking about her own vagina and whether it is adequate. I get a twisted thrill watching her spiral. After she is silent for a few seconds, I put on my headphones. I look back at my computer and start searching the tags #clueless and #airhead.

After a while, I feel the tapping of Jessica's cold finger again.

"I still can't get over *five times a day*," she says, and giggles. I wonder if she and her boyfriend have ever had sex. They probably just masturbate at the same time in separate rooms. Whatever they do to get off, I can tell it is very dark.

"Don't get me wrong." I lift my coffee mug to my lips and pretend to sip. *Acting*. "I have a strong libido. But five times a day is too much for me." I put the mug down, then whisper, "I'm fragile."

"I mean," Jessica says, leaning in. "Your delicate vagina." She looks at her lap.

"Exactly," I say.

I feel a sudden wave of pleasure and look up to see Beau walking past my table. He has a cigarette behind his ear. We make brief eye contact and my spine shivers.

DAWN.

Two hundred and fifty dollars is a lot of money for an astrology reading, but it seems worth it. I need some direction. My last two romantic prospects ran screaming because they knew my exes. All lesbians know each other. I'll have to either meet someone with no ties to the lesbian community or go back to men. Maybe the reading will help me decide which, or where to look.

I take an extra shift at the Blind Pig to justify spending \$250 on a reading. Luckily, I make \$200 in tips alone because I get a big birthday dinner. As always, I keep my eye out for Rolexes and any other signs of wealth, people I can flirt with. But unfortunately the Blind Pig isn't where fancy people go. It's mostly college students and middle-class losers.

I just smile and put my tits out and collect my money and get the fuck out of there.

Back at the apartment complex, I am thrilled to see Karen's empty parking space. She is almost always home at night. I've never seen her with or even heard her talk about another person. It is just her and her orange-striped cat. I've never been inside her apartment, but I've peeked in on occasion. She has a lot of stuffed animals. Tara said she is probably a furry. Maybe she is at some weird furry orgy tonight.

Smoking an Ultra Light out the window, I open Instagram to DM Exalted, my future ex-wife. *I want the reading! I can Venmo you the \$250 :).* I wait for her to respond, but there is nothing. I guess she isn't on her phone. I decide to figure out this Venmo thing while I wait for her to respond.

As I am typing my bank account info into the app, Exalted responds: *I need your birthday, including year, birthplace, and birth time.*

Hmm. I don't know my birth time. My mom will probably know, but we don't have the best relationship. When my dad left, I left too. I moved in with my boyfriend, then my next boyfriend, then my first girlfriend, until I moved into this shithole about ... I don't want to do the math.

I pull up my mom's contact on my phone and try to remember the last

time we spoke. I think it was at my cousin's funeral. He died in a motorcycle accident. We weren't close, but I went to pay my respects. This was about five years ago. My mom came with her new husband, a used-car salesman with a beer belly named Billy, who I called Beer Belly Billy behind his back. At the funeral, he gave me a gross wet kiss on the cheek and told me I needed to come by the house for a steak dinner—he'd gotten a new grill or something. My mom told me I looked very feminine, which I knew was her backhanded way of commenting on my lesbian lifestyle, of which she obviously does not approve. But homophobia aside, I can't blame her for hating me. I abandoned her right after my dad abandoned her. But I had to get out of that house. It was too depressing. I was sixteen and didn't want to have to listen to my mom wailing and screaming 24/7. Plus, she had my sister, Debi, the golden child, who couldn't make the funeral because she was busy making lots of money in San Francisco. I told my mom and Beer Belly Billy it was good to see them, and I would be in touch soon about the steak dinner. We all knew that was a lie.

Hi mom. I hope you're doing well. Random question: I was wondering if you happen to remember my birth time. I'm getting an astrology reading. Very woo woo, I know. :)

As I wait for her to respond, I consider getting a dog. I've always wanted a tiny white fluffy dog I could put in my purse. But getting a dog also feels like giving up.

EMILY.

Thanks to Jessica and her boyfriend and BuzzFeed, I can pay next month's rent. And maybe a little of the rent I owe, not that Marta asked for it. But she always could. I must be prepared.

Lydia is looking slim and so am I. I pick her up and cradle her in my arms and look into the mirror I have propped against the wall across from my bed. I remember telling that wide-eyed Libra about my "exceptionally delicate vagina" and laugh until Lydia jumps from my arms like she is afraid of me. She often seems afraid of me.

I haven't been able to come up with a great meme. I post something half-ass, an image of Natalie Portman from *The Professional*, holding a gun, and the text: "TFW it's been 4 years and your Libra friend still hasn't finished her story." Librans have a lot of trouble getting to the point.

I pick up my iPhone. On Instagram, I have a DM from BreakofDawn. *I was born 7/31/71, Riverside, CA, 9:03 pm.*

Seeing the word "Riverside" makes my stomach churn. I like to think of my fans as the coastal elite, not tragic suburbanites. I respond, then close Instagram. I'll do the chart at Subtropical.

I look at the date on my phone. It's November 26. I decide to write out my December rent check and slip it under Marta's door, four days early, so she understands that I am a responsible tenant who would never miss a rent payment.

After I write the check, I put on my black dress with my purple Juicy sweatsuit top. It is getting colder. I grab my laptop and wallet, put on Counting Crows in my headphones, and skip downstairs to slide the early rent check under Marta's door.

Then I go to Subtropical.

The walk is nice, with the fall breeze and the endorphins and everything. When I am about halfway there, I receive a text from my mom. I am worried someone died, but she just wants to know what I am doing for Thanksgiving.

I try to remember the last time I saw my parents. I think it was about five years ago. I was making money for the first time in my life and feeling pretty cocky. My cousin Rachel invited me to her apartment in Los Feliz, which is the nicer neighborhood next to mine, the neighborhood landlords claim my street is in. Rachel had a charming apartment in the hills toward Griffith Park. It was only a twenty-minute walk from my apartment but felt worlds away from my grungy little street. She hadn't told me my parents were going to be there, hers too. Everyone could fit comfortably in Rachel's apartment she somehow afforded, and she cooked for all of us.

In retrospect, I was a little rude to my parents that evening. We've never had a good relationship. They always act annoyed with my presence, and I act annoyed with theirs. I always wondered why they had even had a child to begin with. I think my parents had expected to create a nerd like them. Someone who fit the name Emily. Someone who wore glasses and read "voraciously" and only tried weed once in college. Someone like Rachel, who worked at a company that gave her benefits and knew how to cook Thanksgiving dinner.

Instead, they got me. Moody and unpleasant and fame obsessed. I wouldn't have liked me either. But I wanted them to be proud of me for finally making money, especially since they'd treated me like a failure my whole life.

But they weren't proud. They told me my lifestyle was unsustainable. They told me I wasn't investing in my future. They always said this, and I was sick of it.

I may have stormed out of the house saying, "I wish I'd never been born!"

Rachel kept telling me to apologize. She said my parents adored me and they were hard on me only because they thought I had so much potential. She said they always talked about my "off-the-charts test scores" and how they wished I had gone to college. Rachel told me this after three margaritas at Subtropical. I stormed out of there too. I don't love how often I storm out of places, but sometimes there's just no other way to get your point across.

It's bizarre that my mom is texting me now. Maybe she feels bad. My parents are getting older, and maybe they feel lonely and guilty that they alienated their only daughter.

I think about responding, but I don't. I can't bear my parents seeing my life now and proving them right. My lifestyle isn't sustainable. I am living

hand to mouth again, like when I was bartending and auditioning at nineteen.

But then I think maybe I can lie to them. Acting practice, like I did with Jessica and Thomas. I have that expensive dress I took from Thomas's house. I will take them to an expensive restaurant and bring Thomas as my date and make him pay. I will tell my parents that I've booked a major movie and that my astrology money is still flush. I can tell them that I've been hired as an astrological consultant for a major company that gives me benefits and a 401(k). I will make them feel foolish for having no faith in me.

I am getting high off the fantasy, starting to feel like it is real. The Strasberg method. I have a little pep in my step as I walk into Subtropical and claim my table. In between researching memes, I look up "best places for Thanksgiving dinner in Los Angeles." I text Thomas to see if he has plans. He doesn't. I am sure I could get him to come.

Filled with newfound courage, I text my mom back: *I'm having dinner at the Palm in Beverly Hills with my boyfriend. Would you like to join us? Our treat.*

My mom responds predictably: *Are you sure you can afford it?*

I reply quickly: *Absolutely.*

Then I open up Instagram and see that a famous Libra model, Stella Shadid, has tagged me in her Instagram story with the Libra meme I made before I left. Stella has twenty-six million followers, which means I am getting hundreds of new followers by the second. I should have known I could count on an airhead Libra to think my meme was "so on point."

This is the perfect time to advertise my readings. As I upload the post, I feel a familiar tapping on my shoulder. Cold, bony fingers. *Jessica.*

"Emily!" she says. "I head back for New York today, so I'm glad I got to see you before I leave." I wonder why she is spending all her time in LA in this one restaurant/bar/coffee shop/cave. "Thomas just thinks the world of you, and I can see why."

"Thomas would think the world of a rock," I say.

Jessica just laughs and laughs.

"Did you get your boyfriend's birth time?" I ask.

"I did!" she says.

Thank God. I do not want to talk to Jessica, but reading her boyfriend's birth chart will serve my three primary goals at the moment. First, to convince my parents that I am rich. Second, to keep Marta off my ass. Third,

to ensure I'll never, ever have to move back to Riverside.

"Great," I say. "Fork it over."

She clicks some keys on her laptop and then reads me the information. "I'm so excited to hear what you say," she says. "I sent your reading to my sister and a few other friends, and they were all *shook*." I wonder if she remembers that this is the precise phrasing she used yesterday and that it is a term that has been out of style for at least three years.

"Let me know if they want readings," I say. I have tunnel vision. If it isn't going to make me money, I am not going to do it. This must be how Elon feels.

"I love your entrepreneurial spirit, Em," she says. "You would kill it in New York."

I perk up a bit. I always thought New York would eat me alive. At least that's what my cousin Rachel said after a few too many margaritas once. She lived there for a few years after college and said I was "too fragile."

"Maybe I'll move there and we can be roommates!" I say, just to mess with Jessica. This serves my fourth primary goal: to start acting again.

Jessica's eyes light up. "That would honestly be so fun."

Surely her mom drank heavily while she was in utero. She has a lot of trouble picking up basic social signals. And I say this as someone who hasn't had a friend in nearly a decade.

I am excited to look at Jessica's boyfriend's chart. His name, she tells me, is *Chaz*.

Jessica and Chaz are comically incompatible. His sun is in Scorpio, and Libra suns and Scorpio suns do *not* get along. Take, for example, my Scorpio sun and my raging disdain for Jessica. Libras are flighty and shallow, and Scorpions are dark and intense. Chaz probably hates her too. The other placements are similarly at odds.

I can't let Jessica know any of this because I want her to pay me and I want her to recommend me to her friends. So I focus on the positive elements of Chaz's chart, such as his Scorpio sun, the best sun. He has a Gemini moon like me too, which suggests high intelligence.

"That's so cool that you and Chaz have such similar charts," she tells me. "No wonder I was instantly drawn to you."

"No wonder," I say. Chaz will probably break up with her soon.

I spend a lot of time emphasizing their *one* remotely com-patible

placement, their vaguely compatible Mercuries. *Vaguely*. But I make it seem like a bigger deal, for business purposes.

“Your Mercury is in Sagittarius and his Mercury is in Leo,” I say. “This is great because Mercury is how we communicate. And both your Mercuries are in fire signs, so you communicate similarly.” These Mercuries could just as easily clash, but I don’t need to tell Jessica that.

Jessica nods. “We have the best communication.”

“You both tend to be direct in your speech patterns. Playful and confident. You probably have really animated and exciting conversations.”

“So true,” Jessica says. “Chaz and I could chat for hours.”

One of the hot waiters walks over to adjust the blinds. A sliver of sun hits my eye and I squint.

“Or *can* chat for hours,” said Jessica.

For a second I feel bad for her. Maybe she isn’t as oblivious as I thought. Maybe she knows her relationship is shit. Maybe she knows I don’t like her. Maybe she puts on a positive face because it is all she has.

“It’s kind of amazing watching you do readings,” Jessica says. “It’s like your whole vibe changes. You seem so happy and at peace.”

I frown at her, then say I have to go. She tries to hug me, and I convert it into an air-kiss. I am not trying to touch anyone unless it is going to end in an orgasm.

That night in bed, I realize I forgot to do BreakofDawn’s birth chart. Jessica distracted me with her cursed energy. I pull my laptop onto my stomach and enter her info into Astro.com. She’s a Leo sun. The sun rules Leo so it’s at home there. But the rest of her planets are in fall—the opposite of exalted. Moon in Scorpio (vengeful as fuck—the only bad Scorpio placement). Mercury in Leo (obnoxious as hell; volume control issues). Venus in Virgo (major relationship saboteurs). Mars in Cancer (victim/martyr complex).

Obviously, I don’t write any of this to her. Instead I start typing, leaning into my Gemini ability to twist the truth, and tell her what I think she wants to hear. I tell her she is magnetic. I tell her she is a natural leader; people flock to her. I tell her she is powerful, maybe psychic, a lion and a witch. I tell her she has intrinsic sex appeal and refined tastes. And I tell her she probably has great hair.

DAWN.

I am browsing small white dogs on Petfinder when I receive an email from Exalted. I open it with delight and begin reading.

I'm thrilled with what I learn.

Exalted tells me I'm a star. This is exactly what I needed, confirmation that my current issues have nothing to do with me. It's everyone else who has the problem. I am powerful and psychic, a lion and a witch.

I give extra attention to the "Sex and Love" section. My Venus is in Virgo, which surprises me because I've always found Virgos boring. But Exalted makes it sound okay. She says I am a loyal partner and that I am attracted to intelligence and cleanliness. This is all true. Tara's car was always filthy, with gum wrappers and half-empty Dr Pepper bottles everywhere. It drove me nuts. But I liked her mind, I really did. I need to be with someone smart, like a doctor or a lawyer. I wonder where I will find this smart person. Exalted says I need a partner with integrity.

My Mars is in Cancer, which means I am very sexy. I wonder if Exalted looked at my Instagram photos before she wrote that. I wonder if she could be my partner with integrity. She seems smart from her memes. She says I would make a good actor because I can be very moving. She also says I am hypersensitive and might experience extreme mood swings. I might also have a temper. I laugh at that because it sounds like an understatement.

I respond to the email, thanking her. Then I ask her if she lives in Southern California, and if so, I would love to take her out for a drink. I already know she thinks I'm sexy, so I may as well ask. I have nothing to lose.

Just as I hit send, a text from Steph pops up. She has been texting me a lot since the night at Jay's Bar, and I haven't responded. Exalted says I can hold a grudge. She is right.

Hi Dawn. I hope you're doing fabu. I still feel terrible about that night at Jay's Bar. I was being an idiot, and I sincerely apologize. If you don't have Thanksgiving plans, Beth and I would love to have you over.

Wow. She is really trying, inviting me to Thanksgiving dinner with her girlfriend who hates me. She must have had to *beg* Beth to agree to that. I enjoy imagining how guilty she feels and how desperately she wants me to forgive her. I get high thinking about withholding the apology she so desperately craves. I think that is my Venus in Virgo.

Truth be told, I hadn't given one thought to Thanksgiving. My son used to always come home, but I can't count on it anymore. When I was with Tara, we would have him over there and give him the guest room. But two adults in a studio apartment is rough. Sometimes he will come up for just the day, often with a friend. He has one friend I like named Jax. He smokes cigarettes and drinks Cook's with me and loves *48 Hours* and Lifetime movies. He's a Leo too, and sometimes we look at Exalted memes together. The first time I met Jax, I went to the bathroom and overheard him say to Bo, "Your mom is so cool!" I listened carefully for Bo's reaction but heard nothing.

For a while I thought Jax and my son might be lovers, but Bo insisted they are just best friends. That relieved me. The last thing I want is a gay son. Life is hard enough.

I think about texting him, but I want him to text me first. I don't want to be a needy mom. When he was little, he worshipped me. He thought I was the coolest person on the planet. As he got older, he seemed to find me embarrassing. I guess I can't blame him. I'm not exactly mom of the year. I decide to send him a casual text.

Any Thanksgiving plans?

I wait for a response, and when none comes, I go back to looking at dogs on Petfinder and think about where and how I'll find this partner with integrity. I hope Exalted responds to my email.

Bo calls me the day before Thanksgiving as I'm walking to 7-Eleven for more cigarettes.

"Hi, Mom," he says.

"Hi, baby," I say.

"So I have some bad news," he says.

My heart jumps, and I worry that he's going to tell me he's moving to New York, my biggest fear. Los Angeles is already too far away.

"I was going to visit you for Thanksgiving," he says, "but Jax is in the

hospital with appendicitis, so I have to take care of him.”

“Oh, poor thing,” I say. I try to make my voice sound sympathetic despite the familiar rage rising in my chest. I don’t buy it. I assume Bo just wants to avoid me and my lame life. Besides, I’m pretty sure Jax’s parents live in the Valley. If he’s actually in the hospital, then why can’t *they* take care of him? But I vow to be nice about it, because I haven’t been drinking and therefore have control, and I don’t want to alienate Bo more than I already have. “Is he okay?”

“I think he’ll be fine,” Bo says. “I just want to be there for him because he’s always been there for me.”

“That’s good,” I say, forcing a sweetness into my voice that I don’t feel. Jax has always been there for him? What about his single mother who *raised* him? What about me? How dare he leave me alone like this on Thanksgiving, one of the few times a year I get to see him. Jax gets to see Bo all the time, and I can’t even remember the last time I was alone with him.

I take a deep breath and look at a palm tree swinging in the breeze, try to channel its serene energy.

“Well, send Jax my love,” I say. “And tell him Dawn has a bottle of Cook’s on ice waiting for him when he feels better.”

“I will,” Bo says. “Love you, Mom.”

I say, “Love you too,” but he’s already hung up.

EMILY.

My parents are already seated at the table when Thomas and I arrive at the Palm on Thanksgiving Day. The room is dim, and I am wearing the purple velvet Betsey Johnson dress I stole from Thomas's closet and a black Isabel Marant cardigan I also stole from Thomas's closet. Thomas looks decent in a blue button-down shirt and black slacks. He embarrasses me, but I think my parents will be proud of me for having a tall boyfriend. They won't like that he doesn't have a normal job, but they will like that he is overeager and polite and absolutely nothing like me.

Also, I instructed Thomas to lie about where he works.

"Hi!" I say when we reach the table, then give each of my parents a small and understated hug. I practiced my greeting over and over. Not overeager, because my parents are forever skeptical of my antics, but I want to show them I am a different person. A happy person. A confident person. A person who has her shit together. Not a person who will storm out of a room without warning.

"Mom, Dad," I say, "this is my boyfriend, Thomas."

"Pleased to meet you," Thomas says. They exchange handshakes and then we sit down.

My parents look extremely out of place in Beverly Hills. My mom is wearing a brown blazer. She looks like a lesbian—the bad kind—as she always does. Her hair is a drab, mousy brown streaked with gray she doesn't bother to color. She wears unstylish glasses and a rusty silver necklace. I feel sad looking at her. My dad too, but he can pull off shabby more easily. He looks like a nerdy professor, which he is. My mom too. I think that's why they are so obsessed with my "potential." They want me to get rich and save them from Riverside City College.

"I'm so happy to finally meet you both," Thomas says after we order our drinks. I wanted to order a Shirley Temple but thought my parents might find this juvenile, so I said, "Let's order a bottle of white," and picked one that

was extremely expensive. Thomas jabbed me under the table because we had agreed on a price limit. But I promised him a blow job and I plan to deliver this time. And I know for this reason that the terms of our deal are not set in stone. I have him in the palm of my hand.

“I am such a fan of Emily,” Thomas continues, “and I’ve always wanted to see where she came from.”

My parents look confused. I’ve never introduced them to a boyfriend before. I’ve never *had* a boyfriend before, not a *real* one, not even now. Like being friendless, being single is also my choice. I know I’m not the prettiest person in Los Angeles, but I am a Scorpio stellium and therefore possess an innate sensuality that is frankly undeniable. My life has seen a series of Thomases—eager men who chase and chase. I crave their attention, but I also hate it. Flattery is a demonic social practice, a trick, sure to disappoint. When I settle down, I know it is going to be intense and all-encompassing and forever.

That’s why meeting—or, I guess, *discovering*—Beau is such a big deal. He is the first person I’ve ever been able to see myself with. Just thinking his name fills my whole body with warmth. I can’t wait to introduce my parents to Beau. But they probably won’t get it. By the time I’m with Beau, I probably won’t be talking to them anymore. I’ll be living in Tribeca or le Marais, where I’ll star in off-Broadway plays or indie movies and invite Jessica to premieres for charity. I’ll take care of my parents financially, of course—I’m not a monster. But I won’t speak to them.

“We’re not quite sure where Emily came from,” my dad says.

He makes this joke all the time. The old me would have said something bratty along the lines of *Did Mom have an affair?* But not tonight! Tonight I am going to be pleasant. I am going to show them that everything is different now. So I just laugh along with my dad as if I’m in on the joke, as if I *invented* the joke. As I laugh, my mom shoots me a concerned glance. She always seems on edge around me, as though I am about to release a grenade or detonate the vest. I want to put her at ease.

“So, what do you do, Thomas?” my dad asks.

I am excited he is asking because it is a topic Thomas and I rehearsed.

“I’m a consultant,” Thomas says. “At a firm downtown.” We decided to omit the firm name in case my parents did research, and I know they’re too polite to pry.

“That’s fantastic,” my dad says. For the first time in years, he seems proud of me. I am addicted to it. I try to think of the last time he’s been proud of me or if he’s ever been proud of me. All my parents ever seemed to care about were my SAT scores.

The waiter comes with the expensive bottle of wine, and I suggest my dad taste it first. My dad seems delighted with the new me. My mom is more suspicious. She’s always been the tougher one—a Taurus, bullheaded and charmless. If it were just me and my dad, I think we might figure out how to get along. My dad is a Pisces—dreamy and gentle—and he understands my obsession with Winona Ryder. He understands film. My mom cares only about books and plants and paying bills on time.

“It’s hard to stay afloat in this city,” my mom says. I take a deep breath. I can’t let her get under my skin. Thomas brought a cannabis vape pen, so I won’t lose my cool. Since I don’t have any pockets, we agreed that when I need it, I will tap his right knee three times and he will hand it to me, and I will smoke it casually in the bathroom.

I hit him with the three taps.

As I pee and inhale, I try to remember the things my therapist had said to me. My mom came up all the time, and my therapist always said things and I always zoned out. Her office was on the third story of this building with huge windows, and there were these gorgeous palms that swayed against the San Gabriels. And I was always a little high.

I vaguely recall her telling me my mom was threatened by me.

No shit, Sherlock. Of course my mom, a mousy Taurus, is threatened by me, a genius vixen who captures her husband’s attention. I can’t believe I paid someone to tell me that.

I inhale until the smoke tickles my lungs and my muscles slacken. After washing my hands, I pull out my eye drops. My cannabis habit was always an issue when I was younger. My mom said it was destroying my brain cells. I told her it was expanding my artistic potential. She said there is no such thing as artistic potential. “Art was made up by rich people,” she’d said.

“That’s why I like it,” I said back.

I blink Visine into my eyes and reenter the dining room. I can do this; I can get my mom on my side. I decide to consider it the biggest acting job of

my life.

Back at the table, the waiter is telling everyone about the special, roast turkey with all the trimmings. I already know I want the shrimp cocktail and the steak frites. Thomas and my parents listen actively, nodding like dogs being trained. Finally the waiter stops talking and we all order, and no one orders the traditional Thanksgiving meal.

While we wait, my dad asks Thomas what kinds of things he consults on.

In the car on the way over, I googled “what do consultants do?” I told Thomas to say “general strategy” and “tech implementations,” then ask my dad about his job, which is exactly what he does. My dad doesn’t seem suspicious, but my mom still does.

By the time our appetizers arrive, my dad is relaxed and seems a bit drunk. He is on his second glass of wine. My mom has hardly touched hers.

“So, Emily,” my dad asks. “Are you acting?”

I can’t believe he is asking this. He must be impressed by Thomas, or just drunk. My parents *never* mention my acting aspirations. My mom glares at my dad, then glares at me. I also rehearsed the answer to this question, although I am more prepared for them to ask what I am doing for money.

“Yes,” I say. I googled “hottest contemporary directors” this morning. I don’t follow “cinema” anymore, but my dad does. He reads the *New Yorker*. I wanted to pick someone he would recognize. I read some names I found online to Thomas, and he said I should say Nico Nadler, a hip horror director with “heavy Freudian themes.” I knew my dad would love this.

“He’s directed two major horror flicks for A24,” Thomas said in the car.

“What’s A24?” I asked.

“Jesus, Em,” he said. “It’s only the most relevant film distribution company of the last seven years. You know, I’d say your naivety could get you somewhere, but you’re probably too old for that.”

This was the smartest thing Thomas had ever said to me.

“I just got a role in the new Nico Nadler movie,” I say. “He directed *Solstice*”—Thomas instructed me to say this—”and *Inborn*—”

“Oh, I know who he is,” my dad says. “He’s fantastic. That is just fantastic, Em. I am so proud of you.”

I could melt right here on the table.

I look over at my mom. “How are you paying your bills?” she asks predictably. Luckily, I have an answer for this, one that I’ve rehearsed several

times.

“Oh, please, Sharon,” my dad says. “Let’s order a bottle of champagne. Our daughter is going to be a star.”

“You can’t exactly support yourself from one movie, can you?”

“Mom is right,” I say. I’m not going to let her get to me. “I have a well-paying job as an astrological consultant for SpaceX. Elon is a big astrology buff.” My mom’s expression remains dubious, but I keep going. “I have a salary and benefits.”

“Wow,” my dad says. “First Nico Nadler and now Elon Musk. This is just incredible, Em. I always knew you were destined for greatness.” He calls over the waiter. “We need to order a bottle of champagne.” He glances at the wine list. “How about the Jacques Selosse?” My dad goes crazy for anything French.

Thomas kicks me under the table again. In a brief moment of desperation, I grab his dick. His energy relaxes and then mine does too.

When the champagne arrives, my mom glares at it like it is poison. She refuses a pour: “I’m fine, thank you.” She purses her lips so hard I’m worried they’ll bleed.

“I find it hard to believe that Elon Musk is interested in astrology,” she says finally.

I am in the middle of my sip. I swallow. “Why?”

“He’s a genius,” she says.

“Well, so am I,” I say.

And then the boys and I clink glasses.

DAWN.

Out of pure desperation, I go to Steph and Beth's for Thanksgiving. I am still annoyed at Steph and don't want to be around her, but I want to be alone even less. I ask if I can bring anything and Steph says no, so I bring two bottles of Cook's.

"Cheap champagne for Thanksgiving," Beth says to me when she opens the door. "You're something else, Dawn."

I want to slap her across the face. But instead I take a deep breath and say, "I'm not much of a cook," then gesture toward the label so she gets the joke.

She doesn't laugh.

Beth escorts me through the house, which is decorated all white and beige and smells of home cooking, better than the restaurant, and into the backyard, which is unnaturally green and manicured. Beth has a good job in insurance or something, so she can afford a nice house and landscapers.

Steph is lounging on a green chair, sipping a cocktail, staring at her phone, probably Instagram, hopefully Exalted, who never responded to my email, but that's okay. I can try again. She always says her "DMs are open."

"What can I get you to drink, Dawn?" Beth asks while Steph is still looking at her phone. Their French bulldog, Pierre, runs over to me. I lean down to pet him, even though I think the dog is annoying and ugly. Who names their dog Pierre? It's so snooty. I remember my night at Chez Pierre with the homophobic bartender. I hate the French. But I still want to go to the French Riviera. Maybe with Exalted.

"Cook's is good," I say, trying not to sound aggressive. "Unless you have anything fancier." I wink my signature wink.

"Dawnie," Steph says, finally looking up.

She stands to hug me, and my instinct is to recoil. I take a deep breath to stomach the hug. I thought about pregaming, but I knew it would be a bad idea given how angry I still am. Occasionally I make mature decisions.

"Take a seat," she says, and I sit in the lounge chair beside her. Beth

disappears into the kitchen, thank God. “How have you been?”

Ugh, I don’t want to answer this question. I’m still working at the Blind Pig. I have no romantic prospects. My son is avoiding me and my sad life. I am ready to give up. I don’t like to be depressed. Depression is for losers. I am Dawn Webster. I am supposed to be happy and bright, a ray of sunshine, the life of the party.

“I’m great,” I lie. “Enjoying the single life.”

“You’ve never had any issues picking up women,” Steph says, then looks ashamed. I know we’re both thinking about the night at Jay’s Bar when Steph ruined everything.

“Were you looking at Exalted?” I ask. We’re both fans of the account.

“I was!” she says, seeming relieved I changed the subject. “How did you know?”

Beth returns outside with a champagne flute in one hand and a goblet in the other. Beth is very skinny—anorexic, I think—and drinks only clear liquor—vodka soda, that sort of thing. She hands me the champagne and sits on the lounge chair beside Steph.

“Thanks, Beth,” I say, but I’m annoyed by the flute. It’s snooty and doesn’t hold enough liquid. I’ll need six of these to get buzzed.

“What did I miss?” Beth asks. She pulls Pierre up to her lap.

“We were talking about Exalted,” Steph says.

“God, I love her,” says Beth. Pierre slobbers on her lap. “Anything good recently?”

I feel oddly possessive over Exalted, like Beth is coming on to my girlfriend. I decide not to tell either of them that Exalted read my chart. Exalted said I could be secretive, I think because of my Scorpio moon.

“She did the signs as dog breeds,” Steph says.

“Oooh,” I say, gulping my champagne. “I didn’t see that one.” I’m irrationally jealous again. “What’s your sign again, Beth?” I assume it’s something boring, like Taurus or Capricorn. Steph is a Leo like me. In high school we told people we were twins.

“Virgo,” Beth says. I was close. I remember Exalted said my Venus is in Virgo. I hope I’m nothing like Beth. The point is I’m powerful and psychic, a lion and a witch.

“What dogs are we?” I ask Steph. She opens up Instagram on her phone and pulls her glasses closer to her face. We’re old now, no longer teens, no

longer twins.

“Beth is an Italian greyhound,” Steph says.

Beth frowns. “Those are kind of weird looking.”

“The description says ‘slim, nervous, understated,’” Steph continues. “That does sound like you.”

I giggle, and Beth squirms like a nervous Italian greyhound. Exalted is good. I’m so desperate to know what she looks like.

“Dawnie, we’re Rhodesian ridgebacks,” Steph says.

“Huh?” I ask. I’ve never heard of that breed, and I don’t feel like pretending I have.

“I didn’t know what it was either,” says Steph.

“Oh, my neighbor used to have them growing up,” says Beth, the know-it-all. “They’re really beautiful”—she sips her drink—“and a little scary!”

Steph shows me the picture: a large tan dog jumping into the air on the beach. It looks like a lion.

“It is beautiful,” I say. Exalted always makes me feel good about myself.

Steph takes the phone back. “Her description says ‘protective, loyal’”—Steph pauses and smiles—“and they’ll eat the furniture if they don’t get enough attention.”

Steph and I burst out laughing, and my anger starts to fade.

Before long, I’ve consumed both bottles of Cook’s, or, like, thirteen flutes’ worth, and Steph and I can’t stop laughing. After dinner, Beth excuses herself to bed.

“Virgo,” I mumble under my breath when she leaves.

Beth’s food was bland, but I pretended to like it because I was buzzed and wanted to please her. Steph and I laughed a lot at dinner, telling war stories from the glory days. Beth alternated between seeming bored and irritated the whole time.

When Beth goes to bed, Steph pours us both tequila shots. Finally, the party is getting started. I wish I had a romantic prospect. I’m horny as hell, but Steph is like my sister, my twin. Also, her girlfriend is upstairs.

The tequila burns in my chest, and I can’t stop thinking about sex. “I wish we had some girls to call,” I say.

“Beth would kick me out,” Steph says, then laughs. I wonder what she

sees in Beth. She's pretty but beyond dull.

"Do you and Beth have sex?" I ask.

Pierre runs up and starts humping Steph's leg, and we both crack up.

"Well?" I ask when we finally stop laughing.

"I plead the Fifth," says Steph. I guess that answers it.

I am feeling restless, reckless. My body is on fire. I need to act out. Before I know what I am doing, I am running up the stairs.

Steph runs after me. "Where are you going?" The panic in her voice fuels me.

I just keep running, sprinting, until I charge into the bedroom. Beth is rubbing moisturizer on her wrinkly elbows, saggy and sad looking. Before I can fully clock her reaction, I charge her. Steph tries to grab me, to hold me back, but I shake her off. I tackle Beth and throw her onto the bed, start rolling on top of her laughing like a maniac.

Beth shoves me off. "Get the hell off me."

Steph pulls me off the bed. "What the fuck, Dawn?"

Steph grabs my arm. I can't stop laughing. My heart is pounding and it feels good.

"Seriously, Dawn, what the fuck?" Steph drags me into the hallway, and I am still laughing.

"This is why I don't let that trashy bitch come over," Beth yells as Steph pulls me down the stairs.

"You ladies just need a good fuck!" I shout. "You both need to get railed and calm down."

Beth has already disappeared back into her room. Soon I am on the street and Steph is shutting the front door.

"Go fuck your girlfriend!" I yell, then laugh again. I don't feel mad or ashamed.

I feel alive.

At home I smoke a cigarette out my window and open my text thread with my son. I know I shouldn't text him now, but I have no control. I am in that state my court-appointed therapist called "the point of no return."

I hear knocking on my door. I assume it's Karen, furious at me for smoking inside. She can go fuck herself, or one of her stuffed animals.

Fucking furry.

I hope you had a nice Thanksgiving, I send to my son.

I hope you enjoyed leaving your single mother, the woman who RAISED YOU, alone on Thanksgiving.

You're a rotten son. Too good for your trashy mom. Your just a snooty skinny faggot in HollyWEIRD.

The knocking gets louder. "Dawn, are you smoking in there?"

Fuck you Bo, I send.

"Dawn, I will call the landlord if you don't put that cigarette out," Karen yells. "I have asthma."

I wish I never had you.

Part II

EMILY.

I am so high from dinner that I don't even mind giving Thomas a blow job afterward. As I bob my head on his shaft, I think this must be how Gwyneth Paltrow felt when she got off Harvey Weinstein: not ideal, but well worth it. She got an Oscar, after all.

Thomas is so excited by it he doesn't even mind that we exceeded the agreed-upon meal price by \$300. We are both getting what we want from this transaction. My therapist used to say that if you alter your thoughts, you can change your reality. She's right. Acting like I am successful and rich and impressive all night makes me feel like I am in fact successful and rich and impressive. I'm confident I've cracked some serious code to happiness. All I have to do is keep lying to myself.

Thomas comes super quickly, which is a major relief—my jaw was starting to hurt. Afterward, I excuse myself to the bathroom and open Beau's Instagram. I tremble when I see the pink-and-orange circle around his avatar—now it's my turn to get off. I open his Instagram story. He is at the Big Sleep. I charge back into Thomas's bedroom and announce, "Let's go dancing!"

Thomas is still all glowy and delirious from the BJ, so I know he will agree. I am right.

We dress and smoke some sativa to wake up. I am trembling with excitement, believing my lies. I am a famous actress, an astrological consultant to a multibillionaire, and about to seduce my dream man. Thomas looks decent enough that Beau will probably see me as desirable.

There is a different bouncer tonight, but Thomas knows him too.

"What is your secret, Thomas?" the bouncer asks. "Always a beautiful woman by your side."

I suppress a smile. I know it doesn't mean anything, but I am not immune to my female conditioning, the sense that when a man makes a positive comment about my appearance, I am doing something right.

The bouncer turns to me. “What, is his dick made of gold?”

“I promise you there is nothing special about his dick,” I say quickly. “He’s just independently wealthy and extremely available.”

The bouncer lets out a hearty laugh, then says, “She might be my favorite.”

“That makes one of us,” Thomas says as he grabs my hand and walks me into the noisy, crowded club.

This is exactly how I had imagined my life in LA when I was eighteen, wearing designer clothes and bypassing lines to get inside exclusive clubs. It only took me eleven years to get here.

I spot Beau quickly, which only intensifies my mania. He’s in a booth with the suspected Leo man from Subtropical and a few vacant blondes. He looks bored in a sexy way, gazing at nothing in particular and flipping his black hair from side to side. I grab Thomas’s hand and pull him to a spot at the bar where I can get a better look.

“Oh,” Thomas whispers into my ear, “there’s my coke dealer.” He’s looking toward Beau’s booth. “Or I guess my old coke dealer.”

I pretend to care, but I really don’t. I don’t want to hear about Thomas’s coke dealer. I am twenty-nine. Coke is for children.

Thomas shoots a goofy wave in his coke dealer’s direction.

Beau waves back at him and my heartbeat quickens. What just happened? Maybe Beau was confused, or just being polite. Or he was waving at someone else.

“I love Beau,” Thomas says.

I start trembling.

“Too bad—”

“Wait, you know Beau?”

“Yeah,” Thomas says. “My old coke dealer. I could really use a pick-me-up ...”

“Beau is not a coke dealer,” I say with indignation. “Beau is a photographer.”

“Yeah, I think he does that too,” Thomas says. He flags down the bartender. “Is prosecco good with you?” he asks.

“Beau is not a coke dealer,” I say again.

“Not anymore,” Thomas says. He turns to the bartender. “Two proseccos, please.” Then he returns his attention to me. “How do you know Beau?”

“I don’t know him personally,” I say. “I just, um, know his work.”

Thomas looks at me without an ounce of suspicion. He has zero intuition. He is incredibly literal, seeing only what is on the surface and nothing else.

Must be nice.

I’m dizzy. Thomas knows Beau. Beau has sold coke to Thomas. What the hell? Why in God’s name would a French aristocrat sell cocaine to Thomas? Maybe there are two Beaus in this bar. There must be some kind of confusion.

“Oh, cool,” he says. “Let’s go say hi when we get our drinks. He might be a good person to know. Maybe he could do your headshots.”

My heartbeat quickens again as I consider this option. I am so confused and afraid and angry. My high is crashing. Before I can answer, Beau and his crew get up and start walking toward us. Beau is looking right at Thomas, and I am certainly going to faint.

“Hey, man,” Beau says to Thomas, then pulls him into a weird masculine embrace. I am so confused as to why Beau seems to like Thomas. My thoughts are going loco. I grab the bar to steady myself.

“You remember Jax, right?” Beau says to Thomas.

The waiter drops our proseccos on the bar. I grab one and gulp.

Soon Thomas and the man in the dress are hugging.

“This is Emily Forrest,” Thomas says to Beau. I am thrilled that he is using my full name, which is slightly more interesting than Emily alone. “She’s a fan of your photography.”

I am normally pretty good at reading facial expressions, but Beau’s is inscrutable. The fact that I can’t read him turns me on. I love that Beau isn’t obvious and predictable like every other fucking person in this world. I want to talk to him and find out what he is thinking—“pick his brain,” as my cousin Rachel used to say when she’d talk to a “colleague” on four margaritas. Beau is even prettier up close: thick eyelashes like paintbrushes, stabbing cheekbones, and a silky mop of nearly black hair like ... well, not unlike my own.

“Cool,” said Beau, “nice to meet you.”

“You too,” I said. I sharpen my eyes at him, drawing attention to my best feature. I can’t tell whether I look pretty or if I’m glaring in a creepy way.

Beau starts introducing us to the vacant girls, and I am so busy trying not to glare I completely miss their names.

“We’re heading out,” Beau says. “But it was good to see you, bud.”

I have so many mixed feelings. Beau is leaving. But also, he is a coke dealer who calls Thomas “bud.” And he looked into my eyes.

Beau walks away in slow motion.

“I have to go,” I say as soon as Beau leaves.

“You don’t want to stay over?” Thomas asks.

“No,” I say.

I walk straight to the Mirror Box. On the way I listen to the Precious Starlets talk about how they are sick of elite media girls arguing about “sex work.” I wish I had the luxury to see sex work as a philosophical debate. I sucked off Thomas because I had no choice. I don’t have a trust fund. I am annoyed. Maybe I am over these girls, just like I’m eventually over all my friends.

Cinnamon is the first person I see in the bar. I am starting to think she doesn’t even work here; she is just a thirsty patron, like me. We have the same birth chart, after all.

“Do you still want your chart read?” I ask. I may as well get something out of her. Also, it will be easy because we have the same chart.

She pulls out her stack of cash. “I need some direction,” she says.

Everyone needs direction, and that’s how I pay the bills.

“So you have a Scorpio stellium,” I tell her. Portishead comes on, and I’m soothed by the sounds of the ‘90s, a superior time, when there were no algorithms and Winona was queen. “This is important.”

Cinnamon’s doll eyes widen. I remember clinking champagne glasses with my father and looking into Beau’s eyes. Tonight has been decent. I am going to hype her up.

“You are magnetic, powerful, and probably psychic,” I say. I tell all water signs they are psychic. Really, everyone is psychic. It’s just a matter of whether you can tap into it. I tell everyone that they have some trait that all humans have. The key is to be specific but also to leave wiggle room in case they’re difficult and want to argue (Aquarians).

Cinnamon nods. “I knew my ex-boyfriend was cheating on me,” she says. “I had no official evidence”—she looks at the dancer onstage, then back at me—“but I knew.”

“People cannot lie to us,” I say. I think about how Thomas tells me he

only has eyes for me when there is another woman's underwear in his bed stand. Expensive underwear that I typically steal.

"Yeah," Cinnamon says. She sips a caramel-colored drink. Red lights hit her cheekbones, and she suddenly looks more severe, less doughy. She grins at a patron, and her gap tooth looks elegant, not juvenile like I previously thought. I wonder if explaining Cinnamon's Scorpio stellium alters my perception of her. My brain is always vacillating between contradictory judgments. It's the Scorpio-Gemini interplay. Or I am just bipolar. Maybe I've been using astrology to explain away my bipolar disorder. If I could still afford my therapist, I would ask her about this big theory.

"Gemini moon suggests genius intellect," I say. I recall all the times my parents have brought up my perfect test scores as evidence of my ruined potential and squeeze my drink in my hands.

Cinnamon sips her drink, nods, flashes her gap tooth. "I'm really smart," she says.

I am seeing Cinnamon in a different light. She probably *is* smart. She definitely makes more money than me. My phone buzzes in my pocket. It's Thomas.

I had fun being your boyfriend tonight.

I groan and put the phone back in my pocket. I recall the night's big reveal, that he is friends with Beau. And Beau is a coke dealer. Or *was* a coke dealer.

Beau had looked right into my eyes.

"People probably fall in love with you all the time," I say to Cinnamon.

She nods, twirling a pigtail in between her fingers. "It's stressful," she says. "I want people to stay away from me."

I suddenly feel close to her. The song changes to Radiohead. Tonight I impressed my dad and saw Beau. Who cares that he once dealt coke ironically? Hazel dealt coke at The New School. It's an ironic rich-person thing. Everything is all good. Famous Libra model Stella Shadid tagged me in another Instagram story. My followers are climbing by the second. Editors are crawling into my inbox, begging me to assign astrological placements to holiday movies, foods, activities, wedding destinations. Whatever.

"This is just my side gig," I tell Cinnamon. "I'm really an actress." I don't know why I am trying to impress Cinnamon. It is probably the chart reading, my explanation of our likeness. It is bullshit, I know. The thing is, everyone

is a thousand different people, and astrological descriptions account for this. There is always something to latch on to. And when you think about the various signs, they all stand for universal human traits. Maybe I could pitch this as an article to *Vice*. “Why Astrology Is Kind of Bullshit: From an Astrologer.” I worry for a second that it will compromise my ability to get readings, which I need to live. But I conclude it won’t. Everyone my age is a nihilist anyway. It might make me more famous. It could be my angle: the internet’s preeminent anti-astrology astrologer. I am starting to feel hyperconfident, like I really am Elon Musk’s astrologer and a budding alt-horror starlet. I don’t know who Nico Nadler is, but I honestly believe I will be in his next movie.

“Have you been in anything I’ve seen?” she asks.

I pause, thinking. “I have a few exciting projects coming up.” Method acting.

“That’s great,” she says. “It’s a rough career, I’m sure.”

I continue to read her chart and tell her she is special, that we are both special. I keep going until she hands me the cash. She seems thrilled with the reading. She introduces me to a few new dancers, ones I haven’t met, who need their charts read.

I leave with \$700 in cash.

DAWN.

I wake up with the sense that I did something wrong last night, but I can't exactly put my finger on what it was. At this point the feeling is so familiar, it could just be called "morning."

The sun cuts my eyes and I grab my phone. I'm scared to look. I put it back down on the carpet.

My unfocused gaze rests on the teal Buddha statue at the foot of my bed. I got it in Long Beach when Bo was just a boy. I was just starting to fall in love with Jen—the first woman I ever loved—and everything felt so nice and safe and perfect. We were this happy little family, with Bo between us, holding each of our hands.

This was before things got chaotic with Jen, before she started to pull away, before I began to go through her phone and her email and come across things I didn't want to see. It was before I noticed how men and women looked at her, and how she couldn't speak to anyone without flirting with them. It was before my anger got out of hand, before the police became involved.

This was also before Bo started pulling away from me, getting his own friends and his own interests. He wasn't a normal boy. I wanted him to play football so I could cheer him on from the sidelines, but he couldn't even catch a ball. He was more interested in taking photographs and smoking weed with boys with tattoos. He was so pale and so weak. He couldn't carry things for me like I expected him to. He didn't turn into a man. He turned into an artsy weirdo, the type of boy I would have made fun of in high school. He felt like an embarrassment, and I felt like a failure.

I'm not totally sure how Bo supports himself. I have an idea, and I don't like to think too hard about it. I know he's photographed for a few magazines, and I know that he has his own apartment and it's a shithole, but I also know freelance photography is not lucrative enough to rent a studio apartment in criminally overpriced Los Angeles.

I went to his apartment only once and it looked like a cave. It made my apartment look luxurious. The bed dropped from the wall and the bathroom was covered in mold. I saw a few tiny plastic baggies on the floor and put two and two together. Then I undid the math.

My gaze floats to the windowsill and I notice a pile of cigarettes. The night begins floating back. I returned to the apartment filled with adrenaline, smoking in a fury. I remember tackling Beth, and I giggle, then feel ashamed. The teacher in my court-mandated drug and alcohol class said, “You might not remember the things you do when you’re drunk, but the people you hurt will never forget them.” It kind of blew my mind. Before that, I thought if I didn’t remember, the other person wouldn’t remember either. I thought my experience of the event would line up with the other person’s. If I didn’t think it was a big deal, neither would they. If I was over it, they would be too.

I pick up my phone and open my texts. I see Bo at the top. I open it and feel sick.

“You can always apologize,” the leader said, “but they will never forget.”

I’m so sorry, baby! I type out.

I was a bit overserved last night at Steph & Beths ... ha ha.

You know I don’t mean any of that. You are my pride & joy.

I hope you had a nice Thanksgiving.

EMILY.

I wake up to banging on my door.

Boom. Boom. Boom.

Marta.

“I paid you,” I say when I open the door. We are both wearing nightgowns in the bright light of midday. I remember how much money I made last night. I locked eyes with Beau.

“I got your December check,” she says. Her nightgown is pink and covered in mothballs. Mine is black and smells like deli meat. “But I’m still missing October and November.”

I open my mouth to protest, but she just keeps talking.

“You’ve been a good tenant, so I’ll let October slide,” she says. I swallow with relief. “But I need November now.” “I have it!” I almost shout. I go into my purse and hand her the cash.

She looks at the bundle with suspicion, then begins counting bills. When she seems satisfied, she looks at me with a stern expression. “This is the last time I make an exception for you.”

“I understand.”

Marta squints her eyes at me. She reminds me of my mom, not about my bullshit.

She turns and I shut the door.

Lydia hits me with her tail and then hops on my bed. I hop beside her, and she hops off. I stick my tongue out at her and then open Instagram. I have hundreds of DMs. I scan through them quickly, hoping for something from WtfBeau. *Nada.*

I do, however, notice a message from JessLovesMatcha. It must be the Libran, Thomas’s friend from Subtropical I took all that money from. Hopefully she wants more readings. I don’t want to have to deal with Marta in her nightgown ever again.

*Em! I was looking at Stella Shadid's Instagram and saw an amazing Libra meme. Thanks to you, I'm now *obsessed* with astrology, so I looked at the account. After some digging (stalking, lol!) I found out it's you! So cool you have so many followers. I had no idea I was talking to a *famous* astrologer! Although I'm not at all surprised. Chaz loved his reading. My sister wants one too! How should we arrange it? Also, I had so much fun connecting with you in LA. Everyone there is normally so distant and weird, it was nice to meet someone with some substance. If you're still thinking about moving to New York, I'd love to be roommates like you suggested. My cousin is a broker and she could help us find a place without ripping us off, lol. I know you're probably super busy, but I look forward to hearing from you. Miss you. <3*

I open the reply box and type, *I need your sister's birth time, date, year, and location. Same information I needed for you and for Chaz. You can send it here. Venmo me and I'll get started.*

I hit send, then feel guilty. I write, *Miss you too.*

I don't miss her at all. I hardly know her. But I don't want to hurt her feelings. This isn't a thought process I typically have. Better to hurt someone's feelings than to be insincere, I normally think. I wonder if the knowledge that I am a Scorpio stellium formed that philosophy (Scorpios are obsessed with the truth and detest insincerity). I can never tell whether I have certain traits because I am a Scorpio or because I *know* I am a Scorpio. This will all go in my *Vice* article.

I will pitch it today at Subtropical in between readings.

I get excited thinking of how much money I am about to make. But I have to save it. I vow to have three months' worth of rent logged before I start making any unnecessary expenditures. If I am in the mood to indulge in nice weed or cooked food, I will call Thomas. I have to stay away from the Mirror Box, unless I am doing readings. Luckily, I have Subtropical now, and there are no strippers dancing for tips there.

I grab my headphones.

The air outside is thick and damp, but not cold. The sky is a bluish gray, and I feel like I'm in *Vertigo*. I put on *Precious Starlets*. Hazel has been high

on herself since she got cast in that Mamet play, and I can tell Camilla is jealous. The interpersonal tension would normally appeal to me, but today I'm not feeling it. The Precious Starlets got me through some very lonely times, but I'm outgrowing them. I spoke to Beau last night, my dad is impressed by me, and I'm a whole new person.

My therapist I couldn't afford might just say my OCD has latched on to something else. But that would be too obvious. Therapists don't understand divine intervention.

I shut off the podcast and put on Counting Crows. I walk quickly to "Mr. Jones," past billboards and palm trees and schizophrenics. As soon as I am falling into a good rhythm, my phone lights up with a call from Thomas. Why the fuck is he calling me? Who calls people anymore? I immediately send it to voice mail, then shoot him a text.

What do you want?

Lol Em you're so funny, he responds.

God. Maybe I should just marry Thomas. I can be the biggest bitch in the world and he still gets a kick out of me. If I can't have Beau, I decide, I will marry Thomas. He is rich and good with his tongue, and he impresses my parents and my terrible personality doesn't bother him.

I just wanted to see how the rest of your night was, he writes. *You left kinda abruptly.*

I was exhausted, I say. *My night was fine.*

Unexpected guilt hits again. My Gemini moon, desperate to be liked. Or maybe I'm just a human being.

Thank you for impressing my parents and paying for dinner, I write.

It was my pleasure :), he writes back.

God, the smiley face emoticon. Vile.

As soon as I start walking again, my dad calls. I am disturbingly popular this morning. I hate phone calls, but I answer nonetheless. It doesn't feel like a choice.

"Hi, Em." I guess my dad isn't so bad. My mom is the problem. Maybe I can encourage him to get a divorce.

"Hi, Dad," I say. "Last night was fun."

"I agree," my dad says. "I was just calling to say thank you for dinner last night. I enjoyed meeting Thomas, and I'm so proud of all you've accomplished."

“Thanks, Dad,” I say. “Must be good genes.” My Gemini moon again. Or just being human. Random and unpredictable.

My dad laughs appreciatively, which makes me feel good.

“Did Mom have fun?” I ask. I hate how much I crave her approval. It is pathetic.

“I think she did,” my dad says, and anger flares up in my gut. Clearly she didn’t believe a word I said. And the annoying thing is that she is right. I am the pathetic loser she thinks I am. I try to think about Stella Shadid and Beau Rubidoux to put my brain in a more pleasant place. It doesn’t work.

“Have you ever thought about getting a divorce?” I ask without thinking.

My dad laughs. “You’ve always had a unique sense of humor, Em.” He reminds me of Thomas for a second, the way he assumes I am joking whenever I am sincerely being a major bitch. They say women marry their fathers. Am I going to marry Thomas and have a child of whom I am deeply ashamed? And then resent Thomas even more for seeing promise in my cursed offspring? I swiftly abandon this line of thinking. Because I’m going to marry Beau. I am more convinced of this than ever.

“Elon is on the other line,” I say. “I gotta run. Thanks for calling.”

“I won’t keep you,” he says. “Love you.”

“Love you too,” I say, and I think I mean it.

After my third chart reading, I open my email, energized. I like having a purpose, and they are playing good music at Subtropical. None of the typical hip crap. They are playing music with soul, like Vertical Horizon.

Dawn Webster, the cursed Riverside woman whose chart I read, emailed me to say she wants to buy me a drink. I laugh a little. This isn’t the first email like this I’ve received. My fans are always trying to be my friends. But friends are the last thing I need.

I delete the email.

Refinery29 wants me to write an article called “Best Holiday Gift for Each Zodiac Sign.” I agree, then start taking notes in my Lisa Frank notebook.

The first thing I write is *Virgo: Nothing. Virgos hate receiving gifts. Their taste is hyper-particular and nothing is good enough for them. They’ll typically sell or donate whatever you give them. Don’t waste your time or money.*

For Scorpio I write, *A classic black dress or timeless coat*, which are just the things I want. Maybe Thomas will give them to me. Maybe Beau will give them to me.

I remember my big idea, then draft an email to my *Vice* editor: *PITCH: Why Astrology Is Bullshit: From a Professional Astrologer*. Then I write out my inner monologue from the previous night, about how all astrological placements represent some part of the universal human experience, so we can all find ourselves in any of them. I'm sure my editor will bite. *Vice* loves to denounce popular things.

I return to making more notes about gifts for the signs. After writing the pitch, I feel less pressure to be "accurate." The point is to nail the magic combination of vague and specific and wicked and entertaining.

I write, *Sagittarius: Fun luggage. Sags love to travel and they love to be perceived as "fun." The louder and more obnoxious the better*. I am thinking of Thomas, obviously, who is always jetting off to Thailand or somewhere insufferable white people love to go. Then I get nervous he's going to take another trip soon and I'll be left without his generous wallet. I wonder if anyone will buy me a Christmas gift.

For Aries, I just start drawing little hearts. Then I feel a looming presence above me. I look up and try not to gasp. It is Beau, standing right over me. For a second I think I'm dreaming or hallucinating, so I blink and he is still there. I quickly cover my notebook with my hands.

"Hi." His face is so chiseled it belongs in a museum. "We met at the Big Sleep the other night."

I feel like all the air is being sucked out of me. I'm not prepared. My mind is racing. "Yeah." It comes out quietly, hardly a noise at all.

"I'm Beau," he says. He leans on the chair across from me. A sliver of light from the blinds illuminates his left eye and reveals orange speckles, like the sun is inside his irises. Exalted shit.

"I remember," I say. *Ugh*. Why can't I engage in small talk like a normal person? Why can't I show him I am interested? Touch his shoulder? Bat my lashes? Instead I sit frozen and rigid, like my skin is made of metal. I pray that my Scorpio stellium is making my paralysis appear enigmatic. I remember why I'm so drawn to astrology: because it gives me an out for being myself.

"Good memory," he says.

My cheeks are on fire. I need to say something. Anything! I can ask him what he is up to this afternoon or whether he is working on any interesting photography projects. My go-to when I am uncomfortable is to ask to read someone's chart, but I already read it, and he doesn't know that, and I don't want him to think I'm an astrologer. I want him to think I am an actress, the real me—not who I am, but who I *should* be. I try to see this moment as a scene in a movie, one in which I have to play a confident woman who is great at flirting. But I can't get myself there. I guess this is why I've never been cast in a film.

"Well." His eyes sparkle. "I just wanted to say hi."

Then he starts to leave. I am so mad at myself. *Say something!* my inner voice shouts, but "Thanks" is all I can manage.

Beau is leaving the restaurant, and I want to die. I haven't felt this angry since my parents nixed the Nickelodeon show. But at least then I could externalize my anger: it was their fault. This time I have no one to blame but myself.

The hot waiter comes over and asks if I need anything.

"A noose?" I say without looking up. He laughs really hard. Too hard. Everyone in LA is or has been suicidal, so these types of jokes are low-hanging fruit. But I'm not joking. I want to disappear.

I leave a five-dollar bill on the table and walk out.

I stomp to Food 4 Less. When I had more money, I'd go to Ralphs. When I was "rich," I'd go to Gelson's. But it's Food 4 Less ... 4 now.

The garish fluorescent lighting inside the store reflects my spraked state of mind. I can't believe I blew it with Beau. My body feels like it's been hit by a truck. But I need to get food for Lydia and, I guess, myself.

As I scan the aisle for the cheapest cat food, my mind replays the various ways the conversation could have gone. I could have asked Beau about his plans for the evening. I could have asked him about his favorite photographers. I could have asked him what he *really* thinks of Thomas.

I could have told him my name.

I can't believe I didn't even tell him my name.

He'd said, "I'm Beau," and I said, "I remember," like a fucking creep.

My legs feel heavy and I almost fall to the floor.

Then I hear a voice, a soft “hi” in my direction. It’s a familiar voice, but I can’t exactly place it. I don’t want anyone talking to me. I obviously cannot handle being spoken to.

I try to walk away from the voice and then feel a tap on my shoulder. I turn around. It’s Cinnamon from the Mirror Box. I feel moderately relieved. I don’t need to perform any type of social normalcy for a stripper.

“Hi,” I say.

“I forget your name,” she says.

“I probably didn’t tell you. I hate my name.”

She smiles. “Same.”

I assume Cinnamon is a stage name and wonder what her real name is.

“What are you up to?” she asks. She looks different from usual, and I realize it’s because she is fully clothed. She’s wearing an oversized parka and black leggings and her hair is down, not in pigtails. So I guess the babydoll act is just for the Mirror Box and its gross patrons, like me.

“Buying cat food,” I say. “I’m having a shit day.” I never tell people about my day, so I’m not sure why I’m doing so now.

“Oh my god, me too,” she says. “Wanna put off our shopping and get a drink?”

“Yes,” I say.

“What’s your real name?” I ask Cinnamon. We are sitting in a dive bar in the back of a Thai restaurant and we are the only people here. No one asked for our IDs and there is no bartender. Cinnamon just grabbed two beers from a fridge behind the bar and told me they were “on her.” This relieved me because I’m not supposed to be making any unnecessary expenditures. I stole the cat food from Food 4 Less, an honorable act for animal rights. PETA should give me an award. And beer is basically food. It will be my dinner tonight. I am eating for free.

“What do you mean?” Cinnamon asks.

“‘Cinnamon’ is a stage name, right?”

She shakes her head no.

“Wow,” I say.

“Yeah,” she says. She cracks open one of the beers with her teeth. “My mom’s dumb as hell.”

I laugh. “Same,” I say. She hands me the open beer and cracks open the other, then gulps.

“So, tell me about your horrible day,” she says.

“God.” I feel comfortable with Cinnamon, in this creepy bar that is probably a drug front. For the first time in forever, I want to tell the truth. “You know how I do readings?”

“Yeah,” she says. “You’re incredible.”

I don’t react to this compliment. It does not even qualify as a compliment to me. “So, I read this guy’s chart over email. And it was just this beautiful chart—”

“More beautiful than ours?” Cinnamon interrupts, then winks. It’s cute.

“Of course not,” I say. “Nothing is.”

“Dumb question,” she says.

“Dumb as our dumb moms.” It’s fun riffing like this. I suddenly remember why people have friends. “Anyway, while not as beautiful as our blessed charts, Beau’s chart is *very* beautiful. Like the lines draw these intricate patterns. And all of his placements are exalted. All of them. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“What’s exalted?” she asks.

“It means the planet is exactly where it’s supposed to be, where it functions best,” I say. “Like, the sun is exalted in Aries, the moon is exalted in Taurus, et cetera.”

“So his sun and moon are exalted?”

“*All* of his placements are exalted,” I say.

“Damn,” she says. “He’s, like, legitimately blessed.”

“Yeah,” I say. I am glad Cinnamon is grasping the gravity of this situation. “So obviously I had to look him up. His name is Beau Rubidoux.”

“Fuck,” Cinnamon says, “that’s a rich-ass name.”

“Rich!” I remember that Beau is a coke dealer, or was a coke dealer. Plenty of aristocrats deal coke for the thrill. “And he’s hot as fuck.” I don’t normally talk this way, but Cinnamon is bringing out a new and unfamiliar side of me. We’re all a billion different people. I make a note to put that in my article.

“Pic,” she says.

I pull out my iPhone and open his Instagram. This is the second time I’ve shown someone Beau’s Instagram at a bar, but this is the first time I’m being

honest about it.

“*Damn,*” she says, grabbing the phone. “He’s sexy, kinda vampiric. Like Robert Pattinson but with swagger.”

As Cinnamon scrolls, I take a sip of beer. It’s disgusting but tastes filling, like bread. It also perks me up a bit.

“I get it.” She hands my phone back to me. “Have you seen him IRL yet?” It’s nice that Cinnamon doesn’t seem to think I’m being creepy.

“Well,” I say, “I’ve seen him a bunch of times. Don’t judge me, but—”

“Oh my god, please, girl,” she says. “You’ve seen my chart. We’re Scorpio stelliums. Obsessive as hell. I have *been there.*”

I laugh, and we both sip our beers. I crave weed and think about texting Thomas.

“So ... you started stalking him?”

“Kind of!” I say, and we both laugh again. “At first I just looked at his Instagram a lot. But then he started geotagging and I realized he went to this place called Subtropical a lot.”

“My friend works there!” Cinnamon says.

“Your friend must be hot.”

“He is!” she says. “More on that later ...”

I laugh. “I have nothing but time.” It feels good having a safe space to speak truthfully. I can’t remember the last time I’ve done this. Even in therapy, I lied constantly.

“So I started going to Subtropical in hopes of running into him. I’d do my readings there and make my memes and write my articles.”

“So cool,” Cinnamon says. “I’m so in awe of what you do.”

“Oh my god, don’t be,” I say. “Astrology is a scam.”

Cinnamon laughs so hard she almost slips off her chair. “I love that you say that after I paid you three hundred dollars,” she says. “Seriously, I love it. We’re both scamming the shit out of people.”

I laugh and feel good, like my terrible interaction with Beau earlier didn’t even happen. Or it happened, but it doesn’t mean as much.

Cinnamon pulls what appears to be a vape pen from her parka pocket and takes a hit. I start salivating a little. As she exhales, she offers it to me, and I practically snatch it.

“Thank god,” I say. “I’m more of a smoker than a drinker, but I haven’t been able to afford weed recently.” I take a big hit and feel my muscles start

to relax.

“So that’s why you upcharged me,” she says. “Some of the girls told me you did their readings for free.”

I feel guilty, and the weed makes me self-conscious and compounds the guilt, and I think Cinnamon can see it on my face, or she can *feel* it, because she is a Scorpio stellium, or because she is a human being.

“It’s totally fine,” she says. “I understand the freelance hustle.” She pauses. “I made so much money that night, and you really helped me understand myself.” She didn’t have to say that.

“I’m glad,” I say, and I mean it. “I gave the free readings a while ago, back when I was making money.”

“It ebbs and flows,” she says.

“Sure does,” I say. “Oh my god, quick sidebar. My parents are super humiliated by me and my lack of steady income, so I told them I have a salaried job as the astrological consultant for SpaceX.”

This time Cinnamon laughs so hard she *does* slide off her chair. She is on the floor, writhing unapologetically. It feels so good to make someone laugh hard enough to lose bodily control. And I hadn’t realized how funny my lie is until now. I never realize I’m being funny until someone falls off their chair laughing.

“That is so fucking good,” she says. She goes back behind the bar and grabs us two more beers, even though I’ve taken only a few sips of mine. There is a bartender now and a few other patrons, and I wonder when they had slipped in. The bartender doesn’t seem to mind that Cinnamon is taking beers without paying. He just slaps her ass.

I take another sip of beer, which tastes better now that I am high.

Cinnamon sits back beside me and takes all the beer caps off with her teeth. It is pretty hot to watch. She isn’t a helpless babydoll at all. She’s badass. I think about telling her she should channel this persona at the Mirror Box instead of the passive baby. But that would be presumptuous, and also, what do I know? She’s just trying to get tips and it probably works.

“Did your parents buy it?” she asks.

“My dad did,” I say. “My Taurus mom didn’t.”

Cinnamon laughs. “What’s your dad’s sign?”

“Pisces.”

Cinnamon shudders. “I’ve had bad experiences with Pisces.”

“Literally who hasn’t?” I say.

“The memes always present them as gentle and sweet,” she says.

“I know,” I say. “It’s some kind of conspiracy.”

“Absolutely,” Cinnamon says.

“Harvey Weinstein is a Pisces,” I say.

And she spits out her drink.

I enjoy making people laugh even though it is never my intention. I am being completely serious. Pisces can be emotional terrorists. They invented gaslighting. And Harvey Weinstein *is a Pisces*. People always laugh when I’m telling the truth and take me seriously when I am lying.

“Can I have another hit?” I ask Cinnamon.

“Of course.” She hands me the vape. “I feel like your sugar daddy, and it’s kind of interesting to be on this side of the equation.”

“That is interesting.” I hit the vape and feel a pleasant sting in my lungs. “Also, I’m sorry.”

Cinnamon grabs my shoulders. “I promise you, I’m into it.” She gulps her beer. “I have so much money right now and I’m thrilled to be able to use it on my friends.”

I feel a tiny jolt of joy, and it feels more authentic than chemical. Is Cinnamon my friend?

“Who knew all I had to do was ...” She affects a new posture—more upright, but also softer. Alert, but submissive. “*I’m baby*,” she says in a breathy voice. “And the money just flows.”

“Chilling,” I say.

“You never know how sick people are until you work in a burlesque club.”

I look at my lap, ashamed. I blew it with Beau and spend all my disposable income being a creep.

“So, back to Beau Rubidoux.” She speaks in a patrician tone I didn’t recognize before. It reminds me of the Precious Starlets. I can see Hazel and Camilla working at Mirror Box as some kind of social experiment. I haven’t listened to them since I made eye contact with Beau.

Maybe I am just high.

“Okay,” I say, happy for the opportunity to relax back into storytelling. “I have this boy I string along named Thomas.”

“Who doesn’t?”

“Exactly,” I say. “I saw that Beau was going to this bar called the Big

Sleep.”

“Oh, *that place*,” Cinnamon says.

“Yeah,” I say. “It’s embarrassing.”

“It is.”

It feels good being on the same page as Cinnamon, especially when I am rarely ever on the same page with anyone.

“So of course Thomas loves it.”

“All Thomases do.”

The bartender is suddenly in our faces. “Want another?”

I am annoyed he is interrupting our moment.

“Two shots,” Cinnamon says, “of tequila.”

“Oh god, I can’t,” I say. “I’m kind of a pussy when it comes to alcohol.” I am feeling a little buzzed from the beer. And high.

“They’re both for me,” Cinnamon says. “And go on. The Big Sleep.”

“Yeah, so I make Thomas take me in hopes of running into the blessed Beau Rubidoux.”

The bartender slams the first shot on the bar and Cinnamon takes it back.

“The first time we go, Thomas says his coke dealer is there, and I’m like whatever, and he’s like, ‘My coke dealer doesn’t sell anymore,’ and I’m like, ‘Stop talking.’ And then we go again, and I see Beau Rubidoux, and then I notice Thomas looking at him too, then waving.”

“OMG, is Beau Rubidoux his coke dealer?”

“Former coke dealer, I guess,” I say.

“God,” says Cinnamon. “This cursed city.” She takes the second shot. “Is that why you’re upset? Because he deals coke?”

“*Dealt* coke,” I say. This distinction is important to me. “And no, not really.”

“Good,” she says. “Everyone in this town deals something.”

I nod. “I deal scam occult wisdom.”

“I deal desire,” she says.

I feel ashamed again, for how much time and money I’ve spent at Mirror Box, throwing ones in exchange for empty connection.

“So anyway,” I say, “Thomas introduced us briefly, and then Beau left with his friends. But I was so high off the interaction. We’d finally met, and it felt like I was getting somewhere.”

“So, what happened?”

“Today I was at Subtropical working, and suddenly he was hovering over my table. He caught me completely off guard. And I acted like such an idiot. He was trying to talk to me, and I completely froze. Finally he just walked away.”

“Oof,” says Cinnamon. “So I get how you feel, but I promise it wasn’t as bad as you think it was. You probably came off cool and mysterious. You left him wanting more! If you had been too eager it would have been worse.”

“You think?” I ask. I consider putting money in Cinnamon’s bra for listening to my dumb story and making me feel better.

“I don’t think. I know,” she says, like a true Scorpio stellium. “You have this icy enigmatic vibe. Your eyes literally put a spell on people. All the girls talk about it.”

“Really?” This, of course, thrills me.

“Yeah! They’re all intrigued by you. And, of course, they’d rather give you a lap dance instead of some gross lurky man.”

I sip my beer, unsure of what to say. The guilt I felt earlier dissipates a bit.

“Anyway, I’m sure you just left Beau wanting more. Positive even! It’s an ideal scenario. You shouldn’t be upset at all. You have him right where you want him.”

Cinnamon is making me feel so much better, and I again have the urge to give her money. Instead she is giving me free drinks and weed and advice. What did I do to deserve this? I fear a sudden disaster will strike to punish me for this spiritual windfall.

“Thanks,” I say. I think about how crushed I felt at Food 4 Less earlier today. “You’ve talked me off the ledge.”

“Fuck!” Cinnamon says, looking at her phone. “I gotta go.”

“Is everything okay?” I ask.

“Yeah,” she says. “I’m just late for this group project.”

“Group project? At the Mirror Box?”

Cinnamon laughs. “I have a life outside of the Mirror Box, thank god. I’m getting my MFA at CalArts.”

“Cool,” I say. I knew it. She is a rich girl doing performance art. She is a Precious Starlet.

“I guess,” she says. “Anyway, this has been fun, but I gotta run.”

“I feel bad I never heard about your bad day. And you listened to me drone on about my nonissue.”

“It’s fine. I’m beyond sick of myself.” She takes my phone off the bar and starts typing on it. “Here is my number. You can make it up to me.” She hands back the phone and kisses me on the cheek, and then *poof*, she is gone.

Suddenly I am alone in this weird bar, which is now filled with people. I look back at my phone and save her number. Then a text from my dad pops up.

I’m rewatching Inborn. It’s fantastic. I’m so proud of you.

I feel guilty and put my phone away.

On the street, I notice I’m famished. Lydia must feel the same way. I stop back in Food 4 Less and buy two packs of turkey, three packs of saltines, a case of Gatorade, and a jar of peanut butter. This will last me for a while.

As I walk home with my groceries, I think about maybe watching the movie my dad mentioned. Maybe we could text about it like a normal father and daughter with shared interests. We used to watch movies when I was a kid. When my mom was out of town at a conference, we’d watch R-rated ones completely inappropriate for children, like *La Piscine* and *Videodrome*. Maybe it’s time for me to start watching movies again. I don’t have to be bitter and jealous. Cinnamon said all the Mirror Box girls noticed my energy. I have star quality, I know it, and it’s only a matter of time until everyone else catches on.

DAWN.

On my break, I smoke a cigarette and scroll through Exalted. Sometimes I like to scroll way back, to years ago. I'm currently in 2017, where there is a post called "Signs from Gayest to Least Gay, and Why." I click through it.

Leo (flamboyant diva)
Libra (princess & patron of the arts)
Cancer (hysterical crisis queen)
Taurus (U-Haul lesbian)
Pisces (weepy alcoholic)
Gemini (chaotic bisexual)
Aquarius (fairy)
Virgo (hiding something)
Scorpio (hiding more)
Aries (gay rage)
Sagittarius (horny enough for anything)
Capricorn (straight)

Each is accompanied by some funny pop-culture image. I normally would laugh, but today I just feel sad. I am the gayest sign. I'm sick of being gay. Being gay has ruined my life. I had so much power over men. With women, I have nothing. I mostly just frighten them.

I put my phone down and inhale deeply, scanning the plaza for something to distract me. I am shocked to see a familiar figure—a figure I will never forget—roughly twenty yards away. He is holding a briefcase and disappears into the Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf.

It's Bo's father.

EMILY.

In my apartment that night I attach my projector to my laptop. I used to screen films on my ceiling all the time, in my early twenties, my cinephile days. Cronenberg, Lynch, Kubrick, Herzog. And, of course, anything starring Winona.

By my mid-twenties, I mostly used the projector to watch *The Bachelor*. I had an obsessive phase with it. I suppose it became an object of my OCD. Whether I auditioned to be on the show is neither here nor there.

In my late twenties, I've used the projector only once, and it was to project Beau's birth chart onto the ceiling. It was the best sleep I'd had in years.

I fill a plate with two slices of turkey, ten saltines, and two scoops of peanut butter. I put some Gatorade on ice. And I start screening *Inborn*.

I am lucky to be a little buzzed while watching my first critically *exalted* film in years. The lingering alcohol quells the jealous rage bubbling up as the opening credits roll. I am dying to see my name in those credits, to be watching them in a theater, surrounded by people who know I am the star.

I eat a slice of turkey to calm down and try to keep watching. As I continue to chew, a repetitive and mindless action, I find myself relaxing into the narrative. Soon, I'm not thinking at all. I'm just watching and being horrified.

This movie is really fucking good. I am impressed by Thomas's choice for our lie, and I am amazed my dad believes Nico Nadler would cast me in a film.

As I fall asleep, I imagine myself on a panel at Sundance, being asked questions about my artistic process. I imagine charming the audience. And then I am unconscious.

DAWN.

I think about Paul my entire shift. I haven't seen him in, well, how old is Bo? Twenty-eight? I haven't seen him in twenty- nine years.

As soon as my shift ends, I practically race to the Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf. It isn't a conscious decision. My body just moves, and my brain is like, *Here we go*. This happens a lot when I'm drunk but not as often when I'm sober.

Paul and I slept together only once. I met him at the Blind Pig when I was just nineteen. He was a dork, unlike any of the beefcake men I typically slept with. He was probably ten years older than me. I had no idea why he liked me, and I guess he didn't. He was just drunk.

He was alone at a table, ordered a cheeseburger and a whiskey on the rocks, and told me his wife just had a baby and he was terrified. I comforted him like a good little waitress, and after my shift, we got drinks, then more drinks, then a hotel room.

When I woke up in the morning and he was gone, I was angry but not surprised. He was married and his wife had a newborn. I was hurt but I understood. I never felt as crazy with men as I did with women. Ever since my dad left, I didn't expect much from them.

When I found out I was pregnant, I had no way to contact Paul. I didn't know his last name or what he did for a living. I didn't even know if he lived in Riverside. I figured he was visiting from out of town, maybe for some sort of nerd conference at the college, because I hadn't run into him since. He looked like an out-of-towner because he wore tweed and was too pale for California.

When I arrive at the Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf, the manager is locking the door. They are closed. I have a small urge to kick the door but suppress it. I recall Exalted saying Leos have "Rage!!!!" She never responded to my email.

I turn around and walk home.

It is completely dark and getting cold, which I typically hate, but seeing

Paul has filled me with a weird glimmer of hope. It feels like fate or something. I haven't seen him in twenty-nine years, but I saw him today. And I am absolutely sure it was him. He has a specific way of walking—I remember that—almost like a limp.

The road is busy and loud, but my thoughts are louder. I puff an Ultra Light and wonder if Paul goes to that Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf often. I never really go there, but I can start going. I'm not sure what I will say to him.

I just know that I need to find him.

EMILY.

On my walk to Subtropical the next morning, it's sunny and warm for the first time in a few weeks. I don't typically like this kind of weather, but today the sun energizes me. This must be how Leos feel. I am wearing my pink Juicy tracksuit, and I don't even care if I run into Beau looking like a junior high schooler from 2003. It doesn't matter what I wear. I am enigmatic no matter what. That's what the Mirror Box girls think.

Fueled by the sun, I fire off a bunch of text messages.

First to my dad: *I rewatched Inborn last night. Nico said he wanted all his actors to watch it before filming. It was even better the second time.*

Then I text Cinnamon: *Thanks again for the drinks and emotional labor last night. Once I get a few more Venmo payments in, I'm going to buy an eighth of top-shelf weed and we can smoke it all while you vent your problems to me.*

Then I text Thomas: *Good call on Nico Nadler.*

My dad texts back first. *Good assignment from Nico. On the second watch, I was struck by the Freudian themes. Of course, there are the dream sequences. But also the way Cassie destroys phallic objects, like cutting off squirrels' heads. It seems to be a reaction against castration trauma.*

This text reminds me of when I used to watch Q&As with directors all the time on YouTube. Freud always came up. I am proud that my dad can talk articulately about film, even though I am sort of over Freud, who just feels like this secret language old white men use to make whatever they are talking about seem inaccessible. Freud just gives cloaked terms to universal aspects of the human experience, kind of like astrology.

Freud is just astrology for men.

I'm not going to tell my dad that, though. Instead I text back, *Nico is very influenced by Freud, so you hit the nail on the he— phallus.*

Haha! my dad types back immediately. I can't help but smile. It feels nice to be riffing with my father, even if it's about Freud's obsession with dick.

Thomas texts back next. *I've actually never seen his movies, but every actress I've slept with won't shut up about him.*

Now I am laughing. I text back, *Bless Thomas's heaux.* Seriously. They dress me, they help me develop convincing lies to my father, and they prevent Thomas from being too needy. If I wasn't trying to save money, I would get Thomas a robe that says BLESS THOMAS'S HEAUX in gold script for Christmas.

I text my dad back. *Have you seen anything else good recently? It's nice to get recommendations from people who aren't in "the industry."*

Then Cinnamon texts me back. *Yessss bish!*

I heart the text, then ask, *How was the group project?*

And then I am at Subtropical.

I take my normal seat in the corner and get to my readings. I have so many to do—upwards of fifty. I love having so much work queued that I don't have to think about anything else, like how I'm going to keep up the lies that I work for Elon Musk and am a budding indie starlet.

Doing readings allows my brain to relax. I mostly copy and paste descriptions of placements, thoughtless and soothing work.

Occasionally I take a break to check my texts.

My dad texts me, *I enjoyed this Korean movie called Parasite. I'm sure you've seen it. I know he's "canceled" but I've also been revisiting Polanski. Knife in the Water holds up. I hadn't seen it since grad school. It's also very Freudian.*

It tickles me the way my dad calls Roman Polanski "canceled." I respond, *I remember watching Rosemary's Baby with you when I was 11. Mom was out of town. ;p*

That's kind of a dark movie to show a preteen ... I hope you didn't tell your mom. ;p

I didn't, I write back.

Then Cinnamon texts. *I'll tell you all about it at Mirror Box today if you're free. I'll be there at 4.*

I'm there, I say.

I take a big sip of my coffee and look at my readings and wonder if I believe in astrology at all anymore. My fucking Gemini moon, so ideologically chaotic. I'm still attributing most of my decisions to my Scorpio stellium or Gemini moon, so I must believe in astrology somewhat. Or is that

just my OCD, like my therapist said? And is my OCD just heightened because of the love feelings triggered by Beau— as love, according to the psychologist on Instagram, catalyzes an OCD response? But isn't psychology just astrology for the independently wealthy? And Beau was brought to me via his birth chart, via the stars. And Cinnamon is quickly becoming the first friend I've ever liked, and we have the same birth chart. So there must be something to it. Maybe I'll put a hold on my "Astrology Is Bullshit" article.

"You okay?" the hot waiter asks.

"Just exhausted trying to figure out what I actually believe," I tell him, and he laughs.

"Glass of wine?"

"I'm allergic," I say without looking up. I focus on the screen, channeling my conceptual indecision into my readings, a concrete task with copy-and-pasteable responses, a salve.

DAWN.

I walk to the Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf before work. I sold my car before I met Tara, so being walking distance to work is crucial. Tara said she was going to buy me a car. So much for that. Maybe Paul will buy me a car when he sees me, out of guilt. He is probably still with his wife. He seems like the type to stay married out of “duty.” His once newborn baby is an adult now, around Bo’s age.

My heart skips a beat before I enter the Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf. I feel giddy, like I am in high school. I glance around the coffee shop for Paul but don’t see him. That’s okay. I’m confident I will see him soon.

I go up to the register and gaze at the menu. They have a bunch of blended drinks in all sorts of flavors: vanilla, black forest, caramel, chai. Ariana Grande is blasting. I don’t know the song, but I recognize her voice. Tara loved Ariana Grande, who she called “Ari.” At first I didn’t get it. “Ari” looks like a plastic baby, and her songs sound like bubble gum. But I like bubble gum, and the girl can sing.

I bob my head to the song until it’s my turn to order. I get a caramel blended drink with whipped cream. I worry for a second about all the calories, then shrug it off. I deserve a treat. I burn a lot of calories at the Blind Pig anyway. My weight is never something I’ve thought too much about. Most of it goes to my boobs anyway.

The drink tastes just as amazing as it looks. I sip it hard and get a little brain freeze. As I walk to find a seat, I see someone I recognize, and it isn’t Paul.

“Hi, Dawn.” Tara is seated in a leather chair with a young-er-looking woman perched on the arm. Tara smiles wide, as though she is thrilled to see me, or thrilled I am seeing *her*, seated close to a young girl with perky breasts.

“Hi, Tara,” I say. I stand tall to show I am neither threatened nor jealous, even though I am both.

“This is Blair,” she says, gesturing toward the girl on the chair’s arm. The girl must weigh less than 110 pounds. She looks like a baby, like Ariana Grande.

“Hi, Blair,” I say. I sip my drink. What kind of name is Blair? It sounds like a boy’s name.

“Hi,” she says with a sort of breathy giggle.

I am tempted to pour my iced caramel blended drink on her head.

“We should probably get going,” Tara says. “We’re seeing a movie at three.”

“Anything good?” I don’t know why I am extending the conversation. Tara looks pretty in a baby-blue dress that flatters her figure. Her hair is shiny. Dimples form on her cheeks when she smiles. I can’t deny that I miss her.

“It’s a foreign film,” Tara says.

Tara always wanted to see foreign films when we were dating, but I don’t like to read subtitles. I stopped going with her and she would go alone.

Jealousy kicks me in the gut. Blair, this new girl who looks like a baby, is going to see some snooty French movie with Tara. I wonder if Tara is going to take her to the French Riviera. I squeeze my drink, and whipped cream bubbles up over the top.

“Sounds fun,” I manage.

“Take care,” Tara says.

And then they are gone.

EMILY.

I close out at 3:15 P.M., after finishing my Refinery29 article and reading eleven birth charts, totaling multiple months of rent. I decide to reward myself by buying a vape pen on the way to the Mirror Box. I stop at my favorite weed store, buy a disposable pen, and plan to let Cinnamon smoke as much as she wants.

When I get to the Mirror Box, the bouncer says he missed me. I say I missed him too. We don't use each other's names because we don't know each other's names. But it feels good to be missed.

Cinnamon is sitting at the bar in her typical babydoll garb, sipping clear liquid from a glass. I remember how easily she'd taken back those shots the previous night. Rich girls seem to have extremely high tolerances. I know this mostly from Hazel and Camilla, who are always drinking, although I haven't been listening to *Precious Starlets*. They were my social life by proxy, my parasocial friends, and since I've been interacting with people in the flesh, I don't need them anymore.

"Hey, girl," Cinnamon says when she sees me. She is sitting next to my favorite dancer, Onyx, who has arresting blue eyes like mine. I know from stalking her on Instagram that she is a Gemini and has a black cat named Binx. She is wearing a Nirvana T-shirt as a dress and fishnet stockings. I wish Cinnamon dressed more like this, but of course that is not my business.

"This is Onyx," Cinnamon says.

"I know," I say. "I'm a fan."

"Oh my god, what the fuck is your name again?" Cinnamon asks me. "The girls call you Ice. Because of your eyes."

"Ice works," I say.

"I like the fit." Onyx pets the arm of my tracksuit. "So soft."

Cinnamon starts petting me too, and I remember why I come here all the time. I read online that regular human touch is a vital element of physical health.

I hand Cinnamon my new vape pen. "I want you to christen it," I say.

"Hell yes," she says. "Let's go in the back."

Cinnamon grabs my hand. Onyx follows. I am excited; I've never been backstage before. It's smaller than I'd expected, and it's messy. Lace bras thrown over stools and discarded heels. Loose mascara wands and lines of white powder. Christmas lights strung over each of the three mirrors.

Cinnamon plops down on a bucket in the corner and hits the pen. Onyx sits next to her on top of a hard suitcase. I sit beside her on the floor.

A man peeks through the door and announces, "Onyx, you're up next."

"'Smells Like Teen Spirit' or 'Come as You Are'?" she asks us.

"'Smells Like Teen Spirit' is your best," I say. "So maybe save that for later, when there are more people."

Cinnamon and Onyx laugh.

"You're so cute," Onyx says. "Some girl is DJing starting at seven or so, so we don't get to pick our music after that."

"Who's DJing again?" Cinnamon asks.

"That annoying girl, Vagablonde."

"Oh god," I say. She is the suspected Leo who always appears on Beau's Instagram late at night, only to be deleted in the morning.

"You know her?" Cinnamon asks.

"I think she's friends with Beau," I say.

A disembodied voice yells, "Onyx, you're up!"

"Hold that thought," she says.

Onyx walks over to an iPad attached to a speaker and fiddles with it. "Smells Like Teen Spirit" comes on, faintly. It gets louder as she opens the door to the stage, then fades as she closes it. A dancer I don't recognize comes in as she goes out. She stomps over to the mirror area. She is wearing Technicolor lingerie at odds with her ornery expression.

"Wait," Cinnamon says, ignoring the angry dancer. "This is great."

"What is great?" I ask.

"Beau's friend is DJing!" She hits the vape pen again. "This means he'll probably be here. And I can help you seduce him."

Butterflies flap around in my stomach. I refuse to believe I blew it yesterday. I probably just looked enigmatic, like Cinnamon said. The Mirror Box girls call me Ice. I'm basically one of them.

"That's a good idea," I say. "Should I go home and change? I guess we

have a few hours.”

“No, no,” Cinnamon says. “Don’t change. You look cool as fuck. Most girls try so hard it’s embarrassing. Effort is *out*. Fashion is *out*. Materialism is *out*.”

“You’re right,” I say. The Precious Starlets could afford Prada, but they shop exclusively at Brandy Melville, a cheap store for teens.

“Just stay here and hang with me. I’ll gas you up and get us a nice little buzz on.” She jumps up and walks over to a duffel bag on the ledge with the mirrors. “I think they got us molly tonight.”

The angry-looking dancer rolls her eyes at Cinnamon, who either ignores her or doesn’t notice. She is busy rummaging through the duffel.

“Who is ‘they’?”

“The owners,” she says. “They always get us an upper and a downer every night. Mostly the upper is coke, which is whatever, but sometimes they treat us to molly.” She is talking into the duffel bag, digging. She pulls out a bag of white powder and holds it up to the light. “I think molly. It’s more crystal-y.”

The angry dancer pulls the bag out of Cinnamon’s hand. “It’s molly,” she says. “And it’s good.” She dips an acrylic nail into the bag, fills it with the crystal-y powder, then sniffs hard. Her eyes go cross-eyed for a quick second.

“Leave some for us,” Cinnamon says.

“First come, first served,” the angry girl says.

Cinnamon rolls her eyes. “I guess we have to do it now then,” she says. I suppose this is how the owners get the girls to perform this early, when they don’t have much of a chance at tips.

The angry girl hands the bag back to Cinnamon, who pulls a dusty gold tray from the duffel bag. Cinnamon begins cutting lines. It’s been a while since I’ve done molly. I like it, obviously, as I am a human being. But I haven’t done it in years. I am worried I will react poorly. I might be too eager and kill my enigmatic vibe.

“Do you think this is a good idea?” I ask. I don’t care if I sound like a nerd. “What if I get too happy and Beau thinks I’m a loser?”

“I don’t think that’s possible for you.” Cinnamon laughs. “Plus, this stuff is super clean. And we have, like, hours until he’ll be here.”

I’m transported back to my early twenties, when I did drugs mostly to kill time, to quicken my race to death. I guess that’s why everyone does drugs in

LA. They aren't becoming the stars they thought they would be when they moved here, and they have all this free time. So they do drugs to fill time and to feel as happy as they think they should feel, for living in LA and pursuing their dreams, even if the good feelings are brief and ultimately empty. I did this for a while until I started making actual money. I decide it is okay, just for today. It is a special occasion. I am backstage at Mirror Box and I am about to see Beau. I am connecting with humans in a normal, healthy way. I think even my former therapist would approve.

The disembodied male voice interrupts my thoughts: "Cinnamon, you're up next."

Cinnamon snorts a line. "What should I dance to?"

"Britney, obviously," I say. "You always do Britney."

"She has, like, a billion songs!" Cinnamon shouts.

"I always like 'Lucky,'" I say.

"You *would*," she says, and I'm not sure what this means. Maybe she means I picked the only Britney song that doesn't sound like it is made of bubble gum.

The angry-looking dancer leaves for the bar area, and Cinnamon mouths, "Fuck you," at the closing door.

"What's up with her?" I ask.

"She's a *fiend*," Cinnamon says. "She literally only works here for the drugs, and she always takes the good ones before anyone else can get them." She lowers her voice. "One of the moneymakers complained and I think they're going to fire her soon." Cinnamon licks a little crystal-y powder off her finger. "I wish they'd do it, like, tonight." Then she giggles. "I feel good, honestly I don't even care anymore."

"Drugs are great," I say.

"Yeah," Cinnamon says. "Until they aren't."

I am peaking on molly and chatting with lots of dancers, who are now calling me "Ice" to my face, when my dad texts me.

Did you enjoy Solstice? I'm rewatching now.

I am very high, but I find it *soooo* sweet the way my dad is trying to connect with me. I haven't seen *Solstice*, obviously, but I decide to practice my acting and logical deduction, about which I am highly confident at this

moment. The summer solstice is the brightest day of the year. A horror movie in the sunlight.

I was inspired by his decision to make a horror movie in the sunlight, I write.

Me too, he writes back. Also, the dyed in the wool academic in me is charmed by all the thesis drama.

I could cry. My dad is so adorable. For most of my life it annoyed me that my parents were academics who had given me neither a trust fund nor Hollywood connections. But right now I am peaking on molly and find my academic father endearing and perfect. He is a brilliant and kind man with excellent taste. He could have done anything, but he decided to invest his time and energy in the youth of Riverside. It's so honorable. I love him and I love MDMA.

Why did you name me Emily? I type back without thinking. I know the answer. Emily Brontë. But I want to know *WHY???*

Before he answers, Beau walks in and I almost drop my phone. He is with a crew, per usual. There is the suspected Leo man. Several blondes who are, from my perspective, indistinguishable, but together they look cool and powerful. The patrons of the bar turn to watch them as they enter. For a brief moment, they even take attention from the dancers. It is impressive.

Two men—the owners, I guess—immediately surround them. I am entranced by the performance and stare for a beat too long, then snap myself out of it. This is exactly what I was afraid would happen if I did—that I would do socially inappropriate things like stare at people or be nice to them.

Cinnamon's arm drapes around me and plucks me from my paranoid thoughts. She raises her eyebrows at me. "How you feeling?"

I'm not sure if she's talking about the molly or Beau's entrance.

"I feel great," I say. "I was just texting my dad." I don't care that this probably sounds dorky. I gave up trying to be cool a long time ago.

"God, I love texting my parents on molly," she says. "It's like all my petty resentments evaporate and I'm just amazed that they are genetically half me, that they raised me and funded my existence for decades."

"Same!" I shout, although I sense Cinnamon's parents funded her existence in a different way from how mine did. My parents gave me the bare minimum. If I wanted a shirt from Limited Too, I had to work for it.

"I wish I could be on molly all the time," she says.

“Same,” I say. I feel great. Beau is here, and Cinnamon the babydoll has her arm around me and I look uncool in an endearing way, I am sure.

“Let’s go try to do a line before Angsty Anna does it all,” she says.

I hadn’t planned to do another line before seeing Beau, but maybe it will be good. Just a small one. This is always how drugs work. *Just a little more.* It never feels like a big deal until the next day, when you want to kill yourself. I’ll jump off that bridge when I get to it.

All the mirrors allow me to look at Beau without looking directly at him. I like to imagine him doing the same, but he probably isn’t. I sneak a final glance before we slide backstage.

“Okay,” Cinnamon says as she approaches the lines. “What’s the game plan?” She snorts.

“You tell me,” I say. “I’ve never had a boyfriend.” I’m embarrassed to reveal this, then remind myself it is unique. Everyone has been in relationships. Most of my loser friends from Riverside are married with children. It’s more interesting that I’ve never done that. It’s gutsier to go it alone.

“You normally date women?” Cinnamon asks. She snorts another line. I wonder for a second if she was projecting onto Angsty Anna—Cinnamon seems like the biggest fiend here.

“Um,” I say, returning my attention to her question. I have hooked up with women, obviously—I’m a coastal urban millennial. And I had a *very* realistic sex dream featuring Hazel the Precious Starlet once. But I’ve never felt attached to someone romantically. I love sex, but I am generally disgusted and turned off whenever anyone wants more than that.

I am confident that with Beau it will be different. I already want him to want me, to need me.

“I normally date no one,” I say.

“That’s so cool,” Cinnamon says.

She hands me the gold tray, and I weigh whether it’s worth it to snort the small line. My biggest fear is coming off overeager to Beau. I have to be myself: off-putting.

“You got this in the bag, Ice,” Cinnamon says.

I snort the line.

It is 1:46 A.M. when Beau finally walks over to us. I know the time because there is a clock by the ATM machine, I guess so people know to get money for the dancers before they close. They close at 2:00, so we're really pushing it. But I don't care. I am so high, just dancing with Cinnamon and periodically disappearing into the back room for a pick-me-up.

I may hate Vagablonde, ideologically, but she is a good DJ. Or maybe I am just high. I can't recall any of the specific songs, but the mood feels right. She doesn't play anything too "up." It's all down-tempo, seductive shit.

"Hi." Beau leans on a barstool and my heart jumps into my throat.

"Hi," I say. "This is my friend Cinnamon."

"I'm Beau." He brushes his hair to the other side of his head. "I don't actually know your name." He looks directly into my eyes and my skin prickles.

"Ice," I say.

Cinnamon jabs my rib cage.

"Cool," he says.

I'm glad he didn't make a dumb joke about how I shouldn't go anywhere near immigration court. Beau is even worse at small talk than I am. He's the polar opposite of Thomas, who can talk to a wall.

"What are you doing after this?"

I open my mouth and nothing comes out.

"No plans," Cinnamon says, saving me. This is the best night I've ever had. "What about you?"

"I think we're gonna go back to my friend Jax's house." He tugs the bottom of his T-shirt and my clit vibrates. "If you all wanna come, it's just around the corner."

Once he is out of eyesight, Cinnamon lowers her voice and says, "You killed it."

Then we go outside to smoke a cigarette. "Are we going to go?"

"I think we should stop by," Cinnamon says. "Give him a little bit and then pull back. It makes people go insane."

"You really are a Scorpio stellium," I say. "Withholding as fuck." I inhale from her cigarette and blow a tube of smoke into the midnight sky.

"I thought you said astrology was a scam," she says, taking the cigarette back.

"It is."

We follow the throngs from the Mirror Box to Jax's apartment. The hallway is jam-packed. I scan for Beau, but there are too many bodies. Cinnamon and I try to push through and get splashed with droplets of liquor and beer, but the molly makes it all feel good and jolly. We finally funnel into the main room. There is a disco ball and a packed dance floor, and the bass is pulsing.

"What do you think?" a woman shouts in my ear. "Is *Next* cheugy? Will I become a sweatshop lingerie model?"

I assume she's talking to someone else.

"Let's get a drink," says Cinnamon. She grabs my hand and pushes the catalog model aside. And then the crowd seems to part like the Red Sea, and I see him, the man of my dreams, pouring some ice into a Solo cup.

We approach.

He sees me and smiles. "Ice?" he asks in a sort of funny tone, and I realize he's making a joke about my nickname.

"Ideally with some liquor in it," Cinnamon says. I like that she talks for me.

"Whiskey, okay?" Beau asks. He fills another cup with ice.

"Yeah," Cinnamon says. "But not too much." She puts her arm around me and my skin tingles. "We can't stay long."

I'm disappointed, but I also respect that Cinnamon is making me seem desirable and evanescent. She's dangling me in front of Beau so that she can snatch me away, like I do with a piece of turkey to Lydia when I'm feeling sadistic, and he will be absolutely desperate for more.

Beau hands us our cups and I take a sip of mine. I'm surprised that it tastes good. Cinnamon is right: we should be on molly all the time.

"Eyyyyy." The suspected Leo I always see with Beau appears out of nowhere and puts his arm on Beau's shoulder. "I recognize you," he says, but he isn't looking at me. He's looking at Cinnamon. "From Mirror Box."

Cinnamon morphs into the babydoll. "I recognize you too," she says with a soft voice, then bites her lip.

"Jax," he says, kissing Cinnamon's hand. "I've seen you dance a million times, Cinnamon, and I have some notes. You have a lot of potential."

Beau seems embarrassed by his friend's gall, but Cinnamon is unfazed. "Oh?" she coos, "I'd love to hear them sometime over a lap dance." She

sticks her tongue in Jax's ear and he squeezes her ass. Cinnamon motions toward me. "This is my girl Ice."

"Ice." Jax raises his eyebrows. "I hope you stay away from the border with that name." He cackles.

I force a weak smile.

The catalog model comes over and grabs Jax's hand, and he follows her onto the dance floor without saying goodbye. The molly begins to turn on me, and I feel like a loser, standing here in a Juicy tracksuit in a roomful of models and musicians and photographers and influencers.

"He's *on one*," Beau says, apologizing for Jax.

A body hurls itself at Cinnamon. "Bittcchhhhhhh," the stranger says, grinding up against her.

"Babe!" Cinnamon squeals. They start moving toward the dance floor.

And *poof*, I have exactly what I want: just Beau and me, alone, facing each other. No one to interrupt us. I know music is playing, intellectually, but I hear only my heartbeat and Beau's breath.

I'm afraid. I sip some more whiskey and it calms me, and I again wonder if I should just become an alcoholic like everyone else.

"How do you know Cinnamon?" Beau asks.

I'm thankful he broke the silence. "I'm a regular at Mirror Box," I say, and my eyes float up to the tin ceiling, which reflects various shades of neon light. I'm freezing up again like I did at Subtropical. I want to be alone with Beau, but I also want Cinnamon to come back and speak for me.

"That's cool," Beau says.

The silence creeps back in, and I rack my brain for something to ask him, a fascinating observation, a cool sound— anything! But I'm drawing a total blank. Luckily he opens his mouth.

"What are you always working on at Subtropical?"

My heart jumps. He's been watching me. I'm so excited I forget to answer.

He looks back at me expectantly.

"I'm writing a screenplay," I say finally. I can't let him know I'm an internet astrologer or a failed actress like every other woman in LA. I tried to write screenplays in my early twenties. But after a while it felt like a waste of time. Complete sentences don't make money. Memes make money.

"What's it about?" he asks.

I sip my whiskey to buy some time, and Cinnamon reappears with some random girl.

“Crystal is taking us to another party,” Cinnamon says to me. “I need to steal her,” she says to Beau.

Beau looks disappointed, which means Cinnamon’s plan is working.

“Thanks for inviting us,” I tell Beau.

“Thanks for coming.” He takes a big swig of his drink. “Do you have an Instagram?”

“No,” I say, then Cinnamon pulls me into the hallway, the sea of bodies and splish-splash of drinks.

Outside, Crystal gets in a Lyft, and Cinnamon and I decide to walk back to Thai Town. We are high and awake and immune to the cold night air. We discover we are neighbors. Cinnamon lives just two blocks from me.

“He. Is. Smitten,” Cinnamon says as we walk. “That was so hot when he asked for your Instagram and you just said no. So mysterious! So aloof! You have him right where you want him.”

“Well, I don’t have a personal Instagram,” I say. “I have my dumb astrology Instagram, but I don’t want him to know about that.” I kick a stick off the sidewalk. “I told him I am a screenwriter.”

“Perfect,” Cinnamon says.

We spend the rest of the walk talking about Cinnamon, which is a nice break from my own head and, unlike most social interactions, not boring at all. She is in love with her professor, which sounds glamorous to me, even though she appears tortured about it. Precious Starlet Hazel fucked her professor at The New School and always claimed he “ruined her life,” but it still sounded enviable to me. I would kill to have my life ruined by a torrid affair.

Cinnamon tells me she is writing her grad school thesis on “the politics of desire” and working at Mirror Box as field research. She hasn’t told anyone at Mirror Box this, as the bosses frown upon CalArts students exploiting their establishment for the academy.

The professor has seen Cinnamon dance a few times. But the bosses don’t like him because he refuses, in his words, to “throw money at women.”

“He is British,” she explains. She also tells me he is married.

My dad is also a married professor, but at community college, which is by no means as glamorous as CalArts. I wonder if he's ever fucked a student. I hope he has. My mom is terrible and he deserves it.

Cinnamon walks me to my doorstep. She says her apartment is "a few blocks up," which I assume means the bougie hills where Rachel lived. I want to see her apartment. The MDMA makes me feel open to this idea of "friendship."

On the sidewalk in front of my building, Cinnamon tells me that Beau will probably go to Subtropical in the morning—well, it *is* the morning, but when it is bright out—because he will be dying to see me again and doesn't have any other way to contact me. So I have to *not go*. I can go the following day, however, when he has waited long enough.

This sounds difficult, but reasonable and not impossible.

I am a Scorpio. I can withhold.

I wake up at noon to the sun blazing through the blinds. Lydia is pawing my face, and I get up to feed her the stolen cat food. I enjoy the whole process of feeding her, putting the food in a bowl and watching her lap it up, things I don't normally think twice of. I once read an article in the *Atlantic* about MDMA therapy for depression. I feel like the molly shifted something in my brain, adjusted my neural pathways. Or maybe it was just my proximity to Beau.

Since I can't go to Subtropical today, for seduction purposes, I decide to do my readings in my bed, like I used to do all the time. I crank Counting Crows and fall into a nice rhythm, completing the readings in a machinelike fashion and watching my Venmo dollars increase. *Venmo riche*, I think, bopping my head to "Mr. Jones."

When the sun fades and the light outside my windows turns a softer blue, I check my texts. I have two unread texts from my dad. I recall our abandoned conversation from last night.

We named you Emily because your mother worships Emily Bronte, which I thought you knew.

To be perfectly honest, I am not a Bronte fan, but it has somehow become unacceptable for a man to dislike a female author, so keep that between us.

I smile. Lydia nuzzles my leg.

Your secret is safe with me, I write. It feels nice to have a secret with my father. I see from the little bubbles that he is already composing a response.

Thank you. I live in perpetual fear of being unjustly canceled for my tepid opinions.

I smile. *Honestly?* I write back. *Same.* I recall that dumbass who tried to cancel me for posting one of her memes, which was well within the realm of fair use.

My dad is still typing: *Would you like to get coffee this week and catch up?*

I'd love to, I write back.

Great, he writes. *I don't want to have to make you come all the way to Riverside. We could meet somewhere halfway. Tuesday and Thursday afternoons work best for me, but I know you're busy, so I'll move things around if I need to. We could also get dinner.*

I look at my laptop to see what day it is. Freelancing means I never know what day it is. I haven't kept track of the days of the week since I was in high school.

My laptop says it's Sunday. Normally I'd be horrified by the realization that I'd gone out on a Saturday night—*so gauche*—but thanks to the MDMA, I do not care. I am thrilled it is Sunday, the day of rest and, more importantly, the day of the Lord. Tomorrow is Monday, which means I can go to Subtropical to see Beau. And on Tuesday, I will see my father, like a good, well-adjusted daughter.

Tuesday afternoon works for me, I write back. *I work remotely for Elon, so I'll just bring my laptop.* I figure I can get some readings done while I am there. It will be nice to get out of the tiny sliver of Los Angeles where I spend all my time. I add, *And we don't start filming until the new year.* The cherry on top.

Great, my dad writes back. *I'll find a coffee shop in between us and get back to you.*

Cool, I write back, with the sunglasses emoji.

It is now completely dark outside my windows. I love this about December, how it shifts dramatically from violent sunlight to pitch dark without warning. I feel more comfortable in the dark. I turn on my lava lamp and watch the room glow.

I decide to make a meme to take advantage of the effects of the lingering

MDMA in my system. I read online that MDMA has a half-life of forty hours, meaning I have another twenty-six hours to feel positive.

I take that viral photo of Donald Trump looking directly into the solar eclipse and put each sign on Trump, then list each sign's greatest toxic temptation as the eclipse. It's stupid and obvious and likely to go viral.

Virgo ... an opportunity for self-loathing.

Cancer ... a wounded puppy

Scorpio ... unrequited love.

Leo ... the sound of their own name.

DAWN.

All the Ice Blended drinks are starting to show on my ass. I'm in the dressing room of an overpriced boutique in the plaza, trying on a teal sundress because I want it to be summer, and inside this windowless temperature-controlled room, I can pretend it's July. I do a little twirl and the dress flies up to reveal my bubble butt.

"Doing okay in there, Dawn?" the shopgirl asks.

"Yep!" Hearing my own name perks me up a bit.

I admire the dress in the mirror. It frames my tits well and brings out the blue in my eyes, but I don't want to get too attached to it, as I can't afford it. Tara would have bought me this dress. Jen would have bought me this dress. And now I have no one to buy me this dress.

I sit down on the floor and open my purse, pull out a handle of Jose Cuervo I stole from work and take a big gulp.

Before my dad left, he bought me whatever I wanted. My mom would get pissed and say, "That girl is never going to understand the value of a dollar." But why did I need to understand the value of a dollar? I was pretty, and my dad always said that was enough. I never thought about what would happen when I turned forty-eight.

I stand up and adjust the dress to cover the tiny wrinkles on the tops of my tits that seem to have developed overnight. Then I take another big swig.

Jen and I wore the same size, so we could share clothes. I had never thought of this benefit of lesbian relationships before: double the closet. Jen had great clothes too, much nicer than mine. But my favorite thing about Jen was how she was with Bo. She treated him like her own. We would go to Castle Park and ride the teacups and drive the bumper cars. Bo was scared of the roller coaster, so Jen would put him in between us and we'd each hold one of his hands. His palms would sweat like crazy, and Jen would rub his hair as we rode up to the top. After the big drop, Bo would be smiling and laughing. Later he'd thank us for encouraging him to go on the ride.

A few years later, when I felt Jen pulling away, it shattered me. She was the first person I dated who felt like home, like the home I had before my dad left. And we had this perfect little family. I knew it was too good to be true. When I looked through her phone and noticed she'd sent a kissy-face emoji to the new lesbian in town, I saw red for the first time. I knew I shouldn't have set her car on fire, but my feelings don't know shit. Jen couldn't understand that I had no control over my actions, there was no decision, it was all instinct. And I did it because I loved her so deeply and intensely that the idea of losing her would keep me up at night. And I did lose her, and not because of another person or a disease or a freak accident, but because of something I did, and that's what ultimately hurt me the most. I lost Jen, and I had no one to blame but myself.

"Miss," the shopgirl says, and I jump, spilling a little tequila on the dress. "You okay in there?"

"Yeah," I say. "It doesn't fit quite right."

I take off the dress and hang it so that the tequila stain is toward the wall, put back on my cheap Marshalls dress, and head to the Coffee Bean.

I've tried every flavor of Ice Blended except black forest. I don't even know what that means, black forest. You can't eat a forest.

"What's the black forest like?" I ask the cashier, who by this point I know is named Rosy, which I remember because she has rosacea.

I am starting to feel at home at the Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf.

"It's like chocolate-cherry flavored," she said.

"Do you like it?"

"I like it okay," she says. "It's not my favorite, but they are all good."

"Well, I've tried all the others," I say. "I think I need to try it."

"Do it, Dawn," she says.

I smile.

"Whip?" she asks.

"You know it, Rosy," I say.

I pay and then walk over to where they serve the drinks. On the way, something catches my eye. It's that weird limp again. I freeze. Paul. He is walking toward the door. I instinctively follow, but by the time I start walking he is already out the door.

“Fuck,” I say under my breath.

“Everything okay, Dawn?” Rosy calls over from the cashier station.

I sigh. “Yeah.”

Rosy is already helping another customer.

As I walk back over to retrieve my drink, something on the ground catches my eye. It’s a driver’s license. I lean over to pick it up.

EMILY.

I can't decide whether to wear my juicy tracksuit, cheap black shift dress, or a designer dress I stole from Thomas. I text Cinnamon and eat a few slices of turkey as I wait for her response. I am a little groggy because I stayed up late watching movies to talk to my dad about. First *Solstice*, then *Parasite*. I hadn't intended to watch both of them in the same night, but when *Solstice* ended, I wanted more. I'd forgotten the feeling of getting sucked into someone else's fantastical vision with a cat curled on my belly. So I turned on *Parasite*, and I enjoyed that one too. I almost watched *Knife in the Water*, but it was 2:00 A.M. and I wanted to get a few hours of sleep.

Wear the black shift, Cinnamon writes back. Or the juicy. Nothing designer. Keep it cool.

On the walk to Subtropical, I try to remember the last time I've had a "friend." Rachel doesn't count; she is my cousin. I did drugs with people in my early twenties, so I must have had friends, but I can't remember anyone specific. I tended to go out with people from the bar, and they all blended together.

The last time I had a friend in the sense of having regular communication and keeping each other up to date on our lives, I believe, was in high school. Zoe's parents had a pool and a lake house in Tahoe. She would share all her clothes with me and tell me I was beautiful and, specifically, that she wanted to look like me. We had fun together, sometimes, but ultimately she became way too needy. I had to ghost her. It took nearly three years of no responses for her to stop texting me. The last I checked, she was still in Riverside with a husband and a baby, like nearly everyone I know from my past.

I suppose she was the original Thomas. Except she never went down on me. Although sometimes I had a feeling she wanted to.

At Subtropical, I walk right to my typical spot in the corner. I don't see Beau, but I don't not see him either. I'm not looking. I feel anxious, but when I catch my reflection in the shine on the table, my expression is serene.

I continue to take notes for my Donald Trump meme, which was sidetracked by last night's film marathon. I also have thirty-five readings left, and it's nice knowing I have tasks to occupy my brain and lots of money coming my way. I write my notes in my Lisa Frank notebook.

Taurus ... pasta with a cream-based sauce.

Aquarius ... aliens!!!

Aries ...

I start drawing hearts again. And then, like clockwork, magic, or divine intervention, a figure appears above me. I don't have to look to know who it is.

Beau is wearing his typical uniform: white T-shirt, black jeans. He is holding a slim laptop under his arm.

"Is this seat taken?" he asks, gesturing toward the table beside me.

"Nope," I say.

He sits down with an enticing combination of awkwardness and grace—stiff, but cool. He opens his laptop and I try not to look at the screen. I close my notebook and return my gaze to my laptop. We are so close to each other, but also staring at our laptops. The screens provide a comforting barrier.

"How was that other party the other night?" Beau finally asks, not looking up from his computer.

I briefly consider whether to lie. I decide against it. I've had enough free acting lessons in the past few weeks. "We didn't go," I say.

"Oh," Beau says. He seems offended, maybe, maybe not. It's hard to tell what he is thinking or feeling. Zoe always said the same thing about me, before I ghosted her—that I was impossible to read.

"We were tired," I say. "It had been a long night."

"I hear that," says Beau. He seems a bit more relaxed. Maybe I just need to talk more. He's so effortlessly beautiful, he probably isn't used to having to carry a conversation. I'm not used to it either. But I am an actress. I can pretend to be chatty. Not too chatty, of course. But just enough.

"You had a long night too?" I ask. I just need to ask him some questions about himself. Get him loose.

He types something on his computer, then looks up. "Always," he says with a pained grin. I remember that he dealt coke. Maybe he is trying to change his lifestyle. I need to change the subject to something more relaxing.

A hot waiter arrives, and Beau orders a black coffee, just like me.

“I’m glad you didn’t order oat milk,” I say.

Beau laughs. “You take your coffee black too?”

“Exclusively,” I say. “Why dilute perfection?”

He nods, then seems a little uncomfortable again. I am enticed by how difficult it is for him to open up. He will get close to seeming friendly, then shut down. To me, it’s like a drug.

I hope he feels the same way about me.

I go back to my laptop and decide to put the ball in his court for a bit. I scan my Gmail absentmindedly.

“Hey,” he says suddenly. “What’s your screenplay about?”

“Oh.” I say the first thing that comes to mind. “It’s about an astrologer who doesn’t believe in astrology.”

Beau laughs. “That’s brilliant.”

“Is it?”

“Yeah,” he says. “Astrology is so trendy right now; it’s everywhere.”

I’m glad he thinks it’s trendy, even though my livelihood embarrasses me. I’m always worried the trend is over. All trends come to an end. When I was in elementary school everyone was obsessed with these things called pogs, which were just garishly decorated pieces of cardboard. We went nuts for them, and they were truly just cardboard. And then one day, *poof*, no one cared about them at all. It was like they never existed. I imagine a landfill somewhere filled with pogs. One day my Instagram account will exist in a landfill in cyberspace.

“I got my chart read recently by the girl who runs one of those meme accounts, I think it was Exalted,” he continues. “I don’t even remember ordering it. I guess I was pretty drunk at the time.”

“Oh?” I’m ashamed but also turned on. Most erotic feelings are accompanied by embarrassment. “Did the reading resonate?”

“Not really, honestly,” he says.

My feelings are a little hurt.

“She made it sound like I was some kind of gift from God. And I’m a loser, honestly.” He laughs. “I double-checked to make sure I gave her the right birth time.”

I frown. “Maybe you have some untapped potential,” I say. “Maybe your greatness hasn’t been realized.” I worry I’m giving myself away.

Beau shrugs. The hot waiter brings his coffee, and he takes a sip.

“I don’t think you’re a loser,” I say.

“Thanks,” he says. He puts his coffee mug on the table. “Seriously, that means a lot.”

Beau and I never really get into a conversational groove that afternoon, but he does ask for my phone number before he leaves. He says he wants to take pictures of me. I’m not sure if it’s an excuse to hang out with me or if he is just thinking about his career. Either option excites me. I know it is passé to be a muse, but I love the idea of being his. I’ve always felt most myself in front of someone else’s camera.

When I get home, I do three readings and then reward myself with peanut butter from the jar and a Polanski film. I don’t have any weed left, but I don’t mind. I am high off my interaction with Beau.

He asked for my number, I text Cinnamon as the film starts. I don’t normally allow myself to text during movies, but I am feeling rebellious.

Feigns shock, Cinnamon texts back.

He said he wants to photograph me, I write back.

As a master’s candidate studying the politics of desire, I have qualms about that, she writes. *But as your friend, I love it.*

I smile and refocus on the opening credits. I haven’t seen a black-and-white film with subtitles in forever, and it feels good, like I’m resurrecting some part of myself I thought was dead. Beau asked for my number today. I am getting coffee with my dad tomorrow. He typed our zip codes into a website called MeetHalfway.com and picked a coffee shop in San Dimas called the Owl’s Beak. I am excited to be a normal daughter.

About halfway through the movie, my phone lights up. When I see the name on the message, my heart skips a beat. It is Beau.

Hey, when are you free to shoot? he asks. *Jax’s apartment gets amazing light this time of year.*

Cool, I write back. I don’t love the idea of going back to that apartment. It had weird vibes.

I was also thinking about Barnsdall Park, he writes. *I don’t normally shoot outside but I want to practice.*

Let’s do that then, I write back. I am relieved to avoid that creepy drug den. *I’ll be your guinea pig.*

Haha, he writes back.

I'm hanging out with my dad tomorrow but I'm free Wednesday. Or Friday. I am technically free every other day after that for eternity, but I don't need to tell him that.

Cool, he says. I think morning would be really cool with your coloring.

I like that he is objectifying me like a painting.

Like 8 am? he writes. *If that works for you.*

That works, I write, even though I can't remember the last time I've seen that hour. I'm never up before 10:00 A.M. Beau doesn't seem like an early riser either. But I like the idea of having a reason to get up early. I will force myself to go to bed early, and then I will wake up at 7:00 A.M. and go for a jog around the block to get my blood flowing. I'll take a cold shower so my skin and hair will be fresh. I'll wear my pink Juicy tracksuit, which will pop in the early-morning blue light.

Cool, let's do Wednesday.

Perfect, I write, thrilled he picked the earlier option. Waiting until Friday would have been torture. I put my phone down and then return my gaze to the movie. After a few scenes, my phone lights up again.

You doing anything fun tonight? Beau writes. My pulse flickers under my skin.

Watching Knife in the Water, I write back, confident he's not one of those moralistic idiots who judge art based on the personal choices of its creator.

Nice, you a Polanski fan?

I smile. He is making conversation. It is easier here, over text, with space between us. The energy of his person is too intense to bear, even with our laptops in between us. This is preferable now.

I was, I write back. *Or I am. I don't know. I sort of took a break from watching movies but I'm getting back into it.*

Why did you take a break?

Jealousy. I am being honest with Beau for the first time.

I hear that, he writes back. *I can't even look at magazines anymore for the same reason.*

My palms sweat against my phone. I'm not even paying attention to the movie anymore. Beau is being vulnerable with me. He probably feels the same as I do, that the energy between us is too intense to handle in person. I am nervous about the shoot, but I also think the tension will make for

incredible photographs.

I understand. I keep typing. I thought about asking you what photographers you like but I'll spare you that.

He responds with the prayer emoji. I wait for him to text more, but he doesn't, which is fine. We have a plan for Wednesday morning. And I need to pay attention to the movie anyway, because I need to be prepared for coffee with my dad. I relax into the bed and refocus my attention on the screen.

The next morning, I remember I don't have a car, and I curse myself for not thinking of this earlier. How am I going to get to San Dimas? An Uber will be astronomical. I am trying to save money. Also, I don't want to show up in an Uber. I need my dad to think I have my shit together, which in Southern California means you have a car. So I text Thomas.

I need your car today.

Good to hear from you, Emily!

Sarcasm is so passé, I write back. *I need to meet my father in San Dimas at 2.* I look at my phone. It's 11:00 A.M.

Ok, ok, he writes. *I have a meeting at noon and I'll come drop it off after.*

Thank you!!!! I assume "meeting" means sex date, but I really don't need to know. I'm grateful for Thomas regardless of his terrible personality.

I assume you will pay me back ...

I am typing out "fine" when he writes back, *Just kidding!*

I respond with an upside-down smiley face emoji and feel sad for a brief moment about my lack of self-respect. I was ready to give him a blow job to use his car. I am a prostitute.

My Instagram followers are still climbing. More followers means more readings and more articles and more money. Maybe astrology is back on top. Maybe "the market" was just taking "a dip."

I work on my readings until around 1:00 P.M. Thomas isn't here yet, so I text him. I want to leave by 1:15 to leave some time to get there on time.

Where are you? I text him. Lydia jumps on the bed. I get up and pour some stolen cat food into her bowl.

Cumming ... Thomas texts back. Revolting.

You have 15 minutes, I write.

At 1:20, I hear a loud honk on the street. I peek out the window to see Thomas's Volvo. He is leaning out the window with a joint hanging from his mouth. He looks like a fucking idiot. But I am excited to drive his fancy Swedish car.

"You're late," I say when I'm outside. He pulls the car beside the curb with the hazard lights on—something only an independently wealthy person would do. Then he jumps out and hands me the keys.

"You'll be in San Dimas by two," he says. "Any questions about ole Pearl?" He slaps the hood of his car like a dumbass.

"I know how to drive a car," I say, refusing to acknowledge that he named his car after the inside of a mollusk. "I grew up in Southern California."

"Okay, Cali girl," he says. "When will you have her back?"

I packed my laptop and want to get a few hours of readings done after I hang out with my dad. Also, BuzzFeed asked me to write a piece called "The Signs as New Year's Plans." I want to show my dad I am a working woman, a digital nomad. I will tell him that Elon has some requests for me and keep working after he leaves.

"Is six okay?"

"A-okay," he says. I have a small urge to punch him.

Thomas's car is much smoother than what I'm accustomed to. I've always driven my parents' old Toyotas because they are the most practical car.

I can't figure out how to use Thomas's fancy sound system, so I drive in silence and think about Beau almost the entire time, imagining how I will pose for his camera. There isn't much to look at in terms of scenery, just highways and cars and dirty palm trees. The sun burns my eyes. I find some sunglasses in the center console and put them on. They are a unisex style, too cool for Thomas, and I assume they were left by a woman.

When I reach San Dimas, a heaviness descends over me. On the sterile streets, people wear yoga pants and fleece jackets. I feel like I'm in the computer game *The Sims*, and it reminds me of my childhood. I stand out with my black dress and black hair and black Doc Martens.

The inside of the coffee shop has exposed brick walls and nitro cold brew taps and Jenga blocks on the tables. I see two patrons in fedoras, which makes me deeply uneasy. The suburbs have no idea that hipster culture died in 2009. My dad sits on a faux vintage couch, wearing a gray cardigan with leather patches on the elbows, a literal professor sweater. He adjusts his

glasses, spots me, then stands up.

“Emily,” he says. I cringe a bit at the sound of my name. I just hate it so much. It was so nice the other night to finally have a nickname. If I audition again, I will go by Ice Forrest. It feels very ‘90s, like River Phoenix or something.

“Hi, Dad,” I say.

“Have a seat,” he says. “What can I get you?”

“Black coffee would be great,” I say.

“Great,” he says. “After your old man.” He looks embarrassed for a second, like he’s been too intimate. “Your mom takes her coffee with cream.”

I think about saying, *You should divorce her*, but instead I say, “Why dilute perfection?” like I said to Beau yesterday. Pleasant sensations swirl through my stomach.

“Exactly!” he says, then disappears to the register.

I sit down and performatively pull out my laptop, just so my dad will see me working when he returns.

“Just have to finish this email to Elon real quick,” I say when he hands me my coffee, which is in an annoying oversized mug. But I am excited for all the caffeine.

“By all means,” my father says. He sits down beside me on the couch and sips from his mug.

“All right,” I say, then shut the laptop. “I’m all yours.”

“So, Em,” my dad says. “What kinds of things does Elon consult you on? I’m admittedly rusty on the zodiac. Do you, say, look at the stars and decide whether it is a good day to launch a rocket?” He laughs a little, and I force a laugh too. I guess it is funny. But I want my dad to think I am legitimate, even though everything I say to him is a lie.

“No,” I say. “My expertise is not in the transits.” This is true. “We have another person for that.” This is a lie.

“The transits?” my dad asks.

“Put simply, the transits involve interpreting how the planets move through the zodiac and what it means.” I sip my coffee. “My focus is rather on personality profiles based on the location of the transits at the time each employee was born, or the birth chart.”

“Fascinating,” my dad says. I can’t help but smile a little bit.

“Whenever Elon considers hiring someone, I look at their birth chart and

determine first whether they would be a good fit at SpaceX or Tesla, second on which team their skills would be best suited.”

“Wow,” my dad says. “That must be a lot of work.”

“It is,” I say. “I have to make all these charts to determine compatibility. Sometimes my apartment looks like the jail cell in *A Beautiful Mind*.”

My dad laughs. “You’ve always had a great sense of humor, Em.”

I force a smile. I am tired of people telling me I am funny. All I want is to be taken seriously.

“Can you give me an example?” he asks. It is so cute that my dad is at least feigning an interest in astrology.

“Okay,” I said. Someone in the corner of the coffee shop starts playing a French horn and I try my best to ignore it. “Say Elon wants to hire someone with a Virgo sun and Capricorn moon. Virgo and Capricorn are both practical, hardworking earth signs. This is not a people person. I would suggest he—or she—is put on a team where they can mostly crunch numbers and not interact much with others. This is someone who is going to get the work done. The Capricorn moon will make them a bit rigid and repressed, so I will try to put them on a team with other, like-minded earth signs. Virgos don’t get along with Sagittarians or Aries, so I would suggest he or she is not on a team led by one of those signs.” As I say this, I wonder why this is not my actual job. I am so good at it.

“Fascinating,” my dad says.

“For the most part,” I say, “air and fire get along and earth and water get along. So I try my best to keep those matched for all the personal placements, from the sun to Mars.” The French horn gets louder, so I have to get louder too. “Of course, it’s not possible to have everyone perfectly matched, but I do my best.”

“What is the most common sign at SpaceX?” my dad asks.

“Virgo,” I say. “Then Pisces. Elon Musk is a Virgo moon, and they’re super efficient workers, so he likes to hire them.” I looked up Elon’s chart the other day. And whenever I look up someone’s chart, I commit it to memory. It’s not a choice; it just happens. I think it’s part of my OCD.

“I’m a Pisces, I think,” my dad says.

“You are!” I say.

“I don’t know much about it. What are Pisces like?”

“Dreamy, creative, sensitive, gentle,” I say. “It seems weird for SpaceX,

because you would expect more robotic signs, but Pisces can be geniuses. Mostly because they're so creative; they see things others can't. This is super helpful in the realm of space travel."

"Wow," my dad says. "I think I missed the genius gene."

"Oh please," I say. "You're a professor!"

My dad shrugs. "Your mother is a Taurus, right?"

I nod.

"What are they like?"

"Stubborn," I say. "A bit dull."

He laughs again, then his face gets all serious. "You know, your mother loves you very much," he says.

"I don't know that," I say. "I don't know it at all. All she does is radiate hostility in my direction."

My dad sighs and the corners of his mouth turn. For the first time I notice that he has aged significantly in the past few years. There are small bags under his eyes, and I realize that one day, maybe not too long from now, he will die. I swallow.

"She's tough," he says.

"A classic Piscean understatement!" I say.

He laughs again, then I change the subject to *Knife in the Water*. We talk about the movie and finish our coffees. My dad starts commenting on the Freudian themes, monologuing the same way I did about astrology earlier. I zone in and out, fantasizing about Beau and thinking about how nice it is to be reconnecting with my dad, even though I'm not really listening to him.

"How's Thomas?" my dad asks when we've exhausted Polanski.

"He's good," I say.

"I liked him, he's a nice guy."

"Yeah," I say. "I don't know if we'll last."

"Oh yeah? Why's that?"

"He's sort of a tool."

My dad laughs. I guess he knows the word from his students. "He was a bit eager."

"Beyond eager." I laugh.

I think about Beau.

"To be honest, I have a crush on someone else."

"Well," he says, "you're young. It's probably smart to play the field a bit."

No need to settle.”

I am tickled by the fact that my dad is encouraging me to “play the field.” I bet he feels like he settled with my mom and is now living vicariously through me, advising me to ho it up.

My dad says he needs to get back to grade papers, and I say I need to return to my charts for Elon. We exchange our first real hug in years, and I shed a tiny tear that neither of us acknowledge. I blame the MDMA for my strange reaction. Also, I haven’t been smoking nearly as much weed as usual. I am less numb.

When my dad leaves, I order another black coffee and start making notes for the “Signs as New Year’s Plans” piece.

Pisces: Ice-skating under the stars.

Taurus: At home alone.

Scorpio: A séance.

At around 5:00 P.M., a barista announces the start of an open mic poetry reading. There is truly nothing I want less than to bear witness to amateur poets in San Dimas.

As I begin to book it, I hear a vaguely familiar voice.

“Emily,” the voice says.

I look around to try to locate it. Oh my god. It is my former friend, Zoe. If there is one thing worse than an open mic poetry reading in San Dimas, it is having to engage in small talk with the childhood friend I ghosted.

“Emily!” she says again, louder this time, I suppose because the first poet has started reading something called “God’s Toothbrush.” She approaches me for a hug, among my least favorite social rituals. “Emily, it’s so great to see you!”

I give in to the hug and try my best not to reveal my disgust. At least she doesn’t seem mad at me. She was always kind of a bitch—not to me, but to those she felt had “wronged” her. And I suppose now I am one of them.

“I miss you,” she says.

I know I should say, *I miss you too*, but that would be a lie. And while I lie all the time, this is a lie I feel physically incapable of telling. So instead I just ask, “Do you live here now?”

“Nope, still in Riverside.” She is wearing a jewel-toned silk top, black

skinny jeans, ballet flats, and a bauble necklace straight out of a J.Crew catalog from 2012. “I’m an interior decorator now, so I was in San Dimas to see a client.”

“Cool,” I lie. Nothing about this is cool. I can’t believe that Zoe, in this outfit, is making a living in an aesthetic field. But if there is one thing you can count on in Southern California suburbs, it’s that the people will have terrible taste and they will spend lots of money to maintain it. They probably look at Zoe’s gold ballet flats and think, *What a fun girl! I want her to decorate my kitchen!*

“Oh! I ran into your dad the other day at HomeGoods in Moreno Valley,” she says.

This image strikes me as deeply depressing. Hazel the Precious Starlet sometimes talks about HomeGoods, but it seems more out of irony than necessity.

“He told me you are doing amazing in LA. Something about how you were cast in this new, hot movie? And you’re an astrologer for SpaceX?”

“Yep.” I smile weakly and wonder how long this conversation will last.

“So cool, Em,” she says. “I always knew you were destined for great things.”

Her phone buzzes and snatches her attention. I feel relieved.

“Crap,” she says. “I have to take this.” She looks back up at me. “It was so great to see you, Em. You look amazing, as usual.” She reaches into her Louis Vuitton purse. “Here— take my card.” She hands me the card, a crisp white square with gold cursive font: ZOE MAY DESIGNS. Her last name used to be Tucker, so I guess she took her husband’s name. I remember seeing a photo of him on Instagram and he looked like a thumb.

“Thanks,” I say, and Zoe May darts off.

DAWN.

A few days after I find Paul's driver's license on the floor of the Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf, Steph shows up at the Blind Pig. I haven't heard from her since Thanksgiving, but I've thought about her a few times. Mostly mean things.

The address on Paul's driver's license is in Riverside, just a short bus ride away from me and close to Steph and Beth's. The other day after work, I took the bus over and walked up and down Paul's street. His house is modest but cute. I can tell he isn't rich, but not poor either. He doesn't live in a studio apartment like I do. The lights were off. I'm not sure what I was expecting.

On the way back to the bus stop, I thought about stopping at Steph and Beth's. I don't have many other friends. I'd even asked Karen to drink with me once after work, and she looked at me like I'd asked her to bathe in garbage.

I catch Steph's eye while taking an elderly man's order. I tell my coworker to cover my table, then walk over to Steph.

"Let's step outside," I say. I walk her over to the corner where I smoke my Ultra Lights and offer her one.

"Thanks," she says.

"I'm sorry about Thanksgiving," I say. "I was overserved."

"It's no big deal," Steph says. She laughs. "It was pretty fucking funny."

I start laughing too, which makes her laugh harder, and suddenly it feels like everything is back to normal. That is the nice thing about Steph. No matter what happens, we always end up back here—the two cheerleaders with the loudest laughs.

Her face turns serious. "Beth and I broke up," she says.

"Oh no," I say. I try my best to make a sympathetic face, even though I can't stand Beth and think Steph is better off without her. But I know she loves Beth. "What happened?"

Steph exhales smoke over her shoulder. "Beth and I got into a big fight that night."

“Oh god,” I say. “I feel terrible—”

“No, no,” says Steph. “It wasn’t your fault.” She taps her cigarette on the metal railing and ash sprinkles onto the bricks. “I mean, I was mad at first.”

I swallow. Tackling Beth while she was moisturizing her ashy elbows felt like a fun and normal thing to do at the time, but now, sober, in the daylight, and with the wisdom of space from the incident, it seems truly insane. My stomach lurches.

“But then I realized you were right,” Steph says.

I perk up a bit. I love to be right.

“We didn’t have sex. Our passion had died.”

I give a sympathetic nod, trying not to reveal just how obvious I find that statement to be. “I’m sorry, babe,” I say, then pull Steph in for a hug. I pull her close and sniff her hair, which has always smelled like the beach.

“It’s okay,” Steph says finally as she pulls away.

“I only have an hour left in my shift,” I say. “Why don’t you get a burger, and when I’m off, let’s get drunk.”

“A-fucking-men,” Steph says.

EMILY.

On the drive home, I watch pink and purple skies descend over strip malls and freeways, factory lights and Chinese food restaurants, the San Gabriel Mountains silhouetted against a neon-blue expanse. I can't believe I got coffee with my dad like a well-adjusted daughter, then ran into Zoe.

It is dark by the time I merge onto the 5. At the Los Feliz Boulevard exit, a billboard catches my eye, fireworks over a burning house. The text says: PHANTASY: A FILM BY NICO NADLER. In the top corner it says: IN THEATERS NEW YEAR'S DAY.

Fuck. I didn't realize Nico Nadler had a movie coming out so soon. Why the fuck didn't I google this? God, I'm such a dumbass. My dad is culturally keyed in. He will surely become aware of the film and learn that I am not in it. *Fuck!*

When Thomas opens his front door, I wrap my hands around his neck.

"I'm very into this, Em," he says, "but it isn't the best time."

I squeeze harder so he knows this is not a sexual flirtation; it's a homicide attempt.

"You didn't tell me Nico Nadler has a movie coming out next month," I say, my voice trembling with rage.

"Whoa, whoa," he says, trying to remove my tightening hands from his throat.

I shove him into his apartment and hit him hard on the chest, then the shoulder. I stab his bicep with his Volvo keys.

"What the fuck?" he says. "Calm down."

"I can't calm down," I say. "Because I was finally getting along with my dad, and you had to ruin it by telling me to say I was in a movie that my dad is going to know I'm not in. He's going to know I lied. He's going to tell my mom. They're going to know I'm a loser." I am pacing and yelling.

"Everything okay?" A blonde emerges from the bedroom. She looks familiar, like one of the blondes from Beau's Instagram.

“No,” I say. “Your fuckbuddy is ruining my life!”

“Slow down,” says Thomas. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. You’re going too fast.” He puts his hands on my shoulders and I shove him off.

“Your little fuckbuddy ...” I say to the blonde, who looks afraid of me, and for a second I’m high on inspiring fear. I feel like an actor in a horror movie. I’m an escaped mental patient about to kill them both. Hell, it could be a Nico Nadler movie. “... told me to tell my parents I am in the new Nico Nadler movie. To show them I matter.”

She nods, fear in her eyes, seemingly trying to convey sympathy to spare her life.

“But Nico Nadler has a movie coming out in less than a month,” I say. I notice a grinder filled with weed and some rolling papers on the coffee table.

“*Phantasy?*” the blonde says. “It looks incredible.”

I glare at her. “Not the point, babe.” I recall my earlier run-in with Zoe and shiver. “The point is my dad has been going around Riverside running his mouth about how I’m Nico’s next muse.”

“So ... you’re worried your dad will see the movie press and find out you aren’t in it,” the blonde says, affecting a therapist’s voice, “and you’ll be exposed.”

“Bingo,” I say. “And it’s all because of Little Thomas here.”

“Why don’t you just tell your dad you’re in the *next* Nico Nadler movie?” Thomas says.

I pause, considering this. The *next next* Nico Nadler movie. I can tell him when I said I was in the next Nico Nadler movie I wasn’t counting *Phantasy*, because *Phantasy* had already been completed and I knew this because I’m in the industry. I was talking about the next next one, the one that hasn’t been filmed yet.

“You’re a fucking idiot.” I throw the Volvo keys at Thomas, and instead of catching them he just ducks like a pussy, and the keys hit the floor with a thud. I walk over to the coffee table and pick up the grinder filled with weed. “I’m taking this,” I say, and then I walk out.

At home, I try to calm down. I have my big shoot in the morning, and I need to get some sleep. I pack the bong and take a nice big rip. I lie on my bed and the anger starts to dissipate. I am in the *next next* Nico Nadler movie. Not *Phantasy*. The one after that. I take some deep breaths and put on *Kid A*

and set my alarm for 6:00 A.M. I will wake up and go for a jog and take a cold shower and prepare myself to look perfect before Beau's blessed lens.

Everything is in its right place.

DAWN.

After my shift Steph and I go to the Purple Parrot. Jay's Bar would be better, but we don't want to make the drive. We want to get drunk immediately.

"How did you end it?" I ask on our second drink. We are drinking Red Bull vodkas because they remind us of our twenties, when we were invincible.

"I didn't," Steph says. She looks down at her drink and swirls it with her straw.

"What the *fuck*?" I say. "Beth broke up with *you*?" My shock is genuine. Steph is so much better than Beth; the idea of Beth ending it is hard to grasp.

"It's not that shocking," Steph says. "Beth has her shit together. She has a good job and a nice dog, and she doesn't get too drunk and spill ice cream all over her furniture. I'm just ... a loser."

I slam my drink on the table and droplets of Red Bull vodka spritz into the air. "A loser?" I say. "I'm sorry, but Stephanie Snyder is *not* a loser."

Steph looks up at me and frowns.

"Stephanie Snyder is a winner," I continue. "She is my best friend. She is a goddess and a boss. She has hair like a lion and perfect tits. She is a Leo, blessed with the power of the sun."

"Oh please, Dawn," Steph says. "My zodiac sign does not make me a winner."

I slam my drink on the table again. "What is *wrong* with you?" I grab her shoulders and shake them until she starts laughing. "Let's get shots."

"Sure," Steph says. "Let's drink until I believe you."

"Attagirl!" I shout.

I walk up to the bar and order two shots of tequila, then bring them back to our table.

"I don't want to talk about Beth," she says.

"That's fine," I say, and then we both take our shots in unison, like twins.

"What's new with you?" she asks.

I wasn't planning on telling her about Paul's driver's license, which at this point I am hoarding like a private secret, but the tequila compels me to pull the license out and put it right on the table in front of us.

"What's that?" she asks.

"Remember a very significant Paul from my past?"

"Holy shit," Steph says.

Steph is the only person I told about Paul. I told my mom I was raped. I told Bo his father was dead.

"Where did you get this?" she asks.

"I saw him walking into the Coffee Bean across from work a few days ago," I say. "I've started going before work hoping to run into him. He was walking out the other day and dropped this."

"Oh my god," Steph says. "I thought he was from out of town."

"Same," I say. "But according to his driver's license he lives right by you." I pause, wondering where Steph is living now that Beth dumped her.

"Holy shit," Steph says. "This is crazy. What are you going to do?"

"I'm not sure yet," I say, and that's the truth.

EMILY.

When my alarm goes off at 6:00 A.M., it feels like the middle of the night. My room is pitch black. I haven't woken up this early since ... high school? Never? I try to sit up, but my body rejects it. I reach for my phone and press snooze. I can skip the jog. I'm not even sure I *can* jog. If I try I might have a heart attack and die. And I can't die before Beau photographs me. I can die right after.

When my alarm goes off for the third time, I feel even worse. My body weighs a thousand pounds. But I have to do this. I hurl my body off the mattress and force myself to do a few jumping jacks to get my blood flowing. Lydia is staring at me, probably because she's never seen me move so much. After just a few jumps, I am completely winded. I collapse back on my bed and text Beau.

Still on for 8?

I hurl my body off the bed again, then go to shower and turn on the cold water. It knocks the wind out of me, and I scream. I jump up and down in the shower until I can't stand it anymore. Toweling myself off, I admire my reflection in the mirror. Today I am going to be before Beau's camera.

I finally feel awake.

I check my phone. *Yep, he had written back. I'll pick you up at ten till.*

I put a thumbs-up on the text. I find his use of "ten till" sweet and old-fashioned.

Luckily it doesn't take me long to get ready. I comb my hair, taking care to make my middle part a perfectly straight line. I put on some mascara and then throw on my pink velour tracksuit.

Here, Beau texts.

I peek through the blinds and see a dusty Honda Accord on the street. Very aristocratic, I think, to drive an old Honda. Much more interesting than Thomas's new money Volvo.

To my absolute shock, Beau gets out of the car and opens my door. I can't

believe it. No one has ever done this for me. Ever.

“A gentleman,” I say.

He shrugs.

This feels like a date, even though the plan is for him to objectify me before his lens. But isn't that all dates? Being objectified? Have I ever been on a date?

In the car, he hands me a hot cup of coffee. “Black,” he says.

“That's so nice,” I say. I'm feeling so taken care of. With Beau and Thomas and my father, I'm really thankful for the male gender these days, taking care of me even though they often embarrass and annoy me, although not Beau. Beau is perfect.

I take a sip of coffee and he takes a sip of his, and then he starts driving. His car is so old it has a CD player, and to my absolute delight, Radiohead's *The Bends* is playing. This all feels too good to be true, and I wait for something terrible to happen.

“Nice choice,” I say, gesturing toward the CD player.

“It's the only CD I have in here,” he says, then laughs. “Actually, I think Jax—the guy who had the party the other night—left a Lana Del Rey CD in here. I figured you were more of a Radiohead gal.”

It's cute Beau chose the music based on what he thought I would like. “I like Lana,” I say. “She's so aloof and alien, all artifice and cinematic glamor—*my shit*.” I pause, wondering if this sounds pretentious. “But Radiohead is my favorite band of all time.” I take a sip of my coffee. “Not very creative, I know.”

“If it ain't broke,” Beau says. He smiles. “The black coffee of bands.”

I smile, then say, “Why dilute perfection?”

Barnsdall is just a few blocks from my place. Beau rolls into the parking lot after only a few songs. As soon as he parks, he jumps out of his seat and opens my door again.

“Thanks,” I say. I get out and feel the damp morning air on my skin. The park is empty and angelic at this hour, the dirty buildings bathed in cool light. I stretch my arms into the sky, and Beau opens the back door to get his camera bag.

“Oh,” Beau says as we walk up to the olive grove, “I have an interview at ten, so we should leave by nine fifteen. I doubt it will take that long to get the shot, but just a heads-up.”

“Cool,” I say. “What’s the interview for?”

Beau pauses, seemingly thinking, like he forgot. “Photographer’s assistant,” he says finally. “Let’s try this spot.”

He stops in the middle of the olive grove. This is the exact spot I would have chosen. The city skyline would be too busy, too obvious.

“For who?” I ask.

He is pulling his camera from his bag. I am excited to see it is an old film camera, a Pentax—exactly what my dad used in the ‘90s.

“Alex Prager,” he says as he stands up, stretching his long legs and providing an enticing image of his body. For the first time this morning, we make eye contact. His fair skin and sharp features pop in the cool light, and I suppose mine are doing the same. I want to kiss his chapped lips, feel his lean torso against mine. I want him to grab my waist really hard. I take a deep breath.

“That’s so cool,” I say, and it is. Alex Prager is one of the most famous contemporary photographers working today. I’ve always loved her work, which is inspired by Hitchcock and Old Hollywood, like Lana Del Rey.

“I like her too,” Beau says. “The job is a real reach, though.” He takes off his lens cap and puts it in his bag. I steal a glimpse of the hem of his boxer briefs peeking out of his pants when he bends over.

“I’ll be thinking positive thoughts,” I say. I hate when people say shit like that, but I don’t know what else to say. My Gemini moon says some really empty things sometimes. Or maybe everybody says trite shit when they don’t know what else to say.

“Thanks,” he says.

“So how do you want me?” I ask, which sounds like something a submissive prostitute would say. But I’m excited about him directing me. I was born to be directed. I’m not good at being natural. I feel more comfortable with artifice, with contortion, like Lana Del Rey. Or maybe it’s my OCD.

“How about you stand closer to the tree,” he says.

I do as he says.

“Now tilt your head up a little.”

I tilt.

“A bit more.”

I tilt more.

“Perfect.”

DAWN.

I wake up with my arms wrapped around Steph's waist. My mouth is dry and tastes like Red Bull. I don't remember coming back to my house, but Steph and I have ended a hundred nights this way. I prop myself up on my elbows and scan the room. There are cigarette butts and an empty pizza box on the coffee table.

Steph groans.

I lean over and start petting her hair, like I always do when we are hungover. I take a big whiff and smell the beach.

"I feel like death," she says. Her skin is dry and tinted gray. I can smell alcohol but can't tell if it is coming from her pores or mine. "What happened last night?"

"Fuck if I know," I say. "We need Bloody Marys."

"Oh my god, Dawn," Steph says. "How can you think about alcohol right now?"

"Hair of the dog, baby!" I pull one of her curls and release it, causing it to bounce up to her forehead.

"I can't move," Steph says, rolling over. She is wearing just a bra and underwear—both lace and baby blue, our favorite color—and I can see her tattoo on her rib cage. We got matching sunflower tattoos when we were eighteen. I love seeing hers and remembering how deep our connection is.

"Oh!" I say. "I slept with this millennial and she used this app! To order Blood Marys!"

Steph laughs. "Yeah," she says. "We could order Postmates."

"Look at you, Miss Millennial," I say in a teasing voice to play off my embarrassment.

"We've both slept with enough of them."

"Sure have," I say.

Steph orders us French toast and bacon and Bloody Marys without speaking to anyone. When the food arrives, we eat and drink on my couch,

not talking and watching *48 Hours*. It's one we've both seen, about a mom who maybe killed her son.

"I just don't get how a mother could kill her son," Steph says.

"You don't have kids," I say. "You don't understand."

She looks at me strangely. I don't want to kill Bo, obviously, but he does get under my skin. He never replied to my apology text after Thanksgiving, and I haven't tried to reach out either because I'm pissed. He spent the one of two times a year he sees me to take care of his friend he sees every day, a friend whose parents live in LA County. I worked so hard to give him a good life, waiting tables at that shithole restaurant, and he's done nothing to repay me. I wish I could go back to twenty years ago, when he was smiling hard and thanking Jen and me for protecting him on the roller coaster. Why isn't he thanking me now?

Steph slurps up the last sip of her Bloody Mary. "I had the weirdest dream last night." She wipes some orange liquid from her lip. "You found Bo's father's driver's license in a Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf. And you drove to his house, and it was right by Beth's."

I think about telling her the truth, that it isn't a dream, but instead I just say, "That's so weird."

Exalted said I could be secretive with my emotions.

I like my little secret.

EMILY.

“When I know, I know.” That’s what Beau said when he got the final shot, and his voice keeps cycling through my head in a loop. It felt so good to be in front of his camera. He worked so quickly, so effortlessly—very exalted behavior. After the first shot, we didn’t speak at all. He moved and I moved, and it was as though we were exchanging dialogue through vibrations. After about eight shots, he said he was done.

“When I know, I know.”

I collapse onto my bed and text Cinnamon: *I felt magical in front of his camera.* Then I worry that is a corny thing to say, but who cares? I feel like I belong on a LIFE IS GOOD T-shirt.

Before she responds, my dad texts me. *I saw the billboard for Phantasy today. (Very Freudian title.) I’m so proud of you.*

My heart sinks. I take a deep breath. *It’s so incredible,* I write. *I got to go to an advanced screening. This isn’t the movie of his I’m in, of course. That one hasn’t started filming yet.*

Oh, of course, my dad writes back. I feel guilty that I made him feel foolish, but at least he seems to be buying it.

The film industry is so bizarre, I write back. Blame it on the industry!

I can’t imagine, my dad says.

You’re lucky you don’t have to, I write back. Nice and cryptic.

Cinnamon texts back. *Of course you did,* she writes. *Did you kiss?*

Not yet ;p, I write back.

Good girl, she says, and I imagine her cooing this in a baby voice to a lurky man at the Mirror Box. *Make his Adonis ass wait!* She’s still typing. *Wanna get a drink? We can go to that place we went before and drink for free.*

I am relieved. I don’t want to be alone, and I don’t want to pay for anything either. I need to save up and maintain the illusion of success to my father.

I text him again. *Let's go see Phantasy when it's out!*
Deal! he writes back.

Cinnamon is whispering in the bartender's ear when I walk in. When she spots me, she wraps me in a big hug and the bartender disappears. "He's in love with me," she tells me.

"Who isn't?"

"You're in a good mood post-Beau," she says.

"True," I say.

We take a seat at the bar. "What are you drinking?"

"Do they have Mountain Dew here?" I want to treat myself.

"You are so adorable." She squeezes my cheeks, which no one has ever done to me before. I have a severe face and my cheeks are sharp, not squeezable.

"Two Mountain Dews," Cinnamon shouts across the bar. "I'm trying to moderate my alcohol intake," she says to me. "Being drunk is so embarrassing."

"It really is," I say, not that I really know.

Cinnamon removes her vape pen from her pocket and we both take big hits.

"Hey," the bartender says. "No vaping in here."

Cinnamon blows vapor in his face. He puts down our Mountain Dews and gives Cinnamon a disparaging finger and says, "Bad girl," in a way that makes me vaguely ill.

"How has your week been?" I ask Cinnamon. I know mostly from film and television that this is what friends say to each other.

Cinnamon rolls her eyes, then slouches over. "The professor," she says, "is fucking with me."

"What's going on?" I ask.

"He says he doesn't want a relationship," she says, "but then he gets lonely and calls me to talk about some minute aspect of his book, and for some reason I always entertain his masturbatory ramblings!"

I sip my drink, delighting in its sugary sting, and try to come up with an appropriate response. I can't relate at all to what she is saying. If anything, I relate to the professor. I am the professor to Thomas. I make him go down on

me and call me talented and I monologue at him and smoke his weed and give him almost nothing in return, save one blow job that lasted about forty-five seconds. I try, for the first time, to see things from Thomas's perspective. What advice do his friends give him? If I was someone who cared about him, what would I say?

"Block his number," I say.

"Ughhhhh." She hunches over, then pops up. "That's what all my friends say." She takes a big sip of her Mountain Dew. "This is so good, oh my gosh. I don't want to talk about the professor. Let's talk about something else ... How has your week been?"

"Pretty good," I say. "I got coffee with my estranged father and ran into my childhood best friend. That was kind of odd."

"Wow," she says. "That's a lot."

"Yeah," I say. "I'm glad I'm getting along with my dad, but it was weird to see Zoe. That's her name, my childhood best friend. I kind of ghosted her. But she didn't seem mad at all. She was wearing ballet flats and gave me her card."

"Ballet flats," Cinnamon says, brow furrowed. "Let me see the card."

I search my wallet and then hand the card to her.

"Zoe May Designs," she says. "I can picture this person perfectly and I cannot picture you speaking to her."

"Neither can I."

A text from Beau pops up on my phone. *Just dropped off the film. :)*

"He is *smitten*," Cinnamon says.

"I just want to fuck him so bad. I've never wanted to fuck anyone this bad, ever."

"That's a strong statement for a Scorpio stellium," she says.

"I know," I say. "My sex drive is not a joke. But this is more than sex. I, like, I don't know. I want to become the same person or something, feel the same thing, even if it's just for a few minutes."

Cinnamon looks at her lap. "That's how I feel about the professor," she says softly, then takes another sip of her drink and perks up. "So how are we going to play it?"

At home I feed Lydia and then feed myself—the last three slices of turkey

and five saltines. Cinnamon and I agreed that she would stop responding to texts from the professor and I would have sex with Beau in no fewer than seven days. Seven days is a long time, but I can wait: I've been waiting my whole life. Growing up, Zoe would always say I was so "chill" with guys: "Em, you're just so chillll. It's like you don't even care."

Well, truth be told, I didn't care. It was Riverside. There was no one there worth caring about. I did care about getting my clit sucked, my tits nibbled, my g-spot stroked, but no boy from Riverside knew how to do those things. In high school I mostly hooked up with women because they were better in bed. But I never fell for any of them, nor did I tell Zoe. She wouldn't have understood and would have probably said something unoriginal, like called me a "big lesbo." She didn't care about her own desire, only about meaningless validation from idiots.

In my early twenties, I met a few boys in Los Angeles who were decent in bed. They were all either tryhards like Thomas or sociopathic models whose bodies were enough to get me off. Or they were women who were great until they fell in love with me, started bombarding me with novella-long text messages filled with wicked accusations. I am positive things will be different with Beau. I can tell by watching him move and by the way he photographed me—gently but with purpose. It won't be like Thomas, who eats me out like he's reading from a manual. Or the women who were great until their daddy issues took over.

Sex with Beau will be great because our bodies understand each other, like they are quantum entangled, a phenomenon I read about while researching Elon. SpaceX is really romantic if you think about it, just a bunch of Pisces launching rockets into the sky. Elon launched a drone ship called *Of Course I Still Love You*, which is an insanely Piscean thing to do, although Elon is a Cancer, another very romantic sign.

Beau's Venus is in Pisces, and they are the best lovers of the zodiac.

I brush the saltine crumbs into my palm, then into the trash. I plop on my bed and open my text messages. I put a thumbs-up on Beau's text—casual—then start typing.

How was the big interview? I ask.

I don't think I got it :(, he responds. So adorable.

Maybe you did! I write back. *And if you didn't, it just means that a better opportunity is on the way.* This is the kind of new age spiritual logic I

typically mock, but right now, at this moment, it feels right.

I spend the next few days finishing the last of my readings. I am about done with my requests from the recent deluge and there are no more coming in, which means I need to make a new meme. The mere thought—*I need to make a new mememakes* me briefly contemplate suicide.

I suppose the MDMA has left my system.

A new DM shows up in my inbox and I hope it's a request for a reading. But it's just Jess, the New York City Libran. *Chaz broke up with me. :(*

Quelle surprise! His name is fucking *Chaz*. And he's a Scorpio! A Scorpio cannot date a Libra. I cannot even begin to come up with a response to this message. She should be leaning on Thomas for support, not me. He would probably say something horribly cliché like, "You're better off without him!" I'll leave that to the resident Sagittarius.

But her message reminds me of the reason I am not currently worried about rent: the famous Libra model Stella Shadid. I decide to make another meme that she will surely repost. Everyone is self-obsessed, but no one is as self-obsessed as a Libra model with a genetically superior older sister (her older sister, Mimi, hasn't gotten any plastic surgery).

I google images of Stella Shadid and start brainstorming. I find a GIF of her interacting with her ex, an R&B star, while walking down the runway at the Victoria's Secret Fashion Show. I've seen this GIF before, and I remember being impressed. The R&B star is at the top of the runway, singing effusively at her. And Stella just calmly walks past him, acknowledging him for hardly a split second, blasé and restrained. It is exactly how every woman dreams of an encounter with an ex. Well, I've never had an ex, but if I had one this is exactly how I'd want to look running into him. Hot and polite, but impervious.

So I post the GIF with a simple caption: "A Libra running into her ex." It is way too generous to Librans, but I need money, which means I need Stella's followers.

As it uploads, I eat two saltines very slowly. Lydia stares at me. I glare at her and post the meme to my story as well, tagging Stella. This will make it easier for her to repost.

I receive another DM from Jessica almost immediately. First, three

streaming tear face emojis. Then, *I hope I can be this chill when I run into Chaz*. I wonder if she thinks I made the meme for her, which is fine if so and makes me feel better about not responding.

That evening I'm in bed watching *Repulsion* when Stella reposts my story. My notifications begin to blow up. I imagine each one as a hundred-dollar bill floating through cyberspace.

In the morning I have hundreds of reading requests, which means thousands and thousands of dollars. I know I need to do some saving, but I also think I deserve a little treat. Lydia too. Instead of Food 4 Less, I'll go to Gelson's. I will buy myself organic turkey and organic Gatorade and maybe a nice cheese, like a Beaufort or a gouda. And I will buy fresh tuna for Lydia.

Before I leave, I take a big bong hit of the weed I stole from Thomas.

On the walk, Beau texts me, *I got the photos back*. Then three flame emojis. I smile at my screen. I can't wait to see them, which is exactly what I text back.

I can email you a link to the digital version, he writes. *And I can give you the hard copies in person*.

Ugh. I want to meet up with him right at this moment and look at the photos and then kiss. But it's day six. Cinnamon said we can't fuck until day seven at the earliest. And I know if I see him, we will fuck. My OCD wants to stick to Cinnamon's arbitrary rule system. I trust her. She is a Scorpio stellium. But beyond that, she is my friend. My first friend I've ever liked.

I actually got a job waiting tables at Subtropical, Beau writes. *I'll be there until 9 tonight if you want to swing by*.

I do, in fact, want to swing by. So badly. So badly that it feels good to deny myself. *I can't today, I have a meeting*, I write. *Maybe tomorrow*. I guess he didn't get the Alex Prager job. It makes sense that he would wait tables at Subtropical. He has the right bone structure. I get kind of hot thinking about women like me deeming him the "hot waiter" in their heads. Hazel waited tables at this place in New York called Dimes Square, which I imagine as New York's Subtropical.

Cool, he writes. *I work the same hours tomorrow*.

I look up from my phone, and I am at the entrance to Gelson's, thrilled it is not Food 4 Less. The people walking in and out of the store wear loose silk

shirts and designer sunglasses. I feel embarrassed by my haggard outfit, then remember that fashion is dead. Better to avoid trying. I adjust my gait to something approaching self-assured and sashay through the automatic doors.

While I am looking at tuna, I hear a familiar voice. “*Emily.*”

An intense chill runs down my spine.

I turn my body, slowly, carefully.

First, I see the gold ballet flats. Then I look up to make eye contact with Zoe fucking May. She is wearing a thin black scarf around her neck. It looks like a designer noose.

“I can’t believe it,” she says. “Two times in one week.”

She sways, eerily, as though she is being moved on a string like a puppet. I remember the massive bong hit I took earlier. I remind myself that everything is okay, I am just very high. I take a deep breath and try to steady myself, act normal. *Nothing matters*, I say to myself in a loop.

“So crazy” is all I can come up with. I feel dizzy.

“So,” she says, “speaking of crazy, I have a crazy coincidence to tell you about.” Her scarf suddenly seems more taut, as though it is attached to the invisible string, holding her head up—tightening, tightening, tightening. “I was just helping my mentor with some shopping at Amsterdam Modern. I don’t know if you’ve been—it’s on Glendale near Echo Park. They have the most fab midcentury modern furniture selection.”

She smiles and her teeth are blindingly white. There is something artificial about her mouth. This isn’t the mouth I grew up with. I think she got new teeth.

“Side note,” she says, putting her face close to my face. “You look so fucking beautiful, Em. I’d forgotten about your eyes.” Her gaze grabs me by the throat. I refocus my attention onto a can of organic tuna on the shelf behind her. I will buy it for Lydia if I survive this conversation.

“Thanks,” I manage. The main reason I was friends with Zoe, I remember, is because she required very little engagement from me. She would just look at me and tell me I was pretty and then talk about whatever she wanted, as if I would know about a midcentury modern design store, as if I didn’t find all my furniture on the street.

“So, anyway,” she says, “my mentor met with Nico Nadler yesterday. He’s decorating Nico’s home office in Los Feliz.”

I look up at the sterile yellow lights and feel a strong urge to sit down. Zoe

keeps talking.

“I told him about you, and he said he’d mention you to Nico as an icebreaker.” She taps her gold ballet flat on the linoleum, then blows a small bubble with a piece of gum I didn’t notice before. “He showed up to Amsterdam Modern utterly humiliated.”

The saliva evaporates from my mouth. The bubble pops and echoes. Zoe May smiles.

“Nico Nadler has no idea who you are,” she says.

I drop my basket.

I pace in the fish aisle for several minutes, trying to remember how Zoe and I parted ways, praying the whole thing was a hallucination. I’ve read about cannabis-induced psychosis. It’s possible that it never happened, that I never ran into Zoe, that I was just extremely high.

It is also possible that I did run into Zoe, after ten years, twice in one week. The first time I saw Winona Ryder in the flesh, she was walking into an Italian restaurant as I was leaving this very Gelson’s. And then I saw her again *the very next day* at a Starbucks in West Hollywood after an audition. I had just moved to LA, and I felt like the universe was trying to tell me something. Obviously I was wrong, but the point is—these things happen. I’ve seen Winona Ryder only twice in real life and it was within forty-eight hours. The only difference is Winona doesn’t know who I am, doesn’t know my parents, doesn’t have the ability to expose me.

“Everything okay, miss?” a stock clerk asks.

“No,” I say, then walk out of the store.

I want to text Cinnamon, but I am too ashamed.

So I walk to Thomas’s house and listen to *The Bends* on the way.

I should have been suspicious when I ran into Zoe in San Dimas. She had no reason to be nice to me. I had aggressively ghosted her. For years she sent me effusive texts about how much she missed me, and I just pretended she didn’t exist. Zoe is a Scorpio like me, and Scorpios do *not* appreciate being ghosted. We like to be in complete control of the friendship, its terms, when it begins and when it ends. I don’t know her full chart, but she must have a Cancer or Libra rising, something spineless that made her continue to reach out to me like that.

I don't think I've ever been ghosted. If I had, I would probably enact revenge, just like Zoe.

I know where Thomas hides his key—under the doormat, like an idiot—so I let myself in. The same girl who was there the other day is straddling Thomas on the couch.

“You don't knock?” Thomas asks.

The blonde hops off his crotch.

“Fuck you,” I say.

“What's wrong with you?” Thomas asks. He's never been aggressive like this with me before. I worry he's sick, or maybe he's in love.

“I ran into my childhood friend, Zoe.” I walk over to the half-packed bong on the coffee table and take a big hit. “Zoe is an interior designer,” I say. “Zoe May Designs.”

The blonde nods, and I blow smoke into her face.

“Her mentor is decorating *Nico Nadler's* new office,” I say, giving Thomas a homicidal glare. “She told me when I ran into her at Gelson's.”

“Which Gelson's?” the blonde asks.

I blow some more smoke in her face, ignoring her question. “She told me that Nico Nadler has no idea who I am,” I say.

“Fuck,” the blonde says. She reaches for the bong. “And you're worried she's going to tell your dad and expose you?”

“Bingo,” I say.

The blonde lights the bong, and my brain goes, *Blonde bong, bong blonde*. She breathes out smoke like a dragon.

“Tell your pops the interior designer is unhinged,” says Thomas.

I giggle at the word “pops.” Then I stop laughing. Maybe Thomas is right. In third grade, Zoe told everyone that her cousin was Monica Lewinsky. This is partially why I decided to befriend her. I didn't believe her cousin was Monica—no one did—but I appreciated the gall.

The point is: Zoe is a liar. She saw an opportunity to humiliate me, her ex-best friend who ghosted her, and she snatched it. I highly doubt Zoe May of Riverside is in any way connected to an auteur director in Los Feliz. And if her mentor truly is decorating Nico Nadler's office, Zoe wouldn't embarrass herself by telling her mentor to drop *my* name.

Without thinking, I text Beau. *Meeting canceled*, I write. I have to fuck him tonight. These are extenuating circumstances. I can break Cinnamon's

arbitrary rule by one day.

The blonde perks up. Her eyes are very red. “Tell him you have a stage name.”

I pause. That’s a good idea. My dad knows I hate my name. Everything is fine. Zoe lied, and if she didn’t, I have a stage name.

“This is why I keep Clover around,” Thomas says. “She’s smarter than she looks.”

She slaps him playfully on the knee and then turns toward me. “What’s your stage name?”

“Ice Forrest,” I say.

Roll through, Beau writes back.

I grab a small nug of weed from the plastic bag on the table, kiss Clover on her forehead (she blushes), and walk out.

I listen to *The Bends* again on the walk to Subtropical. I text Cinnamon: *I’m breaking the pact*. I can’t wait to have Beau inside me. Finally, after all these years, a dick I deserve.

She texts back almost immediately: *Me too*.

Who knew having a friend could be so nice?

Rules are made to be broken!!!!!! I write back.

She hearts the text.

The sky begins to pinken.

My eyes lock with Beau as soon as I enter Subtropical. He gives me a face, like, *I’m so over this*, and I smile at my Converse sneakers.

I sit in the couch area where I met JessLovesMatcha. I never responded to her messages about the breakup, and I don’t plan to. I have nothing to say about that kind of thing.

Soon Beau is hovering over me, wearing a tight white shirt, his cheekbones illuminated by golden candlelight.

“Hey,” he says. “Can I get you something?”

“You need a smoke break?” I ask, feeling bold for the first time in his presence. Being exposed and humiliated by Zoe in Gelson’s, whether it was real or a hallucination, the truth or a lie, made me realize I have absolutely nothing to lose.

“Yeah,” he says, and shifts. “That would be nice.”

He follows me outside. The moon glows in the sky. Beau looks at me expectantly. He wants a cigarette. I do not have a cigarette.

I grab his face and start kissing him.

At first he flinches a tiny bit. I recoil a tiny bit. Then he pounces back. And our tongues dance. I push his chest until his back hits the brick of the building. I grab his waist. He pulls my hair and sticks his tongue deeper.

“When can you get out of here?” I ask.

He grabs my hand. “Let’s go.” He leads me to his Honda around the corner, holding my hand tight. A bolt of electricity shoots up my arm.

He runs over to open my door, and before he can, I push him against the car and start kissing him. He grabs my waist and flips me so that my back is up against the car. I see the side of him that photographed me. *When I know, I know.* He sticks his tongue deep into my mouth and the back of my throat aches. I dig my knee into his crotch and feel his dick getting slightly hard.

A car honks. The driver wants Beau’s spot. We break apart and laugh, and the driver honks again. I flip him off, then Beau opens my door.

As he drives, I trace the inner hem of his jeans with the tip of my finger.

“My place is kinda dirty,” he says.

I want to see his apartment, but it doesn’t really matter. From the second I kissed Beau, something shifted, an electrical current that was previously unlit. I’m not thinking; I am just acting. Every move is natural and organic and unstoppable. I feel like I am being born, alive for the very first time. It doesn’t matter where we are as long as we are together.

“We can go to mine,” I say.

I normally would have asked him to wait outside for a few minutes while I straightened up inside and adjusted the lighting. But in this state, such a request would feel mundane and frankly impossible. There is only one thing I care about right now, and it is having Beau inside me. The need is urgent, more urgent than anything I’ve ever felt in my entire life.

In the apartment, Lydia immediately sprints to the bathroom. I’d forgotten she is shy around strangers. It’s been so long since I’ve had someone over. It’s convenient, honestly, Lydia’s shyness. The last thing I need is my cat watching me fuck.

“Did I just hallucinate something?” Beau asks.

I close the door and shove him against it. “My cat’s shy,” I say, then stick my tongue in his ear.

He cups his hands under my ass, hoists me up, and carries me over to the bed. I am surprised he can do this given his slim frame. He isn’t muscular, but he is strong. Natural Aries strength. Exalted strength.

Beau throws me on the bed and climbs on top of me. He pushes his knee between my legs and I moan. I am exactly where I need to be: under the weight of Beau’s body, arching my body, howling into the dry night.

Soon we’re naked and I have no specific memory of undressing. I’ve entered a new dimension where the typical rules of time and space no longer apply. Beau and I are two Pisces rockets launching into outer space. I feel myself on the ceiling, watching us. Streetlights pour in through the venetianblinds and make our skin glow orange. Our bodies writhe in waves, like snakes.

When Beau finally enters me, I am every single being in the universe all at once. I am me, and I am Beau, and I am Lydia, and I am this apartment, and I am Los Angeles, and I am the earth, I am the sun, and I am the tides, and I am every star in the sky. And we are all warm and cold and dancing and swirling and still and kinetic and quiet and screaming. My body stretches into something inhuman, and I screech, not just my sound but everyone’s sound—we are all one and we are all on fire. And I come, and Beau comes, and we collapse onto each other, and we laugh. I laugh so hard it starts to sound hysterical, like a banshee. Something has been unleashed in me, and in Beau, and in the universe, like everything is open and possible and there are no boundaries or limits.

Exalted.

Afterward, I pour us both glasses of Gatorade with ice and put on *The Bends*.

“We need to hydrate.”

Beau takes a big sip of his. “This is incredible,” he says. “I haven’t had Gatorade in so long.”

“You’re probably dehydrated,” I say. Then I just look at him for a second, drinking the blue Gatorade in my bed, and feel a glimmer of that thing my therapist used to call “gratitude.”

My phone lights up with a text from Cinnamon. It says, *Fucked the prof.*

I write back, *Fucked Beau*.

She responds with three flame emojis and then, *Meet us at the Mirror Box?*

I look at Beau, who is looking at my *Girl, Interrupted* poster and clutching the blue Gatorade in his lap, which is among the more beautiful sights I've ever laid eyes on.

"Want to go to Mirror Box?" I ask.

"Sure," he says.

We walk to Mirror Box holding hands under the moon. I've done this walk a billion times, but right now it feels like my first, I suppose because I am a different person—lighter, happier, filled with promise. Everything is in its right place.

Cinnamon notices.

"You're *glow-ing*," she whispers into my ear.

Then she kisses Beau on the cheek.

"This is Daniel." Cinnamon gestures toward the man beside her, who is frail and afraid and severely lacking in charisma. I can't believe this is *the professor*. If he can get a girl like Cinnamon, I figure my dad could probably have anyone. I remember that I need to tell him to stay away from Zoe and that I have a stage name. Ice Forrest.

"Oh, I'm up!" Cinnamon says, and it takes me a second to realize she is about to perform. It's after 8:00 P.M., and Cinnamon is usually the opener's opener. Maybe she's getting better. "Get whatever you want on my tab," she tells us as she scurries away.

Britney's "Lucky" comes on, and I ask Beau to get me a Mountain Dew and the professor says, "That sounds great," and Beau gets us three Mountain Dews, and we all sip them and watch Cinnamon dance clunkily. At one point, Cinnamon attempts a heel clap and misses, causing her legs to twist, and she tips over. I find some cash in my purse and take Beau's hand and go up to the stage. We throw ones at Cinnamon as she untangles her legs.

I awake to light harsh enough that I know it must be after noon. I worry for a second that the previous night was a dream. Then I feel Beau's arm around my waist. Lydia is purring at the foot of the bed. She feels safe with Beau, a good sign. He is kin.

Beau pulls me tighter and then whispers into my ear, “Last night was incredible.”

“It was,” I say, and I’m not lying. After Cinnamon danced, we all drank Mountain Dews, and Cinnamon was really *on*, telling jokes and cracking us all up. Beau got the professor to open up a bit by asking him about his book project, which I heard only snippets of, phrases like “the polymorphism of electal love” and “reverse sexual imprinting.”

We left before midnight.

On the walk, Beau humored me by asking me to rank Winona Ryder’s movies. I took the bait. *Girl, Interrupted*. *Beetlejuice*. *Edward Scissorhands*. *Heathers*. *The Crucible*. Beau said he had never seen *Heathers* but had always wanted to, and I said we should watch it together and he said that would be fun.

Back at my apartment, we fucked again, and the universe expanded and contracted and expanded again. I remember looking briefly at my iPhone and seeing it was 4:00 A.M.

Beau’s phone dings with a notification.

I go to the bathroom to pee because I am not trying to get a UTI.

“What are you doing?” I ask as I pour two fresh glasses of Gatorade on ice. I return to the bed and hand Beau his glass. I sip from mine.

“I just got my ChromoZone results,” he says.

“Fuck that website,” I say.

“Why?” Beau sips his Gatorade, then puts it on the bedside table.

I think about telling Beau the truth—the disappointing information that I am fully Irish—but I don’t want Beau to know how genetically uninspired I am.

“It’s vaguely eugenicist,” I say instead.

“Right,” he says absently. He refocuses his attention to the screen. “This is saying I have a sister.”

I put my hand on his shoulder and think about fucking him again. “Well, do you?” I ask. He suddenly seems impervious to my touch, which worries me.

“Not that I know of,” he says.

“Oh my god,” I say. “This is like a Lifetime movie.”

He shrugs, and I realize I’ve said the wrong thing. The energy is being sucked from the room. Beau and I are no longer the same person, quantum

entangled and filled with warm light. He is far away from me, moving further by the second.

“Who is she?” I ask.

“Some girl named”—he scrunches his eyes to read— “Emily Forrest.”

I feel like I am experiencing some kind of psychosis, or maybe a stroke or heart attack. I realize, for the first time, that Beau does not know my actual name. He knows me only as Ice. “Who is this Emily Forrest person?” I ask, trying to keep my voice steady. Emily Forrest is surely a common name. Actually, I know it is a common name because I have googled it before. A gynecologist in Tampa dominates my search results.

He hands me the phone and I click the profile, prepared to see this popular gynecologist. Or the volleyball player in San Antonio who also shares my name.

But that’s not what I see.

Instead I see:

“Emily Forrest. Riverside, California. 98.9 percent Irish.” Yup, it is me.

Yup, it is me.

In the bathroom, I turn on the shower.

Then I slap myself across the face.

I have to get Beau out of my apartment.

I turn off the shower and decide to *act*.

Getting my brother who does not know he is my brother out of my carnal bed is the biggest acting job of my life. I pretend I’m in a movie, a very weird movie.

“My dad is coming by today, so I need to clean,” I say, and then realize that “my dad”—if ChromoZone is correct—means Beau’s dad, but Beau does not know this. It’s all too weird. I can’t think. I just have to act.

Beau is still sitting dumbfounded on my bed. He probably wants emotional support, but I cannot give that. His realization is my realization too. But he has no idea.

My head spins.

“Yeah, okay,” he says. “I should get going.”

He walks over and kisses me, which I deftly convert into a hug.

“I’m sorry about the ChromoZone stuff,” I say.

“Thanks,” he says. “I’m not sure how I feel about it. I’m kind of numb, to be honest.”

“I’m sorry, babe,” I say. “There is nothing worse than having family members.” Then I pick up my Juicy shorts off the floor and start folding them so he gets the hint.

He walks over to the door. “I’ll talk to you later,” he says.

“Bye,” I say.

As soon as the door shuts, I flip open my laptop and begin googling. My first search: “How accurate is ChromoZone?” It might be a mistake. It *has* to be a mistake. My life was finally turning around. It was just starting. I was being born.

And now I am dying.

Dead.

I gulp some Gatorade.

It *HAS* to be a mistake. First off, Beau is French. I am Irish. And Beau is from somewhere chic. I am from Riverside. If his dad is my dad, that would mean my dad had been to the East Coast or France. But my dad never travels. As far as I know he hasn’t left California since his honeymoon. Beau’s mom is too sophisticated for my dad. She has to be.

I return my focus to my search results, most of which tend to vow for ChromoZone’s accuracy.

My phone lights up with a text from Cinnamon: *Last night was so good.*

I want to tell her what is happening, but I am too embarrassed, so I absentmindedly heart the text. I am in shock. I think about calling my old therapist. I go into my email to find her contact information. Sandwiched in between reading requests and emails from editors there is a new message in my inbox from ChromoZone: “You have new DNA relatives on ChromoZone.” I click it. May as well double-check.

And in fact, it says I have a brother. Named Bo Webster.

Bo Webster? Beau Rubidoux lied about his name just like I did. I click the profile. Bo Webster is from Riverside, California.

And we share a father.

Part III

EMILY.

I call my therapist three times. She doesn't answer. I leave a frantic voice mail. And then another one.

I can't sit alone with my thoughts. I can tell Lydia is stressed out by my energy. Cats mate with their siblings all the time, so she probably wouldn't be able to understand why I am so upset even if I could explain it to her.

So I call the person I always call when things are shit.

Thomas answers on the first ring.

"I need you to pick me up," I say. "Now."

"What's going on?" he asks. "I'm in a meeting."

"Thomas, we both know you don't have a job, so get your dick out of whatever mediocre vagina it's inside of and come over here. Now."

He laughs and then says, "Hold on," to someone in the background, and I smile, briefly forgetting my current conundrum, at the confirmation that I am correct. "I'll be there in fifteen," he says.

"Hurry," I say, then hang up.

I put on my baby-blue Juicy tracksuit and start pacing outside my building. It is hot, and I quickly break a sweat. Sweating feels right. I need to rid myself of toxins. I am filled with impurity. I think about going to confession, divulging my sins. Jesus loves sinners.

I continue pacing and sweating until Thomas rolls up.

"What now?" he asks out the window. "Did your high school friend expose you?"

"Worse," I say, then jump in the car.

And I tell him everything.

When I get to the big reveal, his reaction is completely inappropriate. He laughs hysterically and can't seem to stop. "I can't believe you thought *Beau Rubidoux*, my former cokedealer, was a French aristocrat. He *screams* suburban try-hard."

"He is my *brother!*" I scream at Thomas. "I fucked my brother!"

He keeps laughing. “I can’t believe you had a crush on that *dweeb*,” he says. Tears are streaming down his face, he is laughing so hard. I know he is just jealous. “I imagine his dick would taste like Flamin’ Hot Cheetos.”

“Why the fuck are you fantasizing about what his dick tastes like?”

“I’m not fantasizing about Beau Rubidoux.” He is still laughing, wiping tears from his face. “That’s you, honey.”

“His name is Bo Webster,” I said. “Bo as in *B-O*.”

“Of course it is,” he says. “Named for his signature scent.”

“I need you to drive me to Riverside,” I say, ignoring Thomas’s dumb joke.

He is still wiping tears from his face.

My phone lights up with a text.

“Speak of the Cheeto,” Thomas says.

“Fuck you,” I say. I position my phone so he can’t see it. “Just drive.”

I open the text: *I’m sorry things were so weird earlier*. Beau, or Bo, is still typing. *I had an amazing time last night*.

I put my phone down.

“What’s lover boy saying?” Thomas asks.

“Can you get over your seething jealousy for one second and be a friend?”

Thomas merges onto the 101.

“I just found out the love of my life is my brother.”

“Love of your life?” he asks. Then he starts laughing again. “I always knew you were a little wacko, Em, but I had no idea the extent of it.”

I punch him hard on the arm and the car swerves. The car behind us honks.

“The fuck?” Thomas says. “Don’t hit me while I’m driving.” His voice is aggressive for just a second. “While I’m driving *you* to Riverside to figure out whether *you* fucked your brother who you think is *the love of your life*.”

We spend the rest of the ride talking about Thomas and his love for Clover, who clearly—based on Thomas’s telling of the story and my brief interactions with her—has no serious interest in him. Hearing about Thomas’s sad romantic life makes me feel slightly better about my own.

“This is the Riverside exit,” Thomas says finally. “Where do I go next?”

I direct Thomas to Riverside City College, a route I unfortunately still know by heart, despite not having been there in a decade. On the way, we pass the sign for Mount Rubidoux, this outdoor park my dad used to take me

to as a kid. As soon as Thomas sees the sign, he bursts out laughing. “Creative,” he says.

“Shut up and drive,” I say.

I burst into my dad’s office with a theatrical flair that would impress Lee Strasberg’s ghost.

His door is partially open, and he is speaking with a girl who I assume is a student because she is wearing a *Friends* T-shirt. When I enter, the girl jumps.

“I need to speak to you,” I say. “Dad,” I add, so the student, who is now looking at me with frightened eyes, will know I am not fucking around.

“I’ll come back later,” she says, quickly gathering her things, exactly as I’d hoped.

“Emily,” my dad says. “Is everything okay?”

“No,” I say.

After the student scurries out of the office, I shut his office door. Then I look him right in the eyes. I have to admit I am a bit high on the drama of the confrontation.

“Did you cheat on Mom?”

My dad looks like he’s been punched in the gut. It’s a look that tells me everything I need to know. He takes off his glasses and massages the bridge of his nose. In the silence, I catch a framed family photo on his desk. We are at Big Bear Lake, one of the only family trips I remember ever taking. I must have been eleven or twelve. My dad and mom are smiling, wearing primary-colored T-shirts. I am wearing all black and glaring at the camera with hostility. I hated that vacation. My parents kept insisting on doing outdoor activities like waterskiing and biking. I hated the sun, and I hated physical activity even more. The whole trip I stayed in my room and closed the blinds and acted out Winona’s scenes in *Beetlejuice* over and over while my parents enjoyed themselves.

“What is this about, Emily?” my dad asks.

“Look,” I say, “I totally get why you had an affair. Affairs, whatever. Mom sucks. You’re a good-looking man with a good personality, surrounded by impressionable students who probably all want to get with you.”

My dad looks like he is being jabbed in the back with a blunt object. I

need to get to the point. “Did you sleep with a woman with the last name Webster? In the late eighties?” I’m not exactly sure how old Bo is, but he has to be around my age.

“Emily,” he says, “sit down. Slow down.”

“I don’t want to sit,” I say. “I am having the worst day of my entire life and I’m pretty sure it’s your fault.”

“What happened?” he asks.

“So I met this amazing guy,” I say.

“The one you mentioned at coffee?” my dad asks.

“Yes,” I say. “My crush.” My dad is a good listener for a dude. No wonder he has so much luck getting laid.

“So we were finally ...” I pause. “Intimate.”

My dad makes a face, the blunt object poking him again. I feel both sad for him and enraged by him. If he is going to fuck around, he has to face the consequences.

“And this morning in bed,” I say, “he got a notification on his phone from ChromoZone.”

“Oh god.”

“I’M HIS SISTER!!” I shout. It feels good to yell like this, raw and unhinged. I make a mental note to channel this energy the next time I have an audition—just imagine confronting my father about cheating on my mom after finding out I inadvertently slept with my brother.

“Emily, I’m so sorry,” he says. I don’t blame him for not being able to come up with much. There isn’t exactly a parenting manual for this type of situation. *What to Do When Your Daughter Storms into Your Office and Announces She Accidentally Slept with Her Brother because You Had an Affair Twenty-Nine Years Ago. For Dummies.*

“I just wanted to confirm that it’s correct,” I say. “Before I close the door. Because he’s the best person I’ve ever met and the only person I’ve ever been able to see myself with, and I read online that ChromoZone can give false results.” This last part isn’t entirely true.

My dad rubs the bridge of his nose again. “I think the results are probably correct” is all he says.

“Fuck you,” I say. And I slam the door on my way out.

I am fuming when I arrive at Thomas's car. Intensifying my rage, Thomas is flirting with an undergrad through his Volvo window. I walk right over to the girl, who is either the same girl from my dad's office or another girl in a *Friends* T-shirt, and say, "He's a sexual predator. Don't make him violate his parole."

She scurries away quickly.

"Thanks for that," Thomas says when I get in the car.

"I can't believe you," I say. "Any of you!" I finally understand all those man-hating feminists I see on Instagram. Men *are* dogs! Peg the patriarchy!

"So, it's true?"

"I never thought my parents could ruin my life any more than they already have," I say.

"Oh god," he says. "Not the Nickelodeon show again."

"I could have been a star!"

"Your parents were smart to keep you from being a child actor," he says. "They all end up with heroin addictions."

"I wish I had a heroin addiction," I say.

"Hey," Thomas says. "Speaking of drug problems." He opens up his glove compartment to reveal a pudgy blunt. I haven't smoked a blunt in years, and I remember why I keep Thomas around.

"Should we smoke it atop ole Mount Rubidoux?"

"Why the fuck not?" I say. "Hopefully we catch on fire after."

"Attagirl," Thomas says.

We sit on a rock underneath a big cross at the top of the mountain. We have a view of all of Riverside, which is just strip malls and pockets of trees and tract homes. The San Bernardino Mountains glow orange in the distance.

"I think this is the first place I smoked weed," I say to Thomas as he flicks his lighter. A gust of wind hits, so I cup my hands around the blunt. Finally it lights, and just watching Thomas suck in smoke puts me more at ease. The smell calms me, the same way Lydia gets around catnip.

"How old were you?" Thomas asks as he exhales a fat plume smelling of tobacco and grapes. I am feeling unbearably nostalgic and extremely angry. I need the blunt in my mouth. I grab it from Thomas's hand and suck hard.

"Middle school," I say as I exhale a cloud so voluminous it looks like it

could have been created by a bomb. “Probably twelve. These boys Zoe and I had crushes on took us up here to ‘get stoned,’ and Zoe didn’t even know what that meant. I only knew from watching *The Big Lebowski*.” I’d watched it with my dad, but for obvious reasons I am not interested in revealing that particular detail.

“Cool girl,” Thomas says.

I scrunch my face at him, then continue with my story. “I convinced Zoe to do it and she hardly inhaled. I got really high and fell in love. Not with the boys, but with THC. It was the first time I’d felt, like, normal. Like I could engage in normal conversations without feeling angry or alienated. I was just happy to chat about normal dumb things, like which teachers were our favorites and who we thought was hot on *The OC*.”

“Interesting.” Thomas takes the blunt from my hand. “So it helped you be social. Most people find the opposite. It makes them too introverted and self-critical to engage.”

“That’s a hideous stereotype,” I say, then worry my comment was too harsh. I guess weed does make me self-critical. But it also makes me a lot nicer. Maybe I need to be more self-aware to engage with others, to keep my hostility in check. “That was a blunt too. Grape. Just like this.”

I watch some boys kick a soccer ball back and forth, silhouetted by the yellowish sky behind them.

My phone dings with another text from Bo. *I’m so sorry again for wiggling out earlier. I hope you’re having a great day and that we can recreate last night soon. ;)*

“What’s lover boy texting?” Thomas asks. “Doesn’t he know to cool it when he finds out his girlfriend is his sister?”

And this time I finally laugh with Thomas. What the fuck else am I supposed to do? I’m sitting on top of Mount Rubidoux, the place I’d first smoked weed, smoking the same style of grape swisher, with the East Coast trust fund boy I completely use for his money and eagerness, who probably has never been to the Inland Empire in his life. I just stormed into my father’s office, an office I hadn’t been to since I was eleven, the same age from the photograph, when it was Bring Your Daughter to Work Day, a day I spent watching *Beetle-juice* on my dad’s desktop computer. And eighteen years later, I stormed into that office and accused my dad of having an affair decades prior. And three hours before that, I’d had the best twelve hours of

my life. I felt the universe expand and I felt myself become earth, wind, and fire. And now the universe felt separate and hostile again, or maybe it didn't exist at all.

"He doesn't know," I say finally.

Thomas tilts his head at me.

"He doesn't know my real name," I say. "He showed me the page of 'his sister' and it was me, and I gave him the phone back and told him to leave."

"Damn, this is so juicy." Thomas blows smoke toward the soccer players, and I watch it waft up into the sky. "Real Lifetime shit."

"That's what I said!" I take the blunt from his hand. "Before I realized his sister was me."

Thomas laughs, and I laugh too. Thank God for cannabis, for helping me laugh at the most depressing parts of life. My therapist encouraged me to go to an OCD support group. A lot of the girls, girls with round faces and shiny hair, had intrusive thoughts about incest. I suppose my current reality would be their nightmare. I didn't get those girls and I never went back to the group.

I take out my wallet from my bag, retrieve my driver's license, hold it out over a rock, and snap a picture on my phone. Then I send it to Bo.

Thomas laughs the whole time.

The text delivers, and I watch the typing bubbles on Bo's end appear and disappear. I mean, what is he supposed to say? There is nothing to say. All there is to do is laugh. So I continue smoking the blunt with Thomas, and we laugh and laugh until the sky turns pink, and then we drive home.

DAWN.

I'm extremely hungover at work when I receive a text from Bo. He typically doesn't text me unless I text him first, so I am excited to see his name on my phone. Maybe he misses his mom. I am forever mourning the version of him that craved my attention.

To treat myself, I go outside to my smoking spot to read the text. The sun is bright. I light a cigarette and open the text, feeling giddy. But as soon as I start reading, my excitement drops.

Why did you lie to me about my dad?

I sit down and inhale my cigarette furiously. My brain is having trouble arranging thoughts. I blink and see spots. It is too bright outside.

After a few more puffs, my thoughts begin to cohere. How did Bo find out? I've always worried about this moment, but reassured myself with the fact that Paul didn't even know my last name—hell, he probably didn't even know my first name. I lied a lot to men, gave them silly fake names like Tiger or Sapphire. And I figured he lived on the East Coast. But now I know he lives in Riverside and has probably been here the whole time. But Bo never comes to Riverside.

How could he find Bo? How could Bo find him?

I think about the driver's license, which I now keep in my wallet.

How did you find out? I type out, but I don't send it. It's the wrong thing to say. I think about calling Steph, but she won't know what to do either. She doesn't have any children, but beyond that, we are too similar. We are both party girls, great for a good time, bad at practical advice. But Steph is the only one I told about Paul. Not even my mother knows the truth.

I light another cigarette and open Exalted to distract myself. She posted another meme about Aries being blessed. She's been posting a lot of things about Aries recently.

"Dawn," Roberto calls out for me. "We need you."

I put my phone away and go back into the restaurant.

EMILY.

In the morning, nothing is funny anymore. I am left with the most intense feeling of dread, a sinking in my stomach. Killing myself seems like a lot of work—it has always seemed like a big production—but also, I don't want to be alive. There is nothing for me on this earth, only pain and shame.

I grab for my phone like I normally do, then put it back. I don't want to look at texts from Bo or texts from my dad or texts from Thomas, laughing at my Oedipal tragedy. I don't want to tell Cinnamon, my first friend I've ever liked, that I fucked my brother.

Instead, I write. *Vice* emailed me a few days ago indicating that they wanted my article: "Why Astrology Is Bullshit: From a Professional Astrologer." And I've never felt more passionately about the thesis than at this moment. After all, I fell for Bo because of his birth chart, because he was "exalted." I thought sleeping with him would save me, but instead it ruined me. It ruined me beyond what I previously thought possible.

I open a Google Doc and start typing. I think of a Susan Sontag quote I saw the other day on Instagram: "I go to my typewriter as I might go to my machine gun." The words come out quickly, intensely, like bullets.

Inside of every person is a thousand different people. Think of someone you know well. Are they not filled with contradictory personality traits? To quote the renowned poet Walt Whitman (Gemini), "Do I contradict myself? ... I contain multitudes." To quote myself, a millennial astrologer, "Do I contradict myself? All fucking day." Astrology accounts for these contradictions, which in part endeared me to it. Everyone has various signs in various planets and houses, which account for the personality wars within all of us. We have our sun, which represents our ego and vitality. Our moon placement governs our emotional attachments. Mercury represents our thinking and communication style. And so on. These placements

within one person are often totally at odds. My sun, for example, is in Scorpio, which makes me emotionally intense and strong-willed. My moon, however, is in Gemini, which makes me fickle and flighty. Due to these placements, both of these people exist within me.

But don't they exist within all of us?

When you think about the various signs, they all stand for universal traits. Take, for example, this description of Taurus I found online: "Taurus is known for its will of iron. But it is also the most relaxed of the earth signs." So both a relaxed Taurus and a rigid Taurus could read this and say, "it me!" All the sign and house descriptions are like this. They are purposefully conceptualized to apply to everyone.

Let's go down the list.

Aries' key traits are impulsiveness and assertiveness. Everyone, in some circumstances, struggles with spontaneity. I have no Aries in my chart, but when presented with a Mountain Dew or a bag of potato chips, I have trouble controlling myself. Impulsivity is a universal trait, and we all have a relationship to it, even the most controlled among us. If someone's chart is mostly Aries and they're moderate and disciplined, an astrologer might argue that they cultivated discipline to quell their preternaturally impulsive tendencies. There is always a way to explain it. I've met plenty of shy, timid Aries. After all, they're ruled by the First House, meaning they're the toddlers of the zodiac. Babies!

Aries' ruler, the **First House**, is otherwise known as the **House of Self**. Of course, we all have a relationship with ourselves. Self-expression and -preservation are universal human goals. If someone with a First House-dominant chart is uniquely selfless, then an astrologer will say that is because in a past life they were so self-obsessed that they are overcompensating in this life. There is always a way to argue for a placement's validity.

Taureans are known to be persistent and epicurean. Of course, we all have things we relentlessly pursue, even if it's just potato chips. We might not all be foodies, but everyone has an area in which we enjoy the finer things. I mostly live like a dog, but I become very excited around expensive fabrics, and I once subscribed to the

Criterion Collection.

Taurus rules the **Second House**, which is the **House of Material Values and Security**. Who doesn't want to collect material wealth and be secure? We're humans living in a capitalist society! If someone's Second House is empty, then an astrologer might say material wealth and security are an area of struggle. If the person retorts and says they have been blessed with finances, the astrologer will say the Second House is empty because it indicates that area isn't a concern. With every sign or trait, it either is or isn't.

Geminis are versatile and witty. And a little chaotic. I have a Gemini moon, and I've always been a bit of a flip-flopper. I will think one thing strongly—say, astrology as a spiritual practice— then something will trigger me and the belief will disappear. But I think most people are this way. My cousin R, for example, has no Gemini in her chart. For several years we would meet once a week at a coffee shop because, she told me, our relationship was important to her. Then I told her I wanted to meet at another coffee shop instead and I haven't seen her since. Humans are inherently fickle.

Gemini rules the **Third House**, or the **House of Learning and Communication**. We all communicate. We are legally required to go to school. We all have a relationship with these things, which can be argued in any which way.

Cancers are moody and motherly. What human isn't moody? I haven't met one. Some aren't motherly. I'm not motherly. But I'm affectionate with cats. Everyone has some being to whom they're warm, and Cancers are known for being selective about to whom they show affection, as all humans are.

Cancer rules the **Fourth House**, or the **House of Home**. Again, we all have a home or are looking for a home. Any argument can be made here.

Leos are playful and theatrical. Play and theater are the spice of life. Without them, we get depressed and kill ourselves. The universal "we," of course! I've even seen my dull Taurus mom play around with my dad from time to time, stick her tongue out at him and shit. It's disgusting but ultimately very human!

Leos rule the **Fifth House**, or the **House of Recreation and**

Creativity. Again, we would kill ourselves without recreation, so we all have some sort of relationship with it. I know some people seem completely unoriginal, but they've probably at least had some wacky dreams! We all get bizarre every once in a while.

Virgos tend to be analytical and persnickety. And again, analysis keeps us alive. We have to work through ideas to make the right decisions for survival. And everyone is finicky in some areas. I'm finicky in almost every area. But think of the most seemingly carefree person you know. Surely there is some area in which they're particular. Maybe they like their shoes organized a certain way, or they don't like to be touched on their neck. We all have the capacity to be a princess.

Virgos rule the **Sixth House**, or the **House of Routine and Health**. We all need some degree of routine to keep our health and make a living. We need to eat at certain times and go to work. Without routine, we go crazy. And without our health, we die. So we all have relationships to these things.

Libras are known for being harmonious and diplomatic. We all have to be tactful at times so we don't end up killing each other! Libras are ruled by Venus, the planet of beauty, so they are also known for fine tastes. But who doesn't like pretty things? Taste might differ, but everyone is drawn to what they find beautiful. And at the end of the day, we all want to get along.

Libras rule the **Seventh House**, or the **House of Partnership**. Even the biggest loners have at least one friend, even if it is just a cat. (This is just a hypothetical and not based on my actual experience.)

Scorpios are enigmatic and perceptive. This one is close to home because my chart is basically all Scorpio. I don't believe in astrology anymore, but I can't help but believe in Scorpios. We just seem to see things others can't. And who can compete with the Scorpio sex appeal? (Don't say Leos; they're wayyyyyyy too literal!) But I guess we all have the capacity to be sexy and to perceive. We have to be sexy (to someone) to keep the human race alive and to perceive what is happening before us so we don't get killed.

Scorpios rule the **Eighth House**, or the **House of Death**. Don't make me explain this one. Okay, fine: We all die.

Sagittarians are optimistic and adventurous. We all have to take risks to reap rewards. And again, without any optimism, we lose our will to live.

Sagittarius rules the **Ninth House**, or the **House of Travel and Philosophy**. We all have to travel, even if it's just from our home to our work, the post office, or a friend's house. And we all have to have a certain way of viewing the world. It's human nature to philosophize.

Capricorns are ambitious and practical, the daddies of the zodiac, if you will (Cancers are the moms). We all have to be practical about some things! Otherwise, we can't survive. And, again, even the laziest among us are ambitious about something. Maybe it's just a video game! We all have something. Having and meeting goals is what keeps us going.

Capricorns rule the **Tenth House**, or the **House of Career**. Most of us have to have a career in some form. If someone is independently wealthy, they have to manage their stocks or whatever the fuck rich people do (I wish I knew). We all have to do something.

Aquarians are popular and detached. Another weird contradiction here. They're known for being zany and eccentric, but also able to get along with everyone. They're emotionally cool but care deeply about humanity. If you have Aquarius in your chart, you'll be able to see yourself, because the descriptions are so all over the place.

Aquarians rule the **Eleventh House**, or the **House of Friendships and Community**. I can say with authority that even the most isolated and antisocial among us will find a community. For me, it's my local strip club.

Pisces are known for being sensitive and intuitive. Think of the most frigid person you know; they're probably gentle toward something. Again, for me, it's cats. And we all have to intuit emotions occasionally, to some degree. Otherwise we could get murdered!

Pisces rules the **Twelfth House**, or the **House of Unconscious**. We all have an unconscious! We all have a relationship to that unconscious, whether we're repressed or uninhibited.

You see? All the signs and houses represent universal human traits and elements of life. And having read a lot of charts, I can tell you that most people have most signs and houses expressed somewhere in

their charts, mostly in a random and even smattering.

The point is, astrology isn't real. It is merely a framework through which to view the universe. It is a language. And I have continued to use that language, despite my lack of belief, because it makes people (myself included) less frightening to me. And it also pays the bills and, momentarily, made me rich.

But I recently saw how astrology can become dangerous. I made the mistake of reading too much into a client's birth chart. All his planets were exalted, which—as my Instagram fans know—is an area of fixation for me, the idea that certain placements are, for lack of a better word, blessed. So I became blinded by this perfect chart, and I fell in love. It wasn't real; it was projection. And it ended tragically. As tragically as it possibly could have gone. I will spare you the gory details.

So I guess the moral of the story is: if you're using astrology as a fun way to joke with your friends or share memes or cut through the small-talky bullshit, by all means—don't let me stop you. But if you're using it for more: for answers, for solutions, or to escape yourself ...

Proceed at your own risk.

I don't even read it over. I just click send. And then I fall back asleep.

DAWN.

I awake to the sound of knocking. Pounding, really. At first I think I am just hungover and the noise is coming from inside my head. But then I realize someone is knocking at the door. I figure it is just Karen, whose job it is to rain on my parade.

The previous night was a blur, another blur. The text from Bo sent me spiraling. After work I needed a strong drink and a good fuck, so I went to the Purple Parrot. Unfortunately, there were no women there. So I drank at the bar while old queeny gay men tried to flatter me.

“Your hair!” one said.

“You look like Goldie Hawn!” said the other.

I didn’t love that. Goldie Hawn is goofy looking, and she has lost her looks. In high school people told me I looked like Christie Brinkley.

But I was drunk enough that I didn’t care. I gave the old queens kisses on the cheek and bought us all shots. The last thing I remember was the bartender handing me a glass of water and me pouring it on his head. He kicked me out, and I suppose I walked home, but I have no specific recollection. In my apartment, I vaguely remember opening another bottle of Cook’s and smoking cigarettes out the window and calling people who didn’t pick up the phone. I don’t even want to look at my call log.

The knocking gets louder. My phone dings. It’s Bo. *I’m outside.*

What the hell? My apartment is a mess. I am a mess. I can’t let him see it like this.

Give me a minute, I text back.

I jump out of bed and start throwing empty Cook’s bottles and cigarette butts and Coke cans I’ve used as ashtrays into the garbage. I open the window and turn on the fan and light some incense.

In the bathroom, I’m shocked by my reflection. My hair is sticking out in a thousand directions like Albert Einstein’s. Black smudges underline my puffy eyes. I splash some cold water on my face and remove my makeup with a

wipe. I put my hair up into a bun on top of my head with a teal scrunchie. I wash my mouth out with Listerine and then douse myself in Ralph by Ralph. I put on my bathrobe and flip-flops.

I take a big gulp of Cook's for courage and open the front door.

Bo is sitting on the curb smoking a cigarette.

"My babyyyyy," I say, walking across the dead grass toward him.

He turns around, and I walk toward him with open arms. He stands up, and when I try to hug him, he backs away.

"I'm upset with you," he says. He's never said anything like this to me before. I respond with my most wounded expression, the face that normally gets me what I want. Tears start to well up in my eyes.

"Let's go inside," he says. I've never seen this side of him before. He's normally so passive and yielding with me. Distant, sure, but never firm like this. Maybe he's finally becoming a man. I thought I wanted this, but now that it's happening, I'm not sure I like it.

I follow him across the brownish grass into my apartment. After having been outside, I'm hit with the smell as I enter: champagne and stale cigarettes and Ralph by Ralph and incense. Ash dropped on the carpet. I see a look of disgust on Bo's face. I can tell he's judging my apartment, even though his is even more of a dump. But I'm his mom. I'm supposed to be aspirational. I know I'm not. The sink is overflowing with dirty dishes. My teal duvet is twisted and unmade. The painting of ocean waves beside my window is crooked. He looks at the Bob Marley quote—"Love the life you live. Live the life you love."—painted in curly blue letters in my kitchen, then my name painted in Chinese letters above the TV.

His face falls. I know what he's thinking. *My mom is forty-eight years old and living in a dorm room.*

He sits down on the couch and sinks into the cushions.

"Can I get you something to drink?" I ask. "A mimosa?" I'm already starting to pour more Cook's into my own glass.

When I walk over to hand him my glass, he's looking at the bookshelf beside my TV, which is filled with framed photos of sunsets and palm trees and Steph and Bo as a little boy. I notice a photo of Bo hugging my leg, the biggest smile on his face, unaware that his mom is an alcoholic and a liar who eventually will be diagnosed with borderline personality disorder, nothing to teach him and no money to offer him.

Ignorance is bliss.

“You were so cute,” I say.

He turns around and looks at me with a heavy expression. I notice for the first time that he might be hungover too. There are dark circles under his eyes and his face is pale. I feel like I’m looking in a mirror, and not in the normal fun way.

“Looks like I’m out of orange juice,” I say as I hand him his cup of champagne.

He takes a big gulp. “Why did you lie to me about my dad?”

I sit beside him on the couch and take a big gulp, mirroring him.

“Aww, Bo.” I start rubbing his hair like I did when he was a little boy. He squirms away, and I feel that tightening in my chest, the one I get when I feel someone is leaving me. My court-appointed therapist told me to watch for this feeling and to take deep, soothing breaths when it arrives. But I’ve never been great at it. Once it hits, it all feels out of my control.

“Why did you lie?”

Tears well up in my eyes and my limbs start to shake. I have the urge to yell. Bo stands up and starts pacing around the apartment. Again, he looks like a man. I don’t like it. I force myself to take some deep breaths. I’ve lost every woman I’ve loved, and I can’t lose my son.

“Bo, honey,” I say. “He was a one-night stand. I didn’t even know his last name. How could I tell a child that?”

He says nothing, just walks over to the window. He picks a cigarette from the pack and lights it. I worry that Karen is home, but then remember I can use Bo to guilt-trip her if she complains. She’s always loved Bo. Bo is my protective cloud sometimes. He softens me to others.

“I wasn’t even sure he *was* alive,” I say.

He squints at me, looking dubious. I don’t blame him. I’m a liar. I lie and I lie and I lie.

“How do you know he’s alive?” I ask.

“I did ChromoZone,” he says.

“What’s that?” I go over to the windowsill to join him in smoking, but as soon as I walk toward him, he puts his cigarette out and walks away. My stomach contracts. I want to yell at him even though I know he didn’t do anything wrong. I’m the one who did something wrong. I take a deep breath.

“It’s a genetic testing and family ancestry site,” he says from the couch.

I'm not entirely sure what this means, but I don't want to ask. I already know Bo thinks I'm dumb.

"I spit in a cup," he says, apparently sensing my confusion. I'm so embarrassed. "And they told me I have a sister."

"A sister?" I ask. "How do you know her dad is alive?" I don't know why I'm still pretending I think Paul Forrest is dead. I suppose his newborn is an adult now, around Bo's age.

Bo looks at me with rageful eyes. I'm looking in a mirror again.

"Because I fucked her," he says. He leaves and slams the door.

I follow him, ready to scream, but he is throwing up on the grass, looking pathetic. I walk back inside and pour the rest of the Cook's into my cup.

EMILY.

I wake up in the midafternoon and grab my phone, momentarily forgetting I do not want to see it. I have lots of notifications.

A text from my dad: *Please call me.*

A text from Bo: *Can we talk?*

A text from Cinnamon: *How are things with lover boy? The professor and I have been in bed for days.*

A text from Thomas: *Clover dumped me, should we fuck our pain away? Or do you only do that with blood relatives?*

And then a voice mail from my old therapist.

I don't listen to it.

I don't want to talk to anyone. I don't want to face my life. I think about going to Subtropical and just doing readings, but Bo might be working. I think about going to Mirror Box, but I don't want to see Cinnamon.

So I call Thomas.

"Young Oedipus," Thomas answers. "Or Oedipaa."

"Oedipus slept with his mother, not his brother," I say. "And if you're looking for the female version, it's Electra not Oedipa, dumbass." I only just learned of Jung's Electra complex while researching my hellish conundrum, but lecturing Thomas makes me feel slightly better.

"Got it, Electra," he says. "What can I do you for?"

"We're not fucking," I say, then think Electra might make a good stage name.

"Of course not," he says. "As we aren't siblings."

"Fuck you."

"You said that wasn't allowed."

"I can't be alone right now," I say.

"Me neither," he says.

"What should we do?" I ask.

Lydia paws my lap.

“I’ll just come get you now and let’s both brainstorm,” he says.
“Okay.”

I try to keep my brain occupied on menial tasks while I wait for Thomas. I wash my face, brush my teeth, feed Lydia. I put on my dress, take off my dress—because it smells. I put on my red Juicy tracksuit, the only one that doesn’t smell. I put on that Arctic Monkeys song that was popular when I moved to LA. I used to play it at the coffee shop I worked at when I first moved here. I had a British coworker whom I fucked sometimes. He was pale and thin with black hair, kind of like ... never mind. He said the Arctic Monkeys were the second coming of the Beatles, and my other coworker—a communist—said British people said that about every band. It all felt so cool. I was eighteen and working in Hollywood with a British person and a communist.

This was before LA started to get depressing.

I eat a piece of turkey with the fridge open, soothed by the sounds of my own chewing and the hum of the fridge and from staring at the light inside until I see colors.

When Thomas still isn’t here, I open Exalted on my phone. I have a bunch of notifications, which is the norm since Stella Shadid reposted me. I glance at my DMs. There is a fresh one from someone with a blue check—Stella Shadid herself. I open it:

Hi girl! I’m f’ing obsessed with your account ... it makes me lmfao constantly. Can you do my reading? In person? Can you come to Malibu? Like today? Haha.

The message ends with five butterfly emojis.

Thomas honks his horn.

I grab my keys and put my phone in the pocket of my sweatshirt.

“*Electraaaa*,” he calls out the window as soon as I’m outside.

I shush him. “Imagine what the neighbors will think.” I clutch imaginary pearls.

In the car, Thomas punches my arm in a brotherly way. Oh my god, I have a brother.

“You have weed, yes?”

Thomas removes a blunt from behind his ear. “This one is peach.” I try to

grab it, but he pulls it back. “Where are we going?”

His new attitude is a lot.

“Malibu,” I say.

“Okay.” Thomas hands me the blunt. I light it out the window and suck in hard. Then I return to my DM to Stella.

What’s your address? I write back.

“You know,” Thomas says as he turns onto Hollywood Boulevard. “I fucked my cousin once.”

I turn on the radio and crank it up all the way.

Thomas and I ride mostly in silence, listening to KCRW, which is playing the Supremes, and smoking out the window, feeling the polluted air on our faces, watching the neighborhoods change. When we pass the sign for the Museum of Tolerance, I tell Thomas we are going to give Stella Shadid a reading, and he responds with an obviously forced nonchalance. I am proud of him for at least trying to be nonchalant for maybe the first time in his life. Being heartbroken looks good on him.

When we see the ocean, I decide to make a plan.

“You’re my assistant,” I say.

“Assistant?” Thomas whines.

“You know there was a point at which you would have *killed* to be my assistant?”

“We’re partners,” Thomas says.

“You’re my intern.”

“Cousins?”

“Fuck you.”

“Partners,” Thomas says again.

“You don’t know enough about astrology,” I say. It’s true. I can’t have Thomas tarnishing my credibility before a woman with twenty-seven million Instagram followers.

“I know enough,” he says. “I’ve lived in California for ten years. I’m on Instagram. I follow your account.”

“You do?”

“Of course!” he says.

We are winding up the hills at this point and I am feeling a little motion

sick.

“Pull over,” I say.

He pulls up behind a Porsche. The hill is so steep that his car is basically vertical. Thomas puts on the parking brake.

“Okay,” I say. “I’m going to give you a quiz.”

“Hit me,” Thomas says.

“If you pass,” I say, “we will tell Stella Shadid that you are my associate.”

“Deal,” Thomas says.

“Okay,” I say. A breeze rushes through the car and it smells like the ocean. I breathe deep and relish the respite from the exhaust-y scents of Thai Town. “What sign is associated with twins?”

Thomas raises his eyebrows. “Come on,” he says. “Too easy.”

“Answer the question.”

“Gemini.”

“Okay, you got the softball.” I pause and think. “A baby is born on April twenty-ninth. What sign is it?”

Thomas looks up at the roof and pulls his hoodie over his head, apparently deep in thought. I know him well enough to know he is thinking of a girl he’s fucked with that birthday. “Taurus,” he says.

“Good,” I say. “A heaux?”

“A heaux.” He smiles, then pulls his hood back down.

“What sign is Stella Shadid?”

“Libra,” he says.

“And what element is that?”

“Air.”

He is doing better than I thought. “Name the two other air signs.”

“Gemini.” He ruffles his hair. “And Aquarius?”

“Nice!”

“That one is confusing because ‘Aqua,’” he says. “Seems like water. But Aquarians are aloof ... Air sign.”

“A heaux?”

Thomas smiles. “A heaux.”

I decide it is most important to make sure he knows Stella’s chart. Other things probably won’t come up. I memorized Stella’s chart on the drive. She gave me her birth info, but I googled her chart beforehand. I cross-checked to make sure Google was correct, and it was. For the first time in my life, I think

that being famous must be terrifying.

“Stella has a Virgo moon,” I say. “What are Virgos known for?”

“Oh god,” Thomas says. “Sociopathic cunts.”

“Clover?” I ask.

Thomas nods. “Mean,” he says.

“Don’t think about Clover,” I say. “Think of memes.”

He ruffles his hair again, takes a deep breath. It’s kind of sweet seeing Thomas all worked up like this. “Clean,” he says. “Neurotic.”

“Great,” I say. “We want to frame things positively for Stella so she is pleased with her reading. So don’t bring any of this Clover-inspired anti-Virgo baggage in there, please.”

“Okay,” he says. “Virgos are intelligent, precise, and fastidious.”

“Perfect,” I say. “And what does the moon represent?”

“Emotions,” he says.

“Great, so what does a Virgo moon mean?”

“Cold,” he says.

I give him a disapproving glare.

“Logical,” he says. “Analytical.”

“Good! Stella also has a Virgo rising,” I say. “What does the rising sign represent?”

“Outward appearance,” he says. “First impression.”

“So how would you imagine a Virgo moon to appear?”

“Well-groomed,” he says.

I am impressed with Thomas. “Okay—”

A sharp nail taps Thomas’s half-open window. A frail platinum-blond woman is standing outside of it, an unleashed standard poodle beside her.

“Can I help you all?”

“Nope,” I say. Nosy bitch.

“We’re here for a meeting,” Thomas says. He eyes Waze on his phone. “Just a few minutes up the hill. We stopped here to consult before the meeting, but we’ll be on our way if it’s any trouble.”

“Oh?” she says. “What a handsome couple you are.”

“We aren’t a couple,” I say.

“Yeah,” says Thomas. “We’re partners.”

“He’s my associate,” I say.

“All right then,” she says. The poodle barks. “Bentley,” she hisses at the

poodle. “Behave yourself.” Then she turns back to us. “Have a nice meeting.”

Stella Shadid’s house is not visible from the street. It’s at the top of a twisty road where all the homes have gates and hedges. The ocean sparkles turquoise in the distance.

As we approach the gate, I turn to Thomas. “Don’t embarrass me.”

“Libra sun and Mercury; Virgo moon, rising, and Venus.”

“Good,” I say.

I open my DM with Stella. *At the gate*, I write.

One sec, she writes back.

The black gate slides open slowly. Thomas and I inhale simultaneously. He drives through the gate and up the short driveway. The house is a minimalist rectangle, all white and glass. Stella emerges wearing an oversized denim shirt with black crosses on it, buttoned only at the top, and a white bikini bottom pulled up over superhuman hips. Her cheekbones could cut marble. Her eyes are a reptilian green, her skin a sparkly bronze. She is surely missing at least one rib. I jab Thomas’s arm so he stops staring.

She gestures for us to park behind a Ferrari. I am nervous Thomas is going to hit the car and lose her trust, but he does okay.

Stella approaches the window. “Sorry, I was in the pool,” she says, looking down at her mostly exposed, made-in-a-lab figure. Her voice doesn’t sound real either. It has a breathy, singsong pitch, like it was programmed by Apple to be a “sexy girl.”

“All good,” Thomas says, and I jab him again.

Thomas gets out of the car, and I follow. Soon, we are face-to-face with Stella. On hot concrete. In front of a white glass box house.

“So which one of you is Exalted?” Stella asks.

I raise my hand and feel a little dizzy.

Stella squeals, then walks over to me, tiptoeing sort of, as though she has difficulty walking. I think of that viral article from a few years ago that said Barbie was anatomically impossible and wouldn’t be able to walk in real life.

Stella wraps me in a cold, reptilian hug. Her arms are around my body, but we are not touching. I feel like I am in a metal cage or interacting with AI. Then she plants a big kiss on my cheek. “I loove you,” she says. Then she kisses my other cheek. “Sorry, I’m European.”

“Very Libra with all the apologies,” I say.

She giggles. “I know,” she says. “I always go out of my way to make sure I’m not offending anyone.”

“This is Thomas,” I said. “My associate.”

“Hi, Thomas,” she says. She doesn’t hug him or kiss him. “Let’s go inside.”

We follow Stella and her weird walk, a sort of unsteady glide, into the white glass box house. The inside is stark. No clutter. Very little art. Modern furniture and geometric shapes. It is sort of Thomas’s taste, like if his trust fund was thirty-two times its size.

“Your house is incredible,” Thomas says, seemingly reading my mind.

“Thanks,” she says. “It isn’t mine.” She doesn’t say whose it is. Now I think it would be nice to be famous, to just have a little white box in Malibu to hang out in with none of the stresses of owning property. She walks us through the open-plan kitchen/ living room. “The best is yet to come.”

She is right. The backyard is all bright greens and blues, perfectly manicured, with an infinity pool that overlooks the ocean. I haven’t ever seen anything that looks this *alive* in Southern California. I suppose this is what money does: allows you to cultivate spaces that feel alive in an arid region that is technically uninhabitable.

She takes us over to a little cabana by the pool. There is a small dog lying in a patch of sun beside it, an Italian greyhound or something fancy looking. “Hi, Tulip,” Stella coos. She picks up the dog and sits down on a pillow with the dog in her lap.

Thomas and I sit down across from her. I feel nervous, but luckily Thomas looks so spastic I seem calm in comparison. That is the nice thing about having Thomas around. I am always cooler than him.

“This is amazing,” Thomas says.

“I know,” Stella says. She pulls out a Juul and inhales for what feels like thirty seconds. She exhales thick rings that float up into the sunlight. “I just learned to do that.”

“Impressive,” Thomas says.

She hands him the Juul and he takes a hit. He tries to make rings and fails miserably. I laugh and so does Bella. I feel dizzy again. She hands the Juul to me and I shake my head.

“Good for you,” she says. “I’m trying to quit.”

“I have other vices.” I don’t want her to think I’m a square.

“Oh my god,” she says. “Your eyes.” She leans up close to me. I am used to this with laypeople, but Stella Shadid is known for being one of the most beautiful women on the planet, perhaps with surgical assistance, and she is looking at my eyes with awe.

“Amazing, right?” Thomas says.

God, I wish he would shut up.

Stella ignores him. “They’re insane.” She is still looking right into them. “They’re, like, cosmic. I’m obsessed. Can I take a photo?”

I shrug.

She pulls out her iPhone, which has all these weird attachments on it, and think fondly of Bo’s Pentax, then shove away the memory.

“Lean into the sun a little,” she says.

I do as told.

“Chin up.”

I lift my chin and she snaps some photos.

“Oh my god, these are stunning. You’re such a natural.”

She shows me the photos on her phone. Models always think they are photographers, but these are actually good. “I’ll put it on my story and tag you,” she says. “Do you have a personal Instagram?”

“No,” I say.

“Oh my god, I love you!”

I don’t know what’s lovable about my not having an Instagram, but she is busy clicking away on her phone, so I don’t need to react.

“She’s amazing,” Thomas says, and I glare at him.

“Done!” Stella says, putting her phone down.

“So, I was looking at your chart with Thomas,” I say.

“Please read me to filth,” she says, then giggles, a breathy, lizard laugh. “I can handle it.”

“Okay, tell me what you know about your chart, and we’ll go from there,” I say.

“I’m a Libra,” she says. “That’s all I know. Indecisive. Flirty.” She touches my forearm. “A little scattered.” She giggles again. “It takes me twenty minutes to tell a simple story. That’s why I loved your meme so much.”

“Right,” I say. “Libra is ruled by Venus, the planet of beauty, so you’re

drawn to fine things.”

“Yep,” she says, and spreads her arms to reference our fine surroundings.

“You are also blessed with a beautiful appearance.”

Thomas nods vigorously, and I glare at him.

“I’ve had some help with that,” she says.

I go on to explain to Stella the various aspects of her birth chart. The sun, the rising. Mercury and Venus. The houses, the conjuncts. Thomas occasionally adds something obvious and Stella ignores him. She asks a few questions, mostly pertaining to love. She keeps touching my arm. The yard turns golden and then a cool blue. At the end of the reading, Stella takes a selfie of us, pointedly excluding Thomas. Then she Venmos me \$1,000 and walks us out. By the cars, she hugs and kisses me again and doesn’t touch Thomas. Then we are out the gate, back on the road, driving along the ocean, and then back on the 10, surrounded by dust and concrete.

“Was it just me or was Stella Shadid flirting with you?” Thomas asks as we pass the Capitol Records building.

“Just you,” I say.

“It was weird,” he says. “She hardly acknowledged me.”

“You aren’t Exalted,” I say.

“The whole thing was so weird.”

“You just aren’t used to being ignored by pretty women.”

“You ignore me all the time,” he says.

I ignore Thomas and look at my phone. More texts from Bo and my dad—my oppressive male relatives. Rachel was always screaming about the patriarchy, especially after the third margarita, and now I wish I could go back in time and yell along with her.

I open Instagram and look at the photos Stella tagged me in. In the first, my icy eyes are lit up by the sun. I don’t recognize the face as my own. I’ve never felt much of a connection to my physical appearance, especially when it’s “pretty.” My insides are not pretty. The next photo is a selfie of us both. I look ugly next to Stella the lizard woman. In both photos, Stella added lots of emojis of stars and moons and crystal balls. A more serious astrologer would be offended by the kitsch, but not I.

I have more than 900k followers now thanks to Stella. I notice I have a

new DM from her, so I open it. *Today was so fun. Thnx for the reading and for letting me photograph you. I'd love to hang out again (sans the boy).* Butterfly emoji, sparkly heart emoji, shooting star emoji. I giggle. Maybe Thomas was right. I respond to the DM with a blue heart emoji, which is all I can come up with. I know in all likelihood I will never see her again. But for a second I like to imagine us falling in love. I remember the last time I fell in love with someone I didn't really know, then shut off the phone.

"What are you smiling at?" he asks. "Brotherly love?"

"Shut up."

As we near my house, I get nervous at the idea of being alone. "Do you wanna smoke and watch a movie?"

Thomas raises his eyebrows. "Netflix and chill?"

"No," I say.

"Sure," says Thomas. "I have nothing else to do."

Thomas pulls up to a spot in front of my building, and I notice someone smoking outside the apartment. As we get closer, I recognize the person.

"Oh god."

"Fuck," Thomas says. "You want me to tell him to leave?"

I feel legitimately grateful to Thomas for this offer and for taking my feelings seriously instead of mocking me.

"Just wait here," I say. "I'll tell him myself."

I get out of the car and walk up to Bo, who doesn't even notice me until I am right beside him. He is pacing and seems disoriented. I remember that he was once Thomas's coke dealer.

When Bo finally notices me, he flips around and jumps. Yeah, he is definitely coked up. And probably drunk too. A lot of regulars at the Mirror Box are like this all the time. His face looks sunken and ashy under the harsh lights outside my building. There is a damp yellow stain on his shirt, probably a spilled beer. I suddenly can't fathom how I ever found him attractive, and not just because I found out he's my blood relative. He looks sick.

"I texted you," he says. He throws his cigarette on the ground and stomps it out.

"I saw," I say. "I haven't been able to look. I'm still feeling pretty freaked out about the whole thing."

He stares at me, tugs the bottom of his shirt, lights another cigarette.

“I’d appreciate it if you left,” I say. “You seem pretty fucked up.”

“Can we just talk for a second?” he asks.

I look at Thomas, who suddenly appears strong and protective in his Volvo, then back at Bo, who looks weak and pitiful.

“I’ll give you five minutes,” I say. I look at my iPhone. It is 6:45 P.M. “You have until six fifty.”

“You’re my sister?” he says.

“Yes,” I say. “I confirmed with my dad yesterday.”

“So, your dad is alive?” he says. My stomach sinks. Does he know something I don’t? I’m furious at my dad, but I don’t want him to be dead. Then I remember he’s been texting me all day and calm down.

“Yeah,” I say. “I went to his office, and I told him about the ChromoZone results. He said they were probably true.”

“My mom told me my dad was dead,” he says. “She’s a liar. I went to her shitty apartment and she was hungover and useless.”

I’m not sure why he’s dumping his mommy issues on me.

“My dad is alive.” I take out my phone and show him that he texted me one hour ago. I also note the time: 6:47 P.M.

“Wait,” Bo says. “You went to your dad’s office yesterday?”

“Yeah.”

“Doesn’t he live in New York?”

“No,” I say. “Riverside.”

“You’re from Riverside? I thought you were from the East Coast.”

“Huh?” I ask. “Why do you think that?” I am, of course, flattered—momentarily plucked from these deranged circumstances.

“I don’t know,” he says. “You just have a sort of New York City vibe. Like, I don’t know. You seem old money and like you’re rebelling against it or something.”

I smile, even though I know it’s a wildly inappropriate time to feel happy. Maybe all those hours of listening to *Precious Starlets* infused me with a sort of aristocratic je ne sais quoi.

“I wish,” I say. “You were born in Los Angeles, right?” I know this from his birth chart request.

“Nope, Riverside.” He takes a desperate puff of his cigarette. “Why did you think Los Angeles?”

“Because I read your birth chart,” I say. I don’t care if he knows I’m a

loser now. “I’m Exalted.”

“Oh, wow,” he says. “Is that why you started following me? Because of my birth chart? And all my lucky placements?”

I nod unabashedly.

Bo lets out a sort of demented laugh.

I guess he lied about his place of birth in his chart request, not that it would matter, because the cities are in the same time zone. I don’t blame him for saying Los Angeles instead of Riverside. I make the same lie all the time. Nobody wants to be from Riverside.

“Mount Rubidoux,” I say.

Bo covers his face with one hand. I also understand why he changed his name. “Bo Webster” doesn’t have much star power.

“My dad teaches at Riverside Community College,” I say. “Since before I was born.”

I note the time: 6:49 P.M.

“Time’s up,” I lie. I don’t feel attracted to Beau anymore because Beau does not exist. I feel sad for Bo Webster and also repulsed by him. I want to get away from him, just like he wanted to get away from his mom. He smells like stale beer and sweat and cigarettes.

“Okay,” he says. And then he stumbles off. Once he is halfway down Winona, toward Hollywood Boulevard, Thomas gets out of his car and walks over to me.

“You okay?” he asks, wrapping his arm around me.

I lean into his chest for a quick second, take a sniff of his detergent, then break away. “I’m fine,” I say. “Let’s watch a movie.”

Thomas refuses to watch anything by Roman Polanski because of his exhausting performative wokeness. He says I should be paying more attention to female directors and then says, “I love Claire Denis.” Then he tells me I need to watch a movie by this woman called Greta Gerwig. He puts on something called *Lady Bird* and it is insufferably twee, so I take out my phone after about thirty minutes. My DMs are filled to the fucking brim. One hits my eye, from JessLovesMatcha.

GIRL wtf I saw you on Stella Shadid’s Instagram!! I knew you were a STAR!!!!

This makes me overwhelmingly depressed. I rest my head on Thomas’s shoulder and eventually drift off.

The next morning, I have an email from my editor at *Vice*. He loves the article and has “hardly any edits”—magic words to *moi*. And he wants it to grace *the cover* of the winter edition of the magazine. I’ve never been published in print before. Astrology-related articles rarely end up in print. Astrology is more of a digital art, I think, then remember it’s one of the oldest belief systems on the planet.

I don’t really care about being in print. My life is still shit. And isn’t print dead?

Nor do I care about having nearly a million followers on Instagram thanks to Stella Shadid. A bunch of people recently tagged me in a RadarOnline post about how I’d been “doxed.” So dumb. I was never hiding! I just don’t believe in crafting an embarrassing online persona like everyone else my age. I see the internet as merely a tool to exploit. There is nothing to find if someone googles my name, other than that gynecologist in Tampa and star volleyball player in San Antonio.

I have a DM from Stella: *Sorry for exposing you bb. :(The press is a nightmare.*

I write back, *RadarOnline is hardly “the press.”*

Then: *Also there is really nothing to expose! Ur fine.*

She responds quickly with two (2) hearts and seven (7) sideways crying-laughing emojis. God, everyone is so dumb.

My other notifications stare at me—from Cinnamon, from my dad. The voice mail from my therapist. I try to envision telling my therapist that I’d accidentally fucked my brother because my dad had a secret affair when I was a baby. Any therapist would probably be thrilled to hear this information, a Freudian wet dream. It would puncture the typical monotony of baseless inferiority complexes and mundane romantic dramas and provide some “real work” to do.

My therapist always said my parents had “crushed my spirit.”

She had no idea!

I don’t call her back.

I don’t call my dad either.

Instead I call Cinnamon.

“Thank god,” she answers. “You’re alive.”

“I wish I wasn’t,” I say.

“Same,” she says. “I don’t know why I’m surprised. It’s been the same record on repeat with the professor. It’s like Nirvana or something, and we all know how it ends.”

I am happy she is talking about herself, her own issues, and alluding to suicide.

“Should we get a drink?” she asks.

“Do you wanna just come here?” I ask. I still have some weed left over from Thomas. “I’m too depressed to leave the house.”

“Perfect,” she says. “Text me the address.”

Like Thomas, Cinnamon laughs when I tell her what happened, which is frankly a relief because I was worried she would be disgusted and never talk to me again. She also says something unexpected.

“This is *exactly* what the professor is writing his book about,” she says.

I am packing my bong to the brim. “Incest?”

“Yes!”

I take a big hit and exhale toward Lydia, who dances in the smoke.

“It’s called the Westermarck effect,” Cinnamon says, “or reverse sexual imprinting.” She takes the bong. “It was invented by this Finnish anthropologist—Westermarck. He argued incest is taboo because when people live in close domestic proximity during the first few years of their lives, they become desensitized to sexual attraction.”

Cinnamon lights the bong. I watch it fill with smoke as she sucks. She removes the carb and, *whoosh*, the smoke disappears into her lungs. I imagine the smoke tickling her chest.

“I never lived in close domestic proximity to Bo,” I say.

“Right,” she says. “Westermarck argued that when this ‘critical period’ does not occur—say, where brother and sister are brought up separately—they may find each other highly sexually attractive when they meet as adults due to genetic sexual attraction.”

I don’t say anything (there is nothing to say), but I am comforted hearing about my personal tragedy in such dry, academic terms. Sleeping with your sibling you don’t know is your sibling is, as it turns out, a real phenomenon with a real title coined by a Finnish anthropologist.

“Dang,” Cinnamon says. “I never thought I would have use for this knowledge.”

We both laugh.

Then I let Cinnamon monologue about the professor. While she talks, I wonder why the professor is writing a book about incest. Maybe he made the same mistake I did. It’s probably way more common than I think. Considering this makes me feel better. But mostly I feel relieved that Cinnamon didn’t judge me for my dark secret.

After we’ve exhausted the professor drama, I project *Girl, Interrupted* onto my ceiling. Cinnamon puts her head on my chest. She starts calling me Susanna, and I start calling her Lisa. After the movie, we chat at the plastic stars on my ceiling, then fall asleep giggling to *Kid A*.

DAWN.

I am drinking Cook's in Steph and Beth's backyard when Bo texts me for the first time since he confronted me at my apartment. Steph and Beth reconciled. Lesbians are always breaking up and getting back together in the most dramatic ways. I don't ask too many questions, but I hope they at least consummated the reconciliation. I still don't love Beth, but Steph is happy, and that's all that matters. Also, it is nice to have access to Beth's backyard, because we are experiencing a heatwave and I desperately need some color. Beth is out of town at some conference.

I met my dad is all the text says.

"You okay, Dawn?" Steph asks.

I guess she still thinks my finding Paul's driver's license was a dream because we haven't discussed it since. I don't bring it up.

I remember that Steph and Beth's is roughly a block away from Paul's. Is Bo there right now? Is my son just a block away?

"I'm good," I lie. I think about all the secrets I have from Steph right now. Exalted said it's my Scorpio moon. That damn moon seems to be the source of a lot of my problems. I wish I had a Leo moon. I wish my chart was all Leo, the best sign. Pierre jumps up on my lap. "Bo just texted me."

"Aw," Steph says. "How is my little angel?" Steph has always adored Bo, especially since she doesn't have any kids of her own. And Bo likes Steph too, perhaps because I'm not super close to my family, so Steph is like his aunt. He calls her Aunt Steph. At least he used to.

"He's good," I say. "He got a new job." That isn't a lie. Bo told me he got a job waiting tables and that information crushed me. My biggest nightmare was always that Bo would become a waiter like me.

"Good for him." Steph looks at her phone and starts giggling.

"What's up?" I ask.

"Exalted did 'Leo Bingo.'"

"Oh my god," I say. "What's on there?"

“Great hair,” says Steph.

“Obviously. What else?”

“Outdoor voices,” she says.

I laugh.

“Drama.’ ‘Gold jewelry.’ ‘Pride.’ ‘Gossip.’”

“Yep, yep, yep, *and* yep,” I say.

“Attention.’ ‘Bossiness.’ ‘Bragging.’ ‘Loyalty.’”

“That’s us,” I say. “What else?”

“Practices sexual reactions in mirror while humping bed.”

We both laugh.

When it gets dark and chilly, Steph and I go inside. We are both pretty tipsy at this point. I plop on the couch in the TV room, and Steph disappears. She returns with a bottle of tequila, two shot glasses, and a bag of white powder.

“Look what I found,” she says.

“When Beth’s away the mice will play.” I pour myself a shot.

“Are we too old for cocaine?” Steph asks as she pours the contents of the bag on top of a coffee-table book on French bulldogs.

“Hell no,” I say. But I’m not sure if it’s true. We’re almost fifty. Steph and I had a serious coke phase in our early twenties, when Bo was just a boy. Bo seemed to love me when I was high, giggling hysterically at everything I said. Tara didn’t like me doing it, so I stopped for a while. I feel too old to buy it at this point, but I am excited that Steph has some. “It’s not like we do it all the time. It’s a special occasion.”

“What’s the occasion?” Steph asks.

“Hmm.” Lots of things come to mind. The heatwave. Bo meeting his dad, although I’m not sure if that’s a good thing. I still haven’t responded to the text.

“You and Beth are back together,” I say finally.

Steph smiles.

“And she’s out of town.” I wink.

Steph laughs. “Amen.”

We clink shot glasses.

Soon Steph and I are curled up on the couch together, blasting Fleetwood

Mac and chatting about everything under the sun. I know I'll feel like shit in the morning, but right now I feel happy.

My phone dings with a text, plucking me from my bliss. It's Bo again. *No response? What kind of mom doesn't respond to that?*

Bo isn't typically confrontational. He is normally sweet, a good boy. He's been distant in the past few years, but never aggressive.

"What's up with my baby angel?" Steph asks. "We should FaceTime him. He's probably on the devil's sugar too." She giggles.

"I don't want to bother him," I say.

"What's going on, Dawn?"

"Nothing. Let's do another line."

Pierre runs over to the lines, and I pull him on my lap. "Could you imagine what Beth would say if we got Pierre high on cocaine?"

"What's going on, Dawn?" Steph repeats.

I snort the line. "Remember when you had that dream about me finding Bo's father's driver's license and him being your neighbor?"

"Yeah," Steph says. "That was crazy."

"It wasn't a dream, Steph," I say. "I really found his driver's license. And he really is your neighbor. And since then, Bo found out about him. And he just texted me that they met."

"Oh my god," Steph says. "This is a lot."

Telling her was a mistake. My instinct was correct. Steph is too much like me. She is a party girl. She doesn't know how to handle serious things.

"How did Bo find out?"

"ChromoZone," I say. I've thrown a lot of information at Steph. I'm not about to tell her that Bo accidentally slept with his sister. I am the worst mom in the entire world.

I do another line.

"Oh god, Dawn," she says. She starts petting my hair, which is the only way either of us knows how to show emotional support. "What did you say when he told you?"

"Nothing," I say, feeling horrible. "Nothing yet." I start crying.

"Aw, Dawn." Steph wraps me in her arms. "I can't imagine how hard this is for you. But don't beat yourself up. You've been a great mom to Bo."

"No, I haven't," I cry. "I've been horrible." I've never said this out loud before or even to myself. "He texted me that he met his dad, and I didn't even

respond. I just got high on cocaine.”

“It’s okay, Dawn,” Steph says. “This is all a lot to handle.”

“I’ve lied to him his entire life.” I am still crying.

“It’s okay, Dawnie,” she says. “You’ve done the best you could.”

“I’m a piece of shit,” I say.

And then I snort another line.

EMILY.

My agent calls me on the drive to Riverside for my dad's birthday party. Thomas is driving. And Bo is in the back seat.

I have an agent now.

My *Vice* article came out just a month ago, at the end of Aquarius season, not that that matters. Before the article came out, I went to a hypnotist so that I'd stop thinking and talking about astrology. It didn't work at all, which was good because suddenly I had all these literary agents calling me and saying they wanted me to write a book about astrology.

I signed with someone from ICM, the agency I'd always wanted to represent me for acting. Maybe my literary agent can put in a good word for me in the acting department. I don't know how it all works. I have no acting reel, no experience. My agent told me she thought she could sell the book for upper six figures based on my Instagram following. That was enough for me. All I had to do was write a twenty-five-page proposal, and I did that pretty quickly, thanks to my lilith in Virgo, or maybe it was just desperation.

I wrote it at Subtropical.

The first time I saw Bo there, we ignored each other. The second time too. But the third time, he came up to my table and asked me how I was doing. I told him the truth, that I wrote a cynical article about astrology that had gone viral and that I had an agent now and was writing a book proposal. I asked how he was doing, and he said he had a few exciting shoots coming up.

By the fifth time, there was a familiar ease between us. I didn't care about impressing him, and I no longer saw him as sparkly or attractive. He was just a guy. A guy whose DNA I happened to share. But it seems our moms are very different. He described his mom as a "trashy party girl" and a "liar." I told him my mom was a "conscientious teacher with a slavish reverence for the truth."

I am talking to my dad again, but I didn't tell Bo at first.

I finally caved when my dad called immediately after I'd hit the bong. The

cannabis made me soft and forgetful, and I answered without thinking. My dad was so apologetic, and I realized I wasn't really mad at him. None of this was his fault. It was my fault, for idolizing and stalking someone based on his birth chart.

Thomas and I visited my parents for Christmas. It was hard to see my mom, but she was on her best behavior. We didn't talk about Nico Nadler or Elon Musk, and when my mom was cleaning up, I fessed up to my dad about my lies. I felt okay telling him because he was a liar too, and his lies hurt me far more than mine hurt him. He said he understood and that he had a feeling about Nico Nadler based on a run-in he'd had with my ex-friend Zoe at HomeGoods. Also, he said I'd said something factually incorrect about SpaceX, but I zoned out when he told me what it was.

When I was almost done with my book proposal, Bo told me he'd met our dad. It was so weird the way he said it. "Our dad." I had a brother. I wasn't an only child. I tried to imagine what that trip to Big Bear would have been like with an equally pale, inside-type brother to watch movies with me.

I was mostly silent while Bo spoke. I tried to be a good listener, but my brain was also pulling me elsewhere. I wasn't ready to listen to him talk about bonding with my dad—my only family member who doesn't repulse me.

But the day before my dad's birthday, I watched Bo spill a soup all over himself and the floor. I felt unbearably sad for him. I helped him clean it up and then asked if he wanted to come to my dad's birthday dinner.

And now we are in the car, on CA Route 60, and my agent is telling me Simon & Schuster is offering a \$400,000 advance for my book. I feel weird. I need money, but I still want to be an actress. What type of person goes from writer to actress? It is normally the other way around.

"They love the part about you fucking your brother," my agent says.

I didn't put that part in my book proposal, but my agent did gently coerce me into revealing the fact to her, after asking a bunch of leading questions about the "worst-case scenario" I alluded to in my article.

I feel queasy.

But obviously I will say yes. My agent will send me the contract, and I will pretend to read it, but I won't. I will just sign.

When I hang up the phone, we are passing the outline of Mount Rubidoux.

"What was that about?" Thomas asks.

“I have a book deal,” I say quietly into my lap.

DAWN.

On my walk to work, the sun is bright as hell and beads of sweat pour from my armpits. I keep wiping the sweat with a tissue in my purse to avoid staining my baby-blue tank top.

Bo has been spending lots of time with Paul, constantly driving to Riverside or somewhere near here to meet him. He's seen me just once. We got drinks at the Purple Parrot after one of my shifts. He had just been hanging out with Paul on campus. He seemed disconnected and aloof, bored of me, like he's been since he moved to Hollyweird. But he lit up when he talked about Paul. He told me Paul gave him all these books I'd never heard of, and he loved reading them and discussing ideas with his dad. It made me sick. I wanted to confront Paul and tell him to stay the fuck away from my son, my only real family member, the boy I single-handedly raised without any of his help.

Bo told me he would be going to Paul's birthday dinner at his house. Of course Paul is a Pisces. Weak and spineless. An adult baby. After drinks, I went home and looked at Exalted posts about Pisces. I found one that said "Pisces Starter Pack." It had a bunch of crying emojis, a photo of an ugly fish, a GIF that said "Cry Baby," the dictionary definition of "delusional," a broken heart emoji, a weed leaf, a septum piercing, tie-dye condoms, a crystal ball emoji, and the Google search "How long until yogurt is poisonous?" Gross.

The post made me feel better. Paul is a whiny loser. Bo is having his honeymoon phase with his estranged father, but soon enough he'll come running back to his mom, just like he always does.

"You're late, Dawn," Roberto says when I enter the Blind Pig.

I look at the clock on the wall. My shift starts at noon, and it is just 12:03. I want to argue, but I know it isn't worth it. The old Dawn would have argued, but today the stakes are too high.

I traded shifts with the new waitress named Destiny to get off early. I had

to suck up to her, which was humiliating because I hate her. She has a bad attitude and makes more tips than me. And her skin is absolutely flawless, despite her smoking cigarettes like me and always eating French fries off other people's plates.

My shift goes quickly. There are fewer tips during the day, but it's low stress. But I feel stressed nonetheless, and I feel it in my stomach. I keep going to the bathroom, and Roberto rudely asks if I am taking ex-lax to lose weight.

"No, I just have a big night," I say. Then I wonder if maybe I *should* lose weight. Destiny is definitely thinner than me, and she gets better tips.

"Big date?" Roberto asks.

"Something like that," I say.

EMILY.

The birthday dinner is at my parents' sterile suburban home, predictably located at the end of a cul-de-sac. My dad's affair, apparently, was not a secret to my mom. Neither of them knew the affair had bred offspring, but my mom seems oddly okay with having Bo come to the house. In fact, she greets him more warmly than she greets me. And she greets Thomas more warmly than she greets both of us.

Bo hands my dad a book called *Ask the Dust* and says, "Thanks for lending it to me."

"Gotta love Fante," Thomas says, like the little cuck he is, and my dad seems thrilled.

"Bo told me there is a club called Ask the Dust in Silver Lake," my dad says. "I wanted to check it out, but he told me I probably wouldn't like it."

I feel ill, watching my dad bond with these idiot boys, one of whom, I suppose, is technically "his son." But I assume Fante's ghost feels worse, having had his book co-opted by a bar where trashy suburbanites and overeager cucks do bad blow to Migos.

"I couldn't in good faith recommend it," Thomas says, "but I've had a few good nights there."

I roll my eyes, and Bo laughs.

My parents usher us into the living room, which is beige and open plan. I haven't been here since Christmas, the day I told my dad the truth, when he reacted in a kind and understanding way, a typical Pisces.

I make a mental note to ask for my money back from my hypnotist.

My dad pours us glasses of wine, and my mom brings out a plate of cheese and nuts. The wine is lukewarm and tastes sour. The food is likely from Costco, shiny and overprocessed. And Bo has assumed a Thomas-esque eagerness, complimenting the shitty wine and the plasticky cheese. It is hard to watch. I go into the bathroom and splash some water onto my face, sit on the toilet, and hit my vape pen.

When I return, I feel a little better, although mildly paranoid. It is weird to me that everyone is acting so normal. Thomas comes over and squeezes my hand. He has been a good support to me over the past few months, but I worry it comes with strings. He's fresh off the rejection from Clover and is probably transferring those feelings onto me. I've been reading a lot of Freud since my big incest snafu.

After Christmas, I told my dad that Thomas is not my boyfriend and he is not a consultant, and my dad said I am too good for him, which delighted me.

"Em, how is the astrology business?" my dad asks, grabbing a cube of cheese. He doesn't ask this with any degree of condescension, although my mom purses her lips tightly.

"It's fine," I say. "Pays the bills." I think about telling my parents about my book deal, but they have no reason to believe me. And when my dad hardly even reacted to my admission of my previous lies, I realized he probably never believed me to begin with. My accomplishments, or lack thereof, don't seem to matter to him. I realize, from reading Freud, that perhaps I'd projected my disappointment with myself onto him.

Also, now that he's ruined my life with his cheating and lies, he is indebted to me. He is beyond guilty, and I enjoy the power over him this gives me. He gave me a MacBook for Christmas (for my readings) and a gift certificate for acting lessons, which I've been too afraid to use.

"It's more than fine—" Thomas says.

I interrupt him, eager to take the attention off myself. "How is teaching?" I ask my dad.

"Also pays the bills," he says with a smile.

We eat Chinese food for dinner, and Thomas and my dad do most of the talking, and when I hear the word "Dodgers" I zone out and focus on my orange chicken. A few times I look up and my mom is glaring at me, but I'm starting to think that might just be her face.

When there is a break in conversation, Bo says that he is enjoying *Pale Fire*, a book I read in high school.

My dad says, "I'm glad," and my mom says, "Nabokov is demented," and for the very first time I understand why he married her.

Thomas steps in to ease the tension. "This orange chicken is bomb."

Soon I am pretending to eat my mom's terrible chocolate cake and feeling depressed, when there is a knock on the door.

“Are we expecting someone?” my mom asks my dad.

“No,” my dad says with confusion.

The knocking gets louder, like banging. The doorbell rings too. Then ringing and knocking at the same time.

I feel excited. I am so bored. My dad starts to get up.

“I’ll get it,” I say.

I walk across the gross plush carpet to the front door, while the knocking continues, escalating in volume. It reminds me of Marta. I remind myself that I am all caught up on rent, with plenty to spare, and she is definitely too lazy to come to Riverside to find me.

I open the door and am confronted with an overwhelming scent: sunscreen and coconut and cigarettes and champagne. It smells kind of nice. Not “pleasant,” exactly, but more interesting than the sterile smell of my parents’ home. I also see big blond hair.

“Who are you?” the woman says. She seems drunk and looks like someone on *Baywatch* or something. I don’t typically feel sexually attracted to women, but this woman does something to me. She is sexy in a way women aren’t anymore, especially not in LA. She has a body. Her skin shimmers. She smells like Coppertone. I am positive she is a Leo.

I assume she has the wrong house.

“Who are *you*?” I ask.

She walks through the door, right past me. “Where is Paul?”

Wow. She does have the right house. Is this my dad’s latest side piece? If so, I am impressed.

She is already on her way to the dining room, and I just follow her.

“Paul,” she spits at my dad. I stand in the doorway, ready to watch the show.

“Mom,” Bo says. “What are you doing here?” He gets up.

I let out a small gasp, and Thomas glares at me. I enjoy watching my parents squirm.

“Sit down, Bo,” she says. Her words slur a bit. She is definitely drunk, and I can’t take my eyes off her. “I’m here to speak to Paul.”

My dad stands up. “Why don’t we—”

“Why don’t you join us for dessert?” I interrupt. Thomas glares at me again. “What’s your name?”

“Dawn,” she says, looking into my eyes for the first time. “Oh, wow,” she

says. "Your eyes."

I blush a little.

"You aren't Paul's daughter, are you?"

I nod.

"No way," she says. "You're so beautiful."

I feel my face turning red. This doesn't typically happen to me.

"Thanks," I say. "So are you."

For a second the other bodies in the room fade and I forget we are in my parents' house.

"Join us for dessert," I say again.

"I'm not sure there's enough," my mom says.

"There is plenty," I say. "I saw there is more than half of the cake left in the kitchen." I noticed this when I took my vape break.

"I don't think that's a good idea, Em," my dad says. His face is blushing and so is Bo's. They are both pussies. I want to get margaritas with my cousin Rachel and scream about how men suck.

"Dawn," my dad says. "Why don't we go outside?"

He gets up and takes her arm and guides her back toward the door.

"I'm going to the bathroom," I lie, and go through the kitchen, then stand in the foyer to spy.

DAWN.

Paul's hand on my arm is soft and clammy. He has a weak grip, like a little boy's. At least now I know where Bo got it from. I hate that Paul seems to think his lame house is too good for me. I want to stay and eat dessert with the family, with his beautiful daughter. I just barely glimpsed his wife, but I can tell she is bland. I can't believe two bland people gave birth to someone so stunning. She looks like Winona Ryder, but with blue eyes.

"What's going on?" Paul asks.

"What's going on?" I say back in a mocking tone. I am pissed. I pull a cigarette from my bag. "What's going on is that you stole my son." I light my cigarette. "My son that I *raised*, single-handedly, without your help."

"Do you mind not smoking?" Paul asks.

"We're outside," I say.

"On my property."

"Why are you being such a dick?" I asked. "I am the one who should be angry right now. Not you." This is always happening to me.

"Let's go on the sidewalk," he says, ushering me across the lawn.

"Get your clammy hands off me." I pull my arm away but walk to the sidewalk nonetheless. I don't want to be "crazy Dawn." My plan was to be calm and collected. But I was so nervous I stole a bottle of Jose Cuervo for the bus ride, and, well, here we are. When I reach the sidewalk, I inhale and look back toward the house. I see Paul's beautiful daughter peeking out the door. When she sees me, she ducks behind the door. I want to know more about her.

"I understand why you're upset," Paul says. He has kind eyes, although not as magical as his daughter's.

"Thank you," I say.

"It's a weird situation," he says. "I probably should have contacted you before seeing Bo, but I didn't have your contact information."

I am glad he is acknowledging this.

“I probably didn’t handle it the best way,” he says.

I say nothing, just drag and look back toward the house. I can’t see Paul’s daughter, but I see her hair—jet black and shiny, sort of like Bo’s. I realize for the first time that she is Bo’s sister. As a kid, Bo used to beg me for a sibling, and frankly I would have loved to give him one, but I didn’t have the money. And it turns out he had a sister all along, and— thanks to my lies—he accidentally slept with her. I’ve really been the worst mom.

“I just want you to know that I have absolutely no desire to replace you in any way,” Paul says. “I’m so sorry for how I handled this. We could get coffee soon and talk.”

Why is he so obsessed with getting coffee?

“Bo, of course, adores you,” he says.

“Did he say that?” I ask.

He nods.

“Why did you leave me that night?” I need to know, even though it seems obvious. He’s this smart, distinguished man living a normal life, and I’m a waitress who once set my ex’s property on fire. “The night Bo was conceived.”

“I was terrified,” he says. “But that’s no excuse.” He pauses, looking like he might cry. “It was the worst thing I’ve ever done in my entire life, and I’m so, so sorry.”

EMILY.

On the way home, the boys and I stop at Mount Rubidoux to smoke a blunt.

Unfortunately, Dawn left before I got to talk to her again. We excused ourselves shortly after my dad came back inside. It would have been bizarre to stay. I imagine my parents are having some sort of talk, although I don't want to think about that.

"Your mom is so cool," I say to Bo on the drive.

"Are you kidding?" he asks.

"Not at all," I say. "She has a vibe."

"For sure," says Thomas, and I feel oddly possessive. I want to be the only one who noticed Dawn's captivating, sui generis energy. Thomas is always deferring to me on how to think and feel, and it's annoying as hell.

"She's a fan of yours," Bo says. "On Exalted."

"Cool," I say, trying to make my voice measured and nonchalant, and also trying to suppress a smile. I know I have a lot of followers, but I never imagined them looking like Dawn.

Thomas parks at the top of Mount Rubidoux and we get out of the car. The cross is all lit up, and there are several clusters of teens laughing and smoking and drinking tall cans of alcohol. I feel a weird swirling in my abdomen—nostalgia and warmth and also fear and sadness.

I sit on a big tree stump in front of the car.

Thomas sits in between Bo and me, then puts his arms around us. "How fun," he says. "A Riverside evening with my favorite Freudian siblings."

Bo and I are silent.

"How fun," I say to Thomas. "An evening with my favorite mooch."

"Mooch?" he says. "I pay for all your weed and all your clothes and a lot of your food."

"Your parents pay for my weed and my food and your heaux pay for my clothes," I say, which shuts him up.

We all pass the blunt back and forth in silence for a few minutes.

“Should we head back?” Thomas asks eventually.

“Yeah,” says Bo. “I have to work early tomorrow.”

We all stand up and begin walking toward Thomas’s Volvo.

“Oh, Emily,” Bo says quietly once we are inside the car.

“Yeah?”

Thomas starts the car.

“My friend Talia is a pretty talented director. She had a short at Cannes last year.” A soccer ball bounces off the car. I don’t know why Bo is telling me this. “She’s casting for her first feature this week. She liked your photos. Would you want to audition?”

I watch the cross become smaller as we drive away from it.

“Sure,” I say.

That night in bed I project *Reality Bites* onto my ceiling. It isn’t my favorite Winona movie, but I’m in the mood for something nostalgic. I feel weird about the dinner. I mean, how could I not feel weird? I have a new brother and I accidentally fucked him, and now he is best friends with my dad. And his mom showed up at my dad’s birthday dinner and tried to make a scene, and I was oddly turned on. I am related to Bo, but I am not related to his mom. This feels important.

When I grow bored of the movie, I pull out my phone. I have a text from Thomas I don’t open. He is so thirsty and probably read too much into being invited to my dad’s birthday dinner.

I open Instagram. I have a bunch of unread DMs, which I don’t care about. I just want to see if Dawn has ever DMed me. Bo said she was a fan, and fans DM me all the time. I can’t stop thinking about her; I’m not sure why exactly. Something about her energy. And her *smell*.

I scroll a bit without much luck. Just when I am about to give up, I see a DM from an account called BreakofDawn. I vaguely recall reading her chart a few months ago. It had some unfortunate placements—a bunch of planets in detriment and in fall, lots of oppositions. I click her profile. Luckily it is public. I recognize her instantly from the bright blond hair. Her bio is just three emojis: a sunflower, a wave, a shooting star. Her grid is mostly photos of herself in bathing suits on beaches or at swimming pools, and I’m thrilled to see a few photos of her in a baby-blue Juicy tracksuit. I immediately smell

sunscreen and my heart rate quickens.

Hi, I write.

Omg hi! she writes back immediately. I'm such a huge fan of your account! It's my lucky night!! What's up?

I'm Paul's daughter, I say. We met tonight.

She writes back, !!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! !!!!!

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to Sarah Phair, my iconic Virgo agent, and to Olivia Taylor Smith, the Cancer editor of my dreams. Thanks to Jaya Nicely for the showstopping Leo cover and Unnamed Press, my visionary Aquarius publisher. Thanks to Liz Constantinou, exalted Aries, for helping create Dawn the sea witch. Thanks to my writing group, Shitty First Drafts—Catie (Cancer), KK (Aries), Ana (Scorpio), Maggie (Leo), Jon (Capricorn), and Robin (Virgo)—for reading the first few chapters and giving me the inspiration to finish. Thanks to Crissy Milazzo (Scorpio) for reading an early draft by accident and gassing me up (Sagittarius stellium). Thanks to Molly Coyne (Scorpio) for “ChromoZone.” Thanks to my tasteful Libra mom for whispering her support and Leo sister for shouting it, to my Capricorn brother for never reading my writing, and to my Pisces dad who is always fishing. And thanks to my genius Aquarian girlfriend, Vanessa.

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–JEAN KYOUNG
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\$27.00 | Fiction

Cover design by Jaya Nicely
Distributed by Publishers Group West
An Unnamed Press Book