August

1

Don't look down, I told myself. *If you look down, you're friggin' screwed*.

There I was, hanging from a second-floor window of St Ambrose Hall in a denim miniskirt and my motorcycle boots. As my bare legs dangled, my sore biceps suddenly reminded me that I had *not* in fact done ten pull-ups during the school physical-fitness test last year. I had lied. In reality, I had done three, twerked a little in mid-air, then bribed Amy Horner with my Shameless Hussy red lipgloss to write down ten. *Crap*.

'Alex!' Colin Nowakowski stuck his head out of the window. He was fumbling to button his shirt over the silver cross on his chest. 'I don't know if you climbing down is such a good idea!'

Last year, I thought Colin Nowakowski was kind of a little turd. But tonight, when we reached for the same hot dog at the back-to-school barbecue, I saw that a summer growth spurt, plus a cool shorter-on-the-sides haircut, had transformed him from turd to quasi-hot hipster. So I'd put my number in his phone, suggesting we hook up later.

Now, seeing him all anxious and twitchy like a meerkat with irritable bowel syndrome, I regretted it. Here's a pro tip: if you ever sneak into a guy's dorm room to hook up and he's got a Michael Bublé station on his Spotify, just turn and run.

'Psh, it's fine!' I said cheerfully. 'I've snuck out of every boys' dorm on this campus! Once P. J. Keller lowered me from the fourth floor on a bedsheet. This is no sweat!'

In reality, I wasn't as chill as I sounded – either literally or figuratively. *No sweat* had been real bullshit because I was sweating heavily in the hot August night. Those friggin' Minnesota mosquitoes were all over my bare legs, I couldn't get my boots to grip on the dangerously smooth stone wall and my hold on the windowsill was slipping.

Suddenly there was a growl below me.

'Was that a *dog*?' I hissed. 'Is there a *dog* down there?'

Before I could stop myself, I looked down. *Crap*. The distance to the prickle bushes made me dizzy and, much worse, there was a giant yellow-white beast whose demon eyes gleamed in the dark. Razor-sharp teeth flashed in its black, cavernous mouth with each bloodthirsty bark.

'Charlie,' Colin told me. 'Father Callahan's dog. He lives in our dorm. He's a Labradoodle.'

'Charlie the Labradoodle?' I squinted at the monster down below, which now looked to be foaming at the mouth. 'That's not Charlie the Labradoodle! I follow Charlie the Labradoodle on Instagram! Charlie the Labradoodle is adorable! He wears fedoras with ear holes! THAT down

there is some genetically modified wolf from a horror movie! Do you hear how he's barking at me?'

'I don't think he likes girls,' Colin babbled anxiously. 'I mean, he lives in a dorm full of guys, where girls aren't even allowed, so I think he's kind of –'

'A MISOGYNIST?' I burst out. 'Your dorm priest has a MISOGYNIST Labradoodle? What, Father Callahan isn't scary enough, with the Rasputin beard and the thunder voice?'

Right on cue, like the approaching rumble of a summer storm, we heard that very thunder voice boom out. Father Callahan, Colin Nowakowski's dorm priest, was coming around the back of the building, calling out in the dark, 'What is it, Charlie boy? What's going on back there?'

'Oh FUDGE!' Colin Nowakowski gasped. 'Father Callahan! Father Callahan's coming!' His face was so pale and sweaty I thought he might barf on me, but I also thought *I* might barf at the fact that I had let a guy who says *Fudge* touch my ass. We were all screwed.

'Quick, help me back up!' I scrabbled against the stone wall with my motorcycle boots, groping with desperate fingers for a better handhold.

'I'm sorry, Alex!' His voice was squeaky with panic. 'I can't!'

'You can't what?'

'I can't get caught with a girl in my room! I can't get in trouble! I'm applying early to Georgetown for engineering!'

'Engineering?' I spluttered furiously. 'You couldn't even unhook my bra! Now HELP. ME. UP!'

Father Callahan's footsteps were approaching, snapping twigs in the bushes below. Charlie's barking was rising to a vicious fever pitch, and I was grunting and pulling myself up, reaching out for Colin. I was so close – my hand outstretched –

Suddenly Colin blurted, 'I'm sorry!' and slammed the window down.

Then I really was screwed.

2

The best view at St Mary's Catholic School is from the top floor of the main building, right under the famous golden statue of the Virgin Mary. From there, you can see the whole campus, which is laid out like a cross, with Academic Quad to the north, the well-swept green Girls' Quad of six stone dorms to the east, the identical Boys' Quad to the west, and straight ahead an avenue of pine trees leading down to the shining lake.

Unfortunately, the view inside isn't quite so hot – because it's the principal's office.

It's a place I know all too well. I know the squeaky green leather chairs that stick to the back of your thighs. I know the framed mosaics of saints being martyred in gruesome and bloody ways. I know the smell of old bibles and disapproval. And I definitely know that look on Father Hughes's face; that grim, set-jaw look that makes the old guy from *Up* look like a flirty fireman in a shirtless calendar.

'Well, Ms Heck,' he began, 'here we are, only your second day back on campus, and already I find you in my office.'

‘Good to be back!’ I said cheerfully. ‘I see you put up a new mosaic – *St Agatha on a Bed of Hot Coals*. It really livens the place up.’

Clearing his throat, Father Hughes reached for a square sheet of yellow paper that was also very familiar to me: a St Mary’s Incident Report.

‘Last night,’ the principal pronounced, in his imminent-plague-of-locusts voice, ‘you, Alexandra Heck, were found face down in the shrubbery behind St Ambrose Hall. You were uninjured apart from mild scratches and bruises . . .’

Pretty accurate, I thought – and it was nice of Father Hughes not to mention the fact that I’d been found with my miniskirt around my waist, my ‘Bow Down Bitches’ boyshorts in full view and Charlie the Labradoodle’s tongue in my ear.

‘. . . and were obviously not in your own dorm at the time of curfew.’

Father Hughes picked up a mahogany stamp from an inkpad. The all-powerful seal of St Mary’s. Time to get serious. He held it poised over the incident report and asked, ‘Do you dispute the accuracy of this interpretation?’

‘No, I do not,’ I said primly. I could get serious, too. ‘I missed curfew. I don’t dispute that.’

Father Hughes lowered the stamp towards the yellow sheet. But, just as the ink was about to make contact with the paper, I continued, ‘But I *do* wonder why Colin Nowakowski isn’t also here right now.’ I gestured to the empty green leather chair next to mine.

‘Mr Nowakowski was in his dorm at curfew.’

‘With a girl!’ I protested. ‘Guys and girls are never allowed in each other’s rooms! Isn’t that in, like, the “hair shirt and chastity belt” section of the school rulebook?’

Okay, I didn’t know exactly what I was talking about, seeing as the day they gave me the St Mary’s rulebook, I tore the pages out and made 200 origami ninja stars. But I could tell there was a double standard here.

Father Hughes spoke in a calm, measured voice, still holding the stamp above the report. ‘Mr Nowakowski did not have a female student in his room at the time of the incident.’

‘Because I was climbing OUT of his room!’

‘He claims to have no knowledge of you being at St Ambrose Hall that evening. According to Mr Nowakowski, he was studying alone.’

Colin Nowakowski, you little shit-faced liar! I couldn’t believe I let his growth spurt trick me. He was still a turd, just now he was a turd with a hipster haircut. And Father Hughes was a turd in a priest collar.

‘You know what this is?’ I jumped out of my seat. ‘This is total friggin’ sexist treatment. You Catholics! You’re still holding a grudge against Eve and that apple! I mean, what was she supposed to do? Girlfriend was in a nudist garden on a blind date with a dude missing a rib – it wasn’t like there were FOOD TRUCKS around!’

Grave, serious and self-controlled as ever, Father Hughes said, ‘We are not discussing the Book of Genesis right now, Ms Heck. We are discussing your continual and deliberate disciplinary infractions.’

And, with that, he lowered the mighty mahogany stamp. It pounded the incident report with gravitas. I was officially in trouble again.

Father Hughes searched through the folders on his desk and found my file. I had so many of those bright yellow sheets, I could have wallpapered Big Bird's S&M chamber with them. My very first related to a practical joke gone awry involving the dorm chapel, a can of whipped cream and a prefect's life-sized cut-out of Harry Styles. From there, I had continued to rack up Dress Code Violations, Personal Appearance Violations, Student Safety Violations – you name it.

'Ms Heck,' Father Hughes said, 'we are starting a new academic year – your junior year, an exceptionally important one for your future here at St Mary's and beyond. It is clear from your conduct that my efforts to integrate you as a respectful and productive member of this community have failed. Therefore I felt I had no choice but to call in more . . . impactful . . . reinforcements.'

Exorcism! That was my first thought. Some wild-eyed priest with a tangled beard and six-inch fingernails had been dragged from the wilds of Patagonia to come chain me to the golden Mary statue and chant in tongues until the devil of disobedience was chased screeching from my body.

I was actually pretty excited.

But, when Father Hughes buzzed his assistant to let someone in, the door opened and in walked a cheerful, middle-aged man with a golfer's tan, thinning grey hair and a flashy watch. I groaned and slumped down in my seat.

This wasn't an exorcism – this was worse.

It was my dad.

Nothing explains my feminist rage more than the fact that my very earliest origins were in these privileged white balls. Of course, my molecular rebel self shot out of there like a bat out of Polo Ralph Lauren hell, but still . . .

'Hey there!' my dad boomed, bounding towards Father Hughes for a vigorous handshake. 'Hughie, my man! Good to see you! Look at you in the big office up here – it blows my mind!' Still holding Father Hughes's hand hostage, he turned to me. 'Hey, Al, do you know your principal and I were both Class of Eighty-Nine? Not only that, we're both St Francis Hall men! Fourth floor, right, Hughie?'

'That's right.' Father Hughes smiled briefly. 'You must remember climbing all those stairs to copy my theology homework.'

'There's my excuse,' I piped up. 'Corruption runs in my blood.'

But my dad didn't hear that; he was going on and on about the good old days at St Mary's, and dumb dorm pranks, and some cranky priest who used to make them swim naked in gym class (I'll need at least a minor hallucinogenic to get *that* disturbing image out of my head). Other than squeezing my shoulder and kissing my head carelessly before sitting down, my dad basically ignored me, but he did turn to me to say, 'Would you believe that back when we were students St Mary's was still an all-boys' school?'

'Wow,' I said drily. 'It must have been crazy patriarchal back then.'

Father Hughes was not in the mood to bro out with my dad. He cleared his throat and tried to set a more serious tone, even calling my dad 'Mr Heck' instead of Wingnut, or Captain Blueballs, or whatever his dorm nickname was back in the day.

'Mr Heck,' he said, 'it is clear your daughter is a strong-willed young woman . . .'

Pagan she-demon.

'And an individual thinker . . .'

Spawn of Satan.

'But, as I explained over the phone, it has become clear that my disciplinary actions are no longer effective in your daughter's case. A serious decision must be made.'

'Righto,' said my dad. 'Definitely. Absolutely. Hey, Hughie, is the hockey stadium open? I'd love to see my MVP trophy from Eighty-Nine – do you remember that championship, man?'

From the look in Father Hughes's eyes, I could tell I wasn't the only Heck in the room that he considered a pain in the ass.

The principal asked to speak to my dad alone, so I sat out in the hallway, slumped against the wall, staring at the shut door.

At first, I was pissed. I mean, what the hell? Father Hughes thought his priest-splaining wasn't domineering enough, so he had to fly in my dad to dad-splain, too?

Whatever happened to the good old boarding-school phone chain, where your principal calls your parents and then your parents call you for a really unpleasant Skype that lasts forty-five minutes until you pretend the Wi-Fi dropped out in your dorm? That's how discipline typically goes for boarding-school kids. At least until someone figures out a muggle version of that screaming letter Ron Weasley used to get at Hogwarts.

Then Father Hughes's phrase echoed in my mind: *A serious decision must be made*. I sat up. Hope bubbled up inside me like that science experiment with the Diet Coke and Mentos.

I was getting kicked out.

That had to be it! Why else would the principal fly my dad in? Father Hughes was sick of me, and he was kicking me out. I was leaving St Mary's!

I hurried over to the window and looked down at the bright green quad and the anally retentive flower beds and all the clean-cut little Catholics burning off their sexual frustration with wholesome sports like Frisbee and Wiffle ball. I looked at the grey, prison-like stone walls of the dorms, and the iron doors of the campus chapel, and bid it all farewell. *Goodbye, St Mary's!* Goodbye, 7 a.m. classes and dorm mass and curfew! Goodbye, nuns and priests prowling everywhere, watching my every move! Goodbye, freezing Minnesota winters and ass-kissing A-students who look at me like I'm an ax murderer when I drop an F-bomb!

I was leaving it all. When my dad walked out of that door, I was going with him. Back to California. Back to freedom

and burritos and high-speed Wi-Fi and public school where the seniors smoked joints in the parking lot. Back to reality where the only place I ever saw nuns was at the *Sound of Music* singalong at the Castro Theater. Back to the life I was supposed to have, before my parents got divorced and everything got so weird and messed up and off-track.

My dad was gonna walk out of that door, and I was gonna follow him and his golf shorts out of this building and off this campus, and never look back.

I was going home.

The door opened. My dad came out.

'Well?' I asked him.

'Everything's decided,' he reassured me. Then he added, 'By the way, I told your mom I was coming. She said to send her love. Well, actually, she *texted* to send her love – she's on a silent yoga retreat in Big Sur.'

'Wow, the maternal bond is a powerful thing.' I rolled my eyes. 'Now I understand how those moms lift cars off their babies.'

'Hey!' my father cautioned me. 'With all the Pilates your mom does, she'd be able to lift a truck off you in a heartbeat, believe me.'

'Whatever. What's the deal? What did Father Hughes say?'

But my dad was distracted. Strolling over to the windows, he looked down at the quad, smiling.

'Don't you love these summer days before classes start? I remember some killer Frisbee games with the guys from the dorm.'

He turned back to me more earnestly. 'Ya know, Al, the friends you make at boarding school are friends for life. It's an amazing bond. They will always have your back.'

I rolled my eyes again. More of my dad's stellar advice, like the day I got my first period, when he took me out for ice cream and, apparently thinking I was an adult now, started giving me stock tips.

'Did I ever tell you about the secret tunnels?' he asked.

'There's no secret underground tunnel network at St Mary's,' I said, and not for the first time. My dad had tried this urban legend with me before. 'Look, what's the deal? Can we go now?'

He checked his Rolex. 'I wish we had time to hang, but I've got an investors' meeting in Tempe, and I've gotta catch the next flight.'

'That's okay,' I said. 'I can be ready super fast. I'll just throw all my stuff in a duffel bag. Or Mary Kate can pack it up and ship it. Let's go!'

'Alex.' My dad was serious now. 'You're staying.'

My stomach sank. 'WHAT?'

'Honestly, Father Hughes wasn't sure if St Mary's was the right fit for you anymore. That's why he asked me to come. But I think you can do really well here, and I asked him to let you stay – as a personal favor.'

'Those are the kind of personal favors you ask for? Keeping your daughter locked up in Catholic prison two thousand miles away?' My throat was tight, and I was fighting not to cry.

'Look,' my dad said softly, 'I know you're not . . . super stoked to be here.'

Wow, Silicon Valley Ken, props for recognizing a human emotion.

'But your mother and I really believe this place will be good for you. So you're staying and you're seeing this through and you're getting a St Mary's diploma. In this family, we finish what we start.'

Says the divorced dude who did CrossFit for approximately six days.

He kissed my hair quickly and said, 'I've gotta run to the airport or I'll be late. But we'll see each other soon. It'll be Christmas before you know it!'

He hurried off down the hallway. I swallowed hard and called after him, 'You know, most parents who come visit take their kids out to lunch. Or at least to Target to buy an ugly dorm lamp!'

He waved without turning around.

'Fifty bucks?'

But my dad and his golf shorts had already disappeared around the corner.

'Ms Heck?'

Father Hughes was standing in the doorway of his office.

'Will you join me for a moment to finish up our conversation?'

I trudged back inside and plopped down on the sticky green leather again.

‘Well,’ the principal said, ‘it looks like you’ll be staying with us until graduation.’

‘Apparently,’ I said. ‘So my dad used to copy your homework back in the eighties, and now he’s bullying you into keeping me in school. You should really take one of those peer-pressure pamphlets from the nurse’s office.’

‘Your father explained your need for structure after some difficult years at home. He made a compelling case. But that’s not the only reason I agreed to let you stay. I still believe you have a valuable contribution to make to St Mary’s, Ms Heck. Besides –’ and here Father Hughes actually smiled – ‘as much as this may disappoint you, you are not the first nor the last St Mary’s student to be caught breaking curfew.’

‘Oh, so that’s the problem?’ I said. ‘I need to be more original and creative in my rule-breaking? *Then* you’ll kick me out?’

Clearly, Father Hughes was over me because he didn’t even answer. He just pulled out a different file and began making notes. ‘You may go, Ms Heck. Have a nice day.’

I jumped up, ripping my thighs from the green leather, and stomped past the wall of mosaics. St Hippolytus, being torn apart by wild horses, had a look of stubborn determination on his face. And I was determined, too. If it would take something shocking and unprecedented to get me kicked out of St Mary’s, I would do it. I would do something no student had ever done before – something so anti-St Mary’s that Father Hughes would have

to send me back to California, even if my dad offered him a million dollars.

As I strode out of the office in my motorcycle boots, I put on my cat-eye sunglasses and mused:

Hmm, I wonder if I can get hold of a blowtorch . . .