

IN MY DREAMS
I HOLD A KNIFE

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For Don and Linda Tannenbaum, whose kindness changed my life.

CHAPTER 1

NOW

Your body has a knowing. Like an antenna, attuned to tremors in the air, or a dowsing rod, tracing things so deeply buried you have no language for them yet. The Saturday it arrived, I woke taut as a guitar string. All day I felt a hum of something straightening my spine, something I didn't recognize as anticipation until the moment my key slid into the mailbox, turned the lock, and there it was. With all the pomp and circumstance you could count on Duquette University to deliver: a thick, creamy envelope, stamped with the blood-red emblem of Blackwell Tower in wax along the seam. The moment I pulled it out, my hands began to tremble. I'd waited a long time, and it was finally here.

As if in a dream, I crossed the marble floor of my building and entered the elevator, faintly aware of other people, stops on other floors, until finally we reached eighteen. Inside my apartment, I locked the door, kicked my shoes to the corner, and tossed my keys on the counter. Against my rules, I dropped onto my ivory couch in workout clothes, my spandex tights still damp with sweat.

I slid my finger under the flap and tugged, slitting the envelope, ignoring

the small bite of the paper against my skin. The heavy invitation sprang out, the words bold and raised. *You are formally invited to Duquette University Homecoming, October 5–7.* A sketch of Blackwell Tower in red ink, so tall the top of the spire nearly broke into the words. *We look forward to welcoming you back for reunion weekend, a beloved Duquette tradition. Enclosed please find your invitation to the Class of 2009 ten-year reunion party. Come relive your Duquette days and celebrate your many successes—and those of your classmates—since leaving Crimson Campus.*

A small red invitation slid out of the envelope when I shook it. I laid it next to the larger one in a line on the coffee table, smoothing my fingers over the embossed letters, tapping the sharp right angles of each corner. My breath hitched, lungs working like I was back on the stationary bike. *Duquette Homecoming.* I couldn't pinpoint when it had become an obsession—gradually, perhaps, as my plan grew, solidified into a richly detailed vision.

I looked at the banner hanging over my dining table, spelling out C-O-N-G-R-A-T-U-L-A-T-I-O-N-S! I'd left it there since my party two weeks ago, celebrating my promotion—the youngest woman ever named partner at consulting giant Coldwell & Company New York. There'd even been a short write-up about it in the *Daily News*, taking a feminist angle about young female corporate climbers. I had the piece hanging on my fridge—removed when friends came over—and six more copies stuffed into my desk drawer. The seventh I'd mailed to my mother in Virginia.

That victory, perfectly timed ahead of this. I sprang from the couch to the bathroom, leaving the curtains open to look over the city. I was an Upper East Side girl now; I had been an East House girl in college. I liked the continuity of it, how my life was still connected to who I'd been back then. *Come relive your Duquette days*, the invitation said. As I stood in front of the bathroom mirror, the words acted like a spell. I closed my eyes and remembered.

Walking across campus, under soaring Gothic towers, the dramatic architecture softened by magnolia trees, their thick curved branches, waxy

leaves, and white blooms so dizzyingly perfumed they could pull you in, close enough to touch, before you blinked and realized you'd wandered off the sidewalk. College: a freedom so profound the joy of it didn't wear off the entire four years.

The brick walls of East House, still the picture in my head when I thought of home, though I'd lived there only a year. And the Phi Delt house at midnight, music thundering behind closed doors, strobe lights flashing through the windows, students dressed for one of the theme parties Mint was always dreaming up. The spark in my stomach every time I walked up the stone steps, eyes rimmed in black liner, arm laced through Caro's. The whole of it intoxicating, even before the red cups came out.

Four years of living life like it was some kind of fauvist painting, days soaked in vivid colors, emotions thick as gesso. Like it was some kind of play, the highs dramatic cliff tops, the lows dark valleys. Our ensemble cast as stars, ever since the fall of freshman year, when we'd won our notoriety and our nickname. The East House Seven. Mint, Caro, Frankie, Coop, Heather, Jack, and me.

The people responsible for the best days of my life, and the worst.

But even at our worst, no one could have predicted that one of us would never make it out of college. Another, accused of murdering her. The rest of us, spun adrift. East House Seven no longer an honor but an accusation, splashed across headlines.

I opened my eyes to the bathroom mirror. For a second, eighteen-year-old Jessica Miller looked back at me, virgin hair undyed and in need of the kind of haircut that didn't exist in Norfolk, Virginia. Bony-elbowed with the skinniness of a teenager, wearing one of those pleated skirts, painted nails. Desperate to be seen.

A flash, and then she was gone. In her place stood thirty-two-year-old Jessica, red-faced and sweaty, yes, but polished in every way a New York consultant's salary could manage: blonder, whiter-teethed, smoother-skinned, leaner and more muscled.

I studied myself the way I'd done my whole life, searching for what others saw when they looked at me.

I wanted them to see perfection. I ached for it in the deep, dark core of me: to be so good I left other people in the dust. It wasn't an endearing thing to admit, so I'd never told anyone, save a therapist, once. She'd asked if I thought it was possible to be perfect, and I'd amended that I didn't need to be perfect, *per se*, as long as I was the best.

An even less endearing confession: sometimes—rarely, but *sometimes*—I felt I was perfect, or at least close.

Sometimes I stood in front of the bathroom mirror, like now, slowly brushing my hair, examining the straight line of my nose, the pronounced curves of my cheekbones, thinking: *You are beautiful, Jessica Miller*. Sometimes, when I thought of myself like a spreadsheet, all my assets tallied, I was filled with pride at how objectively good I'd become. At thirty-two, career on the rise, summa cum laude degree from Duquette, Kappa sorority alum, salutatorian of Lake Granville High. An enviable list of past boyfriends, student loans *finally* paid off, my own apartment in the most prestigious city in the world, a full closet and a fuller passport, high SAT scores. Any way you sliced it, I was *good*. Top percentile of human beings, you could say, in terms of success.

But no matter how much I tried to cling to the shining jewels of my accomplishments, it never took long before my shadow list surfaced. Everything I'd ever failed at, every second place, every rejection, *mounting, mounting, mounting*, until the suspicion became unbearable, and the hairbrush clattered to the sink. In the mirror, a new vision. The blond hair and white teeth and expensive cycling tights, all pathetic attempts to cover the truth: that I, Jessica Miller, was utterly mediocre and had been my entire life.

No matter how I tried to deny it, the shadow list would whisper: *You only became a consultant out of desperation, when the path you wanted was ripped away. Kappa, salutatorian? Always second-best. Your SAT scores, not as high as you were hoping*. It said I was as ordinary and unoriginal as my name

promised: *Jessica*, the most common girl's name the year I was born; *Miller*, one of the most common surnames in America for the last hundred years. The whole world awash in Jessica Millers, a dime a dozen.

I never could tell which story was right—Exceptional Jessica, or Mediocre Jessica. My life was a narrative I couldn't parse, full of conflicting evidence.

I picked the brush out of the sink and placed it carefully on the bathroom counter, then thought better, picking it up and ripping a nest of blond hair from the bristles. I balled the hair in my fingers, feeling the strands tear.

This was why Homecoming was so important. No part of my life looked like I'd imagined during college. Every dream, every plan, had been crushed. In the ten years since I'd graduated, I'd worked tirelessly to recover: to be beautiful, successful, fascinating. To create the version of myself I'd always wanted people to see. Had it worked? If I could go back to Duquette and reveal myself to the people whose opinions mattered most, I would read the truth in their eyes. And then I'd know, once and for all, who I really was.

I would go to Homecoming, and walk the familiar halls, talk to the familiar people, insert New Jessica into Old Jessica's story, and see how things changed.

I closed my eyes and called up the vision, by now so familiar it was like I'd already lived it. Walking into the Class of 2009 party, everyone gathered in cocktail finery. All eyes turning to me, conversations halting, music cutting out, champagne flutes lowering to get a better look. Parting the sea of former students, hearing them whisper: *Is that Jessica Miller? She looks incredible. Now that I think about it, I guess she always was the most beautiful girl in school, and Did you know she's the youngest-ever female partner at Coldwell New York? I heard she's being featured in Forbes. I guess she always was a genius. Wonder why I never paid attention.*

And finally, arriving at my destination: where I always gravitated, no matter the miles or the years. The people who pulled me into their orbit. Mint, Caro, Frankie, Coop. Except this time, no Heather or Jack. This time,

Courtney would be there, since she'd reinserted herself so unavoidably. But it would be okay, because this time, I would be the star. Caro would gasp when she saw me, and Frankie would say that even though he ran with models, I was still the prettiest girl he'd ever seen. Courtney would turn green with envy, too embarrassed by how successful I was, how much money I made, to talk about her ridiculous career as a fitness influencer. Mint would drop Courtney's hand like it was on fire, unable to take his eyes off me, and Coop...Coop...

That's where I lost the thread every time.

It was a ridiculous vision. I knew that, but it didn't stop me from wanting it. And thirty-two-year-old Jessica Miller lived by a lesson college Jessica had only started to learn: if you wanted something bad enough, you did anything to get it. Yes, I'd go back and relive my Duquette days, like the invitation said, but this time, I'd do it better. I would be Exceptional Jessica. Show them they'd been wrong not to see it before. Homecoming would be my triumph.

I released the ball of hair into the trash. Even tangled, the highlights were pretty against the Q-tips and wads of white tissue paper.

But in a flash, a vision of torn blond hair, sticky and red, matted against white sheets. I shook my head, pushing away the glitch.

I would show them all. And then I would finally rid myself of that dark suspicion, that insidious whisper—the one that said I'd done it all wrong, made the worst possible mistakes, ever since the day East House first loomed into view through my parents' cracked windshield.

At long last, I was going back.