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This is a work of fiction. All characters, organizations, and events
portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's
imagination or are used fictitiously.

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For Mom and Dad,
thanks for always encouraging us
to use our imagination

Authors' Note

This book was born out of a deep love for writing and music, and while some inspiration was taken from real-life musicians, celebrities, and events, our characters are in no way intended to represent any specific person. In fact, Harlow Hayes has been created to exist in the same universe as our favorite stars.

From Bach to The Beatles to Taylor Swift, musicians have been leaving "Easter eggs" in their work for centuries. Searching for these clues and dissecting our favorite artists' music is something that we've always enjoyed—so much so that we were inspired to create a fictional musician and write an entire discography for her so we could leave a trail of clues for a fictional journalist to uncover. We had such a blast doing this that we also decided to layer in our own hidden messages, ranging from fun little Easter eggs to major plot hints for the most eagle-eyed readers.

All will be revealed at the end, but be sure to keep an eye out for clues in the text as you read…

*For the glory **a**nd **f**ame, I'd do **i**t the same.*
*Lose myse**l**f in this da**n**gerous game.*

– Harlow Hayes, from the album *Legacy*

C*LEB NEWS

POP STAR HARLOW HAYES ARRESTED ON SUSPICION OF MURDER

By Joel Casey – *September 24, 2024*

Grammy-winning pop star Harlow Hayes was taken into custody by law enforcement in Nashville, Tennessee early Tuesday morning. She is reportedly wanted by authorities in New York on suspicion of murder.

Ms. Hayes is expected to face a judge in Nashville this afternoon, who will order her extradition across state lines, where she'll be arraigned. Details on the alleged crime and victim have yet to be released.

Born Harlow Eleanor McHayton, the singer-songwriter rose to fame at the age of nineteen following the release of her self-titled album in 2015. She went on to produce multiple platinum-selling hits before sweeping the major pop categories at this year's Grammys with her long-awaited fourth studio album, *Apotheosis*. Released in August 2023, the album marked a notable change in Hayes' music, with the artist moving away from her bubblegum pop roots to a darker, indie sound.

Hayes is due to embark on a world tour later this autumn to promote her most recent album, *Legacy*. The somber follow-up to *Apotheosis* has already garnered millions of sales since its release last month, with its lead single "Garden of Bones" hitting number one on all streaming platforms. However, it looks like Hayes will only be touring courthouses and prisons for the foreseeable future, as sources claim "worrying evidence" led to the starlet's arrest.

While there's no additional information at present, we promise to bring you all the shocking new details as soon as we have them.

Comments:

@KaleighTurnerOfficial: NO. FREAKING. WAY.

@SgtPepper909: Harlow Hayes: coming to a prison near you

@InezWrites22: I called it years ago ya'll – that bitch is crazy!

@SianGilbz: Looks like she's leveled up from writing songs about her enemies to just killing them #mood

@CruelSophieXoXo: Harlow honey, when we said SLAY QUEEN, we did not mean literally… anyway, everyone #StreamLegacy

@HarlowsHarlot94: this is obviously not true, another example of the media exploiting her for clout #freeharlow #harlowisinnocent

@MaxwellsHammer3: Damn, when the girl sang about "Violent Ends" she really meant it

@PerisMum: My bet is she finally snapped and killed Kamryn Hart

@SheSaidEd: As long as she didn't touch my bb Colton Scott, I don't give a shit

@JiminWYlover13: @PerisMum Hope it's that sketchy SB

@LiviaStoneHH: Funny how everyone's reporting on the one bad thing she's ever been accused of, but they fail to report on all her charity work over the years

@summertime_sadness01: @LiviaStoneHH "One bad thing"? Bestie, this is MURDER.

PART I

IDOLS

Interviewer: What's the most common misconception about you?

Harlow Hayes: People think they know what—and who—my songs are about. But they have no idea.

Chapter 1

Risk it! Chance it! Never give up! Dreams really do come true…

Entertainment reporter Naomi Barnes knows it's all bullshit. That chasing dreams is a pointless, dangerous endeavor, despite what stars proclaim again and again in their award speeches.

For most, it ends in tragedy. Sometimes it's quick, like ripping off a Band-Aid—a painful demise before they even get their foot in the first of a million doors. Other times it's slow and depressing, a lifetime spent "never giving up" until one day they realize it's never going to happen, they're never going to be good enough. Never were. All that time wasted. All their potential wasted.

And for the few who do manage to break through? Well, if life has taught Naomi anything, it's that if you fly too close to the sun, you're going to get burned. Or worse.

Over the course of her career, she's covered countless celebrities' rise to the top, only to write up their inevitable crash back to earth the following year. They think they've made it, but then their heels are kicked out (or violently slashed) from under them. Many times, it's their own doing.

Like today's fallen star, Jason Mikaelson, once a fan-favorite reality TV personality, now another body in the morgue. Early this morning, following a very public breakup after his monthslong affair was exposed, Jason's ex-fiancée, actress Lauren Vincent, found him unresponsive in the bathtub, foaming from the mouth.

Naomi is about to break the news about the untimely—and, according to sources, unsurprising—death thanks to a tip from her occasional hook-up at the LA Fire Department who responded to the scene. He spilled all the gory and depressing details, like how Lauren rushed over to Jason's home in the hills after listening to a worrying voicemail from him, only to realize she was hours too late. By the time she arrived, Jason's bloated corpse had turned the water a ripe green as if he'd bathed in his own vomit.

It's a typical Tuesday story for Naomi, who's been at her desk at the West Coast branch of C*Leb News—a popular celebrity news outlet that ranks somewhere between TMZ and E! News on the respectable scale—for two hours already. She came in at seven to give herself enough time to write and publish the Mikaelson piece before she heads over to the courthouse at ten to cover the latest celeb divorce drama. It was silent until a half hour ago, but now the office is slowly coming to life.

Doors swing open, colleagues exchange "Good morning"s—some more enthusiastically than others. Fingers tip-tap on keyboards, the printer roars and clicks, then abruptly stops. Someone sighs and mutters something about paper. Coffee drips loudly from the new machine, the most modern appliance in the room aside from the new

intern from UCLA. And then come the "Oh my god"s and gasps of horror. Or is it excitement?

Naomi glances up, still typing. She knows the keys by heart and doesn't need to look at the screen. *The reality star was found unresponsive in the bathtub of his Malibu home by his ex-fiancée, only days after his cheating scandal was made public.*

The C*Leb office is always whirring with chatter, though. Aware of her looming deadline, Naomi ignores the whispers, figuring it's just standard gossip, and turns her attention back to her article.

"Another shining star extinguished too soon," said Mikaelson's longtime producer.

Naomi shakes her head as she types with one hand and grabs her half-eaten granola bar with the other, crumbs falling onto her chest as she bites into it. "Shining star" isn't the phrase she'd personally use; she thinks Jason wanted to punish the actress for breaking up with him after his final gaslighting attempts failed to win her back, and he was willing to hurt himself to traumatize her. He probably didn't even mean to kill himself—just wanted her to feel sorry for him.

It's a harsh, cruel assumption, she knows. But it's a harsh, cruel world.

She refrains from including her disdainful views in the story—she's more professional than that—but she can't quiet her inner cynic after nearly seven years working in the industry and witnessing first-hand how toxic it can be. She's come a long way from the Bambi-eyed new hire, armed with gel pens and a public university degree in journalism, ready to break into the world of glitz and glam. She quickly

learned all that glitters isn't gold. That it's all a facade. Lipstick covering the unsightly pig underneath.

When she made the transfer from the New York to LA branch of C*Leb two years ago, she actually thought she'd get to cover more movie premieres and awards shows than overdoses, affairs, and sexual misconduct claims. But the only difference is sunnier skies and prettier people, two things sensitive-skinned Naomi doesn't necessarily appreciate.

"No fucking way."

Naomi looks up again, confused by what could possibly be causing such a commotion among her normally desensitized colleagues. She stops typing when she sees Becky, the social media manager, holding out her phone to Melanie, one of the editorial assistants. They're both tall, blonde, and tanned, wearing similar bright-colored blouses. A contrast to five-foot-three Naomi's all-black attire, accessorized by her favorite lace-up combat boots.

Naomi dusts the crumbs from her top before catching Becky's attention. "What happened?"

"It's Harlow-goddamn-Hayes…" Becky's Carolina twang breaks through her Cali-girl persona, something that only happens when she's overly excited or upset. Naomi often forgets Becky's another East Coaster who fled to the City of Broken Dreams, like herself.

"She's been arrested for murder!" Melanie's eyes are wild with excitement.

Naomi frowns, sure she misheard them. "Harlow Hayes, as in the pop star?" A lump forms in her throat as she speaks the singer's name.

"The world-famous, Grammy-winning singer-songwriter,

yes," Becky confirms. Naomi smiles, knowing that's how her sister would've described Harlow. But her smile quickly fades.

"Wait, which one is she again?" asks Jake, one of the film and TV writers. "She the one who sings that 'Love Story' song?"

"That's Taylor Swift, idiot," Becky responds, aghast. "How do you work here and not know that?"

"How do you live in the world and not know that?" Melanie mutters.

Jake holds his hands up. "Hey, I don't know, all those pop girls look and sound the same to me."

Becky rolls her eyes, grumbling something about his favorite bands sounding the same.

"Harlow's the one who fell down during her performance at the VMAs a few years back, remember?" says Melanie.

"I thought that was Madonna?"

"No, she fell at the BRIT Awards."

"Oh, and then she had that breakdown, right?" A lightbulb seems to spark to life in Jake's mind. "I remember seeing that rehab story."

Becky sighs. "It wasn't a breakdown and it wasn't rehab—the media made it sound a lot worse because she missed a few shows after Colton Scott announced his engagement, like, a month after they broke up—but yeah…"

"You say that like we aren't the media," Jake quips.

Naomi pushes back her chair and stands, weaving through the furniture dotted around the open-plan office to get to Becky. "Let me see."

Brushing her ash-brown hair over her shoulders, Naomi cranes her neck to watch the video looping on Becky's phone

from the C*Leb TikTok account, which shows the pop star being ushered into jail. Still looking like her usual demure self, Harlow isn't hiding in a hoodie or staring at the floor like most celebrities do when they're arrested. Instead, she holds her head high and smirks for the cameras.

An eerie feeling washes over Naomi. Crossing her arms, she watches in awe as the footage of the arrest cuts to a photo of Harlow from earlier in her career, when she was dubbed "America's Princess of Pop." Platinum-blonde hair. Dimples. Sparkly green eyes. Thin frame. A complete shift in style to her current, much darker aesthetic. Still, beneath the raven-colored hair, black eyeliner, and thick false lashes, the same magnetic, albeit slightly vulnerable aura encapsulates her.

"This is the article." Melanie pushes her phone toward Naomi.

As she scans the page, her heart races—an uncommon reaction for the jaded twenty-nine-year-old, who's rarely shocked these days.

"Joel published it like five minutes ago," Melanie says, referring to C*Leb's managing editor, who splits his time between the East and West Coast.

"New York always gets the jump on us." Jake tosses a ball of paper into the trash can across the aisle.

As if he's been summoned, Joel Casey's name flashes onto Naomi's now-vibrating Apple Watch. She rushes back to her desk to get to her phone.

"Jo—"

"You see the news?" he says, before she can finish his name.

Joel has been Naomi's boss ever since she first started as his assistant in New York, before working her way up to senior staff writer. He's one of the main reasons Naomi has stayed at C*Leb for so long. Even though he can be brash and borderline offensive at times, he treats his employees well, especially Naomi. He respects her not only as a writer, but also as a person. He was empathetic and understanding when she needed time off after her life came crashing down, then he helped her transfer to LA.

"Yeah. We just saw the video. It's…" Naomi can't find the words to describe it, realizing, for once, she's actually surprised. *Harlow Hayes, of all people...*

If Naomi had to put money on it, she would have bet on Harlow being the victim, if anything. The thought reminds her that there's no mention of one in Joel's article.

"Wait, who'd she kill?"