

One

IN THE LATE SPRING OF 1995, JUST A FEW WEEKS AFTER I'D turned twenty-eight, I got a letter from my friend Madison Roberts. I still thought of her as Madison Billings. I heard from Madison four or five times a year, updates on her life that were as foreign to me as reports from the moon, her existence the kind you only read about in magazines. She was married to an older man, a senator, and she had a little boy whom she dressed in nautical suits and who looked like an expensive teddy bear that had turned human. I was working two cashier jobs at competing grocery stores, smoking weed in the attic of my mother's house because when I had turned eighteen, she had immediately turned my childhood bedroom into a workout room, a huge NordicTrack filling the place where I'd unhappily grown up. I sporadically dated people who didn't deserve me but thought they did. You can imagine how Madison's letters were a hundred times more interesting than mine, but we stayed in touch.

This letter had broken up the natural spacing of her correspondence, precise and expected. But that didn't give me pause. Madison and I did not communicate except on paper. I didn't even have her phone number.

I was on break at the Save-A-Lot, the first chance I'd had to read the thing, and I opened it to find that Madison wanted me to come to Franklin, Tennessee, where she lived on her husband's estate, because she had an interesting job opportunity for me. She'd included a fifty-dollar bill for bus fare, because she knew that my car wasn't great with more than fifteen-mile distances. She wouldn't say what the job was, though it couldn't be worse than dealing with food stamps and getting the fucking scale to properly weigh the bruised apples. I used the last five minutes of my break to ask Derek, my boss, if I could have a few days off. I knew he'd say no, and I didn't begrudge him this refusal. I'd never been the most responsible employee. It was the hard thing about having two jobs: you had to disappoint them at different times and sometimes you lost track of who you'd fucked over worse. I thought about Madison, maybe the most beautiful woman I'd ever met in real life, who was also so weirdly smart, always considering the odds of every scenario. If she had a job for me, I'd take it. I'd leave my mom's attic. I'd empty out my life because I was honest enough to know that I didn't have much that I'd miss when it disappeared.

A WEEK AFTER I WROTE BACK TO MADISON WITH A DATE THAT I'd arrive, a man in a polo shirt and sunglasses was waiting inside the bus station in Nashville. He looked like a man who was really into watches. "Lillian Breaker?" he asked, and I nodded. "Mrs. Roberts asked me to escort you back to the Roberts estate. My name is Carl."

"Are you their driver?" I asked, curious as to the particulars of wealth. I knew rich people on TV had drivers, but it seemed like a Hollywood absurdity that didn't connect to the real world.

“No, not exactly. I’m just kind of a jack-of-all-trades. I help Senator Roberts, and Mrs. Roberts by extension, when things come up.”

“Do you know what I’m doing here?” I asked. I knew what cops sounded like, and Carl sounded like a cop. I wasn’t super jazzed about law enforcement, so I was feeling him out.

“I believe I do, but I’ll let Mrs. Roberts talk to you. I think she would prefer that.”

“What kind of car are you driving?” I asked him. “Is it your own car?” I had been on a bus for a couple of hours with people who communicated only in hacking coughs and weird sniffs. I just wanted to hear my own voice go out into the open air.

“It’s a Miata. It’s mine. Are you ready to go, ma’am? May I take your luggage?” Carl asked, clearly ready to successfully complete this portion of his task. He had that cop-like tic where he tried to hide his impatience with a tight formality.

“I didn’t bring anything,” I said.

“Excellent. If you’ll follow me, I’ll get you to Mrs. Roberts ASAP.”

When we got to the Miata, a hot red number that seemed too small to be on the road, I asked if we could ride with the top down, but he said it wasn’t such a great idea. It looked like it pained him to refuse. But it also looked like maybe it pained him to be asked. I couldn’t quite figure out Carl, so I settled into the car and let everything move past me.

“Mrs. Roberts says that you’re her oldest friend,” Carl said, making conversation.

“That might be right,” I said. “We’ve known each other a while.” I didn’t say that Madison probably didn’t have any other real friends. I didn’t hold it against her. I didn’t have any real friends, either. What I also didn’t say was that I wasn’t even

sure that we were actually friends at all. What we were was something weirder. But Carl didn't want to hear any of that, so we just rode in silence the rest of the way, the radio playing easy listening that made me want to slip into a hot bath and dream about killing everyone I knew.

I MET MADISON AT A FANCY GIRLS' SCHOOL HIDDEN ON A mountain in the middle of nowhere. A hundred or so years ago, maybe even longer, all the men who had managed to make enough money in such a barren landscape decided that they needed a school to prepare their daughters for the eventuality of marrying some other rich men, moving up in life until no one remembered a time when they had been anything other than exemplary. They brought some British guy to Tennessee, and he ran the place like a school for princesses, and soon other rich men from other barren landscapes sent their daughters. And then, after this happened enough times, rich people in real cities, like New York and Chicago, started hearing about this school and started sending their own daughters. And if you can catch that kind of good luck, it holds for centuries.

I grew up in the valley of that mountain, just poor enough that I could imagine a way out. I lived with my mom and a rotating cast of her boyfriends, my father either dead or just checked out. My mother was vague about him, not a single picture. It seemed like maybe some Greek god had assumed the form of a stallion and impregnated her before returning to his home atop Mount Olympus. More likely it was just a pervert in one of the fancy homes that my mom cleaned. Maybe he was some alderman in town, and I'd seen him all my life without knowing it. But I preferred to think he was dead, that he was wholly incapable of saving me from my unhappiness.

The school, the Iron Mountain Girls Preparatory School, offered one or two full scholarships each year to girls in the valley who showed promise. And, though it might be hard to believe now, I showed a fucking lot of promise. I had spent my childhood gritting my teeth and smashing everything to bits in the name of excellence. I taught myself to read at three years old, matching the storybooks that came with records to the words the narrator spoke through the little speaker. When I was eight, my mother put me in charge of our finances, the weekly budgeting from the envelopes of cash that she brought home at night. I made straight As. At first, it was purely out of an instinctual desire to be superlative, as if I suspected that I was a superhero and was merely testing the limits of my powers. But once teachers started to tell me about Iron Mountain and the scholarship, information that my mother could not have cared less about, I redirected my efforts. I didn't know that the school was just some ribbon that rich girls obtained on their way to a destined future. I thought it was a training ground for Amazons. I made other students cry at the spelling bee. I plagiarized scientific studies and dumbed them down just enough to win county science fairs. I memorized poems about Harlem and awkwardly recited them to my mom's boyfriends, who thought I was some weird demon speaking in tongues. I played point guard on the boys' traveling basketball team because there wasn't one for girls. I made people in my town, whether they were poor or middle class, especially upper middle class, feel good, like I was something they could agree on, a sterling representative of this little backwoods county. I wasn't destined for greatness; I knew this. But I was figuring out how to steal it from someone stupid enough to relax their grip on it.

I got the scholarship, and some of my teachers even raised

enough money to help cover expenses for books and food, since my mother told me flat-out that she couldn't afford any of it. When it was time to start school, I put on some ugly-ass jumper, the only nice thing I owned, and my mother dropped me off with a duffel bag filled with my stuff, including three changes of the school's uniform black skirts and white blouses. Other parents were there in their BMWs and cars so fancy I didn't know the names of them. "God, look at this place," my mom said, heavy metal on the radio, fidgeting with an unlit cigarette because I asked her not to smoke so it wouldn't get in my hair. "Lillian, this is going to sound so mean, but you don't belong here. It don't mean they're better than you. It just means you're gonna have a rough go of it."

"It's a good opportunity," I told her.

"You got shit, I understand that," she said, as patient as she'd ever been with me, though the engine was still idling. "You got shit and I know that you want better than shit. But you're going from shit to gold, and it's going to be real tough to handle that. I hope you make it."

I didn't get angry with her. I knew that my mom loved me, though maybe not in ways that were obvious, that other people would understand. She wanted me to be okay, at least that. But I also knew that my mom didn't exactly like me. I weirded her out. I cramped her style. It was fine with me. I didn't hate her for that. Or maybe I did, but I was a teenager. I hated everyone.

She pushed in the car's cigarette lighter and while she waited for it to fire up, she kissed me softly and gave me a hug. "You can come back home anytime, sweetie," she said, but I imagined that I'd kill myself if I had to do that. I got out of the car, and she drove off. As I walked to my dorm, I realized

that the other girls didn't even look at me, and I could tell that it wasn't out of meanness. I don't think they even saw me; their eyes had been trained since birth to recognize importance. I wasn't that.

And then I found Madison in my room, the room we were going to share. All the information that I had on her had been provided in a brief letter during the summer, informing me that my roommate would be Madison Billings and that she was from Atlanta, Georgia. Chet, an ex-boyfriend of my mom's who still hung around the house when she wasn't dating someone else, had seen the letter and said, "I bet she's from the Billings Department Stores. That's Atlanta, too. That's big money."

"How would you know, Chet?" I asked. I didn't mind Chet so much. He was goofy, which was better than the alternative. He had a tattoo of Betty Boop on his forearm.

"You gotta pick up on little clues," he told me. He drove a forklift. "Information is power."

Madison had shoulder-length blond hair and was wearing a yellow summer dress with hundreds of little orange goldfish printed on it. Even in flip-flops, she was model tall, and I could tell that the soles of her feet would be so fucking soft. She had a perfect nose, blue eyes, enough freckles to look wholesome without looking like God had blasted her with bad skin. The whole room smelled of jasmine. She'd already arranged the space, had chosen the bed farthest from the door. When she saw me, she smiled like we were friends. "Are you Lillian?" she asked, and I could only nod. I felt like a kid on *The Bozo Show* in my shitty jumper.

"I'm Madison," she told me. "It's nice to meet you." She held out her hand, her nails painted a faint pink, like the nose of a bunny rabbit.

"I'm Lillian," I said, and I shook her hand. I'd never shaken the hand of someone my own age.

"They told me that you're a scholarship kid," she then informed me, though there wasn't any judgment in her voice. She seemed to just want to make it clear that she knew.

"Why did they tell you that?" I asked her, my face reddening.

"I don't know. They told me, though. Maybe they wanted to make sure that I'd be polite about it."

"Well, okay, I guess," I said. I felt like I was forty, fifty steps behind Madison, and the school was already making it harder for me to catch up.

"Doesn't matter to me," she told me. "I prefer it. Rich girls are the worst."

"Are you not a rich girl?" I asked, hopeful.

"I'm a rich girl," she said. "But I'm not like most rich girls. I think that's why they put me with you."

"Well, good," I said. I was sweating so hard.

"Why are you here?" she asked. "Why did you want to come to this place?"

"I don't know. It's a good school, right?" I said. Madison had a kind of directness that I'd not experienced before, where shit that should get her killed somehow seemed okay because her eyes were so blue and she didn't seem to be joking.

"Yeah, I guess. But, like, what do you want to get out of this place?" she asked.

"Can I put down my bag?" I asked. I touched my face and sweat was beading up and starting to trickle down my neck. She gently took my bag from me and placed it on the floor. Then she gestured to my bed, unmade, and I sat on it. She sat beside me, closer than I'd prefer.

“What do you want to be?” she asked me.

“I don’t know. Jesus, I don’t know,” I said. I thought Madison was going to kiss me.

“My parents want me to get amazing grades and go to Vanderbilt and then marry some university president and have beautiful babies. My dad was so specific. *We’d love it if you married a university president.* But I’m not doing that.”

“Why not?” I said. If the university president was sexy, I’d jump right into the life that Madison’s parents imagined for her.

“I want to be powerful. I want to be the person who makes big things happen, where people owe me so many favors that they can never pay me back. I want to be so important that if I fuck up, I’ll never get punished.”

She looked psychotic as she said this; I wanted to make out with her. She flipped her hair in such a way that it could only have been instinctual, evolution. “I feel like I can tell you this.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Because you’re poor, right? But you’re here. You want power, too.”

“I just want to go to college, to get out of here,” I said, but I felt like maybe she was right. I’d learn to want all that stuff she said. I could go for power.

“I think we’ll be friends,” she said. “I hope so, at least.”

“God,” I said, trying to keep my whole body from convulsing, “I hope so, too.”

And we did become friends, I guess you could say. She had to tamp down her weirdness in public because it scared people when beautiful people didn’t act a certain way, made themselves ugly. And I had to tamp down my weirdness because people already suspected that I was supremely strange because I was a scholarship kid. A few days into my time there,

another scholarship girl, from a town that bordered mine, came up to me and said, not in a mean way, “Please don’t talk to me the entire time that we’re here,” and I agreed immediately. It was better this way.

The point is, we had to be composed in public, so it was nice to come to our shared space and cut out pictures of Bo and Luke Duke and rub them all over our bodies. It was nice to hear Madison talk about being a lawyer who sends the most evil man in the world to the electric chair. I told her that I wanted to grow up and be able to eat a Milky Way bar every single morning for breakfast. She said that was better than wanting to be the president of the United States of America, which Madison kind of wanted to be.

We also played on the basketball team, the only two freshmen to start in years and years. The team was no joke, had won a few state titles. At Iron Mountain, basketball and cross-country were hugely important to the school’s identity; I suspected that, for most girls, they were a great way to add complexity to their college applications, but there were girls like me who just really liked being badasses all over weaker people. I played point guard and Madison, so damn tall, played power forward. We spent a lot of time in the gym, just the two of us, running full-court sprints, shooting with our nondominant hands. I had always been good, but I got better with Madison on my team. She gave me some kind of extrasensory court vision; she was so beautiful that I could find her without even looking. We were Magic and Kareem. We told our coach that we wanted to wear black high-tops, but he refused. “Jesus, girls, you act like you’re New York playground legends,” he said. “Just don’t get in foul trouble or turn the ball over.”

There were times when Madison left me behind, but I

didn't take it personally. I think if I'd been a different kind of person—and I don't mean wealthy—I could have been a part of it, but I had no interest. She and the other beautiful girls would sit together at lunch. Sometimes they would sneak off campus and hang out at a bar near this experimental art college where boys hit on them. Sometimes they bought cocaine from some super-sketchy dude named Panda. Madison would show up in our room at three in the morning, somehow eluding the dorm parents who watched over us, and sit on the floor, drinking a huge bottle of water. "God, I hate myself for being so damn predictable," she would say.

"It looks fun," I said, lying.

"It can be," she said, her pupils crazy big. "But it's just a phase."

School was more complicated there than in the valley, but the classes weren't hard. I made straight As. So did Madison. I won a poetry contest when I wrote about growing up poor; Madison had told me to do it after I showed her my first poem, which was about a fucking tulip. "Use it at the right time," she told me, by which I think she meant my bad upbringing, "and you'll get a lot out of it." I think I understood. I mean, here I was at Iron Mountain, thriving. I got here. Madison sometimes slept in my little bed, the two of us wrapped around each other. I had good things, and it wasn't as hard to admit to where I'd been before I ended up right where I belonged.

And then one of Madison's beautiful friends—the least beautiful of the six of them, if you want to be cruel—got upset at a joke that Madison had made, a moment when Madison's weirdness had spilled out beyond the confines of our dorm room, and so the girl told the dorm parent that Madison had a bag of coke in her desk drawer. The dorm parent checked, and

there it was. Iron Mountain was a place for rich people, and it depended on those rich people, so Madison hoped, in bed with me one night as we talked it over, that the school would go easy on her. But I was not rich, and what I understood was that sometimes a place like Iron Mountain made an example of one rich person in order to gain the trust of a bunch of other rich people. It was almost the end of the year, just a few weeks till final exams, and the headmaster of the school, no longer some British dude but a Southern woman named Ms. Lipton with a white shell of a hairstyle and a maroon pantsuit, called Madison and her parents to meet with her in her office, the invitation sent on official letterhead. Ms. Lipton called everyone “daughter” but had never married.

Madison’s father drove up the night before; her mother was unable to come, “so overwhelmed with disappointment,” Mr. Billings told Madison over the phone. He wanted to take us out to dinner, a kind of farewell for Madison and me, although I thought that seemed weird. He picked us up in a brand-new Jaguar. He was older than I’d expected, and he looked like Andy Griffith, with that winking way of acknowledging you. “Hello, girls,” he said, opening the door to the car. Madison just grunted and hopped in, but Mr. Billings took my hand and kissed it. “Madison has told me so much about you, Miss Lillian,” he said.

“Okay,” I said. I was still unsteady with adults. I thought maybe he wanted to sleep with me.

We drove to a steakhouse and there was a table reserved for us, though Mr. Billings said it was for four. And then I saw my mom, dressed up for her, but not dressed up enough for this place. She looked at me with this kind of *what the fuck have you done* look on her face, but she then quickly smiled at Mr. Bill-

ings, who introduced himself and then kissed her hand, which my mother was so jazzed about, clearly.

“A drink, ma’am?” he asked my mom, who ordered a gin and tonic. He ordered a bourbon, neat. It felt like we had instantly become a new family. I kept looking at Madison for some kind of clue as to whether she was freaked out, too, but she wouldn’t even look at me, just kept running her eyes up and down the menu.

“I’m happy you two could join Madison and myself on this night,” Mr. Billings said after we ordered. My mother had chosen a filet that was listed at twenty-five dollars, but I got chicken fettuccine, which was the cheapest thing on the menu. As much as I try to remember, I have no idea what Madison and her dad ordered.

“Thank you for inviting me,” my mom said. She had lived a hard life, smoked too much, but she had been a cheerleader and a beauty queen in high school. She was still beautiful, I had to admit, a beauty that she’d not passed on to me, and I could see how she just might, in this setting, seduce Mr. Billings for a night.

“I’m afraid the reason for our gathering is not so happy,” he said, looking at Madison, who was now staring at the tablecloth in front of her. “I’m afraid Madison has gotten herself into some trouble, because she is headstrong. I have five children, but Madison is the youngest and she is more trouble than the other four put together.”

“Four boys,” Madison said, a little flash of anger.

“Anyway, Madison has made a mistake and she is going to be punished for it. Or that seems to be what awaits us tomorrow morning. And that is why I wanted to talk to you and Lillian here.”

“Dad—” Madison began, but he froze her with a hard stare.

“Did Lillian do something wrong?” my mom asked. She already had her second gin and tonic.

“No, my dear,” Mr. Billings continued. “Lillian has been an exemplary woman while at Iron Mountain. I’m sure you’re quite proud of her.”

“I am,” my mother said, but it sounded like a question.

“Well, here’s the situation. I’m a businessman, and as such, I’m always looking at things from a different angle, seeing all the possibilities. Now, my wife refused to come here; she thinks that Madison needs to accept her punishment and aspire to do better with what’s left to her. But my wife, though I love her, hasn’t fully considered the ramifications of Madison’s expulsion. The effect it would have on her future is more than I can state.”

“Well, kids make mistakes,” my mother said. “That’s how they learn.”

Mr. Billings’s smile slipped for the briefest of moments. Then he recovered. “That’s right,” he said. “They learn. They make a mistake and then they learn never to do it again. But in Madison’s case, it won’t matter that she won’t ever do it again. Her fate has been sealed. And so I come to you with an offer.”

And I knew. I fucking knew right then. And I was so angry that I hadn’t known it hours before. I looked at Madison, and of course she wouldn’t look at me. I grabbed her arm under the table and squeezed the shit out of it, but she didn’t even flinch.

“What’s the offer?” my mom said, slightly drunk, very interested.

“I believe that the headmistress would be more forgiving if the student were someone other than Madison,” he said. “I think if, for instance, it were your daughter, a virtuous girl who

has made so much of herself while dealing with such hardship, the headmistress would offer only a cursory punishment, at most a semester's suspension."

"Why?" my mother asked, and I wanted to kick her in the face. I wanted to sober her up, but I knew it wouldn't matter.

"It's complicated, ma'am," Mr. Billings said. "But I do believe this. I believe that if you and Lillian marched into that woman's office tomorrow morning and told her that the drugs were actually Lillian's, the punishment would be quite lenient."

"That's a big maybe," my mother said. Maybe she wasn't as drunk as I thought.

"Well, it is a risk, I admit that. Which is why I would be willing to reimburse you for your troubles. In fact, I have a check, made out to you, Ms. Breaker, for ten thousand dollars. I believe that would help toward Miss Lillian's continuing education. I believe there's enough in that gift to cover some of your own expenses."

"Ten thousand dollars?" my mom repeated.

"That's correct."

"Mom," I said, just as Madison was saying, "Dad," but they both shut us up. Right then, Madison looked at me. Her eyes were so blue, even in the dim light of this shitty steakhouse. It was such a strange feeling, to hate someone and yet love them at the same time. I wondered if this was normal for adults.

Mr. Billings and my mom kept talking; the food came, and Madison and I didn't eat a single bite of our dishes. I stopped listening to anything. Madison grabbed my hand under the table and held on to it right up until her father paid the bill and escorted us out of the restaurant, his check in my mom's purse.

That night, after he'd dropped us off at our dorm and we'd signed ourselves back in, Madison asked if she could sleep in

my bed with me, but I told her to fuck off. I brushed my teeth and then, while she sat in her bed and read Shakespeare for some paper she had to write, since she wasn't going to be expelled after all, I packed up my duffel bag. How in the world did it hold less than it had when I arrived? What was my life? I got into bed and shut off my light. A few minutes later, Madison turned off her light and we both sat there in the dark, not saying anything. I don't know how long it took, but she finally crept over to my side of the room and stood over me. She was my only friend. I scooted over, and she crawled into my bed. She wrapped her arms around me and I could feel her chest press against my back. "I'm sorry," she said.

"Madison" was all I could manage. I'd wanted something, and I didn't get it. Or it was going to be harder to get it when I got another chance.

"You're my best friend," she said, but I couldn't say anything else. I lay there until I fell asleep, and when the dorm parent knocked on our door in the morning to say that my mother was outside waiting for me, I realized that, sometime in the night, Madison had gone back to her own bed.

THE HEADMISTRESS SEEMED TO KNOW THAT I WAS LYING; SHE tried several times to get me to alter my story, but my mother kept butting in, saying how hard my life had been. And then Ms. Lipton expelled me. My mother didn't even seem that shocked. I'd never even smoked one of my mom's cigarettes at this point, and I was kicked out of school for drugs. I felt like I'd been good for nothing.

When I went to the room to get my duffel bag, Madison was gone. On the drive back to the valley, my mother said that she would set aside money for my college tuition, but I knew

that money was already gone. It had vaporized the moment it touched her hands.

Four months later, I got a letter from Madison. She told me about her summer vacation in Maine. She told me how awful the last weeks of school had been without me there, and how she so badly wanted me to come visit her in Atlanta. There was no mention of what had happened to me, what I'd done for her. She told me about a boy she'd met in Maine and how much stuff she'd let him do. I could hear her voice in the letter. It was a pretty voice. I wrote back, and I didn't mention the awful shit between us. We became pen pals.

I went back to my awful public high school, which felt like returning to sea level after spending a year on the highest mountain peak. All the teachers and students, everyone in the town, had heard about my expulsion, the cocaine, the fact that I had fucked up my one chance to improve my circumstances. They invented little twists on the basic story to make it seem even worse. And they blamed me. They were so angry, like, fuck, why had they ever thought that someone like me could have handled such an experience? And so they gave up on me, stopped talking about college, about scholarships. I turned into a ghost, this story that lived in the town, a cautionary tale, but who would it scare? Who would listen?

Everything was so easy, and nobody cared, and I lost interest. I started working after school, helping my mom clean houses. I started hanging out with idiot boys and girls who had access to weed and pills, and I'd stay with them as long as they didn't expect anything from me. Then, when they did expect things, I just bought weed myself and smoked joints on the back porch of my house all alone, feeling the world flatten out. I started to care less about the future. I cared more about

making the present tolerable. And time passed. And that was my life.

AS WE NEARED THE ESTATE, ALL I COULD SEE WERE GREEN pastures and what felt like miles and miles of white fence. I couldn't understand what the fence was there for, because it wouldn't keep anything in or out. It was purely ornamental, and then, like, *dub*, I realized that if you had this much money, you could make gestures that were purely ornamental. I reminded myself to be smarter. I was smart. I just had a thick layer of stupid that had settled on top of me. But I was still wild when I needed to be. I'd get smarter. Whatever Madison had, I'd get it easily.

The fucking driveway felt like it was a mile long, and it looked like it would lead you straight to the gates of heaven, that's how perfectly maintained it was. It could have ended at a run-down pizza joint with bars on the windows and you'd still be so thrilled.

"Almost there," Carl said.

"What's the mail situation like?" I said.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"Do they have to walk all the way to the end of this driveway just to get the mail? Or do they have, like, a golf cart? Or does someone get it for them?" I didn't ask if he was the one who got the mail for them, but I feel like maybe he knew that I was wondering.

"Well, the postman just brings it to the door," he said.

"Oh, okay," I said. I thought about Madison sitting on her porch, drinking sweet tea and waiting patiently while the postman crept up the driveway, bearing a letter from me about my ideas for a tattoo on my ankle.

I had often fantasized about Madison's home. It seemed weird to ask her for a photo of the mansion, like, *Hey, I could live without another photo of your teddy bear son but please send me pictures of every single one of the bathrooms in your mansion.* When she sent photos, I could make out parts of the house, expensive and well maintained. Maybe if I'd cut them into pieces and reassembled them, I could have seen the whole mansion. Sometimes it was simpler to just believe that Madison lived in the White House. That made sense to me at the time. Madison lived in the fucking White House.

Now, as we pulled up to the estate, I felt this diamond form in my throat, and I almost grabbed Carl's hand for support. The house was three stories, maybe more. I couldn't crane my neck enough to see the top of it; for all I knew at that moment, it went all the way up to space. It was blindingly white, not one trace of mold or dirt, a house that you build in your dreams. There was a huge porch that seemed to wrap around the entire structure; it must have been a mile if you walked it. I had been prepared for wealth, but clearly my life had left me ill prepared for what wealth could be. And was Madison's husband even really all that rich? He hadn't invented computers or owned a fast-food empire. And yet his level of wealth had given him this house. It had given him Madison, who suddenly appeared in the front doorway, and she was waving, so beautiful that I knew I'd take her over the house every single time I had a choice.

Carl pulled the car around the fountain in the middle of the driveway and stopped right at the front door of the house. While the car idled, he swiftly ducked out of his seat and came around to open my door. I couldn't get up. I couldn't make my legs work. Madison suddenly walked down the stairs and held

out her arms for an embrace. But I couldn't meet her. I felt like if I moved one muscle, the whole thing would evaporate and I would wake up back on my futon, the A/C broken again. Carl finally had to haul me up, rag-dolling me as if I were a gift for Madison's birthday, and then I fell into her arms. She was so tall, so strong, that she held me until I smelled the scent of her, until I remembered her, the two of us in bed in that dorm room, and everything was tangible again. It was real. I straightened up, and there I was, standing there. It was the first time in almost fifteen years that I'd seen Madison, but she looked the same. She'd just gotten a little tanner and filled out in a way that suggested adulthood. She didn't look like a robot. She didn't look soulless.

"You look so beautiful," she said, and I believed her.

"Well, you look like a supermodel," I replied.

"I wish I were a supermodel," she said. "I wish I had a calendar that was nothing but me." And like that, it was the two of us again, me being weird and her revealing that, by god, she was weird, too.

Carl checked his watch, did this little bow, and then hopped back in the car and drove away. We could have spent the rest of the day watching him drive away. I kind of wanted to. I kept waiting for his car to turn into some dumb gourd and him to turn into a mouse. I waited for magic, and I didn't think I would be disappointed.

"It's so hot out here," she said. "Come inside."

"This is your house?" I asked.

Madison smiled. "It's one of them," she said, and her nose wrinkled and her eyes got all twinkly. She couldn't talk like this with her husband, none of the other women who lived in

luxury. This was good. She couldn't believe her good fortune, either.

Inside the house, I don't know what I'd expected, but it was pretty plain. There wasn't a lot of crazy art on the walls, and I guess I thought maybe there would be space-age furniture, but this was the kind of wealth where things were so plain that you didn't realize how expensive they were until you touched them or got closer and saw how they were made with great care and with super-fancy materials. In the hallway was a huge portrait of Madison and her husband from their wedding. She looked like she'd just been crowned Miss America and he looked like the emcee who had once been famous. I couldn't tell if it was love, but I also knew that I was no real judge of love, having never experienced it or even witnessed it a single time in my life.

MADISON HAD MET SENATOR JASPER ROBERTS WHEN SHE'D worked on his reelection campaign right after she'd graduated from Vanderbilt University with a degree in political science. She'd started at the lowest rung, brought on because the normally untouchable senator had recently left his wife and two kids and started dating one of his biggest donors, some heiress who was obsessed with horses and wore crazy hats. They wanted to get a woman's perspective on things, I guess. The dudes at the top, who had the senator's ear, had told him that he had to be super dignified about it and never talk about it and har-rumph like a Muppet if anyone even brought it up. I remember her letter to me around this time. *Jesus, these guys are so stupid,* she wrote. *It's like they've never followed up on a single stupid-ass thing they've ever done so they could just fix it.* Because Madison was

brilliant and because she had that slightly skewed way of saying things in a straightforward manner that broke you in half, the senator ended up putting her in charge of the campaign. And, of course, he did this because he was falling in love with her, like everyone did, and because the heiress wouldn't shut the fuck up about some horse that she wanted to buy.

Madison made him conciliatory. She wrote his speeches, every single one. He confessed to his failings, that his desire to make his constituency prosperous, to help every single person he represented, had caused him to lose sight of what made his own family happy. And now that he'd lost that family, he could not lose his larger family, the voters of the great state of Tennessee. It wasn't that hard. He was a political legacy, generations of Roberts men running things, so much wealth that people just assumed they had to vote for him. He merely had to show that he was aware that he'd done a fucked-up thing.

And he won. And Madison got kind of famous in these political circles. *It's really all because his stupid fucking opponent didn't know what he was doing*, she'd admitted in another letter. *If I'd been on that side of things, Jasper would have lost*. And then they got married. And then she got pregnant. And now she had this life.

WE SAT ON THE SOFA, AND IT WAS LIKE SITTING ON A CLOUD, the exact opposite of my ratty futon, which felt like getting stuck in a hole in the floor, just trapped there for all eternity. I wondered how much of this decor had been Madison's choosing and how much of it was left over from her husband's previous wife. There were sandwiches on a tiered tray, lots of mayo and cucumber, so tiny that they looked like dollhouse food. There was a pitcher of sweet tea and two glasses with big solid chunks of pristine ice in them. The ice hadn't even begun to melt, and

I realized that they must have materialized just seconds before we'd entered the room.

"Do you remember that day we first met?" Madison asked.

"Of course I do," I said. It hadn't been that long ago. Had it been a long time ago to her? "You had a dress with goldfish on it."

"My dad had that dress made for me by a dressmaker in Atlanta. I hated it. Goldfish? He was clueless."

"Wait, is he dead?" I asked, suddenly suspicious.

"No, he's still alive," she said.

"Oh, good," I said, but I didn't mean it. It just came out. "Good," I added, just in case.

"I remember that maybe you hadn't even brushed your hair," she said.

"No, I'd definitely brushed my hair," I told her.

"I remember when you walked into the room, like a lightning bolt, I knew that I was going to love you."

I wondered where her husband was. I felt like we were about to make out. I felt like maybe the job was to be her secret lover. My pulse was racing, as it always did in her presence.

When I didn't respond, her eyes turned a little glassy all of a sudden, and she said, "I always felt like I missed out on something really wonderful when you left Iron Mountain."

We weren't going to have a reckoning, not really. Not yet. She wasn't going to bring up the fact that her not-dead father had paid me off to take the fall for her, so that she could have this mansion, this senatorial husband, and all these expensive things. We were, I understood, being polite.

"But now you're here!" she said. She poured sweet tea, and I drank it down in, like, two gulps. She didn't even look surprised, just filled my glass up again. I ate one of the sandwiches,

and it was gross, but I was hungry. I ate two more. I didn't even realize that there were tiny plates stacked on the tray. I'd held the sandwiches in my dumb hands. I didn't even want to look down at my lap because I knew there were crumbs there.

"Where is Timothy?" I asked, expecting to see her son walk into the room with a coonskin cap and a wooden popgun, his skin pale like old royalty's.

"He's taking a nap," she said. "He loves naps. He's lazy, like me."

"I love naps, too," I said. How many sandwiches did you eat at something like this? There were nearly twenty more on the trays. Did you leave some for propriety's sake? She hadn't touched them. Wait, were they decorative?

"I bet you want to know why I asked you to come all this way," she said.

It sank in that this was temporary, that I'd have to leave, so I became curious as to what had been so important that we finally had to see each other face-to-face after so many years of correspondence.

"You said there was an opportunity for me?" I continued. "Like a job, maybe?"

"I thought of you because, Lillian, this is honestly very private, what I'm about to tell you, regardless of what you decide to do. I needed someone who could be discreet, who knew how to keep a secret."

"I can be discreet," I said. I loved this stuff, bad stuff.

"I know," she said, almost blushing, but not really.

"Is everything okay?" I asked.

"Yes and no," she said, twisting her mouth like she was rinsing it out. "Yes and no. Did I ever tell you about Jasper's first family?"

“I don’t think so. I read about them, I think. Do you mean his first wife?”

She looked apologetic, like she knew she was pulling me into something that might ruin me. But she didn’t stop. She didn’t send me back to my mom’s house. She held on to me.

“Well, he had a first wife, a childhood sweetheart, but she died. She had a rare kind of cancer, I think. He doesn’t talk about her at all. I know he loves me, but I know he loved her the most. Anyway, after that, there was a long period of grieving. And then he ended up marrying Jane, who was the youngest daughter of a really powerful man in Tennessee politics. Jane was—well, she was strange. She had darkness inside of her. But, not to speak ill of my husband, it was politically advantageous to be married to her. She knew the world he moved in and could do the things that he needed done. And they had twins, a girl and a boy. And that was their life, you know? Until he met that horse woman, and everything went to shit.”

“But then you met him,” I offered. “It all worked out.”

She didn’t even smile. She was in this now. She was doing it. “It did. We had Timothy. I still get to be involved in politics, just from a different angle, a kind of support position. And it’s nice. Jasper listens to me. Honestly, policy kind of bores him. It’s just his family’s legacy. He likes the fame, but he’s not big on laws. Anyway, things were fine.”

“What happened?” I asked.

“Okay, well, Jane died. She died a few months ago.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. I tried to figure out what kind of grief Jane’s death would inspire in Madison. None, probably. But I still said that I was sorry.

“It’s tragic,” she said. “She never really recovered from the divorce. She had always been so brittle, so strange. Honestly,

she went a little crazy. She'd call late at night saying the most awful things. Jasper never really understood how to deal with her. I'd have to talk to her all night long, walking her through her new reality. I'm good at that stuff, you know?"

"What happened to her?" I asked.

Madison frowned. Her freckles were so beautiful. "Here's what I need to tell you, okay, Lillian? Here's where I need you to promise to keep a secret."

"Okay," I said, growing a little irritated. I'd already said I'd keep the fucking secret. I needed the secret. I needed to eat it, for it to live inside me.

"Now that Jane has passed away," she continued, "there is the matter of Jasper's children. They're ten years old. Twins. Bessie and Roland. Sweet kids— Shit, no, I don't know why I said that. I don't know them. But, you know, they're kids. And now, well, they're Jasper's kids. They're his responsibility. And so we're making adjustments in our lives in order to accommodate them."

"Wait," I asked, "you've never even met your husband's kids? Has he seen them?"

"Lillian? Please," she said, "can we not focus on this?"

"Are they not already here?" I asked.

"Not yet," she admitted.

"But if the mom died a while ago, what are they doing? Are they on their own?" I asked.

"No, of course not. Jeez. They're with Jane's parents, super-old people and not good with kids. We just needed time to get everything prepared for their arrival. In just over a week, they'll be here with us. Living with us."

"Okay," I said.

"They've been through a lot, Lillian. They've not had the

best life. Jane was a difficult person. She kept the children in the house with her and never left. She homeschooled them, but I can't imagine what she taught them. They're not used to people. They're not prepared for change."

"What do you want me to do about it?" I asked.

"I want you to take care of them," Madison finally said, the whole reason I'd taken a bus to see her.

"Like a nanny?" I asked. "I don't understand."

"Like a nanny, I guess; okay," Madison said, more to herself than to me. "I thought maybe more like a governess, like more old-fashioned."

"How is it different?" I asked.

"I think it's mostly just the way it sounds. Really, though, you'd handle all aspects of their care. You'd make sure they were happy; you'd teach them so that they can get up to speed with their lessons. You'd monitor their progress. Make sure they exercise. Make sure they stay clean."

"Madison, are they, like, mole people or something? What's wrong with them?" I wanted so badly for something to be wrong with them. I wanted them to be mutants.

"They're just kids. But kids are so fucking wild, Lillian. You have no idea. You don't even know."

"Timothy seems pretty easy," I offered, so dumb.

"That's just pictures," Madison said, suddenly wired. "I've trained him, though. I kind of had to break him in."

"Well, he's cute," I said.

"These kids are cute, too, Lillian," Madison replied.

"What's wrong with them?" I asked again.

Madison hadn't touched her tea during the entire conversation, since we sat down, and now, to buy some time, she drank a whole glass. Finally, she looked at me with great seriousness.

“Here is the thing,” she said. “Jasper is up for secretary of state. It’s all very hush-hush right now, okay? The other guy is sick and he’s going to step down. And some of the president’s people have reached out to Jasper to see about him and to start the process of vetting him. It’s all happening this summer.”

“That’s crazy,” I said.

“This could lead to big things. Like, vice-president stuff. Or president even, if everything went just right.”

“Well, that’s cool,” I said. I imagined Madison as the first lady of the United States of America. I remembered the time during a basketball game when she elbowed this girl in the throat in order to get a rebound and got kicked out of the game. I smiled.

“So, you see what’s going on, right? Jane’s dead and these kids are coming to stay with us, right when this is all going down. It’s crazy. It’s very stressful. Vetting. That’s serious shit, Lillian. They look at everything. They already know about the adultery stuff, which they’re obviously not thrilled about. But they like Jasper. People like Jasper. I think this might all work out. But these kids. Who knows what their lives have been like? I don’t want them to mess this up for Jasper. He would be so angry. God, like super angry.”

“You just want me to watch over them and keep them safe?” I asked.

“Make sure they’re safe and they don’t do anything crazy,” she replied, her eyes so bright, so hopeful.

I knew how to keep order. I knew all the ways to make bad things happen and how to avoid them. I was wise to how people tried to ruin you. These kids, they would not beat me.

And I realized that I was already thinking like I had taken the job. I didn't know the first thing about kids, for fuck's sake. I didn't know how to take care of them. What did kids like? What did they eat? What dances were popular with them? I didn't have the slightest idea how to teach children. If I failed spectacularly at this task, that would be the end of things with Madison. I'd never get to visit her in the White House. It'd be like we'd never even met.

"I guess I can do it," I offered, so lame. I made my voice harden. I made my body turn into steel. "I'll do it, Madison. I can do it."

She reached across the sandwiches and hugged me, hard. "I can't tell you how much I need you," she said. "I don't have anyone. I need you."

"Okay," I said. My whole life, maybe I was just biding time until Madison needed me again, until I was called into service and I made everything good. It honestly wasn't a bad life, if that's all it was.

Madison's body, which had been tense and vibrating, relaxed. I finally felt calm, knew the depth of the situation, saw the bottom and knew I could climb into and out of it without incident. I leaned back into the comfort of this sofa, which held me in just the right position. Then I quickly leaned forward and ate two more sandwiches.

"Lillian?" Madison said.

"What?" I asked.

"There's more, actually," she said, grimacing.

"What?" I asked.

"The kids. Bessie and Roland. There's something I have to tell you about them."

I had a quick flash of what might come. It was sexual, some kind of abuse that had left them hollowed-out shells. That notion transformed into some kind of disability: missing limbs, horrific facial scars. A sensitivity to sunlight, a mouth without any teeth at all. And then it moved to homicidal impulses, kittens drowned in the bathtub, knives at the ready. Of course Madison would wait until I had given myself to her.

“They have a unique—I don’t know what to call it—kind of affliction,” she began, but I couldn’t keep quiet.

“Do they not have any teeth?” I asked, not frightened but merely wanting to get it over with. “Did they kill a kitten?”

“What? No, just . . . just listen to me, okay? They have this affliction where they get really overheated.”

“Oh, okay,” I said. They were delicate little kids. Didn’t like exercise. Fine.

“Their bodies, for some reason that doctors haven’t quite nailed down, can quickly rise in temperature. Alarming increases in temperature.”

“Okay,” I said. There was more. I just spoke to make Madison keep talking.

“They catch on fire,” she finally said. “They can—rarely, of course—burst into flames.”

“Are you joking?” I asked.

“No! God, of course not, Lillian. Why would I joke about something like this?” she said.

“Well, ’cause I’ve never heard of anything like this. ’Cause it just seems like a joke.”

“Well, it’s not a joke. It’s a serious condition.”

“Jesus, Madison, that’s wild,” I said.

“I haven’t seen it, okay?” she replied. “But Jasper has. I

guess the kids get really hot when they're agitated and they can just catch fire."

I was in shock, but the images felt easy in my brain, honestly. Children made of fire. That seemed like something I wanted to see.

"How are they still alive?" I asked.

"It doesn't hurt them at all," she said, shrugging to highlight how dumbfounded she was. "They just get really red, like a bad sunburn, but they're not hurt."

"What about their clothes?" I asked.

"I'm still figuring this out, Lillian," she said. "I guess their clothes burn off."

"So they're just these naked kids on fire?"

"I think so. So you can understand why we're worried. I mean, Jasper is their father, though I'm fairly certain that this comes from Jane's family. It only started once she was raising them on her own. She was a real handful; I wouldn't be surprised if she was some weird pyromaniac. But Jasper is stepping up. He's going to take care of these kids, but we have to be smart about this. We've got a guesthouse on the property. Well, it used to be something else, but whatever. Jasper spent a fortune to have it renovated and properly safeguarded for the children. That's where you and the kids will live. It's really nice, Lillian. It's beautiful. I'd rather live there than in this huge house, if I'm being honest."

"I'd live with the kids?" I asked.

"Twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week," she said, and she could see on my face that this sucked. "We can arrange for a few days off, to have someone else watch them if you need a break one day. And it's just for the summer, until we can figure

out a more permanent solution, okay? Once the vetting is done and the nomination comes through, it'll all be easier."

"This is weird, Madison. You want me to raise your husband's fire children."

"Don't call them 'fire children.' Don't even joke about it. We can't really talk about it. The doctors have been very discreet, thanks to Jasper's connections, and they're not going to say anything, but we have to get a handle on the situation so that we can figure out how to solve this problem."

This was Madison, campaign manager. She looked at the children setting my fucking hair on fire, these naked fire starters, and she saw only a problem that could be solved with a press release or a photo op.

"I just don't know," I said. Those weird cucumber sandwiches were now making my stomach ache something fierce. My teeth hurt from the sweet tea. Where was Carl? Could he drive me back to my mom's house? Would Madison even let me leave?

"Lillian, please. I need you. And I've read your letters, okay? I know your life. Do you really feel like you're giving up much of anything? That friend who stole your television? Your mom making you drive her to some casino in Mississippi? We're going to pay you, okay? A ton of money. And, yeah, it's a lot of work, but Jasper is a powerful person. We can help you. After this is all over, you'll be free of your life and you'll have something better."

"Don't act like you're the one doing me a favor," I said, a little angry.

"No, I know that I'm asking a lot from you. I didn't want any of this, you know? But you're my friend, okay? I'm asking for you to be my friend and help me."

She wasn't wrong. My life sucked. It was bad, and it hurt because I had envisioned a life that was, if not Madison's fate, at least something that could sustain me. Really, truly, I still believed that I was destined for an amazing life. And if I tamed these children, if I cured their weird fire sickness? Wasn't that the start of an amazing life? Wasn't that something that got optioned for a prestigious biopic?

"Okay," I said. "Okay, I'll watch these kids. I'll be their . . . what did you call it?"

"Governess," she said, delighted.

"Yeah, I'll be that."

"I promise you that I will never forget this. Never."

"I'd better get home," I said. "Is Carl gone? Can somebody drive me to the bus station?"

"No," Madison said, shaking her head, standing up. "You aren't going home tonight. You're staying here. You'll spend the night. In fact, you don't have to go home if you don't want to. We're buying you everything you need. All new clothes! The best computer. Whatever you want."

"Okay," I said, so tired all of a sudden.

"What do you want for dinner tonight? Our cook can make anything."

"I don't know," I said. "Maybe pizza or something like that."

"We have a pizza oven!" she said. "The best pizza you've ever had."

We stared at each other. It was three in the afternoon. What did we do until dinner?

"Is Timothy still napping?" I asked, trying to break the awkwardness.

"Oh, yeah, I'd better go check on him. Do you want a drink or anything?"

“Maybe I can take a nap?” I asked.

I barely took note of how huge the house was now that I was able to move through it. We went up a spiral staircase, like in some big-budget musical. Madison was telling me some nonsense about how during the Civil War they took horses up these stairs and hid them in the attic from the Union army. It’s possible I imagined this, some kind of fever dream in the aftermath of making a life-altering decision.

She led me to a room that looked like there should be an exiled princess in the bed. Every single piece of furniture seemed like it weighed a thousand pounds. Probably some nineteenth-century carpenter had built the desk right in the room and it had been here ever since. There was a chandelier. I’d lived in apartments that were one-third the size of this single room. I made a mental note that I needed to stop being so awed by Madison’s wealth. I was going to live inside this place. Everything that she owned was now mine. I would need to get used to touching it and not being electrocuted.

“Do you need a nightgown?” she asked.

“I’ll just sleep in this stuff,” I replied.

“Sweet dreams,” she said, kissing me on the forehead. She was so tall; I’d forgotten how she’d kiss me on the forehead in high school, how soft her lips were. And then she was gone; the house had swallowed her up. I couldn’t even hear footsteps.

It was almost too much to get into the bed. I felt like the dirtiest thing this house had ever seen. I felt like an orphan who had broken in to the mansion. I kicked off my shoes and then delicately lined them up next to the bed. I got onto the bed, which took actual effort, it was so high up. I closed my

eyes and willed myself to sleep. I thought about those two kids, on fire, beckoning me with open arms. I watched them burn. They were smiling. I wasn't even asleep. I wasn't dreaming. This was my waking life now. They stood in front of me. And I pulled them into my arms. And I burst into flames.