

The University of Maine

DigitalCommons@UMaine

Electronic Theses and Dissertations

Fogler Library

Spring 5-5-2023

They're Coming for Us: A Novel

Sarah Walker Caron

University of Maine, sarah.w.caron@maine.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/etd>



Part of the [Fiction Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Caron, Sarah Walker, "They're Coming for Us: A Novel" (2023). *Electronic Theses and Dissertations*. 3789.
<https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/etd/3789>

This Open-Access Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UMaine. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UMaine. For more information, please contact um.library.technical.services@maine.edu.

THEY'RE COMING FOR US

By Sarah Walker Caron

B.A. Barnard College of Columbia University, 2001

A THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

(in English)

The Graduate School

The University of Maine

May 2023

Advisory Committee:

Hollie Adams, Assistant Professor of English, Advisor

Gregory Howard, Associate Professor of English

Rosalie Purvis, Librarian Assistant Professor of Theatre and English

© 2023 Sarah Walker Caron
All Rights Reserved

THEY'RE COMING FOR US

By Sarah Walker Caron
Thesis Advisor: Dr. Hollie Adams

An Abstract of the Thesis Presented
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Arts
(in English)
May 2023

They're Coming for Us is a feminist dystopian novel told in a non-linear format that explores an alternate timeline in which a series of mass shootings targeting women, queer and nonbinary people and allies have led to the removal of civil rights for women in the United States. Five years later, women and others who don't fit the heterosexual male paradigm remain excluded from the workforce, education, driving and other basic rights. But an underground network is working to right the country and restore constitutional rights. As the story unfolds forward and backward, the reader is left to confront how small incidents ignored can lead to big societal consequences.

DEDICATION

For Paige and Haley and all the women who've forged new paths to equality before us.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to Dr. Hollie Adams, who's steadfast guidance, encouragement and thoughtful reasoning helped me to build a story in a whole new world with familiar echoes of our own. Thank you also to Dr. Gregory Howard and Dr. Rosalie Purvis for serving on my thesis committee.

The writing of any work of length requires a village. To this end, thank you also to the Quarantine Writers group, which I formed during the early days of the pandemic as an outlet to begin writing again and with whom I explored these characters for the first time. Thank you to my colleagues in the Fall 2021 Graduate Fiction Workshop who helped me see what I couldn't yet in this tale. And thank you to Madison Brown for being a friend and sounding board for the last two years.

Thanks also goes to a special few people who read excerpts, rudimentary pieces and full drafts of this novel, encouraging me along the way. Thank you to Angelmary Koola for always being my cheerleader and reminding me that I can do anything. Thank you to Kimberley Gorelik for being an honest and astute reader. And thank you to Gibran Graham for so many things, including reading multiple drafts and withholding comment until I was ready to hear it.

A world of thanks also goes to my family for their unwavering support always. And thank you to my two children, William and Paige, whose patience, support and love made this all possible.

Table of Contents

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	V
TABLE OF CONTENTS	VI
CRITICAL INTRODUCTION.....	1
WORKS CITED	11
CHAPTER 1	13
CHAPTER 2.....	19
CHAPTER 3.....	28
CHAPTER 4.....	35
CHAPTER 5.....	40
CHAPTER 6.....	53
CHAPTER 7.....	62
CHAPTER 8.....	66
CHAPTER 9.....	71
CHAPTER 10.....	75
CHAPTER 11.....	79
CHAPTER 12.....	83
CHAPTER 13.....	93
CHAPTER 14.....	97
CHAPTER 15.....	102
CHAPTER 16.....	105
CHAPTER 17.....	109
CHAPTER 18.....	114
CHAPTER 19.....	117
CHAPTER 20.....	120
CHAPTER 21.....	124
CHAPTER 22.....	128
CHAPTER 23.....	137
CHAPTER 24.....	144
CHAPTER 25.....	149
CHAPTER 26.....	156
CHAPTER 27.....	165

CHAPTER 28	170
CHAPTER 29	179
CHAPTER 30	182
CHAPTER 31	189
CHAPTER 32	195
CHAPTER 33	201
CHAPTER 34	206
CHAPTER 35	210
CHAPTER 36	213
CHAPTER 37	217
CHAPTER 38	222
CHAPTER 39	229
CHAPTER 40	233
CHAPTER 41	236
CHAPTER 42	239
AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY	243

They're Coming for Us
A Novel
By Sarah Walker Caron

Critical Introduction

Sarah Walker Caron

When the world came to a halt in 2020 as the COVID-19 pandemic spread to Maine, I worked nonstop as a journalist to both edit news stories and keep a finger on the pulse of what *Bangor Daily News* readers needed. Toilet paper shortages? We wrote about alternatives. Celebrating birthdays? We were among the first to highlight ideas for covid-safe celebrations. The world was falling apart, and my staff of reporters aimed to help people navigate it.

While I felt capable and impactful at work, at home I was lost. Overnight, my office closed, schools closed and uncertainty loomed all around us. In preparing for the unknown, I found myself buying three weeks' worth of groceries and doing a quick renovation of an attic room to build a space for teaching my Husson University Professional Blogging class remotely as well as for my daughter to dance at home while her studio was closed.

While my children accepted what was happening, they also struggled with the abrupt change and uncertainty. On the morning of March 15, my 12-year-old daughter went to ballet company rehearsal for a show she was to perform in. By the end of the day, both her dance studio and school were closed. At first, it was supposed to be two weeks. We anticipated rehearsals beginning again. My son looked forward to the start of outdoor track season at the end of March. I was sure this was only a blip.

In trauma, there is often a before and after — a point at which everything changes. In terms of the pandemic, that came for me on Saturday, March 15 just days

after the first presumed covid-19 case in Maine, as I sat on the couch, my laptop ready, working on an unscheduled day and realizing that everything was changing around us. The magnitude of the uncertainty was overwhelming, and I found myself thinking back to advice my mother had given me years earlier: It's up to the parent to set the tone for the children. I aimed to convey a sense of security and stability to my children amid the turmoil we were living through.

Our lives became small. The world became unfamiliar. The worries were legion.

In that time of great uncertainty and unfamiliarity, a nugget of a story began to form in my mind — an outlet for the stressors I was experiencing but attempting to mitigate for my children. If the world could shut down over an illness, what else could disrupt schools, businesses and government like that? And, moreover, what would that disrupted world look like years in the future?

My story began with two things: a main character and an idea of women being hunted. Instead of a biological threat, the threat was a violent political uprising. And instead of one presumptive diagnosis, it was a coordinated attack that sought to upend the way the world operated.

Charlie — named for a character in a Doctor Who radio drama, Charley Pollard — was born on one of those dark days, whispering her story of loss, fear and overcoming. Chapter 1 is the first chapter I wrote, though in a less fleshed out form, as I imagined how that world would operate without visible women and gender-queer people. For the timeframe, I chose an alternate timeline in the early 2000s. This settles the characters in a pre-smartphone era when landlines and email were the primary modes of communication. It also creates a space in which going off-grid isn't just possible, it's

almost easy. In this world, the horrific event happens in February 2000. Red Tuesday is a day on which women, supporters of women and anyone who isn't male is systematically hunted on college campuses. Thousands die. The U.S. government soon shuts everything down under the guise of protecting the remaining women, who are forced out of the workforce and whose rights are quickly taken away.

In this world, 9/11 never happens, a choice I made early on in the process for several reasons. First, there's already a massive crisis in the United States that has redefined gender roles and recemented the nation in a traditional misogynistic form. Therefore, the United States isn't the progressive place that hijackers targeted in real life. Instead, it's become increasingly familiar to the extremists.

I've also taken liberties with the government and who's in power. A fictitious president speaks to the nation. The transformative election of 2000, known for its embattled aftermath, doesn't happen. This was deliberate to allow that president to be painted as notably evil without positioning a real-life person in that role.

And, finally, as the story progresses, innovations that actually happened — such as the release of Blackberry phones and other smart devices — don't occur. Without women in the workforce, innovation would be stunted as it is in the novel.

Part of this story — the idea of the rise of a misogynistic class that takes over the government and country — was inspired by actual events. The world of *They're Coming for Us* doesn't become dangerous overnight — there are warnings in the form of women being killed on or near college campuses. There's rising hate toward women, nonbinary people, trans people and so many other groups who aren't men.

The real-life death of 18-year-old Barnard College student Tessa Majors on Dec. 11, 2019, in Morningside Park just outside of Columbia University (Paybarah and Traub) was still fresh in my head in the early writing of this. I was following the arrests and early court appearances of the teens accused of the brutal murder. It seemed so senseless that she'd been beaten and stabbed in the robbery (Croft and Morales). On Dec. 13, 2019, two days after the death, Barnard President Sian Leah Beilock wrote to students: "Some of you may be scared. Our sense of safety in our community and our city has been brutally shaken. A tragedy has happened in a park where so many of us have spent time." As I was writing, I thought of this collective fear and its similarities to the collective fear our nation was facing over the onset of the pandemic. I noted how fear makes people do unexpected things that would otherwise be unthinkable. People rebel, people hide, people find ways to go on.

A world in which smart young women have been targeted in mass shootings on college campuses is also the unthinkable. And yet, it's not. On Dec. 6, 1989, fourteen young women were killed at Montreal's Polytechnique engineering school by a 25-year-old man who was enraged by feminism and saw the future engineers as what stood between him and his dreams. Elizabeth Kastor wrote about the aftermath of the incident for *The Washington Post*, noting how the aftermath was more than grieving lives lost. It called into question the gender politics of Canada:

When the 25-year-old unemployed Marc Lepine shot 27 people, mostly singling out women for his gun before turning it on himself, he did more than shatter the lives of hundreds of students here. He threw into question this country's most basic assumptions about gender and national character, and he forced Canadians

to grapple with the subjects of violence against women, relations between the sexes and the possibility that an anonymous breed of murder long assumed to be endemic to the United States has arrived here. (Kastor)

Lepine's actions and beliefs weren't solitary, though. This had happened before.

The murders in Montreal had echoes of a similar anti-feminist killing in Ottawa in the 1970s as well. In a story for *The Gazette*, a newspaper in Montreal, Canada, writer Mary Lamey spoke to a survivor of the 1975 mass shooting who noted the parallels: “[Anne] McGrath said that in recovering from the incident she was forced to come to terms with society's view of men who murder. ... She joined other feminists and women's rights activists across the country in saying that society must view Lepine's attack on the women at the Polytechnique as an act of misogyny, hatred of women” (Lamey). In Lepine's suicide note, the story notes, allusions were made to growing feminist power and a belief that it was power that should belong to men. An inability to accept equality was a belief others shared, experts said: “Although he may have been extreme in his vengeful actions, he is not alone as a man in being unable to accept that women are gaining in equality,” [Marie-Andree Bertrand, a professor of criminology at the U de M] said. “These manifestations of anti-woman and anti-feminist sentiments are all around us” (Lamey).

The years of 1975 and 1989 weren't unique in these feminist hate crimes, misogyny and harassment of women. The MeToo movement exposed sexual harassment and sexual assaults by powerful men in all industries, for instance. And we've seen misogyny in action in the two most recent presidential elections when viable female candidates were attacked and embattled. Paul Waldman wrote about this in *The*

Washington Post: “[S]ome of the challenges women candidates face are the same as women face in other contexts, like the workplace. [Kate] Manne points to experimental research showing that when a woman is perceived to be competent, people will decide she's unlikeable, but if she's likeable, they'll decide she isn't as competent” (Waldman).

I channeled my concerns, anxieties and fears — not just about the pandemic but also about its impact on women — into this novel, creating a world where toxic masculinity won the battle but not the war. Woven together with thoughts of sexism, anger and oppression, I created a world where women and others who aren't male have been systematically shoved out of education and the workforce as toxic masculinity is thinly veiled by the illusion of protection. Using actual events as inspiration and real places as settings, my work begins to feel possible because it's familiar. Because it doesn't seem that impossible.

An important aspect of this novel is its catalyst: a coordinated attack that takes the form of many mass shootings happening at once. In this timeframe, mass shootings at schools were on the rise. But, moreover, my own experiences as the parent of a mass shooting survivor allowed me to write from my emotional core, hopefully presenting a vivid and realistic account of what the experience and its aftermath would feel like to the characters experiencing the crisis. News stories, like a 1989 sidebar about student journalists in their office when the Polytechnique shooting occurred in Montreal helped me see this from more angles as I approached revisions to make it more realistic (Buckie). This part of the story is critical to the novel's narrative arc, but I also want to be sensitive to readers like myself, who experience distress around anything relating to mass shootings. For that reason, I am including a content warning at the beginning of

the text to alert other survivors and their families that this difficult subject plays a key role in the novel. This will allow them to choose for themselves whether to read or not, based on their own individual ability to navigate even the suggestion of raw violence.

As I approached the novel as a whole, I also found inspiration in novels in the speculative and dystopian genres that helped me shape both the timeline and the nonlinear structure that I used to tell this story as an unraveling of the past, present and future.

A few years before the onset of the pandemic, I read *Vox* by Christina Dalcher, which was published in 2018. This novel tells the tale of a world in which women have been controlled with electro-shock bracelets that limit how much they can speak. In taking away their collective voices, men failed to account for the indomitable spirit and the lengths they will go to in order to survive. So, despite being limited to 100 words a day, forbidden from using pens and paper or reading books or even communicating in non-verbal ways, the knowledge that women hold is still needed. And that becomes the key to freedom.

This was one of the first feminist dystopian novels I read and it resonated with me, both in its possibility and its vivid warning about the danger of anti-feminist movements. These sentiments exist in real life and could create scenarios where women's rights are taken away, which was something I considered as I was writing. Moreover, in a similar way to *Vox's* salvation, it is knowledge and spirit that becomes the key to freedom in *They're Coming for Us*.

In terms of storytelling, *An Ocean of Minutes* by Thea Lim was influential in my development of this novel. Also published in 2018, this novel explores a world in which

a deadly flu pandemic has changed everything. When Polly's boyfriend catches it, she agrees to take a one-way trip into the future to work as a bonded laborer, paying for his treatment so he survives. They make plans to meet in twelve years — that's how far forward she time travels — but after an unexpected re-routing that takes her an additional five years into the future, Polly is in a charged and divided world with little hope of finding her boyfriend. Told in a nonlinear fashion, this is a heartbreaking story about the complexity of human relationships.

I was inspired by the way Lim moves between time periods and places, giving the reader a sense of before, during and after that unravels out of order. It added such depth to the novel, and as I wrote, I found myself drawn to the concept. What originally were written as flashbacks became chapters set in the past. And I liked how this allowed me to build a history from before the unraveling to after its demise without having to tell the reader everything.

In *They're Coming for Us*, I use this technique while also filtering between several points of view in order to give the reader a broad sense of the world these characters inhabit. This allowed me to take the reader into a post-Red Tuesday encounter with a sneering police officer and also a boots-on-the-ground supply run. The reader is given multiple inroads to this world with a selection of characters that represent women at different stages of trauma and repercussions after the erasure of their rights.

In my first Graduate Fiction Workshop with Hollie Adams, we also read *Parable of the Sower* by Octavia Butler, which I found haunting and inspiring. Widely regarded as the first example of Afro-Futurism, this novel was published in 1993. It's set in 2024

— the future — and examines what could happen to a world that’s undergone global climate change, economic crisis, social chaos and dramatic change.

It’s a story of relationships and power struggles, of the ways in which families hurt each other and the way an unrelated group can find family in each other. Butler used a variety of writing techniques to create the world and its parameters. For instance, she used action to reveal backstory such as when the main protagonist and her family are going to be baptized. Although the chapter is about the baptism, it’s the journey there that does the most work — revealing the world beyond the walls of where they live so that the reader may see how the country has fallen, changed and reached a detrimental point. This gives readers a sense of place. Although the first several chapters have little dialogue, much is revealed through dialogue in the later parts of the novel. This allows the reader to learn what’s happened in other areas of the country, for instance, in a natural way. I’ve used both these techniques in *They’re Coming for Us*, as a way to reveal the world and its troubles and answer reader questions in an organic way.

Although *The Handmaid’s Tale* by Margaret Atwood was mentioned to me several times in my process due to a similar premise of women’s rights being taken away and a new world formed, I chose not to read this novel until my own was completed. I didn’t want my work to be unduly influenced by the notable and renowned book before I had a chance to construct my own world and narrative.

I’ve since read *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the groundbreaking novel about a world in which a violent overthrow of the government has led to a world where women have lost their rights and cannot hold jobs, have bank accounts or travel freely. More notably,

women are now sorted into roles based on class and fertility status. For the handmaids, who are stripped of their names and given an “Of-” name, this has resulted in government-sanctioned rape in the interest of bearing children for the ruling class.

While reading the book I noted that the area in which Offred lives is set in close proximity to a college campus in the Boston area in the neighborhood surrounding a college. It sounds like Harvard/Cambridge. I also noted the similarities in how the rebels infiltrate the ranks of the new regime. Unlike my story, there is a class structure in place that offers some women some rights. For instance, the Aunts are in a position of power. Wives are given more agency than others and manage the discipline inside the houses. Women have been sorted into classes and roles. They are controlled in these ways. Moreover, an organized overthrow of the government has occurred, leading to the Constitution being set aside. The Constitution still exists in my novel and the government is intact.

What I hope my writing conveys is a sense of how close the world is to social destruction. Between the epidemic of mass shootings, the whittling away of women’s rights and the rise of extremist politics, a dystopian world in which everything is changed for the alleged protection of a population isn’t so far-fetched. Consider this alternative history as a warning of what could happen if we allow toxic masculinity to fester and bubble over.

Works Cited

- Atwood, Margaret. *The Handmaid's Tale*. 1986. First Anchor Books Edition, Penguin Random House, 1998.
- Beiloc, Sian Leah. "Mourning the tragic death of a Barnard Student." Online. Dec. 11, 2019. <https://barnard.edu/mourning-tess-majors>
- Buckie, Catherine, *Montreal Gazette*. 1989. "Help, Help, I'm Going to Die': [FINAL Edition]." *Edmonton Journal*, Dec 07, A3.
<https://library.umaine.edu/auth/EZproxy/test/authej.asp?url=https://search.proquest.com/newspapers/help-im-going-die/docview/251542142/se-2>.
- Butler, Octavia. *Parable of the Sower*. 1993. Grand Central Publishing, Hachette Book Group, 2000.
- Croft, Jay and Mark Morales. "Teens Plead Not Guilty in Stabbing Death of Barnard College Student Tessa Majors." *CNN Wire Service*, Feb 19, 2020.
<https://library.umaine.edu/auth/EZproxy/test/authej.asp?url=https://search.proquest.com/wire-feeds/teens-plead-not-guilty-stabbing-death-barnard/docview/2357473801/se-2>.
- Dalcher, Christina. *vox*. Berkley, 2018.
- Kastor, Elizabeth. "When Shooting Stopped, Canada had Changed; as Country Mourns 14 Women, it Grapples with Issues of Gender, National Character: [FINAL Edition]." *The Washington Post (pre-1997 Fulltext)*, Dec 10, 1989, pp. a03.
ProQuest,
<https://library.umaine.edu/auth/EZproxy/test/authej.asp?url=https://search.proquest.com/newspapers/when-shooting-stopped-canada-had-changed-as/docview/307231410/se-2>.
- Lamey, Mary. 1989. "'Anti-Woman and Anti-Feminist Sentiments are all Around Us': [FINAL Edition]." *The Gazette*, Dec 09, B1.
<https://library.umaine.edu/auth/EZproxy/test/authej.asp?url=https://search.proquest.com/newspapers/anti-woman-feminist-sentiments-are-all-around-us/docview/431884298/se-2>.
- Lim, Thea. *An Ocean of Minutes*. Gallery Books, Simon & Schuster, Inc. 2018.
- Paybarah, Azi and Alex Traub. 2019. "New York is Unnerved by Student's Killing." *New York Times (1923-)*, Dec 13, 2019.
<https://library.umaine.edu/auth/EZproxy/test/authej.asp?url=https://search.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/new-york-is-unnerved-students-killing/docview/2748095165/se-2>.

Waldman, Paul. "How misogyny is already shaping the presidential race." *Washington Post*, March 25, 2019. *Gale In Context: High School* (accessed January 27, 2023).
https://link-gale-com.wv-o-ursus-proxy02.ursus.maine.edu/apps/doc/A580038514/SUIC?u=maine_orono&sid=summon&xid=e9d8ffeb.

Chapter 1

February 2005

Ducking into an alleyway, Charlie held her breath as she shrank into the shadows and the pungent rotten cabbage stink of decomposing rats. She shuddered. The rats and the maggots that feasted on them were bad, but the humans — the angry, misogynistic humans — were worse. In the shadows, pressed against the faded graffiti on the walls, she was safe for the moment. They would have to look directly in, really look for her, to find her.

Thunk-thunk-thunk. The rhythmic sound passed without a pause.

She could see him — about her height, wrapped in a bulletproof jumpsuit, a black helmet strapped around his chin. Men like him were rare in this part of the city these days — but so were all people. The consensus seemed to be that there was no point in patrolling the abandoned campus and neighborhood with frequency — the sources inside said that the men were certain they'd know if there was anyone living there.

The men were wrong.

In profile, his face could have belonged to anyone — a cousin, a former classmate, a friend. In the before-time, he would have looked just like any other guy. But now, clad in protective wear and patrolling streets, he wasn't. He'd never be again. He was one of them.

As the footsteps faded and disappeared, tears welled in Charlie's eyes. Her lungs screamed. Finally, when her body was in full revolt, she gulped in the putrid air tasting

the decomposition and decay, the sweet vomit taste tingling in her throat. Her relief mingled with revulsion. But she kept pulling in more air, until her lungs felt replenished.

She wasn't seen — for now, at least. This time.

Still crouching, Charlie closed her eyes and listened. She found that when she cut back on the senses she was using, she could hone in better. That's how she became invisible as she traveled the city. She strained her ears, waiting and listening. No one. No boots or breaths. No brush of fabric against itself. The horns and tires that provided the soundtrack for city living just a few years earlier were rare now. In the wasteland that once housed thriving academic communities, the buildings crumbled and statues toppled with no one to care for them. As the academic community shuttered, the neighborhood residents had left too, mostly fleeing to Westchester and Dutchess and Fairfield counties. Some went even farther, crowding into rural towns in Northern Maine where a certain self-sufficiency was expected and New Yorkers weren't prepared for.

But who wanted to live in the epicenter of chaos?

Downtown, it was a different world — a street world with loud vendors, packed pavement and sly stabbings so frequent that the police didn't even respond to them anymore. What was one more street creature stabbed? Downtown, they'd toppled a university too. But the crowded streets were so much more than the purple banners and intricate archway that once celebrated that school.

So downtown survived and Morningside Heights disappeared.

To the visible eye, at least.

Hearing nothing, Charlie stepped from the alleyway and walked with hurried steps to the once-grand limestone and brick building. The facade, once a beautiful

beacon of hope and skill, was crumbling. A streak of black marked the upper floors. It looked accidental — like it had been smeared with flying paint in the street clashes of five years earlier.

But that was the secret.

The black streak was no accident or battle wound. It was a sign.

This, with its crumbling steps and creaking bars that once protected residents from dangling from windowsills, was the place.

With a swift look around, Charlie darted up and through the unlocked door. Inside, the inky darkness threatened to swallow her whole. She didn't hesitate. One-two-three ... twenty-five steps forward, fifteen steps to the right. She bent down, feeling for the hatch — the soft knot in the wood floor that would be unnoticeable if someone flipped the cobwebbed light switch. Not that anyone ever turned on the lights there anymore. This former residence hall was abandoned — or, at least it appeared that way.

There was a method to everything. A pattern even. It was how they survived.

The twenty-five by fifteen step grid in a seemingly abandoned building was just one example of the unwritten methods they'd created for the transmission of materials in the underground network. There were at least a dozen buildings like this around the former campus — all seemingly abandoned and forgotten, all harboring secret information and goods transfer stations. Some even housed parts of the underground network, providing shelter and beds that once were used by students.

Her finger slipped into the knot. She lifted her hand and the smooth wood came easily with it. Feeling around inside, she found the relatively small parcel — fraying twine and rough paper signaling to her brain that this was it. This was the parcel she was there for — just five inches by eight inches — and slim. She snagged the twine with a

single fingertip and lifted it out, tucking it into an interior pocket in her many-pocketed utility jacket. Still plenty of room for more items in her pockets. Replacing the wood, she moved slowly to make the least amount of noise.

Even in safe spaces like this, she didn't dare make herself known. Invisibility wasn't a game — it was her survival. It was everyone's survival.

Retracing her steps, she approached the door and then stopped, holding her breath. She listened for a while again, eyes closed, before finally slipping out the door with a quick glance around. Holding her head down so that her hood obscured her face, Charlie continued on her route.

The grocer was next. But it was nothing like the West Side Market that she used to stroll around, randomly picking up plastic clamshells of mac and cheese and premade grain salads. No, the grocer, like the safe spaces, was hidden from view — a black market literally underground in a space that no one knew was there, except those that did. She reached the intersection of Claremont and 120th Street and swerved left and then down the ramp. The garage had once held the cars of faculty and the richest of students. Now, it was just home to layers of graffiti and a carpet of discarded condoms and needles. With hurried steps, she descended the ramps — one, then two, then three. Next to a pillar, the dirty, flush-set door blended in. Tightly fitted into the space, the heavy metal door used to omit a loud grunt when yanked open. But over time, the metal had softened and regular applications of lubricant resulted in a mere sigh as she opened it and stepped inside.

“You have arrived,” the woman said, her hair hanging in knotty, greasy strings. Years ago, the woman's hair would have made her sadly invisible in the city. Now, it was a deliberate and welcome status. “I have the order waiting. Pack yourself up.”

She gestured to the faded green card table where a jar of dried beans, a parcel of rice, a half dozen spotted apples and a few onions waited. Charlie approached and began moving the items into her pockets. A few apples in the biggest pocket. She pulled a dozen eggs from the large pocket on the other side of her coat and replaced it with the onion and rice. Unscrewing the top of the bean jar, she stuffed a wad of cotton from an interior pocket inside before resealing it — it would dull the noise as she walked. That went into an inside pocket too. She fit the rice parcel snugly beside it.

“Where’s the bacon?” she inquired. This would feed her pod through the weekend with careful rationing. In the space they inhabited, a secret courtyard held chickens for eggs and a few meager raised beds for growing during the warmer months. They stored whatever they could and supplemented with small grocery runs like this. It wasn’t much, but it had sustained them for much of the last five years.

The woman looked cross, like Charlie had made a snide comment or something. But Charlie had memorized the list and wasn’t leaving without the last item. That bacon would flavor their meals and leave behind lard for cooking too.

With a deep sigh, the woman ducked into a backroom and emerged with a frozen package. Just one, instead of the three they wanted. “This is all,” she said gruffly. “My other customers need to eat too.”

Charlie took it. It would have to do.

“Thank you,” she said. It would be easy to grumble about the short order, but why? They were all facing the same difficulties in different ways. She handed the woman the carton of eggs. “The transfer was done this morning. But I also brought you these.”

Charlie didn't wait for a response. Instead, she headed back to the door and slipped out. Pausing, she closed her eyes and listened again before hurrying up the ramps, out into the streets and back to the bunker.

Chapter 2

September 1999

Emma didn't recognize the number that flashed on the small green-hued screen of her Nokia 5110. The sparkly light blue cover, the one she'd selected especially for today, caught the light as she tilted it trying to make sense of who it could be.

It was the first day of the semester, and she appreciated the serene color of the phone cover. She didn't appreciate the unexpected call from an unexpected number though. The trill of the phone ringing jarred her. She wasn't used to it yet — or the level of connectivity it brought. She'd only bought the mobile phone a few months earlier as a present to herself for having a paper published. She wasn't sure she liked it really. Sometimes she just left the phone at home so she could be unreachable like the days not long past.

And on this day, this gloriously sunny and warm September morning, the ringing made her wish she'd left the phone on the kitchen counter.

She always found first classes to be stressful, so the phone was merely building on what she was already feeling. First days were when she didn't know the names that paired with the faces of her students. And that's when they didn't yet know if she could be trusted. Many would be painfully quiet. The ones that weren't would simply talk and talk. It was an uncomfortable balance that she would seek to upset with every meeting until the quietest in the class became the most heard. She was so engrossed in how she'd handle the uncertainty and unfamiliarity.

The phone call wasn't part of her day's plan. Not that you can control when a phone rings per se. But she hadn't expected the past to burst into her present that day.

She answered. If someone was calling her brand-new private cell phone, it must be important.

“Hello, Emma Thorne speaking,” she said into the tiny microphone as she paused and stepped to the side of college walk to let others pass.

“Emma, hi,” his casual familiarity was conveyed in the way he constructed the simplest of greetings. Hearing it was like a hot flame hitting wax, turning it liquid and pliable. Emma stared toward Low Library, seeing nothing.

“Greg? How did you ...” She didn’t finish the sentence. Her voice just trailed off, lost in the crowd of passing students.

“I asked Adam for it. I know you two were talking for a while.”

Talking. Was that what he called it? She’d dated Adam for six months, nonexclusively. He was sweet and kind, but also hesitant and uncertain — he hadn’t wanted to upset Greg, a man who used to be his best friend. Emma and Adam had a great time going to parties and dancing at the club, but he refused to sleep with her. He kissed her plenty of times but wouldn’t get any more physical than that. When she’d let her hand wander, he’d gently move it away. When she started to unbutton her top, he’d suddenly have an emergency. She’d tried to talk to him, tried to tell him that Greg shouldn’t be a factor in things if they liked each other. But in the end, that’s why they simply stopped calling each other. She enjoyed Adam’s company but wanted a relationship that would progress. And she wasn’t willing to fight for it against the specter of her high school boyfriend. There were other fish, as they said.

Emma didn’t reply.

“Anyway, I wanted to call you to see how you are and what’s happening with you.”

Five years, eight months and 21 days. That's how long it had been since Emma sat in a car at a lakeside playground after dark and asked him if he even wanted to be with her anymore. When he answered that he wasn't sure but not really, she told him it was done. She'd driven him home in silence and forced herself to stop calling him. And it had been successful, except for that one moment of weakness on his birthday a few months later when she phoned his house. His mom answered and her curt tone told her not to call again. She hadn't.

After that, she accepted their breakup as final.

"I'm fine. Teaching at Barnard. Using that expensive degree you said would be useless," she replied, taking care not to infuse her words with malice. She was aiming for a laugh — an attempt at the humor they once shared.

He snorted, just faintly, and she smiled, happy for the success. It slowed her rapidly beating heart, just a bit.

"I'm proud of you, you know," he replied, which caught her off guard. That wasn't something he'd ever said to her before about anything. "You told me what you wanted to do with your life and then you went off and did it. It's pretty amazing."

She could hear honking and the lilt of voices chattering and passing in the background as he spoke — the noises of a city. She wondered where he was in relation to her. She wondered if he wondered the same thing. But then she banished the thought from her mind, using the trick she'd adopted in childhood: picturing a short, stout, balding janitor in a blue jumpsuit with a blue hat pushing a wood and straw broom across the floor of her mind. As he finished, he tipped his hat to her and the thought vanished.

“Thank you,” she replied, knowing it was the right thing to say even if she didn’t particularly mean it then.

“Hey, so would you like to get coffee? Today, maybe? I could meet you somewhere on the Upper West Side?”

Greg had never visited her when she was in college at NYU. They’d argued about it dozens of times but he refused to drive to lower Manhattan despite only living a little more than an hour away. And when she headed to grad school in Massachusetts, he only drove north twice. She’d resented that. She wanted to be with someone who put in the effort she did. She wanted to be worth visiting, wherever she was. That had hastened the end of their relationship.

“Um, well, it’s the first day of classes so I am pretty swamped all day.”

“Ok, that’s okay. How about a drink this evening then? My patrol supervisor told me that there are some fun bars around the campus.”

He was pleading. That was new, she thought. And he’d been talking to his patrol supervisor about her? How odd.

“That’s where the students go so no. And I don’t really know why you’d want to meet up now anyway. But ... I guess. How about a milkshake? I will meet you at Tom’s at 5,” Emma said, wanting to end the call and questioning her snap decision to agree even though she could feel the resentment and anger bubbling inside her again. She’d been free from it for so long. But a nugget of curiosity was lodged somewhere in her head. Still, she didn’t offer any other clues as to where Tom’s was. She wouldn’t make it easy for him. He’d either know or have to find out from someone else.

“Yeah. Perfect. Thank you,” he said rapidly. “I’ll see you then.”

“Bye, Greg.”

Already she could feel the nausea of regret in her belly. But she didn't have time to dwell in it. She had to get to class.

Hours later, she pulled open the squeaky glass door at Tom's and was greeted with the surly glance of a waitress. They were never particularly friendly in there.

"Counter," the copper haired woman called. The hair color was so vivid it couldn't be real. And her response wasn't either — it was neither question nor offer. More a command.

Emma felt the blood rush into her face. She wanted a little more privacy than that. And the diner wasn't particularly busy so they could spare the space. She smoothed the tunic she'd changed into after running home to freshen up.

"No, a booth. I am meeting someone," she said, decisively gesturing to the vacant seats on the other side of the restaurant.

"Whatever," the woman replied and Emma knew this was code for "have it your way but it doesn't mean I am going to be nice when I serve you."

The vinyl stretched across the uncomfortable booth seating squeaked as she slid into the seat, feeling the taught springs poke and prod as she did. For an eatery that drew so many tourists who actually believed Seinfeld was taped here (it wasn't; that was done on a sound lot — only the outside was on the show) and so many others who fell for Suzanne Vega's song — the place was kind of a dump. It was a favorite, sure, but also a dump filled with uncomfortable booths, rude waitstaff and way too much wood paneling.

"What do you want?" the surly waitress rolled her eyes as she spoke.

“I’m meeting someone,” Emma said firmly. But the waitress just stood there, practically demanding she order something. “Fine. I’ll have a Broadway Shake. And onion rings.”

The scratch of pen scribbling across the order pad stopped abruptly and the waitress walked away without another word. Emma sighed loudly, annoyed at the attitude, even though she knew to expect it. It still didn’t sit well. Couldn’t the woman try to be a little friendly? Just a little? Still, Emma chose Tom’s for this meeting because she knew they’d be rushed out — and that would help keep this from being some long, drawn out, tearful reunion.

If he showed up, that was.

Emma glanced at her watch. 5:06 p.m.

It wasn’t like Greg to be late. At least, she didn’t think it was. He was always waiting when her train pulled into the station when she went home to visit in college. And back in high school, he’d been so painfully timely that she made him wait a few times while she finished applying mascara or fastening her earrings.

The waitress was approaching with her shake, the off-menu concoction that combined coffee ice cream and swirls of chocolate syrup that was the best thing they offered. And it was huge. It also signaled the start of an invisible clock for the waitress — one she’d use to rush Emma through her time at Tom’s. The onion rings weren’t even out yet, but she knew time was ticking away.

The glass hit the table with a definitive thud and Emma jumped. A straw already sat inside, the end of a paper wrapper waiting to be plucked off.

With a squeak, the door opened and there he was. He looked the same, mostly, his green eyes looking around for her. He stood a little straighter now though than he

had when they were younger. She watched him scan the restaurant for her but she didn't make any move to make it easier. His light brown hair was closely cropped. His jeans hung comfortably from his slim hips. When his eyes landed on hers, she saw them brighten.

"Emma!" he said, walking toward her booth.

"Greg," she responded, her voice a flat line.

He looked like he wanted to hug her, but she didn't make a move to rise.

"You ordered," he said, his face falling just a bit.

"They don't let you hold a booth without ordering," she said, bending forward to sip her milkshake.

He'd barely lowered himself to the booth when the waitress reappeared with her order pad.

"What do you want?"

"Um, uh, can I have ..."

"Any day now." She tapped her pen against the pad rapidly, as if adding a percussion to her impatience.

"A chocolate shake and a cheeseburger. No fries."

Again, the waitress finished writing and walked away without a word.

"Not very nice in here, are they?"

"It's a busy New York diner. What do you expect?" Emma shrugged, not letting on that she agreed. She just didn't care enough to stop coming.

Greg looked at her, studying her.

"How have you been?" he asked.

"Fine. Like I told you on the phone, I am a professor now. Things are good. You?"

“Not bad. Alice and I split up a while ago. I finished the academy and work at the 48th precinct as a patrolman now. The Bronx. It’s rough over there and I love it.”

“Why’d you call?”

“I miss you. I mean, you were there through so much. You helped me train to get into the academy and never let me give up so I wanted you to know it was worth it. But also, I was thinking about when we used to go sit on the swings at night. It was so nice to unwind together like that — pretending we were kids again.”

“Greg, if you are here because you think we have something to rekindle, you are wasting your time.”

The waitress slammed the steaming onion rings and chocolate shake on the table. Emma jumped again.

“My burger?” Greg asked, smiling.

“Not out.”

Greg rolled his eyes at her back as she hustled away. Then he looked at Emma again, a warmth emanating.

“I know. I know it’s really, truly over. I know you don’t want this again. And that’s not why I called. I swear.”

“Then why did you?”

Greg took a deep breath, settling back into the uncomfortable booth seat. He studied her — not in the suggestive way that used to excite her, but in a more serious way like he was weighing something.

“I’m worried, Emma. We get reports every morning about threats and chatter. There’s been more and more appearing that seem to reference colleges like yours and threats of violence. I don’t know what it means but I am worried about you.”

Emma took a long sip from her milkshake, holding the liquid in her bulging cheeks, and then bit a hot onion ring while the shake was still in her mouth. She loved sensation of the hot food meeting the cold. She chewed, gently, careful not to dribble anything. This gave her a chance to think without speaking.

“I can’t believe you still do that,” Greg said, his face betraying his slight disgust.

She swallowed and smiled. “It’s good. You should try it sometime.”

She wasn’t sure what to say otherwise, so she kept eating and kept thinking.

“The threats aren’t specific, but the volume of them is concerning. A year ago, we’d see maybe one on the report. Now it’s dozens every day.”

“Nothing has happened though,” she said. “I mean, maybe it’s all talk? But what does that even mean? Chatter? Threats? What are they saying?”

“Sometimes it’s nonspecific about where and they talk about shooting a lot of women. Sometimes it’s directed at specific women — usually around when they are in the news. Rape, murder, abduction. It runs the gamut.”

“Are you supposed to be telling me this?”

“Probably not. But like I said, I’m worried.”

Chapter 3
February 2005

Charlie woke with a shake, cold droplets of sweat gathered on her brow. Her eyes darted around, seeking the yellow flowered curtains, pink molding and closed closet doors. Those were the trappings of her childhood room, something that appeared often in her dreams these days.

“I’m on the 18th floor of East Campus Hall. These walls are home now,” she said aloud. It was the mantra she said every day when waking in the sparse room. It was how she reminded herself of reality and shed the shackles of her dreams.

They called this the bunker. It wasn’t underground, but it was concealed. And it was where many of them lived.

A few years earlier, this had been sought-after college housing for seniors. The building’s interior courtyard — only accessible from the inside — and unusual amenities (three gyms, a piano lounge and a maid to clean once a week) had made it the most desirable among the university’s many residence halls when the university still operated.

Now it was a refuge.

Many of the features that made it desired campus housing also made it perfect for their compound when everything fell apart.

She hadn’t chosen this life. Not exactly. It was a life of necessity.

Charlie liked to believe her grandmother would be proud of her for surviving and for being a leader in the movement that was going to return women to their rightful place — at the top.

At the moment though, she was in a different world where the rights her grandmother had once marched for had been eroded in the name of perceived safety. She was living in secret, trying to help salvage their future. Around her, there was peeling white paint, thick and dark curtains covering the window and a single daisy in a cup of water on the almost bare dresser.

When The Initiative came for them — the women named to the Angus 100 list — they'd gone into hiding. Female-identifying people had made up more than 65 percent of the list, a high honor that identified the best and the brightest among scientists under age 30. The headlines had been glowing — touting the femme takeover of the list and how labs had transformed from a boys' club to empowering, inclusive spaces.

But that honor had become a dark mark when the list became a secret blueprint of sorts for The Initiative. A to-do list, even.

They resented the women and didn't believe in a rainbow of gender identities. They wanted to roll back the clock hundreds of years.

They had changed everything.

In the five years since, The Initiative had successfully won seats in congress as a new party with an old name — the Bull Moose party. They'd taken over news programs and seated commentators on every major network. And they'd installed themselves as the heads of towns, cities and school boards across the nation. They were in charge.

For now.

But as The Initiative celebrated their wins, a growing roar of dissent bubbled in hidden spaces. Many of those who had been hunted didn't just die.

Initially, they hid and waited. Some set up camp in remote corners of the subway system. Some squatted in abandoned classrooms. But when it was done — more than

10,000 dead on the twin campuses alone and so many others scattered to the winds — they began planning. When they came out of the underground, they found ways into the abandoned buildings and took them over quietly.

The scene in Morningside Heights wasn't unique. At universities around the country where women from the list had been singled out and attacked, they gathered. Young women, trans women, nonbinary people and some brave professors organized using the dark web and secret codes. Sensitive information was hand delivered in a slow, methodical mail system that ran in secret. Those who'd had cellphones had smashed them in the early days, fearing the government might be able to track them. Laptops and computers were only allowed in protective bunkers where IP addresses could be masked with a series of complicated routing and firewalls. Once they entered hiding, they didn't email their families or call home for fear of endangering each other. And they most certainly didn't let anyone know where they actually lived.

The Initiative hadn't considered the brainpower of the people they were targeting — or their ability to play the long game. Of course, it had ended up being a much longer long game than anyone expected.

Officially, Columbia University and Barnard College had closed five years ago. Unofficially, it was the center of the movement — the place where the decisions were made, the plans were laid and where everything started and ended. The other schools looked to the twin campuses for guidance and direction.

And within the campus, East Campus offered privacy and seclusion they couldn't get in the brownstones or the more centrally located dorms. They lived on the upper floors — ones that couldn't be easily seen from the street. At night, they closed blackout curtains tightly over the windows so that they could light the rooms.

Meanwhile, the courtyard — once the place students gazed at but seldom used — was part of the plan. Obscured from view, they could set up life-sustaining operations there. A system of raised bed gardens for vegetables and fruits in the warm months. A chicken coop. Perhaps a cow or goat in the future, but only if they could be sure that the noise and odor would be obscured.

So what that it was in the middle of the city? They wanted to give themselves the best chance of surviving.

These refuges weren't playing. They intended to rebuild and right the world. And as more faculty trickled in, joining them in the pursuit, their mission was solidified.

That started here, with a safe living space and long-term plans for viability.

To keep the bunker safe, no one entered the building directly. Instead, they mostly used the abandoned tunnel system that connected both schools' campuses. It had been used for The Manhattan Project in the 1940s but was later retired and then closed off. Delivery doors, designed to be unnoticed, provided another way in and out too.

The tunnels were legend on the campuses, which had worked to the refugees' favor. Over the years, industrious students had found their way in, exploring the tunnels for fun. Rudimentary guides were the first maps the survivors used. There had been a handy story in *The Columbia Spectator*, complete with maps, that several women had saved. It had been instrumental when they were first underground. But now, in the aftertime, they needed more — they needed better.

The streetside tunnel near the park and the one from the nearby International Affairs building were a good start, letting them sneak in and out of the bunker. But they knew the tunnel network was far more robust than any of the student explorers had

discovered. So that was the job of the tunnelers. They climbed, shimmied and scurried through the tunnels daily, seeking new turns and hidden entrances. They took pickaxes with them and reopened doorways that had been sealed with stones. And they made the definitive map that would, eventually, allow the refugees to recruit more women and finish their work.

Charlie wasn't a tunneler. She was a gatherer — one of those chosen for their stealthy movements, who was charged with gathering orders and supplies from the underground network. And she was good at it. Perhaps all those years of dancing had benefited her in unexpected ways. She could walk virtually noiselessly and contort her body in unexpected ways.

Likewise, Charlie's former roommate Evie was good at her job. She was the tunneler responsible for finding the twin tunnels that connected the ancillary parts of the campus where East Campus sat with the main campus. That find had opened up safe mobility underground. That meant that all the refugees could move about, access labs and proceed with their work. It also meant that the supply runs could be partially completed belowground.

Charlie was living a life so distant from the one that she and her grandmother had dreamed for her. There were no rehearsals and curtain calls, no multi-city tours. She hadn't wound the ribbons of her pointe shoes around her ankles in years.

After her grandmother died, she'd quit dancing. Struggling with her emotions and feelings, she was angry and her mother didn't know how to help her. Her mother would bounce between permissiveness and intense anger, struggling with her own big and untethered emotions. When Charlie announced she wasn't going to dance anymore, her mother just agreed.

Charlie regretted it immediately. But it was done. She didn't dance again.

Instead, Charlie got a new dream: to be a novelist. She'd always received high marks for her writing and she loved diving into the new worlds of the fictional characters she imagined. In college, she had excelled, double majoring in chemistry and English in hopes that the science education would make her prose more daring and informed. Her research had been highlighted when she made the Angus 100 list. But she had other plans than to continue working in a lab. As her senior year got underway, Charlie had applied to two MFA programs. And just before everything went to hell, she found out that New York University had accepted her with a full ride and a stipend. She had been so close to the next stage of her life.

Another dream lost.

Instead of seeing her name on bestseller lists, Charlie was now living in secret, estranged from her mother and struggling to survive in a world where being a smart young woman was a liability. If quitting dancing was turning her back on her grandmother's dreams for her, this was sprinting away from them.

At least being a novelist would have brought her closer to that plan.

What would her grandmother — the woman who taught her women could be as exceptional as they wanted — say about a world where female intelligence could get you killed? Charlie knew the answer: she would say to fight.

In the vulnerable, lonely waking moments Charlie let herself remember the time before when she was a granddaughter, daughter, niece, friend, cousin and student. It was then that she let herself mourn, even if only for a moment, the life that evaporated and all that she'd lost. It was then that she forgave herself, again and again, for not grieving as she should have.

Otherwise, she didn't have time. They had a mission and a responsibility. They had to survive.

"Charlie? We need to get to the meeting." Evie rapped on the door with her knuckles.

Chapter 4

June 2004

The rust-tinged farm truck rumbled and sputtered up the otherwise quiet road, clanking along the way. Gracie peeked between the window blinds and could see Auntie Lolly at the wheel, a baseball cap barely concealing her tight black curls. She dashed out of the room and down the stairs to greet her.

Gracie's mother, Lynn, was already outside when Lolly rolled to a stop in front of their garage door and Gracie burst out the front door.

"Don't worry. I have my permission slip," Lolly said, deadpan, as the driver's door creaked open and she stepped out, smoothing her shapeless flannel shirt over the loose jeans she wore.

"Good. Wouldn't want Devo to get in trouble for letting you drive again," Lynn replied.

Gracie wasn't sure, but she thought she saw a hint of a teasing smile from her mother — an odd reaction. The penalty for being a woman driving without a permission slip was harsh — imprisonment and forced labor.

"Gracie, come here and give me a hand," Lolly commanded, already holding two egg cartons aloft. "I am so happy to see you, sweet girl."

Gracie surged forward, the little rocks along the driveway digging into her bare feet.

"I know, Ma, I should be wearing shoes. I am so happy to see you, Auntie Lolly. I missed you," Gracie said.

“We’ll hug inside,” Lolly whispered as she began stacking the two egg cartons, several parcels of meat and a bunch of carrots with the fronds still attached into her arms before indicating she should go back into the house. The carrot greens brushed against her nose as she walked, tickling it just so. She wiggled her nose back and forth but couldn’t keep the sneeze at bay.

“Bless you,” her mother and Lolly called in unison.

As the door closed behind her, Gracie could hear the muffled sounds of Lynn and Lolly greeting each other. They weren’t sisters — not in the blood sense — but they were so close, they might as well have been. Lolly and her brother Devo grew up next door to her mom.

In another lifetime, Lolly had been a lawyer who wore power suits and the tallest of stiletto heels — the really fancy ones with the red bottoms. But she wasn’t allowed to practice anymore. Instead, she farmed with her brother and delivered eggs, meat and vegetables to friends and family members within a 25-mile radius. It was allowed because it was domestic work. She could drive too, but only because farming was too demanding for both Lolly and her brother to be away from the farm at the same time. She had to carry a permission form signed by her brother.

This was the auntie that took her to the ballet in Chicago and for tea at the American Girl store in New York. Together, they’d dreamed about Gracie’s bright future as an astronaut or a physicist, pushing the limits on what was possible. Her auntie had always seemed so glamorous. Lolly had worked for a high-powered law firm doing corporate law. But she did pro bono work representing refugees seeking asylum on the side. It was required of all partners but that was the work that filled her soul.

Now that she was a farmer, Gracie wondered what filled her soul.

Gracie set about to put away the groceries, tucking the perishables into the fridge. She could still remember what it was like before, when her working mother would have groceries delivered by a service and Gracie would be tasked with unpacking everything — boxes of cereal, cartons of nut-based milks, jars of sauce. These days, packaged food was hard to come by. Many factories had shut down, unable to continue work with much of their workforce forced home. A few later reopened. But with women banned from jobs, there weren't enough people to operate the machinery.

“Gracie, dear, I need to talk to your mom privately,” Lolly said, entering the kitchen with her mother and wrapping her in a warm hug. Gracie loved the warmth of her auntie's terra-cotta arms encircling her. “But I love you.”

“Love you too, Auntie Lolly,” Gracie said, nodding.

She headed back to her bedroom where she kept books deemed “safe” on her shelves, and those deemed “objectionable” under floorboards. Though there weren't actual laws banning certain books, the public tone was clear: girls shouldn't be indoctrinated into the world of freedom and possibilities their mothers had come of age in. Gracie raised a floorboard and lifted a dog-eared volume out. The spine was deeply creased with wear and use, well loved. She was 17, soon to be 18. She'd last gone to school for eighth grade. That year, the new rules had been in place and girls were barred from advanced classes and all math classes. But a male classmate had shown her the work his class was doing in math, and she did that too on the sly.

After that, she was home with her mother. With women barred from business — or work of any kind — her mother had to leave her career in education. Like factories, restaurants and stores found themselves unable to operate without women to work in them. So many businesses had shuttered.

At home, they cooked and cleaned so people would see them adjusting to the new life. But behind closed doors, there were math and science lessons, literature assignments and historical readings. As she neared what would be her high school graduation, Gracie was sure that her education was drawing to a close. She'd heard about a few former classmates preparing for weddings and worried that was coming for her too.

In their small, cozy house, voices carried. Gracie could hear Lolly and her mother talking with urgency. But their hushed tones meant she couldn't actually understand what they were saying. At times, they seemed excited. At others, they seemed at odds. Finally, both women appeared in her doorframe. Gracie didn't think to hide her book, but wished she had.

"Gracie, Auntie Lolly wants to chat with you a bit. I am headed out to walk to the store to get sausage for dinner," her mother said. "Tell her what she needs to know. I love you."

Then she was gone, without any further explanation.

At first, Lolly glanced at the book she was reading — *Bridget Jones' Diary* — with a snort and then asked about her lessons.

"I hear you've been working your way through my old physics book," Lolly said. "Have you found the equations challenging?"

Confused, Gracie hesitated. She wasn't supposed to talk about her lessons. That could get a young woman arrested. But this was her auntie and her mother had told her to "tell her what she needs to know."

"It's okay, Gracie. I am here to help," her auntie had said.

Then, like a dam opening, her thoughts about mass and gravity and the speed of light had spewed out. She was fascinated by physics — how so much of the world could be explained with formulas and math. That led to a discussion about NASA’s human calculators, who’d been essential to the space agency’s success in reaching orbit and the moon. Gracie couldn’t read enough about them, but especially about the women like Katherine Johnson who were both instrumental to and forgotten by history until relatively recently. Before she knew it, she was talking how a more efficient engine could be built and powered without fossil fuels.

Gracie was breathless with excitement. She hadn’t been able to freely talk about things like this in years. It was like a weight being lifted.

When her mother returned, Lolly excused herself to talk to her. This time their voices weren’t hushed.

“It’s a yes,” she said.

“You’re certain?” her mother replied.

“Absolutely. I’ll start making the arrangements and send word. You need to talk to Danny, and we’ll work on the cover story. She has a brilliant mind. We can’t let it go to waste.”

Two weeks later, Gracie packed her bags.

Chapter 5

February 2005

The murmur of hushed conversations in the candlelit lecture hall rose to a pulsating pitch as the last few people trickled in. They collapsed into the built-in seats across the multiple tiers and balconies, craning their necks to chat and gesturing wildly. It could, almost, have been the moments before a class was to begin.

But that was before.

The prized lecture hall, once the pride of Columbia, could seat 330 students for general chemistry classes — or dozens of eager families, hoping their children might be in the next matriculating class. These days, the stately room with intricately carved wood railings, paneling, molding and details that had been the most-filmed college classroom anywhere, rarely saw any people — and never a class.

The once-polished wood showed its age and neglect in deep scratches and dulled finishes. Without a custodial crew on campus — they'd left along with everyone else — no one had polished or treated the fine wood in years. The dull hum of arriving students that had brought the lecture hall to life daily was a distant memory. It had been years since the well-endowed university had collected tuition from students at all.

Holding a meeting like this with their whole community of 207 students and professors was risky. It had been several years before there was confidence that they had enough privacy, protection and camouflage to gather even half their community at once. Before then, a select group would meet, representatives of all the pods along with the professors, and then they'd relay the information back.

But advances in the tunnel network had better connected all the living areas so everyone could make their way to the lecture hall without being seen. And once inside, they were hidden in a room without windows at the center of one of the many abandoned campus buildings. They were fortunate that Columbia and Barnard had rooms like this — and an existing secret network of tunnels.

Most campuses across the country didn't. And that made operations in those locations even harder and more dangerous. The stories would trickle in — a raid in New Orleans after an exterior light was accidentally turned on, a series of disturbing murders in Houston and abductions across the country as women were found and disappeared.

Not being seen was crucial.

An armed, uninvited militia hid in plain view across the country. In New York, men like the one who'd passed Charlie on a recent supply run didn't try to hide who they were anymore. They didn't need to with a president that they felt was on "their side." And those men — the ones who believed that women were in their rightful place out of business, government, education and sight — were the most dangerous of all.

In New York, though, the women had an unexpected ally in police, city and fire officials. The police not only knew where they lived, but sometimes helped courier messages to other parts of the city. The refugees had formed a partnership with them early on. For the city and fire officials, the unspoken agreement was more tenuous: stay hidden, don't give us reason to acknowledge you, and we'll all be fine.

And, fortunately, Manhattan remained a no-fly zone so there was no risk of anyone overhead seeing a flock of chickens pecking around in a courtyard or anything.

Maybe it shouldn't have been so surprising that New York wasn't on board with the new world, not really. But early on, reaching agreements had been easier than expected.

Still, the police couldn't openly protect them from the militiamen.

Charlie noted that one thing hadn't changed over the years in the lecture hall: those seats didn't get any more comfortable with age. After sitting there for hours, discussing the plans, arguing the processes and trying to convince each other of routes forward, there was a lot of restlessness.

And yet, there were still hold-outs.

Jennifer was one. She'd been a first semester freshman when the first young woman was killed. At the time, Jennifer was learning about herself and tasting freedom. She stayed up all night to finish literature papers and spent her days popping around the city to explore all the food and culture it had to offer. Though the college community was shaken, it didn't seem like it was more than a random act of violence at the time.

When another death happened, and another, people started to talk on campus. When similar deaths began happening at other campuses, the rumble intensified.

That first death started to seem like a turning point.

But no one really knew the deaths were connected at the time. It was just talk. Wonder. Fear. No one imagined that the deaths could really be a movement against smart women. It took months and more than a dozen deaths before a reporter, reviewing the names, found a connection between the killings spread out across the country.

They'd all been recently named to the Angus 100 List — a list of the brightest minds among college students. And they were all women.

Once the connection was drawn, everyone could see the blueprint for what was happening and who was at risk. And it wasn't just in New York; it was across the country. But they realized too late. Red Tuesday happened, and the list of deaths expanded to include so many others who didn't fit the misogynistic view of The Initiative. Gay people, nonbinary people, trans women, men who were seen as too sympathetic to women in society — they were all targeted too that day.

But it was the women that the country clung to as needing “protection.”

“We're waiting for Godot here, sneaking through tunnels and raising chickens, while the world goes on outside without us. I don't see how the next election — more than a year from now — can change anything. The last one certainly didn't. We don't know if we will even be allowed to vote,” Jennifer said, pacing. Beads of sweat on her forehead glistened in the candlelight. “What I am saying is that maybe the opportunity is lost. Maybe the country has already decided what it wants.”

Early on, the professors had noticed how adept Jennifer was at fixing things — radios as they failed, light systems as they went offline. Her mother had been an electrician, always showing Jennifer how to take apart and put together things. When Jennifer was asked to join the makers working on experiments and projects aimed at furthering their society in secret, she knew it was the right future for her. It was everything she was good at technically and academically. And though her work surrounding low-energy lighting had led to some impressive results that helped them light the tunnels without noticeably drawing from the electrical grid, she had become restless lately. Angry. Unsettled.

“It's disappointing to hear you say that, Jennifer. We are far from alone in this. There are women and allies all over the country working to bring about change. And

here, allowing this, the plan has been underway for some time. You know that. And you know that we used what we know to make it. What we're here today to discuss are just the details," Professor Thorne said, her lips pursed. "I know it was a blow when we couldn't vote in November. I wish we'd found a way. But New York doesn't have a means to do so that doesn't involve putting everyone at risk."

In the before-time, Professor Thorne had taught bio-engineering. Now, she oversaw the farming and animal raising — both courses and in real-life practice.

Mumbles rumbled through the cavernous room. Jennifer wasn't the only one struggling with doubt, though the professors had tried to ignore it. The impatience was visible in the work — makers making simple mistakes, tunnelers being louder than advised, that sort of thing. There wasn't room to ignore the signs anymore.

It had been a long five years.

Shifting on her feet behind the massive slate table at the head of the room, Professor Thorne looked uneasy. The professors were in as much danger as the students. For the plan to work, they had to believe in it.

But on the faces around the room was the exhaustion, the fatigue, the wonder if this is the best it would ever get again.

"I don't know why I am here anymore," Jane said quietly from across the room. She was a mender, one of the women who worked on textiles, ensuring that window coverings were ready for any new room used, clothes fixed and linens prepared. When one of the old, woven burlap couches tore, the menders were there to patch it back together with careful stitches.

They also made sure that the textiles used by the gatherers on runs would hold whatever they were picking up. A torn pocket could be the difference between feeding

their cohort for a day or a week. Charlie had been grateful for their work recently when she was about to leave and discovered a rip in her largest pocket. It could have been a disaster – a loss of goods on the street, at best, or a complete derailing of the carefully planned and timed run, at worst. Jane had patched the tear quickly to get her by, and then took the coat overnight to do a more permanent fix.

But Jane didn't just know how to repair things. She had conducted trial runs with experimental weaves using the items they could easily obtain – plastics, leaves, even tree bark – in an attempt to begin manufacturing new clothes and textiles for the school. She hadn't found the right fiber yet, but word was that her experiments were showing promise.

“Jane, we're here because we don't want to be sent back to the kitchens and forced into small lives with no room for intellectual life,” Evie's voice was loud and sharp. Angry.

“Do you actually think we have an intellectual life here?” Jane shot back.

Around the room, a rumble of murmured conversations erupted.

Evie stood quickly, knocking a notebook to the floor with a clatter. A flush traveled up her face, settling an angry red on her checks.

“You've got to be kidding,” Evie said. “Do you even have any concept what it's like outside these walls? Don't you understand what your life would be like if you weren't here? Do you want to be a baby machine, refused books and friendships because they are so afraid of what will happen if women can actually talk to each other again?”

“All I do is fix old clothing. I can't even make anything new. What kind of a life is this, living in barely held together rags and hiding from our families and the world?” Tears gathered in Jane's eyes.

“Jane, your experimental weaves are showing so much promise,” Professor Thorne said, her voice level.

Living in secret for five years had left them without so many basic things they’d taken for granted before. There was no running to the pharmacy for pain reliever or picking up takeout on the way home from a busy day. There was nearly no time spent on the streets at all. And when they needed anything — from toothpaste to tunics — it either had to be fabricated on site or ordered with no guarantee it would ever arrive. Food was available but not often plentiful, a hint of insecurity flavoring every meal.

If there was one thing they all needed — besides freedom to live their lives again — it was new clothes. There wasn’t a shirt in the room that hadn’t been mended. Most pants bore patches. Even shoes had been restitched or resoled to keep them functioning. Jane had told Charlie how close she felt to a breakthrough, but it remained just out of reach and she was frustrated.

Other things — paper and pens, for instance, had been easier to come by. They’d been abandoned in every building on campus, left behind in dorms and offices alike, and littered on the floors of hallways. It was merely a matter of gathering them, something Charlie had spearheaded. The storeroom had enough writing supplies to keep them going for at least a decade.

Charlie doodled in one of the found notebooks, phrases and dark patterns that reflected what she was hearing, digesting the conversation and trying to ignore the painful flatness of the chair. Carved into the table in front of her were three words, probably from one of the women in the room in one of the early meetings: We will rise.

The conversation didn’t have the same tone — it was tinged with sadness and uncertainty, things that Charlie didn’t understand.

“Why are you all recruiting people if you don’t believe in what you are doing?” Gracie asked. She was 18 and had only arrived a few months earlier. “It seems pretty disingenuous to evaluate and select more people to come here if you all just want to return to the world where you literally cannot do anything. Until I got here, my mom had me attending knitting circles that were really classes on politics and biology and I had to hide all my books under the floor. I thought that’s how it was. I didn’t even remember that girls used to be able to, like, go where they want. My Auntie Lolly can’t even drive without written permission from her brother. My mom hasn’t driven in years. My middle school classmates — because, you know, that’s as far as I was allowed to go in school — are all being married off. I’d started to forget that high school was even a thing for girls before five years ago. It’s gross and it’s scary and if you were out there, you would understand how insane the world is.”

Gracie was in the seventh grade when so many young women and male allies died. She only remembered how things changed. Those who’d been there like Charlie, Evie, Jennifer and Anna knew how things were before. They remembered what freedom felt and tasted like.

“When I got here, it was like ... everything I thought I knew had been wrong. I could like choose books and read them without worrying someone would burst in my house and drag me away,” Gracie said.

Charlie usually ignored girls like Gracie. She carried the weight of the shunning women had faced in recent years and though she’d adapted quickly, there was still a wide-eyed disbelief in anything that was said or done.

“Mary Conrad was finishing a run through Morningside Park when she was stabbed. Anna Singer was studying for a psych exam when she was pushed from a fifth

story window. Devra Moore fell in front of the 1 train on her way to her internship. She was pushed,” Charlie rose from her seat as she spoke. “Leeza Murray was shot in what was made to look like a mugging. All of that happened in the first six weeks of a semester five years ago. And even though having that many female students die in such a short time was unusual, no one thought the deaths could possibly be connected. It was unfathomable. Then Red Tuesday happened.”

Charlie hadn’t intended to speak but she was so tired of the complaining. She approached Jane, looking her in the eye. Jane had been there. She survived when others hadn’t.

“No one expected that snipers could target 18 buildings here or that other gunmen would hide in stairwells. No one expected they could systematically kill 254 people — many of them carefully selected — in seconds. But that’s what happened. And it happened all over the country at the same time, on the same day. Sometimes the unimaginable is only unimaginable because we want to believe it can’t happen,” Charlie said softly. “That this plan will work seems unreal. I know. It’s so many dominos being placed in order and set in motion at just the right time. But we have to believe it will. We have to believe our planning and efforts and strength in numbers will prevail.”

Charlie paused, looking around the room at the faces now turned toward her.

“We’ve been playing the long game for five years and it sucks,” Charlie said. “But we know it’s made a difference. As much as a chokehold The Initiative has on the country, it hasn’t managed to turn it into a modern *Handmaid’s Tale*. Yes, girls aren’t being educated past middle school. Yes, marriages are the new college admissions. But people like Gracie’s Auntie Lolly are also still driving. They have to jump through hoops but they aren’t totally kept out of society.”

She turned around, facing the others, “We didn’t come to this plan by accident. Remember that. We aren’t blindly following unseen leaders. Many of us were here five years ago. We remember what the world was like before The Initiative did what they did. We remember parties and laughter and waking up at the last minute to get to class. We were so free and didn’t know it. And that’s what we want back — the country where the most brilliant minds, regardless of gender, age or color, can lead. That’s the ideal we’re working toward. And the ‘we’ I talk about is right here. The faces around you are the faces that are leading the change. We can do this.”

Charlie looked from face to face. Jane had tears in her eyes. Jennifer held her gaze, finally giving a meaningful nod. But Gracie looked away.

Professor Thorne, with the slightest of smiles, thanked Charlie. Next to her, Professor Winkel produced a letter, unfolding it with precision — and maximum noise.

“We have received a request from Pepperdine,” Professor Winkel said, pausing to look around the room. “Their processors have successfully hacked into the government servers and located the Six Year Doctrine. It lays it all out — the plans we’ve seen already enacted and the ones that are to come. This is the puzzle piece we’ve been waiting for. We’re in year three of the plan so we can authenticate that it’s in play. Having a copy is essential.”

Professor Winkel had been a human rights professor teaching about female genital mutilation, abuses by the U.S. Government in I.C.E detention centers and the history of migration. Now, though, he taught how to fight for human rights to the victims of violations. Like Professor Thorne, his work had gone from theoretical to real.

“They’ve agreed to share the plan with the seven school consortium, provided that each do one thing. It’s different for each school. For us, given our advancement in

lighting and chip creation, they've asked for us to design and install a lighting system in their tunnel system."

It was a simple request. At first blush, at least. They had the technology, tools and parts to install many more lighting systems. But Pepperdine was in California, across the county.

"Do they even have a tunnel system?" Evie asked, perplexed. "I thought that was one of the campuses where they tried to pass instead of hiding underground."

"Good question," Professor Winkel said. "Not yet. They've asked DePaul to design and dig their system. As you may remember, some students from DePaul stayed with us two years ago to learn about our tunnel system and use that knowledge to design their own. The project was a success so Pepperdine is hoping it can be repeated for them. And as you know, trying to pass has been a dangerous prospect for a lot of people."

The Six Year Doctrine. It was the Holy Grail of the resistance — the blueprint to The Initiative's plans. With it, they could direct their efforts to prepare them for the fight coming.

"This is what we've been working toward. And I know for some of you, this repressive world came as a complete shock. But for women like my partner and I — if I can even call her that now — it's been our lives for a long time. While many of you had a reasonable expectation of rights and privileges as women, we faced discrimination at every turn. Can you imagine loving someone — really, truly loving them — and being told your love was 'unnatural' or false? Being told you could never marry or have the right to care for each other in a catastrophic medical event simply because your partnership didn't fit the paradigm of what the nation at large thought a marriage should look like? It's hell," Anna said. "So now, you feel the discrimination too. And it

sucks. And this — the fight that we’ve been working toward — is how we make sure this regressed nation is a footnote to history, not the actual future.”

Murmurs spread across the room. Professor Winkle waited for someone to say something. Charlie saw him exchange a long look with Professor Fry. Was that fear? Something else?

“Shall we vote?” Charlie asked at last.

“Yes,” Jennifer, Gracie and Jane all said quickly.

Professor Thorne called for a vote of hands and like a wave, hands rose around the room. It was unanimous.

“Excellent. Then it’s time to designate some jobs for the fabrication of the system and plan the trip to California,” Professor Fry said, speaking for the first time. She taught engineering at the old schools and had created the courses now teaching students real world applications of engineering. “I’ll be the faculty advisor for the planning team.”

“And I will be the faculty advisor for the travel team,” Professor Douglas said. The only other male member of the faculty, he previously had taught English, specializing in dramatic literature. When the world collapsed, he stopped teaching Oedipus and the many Shakespearean plays he’d delighted in and switched to nonfiction texts — teaching areas of history that could help them learn to make better decisions in the future. “It’s going to be a hard journey. As you know, travel for women is illegal except for visiting family or marriage. But there are ways.”

“Then it’s settled,” Professor Winkle said.

“We’ll convene groups and assign roles over the next few days. Be prepared to leave. We’ll move quickly. Things are rapidly changing outside of our walls. We need to be ready,” Professor Fry said, walking toward Professor Winkle.

Everyone began to file out. The professors bent their heads together. And Charlie wondered what they weren't telling them yet.

Chapter 6

March 2005

“It’s like a sea of khakis,” Anna said with disgust.

Move-in day used to mean excited undergrads and their parents arriving at the twin campuses with carloads of linens, clothes, computers and toiletries that they would pile into dark blue vinyl rolling carts and push into the dorms. There was laughter and tears, some harsh words and carefree ones too. It was the day the young students were left on their own — something they’d waited so long for.

This move-in day was different. Boys in pressed button-downs and khaki pants arrived with their parents. While they brought loads of linens, clothes, computers and toiletries, they carried them in quilted bags as if they were off to a country picnic. No one smiled. There were no laughs. Just people entering and exiting with stiff movements. Quietly, they all moved in. Quietly, a fresh crop of young men took their places in what had been women-only dorms. Quietly, Barnard’s campus became The Barnard School for Citizenry Studies.

It went against everything the school had done for empowering young women for more than a century.

The young men arriving were from wealthy families, ones that could afford to pay the steep tuition for the prestigious new school that would, in a few months’ time, teach their sons to manage a household, oversee finances and help with the safety movement in the country. With instructors straight from the Department of Homeland Security

and top financial firms, this was a new vestige of finishing school — but it was aimed at the only portion of the population allowed to be educated beyond eighth grade.

Hand chosen from graduating high school seniors, these young men would also be the first admitted to reopened colleges in a year. That was the plan brokered by a government task force with the buy-ins of dozens of colleges across the country.

Charlie, Anna, Evie, Jane, Jennifer and Gracie watched the move-in from one of the Columbia buildings overlooking 116th Street.

“Why did they choose Barnard’s campus?” Gracie asked, wrinkling her nose. She’d read the same materials they all had and attended the same meetings about the plan. But still, it confused her — there were so many other choices.

“Because while Columbia will reopen to men in the next year, Barnard cannot. They won’t let it. Educating women, you know, is devil to them. So they were like ‘Women aren’t coming back so why waste the campus?’” Evie replied. “Or, at least, that’s what they told the press. But really, this is just a middle finger to women everywhere. As if we needed another reminder that the world we had before is dead.”

Charlie snorted, bobbing her head in agreement, “And we agreed because it’s best to keep your friends close and your enemies closer. It’s cliché, but it’s also totally true. Well, except for the part about the world before being dead. I don’t believe that.”

“How can you not?” Evie’s eyes flashed with anger. “You, of all people, know how brutal the insidious movement was and how rapidly they unmade everything.”

“Yea, but they didn’t. We’re still here. We’ve been here. They failed to actually take the whole country. There’s 207 of us here and thousands spread out on the other campuses. That has to mean something,” Jennifer said, eyebrows raised.

“She’s right, Evie. We’re still here,” Charlie agreed.

Across the street, the solemn move-in continued, ignorant to the argument happening among women who weren't even supposed to be there. But, then again, they were just willfully ignoring what was right there. The parents at drop-off were delivering their precious sons to learn how to take control of assets, exert control and dominate women. Under the guise of safety and education, they would be taught how to make arrests, shoot handguns and overpower people. They would be indoctrinated into The Initiative. In the end, these young men would be deputized to arrest women, to hold them and to lock them up. But that was the part no one talked about.

"Supply runs will be very complicated this summer," Charlie said with a groan. "They are just so close."

"We need to use one of the other drop locations for mail. Elliott won't be an option with them there," Anna replied. "We need to spread the word. The sooner we stop using it, the safer we all will be."

Tears welled in Evie's eyes as she spun away from the move-in.

"That's our school. They don't belong there. It's insane to think this will really work and be okay. How can any of us be okay with this," she said, swiping roughly at her eyes.

"We don't have to be, Evie. No one expects us to. We just have to keep going. Our job here is to create a strong movement to take back our country. And that includes our school," Charlie said, slipping her arms around her friend. "Sometimes, the only way out is through."

Jennifer reached out to stroke Evie's hair, but couldn't suppress the laugh bubbling up in her.

"What is it with you and the platitudes today?" Jennifer said.

Charlie and Anna laughed. Gracie just watched them, curious. Evie dried her eyes.

“It’s ridiculous, isn’t it?” Charlie shrugged.

They watched for a little longer. Parents coming and going. Stiff handshakes goodbye.

“They are really staying close to the quad,” Charlie said. “But we can’t see the other side. They could be all over Claremont and we just don’t know.”

“The not knowing is what’s going to get us killed,” Evie said, shaking her head.

The intel they had told them the school would operate in the quad and Barnard Hall, with the rest of campus blocked off with heavy fencing. The fencing they’d expected hadn’t materialized, but there was a row of jersey barriers blocking off the rest of campus. But intel wasn’t enough to be sure they could even visit Elliott anymore.

“My God. They look like all the boys that were in my classes. They look like they could be my brother or my friend or someone I worked on *The Spectator* with,” Anna said. “I mean, if all those people suddenly became robotic.”

“Do you miss it? Dating, sex, all that,” Jane’s voice was soft, tentative, hesitant. It was the thing they didn’t talk about — not often. But for many of them, there had been a before filled with relationships, intimacy, connection and it evaporated with their rights.

“I haven’t seen my girlfriend in nearly three years,” Anna said. “But her letters ... they keep me going. It wouldn’t be safe for us now — not that it ever totally was. But I keep thinking that the day is coming when we’ll meet up and I will run into her arms and it will be like no time has passed. But yeah, I miss it all.”

“I don’t miss it. I guess I should, but ... those last few days ...” Charlie said, trailing off.

Evie nodded, her hand squeezing Charlie's upper arm. Then she sighed, her eyes cast down. Years ago, her long lashes and plump lips had drawn Jason to her. And when they progressed from talking through the Chaucer lectures for a lit class to exploring each other's soft bodies in tangled, sweat-soaked sheets, they'd happily discovered their mutual attraction was both mental and physical.

Silence bloomed between the friends.

"Yes," Evie whispered, finally. "How could I not?"

Charlie gathered Evie in her arms, holding her firmly as the quiet sobs erupted.

Evie had found Jason in a bloody heap on that horrible day. His chocolate eyes were devoid of the sparkle that had made even the most mundane declarations glorious. If the mass of blood pooled around him wasn't enough of a clue, his frozen in time face let her know: her love was gone.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have —" Jane looked around frantically.

"No, no. She's okay. These are the things we should talk about but never do," Charlie said. "And when we don't talk about them, it's like we're pretending we didn't exist before all this happened. But we did. And we existed with people who are gone — those who were taken and those who completely shit on us."

Evie moved closer to Charlie, tucking her head into her neck. Charlie breathed a soft shhh sound.

Evie had lost Jason. Anna's girlfriend left campus after she was injured. Jennifer hadn't been in a relationship at the time. But Charlie's boyfriend had been one of them.

"It's surprising there haven't been more hookups or crisis relationships," Jennifer said quietly, looking at the ground where she moved her toe in a circle on the pavement.

"Have there been any?" Jane asked, furrowing her eyebrows.

Jennifer shrugged.

“Who knows,” Evie whispered.

The move-in reminded Charlie of the frantic but somber move-out five years ago. She’d watched from one of the overlooks at Columbia as Barnard parents across the street swiftly filled their cars with their daughters’ belongings. It had been such a quick and quiet move-out, and the tears they saw weren’t from the sadness of a semester ending but from the jarring realization that no one had any idea of what would come next.

It was one week after the day now known as Red Tuesday — Tuesday, February 19 — and the president had addressed the nation the evening before, announcing a sweeping executive order aimed at keeping women safe. It had shocked the nation.

“My fellow Americans,” he began, sitting at his desk in the Oval Office. “Less than a week ago at campuses around the country, gunmen sought to destroy one of our nation’s oldest and most prized institution: our higher education system. We lost tens of thousands of our nation’s daughters along with sons and professors who’d spent their lives educating our future. I’ve spent the last week traveling the country, meeting with university presidents, the families of those slain and talking with my advisors. I’ve gotten daily briefings from state and federal law enforcement authorities too. Along the way, I asked everyone the same question: where does our nation go from here?”

He’d paused, licked his lips, taken a breath. Charlie had rewatched the speech so many times since then, she could recite it with perfect timing. She could also see through his fatherly façade. Even as he bowed his eyes in mock reverence, she could see he was enjoying this. He was savoring it. This would be that moment that a president dreams of: the one where he becomes the nation’s protector and guarantees reelection.

It was nearly an election year, after all.

“Along the way, I heard the same thing over and over again: protect our children. Protect our families. Save our daughters. Do whatever it takes. As a god-fearing man, I take that mandate very seriously. It is with that in mind that together with my advisors, I have devised a series of short-term protections to take our next generation out of harm’s way.” He paused again. This time it was for dramatic effect.

“Effective Wednesday, February 27 at 9pm, all colleges and universities are ordered closed until further notice. All students must be sent home. All faculty must vacate. While we understand that the spring semester has only just begun, it is our belief supported by the national intelligence community’s intel that a critical danger still threatens the bastions of learning in our country. As you may know, while we have identified more than 900 of the shooters, there are still several hundred who haven’t been identified. Moreover, in the daily briefing by the Joint Chiefs of Staff tonight, I learned that FBI, CIA and NSA have not found a link between the shooters. I have every faith that if there is one, they will uncover it. But in the meantime, we must be vigilant. With that in mind, I further order a nationwide lockdown beginning Friday, February 29 and lasting for a period of three weeks.”

He paused again. He licked his lips. He looked directly into the camera.

“During the three-week lockdown, all businesses are ordered closed. All school districts will be closed. All non-essential workers are ordered to stay home. Law enforcement, emergency services, medical workers, journalists and gas station attendants will be permitted to work. No one else.”

The gasps had been audible. Charlie had been watching the address in her dorm common room. She remembered a heartbroken Anna reaching for her hand and tears

streaming down Evie's already devastated face. But mostly she remembered the commotion that followed. It was deafening – scrambling feet, cries of fear, a rush of people. They'd lost so much in the past week. And now, they were losing their community too.

To close down the country was unprecedented. How would people eat? How would businesses survive?

“Citizens of the United States, I implore you: Take these next few days to plan, stock up and prepare. You need to stock your kitchens, retrieve your vulnerable family members, prepare for this shutdown. The National Guard is being deployed in all 50 states and our territories to help local law enforcement enforce this mandatory shutdown. Our men and women of the Armed Forces are being recalled from around the world to help with the effort as well. This will be no small undertaking, but it is necessary to keep our children safe and to find the group responsible for the reprehensible actions of last week and prior.”

As Charlie watched the move-in now, there was something she couldn't quite put her finger on. Was the somberness really decorum? Or was there something else at work here? What did these boys even think of the world they were entering?

“That seems to be the last of them,” Jennifer jarred her from her thoughts. A man was closing the gates to the quad. The last car was pulling away. They hadn't strayed from the anticipated area. At least not yet.

“This is all wrong,” Anna said.

“Let's go,” Evie said. “Charlie, I've made some progress on finding what might be the crosstown tunnel. If I can map that, your supply runs should be okay for now.”

The crosstown tunnel was a myth. It was the holy grail of the tunnel system. Rumor had it, when the tunnels were built, a crosstown tunnel had been dug connecting Barnard and Columbia on opposite sides of Broadway but not finished. It ran beneath the subway tracks, hundreds of feet down and was unlit and rugged. Or, at least, that's what people said.

Evie had made it her mission to find it. But after five years, it seemed to be as mythical as Charlie had come to believe.

Or was it?

"It's mostly dirt," Evie continued. "And the inclines are the steepest I've encountered. It's almost as if it's only deeply underground directly under the tracks. But I want you to know that if it's there I will find it. And I think I have."

Chapter 7

March 1993

“Charlie’s grandmother died last night,” her mother said, her usually bright voice weighed down with grief.

It was a sunny morning, no longer cold despite it being mid-March. Her mom was driving their carpool to school — Charlie, Lisa and Ian. They were friends because they carpooled together or they carpooled together because they were friends. It was almost the chicken and the egg — which had come first? Either way, the conversation wasn’t one Charlie wanted to have. Not then. Not like that.

When Mere, her grandmother, had slipped away the night before, Charlie hadn’t wanted to look at the soulless corpse. But her family gathered around it, as if it could bring the vibrant woman back. One by one, they leaned in to kiss the forehead one more time.

Charlie had stepped back, recoiling from the idea.

What lay in the bed wasn’t her grandmother — it was just skin and bones and flesh. Her mother had urged her forward with a soft nudge and Charlie, just 14, had given in, pressing her warm lips to the cold forehead. She shuddered remembering how unhuman Mere’s skin had felt to her supple lips. She vowed never to touch a corpse again.

Later, sitting in the living room waiting for the funeral home to arrive, Charlie had melted into the uncomfortable armchair, the one that Mere had loved best — not for its cushy welcoming (which it did not have) but for the specific fabric she’d selected when having it reupholstered. It was a black damask with golden eagles that sparkled

ever so slightly. Charlie had traced the outside of one with her finger while her cousin began listing off all the tasks the family would have to take care of the next day.

“And Charlie, you’ll help me with calling the hospice people to come pick up the bed and other assistive stuff. Other people need that,” June had said.

“Can’t. I have school,” Charlie’s voice was flat but definitive.

The room had gone silent. Her aunts and uncle turned, pity dripping from their gazes. Her mother mumbled something about grieving.

“Life goes on. I have to go. There’s a biology test,” Charlie said.

That’s how she ended up in carpool, her mother sharing the death that Charlie didn’t want to think about with her friends who would inevitably tell teachers and other friends.

As her mother’s words settled around the car, Charlie cringed, shrinking into the soft fabric of the Saab hatchback’s seats. She wanted to disappear. That seemed a better alternative than anyone feeling sorry for her.

The words seemed to reverberate around the car, encompassing her.

She was a high school freshman then, with almost black hair, a closet full of black clothes and a deep purple lipstick they called Vamp. She didn’t know how to feel. In the preceding months, she’d thought about what it would be like but in the end, it was as confusing as it had felt imagining. Would she ache with remorse? Would she still hear Mere’s soft voice, encouraging her? Instead, the world really did just continue, as if nothing had changed.

Her grandmother had taken in her last shuddering breath, and then ... the world kept spinning.

But everything had changed. One moment, she lived in a world with her grandmother and the next she didn't. Maybe she did know how to feel after all: hollow. Her grandmother had been her confidante, her best friend. They'd spent hours upon hours together, swimming, digging in the sand at the beach, antique shopping, strawberry picking, cooking ... She'd counted on having her there always. There wasn't a goal or dream she had that didn't include her grandmother being there. How could she ever step on stage again without Mere cheering her on?

And yet, in her final days, riddled with cancer that stole her autonomy, her grandmother had been a shell of her self — as if someone had sucked the body from her body. Gone was the fashion icon who'd lived a very full life with a very full career before becoming a mother and a grandmother. Gone was the athletic woman who had taken up painting in her later years to fuel her creative soul.

Her grandmother had been vivacious — a stage actress in the 30s and 40s, until the war changed everything. The newspapers had reviewed her work — and her look, calling her “a shapely brunette” and commending her dance talent. She'd kept all the clippings, tucked into boxes in her big wooden trunk. When Charlie was little, her grandmother would bring them out every so often, looking through them.

She'd nudged Charlie into dance classes. Ballet, tap, jazz, swing ... she'd envisioned Charlie on film, a star too. It was a dream Charlie relished.

But the illness had altered everything. Mere couldn't drive her to classes anymore so her aunts and uncle helped out. She could barely sit through a short performance when Charlie had danced in a production in the spring. As things progressed, and her mother insisted on toxic hope, Charlie had wrestled with her feelings, alternating between angry and confused and sad and broken. She wanted her grandmother to fight

harder, even as she realized she couldn't — Mere had tried. She really had. But the cancer wouldn't be trifled with. The bold, vivacious woman had been rendered frail and slight. Charlie learned, though she didn't want to, that sometimes the best efforts and intentions can't stop cancer. Sometimes people die anyway.

And Mere had.

"She's not gone, Charlie. You just can't see her in the same way," Lisa said softly.

And Charlie breathed in the sentiment, letting it wash over her. She would hold onto that.

Chapter 8

March 2005

“We’re just going to have to go slowly. We’ll make our way to the 110th Street station and then take the service tunnels through the subway to make our way downtown. It’s going to be a whole day mission, so be prepared with whatever you need to move about comfortably for that one. This needs to be done. And if we mostly use the subway tunnels, we can carry a lot more back,” Anna reasoned, tapping at the map in front of her. “Did someone pick up the collapsible carryalls from the storage tunnel? We’ll need those.”

Tomorrow would be a supply run day. But this wasn’t the usual neighborhood run. They had to go much farther while remaining totally undetected. They had to make their way downtown for more substantial supplies. Their order of Blueberry Cookies — the code name for a new, powerful computing device that used hologram technology to render keyboards and monitors unnecessary — had come in. It was unlike anything any of them had used before. And it was so much more portable too.

The compact devices would be useful in so many ways.

But most of all, it would allow them to connect with the outside world in a way that had been virtually impossible for years. The Blueberry Cookies would be the brains in automated technology on campus to make their living quarters safer and more secure. They’d also be used in the cross-continental planning for the tunnel systems on other campuses. And, Evie’s team hoped to use them to power a robot scouting device. But the run wasn’t just for the special devices. The team would also pick up a big order of hard-to-get food stuffs to refill the stock room.

“Yea, but we aren’t machines. And we know that the MTA crews will be working in some of the tunnels. We need to be able to move through safely but we might not be able to light the route the way we did last time,” Jennifer replied, looking skeptical. “What if they spot us? Professor Fry said this tech could be catastrophic in the wrong hands.”

“It will be okay. We’ll plan to stop when we get to the 91st Street Station — both directions — and take a break, eat, whatever,” Anna said.

The old station, decommissioned in the late 1950s, had been covered in graffiti and trash when they first came across it in the early days. It smelled like the cesspool it had become over the years. They’d used that to their advantage, cleaning up the station but creating a sort-of moat of trash and cesspool to make it unattractive to others. As a result, they had an undetected safe haven. It wasn’t much — clean overturned milk crates and a couple of sawhorses they had acquired from a worksite with a plywood sheet on top. But it served its purpose.

“I’m more concerned about these two spots along the way, Anna,” Charlie said, pointing to two areas on the subway track where they knew workers would be. “The work being done there is pretty extensive. Aside from timing our crossings to shift changes, we really run the risk of being seen. And you know that can’t happen. Not now.”

Anna sighed. “I know. It’s going to be a lot harder than any of our other runs. And the amount of stuff we will be returning with is a problem too.”

With the new school opening and increased calls from the White House to ensure that women stayed “out of harm’s way,” violence on women was increasing. The thinly veiled coding of the language was creating a great rift in society, one that set the

masculine protector against women and anyone who supported them. With the president telling paternal society groups to “Stand tall and be at the ready,” he’d galvanized them to enforce what they saw as the natural order — women at home, raising kids, cleaning and cooking while men were out running the world. When they found women doing something they felt was against the natural order, they lashed out. Most just berated and harassed women. But a few had used weapons to make their points. A recent spate of stabbings in midtown had everyone on edge.

“Then maybe we need to plan to be gone for two days. Then we can go even slower. Everyone here will have to understand,” Anna said.

Two days. It would be their longest and slowest supply run ever. Pushing it out meant more time out in the open and chance of them being discovered. But the alternative was to rush through, potentially exposing themselves in the process.

Charlie sighed. Both sounded bad. “No, let’s go fast. The longer we’re out there, the more chance we have of discovery. We’ll need to be extra careful though. Review the tunnel guide tonight, everyone. You need to know where the exits are along the route, and the service tunnels too. We need to have options along the way should we run into trouble,” Charlie said.

“Sounds like a plan,” Jennifer said, nodding.

“Agreed,” Anna replied, folding the map. “We leave at 4am. Meet in the lobby, please. And remember canteens, snacks, anything else you need.”

Charlie gathered up her notebook and supplies, turning to leave.

“Charlie,” Anna said to her back. “Can you and I get together this evening? I want to run through the plan with you again. What you said got me thinking.”

“Do you want to just do it now?” Charlie was impatient. This meeting was to ensure the details were ironed out. If Anna wanted to meet, that meant she saw wrinkles in the plan still — and Charlie wanted them figured out as soon as possible.

“Sorry, I can’t. I have a run to do. The blueprints for the new grow room arrived from Duke. We’ve been waiting for that. I have to retrieve it as soon as it arrives,” Anna said.

The grow room was crucial to their planning. It would allow them to go completely underground, if necessary, to remain undetected as the campus reopened. Charlie understood and relaxed slightly. It would be fine to go over the details later.

“Gotcha. How about 7?”

“See you then.”

Charlie left, walking through the halls that had become a clandestine home to so many. When everything had happened five years ago, they thought this would be a short-term thing. They’d remain hidden, learning and surviving, until the world righted itself. But the world didn’t right itself. In fact, it seemed to get worse with each passing year. And now, as they approached the end of the President’s second term, the stakes of the election seemed to be higher than ever.

He was seeking a third term. He’d convinced Congress to approve the run using emergency powers that they’d granted themselves four years earlier. Though the 22nd Amendment to the Constitution still said that it couldn’t happen, the election was proceeding. The President’s party had become one of angry men, fighting for their place in the world. They were waging a dirty, mudslinging campaign, determined to keep their power stronghold on the government.

There were other candidates from his party, but none seemed to be gaining traction. Meanwhile, the other party was promising a better tomorrow — one where women's rights would be preserved and the balance of the country would be restored. They hadn't even chosen a candidate yet and still, they were unified.

Some days, it felt like a pipedream that anything could change for the good of women. Congress was still debating whether women would be allowed to use their voting rights in the election nationwide.

If the opponent lost, so would women. The United States as they knew it would never return.

What then?

A lot of the women in the de facto Barnard community didn't want to think beyond the opponent winning. But Charlie was too realistic. She knew she had to consider both outcomes. Otherwise, she would be unprepared for the future. They all would.

Chapter 9
January 1998

Before Charlie even reached the door of the unfamiliar classroom, she knew what she'd find. The noise proceeded it, revealing that she was far from the only one who'd read the description of the offered-every-other-year class on beat poets and wanted in. Turning the corner into the classroom, she saw it was even worse than she expected. It was packed with prospective students. Every chair around the dark, stately table was filled. So were the ones around the perimeter of the room. Students, each clutching a backpack or tote, crushed in, taking up every square inch of floor. The only space left to stand was in the doorway.

This wasn't looking promising.

Pressing her shoulder into the doorframe, Charlie staked her spot while pulling a small notebook and purple pen — it was the only color she'd use — from the side pocket of her bag.

"Welcome, everyone! This is the first meeting of ENG 491, Beatnik Poets and Their Muses. For most of you, this will also be your last class. As you may know, there are only 10 spaces for students and they are awarded based on merit. Today's class has two parts: a brief description of the course and an application via index card on which you will make your case for being here. You have to earn the right to be —"

Charlie let out a loud "oof" as someone burst into her shoulder. The silenced room turned their eager eyes toward the doorway, shooting daggers at the commotion. A flush rose over Charlie's cheeks. Next to her, the girl's eyes grew large as saucers.

"Sorry," the girl squeaked loudly. She looked at Charlie, still alarmed. "So sorry."

“As I was saying,” the professor continued, pressing her lips together, “You have to earn the right to be here. What I am looking for on your index cards is a spark of something — a reason I will enjoy having you in this class. Obviously, there’s limited space to demonstrate that. It’s by design. Don’t write so small that I can’t read it to say more. Just state your case briefly.”

She went on to talk about the poets the course would cover and the projects they’d do together. It all sounded magnificent — except that most of the people there wouldn’t be in the class. It was too selective.

When the index cards were handed out, Charlie shifted her weight to balance her notebook against the door, using it as a de facto desk.

“Smart,” the late girl said, mimicking her. “Sorry about earlier. I went to the wrong building first and then had to hightail it over here.”

“No worries,” Charlie replied, capping her pen and advancing to hand in her index card. She’d written only one brief sentence along with her name and email address. She hoped it worked.

The professor had said she would email the lucky 10 people by the end of the day. That was less than a sixth of the people who had crowded in for day one. The odds didn’t look good.

“I’m Anna,” the late girl said, catching up to her in the hallway. She stuck out a small, bony hand. Charlie accepted it.

“Charlie. Are you a first year?”

“Transfer student. I’m a sophomore.”

“Me too. Welcome. Aside from the class no one will get into, what are you taking this semester?” Charlie asked.

“Intro to Astrophysics, International Politics, Conversational Spanish and Macro Economics,” Anna replied. “I am still deciding what I want to major in. If I don’t get this class —” she bark-laughed “— then I will probably add Victorian Literature to the mix. You?”

“I’m doing a dual major in English and Chemistry but still have a couple core classes to get out of the way. So, French III, Statistics and Independent Study Swimming, and then Early Modern Literature — and this class, if I get in. But I won’t,” Charlie said.

“Cool. Do you like it here? I am constantly wondering if I made the right choice. But I wasn’t finding what I wanted at Fordham’s Lincoln Center campus. I mean, the location couldn’t be beat, but I am not an actor or a dancer and aside from those majors, there wasn’t much reason to be there. And I really didn’t want to be on the Bronx campus.” Anna pushed open the door and they stepped outside into the warm, sunny day.

“I like it. My mom went to Barnard before me, so I guess it was always expected that I would end up here. But I don’t mind. It’s a great school and a great campus and a great community. Wait till later in the semester rolls around. There are some really rad traditions like a midnight pancake breakfast during finals and a sandwich day when they try to build the world’s largest sandwich every year. It’s fun. Plus, the speakers we get on campus are absolutely incredible. Always aim to arrive early though. Events fill up super-fast — ticketed or not,” Charlie said. “Where are you headed?”

“Back to my dorm. I’m in Elliott Hall. What about you?” Anna said, brushing her bangs out of her eyes.

“I’m headed in the other direction. Plimpton. It’s on Amsterdam. Um ... but if you have paper, I will give you my dorm phone number. Maybe we could hang out or something,” Charlie said.

“That would be awesome. Being a transfer is super hard,” Anna said.

Charlie wrote down her number and her name.

“Well, nice to meet you and I hope we get together,” she said, backing away.

“See ya!”

Chapter 10

March 2005

Charlie curled her hands around the steaming mug, the scent of honey-tinged mint wafting around her. It was quiet in the old common room of East Campus, where students had once gathered to watch episodes of *The Bachelor* and study for finals. There were no televisions anymore. Most technology — even the most innocuous seeming — had been moved out of the living area into underground storage. That’s what made the Blueberry Cookies so valuable. They ran on new technology with extra redundancy to prevent hacking or surveillance. In a few days, they’d have a more active connection to the world again.

The older devices were slow and dangerous, with fewer protections against hackers and government surveillance. They didn’t want to risk it.

Only the threadbare, wood-armed university chairs like the one she sat in remained.

Lost in thought, Charlie traced the design on her faded mug. It showed the gates of Barnard in black, with the familiar school logo across the top. The mug had been a gift from her mom, bought on a visit sophomore year.

“Charlie, let’s stop in the store!” her mother had beamed as they walked through the Diana Center. Charlie, who was determined not to be a college student wrapped in her college name, groaned but obliged. Her mother was so proud of her for being a second-generation Barnard girl.

Inside the store, her mother’s graceful fingers leafed through shirts and pointed at scarves. A trail of her perfume wafted through the store — not in an unpleasant way,

but in a comforting one. Charlie could practically smell the entwining rose and vanilla scents as she remembered how her mom had picked up a sweatshirt (“I want everyone to know where my eldest daughter goes!”), shaking it out to check the fit. Then she grabbed a water bottle too, as if it was a candy bar in the supermarket checkout line.

“You have to choose something, or maybe two somethings,” she’d told Charlie. “What about a shirt?”

“Mom,” Charlie had said, elongating the word in the way only a sullen teenager could. Eventually though, she’d obliged, choosing the mug and an umbrella, which she needed anyway.

The umbrella was tucked into her dresser upstairs, still. In her rush to pack, somehow these items had seemed so important. And maybe they were — the mug, at least, got used often. The umbrella made her wistful of the before times. She refused to use it again until the world righted itself.

Where was her mother now?

Glancing at her watch, she saw that it was now 7:21 p.m. Anna was late. Despite the first time they met — when Anna collided with her outside a packed classroom — it was unusual for the reliable, thoughtful woman who’d been set to graduate at the same time as Charlie before everything changed. They’d been so close.

“Have you seen Anna?” Professor Thorne leaned in the doorway, her voice a higher pitch than usual.

“No, I’ve been waiting for her. She wanted to go over our supply run plan again and talk through some problem areas. But she’s late,” Charlie replied, straightening up.

Professor Thorne uttered something under her breath.

“What?” Charlie stood up, taking a step toward the door.

“Charlie, we might have a problem. Anna was supposed to bring me the blueprints for the ... the ... the offensive planned for Washington D.C. that arrived today. But no one has seen her since this morning. She left for the pickup but I just got word that she never made it,” Professor Thorne said.

“The offensive? What? She said she was picking up grow room blueprints. Where was she going? I’ll retrace her steps. Maybe she’s hurt,” Charlie said, already moving to the door.

Professor Thorne stepped fully into the doorframe, blocking her exit. “Charlie, we had to be careful. I told her to keep it confidential. I don’t think ...”

“Tell me where she went. If she left this morning and never made it to her destination, then something is very wrong. I am going to find her,” Charlie replied, cutting the professor off. “And I expect you will tell us all about this offensive when I get back. It seems like it was something we probably should have heard about in our last meeting when we were discussing next steps.”

“Elliott. She was retrieving the package from Elliott,” the professor said quietly. “There was a mix-up in the delivery instructions. It couldn’t wait. And I’m sorry. I thought waiting until I understood the plan better would be better.”

“Wait. Elliott?!? Are you kidding me?” The blood rose into Charlie’s face, a rage making her fingers tingle. “On the other side of Barnard, the day after the boys moved in?!? We haven’t even had time to figure out what routes are safe yet. And this on top of everything you didn’t tell us?”

She pushed past the professor, heading for the stairwell to go change before heading out into the night.

“It couldn’t wait,” Professor Thorne repeated, firmly, as the door closed on her voice.

“We should have been told.”

Angry, scared, worried, uncertain — Charlie was a bundle of emotions ping-ponging against each other as she entered her room, slamming the door behind her. It had been hours — why hadn’t anyone thought about Anna’s absence earlier? Why didn’t they worry sooner? She changed, preparing herself for invisibility. Black hoodie, black pants, black shoes ... she was ready.

A knock reverberated on the door as Charlie went to open it, startling them both. Evie stood on the other side, clad in black as well, her hand still raised.

“Jennifer told me what happened. I’m going with you,” she said. There was no room left for question.

Charlie nodded. Then together, they headed to the ground level.

Chapter 11

February 1999

Evie was so engrossed in her economics homework that the screech of furniture moving made her jump. Not a small startle either — a full blown, flying up from the bed, jump. Her heart pounded, even as she realized what she was hearing.

Sharing the suite with four other people was noisy. While she could sometimes block their noise out, she often found her concentration jarred. And yet, she loved everything about it — the building, the location, the people she shared it all with. Offset from the rest of campus, Plimpton was an oasis with a near-round-the-clock market below and the best sub shop in Morningside Heights barely a block away.

Of course, it had its flaws. The location also meant slightly longer walks to class along the ever windy 120th Street and dealing with the cold, harsh, industrial linoleum floors — and all the noises that came from living on them.

Evie's room made up for any locational shortcomings. She'd enveloped it in her favorite color — blue — as if she was a midcentury designer on a mission. Sheer blue floral curtains hung from a tension rod, a barrier between her and the guys smoking outside the market. On her bed, an overstuffed navy comforter beckoned her to sit. On the floor, a lighter blue shag carpet warmed up the space. And around the room little white twinkle lights gave it ambiance. Her walls hung with posters in blue tones from all the museums she'd visited over the last three years. Her favorite was a mixed media collage that used photography alongside oil painting, the brushstrokes visible in the print. She would stare at that whenever she was thinking something through.

It was cozy.

Of course, Evie had something else in mind for her junior year housing. She had wanted to get a suite in one of the plusher buildings closer to campus. But when room selection day happened in the spring, she and her friends had all forgotten until late at night when they were crowded into a common room playing a tense game of Settlers of Catan. A mention of “next year” had rocketed them all back to reality, realizing what they’d done and it was sheer panic — a mad scramble to send emails and beg forgiveness. And the next morning, they’d all appeared in person at the housing office, begging for help. No one won the game either, which added to the distress.

Fortunately, they hadn’t lost housing, which was their biggest fear. Still, they were scattered across different suites instead of being housed together.

Evie ended up on a high floor with two Barnard sophomores — Jane and Daisy — and two Columbia juniors — Sam and Jason. Plimpton was one of the few Barnard dorms open to Columbia and thus it was co-ed despite it being a women’s college dorm.

It had worked out, mostly. A few weeks into the semester, Jane and Daisy mostly kept to themselves. They didn’t spend much time in the suite and Evie had no idea where they went or what they were studying. But Sam and Jason were game for late night trips to the market for snacks and the occasional dinner out so she’d found comradery among some of the strangers at least. Plus, Anna and Charlie were in the building too and the three of them spent a lot of time going between each other’s spaces.

Every so often though, like when noise interrupted her, she was reminded that these roommates were a little different from her previous ones.

When Evie stepped out into the hall, she could hear the huffs and grunts of something coming from Jason’s room. His door was open, so she stepped closer, seeing him standing on his desk, his arms raised to the ceiling.

“What are you doing?” she asked, leaning against the door frame.

“Making constellations,” he replied, brushing the sandy blond hair from his aquamarine eyes. His black t-shirt was riding up with his arms, exposing his unexpectedly muscular abdomen.

“Constellations,” she repeated. It wasn’t a question. It didn’t need to be. He was an astrophysics major who worshipped the night sky. Not long after meeting for the first time, he told her how over the summer he’d camped in Maine with his family so he could see the pinpricked sky for himself, awash with milky galaxies, stars large and small and planets so far away. When he talked about the experience, everything about him lit up.

“Yea. I am recreating a picture I took this summer in Maine so when I fall asleep every night, I can remember,” he said, smiling. His glasses had edged their way down his nose slightly but he made no move to fix them.

“That’s —”

“I know, it’s weird. But I love the night sky,” he cut her off, but not unkindly. He was sheepish, as if used to people criticizing his interests.

“No, I was going to say really sweet. And cool. And pretty amazing. I want to see it when it’s done,” she replied, flushing. Did it sound like she was propositioning him? Was she?

“It’ll be pretty epic,” came a voice from the corner. Sam sat cross-legged on the bed, gazing up despite holding an open book. “He’s been at this for hours.”

“I’ll bet,” Evie replied, surprised but smiling in Sam’s direction. Her flush receded, knowing they were there too. “Alright, I need to get back to studying. Good luck.”

“I’ll try to be quieter the next time I move the furniture,” Jason said.

“What? No, I —”

“It’s okay. I know that scraping was really loud. Sorry,” he replied, smiling. His eyes crinkled gently at the corners and she wanted to lose herself in their oceans. She said nothing for a long beat.

“Thanks,” she finally whispered before backing away toward her room and closed the door. Shit. She wasn’t supposed to like her suitemate quite like that. But those abs. And those eyes. And that fine brain.

Chapter 12

March 2005

Anna was dead.

Her lifeless, blood-drained body had been deposited on a desolate stretch of sidewalk, glazed over eyes gazing to the sky. She'd been left outside Low Library, found by a wandering Gracie who wasn't looking for her.

Professor Thorne had crumpled, unable to bear the weight of the loss and her role in it. But for Charlie, Evie, and so many others, it was so much more than the loss of one of them. It was a loss of security. Panic bounced between them.

Back inside, they gathered.

"We need to call the police," Gracie sobbed, her body held up by the wall. When she'd returned to East Campus, she'd trembled, barely able to articulate what she saw.

She was only a little better now.

"That's the last thing we should do," Charlie retorted. "Yes, Anna's body needs to be dealt with. But we can't call for help. That would be like throwing open the curtains, turning on all the lights and putting a neon sign outside that we're still here. And what were you doing out there anyway?"

It sounded so cruel. Anna was one of Charlie's best friends. But they'd learned early on not to draw more attention to themselves — or betray their secrets. Even when someone died.

"But you said the cops look out for us," Gracie replied, her eyes wide and distressed.

“They do, Gracie, by looking the other way. As long as we keep ourselves hidden, they leave us alone. But a body out in the open isn’t hidden. It’s not even in the realm of hidden. The police know we live somewhere around here and they don’t ask questions, but what are they supposed to do when they have to investigate a murder?” Evie’s words were clipped with impatience. “And for their protection, we provide a pipeline for secret communications between the NYPD and other departments. You know that. Anna isn’t the first person who’s been killed. But we’ve largely stayed safe all these years because we’re careful and take care of things ourselves.”

“I need the package,” Professor Thorne whispered. It was so soft it was almost a breath. But Charlie heard her, shooting a glare in her direction.

“I’ll go to Elliott,” Charlie growled. “And I’ll see if there’s any sign of how Anna died. She clearly didn’t die where Gracie found her. There was no blood.”

Her voice cracked on the last word, despite her best efforts to stay focused.

“With me, like we were going to before —” Evie said.

“No, I don’t want to endanger you too,” Charlie said firmly.

“This isn’t your choice. She was a friend to both of us,” Evie said.

Charlie wanted to go alone. She could feel the sizzle of anxiety coursing through her veins. Losing Anna was too much already. But there was wisdom in traveling together so as much as she wanted Evie to remain behind, she nodded in agreement.

“We’ll figure the rest out,” Professor Douglas said. His warm baritone was naturally reassuring, a cozy blanket on a cold day.

Charlie didn’t know what they were going to do with Anna’s body. She shuddered, thinking that they would have to touch the cold, dead skin. But she did know that a body is merely a vessel — and once the life leaves it, it isn’t the person anymore.

Evie and Charlie rushed toward the tunnel exit, tears running down their cheeks but voices silent.

Easing out onto Amsterdam Avenue, they dashed from shadow to shadow, following the above-ground route that Anna favored, weaving through buildings and doorways along 120th Street. It was the most direct route, despite also being the most exposed. They stepped lightly, making as little noise as possible while keeping a keen eye on their surroundings.

They didn't know what they would find – or even what they were looking for. But they looked anyway, hoping that anything amiss would be apparent. Maybe they'd learn something about who killed Anna.

As they reached Broadway, the wide, well-lit intersection, they exchanged a long glance. They were within blocks of the new boys' school — sight-distance, even, if you were looking from the right angle. It should have been cause to turn around. But they needed to get there as fast as they could.

The only way to cross Broadway was to run through the light-soaked street. Charlie gave Evie a little nod before crouching into a runner's starting position while still in a shadow. Evie mimicked her movement.

They waited in that position for a minute and then another, watching and readying themselves. And then, when they were confident that there wasn't anyone nearby, they sprinted across the street and back into the shadows.

There was nothing to even suggest Anna had been there earlier. It was like she'd never walked these streets at all.

They kept going, creeping further along on 120th Street until they reached Claremont. In the old days, this had been a well-lit area where Barnard students and

professors lived. But over the years, the streetlights had stopped working. With the neighborhood residents gone, no one had bothered to fix them and to the women of the new underground Barnard community, it was quite all right. The road was mostly dark and easy to navigate, and it was easy to hide on.

“Are we both going all the way to Elliott?” Evie asked in a voice not much louder than a breath.

“I can go alone, if you prefer. You could wait here. We need to retrieve the package. Its importance hasn’t changed,” Charlie whispered. “After we get it, I think you should take the tunnels back and deliver the package to Professor Thorne.”

“No, we’re in this together,” Evie said firmly. “It’s me – I am not some kid who just arrived from Cape May.”

“Evie, I know. But sometimes being in this together means that we have to split up to get what needs doing done. The less time that package spends in the open, the better. I need you to take it back so that it gets there safely. And I will be following above ground but going a different route. Maybe Anna varied her routine. Maybe I can find something that will give us some idea of what happened. Who killed her?!? We need to know. Please, I need you to do this,” Charlie said. Her quiet voice conveyed a range of emotions.

Evie didn’t say anything for a minute. “Ok. I will,” Evie breathed.

No sooner had the words escaped her mouth than there was something — a noise. It was the slightest rustle to their left, the faintest of sounds — almost like a sleeve brushing against a side.

They both trained their eyes to the left, standing absolutely still. Time passed, but they couldn't tell how long. Their muscles began to ache from holding their positions. Was there anything there at all? Had they just imagined the noise?

Then they saw it. A rat the size of a well-fed tabby cat skittered out of the shadows, startling them. Evie's hand flew to her mouth, stifling a scream as the rat ran over her foot.

"Holy shit," Charlie whispered. "Let's move."

Heading down Claremont was like muscle memory for her. She'd walked this route dozens and dozens of times on runs. But it was more than that. She'd lived here in a time not that long ago. They stopped in front of the limestone building with the black streak.

"It's going to be pitch black inside. There's a grid we use. If I go alone, I can get in and get out fast," Charlie said, reaching for the door.

"But what if someone is in there? I think I should come in to look while you retrieve the package," Evie reasoned.

Charlie hesitated. Only gatherers were supposed to enter the drop points. It was a security protocol she herself had insisted on years ago. Tunnelers like Evie were experts of navigation, but only gatherers knew where the mail drop points were. It was essential to keep their community safe.

But if there was ever a time to ignore the protocols, wasn't this it? Or was she overreacting?

Still, Evie made a good point.

“Okay, but once we step in, stay where you are. Let me retrieve the package before you leave the door. I don’t want to be thrown off — it’s hard to recover from,” Charlie whispered.

“Ok.”

They crept in, shutting the door gently behind them. Charlie’s footfalls — 25 steps forward, 15 steps to the right — were so soft, so gentle, that they were almost undetectable. The room was a vacuum of silence. But as she began to bend down to reach for the hatch, she heard something.

In all of the runs Charlie had done, she’d never heard anything at all so the soft sound was startling. But she’d also never entered the building with a companion before. Reason, logic, fear and concern bounced around in her mind.

Was it a breath? Was it Evie? Where was it coming from? What if they weren’t alone?

She crouched down and looked around herself, willing her eyes to adjust to the darkness. But with no light, it was near impossible. She couldn’t see anything. She knew the building still had the guard’s desk, seating and artwork it had contained when students lived here. But she couldn’t discern any of it.

She stayed still, listening, waiting and hearing nothing more.

Finally, after what seemed like hours though it was probably only 10 minutes, she felt for the hatch — the soft knot in the wood floor that would be unnoticeable in the light — and lifted it, swiping the package from inside before closing it again. Then she moved rapidly back to the door.

Was Evie still there? She had to trust the answer was yes.

“I don’t think anyone’s here,” she whispered.

“I don’t either. But I can’t see anything. It’s eerie being in here like this,” Evie whispered. “I don’t know how you’ve done this for so long.” Her voice was coming from Charlie’s left. That’s the only reason Charlie knew where she was.

And yet, Charlie still wondered.

“I am going to open the door a little wider than usual. Can you watch the room? Look for anything unusual. Just in case,” Charlie whispered, knowing full well that Evie had no idea how wide she normally opened the door (not wide at all) or how she came and went.

But without streetlights, there wasn’t much more that could be seen. Evie swept her eyes around the room, barely making out its scope — an improvement, at least. But she couldn’t see anything. And she definitely didn’t see any signs of Anna having been there.

“Nothing,” she whispered.

Together they slipped out the door and down the street, through the shadows. When they reached the Claremont entrance to the Barnard campus, Evie turned to Charlie and indicated the door. “This is the way to the tunnel,” she said.

“Through the school?” Charlie was surprised

“The other entrances are trickier to get to. I think this should be fine. You enter, then go left and follow the tunnel through Milbank before taking a stairwell down. Underneath the original subbasement of Macintosh Hall where the bowling alley motor is — the entrance to the secret Broadway tunnels is there,” she said. “Do you want to come with me?”

Charlie was surprised. Her mother had talked about Macintosh. That had been where the bowling alley was and where the Barnard Bulletin offices had been. The

building had been torn down in the early 2000s to make room for the state-of-the-art Diana Center. But she didn't realize that part of Macintosh was still there, hidden from view and concealing the secret tunnel dwellers had tried to discover for years.

"I need to go a different way. I want to see if Anna went a different route. I'll see you back there," Charlie said, handing off the package.

Evie slipped inside the outer door, then darted through another door inside and out of sight so quickly Charlie almost missed where she went. Taking a deep breath, Charlie slouched against the building for a moment. Everything felt wrong — bringing Evie with her, losing Anna, standing here so close to where boys now dwelled. It was a series of wrongness, and it was leaving her feeling off-kilter. She couldn't afford to feel this way.

But what was more was that her unease had her questioning everything.

"Stop it," she whispered to herself. "Stop."

A few deep breaths and she was ready to move on. But the footfalls, slapping against the pavement, stopped her. They were coming from 120th Street, about 500 feet to her right. She didn't have time to run. She wasn't even sure she had time to hide. But the doors to the tunnel were a few steps away — maybe she could slip inside.

Charlie side stepped to the glass door as softly as she could. One. Then two. Then — crap — her foot slipped on a pebble. The faint sound seemed magnified around her, like a thunderclap. But the slapping steps didn't falter for a moment. Maybe they hadn't heard, she thought as she slipped through the entrance and gently closed the door behind her. Retreating into the shadows, she was steps from where Evie had disappeared. All she had to do was slip inside the inner door and she'd be gone.

But Charlie paused. She couldn't hear the steps anymore. If she stayed crouched in the shadows might she watch the person or people pass? Could she observe them without being detected? Was it worth the risk?

With Anna dead and the neighborhood shifting, Charlie decided she had to see where they went and what they did. Her group's safety might depend on it.

Dressed all in black with her hood pulled up, she hoped she was invisible to the casual passerby, obscured from view. She hoped they didn't look inside. She didn't move. Instead, she just waited, counting in her head.

She reached 20. Then 50. Then 200. Finally, as she neared 300, she heard them. The slaps were obscured by the door. But even muffled, they were clearly getting closer and closer and ...

Charlie peered out the corner of her eye at the door, unmoving.

But then, the steps started to move away. They had gotten close and then ... what?

That's when she knew. They were crossing the street. They were headed toward Elliott.

The safe spot had been compromised.

With their backs to her, she felt confident that she could keep watching through the glass door. Even in the deep darkness, their crisp white shirts and khaki pants were just visible as they neared where she knew the entrance to be. But she couldn't see them enter. She couldn't see or hear anything.

Charlie had to get closer.

It was a fool's thought, she knew. But if security was compromised, she didn't see anything more important than confirmation.

She slipped out the door again, shutting it softly and crouched down. If she couldn't see them, they surely couldn't see her. But she could still hear the footsteps as they slowed. She softly moved down the street, ducking behind a mailbox and peering toward the entrance to Elliott. She could see the figures there.

She watched as they opened the door wide, flipped a switch illuminating the space and entered. The heavy door cracked closed behind them.

What were they doing in there?

Charlie wanted to rush forward and follow them in. She wanted to storm the building and demand they leave. But as she crouched there, struggling with what to do, she remembered the package — the package she'd just sent through the tunnels back to their home.

Anna was still dead. Evie was somewhere underground with the package. Suddenly, it was all clear to her.

Charlie turned, still crouched, and started running.

Chapter 13
February 2000

Hefting open the heavy wood and glass door, Jennifer thrust herself into Hamilton Hall and out of the blustery cold. She shook her soft wool scarf loose as she dashed up the stairs, headed to her fourth-floor classroom. With just minutes before her class, she was certain she could make it without being late. For once. And she did. Barely.

At the front of the brightly lit lecture hall, her professor was tapping a stack of notes on the lectern — a sign that he was about to utter the same thing he did at the beginning of every class.

“Welcome, learners. Shall we begin?”

Jennifer fell into a seat, struggling off her coat while simultaneously reaching in her bag for a notebook, a trio of colorful pens and the dog-eared copy of *Taming of the Shrew* that she’d stayed up way too late reading. Around her, stillness. Everyone else seemed poised and ready.

“When you’re settled, Jennifer,” the professor purred in his comforting baritone. She wanted to hate him, but the class was just so good.

“Sorry. I – sorry,” Jennifer said, breathing in and stopping her movement.

“Alright. When we last left Lucentio, Bianca, Petruchio and Katherine, we were discussing what this comedy tells us about the role and rights of women in Shakespeare’s time. Can anyone recap our discussion in brief?”

And the discussion was off, jumping from the recap into a heated conversation about sexism and patriarchal society and onto the use of comedy to illuminate societal problems.

“Now, here’s the question,” the professor said, interrupting. “Was Shakespeare one man who wrote the whole body of work we attribute to him? Or was he really only the author of some of it? And if not him, then who?”

Hands shot up in the classroom. Enraptured, Jennifer held hers high in the air. This was her favorite part of her Shakespeare in Context course.

But just as a classmate began to speak about the disparity among the different plays attributed to Shakespeare and how the voices seemed starkly different, something flicked outside the window — a flash of movement that started Jennifer, catching her eye. She looked briefly and then looked again, concerned and rising from her seat.

“Oh my God. Oh my GOD! They’re shooting,” she managed, pointing out the window as she sputtered words. Below, gunmen fanned out across the quad, heading toward Butler Library, Lerner Hall, Pulitzer and across College Walk to the other academic buildings. Around them, chaos. People running, screaming, tripping, dropping things, explosions of bullets ripping through their wool dusters and puffy coats, felling them onto the concrete.

Red. There was so much red.

Everyone in the classroom was standing now, some crushing forward to peer out the windows and others backing up, screaming.

“Get down!” the professor yelled just before the windows shattered in, a spray of glass glittering through the room and landing with small tink on the floor. Sharp noises

seemed to be coming from all directions as the class dissolved into chaos. Some students ran, some cried, some screamed. It was all happening at once, all so sudden.

Jennifer had stepped back toward her desk and crouched. She was frozen there as people moved around her and glass glittered on the floor in front of her.

“Lock the door,” she whispered.

“What?” the redhead next to her asked.

“Lock the door!” she screamed, feeling herself rise involuntarily as she looked wildly around for their professor. Her eyes landed on him, lying huddled against the radiator, his pant leg shredded at his kneecap.

Red. So much red.

“I can’t,” her professor said.

“Give me your keys,” Jennifer commanded, closing the space between them.

“Someone help him. Put pressure on the wound.”

Key in hand, she dashed across the room and slammed the door, twisting the key in the lock.

“Paper! And tape! Quickly!” Frantic, Jennifer looked around the room for something, anything. Blood was everywhere — smeared on the floors, across the desks and splattered onto the remaining windows. The boy who always seemed to play devil’s advocate in their discussions lay face down near the lectern. A blonde who always sat in the front row, her perky ponytail seeming to be too excited, was using her shirt to stem their professor’s bleeding. Other classmates were tending to another victim, applying pressure to wounds and making those most injured as comfortable as they could be. Those who were injured and still alive. On the lectern, the lecture notes waited. Jennifer lunged for them.

“I have tape,” the redhead said, rushing forward, and together they covered the window with layer after layer of paper.

When they backed away, there was no relief. The echoes of screams and gunshots in the hallway outside were deafening. It was hard to tell how close or far they were.

Now closed off, they could only rely on sound.

Jennifer crept back to her professor, taking off her belt as she walked. She crouched beside him, winding the leather around his upper thigh again and again until she could pull it tight. Cut off the blood flow, she kept thinking, as she threaded the end through the loop and secured it.

Sirens were approaching. The screaming continued. The gunshots seem to fade. And the blood — the red, red blood — surrounded her.

Chapter 14

March 2005

Pat-pat-pat-pat-pat.

Rubber soled shoes met the linoleum floor in an even rhythm. The faint airiness of breaths drawn in joined the sound. Those were the only noises standing between the crowded common room and absolute, unnatural silence.

Judy was pacing. Professor Thorne pressed her back against a wall, sitting with her knees pulled up tightly to her face. Jane, Gracie and Claudette sat shoulder to shoulder on one couch. Jennifer and Professor Fry faced each other in armchairs, not seeing each other. Others held hands, sitting near the door, the walls, in the open.

Pat-pat-pat-pat-pat.

Anna's body had been dealt with. Evie and Charlie had been gone for hours. The unknowns were casting darkness over the thoughts that no one wanted to voice.

Footfalls approached rapidly, a scurry of sound that captured everyone's attention. But when Professor Douglas entered with two tunnelers and a maker, the collective disappointment rumbled through the room.

"Nothing yet," Professor Douglas said, stating the obvious but also questioning. In the realm of uncertainty, both existed together.

"Nothing," Professor Thorne whispered in reply.

They'd known it was risky allowing the Barnard Finishing School for Boys to open so nearby. But they'd been ready. Professor Winkel and Professor Douglas were even teaching there.

More footsteps approached. The group shifted, alert, hoping.

Sweaty and frantic, Evie dashed into the room, holding the package aloft.

“Here it is,” she said breathlessly, offering it to Professor Thorne.

She looked exhausted, like she hadn’t slept in days or had just run a marathon. Her arm still extended, still holding the package, she bent at the waist. Her free hand rested on her knee as she caught her breath.

“Where’s Charlie?” Professor Thorne’s voice was urgent, impatient. She didn’t reach for the package but did spring to her feet, her eyes glossy.

Evie straightened, silent, looking around the room for the first time.

“We traced the route Anna usually takes to see if we could learn anything about where she was killed. Charlie is returning via a second route now. But she didn’t want to —” Evie was cut off by the sound of running.

Charlie flung herself into the room, breathless and wild-eyed. She reached out and snatched the package from Evie’s outstretched hand, holding it away from her body and moving back toward the door. She never stopped moving.

“We have to get this out of here. It can’t be opened,” she said frantically. “Elliott isn’t safe anymore. We aren’t safe. I’m going.”

Charlie didn’t wait for an answer. She turned and began running again — down the hallway, back to the outside.

The near silence that had settled on the room was banished by the dull roar of rising voices wondering and worrying together.

“Charlie! Wait!” Professor Thorne was out the door and running too, chasing her. “Charlie! Are you sure? What happened?”

Charlie didn’t turn, didn’t stop. She kept running, slowing only enough to allow Professor Thorne to catch up. Evie was behind them, running too.

“I saw them. Boys from the new school. They entered Elliott. The lights were on and —” Charlie’s voice was urgent and loud. “We have to get this away from here.”

“Evie, go back. Tell the others to pack up. Take what you can. Make sure you take the tech and the supplies,” Professor Thorne said. “Charlie, where should they go?”

Evie pivoted, not waiting for an answer as she headed back, running.

“The 91st Street station. It’s abandoned, but partially visible from the 1 train so wear black, everyone. You need to be invisible. Jennifer will lead you there,” Charlie yelled back.

Professors rarely left campus. Professor Douglas and Professor Winkel had apartments nearby, but they’d rarely used them until the boys’ school opened. They didn’t want to arouse suspicion. They couldn’t even pick up supplies for fear someone would wonder why they needed them. Professor Thorne and Professor Fry left campus even less often.

Charlie led the way out, whispering instructions on how to stay in the shadows and cross Morningside Drive fast enough to slip into the park without too much exposure. It was dark in there, the leaves shading the paths and only slivers of moonlight filtering in. Charlie had avoided the park when she was a student, crept out by how remote and uncertain it felt. Now, she didn’t even think about the old fears.

They kept moving, their footfalls making soft, almost imperceptible thuds. It wouldn’t be safe until they were far away.

“Should we open it and see what it is?” Professor Thorne asked quietly, looking at the package cradled in Charlie’s hands.

Charlie considered. Perhaps it was indeed what they’d expected. Perhaps the package had been placed there safely despite Elliott being taken over. Perhaps ...

“Not yet,” Charlie replied. “Let’s get across to the other side of the park first.”

She didn’t know if the distance really mattered. There could be a tracker in the package monitoring their every movement — a tracker that might have already led people to everyone else. Or it could be something else — a tiny camera, an itty-bitty microphone, a bomb.

Whatever it was, distance felt safer. Even if it was a false safety.

They kept running, approaching the edge of the park.

“Emma!”

The voice shot sparks through Charlie’s body. No one should know they were here.

“Emma!”

Louder this time, Professor Thorne and Charlie stopped. The voice was coming from the shadows in front of them.

“Emma, I need to talk to you.”

The uniformed officer approached them, sweaty too and with palms up, as if pleading. His eyes flickered over Charlie, an echo of surprise.

“Greg,” Professor Thorne breathed. “Greg, what are you doing here? How did you find me?”

Charlie looked from one to the other, not understanding how the professor who had led so much of the work that kept them fed could also be the woman standing beside her, with melting eyes soaking in the man — the cop — before them.

“It’s time, Emma. You have to,” the man — Greg — said.

“What?” Charlie couldn’t form a full thought. Although they helped transmit messages for the cops, they didn’t have contact with the outside, beyond academia. They

couldn't. And no one knew where they were living. That was the deal. Even the new students. That was how they remained safe.

"They're coming for us," Professor Thorne said. It was definitive, not a question, and said to Charlie or to the man or to no one at all.

"Yes. The chatter has intensified. It's targeted. They know and they are moving in. You need to move everyone. Fast," Greg said, stepping forward. "And you have to give me that. They're tracking you with it. We want to help. We'll delay them as long as we can."

"We're already on the move. I can't tell you where to but thank you," Emma said, looking at Greg for a beat longer before gesturing to Charlie to hand over the package.

"Destroy this. No matter what, make it disappear."

"I will," he said. "Emma, I —"

Charlie grabbed Professor Thorne's hand, "We have to go."

"Goodbye, Greg. Thank you."

And they ran.

Chapter 15
February 2000

In the dim light of evening, Evie lay curled into Jason on his flannel duvet, their hands intertwined. Above their heads, glow-in-the-dark stars — Jason had recreated the Maine sky in his senior year dorm room — came to life, a greenish glow spreading across the room.

“Three more months,” Evie said, giving his hand a light squeeze.

“Barely.” Jason nodded. “And then we’re off.”

Evie studied the way their fingers wove together, fingers pressed against fingers in a neat formation. She was silent, thoughtful, wondering things she didn’t want to say out loud. That might ruin everything. Usually they talked about classes and news and their childhoods. They made plans for concerts and camping trips. But they didn’t talk about the greater future.

“After graduation, Evie, what do you ...” Jason’s voice trailed off as he tried to tiptoe toward the subject she didn’t want to talk about.

Tears pricked Evie’s eyes as she stretched to look at him, breathing in deeply.

“I’m ... I’m not sure. I want some time off before grad school. There are so many openings for paralegals and everyone I know who’s graduated and done that has said it was a good interim stop on the way to a career,” she said. “And you’re going to find a teaching job?”

“Maybe. I’d like to teach high school science before I go to grad school and eventually get my Ph.D. Once I’m at NASA, I feel like there will be no going back to work with teenagers,” he said.

“Um ... You’re barely not a teenager, Jason,” she said.

“I know, I know,” he laughed. “But my younger, newer high school teachers were the ones who remembered what it was like. They were the ones who, like, inspired us. My friend, Dan, is in film school learning to write and direct scripts because our 9th grade English student teacher noticed his writing and talked about it. That’s powerful and it’s something that seems like it would be good for me before I have to, like, worry about whether we have enough rocket fuel for a Mars mission.”

“Well, that’s true. My very favorite math teacher was only in her third or fourth year of teaching. She’s the one who encouraged me to consider economics as it related to geography and politics,” Evie agreed.

Then they were silent again, thinking and staring up at the green glow of the ceiling. Beside her, Jason shifted slightly, moving to face her more.

“Evie,” he said quietly.

She shifted too, moving until they were laying on their sides, looking into each other’s eyes, hands still clasped together.

“Evie,” he said again. “I know we both want these big careers. But it sounds like we could both stay in New York. Or do these things in another city. Chicago? Washington, D.C.? Boston? And I’d like that. I’d like to ... find a place together after graduation. I love you. I want our relationship to be more than a college thing.”

Evie could feel the corners of her mouth rise as tears poured from her eyes. Ever since they first talked — really talked — she’d envisioned more than dorm room sex and dates at the Ethiopian restaurant down the street. But they were both so practical about it, they hadn’t wanted to get into what happens next when they hadn’t even decided what they would do right after the ink dried on their diplomas.

“Really? I love you too. I want that too. And I don’t care what city it is. Well, I mean I do — No to Miami, LA or Dallas — but I’d be open to most anywhere right now. Let’s do it,” she said.

Jason’s grin practically lit up the dark room. He leaned in, kissing her deeply and pulling her so close. She knew his hands would soon travel down her side until they reached her ass and then she’d melt into him, feeling his erection through her jeans and his. And then they’d be off, exploring each other’s bodies as if for the first time — though after more than a year, it was far from the first time. But right now, they just kissed eagerly.

“Let’s make a list. Maybe we should each make a list, actually, of the cities we’d most like to live in. And then we can compare and come up with a top five to focus our job applications on,” he said, pulling away from her for a minute. “Yeah, we’ll each make a list. This is going to be amazing. I can’t wait to do you in a real bed every night. And morning. And all day on Sundays.”

She laughed, swatting him playfully.

“Happy Valentine’s Day, sweetheart,” he said, serious now.

And then they were kissing again, their hands moving all over each other as they eagerly took in each other’s bodies.

Happy Valentine’s Day, Evie thought, unable to pull away to say it out loud. Suddenly the greater future came into focus, and she couldn’t wait.

Chapter 16

March 2005

The silence was a heavy blanket in the ugly void of the abandoned subway station. Each person could hear the rhythmic beating of their hearts and it sounded like thunder. Each person became aware of each breath and even the slightest of movements. In the dark silence, they were overwhelmed with sounds.

A day earlier, they'd been free to roam East Campus — operating gardens and learning new skills. But it had been compromised. Their learning community had been compromised.

They stood, sat, lounged and waited in the cavernous space where subway trains once screeched to a halt. They leaned against each other and against the dirty walls, hundreds of them waiting, clustering wherever there was room. They ignored the rough grit of the floor and just got comfortable where they were. In the shadowy, bleak darkness, it was hard to tell where one person began and another ended.

Six hours earlier, the evacuation had begun. It was swift and methodical, just as they'd planned. Evacuation was something they planned for, prepared for and even rehearsed. So, when the time came, there was no question what to do. That was the strength of the movement — they thought ahead and were ready. The newest members of the community were broken into groups and led by tunnelers through a maze of underground spaces until they arrived in a subway tunnel and sprinted down tracks. That, they thought, would be the most secure people-moving method.

But there were too many of them to all go that way at once.

Gatherers shepherded two and three people each above ground, slowly making their way south through shadows and alleys. The ones moving above ground carried less with them. They needed to be nimble in the dangerous streets.

The rest were left behind in the tunnels below Columbia, waiting until the tunnelers and gatherers could return and guide them too.

At the same time, menders shut down their living site.

They'd abandoned the chickens, setting them free in the park. They tore up the gardens and tossed the sitting room furniture around to make it look less lived in. They each took only what they could carry — one backpack each — and only the most important items. Tunnelers pulled sleds piled with food, medicine and technology as far as they could. Later, they'd return for it when the trains stopped running for the night. Other things — the mementos and personal items they'd held onto — were moved to a secret basement room accessible by tunnel, which they hoped to return to soon. Everything else was left behind, just as it had been five years earlier.

"How long do we have to wait here?" Gracie whispered. In the silent space, those words became enormous, filling the cavern and encircling them. But she reasoned that it was what everyone was thinking even if others were too classy to say so. She felt justified in asking.

"As long as it takes," came the whispered reply, curt and sudden. She couldn't see who'd spoken, but she felt the rebuke all the same. Shut up, sit down, just wait. That was ultimately what they'd been told.

It felt a lot like what she'd been told for years. Back home, after everything changed, school ended and she felt an immense pressure to be seen and not heard. There was little discussion about her thoughts or wonders or what she hoped for her

future. And there was little room to learn — all done in secret, she couldn't bask in the joy of bouncing ideas off her classmates or being praised by her teachers for insightful observations about the books they read. She wasn't even supposed to read — not really. Or, at least that's how it felt. She'd hoped that here, learning and helping and hopefully remaking the world, things would be different from the suffocating world she'd been living in. But maybe it was the same everywhere. Instead of hiding her books beneath her bed, she was now hiding herself and her mind in a dank subway where there were undoubtedly thousands of rats and roaches just waiting for her to be easy prey. Maybe there existed no place where she or her thoughts would be welcome. Maybe the whole country was bad and the only way to escape the bad was to leave altogether and seek refuge in a country without the laws that kept women down.

Maybe she was just tired of sitting in the sewer muck.

The last was the most likely.

Despite the mass of people, so many were still missing. She heard the others talk about groups coming still — but it had been a while since anyone new had arrived. How long had it been though? An hour? More? Gracie couldn't see Evie or Charlie, which told her that moving people was still underway. Several of the professors weren't there either — mostly the male ones. She counted the missing off in her head, three, six, twelve — and those were just the ones she knew.

How many hadn't arrived yet? How many wouldn't?

Their world had been so much fuller two days earlier. Now they waited and wanted and wondered and hoped and listened to water drip-drip-drip though the tunnel. The shudder of an explosion earlier had been an awakening. Someone tried to blame it on construction. Another person tried to relate it to the rumbling trains. But

Gracie had watched as only a few more groups stumbled in after that. She'd listened as they explained rocks falling and tunnels collapsing.

No one knew what had happened. No one knew where it came from. No one knew for sure what it was.

"It was loud. I still have a ringing in my ears," one girl who'd come from the underground tunnels whispered.

"The sidewalk cracked in front of me," said another, who'd travelled in the shadows.

Then there was no one else.

Those who were talking had been hushed soon after — not to avoid the sharing of information but to keep their location secret. When the city began to wake up, they needed to keep their whereabouts hidden. The workers would be arriving in areas of the tunnel not too far off in a matter of hours. People, who could betray their location.

But, Gracie wondered, what would happen after that? And what about all the people who hadn't arrived yet?

Chapter 17

April 1999

Nate ran his tanned hand through his floppy blond hair, pushing it back then letting it fall in a cascade around his chiseled face. It was like a scene out of some teen rom-com and made Charlie giggle every time. Nate would be the protagonist undergoing a transformation, realizing that he and his friends were totally superficial and making some misguided bet.

Those blue eyes — an ocean — drew her in for a dip. She could swim in their cerulean grace. He was just so pretty. That's how she'd described Nate to Evie after meeting him in class in January. She knew Evie had been skeptical that his prettiness was enough to sustain an actual relationship. Evie's boyfriend was cute, sure, but she said there was something about him — like how he'd recreated a night sky scene on his dorm ceiling — that made him so much more. Jason was kind and thoughtful and wanted to make the world a better place. Charlie wasn't sure Nate had that much depth. Sure, he was brilliant. Charlie loved hearing him reason through their complex political science reading assignments and challenge their instructor on game theory. But it all seemed almost performative for him — like he was doing these things because he had to while he was playing the part of student. Still, she liked him. And she especially liked his hair, eyes and the way his wool sweaters fit him just so. Maybe he wasn't her forever love, but he was a lot of fun for now.

"Babe? Babe. Seriously, just let me read through your paper. For inspo. I just need to get some idea where to start," Nate said in the surfer boy voice he used when trying to get his way by leaning on his cute boy looks.

Charlie felt a rush of disdain.

The muffled sounds of a truck rumbling by, a honk and the whoosh of tires on pavement filled the space between them. In the distance, a faint siren. A whistle got louder and then softer as a gust of wind hit the closed window.

Charlie didn't want to fill the space with words. She wanted to clear out, to empty it, to leave, to never look back, to be free from Nate. But she also worried she was being too rash. Her grandmother had always told her to take a few beats before making a decision that will change everything. She was trying to do that.

But Nate didn't seem brilliant when he acted like this. He seemed deliberately obtuse, and it was a huge turn-off. The biggest. And she wondered why he'd want to see her paper anyway. It didn't hide some amazing discovery. It was just a thoughtful look at the topic she'd chosen.

Charlie knew Nate already had the paper planned. She knew there was probably an outline tucked into the textbook on his desk. There might even be a first draft waiting for a read on his computer. What she didn't know, though, was why he was so intent on knowing what she'd written. The whole thing was so weird. It felt almost devious.

He'd asked to see her papers before — a short response here and an essay there. The first time, she agreed. She was flattered that he thought so highly of her work that he'd even ask. But after their professor cautioned against outside influences in their work, she worried that Nate's had inadvertently been similar, making them both look bad. After that, she declined every request. She'd explained why at first — she didn't want it to be weird — but he kept asking again and again and again. And she kept saying no. She didn't bother to explain anymore.

Each time he asked grated on her a little more.

She knew it was probably time to walk away. She'd make a note in her agenda to have that conversation. Maybe on Friday night.

She'd also knew that they rarely tackled the same subject. While he gravitated toward war and power, she was more interested in the parts of history that weren't adequately recorded in textbooks — the women who brokered deals, stopped international incidents and worked alongside the men who were remembered. Her teacher encouraged them to explore international relations through their own interest lenses.

She'd grasped the opportunity with excitement, writing her most recent paper about the women spies and radio operators who connected Europe during World War II. The research had been fascinating to her and she was already imagining how she could use it for her senior thesis — a fiction period piece.

But when she'd mentioned a bit of what she learned to Nate while working on it, he'd scoffed — not dramatically, but audible enough that she noticed. That made his insistence to see her paper now even more baffling.

Nate had been irresistible when they first met — all grins and sweetness. They'd picked up dessert at the Hungarian Pastry Shop on their first date and then ate while walking aimlessly down toward 110th Street and onward, sharing their histories and aspirations. He made her laugh. She listened to him as he dissected lessons and reasoned out ideas. His thoughts on how a better history curriculum in k-12 schools could stop future wars were legitimately fascinating. And he seemed enthralled with her recounting of war correspondence that showed far more women worked in dangerous jobs and helped with the war effort than history books would have them believe.

For the first few weeks, it had been a lovely partnership that felt wise and wonderful. But the more time they spent together, the more she began to see him as manipulative and disingenuous. He'd increasingly pressed her to back off of some clubs that he didn't see as worthy ("You're writing for the Barnard Bulletin? Why? Who even reads that?!?") and to share her homework and papers with him — even from classes they weren't in together. She wondered why he was so concerned with what she was turning in and denied him again and again. That didn't stop him from asking.

Despite all that, he had a spark that intrigued her. And while she hadn't quite decided to break up with him yet — well, maybe now she had — all signs pointed to that being a must-do. But in the meantime, she could still enjoy herself a little more. He was rather remarkable in bed, after all.

"No, Nate. Do your own work. My paper won't help you with yours. We both know they are most certainly completely different topics. Anyway, I have to run. I'm babysitting at four and need to stop at my dorm first," Charlie said. She forced a smile. "The best way to start is to just start."

Charlie felt the tingling of her skin — nerves — as she waited for him to respond. He was silent. His expression clouded and then cleared.

She leaned in for a kiss more out of habit than desire but Nate hesitated just long enough that the misalignment of their relationship was laid apparent before them. Then he leaned in, his hair flopping toward his eyes, and their lips met. Charlie could feel his warmth and felt the desire that was keeping her there — for now.

"Have fun. I'll just be here, struggling through international politics," Nate wiggled his eyebrows. "You're probably right about the paper."

That was certain.

Maybe she was wrong about the demise of their relationship. Maybe she just hadn't cracked the code of him yet. Maybe this is what grown up relationships were like — not being the same but enjoying each other anyway. Still, it felt more like high school romance, burning fast and furious and burning out even faster. Maybe they were a supernova about to explode.

Or maybe she needed to stop thinking about Nate and pay attention to where she was going, she thought as she jumped back toward the curb after nearly walking into traffic on Amsterdam Avenue.

Her phone pinged.

Sorry. You're just so brilliant. Good luck babysitting.

Maybe they could keep going a little longer after all.

Chapter 18

March 2000

Claremont Street at 4 a.m. was deserted. It was darkness and near silence, save for the gentle scratching of city wildlife scurrying about in the shadows. No lights peeked out from curtained windows or through cracks in doors. It looked as it had on countless other visits. But despite there being no sign that anyone had walked there earlier, it had changed. Everything had.

Charlie couldn't put her finger on the difference as she watched the street from a shadow. Crouched there, she ran her eyes over the street from end to end. Then she looked over every inch of the buildings. Nothing looked different or out of place.

It was just as it should be. And yet, it wasn't.

Charlie stayed there, watching from her crouch, for longer than usual. She was waiting, uncertain, feeling an anxiety blossom and bloom in her chest. She was always cautious, but this time felt more urgent — if that was possible. Finally, she crept from shadow to shadow, aiming for pure silence. But even the lightest movements carry a whisper. She also paused often, still looking again for anything different. There was nothing. It seemed the same. So why was she still so on edge?

Finally, she raced the last 50 feet up the street to where four clear plastic trash bags were stacked in a haphazard pile at the curb. There was only one stack for the street, all near the dorms where young women had once roamed. It was right where it should be. Why didn't it feel right?

Now she was exposed. Out in the open, she crouched again and worked at the first knot. It would have been so much easier to rip into it, but she didn't want it to be

obvious that the bag had been touched. When she pulled the second knot free, it released soft scrunch and crackle sounds, a hiss of relief as it came undone. Then she plunged her arm in, feeling around for the familiar items. Nothing. She repeated the process, getting shoulder deep in the next bag and the next, only to find that they didn't have the parcel or its precious contents.

Every few minutes, she just stopped, staying still. With each bag, she knew, the risk grew greater. Someone would hear her. Or they would see her. Or maybe they would sense her. Then, satisfied that she didn't hear anything unusual, she pressed on again and again. She had to. It was necessary.

Finally, from the sixth bag, she pulled the box out and with it the folded paper instructions from the manufacturer. Then she ferreted in further, collecting one-two-three items until she had all 28. She tucked the wrapped tubes into the box with the instructions curving over the top and secured it. Thankfully, she'd noted, they were all still sealed – they hadn't realized what the parcel was after all. Why would they? That was the whole point of their shipment system: conceal sensitive information in things the men would think were sensitive anyway. The strategy had worked for years.

Now, on the dark city street so close to the enemy, she wondered why they always underestimated women. Why did they think that sending women home and ordering them away from their passions and outside lives would be something women would let stand? Of course, to the outside world, it looked like they had. But there was so much more concealed beneath the surface. Just like the objects tucked into the box and into her pocket.

She reached into another pocket and pulled out an identical box. Tipping the contents into the bag in front of her, she let the instructions and box fall in after them.

Then she resealed the bag, double knotting it and placing it back into the pile. Tying the other ones and arranging them as she found them, she felt the silence and darkness grow more animated around her. It was closing in, its secrets malicious and angry. But when she lifted her head, she saw nothing. The street was still deserted. The windows were still unlit. There was no one there except her, the trash and the rodents.

Leaving the bags in a haphazard pile, she darted away, heading toward the river — the lesser used route. She'd be in the open for longer than she wanted to be but she couldn't go back the way she came. Not this time.

Chapter 19

March 2005

She could feel the warm ooze spreading from her forehead downward. Over her nose, to the right, beside her mouth, onto her chin — a stream that kept going and going and going. The warm turned to cool just after it arrived in a new place. Warm surge — cool follow. And so on.

Her ears buzzed, a constant high-pitched fuzz that drowned out anything else. It surrounded her. She could hear everything and nothing.

The fine granules of concrete dust gathered in her nose and mouth, a gritty chokehold on her breathing. Her nose ached, stiffened, sore. She could move her fingers but not her palm, wiggle her toes, but not move her legs. Trapped. She was absolutely trapped.

And, worse, she smelled something, faint and foreign that stung her nose. What was it? Why did it burn and fascinate all at once?

Time ticked by and she wasn't aware of how long — shaken, stirred and flung around, time meant nothing and everything. She was everywhere and nowhere. She was alive and dead, trapped and free, going everywhere and nowhere.

As time went on, she felt more — The awkward angle of her leg crushed below her, radiating pain and heat and anger into her hip. The way her chest couldn't quite expand the way it wanted to but kept trying to. The press of jagged rock into her shoulders. The proximity of the cold concrete pieces to her face.

She really was trapped. She couldn't see or hear anything. And despite trying to wiggle free, there was nowhere for her to go.

The last thing she remembered was leaving with the last group. She'd had the remaining crackers and ramen noodles piled with gauze and bandages on the sled she was pulling. All the better food and tech had gone before, hidden. She'd made sure of it. They needed it. The tech they'd built would give them advantages as they moved toward the future. She was bringing the rest — the things that would keep them alive. It was her ninth trip to move supplies from the basement of East Campus. The last tech run should have been her last, but she'd wanted to make sure they had everything. She wanted to make sure they survived.

Unlucky number nine, she thought, a giggle erupting. Cement dust crumbled into her mouth and she gagged.

Nine wasn't that way for most people, but for her it always seemed to come with negative consequences. She was nine when her parents divorced. It was the ninth of September when her sister was killed in a crosswalk by a hit-and-run driver when they were teenagers. It was her nine-year job anniversary when she found out that she was being denied tenure at her previous university in favor of a younger, more connected male colleague.

Maybe she should be like hotels and remove the number nine from her planning. No ninth trip. Just eight followed by ten. That would be better. Surely that would stop things like getting trapped in a secret underground tunnel that almost no one knew about or how to get to with people — what happened to the three women with her? — who didn't know where they were going or where they came from.

Was she fading between conscious and unconscious? Or was she imagining it?

The jagged trick-trickle of falling pebbles rocketed her into reality. It was too uneven — too inconsistent — to be natural. Something was making the rocks move. Something was making them fall.

“Help!” her voice was a hoarse whisper. Her throat burned with every second of vibration. And yet, it was worth it. She tried again. “Hellppppp!” Louder now, someone responded. Someone heard her. Someone was coming.

Chapter 20

October 1989

The rattle and rumble of the train was making it hard for Emma to hold her hand steady while writing in her journal. Her letters were jagged and messy, so unlike her usual writing. It made her feel off kilter. Add to that the power fluctuations that had the lights flickering and it became a stressful, nearly impossible endeavor. Slamming the blue flowered chintz cover closed, she sighed loudly, giving up.

She'd left school in a rush, forgetting to grab her watch — the fabulous neon green and pink Swatch her parents had given her for her last birthday. Now she had no idea how far they were from the Mount Kisco stop where she'd be meeting Greg. She had no idea how much longer she had to be on the train at all.

Probably better to stop writing anyway, she thought. She didn't want to miss the stop. That would be a disaster.

Two months into her freshman year at NYU, Emma had gone to three parties, had precisely one sip of Bell's Best Brown Ale and discovered that she needed little sleep to function in her early morning classes. She'd made friends with a trio of junior boys who drank too much and smoked dope to feel creative. They seemed amused that she refused their vices. She found them to be endless fonts of inspiration for writing.

Being away from home had been a shock at first — she was responsible for ensuring she ate and hydrated (not a problem). She had to help clean their communal bathroom (somewhat of a shock). And it was up to her if the bed got made (turns out, she did prefer it made). She was also in charge of budgeting for her own fun and ensuring that all the to-dos (especially the bundles of homework) got done.

Though she would never tell them, she realized how much help her parents had been when she was in high school. They'd been behind the scenes, cleaning, cooking and ensuring she had everything she needed. She'd never had to think about which cleaner would get the coffee stains out of the sink or the toothpaste off the counter. It was always just done. Someday, she'd thank them. Just not yet.

The other change had been what she called her relationship. Back home, they only referred to each other as friends. No one knew about their secret meetings at the docks by his brother's house or the nights they lay on a blanket in the town park watching the stars. That had been fine. She didn't want anything serious. They could both also see other people. It had worked for them.

But while going away to college had always been the plan, continuing her relationship with Greg was a surprise addition.

She'd always thought that when she left, they would call it quits. Why wouldn't they? They weren't really dating.

But as she prepared to leave, he had changed. He had become so tender.

She remembered his tears, his need to hold her, his hope she'd want to stay together.

She was so surprised that she agreed.

Seeing that other side of him had been so beautiful. So, she let herself believe this could be something more.

But since leaving, she found herself impatient with the whole thing. She knew she should miss him. She should want to talk to him. She should have a sense of heady anticipation to see him. But anything she felt like that was forced. She told herself she should feel it, so she did.

Now here she was on a train, heading to see him after weeks of separation. It would be just one evening together and then she was heading back. But inside her, a jumble of thoughts and emotions bubbled —their calls were awkward, sometimes adversarial. There didn't seem to be enough to say. And while he seemed concerned about her safety, it came out as controlling in a way she was uninterested in. Sometimes she wondered if they were both wasting their time, trying to hold onto something that wasn't meant to be long term. It was never supposed to be more than fun.

They were just kids.

And, more so, she wondered what kind of a future they could have if they both continued to hide their relationship like this. It didn't make for any kind of a foundation.

"Mount Kisco next!" the fuzzy voice blared over the intercom.

As much as she wanted to see him, a part of her wished she'd never left the city. A part of her wondered if this was all for nothing. A part of her wanted to find the next train back and be on it. She wanted to announce to her roommates and friends that they were done.

And then she saw him. His white blazer with a wild dark blue floral pattern. Popped collar, rolled sleeves and that navy Izod polo with the alligator just peeking out past his lapel. His acid washed jeans followed the strong line of his legs, and she practically salivated seeing his goofy grin and cropped blond hair. He was leaning up against his old VW Fox — the car that periodically just stopped driving, sometimes even in the middle of the highway. He loved it anyway — or really, "her" anyway. He called his car Margaret after the Princess Royale in Great Britain. She still wasn't entirely sure why (wasn't Diana so much more interesting?).

"Sorry, my DeLorean is in the shop," he said, his smile widening.

She swooned a little. That'd been their running joke for years.

"Hey, stranger," she said, raising her arms to embrace.

"Hey, back," he replied, a smile tugging at the corner of his lips. "Missed you."

She breathed him in, rugged and strong. Maybe everything would be okay after all.

Chapter 21

March 2005

They heard them before they saw them coming. Shuffle, shuffle, drag, shuffle, shuffle, drag. Hidden in the abandoned subway tunnel, the noise seemed to come from every direction — monstrous and jarring. Shoulders tensed, bodies folded back into shadows, breathing hushed. It was impossible to know what was coming so anxieties stretched around them, encircling the group like barbed wire being pulled tighter and tighter. And there they stayed, waiting, until the noise came close enough that they could see.

Evie, with her arm slung around Professor Thorne's shoulders, was injured. Blood streamed down her face, arms, legs. Angry zigzagging scrapes covered much of her skin. And her left leg didn't look quite right. Evie remembered the explosion that collapsed the tunnel around her. She remembered being trapped and wondering if that was where she'd end — on the campus where she helped fight for a future. She remembered the rubble and being pulled free. And then she was in the subway tunnels. She didn't remember how they'd gotten her here. Worse, she didn't know what happened to the women who'd been with her.

The explosion had been so nearby, so massive that it cast a certain finality to their time on campus. There would be no going back. At least not in hiding.

She'd yelled to them to run. But had they?

"Evie ..." So many whispers, so much concern.

"Hush, I'm fine. Hush. Where's Charlie?" Evie breathed, fearful that their voices would be heard.

“Behind you. What happened?” Charlie had entered so quietly no one realized she was there until she spoke. She looked at Evie with concern, stepping closer so she could lean on her shoulder.

“I’m okay,” Evie whispered to her.

“What happened?” Charlie asked again.

“An explosion. The tunnels — or at least some of them — are gone. I don’t know what happened to everyone else,” Evie replied. She slumped back and away from Charlie, letting her legs briefly support her weight. Then she landed against the tunnel wall, using it as a guide to slide to the ground.

Evie looked defeated.

“If they’re trapped, Professor Winkel and Professor Douglas will find them,” Professor Thorne said. “They’re looking right now.”

Evie gave a silent nod.

“Who’s still out there?”

“Professor Fry was moving the last of the supplies. Monica and Judy were with us. I don’t know what happened to them,” Evie said, a sob releasing from her chest.

For a moment, no one said anything. Jennifer looked stricken. Tears leaked from Jane’s eyes.

“Charlie is that ...?” Professor Thorne asked, breaking the silence.

“It is. And they didn’t find it,” Charlie said. “Not a single wrapping was opened.”

Professor Thorne accepted the box from Charlie and opened it, rummaging around.

“I don’t know how they missed it.”

“They’re men. They’d never think to hide a map on the inner wrappers of tampons.”

Professor Thorne looked up and stilled. Charlie was right. A box of tampons was practically invisible to those that didn’t use them. They were seen as disgraceful — something to be hidden. So The Initiative would never think that something bigger could be concealed with them. But to those that did, it was a beacon. A sign of something. Inside this box was the document they’d been waiting for, all in pieces wrapped around the individual tampons. And now they needed to piece it together.

“We need to be quiet now. We have a long day ahead,” Professor Thorne said finally. “Let’s work in shifts to open these and piece it together.”

“What about Professor Fry? What about Monica and Judy? What about the tampons?” Gracie asked, her voice rising.

“Gracie, Professor Douglas and Professor Winkel are looking for them. They can be safely above ground. We have to trust that they will find them and hope they will be okay,” Professor Thorne said. “I know this is hard.”

Gracie choked in air. Living in secret had been one thing. But this was so much more.

Charlie was opening the box, looking around for something. Others were closing in around it.

“Find something we can transfer them to — something that is clean and preferably can be closed tightly. We’ll need the tampons too. But they will have to be stored unwrapped so we will have to be careful to keep them clean when we open them. If you drop one in the sewer, consider it a loss,” Charlie said. “Let’s get a surface cleared and start working. Who has a tarp? That could be a good extra barrier.”

Gracie wondered how Charlie could be so cold. Didn't she even care?

"Good idea. I'll take first shift. Gracie, Charlie, Jane, will you help me? And perhaps Evie, Claudette and Jennifer, you can take second shift?" Professor Thorne said. "We need to carefully unwrap each one and then spread out the wrapper pieces. We might have to cut some to piece this together. And then, once they are all spread out, we have to put the puzzle together to form the document."

"What is the document?" Gracie asked, finally.

"It will tell us where we are needed next and how we're going to save this country." Professor Thorne was definitive.

Chapter 22

March 2005

The mangled, broken bodies of three young women were pulled from the rubble by the eager hands of young men at the Barnard Finishing School for Boys who'd been dispatched to the scene after the explosion. None of the boys had ever touched or seen a dead body before. Professor Douglas watched them with disgust, their virgin hands probing in the rubble.

The young men moved concrete and stone, bent back metal and set aside debris until the bodies would come free. Then they dragged them out under the watchful eyes of professors. Legs were bent in the wrong direction. Arms were crushed. The boys looked at their hands, now dirty, in amazement — almost marveling at the way the blood and dust mingled in a perverse coloring.

"That's it, that's it. Now check her pulse. Do you feel anything?" Professor Douglas asked dispassionately. "If she has a pulse, we need to help her."

The boys fumbled trying to locate a pulsing vein on the young woman's wrist — a stranger to them, but not to Professor Douglas nor to Professor Winkel who recognized Judy, who stood nearby. They could find nothing — not even a glimmer of life in the first body. Nothing. The collapse had crushed the girls in the tunnel, squeezing the life from their bodies. But they kept trying, searching, feeling each one for a pulse with their eager fingers.

"Nothing, sir," one said, sitting back on his haunches.

"Same here," said another, his hand trailing away from the girl's neck and brushing over the half-moon curve of her ample breast. Professor Douglas furrowed his

brow, watching as he tried to appear casual as he did it — like it was a natural motion. But what was really happening was clear: he was trying to cop a feel on a corpse. And not just any corpse — it was Monica, who'd only arrived at the school a year earlier. But now, the promising engineering student was reduced to a crushed shell being felt up by a stunted boy who thought no one was watching as the bulge protruded in his pants and he reached again for a less subtle feel.

“These were people, young man. They are not here for your personal pleasure. If you can't find the pulse, then please move away from that body,” Professor Winkel said, taking care to annunciate each word. Professor Douglas could hear the kindred thoughts betrayed in the statement. They both had taught these girls — they weren't just bodies.

The boys had been children when the world changed so they came of age in a world where boys had little contact with girls as they hit puberty. But that hardly excused the primal behavior.

“Save that energy for your future wife,” Professor Douglas growled at the boys. The third and fourth professors who were overseeing the whole operation, both nondescript men of the older white variety, seemed confused by the whole exchange and said nothing.

The third boy, who was poised to claim a faint pulse and start mouth-to-mouth, was sufficiently chided by the words that he sat back and nodded. “Nothing here either.”

“Call the police to come haul these away then,” the third professor ordered. “It's a shame these girls weren't protected as they should have been. Runaways, I suppose. This is why we keep girls home.”

Professor Douglas could hear the low whistle of air forced from Professor Winkel's lungs. He could see how the veins in his neck became more prominent as he fought to keep a composed, emotionless face.

"But sir, do you hear that?"

From a nearby pile a muffled squeak — no, not a squeak. More of a long vowel in a high-pitched monotone. It stopped. Then it started again. Heads swiveled toward the noise, trying to pinpoint its location. Professor Douglas motioned for everyone to stay where they were but he moved closer in slow deliberate movements.

"Here! Boys, come quick, there's someone here," he called before cupping his hands around his mouth and yelling. "Can you hear me? We're coming!"

The boys darted over, pulling the biggest pieces free first and then digging through the debris with their bare hands. The voice became clearer with each fist full.

"Help me!"

"Save your energy! We're coming," Professor Douglas called back.

Professor Winkel, looking helpless and wringing his hands, told the other two professors to go call for help.

"We need the police for those bodies and an ambulance for whoever is under here," he said. They grumbled a reply, but he shooed them off.

"A hand!" one boy yelled. The fingers stretched in the air as he did, as if released from captivity.

"You're almost out!" Professor Douglas called.

"Thank you! Oh, thank you!" the female voice called.

The arm followed, then the other and after an eternity, they uncovered the woman's head and legs. The crash and crunch of their digging was set against her light crying.

"I can't – I can't take in enough breath," she said. "Please hurry."

They were nearly done. They'd nearly freed her torso. But as they reached for the last stone — a massive slab of concrete that covered her chest — Professor Douglas stopped them. He fought back tears as he rushed forward, hoping the boys didn't see.

"Wait. Oh no. Wait. Professor Winkel, come here. Boys, back up."

A metal loop on the upwards side of the concrete looked like a perfect handhold. But as they peered closer, they could see that the rebar extended out the other side of the slab and into her chest. She wasn't just pinned; she was pierced through with the metal.

"Miss, I am so sorry. We can't go any further right now," Professor Douglas said, his eyes connecting with hers and speaking volumes. "I know you're hurt, but we have to wait for help."

"Why? What is it?" Panic made her words lilt up. "What's wrong?"

"This slab — it has metal rods that extend toward the ground. They provide support for the structure. But when the tunnel collapsed — you were in a tunnel, right? — this piece landed on you and one of those rods is through your chest. I am afraid that if we move this, it will have dire consequences," Professor Douglas said, squeezing her hand. "We'll wait. The EMTs will know what to do."

With her free hand, the woman swiped at her eyes. The salty tears made black streaks stream from her eyes.

“It hurts. I don’t know that I can ...” Her words trailed off. “Here, help me. I need to see. Help me lift up just a bit.”

“I don’t know if that’s a good—”

“Now. I mean it. I need to see,” she said firmly. Tears were still streaming down her face.

The boys tried to prop up her shoulders, but the concrete and the rebar were too high on her chest.

“It’s too close. Too close. They won’t be able to do anything,” she said quietly. “Listen to me. The girls I was with, they were just curious. They wanted to see the outside world. They’ve been trapped in their homes for so long. And I thought a quick trip through the tunnels and to peek out some buildings would fill that need for them. They are innocent. Don’t hurt them. Don’t let anyone hurt them.”

The boys exchanged glances. Professor Douglas said nothing for several beats before stepping back slightly, as if surveying her predicament.

“If we just cut that there, and wiggle that—” he tapped his mouth with three fingers, contemplating. “—I think there might be a chance. Don’t you want a chance?”

“There’s no chance. None. You can see it too. Where are my girls? I need to see them before it’s too late. Oh, it hurts. I feel like I am drowning.”

“Ma’am, I’m sorry,” Professor Winkel said, stepping forward, his tear-stained face filled with familiarity. “You’re the only living person we’ve found. How many girls were with you?”

A choked sob escaped from her, cut off, broken and shrill. Her shoulders shook, but as her body expressed the anguish, her sobs were cut with screams of pain. Every

moment pushed the bar against one side of her body or another. The boys averted their heads.

“I’m so sorry,” Professor Douglas said, looking back at the boys and wondering what he could say to make them leave. Now.

“Three, there were three. Maybe ...”

“I’m so sorry,” Professor Winkel stepped forward, crouching beside her. “Boys, you should go and see what’s keeping the authorities. We’ll stay with her.”

“Who are you?” one asked her.

“GO,” Professor Douglas barked before she could answer, relieved that Winkel could think faster than he in the moment, despite everything.

And with that, the boys rose, taking swift steps to head back to the school.

The professors waited until they were out of sight before speaking again.

“Mary,” Professor Winkel said, tears in his eyes. “Oh, Mary. No. We have to get you out.”

“John, hold it together,” she whispered, wincing. “You can do this. You can let me go and continue the good work we’ve done together. It’s okay. It’s just my time and I am grateful for all I have been able to do. But I need to know — you said you found three? What of the others?”

“Iris, Judy and Monica. Were they with you?”

“Yes,” she whispered. “And Evie. We were the last group. I stayed behind to make sure the technology was moved and stored in a way we could retrieve it later. And then I went back again to help. I was dragging the last of the food on a cart.”

“Evie’s not here,” Professor Douglas said. “I’m certain. And we haven’t found a cart. I imagine, if we can say you confirmed this was the whole group we can keep

anyone from looking closer. We can pretend you were, as you said, a mom and her girls out for a secret walk.”

“Thank heavens.”

Sirens in the distance signaled the impending arrival.

“Evie knows where the tech is hidden. She needs to take a team to get it. But they should wait a few days at least. And my sister. Someone needs to send word to my sister. She’s in Endicott. Let her know that I died doing what I love — she’ll understand,” she was talking rapidly, trying to say everything that needed to be said. She turned her head toward Professor Winkel, a smile warming her pained features. “John, thank you for all of these blissful years together. You are the best man. You were so unexpected when you came into my life — I’ll never forget the first time you burst into my office — and so welcome in how you stayed and loved me through the good times and these years of hell. Thank you for all these years. I — I love you. I love you with every fiber of my being. Thank you for loving me too.”

“Mary, you saved me. No one had ever challenged me like you did before. And no one had ever encouraged me like that either. I was headed down a bad path and you righted my way. I don’t know how I would have lasted all these years without you. Please don’t leave me. I love you too.” Tears ran in wide streams down Professor Winkel’s face as he bent forward to kiss Professor Fry.

“I’m too hurt, John. I would give anything to stay. But we have to protect our students. You have to make the inevitable happen before anyone else can ask me anything. But remember how much I love you and believe in you. And remember me,” she said.

“She’s right. John, we have to,” Professor Douglas whispered.

Professor Winkel kissed her one last time. Her blood left streaks across his face, but he didn't care. The sirens were getting closer but he didn't want to interrupt them.

"Always," she whispered as their lips parted.

"Always," Professor Winkel replied.

"I'm sorry, it's time—" Professor Douglas said.

"Do it," she rasped.

With Professor Douglas on one side and Professor Winkel on the other, they lifted the concrete from her chest. She cried out, gasped, screamed, choked and then finally, mercifully, let out one last raspy sentence.

"Help them finish it."

And then Professor Mary Fry, the brilliant engineer who taught students to build all new systems to remake the world's communications, died.

The flashing lights arrived.

"Give her mouth-to-mouth," Professor Douglas whispered hurriedly.

"What? No—"

"Do it. Your face."

Professor Winkel bent over her lifeless body and pressed his lips onto hers one last time. Breath-breath-breath.

The air wheezed out her chest cavity, squealing. He could hear the footsteps approaching. He placed his hands on her chest to start chest compressions, a sob escaping as he did.

"One-two-three-four-five—"

"Sir, she's gone. There's nothing you can do." An EMT placed a bag beside him and bent down. "You can see. You're only spilling more of her blood."

Professor Winkel rocked back on his heels, looking at the bright red blood on his hands. It matched the streak snaking down her forehead and the puddle on her chest.

Professor Douglas placed a hand on his shoulder, feeling the other man's shoulders sag as he exhaled. He willed Professor Winkel to stand up. To put on the face. To walk away. But he knew this was more than the loss of a colleague. Though they kept it quiet to avoid campus politics, Mary and John had been together since the 80s.

Nearby, the officers were already moving the bodies of the dead girls. Others questioned the boys, whose eyes were wide.

"Are you sure there weren't others?" the burliest of the cops asked.

Professor Douglas stepped closer.

"Yes. We checked the other collapsed areas but only the woman — their mother, I guess — and three girls were found," he said.

"Yeah, she said the girls just wanted to see the world outside their home," one of the boys chimed in.

"Can't blame them," the cop muttered as he closed his notebook. "It's a damned shame."

Chapter 23

March 2000

Gracie lifted her head, startled by the clang of her mother snatching the keys from the counter as she marched toward the door. She'd been carefully tying knot after knot, trying to create a perfect friendship bracelet for her best friend who she hadn't seen in weeks — not since the birthday party they both attended the night before their parents said they had to stay home and out of sight until things were safer.

Things still weren't safer.

Her mother had been glued to the news all morning, snippets of the reporting wandering into the kitchen where Gracie was intent on her work. "An uptick in deaths." "Nine more shootings were reported." "A new emergency government order shut down ..." Gracie tried not to listen.

But then her mother, in a frenzy and muttering to herself, hastily started to make a grocery list.

"Butter, milk, eggs, bananas and half-and-half. Skinless chicken for dinner and cheese crackers for snacks. Is there anything else we need?" Her mother was talking to everyone and no one. She was just talking, really.

Gracie wondered if grocery shopping was all her mother had to look forward to these days.

Satisfied, her mother had shoved the list into her purse and started toward the kitchen door.

"You can't go," her father roared. It wasn't the first thing he'd said about the trip out that day, but it was the loudest. And the angriest. That was before her mother had

stormed upstairs to the bedroom, demanding that he follow her, before the shouting grew to a fury and then subsided into a muffled hum that Gracie could ignore and before the clatter of the keys, which she could not.

“Let’s go, Gracie,” her mother said, shooting her a look that made clear it wasn’t a request. She was dressed, coat and shoes on.

Then she continued through the door leaving Gracie to scramble out behind her, pulling her parka on as she went.

Gracie buckled herself into the backseat where she usually sat. Her friends’ parents never made them sit in the back, but her dad had read some research about the safest place in a car and after that it was always the backseat for her. She looked at her mother, who was taking deep, noisy breaths in the front seat. Her shoulders were rattling a bit and Gracie wanted to reach out, wanted to ask her if she was okay, but she also didn’t want to call attention to it. If she pretended it wasn’t happening, it wouldn’t really be happening, right? Gracie wondered if her parents would be like Mary’s — divorced and living in different towns — soon.

“Alright, sweet girl, off to the grocery store,” her mother said in that familiar singsong. It was as if the anger inside evaporated moments earlier with all the breathing.

It had been five weeks since school had locked its doors, putting a barrier between Gracie and her favorite notebook and prized box of nearly perfect-colored pencils. That meant it also had been five weeks since she last saw her best friend. On the positive side, it had been five weeks since she last had to ignore Joey Danner when he asked for her phone number (“Come on, Gracie! I want to call you after school!”). That was one of the more exciting parts of this time.

It had also been five weeks since her mom had started to stay home every day instead of leaving in the mornings for work, which was exciting at first — more time with her mom — and then weird. Dinners had become more involved — more dishes, more ingredients — despite the fact that the family was eating earlier than ever. Her mother seemed distracted, often watching the news channel for hours. And she didn't want to talk or play games much. Gracie hadn't even seen her read, though in the time before the nationwide lockdown began her mom read every night after dinner. She just seemed sad all the time.

Gracie's parents had told her that the lockdown was supposed to end after three weeks, but it didn't. Her mom was placed on temporary leave at work, like everyone else's mom she guessed. But the longer she stayed home, the sadder and quieter she became. Gracie's school had extended their break twice. And now, she'd heard her parents say, they might not go back to school at all this year. She couldn't decide if that was exciting or sad. She missed her teachers and her friends and the really amazing squares of pizza the cafeteria served on Thursdays. But she also liked having all day to make friendship bracelets or reread the first four Harry Potter novels (she couldn't wait for part five to be released).

Her mom clearly wanted things to change, to go back to the way they were. She'd gone through spurts of baking a lot or cleaning a lot. But mostly she slept and watched the news while her dad got to leave the house every day and drive to his job at the hospital. Gracie had given up asking her to do things. The answer was always no.

But when her mom asked — or commanded as she'd done when they were leaving the house — Gracie was there.

She just hoped her dad would be calmed down by the time they returned.

“So we’re going to the grocery store? Can we get some ice cream too? It been forever. We could even get cones and toppings at the store and have an ice cream social at home with Dad. That would be so much fun,” Gracie broke the silence, looking hopefully at her mom. “I wish we could invite friends over.”

“Mmmm. Ice cream sounds good, sweetie,” her mom said.

And then it was silent again, except for the hum of the engine and the scatter of rocks on the road as they drove.

Gracie knew what her mom was thinking about. It seemed to be all she thought about these days. That day that the newscasters called Red Tuesday had changed everything. That’s when her parents began to fight. That’s when her mom started to look sad all the time. That’s when her whole life imploded. No more seeing friends. No more school. No pep squad tryouts for the spring. People had died, she knew, but it was the death of familiarity in her own life that really stuck out for her. She couldn’t wait for normal to return.

When the nationwide lockdown began, her parents told her it was supposed to give law enforcement time to flush out the people behind the attacks on college students — women, mostly, she’d realized. Instead, it only magnified the attacks. As her mother leaned toward the television again and again, Gracie heard snippets of the new reports — shootings at parks and playgrounds. A massacre at a pharmacy. Hundreds dead at women’s health centers and Planned Parenthoods, whatever those were.

And now her mom wasn’t even going back to work. She’d read the letter that arrived by mail when her parents weren’t looking. “We regret to inform you that due to the continued violence against women across the country ...” it had begun.

That day, her mom had returned to bed and stayed there. She'd locked the door too, but that didn't stop Gracie from hearing the sobs for hours.

But now, she was up and behind the wheel of her car. Gracie hoped this meant her mom was feeling better.

Flashing lights spun through the car, shaking Gracie from her thoughts. Her mother looked startled too, as she slowed the car and pulled to the side of the road.

"Don't say anything," her mother whispered as the crunch of gravel under boots neared the car.

"Ok, mom."

Tap-tap-tap.

The baton hitting the driver's window was fully extended. Gracie could see its length — like an extension of the uniformed man's arm. Her mother's head and headrest obscured her view, but she made eye contact with the man as he stepped back to peer into the backseat with his piercing blue eyes and not a hint of a smile.

"Good evening, ma'am. Out for a drive with your daughter?"

"Officer."

"Do you know why I pulled you over?"

"No, sir. I know I wasn't exceeding the speed limit."

"True. But we're in a lockdown, ma'am."

"I'm just on my way to the grocery store. My family needs to eat." Her mother's voice was strange — even but upturning slightly, as if she was losing a battle against controlling it.

“Ma’am, I understand you’re used to certain privileges, but those have been suspended. Do you have your husband’s permission to be driving his car? And do you have his permission to have your daughter outside your home? I’ll need to see those.”

Her mother gasped, turning her head to fully face the man. Gracie sunk into her seat, uncomfortable at the mention of permission. Since when did her mom need permission from anyone for anything? Why was this man treating her like she’d done something wrong?

She could see her mother gathering herself, sitting up straighter, pulling in a steady breath before she spoke again.

“I did not check my privileges at the schoolhouse door any more than you did, sir. This is my car and I do not need my husband’s permission to drive it. Nor do I need anyone’s permission to take the child that I grew in my womb and birthed out my vagina anywhere. Moreover, the nationwide lockdown ended at sundown yesterday so I am well within my rights as a citizen with a valid driver’s license to be driving to the grocery store, which is one of the permitted businesses that has been allowed to stay open during this ordeal, sir.”

Gracie wanted to cheer, but she could see how the officer was moving, leaning toward her mother in a way that wasn’t friendly. A glimpse of his face appeared between the headrest and her mother’s head.

The corners of his mouth raised into a sneer. “Not in this state.”

Her eyebrows crinkled together in confusion. Gracie didn’t understand. She saw her mother recoil, and she wondered if they were feeling the same thing.

“You have two choices, ma’am. Drive home like a good little woman right now, and I will forget that you forgot your place, just this once. Or, step out of that car and let

me arrest you. I would sure love to be the first in the department to send an out-of-line lady to the special detention center set up just for folks like you. And I bet that would teach your little one back there your role in proper society.”

He had a way of speaking that seemed to take familiar words and make them somehow less recognizable — like the way he said “proper society” as if it had extra syllables in there.

A redness spread up her mother’s neck and onto her cheeks. Gracie recognized the look of anger and defiance mingled with something else. Was it fear? Was her mother afraid too?

“Right, officer, of course. I’ll head home,” her mother said quietly, but then she added in a biting tone, “Who needs to eat anyway?”

That’s when Gracie realized that normal wasn’t coming back.

Chapter 24

March 2005

The church stood out against the lit darkness on the corner, majestic against the navy night sky. One by one, the group darted across the deserted street and walked briskly past the metal fence in front. They communicated with nods and hand motions mostly, but the silence had become too much and Gracie wondered if she was missing something.

“Where to now?” Gracie asked, looking around in confusion, forgetting to speak quietly. A sign at the corner declared this Mulberry Street, but it meant nothing to the 18-year-old.

“We’re looking for an arched door in the brick wall beside the church,” Charlie said. “But keep quiet. We can’t let anyone know we’re here and there are apartments right there across the street.”

They found it and slipped into the cemetery. Charlie gestured toward the rear of the church, and they walked that way, nearing the stone exterior where another black arched door awaited.

Inside, it was red first — a bloody light casting a glow on the entrance — and then white. The lights created a sense of displacement as they crowded inside and gently closed the door behind them.

“These are the only catacombs in Manhattan,” Jane said. “There are some pretty famous people buried here.”

Charlie nodded.

“This is also the only Catholic cemetery in Manhattan. St. Patrick’s Old Cathedral — that’s what we’re under — was St. Patrick’s in the 1800s. The new one that everyone flocks to didn’t exist. This was where the Catholic Church’s archbishop gave mass. It’s where Catholics came for their most holy needs, I guess,” Jane continued.

The creamy white walls — were those cinderblocks? — stark white ceilings and light tan stone floor made the whole space feel sterile. It was more like a hospital corridor than a place where the dead were kept. But tall indents in the wall revealed the true purpose. Some of the crypt stones said “Vault” in large letters followed by a family name. Others gave long epithets — In memory of Eliza Ann, daughter of ... — It was comforting and chilling. A show of love and a reminder of the death that had surrounded them for years now. Others just said a name.

“Where is everyone?” Gracie whispered, gazing at a stone from 1840.

“Further inside. There are two entrances, so we have to be careful to be far from both,” Charlie said, walking through the corridor swiftly. “Let’s go.”

The fifteen of them walked single file through the halls, sticking close to one another to not get lost. After losing Professor Fry and three students in the tunnel collapse, they decided to travel in larger groups in the early morning hours to make the trip downtown faster.

Other hallways branched off and off and off — a maze of corridors. In some, the heavy black doors were illuminated by eerie red lights like the ones they saw when they entered. Those areas seemed to conceal the bodies of people who were different in some way. And perhaps not different in a good way. Others were black.

They walked and they walked and they walked. And then they found the others, far from the entrance. Far from everything.

“Welcome. We’re safe here,” Professor Thorne said, her arms open. “We have about two hours until sunrise. Once that happens, we’ll need to be quiet. This church is still in use and we don’t know if they will be able to hear us through the floor.”

“Is everyone already here?” Charlie asked.

“Two more groups are coming.”

In the catacombs, they no longer had to worry about what dwelled around their ankles. But it was dark and cold, a labyrinth of space. Five tubs were set up in the corridor, but the water became black with dirt too fast with so many people in need of bathing. Finally, they decided to take advantage of the remaining night and went in twos and threes to the church bathroom where they washed each other’s hair, washed clothes and rinsed everything away from their aching, tired bodies before sneaking back into the catacombs. The subway had been far worse than they’d imagined when they planned the escape route.

Fortunately, clean clothes were waiting in a crypt for them. While their muck-stained pants and shoes dried, the patched pants and ragged shirts made them feel human again.

By the time Gracie was clean, Professor Thorne was working with teams of women to piece together the map. They’d freed all the pieces in the subway, but it proved too much to assemble in the dirty, rank environment.

Now, they had clean walls and floors, safety and room to move about. And they had a bulletin board and push pins just waiting to put it together.

“How did this become a safe house?” Gracie wondered out loud near daybreak.

“I think the church volunteered it years ago,” Jennifer said. “You’d be surprised how eager they are to help when the social movement in the country makes church attendance dip to nothing.”

She rolled her eyes to make a point.

“Yea, there’s a list of safe houses — in the city and beyond — this was on it and met our needs best. After those days in the sewer, we wanted to be somewhere clean and spacious where we could prepare for the journey ahead,” Professor Thorne said. “It’s not so bad, really.”

“And where are headed next?” Gracie asked.

“The Pepperdine trip will go on as planned, but the rest of us have a very important mission in Washington, D.C.”

Professor Thorne was spreading the reassembled map and document onto a wall where it would hang for them to examine.

“What? Why?” Gracie thought they would just move somewhere else in the city. She thought that going to school here meant being here. “How will my parents know—”

“They won’t,” Charlie snapped. “Don’t you get it? This is more than your current education. We’re fighting to get our world back. And Virginia, Illinois, North Carolina and Georgia all passed the Equal Rights Amendment over the last five years. Don’t you understand what that means?”

Gracie shrunk back. She had only sort of heard of the ERA, and she thought it had already failed. She didn’t want to answer and be wrong. Charlie was upset enough.

“It means that we are one signature away from the Constitution codifying equal rights for men and women in the country. Once that gets signed, the laws that force

women to stay home, not work and not be educated will be unconstitutional,” Professor Thorne said. “That’s our road back.”

Chapter 25

February 2000

The twinkle of an ICQ message chimed from Charlie's laptop and she jerked her head up wondering who was messaging her at 3:24a.m. on a Wednesday. Peering at the grey and blue box, the bright green flower logo with a yellow center and that one inexplicably red petal (why, she wondered again for the umpteenth time, couldn't it be all green?), she saw that Evie, Anna and Jennifer were unavailable, marked as n/a on her screen. Her high school best friend had the on icon next to her name along with the little phone thing. But there wasn't a new message from her. Alanis Morissette was singing "You Oughta Know," a beloved high school anthem that she kept on her MP3 player playlist years later.

And maybe that was fitting as she realized it wasn't any of her friends messaging her. It wasn't even a classmate stuck on a homework assignment or needing another set of eyes on an English paper.

No, the middle-of-the-night message was from Nate — the very last person she wanted to talk to.

Her computer speakers quieted momentarily before the opening chords of Faith Hill's "The Way You Love Me" came on.

"Gah," Charlie muttered, not wanting to hear the sweet love song right then. She poked at her computer, hurrying to skip to the next song before another note came through.

The vibrant sound of "Beautiful Day" by U2 replaced it. It didn't exactly fit how she was feeling right then, but it was better, she thought.

“Nate,” she hissed. Then she hoped her suitemates didn’t hear her because that wasn’t a conversation she wanted to have. With her headphones on, she had no idea how loud she was.

Closing her eyes, she breathed in deeply and then exhaled. Then she did it again and again, until the tension released some. It was something her mother, a doctor, had taught her to do when she was small and learning to deal with her big emotions.

“Hey there, Charlie. Long time no chat.” The brief message didn’t appear bad, but Charlie was apprehensive. When they’d broken up the previous May, just before move-out, he’d been cruel and calculating with his biting words.

He’d called her simple and talentless. He’d insinuated that she didn’t belong at Barnard and had only gotten in because of her legacy family. And then he’d accused her of trying to rewrite history one misguided paper at a time.

“If by rewrite you mean make it accurate for what really happened, then you’re right about that at least,” she’d said before leaving his room and walking straight out of his dorm without even a glance back. She’d been angry, but more than that she didn’t want to give him the satisfaction just in case he was watching.

And now here he was again, dropping into her ICQ box like nothing had ever happened. As if.

As snow fell in delicate flakes outside her window and the chill of February settled around campus, the song playing changed to “Stan” by Eminem and it seemed so prescient in that moment. Nate was destructive. He was mentally unstable. He was so freaking foolish, she wondered what had attracted her to him in the first place.

Torn between anger and curiosity, she debated slamming the cover of her laptop closed and ignoring him. Or she could set herself to privacy mode and she’d disappear

from his screen. So she did nothing. She just stared at the screen, at the message and tried to wish it all away.

Regret washed over her.

She wished she could unsee the words. Unknow that he was reaching out to her.

She wished she could go back and never meet Nate at all.

ICQ chimed again.

“I wonder what your mom will say when I show her those pictures we took in my dorm room. You know, the photo shoot you couldn’t wait to do. I can’t wait to find out.”

Ice spread through Charlie’s veins and she lurched back.

“No, no, no,” she whispered, her eyes filling with tears. “No!”

Her whispers became sobs, a rising wave of darkness and dread surging through her.

A knock sounded at her door.

“Charlie, are you okay?” Evie called from the hall.

“No, no. I mean, well, no. Oh my God, Evie,” Charlie said, peeling the headphones off her head and barely registering that Evie was still in the hallway behind the closed door.

“I’m opening the door,” Evie said, and she did very, very slowly. “I hope you are dressed because here I am. What is it?”

“Na-na-na-Nate,” Charlie said, barely able to get the word out, barely able to function. She pointed feebly at her screen, as if that was enough explanation and Evie approached to look over her shoulder.

“Oh, shit,” Evie breathed. “Would he really do that? How will your mom react? Are there really pictures?”

Charlie gave up trying to use the breathing technique her mom had taught her. It wasn't working this time. How could it? This was so much worse.

"Yes. I don't know. And, I think so? There was this one time when I drank too much ..."

"Jesus. Okay. Jesus. Oh my God, Charlie. But also, isn't this like the stuff you've been researching and writing about for the last four years? Men using this idea of how women are supposed to be to blackmail them into compliance? Because this is totally blackmail."

Charlie still hadn't answered Nate. She hadn't said a thing. But she imagined him staring at his screen and practically staring through it, taking her silence as a perverse acceptance or something.

ICQ chimed again.

"No, no, no, no, no," Charlie said, not wanting to look this time. Not wanting to know what came next. She felt her whole life, her whole future career, her whole everything derailing with each passing moment.

"Nope. There's no ignoring this, Charlie. Don't let him have your power. Let's look together," Evie said as she settled in beside her, nestling close.

"I know where she lives. I know where she works. But first, maybe I should send them to your dean. I bet she'd be interested too," the message read.

Evie rolled her eyes and looked at Charlie, her expression annoyed.

"Enough. It's time to tell him to go away. We don't even know if there are really pictures, right?" Evie said.

Charlie sniffed, pulling her knees to her chin as if trying to make herself as small as she felt right then. "I guess not. No, I don't know for sure."

“Right. And even if there are, what’s the worst that will happen? A few people find out that the feminist Barnard senior writing about a history of men taking women’s agency from them as they push them out of history has had a man try to take away her agency and shame her for being sexual? Seems like once your mom and the dean got over the shock value, it would be kind of non-news,” Evie said, scrunching her nose in disgust.

“True. I mean so what if there are pictures? That has no bearing on anything else I do,” Charlie agreed.

“So now you have to respond,” Evie said, nudging the laptop toward her friend.

“Right. Right. Now I just need to tell him ... to go away,” Charlie said.

“To fuck off,” Evie corrected.

And that’s what Charlie typed: “Fuck off, Nate.”

“I don’t know if I should send this. What if it provokes him?” Charlie asked, uncertain.

“You need to stand up to him,” Evie replied.

Charlie pressed send.

The ICQ chime was almost instant. It was as if Nate had just been waiting for her to say something. Anything at all.

“Check your mailbox after the mail arrives tomorrow, sweet Charlie. I am not kidding. I have a little preview for you.”

Then he disappeared, offline, no longer available.

Charlie felt tears prickling her eyes again and she bent toward Evie who enveloped her in a hug. It was easy to believe things would be fine, really, given her academic interests, but she couldn’t be certain what would happen if those photos got

out. Barnard wasn't so removed from a more prim and proper institution that expulsion wasn't totally off the table. What would happen if she didn't stop him? She wondered what would be in her mailbox when she got there. She wondered if he was just making it up.

"It's going to be okay," Evie murmured into her hair. "You are going to be okay."

"But what if I get expelled?" Charlie whispered.

"You won't. I promise you that will not happen."

Charlie could still remember when she trusted Nate — before the begging to see her papers and disparaging her to the professor. Before he'd gone from all around sweet guy to misogynistic asshole. Before he'd made clear that he believed women had only one place in the world: giving birth to baby after baby. That last bit. That was what finally caused her to break it off with him. She didn't need that in her life.

And that's when she realized it didn't matter. Nate could send the hypothetical photos wherever. But what he didn't understand was that she wasn't embarrassed of being a sexual woman. She wasn't afraid of being seen in bed with another person. She wasn't afraid. He could threaten and threaten and threaten. But she wouldn't fear him. There was no need to. And if it caused problems at school, maybe that was the fight she needed to have.

Evie and Charlie stayed there for a while, quiet and comfortable, Evie smoothing Charlie's hair. And when Charlie's breathing slowed to an even in and out, Evie laid her gently on the bed and covered her with the afghan at the bottom of the bed. She tiptoed out, turning off the light.

When Charlie woke the next morning, she remembered the middle of the night messages and the threats from Nate. The threats that she wasn't going to worry about.

Still, she made a mental note to see what Nate had slipped into her mailbox. But first she needed to take a French exam, turn in a political science paper and go to her Victorian Literature class.

Along the way, Nate's words became ether. It wasn't until much later, after her school to-do list was done. After she'd made it back to her dorm where she made a big sandwich with sliced eggs, lettuce, tomato and onions. After she'd eaten the sandwich while watching *All My Children*. And after resident assistants ran through the dorm halls telling everyone to lock doors, turn out lights and hide.

It was only after that, when the pings of what might have been gunshots stopped. When the sirens silenced, but the flashing red and blue lights still danced outside. When the news began to trickle in on instant messengers and the 6pm broadcast. Only then, when she heard about her International Politics professor dying steps from the mail center in the basement of Macintosh, did she remember what Nate had said.

And that was when she knew there were no pictures. There was just a horrible, awful, cruel boy she'd once liked who was now part of the horrible massacre that killed so many people — how many? Did anyone even know? — that Tuesday afternoon. And when Evie met her eyes — they were watching the broadcast together — she knew that Evie knew it too.

Chapter 26

March 2005

It didn't matter how many scratchy blue moving blankets — the ones intended for safeguarding precious furniture in a moving van — Charlie stacked beneath her. She now was sitting on four of them. And it didn't matter how she shifted from one position — leg tucked under — to another — crisscross applesauce — in the dark storage hold. None of it really mattered because there was simply no way to be comfortable in the narrow space behind dressers, boxes and other detritus of a life while the old, creaky, cold van bumped and jerked down a New Jersey highway.

There was also no amount of hiding from view that could make Charlie feel safe on the trek. She was guiding nine women south from New York to Washington, D.C. blindly. They hadn't had enough time to plan a route they could navigate on their own. So when the opportunity to hitch a ride on the moving van operated by a member of the church they'd been hiding at arose, she said yes.

Now, she wondered why she had trusted this man she didn't know so easily.

Tucked in the dark, stale space, she couldn't see where they were going. Nor could she be certain that he wouldn't betray them along the way. There were so many ways in which things could go wrong and she spun one after another around in her head over and over again.

It had been hours since they climbed into the truck and tucked themselves into the small space. Soon she'd know for sure. Soon, the driver should be pulling off the road into a park-and-ride, unlocking the rear door and leaving them to find their way out and into the woods.

Charlie could hear the light snores of women to her right and she wondered how they relaxed enough to sleep. But she was glad they did. Once they left the truck, they'd be completing the journey mostly on foot. First, though, they'd hide out in a closed campground in Cape May, New Jersey, that promised rustic cabins outfitted with bathrooms, microwaves and full fridges as well as space heaters to keep them warm at night. There would be no fires — the smoke was too much of a risk — but there would be a safe place to plan the remainder of the journey and set off.

Squealing brakes and a veering right of the truck told Charlie they must be close. Once they stopped and she heard the click of the door lock, she'd have to herd everyone into the woods before getting her bearings and using a compass to navigate them to the safe sight.

Charlie felt around for her backpack and found the straps to slip her arms through. Then she quietly urged the women around her to wake and do the same.

"We have to get out soon," she whispered. "When we do, remember the plan: Straight into the woods and don't stop until I do."

"I have to pee," Gracie complained.

Charlie wished again that Gracie had been sent with the Pepperdine-bound group. But as a new school member, her skills were limited. Charlie agreed to take her because she knew the basics of mending, which could come in handy as they traveled through the woods and on foot such a distance. But that didn't mean she liked it.

"Hold it, Gracie. This is serious."

Charlie was surprised to hear Jennifer admonish the girl. Usually the group left that up to Charlie or the teachers or whomever else was the elder of the group at the

time. It made her smile a bit, glad that she wasn't the only one tired of the girl's complete naïveté.

And then they were stopped.

A door closed. Charlie waited, letting out a low shhhh.

Although the church member agreed to transport them, that didn't mean they were safe — or alone. But then the lock clicked and the door fluttered open just for a second — just a fraction of an inch. And that's when Charlie moved. She rushed forward, grabbing a box and handing it back where it was settled in the space she'd sat moments earlier. Then another and another until there was a path to the door. She pushed it open tentatively, looking around with intensity.

Outside, it was dark but lights in the parking lot made it less so.

"Ok, let's go," she said, holding the door and waving the group out. "Straight back to the woods. Just start hustling. I will be there in a second."

When the last woman left, Charlie turned, rearranged a few more things and then hopped out herself. She locked the door and dashed to the woods, quickly catching up with the group. She didn't stop moving until she was in front of them, leading their way deep into cover where they could use a flashlight to review the map and compass and choose their path.

In a clearing — one marked with a vibrant green blaze on a tree — Charlie finally stopped.

"Gracie, step into the woods a bit, but don't go far. You can pee there," she said. "Jennifer, can I have that map now?"

The women spread it out and Charlie used a finger to trace where they'd been to where she thought they were.

“Amber, check that blaze. See if there’s coordinates written in small letters below it. Here, use my flashlight,” Jennifer said, gesturing to the mark.

Amber read off the numbers — coordinates — and Charlie realized they’d walked slightly too west to a different safe spot than she intended. That had always been a possibility with how quickly and uncertainly they had to enter the woods.

“We appear to be about two miles from the campground,” Charlie said, pointing at the map. She shined her flashlight toward the compass. “And we want to head in that direction. As long as we keep traveling southeast-ish, we should be there in about an hour.”

“What’s happening?” Gracie returned to the clearing, zipping her jacket as she did.

“Two-mile walk. Follow Charlie. Campground awaits,” Amber recounted flatly.

“Does anyone else need to pee or maybe eat something?” Charlie looked around to see a few nods. “Okay, let’s take 20 minutes and do whatever we need to before we head out. But everyone, remember: be as quiet as you can and use lights as little as possible. It feels like we’re the only ones out here, but that may not be the case.”

Charlie switched off her light and slumped to the ground next to the map, folding it up carefully. Around her packs unzipped, scarves were added, food was consumed and occasionally someone would walk to or from the woods. She knew she needed to project confidence, but she was tired. They were in the middle of the woods in a place she was unfamiliar with traveling to a campground she’d never been to where she was supposed to trust that they were safe. And although the others looked to her for leadership, she wondered if she really deserved the confidence.

In New York, it was different. She knew Morningside Heights with such precision that she could do her runs in complete darkness without worry. But, she wondered, did that familiarity trick her into believing she was wise enough and strong enough to do the same in places she didn't know?

A deep sigh escaped from her lips as Jennifer sat down beside her.

"Do you need to sleep?" she asked.

"No, I'm fine," Charlie replied.

"It's okay if you need a break. I know you didn't sleep at all in the truck."

Charlie smiled slightly, "Nope. But I'm okay. I really just want to get to the campground. Maybe when we get there, I can sleep some finally. I am tired. But I am too worried and anxious to let myself relax. This is a lot different from New York."

"I've been here before," Jennifer said. "It's so different. But the campground we're going to will be a good stopping point to prepare for the next leg of the journey."

"That's good to hear. You should be leading us though," Charlie said.

"Nah, you're great at this. You know how to keep everyone focused and on track and quiet. All without saying much. It's a pretty awesome talent," Jennifer said, starting to stand and offering her hand. "Time to get moving, right?"

Seeing Charlie rise, the others gathered, bags at the ready and waited for her to lead.

Walking through the brush and growth, Charlie had to stop often to make sure they were still heading in the right direction according to the compass. It was so much slower than the leading she'd done in New York and she didn't like the discomfort of unfamiliarity that came with each step.

As much as she tried to conceal her discomfort, she could feel the unease extending to those following her too, whispers and yelps coming more frequently. So after two hours and 23 minutes, when they emerged into a clearing, it was a relief. Cabins were dotted every 30 feet along a dirt road. Campers sat, locked up tight nearby.

“I need to find the office,” Charlie said. “There’s a lockbox hidden behind it with all the keys we’ll need. In the meantime, spread out and choose a cabin. Each one has three or four bunks, so you can share if you want.”

“Do you want me to come with you?” Jennifer asked.

“Sure, that’d be great,” Charlie said, dropping her bag on a porch.

The sky was beginning to shift from inky blackness to a dark, deep blue. Daylight. Charlie wanted to be inside and asleep before the cover of darkness disappeared altogether.

“When my family and I stayed here, I adored that playground. I begged my mom to take me every morning,” Jennifer said. “But it was a weird time. Like a year or two before they split up, I think? I remember my dad trying to light a fire and the wood wouldn’t catch. And my mom ... she was like trying to stay clear of him, but couldn’t quite hide the smirk. They got into the biggest fight because my dad was so stubborn but really had no idea what he was doing. And my mom did, but she was trying not to ruin the vacation.”

“What happened?”

“In the end, my dad stomped off to the bathroom and while he was gone — like the second he was gone — my mom rearranged the wood and adding some kindling and got the fire going.”

“Badass.”

“Yea, she was. My dad totally ignored the fire when he got back and went to bed while my brother and mom and I made s’mores and told ghost stories and stuff.”

“Were you upset when they divorced?” Charlie asked.

“No. By then, Dad’s moods were just too much. He made every day pretty miserable. He wanted to be like this 60s sitcom dad who was head of the house and everyone looked to him to make decisions. But the reality was that my mom was more educated, more capable and a better parent. Life was better when they divorced. Our home was so much more peaceful.”

Charlie and Jennifer rounded a bend in the road and saw the office ahead. The road curved past it and into a treeline.

“This place is so concealed. It’s such a relief after that truck ride,” Charlie said.

In the rear of the office, Charlie counted her steps from the corner. Stopping after nine, she felt the siding boards, looking for a loose one. As her fingers probed one slightly above her head, she heard the creak before the board nudged in slightly.

“Got it.”

The ring of keys was tucked into a sealed plastic bag. Each one was marked with a cabin number or building name, and a list of instructions explained what to avoid and how to set everything back as it had been before they left.

“My god. This network thinks of everything,” Jennifer said.

“They really do. It’s amazing to see it in action beyond New York.”

Back at the cabins, Charlie unlocked the doors and the women carried their things inside.

“Hey, everyone! Come out. A few notes before we tuck in,” Charlie called from the clearing. The instructions had said that loud voices were generally okay since they were on 30 acres.

“Alright, the owners of this campground left some notes for us. First, no trash left behind. If you have trash, set it aside to take with us. We’ll need to find a place to get rid of it after we leave the campground. We might even be able to bury it in the woods somewhere. But, anyway, take it all with you. Second, no lights. The cabins are electrified. But this is a particularly dark area so when the lights come on, we become more visible. As you can imagine, that’s a really bad idea. And finally, absolutely no fires. The smell and sight of the smoke will be a red flag that we’re here.”

“Can we use our flashlights,” one woman asked.

“Yea, of course. Just don’t point them at the sky,” Charlie said. “Okay, everyone, get some rest.”

The wood steps creaked and balked as the women entered the cabins, shutting the doors firmly — a chorus of thuds echoing through the trees. Outside, chirps and snickers of birds and animals waking from their slumber rose. It was deafening to Charlie as she settled on the thin, flat mattress, pulled into a ball covered with a tiny blanket for warmth. Even as the sounds outside increased, she felt herself pulled into an abyss, falling and falling and falling.

And that’s where she was hours later, in a dreamless falling sleep, when the pounding on her door jarred her awake. It was loud and frantic and she could hear the talking outside before she even turned the handle.

“Charlie, we have to leave,” Jennifer said breathlessly, her backpack already slung on her shoulders and the truck driver standing a few feet back, looking anxious.

“They know you’re here. I was having a smoke outside my motel this morning when I heard a bunch of them. They’re coming at dusk,” the man said.

“Dusk? Why dusk?” Charlie asked.

“They want you to think you are safe,” he said.

Charlie considered for a moment and then realized that she had to trust this man. She had to believe The Initiative was coming for them at every turn. They probably were.

“Let’s move,” Charlie said, gathering her things roughly and shoving her pack back together.

“I’ll make sure everyone has everything. You’ll lock up?”

“Yes. Where’s the truck?” Charlie asked.

“Near the office. I drove right in when I realized this had been compromised.”

“Okay – everyone should get moving, Jennifer. I’ll be right behind you.”

Chapter 27

March 2005

It was different in Philadelphia, Evie noted on the morning they arrived. Inside the boarded-up former department store that served as a safe house, it was like its own world. Evie was surprised to find hundreds of women bunkered down, living in makeshift shelters that created their own living spaces. On an upper floor, vendors from the community set up stalls where they sold mending services, makeshift bedding supplies, and homemade toiletries. In the basement, the store's café became a restaurant and grocery store selling both produce grown on the roof and commercial food. Bathrooms that once were used by workers were now communal for all. And, in perhaps the greatest stroke of luck, there was even a shower room and laundry room that the department store had installed in its heyday for employees to always look their best.

Everything in the living center was clean — even cleaner than East Campus had been.

“We have a barter system for goods. No one has any money these days, but they have labor. So, someone might trade two hours of cleaning duty for tampons or four hours of mending for a week's worth of clementines,” a woman giving the travelers a tour said.

“That's very civil. It's like you are your own economy,” Evie said. “How did this all start?”

“After the murders and the lockdown, a couple of friends here in Philly had nowhere to go. Neither of them had kids. They weren't married. Their families were far

away. And they didn't want to get shipped off somewhere, which was rumored to be what would happen. So, they tried to come up with a place to hide. One of them had worked here in high school and knew how to get in despite it being boarded up — there's always a hidden entrance, you know? And that's what they did. They brought everything they could. Actually, I think they basically moved everything they had into here. And they live in the luxury dressing rooms on the third floor still," the woman said. "Anyway, they were alone for a while but they wanted to give other people a chance to escape and live independently too. Lesbians and trans people and genderqueer people. They were all targeted and repressed too. So, they spread the word. They got involved in a couple of knitting and sewing circles that popped up and used them to create an information network to get the word out."

"How many people live here now," Jane asked.

"We stopped counting when we reached three hundred, but I suspect it's closer to a thousand now," the woman replied.

"You stopped counting? Why?" Evie said.

"It wasn't the most important thing. The numbers are interesting to bureaucrats but we're a sanctuary. We can tell by looking around if there's more space for more people. And we can tell if we have enough food and water. We rely on observation not arbitrary means of tracking our community. We've been lucky. We use the roof openly for growing food though we try to only tend it at dawn and dusk. And the police have left us alone."

"The NYPD left us alone too. It surprised me at first, but they lost so many colleagues and respected superiors with the temporary orders. I don't think anyone

considered that there would be factions of men who actually were happy to have women working alongside them,” Evie said.

“It’s more than factions though. Here in Philadelphia, we get food deliveries from the local fire station, the post office does a weekly drop-in so we can get mail out to our families and they postmark it from other sites in the area and the hospital sends a couple of nurse practitioners to check in on us every month. We have doctors here already, but the nurses bring medicine we wouldn’t have otherwise,” the woman said. “But everyone is too scared to really fight back and get us back into the world. The government has been pretty vicious these last several years and the militias are ruthless.”

The group arrived at what used to be the jewelry counter and stopped.

“Here’s where you will be staying. It’s really not that comfortable, but it will give you a place to rest for the night at least. We have a few blankets for you in the counter storage and pillows too. And your rations are on the far counter. It’s not much, but we hope you will enjoy your stay. We’re all really grateful for what you’re trying to do,” the woman said.

Evie smiled. It was so different. The room was loud with conversation and the people seemed unhindered by the last five years of hiding.

“Thank you so much for having us,” Evie said and then she shook the woman’s hand.

The space, which was shaped in a square and confined by glass cabinets that probably once held fancy watches, was just large enough for all of them to sit down with their packs, resting their legs. But that only lasted a few minutes. A couple of women rose to use the restrooms. Others decided to tour the sales floor.

Evie, though, stayed put, her eyelids drooping as she reclined. She could feel the sinking of her shoulders and the relaxing of her legs. She could hear the people moving around her and smell the cleanliness of the strange colony. But all she could see was the darkness behind her eyelids.

In her dreams, Evie was lost in a tunnel, alone and feeling the dirt above sprinkling on her. She knew she shouldn't speak. It would make things worse. She bit her lips, harder and harder and harder until they were sewn shut, closed forever. She walked faster through the maze of the tunnel, frantically searching and scanning for another tunnel, an exit, anything. She was suffocating with her closed lips and fear. She was ...

Shaken awake, Evie looked around frantically. She was stretched out on the floor in the unfamiliar space, her pack under her like a pillow. She struggled to a sitting position, leaning against the cold glass and metal of the cabinet while she blinked sleep from her eyes and looked around at the people and spaces. The tour guide kneeled in front of her, extending a hand with a note.

"This came for you," she said, pushing it at Evie's hand. The white business envelop was tightly shut, a golden wax seal spread across the center of the flap.

"How," Evie muttered, not really expecting an answer. "Who even knows we're here?"

Her voice was coarse and garbled. Her limbs felt heavier than they had earlier. The sleep, it wasn't letting go just yet. But it had to. She needed it to.

"You okay, Evie?" Jane asked, standing with a few others. Evie nodded.

The tour guide raised her eyebrows in reply but said nothing. She rose and turned to walk off, her job complete.

“I’d open that if I were you. The messenger was pretty frantic,” she called over her shoulder with a shrug.

Evie forced her pinkie into the edge of the flap, nudging it open bit by bit. Then she freed the single sheet of paper inside.

“Shit.”

Chapter 28

December 2002

There was a darkness that settled in the wood paneled office. It wasn't that it didn't have windows — it actually had four of them. And it wasn't that the lights didn't function. They still did nearly all of the time. But there was something else that seemed to cast a dark glow on the space. It was almost like the room had a mood all its own.

Jennifer didn't like coming here. She didn't like having to do this again and again. But every time she was summoned, she went. It was almost a compulsion.

"Let's go over it again," Professor Douglas said.

"We've been over it three times today," Jennifer replied, exhausted with the conversation. "And dozens of times before this. What do you think you are going to learn by reliving that horrible day again and again and again?"

"There's so much to be learned, Jenny. You were the first in the class to notice. And you snapped into action. What was it about you that was different? That's what I am trying to decipher from these conversations." His velvet baritone didn't hold the same sway it once did for her. Now Professor Douglas's voice was merely a cheese grater scraped across her nerves.

Jennifer hated that he called her Jenny. She also hated that he put so much emphasis on her role in his survival that day. If not her, it would have been someone else, she was sure.

"One more time, then we'll be done," he said.

"Fine. But this is it. I am not going to keep doing this with you," Jennifer said.

Still, she wondered, would she be able to resist when he asked her to come in again? She hadn't been able to so far.

"Start at the beginning, please," he said, positioning his pen above a fresh legal pad.

He used a different one for every telling of the story. Jennifer wondered how he was able to get so many. But then again, he had keys no one else did. Maybe there was a storeroom somewhere in the building just filled with the yellow pages. Maybe there was an entire building of supplies he wasn't telling anyone about. Maybe, despite what Charlie and Professor Thorne and everyone else believed, he wasn't to be trusted.

"I was running late for class. It began at 11 a.m., I think, and it was just a few minutes before when I reached Hamilton. I remember how hard it was to open the front door — all that heavy wood and glass was particularly hard to pull open that day. And I remember how cold it was outside — maybe it wouldn't have been so cold if it wasn't also so windy. The wind was biting. Then I entered the building and it was like being slapped with warm air. My skin felt itchy because of it and I had to undo my scarf right away. It was too warm. Anyway, I was running up the stairs — the elevator would have taken too long — to the fourth floor. And I knew I didn't have any time left and I really didn't want to be called out again like you did every time I was even a fraction of a second late."

Jennifer paused. This part of the story was hard to tell because it was so firmly set in the before time. The idea that being late to class and fearing being called out was something to worry about seemed ridiculous now. What small worries they were.

"Go on, please," Professor Douglas said.

“You were holding your notes — a whole stack of them — when I entered. And you did that thing you always did, tapping them on the lectern three times. So I knew I had made it in time, but just barely. And then you said —”

“Welcome, learners. Shall we begin?”

“Yes, that. You said that at the start of every one of our classes.”

“I’d been saying that at the start of every class for years and years. A professor I had once said that having something predictable to call class to order would make you more memorable to students,” Professor Douglas said, his eyes looking away from her at some invisible point in the past. “Sorry, please continue.”

Jennifer didn’t usually reference that phrase when she told the story. It seemed so inconsequential. But maybe, she thought, he really did need it all — the whole story from start to finish — to be satisfied. Maybe then she could be released from this cycle of memory and recitation that never seemed to quench his need to remember and understand.

“I sat down and took off my coat. It was caught on my arm so I was kind of struggling with it. And I was also trying to get my supplies out — my notebook and copy of the book and I don’t remember what else. And then I realized I was the only one moving and I could feel the blood rising in my cheeks and I was so embarrassed, even though I was on time.”

“This is good. You haven’t talked about this before.”

“And you called me out. I wasn’t even late and you still called me out and I hated you then. You said ‘Whenever you’re settled,’ and I was just so embarrassed. I wanted to disappear. But I just stopped moving altogether and you were satisfied enough to begin talking about the play.”

“What were we reading, Jenny?”

“*Taming of the Shrew*. You remember, don’t you?” Jennifer asked, confused.

“Yes, but I wanted to hear you say it. I want you to be in that moment again.”

Professor Douglas shifted in his seat, his hips moving from side to side in that way he did when he started to get excited. She wondered what that did for him. What did it feel like? Why did he do it so many times in these discussions?

“You referenced our last class and the characters — Lucentio, Katherine and I don’t remember who else — and talking about the rights and roles of women in the time of Shakespeare. We’d had such a long conversation about that before and you wanted someone to recap it for you.”

Jennifer paused again, remembering how passionate she’d felt discussing the comedy in that class — and how capable. She remembered how important the discussion seemed at the time. Was it still? Perhaps, she thought. The role of women was still in question.

“What are you thinking about, Jenny?” he asked, leaning forward.

“The discussion seemed so important then. And I wonder if it’s still important now. If we could learn something from literature like this as we have modern discussions about the role of women in society. It’s like we keep having the same conversation, century after century.”

“A wise observation, indeed,” he replied, sitting back. He didn’t shift this time though. She wondered if he was just saying that to keep her going.

“Anyway, we were talking about patriarchal society and how sexism is a pervasive force that tries to hold women back. And we were talking about how comedy is especially effective for pointing out the ills of society because it cloaks the criticism in

laughter and the audience is so enraptured by the surface level funny that they don't notice the points it's making right away."

"Ahh yes. You really enjoyed the discussion. You bring this up every time we talk. But each time, you also seem to emphasize a different point of it. It's fascinating."

She looked at him, curious. Was reliving this again and again not just about what happened after? Was he also getting off on the idea that he'd been a great professor once?

"Please, continue."

"I saw something. We've talked about this before. I don't know what it was. It was like a flutter or a flicker in my peripheral vision. I can't be any more specific than that. But I saw something and I turned my head. And I couldn't even quite focus on what I was seeing. It was like all a blur. But it got me out of my seat and I had to take a closer look. I think you were speaking when I did. But you stopped. Why did you stop?"

"I was trying to figure out what you were doing. It was unusual for a student to suddenly get up and go to the windows during class. I was trying to find the right words to tell you to sit the hell back down," he said. "You haven't asked that before."

"I know. It just occurred to me that there had been a sense of silence when I looked outside."

She didn't want to continue. She didn't want to have to talk about this part of that day again. She wanted to get up and leave now.

"Isn't this enough?" she asked. "Haven't I shared this next part enough yet?"

"Jenny, you've been making such fresh strides today. Let's just get through this. It's the last time, remember?"

She exhaled, annoyed. Her muscles in her back tensed. She could leave if she wanted to, she knew on some level, but she felt frozen in that chair — frozen in that office with Professor Douglas. She didn't say anything for one minute, then two. And he just sat there waiting, not saying anything. Finally, she started again.

"I looked out the window and saw people running. There seemed to be more people out there than there should have been. I remember wondering if I'd missed some campus event announcement. But then I saw that one of them had this big, long gun and he was pointing it this girl in a white wool coat. He must have pulled the trigger because the next thing I knew, there was a red circle growing on her back and she was on the ground and the bag that she'd been carrying had fallen. Her books were spilling out of it. And there was a blue bouncy ball that rolled out and I was watching it. But this all must have happened very fast because then I saw other men with the same gun and other people falling and dropping things. And someone was shouting. Have I talked about that before? I remember someone yelling 'Oh my God! They're shooting!'"

"That was you. You haven't mentioned it before, but that was you."

"It was? I don't remember saying anything. And I don't remember anyone else hearing it or seeing it. I just felt mesmerized — no, that's the wrong word — I felt trapped, like I couldn't look away from what was happening. If I did, I thought, something worse would happen. There was so much red. It had snowed and the red just was like luminescent against the white snow."

"This is great. Keep going." He was moving again, his hips wiggling from side to side and she was momentarily distracted by it. His excitement was growing but she only felt intense dread. She didn't want to continue. But this was the last time, he'd said. She wanted it to be the last time.

“Then I noticed there were people around me. I wanted to get away from those windows, but there were so many people. And the noise. There was shooting. But it wasn’t coming from outside. It was behind us. Was it in the hallway? And the screams. And the pounding of feet. There was a gunman in the building, wasn’t there?”

“Yes, there was.”

“I thought the window exploded because someone shot at us from the ground. But that doesn’t make sense, does it? Someone shot at us from the doorway, didn’t they?”

She was panicked now, realizing that the way she remembered things was inherently flawed because she’d been so focused on the gunmen outside.

“Someone did shoot at us from outside. You were right. That’s why the window exploded in. Your memory is fine,” Professor Douglas said, leaning forward. “But there was also a gunman in the building. Or several.”

“I moved back into the classroom away from the shattered window. I was by my desk then. That’s when there was this noise — it wasn’t like a firework. I thought it would be, but it wasn’t. It was like a pop. Then another and another. How many were there? And I said to lock the door because I was thinking about how we could survive. But you wouldn’t do it. You—”

“I’d been shot. A gunman ran by our door and shot off a couple rounds into the room. Do you remember that?”

“Blood. I remember the blood. It was on your pants. You were wearing those faded grey khakis that hugged— never mind. There was blood all over them.”

“But you don’t remember anything else?”

“I— no? Should I?”

“Three students were killed in our classroom. Two others were wounded.”

“I don’t remember that.”

“I’ve told you before — not long after it happened. You don’t remember? What do you remember next?”

“I took your keys. And I locked the door. I think I told someone to help you, but I can’t remember if they did. Then we used your notes to cover the window on the door. We put like two or three layers of them there. And then I turned around and there was so much blood. It wasn’t just coming from your knee. It was everywhere.”

“And then what?”

“The door was locked. We couldn’t see out into the hall. We were all crouching on the ground. I used my scarf to put pressure on your knee to stop the bleeding. And there was chaos. It was so cold too. Without the window, the room got so cold. And I was scared. Every so often the door would rattle as if someone was trying to get in.”

“Do you remember when police arrived?”

“It was a while later. I remember that. And I didn’t want to open the door. I still had the keys and I didn’t believe it was them.”

“Yes, yes. Exactly.”

“You told me I had to let them in. And it was like I was on autopilot. I did. I opened the door and they came in and then ... I don’t remember what happened after that.”

“You fainted. You just crumpled to the ground. Goodness, this is wonderful. You made it through the whole thing this last time. Jenny, you saved my life. I can’t thank you enough for that. Next time—”

“This was the last time. You got the whole thing, as you said. Now we’re done.”

“Jenny, don’t be like that. We’re making real progress. Next time—”

“No. No. This is done. I am glad you are fine and the replacement knee surgery was so successful. I am glad you got enough of my memory this time. But this is done. I am done reliving that day.”

“Jenny—” Professor Douglas rose from his chair and approached her. The bulge in his pants was unmistakable and she felt a wave of something. She wanted it to be revulsion, but it wasn’t.

Jennifer stood suddenly. She needed to get out of the office. She took a step forward and then another, but misjudged where Professor Douglas was. She stopped short, her hand grazing the bulge and she felt something course through her, an electric charge. She didn’t move her hand away, and she saw him shiver with excitement.

And then she forgot. She forgot that she wanted to leave. She forgot that he was her professor. She forgot everything and just let it happen.

Chapter 29

March 2005

The cargo hold was no more comfortable the second time around. It was cold — the kind of pervasive cold where it cuts through layers of clothing, leaving Charlie and the others shivering and wondering if they'd ever be warm again. The metal floor seemed to soak in the cold, surrounding them with it and penetrating to the bone. The unforgiving surface hurt to sit on — and the moving blankets were no longer even a little help. They'd been reallocated to provide a buffer between the goods being transported and the people in hiding. Charlie told everyone to huddle together, to share their body heat in hopes it would make the trip a little less painful. But it was only a little helpful.

Wide awake and cold, they were whispering as the truck drove west, stopped for an hour to unload packages, slightly north, stopped for an hour again to unload, and then south. The huddle of bodies just wasn't enough to keep them warm — but that wasn't even their main concern.

"How can you be sure we're safe," Gracie asked, her eyes wide. "How do we know we aren't being abducted? How do you even know we're headed south now?"

Charlie, in the dim daylight coming through tiny holes in the side of the truck, held up the compass, waving it a bit.

"If there's one thing we do know, it's that we are going in the right direction," Charlie said. "And the driver was true to his word on the route he was taking."

The stops had been nerve-racking, Charlie had to admit. She'd woken everyone up and insisted they stay awake, alert, hidden and silent. Although a couple of people

grumbled how it would be easier to sleep, Charlie felt it was too risky — one errant snore would give them away.

The driver had said they'd hit Washington, D.C. about two hours after the second stop. How long had it been, Charlie wondered. It felt like hours but could have been mere minutes. The creeping cold had a way of making everything feel infinite.

"He saved us," Jennifer whispered, shaking her head. "I am sure of it."

A few others murmured in agreement.

"We should talk about what's going to happen when we get to D.C.," Charlie said. "I know we all want to get out of here, but we may have to wait a bit. It has to be dark when we leave. And we need to wait for the all-clear."

"What's the all-clear?" Jennifer asked.

"A series of taps on the side of the truck. It has a certain pattern to it," Charlie said. "Don't worry — this is old stuff. The code came with our original invite to D.C."

"More waiting," Gracie sighed. Charlie shot her a look, though it was hard to tell if she saw it.

"Then we're headed to a safe house. It's in DuPont Circle, just off the metro station. It used to be some kind of a food court or something, but it's been shut down for a while. I'm told it's pretty well concealed and pretty dark and dank so prepare yourselves."

"Gross," Gracie said.

Charlie shrugged.

"We'll be joining up with other groups that have been called in. I don't know how many. But some of the professors will be meeting us there as well. We'll know more about what's happening once we arrive."

Charlie could see heads bobbing up and down in the dim light. She didn't really know much else and was as curious as the rest of them. But, for now, she just needed to get them there. And to keep them calm until then.

"Maybe we should try to sleep a bit," Jennifer suggested.

"Probably a good idea," Charlie replied.

"I'll stay up this time. You need rest," Jennifer said to Charlie.

And this time, Charlie didn't argue.

Chapter 30

March 2005

Dark and dank didn't begin to cover it, Gracie thought as she skirted around a dark puddle on the floor. It wasn't quite as gross as the subway tunnel had been when they evacuated the campus, but it was pretty close. And this time, with yellowing lights flickering overhead and noises echoing, they had the added struggle of being able to see the rats and other pests occupying the space and hear them scurry and squeak too. It made Gracie want to vomit.

But distractions helped. When they arrived, she'd watched Charlie dry heave upon seeing a maggot-infested dead rat in a corner. And when Evie and her group arrived right after them, the commotion was riveting.

From what Gracie overheard, Evie got a note in Philadelphia that sent her group careening toward D.C. instead of California.

"We'll head to California in a few days once it's handled," Evie told Charlie. Gracie had tried to seem busy staring at graffiti while she listened. She figured she would exclaim about how much there was to read if they asked her what she was doing. But they didn't notice her and for that, she was glad.

Since then though, it had been unnervingly quiet. Gracie didn't know what they were waiting for — or perhaps who? That's the problem with not knowing: you have no idea what the right question to ruminate on is to begin with.

At least it was better than thinking about all the things that hadn't happened five years ago. That year, her middle school basketball tournament was cancelled at the last minute. And the next year, her eighth grade class hadn't gotten to take the traditional

trip to D.C. (though, to be fair, the grade above her hadn't gotten to either). There was no eighth-grade dance either, no end of school banquet and no cute dress under a graduation gown. Instead, when she finished eighth grade, she was simply sent home. For good.

She didn't like to think about it. And she especially didn't like to think about how bitter her mom had been after that day they were pulled over by the scary, snarling cop. It had been at least a year before she heard her mother laugh again.

Gracie saw the word "Mom" written in puffy letters on the concrete wall and reached out a finger to trace them. She missed her mom. She missed how her mom had become so badass after that year, starting sewing circles and sneaking new books into the house. And she especially missed how her mom told her in whispered stories the feminist history of the United States. That's what made Gracie so excited to head to Barnard. Now, she wasn't sure why she was even still here. Was running from one dirty, underground safe house to another really fulfilling her destiny, learning anything or taking back the country?

"Gracie, we're meeting by the Chicken Chirps sign in 5 minutes," Jennifer whispered, moving swiftly past her. Gracie gasped, startled, and was relieved she hadn't screamed. She hadn't heard her coming. In fact, she hadn't heard or noticed a lot — like how many people were in the space now or that Professor Thorne and Professor Douglass had arrived.

Gracie looked through the cavernous space, spotting the dingy, dangling sign where a crowd was quickly gathering. There were so many faces she didn't recognize. She'd known there would be others here — Charlie had talked about it during the drive — but she hadn't realized how massive the gathering would be.

“How has no one noticed all these people arriving?” Jane asked, falling in step with Gracie.

“I was just wondering that too. Well, that and how big exactly the movement is. Where did all these people come from?”

“And I thought our group in New York was big,” Jane replied, shaking her head.

They drew closer to the crowd and saw that the professors were gathered with a dozen other adults — well, Gracie thought, older people at least. She was an adult after all. Technically speaking. And it wasn’t quiet. Again, Gracie wondered how they weren’t being found. This was so different from New York.

“Everyone! Everyone! Can we have your attention, please?” Professor Thorne clapped her hands together, yelling above the din. The volume dimmed a bit, but didn’t quiet. “We’re going to get started. Please quiet!”

The voices silenced one by one until just a few were left. Gracie could see the heads that belonged to them swivel in a moment of self-awareness that made her giggle.

“Alright, my name is Professor Emma Thorne. I am from the Barnard cohort and formerly taught at Barnard in the before-time. We’re here in D.C. to help with efforts to take back our country and our government, as you know. With me here is Professor Douglas ...”

Gracie tuned out. She already knew him. And she didn’t care who the other professors were or where they came from, much less where they came from before Red Tuesday happened.

She barely knew what Red Tuesday was. She probably should have and, sure, she’d heard about it on her mom’s television. But she didn’t have the intrinsic reaction that everyone else did to it. She hadn’t been there. She hadn’t seen the danger or felt the

fear — the things that Evie, Charlie and the others seemed to carry with them. She hated that she didn't know though, because they knew she didn't. And sometimes when they were talking about it, they seemed to look at her like she was missing something.

Maybe she was.

Gracie scanned the faces that surrounded her. Everyone seemed to be riveted by the introductions. Their eyes faced the professors, their expressions intense, curious. Wasn't there anyone else bored with the whole thing, she wondered. Surely, she couldn't be the only one who'd rather be doing anything else — reading, painting, anything. With a deep sigh, she looked back to the professors. Someone she didn't know was talking now — a woman with horn-rimmed glasses and black hair cut in a long bob. She reminded her of the moms at her school before everything changed.

“... the National Archives Librarian. A group led will head out at 12 a.m. to head to the National Archives, where they will gain entry and conceal themselves until morning when the librarian is expected in. We are aiming to arrive during a shift change, which will allow less scrutiny.”

Professor Thorne scanned the crowd, a hand hovering above her eyes as if the sun glare in the underground tunnel was too much. Gracie stifled a giggle.

“Charlie,” Professor Thorne called out and then nodded as she made eye contact. She gestured in her direction. “Charlie will lead that team, which will be made up of people from all the cohorts. We're aiming for the right assembly of skillsets for this.”

The other professor gave a brief nod. “And once you've located the librarian, your job is simple: get them to certify the Era Rights Amendment. With that, it becomes codified into the Constitution and all the restrictions on women will be instantly rendered unconstitutional.”

“And by simple, she means it’s going to take your best skills of persuasion. We’re up against a precedent that a president must request this to happen before it can happen. However, that isn’t the actual process.”

A murmur roiled through the crowd. Heads spun and conversations brewed.

“That’s nuts,” Jane muttered. “It cannot be that easy.”

A woman to their right agreed, “This is a fool’s errand. I can’t believe I came here for this.”

Another spoke up, though without the concerns: “Sounds pretty amazing and worthwhile to me. If this works, we could have our world back. Just like that. Wouldn’t you like to sit in a café again? Or travel? Or just ... go to a bookstore and read whatever the hell you want?”

To Gracie it made sense. She found herself nodding along.

“I guess. But why didn’t anyone make this happen sooner?” Jane asked.

“Why would the president who was enjoying the male-dominated world he’d reshaped ever request that it be done?” Gracie replied, her eyes scrunching in confusion.

In fact, she thought, it made the most sense of anything she’d heard lately.

The professors were talking again. Different ones this time, talking about a diversion and something else. But Gracie was thinking only of how she’d get picked for the team to go to the National Archives. This was the kind of thing she wanted to be doing.

“...dangerous. But we’re committed to keeping you safe and seeing this through. We are so close — so close to the end of this. But the next 18 hours will be critical. The National Archives Librarian doesn’t know we are coming. The government doesn’t know we are coming. We need to keep it that way for as long as possible. That’s why, once we

all split up, you're forbidden from even mentioning the plan to each other. As you head out into the world, have a story in mind. That will be your tale to tell should you get stopped or detained. And whatever you do, don't mention what's happening. It's crucial. The element of surprise is in our favor."

Gracie saw the bobbing heads nodding in agreement and wondered how they could be so definitive when they were so skeptical minutes before.

As the meeting broke up, Gracie set out to find Charlie. If anyone could convince the professors to let her come along, it was Charlie. She just needed to convince her that it was a good idea first. And surely Charlie would see that. Surely, she would. Gracie wanted to be useful. She wanted to matter.

"Charlie! Charlie!" Gracie said, pushing past a group of women she'd never met before who seemed deeply involved in a conversation with their heads tilted toward each other. "Charlie!"

She saw Charlie's chest rise and fall with a deep breath, "Yes, Gracie?"

"Take me with you. I want to go. Please take me. I will be the best help. You've seen. I am really good at traveling in secret. And I am really persuasive too. Please take me. Please take me," Gracie said, her eyes round with excitement.

"I'm not assembling the team. Sorry. You're hitting up the wrong person for this one."

Gracie felt her face fall into a scowl but forced herself to smile again.

"Oh, come on, Charlie. I know that if you suggested it, the professors would be all in. You're Charlie! The one they look to for leadership. Surely if you suggested me, they'd be all in because they respect you so much," Gracie said, hoping she wasn't laying it on too thick.

“Gracie, I am leading the team, not assembling it. You’re barking up the wrong tree. And I am not getting involved in who’s coming. As you can see,” Charlie gestured around them, “there are a lot more people here than were in New York. Honestly, I want — and you should too — the right group for this, whoever that is. If you’re part of it, great. But who knows what all these other people could do. This isn’t about glory. It’s about getting something very important done and hopefully getting all our lives back. I can’t tell you how much I miss my mom. But until something changes — and this could do it — I won’t be able to. So I am not playing favorites or begging for you to join the team. I will take whoever the professors think is best.”

Charlie turned and walked away before Gracie could say anything more. Her hopeful smile turned into a frown and she resented that Charlie mentioned glory at all. As if she was that shallow.

Chapter 31

March 2005

The massive columns of the neoclassical National Archives Building stretched around the structure, as if creating a jail around the national secrets it contained inside — holding them in. Above the entrance where the triangle of a roofline met a horizontal jutting out, a relief of horses and people in flowing toga-like garb performed some scene. It seemed so official, so stately, as Charlie looked up at it on their approach.

“Archives of the United States of America,” Evie read out loud. “I can’t believe our country has kept national secrets in a building in the wide open for all these years.”

Charlie nodded. It was weird — the building wasn’t far from museums, the White House and the Capital Building. It was just there.

“How are we getting in?” Alice asked, tucking her smooth black hair behind an ear. Alice came from the Northwestern group, who’d arrived late the evening before. Charlie was told she was an expert at gaining entry to hard-to-open doors. A master locksmith, Professor Thorne had said.

“There doesn’t seem to be anyone around. Could you just open the front door?” Charlie asked. “I mean, it’s the middle of the night.”

Alice looked left and then right, considering. “I could, but I worry that looks could be deceiving. Is there a more concealed entrance somewhere?”

“There’s a research entrance on the Pennsylvania Avenue side of the building, but I think it’s less concealed than the main entrance on Constitution Avenue. I think you should go ahead to the main entrance, maybe with one or two others, and get the door

open and then we'll all join you. That way there isn't a large group just hanging out or something," Charlie said.

"Sounds like a plan," Alice said. "Chloe, Jenna, why don't you join me?"

Charlie bristled. Chloe and Jenna were from Northwestern too. And that wasn't even the whole of it. Charlie was in charge of the mission. She knew she needed to remain in charge. She was the only one with all the information.

"Alice, take Evie and Melissa. They have the skills you'll need. We only have 25 minutes to get in — shift change and all that. I know you are most comfortable with your own people, but we are all here because of very specific skills," Charlie said, definitively. "Chloe, you'll be on lookout at the northwest corner. Jenna, you and Egan will watch for the signal. Alice, Evie, Melissa, you'll need to flash a light — two quick, three slow — when the door is open. You should each do it in a different direction because we'll be scattered."

"Fine," Alice said, tersely. She wasn't used to being not in charge.

A half-hour later, they were all together again. The dark rotunda was a shadowy place with slick floors and so much stone.

"Thank God for shift change. What now?" Evie asked.

"Now, we need to find the office of the Archivist of the United States. It will be in a different section of the building than the public typically visits, so we'll need your skills, Alice, again. And yours, Evie. We don't know if there's any alarms in here," Charlie said. "I want to stay together. We have three and a half hours before people begin to arrive and we need to be there before then."

"Do we need to worry about guards?" Evie asked.

“No, at this time of night, they patrol outside, primarily. But we should watch for cameras. I hear there are a few in particularly sensitive areas,” Charlie said.

“Who is the Archivist?” Melissa asked.

“Daniel P. Lewis III. He was appointed four years ago after the last archivist tried to bring female workers back. The intel I read said that he’s very by-the-book though, which is what we’re banking on,” Charlie replied.

“I came here with my parents once for a tour,” Alice said. “They were both professors. Are professors? I don’t even know how to say it anymore. I haven’t talked to them in years — their request for my safety, I guess. Anyway, there’s a lot of public-facing areas in this part of the building. We need to look for the nondescript entrances. Those are the ones that will lead to other parts of the building where researchers work and where the offices are.”

“Got it,” Charlie said. “Do you remember much about the layout?”

“I do.”

“Then why don’t you lead us. You’ll know more than I do.”

Through galleries and upstairs and down again, they walked and walked and walked, occasionally motioning to each other to move in a different direction when they spotted what might be a camera. They were mostly silent for the duration, nervous to make any more noise than they needed to.

Hours later, they’d found the right door to the right corridor — the signs helped somewhat — and piled into the spacious wood and leather office. The team of six was exhausted, and there was no way of knowing when they’d finally meet the archivist. Then Melissa and Chloe would have to convince him to certify that the ERA had been ratified. They knew the legal arguments. They also knew that it wouldn’t be as simple as

asking him to do the right thing. In a corner, they strategized and rehearsed. Nearby, Evie and Jenna napped. Alice and Charlie watched over, unable to risk their safety by sleeping.

“Is it weird that we still don’t hear anyone?” Alice asked Charlie. She’d been pacing in the office, occasionally stopping to listen at the door.

Charlie glanced at her watch: 10:17 a.m.

“A little, maybe. But I have no idea how many people typically work in this area. Do you?”

“No, but I’d think there would be at least security patrolling now that the building is open,” Alice replied. “Something doesn’t seem right.”

Charlie considered this. It had almost been too easy to get in and find the office. And now it was too quiet. “You might be right. But we’re kind of stuck here now. If the building is open, it will be crawling with people. We can’t risk trying to leave in the daylight.”

“We’ll have to wait for the nighttime shift change again,” Alice confirmed. “Crap. This is a disaster.”

“The whole thing — even the signing of the ERA as a solution — seemed too easy. Like why couldn’t this have happened before?” Evie said, now awake and stretching.

“Well, four more states were needed for ratification. Virginia, Illinois, North Carolina and Georgia all did it in the last five years — but really, it was North Carolina’s vote a few months ago that clinched it. This is the first time it’s been possible,” Melissa said. “It makes sense to me.”

“Jane — she’s from our cohort — called it a fool’s errand to come here. I am beginning to agree.” Evie said, her eyebrows raised.

“I don’t think it’s as non-sensical as you think. But this waiting. I am worried too,” Chloe said. “We can’t get this done if there’s no archivist here.”

“And I’m hungry,” Jenna grumbled.

“Let’s check the desk drawers for snacks,” Charlie said. “Food will help us wait.”

Three half-squished granola bars, one tin of dry roasted almonds, an unopened plastic container of English Toffee from Trader Joe’s and a half-empty case of Fruit Gushers later, they began dividing up the food.

“This is such a weird assortment. Like what adult keeps a case of Fruit Gushers in their desk?” Evie said, popping one in her mouth before biting down to feel the liquid spread.

“I know, right? And like nothing of substance. Though I do love that toffee,” Jenna agreed.

“Do you smell that?” Alice said, standing up so quickly that the chair she’d been in rattled. “It’s like ... like rotten eggs.”

“It’s gas,” Charlie said. “Everybody up. We have to get out of here.”

“What – but ...” Evie said.

“We have to go,” Charlie repeated, moving rapidly to the door. “Everyone, we need to move quickly and quietly. Watch out for other people though. If you see something, tap the person in front of you. If you get tapped keep it going. We need to be silent.”

Charlie reached for the doorknob and tried to twist, but it wouldn’t move.

“Shit. Shit, shit, shit, Alice —” Charlie said.

“I got this,” Alice said.

Minutes later, they pooled out into the hallway, coughing and gagging.

“Run,” Charlie croaked, and they did. Down the corridor, through doors, going and going, stumbling and tripping.

The odor seemed to follow them, intensifying. As they approached the rotunda, their relief was audible. But that’s when they heard the crackle. That’s when the explosion blew them forward, the fireball passing over them and shattering the glass door onto the steps outside.

Their bodies lay bloodied on the marble, splayed out. But they were breathing, still.

And there was only one voice in the chaos.

“Charlie ...” Evie whispered, a rattled breath escaping her lips.

Chapter 32

March 2005

In the darkness, Gracie didn't know where anyone was. Not precisely. The lights in the cavernous space clicked off, as if by magic, at 11:59 p.m. She'd been startled, but no one else seemed to be. Or, at least they didn't sound like they were. Light waves of deep breathing and quiet snores set in. But Gracie stayed awake, annoyed. She thought about her bed at home and the hidden places for her books. She thought about her mom and how she always smelled as if she'd just stepped from a library book — that faintly sweet aroma of paper and good musk clinging to her skin. And she thought about her dad who always seemed to know what to do when something went wrong.

Gracie was dwelling in a something-went-wrong world now and she didn't have the faintest idea what to do about it.

If she was home, she'd talk to her parents and reason through options — perhaps even discovering options she didn't realize she had. But on her own, she only saw two options: stick it out or bail.

That's when she decided she was leaving. Enough already. Not everything can be fixed. And the situation she was in was just too much. Sleeping on a tarp in a dirty, rat-infested — there had to be rats, right? There had been in New York, surely this had to be the same. She wasn't here to hide in dirty underground spaces. And while she liked the idea of reverting to the world before everything turned upside down, she liked the idea of a cozy bed, warm showers and hot meals even more. And really, Charlie had made it clear that she wasn't welcome helping to save the world anyway. She wasn't needed. She

was nothing. Gracie wondered if Charlie had even mentioned her desire to help to anyone at all. She doubted it. Charlie clearly thought she was useless.

Gracie was tired of being treated as a skill-less child that everyone had to endure. She was tired of being disregarded, ignored and forgotten. She was just tired of everything. And that's why she was leaving. She'd exit the underground space, figure out where she was and start walking home. It might take a few days, but it would be worth it.

But even as Gracie settled into her decision, stuffing her things back into her backpack, she wondered if it was the right one. There seemed to be so much more she could be doing if anyone just let her. She had ideas and plans and skills and knew she would have been the perfect lookout for the mission to the National Archives.

She wondered who was the lookout. She wondered if they were any good at it. She would have been better.

As she got herself up and lifted her pack to her back, she thought about how exciting it was when she found out Barnard wanted her. It was like a secret door had been opened. And when she arrived, meeting professors and learning in such an immersive way about science, math and history had been amazing. But it had come to an abrupt end when Anna died.

Everything since then had been about survival. And if surviving was the only thing they were learning, what was the point? What made that better than the girls her age who'd already been married off? At least they were living in comfortable homes with washers and dryers.

The darkness made leaving harder than she expected. Gracie wanted to tiptoe through the space barefoot to make as little noise as possible. That seemed like the

logical move. But that would involve being barefoot in the petri dish that was the old food hall they were staying in. Even on the sleeping tarp she'd been assigned to, she was grossed out to be that close to the floor. So she kept her socks and shoes on and just focused on moving slower until she squeezed out of the space and ascended the nearby staircase to street level. And she still had to try to avoid stepping on anyone. Just because she couldn't see people around her didn't mean they weren't there. And they were. Lots of them.

It was mind-blowing to Gracie that they were hiding this close to where men passed by in droves all day long, coming to and from the metro. Or, she assumed they did. That's what she pictured when she thought of a popular area of a city, which this was as far as she knew.

Outside, the sky was still a dark navy, still nearly starless, still spread like a blanket over the city. But a thin line on the horizon was just barely brightening to waves of gold and orange as Gracie slipped out of the space and up the stairs to the street. If Charlie and her crew could move about the city, so could she.

Outside, it was deserted. Gracie didn't expect to see the chairs and tables inside the nearby café stacked in the window. And she didn't expect to see absolutely no one in any direction.

Would anyone even notice she was gone? Probably not. That's how unimportant she was.

Gracie looked from side to side, the unfamiliar cityscape providing no clues which way she should go but something urged her to turn right. That must be west, she thought. She wished she had Charlie's compass. Even a map would help, if she could find some road signs.

Gracie began walking. She had no idea if it was really the right direction, but she figured some action was better than no action.

As she passed endless brick rowhouses, she wondered who was sleeping inside them. Did they have daughters like her? Were they fighting back in their own way? Or did they like the new world? Maybe they would even wake up and resume planning a wedding for their teenager.

Lost in thought, she stopped paying attention to where she was walking or the direction she was headed in.

That's how she ended up rounding a corner and seeing two men. She hadn't heard their voices at first, but now just down the darkened block, she could make out their fragmented conversation. In a panic, she rushed down the stairs to a lower-level entrance to the building next to her and crouched down, wondering if they'd already seen her. Was it too late? Was she about to be picked up and married by the end of the day to some random man who really liked younger women?

From her hiding spot — if it could be called that — Gracie heard words. It wasn't quite enough to totally follow their conversation, but she could make out enough to understand. They clearly hadn't seen her.

“...already here.”

“...hundreds hiding ...”

“...bitches ... forgotten ... won't know what ...”

“...kill 'em all ...”

“...boomsticks ...”

“...home ... start dinner ... right in line ...”

Gracie couldn't hear what came next. She was too busy mulling the word "boomstick" in her mind. It was unfamiliar, like a relic that her parents would nod knowingly about upon hearing it. She wished they were here to ask about it.

She inched up slightly, moving up the stairs and through the shadows to another stairwell. It was risky but she wanted to hear more and to get a better look down the block.

"...tomorrow when the sun begins to go down. We have to be at the ... 2 p.m. ... instructions ...," the gruff voice said.

A nasally voice began speaking. It was quieter though, more disjointed. She heard only a word here and there — "convening," "shackle them," "row ... overturn."

Gracie wanted to hear more but a loud engine approached, passing where she was and coming to a stop down the street near the men. The voices quieted. Then a door slammed and the engine got quieter and quieter as it drove away.

She stayed where she was for a long time, afraid she would step out of the shadows of the stairwell again and find that the men were waiting for her. Plus, she didn't know what to do. She still wanted to go home. But she'd heard enough of the conversation to know something was happening and it wasn't good.

Gracie thought about her mom. She remembered her mom before, when she walked around with a sense of purpose. She remembered how her mom had changed later, when she was forced to stay home and forced to give up her career and her car. She'd become so quiet, so small. Gracie had thought it was her fault — she was too loud, played too much, wasn't serious enough. That's when Gracie began to read more. If she learned by herself, if she could prove she was smart enough, if she could be enough, her mom would get better. And it worked. Not right away, but after a while. Her mom

started talking about Gracie needing to learn more. And then her mom started thinking up ways to make it happen. That's how she ended up spending hours in the library, entering through a hidden entrance at dawn and leaving the same way at dusk at least one day a week. That's how Gracie got here. Because her mom made her smart enough.

Stepping from the shadows, she headed back to where everyone was hiding. She wasn't entirely sure what she'd heard, but it sounded like danger. Maybe, she thought, she could stop their group from being ambushed — if anyone would listen to her.

Chapter 33

March 2005

The ding of the bell was constant, a single note melody going on and on and on. Charlie urged her arm to move, to reach out, to stretch toward the alarm clock that was certainly the cause of the offending noise, but she couldn't quite convince her limbs to behave. The sleep was too strong, wrapped around her body like a straitjacket.

Wake up, she urged herself. Wake up. But she didn't or couldn't or wouldn't.

The ding continued, unending, relentless, shrill. Charlie needed it to stop. She needed it to be silenced.

"Just five more minutes, Mom," she mumbled through her haze, and then wondered why. Her mom wasn't here. And even if she wasn't, she wouldn't be turning off the maddening ding. She would tell Charlie to get up and do it because she needed to get up anyway.

And Charlie definitely needed to get up. She needed to rise from the hard, cold floor. She needed to pull herself forward in the hot air around her and force herself up. But the hold on her was too firm, too unrelenting.

Finally, Charlie managed to wriggle her arms into motion, raising them and waving them about.

This wasn't her bed, she realized. And this wasn't her bedroom. As she pried open her eyes and saw the bright flickering glow of fire nearby, she remembered the explosion. She remembered how it had sent her flying. And now, she remembered that they were at the National Archives and they were in danger, but she couldn't quite move to do anything about it. She had to rise.

But first, she had to turn her head. She slowly heaved it to one side and then the other where she recognized Evie beside her, lying face down with her hair spread around her.

“Evie,” Charlie rasped. “Evie!”

But Evie didn’t respond. She wasn’t moving but Charlie thought maybe she too just needed to wake from the forced slumber of the impact. But as Charlie watched her friend for any flicker of movement, she realized that Evie’s back didn’t even crest with breath. She was completely still, motionless.

“EVIE!” Charlie screamed, though it sounded like a whisper in her head with the ding still carrying on its single note chorus. Moisture gathered in Charlie’s eyes, lying in wait, a threat. “EVIE!”

And still, Evie didn’t move. She was still.

Charlie rolled to her side, the effort winding her but she kept moving, kept trying to get to Evie. As she rose from the ground, forcing herself to her knees, she could see the halo of blood spread around her friend’s head and the oozing brain matter dipping into it from her cracked skull. Charlie reached out anyway, grasping Evie’s shoulder to shake her awake. Her mom would tell her to call Evie’s name twice more, closer to her head, so she did. But Evie didn’t stir.

“Nooooooooooooooooo!” The guttural cry came from somewhere deep inside Charlie, a reservoir of pain that had been brimming since Anna’s death and now spilled over. Bile rose in her throat and then she was heaving, her body releasing everything it could and splattering it on the ground.

Evie was gone. Her best friend was gone.

And then the hot tears came, vicious and angry. They ran in dirty streams down her face and she couldn't think past them or the crushing press of devastation in her chest. She and Evie were supposed to be on their way back to the safehouse with good news now. They were supposed to be nearly liberated, finally able to return to their lives after so long. They were supposed to be moving into this next chapter together. That's what Charlie had imagined when they set out — she'd allowed herself the gift of hope for a different future. She'd allowed herself to believe that finally, everything would be okay again.

But nothing was okay. And the harder she tried to clear her mind, the more the devastation grew in her chest. It grew, a balloon expanding inside her, threatening to explode her chest cavity. She would die right here, right beside her friend. And that would be it. Her freedom would come in the form of death, saving her from this brutal world where being her — a smart, driven woman — was the worst thing imaginable.

Charlie doubled over onto Evie, the tears still bursting from her eyes. Now they made expanding circles on her friend's shirt, wetness against the hot dead skin. Charlie's body heaved in shuddering motions as she screamed no again and again.

Around her the sound was changing, morphing, calling to her as if the ding was bending around her name, manifesting it. It became louder, more persistent, until Charlie was wrenched forward, forced to see it was a person calling to her. A woman. Professor Thorne.

"Charlie, we have to go. The fire! Charlie, come on. We have to move," Professor Thorne said with urgency, pulling her to her feet.

"But Evie. We can't leave Evie," Charlie croaked, her shoulders still heaving with emotion. She reached for her, grasping her lifeless arm. "Help me!"

“Charlie, leave her. Evie is gone and I am so sorry about that but we have to go before the fire gets us too. Come on. Evie would understand. You need to run now Charlie. Can you run? It’s time to run,” Professor Thorne said.

And they did, dashing from the building onto the street and into an alley just before the flashing lights and sirens of the fire department landed in front of the building. In the alley, Charlie could just make out the blood-stained faces and bodies of Alice, Chloe, Jenna and Melissa who were crowded around the professor with the horn-rimmed glasses, who Charlie remembered was Professor Lynn Kurtz from Northwestern. Nearby, Professor Douglas dabbed at blood streaming from Jennifer’s leg, as if an artery had been severed.

“Stephen, press it. You have to press on the wound to stop the blood,” Jennifer said, her voice urgent and anxious. “Where’s Evie?”

“Evie is gone,” Charlie whispered before crumpling to the ground.

“Gone, like she went back already?” Jennifer asked, confused.

“No, gone. She’s ... gone. She’s dead,” Charlie said, curling into a ball. Jennifer gasped, stricken.

“No, no. Charlie, no. We can’t stay here. You saw the flashing lights. Everyone, let’s move. We need to get out of here. We can talk about Evie later. And we will. But right now, let’s get as far away as we can,” Professor Thorne said, an urgency lacing her words.

They did, moving away in the shadows and continuing for what seemed like hours to Charlie. She saw the rest of her team holding each other up while she leaned on Professor Thorne’s shoulder and Professor Douglas mostly carried Jennifer. They still kept moving even as the light of dawn began to color the horizon.

“Almost there,” Professor Thorne whispered but Charlie didn’t know if she meant it or was just saying it.

But then there they were, stumbling down the stairs and into the hidden space where Gracie paced, waiting.

“Oh, thank God. We have to move everyone. Right now. There’s an attack coming. They know where we are,” Gracie said hurriedly.

“What—” Professor Douglas began before being cut off by Professor Thorne.

“We can’t. Can’t you see everyone is injured. And what are you talking about anyway?” she barked.

“You need to listen to me. We have to move. I heard them. I went for a walk and heard two men talking. They are coming for us at sundown of all things. Please. Believe me. I wouldn’t make this up,” Gracie said, pleading.

“This seems like a really bad idea,” Professor Thorne said.

Charlie looked at Gracie, as if seeing her for the first time. She saw the abject fear in her eyes. She saw the much younger girl — still a teen — and realized she had more to her.

“Even if Gracie misheard, we need to move. We can’t stay if there’s even a suggestion of an attack. We have to survive. That’s the only way Evie’s death will mean anything,” Charlie said, breathlessly. “Gracie, help me to my bag. I need to pack up.”

Surprised, Gracie moved ahead, stepping under Charlie’s outstretched arm to guide her forward through the dark.

“I’ll gather everyone,” Professor Kurtz said, stepping to walk around Charlie and Gracie into the blackness just as the lights switched on for the day.

“Well, isn’t that a miracle,” Professor Douglas said, deadpan.

Chapter 34

March 2005

The evacuation had been hasty. Emma Thorne hated that. She hated that after doing everything they could to be deliberate in their movements for five years, they had to rush out of the Washington D.C. safehouse without a plan. Everyone had gathered everything into their packs, endeavored to make their encampment as if it never happened and then slipped into the drainage pipes that ran below the metro and the food hall they were in. There was no set destination, only a sense that they had to scatter — and plan on the fly.

As they descended into the tunnels, one by one, they were silent except for the hushed rustling as their packs brushed against the narrow space again and again. Jennifer, whose leg was swelling quickly, couldn't descend on her own and also couldn't descend with anyone — the space was too narrow and her one leg couldn't support weight. They used a makeshift harness to lower her down after convincing her it was the only way. Jennifer was sure they'd drop her, but she arrived safely on the bottom. Then she leaned on Charlie and Gracie, hopping forward with them.

"There are four tunnels here," one of the professors called to Emma. She was standing about 500 yards away from the entry point. "We should split up."

"Agreed. Let's break into four groups. Gracie, Jennifer, Charlie, Melissa, Alice, Chloe, you all wait for me. We'll take the tunnel that heads to the left. And I'm happy to oversee anyone else who wants to join us. But they should know that we'll be splintering off more to continue our work so don't expect it to be a lot of waiting and whatnot. We're

headed back above ground to find the librarian. The other groups should head in the other tunnels.”

“Got it.” The words came from a disembodied voice. Emma couldn’t be sure who it belonged to.

She turned her attention to the entry point as the last of the women descended into the tunnel.

“Hurry on now,” she said before climbing up to wrestle the iron cover back into place.

Above her, Professor Douglas reached to help with the heavy metal grate.

“I’ve got it,” she replied with a thin terseness as the grate skated into place with a screech.

“Emma, please.”

“No, Stephen. You knew better. I don’t know which is worse: that you got her so badly injured or that you’ve taken advantage of the precarious situation we’ve been in for all these years in such an egregious way.”

Emma glanced behind her, ensuring that her group was sufficiently far away as she spoke.

“Emma, it’s not like that.”

“Stephen, it’s exactly like that.”

Professor Douglas released a long sigh, staring down at her. She stared into his eyes for a few more beats then were comfortable before releasing her own deep sigh.

“You know what comes next,” she said. “You have a job to do.”

As a man, he didn't have to hide. He could slip into the general population and go about his day as if nothing had changed. It had always been that way, but only now, in a new city, did it sting her. She missed having that agency.

"I know, I know. Gracie's intel was the most helpful we've received. I'll find a way in," he replied, rocking back onto his haunches. "And you have the means to communicate now."

"We do. That is making this evacuation less chaotic than it might have been. Thanks for that," she replied. "You should go. You want to exit while there's a big crowd and a train should be arriving momentarily."

She'd devised the framework for his assignment — exit into D.C. Check into a hotel and clean up. Find the men who planned to attack them and infiltrate the group. Then, begin splintering their alliances, bit by bit. That had been part of the plan devised months ago. It ended up being one of the only parts that was happening exactly as written after everything was moved up suddenly.

She didn't know if it would work or if it could be done in the time they had to work with. But as the women worked on their assignment, distracting the men would buy them at least a little time.

"And you?" he asked.

"We're headed toward the National Mall. We found a bunker on an old blueprint that we suspect might be where the Supreme Court justices and congresswomen are hiding. It's not on any other maps or documents, so it seems pretty covert and concealed," she replied.

"Okay. Be safe. I'll see you when it's done," he said, pausing slightly. "And please make sure she's treated. I know you don't want to hear this Emma, but I love her."

Professor Thorne couldn't stop the dramatic eye roll that met his words.

"She'll be fine. We take care of our own. Always. But you need to focus. These men ... they are dangerous."

"I know."

Glancing over her shoulder, she could see her group getting restless, the flashlight beams bouncing over the walls. She needed to follow them so she wasn't left behind and alone with the group's burner phone.

"Bye, Stephen. See you when it's done."

Chapter 35

May 2004

Jennifer leaned her bare ass against the heavy wooden desk in the wood paneled office that had become her unexpected refuge in the years since she first unzipped Stephen's pants and gave into her baser needs. The bourbon in her highball glass was feisty — pungent to her nose, abrasive to her tongue and burning to her throat. It was the last of his store of alcohol. If they wanted more, he'd have to venture out and slip into the masses, hoping he could buy some without attracting suspicion. She didn't know that she cared enough about drinking to ask that.

For now, she was glad to have it.

Outside the four windows that never seemed to let in the right light, the greenery on the campus was in full rebirth. Leaves unfurled on the trees, framing the grassy areas where graduations should be happening. But the university had remained closed for four long years. She marveled that all these years later, groundskeepers still showed up dutifully once a week to cut the grass in the quad, tend to the gardens and ensure that Columbia looked pristine even deserted. And it was a marvel to her that they didn't know about the secret community that had called the campus home for all these years.

Well, she had marveled at it. Now she knew it was more willful ignorance with a side of bribery that kept them from seeing any of the women. That was what Stephen and his cohort of feminist male professors had arranged and maintained. It had struck her as strangely paternal when he told her about it last night — as if they needed protectors after all.

Nearby, Stephen slept on his stomach, his arm curved around the pillow beneath his head and his face turned away from her. He snored lightly, an endearing low-tone of breath in and out. She didn't get to see him sleep enough. In their time together, they'd kept everything between them secret — a mutual decision that she pushed for. He'd wanted to tell after the first year. But she wasn't ready to admit to her celibate friends that she'd fallen into this, whatever it was, when they were living in such a screwed-up reality.

And yet, part of her wanted everyone to know.

She didn't like that he'd kept secrets from her over the years — about the groundskeepers and also the network of feminist men trying to infiltrate the government to right things. No, not trying. They'd done it. They were actively doing it. And, he'd told her, if the November election went as planned, there would be a majority to overturn the suppression laws ready by spring.

In their whispered conversation the night before, he begged her not to tell anyone. He begged her to keep the secret the way she'd asked him to keep them a secret. She'd reluctantly agreed.

She took a sip of the liquid, letting it swirl in her mouth before swallowing it down while she kept watching him.

His peppery hair tinged with salt had become more salt than pepper in the last two years. And although he said she kept him young, she could see his age accelerating before them. She wasn't naive enough to think it didn't matter. It did. In the world they inhabited before everything changed, she would have never been in his office that day in the end of 2002, aroused by his arousal and hungry for him.

She was still hungry for him. As she stood there, remembering the moment she let her hand linger on the bulge between them, she felt the same electricity course through her, setting her on fire.

Taking her final sip of the bourbon, she set the glass on his desk blotter — the one that still held the 2000 desk calendar — and crouched down beside him, gently rolling him onto his back.

“Jenny ...” he whispered, barely awake as she pressed her breasts to his chest, drawing his hand up to touch them. “I’m not awake.”

“You will be,” she said, reaching her own hand down to grasp his hard cock.

“I love you,” he breathed, his fingers now firmly rolling her nipple between them.

“I know,” she replied. “Now touch me and show me how much.”

Chapter 36

March 2005

“I’m not signing that.”

The National Archives librarian, Daniel P. Lewis III, grew flushed as he said this, his eyes darting between the women crowded around him in the windowless concrete room. Their group had tracked him from the entry point they’d been tipped off about through a network of subterranean spaces to the room where he’d been living for days.

“You have to. This is your job. Sign it. Add it to the register. Make this law. The states have passed it. You know that,” Chloe was practically begging, her anxiety raising her voice. Charlie reached out to place a hand on her shoulder.

“No. No National Archives librarian has ever signed an amendment into law without the President of the United States expressively requesting that he do so. And I am certainly not going to be the first to break that tradition,” Daniel said, stepping backward towards the unmade single bed that still bore the impression of his body from the sleep they woke him from.

“But that’s not even part of the process and you know it. Just because it’s always been done that way doesn’t mean it needs to be done that way now. Stand up. Be the person who rights this country again by making the Equal Rights Amendment codified into law. You can be the person everyone remembers for their bravery,” Alice said.

Charlie wondered how Alice was still so calm and directed — unflappable. She knew what she was arguing.

“No. I won’t,” he replied. A sigh escaped his lips as he sunk onto the edge of the bed. The white sheets bunched around his plaid flannel covered thighs. “I can’t. I would

if I believed it would actually work, but it won't. Two of the states that approved it years ago have filed lawsuits that are circulating through the courts now. They want to overturn the votes because it's been so long. Until those are decided — the constitution is unclear about how long states have to pass an amendment before it becomes invalid — my hands are tied. I don't want to give you all false hope about this."

Charlie stepped backwards, reaching for the cold concrete wall, emotionally leveled. This was the plan. This was the whole plan and now, it failed. There was no next move. No next strategy. Their last effort was fading away like smoke. And now, they'd told someone — practically laid it all out — exactly what they planned. Could they even trust him? What made them think they could? She slumped against the pale blue painted surface, feeling the cold seep into her. It felt a lot like failure.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly.

"We understand, Mr. Lewis. Thank you for explaining it to us. It's just so ... we'd thought we'd found the way to get our lives back and ..." Defeated, Charlie's eyes filled with tears. She couldn't continue. She couldn't think about this anymore. Already it felt like Evie died for nothing.

Charlie wanted to cry openly. She wanted to sob again, as she had over Evie's body. But there were no tears left. There was just a crushing sense that she had to accept this new world. She would have to emerge and accept whoever came for her. Melissa stepped toward her, wrapping her in a hug. Charlie felt the breath leave her momentarily.

"There is something though," he said hesitantly. "But you need to be fast."

Charlie pulled away from Melissa, stepping toward him as if drawn in by the possibility of a new hope. Nearby, Alice and Chloe leaned in ever so slightly, ready and curious.

Daniel seemed to be weighing his words now. He looked at each of them, one after another, before continuing.

“The Supreme Court still has two sitting women — Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Sandra Day O’Connor — and they have allies on the court. In the Senate, there are 17 sitting women. The House is the most surprising of all with 73 sitting women, including the ones sworn in earlier this year —”

“How were women sworn in? Or even elected?” Chloe asked urgently.

“Not all the states have observed the federal guidelines. Notably, California, Maine, Louisiana and Michigan refused to enforce the voter suppression rules. And at the capitol, a second swearing-in was held for women in secret in January so that they may take their seats. But that’s not the point. The point is that there is elected representation who have a mandate to represent their populace and an interest in overturning the women suppression laws. Remember, they come from states that believed they should be in office despite the changes to the country over the last five years. Add to them their liberal cohort in each of those bodies who believe in equality and they could well change things,” Daniel said.

“But if there are all these elected women, why haven’t they done this already?” Charlie asked, her eyebrows scrunched in skepticism. It couldn’t possibly be that simple, she thought.

“For much of the last five years, they were barred from chambers. The capitol police ensured they couldn’t get in if they wanted to. But a new mayor was elected in

November who stopped that practice. Then three months ago, they returned and a series of meetings were held. Since then, as far as I have heard, they've been in hiding, waiting," he replied.

"Waiting for what?" Charlie asked.

"Waiting for the mobilization. And, in the case of the Supreme Court, waiting for Gretchen Monroe, et al v The United States of America to advance to their court. You are the mobilization — I assume there's more of you? — and the case is scheduled to be heard on Tuesday. Now is the time."

"Okay, where can we find them?" Chloe asked.

Daniel rose to his feet, straightening his pajama pants before placing his hands on his hips.

"That I don't know. Their location was kept as a deep secret because of fears that the administration and its supporters would try to retaliate for their return to Washington," Daniel said.

Charlie closed her eyes tightly, firmly, pressing out the doubts. She breathed in and out, focusing on the air entering her lungs and leaving. This seemed like an unreasonable puzzle, one with too many unknowns. But she wanted to believe. She wanted this to be the end of this horrible period — a fresh start of sorts to begin again. That's what they all needed, really.

"What do we have to do?" Charlie whispered.

"Find them. Tell them it's time. That's it. They will do the rest," he said.

Chapter 37

March 2005

Gracie watched as Charlie returned with her group, sensing something. They didn't look like women who'd just saved their country. They looked ... determined though. Angry even. And as they crowded around Professor Thorne to relay what happened, Charlie beckoned her over to hear too.

"Gracie, you need to hear this," Charlie said.

This was what Gracie had wanted — to matter to the group. To matter to the movement. And while Jennifer remained on a cot on the far wall, surrounded by a few others in their group, she was included.

But as the news unfolded, Gracie felt an edge of betrayal skim her soul. Why did everything have to be done with such a cloak of secrecy? Why couldn't the legislators and justices just have done their job already? The more she considered it, the angrier she got. And then she understood what she'd seen on their faces.

"How are we supposed to find people who are so well hidden that no one even knows they are in hiding?" Gracie demanded when Chloe finished the end of the story.

"I have to make a call," Professor Thorne said, hustling away to retrieve the burner phone. "I'm going to have to climb up one of the tunnels to get a signal. Don't follow me. If I get caught, you need to run and just find them. By any means necessary. I have faith in you."

And then she took off running.

"What was that?" Gracie demanded.

“Gracie, focus. She’s calling the network to find out what she can. In the meantime, we need to find out where else there are hidden spaces in the underground here. I am positive that wherever they are hiding, it’s nearby and practically in plain sight. But it would have to be somewhere sizable, clean and with adequate electricity and running water. It’s not a small group,” Charlie said. “I wish we had a map.”

Alice and Melissa nodded in agreement. But Gracie was learning that Columbia’s map of the hidden tunnels was an anomaly. Usually, hidden spaces were kept hidden by a lack of documentation.

“I hope she’s calling Stephen,” Jennifer said quietly from across the space.

Gracie looked at her, confused.

“Professor Douglas? Why?”

“Holy shit, Jennifer,” Charlie’s voice was incredulous. Gracie watched as she rapidly crossed the space to Jennifer. “What did you do? WHAT DID YOU DO?”

“What I did doesn’t matter. But he’ll be able to help. He has the connections,” Jennifer replied, a steady fierceness in her voice.

“How— Wait. Wait. I can’t believe we didn’t ask you this sooner, but why were you injured in the explosion? How were you injured? You weren’t with us. How were you injured too?” Alice’s scrunched face flushed as she spoke accusingly.

Jennifer opened her mouth to speak just as Charlie’s palm slapped her cheek with a loud crack.

“You bitch. What did you do?” Charlie demanded.

Gracie looked from woman to woman, trying to figure out what was unraveling in front of her. She hadn’t thought about Jennifer’s injury — not when everyone returned

in such a frantic state made worse by her information. They'd evacuated so quickly she hadn't even considered that Jennifer wasn't supposed to be there.

"I didn't do anything. At least not like you think, Charlie. Come on, haven't you known me long enough to know who I am?"

Charlie growled in response, a fury seeming to make her vibrate before Jennifer.

"Stephen and I followed you all. We hid outside, watching. He was worried that the intel was a trap. And then ... well, it was. Wasn't it? We saw you running through the lobby and then the explosion happened and I ran in. He tried to stop me, but I had to get to you and Evie. But before I could, there was another noise — a series of pops. That's when I fell. It was like my leg exploded. And then I saw Evie too and ..."

"You didn't think to tell us sooner?" Alice asked, quieter now.

"No one has been talking about what happened," Jennifer pointed out. "We had to evacuate and then ... we were here. Dealing with this new intel."

"Why do you keep calling him Stephen?" Gracie asked, eyebrows raised.

"That doesn't—"

"Yes, it does. Answer the question," Charlie demanded. "Or maybe just tell us how long. Since the why is pretty clear."

"Three years," Jennifer said, holding Charlie's gaze. "And that's neither here nor there. This was mine alone."

"You don't keep secrets like that from friends," Charlie replied.

"Sometimes you do, when you know that your unexpectedly happy relationship is an affront to the work you are doing to free people like yourself from oppression," Jennifer said. "I love him, Charlie."

Charlie's shoulders slumped. "You're allowed to be happy."

“It’s never felt like I should be,” Jennifer whispered.

Gracie still wasn’t sure what she was hearing, but she was beginning to understand.

“Should I go after Professor Thorne? Make sure she’s calling Professor Douglas?”

Gracie asked suddenly.

“No need, I already called,” Professor Thorne said. “I take it you all know now?”

“Only about our relationship. I didn’t tell them the rest yet,” Jennifer said, whipping a hand across her face to brush away tears.

“Okay, that will have to wait then. For now, though, I have information. There’s a bunker about a 30 minute walk from here. That’s where the congresswomen and justices are likely hiding, Professor Douglas tells me. It was marked on a recent intel report as a spot to know with no other information, so it sounds like it’s probably accurate,” Professor Thorne said. “Now, obviously Jennifer isn’t going anywhere. But some of us need to stay and the others need to go. I will lead this trip myself as I have the complicated directions.”

“I’m coming,” Alice said.

“So am I,” said Charlie.

“That’s fine. And Gracie, you come too. The rest of you, stay put. Make sure Jennifer stays comfortable. We can’t get her more than those basic painkillers until this is done. You all should be okay here while we go. But if we don’t return within two hours, assume something is wrong and head out in the opposite direction we go in.”

“How will you know where we are?” Melissa asked.

“I won’t. You’ll need to stay together and stay hidden if you move. We’ll find out. And if we don’t, make good decisions about where you go from here.”

Melissa looked surprised — shocked even.

“You’re just going to leave us?” she asked, her voice high with anxiety.

“You are capable women. You’ll figure it out if you have to. But we need to go. This has to be done today. See you on the other side,” Professor Thorne said firmly.

“Grab your things Alice, Charlie, Gracie, and let’s go.”

Chapter 38

August 2005

“39 Indicted in 2001 Murders, More Expected”

“Impeachment Trial Enters 4th Day”

“1 Train Rumbles Through Manhattan Again”

The bold headlines made Charlie smile as she passed the newsstand. The arrests were the latest in a string of enforcements that targeted more than six years of violence against women. Once women were welcomed back to the police precincts and courtrooms, and filled the newsrooms again, the arrests began almost immediately. The impeachment was a happy surprise — though perhaps it shouldn’t have been. Once the infrastructure began reopening, things really felt like they were improving. Better even.

But the fact that Charlie could see the newspaper on display at the newsstand as she walked freely along Broadway, traffic zipping past her on the steamy August day as if the Morningside Heights campus had never been closed, was the biggest sign of change. It was as if the neighborhood had never shut down. She wasn’t sure even six months ago this would be possible.

But here she was, part of the team who had one year to renovate the Barnard curriculum for the modern world. It would be a starting point to the work in progress that would have to adapt as time created a better buffer and made clear what different students would need at different points of rebuilding their society.

In the last five years, the oppression of women had held back advances in art, science and healthcare. It had also stifled the publishing industry, with only male authors being published. That was changing rapidly, but it couldn’t undo the

interruption that had already happened. Five years without female authors was repressive. Moreover, the disruptive years where females were barely educated meant that to be a women's college, they had to redefine what applicants needed to bring to the table — and what Barnard could offer them.

Already the recruitment process looked nothing like what it had been prior to 2000, the admissions team had told Charlie in a meeting. There would be no standardized tests. Applications were built more on a series of essays prompts about turning points, seeking out education and creating future plans than on grades and academic records. With a nationwide gap in education, Barnard, and other schools, had put out the word that they would be seeking women with either three years of high school — those who'd had their education interrupted in 2000 — or a GED in progress for the next three years. It was the only way they could resume operations in a year. Even when the college and others like it did, there would be years of work to right all the wrongs that had occurred. Charlie was advocating for a curriculum that included mandatory courses on oppressive regimes, women's history and understanding mental health — alongside courses that would revive or create skills they'd missed during the oppression. They would teach about gender and sexuality in a way that had been nearly taboo before. Barnard would require composition classes, retooled math basics courses and reimagined overview of science alongside intro to economics and intro to political science classes. As the curriculum team, they wanted to ensure that everyone who went to their school learned enough to understand the political climate and economic impact of what happened. Through knowledge, they thought, it could be prevented in the future.

Today, though, was about majors. Barnard had made the decision to consider all previous departments disbanded. That meant that Charlie and her team could pick and choose which departments would be rebuilt for the first school year in the new world — and which would be considered for future years. They had an all-day work session planned to iron out a rough plan.

It was overwhelming to be making decisions about the future, Charlie thought. They'd barely just gotten their agency back. And there was still so much work ahead of them. The women of America would be dealing with open hatred from the men who resented women and still wanted the world they had enjoyed, if only for a short time. There would surely be more attempts of oppression to stand up to as well to ensure that what happened in 2000 could never happen again. Those were the things that hung in the back of her mind as she considered her work.

But for now, she just needed to keep going.

Charlie turned left, passing through the black gates of Barnard, open again for the first time in years. And she, if only momentarily, fought the instinct to duck into the shadows before she proceeded. Even though she could walk openly now, it was still a constant battle to feel safe — especially on the campus she'd circumnavigated nearly daily in those dark years while she gathered food, packages and communications for their community. Perhaps it would never leave her, that instinct.

"Morning, Charlie," Daryl, the newly hired weekday guard, said from the guard stand.

"Morning, Daryl. Thanks for being here," Charlie said, smiling at the tall man with the warm chocolate eyes as she hustled into Barnard Hall, where the offices were all centralized for the meantime.

Charlie took two deep breaths, counting slowly to ten with each one, as she waited for the elevator to arrive and whisk her to the fourth floor. Entering the tight space always made her pulse quicken, but she did it anyway to try to get past it. It was a conscious decision to face her fears head-on. Her newly hired therapist praised her for doing it.

The elevator doors shut with a tap and she began to rise. Second floor. Third. And finally fourth. When the doors opened, it was like all that stress poofed away from her.

Charlie stepped out into the corridor — it was still practically a 2000 time capsule with faded announcements for events and posters for books long released lining the walls. It was on the list of things that needed to happen, but the time was short to make some curriculum decisions in time to begin recruiting on September 1, as planned, so that had to come first.

“Morning, Charlie!” Alice said as Charlie entered the office they shared.

“Morning, Alice!” Charlie had advocated for recruiting Alice after their work together in D.C. And Alice had agreed only after learning that it was Charlie who specifically requested her.

“Emma was in here about 10 minutes ago looking for both of us. She said she wanted to go over the final briefing memo with us before submitting it,” Alice said.

Emma. Charlie still wasn’t used to treating Professor Thorne like a peer despite all their years working together at the underground school. She also wasn’t looking forward to going over the details of their time between leaving campus and reopening the government to women. Whenever she thought about it, she teared up, thinking of Evie.

Piecing together their memories and Jennifer's, they'd realized that Evie survived the bombing only to be shot point blank in the lobby of the National Archives. Jennifer was shot too, her leg shattering. Everyone else lived — including Charlie, which was inexplicable to her. Weeks later, as the Capitol police finally investigated what happened, the surveillance video showed a man shooting them both — a very familiar man. The man who'd wanted her dead years earlier. Charlie still didn't understand why Nate went for Evie and Jennifer instead. But maybe he just wanted her to suffer more. She hated to admit it, but it was successful. She cried for Evie every day. And she'd become one of the team transporting Jennifer to and from appointments as she had grueling surgeries and physical therapy to reconstruct and learn to use her leg again.

Nate was now awaiting trial in a federal penitentiary. Charlie kept tabs on his case but tried not to let it consume her.

"If you're ready, let's go find Emma and wrap this up then," Charlie said, tucking her bag under her desk. "I really want to get it over with."

"Okay, cool," Alice said, rising. "What time does the majors meeting start?"

"At 10 so we have some time," Charlie replied as they walked down the hallway and into Emma Thorne's office. On the door, her makeshift nameplate said "Dean of All Things," which was strangely fitting for the woman acting as the de facto president, provost and every other role that needed to be filled in college leadership.

The previous president declined to return.

"Charlie, Alice, come in, come in. I am so glad you are here," Professor Thorne — Emma — said warmly. "I figured we could quickly go over all this before the day's meetings begin. Once we send over this report, we can finally put this all behind us, I think. Well, sort of."

Charlie grimaced, a knot twisting inside her.

“Sounds good,” Alice said, lowering herself into one of the two chairs in front of the desk. Charlie followed, lowering herself into the other chair.

“I’ll read through the narrative from your path to D.C. and that first trip to the National Archives,” Emma said. And she did, pausing a few times so they could all gather themselves.

“We should add that the security footage later showed that Evie was murdered. She didn’t die in the blast,” Alice said. “What was the man’s name?”

“Nate Russell,” Charlie said, her eyes cast down. “He was my ex-boyfriend. The last man I dated before everything went to shit. He’d tried to get me killed on Red Tuesday.”

“Charlie, no. Why didn’t you tell us sooner?” Emma said, her eyes wide.

“I — I don’t know. I mean, I do. I hate thinking about it. It’s my fault. I think he killed Evie to torture me and ... it’s all my fault she’s gone. My best friend is dead because of me.” Charlie’s tears obscured the last few words as she voiced the parts she usually kept buried deeply inside. Her therapist was coaching her to say things like this out loud more. “Anyway, let’s keep going unless you think that needs to be in there too.”

“We should probably make a note of it somewhere — just that you knew him. Evie knew him too, I presume?” Emma looked up for Charlie’s confirmation — a head nod — and satisfied, typed in a sentence. “Okay, we can keep going. You might be asked to speak about that during the proceedings though.”

“Do you need water or maybe some tea before we keep going?” Alice asked softly, touching Charlie’s arm.

“No, I’m fine. But thank you,” she replied. “Onto the trip back to the safehouse and the evacuation?”

Emma nodded, reading the report that recounted where everyone went and attempted to reconstruct who ended up where.

“Do we need to add something about the ambushed group?” Alice asked.

“No, they have their own recounting to submit. We just need to focus on what we did and saw,” Emma replied.

That group had been badly injured when they neared a junction that they didn’t realize was public. Three had died on their side. But they’d fought hard, and the casualties on the other side were significant.

“Alright, the next section is about when we found the bunker. Stop me if you remember anything differently or think we need to add anything,” Emma said.

Charlie exchanged a glance with Alice, who already had tears in her eyes.

Chapter 39

March 2005

Finding the underground bunker had turned out to be the easiest part of their journey. It had been so easy that even Gracie wondered if it was a trap. After they left Jennifer and the others in a decommissioned maintenance room, Professor Thorne had guided them above ground briefly and then back underground, through a series of tunnels and then a slim ventilation shaft before they arrived at the wall. But it only looked like a wall. It opened to reveal a maze of boardrooms and apartments and that's where they located everyone. Even convincing them that it was time was easy.

The tunnel system led to the congressional offices and to the Supreme Court.

"I'll escort you through," Emma offered. But the women declined, instead relying on their all-female Secret Service detail.

"We started hiring women a while back. We're ready. Now, you all need to be. We'll head back to our offices and show up for the proceedings today. But there will be violence outside. Don't let it get to us. We have one shot at this," one Senator said. "We're going to force a vote on a series of bills that will overturn the suppression orders. Our allies submitted them months ago, quietly, and they've already been vetted in committee."

Gracie didn't exactly understand how the government worked but wasn't sure it could be this easy. But between the court case being argued later in the week and the bills that they felt would pass, it sounded like they were days away from change. She wondered if her mom knew.

Professor Thorne stepped away to take a call and Gracie could see her gesturing wildly as she spoke.

“We need to move. All of us. The men are mobilizing above ground. We’ll be joining our group to protect the capitol,” Professor Thorne said when she returned.

“And the other groups?” a representative asked.

“They’ll be there.”

Gracie wondered what other groups they were referring to. She’d thought that their group — large as it was — was it. But when they emerged onto the National Mall twenty minutes later, they were met with a sea of women. They were pressing ahead, some shouting orders to surround the capitol building. Others directed people to the munitions tent. It was more women than Gracie had seen in one place ever. And they were all here.

There was so much hope there. The organization and readiness took Gracie’s breath away. But she wasn’t ready. Not even a little bit

“What’s happening?” she’d asked to no one in particular.

“Gracie, what you do next is your choice. You were great in the tunnels and your info about the men mobilizing was instrumental to our final preparations. But the men who are coming have one thing in mind: killing us. So you have to decide now if you want to return to Jennifer and the others and guard them or if you want to stay here and fight,” Professor Thorne had said. Nearby Charlie nodded solemnly. Did everyone know where this had been going except for her?

An anxious energy rose inside her. She didn’t want to hide. But she also wanted to survive and the idea of being in a battle that involved the very large guns the women were carrying scared her.

“I ... I don’t know,” she whispered.

“I’ll take you to Jennifer. Let’s get you a gun first though. You may need it,” Charlie said gently. “She needs protection. The others do too, but Jennifer won’t be able to run so you need to stick with her.”

“Okay, I can do that.”

In the munitions tent — it was an actual tent — different lines led to tables for different weapons and the associated ammunition. How did that even get there without anyone noticing, Gracie wondered. Charlie led her toward one with smaller handguns.

“This will be easier to handle,” Charlie said as they approached, Gracie following Charlie.

“Hello, choose a gun and then let me know how much ammunition you want,” a warm voice said. “If you aren’t sure, tell me what the job is and I can help.”

Gracie, still behind Charlie, felt a fiery rush course through her as the woman spoke. That voice — that voice! It was one she’d known all her life, as familiar as her own skin.

“Mom!” Gracie said in an elongated whisper as she stepped beside Charlie.

“Gracie! Oh, Gracie,” her mother said, looking from Gracie to Charlie. “Oh my sweet girl.”

She leaned forward and embraced her daughter over the table. Gracie felt the burning sensation of tears gathering in her eyes. All she’d wanted was to see her mom again and here she was.

“Mom, what are you—”

“Gracie, sweetie, I love you so much and I hope your job won’t put you in too much danger. But there’s no time for catch up now. I’m sorry, sweetie. Let’s get you a gun and what you need,” her mom said, straightening.

“She’ll be protecting an injured person in hiding,” Charlie said.

“Excellent, excellent. I’d recommend this gun,” she said, gesturing to one of the smallest guns, “and one box of bullets should be enough if you are going to be concealed.”

Gracie felt like she was observing the scene from outside her body as the gun got placed in her hand and she was shown how to hold it, how to release the safety and how to fire. Then they showed her how to load the chamber. Her mother pulled out an extra box of bullets — “just in case,” she said — and then suddenly they were walking away. There were no promises to talk later or meet somewhere.

“I love you, Mom,” Gracie said through tears over her shoulder. But her mother was already helping someone else.

“Gracie, it’s going to be okay. Your mom has a job to do now though. And so do you,” Charlie said softly as they approached the maintenance room in the Metro.

“I know but —”

“Focus, Gracie. Keep Jennifer safe. And I’ll look out for your mom,” Charlie said. Then she reached forward and embraced her. “You’ve got this.”

Chapter 40

August 2005

“Thanks for a productive work session, everyone!” Charlie said, closing her laptop and smiling at the work group. “We’ll pick it up tomorrow with the last few legacy departments and any ideas you have for new ones.”

A chorus of thanks bounced around the room punctuated by the slide of chairs being pushed in and feet padding out. Charlie stood and looked at Emma and Alice, who seemed to be smaller than they had been when they first gathered in the morning. Finishing the report had been draining. But the work on majors had been hopeful. But perhaps it wasn’t enough to drown out the memories of what happened months earlier.

“You okay?” she asked them.

“Yes. Just ... I need some time now. It’s been a day,” Emma said.

“I keep thinking about Gracie and her mom. How we found them, curled around each other, blocking the door,” Alice said. “It was so horrific and so beautiful all at once.”

“It was. I was with Gracie when she saw her mom before everything happened. I hadn’t realized how much she missed her. Maybe that’s why she was the way she was sometimes,” Charlie said. “I mean, she was just a kid still. I’ve been trying to keep her in mind with the decisions we make here. The students who will arrive on campus will have the blend of homesickness and uncertainty that she had. I want to find a way to bridge that into something positive.”

“Gracie may have been annoying at times. But she was so damned smart. I don’t know how she moved Jennifer and the others so swiftly and to that practically plain-

sight location, but it saved their lives,” Emma said quietly, leaning back in the blue fabric covered chair.

“The thing that eats me though is who shot them. I mean, it was a last-minute choice to have anyone hide there. It was concealed but easy to access. And it wasn’t well trafficked. No one else was attacked in the underground hiding places,” Alice said. “And the number of bullets fired. Gracie must have hit her attacker or attackers at least once.”

“She’d never shot anyone before though. It was her first time even holding a gun. Maybe she missed with every shot,” Charlie said, nodding slightly. But Emma’s reaction startled her. She seemed frozen. Stuck even.

“What is it,” Charlie asked her. “Emma?”

Emma looked up, tears overflowing from her eyes and regret framing her face.

“Emma?” Alice asked, now seeing it too.

“I know,” she whispered.

“You know what?” Charlie asked.

“I know. I know what happened. I have a contact in the police department here. Close the door.”

Alice and Charlie’s eyes went wide with shock and anger. Charlie walked over and eased the door shut.

“And you didn’t tell us?” Charlie demanded, returning to her seat. “Is it that officer — Greg?”

“That’s not important. But yes. And I couldn’t tell you. I mean, I am not supposed to know and he doesn’t know ... well, he’ll be charged soon. Listen, you can’t say anything to anyone. Not to Jennifer or Stephen. Not to your friends or family. Not even to each other. I’ll tell you but it can’t leave this room, okay?”

They hissed their assent and waited.

“When we arrived in D.C., we received a dozen burner phones that we distributed among the group we were with. Several of the professors had them. We gave some to those who got sent out on special errands and Stephen also took one and Professor Winkel had one as well,” Emma said. “All the numbers were pre-programmed so if you needed to send a message to everyone, you called the number two in your phone and the next person did the same and it ensured that everyone got the message. So that’s what I did when I left you all in the tunnel to make a call. I called Stephen and then I started the phone tree. Stephen had recommended the hiding spot for Jennifer and the others because it was uniquely placed nearby but also the kind of place no one in their right mind would use for hiding. Anyway, I didn’t share the location with the phone tree or anything. We kept information to a minimum.”

Emma sighed deeply, turning her thumbs around each other. Charlie wondered if she was measuring her words or deciding how much to tell them.

“But later, just before you took Gracie there, I got a call.”

Chapter 41

March 2005

Gracie paced. Back and forth. Back and forth. She chewed at the edge of her nails. She wondered if she'd made the right call. Why wasn't she brave like her mom? Or her Auntie Lolly? Lolly would have never chosen to hide — even if hiding was also protecting someone. She'd kept driving and been out — with permission, sure — but out there doing something.

Apparently so had her mom. Her mom! She'd missed her so much and she was here too. Gracie couldn't wait until this was over. She couldn't wait until everything was normal again. That had to be what was coming, right?

But what was normal anymore, anyway?

Gracie glanced at Jennifer and the other women she was guarding. The gun felt enormous in her hands, heavy and cold. Dangerous. She didn't want it. She wanted to drop it and run. To find her mother. To do something other than stand here.

“Jennifer, I am going to step out. I want to see something,” she said vaguely, addressing the only person she sort of knew.

“Be careful,” Jennifer replied, her voice cracked.

Outside the maintenance room, Gracie glanced to each side. She realized she hadn't even looked around when Charlie led her into the Metro and to the concealed room where the injured would hide and Gracie — inexperienced, scared Gracie — would protect them.

She abruptly turned and walked, putting as much distance between her and the room as she could. It was dark down here, not as well lit as other areas she'd been.

Somewhere water dripped. Somewhere something scurried. Gracie felt a chill travel down her spine.

She wanted to run. She wanted to go home. She wanted her mom.

Gracie didn't realize it until she was almost there, but she'd found her way back to the more open area that led to the Metro platforms. She stopped, realizing she had no idea what she'd do if she actually did leave. And she doubted her mom would be proud of her for deserting the people she was supposed to be hiding. She had to go back. She had to be brave.

Gracie turned and started back, noticing for the first time the way small passages veered off here and there. In the darkness, it was easy to miss them. But now hyperaware of where she was and what she was doing, Gracie realized underground tunnel systems were genius for hiding people. She probably should have realized that sooner, like when they were in New York. But someone else was always doing the thinking then. She was just along for the ride.

When she hefted the door to the maintenance room open, Jennifer looked stricken.

"Gracie, I just got a call." She waved the phone at her. "Something ... I don't even know ... something. I think someone found out where we are. Someone bad. You have to get ready. We can't—"

The passages, Gracie thought. She saw the passages for a reason.

"Up," Gracie said to Jennifer, offering a hand after she tucked the gun into her waistline. "All of you, get up. I need to move you."

"Gracie, where the hell are we going to go?" Jennifer demanded, angry.

“There are some concealed passages not too far from here. You will be safer there. I am sure of it,” Gracie said. The others grumbled but complied. “Jennifer, you have to trust me.”

Jennifer studied her, uncertain. Gracie had warned them earlier. Could she be right now too? Finally, Jennifer accepted Gracie’s outstretched hand and rose.

“Come on, fast. We need to move,” Gracie said, leading the women out, her arm around Jennifer who hobbled beside her.

“I hope you know what you’re doing,” Jennifer whispered, worried.

“I do.”

Down the second passage, Gracie found an open space that didn’t seem to go anywhere.

“What is this place?” one woman asked.

“No idea,” Gracie said, helping Jennifer to the ground. “Okay, you all stay here. I am going back. I don’t want whoever this is to not find us at all and start looking.”

“Gracie, you can’t,” Jennifer said, her eyebrows furrowed.

“It’s going to be fine. I will distract them or something,” Gracie said. “Or maybe I will, like shoot them? I don’t know. But anyway, I am going. Be quiet. Turn off the sound on the phone. You aren’t here.”

Chapter 42

August 2005

In the conference room, Alice and Charlie stared at Emma Thorne. How could someone they trusted be the reason Gracie and her mom were dead? How?

“Professor Winkel said he needed the location because another professor had been injured while fleeing. He wanted to take that professor there,” Emma said.

“How did he know there was a location?” Charlie asked.

“That should have been my first question but everything was so hectic. There was all the shooting outside, something exploded too. And I made an assumption that Stephen must have told him. In retrospect, it made no sense because if it was Stephen, he also could have told Professor Winkel where they were. But I didn’t question it,” Emma said.

She paused, looking down as tears streamed down her face and dropped in small puddles on the dark wood table.

“Even when we found them, I didn’t know because I trusted him. We’d been working together — working on fighting The Initiative — for so long that I never imagined he would turn on us. But he had that injured professor with him and it seemed logical in the moment,” Emma said quietly. “I feel like it’s all my fault. If I’d just asked more questions before sharing the location maybe they’d be alive still.”

“Wait. So, Professor Winkel killed Gracie and her mom?” Alice asked. “Why? That makes no sense. Why them? Why would he kill the people he was trying to help? I thought he was a professor here. I thought he was one of the founders of the underground movement with you here.”

“He was. In fact, he’d done a lot of work connecting the campuses so we could plan the whole operation. He was how your group from Northwestern joined up with ours. But he was angry. It turned out he and Professor Fry ...” Emma paused and looked at Alice. “She was the reason we were able to engineer all the tech we had. She was absolutely brilliant. Anyway, they were in a relationship and no one knew. So when she died after the tunnel explosion, he was in agony. But more than that, he wanted someone to blame.”

Charlie remembered the stolen glances and heads together. “I wondered if there was something ... anyway, wow. But still, how did that make him kill Gracie?”

“When Mary died, he was so angry with Stephen. Remember, they were recovering the bodies? Mary was alive when they found her, but she’d been impaled. There was no saving her, Stephen told me. But Professor Winkel felt like Stephen had let her die. He was certain something else could have been done. It couldn’t but he blamed Stephen and he wanted him to hurt too. So, he went there to kill Jennifer and whoever else he could find. He even brought that injured professor as a sort-of Trojan Horse to get inside the room,” Emma said.

“But it didn’t work,” Charlie said slowly.

“No, it didn’t. I’d given Jennifer my phone and someone tipped her off. That’s why Gracie moved everyone. I don’t even know how she found the new location but she did. And when Professor Winkel arrived, he found Gracie inside alone.”

“So how did her mom end up there too?” Alice asked.

“I don’t know. Actually, I don’t really know much more than that. That other professor, she died about a week later and she was never alert enough to give a good statement. And Gracie and her mom can’t tell us,” Emma said.

“That’s ... wow,” Charlie said.

“Everyone assumed that Professor Winkel was shot during the battle outside, but I think Gracie shot him. And now, his arrest is imminent,” Emma concluded. “In fact, it might even be tonight I hear.”

“I ... I can’t even,” Charlie said. “He’s working on campus here still.”

“I know. For now. I mean I found only out about all this a few days ago.”

“Are we in danger now?” Alice asked suddenly.

In the months since, Congress did its job and in the days that followed, the Supreme Court did too. And finally, after the President’s veto, Congress voted to enact the legislation anyway. Yet still, safety had been a question that they all carried with them, always. As they reentered the world, set up new households in apartments that were theirs alone and reconnected with their families and friends, they constantly asked themselves if they were safe. And too often, the answer was that they weren’t sure.

“I’ve thought a lot about that. And I think so. He wasn’t angry at the movement. He was a hurt man who made a really bad choice in anger,” Emma said.

Charlie stood up, restless, and paced the room.

“I hate this,” she said.

“Me too,” Alice replied.

“We’d be fools to think that everything would be fixed overnight. Look how much progress has been made already. And look how much we learned about who we are and who we want to be as a people. Law enforcement is doing an amazing job of bringing the people who turned the world upside down to justice. We have to let them,” Emma said.

“Anyway, my contact tells me he’s not a threat to us. And that it’s key that he doesn’t know he’s going to be charged. I trust that because I have to.”

“How can we bring young women here again though when there’s still so much hate in the world?” Charlie asked. “I mean, are we just putting them into danger all over again?”

“No, no. We can’t think like that,” Alice said. “I mean, look at us. We are living in the world again. We can go out and move freely and things are better. We helped make that happen.”

“Charlie, it’s going to be okay,” Emma said, standing too. “If you two want to take tomorrow off and —”

“No, no. I wouldn’t do that. We fought for our agency and we got it. I am not hiding again,” Charlie said.

Alice and Emma nodded.

“I’ll let you know when he’s arrested. But really, forget we spoke about this,” Emma urged.

“Ok,” Alice agreed.

They gathered their things, walking out the door in single file to return to their desks and bags, to their apartments and lives, to their freedom. That was, ultimately, what they’d been fighting for all along.

But they did so with a new dawning that their freedom would always be threatened by the ugliness of jealousy and revenge. That, they realized, was something they could never overturn.

Author Biography

Sarah Walker Caron is the author of eight books including *The Disney Princess Tea Parties Cookbook*, *Classic Diners of Maine* and *The Super Easy 5-Ingredient Cookbook*. She is also a senior editor for the *Bangor Daily News*, overseeing coastal news. Her food, parenting, travel and essay writing has appeared in *The Washington Post*, *Fine Cooking*, the *Boston Globe*, and on The TODAY Show website, among others. She lives in Maine with her two children and sweet black cat named Bippity. She is a candidate for the Masters of Arts degree in English from The University of Maine in May 2023.