BRIGHT YOUNG WOMEN

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As is true in many books of fiction, this book was inspired by events that appeared in the news. Nevertheless, all of the actions in this book, as well as all of the characters and dialogue, are products solely of the author's imagination.

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For C—I couldn't have written
the last line without you.

PAMELA

Montclair, New Jersey

Day 15,825

You may not remember me, but I have never forgotten you, begins the letter written in the kind of cursive they don't teach in schools anymore. I read the sentence twice in stinging astonishment. It's been forty-three years since my brush with the man even the most reputable papers called the All-American Sex Killer, and my name has long since fallen to a footnote in the story.

I'd given the return address only a cursory glance before sliding a nail beneath the envelope's gummed seam, but now I hold it at arm's length and say the sender's name out loud, emphatically, as though I've been asked to answer the same question twice by someone who definitely heard me the first time. The letter writer is wrong. I have never forgotten her either, though she is welded to a memory that I've often wished I could.

"You say something, hon?" My secretary has moonwalked her rolling chair away from her desk, and now she sits framed by my open office door with a solicitous tilt of her head. Janet calls me *hon* and sometimes *kiddo,* though she is only seven years older than I am. If anyone refers to her as my administrative assistant, she will press her lips together whitely. That's the sort of current-climate pretension Janet doesn't care for.

Janet watches me flip the navy-bordered note card, back to front, front to back, generating a slight wind that lifts my bangs from my forehead. I must look like I'm fanning myself, about to faint, because she hurries over and I feel her hand grazing my mid-back. She fumbles with her readers, which hang from her neck on a rhinestone-strung chain, then juts her sharp chin over my shoulder to read the outstanding summons.

"This is dated nearly three months ago," I say with a ripple of rage. That the women who should be the first to know were always the last was the reason my doctor made me cut out salt for the better part of the eighties. "Why am I just seeing it now?" *What if I'm too late?*

Janet mean-mugs the date. February 12, 2021. "Maybe security flagged it." She goes over to my desk and locates the envelope on top of my leather-looking-but-synthetically-priced desk pad. "Uh-huh." She underlines the return address in the upper-left corner with a square nail. "Because it's from Tallahassee. They would have flagged that for sure."

"Shit," I say insubstantially. I am standing there when, just like that night, my body begins to move without any conscious consent from my mind. I find that I am packing up for the day, though it's just after lunch and I have mediation at four. *"Shit,"* I say again, because this tyrannous part of me has decided that I will not only be canceling my afternoon but I will also incur a no-show fee for tomorrow's six a.m. spin class.

"What can I do for you?" Janet is regarding me with the combination of concern and resignation that I haven't seen in a long time—the look people give you when the very worst has happened, and really, there isn't anything anyone can do for you, for any of us, because some of us die early and inconveniently and there is no way to predict if it will be you next, and before you know it, mourner and comforter are staring dead-eyed into the abyss. The routine comes to me viscerally though it's been eight presidential administrations.

Three impeachments. One pandemic. The towers going down. Facebook. Tickle Me Elmo. Snapple iced tea. They never got to taste Snapple iced tea. But it didn't happen in some bygone era either. If they had lived, they'd be the same age as Michelle Pfeiffer.

"I think I'm going to Tallahassee," I say in disbelief.

Tallahassee, Florida

January 14, 1978

Seven hours before

On Saturday nights, we kept our doors open while we got ready. Girls went in one room wearing one thing and came out wearing something shorter. The hallways were as tight and restricted as the passageways on a navy ship, snarled with chatter about who was doing what and going where and with whom. Hair spray and nail polish fumed our personal ozone layer, the blast of blow-dryers raising the mercury four, sometimes five degrees on the analog thermometer mounted to the wall. We'd crack the windows for fresh air and mock the music coming from the bar next door; Saturday night was disco night, which was for old people. It was a statistical impossibility that something bad could happen with Barry Gibb cheeping in his far-reaching falsetto that we'd all live to see another day, but we are what mathematics models refer to as outliers.

A coy voice accompanied the patterning of knuckles on my door. "I think it might snow." I looked up from the volunteer schedules papering my hand-me-down secretary's desk to see Denise Andora standing on the threshold, hands clasped girlishly at her pelvis.

"Nice try." I laughed. Denise was angling to borrow my shearling coat. Though the winter of 1978 had brought a deep freeze to the Panhandle that killed the azalea trees along the Georgia border, it was never cold enough to snow.

"*Please,* Pamela!" Denise put her hands together in prayer, repeating her plea over red fingertips with crescendoing urgency. "Please. Please. *Please.* Nothing I have goes." She turned in place to prove her point. I only know the minute details of what she was wearing that night because later there was a description of her outfit in the paper: thin turtleneck tucked into snap-front jeans, suede belt and suede boots in matching chestnut brown, opal earrings, and a beloved silver charm bracelet. My best friend was approximately one hundred feet tall and weighed less than I did as a child, but by senior year I'd learned to manage my envy like a migraine. What triggered that star-seeing pain was looking too closely at Denise when she decided she needed attention from men.

"Don't make me beg." She stomped her foot a little. "Roger asked some of the girls if I was coming tonight."

I put my pencil down. "Denise," I admonished.

I'd long ago lost count of the number of times Denise and Roger had called it quits only to encounter each other out at night, however many warm beers and deep lovelorn glances it took to forgive the spiteful things they'd each said to and about the other, but this most recent split didn't feel so much like a split as it did a severing with a dirty kitchen knife, quite literally infecting Denise, who vomited everything she ate for nearly a week and had to be briefly admitted to the hospital for dehydration. When I picked her up at the curb, she swore Roger was out of her system for good. *I flushed twice for good measure,* she'd said, laughing feebly as I helped her out of the hospital-mandated wheelchair and into the passenger seat of the car.

Denise shrugged now with sudden, suspicious indifference, sauntering over to my window. "It's only a few blocks to Turq House. On the night they're calling for three inches of snow. I'll be a little cold but"—she swung the lock lever and pushed her palms against the glass, leaving behind prints that would soon have no living match—"maybe Roger will volunteer to warm me up." She faced me, shoulders thrust back in the frostbitten room. Unless her parents were coming to visit for the weekend, Denise's bra remained collecting pills in her top drawer.

I could feel my willpower eroding. "Do you *promise* to get it dry-cleaned after?"

"Yes, ma'am, Pam Perfect, ma'am." Denise clicked her heels with a militant clang. *Pam Perfect* was her not-entirely-affectionate nickname for me, cribbed from the popular prime-time commercials featuring the woman with the feathered bangs, talking about the pure vegetable spray that saves her time, money, *and* calories. *With PAM cooking,* she trumpets while sliding a silver-skinned fish from frying pan to plate, *dinner always turns out PAM perfect.*

Denise was the first friend I'd made at Florida State University, but recently we'd found ourselves at an impasse. The rot at the core of Panhellenic leadership had always been favoritism, with former presidents hewing close to the rule book for some of their sisters while allowing their friends to get away with murder. When I ran for the position and won, I knew Denise had expected leniency with my name at the top of the executive board. Instead, I was so determined to do better than those who had come before me, to be remembered as a fair and impartial leader, that Denise had more strikes against her than any other sister that quarter. Every time she blew off Monday's chapter meeting or postponed a service trip, it was like she was daring me to kick her out. The other girls watched us like two whitetail bucks who had put our heads down and locked antlers. Our treasurer, an auburn-haired Miss Florida finalist who'd grown up hunting in Franklin County, was always saying that one of us better submit before we got stuck and had to be sawed apart. She'd seen it happen in the wild.

"You can wear the coat," I relented.

Denise capered to my closet with childlike glee that made me feel like an awful shrew. Her eyes rolled back as she slipped her arms into the silk-lined coat. I had beautiful clothes that fit like a second, softer skin, thanks to a mother who devoted her life to caring about such things. Maybe I would care too if I wore half my wardrobe as well as Denise. As it was, I had a round Irish face that contradicted my figure. That's what I had—not a body but a figure. The disconnect between my freckled apple cheeks and pinup proportions was extreme enough

that I often felt the need to apologize for it. I should be prettier or less, depending on who was looking and where.

"Can you shut my window before you go?" I slapped my desk with an open palm as a gust of wind blew into the room, threatening to spirit away my color-coordinated calendar pages.

Denise went over to the window and staged a hammy show, pressing down on the rail and grunting like she was giving it her all. "It's stuck," Denise said. "You better come with me so you don't freeze to death planning the thirty-third annual blood drive. What a way to go."

I sighed, not because I longed to attend a shouty fraternity party and couldn't because I did in fact have to organize the thirty-third annual blood drive; my sigh was because I did not know how to make Denise understand that I did not *want* to go, that I was never more content than I was sitting at my pencil-scratched desk on a Saturday night, my door open to the din and the drama of thirty-eight girls getting ready to go out, feeling like I'd done the job I was elected to do if, by the end of the week, everyone could put on music and mascara and taunt one another from across the hall. The things I heard from my room. The absolute hell we gave one another. Who needed to shave her big toes and who should never dance in public if she had any desire to eventually procreate.

"You'll have more fun without me," I demurred lamely.

"You know, one day," Denise said, turning to close the window for real this time, her long dark hair flapping behind her like a hero's cape, "those cans of yours are gonna be in your lap, and you're going to look back and wish—"

Denise broke off with a scream that my nervous system barely registered. We were twenty-one-year-old sorority girls; we screamed not because something was heinously, improbably wrong but because Saturday nights made us excitable and slaphappy. I have since come to loathe the day most people look forward to all week, its false sense of security, its disingenuous promise of freedom and fun.

Outside on the front lawn, two of our sorority sisters were huffing and hauling a blanketed parcel roughly the dimensions of a movie poster, their cheeks chapped pink with cold and exertion, their pupils dilated in a hunted, heart-pounding way.

"Help us," they were half-laughing, half-panting when Denise and I met them on our short stamp of lawn, edged with pink bursts of muhly grass to dissuade patrons of the bar next door from parking on our property when the lot filled up. It was such a successful trick of landscaping that none of the students crossing paths on the sidewalk, on their way to grab a bite at the Pop Stop before it closed, had stepped over to lend a hand.

I positioned myself in the middle, squatting and lifting the base in an underhand grip, but Denise just rounded her fingers and produced an earsplitting whistle that stopped cold two guys cutting through our alleyway. No amount of landscaping could deter people from pinching our shortcut, and I couldn't say I blamed them. Tallahassee blocks were as long as New York City avenues, and Denise loved that I knew that.

"We could use a hand." Denise tossed the dark hair she had spent hours coaxing into silken submission and popped a hip, every man's fantasy hitchhiker.

I saw bitten-down boy fingernails curl under the base of our illicit delivery, inches from my own, and I was relieved of the weight instantly. I moved to the head of the operation to direct the guys up the three front steps and then—*carefully, a little to the left, no, other left!*—through the double front doors. We'd just had them repainted cornflower blue to match the striations in the wallpaper in the foyer, where, at that moment, everyone congregated—the girls in the kitchen making popcorn, the girls who had bundled together on the rec room couch to catch up on weekday tapings of *As the World Turns,* the girls who were going out, hot rollers in their bangs and waving their wet nails dry. They wanted to see what all the commotion was about as much as they wanted to slyly assess our handlers off the street, older than we were by at least eight years but not any older than the professors who routinely asked us out to dinner.

There was some arguing about what to do next. Denise was insisting the guys continue up the stairs, but the only men allowed on the second floor were family members on move-in day and the houseboy when there was a repair to be made.

"Don't be like this, Pamela," Denise pleaded. "You know if we leave it here, they'll steal it back before we can make the trade." Though the cargo was draped in a bedsheet, we all knew that it was a framed composite from our sweetheart fraternity, every active member unsmiling in a suit and tie, their rattlesnake-and-double-sword coat of arms at the center. We'd been going back and forth for months, each house lifting one of the other's composites and leaving behind a sooty square that not even a heavy-duty ammonia solution would wipe away.

Denise was staring at me with glittering, kohl-rimmed *gotcha!* eyes. Over a decade later, when I finally became a mother, I would recognize this trick, this asking for something you knew you weren't allowed to have in front of a roomful of people who wanted you to have it. There was no saying no unless you didn't mind everyone thinking you were a mean old hag.

I produced a scoffing sound from the base of my throat. How dare she even ask.

Denise's lips parted, her features slackening in disappointment. I knew this look too. It was the look Denise got every time she encountered me as chapter president after so long of knowing me as her friend.

"Man on the floor!" I shouted, and Denise seized me by the shoulders, shaking me with playful contention. I'd *nearly* gotten her. We were swept up then by the other girls moving like a school of fish, one vibrant body thinned by the stairwell and reshaped on the landing, squeezed thin again by our tapered halls. The whole time we were singing "man on the floor," not in unison, but single voices in gravelly competition with one another. There had been that Paul McCartney song—"Band on the Run"—which to one of my sisters, no one could ever remember who, had always sounded like "*Man* on the Run," and with one more modification the inside joke of The House was born. It was so catchy that the next morning, sitting in our dining room in dazed compliance,

I heard the hum of the chorus. There were loads of men on the floor at that point, some in blue, some in white lab coats, the ones in charge in street clothes, and they were cutting bloody squares out of our carpets and tweezing back molars from the shag. And then someone else sang it full force—"man on the floor, maaaaan on the floor!"—and we started laughing, real deep-bellied laughs that made some of our uniformed house guests pause on the stairwell and look in at us, only traces of concern on their scowling, reproachful faces.

The composite was delivered to room four, the room of the girls who had pulled off the heist. Our handlers took in the limited quarters skeptically, before kicking the door shut with their heels and leaning the prized piece against the foot of one of the twin beds. If you wanted to get in that room, you had to turn sideways, and even then I don't think I could have slipped inside, not with my *figure*.

"You don't have an attic or anything?" one of the guys asked.

We did, but having the composite in your room was like hanging a pair of stag antlers on your wall, Denise explained to them. Already, some of the flatter-chested girls were squeezing through the cracked-open door with their cameras to take pictures of the hometown heroes in room four, who posed alongside their kill grinning, air guns drawn and hair tumbling down their backs like Charlie's Angels. In a few hours, he would try to enter this room but would be met with too much resistance owing to the composite of the 1948 class—I still remember that was the year the girls filched, can still see their oiled hair and horn-rimmed eyeglasses. Today Sharon Selva is an oral surgeon in Austin and Jackie Clurry a tenured professor in the history department of the very university held captive by terror that winter of 1978, all because of some silly Greek prank.

Denise went determinedly to the small amber-bodied lamp the girls kept on top of a stack of old magazines, screwing off the shade and stretching the cord as far as it would go so she could crouch before the picture and scan its surface with the bare bulb, not unlike

a beachgoer with a handheld metal detector. She shook her head in awe. "Even their composites from the forties were mounted with museum quality!" she cried with deeply felt outrage.

For two years, we'd allowed the guys of Turq House—short for the shade their shutters and doors were painted—to think they were partaking in the classic friendly theft that had been occurring between sweetheart sororities and fraternities for generations. What they didn't know was that we'd been swapping out the high-quality glass from their composites for the acrylic plexiglass from ours before proffering the exchange. It was Denise who caught the discrepancy, back when we were sophomores.

This glass is gorgeous, she'd breathed, and the older girls had laughed, because Robert Redford was gorgeous, but glass? Little sophomore Denise had marched us down to our display wall and pointed out the differences—see how faded our composites had become? Turq House was using glass, expensive museum-grade glass that protected their photographs from damaging elements like the sun and dust mites. Denise was a fine art and modern languages double major—the former concentration had always been the plan, the latter added to the mix that past summer, after she read in the *Tallahassee Democrat* about the construction of a state-of-the-art Salvador Dalí museum down in St. Petersburg, Florida. Denise had immediately shifted to declare a double major in modern languages, concentration in Spanish, spending the summer after her twentieth birthday on campus, making up two years' worth of credits. Dalí himself would be flying in to interview prospective staff, and Denise intended to dazzle him in his native language. Hardly surprising, but when they eventually met, he was completely taken with her, hiring her as an assistant gallerist to start the Monday after graduation.

"I doubt they'd even notice . . ." Sophomore Denise had trailed off, smart enough to know that as a pledge, she couldn't be the one to propose it.

There were and continue to be plenty of disparities between fraternity and sorority living, but the big one that the chapter president

at the time was always going on about was the level at which Greek alumni gave back to their organizations. Fraternity men had, for generations, gone on to become more economically sound than sorority women, and by and large their houses boasted newer furniture, top-of-the-line air-conditioning units, and, "As our eagle-eyed sister Denise Andora recently pointed out," she said at the top of the next chapter meeting, "even *clearer* glass than we do."

The ploy was condoned that evening, and I've heard rumblings that the girls are still at it today.

Denise tapped her long nails on that durable, reflection-controlled glass and groaned almost sexually. "God, that's good stuff," she said.

"Would you like us to leave you alone with the glass, Denise?" Sharon asked, deadpan.

"To hell with Roger." Denise planted a wet one on the limpid surface. "This glass and I are going to live a very long and happy life together."

Sometimes, when I get an unfavorable outcome in court, when I start thinking justice may be a fallacy after all, I remember that Salvador Dalí died six hours before Denise's killer went to the electric chair. January 23, 1989: look it up. The passing of one of the world's most celebrated and eccentric artists ensured that the execution of some lowlife in Central Florida was not the top news story of the day, and he would have dead-man-walked to the execution chamber bereft over that. More than his own freedom, more than the chance to make me sorry for what I did to him, what he wanted was a spectacle. On these bad days, I like to think that Denise is up there, wherever it is truly smashing women go when they die, and that she'd managed to pull a few strings. Overshadowed his death the way he did her fleeting time on this earth. Revenge is a dish best served cold. The vixens of *As the World Turns* taught us that.

"The future—she was looking forward to it very much."

—AUNT OF ONE OF THE FLORIDA STATE
UNIVERSITY VICTIMS, 1978

January 15, 1978

Five minutes before

It must have been more than hunger pains that roused me, but at the time all I wanted was to go downstairs and make myself a peanut butter sandwich and fall right back to sleep.

I rolled out of bed, stretching, groaning when I saw myself in the small oval mirror tacky-glued to the wall. I'd fallen asleep fully clothed, using my textbook for a pillow. After I'd posted the volunteer schedule to the bulletin board outside the bathrooms, I'd moved on to the reading for Monday morning's American Political Thought, and now my cheek bore a faint printing of the Equal Rights Amendment. I rubbed at it hard with the heel of my hand, but Alice Paul's words wouldn't so much as smudge.

Perks of chapter presidency started with living alone in the big balcony room off the front set of stairs and ended there. The bay window, the *privacy*, fooled some girls into thinking they wanted to run for the position, until they took the time to consider how much thankless work it was on top of your regular course load. It was the inverse for me. The meetings, budgeting, and managing, the litigating of the slights small and smaller—those were the draw. I fell into a depression with too much free time on my hands, and I dreaded going out, dating, guys, the whole scene. My figure had helped me secure a respectable boyfriend freshman year, and while kissing him

didn't exactly set my heart on fire, I'd kept him around for expediency's sake.

The chandelier in the front hallway was set on a timer, switching off automatically at nine. But when I came out of my room a few minutes shy of three in the morning, the foyer was spit-shined in platinum light. They still don't know how this happened, but that chandelier saved my life. If I had turned right out of my bedroom, headed down the narrow hall for the back staircase designated for after-hours use, I never would have come back.

I descended the front set of stairs, hand grazing the wrought-iron railing, one of the oldest and prettiest parts of The House. In the foyer, I spent a minute or two fiddling with the light switch on the wall, to no avail. I added it to the morning's ever-expanding chore list: call the houseboy first thing, before the alumnae arrived for—

Don't just stand there, a woman cried. *Do something. Do something!*

A glass shattered somewhere in the back of The House. Then another. Another.

I looked down at my feet, in the corduroy slippers I'd wear for the last time, and found they were somehow moving toward the disturbance coming from the Jefferson Street side of The House. Even as I came around the bend to the rec room and saw that it was only the television, left on by one of my sisters to an old episode of *I Love Lucy,* the one where Lucy keeps offering Ricky objects to smash in lieu of her face, I knew something wasn't right.

Still, I went around, turning off all the lamps that had been left on in the room, collecting the plates littering the coffee table, sticky with the residue of Jerry's hot fudge cake. My eyes were burning with tears because I was someone who could cry only when she was angry. The alumnae Tea & Tour started at nine a.m. sharp, and *this* was how the girls left the place?

My ponytail had loosened in my sleep, and I kept having to shoulder my hair out of my eyes, and at some point, I realized it was because there was a freezing draft filtering through the room. I rocked back on my heels and squinted through the archway to see

that the back door had been left open too. *Goddamn fucking children,* I thought, because that's what I would normally think if a part of me didn't also suspect that something unspeakable was unfolding, that moment, right above my head. *Drunk goddamn fucking children,* I thought again, performing for myself, clinging to the last seconds of normalcy before—

A thud. *The* thud.

I stopped. Stopped moving. Breathing. Thinking. All functions seem to shut down to divert resources to my eardrums. Overhead, there was a flurry of footsteps. Someone on the second floor was running at a nauseating, inhuman speed.

It was as though a magnet were attached to the soles of those feet, and the nickel in my scalp dragged me along for the ride—past the wall of our composites, under the poorly plastered crack in the ceiling, and finally, to the place between the coat closet and the louvered kitchen doors where the footsteps stopped and so did I. I was standing in the shadow of the main stairwell, facing the double front doors approximately thirteen feet and two inches in front of me. I guessed fifteen feet, but when the detective measured no more than an hour later, I found I'd ever so slightly overshot the distance between us.

The crystal chandelier was undulating, disturbed but still unerringly bright. When the man came down the stairs and darted across the foyer, he should have been very hard to see. Instead, the chandelier acted as my archivist, logging a clear and unabridged shot of him as he paused, crouched down low, one hand on the doorknob. In his other hand he held what looked like a child's wooden baseball bat, the end wrapped in a dark fabric that seemed to arch and writhe. Blood, my brain would not yet permit me to acknowledge. He wore a knit cap, pulled down over his brows. His nose was sharp and straight, his lips thin. He was young and trim and good-looking. I'm not here to dispute facts, even the ones that annoy me.

For a brief, blissful moment, I got to be angry. I recognized the man at the door. It was Roger Yul, Denise's on-again, off-again

boyfriend. I could not *believe* she'd sneaked him upstairs. That was an orange-level violation of the code of conduct. Grounds for expulsion.

But then I watched as every muscle in the man's body tensed, as though he sensed he was being watched. With a slow swivel of his head, he focused like a raptor on a spot just beyond my shoulder. I was paralyzed by a hammering dread that still comes for me in my nightmares, locking my spine and vaporizing my scream in the sandpapered walls of my throat. We both stood there, alert and immobile, and I realized with a wrecking ball of relief he could not actually find me in the shadow of the stairwell, that while he was visible to me, I remained unwitnessed.

He was not Roger.

The man opened the door and went. The next time I saw him, he would be wearing a jacket and tie, he would have groupies and the *New York Times* on his side, and when he asked me where I was currently living, legally, I would have no choice but to give my home address to a man who murdered thirty-five women and escaped prison twice.

I found myself heading for Denise's room, planning on reading her the riot act. I would never be able to adequately explain this to the cops, the court, Denise's parents, or my own. That while I knew it was not Roger I'd seen at the front door, I had not picked up the phone and called the police but instead had gone back upstairs to reprimand Denise.

Halfway down the hall, the door to room number six opened, and a sophomore named Jill Hoffman staggered out, hunched over at the waist and headed for the bathroom down the hall. She was drunk and running to the toilet to be sick.

I called out her name and Jill turned fearfully, like she thought I might be mad about the flesh on the right side of her face, peeled back to reveal the very bone the fashion magazines told us to high-

light with blush. She was trying to speak, but her tongue kept getting pushed under by thick currents of blood.

I took off down the hall, flapping my arms strangely and cawing for everyone to get up. One of the girls opened her door and asked blearily if The House was on fire. I guided Jill into the girl's arms and, in a moment of cogency, instructed her to close the door and lock it behind her. In my peripheral vision, someone else wandered into Jill's room and screamed that we needed a bucket. I thought we needed to start cleaning up the bloodstains Jill had left on the carpet before they set, and this made absolute sense to me at the time.

I went into room twelve on the right side of the hall and hollered for the girls in there to call the police. When they asked why, I had to stop and think for a moment. I do not remember saying this, but the author of one of the more ethical true-crime books wrote that I did. "Jill Hoffman has been slightly mutilated," I was alleged to have said, calmly, and then I walked at an unhurried pace to the bathroom, got a bucket from under the sink, and went into Jill's room, thinking I was going in there to scrub a stain out of the carpet.

Jill's room was wet, her sheets submerged in a dark, oily spill, the yellow curtains splashed with so much blood they strained on their hooks, heavier than they'd been seventeen minutes ago. Her roommate, Eileen, was sitting up in her bed, holding her mangled face in her hands and moaning *mama* in her low country twang. Eileen was a loyal listener of Pastor Charles Swindoll's radio show, and though I was not at all religious, she'd gotten me hooked too. He was always saying that life is ten percent what happens to you and ninety percent how you react to it.

I shoved the bucket under Eileen's jaw and pried her hands away from her face. Blood and saliva hailed the metal base, indeed sounding so much thicker than water.

"Take this," I said to a junior who had followed me into the room. She turned her face away, gagging, but she held that bucket for Eileen until the ambulance arrived. "Don't let her cover her face or she'll choke."

I went left out of Jill and Eileen's room, toward my own. It was just like taking rounds at chapter on Monday evenings. The count started at the front.

Most of the girls were startled awake as I barged through their doors and hit the lights, raising the backs of their hands to their eyes, tonguing sleep crust from the corners of their mouths. Though their faces were scrunched up irritably, they were at least in one piece. Insanely, I started to wonder if Jill and Eileen had gotten into a fight with each other, if things had perhaps gotten out of hand. But then I got to room eight. A girl named Roberta Shepherd lived in room eight. Her roommate was away on a ski vacation that weekend, and unlike the others, Robbie did not moan and groan when I told her to wake up and turn on her light.

"Robbie," I repeated in the schoolmarm voice they all mocked me for behind my back. "I'm sorry, but you have to wake up." I was stepping into the room, my adrenaline performing the function of courage. But it turned out there wasn't a need to be brave. Robbie was asleep with the covers pulled up under her chin. I walked in and touched her shoulder and told her that Jill and Eileen had been in an accident and the police would be here any moment.

When she still refused to respond, I rolled her onto her back, and that's when I saw the thin scribble of red on the pillow. Nosebleed. I patted her on the shoulder assuredly, telling her I used to get them when I was upset too.

Out of nowhere there was a man in a uniform by my side, bellowing and blustering at me. *The medic! Get the medic!* I went out into the hallway, feeling at first wounded and then incensed. Who was he to yell at me in my own house?

The hallway seemed to have morphed in the brief time I'd spent in Robbie's room, into a crawl space of surrealism, crackling with the radios of pipsqueak campus officers not much older than we were. Girls wandered the halls wearing winter coats over their nightgowns. Someone said with total confidence that the Iranians had bombed us.

"There's a weird smell coming from Denise's room," reported Bernadette, our Miss Florida and, as treasurer, my second in command. Together we went around the curve in the hallway, sidestepping two slack-mouthed and useless officers. I wondered if maybe Denise had forgotten to wrap up her paint palette before going out for the evening. Sometimes she did that, and it emitted an odor like a gas leak.

Denise was someone who hated to be told what to do. She was bullheaded and talented and conceited and sensitive. Our friendship had not survived the role I had stepped into willingly, one where it was my mandate to make sure everyone followed the rules, no matter how pointless and archaic Denise thought they were. But still I loved her. Still I wanted her to have the big, swaggering life she was destined to have, though I had come to accept it would likely not involve me.

The moment I walked into her room, I knew. I *knew*. I'd only lost her sooner than I'd readied for. Denise was sleeping on her side with the covers pulled up over her shoulder. It had to be close to eighty degrees in the room, and the air was sick with a fetid bathroom smell.

Bernadette was physically restraining me, telling me to wait for the medic, but I wriggled free from her grasp. "She's a sound sleeper," I insisted in a strangled, furious voice. Whatever Bernadette was implying, whatever she was thinking—she was *mistaken.*

"I'll be right back," Bernadette said, and then she banged her elbow painfully on the doorframe as she turned to run down the hall.

As though she had been waiting for us to be alone, Denise's hand shot straight up into the air, a stiff-armed salute. "Denise!" My laugh sounded deranged, even to my own ears. "You have to get dressed," I told her. "It's a Code Bra. There are policemen everywhere."

I went over to her, and though I continued the ruse that she was only dreaming, I understood enough to cradle her in my arms. Her dark hair was studded with bits of bark, but unlike Jill's and Eileen's, it was dry and soft as I stroked it and told her again that she needed

to dress. There was not a scratch on her face. It would have mattered to Denise that she left this earth unscathed.

I pushed the covers off her—she had to be hot—and found that although she still wore her favorite nightgown, her underwear was balled up on the floor, next to an overturned Clairol hair mist bottle. I did not understand how this was at all possible, but the nozzle top was gummed over with a dark substance and a clot of wiry dark hair, the kind of hair that gets stuck in your razor when you shave before going to the beach.

I felt a hand on my shoulder, nudging me out of the way, and that man was by my side again, the one who'd yelled at me. He dragged Denise out of the bed and onto the floor. I told him her name and that she had an allergy to latex. She had to be careful what paints she stored in the room because of it.

"That's good to know," he said, and I forgave him then, because he was so gentle with Denise as he pinched her nose and lowered his face over hers. She had fallen back asleep, but when she woke again, I would tell her that the man who'd saved her was handsome and not wearing a wedding ring. Was a medic the same thing as a doctor? Denise was the type to wind up with a doctor. Maybe this would be the story of how she met her husband, and someday soon I'd be telling it at her wedding.

January 15, 1978

3:39 a.m.

The police officer upstairs told us to go downstairs, and the police officer downstairs told us to go back upstairs. We encountered a different officer on the second floor, and this one told us in an exasperated voice that he really needed us to stay in one place and not disturb anything, and so I was the one to make the call. We'd sequester ourselves in my presidential palace.

My room had double floor-to-ceiling windows, directly above the white railing with the bronze Greek lettering. With the drapes buckled, the windows looked out over the white-bricked walkway where Denise had drawn our swirly Greek script in industrial chalk at the start of the semester.

Someone tugged on the drapery wand, and blue and red fulminated the room. "Another ambulance is here," she really didn't need to announce.

A few of the girls went over to the window to see for themselves. There must have been about thirty of us crammed in that room, and the smell—of night cream and beer breath—remains embedded in some primordial olfactory nerve of mine.

"*Three* ambulances."

"Seven cop cars."

"I count six."

"Six. I feel so much better now."

Bernadette and I fanned out, covering the room counter and clockwise, gathering as much information as we could. Who had seen something. Heard something. One of our pledges told me it was a burglary and we should check to see if the television was missing. Another insisted we'd been shot at by the Soviets, that the country was going to war. "I don't think that's what's going on," I said, giving her knee a little squeeze.

Bernadette and I huddled up to compare notes. Even in the mornings, in her bathrobe and single hair curler, she carefully margined her lips in glossy cherry lipstick. It was startling to see her pale mouth, and I could tell she was self-conscious to be without her signature color. She kept chewing on her bottom lip, flushing it momentarily with bright blood. She was still wearing the beaded blouse she'd started the night in. This turned out to be a crucial detail.

"I couldn't get this off," Bernadette said, indicating the button on her beaded blouse. I leaned in, pinching the fabric between my thumb and pointer finger. The crystal appliqué had gotten tangled in the buttonhole. "I knocked on Robbie's door for help. She has those fabric scissors." Robbie was a fashion merchandising major. "I remember her groaning that it was three in the morning. And I looked at her clock because I knew she was exaggerating. And I said it's two thirty-five, Robbie. And she said do you want my help or not?" Bernadette exhaled, incredulous. "When did this happen? How did I not hear anything? She was fine. When I left. She was *fine*."

"We'll go see her at the hospital as soon as they let us out of here," I promised her. Everything I promised that morning seemed possible now that I'd had the chance to conduct reconnaissance. A stranger had come into The House, likely to steal from us, and he'd encountered some of the girls and panicked. Home invasions were not an uncommon event. No one had intended us harm, and though Jill and Eileen had been bruised and bloodied, it was one of those things that looked worse than it was. Like when you nick the

back of your ankle in the shower and it gushes with the force of a main artery. It had to be like that; otherwise, like Bernadette had just pointed out, we would have *heard* something. I dusted my hands on my thighs, my concerns allayed for the time being.

It felt like we were in that room for hours, but it couldn't have been more than twenty or thirty minutes because the birds hadn't started up yet when a new officer opened the door. We'd fallen into a listless stupor, but the moment an outsider entered the room, everyone wiped their faces and sat at attention. We were used to gathering for meetings and announcements, and the officer seemed unprepared to have the floor so unanimously ceded. He stalled out for a long moment with something like stage fright.

"Do you have any news?" I prompted. He nodded at me, grateful for the reminder of what he was doing here. He was broad and barrel-chested, a local boy with a badge, but his voice didn't carry. We had to lean in to make out what he was saying.

"There's a lot of people on the second floor now, and they're gonna be here awhile. We're gonna move you downstairs."

I raised my hand, not to be called on but to announce that I was going to speak. That was how it worked in chapter too. If you had something to say, you signaled, but no one called on you. This wasn't class and we weren't students here. I was always saying that we were associates running the business of The House. "What's happening with the other girls?" I asked. "How are they doing?"

"The girls are at Tallahassee Memorial."

"All of them?"

He nodded, his face shiny and sincere.

The relief was stabilizing, not just because it was the answer I wanted but because it was an *answer*. In the month of uncertainty that was to follow, what I wanted, what we all wanted, was clarity. What had happened? Who had done it? What did we do now?

"When can we call our parents and let them know what's going on?" I asked.

The officer swished his mouth to the side, thinking. "Maybe

an hour? That's about how long it'll take to fingerprint a group this size."

The girls broke ranks then, their questions and objections unruly but reasonable. I allowed it, figuring everyone had earned a few moments of disorder. I stood and moved into the center of the circle, and everyone shushed one another. "We're being fingerprinted?" I asked in a calm but concerned spokeswoman's voice. "Why?"

"Everyone always gets fingerprinted."

"Who is everyone?" I snapped, losing patience.

"Anyone at a crime scene. Not just assailants."

"Assailants? Does that mean there were multiple?"

"What? No. Maybe. We don't know."

"So you haven't caught the person who did this?"

"We got a lotta guys out there looking."

I pinched the bridge of my nose in frustration. "Can everyone at least get back into their rooms to change before we go downstairs?"

"No," he said. And then, in response to a chorus of complaints about parading around without pants in front of all these men, the officer shrank into himself, retreating, and told us he would give us five minutes to get ourselves together.

"You can all borrow as much as you want from me," I said. I started for my closet, its contents so desired by the one person who was not there in the room with us, but I stopped at the knock on the door.

A different officer poked his head in this time. "Which one of you saw him?"

I turned. "I did."

"I need you to come with me right away," this new officer said.

"Can you take charge while I'm gone?" I asked Bernadette. She nodded, her naked lips pressed together resolutely.

I hurried out, eager to help, to get all this sorted so I could go and see Denise at the hospital and rush back here to tidy up before the alumnae arrived. I could call my boyfriend! Brian jumped at any opportunity to put his freshmen pledges to work, and they would

get The House shipshape while the girls showered and dressed. The alumnae would no doubt be shaken when I explained we'd had an incident in the night—an attempted burglary, it seemed—but impressed that the tour still went off without a hitch. I imagined them reporting back to the governing council that the women of the FSU chapter showed extraordinary poise in the face of a harrowing ordeal. I followed the officer downstairs, fevered with hope.

Four a.m.

His nose. Really, it all came down to the nose. It was his most distinctive feature and the easiest to describe for the art major who volunteered to try her hand at that earliest forensic sketch. Straight and sharp, like the beak of some prehistoric killer bird. Thin lips. A small man. In seventeen months, I would relish repeating this description for a courtroom. I'd had about enough of hearing how handsome he was, and no man likes to be called small.

The hat he wore covered his ears and eyebrows. The art student, a sophomore named Cindy Young, struggled with the hat, taking the gray eraser to the page twice. The first try made him look like he was wearing a bathing cap, the second a helmet. "I'm usually better than this," she said, sweat on her furrowed brow. Like me, like all of us under that roof, she was a perfectionist whose hand was too shaky to meet her own exacting expectations.

"Let's see," Sheriff Cruso murmured, sitting down on the couch in the formal living room and hunching over Cindy's sketch. I was on the floor next to her for support, my legs straight out under the coffee table and my back against the couch's ruffled base. Sheriff Cruso's knee was right next to my face, and it was inappropriate how turned on I felt by the two of us sitting like that. I didn't even like sex. Denise said that wasn't a "me" problem but a Brian one.

Sheriff Cruso passed the sketch to Detective "pronounced like dill" Pickell, standing behind the couch. "Take a look at that, Pickell," he said. Pickell and Cruso appeared to be about the same age—younger than I thought a sheriff and detective should be—and while Cruso was Black, he was clearly the one in charge. This was highly unusual in the 1970s, not just in the Panhandle but anywhere. For generations, the Southern sheriff was white, middle-aged, and poorly educated, a defender of the status quo. But as crime increased in rural areas and racial attitudes shifted, voters trended toward younger, more educated candidates. Cruso had his criminology degree from Florida A&M and he was Leon County's first Black sheriff, which was a milestone New York City wouldn't achieve until 1995.

Detective Pickell held the drawing under one of the table lamps for a better look. "This is good, Cindy."

"Can I wash my hands now?" Cindy asked. She was sitting with her carbon-blackened palms turned up on the edge of the coffee table so she wouldn't stain the cream-colored furniture in the formal room. We were still worried about the nice couch in the nice room when, upstairs, Jill's blood had seeped through the mattress and would eventually rust the springs.

"Go ahead." Cruso tipped his head. Then, over his shoulder to Pickell, "Can you check to see if we're clear for Miss Schumacher here to take us through the house?"

Pickell headed for the foyer, arcing widely around the girls lined up to use the downstairs bathroom after being fingerprinted in the dining room. They were covering their faces so the police wouldn't see them cry, ruining the arms of my sweaters. The press would go on to write that you could hear our screams from outside, not their most offensive fabrication but one I took umbrage with nonetheless. We conducted ourselves with a restrained horror that I was proud of at the time. I thought if this had to happen to us, at least everyone would remember that we were strong and brave. Back then you were strong and brave if you didn't carry on about it. But people wrote whatever

they wanted to about us with no regard for the truth. Looking back, I should have let everyone scream.

Sheriff Cruso gazed down at me and gave me an approachable smile. Now *he* was actually handsome, unlike The Defendant, who was just handsome for having done the vile things he'd done. Sheriff Cruso was well over six feet, with a defined, manly jawline but cherubic cheeks. I'd soon come to learn he wore cowboy boots with everything.

"So this Roger Yul. What's he like?"

I'd told Sheriff Cruso and Detective Pickell the truth. How at first I was so taken aback to see a man at the front door in the middle of the night that I'd thought it was Denise's ex-boyfriend, Roger. I was prelaw, the daughter of one of New York City's top corporate lawyers, and somewhere along the way I'd picked up a thing or two about the criminal investigation process. I knew law enforcement was trained to fixate on that first gut impression, but I wrongly assumed they possessed an appreciation for the nuance of a mind, for the ten-car pileup of neurons and chemical messaging that occurs in the moment your whole world goes sideways.

"Roger is a typical guy who can't make up his mind," I replied as patiently as I could. "But it wasn't Roger I saw at the door."

"What do you mean by that?" Sheriff Cruso asked, ignoring the second part of my answer entirely. "Can't make up his mind, that is."

I wanted to sigh. Kick my legs like a toddler having a terrible-twos tantrum. *You're wasting my time, your time, everyone's time! Go out there and find this guy with the pointy nose and the nice overcoat!*

But I kept my composure. "Sometimes he wants to be with Denise, and sometimes he wants to be single. But again, it was not Roger I saw at the front door."

"And right now?" Sheriff Cruso persisted. "Does he want to be with Denise or not be with Denise?" He smiled down at me in a *humor-me* way I did not at all buy. Most men couldn't stand me.

"She broke things off before the Christmas break, and now it's pretty obvious he wants to get back together with her again. Don't

tell Denise I told you that, though. Her head's big enough." I rolled my eyes in a way that I hoped would make Sheriff Cruso see I wasn't trying to give him a hard time. People always felt like I was giving them a hard time, and I don't know, maybe I was. But Sheriff Cruso didn't laugh. He did this thing when I mentioned Denise. A sort of blink and a double take at the same time.

Detective Pickell returned to the room. "We can do the walk-through now. But first, Pamela, I need you to remove your slippers so that we can eliminate your footprints from those of the intruder."

I drew my foot into my lap and regarded the blood-cast rubber sole with an archaeologist's curiosity. I'd had no idea my arches were high until that moment.

I retraced my steps for them, starting at the back door. Where I heard the thud overhead, Pickell ripped off a strip of black tape and marked the carpet in the after-hours hall. He did it again at the edge of the foyer where I had seen the intruder come down the stairs and pause at the front door. We were told not to touch the tape until we were given the okay, but then no one ever gave us the okay or bothered to return our phone calls. Just before everyone went home for summer break, I ripped it up in a silent, towering rage.

Pickell told me to stand in the exact place where I saw the intruder and hold down the blade of the measuring tape with my big toe. At the front door, he looked down at the other end in his hand and declared, "Thirteen feet, two inches."

Sheriff Cruso nodded, satisfied, as though something inevitable had been confirmed. "That's pretty far in the dark."

"But it wasn't dark." I pointed at the chandelier, my grand seeing-eye glass.

"It's still not the best lighting in the middle of the night," Sheriff Cruso said, though objectively, he was wrong. We were both squinting, looking up at it. "And I don't want to be so quick to discount your initial instinct."

It is a guilty pleasure to be persuasive when you are wrong. That's what my father always used to say, to warn, really. Once you have

the tools to win an argument, a good lawyer must use them not just wisely but ethically.

And yet, he would always add with a wink, *great lawyers know when to compromise*.

"Sheriff Cruso," I said slowly, as though something were just dawning on me. "One of my sisters, her name is Bernadette Daly—she's our treasurer, actually. Second in command." I wanted him to know she was a reliable source. "She went to Robbie's room at two thirty-five a.m. and stayed for a few minutes. She said Robbie was fine then. When I came down here, the TV was on. An *I Love Lucy* episode. And when I turned it off, the credits were rolling. They're half-hour episodes. So that must have been just three a.m. No more than a minute later, I heard the thud."

Pickell was feeding the blade of the measuring tape, closing the distance between the front door and where I stood, and his eyes were trained on his superior, as if to see whether Sheriff Cruso agreed that what I was saying was important.

"That means all this happened in about a twenty-minute span." It was seventeen minutes, according to the original crime scene report, oxidizing somewhere in the Florida Museum of Archives. "How could one man do what he did to four girls in a twenty-minute span? What if there were two of them? Roger and this other guy?" I held my breath. I did not at all believe what I was saying, and I had no idea the damage done in that moment, just trying to get them to listen to me.

"Interesting," Pickell said eventually, because Cruso wasn't biting. "Remind me the name of your sister who spoke to Robbie Shepherd?"

"Bernadette Daly," I said, drawing out her name, then spelling it for him too. He wrote it down, then leaned in and muttered something in Sheriff Cruso's ear, his face turned away from me so I couldn't read his lips.

Sheriff Cruso nodded grimly at whatever it was Pickell whispered, then said to me, "Thank you, Pamela. That's all for now. You can go call your parents if you'd like." He started up the stairs.