

THE
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G I R L

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For my sister, Yasmin, my favorite person
to watch scary movies with

Beware; for I am fearless, and therefore powerful.

— *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley

PROLOGUE

Rachel sat at her desk like a pretzel, ankles tucked beneath her, knees up and pressed against the hard edge of the wood. She stared at the wiki for Nellie Bly, the historical figure she was supposed to be writing a paper on, but all the words made her eyes glaze over. It wasn't that she wasn't interested in Nellie Bly; Rachel could get behind any badass journalist with a zippy name. But there were just too many distractions around.

Spotify blared the latest Taylor single, and no matter how many times Rachel put down her phone, determined to start reading about Nellie, it would chirp again with a new text from Amy and she had to pick it up. Like now.

i wonder what he's doing rn. we should go to his house and SPY
i'm not about to stalk, Rachel texted back, and put down her phone for real this time.

But even as she read Nellie's truly interesting bio, Rachel's mind kept wandering.

She wasn't going to spy but . . . what *was* Oscar doing right now? Was he out with friends, or playing video games, or studiously doing homework like she was supposed to be? Whatever he was up to, Rachel was sure he was definitely not thinking about her. He barely knew she existed. Well, except for the fact that they'd actually had, like, a legitimate conversation this morning. It didn't last more than three minutes, but it was real. And there were smiles. Mutual smileage was had.

Rachel grinned just thinking about it. And even though she was alone, she buried her dopey, blushing face in her hands.

A string of new messages furiously beeped from her phone and Rachel picked it up, Nellie Bly all but forgotten.

U likee him!!! Amy wrote.

U luv him!!!

U want to have his BEBEEES!!!!!!!

Rachel groaned and hurled the phone onto her bed, then shoved it under her pillow. She did not want to have Oscar's *beebes*, and she seriously never should've told Amy about her crush. Back to Nellie. Rachel sat up straight, readjusting the laptop, like getting the right screen angle was the trick.

As Rachel ignored her phone even harder, she caught sight of someone outside. Her desk sat flush against the window, where she could see the front lawn. It wasn't unusual to spot someone

walking around, but it was past nine in the suburbs. Nobody was out past nine.

That wasn't what made Rachel pause, though. It was that this person had stopped in front of her house, still as a statue. He wore dark pants and a black parka, and although she couldn't see his face very well, it seemed unusually pale.

Goosebumps crawled up Rachel's arms, but she wasn't sure why. The logical part of her brain kept telling her that it was just a person on the street – a neighbor, maybe – nothing more.

A muffled dinging came from under her pillow. Rachel grabbed her phone, glancing down at Amy's latest text.

STALKERS CAN'T BE CHOOSERS GURRRL

Out the window, the man had gone. Rachel breathed a sigh of relief.

As Taylor's voice faded and Rachel's phone finally stopped beeping, she decided to get back to work. But then she heard another noise. This time, it wasn't from any of her devices. It came from downstairs.

Heavy and deliberate, like a footstep.

But that was impossible. She was alone in the house. A new song threatened to start, but Rachel quickly muted the melody. She sat perfectly still, like a puppy anticipating the arrival of a stranger at the door. She waited a bit, ears straining as a long beat of quiet stretched out endlessly.

And then a noise blasted through the room. She startled,

nearly falling off her chair at the shrill chirp of a new text. This time Amy had sent just a gif of a bearded Chris Evans breaking out in a hearty giggle. Rachel would've laughed too, but there was that nagging uneasiness that pulled at the hairs on her neck. Actually, given the circumstances, the longer she looked at the gif – an infinite loop of explosive, silent laughter – the more it creeped her out.

Right as Rachel was about to text back, she heard the noise again. This time, it was louder and she was sure it was a footstep. Someone had stepped on the creaky spot in the hardwood between the couch and the coffee table.

Rachel took a deep breath. 'Mom, is that you?'

Her mom was supposed to be out in the city for a girls' night with her friends. But she had only left an hour before and she couldn't be back yet. Maybe she'd turned around, forgotten something.

Rachel clung to this thought even as her heart started pounding. But the back of her mind was telling her that she would've heard her mom's car pull into the driveway, heard her dump her ring of keys loudly on the console table, heard her messily toe off her boots as she announced she was home, the way she always did.

Rachel put her phone down and made her way to her door, opening it slowly.

'Mom?' she called out again.

When no answer came, Rachel stepped out of her room and crept down the hall toward the stairs. Her socked feet padded lithely on the carpeted steps until she entered the living room.

Someone was there. It wasn't her mom.

The man from outside was standing across the room, dressed all in black. Even his hands were gloved. As Rachel stared at his face, she realized now why it had looked so pale before. What she'd thought was flesh was actually a white mask.

Then Rachel caught sight of the other man. He stood by the TV, dressed just like the first. They stared back at her, their faces scarred and rubbery.

The brain does curious things when suddenly presented with something it cannot comprehend. Rachel's very first thought – a flash – was to offer the men a glass of water, like she'd been taught to do for all guests. And then, just as quickly, she understood. These men were not guests.

Rachel's first impulse was to call for help, but anything that wanted to come spilling out of her got jammed in her throat, frozen along with the rest of her. She felt like she was suddenly sinking in quicksand and any movement would only thrust her deeper into the muck.

Two things happened very quickly and all at once.

One of the men charged out the door, blasting through it like he was swept up by the wind. The second man moved too, but not for the door. He lunged toward Rachel, and just like that she

broke free of her paralysis and ran. She thought only of the back door in the kitchen, picturing herself opening it, breaking through to the crisp backyard air, and escaping. In a moment, she didn't have to picture it. She was in the kitchen, she was reaching for the door, fingertips an inch from the knob.

But then his hand was a vice around her arm. She was caught.

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ONE YEAR LATER

I opened the door and Sandra was there, her smile and outfit sparkling.

‘Get dressed, Rachel, we’re going to a party.’

I’d only known the girl three weeks but here she was, showing up unannounced at my apartment like she’d been doing this for years.

‘Sorry, can’t.’ I was in my sweats and getting ready to relax with my favorite comfort movie of all time, *Night of the Living Dead*. Also, I hated parties. ‘My mom doesn’t want me going out on a school night.’

Like an apparition in a bathroom mirror, my mom appeared behind me. ‘Sunday’s not technically a school night, is it, Jamonada?’

Jamonada was a pet name my grandmother had given me.

I'd tried to give it back but there were apparently no refunds, and anyway, my mom loved it. It was Spanish for 'ham.' Not like 'That girl is so funny and precocious – she's such a ham!' Like literal lunch meat. And now Sandra had heard it, so there was that.

'Hi, Ms. Chavez!' Sandra said.

'There's school tomorrow,' I muttered. 'So, yeah, definitely considered a school night.'

'But you didn't have school today,' my mom countered. 'I'd say the jury's still out.'

Sandra nodded emphatically while I stared at my mom like she hadn't raised me for sixteen years. At first, I honestly could not figure out her angle. And then it hit me: My own mother was worried about my friendless-loner-patheticness.

'But you want me rested and refreshed for school tomorrow, *right*, Mom?' I did that clenched teeth thing people do when they want someone to take a hint.

My mom did that bright-smile thing people do when they ignore hints. 'You had the whole weekend to rest and refresh, honey.'

We were at an impasse. I wanted to spend the night with the living dead and my mom wanted me to spend time with the actual living. Time to bring out the big guns.

'Sandra, tell my mom where the party is.' It was a risk. For all I knew Sandra wanted to take me to Gracie Mansion to hang

out with the mayor, and with the circles she ran in, that wasn't entirely implausible. But chances were good that the setting for this party would suck.

Saundra hesitated, but I pressed on. 'Go on, tell her.'

'An abandoned house in Williamsburg,' Saundra said.

I swiveled back to my mom, glinting with triumph like a freshly polished trophy. '*An abandoned house in Williamsburg.* Hear that, Mom?'

It was a game of chicken now. My mom and I stared each other down, waiting to see who would give in first.

'Have fun!' Mom said.

Thwarted by my own mother. She'd had only two rules for me when we moved to New York City: 1) Keep my grades up, and 2) make friends. The fact that Saundra had shown up here should have been enough proof that I'd made friends. Well, one friend. Either way, I'd accomplished the impossible task of making a new friend as a junior at a new school. But to my mom, a party meant more possible friendships, so that meant I was being dragged to Williamsburg.

I got changed (I refused to take off my tie-dye pajama shirt, despite Saundra's protests, but I dressed it up with cut-off shorts and a jacket) and we left.

'We could walk,' I suggested. We were in Greenpoint, just one neighborhood over, and the weather was nice.

Saundra snorted. 'What, and get murdered?'

‘It’s pretty safe around here.’

Saundra dismissed me and the borough of Brooklyn with a laugh and took out her phone. ‘Yeah. *Sure.*’

The Lyft arrived in less than three minutes.

We sat in the backseat, Saundra multitasking by taking a dozen selfies, updating all her social, and telling me who’d be at the party. This also happened to be our lunch routine, where she told me all the gossip about people I still barely recognized in the hallways.

Saundra had decided we would be friends as soon as I walked into Mr. Inzlo’s History class at Manchester Prep. When I sat down, Saundra had leaned over and asked if she could borrow a pencil – a total front, I knew, since I’d spied a pencil in the open front pocket of her lavender backpack.

At first, I’d wondered why Saundra wanted to be my friend, but I quickly realized that Saundra had started talking to me because she couldn’t handle the fact that there was somebody in her class who she knew nothing about. Because as I soon discovered, Saundra Clairmont’s defining characteristic was her burning compulsion to know absolutely everything about absolutely everyone.

So that day, I fed her some morsels about myself. Before Manchester, I went to public school on Long Island. I lived there with my mom until we decided to move to New York City.

Unlike the majority of the students, I was not rich or a legacy

or technically a scholarship kid. I only got in because my mom was the ninth-and tenth-grade American History teacher. So, yeah – my mom had a knack for getting me to go places I didn't want to go.

But now, as Sandra and I sped toward Williamsburg, I'd gone from not wanting to go to this party to dreading it. The thought of seeing all those people, not a single one of whom would talk to me – made my throat tighten. Worst of all was knowing that I'd have to pretend. Pretend to be a part of their world, to be like them. I was about to tell Sandra that I wasn't feeling that great, but then the Lyft pulled up to the place. Sandra bounced out of the car and I scrambled after her.

We walked up to the abandoned house, which looked straight out of a late-80s urban horror movie. All of the windows were boarded up with weathered, graffitied wood and there were multiple signs stuck to the door with tiny print that was surely warning us to stay away. It was crammed between a closed warehouse and an empty lot with a FOR SALE sign on its chain-link fence.

But there was one bright spot. A girl sat on the stoop, reading a book. Her fingers blocked the title, but the sharp corners of Stephen King's name peeked out on the cover. I liked Stephen King movies. Maybe I could strike up a conversation with this girl. Maybe this was my kind of party after all.

'Hey, Felicity!' Sandra said. Felicity looked up from the

book, glaring from underneath micro bangs. She didn't return Sandra's greeting.

'Okay then, bye.' Sandra looped her arm through mine and pulled me up the steps. 'Leave it to Felicity Chu to bring a book to a party.'

The living room was packed with a couple dozen people laughing, joking, and sloshing drinks in their hands. The inside of the house wasn't much better than the outside. The wallpaper was moldy where it wasn't peeling, the floors were sticky linoleum, the only light came from heavy-duty construction lights, and you could practically smell the asbestos in the air. But nobody seemed to care.

I didn't know exactly what I had expected at rich-kid parties, but this wasn't it. I found it kind of ironic that they'd all left their cushy palaces to get their thrills in a house that was falling apart.

'Gonna grab a drink,' Sandra yelled over the music.

'I'll come with you.' But when I turned around, she was already gone, swallowed up by the crowd. The only thing worse than going to a party you don't want to be at is being at that party solo. I wasn't gonna hang around as the lonely buoy lost in a sea of friends. There was only one thing left to do: hide in the bathroom.

Walking up the stairs was like entering a portal. The sounds of bottles and bad pop music faded away, eclipsed by a dank

darkness that thickened with every step. Usually, my anxiety went away once I walked away from a crowd and into a pocket of quiet. It was like breathing into a paper bag, a quick way to calm myself down. But not this time.

I stood at the top of the stairs, waiting until my eyes adjusted to the dark and I was able to make out shadowy shapes. I clicked my phone on for some light, enough to see the hallway was covered in a flowery wallpaper. As I felt my way down the hallway, though, the faded blooming petals turned creepy, like wrinkled, witchy faces.

My breath hitched at the sight of a door slightly ajar. The crack was so black it was impossible to tell what was inside that room, and holding my phone up to it didn't help. There could've been a person standing right there, watching me, and I wouldn't have known. This place was getting to me.

I should've turned around and left, but I was at a party. I wanted to be carefree and normal and stupid. Not someone jumping at every shadow. So, I pushed my fears aside and pushed the door open.

It was the bathroom after all. No one inside. The lights didn't work, and neither did the faucet, but it was quiet. I pulled out my phone and pulled up Instagram. Nothing good ever came from going to his page, but I couldn't stop myself. I knew it was bad for me, but I downed the poison anyway.

I clicked on the picture of him and his best friend in their

soccer uniforms. My eyes traced the strands of his hair, his dark amber eyes, nearly shut with glee. And the dimples. His wide, dimpled smile was a sucker punch to the gut. Below the post were hundreds of comments from his friends. I'd read every one of them, multiple times. If I started to read them again now, I could lose hours.

But then I heard a voice. It was indistinguishable at first, but it had an angry cadence.

I was clearly not the only one upstairs. I quietly left the bathroom and followed the voice to the room next door. I realized there were actually two people speaking in hushed, insistent tones. An argument.

The door swung open and I had just enough time to get out of the way as Bram Wilding stormed out of the room. He didn't notice me. But when I turned back around, I knocked right into Lux McCray. I'd never actually met either of them, but they were high school royalty, the kind of popular that you don't need to meet to already know everything about them. Lux and Bram were Manchester Prep's resident power couple.

My phone slipped out of my hand and bounced on the carpeted hallway floor. It illuminated Lux, finding her the way that light always seemed to, and highlighted the sharp angles of her face so that she looked like the heroine on a V.C. Andrews book cover. Her eyes rounded in surprise, but then narrowed.

'What the hell?' Lux demanded. 'Were you *spying* on us?'

‘No?’

‘I don’t know what you think you heard —’

‘I didn’t hear anything.’

Her glare roved over me, from my Zappos slip-ons to my messy bun of thick brown hair, then lingered on my face. Maybe Lux was asking herself why I had so many freckles and couldn’t I have found a beauty tutorial that would get rid of some of them?

I stared back at her. My natural freckles definitely looked like dirt compared to her fake ones. I could tell Lux’s freckles were fake because they were too round, uniformly small, and perfectly spaced. The kind you drew on gingerly with a brow pencil. They skittered over the bridge of her nose, fanning out above the tops of her cheeks. A beautiful constellation.

I got a whiff of her perfume. Miss Dior. The preferred eau de parfum of future disgraced political wives. Her skin glowed, soft and toned, beneath the straps of her Brandy Melville tank and her hair was the color of whisked butter. She was the kind of blond and pretty that died early in horror movies.

But then Lux’s gaze diverted to my phone on the floor. She picked it up and looked at the screen long enough to see not only the post but also the Instagram handle. ‘Maybe watch where you’re going instead of stalking *Matthew Marshall*.’

A heavy ball of anxiety burrowed in my chest, threatening to expand to the rest of my body. It happened quickly like that, the

way fear took over sometimes. One minute I could be fine and the next I'd start feeling uneasy, jittery, my fingers and toes tingling in a bad way. She wasn't supposed to know Matthew's name. No one was. I pounced for my phone, and Lux looked shocked and offended, as though it was *her* phone. I managed to snatch it out of her hands.

'Freak,' she hissed, shouldering past me and disappearing down the dark hallway.

It was an instant reminder of what I was. Not normal. A freak. It was obvious to everyone, including Lux. Yeah, I was officially over this party.

I headed downstairs to find Sandra so we could get out of there, but the unnerving darkness and the weird encounter with Lux followed me like a tablecloth I'd accidentally tucked into my waistband. Nobody was supposed to know Matthew's name. I'd known it was a bad idea to come to this party. I'd known it.

My brain swarmed with dizzying thoughts and it felt like I was going down the stairs both too fast and too slow. I pushed my way through the crowd, my tunnel vision zeroing in on the front door.

I was outside in a second, swallowing the crisp night air. I needed to get my mind right, do literally anything else but think about what had just happened. I needed to do something stupid. Reckless.

My eyes hooked on to the only person outside. I walked over

and tapped him on the shoulder. In times like these, I could be a character in a possession movie if I needed to: lose all control and let something else take over. I barely waited for him to turn around before I grabbed a fistful of his shirt and pulled his face down to mine.

I hate the part of myself that did stuff like this. Reckless and wrong.

But it worked. As soon as our lips touched, all thoughts of Matthew Marshall and Lux and how stifling the house had felt were washed away. And in that moment, I didn't care. I could chalk it up to high school party shenanigans. I could pretend I was drunk, be a wild girl, morals be damned. I was pretty sure this was what normal kids did at normal parties.

Soon I wasn't thinking about anything at all, and as my thoughts quieted, my senses took over. There was the sound of his breathing; sharp as he inhaled through his nose and then soft as he sighed. I took in the scent of his shampoo, something woody. Pine and lime. And then even those senses fell away and I was left with only two. There was just the feel of his lips, and the taste of them.

When we both pulled away, breathless, I finally got a look at who I'd been kissing.

At the sight of him, my mind – serenely blank just a moment before – blared loud with a big resigned *fuck*.

'Rachel?' Sandra called as she came down the stoop.

I couldn't tell if Bram Wilding was horrified or repulsed by what I'd just done, but he gave me the courtesy of staying stone-faced. So that was good to know. Bram, *Lux's-boyfriend-who-I'd-just-basically-assaulted-because-I-was-a-criminally-inappropriate-freak-like-Lux-said-I-was*, was courteous. He turned and walked away before Sandra could see him.

'Who was that?' Sandra asked when she reached me.

'Nobody.'

She quirked an eyebrow. 'I just saw you talking to somebody.'

'It was no one. A ghost.'

'It's funny you should say that,' Sandra said, the tips of her fingers twiddling together. 'Cause there's gonna be a séance!'