

Praise for Layne Fargo's
“Addictive” (*BookPage*) novels

THEY NEVER LEARN

“Layne Fargo’s *They Never Learn* will delight fans of Karin Slaughter, *Dexter*, and *Killing Eve* with its deftly drawn portrait of a woman on fire and her unquenchable lust for revenge. . . . This tightrope thriller feels a bit like getting away with murder.”

—Amy Gentry, bestselling author of
Good as Gone and *Last Woman Standing*

“A fierce, provocative thriller that grabs you by the throat and doesn’t let go. Revenge has never looked so good—or so appealing!”

—Samantha Downing, *USA Today* bestselling
author of *My Lovely Wife* and *He Started It*

“A fierce, feminist suspense that gives power to the powerless and takes vigilante justice to a whole new level. Spectacular and propulsive, this is a powerhouse of a novel.”

—Samantha M. Bailey, bestselling
author of *Woman on the Edge*

“Searing . . . Fargo shocks and entertains while delivering a scathing takedown of campus rape culture. Fans of Chelsea Cain will appreciate this fiercely feminist twist on serial killer fiction.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“Layne Fargo . . . [has] been reinventing the vigilante genre for left-wing politics.”

—*CrimeReads*

“Layne Fargo’s *They Never Learn* . . . seeps into your thoughts like blood through floorboards. If you read this at night, be prepared to sleep uneasily—or not at all.”

—*Criminal Element*

“With stunning, dagger-sharp prose and a deliciously satisfying plot, *They Never Learn* is the feminist revenge thriller we need and deserve.”

—Megan Collins, author of *The Winter Sister*

“As utterly wicked as it is empowering, *They Never Learn* shows Fargo at the top of her game.”

—Allison Dickson,
author of *The Other Mrs. Miller*

“Will satisfy [Fargo’s] fans and delight revenge aficionados everywhere.”

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“Compelling . . . [An] entertaining, funny, and sexy thriller.”

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“A gorgeously written ragestorm of a thriller. *They Never Learn* is a feminist powerhouse that will shock readers as much as it satisfies them.”

—Wendy Heard, author of *The Kill Club*

“Dark, shocking, and utterly satisfying!”

—Kathleen Barber, author of
Truth Be Told and *Follow Me*

“With *They Never Learn*, Layne Fargo earns high marks for a cerebral plot about female rage.”

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TEMPER

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“Fargo maintains a scalpel-like control over her characters, even when they themselves are out of control.”

—*Chicago Tribune*

“The kind of debut people are going to remember: intense, well crafted, and emotionally blistering.”

—*CrimeReads*

ALSO BY LAYNE FARGO

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For Emily

*THEY
NEVER
LEARN*

1

SCARLETT

I'll know it's working when he starts to scream. But for now, I wait. I snuck into the garage an hour ago, when it was still pitch-black outside. I'm dressed to match the shadows, a hood pulled up to hide my vivid red hair, face scrubbed clean of makeup. No need to look pretty for this.

There aren't any vehicles in here, just some old exercise equipment sitting on scraps of carpet, stale sweat and mossy body spray hanging in the air. I'm pressed into the back corner behind a set of warped metal shelves. Enough to conceal me, if I stay extremely still. I keep my breathing steady, focusing my gaze on the peeling red vinyl of the weight bench, the small gashes in the material like open wounds.

Footsteps slap the pavement, and the side door to the garage swings open. Right on time. A young man comes in, swabbing the sweat off his brow with the hem of his T-shirt.

Tyler Elkin. Star athlete, and one of the worst students I ever taught in my Intro to English Lit class. As

starting quarterback, he took the Gorman University football team all the way to the conference championship last season. That was before the rumors started.

He tugs his earbuds out and swipes his thumb across his phone screen. Music starts blaring from a small speaker set up on a crate beside the weights, a screamy white-boy wannabe punk rocker whining about some girl who broke his heart. That bitch, how dare she.

It sets my teeth on edge, but I don't move a muscle. I can't risk Tyler seeing me. Not yet.

Tunelessly humming along, Tyler walks to the dented mini fridge in the corner and removes a glass bottle. He tosses the cap onto the floor and takes a long pull of the liquid inside. It's an energy drink he makes himself, with activated charcoal, cayenne, and several raw eggs. Smells awful, and tastes even worse. I tried it myself, after brewing up a batch based on the instructions on his Instagram. Then I added my own special ingredient, mixed right in with the rest of the bitter grit at the bottom.

He made a video on his "kickass morning routine" too. He starts his day the same way, even on weekends: up at 5:00 a.m., hours before his fraternity brothers, for a brisk run along the path by the river at the edge of campus. He always pauses to take a photo of himself with the sunrise saturating the background. Then he comes back here, to the garage behind the frat house, for weight training. He'll down half his energy drink now, the other half once his workout is done, while he captions his sunrise selfie with some inane motivational message. *Rise n grind. Make 2day yr bitch.*

Tyler polishes off another gulp and wipes his mouth. He has full lips and long eyelashes, which ren-

ders his face almost feminine from certain angles. He could be a model, one of those sun-burnished Abercrombie boys tossing a ball back and forth in matching madras shorts. It's clear from his social media he considers that his backup plan if the whole football thing doesn't work out. A boy like Tyler, he could have any girl he wanted. But where's the fun in that? It must get boring after a while. Not that that's any excuse.

Tyler lies back on the weight bench and starts raising and lowering the barbell in time with the music. Until his rhythm slows, stutters. His fingers wrap tighter around the bar. Then they spasm, and he almost lets go of the weight, dropping it on his catalog-perfect face.

My breath catches. That would ruin my whole plan.

He barely manages to keep ahold of the barbell. With quivering hands, he sets it back on its stand and shuts his eyes for a second. He sits up, shaking out his wrists, his arms. But now his legs are spasming, his calf and thigh muscles clenching and unclenching like fists.

Tyler stands, trying to walk it off, rolling his neck, cracking his vertebrae. I shrink deeper into the darkness. It's almost time, but not yet, not—

“Fuck,” he says, raking a hand back through his sweat-soaked blond hair. He picks up the bottle again, taking another swig, Adam's apple bobbing as he swallows.

Still holding his drink, Tyler leans against the weight bench, trying to stretch out the strange cramps in his legs. It's only a few seconds before he seizes all over and collapses. The bottle goes with him, landing beyond his outstretched hand. The glass doesn't break, but the remaining contents flow out onto the concrete floor.

That's fine. He's had more than enough now.

Tyler's body is no longer under his control. He's twitching, contorting, spine arching, lifting his back off the floor so he's supported only by his head and heels. He finally lets out a scream—throaty, guttural at first, then keening higher, turning into a sob.

If it weren't for his obnoxious music, someone might hear. If he gets much louder, they might anyway. I step out of my hiding place, but he's in so much pain it takes him a few seconds to put it all together—to recognize me in the first place and then to wonder why his literature professor is standing over him in his own garage at six in the morning, smiling while he screams.

"Please," Tyler manages to choke out. "Help me, please h—"

Another convulsion takes hold of him. Soon he won't be able to speak at all. This is the most I've ever heard out of Tyler Elkin's mouth. When he bothered to show up to my class, he grunted one-word answers, slumping down in his seat with his legs sprawled across the aisle like he didn't give a damn how much space he took up.

They never do, men like him. Well, he's more of a boy, really. The garage's fluorescent overhead light emphasizes all the still-adolescent features of his face: the downy excuse for a mustache on his upper lip, the pimple swelling in the crease between his nose and his cheek.

He's a boy, and he'll never become a man. Because in a few more minutes, he'll be dead.

It's risky for me to be here. I know that. I could have left the tainted drink in the fridge for him and slipped away while he was still out running. But the truth is, I

enjoy this too much to miss it. It's my reward for all the hard work. Besides, there's one more step in my plan.

I pick up Tyler's phone and hold it in front of his face. At first, the device doesn't recognize him, his features are so twisted with agony. I wait for the convulsions to ease again, his body giving up the fight even before he does. After a few more seconds, the lock screen blinks away.

I open Instagram and crop Tyler's latest selfie so only the sunrise in the background is in the frame, applying the filter he uses for all his posts. For the caption, I imitate the appalling grammar and spelling he employs.

last run last sunrise, so sorry 4 everthing

Tyler lies there panting, soaked through with sweat, blinking up at me as I methodically wipe all traces of my fingerprints from the device.

"Why—" he starts, but his throat is too constricted to speak.

I put the phone in his twitching hand and lean over him, my body casting his in shadow.

"Megan Foster," I say.

Tyler's eyes widen—and *this*, this is my favorite part. The abject terror that takes over their faces. That's how I know they're finally seeing me, realizing what I truly am.

I imagine what Tyler might say, if he were still capable of forming words. *It wasn't just me*—that's probably where he'd start. He wasn't the only one who held Megan down on that filthy frat house mattress. They all did it—Tyler and four of his closest friends, half the starting lineup of the football team.

I didn't start it. Who knows, that might even be the

truth. Maybe Tyler was the second to take his turn, or the third, or the fourth, or the fifth. Maybe by the time he got there she'd given up fighting back, so he could almost pretend she was willing. He didn't have bruises and scratches on his arms afterward, like his teammate Devin Caldwell did. But the police didn't do a damn thing to Devin Caldwell either. They claimed there wasn't enough proof.

For me, what Megan said was more than enough proof. True justice would have been bolting the fraternity house doors and setting the whole place on fire, burning every one of those boys in their beds. I might not even have needed to douse the place in kerosene first, considering every surface is sticky with spilled alcohol. But I can't kill them all, not unless I want to get caught. I've spent the past sixteen years murdering men who deserve it, and I'm not about to get sloppy now.

So I made the logical compromise: pick one man and make an example of him. Tyler was the clear choice. Not because he's the quarterback or the alpha male or any of that macho bullshit, but because, even though he and his four teammates all did something abhorrent that night, Tyler's sin was the worst.

It was his Instagram that tipped me off, actually: photo after photo of Tyler at parties, leaning against walls and doorjambs and tree trunks, holding a bottle like the one oozing out on the floor beside his soon-to-be corpse.

Tyler believes clean living means a stronger game. So while his frat brothers got wasted on cheap beer and skunk weed, Tyler restricted himself to sipping his homemade energy drinks. Five boys raped Megan

Foster, but only one of them did it while stone-cold sober.

Looking back, the signs were there from the first week of class—the way Tyler always picked the seat right behind Megan's, flicked her curtain of brown curls back while she was trying to read. Told her, even as she shrank away from him, *You'd be so pretty if you smiled.*

He's seizing again, but he's gone silent now, eyes rolled back into his head. I crouch down beside him, careful not to touch anything else. It's just a matter of time. No hospital could help him at this point, not with that much strychnine in his system.

There. Finally. Tyler's body goes through one more bout of clenching convulsions, and his lips stretch back from his teeth, fixing his too-handsome face in a gruesome parody of a grin.

Who's smiling now, motherfucker?

2

CARLY

I've been counting down the days all summer, but now that we're here, I feel like I can't breathe.

The heat isn't helping. It's scorching outside, and for the whole drive from our small central Pennsylvania hometown to Gorman University, the air-conditioning in my parents' Nissan barely reached the back seat. Sweat streams down my spine, pooling in the waistband of my jeans.

My father glances in the rearview mirror, trying to catch my eye. We have the same eyes: smoky blue with dark shadows underneath. That's about the only thing we have in common.

I avoid his gaze, peering through the car's tinted windows instead as he steers onto the paved drive that curves around Whitten Hall, my new home. I was expecting, I don't know, something more like a dorm. But Whitten looks like an old manor house, with columns by the entrance and grasping fingers of ivy crawling all over the red brick.

My mom waits until my father punches the hazard-

light button and gets out before she twists around in her seat to look at me. “Do you want us to come inside with you?” The hope in her voice is like a knife in the heart. “Help you unpack?”

I taste blood and realize I’ve been gnawing on my bottom lip again. “No, that’s okay.”

She took me out for a farewell meal yesterday—at lunchtime, when she knew my father would be at work. Nothing fancy; we just split some chicken nuggets and a large Frosty at Wendy’s. The whole time, she blinked too much, like she was trying not to cry.

She’s doing it now too, her eyelashes fluttering, fingers tangling in the gold cross necklace at her throat. Her hair is dark like mine but stick-straight instead of wavy, and she wears it in the same sleek curtains around her cheeks she did back when she and my father met. He thinks all women should keep their hair long or they aren’t “feminine.” My junior year of high school, I hacked mine off to shoulder-length with a pair of kitchen shears, and he wouldn’t speak to me for a week. Now I wear it even shorter, skimming my jawline.

The trunk slams shut, and my mom and I both jump, shoulders stiffening.

She gets out of the car first. I take a deep breath before I follow, unpeeling the backs of my arms from the seat. My father stands on the curb beside my luggage, hands on his hips like we’ve made him wait for hours instead of a few minutes. I only have two bags—a duffel and a hard-sided suitcase—while most of the other arriving students seem to have a whole moving van’s worth of stuff, plastic milk crates and IKEA bags and cardboard boxes labeled with Sharpie.

Next to the car ahead of ours, there's a petite black girl standing on her tiptoes to hug her dad goodbye, tears streaming down her cheeks. He's crying too but trying to hide it, clenching his jaw tight, squinting his eyes shut. I can't imagine feeling that way. I can't imagine feeling anything but relief at saying goodbye to my father.

I let him hug me, though, because I know it will be worse if I don't. It's important to him that we appear to be a happy family, even if there are only total strangers around to witness the charade. He still looks displeased—at the stiffness in my arms maybe, or the way I tensed up when he squeezed my shoulders.

He steps back to stand beside my mom, putting his hand on her hip—the spot where he knows her sciatica hurts the worst.

“Call us once you get settled,” she says, smiling wider to cover her wince.

I hug her too, and then I pick up my luggage and head toward the front door. My bags are heavy, but I feel so light, almost giddy with relief. I'm not going to turn around. I'm not going to watch them drive away.

Entering Whitten Hall feels like stepping into a sepia photograph, everything a different shade of brown. In another lifetime, the entryway might have been a formal parlor. Now it's crowded with slouching sofas from multiple eras, plus a bulletin board showing a chaotic assortment of flyers for sorority rushes and intramural sports and LARPing clubs. A pop song from this summer drifts down from one of the rooms above.

Just inside the door, a girl wearing a red Gorman University tank top and denim cutoffs sits on a folding

chair, a clipboard balanced on her lap. There's a boy next to her, crouched down on the nubby tan carpet with a Steelers cap pulled low over his eyes. He touches her bare thighs, fingertips brushing the shredded hem of her shorts.

Oh my God. He's grabbing her. I should—

But then she grins and ducks under the brim of his hat to kiss him. And keeps kissing him, like I'm not even here, like I've faded right into the beige walls.

I let my duffel bag thump to the floor. The girl separates from the guy's face with a suction-cup pop and finally looks at me, her lips twisted in annoyance. "Yes?"

"I'm, um—moving in?" I should have let my parents come inside with me. I have no idea what I'm doing. Maybe I'm in the wrong place. Maybe I shouldn't be here at all.

"Name?" the girl demands, looking down at the clipboard.

Her boyfriend gets up and saunters toward the door, pulling a pack of cigarettes from the pocket of his nylon shorts.

"Carly," I say, my voice scrabbling upward at the end as if it's trying to hang on to a ledge. "Carly Schiller."

"Welcome to Gorman University, Carly Schiller," she says, flat and bored like she's reading from a script. "I'm Samantha, your resident advisor. Looks like you're on the second floor, with"—Samantha motions to a girl who just came down the stairs—"Hadley!"

The girl is gorgeous, with glowing pale skin and corn-silk blond hair pulled into a low ponytail. I'm suddenly aware of how flushed and shiny my face must

be, how heavy my clothes feel with sweat, while her retro sundress—the same shade of blue as her eyes—looks fresh and breezy, perfect as her cat-eye liner. I bet my own black eyeliner is all smeared. I shouldn't have bothered with it this morning, but I wanted to look . . . I don't know. Like someone else.

"Meet your new roommate," Samantha says. "Carly, this is—"

"Allison Hadley."

Allison sticks her hand out for me to shake. Her nails are shiny, painted bright red, and there's something sophisticated, almost grandiose, about the way she carries herself. It reminds me of the actresses in the 1940s movies my mom loves. Allison says her name like I should know it already.

"Where's the rest of your stuff?" she asks.

I look helplessly at my two shabby bags, slumped against each other on the floor. "This is everything."

Allison tilts her head, perfect ponytail swishing. "You didn't bring a fan or anything?"

I shake my head.

"That's okay," she says. "I've got a couple, and I've had them all on full blast since this morning, so it's slightly less sweltering up there. Here, let me help you with that."

"Oh, no, you don't have to—" I start, but she's already lifting my suitcase, carrying it toward the stairs. I catch up with her, hoisting the duffel onto my shoulder.

The curving wooden banister is grand, but the steps are covered in the same dingy carpet as the entryway, strips of duct tape stuck over worn-down patches on

the treads. Upstairs, the music is louder, syncopated beats vibrating the walls.

Allison stops on the landing, letting the suitcase drop. “Damn, girl. What did you pack in here?”

I’m hoping I’m too red-faced already for my blush to register. “Just . . . books. A lot of books. Sorry. I can—”

“It’s okay, you’re saving me a trip to the gym.” She continues down the hall, dragging my suitcase behind her like it’s a disobedient dog. “Bathroom’s there,” she tells me, gesturing with a point of her chin. “And this is us.”

The door is propped ajar, and Allison bumps it the rest of the way open with her hip. She’s already moved in to the right half of the room; the bed is made with a red-and-black comforter, and there’s a row of Broadway musical posters—*Wicked*, *Rent*, *Phantom of the Opera*—hanging above it. As she promised, there are multiple fans, all switched on high: two slowly oscillating between the beds, and a box fan stuck in the window, blowing stagnant air out through the ivy.

“If you don’t like that side,” she says, “we can switch. I just took the same one I had last year.”

“No, it’s . . . this side is fine.” I set the duffel down on the bare mattress. “Wait, you’re not a freshman?”

“Sophomore,” she says, sitting cross-legged on her own bed so her skirt drapes over her knees. “My roommate from last year transferred to Penn.”

“Hey, Allie, you ready—”

A boy walks right into the room like he lives here too. Once he sees me, though, he stops, suddenly awkward.

“Oh, hey,” he says. “Sorry. You must be—”

“This is my new roommate, Carly.” Allison gestures between us with a dramatic roll of her wrist. “Carly, this is Wes.”

Wes is slightly built, with narrow shoulders and brown hair that flops over his forehead, skimming the edges of his wire-rim glasses. He must be her boyfriend. Although she didn’t introduce him that way, and he’s not quite the type I would have pictured her with. I mean, I only met her a few minutes ago, so I don’t really know her, let alone her taste in guys. But I can tell just by looking at Wes that he’s like me: a fade-into-the-background person. Whereas Allison . . . she shines like a spotlight’s pointed on her.

“Nice to meet you, Carly,” Wes says, before turning his attention right back to Allison. “Did you still want to—”

“Yes!” She springs up off the bed. “Yes, sorry, I lost track of the time, but I am ready!”

Allison slips on some sandals and grabs a lanyard holding her keys and Gorman ID. She doesn’t look back at me, but Wes does, pausing in the doorway to cast one sidelong glance my way before following Allison out.

The low roar of the fans makes it seem like the room is breathing. My parents are probably only a few miles away, heading west on Route 422, but I feel like I’m on a separate planet, finally free.

I can be happy here. I know I can.

3

SCARLETT

“Don’t kill me.”

I swivel around in my chair. Dr. Andrew Torres stands on the conference room threshold, holding up his chipped Shakespearean insults mug with a guilty smile.

“I took the last of the coffee,” he says.

I salute him with the cup of dark roast I picked up at the library coffee cart on my way to work. “I’ve got it covered.”

He laughs and slides into the seat on my right. “You always do.”

After taking my leave of Tyler’s corpse, I still had time for an abbreviated version of my morning routine. Shower, mascara, lipstick, hair styled into soft waves. But I had to grab breakfast on the go. I’m always starving after a kill, even the ones that don’t require physical exertion. I finished my cranberry muffin before I even made it across the Oak Grove to Miller Hall.

I was one of the first to arrive for the staff meeting. The rest of the faculty are filing in now, chatting

amongst themselves, but none of them acknowledge me. Drew is the only coworker with whom I have anything approaching a friendship, and that's because he finds the rest of the English faculty almost as tedious as I do.

"How was your summer?" Drew asks as we both flip to fresh pages in our notebooks. He's used the same plain narrow-ruled style as long as I've known him, buying a new one to commemorate the start of each semester. "I hope you didn't spend the whole time working on that fellowship application and studiously avoiding fun."

"Not the *whole* time," I say. "Thank you again for the letter of recommendation."

Drew waves me off. "Your work speaks for itself. If they don't choose you, they're idiots."

He's the one who told me about the Women's Academy fellowship in the first place. The academy is a private archive, dedicated to preserving the work of lesser-known female writers. They recently obtained a collection of previously undiscovered letters from Viola Vance, the turn-of-the-century poet who's been the main subject of my scholarly research for the past several years. Whoever wins the fellowship will have exclusive access to the letters for twelve months, as well as a flat around the corner from the archive in London.

And it's going to be me.

"Rafael and I would love to have you over for dinner next weekend," Drew says. "He brought a truly obscene amount of wine back from our trip to Paris, and if you don't help us, we'll be forced to drink it all ourselves."

I smile. "Can't have that."

Drew's husband, Rafael, is as vivacious and outgoing as Drew is serious and scholarly. They seem like an odd match, but somehow it works; they've been married for more than twenty years now.

"If you want," Drew says, "you could even bring—"

"Oh God, did you hear?" Our colleague Sandra Kepler slides into the seat next to Drew, her long silver earrings jangling like wind chimes. I lay my palm over my notebook page. Force of habit—I haven't written anything yet besides today's date.

Drew takes a sip of his coffee, shooting me a look. Sandra can be equally histrionic about topics ranging from devastating departmental funding cuts to copier paper jams. But I have a good guess about what might be upsetting her this morning.

"Hear what?" Drew says.

Sandra drops her voice even lower. "Tyler Elkin."

I furrow my brow, like I'm trying to place the name. It would seem more suspicious if I recognized it right away—I only had Tyler for a single one-hundred-student lecture class, and I notoriously don't follow Gorman sports.

"The football player?" Drew says. "What about him?"

"He was found this morning . . ."

Sandra leans toward us, so close I can smell the burnt faculty-lounge coffee on her breath.

"Dead," she says. "At his fraternity house."

That was fast—even in a town this size, where gossip travels at the speed of light, I thought it might take a few more hours for word to circulate.

I widen my eyes, holding my mouth in a little *o* of shock. "How did he—"

“I don’t know. The police are still there, I saw the cars on my way to campus.”

One of the downsides to committing murders outside the school grounds: the police are called in right away, while the evidence is still fresh, instead of campus security bumbling around the crime scene first. But I already weighed those risks when making my plans. Tyler would have been too difficult to get alone on campus; he always traveled with a pack of other football players and hangers-on.

The police don’t worry me much anyway. A few of the Gorman Township officers aren’t entirely inept, but they still have only rudimentary forensic training and laughably outdated laboratory equipment. And if a death is written off as a suicide, a random fall, a freak accident, they only look into it as much as they need to file their bureaucratic reports. Some days, I almost miss the challenge of evading the Chicago Police Department.

“Everyone’s talking about this Instagram post he made, though.” Sandra holds out her phone to show Drew and me the sunrise picture at the top of Tyler’s feed. It has a couple thousand comments already.

For the benefit of Sandra and Drew, and anyone else who might be paying attention, I press my mouth closed again and arrange my face in a studied mix of concern and consternation.

“How awful,” I say.

“I know.” Sandra shakes her head. “He was so young.”

“Even younger than that boy last year,” Drew says. “The anthropology major?”

Sandra presses her hand to her chest. “Such a shame.”

Twenty is young. But if Tyler was old enough to gang-rape a girl and try to get away with it, he was old enough to pay the price. And as for the boy last year, he got off easy, considering what he did to his poor girlfriend. He beat her bloody for months on end, but after I pushed him into the river from the county’s most popular suicide-jumping bridge, it took him mere minutes to drown.

I can feel hardness bleeding into my eyes again, so I look down at the table, hoping it appears that I’m overcome with emotion. Then our boss sweeps into the room in a cloud of English Leather cologne, and it’s time for a different sort of dissembling.

Dr. Kinnear is more than ten minutes late, even though he called the meeting. He always acts like he’s terribly busy, running from one important engagement to the next with hardly a chance to catch his breath. He probably just took too long to jerk off in the shower.

Kinnear takes up his position at the head of the conference table but doesn’t sit down yet, bracing his hands against the high back of the chair. He gives us all a weary smile, with a hint of sadness crinkling his eyes behind his tortoiseshell glasses. He must have practiced in the mirror.

“I’m sure you’ve all heard the tragic news by now,” he says.

Everyone nods somberly, myself included. The department’s youngest adjunct is actually crying, dabbing at the corners of her eyes with one of the brown paper towels from the bathroom. Kinnear takes a moment to

give her a comforting squeeze on the shoulder. Rumor has it they slept together after the last faculty holiday party. At least she's more than half his age, if only by a few years.

The young man seated next to her takes a handkerchief out of his pocket and offers it to her. Dr. Stright—he's Kinnear's favorite, because he's basically a younger version of Kinnear. They even look alike: sandy hair, blue eyes, pretentious eyeglasses, and simpering *everyone-please-like-me* smiles. Now that Kinnear is well into his forties, Stright has the dubious distinction of being the sole good-looking young male professor in the department. He has all his students call him by his first name, like he's one of them. A pathetic ploy, but the undergrads—especially the girls—seem to eat it up with a spoon.

"I don't know any more than you do now, I'm afraid," Kinnear continues, "but I'm sure more details will be made public as soon as the police feel comfortable sharing them."

"So we don't know yet?" Sandra asks. "How he was—"

"From all indications," Kinnear says, "Mr. Elkin took his own life."

Good. If they're at all competent, the police should soon determine that the strychnine he drank came from the box of rat poison sitting right on top of the shelves that served as my hiding place this morning.

I didn't even have to plant the poison. I found it during one of my preparatory stakeouts of the garage, probably left over from some rodent infestation years prior. I took what I needed to doctor Tyler's drink and put the box right back where I found it. Perfect

for my purposes: it supports the story that poor Tyler, wracked with guilt, decided to put himself out of his misery with the nearest thing at hand.

“Now,” Kinnear continues. “As devastated as I know we all are, we still have business to attend to. Classes will be commencing as scheduled on Tuesday.”

There’s a low murmur of assent around the table, and everyone less prepared than I am—which is, as usual, the vast majority of my colleagues—readies paper and laptops for the meeting.

Kinnear takes his seat, looking directly at me with a smile. “Scarlett?”

Not *Dr. Clark*. Never that. It was somewhat less infuriating when we were both just faculty. But then he glad-handed his way to the interim department chair position after Dr. McElhaney retired last year, and now he thinks he can treat me like his fucking secretary.

“Yes?” I say, although I already know exactly what he’s about to say.

“Would you mind taking notes again? You’re so good at it.”

I force myself to return his smile and click open my pen.

For the next forty minutes, Kinnear drones on about term dates and lesson plans and the orientation of new students (which ones, I wonder, will he try to fuck this year?). I write as he talks, filling the lines of my notebook with impeccable cursive. I chose my seat at the back corner of the table carefully, so no one can look over my shoulder and see what I’m writing, not even Drew.

Because I’m not just writing meeting notes. I’m

jotting down dates, times, and places and events where Kinnear mentions he'll be. Weaknesses I can exploit, ways I might be able to get him alone, humiliate him, make him suffer, make him scream.

Now that Tyler's dead, it's time to turn my attention to my next target. And unlucky for Dr. Kinnear, he's risen to the very top of my list.

4

CARLY

I creep through the darkened room, trying not to make a sound.

My first class on Mondays is early—well, too early for Allison anyway, and I’m doing my best not to wake her. Even asleep, she looks glamorous, her hair splayed artfully across the pillow. I sleep in faded plaid pants and an oversize T-shirt, but Allison wears a satin nightgown to bed every night.

I slip off my pajamas and replace them with a pair of jeans as quickly as possible, then wrangle my bra on without fully removing my shirt. I still feel weird getting dressed with someone else in the room, even if that someone is unconscious. Our schedules seem to be totally opposite, so Allison and I have barely spoken since move-in day. I’m in bed by ten, just like back home, while she stays up way past midnight, studying by the soft glow of the string lights wound around her headboard.

As I’m zipping up my backpack, Allison shifts positions with a soft sigh. Her nightgown slides down to

reveal the tops of her breasts, and suddenly it seems as bright as midday in here. I avert my eyes, hurrying toward the door.

It isn't until I'm halfway across the lawn that I realize I forgot to put on my hoodie. I had it laid out on the bed and everything: my favorite one, the black fabric faded to dark gray with too much washing, ragged holes in the sleeves where my thumbs poke through.

I'm still early enough I could go back for it. But I don't want to disturb Allison. I hunch my shoulders so my backpack straps almost touch my earlobes, hugging myself as I continue my trek into the heart of campus. Whitten—or “Whit,” as everyone seems to call it—is right at the edge of Gorman, near the woods that border the university's property. It's a bit of a walk to get to class or the dining hall, but at least it's nice and quiet.

Campus is nearly silent at this time of the morning. There are only a few other students in the Oak Grove: a group of boys in running gear stretching on the steps of the library and two girls sharing a steaming cup of coffee on one of the squat red benches lining the path. Everything here seems to be red: the school's official color is crimson, and most of the buildings are the same red brick as Whitten.

This morning's class is the only one in my schedule I haven't attended yet: a Monday writing seminar that didn't meet the first week of the semester because of Labor Day. It's in Miller Hall, the same building as all my other English classes. Miller is red brick like the rest, but with a sloping slate roof and charming arched windowpanes. I've heard other students complain about how musty it is in comparison to the newer construction buildings on campus, but I love it. It feels like

an old schoolhouse, right down to the wooden desks with decades of carvings from former students.

I have to wander the halls for a while before I find the right room number, and even then I'm not sure I'm in the right place. This doesn't look like a classroom. The space is tiny, made even smaller by the bookshelves lining the walls and the brown loveseat sitting in the corner, and there aren't even any desks, just a bunch of folding chairs set up in an uneven circle. A few of them are already occupied, though, by a dark-haired girl with purple glasses and a severe pixie cut, a tall guy in an argyle cardigan sweater, and—

Shit. Not only is Allison's boyfriend here, he's smiling at me. Once I make the mistake of meeting his eyes, Wes scoots his bag away from the chair next to him.

I pretend not to notice his gesture of goodwill and take the seat farthest away from him instead (which isn't very far, anyway, in this cramped room). Now I'm overheated, sweat gathering between my shoulder blades as more students fill in the circle. I don't know what I'm so freaked out about; Wes seems like a nice enough guy. And Allison doesn't seem like the type to get jealous if another girl talks to her boyfriend, the way my dad does when my mom speaks to any man who isn't him.

As if someone like Allison could ever be jealous of someone like me.

The sound of furniture legs screeching against the floor startles me to attention. A young man with sandy-blond hair picks up the last empty chair and flips it around so the back faces into the circle.

"I think this is all of us," he says, "so why don't we get started?"

This is the professor? He barely looks older than we are. He sits astride the turned-around chair and pushes his rectangular black glasses higher on his nose.

“Okay!” he says. “Well, welcome, everyone. Those of you who’ve taken my classes before know I like to keep things casual, so please call me Alex, none of that ‘Doctor’ or ‘Professor’ stuff. Some of us are already acquainted, but let’s go around the circle and introduce ourselves anyway.”

He looks over at Wes. “Mr. Stewart, you want to kick us off?”

“Sure.” As he looks up to address the class, Wes’s gaze catches on me again. “I’m Wes Stewart, junior, English/theater double major. From Indiana originally.”

That means Allison must be from Indiana too. I knew they went to high school together because Allison has their prom photo tacked up above her desk, Wes standing behind her with his hands on the waist of her spangled velvet dress.

The introductions continue around the circle. I barely hear them; I’m too nervous about mine. I rub my sweaty palms against the faded denim on my thighs, but it doesn’t seem to help any. When it’s finally my turn, there’s an awkward pause that’s probably only a second or two but feels like an eternity. I swallow and force myself to speak.

“I’m, um, Carly Schiller. I’m a freshman. Also majoring in English.”

“You’re a freshman?” the girl with the purple glasses asks. She looks to Alex, her mouth twisting sourly. “I thought this was an *advanced* seminar.”

“The writing samples in Ms. Schiller’s application impressed me so much,” Alex says, “I made an exception. We’re very glad to have you here, Carly.”

His smile is so sincere, I think I might be sick. I try to smile back and mumble something that sounds like *thank you*, but I can barely hear myself over the roar of blood in my ears.

Alex spends the rest of the period going over how the course is structured—required reading, how grades will be assigned, the daily journal we’re supposed to keep in addition to our weekly writing assignments. Despite my detailed notes, my head is spinning. Maybe that girl is right; I don’t belong here.

After class, I take my time packing my stuff while the other students file out. Wes lingers the longest, hanging in the doorway, and for a second I think he’s waiting for me to catch up with him so we can walk out together. But he’s just pulling headphones out of his beat-up canvas messenger bag, untangling the cord before plugging them in.

I wait until Wes is gone to approach Alex. “Professor—”

He turns around and hits me with that aggressively friendly smile again.

“‘Alex’ is fine,” he says. “Something I can help you with, Carly?”

“It’s just . . .” I trail off, wringing my backpack strap. “Well, *should* I be in this seminar? I didn’t know it was for upperclassmen.”

Alex sits on the edge of the desk and laces his fingers. “Do you *want* to be here?”

He doesn’t seem annoyed, only curious. Like he

finds *me* curious. I shouldn't have tried to talk to him. I should have just left, gone straight to the registrar and switched into a different class. *Stupid, so stupid.*

"I'm not sure . . . I mean, I don't want it to be—"

"Because you absolutely deserve to be here," he says. "Your application essay was one of the strongest pieces of writing I've read in years."

I glance down at the toes of my sneakers, my cheeks coloring.

"How about this?" he says. "Let's give it a few weeks. If you're struggling with the assignments, or have any questions—if you need anything at all, I have office hours every Thursday and Friday. Sound good?"

"Okay," I tell him, even though none of this sounds good at all. "Thanks, Prof—"

"Alex."

He pushes off the desk and stands up. The room feels smaller than ever.

"Alex," I say. "Th-thank you."

Tears are already pricking the corners of my eyes as I hurry out into the hallway. I am *not* going to cry, not here where people can see. Back home, I'd go to my bedroom, lock the door, and let this all pour out of me in private. But for all I know, if I go back to Whitten now, Allison will be there, still asleep. Or worse, awake and watching me with those sparkling, too-blue eyes.

The Oak Grove is teeming with students now, and sunlight streams through the trees, turning all that red searing. I wish I could disappear, but all I can do is hunch my shoulders again and duck into the flow of foot traffic. If I can't be happy here, at least I can be invisible. After all, anything's better than going back home.

5

SCARLETT

The sultry music thrumming through my study is almost, but not quite, enough to drown out the Friday night revelries from the student housing down the street. That's the price I pay for living so close to campus.

The house itself is nothing special: a tiny Tudor with sloping floors and a roof that leaks every spring. I bought it when I first took the teaching position at Gorman, and this study is the room that sold me. It's the largest room in the house, with built-in bookshelves lining two entire walls. Now that it's October, the weather is finally cool enough to ignite the gas fireplace set into the corner between them.

As soon as I got home after my last class, I changed out of my work clothes and put on my favorite black satin nightgown and matching robe. My feet are bare, my hair tumbling loose over my shoulders. The glow from the fire turns the copper waves almost crimson.

My application for the Women's Academy fellowship has been all but complete for weeks, but I'm

reviewing it one last time prior to submitting—still more than a month ahead of the deadline. I have to make sure every detail is perfect. Getting this fellowship could change everything.

When I hear the front door open, I don't bother looking away from the laptop screen. Only one person other than me has a key to this house, and I've been expecting him.

My graduate assistant, Jasper, takes the steps two at a time but comes to a stop on the study threshold, rapping his knuckles on the open door. I make him wait until I've reached the end of a page before shutting the computer and motioning him inside.

He has to bow his head to avoid hitting it on the doorframe. Jasper's height is unusual even now; back when this house was built, it was practically unheard of. He's carrying a stack of library books in the crook of his slender arm.

"These five came in." He sets the books down one by one on the corner of my desk, adjusting them so all the spines line up. A lock of light brown hair falls over his cheekbone, emphasizing its sharp slant. "But the volume of correspondence you wanted is still in transit. I'll follow up with PALCI if it doesn't arrive next week."

I exhausted the relevant texts in the Gorman library years ago, so now most of my research materials have to be shipped in via interlibrary loan. Even then, it's difficult to get hold of what I need. But if all goes according to plan, I won't have to content myself with the Pennsylvania academic library system's paltry selection for much longer. I'll be able to go right to the source, review the primary materials. The Women's Academy

archive has boxes full of actual letters between Viola and her contemporaries, in their own handwriting.

It's enough to make me salivate—but it's not the only reason I'm so keen to win the fellowship and spend a year in London. I need to get out of Gorman, at least for a while.

Not that there aren't enough deserving men to murder here. That's the problem: there are plenty, but to avoid attracting attention to myself in a town as small as this one, I have to sit on my hands for months at a stretch, wait until sufficient time has passed between deaths. Watch them keep hurting people without consequence, until the time is right.

When I was in graduate school in Chicago, I could probably have killed a man every other week and gotten away with it. London is three times larger. It would make the perfect hunting ground.

Jasper finishes straightening the books and looks at me. The flickering firelight turns his green eyes darker. "Will there be anything else tonight, Dr. Clark?"

Holding his gaze, I push my chair back from the desk and part my legs. The satin slides away from my skin like water.

Every time I fuck Jasper, I feel a pang of guilt over my hypocrisy. But I'm nothing like Kinnear. Jasper is a grown man, less than a decade younger than I am, not a wide-eyed teenager who doesn't know any better.

Besides, back when our affair started, he wasn't even working for me. During the first year of his PhD, he was Kinnear's assistant; after Kinnear took the interim chair position, Jasper was passed along to another professor—and he made sure it would be me. I had my doubts about the arrangement, but he's proven