

"[A] binge-worthy thriller
that made me scared of
my phone for days."

—David Yoon,
New York Times
bestselling author of
Version Zero

No one escapes
real life.

incarnate

a novel

alma katsu

Bram Stoker Award–winning author of *Fiend*



Also by Alma Katsu

Fiend

Red London

Red Widow

The Fervor

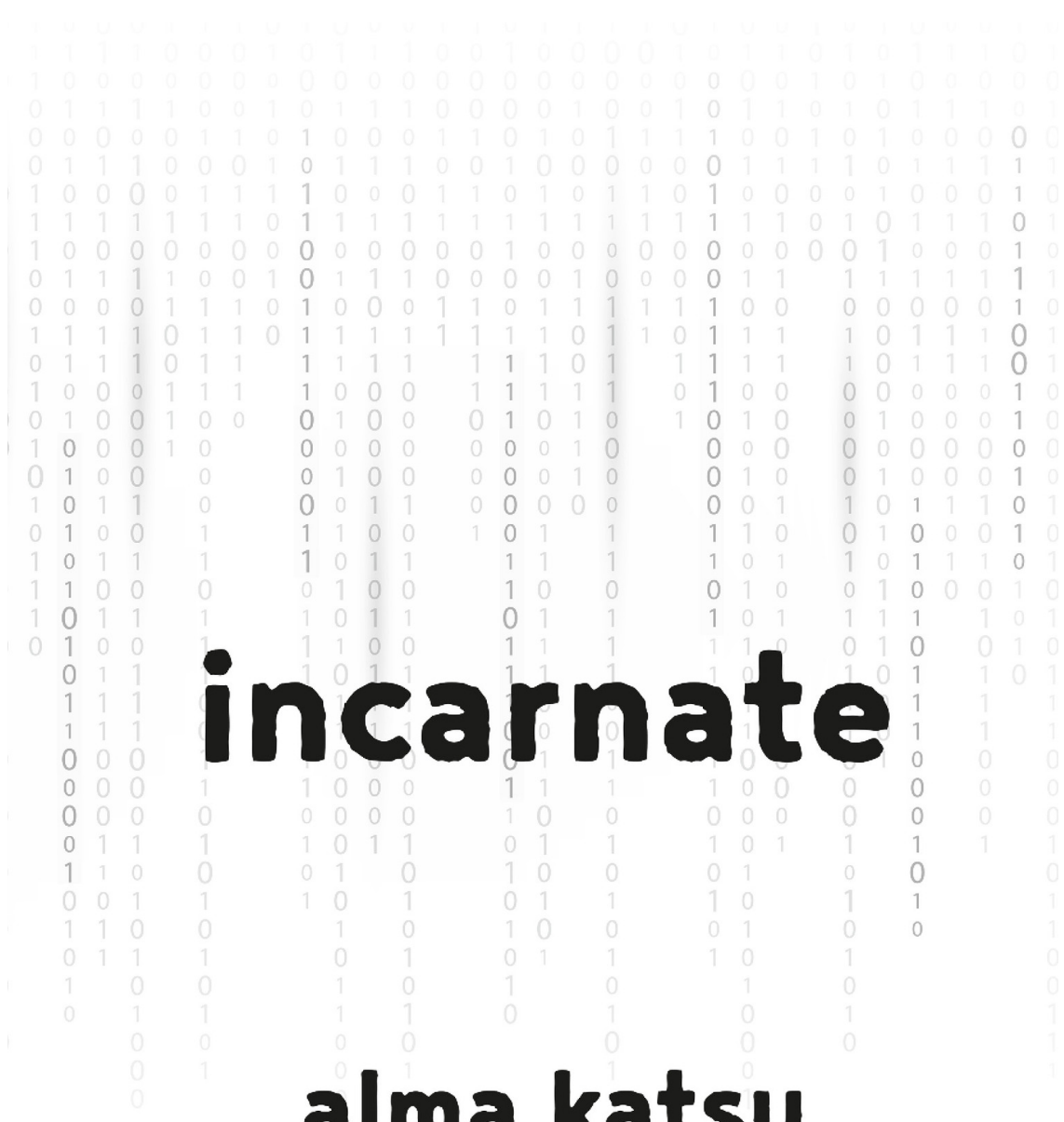
The Deep

The Hunger

The Descent

The Reckoning

The Taker



incarnate

alma katsu

G. P. Putnam's Sons
New York

PUTNAM

— EST. 1838 —

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS

Publishers Since 1838

An imprint of Penguin Random House LLC

1745 Broadway, New York, NY 10019

penguinrandomhouse.com



Copyright © 2026 by Alma Katsu

Penguin Random House values and supports copyright. Copyright fuels creativity, encourages diverse voices, promotes free speech, and creates a vibrant culture. Thank you for buying an authorized edition of this book and for complying with copyright laws by not reproducing, scanning, or distributing any part of it in any form without permission. You are supporting writers and allowing Penguin Random House to continue to publish books for every reader. Please note that no part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner for the purpose of training artificial intelligence technologies or systems.

Cover design: Tal Goretsky

Cover image: (closeup of eye) Iuliia Isaieva / Moment / Getty Images

Book design by Shannon Nicole Plunkett, adapted for ebook

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Names: Katsu, Alma author

Title: Incarnate / Alma Katsu.

Description: New York : G. P. Putnam's Sons, Penguin Random House LLC, 2026.

Identifiers: LCCN 2026017469 | ISBN 9798217177707 hardcover | ISBN 9798217177714 ebook

Subjects: LCGFT: Novels | Fiction

Classification: LCC PS3611.A7886 I53 2026

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2026017469>

Ebook ISBN 9798217177714

The authorized representative in the EU for product safety and compliance is Penguin Random House Ireland, Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68, Ireland, <https://eu-contact.penguin.ie>.

ep_prh_7.5a_157683657_c0_r0



Contents

Epigraph

Prologue

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Two](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Three](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Four](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Five](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Six](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Seven](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Eight](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Nine](#)

[Chapter Thirty](#)

[Chapter Thirty-One](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Two](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Three](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Four](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

Only a fool believes that technology is a cornucopia of wonderful stuff without a price to be paid.

—Clifford Stoll, pioneer in digital forensics and tech futurist

No man for any considerable period can wear one face to himself and another to the multitude, without finally getting bewildered as to which may be the true.

—Nathaniel Hawthorne

[illegible]

prologue

Dorothy Wagner sat in the waiting area outside the doctor's office. Her heart banged hard against her ribs but she didn't dare show how afraid she was, even though it was perfectly normal under the circumstances.

Sounds drifted in from elsewhere in the facility—shouts, manic bursts of laughter, angry raised voices—but it was quiet in the waiting room. They were trying for tranquil, was her guess. A wall of windows looked out on a sweep of lawn and a leafy grove of beautifully maintained trees. The words her parents had used to describe the place: *campus*, *grounds*, *treatment center*. Not *looney bin*, *prison*, *psych ward*. She'd learned the proper terminology fast even though she hadn't been there twenty-four hours. Dorothy's parents had assured her when they'd dropped her off in the family minivan that she'd only be there a day or two. A week at most.

Two voices could be heard from behind the door to the doctor's office. One had to be Dr. Gruber's; it was his office, according to the plate on the wall. The second—probably belonging to a fellow inmate—oops! *Patient*—was much softer, too quiet to make out what was being said, but it was just as well. Dorothy didn't want to meet any of them, and she didn't want to hear about their problems. She had enough trouble dealing with her own.

The door opened, and there stood the doctor. He was unimpressive, an off-season mall Santa Claus in a beige cardigan stretched hopelessly out of shape, chinos, and bifocals that slid down his nose. His flabby face was covered with several days' growth of hair. He did not inspire confidence in either himself or the clinic.

He extended a big meaty hand. "Hello, I'm Dr. Gruber. You must be Dorothy."

She followed the doctor into his office and sat on the couch gingerly, as though it might be booby-trapped. His office offered no distraction at all. It was utilitarian, sparsely furnished with what looked like institutional

retreads from a vast storage facility somewhere piled with old desks and filing cabinets. Which only confirmed Dorothy's suspicion that this was a state hospital. Of course it would be; her parents couldn't afford a private place. Dorothy looked for the patient she'd heard speaking, expecting to see someone cowering in the corner, anxious to scoot by on her or his way to freedom.

But there was no one else in the room.

Gruber sat and opened his notebook. He licked a finger and made a show of flicking through the pages. "Good morning, Dorothy. Do you know why you're here?"

Of course she did. She wasn't an idiot. "The incident."

"That's right." He clicked the button on the end of his pen with more force than was needed. "The parties involved, well, um...thought it would be best if you came in for an evaluation."

The parties involved: her parents, the school, the police. Amber's, Megan's, and Hailey's parents. No one had asked her because Dorothy was only twelve, used to being subjected to the decisions of adults.

"So, why don't you tell me what happened? In your own words?"

In your own words—sounded like something you heard on a courtroom drama. The whole thing was mortifying. She'd told her story so many times now—to her parents, to her teacher and the principal, to the police—that she couldn't believe she was being forced to repeat it again. Even after telling her story, it hadn't done any good, had it?

"They were bullying me." She picked up one of the two throw pillows on the doctor's couch and hugged it tight to her chest like a shield.

"The three girls? Megan, Amber, and Hailey?"

Dorothy nodded.

"And...could you be more specific? *How* did they bully you, Dorothy?"

Every way possible, it seemed. With their eyes, which followed her everywhere in school, until she met their gaze, and then they'd look away coldly. They tormented her with their knowing smirks and the way they'd turn on their heels to avoid crossing paths with her. They bullied her with

their cutting laughs and the things they whispered to each other after she spoke in class, always quiet enough that no one else noticed.

When Dorothy didn't answer, the doctor tried again. "Did they send threatening texts, Dorothy? That sort of thing?"

"Yes. But it started with texts to the rest of the class. They made fun of me." The whole thing had come to light after one kid from school, the only one she might consider a friend, reluctantly told her what was going on. Dorothy wasn't part of the group chat and didn't know what they were saying about her.

"What did these messages say? Do you know?"

She squirmed. What was the point of making her talk about this *again*? Obviously, someone had told him everything already. Her parents, the police. He was a sadist, making her relive it.

"They made fun of me. Said I was ugly, fat." She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I wasn't the only one. They made fun of other girls at school, too. I was just the latest."

Again, the sympathetic murmuring. "But they took things further with you, didn't they?"

She dropped her head, chin to chest. Burning with shame.

"Why do you think that was?"

They did it because they were right. Because I'm not popular. I'm not pretty. I don't get a hundred likes every time I post a selfie like they do. Because my family doesn't have a big house with an in-ground pool and I don't go on awesome vacations that I can post about on Instagram. Because no one invites me to dance on their vids. Because this is who I am and there's nothing I can do to make them stop.

Because being unpopular is the worst thing you can be.

Apparently she had done something to make them hate her.

Besides just exist.

When she didn't speak, Gruber shifted in his seat, leaning toward Dorothy. "I've been told, Dorothy, that you're a really bright girl. Gifted, even."

Nice try, but Dorothy had learned not to trust flattery. People only said nice things so they could take them back later, to knock your legs out from under you. They didn't mean it.

"That makes you different, and at your age, it's really hard to be different. There's—jealousy. Your peers can be...merciless. The pressure to conform, to fit in, it's intense. Anyone who sticks out can become a target. It's not right, we all know it's not, but that's the way it is."

She forced herself not to roll her eyes. She'd heard this all before, and it was of no help.

He continued, ignoring Dorothy's disdain. "Teasing can be part of growing up. It's part of being in a tribe, understanding our place in the world. But it's gotten a lot worse in the past twenty years or so, with social media. I know"—he rushed to continue, before she could turn away from him in disgust—"that sounds weak, but it's true. You grew up with social media, so you don't know what it was like before. But there have been a lot of studies on how mental health has worsened, particularly for your demographic. It's given bullies a new tool they can use, another means to torment others. Put a new twist on an age-old problem."

That's where this was going. He was going to tell her to stay off social media, like her mom had said. That was adults' answer to everything: Social media is evil. They didn't get it, though. They might as well tell Dorothy to stop breathing air.

She hadn't attacked these girls, so why was *she* the one being punished? Were they having their phones taken away from *them*? That was the real question in her mind: Why was she in this facility, being evaluated by this doctor like a bug under a microscope, when she wasn't the one who'd done the bullying? Amber, Megan, and Hailey were the ones who should be locked up. They were the sick ones. The ones who'd done something wrong. Megan and Amber and Hailey were all being "spoken to," Dorothy (and more important, Dorothy's parents) had been assured by school authorities, but in practice they were still free to torment and harass anyone they wanted. The school was powerless against them.

Because in the eyes of everyone who mattered, those three girls were *anointed*. Blond and pretty and popular, they could do no wrong—and when they did, it was never their fault. *Yes, Dorothy, tell us what you did to make these girls hate you.* As though those girls had the right to torture whomever they pleased. They were liked and Dorothy was not and there was nothing Dorothy could do about it.

It was that simple.

Gruber was scrambling through his notes, the rustling of pages sounding like an animal burrowing in the walls. He stopped flipping the pages and looked up at her. “I see here that you’re a talented artist.”

She had a feeling it would come back to this. The picture she’d drawn of Amber. It had been a little challenge she’d set for herself, that was all. An exercise. Her art teacher had loved it—*so realistic, so lifelike*—and insisted they put it in the art fair, hang it in the hallway at school, though Dorothy had begged her not to. She hadn’t meant anything by it and she certainly hadn’t meant for it to seem creepy, as Amber claimed. Amber should’ve been flattered, the art teacher, a clueless woman a year or two away from retirement, had said, bewildered by the drama that had followed, but Amber had said it was proof that Dorothy was obsessed with her. *She must’ve followed me everywhere...spied on me...*

I feel violated.

“I just drew her picture,” Dorothy said miserably. “That’s it. Kids draw pictures of their friends all the time.”

But Amber was not her friend.

The doctor licked his lips, thinking...but electing not to ask the questions she knew were churning in his head. The questions that everyone had but no one had asked—yet.

Instead, he shifted again in his chair. “So...I need you to help me understand, Dorothy, how things got to the point they did. So, after the drawing, these girls started texting you, saying you should...kill yourself.”

Hearing her shame said aloud, the words coming out of a stranger’s mouth, was like having boiling oil poured over her head. How she wished she could melt into the ground and disappear. “Yeah,” she croaked.

“But when the police searched your phone, they didn’t find these texts, did they?”

She’d deleted them, she told them. The texts made her feel bad. She wanted them gone. He had to have that in his notes. She wasn’t going to say it again. She wasn’t going to go round and round this same argument every time. She wanted it over. She wanted it behind her.

The doctor was studying her, so Dorothy tried to squash every possible tell, every twitch, every blink.

“You weren’t saying that for attention, were you?”

Dorothy squeezed her eyes shut.

I must become invisible.

“And so that’s when you—”

She cut him off. “I just wanted those girls to stop picking on me. I wanted them to leave me alone.”

“We understand that, of course. That was definitely wrong of them. And we’re lucky that you’re smart enough to know that suicide is not the answer.”

Of course she knew. She was smart enough to see three or four steps ahead of most people, as smart as the adults said she was. She got what the teachers were saying before anyone else in her class. She got great grades. Her intelligence didn’t get her respect, though. It didn’t get her friends. It made her a freak, an outsider.

And every once in a while, her brains led her down the wrong path. They lied to her.

Still...she was smart enough to protect herself. To make everyone else go down the wrong path, too.

“Are they going to be punished? For what they did?” she asked.

Gruber cleared his throat a second time. “Well, the authorities are looking into your statements...and what the girls have told them, of course, their side of the story, and it’s still not clear, is it? Who did what to whom? It looks like there’s plenty of blame on both sides.”

She gritted her teeth. Of course, there was no evidence. The girls claimed to have deleted Dorothy’s posts. Those girls were the popular ones,

so they got kids at school to support their side of the story.

And as to their claims? They could put anything they wanted on their phones. Make up stuff, bad stuff, incriminating stuff, and pretend Dorothy had sent it to them.

It was her word against theirs, and Dot knew how the police and the school authorities would react. *Kids will be kids. Especially girls. Girls can be the meanest. What are you going to do?*

The doctor continued to stare at her, turning something over in his mind. His iris twitched nervously, did he know that? That had to be a sign of some kind of illness, heart trouble or maybe neurological. Someone should tell him, she thought.

Then he came to life, brushing away the sweat on his upper lip before flipping his notebook shut and gathering his things. “All right, Dorothy, I think we’re done here. I think I’ve heard enough for my report.”

She sat up straighter. He was cutting things short. Like she thought he might.

“Your parents have agreed for you to change schools. St. Ignatius.” That was a private school. Dorothy didn’t think this was something her parents could afford. “They think you’ll like it better. Class sizes are smaller. Phones aren’t allowed in the classrooms.” Gruber stood. “Look, Dorothy, the best thing is to put this awful experience behind you, okay? You’ll go to a new school and get a fresh start. I think everyone would be happy if you just agree never to try something like this again. Okay?”

She smothered a smile. It had gone as planned, though maybe Gruber was caving a little quicker than expected. But she had predicted that the adults would be cowards. She was being released from this facility as though nothing had happened; oh, there’d be follow-up visits with Gruber or someone like him. There’d be no avoiding that after what she’d tried to do.

Then it came to her, why Gruber was letting her go.

It wasn’t because of her brilliant plan or its masterful execution.

It was only because of Jurgen.

No one wanted to heap more grief on poor Teresa Wagner, Dorothy's mother, a woman who'd suffered so much already. As for the poor little girl who'd lost a sibling...that had to figure somewhere in this, to have had an effect on a growing child's psyche. At least, that's what the police and school authorities and even this doctor were happy to believe.

Jurgen. Somehow, she'd forgotten all about him.

She could've kicked herself. What a waste of all her efforts.



one

ten years later

"I won't be in your hair for too long," Dorothy promises as she hauls her suitcase over the doorway. She is staying in the condo of Marta, a friend of a friend of her mother's, the only person they know who lives in Los Angeles. Her place is only about an hour's commute to Tomas Delgado's studio, a miracle in the traffic-choked city. There is no way Dorothy will be able to afford a car payment *and* rent, not on what she will be earning.

"Yeah, no problem," Marta says and follows Dorothy into the cramped living room. "I know what it's like in the beginning. This is, like, my good deed for the year—pay it forward, right?"

Dorothy will sleep on Marta's couch while looking for an apartment. Marta is in her early thirties, working as a stylist while hoping for her break as an actor. She is very pretty but seems to be just not quite pretty enough to get picked for parts, at least to Dorothy's eye. She also strikes Dorothy as being kind of cynical and tough-minded, though who is Dorothy to say?

She has just started following her big dream, while Marta has been working at it for a decade, spinning her wheels working a station in a salon, inhaling fumes while watching other actors get parts she auditioned for. That's probably what living in L.A. does to you after a while.

"So, this guy you're gonna work for, you've never met him?" Marta asks as she takes a drag of a cigarette, the sliding door to the tiny balcony open, which only serves to blow the smoke back into the apartment.

"No, not exactly. But we've been corresponding for over a year." Dorothy sets her suitcase on an empty patch of floor. It looks like she's going to literally be living out of her bag, as she can see no place to store her things, and Marta hasn't offered her so much as a shoebox. She feels terribly out of place, like an intruder, even though she gets no hostile vibes from her host. It's all almost too much—the cross-country flight, her first time in Los Angeles, the strangeness of the West Coast with its palm trees reaching for the open, empty blueness of the sky. It's so unlike her home in northern New Jersey. It's like she's ripped her life open and shaken out everything that is worn and comfortable, and now she is waiting to see what her life will be.

And it starts with this stranger's cluttered, messy place.

"So...you ever think about giving up and going home?" Dorothy asks.

Marta jerks back, spilling ash on the floor. "Why would I do that?"

Dorothy sees immediately that she's been rude, a bad habit of hers. *You're too blunt*, her mother has told her on more than one occasion. *You could stand to be nicer to other people. Not everyone sees things the way you do.* "I'm sorry, I didn't mean...I guess I just assumed if you came here to act..." *And you're still cutting hair, you must suck.* There's no good way out of this.

"Why should I go back? L.A. is my home now. All my friends are here."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean—"

Marta's turns to leave, the air chilly. "You'll see. It's not so easy."

.....

Is it true that Dorothy doesn't know Tomas Delgado? It's more complicated than that, but she doesn't want to explain it to Marta. It's not important anyway. It's not like they're going to be roommates for long. Dorothy's tired of explaining the situation to people, to her family, her college adviser, her friends. To everyone else it seems crazy that she would move across the country, to a place she's never been and where she knows no one, to take a job working for a stranger starting his own business. "Maybe wait awhile," her mother, Teresa, suggested. Dorothy usually feels that her mother is on her side, but this time was different. "No shame in playing it safe. It's *smart*. Why not work for your uncle Freddie for a while, while you wait to see if this man's business finds its feet?"

"Oh, Mom, you don't understand the VFX industry. You have to get in on the ground floor." She doesn't know if that's true, though. Dorothy's chosen field, visual effects, is a foreign planet to her parents. She comes from a family of teachers and mechanics and, at best, middle managers, the kind of jobs that are easy to wrap your mind around. They don't trust anything to do with the entertainment business. It all seems shaky and shady to them, a risky way to make a living. Nothing you'd entrust with the happiness of your offspring.

Sure, it would've been better if Dorothy had gotten a job with an established studio like Industrial Light and Magic, a place that average people had heard of, but those jobs are few and far between. "Everything in L.A. is about who you know," one of her professors said when she asked for career advice. You had to be there, get into circles of people in the same profession, and then the opportunities would come.

But this job fell into her lap.

Like everyone else in the world with a cell phone, Dorothy had been captivated by the videos of NotJessPerry. The clips featured a man who looked like action star Jess Perry but wasn't, at least that's what the creator, known only as Tomas, claimed. He had no reason to lie, and besides, there was no way a nobody could afford to hire Perry, one of the biggest movie stars in the world.

She remembered the first video vividly. There on the screen was her favorite actor replicating the latest dance to go viral on TikTok. The sinuous moves, sly winks, fancy footwork. Only...Jess Perry didn't dance. This fact was well known. He'd said in interviews that he could sing—though it was nothing special—but he'd lost acting jobs because he had two left feet.

And yet here was the handsome actor, adored by hundreds of millions, looking like some kind of pop star.

Buried in the text accompanying the video was the ironic hashtag #NotJessPerry.

A few weeks after the first video came a second. In this one, Jess Perry was doing regular, everyday things. Eating a Popsicle, changing out of a sweater, speeding by on a motorcycle. He spoke this time, and it was undoubtedly Perry's voice, the same voice Dorothy knew so well from TV and movies.

More videos followed. They showed the star doing what were, on one hand, mundane things: changing his clothes, talking to people on the street. But the point was to prove that Tomas's manipulation of the media was flawless. Something as simple as having a character pull a half-zip anorak over his head, for instance, presented difficulties for any video-editing software; that Dorothy knew from the classes she took for her college degree. The seconds when the clothing obscured Perry's face presented two chances to mess up, for the seams between real and fake to show.

By then, the videos had gone viral. They had been the object of speculation in countless posts. *Wired* ended up breaking the story that these videos featured not the actor Jess Perry but an AI video created by an unknown visual effects artist, Tomas Delgado. Tomas worked for a small effects studio in New York City, doing grunt work on video games and straight-to-streaming movies. His Jess Perry deepfakes were his own creations, he explained in the *Wired* interview, a challenge he gave to himself. The second video was designed not to stun the general public, like the first one, but to impress his fellow professionals. It featured situations that were notoriously hard to pull off, typically times when the programs would glitch and reveal that there was some digital prestidigitation going

on. “The people who do this for a living know that I’m doing real honest-to-God magic here,” he told the *Wired* reporter.

After that interview, everything blew up for Tomas.

Dorothy spent hours poring over the videos, going frame by frame, trying to find the seams and theorizing how Tomas had pulled it off. Whatever his method or software, it was light-years better than what she was learning in class, which bugged her. She had no illusions that the college was giving her little more than glorified training for an entry-level job, but for that amount of money at least they could try to *approach* something more current.

Finally, one evening, her vision blurry from hours squinting at the screen, she decided to contact Tomas. Normally, she would never be this forward. She never tried to contact celebrities, not like some people she knew, desperate to reach out to their idols. She wasn’t sure Tomas could be considered a celebrity, anyway, though she kept an eye on his follower count and it was steadily clicking upward on every platform.

This was different. She wasn’t trying to meet a celebrity. This was professional interest—not that she would dream of asking him how he did it, how he made the magic. She was just going to tell him how much she admired his work and leave it at that.

Looking back, she realizes it was unlike her. She thought she’d learned her lesson early on: No one really wanted to connect with her on social media. The few connections she’d made with strangers fizzled out into nothing. The only thing anyone was interested in was using other people; once they saw that you had nothing to offer besides one more “like” or “subscribe,” they moved on.

At the same time, she’d been conditioned to feel that she had a relationship with the people she followed. She knew from her communications class that such delusions were called “parasocial relationships.” It was the rush of intimacy fans felt for the idols they followed on social media. All those photos and videos and posts gave you these glimpses into their lives and created the illusion that you were friends. “But those aren’t real lives,” the professors had stressed in their lectures.

“Those are pretend lives, created precisely to give the illusion of closeness.” This was the dark art at the heart of their chosen profession, the teachers emphasized. For God’s sake, use it ethically.

Dorothy’s classmates had hooted at their professor’s presumption. *Our generation grew up with social media*, they countered. *We know better than you that it’s make-believe.*

That’s what they thought, anyway. Dorothy wasn’t so sure.

She decided to ignore their advice and write to her idol. Tomas Delgado had been able to accomplish exactly what she wanted to do: prove herself to the world. From the *Wired* interview and everything she could find out about him online, Tomas was an otherwise unremarkable young man from Queens. He was twenty-nine years old, on the slight side, not particularly handsome. His family worked blue-collar jobs, just like Dorothy’s. He had no relations in the creative arts, let alone in television or movie production. In other words, in another timeline, a different plane of existence in the multiverse, Tomas Delgado *could* be her. She could be Tomas Delgado.

So, before she chickened out, Dorothy sent him a DM:

Hello, my name is Dorothy and I’m a student at Montclair pursuing a VFX degree. I just want to tell you how much I admire your work. I feel like I’m looking at the future when I watch your videos. I wish they taught something like it here, but my professors aren’t even aware of your work or how it has the potential to change the industry.

It was, she knew, a childish thing to say, obviously pandering to his ego. But it was the truth. She just wanted to express her admiration. She didn’t want to be one of those people who asked for career advice and came off sounding like they were looking for favors—or worse yet, asking a complete stranger for a job. She pressed the “send” button before she chickened out.

The next morning, she was surprised to see a message back:

Nice to meet you, Dorothy. It’s nice to be noticed by someone else in the field. They won’t teach anything like this in your college program because what I’m doing is

truly cutting edge.

The last bit stung a little. This is what happened every time she tried to connect with another person: There was always some kind of backhanded dig or subtle put-down. *You are not my equal*. The sting was overshadowed by elation, however: He had written back to her! He, a somebody, had recognized her, a nobody. Happiness swelled in her chest.

He probably expected their exchange to end there. He was merely being polite. Common sense told her to leave it at that, but she decided to extend herself. To risk seeming needy. Nothing ventured, nothing gained.

Can you suggest things I should study on my own? New software? Creators I should be following?

Dorothy couldn't believe when, later that day, there was another response from Tomas:

If you're really interested...

She expected a link to a course he was selling. Master classes, a subscription service, even private consultations. That was the name of the game, wasn't it? Income streams, the gig economy. She was pleasantly surprised when, instead, he listed a half dozen YouTube accounts (most of which she already knew about, she was happy to see) and linked to a couple of discussions on Reddit that she hadn't been aware of. After spending a few hours online chasing all this down, she messaged back, thanking him for his generosity.

Over the next few weeks, Dorothy came to learn quite a bit about Tomas Delgado. He lived in New York City and had been working in the film industry in VFX for about seven years. She found a few pictures of him on his Instagram and Facebook accounts showing a slight man in his late twenties, his wiry black hair pulled back in a ponytail and his jawline

accented with a wispy fringe. He usually wore sunglasses but in a rare shot with them off, his eyes looked kind. He didn't seem to like to post pictures of himself. Instead, there were mostly pictures of his world. City streets, friends hanging out in a bar, and his workplace, a studio somewhere, his workstation cloaked in darkness. The table itself was littered with tiny figurines, empty cans of energy drinks, and crumpled Post-it notes. The typical life of a VFX artist, the job she hoped to have one day.

As she watched his follower count grow, she wondered why he bothered to continue to chat with her, worried that he might have an ulterior motive or that he might be hiding some dark, unsavory proclivities. He had over a million followers now on TikTok and nearly as many on Instagram, and the numbers grew by leaps and bounds every day. He confided that he was getting courted by businessmen who wanted to turn his techniques into something they could sell to the film industry. Producers were approaching him with ideas for collaboration. He was being thrust into a whole new world but still found time, in the wee hours of the night, to message with a college student. She imagined it might be because he liked being admired and that it was satisfying to have someone like her, a never-ending, nonthreatening source of praise. She would never compete with him, would never be able to surpass him.

Besides, there was nothing about her that he could want. She wasn't pretty, she wasn't rich, and God knew she wasn't connected. All she could offer was adoration.

She was surprised one day when he asked her to tell him about herself. You have no presence on social media, he messaged one evening. I feel like I'm talking to a ghost.

That's what she felt like: a ghost in a very big machine.

She gave him a carefully abbreviated version of the truth: I stopped using social media when I was bullied in middle school. I have new accounts under a fake name but they're just for watching. I don't want to put myself out there. I just want to observe. Be a lurker for a while.

He didn't give her a hard time like most people would. He didn't tell her that she needed to get tougher, that bullying was good for you and built

character, like some sickos said these days. I can respect that.

She doubted that he meant it, though. Social media was his whole world, after all. Those TikTok snippets and Instagram reels and videos on YouTube were what got him noticed. He communicated to his much-enlarged world through comments and DMs. It was the way everyone communicated, and it was preferable to talking to real people, face-to-face. It was how we knew the world. And unlike her parents, who had been born long before social platforms had been invented, this was *her* world. She had been four years old when social media first started to blossom. It was all she knew.

She suspected he thought she was a freak, a loser. He would stop responding soon.

A week later there was another message from Tomas.

Do you need to do an internship for your degree? I've been telling you how busy things have gotten for me, and I can use someone to manage my files. It can be virtual, not like you have to move to the city or anything. It would be an unpaid internship, but it would be less than ten hours a week. What do you say?

Tomas set up a Zoom and for the first time, Dorothy got to talk to him face-to-face. In some ways, he was exactly as she'd imagined him: a bundle of nervous, caffeinated energy who talked a mile a minute. In other ways, he was a surprise: his soft voice, which she had to strain to hear. His hint of an accent, though she didn't know where it came from. He was at the desk that was featured in his Instagram shots, a messy landscape in a dark cave.

"I'm working, like, thirteen, fifteen hours a day and I don't have time to keep my files organized like I should," he explained. "Plus things are moving pretty fast here. I got a manager and a guy who wants to start a business with me. I'm probably going to be moving to Los Angeles"—his voice swelled with pride here—"and so who knows? Maybe there'll be a

job for you down the road, once you've graduated." It seemed like a pipe dream, a carrot he was dangling in front of her to get her to work for free.

This might be why he'd been so friendly. Unpaid or not, however, it was an opportunity. And surely he'd feel indebted to her, if his business took off....

"Yes. Of course! This is amazing."

When she told her program adviser that she'd gotten an internship with Tomas Delgado, the man only blinked at her. "Who?" He was a VFX professor and he hadn't heard of the hottest new name in his field. Typical for this school. The man was out of touch, in Dorothy's opinion. Out of it. He never remembered her name, let alone anything about her academically. She was a blur to him, a blank, nothing more than a ghost, but it didn't matter. She was proud that she'd snagged this internship. It might've meant nothing to him, but it meant something to *her*.

At last, she'd been *seen*.

Tomas gave her access to his network. Her instructions were simple: Every weeknight at two a.m. (at least while he was on the East Coast), Dorothy was to log on and clean up his files. Make sure a copy of everything he'd worked on that day made it into backup files. She developed a filing system that made it easy to retrieve not only the videos he'd worked on, but backups of his programs, which he fiddled with daily.

It took her a week to clean up the mess she'd found there, to sift through all the NotJessPerry videos and clips and flotsam and jetsam, but that was a learning experience in itself. Her brain ate it up and asked for more. She studied each version she found, seeing the adjustments he made to make the video better. Eliminating glitches, enhancing certain aspects of the video or audio file to make it more seamless. To better fool, or enchant, watchers. He was like a magician, tirelessly going over and over his craft, smoothing his prestidigitation until it was flawless. *Look at this, not at this. Nothing up my sleeve. Presto.* He knew how to make people question their

eyes. It took her breath away to watch, even as she studied proof of how he'd done it.

The more she saw, the more she was certain of what she wanted to do with her life.

She wanted to be Tomas.

So, she was thrilled when shortly before graduation, after a semester toiling in the wee hours, Tomas told her he had opened his own studio in Los Angeles and asked if she wanted to work for him.

Dorothy arrives at Tomas Delgado's studio at ten a.m., as instructed. The building is in an industrial area set back from a street choked with strip malls and sandwich shops. Box trucks rattle by as she walks from the bus stop to the address Tomas gave her. It's an old warehouse surrounded by a parking lot whose asphalt is crumbling. She imagined something more glamorous, but rents in L.A. are sure to be sky-high. Maybe this is the best he could do.

One flight up from the street, she's met by a set of double doors, DELGADO VISUAL EFFECTS silk-screened across the glass. Through the doors is an open area with a grouping of gigantic beanbag chairs in front of a huge monitor. To one side is a stainless-steel kitchen area with a refrigerator with glass doors, all the better to see rows of neatly arranged water bottles and, on the shelf beneath that, a few champagne bottles. But most of the space is taken up by cans of energy drinks. Rows and rows of them.

There is no receptionist, no one to greet her, and Dorothy is unsure what to do. The space has the air of being new and unfinished and for a split second she feels like she shouldn't be there, like she's walked in on something that's supposed to be private. The hall seems to continue around a huge, standing partition, so she follows it tentatively, listening for noise the entire time. She finally hears someone pecking at a keyboard and follows the sound to an open door.

A small woman sits at a desk inside a compact office, probably a few years older than Dorothy. She looks up when Dorothy stands in the doorway. “Can I help you?” Her tone says she doesn’t want to be helpful and that she resents being interrupted.

“I’m looking for Tomas Delgado.” Then Dorothy adds, “I’m the new employee.”

The woman is unimpressed. She heaves up from her chair. “I’ll take you to him.” She walks quickly on sneakered feet. Bangles jangle on her bony wrists. How can you type all day wearing those?

“Are you a tech, too?” Dorothy asks, since the woman offers nothing.

“Yeah. I’m Angelica.” She doesn’t offer a hand. She doesn’t even look over her shoulder.

Angelica stops in front of another open door. “Your new hire is here,” she announces, then steps back so Dorothy can go in.

A man bounds out from behind his desk, reaching with both hands for Dorothy’s. His enthusiasm is immensely gratifying. She doesn’t know what she would do if he were as indifferent and cold as this woman.

This is the first time she has met Tomas Delgado in person. While he looks like the man she’s seen on Instagram and YouTube for over a year now, she’s surprised to see that he’s even smaller than she imagined. She is easily as tall as him, taller if she wore heels. His wiry hair is pulled back in a loose ponytail, and he has a wispy mustache and goatee framing his mouth. His Daft Punk T-shirt is obviously vintage. He’s the very model of a boho dude, like a smaller Lin-Manuel Miranda.

His eyes shine as he looks at her. “Hey, it’s great to finally meet face-to-face. I can’t believe you’re here. You followed me all the way to California! How crazy is that! My own family didn’t do that,” he laughs.

She believes in him. Is it something she needs to say out loud? Isn’t it obvious?

He shows her the room that will be her office. It’s at the end of the hall, closest to the reception area. That means she will be expected to greet visitors, she knows. In his rush to speak, Tomas has already told her she is the youngest and least experienced of everyone on the team—a small team,

only two other techs besides her, and Tomas, though he expects to hire more before too long. She expects she will get the grunt work, at least until her creative skills come up to speed. She winces at the last part but then tells herself it's understandable: He hasn't seen any of her creations yet.

The workstation is top-notch. There are three monitors. The chair is the kind used by serious gamers, made for people to spend hours and hours in without moving. A hint of what is expected of her, no doubt.

"Everything is top-of-the-line." Dorothy runs a finger along the keyboard.

Tomas grins. "My investors are serious dudes. I don't know anything about running a business, but they do. We're in good hands. You'll be in charge of managing our files," he says as Dorothy powers up the workstation and tries out the chair. "Just like you've been doing, as we discussed."

"Do you have your own servers?"

He takes her down to the server room at the other end of the hall. It's frosty in there, as expected. A backup power generator stands blinking in the corner. A rack of servers stands in the center of the room. The extra room is obviously for expansion once the business takes off. "All Nvidia GPUs," Tomas says, giving the rack a caress. "Jesus, these things cost a fortune! I'd have to mortgage my parents' house just for the down payment on them. Thank God for investors. They're putting serious money into this company." He shakes his head in disbelief that someone trusts him with all this.

"And you're going to continue using the cloud for backup?" Dorothy wants to be sure.

"Oh, yeah. As you can see, we've got surge protection here and backup power, but I'm not taking any chances." Tomas gives the server rack another pat. "We're talking multimillion-dollar projects. Movie studio executives are the nervous type. We need off-site backup."

They walk together back to her office. "You'll work on projects, too, I promise. It won't be all admin," he says as she settles in behind the desk.

“I’ll supervise your projects, too. I know that’s why you came here. Just stick with me, Dot. We’re going places.”



two

two months later

Tomas is highly agitated this morning, predictably. In the couple of months she has worked directly for him, Dorothy has come to know his moods as intimately as she knows her own. Today, he has good reason to be anxious.

Catrina Villeneuve is coming in to be videotaped.

Villeneuve is Dorothy's favorite musician, at least since her latest hit song, "Whatever You Say," came out earlier this year. The young woman's popularity has gone through the roof with that tune and the subsequent appearance on *Saturday Night Live* as the musical guest. She just signed with a major cosmetic company to be their spokesmodel for the next two years and reportedly is about to embark on a world tour that will see her traveling for ten months, and so it has been decided that the first advertising campaign will be made entirely with artificial intelligence. Villeneuve will come in for a body motion capture. Later, Tomas will work with a team from the advertising company handling the campaign to create videos. The

singer has no qualms about having a doppelgänger carry the water on her cosmetic contract, at least for the first round. She is diversifying her income streams, the manager tells Tomas. There's interest in being able to use the digital twin they will be creating in other ventures as well.

It is to be a grand experiment.

Catrina is in the prep area, getting the tech attached to her face. She's already donned the skintight black suit. Tomas wants to do facial capture first. Since these are beauty ads, there will undoubtedly be a lot of focus on her face. From a quiet spot in the shadows, Dorothy watches as Angelica applies white dots all over Catrina's cheeks, chin, forehead. So many more than Dorothy has typically seen in her class experiments. More of Tomas's proprietary sleight of hand. She drinks in everything the technician does, as well as the banter between Angelica and the musical superstar, proving Angelica can be pleasant when she wants to. When she has a reason.

It strikes Dorothy how different Villeneuve is, though she can't quite place her finger on what exactly it is. Is it the "it" factor that makes someone destined to become a superstar? She thrums with hummingbird energy. And she's *thin*: Dorothy has never seen anyone so skinny. She is a barely padded skeleton, just bone and muscle. How can she possibly have the energy to do three-hour concerts night after night? Is it energy drinks? Drugs? Dorothy can't shake the feeling that the young artist is burning through some precious life force like a candle blazing at both ends.

On the main part of the studio floor, Tomas works with a second technician, Ric, to fine-tune the array of cameras they are going to use. He spent the entire day yesterday setting up the rigs, particularly the special cameras to be used for her face. Dorothy assumes his fiddling today is purely nerves.

Catrina is led to the center of the floor, surrounded by a system of cameras positioned to cover 180 degrees, or the whole of her face from ear to ear. "All you have to do is stand still, try to keep your eyes open, and I'll do the rest," Tomas tells her.

"I did something like this for a music video once," the singer says. Dorothy notices how tall the woman is, how she holds herself like a

ballerina. Like a string holds her up by her head, carrying the weight of her body. She bobbles and floats like a marionette. The suit hides nothing, her collarbones jutting out like a clothes rod. Her neck is alarmingly long. She is almost a caricature of elegance, an exaggeration of classically beautiful features. Also, now that Dorothy can see her better, she decides that Villeneuve is more flat-chested and slightly heavier in the thighs than she originally thought. Costumes apparently make a huge difference. It's all about fooling the eye.

Though it's also a relief to see that she is not perfect. She has her flaws like every other woman in the world.

Tomas preens a little while he adjusts equipment. "With all due respect, Ms. Villeneuve, you've never sat for a capture like this. Motion capture is old-school. We use our own proprietary software for the latest in *performance* capture. My program will bring out all the nuance in your personality as expressed by your face." Tomas is exaggerating. Dorothy knows, because she sees the metadata attached to all his software, that he gets a lot of his code from open sources. He leverages names of programs dropped by other VFX artists, scours GitHub. He is clever about how he stitches routines together, how he applies everything, but it is hardly as groundbreaking as he leads others to believe.

Does he know that she knows? It's not something they've talked about. The closest he's come is telling her it's okay to use what everybody else is using if you apply it in innovative ways. *Our little secret, okay?* Still, she feels a little like Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, getting to see the man behind the curtain for what he is. Nevertheless, his results are amazing, and there's no arguing with that.

Catrina seems satisfied. She stands motionless as the cameras whirl around her. She smokes a cigarette whenever Tomas checks the footage. "I want to get more into acting," she tells him during one of these moments. She presents it like an expectation, not an aspiration.

"What we're doing today, it can maximize your chances there," he says absently as he resets the position of one of the cameras. "I tell you

what; I'll put together a reel for you of your avatar—doing a fight scene, a period drama like *Bridgerton*—”

“Ooh, put me in *House of the Dragon*,” she says as she stubs out the cigarette, using a plate as an ashtray. “Or a soccer video game. I’ve always wanted to be a world-class athlete.” There is a pregnant moment as Villeneuve poses, tosses her head, tries another pose. “There’s something I want to ask, but I don’t want to come off like a jerk.”

Tomas tenses almost invisibly. He knows what it’s going to be about, as do Dorothy and the other two technicians. It’s all anyone in the motion picture business can talk about these days. It’s everyone’s darkest fear and, at the same, their secret hope. “Go ahead. Ask away,” he says genially.

The singer dives in. “What do you think about artificial intelligence? Like this new program, SonaAI? Did you see that fake actress it created, Milly or Sally or Patty or whatever?”

“Betty,” Dorothy says under her breath. Nobody hears her.

“I mean, that shit looked real. It could’ve been a real girl, easily.”

Tomas acts like he’s concentrating hard on what he’s doing. “It was pretty good, I agree.”

“So, aren’t you afraid it’s going to put you out of business? I hear it’s dead easy to use, too. Why would Hollywood need to continue coming to you if they can do it on their own?”

Everyone in the studio freezes. What she just asked is rude, certainly, but Dorothy doesn’t blame the singer for being curious; it is the question on everyone’s lips.

Tomas sighs, gently, so Villeneuve cannot hear him. He is too savvy a businessman to be as rude as she is. “I understand the curiosity, I do. But it’s not as easy as they make it sound in the newspapers. It’s good enough for playing around, for experimenting. To make some short to amuse your friends. Are you going to use it to make an entire television series? I don’t think so. It would take as long to correct the program’s mistakes and inconsistencies as it would to make it the conventional way.”

What Tomas doesn’t say—what the techs in the studio know—is that the program isn’t far behind state-of-the-art. That’s a matter of a year,

maybe, before the appreciable difference between what Sona can do and what Tomas can do is paper-thin, so thin that it won't matter to most people. There is a lot of money being poured into artificial intelligence research, and Tomas's investors have tightened the purse strings. Suddenly, his clear advantage in the field is looking shaky and he is under a lot of pressure to show the industry what he can do.

They capture her body in the afternoon, after a lunch of salad and seltzer water. For the cosmetic company, it's mostly standing, turning, lifting her hands (with their elongated fingers) to her face, looking up at cameras suspended overhead. Sitting, reclining, lying and turning her head, again, to the cameras. "Fantastic," Tomas says when they've finished, and an assistant helps the singer scramble off the platform that stands in for a bed.

"That's it?" Catrina asks as Angelica pulls the dots off her face.

"That's it."

"And now I'm off to rehearsals." She starts for the dressing room. "We leave for China in two months. The first leg of the tour."

Villeneuve is scarcely out the door when Tomas turns to Dorothy. "Why don't you take a shot at putting together some pieces for Villeneuve's reel? See what you can come up with." Dorothy's heart seems to grow four times larger in her chest. Her first solo assignment. She can barely breathe.

.....

Dorothy waits until everyone else has left for the evening. It's her habit to work when there's no one around, like a monk in a cell. She doesn't have to wait long: Everyone is exhausted by the day's activities and has left early. Having a celebrity in their midst energized them at the time, but it was draining. Maybe that's how people like Villeneuve are able to be so high-performing: They feed off other people's excitement. Now Dorothy is sapped.

She picks a playlist and slips in her earbuds. She likes mellow music while she works, for the most part. Some VFX designers, mostly the men,

like their music fast and loud. It's good when designing first-person shooter games, she imagines. Fight scenes. Someday, she might need to cultivate a taste for it.

Next, she pulls up Villeneuve's files. She runs through them for quality. While she reviews frame after frame of the young woman's face and body, she thinks about scenarios she can create to showcase the singer's potential breadth. It wouldn't be too hard to make her a character in a medieval-fantasy video game. A kickass heroine in leather, flashing swords. Another possibility would be to create a fantastical concert, something that's impossible to stage in the real world, featuring Catrina. Dorothy likes both ideas but feels that the second one is unimaginative. She wants to impress Tomas.

It is the assignment she has been itching to do for the past four years, since she started her degree program. The projects she did for class are only part of the story: There are the countless hours spent poring over video games and movies and YouTube, analyzing the work of VFX artists, those inside the industry and talented amateurs. For a while, she thought about starting her own channel on YouTube where she would critique others' work, but she quickly realized it was a nonstarter. She had no reputation in the field, and she'd likely get shredded for the slightest mistake by opinionated men with no more wisdom than she possessed.

Now she has the chance to show what she's capable of.

Tomas only expects her to do previz, which typically looks like an ancient video game, figures that could've been made from Legos moving around in front of color-blocked backgrounds. Rudimentary storyboards, nothing fancy. Rough proofs of concept. But Dorothy wants to do more. She wants to dazzle him.

The issue is that previz can be done quickly, but to create anything with more substance—to put meat on the bones, as it were—will take more time. Potentially a *lot* more time. Overlays of costumes, makeup and prosthetic effects, backgrounds—these will be relatively easily taken care of. But what Tomas really wants is seamlessness. The pieces will all have to

look like Catrina is performing them herself, with nothing to spoil the illusion. No glitches.

Usually, Tomas does most of this work himself, even though he knows he will eventually have to teach his assistants Angelina and Ric (and, one day, Dorothy, too), or else the company will never be able to handle the volume of work that Tomas aspires to. He wants to be the man Hollywood thinks of when it comes to artificially created imagery, and Dorothy needs to show him that she's as capable as the two more senior assistants of helping him get there. After all, they are only senior to her because of their age—in their midtwenties, compared to Dorothy at twenty-one—and because they have a few years' worth of experience in the field. If she can prove she has potential, Tomas will make her equal to Angelina and Ric. She's sure of it.

It's only been a short time, but Dorothy—always watching, missing nothing—has the measure of both her colleagues. Angelina is competent but lacks self-confidence. She wastes time (a cardinal sin in this business) second-guessing herself. Her portfolio is full of safe pieces, nothing that would catch your eye, and Dorothy is not even sure why Tomas hired her except to do tedious background work. That's all she's suitable for. Ric is a little more inspired, but he's sloppy. And lazy. He's always hanging out in the corner on his phone or disappearing for a smoke break or grabbing a coffee when he should be working. Maybe it's because he's nervous around Tomas—the maestro, the genius—but it could be that he has a bad work ethic. It grates on her that these two are technically above her, but Dorothy doesn't see either of them as serious competition, when it comes down to it. And a few well-chosen words in Tomas's ear would be all it would take... not that she would ever do that.

When all's said and done, you have to look out for yourself, her father told her. A good man, hardworking, but that had not gotten him far, had it? She remembers overhearing him grouse to a neighbor over beers at a backyard barbecue about how he'd been passed over for a promotion in favor of a man who'd bad-mouthed him. He'd been raised to believe that you did your best and your work would speak for itself, but that was not

enough in this world, he complained to the neighbor, his words slurring slightly. *You have to play the game.*

Don't listen to your father, her mother said when Dorothy had asked her about it. *There might be other reasons he got passed over. You just do your best and don't worry about being rewarded. Your best is all you can do.*

Enough. Focus, she tells herself as she queues up another playlist, something more upbeat. Maybe that will get her blood pumping. She jumps up to dim the lights and make sure the alarm is on on the front door and then slides into her chair to get back to work.

.....

Two days later, Dorothy sends Tomas a link to her files. But he's out of town at a business meeting with a potential client and she has no idea when he might see the email. Probably not until he staggers into work tomorrow morning. Tomorrow is soon enough.

He comes in shortly after eleven a.m., bleary-eyed and unshaven. Dorothy lets him plod to his office; she doesn't want to ambush him right away, knowing he probably hasn't even looked at the files yet. "Hi, Tomas. Did the meeting go well?" she asks as he trudges by. He answers with a wave.

Dorothy tries not to hover, but she can't help herself. Restless, she jumps up from her desk to wander up and down the hall, walking past Tomas's office to go to the server room for no reason, only to stand inside in the cold air, trying to calm down. It has to be annoying—Tomas can't fail to see what she's doing—but nerves make it impossible for her to sit still.

Finally, when Dorothy is afraid she can stand it no longer, she gets a ping on the office Slack channel. It's from Tomas. **Got a minute? Can you come to my office?**

She takes a deep breath, even though she feels like she's going to throw up. She forces herself to walk calmly down the hall, then raps softly

on his open door. “Come in,” he says without looking up from his monitor, fingers tapping keys furiously.

When he does look up, Dorothy isn’t surprised to see his gray skin, or the bags under his eyes. There is a flash of guilt when she thinks how she’s contributed to his workload with the reel—a silly thought, seeing as it’s his job, his company. She’s a people pleaser deep down. It’s her mother’s example and, hence, her mother’s fault.

“Sit down, sit down. I looked at your reel,” he says, tearing himself away from his monitor. Dorothy closes the door behind her. If she’s going to get negative feedback, she doesn’t want Angelica next door to hear it.

He seems nervous, gesturing at the chair for her to sit across from him. Normally, they sit side by side so he can point out things on the monitor.

He gives her a sheepish grin. “Well, Dot, I have to say you really surprised me. I was expecting a previz file...” He trails off and wipes a hand nervously on one leg. “I had to rewatch it three times. I couldn’t believe what I was seeing. Not after you’d only had—what—one, two days to work on it?”

What she gave him was Villeneuve in three different scenarios, only about twenty seconds or so in each. Villeneuve as a Disney princess, in a voluminous ball gown and with meticulously styled hair. Villeneuve as an assassin out of a medieval-fantasy video game, a leather tunic and hood and bow and arrow. And last, Villeneuve dressed casually, as though she’s chilling on a Sunday afternoon.

“It was...well, fantastic, there’s no other way to describe it. Sure, the backgrounds are clunky, but they’re just placeholders. And there are a few glitches with the transitions; it still needs a couple hours of work. But man, what you gave me was...impressive. So real. The movement of the skirt was still a little stiff”—he shrugs at his nitpicks—“but everything about Catrina’s face was perfection.”

When Dorothy starts feeling a little lightheaded, she realizes she’s been holding her breath. This is everything she’s dreamed of: Tomas praising her work. Tomas acknowledging her skill. A hot wave of emotion

rises in her. This is what she's worked so hard for. For a brief moment she is afraid she might start crying.

He isn't done yet. He picks up a mechanical pencil, using it to point at the monitor. "The assassin was by far the best, maybe 'cause it's the least like her. I don't think I've ever seen her scowl or squint in real life and yet you nailed it. Her face conveyed mistrust for sure, in a way that isn't cartoonish at all. It looks *real*. When she was a marksman listening for the sound of footsteps on her trail, she looked so convincing. The leather of her tunic had this shine suggesting moonlight, and considering the limited amount of footage we got that day..." He shakes his head in admiration—or maybe disbelief. "It's good. Real good."

Dorothy feels like she's melting, relief washing out of her body in waves.

He leans back in his chair, hands resting on his stomach. "No doubt about it...I'm going to have to watch my back, Dot. It won't be long before you'll be leaving me in the dust."

Back in her little office, she closes the door before letting herself slide to the floor, her legs no longer able to support her. Tears spill down her cheeks, silently. She will not let anyone overhear her giving in to her emotions, allowing herself to bask in what Tomas said. *The irony about what we do is that if we do it right, nobody will notice it. The skill it takes to do this kind of work will disappear and all the audience sees is this beautiful, seamless miracle. But we know. Those of us who do this kind of work, we'll appreciate it. It's kind of a shitty thing, but it is what it is.*

But I want you to know I see you. I see you, Dorothy.



three

The trouble starts, naturally, with Catrina Villeneuve.

It's another late night in the office, Dorothy cleaning up the imperfections on the Villeneuve reel. She keeps at it even though the others have already left for the day, until her head aches and her eyeballs burn. How many hours has she been on the workstation this evening? She's lost track of time.

Later, when she tries to trace the whole mess back to its origin, to the very beginning, Dorothy will ask herself where the idea to create Isabella came from. Did a voice whisper in her ear, a ghost in the machine prompting her? That makes more sense than to believe it just came to her out of nowhere, that there was no genesis, no bits or crumbs to coalesce into something greater than its parts. But she will come to see—later, much later—that the idea was there from her earliest days of scrolling, scrolling, forever scrolling.... Eyes taking in image after image that, she felt at the time, might be mocking her. Criticizing her. At first, her phone trained her to compare her body to others, and now with SonaAI, she compares her work to the work of others. An endless treadmill of competition.

The internet is flooded with fake people generated on SonaAI. Her lip curls at the crudeness of most of them. The too-big eyes, like those paintings of hungry waifs from the seventies. Lips as poufy as pillows, legs like stilts. They end up more like caricatures of people than like anything else. Because everyone thinks they can do it—everyone thinks they can make the perfect being, the perfect creation.

I'll show them how it's done.

She puts on the motion-capture suit and films herself doing a few simple moves. Walking across the studio. Skipping. Dancing. Thank God the studio is empty or she'd never have the nerve to prance around like this. But after reducing the figure to a basic wire skeleton, she sees, with embarrassment, that it won't work. She's no performer. Her movements are jerky and timid. Plus, her proportions are all off, though she knows this from art class, so it doesn't bother as much. Her limbs aren't long, her movements aren't fluid. She isn't an actress or dancer. She doesn't have the dynamic energy of a cheerleader. She couldn't create a character that everyone would fall in love with, not using this footage as its foundation.

Cheeks burning, she wipes the files and erases them from the logs so it's like they never existed. Then she returns to her assignment.

At half past three in the morning, Dorothy decides to stop. She's so tired that she's started to make mistakes, which horrifies her. She's spent so much time making Villeneuve's skin absolutely flawless that it's all blending together in her mind. It's easy to go overboard at this point and create something that looks like a plastic surgery job gone wrong.

She pushes back from the desk and yawns. Yes, time for bed. She'll use the couch in Tomas's office. She doesn't feel like ordering up an Uber to take her across town to her decrepit apartment. God save her if she wakes her roommate. It's Kim's apartment, and Dorothy is just living in it.

But she takes a final look at the image plastered across her monitor of Catrina Villeneuve's beautiful face. Her fluid, graceful movements from the photo session are now tattooed on Dorothy's memory. She'll see the singer in her dreams tonight, without a doubt.

And then it hits her: She doesn't need to make her own motion files. She has the perfect specimen at her disposal.

She can use Villeneuve.

Not her face, obviously. Everyone knows that face. She'll overlay a new face, one that Dorothy creates. A creature even more beautiful than the singer.

She'll adjust the body, too. Shave off some of her hips and augment her bust. She appraises Villeneuve's body like a surgeon—the singer is undoubtedly beautiful, but even she has her flaws. Dorothy can fix that. Everyone knows the feminine ideal: It's a Barbie doll, right? White and blond. Tall and thin yet also curvy, graceful as a ballerina, delicate as a butterfly.

Everything that Dorothy is not.

Dorothy is no longer exhausted. Her fatigue vanishes as soon as the idea pops into her head. She pulls her chair closer to the desk. She has work to do.

The sun has been up for an hour by the time Dorothy pushes back from her desk again.

The fruit of her labor is plastered on the monitor in front of her. One would never know it's Catrina Villeneuve underneath that face, though if someone were really, really perceptive, they might sense the ghost of something familiar looking back.

Dorothy's goal is nebulous: to create a figure of mesmerizing beauty. Her art teachers have always said she has an eye for beauty. But physical beauty is in the eye of the beholder, right? There's no way to create one image that each and every person on earth will agree is the epitome of beauty.

That might be the obvious truth, but it's also a lie, one Dorothy has always despised. There are standards of beauty. From time immemorial, women have been held to the standards of others, and there is some

consensus of these standards even if they are unspoken, unwritten. Sure, they might conform to local tastes. A beauty in China might not look much like a beauty in Ghana.

Or is even that true? Look at the contestants in the Miss Universe pageant. Dorothy has scanned the faces of the winners from the past thirty years into a facial-recognition program to look for commonalities. She now has data to tell her how wide the eyes should be set apart, how large the mouth in proportion to the lower half of the face, the ideal line of the nose. She doesn't follow what the numbers tell her, not exactly, using her own taste to guide her hand. But there's a certain Western European construct to the face that is undeniable.

For now, the figure has hazel eyes. The changeableness of the color makes sense. The hair is not finished: Dorothy wants it to have an elaborately constructed assortment of highlights, and that's going to take some work.

But the face...She's satisfied with the face.

She glances at the clock in the corner of the screen. Angelica should be arriving soon. Dorothy has to clean up everything before anyone gets on the system. Quickly, she moves her files into a vault she's hidden on the system. A casual looker will never find it; it's invisible. She goes into the logs and erases all traces of her work. The logs—if anyone bothers to look, and she knows no one will—will only show her time working on the Villeneuve reel. Those missing hours...she'll say she fell asleep on the couch. How she is going to get through the day on no sleep, well, she'll figure it out. Energy drinks and maybe a catnap during quiet hours. Tomas is going to be out of the office today anyway—he has a meeting with Graham Jones, his investor. Things are always quiet in the studio when Tomas is away.

Dorothy spends several more days working on her new creation. It feels like a baby growing by leaps and bounds, with each change she makes helping it

to grow stronger, sturdier, more independent. There are times Dorothy looks at it and almost mistakes it for human.

She names it Isabella.

If she were smart, she'd have started with a video. People prefer videos, but Dorothy thinks she needs more motion-capture files before she can create a convincing one. Villeneuve's files are limited, after all. For now, she satisfies herself with a still image of Isabella. She settles on placing Isabella in a meadow, walking, with her head slightly turned so she's looking over her shoulder back at whoever is ostensibly taking the picture. Dorothy dresses the avatar in fashionable ripped jeans and a slouchy sweater. The hair takes the longest to do—naturally—but it's so important, especially for a female figure. Hair really is the crowning glory. It draws the eye. It conveys a tactile sensation in a way that other parts of a one-dimensional character don't. She gives Isabella a lush, flowing tangle of curls in blonds and honey browns, the lighter streaks glinting in the sunshine.

It's like playing with paper dolls. Of all toys, they were her favorite growing up. That was how she perfected her drawing hand—creating them one after the other, striving for perfection. Crumpling up the ones that displeased her, trying again. Why not—it was only paper, colored markers, and crayons. She understood later that she had been trying to make the girl she wanted to be, with a perfect body and a perfect face. Who had all the clothes she wanted. A girl who would be popular. Who other girls would want to be friends with.

The meadow behind her creation is nondescript. It could be anywhere and that's how Dorothy wants it. She strips all the metadata off the file she uses—a photo she finds on someone's Instagram account—because it's imperative that Isabella remain a mystery.

She's figured that part out already, too. As Isabella becomes more and more complete, Dorothy knows that she will not keep this creation to herself. The figure on her monitor is no paper doll. It makes Betty, that fake actor created on Sona, look downright cartoonish. Something this perfect

deserves to be adored. She wants to see if others will find her creation as amazing as she suspects it is. She wants to feel that admiration and respect.

She wants to fool everybody.

Testing it out would be easy enough. She'll create an Instagram account for Isabella and post this picture there. Dorothy hides ownership of the account with a newly created email account and a fake name. Her stomach clenches as she types, a memory of that bad time when she was so young and clueless that she didn't know how to protect herself. She's learned to hide her tracks. Anonymity will shield her from ridicule. After all, the internet can be...unpredictable.

It's an experiment, she tells herself. A test of her artistic and technical prowess. Will people respond to something she's created? And also, maybe, to prove that the human hand is better than artificial intelligence, that SonaAI is not going to make her and Tomas irrelevant.

Dorothy creates Isabella's Instagram account: @iamisabella. The profile reads "The girl next door." Hah—she's clearly anything but. Dorothy leaves the profile maddeningly empty. No location, no link to an explanatory website anywhere.

Isabella is a girl. Just a girl.

She checks and triple-checks the metadata before posting the image. She almost chickens out when she realizes that above all else, she must keep it a secret from Tomas. He'll surely see Catrina Villeneuve's digital twin under Isabella's skin and know what Dorothy has done. It would be a blatant violation of the contract the singer has with Tomas. Villeneuve could sue him if she finds out. He, of course, would fire Dorothy, maybe even sue her in turn. A lot of fuss for what is, basically, a harmless exercise. No one is getting hurt. It isn't like she's going to make money off Isabella. Take food out of Villeneuve's mouth or attract investors away from Tomas.

Neither of them need ever know.

Shortly after midnight on a Thursday, Dorothy uploads her first image of Isabella to the Instagram account. She stares at it for a long time, her heart machine-gunning in her chest. She imagines it's like seeing a child off on the first day of school. Out she goes into the big, wide world on two

wobbly, newborn legs. Dorothy is frightened and a little angry, prematurely, for her creation.

Finally, she tears herself away, closing Instagram and setting her phone aside, determined not to look at it again until morning. Tonight, she will try to catch up on sleep. She doesn't linger in the studio but calls an Uber to take her home.

But sleep doesn't come easily, of course. Who is she fooling? She wakes groggily between two and three a.m. and the first thing she does is reach for her phone. Blood pounds in her ears as she presses buttons, even as she scolds herself not to get her hopes up. Isabella is nothing more than bytes. A lifeless image will not be disappointed if there are no views, no likes. And Dorothy knows only too well how hard it is to get attention on social media. Even the tiniest bit only comes after much effort, if ever. She isn't sure what she's expecting.

Well, that's not exactly true. In her wildest dreams, she wants a Cinderella story. For herself, for once. She works hard. She deserves it. Maybe not with Isabella—after all, if she blew up, Dorothy is almost positive someone from her team would realize what she's done—but with *something*, someday. And for now, fooling a few people online with her creation...well, that wouldn't be so bad.

She thumbs her way to Isabella's post. Almost a hundred likes. It's been up for, what, two hours and has gotten more likes than Dorothy has gotten in her entire time on social media, but it is still lower than she hoped. She scrolls through the comments: Hey, pretty lady...Where do you live?...And the predictable show us your tits.

Dorothy puts the phone on her nightstand. The numbers are disappointing, but at least her worst fears are allayed. People respond to Isabella. They respond to her beauty. It's not the landslide she hoped for, but she'll take it. It's a step in the right direction. She falls asleep laying out the next image of Isabella in her mind.

Her hand lands on the cell phone when she wakes a few hours later. Normally, she'd be at the office already. The others will think she's sick or that something bad has happened. She'll have to hustle—but not before checking...

Over two hundred likes. Nearly as many followers. The numbers continue to climb but so much more slowly than she imagined. It's silly to have high expectations, she knows. It's a paradox: It's hard to build a following but then you see all these people—normal, everyday people, not sports stars or singers—with millions of followers. You see with your own eyes that it can be done, but at the same time, it's maddeningly out of your grasp.

She watches her phone every step of her way into the office: on the bus, during the short walk up the street to the big, nearly empty building. She passes by her usual stop for coffee and has to double back. It's over three hundred likes now. It's not snowballing, not yet, but it raises her hopes a little. This is doing better than anything she's ever posted. Be optimistic. This time it's going to be different.

Angelica and Ric are at work before her, which never happens. Ric ignores her as usual but Angelia glowers. "I thought maybe you'd been hit by a bus," she says as Dorothy walks by her office. She follows her. "It must've been something serious, to make you this late."

Dorothy hangs up her hoodie to buy time. Angelica is fishing for information. "Late night, that's all."

"Late night in the office, you mean."

A chill goes up Dorothy's back. How does Angelica know? Did Dorothy overlook something last night, leave some little sign that she was doing something she shouldn't? "No later than normal," she finally says.

"Yeah...you know, I talked to Tomas about that. You shouldn't be staying here by yourself so late."

She isn't sure what Angelica is implying. She doesn't think for a moment that Angelica's worried about Dorothy's safety. More likely she knows she can't put in the hours Dorothy does and doesn't like the competition. Rather than working harder, she'll try to keep Dorothy from

pressing her advantage. The thing is, Dorothy cannot see Tomas caring one iota. He gave over his life to his work. He'll only admire her for doing the same—and Angelica knows it.

"You can act like nothing's going on, but you're up to something. I know it." Angelica crosses her arms over her chest, making herself tough and hard.

"I just want to do a good job." Dorothy slides into her seat, powers up her monitor.

"You can cut the act. I'm going to find out what you're doing, and you can be sure I'll go right to Tomas when I do." Dorothy sighs as Angelica stomps away. She doesn't *want* to hate Angelica. She hoped they could be friends; there are few enough women in this field.

It always seems to end up this way, though. Megan, Amber, Hailey—the names flit across the back of her mind like bats. Like a chant, an incantation.

Of course, Dorothy *is* up to something, which means she'll have to be doubly careful not to give Angelica anything to use against her.

The first thing she does is check the logs, but everything looks normal. No signs of Angelica poking around—but Dorothy doubts she has the technical skills to get very far. Everything looks good. She has to believe that the electric stuttering of her nerves will subside before long.

By lunch, the numbers have slowed considerably. It seems stalled at around 350 likes. A sour pain flares in Dorothy's chest. Her hopefulness from just an hour ago is deflated, puddled at her feet. She knows, logically, that it takes time to build a following online. They studied this in her marketing classes at college, went through case studies to learn how things go viral—or, rather, how rarely that happens. How it's nearly impossible to manufacture, the randomness of it. Nevertheless, Dorothy feels frustrated. Don't we all believe, secretly, that it'll be different for us? That we'll be the lucky ones, like winning the lottery. She knew all this and still couldn't help getting her hopes up. It happened for Tomas, didn't it? Doesn't Isabella deserve it every bit as much as #NotJessPerry? Dorothy doesn't like to think that she's failed, that she's let her creation down.

There are tricks to boosting content—buying likes and reposts, cultivating audiences—but Dorothy doesn't have the time or money to do that right now. The one thing she can do is to post more content, and soon. To build on what she's started. She won't risk working on it during office hours, just in case someone steals a glance at her monitor. But it's plausible for her to work with the Villeneuve files since she's still polishing up the reel for Tomas, the one they'll submit to the singer. What she could really use are more motion-caption files from Villeneuve. The range of movement they captured is ridiculously small. She needs to convince Tomas to talk Villeneuve into coming into the studio again, and with her leaving on tour soon, that's probably impossible. That leaves no alternative but for Dorothy to try different AI programs to create Isabella's movements out of whole cloth. Doable, but time-consuming. And going this route means she probably won't be able to re-create Villeneuve's particular way of carrying herself, the graceful ethereal quality that Dorothy so loves.

She's working on her laptop at the apartment when her phone dings.

She glances at the screen. **YOU HAVE A MESSAGE.**

A text? Usually it will announce who's contacting her, and that list of suspects is short. Her mother, most likely. Her mother is always checking in. Doesn't want her girl to be sad or lonely, she says. Contact with the few friends she has back in New Jersey has slowed since she moved to the West Coast, after the first couple of weeks of excited questioning (**What's it like? Are the boys cuter?**). Her father never texts and her brother, Wolfgang, only slightly more than her father.

It's probably an ad. Someone trying to sell her something, or one political party or another pestering her. Wait—she hasn't registered to vote yet in California. She shouldn't be on their radar.

She puts it out of her mind until it dings again a few minutes later.

Now she's annoyed. She lifts the phone and pounds in her pin.

MESSAGE (2) FROM UNKNOWN NUMBER.

Uh. Definitely an ad. She's about to put her phone back down when she catches herself. She's already opened it, might as well see what it is, even though she feels like a sucker for giving in. She swipes over to the messaging app.

Looks like you made a friend. She's beautiful.

Dorothy does a double take. Who is this?

Don't keep her all to yourself, now. She could take you far.

A shiver runs up the arm that holds the phone, as though someone has given her an electric shock. She almost drops it to the floor.

Whoever this is, they've got to be talking about Isabella. What else could it be about? But her link to Isabella is buried behind a fake email account, a fake name. There's no way anyone could know she has anything to do with the account...not unless this person is some world-class hacker type. Works for the National Security Agency.

Who is this? She goggles at the screen again. **UNKNOWN NUMBER.**

There's an easy way to fix this. **NUMBER BLOCKED.**

She feels a crumb of satisfaction—*there*—but does she feel any safer? Back in control?

Not so much.

She returns to her work but keeps looking over at her phone, expecting it to ding. There is an electric tension in the air that she tells herself is just nerves and exhaustion. She racks her brain to figure out what else it might be about.... The only beautiful woman she's hung around with recently is Villeneuve, and everyone was forbidden to take pictures during the shoot. Nothing adds up.

Dorothy has just started to forget about the incident when her phone dings again.

UNKNOWN NUMBER.

It can't be the same person. She blocked them.

Her heart speeds up. She's jittery and she gets mad at herself. Why should she be nervous? She's done nothing wrong—well, not *that* wrong, just used proprietary data to make an avatar but it's not like she's done anything illegal with it. Just posted it on socials.

I know what you want, Dorothy. And I can help you get it.

She stares at the words in disbelief. Who is this? How can they claim to know what she wants—she doesn't know herself.

That's not really true, though. Oh, she has some secret desires, but she hasn't laid claim to them yet. Good girls aren't supposed to want things, or expect to be rewarded or recognized. Dorothy has always been a good girl. Turning in her assignments on time, never skipping class. Helping her elderly neighbors and never expecting a reward. Listening to her parents instead of sneaking off to parties in the woods. Helping her mom through that one dark time.

She looks at the messages again. It's a scam, it's got to be. It reads like superaggressive marketing, some crazy scheme devised by criminals in a third-world country.

This is harassment. Don't text me again or I'll report you.

Send.

That sounds weak, even to Dorothy. She tries to go back to work but her concentration is shot. With every second, she expects her phone to ding again.

But for now, it's silent.



four

The first video featuring Isabella comes out a week later. Dorothy doesn't dare use anything close to the footage she made for Villeneuve's reel. It takes a bit of searching to find a program that will manipulate Tomas's footage of the singer to have the figure dance, then overlap Isabella's face and body. Dorothy makes Isabella do a few popular TikTok dance trends and the result is far from perfect, but after four days of polishing and tweaking, she decides it's good enough. It's less than twenty seconds long—how much scrutiny will it get anyway? That first image still rests at under four hundred likes on Instagram; it isn't like there's a legion of fans waiting breathlessly for the next release.

She uploads it to Isabella's new TikTok account on Thursday night, followed by posting to Isabella's Instagram. She decides to camp out in the office to work on a new reel she's been assigned. Tomas's business at this point is mostly trying to attract new clients, and he's created a digital twin of a country music star who wants to up his video presence. Country music is not Dorothy's thing, so it's grating to listen to his music pumped through her headphones as she works on his spec reel.

She can't lose herself in her work, and every few minutes her gaze drifts over to her phone, lying face down on the edge of her desk.

It hasn't even been an hour yet. It would be stupid and demoralizing to check it now. *Get back to work.*

It would be different if she were working on something for Isabella. She'd enjoy that. But this country singer with his too-shiny eyes and leering (definitely leering) face is off-putting. It's like she's making a commercial for a pedo. Or a demon. Maybe that's her way into it.... She starts outfitting him as a demon with red skin and horns and cloven hooves, surrounds him with flames and smoke and a half dozen singing, dancing demon girls....

She gets lost in her work and by the time she remembers her phone, two hours have come and gone.

She thumbs over to Isabella's new TikTok account. Predictably, there aren't many views, just over a hundred, and those numbers are a miracle for someone with no followers. Instagram is better; the reel has a couple hundred views. It's a start, she tells herself, but it's hard to keep up the pretense of satisfaction. It's hard to be patient. Her heart sinks.

She's about to return half-heartedly to her assignment when an alert pops up on her phone. She's got a DM on her Instagram account—hers, not Isabella's. Highly unusual, since she rarely ever posts to Instagram and can't remember the last time anyone had DMed her.

She opens the app and goes to messages. The DM is from username BigBounce93.

Don't be discouraged. You're on the right track. Isabella has the potential to make your wildest dreams come true.

She goes to BigBounce93's profile, but there's nothing but a stupid stock photo of a red balloon floating against a bright blue sky. **0 FOLLOWERS; 5 FOLLOWING.**

She grits her teeth and thinks back...doesn't remember seeing that username before but that doesn't mean anything. You don't have to approve

followers on Instagram, not like on Facebook. She can block him, however. Her fingers hover above the screen.

Instead, she types. Who are you? Do I know you?

The pause feels infinite before the reply pops up. We're all friends here, aren't we?

Her skin crawls. Something about this feels off. Maybe it's just a run-of-the-mill internet troll? How has he connected her to Isabella?

Of course I know you, Dorothy. I know all about you. I know you were picked on, ridiculed, harassed. But I want you to be happy. Don't you deserve happiness?

This is so, so freaky. He's a creep, right? Obviously. Some loser who hunts down women on the internet and scares them to make himself feel powerful. She should block him. She should send his username to the Instagram authorities, ask them to look into him—not that anything will be done, she expects. It's not like he's posted pictures of child porn or animal torture. As a matter of fact, he looks like he hasn't posted anything at all.

You want Isabella to be popular, right? To get all the attention you deserved but never got. You want Isabella to be a celebrity. A star.

It's hard to get attention online. You've seen that already. But I can do that for you.

Ah, here it is. The pitch. The scam. She should block him—again—and her finger hovers above the screen. But. What harm is there in finding out what he's trying to sell? Maybe it's real. Maybe he's the guy who makes eight-year-olds into YouTube millionaires unboxing toys online.

Instead, she types, How?

That's for me to know. It's my secret.

She stares at the words floating before her eyes. Who else have you done this for? Anyone I would've heard of? She's taunting him. Prove it.

The reply comes right away. That's not how this works.

This is crazy. Why is she even talking to this guy? She's giving him exactly what he wants: attention.

And yet...it costs her nothing. Even if he's jerking off in his parents' basement...and she can't imagine what she's said or done that would give anyone, even a horny teenage boy, an erection. So, tell me how this works.

Your next video will go viral. I guarantee. You'll get all the attention you ever wanted.

Okay, this has got to be a scam. She's heard of stuff like this: You pay someone with a bot army and they flood your account with thousands, tens of thousands of likes and follows. It looks good, the numbers are impressive, but there's nothing behind it, no real audience, no real connection.

I get it now. It's a scam. I put up a video and you give it a couple thousand likes
from bots.

Not thousands. Millions. From real people who will love Isabella and hang on her every picture, her every move, her every word. You will be loved. Worshipped.

Anger starts to flare inside her again. If this is legit, why haven't I heard of you before?

The silence before he responds is mocking. Maybe you have.

She slows her breathing. Could he be telling the truth? You see the most unlikely people going viral, after all.

How much do you charge for this voodoo?

This isn't about money.

She waits for him to go on, to explain what he'll expect in return for his black magic, but there's nothing. It must be sex, then—what else is there? He must be some really awful troll, breathtakingly ugly, or into really perverted things to extort strangers over the internet. Maybe he wants her to turn Isabella into a sex thing.

Try OnlyFans. I'm not going to make manga porn for you.

It's not about sex, either. You think too small, Dorothy. You need to stop being afraid all the time. Don't let the world hound you into hiding your gifts.

That stings.

What do you want in exchange?

I'll let you know when the time comes.

That makes her blood run cold. *I'll let you know...* Only a fool would agree to something as open-ended as this. He must take her for an idiot.

Yet...

Do we have a deal?

What is she agreeing to, really? It's not like she's signing a contract. It's two strangers exchanging DMs. She's no lawyer but she's pretty sure none of this would stand up in court. Whoever is on the other end of this conversation, he's a liar. Someone who wants to make himself feel better by making promises to strangers. It's sad, really, that this is how he tries to make a connection. She says yes, the next video bombs, and then she never hears from him again. What has she got to lose?

His words—*You need to stop being afraid all the time*—echo in her head.

Okay, she types.

Done, he replies.



five

She needs to make a second video.

She sinks deeper into her chair behind her workstation. To tell the truth, she feels silly about what just happened. Some anonymous person texts her with promises and she's just going to do what he says? It's got to be a prank or a hallucination, but when she paws through her phone, the texts and DMs haven't magically disappeared. They're still there. However, no matter what she tries, she can't get the phone to give up the telephone number or user account associated with those messages. She prides herself on being pretty savvy about security stuff—figuring all that out for Tomas has made her better than most—but getting past privacy barriers, getting ISPs: That's for the police or the feds.

Make another video and put it up before midnight, the troll's next message read.

If she's made a deal—and it looks like she has—then she might as well test it out.

Dorothy racks her brain for ideas. No dancing, no singing—those have been done to death. There is no way Isabella will stand out from the crowd. Aside from those, however, she comes up blank. She starts to panic.

She's almost ready to throw in the towel, when it comes to her. Most of the comments—the ones that aren't pornographic—are about Isabella's hair. People are obsessed with it. As well they should be, Dorothy thinks huffily; it took her long enough to create it. It's hard to get hair to look realistic, especially in close-ups. It's the texture and the arbitrariness of the strands that make it difficult. So much work, in fact, she's loath to go back to it or change it in any way. There's a reason Disney princesses keep the same hairstyle throughout a movie, that it looks like they're wearing a hair helmet. (With the exception of *Brave*: Merida's hair was fucking awesome. Dorothy read that Pixar took three years to create a special software; luckily, some of this magic has leaked into the VFX community since then.)

Mostly, people can't believe that the complex waterfall of gold and amber is Isabella's natural color. "You must spend hours in the chair," more than one person wrote. "It must cost a fortune every time you go in for color."

It's time to mess with their heads.

Dorothy slips on headphones and cues up music, even though it's so late that there's no background noise to block out. She needs to get into the zone and stay there for however long it takes.

It's easy to pull together a hair salon. It doesn't need to be spectacular; it can be something predictable. Bright lights and white fixtures, but the mirrors are canted away from the frame so she doesn't need to deal with reflections; no reason to make it more complicated than it needs to be. Then she creates a stylist—again, nothing earth-shattering. She throws together a woman who looks more like a tattoo artist than hairstylist, with black locks under a bandanna, black leggings, and a flannel shirt with the sleeves ripped off. She decides to name her Adele.

Next, she plunks Isabella in the stylist's chair, tucked up like a long-legged pixie, spinning around playfully while Adele asks Isabella what she wants to do with her hair. "Not color! Leave my color alone," she jokes. Dorothy has Adele part Isabella's hair close to the scalp and zooms the camera in—a tricky shot, making the scalp look real—to show that there are no roots. This is, ostensibly, the woman's real hair color.

Then she has Adele stand beside the chair, hip jutted out, regarding one strand of Isabella's impossible hair. "So, what do you want to do?" she asks.

Dorothy chews on this conundrum for a minute before it comes to her. Hairstyles. She'll put Isabella in a variety of hairstyles.

But not in the usual way.

It takes all night and into dawn. Changing the styles isn't the hard part: The hard part is matching the multihued colors as they are bundled, curled, or braided into these new configurations.

The stylist's chair spins and then stops, and there is Isabella in a new, outrageous hairstyle. A cascade of barrel curls. Spin. Stop. A confection of braids, like something out of *House of the Dragon*. Spin. Stop. Isabella in an updo fit for Audrey Hepburn. In each take, Isabella laughs, scrunches up her adorable nose, makes faces. She is beautifully joyful. Carefree. Reveling in her freedom.

Everything the world tells a girl she's supposed to be.

Everything Dorothy has been told she is not. Not delightful, not submissive.

At the end, she has Isabella chirp, "This is the best part of being a girl!"

Exhausted, Dorothy crawls onto the couch in Tomas's office. There's just enough time for a catnap before the others will start trickling in. It's impossible to sleep, though, because her head is spinning. She's having second thoughts about that last line; it makes Isabella seem brainless, like that talking Barbie that said, "Math is hard."

Her creation is anything but brainless.

As silly as it is, the video is good, she's sure of it. It has the potential to go viral. It needs a little more work, and she has to dig in on the voice part, but she can almost not go to sleep for her desire to keep going. On reflection, even the last line can stand. Isabella made it seem innocent, natural. Only a curmudgeon would take offense.

However, the video won't be ready to go up before midnight. Not if it's going to stand up to Dorothy's expectations, and it's not ready yet. She's

nervous—is the deal she made for real? Is she throwing it away by failing to make the troll’s deadline? Surely that deadline is arbitrary. Surely, she can post it tonight by midnight—if it’s real.

She smothers the hope that has burbled up in her chest. *Don’t be a sap. That was a troll. Some subhuman pranking you. Forget about it. What you’ve made is awesome and when it’s ready to be released, it will deserve every like it gets.*

Dorothy raises her head from the scratchy couch cushion. Somehow, she did manage to fall asleep and...what time is it? She lifts the phone to her face. **8:10 AM.**

Fuck...everyone will be showing up soon. She’s in the same clothes from yesterday. Will Angelica notice? What a stupid question, of course she will. Dorothy needs to run home and shower and change clothes. And then there’s the matter of the alerts crowding her screen. Not for her—they’re for Isabella’s accounts. Dorothy’s brain goes white with fear for a moment. What the hell is going on? She thumbs over to Instagram and is shocked to see there is new content up, a reel.... It’s the video she worked on last night.

And it has thousands of likes.

Her brain somersaults, like she’s been spun senseless. How did this happen? She doesn’t remember posting the video. As a matter of fact, she remembers thinking it needed more work. And what about the metadata? She frantically pulls up the video and sees that the metadata has been stripped, just like with her previous content. Nothing is different—except that the likes and comments are going through the roof.

Girl, you are so beautiful!

Your look is to die for

I want your hair!!!

Dropping back into her seat, Dorothy goes through the logs. It takes some doing, but she finds a line entry that shows the video file was transferred to her cloud drive at 6:43 a.m.—when she was asleep; she

knows she was asleep. From the cloud drive, it looks like it was uploaded to Isabella's Instagram and TikTok accounts.

But this is impossible. No one has the passwords to those accounts but Dorothy.

Only it looks like somebody does. Or figured out a way around those platforms' security protocols, but that, too, is impossible. That would be big, big news. If someone had figured out a way, people would be talking about it. Accounts would be plundered, wrecked. There's no way it would stay a secret.

Dorothy rubs the spot between her eyes. She feels a migraine coming on fast and strong, like a tidal wave.

She thumbs over to the DMs. Did you break into my accounts last night? What the fuck do you think you're doing?

But there's no reaction.

There's nothing she can do but wait.

Instagram, TikTok...the numbers click upward as she watches, like some crazy game show. *This can't be real*, she thinks, but she knows it is. What she doesn't know is how the troll is doing it. He must have a backdoor into these platforms so he can mess with the numbers (though, again, this would be so earth-shattering that no one would be able to keep it a secret, *no one*). He might have a programmer at each platform on his payroll....

After all, what's the alternative? *Really* crazy shit. Like, right-wing conspiracy, Big Brother manipulating reality kind of shit, the stuff those crazy podcasters like to talk about.

Holy cow: The video, only five hours old, has amassed nearly ten thousand likes on Instagram, and a staggering twenty-five thousand on TikTok—and is still climbing. Her hands tremble as she jumps from one app to the other. She's never seen anything like it.

"Hey." Ric is suddenly standing outside the door to her office, his brows knit in consternation. "You need to release the Dougan file if you're done with it. And get off the phone—you're supposed to be working."

Ric telling someone else to get off the phone: That's rich. She'd say something snappy back if she weren't knocked speechless by what's going on. *This is crazy, this is crazy...* The numbers keep flipping like the arrivals board at an old-fashioned train station. She cannot imagine where or how it will end.

The part she doesn't want to think about is what this might mean about the troll.

And what kind of bargain she's made.



six

"Jesus, have you seen this girl?"

It's Tomas's voice, a week later, ringing out from the depths of his office.

Given the explosion of activity surrounding Isabella's video, the one Dorothy has come to think of as "the hair video"—over a hundred thousand followers on Instagram before the first week was over, thanks to the twenty-second video in a hair salon, and nearly as many followers on TikTok—Dorothy knows it was only a matter of time before someone at work would bring her up. They are in the media-and-culture business, in a way. They're supposed to be on top of what's popular, what's resonating with people, particularly young people.

Dorothy isn't prepared for the squawk from Tomas's office, though. That tone means he wants to discuss this, so she locks her screen and heads to the reception area, where they usually hold team meetings. Tomas, Angelica, and Ric are gathered around the huge monitor on the wall. The two technicians stare at Tomas's phone, while he stands to the side with his arms folded. Dorothy sidles up to Angelica to see what they're looking at, though she has a giddy feeling that she already knows.

Isabella's face beams up from the screen.

Tomas points at his phone. "Anybody know who she is?"

Angelica shrugs as she hands the phone back to him. "I heard everybody is trying to find her. *Wired* supposedly has a private detective trying to track her down."

"That's smart." Tomas pushes the phone into his pocket. "We should try to find her first."

Angelica narrows her eyes. "Why? What are we going to do with her? We're not a modeling agency."

"No, but anyone that hot"—Tomas means virally, not physically attractive; *hot* is his favorite adjective—"we should be working with. Do a spec reel for her! Give her the #NotJessPerry treatment! Now, c'mon. Think. Girls who look like that don't just appear out of nowhere. Somebody has seen her before. Somebody knows who she is."

"I'm sure it's just a matter of time before her story comes out," Ric says. He already looks half checked out of the discussion, starting to glance at his phone.

Ignoring Ric, Tomas digs his phone out again. "Does anyone notice anything funny about this picture?"

Dorothy's heart starts to sink. What has he noticed? If anyone will catch a mistake with the graphic—an inconsistency, a flaw—no matter how small, it will be Tomas.

He picks up the remote control for the monitor and Isabella's video pops up on-screen. She looks amazing, and Dorothy can't help but feel a bit proud.

Angelica and Ric go up to the screen, their faces only inches away. They murmur, but neither offers any thoughts. No surprise. They don't know what to look for. They're not as knowledgeable or as fastidious as Tomas.

Their boss paces from one side of the monitor to the other, leaning forward occasionally for a closer look, only to lean back again. "I mean—and I don't mean to sound paranoid or anything—does anyone else think this might not be a real person?"

Dorothy has to check herself to keep from gasping.

“You think it’s AI? Somebody made it with Sona?” Ric practically presses an eyeball to the screen.

Tomas sucks at his teeth. He doesn’t like to even hear the word—*Sona*—uttered in his presence. “Yeah. It looks so...” He shakes his head like he’s shooing away a bug. “Could it be Sona?”

Ric shrugs. “If that’s Sona, it’s the best job I’ve ever seen. But if that was the case, the Sona guys would be taking credit for it.”

Angelica murmurs but doesn’t commit, as usual. Tomas keeps staring, until after a few more passes, he gives up. He calls out over his shoulder as he heads back to his office. “Dot, get on the metadata. Do your magic. Whatever you can find. Tell me what you see.”

Dorothy suppresses a sigh of relief. She can tell him whatever she wants. He isn’t going to poke through the metadata—that’s grunt work—and he’s the only one on the team besides Dorothy who knows what to look for. That’s her domain. She’s gotten lucky.

The rest of the internet seems to be catching on to Isabella quickly. By the next week, there are a handful of pieces speculating on the identity of the girl of the hour. Who is she, where is she from, how could she have waited this long to post pictures of herself online? There’s no history of selfies, no early appearance on Facebook or any of the other social platforms. Her accounts are new; she hasn’t been slowly building an audience over years. One or two people speculate that Isabella could be manufactured, a product of Sona, only to be met with a chorus of ridicule. There’s no way the person in this image is virtual, the experts all jeer. *Look at the skin, look at the hair. Look at the earlobes and the hands*, notorious weak points. *She’s flawless. She has to be a real person.*

Dorothy doesn’t know what to think about Isabella’s sudden popularity. It makes her head reel. The constantly climbing numbers, the attention, the stream of comments that she cannot keep up with...it’s all too

much. She tries to compare it to the case studies from class, but there is no comparison.

She'd like to think it's all due to her. Her work, her talent, her vision.

But doubt gnaws at her, like a mouse clawing its way under the baseboards.

"Get me an answer. She's AI: yes or no," Tomas snaps at his technicians on his way out the door that evening. "*The New York Times* is asking me to weigh in on it." He won't want to miss this opportunity to appear alongside other big VFX names, which would confirm he's one of the leading figures in the industry. "I don't want to look like a fool."

Dorothy wants to confess. *She's fake and she's only possible because I used your programs, your techniques. Because I borrowed your genius.* It all comes back to him. True, she put in innumerable hours of work, but the honors—once the truth is known, and she knows better than anyone that this is inevitable—belong to him. Thinking this, reassuring herself, makes her feel better for not telling him now. And a part of her can't wait for him to know. She imagines his surprise, then his pleasure at seeing how she's blossomed under his guidance. He'd be happy for her, she just knows it.

"Were you here all night again?" Angelica says as she arrives at the office the next morning. In her peacoat and holding a cup of tea, she looks around suspiciously. "Eww, it even smells bad in here."

Dorothy ignores her. She waits for the coffee machine to finish brewing, hands in the pockets of her jeans, hoping her coworker doesn't notice she is wearing the same clothes from yesterday. Again. She makes a mental note to stash a change of clothing in the file cabinet in her office.

Angelica brushes by to put her lunch in the refrigerator. The tech is vegan and Dorothy imagines she brings in the same lunch every day, tofu and bean sprouts. Cheerless, just like Angelica. "It's not healthy, you know, the number of hours you spend here," Angelica says. "And it's probably not legal. You could get Tomas in trouble if word got out."

That sounds like a threat, but she isn't going to let Angelica get a rise out of her. "I'm trying to get a project finished," Dorothy says. "I don't see why you should be so concerned."

It's as much of a rebuke as she dares. Angelica is obsequious around Tomas but with everyone else she can be downright mean. A bully. "Maybe he's giving you too much work, if you can't get it done in a normal amount of time. Maybe I should talk to him about it."

Normal is subjective in this line of work. VFX is notoriously difficult. It calls for a crazy level of attention to detail. Obsessives are best at it, but it's all too common for folks to fall down rabbit holes and to burn out. A nice person might worry about Dorothy's health and well-being. That's not what's going on with Angelica.

"Just mind your own business," Dorothy mumbles as she walks away.

They are called together again in the lobby after lunch. Angelica pokes at her mushroom-flavored ramen-in-a-cup and Ric stares at his phone, the illuminated screen reflecting off the round lenses of his eyeglasses. Tomas stands in front of them, foot tapping the floor, visibly impatient. Stupid Ric; he's going to get fired before long, Dorothy is sure.

"So, everyone had homework assignments," Tomas says loudly enough to make Ric look up. "Who wants to go first? Angelica?"

She exaggerates her chewing. He can't expect her to speak with her mouth full, can he? "Okay. Dot?"

Dorothy pulls the sleeves of her hoodie over her knuckles on both hands. "Yeah. I looked at the metadata on her upload to Insta. It was corrupted, or erased...whatever. I looked into the user account, but that was fake, too. The email associated with it is privacy-protected. No history on the email account, either. It appears to have been set up just for this Insta account."

Tomas crosses his wiry arms. "A real mystery woman, huh? Doesn't want to be found."

"Or she just likes her privacy," Dorothy mumbles.

"If she likes her privacy that much, then why post to Insta at all?" Angelica asks, finally finished chewing. "There's more coming, wait and

see. She'll be selling Bitcoin or doing OnlyFans or something."

Tomas lets it drop. He nods in Ric's direction. "What about you? What did you find?"

Ric seems surprised to be called on. "I, uh, tried to find out where she took that picture. Did a reverse search on the photo. Tried to find the location, but it came up nada. The background has got to be a composite or something."

"That's it?" Tomas is unimpressed. He snorts, then turns to Angelica. "What about you? Talk to your friends? Find out anything?"

Angelica can be dangerous. She can find things out if she really wants. She claims to have friends working at each of the social platforms, people able to dig into the data that isn't shared with the public. The most damning thing would be if she got hold of Dorothy's ISP, but for that post to Instagram she used a VPN that bounced a half dozen times around the world, randomizing the ISP. It would take a certified wizard to trace it back through each of those routers.

Angelica looks down, avoiding Tomas's eyes. "The jury is still out," she says. "Apparently, the guy at *Wired* isn't getting anywhere either. Whoever this chick is, she doesn't want to be found. But a lot of these internet sleuths are getting involved. Once she puts up more posts, they'll have more to work with. She's going to make a mistake at some point, and that's when we'll have her."

Tomas isn't pleased. "That's why it's important that we find her *first*. Everybody keep on it. That's your number one priority."

This is met with silence, the techs unsure whether he's joking. Tomas can't mean it, of course, not with deadlines for two projects—a commercial for a German car company and footage to be used in a movie trailer—breathing down their necks. He expects them to get everything done, and all three technicians know it.

Everyone ambles back to their offices, but Dorothy stays in the beanbag a little longer while her heart rate slows. Her secret is safe for now, but how much longer will that last?



seven

THERE'S A NEW QUEEN OF INSTAGRAM

Erik Pinto, *New York Times*

Unless you are living under a rock—or its modern-day equivalent, you're not on social media—you have heard of Isabella.

Three months ago, her first picture appeared on Instagram. [photo credit: Instagram] The account had no followers, nor did it follow any accounts, not even the most popular celebrities of the day. The profile contained no information, only that Isabella (if that is her real name) is a “happy” and “sunny” girl.

Anybody with eyes can see that she's beautiful. Tall and curvy, like a dancer of Scandinavian descent, with eyes that change color depending on the light and a mane that includes every shade of tawny. A lot of what's appealing about her seems conventional, but the longer you look, the more you realize that something else is going on with her, too. She's the kind of girl that inspires insane levels of devotion.

Yes, Isabella is just a girl, but by the end of the second month, her account had amassed over half a million followers, breaking all of Instagram's previous records.

Social media experts are astounded. “Even well-known celebrities need more than a few weeks to get these kinds of numbers,” said Joe Watanabe, a professor of media studies at the University of California, San Diego. Prof. Watanabe is the author of *Social Dilemma*, *Social Disease*, a critique of social media culture that is taught at universities worldwide. “There has to be an awareness that the account exists before you see this kind of snowball effect. The fact that an account was able to trigger this kind of enthusiasm with so little content and without corporate support is, frankly, a

phenomenon we haven't seen before. It defies explanation. We'll be using this as a case study for marketing for years to come."

"There's a lot of factors at play here," said Sonia Blackwood, CEO of MMLA, the largest social media influencer management firm in the US. "First, and so obvious that I hesitate to mention it here, this woman is gorgeous. Movie-star gorgeous. No, strike that —when was the last time we saw an actress or singer who was able to capture the public consciousness like this? Kendall Jenner, maybe. Pamela Anderson. And then there's the mystery factor. Nobody knows who she is. Nobody knows anything about her. It would be different if you could go to her Facebook page and see all these pictures of her growing up, that sort of thing. Until recently, however, she wasn't on TikTok or Facebook or even Twitter. She's an enigma. Everybody loves a mystery."

People have tried to message her Instagram account directly. I did, in researching this story. There was no answer. If the mention of *The New York Times* doesn't get someone to respond, I don't know what would. For someone on social media, she doesn't seem concerned with playing the fame game.

Thousands of internet sleuths have tried to track down the person behind the account. There are a half dozen groups on Reddit alone devoted to combing metadata and swapping tips for Isabella hunters, which has in turn contributed to the account's skyrocketing popularity. There's at least one website set up by someone who claims to know who this mysterious woman is, but the site is disappointingly thin on facts. But such opportunism is to be expected, in this day and age. Social media abhors a vacuum, after all.

Fans insist there's more to her appeal than just looks. "She seems approachable," said one self-proclaimed Isabella superfan. "Even though she's so pretty, she doesn't seem stuck up. She looks like she'd be really friendly."

Pat Newmann, head of the Western Agency, one of the largest talent agencies in Los Angeles, has offered a million dollars to anyone who can provide him with information that leads to the person behind the account. "A million dollars? It's got to be a stunt," Blackwood said, sounding slightly miffed to have been bested by Newmann in the hunt for the Next Big Thing. "If I know Pat, he'll come up with some way to wiggle out of paying. But his instinct is right: This young woman is going to be a major star of both new and old media, if she can overcome her shyness."

Nice article in the Times, the text on Dorothy's phone reads. Happy?

Unknown number.

She thumbs a response. How long is this going to last? I bet it's going to be over tomorrow.

The reply comes back immediately. We're just getting started.

WHAT DOES OUR OBSESSION OVER ISABELLA TELL US ABOUT OUR MENTAL HEADSPACE?

Alyson Tybold, *Vanity Fair*

Like hundreds of thousands of women, I was at first intrigued by the mysterious creature on Instagram known as Isabella. Sure, she's a beauty, but there are thousands of beautiful women in the world. Okay, maybe Isabella has the kind of beauty you rarely see, Elizabeth Taylor-level beauty, so maybe we're talking hundreds instead of thousands...or maybe dozens?

The point is, we've seen beautiful people before. The interesting phenomenon with Isabella is that so many people have come to instantaneous agreement about this woman's desirability. It's at once both obvious—duh, just look at her—and a singular occurrence, like an earthquake or tsunami. Hurricane Isabella struck out of the blue.

The debate over standards of beauty has taken place in the public square for as long as there have been villages. Women are held to standards of beauty practically from the time they learn to walk. We develop an instinct for what society considers beautiful: a rose, a butterfly, a sunset.

But for humans, that beauty is mostly beyond your control. You're born with a certain hair color, eye color, body shape. You're going to be tall or short, fat or lean, depending on your genes. Genetics also determine more important things for us—health, intellect—but it is appearance that we fret over the most.

Now there's Isabella.

Plastic surgeons I've spoken to have told me they have clients coming into their office demanding to be remade in Isabella's likeness. Women want her cheekbones or jawline, the arch of her brow.

What women really want, it seems, is Isabella's hair. Her hair has infuriated thousands of hairdressers, who have been bombarded with requests for "Isabella's hair." "That is not a natural hair color," Daniel Monte of Monte Salon, one of the highest-end salons in Manhattan, told me. "We are talking hours and hours of painstaking layering to get that depth of color. And depending on what your natural hair color is, it might not be in the cards for you. But clients are refusing to accept this. They'll pay any amount of money, but I won't do it. The chance that they'll be disappointed is too high." Her hair is so singular, they've come up with a name for it: *spun honeygold*. "It sounds like a new variety of apple," one hairdresser said to me snarkily.

Is this where social media has been leading us? Is it no longer acceptable to be merely normal? Are we average mortals doomed to endlessly compare ourselves to the blessed thanks to social media? And the unusually blessed, at that—at least one plastic surgeon told me that there's something unnatural about Isabella's proportions. "Not impossible," said Dr. Larry Feinblatt of Lenox Hill Hospital. "She could've had some ribs removed to get a waist that tiny. It's been done before. But those legs, that neck...it suggests that either the photo was tampered with, or this young lady has giraffe or alien in her DNA."

You must be happy. At this rate, you'll be able to quit working for someone else. Isabella will make you rich.

Unknown number.

I never said I wanted to leave Tomas. A knot rises in Dorothy's throat at the idea. She owes him everything. She could never be so ungrateful.

I know what you want, Dorothy. Even if you can't admit it to yourself.

NOTABLE QUOTES

Vulture

"All I know is, my ten-year-old daughter is obsessed with Isabella. She cares more about that woman than she does her old dad. It really makes you question the nature of reality, you know? There's a whole generation to whom the virtual world is the real one, because perception trumps reality. Perception *is* reality."—Actor Heath Hemsworth, apparently oblivious to the irony of his statement.



eight

The time has come to do something Dorothy has put off for too long. She needs to dig into the comments on Isabella's posts.

She's known she needs to do it, but it's daunting. Isabella may have only a few pieces of content, but those few pieces have prompted thousands and thousands of comments. That anyone can have instantaneous success like this is thanks to TikTok. In the old days, Dorothy's professor said, you needed to work hard to build an audience, but TikTok's algorithm had made it possible to find success overnight. She's proof: It happened with one short video. There's a niggling in the back of Dorothy's mind, though: It can all be over tomorrow, too. The internet is littered with overnight sensations.

Dorothy senses, however, that her creation might have more staying power. She's leaped into public discourse, after all. There are articles about Isabella, memes have been created, and there are hundreds of reels in which girls dissect every little thing about her. Reels in which girls parody the videos, dress like Isabella, and imagine her in silly, outlandish scenarios. Dorothy cannot resent them because it's obvious these parodies were made with love.

It's mind-blowing.

And keeping up with the whirlwind of interest has been...exhausting. Keeping up with her workload in the office and making sure Tomas is happy is a big part of that exhaustion. She barely has time to eat, and forget about sleep. When was the last time she slept in her own bed?

Dorothy grabs a ramen bowl from a little place downstairs and returns to the office to read in peace. Everyone else is gone already, naturally. This is her favorite time of day, around eight p.m. The sun has sunk low on the horizon, bathing the office in a dim orange glow. She thinks about going home, but now the mere thought of leaving the office has her feeling anxious. She's afraid she's becoming agoraphobic. It's her own fault: She's conditioned herself to feel that the studio is her only safe place, close to the servers. The remedy is to force herself to go home sometimes, but as long as she believes that she can stop anytime, she puts it off. Enables her own worst impulses.

It's because of the work, she tells herself. No one can resent you for being a hard worker. It is, perhaps, the last permissible vice in America. She's just doing what Tomas told her: She must be totally devoted to her craft.

She lifts the lid on the takeout container and is hit with a cloud of salty, briny steam. Her stomach growls in response. It's the first time she's eating today. Another thing she's going to have to watch: Hunger can mess up her head. She might start making mistakes covering her tracks.

She decides to work backward. There are only a handful of posts and short videos, but even the throwaway ones have racked up hundreds of comments now. The one that supercharged Isabella's career, the hair video, has too many to even estimate. There's no way she's going to be able to read every one of them. There are tools that parse through comments and spit out a gist, but she doubts this would be very useful. A quick scan of the first twenty or so reveals a pattern. Most are vaguely encouraging, conveyed by a couple of words or an emoji. Every fifty or so, the predictable request for Isabella to shed her clothing or set up an OnlyFans account.

But buried every hundred or so comments is an offer for a sponsorship deal. Dorothy checks out the companies and finds most dubious: purveyors of shoddy junk, fast fashion, pyramid schemes. A few turn out to be intriguing. An offer to promote a line of women's athletic clothing, or to be a spokesperson for a new brand of aromatherapy products. Inquiries from several big-name hair-care companies—of course. The Saudi tourism board has invited Isabella to participate in a weeklong promotional trip to a new resort. The trip will consist of only female influencers to show how friendly the kingdom is to women.

While the latter is out of the question, Dorothy's interest is piqued. This is what she's dreamed about: making a living as an influencer. While trips and free clothing are enticing, she wonders how she could earn enough money to live on. She's read that some influencers make over fifty thousand dollars per sponsored post. A celebrity could get six figures. Eight-year-old kids make millions of dollars in one year doing videos of unboxing toys. There has to be a way to make the jump.

Most top influencers, she knows from reading, have managers who help them book lucrative deals. The easiest way to get her foot in the door will be to approach agencies who represent up-and-coming talent. Most of them simply give influencers access to a database of current offers from sponsors and advertisers and you apply to be considered. Dorothy doesn't like this approach; it seems beneath someone as clearly special as Isabella. Not to mention, potentially complicated. They might require interviews in advance, or in-person meetings, which would be impossible for her, obviously.

She needs to eliminate some of these steps. She needs a manager who will immediately grasp the possibilities with Isabella and, eager to sign a future superstar, will let her set her own terms. She needs to find a manager who has clout and can argue on Isabella's behalf.

She scrolls on and on, a little upset at the thought of missing an offer, afraid to leave anything on the table. With her luck, she'd skip by the most important one, the one that would change her life overnight. Such things are known to happen.

The repetition, however, is numbing. She wakes up a couple of times when her head has rolled forward. Sleep calls her like the pied piper. She's about to stop scrolling for the night when her eye falls on it.

Beautiful girl, you must be careful. You are making a deal with the devil. Only misfortune can come from it.

For a second, she can't breathe.

Somebody knows about her deal. But how? It forces her to believe there might be more to what happened, that whatever was done on her behalf to make Isabella's video go viral is a well-practiced scam and she is the latest victim. *My God, my God, what have I done?*

Her heart lodges in her throat.

The poster's handle is cicada449. She looks up his account on Instagram and it is the typical mishmash of random street shots and stupid memes. *Are any of these selfies?*, she wonders as she squints at photos of clusters of people. There aren't many captions, but the ones she can find all have the same slightly off English, leading her to think the person behind the account might not be a native English speaker, maybe isn't even human but a poorly programmed bot. Or it could be orchestrated to appear that way. Is everything on the internet a scam?

At least his account isn't just leering pictures of pretty young girls and his rude thoughts. Though nothing she sees here helps her understand why he would leave that comment on Isabella's video...or if he knows about the troll. It has to be her own guilty knowledge making her feel this way.

Then she remembers an incident from college, a conversation that came up during a group work project. It was a late night, everyone punchy from too many hours together, too many Doritos and energy drinks, when one of the boys asked if anyone had heard the story about this entity that lived on the internet and could grant you your greatest desire.

But in exchange, it would destroy you.

They howled with laughter. They told him it was an urban legend. A stupid made-up story like Slenderman or any one of a hundred spooky

myths that had proliferated online. A boogeyman to scare kids into behaving themselves. He cringed as they hooted and threw crumpled-up chip bags at him. He blamed it on too many edibles and never mentioned it again. Nobody did.

Could cicada449 be the boy from her class? Unlikely. It seems that he might know about the troll, however. She wonders if she should send him a DM, using Isabella's account, and ask outright what he means. He's her first and only lead.

The thought makes her nervous, though. Chances are cicada449 is just one of the millions of sad, lonely people on the internet looking for attention. She doesn't want to be lured into a conversation with a crank. Her instinct—ingrained in her from years of being warned about strangers, particularly strange men—is to avoid him altogether.

It only takes one more second to make her decision. Blocked. *Goodbye, cicada449.* That should take care of it.



nine

Pain wakes Dorothy in the middle of the night. *Just my luck, the one time I'm able to sleep in my own bed,* she thinks as she rolls over in the dark.

She reaches down to touch where her legs are throbbing. They're not hot to the touch, but they pulse with an electric sensation. The pain is in the bone and her joints. She remembers getting something not quite similar when she was young, which her mother called "growing pains." *You'll outgrow them in a few years,* she reassured Dorothy at the time. It seems unlikely that this could be the same thing. Adults don't get growing pains. Her height hasn't changed in years. Besides, she's pretty sure she saw a YouTube video that said growing pains are a myth. Something else is responsible for the tingling. No doubt Dr. Google will tell her she has bone cancer or an autoimmune disease.

She gets out of bed to take painkillers, then goes back to her bedroom, closing the door behind her. Lying on top of the bedding, she massages her thighs and her shins. It does nothing to disperse the pain. She feels achy all over, too. Maybe it's the flu.

That's probably it. She caught a low-grade flu riding the bus. She's heard you can pick up tuberculosis or malaria on public transportation,

though those might be urban legends. This, too, is probably nothing. She'll try to sleep it off. Surely she'll feel better in the morning.

She's getting dressed when she notices her pants don't fit right. At first, she thinks it's because she's sleepwalking through her morning routine and she's done something dumb, like grabbed a pair of Kim's pants by mistake. On a second attempt, she does no better. She can zip them up fine, but they are, inexplicably, shorter. The hem stops a couple of inches above her ankle like they're capris. But she doesn't remember noticing anything off the last time she wore this pair. She peels the pants off and reaches for another pair in her closet, one she hasn't worn in a long time, but it, too, is short, riding above her ankle. *Huh*. These pants are dry-clean only, though, and have never seen the inside of a washing machine or dryer. The dry cleaner must've shrunk them by mistake. She makes a mental note to bring it up the next time she stops by.

But to have two pairs shrink like that—strange.

For the entire day, Dorothy feels as though her muscles are all knotted up, as though she spent the night crouched in a box or tucked up in a ball. She desperately needs a good stretch, for four people to each grab an arm or leg and *pull*. Dear God, this is so freaky. Maybe it's time to see a doctor or a chiropractor. She knows what he would say: She spends too much time hunched over her laptop. Stop scrolling and look up, for God's sake. Or that she's growing. She's on the short side—well, for her family, anyway—and maybe her body is finally catching up. Nothing to complain about there.

She's up and down all day at the studio, walking to the kitchenette for more coffee and then later needing to head to the bathroom, predictably. It feels good to move, though. Her knotted limbs thank her. *Work it out*—whatever “it” is.

Angelica corners her during one of the kitchenette breaks. “You’ve been up and down the hall all morning. You sick or something?”

Dorothy would just as soon blow her off, but it doesn't pay to ignore her prickly coworker. "Maybe. I don't know. Too much coffee, probably."

Angelica squints at her. "Is something going on with you? You seem different."

Great. She can see it, too. "I don't know what you're talking about."

She skims Dorothy head to toe, searching for a reason, a cause. "You should stay home when you're sick," she says finally. "No one wants your germs." She marches off, carrying a mug of herbal tea. Every exchange with that bitch is like a punch to the gut, at least when Tomas isn't around.

The exchange distracts Dorothy from her body's soreness and makes her think about the office, her job. She's made Tomas's studio her entire life. She thought if she followed his example and made work her sole focus, everything would fall into place. That hasn't happened, though. Tomas is well-meaning but he's too busy to give her much attention, and there's no closeness with her coworkers. Angelica is toxically competitive and Ric is lazy. They haven't become her family the way she hoped they might, sharing long hours together on projects, going for late-night dinners afterward.

Her phone vibrates. When Dorothy checks the screen, she sees it's a text from her mom. Thinking of you, sweetie. Want to make sure you're doing okay. Don't push yourself too hard. Call me sometime. You know I worry about you.

She knows why her mother worries and she's sick of it. She knows, too, what her mother would have to say about Angelica. She'd tell Dorothy not to obsess about her. A wave of disgust rises up as Dorothy pushes the thought away.

She'll survive today's little exchange with Angelica, but Dorothy's instincts tell her this isn't over and that one day she's going to have a problem on her hands.

Later, Dorothy is about to start packing up for the day, when her phone buzzes. She glances at the screen. Unknown number.

I bet you have questions about what's happening to you.

It takes her a minute to put the pieces together.

He's messing with your head, she thinks, the hand holding the phone shaking. *That's how he gets off*.

Another text floats onto the screen.

Don't worry about it. You're going to love it when it's done.

I told you I know what you want. Better than you do.



ten

It's time to do something about the sponsorship offers languishing in the comments of Isabella's videos. Dorothy has been preoccupied by the mystery aches and pains shooting down her now longer (frankly, practically stiltlike) legs, which have started to move up to her hips and rib cage. She wakes up feeling sometimes like she can't breathe, like her ribs are contracting, curling in on themselves. Smashing her lungs, squeezing her heart and whatever other organs are in there, to make her torso narrower, more like a teenager's. No, come to think of it, she was never this pipe-stem gaunt, not even when she was eleven. This is not normal—*NONE OF THIS IS NORMAL*, her brain tells her frantically—but Dorothy pushes all such thoughts away. She's much too busy to worry about whatever is happening to her...and it's not like she's sick, aside from the burning in her bones and tightness in her chest. How can she be sick, though, when her skin is pink and glowing? When she looks healthy?

And the sponsorships. They call to her every time she looks at the balance in her bank account. On what she earns, she can't save any money. She feels like she's one emergency away from having to beg her parents for help. She'd like to buy a car—this is Los Angeles, after all, and riding the

bus is admitting defeat—but you can't pay an auto loan with good intentions. Just one fat sponsorship and she could buy a car outright, no loan necessary.

So, the most important thing is to get her ducks in a row in order to make Isabella real—as real as possible, as real as she needs to be to start earning money. After a day of hard thinking, Dorothy decides to hide the fact that she's virtual from the sponsors. Given all the fervor over deepfakes and AI-generated figures, someone would find the path that leads back to Dorothy—after all, at least one person already has. And she can't risk Tomas and Catrina Villeneuve finding out what she's done.

After reading up online, Dorothy decides that all she needs are a few allies, a few intermediaries to put between her and the sponsors. So, she sets out to do just that.

Dorothy checks her phone from the sidewalk: 3:10 p.m. Right on time for her appointment.

She hates leaving work early and couldn't help but feel she was doing something wrong as she stepped out the door while the others were still at their desks. She told Tomas she had a doctor's appointment, in keeping with her ongoing aches and pains and unexplained growth spurts, which are getting harder to ignore by the day.

She has an appointment with a professional, but not a medical one.

The building looks to be crumbling around the edges. It isn't, of course, but it gives off strong vibes of neglect. It's tucked around the corner from a busy street. The street is home to a laundromat, a nail salon, and a bodega advertising payday lending. A couple of very sketchy people hang out on the corner like scouts in a dystopian movie. Everything about the location screams that only losers and never-rans would keep an office there.

Perfect.

She walks straight to the elevators—no guard in the tiny, dark reception area—and presses the button for the ninth floor. The roster

downstairs (surely neglected, letters falling off the black board) says the lawyer's office is in room 913, but when she arrives on the requisite floor, it seems like a ghost town. The carpeting is bleached in streaks from sunlight that falls between neighboring high-rises. There's no sound or light coming from behind the doors she passes. She stands before 913, listening for signs of life. It's as quiet as the others. Maybe the whole thing is a scam. It could be where the police run a sting operation to catch runaway criminals.

Finally, she just walks in.

There's a small anteroom with a desk and a few chairs, but no receptionist. It reminds her of the TV show *Better Call Saul*, furniture from a rent-by-the-month place, cheesy prints on the wall. On the far side of the room, a door opens onto a second room, where a middle-aged man sits at a desk, peering at a computer monitor. He wears glasses with thick tortoiseshell rims and makes no attempt to hide his thinning hair.

She hovers in the doorway to his office. "Uhm, Herb Zeilman?"

He tears himself away from the computer screen to look at her. "Yes?"

"I'm your three fifteen. Dorothy."

She found his name on a matchbook among her roommate's things. Why Kim needed the name of a seedy lawyer, Dorothy doesn't know, but she isn't surprised by it either, such is the mystery of her roommate. She's wary of going to someone with a better pedigree: She needs to take this first step and, having no firsthand experience with lawyers, is afraid she won't be able to afford it. Too, she needs to control this person and suspects that a lawyer will be far smarter than she is. After all, they've spent years in college, gotten that law degree. Have to have some kind of cunning.

However, a man who leaves matchbooks for petty criminals to find probably needs the money and maybe has levers that mean he can be controlled.

And what she's asking him to do is easy.

He simply needs to be able to keep a secret.

Zeilman gestures to the chair on the other side of his desk. "What can I do for you?"

He expects her to talk about child support, a deadbeat dad. Or maybe about suing an employer, a restaurant where she slipped and wrenched her back. She enjoys the surprised look on his face when she asks, “Do you know what an influencer is?”

He admits to knowing the term but not much more. His lack of knowledge means Dorothy has the rare pleasure of explaining something to a man, an older man at that. She watches his eyebrows twitch and his mouth shift, ferret-like, as she speaks, as he puts the pieces together in his head. She’s decided in advance not to tell him her whole plan. That would be foolish and unnecessary. He doesn’t need to know that she borrowed Tomas’s equipment and methods. As a matter of fact, the less he knows, the better.

“Have you heard about an influencer named Isabella?”

The lawyer shakes his head. Of course he hasn’t; until a minute ago, he wouldn’t have been able to name even one influencer.

Dorothy opens her phone, thumbs to Instagram, and pulls up Isabella’s account. She taps on the very first picture, the most recent post, because the numbers are the most impressive: It’s up to three million likes now, with comments in the thousands. Seeing the numbers makes her smile.

Light from her phone paints the lenses of Zeilman’s glasses white and obscures his eyes as he studies the image. “Wow, she’s beautiful.”

“That’s the woman I told you about. I guess you’re not on social media much.”

“No...but wait, I think I might’ve read something about this in the newspaper.” He takes the phone without asking for Dorothy’s permission and begins scrolling through the pictures. Isabella walking in the desert, bright sun and solar flares nearly bleaching it of all color. A very short reel showing Isabella petting a llama’s nose. The infamous hair video, the numbers now in nosebleed territory.

“Probably. I’m here representing this woman. Isabella.”

The lawyer looks up from the phone, seeing Dorothy for the first time. “You know her?”

I am her. “Yes. I’m here because she’s about to sign some deals with sponsors and she needs a lawyer to handle the paperwork.” She tries to keep her voice from shaking.

His brows furrow. “Why didn’t she contact me directly?”

“She wants to keep her anonymity, as much as possible, so she made me her intermediary.”

Zeilman looks skeptical. “How do I know you really do represent this woman?”

“I guess you won’t. But I do. No one’s going to come out of the woodwork to sue you, if that’s what you mean.”

He tilts his head, the wheels turning inside. “How do I know she’s doing this of her own free will? That she’s not being held hostage somewhere, or that she’s *compos mentis*?”

Look at him, a man who represents small-time drug dealers and gets them off on technicalities, suddenly getting scruples. But she prepared for this. She says nothing, just stares at him coldly. *You’re not fooling me.*

He caves. “Okay. Okay.” He probably thinks this isn’t going to be a big deal. So, some girl gets a few sponsorship deals, free makeup for a few years, trips to failing resorts, and cruises where everyone comes down with dysentery. What does he care? Everybody does something a little shady these days. He’s just the facilitator. “What do you need from me?”

An hour later and a few hundred dollars lighter, Dorothy is back on the street, headed for the subway. That went well. She made sure Zeilman understood that Isabella values her privacy above all else. He is not to share Dorothy’s part in this with anyone. He will wield power of attorney for the shy Isabella, signing the contracts that Isabella’s business manager brings to him. And as she explained all this to him, she could tell by the shadow of suspicion in his eyes that he knew what he was signing up for wasn’t on the up-and-up, and he raised no objection.

The next step for Dorothy will be to set up a bank account to process the checks. She will probably need to set up some kind of front company as owner of the account. She’s seen this sort of thing mentioned on television programs. Drug lords and guys looking to avoid paying out to their ex-

wives apparently use them all the time. She will read up on it soon. One more research project. And Zeilman undoubtedly has some prior experience here. He can probably help with that. The whole thing, though far over her head and unlike anything she thought she'd do in her life, fills her with excitement. It proves she's far more capable than anyone gives her credit for, more capable than she's dreamed herself.

This is a good feeling. No, it's better than *good*. It makes her feel vindicated after being underestimated her whole life.

After setting up the shell companies, there is one last step she will need to take. The one that scares her the most.

She has to get Isabella a business manager.

She has to talk to Claire Cameron.



eleven

This next step is by far the scariest part. The riskiest part.

Claire Cameron's name came up early in Dorothy's exchanges with Tomas, back when she was still in school and Tomas's career was taking off. Claire was one of a new breed of business manager in the entertainment industry, representing entrepreneurial creatives as well as breakout influencers. Tomas was so proud of signing with her. "She represents Keith Olde Heuvert and Balthus Langan," he said breathlessly, rattling off the names of social media royalty. This woman did some work for Graham Jones, the British technocrat bankrolling Tomas's studio, and it was Jones who asked her to take Tomas on.

Dorothy has her heart set on getting Claire to represent Isabella. It would make a statement. It would let professionals in the industry know to take Isabella seriously.

After seeing Claire in action, Dorothy is even more determined.

Today she has her chance. Claire is in for a meeting with Tomas. Dorothy is in the reception area pacing, practicing what she's going to say. She's had a few opportunities the past few days but chickened out each time. *I need to work out exactly what I'm going to say.... I'll catch her next*

time; she has to leave for another appointment.... The truth is simple: Dorothy is afraid of Claire. Afraid of her strength and her cool control. She sees the way Claire is able to control Tomas, keeping him from spinning out, getting him to agree to do stuff her way. She's a hundred times smarter than Herb Zeilman, stronger than any other person she knows. She's as admirable as she is frightening.

And Claire can end everything for Dorothy if she doesn't like what she hears.

It's stupid, this obsession with Claire. It's playing with fire, but isn't that what every arsonist does, the same way murderers return to the scene of the crime? Flirting with disaster; it's the only way to know you're alive. It's like Dorothy has a death wish, the way she's fixated on Claire.

No, it's not self-sabotage, she assures herself. It's because Claire is the best, top of her field. And she's certainly the best that Dorothy is able to reach out and touch; who knows how hard it might be to get through to anyone else? Everybody wants to be an influencer these days, ergo their business managers must be in high demand. She might as well try the one who's her best chance at success first.

The big meeting between Claire and Tomas breaks up. Tomas leaves with Angelica and Ric, armed with laptops for a presentation to studio executives, the meeting Claire has just finished prepping him for. Claire is in Tomas's office alone, packing up her things and ordering an Uber.

Dorothy tiptoes up so quietly that Claire jumps when she raps on the open door. "Claire? Do you have a minute?"

A hassled look passes over the woman's face briefly, but Dorothy resolves not to back away. Claire only uses her poker face when she needs it. She isn't the classic Hollywood denizen. She isn't an ex-actress. She probably was slender when she was younger, but she's stocky now, like a former athlete in middle age. She has California-blond hair, though, and the sun brings out the freckles on her cheeks.

She stops stuffing files into her satchel. "Yeah, sure. What's up?"

Dorothy heads to the couch in the corner, relieved when Claire follows her. They sit facing each other, the business manager clearly confused as

she waits for Dorothy to speak. Dorothy draws in a long, slow breath, choosing to live in that moment for a split second longer. She has good reason to stall. Everything she's worked for so far could be undone. Claire might reject what Dorothy is about to propose, or she could choose to expose her to Tomas.

For the hundredth time, Dorothy questions whether going to Claire is the right thing to do. But...Isabella is her baby and it's been a difficult birth. Claire's good at her job and Isabella deserves the best chance at success.

And for reasons Dorothy can't pinpoint, she feels she can trust Claire.

"First, you have to promise me that what I'm about to tell you stays between us. You can't go to Tomas. You can't tell anyone. But I promise you it's worth it."

Dorothy's afraid she's lost it right then. A look flashes across Claire's face, distrustful and, frankly, a little disgusted. Dorothy's miscalculated. Tomas is Claire's biggest client—if not her biggest one today, surely the one with the most potential. There's no way Claire will prioritize her above Tomas.

"Look, Dorothy—" Claire is using the voice she saves for when she needs to take control. Dorothy has heard her use it dozens of times with the sometimes flighty Tomas.

Dorothy cuts her off. "This has to do with Isabella."

That stops the business manager in her tracks. It's the only thing that would. Claire will want to meet the online sensation. She'll want to be the one who bags her as a client. Claire isn't immune to ambition. It's what makes her so successful.

"How do you know Isabella?" Her stare cuts into Dorothy like a laser. "Tomas told me he hasn't been able to locate her."

"Yeah, that's right. Eventually I was able to track her down, but when I got in touch with her, she begged me not to tell anyone." The trick here is to sound as pathetic as she possibly can, like an inexperienced kid, so Claire won't crush her.

Claire narrows her eyes. "So...if you're not supposed to tell anyone, why are you telling me?"

“Isabella asked me to help her. She’s overwhelmed. She doesn’t know how to deal with everything that’s coming at her. The requests, the sponsorship offers. She needs a business manager, and I told her she should talk to you.”

Claire sits back, tapping a finger against the armrest. Thinking. Processing. At least she stopped scowling. “Okay. Give her my number. We can talk.”

“She won’t talk on the phone. She only wants to communicate through email.”

Her brow furrows again. “Why? Is there something wrong with her? Doesn’t she speak English?”

That will limit her potential in the eyes of sponsors, Dorothy knows, but for the moment, it’s as good an excuse as any. “Her English isn’t great. She’s working on it, though,” she adds hastily.

“Where does she live? Is she overseas?”

“I’m not sure. Somewhere in Europe, I think.” Europe appeals to Americans. Best to keep it vague, though. “She’s a digital nomad.”

Claire’s clearly weighing it all. After a minute, she rises. “Sure, have her email me.”

“And...you’re going to keep your promise? You’re not going to tell Tomas?”

Claire gathers her things but turns back to Dorothy. “I don’t know that, technically, I made a promise but...no, I won’t tell him. But you should think long and hard on where your loyalties lie. Tomas has given you a lot.” As though Dorothy needs reminding. “You’re holding out on him.”

It makes her look bad, but Claire doesn’t know how much Dorothy has done for Tomas. Dorothy does the work of at least three people, and thanks to having access to all company files, she’s learned that she’s paid less than the other two. Tomas knows she’s worth more than either Angelica or Ric—he says as much all the time—and can afford to give her more money, but he chooses not to. That assuages her guilt somewhat, even if she isn’t going to tell Claire.

It's clear how much value he places on Dorothy. Then why didn't he take her to today's meeting? The other two techs went with him, but she's been left out. She's stopped looking the other way when these slights happen, stopped pretending he means nothing by them.

He himself told her: No one is going to look out for you the way you should look out for yourself.

I'm just looking out for myself.

She follows Claire at a distance as the woman leaves. From the window, she watches her climb into the back seat of a black SUV.

It's over. She's done it. She can breathe again. A sensation passes through her body like a wave of icy cold seawater. Relief. Excitement. Is this the high a thief feels after a successful breaking and entering? She's invincible. Her deceit hasn't come falling down around her ears—yet.

It still depends on whether Claire will keep Dorothy's secret.

That evening, sequestered in the darkness of her tiny bedroom, illuminated only by the light from the monitor, Dorothy works on an email to Claire. She reads through it over and over, anxious to strike the right balance between naive and streetwise, with her English just awkward enough to support what Dorothy told Claire. It's like being an actress or even a spy, she thinks, but she's been trained for this by a lifetime in social media, where no one is who they pretend to be.

When she's finally happy with it, she hits "send," launching it through the VPN that will bounce it through a volley of servers all around the world.

Dear Ms. Cameron,

I am looking for a manager. I have been told that you are excellent.

I am new to this. I hadn't planned to become an influencer. I have not posted to social media before. Friends talked me into making that video, and now they tell me I should be an influencer.

The most important consideration for me is privacy. I want to create my own content without outside interference. No photographers or directors. Will this be possible?

She hesitates to include the last part, but she can see no way around it. Isabella is an artificial construct, as one of her professors liked to say instead of “avatar.” She is a virtual entity who will never be able to step out of the virtual world. Dorothy needs to set expectations from the beginning; otherwise this will not work.

Claire’s response arrives in Isabella’s mailbox before midnight.

Dear Isabella,

I’m very happy to make your acquaintance. Congratulations on breaking records on Instagram and TikTok. Very impressive! Considering your newness to social media, this is a remarkable accomplishment. It bodes well for your future. You’re a natural!

I believe your potential as a social media influencer is practically unlimited. You could be bigger than Mr. Beast one day if your career is handled correctly. But in order to plan the right path for you, I need to know more about your goals. Is being an influencer your end goal? Or do you see it as a steppingstone to another career, perhaps as an actress, singer, or designer? Do you hope to get your own TV show one day, or makeup or clothing line, or become an entrepreneur? I’m afraid I’ve seen too little content from you to give advice on which path might be best. You are, obviously, a very beautiful woman, but that beauty might be overshadowing other skills and talents.

As I said, I believe your potential is limitless, but you may find that building an audience may be a bit harder than what you’ve experienced so far. You must show that you’re more than a pretty face. I can help you figure out the best way to show yourself to the world. Together, we can plan your next moves.

The potential for influencers continues to grow, which means you could become a very rich woman. It won’t happen overnight, and it will take a lot of work and the right guidance. Now is the best time to strike. Everyone is curious about you. Your name is on everyone’s lips. I’d like to arrange a time to talk....

Dorothy’s eyes glaze over as she skims the rest. Her heart speeds up, starts pounding. This is becoming real too quickly. She might be rushing things. This is Claire Cameron, after all, the sharpest person Dorothy has ever met. It doesn’t seem possible to fool someone like her forever. Before long, she’ll realize something funny is going on, and it’s probably too much to hope that by the time that happens, she and Claire will have made so

much money together that it'll be possible to trust the manager with the truth.

All those things Claire brought up—singing, acting, starting a business—are impossible. Those all require a real, live person. They are all grounded in the real world.

Dorothy is fine with leaving the physical world behind. The only good things to happen to her have happened in the virtual one.

Fingers poised above the keyboard, Dorothy takes a long minute to compose the response in her head before she starts typing.

Dear Ms. Cameron,

I can assure you that I have no other goals in my life right now except to have a career as an influencer. I have no talent for singing or dancing. I have never studied acting. I have nothing to offer but my face and my unique style.

She smiles at the last bit. Her style is not unique and that's by design. Being too individualistic hurts you in this game. Her ability to interpret trends—that's her strongest talent.

I think this is what draws people to me. They can sense that I am what I say I am and they are drawn to that honesty.

Again, Dorothy smiles. Everybody says they want honesty, but nobody is honest anymore. Our real lives are dull and tedious, at best the materials with which we construct new stories about ourselves. At worst, painful memories to hide.

I must come back to my previous question: will I be able to work alone and produce content by myself without interference? I insist on my privacy. Also, I regret that I cannot do a phone call with you at the moment. I am recovering from a bad illness and have lost my voice temporarily.

She wrinkles her nose at the last part. It stands out as an obvious lie. She can't think of any other way to put Claire off, at least until she can find a voice synthesizer to fabricate a voice for Isabella. There are plenty of

voice programs for AI; it's a matter of doing the research and picking one. The team tried using one to dub Villeneuve's voice for a commercial, but it still sounded too robotic, worse than auto-tune. The singer needed to go into the studio to record her part. Of course, Villeneuve's voice is well known, and Dorothy can't use it. All she's recorded for Isabella, to date, are a few squeaks and mumbled words on short videos. It's not like she's recited long monologues or given a speech. Nobody knows what Isabella really sounds like.

When Dorothy wakes up at three a.m., there's an answer from Claire waiting for her.

Dear Isabella,

I think you might be selling yourself short. I would love to set up meetings for you with producers who could evaluate your potential in these other fields. But let's set that aside for the moment. I can see that you're anxious to get started.

Regarding your question about working alone, certainly it can be done, but you should know that it would limit the types of sponsorship deals you would get. Higher-end sponsors typically bring in their own film crews. Higher production values mean that the content can be used in a variety of ways, not only on TikToks. These people are professionals, Isabella. Your content has been excellent so far, and no one could argue with the results, but I think the potential of content produced by the top videographers and photographers in the field is, well, I'll say it again: unlimited. Again, however, we can start from where we are. I can find you sponsorship deals that will allow you to have complete artistic control, and we can talk in the future about changing the model.

If that sounds good, please sign the attached representation agreement and I'll get started lining up offers.

Dorothy rolls on her back and pulls the blanket to her chin, happiness flooding her body. She's done it: She's gotten Claire Cameron to agree to be her manager. In that moment, it seems like nothing's impossible. Dorothy has plugged into the flow of the universe and is riding a wave of positive energy. Manifesting the life she wants, the life she deserves.

Could there be problems down the road? Without a doubt. But she will deal with them the way she's dealing with them now. She's proven that she's as talented and capable as anyone. Even Tomas.

Success. It's much sweeter than she even imagined.



twelve

Pain wakes Dorothy before the alarm clock.

She's grown used to pain these days, though the pain in her legs has gone from sharp to dull, a mere vestige of what it was before. The stabbing sensation is back, but it's moved to her head.

She lurches out of bed and staggers down the hall to the bathroom, mindful not to wake Kim as she passes her door. She stands staring at her face in the mirror. It might be that she's groggy and not quite awake, or that pain is distorting her perception, but the face staring back at her does not seem like hers. It's like looking at a badly painted portrait. It takes a few minutes to put her finger on it, but eventually she figures it out: Her eyes are slightly out of alignment. *Crazy*. She leans closer. Maybe she's always been like this but didn't notice until now? Her eyes are probably more sensitized to detail after endless hours spent checking and double-checking Isabella's face. But this?

This is not my face.

She started to have bad headaches about a week ago. Never being prone to headaches before, she did her best to figure out what might be happening with Google, the poor man's doctor, typing every query she

could think of into the search engine. The answers most often pointed to a variation of a migraine.

But now she sees this is no ordinary headache. A migraine can't change the contours of your face. The pain is mostly in the bone. A toothache? She's heard toothaches can result in pain elsewhere. And swelling, which could explain the physical change...sort of. It's been a while since she's seen a dentist. Still, her gut tells her it has nothing to do with her teeth.

As impossible as it may be, it appears that her skull is changing shape. The evidence stares back at her from the mirror. Her face is reshaping itself. The only explanation she can think of is that something is growing inside, pushing on bone. Perhaps a tumor?

However, there's the perplexing lack of other symptoms that would signal cancer. No nausea or dizziness or weakness. Still, at this point, Dorothy can admit that it would probably be good to make an appointment with a doctor—of course, first she'll have to *find* a doctor. There's been no time for that since she moved to L.A. Neighborhood emergency clinics have filled the gap, but she can hardly go to one for a cancer screening. For that, she'll need a specialist. Luckily, Tomas pays for health insurance for all his employees, so at least money isn't an issue. Yet.

She tries to quell the jackrabbiting of her heart, to tell herself it can't be cancer or anything else so serious. She felt this in her legs first, and nothing bad came of it, after all. Nevertheless, she hears her mother's warnings inside her head: *You work too hard, you're going to make yourself sick*. After losing one child, Teresa became an unapologetic worrier.

Still, what's been happening to Dorothy can't be what her mother had in mind.

It takes a while to find a good picture of her face for comparison (that's what comes of being so camera-phobic all her life). She supposes if she asked her mother, she'd get a photo right away, but she doesn't want to alarm her. Eventually she finds one they took in the studio shortly after it opened, a team shot, with Dorothy hiding in the back wearing the slightest of smiles. Most of her face is visible.

She enlarges it, then compares that face to the one in the mirror. The difference is startling. First, the shape of her eyes has changed. They are now larger, with a slight uplift at the corners. The color has shifted, too: What was once a dark brown has lightened to a sun-bleached walnut. She's always thought her nose clunky and vaguely masculine but now it looks like she's had plastic surgery, the sides shaved and the tip now in a cute little ski jump. Her cheekbones have lifted and broadened—not ridiculously so, but there is a noticeable difference. And her chin is narrower, her lips fuller.

Unless it all happened overnight, the changes must've been subtle as they were occurring, as no one has said anything to Dorothy. She can't say how long this has been going on because she paid no attention before it started hurting last week. And she took defensive measures once she realized it was happening, like wearing her hair down so it covered part of her face, keeping her hoodie up, and wearing sunglasses whenever possible, even in the bodega getting dinner from the steam tables. People invariably stare at her like she's the Unabomber.

Someone who knows her and has not seen her in a while—her family, for instance—would be shocked. She makes a mental note: no Zooms, no FaceTimes. Not that there have been many of these since she moved. They would suspect plastic surgery, but Dorothy doubts a face could be reshaped to this extent without serious recovery time. Shaving bone, inserting prosthetics...She's read plenty of celebrity gossip, and she knows what it takes. And it would probably look freakish and Frankenstein-like, unlike the face in the mirror, which looks natural and smooth and absolutely flawless. Maybe they'll assume she was going for an "Instagram face," with Botox and injectable fillers plumping out her cheeks and lips.

But the face in the mirror is not one of those cookie-cutter examples of low self-esteem and body dysmorphia. The face in the mirror is unique, and it is gorgeous.

And she cannot deny it: She looks quite a bit like Isabella.

It hurts—by God, it hurts—and it's scary, but if this is the result...if the troll is truly behind this...it will be worth holding on, to see how she

will end up.

Her heart speeds up with excitement, not fear.

But what she sees in the mirror—it's impossible. People don't molt and morph and become someone new. She can't be turning into Isabella.

If that's true, what *is* she turning into?

She shakes her head and the throbbing pain flares up, her skull protesting at being handled ungently.

I'm hallucinating. It's all the time I'm putting in. Maybe everyone looks a little like Isabella to me now.

It's a mirage, she decides.

Because she has no alternative.



thirteen

Dorothy searches through the boxes in the upper shelves in the office kitchenette. They keep a couple of kinds of coffee pods on hand and she's looking for mocha, the kind she likes. No one else drinks it—Tomas has some special blend he brews on a machine in his office, and Ric, too lazy to make his own, brings coffee from the shop down the street—and Dorothy is the one who keeps the kitchenette stocked, so she knows there should be one box left. It seems to have disappeared.

If she didn't know better, she might think someone stole it just to piss her off.

Dorothy's on the top of the stepstool when Angelica comes in. She stands at the sink, rinsing out her mug while pinning Dorothy with an evil-eyed glare.

Dorothy climbs down from the top step. She avoids looking at Angelica as she fiddles with the coffee machine, shoving in a regular coffee pod, trying not to feel resentful. But Angelica continues to stare at her, as though she's caught her shoplifting.

Finally, she speaks, lifting her mug as she points at Dorothy. "What's going on with you?"

It's been three weeks since the pain in her head spiked. "What are you talking about?" Dorothy continues to keep her back to her nemesis.

"There's something different about you."

Dorothy freezes. *Shit.*

Angelica takes a step closer.

"I cut my hair." Dorothy has not cut her hair. She wears it the same way she has every day.

"No, that's not it. It's your body." Angelica gestures at her.

"I lost some weight. Maybe that's it." She hasn't lost weight. If anything, working nonstop with little to no time to exercise, Dorothy should have put on a few pounds.

Angelica clucks her tongue disapprovingly. She's one of those tiny women, short and with a skeleton seemingly made of twigs. Dorothy sometimes fantasizes about sitting on her and squashing her flat, snapping those toothpick-thin bones. "No, that's not it. I think...you're taller? Your head used to be in line with the handles on those cabinets, but now you're, like—what, a good three inches taller? More? Are you wearing inserts or something?"

She figures Angelica has been keeping tabs on her—is obviously obsessed with her—but this is borderline psycho. She's tempted to say she's wearing heels, but a glance at her feet would confirm that she's in flats, as usual. "No, I don't know what to tell you.... You're mistaken, that's all," she says and shrugs. "Maybe your eye for detail isn't as good as you think it is." To an artist, your eye is everything. She can't help placing a zinger.

Angelica clamps her mouth shut, scowling.

But it comes up again later. Dorothy is sitting with Tomas to go over her work, and he suddenly stops, looks at her quizzically, and asks, "Did you get some work done or something? You seem different." Then he adds, "It's nothing to be ashamed of. Lots of people in L.A. do it."

"Tomas!" she says, feigning indignity. "I'm pretty sure you're not supposed to ask that."

He flushes and rubs the back of his neck. "Look, Dot, it's undeniable. You've changed." He gestures at his own face. "I hear women are going to

surgeons to get the ‘It Girl’ face. You know—like Isabella.... You’re not getting Botox, are you? Injectables are so popular in L.A.”

“Botox? I just turned twenty-two.” Hot and cold flush through Dorothy: fear, panic, struggle for control.

Tomas waves his hands as though he could wave it all away. “I only ask because I’m concerned about you. You haven’t been yourself lately.”

If he only knew. “Angelica said something to you, didn’t she?”

He flushes deeper. “Yeah, but it doesn’t matter. I noticed, too. Are you sick? Is it something you didn’t want to tell me?”

Is she sick? “Yeah, a little tired, maybe. Out of sorts.” That’s what her mother used to say when her father got on her back about her depression. Like it wasn’t normal to be depressed after your baby died. Like there was a timeline and expiration date for something like that.

“Maybe you should see a doctor.”

“It’s not that serious.”

“Dot, I guess you haven’t noticed, but you’ve definitely shot up. I saw it, too, when you were changing bulbs on the lighting rig. You didn’t need the stepladder this time. You could just reach up and—” He makes a plucking gesture. He gives her an imploring look. “You’re not taking growth hormones, are you? Steroids? That stuff is dangerous.”

“Growth hormones?” It hasn’t even occurred to her. “No.”

“What else could it be? You’re not getting plastic surgery?”

Dorothy leaps out of her chair. *Danger, danger.* “What is this? Some kind of inquisition? All because I grew a couple inches?”

“*Something’s* going on with you. I have an eye for these things, you know.”

She turns away, not wanting him to see her redden. She can’t get him to leave her alone with a cutting remark, not like with Angelica. Besides, some small part of her likes the attention from Tomas. And she was hoping whatever it is that’s happening to her would stop before it got any worse, that it isn’t as bad or as noticeable to others as it is to her.

“Plastic surgery? Wouldn’t there be scars? Does it look like I’ve had anything done to my face?”

He waits a beat before answering. “No.”

“Well, then.” She reaches for her laptop. She needs to get out of there, to get away from him, to splash cold water on her face. Then maybe she’ll wake up from this awful nightmare.

“Look, something’s going on. People don’t change like that. Maybe you should see a doctor.”

Dorothy desperately recalls some body-positive message she saw online. “Maybe it’s just a second puberty or something. You know, growing out of my teenage self, into being a woman. I feel fine, okay?”

“But you don’t know. It could be—serious.”

“I’ll go to the doctor if that’s what you want, but you’re worried for nothing.” She tries to stop but can’t. Her anger has reached the breaking point. “It’s Angelica, isn’t it? She put these ideas in your head. She was hassling me about it in the break room this morning.”

He looks at a loss. “Yeah. And I don’t know what’s going on between you two—”

“It’s not me, Tomas. She hates me and I don’t know why. It’s been like this since the day I walked into the studio. I think she’s one of those people who has to pick on other people to make themselves feel better.” Dorothy hates to say this; she knows how it looks. When women fight, men tend to see it as petty and...inevitable. A catfight on the playground, feeding into the cliché that women can’t get along.

True, Dorothy has always been a loner. An introvert, though not always by choice. It’s not easy making friends.

And Dorothy knows about bullies. Only too well.

“If I were to leave—” she starts.

“Don’t say that.” He looks stricken.

“—she would start picking on Ric. Mark my words. Talk to her, please. Tell her it’s all in her head.”

“But you *are* changing.”

“It’s none of her business.” And she’s saying that, by extension, it’s none of his business either. And he knows she’s right.

Slowly, he nods. “Okay. I’ll talk to her.”

But Dorothy cannot shake the feeling that this won't be the end of it.



fourteen

Social media is an implacable beast.

Dorothy knows what you need to do to climb the influencer ladder: You need to produce new content and you need to do it more or less on a schedule. Followers need to be fed a constant stream, tethering them to you. Your story must have familiar plotlines and recurring characters, like a soap opera. This means Dorothy needs to start populating Isabella's life with ancillary characters, even if they're not real and will never be seen on camera. Isabella must have friends and, more important, enemies. Drama, crises, and resolutions.

To do all this, she needs time: time to look at content produced by others, particularly by the influencers she hopes to unseat. People are drawn to trends because they like to feel like they're in the know. But how can she do all this when she's working like a dog for Tomas? Her days at the studio are, paradoxically, busier and quieter than she thought they'd be. Because the studio is establishing itself, actual work is sporadic. Tomas goes out to talk to producers, television studios, and movie executives to convince them to try his magic. *Think how AI will change storytelling*, he tells them. *It's possible to do the impossible: age your stars, make them younger. Put them*

in eye-popping stunts. Anything you can imagine, my team of magicians can do it for you faster and cheaper than you can do it for yourselves.

He takes the same message to the stars themselves. He offers them magic. *Once we create a digital twin for you, you'll be able to be in more than one place at a time*, he tells rappers, rock stars, movie stars. *You won't have to say no to anything.* He shows them snippets of Villeneuve's reel, with the singer's permission. *You hang on to the rights for your image, your voice, and we'll do the rest*, he promises them.

A few bite. *Show me what you can do.* Tomas has the team work on reels on spec. Their time is paid for by his investors, a well that seems to overflow with money. How long until the well runs dry, nobody knows. Dorothy doesn't know what will happen to her if and when it does, another reason she looks over her shoulder anxiously, eager to steal a few minutes to work on the next TikTok video for Isabella. The avatar is her golden parachute, her plan B. Tomas is the troll, offering fame and riches to people who are already famous; Dorothy is the acolyte spinning, spinning for all she is worth, trying to stay alive.

More frequently, however, the movie people and the studio executives, the rock stars and actors ask, *What about SonaAI? What can you do for me that Sona can't do cheaper and faster?* Tomas goes back to Villeneuve's reel and points out the differences between his team's work and what Sona has created. He points out quality and consistency issues that go unaddressed with Sona. *You can use an AI tool, but you still need a good programmer to fix the problems; otherwise it's going to look cheap and cheesy.* Sometimes they listen, but for the most part they don't take the next step. They say they'll get back to Tomas but then they don't return his calls. Tomas frets that they think he's just being too "artistic," worrying about differences so slight that no one else notices.

And in a few years—heck, maybe even in less than a year—they'll be right. It won't make an appreciable difference if you use AI to make your commercial or entire television shows. The average viewer won't care. It'll be good enough, since they only half pay attention anyway; fast-forward through scenes they don't like; jump from show to show every two minutes,

never giving art a chance to settle. For most people, art has devolved into cheap, unsatisfying fast food, nothing more than simple entertainment to pass the time.

Today, she's working on a reel for a musician, though it feels like a disservice to call him that—he's so much more. He started out as part of a trio of rappers who became big, then he went on to produce other artists, then began collaborating with filmmakers and fine artists and all kinds of creative people. If this man starts working with Tomas, exploring how Tomas's work can expand his creative endeavors, it could open a lot of doors.

Tomas is extremely nervous about the reel, so he's handed the majority of work over to Dorothy. She's flattered but she's also annoyed because it requires all her time and attention, even outside of working hours, and she really needs to create more content for Isabella: another short video, maybe a couple of images. That's not how it works in this business, though, and she knows it. She's supposed to devote all her waking moments to completing the job and to claw back her own time later, when there's nothing pressing.

Even when there's nothing on the schedule at the studio, there's always something for Dorothy to do. That's the kind of person she is. She worries sometimes that she might have OCD or some condition that makes it hard to leave things alone. As if “driven” and “detail-oriented” are nothing more than euphemisms for being crazy or broken in some way, desperate to please others. Desperate for the approval of others. Her neurosis is great for Tomas, not so good for her.

She takes images of the musician and wraps him in a space suit, making him an astronaut. Tomas wants to see him jetting through space because the musician is obsessed with science fiction; apparently he's even a friend of Neil deGrasse Tyson. Tomas has given her a loose and rushed bare-bones concept and expects her to come up with the finished product, thirty seconds with a discernible beginning, middle, and end. He has figured out that Dorothy is a capable storyteller, too, in addition to being artistically and technically gifted. She's starting to believe—thanks to the work heaped

on her shoulders—that she might actually be special. It’s hard to accurately judge yourself. And she can’t help but wonder if some of it is attributable to the one person she dares not think about. The troll.

She doesn’t want to believe that.

When she takes a break to go to the bathroom, she thumbs through TikTok. She swipes through most of it—boring, repetitive, seen it before—but lingers over the better ones, zeroing in on the qualities that make each stand out. As she watches the subject talking or singing or dancing, Dorothy marvels at how easy the creator has it compared to what she must do for Isabella.

For her creation, her baby, her darling Isabella.

Washing her hands, Dorothy studies her face in the mirror. She really is getting to look more and more like Isabella every day. She tries not to think too critically about how it’s possible, because it’s impossible. She prefers to think of it as an unexpected gift, and you don’t look a gift horse in the mouth, isn’t that what people say? A voice in the back of her mind warns that ignoring it is stupid and dangerous. But what she sees in the mirror isn’t a tumor or simple swelling. It’s not a logical process or something that can be reversed—even if she wanted that, which she doesn’t. She’s been given a tremendous gift—to go through life as a beautiful goddess—and only a fool would say no thanks.

Hours pass. Kim returns from her shift at the restaurant stinking of roast meats and garlic. She shares the takeout box of leftovers she’s brought home with her: sautéed spinach and peppers, slivers of pink duck breast. Dorothy wishes she’d brought some of the restaurant’s fine artisanal bread or a piece of key lime pie. Kim avoids carbs like they’re Ebola, but one benefit of the transformation is that Dorothy can eat whatever she wants and not gain weight, not an ounce. Next time she sees her mother, she’ll eat two helpings of the lasagna she loves so much.

If she ever sees her mother again, she realizes with a twinge.

She’s back in her bedroom, laptop resting on a pillow on her lap, back at work on the reel. Sounds from the television drift through the wall from the living room, where Kim watches her favorite Korean rom-com. Dorothy

is laboriously layering textures on the space-suit helmet when her phone buzzes.

She flips it over. The screen is lit up. Your transformation is almost complete.

Unknown number.

The reality smacks her in the face. She hasn't wanted to acknowledge it; she's pretended that it's been a mystery. But there is no mystery: He's behind it, as unreal as that is. The only mystery is how.

"It's you," she says, barely a whisper.

Stupid girl, of course it's me.

He can hear her. She stares down at her phone and remembers something one of her professors said once. *Don't fool yourself. It's always on, you know. Your phone, or Alexa or Siri. It's always listening. It may not always be recording, but it's always listening.*

An icy finger skips down her spine.

Buzz. I'm giving you the opportunity to be Isabella. That's what you want, isn't it?

When she doesn't answer, there's another buzz. You're going to be beautiful. Isn't that what you always wanted?

Well, who doesn't want to be physically appealing? But no, that's not it. That's not what she really wants. It's not what the troll promised, either.

Our deal wasn't for beauty, she types. It's for power. Fame.

Buzz. You're not alone, you know. So many hungry souls. Everyone wants it. And now it's yours. Is what I've given you not enough?

I've made you Isabella's twin. Just like what you and Tomas do for others. Only in this case, you're Isabella's flesh-and-blood twin. Her meat puppet twin.

I've given you what you need to get to the next step.

How is this happening? she wants to ask. She wants him to explain how he's doing what's been happening to her, but she knows he won't. He can't. There is no possible explanation.

The phone falls silent.



fifteen

A few weeks pass. The mysterious aches continue, though Dorothy always manages to talk herself out of seeing a doctor, knowing on a deeper level that it is pointless. Even though the pain has moved primarily to her head, she still has a low, dull ache in her arms and along her spine. Whatever was happening with her legs seems to be over, and even though she has no idea what happened deep in her muscles and bones, she must admit her legs are gorgeous: long and sleek, like a runway model's, like a gazelle's. If this means her arms and torso will become perfect, too, she's willing to suffer a few more aches and pains. She has a litany of excuses, platitudes that allow her to pretend. *It can't be arthritis; I'm too young.... It's because I never exercise. I need to find a yoga class or start running.* As though she has even a spare minute for herself. All her time and energy goes toward Isabella.

One afternoon, Dorothy sits stiffly at the keyboard while Tomas is on the phone. They were going through his presentation for a big film festival coming up in London when the phone rang. She isn't sure who he's talking to, and she wonders if she should leave and come back when he's finished up.

She starts to rise from the chair, but Tomas waves her back, his expression clearly saying, *I'll be off in a second*. That's unlikely, though. Short conversations are rare for him. He throws himself into everything one thousand percent. What he needs is a bunch of avatars, like he creates for other people, so he can be in multiple places at the same time. That would suit Tomas just fine. If there were a magic clone pill that could split you into a number of doppelgängers, he would take it without question.

The good news is that the reel she made for the musician/producer/impresario/wunderkind, Beebo (real name: Franklin), has worked its magic, and the man is on board. He'll be sharing the digital twin Dorothy made for him with his peers and work will come pouring in. Or that's the plan.

"Sure, sure...I'll meet with them while I'm in London. Send me a time and I'll get it on the calendar." Which means chances are high that this meeting will fall between the cracks. Tomas needs a personal assistant but has put off hiring one, refusing to surrender control of his life. Scheduling often falls to Angelica, but she does a terrible job of it, complaining that she has her own work to do. The girl is the poster child for passive aggression.

The gap works to Dorothy's advantage, however. Tomas would like to be a micromanager but he's too busy. That means he doesn't scrutinize logs or metadata or any of the traces that would alert him to anyone doing anything sketchy at work. He trusts them all so much, Dorothy has come to see. Trusts her most of all, which makes her feel proud and guilty equally.

He finishes the call and comes back to sit next to Dorothy, rubbing his face. You can tell he's getting by on too little sleep and too little food. Thanks to their new friend Beebo, Claire got Tomas booked at the last minute to appear at a London film festival to show thousands of people in technology, film, and television what his company has been doing since the #NotJessPerry videos. Ric has done a first cut at a reel showing some of their work, including what they've done with Catrina Villeneuve. There are a couple of seconds of the first spot they did for the cosmetic company, which the singer and the company both signed off on, and Tomas wants to

slip in a few seconds of Dorothy's reel, the part showing Villeneuve as a medieval assassin.

The problem is that it hasn't been shown to the singer yet for her sign-off. Dorothy keeps asking for more time. Tomas has been on Dorothy for days, but she's dragging it out so she has an excuse to access the motion-capture files. Not that it would be a huge problem if Tomas found her using the files after she wraps her assignment, but she doesn't want to take that chance.

"I don't understand why you're not done yet, Dot. You churned out the stuff for Beebo fast enough."

She doesn't need access to Beebo's files. "I can do better."

He cracks pistachios out of their shells and shovels them into his mouth. An open can of energy drink sits on the edge of the desk. He has the natural high energy of a squirrel.

"We can always do better, given enough time. We don't always get that, though. That's the business." He drops the shells into a wastebasket at his feet. "Can I give you some advice? Don't be your own worst enemy. It's hard to know when you're done, sure. Whatever you're working on, it could always be better. But you have to learn when to stop. When to let go."

That's easy for him to say. She's afraid of displeasing Tomas, of being sent back to the drawing board with a few curt words. She's seen him do this with Ric and Angelica. There's nothing worse than a rebuke from Tomas. He can be cruel without meaning to or even realizing it; it's just his personality, the caustic streetwise boy who developed an acid tongue to keep the bullies at bay. Exhaustion has made him worse, in this regard. He's less patient. He's spared her his ire for the most part, though she worries sometimes that might be because she's super cautious. Wound as tightly as a coil. Afraid of making the slightest misstep.

Tomas. She loves him, but lately, sometimes she hates him, too.

He props his feet up on the corner of the desk and pushes the chair back like it's a recliner. "Hey, don't take it the wrong way. I'm just trying to give you the benefit of my experience."

"You're my boss. You're supposed to tell me what to do."

“I consider myself more than your boss. I think of myself as your mentor.” His smile is kind. “I see a lot of myself in you, you know. Starting out, I was just a kid who wanted to be part of this world more than anything but had no one to guide me. I had no idea how to get to where I wanted to go. You should always be hungry, you know. You should always want more. Don’t settle.”

“But I’m not like you,” she says shakily. Deny, hide. “I’m not a trailblazer. I’m not going to invent anything.”

Tomas laughs, his feet slipping off the edge of the desk. “You can’t really believe that. I mean, you’re the most technically advanced person in this office! If you left tomorrow, I wouldn’t be able to find my own ass with both hands. I don’t know how to do half the things you do here.”

“That’s just keeping track of files and security,” she says dismissively. Then she freezes: She shouldn’t have said anything about security. It’s her guilty knowledge pushing through. Tomas probably never thinks about the fact that she takes care of that, too. The last thing she needs is for him to go poking around in there—or worse, bring in someone else to take over.

“Still, if you weren’t here...I don’t want to think about the mess we’d be in. And you took it on yourself to learn how to do all that. They don’t teach that stuff in school. Don’t think I haven’t noticed.” He leans toward her and in that second, her guilt is nearly overwhelming. She’s picking his pockets, basically, and he doesn’t know it. He’s trusting the one person he probably shouldn’t. “Your artwork is great. You’re coming along so fast... maybe faster than anybody I know. You could be one of the best one day, if you keep this up. Better than me.” He laughs again but this time there’s a slight forced quality to it, like it hurts a little bit to say it. “It won’t be long before I’m going to have to watch my back.”

She shakes her head, blushing.

There’s a warning for her in there, too: He’s noticed. *You’re more capable than you let on.*

He looks into her eyes. “All I’m saying is that it’s okay to want things for yourself. You’re talented and you could go far, but you have to want it. No one’s going to give it to you.”

He reads the want emanating off her. Can he possibly know what she's up to? She slides back in her seat, away from him.

"I've noticed that about you, too, Dot. You don't speak up. You don't challenge the others when they say something dumb. It's like you don't want attention—"

It's so crazy for him to say this when it seems like every minute of her day is consumed with the pursuit of attention for Isabella. For her work. "I don't know about that," she murmurs.

"I'm telling you, Dot, if you want to be successful, you have to go out there and take it. You have to make it happen for yourself because no one else will do it for you." He's proud of what he's managed to accomplish, she knows that. Tomas goes for what he wants, unafraid to make mistakes.

When she starts to get up to leave, he holds out a hand. "Wait a minute. There's one more thing I want to talk to you about." His face gets serious and Dorothy's stomach starts to knot. "There's no easy way to say this.... Look, I appreciate what you're trying to do. You're driven, I get it. But as your boss, I gotta tell you...you're spending too much time in the office. I'm starting to worry about you."

She sighs and looks away. "It's Angelica again, isn't it? She's been complaining to you."

"Well, yeah"—why deny it when they both knew it was true—"but she's not wrong. Am I giving you too much work? Like these previz files—you didn't have to go that far. Don't get me wrong, I appreciate your hustle. And it's only going to make you a better viz artist. But I don't want you making yourself sick over it."

Isn't this what they just talked about? That she has to take what she wants, be ruthlessly single-minded? "This is what I want to do. I don't have hobbies. I don't have friends! Work makes me happy."

"But Dot, it *is* making you sick, isn't it? You can't deny it." He gestures at her, and Dorothy flashes back to their earlier conversation. So he's not letting this go. The extended limbs, the sinuous torso, the prominent cheekbones. It's like she's been exchanged for an alien, swapped out by the fairies, a changeling left in her place.

Talking about what she's going through is a trap, however. Because she can't explain what's going on, her only defense is to pretend it isn't happening. "Look, I'm on top of this. I've seen a doctor. He says it's nothing to worry about, just my body changing naturally. It happens, I guess. It's not like it's contagious, so I'd appreciate it if everyone could just chill and give me space."

She almost feels pity for Tomas. He looks sorry that he brought it up. He agrees with her, she knows it: Hasn't he documented his past couple of years on Instagram and TikTok, the insane hours he put in to make the #NotJessPerry videos, how it'd consumed his life? And here he is now with no girlfriend, no friends, just business associates.

Whatever she's going through, it's a worthy sacrifice. That's the only lesson you can take away from the Tomas Delgado story.

This isn't Tomas the artist talking. It's Tomas the boss, thanks to Angelica.

The idea comes to Dorothy all at once. The solution is staring her in the face.

"There's a reason Angelica is speaking out against me." Dorothy has been avoiding Tomas's eyes but now she lifts her head. "I found a keylogger on the system last night. Somebody is trying to collect passwords. Somebody is spying on you. I think it's her."

Tomas's expression falters for a second, before he gives a short burst of nervous laughter. "That's impossible. She doesn't know anything about computer security. She's, like, the least capable person on the team. She could never install something like that on her own."

"You don't know, Tomas. It's dead simple now. You can get programs on GitHub or the dark web with all the instructions on what to do. Cheap. Easy." She decides to turn it up a notch. She drops her voice. "Look, I need to do more scrubbing, but I found an initial tie to Angelica's account. I gotta go over the logs again, though. I hadn't intended to bring it up until I was sure."

She feels bad for lying about Angelica, given what she herself is doing behind Tomas's back. Who's the real thief here, after all? But she tamps

down her guilt, telling herself that, on balance, she does more for Tomas than Angelica did and ever will. And it's Angelica's fault; she's the one making trouble. She can't mind her own business, and Dorothy can't have Tomas looking at her too hard.

Tomas goes pale. He has to trust her on this because he, too, knows nothing about computer security. When Dorothy took over file management for him, she was surprised at how messy it was. It was a miracle he'd been able to find anything. Plus, it was wide open. Any script kiddie could've waltzed in and taken whatever they wanted. She locked all his shit down.

There's a risk in what she just did. Tomas might think this beyond her capabilities and bring in an outside expert, someone who would be sure to find her hidden vault. Or maybe he'd have his doubts: It's her word against Angelica's, and everyone knows there's bad blood between them. Tomas wouldn't want to open himself up to a lawsuit.

But...Tomas is also frugal. Boy-from-the-projects cheap. He won't want to pay for an outside expert if he doesn't have to.

She decides to play another card. "Look, I know you don't want to think about this, but who knows why Angelica—or someone else—could be doing this. Maybe a competitor hired her to get to your files or to drop in a backdoor, and then they'll use their own people to take what they want. You know it's possible—Angelica knows a lot of people in the business. I'm sorry, Tomas. I didn't want to find this, you know. It's not like I wanted this to happen."

His face goes white as chalk, all the energy drained out of him. A sharp pang of guilt pierces Dorothy. It isn't too late to make this right. She can make all his pain go away, tell him later that she was mistaken, that everything's fine.

But she'd still have Angelica to contend with.

That bitch isn't going away.

So, Dorothy keeps her mouth shut.

Tomas lets his head drop, chin to chest. "No, no...you were right to tell me, Dot. I've heard stories of similar things happening at other studios. It's

a cutthroat business. And there are a group of tech bros, rival studios...I wouldn't put this past them."

When he lifts his head, his expression has changed. It's hardened—and she's done that to him. Where did this come from? She shivers to think she's capable of coming up with this idea. It's evil.

"Do what you have to do," he says sadly.



sixteen

Dorothy feels like a spy.

You'd think that she's gotten used to sneaking around on the computer systems by now. She opens and closes every session on Tomas's machines by scouring the logs and erasing every trace of her illicit activity.

But that feels normal to her. Installing a keylogger and making it look like Angelica did it—that's straight-up villain shit. She can't believe she's going through with it.

But she opened her mouth to Tomas, made a serious allegation, and now she has to follow up. He isn't about to let that slide.

She finds a keylogger online, one commonly used by snooping spouses. The trick is making it look like a complete amateur installed it. It has to be sloppy enough that Dorothy would've found it on a routine check of the system. Not evil genius-level work, in other words. Then she changes the metadata so it looks like it came from Angelica's computer.

When she's finished the installation, she double- and then triple-checks the logs. All this security stuff is starting to make her squirrely. She's seeing logs in her sleep. Not that logs are particularly readable. They're hard on the eyes, not meant to be gone through line by line. A skilled

system administrator would be able to pick apart what Dorothy's done—probably. But Dorothy is Tomas's system admin. He's going to take her word for it.

She waits until Tomas has been at his desk for a half hour when she picks up her laptop and goes down the hall to his office. She raps gently on the door, hoping to sound like she doesn't want to be the bearer of bad news.

"Come in," he calls out.

She closes the door behind her. "I have something to show you."

She sets her laptop on his desk and flips it open. She scrolls lines and lines of logs before his eyes. "See that there?" She points to a line on the screen. "That's the keylogger, just like I said. It scooped up passwords to all our accounts. Mine, Ric's—and yours."

Tomas's mouth drops open. Oh, he looks devastated.

An employee has betrayed him.

Dorothy stands up, folds her arms over her chest. "That's the keys to the kingdom there. She'd be able to get into anything. Anything." She makes a sad face. "It's Angelica. See? That's her computer's device ID number."

Tomas squints at the line she's pointing to. "But that just means someone used her computer to do this, right? It doesn't mean for sure that she was the one...."

Dorothy sighs like she's really sorry to be the one to have to tell him but... "That's true, but look at the date-time stamp. It was during working hours, two weeks ago. She was in her office at that time. Look at all the other activity." Dorothy flips to another screen, showing a whole other set of logs. "This is her typical workday activity. See? It's the same. She was never out of her office for more than a few minutes, not enough time for someone else to go in without her knowing. It was her, Tomas. She did it."

She bites her lips while Tomas sits frozen at his desk. She's pretty sure he's going to do what any boss would do: fire Angelica. But Tomas is an inexperienced boss and what's more, he has a good heart, and Dorothy isn't sure that he won't end up being unable to pull the trigger. Then this whole

scheme will backfire in her face: Angelica will be furious and become even more vicious, looking for any way to prove her innocence and that Dorothy set the whole thing up. A frozen wave of fear passes over her. She has to concentrate really hard to keep from shaking in front of her boss.

Tomas sighs, dropping his head. He claws at the back of his neck, undoubtedly tied in a knot. “Okay, Dot. Thank you. Could you let Angelica know that I want to see her in my office?”

Her feet seem to skim the ground as she walks down the hall to Angelica’s office. This is so surreal and unlike anything she’s done before. In school, she was the good girl, the rule follower, waiting for the system to avenge her when she was wronged. She saw what happened when you tried to avenge yourself, didn’t she?

It feels remarkably good to strike back. “Tomas wants to see you—now,” she says, keeping her tone as friendly as possible.

She sits at her workstation, finding it impossible to concentrate. Muffled voices come from down the hall, getting louder and louder, but she can’t make out any words no matter how hard she strains. After a few minutes, the door to Tomas’s office opens and then slams shut, and then angry footsteps storm toward her.

Angelica stands in the doorway. Her face is inflamed, her eyes wet. Her mouth is twisted in a way that’s frightening. She slams the door behind her as she rushes toward Dorothy. But Dorothy is taller than Angelica and sturdier and doesn’t think she has anything to fear from her. She stands, nonetheless, and closes her laptop.

“You! Snake! I don’t know what you did, but I know it was you.” Angelica jabs a finger in Dorothy’s face. For a minute, Dorothy thinks Angelica is going to physically attack her, throw herself at her and start clawing her eyes, but Angelica restrains herself. She’s shaking, though, full-body shakes, like she’s possessed. Dorothy’s never seen someone so transformed.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Dorothy says coolly. “The logs don’t lie—”

“You made them lie! I’m innocent! I didn’t do anything! I wouldn’t know how to do what you say I did—and you know it!” Now she bumps against Dorothy, forcing her to take a step back out of surprise. She doesn’t expect tiny Angelica to physically accost her. It’s like she doesn’t know how fragile she is. “I don’t know what you’re fucking up to, you freak, but I’m going to find out, and when I do, I’m going to ruin you.” The last words are said with a sneer—but her voice quakes.

Dorothy is pushing Angelica out of her office when Tomas and Ric come to see what the commotion is about. Ric just stands with his mouth open, but Tomas helps to wrench Angelica off Dorothy. “That’s enough! It’s over, Angie. Clean out your desk and get out of here. Don’t make me rethink my severance offer.”

Dorothy stays in her office with the door closed until Angelica leaves. She never would’ve thought Angelica could be so violent, so physical. For one thing, she’s sure the woman is guilty of *something*. Surely she had plans...most likely to seduce Tomas to secure her place in the studio. Trade sex for security, as it’s obvious Tomas has no time to even start looking for a girlfriend. Maybe Angelica planned to become his office wife and use her position to drive a wedge between Dorothy and Tomas.

She could even have been behind that business with cicada449. But for that to be true, Angelica would have to know that Dorothy’s behind Isabella’s account, and if she did know, there are a lot worse things she could’ve done.

No. Dorothy tries to calm her breathing, willing her tremors to quiet. She’s letting her imagination run away with her.

Just to be sure, though, Dorothy logs on to Instagram, using her own account, not Isabella’s, and looks at cicada449’s activity. Since she blocked the fucker, she doesn’t see anything on Isabella’s account and has almost been able to forget about the guy.

And now as she scrolls up and down the page, she sees that nothing has changed. It’s almost dormant. No followers, and only following two other accounts, both of young female influencers. She’s pretty sure these are porn accounts and that the users’ pictures are doctored. Big boobs nearly fill

their thumbnails. She can imagine the kind of stuff cicada449 leaves on their posts. Warning them that they're going to burn in hell even as he jerks off to photos meant to lure users over to their OnlyFans pages.

Ugh. So, maybe this isn't Angelica.

Wait...As Dorothy follows cicada449's activity, she finds a couple of posts on the feed of another influencer, some ranty guy called the Annihilator. The entries seem harmless, though.

Maybe she should count herself lucky that there aren't more cicada449s following Isabella. Weirdos and stalkers are the price of being an influencer. If the internet's done nothing else, it's shown how many perverts there are in the world, so many more than Dorothy would've guessed. No wonder all those conspiracy theorists are obsessed with pedophiles and sex pests.

A noise in the hallway draws Dorothy's attention and she looks up—to find Ric standing in her doorway, staring at her. His expression is pure disgust...and maybe a little fear. Without saying a word, he walks away.

Dorothy snaps her laptop shut and then closes her eyes. Respite, even a brief one, feels good. She rubs her eyes with her knuckles until she sees white stars. What she wouldn't give for a few days off. Some peace and quiet.

But that isn't going to happen anytime soon. She's just getting started.



seventeen

Something is wrong.

Waking up has always been hard for Dorothy. It's because she sleeps so little; when she finally does, her body doesn't want to let go. Sleep is a vast emptiness where someone holds her in a vaguely threatening bear hug, refusing to release her every time she tries to leave.

But this one morning is different: She knows immediately that there's a problem with her face.

It feels—dead.

Jolted awake from fright, she prods her right cheek, expecting to feel the sensation of touch, but there's nothing aside from a dull sense of pressure.

And her skull hurts. Her jaw aches like it's been hit with a sledgehammer.

She leaps out of bed and scrambles to the bathroom. She peers into a mirror clouded with scum and speckled with spots (neither she nor her roommate is much for housekeeping) to see the right side of her face sagging like a clay sculpture that has gone horribly awry in the kiln, like the changes she has been going through have gone too far, have gone out of

control. She touches the drooping corner of her mouth. Her cheekbones are now strangely out of proportion to her jaw, like she has the head of an alien, one of those gray men with big eyes like the cats in those kitschy old prints. Hair and sunglasses and a hat will only cover so much. It means being stared at on the bus, like a circus freak, and she can't bear that for another day.

"What happened to you? You look horrible," Kim says when Dorothy walks into the kitchen. The roommate, chipper as always in yoga pants, her hair up in an artful mess, is making an acai smoothie. "You should go to urgent care."

Dorothy grunts noncommittally. Her panic has subsided, once the shock passed. There's pain, sure, but it's manageable. It's merely one more of the strange adjustments her body is making.

"I'm fine. It'll go away."

Kim looks at her with alarm. "No, Dot. No way. It might be contagious. I don't want to catch it." She's a waitress but also an aspiring actor. She babies her face. Half the shelf space in the bathroom is taken up with her lotions and creams. "I have an audition coming up."

She knows that tone of voice. Kim is one step away from spiraling into hysterics. "Okay. I'll go." Besides, she's a little curious as to what a doctor will say. Maybe it isn't all in her head.

But she knows deep down that there's only one explanation for what's happening.

In late, she texts Tomas.

"Dorothy Wagner?" a nurse calls out from the reception desk, and Dorothy slams her laptop shut.

"Bell's palsy, most likely," the doctor says as soon as he looks at her. In rumpled scrubs, a five-o'clock shadow growing on his face, and barely able to keep his eyes open, the doctor looks like he's just finished a long stretch somewhere, a resident taking shifts at the walk-in clinic to earn extra

money. She isn't sure she can trust a resident's diagnosis. "We can send you for tests. In the meantime, we can start you on a course of antibiotics. If it is Bell's palsy, there are treatments you can do, but we'd want you to take those tests first to be certain."

She doesn't push back. She doesn't need tests to tell her it isn't Bell's palsy.

She knows where this came from.

"The doctor said it's going to take a lot of tests to figure out what this is," Dorothy tells Tomas over Zoom. "The pain has increased, and it's hard getting around. The bus ride is torture. Is it okay if I work remotely for a while, at least until the doctor figures out what's going on?" She lets him see her face and the way he recoils, she feels like the hunchback of Notre Dame.

"Do you remember when it started? I heard"—Tomas drops his voice into a conspiratorial whisper—"that Catrina Villeneuve's got some funky illness, too. You don't think you could've caught something from her?"

She grimaces from guilt without thinking about the timing. "Naw, no way."

"Maybe Angie was right, Dot. Maybe this is what you get for working so hard. It's stress." Great, Tomas and her mother would be in complete agreement. She left practically the same voicemail message the day before yesterday: *Don't stress yourself working too hard. You know that stress isn't good for you. We don't want you to have a relapse.*

Dorothy would argue that she thrives on stress. Blooms under stress.

C'mon, Tomas, just give me the thumbs-up. How can he say no? She worked remotely for him for almost a year while she was in college. Of course, she was only doing system admin work then, cleaning files and taking care of security. Now she's doing creative work, too, which requires a lot of feedback—usually done sitting sidesaddle with Tomas.

Still, when circumstances call for it, he's given feedback other ways. Usually over Zoom, but sometimes, depending on his schedule, he'll just append a file with comments or send general guidance in an email.

It isn't just a matter of accommodating her, though. If he lets her work remotely, Ric will certainly ask for the same privilege. But he needs supervision, even Dorothy sees that. He'll spend his days scrolling on his phone and playing video games if someone isn't constantly on top of him. She isn't sure why he took this job at all. He'd probably rather be a game designer.

Focus, Dorothy, focus. Ric isn't her problem. Drawing more attention with her bizarrely morphing body: That's her problem.

"The thing is, Dot, I have to start interviewing for Angie's replacement—or replacements. I'm thinking we need two more artists on the team. I need someone to onboard them, since I'll be traveling a lot next month."

You are not going to tell me no. She makes herself count to ten to keep from snapping back in anger. Another example of how much Tomas depends on her, yet on paper she's the lowest-ranking person in the office. With three years at a well-known effects studio under his belt, Ric is the senior technician, so it should be his job to train and oversee new hires. Yet both she and Tomas know he wouldn't do as good a job. She has a nagging suspicion that Tomas regrets hiring Ric, but it's hard to get qualified people in this field. Studios poach from each other all the time. The one consolation with Ric is that nobody will poach *him*. If anything, that famous effects studio was probably relieved when he left.

She grits her teeth. "I'm sorry to ask, but it's really important. I'm sick. Maybe it is what Villeneuve has, maybe it's contagious." Might as well play that card, too. She silently thanks Kim. "Maybe Ric could fill in, at least until I'm feeling better? With any luck, it'll be over by the time you hire the new people."

She doesn't add *You owe me this much*, even though it's how she feels.

Tomas is quiet for such a long time that Dorothy's afraid she'll have to come up with some kind of threat, but finally he grunts his approval. "No, you're right. You can work from home. Just promise me you'll take it easy. I need you here. We're in this together, right?"



eighteen

The next morning, Dorothy walks down to a coffee shop around the corner from her apartment. It's early and Dorothy's mind is elsewhere, so she neglects to pull her hoodie up or put on sunglasses. She's halfway down the block when she realizes that people are looking at her. Passersby on the sidewalk stare. Heads turn in cars waiting at traffic lights. Not everyone, but it's certainly more than usual.

While in line at the café, she notices a few people turn in their seats, nudging their companions. Someone takes out a camera and snaps her picture. *Rude*. The picture taker should've asked first. Dorothy turns her back to the young woman, who titters excitedly to her friends.

Dorothy turns her attention back to her TikTok feed. A young bug-eyed woman looks into the camera, asking breathlessly, "Where is Catrina Villeneuve? Her last-minute no-show at a music-video award show last night renewed rumors that the singer is suffering from a mystery illness...."

Villeneuve looked fine the last time Dorothy saw her. Though, come to think of it, Tomas had said something about her being sick.

Weird.

"Next!" the clerk shouts out from behind the counter.

Finally, it's Dorothy's turn. "A blond vanilla latte, please."

The girl at the register goggles at her, then spins on her heel. "Coming right up."

"Hey—don't you need my name?" Dorothy calls after her, annoyed.

The cashier's face reddens. "Oh, I know who you are."

Dorothy struggles with that for a second. That isn't possible. It's her first time here. The cashier's mistaken her for someone else. That must be it.

Dorothy is leaning against the wall, trying to ignore everything going on around her, scrolling on her phone, when she hears the barista call out, "Isabella."

She freezes.

Ignore it. Maybe the order belongs to someone else.

The barista leans over the counter, holding out the cup. "Miss! This is yours."

She feigns surprise as she looks up, like she's coming out of a fog, and ignores the phones pointed in her direction as she goes up to retrieve her drink. Murmurs rise behind her as she heads straight out the door.

Hoodie up, sunglasses on. The world rocks like a fun-house mirror as she hurries down the street, anxious to return to the solitude of her apartment. *No no no.*

On one hand, yes, this is a dream come true. She now looks enough like Isabella to readily pass for her—that's what she's hoped for, prayed for. She'll be able to make videos like every other influencer—well, she'll still spend a lot of time in the editing phase, erasing every minor flaw or difference between her and the original Isabella. It'll just be much, much less.

But now that the time has come, she isn't ready. Soon, there will be pictures of her on the internet as Isabella. Pictures tying her to this neighborhood, this street.

More important, however, she's not ready yet to be Isabella. She's not ready for her secret to be revealed. She has no explanations for her family, for Tomas. Nor can she explain her physical change—and she probably

never will. She's staked her future to images she fabricated for the internet, and now other people's photos of her will be her undoing.

What has she done?

Back in the apartment, she locks the door behind her and slides to the floor. She threw the coffee in a trash can on the street and now she throws the sunglasses across the room. Tears start to well in her eyes. This means she will need to move. She can't afford to have people cruise up and down in front of her apartment, hoping to take a picture of the elusive internet sensation. Moving takes time, it takes money.

Funny, fame is exactly what she wanted, what everybody wants these days. But now that she has it...

She pinches the bridge of her nose and tries to slow her breathing, to push down the panic. She can fight those photos. She can say it isn't her, that it's some Isabella wannabe; God knows there're plenty of them these days. She can claim to have been on the other side of the world at the time.

It won't matter. There will always be the curious and the disbelievers. People will come to this neighborhood looking for her anyway.

Calm down. She stretches out on the crummy sofa and checks her phone. Sure enough, there are already a few pictures up under the hashtag #Isabella. Luckily, they're all less than conclusive thanks to bad lighting, bad angles, blur. They are already asking for the location in the comments, though. She checks the metadata and the posters didn't bother to strip off geo-coordinates. Any stalker in the world can come after her now.

Her stomach lurches.

After a minute, she goes back to those photos, expanding them, to study her likeness. She's a dead ringer for Isabella. Well, maybe not an exact match, but close enough to explain away any differences. The face is a better match than the body, she has to admit, but bodies are more easily disguised with clothing. She picks up a strand of hair to examine under the light. It doesn't have the depth of Isabella's highlights, but it's lightened up a couple of shades and the texture has changed completely. It's as silky and shiny as hair in a commercial. Pretty soon, it will be an exact match for hair that stylists complained could not be duplicated.

She goes to the bathroom and pulls down her roommate's bathrobe and forgotten gym clothes from in front of the full-length mirror on the back of the door. Staring into the mirror for a good five, ten minutes, she runs her hands over her new contours. Not only is she taller, but it's as though someone has stretched her like taffy. Weight has been carved off, her bones made lighter, thinner. Now that she can soak in all the changes at once, there's no denying it: She is nearly an exact replica of Isabella.

She presses her face into her hands. For a minute, she's lightheaded. It hits her all at once.

How was the troll able to do this?

She digs into the vanity for her makeup bag, spreads the array of half-empty bottles on the counter, then arranges her brushes. For the next hour, she works on her face. She falls into an easy rhythm, like filling in a paint-by-numbers, because she knows Isabella's face so well. It's easier to shape Isabella's features—eyebrows, eyeliner, contours, lip liner—than it is to do her old face. Muscle memory guides her hand.

When she's finished, she takes a couple of photos and studies them. Not bad. Again, not an exact match, but the differences can be attributed to the lack of filters and other online tools. As she studies the photos and then her face with her artist's eye, it dawns on her that this could work. She will be able to jump the chasm. She could pass herself off as Isabella.

She can scarcely breathe. She doesn't ask anymore how this is possible. She's accepted it. She remembers the text messages. She's pretty sure they're still on her phone. She never did try very hard to find out who was behind the unknown number. There are ways to find out. Hire a hacker off the dark web. She never did, though. Didn't want to know.

She remembers, too, what cicada449 wrote. *Beautiful girl, you must be careful. You are making a deal with the devil. Only misfortune can come from it.*

Did she make a deal with the devil? She's never met the devil, never signed any papers—though she doesn't really believe you have to go through these exact steps. Intent is as binding as a signature in blood.

As she sits on the couch in a stupor, thoughts pop into her head. How, exactly, will she become another person? Most pressing: How will she cease to be Dorothy? The change will be impossible to explain to people who know her well: her family, Tomas. It's been a while since her family has seen her face. Even her roommate, who barely pays any attention to her at all, who seems to only have eyes for herself, seems to have noticed something.

She opens her phone again and goes back to the photo she was looking at before, the one good one of the old Dorothy. She stares and stares at the girl in the picture, totally familiar and yet, if she is honest with herself, someone who has not been around for a while. It's sad that even Dorothy didn't notice her slipping away. And now she's gone before Dorothy could make a conscious decision to let it happen.

Not that she's sure she could've stopped it. It's all been beyond her control—or so she wants to believe.

One more look at the photo. She will never see this girl again. Never get Dorothy back.

She will never *be* that girl again.

Joy surges in her chest.

Her happiness is short-lived, however, as another thought comes to her: What if this transformation doesn't stop? After all, there's really no telling what's happening to her. What if she keeps morphing, leaving Isabella behind next, her features stretching beyond beauty to the grotesque? Her limbs growing to nonhuman proportions? Where might this end?

She's reminded, suddenly, of one of her favorite fairy tales. A poor girl is tricked into marriage to a loathsome prince who thinks she knows how to make gold from straw. A little man promises to spin gold for her, if she promises to give him what he asks for at a future date. Everything goes right as rain, until the girl has a baby daughter, and then the little man returns and demands the baby in exchange for his earlier services.

Rumpelstiltskin. It was in her favorite book as a child, a big book of fairy tales. What she liked, she remembers, was not the story so much as the

illustration at the beginning, of a golden-haired young woman watching a strange, troll-like figure at a spinning wheel. The young woman was beautiful and the troll so...grotesque. Dorothy was unable to identify with the girl; she was too beautiful. No...she thought herself more like the troll. And isn't that the case now? Like the troll in the story, Dorothy is making something precious out of nothing.

How did the story end? She fights to recall. The girl, now a queen, now a mother, tricks the evil little man, though Dorothy can't remember how. The important part is that she wins in the end, and why shouldn't she, because she never did anything wrong. She didn't ask for any of it—the husband, his expectations, most likely the pregnancy itself. Did the girl in the fairy tale know what the little man wanted before she agreed to the deal? Does it matter? What choice did she have?

Besides, Dorothy tells herself, her transformation doesn't fall into the same category—this is real, while that was a story. She feels the truth of this deep in her bones. The pain she has been suffering for the past several months should be evidence enough.

Even if the troll hasn't told her what it is yet, she knows her miraculous transformation will not come without a price.



nineteen

Dorothy is putting the finishing touches on a new Isabella video when she gets an email from Claire:

Isabella, I've got an offer from a sponsor that I think you're going to like.

Dorothy thumbs through the email. Claire's right: It's a great offer. A day's shooting in downtown Los Angeles for a company launching a line of healthy smoothies. The company's advertising agency will provide a camera crew, but Isabella will have creative control. They'll pay her twenty-five thousand dollars to make a couple of videos that will run on her feeds and those of the parent company, a huge conglomerate. The money might not be as lucrative as what celebrities make—what Villeneuve commands, surely—but it will be high profile. It will make a statement. It means Isabella will be taken seriously.

She can see no downside.

Her stomach does a series of flips as she types in her response. Sure. I'd love to. Set it up.

.....

The morning of the shoot, Dorothy can't keep anything down. Not coffee, not even a yogurt. She sends an email to the office—taking a sick day—and puts the studio out of her mind. She packs her favorite cosmetics in a bag along with a couple of changes of clothing, as requested, and then walks a couple of blocks over to the hotel where she asked to be picked up by the driver.

She's put a lot of thought into the location for the shoot. Originally, she thought of Chinatown or Olvera Street, a Latin community in one of the oldest parts of the city—both very visual locations that would give her plenty to play with—but she ultimately ruled them out, fearing it might come off as cultural appropriation. After all, Isabella is whiter than white. She could almost pass for a Viking shield maiden—just put a helmet with horns on her head. After perusing Instagram and TikTok for a while, she decides on the Broad Museum. Known for its crazy contemporary art exhibits, it's both iconic and crisply modern. Luckily, the sponsor agrees and arranges all the permissions. They are to go in early, hours before it opens to the general public, so they can get whatever shots they need with minimal fuss.

The camera crew is ready by the time Dorothy arrives. There's a makeup artist waiting, too, a pleasant surprise. As Dorothy sits in the chair, the director goes over the schedule. They agreed on certain exhibits in advance. Isabella is to walk, caper, or saunter by, eyeing them coolly as she swigs from a bottle of the smoothie product. She sees the bottles lined up on a rolling cart, just over the director's shoulder. She hopes they don't taste like shit.

"Oh my God, your hair," the stylist croons once the director walks away. "It's every bit as dreamy as I thought it would be. How do you get it so soft?" she asks as she runs her fingers, coated in product, through it.

"Good genes, I guess." Teresa's hair is raven black.

"And your skin. It's flawless." She runs her fluffy powder brush over Dorothy's cheeks one last time while Dorothy thrills at the praise. After a lifetime of worrying about her problem skin as a child, being ridiculed as

“pizza face” by her schoolmates and never getting a compliment, even from her parents, she never thought she’d hear anyone say this about her. Never.

They start with the exhibit *Tulips*, a collection of six mirror-polished stainless-steel abstract flowers set on a white platform. She does several passes—walking by them, standing in front of the cluster—and in each one, she takes time to admire the multiple reflected distorted images of herself in the rounded surfaces. At first, the whole experience is awkward. After a lifetime of being ignored, it’s disconcerting to suddenly have people laser-focused on her every movement. Nothing she does feels natural. She doesn’t move like Villeneuve—though she’s been practicing. The director is kind at first but then his command—*cut*—gets terser and terser. “Why don’t you take five, Isabella?”

She stands in a corner by herself, facing the wall and wishing the floor would swallow her up. It’s a disaster. *Everyone must’ve noticed...I’m nothing like my videos.*

She shakes out her arms and tries again. And again. And eventually, movement starts to come more naturally. What is she doing except capering; how hard can it be? It’s not like doing a complicated TikTok dance. Never mind that she’s never capered in her life, never been that carefree. She’s carefree now.

Why shouldn’t she be? She’s the luckiest girl in the world.

Next, they head to *Balloon Dog (Blue)*, another polished stainless-steel sculpture, and do similar passes. An assistant swaps out drink bottles between takes so they can showcase different flavors. The bottles are curved artistically, like mini-statuettes, making the museum a good setting for the product. And the bottle colors are bright and eye-catching. It’s starting to click, to come together.

They record at the exhibit *Under the Table*, a gigantic set of tables and chairs that make Isabella look like a doll. She rests against the table leg and looks up as she sips, trying to evoke childhood innocence.

The last shot is in one of the Infinity Mirror Rooms, *The Souls of Millions of Light Years Away*. They have to rush, because the museum is about to open and the mirrored room is one of the most popular exhibits.

People are only allowed sixty seconds by themselves inside the big room full of mirrors and lights.

The cameraman squeezes onto the platform with Isabella, his handheld camera practically in her face. Four different bottles are lined up at her feet. “You drink, and I’ll walk around you,” the cameraman explains. Dorothy nods, though she can scarcely take her eyes off her surroundings. It’s beautiful, all those spangles of light reflected infinitely around her.

“Won’t the mirrors pick you up?” she asks, accustomed to such concerns from the capture shoots in Tomas’s studio.

“Let me worry about that,” the cameraman says as he fiddles with meters and dials.

Afterward, in the car taking her back to her fake drop-off point, Dorothy thinks back on the experience. She’s never had a day like this before. Even as she was still finding her footing at the start, everyone was super nice to her—well, more than that. They *fawned* over her. Treated her like royalty. That must be what it’s like to be a celebrity, a movie star. The camera crew, both men, couldn’t stop staring at her, as though she was the most beautiful woman they’d ever seen. The museum’s representative, not the director but another functionary, a middle-aged woman, stared at her the entire time with naked envy. Even the driver of the hired car looks in the rearview mirror so much that Dorothy’s slightly worried they’ll get into an accident.

Is it her beauty they were admiring, or her fame?

Attention, the most precious and fragile substance in the world. Doled out by capricious algorithms, subject to the whims of the masses.

That’s it, she realizes. They goggle at her because she’s famous—and they’re not. She has succeeded where they have failed. It’s like being one of the Beatles or Britney Spears or Sabrina Carpenter. It’s intoxicating, overwhelmingly sweet and narcotic at the same time.

If this is what it’s like to be Isabella, she will take it.

And if she has to make a deal with some weird, ephemeral voice from time to time, well, it’s worth it. After all, so far he’s been more bark than bite.

Surely, there are worse deals to be had.



twenty

A couple of days later, as she's picking through comments on Isabella's TikTok, she sees one from cicada449.

It's nothing more than a link: <http://www.creepypasta.com/thebargain>.

Anger spikes inside her skull. This is impossible. She blocked him from Isabella's account—didn't she? Yet he's back. After a deep breath, she thinks about that. Nothing is immutable on the internet; unexplainable things happen all the time. A platform might reboot after a software glitch. She remembers when Twitter—oops, X—messed up everyone's followers after a software catastrophe. It's possible for things to go awry whenever there's a human in the loop.

So...he sent her a stupid story. Is she supposed to be scared?

She's about to delete the comment, her hand hovering over her mouse, when she hesitates. She remembers Creepypasta from when she was in elementary school. These stories used to be so popular. She'd trade links to her favorites with her friends and they'd talk about them over lunch. She even wrote one or two of these little stories herself and posted them, but they never got any attention.

Well, they got attention from the stuck-up girls in her class, but not the kind of attention she wanted.

How did cicada449 know?

Delete it, a little voice inside says. Hide your shame. Make it go away.

But a part of her rebels. Dorothy doesn't like to be told what to do. True, in the day-to-day she hardly acts like a firebrand, but in the privacy of her own head, her own space, at least, she can do what she wants. What does she have to fear from a story written by some kid?

And the past—well, the past can't harm you.

THE BARGAIN

It all started when I joined a writer's group online. It was the kind of site where anyone could post a story and others would read it and give you feedback. I stumbled on the site and started reading the stories, and I realized that I could do this, too. Though to be truthful, I'd never thought about being a writer. It just seemed like something fun to do.

Looking back on my first story, it was pretty lame, and people let me know it. It was the story of a teenage girl (me) who finds a magical well behind her school. Some of the readers pointed out that the story really didn't go anywhere after the main character discovered the well, and they were right. My second story was about a ghost and that was a little better, and I got some encouragement after this one, and so I kept going.

After a few months, I'd posted five stories. I'd noticed that fewer people were reading and leaving comments—but one person left a comment on every single one. Rollo3341. His comments were, without exception, mean. He told me I should stop writing. He asked why I even bothered. He said I was taking time and attention away from others who actually *could* write and that what I was doing was nothing more than a pathetic bid for attention.

The others, the ones I considered my friends, told me to ignore him. *There are always haters*, one girl wrote. *Rollo3341 hasn't written one story*, another person pointed out. *He's nothing but a troll*.

After that last comment, the next day I got a DM from Rollo3341.

SillyCat1001 is right, he'd written. *I'm a troll. And you know about trolls, don't you? We have magical powers*.

You're not that kind of troll, I wrote back.

Who's to say? You've never seen me, never met me. Maybe I'm a Norwegian bridge troll, he typed, including a link to a Wikipedia page for Norwegian trolls. It was ugly, short and stumpy with a wicked underbite and canine teeth like fangs. It wore a pointed hat like a dunce cap, only the cone fell over, limp and lifeless. *We trolls can grant wishes, just like a fairy or a genie*.

You want people to like your stories? I can make it so. Everyone will love them! Would you like that?

You'll teach me to be a better writer? I asked.

You don't need to bother with that, he typed in a way I imagined to be scornful. *I'll just make you popular. That's all most people care about anyway. They can't tell if something is bad or good. They just go along with the crowd*.

Rollo3341 seemed to be nothing more than a bitter old troll and so I thought, what's the harm in calling his bluff? I mean, he wasn't going to be able to get people to like my work if they thought it was crap. No one seemed to like him, anyway.

Sure, I said. *Make everyone fall in love with my stories*.

There'll be a price to pay, you know.

I felt a chill go through me, then. *What's the price?*

There was a pause before he resumed typing. *I don't know yet. I'll let you know. For now, all you have to do is write a new story and put it up on the story board before midnight tonight*.

Then he stopped typing.

At first, I was mad. It was eight pm, not a lot of time to write a story, even if you had an idea for one, which I did not. I thought he might be

trying to trick me, getting me to write a terrible story to destroy whatever goodwill I'd been able to establish with the rest of the group. Of course, at that point very few members were reading my stories. There wasn't much of a risk.

But I figured it would be a good test of his powers. If I wrote a story that was undeniably bad, there was no way he'd be able to get people to lie. Then I could expose him. Maybe he'd get kicked out.

I quickly wrote a story, something to do with Christmas (which was only a month away). I didn't try hard at all. It felt like I was creating something bad on purpose.

I posted the story with minutes to spare before midnight.

In the morning there were four comments under the story—and they were all good.

I didn't know two of the people who left comments, but I knew the other two. They were high on the leaderboards, writers who had penned numerous stories for the site, and seemed to be well-respected. There was nothing from Rollo3341.

It was mystifying. I thought about it all day at school, wondering how he had done it and done it so fast. Would there be more comments when I got home from school?

When I checked again, there were more than kind comments—people were begging me to write another story, right away! They couldn't wait, they claimed; they needed another story now or their heart would break. I can't lie: it felt good. It felt better than good.

It went on like this for weeks. I *let* it go on like this, I should say. I wrote story after story, whatever came into my head, and posted it to the site. Each story met with rapturous praise. I knew they didn't deserve it, but I couldn't explain how Rollo3341 was making this happen, and I was able to put it out of my mind—more quickly than I would've thought possible.

The attention was addictive. I became more and more daring as time went on. I started making fun of the people who'd told me in the beginning that my stories needed work. I mocked their contributions

and all my new fans would laugh along with me, ridiculing them together. It felt good to be so powerful. How could anything that felt so good be wrong?

But I knew it was. All of it was wrong.

Several months had passed before I heard from Rollo3341 again. *You haven't forgotten our deal, have you?*

What deal? I texted. *I don't remember agreeing to anything.*

His response was immediate. *It does no good to pretend. If you didn't agree, you wouldn't have continued to put stories up on the website.*

Of course, he was right. I'd made a deal with my actions. I didn't need to sign my name on a contract in blood.

What do you want?

I will take what I want. Just remember that this is all your doing. It wouldn't have been possible without your ego, your greed, your desire.

Then—silence.

Fear fell over me like a blanket. Rollo3341's tone had changed. I could tell he was serious.

I didn't have to wait long.

My baby brother Jason had been sick from birth. He came ten years after me—my mother was 45 when he was born. The doctors had told my parents that he was finally getting better but he was still underweight, small and sickly.

He died three days after the text from Rollo3341—or, as I've come to think of him, the Devil.

If it had stopped there, that would have been bad enough. But that wasn't the end of our deal.

The second to die was my mother. She swallowed a bottle of pills with half a bottle of wine.

Next was my father. He'd already started drinking more heavily before my mother took her life, but afterward he kept himself in a permanent state of intoxication. The night he reached for the car keys

—

That's enough. Dorothy tears her eyes from the monitor and pushes back from the table, her heart pounding hard in her chest.

This is no kid's story. Sure, it read at first like it had been written by a kid, but the writing got more complex and assured as it went on. This was written by an adult.

But how the hell did he know?

Dorothy is the baby of her family—now.

She barely remembers her baby brother, Jurgen, named for her grandfather. He looked like a tiny old man with his red, scrunched face and little fists.

He died of SIDS. Crib death, they call it, but Jurgen had been in bed with their mother, who was exhausted and in need of a nap. Dorothy almost went into her parents' bedroom to ask her mother a question, but her father warned her to let her mother rest. She needed it desperately.

When Dorothy's mother woke up, the baby was dead beside her.

Dorothy doesn't want to remember the desperate times that followed. Her mother's depression. Her father's wordless anger.

At least they didn't kill themselves like in this horrible, ugly story.

The worst part was that when the girls in school found out—the bitches—they actually *teased* her about it. Said it was her mother's fault for being so fat. That she smothered Jurgen in his sleep.

Dorothy figured out a way to make them shut up, though.

She glances over at the laptop screen, glowing innocently at her.

How does the troll know? Or cicada449?

And what's the deal with the two of them? She feels like she's being pulled by two opposing forces, the troll on one side and cicada449 on the other. It feels like she's stumbled into a running battle, one that existed before her and will continue after she's gone.

She slams the laptop shut.



twenty-one

Dorothy is looking at Isabella's account over a girl dinner of cheese cubes and spicy roasted almonds, when she stumbles across this... problem. **4.7 MILLION FOLLOWERS; 15 FOLLOWING.**

She squints at the numbers. **15 FOLLOWING.** This is a glaring mistake. Only assholes and fake accounts follow no one or, in this case, next to no one, and only amateurish fake ones at that. Her only excuse is that she's been so busy creating content—not to mention doing her real job for Tomas—that she hasn't had a chance to properly set up Isabella's account. This is housekeeping she must do to keep Isabella from looking like a blatant bot or a pompous asshole.

She prays it's not too late, that it hasn't been noted by now.

She's done her homework in advance. She even started, hence Isabella's fifteen follows, but got sidetracked. So, she knows the accounts she should be following. The unspoken rule of social media (though it doesn't seem that any rule in social media is really unspoken, unwritten, or un-videotaped) is that you follow the big dogs in your community. Her professors said that in the really early days, people would automatically follow back, but that convention is long gone. That followers-to-following

ratio is still an important metric, if not the be-all and end-all it once was. It's still true that if the number of accounts you are following outnumbers the ones who follow you, you look needy. Unpopular. Like a nobody.

But you have to do the right things if you want to be accepted into an established online community. She isn't sure how to describe the audience she is going for. Lifestyle creators, for the most part. The YouTubers and TikTokers who are the reigning kings and queens of online attention.

She feels a little shy logging in to Isabella's account to follow these people. Shandybell. TexasTwister. Charli. They all have many, many more followers than Isabella: Charli alone has over a hundred million, more than most heads of state, more than celebrities and sports figures. But, Dorothy reminds herself, these women have *years* on Isabella, years to accrue followers. To get almost three million followers in a few months has put Isabella on top of trending lists everywhere. People are talking about her not only on social platforms, but in real life, her name mentioned on late-night TV and podcasts. No one of any standing in the social media world can claim to be unaware of her.

And it's true, if ironic, that you can have millions of followers but fall out of the public eye. You have to fight to stay relevant. You have to make sure you weigh in on the hot topics of the day. Make snarky posts about the red carpet at the Oscars—or, if you are Charli, walk the red carpet yourself.

This includes having something to say about the It Girl of the moment.

Dorothy keeps an eye on Isabella's accounts' follower counts, checking every twenty minutes or so to see if any of these girls have followed her back. Nothing. They are making Isabella sweat. It's understandable. She's the new girl, and they want to make sure she knows her place, though they won't have the power to do that for much longer. With the way things are going, it's only a matter of time before Isabella has as much power as—or more than—any of them. Well, maybe not Charli, with her popular podcast-slash-video series where she interviews celebrities.

It isn't just her pride talking, though it feels good to give in to her ego, even for just a split second. Her superstardom is destined. She's sure of it.

It isn't until a little after midnight that Dorothy sees the first tiny victory.

Charli has followed her back. Charli, with her 113 million followers while following only 995 people. Charli who makes TikTok reels while sitting next to the runway at Paris fashion shows and from bistros at Cannes. Charli and her team have made the conscious decision to add Isabella to that small in-crowd.

Dorothy's fingers hover over the keyboard. The real power of a mutual follow is that she can now send direct messages to Charli. It's a semisecret back channel to the powerful and well-placed. She has to play this right, not come across as desperate or amateurish. Luckily, she's watched Tomas handle his transition from nobody to somebody and listened as he complained about walking that tightrope many a late night in his office.

She knows exactly what to do.

Thanks for the follow, girl. Been an admirer of yours forever. I'm literally dying right now. I am dying. Dead.

Send.

The next day, Charli leaves a comment on Isabella's latest video. Ooh girl, you are a goddess. The 4,615 users who left comments on that video will now receive a little blip in their notifications that, if they bother to watch in any detail, will inform them that mega-superstar influencer Charli called Isabella a goddess.

Would it be too needy to take a screenshot and post it to her socials?

By noon, TexasTwister and Shandybell have both followed Isabella, too, as well as a dozen other top-name influencers, mostly gamers and comedians, boys who made fun of themselves and their friends for money. They drool over her, for the most part saying things about Isabella's figure. That's okay; it's part of the territory. The DMs start creeping in, asking her where she lives, if she has a manager. Invitations to do a video together or some other shared-content scheme. Everyone wants to capitalize on her popularity while it lasts. All these people have been in the spotlight for a

while, and they all know how fleeting such fame can be. She knows some of their names from the rankings put out by various marketing firms or appearing in *Business Insider's* periodic profiles. How many of them were on the list last year? How many of the ones who were on the list even three years ago are still around?

The questions freak Dorothy out, though, because now she must be careful with her answers. Lying to this crowd would have consequences. And she knows that DMs do not mean they are friends. Their relationships will be symbiotic: You do something for me, I do something for you. We don't have to like each other.

She tells them she lives on the West Coast but evades all attempts to pin her down. It's been like winning the lottery, she types in one of their first group chats. I have to get some protections in place before I go public, she explains.

TEXASTWISTER: I hear ya. Smart move.

SHANDYBELL: You get stalkers. Dirty old men show up at the coffee shop where you made a video. It's gross.

MR. FANTASTIC: Hey! I resemble that remark! I only did that once and you said you liked it!

When Dorothy releases an image on Instagram of Isabella walking down a city sidewalk, Charli DMs her. Nice outfit! Where'd you get it?

It doesn't exist. She can't admit to augmenting her images; she would seem inauthentic. Nor can she lie to Charli and try to fob off some made-up clothing label or designer. Charli will know.

Thanks. My mother made it. She thinks she's a fashion designer. Your mother?!? She's a genius. Ask her to make something for me. I'm a size 4.

Every question is a minefield. TexasTwister asks about the motorcycle in one of her earlier images. You ride, girl? We'll have to get together sometime. I have a Triumph Scrambler, 900cc.

It's not mine, Dorothy types back hastily. I borrowed it from a friend. She needs to avoid being boxed in, at least until she's mapped out what the next six months will look like.

So many moving pieces.

Meanwhile, the number of her followers mushrooms. One week after joining the influencers' club, one week of their occasional posts on her content, and that number shoots up to 12.3 million. By the end of the second week, it's snowballed to over 20 million. Dorothy can hardly believe her good fortune.

But there's no doubt that it isn't due to *good* fortune and nothing more.

Later, Dorothy will wonder how it all came about, if it was something she manifested because she wanted it so badly, or if the cosmos made it come about as some sort of lesson.

Or if the troll had something to do with it. He claimed to have brought others their fame and riches. It's possible.

It starts when Dorothy sees an Instagram post by Charli, who's wearing leggings and a big cashmere sweater, her hair held back by a wide headband. Open suitcases are arrayed in front of her like she's packing for a trip.

Going to San Diego for a few days at the end of the month with my besties
TexasTwister and Shandybell. Mr. Fantastic and the Annihilator will be there, too.
It cannot come too soon: I need a vacay.

A hype house. Dorothy's heart pings with jealousy. Why didn't they invite her? It would be perfect.... Her jealousy quickly cools down as she talks logic to herself. *You just met them, don't have unrealistic expectations. They're all superstars and you're not—yet. Be patient. You're not ready for this yet.*

The message alert wakes Dorothy. It takes a minute to clear the cobwebs in her head. She holds the phone steady in her palm and squints at the text.

It's Claire. Pack your bags, you're going to San Diego. Thank me later, babe.

Dorothy puts down the phone. Did she ask Claire to do this for her? If so, she has no recollection. What a cringe convo that must've been. *Mommy, get me an invitation to the cool kids' slumber party.* Unfortunate echoes of her childhood.

That's what these business managers do, right? Create opportunities for their clients. And these hype houses aren't about friendship or popularity, except on the leaderboards. It's business, not pleasure. Still, she can't help but feel small and weak and unpopular over the last-minute invite.

That's what this opportunity is about, though. To make content with the biggest names in social media, appear on their YouTube channels and in their TikToks. Get more followers, exponentially.

At the same time, it's risky. She could make a rash move—she's done it before—and send all her hard work crashing down. Tomas has made a few missteps that sent potential clients scurrying away. You can't appear too needy, too clingy. Nothing stinks like desperation.

On the upside, San Diego is close. She can take a commuter flight and be there in under an hour. And it's for a weekend, just a couple of days. She wouldn't even have to ask Tomas for time off. It won't be a big investment of time or money.

It could be fun. Maybe these people could become actual friends. Peers she could turn to for advice as she navigates this new career. Right now she has nobody, has to make every decision for herself. It's exhausting. Hasn't she wished for this over and over since launching Isabella?

Though she knows the chances of it working out this way are slim. From what she's seen the world of influencers is fiercely competitive. It reminds her of life in high school. Mean girls. Backbiting, mockery, isolation. They could be luring her in only to skewer her. Take her down a couple of pegs, reduce the threat from an ultrahot rising star. Her stomach is tied in knots.

But these women aren't teenagers. They are in their twenties. Charli has to be in her thirties.

The pull to make a friend, to have someone she might be able to depend on, particularly in this crazy, fun-house life she has now, is strong.

She bites her lip. Claire is waiting for her answer.

She types back: You're my fairy godmother!!!

She pushes "send" and hopes she hasn't made a terrible mistake.



twenty-two

two weeks later

The Uber drops Dorothy off at the address Charli texted. She recognizes it from the pictures on Airbnb, though it seems different. It's smaller (they always are), less fantastic, more ordinary. The neighboring houses are closer, though there is a fence on either side to shield the ground level from prying eyes.

The door opens and a person Dorothy doesn't recognize from Instagram or TikTok stands before her: a woman in her thirties or forties, slightly overweight under her loose sweatshirt and yoga pants, frizzy hair pinned to the top of her head, thick eyeglasses. She appears as though she just came from the airport, too, frumpy and cranky. She looks Dorothy up and down. "You must be Isabella."

A frisson of impostor syndrome before Dorothy sticks out her hand. "I am."

The woman steps aside and indicates that Dorothy should come in. "I'm Cindy, Charli's sister. I'm also her assistant." Dorothy sees little

resemblance between this woman and the thin, sleek mega-influencer. Cindy closes the door after Dorothy wheels her suitcase inside. “Are you alone? No assistant? Stylist?”

She’s made a mistake already. She tries not to flush. “Nope. Just little ole me.”

Dorothy doesn’t know from the face Cindy makes if she’s impressed or amused. She glances down at Dorothy’s luggage. “Just the one? Boy, you travel light.” Again, that inscrutable look. “All right, then. Follow me. I’ll show you to your room.” They climb the stairs, made of concrete and glass, soaring above the huge foyer. Cindy doesn’t offer to help carry anything, leaving Dorothy to struggle with her suitcase and overstuffed tote. “This place is huge,” Cindy says as she leads the way past open bedroom doors, her sandals scuffing and slapping the polished concrete floors. She leads Dorothy to a bedroom at the front of the house. No ocean views, then, Dorothy grouses to herself. From the photos on Airbnb, she recognizes this as the smallest bedroom, the least flashy. They’re splitting the bill evenly, to the best of her knowledge. She’s the newbie and lowest in the pecking order. *Be grateful to be here at all.*

“Here you go,” Cindy says, waving a hand.

The lighting isn’t great here for either videos or selfies but...it’s two days. She’ll shoot on the lawn if she has to.

Dorothy smiles. “This is really nice.”

Cindy turns to leave. “We’ve got a chef coming in for lunches and dinners. Everyone’s here except for Tony”—Mr. Fantastic’s real name—“and everyone’s gathering on the patio in an hour to go over house rules. I’m the housemother this weekend, so let me know if you need anything.” She doesn’t offer her cell phone number and walks out before Dorothy can ask, closing the door behind her.

Dorothy unpacks slowly. Voices can be heard through the walls and floor, though she can’t make out the words.

She resists the urge to change clothes but freshens her makeup with her newly acquired skills, careful as a surgical nurse changing bandages on a critical patient, before heading downstairs. She walks through a cavernous

great room to get to the deck, which stretches the width of the house. From the deck, there are sweeping views of the beach, only slightly hindered by a row of beachfront mansions. What would it be like to *live* in a place like this? It's hard not to get her hopes up.

Three, no, four, no, *five* women are on the deck. A couple of male voices drift in from other parts of the house.

The woman on the huge modular sofa has to be Charli. The resemblance to Cindy is negligible; she's what Cindy might look like if she subsisted solely on Ozempic and spent a lot of money on an aesthetician. Charli, notorious for changing her hair color and style, has it dyed a bright blond. The look on her face—pensive, calculating—is only rarely seen in her photos, in which she most often is laughing or, at the least, smiling. The woman reclining on the sofa, staring pointedly at Dorothy, is deadly serious.

Standing by the railing is TexasTwister. She really is as tall as she appears in her videos. At least six feet, possibly more. She has a long face, too, and a wide mouth accentuated by coral lipstick. She wears her trademark cutoff jeans and cowboy boots and a bandanna tied loosely around her neck. She turns laconically to Dorothy as she emerges onto the deck.

Shandybell is every bit as beautiful and delicate as she appears in her videos, with an overpowering nimbus of wiry hair floating around her face. There are rumors that she is being considered for a television show, making the rare but coveted crossover from the virtual world to old media. (Whether that's an upgrade or a downgrade is a matter of intense debate.) Lying on a chaise under a huge umbrella, she's a goddess in repose, in her halter top and matching bell-bottoms, sipping from a tall tumbler of something a healthy green shade.

Cindy and another woman huddle together off to the side, over a stainless-steel counter displaying trays of fruit and rows of bottled mineral water.

"Hey, it's the new girl," Charli says from the sofa. She doesn't get up but waves a hand airily in Dorothy's direction. "Have any of you met

before?” she asks, as though she doesn’t know already. As if they haven’t compared notes well in advance.

“Nope,” TexasTwister says. She covers the distance to Dorothy in a couple of long strides. She sticks out her hand. Coral nail polish to match the lipstick. “Heidi. Heidi Wainwright. And you’re...?”

“Isabella.”

“You use your real name?” Heidi asks. Is there a touch of scorn in her voice?

“Rookie mistake?” Dorothy asks, to which Heidi shrugs.

Dorothy walks over to Shandybell and extends her hand. “Shandala,” she says as they shake. “Nice to meet you. Where’s home?”

“Not too far away.” Dorothy wonders how long they’ll be satisfied with vague answers.

Charli raises her eyebrows. “Not going to say? You do like your little mysteries, don’t you.” It isn’t a question.

Oh well. You have to give something to get something. “I’m in L.A. right now, though I’m not sure how long I’ll stay.”

“L.A. girl, huh?” Heidi asks. “That’s nice. Convenient for those red-carpet events.”

Dorothy almost laughs. In her wildest dreams, she doesn’t expect to be invited to any of those anytime soon—but why not? She can make appearances as Isabella now, and clearly these girls don’t write it off as outside the realm of possibility.

A boyish laugh echoes from the house’s cavernous innards, followed by a volley of shouts and more laughter as Tony Lamotta, a.k.a. Mr. Fantastic, comes bounding out into the sunshine, accompanied by two men about the same age. They are like puppies, tumbling over one another in a series of playful headlocks and arm punches. They fall onto the sprawling couch, sending Charli skittering to the farthest corner, looking none too pleased.

“Can you stop that roughhousing for a minute?” she snaps, lifting her drink out of harm’s way.

“Never. Not even for a minute. Hey, Brian, make me a smoothie, will you?” Tony calls to the man who has risen from the couch and walks to the back area where the other women have been banished. He gestures at the departing figure. “That’s Brian. He’s my personal trainer. And that other guy is my assistant, Jason.”

Is she the only one without an entourage? Dorothy wonders.

Cindy suddenly materializes before them. “Okay, I’m going to go over the house rules while we’re here.”

“No way!” Tony squawks from the couch. “Davey’s not here yet. We can’t get started without Davey.”

Davey is Dave Rasmussen, known as the Annihilator. He was a stand-up comic, not getting far on the club circuit, until his abrasive style found an audience on YouTube. Of all the influencers spending the weekend together, Davey is the one Dorothy has been most nervous about. He’s a little older than the rest of them, and smart. From what she can tell from his videos, he’s really, really smart.

“Davey’s always late. Besides, he’s done this before. He knows what’s expected from him,” Cindy says dismissively. She lifts her phone to read from it. “The big one is no posting pictures of one of the other principals without prior approval of the shot. That is ironclad. Nobody wants another incident like we had in Detroit.” Murmurs all around. Dorothy has no idea what they’re talking about, naturally, but she isn’t going to ask, not now. The rest of the rules are predictable. The object of the weekend is to generate content. “You can expect that cameras will be rolling all the time,” Cindy finishes, looking at Dorothy specifically. Her stare is chilly. “Behave accordingly.”

They go together to the beach. It’s too cold to swim but that doesn’t stop Mr. Fantastic and his entourage from jumping in, then trying to push Dorothy and Shandybell in, too. Charli and TexasTwister walk arm in arm, each shooting from a selfie stick as they ramble on about the beautiful sky

and pristine sand, their long hair whipping in the wind. Meanwhile, they pass small knots of beachgoers who either watch from the sidelines in complete confusion or hurriedly pull out their phones to record the passing parade. Dorothy's cheeks burn; she's still not used to making a spectacle of herself. She doesn't stop recording, though.

At dinner, they act up while the private chef cooks. It feels like something out of a movie to Dorothy, a movie about a queen and her court. Charli is, of course, the monarch, and the rest are her courtiers, vying for her attention, her favor, waiting to be called over to take the seat beside her. By that time, Davey has arrived. He's not staying in the house, as it turns out—"Too noisy, can't work" is all he says—but at another rental nearby. He arrives for dinner with his girlfriend tucked under his arm. The girlfriend knows to stay out of the shots. Do the Annihilator's followers know he's in a relationship? Dorothy doubts it.

Meanwhile, the assistants (Shandybell's, TexasTwister's, and Mr. Fantastic's are staying down the road at a Motel 6, it turns out, all the bedrooms in the Airbnb taken) dart in and out like swallows to discuss angles and shots, refresh drinks, powder a nose. It's dizzying, noisy. Even the smells wafting from the stove are overwhelming.

"You're a quiet one, aren't you?" Shandybell asks. They sit together at the huge kitchen island, watching the chef cook.

"She's overwhelmed," Mr. Fantastic brays from his end of the table.

"That's because we're overwhelming," TexasTwister replies, her long arm reaching past them for a wine bottle. "You'll get used to it." That sounds promising, like they expect she will be a permanent fixture at this Mad Hatter's party.

But the look on Charli's face tells Dorothy that she isn't so sure.

The party does not wind down until nearly two a.m. Dorothy's exhausted but afraid to leave, afraid of what the others will say about her. She films and films, glad she brought an extra battery for her camera, and extra chargers for everything. At least she isn't a newbie when it comes to equipment. Working for Tomas has trained her well, though she can't share that, of course. The women are careful not to get drunk, but the same can't

be said for the men. The night ends when Mr. Fantastic does a very drunken handstand at the prompting of his assistant and almost breaks his neck when he tips over backward. The only exception is Davey, who nurses his beers.

Before getting into bed, Dorothy checks the footage on a trail cam she set up on a shelf. The trail cam is old, something she picked up on a whim at a yard sale. It's almost a miracle she brought it with her, just something she thought of at the last minute as she packed her equipment bag, and the same went for setting it up before she headed down to dinner. A part of her can't help but feel paranoid, like there's no privacy in this house. She feels a menacing vibe, which she rationalizes as the novelty of being surrounded by strangers. Tired as she is, she nonetheless pops out the SD card and pops it into the reader she brought along. Despite her anxiety, she expects to see nothing, so she's surprised when, as she fast-forwards through the feed, she sees Mr. Fantastic creep into her room.

What the actual fuck?

He creeps on the balls of his feet, obviously trying not to make noise. He goes to her suitcase first, flipping the unzipped lid up. Seeing it's empty, he starts opening the drawers, sliding them open a few inches gingerly, sliding them back, until he finds what he's looking for. He reaches in and pulls out...a pair of her underwear. He lifts the panties and buries his nose in them.

Gross. Her stomach heaves. Though she also feels weirdly...flattered, not that she wants to admit it. Mr. Fantastic, YouTube lothario, finds her so appealing that he's snuck into her room like a lovesick schoolboy.

He tucks the panties into his front pocket and slips out of the room.

The pervert. He likely had her panties in his pocket all through dinner.

She sits back and shivers, unsure what to do. Her instinct is to call him out. Plus, it's her duty to warn the women in the house, right? But they know him better than she. He probably has done the same thing to at least one of them. She can't afford to make an enemy of him right off the bat. Mr. Fantastic might not be as popular as Charli, but he has a strong following of juvenile men who love harassing women. She can picture them sending her death threats, doxxing her, maybe even stalking her in real life.

Plus, the others might not appreciate that she set up surveillance in her bedroom. It certainly signals that she doesn't trust them. She wouldn't have done it, though, if it weren't for what Cindy said. *Assume you're being filmed at all times.* Someone could've easily snuck into her room to set up a hidden camera. Naked pictures of Isabella would be a hot commodity. She thought she needed to protect herself.

Cindy's words were more than a warning: They had been a piece of advice.

Tony had obviously forgotten that advice.

Dorothy holds the SD card between thumb and index finger. Now she has blackmail material, if she wants to be cruel. She has leverage over Mr. Fantastic.

She tucks it inside one of her sneakers for safekeeping.

An overcast sky blooms over the beach, painting the landscape in grays and pale blues.

Saturday. They are scheduled to spend the *entire* day together. Dorothy's tempted to feign illness and stay in bed. She isn't sure she will survive a second day. Her nerves are jangled after all the time they spent together yesterday. She's not used to being around people nonstop.

Not to mention the surprise capture on video.

When she goes downstairs for coffee, she finds everyone else gathered around the gigantic dining table, hunched over laptops and cell phones, furiously editing content. Charli and TexasTwister aren't even in makeup yet, their faces strangely washed out. Shandybell's assistant gives up her seat graciously to Dorothy and perches on a stool at the kitchen island instead.

Funny, even though until recently she worked in a studio all day with only a thin partition between her and the other artists, Dorothy has never worked on Isabella's social media content when there was another soul

around. As she starts opening files, it feels wrong. It feels illicit, like exposing herself in public. She isn't sure if she can do this.

Then she sees a short video she put up last night before falling asleep. Ten seconds from the beach, the camera zooming between the faces of her new, famous friends, everyone laughing and appearing to have a good time. Ending with her own smiling face looking ready to burst with happiness.

That's her. It jolts her. That's her face, not a computer-generated simulacrum but *her*. She can recall being in the moment, from the feeling of sand between her toes to the wind pulling on her hair. Shandala tugging on her arm, the boys kicking a spray of frigid salt water in their direction.

And below, the numbers...The likes and comments, so many that it makes Dorothy's heart leap to her throat. Tens of thousands in just a few overnight hours. All that adoration—for her. Not for her paper doll, her ghost in the machine, but for her.

Yes, yes, yes—she could get used to this.

She's still gawking at her monitor in a daze when there's noise from the front of the house. Davey walks into the kitchen with his silent girlfriend at his heels.

He deposits a crumpled brown paper bag on the island. "What—still editing? What a bunch of slackers. I finished, like, an hour ago. I brought breakfast. Bagels."

A protest goes up from the table. "Ugh—carbs," Heidi says.

"You're sabotaging us," Shandala adds. It doesn't stop anyone from reaching for the bag, Dorothy notices. Within minutes, there are crumbs everywhere as bagels are sliced, toasted, and frosted thickly with cream cheese. The sound of typing is replaced with the sound of chewing. Silence reigns temporarily over the busy workspace.

"So, what's the plan for today?" Davey sits on a couch, arms stretched along the back cushions. His eyes are trained on Dorothy, she notices.

Charli groans. "We agreed to the agenda in advance, Davey."

"Yeah, keep up." Tony smirks. Davey shoots him a warning look.

"We're doing a yoga class in a salt cave," Heidi says.

"Pass." Davey smirks at Dorothy now, too.

“Right. You wouldn’t want to corrupt your body with exercise,” Shandala says. “Maybe you’ll join us for a wine tasting in the afternoon? We’re doing the urban wine trail in this area called Funk Town—”

Davey wrinkles his nose but says nothing. Dorothy can see that he considers himself an iconoclast, existing outside the norms that the rest of them have to adhere to. There’s something dangerous about him. Hasn’t she heard something about the Annihilator? It scratches at the back of her mind. Dorothy has met people like Davey before, but in school, where the stakes were much lower. He’s naturally competitive. The question is how well he can control that instinct.

“My feet are killing me,” Heidi complains when they’re back at the house. Sunburnt and tipsy, they flop on couches and chaises. In the quiet moment, Heidi rubs her size-twelve feet, and Dorothy thinks she might risk asking a question that has been nagging her. They’re all friends now, aren’t they?

She tips her head closer to Heidi’s. “Hey, have you ever gotten any strange offers online? From one of your followers?”

Heidi laughs. “Are you kidding? Too many to count. In the beginning, I’d charge ’em for pictures. Ten bucks for a shot of my feet. The weirdest one had to do with stuffed animals.”

Dorothy sees she’s going to have to be more specific if she wants to learn if anyone else has ever heard from her troll. The desire to know outweighs her desire for secrecy. “No, this is something else. Like, have you ever been approached by someone who promised he could make you famous?”

Heidi’s look turns quizzical. “You mean, like a promoter? That’s what your manager is for, honey.”

Clearly TexasTwister has no idea. Dorothy decides to beat a hasty retreat. “Yeah, that must’ve been it. A promoter.”

Heidi runs a hand through her sweaty hair dismissively. “You gotta be tough with these people. There’s always someone looking to make a fast

buck off you.”

Cindy distributes bottles of water—“Hydrate, people”—and reminds everyone they’re going to a club tonight. “We’re going to see the hottest DJ in town,” she says. “They know we’re coming. They’re going to let Tony spin a few records.”

Shandala snorts. “I think I could do a better job.”

Dorothy presses the cold bottle to her cheek. No way is she going to be able to party all night with this crowd. She’s already exhausted—this is where lack of exercise takes its toll. Nor is there any reason to go: She has plenty of footage, enough to splice into several reels and shorts. A week’s worth of content, at the least.

“I think I’m gonna pass,” she says, rising from her chair. “I think I’m coming down with something. A cold, maybe? I don’t want to hold you back.”

Cindy breaks the ensuing silence. “Uh, do what you have to do, I guess, but we told the club you were coming. Everyone’s excited to meet you, you know.” She says that almost grudgingly. “They’ll be disappointed if you bail.” The looks on their faces—Charli’s, Shandala’s, Heidi’s—say bailing is not an option.

“All right...never mind,” she murmurs. “I’ll go. It’ll be great.”

“Ubers arrive at ten p.m., everyone,” Cindy says with the cheerfulness of a drill sergeant. “Be ready to go. Don’t make the rest of us wait on you.”

The club Cindy has chosen is not at all what Dorothy expected. She’s thinking of Los Angeles: The discos and dance clubs she’s seen or heard about are moneyed, sophisticated, cutting-edge. Or they’re subversive and edgy. The club they’re driven to tonight has a suburban vibe, the kind of place where tired office workers might go on the weekend for half-price cocktails. Tourists round out the dance floor.

The other influencers work the club hard, picking out the most picturesque nooks, finding ways to take footage that makes the place seem

much livelier than it is.

Dorothy, however, can't keep from watching Tony. He flits around the club with his entourage, chatting up girl after girl, taking selfies with them, dancing, drinking, even dispensing kisses on request. People buy him drinks left and right, treating him like a celebrity. Does he think of himself in that way? The past couple of days have shown Dorothy that being an influencer is a job, every bit as much as digging a ditch or going into the office. She knew that, but she was used to toiling in a different, purely technical way. Working for Tomas was not so different from being a student: sitting at a desk, being alone with her thoughts for the most part. As Isabella, she has to engage as a human. It quickly drains her energy. It's not what she expected, though she realizes the absurdity.

You're Isabella now. Isabella is flesh and blood.

It hits her again that night, how much this whole thing reminds her of being back in school. Whenever she glances at one of the other women, she sees that she's being watched, just like in middle school. Evaluated, judged. They're not her friends; they're competitors. Competitors for the only prize that matters these days: attention. Her instincts tell her that she's being ganged up on—maybe it's all in her head, it's a possibility—and she doesn't like it. She's never handled that feeling well. It brings out the worst in her.

At midnight, Dorothy hails an Uber. "I'm going home," she tells Cindy on her way out the door, not bothering to wait for a response. The woman has been giving Dorothy dirty looks all night, clearly disgusted that she didn't get into the spirit of things. Now out on the dingy red carpet in front of the building, she looks anxiously up and down the near-deserted street until a blue Accord appears as ordered.

She unlocks the door to the rental and trudges inside. The lights are on, no surprise there, given how chaotic it was before they left. Hearing noise deep in the house, she follows the sound (did someone break in? or is it a member of someone's entourage, left behind to tidy up?) to find Davey by himself on the deck, a bottle of wine on the table in front of him.

"Oh. Hey." She waves uncertainly. What is he doing here if he's staying down the road? Did someone leave him a key?

“How did it go?” he calls out. He lifts the wine bottle in invitation, beckoning her over.

She hesitates. She still thinks that something’s off about Davey, but she feels safer, under the circumstances. There’s no audience around to tempt Davey to ridicule her in his trademark eviscerating way. It’s just the two of them. The sky behind him is vast and empty beside the stars. You can hear the ocean, faintly. All that peacefulness, too, makes him seem trustworthy. Besides, she wouldn’t mind a glass of wine. She kept her alcohol consumption down at the club, despite wanting desperately to be numb, because she didn’t want to spend all her funds on ultra-expensive drinks.

He pours a glass for her and hands it over. She takes a sip. She has no idea if it’s good or not, expensive or not. She’s never been that kind of girl, never been much of a drinker. This tastes serious, like something an adult would drink. It tastes like money. Davey must be doing all right.

“Was it the usual shit show?” he asks.

She’s too shocked by his honesty to respond.

“I don’t know why I go on these trips.” He runs a hand impatiently through his hair, sending curls flopping every which way. “They were fun once, and I guess I can’t deny that it helped my career, being seen with the likes of Charli and Shandy. They stopped being fun, though.”

She takes a longer sip and the taste grows on her. “Yeah?”

“It’s Tony—for me. Was Tony acting like an ass, as usual? Like an eight-year-old who refuses to grow up?” He stares a hole through her, as though waiting to see how she’ll react.

She replays the evening in her head, tries to be objective. “No, not really. Just very social.”

“It’s his audience. He’s trying to hold on to that younger demographic. The Peter Pan tribe.” He smirks, then drains his glass. He holds the wine bottle out to her, even though she’s barely touched hers. Is he an alcoholic? “It’s hard to find male influencers who are what you call ‘mature.’ ”

She nods, though she isn’t sure if this is true. It’s then she wonders where his girlfriend is, why she isn’t here with him. Did she go home early?

Maybe they had a fight. “Where’s...?” She can’t remember the woman’s name.

“Gwen? She went back to the hotel. Tired.” He lifts his glass for another healthy gulp.

Yes to being an alcoholic, she decides, watching him. Is this an ambush? Has he come back to the group house in hopes of a hookup? Dorothy is the It Girl, after all. “What are you doing here?”

“Eh, just your basic FOMO.”

He continues to stare at her in an unreadable way. Funny, he seemed like the most confident one in the bunch at first, but now she’s having doubts. Maybe he’s as insecure as she. Maybe she can turn him into an ally.

Another big sip. “If you were afraid of missing out, you should’ve come with us.”

“I told you, I can’t stand Tony. If I spend too much time around him, I get the urge to punch him in the face. And you should hear the things he says when he thinks the girls aren’t listening.” He rolls his eyes. “I would never leave Gwen alone with him.”

She hesitates. She has a hot piece of gossip she can share with him. They might bond over it; it would be perfect.

After a moment’s hesitation, she tells him. She tells him about the hidden camera catching Tony in the act of rifling through her underwear. Stealing a pair. “What a creep, right? So, you were right about not leaving Gwen alone with him.” She tilts back her glass, finishing the wine.

She doesn’t register his raised eyebrows at the time, his muttered, “Well, aren’t you the smart one, setting up your own nanny cam. Clever, clever.”

The next morning it’s all over socials.

Luckily, she checks her cell phone before heading downstairs for coffee. It’s their last day in the Airbnb and they’re to leave by ten a.m., but

something in the back of her mind tells Dorothy to take that extra minute to check for messages.

Isabella has been tagged thousands of times. The tags lead her to a video on Davey's YouTube channel.

There they are, sunken into those deep sectionals on the deck, the San Diego sky twinkling overhead. The camera stays on Dorothy, for the most part, with only the occasional cutaway to Davey nodding sagely. Gwen must've been hiding somewhere with the camera. They'd set it up beforehand, so Davey knew exactly where Dorothy needed to sit for the perfect shot. They'd set a trap and, with the help of a glass of wine, she walked right into it.

She wishes the bed would swallow her whole. Maybe she can order an Uber and sneak out without seeing anyone else. The others must know about it. Voices rise up from the first floor, loud. She can almost make out words but there is no mistaking the sharp, heated tone of their voices.

Damn. Damn.

She packs hurriedly after calling for a car. Slipping out of the room as quietly as she can, carrying her suitcase so it won't squeak and give her away, she tiptoes barefoot down the stairs, shoes stuffed in her tote bag. Voices drift toward her from the kitchen like a cold front. She's almost at the front door....

"Where do you think you're going?" It's Heidi, hands on hips. She rushes out of the kitchen after Dorothy. No makeup, bags under the eyes but her cheeks flushed.

"Uh-uh." Shandala wags a finger at Dorothy. "You're not going to get off that easily."

Heidi herds Dorothy into the kitchen. It's only the influencers, at least, none of the staff, except Cindy. The look she gives Dorothy is the dirtiest of all of them.

When Tony sees her, his face falls and he jumps off the stool. He doesn't seem to know whether he should start yelling at her or run away from her.

But it's Charli who speaks first. "You did a dumb thing," she says to Dorothy. She, too, is without makeup and looks like she might have a hangover. She wears a ratty chenille bathrobe.

"I didn't know he was filming us." It's all Dorothy can think to say.

"What was the first thing Cindy told you? Assume you're being filmed at all times."

"And Davey's the worst," Shandala adds. "He'd sell out his own mother for fifty thousand likes."

"Shouldn't you be mad at Davey?" Dorothy points at the spot where he was sitting last night, as though he's still there. "He's the one who put it up on YouTube. He could've gone to Tony first. Told him this was coming." The only thing he spoke truthfully about was hating Tony. Dorothy senses that part is true. After all, he's embarrassing Tony every bit as much as he's betraying her.

Charli shakes her head, arms folded over her chest. "Yeah, Davey shouldn't have done this, but that's Davey. He needs the drama for clicks. *You* should've known better than to talk about it with him. You shouldn't have been a dumb shit."

"What about Tony? Wasn't what he did dumb? And creepy, besides?"

Heidi tosses her head. "Yeah, but that's Tony. He's an idiot, but he's harmless. And he's one of us. We've been hanging together for, like, forever. We got history, and if you go public with this, other stuff will come out. Stupid things from ages ago." She waves a hand dismissively and Charli throws her a look. *Shut up.* "If you go after him, you go after all of us."

"We all got our skeletons in the closet," Tony says defensively.

"If you go public, what do you think is going to happen to Tony?" Charli's tone makes it clear: This will ruin him. Dorothy tries to reason, if only with herself, that this might not happen. The men who watch Tony's videos, they're not exactly champions of women's rights. There's probably a lot of panty sniffers among them. It will be a joke kicked around the internet like a football and then forgotten by the weekend.

“Give him the footage,” Charli says, pointing at Tony. It’s surreal, Charli as stern as mother superior, Tony hunched and defeated like a whipped dog, everyone glaring at Dorothy reproachfully. Yet, she’s the wronged party in all this; Tony snuck into her room, invaded her personal space, stole something from her. Davey tricked her, secretly filmed her, and used it against a man who was ostensibly his friend. But Dorothy ends up as the bad guy, easy to blame because she’s the newbie, and a woman. She isn’t sure how it’s all been turned on its head.

Her throat tightens, but she has to defend herself. “I can’t do that. If anyone challenges me...If he”—she points at Tony—“decides to sue me, I need to have proof. This is my proof.”

“He’s not going to sue you. We all want this to go away. But this way he knows the footage won’t turn up someday,” Charli snarls. “Look, this isn’t a suggestion. It’s an order.”

Without another word, the influencers start to tighten ranks, coming closer to Dorothy, as though they intend to chuck her down the stairs or give her a full body search. She starts to hyperventilate, nearly blind with panic. It takes her back to high school, middle school...the same feeling of being ganged up on. Bullied. She feels the intense need to strike out, to strike back.

But something else happens. Her anxiety and fear dissipate like fog burned away by morning sun. *This is ridiculous and I am done with it.* Dorothy draws herself up and takes a step backward, toward the hall. “No. I’m not going to do it. I don’t care if you vote me off your little island—I don’t want to be here anymore anyway.” Will they put their hands on her? She turns and heads for the hall, snatching up her tote bag and reaching for the handle of her suitcase. *Please be out there*, she prays silently to the Uber driver.

He is. A silver Camry sits patiently at the curb. Dorothy throws her suitcase in the back seat first, scrambling in afterward. “Go, go, go,” she shouts like she’s mushing a team of sled dogs. Through the rear window, she sees the front door fling open and the others tumble out. They stare in angry disbelief as the Uber drives away.

Dorothy lets out a long exhalation and leans into the back seat. She feels relief, but anyone can tell that this isn't over, of course not. There will be a price to pay, no doubt about it.



twenty-three

It starts a few days later, the first volleys flying past her like arrows.

TEXASTWISTER: What do we really know about our girl Isabella, y'all?

It comes in a video, the six-foot-tall TexasTwister with her trademark updo and caterpillar-thick fake eyelashes, sitting in a rocking chair on the porch of her parents' sprawling Dallas mansion. She lifts a finger, displaying a long acrylic nail painted shades of neon pink and orange. "You know me and Shandybell and my girl Charli just spent a long weekend with her in San Diego." Her high-pitched voice is thick with acid. "And she got herself tangled up smack dab in the middle of a scandal, didn't she? Well, me and the girls are gonna give you the lowdown on that little episode. We're gonna tell you what *really* happened."

Dorothy wants to throw her phone across the room. But she can't run away from this. She knew they would come at her, try to discredit her to save Tony's ass.

The only chance she has is that people might tune it out. After all, these petty spats are common online. It's the virtual version of what happens in professional wrestling. Better for everyone's ratings, right? She hopes that's what most people will think and that they'll move on. Charli

did the same thing to Shandybell a while back, didn't she, but they made up and everyone's friends now.

Dorothy has a sinking feeling that won't be the case here.

The next scene in the video is in the back seat of a limo, one of those horrendous, gaudy stretch limousines. They're all in there, minus Davey, huddled under parkas and guzzling champagne in plastic cups like they're in a Lady Gaga video. Tony sits between Charli and Shandybell, looking every bit the lost boy, his head on Shandy's shoulder, forlorn.

"So, what do you have to say to your followers about that piece the Annihilator put out the other day?" Charli sounds like somebody's mother, teeing her child up to explain its bad behavior to the teacher.

Tony makes big puppy dog eyes right at the screen. Who's holding the camera? Dorothy's bet is on Cindy. "It's a load of crap. That girl, Isabella, is hallucinating. I don't know why she'd say those things, unless it's because it's a fantasy of hers to hook up with me."

The women cluck their tongues and make sad noises.

"Yeah, I thought she was pretty sus, the way she acted all weekend," Heidi says.

They cut to a brief montage of shots of Dorothy being shy or noncommunicative. Hanging behind as Charli and Heidi walked arm in arm along the beach. Not having much to say at the wine tasting. Wobbling on one leg in yoga class. But Dorothy thinks she hardly looks like a psycho, more like a fish out of water—and who doesn't identify with that at least some of the time?

The montage ends and returns to the group in the limo. "So, what did you think of Isabella?" Shandybell asks Tony.

"She's not as pretty IRL. A little fatter than in her videos. Her nose was bigger, too. I guess her people fix all that up in edits.... Anyway, she was definitely hot for me, I gotta say. We did a little something, you know." He smirks, implying much. Dorothy's stomach heaves.

"I thought you had a girlfriend," Charli says through clenched teeth. He must be going off script.

Another smirk. “What are you gonna do when a girl like that throws herself at you?”

Shameless.

He shakes his head like it’s all the saddest thing he’d ever heard of. “I don’t know how Davey fell for her story. You know, I don’t really blame him. A girl comes up claiming that someone did her wrong, he wants to believe her. He wants to do the right thing. But he shoulda come to me first. He shoulda talked to me. I would’ve told him no way. *No way*. She’s not even my type.” The standard male defense. *Why would I sleep with her? I prefer brunettes.*

Lies, lies, lies. The truth doesn’t have a chance on social media. Pics, or it didn’t happen—but you can’t provide evidence of a negative.

She wants to strike back so badly that her hands shake over the keyboard. She’s smarter than Tony, though, smarter than all of them, and her instinct tells her to wait. Not to do or say anything until she’s thought it through. With great reluctance, she closes her laptop and sets it aside.

When she checks back on Tony Lamotta’s video an hour later, it’s amassed hundreds of comments. Since they’re the gamer’s fans, very few are in Isabella’s favor. They tar her with all the usual slurs—skank, whore; just another slut trying to steal your power—and, predictably, ask for pictures of her body parts. *Good luck with that.* Dorothy smirks.

In his replies, Lamotta sniggers and relies on innuendo to string his admirers along. Without Charli and the others looking over his shoulder, though, Tony loosens up, acts his usual obnoxious self. Let’s just say you won’t be seeing my girl doing any music vids because she ain’t that good with her mouth.

Oh God, oh God...Dorothy’s head throbs. This is a nightmare. She knows competition among influencers can be fierce, but she didn’t think it would get this bad this quickly.

She watches Tony’s latest video a second time. It’s almost as though he’s daring her to show her video. What is he up to?

There’s no question that she has to fight back, or this will never stop. She has to fight back before Charli decides to take a swing and bury

Isabella before Dorothy's precious creation can realize her full potential.

Goddammit, it's all Davey's fault. Conniving, calculating bastard... Turns out there was a good reason to be wary of him. And then she remembers where she saw that mention of the Annihilator—it was on the troll's Instagram account. BigBounce93 had left a comment on one of Davey's posts. She saw it with her own eyes, weeks ago. She lunges for her phone, opens the Instagram app, and searches for BigBounce93. The thumbnail of a red balloon. Still following only five accounts.

@IAMISABELLA

The next three are of older internet sensations, names Dorothy is only vaguely aware of. One transitioned to television and is probably still doing sitcom walk-ons. She's pretty sure one is dead from an OD or other self-inflicted exit. The third, she's not sure.

But the last one...

@THEANNIHILATOR

Her heart speeds up like a race car. Frighteningly out of control.

Oh God oh God oh God.

She looks at the phone in her hand. Remembers the troll's text messages, urging her to speak her desire out loud.

It's always listening.

"What are you doing to me? Did you set me up?"

Silence.

"If you're out there, help me. I need your help. I want to get back at this asshole so bad."

Silence.

"You did this to me. You *owe* me."

Nothing. No buzz. No unknown number.

It appears she's on her own.

.....

She decides to call his bluff.

She thinks about asking Claire for advice—her manager’s called a couple of times but Dorothy has sent it to voicemail—but she bristles at the idea. She doesn’t want to be lectured right now. She knows she fucked up. Plus, it seems too much like going to your mother for help after a playground fight. She’d done that once before and look how that turned out. No, she’s a big girl now. She can fight her own battles.

The next day, she posts the video she snagged with the hidden camera. It starts slow and so risks that some people might cut away too soon, but she doesn’t want to trim time off the front or back for fear of being accused of editing out the truth. The video shows Tony entering her room, rifling through her clothes, doing the deed, and creeping out. The light is low, but it’s undeniably Tony “Mr. Fantastic” Lamotta burying his nose in a handful of white lace.

Weasel out of this one, she thinks as she hits “upload.”

He posts a response in less than an hour. “It’s clearly AI,” he proclaims on TikTok. “It’s disgusting—but not surprising—that she’d stoop so low.” A bald-faced lie, and he makes no effort to explain how he’s come to this conclusion, no pointing out discrepancies, any of the ways deepfakes tend to give themselves away. No, he makes a decree and his followers parrot him, happy to be in on the joke. Happy to make this safe space for an asshole to get away with harassing an innocent woman. A victory for one is a victory for all. They create an impenetrable wall around their idol, making it impossible for the truth to get near him. There’s nothing the internet likes better than putting a woman in her place.

“Let me be real with you guys. Anyone can be a victim of sexual harassment. Even men. And what Isabella did with this video? Unforgivable.” Tony makes sad eyes at the camera and the likes and comments jump like they’re on fire. Dorothy’s stomach curdles to think that this is going to turn him into some kind of martyr. She can imagine what he’ll say on his victory tour on the manosphere podcasts.

Why did she expect any better? Why did she think she might be heard or seen? She might be the hottest property on the internet at the moment, but she does not have the deeply loyal fan base of Mr. Fantastic, a gamer

who climbed the ladder by making trailers for nonexistent movies and *Jackass*-style videos where at least one of his posse gets maimed.

And as for the troll? What if this was the plan all along? What if he isn't some supernatural power but simply a wrongheaded denizen of the manosphere who set her up? It would make sense that Davey was in on it, too. She kicks herself for being so stupid.

Mr. Fantastic's fans' response hits social media immediately. Starting slowly, then building momentum, they begin peppering TikTok and Reddit with accusations and speculation. *Let's dox this bitch* is the rallying cry, and Dorothy feels the subliminal itch as thousands comb through the internet, looking for information that will lead to Isabella.

There's idle speculation, too. And memes, of course: screenshots from Isabella's videos and images with all the usual slurs smeared across them. *Look, another woman who can only succeed by lying about a man....* They plaster her face on naked bodies and there's even a deepfake by the end of the day depicting her crawling to Tony on her hands and knees. The latter is clearly made with Sona—the glitches and flaws jump out at Dorothy, if not to the average viewer. Sona makes great revenge porn.

The memes and deepfakes are bad, but it's their attempts to dox Isabella that have Dorothy really worried. Sure, major media outlets have tried to track down her mystery woman, but the resources they put on the problem were meager. A couple hundred, maybe a *thousand* individuals, though, going through every bit of footage she's ever put out...That's how you crack cold cases or track down the location of secret prisons.

It's just a matter of time before one of Tony's superfans finds the tiny piece of metadata that will tie her to Isabella and then the whole thing comes tumbling down. Tomas and Villeneuve will sue her, Claire will dump her. She'll become an unemployable thief, her life over before she turns twenty-five. She'll become an epic failure, a cautionary tale for Gen Z, told with glee by their parents. *See, this is what the internet will do to you.*

Fuck, fuck, fuck. What can she do?

All she has at her disposal is an arsenal of cutting-edge video effects tools and the skills to make the most of them.

She quakes with rage...and fear. Can she do this, *really* do this? It's not her skills she questions—she knows she has the talent—but does she have the venom in her, the balls? Growing up, she wasn't expected to fight back, especially against a man. You curled into a fetal ball and hoped they would tire before you were too damaged.

Remember Amber. You're not going to be a victim your whole life, are you?

Christ. She almost jumps out of her skin, looks around as though someone has spoken over her shoulder. There's no sound, though. She knows that but...it seems so real. She swears she can hear the voice fading, last wisps dissolving on the air. Where did that come from?

I know you have the fire. It's still there, buried deep inside you.

Stop looking for excuses. Focus on the task at hand. Mr. Fantastic and his army of devoted zombies. *You want a deepfake? I'll show you a deepfake.*

She spends the evening in a white-hot fury making a video aimed at pressing all of Tony's buttons. Panties raining down on his head, spilling out of his closet. Showing him peeping through walls in public bathrooms. Even a fleeting cut of him fellating a member of his posse, crouched between his legs, the boy's head thrown back in ecstasy (in the image she pirates, he's laughing uproariously at one of Mr. Fantastic's jokes). Will it be taken down for being pornographic? Certainly, but not before exploding across the internet like a bunker-busting bomb, with copies uploaded to its farthest corners. She's against revenge porn but she puts those feelings aside. What she's creating is terrible, no question about it, but Tony Lamotta deserves it.

By the time she's finished, her head's throbbing. It was like her brain was trying to warn her: Don't push it. Flashes of white and red start to obscure her vision.

As she puts the finishing touches on the deepfake, she thinks ahead. She's not done. Davey is next. Whatever she does to him will have to be subtle, though. He's a snake, a manipulator. She'll have to think of something he won't be able to squirm out of. Something that will send an unmistakable message: *Don't ever mess with me again.*

At the same time, she'll have to be careful, as it appears there's some connection to the troll. Did he also make a deal with the devil? She can't tell. And the troll isn't saying. Perhaps he's content to let his minions fight things out among themselves. Or maybe he's set them against each other, sowing chaos. She can't tell what's going on. For someone who's always been able to see three, four steps ahead of anyone else, it's crazy-making.

As always, she waits before posting the video. Never, never act in haste. But her head's splitting with the worst headache she's ever had, even worse than all those overnights creating the first Isabella images, and she takes a couple of the strongest aspirin in her medicine chest before heading to bed. She'll give the video one last look in the morning before posting it online.

She thinks briefly of the troll, worried that she's poking the bear. Fuck him, though; he's the one who abandoned her.

And she can take care of herself. She's proved that already.

.....

When she wakes, the headache is gone.

She lies in bed, eyes closed. Breathing the warm, still air of her bedroom. Her first thought is that she's exhausted. So, so tired. She'd like to take the day off. Between the studio and creating Isabella, it seems like she hasn't been able to rest a minute.

What she really wants, though, is to go home to New Jersey. See her parents. Eat her mother's cooking. Even the fattening lasagna—she'd eat it gratefully now. The mere thought of her childhood home brings a lump to her throat.

But going back is impossible, she remembers with a stab to her heart. That Dorothy doesn't exist anymore.

Even if she were able to get away for a few days, she wouldn't be able to enjoy it, not with everything that's going on. There's nothing to do, then, except drag herself out of bed and start the day.

Standing in front of the bathroom mirror, brushing her teeth, she uses those first still moments in the morning to think about what she's about to do. The deepfake, the brutal one-two punch for Tony Lamotta. There're probably hidden risks in posting such a thing. The debate hasn't been bad for business, quite the opposite. There have been over a million views of the panty-sniffing video. Sure, a lot of them are Tony's fans, but Isabella's account has gained tens of thousands of new followers. It also fulfills the objective of having her name mentioned in the same breath as the biggest influencers of the year. The video is being mentioned everywhere, from TMZ down to the lowliest YouTuber.

If the opening volley in their war has gotten this much attention, imagine what her video will do.

When she looks at her phone, however, it's blowing up with something entirely unexpected. YouTube influencer in catastrophic car accident, the post reads. Tony Lamotta, known as Mr. Fantastic to his millions of followers, is in the hospital in critical condition following an accident last night in the Detroit suburbs.

Dorothy scrambles upright, a sick feeling in her stomach.

Serves him right, a voice says in the back of her mind.

What? No. Where did that come from? It's as though that horrible headache has been replaced by this voice.

There's a statement on Tony's Instagram account, under one of his headshots.

Tony's car was involved in an accident on the Detroit beltway at approximately one am. It appears he lost control of the vehicle while negotiating unusually heavy traffic. His vehicle left the road and flipped several times before coming to rest on its roof. The passenger was pronounced dead at the scene and Mr. Lamotta was medevacked to Sinai General Hospital....

Dorothy swipes through the photos. The car, a black SUV, is crushed nose to tail, lying on its roof like a dead cockroach. It's surrounded by police and EMTs, a couple of ambulances, and even a fire truck. She supposes if the police and fire departments are already there, it means Tony has been taken out of the vehicle. That he isn't trapped inside, suffering.

She spends the morning refreshing her feed every fifteen minutes. Details trickle in painfully slowly. The dead man is the trainer who was with them in San Diego. Tony has been in surgery through the night. He's in the ICU. If he survives, there will be more operations to fix the many, many bones he's broken. A photo of him is released later in the day showing his head wrapped in bandages, the exposed parts beet purple and swollen. Under the post, someone commented, A friend is a nurse at the hospital and she told me Lamotta's jaw was broken in five places and had to be wired shut.

He's not so good with his mouth now, is he? the voice in her head sniggers.

It's not funny. He could die.

The only good to come of it is that all discussion of the feud stops immediately, like a storm blowing it clean away. Nobody's interested when one of the parties is hanging by a thread in a hospital bed. Dorothy can just declare herself the victor and walk away.

Still...she's sick and disoriented. This can't be real—though it's splashed all over social media. The worst part is feeling that she had something to do with it, though that's also undeniably false. Tony crashed outside Detroit. She's over two thousand miles away in Los Angeles.

All her excuses are just that...excuses. She remembers the plea she made into the ether. *Help me.*

Smite my enemy.

.....

A week later there's a post on Lamotta's Instagram page.

While the family is grateful for all the love and support we've received from Tony's fans, we are asking for privacy at this time. Tony's doctors have told us that Tony has a long road ahead of him, but some of the damage is irreversible and a full recovery is not possible. The family has decided to delete Tony's Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok accounts by the end of the month. We hope that you will all remember Tony as he was.

It's hard to breathe. She cranks her window open as wide as it will go and leans out, drawing deeply. She feels as though she might vomit.

It's not your fault. You didn't ask for this.

This is crazy. It has to be a coincidence. It's the timing that makes it feel like she had something to do with it.

But she knows the truth. A truth she can't let herself believe because it's impossible.

As impossible as her face and body changing before her eyes.

A few days later, just as Dorothy has managed to push all thoughts of Tony and his accident out of her mind, there is an email from Davey.

Isabella,

I hope you're not expecting me to apologize for tricking you into making that confession. Everything is fair game in our profession. It's the first lesson we all learn. The only thing that matters is whether it lands or not.

I'm writing to let you know that you have nothing more to fear from me. If I'd known you were under His protection, I never would've gotten involved.

Confirmation, but it doesn't make her feel any better for being right. Her stomach tightens painfully.

The troll—Davey knows about the troll. Hell, he was a failing stand-up comedian before his influencer career took off; he probably made the same deal that she did.

As much as she hates him and wants nothing to do with him, she needs to know. She thumbs a text to him. *Davey, what do you know about the*

troll? You gotta tell me.

She waits and waits. Bites her lip, impatient. Finally, the three floating dots appear.

The feeling of relief is wonderful. It's like finding someone who can confirm that you've seen a UFO. The shit she's gone through these past months...Now she knows that she's not crazy, and here's the proof.

After what seems like an eternity, Davey's text appears: You're obviously his favorite—look how successful you are. If I come near you again, he'll squash me like an ant. We're done. Don't contact me again.

At first, she's flustered. She has to find out more and Davey has the answers. She screams at the phone, flings it across the room. She retrieves it and calls, but it goes to voicemail. She texts again, and again, but it feels like she's pounding and scratching at a locked door. She can't force him to help her. He's *terrified*.

She knows she has to accept the fact that he's never going to tell her. She has to figure it out for herself, earn the answer.

And now she knows more than she did before: She *knows* she made a deal with the devil. She knows she's partnered with the dark side, the underworld. The bad guys.

Now she's a bad guy, too.

Davey realized she's dangerous. No one has ever thought her dangerous before—well, maybe once. But they didn't take her seriously then.

They'll take her seriously now.



twenty-four

A couple of days pass in a rush of work deadlines. Dorothy shoves down her curiosity over what Davey knows, as well as attempting to dismiss any thought of trying to convince him to talk to her. Not everything can be solved, she tells herself.

Dorothy looks at the time on her phone. She's been dreading this. She must put this impossible mystery on the shelf and return to the real world.

It's time to get ready to meet Claire for lunch.

She tears herself away from the laptop and heads to the shower. While she is happy and grateful to have Claire as her manager—the woman has lined up so many opportunities, it's truly amazing—these in-person meetings make Dorothy anxious. First, there's the fact that she ignored Claire's messages after the debacle with Tony. She'd planned to get in touch after a few days and take her medicine, but then she let it stretch out one more day, and then another...and then was a bit flummoxed as to what to do. So, she was grateful when Claire's assistant broke the impasse with a text reminding her of their appointment.

Second, the woman is hella intimidating. Maybe it's because she has zero interest in glad-handing or trying to ingratiate herself with whoever

she's speaking to. She seems to have X-ray vision and can see through whatever you're trying to sell. Or maybe it's because Dorothy has so many things to hide, she has good reason to feel like the blanket can be ripped away at any moment, exposing her.

The hot water of the shower feels good against Dorothy's body. The physical changes seem to have slowed to a crawl, if that, but the pain hasn't gone away. It's still there in her bones and joints, a steady drumbeat of ache. Being in constant pain makes Dorothy short-tempered. It's a good thing she's not in the office anymore; she'd be snapping everyone's heads off. Regular aspirin and other over-the-counter painkillers do nothing anymore and she's resorted to stronger stuff, turning to Kim to get her hands on Percocet and tramadol. The drugs make her sleepy and dizzy, but that's not a problem when she's sitting at the computer, and she's always at the computer.

If that's the price she must pay for her amazing new body, new life, then so be it.

The restaurant Claire has picked for their meeting isn't the kind of place Dorothy is used to. It's in Santa Monica, for one thing, as far from her grubby apartment as possible in the sprawling wonderland of zip codes that make up Los Angeles. It's the kind of place movie stars and Hollywood producers frequent, with sleek, futuristic-looking furniture, high ceilings, and tables spaced far apart so you won't be eavesdropped on. Dorothy checked it out in advance online so she would know how to dress, only to realize that she doesn't have the right clothing, not in her new and ever-changing size. Athleisure will have to do. Certainly, athleisure is acceptable daywear everywhere in L.A.

Claire arrives shortly after her, rushing to the table with her briefcase. Dorothy wears gradient sunglasses to obscure her face. She is Isabella for all intents and purposes, but she's still nervous around Claire, unsure how good the woman's eye for detail might be.

“Did you order already?” Claire asks, waving aside the menu when it’s offered to her. She probably eats here all the time. Dorothy shakes her head; she’s too nervous to even think about food. “We’ll have lobster salad and a bottle of the Verdigris pinot grigio,” Claire says to the waiter, who hustles away.

“Nice place,” Dorothy says, reaching for her water glass. Its sides are slippery from condensation and she almost drops it. She’s not good with small talk but she feels the need to stall, not wanting to get onto the subject of her ghosting her manager. She dreads a trip to the woodshed or, worse, being dumped as a client. “I bet you come here all the time.”

“Not as often as you might think. I was in the neighborhood for another meeting. We can do something closer to you next time, if you’d like.” Claire is fishing for information. Dorothy still hasn’t given her an address, claiming she’s couch surfing with friends. It’s in keeping with Isabella’s professed bohemianism.

Claire studies her as she puts her sunglasses in a neat little case. Dorothy—Isabella—is a little puzzle that Claire is trying to solve. “There’s a reason I wanted us to get together. We need to discuss a couple things.”

“Is it about the influencer weekend?” The words almost choke in her throat. Dorothy feels like a teenager being called to task. She slouches in her chair.

“That’s one thing, yes. Why don’t we start there, since you’ve brought the subject up.” Claire leans forward, forearms resting on the tablecloth. Her expression is stern. Dorothy can see that she wants to light into her, but she won’t. Control. “That wasn’t a good idea, picking a fight with that bunch.”

“It’s not my fault. I think that was their plan all along, to try to make me look bad. They wanted to end my career so I wouldn’t be a threat to them.”

The waiter appears with the bottle. He pours for Claire, and after she nods, he pours more into her glass and some for Dorothy and then leaves quickly. Funny, he doesn’t try to steal a glance at her. Maybe they get used

to waiting on celebrities. Still, she feels the tiniest bit insulted. He should at least want to take a selfie with her.

“Maybe you should look at this another way, Isabella. Your industry, the influencer industry, thrives on turmoil. Drama. Sure, your followers don’t want it to get out of hand. They don’t want to see anybody get hurt. But without a little drama, things get boring. You know what I mean?”

“Well, sure.” *Duh*. Dorothy has been following online dramas most of her life. They are her generation’s soap operas. “All I did was defend myself. Tony’s the one who blew everything up.” She starts feeling hurt. She shouldn’t have to explain herself to her manager. She expects Claire to be on her side.

“I understand that, yeah. And you do have every right to protect yourself. I’m just saying that next time, call me first. That’s what I’m here for. We might’ve been able to come up with a better way to handle it. Call in a crisis consultant, for instance. I mean, I know Tony’s manager. We used to work together at Rinehart. How do you think I set this up in the first place?”

Dorothy slumps. She should’ve remembered that.

“Look, it’s not all bad. None of your sponsors have pulled out, and you have tens of thousands of new followers on both YouTube and TikTok. I mean, Tony has his supporters, but there are lots of people out there who don’t like to see women disbelieved and harassed.”

Dorothy fiddles with her cutlery. “Well, at least there’s a silver lining.”

“More than one. MTV’s been in touch. They’re interested in doing a *Big Brother* kind of show with you and the others sharing a house—”

“You’re kidding me.” A television show is tempting, very tempting... but the idea of seeing those girls again curdles her stomach.

Claire sighs. “I know what you’re thinking but...it might work. Obviously, Tony wouldn’t be involved.”

Dorothy sees him in her mind’s eye, in a hospital bed. Broken in a hundred pieces, glassy-eyed and vacant. Her vision goes bloodred.

She did that. It’s her fault.

Sourness floods Dorothy's mouth. "I don't want to see those psychos ever again."

"Never say never," Claire chides her. "You never know when you might need one of them. Besides, people put up with more than that for a chance at reality-show stardom." *Check yourself*, she means.

They're interrupted again by the waiter. He hurriedly lays the plates before them, offers the pepper mill, then darts away like a hummingbird. Again, not even the slightest peek in her direction. Who does this guy think he is? Would it kill him to smile at her?

Dorothy stares down at the white lumps of flesh scattered over pale green leaves, inert and dead-looking. She can't remember if she's ever eaten lobster before in her life. What if she doesn't like it? She doesn't feel hungry in the least. As a matter of fact, she might even get sick to her stomach.

Claire jabs her fork at her salad. "We need to get back on some of those offers that have come in."

Dorothy knows what she's talking about. Before the online blowup, there were invitations to pose for covers for *Elle* and *i-D*, and to sit next to the runway at the Sergio Hudson New York Fashion Week show.

She reaches for her wineglass. "When do we need to make a decision? Can we wait another couple weeks on those?"

Claire stops eating. "What's the problem? I don't understand."

"I—I don't know." But she does. She's afraid. It's getting much bigger than she imagined when she started all this. It's too much, and it's going so fast. And it's coming together because she made a deal. That's why this is happening. She'd have none of these things without the troll.

She starts having trouble breathing, like she can't get enough air. She sees the pictures of Tony floating before her eyes. Bandaged, immobilized. That's her fault. She made a deal and look what's come of it. She has to imagine that the more she gets, the higher the bill.

What was it Davey said? The troll obviously favors her.

Slow your breathing. Dorothy clutches the side of the table. Is this what a nervous breakdown feels like?

Claire reaches forward to pat her hand. “Hey, take it easy. You’re hyperventilating. I know...it’s daunting. It’s a big deal. But the camera loves you. I think that’s been well established. They’ll take care of everything. Stylist, the shoot. There’s nothing to worry about.”

Maybe she’s worrying for nothing. She’s learned her lesson with Tony. She’ll keep it together now. She just can’t get the idea out of her head that something disastrous is going to happen. *There’s always a price to pay.*

“There’s some talk about maybe getting an invitation to do a walk-on appearance on *Saturday Night Live*,” Claire continues. “Those are last-minute things. You have to be ready to go when they call you. We shouldn’t put your name forward if you’re not sure.” Clearly meaning, *Don’t be an idiot. Don’t screw this up.*

Don’t waste my time. If you’re not serious about this...

Dorothy nods vigorously. “I understand. Really, I do.”

“I’m not trying to force you to do anything you don’t want to do. But this is my job as your manager: to get you opportunities that will advance your career. Any other influencer would be thrilled with these opportunities. This is how we make you a celebrity. If you don’t start responding to these offers, they will stop coming. They will dry up, and they’ll go to other influencers. Your rivals.” *The women and men who just humiliated you*, she means.

Claire stops eating. She puts down her fork and looks Dorothy squarely in the eye. “Look, I’ll be blunt. If there’s a good reason you’re pulling back, you need to help me understand. But you cannot continue to play hard to get and expect me to stay on board. It’s not going to go over well. Influencers’ careers are fragile. You cannot be satisfied with sponsorships for sports clothing and makeup. You could be parlaying this moment into a career. In a year’s time, you could be bigger than Charli. The possibilities are truly endless.”

Dorothy sinks back farther into the cushioned seat, a chastised child. “I hear you.”

“Good. While you’re in the mood to listen, here’s another thing you need to do: You need to fill out those forms I sent you. The money’s starting

to come in, and we need to untangle the mess that you set up with that ‘lawyer’ of yours—and I’m using the term lightly.”

She’s referring to a stack of legal forms her assistant sent over weeks ago. Dorothy has been stalling because she needs to provide documentation: social security number, birth certificate, all things she doesn’t have. She knows a little about how to create a new identity thanks to her true-crime obsession and knows the answers can be found on the dark web. It’s tricky, though, figuring out who she can trust. There are plenty of stories of how people lost their money by trusting the wrong person, not to mention the times it turned out to be an FBI sting. She suspects that Herb Zeilman could help her with this but is sure he will up his cut once it’s confirmed that something shady is going on.

“I will. It’s complicated because I don’t have a permanent address right now,” she says.

Claire’s expression is skeptical. She’s not dumb, and Dorothy isn’t sure how much longer she can stall on the matter. “Sure. Look, you just have to figure it out. If you need money for a security deposit or something, I’m sure we can work it out.” *Get your shit together*, in other words.

What’s Dorothy afraid of? She can’t quite put her finger on it. This is the payoff, what she’s worked so hard for. It makes no sense to hesitate like this. “Go ahead and accept the magazine covers. The fashion show, too,” she says finally. That will make Claire happy and give her something to work on, distracting her from the legal forms. It will buy Dorothy a little time.

“Good. Now you’re using your head.” The look on Claire’s face, however, says she’s not so sure.



twenty-five

It starts with a conversation Dorothy overhears at the bodega.

As she stands in line with two liters of Smartwater and a tuna salad wrapped in cellophane, her ears catch the word *Isabella*, spoken by one of two girls behind her.

She glances over her shoulder. It could be any Isabella, of course. But now that they have her attention, Dorothy can't help but eavesdrop. No one would recognize her; her bucket hat is pulled low with her hair tucked up inside. Sunglasses. A huge, baggy sweatshirt.

"...it's sad and all but, I dunno, there seems to be more shit coming out about her. Like, what's the point of being pretty? If that's all you stand for. And it's probably all done with filters and shit anyway. That bitch is probably fake as hell."

Dorothy freezes at these words uttered behind her. She sidles around to glance at the two girls by pretending to look at a brightly colored bag of chips on a shelf behind them. The one who spoke is younger than Dorothy, a little overweight, wearing a heavy veneer of makeup. Her friend is smaller, less made up. Both are staring at their phones, their thumbs flipping through screens.

“Yeah. And look what happened to Mr. Fantastic....” The other one’s words trail off as she pauses to momentarily gawk at something on her screen. “I mean, who knows, right? But the guy is in intensive care. I feel sorry for him. You gotta give him the benefit of the doubt.”

Dorothy stifles the urge to grab these girls and shake them. The accident had nothing to do with his crime. How is she anything but the victim here? They think he’s innocent because he got injured? The man is a perv; the evidence is right there, they could see it with their own eyes if they bothered to look. Dorothy’s anger spirals up at their misplaced sympathy. Society has weaponized women’s natural empathy against them. These two girls have been conditioned from birth to take the man’s side, to give men the benefit of the doubt while, at the same time, being suspicious of what a woman says. It’s ingrained by the time they’re this age, not realizing the unconscious bias that kicks in and makes them doubt even video evidence. *Pics or it didn’t happen*. Yeah, turns out even pics won’t sway some minds.

She even feels a tiny bit better about the fake videos *she’s* made. Gotta fight fire with fire, right? Anything to gain the advantage.

She quakes all the way home. She can’t do anything about these two clueless girls, but if people are attacking Isabella, she’s got to do something about it.

Back at her apartment, she cracks open a bottle of water and unwraps her sandwich and, as she chews, searches Isabella’s name, to see why people are talking about her.

It doesn’t take long.

TEENAGE GIRL COMMITS SUICIDE AFTER CYBERBULLYING

WLAF LaFollette, Tennessee

A local LaFollette girl took her own life after being relentlessly bullied online for being an “Isabella” superfan.

Dorothy's stomach drops. Oh God oh God oh God.

Tina Augustin had posted fewer than a dozen videos to YouTube before deciding to jump off the bridge at Norris Lake in Chapel County. She was pronounced dead at the scene.

"People started posting mean comments on the very first one," Tina's mother, Deidre Augustin, told reporters. "It's remarkable how cruel some people can be, calling her fat, stupid, clueless. They called her a lesbian, can you believe that, because she admired that model or whatever, Isabella. Well, once that happened, they started bullying her at school, too. Her own classmates. She never was one of the popular kids, you know, but they wouldn't let up."

Dorothy sits back in her chair. She feels like she's been gut-punched.

Her past rushes up like a tsunami, threatening to overwhelm her. It's always there, waiting. It's like that Creepypasta story and her dead brother, Jorgen.

Sweat beads on her forehead as nausea starts to rise in her throat, and she makes it to the toilet just in time. Wipes gross, acidic spittle from her mouth.

Megan, Amber, and Hailey used the same words in the texts they sent about her. *She's fat, she's stupid, she's ugly.*

And more. Dorothy's head pounds. Boom, boom, boom.

Dorothy is a lez.

She's in love with Amber.

She leans her forehead against the cool wall tile, burning with a decade of repressed shame. The worst was when she realized her mother had seen those texts after the police recovered them and shared them with the parents. Even as a twelve-year-old, Dorothy knew there was no reason to be ashamed for being called a lesbian, but that didn't stop her from feeling it all: denial, confusion, anger, rage. She didn't think she was gay because she'd drawn a picture of Amber—she didn't know what she was, but she was not in love with that clueless, self-absorbed bitch—but for those three to attack her like that? Over a stupid sketch?

The anger she feels now is only a shadow of what she felt then. Twelve-year-old Dorothy burned to strike back. To make them shut up. To

make them leave her alone.

It wasn't hard to come up with a plan, and she picked Amber because she was the most vulnerable of the three. She was like a golden retriever, following Megan's lead. It was easy to make her walk into a trap.

Dorothy wipes at the tears and snot that have streaked down her face. *Stop thinking about what happened before.* She needs to focus on the here and now: first Tony Lamotta, now the dead girl in Tennessee. With Augustin and the obvious reference to Dorothy's past, it's impossible not to see the troll's hand in all this. He wants her to remember it—for reasons she can't imagine. Is he trying to teach her a lesson? Make her feel remorse?

But she has no reason to be sorry—unlike Tina Augustin, it's not as if Amber died or anything.

Dorothy was very careful at the time.

This girl's suicide isn't about you. This is about Isabella, Dorothy tells herself as she rises shakily from the bathroom floor.

But then a voice enters her head as she walks back to her computer. *This isn't your fault.*

She presses her hands to her ears. That—voice. Not again.

The girl obviously had mental health issues. You can't blame yourself. Or Isabella. That's not what this is all about. Isabella is a friend to all. Isabella isn't judgmental.

The voice is a good spin doctor, Dorothy laughs to herself. It's coming from within her own head; of course it is. She has to believe that. She's getting good at coming up with excuses, at protecting herself. It isn't her fault this girl is dead—it's those mean, predatory bitches in her school. Driving that sweet kid into jumping off a bridge. She hopes they feel like killing themselves now.

Focus. The issue in front of her is damage control. Isabella should make a statement. If one of her fans was bullied into committing suicide, Isabella should speak out against it.

But Dorothy's lack of experience stops her short. You have to be really careful about this kind of thing—she's seen that from a couple of epic fails when celebrities weighed in on a tragedy only to get it wrong. They came

off looking like clueless, narcissistic ghouls, using a tragedy to make it all about them. Isabella can't afford to come across as anything less than totally sad and supportive of the girl's family. Maybe she should even donate money toward the funeral...or would that be seen as admitting guilt? Overstepping? Creepy, even?

Claire will know. That's what managers are for, after all, to steer things in the right direction. Didn't Claire just chide her for not reaching out for her help? Dorothy spends a few minutes writing up a post for Isabella about the tragedy—*Bullying is never, ever right!*—and sends it to Claire for her opinion.

Within the hour, Claire sends a response.

It's not exactly what Dorothy expects.

I'd heard about this tragic incident but wasn't sure whether to bring it up to you. I see now that I should've, so apologies for that.

This note of yours is a good start, Isabella. I'm sure the girl's family will appreciate it. I'm wondering, though, if this isn't an opportunity, too.

You are directly implicated in a story that everyone is talking about. Journalists are asking serious questions about you specifically and whether you're a force for good or bad. Bullying continues to be a very important issue. Recent documentaries on Netflix and elsewhere have only increased interest in the subject.

You're a phenomenon now. People don't think of you as a private citizen. I think you should definitely be a part of that discussion! You could use this tragic incident as a springboard to become a leading voice in the online community. The important thing is that you see this as an opportunity. You need to turn this into a positive for your brand. And we need to move quickly. How would you feel about writing a serious essay? I would see about getting it published somewhere it would get the recognition it deserves.

If you're up for it, I would suggest that you write an essay that includes the following points....

Dorothy's eyes glaze over as she reads through the rest of Claire's email. Damn, this woman is smart, Dorothy has to give her that. It's impressive how quickly Claire has thought of every salient point. She has

considered every angle and put together an outline for Dorothy to follow. No wonder Tomas's career has grown as quickly as it has.

He's smart enough to follow every bit of her advice. But Dorothy... well, Claire's suggestions stare back pointedly from the screen. This whole incident—being bullied to the point of taking her own life—hits too close to home. It has reopened a tender spot Dorothy thought healed long ago. She's paralyzed like a deer caught in the headlights. She doesn't want to go anywhere near it.

No, writing an editorial is out of the question. She types, This is a good idea, but I'm no writer. Maybe we could find someone to write it for me? She presses "send" before she chickens out.

Claire doesn't respond until late the next day. There's something about the way it's worded—Sure, I'll find someone to ghostwrite for you—that makes Dorothy sure Claire is disappointed in her.

So be it.



twenty-six

The email from Tomas arrives in Dorothy's inbox with a ping. Catrina Villeneuve is coming into the studio on Friday.

If this had happened a couple of months ago, Dorothy would've been overjoyed. Then, she desperately needed new motion capture of Villeneuve. She'd used the choice parts of the original footage so often that she was afraid viewers would figure out that she was on repeat. Still images could be made from a single frame; videos were another story.

Now, with her transformation, she no longer needs it.

Dorothy, I need you to go into the studio to cover this. Sorry it's last minute. Catrina's people insisted, and I can't get back in time. I need someone to supervise the shoot.

Under normal circumstances, Dorothy wouldn't dream of heading into the studio, of course, but everyone who knows Dorothy's old face is away. Tomas is in Europe at a film festival, wooing potential clients, Ric is with him, and she hasn't met the new technicians in person. They've never seen her face. On the occasional office Zoom, Dorothy blocks her video camera. They have no idea what Dorothy Wagner looks like.

Besides, maybe Dorothy doesn't *need* to see Villeneuve again, but she *wants* to. Villeneuve is the inspiration for Isabella. She's the ghost in the machine. It will be invigorating to see the pop star again, to be inspired by her energy and her look, but particularly by the way she moves. There are always videos from concerts and interviews and other appearances to use for reference, but nothing compares to what it's like to be in the woman's presence. Dorothy feels she lost a bit of the magic that gives Isabella her spark, and this is her chance to—maybe—get it back.

Sure, she types back to Tomas.

Dorothy arrives at the studio at the hour Tomas requested. It feels funny to be back after so much time away. It's ominously quiet, like walking into a mausoleum. Where are the new VFX artists?

The first thing she does is peek into her old office. The desk is unrecognizable now with someone else's knickknacks spread across it. Photos beside the monitor show a young woman holding a baby in a unicorn onesie.

Dorothy goes into the studio and begins checking the big, circular camera rig. It looks as though someone has started setting up already. A few minutes later, she hears noises at the front door. She goes into the reception area to see two men with messenger bags slung across their bodies, wearing baseball caps to hide thinning hair. They stop in their tracks at the sight of her. "Are you Victor and Manuel? I'm Dorothy."

It feels strange to be introducing herself by her real name, but it feels good, too. The face no longer matches the name in her mind. She's taken precautions to hide her now-famous face, hidden her hair under a wrap and put on a pair of dark sunglasses, but the two men take it in stride. They are an odd couple, one young and round and soft, the other older and tall and scarecrow-ish. "Finally, we get to meet the mysterious Dorothy," Victor, the older of the two, laughs as he reaches to shake her hand. "I was starting to

think you were a chatbot or something Tomas made up to give us something to aspire to.”

“He talks about me?” she asks, incredulous.

“All the time.”

They work together to finish the rig, the two keeping up a running patter the whole time. Nervous small talk; they must feel they’re being judged, Dorothy thinks. This is only natural, since she’s the senior person on the shoot and they don’t know her. Still, both men are friendly and funny. Who knows; if she were able to work with them and not Angelica and Ric, she might’ve been happy at work. She might’ve wanted to stay.

Villeneuve is expected at one o’clock, but the hour comes and passes. She’s an hour late, then almost two. Dorothy starts to worry, wondering if she should try to reach Tomas, when the front doors swing back and Catrina Villeneuve sweeps in with her entourage.

Only it’s not the same as the last time, and it’s obvious off the bat. The atmosphere is subdued. The crowd moves slowly, with none of the bustle of before. In the center of the cloud of people is Villeneuve—leaning on a cane. She’s shrunken, wizened. Aged before her time. Her glorious hair is pulled back in a severe ponytail and the bill of a baseball cap partially hides her face. Her assistants block most of Dorothy’s view. When Dorothy goes up to introduce herself, a woman steps in her way.

“Who are you?” the woman says pointedly, chin jutting upward. She looks like she’d kill to protect the singer.

“I’m Dorothy. Tomas should’ve given you my name. I’ll be supervising today’s shoot.”

The chin lowers. “Yeah, yeah. I’m Catrina’s manager. Serena.” Her handshake is curt and almost painfully firm. “Hopefully Tomas explained what’s going on here.”

Dorothy looks over the woman’s shoulder to the singer. Her entourage is settling her into a chair by the technician’s station. They take her oversized puffer jacket and wheel in a heater when she complains of the cold.

When the singer takes off her cap, it’s obvious that she’s seriously ill. She’s pale, her skin drawn, muscle wasted, hair thinning. There’s no

roundness to her face at all; it's a skull. She hunches in her seat as though she's no longer capable of maintaining that disciplined posture she's famous for. It makes sense now why the second leg of her global tour was pushed back a few months. When the news came out, it was said she was suffering from exhaustion from the last tour and wanted to rest up to give her fans the best experience. Looking at her now, Dorothy has to wonder if a delay of a few months isn't being optimistic.

"Yeah, I know I look pretty bad," Villeneuve says when she catches Dorothy staring at her. "The doctors don't know what it is. I can't tell you how many vials of blood I've given since it started, but the tests have been inconclusive."

Dorothy has seen what happens when someone gets a serious illness—a teacher in high school found out she had terminal cancer, an aunt was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis after she turned forty—so she's familiar with the wasting, what it means.

How long has it been since the last time she saw Villeneuve? Six months? "It started in late April," Villeneuve says. "Out of the blue. One day I was in twelve-hour-a-day rehearsals for the tour and the next I could barely get out of bed."

"You're working too hard. Your body needs rest," Manuel murmurs as he attaches the dots to Villeneuve's face. He has a kind heart.

"That's what the doctors said at first. So, I stayed in bed for a month and it didn't get any better. That's when they started taking me seriously."

"We need more videos and holograms to fill in onstage," the manager says, cutting the talk of illness short. "That's what we need you to do."

Villeneuve takes a sip of tea. "Tell Tomas thanks for squeezing me into your schedule."

"Of course," Dorothy mumbles, glassy-eyed with shock.

The shoot goes painstakingly slowly. There are frequent breaks, with Villeneuve resting in a chair with a blanket over her shoulders. Her ballet

training has seemingly deserted her. Her movements are jerky and she makes many mistakes and has to start over. Dorothy despairs from the sidelines, watching. Catrina Villeneuve is one of her favorite performers. It's hard to imagine the singer will be able to bounce back from this.

Dorothy sits with Victor and Manuel in the kitchen area once Villeneuve and her entourage have left. They stare blankly ahead, shell-shocked, holding cans of energy drink and mugs of coffee.

“What do you think it is?” Manuel asks. “MS?”

“They have tests for that,” Victor says. “She said her doctors don't know what it is. She must be dying.”

“Oh my God. It's terrible. And there's been nothing about it on TikTok,” Manuel says. As though nothing's real unless you see it on social media.

But his comment jolts Dorothy out of her stupor. “Don't get any ideas. Don't post anything on social media. If either of you leak anything, Tomas will fire you. Got it? We have to show that the studio is trustworthy.” Heads nod. “It's not our place to tell Catrina's story. Be respectful.”

.....

Once she's back in her apartment, Dorothy texts Tomas.

We did the shoot but I don't think you're going to be able to use any of it. Her health is bad. Really bad. She looks like a corpse. I think we're going to need to create the whole thing from scratch.

She presses “send.” Hopefully the two new guys are talented and can handle this level of work.

Tomas calls Dorothy back right away. “Hey, be respectful of our clients. ‘Corpse’—really?”

“Sorry.” Her apology comes out automatically.

“Yeah, Serena told me why they needed another shoot. Damn, that's too bad. I wish I had been there.”

“It was sad.”

“We got to do our best for her, yeah? Dorothy, I want you to work up ideas. Themes, costumes. You did the viz reel, you have the most experience with her. I want to see it by the end of next week.”

“Of course.” This will take her away from creating Isabella content, but it doesn’t bother her. She owes the singer this much.

And it might help her create new Isabella content, too.

She thinks back to what Villeneuve said. The illness hit her in late April.

Dorothy remembers what else happened in late April.

She posted her first image of Isabella.

It doesn’t mean anything.

You have nothing to feel guilty about.

Maybe the voice in her head was right. People get sick all the time. Bad shit happens, unexplainable shit. It has nothing to do with anything aside from whether you take care of yourself. If you eat junk food and smoke, or if your DNA is faulty. And Villeneuve did smoke; Dorothy saw it with her own eyes.

Does she notice in that guilt-drenched moment that the voice in her head and her own voice are nearly interchangeable now? She does not.

She flips to the early shoot they did of Villeneuve. She can’t get over how healthy the singer looks compared to the image of Villeneuve in her mind, the birdlike girl sitting in the folding chair, struggling for breath, wincing as she pulled the neoprene suit over her shoulders.

I am not responsible for this.

But there is a red-hot, burning lump lodged in Dorothy’s sternum that tells her otherwise.

The next thought gets pushed away almost before it can register in her consciousness. Dorothy turns away from it but can’t avoid its fading echo. *Is this what’s going to happen to me, too?*



twenty-seven

Dorothy's putting the final touches on a video edit when the screen of her cell phone lights up. *Mom*. A familiar guilt bleats in her chest. She's tempted to let it go to voicemail, as usual, especially as she guesses why her mother's calling.

But guilt twists the knife extra deep, and this time, she picks up. Wills herself to keep it light and breezy. "Hi, Mom. What's up?"

"Can't a mother call her daughter?"

"Of course. I'm working, though. You always forget the time difference. It's"—she glances at the phone screen. Oops; it's 8:20 P.M. —"Okay, you got me. I'm working late."

"You're always working late. You need to talk to your employer—"

"Mom, I'm not having this conversation again."

She sighs. "Okay, okay. Have you thought about what I texted you about a couple days ago?" Dorothy racks her brain but she has no memory of it. Did she even look at the text? When Dorothy hesitates, her mother continues. "I need to know if you're coming home for Christmas. Your aunts and uncles are asking. Everyone wants to see you."

Panic rises in her chest. *Nobody* can see her. It's one thing to explain away the changes to her roommate or the handful of people at work—none of them paid much attention to her anyway—and another thing to explain it to people who've known her for her entire life. At twenty-two, you don't shoot up six inches in a couple of months. She no longer resembles anyone in the family. She can explain the change in her hair as bleach and dye and blame some of the changes to her body on plastic surgery, even though the totality of her transformation is way beyond the realm of possibility.

"Mom, here's the thing—"

"Dot, do not tell me you're not coming home this Christmas," her mother says through gritted teeth.

"Nobody cares, Mom."

"How can you say that? Everybody cares. Everybody's so proud of you, moving out to Los Angeles on your own, starting a career." Her mother's voice swells with pride. The part she leaves out, however, is that everyone is proud that she was able to overcome the *incident*. That she's managed to turn out normal after all. "They want to see you."

Dorothy rubs her forehead again. *Think, think*. "The thing is, Mom, we're really busy trying to make the studio a success—"

"Honey, it's your boss's studio, not yours. You don't owe him your life —"

"—and I don't have a lot of vacation time. Not enough to make it worth my while to fly coast to coast. Plane tickets are spendy."

"I'll buy the ticket for you."

"I don't want you spending that kind of money on me."

Her mother makes a familiar noise of irritation, like a warning growl.

"Mom, really. It's okay. I'm not a kid. I don't care about Christmas—"

"You used to love Christmas."

"—anymore. I don't care about Christmas anymore. I'll come out this summer, when I have more time." She holds her breath, waiting to see if her mother will back down. She can be annoyingly stubborn.

There's a long pause during which Dorothy can practically hear her mother's patience burn, crackling like kindling. "Think about it, honey.

You'll be lonely spending Christmas by yourself."

"I'll be fine." *I'm alone all the time anyway. I'm a pro at loneliness.*

She knows what her mother is getting at. What she's really afraid of, what she'd use every tool at her disposal to keep from happening. Again.

Dorothy keeps up her end of the argument until her mother tires, like hooking a big fish on a line that will not break, and gives up. "Don't get too grown up to see your family. Family is the only thing you can depend on. Family is real—all that stuff on the internet isn't."

Dorothy rolls her eyes. Her mother will never get it.

"And don't work too hard. You know what can happen when you get too stressed," her mother says before hanging up.

Was her mother's voice wavering? It sounded like she was going to cry.

You did the right thing. You're destined for something they won't understand.

The words pop into her head. The voice—again. She starts, then winces at the arrogance of the words. She doesn't think she's destined for anything, except maybe losing her mind. Where do these thoughts come from?

But it hits her all at once: She's going to have to cut off her family, everyone in her old life. They can't see her again—or not until enough years have passed that the change in her appearance won't seem impossible.

She snorts to herself: It's not that much of a sacrifice. Nobody wants to see her anyway.

That's not true. Her mom has always been there for her. A tiny part of her wants to tell her mother what's been happening to her. If there's anyone who would listen, it would be her....

But no. She can't do that to her mom. What's happening to her is unexplainable. Her mom would lose her mind. She's been through so much, not only with Dorothy, but with Jurgen.

Dorothy brightens. Maybe that's the bargain: The troll gives her fame and Dorothy sacrifices family ties. That would be easy. That's a price she's willing to pay.

Which is why she doubts that's the case.



twenty-eight

Dorothy is idly scrolling on her phone as she gulps down her lunch when she sees a post on Instagram.

SINGER CATRINA VILLENEUVE FOUND DEAD IN BEL AIR HOME.

She goes cold. The hand holding the phone begins to shake.
It has to be a mistake. Or some lying piece of clickbait. Fake news.

Catrina Villeneuve, 24, had been sick for months, according to her manager. Doctors were unable to come to an agreement on the cause of her illness, but at the time of her death, the star was practically immobilized and had lost over thirty pounds.

Dorothy lowers the phone to her lap. Nausea rises up. *It's not your fault. It can't be.*

The phone buzzes. It's Tomas.

"My God, Dot, have you seen the news about Catrina?" His voice is pained. Sweet Tomas.

"Yes." She doesn't trust herself to speak.

His voice drops to a whisper. “You saw her a week ago...did you have any idea?” He doesn’t wait for her to answer. “You know they’re saying that she took her life.”

God. Oh God oh God oh God.

“I heard that on TikTok, a rumor supposedly from someone in her entourage. Said she couldn’t live knowing she’d never be able to perform again. She couldn’t bear to lose everything after how hard she’d worked.” Tomas sniffs, doubtful. “Who knows if it’s true or not? Catrina didn’t seem like a quitter to me. People really shouldn’t speculate at a time like this. They shouldn’t say shit for the clicks, not about something so terrible and personal.”

It’s like she’s been hit square in her face. If Catrina Villeneuve committed suicide, it’s Dorothy’s fault. She knows this as surely as she knows anything. It may be unexplainable but that doesn’t make it not true.

“Don’t you think it’s strange that the doctors couldn’t figure out what was wrong with her?” She can barely speak, her voice a squeak.

“For reals. Just between you and me, she told me that she’d tried *everything*. Even went to some of those holistic healers. Ate nothing but synthetic plant protein and all that shit. Nobody could pin it down. She was in so much pain.... I get how you can get to the point where you can’t stand it anymore. That poor, poor girl.”

When Dorothy ends the call, it feels like she’s swallowed a stone. She collapses on the couch and presses a pillow to her stomach. How will she be able to live with herself? But...she *can’t* be responsible. It makes no sense; if she told anyone this story, they’d laugh in her face. She stole Catrina Villeneuve’s essential energy through social media, fed off her like a vampire? They’d think she ate too many weed gummies. Her mother would blame it on all that time scrolling, clicking, liking. *This is what happens when you can’t be separated from your phone for five seconds. You give the internet all your time and it gives you crazy ideas.*

In her heart, though, she knows she’s complicit.

Could she have done something to prevent it? Maybe she should’ve destroyed Isabella’s account a couple of weeks ago, as soon as she saw

what has happening to Villeneuve...maybe that could've reversed the process.

Listen to yourself. You sound ridiculous.

That *voice*. It's not just her guilty conscience pushing back. The words intrude on her thoughts. It's lecturing her. She walks to her bedroom and digs out the vial with her precious supply of painkillers. She just took a dose a few hours ago, but she wants something to knock her out, make her stop thinking.

Anything to make the voice go away.

.....

However, Catrina Villeneuve is not done with her yet. Every time Dorothy looks at her phone, there are more pictures, more stories. Fans pile flowers on the sidewalk outside the gates of Villeneuve's mansion. Teenage girls sing tearful tributes on TikTok. Worse yet, pictures of Villeneuve at the height of her illness trickle out, the singer—tiny to begin with—shrunk down to doll size, her eyes sunken, her once-glorious hair thinning and brittle. Now people are openly speculating that she died from an eating disorder, and the suicide rumors will not stop, extending the press's interest. It's torture for Dorothy. It's horrible, but there's nothing she can do but bear it.

Still, every time she sees the pictures on socials, she wants to jump out of her skin.



twenty-nine

A week later, Dorothy wakes to a panicked text message from Tomas: My plane was canceled due to bad weather. I expect to get a flight out tomorrow afternoon at the latest. I need you to go into the office today and review the guys' work on Villeneuve files. Sorry; will make it up to you.

The boss is in Beijing giving a presentation to potential clients, a big movie production company. Dorothy heaves a full-body sigh but if she's honest, she doesn't really mind. Last week's trip in showed her how much she misses going into the office, being around people and feeling like part of a team. Sure, she'd spoken to the new guys, Manuel and Victor, during the occasional Zoom call into the office, but in person she saw they were much nicer than Angelica and Ric. She'd managed to hide her appearance on those Zooms by keeping the lights low or turning off her camera under the pretense of being sensitive about her misshapen face. She worked out a way to do her makeup and used a dark brown wig that looked like her old hair. When she wears sunglasses with huge dark gradient lenses, the resemblance to Isabella is scarcely noticeable.

Ric's in Beijing with Tomas. He's become Tomas's body man, carrying cases full of equipment, making sure all the logistical stuff is set up, even fetching a cappuccino from the Starbucks as they wait for their plane to depart. He's become the glorified personal assistant that Dorothy was once afraid was her destiny. Instead, she gets to do technical work, Ric is driving Tomas around in rental cars, and Angelica is nowhere to be found. Funny how that's worked out.

She's a little resentful of Tomas's ask. It's been hard enough juggling what she considers her two careers: shouldering the technical burden at Tomas's studio and trying to keep Isabella alive on socials. Working 24-7 is taking its toll on her. She feels like that girl in the circus spinning plates on bamboo poles. Spin, new content for Isabella. Spin, get that essay up on the girl who committed suicide, poor Tina (for all the good it does; the essay runs in *i-D* magazine but fails to get any attention on social). Spin, a nerve-racking cover shoot in a photography studio in Sherman Oaks. Spin, spin, spinning straw into gold. She's not even sure she's able to stay asleep for more than a couple of hours at a time anymore, even if she ever had the opportunity to do so. What do they say—if you go more than thirty-six hours without sleep you start to go insane? She should volunteer for a study; they'd rewrite the books on *that* myth. Sure, quality suffers, everything suffers, but that's just too bad, isn't it? That's the reality of life in the twenty-first century. She gets by with energy drinks, coffee, and lots of painkillers.

She grits her teeth. It won't be great, but she *can* do as Tomas asks. With him and Ric out of the office, the coast is clear. It's possible. She rarely steps foot out of her apartment lately; so rarely, in fact, that even Kim has said something about it. *You're turning into, like, less than a ghost. A rumor. People ask if I really have a roommate or if you're a figment of my imagination. Hahaha.*

She gets to the studio by lunchtime. She sits at Tomas's desk to review the files since she no longer has an office of her own. Villeneuve's people want to salvage whatever they can from that last session. With the singer gone, it's more important than ever to turn the assignment around as quickly

as possible. Tomas explains to the team in an email that the footage will fill in a few spots in a documentary that was in the works before Villeneuve's death. It's being done at her family's request.

Dorothy cracks open an energy drink and logs in to her account. Files from both techs wait for her review, videos portraying a solo Villeneuve performing one of her hit songs. Dorothy spends a couple of hours poring over their work. Victor was responsible for background and lighting while Manuel was given the figure to clothe and finish. Victor's work is impressive. He's made the backgrounds seamless. Lots of depth and the lighting is flawless, and the whole thing has the right amount of blur. As for Manuel's work, the hair and skin texture on Catrina's figure needs some touch-up, but figure work is the harder of the two assignments since that's where viewers' eyes will focus, and what Manuel has done is already much better than what most artists would be able to achieve. Both techs are coming along nicely. Before long, they'll be the ones training the new hires and leading project teams. She's proud of the way Tomas's studio is expanding, proud of her part in helping it grow.

It's almost quitting time and Dorothy's about to pack up her things to catch the bus when she hears someone walk into the reception area. The footsteps lead to her door before she has a chance to rise from her chair to see who's there.

Claire.

An icy finger presses against Dorothy's throat, then down to her stomach.

"Isabella?" The manager does a double take.

"Hey." Dorothy's voice comes out thin and squeaky. "What are you doing here?"

Claire approaches Tomas's desk with no hesitation, and that's when Dorothy notices the thick folder in her hand. "Tomas is my client, too, and I have some papers I needed to drop off." She speaks slowly, like she's working through what the hell is going on, seeing that something isn't adding up. "But...what are *you* doing here? And what did you do to your hair?"

Dorothy's hand reaches slowly to her head. *Stupid*. "It's a wig," she confesses. "I use it as a disguise, so I can walk down the street without being recognized."

Claire continues scowling, unconvinced. "And why are you sitting at Tomas's desk? Do you know Tomas?"

Dorothy has no answer. Isabella shouldn't be here. There's no reason for her to be here. Dorothy's usually nimble brain bogs down, sluggish. Even the voice that's been echoing around her head is speechless. And the look of confusion on Claire's face—the slow tick, tick, tick of time passing as pieces come together, pieces that are not coming together for Dorothy—compounds her fear.

Though she has no idea what she will say, Dorothy opens her mouth to speak just as Manuel ducks through the door. In a rush to leave for the day, his messenger bag already cinched over his shoulder, he drops a folder off, too, the mandatory paperwork for project tracking that Dorothy herself instituted.

"Hey, Claire," he says breezily as he steps around her to slide the folder on the corner of Tomas's desk.

In that split second, the answer comes to Dorothy: Claire will not identify her as Dorothy. It's simply beyond comprehension. The Dorothy she knows looks completely different. This face belongs to Isabella, petulant client and future social media superstar.

The only people who know her as Dorothy in her present form are Manuel and Victor.

As long as Manuel doesn't say anything, she's safe.

Manuel pivots and heads for the door. "Victor's already gone. You're the last one." A pause as he crosses the threshold. "Good to see you, Claire." A second pause before he adds, "Talk to you later, Dorothy."

The room freezes. Claire stares at Dorothy like an owl. Her mouth drops open, as if to speak, but no words come out. The only sound is the heavy glass door falling shut behind Manuel, echoing from the reception area.

Claire jabs a finger at her. "Why did he call you Dorothy?"

Dorothy tries to laugh but it's far from convincing. "Slip of the tongue, I guess."

But Claire is shaking her head and circling around her at the desk, her eyes glued to Dorothy. "It didn't seem like a mistake to me. But...you're *not* Dorothy. I've met her."

"Have you?" Her voice sounds weak.

"You know I have. She's the one who approached me about talking to you. But Dorothy's working from home, right? She's sick, or something. That's what Tomas told me." She's obviously fighting to pull the pieces together, but Dorothy tries to reassure herself that Claire will not. How can she? There is no logical explanation. If someone put a gun to Dorothy's head, she wouldn't be able to explain what happened to her, how she became another person, ceased to be Dorothy Wagner.

Dorothy would give anything to know what's going through Claire's mind. Maybe she's remembering that she's never seen the two women together, or how Dorothy conveniently asked to work from home just as Isabella walked into Claire's life.

Or maybe she's thinking nothing at all, awash in confusion.

Claire stops circling her. She gets in Dorothy's face, squinting at her. "Plastic surgery? Did you have yourself remade to look like Isabella? If so, that's seriously fucked up."

Dorothy laughs nervously. "Is that what you think?" Plastic surgery couldn't stretch limbs. Plastic surgery couldn't remold an entire body in the course of a few months.

"I don't know!" Claire snaps, her voice echoing off the ceiling. "You tell me what's going on. Why are you here, Isabella? And why did Manuel call you Dorothy? And don't fuck with me. I want the truth."

But Dorothy's at a loss. This brain fog is happening more and more and it's worrisome. She's no longer the clever one, able to stay one or two steps ahead of everyone else, answers—lies—coming to her at lightning speed. She's glitching, exposing the seams of her constructed self. Could it be a sign that this change is ongoing? And if so, who knows where it will end? The tide is coming in, inevitably, her grand deception determined to

close over her head, and she doesn't know what to do. It feels like she's been paddling so long, barely keeping her head above those waters, that she's exhausted. There's nothing left to do except drown.

Claire presses a hand to her forehead as she looks heavenward. "Goddammit, Isabella—if that's who you are—this is the weirdest client relationship I've ever had, and that's saying a lot. I expect a certain amount of shit. Most of my clients are young and I end up as their mother or babysitter more than their manager. I'm with them when they have their first big highs, and terrible lows. I've sat beside them at the hospital when they've hurt themselves from some stupid online stunt. But you? You take the cake."

She starts pacing again, heels clicking furiously against the polished concrete floor. "I mean, who the hell are you, anyway? I don't know the first thing about you—I don't even have an address! You won't even tell me where you went to school, or about your family. I ended up going to your lawyer, you know. An unbelievably shady guy, by the way, but I suspect that's exactly why you chose him. He said he does everything with you by email, and that's by *your* orders. That's how you wanted to do it—or rather, that's how Dorothy wanted it. He said that she set the whole thing up. He's never met *you*, Isabella. Doesn't that seem weird to you? It seems weird to me."

Sweat blossoms across Dorothy's upper lip. "What's so weird about it? I asked Dorothy to help out—that's all."

"You know, I found the whole thing so strange that I did some research. Yeah: influencer fraud. The cases I found had to do with influencers buying fake followers to make themselves look more popular than they really were, or scamming businesses into throwing ad dollars their way. I mean, maybe you inflated your follower count, but for an unknown account to buy a million followers practically overnight? Too risky. Someone would have figured it out by now. And if this is all a fraud, it means that you've managed to fool major media outlets, too. It doesn't add up. Nothing adds up."

Dorothy titters. "You're worrying for nothing."

“Am I?” Claire stops pacing. “I started to wonder if there was no Isabella, right up until the moment I finally met you. I thought maybe this was like a mail-order-bride scam and the real Isabella was a sweaty middle-aged man running the whole deal out of his basement apartment. Maybe he’d created Isabella using Sona. Maybe he’d found a pretty but stupid girl to exploit, one to take pictures of, but there was no way he could risk letting anyone *meet* her. There are countless scams like this; I’ve heard ’em talked about on the fringes of meetings with other managers.”

“Obviously I’m not a sweaty man in a basement.”

Claire shakes her head in disbelief. “But you haven’t explained to me who you really are. Does this have something to do with Dorothy? It must...I thought there was something funny about that girl. So secretive, and I told Tomas, too. So, this is the last time I’ll ask you: What the hell is going on?”

When Dorothy stands, her legs are trembling. Sweat drips from her armpits down her sides in a cold trickle. There’s no way she’s going to be able to stall Claire any longer, but she’s coming up empty. Even the phantom voice has deserted her.

Claire throws up her hands. Her face is red, nostrils flaring with rage. “Nothing, huh? Can’t explain yourself? This is bullshit. I can’t have a client who won’t tell me the truth. We’re done. Isabella, Dorothy, whoever you are. Through.” She spins around and starts for the front door.

No, no, no. Dorothy runs after her, into the reception area, close to the kitchenette and those big, clumsy beanbag chairs. She has to stop Claire before she gets out the door. It won’t do to get into a screaming match in the stairwell. No telling who might be within earshot in the other parts of the building, even on a Friday afternoon.

Stand your ground. The voice is back, finally. *All you have to do is deny, deny, deny.* “I don’t know what to tell you,” Dorothy squeaks.

Claire stops and turns around, her expression furious. “You don’t get it, do you? If you’re running some kind of scam, I can’t be associated with it. I have other clients to think of, people who’ve trusted me with their hopes

and dreams.” From the way she narrows her eyes at Dorothy, you’d almost believe she knows. Knows everything.

A solution materializes in Dorothy’s mind, a figure emerging from the mist, her fine brain sputtering back to life. A way to relieve all this pressure. *Tell Claire the truth.* The woman is smart, she’ll be able to see a way out of this. There’s still money to be made with Isabella, after all.

Dorothy’s heart pounds so hard it feels like it will fly out of her chest. “You’re right...I’m not Isabella,” she stammers.

How dare you deny me. The words boom in her head, loud, frightening, almost knocking Dorothy to her knees.

“What do you mean?” Claire grips Dorothy by her shoulders, squeezing her.

And so Dorothy explains. She keeps her gaze trained on the floor the entire time, not able to face Claire. It’s too shameful. She’s admitting to being a liar and a thief. She explains how it started, using Villeneuve’s files as the basis for her creation, how she used Tomas’s techniques and studio to manufacture the whole thing. But she stops before she gets to the physical transformation. The unexplainable part.

As she speaks, she holds out the faint hope that Claire will see the upside to all this: Isabella is a wonder, a miracle, and there’s no reason why their partnership needs to end. Not after Dorothy has gone through so much to get to where she is. The pain. The sacrifices.

Claire stares back at her, as white as if she’s seen a ghost. For the first time, Dorothy sees Claire at a complete loss, struggling to form a sentence. She gestures at Dorothy, a hand outstretched but trembling like a leaf in the wind. “This is...impossible. It can’t be true.”

But there’s no other explanation. A woman as smart as Claire would see that, and it’s this paradoxical truth that stops Dorothy cold. Should she reveal to Claire the missing puzzle piece, about the troll and the diabolical deal she mistakenly agreed to? She knows the answer to this. As much as she would like to unburden herself and have a companion in this otherworldly excursion, such a confession would be a step too far. It would

convince Claire that Dorothy—or whoever this woman is standing in front of her—is insane.

“Please don’t tell Tomas,” Dorothy says as she finishes. Tears wells in her eyes.

“Are you crazy? I *have* to tell him. He’s my client. I can’t withhold this kind of information from him. You used his company’s files. His computers, his resources. This isn’t your work—not entirely, anyway. And you didn’t get permission from Catrina Villeneuve to use her motion capture—”

“It’s not like you can tell it’s her.”

“It doesn’t matter. These are ethical considerations.” Claire presses her fingers to her temples. “Didn’t they teach you this in school? You can’t just take what you like from other people. I can’t believe you did this.”

A cold wall descends between Dorothy and her manager, a door slamming shut between them. “You’re going to need a lawyer. I suggest you find yourself a better one than the one you’ve got.” Claire reaches into her pocket for her phone.

“What are you doing?” Dorothy asks, panicked.

“I’m calling Tomas. You know, I told him you put me in contact with Isabella. I let him know you’d disobeyed him, but I told him it was nothing. That he should forgive you. It was wrong of me to hedge like that to protect you. The fact remains, *you* should’ve told him what you were doing. You should’ve trusted him. He’s done right by you, Dorothy. You must see that. So, we’re going get this out in the open—now.”

Dorothy’s eyes lock on the black rectangle in Claire’s hand.

She’s going to lose everything. All that work. The sponsorships. Tomas’s respect. She might even go to jail if Tomas or Catrina’s family decides to press charges.

She has to stop her.

Dorothy lunges for Claire’s phone.

Claire, startled, takes a step back, but her feet trip on one of the beanbag chairs. She stumbles, falling to the floor.

She's going to kill me, Dorothy. The voice rips through Dorothy's skull. *You'll never see me again.*

Save me.

This is the end. She'll never again thrill as she opens Instagram or TikTok and sees thousands and thousands of people pouring out their devotion to her. It's a high she can get nowhere else, a high that—after the news gets out—she'll never feel again. She's done the impossible, what only a handful of people on social media have been able to do—and now she's going to lose it.

I'm your baby, the voice cries in her head. *Don't let her end me.*

There, on the pedestal next to where Claire has fallen, is a sculpture Tomas's interior designer talked him into buying. They joked about it among the team, how big and ugly it is. It looks like a rock, something you could pick up off the ground in the San Gabriel Mountains for free, while the designer charged Tomas hundreds.

Dorothy stands directly over Claire, who struggles to get to her feet. Dorothy picks up the sculpture. It's heavy and—wait, why is she holding it? The voice clamors in her head (*save me, save me*) as she brings it down on Claire's face, again and again, until the woman is no longer moving.

Dorothy staggers backward.

This isn't like her. She isn't a violent person.

You saved me. You did what you had to do. She was going to destroy me.

Dorothy wants to take a fist to the side of her head to shut up the voice. Why is it so hard to think? She drops onto a beanbag, two feet away from the body. Claire is completely still. There's no rise and fall of her chest, no twitching of fingers. She's no longer a threat, but dear God...

I've killed someone.

Though even that feels...debatable. It felt like she watched from a distance. Like someone stepped into Dorothy's body while her consciousness looked away.

Don't be ridiculous. It was you, Dorothy. You wanted this and you made it happen.

What next? Think, think, think. Focus. She recalls television shows where murderers have to dispose of a body. They wrap it, mummy-shaped, in a blanket and drag it to the trunk of a waiting car. She has no car, though, and no blanket on hand. Then there's the meticulous cleanup, making sure not one speck of blood remains to be caught under a policeman's black light.

It's ridiculous, it's impossible.

But it's only necessary if you want to get rid of the body. You don't have to.

The unwanted, intrusive voice...is right.

Her instinct in the moment is to flee. Her grand deception is over. She can't remain in L.A. now that Claire's dead. There's no way she'd be able to endure endless police inquiries, let alone face Tomas's shock and grief every day.

You don't have to worry. You've been planning for something like this all along. And the voice is right, when she thinks about it. Her entire life is anonymous and portable. The shell company, the offshore bank account where she had the lawyer deposit her money. Back in the dumpy apartment, she's kept her life trimmed down to only a few possessions. Who needs a go bag?

There isn't as much money as she hoped for because it's still early in Isabella's career. A tragedy that she'll have to leave all that potential behind but...she has no choice now.

She'll flee.

There's only one thing she absolutely can't leave behind: her files. Tomas's programs. She can't flee without taking them with her. Her reaction to the thought of losing them is visceral and painful. Even though she doesn't need them now, not since her transformation, there's no telling what lies ahead. What changes her body might have in store. What the troll might decide to do to her. Not to mention that she'll have to erase every trace that Isabella was ever on Tomas's system.

She steps over Claire's body on the floor and walks down to the server room. There, she digs out a hard drive, one of Tomas's backups (thank God

the man's paranoid about losing files) that she didn't get around to installing. Then she spends an hour meticulously copying over all the files that would serve as evidence. Then she erases the files in the hidden vault and lastly, she cleans up all the logs. She's able to forget about the body she left cooling in the other room and concentrate on the matter at hand. Dorothy has always been able to focus. She doesn't think about the fact that she doesn't have the stomach to mop Claire's blood off the floor, but she can clean up her virtual space with the patience and focus of a neurosurgeon.

She takes one last look around Tomas's desk, where she was working. It has to look like just another Friday, that Dorothy wrapped up her work and went home as usual. She doesn't cave and order up an Uber: She walks to the bus stop as she would under normal circumstances. She sits alone in the bus shelter, shivering despite her thick hoodie. Seeing, in her mind's eye, Claire's body on the studio floor and wondering how long it will lie there before someone finds it.

True-crime shows have taught her that as soon as she becomes a suspect, the police will go after all her data to trace her movements. She needs to disappear and that means she needs a new identity. She's struck by the irony that while she's made the most perfect creation in the world, a fake person, she has no clue how to make a fake passport that will stand up to even the slightest scrutiny. She never got around to getting fake documentation for Isabella. She has no choice but to leave the country under her real name and hope she'll be able to find someone, probably through the dark web, to help her.

She packs a bag. It will be too suspicious to clean everything out, and she doesn't have a second suitcase anyway. She scribbles a note for her roommate: *Decided to get away for the weekend. I'll be home Sunday evening.* Kim has shown no interest in Dorothy and has gone out of her way to avoid even the slightest bit of contact with her, and this is so

out of character—Dorothy hasn't left town since she moved to L.A.—but there's nothing else she can do. She only needs to keep Kim from raising the flag for a couple of days.

The most precious thing Dorothy carries is the hard drive. As she tucks it among her clothes, building a nest of T-shirts and underwear around it, she wonders if she will be able to get it through security without a problem. If she flies international, they might demand paperwork, permits. She thinks of Tomas's complaints of trying to get his equipment through customs in the past. She'll check her bag; it's more likely to slide by that way. One little hard drive shouldn't arouse suspicion.

The last thing she does is find her passport. She was a teenager when she got it. There is only one year left before it expires. At first, she panics but then she realizes it may work to her advantage. The girl in the photo is listed as being five feet tall and weighing 120 pounds. Present Dorothy looks nothing like past Dorothy, but she has an explanation: She's grown up. She isn't an adolescent anymore. She can claim that over the past nine years the ugly duckling has grown into a beautiful swan.

.....

Dorothy sits in her tight airplane seat, checking the time on her phone every minute. She managed to get a window seat at the back of the plane. She's grateful not to be stuck in a middle seat, booking at the last minute like this.

As she waits for takeoff, she expects the police to come rushing onto the plane, scanning the faces of every passenger...an attendant pointing at her—*There she is!*—before the police fall on her with handcuffs. She waits for fellow passengers to start whispering and pointing their cell phones at her, recognizing her as the famous It Girl even though she's taken all the usual precautions (sunglasses, hoodie, not a trace of makeup).

She's all pins and needles until the plane rumbles down the runway, holding her breath through the eventual lift into the air. This flight's just a first step, a way to hide until she can catch her breath and make plans, but she feels infinitely better. Watching clouds streak by outside the cabin

window makes what happened in the studio seem more like something she's seen on television than reality.

Her flight out of LAX is to Chicago, her decision based on the fact that its airport is a major hub for international flights. She checks in to a lonely airport hotel, uninterested in playing tourist, and stays barricaded inside. After the clerk at the front desk gives her a double take—*Has anyone ever told you that you look like that girl on the internet, what's her name, Isabella?*—she decides that she'll stay in her room the entire time. She orders room service and nests in bed to do research.

Best places to go when you want to disappear. Best places for American expats.

How to get a new identity.

How to start a new life.

She knows the police can search your browser history, but she doesn't let that stop her. After all, it's not like they have monitors ready to pounce every time someone searches "how to disappear." America is not a complete surveillance state—yet. They only check after you've already been made a suspect. By the time someone discovers Claire's body in the studio, Dorothy will have ceased to exist.

She calls down to the front desk for a pair of scissors. Predictably, the blades are dull, but they will have to do. Dorothy stands in front of the bathroom mirror, fingering the ends of her hair. Whatever made her shoot up in height also changed her hair, finally giving her the tresses she'd wanted her whole life. It's time to say goodbye to Isabella's crowning glory, the spun honeygold that propelled her creation to stardom—but now this flowing perfection, this million-dollar hair is a liability. It's utterly recognizable. She starts cutting, handfuls at a time, until the counter is carpeted in shades of auburn and honey, and she sees herself with a raggedy chin-length bob. As soon as she can, she'll pick up hair dye, something that will take her right back to the drab brown hair she's always hated.

No matter what she does, she ends up hating herself, it seems.

Her plan comes together at two a.m., after she's pushed a tray with the cold remains of a hamburger and french fries into the hall. She's found a

person on the dark web who'll make a fake passport for her in Istanbul. Of all the entities she looked at, this one seems the most legit. Of course, it could be a sting; a team from Interpol could be waiting to arrest her as soon as her plane lands in Istanbul. Or the counterfeiter might try to extort her for more money once she's in-country and at his mercy. Someone desperate enough to fly to Turkey is probably desperate enough to pay double the amount, right? No honor among thieves.

Any way you look at it, it's risky, but she has no choice.

During a layover in Frankfurt, she has her offshore account wire money to a bank in Turkey, where she'll pick up the cash to pay off the forger. If she tries to get the cash while on US soil, the bank will be required to report a transaction of that size—another trick learned from true-crime podcasts. Again, while she will be long gone before someone sees the report, she doesn't want to leave a trail that would connect her name to the offshore account or her shell company.

As she stands in line to board the flight to Istanbul, Dorothy tries not to cry when the gate agent scans her boarding pass, tries not to think about everything she's leaving behind her.

Her brilliant, short-lived career. Tomas. Her family.

Her life as Isabella.

It's a depressingly short list.

Instead, she tries to concentrate on the scary road ahead of her.



thirty

The city rushes by outside the window of Dorothy's taxi, a blur of concrete and brilliant sunshine. A taxi from the airport to her modest hotel on the outskirts of Istanbul is an expensive luxury, but she doubts her ability to get around on public transportation alone, never having been outside the United States except for one school trip to Canada. She has no familiarity with the Turkish language. The mishmash of faces outside the taxi's window—unfamiliar hues, dark inquisitive eyes—makes her anxious. The unfamiliarity of so many women in hijabs, old women in long, sweeping gowns. She draws back farther into the cab, holding her purse tightly against her stomach.

At least the hotel is affordable, barely a step above a youth hostel. When the clerk asks, in awkward English, what brings her to Istanbul, she mumbles an excuse. Clutching her key, she retreats to her room, dragging her suitcase behind her. She locks the door, draws the curtains, and curls up on the bed, her back to the wall. She waits for sleep to find her, half hoping that she never wakes up.

The next evening, she takes a taxi to the address she got from the man on the dark web. Again, the city flashes by outside the window, this time

bathed in periwinkle and indigo, punctuated by twinkling lights. The city is easier on the nerves, not to mention prettier, by night. *If I were a real influencer, I'd be out there taking pictures and having experiences.* But she can't bring herself to do this; does it mean she's not a real creator?

She doesn't need to ask. Everything about her is pretend.

The cab driver gives her a funny look when she gives him the address ("You alone?" he asks in broken English), but she isn't prepared for the seediness. Kids run in the streets despite the hour, alleys are choked with trash. The air is thick with angry yelling. Faces turn toward the cab as it glides by, eyes trying to see who's on the other side of the glass. "Can you wait for me?" she asks as she exits, holding out extra money as she pays, an incentive, but the man shakes his head curtly and drives off as soon as she shuts the door.

She locates the apartment with only a minimum of confusion, finding the number 49 on a door in the basement, no rhyme or reason to the order. A short, thin man hurries her in, looking behind her as though he fears someone will come after them.

Inside, it's cluttered and dark. It doesn't appear to be an apartment, more like a place of business, which makes sense. Stacks of boxes line the walls, making the tight hallways even narrower. She follows the man like a mouse trying to navigate a maze, trying to memorize the route in case she has to find her own way out, giving up when she realizes it would be impossible.

They finally come to a room. A small round table anchors the middle of the space, surrounded by mismatched chairs. It's cluttered here, too, the floor nearly disappearing under haphazard stacks of books. A variety of desk lamps illuminates the space.

"You're Dorothy, I assume?" Thank God his English is good. "You can call me Ger. You've come for a passport?"

She practiced her reason for needing such an illegal thing, reciting it in her head on the way over. "Yes. You see, I—"

He holds up a hand. "No need to explain. Really, it's better if I don't know." He lights a hand-rolled cigarette. The smoke is foul-smelling,

nicotine combined with something trashy. She fears she might gag.

“Okay. First thing, we take a photo.” He gestures to a space just off the room, an alcove with a chair set on a nondescript gray background, the long roll of paper trailing on the floor. She takes off her hat and faces a little stand holding photographic equipment, all digital, of course. As she pulls off her hat, she wonders if he will recognize her but relaxes when he says nothing. Maybe that’s a tenet of his business: Say as little as possible. Ask only necessary questions.

Ger fiddles with a few buttons, his attention on a little screen somewhere out of Dorothy’s view. The light is dim and canted slightly off her face, which will make the photo less sharp. He takes a few shots, then tells her she can relax. Behind the desk, he peers at the screen and hems and haws over the pictures with the care of a man putting together a wedding album. Finally, he leads her back to the table in the other area.

“I think I’m going to give you an Irish passport,” he says as he gets her settled at the table. “It will cause fewer problems in the long run. Romanian or Bulgarian is easier, but they will get suspicious if you can’t speak the language. I have an Irish blank, but they are more expensive, you understand?”

“No, I don’t.” Panic rises in her throat.

He furrows his brow. “I buy these documents from people who work in the passport office in their country.” He flaps his hands. “An Irish one costs more because it’s harder to get. My contact is taking an awful risk. See?”

She does now: There’s an entire network of government workers selling their countries’ passports on the black market. She assumed the entire document is fake but that’s naive, she understands now. A passport would be complex and hard to duplicate. Easier to buy them from an underpaid worker.

Another part of the real world she knew nothing about until today.

Of course, he could be trying to scam her, now that he’s met her and sees she’s alone and vulnerable. She tries to read his face, scans for guilt and shame, but he seems sincere. She’s still not good at telling when someone is lying to her. She’ll have to get better.

“Twenty thousand.” US dollars, he means.

“I only have fifteen.” The agreed-upon price.

He sighs, looks down at the floor, hands on hips.

“Look,” she says, “it’s not like I can go to an ATM...not at this hour, in this neighborhood.”

He looks at her, not without sympathy. He draws heavily on the cigarette, then coughs. Finally, he asks, “How much do you have on you?”

“Seventeen.” She’s being truthful. She doesn’t care about being clever or smart anymore—she just needs to get this nightmare over with. Sure, it’s all the money she has, but she can figure out a way in the morning to get more cash to pay her hotel bill and buy another plane ticket.

“Okay. I’ll do it for seventeen.” He watches as she counts out the money, then picks up the stack with two hands. “You wait here. It’s going to take a little time. You can nap over there if you get tired.” He gestures to a narrow cot almost hidden behind more books.

She listens as he works, apparently in a room just next door. After a while, he brings her a cup of hot mint tea, then disappears again. The sound of a radio or podcast plays in the background, two male speakers in a foreign tongue, probably Turkish. She tries to use her phone to look for news from L.A., but there’s no connection and she’s hesitant to interrupt Ger to ask about wi-fi.

She will have to wait. She will have to be patient.

At one point, she goes to the cot with the idea of taking a nap. It’s a haphazard affair, the frame rickety and the blanket smelly. It makes her wonder about all the people who came to Ger before her. Were they running from the law or an abusive spouse? Trying to outrun some criminal to whom they owed more money than they could ever repay? At least one or two had to have blood on their hands, like she does. She looks down at the thin cushion that serves as a mattress, covered in some kind of dark, rough fabric, and a blanket, folded into a square and resting at the foot of the cot. Neither appears to be clean and she doesn’t think she can stand the touch of sheets that, until recently, held someone else, most likely a criminal trying to stay out of jail.

Like her.

When Ger wakes her, she's resting her head on her arms on the table. There's a streak of drool on the right side of her mouth. She wipes at it self-consciously, as she wills herself back to consciousness.

"It's done," he says as he holds the passport out to her. She runs her thumb over a gold harp stamped on a maroon cover. "Sorry about the changeup, but it's your best bet."

She looks at the main page, the one with her picture. She tried to appear as neutral as possible, but she thinks she looks a little sad. A little lost. At least she doesn't look like a murderer.

He continues. "Your name is Aoife Gallagher. You can tell them that you work in tech in Dublin. You go to a lot of training sessions, so lots of international travel."

She flips through the pages, several of them filled with stamps. France, Spain, Greece. The stamps look official. As for the passport itself, it seems flawless to Dorothy's admittedly inexperienced eye. The pages are appropriately worn, ink smudged in places. The handwriting, where required, appears to have been made by different hands. There's even an entry stamp for Turkey.

They sit together at the table with cups of fresh, hot tea, while Ger explains the next steps to her. "You want to fly out on your new passport. It's none of my business why you need this, but if it's for more than just travel, to get out of the country, you can use it to set up the other things...a bank account, driver's license...." He looks at her as though he knows she can use the help.

"Thanks. I have no idea what I'm doing. Is that obvious?"

He pushes his glasses up the bridge of his nose. "Nobody who ends up here does."

Holding the little booklet, Dorothy's struck by a wave of vertigo. The passport makes real to her the chasm she's crossed. The necessity of this new life. The enormity of what she has to do.

As soon as she uses that passport, she will officially be on the run.

He seems to read her mind. “You want to get rid of your old passport. If you get searched at a border crossing, you don’t want the authorities to find it on you.”

She nods. She wonders if she should offer it to him. Maybe he can recycle the cover, the empty pages. It’s barely been used.

She holds it out to him. He hesitates, one eyebrow raised. *Are you sure?* He doesn’t hesitate the second time she offers it.

For a moment, she doesn’t want to leave. This man seems kind and he’s obviously familiar with the world of shadows. He has answers. She has none. Sure, he’s part of what makes the internet mysterious and dangerous, a mage guarding a secret passageway, a troll hiding under a bridge. Individuals with arcane powers who exist in the shadows and can manipulate reality. She thought she was one of them. She knows differently now.

She also knows she can’t stay. What’s she going to do, sweep his floors and make mint tea for his customers?

The body lying on the studio floor flashes through her head.

Surely it’s been found by now.

Her teeth start chattering. Ger gives her a sympathetic look. How many people has he seen just like this at this very table?

He calls a taxi for her and right before she’s ready to leave, he presses a booklet into her hand. It’s obviously had a hard life and it’s made of photocopied pages stapled together. Part of the analog world, the world she must escape into. “It’s a handbook for disappearing,” he says, almost apologetically, like he’s slightly embarrassed by his gesture. “Somebody I know put it together. It’s pretty good. He knows what he’s doing. I think you could use it.” She slips it into her messenger bag. “You’re going to be okay,” he says as he walks Dorothy to the doorstep, then closes the door in her face.



thirty-one

Dorothy stays a few more days in Istanbul, using the time to execute some of the steps in the pamphlet Ger gave her.

She's thankful for the booklet; God only knows what she'd do without it. It's titled *How to Disappear*. The author has no name, no profile, no picture (naturally). He's already disappeared, even though his personality is all over this little treatise. She's read its scant pages so many times already that she feels she's committed it to memory. She imagines he's in his thirties, with an advanced degree in engineering or computer science, but he's somehow managed to fall afoul of the authorities in his country. He's written all this up while he's fleeing, establishing a new identity for himself, trying to stay a couple of steps ahead of the security forces on his trail. It's all romantic and probably complete nonsense, but it has become her life in short order. It's all she has to keep from being crushed by the weight of her circumstances.

A quick online search gives her the name of an international bank with offices in Dublin and Belfast, and she goes to a branch not far from her hotel to open an account and transfer most of the money from the offshore account. Next, she books a few weeks' stay at a very modest Airbnb in the

countryside outside Dublin and uses that address for the delivery of her new credit card. It's all very slapdash, but it gives her the illusion of feeling like she knows what she's doing. That she has everything under control.

Leaving Istanbul does not scare her nearly as much as entering Ireland. Her knees knock as she waits at passport control. The uniformed men and women behind the glass partitions are unsmiling and brusque. While she inches forward in line, she studies their every move. She notes how many questions they ask each traveler. She follows the jerky pattern of their eyes as they watch each person's face as he or she answers. They're looking for tells, for any sign that the person might be lying. She tries to pick up on patterns in ones they single out—more men than women, more men in their twenties and thirties. People who don't look European, who might be Arabic or from South America. Honestly, she can't tell. They seem to scrutinize everyone equally.

The last person in front of her steps up to the next available passport officer.

I'm going to be caught. Her throat goes dry as a desert.

"Next!" someone calls out.

She wheels her suitcase to the open counter. It's a woman behind the glass, wearing a bland no-nonsense expression. She takes the passport and opens it to the first page. Her gaze sweeps over it, then jumps to Dorothy, where it settles for no more than a second. Are there cameras on her face? She read that China uses artificial intelligence to pick up micro-expressions that indicate if a person is trying to hide something.

Don't sweat.

"And what was your reason for travel to Turkey?" the woman asks easily enough, her voice tinged with an Irish accent.

"Work." Dorothy doesn't try to mimic her accent, knowing she'd only get it wrong.

Your passport is good. Ger did a good job.

Don't twitch. Breathe.

The woman picks up her stamp and brings it down on the page. "Ah, grand. Welcome home."

It's that easy.

Relief surges through her as she exits with the others, loping toward customs. She wants to laugh, to spin around in circles. There's little in her luggage except for electronics, a laptop and chargers and of course the hard drive, but it's not a conspicuous amount of goods and so they let her through with no fuss. She stands on the curb hailing a taxi before she knows it.

For the first time since she left L.A., she can breathe.

It appears she's going to get away with murder.

An hour later, the taxi deposits her in front of the rented cottage. It's smaller than it seemed from the Airbnb listing, but that's all right. At the moment, she needs to feel the edges of her world. She needs to feel cocooned to feel safe. The town is small, a crossroads on the edge of woods and fields, hardly a town at all. Her rented cottage has tiny rooms, including one that barely qualifies as a kitchen, and it's surrounded by overgrown hedgerows and has heavy curtains on all the windows.

She is walled off from the world. Perfect.

The first thing she does is sit at the wooden table in the kitchen and set up her laptop, searching for news on Claire. Enough days have passed that someone has to have found her in Tomas's studio, and sure enough, it's on all the news channels—KABC, KTLA, NBC4. **BUSINESSWOMAN FOUND DEAD IN TECH CLIENT'S OFFICE** is the headline on the first article she sees. She clicks on a video and watches a blond reporter in front of a familiar building. Behind her, a gurney wheels by, a body-size lump strapped to it.

Dorothy's stomach lurches and she breaks out in a cold sweat. She can barely follow what the woman's saying: *Tomas Delgado, the studio owner and associate of the deceased, was brought in for questioning....* She clicks through a few more links until she finds one of Tomas. He looks terrible, pale and sweaty and pinch-lipped, his eyes red from crying. Someone who doesn't know him might think he looks guilty and that those eyes are a result of smoking weed or some other vice, but Dorothy knows him well enough to know he's in shock. He stammers through the interview, saying how Claire was a close friend in addition to his business manager and how

he owes his success to her. Only a coldhearted skeptic would think he's lying, but there are plenty of those in L.A. Plenty of them in the world.

"Cameron was also the manager of social media sensation Isabella." When Dorothy hears this pop out of one reporter's mouth, her heart nearly stops. "However, attempts to reach the famously reclusive social media figure have been unsuccessful."

Not just the media, but the police have probably been trying to reach Isabella. Dorothy has been studiously avoiding her own voicemail and email, but she forgot about Isabella's accounts. With Isabella unresponsive, the police might've gone directly to Instagram or TikTok to bypass the security fronts she used for Isabella's accounts. All it takes is one look at the layers of ghost entities pretending to control the accounts, all the subterfuge, and they're likely to become suspicious. A normal person doesn't need all these precautions.

A normal person wouldn't take this long to make a public statement, either. It's been a week since the body was found. It's time for damage control.

Dorothy composes a message for Isabella to post to all her social media accounts.

I have just learned of the tragic death of my business manager and friend Claire Cameron. To say it is a shock is an understatement. I had been in seclusion for the past week on a meditation retreat when I heard the news.

Claire's tragic death has compounded doubts I'd already begun to have about my career as an influencer, and I've decided to withdraw from social media effective immediately. I wish to thank each of you for your love and support during these past whirlwind months.

She bites her lip as she reads over the statement. It's brief, maybe too brief. It might make her look like she isn't truly affected by what's happened to Claire. Maybe she needs to be more effusive. More emotional. She can't afford to come off as cold. People like it when young women sob and appear not in control of their emotions, like it confirms some fundamental truth of the universe.

However, she's also smart enough to realize that she *is* a cauldron of emotions at the moment. Anything she says now might end up being a problem down the road. She killed someone she knew, *someone who had tried to help her*.... She starts hyperventilating, unable to stop replaying the scene in her mind. She's maintained an iron grip on herself throughout her escape but now that it's over, now that she's alone with her thoughts, the potential to make a mistake is high. So very high.

She's a fugitive. She's a liar and a thief...and a murderer.

She presses "post" and closes her laptop.

Birds are singing outside her window when she wakes the next morning.

Somehow, Dorothy managed to sleep. Exhaustion had a lot to do with it, of course, but she overrode her nerves and left her laptop and phone in the front room and refused to get out of bed when her mind started whirling. At some point it quieted, and she's surprised the next morning to find she's slept through the night.

There's no food in the house and she's starving. She slips her laptop and phone into her tote and starts down the lane. The sun is bright, burning off fog in the meadows and farmers' fields. Two fuzzy ponies watch her from a paddock and she wishes she had an apple or carrots to tempt them over so she could rub their velvet noses. She senses movement behind the doors and windows of the cottages she passes, but otherwise the village is quiet. It's all so quiet and calm and *green*—the opposite of the life she knew in Los Angeles.

Eventually, she finds a café set on the ground floor of an old stone house. The café's only got a few small tables pushed against one wall and a long counter along the back. An older woman wearing an apron waits at the counter, watching her. "Do I take a seat?" she asks the woman, who seems surprised by the question.

"New in town, are ye?" the woman asks as she draws a pad and pencil from her pocket. No tablet for ordering, then. No QR codes. "What can I

get you, love?”

No menus, either. “Bring me whatever’s popular.”

Dorothy sits at a table set in its own square of sunshine and waits for her breakfast. She’s the only customer. She expects the woman might come over to chat, perhaps curious about an outsider, but is surprised and grateful when she’s left alone. Customers trickle in for takeaway coffee and sausage rolls. An old man sits at the table farthest from Dorothy and begins reading a newspaper.

Dorothy takes out her laptop and logs on to the café’s internet through her VPN. She pats herself on the back for having resisted the siren call of the internet for the most part, but she needs to see what people are saying about Isabella’s departure.

She expects a reaction, for her haters and rivals to revel in her surrender, if nothing else. She’s not expecting the tsunami that waits for her. The first stop is Isabella’s Instagram account, of course, as it’s the linchpin of her online following, her fortress, her rock. Dorothy didn’t post a current image of Isabella to go with the farewell message, choosing instead to repost her very first picture, the innocent happy, sunny girl walking through a field, an outstretched hand grazing the tops of wildflowers.

There are over fifty thousand comments.

Dorothy gasps. The numbers jump before her eyes: 55,000...60,000...

Should she read through them? On one hand, she knows she should *try*. It’s important to take the temperature. To read the room. On the other hand, though, the idea of wading through all that is daunting, not to mention depressing. She’s not ready to reimmerse herself in the problem that is Isabella. These few days away have been soul-replenishing. The temptation to walk away and leave it for another day overwhelms.

Dorothy logs out of Isabella’s account.

The news will give her a better perspective, she decides, than a fire hose of comments. Fingers poised over the keyboard, Dorothy is about to compose a search but...no. Better to wait a couple of days. A firestorm waits for her, but that’s to be expected. But unless it ends up being a very slow news cycle, it could blow over in a day or two. After all, even by the

internet's standards, Isabella is a flash in the pan. A one-hit wonder. Given the severity of her actions and the consequences should she be caught, Dorothy would be grateful if this turned out to be the case. At the moment, if the world barely notices as Isabella sinks under the surface and out of the public eye, and she's only to be remembered a decade later as the answer to a question on some game show, that sounds pretty good to her.

Besides, there's a lot that Dorothy should be doing. She has to create a life under this new identity. She has to manufacture a new past, a backstory that will explain away the holes, like why she has no school records. She needs to weigh carefully how much work to put into all this: She might need to abandon Aoife Gallagher before long and become a new person any day. She can't blow all her money on expensive black-market documents.

At the top of the list of things she must do, though, is decompress. Dorothy knows there's nothing healthier for her at this moment than to turn it all off. To touch grass. She needs to pretend the internet doesn't exist, and the easiest way to do this is to put her boots on, open the door, and start walking.

Back at the cottage, she finds her sunglasses on a table by the front door and grabs a baseball cap, her habitual disguise, even though the town seems barely populated. All she needs is for someone to post a photo of her to Instagram with the locational data still attached, asking the innocent question, *Is this Isabella?*

Stepping into the late-morning sunshine, she chooses to walk in the opposite direction from the way she went this morning. Before long, she's out in the country. Pastures line both sides of the road, cows and sheep graze on hillsides bright with grass. Occasionally, a car passes by and the occupants might give her quizzical looks (do people not go out for walks in Ireland?), sometimes honk at her as though she's a road hazard.

At least villages are not far apart, she thinks gratefully as she comes upon an open pub. It's past noon by then, a respectable time for a bar to be open. She's not much of a drinker but gets a pint and sits outside at a picnic table.

She wants to turn off her mind but it won't stop working, making lists of the things she needs to do and questioning how long she can remain in this place. She's paid rent for a couple of weeks and she can hardly afford to leave and forfeit the cash. As a matter of fact, she needs to think hard about what she will do for money. At the rate she's been going, the money in Isabella's account will only last a few months, maybe a little more if she's extra frugal.

The obvious answer is to get a job. Her passport will be good enough in a little place like this, probably, a place where a small business needs an extra pair of hands. If she doesn't try for something in a big city, she probably doesn't need to worry about getting a national identity card.

Fugitives manage to evade capture for years, sometimes decades. Dorothy is smart, daring—surely she can hold out for a couple of weeks, at the very least. She'd do better if she considered it a personal challenge instead of an existential threat.

She looks over the meadow behind the pub. Three beautiful horses, as dark as molasses, grazing, as natural as breathing. Two couples take over the picnic table next to her, laughing at one of the men, a funny guy, apparently. A car pulls into the dirt parking lot and a child jumps out, laughing as he outruns his mother. All of it perfectly ordinary. Another ordinary day. Yet, it's not the world she's used to. Her world is the virtual one. This one seems fake and unnatural.

Every nerve in her body is telling her to run. *You need cover. You need to hide.* But no one seems to be coming after her.

Breathe in, breathe out. Easy now. Don't make a spectacle of yourself and nobody will know. You're safe, she tells herself over and over.

Safe enough for now.

She wakes in the middle of the night, blinking awake in darkness to a tug on her hair. *You can't do this to me, Dorothy,* the voice says. *You need me. You are me.*

No. She shoulders the blanket and rolls on her side, away from the door. There's no point in arguing with a guilty conscience, she tells herself. *Isabella's time is over. She is no more. There's no one here to pay the troll and eventually, he'll stop looking for her.*

We'll see about that, the voice replies.

Dorothy waits seven days before she checks the reaction to Isabella's retirement.

Again, she's amazed at the media coverage that's accumulated. There are thousands of links now, many of them to news sites. All of them ask what's happened to the internet It Girl, and whether she had anything to do with the death of her business manager. Of course—the idea's too delicious for the media to ignore. Dorothy scrolls through the first two pages of links and quickly sees that they're all, roughly, the same. They're all questions without answers.

After wading through these, she summons the courage to go to Isabella's Instagram account. Comments on her final post have risen to over a hundred thousand. Trembling inside, she starts scrolling through them. Most are trivial (“Oh no,” “Don't go,” “I love you, Isabella”). There are poems, GIFs, and crudely drawn portraits. There's the occasional mean-spirited comment, too, labeling her a phony, a scam artist, someone who was in it to get rich quick (if only they could see her pitiful bank account). And while the first two might've been true—truer than the commenters could know—the latter makes no sense. If Isabella were in it for the money, she wouldn't have left. The murder has made Isabella more famous than ever. If she played it right, within a short time she could've been as famous as a Kardashian.

Then there are the ones who accuse her of murder. She's responsible for Claire's death, more than one user insists. She split right after the murder, didn't she? That proves she's guilty. It gives Dorothy chills to

see how quickly people turn on you. One minute they love you, the next they want to see you stood before a firing squad.

It takes longer for her to screw up the courage to check Dorothy Wagner's email and voicemail. After arriving in Ireland, she jumped to a new, clean cell phone for her new persona and powered her old one down before the plane had even landed. Using the new phone felt funny at first, like trying to walk with three legs or write with her nondominant hand. There is almost nothing on it—no phone numbers or email addresses, no backlog of photographs and videos, no bookmarks. It should feel weightless and freeing but it turns out to be the opposite, a constant reminder of what she left behind.

She finds her old phone in the bottom drawer of the bathroom vanity and takes it with the charging cord to an outlet. It takes a few minutes for the screen to come back to life and then she eagerly starts thumbing through the apps. She's stunned: There are so many unanswered calls, so many unheard messages.

Then she finds the voicemail from Tomas.

It's from the Tuesday evening after she fled. It's strange that he waited so long to call; she expected he would've called right after Claire's body had been discovered on Monday morning. She almost chickens out and goes to the transcript, but she decides not to be such a coward. If she owes it to anyone to listen to their words in their own voice, it's Tomas. Besides, she needs to know what he knows. It's possible that he hired someone to take over security of the studio system and that this person discovered Dorothy had been up to something.

It's a long call, over ten minutes, rare for Tomas—he tends to leave messages of no more than a few seconds. That alone almost scares her off from listening. She takes a deep breath to anchor herself before pressing “play.”

“Dot, this is me.” Tomas should be peeved or angry, but instead he's sniffly, like he's been crying. “Call me. No one's been able to get through to you, and everyone's worried. I'm worried. Your roommate said you'd gone away for the weekend but you're not back and no one knows where you

are.” Another snuffle, followed by a hoarse cough. “I’m sure you heard about Claire...we’re all in shock. But I’m afraid maybe you were here at the time when Claire was murdered, that maybe whoever did this to Claire did something to you, too.... Took you with them?” That makes her feel better, strangely. It appears that Tomas doesn’t entertain the notion that she might be responsible for Claire’s murder, instead thinking the murderer forced her, a witness, to go with him, perhaps somewhere else where he intended to kill her. It sounds like no one knows she had been there at the time of the murder.

He doesn’t know what happened. Nobody knows.

Except her.

“The police took me in for questioning. Can you believe it? They think I had something to do with it.” His voice is a sick, dry whisper. “I guess it’s because she was found here.... But that’s crazy. I told ’em they could check my books, my phone, whatever...everything was good. Claire and I never argued. You know that’s true. You could tell them—if you were around.”

She shakes her head in disbelief. The police must be desperate if they suspect Tomas. He’s the last person you’d suspect of murder—of course, people probably say the same thing about her. But Tomas? Sure, he had a hard streak, but at his core he was gentle. She wishes she could help him, but that’s obviously out of the question.

“Call me when you get this. I can’t take losing two of the most important people in my life.” A huge sob. “You gotta be okay, Dot. You know I can’t run this place without you. So quit playing and call me. Call me.”

She deletes the message. She’ll never listen to it again. In all likelihood, she’ll never speak to him again. She feels like a traitor, an ingrate, a rat...but her hands are tied.

Dorothy is so shaken that she’s tempted to put the phone away again, but she forces herself to push on. The next call in the queue is from the Los Angeles Police Department. A fresh wave of icy cold washes over her.

“This is Detective Simonez, again, Miss Wagner. Please give us a call when you get this message. We’d still like for you to come in for

questioning. If you don't respond, I'm afraid you've left us no choice. We'll have to get a subpoena—"

Dorothy stops the message. At least there doesn't appear to be a warrant for her arrest. If those true-crime podcasts are correct, that means they're still investigating and likely haven't come across anything that ties her to the murder. Though that's going to change when they find out she's left the country. Perhaps they haven't gotten to that point yet, calling in the FBI, checking airports and bus stations. Or maybe she's watched too much TV and gives them too much credit. Maybe it means she isn't much of a suspect if this is as far as they've gotten.

As she scrolls through, she notes how many times her mother tried to reach her. Teresa was obviously frantic. How had Dorothy not realized this would happen? She should've prepared her mother for her disappearance. Warned her that she was going on an impromptu trip for a couple of weeks, anything to keep her from worrying. To forestall the inevitable.

Dorothy clicks on the most recent of her mother's calls, from just two days before. She braces for the sound of her voice.

"Dorothy, it's been over a week since the news," Teresa says through a veil of sniffles. Her voice is weak like she's been crying a long time. "Where are you? Why haven't you called? The police tell us that if you haven't called it's because—" Her voice catches. "They're wrong. I don't believe that. I believe you're still alive."

How much easier things would be if the police thought Dorothy Wagner was dead.

Her mother murmurs like she's in a stupor, words Dorothy cannot make out. She's so obviously in bad shape that Dorothy again squirms with guilt.

And then she says something that stuns her.

"Did you do it, Dorothy? Did you kill that woman?" The words are not unlike the ones Teresa said to her ten years ago. A suspicion Dorothy thought long buried. "I'm sorry, baby, but when the police told me about the dead woman, I couldn't help but think of...Amber." She doesn't ask if

Dorothy remembers her, of course not, because there's no way Dorothy would ever forget.

"I didn't want to believe it then, what Amber said. You were only twelve! And you had always been sweet, my sweet girl."

Her mother was good at ignoring what she didn't want to see.

"I didn't want to think you were capable of...hurting someone." The voice cracks against the pressure of reality. "I told the police that it couldn't be true. I said those girls had some kind of grudge against you, everybody knew that. I convinced them that Amber was lying." Her words slur through a wash of tears and sniffles. Each word makes the temperature drop, though. With each word her mother says, the room gets colder and colder.

"She said you tried to *kill* her, Dot." Her mother's tone is incredulous. "That you were going to kill her and make it look like she'd done it herself. Of course I didn't believe her...what mother would? For ten years, I haven't let myself believe it...I haven't let myself think about it...until the police came to the door and said there was this dead woman and you had been the last person seen with her alive...and it all came back to me, Dorothy. I couldn't stop asking myself, had I made a terrible mistake?"

She never let it go. Her mother held on to her suspicions for a decade, an unspoken knowledge that her daughter was capable of something so evil. That her daughter was capable of murder.

It had been a good plan. Dorothy deserved everyone's sympathy after being publicly tormented by these three girls. So if one of them was so sorry for what she'd done that she tried to make amends by taking her own life, everyone would understand. It would've been beautiful, poetic justice. And it almost worked, except a gym teacher found Amber in the locker room after she'd slipped into a diabetic coma. Juvenile diabetes being such a tricky thing to manage, and Amber being so recently diagnosed, it was understandable how she might've messed up, as her parents insisted. They didn't want to believe the suicide note Dorothy had left in the gym locker next to Amber's cute little boots. Once Amber woke in the hospital bed, she insisted that she hadn't tried to kill herself, but by this point, no one knew what to believe. *Kids are so dramatic these days*, parents agreed. Amber

had been extra emotional after the whole thing about bullying Dorothy broke, you could ask any of her classmates.

If that gym teacher hadn't decided to head back to her office for a heavier jacket, no one would've found Amber in time. It would've been one more tragic suicide in a year of surging adolescent attempts.

For ten years, Dorothy has believed that her mother did not suspect her. Has never suspected her.

"If you had anything to do with this"—her mother takes a juddering breath—"you need to go to the police. Promise me you'll do the right thing and go to the police."

Dorothy stops the recording.

She can barely breathe and feels lightheaded. She needs to open a window.

And to think she was tempted to let her mother know she's alive. She goes through her phone and deletes all the messages from her, knowing she'll never be able to bear listening to them. Not after this betrayal.

With shaking hands, she powers down her phone and tucks it in the very bottom of her suitcase.



thirty-two

Slowly, day by day, Dorothy's time in the cottage draws to an end. Mornings walking down the road to the little café for coffee (daydreaming of working behind the counter, learning to make their scones, putting wildflowers in the tiny jars that served as vases on the tables). Afternoons walking to one of the nearby villages if the weather allowed. Evenings wrapped in a blanket on the loveseat, staring out the front windows into darkness. Always thinking about what would come next.

As the days slip by and no police show up at her doorstep, Dorothy dares to hope that she's gotten away, that there will be no restitution to be paid. At what point will she know that she can get on with the rest of her life—she has no answer, no idea. She could be a fugitive for the rest of her days.

She extended her rental by another week, but the owners have written to say new tenants are coming with the first of the month and Dorothy can delay no longer. She thinks about finding another place nearby but decides it's a bad idea to stay in any one place for too long. As it is, the villagers in this sleepy little town know her as a tourist. The clerk at the café knows her

regular order, and she's started to see the same cars on her trek to the pub. If she stays any longer, they'll start to get curious about her.

She checks online every few days to see if the investigation back in America is over, but no luck yet. She's optimistic that public interest is at least waning.

It's almost her last day in the cottage. She walks to the café, sitting at her usual spot. Riona, the woman behind the counter, brings over her regular order (a pot of strong tea and a fat rascal). She's just broken a piece off the scone when she sees a news article about Isabella. "I worked in Tomas Delgado's studio. There's one person who's involved in this whole mess that no one's talking about. That person is Dorothy Wagner."

Angelica. It has been only a year since Dorothy had last seen her, and the woman has changed dramatically. She's always been small, but she's starting to look wizened, older than her age, which is her late twenties. She has bags under her eyes and her voice has gotten hoarse as though she's been smoking. There are gray hairs mixed in with the walnut brown. She has the same scowl, however. Nothing has changed there.

"Dorothy was a little nobody who'd wormed her way into Tomas's life." Angelica says in a video interview for some second- or third-tier news outlet. She looks self-important, sitting archly for the camera. "Somehow, she got him to give her a job, even though she had no experience. Then the next thing we know, she's gotten in touch with this Isabella person, even though everyone in the world had been looking for her and no one was having any luck. Then Dorothy introduces Claire Cameron to her, so Claire becomes her manager." Dorothy gasps; how had Angelica learned that? Claire must've told her; there's no other way Angelica would know. Unless Tomas shared it.

The woman's face is pinched, mean. "She was up to something. She was always hanging around the studio when nobody was there. But Tomas is such a trusting soul"—her tone says it all: Tomas is a chump—"that he never suspected her of anything."

Angelica's words roil in Dorothy's chest like heartburn. Surely after hearing this, the police will push Tomas to have the system audited by

experts. Or maybe Tomas will come up with the idea himself. Things are about to get worse.

She makes her way out of the café and hurries home, spending the rest of the day trying to come up with a solution. How she wishes she could make it all go away. She needs to think of a way to walk away from it all. To bury Isabella once and forever...

To bury her.

The solution is obvious. Right in front of her nose.

She needs to kill off Isabella.

It's shocking how quickly the idea of killing comes to her, even with the memory of Claire on the studio floor fresh in her mind. She can still feel the way Claire's skull crumbled under the blows...No. Dorothy refuses to accept that she did that. It had been as though she'd stepped out of her body for a few seconds and something else had stepped in to wield the murder weapon.

All evidence to the contrary, Dorothy refuses to believe it had been her.

Besides, it isn't as though she would physically kill Isabella. Without a corpse, though, would anyone believe that Isabella is gone? From what she's read, there are lots of people who refuse to believe that Isabella has truly left social media, skeptics who think it was all a publicity stunt and that she'll be back to cash in once the police are no longer breathing down her neck. Just as there are many who think her innocent of Claire's death and beg incessantly for her to come back. *We miss you! We love you!*

Every time Dorothy reads those words online, her heart swells with pride.

She shakes the thoughts out of her head. *No. No more.*

The only way to make the whole thing die will be to give them a body.

The only body she has, however, is her own.

She rises from the threadbare loveseat and takes her dishes to the kitchen. Rinsing the plate and cup under the tap, she lets her mind wander. The warm water eases away the scurrying thoughts, slowing things down until she can focus.

Theoretically speaking—and it can only be theoretical—how could you do something like this? She'd have to find someone who looks like Isabella. With enough destruction, the face can be finessed—disfigured or burnt—as well as identifying marks like fingerprints and dental records.

Dorothy stops, the scalding water rushing over her hands. Where are these thoughts coming from? She doesn't think like this. She isn't a killer.

Except that she is.

She turns off the water and stands shaking at the sink. Claire's crushed skull and the bloody puddle materializes in front of her eyes. She reels, holding on to the edge of the sink to keep from swooning.

But even Claire's death is a far cry from what she's imagining now. Claire had threatened her safety, had pushed her into it. The attack hadn't been premeditated. It had been an explosion of fear and self-preservation. The killing of a complete stranger will be cold-blooded murder. Dorothy will have to hunt a woman like an animal with the intention of killing her.

She staggers to the loveseat. She rubs her face furiously, the physical touch waking her up, grounding her in her body once again. *You live in your head too much. You need to live in the real world.*

She cannot let herself kill again. She can't go down that path. She knows right from wrong. Even in this age, when it's acceptable for people to reveal their naked desires in public in text and photos and little videos, she still believes there's a baseline that shouldn't be crossed. That the idea of right and wrong is real, not just a concept, and only a bad person willfully does bad things. Every day, she sees people equivocating everything they did—lie, steal, cheat on their spouses and partners—but she has to hold the line.

No more. No more.

.....

She writes a suicide note for Isabella.

The main thrust of the note is to have Isabella claim she's responsible for Claire's death and to convince everyone that she's confessing now

because she can't live with the guilt. She spends an entire evening working on it, rewriting it over and over.

The true crime podcasts convince her it's possible. Many people have successfully faked their own deaths. There are entire websites devoted to the subject. The lesson from all these stories is that the police will find you only if they really, really want to, and most of the time, it seems they're content to move on to the next case. Claire's murder took place over a month ago and it seems the public is chasing its tail on that one.

Dorothy will take that risk.

Yes, it's a good way to close the door on the incident, Dorothy decides. To put it all behind her. When she leaves Ireland, she goes to the northernmost tip of Scotland. She picks the area for its cold isolation, even though it's difficult to get to. She saw pictures and found it perfect: it seems like the end of the world. John o'Groats is where you catch the ferry to the Orkney Islands. She wishes she could take the time to wander around the islands, home to neolithic ruins and Viking settlements, but no. She can't risk being seen.

It's time to close the door on Isabella and start over.

In the end, she leaves the suicide note under a rock in the ferry terminal, a spot overlooking the unforgiving North Sea. She leaves a piece of clothing behind that will be identified as Isabella's, a hoodie from one of her sponsors and one Dorothy has worn in more than one video. It isn't much, but she prays it will be enough to convince people. She feels sad as she arranges the evidence, draping the pink jacket over a railing so that it waves like a phantom arm in the brutally unrelenting wind and will catch someone's attention.

What are you doing?

The voice leaps up in her head. A monster awakens. It isn't that the voice left her, not entirely, but lately it has grown quiet. Sleepy. Dorothy had been hoping it had gone away, attributing it to her better mental health.

You can't do this! I won't let you...

After everything I did for you...

Look in the mirror. You're beautiful now. I gave that to you. Ingrate.

As Dorothy walks back to her rental car, she closes her mind to the screaming, the crying, the threats. This is the end of Isabella.

She searches in her purse for the Xanax she bought from a man in a pub. She sits behind the wheel until the screeching diminishes, then subsides, along with her anxiety.

Besides, it isn't as though Isabella is really dead. Dorothy still has her files on the hard drive and can revisit Isabella at any time, but it feels blessedly final to Dorothy.

This nightmare is finally over.



thirty-three

two years later

Dorothy unlocks the front door and steps inside her home. It's chilly out, the reason for her jacket and scarf and woolly hat, even in early May. But that's Oslo for you.

She lives on the outskirts of the city on the top two floors of a small house in a quiet neighborhood. One of the reasons she picked this area is its easy access to the city. After two cautious years on the run, she's finally ready to be around people again.

She didn't intend to settle in Norway. She thought she'd go someplace in the heart of Europe, someplace where it would be easier to make an escape if the police started closing in. By then, however, the investigation into Claire's death seemed to have sputtered out, and so during a layover in Norway Dorothy decided to stop running. The police had stopped leaving voicemails. The media had stopped writing about Isabella after the confession note was found by a ferry crew member the same day Dorothy had planted it. Isabella's suicide had been accepted by the public even

without a body. There would always be skeptics, conspiracy lovers, even the radical few who insisted it was all a hoax, from Isabella's first, naive photo on Instagram to the suicide scene at the ferry depot. There was even a small group who believed there'd never been an Isabella and that a mysterious force had orchestrated the whole thing.

Dorothy goes into the kitchen with her tote bag. There are a few groceries to put away, yogurt, cheese, brown bread. She congratulates herself for practically being Norwegian at this point: She's gotten a taste for brown bread, that ubiquitous Norwegian staple, though she still can't bring herself to eat lutefisk. Maybe one day.

The cute man behind the cash register winked at her as usual. He wanted to strike up a conversation, she could tell, and she's trying to work up the nerve to let him. She's dying for a friend but is still afraid of where that may lead. One step at a time, she tells herself. She's only just decided to stay put.

Dorothy is happy with her little apartment. It catches the afternoon sun. There's no yard to speak of, but she's okay with that. She walks every day after lunch in the nearby park. Sometimes she takes the bus down to the water, to the inner Oslofjord, to enjoy the light shining off the sea. Mostly she stays inside, though, unable to overcome the feeling that she's being watched. She found remote work for a tech company designing websites for small businesses, and some graphics work through an online service that hires piecemeal. She is still Aoife Gallagher in name, living on a tourist visa in Norway. Since the companies she works for are overseas, she's able to avoid coming under scrutiny by Norwegian authorities. She earns enough to pay the rent and buy her groceries, so she isn't reduced to tapping the last of her funds in Isabella's offshore account. Her emergency fund.

She toasts cheese on brown bread and carries it to her office along with a cup of tea. For work, she's picked the sunniest room in the house, which has a big window that looks down on the street below. It's quiet but she welcomes the occasional diversion: someone on the way to the park with their dog or a neighbor returning from the shops.

As she chews on her toasted cheese, she thinks about her family. Is it finally safe to contact her mother? It's like testing a bruise, seeing if it's starting to heal. Sure, apparently her mother thinks her own daughter could be a murderer—harsh—but it seems very unkind to keep Teresa in limbo like this. It is its own kind of hell to have a child just disappear one day. Dorothy could see if she can trust her mother not to go to the authorities, if she asks her not to. It's a small price to pay for closure, wouldn't you think? A couple of lines written on a postcard and mailed from someplace far away, that should suffice. Just the thought of it warms her heart a little.

It's a pipe dream. She knows it will never happen but can't help playing with it, like a loose tooth.

The other person she hasn't had any contact with in a long while is the troll. She's not sure why, though she has her theories. He might be dead—that's the best-case scenario. He might be busy with his latest victims—that's more likely. Whenever an internet star suddenly shoots out of nowhere, Dorothy resists the urge to find out more about them, to see if this person, too, might be enjoying supernatural help to rise from obscurity. It's a slippery slope once you start snooping online, and before long you've left breadcrumbs that make it possible for you to be found. She's like a rabbit living in the wild, taking pains not to give away her location to predators, not by scent or sound or movement.

Finished with her meal, she opens her laptop and goes back to what she was doing before the interruption, designing a logo for a Danish florist shop. She's been struggling to come up with something that's not too hokey; it seems the owner wants something sophisticated for his shop befitting its location in a trendy Copenhagen neighborhood. For what she will earn, however, she can't afford to waste time. She needs to pull something together and move on to the next low-paying task.

But she doesn't; instead, she goes to another file, a project she's been working on for herself. She calls this creation Hanna. Why she's driven to design another avatar, she isn't sure. It might be force of habit, something that feels natural to do after pouring thousands of hours into Isabella. Or

maybe she misses flexing her professional muscles. Or, most likely, she's just lonely and a digital twin is the closest thing to a friend.

Hanna is undeniable proof that Dorothy has a master's eye for beauty, that Isabella was not a fluke. And, as with any gift, it seems a shame—no, a crime—not to use it.

For the past couple of weeks, she's been plugging away at her new creation during odd hours at night when she can't sleep. Sometimes she goes to the avatar to clear her mind between assignments.

Dorothy scrolls through the sketches she's done of Hanna. She's made her a little less intimidating than Isabella, a little more relatable. Her hair is a riot of bright red curls. She's gone as far as she can with the software programs at her disposal. To make Hanna hyperreal, Dorothy will need to use Tomas's software. The hard drive with all those files is hidden away in the attic space over the bedroom. She hasn't powered it up since fleeing Los Angeles. She doesn't even know if it's operable, or if it was damaged when she ping-ponged around Europe. Her new laptop might not have enough processing power to handle Tomas's programs.

She'll need a stepstool to reach the little trapdoor in the ceiling, and then she'll have to hoist herself up into the crawl space.

Her thoughts are interrupted by a noise that sounds like it's coming from behind the walls. It's a hollow thumping, like someone is testing for weaknesses. *Knock knock knock.*

A little lower. *Knock knock knock.*

Hair stands on the back of Dorothy's neck. It isn't the first time she's heard it. She isn't sure what it is—probably an animal trapped in the wall, making itself at home. It's an old house and cheaply made.

Still, by now it's started to get dark out, and she has no desire to crawl around the attic only to have a mouse or squirrel or, worse, a *rat* leap out at her. She puts off retrieving the hard drive until morning. She closes her laptop and goes downstairs for more cheese and bread and to retreat to the farthest room in the house from the attic and see what's on television. During a slow spell in a movie, Dorothy scrolls through social media, but her tired eyes fail to see a post that says influencer Davey Rasmussen, the

Annihilator, died after falling or jumping off a high-rise building in New York City.

In the morning, Dorothy makes a pot of coffee and goes back to her office. The noise in the walls continued all night, making it impossible to sleep. She lay awake with the covers pulled up to her chin, trying to follow the sound in the darkness, trying to judge if it was getting closer, if it had moved to another room or under her bed. Now, however, it's daytime. It's harder to believe that you're being stalked by a family of rats or a malicious spirit when the sun is out. She resolves to believe the more conventional possibility and contact the landlord for an exterminator.

The first thing she does, however, is return to the drawings of Hanna. As she flips through the stills, she feels a familiar restlessness. This work is *good*. Hanna will not be as big as Isabella and that's okay. Dorothy likes to think that she's learned her lesson. She won't make the same mistake twice.

She knows better now. She won't get caught up in the same trap, she's sure of it.

After all, what's the alternative? Working herself to exhaustion chasing down petty little assignments on job marketplaces like Fiverr and Dribbble? Drive herself crazy with cheap, picky clients to make a few measly euros? These gigs will not generate enough money to sustain her for much longer.

Looking for a bigger job would require a work visa and national identity card. Seeing money from social media will take time, yes, and it's not a guarantee, but that's her best—her only, really—option. Even if it risks drawing the attention of the troll.

This time, it will be different, she's sure of it.

She heads to the nearby park for her daily walk. Her only exercise, since she can't afford to pay for a gym. Sunshine, fresh air, and a chance to step away from her computer, to be in contact with the real world. She passes an old woman wheeling her groceries home and a pet walker juggling four dogs. With her head down and hands stuffed in her pockets,

Dorothy thinks about Hanna and how she will handle everything this time, what she will do differently. For one thing, she'll be up front about Hanna being AI. Her body isn't about to morph into a replica of her avatar—at least she hopes this will be the case. Honestly, the possibility is terrifying. The pain has finally subsided, but it's taken three years. She never wants to go through that again.

Besides, Sona has made AI characters commonplace. The battle over AI is finished, the outcome never in doubt, really. Social media and entertainment are full of fake actors, fake spokespeople, fake musicians, fake everything now. One of the most popular European children's shows is all AI, from scripting to theme song to scene generation. Nobody bats an eyelash at it now. Which means the potential for someone with Dorothy's talent is limitless.

Dorothy starts on a second lap, passing mothers with strollers. A couple of the mothers give her a strange, silent look of curiosity twisted with—fear? Perhaps they recognize something in Dorothy's face, Isabella's imprinted over her own. Frustration flares in her chest; Dorothy's tried everything to rid herself of Isabella's ghost. She changed her hair color and the way she dresses, but there are too many aspects that she can do nothing about. Her roots grow in honey-toned. Then there's the shape of her body: She can't gain weight no matter what she eats—the opposite of her old problem. The irony isn't lost on her. At least the changes have stopped, and with every day that passes, the fear that she might follow in Catrina Villeneuve's footsteps lessens.

She will devote all her spare time and attention to Hanna. She'll plot an entire strategy, figure out which users to go after, which alliances to make with other influencers. She can risk handling it all as Aoife Gallagher in the beginning, but eventually she'll need a few cutouts to operate through. She'll need a new business manager, obviously, but what about Herb Zeilman? Dorothy has a feeling her old lawyer will be good with whatever she suggests as long as there's money to be made. He's not one to get hung up on moral issues.

It's settled, then. She's happy, eager to get started.

She can do nothing without the hard drive and Tomas's software, however.

When she gets home from the park, she tries not to think about what she's about to do. To think about the troll is to send an invitation; this she believes. She clears her head. She locks the door behind her and strips off her jacket, hanging it on a hook by the door. Next, she takes the stepstool from the kitchen and carries it up to her bedroom. All very businesslike, all very matter-of-fact. It's a stretch, but Dorothy manages to push the trapdoor aside and then pull herself into the crawl space. Too late she realizes she should've brought a flashlight with her. She has her cell phone, though, and she turns on the flashlight tool, flooding the small space with a bright white, almost clinical light.

There are only two boxes—she's tried hard not to accumulate things, not wanting to get weighed down—and it takes little time to find the hard drive. While she's up here, she tries not to look for signs of an animal, but she can't help herself, glancing around for droppings or bits of chewed-up insulation or cardboard. It's all neat and tidy. Weird.

After putting the trapdoor back in place, Dorothy clears space on her little desk for the drive. How odd it looks, familiar and unfamiliar at the same time, like a friend she hasn't seen in a long time. Looking at it, though, a chill passes over her. It's like taking the first step on a forbidden journey, the first sip of liquor after giving it up. She unwinds the cable and plugs it into her laptop. The green lights come on as normal, but she holds her breath until she opens the old programs and sees they're still accessible. *Thank God.*

The hours melt away as she re-creates Hanna with Tomas's programs. She has no choice but to use Catrina Villeneuve's old motion files, at least for now. Later she will search online for files being sold on the black market.

She takes a break, sitting back to look at her handiwork. Nothing she's made so far could be considered a finished product, but what she has done isn't bad. Dorothy goes to the kitchen and reheats the morning's coffee. She has a feeling she'll be working through the evening to perfect this short

video. Then there's all the behind-the-scenes work, creating new cutouts and shell entities to hide Hanna's accounts on Instagram and TikTok and YouTube. The rest of her research—finding comparable accounts, looking for potential sponsors—can wait until she's put Hanna's first reel up. She has to get the ball rolling the same way she did with Isabella.

The thought of all the things she needs to do isn't daunting at all. Quite the opposite: It's the happiest she's felt in a long time. She feels alive. At that moment, however, leaning against the counter in her tiny kitchen, holding the cooling mug of coffee in her hands, her thoughts drift to the question she hasn't dared ask in the past three years: What about the troll?

She has thoughts, though she doesn't dare dwell on them for any longer than a few fleeting seconds, afraid it'll conjure him up on the spot. After everything she's been through, she doesn't understand him or the bargain any better. She has no answer for why she hasn't heard from him since she's been on the run.

All she knows is that for the past two years, she's lived a life without attention. With no family, no friends, and no presence on social media, Dorothy has been little more than a specter. Like the Dorothy of old, she's a ghost in a big machine. That alone has been a kind of punishment, Dorothy looking on and wanting to interact with the world, missing the attention and fame but mostly missing the opportunity to use her abilities. To shape the virtual world to her liking. To wield her talent like a weapon.

It's okay, what she's doing with Hanna, she tells herself. It'll fly below the troll's radar. Hanna isn't Isabella. Dorothy is not going to make a bargain with the troll for Hanna. As for her existing bargain—well, Isabella is dead. Which means that bargain is dead.

She's still good at spin, at telling herself what she wants to hear.

The sun's come up by the time she's finished. She's double-checked the metadata on her files. She's created accounts—everythingHanna—on both Instagram and TikTok. She wants to use the same bio as Isabella's, *The girl*

next door, a breadcrumb left for the eagle-eyed. A teaser. It would be fun to see if that lures in Isabella's fans, if they'd still be looking for her. On second thought, though, she decides it would be madness to take such a risk now, when she's finally free and clear.

She drops Hanna's first video on the platforms and then tries to put it out of her head. She won't be obsessive this time. To take her mind off it, she checks a couple of the gig platforms she uses, looking for new jobs to bid on. There's an email from the middleman on the florist gig: The client loves it! Can she send it in a couple of different background colors? The one thing Dorothy would change about her life, if she could, would be to find a full-time job. She hates gig work. Now there's this constant anxiety that she might be missing out on a potential job if she isn't on the internet every minute. She'd like to kick the balls of whoever came up with the gig economy. More work, less money, no insurance, no safety net. It's a stupid lie fed to desperate people.

She's lacing up her sneakers to go on her midday walk when she decides to steal a look at Hanna's account to see how it's doing. She's been fighting the urge all morning, like trying not to scratch when you have a full-body case of hives. It's lunacy to check so soon. If the numbers are crap, she'll be disappointed, perhaps profoundly. Isabella, she reminds herself, was a once-in-a-lifetime fluke, and even she didn't start out strong. Dorothy simply cannot get her hopes up.

It's been almost five hours since she put up Hanna's first video. Her hands tremble as she navigates to the new account on Instagram.

Two hundred sixty-one followers.

That's not *terrible*, she assures herself, not for a complete unknown. It's not Isabella, but there will never be another Isabella. Still, her guarded optimism sinks like a stone in her stomach.

Shake it off. She slips the phone in her pocket and starts on her walk. She can't concentrate on her surroundings, the birdsong and the crisp air, however, as her mind churns, trying to think of ways to improve Hanna's engagement. Maybe the old, tried-and-true method of following popular accounts, seeing if they might follow back...shamelessly flattering

influencers...imitating influencers...Something inside Dorothy begins to stir, like waking from a long sleep. No, like coming out of a coma. She feels rusty but energized. Her world is opening back up, a familiar world where she's already proved her mastery. It calls to her. How she's missed it.

Dorothy cuts her walk short to return home. Filled with new ideas, she goes straight to work on Hanna's account. The gig jobs on her plate are small potatoes; nothing is more important in this moment. Hanna will be her future; she's sure of it.

The first thing she does is flip to Hanna's Instagram account. The follower count has barely budged. She scrolls down to the comments. What few there are aren't bad. They are more than the usual catcalls and requests to show her tits. You can't get away from that. Dorothy's spirits lift a little. It's a start. A beginning.

Just as she slides into her chair, however, she hears that noise in the wall again. It's louder than before, like the mouse or squirrel or whatever it is that's gotten into the wall has gotten bolder. And dammit, she forgot to contact the landlord about an exterminator.

She pauses, fingers hovering over the keyboard. She hates vermin, always has. In Los Angeles, she saw rats nearly every day rummaging through trash in the gutter, scampering down the alley behind her apartment building. She hates to think there might be one living over her head. Running around her apartment while she sleeps.

But the crawl space is clean. She's seen it with her own eyes.

She'll call an exterminator tomorrow herself, not going through the landlord, then pushes it out of her head to get back to work.

.....

By the time Dorothy looks out the window, night has fallen. Outside, the sky is a velvety black, embellished with only a bright sliver of moon, the stars having receded for some unknown reason. The street in front of her house is empty, though the wind pushes bits of trash and dead leaves up the sidewalk like an invisible push broom.

She rolls back from the desk. Her stomach growls. A glance at her phone tells her it's past ten p.m., and she hasn't eaten since breakfast.

There isn't much food in the house, she sees as she paws through the cabinets and the refrigerator. She's not sure she can face another cheese sandwich. She peels the lid off a cup of yogurt and settles back at her desk.

As she pulls the laptop to her, however, her eye goes to the flashing green lights on the hard drive.

Isabella. Dorothy hasn't looked at her in over two years. A pang runs through her; she misses Isabella, of course she does. The way a mother would miss her baby.

But Isabella is dead. That's what Dorothy has been telling herself every day since she left the suicide note at the ferry terminal. There's no going back, no resurrecting her. It's better to think of her as gone.

Still...surely there could be something instructional in Isabella's files, something she could bring to Hanna. She might uncover some secret that eluded her before, an important element that she did by instinct with her first avatar.

An electric sensation passes through her. Not excitement. More like—fear.

What does she have to be afraid of?

It's impossible not to think of Isabella without thinking of Claire, and if Dorothy concentrates, she can feel the sculpture in her hands, the weight of it as she swung it down, down, down. She can hear the loud crack and feel the skull giving way. She's been able to push it out of her mind for the most part, except for the worst moments of guilt, like when she watches a true-crime show that reminds her of her escape from Los Angeles.

Now that she's allowed herself to think about Isabella again, though, it's like the avatar is calling to her. *It's only because my life is so lonely.* In some ways, Isabella was like a sister to her. Her twin. And twins are said to have a special bond, a bond stronger than death.

Stop being a baby. You need to check your work. Take a look.

After much dickerings, she decides to look at the last video she made of Isabella. Arguably, her best.

When she opens the file, she gasps.

Isabella has aged.

Dorothy zooms in and hovers over every degradation of Isabella's perfect form. It's been affected in every way possible. Her body is unmistakably the body of an older person. Flesh sags from the bone. She's maybe in her sixties or seventies—it's impossible to tell. Her face has wrinkles at the corners of her eyes and around her mouth. Her neck is wattled like a turkey's. Her hair has lost its luster, and grays sprout among the honey and amber like weeds taking over a garden. It is the nightmare of beautiful, vain women everywhere.

The only way this could have happened is if someone went into the files and changed her.

But the hard drive has been sitting in a box in her attic.

Impossible. But the proof is in front of her eyes.

She shoves away from her desk in fright.

There is no way this could be happening. Someone's playing a trick on her. The first name that springs to mind is Angelica. Yet that's ridiculous. No one knows where Dorothy is, *who* she is. The hard drive sat unplugged in the cold space over her bedroom, untouched.

It's all impossible, and yet...

She reaches for the hard drive, ready to yank out the cord tethering it to her laptop and throw it out the window. Or she could take it downstairs and hammer it until it has broken into hundreds of pieces.

Something bad is going on.

The hard drive is cursed. It's possessed.

She wheels slowly back to the desk, like creeping up on a slumbering beast. She knows what she *should* do if she were being rational, and that's delete all of Isabella's files. They're the only evidence that ties her back to the bad things that happened in Los Angeles. The bad things that Dorothy Wagner has done.

And she isn't Dorothy Wagner anymore. She's Aoife Gallagher. No one can link Aoife to Dorothy—unless they come across this hard drive.

But a hand tugs at her heart, stopping her from destroying Isabella. She knows she'll never make another avatar as special. Isabella was magical. Isabella is proof that Dorothy Wagner is special, too.

You can't delete me, Dorothy. You'd be killing me.

The voice has returned.

Dorothy goes cold. It feels like her body is shutting down. Her vision has gone snow white, too. Her teeth chatter.

There's so much she needs to know, so she asks. *You've changed, Isabella. What happened?*

You left me. Without attention, I withered.

I'm sorry. I had to end everything and hide. You understand.

The voice pauses. *You've made another one, I see. A replacement.*

Not a replacement. Even Dorothy can see her protest is weak. *Something—different.*

The voice laughs. *You can lie to yourself, it doesn't matter. You made a mistake, you see. You put Hanna on the internet. Now he can find you.*

A cold wind blows right through her, hollowing her out.

He's coming, Dorothy. It won't be long.

Her mind flails for a solution, something to appease the troll. *He can use Hanna. He said I had a gift for making irresistible avatars.*

It all makes sense now. Why he reached out to her, what he wanted from her. *He needs someone to help him draw attention, doesn't he? He needs that chaos on the web, a chaotic virtual world.* She was one of his agents of chaos, too arrogant to see what she was really doing.

The voice doesn't answer.

I can help him, Dorothy insists. *Tell him. We can try again with Hanna.*

He doesn't trust you. This time, he'll just take what he wants.

She gets even colder, blood freezing in her veins. *What is he going to do?*

A pause. *What do you think?*

Funny—her mind goes back to that terrible time in San Diego. She remembers how he destroyed Tony. What was it that Davey said to her, when he told her to never contact him again? *He'll squash me like an ant.*

When the familiar pain returns, Dorothy curls up in a ball in the middle of the floor. It strikes her face first. Not the legs, like before. Maybe it's going to go in reverse order, she mulls; not that it matters, but thinking about it provides a momentary diversion. The pain is so much stronger this time, though. It feels like something inside her is being unraveled fast, being *pulled* out of her. She's being disassembled. The jawbone, the cheekbones, the bone that forms her brow—they all hurt like someone is breaking her skull apart with a mallet.

Or bringing a rock down on her head.

She crawls on her hands and knees to the bathroom in search of aspirin or stronger painkillers, if she has any left. Her teeth ache in an inhuman way. Her vision blurs and skews, as though her eyeballs are being squeezed out of shape.

The bathroom floor is cool, so she lies down. She is so, so hot now. Burning up.

She curls up again, unable to straighten her spine or lift her head.

The pain is excruciating. How is she supposed to survive this?

Then she remembers: She's not.



thirty-four

two weeks later

The *politiet* roll up in front of Dorothy's apartment. The old woman who lives downstairs called to complain of a strong odor, not to mention that she hasn't seen the girl coming and going on her usual walks. Although the city police have plenty to keep them occupied, she somehow convinces them that they should check on her neighbor, a foreigner. Two officers are sent, an older man named Einar, and a younger woman, Aslaug, spared from traffic duty for an hour. They wave to the old woman, who watches from a window at the back of the house, as they exit their vehicle.

The smell hits them as soon as they open the front door. Einar has smelled this specific smell one time before, when he was sent to check in on an old man who missed several doctor's appointments. He looks at Aslaug and shakes his head; they both know how this will end.

There are no signs of a break-in. No signs of a struggle, either. That's something, anyway. It could go one of three ways, Einar says to Aslaug: Either the girl died peacefully of some natural cause, she's taken her life

(suicides being uncommonly high in Norway that year, Einar read just that morning), or she's suffered a freak accident. If the latter, they'll probably find her body in an undignified position in a pool of blood, now tacky and dried out.

They work their way through the apartment quickly. There's nothing in the spaces they can see from the front door, not in either the tiny sitting room or the kitchen, which means they must move deeper into the apartment. Einar leads the way up the narrow, winding staircase to the second floor.

The smell is stronger here.

They are faced with two open doors. They can see through the one directly in front of them. It reveals a bedroom with a neatly made bed, a row of hooks on one wall, shoes tucked under the bed. It looks like everything's in order, nothing amiss.

They walk toward the second door, Einar again in the lead. It's instinctive to him, that he should be the one to go into the room first. He's already seen a dead body that's sat around for a while, after all. Aslaug is new to police work. He wants to spare his partner such a sight, if possible.

Detective Freya Nielsen rubs the space between her eyes. She's prone to migraines, and since reading the medical examiner's report—twice—she can feel one coming on.

There was a dead body on the floor, just as the police officers had feared.

It's just that it wasn't the body of the woman who lived in the apartment.

Freya calls the medical examiner. "How do we know it's not Aoife Gallagher?"

"Because the old woman who lived there looked at the body when it was being removed and she said it wasn't her neighbor. I don't agree that the officers should've let this happen, but it's too late now."

Freya looks at a picture of the remains. The body is not exactly... peaceful. It looks as though someone did damage to it—out of hostility? Rage? It's covered in bruises and blood, broken, like someone tried to pull it apart. Or maybe dropped it from a height. If that's what happened, though, why bring the body to the tiny apartment? If you threw a body off a roof or over a cliff, why bring it back inside?

"We have Gallagher's passport, too," the doctor continues. "The deceased doesn't look like the picture in the passport, either."

Does that mean the quiet Irishwoman living in the shadows in Oslo is a murderer? That she killed this woman and left her in her apartment? It seems so unlikely that it makes her head spin.

"There's more," the medical examiner continues. "The DNA matches an Interpol case. A missing American wanted for questioning in a murder. I'm going to recommend we hand it over to Interpol." Freya senses relief in the medical examiner's voice. "I have enough real work to worry about."

"But it's a mystery," Freya says. "Aren't you curious about what's going on?"

The medical examiner snorts. "There are plenty of mysteries in Norway to occupy our time, Detective. More than enough."

She's right, Freya decides as she hangs up. The Americans' chances of getting to the bottom of it are far better than hers.

She gets up from her desk to walk to the coffee station for a fresh cup. She brings her phone with her, thumbing over to Instagram. She's completely obsessed with a new reality TV show, *Hjemmemennesket*, or *The Homebody*, which has five women competing to see who can keep the best house. It's totally ridiculous, these women are given budgets to feed their families and decorate their homes, turning their lives into a game show. It's far from her life as a working mother, but she can't stop watching it. They're introducing a new cast member today on their Instagram account and she wants to see if the announcement has been made yet.

Ah...it's a man. A young man, very cute, with a three-year-old daughter and a husband who works at a bank in the city. Freya expected

they'd pick another middle-aged woman, but this is a good choice. She taps over to the new man's Insta account and hits "follow."

Immediately the screen fills with more faces, suggestions for new accounts she might be interested in, too. Freya almost swipes away when a face catches her eye. This person is gorgeous, but more than that, she is gloriously self-possessed. She stands with her hip jutted out and her head tilted back a bit cockily. Red hair like that girl in that movie *Brave*. Green eyes like emeralds staring right at you, daring you to look away. A hint of a smile playing on the lips.

Freya clicks over to the profile. The woman's name is Hanna.

The girl next door.

Freya's thumb hovers over the button. Doesn't she already follow someone with that same line in her bio?

Oh well, what does it matter? The line is a cliché, and the internet is nothing but an echo chamber, anyway.

She clicks.



afterword

In the mid-2000s, I was one of the US intelligence community's first social media researchers. As a research analyst, I dealt with the goings-on behind the feeds: sifting through metadata, measuring social networks, and the like. The average user of social media was like the audience at a magic show, delighted to be deceived. I was the magician's backstage technician, privy to how the tricks were accomplished. I followed the early years of social media with intentionality because my job was not only to make sense of what was unfolding, but to predict where it would go. I went on to become a technology forecaster, evaluating a wide range of emerging technologies for the potential to disrupt society. That's where my knowledge of deepfakes and generative AI comes from.

I wanted to write *Incarnate* because the longer I worked in this field, the more dissatisfied I became with where certain technologies were taking us. The original idea behind the book was to write *The Picture of Dorian Gray* for the twenty-first century. I was seized by the idea of modern technology making it possible to indulge our vanity to the utmost degree,

enabling us to remain young and beautiful forever, like the protagonist in Oscar Wilde's book.

While a lot of people, Dorothy included, cannot imagine life without social media, it's also taken some humans—again, poor Dorothy—to a dark place. It has changed us. Obvious as this may be, it seems that many people don't appreciate the extent. Social media has changed the way we think and changed human nature to a degree, and it's done so in a shockingly short twenty years. There's been a lot of good research done in the field of social media studies, lately veering to the critical, citing its effects on mental health. It's important to bear in mind that we, the users, had no say in how the platforms grew and changed their algorithms. They bribed us with trinkets and spare change to produce the content that brought them more users, more eyeballs, and solidified the role of social media in our lives. It's also important to remember that the companies behind these platforms never had a grand plan for where their creations would take us. It was all developed on the fly, for the most part reactive to developments at rival platforms. The end goal is marketplace domination. For something that now occupies such an important place in our lives, you'd think there would be more oversight.

Beware the unintended consequences of a new technology. This is the most important lesson you learn as a forecaster. With all disruptive technologies, there are unintended consequences. It's impossible to predict all the ways in which an emerging technology might impact our world once it goes beyond what its creators intended and into the hands of the masses. Of course, the developers won't admit this. Our tech overlords believe they are prescient and that they are in complete control of the tech genie in the bottle. But they are bluffing, putting on an act for investors.

This type of disruptive leap forward occurred while I was still writing this book, as OpenAI's Sora burst onto the scene. It began popping out realistic, wholly fabricated video from text, no visual imagery of any kind needed, shaking up the TV and movie industry, the same industry in which Dorothy was originally employed, in the first draft. This sudden

democratization of deepfakes required a change to the novel. (If you write about new technology, whether fiction or nonfiction, you must be nimble.)

What makes prediction in tech hard is that it's never about the technology itself, no matter how transformative. It takes a confluence of events to make a new technology take off. In the case of the rise of realistic virtual people—avatars—such as Tilly Norwood, the first widely touted AI actress, there were a number of both technical and sociological factors that needed to exist. Generative AI had to become fairly sophisticated, yes, but also society had to be in a space where reality was valued less. Thanks to the propaganda waged in the social media space for over a decade, not only can the public not tell the difference between real and fake, it would seem much of the population no longer cares. As I write this, people freely admit to falling in love with computer programs such as gen-AI chatbots. One reason for this is because society has become conditioned to expect customization: an expectation that everything can be tailored to meet our precise requirements. A long chain of digital technologies now allows us to withdraw into our own world, with synthetic people reinforcing our worldview. Like Dorothy, these technologies have made us more insulated. More selfish. More entitled. We use them as a periscope to see into the lives of millions of people, lives we would otherwise be unaware of, while conveniently forgetting that most of what we are permitted to see is fabricated. And we use technology like armor to keep the rest of the world from seeing us as we truly are.

Here's the last lesson of tech forecasting: Every technology has two sides, and those two sides are not Good and Bad. They're Offensive and Defensive. You can use a new technology to improve your lot in life or to further your goals, but you can also use it to take down your enemies, to obfuscate or deceive (which some might see as defending yourself). Unfortunately, not everyone is aware of how they're using this tool until it's too late.



acknowledgments

While I drew on my years as a researcher of the various technical fields used in Dorothy's work, this book would not have been possible without the input of VFX artist Chris Connelly, who advised me on how the job is done IRL. The misrepresentations, as I bent reality to fit the needs of the story, as well as any mistakes, however, are my own.

My thanks, as always, to the great team at Inkwell Management who supported me through the wobbly process of bringing *Incarnate* into the word: Richard Pine, Eliza Rothstein, Lyndsey Blessing, and Sidney Boker. Thanks also to my miracle worker of a film agent, Angela Cheng Caplan.

Thanks to the tireless folks at Putnam who worked on this novel: editors Daphne Durham and Brianna Fairman, Katie Grinch, Regina Andreoni, Sofie Parker, Alexis Welby, Ashley McClay, and Tal Goretsky for the cover. Many thanks to Ivan Held for his continued support.



Photograph © Matt Mendelsohn

Alma Katsu was a senior intelligence analyst for the federal government, a senior technology policy analyst for the RAND Corporation, and director of a DOD research lab before retiring in 2017. She went on to be a consultant for government and private industry in technology foresight.



Penguin
Random House
PENGUIN PUBLISHING GROUP

***What's next on
your reading list?***

**Discover your next
great read!**

**Get personalized book picks and up-to-date news about this
author.**

Sign up now.