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Dear Hercules Valentine,

All roads lead back to you.

Forever Yours,

Paisley Grove

The Call

Paisley Grove

Palo Alto, CA

I try to focus on the code I'm writing as my fingers fly across the keyboard. For the past two weeks, a big foreboding lump has sat like a log in my gut. Day or night, asleep or awake, it's there. I've been doing coding sprints to make myself ignore its presence, but the exercises barely work.

I recall the day I sat in this chair, talking on the phone with my brother, Max. I'd just had my first over-the-phone interview with Mason Harper, director of software engineering at Valentine Technical Innovations, or VTI for short. I don't want to have this memory right now, and I work more feverishly to rid myself of it, but it doesn't go away. I was forced to admit to Max that my interview went well, despite wishing it hadn't.

"You're doing it for Grandfather," he said, hearing the apprehension in my voice. "You're doing it for us." He's been saying that a lot these days, and he's starting to sound like a broken record playing a very irritating song over and over again.

I close my eyes as my fingers come to a halt. My brother, who's eight years older than I am, knows me well. Despite the large age gap between us, we've always been close. He knows I'd rather cut my hands off than let down our family, making it hard to say no when he attaches our mission to family duty. I'm a Grove.

Grove Industrial Technologies is the number one producer of the latest groundbreaking high-tech products. According to Max and my father, Xander Grove, our top spot doesn't come without our family endeavoring to maintain it. And although they've never said it, frankly, I've been programmed to believe that I was born with an obligation to do my part.

"Remember what they stole from us. They can't get away with it," Max reminded me for what seemed like the millionth time.

I open my eyes and focus on the same scene I observed during our conversation that day. Currently, I live in the Palo Hills in a house that used to belong to my brother. He'll never admit it, but I know he moved out of this place because he couldn't take the lack of excitement the community has to offer. He's now back in New York, and I'm cooped up here, watching how the leaves on the trees in the backyard endure a thrashing from the restless wind. The oaks have changed since I last paid any attention to them. Their foliage has grown so high and thick that it looks as if I'm in my own little universe, being swallowed alive by leaves and branches. I work from home, hardly ever leaving the house other than to jog, which I do twice a day, shop for groceries, or grab a bite when I'm not in the mood to cook.

Do I want to live this sort of solitary life? No, not at all. I miss my friends. I miss the world. But the next five minutes will determine my future. VTI sent an email to the final group candidates yesterday, informing us that the person who lands the position will be contacted by 2:00 p.m. EST. It's now 4:55 PST. I close my eyes and pray that person won't be me.

I'm suddenly jolted by loud ringing. The sound isn't coming from my personal device. The chime of the ancient analog phone stabs my ears like the shouting of an angry crowd. My personal device plays Junga's "Uprise," a song that reminds me of him—Hercules. Hercules Valentine. The secure device that's registered under a fake name has the harsher ringtone. I swivel around in my chair and, pressing my palm over my beating heart, glare at the secure smartphone on the bookshelf.

After the third ring, I muster enough energy to answer the call. "Hello." I clear the frog from my throat.

"Hi, is this Lark Davenport?" The woman's cheery voice clashes with my sense of doom. Lark Davenport isn't my real name, though—it's the one I used when I applied for the job.

Don't say "um." Speak clearly, and remain professional. You can't get caught.

I stand tall. "Yes, this is she. How can I help you?"

"Hi, Mrs. Davenport, this is Lake Clark." She pauses. She probably wants my response to be as happy and easygoing as hers.

I remember Lake. She was part of the team that interviewed me over the phone. They wanted to use old videoconference technology, but I lied and said that I was between clients and only had the bandwidth for a voice call. I hate lying. Not only that, but I'm not very good at it, and Max knows it. *If I'm caught...*

"Yes, Lake, I remember you," I say in a chirpy tone that I hope is convincing.

"Good. We'd like to offer you the principal software developer position. Mason wants to know if you can start next Monday."

Say no, Paisley. Say that unfortunately, you're unable to take the job because something came up, and then thank her for the opportunity.

"Monday's too soon. I'll need fourteen days," I reply instead. That's the plan. We'll need at least fourteen days to run a test.

"Okay. Fourteen days. That'll work. We're just excited to have you on our team."

Her optimism intensifies the foreboding sensation coursing through me. I close my eyes, trying to get a handle on my emotions as she tells me what date and time they'll be expecting me and where I should report. Someone from HR will take me on a tour before bringing me to my team's area. She goes on about the concierge service for workers, the state-of-the-art dining facility, resting pods, and the gym. The longer her sales pitch lasts, the more it feels as if the molecules I'm breathing are suffocating me. I want to stop her and tell her there's no need to convince me since I already said I'd take the job.

"Lark?" she finally asks.

"Humph?" I force my eyes open.

"Well, we can shore up the rest of the details in fourteen days."

I rub the back of my neck because it's too warm, and for some reason, I want to cry. I want to shout, "Beware of me, Lake Clark—I'm an interloper."

"Right," I barely say.

"Do you have any questions for me? Oh," she says as if she remembered one last thing. "More money has been allocated to your position. Instead of \$157,000 annually, your salary will be \$177,000."

Salary? I don't care about a salary. I'm not supposed to be there long enough to collect a first paycheck.

I force a smile to help me muster the right reaction. “Oh, that’s great.” My tone fails to match my words.

“I think so too. And you have no other questions, right?”

“Not today,” I sing. *That’s better.*

“Good. Welcome to team Lark.”

I thank her, and we say goodbye. As soon as I drop the cellphone on top of my desk, I tug at the collar of my T-shirt, gasping for air, praying those thick molecules that I’m breathing deep into my throat will stop suffocating me.

Nine Years Ago

The Boy In My Class

Paisley Grove

Mrs. Fontaine, my sixth-period teacher, looks at me, and I know it's not going to be good.

“Before we say goodbye to your high school careers, let's give a round of applause and a big congratulations to Paisley Grove for her well-deserved full scholarship to the Albrecht Institute of Technology,” she announces.

And now, she's clapping like a dolphin. I stare at my doodles as if willing my spiral of circles to grow on its own. If I could hide inside my skin, I would. It takes a few seconds for my classmates to be lured into lazy applause. I'm not surprised by their reluctance to wish me well. My senior year of high school, which should have been the best of them all, has been the worst.

I'm an outsider. I arrived at Dorset Meacham Academy, a private school on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, a week after school started last year. My grandpa, the famous Charles Gregory Grove and my favorite person in the world, passed away three weeks before the start of the school year, and his second son—my father, Xander Clyde Grove—took over the role of chairman and CEO of Grove Investment Bank. That meant our family had to pack up and move from our perfect lake house in Agoura Hills, California, to a building that consists of five townhouses made into one big-ass monstrosity of a house having fifteen bedrooms and fourteen bathrooms and a lot of other useless space. I find the high ceilings, drafty rooms, loads of crown molding, and coffered ceilings extremely unpleasant. The gaudy furniture looks like something a tourist would see during an unremarkable royal-mansions-of-Europe tour, and all of it is too uncomfortable to lounge on.

My grandparents used to live here. Well, mostly my grandfather. My grandmother, Leslie Swanson Grove, is a wildlife-conservation photographer, and ever since I was very young, she's spent more of her days living out in the wilderness than inside their

oversized home. After Grandfather died, Grandmother was ready to donate the place to charity, but my father insisted we move in instead.

I voiced my objections about living in the house, complete with a written list of well-thought-out reasons to move into a more modern condo. My highlights were the energy we would consume to keep a house this size heated and cooled, how ostentatious we must appear to the average human being, and finally, the ghosts. I swear the place is haunted by a lot of eccentric leftovers from centuries past.

“Ghosts do not exist, Paisley,” my father replied. “We’re living here—get used to it. If anyone is able to adjust to this change, it’s you, sweetheart. I need you to be strong for us.” Then he kissed my forehead, complimented me for how succinct my argument was, and left for the office. The end.

I’m not a crier or a pouter, and my dad knows that. So does my mom. So they’ve never heard about how unhappy I’ve been since moving to the city, and contrary to Dad’s belief, I’m not “adjusting.”

The worst part of the move was leaving lifelong friends behind, people I’ve known since first grade. I’m shy and nerdy, and just like I thought, it will take another eighteen years to build a network of friends like the ones I have in Agoura Hills. At this school, I have no true friends. The way my classmates here treat me is very odd. No one’s outright mean to me, but they’re not friendly, either. I’ve been thinking maybe that’s because I’m a Grove. According to the last Forbes report, we’re the fourth richest family in the world, and we’re still climbing in rank.

The other students may also find my bodyguards off-putting. Jim, Dennis, and Mike are fairly new additions to my life. Last summer, my cousin Treasure reported she’d been kidnapped, but I know the truth. No malevolent forces had snatched her off the street and held her for ransom—she’d been off with a boy. Her lie was elaborate, though. It included two creepy notes asking for ten million dollars and then, two weeks later, an escape story after she showed up at her family home’s iron gates with self-inflicted bruises. Treasure said her lover wouldn’t dare lay a hand on her even if she begged him to. Still, she’s never revealed who the guy was, only that her parents—Uncle Leo and Aunt Londyn, my father’s brother and his wife—wouldn’t approve. Her lie has made it

difficult for me, though. Each day, I struggle with breaking my vow of secrecy and blurting out the truth to my parents.

However, Leo and Londyn aren't making Treasure suffer for her lie, and it's not like they would ever hold her accountable if they knew the truth. They'll let Treasure get away with murder. I'm the one with the overprotective parents. I'm the one who's been assigned bodyguards because of her two-week tryst with some mystery man. So now, Jim, Dennis, and Mike are always posted at the front and back of the school and outside of my classroom. Their presence could be another reason why I have no friends here. And as far as boyfriends go, no boy ever gets too close to me. My dad made it a point to remind my bodyguards to give me breathing room, but everyone knows they're around, waiting to pounce on those who are intent on doing me harm.

Basically, when my classmates think of me, they don't get a warm, fuzzy feeling. And that's fine. I don't take their detachment personally. Putting myself in their shoes, I'd avoid the rich girl with three burly men guarding her too. So their forced applause isn't the reason why the back of my neck and cheeks are burning and my head feels like it's floating to the ceiling. It's Hercules Valentine, the most gorgeous and mysteriously interesting boy I've ever laid eyes on.

Is he looking at me? Is he clapping?

Without stealing a glance, I wonder if he's aiming his probing eyes, kissable lips, and chiseled features in my direction. The breath I finally release trembles as I fight the urge to soothe my curiosity.

Not yet, Paisley. Don't look yet.

In this class, Global Economics, we sit in the same row. Lyle Gant is the only body positioned between us. Sometimes, in my peripheral vision, I watch Hercules's hands take notes or his fingers tap quietly but impatiently on the top of the desk. And sometimes, he transforms my heart into a swarm of butterflies fluttering their wings when he stares at me, seemingly unaware that he's doing it.

"Go ahead and stand up, Paisley," Mrs. Fontaine says.

Her words send something that feels like an electromagnetic pulse through me. For a moment, I think I'm going to pass out. Questions overwhelm me. *Do I look extra fat in*

my skirt? The button popped on the band during second period, but no one can see the mishap under the hem of my shirt. But also...

Is he watching me or staring at his doodling or, even worse, gazing restlessly out the window, paying no attention to me at all?

I haven't moved an inch, so Mrs. Fontaine wiggles her fingers upward. "Go on—stand up, Paisley. The National Tech Excellence scholarship is the most prestigious scholarship in your field, and it's not one you're given—it's one you earn."

I think she added that last part. She doesn't want my classmates thinking the scholarship was handed to me because of my last name. But I don't care what they think about me. I've had to don emotional armor made of tungsten since my first day of school when I smiled at two girls in my first-period class and they pretended I didn't exist. Bailey and Aniston are their names. They still behave as if I'm a stranger.

I don't remember rising to my feet, but I'm standing. My legs tremble as the clapping dies down. And just before it all ends, I turn, looking past Lyle. Hercules's lidded gaze holds me captive, refusing to let go. I've never been boy crazy, but I've been fantasizing about him since the first time I saw him. In my made-up world, we're the perfect couple. He's such a good kisser, and his fingers stimulating my body always inspire a panty change.

The bell rings, and he rips his eyes away from mine, thereby releasing me. I can't feel my legs while the other students move around me, collecting their backpacks and whooping because we're finally free from high school. I plop back down into my seat, talking myself off the love cliff. I don't want to read more into the fact that he was looking at me that way yet again. The only reason he paid me any attention at all on the last day of school is because Mrs. Fontaine made me the center of attention. Actually, he's probably always looking at me because I stupidly look at him first.

And then my body goes stiff as fingers tap the top of my desk. First, I see his thighs, and then my eyes veer up to his gorgeous face. My mouth is caught open, and my breaths are craggy.

"Congratulations on AIT," Hercules says.

I'm still staring at him stupidly. *Say something, Paisley, damn it.*

I start to say thank you, but he walks away before I can form the first of the two words. I want to drop my head on top of my desk and moan. I'm so embarrassed. Why couldn't I say something?

And then, while beating myself up, I notice something. Everyone who remains in the classroom is watching me with surprise and shock. Oh, yes, there's another reason why Hercules and I have never spoken to each other. His family and my family, for some unknown reason, are enemies.

* * *

Before I can make an escape, Mrs. Fontaine calls me to the front of the classroom to once again congratulate me on my scholarship. The cheers and jeers in the hallway are not as distracting as my wishing I could make it to my locker before Hercules has a chance to clean his out and then walk out of my life until tomorrow, which is graduation day. I want to say thank you to him for his well-wishes and even strike up a bigger conversation. Possibly, I could ask him what college he'll be attending. That would be a great conversation starter.

My eyes keep darting away from Mrs. Fontaine's moving lips and looking out the door. I wonder if she knows what university Hercules is going to. Maybe I should ask her. Or maybe not.

"One of those people is Benjamin Geoffrey, head of the Elite Programmer's Society," she says.

I can barely remember what she said before that. Something about her colleagues being excited about me starting at AIT this fall and that they're well aware of my expert programming abilities. The entire school is aware of my programming skills. This January, I won the national CodeOrama competition. My initial project was one I named Killer Firewall. On one rare afternoon, when my mom was home, I demoed Killer Firewall for her.

Eyebrows ruffled, Mom asked, "You created this one hundred percent on your own?"

"Yes, of course I did," I said, offended.

My mom's eyes brightened. "Sweetheart, I only want to make sure no one else can

claim proprietorship. You know how you've always wanted to make a product for Grove Industrial Technologies? Well, this is it."

I took her through my steps, showing her how I'd made my software hostile toward attempted security breaches and any type of virus, known or not yet invented. If a hacker attacked my firewall, their entire hard drive would be drained. If they tried to upload malware onto my computer, their virus would turn on their system. I also showed her how I could even release a worm into the operating system of a hacker, which would collect pertinent system identification data and cordon it off to be used for a security-breach report. I came up with the idea after GIT suffered a hostile attack on Christmas Day last year.

My mom stood up straight and stretched her back. "I must admit, though, your software is quite ominous for a high school competition project."

Some days later, I overheard her singing my praises to my dad but voicing concern that my Killer Firewall might be my way of protecting myself because I felt as though they didn't protect me enough. My mom is always worried that she's wounding me by working too much and focusing more on her career than on home. I don't think she is. She's my hero.

However, since GIT acquired Killer Firewall, I entered software I call the Curricula Crown into the competition instead. It's a smart internet search engine that compiles and composes data on any micro or macro academic subject, and with one final click, it hands educational professionals a solid and comprehensive lesson plan. All the teachers at my school now use the software, and so do numerous other educational institutions, as it was also acquired and licensed by GIT. That's the long reason why it was so easy for me to land the most coveted scholarship in the tech field. Every single teacher at my school wrote me a letter of recommendation, saying how my software transformed their classrooms and how they are so proud that I attend Dorset Miracle Academy. And this is probably another reason why I'll never land in a romantic relationship with Hercules Valentine—I'm more than a nerd. I'm, like, a super nerd.

"I know it hasn't been easy for you here at Dorset," Mrs. Fontaine says.

Now she has my full attention. *Has she really noticed how others have treated me?*

“I got through it.”

Her smile remains sympathetic as her eyes roam my face. “You’re quite a remarkable young lady, Paisley. I’m very honored to have been your teacher.”

I open my mouth to ask if she knows why everyone’s been treating me like a pariah. But instead, I say, “Thank you.”

She wishes me well, and I wish her the best too. I try not to run out of her classroom, as I’m emboldened now more than ever to finally catch up with Hercules and chitchat with him, even if all we talk about is the weather.

Free at last, I hurry past open lockers, stepping on papers that were tossed in the air and now litter the floor. It’s quieter than it was only minutes ago. One thing about New York City, compared to California, is that at the end of the school day, students don’t linger for long. In the city that never sleeps, life is always more exciting beyond the confines of the school’s gates.

Hercules is nowhere in sight, but my locker looms a short distance ahead. My steps slow when I see Greenly Hyde, a girl who wears her uniform skirt shorter and her blouse tighter than the rest of us, at her locker, which isn’t far from mine. And she’s not alone—her snobby friend, Donovan Milner, is with her. He’s frowning as if whatever she’s saying is making him miserable. But he always looks that way. I’ve concluded that Donovan, for whatever reason, is a very unhappy person. And the two of them are the last people I want to see before I abandon the halls of Dorset Beacham Academy, and my locker, for good.

I ignore Greenly and Donovan as I turn my lock. I can feel them watching me, though. If I could, I would just walk away and come back and get what’s inside tomorrow before our graduation ceremony. I don’t have much left inside it other than a graduation-day instruction pamphlet and my advanced statistics and economics textbooks.

“Smart girl,” Greenly says as I shove my books into my backpack.

I check over my shoulder to make sure she’s talking to me. I don’t think she’s ever said much to me other than “excuse me” and sometimes a curt sigh whenever she feels I’m in her way. She’s watching me with a slight grin, and her eyes shine as if she’s seeing me for the very first time. I’m not sure how to respond to her comment, so I don’t.

“I’ve never had a class with you. I guess I’m not a brainiac like you.” She chuckles politely.

I keep my face wide and expressionless. Greenly’s parents must have named her that because her eyes are turquoise. Her lips are red, and everything about her appearance is perfect. She’s the sort of girl that Hercules would go for. Actually, I’ve heard rumors that they were once a couple until he broke up with her.

“Right,” I say absentmindedly.

“What are you doing tonight?” Donovan asks with a straight face. I swear he has no joy in him at all.

Grimacing, I think about what I have planned for the rest of the day—the same old afternoon butter cookies and more coding. “I don’t know. Why?” I’m curt because deep down, I feel like they’re fucking with me. I may be an outcast, but I’m nobody’s punching bag.

“There’s a graduation party tonight, and you’re graduating, so you should come.” Again, he says all of this with a blank face.

“But you can’t bring your goons,” Greenly adds.

I look behind me to see who they’re watching. Mike, the burliest of my bodyguards, stands at the end of the hallway. He’s facing our direction while not focusing directly on us. It’s strange how they know how to make themselves inconspicuous while being so noticeable.

I’m trapped in indecision. My parents wouldn’t want me to leave the house without at least one bodyguard, even though I know I’m not in any real danger. As soon as I make it home, the men will be off shift because I never leave the house once I’m in. For the rest of the night, it’ll be just me and the house staff, people who have worked in our home since my grandparents first moved in.

“You can find the details on the graduation announcements message board. I’m sure you know how to find it since you’re a computer guru and all.” There’s something contemptuous in Donovan’s tone. Or maybe he can’t help but sound like an asshole.

“And Hercules is going to be there. You’ll like that, right?” Greenly says, contorting her red lips into a coquettish smirk.

My mouth falls open as my blinking slows down. “What?” *Why in the world would she mention Hercules to me?*

The chuckle that escapes Donovan makes him sound like a hyena. “You’re always staring at him.” He rolls his eyes.

He’s objectively being an asshole, but I really don’t care. Frankly, I don’t like him either. But I wonder who else noticed me staring at Hercules.

Greenly chuckles. “Just come. You won’t regret it,” she says before they walk off arm in arm as if they’ve just accomplished something they planned before I showed up.

I examine their backsides until they’re almost at the end of the hallway.

“You should go.”

I whip my face toward the voice and find Hercules slamming his locker shut. He strolls in Mike’s direction.

What a physique. Did he hear Greenly say I’m always staring at him?

He’s not out of sight yet. My lips twitch as I search for the courage to say something. And then...

“Hercules?” I call before I realize I’m doing it. It’s like he’s moving in slow motion when he turns to face me. I fight the urge to hyperventilate as I put on a smile to make myself appear less nervous than I actually am. “Um, thanks.”

Gosh, that sounded strained. I clear my throat.

“For what?”

My hear flutters. He asked me a question. It’s the first one he’s ever asked me. “In the classroom. You said congratulations. Thanks for that.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Thank you?” I widen my eyes, feeling foolish because I already said that.

He nods. “See you tonight.” Then he turns and walks away. I can’t take my eyes off him, and I’m still staring at the space he left behind now that he’s out of sight.

Finally, I’m able to release the tension in my body, and I take a deep sigh of relief. Unfortunately, I won’t be able to see him tonight. No bodyguards, no party. But I walk away from my locker, grinning big. I did it. I said something to him first, and he responded. Hercules Valentine replied to me!

Access

Paisley Grove

I've been staring at the message board. The light from my monitor engulfs my face like the glare of headlights. I've read the address over and over. It's now mapped in my brain. My nerves are wrecked. Ever since the ride home, I've been contemplating whether I should go to the party or not. It's seven o'clock at night. My mom is wrapping up a talk about corporate cyber security in Toronto. My dad, who should be home by now, called to say he'll be flying to Toronto for a late dinner with my mom and asked if I wanted to join them.

"No." The word came out of my mouth before I realized I was saying it.

My father paused. I'm sure he thought I'd say yes. Usually, I would go with him. Since my parents travel for work so much, joining each other on the road for dinner and sometimes staying overnight to have breakfast in the morning is one way we spend time together as a family.

"That's right—you graduate tomorrow. We'll be back in time for you to rest up, if that's what you're worried about," he said.

"Nah, I'm just going to stay in tonight. I'm tired." I'm not tired, actually. I'm wired and bouncing off the walls.

He snorts a chuckle. "You know your brilliant brain can take a break from working on your latest and greatest app."

My chuckle is faint. I hear the pride in my dad's voice, and it makes me happy to know that he so easily recognizes my talent. And that's why I hate lying to him. "No. I'm not working tonight. Just resting."

"Oh... are you feeling well, sweetheart? I can have Dr. Hammerstone stop by and give you a quick checkup."

I close my eyes and massage my left temple. "I'm not sick, Dad. It was just a long day, and tomorrow's graduation day. I'm a covalictorian. I think I need to take some

time to reflect on my future and be well rested for the ceremony. I'm sitting on the stage. That's nerve-racking too." The last part is the truth.

"That's thoughtful, honey, and very mature of you," my dad says.

Tears collect in my eyes as the corners of my mouth turn downward. I hate deceiving him. I love him so much, and he's such a great dad that he deserves nothing less than the truth. I want so desperately to say, "You know what, Dad? I'll fly to Toronto and have dinner with you and Mom. It'll be fun." But I can't. I want to see Hercules in a setting beyond our school's campus more than I want to be honest with my parents.

* * *

I'm too discombobulated to remember exactly how I ended my call with my dad. I think I told him I'll see him at breakfast. Max is flying in from Palo Alto to attend my graduation ceremony. He should arrive first thing in the morning. I'm excited about seeing him. As I read the address of the party once again and think about Max, I can hear him telling me to find a better way to get what I want. But I resist taking phantom Max's advice and program a two-minute loop into the security camera for the east wing exit. The loop starts at ten o'clock and lasts for three minutes. If it's any longer than that, I risk having someone discover the changes I made to the security system. I also program a return three-minute loop for one in the morning. That means I have to be home before the one-o'clock bell tolls.

I have an hour and a half until go time. My mind is firmly made up, which is why I spring to my feet and take off my shirt as I hightail it to the closet. First, I put on a little black dress. I swish this way and that in the floor mirror framed in glossy ornate wood, which used to belong to my grandmother. The two rolls on each side of my back make me take the dress off and try on a red silk kimono-style dress. I study myself wrapped in the shiny fabric and then burst into laughter. What a hideous sight.

I tug the dress off, narrowly avoiding ripping it. It's time to take a good long look at myself in the mirror. During my last annual checkup, I learned that I put on twenty-three extra pounds, and now I'm thirty-nine pounds overweight. I bet Greenly doesn't look in the mirror and see loads of problems with her face and body. She's thin, sort of a waif, and I guess guys like Hercules prefer that in a girl. Her face is also perfectly symmetrical,

and she's classically pretty like those girls in cosmetic commercials and ads. Whenever boys pass her, the bold ones flirt and the shy ones blush. Me? I'm just bloated, I guess. My thighs are three times larger than Greenly's and my mom's. I'm prone to acne breakouts depending on how stressed I am. And I have a gut. Treasure says I don't, but I'm staring at it right now, and yes, it's a gut.

When it comes to genetics, my looks should dwarf Greenly's. Sometimes I wonder how in the world I can be Heartly Rose's daughter. With her long legs and unmatched beauty, my mom paid for her first two years at MIT by working as a world-renowned supermodel. It took less than a year for her to become the "it" girl that all the big fashion houses wanted to work with. Thirty years later, the Heartly Rose of yesteryear can still land on the cover of top beauty mags. That's because my mom is also just as brainy as I am. While juggling school and modeling, she used her hobby of coding to create an app to help achieve work and academic balance. Out of the brain of a beauty came M.O.DEL. Her next step was to peddle her new software to designers and fashion editors. She showed them how much money they could save and how timeless and reliable their favorite models could be when they hired them from the M.O.DEL directory. All designers had to do was upload a clear picture of the front and back of their designs into a project box and then add their patterns. Once the necessary uploads were completed, the complex code was executed, and the virtual fashion model would be wearing the designs, posing and selling the products to perfection. Back in 2023, my mom's app came up on my grandfather's radar. She was only twenty when she brokered a deal and signed a contract with him. According to the story, which my parents and Uncle Leo often retell at dinner parties, Grandfather was so impressed by the beautiful and brilliant Heartly Rose that he arranged a celebration dinner at his house in Norfolk County and invited her. Little did my mom know that she'd walked into a setup. And it worked. My dad and uncle Leo both sought to win her affections. My mom admits that she chose my dad at first sight even though he pandered to her the least. My dad says he didn't have to try so hard because he knew she was his from their first hello and handshake.

"I felt our chemistry shoot up my arm and into my heart," my dad says.

Blushing, my mom always replies, "So did I."

Then they'd kiss, careful to make their lip-lock suitable in their daughter's presence.

"I bet your mom and dad fuck like porn stars," Treasure once said.

"Ugh," I said, sticking my tongue out like her observation had made my mouth sour. "Stop saying that."

Anyway, my parents got married five years after they met. Two years later, they had Max, and eight years later, when my mom was thirty-five and my father was thirty-nine, they had me. With one look at Max, it's clear that even though he favors our father, genetics have also graced him with Heartly's best physical features. He's tall, graceful, and has a confident gait. The girl staring back at me in the mirror inherited her mother's brains more than her brawn.

After trying on six more outfits, I decide to go with a pair of black skinny jeans that make me look ten pounds lighter and a white off-the-shoulder blouse. I dash to the bathroom to put on a light layer of red lipstick and fluff my thick locks, which I definitely got from Heartly. Running out of time, I race back to my closet and slip on a pair of ankle boots and a black moto jacket because it can get a bit nippy at night for this California girl.

It's now 9:59 p.m. I hurry up and zip a few things into my jacket pockets—my keys and cellphone, the thin wallet that contains my ID, the one credit card my parents allow me to keep, and forty dollars just in case I need emergency cash. Then I walk quickly, making sure no one sees me, to the west-facing exit. Slipping out is as easy as I thought it would be. It's dark out in the garden on the side of the house. I lengthen my steps, unable to reach the gate that opens to our private alley fast enough. A quick glance toward the spray of moonlight reveals tiny lights twinkling throughout the cherry trees in the garden. The gardener removes the lights from the foliage when the trees flower in the spring. When I make it to the gate, I realize I won't be around next year to enjoy the bloom. It's the only time of year my mom and I sit in the garden together. She sips coffee and I drink lemon chiffon tea as we talk about personal stuff, like how much she misses her mom, who died before I was born.

As I jog through the darkness, I picture my mom's face lighting up whenever she

remembers my grandma. The happy memory helps sop up the creepy and dangerous feeling that goes with running through an alley at night. Finally, I reach the gate. There's so much activity on the sidewalk that I relax a bit as I use my key to unlock the gate and then close it behind me.

Standing on the sidewalk, watching people pass, I'm aware that it's not too late to go back inside, drink a cup of tea with milk, and curl up in bed. But just thinking about another uneventful night makes me hasten my steps, and I'm off.

* * *

The venue isn't that far from where I live. The short distance doesn't give me much time to change my mind. It feels exhilarating to be outside, walking alone under the cover of night. I haven't been able to do this since Treasure's fake kidnapping. The pungent odor of stale trash, smoke from the subway system, fried food, coffee shops, rat piss, and other variables doesn't make me wrinkle my nose as much as it did when I first arrived in the city. I'm not sure if being immune to the exotic scent is a good or bad thing.

I make it to Fifth Avenue, and that's when I start recognizing faces. We're all heading in the same direction. The party is being held at the trilevel penthouse of a guy named Darby Harborne. It's noted that there will be no adult supervision. However, attendees aren't to stray from the upper floor and rooftop. The more people I see, the more nervous I become. A line of expensive cars is stopped in front of the building. Some people are being let out, and others are handing off their vehicles to valet attendants.

Feeling like a fish out of water, I follow those who appear to be students to a long line and take my place in it. Two burly security guards stand at glass doors to the left of an elegant empty lobby lit by crystal-encrusted chandeliers. Apparently, we're not going in through the main lobby. We're being shuffled into a private hallway. This entire scene is not what I had in mind. First of all, it appears as if I'm the only person who came without friends or a date. Second of all, I didn't know I'd have to wait, alone.

Momentarily, I consider calling Gina, an acquaintance from the programming club. We're not great friends, but we do have lunch together just about every day in the tech room. She and I went shopping together in DUMBO once too. We spent most of our time wandering in and out of stores, not saying much to each other.

In retrospect, this has truly been the loneliest year of my life. That truth slams into me like a ton of bricks. Maybe I should go home and forget I ever knew these people. I take notice of them bouncing around excitedly, happy to be around each other. I sigh, thinking I should give up my fantasies about Hercules Valentine. He's never going to be into me anyway.

"Listen up!" a man's voice booms.

We all stretch and angle our necks, trying to get a better view of the muscular security guard.

"Your party has reached capacity. When one comes out, I'll let one in!"

Groans erupt. I'm sort of relieved, thinking the announcement is a sign that I belong at home.

"Is that you, Paisley Grove?" one of the girls standing behind me asks. I turn to see who she is, and my gaze latches on to Greenly. "No waiting for us, chickadees," Greenly says, strolling past the long line as if she's the queen of the universe.

If the black beaded dress she's wearing were a half inch shorter, we would have a clear view of her vag. Her hair is longer and thicker than it was today in the hallway. She's added extensions, making herself even more glamorous than usual.

Just before the green-eyed monster can seize me, Hercules gallops out of nowhere to walk beside Greenly and Donovan. I inhale sharply and hold my breath. He's so yummy. Dark pants hug his strong athletic thighs, and a black short-sleeved shirt shows off his hilly chest and biceps. The sight of him always has the ability to take my mind to places it never goes with other boys. Like now. As I again stare into his sexy eyes, I can picture him on top of me, and I'm wondering what it would be like to have him take my virginity. I smile at him tentatively. I think he does the same, but I can't be sure.

The parade is almost over. Just to show how special they are, Greenly leads Hercules and Donovan to the main lobby. She flashes a bracelet at the doorman, who lets her in. Donovan, with his nose stuck up in the air, does the same and follows behind her. When they're both inside, they turn toward the glass door and search for Hercules, who has peeled away from them. He's saying something to the guard, and he and the muscular man are looking at me.

The guard nods, and Hercules walks in through the entrance reserved for the rest of us. I like that about him, and frankly, our brief interaction is enough to satisfy me not only for the rest of the night but forever. Smiling and happy, I step out of line and take a step.

“Paisley Grove?” a husky voice calls.

I whip around. The guard is walking toward me. My head spins so fast that I fight the urge to pass out.

He stops. “You’re in. Follow me.”

For some reason, my feet won't move. *Did Hercules just arrange my entrance into the party? And if so, what does that mean for us?*

“You should go,” one of the girls who was standing behind me says. I glance at her. I don’t recognize her even though she clearly knows who I am.

I turn my attention back to the guard, who’s waiting for me to walk in the wrong direction—the right direction would be to go back home and slip into bed and be fast asleep before my parents return. But as if my feet and brain are on automatic pilot, I skip the line and head to the gateway that leads to the boy of my dreams.

Bad Boys

Paisley Grove

Fifteen Minutes Later

The bass that's playing thumps like a perpetually rising heartbeat. I like the song and wonder who the artist is as I finally find a comfortable nook against the wall, where I can see all the action, and position myself in it. The party is wall-to-wall packed. The lights are low. And there's a lot going on. Heads bob up and down and this way and that to my right, where people are dancing. Bodies coil around each other provocatively. I wonder if Hercules and Greenly have made their way to the dance floor and are among those dry-humping each other in plain sight. Students I recognize who are not old enough to drink are downing glasses of alcohol. I try to place all the faces I see. I'm not being ignored as much as I thought I would be. People are looking at me, and I wonder if it's because they're trying to figure out if I'm me or someone else. Apparently, I don't look the same tonight. There are a lot of faces I don't recognize. The house is decorated nicely, though—more contemporary than ours by a mile. Partygoers lounge easily on the massive sectionals and ottomans. Conversation is lively. I don't know who to speak to or what to do. And still, Hercules is nowhere in sight.

“Wait, PG? No fucking way, no way, Paisley Grove?” O'Brien Klein says, stopping in the middle of passing by. He's tall and lanky—about six feet, four inches—and obviously tipsy. O'Brien plays basketball for our school. I heard he's a good athlete but not the best. The scholarship players are the reason our school is number three in the state. He's not one of them. His father owns a food-manufacturing company, and therefore, his tuition is paid in full. However, I've noticed how cocky he can be, strolling through the hallways like he owns the world. He's never paid me any attention, and I've been okay with that.

I raise my hand lazily to say hi. Of all the people here tonight, he's the only one

who has spoken to me, so I can't blow him off like I want to.

He flashes a slanted smile as his appreciative gaze slips up and down my body.

"You look hot, PG. I knew you had it in you."

"Who's PG?" I ask, annoyed by the fact that he changed my name into an acronym.

"You're PG, Paisley Grove," he says, sounding as if he didn't detect an ounce of my irritation. "Hey, can I get you a drink?"

I shake my head adamantly. Since I smell alcohol on his breath, I assume he wants to fetch me a cocktail too. "I don't drink."

I've had a drink at Treasure's parties, usually no more than one strawberry or cherry margarita. And Treasure was always around just in case I became tipsy and lost even a kernel of inhibition. Tonight, I'm alone. I would never make myself so vulnerable. I don't want to end up doing anything to embarrass myself or the family. I've already broken the rules by lying to my parents.

"Okay," he says, and I'm surprised he accepted my decision so easily. "But what made you finally come out tonight? You've been MIA all year, playing with your computer, right?" His smile is less crafty and more charming, and I study it a bit longer to see if I can discover an ounce of sarcasm in it. So far, I can't see it.

"Kind of," I say, deciding to tell the truth.

"You're smart and pretty. I like that in a girl."

I didn't mean for my mouth to fall open. *Is O'Brien Klein, of all people, trying to hit on me?*

He steps closer, and my eyes grow wide with surprise. "Hey, how come we've never gone out, grabbed some coffee or something? You drink coffee, don't you?"

I nod. You can't keep the hours I keep, writing programs, and not drink coffee—strong coffee. *But now what do I say?* I want to keep our conversation going. If he hadn't said anything to me, I'd still be standing here, feeling awkward and all alone.

"So where are you going to college?" I ask.

He presses his lips into a tight smile. "I don't know. I'm taking the year off to travel. Wanna come?" His eyebrows flit upward as he takes notice of the lower half of my body. I'm starting to think there's a double entendre in his question. Once again, he's

rendered me speechless.

“Congratulations, though, on your scholarship. I heard about it,” he says.

I drop my face bashfully. “Thanks.”

“You know, I never played along with that ‘this is Valentine country’ bullshit.”

My head shoots up. “What do you mean by ‘Valentine country’?”

“The feud,” he says as if I’m supposed to know what the hell he’s talking about.

In a way, I do. Our families had business disagreements in the past. I have no idea what those disputes were, but I wouldn’t have thought corporate issues would find their way to our high school.

“I don’t understand,” I say over the music. The song has changed to an electronic rap number that’s a bit louder than the last.

I’m caught off guard when O’Brien comes even closer. His mouth is next to my ear. “Me neither. But I’ve had a crush on you since I first saw you. You’re sexy, Paisley.”

I’m experiencing sensory overload. “Me?” I’m barely audible, still ruffled by the mention of the Grove-Valentine feud.

He moves his mouth close to my other ear. “Yeah, you.”

I’m staring into his eyes, speechless. I want to ask him more about the feud. It explains a lot about why everyone behaved as if World War III had ended when Hercules spoke to me in class today. It would also explain why it’s been so difficult to make the kind of friends I have back in California.

O’Brien continues to lean into my intimate space. I don’t think a boy has ever gotten this close to me before. The faint rosewood scent of his cologne rages through me like a gust of pure animal instinct. This feeling is strange because he’s not at all my type. I’m not into jocks or guys who appear to have no depth.

“What do you think about that?” he asks.

I’m experiencing sensory overload. “I don’t know,” I exhale.

His lips are on my earlobe. “I think you’re naturally sexy.”

I’m speechless. My body is confused, and so is my mind. *Me? Sexy? No way.*

“How about I get you a drink? Like a Coke or something?” Finally, he leans back, and I’m staring into his lit eyes and noting his slanted smile.

“I don’t...” I stop myself from telling him that I don’t drink soda either. My parents never allowed me to have it growing up, and therefore, my tastebuds reject the syrupy sweet taste. But I don’t want to come off as a party pooper. So I nod. “Okay, I’ll take a Coke.”

His smile turns broader as he puts his hands on my shoulders. “Don’t move.”

He doesn’t have to worry about that, because I can’t move.

Looking For PG

Hercules Valentine

I bob my head to Junga's "Uprise," a rousing electronic mix. I'm casually scanning the room, pretending I'm not looking for *her*. I haven't spotted Paisley Grove yet. Maybe she's on the rooftop, catching some air. This isn't her scene. I'm aware of this not because I know her but because I've been watching her. In my family, you hear a lot about the Groves. The grandfather, Charles Gregory Grove, was conniving. My father thinks he deserves to be dead. I've been waiting for Paisley to live up to the bad press, but she hasn't. As a matter of fact, I can't figure her out. She's quiet and resides in her own world, which I think is on a different plane than ours. And if you give people the chance to treat someone like shit, they'll jump on it. Either she doesn't know she's been treated like shit, or she doesn't care. I suspect she's too smart and mature to care. The software she made for the teachers was a whole new level of brilliant. And then there's the fact that she's attractive in a sensual way.

"Who are you looking for?" Greenly's voice rises above the music.

All eyes are on me. Donovan, Kirk, and a brunette whose name I can't remember have been holding Greenly's attention. I thought Paisley would find her way to our group since Greenly was the one who invited her to this lame-ass party and I made sure she got in. I want to talk to her, get to know her for myself.

I shrug. "Just checking out the scene."

I look away from the group. Paisley's the only reason I'm with them. I glare at the staircase leading to the rooftop and then focus on Greenly. I heard she's been spreading rumors that we used to go out. We never did. She's never appealed to me. There's no mystery to her. She was my first kiss of the year, though. We were at my buddy Scott's New Year's Eve party. The countdown ended, and Greenly jumped on me, wrapped her legs around my torso, and shoved her tongue in my mouth. I didn't like it. Her overeager lips were too tense, and I pulled away from her, set her back down on her feet, and got

the hell away from her.

Donovan lifts his chin, pointing it at something behind me. “If you’re looking for Paisley Grove, she’s leaving with O’Brien.”

What? I jerk my head around, following his gaze. I would have continued feigning indifference if she was with anyone but O’Brien. The guy’s bad news, especially at parties like this.

“Let’s go dance, Hercules,” Greenly says, her fingers wrapping around my wrist.

Something’s wrong. O’Brien’s arm is around Paisley’s waist, and her head is against the side of his chest. Her arms are flailing like she drank too much. She just got here. Paisley Grove can’t be that drunk already. The hairs are standing up on my arms because I know O’Brien’s deep dark secrets. I walk fast, and my strides are long as I keep my eyes on them.

“Hercules, where are you going?” Greenly whines. She says something else, but her words get gobbled up by ambient noise.

I’m close. “O’Brien!” I try to stop him from closing the door to the elevator. “Shit,” I mutter, weaving past people. I don’t want to create a scene.

When I make it to the roped-off hallway where there are two private elevators facing each other, they’re gone. I can’t stop here. I have to go after them. I step over the red rope.

“Hey, hey, hey,” a security guard says, grabbing me by the shoulder.

My anger erupts like a blast from a stick of dynamite. All I see is red. He has his fucking hands on me, but he didn’t feel the need to stop the slimeball from taking advantage of an obviously drugged girl. My movement is too swift to stop myself. The guard is against the wall, my forearm against his neck, and I want to hurt him badly for what he let happen.

“Why the fuck didn’t you stop him?” I say, my lips clenched.

“Hercules!”

I face whoever called my name.

“What the fuck?” Darby bellows like I’m the one who’s in the wrong.

I toss the guard away from me like he’s yesterday trash. Since Darby is near

enough, I reach out to grab him by the collar. “Where did he take her?” I growl.

Darby’s eyes expand. “Who are you talking about?”

“O’Brien. Where’s he taking girls he’s raping tonight?” I’m loud, and I know it. I want everyone within earshot to hear me. I know for certain that those fuckers have done it before, but no one can prove it. It’s why I never go to their fucking parties. And I want to rip his fucking head off for allowing his buddy to do it to Paisley Grove.

“Do we need backup?” The guard asks. I take a glance. He has his radio to his mouth.

Darby and I glare at each other like two lions before battle.

“No,” he spits, lips clenched.

He shoves me hard in the chest, but I don’t budge. My stalwartness sends him a message. I have two older brothers who are hard as hell. I can absorb punches, and Darby sure as hell doesn’t want to take one from me.

I draw him close. We’re nearly nose to nose. “Where did O’Brien take Paisley Grove?”

“Let go of me.”

“You’re taking me, then?”

“Yes,” he says in a low snarl.

I release him, thrusting him away from me. He finds his footing, circles his shoulders, and eyes me cautiously as he reaches out to hit the down button on the elevator.

“Is everything okay?” the guard asks.

Darby slaps a hand against the wall and sniffs bitterly. “Get the fuck out of here. You’re fired.”

The doors slide open. I don’t look at the guard. Usually, when an asshole like Darby fires someone, I’ll figure out a way to hire that person. In this case, the security guard pretended not to see a rape in progress just to keep his job. He deserves to be canned.

We’re riding down to the first floor of the penthouse. I’m glaring at Darby’s image on the steel walls in front of us. I want to rip his head off. The thought of something bad

happening to Paisley enrages me at an irrational level. I'm aware that she's only here because I laid it on thick in the hallway. I wanted her here. She was supposed to be mine tonight. And O'Brien, the fucker, plucked her away from me. I swear, if he's fucking her against her will—I clench my fists—I'll kill him.

"I thought you didn't like the Groves," Darby bitches.

I bite down on my back teeth, steadying my anger. It's all I can do to stop myself from ripping his head off for saying that. *Fucking prep school jerks go so far*. I never asked any of them to choose sides—not for me, at least. My brothers set the rules about how anyone with the last name Grove should be treated long before I arrived at Dorset Meacham Academy.

I'm staring at the gold-plated wall in front of me. I can't focus on shit, though. All I see is red. "You'd just better hope your friend doesn't have his dick in her." Thinking about what she might be experiencing right now makes me want to break something. Between my brothers and me, I'm the most measured, but if someone fucks with me or anybody I care about, I become hell on earth.

The doors slide open, and Darby shoots out like he's afraid I'm going to toss him out. If he hadn't moved fast enough, I would have. I'm following him down a hallway that looks like it's part of a museum. We're passing nude statues encased in glass. Marble tits and dicks on display makes the moment worse.

Then I can hear her groaning and mumbling words I can't decipher. I see the door. Thank God, the fucker was too eager to close it. I've already pushed Darby out of the way, and when I run inside the room, Paisley's on the bed and O'Brien's on top of her, holding her down while struggling to push down her pants.

"What the fuck!" I roar.

O'Brien quickly turns to look at me at the perfect time. My fist meets his face, and he flies off of her and then rolls off the bed, crying and holding his nose.

Paisley squirms on the bed. She's in an odd state of being alert while out of it. "Dad, Max, help me," she slurs. "Mom..."

I don't think. I sweep her up in my arms, adrenaline pumping. She's as light as a feather.

“What did you give her?” I shout at O’Brien.

Blood streams down his lips and covers his hands. “You broke my nose!”

I won’t put Paisley down. She’s safest in my arms. And he should thank his lucky stars that my hands are occupied and not pounding the hell out of his face.

“What the fuck did you give her?” I shout louder. “You’d better fucking answer me, or I’m going to send the fucking cops to upend your fucking party.”

I’m spitting. I’m enraged, but Paisley wraps her arms around my neck, and my anger starts to melt like butter.

“Pinkies,” O’Brien whimpers as he manages the blood flowing from his nose.

I look at Darby, who’s standing still, petrified that I’ll turn my wrath on him. Giving him what he deserves isn’t my priority at the moment. Paisley is.

“We need to get out of here without being seen. Make that happen.” I’m surprised by how much I sound like Achilles.

Darby doesn’t say anything. Head hanging, he scampers out of the room, and I know to follow him.

“I’m sorry about this, and, um…” Darby says as he anxiously rubs the back of his neck.

“You don’t need to apologize to *me*,” I say. His ass is grass, and he knows it.

“He wasn’t going to go all the way with her. We were just having a little—”

I don’t want to hear the rest. “You’d better be glad my hands are occupied, or they’d be beating the shit out of you right now.” Darby’s not a small guy, but neither am I.

“Where am I?” Paisley whispers. She’s groaning, and her head is bouncing against my shoulder like it’s hard for her to find a comfortable position and stick with it.

Her face is prettier up close, though, and for a moment, I’m mesmerized by her features and the sweet scent of her breath. “It’s me, Hercules. I’m going to get you some fresh air.”

Her eyes open a bit wider as Darby flicks on the light, and we turn down a long, empty service hallway. We quickly make it to the far end of the apartment, where there’s a single elevator marked *Garage Level*.

“You know, I have a scholarship, and so does OB.” Darby’s eyes are pleading with me to keep this all quiet as I step into the elevator.

I can’t think about how I’m going to deal with him yet as my finger stabs the down button. Paisley exhales against my neck. I narrow my eyes at him. The fucker is trying to save his and his friend’s asses after I stopped a rape in progress. The doors close between us, and that’s that. I’ll leave him worrying about what I’ll do next. I have to do something, though what that something is, I don’t know yet.

“Am I dreaming?” Paisley whispers.

I look into her half-open eyes. Seeing them this close makes my stomach tight. I don’t know why she incites strong feelings in me, but she does. “I’m going to get you to the hospital. Get you checked out.”

Her eyes open a little wider. “No,” she says drowsily.

“O’Brien put a drug in your drink, Paisley. You have to get checked out.”

“Am I...?” She brushes her cheek against mine, and I nearly lose it. Her skin is as soft as cotton. *Fuck*. I grow a boner. “Is this really you?” she whispers as her eyelids flutter closed.

Then, as the doors slide open, her mouth presses against mine. Our tongues lightly brush, and our lips join the kiss. She’s the one leading us in this sensual and arousing make-out session. A grunt escapes me as I relish the taste of her fucking sweetness. My dick is throbbing like it never has before. The doors close again, and that wakes me out of my stupor.

“Shit,” I whisper, hitting the button to open the doors.

I step out into the lobby of the subterranean parking garage, looking into her eyes, which are now alert and perplexed. *What do I do next?*