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PENUMBRA

by

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This is what I remembered when she called me: Allie wearing nothing but a warty troll mask and tennis shoes. She was sixteen years old and ran with her arms out. My breath fogged up in my goblin mask as I tried to keep up. At the time, I was seventeen and in love with her. Her brother Andrew had put us up to this, one of his typical Halloween dares before he died. I remembered the mask because I didn't want to think about how beautiful she was.

"Jonah?" she said, her voice urgent. "Is that you?"

My throat tightened. "Yeah, it's me." We hadn't talked since the summer of 2005, five years ago. Back then, she wasn't Penumbra yet. As a sophomore in high school, she was the lead singer of a band called High Priestess. She'd dreamed of making a concept album about William Blake but her songs were hijacked by controlling producers, Swedish hit-makers, software algorithms.

"I know I've been bad. Will you forgive me?" Her tone was both penitent and playful, as if I still worshipped her.

"Forgive you for what?" I was in my roommate Rob's walk-in closet, my bedroom for the moment, my guitar on my chest. Above me, a constellation of Christmas lights gave the closet a

soft, twinkly glow. My heart felt like the timer on a bomb. I shaped an E-minor chord and gently strummed the guitar. It was the first chord I'd ever taught her.

"For everything. There's nothing like Arkansas to make you penitent."

"Arkansas?"

Rob had put on an angsty album from the late nineties and the bass throbbed through the walls. I wanted him to turn the music down but it was his apartment. He was the one with the trust fund. He'd convinced me to move to New York after I finished traveling in India.

"I'm in Little Rock. Memphis tomorrow. Think I should go to Graceland?"

"You're on tour?" As if I didn't already know.

"I'm coming home for my dad's surgery. You around?"

I didn't answer.

"You're still mad at me," she said.

"It's not that. I'm not in Iowa."

"But my mom said—"

"She wouldn't know. I just got back from India. I'm staying with a friend in Williamsburg."

"So you're stalking me?" she joked.

She lived in the Village, just a few miles away. Crowds of girls followed her around the city. Once I'd joined a crowd near Washington Square, hoping to see her, but she never showed up. A mother gave me a look and pulled her daughter close. I was ashamed to be mistaken for that kind of man. Maybe she'd seen something terrible in me that I didn't know about yet,

someone about to fall off the edge. It was 2010, the economy still in free fall, and I had no idea what I was doing with my life.

“Yeah, sure. Me and everyone else, right?”

“You *are* mad, aren’t you?”

“Not mad, no.” The right word was disappointed. What had I expected from her? Maybe indie rock or faerie folk, if that was even a thing. Not Top 40 hits.

There was a long pause. “Maybe we can catch up after I’m done touring.”

“Of course. I’d love to see you.”

“Well,” she said dryly. “Keep your pants on.” And that was it. *Click*. End of conversation.

Rob was in the living room, hunched over one of his antique typewriters. A Remington. He loved old typewriters. Machines with souls, he called them.

“It was that girl.” I let out a heavy sigh.

“Penumbra?” He didn’t look up. He had a scruffy beard, black denim pants, a stocking cap. He was working on a chapbook called *Afterburner*, complete with mediocre poems and blurred black and white photos.

“She has a real name.”

He sprawled across the couch, bemused. “You’re still in love with her and all that. You’ve got this sister complex thing.”

“I’m not in love with her. Not anymore.”

His wink annoyed me. He thought I was lying. Maybe I was. He wanted me to pour my guts out about Allie again, how she and her older brother Andrew had been my best friends.

Andrew died just before Allie moved to New York. The details were all the more intriguing because Allie had made it big.

She was Penumbra now, and every week there were pictures of her in the tabloids, climbing out of a limo or smacking paparazzi with a Hermes bag or even passed out under a table at a bar. She wore organza and wool crepe and dresses that made her look like she'd stepped out of a period piece on the Renaissance. She was never in a bikini or on a beach.

The last time I saw her was a few weeks after Andrew's funeral. She had her guitar, a messenger bag, a credit card she'd stolen from her mother. We were waiting for the bus that would take her to New York. She was seventeen and we'd just graduated from high school, me on time and her a year early. More than anything, I wanted us to start a band. I liked Radiohead, Brazilian guitar music, stripped down electronica. She was obsessed with Nick Drake and Fiona Apple's latest album. That's what I wanted our music to sound like, a combination of those obsessions, her voice strobing over my guitar. I even came up with a name: Fuzz.

I pressed her against the wall by the ticket counter at the bus station and kissed her. Why was she leaving? Did she blame me for what happened to Andrew? She shook her head, too surprised to say anything. She wore a worn-out fisherman knit sweater because she knew the bus would be cold. In New York she was staying with a friend of a friend, a girl she'd never met. I wanted to convince her not to go but I didn't have the right words. There was a chord progression playing in my head, something in B-minor.

"Keep writing songs." It was a stupid thing to say. She was going to New York to be a singer. "Call me when you get there. Let me know you're safe."

Her phone was disconnected a few days later. She never did call, until today.

We met at a coffee shop on Bedford Avenue in the Village a few weeks later. I arrived early and checked myself in the bathroom's hazy, graffitied mirror. Dark hair, day-old stubble, skin still bronzed from India. My aunts always told me how handsome I was. Great news, but I never heard it from anyone else. Was there a secret auntie rule that said fatherless sons must be praised for their looks? Maybe it was their way of saying they missed him, too.

I found an empty table near the back. Bass throbbed through the speakers. There was someone on guitar, someone else on static. The barista twisted knobs on the espresso machine, DJ Latte at work. All around me, friends I hadn't made yet stared at laptops and got to know their sandwiches. I wondered if I should tell Allie about the cave. Probably not. She'd think I was crazy.

I ordered a coffee and checked the newspaper. The headlines blurred as I read them. The Greek economy in a death spiral. Pakistan recovering from monsoon floods. 33 Chilean miners trapped two thousand feet beneath the surface.

I'd reached the obits by the time Allie showed up. That was Allie, always late enough to make everyone angry. She wore slim fit jeans and a hooded shirt with a guitar stitched on it, its

edges fashionably frayed to gossamer. Her long blonde hair was tied in a loose ponytail and she was wearing sunglasses. She was disguised as herself, as Allie, not Penumbra.

She took off her sunglasses and twisted her way between the tables, dancing through a tangled mess of power strips. Meanwhile I was underwater, my lungs burning as I swam upward, trying to surface.

She was the sunlight sparkling through trees. She was the moment I fell asleep and began to dream. She was both the beginning and the end of a panic attack, the quickening dread, the blessed relief. She was all these things at once, just as she'd always been, even after five years.

I gave her a hug. She was so thin, hardly there. The tabloids said she had an eating disorder. Maybe I was still dreaming her, or maybe she was dreaming me. She pulled away like I was holding her captive. She was very fair-skinned with the lightest dusting of freckles on her nose. Her eyes were sometimes blue, sometimes green depending on the light, and she had the exhausted luminosity of a person that's stayed up all night to watch the sun rise, which only made her more beautiful.

"Sorry I'm late. Someone was following me." Her voice was bright and nervous. A tall black man with a shaved head and long gray overcoat was watching us.

I gestured with my eyes. "You mean that guy?"

"No, that's my bodyguard. You'd better be nice."

I couldn't tell if she was kidding or not, if she was still my old friend Allie or if she'd become someone else altogether.

"Can I get you something? I'll get your favorite," I said.

"What's my favorite?" she asked. Her smile cut me open.

“You love raisins,” I said, even though she’d always hated raisins.

“Don’t you dare,” she said. “I’ll send you back if there’s raisins.”

I ordered two lattes and a cookie while Allie checked her phone. Her long hair was gathered in her hood, a nest of spun gold. Out on the sidewalk, a young woman peered through the window, cupping her hands around her eyes. She had a strange resemblance to Allie—the same blonde hair and slender build and even the same features, and yet she seemed to be withering away, a skeleton in a baggy sweater and sweat pants. A moment later, she was gone. Maybe I was hallucinating, seeing Allie everywhere I looked, or maybe she was a Wisher. Her most ardent fans called themselves Wishers because of “Death Wish,” one of her biggest hits.

“Hope you still like monster cookies,” I said when I returned.

“I do,” she said. A sliver of a smile.

“So why’d you call?” I asked. “Why now?”

She broke the cookie in half. “My dad had heart surgery a few weeks ago and it got me thinking. I don’t want to be a stranger anymore.”

“How’s he doing?”

“Oh, he’s fine. Zombies never die, not unless you have special weapons.”

It was easy to imagine Clyde as a zombie. His face a wrinkled pancake, his mustache a pat of gray butter. His shambolic walk, his rumpled button-ups. It was obvious she’d never forgiven him.

“What about your mom?”

Allie shrugged. “Same old. Just waiting to die.”

So Allie hadn’t forgiven her, either.

“I’m sure they’re proud of you.”

“I have no idea. We never talk about it.” I recognized her expression, that look of helpless rage. “I hardly ever see them, anyway.”

I took the napkin from under my coffee and wrote Penumbra backwards. This was an old game we used to play: spelling words backwards, turning them to spells.

“Arbmunep,” I said, showing her the napkin. “Sounds like an Egyptian goddess.”

She was confused at first. I had the same delicious feeling as when we were kids and I convinced her that trolls lived in her basement. She managed a smile. “Ah, Hanoj.” She gave me her brave look: a deep sigh, eyelids fluttering. For a moment, the past was a spool of film threaded between us.

“I’m so glad this tour is finally over,” she said. “It was awful. I’m sure you think I’m a sellout.”

How was I supposed to answer? I only listened to Penumbra because there were moments in each song when she sounded like the girl I used to know. Her music combined dance beats with a dark, edgy mood but it was still pop. It wasn’t deep or even that interesting.

“It’s okay,” she said. “They’re not my songs. They never were.”

“I loved the EP you made in high school. I wish you’d do more stuff like that.”

She grinned. “*Love in the Time of Bosch*? That was so bad.”

She’d made that EP with High Priestess, her high school band. It was four tracks, heavy on reverb and full of samples of Gregorian chants and spooky sounds ripped from a CD called *Haunted Houses for Kids*. Andrew and I had listened to it endlessly.

“I always thought you’d take that path. Coffee shop circuit, making the art for your albums, that kind of thing.”

“I tried that path,” she said. “It didn’t work out.”

“Seems like it worked out pretty well. I mean, look at you. You’re famous. I still can’t believe it.”

“Not so loud,” she said, her voice low. “Someone might hear you.”

Marcus sat a few tables away, sipping his coffee, scanning the room for threats. His eyes met mine and I wondered if he’d already sized me up, if he considered me friend or foe or still in that gray area in between.

“Tell me about India,” she said. “Was that Andrew’s idea?”

“No.” Her suggestion annoyed me. “You remember the encyclopedia game?” The game was simple. We took out her family’s encyclopedia set from the seventies and flipped through the musty pages, choosing entries at random. We’d read the entries aloud, making up facts as we went. The purpose of the game was to separate truth from lies, or, if we were the one reading the entry, to blend truth and lies together so anyone listening couldn’t tell the difference.

“Sure.” Allie circled her finger in the air as if she were about to choose a page. “You make something up and pretend it’s real. That’s why he’s gone.”

“The encyclopedia game?”

“No. Because he lost touch with reality. I don’t think he ever really wanted to go anywhere, except to find those, you know—”

“Unnamable Ones,” I finished.

She shuddered. “Let’s not talk about him.”

“Well, that’s kind of how it started with India. The encyclopedia game. One day we were playing and my finger landed on Shiva.” This wasn’t quite the truth. Andrew had been the one to read the entry aloud. Each time he told a new fact, I pointed at him and yelled *lie*, except everything he said was right there. Shiva had four arms and wrapped himself in snakes. His son had the head of an elephant. He had worshippers that hung out in graveyards and smeared themselves with ash. He was king and destroyer, male and female, poison and medicine. There were other reasons I’d gone to India but if I followed the thread of my decisions back to the beginning, this was the source. Without Shiva and Andrew and the encyclopedia game, I might’ve gone somewhere else. Maybe I wouldn’t have gone anywhere at all.

I told Allie I was just another backpacker living on twenty dollars a day, stretching out the last of my student loans. I spent a year abroad with a bumper-sticker mantra in my head: *not all who wander are lost*. But I was definitely lost. I visited waterfalls and mountains and temples, stayed in ashrams, volunteered at an elementary school, even spent three weeks in a cave.

Her brow furrowed. “A cave? Why?”

I knew that would get her attention. I hadn’t told anyone about the cave, not even my mother. “There’s a long tradition of hermits living in caves, looking for enlightenment.”

“So you became enlightened?”

“No. But I realized everything wasn’t quite so important as I thought it was.” She probably thought I sounded like Andrew.

She sipped her latte and stared out the window. “I’d like to believe that. Maybe if I could just exfoliate and scrub really deep down, I’d find a shiny new person underneath.”

“What’s down there isn’t shiny. I wish it was.”

“Don’t say that.” She rubbed her eyes.

“What’s wrong?” I broke off a piece of cookie. It was a boring bite, no monster left.

“I’m so burnt out. I don’t even sleep. I lie in bed and worry, pretty much.”

“You did that before.”

“This is like, squared. This is insomnia extreme. I can’t flip the switch off, my mind’s just racing. I feel so trapped.” She gave me a hopeful look. “I really hope we can be friends again.”

“Of course. Everyone wants to be your friend, right?”

“Not really. I can’t trust anyone.”

“I feel the same way sometimes. There’s a wall there, a barrier.”

“That’s what I mean. You’re the same. You were like that even before what happened to Andrew, what happened to me—”

“Because of my dad. All my psych books talked about it. Intimacy issues, trust issues. When you lose someone that young—”

“Right, and that stuff keeps coming up. I used to think there could be resolution. My therapist talks about closure and all that, but it haunts you, that’s part of the package. I’m sure I would’ve been a different person otherwise. I never would’ve been Penumbra.” Her phone buzzed and she checked the caller. “I’m sorry, I have to go. Do I look like I’m going to pieces?”

“You look fine to me.” It was both an understatement and a lie. She was beautiful and fragile, each quality enhancing the other.

Her hair had the woodsy smell of coffee when I hugged her. I wanted to bite the delicate stalk of her neck, hauling her off like a kitten. Marcus was watching, ready to snap me in two.

“I’ll call you, okay?” she said.

“Sure.” I tried to sound casual.

She put on her sunglasses and covered her hair. Someone looked up, trying to place her, then returned to his sandwich. I heard Andrew’s voice in my ear. *Don’t touch her. Don’t you fucking dare.*

When she was a girl, Allie drew elfin women with Celtic crowns, their faces plain and unbroken as snowfields, their hair made of woven vines, their bodies shrouded in white gowns. She’d told me stories of Beltain rituals she’d read about in books about witches and paganism. Andrew had yelled “orgies!” and thrown up his hands, making us laugh. That memory just made me sad now.

I put in my headphones and put on “Death Wish.” It was a slow burner, one of the few songs I liked from Penumbra’s first album. She whispered into my headphones, her tone mocking and seductive.

You’ve got a death wish, just feeling kind of blue.

You’ve got a death wish, be careful what you do...

I taught Allie her first chords when I was fifteen and she was thirteen. We sat on opposite ends of the couch in her basement, our feet on the coffee table. The guitar belonged to my dad before he died. MTV was on, the volume muted. Allie would turn up the volume if she liked a music video or hadn't heard the song before. It was after midnight, some time in June or July. We were nocturnal creatures, rejecting the world of light and normal waking hours.

Andrew was hunched in front of a computer in the corner, absorbed in a sadistic game where the treasure was stolen before he could reach it. The monsters that killed his party of warriors blindsided him before he could turn and start fighting. There was a hole in the wood paneling by the computer where he'd punched his way through the wall. Every time he died, he screamed in frustration.

I'd been playing guitar for six months, mostly fingerpicking chords and putting myself in a trance. E-minor, the second string droning, my left hand moving up the neck, a little tremolo. Nothing special.

Allie made eyes at me. “That sounds nice.” She was still a kid, flat-chested and obsessed with boy bands, prone to tantrums when she didn’t get her way. I was already having my first guilty thoughts about her. In these fantasies, everything happened in the dark, under the covers.

“Thanks.” I tried to play it cool. I wish I’d been more confident. I simply couldn’t tell her how I felt.

“Fuck!” Andrew yelled, punching the wall. “Fucking ogres.” His blond hair was shoulder-length and tied in a ponytail. He wore black denim pants and a ripped t-shirt. His arms had small hard muscles from doing push-ups but his features were delicate and he looked like a snarling child when he was angry.

“Hey, look,” I told Allie. “This is E-minor. See how easy it is? Just two fingers.” I strummed the chord.

“It’s sad.”

“You don’t like it?” I stared at the guitar, trying to focus.

“I love it.”

“Want me to show you?”

She nodded so I gave her the guitar. Her fingers were warm little creatures that I placed against the strings. She strummed the chord with the pad of her thumb. It almost felt like she was touching me instead.

“What are you doing?” Andrew asked.

Allie strummed the chord again. I showed her A-minor, shaping her left hand around the neck of the guitar.

Andrew knocked his chair to the floor and plopped down on the couch between us. “Jeez. Even my farts sound better than that.”

“Andrew, stop,” Allie said, wrinkling her nose and laughing.

“Why should I stop?” Andrew asked. “You’re the one that farts and blames it on mom.”

She flushed red. “Don’t be so gross.” She rushed into her room. I wanted to join her and sprawl on the bed beside her while she tried out other chords. Her room was pleasantly messy with drawings of elves pinned to the walls. A row of stuffed animals sat on the ledge of the egress window above her bed. Cotton pajama pants covered in dolphins hung on the hook behind the bathroom door. She was probably lying facedown on her bed and crying, too mortified to come out.

Andrew punched my shoulder. “Let’s go for a ride.”

We wheeled our bikes from behind the house and rode hard and fast through tree-lined streets, up toward the graveyard, through pools of light in empty parking lots, and then along the curving parkway that went by our high school, its bell tower like an ancient cathedral in the dark. We were drawn to the specter of our school that summer, its empty halls and lockers, its rolling lawns perfectly mowed.

We threw our bikes down and fell to the ground. The grass was damp, the breeze cool and humid.

“Leave her alone, you pedophile,” he said.

“Fuck you.”

“I know you’re into her.”

I didn’t answer.

“She doesn’t like you. She thinks boys are disgusting.”

His cruelty stung me. I never got used to it or understood it. I pinned him to the ground and slapped him when he rolled away. He answered with a closed fist. The taste of metal, the twinkle of distant stars. I fell to the grass, stunned. He was about to hit me again when his eyes went blank. He dropped to the grass beside me.

“Why are you such an asshole?” My voice was dead. I didn’t expect an answer.

“I don’t know.” And then, after a long pause: “Maybe I’m sick.”

He’d never said anything like that before. “Yeah, maybe you are.”

I lay in the grass for what felt like hours, dreaming while awake, my head throbbing, the stars holding me down. Eventually, Andrew left. The click of gears, the soft whir of wheels as he biked away. My anger turned to sadness. I should’ve asked what he meant about being sick. He never brought it up again.

—

Allie called four days after we met for coffee. She wanted me to join her at the Golden Buddha. It was eleven on Saturday night and her words were blurred, the edges rubbed off. There was giddy laughter and music coming from her end.

“When are you thinking?” I asked. The bar sounded vaguely familiar— it was one of those nightspots where everyone goes but no one gets in.

“Right now.”

I showered quickly and brushed Rob’s wine off my teeth, trying to make myself presentable. I went through my limited clothing options, which hung above me in the closet while I slept. T-shirt or button down, jeans or slacks? I felt terribly insignificant but even that had

its own allure. I could be James Dean coolly racing toward a cliff. “Reality check, Jonah,” I told myself. “Remember the cave.” Saying that made me feel better. I dressed as nicely as I could: best jeans I had, long-sleeve button-up, Italian oxfords my mom gave me for my birthday. Andrew watched over me, snarling his disapproval.

Rob was on the couch in the living room, eating a carton of Chinese takeout. “Where you going?” he asked.

“Nowhere.” There was an awkward silence while he waited for an invitation. I rubbed my eyes and feigned exhaustion. I was already sick of him.

“Well, I’d better stay focused,” he said, trying to hide his disappointment.

I took the subway to Canal Street and walked the rest of the way. A line of people snaked along a velvet rope, all better dressed than me. The bouncer was huge, a sumo wrestler in a fat suit. His head was shaved, his Confucian beard strung up in knots. I called Allie to let her know I’d arrived. Two minutes later, Marcus came to the door and the bouncer gave me a curt nod. I tried to pretend I came to clubs like this every day.

There was a gold Buddha on a backlit fountain in the center of the room, his fingers reaching down in the “Touching the Earth” pose. Veins of water ran through the glass beneath my feet, snaking up the walls and cycling back into miniature waterfalls. Onstage, a young man played a harmonium, his voice low and hypnotic, his eyes hooded above a bearded face.

Marcus parted a curtain and waved me through. A dozen people sat on two leather couches, their drinks clustered on small round tables. A dark-haired woman gave me a tight-lipped smile. A group of four were on their way out, heading to another party. They were well-dressed and beautiful, cutouts from a movie. I recognized a tall blond man, maybe from TV.

The dark-haired woman approached me. She wore a black velvet jacket with a skirt and knee-high boots. “I’m Madison.” She had the tone of a polite hostess dealing with a strange guest. “And you are?”

I introduced myself. Jonah Weiss, childhood friend. Did I need a name tag? She laughed, fully aware of the effect her laugh had on others, including me. That sudden, calculated openness, her eyes shining, her smile brilliant. I wasn’t used to so much loveliness, a dozen people that could’ve been in magazines.

“Oh, yeah. Allie mentioned you.”

I looked past Madison at the blur of faces, a few giving me curious looks, most ignoring me. Allie sat by a tall, gauntly handsome man in a tuxedo. His dark, slicked-back hair was graying at the temples.

“Jonah! You’re here!” Allie’s eyes were unfocused, her hands curled into loose fists. She wore a black strapless dress.

“Sit down,” the man told me, his voice sharp. I shook his hand, trying to match his chummy death grip. “Name’s John Wylde. I’ve heard a lot about you. Nothing good, of course.”

Allie forced a smile. “I just said we’re old friends, that’s all.”

Madison slid into the booth next to me. She leaned forward, chin in hand, listening intently. Her arm brushed against mine.

“Maybe you’ve heard of me,” John said. “I own Burnout Records. I do a bit of everything. Mostly I take care of my people.”

“I’ve heard a little.” There’d been stories about him in tabloids and music magazines, most of them bad. His father was a psychopath with a hedge fund. Wylde had been a lacrosse star

at Yale and a member of various secret societies. He was also a drinker and womanizer, his twenties and thirties marked by one financial failure after another—bad real estate deals, a stake in a reservation casino, stock market deals gone sour. His father goaded him with each failure, hardening him in the fire, making him ruthless and hungry for success.

When he was in his early forties, Wylde convinced his father to invest in a failing indie label called Burnout Records. He discovered the thing he was good at. He had an ear for hits and an ability to mold talent just as his father had molded him. He had no tolerance for failure. Even when the business struggled, as many labels did, he kept it afloat with infusions of his own cash. He'd been the one to discover Neutrino, Lowdown, Crooked Arrow and Jaylene Diaz, all stars that went gold or platinum. According to rumor, he'd destroyed them, too.

"I don't like childhood friends," he said. "They always show up when you least expect." His eyes were blue as pilot lights.

He was making his position clear. She was a star and I wasn't.

"He's not like that," Allie said.

Wylde shook his head. "They're all the same. I know about this kind of thing."

Another cluster of lovely, self-assured people were preparing to leave. Madison checked her phone. "We'd better go," she said.

Allie crossed her arms. "I'm not leaving."

"Jordan will be disappointed," Wylde put his hand on Allie's leg but she jerked away. I couldn't quite parse her expression—distaste, hatred, maybe even fear.

"She doesn't give a shit," Allie said.

"Don't be like this," Wylde said.

“I said I’m not going.”

Wylde slid out of the booth and gave Madison a tight smile.

“I’ll take care of this,” Madison said.

On his way out, he whispered in Marcus’ ear. Marcus nodded, his brow furrowed, then scowled at me.

Madison signaled a waiter.

“I’m staying,” Allie said. “I’d just make a scene anyway.”

“Then I’ll stay, too,” Madison said.

“Just go. I know you like that kind of thing.” Allie wrinkled her nose.

“Have it your way.” Madison slid out of the booth, her arm brushing against mine again.

“It was so nice meeting you,” she told me.

She was the last of the group to leave. No one else said goodbye to Allie. Maybe they were expecting her at the party.

“What was that about?” I asked.

“It’s Jordan Knightley’s birthday. You’ve probably heard of her.”

I had. Her first album had just gone platinum. She was nineteen and raven-haired with a big, brassy voice. According to the tabloids, she and Wylde had gone to Saint Tropez a few months ago. They’d spent two weeks sunning themselves on his yacht and partying on the Plage de Pampelonne. Wylde in board shorts, his hair wet against his neck. Jordan in a string bikini, her skin so dark that she looked vaguely ethnic, but she was a well-off white girl from Malibu. She was petite and narrow-hipped, with a round, sweet face that made her look like a child.

“So you don’t like her?” I asked.

“I don’t like anyone.” A waiter cleared the tables. Allie ordered a martini with extra olives. I ordered The Boss—something with rye and smoke over a big cube.

“So what’s the deal with Wylde?”

“He hates you.”

“What an asshole. He doesn’t even know me.”

“He knows more than you think. He probably has someone watching you.”

“Seriously?”

“He has people watching me.”

“That’s rough. I don’t envy you.”

Allie laughed. “Of course you do. You live in a closet in Williamsburg.”

Instead of jabbing back, I gave her a knowing smile.

“What’s that look?” she asked.

“Just thinking.” The pleasure tingling in me felt like a limb that’s fallen asleep. She was still the thirteen-year-old giving me a wide-eyed look as I taught her to play E-minor. She was still the first girl I’d ever kissed or seen naked.

“What?” she asked, annoyed.

“You remember that teddy bear you used to have? The really big one? For a while it was almost as big as you.”

“Oh, god. I can’t believe you’re bringing that up.”

“You tied bows around its ears. You sang it songs.”

“Not *it*,” she said. “*Her*.”

“Her name was Brenda, right?”

She crossed her arms. “What’s so funny?”

“You sang songs to Brenda the Bear.”

Once Andrew went in her room while she was singing to Brenda and dropkicked the bear from her arms. I was right behind him, stifling my laughter like a cough.

“*Left* right *left* right,” Andrew said, naming his punches, hitting Brenda’s plush mouth over and over. He threw Brenda across the room and we raced out, laughing.

“I loved Brenda,” she said. “Her nose was never the same after that.”

“Everything that happened is still there. You can’t pretend it’s not.”

“That’s exactly why John hates you.”

We sat in silence, listening as the fakir on stage moaned secrets in our ears. Our drinks didn’t last long. “Come here.” She patted the seat by her.

I squeezed into the seat. The curtains were parted just enough to see the bar.

“I’m a mess,” she whispered. “I’m barely holding it together.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Are we good? Are we friends again?”

“Of course.”

She waved a waiter over and ordered more shots. “Then drink with me. You’re here. You have your own closet now.”

We tipped back our glasses. “I might as well enjoy it. I won’t be around long.”

“Why?” She slammed her glass down.

It was time for the ask. I was sick of Rob’s airless closet, which smelled like old takeout no matter how much I cleaned. I’d agreed to help with his literary chapbooks in exchange for

room and board, which sounded good when I was emailing from Delhi but not so good when I discovered that “room” was Rob’s closet and “board” was occasional pizza. I didn’t even have enough money to book a flight home.

I took a deep breath. “I’m broke. I need a job.”

“What kind of job?” She chewed the edge of her thumb, concerned.

“I don’t know. Anything really.” This was the reason Wylde hated me. I was doing the thing childhood friends did.

“Do you have hydration skills?”

I couldn’t tell if she was serious. “I’m an excellent hydrator. Water is my specialty.”

She clapped her hands. “All right then. You’re hired.”

“I expect payment in the form of mandrake root plus the liver of your firstborn son.”

Her laughter was a gentle gust of derision and delight. Soon she was cross-eyed drunk and slurring her words and talking about our teen years like they were the only sweetness she’d ever known.

“Losers! We were such big losers,” she said.

“I got you started on guitar.”

“Yeah, right, you knew like five chords.”

“I always wanted to sing with you.”

“You sounded like a donkey braying but you were so *sincere*.” She closed her eyes, crooning the word. She was too drunk to notice how badly she’d hurt me. When she shifted in her seat, I noticed her underwear was a lacy black thing.

She fell asleep a few minutes later. I gave her a gentle nudge but she was out. I finished my drink and then hers. This is how you get mono, a college roommate had told me once. At parties, I'd continued taking my chances, not wanting all the half-finished drinks to go to waste.

"I think Allie's done for the night," I told Marcus.

He looked at her without surprise. "Why don't you hang out, have some coffee?"

"She do this often?"

"That's not for me to say."

Allie looked like she was enjoying a peaceful prenatal sleep. In the video for "Death Wish," she'd twisted herself into a ball in her underwear and tank top as she screamed about the darkness of young love.

I tried not to look too closely. She was so beautiful, so vulnerable, so compromised. I was surprised Marcus wasn't sitting between us, guarding her carefully, because I wanted to fall asleep beside her, our bodies spooned together, my face in her hair.

I was seventeen the first time I kissed her. We were sprawled on the floor by the drum set in Allie's basement, high and a little drunk. Jenny, the drummer for High Priestess, had brought vodka and weed. She crouched over the drums, tapping out a soft beat. Andrew had taken a girl named Misha into Allie's room an hour before. Allie called through the locked bedroom door but they wouldn't answer. We tried to get in through the bathroom door, which connected to Allie's room. It was locked, too. We ran around to the back of the house, trying to spy through the window, but Brenda the Bear blocked our view.

"I can't believe this," Allie said. "He's so gross."

We returned to the basement. There were usually a few girls curled on the couches, most of them crushing on Allie, but they'd all left. Even Jenny had gone outside to smoke a cigarette. I wrapped my arms around Allie, nearly knocking her to the ground. Soon we were lying on the shag carpet, kissing. I didn't notice Andrew hovering above us a few minutes later.

"Booyah!" he shouted. His hands dug into my ribs. I twisted around, trying to block him, and smacked Allie with my elbow.

"What the hell?" she yelled.

I ran into the bathroom and grabbed a towel. When I came back, she was holding her nose. Blood oozed between her fingers.

"What's wrong with you?" Andrew asked. "You hit my sister."

"I hit your sister?"

"You totally spazzed out." He shook his head. "Jesus."

I tried to help Allie up but she batted me away.

"You okay?" Andrew asked.

"Fuck you." She climbed unsteadily to her feet and went to the bathroom.

Misha watched us, her arms wrapped around herself. Her hair was dyed blue and she had a piercing in her lip. None of us really knew her.

Andrew draped his arm over Misha's shoulder. "It's just a bloody nose, thank god."

"What the fuck, Andrew?" I asked.

"I'm sorry, I couldn't help myself. I thought it would be funny but it wasn't." He looked at the ceiling and reconsidered. "Actually, it *was* funny, but then you spazzed and hit my sister in the face."

“I should go.” Misha’s wispy voice didn’t match her aggressive sense of style.

“You should stay,” Andrew said.

Allie came out of the bathroom. Her eyes were wet, her nose plugged with toilet paper.

“What were you doing in my room?” she asked.

Andrew grinned. “Just talking.”

“I told you to stay out of there.”

“I’m leaving,” Misha whispered. She walked with her shoulders hunched, her eyes lowered. I couldn’t be sure if she said *bye* or just exhaled more loudly.

“I told you to never touch me like that again,” Allie said.

Andrew turned pale. “I didn’t do anything,” he said, his voice soft.

“That is a *violation*,” she said, snarling the word. “You *violated* me.”

“No, sis, I’d never do that,” he said, shaking his head quickly.

“My therapist said I need boundaries,” she said. Andrew wasn’t the only one cowering now. I was, too. “That means stay out of my room. Stay away from *me*.”

“But I love you more than anything, sis. I want you to be safe.”

“Jesus, Andrew! It’s just Jonah, okay?” She went into her room and slammed the door.

“Damn,” Andrew whispered.

“What were you doing with that girl?”

“We were just talking. Seriously.”

“Yeah, right.”

“We went into the bathroom,” Andrew admitted.

I gave him a dubious look.

“Are you saying I’d do it on my sister’s bed? That’s gross. We went to the bathroom.”

“That’s still weird.”

Andrew searched the nest of cords around the Fender amp. He found half a bottle of vodka and a charred bowl of weed. He took a hit and passed the pipe to me. I could still feel Allie’s arms around me, how eager she’d been.

“I always knew you liked her,” he said.

“Fuck off.”

Andrew’s parents never came down to check on us even though their bedroom was right above us. They left their TV and air purifier on at night, along with Clyde’s sleep apnea machine, but they must’ve heard Allie yelling. She raised her voice when she said *violation*, as if she were screaming at them, too.

Now Allie was curled in a booth at the Golden Buddha, looking much too vulnerable. Was she like this with other men? How did men like Wylde treat her? What about Pete Stoddard, the lead singer for Neutrino, who’d once been charged with assault for hitting an ex-girlfriend? He and Allie had dated for a few months. I’d read about the fight she’d had with Stoddard at a Yankees game, her issues with alcohol and painkillers, her inability to finish her last tour due to stress and exhaustion. I’d seen the partially censored pictures that showed her climbing from a limo in a short dress and I’d gone to another website where the pictures were uncensored, revealing more than just the skimpiness of her underwear. I’d seen her deer in headlights look when the paparazzi caught her by surprise.

I put my arm around her and she rested her head on my shoulder. Her left hand landed on my chest, looking for my heartbeat.

At closing time, Marcus woke Allie. We helped her up while she murmured in our ears, her voice full of sweet insinuation. Even half-asleep she wanted attention and admiration. Perhaps even in deep sleep she remained aware of the endless eyes watching her, clustered like patterns in a honeycomb.

Marcus led us through a back exit where an idling Towncar was waiting. Allie went into the backseat, too drunk to say goodbye, while Marcus sat in front with the driver. I caught the train back to Williamsburg.

A few days later, Allie called and told me she'd slept better than she had in months. She said it was because of me, as if I should be flattered I wasn't just her friend but her sedative. She asked if I still wanted the job. I was surprised she even remembered. Did I really want to be her water boy? And what would Wylde have to say about it?

"I already told him," she said. "It's taken care of."

"Taken care of? Sounds ominous."

"Consider it payback."

"Payback?"

She laughed. "Wrong choice of words. I just want to help, that's all."

"Well, thanks."

I knew what she wanted from me in return: my loyalty and endless affection, for which I'd get a water boy's wages along with the constant reminder that I owed her, that she owned me, that I'd always be in her shadow. But I also felt the familiar tug of old patterns. I was the needle dropping into the groove of a record, wanting only to circle and skip back into her orbit. She was the junk food I couldn't stop eating because it reminded me of childhood. She was the song that

kept playing in my head. She was the centerfold I'd found when I was ten, pulled loose from its staples and left crumpled in the woods, all legs and thorax, which I'd smoothed and taken home and kept under my mattress for months until my mom found it and threw it away. She was friend and family and fantasy. She was all the angst and loneliness I'd never resolved. I could love or hate or wall her off inside me. Ever since she'd left Iowa, I'd tried to wall her off, but that was no longer an option.

Later that week, John Wylde's secretary called and set up an appointment. I dressed for an interview, wearing the oxfords that had gotten me this far. Burnout's offices were in an Art Deco skyscraper just off Broadway. Gold and platinum records lined the walls, including seven hits from Penumbra. I spent a half-hour reading luxury travel magazines, examining the interiors of sprawling haciendas and chateaux. One was a historic church converted into a five-star hotel. There were mineral pools and a spa where non-believers had once been impaled.

Wylde's office was a big spare room with floor-to-ceiling windows and framed posters of Burnout stars. Wylde sat behind a desk made of fiberglass and steel, a skyscraper in miniature. Tropical fish squiggled through its interior, circling beneath his tapping hands, sleeping sideways in fingers of coral.

"Let's make this quick," he said. "I think you're disgusting."

I wasn't sure how to respond. If this was an interview, it was going badly.

"I don't like it when childhood friends show up out of nowhere. They always want something. So what do you want?"

"She got in touch with me, not the other way around."

He looked at me like I was a smudged receipt. “Look, I know what she wants. She’s lonely and desperate for friends. What about you?”

“We’ve been friends a long time.”

“You *were* friends a long time. Up until a few weeks ago, you hadn’t talked in years.”

“We fell out of touch.”

He leaned forward, steepling his fingers. “Why?”

“She moved here.”

He shook his head. “What aren’t you telling me?”

“I don’t know what happened. She never told me.”

“You were her brother’s best friend. You see why I don’t like that? She’s fragile. That means handle with care.” He squeezed his eyes shut. “I’ll write you a check if you just go away.”

“I need a job, not a handout.”

“Five grand plus a ticket out of town. Anywhere you want. Iowa, India, whatever.”

“Not interested.”

He looked up at the ceiling, considering his options. A heavy sigh. “Then your job is to be stable, to be a friend. That’s an issue for her. You understand? Nothing fancy here. We’ve invested a lot of money in her. We’ve got an image to protect. That means don’t talk to anyone about her life. That’s the business side of things. Everyone hates the business side. It’s inhuman, it’s impersonal, but it’s also the reality. We have Allison the person and Penumbra the product. You got that?”

“Sure.”

“She’s one of the most important assets in our portfolio. I’ve told her in those exact words: ‘You’re the most important asset in our portfolio.’ She wants you in her life, I don’t know why. I’m not her shrink, and her shrink won’t tell me what’s going on because of that whole privacy thing. It’s my job to keep her happy, but it’s not easy.”

“All right.” He was being an asshole but his composure and the absolute directness he had, as if he were a sniper of hearts and minds—nothing but one-shot kills—filled me with disquieting respect.

“Our number one goal is to get her on track and in the studio again.”

“Didn’t she just finish touring?”

“Strike while the iron is hot. The transition back to recording is always tough. She needs support and encouragement. That means keeping her focused on the present, not the past.”

“I’m all about the present and looking forward.” This was a complete lie. I was a cave-dweller, a navel-gazer, an unrepentant nostalgist. If I seemed cynical about the future, it was because my father had died in his forties with most of his dreams unfulfilled. I was afraid the same would happen to me.

“So what’s the going rate for friendship?” he asked.

“You can’t put a number on that.”

“Don’t be coy. You want a job. How much do you want?”

“I hadn’t thought about it.” I felt too shitty to give him a number.

“We’ll get it figured out. One other thing. No funny business. She doesn’t like that stuff. You touch her and you’re gone.”

I didn’t like the way he emphasized the word *gone*. I managed a nod.

“It’s been a pleasure.” His handshake was firm but not friendly. I hurried to the elevator, feeling like a piece of trash that’s been wadded up and thrown away. I waited until the elevator doors closed behind me to give him two middle fingers and a silent roar.

Within weeks, I’d moved into a small one-bedroom in a building five minutes away from Allie’s brownstone. Madison took care of everything. The apartment was shaped like a puzzle piece and the kitchen was smaller than my Williamsburg closet, but at least I had a kitchen now. The apartment was connected with Wylde’s business interests and I had a special price, sans finder’s fee. The rent was subtracted from my pay, which was somehow linked to the expense account. I didn’t understand the arrangement and nobody explained it to me. Maybe I was paid in mandrakes and mushrooms after all. It never felt like real money was being spent, even when I joined Allie’s entourage at fancy restaurants or Madison dressed me in nice clothes. Assets were simply rearranged. I tried pretending none of it mattered but I wanted more money, power, and respect. I wanted to be Allie’s equal, the guy standing with her onstage, hammering out power chords.

I should’ve been more grateful but I felt the same dread I’d had as a teen. That dread began with my father’s illness. I’d lie in bed trembling, sure something intensely bad was about to happen, but it already had: my father was dying. After he died, the dread grew worse. I wondered where he was and what happened to him. I was afraid hell or some other frightening afterlife existed and he’d been sent there, even though he’d been a good person. His illness was a living hell so why would his afterlife be any better? Either he’d completely and utterly

disappeared or his spirit continued on somehow, unable to communicate with me, perhaps not remembering me at all. Both prospects were horrifying.

The bad thing had already happened but there was no limit to the number of bad things that could happen to a person. I was as scared and sad and lonely as I'd ever been. It hurt to imagine my dad smiling at me when I closed my eyes and it hurt just as much not to see him at all.

In those years, I didn't trust the ground beneath my feet. I knew I'd roll snake eyes again, that my mother would be next. Now I was sure the same would happen with Allie, too.

I spent my first few weeks buying stuff because it made me feel better. I had more space so I filled it with things: a decent bed, lounge chairs, a sectional couch, framed reproductions of French posters advertising absinthe, a picture of the Annapurnas in Nepal. I bought a scuffed desk, a four-track, a Fender amp, a new guitar on layaway. I was back in the red and living beyond my means but I'd been below zero since starting college. At least the guitar was a sweet little thing, an electric acoustic with nylon strings and a cutaway neck, its sound dark and melancholy.

I had to buy a closet full of clothes to be associated with Allie and get past the velvet rope, which meant Madison took me shopping in Soho on a brisk November afternoon when the air already smelled of winter. She wore jeans, a white wool sweater, a gray scarf. I was surprised by the way she hugged me, as if we'd known each other forever.

"So you and Allie used to be close." There was a sharpness to her voice that she could plausibly deny if I called her on it. She alternated between this sharpness and a softer, more intimate tone.

I nodded. We were in a store with hardwood floors, exposed brick walls, a leather couch. The clothes themselves were carefully curated like museum pieces. The cheapest shirt was two hundred dollars. Madison was an efficient shopper, making her way through the racks and pulling out slacks and button-downs I might like.

“That’s good.” She gave me a conspiratorial smile. “She needs more friends.”

“So what do you do for her?”

“Pretty much everything. I handle her day-to-day routine. I make sure she doesn’t spend too much time alone.” She pointed me toward a tiny dressing room with a flimsy curtain.

“Why’s that?”

“She gets down on herself. She has her moods.” She peeked in while I was in my underwear and handed me a pair of jeans. I tried on an outfit and she squeezed into the tiny room with me. She checked the fit at the shoulders, waist, hips. I was painfully aware of her smell, some heady mix of rare perfume and standard human. I couldn’t help but like her. Maybe I was just susceptible to her good looks, her focused attention.

“This looks good on you,” she said.

Was this a test? Had Allie or Wylde put her up to this flirtation? If so, it was working.

“Isn’t this a bit excessive for a professional hydrator?” I joked.

“You need to look good if you want to be seen with her. Just don’t get too settled in. She fired pretty much everyone before you came on. Her publicist, her manager, all her other assistants. They’re gone.”

“She’s kept you around.”

She smiled, showing a sliver of teeth. “She trusts me. I was the first person she ever met in New York.”

She told me the story from the other side of the curtain. Two days after I kissed Allie goodbye at the bus station in Iowa, Allie arrived at Madison’s apartment in Boerum Hill with a backpack and guitar, still wearing her fisherman’s knit. She’d lost her phone in Pittsburgh and barely had enough money for a month-long sublet while Madison’s roommate was in Europe.

Soon Allie had a job at a nearby coffeeshop where the manager harassed her. Each evening she locked herself in her room and played her songs until she went to sleep. She ate scones and croissants from the coffeeshop but little else. Madison assumed these were stale castoffs but soon she realized Allie was stealing them.

A few times a week, Allie performed at open mics and did gigs at coffeeshops. She played the same half-dozen songs each time, mostly songs I’d heard in Iowa before she left. “Blood in the Snow” was a favorite of mine, sung in a wispy alto over gently strummed B minor chords. The chorus: *“I said we’d better take it slow... but there’s blood in the snow...”* She’d never recorded the song as Penumbra.

“I went to all her shows. I was her confidante, her only friend.” I could picture this friendship very clearly because Allie had been the same way with Sabrina, her closest friend from High Priestess. Allie could be so aloof that her attention, when given freely, was as warm and radiant as sunshine. “Her voice was gorgeous and she was, too, though she didn’t know it yet.”

Allie knew she was gorgeous even then. She just didn’t believe it.

“So how’d she end up with Burnout?” We took a pile of clothes to the checkout counter. The cashier gave us a knowing look, though I wasn’t sure what she knew.

“She wouldn’t have gotten this contract if it weren’t for me. I got her started playing in galleries and then she met John.”

Madison paid for my new clothes with a black credit card and took me to another store, this one painted entirely white with white leather cubes for seating. Button-downs, cardigans, shoes. She bought a dress for herself, too. The black credit card came out again.

“Are you sure this is okay?” I asked.

“It’s fine. She doesn’t even check her bank statements.”

“That’s not a good thing.”

“She’s rich. Don’t worry about it.”

I didn’t complain. A third store and then a fourth. Soon my arms were full of shopping bags and Madison had dressed me (not quite literally) in a wool cardigan, leather boots, and cuffed pants. I liked her hands on me, both intimate and professional.

She picked out a dinner coat and held it against my chest. I tried to ignore the price tag. She smoothed the material against my arms and smiled. “Are you still in love with her?”

I examined the coat in a full-length mirror, avoiding her eyes.

“I’m good at secrets,” she said.

“We’re just friends.”

I had questions, too. Was Allie seeing anyone? And why did she want me around, especially if she was so worried I might hit on her? These questions would’ve revealed too much about how I really felt so I didn’t ask them.

Allie called at one in the morning. I was playing guitar and working on a song. When I saw her number on the phone, I was sure it was bad news. Maybe she was hurt. Maybe she'd taken too many pills. Maybe she didn't want me to be her water boy after all.

"How was your date with Madison?" Her voice had an edge.

"It wasn't a date." My voice had an edge, too. I went to the kitchen and poured two fingers of whiskey to calm me down.

"Did you play dress up?"

She was reminding me, once again, that I was indebted to her. "She told me how you became friends. She said she launched your career."

"Really?" Her tone turned scornful. "She said that?"

"So it's not true?"

"She doesn't even know what happened with John."

"What happened with him?"

There was a long pause and I checked the phone, sure she'd hung up.

"He's truly a horrible person. That's all you need to know." There was the click of a light switch on the other end, the hiss of running water. "So what do you think of Madison?"

I chose my words carefully. "She's nice."

"Isn't she pretty?"

"Not my type." I kept my voice flat.

"Who's your type?"

How was I supposed to answer these questions? "I don't have one."

“Didn’t you have girlfriends in college?”

“A few. Nothing too serious. What about you? Enjoying the benefits of stardom?”

“I’m not that kind of girl. I’m not like Madison.”

I poured more whiskey and tried to answer her questions in a neutral tone. She wanted to know if I had other friends in the city. Specifically, did I have female friends? Not at the moment. Did I want one? I was happy enough as is. Happy enough? That didn’t sound happy. I admitted my standards were low, a hedge against disappointment. She wanted to know what I feared. The usual things, I answered. Death, humiliation, illness. I was afraid of being a bad person and doing horrible things I couldn’t undo.

And her? What did she fear? The usual things, she agreed. Death, humiliation and sickness were on her short list. Late onset mental illness. Certain people she wouldn’t mention. Mostly she worried she’d never fix the broken things.

“What broken things?” I asked.

“My inner nature. My deepest self. I feel so sick.” She’d always felt this way but it had gotten worse since she became Penumbra. She had shortness of breath, tension headaches, a dull throbbing in her chest and stomach. But she didn’t want to talk about that, not now. It was two in the morning and she was tired. She said good night and hung up.

Allie's days were filled with interviews and meetings, one pitch after another from songwriters, businessmen, marketers, and publicists. She walked with her shoulders high, her eyes focused on the middle distance. Three bodyguards formed a protective ring around her. In her wake: paparazzi with cameras bowing their necks, men in trench coats and soiled jackets, teenage Wishers holding iPhones aloft, their cheeks covered in glitter as they cheered her on. Allie hadn't been kidding about people following her. I soon learned about the worst of them.

There was Jeremy Langwold, a schizophrenic in his late twenties that believed Allie was his soulmate. He wrote her letters and tried to break through the ring of bodyguards, shouting declarations of love and threatening to kill himself.

There was Pete Stamos, the most parasitic of her paparazzi. He had graying, close-cropped hair and wore a bomber jacket and an oversized gold watch. He'd been the one to capture Allie climbing from a limo in skimpy underwear, her crotch exposed. The pictures got him a six-figure paycheck.

There was Randall Hunt, a registered sex offender that loitered in a park near Allie's loft, though it wasn't clear whether he craved Allie or the preteen girls that mobbed her.

There was Anna Newsome, a nineteen-year-old cancer survivor that Allie met through the Make-A-Wish Foundation. She'd used her college fund to get plastic surgery, altering her features to more closely resemble Penumbra. She had a sharp, angular face and wore a blond wig. Her wish: to be Allie's best friend before she died. She'd turned desperate as her prognosis grew worse, her voice shrill as she called Allie's name from the crowd. Allie just wanted Anna to die in peace.

Allie smiled often but without warmth. She took regular bathroom breaks, disappearing for twenty minutes or more, not coming out until Madison knocked loudly on the door. Madison mapped out Allie's days, checking a schedule on her iPad, taking phone calls, ordering people like me around. In the Escalade, Allie put on headphones and closed her eyes while Madison reminded her about talking points, contractual obligations, logistics. It was a busy time because of the holidays and new endorsements and all the necessary preparations for returning to the studio to record her fourth album, but Allie showed no enthusiasm for any of it.

Madison planned our evenings as meticulously as our days. We went to the city's most exclusive parties and nightclubs, where Allie could dabble in seeing and specialize in being seen. She liked satin and velvet, zinc or wood plank bars, dimmed lights or candles. There were parties in brick warehouses, subway tunnels, abandoned water towers. There were fundraisers in Tribeca penthouses and Dumbo galleries. There were galas and premieres and even a masquerade ball where I found a couple in black masks fucking behind a curtain. Somewhere in the distance, Allie's hair was a flicker of candlelight I could never quite reach. I drank too much, mostly to salve the low-grade anxiety and depression that followed me everywhere. Some nights I was so drunk I heard nothing but laughter and voices but no actual words. We might as well have

babbled like babies because the words themselves meant nothing, only the attentiveness, the feeling of wanting and being wanted, denying and being denied.

Sometimes I found myself alone with Madison, tucked away in a booth or at a bar or waiting in line for the bathroom. She was both outgoing and friendly but there was usually a hint of mischief, a compliment wrapped in a jab, a hint of self-congratulation. “Of course that coat looks good on you,” she’d say. “I picked it out.”

She liked to tell me stories about her childhood, though I’m not sure why. Did she tell everyone these stories or was I the only one? She could describe what each house looked like on certain streets near her childhood home, even the color of its trim and the number of windows on the second floor. She remembered whether a child had lived there, and their age and name, and the toys they’d left in the yard, even if she’d never been friends with the children that owned those toys.

Sometimes she’d climbed into the lower branches of a tree just to watch people go by. There was a stunted apple tree that seemed huge when she was small, its apples wormy and sour. There was a sweet birch with shiny reddish bark that she learned to shimmy up when she was a little older. There was a holly thick and bristling with secrets, with a dark hollow carved beneath its branches where a child could hide and weave crowns made of pansies.

I enjoyed her forays down childhood streets I’d never seen. I wanted to imagine the children in the upper windows, the possibility they could be my friends, too. I wanted to share this perfect dream with Madison because it felt so simple and innocent. It didn’t burden me like memories of my own childhood or stories of Allie’s.

But I couldn't trust her because I didn't trust myself. If it weren't for Allie, I might've gotten lost in Madison's contrail. I asked Madison once about the fragrance she wore on her wrists and throat, which was both earthy and smoky, a smell I came to associate strongly with her. It was a fragrance called vetiver. I could hardly describe Allie at all, let alone in a single word, but Madison was different. *Vetiver* would've been enough, but only because it said so much.

Unlike Allie, who was too wrapped up in her own thoughts to notice the world around her, Madison was firmly anchored in the world of people. She yearned for connection. She wanted to understand how everyone fit together. Where did they belong in the social fabric, what did they think of her, who did they love and hate and secretly desire? She liked to play matchmaker and make seating arrangements for dinner parties and organize the ever-shifting entourage that joined us when we went out.

On most nights, there were about a dozen of us. Madison would invite various New School friends, trust funders and minor celebrities. Some wanted to rub shoulders with a superstar, take selfies and drink themselves into oblivion. Others made their pitches late in the evening, waiting for the right moment to pull Allie aside. Would she do a charity lunch for after-school programs? Would she endorse a local fashion brand in exchange for one-of-a-kind couture dresses? Was she interested in playing a part in a blockbuster movie where wolves controlled by malevolent sorcerers gathered en masse and took over the world? Allie enjoyed these pitches and the power they gave her. She turned down the arrogant, the mansplainers, the dolled-up women hawking beauty products. She agreed to the charity events and put forth her own causes: she was a passionate advocate against bullying, species extinction, tar sands oil.

There were a handful of regulars in our group. Lily and Sarah were close friends of Madison's from the New School. Lily was a former theater major, though she was reconsidering her options, all of them impractical: fashion designer, novelist, film critic. She was pale and heavily freckled with frizzy red hair, dark brown eyes and a tendency to dramatize her words with her hands, always alert to the possibility someone might be watching from the back row. She was struggling through an internship at a publishing house that barely paid anything.

Sarah had studied art history with Madison. She'd written her undergrad thesis on the meticulous needlework of Pointillism. She was, in fact, on point and practical—crisp pageboy haircut, slacks, no nonsense blouses, owlsh, oversized glasses. She was also brusque and skeptical, prone to sarcastic takedowns uttered from the corner of her mouth, deeply ashamed to be working in retail.

Oliver had studied film at NYU, a fact he never let anyone forget. He and Madison had been involved at one point, but the details were fuzzy. His father was Spencer Hull, best known for his films *Fall of an Empire* and *Beyond the Rings*. His family was Hollywood royalty and they had property in the Hamptons, Tribeca, Aspen. Oliver usually wore his father's everyman uniform—black denim pants, Converse, black t-shirt, Yankees baseball cap over dark, shiny curls—which only made him seem more pretentious. He called himself a documentarian and filmed us without bothering to ask for permission.

Sometimes I invited my friends Rob or Ryan along, though I always asked Madison's permission first. Rob was loud and bought the girls drinks and talked about himself and his chapbooks like they were singular gifts to humanity. Sarah and Lily laughed at his jokes and flirted with him and perhaps even considered whether they could date him.

Ryan had lived with Rob and I in our college co-op. He was a small town kid from northern Missouri with the brawny, thick-shouldered build of a defensive lineman, though he hated sports. He was half-man, half-yeti, with an overgrown beard and shaggy hair that covered his eyes, eyes that were always looking down because he was painfully shy. We often sat together at the bar, hiding behind our drinks. He'd studied art in college and was adept at figure drawing with charcoal. He could draw the human figure with tremendous depth and precision but he had no talent for faces. The eyes and mouth and nose of the people he drew were blurred and imprecise, never quite matching, so he replaced their heads with animal masks instead. These masks were heavily stylized, too, because he was no better at drawing the heads of animals than those of people.

If Allie was the one holding court, then Madison administered it, marshaling us into black Escalades and ferrying us around the city. Here we were, ten abreast, pretty girls and swaggering guys, overly prideful of the company we kept and the simple fact we were young and good-looking and had someone else's money to spend. But the best nights happened when there were just a few of us at Allie's loft or Madison's place in Boerum Hill or even once at my apartment. On those nights, it almost felt like our circumstances had made us close, like a group of students studying abroad together and on the verge of truly becoming friends. Meanwhile Allie ruled over us like a queen, both gracious and remote.

Allie and I rarely had time to ourselves. We didn't talk of Fuzz or our past or the music she wanted to make, but gradually our old familiarity returned and we became more comfortable with each other. I tried to make her laugh. We talked about the end of the world and how it might happen: I wanted the super volcano, she wanted gamma rays. I wasn't myself but an

approximation of the person I'd been when we were younger, and in some ways, she was, too. We were trying to make up for lost time, as if we'd been friends all along.

The phone calls were different. They always came late at night, waking me up, though sometimes I stayed up for her, drinking whiskey and playing guitar. I was working on a song built around repeating arpeggios, whole fourths and fifths and octaves with dissonant notes thrown in to make it spooky. I let my right hand flow like water across the strings, the tide coming in and out. When I played long enough, the rhythms absorbed me and I forgot everything else. The knot in my chest rose up and I wanted to sing but couldn't.

And then she'd call. I let the phone ring twice. I turned the lights off if they were on. I cocooned myself in her voice, drifting into a dreamlike state. Only then could we talk about the things we didn't talk about with anyone else.

On one of those evenings, she told me about her first year in the city, when she was mostly miserable.

"That's why I never called you. Everything was terrible and I was a total failure. I hated my job, my life, my boss."

Her boss Dane harassed her regularly. So did some of her customers. She was eighteen and kept her head down, her shoulders rounded, making herself as small as possible. An old man groped her on the subway. A group of high school boys surrounded her and asked for blow jobs. Everywhere she went, men touched her hair without asking. She hid her hair under a woolen knit, wore sunglasses and oversized sweaters, rarely smiled. Dane took this as a challenge. He was in his early thirties, his chin stubbled, his biceps covered in tattoos. She was afraid he might

follow her into the bathroom but maybe she was just paranoid. It was because of what had happened with her uncle. She was sure other predators could smell her fear.

My throat tightened when she mentioned her uncle. I felt just as paralyzed as I did in the days and weeks after she was assaulted, when she was too ashamed to be in the same room with me, as if I was the one to hurt her. I felt like her shadow, always close by but never able to reach her. I wanted to fix what couldn't be fixed, to undo what couldn't be undone.

Allie's sublet was supposed to end after a month but Madison's roommate Tiffany never came back. Tiffany's brother came from the Bronx with a pickup truck, leaving Allie with an empty room. Allie stayed on, using Madison's air mattress as a bed. When Allie signed her contract with Burnout and moved out nine months later, the room still had nothing but an air mattress, a floor lamp, a stack of used books, and two cardboard boxes where she stored her clothes.

She stole croissants and muffins from the coffee shop because she couldn't afford food. She had no insurance and she thrifted the clothes she had and cut her own hair and left the neighborhood only for open mikes and occasional shows at coffee shops where she was lucky to make ten or twenty dollars in tips over the course of an hour. When she performed, her voice turned wispy and no one liked her songs. There were dark moons under her eyes and her stomach growled constantly and the smell of coffee nauseated her. How could she ever open up and sing for strangers?

It was easier when she did covers. Her voice was stronger and she no longer had to be herself. She covered Neil Young, Jeff Buckley, Billie Holliday, Fleetwood Mac, Joni Mitchell. Slowly she gained confidence, or at least the semblance of it. She could look in the mirror

without contempt, without picking at her skin. Her audiences began to notice. No more polite applauding. There was genuine warmth now.

Afterwards, she had to go home when the streets were quiet and it was a bad time to be a woman alone. With the guitar strapped to her back, she felt like a turtle with a soft, breakable carapace. She made it through her first winter with a black puffy coat, an oversized sweater and fur-tufted boots she'd thrifted, but she was always cold.

She'd been in the city six months and Madison was her only friend. They watched movies together and Madison shared her pasta and sometimes even a bottle of wine. Allie learned that Madison had grown up in a small town in New Jersey on the Delaware River, about an hour north of Philadelphia. She was an only child. She worked as an administrative assistant at a gallery in Chelsea, learning the business, and dreamed of starting her own gallery and discovering new artists.

"It's all about connections," Madison said. "Who you're friends with, who you fuck, who you fuck over."

This was disheartening advice. Friends were nice but Allie didn't have a knack for making them. She didn't have Madison's innate ambition or sex appeal. Madison brought home a carefully curated collection of men: bankers, artists, trust funders. She kept in touch with them afterwards and wasn't shy about asking favors.

"That's what you need," Madison said. "A few good fucks in high places."

Allie covered her face, trying to hold back tears. It was because of her boss, she said. Dane kept touching her arm, her lower back, her hip. She didn't want to be touched like that.

The next day, Madison came to the coffee shop while Allie was working and had a private conversation with Dane in the back hallway. Their voices were heated and then quiet. A few minutes later, Madison came out. She nodded at Allie and left.

Dane waved Allie into the narrow hall that led to the bathroom. The walls were covered with reclaimed wood paneling and burlap coffee sacks from Guatemala.

“Allie, I’m really sorry. I had no idea you felt this way.”

She looked at her feet, then his. She had worn-out Converse, he had stylish leather boots.

“I thought we were friends,” he said. “I never meant to create a hostile work environment.” The phrase was obviously Madison’s, not his.

Allie bit her lip. They’d never be friends. Every environment felt hostile to her.

When Madison learned Allie was afraid to walk home alone at night, she began going to shows with her, taking her laptop so she could work while Allie played. Allie had an old laptop and still hadn’t replaced her lost phone while Madison was hyper-connected, constantly sending emails and texts, keeping up with the latest trends and parties. Allie always declined her invitations.

As Allie’s audiences grew from ten or twenty to forty or fifty, Madison took notice. “Your voice is so amazing. You’re really talented.”

They’d been living together eight months and Madison rarely complimented Allie on her voice. If anything, it was the opposite—mild annoyance when Allie stayed up late practicing songs, occasional lukewarm encouragement. Allie’s face turned hot and she looked down at her

shoes, then Madison's. Her own worn out sneakers, Madison's polished knee-high boots.

Madison was so stylish, so beautiful.

"This is the first thing that has to change," Madison said, taking Allie by the shoulders.

"Stand up straight."

Allie stood up straight.

"Look into my eyes. Really look into them."

Madison's eyes were big and luminous. Of course men wanted to sleep with her.

"Now smile," Madison said.

Allie's mouth trembled when she smiled.

"You're a beautiful woman with a beautiful voice."

Allie blushed.

"I'm going to help you, okay? In return, I want you to help me. Can you do that?"

Allie nodded. She didn't deserve Madison's attention and she'd never be able to help her.

"I want you to practice with a mirror. Shoulders straight, smiling, eye contact. Before every song you play, remind yourself to do that."

Madison gave Allie a dress that ended above the knee and had a delicate filigreed pattern. She threw away the black puffy and the cheap fur-tufted boots and let Allie borrow one of her spring coats and a pair of elegant shoes. Until that night Allie had worn her puffy everywhere.

Allie stared at herself in the full-length mirror in Madison's room. "This isn't me," she said. "I'm someone else now." Plants lined the windowsills, aloes and orchids and cacti, proof Madison had a knack for making things grow.

"Sometimes it's better to be someone else," Madison said.

Allie smiled at herself. How had she managed to forget this? In high school, she'd been a high priestess, a sultry vampire, an elfin troubadour—or trobairitz, since she was a girl. Of course it was easier in Iowa before Andrew died, but there was no reason she couldn't become a high priestess again. That was the moment she decided to become Penumbra, or perhaps that was the moment Penumbra decided to become her.

Penumbra was an inspiration she'd had in The Glen the year before coming to New York. The Glen was a wooded lot with a creek behind her parents' house where she took her guitar and played songs. She imagined that birds and deer would gather round and listen to this strange fairy princess who didn't belong to her family. While Andrew was on a quest to find creatures he called Unnamable Ones, Allie was queen of her woodland kingdom.

The night of her inspiration, Clyde read an article about an eclipse at the dinner table. Aggie had made spaghetti with ground beef and shredded parmesan from a packet. Andrew laughed at his father, imitating his gruff voice, but Clyde ignored him. The astronomical terms intrigued Allie. A penumbra was the halo that surrounded the moon during a complete eclipse of the sun. It was the perfect name for a fairy queen.

Allie went to The Glen and sang snatches of verse, lines that didn't fit together yet. She watched the trees as the twilight and the branches became one. Evening filled the spaces in between. "Penumbra," she whispered. High Priestess was already finished. Each time she said the word *penumbra*, it became stronger, like a mantra. It unlocked the portal between the sun and moon, her own darkness and light. She saw her career stretched before her, piercing the future like an arrow. She was connected to it already. The word *penumbra* would be enough to make it happen.

“I’m Penumbra now,” Allie told Madison.

“Penumbra?” Madison wrinkled her brow.

“My stage name. I’m not Allie anymore. I’m Penumbra.”

“Attagirl.” Madison gave her a hug.

Madison reached out to her contacts in the art world and beyond. She wanted Allie to play at gallery openings instead of bars and coffee shops. She helped Allie put together a set list and suggested new songs for Allie to learn. Madison’s favorite song was Jeff Buckley’s version of “Lilac Wine.” Allie broke down in tears and told Madison that Andrew had drowned like Jeff Buckley. That was the beginning of what seemed like a deepening friendship.

Allie played galleries as Penumbra and dressed like an artsy girl, her hair tied in a crown atop her head, her face carefully powdered, her arms bare and sleek. Elfin girls were supposed to be thin and pale. *Shoulders straight*, she reminded herself. Her voice wasn’t so wispy when she sang covers. It was clear and strong and carried through rooms. Penumbra had resonance and power. *Eye contact*, she told herself. It didn’t work to make full eye contact—she wasn’t quite that brave—so she looked at the outlines of faces, the tops of heads. *Remember to smile*. This was the hardest part, drawing her lips upward as if she were happy, because the glorious feeling when she sang wasn’t happiness. It was a serious, deeply spiritual feeling, but she didn’t want to reveal too much of her spirit to strangers. They might pluck it from the air like toothpicks piercing shrimp.

While she was playing, Madison circled around the crowd, name-dropping Allie in conversations. “She’s my roommate. Isn’t she beautiful?”

Late one night, after Allie had played a gallery party Madison couldn't attend, Allie caught a bus back to Boerum Hill. It was June and she'd been in the city almost a year. She'd had three glasses of wine and she bounced through the crowd, an artist herself, accepting compliments about her voice and beauty like she actually deserved them. She could get used to this kind of attention. She wore Madison's black dress and her hair was tied up and she felt buoyantly happy as she walked home. She smiled in the dark, her shoulders upright. For an evening at least, she wasn't afraid. The air was thick and balmy, another skin over her own, and it made her nostalgic for summer nights in Iowa.

She didn't notice the men until they called to her. "Hey, girl." A smoker's voice, deep and raspy.

She stared straight ahead. What would Madison tell her? Should she keep her shoulders straight or stoop forward and make herself small? Should she reply in some way or pretend she hadn't heard them?

"What's the hurry?" called another voice.

How many were there? The voices multiplied around her. A man grabbed her arm and pushed her against the stoop. Her guitar made a hollow sound against the brick. He was so drunk he smelled like rubbing alcohol. He threw her over his shoulder, his hand reaching under her dress. She slipped headfirst down his back and crashed to the sidewalk. Her mouth filled with blood. Somehow she got to her feet and ran, only to be yanked back by the straps of her guitar. She struggled loose and the Guild she'd had since she was sixteen dropped from its soft case, snapping as it hit the concrete. She ran as hard as she could and didn't stop until she reached a convenience store two blocks away. She doubled over by the newspaper stand by the door.

She couldn't breathe. Her lungs were frozen. She couldn't breathe. She was light-headed, her heartbeat drumming in her ears, her vision filled with floaters. She couldn't breathe. The fluorescent lights turned her skin inside out, a ghost with gray-blue veins. And then a single small shuddering breath, the smell of mop suds choking her. Her hands were scraped and bloody. An old Mexican woman rushed around the counter, speaking in Spanish. Allie recognized one word— *ambulancia*.

"I'm fine." She managed another breath. "I want to go home." She couldn't afford a hospital bill. Tears burned her eyes. Home was her mother sick in bed. Home was Brenda the bear with her dented nose. Home was the mostly bare room in Madison's apartment with a mattress on the floor.

The old woman called a taxi even though Allie was only six blocks from Madison's apartment. The driver offered to help her upstairs but Allie refused, using the railing for support instead. She fumbled for her keys and unlocked the door. Madison was already home and in her pajamas, a bowl of popcorn in her lap.

"I'm so sorry," Allie said. "I ruined your dress."

"Forget about the dress." Madison rushed Allie to the bathroom, leaving the popcorn upended on the floor. Allie's scalp was crusted with blood, her nose runny, her cheeks splotchy with tears.

"My guitar. It's gone. I can't believe this." Her mouth was bleeding, too. She checked her teeth, hoping they weren't loose. She hadn't been to a dentist in three years.

"We need to go to the hospital."

“No, really, I’m fine.” Her lip was split open, her vision fuzzy. She recognized this feeling from when she’d fallen down the basement stairs as a kid. She had the same deep exhaustion, the same chemical waft of ammonia blooming in her sinuses. Her father took her to the ER, his hand tapping her knee as he drove so she wouldn’t fall asleep. The doctor checked her eyes with a flashlight and she’d spent the night in observation just in case. That was the detail she remembered most, the pendulum of light swaying back and forth.

“You don’t look fine,” Madison said.

“I don’t have insurance.”

“We should file a police report.”

“I don’t want them finding me.” She’d never walk down that street again.

She took a scalding hot shower, the water stinging her cuts. If only she could boil her skin. No matter how much she scrubbed, she couldn’t get clean.

She called in sick three times that week. She pretended to be in severe pain so she could take expired painkillers that had been abandoned in the medicine cabinet. She spent her days watching reruns on TV, too numb to do anything else. She had no guitar and couldn’t practice. That was the closest she ever came to calling me, but she was too lonely, too ashamed.