

the
sharp
edge
of
silence

CAMERON KELLY
ROSENBLUM

HOT
KEY 
BOOKS

This book contains descriptions of sexual violence and self-harm that some readers may find triggering.

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*For Mom and Dad,
who taught me resilience*

I contain multitudes.
—*Walt Whitman*

The
LYCROFT PHELPS SCHOOL

est. 1856
12 Liberty Street
Whitney, New Hampshire 03026

Dr. Griffin Frye
Head of School

Charlotte Tate Foresley
26 Deer Path Rd.
Thornwood, IL 60063

Dear Charlotte,

It is my great honor to offer you admission to the Lycroft Phelps School. Let me be the first to congratulate you on your fine accomplishments as a student and community member in middle school. Our admissions department is extremely selective. We are confident you have the curiosity of mind and exemplary character to thrive here at Lycroft Phelps. Like so many other talented “Crofters,” you’ll discover passions, pursuits, and friendships that will last a lifetime. Enclosed are the enrollment papers and student code of conduct pledge for you and your family to review, sign, and submit by April 15.

Who will you be at Lycroft Phelps? Explore the enclosed Athletics & Clubs catalog. Our offerings include

a broad variety of sports (Boy's Crew won the Northeast Prep School Conference last spring!), performing arts, robotics, a capella, and Young Entrepreneurs to name a few. Dance director Celeste Chu is eager to bring your impressive dance experience to our own Ballet Northeast School, and to help you grow in your artistry.

Since 1860, distinguished Lycroft Phelps graduates have attended America's most elite colleges and universities and gone on to make significant national and global contributions in the arts, sciences, public policy, and business. You're on the path to making your mark, Charlotte Tate Foresley. Congratulations!

Sincerely,

Dr. Griffin Frye, 'Croft '86

M.A., Williams College

Ed.D., Columbia University

dant mentem animumque deducemini ~ Lead with minds and hearts alight

The
LYCROFT PHELPS SCHOOL

est. 1856
12 Liberty Street
Whitney, New Hampshire 03026

Dr. Griffin Frye
Head of School

Maxwell Hannigan-Loeffler
368 W. 67th St.
New York, NY 10023

Dear Maxwell,

It is my great honor to offer you a space at the Lycroft Phelps School as a Founders Legacy Scholar. Congratulations! This four-year scholarship covers all room, board, tuition, and school-related expenses from freshman year through graduation. Currently, we have just two other Founders Legacy Scholars at Lycroft Phelps. Our admissions committee found your exceptional prowess in STEM and numerous awards in math and science highly admirable, and we are confident you are on the kind of trajectory that makes for an exemplary career at Lycroft Phelps and well beyond. I'm sure you'll find nourishing challenges in our new Kessler STEM Center, as well as

leadership opportunities within the department. We want to see you among the network of highly successful Lycroft Phelps alumni one day.

Who will you be at Lycroft Phelps? Explore the enclosed Athletics & Clubs catalog for next year. Like so many other talented “Crofters,” you’ll discover passions, pursuits, and friendships that will last a lifetime here on our beautiful campus. Enclosed are enrollment papers, Founders Legacy Scholarship details, and the student Code of Conduct pledge for you and your family to review, sign, and submit by April 15. Please do not hesitate to call my office directly with any questions.

Sincerely,

Dr. Griffin Frye, 'Croft '86,

M.A., Williams College

Ed.D., Columbia University

dant mentem animumque deducemini ~ Lead with minds and hearts alight

The
LYCROFT PHELPS SCHOOL

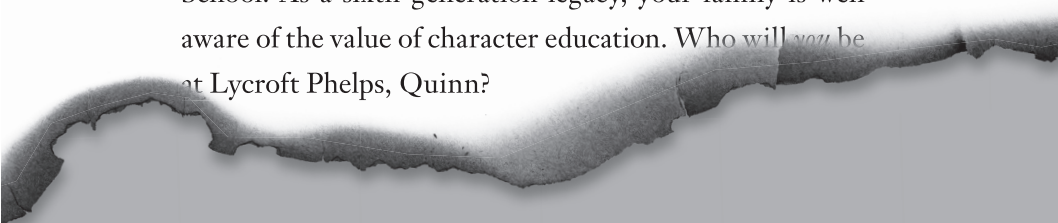
est. 1856
12 Liberty Street
Whitney, New Hampshire 03026

Dr. Griffin Frye
Head of School

Quinn Luddington Walsh
2636 Shore Rd.
Southport, CT 06890

Dear Quinn,

It is my great honor to welcome you to the Lycroft Phelps School. As a sixth-generation legacy, your family is well aware of the value of character education. Who will *you* be at Lycroft Phelps, Quinn?



SEPTEMBER



Thursday Night

QUINN WALSH

✧ *Lower Mid* ✧

I weave between trees—hidden, exposed, hidden, exposed—navigating roots and rocks and earth, spongy with leaf rot. Sprawled between tidy footpaths, these woods are unruly and thirsty, sucking the darkness between grooves in the tree bark and crevices in the rocks. The sky's at its darkest now—between sunset and moonrise.

So many between.

I'm between myself and myself, I think. I feel my bones but don't recognize my skin. This strange new self drinks in the power of night. I know what I *was*. I don't know what I'm becoming. But I know what I need to do. Get Officer Doughty's gun.

Because Colin Pearce must die.

I take care crossing the spiky skeleton of a fallen pine that ripped right through my running tights and slashed my knee last night. The tree is a landmark, and I know I'm nearly there. Rectangles of light appear through the black lace of leaves. Anderson House, home of LPS Campus Safety, is up ahead.

At the woods' edge, I stop. Twenty feet of lawn separates me and Officer Doughty. It's cold for September. My breath is uneven, billowing from my face in ragged blasts. I clamp my jaw and exhale

through my nostrils, not wanting the act of fucking breathing to give me away.

Framed by the lit window, Doughty sits at his desk writing in his log. It's three minutes before eight p.m., and I can practically count off the seconds until he glances at the clock and commences his quitting time routine. Soon he'll walkie his deputy, Safety Officer McPhee, who's buzzing around campus in a pimped-out golf cart, and sign off for the day. He'll lock up Anderson, get in his pickup, and head home.

He closes the log and tips his chin toward the clock, then predictably walks toward the tiny bathroom.

I'm in all black, like Tom Cruise in those *Mission: Impossible* movies Dad and I used to watch. Just like a spy, I dash across the grass and press myself against the shingles of the old 1950s cottage. I peer in the window, opened a few inches. I already know there's only one main room with the desk, a few chairs, and a cot in the corner. A computer monitor with a split screen flips through grainy black-and-white scenes on campus. If Campus Safety had even the smallest particle of a clue, those cameras would point to the darker corners of school. Instead, it's like I'm watching the LPS website virtual tour. All brick and ivy colonnades, white domes crowned in blue, expansive quads crisscrossed by footpaths in pleasing geometric patterns. Does Doughty really believe the bronze Founders Statues of John Lycroft and Erastus Phelps needs a security cam trained on them? Then again, I think, I can use this ignorance to my advantage. Once I have the gun.

The toilet flushes, and the bathroom door creaks. I duck. Doughty's footsteps approach, the wheels of the chair crackle over

grit on the worn wood floorboards, and he rests his knee on the ratty green seat cushion. He's so close I could poke him if it weren't for the wall. A giddy surge of my own power courses through me, and a bubble of laughter grows in my chest, threatening to pop and blow my plan to smithereens.

Stuff it! I tell myself. And the laugh curdles into anger, pooling in my throat, seeping back into the rest of me and settling to a simmer.

Doughty shifts and removes a shoulder holster, normally hidden under his bulky LPS Safety jacket. I doubt most people know Doughty packs heat. Like he'd ever shoot anyone at LPS. But I know. And this knowledge is everything.

He opens the desk drawer. Slides the pistol from its snug leather pocket—gently, reverently, maybe even lovingly. His gun may be the single thing that reminds Doughty what he *could* do if he didn't work at Lycroft Phelps.

In the trees, I hear John Lennon singing, and for a flash I'm five years old, with Dad in the study at home. He's setting the needle onto his vinyl record of the Beatles' White Album. "This is greatness, Q," he says. "Listen." He smiles, closes his eyes. The needle hisses, snaps, and then Dad sings softly with the *doo-doo-doo* part, and opens his eyes at *oh, yeah*. I giggle. He swoops me into the air as Ringo's drums kick in, waltzing me around the room. I want this version of me back so badly I have to blink hard to unsee it and refocus on Doughty.

The thump of his pistol against the wood echoes in my gut. My temples pulse. I'm weak and jangly at once.

He's hanging his holster on a wall peg and locking the drawer, opening another one and dropping in the keys. Hardly a foolproof

safeguard, but in his defense, he suspects nothing. And I'm invisible, so we'll give him a pass on this misstep.

I press myself flat again as he shuts the window. I hear him latch it, and the lights dim. He's about to walkie Deputy McPhee. Even through the glass, I hear the fuzzy voice: "Hey, boss." My opportunity.

I silently dart around the back of the building to the other side of the porch, almost as if I'm flying. I think, *Wait, I am a ghost*. But, no, I've bitten my cheek and can taste blood when I press it with my tongue.

I pick a fat tree as close to the porch as I dare. Last time I was too far. Tonight I'll see that alarm code he dials to lock up. Doughty steps outside, closing the door behind him. He pokes buttons, which I know to be in a three-by-four array, like a phone pad. All I have to do is memorize the pattern. I stare as hard as I can.

Blip. Blip.

Three-three . . .

Bleep. Bleep. Bleep. Blip.

Nine-seven-nine-seven? Or six-four-six-four?

Doughty spins my way, heading for the pickup. Shoes crunch the path. The truck door opens. Slams. Engine turns over. Light floods the woods around me. The tires grind, spit gravel, and headlights swivel away.

Then silence. I'm alone.

He could forget something and come back. So I wait, leaning against the tree. An asymmetric moon rises from the hills behind Lake Edith. It tosses pieces of itself onto the water, and the lake

wears them like sequins. *You don't need to make yourself beautiful for this place, Edith*, I say in my head. *You're too good for them*. I'm motionless until the moon shoves off the hilltops, launching itself into the blue.

I move to the door. My gloved hand hovers in front of the keypad.

I tap: 3-3 . . . 9-7-9-7. I don't hear any unlatching sound but try the knob just in case.

Nothing. "Shit."

I stare at the numbers, willing them to reveal the code to me.

Haltingly, I push 3-3-6-4-6-4. I shake the knob. Again, nothing.

Inky, liquid shadows shimmer at the corners of my eyes. The numbers vibrate. I swear he dialed that pattern. I *know* it. Maybe the 3-3 was 6-6. I've got one chance left, assuming that the alarm will auto-lock—or worse, start blaring—if I try a fourth time.

6-6-3-1-3-1.

Silence.

The knob doesn't move. I throw my head back, about to yell *FUCK* as loud as I can when I see a bunch of kids coming up the hill from the lake. "*Fuck!*" I whisper instead, and duck behind the fat tree.

It's guys. One of them says something. I can't make out specific words, but it must have been really sick because the others laugh in that way when they know they're not supposed to. First Years, probably, so new to campus they don't dare *not* laugh. My throat clamps tight, and for a second, I think I might barf.

No, I tell myself.

When they're out of range, I contemplate trying one more time. I simply can't risk a blaring alarm. I'm sure I could get away now, but they'd double down on precautions—which are stuck somewhere in the 1970s, right where I need them.

I stare at the charcoal sky as my staccato huffs of breath vaporize above me. I'm done here for tonight. From the trees, two bats dart in a quick, pointy dance to starry music only they hear, and I feel so devastatingly alone that I could lie on the ground. Go to sleep and never wake up. The bats vanish. A tear rolls down my cheek. I swipe it away.

I fish my AirPods from my coat pocket. The opening to “Gimme Shelter” by the Rolling Stones washes over me like a filmy dream, waking every cell on its way. The bongos find my heartbeat.

Ready again, I flit, bat-like, back into the company of trees, my shadowy secret keepers.

CHARLOTTE FORESLEY

✧ *Upper Mid* ✧

I read the prompt on my laptop screen for the zillionth time.

What is at the heart of your desire to be this year's Young Choreographer?

It's not a trick question. And yet. I've been staring at it for a solid thirty minutes. My hands hover over the keys. *Don't think, Charlotte. For once.* The application is due to Madame Chu, director of Lycroft's Pre-Professional Ballet program, tomorrow by three o'clock, the end of classes. Madame is cagey. Does she want me to genuflect here or make some kind of statement about my artistic passion? She could want either. Or both.

I type.

It would be an honor to join the long list of distinguished dancers who

"Blech," I say, pressing delete. My screen burbles like it agrees with my assessment. But I realize it's an incoming text. Grace, my hometown best friend since preschool.

Grace: That pic you sent. You're living on a movie set!

She's talking about a photo of the quad at midday break today. Giant maple trees turning red at the top; students draped around the lawn having picnic lunches in small clusters.

Me: I know! It's like that painting made up of little dots we love at the Art Institute—the Ferris Bueller one.

Another computer burbly sound. She's FaceTiming. I glance over each shoulder to make sure I'm really alone here in the library's reference section, ashamed that I care. I can't explain why I have a hard time shifting back to the Thornwood version of myself when I'm here. Anyway, it's all clear, and I answer.

Grace pops on the screen. "Ha! *Sunday on La Grande Jatte*—New England prep school style."

"Perfect!" I say. "I miss you."

"Me too," she says.

"Just apply. You could be here by January." She won't, and I'm not sure it's the best idea anyway, but in a perfect world, it would happen, so I go with that.

"Ha! Not everyone's LPS material, Char."

I lower the laptop volume. "Please. Do *I* look like LPS material?! I'm just a good faker."

She makes her skeptical face. "Bull. Charlotte Foresley is quintessential LPS material. They put you on the frigging website landing page." She's grinning, anticipating my freak-out.

"What? They did?" I squeak. "How do you know?"

While I click the tab to open the page—also our student portal login, which means *e-ver-y-one* on campus will see this—Grace says, "Your mom shared it on Instagram. Of course."

"Oh God," I groan.

"They really should let you access social media more often at that place," Grace is saying. "I mean, your *mom* is online more than you. Sad." I don't bother arguing. I love escaping social media, honestly.

I stare at the picture. It's our advanced pointe class warming up at the barre, including my roommate and best friend here,

Hannah. But my face is the only one visible from the camera's angle. It looks like everyone's echoing my pose. "God, my port de bras. Atrocious." I click it away, cringing.

"I see your perfectionism's thriving," she teases. "Anyway, who cares about ballet arms? I want *dirt* on the hot new boyfriend."

I hunker closer to the laptop. "Shhh! Geez. Grace!" I whisper.

She slaps her hand to her mouth. "Oh shit! Is he with you?"

"No, but he could be!" I say softly. "Seb isn't quite my boyfriend." How to encapsulate an entire school culture . . . "People don't say *boyfriend* and *girlfriend* here."

"Don't say 'boyfriend and girlfriend'?" She smiles in disbelief. "Okaaaaay. He asked you to prom—"

"Summer Sendoff," I correct, then cave. "Yeah, it's a prom."

She rolls her eyes. "Yes. One where you and Seb made out passionately. He called you all summer; you visited his Cape Cod vacation house"—she air quotes—"on the way" back to school, even though it's not on the way. Are you just *buds*?"

"No. *Boyfriend* is kind of extreme. As a term." Grace arches an eyebrow. It sounds flimsy even to me. "Labels and all that," I add, which doesn't help. The truth is, I don't understand it myself. I want to yodel from the chapel bell tower that I'm Seb McNeilly's girlfriend.

"Have you boffed?"

"Grace," I groan.

"Charlotte."

It comes from over my shoulder, and with sickening certainty, I know who it is. I whisk the laptop shut, spinning in my chair and emitting an involuntary yelp.

Seb, hands in his pockets, eyes glittery with amusement.

“Whoa,” he says with his warm, infectious chuckle. “Why so jumpy?”

I feel my mouth attempting to smile, but my heart is in overdrive. “You scared me.” I study his face for a sign that he heard us. He’s simply grinning. Utterly inscrutable.

“Sorry,” he says through a chuckle. “You shouldn’t hang out in the creepiest corner of the library.” He pulls an encyclopedia from the bookshelf, blows dust off it, and examines it like a dinosaur bone. “I mean, who uses these things?”

“Nobody. That’s the point.” I stand and smooth my breathing, positioning myself between the laptop and him, as if Grace might burst it open and they’ll share a big laugh. I stretch one shoulder by tugging my elbow, then switch to the other. “There are zero distractions here.” I smile, hoping I’ve regained something close to my cool.

It works. Seb shakes his head like I’m a charming puzzle and puts the book on the table. He moves behind me and presses his thumbs into my shoulders, massaging. I resist the urge to melt into him like a cat.

“I’ve got a better place,” he says. “Exceedingly better.” He spins me, lifts my arms one at a time so they’re wrapped around his neck. I’m tall but Seb’s six three, and yet we just *fit*. He lowers his face, and we kiss. He’s freshly showered, and I run my fingers through his baby-soft hair, where it curls at the nape of his neck. “Mmm,” he says, pulling away. “Come on.” He pats my back pockets. “I can’t wait to show you this.”

I squint, trying to appear as though I’m weighing my options. I’d follow him into an active volcano, but I don’t want him to know

that. “Okay,” I say. I turn my back to him, flip open my laptop, and quit FaceTime. *Sorry, Grace*, I think. She’ll understand.

Seb thumbs through that encyclopedia. It’s the C volume. “Hey! Chromium. We just learned that one,” he says. I’ve been helping him memorize the periodic table for his honors chem class. I took it last year.

He closes his eyes. “First element in group six, a steely-gray, brittle transition metal.” He blinks, adding, “Lustrous and resists tarnishing.”

I think I love him.

“Ding, ding, ding!” I sling my backpack over my shoulder.

As we pass through the common room, I feel eyes on us and lift my chin like I would in a performance. Otherwise, I’d liquify into a puddle right here and now. I can dance in front of hundreds of people, no problem, but walk me through this place, filled with girls ogling Seb and wondering what’s so great about me, and I want to disappear. Pretending I’m onstage is a dancer superpower, I guess.

Outside, the air has a sweet, sharp smell. This is my third Lycroft Phelps autumn, and I can’t get enough of it. I’m a sucker for a costume change. The bright foliage, the orange pumpkins against stonewalls, the sweaters and boots and scarves—heaven.

Seb and I stroll side by side, bumping hips occasionally, past the Founders Statues. Since dinner, someone has wrapped green-and-white school scarves around Lycroft’s and Phelps’s bronze necks. A sign says *LPS vs. Tofton, Saturday!* A football’s stuffed in Lycroft’s crooked elbow.

“Why don’t the rowers do something like that?” I ask.

“Why don’t the dancers?” Seb replies. “Tutus or something?”

I shove my shoulder into his chest, less because he deserves it and more because I have an excuse.

“This way,” he says, steering me down a narrow, sloping path between Spangler Dining Hall and the woods. A pink splotch of sky lingers through the leaves where the sun has just set, but otherwise the trees are dark, tangled, untamed—straight out of a witch’s fairy tale.

A sudden rustling sound—a crashing of twigs and leaves—raises the hair on my scalp.

We stop. “Um, what was that?” I say, sounding less terrified than I feel.

“Dunno,” Seb says. “A raccoon or something. A fox.”

“It sounded bigger than that,” I say, squinting into the darkness.

“Woods amplify sound sometimes,” he says, but I notice he’s squinting, too. Then his expression returns to normal and he makes an amused huff. “It could be . . . the Lycroft Yeti!” He grabs my waist and growls. I squeal and thump his arm. It’s sort of ridiculous, but I feel like a yeti/fox/wolf could get me, but nothing like that would ever get Seb. That’s not in his life story. He’ll float comfortably above the rest of us earth-bound creatures until he passes away peacefully in an Adirondack chair watching the sunset over Cape Cod Bay at age ninety-nine. I know this like I know how to tendu. As we round a bend, I cling to him and take comfort seeing Campus Safety just down the hill. Seb stops, his feet making a short, sharp crunch in the pebbles. “Here we are.” We’re in front of a small cottage that is dwarfed by Spangler.

I eye him. “I don’t get it,” I say.

“This,” he says, standing between me and the door, “is the oldest building on campus. The 1856 Library.”

“Okaaay.”

He pulls his hand from his pocket and jingles a key ring. Before I can formulate the right question, he’s slid it in the lock.

“Wait,” I say. “We aren’t allowed in here. Are we?” I hate how I sound—prudish. Chicken.

“Don’t worry,” he says, fiddling with the lock.

“You do realize that’s Campus Safety down there, right? Within eyeshot.” Not *eyeshot*, exactly, but this feels way too reckless. “Isn’t this breaking and entering or something?”

Instead of responding, he sweeps open the door. “After you, Charlotte.”

I realize this is not a moment to be Charlotte Tate Foresley, high-honors Upper Middie, ballet school soloist, and Big Sister group leader. In other words, this is no moment to be me. With a final glance toward Campus Safety, I check my metaphorical goody two shoes at the door and enter the darkened room. The fruity smell of aged wood and old books envelops us. Seb pushes an ancient button on a switch plate. For two seconds, nothing happens. Then four Tiffany stained-glass floor lamps light up each corner of the room. A stout globe stands guard before the floor-to-ceiling bookshelves. There’s even one of those rolling library ladders.

“Whoa,” I say.

“Right? It’s like a lost room from the game Clue! You can practically see Lycroft’s butt print in this chair.” He points to a leather seat by the fireplace.

I laugh, then ask, “Seriously, how—”

“Shhhh. It’s all good. Ready for the best part?” He steps onto the ladder. “Give me a push.”

I smile quizzically and shove his leg. He rolls away, grinning. When the ladder stops, he inches himself to a cabinet built into the woodwork, opens it, and, like a magician, produces a silver tray with a crystal carafe and two matching glasses. It’s fancy wedding gift material. “Behold,” he says, stepping down. “The family Scotch.”

He sets the tray on a coffee table and pours us each a drink. Seb’s family owns McNeilly Scotch, a world-famous whiskey company. Before the trip to Cape Cod, my dad asked if I could snag him a bottle for Christmas from my new boyfriend. My mom swatted him.

I eye Seb and take the glass. He taps it with his, eliciting a delicate chime. “Cheers.” He sips, so I follow suit, only allowing the liquid to brush my lips. It’s cough medicine on fire.

I make a sound like “Grahgh!”

He laughs. “It’s an acquired taste. You’ll get there.”

I smile; his words hint at *future*.

He flops onto the sofa like he owns the place and pats the cushion beside him. “I’ve got my first Latin quiz tomorrow, so I guess I gotta get to it. How about you?”

I want to interrogate him about the keys, but why ruin his magic trick? “Plenty to do,” I say, and settle beside him.

Seb’s confidence spreads by osmosis, and pretty soon I feel like I belong here, too. I slip off my shoes and tuck my toes under his thigh. He’s sitting upright, the cross to my T. For almost an hour, we conquer our different homework assignments in a peaceful

coexistence that warms me from our point of contact straight up to my cheeks. I should be working on the Young Choreographer essay, but I can't fit ballet Charlotte and Seb Charlotte in my head simultaneously, so I'm doing math. Each problem I finish, I reward myself with a glance at him. His hair is light brown with sun streaks, and his eyes—earnestly scanning the page of his Latin book—match his hair color somehow. Hannah named it *McNeilly Gold*.

Let me be clear. Seb McNeilly is hot in about sixteen different ways. How I've ended up next to him on a sofa in this place is mystifying like the best kind of dream.

I'm multiplying exponents, when out of the blue Seb says, "Nooooo," staring at his phone. It's quiet, passing his lips like a slow, tantric breath. In the Language of Sebastian McNeilly, this means something big has happened. I'm not a native Seb speaker, but I'm conversational. The Cape Cod trip helped me assimilate to the family's fine art of understatement. They're Keep-Calm-and-Have-Another-Gin-and-Tonic kind of people. (My family is more the Drink-Wine-and-Speak-the-Truth, Come-What-May kind, based on my observations at holiday gatherings.)

"Mmm?" I move only my eyes to look at him. I don't dare test it, but I'm fairly certain overeagerness around him would be my kiss of death.

He rakes his fingers through his hair. "Chauncey is out." He looks at me, blinking.

I squint. Chauncey—whose real name is John Ceezak, which blurred to John Cee and then Chauncey after a legendary party the year before I got here—is Seb's roommate and best friend.

Chauncey's the golden retriever puppy of the Senior class: beloved, blond, not the sharpest dog in the hunt.

"Out?" I repeat.

"Booted. From Lycroft. Till January." He gazes into the mid-distance.

"Why?" I don't reveal that my heart is dancing tiny pas de bourrées. Less Chauncey means more Seb for me.

"Mr. Larabee busted him for plagiarizing. Chauncey," Seb scolds, sighing and scrolling his phone. "His grandfather's sending him to build houses in Guatemala. For perspective, he says."

"It could work," I say.

"Maybe." He slaps his knees and stands, moving to the window. "Meanwhile, our boat is screwed."

Seb rows crew in the Varsity-1 boat with seven other oarsmen plus the coxswain, formally known as Chauncey. They're really good. Ivy-League-scouts good. Seb is the stroke seat, pace setter for the boat. I think it's like the captain, but Seb claims not. Of course he would say that.

"Chauncey's only the cox," I say. "You're the ones who actually row."

"You need the cox," he says. "He's the brains of the boat."

"Oh, the irony," I say.

"Not funny," he says, but he's smiling, and per usual, my heart folds into a curtsy. Then he loads his backpack. We're leaving, I realize, and begin packing, too. Once he pushes that old light switch, he holds the door for me and follows me onto the path. I can't lie; it feels like we're leaving our very own house. And I like it.

Our breath makes cartoon clouds above us. "This is really cold for September, even by New Hampshire standards," I say, leaning into his sweatshirt once he's locked the door.

"I love it, though, don't you?" He pulls me close. We lose our balance and laugh. Above, stars dot the endless blanket of sky.

"Yeah," I say, leaving off *I love everything when I'm with you*.

We've walked a few steps when Seb stops short. "Hey. I know." Our eyes lock. I have no idea what he's thinking. Still, after nearly four months.

"What?"

"*You* can be our cox," he says.

My stomach does the wave. He wants *me* to cox?! I check myself. "Ha!" I break our gaze and continue walking. "Right."

"Why not? You're light, smart, and way hotter than Chauncey. I'm sick of looking at his sorry face every practice."

"While that is a flattering offer, I'm afraid I'll have to decline," I say. "Ballet. No time."

"Screw ballet," he says into my ear, then comes in for a long, soft kiss, and I actually consider screwing ballet. But I'm finally a soloist this year, and I have a shot at Young Choreographer. Besides, I've been dancing since I was four. I shouldn't just . . .

I'm lost in his smell and his lips and his hands caressing my ribs until *snap-snap!*

We jump apart.

A good-sized *something* is forging through the woods.

"That was closer!" I whisper. My heart is a metronome on Adderall.

Another burst of crackling brush. I jump back into his arms.

We're motionless, intuitively holding our breath.

"It's a person," he says so softly I hardly hear it. I nod into his chest, picturing something from a *Scream* movie, but he breaks away from me, emboldened. He is the opposite of me.

"Is that you, Pearce?" Seb calls into the woods. "You perv!"

I whip my head toward Seb. "Why would Colin Pearce follow us?" I ask. His eyes flick toward me and away.

"Creepy," I say, but only under my breath.

More shuffling through leaves. A dark figure darts between the trees. My hair follicles shiver in waves.

"Pearce!" he yells. We stay still.

"Wouldn't he at least respond?" I breathe. Seb doesn't answer. "Let's run," I say. "One, two—"

Before I whisper *three*, we're sprinting like it's the zombie apocalypse and we don't stop when we reach the main quad, or as we pass the Founders Statues and startled classmates—not until we're at Fisher, my dorm, where we collapse onto the cold stone steps, panting.

"What . . . was that?" I say.

Seb takes my hand for a few breaths, and then he starts to laugh. This answers none of my worries—Why would one of Seb's crew teammates and good friends stalk us? If it wasn't him, who was it?—but I find myself laughing, too, willfully swallowed into Seb's hermetically sealed world. I kiss him then—greedily, like I can steal this way he has of owning the universe and make it mine. He pauses and looks in my eyes. I've surprised both of us and I'm embarrassed, but he just kisses me back.

There's no word for fear in Sebanese. Whether that was Colin back there, the Lycroft Yeti, a black bear, a serial killer loose from

the New Hampshire State Prison—it's just another adventure to Sebastian Cope McNeilly III. Just what happens after you sneak into the oldest building on one of the most prestigious prep schools in the country and drink high-end Scotch out of crystal snifters you somehow stashed there earlier. For the first time, my life feels more daring offstage than on it. I breathe in Seb's clean, masculine smell. It's dangerous to fall this hard for a guy like him, but there's not a thing I can do to stop myself.

MAX HANNIGAN-LOEFFLER

✧ *Upper Mid* ✧

“Tell me we’re close to sealing the deal on this thing. Please?” Colin Pearce says. He barely fits on the student chair, elbows and knees jutting into space like a crane. We’re in the second-floor lab, and the custodian already asked us twice if he could vacuum.

Colin and I are partners for our Physics Intensive project. We’ve set out to determine the initial and final velocity of horizontally launched projectiles when gravity is the only force. I mean, air resistance is a force, too, but Mrs. Lewis told me to leave that out for simplicity’s sake in this experiment. It’s only September.

“We *would* be close,” I say in response to his question, letting him fill in: *If you would actually contribute*. But I don’t look at Colin while I say this because, though we both know he needs me to get an A on this assignment, we are equally aware he’s got enough stored energy in one foot to launch my ass from here to Spangler. In a stiff wind.

He makes a throaty sound of amusement. “Chill, Mr. Spock.” Leaning forward, he takes a ball bearing between his fingers, squinting, like he’s never seen one before, when in fact they’ve served as the aforementioned projectiles we’ve been releasing down a ramp since we got here. “Give me something to do.”

“We’re finished with those,” I say. “Measure the distance from where it landed to where the others landed.” I had dusted the ball

bearings with graphite shavings so we could see the landing points *and* how long they kept rolling after landing, as that data provides further evidence of velocity.

He picks up the tape measure and squats. “Here to here?”

I exhale loudly. “Yep.”

Colin announces the results while I enter them into my calculator. We repeat this process several times, and then I calculate the average distance traveled, including a separate calculation for the post-impact roll. He listens attentively, smiling to himself as he takes notes. I’m still mad at myself for agreeing to partner with him. He’s not stupid by any means, but he’s lazy as hell. For the two years I’ve been at Lycroft, I haven’t registered on his radar—I’m not sure I’m in his field of vision, actually—so he caught me off guard when he asked to partner at the end of our first class.

“I can print these up on cards so they look good for the presentation,” he’s saying now, like maybe he heard my thoughts and remembered he owes *something* to this venture.

“Okay,” I say, “that’s a—”

But he’s pulled his phone out of his pocket. His eyebrows yank together. “Fuck,” he says. “Goddammit, Chauncey!” I look over my shoulder in case Chauncey is standing there, but we’re alone. Colin’s thumbs skitter across his phone screen, and then he shoves his chair under the lab desk. He’s mobilizing for departure, leaving the cleanup to me.

I consider asking what’s up with Chauncey, who lived across the hall from me last year and is actually a decent person. I mean, considering his friends. He’s also barely taller than I am. Maybe that’s *why* he’s more approachable. Or maybe he can just see me.

Anyway, I feel like Colin wants me to ask, so I don't. "Here," I say instead, handing him the ramp box.

He tosses it back. "Sorry, man. Gotta make like a banana and get the fuck outta here." He looks at me all earnestly, but I swear he says the next part just to hear it himself. "Chauncey got booted from school, and now the fastest boat in Lycroft history has no coxswain." He presses his lips thin, shakes his head, and whisks past me out the door.

"You prick," I say after he's gone.

"I was going to vacuum?" says the custodian.

"Oh—" I nod too hard. "I didn't mean *you're* a—" I add, feeling my face heat.

He chuckles and waves dismissively, flipping on the vacuum.

I put the ramp, et cetera, in our cubby and leave the custodian in the lab. Last year, the school installed this cool glass catwalk, a pentagonal prism, connecting the old Winfield Science Building to the newer Kessler STEM building. To passersby at night, it glows blue, and it lets me imagine I'm leaving Google headquarters to go home to my hot girlfriend (who either *is* or very closely resembles Alexandra Buchanan, the Lower Mid from Outdoors Club) at our carbon-neutral home. As I walk through it, I watch Colin below me, pacing in a dome of lamplight on the footpath, gesticulating while talking on his phone. He's probably whining about Chauncey. When he pauses to listen, his breath vaporizes over his head, and I smile because he looks like he's spontaneously combusting—which of course I know is impossible when it comes to humans, due to the whole our-bodies-are-70-percent-water thing, but a guy can dream.

A flash of motion catches my eye in the woods behind him.

I stop, my heart giving an extra tick. I lean onto the smooth wood railing and stare into the darkness.

There it is again! I step back from the window. We're in the foothills of the White Mountains, so it's probably an animal. Moose are known to appear on campus once a year or so. Or, I think hopefully, it's a bear and it can maul Pearce.

But my gut tells me it's something else. The movement looked . . . calculated. Predatory, maybe. Catlike. A wildcat? It moves between a couple of trees, and I realize it is bipedal. And in spite of the LPS Yeti lore, I know it's human. The words *active shooter* streak through my head like bullets, and I think I should get the hell out of this transparent tube. I bolt into Winfield and get to another window by the stairwell. I dial Nils, telling myself we have security gates at the campus entrances, but counter that with my knowledge that security is always an illusion; LPS covers two thousand acres, much of it fading into wilderness.

Nils doesn't pick up. Not sure how he could help, anyway.

Then I see the guy—dressed in black like a Navy SEAL sniper, scuttling from a tree to crouch behind a boulder. I'm nauseous.

Pearce is oblivious, barking into his phone.

I can't tell if the guy's armed. All I can see is the curve of his shoulders and his head, peering over the rock. I should call Campus Safety or maybe 911, but I'm frozen.

Colin stuffs his phone in his pocket and marches up the path toward the main quad, which has rows of night lamps. The dude tracks Colin's movement, then sprints from one concealment to another. *Jesus! He's stalking Pearce?*

"Hey! Somebody!" I call, but of course I'm still alone. I could run through the pentagonal prism to get that custodian. I don't

want to lose sight of the stalker, though, *or* run through that transparent gauntlet. I stutter-step in three directions at once, helpless.

If I yell to Colin, it could trigger the stalker.

I have his number.

My fingers are clammy as I dial. Colin's phone lights up, illuminating his face. He checks the screen and taps it.

"Hey," Colin says.

"Pearce!" I whisper-hiss. "There's a—"

"This is Colin. Leave a message." *Beep.*

I stare at my phone. "Are you fucking kidding me?" He sent me to voice mail? "Good, go ahead and die." But of course I don't mean this, and freak out that I've somehow sealed his fate. I thunder down the stairs and swing the door open.

Colin is a ways up the path at this point. The stalker's vanished, and I'm not sure that's a good thing. I'm about to yell to Pearce when the blue light of the Campus Safety golf cart rolls into view.

"Thank God," I say. It's Doughty's sidekick, Deputy McPhee. He raises his fingers from the wheel in greeting. Colin raises his, disappearing around the corner of Spangler toward the main quad. McPhee rolls by me. I stand still in the Winfield doorway, weighing my options. I mean, nothing happened. Do I just ignore it? What if something *does* happen, though, and I didn't say anything?

"Officer McPhee!" I call.

McPhee jerks his head in my direction, nods, and pulls a U-turn. It's disturbingly reminiscent of me driving my red Tiny Tots car at age four. "Evening," McPhee says. "How can I help?" He's a burly redhead who resembles several of my cousins on the Hannigan side. This brings me a little comfort, until I explain what I saw and McPhee rubs his chin skeptically. "You sure?"

I nod. "It was definitely a guy following Colin. But I guess I don't know if he was actually, you know, dangerous." McPhee's got one fuzzy red eyebrow tilting forty-five degrees.

Here it comes. He recognizes me. The short-guy thing is rare at LPS. I shift my weight, bracing for the inevitable.

"Aren't you the boy who called in the suspicious smell last year? Shanahan?" He twirls his hand, unable to come up with the second half of my name.

Boom.

"Hannigan-Loeffler," I correct him.

"Yes, that's right," he says, like I could've given the wrong damn name.

"It smelled dangerous." I sound defensive, which annoys me.

December of my sophomore year, I woke to a gas smell in the dorm. I thought it was a cracked line. Everyone was evacuated at two a.m. and stood shivering in their underwear while the fire department checked the building. It was during exam week, too.

The school administrators kept my identity private so I didn't get the shit kicked out of me, but I always suspected they thought I made it up. Which would be so weird, and why would I do that? "I could have dreamed the gas smell, I guess." I look at my feet. "Anyway, this is totally different. I am wide awake, and he was right there!" I point toward the boulder. I can tell he's not buying it, so I say, "Do you want to be wrong on this?"

Grudgingly, McPhee takes the walkie from his holster and contacts the Whitney Police. While we wait, he jots notes as I fill him in. But when the town cruiser arrives and I say it all again, I feel the story starting to sound preposterous. The cops, looming above me in crisp blue uniforms, nod respectfully, but they don't

look alarmed in the least. They shine spotlights into the woods and crunch around in the leaves for good measure. Satisfied, they climb back into the cruiser. The driver, a beefy older guy with a bulbous nose, looks me in the eye from the window. He says in a slow New England drawl: "I've been doing this for a long while, son, and this smells like a student prank."

McPhee looks all sympathetic. "You had anybody poking fun atcha lately, Max?"

I'm sure they think I take plenty of crap at this place, given the number of good-looking entitled jocks enrolled. Even in a generous Dudes:Nerds ratio, I'm outnumbered 25:1. I accept this fact and choose not to be offended by McPhee's appraisal of me.

"Nah, but you're right, I bet," I say. At this point, my dignity's at stake. "Crofters being Crofters."

The New Englander frowns, gazing into the woods. "Sounds about right," he says, then exhales in a way that makes me think he's not a big LPS fan. "Aw righty, then. Until next time, Jimmy." He nods to McPhee.

"You live in Stevens or Atwood Hall?" he asks me when they're gone.

"Stevens."

"Want a lift?"

I'm not sure if it's out of pity or boredom. I glance into the woods. "Sure."

We hop in the golf cart.

At Stevens, as I jog up the flight of stairs to my room, I wonder if it's worth it for me to attend this school, with all its pretentious bullshit. But Lycroft Phelps nearly guarantees me the college of

my choice. They send me to all the international robotics competitions. And it's a free ride, my dad loves to remind me. My parents own a design firm in SoHo. We're middle class, I guess, but I'd never be going to a fancy boarding school without the scholarship. They've got three kids to get through college. "Max makes them look good," my mom says. But, besides my nerd compadre Nils, nobody respects me outside of the math and science departments. I'm like an exponent: I raise the value of Lycroft Phelps's reputation, but I'm small enough to be ignored.

I open our door to find Nils asleep on the middle of the floor, one ankle tottering on a bent knee, highlighter falling out of his relaxed fingers. A book called *Art through the Ages* is splayed on his belly. He's so ridiculous I snort. I wish I could trace him with crime scene chalk.

"Nils." I prod him with my Adidas. "Dude, wake up."

"I'm up," he says, wiping his mouth with his wrist.

"You have a bed," I say.

"I didn't . . . want to . . ." He stretches his spine in a twist.

"Fall asleep?"

"Yeah," he says, yawning.

"Well done." I hang my backpack on the desk chair. The highlighter sails over my shoulder and lands on my desk.

"You missed," I tell him.

"That was a warning shot," he says from the floor.

This idiocy right here? This is why I stay.

I turn. "You're not going to believe this, but I saw some kind of stalker following Pearce tonight."

He's up, hopping. Presumably, his foot's asleep. "What?"

"Swear to God."

Nils sits on his bed, rubbing the foot. I commence my retelling. His eyebrows climb farther up his forehead as I conclude.

"I know," I say. "Crazy. Pearce had no idea." I slide my shoes off. "That cop was probably right, and it was just a student."

He stares out the window for a moment. "Whatever you do, don't tell him."

"Because . . ." I prompt.

"Because," he says. "Those guys eat their own. Maybe Pearce finally pissed off the wrong dickhead."

"I like that plot twist," I say. Nils brushes past me toward the hall bathroom.

As I peel off my clothes, I picture the guy in black and try to mind-bend him from sinister to . . . comic? It doesn't quite work. I can't shake the catlike stealth. When Nils returns, I say, "My brain just read him as *predator*." I open my fingers in what I think is a neon-sign gesture.

Nils smiles. "Max, do you think you might be influenced by all your"—he mimics my gesture—"true crime shows?"

"Yeah," I laugh, grabbing my toothbrush and washcloth. "You're right." Drying my face at the sink, I look in the mirror and think how much more relaxed I'd be if I lived in Nils's head instead of my own.

Q

The woods are dappled silver by the moon, and my AirPods muting all natural sounds create a feeling I'm in my own private snow globe, drifting through the night sky. But I know it's an illusion—one that will burst wide open if anyone discovers me. I want to belt out this part of “Gimme Shelter” like Mick Jagger’s backup vocalist does, but instead I whisper along. I can’t risk it. My plan—and the *anger* driving it—is all I’ve got to keep me from floating into cold, starless forever.

Staying angry anchors me. My older cousin Macy may be a flake in a million ways, but she got me angry. Angry keeps me breathing. Angry brought me back to Lycroft.

That fucker needs to pay, Macy seethed last June, back at home. At the time, I lay limp in my window seat. I’d been sleeping there instead of my bed since returning from school. I didn’t belong tucked in with my floral comforter and down pillows and Mr. Paws, my balding stuffed bear. Maybe it would’ve been different if my mother were still alive, but she isn’t. Thank God for Macy. Before she came to my rescue, my mind’s eye watched a sinister black cloud—some phantom, smoky fog reflecting the deadest part of me. Each night it slipped under my closet door and slid across the wide wood floorboards, over the blue braided rug, up the wall to the cushion in the window seat.

I knew it was only a matter of time before it swallowed me into the nothingness.

And part of me wanted to go.

Part of me still does.

So I need the anger.

In a few more bars, the song ends, exposing the stark sound of my rapid breath and the crackle of sticks beneath my Converse. Up the hill a ways, a couple walks on the path near the 1856 Library. To avoid them, I veer deeper into the woods just as the opening guitar riff from the Stones' "Can't You Hear Me Knocking" rolls through my AirPods, cranking me back up. The song's layers of sound tumble around with childhood memories—Dad dancing me around the patio or the den or the kitchen, teaching me the chords on my guitar. I'm mouthing the words, visualizing the notes. The next time I see the footpaths through the branches and leaves, I stop dead.

Under a lamppost, it's him. On his phone. My heart skitters around my chest, a trapped butterfly I could choke on. I want to run, but I can't. Even from there he's got me in a vise grip. If I had the gun . . . I shape my hand into a pistol, squint over my finger, aim . . .

He turns, walking. My feet decide to follow without my permission. I'm scurrying to a large rock. Then a tree. And another. The music has stopped again; my breath is urgent, my mouth dry. He says something. I can't hear the words, but the voice slithers into my ears.

He's looking toward the woods, his skin blue in the light. . . .

I realize I'm trembling and huddle over my knees, hiding.

And all at once I see myself that night. May 31. A caterpillar curled on the grassy Amphitheater Lawn, by the marble statues of the nine Greek muses. He towers above me, tucking in his shirt. Zipping his fly.

Fine. Be that way.

His Italian leather loafers shushing away through the dewy grass.

Shush

Shush

Shush

“Officer McPhee!” I hear someone call now.

I remember where I am. The AirPods have fallen from my ears, and I paw the rotting leaves, peering around the tree. He’s gone, but there’s commotion I don’t have time to see. My fingers catch on the AirPods. I pick them out of the debris, not caring that I’ve collected something small and slimy and possibly alive. Clutching all of it, I turn toward the darkness and run.