

DISCLAIMER

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“Write whatever book you want,” Atticus said, swiping his forehead with the back of a goose-bumped gardener’s glove. “I hear it’s been a while.” He grinned, gallingly, as if posing for an ancient album cover. “Just don’t bill it as some half-assed tribute to the band. You’re still obsessed with Lizzie, is all.”

I didn’t flinch. Atticus had always been suspicious of my friendship with Lizzie Evans, a friendship that predated their own improbable romance by a good couple of months. He wasn’t stupid. If he knew it’d “been a while” since my last book, he’d likely already guessed the reason for my surprise visit.

“Lizzie and I were friends,” I explained, far from the first time. “I was never ‘obsessed’ with her. People like me don’t get obsessed.”

Atticus’ giggling lips made a flatulent sound. “Please,” he said. “I’ve known more than my fair share of obsessive women.”

“I don’t mean women, per se—”

“I don’t really have time for this, B.”

Atticus jerked his cartoony glove toward the yard work. He was armed with a pair of steroidal scissors, a sinister-looking tool bearing a striking resemblance to certain man-eating fish. Its teeth were tailor-made for snipping, or pruning, or cutting stuff back. What did I know? Cut flowers were the only plants I could handle. I took a simmering delight in watching them wither.

“Busy plowing the back forty, huh?” I clucked my tongue in mock sympathy.

Atticus groaned like an exasperated sitcom sibling. “Just to recap: You drove all the way out here, without the courtesy of texting or calling ahead, just to get my permission to write a book about our high school starter-band?”

We were twenty years old when Metro Pest imploded. Atticus alone flourished in the aftermath. By the time he turned twenty-one, he had a new band (Crooked Crosses), a new look (Jesuit priest-cum-war criminal) and a new record getting national attention. An appreciative, if smirking review in the *New York Times* gave Atticus enough ammunition to mount a hostile takeover of the music industry; covers of *Spin* and *Rolling Stone* gave him an army. Too bad most of the infantrymen went AWOL after the critical massacre of

his sophomore record, a bloated double album hubristically titled *The Second Coming of Crooked Crosses*. Hemorrhaging cash, his indie record company wisely decided against financing a third.

“Not permission,” I said. “More like your blessing, I guess.”

He shot me a casually papal Sign of the Cross. “Consider yourself blessed.”

“Just like that?” I asked, a bit taken aback. “I’m absolved?”

He sighed. “Do you have a legally binding document on hand, B? A contract or consent form, something for me to sign?”

The thought never crossed my mind.

“Can’t we just shake on it, like in the old days?” I smiled. “A gentlemen’s agreement.”

Atticus was squinting at me now, making a show of sizing me up. In a flash I saw what he saw: the bespoke sports coat, the striped silk shirt, the suede chukka boots. A man who wore such clothes would be labeled a dandy, a fop, a popinjay. Yet on a woman, they scanned as indisputably masculine. “Is that what you are now, B? A *gentleman*?”

This from a man once famous for prancing around in his mother’s Lane Bryant blouses.

“I try not to overthink things,” he said, alluding, apparently, to the informal devil’s deal we’d yet to strike. “In fact, lately I’ve been forcing myself to *underthink* things, if you catch my drift.”

Back when it still mattered, Atticus Dolby had had a reputation for being insanely hard to please. My understanding is that mobs of emotionally and professionally depleted people — producers, promoters, road crew, friends — just stopped trying.

“Geez, I barely recognize you,” I said, only half sarcastically.

Atticus’s long, silvered hair was just this side of Jesus freak, paired ironically with a matching foot-long beard I was tempted to give a semi-playful tug. It was the same beard all the hirsute *braumeisters* down in South Philly had simultaneously affected, as per the by-laws of some hops-worshipping doomsday cult. I can’t say I wasn’t disappointed.

“That’s the idea,” he said, winking.

As if the rampant facial hair wasn’t enough, Atticus’s clothes, from the tips of his dirty-blond Tims to the top of his suspiciously pristine tractor cap, were a far cry from the bedraggled troubadour-chic wardrobe (paisley shirts, leather vests, scuffed moto boots) he can be seen sporting on old album covers and in early music videos. The clothes may very well make the man, but in Atticus’s

case they apparently conspired to *un*make him, or at least cast him in a new, possibly life-derailing role. The modest farmhouse, too, looked as if it had been called up from central casting. Perched atop a gentle hill, the humble dwelling provided its inhabitants with the coveted high ground, at least geographically speaking.

Atticus lowered his voice and glanced over his shoulder, as if anyone could overhear; the nearest neighbor was a quarter mile away, and from the look of the surrounding properties possibly dead. “Full disclosure,” he stage-whispered, “I’m the good cop here.”

I was afraid of this.

“Is she home?” I asked.

Atticus frowned. “C’mon, B. That’s not Tasha’s style.”

He was right, of course. Had Metro Pest’s former keyboardist been at home, this conversation would’ve never made it past the *cut the shit* part. And by now the place might’ve been crawling with actual cops.

“Your timing always was impeccable,” he said.

Some people signaled foul weather from a long way off, like heat lightning on the horizon, giving you ample time to duck and run. Tasha Greene’s ire

more often took the form of a summertime squall. By the time it occurred to you to take cover, you were soaked to the bone.

“Maybe you should call and warn her,” I said.

“You could always just hide in the bushes and ambush her when she pulls up.”

I shook my head. “Not *my* style. Besides, ambushing Tasha Greene is a mistake I’m nowhere near dumb enough to make. Those ankle boots of hers should be registered as lethal weapons.”

“Alas,” Atticus sighed, “the ankle boots have gone the way of the Walkman. Along with the fishnets and pleather miniskirts.”

Tasha and Atticus were technically newlyweds, but they’d dated off and on — mostly off, I’d heard through the grapevine — for the last twenty years.

“And now, *alas*, she wears the bottoms of her trousers rolled.”

“Hey, I tried to write a book once,” Atticus said, nodding toward the farmhouse. “Right after I bought this place. Hell, it was half the *reason* I bought this place.” He chuckled ruefully. “A semi-autobiographical thriller called *Fame Fatale*. Thirty thousand words — *poof!* — up in smoke.”

“What happened?”

He glanced at the handsome stone chimney, an obvious selling point.

“Atticus, don’t tell me Santa Claus absconded with your novel in progress!”

When he laughed, I was treated to a time-bending glimpse of a spritely kid outfitted in Converse All-Stars and a secretarial chemise.

“Tasha read the first few pages and tossed the massive waste of paper into the fireplace.”

I was horrified. “Please tell me you’re joking.”

“In my pragmatic wife’s defense,” he said, apparently serious, “it was a freakishly cold night, and the fire was dying.

§

Our freshman year of high school, Atticus was a doughy, bespectacled fourteen-year-old in a billowy white blouse, flour-sack pantaloons and paint-splattered high-top Chucks. He spoke with a quirky, unidentifiable accent I thought of as “Austringlish.” My girlfriends labeled him “cuddly,” like some plush carnival prize. They would’ve sooner shagged Teddy Ruxpin than jump Atticus Dolby’s pudgy, brotherly bones.

Only in the movies do incurable nerds rise from the ashes of the incinerated library books smoldering at their feet to become the wildly charismatic, hot-rod phoenixes they always suspected (hoped? dreamed?) themselves to be. Real life is trickier. Real life, I’ve found, is anti-transformation.

Not so for the Galatean likes of Atticus Dolby, à la Lizzie Evans. Even at seventeen, Lizzie had vision and style and one-liners to burn. A self-proclaimed lover of contrast, she'd previously gone gaga for the leather-clad punk who rode his ten-speed to school; the South Philly tough with a photo of his dead *nonna* taped to his locker door; the chess club geek with a switchblade secreted in his tube sock. So naturally, she went gaga for Atticus.

It was as Lizzie's improbable protégé that Atticus traded his big round wire rims for contacts, grew his greasy hair long and took to wearing a beret — not the floppy artsy-fartsy kind but a decidedly masculine, military-grade chapeau. If Atticus's beret had anything at all to do with art, it was the art of war.

Most crucially, rarely was Atticus seen without a cigarette affixed to his budding front-man pout. And when he showed up in homeroom one day wearing a stained thrift shop Stetson, he briefly became known — for the most part affectionately, I think — as the Marlboro Mien. (Did I mention our school was brimming with overachievers?) A botched mugging on the Broad Street subway put an untimely end to the Roy Rogers routine; he lost the hat in the scuffle, never to be replaced. I was glad to see it go. That hat marked an irre-

versible change in Atticus Dolby; to me it seemed like a grim symbol broadcasting his transition from sensitive, quasi-shy aesthete to strong, silent type, my least favorite among a man's many masks.

§

I'd made it halfway back to my compact clown car when Tasha appeared in a brawny pickup truck that looked powerful enough to *pick up a truck*.

"What, ho!" she called from inside the sprawling cab of her muscular driving machine. "Do my eyes deceive me?"

"Hey, Tash."

"*Hey, Tash*," she mimicked, putting the truck in park and cutting the engine. She exited the hulking vehicle as if disembarking the cockpit of some sputtering twin-engine airplane. Amelia Earhart, I thought, surprised to see Tasha's hair clipped short and tinted chestnut brown rather than bleached, as in the old days, to resemble a light bulb.

"It's been a minute," I admitted, doing my best to smile. *Ah, but she can smell fear*, I thought. *You're not fooling anybody with your phony-ass hey-girl grin...*

“Ya think?” Tasha wrapped her long, sinewy arms around me. Women didn’t engage in lame one-arm bro-hugs (back-pats optional). When we embraced, we did it with real feeling — even if the feeling was hostile.

“Congratulations,” I said. “I hear you’re an honest woman now.”

She cocked her head and smirked enigmatically. “What’s with the pink hair?”

Strictly speaking, my hair — or parts of it — was fuchsia.

“Consider it my little red corvette,” I said.

Tasha knit her expertly plucked eyebrows and nodded knowingly. “Doesn’t getting old suck big, hairy donkey balls?”

“More like Donkey *Kong’s* balls,” I admitted.

“I’ve never understood that name.”

“He’s a video game ape who hates Italians,” Atticus shouted from the side of the house. I’d almost forgotten he was there, in his wide-wale onesie and big-boy boots, witnessing this dog-and-pony show of a reunion. “What’s to understand?”

I pulled an apologetic face. “You caught me on my way out, Tash.”

“Actually, you caught *me* on my way in,” she smiled tightly. “In the neighborhood, were you?”

“Passing through, yeah.”

“Surely you can spare an hour or two for a couple of old friends.” She appealed to her pastorally-attired husband, though the notion that Atticus Dolby might hold any legitimate sway over me was ridiculous. “Babe, tell her it’s rude to drop in unannounced after all this time and then just up and leave.”

“I think you just did,” Atticus said.

Tasha’s expression visibly hardened. Turning to me, she said, “Nope, uh-uh. Sorry Pinky Lee.” She took hold of my hand and yanked me up the wooden porch steps. “Let’s get a homemade meal and a glass of good wine in you first. Then you can go — maybe.”

“Pinky Lee was a man,” I said.

Tasha flashed that strained smile again and squeezed my hand, hard. “If you say so, babe.”

Metro Pest played mostly house parties at the outset, but we soon earned a fast following outside our criminally biased circle of friends. We even managed to score a handful of gigs at the sort of places where the patrons weren’t fussy about their music — or the age of the musicians playing it. Our youth made us a novelty, but we had no real problem with that. Besides, we could

back up the fresh faces with solid songwriting. And after we added a long-limbed suicide-blonde named Tasha Greene on keyboards, club owners began soliciting *us*. There was only one snag: Lizzie had gobs of stage presence, but she really couldn't sing. None of us girls could, which put a real crimp in our image as a female-fronted band. Since Atticus was writing most of the songs anyway — he was just better at it, a natural tunesmith — we tried him on vocals, and he put us all to shame. "A star is born," quipped Lizzie, sneering at the kid's perennial Chuck Taylors. "Albeit a breach." She pulled me aside. "I've got to do something about those shoes. And those clothes." She laughed. "And that hair." "Mold him, shape him," I advised, only half seriously. "I'm on it," Lizzie assured me.

§

The one hit that had made Metro Pest so briefly wondrous was recorded the summer after we graduated high school. It was called "Disclaimer" and it was an Atticus Dolby original, one of the first songs he'd ever written. It was about a girl, of course, though I'd never been convinced it was exclusively about Lizzie. Lines like *If dying is an art, I'm the Sistine Chapel / If you're the peach I dare not eat, who's the rotten apple?* seemed directed less toward one specific

person than illustrative of a more general malaise, a kind of romantic restlessness or insatiable sexual hunger. The chorus was another story. *Disclaimer / don't blame her / she can do no wrong / Disclaimer / won't tame her / with the same old song / Disclaimer / don't shame her / all her vows are long.*

That last line always got me thinking, with its pun on the near-homonyms *vow* and the *vowel*. There'd been a girl at school named Lucy Keane, a lanky redhead with a plump lower lip and provocative bottle-green eyes who'd never made any bones about being into the Marlboro Mien in a big way. Lucy had dubbed herself president of the Metro Pest fan club and famously sported a homemade T-shirt that read HEAD PEST, leading some people to wrongly assume she had lice. She was inevitably dubbed "Licey," a moniker which spurred her, in a foolish, impressive display of ante-upping, to shave her head. Atticus claimed that Lucy Keane was a tad unhinged even for a groupie. But I could see that he was curious, as a songwriter if not a budding sex symbol.

As for "Disclaimer," people loved it, which meant they loved us by default. And why not? We were adorably scruffy, adorably disarming, adorably jejune. Plus, we were all over the radio — at least local radio — and even D-level celebrity (technically a passing grade) holds a certain allure.

§

Tasha managed to be charmingly hospitable over dinner, if aggressively so, piling my plate with second helpings I declined and admonishing her husband to freshen my drink despite my protestations about having to drive. It was Atticus who cracked first. In the end, the bogus affability was just too much for him to stomach.

“Go ahead, B,” he blurted, apropos nothing. “Tell her.”

A blank look from Tasha, which I basked in for a blessed few seconds.

“Tell me what?” she finally asked.

Atticus didn’t take his electric eyes off me. “The reason she’s here.”

Tasha frowned at her husband as though he’d had the poor taste to tell an off-color joke. “I don’t like it when he gets this way,” she said to me. “Mr. Cryptic.”

“Oh, I remember.”

“He thinks it’s cute.”

“I’m not the one keeping secrets,” Atticus said.

“Secrets?” I said, genuinely confused. “What secrets?”

“She’s writing a book,” he said.

Tasha looked from me to her husband and back again. “So?”

Atticus shook his head. “She’s writing *the* book,” he said. “The one about the band.”

I’d published three novels in two decades, though I’d written easily double that number. For every work I published, it seemed, there existed a shadow work, a skulking, pitifully misshapen manuscript that would never see the light of day, and with good reason. My last book had been popular enough to put me on the literary Google map with a damning pin that read “Next Big Thing.” Since then, I’d been lost.

In the interim, a lot of people with short memories had decided to forget me, and as much as I would’ve liked to hold it against them (and sometimes succeeded in holding it against them), secretly I couldn’t blame them. To my publisher’s eternal annoyance, I’d never written about Metro Pest — not so much as a single smirking allusion in anything I’d authored. I wasn’t comfortable trading on my early celebrity, such as it was, but I was even less comfortable — physically sick, to be honest — trading on Atticus’s fame and Lizzie’s tragic death. I cherished that time and was fanatically protective of it. I could label my novel a pack of lies, slap a lame disclaimer on the title page to cover my ass, bemoan the many evils of confusing an author with the characters she’s gone to great pains to create. But the world was full of literary trash-pickers

who were happy to sort through the supposedly worthless junk of style and craft in search of the juicy autobiographical bits. These people spent their time scavenging for misperceived sincerity, trawling for the so-called truth. Hell bent on blissfully missing the point, they prided themselves on reading exclusively *between* the lines, single-spaced or not.

For years I'd kept those stories to myself. But now, approaching authorial obsolescence along with dreaded middle age, I'd found that the modish clothes and "pink" hair and former "It-Girl" status weren't enough. I needed Metro Pest and I needed Atticus Dolby and I needed, still, lovely, luckless, irreplaceable Lizzie Evans.

"Well, it's about time," Tasha sneered, mock-relieved to receive confirmation that I'd finally thrown them all to the dogs. "What took you so long?"

Atticus was giving me a curious look. "She's been working up the courage to ask for our blessing."

His wife's laugh was the sound of a brittle vinyl discus shattering against something stronger, say, a philistine's skull. "She's not here for our *blessing!* Jesus, Atticus."

"Okay, what then?" They'd begun discussing me as if I weren't sitting right there in the room with them, which was never a good sign.

“She’s here for intel, baby. She’s here to pump us for useful information.”

Tasha turned back to me, her patronizing smile fading fast. “Or maybe she’s here for something like forgiveness.”

The very idea was laughable, and I told her so.

“So why aren’t you laughing?”

“Hey, man, my conscience is clear.”

“Conscience!” she barked. “What fucking conscience?”

I stared her down; Tasha stared right back.

“I should go,” I said.

“No, stay.” She reached for my hand, pretending to care. “It’s been so enlightening, B, having you here.”

“Look,” I said after a moment, “it’s not like Metro Pest is ever going to be inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. We put out one record, on our own dime, a lifetime ago. We’re a one-hit wonder, a music industry footnote. A footnote’s footnote.”

Atticus silently got to his feet and headed over to the honeycomb bookshelves where he kept his vast collection of vinyl. He bent down, selected a record and, upon returning to the table, handed it to me.

Not just any record. Our record. The only album we ever released, named for its surprising hit single. There we were on the sleeve posing against the seedy backdrop of Metro Pest Control, four baby-faced teenagers playing dress up: Lizzie in her ratty cardigan and flared corduroys; yours truly in her favorite striped sports coat and baggy jeans; Tasha in her loincloth vinyl skirt and spiked ankle boots; Atticus in his borrowed leather car coat and pretentious beret, the unlit Marlboro dangling from his mouth resembling a straw through which he wasn't above shooting a saliva-damp spitball.

"The twentieth anniversary reissue," Atticus redundantly informed me, tapping an iridescent bug-shaped sticker highlighting this very fact. "Vinyl is on the upswing."

"When did this happen? Why didn't you tell me about it?"

"I was getting around to it," he claimed. "It's not like we meet up at the kombucha bar once a week for shits and giggles."

"More shits, less giggles," sniped Tasha.

"*Disclaimer* is twenty years old," he said, grinning like a madman. "It should be celebrated. It should be *commemorated*."

I flipped over the LP. "What's all this?"

The original track listing boasted a dozen or so additional songs, though that was overstating the case. These demos hadn't made the final cut the first time around for the simple fact that, even as exercises in half-baked balderdash, they came up short.

"That's nothing," Atticus said. "I've got tons of stuff: more demos, snippets, outtakes. There's a whole album's worth of new material waiting in the wings."

"New?"

Atticus pursed his lips, a familiar gesture meant to indicate his patience was wearing thin. "New to our fans, B."

"What fans?" I cried. "Who even remembers us?"

"You'd be surprised."

Maybe. And hadn't that always been the problem?

"By all means, commemorate *Disclaimer*, if that's how you choose to squander the fruits of your solo success," I told him. "Reissue the record beefed up with all the crappy non-tunes and collector's edition bullshit you want. But you're kidding yourself if you think people actually care."

Tasha unsubtly cleared her throat. "Maybe now isn't the best time for you to be working on a tell-all."

"I don't write tell-alls," I said. "I write fiction. I write about stuff that never even happened."

"But stuff *did* happen," she snapped. "Highly *personal* stuff. And you'll use it to your advantage, or at least try to. Or else you wouldn't be here." She paused for effect, like the born performer she was. "The book's already written, isn't it?"

"Not really," I lied, "no."

Tasha didn't hold my gaze so much as wrap it in a headlock. "You always were a conniving little bitch."

I stood abruptly and tossed my napkin on the table like a cliché of a person leaving a restaurant in a huff. "Dinner was delicious. Let's hope I can keep it down."

"Wait, you're leaving?" cried Atticus.

"Oh, she's leaving," Tasha said. "Possibly through the window."

He seemed suddenly disconsolate. "And you're publishing the book even though we're against it?"

I gaped at him. "What happened to write whatever book I want?"

He shot me a *thanks a lot* look. "If Tasha's against it, then so am I."

"My hero," wisecracked his wife. "I'm calling Barry in the morning."

“Who’s Barry?”

“Our lawyer,” Atticus said.

“Libel, slander,” Tasha mused, “I can never remember which is which.”

“The word you’re looking for is censorship,” I said.

“Of course you’re publishing it,” Tasha sneered. “There’s no other Troy for you to burn, is there, B?”

She was referencing the Yeats poem whose title Lizzie had keyed onto the hood of Atticus’s car the night she died.

Tasha wasn’t alone in her conviction that Lizzie intended to take her own life the night she died. But the authorities determined otherwise, and her death was officially ruled an accident, though it was cold comfort to her grieving family and friends.

That night, after leaving our place in a simmering rage, Lizzie went for the dozenth time to Atticus’s apartment and found him not at home. This time, though, she decided to hole up in his car with a pilfered bottle of Johnnie Walker (Atticus never locked his car; he claimed it wasn’t worth stealing). She would drink herself senseless or accost Atticus upon his return, whichever came first. Riffing the glove box for evidence of his treachery, she found a half-forgotten pack of Marlboros. Well on her way to oblivion, she began

chain-smoking the stale cigarettes as a subtle fuck you to her disloyal dumbass boyfriend. Perhaps she wouldn't have passed out quite so quickly or so profoundly had she weighed more than ninety pounds; or had she consumed something more substantial than Peanut Chews and iced coffee for dinner; or had she thought to open a window, thus filling the fuggy car with the crisp, potentially head-clearing autumn air. A lit cigarette ignited the highly flammable pea-green turtleneck she'd bought at Village Thrift a few days before, at my urging. But that wasn't what killed her; she'd come to and exited the car by the time it was engulfed in flames. What killed her was the fireball that erupted when those same flames reached the jug of gasoline Atticus had stowed on the floor behind the passenger seat. The trunk was crammed with band equipment. He and Tasha were due to leave on a clandestine mini tour as a *duo*.

"She was nineteen!" I shouted at Tasha, incensed. "She was in pain!"

Her weirdly ageless almond eyes bulged to the size of walnuts. "Exactly!"

I turned on my heel and began frantically waving both hands as if drying freshly painted fingernails. "This was a mistake," I said. "Go right ahead, lawyer up. Publishers have lawyers too."

“Barry’s top-notch,” Tasha exclaimed as I exited the dining room. “Barry’s the best!”

“He’s going to have to be!”

I stormed through the front door, took the porch steps two at a time and tumbled into my car. I’d driven halfway back to the city before realizing Atticus hadn’t smoked a single cigarette the entire time, not out in the garden while fussing over the prissy foliage; not over pre-meal Negronis; not even after dinner in lieu of dessert, which in the old days was the one time he could always be counted on to light up. Instead, he’d stuffed his face with two pieces of cherry pie a la mode and polished off his rail-thin wife’s as well.

§

Atticus had paid me a surprise visit a few years back, though Tasha didn’t appear to know it. At the time I’d assumed he simply missed his old life and was running out of shoulders to cry on (tears that, it seemed, would only pool on Tasha’s impressively broad pair like rainwater on a flat tar roof). Whatever his reasons, he appeared on my doorstep looking more than a little scraggly, a good approximation of the stray he’d always secretly longed to be.

“Trick-or-treat,” he said, grinning like a hollowed-out gourd.

"You're a day early," I replied, less surprised to see him than either of us would've guessed.

"Is this a bad time?" He nodded toward the goo-slathered butcher knife in my hand.

"Yes," I said, smiling maniacally. "For *you*." He wore what looked to be his old high school beret, a half-unbuttoned leopard-print shirt, and an excess of eyeliner. "Who are you supposed to be, anyway?"

"Bowie?" he asked, as if I'd curated his costume.

I shook my head.

"Lou Reed?"

"Warmer."

"Eno!" he shouted, like the winner of some fast-paced card game.

I chuckled despite myself. "Sorry, Brian. I'm fresh-out of candy."

"Already?"

"Not *already*, dude. Halloween's tomorrow. I haven't bought any yet."

"B?" Called my dinner date from inside the house. "Everything okay?" The voice belonged to a petite blonde schoolteacher I'd met online. Her profile cited her nickname as "Miss Bossypants," and that was just fine by me. I was

looking forward to an evening of being told what to do by someone who knew exactly what she wanted and, more crucially, the most efficient way to get it.

“Give me a sec,” I called back. “There’s a confused trick-or-treater at the door.”

“You’re busy,” Atticus grinned, more genuinely this time.

“Sort of, yeah.”

I could see his wheels spinning. “Well, I only stopped by to have this autographed.” He leaned forward and handed me a copy of my latest book along with a fancy felt-tip pen.

“Should I make this out to Eno, or Ono, or Bono...”

He laughed and shook his head. “Atticus is fine.”

I tucked the knife under my arm and scribbled on the flyleaf. I dated the page and handed the book back to him.

He didn’t wait until we’d parted company to read what I had written, which I’d come to think of as standard book-signing etiquette. “Do you mean that?” he asked point-blank, wide-eyed, his voice close to cracking. “Are you really eagerly awaiting my encore?”

I told him that I was. A person with his kind of talent couldn’t just ignore it, could he?

"I'm not a big believer in second acts," he said.

"So skip Act Two," I told him. "Go straight to Act Three or Four. Or Fifteen."

"Maybe this *is* Act Three," he said. "Maybe this is how the story ends, right here on your doorstep, with a butcher knife instead of a gun..."

"If that's the case, you're being awfully brave."

"But I was a coward when it mattered," he said, growing wistful. "My courage never even came close to equaling my desire."

He was quoting Yeats, a call-back to the night Lizzie died. I suddenly realized Atticus was drunk, that whatever courage he currently possessed was of the liquid variety.

The last thing I wanted to do with a pretty, domineering pumpkin carver in my kitchen was discuss Atticus Dolby's shortcomings as a boyfriend, if not as a human being. Who had that kind of time?

"Maybe you just didn't desire her enough," I said, knowing there was no "maybe" about it.

"Desire is a terrible thing," he said, the phrase ringing some distant mnemonic bell. "Not to speak ill of the dead, but Lizzie was too demanding. Lizzie was *difficult*."

“She was a kid, Atticus,” I said. “All kids are difficult. You were the personification of difficult.”

“I was an artist,” he declared, apparently serious.

“You were an asshole,” I said, wagging the knife as if daring him to dispute it.

Atticus reeled backwards, either due to a drunken loss of balance or sheer self-preservation. “Whoa, whoa. Am I sensing a smidge of unresolved hostility here?”

“Just a smidge,” I admitted.

Atticus looked stricken, his eyes shiny with tears that had yet to fall, that might never fall. Twenty years on, had they ever fallen? Not that I had seen.

“I still don’t know how she found out. Tash and I were being so careful.”

“Sneaking around, you mean.”

“We didn’t want to hurt her,” he said. “But she ended up hurting herself. And I’m still being punished.”

I couldn’t believe my ears. “*You’re* being punished? Actions have consequences, Atticus. Terrible, fucked up, unforeseen consequences. Please don’t tell me you’re just learning this now.”

“You don’t get it,” he mumbled, an insipid variation on an old, old theme. He dug the heel of a hand into his eyes like a little boy. “Nobody ever gets it.”

I was on the verge of tears myself now, but no way in hell was I going to cry in front of Atticus Dolby, not at this late date, not ever. “You can’t possibly believe that still, at your age. *Everybody* gets it. You’re not such an enigma. None of us is.”

But he was halfway across the street, listing like a waterlogged dinghy, his perfect, patrician nose buried in his phone.

§

The night Lizzie died, she’d barged into my bedroom the way she barged everywhere: classrooms, bars, doctors’ offices—even Midnight Mass. She had a rare, celebrity-grade magnetism, and she knew it. Spoiled rotten by the public’s inexplicable, undivided attention, she’d grown accustomed to people being pleased to see her, because they invariably were, often despite themselves.

“I still can’t find Atticus anywhere,” she said, *in medias res*, as though we’d been engaged in a detailed conversation about her boyfriend’s whereabouts. “He never disappears like this. If anything, he’s usually up my ass.”

I buried my nose in my book and pretended not to hear any of this.

“B?” she said, trying to catch my eye. I held my ground; Lizzie charged ahead. “B?”

“Jesus, *what?*” I exclaimed without looking up.

“Sor-ry. What is that, like, the fucking *Kama Sutra?*” She set her jaw and crossed her arms over her meager chest as if she’d invented the look. “Where’s Atticus?”

“How would I know?”

“Are you kidding? You don’t miss a trick.”

Flattered despite myself, I said, “That’s not true.”

Silence, of the prolonged variety. I looked up from my book in time to see Lizzie’s molten eyes harden. She already knew. She had to know.

“Tell me.”

I didn’t know what to say. By not saying much of anything at all, I’d already said too much.

“Look, I’m trying to *read* here.”

I sounded idiotic, but I just couldn’t think. I’ve always been a lousy liar, especially under pressure. The only lies I seemed to tell with any believability all happened on the page.

Lizzie crossed the room and sat down beside me on the bed. She took my hands in her own as though I were the one in need of comfort. “It’s okay,” she smiled, giving my fingers a gentle squeeze. “Close your eyes. Clear your mind. *Think, B.*”

I followed her instructions, as best as I was able. I didn’t have anything to gain from their breakup; in fact, it would likely spell doom for the band. Lizzie was a lot of things — tolerant, adventurous, often just plain reckless — but “sexually fluid” wasn’t one of them. Not to my knowledge, anyway, and by then I’d convinced myself that I knew Lizzie Evans better than anybody, maybe even better than I knew myself.

I’d wanted her, it’s true. But I wasn’t brave or naïve enough to even attempt to cross that forbidding, well-defined line. Despite our intimate pose, I wasn’t entertaining elaborate fantasies of Lizzie suddenly moaning my ridiculous given name and collapsing into my arms or covering me with kisses. I was simply torn between telling my friend a painful truth or keeping it hidden.

“He’s with Tasha,” I heard myself say. I opened my eyes.

“Okay.” Lizzie let go of my hands. “He’s with Tasha.”

“No,” I said, attempting to hold her gaze in near-telepathic fashion, lest there be any confusion. “He’s *with* Tasha.”

Lizzie's face went blank, which was deceiving, considering how crowded her mind's eye must've become with pornographic scenes of Atticus and Tasha screwing spread-eagled in his lavish sleigh bed or sideways on her fetid, creaking couch, where Lizzie herself had crashed after many a night of dancing and heavy drinking, where Tasha and I had even ended up the previous New Year's Eve, stupefied with booze and desperate to mark the moronic occasion...

"I followed them for a few blocks," I lied, even as I told myself that the details didn't matter. The devil, as usual, was everywhere. "They started kissing on the corner, pawing at each other like they were searching for concealed weapons or something."

"Bullshit," Lizzie said, without much feeling. Her composure scared me a little.

"I wish it were."

There was no need to fill in the blanks. We'd witnessed similar scenes depicted in countless television shows and music videos and movies: the man's pants pooled shabbily around his ankles, the woman's back braced against a slimy brick wall. The workmanlike huffing and puffing. The self-conscious sexy-girl sounds, pornographic piggy-squeals, as if somebody was crouched in a dumpster shooting their sex tape.

Lizzie's jaw began working like mad—she had a bad habit of grinding her teeth whenever she was agitated—but her gaze was unwavering.

“You knew, didn’t you?” she said. “This whole fucking time, you already knew.”

“No.”

“Oh, bullshit, Buttercup.”

Her use of my absurd given name was worse than any slur.

“I never saw them before today, Liz. I swear.”

“But you knew,” she hissed, her eyes flashing like a grease fire. “Admit it.”

“I didn’t have any proof.”

“Proof! What is this, *The People’s Court*? News flash: If you suspect your best friend’s boyfriend is cheating on her, you say something. Especially if you happen to be in love with her yourself.”

My own jaw was set now, my ears burning red. I narrowed my eyes at her.

“I am not in love with you.”

“Oh, no?” she smirked.

It was an ugly, indelible, brazenly hateful smirk. To this day it lingers, Cheshire-like, in my memory, occasionally keeping me up at night.

“My boyfriend’s an asshole and my best friend’s a liar,” she said before stalking out the door. “What’s not to love?”

§

I completed the edits in a matter of weeks. (Tasha was right, of course. I’d already finished the book—which I’ve decided to title *Fame Fatale*—by the time I pulled up outside her converted farmhouse and flagged down Atticus.) I’d only been postponing the inevitable all these years by pretending to protect Lizzie’s memory. Deep down I’ve always known I would use it someday—would use her. I was a much better liar, it seemed, than I’d realized.

Did finally writing about Lizzie’s death make me a bad friend? Did it mean I loved her any less? Had I ever really loved her at all?

It hardly mattered. Lizzie Evans was dead. She died in a car fire way back when we were kids. She was never coming back. Not without my help, anyway.

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