

An Angel Among Women

I am in the middle of a dream and I never ever want to wake up. Me and Nathaniel are in his basement. Photos of us and our families over the years line the walls and cover the tables. A 3rd grade field trip, his little sister's Baptism, my 13th birthday party. I've been in this basement for hundreds of hours. Nathaniel turns the TV onto static and comes back to the worn-down couch. I'm not sure if we're separate entities anymore. I'm happy.



I wake up early and spend time in the kitchen with some egg hash and the sunrise. There's a nice orange haze oozing in from the windows and the occasional *tss* from the frying pan. My body is moving on autopilot as the smell of fat and potatoes and cheese follows me around like guilt. I'm packing a blueberry muffin in Tupperware when Mom floats in. She gives me a silent hug on her way to the coffee.

"Good morning, Angel," she fills the coffee pot with water from the tap, her wrinkly hands topped with obnoxiously bright French tips. "Want coffee?" I slip the frying pan under the stream of water as well, leaving it in the sink to deal with after school.

"No it's okay, I already feel pretty awake this morning. I slept good." My stomach flutters a little when I say that.

After forty minutes of edging yourself at the countertop, I'd hope you're awake.

"I can tell. You made yourself some breakfast too." She gestures to my half-eaten hash and I feel embarrassed for having my efforts noticed. "Time heals all wounds." She says the last part quietly and I ignore it since I think it's a stupid phrase to cope with the fact that none of us can control the things we love. I smile and push the rest of my hash in front of her before replacing it with the Tupperware in my hands.

“Yeah, I am. I’m bringing Nathaniel some breakfast too,” I shake the muffin. “Love you, see you later.” I squeeze her fragile shoulder and see her shake her head as I’m heading for the front door.

“You know cheese makes me blotchy!” I hear the food disposal go off.



Walking down the main hallway in our school was like walking backwards in time. The bulletin board next to the front doors was covered with current flyers: dates for the upcoming basketball games, bake sales, registration link for the Spring fundraiser gala, tutor advertisements. Nailed into the walls though were superlatives and trophies and awards spanning from 2019 to 1947. There’s nothing from after the Pandemic. I make my way down towards the 1970s, which is by the athletics locker room doors. I take a seat on the stairs and pull out my word search book. ‘Asbestos’, ‘asbestos’, ‘asbestos’. ‘Asbestos’. Where the fuck was ‘asbestos’? Was I reading that word right? I wonder if Nathaniel’s out of the showers yet.

You’re not very good at multitasking, huh, fatty?

Can you shut the fuck up? My inner voice had taken a nasty turn for the past week or so, since I stopped taking my birth control after Nathaniel dumped me. I expected it would become less volatile after the extra estrogen left my systems. I rubbed my eyes and looked back to the word search. Oh, abscess. I got back to searching for abscess.

“No, I’m really excited for tonight—why’re you asking?”

My back shoots straight like a bolt went through my spine. I turn away from my book and my eyes fall not on the person who owned the abalone voice, but the man she was with.

Nathaniel's hair was still wet from his shower and now I knew where the smell of vanilla and clove was coming from. His shirt fell from his shoulders in folds that kissed his body like the whispers of fabric on marble statues in Greece. In fact, most things about him were Grecian statue-esque. Hair that curled even when dripping wet, and his ancient nose, bumped and asymmetrical from when he broke it in the 2nd grade, like a pyramid on a glistening desert plain. He looked molded out of brown sugar syrup. He had a little stubble, maybe a week's worth. I loved when he didn't shave. I could talk about him forever. He towered over the girl who's voice was like abalone.

"I just wanted to make sure. I've never done this before," his voice was so deep and sweet, like a rich amber honey. "This whole formal family thing." He sounded a little nervous and I could feel my palms prickle with beads of sweat like I was eating habaneros. He was twisting one curl around his fingers. I know he does that when he's nervous. Abalone girl began replying but I was already flying across the hallway.

"Hi, Nathaniel," I sound disgusting. "How was practice? You look handsome." He does. His arms look extra toned from his morning meet, and his skin loo—

"It was good, thanks," he's embarrassed, or maybe uncomfortable? His eyes glance between me and Abalone.

"Good morning, Angel." twinkle twinkle smooth smooth smooth. She does a tiny friendly wave and her nails are painted my favorite shade of pink. Her hair was folded into two long red plaits like a certain rag doll. My stomach did a backflip in jealous protest.

“Good morning, Emily, your hair is really fragrant. Mint?” She evokes the image of a tube of toothpaste, walking around, enrolled in our high school class. Astringent. Nauseating. I can’t help but get lost in what it’d be like to step on her tube abdomen and see her bicolored innards *pop* her little white cap head off. Me and Nathaniel fuck on top of her deflated repository of a body.

“Yeah, I just got it–Gurly Curly. I’m glad you can like, smell it. It makes me feel like it was worth the money.” She laughs and it’s like fairies are playing bells made from rolled up petals.

“Definitely, it smells very fresh. I like it.” Holy shit these lies are just spilling out of me.

“What’s up, Angel?” Nathaniel’s so handsome when he’s serious. I pop a smile on.

“I brought you a blueberry muffin,” I unveiled the gift from behind my back. He pauses a beat, I swoop in. “No nuts, as always.” He’s still counting beats, his eyes bouncing back and forth, unsure which words to land on. After a moment of this metronome, he takes the muffin. His finger touches mine and I can’t help but feel my insides fold in on themselves, like I was a hormonal black hole. He played piano growing up, so he liked having long–

“Thank you. Can I talk to you later?” Bashful, he was bashful. Emily waved his words away.

“Hey, it’s okay. My like, 1st period is on the other side of campus so I needed to go anyway. Nate, just text me.” Emily turned to me and I felt like I got pistol whipped with a bushel of spearmint. “Bye Angel, I’ll like, see you around.” She had a big smile, lots of teeth. I smiled back, remarkably more elegant.

I waved half-heartedly before slipping my arm around Nathaniel's. He said some goodbye to Emily, I don't know. I was weaving us through the student body like we were at Coachella. We got to 1st period.

"Angel, thank you for the muffin, you know I like them. But we can't be doing this. I want a clean break up, no weird in-between." His voice was even quieter than normal, hushed like we were whispering in the 4am darkness. He hated drawing any sort of attention.

"There is no weird in-between between us, okay. I'm just trying to be a good friend, *and* I was testing this recipe for the Gala." I crossed my arms in front of my chest, looking angry but making sure to do my cleavage some favors. "I didn't give you the whole batch, did I? And I expect a review in return so it isn't even really a gift, more of a trade." That wasn't a lie. These muffins were in preparation for the annual Center of the Mind Gala this Sunday. Me and Nathaniel had been attending the past three years, but it was my first time baking something for it, which *he* encouraged me to do anyway. He paused, becoming a metronome again.

"Okay. Thank you. I'm sorry. I'm trying to figure out an appropriate relationship for us."

"Do you mean *other* than best friends? Can't you please just stop thinking about it so much? If anyone should need balance it'd be the *amazing* girl who got her *heart broken* and her *boyfriend stolen* right before her eyes." I was joking, but we both knew there was a foundational truth in my words. He snorted a laugh out and shook his head.

"I don't think stolen is the right word, but yeah. Thank you for being nice to Emily so far. I know this isn't the easiest thing to deal with, but I think we'll all be friends after some time."

"Yeah, you know me. Always looking for more girl friends."

Liar, liar, hair's on fire.

I slithered past him and into the classroom. I think I'll stop by Target on the way home and steal a mint candle.



Mint candle acquired. As well as: spearmint gum, tingling lipgloss, four travel sized toothpastes, one normal size extra whitening toothpaste, a box of Junior Mints, the mint flavored Yerba Mates, and regular mints.

I had 15 minutes until my bus home. I tore into the box of one of the travel toothpastes, dropped the tube on the ground and stepped down on the inferior part of its body, forcing the mush up near its neck. It was swollen and distended next to my shoe but I wasn't satisfied. There were no guts, nor *pop* sound. No projectile nor splash. Disgusting and dissatisfactory. This is why I got so many—to test out which method feels most satisfying.

This isn't some common occurrence by the way. I don't know when I got so... aggressive. I'm thinking I may be getting ready for my cycle.

The bus arrives and I settle in. I open the Junior Mints and pop them into my mouth one by one, sucking all the chocolate coating off before swallowing it whole. What if I should give up on pressurizing Mr. Colgate and just stab them? Suck suck suck. Maybe I can force the toothpaste to cram into a tiny overfilled portion of the tube. Swallow. Replace. Once its distended again, I can just use my Swiss A—

“Hey, Angel?”

I turn towards them with my polite face armed before I can process.

“Ah, Emily,” I glanced to make sure I had already put my bag on the empty seat next to me. I had not. Was too distracted by proxy gore.

“Hey... how’re you?” She’s taken these three seconds as invitation enough to sit down.

“I’m wonderful, thank you for asking. How’re you liking school thus far?” I’d be much more wonderful if I could continue pretending she doesn’t exist. Her hair was brushing against my arm as she adjusted herself-it was all down and loose today like a strawberry waterfall.

“Oh, hm. I like it a lot, actually. I feel like I’ve already met a lot of cool people, and made friends. Um, that’s kind of why I wanted to talk to you.” So she has a motive. “I know you and Nate have been close like, almost your entire lives and I cannot come out of nowhere and make that disappear. I’m like, not trying to ruin your friendship, and I wanted you to know that. And Nate knows that too.” She pulled her hair to one side and began stroking it smooth. “We’ve like, talked about you and him and stuff. Not that me and Nate are even *official*, but like, I really just wanted to cut off this deadweight. I think you’re really cool, and care about Nate’s happiness, like I do too, and so I would rather we be able to be friends?” She spoke that all in one exhale, and her face was the tiniest bit flushed. “Sorry, I know this is like, unexpected and maybe even unwelcome but I wanted to offer the olive branch... just in case.”

Can you spot a liar?

A chill went down my spine and I wondered if the voice meant her, Emily, was the liar. How did it know? I felt disrespected that she would talk to me, anger brewing in my arms. I continued sitting there for a minute. And another. Next stop Sacramento and 87th. I pressed the signal button.

“Thank you for saying that, Emily. I do care about Nathaniel. We’d been together for 5 years... it's expected that we'd want to explore other things and experiment with others before settling down, but I didn’t expect one of those experiments to want to befriend me. I think it’s very brave of you to be so nonchalant about it all..” I tap her shoulder as I’m leaving the bus. She grabs my hand at the last moment.

I can spot a liar, Angel.

“Thank you, Angel” she smiles and lets go, unbothered by my attempt at a backhanded compliment. Bitch.

I’ve just woken up. I smell salty.

I don’t remember much of my dream, other than it was a nightmare. Emily was there. She was surrounded by wrappers. Candy wrappers, chip bags, muffin liners, pistachio shells. She tried speaking with me, and I charged at her. She moaned out in pain, spit and crumbs hitting my face as she stumbled backwards. Her body dropped and there was a sickening *crack* when her head hit the floor. I jumped in the air, determined to land the projectile-inducing blow. But then I saw she was scared. Her eyes wide and childlike, and her mouth stretched open in a grimace. She had peed all over herself from fright.

Wait. Pee.

I pull up my blanket. I smell like pee.



Shower water leaking was making a small Nile River in the third floor West Locker Room, and it had apparently captivated my last five minutes. I touch my big toe to the wall and wait for the Nile to reach me. I come back to Earth just enough to evaluate myself in the quasi-mirror hanging in my locker. I'm strong looking. Pretty tall, toned muscles. No tits though. Very female athlete. I wouldn't hire me for Playboy.

I would hire Emily.

What the fuck. No I wouldn't. I'd fire her. I'd spike her protein shake with Miralax. I'd hire her only to give her the wrong information, have her show up in an empty parking garage to a group of men with ill intent.

I should see if Emily is changing in here, too.

Before I can even think about what I'm doing, I look away from the mirror and do a quick scan of the locker room. Black bodies, thin bodies, penis bodies, vulva bodies. Emily's body. My eyes land on her and thankfully she's turned with her back towards me, into her locker.

As soon as she's in my view, I whip back around until she's not again. Until I am the only stupid pathetic Nathaniel fangirl in my sight. I feel like my head is trying to float off my body. Not only was it spinning, but it was in direct opposition to the desire of my body. My vessel wanted to get out of this moldy humid desert, and my mind just wanted to watch Emily put lotion on her legs.

No wonder she managed to steal Nathaniel— look at that grabbable ass. You could work out every day, all day. Focus only on your glutes. Do sidesteps and donkey kicks till you start 'weesnaw-ing', it'd happen before you get an ass worth objectifying. Your genes just don't have this in the cards. Get used to it, piggy.

I know my inner voice. This is not the same bitch. Even with the birth control considered, this voice just doesn't communicate the same sentiments as my usual voice. Not enough #girlboss content, too much fat-shaming.

The insults and comparisons continue as I put my clothes on. The moments where the voice does take a moment to breathe, I am bombarded with the overwhelming urge to turn around again, look at how flat her stomach is. I make it about a minute before my body betrays me and I sit on the bench, rummaging around in my duffel bag without truly searching for anything. I'm watching Emily put lotion on. She sprays herself with perfume—pomegranate. Her garnet hair isn't wet, it's effortlessly on the top of her head, choked by a claw clip. Her hair was curly too. She was so put together, and I was wearing a blood drive T shirt.

Of course you're looking. You're so pitiful, so obsessed. What are you thinking about?

I'm thinking about how sad I am compared to her. I'm thinking of the Gurly Curly BOGO sale going on at Walgreens, how if Nathaniel closed his eyes I could smell just like her, I could replace her just like she replaced me. I'm thinking of how Nathaniel's favorite cookies were the fudge mint ones I made for Christmas 2013, and how I would've thrown away all the mint in town if I had known it'd be co opted by a ginger Valley Girl. I'm thinking of how I could still try, how I could have hope and fight to get Nathaniel back without him closing his eyes. But that's the most difficult thought to follow because I can't even argue that I should win against my opponent. But I want to. I want to beat Emily, I want Nathaniel back, regardless of what, or who, he wants.

You're a selfish, narcissistic cunt.

Cunt? That's not a word usually in my vocabulary.

Emily turned and looked me in the eyes. I gave her a nod and put on my socks.

“Hey, Angel, how’re you? You look like you um, used a lot of energy on the courts today.” She smiled at me before turning back around and grabbing her underwear from the locker.

“I’m lovely, doing well. Nathaniel gave me critiques on the muffins for the Mind Gala, I got my dress last weekend.” She paused for a moment when I mentioned Nathaniel.

“That’s nice, I got mine like, a couple days ago too actually. But me and um, Nate have to find a tie that matches the like, fabric.” Her voice trailed off halfway through her sentence, like she wasn’t sure whether to complete it. She dropped the towel and kept her back to me. She had freckles. “Do you have someone you’re going with?”

“No, since I’m one of the Gala’s caterers this year, I’d rather go alone for adaptability’s sake.” I think I sounded genuine. The total attendance is an estimated 25 people, so being the ‘caterer’ sounded a bit ambitious.

“I think it’s genuinely cool how ambitious you are.” Did she just say ambition too? “I ask less because I’m interested in the Gala, but more because I’m like, curious if you’re also... seeing someone new?” She turned around, shirt finally on, and raised her brows at me. What is she asking for?

“I...” I wasn’t sure what answer was going to let me leave this locker room on top. Yes? That would be a lie. I yanked my leggings up and grabbed my shoes from my duffel bag. No? That’s admitting to her that I am, indeed, pitiful.

You don’t need to lie, pretty girl. A chill ran down my spine.

“Sorry, I don’t mean to pry. I just wanted to talk about casual stuff, like friends. You’re so pretty, I’m sure you had a million guys asking you out when you became single again. You don’t have to lie to me, I’m not a judgemental person, I swear.” Her words bounced around the walls of my mind, ricocheting and reverberating. ‘Became single again’, as if that wasn’t entirely her doing. She had to be messing with me. Emily released her tresses from the claw clip and began to nervously stroke the ends. Why do both her and the voice think I’m a liar? Am I lying?

“Why... Did you choose those words?” What if Emily is the composer behind this inner dialogue?

“Sorry, I don’t mean to force anything. ” Did she think I meant her calling us friends? Was she playing dumb, thinking I’d give up on the fight? Quick cost-benefit analysis says who cares, leave.

“It’s okay, I’ll see you.” I didn’t want to confront her right now. She reminded me too much of Rapunzel right now and I don’t want to admit my likeness to an Evil Stepmother. Plus, I would need to plan elsewhere so she couldn’t intercept my thoughts. Cunt.



I was replaying the locker room encounter over and over in my mind, mixing the Gala Muffins for this weekend. Less flour than last time. Nathaniel suggested lemon icing.

For every minute I thought of Nathaniel though, I spent five minutes circling Emily in my mind like a lion. I thought of things in my own inner voice that I’m confident were mine—the bicolored innards, Nathaniel’s truck and the time we got drunk in its bed, Emily’s face and the smell of piss, the ends of her hair flipping out from behind her ears like flames. But I also heard the twinkling voice, her voice. I wasn’t enough for Nathaniel, I wasn’t admired enough, I wasn’t new enough, I wasn’t exciting enough. I was too hard, where I was meant to be soft and inviting.

You aren't feminine, not like Emily. You don't even have a regular schedule.

My spoon fell to the ground with a startling *clatter*. That. Those were thoughts that came directly from Emily and her telepathic bullshit. I hear the front door open.

"Is that my Angel I hear in the kitchen?"

"Yeah, hi Mom, welcome home. I'm making muffins." She kisses my head and begins unpacking the groceries she brought in with her.

"I know! Or I hoped you'd be. I brought you some fruit and spices in case you wanted to go a little experimental with some extras." She looked at me with suggestive eyes and pushed over the coconut flakes. She'd caught me at the perfect time, the muffin tin was freshly filled but no produce or toppings yet.

"Thank you, I'll make you a coconut one in this next batch."

"Thank *you*, sweetheart. How're you? How's school? Did you give Nathan his muffin the other day?" I could tell she was treading very carefully, that she'd been chewing on these words for a while now. "Everything happens for a reason, y'know? It means something—or *someone*, better is coming your way." She paused for a minute, I think hoping her wisdom inspired me to fill the space with confessions of heartbreak between ugly sobs. "Oh! I almost forgot," More words that sounded chewed. "I ran into Claudia at the grocery store just now."

I am not prepared for this. I am peacefully making muffins at twilight right now, I do not want to hear about my Mom's interaction with Nathaniel's mother.

"Mm, that's interesting." I avoid her eyes and instead look at the coconut flakes, like they're little thin slivers of skin in a bag.

“Isn’t it! She’s hoping you’re doing well,” I hate to know my wellness was the topic at Safeway. “She said she met the new girl the other night—apparently she wore *very* short shorts. To her first time meeting the family!”

“Mom, I don’t want to talk about that.”

“Well, I’m only mentioning it because Claudia mentioned it, and Claudia only mentioned it because she said she wishes that *you* were coming over instead. We’re both rooting for you, sweetie pie.” She spoke about my ongoing war like it was a Little League game. I sprinkled some coconut shavings into the last muffin tin and popped the tray into the oven.

“I wish I was the one coming over instead, too, Mom.” Her words had hurt me. You could hear it in how pissed I sounded.

“Well, if Emma is anything like Claudia says, I’m sure you’ll be back there in no time. You’re the most beautiful girl Nathaniel’s ever gonna get the chance to be with and he’ll either recognize that or be a fool.”

Tell her my name is Emily.

“Okay, thanks Mom. I’m going to lay down for a bit while those bake. Thanks for the extra ingredients.” I head to my room.



I’ve been in my room wearing this stupid dress from last year’s Gala for the past three hours. I felt my body lift itself off the floor, and the crinkle of tulle as I gathered this monstrosity.

What do you think?

I did a twirl. What could I have done differently? Was there a world where I didn’t fail? I looked sallow in the mirror, a tinge green.

Only if Emily never showed up.

Emily's telepathic input, while cruel, was pretty consistently right. I raked my fingers through my flat dull hair. Box blonde. I'd been getting it done since I was 11-a middle school woman's treat. It was my mom's idea, but when I found out Nathaniel's first crush was Taylor Swift, I insisted on bleaching my hair. He'd never been into a redhead before, not as far as I had known. I was his only type I knew about.

Holy shit. What if Emily wasn't actually his type either? She's in his mind, too. She's controlling him.

Oh, she's a detective piggy.

The town's Freemason Lodge was filled with hundreds of balloons, representing the human brain, and there was a long banquet table along the side of the room, filled with drinks, treats, and my muffins. I arrived a little early. Most of the people that were there at the same time were adults I didn't care to exchange pleasantries with. Claudia and her husband, for example. I'm not sure why the adults in this town all like to gossip about high schoolers, but I had to, once again, hear about Emily's mediocre first impression, and how much they hope Nathaniel sees God's will. His family is very religious, and they've loved me since they learned my name. I was saved by my parents taking over my position in the conversation.

I was obsessively looking at the front door, ears primed and listening for the hinges to open. I'd hear her voice taunting me again. I was scared and anticipating. Nathaniel and Emily arrived about an hour later.

"Hi Nathaniel, Emily." I gave them a polite smile. Emily's dress was short, and casual. A big contrast from my full length princess gown. Her hair was down, brushing against her hips with some gold beads strung throughout.

“Angel *woah*, you look like an actual like, princess today.” I was stunned that she would try so little to hide her ability.

“That’s funny you say that. I was just thinking the same thing.” I narrowed my eyes at her. Nathaniel shuffled awkwardly like he was trying to figure out a path away from me. “Nathaniel, go try the muffins I made. I used less flour.” He looked between me and Emily.

Let’s have girl time.

“Okay, just please be cool, Angel.” I gave Emily a look like we exchanged a fun girlhood moment.

“Come to the bathroom with me?” I pantomimed powdering my nose and pointed towards the back of the Lodge.

We meandered through the lodge, and I locked the bathroom door behind us. I picked my makeup pouch out of my bag, slowly and pointlessly shuffling things around—a lipstick, a roller ball, putting it back. Emily didn’t need to touch anything up, she’d just arrived. We made eye contact through the mirror a few times.

“You remember how you called us friends the other day?” I finally interrupted our grooming.

“Um, yeah, why?”

“How did you do it? How did you make friends so effortlessly this late into the school year? People seem to be really drawn to you, and I want to know if you’re doing something on purpose.”

“Like, if I have a like, trick or something?”

“Yes.”

“No, not really. I just ask people questions, try and listen to what they have to

say.”

“That’s it? You’re very persuasive for someone who’s doing, apparently, so little.”

This time she met my eyes with confusion.

“Um, sorry, I don’t get what you mean by ‘persuasive’. Or like, I know what it means but I don’t know what makes you think I am.” Her beads *click* against each other as she starts pulling on her hair.

“Do you know when me and Nathaniel broke up?” I didn’t break our gaze before she had to look away.

You’re embarrassing yourself right now.

“Kind of.”

“Let me clarify the question, do you remember when *you* and Nathaniel started seeing each other?”

She’s going to tell Nate all about this, how psychotic you are.

“Um, April.” Why is she acting shy now? I started feeling rage build up in my arms.

You should use your arms, Angel.

“I call you persuasive because you *persuaded* him to leave me for you, when you had been here for *two weeks*.”

She isn’t suspecting a thing.

“Angel, I know we have to talk about all that like, eventually, but I don’t think at the Gala is a good idea.”

I know you have a pocketknife in your bag. My self-defense knife. I’d only ever used it to carve me and Nathaniel’s initials into bathroom stalls, and slice pears up.

“He didn’t even fucking like redheads, Emily. I’m blonde, I’m *blonde*.” She was quiet. She kept glancing at the bathroom door behind my back, I’m sure praying someone would interrupt us. Every time her head turned and I got a full shot of the back of her head, I was reminded how vulnerable the nape of a neck is. “And I think I know how you stole him.” I put my makeup pouch back into my bag and felt my Swiss Army Knife there, waiting at the bottom of this tiny purse. Just my wallet, my makeup, and this knife.

I palm the concealed Swiss knife.

“Angel, we didn’t do anything before you broke up, I swear.”

Can you spot a liar?

“That’s not what I’m *saying*, *Emily*. I thought you were a good listener, *Emily*.” I threw an empty plastic tissue box at the wall, she jumped when it cracked and a small yelp came out of her. “And I can *spot the fucking liar here*.” I felt my chest inflate with this feeling of power, grandiosity, control. For a flash moment, I was terrified at this explosion of superiority, but I was soon swept back into the rolling tide of rage.

“Um, I’m sorry, I just thought that’s what you were asking me... if he cheat—”

“*I know Nathaniel didn’t cheat, Emily*.” My voice surprised even myself. I took a breath and looked at her hands, clenched into fists at her side. “And even if he did cheat, I know what you’re capable of doing, of making other people do. That cheating wouldn’t have been entirely of his own will. *You* are the one who started this, it’s all *because you moved here*.” I open the knife with a quick flick, and Emily’s eyes jump to it.

“Woah, what? I’m *really* confused, Angel. Are you saying I like... like, drugged him?” She looked horrified and hurt and so pitiful it reminded me of the big wet helpless version of her from my dream.

“No, I’m talking about your telepathy, cunt.” I spit it out before I could think of another proxy topic. I pointed the blade at her, not meaning to do so as a threat, but rather how someone would use their finger. “I know that you can at least do it to me, so I realized that I’m probably not the only one. Me, Nathaniel, I’m sure the rest of the fucking people in our grade.” Her eyes didn’t do the metronome thing like Nathaniel’s, but rather she just stared at the tip of the knife in front of her for a while.

“Angel, I don’t even believe in ghosts. You think I can use *mind control*?” She laughed a little when she said that but I don’t think it was because of anything funny. I pull my arm back down and twist the knife around in my hand.

“I’m not stupid, I put the pieces together. The locker room. The bus. In the hallway, on the field, in the cafeteria, in my *dreams*. Thinking you’re so much better than me because you have a nice body, because *you’re so nice*. You waited so patiently to steal my fucking boyfriend, nice girl.” I closed the distance between us and grabbed a fistful of her hair. I twist the knife again. “God, even just the hour of this Gala before you *arrived*, *you just wouldn’t leave me alone*. Repeating over and over how embarrassing this Gala is, my first year alone. My dress isn’t the right color for myself, my hair looks like shit, my makeup isn’t flattering. Telling me I looked obvious and out of place here. Well who’s fault is that, Emily? Who’s fault is it that I’m here *alone like a fucking pariah*?” She tried to take a step back but I gripped her hair harder and met it with my knife.

I slashed downward, grazing her hand as I did so. Each individual strand of her hair was *popping* as it tore and broke from her body. Beads flew from her hair, newly freed, and ran across the tile floor, bouncing off walls and stalls and plants and crevices. One hit my face. She screamed, the viscous bass from the main hall swallowing her pain up with throaty vibrating B major gulps. She let go of me and her hands flew in front of her, eyes pinching shut with force that wrinkled her whole face. Her mouth pulled back in a grimace so taut I could see all her molars, and from a cursory glance it looked like those were perfect too. The side of her hand was slick with blood, her thumb cut open by the flesh base of her palm. I held her dark ruby hair in my once-gripping hand. I wonder if there's any wives tales about this situation, like a mistress catching the bouquet at a wedding and getting married next. What do I win for cutting another girl's hair off?

My knife is dull. A little rusted on the edges. I've never used it on another person before. It cuts most of her hair but some of the bundle in my hand came ripped out of the follicles themselves. I was pulled back to the present when Emily let out a sad howl, like a dog on its last legs.

My arms stopped growing wings, I dropped the handful of red hair, and I dropped the knife knotted in it. What the fuck was wrong with me? I looked at Emily and she was desperately raking her fingers through the ends of her now-bob, like she'd do a magic trick and pull her long tresses out from under her nails. She was still making sad howls, shoved out of her body by forceful sobs.

"Holy shit. Emily. I'm-"

"Angel, I've never cut my hair before." She let out another tortured cry.

KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK

“Emily? Emily, are you in there?” It was Claudia.

Me and Emily meet eyes, she froze at the sound of the door and stopped crying. Just me and her, alone in a room with denial. I shoved a hairband from my bag into her hands and rushed to the door, praying she wouldn’t be behind me when I did.

“What... What’s up, Mrs. Mulligan?” I sounded out of breath still, but was even more surprised that Nathaniel’s mom was just as panicked as I was.

“Epi-pen. Nathaniel said Emily is carrying his Epipen. He’s at the front of the Lodge waiting for the ambulance. Where is Emily?” Claudia’s eyes began searching past my back desperately.

“She’s in the stall because she was feeling sick, but,” I look at the counter next to the door, where Emily is throwing her hair into a low bun. “But I can... I can,” Why the fuck did I almost attack Emily? “I can ask her for her—”

“No, I feel better, let’s go.” And Emily blasted past me through the doorway, towards the front porch. My view of her run highlighted the short bun that bounced against her neck with each step.

Claudia looked at me with wide, worried eyes. “Angel, you know Nathan’s allergies. You know he can’t have nuts. What are in your muffins this year?” She was blaming *me*?

“Blueberry, just blueberry muffins,” I sounded defensive, and a little louder than I had intended. I know he can’t have peanuts. I know he can’t have almonds.

“I’m not *accusing* you, I just want to know what to tell the hospital.” She lowers her voice. “For all we know, Emily herself did it.” I felt a tinge of anger, hearing that. I just cut the girl’s hair off, and now her boyfriend’s Mom is shit-talking her? My Mom appeared next to Claudia and squeezed her arm, falling into stride with her.

“Oh dear, what is it that he’s allergic to? Walnuts, peanuts, pecans?” My Mom had a voice like a pigeon’s coo, it was very Southern and intimate. A very faint siren began to come closer. I think he’s allergic to macadamia nuts.

“All sorts of nuts-peanuts, walnuts, almonds, coconut, cashews.” We got to the door and she broke free from my Mom’s arm and rushed over to Nathaniel, who was sitting on the stairs with his suit pants halfway down his thigh. He didn’t look good, for once. Emily was counting to ten out loud, she had to use the Epipen on him. I felt jealous, and sad. Not because Nathaniel was covered in raised angry red hives, or because his face was pale and glistening in sweat, but because I hadn’t given him an Epipen since we were in elementary school. It was scary when I was seven, but it looks very romantic at 18.

I know it was the coconut flakes. Contamination, same handling area.

You know it was your fault, trying to multitask. I love to say ‘I told you so’.

Of course I did. I didn’t need Emily or myself or... whoever this is to tell me that. I wondered if I looked as red as Nathaniel because I could feel all my blood rushing to my cheeks. It’s because I’ve been distracted by Emily, by this fucking voice, by Nathaniel himself. It’s because my Mom just *had* to ask for a coconut muffin. It’s because I didn’t just make a unique batch after I finished the Gala Muffins. I can’t believe I’ve done this. Or maybe I can. Maybe I’m so obsessive that it’s no surprise I’d end up hurting the guy I love through my own actions, because I was distracted by my pathetic heartbreak. If I did decide to take Emily’s olive branch, would this have happened? What if I had just let it go?

I watch Emily with Nathaniel, waiting for the ambulance. She’s dabbing his sweat away with the hem of her dress. Some face-framing pieces have fallen out of her new bun, and she looks good. She looks unbothered, and intentional. I feel relieved, unexpectedly.

After the ambulance with Nathaniel and Claudia left, and my Mom went back inside to tend to guests, it was again just me and Emily. She looked at me with unsure, big, scared eyes.

“Emily,” Oh this felt impossible. I felt like a mountain, trying to open its heavy jaw and speak. “What if I told you that I think this was my fault?” She was contemplative, staring off into the distance.

“I’d think you’d feel pretty bad. And that you didn’t do it on purpose, and I’d keep it to myself because it’s been a stressful couple of weeks for everyone.” She was looking at me with big eyes again but not scared. Curious, interested, frustrated and pleading. “I’m a normal girl. No powers. Just like, a positive outlook.” Even when she sounded done with this whole feud, she managed to make me feel empathized with.

“I don’t think I could accept that Nathaniel would leave me. It was easier to blame you. For his decisions, my decisions, all of it. Easier to distract myself by hating you than I don’t know, moving on.” She smiled sadly at my words.

“I get it. I like, *get* hating me.”

“Why are you even here, sitting with me? I cut off your hair, Emily. Who the fuck does something like that?” She flinched and then laughed.

“I don’t know, like, a crazy person?” She looked at me to see my reaction. I laughed because she was right. Her shoulders relaxed a little at my laughs and she looked back out to the sky. Her eyes began to look at the future in her thoughts, far far away from this Gala. “Honestly? I’m a way too forgiving person. But like, I like that about myself. My hair will grow back, I know I’m not the voice in your head, and I don’t want to make anyone else’s life harder. Plus, I just want us to get along, I want you to like me.” I felt pity in response to her words, not sure which of us I pitied more.

“I like how honest you are.” I was embarrassed, giving a genuine compliment. It felt like I was standing in front of her topless and waiting for her to rate me.

“Thanks. I’ll also be honest and say that I’m going to keep... this,” she winced almost imperceptibly as she gestured to her choppy bun. “as like, I don’t know, potential blackmail material one day.” She glanced back at me with a laugh on her lips but I don’t doubt she was being honest then too.

We were quiet for a moment, enjoying the hum of bass from inside the lodge, and the faint dying sounds of Nathaniel’s ambulance sirens. “Thanks for not stabbing me, Angel. That’s what I was preparing for.” My turn to be honest.

“I definitely thought about it. Or the voice did at least.”

“Y’know, maybe I can talk this voice into being my friend and leaving us both alone.”

I sighed, and looked at the moon. She sat low in the sky, and full. I didn’t hear that voice again for a long, long time.