

## House Arrest

The call wakes me from a fitful slumber.

My eyes are open in a second, filmy with exhaustion. My hands fumble for the cell phone tucked haphazardly beneath my pillow. I read somewhere that you're not supposed to do that – it causes cancer, or something. But if I hadn't, I definitely would've missed this call, so. Welcome to the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

“Hello?” I croak into the receiver.

“Good afternoon, ma'am. Is this Cassandra McDonough speaking?”

*Good afternoon?* I pull the phone away from my ear to glance at the time. 1:23 p.m.

Fuck. Now it's even more embarrassing that I obviously just woke up. I take a moment to clear my throat before raising the cell phone back to my ear.

“Ms. McDonough? Are you there?”

“Yes, I'm here. Sorry.”

For a moment, the woman is silent. A soft exhale crackles over the line. “Ms. McDonough,” she says. “My name is Alexis Fisher. I'm a member of your parents' legal team. Or rather, your legal team.”

A chill runs down my spine, icicles melting in rivulets across my skin. “My...” I trail off, the lump in my throat back in full force. “My legal team?”

“Yes, ma'am,” Alexis says. “I'm calling to let you know ahead of time to expect law enforcement officials to arrive at your place of residence shortly.”

It takes a moment for my sluggish, hungover brain to catch up. Surely she can't have just said what I think she said.

"I'm sorry, what? That... that can't be right. Why?"

Alexis hesitates again, long seconds quivering between us. I wish she would just spit it out. Clearly, I'm on borrowed time. "Alexis," I repeat. "*Why?*"

"Ms. McDonough. You've been accused of murder."

The next few hours pass in a blur of rough hands and legalese. I'm unceremoniously escorted from my apartment in Beverly Hills into a police car. The lights aren't on, at least, but there's enough cops around that we're still drawing attention from my neighbors. I guess they don't take chances when they're arresting you for murder. There must be at least a dozen police here. I don't remember doing what they say I've done, but surely I can't be this dangerous.

My parents meet us at the station, sunglasses and baseball caps hiding their features from the paparazzi, but also from me. I can't read their faces at all, can't decide what they think of me, what they believe. An older man in a crisp navy suit is with them. My lawyer, I presume. The anxiety coiled in my chest loosens just slightly. *Thank you, Alexis.*

A policeman leads me into the building, handcuffs and all. He must've introduced himself to me when he put the cuffs on, must have read some sort of rights to me, but my brain feels mushy, uncertain. The day has a glassy, unreal quality. Dimly, I wonder if I might still be high. Maybe this is all some twisted hallucination.

Once my procession has gathered in the station, the officer turns to my parents. “Mr. and Mrs. McDonough. I assume you’re aware of the accusations made against Ms. McDonough.” Their heads dip slightly. He continues, “I’d like to make it clear to you that there will be no special allowances made because of the... high-profile nature of this case. We take these accusations very seriously, regardless of the accused’s status.”

My parents are rigid and unreadable. “Of course,” my father says.

The officer’s eyes widen slightly. He clearly wasn’t expecting them to acquiesce quite so easily. His reaction would make me laugh, under any other circumstances. If he thinks my parents care about how this might be affecting me, he’s deeply mistaken. They’re here to protect their reputations. To help keep this quiet.

“Alright, if we’re clear on that,” he says, “I’d like to take Ms. McDonough back for questioning.”

*God. Questioning.* I possess enough of my mental faculties to exercise my right for legal counsel. “I won’t submit to questioning without my lawyer present,” I tell the officer, shooting a glance at the older man standing rigid next to my parents.

The officer’s expression darkens. I get the sense he’s restraining a sigh. “Of course, Ms. McDonough. If you and...” he pauses, uncertain.

The man speaks for the first time. “Attorney Matthews.”

“Mr. Matthews,” the officer continues, “would follow me.”

Not for the first time, I fight back the urge to snort. Of course I’ll follow him. I’m in *handcuffs*.

Attorney Matthews and I are led deeper into the station, spiraling further and further into the belly of the beast until it feels plausible that the outside world has disappeared entirely. We pass a man waiting in a chair in the hallway, a baseball cap pulled low over eyes locked on his phone screen. He glances up as we pass, electric blue eyes locking on mine. I glance away, embarrassed. This is not the kind of attention I'm used to.

We stop in front of an imposing metal door that leads into a stark, windowless room. For some reason, I'm expecting the room to look like the movies. I picture a brittle wooden chair and a table bolted to the floor, the entire scene shrouded in harsh white lights and deep shadows.

The actual thing is nothing like that. A small, rectangular table is shoved into one corner, two chairs on one side and one on the other. A dim yellow light flickers above us.

"Please, sit," the officer gestures toward the table. He takes a seat across from us. I've never met Attorney Matthews before, never even considered that my parents must have lawyers on standby, but suddenly his presence becomes my lifeline. I move in sync with him, walking carefully over to the table. My cheeks burn when he pulls the chair out for me. I'm not sure if it's embarrassment or outrage. Maybe a bit of both.

The officer takes a deep breath, settling more deeply into the chair. "Alright, let's get started." He fires at us a long slew of incompressible legal language, rights and consent to recording and acknowledgments of my right to legal counsel that soon begin to filter in one ear and out the other. I desperately hope it all makes more sense to Attorney Matthews. *It must. Right?*

Eventually, he addresses me directly. "Ms. McDonough, you've been detained here today, May 13<sup>th</sup>, 2025, at the Beverly Hills Police Department because of your alleged involvement in a

crime committed last night, May 12<sup>th</sup>, at approximately 11:34 p.m. Pacific Standard Time. You have been taken into custody for your alleged connection to the murder of Ms. Sandra James. My name is Detective Andrew Somerset, and I'll be conducting this interview regarding your whereabouts last night."

I try ignore the gut punch I feel at hearing Sandy's name. We had history, but I didn't want her *dead*. At least, I don't think I did. I'm not sure what to say. I look to Attorney Matthews, and he offers the slightest dip of his chin. Turning back to the detective, I say, "I understand."

"Then let's continue," Detective Somerset says. "Ms. McDonough, can you give me an overview of your whereabouts yesterday? Where you went, what you did?"

I hesitate. "I went to my morning Pilates class at 8 a.m. I stopped at Starbucks afterward. I spent the rest of the day at home, until..." I pause. This next part doesn't make me look great, but I can't figure out a way to avoid mentioning it. Lying to the detective probably isn't a good idea.

"Until?" Detective Somerset prompts.

I take a deep breath. Better to rip the band-aid off as soon as possible, I guess. "Until I went over to a friend's house to get ready for a birthday party."

"Who was the friend?"

"Joshua Miller."

"Who was the birthday party for?"

I swallow. "Sandra James."

The detective's face is stony, unreadable. "What time did you get to the party?"

“I’m not sure,” I say. “I don’t remember.”

Detective Somerset’s eyes narrow at that. “Were you under the influence of any kind of drugs or alcohol?”

Sweat pools under my arms. “Yes.”

“Which substances?”

“I had a few shots of vodka at the pregame, cocaine when I first got to the party.” I think I catch a grimace on Attorney Matthews’s face, there and gone in moments. I continue, “I don’t remember what happened after that.”

Detective Somerset stares at me. Does he look smug? In my head, he seems to. In my head, he’s pasting that stoic expression on his face while grinning ear to ear inside. Who wouldn’t be, after the admission I’ve just made? A suspect who can’t remember a thing about last night, let alone the crime they’ve supposedly committed, is probably as close to a home run as detectives get. Hell, maybe I *did* do it.

The rest of the interview goes quickly. Detective Somerset pelts me with questions I can’t answer:

“Did you speak to anyone after you arrived at the party?”

“I don’t know.”

“How did you get home after the party ended?”

“I don’t know.”

“Did anything happen that sticks out to you as significant in relation to this case?”

Attorney Matthews objects to that question, something about the murky meaning of “significant,” but I wouldn’t have been able to answer it anyway. *I don’t know, I don’t know, I don’t know.*

Finally, Detective Somerset sits back in his chair. “Alright. We’re almost done. I’d like to direct your attention to these images taken from Ms. James’s home security system. These images were captured between 11:28 p.m. and 11:34 p.m. Pacific Standard Time.”

He takes a stack of papers from a folder sitting in front of him and slides them toward me. The pictures are dark and grainy. For a moment, I’m not sure what, exactly, he’s trying to show me. These could be photos of TV static, for all I know.

Detective Somerset must read the confusion in my face. “These stills were isolated after the camera’s lense was deliberately tampered with. As such, there is no clear footage of the actual crime.”

I take a closer look at the photos. Somerset is right; the pictures show almost nothing about the actual murder. All I can make out is the presence of two murky black figures. One looms over the other, sprawled in loose strokes on the ground. That must be Sandy.

Turning back to Detective Somerset, I say, “These are... disturbing, certainly, but there’s no way to tell who the perpetrator is. That could be anyone.”

He nods. “Correct.”

I pause, uncertain. “Correct?”

For a moment, I think all of this might be some big, ridiculous joke. A prank pulled by my friends or some Hollywood buddy of my parents’. Maybe Attorney Matthews will rip off his

serious black tie to reveal a hidden camera or pull a microphone out of his briefcase. *You've been pranked, Ms. McDonough! How do you feel?*

Detective Somerset pulls me back to reality. "The figure in these photos is unclear. However, the camera captured clearer footage prior to its destruction. We believe the individual pictured in this photo tampered with the camera in order to eliminate evidence of the murder of Sandra James." With that, he pulls another photo out of his folder and slides it across the table.

I reach for it with shaking hands. He's right; this photo is much clearer. Mere inches from the lense is a person, unmasked and wild-eyed. The picture is in sickeningly high definition:

It's me.

After that, I pretty much lose all composure.

"That... that can't be right." My voice shakes. My skin suddenly feels ice cold, like all my blood has been unceremoniously extracted from my body. I almost expect to see it on the floor around me, deep red streaks pulsing from my skin onto the ground. Like Sandy's must have.

Detective Somerset eyes me. I hope he's not taking my panic as a confirmation of guilt. I reserve the right to panic a little at the sight of me on a murder victim's security camera, minutes before her death, on a night I can't remember a moment of.

"Do you deny that that's you, Ms. McDonough?" Detective Somerset asks.

I turn to Attorney Matthews, but even he seems off balance. "I—I mean, it looks like... it must be..." There's too much spit in my mouth. I can't speak. I swallow, thick, warm saliva

moving sluggishly down my throat. “Yes, that appears to be me, but I don’t remember doing that. I’d have no reason to do that.”

“So, you don’t deny it.”

I glare at him. Obviously, I’m not denying it. I *can’t*. This picture couldn’t be more obviously me if my name was tattooed across my forehead. *What the fuck were you doing, Cassie?*

I stare straight ahead. “No. I don’t deny it. But you have no proof that I’m the person in the rest of the photos. There are plenty of other reasons I might’ve disabled the camera. You can’t keep me here.”

Detective Somerset sighs. “In normal circumstances, we would certainly be keeping you here, Ms. McDonough. But laws don’t seem to apply to *celebrities* the way they do to the rest of us, do they?” His words drip with disdain. “Your parents have paid your bail. You are to be released back to your apartment on house arrest.” He leans forward, pushing further into my space. I fight the urge to cringe back. “But be aware, Ms. McDonough, that our officers are hard at work collecting as much evidence as possible from the scene. If we can’t keep you in custody yet, we’ll be able to soon.”

Is he allowed to say that to me? That can’t be protocol.

Attorney Matthews seems similarly disgruntled. “I believe this interrogation is at an end,” he says. “My client is free to go.”

“Yes.” Detective Somerset says. “With continuous police surveillance, of course.”

*Are you fucking kidding?* “Um, what?” I ask.

“Police surveillance, Ms. McDonough,” Somerset deadpans. “It’s a condition of your release.” He smirks, any semblance of professionalism falling away. “I hope you’re not sick of us just yet. I look forward to seeing you again soon.”

My parents drive me back to my apartment. I can see the police cars trailing behind us, insurance against any plans for escape. They really don’t need to worry. My parents wouldn’t save me unless there was a camera there to capture it. Maybe I can convince them I’m making a found footage film, or something. *Please, Mom and Dad, please help me. It’ll be great exposure.*

I decide to break the ice. “So, crazy morning, huh?”

Nothing.

I try again. “Not every day your only daughter gets accused of murder.”

This cracks them. “Accused?” my mother asks, deep, sultry voice thick with anger. She’s famous for that voice. “Or did you actually do it?”

I’ve long since gotten over my parents’ general disinterest in me, but that stings. “Seriously? You think I’d do something like that?”

“I don’t know what to think, Cassandra,” she says. “I don’t even know you anymore.”

*Did you ever?* The thought is petulant, childish. Sitting in the lush backseat of my parents’ Porsche, I realize I don’t have that luxury anymore. Twenty-four years of idle disinterest sliced open in one blank night. It feels like my birthday. *Welcome to the real world, Cassandra. We’re not happy to have you.*

“Does it matter if I did it? Would you think of me differently?”

My mother's head swings over her shoulder. "Of course it matters," she snaps. "A scandal like this would ruin us. No more apartment in Beverly Hills, no more 8 a.m. Pilates and hard work being an *influencer*," she sneers. "No more McDonough dynasty. Is that what you want?"

"No," I say. "No, it's not." But it might be. Somewhere deep inside me, something sharp and wretched uncoils. Maybe I did do it, if only to escape this. To live in a world no one else can reach. To be really, truly alone in a way the McDonough's never have been.

I stare out the window as we lapse back into silence. Buildings flash by me, blurring and warping before I can truly make sense of them. I spend a few minutes wishing I lived somewhere remote and unreachable, somewhere nothing like this could ever touch me again. Switzerland? I think I'd like Switzerland.

By the time we reach my apartment complex, I've almost managed to disconnect myself from the situation. Whatever happened last night didn't happen to me. I'm an observer, still watching from the clouds, alone and carefree and careless.

The slam of a car door jolts me from my reverie. My father circles the front of the car until he reaches my side. "Get out," he says, wrenching my door open.

I uncoil my stiff limbs and make the short leap back to reality. Exhaustion strikes me all at once. My knees weaken, legs sagging slightly. My father reaches out to grip my arm, pulling me up and toward the gilded doors to the building. My mother doesn't follow us. She doesn't even get out of the car.

In the lobby, my father turns to me with a tight, practiced neutrality. On nights when I'm feeling particularly low, I sometimes watch my parents' movies and laugh at the stiff

shapelessness of their faces. Unlined and unmoved and entirely inhuman. Now the sight sends a pulse of nausea through me. “Try to remember what happened last night, Cassandra,” he tells me. “I don’t want to pay these lawyers any longer than I have to.” With that, he turns on his heel and stalks back outside. Asshole didn’t even walk me to the elevator.

Something keeps me from going straight back to my apartment. Does house arrest mean I can’t leave my apartment at all, or is anywhere in the building fair game? The cops can’t possibly shut down an entire building for me. People have lives.

With that thought fresh in my mind, a burst of energy takes me to the stairwell. I stumble up the stairs two at a time, manic, restless energy fueling my mad dash to the rooftop. I shove the door open to a gust of balmy California air. I wish I lived somewhere colder. I need something to shock me awake, to screw my head back on. My thoughts feel leaden and useless. I can’t remember anything. I don’t even try.

I lean over the ornate railing and wonder if I would survive falling all the way down. With my luck, I probably would. Then I’d get to spend the rest of my life in prison *and* in a full body cast. A deep sigh propels me away from the edge and onto the nearest couch. The cushions and the soft warmth surrounding my battered body lull me into a daze. I should think about what happened last night, but the thought fills me with a deep, familiar anxiety I’ve worked hard to curb over the years. I’m not a brave a person. So when sleep starts to take me, I let it.

I wake up to a text from Josh. *how are u feeling?*

For a moment, I’m confused. And annoyed. Then I remember he has no idea what happened to me today. At least, I don’t think he does. Considering my phone isn’t completely

blowing up, I'd guess my parents have done a good job of keeping things under wraps. I'm starting to text back when a realization stops me cold. Maybe Josh *does* know what happened. Maybe he can tell me what happened last night.

With trembling fingers, I write, *fine. rough night*. There. That's vague enough to keep him off my ass if he doesn't know anything, but leading enough to get him to open up if he does.

His reply comes almost instantly. *srsly. can't believe we did that lol*.

A spike of dread punctures the anxiety churning in my gut. Thoughts run wild in my head. *We killed her. I really am guilty. I'm never going to be free again*.

With Herculean effort, I wrench myself from my spiral and write back, *what do you mean? i don't remember much??*

This time, he takes longer to respond. Just when I think I might hurl myself over the edge after all, my phone chimes. I swipe it from the cushion next to me and jerk it toward my face.

*u know ;), he says. wanna go again tonight?*

Ugh. Right. I don't remember much, but Josh and I have a... history of getting drunk or high or both and making rash decisions. And considering I don't think even he's stupid enough to ask if I want to commit another murder tonight, his question must be of the sexual variety.

*no thanks*, I text. *just trying to figure out what happened*. I almost turn my phone off entirely before an idea strikes me. If I was with Josh last night, we might've still been together when Sandy got hurt. He could give me a real, solid alibi.

Swallowing my pride, I go for the double text. *do you remember what time we hooked up? trying to piece things together haha*.

I watch his reply bubble at the bottom of my screen. The wait is interminable, the suspense unbearable. Finally, he sends, *pretty sure it was 10 ish. idk u left right after so not sure what happened next, sorry.*

Well, shit. My stomach melts to my toes. This remembering thing is going really well. I'm sure my parents will be thrilled with my efforts. *Sorry, Mom and Dad, I know I had a mediocre hookup at some point, but I left right after. Probably to kill Sandra James. My bad.* Still, Josh isn't entirely useless. If I was with him until 10, and Sandy wasn't attacked until 11:30, maybe I wasn't even at the party anymore. Maybe I stumbled out of Josh's arms, confused and vaguely ashamed, and caught a ride home to sleep it off.

I'd like to believe it, but there's a sinking feeling in my stomach I can't ignore. I destroyed that camera. I must have. Which means my night didn't end after I left Josh.

I reopen my phone and type "how to remember what happened after blacking out" into the search bar. Maybe there's some kind of ritual I can try, some sort of herbal relaxation thing.

After a few seconds, the screen fills with articles about the science of memory and the effects of alcohol and drugs on the body. A few hotlines, too-bright sentiments of support for recovering addicts. I scroll past them all to a link at the very bottom of the page advertising "psychic stimulation of repressed experiences." Sounds like LA bullshit, but I'm desperate. I click the link, watching the blue letters bleed to purple before the website opens. The page is almost bare, seemingly thrown together by someone disgusted by the modern-day necessity of the internet. A name and number in looping, flowery script fill the screen: Violet Wilkinson, (323) 855-4120.

I type the number into my messaging app and write *hi. need help remembering something that happened last night. can you help?*

Violet responds immediately. *I prefer not to communicate in such an impersonal manner. Please call for any questions or consultations.*

I fight the urge to shut my phone off and go back to wallowing. I hate making phone calls, but I'm running out of options. I retype the number and raise the phone to my ear.

Violet answers quickly. "Hello there," she says, voice bright and smooth. "How can I help you?"

I'm suddenly hyperaware of the precariousness of my situation. How much can I say over the phone? Are the police listening to my conversations? "Um, hi," I say. "I went to a party last night, and I'm having trouble remembering... something that happened," I hedge. "Can you help?"

"Possibly," Violet says. "The mind is a mystical place. Some memories are hidden for reasons we can't even comprehend."

"This was a bad idea," I almost say. "Right, makes sense," I tell her instead. "Can you try, though?"

Violet is silent for a long, breathless moment. "I can try," she says. "But I can't work over the phone. I need to get a sense of your energy in person."

"I can't meet in person right now." At least, I don't think I can. Detective Somerset read me a lengthy list of rules before I left the station. I'd mostly tuned him out, but I think I remember something about "preapproval of visitors."

“Then I can’t help you,” Violet says. There’s a genuine sadness laced through her words, like she can feel my desperation through the phone. “I’m sorry.”

“No, wait, please!” I beg. “I…” I exhale, a million errant thoughts condensing themselves into a single sentence: “I can meet you. Where?”

I spend the next few minutes considering how to break out of my apartment building. I can’t get anywhere from the roof if I want to make it out alive, so I retreat back into the stairwell. The air-conditioned air hits me like an ocean wave, calming my nerves and clearing my head. A tentative plan is forming in the shredded remnants of my mind. I jog the rest of the way to my apartment and slam the door behind me. I don’t bother to take my shoes off. I won’t be here long.

I search the drawers of my luxurious, too-clean kitchen. A knife would work, but I’m hoping for something more precise. Eventually, my shaking hands find a pair of crimson kitchen shears. *Perfect.*

I take the scissors to the bathroom and study myself in the mirror. I won’t pretend I’m not a striking person—I’m the daughter of two of the most famous actors in the world. Usually, my face works in my favor. But today, I can’t be beautiful. I need to be invisible.

Slotting a chunk of long, dark hair between the blades, I snap the scissors closed. The strands fall messily to the floor. *Holy shit.* I’m really doing this.

I cut the rest of my hair as quickly, but as carefully, as possible. If I’m going to go unnoticed, it has to look like a nice, normal, sane haircut. Not one done by a murder suspect. Once my hair is suitably unrecognizable, I lean forward and scrub the remnants of last night’s

makeup off of my face. I almost never leave my apartment without makeup—a hazard of a life in the spotlight. I'm counting on that to work in my favor.

Next, I search my enormous closet for an outfit I would never wear. I find an oversized sweatshirt left here by Josh after one of our hookups. I throw it on along with a pair of black sweatpants and running shoes. I toss a box of cigarettes into the pocket of the hoodie, then make my way toward the door.

The nervous energy coursing through my body urges me to take the stairs, to keep moving no matter what, but I manage to ignore the instinct. If this is going to work, I can't look like I'm in a rush. After what feels like an hour, the elevator dings its arrival on my floor. I tap my foot the entire way to the lobby.

In the lobby, I pull my hood up over my shorn hair. I shuffle toward the door, trying my best to project disinterest. I let the sweatpants sag slightly on my hips and pop an unlit cigarette between my lips.

Outside, police mill around the outskirts of the building, staring at passersby and tracking the rotation of the lobby door. I can feel their gazes like brands on my skin, even in my oversized, unassuming outfit. Instead of stalking forward and making my escape as quickly as possible, I continue my slow shuffle out the door and around the side of the building. Once I've turned the corner, I pause to lean against the wall, taking the cigarette from between my lips and reaching for my lighter.

*My lighter. Shit. Oh, shit.* A resident coming out for a smoke break is normal, unassuming. A resident standing outside with an unlit cigarette is out of the ordinary. It's noticeable. For a moment, I'm paralyzed, my momentum stalling like one of my parents' old

sports cars. An idea snakes its way into my mind, ridiculous and absurd and maybe, *maybe* plausible. I heave a deep, annoyed sigh before pushing off the wall and making my way toward the nearest pair of officers.

They glance up at my approach. “Either of y’all have a light?” I ask, forcing a calm that I don’t feel into the words. I let them scrape out of my throat, rough and, hopefully, androgynous.

The nearest officer studies me, cataloguing my outfit and the cigarette between my fingers. I tip my head back slightly, letting the hood slide slightly to show off my short, spiky hair. The man relaxes a bit at the sight of it. I must not match the description he’s been given. “Nah, sorry, man,” he says.

“All good,” I tell him. “I’ll just buy one down the road. Thanks anyway.” With that, I turn away from the men and make my way to the sidewalk. I force myself to proceed slowly, maintaining an even, shuffling gait that carries me away from the building and the sightline of the police. I even shake my head in annoyance a few times, waving the cigarette around in sharp, irritated lines. Maybe I’m not such a bad actor after all. A giddy, delirious joy rises inside of me. Would this make finally my parents proud?

Soon enough, the apartment complex has faded from view. I walk a few more minutes for good measure, then hail a cab. Shoving a wad of cash into the driver’s hand, I ask him to take me downtown, closer to Violet. Closer to answers.

“You have a very negative energy,” Violet tells me from across a small, round table.

“Thanks,” I deadpan, staring directly into her eyes in an effort to avoid looking around the room. Violet’s home is eclectic, an eccentric mixture of lamps and tapestries hanging from sagging yellow wallpaper. She clearly isn’t in this business for the money.

“Before I can do anything, we need to clear your head,” she says. “Close your eyes and breathe with me.”

I resist my natural skepticism and let my eyelids fall closed. Long minutes pass in near-silence. By the time Violet declares me “centered,” the only thing I feel is bored.

“Alright,” she says. “Tell me what this is about.”

I consider how honest to be. I settle on, “I might’ve done something last night,” I tell her. “Something bad. And I need to know what it was.”

Violet considers me. “If whatever you did was bad enough for your subconscious to suppress the memories entirely, we may not be able to shake them loose in one session. The mind is a stubborn place.”

“I don’t have much time,” I tell her. “I need to remember *now*.”

Violet blinks, once, twice. “Okay,” she says finally. “I usually don’t start this way, but if you truly have so little time, we need to tap deep into your unconscious mind.” She rises from her chair and returns with length of cloth. I don’t realize what it is until she starts tying it over my eyes.

“Hey, wait—” I start to say, before a sharp glare from Violet silences me. Here, I’m not a celebrity or an influencer, I’m a desperate client. I let her tie the blindfold around my head. Next,

she presses a withered but firm hand against my shoulders. I take it for the command it is, rising from the chair and letting her guide me from the room.

“Where are you taking me?” I ask.

“A sensory deprivation chamber,” Violet says. “You need to get as far away from reality as possible.”

*I know better ways to get away from reality.* Still, I let her lead me down a hallway and into an obnoxiously humid room. “Take off your clothes,” she tells me. At what must be a deeply skeptical grimace, she continues, “Submersion in water mutes reality and allows for a greater connection between the mind and body.” When I still don’t move, she says, “Unless you’re not as interested in answers as you say you are.”

That spurs me into action. I strip out of my clothes and leave them lying on the ground beneath me. Violet guides me forward until my feet hit the water, which is nearly as warm as the air around it. The small pool slopes gradually downward, and even without my sight, I get the idea. I move forward on my own, and once the water hits my knees, Violet releases me. I wade deeper into the water, the liquid climbing higher and higher up my body until I can’t help but release my grip on the slick floor. I float there on my back, silent and uncertain, until soft music begins to flow into the room. Violet must still be in here, somewhere.

“Focus your entire being around the gaps in your memory,” she calls. “I’ll be working to help you from here.” She pauses. I think she must be done speaking when she says, more softly than before, “Good luck, Cassandra.”

Time flows in strange spirals as I lay in the water, concentrating desperately on the events of last night. Reality starts to blur into impressionistic strokes and vague images of flashing

lights. Maybe something Violet is doing is actually working, or maybe I'm just deeply exhausted. Either way, I sink deeper and deeper into my body, until my eyes fall closed beneath the blindfold and time holds no more meaning.

A deep, thumping bass vibrates through the bed and into my limbs. There's a softness to my movements, my body more pliable than usual. A combination of okay sex and better drugs. I slip from beneath the sheets and tiptoe toward the door. Josh is on his phone and at least as high as I am; my movements barely seem to register. He grunts what might be a goodbye, but I'm already opening the door and slipping into the hallway.

Out here, red and blue lights flash in time with the music. Party guests line the walls, talking or dancing or drinking. I ignore them, and for the most part, they ignore me back. I'm not the most famous person by here, not by a long shot. The people who do call my name engage with me only long enough to pay me a few simpering compliments. Probably hoping I'll recommend them for my parents' next movie.

I wander the halls of Sandy's mansion, having halfhearted, unintelligible conversations for as long as I can bear. When my fractured mind has reached its limit, I pull out my phone and check the time. 11:20. Even in my state, I'm hesitant to leave the party this early. The longer I stay, the more content I can squeeze onto my social media pages tomorrow. I excuse myself from my latest conversation and make my way outside. Maybe I just need some air, a chance to clear my head. I slip out a sliding glass door in Sandy's kitchen and settle myself on her patio.

I've barely been outside for five minutes when I hear raised voices approaching. I squint, searching for the source of the noise. The patio is dark except for the blinking lens of a camera

mounted on the pool fence, and my eyes are bleary and unfocused, but Sandy's long, tan legs and famous platinum blonde hair are unmistakable. The man at her side is a few inches taller than her and much wider. She's stalking away from him, toward me, when he wraps one of his thick hands around her upper arm, holding her in place.

The sight sparks something in me. Sandy and I drifted apart a long time ago, but we were friends once, and for once I want to do the right thing. Maybe it's the intoxication, or maybe some long-suppressed goodness is fighting its way to the surface of my mind. I stand and make my way toward them.

"What's going on?" I call.

The man's head whips toward me. There's a too-bright sheen to his vivid blue eyes. Aggression is written in every line of his face. *Maybe I should've been more subtle.* "Go away," he says. "It's none of your business."

"It looks like you're hurting her."

"Cassie, it's fine," Sandy says. She looks irritated at the interruption. "Just go back to the party."

I shift back and forth on my feet, uncertain. "But..."

Sandy rolls her eyes. "God, Cassie," she says. "Are you seriously this desperate for attention? I said *leave*."

She's struck a nerve. Anger sparks in me hot and fast, breaking through the haze of intoxication. I take a step closer to her. "Fuck you," I say. "If it weren't for me, you wouldn't even be throwing this stupid party."

She pauses, irritation shifting to suspicion. “What do you mean?”

“I’m the reason you’re even here! My parents got you cast because you were *my* friend. You’re in the industry because of *me*. And you think you get to treat me like that?”

The smooth lines of her face crease into something vicious. For the first time, I think she’s ugly. “You’re a spoiled brat, Cass,” she sneers. “You think I should bow at your fucking feet for giving me everything I have? Sure, maybe your connections did help. But the difference between you and me is I have actual fucking talent.” She laughs then, a cruel glimmer shining in her eyes. “Go ask Mommy and Daddy to up your allowance and leave the people who actually deserve to be here alone. You’re a joke, Cassie.”

Something in me just... gives. Snaps under the pressure of twenty-four years on the edge of the spotlight, desperate to find a way in. “No,” I say, razor sharp and immediate. “No, I’m not.” I turn and stalk away, back toward the patio and the camera mounted on the fence. In typical Beverly Hills fashion, Sandy’s fences are tall and imposing, but I’m not a small woman, and I’m wearing heels: I smash my knuckles straight into the lens.

“Hey, what the fuck?” Sandy yells, voice muted by the distance.

I turn back toward her.

She closes the distance between us, eyes wide and rabid with rage, her argument with the man behind her forgotten. “What the hell are you doing—”

She’s cut off by the sharp *thwack* of my bloody fist hitting her face. For a moment, we’re both left gasping. My hand quivers at my side, hot and throbbing. “That.”

She recovers her composure enough to speak. “Oh, you’re so fucking done,” she hisses. “I’m calling the cops and pressing assault charges. Even your parents won’t be able to save your ass.”

I point to the camera sagging off the fence. “It’s your word against mine, bitch,” I say. “You say a word about this and my family will sue your ass into your next life.”

Tension simmers in the air, thick and heavy, but I don’t care anymore. I feel powerful, intoxicated in a whole new way, for the first time in a long while. She opens her mouth, but I’m already pulling the sliding door open and stepping back into the house, leaving Sandy alone with the man. I feel no urge to protect her anymore. I hope she gets what she deserves.

I wake with a gasp. For a moment, I have déjà vu, memories of this morning flooding me. Then everything sharpens.

“Holy shit,” I say. “Oh my god, it worked! Violet, it actually fucking worked!”

Silence. “Violet?” I call again. “Are you still there?”

When there’s still no response, I tear the blindfold from my eyes and drag my body from the pool. My clothes dampen the moment I tug them down over my soaked limbs, but I don’t care. I might not be a good person, but I didn’t kill Sandy. I’m free.

I wander back to the front of the shop, searching the hallways for Violet. Just when I think I must’ve forgotten how to get out of here, I spot her.

“What...” I croak. Clearing my throat, I try again, “What’s going on?”

Violet turns to me, a grimace deepening the lines on her face. “I’m sorry, Cassandra,” she says. “When you said you did something bad, I didn’t realize you meant…” she waves her hand toward the men standing across from her. “I had to tell them you were here.”

I only recognize one of the men, but it’s enough. “Hello, Ms. McDonough,” Detective Somerset says. “I told you I’d see you again soon.”

I cross my arms. “You still can’t arrest me,” I say. “I haven’t done anything wrong.” Well, that might not be true. But I didn’t kill anyone.

Detective Somerset snorts, more of an exhale than a laugh. “Ms. McDonough, you broke the terms of your release the second you stepped outside of your apartment building. And even if you hadn’t, you still wouldn’t be free to go.”

His words send a chill down my spine. “What do you mean?”

“We got a tip from a witness this morning, shortly after you left the station. Said he saw you and Sandy arguing in the yard before you smashed the camera. You got pretty violent, from what I’ve heard.”

In seconds, everything clicks. Those blue eyes in the station this morning. And… last night. With Sandy. They were arguing, before I derailed them. If I didn’t kill her, he must have. “Wait, no, that’s not fair,” I say. “You don’t understand—”

“Save it for the judge, Ms. McDonough,” Somerset says.

“No, wait, you can’t do this! My parents—” My voice breaks. “He killed her, not me,” I whimper.

“There’s no clear footage,” Detective Somerset says. “At this point, it’s his word against yours. At least until the DNA analysis comes back.”

The words are a sick echo of mine to Sandy last night. I realize with sickening clarity that this is all my fault. If I hadn’t smashed the camera, I could clear my name. When those results come back, they’ll find exactly what they’re looking for: my DNA all over Sandy’s skin. I didn’t kill her, but I might as well have. The setup couldn’t be more perfect if that man had planned it.

Detective Somerset leans in, his lips millimeters from my ear. “I heard you like attention, Cassandra,” he says. I can feel his smile, hot and sticky against my skin. “You’re about to get a lot more of it.”