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Samantha watched the girls as they filed into the event hall, tilting their heads back to stare at the ornate vaulted ceiling with its oversized chandeliers dripping silver and blue crystals. They elbowed one another in the ribs, mouths open, as if to say – *Look at that! Can you believe it?* Her publisher hadn't wanted to hire this space for her book launch. They said it was a waste of money, money that could be used more 'efficiently' for marketing, subway posters, targeted ads on Instagram, and she had simply waited until they'd stopped arguing, waving their Excel sheets and projected budgets like white flags, pitching other, cheaper venues, and when they had worn themselves out, she'd smiled sweetly and said, 'It has to be the Ballroom, I'm afraid. My girls deserve the best.'

And look at them now, she thought, staring at the monitor screen backstage as they unbuttoned coats and shook out hair flattened by the cheap berets they hoped would make them look sophisticated, even French, perhaps, tucking their *New Yorker* tote bags under the red, velvet seats. They were young, in their early to mid-twenties, and pretty with their winged eyeliner and red lipstick. They wore heeled booties from Forever 21 and ribbed dresses from Zara and they were mostly white, but that wasn't her fault; as her manager always reminded her, it was just the demographic for this sort of event. Really, it had

nothing to do with Sam; she'd always fostered an inclusive atmosphere in her workshops, insisting that everyone was welcome regardless of race, sexuality, or gender identification. But in the end, it was *these* girls who had come to her – these nice, white girls – and Sam knew it was her responsibility to help them the way she wished someone had helped her when she was their age. It was over twenty years since she'd limped off that cramped, overnight flight from Utah with nothing but the memories of all she had lost to sustain her, yet despite everything she'd been through, she had refused to become a victim. She'd been determined to bring this city to its knees and make it hers. And look at her now. Look at how far she had come, and she had done it all by herself.

'We're about to hit a million views,' Jane, her manager, whispered in her ear. 'You are a goddamn genius.' Samantha reached one hand up to cover Jane's and she smiled in relief. She had been right to trust her instincts, then, to argue that a little controversy never did the first week of sales any harm, no matter what her gun-shy editor had thought. It was like she always told her girls: if you follow your heart's truth, you'll never be led astray.

The stage was in darkness except for the screen against the back wall, emblazoned with the word CHASTE in giant neon letters. 'Is it a bit much?' she'd asked Jane earlier, when she saw the set for the first time. She was always like that before a big event, antsy, restless, wanting to make sure everything was perfect. 'If it's good enough for Beyoncé,' her manager had shrugged. 'And the girls will love it, it's very 'grammable.' A spotlight switched on now, particles of dust dancing in its heat, and there was a ripple of energy moving through the audience, like a wave crashing on the stage and lapping at her toes. Sam pressed her fingertips over her ears to block out the excited muttering, the half-stifled laughs, the rustling of skirts

being adjusted and seats settled into, until all she could hear was a faint echo of her own breath. She slowed it down, visualizing a bolt of lightning running through her, turning her to flames. She would set this place on fire and burn every person here alive; they would be born anew once she was finished with them.

‘Happy New Year! Welcome to the Ballroom for this very special event!’ A male voice, deep and loud, reverberated in her bones. ‘Samantha Miller,’ he said over the loudspeaker, waiting for the applause to die down before he continued. ‘Samantha Miller is a *New York Times* bestselling author who travels all over the world as a motivational speaker. Her first memoir, *Willing Silence*, was released by Glass House Publishing in 2011. After Oprah called it her book of the year, it went on to sell over ten million copies in the US alone,’ the man said. ‘She set up Shakti, a lifestyle brand with a spiritual focus, in 2013, and the website’s podcast regularly tops the iTunes charts. Her four-part documentary series, *Shakti Salvation*, premiered on Netflix last year. We are thrilled to have her here tonight to celebrate the launch of her fourth book, *Chaste*.’ He could barely be heard over the roaring crowd now, the chants of *Sam! Sam! Sam!* growing louder and louder. She would never grow tired of that, she thought – her girls, calling her name. It was all she would ever need to be happy.

‘Here’s Samantha Miller!’

The cheers were deafening as she walked on to the stage, the cream silk jumpsuit clinging to her five-foot-nothing frame, her butter-blond hair curled to fall over one eye. It had taken the best make-up artist and hairstylist in the city two hours to put this together – ‘I want to look *pure*,’ she’d instructed them, ‘it needs to be on brand for the new book’ – but now that she was here, Samantha forgot all of that; the styling choices, the mood boards, the look books. She cared only about her girls.

She held her arms out to the side, embracing everything they threw at her – their appreciation, their love, even their desperation. She would take it all and offer it up to the Universe in their names.

‘Welcome, my loves,’ she said, gesturing at the crowd to sit down. They did so immediately, staring at her in rapt attention. ‘Thank you for coming out on such a cold evening,’ she said, looking at each girl as if she had been waiting there just for them to arrive. ‘I’m glad you are here tonight, each and every one of you. You are *exactly* where you are supposed to be because, as we know, the Universe does not deal in “accidents”. This was meant to be. I want you to surrender to that knowing. Feel the peace which that surrender brings you. Allow it to fill your soul.’ Samantha put a hand on her heart, asking the crowd to do the same. ‘I breathe in love,’ she said, and the girls repeated it as one. ‘I breathe out fear,’ she said, smiling when they chorused it back to her. ‘That’s right,’ she said. ‘*That’s right*. I can feel the release of energy in this room and it’s amazing. Can you feel it, my loves? Can you feel your own power?’

The girls nodded their heads, murmuring *yes, yes, I can*. There was an easing of sorts, their shoulders falling, the knot that had been caught in their chests uncoiling. Such was the power of Samantha Miller. She would save them from their pain, their trauma, their difficult childhoods. The strained relationships with their parents – the fathers who ignored them because they’d wanted sons, not daughters, and the mothers who asked if they were ‘sure’ they wanted that second helping of mashed potatoes – ‘carbs are *so* fattening, honey’ – the men who fucked them and never texted again, the friends who talked shit out of the side of their mouths, and the other friends who gleefully repeated it back to them. This was a saturated market – so many broken girls with money to

spend – and there were a lot of beautiful white women out there, selling wellness and crystal-encrusted yoga mats and fifty-dollar meditation candles, but none of them could do what Samantha Miller could. Authenticity was an overused word these days but the truth was, Sam had it. She'd been there; she had touched the bottom they all feared. She understood their despair but, more importantly, she understood the fury hiding beneath their smiles. She knew there was nothing more powerful than a woman finally given permission to scream.

'I know you,' Samantha said and the girls startled, as if afraid they had spoken out loud, revealing too much of themselves. 'I know you because I *was* you,' she continued, walking to the edge of the stage and sitting down, dangling her feet over the side. The hem of her jumpsuit rose, revealing silver python Miu Miu platforms, and there was a collective intake of breath. *She's so cool*, Sam could almost hear them thinking. Every magazine profile she'd ever been featured in had gushed that Samantha Miller was proof that you didn't need to wear sackcloth dresses to be spiritual, you could still care about your appearance and believe in a Higher Power. 'The Woman Making Spirituality Sexy!' the *Glamour* headline had screamed, and her manager insisted on using that as a tagline for all future books.

'Sexy sells,' Jane had said. 'And let's be real, Sam. Self-acceptance is more palatable when it comes from a woman who looks like you.'

'I arrived in this city with two hundred bucks in my pocket,' Samantha told the audience. 'I was nineteen and alone. I mean, I wasn't going to ask my parents for help, was I?' She paused, waiting for their murmurs of agreement. These girls had read *Willing Silence*; they knew why she'd been so desperate for independence from her family, financial and otherwise. They

knew what her family had done to her. 'I slept on friends' sofas and worked in dive bars, using my tip money to party. And by party, I mean do cheap coke and have sex with any man who'd have me.' She chuckled ruefully and the girls did too, as if they also woke up in strange apartments with bruises speckling their inner thighs, scanning the floor for a used condom to see if they needed to pick up Plan B on the way home or not. 'But my life changed the night I met Lori Davis,' Sam continued. 'I was tending bar at her bachelorette and she said she liked my style.' She shrugged. 'It was the late nineties. Everyone else in New York was cosplaying Gwyneth Paltrow but I was wearing acid-washed jeans and had shaved half my hair off.' Her mother would have hated that hairstyle, which was the reason Sam had done it, of course. Carolyn Anderson-Miller, who'd made her fortune from women's longing to be beautiful and who'd reminded Samantha every day since she turned thirteen that there was *nothing wrong with being pretty*. 'Lori gave me her business card and when I looked at it properly the next morning, I realized . . .' Sam paused and the girls found themselves leaning forward, urging her to continue, even though they knew how the story ended. They'd read it in her memoir, she had repeated it in dozens of interviews over the years, and yet still they wanted to hear Sam say it again, just for them. ' . . . that Lori Davis was the editor-in-chief of *Blackout* magazine. I met her a week later for an informal chat and before I knew it, I was her second assistant.'

Second assistant and then first. 'You're doing well,' Lori told her, and Sam knew she should feel grateful. She was promoted to market editor, and packages began arriving to the office with her name on them, designer sunglasses and low-slung jeans and handmade panettone at Christmas, presents from PRs who wanted Sam to feature their employer's label's latest collection in the magazine. There were invites, too, gold foil letters on creamy vellum paper, and front-row seats at the shows, passwords

for after-parties at a secret speakeasy in a Chinatown basement. It was fun, at first, but then she got bored. She went looking for trouble, her mother would have said. And she found it.

‘I went to rehab when I was twenty-seven.’ Samantha pushed herself to standing, brushing dust off the back of her jumpsuit. ‘But it wasn’t rehab that saved my life, it was *faith*. I’d been taught since childhood to have faith in external sources – my parents, my teachers, an almighty, all-seeing God – but once I took that faith and turned it inwards, when I made the decision to believe in myself above all else, that was when I came alive. Without that, I wouldn’t be here today.’ She signalled to the technician in the balcony, as they’d rehearsed earlier, and he turned the lights up in the audience so she could see her girls in all their glory. So young, their faces slightly shiny, patches of oil breaking out through foreheads and chins, mouths quivering with emotion. Her heart felt too big for her chest as she smiled at them, with their phones pointed at the stage, photos and videos taken and uploaded to TikTok and Snapchat and Instagram, tagged #TheQueen and #Samantha-Miller and, most importantly, #Chaste. ‘I know you,’ Samantha said again, but quieter this time. ‘I know what you are searching for because I was searching for it too. It’s a difficult time to be a young woman. The world can seem such a frightening place, can’t it? We’re living in an increasingly divided country.’ *Be careful, Sam*. She didn’t want to say anything that could be misconstrued as too political, not in this climate. ‘But I urge you to see love where others would sow hatred, unity where they would sow fear. You are children of the Universe and you are powerful beyond measure. Once you believe that, nothing can stop you. Do you believe?’

She raised her hands, mouthing the words *thank you* as they clapped so loudly their palms stung. Oh, but she loved these girls, with their hopes and their dreams and their yearning so

fierce she could almost taste its salt on her tongue. They always told Sam that she had saved them but they'd saved her too. They had given her a purpose, a reason to stay alive.

'OK. Let's do this thing,' she said, adjusting her headset as she opened the event up to audience questions. A few trembling arms went up, gulps as a microphone was passed to them. Their voices low as they asked the same questions Samantha was always asked at events like this – *How did you find the courage to leave your job at the magazine? I'm worried about money! What advice do you have for anyone who wants to write a memoir?* And then, there were the girls who stood and stared at her with hungry eyes, the girls who were too thin and too pale, their knuckles swollen red and cold sores puckering at the sides of their mouths, and they would ask Sam for help, *please, please help me*. They knew there was a better life waiting at the other side of this but they couldn't seem to find the key to unlock the door, and they were tired, couldn't she see how tired they were? She tilted her head, softening her tone as she reassured them that if she had managed to recover, so could they. There was help out there, but they had to reach out with both hands and grab it. She had been *sick*, Sam reminded them, so sick it was a miracle she was still here. But she'd clawed her way out of addiction because she believed that she was destined for greater things than an undignified death slumped over a toilet cistern. 'Do you believe in yourself?' she asked. 'Do you believe that you deserve to be happy and well?'

She wished she could take care of these poor girls, bring them home with her and nurse them back to health, every single one. In the beginning, she used to give out her cell number, told them to get in touch if they ever needed anything, but she couldn't do that any more. So often, the girls had no respect for her personal boundaries, expecting her to be all things to them – a surrogate mother, a therapist, a best friend. It was too

overwhelming so now she just told them there was an online workshop that supported addicts on Shakti.com ('And it's running at a 20 per cent discount right now, you just need to give proof of purchase of *Chaste*') and wished them well on their journey. *Keep the show moving*, she imagined Jane saying, and she gave the stage manager an almost imperceptible nod, swallowing her guilt as he wrenched the microphone from the girl mid-sentence. She stood again, peering into the audience. 'You,' she said, pointing at a young Asian-American woman halfway down the auditorium. The event was being filmed tonight and Jane had said it would look better if there was at least *one* person of colour on screen.

The woman glanced at the row behind her then pointed at herself. 'Me?' she asked, and Samantha smiled.

'Yes,' she said. 'You.'

The girl appeared to be in her early twenties; she had dewy skin and shining black hair cut in a bob with sharp bangs. She'd smudged kohl around her eyes and she was wearing a cropped sweater with a checked mini-skirt, like Samantha had as a teenager when she'd developed an obsession with Liv Tyler in *Empire Records*. *Is that when you know you're old?* she wondered. *When you realize you wore the latest trends the first time around?*

'Hi, Ms Miller,' the girl said.

'Oh please, my love. Call me Sam.'

'Um, OK. Sam. I just wanted to say congratulations on your essay in *Blackout* today. I thought it was super . . . brave.'

'Aww, thank you. That's sweet of you.'

'I suppose . . .' The woman tightened her grip on the mic. 'I suppose I want to ask – why *this* book? Your work has been, like, totally transformative for millions of women, myself included.' Samantha looked down, a small smile tugging at her lips. No matter how many times she heard it, she still couldn't quite believe the impact her work had had, how big it

had all become. It was beyond her wildest dreams, this life she had created for herself. 'You taught us it was OK to see ourselves as sexual beings,' the young woman continued. 'Just because we were female didn't mean we had to become wives and mothers, there was a different path we could take—'

'And I still believe that,' Sam interrupted. 'Nothing I've said or written – especially not in my new book, *Chaste* – has contradicted any of that.'

'Yeah . . . I guess,' the girl said, and there was the beginning of something, a minuscule shift in the atmosphere, so delicate Sam wasn't sure if anyone else would have picked up on it, but she'd been doing these events for a very long time and she was acutely sensitive to an audience's temperature. She could gauge by a passing cough or clearing of a throat if the girls were still with her or not. 'But this is your first book in over four years,' the young woman said. 'And I want to know why you would decide to write about *chastity*, of all things? Like, at this particular moment in American history when there are so many people in positions of power who would take advantage of that? And who, like, have done so in the past?' She faltered as the other women in the auditorium frowned at her, clearly annoyed that she would bring the mood down in this way – *What is this girl's problem?* she imagined them thinking – but then they turned to the stage again, looking to Samantha with curiosity, waiting to see how she would handle this.

She walked to the back of the stage, touching each neon pink letter and calling it out as she did so. 'C . . . H . . . A . . . S . . . T . . . E . . .' she said. '*Chaste*. Ever since I was a teenager, I've been saying that the idea of "virginity" is a patriarchal construct designed to control female sexuality, but I believe chastity is a very different thing. What's your name, sweetheart?' she asked, and the girl mumbled, 'Amy,' into the microphone. 'Thank you for your excellent question,'

Samantha said, and Amy couldn't help but smile in relief. 'The truth is, Amy, the modern dating scene has made sex disposable. It's made *people* disposable. I've come to believe that sex is sacred and we have to honour it as the force that it is. We shouldn't throw it away on those who are not worthy of us.' She could taste something sour in her mouth as she remembered the people she had tried so hard to make love her, how weak she'd become in the process. All the things she wanted to forget now. 'But it's not that I think we should become asexual or anything!' she said. 'Women have the right to pleasure. But is casual sex all that pleasurable? When female satisfaction is still seen as secondary to the male—'

'So, what are you saying?' Amy asked impatiently. 'That if we want to close the orgasm gap, we should just sleep with our best friends like you did?' There was a gasp from the audience, a smattering of nervous giggles.

'*Woah,*' a voice near the front said and the girls shifted in their seats, whispering to each other. Samantha was losing them; she needed to get this under control or the event would be ruined.

'I presume you're talking about my essay in *Blackout*.' Samantha pretended to laugh. 'Have the rest of you read it?' she asked the crowd, smiling when the girls shouted *yes, of course*. 'Well, then, you'll know the essay is about an experience I had with a friend when I was a teenager. I identify as straight – I'm attracted to men, I've only ever dated men – but I had the most intense orgasm of my life that night.' She stood in front of the neon letter A, hands on her hips, as she and Jane had practised; this was the pose which would look the most flattering in the photos, they'd decided. 'I chose today as the publication date for *Chaste* because it's my anniversary. I haven't had sex in two years,' she said. 'And I've spent a great deal of that time thinking about that night with my friend and wondering why I was

able to let go in a way I never had before, and sadly, I never have since. This book is the result of that wondering. I believe that in reclaiming our right to be chaste, women will actually *destabilize* everything society has conditioned us to accept about our sexuality. Do you understand?' She looked at the young woman, and there was something on her face that Samantha recognized; she'd seen a flicker of it on other people in her workshops before. This girl needed her help, she realized, and she knew what to do. 'But I have a feeling that's not what you wanted to ask me, is it?' she said, and the girl shrank back, staring at Samantha with wide eyes.

'I . . .' Amy started. 'I don't know . . .'

'This is a safe space. You can be honest here. What is it you *really* wanted to talk about?' Sam asked gently and the young woman's composure cracked, a sob clawing out of her throat.

'I'm sorry.' Amy put a hand up to cover her face. 'When I read your essay earlier, I just . . . I can't imagine ever doing something like that.'

'You can't imagine doing something like what?'

'Something so . . .' Amy bit her lower lip to stop herself crying. 'You wrote about having sex with another *girl*. Aren't you scared of what people would say? My parents are— They're religious,' she said quietly. 'They wouldn't accept that. I wish—' Her voice broke. 'I wish I could be brave like you.'

'Oh, honey,' Samantha said, her heart hurting at seeing one of her girls in such pain. 'I wasn't brave when I left school. I wasn't brave when I came to New York, all alone. I was young and scared, just like you are. But I've learned a lot since then, and the most important thing I've learned is that you have to be true to yourself. This isn't about your mom and dad accepting your sexuality, it's about *you* accepting it. You have the power to change your world, right here, right now! I know you can do it! I believe in you.'

The girls began to applaud, shouting *yes, queen!* and Samantha wanted to throw her head back with the energy that was running through her, that electric shock stretching out her spine, ready to shatter her into a thousand pieces. This job could be difficult, it could be tiring, demanding. She had sacrificed so much to get where she was in her career – friendships, marriage, motherhood – and she had felt lonely at times, she could admit that. But none of that mattered when she was on stage and she saw these girls becoming whole before her, their broken hearts re-stitching because of her words. That was why she had been put on this earth, to help them. *Thank you*, she said silently, offering gratitude to the Universe for her gifts, and granting her an audience willing to receive them. *Thank you*. Then she looked the young woman straight in the eye. ‘Tell me, Amy. Are you ready to change your life?’

As she came off stage, the jumpsuit clinging to her body with sweat, Samantha could see her manager waiting under a large, blinking EXIT sign. Jane was on her phone, scowling as she tapped furiously at the screen. ‘Oh my god,’ Sam said, half laughing. She lifted a hand, showing the other woman that it was trembling. ‘*Fuck me!* That was good. Did they get it all on camera? The energy was insane, we should use clips for Shakti’s YouTube channel. Did you see that girl at the end? I was worried when she first started talking – there’s always a tricky one, these days – but I got through to her, didn’t I? I really think I made a difference.’ Sam grabbed one of the hand towels stacked on a folding table, next to the bottles of smartwater and hand sanitizer. She dabbed at her forehead, then her chest. She waited for Jane to tell her that it had been awesome, that Sam was a star, that it was the best event she’d ever done. But the other woman just stared at her, an odd expression on her face.

‘Sam,’ she said. ‘I think we have a problem.’

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‘Jane,’ she hissed as she tried to pull the key out of the lock, jiggling to get it free. ‘Just tell me what’s going on, you’re freaking me out.’

Her manager had thrown a coat around her shoulders when they were still backstage at the Ballroom, insisting they leave immediately. Jane bundled her into an Uber, and Samantha could hear her tense conversation with the stage manager through the window.

‘I have fifteen hundred women waiting in a line down there, I don’t know what you expect—’

‘Tell them she has a stomach flu or something.’

‘A stomach flu? Are you fucking kidding me?’

‘Say she had a family emergency, then. I don’t care, man. You’ll think of something.’

Jane climbed in after Samantha, slamming the door behind her. ‘You have the address?’ she asked the driver, a middle-aged white man with frosted tips who was blaring nineties hip hop from his iPhone. ‘Turn that shit off,’ her manager snapped at him.

‘Is . . . is everyone OK?’ Sam asked, her heart slowing to a painful thud. ‘Has there been an—’

‘It’s nothing like that.’

‘What is it, then?’

But Jane wouldn’t say any more, holding a hand up to silence Sam when she tried to speak. ‘Not here,’ she said, tilting her head at the guy in the front seat. She stayed quiet as they walked through the building lobby, pressing her lips together as Sam smiled a hello at Alberto, her doorman, and made

polite conversation in the elevator with Mrs Cohen, the elderly widow who owned the classic-six apartment on the floor above.

‘OK,’ Sam said once she managed to get the front door open. She hung her Max Mara cape on the coat stand, throwing her purse and keys on to the sideboard with a clatter. ‘Are you going to tell me what all this drama is about? It had better be good, Jane. I can’t believe you made me skip my signing. The girls will be devastated.’ That was always Sam’s favourite part of an event: meeting the fans, hugging them as they cried and told her how much her work had impacted their lives. ‘And’ – she tried to find some way of getting through to her manager – ‘they might ask for their money back. The meet and greet was included in the ticket price.’

Jane closed the door behind them and leaned against its heavy wooden frame. She looked tired, her lean face almost haggard in the low lighting. ‘Are you all right? Do you need some water?’ Sam asked, concerned.

‘Can we sit down?’ her manager said, and Samantha led her into the living room. It was a large space with deep-set case-ment windows and intricate cornice mouldings running around the edges of the high ceilings, a faded Persian rug on the hardwood floor. She gestured at Jane to remove her heels before sinking into the smoky-grey velvet sofa. This apartment had been her first big splurge when the ‘movie money’, as Sam called it, came through. Everything in here – the French marble console and the embroidered linen cushions, the oversized paintings in vibrant oils and the hand-painted wallpaper in a whisper of duck-egg blue – it was all testament to her hard work, the sacrifices she’d made and the breathtaking success that had followed. Sam had never brought any of the men she’d slept with here, insisting they go to their apartments or a nearby hotel instead. It had felt too precious to sully in that

way and she was glad of it, afterwards, glad she didn't have to live among the ghosts of their contempt and her neediness; the silence that had buried itself in the walls when the men left immediately after fucking her, like they always did.

'I need a drink,' Jane said, tucking the leather satchel stuffed with extra copies of *Chaste* into the side of the couch. She looked at her phone, then back towards the galley kitchen. 'Do you have any wine?'

'Of course I don't have wine here,' Samantha said, screwing her face up. 'I'm a recovering addict. What's *wrong* with you tonight?'

Jane held a finger up, finishing an email. A swooshing sound as the message sent, then she placed her iPhone on the coffee table, face down, and that was when Sam really began to worry. Jane never put her phone away, not even when they'd rented out the most expensive restaurant on Madison Avenue to celebrate *Willing Silence* selling seventeen million copies worldwide. It was something Samantha had chastised her for, saying that she should take Shakti's digital detox workshop, and Jane had rolled her eyes, replying, 'You can't afford for me to take a digital detox.'

'So,' her manager said. 'We have a situation.'

'OK,' Samantha replied slowly.

'It's about your *Blackout* essay.'

'Oh, come on! We were expecting a backlash. We're reclaiming chastity for a new generation; this isn't easy work. Whenever you introduce an idea to the culture, there's always criticism. Then, within a few years, poof! It's part of the mainstream and everyone has moved on. Don't panic, it'll—'

'It's not that.' Her manager smoothed her hair into a tight ponytail. Everything about Jane was neat, from the starched collar of her crisp, white shirt to the polished patent leather of her pumps, and even now, when she was as stressed as

Samantha had ever seen her, she looked as if she'd been freshly laundered. 'It's Lisa. She emailed me. She must have got my details from the site.'

'Lisa,' Sam repeated. The name didn't belong in her mouth, not here, not in this life. That was a name from before. Before the books and the movie and the money, before rehab, before the school in Utah, even. It was a name she had thought of every day while she was writing *Chaste*, but Sam hadn't said it aloud for a very long time. 'Do you mean . . . Lisa Johnson?'

'Lisa Taylor now.'

'Oh.' Samantha swallowed. 'She and Josh got married? Wow, I can't . . .' *Why didn't my mother tell me?*

Sam had looked Lisa up on Facebook years ago, but her privacy settings were so tight, all Sam could see was a profile photo of a sunset. She had sent a Friend request and a short message – *Hey girl! It's been forever! I'd love to catch up! Sxo* – but she'd heard nothing back. She had looked him up too, of course, holding her breath – what would she do if he was single? Maybe he was living in the city now? They could go for lunch, or a quick drink after work, and who knew what might happen after that – but after trawling through dozens of Joshua Taylors, none of whom were him, Sam had given up.

'What did Lisa . . . Taylor have to say for herself?'

'She saw the piece. And she's not happy about it.' Jane cracked the knuckle of one thumb, then the other. 'You told me you'd make sure the friend couldn't be identified.'

'I did.'

'You used her fucking initial, Sam! That's not exactly high-level espionage. And Lisa Taylor definitely doesn't think you did a good job.'

'What?' She's not the only person in the world whose name begins with L.'

'She says she's easily identifiable as the best friend.' Jane

looked at her phone again. 'She spelled "identifiable" wrong, by the way. Fuck me, this email sounds three glasses of Chardonnay deep. But yeah, she says it's humiliating, she's still living in your hometown, she's worried what her husband will think, blah blah blah.'

'Right.' Samantha could feel the old resentment stir awake, scraping at her insides. 'Perish the thought that *Josh Taylor* might have to deal with any of his fucking . . .' She forced herself to take a breath. There was a place for anger, she would tell her girls at her workshops. It could be cleansing, especially for women who were so often told it was forbidden to them. But it could destroy you too, if you allowed it to burn through you like a wildfire. She had done enough therapy to recognize that it was easier to be angry with Lisa and Josh than to admit how much they had hurt her, how rejected she'd felt after they'd abandoned her when they no longer had any use for her. 'Has she actually read the piece?' she asked her manager. 'It's basically a love letter to our friendship. I don't get it.'

'I bet she doesn't want her friends thinking she's a dyke,' Jane snorted. 'I know women like that. When I came out, half my senior year stopped talking to me in case I'd get the "wrong idea". Like I would have had any interest in those basic bitches.'

'Yeah, but it's not the nineties any more. There must be *some* gay people in Bennford at this stage. And besides, I said in the essay we were both straight.' Sam walked out to the hall, rummaging in her purse until she found her phone. 'Listen to this,' she said as she scrolled through her Instagram messages. 'Hi Samantha! I never DM celebrities but I read your *Blackout* essay and I just *had* to contact you. I've never felt so seen . . .' She scrolled again. 'I love you, Sam! Your honesty inspires me to be braver . . . And this other woman sent a voice message and she was like, because of your essay I told my husband about a queer experience I had in college. She knows now she has

nothing to be ashamed of and she never did.’ Sam sat down on the sofa again, hugging one of the cushions to her chest. ‘There are hundreds of messages like that. *Hundreds*. And that’s just on Instagram. The new PA—’

‘Darcy,’ Jane reminded her. ‘She graduated top of her class at Princeton last year.’

‘Yeah, Darcy. Sorry.’ Sam did try to remember her assistants’ names but they were all so similar, with their shiny hair and liberal arts degrees and stories of ancestors who had arrived here on the *Mayflower*. ‘Darcy had to take over my accounts because I can’t answer all the messages myself. It’s crazy. How many views has the essay had now?’

‘One point four mill.’

‘*Fuck*. We have something here. This is important.’

‘I’m not saying it’s not.’ Jane rubbed her eyes but her mascara didn’t budge; it wouldn’t dare, Sam thought. ‘But that’s not the issue. I’m trying to explain, if you would just—’

‘I don’t want to get into ego here.’ Sam threw the cushion aside and curled one foot under her, picking at the black polish on the other big toe. ‘I’m just the vessel. I know I’m not important but the *message* is important. These labels we put on ourselves and our sexuality are so binary and we need—’

‘What *you* need to do is to take a minute,’ Jane interrupted her. ‘What would you tell me if I was spiralling like this? Wouldn’t you say that I should turn it over to my Higher Power or some shit?’

‘Not now, Jane,’ she snapped. ‘I’m a human being having a human experience and I need to honour my truth. And my truth is that I feel really upset. I can’t believe Lisa is throwing a hissy fit over a stupid essay. We’re not in high school any more.’ She bent down to the coffee table to grab the small, gold Buddha she’d bought on a silent retreat in Chiang Mai and cradled it in her lap, rubbing its belly for luck. She breathed in, counting

to four, and she breathed out, asking her spirit guides to show her the way through this. When she opened her eyes, Jane was watching her warily. 'I want to apologize,' Sam said. Such behaviour was beneath her, they both knew that. 'I shouldn't have snapped at you, that was unacceptable. Everything about Lisa . . . it makes me a little crazy, I guess.' She waited. 'Jane?' she asked when her manager didn't say anything.

'There's something else,' the other woman said. 'I'm not sure how to say this to you but . . .'

'What is it?' Sam clutched the buddha so tightly that her knuckles turned white. 'Did she say it didn't happen? Did she actually deny this?'

'Not exactly,' her manager replied. 'Lisa isn't denying it happened. But she says she remembers it differently.' Jane took a deep breath. 'She said what happened between the two of you . . . Sam, I think she's claiming it was sexual assault.'

3.

If you had asked Sam where she was in the moments after Jane told her about Lisa's allegation, she would say she knew she was in her apartment, the pre-war building on the Upper West Side with a view of the river from the rooftop. Jane was there, mouthing words that Sam couldn't seem to hear because she wasn't in her body any more, she realized; she couldn't feel her feet on the ground and her hands were clutching at the fabric of the sofa, as if to prevent herself from floating away. She felt so light, like she was dissolving to air. She was dimly aware of Jane wrapping a blanket around her, a Scottish tweed that smelled of her favourite perfume. Her manager sitting beside her, saying, 'We're gonna figure this out, Sam, I promise.' She wasn't sure of how long they sat there together in silence, how long it took for her to stop shaking, for the tectonic plates of her brain to slot back into place and for her to come back to herself, folding into her body again. Jane fumbled in her satchel, groaning. 'This was a bad week to give up smoking, wasn't it?'

'It's gross and it's eating your lungs,' Sam said automatically. She shrugged the blanket off. 'Forward Lisa's email to me. I want to read it myself.'

The message was rambling, littered with typos.

I just read your essay in blackout I cant believe you would write this about me. I'm mortified. You can't jsut say things like this. I'm a mother now. I have two girls. I cant have them reading something like this. How could you? It was private

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sam what happened. you shouldn't have done this. That night . . . , I didn't want that to happen. I'm not like that. but when Sam wants something, it happens whether you want it or not. you just did it anyway didn't you? It didn't matter how i felt. You just took what you wanted without my consent.

Sam looked up from the iPhone, dizzy, and for a moment she thought she was going to pass out. 'Oh my god,' she said. 'She's implying that I . . .' She let the cell phone drop from her fingers as she lay down on the sofa, wrapping her arms around her head. She always told her girls it was important to cry, it was *cathartic*, but now, when she needed it most, she found it almost impossible to do so and she shook with the effort of trying to let go.

Jane waited until Sam was still, when the brittle sobs had stopped shuddering down her spine. 'Are you ready?' her manager said. 'Because we need to get our game plan together.'

They talked into the early hours of the morning, turning her apartment into a war-room. 'I don't understand,' Sam said, pulling strands of her hair out and letting them shimmer to the ground. 'I don't understand why she'd say something like this; it doesn't make any sense.' She looked at Jane. 'Why would she say this?'

'I don't know.'

'But *why* would she lie about something like this? Why would—'

'OK,' Jane cut her off. 'You've asked me that at least ten times. I get this is a shock but we need to focus. What are our options?'

'What do you mean, options?'

'We need to make this go away, before it becomes an actual problem. I suppose you could offer to write a retraction to the

essay but it would hurt book sales.’ The other woman winced at the thought. ‘And it’ll damage your credibility, long term.’

‘Book sales? I’ve basically just been accused of *sexual assault* and you’re worrying about book sales?’

‘Yeah, well, this is where I earn my fifteen per cent.’ Jane was calm, cracking her chopsticks in two and fishing some shrimp out of the takeout box she’d ordered at midnight, when it became clear she wouldn’t be going home any time soon. ‘I know this is upsetting, but it’s my job to worry about things like that.’

Sam picked up her phone, scanning through the email again. ‘You know, there’s something not quite right about this. All these mistakes, that’s not like Lisa. She was an honour roll student, she was . . . Do you think she’s OK?’

‘This is gonna sound heartless but I don’t give a fuck. There’s too much at stake here.’ Jane stared into her Kung Pao intently, avoiding Sam’s gaze. ‘Have you thought about how this might jeopardize the Shakti sale?’

‘It wouldn’t.’ She felt herself go cold. ‘We’re so close and Teddy has my back; he promised he’d take care of me.’

‘He isn’t the only investor. At the end of the day, there are millions of dollars at stake here. If the board decides you’re a liability, Teddy’s hands will be tied.’

‘Shit,’ she swore. Sam hadn’t been convinced, in the beginning, that going public was the right choice for Shakti, but when Jane told her how much money she would get as a payout, Sam had gone quiet. With a deal that big, there was a real possibility she might get a *Forbes* magazine cover, one which described her as a mogul, a genius. Everyone in her hometown would read it. Lisa would too, and more importantly, so would Josh. She couldn’t lose this deal, not now. ‘I can’t believe this is happening.’ Sam covered her eyes with her hands. ‘This is so unfair. I’m a good person. I don’t deserve this.’