



New York Times bestselling author of TELL ME THREE THINGS

Julie Buxbaum



Ⓐ Lie Ⓑ Cheat Ⓒ Bribe Ⓓ All of the above

Also by Julie Buxbaum

*Tell Me Three Things*

*What to Say Next*

*Hope and Other Punch Lines*

# ADMISSION

Julie Buxbaum

DELACORTE PRESS

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For Hallee Hochman: my first friend and my first phone call should

I ever need to dispose of a body.

Jerry, just remember...it's not a lie if you believe it.

—George Costanza, *Seinfeld*

## CHAPTER ONE

Now

My younger sister, Isla, will claim that she heard the footsteps before the doorbell rang,

like a swelling movie score. *On. The. Count. Of. Three.* That she knew then what was to

come. The guns, the hard metal handcuffs, the cameras, the headlines, the conversion

from human being into meme.

The everything being over, just like that.

I don't believe her.

Isla has also sworn that she had a dream about an earthquake the night before the

big one in Thailand last fall, that she suspected Beyoncé was going to drop that surprise

album, that three years ago she predicted everyone would grow tired of cupcakes and start

eating macaroons instead. Which is to say that Isla likes to be the first to know stuff, to

take credit for willing into being that which is incapable of being willed. I am always the

last to know. Maybe this is the biggest difference between us, how comfortable we are

anticipating that which can't be anticipated, how prepared we are for that for which we

can't prepare.

I am not ready. The apocalypse shouldn't arrive when you're in flip-flops or wearing

sweatpants that have your high school's acronym (WVHS) spread along your backside. At

least, this wasn't how I'd always pictured the end: I'd expected to need a stash of batteries

and a flashlight and canisters of water, none of which would have helped make this

moment any easier.

I certainly didn't expect hungry paparazzi with cameras slung around their necks.

I hear the doorbell, which triggers a Pavlovian burst of joy. The doorbell usually

announces the arrival of something good: cosmetics I ordered from Sephora, a swag box

from the studio that my mother will pass on to me and Isla; less often and less exciting

but still plausible, a script sent in a rush from her agents, which may mean a new

shooting location for my mom and a family adventure. Vancouver or Atlanta. Last time,

Scotland. Once, luckily, New Zealand.

But it's 6:30 a.m. on a Monday, a school day, too early for UPS, too early for

anything, really, except coffee. It's still dark and foggy, the world cruelly indifferent to the

fact that I am not, nor will I ever be, a morning person. When LA has not yet become the

city I love, full of glitter and grit, and is instead a sleepy and quiet town. My toenails are

painted in alternating cardinal and gold, a detail that will be dissected by the tabloids

later. They match my brand-new oversized Southern California College sweatshirt. This

last item, I will, of course, end up regretting even more than my polish or the letters on

my butt, a convenient way for my idiocy to be memorialized.

I'll be honest, since there's no other way left to be: There's a whole lot I will end up

regretting.

But before I swing the door open, I'm still blissfully unaware of what's on the other

side. In my uncaffeinated haze, I imagine a cardboard box on the stoop: the teal eye

shadow palette I impulse-ordered last night to beta test for prom. Later, when all I have is

time, when the hours stretch long and lonely, I will realize this first instinct made no

sense at all. I didn't pay for overnight shipping.

When the chime fades, there's a hard knock and an "Open up," and I wonder what's

the UPS guy's problem.

"Coming," I yell back, and then, "Relax, dude."

My dog, Fluffernutter, thinks I'm talking to her, and so she lies down at my feet and

rolls over to expose her belly. I take a second to give her a quick rub. When I tally my long

list of mistakes later, this will not be one of them. Fluffernutter, ever loyal, gave me one

more moment of ignorance, an extra second in the before.

Another knock, so I scoop up the dog, kiss the top of her curly brown head, and then

open the door with a "Hold your horses."

When we watch this moment on TMZ, and then again on CNN and MSNBC, and

even for a dark minute on Fox News, my face is blurred because I'm only seventeen and

still a minor. Afterward, Isla will turn to me and say, "'Hold your horses'? Really?" and I

will shrug, like *Who cares?* though she will be right and again I will be wrong: This will

turn out to be another thing that makes me look bad in the court of public opinion, if not

a real court one day.

You don't say *Hold your horses* to the FBI.

The relief of my blurred-out face is short-lived. My picture will soon be splashed

across magazines and newspapers and most indelible of all, the Internet, images

borrowed from my mom's old Instagram posts and therefore legally considered public

domain.

On the porch, seven men spread out in a line, all wearing black bulletproof vests,

lettered like my pants (though theirs say FBI, not WVHS, of course), guns pointed in that

way you see on television procedurals. Two-handed grips. Serious faces.

*This must be some sort of joke, I think.*

My mother's fiftieth birthday is coming up, though she has so far refused to acknowledge it, partly because according to IMDB and Wikipedia, she's only forty-five.

The only reasonable explanation for the scene in front of me that I can conjure up on

such short notice is this: It's a gag. These men are strippers. As soon as my mom makes

her grand entrance, cheesy techno music will start blaring and they'll all do that one-piece

tear-off. A choreographed move down the line, like Rockettes. Aunt Candy, my mother's

best friend, is exactly the sort of person who would think sending FBI strippers to your

door at 6:30 a.m. is hilarious. When she had a colonoscopy last spring, she blew up the

black-and-white picture of her poop-flecked insides, had it expensively framed, and sent it

to us as a Christmas present with a card that said, *Now you know me inside and out*. My

mom hung the photo in the guesthouse bathroom, and if you didn't know any better,

you'd think it was a modern art masterpiece and not what it really is: proof that Aunt

Candy is literally full of crap.

"Can I help you?" I ask, smiling despite the hour. Because it's still funny, this before-

moment, when I think that I'll get to see these semi-handsome muscley men undress and

dance. When I still believe they're carrying toy guns and not semiautomatic assault rifles.

When my default was friendly, not defensive.

"We're here for Ms. Joy Fields," they say, and at the exact same minute, I hear my

mom exclaim in a panic: "You weren't supposed to answer the door."

My mother, Joy Fields—who you probably already know as Missy, the surrogate for

the two gay dads on the long-running aughts CBS sitcom *My Dad, My Pops, and Me*, or

more recently as the queen in *Blood Moon*, the royal vampire show on the CW—is an

actress, and therefore, I don't react when I hear her nervous voice behind me. She's won

six People's Choice Awards, she can weep on command, and sometimes she speaks with a

British accent just for fun.

Which is to say, my mother can be a little dramatic.

Then again, as the world will learn mere minutes from now, I can be a little oblivious.

“What's going on?” I ask.

“Go get your father,” she says, and she puts her arm out straight across my chest,

like she does in the car when she has to stop short. A reflex to protect me. Her hair drips

water onto her shoulders, and when I see she's not wearing any makeup, that she's run

here straight from the shower and hasn't even stopped for undereye concealer, it hits me,

finally: This is not a practical joke. This is real.

“Just give me a minute to get dressed first,” my mom says to the man in front of her,

like she knows exactly what's going on, like she's not surprised that they are here, only



that they are here this early, slightly ahead of schedule.

“Ma’am,” the guy in the center says, in a surprisingly mild voice, and he does a hand

signal thing to the others that obviously means *Put down your guns*, which they do, all at

once, as synchronized as Rockettes, a bizarre version of my original imagining. I feel a

sudden relaxation in my body; at some level I must have known that these were actual

weapons, with bullets, and that they were pointed, if not quite directly at me, then close

enough. “Someone can bring your clothes later, no problem. Please hold out your wrists. I

have a warrant for your arrest. You have the right to remain silent....”

I don’t hear all of it, though I can guess what he says, because I live on this planet

and have therefore seen *Law & Order*. Isla, who despite being one year younger is always

one step ahead, must have been standing here at least part of the time, because she’s the

one who fetches Dad. He comes running in his pajamas—a T-shirt we bought him as a

joke last Christmas that says *Master of the Universe* (the tabloids will have fun with that

too) and fancy pajama pants from Fred Segal, crisp and paisley. He has a phone glued to

his ear. I can't imagine who he could be calling.

Not 911.

The cops are already here.

My mother is led to a waiting car, and they do the hand-on-the-head thing while she

ducks into her seat, and for a second, before I remember what's happening, even though

they are gentle, I wince. My mom hates anyone, other than her stylist, touching her hair.

She's convinced she's thinning at the back ever since an unflattering paparazzo shot of

her scalp, exposed on a windy day, was featured on the cover of *Star* with the headline

INSIDE "MISSY 'S" CANCER SCARE!

Thirty seconds later, my phone beeps in my pocket and a *New York Times* alert

reports what I've witnessed in real time.

The headline: JOY FIELDS, SITCOM STAR, ARRESTED ON MULTIPLE FRAUD CHARGES IN

COUNTRY WIDE COLLEGE ADMISSIONS SCANDAL.

And that's when I know: This is all my fault.

CHAPTER TWO

Then

“Listen, I realize it’s not your fault you’ve been body snatched,” Shola, my best friend and

partner in crime, says. It’s a Sunday morning, only three weeks into senior year, and I sit

studying for the SAT at the dining table, refusing to put away the books to go swimming.

Before now, it’s always been the other way around. Shola, fastidious and focused, me the

one begging her to go outside and play. “But who are you and what have you done with

my best friend?”

Last spring, Shola managed to get a 1560 on the SAT without a \$500-an-hour tutor,

and then to see what would happen, took the ACT and walked away with a 34. So she can

put her feet up, which she is doing now, literally, on the chair next to mine. If she weren’t

my best friend and my favorite person in the world, I might hate her just a little.

“Be supportive of Nerd Chloe,” I say.

Beyond the sliding glass doors, the pool’s bright blue water ripples, a rectangular

oasis with chaise lounges scattered around, like wheel spokes. A big woven basket sits full

of Turkish towels, all rolled and at the ready. It’s a crime against humanity that I am

stuck inside deciphering math equations.

“Please never refer to yourself in the third person ever again. It’s icky.”

Shola turns

back to reading a romance novel, because even though I have to study and she doesn’t,

she prefers hanging out here rather than at her own house, which isn’t a house but a

small apartment with only two bedrooms over in West Adams. She shares bunk beds with

her three brothers and sisters. “Come on. I’ll even let you have the unicorn float this

time.”

Shola, at five foot eleven, is the shortest in her family, but sometimes when we stand

next to each other, I have to crane my neck to make eye contact. This is only one of the

many ways in which I feel small next to her. Shola is Nigerian American and beautiful,

and she recently dyed her short hair platinum blond, like a young Grace Jones, because

she has no fear. Sometimes it’s confusing to be best friends with someone so effortlessly

cool. We met in seventh grade, before either of us noticed how much better she was at

everything, and it’s an unspoken tenet of our friendship not to dwell on my relative

mediocrity.

Instead, we've gone the much healthier route of my celebrating her accomplishments like they are my own. Her wins are my wins. To be jealous of Shola

would be to miss the point entirely.

"Pancakes, ladies?" My mom glides into the room wearing a pristine red gingham

apron I've never seen before, red short-shorts, and matching four-inch red stilettos, and

holds out a giant stack of pancakes plated on a red ceramic platter. Shola and I grab a few

from a red rubber spatula and as she pirouettes back out, my mom stage-whispers: "I

swear I put on five pounds just from the smell."

"*Marie Claire* profile," I say to Shola before she can ask. Shola already knows that

my mother is not the type to make pancakes on an ordinary Sunday morning because:

carbs. Not to mention my mom doesn't usually color-coordinate her clothing with our

kitchen utensils. In fact, this might be the first time I've seen her play sexy homemaker,

though she does bake a lot of holiday cookies in Christmas movies on the Hallmark

channel. In those, though, she's always forced to wear plaid and cutesy Santa hats.

Readers of women's magazines would be devastated to learn that unlike her party

line—"I love nothin' more than a burger and fries"—originally coined in a string of

McDonald's commercials in which my mother smiles while digging into a Big Mac, the

real way my mom keeps so thin is, spoiler alert, by the time-tested method of not eating, a

fast metabolism, religious exercise, and, to leave no room for error, a frightening amount

of self-shaming.

My mom spins and does Pilates and works out with a personal trainer named Raj,

who she pays to yell in her face and to push her so hard she sometimes pukes. As she

likes to say, *Fans don't want to know how the sausage is really made.* The truth is that

fans don't want to know that the body they celebrate as beautiful may in fact be the

product of a clinical disorder.

True story: Despite the fact that McDonald's residuals, at least in part, paid for this

house, I wasn't allowed to step foot into one. Isla and I only went once I had my own

driver's license, a tiny act of rebellion and curiosity that ended up giving both of us

diarrhea.

Perhaps my parents have taken *too much* care with our digestive systems.

“One of those ‘at home with Joy Fields’ things. Carrie came early to mix the batter,

so all my mom had to do was ladle it onto the pan in front of the reporter,” I explain to

Shola. Carrie is my mother's assistant and one of the many magical people who keep our

lives running smoothly.

“Your family is so weird,” Shola says with affection and a full mouth.

“Can you take this test for me? Please. I'll be your best friend,” I joke, though if there

were a way for Shola to impersonate me—short and white, with boring brown hair and

boring brown eyes, I wouldn't say no. In fact, I wouldn't mind borrowing Shola's

transcript too, since I've somehow slipped into the bottom half of our class. We go to

Wood Valley, which is not only the best private school in Los Angeles, but is widely

considered to be one of the best schools on the planet. When I first got in for seventh

grade, my parents would adopt a self-congratulatory tone when talking to their friends, as

if this spot at a middle and high school would alone be enough to secure me a particular

kind of life, though I still have no idea what that life is supposed to look like.

Exactly like theirs, I think, but with a fancypants degree.

“Don’t worry. Even if you end up in clown college, I’ll still love you.” Shola pinches

my nose and makes a *boop* sound.

“At least someone will,” Isla says as she walks in from the butler’s pantry, holding a

racket in one hand and a six-hundred-page Dickens novel in the other. She’s wearing a

short white tennis skirt and a high ponytail, which means she’s heading to the club with

Dad. She looks like an advertisement for milk. Or Princeton.

“Where’s Isla? Is she upstairs solving the energy crisis and brokering world peace

again?” my dad asks, wandering in from the other door in his golf clothes. “It’s almost tee

time.”

We are always like this, even without the benefit of an audience. All quips and

separate entrances from side doors. A mediocre sitcom come to life.



“Nope, that was yesterday,” Isla says, and for no reason at all other than this is who

we are, when I catch her eye, I scratch my face with my extended middle finger. In

response, she slowly winds up hers and then pretends to use it to apply lipstick.

My dad doesn’t even blink.

“Your family is so weird,” Shola says again after Isla walks out, not in anger so much

as boredom. This is how Isla and I show each other love—with idiotic takedowns and

clever ways of giving each other the finger (my personal favorite is blowing mine like a

harmonica). It’s the inversion of my relationship with Shola—I don’t celebrate my sister’s

many accomplishments as my own, or she mine (if I had any), even though you’d think it

would be easier with your own family.

But it’s not. It’s harder.

My dad walks over to me, grabs my head, and sniffs it like I’m an infant. He looks at

the pancakes longingly.

“I told your mom she should have told the *Marie Claire* lady: ‘Do you expect your

male interviewees to make goddamn breakfast?' I don't think so, but she said Paloma

would fire her as a client if she said that," my dad says.

"Paloma can suck it," I say, and my dad gives me a high five. We're united in our

hatred for Paloma, my mother's publicist. If we are actors in a sitcom come to life, she's

our director. Such is the power of Paloma that at last year's Emmy party, she made our

family wear coordinating beige outfits and pose on a red carpet in front of a wind

machine, so if you google me, what pops up is a deranged version of a Kardashian

Christmas card.

"My mother would wash your mouth out with soap if she heard the way you talk,

Mr. Bellinger," Shola says.

"A boy can dream," my dad says.

Shola once told me, "Your dad is super hot. He talks like he knows what he's doing in

all the things, Chloe. All the things."

I think about this a lot, in that strange way a random detail can get lodged in the

brain. Not about my dad's attractiveness or prowess, of course, which is gross and will

never be mentioned again, but I wonder at the casual ease with which he moves through

the world and convinces everyone he's got this. That heady combination of white male

privilege and substantial wealth that inspires restaurant hostesses to give him the best

table, makes investors hand over their money, and generally forces the world to bend to

his will.

Though I've inherited the white privilege and I guess, eventually, some of the

money, I do not got this. On any front. If I were one day given my own fragrance line, it

would be named, in that sexy breathy whisper of perfume commercials, *Indecision*.

"Shola, how many times have I told you to call me Richard?" my dad asks.

"Approximately eleventy billion," she says.

"Call me Richard," my dad says.

"Eleventy billion and one," Shola says, and not for the first time, I wonder what she

really thinks of my family. *Weird* seems too small, too limiting a word, like she's

intentionally being vague.

I might pick these two words instead: *lovingly deranged*.

“This one’s quick.” My father taps his nose and grins at Shola. “You should give some

SAT tips to Chlo. God knows she could use all the help she can get.”

—

Later, after Shola has gone home to tutor the Littles, what she calls her twin brother and

sister, who, in the sixth grade are already taller than me, my mother plops down on the

couch. She has traded her apron for a crisp white pajama set with navy blue piping, and

she looks like she’s in an ad for expensive linens. I again have my SAT book open, though

my hair is wet from an afternoon swim.

“How’d it go?” I ask, and my mom leans her head back against the tufted velvet and

sighs. Her blond hair spreads out like spilled water. Whenever people meet her, they can’t

help staring, and not only because she’s famous. They stare because she’s flawless. Even

in LA, where we have a ridiculous number of pretty people, she’s a Monet in a room full

of Bob Ross paintings. All are pleasing to the eye, but a Monet demands you stop and

linger. You take a piece of its beauty with you in your mind when you go.

I've always wanted to ask but have never gathered up the nerve: *What's it like to*

*look like you? How does it feel to walk around with that kind of power?*

Looks-wise, I take after my father. My features add up to a perfectly normal, albeit

bland, face. I'm like the art you find on the walls of a hotel room, a photograph of a

familiar local landmark designed to blend into the background.

To be clear: I'm not complaining. I learned long ago that there are worse things than

being unnoticeable.

"It's the same interview for twenty years. They ask me how I'm like Missy in real

life, and I say, 'Actually I'm nothing like her,' and then I try to pivot to promote the new

show, though no one actually wants to hear about the new show. Paloma said the

pancakes were a mistake."

She puts her arm around me and brings me in closer for a snuggle. We're a touchy-

feely family. Not a day goes by when my parents don't say *I love you*, and often, before

bed, they'll swing by my room to tuck me in even though I'm seventeen and supposed to

be too old for that. I realize that if I'm going to rebel—beyond that sacrilegious trip to

McDonald's—I should do it now. I'm supposed to want to ink my arms with tattoos and

dabble in recreational drugs and dream of living a life free from my parental overloads.

But Hudson, my half brother, who's ten years older and the product of my dad's first

marriage, has ruined all of these things for me. He's tatted out, more ink than skin, and

more than a dabbler on the pharmaceutical front, and I don't think he's ever listened to a

word my mom and dad have said.

He and I share a little DNA, and not much else.

My parents' worst nightmare—and to be fair, maybe mine, too—is that I turn out like

Hudson, who didn't go to college and instead goes to rehab on the regular.

My mom taps the SAT book.

“So what was your last score?”

“About the same,” I say, and my eyes fill and I fidget with my wet head. This is a lie:

My score seems to be going down, not up. “I swear I'm studying as much as I can. I really

am.”

Here's what I want to say instead: *It turns out I'm stupider than we thought and I'm*

*sorry.*

"Aunt Candy says she knows a guy who can help."

"Another tutor?" I try to keep the whine out of my voice. Senior year has barely

started, but between Mandarin five days a week and my volunteer work at the Reading

and Resource Center, on top of studying and homework, I'm already burned out. I would

cut down my volunteer hours, but it's the only extracurricular activity I actually enjoy.

Cesar, my first-grade little buddy, is my favorite person in the world after Shola, and I

refuse to let him down.

"Not a tutor. An admissions consultant."

"That's what Mrs. Oh is for. I thought Wood Valley doesn't like us to hire privately."

Last week, I had my first meeting of the year with the Wood Valley college counselor,

Mrs. Oh. She patted my hand, like she was a doctor about to tell me I had only three

weeks to live, and said, "Honey, I think this application list has too many reach schools.

With your numbers, we need to be more realistic."

Then she asked me what I was hoping to get out of my college experience. I couldn't

tell her the truth. That I'm looking forward to fraternity parties and football games and if

it doesn't happen before, a not-so-traumatic loss of my virginity.

"This guy is supposed to be the absolute best. He's based in New York, but he's flying

in to LA to meet with us. He'll come up with a list of schools, he'll help us with our

applications, and he'll edit our essays. He advocates behind the scenes." I don't comment

on my mom's creepy use of the words *us* and *ours* like she is applying too.

"Aunt Candy says you'll love him. He helped Philo get into Yale." Aunt Candy is not

really my aunt; she's been my mom's best friend for the last thirty years, since they met

doing off-off-Broadway in New York. Candy quit acting when she married a hedge fund

billionaire and moved into a town house on the upper east side of Manhattan. Now when

anyone asks her what she does, Aunt Candy calls herself a "philanthropist" and likes to

joke that her wrists get tired from writing so many checks.

I blame Aunt Candy for the fact that no matter how much I complain about my lack



of aptitude when it comes to foreign languages, my parents won't let me quit taking

Mandarin. A few Christmases ago, when we were all vacationing at her house in

Mystique, she casually mentioned that Philo was fluent. Not a week later, Isla and I both

had a private tutor.

If my mother's gifts are her ability to mesmerize people with her looks and to elevate

bad TV dialogue, Candy's is her unerring confidence and the fact that she always *knows a*

*guy*.

Actually, not *a* guy. *The* guy.

"Seriously? This is a done deal?"

"What?" My mom drops a kiss on the center part in my hair and smooths my

flyaways with her hands. "It can't hurt."

### CHAPTER THREE

Now

Isla and I sit in stunned silence as my father paces and shouts into his cell phone.

"No, this isn't like the time we bailed Hudson out for that ounce. These are felony

charges. She could go to *jail*. ” My dad’s voice breaks, and Isla and I both involuntarily

shiver. My brain had not gone there yet. Apparently, neither had all-knowing Isla’s.

I don’t know who he’s talking to. Aunt Candy, maybe, or perhaps Aunt Candy’s

husband, Charles, who probably keeps a team of lawyers on retainer. My mom always

says that it’s impossible that anyone could have gotten as rich as Charles has by doing

everything on the full up and up. I’ve always assumed that was sour grapes on my mom’s

part—as cushy as my mom’s life is, Aunt Candy’s is significantly, outrageously cushier.

Even with my mediocre math skills, I know a billion dollars is, after all, a *thousand*

million—but maybe she’s right.

“I know,” my dad says. “I know.”

Isla and I watch him, our eyes moving back and forth as he crosses the room. This

feels only slightly better than watching CNN, which we’ve consumed for three hours

straight already, injecting their endless, breathless coverage of what they are calling the

“college admissions scandal” straight into our eyeballs. The footage played on a loop: my

mom ducking into that cop car and being driven away, the tie of her robe flapping out the

door, like a broken hand waving goodbye.

I turned off my cell phone—the hate texts and the morning show requests started

almost immediately—so I can't call Shola or Levi. Then again, I can't imagine what my

friends could say that would make me feel better at this point: *Sorry your life has turned*

*into an episode of Breaking Bad ?*

“I'm heading over to the courthouse. The top guy from Dinnison and Cromswell is

meeting me there. And my banker is standing by for bail.”

*Bail.* That's a word we've only ever used in relation to Hudson, and even then, as far

as I know, only once or twice. Plus, Hudson has always faced state charges; my mother

has, apparently, been arrested for federal crimes. I don't know what the difference is, but

from the way my dad's voice pitches up, frantic, I gather federal is way worse.

My dad crosses the room, steps over my outstretched legs. Isla's been glaring at me

on and off all morning. What she wants to say but with uncharacteristic self-control

hasn't said yet: *If you weren't such an idiot, none of this ever would have happened.*

Isla has ranked in the top five of her class since she started at Wood Valley.

Whenever I was studying for the SATs and struggling with a question, she'd glance over

my shoulder and say, "Duh, it's C." When she wasn't looking, I'd check the answer key in

the back. She was always right.

"They say likely anywhere up to a mil. When we first heard, I called around yesterday. But I don't know. We didn't expect this. There were guns. Semis, I think. What

does it matter? We should sue them. Emotional distress. Child endangerment. Violation

of privacy. I mean, Chloe, her whole life is ruin—" My dad freezes, suddenly remembering

I'm in the room. But I'm not following what he's saying. I'm stuck at "I called around

yesterday."

CNN has informed us that there is a two-hundred-page criminal complaint publicly

available online. So much for privacy. I haven't found the courage to click on it yet, but I

bet Isla has.

According to the *New York Times*, forty-five people have been arrested alongside my

mother. From what I can gather, the charges are conspiracy to commit mail fraud and

conspiracy to commit honest services fraud.

I have no idea what any of these words mean when they are put together in that

order.

But I do know that my mother is being accused of fixing my SAT score and paying

bribes to get me into SCC.

My idiocy is right out there, in the open, for the whole world to see.

As I watch my dad stride one more time, back and forth, my stomach revolts.

I sprint to the bathroom and throw up.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Then

We sit in a circle in English 4. Mrs. Pollack thinks this formation encourages discussion,

that if we see each other's faces, we're more likely to say what we're thinking out loud.

Instead, it makes me queasy. I've long wanted to raise my hand and tell her that if she

really wanted an intense conversation, we should hold class via text.

Today, a month into senior year, we're talking about *Crime and Punishment*, which

of course Shola loved and I hated, or at least I hated the first fifty pages enough not to

read beyond them.

“So Fyodor Dostoyevsky—and this is in real life, not in *C&P*, remember—is about to

be executed, is mere seconds away from being shot in the head, and instead ends up being

sent to a labor camp in Siberia for four years. Now, what is four years? Let’s unpack this.”

Though we are less than a month into the school year, we already know that *unpack* is

Mrs. Pollack’s favorite word. Shola and I count, and she once used it thirty-two times in

forty-five minutes. “Four years is how long you will spend in high school. Imagine, for a

moment, that instead of lounging around in this lofty bastion of privilege and

entitlement, you were serving time at a prison camp in Siberia.”

“Samesies!” Levi shouts, and the room dissolves into laughter. Axl and Simon both

fist-bump him, and he looks over at me, as if to make sure I registered the joke. I smile,

and catching his eye feels like the most delicious kind of panic.

I’ve had an intense, debilitating crush on Levi since seventh grade, and I’ve been

relegated to the friend zone for just as long. Which is totally fine. We can't get everything

we want. Deprivation builds character.

Levi and I hang out sometimes and text constantly—about school, about our

existential crises, and of course about all the girls he likes, because life is cruel and

though this may not be a Siberian labor camp, high school has its own indignities. Shola's

convinced that Levi is just as in love with me as I am with him, but as my ride-or-die, it's

her job to feed my ego when the rest of the world craps on it.

I do the same for her, because even though Shola is the best person on earth, high

school isn't a place known for recognizing out-of-the-ordinary greatness or for celebrating

true nonconformity. They only seem to like the intentionally cultivated, Instagram-

friendly kind. Shola's literally too cool for school.

Levi, on the other hand, has found his venue here at Wood Valley. I'm not the only

girl who watches wistfully as he walks down the hallway. He's half Indian, half white, and

has unruly brown hair and big brown eyes and a grin that spreads so deliberately and

sensually, it feels like he's unzipping a zipper. He's president of our class, is a National

Merit Scholar, and takes five APs on top of playing two sports. But sometimes he rubs his

eyes with his fists, like babies do when they're tired, and it is so cute and guileless that I

die a little. I suspect he knows how I feel, has always known, and I also suspect that he

likes to stoke my crush, because it's fun being on his end of its unrequitedness. I don't

blame him.

"What do you think, Chloe?" Mrs. Pollack asks, but I've been off in Levi land, so I

have no idea what she's talking about.

My face flushes hot.

"Um, what was the question?" I hate being caught out in class. It's embarrassing

enough when our tests get handed back and I have to flatten my palm over my inevitable

B minus so that no one else sees.

"*Crime and Punishment*. We know from history that Dostoyevsky is rejecting

Russian nihilism," she says. She's trying to help me out here but it's not working. I have