

I

Every happy teenage girl is the same,
while every unhappy teenage girl is miserable
in her own special way.

The whole thing was a fucking disaster. Lolly found out her boyfriend Steven was cheating on her while she was getting his Apple Watch outfitted with a new wristband at the Hermès store on Madison Avenue. Steven didn't even know she had his Apple Watch. Twenty minutes ago, he decided to do back-to-back SoulCycle classes, while Lolly begged off staying for the second class with him. (Her new gluten-free diet lacked the necessary carbs for her to handle doing a double sesh without passing out.)

She was telling him the truth while also needing the time and access to his Apple Watch to take it to the store for a new wristband, his present for their eighteen-month "screw-a-versary," which happened to be the very next day. (Lolly didn't love commemorating their first official date with this crude moniker, but Steven called it that. Lolly went along because she loved him.) So while Steven was climbing an imaginary hill to the steady beat of Dua Lipa's "IDGAF" at the East 83rd Street studio, Lolly was fifteen blocks south standing at the counter of Hermès.

She was deciding between the traditional double-wrap band in iconic orange leather and the more hetero choice in matte black. She was admiring the orange band on her own delicate wrist, when Steven's Apple

Watch vibrated and a tiny tit pic flashed on the screen, followed by the gray text bubble containing the letters: DTF? *eggplant emoji*

Lolly tapped the touch-screen to see the photo again. Confirming the worst, she froze until her fight-or-flight impulse kicked in. Lolly chose flight, forgetting to take off the new band as she ran out, and was stopped by the burly security guard who blocked the door. Lolly, never good at holding back tears, started to sob pitifully, staring down at her beloved Gucci sneakers (the ones with the glittering snakes) that Steven had bought for her this past Christmas. Unsure of what to do, the security guard placed his arms around the crying girl. She pressed her face into his poly-blend jacket and whispered, "It's a mistake. It must be a mistake. Please let it be a goddamn mistake."

Eventually the beautiful Japanese saleswoman decked out in head-to-toe Hermès, who had been helping Lolly before, took charge of the situation and brought her into the back room. She sat her down on a small couch and gave her a Perrier, which gave Lolly hiccups and made her start crying even harder. The whole scene was quite embarrassing for all parties involved. Kimiko, who had worked at Hermès for ten years, was no stranger to the rampant cheating of the city's wealthiest citizens, many of whom were her clients, but there was something about witnessing this seventeen-year-old girl's loss of innocence IRL that unexpectedly moved her.

Once they had gotten rid of her hiccups, Lolly asked if she should scroll through the rest of her boyfriend's messages or not. Kimiko said in a quiet voice, "Better to find out how bad it is now when you're not alone." Soon both women were mesmerized by the appallingly graphic nature of Lolly's boyfriend's relationship with the mysterious "Brad." Steven had used a fake name in his contacts, but there was no chance "Brad" was a guy judging from the plethora of female body parts being photographed and sent to Steven over the last several weeks. There was even one blurry up-the-skirt video that made both women wince and groan in unison.

Lolly purchased an Hermès Iris belt buckle and reversible strap in bleu saphir and bleu Brighton to thank Kimiko for her kindness and left the store fifteen minutes later, Uber-ing straight to Steven's parents'

massive four-bedroom penthouse apartment at 15 Central Park West (his parents were currently in Aspen skiing) to wait for his cheating ass. She tipped Gustavo the doorman a Benjamin not to tell Steven she was upstairs, citing a surprise gift and waving the orange Hermès shopping bag as proof. The doorman took her money, but clearly warned Steven anyway because ten minutes later her bf showed up carrying red deli roses in his still sweaty hands.

He had managed only the words “Lolly baby, what’s wrong?” before his mother’s favorite Lalique Tourbillons amber vase whizzed past him and smashed into the marble foyer floor. He stared at his normally demure girlfriend in shock when she said, “Just tell me one thing Steven . . . !” her voice now building in ferocity, “When’s your screw-a-versary with Brad?!” She was now holding up his Apple Watch as digital proof. Steven stared at it and knew he was irrefutably busted.

Steven’s momentary confusion quickly turned to sheepish shame and he activated full grovel mode. He tried to approach her, but she backed away from him. “Don’t come near me, you . . . you . . . disgusting pig! That’s right, I saw all the vile thirst trap pics that slut Brad sent you!” she screamed. At the mention of the pictures, the latest naked pic that Steven had seen on his phone after class popped into his brain and the tiniest lascivious smile flickered across his face. He was an eighteen-year-old boy, after all.

Unfortunately, Lolly caught Steven’s smirk.

The noise she emitted was more animal than human and she ran past him, almost knocking him over in the process. Having nowhere to run except the end of the hall, Lolly opened the door to the master bedroom and slammed the heavy door behind her. She locked the door and ran straight into Steven’s mother’s walk-in closet. She threw herself face-down on the bloodred crushed-velvet chaise at its center and began to cry harder than she had ever cried before.

Steven tried talking to Lolly through the door, but he was met only with the occasional sound of things being thrown at the door. An hour later he was in the living room watching SportsCenter highlights and eating his third pepperoni Hot Pockets when he received the following text from his buddy Kaedon: Dude, did U buy ur gf a fur coat?!!!

Steven paused the TV and quickly discovered he was already unfriended and blocked across all Lolly's social media accounts. (So much for their 453-day Snap streak!) He texted Kaedon back: screenshot?

Seconds later he received a selfie of a possibly naked Lolly wearing one of his mother's fur coats. Lolly, being much tinier than his mother, looked ridiculous in the chevron-quilted Russian sable, her eyes wild and ringed with mascara. She looked like a rabid raccoon . . . one who just found out that her boyfriend was cheating on her and was royally pissed. He shook his head and knew the situation was now far beyond his skills to rectify. Steven fired off a string of texts to his sister Anna in Greenwich, Connecticut, telling her he was in dire need of her immediate in-person assistance. His sister was younger than he was, but much wiser, especially when it came to relationships and all the tricky emotions that came with them.

Ten minutes later he received a text from Anna announcing her arrival into Grand Central at 8:55 P.M. Before he could text back telling her to take a car, two more texts arrived explaining the latest snowfall was backing up traffic, with Google Maps showing how a train would be the fastest way into Manhattan for her. Anna's last text stated she expected him to pick her up at Grand Central in person so she could hear his side of the 911 gf emergency!! Steven replied with only the single character k, as there was no emoji to depict the grand scale of how fucked he truly was.

II

After playing *Shadow of War* to clear his head and sipping some of his dad's Glenmorangie Pride 1974 scotch to calm his nerves, Steven tried once again to talk to Lolly through the door. A moment later he finally received some indication of his girlfriend's state of mind, but it wasn't good. Lolly pushed the black-and-white photo strip of the two of them,

which they had made together in the photo-booth at her little sister Kimmie's bat mitzvah a year and a half ago, underneath the door. This picture was at one time (like four hours ago!) Lolly's most cherished possession, which she carried around in her LV wallet.

Steven often found his girlfriend staring at the photo strip, but it had been in a different condition than the one he was looking at presently. His eyes had been poked out in each of the four pictures and she had also drawn tiny dicks on his forehead.

"Lolly, baby, it didn't mean anything. It's you I love. I swear." Saying this out loud he knew it was true. When Steven was fourteen years old, his father discovered him getting a BJ from Jenna H. while her parents were over for dinner. His father sent the humiliated girl out of the room and sat Steven down and told him two things. First, he needed to get better at hiding if he didn't want to get caught. And second, the more important lesson, Steven needed to learn the difference between loving sex with girls and loving the girl he was having sex with.

At a loss for what to say and knowing Lolly adored Anna, as every girl adored his younger sister as soon as they met her, Steven announced Anna was on her way into the city, hoping Lolly would take this as a sign he wasn't giving up easily. But again, he was met with only silence. He did however get a text from the doorman alerting him to the fact that Dustin L. was on his way up. Steven sighed, pissed at himself for forgetting to cancel his thrice-weekly homework tutoring session. He stood up in the hallway and headed toward the front door.

He considered talking to Dustin about his current dilemma, as Dustin was one of the smartest guys he knew, but Steven decided there was no way Dustin would take his side. Dustin was technically one of Steven's oldest friends, as their mothers had happened to attend the same mommy-and-me music classes, so they played together as babies every Tuesday and Thursday and were "best buds" until the age of five. But then Dustin's parents divorced, and he went to public school while Steven went to private, which meant they hadn't run in the same social circles for years and had only recently gotten back in touch when Dustin became Steven's homework tutor.

Currently Dustin was a senior graduating with honors from Stuyvesant in June, while Steven was a second-time senior at Collegiate. Steven had attended Collegiate for elementary school but was kicked out in fifth grade when he got busted pantsing a classmate during PE. Next, he was kicked out of Xavier in seventh grade for pot, then Riverdale in ninth grade for fighting. He then attended Horace Mann for a few semesters and was now back at Collegiate on a very short leash.

Steven had his mother to thank for his reinstatement. She'd had to call in a few favors to make it happen. And since one of the conditions of his academic probation was maintaining a high GPA, his mother had hired a string of overpriced homework tutors that all quit after a week or two, citing Steven's poor attitude (i.e., filthy mouth) and even worse work ethic. At her wit's end, his mother finally had the brilliant idea to call Dustin's mother to see if Dustin, whose impressive academic accomplishments were always touted on fb, would agree to work with Steven as his new homework tutor. His mother knew that while her son had little respect for the authority of adults, he coveted the approval of his peers.

Dustin had been adamantly opposed to tutoring Steven when his mother brought it up to him last October. He pointed out that he and Steven were only "friends" because of the happenstance of their two mothers meeting, and by all accounts, the two boys could not have had more different childhoods. "We have nothing in common!" Dustin moaned. "What will we talk about?"

"What you're being paid to talk about . . . homework," was her calm reply.

Dustin let out a deep sigh and rolled his eyes. Where Steven was a good-looking, rich party boy from Manhattan's highest social circle, Dustin was none of those things. Dustin was adopted and knew nothing about his biological parents. Well, he did know that his teenage mother had left a note saying he should be given to Tamar L., "the nice social worker lady who was smart and kind, when she was just a kid from a fucked-up home living with her messed-up mom." She wanted a better life for her own kid, which is why she knew she should give him up.

And so, one Friday night on her way to temple for her first Shabbat

service in quite some time, Tamar received a call from a social worker at a hospital and was given one hour to decide if she wanted to become the mother of a two-day-old newborn. Taking it as a test of her lapsed piety, she leaned forward and gave her cab driver the address to St. Luke's on 112th Street. When she told her husband about her intentions and explained her taxicab epiphany, Dustin's soon-to-be adoptive father didn't give it a moment's hesitation (even though they already had a three-year-old) before saying, "I'm in!" And Tamar was consumed with a feeling of security that she had married the right man. Eighteen years later, Dustin's mom still told this story, but with the caveat that while she was right about adopting Dustin, she had spoken too soon about her now ex-husband.

Dustin had grown up to be a quiet, serious boy whose adoptive parents continually made jokes to their friends that their own genes could have never produced such a smart kid, and Dustin, knowing the routine, would respond that he was pretty sure his biological parents could never have raised him to be such a good Jewish boy. (Only recently with the rise of Drake's popularity was Dustin's blackness combined with his Jewish upbringing thought of by his peers as "cool" rather than "weird.") What people didn't know was that Dustin was also prone to panic attacks and had been in therapy for his anxiety since the age of ten, which was why the thought of tutoring a "crazy rich kid" like Steven tied his stomach in knots. "No way. I can't do it, Mom," Dustin said. "Steven's the epitome of the one percent, and me helping him is like going over to the dark side. I'm no Kylo Ren."

Dustin's mother, being a very practical woman, calmly explained to her son that he was making far too much of a big deal over the matter. "You're being too emotional, Dusty," she said. "This is not *Star Wars*. This is real life, and it's not fair of you to write Steven off just because he was born into great wealth. No one's saying you have to be best friends with him. This is a job where you're providing a needed service and getting paid well for doing it. You'll make more money in the next eight months than I make in an entire year." The going rate for homework tutors in Manhattan was easily two hundred bucks an hour, and Steven's mom was of course offering more, which meant Dustin would be clearing

over two thousand dollars a week along with a bonus of ten grand if Steven ended the year with a GPA above a 3.2.

“Don’t you see how insane that is?” Dustin replied. “You’re a licensed professional who spends her days helping the underprivileged, people who actually need help. You’re the one who’s always saying social workers and public-school teachers are the two noblest professions that are grossly undervalued in today’s world. How can you in good conscience suggest I do this?”

“Stop being so melodramatic! You’re going to college next year and this will spare you working at some crappy part-time job for spending money. That’s the way I’m looking at it, and so should you.” Dustin found his mother’s viewpoint to be simplistic and shortsighted but when he tried to tell her as much, she refused to debate the matter with him further and instead insisted he talk the matter over with someone else before turning it down.

Dustin decided to end the matter quickly by going to the highest authority first, the rabbi at their temple. Much to Dustin’s surprise, Rabbi Kennison agreed with his mother, citing the example that she herself had worked at McDonald’s in high school. “I asked every customer if they wanted to supersize their meal; does that mean I’m responsible for the obesity problem in America?” she asked. Before Dustin could answer, she added that Dustin would be performing a mitzvah by using his God-given intellectual gifts to help another. “What if Steven grows up and becomes a senator because you helped him with his studies?”

Dustin would have scoffed at the idea that the kid who once ate a June bug on a dare when they were four years old could ever become a senator, but the fact that the current president was once a reality star who cheated on his pregnant wife with a porn star gave him pause. Instead Dustin thanked her for her counsel and immediately called Dr. N. and requested an emergency therapy session. After fifty minutes of therapy, Dustin was no closer to a decision. He eventually reasoned that all teenagers, rich and poor alike, probably had the same capacity for good or evil, and the best way to combat evil was through education—that is, if no lightsaber was available. (Dr. N. casually mentioned at the end of the session that if Dustin turned down the job, perhaps he might recom-

mend his nephew for the position, as he was a poor law school student at Fordham. Dustin found this suggestion ethically questionable.) After a week of intense hand-wringing, Dustin accepted the tutoring job, warning his mother that if he felt even a twinge of inner turmoil, he'd quit.

What Dustin found after his first month was that the nine hours a week he spent tutoring Steven was not in fact an Aristotelean battle between good and evil like he had feared (nor a biblical, Shakespearean, philosophical, or even George Lucasian one), but was instead fun. His childhood friend wasn't as entitled and insufferable as Dustin had assumed he would be. Steven had grown up to be very much the same as he was when he was a toddler, a charismatic boy with a good sense of humor who enjoyed expensive toys and was happy to share them with his friends (and who would probably still eat a bug if he was dared to do so).

By the second month, Dustin had begun to find his time spent with Steven amusing, even though he would never admit it to his mother. On more than one weekend, Dustin found himself looking forward to their Monday study session, when Steven would no doubt regale him with some outlandish story from his "lit AF" weekend. The two boys had polar opposite high school student experiences: Steven's were all drugs, nightclubs, and hot girls while Dustin's were mostly coffee shops, study groups, and smart girls who always, always "friend-zoned" him.

By the end of the fall semester Dustin had whipped Steven into fighting academic shape, witnessed Steven ace his finals (without cheating), and found himself prouder of Steven's 3.3 GPA than his own 4.0 (though with APs his GPA was actually higher). The two boys celebrated their shared victory over a massive steak dinner at Peter Luger in Brooklyn, and when Steven toasted Dustin for achieving the impossible—Steven's father told him he was proud of him for the first time ever—it dawned on Dustin that he was going to miss Steven during the monthlong winter break. The fact that he had been proven so wrong about his old friend didn't annoy Dustin, but instead filled him with joy. Feeling superior to his peers often made him lonely, and that night over a feast fit for a king, he felt a profound sense of connection to someone his own age, and he liked it very much.

This was when Steven invited him to his annual New Year's Eve party,

which, though he didn't know it at the time, would forever change the course of Dustin's life. It was never Dustin's soul that was at stake upon reuniting with Steven, it was his heart. The reason for this was that Steven's girlfriend, Lolly, had a little sister, Kimmie, who was to become Dustin's newest infatuation and perhaps his greatest love.

III

Unlike Steven, Dustin had always been an intense, bookish kid, which meant he didn't have many friends, but this never bothered him because he had no time to be social. He put all his time and effort into his schoolwork, the debate team, and worrying about global warming and the rising sea levels. However, he did have one source of real joy: movies. Sitting in a dark theater, he could momentarily stop worrying about his extensive AP course load and just breathe. Because of this escapism, he had seen an impressive number of films, with his favorite guilty pleasures being the high school comedies of the eighties and nineties. It was these very movies that ignited the flame of his one super-secret, shameful fantasy that he had never admitted to anyone in his entire life, not even his therapist.

This fantasy was that Dustin wanted to end his high school career by going to his senior prom not with a pack of guy friends, or even a smart Ivy League-bound girl whose GPA he admired, but with a gorgeous, completely out-of-his-league hot girl (he didn't even care if she was smart). And he didn't want just any pretty high school girl, he wanted a girl who was on the not-so-secret "secret" Manhattan private school Hot List that came out every year during the Christmas holidays, ranking the top ten private school girls in every grade. (He knew, of course, that the very existence of such a list was shallow, misogynistic, and demeaning to girls, but it's not like he actively participated in the making of the list; he just viewed it. And then promptly hated himself for doing so.)

Dustin was wise enough to know this reverie of his was fueled by the fantasy-filled teen movies he loved, where the “nice guy” always ended up with the “hot girl,” but he didn’t care. He wanted what he wanted, and even though he felt guilty for having such a frivolous hankering, especially when the entire political landscape was a shit show these days, he let himself off the hook by viewing the matter scientifically. What he was experiencing was a biological imperative, or to put it more crudely, it was because he had just as much testosterone as every other teenage boy in America.

This prom fantasy of Dustin’s had morphed into an entirely different beast six weeks ago, on the night of Steven’s annual New Year’s Eve party. This infamous party came into existence four years prior when Steven had no choice but to attend Baruch, a New York City public school, for the first semester of his freshman year after he managed to get kicked out on his first day of Riverdale Country School. Steven, worried he was going to lose his social standing while he waited for his mother to get him into a new private school, asked his father to let him throw a New Year’s Eve party, while his parents spent the holiday as always at their beach house in Maui.

His Korean father, who was constantly worrying about his half-Korean son fitting in with the best of New York society, agreed and gave his son the sage advice that for a party to be memorable, it needed not only to be lavish but exclusive as well. It was his father’s idea that Steven should restrict his party to only upperclassmen (private school juniors and seniors) even though he was himself only a freshman. And to attract these cool upperclassmen his father paid handsomely for A\$AP Rocky to perform. It was his mother’s idea to “paper the party” with twenty young Wilhelmina models paid to be pretend guests, something she had heard about from a friend who made his fortune investing in nightclubs. The original party was an enormous success, and Steven’s reputation as the host-with-the-most (models and booze) was now legendary.

This very party five weeks ago was Dustin’s first time being invited, though he had heard stories about the infamous gathering over the years. When Dustin showed up that night, he had convinced himself that the party, like most things in this town, was more than likely 50 percent

hype, but as soon as he entered, he knew he was wrong. This party was unlike anything he had ever seen before.

It was as if Santa Claus had quit the toy-making business and opened a strip club. Sexy models dressed like holiday elves circulated the professionally decorated party, handing out truffle mac-n-cheese balls and poached purple potatoes with caviar. There were two top-shelf liquor bars manned by scantily clad bartenders. (This being her second year as gf of the host, Lolly had made sure there were hot male bartenders as well.) There was a stream of professional DJs who were in charge of the music. And right when you entered the foyer, the first thing you saw was a seven-foot-tall ice sculpture fountain of Rick and Morty, in which champagne poured into Morty's hand, then would travel through Morty (sitting on Rick's shoulders), and come out Rick's "Pickle Rick" dick perfectly chilled.

The fountain was the most Instagrammed photo of the party.

Steven's parents' only new rule this year was that there would be no smoking cigarettes inside because of the fifteen-million-dollar Matisse-cigarette-burn incident of last year's soiree. Solving this problem was easy. They simply opened their roof access, the stairs in the hallway outside of Steven's front door. (Steven's parents shared the floor with only one other family and the C.s were gifted the K.s' Parisian pied-à-terre keys for their holidays to ensure they wouldn't be home to deal with three-hundred-plus teenagers rampaging on the rooftop.)

After wandering from room to room in the main party, Dustin decided to go check out the roof before he dumped his coat in Steven's sister's bedroom. Upstairs he found throngs of people smoking spliffs and cigarettes under heat lamps, a Ping-Pong table and an ice hockey table in full action, and a pop-up shop from Serendipity 3 manned by someone dressed in a penguin suit. Overwhelmed by the sheer insanity, Dustin got himself a hot chocolate and walked over to check out the view. Central Park was breathtakingly beautiful, still blanketed in white from the first early snowfall of winter. As Dustin stared out across the park, he couldn't help but wonder if Steven's dad had paid for it to snow.

Turning to scan the crowd of faces, Dustin didn't see one person that he knew, and he realized the only people who had spoken to him since

arriving were paid waitstaff. He made the decision, after finishing his hot chocolate, to leave before Steven even knew he had shown up. This party was obviously not his scene and these were not his people, and admitting this allowed him to finally relax. When Dustin checked the time on his iPhone, he saw an alert reminding him that OSIRIS-REX was going into orbit around the asteroid Bennu, and even though this was happening 70 million miles away he looked up anyway and found the night sky to be quite calming. He was gazing upward when he heard a sweet voice ask him what he was looking at with such fierce concentration.

When he looked down to see who had spoken, his first thought was that he had gotten a contact high from mistakenly walking into the kitchen pantry earlier, which was being hotboxed by three Dalton seniors, because the girl standing before him looked like a blond angel, otherworldly and ethereal, sparkling in a silver dress with a pale pink pashmina wrapped around her shoulders to cover her wings.

As a man of reason Dustin did not believe in the phenomenon known as “love at first sight,” but in that moment it absolutely happened to him. He spoke to this gorgeous girl about how he had the *New York Times* Astronomy and Space calendar alerts on his phone and how he had just received a notification, and she told him that she never really “got the whole stargazing thing” until she spent a year living out West where there were no tall buildings and the sky was bigger than she ever believed possible, chock-full of a zillion stars. Dustin adored her use of “chock-full” and how she guilelessly admitted she hadn’t understood that bright city lights were the reason why she never saw the stars in Manhattan.

Dustin gently corrected her, explaining that on a clear night it was possible to see a few constellations if you knew where to look. He then explained why the spacecraft OSIRIS-REx’s first orbit around the asteroid Bennu was significant and how exciting it was that such a thing was happening in space while they were standing there. “Can you even imagine the years of preplanning that went into this one event? It’s such a huge accomplishment for all involved.”

“Sure sounds that way,” the angel, whose name he didn’t even know,

replied and then shivered in the wind. Pulling her wrap tight around her shoulders she told him she needed to go find her sister, but she hoped they could talk more later. And then she was gone. If she hadn't touched his arm telling him it was nice to talk stars with him, he would have wondered if she had ever really been there at all.

He ended up staying at the party until a little after midnight, which he owed to the good fortune of running into two girls he knew from SAT prep class who let him tag along with them for the evening. Stephanie and Tasha were friends of Steven's girlfriend from Camp Laurel in Maine, and they both admitted to being first-time party attenders as well. Dustin was relieved to hear they were as overwhelmed as he was by the spectacle, but they said they were sticking it out to the bitter end, unsure if they'd ever score an invite again.

Luckily the two girls were chatterboxes, so Dustin stayed his usual quiet self and just listened while secretly scanning the crowd for the girl from the rooftop. It was only minutes after the New Year was welcomed, via screams and confetti cannons, that he saw her again. He was in the library sitting on a couch with Tasha and Stephanie, when his mystery blonde hurried by the doorway. He pointed her out to Stephanie, and she matter-of-factly informed him the angelic beauty was Kimmie, the little sister of their friend Lolly.

"I didn't know Lolly had a sister," was all he had to say before Stephanie and Tasha unpacked Kimmie's entire life story. Kimmie had just started Spence as a sophomore, because her freshman year had been spent living in Nevada and training to be an Olympic ice dancing hopeful. Six months ago, she moved back home after a terrible spill during a competition when Gabe, her skating partner and gay BFF, mistimed a deep outside edge lift, lost his balance, and fell backward, causing her to fall forward and shatter her kneecap. She spent the whole summer recovering from surgery and was told her career as an ice dancer was over.

Tasha then added, "Well, if I had to choose between the Olympics or being on the Hot List, I'd pick the Hot List for sure."

At the mere mention of the list, Dustin choked on his now-warm champagne, which escalated into an embarrassing coughing fit. After getting pounded on the back by both girls, he finally managed to get

out in a raspy voice, "She's on the list?" Dustin tried to sound as casual as possible, because truth be told, he hadn't known the list was even out yet.

Stephanie nodded. "She came in at number three, which is incredible since she didn't even campaign for it."

Tasha added, "And she doesn't dress slutty like all the other girls."

"Well, not at school," Stephanie said. "But there's plenty of videos of Kimmie in some skimpy-ass ice dancing outfits on YouTube."

"Do you think it sucks for Lolls to have such a gorg little sister?"

"Nah. I'd rather have a bf like Steven than be on the list."

"Same."

Newly awash in so much information, Dustin, not wanting to give either girl reason to be suspicious, artfully changed the subject and then left the party twenty minutes later. He chose to walk home across the snowy park so he could replay the night in his head, marveling at how every choice he'd made in his entire life led him to that serendipitous encounter on the roof. As much as he tried to stop himself from going there, near the end of the walk he couldn't help but imagine what it would be like to walk into his prom with Kimmie S., the third hottest sophomore in all of Manhattan.

IV

School had been back in session for almost two weeks, and Dustin had seen Steven six times and had been unable to find the courage to talk to him about Kimmie directly. When he thought about why this was, all he could come up with was that he didn't know if he wanted to hear the truth. Because if he were to learn he had only a miniscule chance in hell with her, where would that leave him? But as Dustin crossed the park in the late afternoon for tutoring, he thought about what he'd just discussed in therapy. Today was lucky number seven and he was finally going to grow a pair and confess to Steven his love for Kimmie.

Dustin knew something was wrong as soon as he stepped into the apartment, and Steven embraced him in an awkwardly long bro-hug. He then said, “Dude, you can’t even believe my day. Come in. Come in. Good you’re here.”

Dustin’s first thought was Steven was on drugs. While getting himself some water in the kitchen, he checked his friend’s eyes. Steven’s pupils looked normal given the amount of light in the room. Dustin’s older brother was currently in rehab, so he had some experience with people on drugs, and though he knew Steven used, he was certain Steven wasn’t currently high.

To Dustin’s surprise, Steven settled down in the formal dining room at a table that could comfortably seat twenty-four people. He made a big show of opening his physics textbook, telling Dustin they could start working on his problem set right after they had a shot. Ordinarily, Dustin would have refused, but he needed to steel his nerves. The booze was surprisingly smooth and when Dustin said as much, Steven replied, “It fucking well should be, this shit is ninety-five hundred bucks a bottle!”

When Dustin heard this, he shook his head, grabbed the bottle, and did some quick calculations. “We just imbibed seven hundred and sixty dollars’ worth of booze!”

“And we’re doin’ it again!” Steven said, pouring two more shots.

Dustin, unable to deal with his growing anxiety, blurted out, “Is it absolutely impossible to believe Lolly’s little sister would ever go out with me?” and then downed his second shot.

Steven sat back in his chair, let out a slow wolf whistle, and said, “Dustin, you dirty dirty direwolf, you.” (A love of *Game of Thrones* was one of the few things the two boys had in common.)

Dustin ignored the whistle and kept going. “Ever since I met Kimmie on New Year’s Eve she’s all I can think about. My father caught me watching her ice dancing videos on my iPad and now is probably wondering if I’m gay. Thank god I met her after I got into MIT, because that girl is a GPA-wrecker.”

“Is that nerd-speak for crazy hot? Me likey.” Steven laughed at his friend’s outburst, set the front legs back down on the floor, and then said

quite seriously, “Real deal, I think Kimmie would be into a smart guy like you. Plus, girls high-key freak out over the status that comes with dating seniors.” Steven paused, which Dustin instinctively knew meant trouble.

“But . . . ?” Dustin prompted.

Steven nodded and continued, “But . . . she’s currently caught the attention of Count Vronsky and may be a little under his spell right now. But hang tight, ‘cause no girl lasts long with him.” Steven was sorry to give his friend the bad news, but he felt he owed it to Dustin to clue him in on who he was up against.

Dustin furrowed his brow, digesting the news. “Please tell me ‘Count’ is a nickname and not his actual official title.” Steven told his pal that it was indeed a nickname, but one born from a rumor that Vronsky’s father’s lineage could be traced back to a legit Russian royalty. The second theory on why he was known as “the Count” was because it took five minutes for him to count all the girls who had dropped their panties for him, but Steven kept this part to himself, instead adding, “But, seriously, Lolls thinks the Count’s a passing fancy and you could be the slow and steady tortoise that wins Kimmie for a prize.”

“Race,” Dustin corrected. “The slow and steady tortoise wins the race, not a prize.”

“Same thing!” Steven countered back in all seriousness. “You gotta assume if you win a race you’d also win a prize, yes? Dustin, my friend, I’ve got another expression for you . . . ‘Lighten the fuck up, dude!’ This is some real-ass life shit we’re talkin’ about, not English lit!”

It was Dustin’s turn to laugh at Steven’s comment and at himself. It was in Dustin’s nature to be inordinately precise about details, which served him well in school, but made him seem uptight socially. Dustin asked, “Hey, why would Lolly know I have a tortoise in the race at all?”

Steven admitted he had been aware of Dustin’s interest in Kimmie for a while now. Lolly was the one who put it together after joining the two boys during their study session last week. She told Steven that Dustin had awkwardly managed to bring up Kimmie’s name three times while they worked on Steven’s calc homework, which could only mean one thing. Hearing this caused Dustin to drop his head to the table and

thump his forehead a few times. Steven put a hand on Dustin's shoulder and promised his friend he was willing to help him with his Kimmie quest in any possible way. Dustin thanked him profusely and said he'd repay the favor any way he could.

Steven, emboldened by their bonding session, decided it was now his turn to confess his own girl troubles. Dustin listened to everything Steven said without interruption, only raising an eyebrow when Steven admitted that Lolly happened to be in the very same apartment with them at this very same moment.

Dustin chose his words prudently before giving his opinion on Steven's tale of woe, but no matter how hard he tried to find a way to side with his friend, he couldn't do it. He strongly disapproved of Steven's cheating on Lolly. It made no sense to Dustin that any man could make a case where it was okay to cheat on his girlfriend. The way Dustin saw it, why bother to make a commitment to someone if you had no intention of honoring it? Sure, he knew that plenty of boys cheated on their girlfriends with the reasoning that their girlfriends were holy terrors, but Lolly was no such terror. Steven tried to explain to Dustin that staying faithful was harder than it looked, but even as he said it out loud he knew his words were lost on him. He also knew that staying faithful for Dustin wouldn't be difficult, as he was made of sturdier moral stock than himself, for sure. And Dustin, who was somewhat of a rookie when it came to kicking game, probably had fewer temptations to deal with in general.

"Dude, it's not like I don't have banger's remorse, 'cause I do," Steven admitted.

"But do you have remorse because you did it, or because you got caught?" Dustin asked.

"I'd say fifty/fifty."

"And I'd say, thank you for your honesty," Dustin said, and he meant it, too.

After an hour passed, Steven told Dustin he had to cut their time short so he could pick up his sister at Grand Central. Anna was coming in for damage control. Dustin, now understanding the extenuating circumstances at hand, found himself offering to edit and proof Steven's paper on the flaws of the American prison system for him. Truth be told,

Dustin welcomed the idea of a little busywork because he had nothing better to do that night except obsess over Kimmie, which was the last thing he wanted. The thought of doing yet another deep dive through her Instagram feed, where he would stare at heavily filtered “artistic” photos of nature, made him want to scream. (Kimmie’s most annoying trait so far was that she, unlike most other teen girls, rarely posted selfies.)

As Dustin gathered up his things to go, it occurred to Steven how he might help Dustin and himself with one simple idea. “You should go to Wollman Rink right now because Kimmie’s there skating. She was recently cleared by her surgeon to skate again and Lolly said ‘skating puts Kimmie in her happy place.’ And if you show up when she’s in her happy place, then maybe some of her happy place could rub off on your happy place, nome sayin’?”

Dustin shook his head vehemently at the suggestion. “No way, I can’t. Do I look like a guy who can fake his way through a staged run-in? Nope, nope, nope!”

Steven waited for Dustin to quiet down before he continued. “C’mon, you’d be doing me a solid by going to talk to her.” His rationale for this request was that he needed Kimmie to cover for Lolly’s absence to their father and stepmother. “Lolly’s going to be in no shape to see the ‘rents tonight and Anna’s gonna need some time to talk her down off the crazy ledge!”

The last thing Dustin wanted was to get in the middle of Steven’s messy love life, reminding his friend that the messenger was the one who always got killed. “Text her yourself.”

Steven, now exasperated, raised his voice slightly. “C’mon dude, think about it. What am I supposed to text? ‘Yo, Kimmie, I straight-up cheated on your sis and now she’s gone all Sylvia Plath and locked herself in my mother’s walk-in?’ Dustin, do it for me. I’ll pay for your Uber, hell, seize the moment and take her to Serendipity 3 for frozen hot chocolate, which I’ll also pay for. Buy her the thousand-dollar sundae with the gold leaf, for all I care. Trust me, that’s a total panty-dropping move!” Steven pulled out his phone. “What’s your Venmo again? Seriously, let me *assuage* my guilty conscience by helping you with Kimmie. Vocabulary! I win.”

Dustin laughed and then closed his eyes for a moment and tried to picture himself sitting across from Kimmie in a cozy leather booth, watching her perfect mouth blowing on her hot chocolate. He shook the picture out of his head and waved off any more talk of money, heading out the door without agreeing one way or the other. Steven called after him, telling him he should trust him because the only subject he was smarter than Dustin in was girls.

Dustin almost reminded Steven that his current girl problem disproved his last statement but didn't. He was positive his friend wasn't in the right mind-set to handle the hard truth.

V

Steven was staring up at the arrivals and departures board in Grand Central when he found himself standing shoulder to shoulder next to Alexia V. (known around town by his nickname the Count, or just Vronsky), who was also scanning the board above them. "Hey man, what brings you here?"

Vronsky gave him a big grin. "Would you believe I'm here to pick up my mother? She's recovering from a broken ankle and is still using a cane. She attended a dinner party at my uncle's in Greenwich, gave her driver the night off, and is now taking the train back by herself. She didn't ask me to pick her up, but why else would she have sent me her arrival time?"

Steven returned his smile and decided that on close inspection Count Vronsky was every bit as handsome as everyone said he was. As they were both newish to Collegiate and Steven was a senior, everything he knew about Vronsky was strictly based on reputation. "If I was a betting man, I'd wager there's another reason. Gotta bank some 'good-boy points' for the future, perhaps? That's what I do whenever I can. What choice do we have when blessed with formidable women for mothers?"

Vronsky roared with laughter in response, slapped Steven on the back,

and then proceeded to neither confirm nor deny anything. Instead he answered a question with his own. "And you? What brings you out on a snowy evening without a proper overcoat?" Steven looked down and realized Vronsky spoke the truth. He had been so distracted trying to get Dustin out the door and not be late himself that he had left the house in only a Loro Piana cashmere cardigan and his black Burberry cashmere beanie.

"A beautiful girl," Steven answered, but quickly realizing this was not the right time for him to be so cavalier, added, "My sister, Anna. She's coming in from Greenwich, too."

Vronsky frowned. "Did I know you had a sister?"

"Anna's a junior at Greenwich Academy. She's the equestrian of the family and can't bear to be too far away from her precious horses, so she mostly lives at the Greenwich house. Plus, she has two giant dogs she's obsessed with. She's always saying it's her duty as a mom to give her fur babies a proper backyard to romp in."

"Gotta love the girls who love riding," Vronsky said with a sly grin, then quickly added, "Horses."

Ordinarily Steven would be all over Vronsky's statement, piling on his own vulgar jokes, but since they were talking about his sister, he kept himself in check. "Maybe you know her boyfriend, Alexander W.?"

Now it was Vronsky's turn to straighten up, even adding the flourish of tightening an imaginary tie. "No shit? Your sister is the gf of the Greenwich OG. Interesting."

"Not really." Honestly, if Steven never heard another word about Anna's umchina boyfriend it'd be fine with him. "Umchina" was one of the few Korean words Steven had learned from his Korean grandmother. There's no English translation, but it basically means the perfect son of your mother's friend, the one you're constantly compared to. For Steven, the Greenwich OG was his umchina because his mother couldn't help but list off every single one of Alexander's many accomplishments in Steven's presence. She once even went so far as to say, "Greenwich is so fortunate to have someone like Alexander representing it."

Alexander W. had been his sister's boyfriend for the last three years, earning his nickname, the Greenwich OG, for being the only privileged

white male in the country to have gotten into all eight Ivy League schools his senior year. He was old-money Connecticut from a good family, had published his first op-ed piece in *The New York Times* at age sixteen, was valedictorian at Brunswick, and spent two weeks of every summer teaching disadvantaged youths how to sail (which Steven found moronic, as if poor kids sat around wishing they could sail). He for sure would be the Democratic presidential nominee in another twenty years if the current president didn't decimate the American democratic system for all eternity. Alexander was presently a freshman at Harvard University but traveled back to Greenwich often to be a devoted boyfriend to Anna. Only the formidable Greenwich OG could get away with being a college guy who still had a high school girlfriend.

Anna was seventeen and two years younger than Alexander, but she had always been quite poised for her age. The perfect couple's "meet cute" happened at the White House Easter Egg Hunt when she was thirteen. Alexander was there because his dad was a big supporter of Obama, and she was there because at thirteen she played the violin in an award-winning string quartet, otherwise comprised of high school girls. If you believed the stories, it was said that when Alexander watched Anna play, he felt an overwhelming sense of déjà vu, even though he was certain he had never seen her before in his life. What he did know was that he no longer cared about helping little kids find Easter eggs. His only goal was to meet the beautiful girl who played the violin like she was sent down from the heavens to do so.

Alexander introduced himself to Anna at the dessert buffet and was so taken with her delicate beauty up close he dropped a piece of cherry pie on her white dress. Horrified over the mishap, he quickly arranged to have Anna borrow a dress from Sasha, President Obama's younger daughter. (To this day, Anna is still friends with Sasha.) What they later figured out was that Alexander had seen Anna play the violin for his aunt's second wedding at the Saugatuck Harbor Yacht Club in Westport the previous summer. Utterly smitten, Alexander begged his dad and stepmother to invite Anna to fly home with them on their private plane instead of letting her take the train. His stepmother had never

seen Alexander behave in such a way before, and in an effort to win favor with her husband's only son, she called Anna's mom and arranged the whole thing.

By the time Anna arrived home, she had the "promise" of her first boyfriend, since she wasn't allowed to "officially" have a boyfriend until she turned fourteen. Alexander had no problem waiting and the two had been the perfect couple ever since. The long-term plan was marriage, of course, but the post-high school plan was that Anna would attend Harvard or Yale and Alexander would go to law school wherever she ended up.

Steven once asked Anna whether it was scary to have her entire life planned out at such a young age. "We live in America now, so it's not like you gotta do the whole Korean arranged marriage for the good of the family status thing, you know?"

She just smiled at her brother's sarcasm and told him, "Alexander is a good person. He needs me and I'm happy to be there for him." Steven was quick to remind her that Alexander was not a dog and to ask her about her own needs, to which she simply replied that Alexander adored her, and she liked how easy their relationship was from the very start. She was relieved to not have to deal with the drama of dating, which she had little time or patience for. Alexander was everything a girl could want, plus it helped that her parents approved of their relationship. There were very few boys that their father would ever trust his precious daughter with; in fact, Alexander may be the only boy that fit the bill. In Korea, societal status was paramount, and Alexander's father was the top of the Greenwich elite. It was this importance their parents placed on social standing that Steven disagreed with the most.

"Track twenty-seven," Vronsky said, breaking Steven out of his thoughts.

"What did you say?" Steven asked.

"Their train, it's arriving now."

Steven nodded and hurried after Vronsky, for whom the crowd seemed to part, as he walked toward the escalators in his Brioni camel overcoat, his extra-long Tom Ford cashmere scarf dragging on the ground behind him.

VI

Anna K. told Mrs. Geneviève R. she'd be back to say a proper good-bye, but she needed to look and see if she could spot her brother, Steven. "Please know if your son isn't here we'd be more than happy to give you a ride home. And, if neither one shows up for us, I'm pretty capable myself."

It was rare for Geneviève to be impressed, but this delightful young creature was a firecracker. "Absolutely, my dear. I truly believe men need us women to show them their purpose in the world. For instance, meeting a woman's train on time."

Anna smiled at the socialite's words while standing in the doorway of the train car. She looked around and finally spotted her brother. She called out to him, but he didn't hear, so she stepped onto the platform, waving to get his attention.

What Count Vronsky first noticed about the exquisite girl were her eyes, dark deep pools that sparkled beneath incredibly long lashes. She looked like a perfect porcelain doll standing so straight and tall in her pale gray Max Mara cashmere coat. He also admired that she didn't wear much makeup like most teenage girls. As he stood watching, Steven bear-hugged her. Ah, so this was his younger sister?

A sharp rapping noise broke his gaze, and he turned to find his mother waving at him, as she banged her cane against the window once more for good measure. Having no other choice, he hurried into the train car. "Mother, dear," he called out, which was exactly how Geneviève preferred to be addressed by her favorite son.

"Alexia, your scarf. It's dragging on the ground like you're some kind of animal." His Parisian mother, a grand dame of New York society, never had a hair out of place, let alone a rebellious scarf. He quickly flung the unruly end over his shoulder and held out his hands to help her to her feet. She no longer had to wear a boot on her injured foot, but she still had it tightly taped and wrapped for security.

“Mother, you shouldn’t be wearing heels.”

“Darling, two-inch heels for me is the same as wearing flats,” she murmured, kissing her handsome son on both cheeks.

“Oh good, you found him.” At the sound of her voice every hair on the back of his neck stood at attention. He forced himself to turn around slowly to meet her.

“Did my mother doubt I’d show up?” he asked, his eyes twinkling.

Anna found herself blushing, not out of embarrassment but because she was so startled by Vronsky’s good looks, his dirty-blond locks falling over a face that was movie-star handsome. But it was more than his appearance: he exuded a confidence that could only be described as a king-of-the-jungle magnetism. She was sure her face registered wonderment that she would be susceptible to such a thing. “Not for one moment. I was probably projecting my own doubts about my brother showing up for me.”

“Anna, please meet my son Alexia, or Alex as he prefers to be called. Alexia, this remarkable young lady was kind enough to keep an old dame like me entertained for the entire trip. She’s quite special, this one,” Mrs. R. said.

Anna held out her hand to shake the one he was already extending. “A pleasure to meet you, Alexia, your mother has told me so much about you I feel like I know you already.”

Vronsky groaned. “Believe only the bad stuff. My mother often crowns me with a halo I don’t deserve.”

Before Anna could reply, Vronsky’s mother snapped, “Nonsense, you’re the most eligible bachelor in the city. Such a shame Anna’s already taken by the OG, or I’d insist you ask for her hand immediately.”

Anna and Alexia traded secret smiles at his mother’s use of the nickname, both certain she had no idea that OG stood for “original gangster” as opposed to “Old Greenwich” like she probably assumed. Vronsky’s mother barreled on, as was her way. “We traded stories of our children, my human ones and her four-legged ones. Anna is an accomplished rider and has two show dogs competing in Westminster next week.”

Anna, embarrassed by the praise, quickly corrected her. “I’m not showing them myself, my handlers Lee Ann and Ali will be doing the honors.

But it's true, I'm a girl who prefers the company of animals to people." Vronsky studied her face while she spoke, barely registering her words. She was truly the most stunning girl he had ever seen, a perfect blend of Eurasian beauty: almond eyes and sleek shiny dark hair combined with high cheekbones and a perfect WASPy ski-slope nose.

The conversation ended abruptly as a commotion erupted outside of the train. There was suddenly lots of shouting and people running by their window.

"Wait here, let me see what's going on," Vronsky said. Anna nodded, stepping toward Vronsky's mother and helping her sit back down.

He returned a few minutes later followed by Steven, reporting it was safe for them to leave now. Anna asked what was going on, but both boys exchanged looks and remained silent. Anna demanded, "Tell me; I want to know."

Vronsky gravely explained that a homeless man was the source of the uproar. The man had two dogs and was insisting that one of them had jumped out of his arms onto the tracks and was hit by the train. Anna gasped at the news. "Our train? Oh god, is it true?"

Her eyes were already welling up when Vronsky, compelled to be honest with Anna despite her reaction, confirmed the ugly truth. "I'm afraid so."

"That's so awful!" Anna cried, not bothering to wipe away her tears. She felt a roiling in her stomach. *This is a bad omen*, she thought. The four of them were on the platform heading to the escalator when Anna turned to see two police officers on the scene, one of them placing the still howling homeless man in handcuffs. Anna stopped walking. "Why are they arresting him?"

Steven explained that the homeless man had shoved the train conductor during the commotion. He then put his arm around his sister trying to usher her onto the escalator, but she refused to move.

"But what about his other dog? Didn't you say he had two? What's to become of that dog?" Anna pulled away from Steven and took two steps forward, but Vronsky put his hand on her arm and gently stopped her.

"No, don't. I'll go make sure his other dog is taken care of. Can you make sure my mother gets home for me?"

Anna met Vronsky's eyes and immense relief flooded through her. "You will? That's so sweet of you. Of course, we'll take your mom home."

Geneviève remained silent during the exchange, proud of her son for stepping up to do the right thing, but aware that he was far more concerned with doing the right thing for the beautiful girl's sake than the dog's.

Vronsky's mother had boasted a great deal about her son's accomplishments (romantic and otherwise) on the train, so Anna was already impressed, but this move was above and beyond. What kind of sixteen-year-old boy possessed the type of heroic goodwill she'd just witnessed? It was like her pain had become his as well. In that moment she felt as though his crystal blue eyes had seen her secret self, which was ridiculous because how could such a thing be possible when they had only just met?

VII

Dustin had no problem picking out Kimmie from the swirling mass of skaters at Wollman Rink. She was wearing a deep purple faux fur jacket with matching earmuffs, and even though her knee was not 100 percent, she was still the best skater on the ice. She moved with such grace and ease, Dustin couldn't take his eyes off her and was embarrassed to discover he had been holding his breath while he watched. He walked to the railing, unsure of how to get her attention, finally deciding he'd call out the next time she skated by. But three times she whooshed past, and three times he was unable to speak as he stared at her beautiful face. Eventually two middle school boys in hockey skates playing tag crashed into a few novices and a little boy belly-flopped onto the ice, landing so hard that he spun a full 720 degrees in his navy Patagonia snowsuit directly into Kimmie's path.

"Kimmie, watch out!" Dustin's voice was so urgent that several people, Kimmie included, looked his way. In one bunny hop movement, Kimmie made a full stop an inch from the fallen boy. She bent over and helped the little guy to his feet and delivered him back to his parents. As Dustin