

## Notes on the first draft of ILLUMINATE , Chapter 1

1. The title was originally HAVEN but when my editor learned that another teen paranormal romance novel named HAVEN was set for release a few months before mine, we knew it needed to change. Now, I'm so glad: ILLUMINATE is perfect.

2. This chapter was initially about 38 pages long. Waaaay too long. We re-broke most of the chapters to keep them under 20 pages. When we chopped this one into two, we had to rename it. Since Haven doesn't arrive at the hotel in this chapter anymore, "First Impressions" didn't make sense. I changed it and I also decided that all the chapter titles would be taken from lines of dialogue.

3. After outlining for weeks, I finally sat down to write and spent hours knocking around the perfect first sentence. I loved the idea of something very simple, straightforward and unassuming to start because this was going to be one wild, twisty, turny, paranormal story. Also: my editor suggested lopping off the second half of the sentence after "unremarkable" to make it more crisp, which I loved. My sentences often tend to be long, so many were shortened throughout the book.

4. I mentioned *The Picture of Dorian Gray* here because I consider ILLUMINATE an update of that classic.

5. There's always overwriting in the beginning of the first draft as you're establishing your character's voice. My narrator, Haven, is very introspective. She has a rich inner monologue because she's so disengaged socially from those around her but this was too much so I trimmed.

6. This chat about hedonism foreshadows the world Haven's about to enter.

7. My agent suggested cutting this and I agreed. I had wanted to show that Haven isn't popular, but I went too far and made her seem desperate.

8. It sometimes takes me a while to name characters, especially tertiary ones because you don't spend much time getting to know them. "Sarah" was just a placeholder until I found the right name but even as a placeholder it failed. My sister—my first reader-- flagged it immediately telling me: "She can't be Sarah. That type of person is never named Sarah." She became Courtney.

9. Foreshadows what's going to happen to Haven!

10. Speaking of names: Stone was a placeholder too. I wanted something earthy for Haven's surname. And then it hit me: Terra. Perfect.

11. My editor noticed that all of the women of a certain age in this book called Haven "dear"—such a good catch. I cut most of these references.

12. Trimmed by my editor. We get it, the backpack was heavy, move on!

13. My agent suggested I cut this and I agreed. Haven is intended to be an invisible outcast, someone ignored, not someone who's actually attacked—that would be a rung below her on the social hierarchy of high school. This seemed to go too far so we cut it.

14. Trimmed. Unnecessary: we already get that she's a good girl.

15. Joan is Haven's adoptive mom so originally I was calling her "Aunt Joan" in an attempt to give her a title of some sort but realized this was ridiculous and confusing so I dropped it.

16. Cut. Once again: unnecessary.

17. BOOM! A sign that she's not a completely typical kid and that this story will take you somewhere unexpected...and hopefully it'll also make you want to keep reading.

18. Cut by my editor. I had wanted you to feel Haven's nervousness. She's looking around, picking at her fingers, uncomfortable. But it was unnecessary, we needed to get to the point faster. Little trims like this can really add up and make the early pages move faster.

19. Trimmed. More unnecessary details. After this scene we're not going to see Principal Tollman again for the rest of the book, so we don't need to be here very long.

20. Just a fun little foreshadowing: This spells DEVIL. Ha!

21. Again with the "dear." Cut.

22. General tightening and condensing in here to make it move a little faster.

23. My agent suggested that a descriptive chunk about Joan from later in the chapter be moved here and expanded. I had initially included it during a quieter moment so as not to break up the party scene here, but I realized it made more sense to get that description in earlier.

24. I gave Nurse Michelle a promotion: she became Dr. Michelle. I also made her younger in order to really turn her into a kind of ideal Haven aspired to be. I also added a pivotal scene much later on with Dr. Michelle at the hotel in a twist that is crushing to Haven and a turning point in the story. You'll see! Some of the best twists, like giving Michelle more of a role, don't always occur to me on the first draft.

25. I completely cut Dr. Thomas. In trying to show how engrained Haven was in hospital life, I went too far by showing too much of her backstory with characters that we're never going to see again or, in this case, characters we don't really need to meet in the first place.

26. Joan winks at least three times in the next few pages. Yikes. My editor noticed and I cut.

27. Details like this one communicate plenty (and in an economical fashion) about how much Haven is woven into the tapestry of life at this hospital.

28. Cut. This really slowed things down. This hospital scene is so obviously something I wrote when I was still establishing Haven's voice and backstory and still getting into the groove writing this book. When I started, I had wanted to show Haven doing her job, but by the end of the book that just wasn't necessary anymore. When you've finished writing the book and you look back at those first 50 pages, there's always stuff like this that cries out to be cut. But writing this was still worthwhile, it cemented who Haven was in my mind. In place of this long scene, I just added a line about taking a goodbye tour and then went straight to the important part that has bearing on the rest of the book: visiting the pediatric patients whose photos Haven had taken.

29. Originally I had listed the handful of kids who were Haven's favorites and I had planned to have them reappear at the end of the book, but the story moved away from that as I was writing it. I cut these names and descriptions, except for Jenny—who helped Haven discover her love of photography, which becomes so important to the book.

30. I added a bit in here about Haven's photo project getting attention back at school just to show what a big deal her talent was.

31. Lots of trimming and condensing in here since I cut out the Jeremy and Steve characters.

32. My editor cut some of Haven's conversational nervous tics throughout the book since sometimes there were just too many of them.

33. The description of this feeling was too much here, I moved it to a more dramatic spot later on.

34. Cut by my editor, who pointed out that Haven didn't actually have to prove herself to score this internship.

35. Cut. We get it, you're nervous. Enough!

36. Cut. More unnecessary inner-monologue-chattiness.

37. Here I added in some details of the fall Dante took as a child in order to help readers see his injuries. These are important later on in the book when there's a discussion about his scars.

38. Tightening, tightening, tightening.

39. She's a tomboy, so I realized that all of this pink didn't make sense. I changed it to silver instead.

40. Trimmed.

41. Trimmed. Just open the box already!

42. It occurred to me that a diamond pendant was too fancy for teens, so I changed it to a birthstone.

43. Trimmed.

44. Cut by my editor: it's obvious there would only be one of these if it's in an antique store.

45. Trimmed and made clearer.

46. Break here, start chapter 2!

## First Impressions 2

Up until that point, English class had been unremarkable and had carried on completely as expected. We were halfway through "The Picture of Dorian Gray." Mrs. Harris, with her voluminous hair behind precariously perched on the front of her strained wooden desk, scanned the room searching for flickers of comprehension—or, at the very least, consciousness—in a sea of clueless faces. I slid ever-so-slightly down in my seat, letting my long wispy hair, still damp from my morning encounter with winter's sloppy-wet sleet, fall around the sides of my face: hiding. I've never much been one for participation. I generally know the answers, but I just don't appreciate the attention that comes from knowing them. Answer correctly and you have further cemented your reputation as a brainy, hopeless outcast. Answer incorrectly and not only are you a bookish nerd, but now you're even bad at that; if you're imperfect in your intellect, you have got nothing left. It was a lose/lose situation at best. So I read ahead in the book, tuning her out, glancing up every now and then to the clock above the chalkboard or to the windows where blustery, chalk-white skies hung over another frigid January day. Evanston, Illinois, and the tundra that was the greater Chicago area would likely look this way until April, but it never bothered me so much. I liked the way that braving its wind-whipping wrath could make a person,

even someone as easily tossed-around as me, feel stronger.

"So let's talk about the nature of good, evil and hedonism," she droned on. 6

At hedonism, on reflex, my eyes darted two rows in front of me. Buzz-cropped Jason Abington, wearing his basketball jersey--#9—to advertise the big game this weekend, nibbled on the cap of his black ballpoint pen—MY black ballpoint pen. Somewhere inside my stomach, swarms of butterflies fluttered from their cocoons. It was for this very reason that the front outside pocket of my backpack bulged, at all times, with scores of these pens, which I had, optimistically, bought in bulk. He seemed never to have his own and somehow, an odd stroke of luck, he had asked to borrow one from me weeks ago and then again and again and now this is what I had become to him: a pen supplier, a purveyor of pens. 7

That was just fine. I would rather be that, a shred of something to him, than even less than a blip on his radar. At the desk beside him, a blonde creature—his blonde creature—named Sarah 8 wirtled her artfully hot-rolled bodacious curls. This is what boys like him were conditioned to expect. This wasn't me and I couldn't imagine it ever would be, regardless of what magical metamorphosis 9 one was expected to undergo during high school. I was a work in progress, but I had no reason to believe the finished product would ever be like that.

It occurred to me I had stopped paying the least bit of attention when Harris called:

"Ms. Stone. Haven. Did you hear me?" 10

To be honest, no. Scrambled, I shuffled through the shards I had caught of her lecture, searching for the most likely line of questioning and then shooting out an answer that ought to fit. "Um, Dorian and Lord Henry believe in following the senses, pursuing whatever pleases them, uh, no matter the consequences, and, um, not worrying about right and wrong?" I proposed, sweat dampening my temples. Jason angled his head back just a touch in my direction;

I felt other eyes burning on me too.

"Thank you dear, that's lovely," she was holding a slip of paper she had just taken from a senior girl, bored, chewing gum, who now left the room. "But your presence is requested in the principal's office."

A weak chorus of, "Ooooooh" broke out, providing a soundtrack as I gathered my books and boulder of a backpack, which was always so stuffed it resembled a jet-pack capable of propelling me anywhere I needed to go and heavy enough it carved divots into my narrow shoulders. As I squeezed through the aisle, I spotted, from the corner of my eye, a wadded up ball of college-ruled paper launched by one of the usual tormentors at the back of the room. I dodged just in time and it hit my bicep—far better than my head—as I passed Jason's desk. His eyes looked up for only a moment, expressionless. (It seemed to be that he would keep this pen, like the other two from last week.) Sarah snickered. I grabbed the hall pass Harris' pudgy digits waved at me, and made my way out the door into the quiet serenity of the empty hallway.

In my two and a half years of high school, I had yet to set foot inside Principal Tollman's office: I'm just not that kind of girl. So I couldn't imagine what this could be about. On the walk there, footsteps echoing on the linoleum, faded voices muffling out from passing classrooms, I did a quick inventory: I had gotten in exactly zero trouble pretty much since childhood. So was it something else? Some other kind of discontentment or disturbance or maybe even disaster? Was something wrong with Aunt Joan? This is how it is with me, when left to wander, my mind seizes on all sorts of horrific possibilities, which is pretty much how Aunt Joan feels about me. A state of constant fear for my well-being.

But, in our case, this sort of overreaction was justified.

This is just what happens when you are discovered, as I was, at roughly age five, in a

muddy ditch somewhere off of Lake Shore Drive in the dead of winter.

A Jane Doe, little lungs barely breathing, no memories of anything that came before that night, no one ever to come looking for you. And you get raised by the kind nurse (not actually an aunt) who eventually takes you in, names you, feeds you, clothes you. After a thing like that, worry becomes more than a reflex, it becomes an umbrella shading daily life, hovering with implied menace every time someone is late to get home or doesn't call when they say they will.

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Tollman's office walls were proud galleries of her own gilded diplomas, commendations from the superintendent of Cook County Public Schools for things like collectively high PSAT scores, photos of her with the portly local congressman, the sorts of knickknacks that engender a sense of authority over not just kids, but any parents who get stuck in there to explain why Junior set off that stink bomb in the cafeteria.

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I stood just inside the doorway picking at the dry, rough cuticles of my fingers, while she scribbled her signature on paper after paper. My breaths came in shallows spurts, hardly expanding my chest at all.

"Ms. Stone, have a seat," she said over top of the rimless reading glasses perched on her nose, the kind that made a person instantly appear decades older, an ancient 80 instead of, say, a trim and well-maintained 50-something. She squared up in her chair, watching me, until she finally spoke. "So it looks like congratulations are in order." I felt my eyes involuntarily bulge.

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"We've just been notified that you and two of your fellow eleventh graders have been accepted into the Department of Education's Vocational Illinois Leaders intern program."

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It took me half a second too long to process.

"Oh, wow. That's great, thanks," I said, more reserved than she probably expected, but I was preoccupied. My mind sorted and sifted, channel-surfing fast through everything I'd applied

for in the past year. There was just so much. Anything that could earn me extra cash for college; anything that would sound good enough to help me clinch a scholarship to one of my dream schools, internships, fellowships, essay contests, my mailbox and my mind flooded with the constant stream of applications and deadlines and hopes. And yet, somehow, this didn't even ring a bell. She took off her glasses and stared at me with a faint smile, a director waiting for the reaction shot she wanted. "This sounds fantastic," I started. "I really am honored. But, forgive me, I can't seem to recall actually applying for this." A nervous grin propped up the corners of my mouth.

She laughed, a small, charmed chuckle.

"Oh, well, dear,<sup>21</sup> that's because you didn't. That's the beauty of this particular internship, they just pluck the best and the brightest and place those students with a thriving Illinois enterprise for the semester. It's a new sort of pilot program the state seems to be trying out. You will each be paired up with someone at this business who will act as both a sort of advanced independent study tutor and mentor. And," glasses back on, she read from a paper. "Let's see, ooooh, yes, it appears you're going to be placed at the Lexington Hotel in Chicago. Why, that's really remarkable, you know. They're about to reopen, and the woman who owns it has become the toast of Chicago's business world practically overnight. I'm sure you've seen her in the Tribune and on the news and so forth. This is a tremendous privilege. It says here that room and board are even provided, and there's a considerable stipend in exchange for good old-fashioned 9 to 5 hard work."

As she spoke, the words rushed at me too fast to make sense of. So I would be living at this place? Living at a hotel? Working full-time? No actual classes? Considerable stipend? It was all a lot to wrap my head around. First, how do things like this just fall from the sky? Perhaps the

near-perfect grades I worked so hard for, the afterschool job I had had for pretty much a decade, the Saturday nights spent at home studying, were finally all being cashed in, paying off in something tangible, something that could launch me to the level I needed to be to have a shot at some of these schools on my wish list, the pricey and prestigious ones.

“I know you’ve started your semester--the timing is a bit odd, I suppose the county is still ironing out the kinks-- however, we’ll make it work for the three of you students since this is a rare opportunity.” She said this with a hands-clasped, tilted-head gravity that suggested she would like some gratitude and gushing in return.

“Thank you, Ms. Tollman. I appreciate it, this is really great.” I couldn’t quite put the words together, my mind was already five steps ahead of this moment sorting through what Aunt Joan would say—would she even let me go?—what I would bring with me, how I would tell them at the hospital. “May I ask when—“

“You start next week. Everything you need to know should be in here.” She stood from her desk, thrust a slim manila envelope at me, then surprised me by grabbing my limp, unsuspecting hand for a firm shake. “Do us proud, Haven. We’ll see you back here in September.”

I had never seen so many people crowd the half moon of the pediatric nurse’s station when there *wasn’t* an emergency. There must’ve been at least three dozen of them pulled from even the farthest corners of the hospital compound and representing the full range and color palette of scrubs—pinks, blues, greens, Disney characters--all buzzing around me, nibbling on heaping slices of red velvet cake (my favorite), devouring the frosted well-wishes that had read: “Happy Birthday and Congratulations, Haven! We’ll miss you!” It was a good thing it was a big

cake. Aunt Joan, had, of course, orchestrated the whole thing, a combination early birthday and farewell—or as she said in her speech, “Not goodbye, just goodbye for now”—all in one. Now, she bent over the sheet cake, shoulder-length gray hair tied back in her usual firm ponytail, dishing out precisely sliced pieces as fast as she could, supply meeting demand swiftly and with an exchange of smiles. I always wished to be such a good hostess. At the moment, though, I was doing my best as the center of attention, another tricky role for me, but one I was lucky to be thrust into. As problems went, this was a fine one: surrounded by so many well-wishers that I had managed only one bite of my celebratory confection before being pleasantly besieged, a tug at the arm of my salmon-hued scrubs here, an ambush hug or a jolly pat on the back there. A who’s who of everyone I’d worked with through the years, or, at least, anyone able to steal time away from their life-saving duties.

“Y’know, I just don’t know how I’m going to tell some of my patients about this,” said Nurse Calloway from cardiac, whose trademark blond beehive was rivaled in size only by her wide, warm smile. She stabbed at her cake as Nurse Michelle—from pediatrics, where she almost could pass as a patient, full of energy with a perky ponytail to prove it, younger looking than her 40 years and, like me, only a couple inches over 5 feet—and white-haired Nurse Samuels, with sweet glistening eyes behind her thick glasses, nodded in agreement. This was my little sorority. “This is going to break their hearts,” Calloway continued. “And these are hearts that are already in pretty bad shape to begin with.” We all laughed.

“Indeed, you will be missed,” Dr. Thomas, second piece of cake in hand, joined the circle. He was everyone’s favorite: 50-something, polite, and divorced, so he made the single nurses swoon. He had let me read x-rays with him from the time I was little—showing me my own, oddly intact, back when we first met. Ever since, together, we had sussed out fractures of

every size and scope from clean, sharp breaks to, my favorites, those hairlines that appeared only as narrow-banked rivers snaking a landscape. The small fault lines that were easy to miss and yet could wreak such havoc if you didn't catch them early. "I assure you, the loss will be positively crippling in orthopedics." An eruption of giggles.

"Oh, Dr. Thomas," Calloway slapped his arm playfully.

This was the kind of humor we were used to in these parts. A little macabre, but this was how everyone got through the day. Thomas broke off with a wave to mingle with the rest of the group, disappointing the trio surrounding me, and refocusing attention.

"But, Haven, what about weekends?" Samuels sniffled. "Could you still come on weekends? Or evenings? Something?"

"Now I'm starting to feel bad," I said, looking at all three faces. "Maybe I should stay,"

At the other end of the nurse's station a good fifteen feet away, Aunt Joan perked her head up, waving her cake knife in the air.

"I know you're not guilt-tripping my girl, are you ladies?" she called over to us, winking at me and cutting a piece of cake for herself at last. Propped up on the table behind her, a photo of me, about 10 years old wearing a mini-candy-striper's uniform, sat framed. I was all over this place, a scavenger hunt could be conducted to find photos of me at every age scattered on desks throughout the sprawling compound that was Evanston General. I was everyone's surrogate child smiling from their desk tops and cabinets and computer wallpaper. This had pretty much been my daycare center for as long as I could remember, coming to work with Joan and being babysat by anyone and everyone until I was old enough that they could start giving me something useful to do. Joan wandered over, plate in hand, mouth full of cake and put her arm around me. "We have to let this one spread her wings, she'll fly back." She winked.

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"It's just one semester, I'll be back at the end of June. You'll barely have time to miss me."

"So, that's a no on weekends and evenings?" Calloway pressed.

"Come now, everyone!" Joan hushed them, licking frosting from her index finger.

"Enough! We don't want her on that bus late at night going back to that hotel, it's just too much for my little Haven."

"It's too much for little Haven," I joked. Everyone laughed. They were a good, sweet audience. "I'll do a goodbye tour before I leave, promise," I reassured them, a crater deepening in my heart. Joan had warned me of this: they would need more comforting than me.

The day didn't get much easier. Festivities over, I tagged along with Calloway on the dinner run through the cardiac wing, delivering tray after tray of discs of albino roasted turkey and cups of pale cherry jello and firm rolls.

"She's a heartbreaker, this one, that's what I always say, and now I know," grumbled Mr. Hanson, a frown on his grizzled and prunish (in both color and texture) face, after Calloway broke the news. But--he didn't fool me--his words were tinged with enough playfulness that I knew both that he forgave me and that he was recuperating nicely from the surgery that had landed him in here in the first place.

"Mr. Hanson," I let my voice dip, matching his mischievous tone. I set the dinner tray on his bedside table and swung it in front of him. He scowled at it, nostrils flaring. "You're looking so good, you'll probably be out the door right after me."

"No, no, always breaking hearts. And fighting the boys off with a stick, I bet!" he laughed, a phlegmy laugh that morphed into a cough and then twisted back to a laugh again. He always liked to say this, and it was always unbelievably embarrassing, so much so that if these

words had not have come from a sweet octogenarian whose vision happened to be going, I would have thought for sure he was actually making fun of me. His words just could not have been further from the truth, but still some buried part of me was grateful to hear anyone say this sort of thing no matter who it was and how ridiculous is sounded to me. If only someone, anyone, who wasn't a senior citizen were to say this to me, I would fall in love with them instantly.

"Oh, Mr. Hanson," this was how I always responded to this, it was the only possible response. "Now just promise me you'll keep eating your meals no matter how bad you think the food is and be nice to the nurses, okay?"

"Alright, alright, alright, I can't say no to you," he barked, waving his hands at me in surrender. I gave him a kiss on his wrinkled, rough forehead.

"Be good," I smiled, pointing at him.

On my last stop of the day-- the one I really dreaded--I cut a pied piper's path through the pediatrics ward, making the rounds with Nurse Michelle and collecting followers as I went room to room until I had ten or so pajama'ed kids trailing. I snuggled some into their beds, dispensed hugs and kisses by the hundreds, promised to visit everyone soon, and finally landed back at the playroom. By this point only my core group—my Darlings as I called them because they seemed

like my own version of Peter Pan's surrogate family—remained. They ranged from six to 14 and for one reason or another, we felt particularly tethered to each other just in the way you hit it off with certain people and see yourself in them as they do in you. Pint-size Penelope (the baby at 6), cheery, blonde ringletted Helen (10), tough guy Jeremy (12 and a half, and don't forget the half), his idol Steve (13), and sweet Jenny, the 14-year-old who had been in and out of here for years and had a different color headscarf for each day of the week and was my right hand. We took our

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usual seats on the cushy sofa of the playroom, my spot was just under the photo-adorned bulletin board we had assembled together: a collage of photos of each child in the ward, running the length of the wall, with a border in a riot of colors. It looked like a wonderful explosion, confetti, a massive yearbook page, and we updated it with new photos of everyone on a regular basis. It had started as nothing really, just a little project I decided to try for photography class last year, I asked if a few kids would be willing to let me photograph them and they did and then, somehow, everyone wanted in on it. They would tell me they loved seeing themselves, that they felt that the photos looked more lively than what they saw when they looked in the mirror, which surprised me. Though, they did all seem to glow in a way, in those pictures, like the camera cut down to their core. I studied it, taking it all in for a second, then curled my feet up, arms hugging my knees, and launched right in.

“Okay, guys, so I’ve got a job for you.” They leaned in toward me, as one. I knocked a knuckle against the bulletin board behind me. “I’m officially putting you guys in charge of the Wall of Fame. Nurse Michelle has kindly promised to take the photos so you can keep rotating in the new ones. Don’t let her slack off. Remind her I’m gonna be back in a couple months and I’ll expect it to be in good shape.”

“Ooooh, um, she’s not such a good photographer,” Jenny whispered. She had her favorite pink bandana tied around her bare head. “Remember the one of me with just one eye open when you were out that one day? Seriously, she was taking my picture for almost an hour, that’s the best we got.”

“Good point, Jen. Forgot about that. Not quite a natural is she? We’ll just hope that she’s improved since then. Be patient with her, guys. I’ll be coming back to check on things and make sure our artistic standards haven’t fallen too far,” I assured them. “And Jenny and Steve, if

necessary, I give you permission to take over the photography yourselves.”

“Hey! What about me? Us?” Jeremy pointed to the two quiet and polite little girls. “Me!”

“I thought you’d like to spearhead the collage duties.”

“Got it,” he seemed pleased.

“We’re all good?” Everyone nodded, solemnly. “I’ll miss you guys.” I burst up from my seat. “Alright, high fives everyone, let’s have it.” I raced around slapping each soft palm.

Night had fallen by the time we left, the lights of Chicago weakening to a dull glimmer in the distance as Joan drove through the darkened, windswept suburban streets of cozy, quiet Evanston. The city felt much farther away than it actually was from home and the comfortable routine of my life. Beneath my puffy parka I could feel cold bands of sweat trickling down my skin. I must have sighed.

“You okay?” Joan asked, peeking at me in that way of hers, from the corner of her eyes as she drove, the slush shushing softly under the tires.

“Sorry, yeah.” I kept my gaze straight ahead, into the ice-encrusted, velvety night. I just mean, I think that was actually a lot tougher than I expected.”

“Of course, honey, they’re all like family. Besides, going away parties are designed to make you sorry you’re leaving—they’re sneaky that way.” She smiled, and I did too. “But you know what? We’re all right here, and you’re just a half hour away—an hour on the L—it’s nothing. It’ll be fine.”

“I know, I’m just sort of, I don’t know, nervous.” A twinge of guilt nipped at me, I didn’t want her to worry, and I certainly didn’t want to remind her that just about 24 hours ago she was completely vetoing this whole plan. It had not gone well after school that day. I, at least, had the

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good sense to wait till we got home from work before telling her, thereby eliminating the possibility of causing a scene at the hospital when she inevitably flipped out. She sounded all the expected alarms: "Why do you need to stay there? How hard are they going to be working you that they need you on the premises 24/7 when you only live an hour away on the L? Don't they know there are child labor laws?" Sure, I had told her, the whole thing is organized by the school board so obviously they're not shipping us off to some sweat shop. But, in the end, there was just no denying the honor that seemed to come with this. I had pulled out the packet from Principal Tillman, with all the particulars of where I'd be going, when I would need to report there, what I would be paid (her eyes bulged at that), and then a folder full of information about the hotel, glamorous glossy photos of its grandeur, and a host of clippings of stories from every newspaper and magazine in the city, about the equally glamorous woman: Aurelia Brown, blonde, stunning, unbelievably young, powerful, and seemingly perfect, who would be my new boss. In the end, Joan had to say yes, she didn't stand a chance against such a well-fought campaign.

But now, as Friday night closed in on me, ushering in what I knew would be an intense weekend of preparation for this sudden new chapter, it was all catching up with me, tugging at my chest, holding me down.

"I just don't know what this will be like," I continued, finally. "I don't know if they'll like me or if I'll do a good job. I have to prove myself all over again. And it's just weird, I mean, I've never even been to camp and now I'm going to be living somewhere else. And I know I want to go away to school, but I would have a whole extra year to get ready for that, you know? I just feel really...off." That was the only way to put it: I felt that I was playing the role of me—and doing it badly--in what would be a spinoff of my life, and in this role, I was supposed to be someone who was smart enough she could be dropped into any situation and instantly sort out

her place in that world, among those new faces and new experiences, and conquer it all. But I just wasn't sure I could be convincing at it yet. The glow cast by the street lamps transformed the bare trees lining our path into spindly, tentacled beasts. I shivered but then took control and a deep breath. 35

"You will be just fine. They picked you, remember? They know you're special. They want you there, remember that," she offered, in soothing tones. "And, besides, you'll have Dante there. You kids will have each other."

"I know. That's the only reason I'm not totally freaking out. Imagine what a basketcase I'd be if I had to go it alone."

"No kidding," Joan smiled. I had to, too.

Dante Dennis, had been my security blanket, and best friend, for about ten years now. The fact that he was one of the other two kids going to the Lexington with me might have otherwise seemed pure, dumb luck, except that he and I were always vying—politely, of course—for the top of the class, for the grades and the honors and the leadership titles and everything, always running neck and neck, and so it made sense when he hedged at lunch, sheepishly peeking out from behind his chin-length dreadlocks, and grabbing a French fry from my tray.

"You wouldn't happen to have any news, would you?" He had eased into it, then bulldozed on. "Because I do. And I will die if you DON'T have news. Please tell me you're ditching this town and breezing into the Windy City for a certain fabulous internship?" He raised his eyebrows at me—up/down, up/down—conspiratorially, and instantly a wave of relief washed over me. that was all it took. 36

"You wouldn't be checking into the Lexington Hotel, would you?" I answered.

"Yesss!" He was practically jumping in his seat now. "Oh my god, we're going to have

so much fun. I mean, who lives in a hotel? Only like rock stars and celebrities and maybe those messed up starlets who, like, divorce their parents. Get me out of this horrid high school and into Chicago society!”

“Yes, please.” I smiled, shaking my head. We looked around us at the tables full of people who would elect us president of things like French Honor Society, but yet not talk to us, ever. I took a breath and ratcheted my mood down just a few levels. “Are you a little...”

“Nervous?”

“Yeah.”

“Hello?! Yes. Of course. I mean, the whole thing seems like kind of a big deal--Tollman seemed, like, weirdly excited, and I sure don't want to mess up. We could get total kickass college recommendations outta this. And these people could probably get us into any school in Chicago without even trying: Northwestern, U Chicago, they probably know everyone. We'd be idiots not to be nervous. But we're smart and seriously, we work hard, it's all good.” He swatted his hand at me, no sweat.

And I exhaled. This was his rare talent—far more impressive than his tenure on the Honor Roll or his landslide re-election to Student Government, or the absurdly gourmet bake sale he organized for charity each year, full of the most precious confections you've ever seen (he was no less than an artist whose chosen medium just happened to be frosting)--but, no, his greatest accomplishment, as far as I was concerned, was his ability to act as a human tranquilizer for me. He could keep me operating at a sane and steady level no matter how twisted up I felt inside. He had had years of practice at this, of course, and had proven his aptitude for it from that very first day I met him at the hospital so many years ago. Back then I was roaming the pediatric halls waiting to find out who I was and where I would be shipped off to. He had fallen climbing

a tree one afternoon and been rushed to the emergency room by his frantic mom. He wandered into my room with his broken arm plaster-casted and slung in a sling, after tendon damage had forced him to stay overnight and we were up till nearly daybreak telling ghost stories. He went home the next afternoon but promised to visit me once a week as long as I was there and sure enough, every Friday he would appear, running down the hall pulling his mom Ruthie with him, his little arms always full of coloring books or stuffed animals or pictures he'd drawn for me.

Joan pulled into the driveway of our town house: Home never looks so good as when you know you're going to leave it. Ours was a faded royal blue out front, with brown shutters and a slim covered porch for refuge on rough days. Tall and narrow, the place was plenty big for just the two of us and mere blocks from Lake Michigan, which was still and icy now but would be our favorite escape for afternoons of sunbathing and picnicking when the weather would finally turn warm.

"Go on in, I've gotta get some things out of the trunk." Joan shooed me away.

"Need help?"

"Nah, go on in," she insisted. "I'll be just a sec."

With that, I opened the car door and ran up the front steps and to the porch as fast as I could, the icy air rattling my bones as the wind howled and whooped around me. My gloved, numb fingers fumbled with the keys and finally the door opened and a blast of heat warmed my raw, windburned skin.

I flipped on the light: through the living room, back in the kitchen a "Sweet 16" balloon danced above the table shimmering in pink and silver, and a homemade cake—iced in creamy pink—and a palm-sized box, wrapped in glittering pink paper with a silver bow waited for me.

I dropped my backpack on the floor and beelined straight to my birthday shrine,

unzipping my coat--now so leaden in the indoor warmth--as I went and disposing of it on a living room chair on my way. Joan was already at the door, a smile on her lips, by the time I dug my finger into the fluffy icing and licked it off.

"Part two of the birthday extravaganza!"

"Delicious. And amazing. But it's not until Monday." That, at least, was the date we had always celebrated since we didn't really know for sure. Sometimes it still felt strange to be the only person I knew who didn't know when her birthday actually was, but we simply observed it on the day when I had been found and taken to the hospital where she was the first to tend to me, patching up my gashes and scrapes, checking for broken bones, and slowly, getting me to talk to her, though I had nothing to say, nothing that was helpful at least. So this was the date we celebrated and it always seemed to work just fine.

"I thought since we were already in such a festive spirit, we would just continue the party, let the good times roll." She set down her purse and shimmied off her coat, hanging it on the rack by the door. I took the glittering box in my hands and shook it.

"So can I open it?"

"You'd better!" she said, joining me at the table and sampling a finger's worth of icing herself. "Go on!"

With a crisp slice, I tore at the paper—I always wished I was one of those girls who delicately picked at a corner, freeing a wrapping so methodically that it could all be used again and no one would know. But that just wasn't me. I shredded it, clawing until I was left with a white velvet box, the size of a deck of cards. I lifted the hinged lid with a squeak and click and the contents inside sparkled at me.

"I know you're not into jewelry, my precious little tomboy," she winked. "But 16 is a

biggie and I thought you should have something pretty." I pulled out a necklace, webbing its gold chain around my slim fingers. It's true, I didn't wear any jewelry, ever, and what little I'd ever gotten had always sat in their boxes untouched and ended up buried in my closet never to be seen again. But this one already felt different. For one, it wasn't a heart or a dangling diamond or any of the kinds of shapes I was used to seeing on the girls at school, the girls who always had just the right everything and who would have attracted notice and admiration even if they didn't. Instead, this pendant, almost harp-shaped and running the length of my fingertip, was something entirely new: a single gold wing, its texture softly rippled to give the illusion of feathers. She continued. "I found this at that antique shop I always make you go into with me. You know? The one out on Main Street?"

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"Right, the one next to that book store that I always sneak into when you take too long."

"Exactly," she smiled. "So, I just thought it looked special, like you, and unique—it was the only one there." She kissed the top of my head. "I liked the wing, because you're really going places, you know that? You're soaring, dear. You have so much ahead of you."

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"Thanks, Aunt Joan, I love it, I really do." Necklace still laced around my fingers, I gave her a hug and held there an extra second longer than I normally might.

"Maybe you'll actually wear this one, you think?" she said, smoothing my hair.

"I'll prove it." I dangled the necklace from my finger, lifted up my hair and turned around. "Would you?"

"I'd be honored." She fastened it on, turned me around by my shoulders and straightened it out, setting it in place so it hit just at that little indented spot at my neck. "Perfect, go see."

I flipped on the bathroom light and studied myself in the mirror. My eyes went directly to it in my reflection. Generally, everything about me always seemed built for blending in, my

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features when not drawing attention for the wrong reasons (my nose looked, to me, like a blob of uncooked cookie dough) had a way of fading into the background and on top of that, my hair, skin and eyes were each just one shade off from each other in the color spectrum: caramel skin, bone-straight honey brown hair, dark amber eyes. The pink scrubs, of course, did nothing to improve upon all this, hanging as they did on my boyish frame, no curves to cling to. And I had worn entirely the wrong long-sleeve thermal shirt underneath the v-neck top today: my favorites were in the hamper and poor planning had left me with only this old one, which had a v-neck just a touch deeper than the scrubs. I looked at the mirror now and wondered if that corner of my scar, the nasty three angled stripes like accent marks and pebbled in texture, like burns, located in the space above my heart, had been peeking out like this all day. Each just two inches long but, when coupled with the pair on my shoulder blades, collectively signaled one big, marred canvas. The necklace, clearly, should have looked glaringly out of place having me as its unworthy mannequin. I expected to find my neck looking like it belonged on someone else's body, but somehow this new piece seemed at home. The intense shine of the gold caught the light and cast a soft glow upon my face, just enough to infuse my skin with a new glimmer. I lifted my hair back to look more closely. I did like it actually. Perhaps I was growing up at last. Maybe this was the first sign of the sophistication to come. Sixteen. It felt weighty, substantial, important.

"I love it," I called out, still admiring. "Thank you so much."

Monday, of course, came entirely too fast, as it always does. But this time the new week seemed to land with a greater thud in the pit of my stomach. After a weekend that was a blur of packing--clothes, books, comforts of home--stuffing it all into two large duffel bags and feeling