

LOVE Is
the DRUG

ALAYA DAWN JOHNSON

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[androstadienone]



Bird wakes up.

The walls aren't white, but close, the color of a cracked egg. She turns her head on the pillow and looks through a window to the street below. Deserted, not a single car parked on the side, and she stares at that until a solitary tank grumbles down the road, guns steady.

Her head aches. She raises her arm to feel it, and sees a needle taped down to the vein in her elbow. She tries to count the stitches on her forehead and concludes ten or eleven. A hospital. But the silence of the room, the hush in the hall, the jarring rattle of a tank outside —

“What happened?” she says, and finds her voice rusty but functional. It has never been particularly melodic. She tries to remember. It's like trying to follow a conversation in a language you barely speak — whatever meaning lies buried there, she can't reach it.

Outside, the sun turns orange and limp violet, silhouetting the bare branches of the trees lining the street. Something about those branches makes Bird sit up and push her hair away from her forehead. *I need a relaxer*, she thinks, feeling the dense, wiry curl at her roots. How long has she been here? There are flowers on the side table — white and pink lilies wilted around the edges and swimming in cloudy water. A note hangs from the vase but she doesn't read it. She wants to believe they're from her parents, but she knows they aren't. Her head aches with the effort of not thinking about him.

She looks back out the window. The trees still had their leaves at the Robinsons' party. Yellow and red and brittle brown.

And so Bird remembers the last thing she can.

It goes like this —

Coffee was in the basement doing lines. Paul was upstairs with the Robinsons and their guests, capital-N networking. He wanted a national security internship this summer, and there were at least two senators and one highly placed government contractor drinking martinis who could help him. Bird had known the second she saw Coffee smoking by the mailbox outside that she would make her excuses, but for now she filled the slot that Paul expected: supportive girlfriend, enjoying the party.

"I think that guy over there is with the *Washington Post*," Paul said, and nudged Felice. "Weren't you saying the other day you were thinking about journalism?"

Felice looked up from her phone and glanced over. "Isn't he the film critic or something? Honestly, you'd think Pam Robinson could get some better guests. I mean, Bob Woodward is a family friend. I haven't decided what direction I want for this summer, but if it's journalism, I'm sure my dad can just call Bob."

"Bob Woodward, like from AP US History? Deep Throat?" Paul said.

Felice smiled gently and combed her fingers through aggressively blunt-cut bangs. "My dad is very well connected."

"My dad knows Adrian Fenty," Charlotte said. She glanced at Bird as she said this, her look a soap bubble of pride that popped under Felice's dismissive shrug.

"What's he, the old mayor of DC? I mean, great for your dad, but the local political scene is low rent."

Paul jumped to Charlotte's rescue. "You really think that, after 8/16? That terrorist flu is practically a pandemic. Venezuela has oil money, a rogue government, and biological WMDs — they're a world

threat. And the most important people in the world live here. Local politics are national politics.” Bird stepped closer to Paul and squeezed his hand, though she felt a jolt of some repelling force she didn’t want to name when he continued, “And that makes it a very good time for me to get in the game.”

Charlotte wound a braid around one finger and said nothing. Behind her, Trevor Robinson stood beneath an early-period Warhol that had probably cost six figures. He was speaking with Cindy de la Vega and an older white man who was gesturing, for some reason, at the ceiling. The Robinsons’ dining room and foyer swarmed with people, mostly adults with a few young hopefuls like Paul, Bird, Felice, and Charlotte.

“Forget the stupid flu, the guy that Trevor’s talking to is the head of Cornell admissions.” Bird jumped to hear Gina’s voice behind her. Gina was a friend of Felice’s, the daughter of someone very rich whose profession seemed to consist of spending money (most recent purchases included an exact replica of the Christopher Nolan Batmobile and a third château in the Loire Valley). Somehow the transitive properties of friendship never seemed to extend to Bird and Charlotte, whom Gina alternately tolerated and ignored.

“I didn’t know you wanted to go to Cornell, Gina,” Paul said.

“Well, I *want* to go to Harvard, but Ms. Vern says that it’s a real reach for me after that shit show in geography last semester, so right now as far as my dad’s concerned any Ivy will do.”

“But still, I mean, *Cornell*? You can definitely do better,” Felice said.

Bird usually stayed out of Gina’s money-scented orbit, but she couldn’t let this go. “I don’t think Cornell is really —”

Paul twisted her hand just as Gina pivoted and smiled. “I know you’d be really glad to get in there —”

“Actually, I want to go to Stanford —”

“— but some of us have parents who hold us to very high standards. And *anyway*, we all know that you guys are lucky. You’ve got, like, a free pass to any Ivy you want. The other day I heard that even *Marella*,

who hasn't done an extracurricular that didn't involve fucking the freshmen girls since sophomore year, is applying to Princeton. Like, my dad actually told me I should check the Latino box on my apps because my great-grandmother came from Puerto Rico, I mean she was white, but still, Puerto Rico, but I decided that it wouldn't be right to get in on anything but my own merit."

"Gina," Felice said after a silence filled by a John Coltrane trumpet solo and Pam Robinson's laugh, "I think everyone is getting in on their own merit."

Paul and Charlotte looked at once exhausted and uncomfortable, precisely how Bird felt; they had all heard this shit with different tunes since sophomore year. Still, usually Felice managed to avoid it when Bird or Charlotte were around.

"Sure," Gina said, smiling at them. "Of course you guys are. You're so smart and talented and, like, pillars of the school. But, come on, Marella's another story. If she was white, she'd be off to UDC."

Paul and Felice laughed. Charlotte wound another braid. Bird realized that she was about to throw her Diet Coke in Gina's face.

"I'll be back," Bird said, and jerked her hand from Paul's grip. Had she seen Coffee standing by the French doors? She pushed through the crowd, heart jumping when she saw a tall man from behind, but he turned out to be Trevor's father. Coffee wasn't upstairs.

The invitations to this party had been limited and coveted, but only by a certain type of student at the brother-sister prep schools of Bradley Hall and Devonshire Academy. Trevor Robinson was one of the richest boys in school, which was saying something in a place where the category of "parents" included the vice president and the secretary of state. His mother was a senator and his father worked on K Street. His mother was also Black, which put her on Bird's mother's radar as a potentially valuable ally in the ongoing campaign to turn her daughter into a model of successful Black womanhood. Pam Robinson was throwing this party ostensibly in honor of a new scholarship she was funding, which would give three "underprivileged" DC

students four free years of the world-class education on offer at Bradley and Devonshire. Carol Bird had complained for a solid week about having to miss this party, but she and her husband had been called away to Georgia for work. For the space of a breath, Bird had thought that meant her deliverance as well. Attending this party would make all her mother's plans for Bird's summer as inevitable as a hole in the ground. How could she possibly refuse that prestigious K Street internship, facilitated by Pam Robinson and her husband, in favor of some cashier job at a gift shop on U Street? Never mind that when she walked past Cici's Handmade on her way to the Metro, Cici always waved at her from the register. Never mind that the smell of their handmade shea butter cream and incense always made her smile. Two days ago, Coffee had found her crying about it in the rose garden. It was the first time their acquaintance had crossed that particular threshold, but it happened easily, naturally. He put his arm around her shoulders; she wiped her nose on her jeans. *Just don't go*, he told her. *Stay home, and tell her you forgot. How much longer can you do this to yourself, Bird?* She knew exactly what he meant. And she had promised him. But then Paul had called her this morning, so sure of her support. Her mother had called this afternoon, and between the fire on one side and the hot iron on the other, she had protected herself the only way she knew how. She went along.

She hadn't known that Coffee would be here too.

She found Coffee in the basement. Hiding from the crowd or waiting for her – she didn't know, but the game required that she didn't guess. He lifted his face from powdered remains on the glass coffee table and wiped his nose.

“That's some excellent company you keep, Bird. What was it you were all laughing about? Marella screwing the freshman class? And here I believed you when you said you didn't want to come to this party. But I'm sure the homophobia adds spice to your friendships.”

Bird shivered. So she *had* seen him upstairs. She felt a profound moment of regret for not having thrown her Coke in Gina's face, never

mind the consequences. His withering smile, his condescension, they made her run hot and cold with shame and anger.

“They’re not that bad,” she said, though she knew they were.

“You honestly think that?” He shook his head. “No wonder you came here. So what do you think,” he said, “are we all dead by Thanksgiving or Christmas?”

He tapped his left foot nervously against the wrought-iron table leg and flipped the snuff spoon between his fingers, so fast it looked like a magic trick. Her heart beat very fast, like she’d actually snorted his powder, but she knew that was just Coffee. They had met at another prep school party more than a year ago, and whenever she saw him she felt the echo of that first galvanic shock.

He snapped his fingers and tossed the silver spoon to his other hand. His eyes were a little green and a little yellow, and right now they made him look alien. They narrowed like darts, and they drew blood when they landed true.

“Well? Head up, Bird, or do you care about anything besides getting into Brown?”

“Stanford,” she corrected automatically.

He laughed — she hated that laugh, short and brittle. It made her feel as if she’d been strafed with bird shot. Her breath rattled out of her.

“What, you mean the terror flu?”

“It’s not just a flu, Bird,” he said, making a stupid pun of her last name. Only he ever used it — everyone else called her Emily.

“Then what is it, genius?”

She walked over the plush carpet, so she felt the slight advantage of looking down on Coffee’s swamp-colored eyes and dirty-blond hair, which grew in curls thick and discrete, like fat worms against his scalp.

“A pandemic,” he said quietly. “The CDC called it an hour ago. And California’s ground zero. You sure you’ll have a school to get into this spring?”

He let her tower above him, but she felt awkward in her heels and short skirt, and so she knelt.

“Don’t be melodramatic,” she said, even though upstairs Pam Robinson and the other politicians were talking about quarantines and travel restrictions. “It isn’t that bad.”

“Five to ten percent death rate,” Coffee said, punctuating each word with a swipe of his snuff spoon, like a junkie conductor. Not that Coffee was a junkie. He was something more complicated. “We’re talking Spanish flu bad. SARS bad.” He paused and let the spoon fall to the glass tabletop with a clatter. Bird wondered what Trevor would think if he came down just then — but he must have been the one who invited Coffee in the first place. Boys like him sometimes liked playing sides like that: CIA contractor upstairs, prep school dealer in the basement. Martinis and coke lines, shaking hands and smiling politely.

“Start a war bad,” Coffee said quietly, and leaned a little closer to her. She sucked in a breath. “You think so?”

“Suits upstairs say the drones are already flying over Caracas.”

“Caracas? Already? But isn’t Venezuela still denying that they hired those FARC generals?”

“And FARC claims they haven’t even laid eyes on those guys for years. But the drug lords say Venezuela paid them and gave them the flu, and of course that means we’re safe to ignore the mountain of evidence that even when Chávez was alive Venezuela barely spoke to the FARC.”

FARC, the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia), had been staging an armed rebellion against the Colombian government for decades. They were notorious for brutal kidnappings and world-scale cocaine operations, and speculation had bubbled for decades in the US press about their ties to Venezuela’s socialist government.

Bird chewed her lip. “Venezuela’s been supporting terrorists for years. Colombia says they’ve been harboring them in training camps. Maybe there’s special intelligence, like in Afghanistan. . . .”

“And bombing some poor city to rubble is really going to save us? Come on, don’t you ever think about the opinions you regurgitate?”

She glared at him, though sometimes she thought half the reason she talked to Coffee was because he would call her out. The way he said it, more wearied than angry, somehow made it better.

“You’re the next Thomas Paine, yeah? Where are your original opinions?”

“I didn’t say they were original. But at least I think about them.”

“How do you know I don’t?”

Coffee smiled, close-lipped. He gave her one of those long looks, the ones that made her wonder why the hell she’d ever liked Paul, even though she knew that her life would be over if she dated someone like Coffee. It made her feel like she wouldn’t care.

“Because you’re smart, Bird. If you thought about it, you wouldn’t believe it. And you *know that*, somewhere deep inside, and so you make sure you never really examine what other people say. Because then you wouldn’t be the perfect Devonshire Academy girl, and you might do something that disrupts your parents’ government careers, and you might realize you won’t actually like the life you’re headed into like it’s a goddamn firing squad, and then, Bird, where will you be?”

“Back in Northeast, living with Nicky.”

It took her breath away, the things she would say just to see his reaction. Thoughts she’d never told anyone, thoughts she never even knew she had, laid out like his little blue pills on a designer coffee table. And that, she knew, was the real reason why she talked to him. Every semi-accidental encounter at a party or after class or in the rose garden — all so that she could feel the profound relief of his presence. Coffee was the only person she had ever met who seemed to like who Bird really was, beneath all the layers of expectation and achievement and failure. Even if Bird had told Charlotte and Felice about her uncle, they wouldn’t have understood. *That* was Coffee’s magic — despite being prickly and judgmental and occasionally insufferable, he understood. He was the one person who didn’t need her lies.

Coffee leaned back. Bird was aware of an uncomfortable, unprecedented silence between them. As though her confession had stopped the world. Then she understood: For once, Coffee had gone motionless, his habitual jitters stilled.

“Why is it you don’t try that more often?” he said softly.

“Try what?”

“Honesty.”

She shrugged. *I try with you*, she could have said. She loved Nicky, she admitted that in dark nights of furiously planning the exact steps of her future — Stanford, Harvard Law, K Street. All of it to avoid turning out just like her favorite uncle. All of it to avoid seeing disgust smother the reserved pride in her mother’s eyes.

“I take it Nicky is your deadbeat uncle?”

“He’s not —” She shook her head, the turn of the conversation so close to strained confrontations with her mother that she felt nauseous. It was her particular hell, always having to defend and love the person she’d give anything in the world not to be. “Nicky is a good guy. He’s just a poor, unambitious loser.”

“Like me?”

She stared at him. Something tapped an irregular tattoo on the glass, and when she looked down she realized it was her own hand, her own ring from her debutante ball a year ago.

“You’re not poor,” she said.

He flashed his teeth, though she wasn’t sure she would call it a smile. “Two out of three,” he said. “No wonder you like me so much.”

She didn’t tell him that she knew Nicky had dealt on and off for years. Never got caught at it, thank God. Coffee was a diplomat’s son at a prep school with the vice president’s kids — the worst that could happen to him was probably getting deported back to Brazil. But a Black dude in Northeast selling dime bags of coke on the street corner? She wouldn’t see him for years.

Maybe Coffee had first intrigued her because of how he seemed like Nicky’s photographic negative. But that wasn’t why she knelt on

the shag rug and grit her teeth against a shiver more violent than a chill. That wasn't why she could tell him things she would never breathe to anyone else.

That wasn't why she wanted to scream when Paul's voice hit her broadside from the stairs.

"Emily," he said, "why don't you come up? There's someone I want you to meet. Oh. Hi, Alonso."

Paul insisted on calling Coffee by his real name. It was one of Paul's things — he didn't believe in nicknames. He found it faintly offensive that Coffee called her Bird. She savored her secret like hard candy: She liked it better.

"*Olá, Paulo,*" Coffee said, raising his right eyebrow so gently only Bird would notice it. She laughed once, like a yelp.

Paul had generous lips, which now drew back in clear disapproval. "Seriously, Emily, everyone is upstairs. The Robinsons were nice enough to invite us, the least you could do is show your face."

Between the two, Paul easily won the ribbon for best-looking. Not that Coffee didn't have a certain appeal — she had admired the compact strength of his wired frame more often than she would admit to anyone, even him. But Paul had the broad chest, the kissable lips, the chiseled jaw, and the killer smile. He was light-skinned, which her mother approved of, though she would never say so. When he laughed, she wanted to laugh with him. When Coffee laughed, she wanted to hit him. Paul would never think of neurotic, schizo, drug-dealing Coffee as competition.

He wasn't, of course. Coffee didn't compete. Though lately she had begun to feel a tension in his presence, along with the relief. She thought of him when he wasn't around; she noticed the way he looked at her; she refused, categorically, to consider what that might mean.

Paul helped her up. "Remember that security firm I was telling you about?" he said, lowering his voice. "One of the guys up there practically promised me a paid internship this summer. I know I said I

wanted the CIA, but I've been thinking the private sector is really where the action is."

Bird's stomach lurched for no good reason, except that the hand Paul kept on the small of her back felt so proprietary and demanding. Like she had no choice but to follow him to the stairs and make nice with the people the Robinsons had invited to get their son's friends internships and job offers.

Coffee stood abruptly and fished a tin of rolling tobacco from his vest pocket.

"Hey, Alonso," Paul said, pausing on the steps. "Friendly advice, there's someone who works for the DEA upstairs. I'd be careful."

Coffee's honey eyebrows drew together in a scowl that looked almost dangerous. "Nicotine is a fully legalized narcotic, Paulo," he said — the last, mocking syllable almost swallowed.

Bird knew when Paul was pissed, but unlike Coffee he considered it a sign of weakness to express it. He smiled. "Shit will kill you too, *Alonso*. Have fun."

She had one last glance at him before Paul propelled her the rest of the way up the stairs. Coffee stared at the space where she had knelt a minute before, the tremor of his hands spilling tobacco onto the rug like pollen.

"Roosevelt's on the porch," Paul said. "Here, do you want a drink?"

"Trevor's parents are letting us?" she asked, surprised.

Paul laughed and grinned at her, revealing the perfect teeth his parents had purchased at great expense during middle school. "Like, a Coke. Don't get too excited."

"I'm cool," she said. "Who's Roosevelt?"

"Roosevelt David, recruiter with Lukas Group. They're private contractors with the CIA and Army Special Forces. Serious national security shit. They don't even have a website."

She forced down a smile. “So how do you know he isn’t just a freak with a business card?”

“Senator Robinson invited him, remember? And anyway, this isn’t the first time we’ve met. These guys are legit, believe me.”

Bird didn’t know what to make of this information. It implied that Paul had been less than truthful about his strategizing for the all-important post-graduation internship, and this disturbed her. For the past year, his approved ambitions for the future had protected her own half-formed hopes from her mother’s scrutiny. They were the reason why she let him steer her around the party like she was more dirigible than girl. The reason why she hadn’t broken up with him six months ago.

Some days she didn’t understand how she put up with Paul — physical attraction can only count for so much. And then she contemplated the breakup conversation with her mother, who Bird swore loved Paul more than her own goddamn husband, and she panicked and recalibrated. Bird was an excellent recalibrator. Adjust a screw here, prop an unraveling lie there: Paul is a great guy, goal-oriented just like she is, and does she really want the hassle of a breakup now, when it will all happen so naturally once they go to college? She thumbed this rosary of self-justification until she felt calm and steady again. Until she felt safe in the conditional penumbra of her mother’s approval. Forget dating Coffee. Forget it. He wouldn’t want her anyway, as she damn well knew.

Paul, of course, hadn’t noticed her abstraction. He stared through the glass doors that led to the back porch and frowned.

“Crap. That dealer of yours is out there. Smoking with Roosevelt. I hope he doesn’t think he’s getting anything out of him. That job is *mine*.”

“I doubt he wants it, Paul,” Bird said, rubbing his arm in a habitual, placating gesture. A boy who said things like *the principle agent of terror around the world is the US government* wouldn’t exactly be eager to sign up as the CIA’s newest waterboarding trainee.

Paul shook out his shoulders and smiled. “Of course not. You’re right. That druggie asshole couldn’t get within fifty yards of Langley.”

He caressed the back of her neck without looking at her. She shivered. "I don't know what I'd do without you, Emily. Thanks."

Her wobbly smile felt genuine. Paul *was* a great guy. She didn't have to want him for the rest of her life to be happy with him now.

"I'm going out there," he said suddenly. "Coming?"

"You hate cigarette smoke," she said, but he was already propelling her forward, and her words seemed to get lost somewhere between the tilted edge of the Warhol and Cindy de la Vega's peroxide-blond split ends.

Coffee leaned against the marble banister, smoking down one of his hand-rolled cigarettes. He must have walked outside from the basement while Paul led her through the house. It didn't look like he was actually speaking to the man Paul had called Roosevelt, though they shared that quiet smokers' camaraderie. Roosevelt was younger than she'd have expected for a high-level government contractor. No more than thirty-five, though he could just be thirty and a smoker. He had brown hair and eyes of the exact same shade, and a muscular build that indicated some, but not too much, time in a gym. He looked unassuming, but something about the set of his mouth made her instantly wary.

"Oh, Paul. I didn't know you smoked."

"I don't," Paul said, smiling with a bit too much gum and spreading his hands in a you-got-me shrug that made him look like Alfred E. Neuman. "It was just a little stuffy in there. Emily wanted some fresh air."

Oh, did I? Bird thought, and caught Coffee's raised eyebrows. She tried to glare at him — she didn't want to screw this up for Paul — but it came out with a trailing edge of an embarrassed smile.

"So *this* is Emily," Roosevelt said, and flicked the stub of his cigarette over the railing. Bird thought of the Black or Hispanic gardener who would probably be picking this asshole's cigarette butts out of the azalea beds tomorrow morning and sighed.

"I've heard a lot about you," he said. "I worked with your parents a few years back. Your mother's a brilliant woman."

Bird struggled to keep her mouth curved in a polite smile, her eyes bright and interested, her hip jutted in a casual contrapposto. She did not so much as flick a glance at Coffee, and yet she felt him burning in her peripheral vision like the glowing ember of his half-smoked cigarette.

“She’s a difficult act to follow sometimes,” she said, and though she felt reasonably proud of her effort, she knew Coffee, at least, would be able to read her confusion. Maybe even see the deep pit of anger and hurt that gazed up at her when she contemplated her parents and their all-important jobs. She had no real idea what they did. When asked, she told teachers and friends that they worked in public health with various government agencies. But all she really knew was that her parents were scientists: her father’s PhD in chemistry, her mother’s in molecular biology. They did not encourage her curiosity, and abandoned her for weeks at a time on business they would never discuss. Still, over the years she had gathered her clues and hoarded them as carefully as a KGB spy. A careless letterhead, crumpled in the trash instead of destroyed in a shredder. A late-night phone call her father took in the backyard, when she was supposed to be visiting a friend. The remembered Wi-Fi signature of a private airport in Virginia, frequently used by Pentagon contractors.

That they would work with a man like Roosevelt confirmed all of her worst suspicions. She felt queasy and smiled to cover it.

“Emily! You never told me your parents were in . . .” Paul trailed off, suddenly unable to describe what precise field Roosevelt might represent.

“You work for Synergy Labs?” Bird said, each syllable hanging heavy from her lips.

Coffee’s cigarette tumbled to the ground. He stubbed it with his heel and then retrieved the remains with shaky fingers, white with cold. Did he *know* something about that place, or was he just jumpy from whatever he had snorted? Roosevelt’s lips tipped upward. He reached inside his coat pocket. For a hard second she was sure he was

going to pull out a gun. But like a magician's trick, the danger she sensed in his posture transformed into something utterly pedestrian: a business card in sharp blue and red, printed on heavy stock.

Roosevelt David
Director, Analysis and Recruitment
Lukas Group

"Not Synergy Labs, no," he said. "I'm not sure where you would have heard that name, Emily."

She took the card with a hand she forced to be steady, and shrugged. She had found the name on ripped stationery one afternoon years ago while rummaging through the trash. She'd Googled it exhaustively, but hadn't found anything more than a couple of rumors on anarchist message boards – the kind frequented by people who thought rockets had hit the Pentagon on 9/11.

"My parents don't talk about work much," she said. "But I overheard stuff a bit when I was younger." She didn't know why she added that last qualifier – except that Roosevelt's blandly interested smile intimidated her with logarithmically increasing intensity. She began to wonder if there was more to this meeting than just Paul wanting a killer internship. Had Roosevelt used Paul to get to her?

But that was nuts. No way anyone like Lukas Group or Synergy Labs, whoever they were, would care about Emily Bird. No matter where her parents worked.

Her self-deprecation seemed to have dispelled some of his interest. He shifted his attention from Bird to Paul. "It's understandable," he said. "You can never be too careful in matters of national security. I think you can appreciate that, right, Paul?"

As Paul rushed to reassure anyone listening how highly he valued discretion and the value of knowledge to protect our country, especially given the new threats of bioterror, blah blah, Coffee flicked his wrist in the direction of the house. Without another word, he walked

down the porch steps and went through the sliding glass doors to the basement, where she could see a dozen or so fellow students had retreated, driven back at last by the drunken, power-hungry socializing of the adults above.

Bird waited through a full minute of Paul's monologue — she would have to warn him later not to confuse desperation with enthusiasm — and then excused herself.

"I'm a little chilly, but it was great to meet you, Roosevelt. I'll let my mother know I ran into you when she gets back from her trip."

For some reason, Roosevelt laughed. "You do that, Emily Bird," he said.

Cindy de la Vega and her Gonzaga boyfriend had trapped Coffee between a Chinese vase and the eighty-inch flat-screen television tuned to *South Park*. Cindy was telling him how much she needed Adderall to help her study for *four fucking APs* in the spring. The Gonzaga boyfriend grimaced and rubbed sweet circles on her back, but Bird had heard that whatever-his-name was getting recruited by Cornell to play football. Officially, of course, Cornell was interested in his well-rounded academic profile, but everyone knew what it meant when certain admissions officials dropped by a game. Only people like Gina distinguished between Harvard-Princeton-Yale and the other Ivies, so he was unlikely to be too concerned about AP cramming.

"I understand that, Cindy, I do, but I don't have much on me."

Gonzaga boyfriend had never seemed very bright. He had a nice body, but his looks weren't much: His teeth could have used braces and a spray of acne scars marked his high cheekbones. Nothing compared to Paul, Bird knew that, and yet that unself-conscious, adoring smile he gave Cindy made jealousy burn with the endless heat of napalm fire in her gut. Everyone told Bird she was lucky to have Paul, but she knew she was just a coward. *Cindy* was lucky.

Gonzaga boyfriend pulled his wallet from his back pocket and handed Coffee a hundred-dollar bill.

“She’ll take what you have. And when you get more, let me know?”

Coffee eyed the bill a second longer than felt comfortable, shrugged, and took it. He pulled out two sandwich bags, one with pills.

“Eight Adderall,” he said. “And this is Hindu Kush.”

“Hindu what?” Cindy said, grabbing the pills like they were the last of the Halloween candy.

“Weed, babe,” Gonzaga boyfriend said, and put the second bag in his pocket. Bird hoped that Cornell didn’t drug-test their football players.

“Now,” Coffee said, with diction just precise enough to take a mocking edge, “if you’ll excuse me —”

He caught Bird’s eye, and they stared at each other for a moment that made her feel tumbled and stoned.

“Wait,” Cindy said. “Are you sure you don’t have something else?”

“Not unless you want some coke,” said Coffee baldly.

But Cindy just shook her head and leaned closer. “No, I mean your own stuff. I hear you make shit way better than Adderall in your basement.”

Bird had heard this too, not as though she’d ever seen any evidence for it at these parties. But a month ago she’d overheard Mrs. Cunningham, their AP Chemistry teacher, saying that she thought “the Oliveira boy” was an actual genius and knew more about organic chemistry than your average first-year grad student.

“Not for sale,” said this purported genius. And then, “Cindy, keep those safe, all right? People are already talking like every Latino in the US is a druggie terrorist-in-waiting.”

“I don’t see what those Colombian assholes have to do with us.”

“Neither do I. The Republican party has other ideas, though.”

Cindy laughed like he’d made a joke. She let her boyfriend pull her away for a solid make-out session on the couch. They weren’t alone —

two students Bird vaguely recognized were getting into it against the wall behind them.

“If it’s going to turn into that kind of party,” Bird said, knowing without looking that Coffee had approached her, “I hope Trevor keeps his parents from the basement.”

“Trevor has plenty of experience keeping his parents from the basement,” Coffee said somewhat cryptically. She turned to him. He smelled like shag tobacco and ironing starch and vulcanized rubber and a little sweat. She hated his cigarettes, but she loved the way he smelled with the mindless passion of an insect hunting its mate. This was one of the things she would never tell him.

“Listen,” Coffee said, “I think you need to stay away from that guy.”

She knew who he meant. “Why?” Though maybe she already knew, maybe she already agreed, thinking of Roosevelt and his strange laugh and disturbing insinuations.

“He’s an asshole.” With his accent, it sounded more like “arsehole.”

“You think everyone’s an asshole.”

“Okay, a dangerous asshole. Synergy Labs is nothing you want to mess around with.”

He spoke very quietly. No one was paying them any attention. And still, Bird felt for a moment like she had stood up too quickly and the room glowed white and hazy around her. “You *know* what they are?”

Coffee was very tall. He hunched over and pinned her with his eyes. “Everything your parents do is classified, Bird. Top secret. Did you see Roosevelt when you mentioned the name? He nearly shat himself.”

Bird hadn’t noticed much at all, but she was willing to concede that a dealer might be better at gauging reactions to illicit information. “But what is it? If it’s so classified, how do you know anything?”

“I don’t. But sometimes things leak. There’s other sites like WikiLeaks now, though they never last long. Cyber attacks, probably by the government. But if you’re paying attention . . . so I was paying attention. I saw the name crop up in a few places. They’re involved in

national security, mostly bioterrorism. They're private, but work with the CIA. They . . ."

She didn't know that she'd ever seen Coffee swallow his words before. He was more the type to deploy them like depth charges. His right hand drummed the wall, out of rhythm with his tapping foot. He looked jumpy enough to clear his skin.

"What? What is it?" *Who are my parents, really?* Bioterrorism sounded heavy. It sounded like hazmat suits and contamination procedures and deadly viruses that caused zombie plagues.

"They might be involved with the new flu."

"Involved?"

His breath stuttered like a machine gun in his chest. "No one believes any of those terrorist groups could have done this on their own. They had help."

"Yeah, and the secretary of state said that the help came from Iran."

"You really think they have that kind of expertise in biological warfare?"

Her eyes snapped open. She hadn't even realized she had closed them. She was angry enough to spit. "Oh, you almost had me, you know that? You're telling me a CIA contractor, working for the government of the US-of-A, helped terrorists deliver a virus that's *killed fifty thousand people*? Really? What else? Roosevelt personally sent the rockets into the Twin Towers?"

Coffee's fists clenched and unclenched. He looked away from her. Though his voice was just as low as before, it trembled and cracked with strain.

"I don't believe that shit about 9/11, Bird, but please tell me you're not such a conservative, conformist, privileged US —"

"Oh, *hells* no. Some preppy Bradley boy telling *me* about privilege? Dude, you're bathing in it."

He ran a trembling hand across his forehead. It came away slick with sweat. Some of Bird's anger twisted, and turned to fear. "Bad

choice of words,” he said. “But there’s good reason to believe that someone other than terrorists are involved in this flu.”

“The president —”

He rolled his eyes and cut the edge of his hand through the air beside her. “Screw the president,” he said, and for a moment Bird nearly crumbled in laughter at the thought of anyone saying something like that in a place like this. Only Coffee. “He says the evidence is classified. His officials leak unsupported accusations in the press and then the administration uses the leaks as evidence for their war. It’s bullshit, Bird. We have no idea how this happened. Hell, maybe it’s natural. Mother Nature screwing us over.”

“But you don’t think so. You think the government, *my parents*, helped spread this flu that’s killing its own citizens. That’s mind-control drugs in the water nuts, Coffee. Serious tinfoil hat time.”

She knew she was telling the truth, and yet the bleakness of his expression as he regarded her made her shift uncomfortably. She had upset him, so effectively penetrated his wall of disaffected cool that she felt exhilarated and humbled by it. But until now she hadn’t realized how thoroughly disconnected Coffee was. She felt untethered, almost sick with the knowledge of him.

“Ever heard of the Tuskegee syphilis experiments, Bird?”

“You mean that case from the seventies? Some kind of medical discrimination against Black people?”

“The government of the US-of-A watched four hundred Black men die slowly of syphilis for decades after they’d developed a treatment. For an experiment. History, no tinfoil hats required. Look it up if you don’t believe me.”

She remembered the offhand mention of the case in her history textbook. She didn’t say, *But that was probably a long time ago*, because she knew better. The government continued its excellent record in selling Black folk down the river, as her grandfather would have said.

But Coffee wasn’t done. “And for good measure, the US also sent some infected prostitutes into a Guatemalan prison to give syphilis to

around a thousand inmates so they could study them for a couple more years.”

She shook her head, as if that would make the things he was telling her less believable, more comprehensible. But still — “Fifty *thousand*, Coffee.”

His honey eyebrows drew together sharply, like he’d been burned. “Two hundred fifty thousand. At least. You don’t *have* to forget the rest of the world, you know. It’s not a test of US citizenship.”

Her cheeks surged with warmth, and he was close enough to see her blush. She couldn’t deal with this. She couldn’t stand to be around Coffee and his conspiracy theories for another second.

“Do you have a point? Because otherwise I should find Paul.”

“My *point* is that Roosevelt is dangerous. He moves like he’s packing, though he isn’t, which should tell you something. He tells you about your parents like he knows all about you, and you’ve obviously never met the guy before. You can argue with me all you want about Synergy Labs, but you said that name like you *knew* it was bad news and wanted to know what it meant to someone else. Well, here’s what it means: You just told Roosevelt that you knew something that you shouldn’t. So I strongly suggest you stay away from him.”

Bird’s feet ached in her stupid heels, but it felt too vulnerable to take them off here. Coffee stared at her with an air-sucking, chest-heaving intensity. She looked away. “He’s giving Paul an internship.”

“So?”

“Paul *is* my boyfriend.”

He flicked his fingers against his palm. “The obvious and unavoidable. But I understand. How could you have resisted his scintillating wit, his insightful political observations, his clear respect for your intellect? Or, wait, did I mean his finely toned abs? I get confused sometimes.”

Bird took off her shoes in two jerky, furious movements and waved one of the stiletto heels in front of Coffee’s nose.

“You are no prince either. You’re a crazy, lazy, nicotine- and pot- and

God-knows-what-else-addicted freak. You're a *diplomat's son*, for God's sake, you could do anything you wanted, but you're just a dealer. And a conspiracy nut."

He knocked her shoe away. It smacked against the wall beside them, loud enough to make a few of their classmates stare. She had to stop this. This would be all over Facebook in a second. With video, if she wasn't careful.

"So he's the suck-up and I'm the druggie. But you, Emily Bird. You're the worst of us all."

He looked so sad as he said it, though his tone was angry enough. She had every intention of turning away, but the open end of that sentence called for completion, for the terrible verdict to be elucidated and explained. *Is this what Coffee thinks of me?*

"The worst?"

He closed his eyes, and did not open them even when he started to speak. "You're an iconoclast whose highest aspiration is K Street. You're a Black DC girl determined to run away to a California suburb with barely any Black people. You have a heart, Bird, but you only use your head. You try as hard as you can to be conventional and unoriginal and unthreatening, but somehow you always fail. Just a little bit. *Because you know better.*"

She picked up the shoe with one trembling hand and wiped her eyes with the other.

"Fuck you, Coffee," she said, feeling like she was cracking in half, riven by a fissure spreading from somewhere north of her belly button. "I never want to see you again."

He nodded, as though to acknowledge the fairness of this, but then she saw that his own eyes were too bright and he had sagged against the wall. She took some pleasure in this, but not much. She must have imagined whatever she felt with him.

Or perhaps he was just the first person who cared enough to see her clearly.

She climbed the steps in her stockings. Nearly at the door, his voice stopped her.

“Bird.”

He sounded hoarse, desperate. She didn’t turn around. He pressed something into her palm. A piece of paper with a phone number scrawled across in a nearly illegible hand.

“In case something happens. I’ve never . . . you’re the most . . . sometimes it kills me, what you could be.”

“If you don’t like me for what I *am*, what good is it?”

He fell silent. She balled the paper into her fist, shoved it in her pocket, and pasted a pleasant smile on her face. Then she went to find Paul.

This part is hazy, broken, half-intelligible. Strange, with the rest of the party indelibly burned into her memory — *Somehow you always fail. Just a little bit. Because you know better* — that the end would fuzz out like a radio station out of range. Bird lies in the dark, alone in a hospital, and forces the pieces into something like a shape —

Her saying, “I want to go home, Paul,” while keeping her voice pleasant with an effort that felt like lifting a car.

Paul giving her a panicked shake of his head and hurrying off to confer with Roosevelt. Her feeling Coffee’s number in her pocket, nearly throwing it away, and finally smoothing it out and tucking it back. What if something did happen? Who else would believe her?

Trevor talked to her then, she thinks, something about the track team, which they did together in the spring, but she can’t remember more than that. Then a disjointed wash of noise and color and shape: Pam Robinson standing by the door to thank people for coming, Paul waving her over to the leftovers on the dessert table (painted marzipan and chocolate ganache, and the sweet, fizzy smell of spilled champagne), Roosevelt making some comment . . . some comment . . .

Her head throbs.

“Emily,” he said. “Emily, we need to talk, I think, but somewhere more private. Paul, could you drive . . .”

And then she’s in the car. Paul is strapping her in, she doesn’t understand why.

“She’s drunk?” someone said – not then, in the car, but earlier. Outside. Her mouth tastes of peach schnapps and vomit. The wind kicks up clouds of orange and red and brown leaves. She raises her hands unsteadily to catch them. She recognizes the voice – Trevor, sounding worried and bemused. Trevor, whom she used to crush on like anything back in ninth grade, before Paul. Trevor, who has never seemed very interested in Devonshire girls.

Paul’s arms around her. She squirms to get free, but he holds her close. “Had a bit too much, I guess,” he says. “I’ll get her home.”

Paul half carries her to the car. The Robinsons’ house looms over his shoulder, pale bricks and amber wood and glowing glass, a tasteful fortress nestled in the enclave of Rock Creek Park.

“Paul,” she says. “Paul, Paul, Paul!” Each time more insistent. He fastens the seat belt. He doesn’t look at her.

“Emily, honey,” he says to the dashboard. “Emily, we’re just going to talk to him for a few minutes. I don’t . . . you don’t have to worry. I’ll take care of you.”

I should have broken up with you, she thinks, then and now, a clear peal of regret. She can hardly feel her limbs. She is sinking, melting into the leather interior of Paul’s new Land Rover.

Then the car starting, then the house receding, then her heart in her throat as a shape falls down the driveway, a boy in an uncoordinated, headlong, screaming fit of a run. She can’t hear him. She feels the peach in her throat again, pushed up by the sudden pressure of her desire, her happiness, her sharp and fractured panic. He will not make it. He can’t possibly. But he still tries.

Paul curses. “Not *that* asshole! Emily, what did you tell him?”

He guns the car and takes the driveway corner on two wheels. Bird knocks her head, hard, into the window. When she can lift her head again, there's blood on her face and Coffee is gone, gone, gone.

Beyoncé starts to sing, and Bird realizes it's Paul's phone. He stares at the caller ID. Unavailable, it says, which means Roosevelt.

She's going to be sick again. She's going to pass out. She has to say this first. It is important, more important than anything that she say this first.

Clearly, articulately, as though she isn't holding her head together with her fingers, she says, "Tell him what? He's just a freak with a thing for me, Paul."

And then Paul takes the call, and she closes her eyes and imagines Coffee's footsteps, unsteady and quick, following her into darkness.

Subject:

Bird, née Emily, seventeen years old.

Appearance:

Dark brown skin, wide nose, medium lips. Her hair is shoulder-length and brittle from years of drug-store relaxers. There's a revolution at the roots, though, where it grows thick and nappy. Small breasts, small hips, big thighs. An athletic build, if I were being generous. Fairly tall at five foot nine, though far from the tallest girl in her class. Still a head shorter than Coffee.

Disposition:

Narrowly ambitious. In possession of a serious Mommy complex. Probably a Daddy complex too, but Mommy takes enough energy as it

is. Secretly longs to own her own shop in a friendly, not-too-gentrified DC neighborhood and feel embedded in her community in the sort of small, holistic way her mother would never understand. So she compromises by aiming for the farthest mother-approved school she can find: Stanford. In her snarly subconscious, Bird understands that this is a final gambit, a desperation tactic designed to prevent her outright suffocation, her mother's ambiguously intentioned asphyxiation of her daughter's spirit.

In her pocked and abraded conscious, she thinks this is because she wants to attend a top-tier university in a well-cultivated suburban setting.

In the liminal space between the two, she imagines the shapes her shop might take: bookstore, lending library, soul food restaurant, natural hair salon. Hell, a few months after meeting Coffee, it occurred to her she could even run a head shop. The thought of what her mother would say about that sent the notion fleeing deep into her overstuffed subconscious, but it hasn't left her.

Verdict:

Capable of an astonishing degree of self-deceit. Prior to the disaster of the Robinsons' party, would have described herself as "happy" with her home and school life. Prior to the revelation of that last ride in his car, would have indicated she was "mostly satisfied" with her relationship with Paul.

How stupid can a girl get? She's in love and she doesn't even know it.
You're in deep, now, Bird. Wake up!