

MURDER ON A SCHOOL NIGHT

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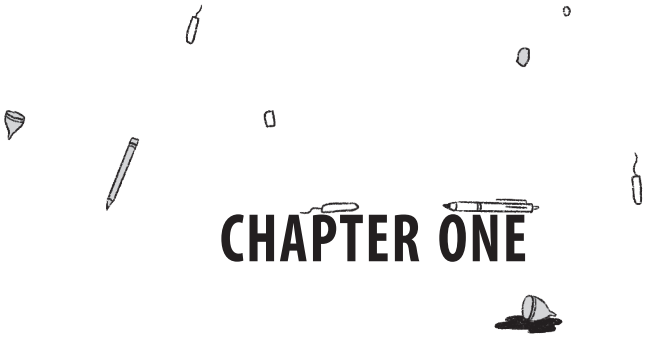


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For Chloe Seager: The actual best ❤



CHAPTER ONE

'Body Positivity Influencer Winona Philips says she recites this prayer to her vagina every morning!' Annie shouts across at me as the two of us cycle side by side.

It wouldn't be so weird that she was shouting the word 'vagina' across the street if it weren't for the fact that she's riding her six-year-old sister's bicycle. Complete with streamers, glitter and an old Paw Patrol reflector. It's our first day of sixth form – where we'd committed to a more sophisticated way of life – and yet a broken chain on Annie's bike hath shat upon all our poise.

'If Winona Philips is so body positive then why does she also say that she steams her vagina once a week over a pot of boiling chickpea water?' I ask, rolling my eyes. 'If you ask me, that sounds like a recipe for thrush.'

Winona Philips brings both joy and confusion to our lives. Sometimes what she says is so spot on (that you don't have to have a vagina to be a woman) and other times it's just confusingly wild (chickpea vajacials? No, ta). The prayer is meant to attack taboos

around vaginas and vulvas and make more people aware that the bit they think is the vagina is actually the vulva. Annie loves to howl it into the empty streets of Barbourough, claiming she's warding off shame.

'I'll admit that her logic is sometimes flawed, but I guess adulthood's about accepting that no one has *all* the answers. The vajacials were definitely wrong, though, and I don't see anyone with a knob being told to steam it,' Annie says proudly, her sweet, heart-shaped face, big eyes and rosy cheeks making the word, 'knob' seem adorable.

As we ride around the quiet tree-lined residential streets of Barbourough, the sun shines through the leaves, offering a feeling of peace and light. We fly past houses with their windows left open to let in the early autumn breeze, the occupants completely unaware of the words that Annie is about to spew into their early morning world.

Like me, Annie is five foot one. Small and mighty. She looks like a cherub but has a mouth like a dirty sewer, and I love her.

I can't wait until we're two old ladies, hanging together in our rocking chairs, Annie reciting poetry to her vagina, me taking my teeth out so I won't be expected to join in.

I'm not a prude. Just, I guess, more of an introvert.

'I'm starting the prayer right now, Kerry, and you can't stop me!' she shouts, looking down at her crotch area while I focus on the road ahead.

'Oh god.' I blush, trying to cycle into the wind so that the words get lost.

As people in the houses and driveways around us get their kids ready for school, some of them taking pictures of first uniforms or waiting on porches for slower younger siblings, I doubt anyone's bargained on Annie's poetry joining the chatter of birdsong from the trees. We cycle past other members of the sixth form getting into each other's cars, and I keep my head down, focusing on getting past them ASAP, or at least before she gets to the last line.

'I am strong and empowered, the patriarchy is but shit upon my shoe, good morning to all, and a very . . .'

Annie strings this last bit out as we reach old Mrs Robbins's house, where she's putting out the rubbish in her hair net, as she does every morning at this time.

'GOOD VULVA TO YOU!' Annie screams into the wind as we pass, making poor Mrs R drop her bag of rubbish on the floor. She starts shaking her fist wildly at us.

This has become a daily ritual for the two of them, Annie shocking and appalling Mrs Robbins with what Mrs R calls Annie's 'loose language'. It's definitely an experience that Annie enjoys more than Mrs R.

'Annabel! I should tell your mother, the way you fling these dirty words around!'

'Chill out, Mrs R, babe. Vulva's not a swear word. They exist and they matter. Go stick a mirror between your legs and free yourself from the ancient shame that binds you!' Annie tries to cycle away as fast as she can, her knees knocking into her elbows with every pedal rotation. She looks like a Sylvanian Families' character on speed, streamers dancing in the breeze behind her,

sunlight bouncing off her shiny gold cycling helmet.

'Sorry, Mrs R,' I stop and mutter.

'I fronted Women's Lib back in the day, you know! And I NEVER had to use such language!' Mrs R shakes her head as she shuffles back indoors, her dog Herbert giving me a final side-eye.

I catch up with Annie in two casual pedal rotations, while she's powering away furiously. Her legs are racing round, trying to generate some kind of speed, but she's getting nowhere. Those tiny wheels are in no rush.

'Poor Mrs R,' I say when I'm alongside her.

'My sleuthing skills tell me that she wouldn't come out every day at the same time if she didn't want me to shout "vulva" at her. She must love it really or she'd just put her rubbish out five minutes later,' Annie says, trying to keep up with me.

I can't fault her logic, even though Annie only decided it was her destiny to be a detective this summer after reading ten Agatha Christie books. Since then, she's been trying to find mysteries everywhere she can, which in a village this size is hard. She's manifesting drama in a place where the highlight of the year is the annual village jam competition.

Her latest investigation arose when she realised that the pigeons close to the village green seem to be lusher of feather and claw than the ones that hang out near the school. She believes someone to be feeding the pigeons by the green. It's hardly a Nancy Drew mystery. She's code-named her investigation Operation Plumage.

'Dude, you look hilarious trying to go fast on that tricycle,'

I say, noticing the beads of sweat on her furrowed brow, eyes set in steely determination.

'How dare! I think I look very sophisticated,' she says, red-faced. 'Either way, in two weeks this cycling hell will be over for both of us because you'll have your licence!'

'My provisional. I still can't drive us with that,' I say.

Just the thought of driving makes me anxious. Last year I was diagnosed with anxiety after I started having panic attacks. I'd start worrying about something and before I knew it, it would control all my thoughts and make focusing on anything else completely impossible. I'm on medication now, and I had therapy, but I still find myself anxious a fair bit. It's not just something that goes away.

'Whatever,' Annie protests. 'Everyone knows there are two ways to become popular. Either being one of the first in your year to get a driving licence or being on a reality TV show. And until I solve Operation Plumage and go viral –' I snort at this – 'you're our only chance. GRASP IT WITH BOTH HANDS. DO IT FOR US!' Annie squeals to a halt in front of me, drifting her bike perpendicular so she can stop me and plead from her tiny chariot.

'Always with the obsession to be popular. What *is* it that makes you want it so much? Aren't I enough for you?' I ask.

'Of course you are, but wouldn't it be nice if people carried stuff for us and moved out of the way in the corridor like they do for Heather? Pretty badass, no?'

'Ugh, that's not popularity you're craving, that's a dictatorship,' I say as she puts her little finger up to her lips, mock super-villain style.

'Oh, my bad.' She stares at me sideways in a sketchy manner.

Previously, due to Annie's obsession, we've made several attempts at popularity. I don't need to explain that these were unsuccessful.

- Firstly, in Year Seven, we started the CSI Coders club having watched too much *Pretty Little Liars*. We thought we'd need to hack into things and perform various sleuthings in our teenage years to prevent dark crimes from being committed and be revered by our classmates. Totally cool and normal. Sadly, hacking was harder than we anticipated, and shockingly has never actually been necessary in a village where most people consider contactless card payments to be a form of technological witchcraft and proclaim they 'don't trust it'.
- In Year Nine, despite neither of us having any musical talent or skill, we decided to start a band and compete in the school talent show. We were an a cappella group singing songs about the struggles of loving Harry Styles when he'll never know who we are (it felt relatable at the time). Not only did we come last but during some very active dancing Annie fell off the stage and twisted her ankle. Poor Annie had to do the hop of shame around school for six weeks after that.
- In Year Ten, we attempted to throw a party for our joint birthdays. Three people came. Two of them were related to us; the other was a two-year-old that Annie's mum was babysitting. It's hard to get people to come to your party when

the only time they've noticed your existence, you made a holy show of yourself by falling off a stage.

Mostly I feel bad for Annie because she really tries, her spirit never faltering in her belief that one day she will be popular. Whereas I resigned myself a long time ago to not being a popular person – sometime around the age of three when we were thrown out of a playhouse for not being cool enough. Instead, I resolved to find success elsewhere and decided I'm going to become a journalist. An investigative journalist who reads a lot of books and never has to face the prospect of rejection from her peers again.

We pull up in front of the school and I marvel at Annie's commitment to the tiny bicycle. Getting off and proudly rolling it through the gates in front of everyone, gold helmet still in situ. People give the bike a funny look as we pass through the car park to the bike rack, but mostly they're busy catching up in their cliques.

We don't have a clique. I like to think of the two of us as our own self-contained clique. It's more badass to be on your own path. But Annie's told me that saying 'badass' immediately makes me less badass. Also, in the secondary school hierarchy of cliques, I'd say if ours really was a clique, it's quite far down the list. In short, we're less cool than a tabard-wearing dinner lady.

I'm just fixing my helmet hair, attempting to give my mid-length mousy brown mop some kind of volume despite it being plastered to my head with sweat, when the sound of Lizzo and a sense of impending doom fills the air.

Right on cue, an imposing black Jeep with tinted windows comes careering round the corner as the playground parts like the Red Sea. Within the Jeep's tank-like shell sit the current monarchy, the monsters on the throne that Annie so desperately wants.

Les Populaires.

It's not so much that people in this school want to be friends with Les Populaires, it's that they want to *be* them. Everywhere they go people move out of their way. If they wear something, most of the school will be wearing it next week. Rumour has it that Heather, head Populaire, has brand sponsorship from all the major fashion houses and make-up brands, and she's constantly posting #PR and #AD content on Instagram to her thousands of followers.

'I mean, that could be us soon, when you get your provisional,' Annie says, gesturing as the Jeep zooms towards us. Unfortunately, she takes her eyes off the Jeep for a moment and doesn't notice a coffee cup come flying out of the window from the unmistakeable bejewelled hand of Heather's best friend Selena, smacking Annie square in the tits.

For a while Annie doesn't move, she's just staring eerily ahead with her mouth open. It's as if she's been frozen in time, forever stuck in the moment before her white top was stained with what smells distinctly like a mocha latte, and then she springs into action. Ten thousand emotions cross her face all at once as she looks down at her soiled T-shirt, before finally settling on rage.

'FUCKING TWATS!' she screams at the top of her lungs as the Jeep comes to a standstill in the car park, sprawled across three spaces.

Like Miranda in *The Devil Wears Prada* arriving at the magazine office, Heather's entry to the playground is the event of the day. As the front door of the Jeep opens, her Louboutin boots signify the start of her sixth-form style. The rest of her follows as groups around the playground raise their iPhones to take unsubtle pictures. She looks around her, aloof, disinterested, savage, tossing her long auburn hair behind her pale, freckled shoulders.

She's followed by Heather mark two, otherwise known as Selena. Selena's more dangerous to us than Heather because she actually knows who we are. Fresh from her coffee-throwing violence, Selena swings her long tanned legs out of the Jeep. Luscious straight dark hair swishes behind her, her huge brown eyes concealed behind big black sunglasses, lips pursed in a constant duck pout so as to accentuate her cheekbones and tiny, pointed nose. She smooths down her dry, unstained dress and straightens her prim black headband. To an untrained eye she looks innocent, but we know she's evil.

And last come the twins Colin and Audrey. The double threat. Between the two of them they've more secrets than MI5. They're both incredibly poised and beautiful, and their outfits always complement each other. Today Audrey wears a short white sun dress, with her perfectly long dark brown legs accentuated by a pair of white-and-gold cork-wedge heels. Meanwhile, Colin wears a white shirt and beige trousers. Audrey's make-up is, as ever, perfect; bright red lipstick and contour on point. Colin and Audrey come as a pair; they share everything except men. You cross one, you cross the other.

You never cross one.

The four of them line up in sequence, legs moving in unison as they walk in an unbreakable line towards the common room. The two of us jump out of the way before they flatten us, our peasanty existence not even in their line of vision.

'I'm sorry for your loss,' I say once they've passed, gesturing to Annie's white T-shirt but pleased that for once it doesn't seem to have actually got on me as well.

'I'm sorry too,' Annie says sadly, dabbing at her boobs with an old Pret napkin from the bottom of her bag. 'That I will have to kill them all and end up in prison before we've even really started the term.'

It's interesting that despite all her interactions with Les Populaires ending like this, Annie still wants to be popular. I guess it's a bit of 'if you can't beat them, join them'.

'Completely understandable. No one would convict you after a second in their company,' I say as we grab our bags and walk towards the safety of school.

And that's when I smell him.

Adam Devers.
He shines like the sun.
He sparkles like the stars.
He is the moon, the planets and the universe.

I'm stopped in my tracks by his beauty and take a deep breath, trying to inhale his sweat as he passes, my tongue breaking forth

from my mouth as if to taste it. If I can lick a drop of his perspiration, I'm sure it will cure me of my virginity. Not that, you know, I'm ashamed or anything. (No one must ever know that the closest I have ever come to a sexual experience is accidentally sitting on my phone when I got a text.)

'Je canNOT,' Annie whispers, her hand still on her coffee-soaked tit as she dabs at it with her Pret napkin, looking like a bit of a perve actually.

He is the dictionary definition of the phrase 'fanny flutters'. It speaks volumes of his fitness that even Annie sees it when she normally proclaims fancying people to be a waste of time.

I compose myself and stare pointedly at Annie's boob-dabbing hand. It's as if she's sucking up all the moisture from her top, she's so thirsty for him.

'Oh, how the mighty feminist hath fallen.' I shake my head at her.

'Sorry, your honour, it's not me, it's my vagina.' Annie continues staring.

I can't talk, I'm staring at Adam Devers' arms as he climbs the stairs with the football captain, high-fiving everyone on their way, other boys from the football team trailing behind. It's like watching Justin Bieber interacting with the front row at one of his concerts, only sexier. He even takes the glory from the captain, outshining him with his beauty. Every person he walks past gushes in his presence. He's flustered more women than I've had periods, and I started menstruating in Year Seven.

'I don't think we're supposed to objectify people,' Annie

whispers right in my ear, the feeling of hot air hitting my ear canal making me jump out of my arm-focused trance.

I'm not sure how she got so close to my face without me realising, and I love her, but I hope she never, ever does that again.

The two of us follow in Adam's footsteps up the stairs and into school. The musk of abandoned PE kits, hormones and rejection hits me right in the nose, and instantly kills my lady boner.

Sadly, Adam's been betrothed to Heather the Horror since Year Seven. They apparently did *it* in Year Ten using a sandwich bag as contraception. I don't believe it and I don't believe sandwich bags are an effective form of contraception, and I will die on both of those hills.

We head for the common room, the MOST exciting thing about being in sixth form. We can FINALLY just stroll into that regal ground and be those people we've long-admired who sit on the comfy padded seats, drinking tea, playing music and wearing clothes that aren't uniform.

Five long years of watching others enter the sacred space, dreaming of when we eventually get to do it, and that day is finally here.