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GRAFTON

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I

THE THEFT

January 1979

Iris stood at the counter in the school office, detention slip in hand, anticipating a hand-smack from Mr. Lucas, the vice principal. She'd already seen him twice since her enrollment at Climping Academy the previous fall. The first time, she'd been turned in for cutting PE. The second time, she'd been reported for smoking outside study hall. She'd been advised there was a smoking area set aside specifically for students, which she argued was on the far side of campus and impossible to get to between classes. That fell on deaf ears. This was now early January and she'd been reported for violating the school's dress code.

She was willing to admit that detention slips were a poor means of establishing her place in a new school. The younger students wore uniforms, but in the upper grades, clothing was at the discretion of the individual student as long as the overall look was considered within bounds. The way Iris read it—no skirts or dresses with hemlines

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above the knee, no tank tops, no shorts, no T-shirts with slogans, no underwear showing, and no flip-flops or Doc Martens. As far as she was concerned, she was playing by the rules. She'd assumed she could wear anything she pleased, within reason, of course. Climp had a different point of view. In the minds of the school administrators, clothing was meant to show modesty, respect, conservatism, and seriousness of purpose.

Her choice that morning had been an ankle-length claret-colored velvet dress with a ruffled collar, long sleeves, black tights, and high-top red tennis shoes. Her hair was long and thick, a color that fell somewhere between auburn and flame red thanks to a mixture of boxed dyes. Two big silver barrettes held the mass away from her face. On each wrist she wore a wide leather cuff, studded with brass and silver nail heads. As it turned out, all of this was a great big no-no. Well, shit.

The school secretary, Mrs. Malcolm, acknowledged Iris's presence with a nod, but clearly the woman didn't intend to interrupt her work over the antics of a problematic ninth grader. She was busy distributing mail to various teachers' cubbyholes. The student volunteer, Poppy, was stapling together packets of some sort. Iris was a freshman at Climping Academy, the Santa Teresa private school located in Horton Ravine, which was so la-di-da, it totally freaked her out. She was only at Climp because her father had been hired to teach advanced placement math and to coach field hockey. The tuition was twenty thousand dollars a year, which her parents could never have afforded if not for her father's job, which allowed Climp to waive the cost of enrollment.

The last high school she'd attended was in a "mixed" neighborhood in Detroit, which was to say, drugs, thugs, and vandalism, some of which Iris had generated herself when the mood struck her. She'd been uprooted from Michigan and plunked down on the West Coast despite her protests. California was a bust. She expected surfers, dopers, and free spirits, but it was all the same old shit as far as she could

tell. Climping Academy was beyond belief. Enrollment from kindergarten to twelfth grade was three hundred students total, with a pupil-to-teacher ratio of nine to one. Expectations were high and most of the students rose to the occasion. And why would they not? These were all rich kids, whose mommies and daddies gave them the best of everything: trips abroad, unlimited clothing budgets, private tennis and fencing lessons, and weekly visits with a shrink—the latter just in case some boob was gifted with a brand-new VW instead of the BMW he had his heart set on. Big boob-fucking-hoo. Her parents often expressed doubts about her private school attendance, citing the pressure to conform and the dangers of materialism. Her parents fancied themselves Bohemians.

One look at her outfit and her homeroom teacher, Mrs. Rubio, had informed her she'd have to go home and change, and when she told Mrs. Rubio she had no transportation, the woman had suggested she take a bus. Like, huh? Iris didn't know anything about bus schedules so what was she supposed to do? Unlike most of the other students, she didn't live in snooty old Horton Ravine. Moving from Michigan to California had been a shock, the sticker prices for homes being exorbitant. Her parents had purchased a shabby rambling house on the Upper East Side with a mortgage that would keep them enslaved for life. How Bohemian was that? Iris was an only child. Her parents had never wanted children in the first place, a sentiment they were happy to remind her of at the drop of a hat. Her mother, at the age of twenty-five, went in to have her tubes tied against medical advice, and discovered she was pregnant. Husband and wife had agonized over whether to terminate, and in the end they decided it was acceptable to have one child. Often in Iris's hearing, they congratulated themselves on their parenting style, which consisted largely of instilling independence in the girl, meaning an ability to entertain herself and demand precious little.

Her mother had a degree in political science and was currently teaching part time at Santa Teresa City College. She also volunteered

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two afternoons a week at an abortion clinic, where she felt it was incumbent on her to champion reproductive rights, women's control over their own bodies, and the advisability of women keeping their options open instead of burdening themselves with unwanted offspring.

Meanwhile, having witnessed the sophistication of Horton Ravine, Iris was embarrassed by the way she was forced to live. On the home front, her parents favored clutter and disarray—imagining perhaps that untidiness and intellectual superiority walked hand in hand. Iris couldn't remember the last time the three of them sat down to a meal. Dishes were left in the sink since neither her mother nor father could be bothered with such things. Dusting and vacuuming were too mundane to address. Laundry went undone. If one of them broke down and actually washed and dried a load, it was left in a pile on the living room sofa to be reclaimed as needed. Iris did her own. Her parents believed it was exploitative of the lower classes to hire household help, so those chores were best left a-begging. They were also committed to the notion of equality between the sexes, which spawned an unspoken competition to see who could force the other to knuckle under and pick up the slack. Iris's bedroom was the only orderly room in the house and she spent most of her free time there isolated from the chaos.

Mr. Lucas appeared in the doorway to his office indicating that she should come in. He was a good-looking man, low-key, relaxed, and competent. His hair was the color of California beach sand, his face nicely creased. He was tall and trim, given to cashmere vests and dress shirts with the sleeves rolled up. He tossed a file on his desk and took a seat, lacing his fingers above his head. "Mrs. Rubio has lodged an objection to your outfit," he remarked. "You look like you're on your way to the Renaissance Faire."

"Whatever that is," she said.

"This is the third detention you've been cited for since you arrived. I don't understand this pattern of defiance."

“Why is it a pattern when I’ve only done two things wrong?”

“Counting today, that makes three. You’re here to learn, not to do battle with school authorities. I’m not sure you appreciate the opportunity you’ve been given.”

“I don’t give a shit about that,” she said. “All my friends are back in Detroit. With all due respect, Mr. Lucas, Climping Academy sucks.”

She saw that Mr. Lucas was prepared to ignore her bad language, probably thinking the issue of trash talk was not what was at stake. “I went back and looked at your records. At your last school, you did good work. Here you’ve set yourself on a collision course. You miss your friends. I get that. I’m also aware California isn’t an easy place to live if you’re accustomed to the Midwest, but you keep on acting out, you’re only hurting yourself. Does that make sense to you?”

“So what’s the deal? Three demerits and I’m out?”

He smiled. “We don’t give up as easily as that. Like it or not, you’re here three more years. We want the time to be pleasant and productive. You think you can handle that?”

“I guess.”

She studied the floor. For some reason, she was stung by his tone, which was kind. His concern seemed genuine, which made it all the worse. She didn’t want to fit in. She didn’t want to adapt. She wanted to go back to Detroit, where she knew she was accepted for who she was. In that moment, Iris realized she had violated her own working strategy in situations like this. The trick was to look abject and give a lengthy explanation for the infraction, which might or might not be true. The point was to fill the air with verbiage, to apologize at least twice, sounding as sincere as possible for someone who didn’t give a rat’s ass. The secret was to put up no resistance whatever, a technique that had worked well for her in the past. Resistance only fueled the lecture, encouraging the adult-types to pontificate.

She murmured, “What about my clothes? I don’t drive so there’s no way I can go home and change.”

“Now that, I can help you with. Where do you live?”

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“Upper East Side.”

“Hang on a minute.”

He got up from his desk and crossed to the door to the school office, which he opened, sticking his head out. “Mrs. Malcolm, can you do me a favor and let me borrow Poppy for half an hour? Iris needs a ride home. Upper East Side. There and back, thirty minutes max.”

“Of course. If it’s all right with her.”

“Sure. Happy to.”

Iris could feel her heart start to bang in her chest. Poppy was one of the most popular girls at Climp, operating at such an elevation that Iris barely had the nerve to speak to her. She was close to panic at the idea of being in a moving vehicle with her for even ten minutes, let alone thirty.

Once in the parking lot, Poppy turned to her with a grin. “Cool threads, kid. I wish I had your nerve.”

The two got into Poppy’s Thunderbird. Once Iris slammed the car door, she reached into her bag and pulled out a vintage Lucky Strike cigarette tin, filled with tightly rolled joints, at which Iris was adept. “Care to partake?”

“Oh, shit yes,” Poppy said.

That had been January and the two had been inseparable since. To Iris’s credit, she was a model of good behavior for the next three months.

Every afternoon, they repaired to Poppy’s house, ostensibly to study, but actually to smoke dope and raid Poppy’s parents’ liquor cabinet. Iris was a genius at concocting mixed drinks, utilizing what was available. Her latest she called a “flame thrower,” which entailed Kahlúa, banana-flavored liqueur, crème de menthe, and rum. Poppy’s parents didn’t drink rum. That bottle was held in reserve should a guest request it. Poppy’s father was a thoracic surgeon, her mother a hospital administrator, which meant long hours for both and a preoccupation with medical matters, gossip as much as anything else. Poppy’s two older sisters had graduated from college. One was now in

medical school and the other was working for a pharmaceutical company. The whole family was high-profile and high-achievement. Poppy was an oopsie baby—a surprise addition to a family, arriving long after Poppy’s mother assumed she’d been liberated from diapers, teething, pediatricians, PTA meetings, and soccer practice. Iris and Poppy had that in common, their alien state. It was as though both had been deposited by spacecraft, leaving the mystified earthlings to raise them as best they could.

Most of the time the two girls were on their own, ordering pizza or any other foodstuff that could be charged to a credit card and delivered to Poppy’s door. At least she could drive and she often delivered Iris to her house at ten at night. Iris’s parents never said a word, probably grateful she had a friend whose company she preferred to theirs.

In April, Iris was dumbfounded when she received yet another summons to the vice principal’s office. What’d she do this time? She hadn’t been called out on anything and she felt put upon and unappreciated. She’d been doing her best to blend in and behave herself.

Even Mrs. Malcolm seemed surprised. “We haven’t seen you for a while. What now?”

“No clue. I’m tooling along minding my own business and I get this note that Mr. Lucas wants to see me. I don’t even know what this is about.”

“News to me as well.”

Iris took a seat on one of the wooden benches provided for the errant and unrepentant. She had her books and her binder in hand so that once she was properly dressed down, she could report to her next class, which in this case was world history. She opened her binder, pretending to check her notes. She was careful to show no interest in the secretary’s disbursement of manila envelopes, but she knew what they contained: the Benchmark California Academic Proficiency Tests. These were administered at the beginning and ending of junior

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year, designed to measure each student's mastery of math and English. Poppy had been bitching for weeks about having to perform up to grade level or suffer the indignities of remedial catch-up work. Under certain circumstances, the test results would determine whether a junior was even allowed to advance to the senior year. Iris wondered if there was a way to get her hands on a copy. Wouldn't that be a coup? Poppy was her best friend, a diligent student, but not all that bright. Iris could see her limitations, but overlooked her deficits in the interest of her status at Climp. Poppy's boyfriend, Troy Rademaker, was in same boat. His grades were excellent, but he didn't dare risk anything less than top marks. He attended Climp on a scholarship it was essential to protect. In addition, he and Austin Brown were among the nominees for the Albert Climping Memorial Award, given annually to an outstanding freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior based on academic distinction, athletic achievement, and service to the community. Austin Brown was the unofficial, but equally undisputed kingpin of the junior class, much admired and equally feared for his scathing pronouncements about his classmates.

Poppy wasn't conventionally pretty, but she was stylish and well-liked. Schoolwork was her curse. She was one of those borderline cases where year after year, teachers had talked themselves into passing her along without requiring a command of core subjects. This had always worked to Poppy's advantage, keeping her in lockstep with classmates she'd known since kindergarten. The problem was that grade by grade, she'd been advanced on increasingly shaky grounds, which meant the work only became harder and more opaque. Now Poppy alternated between feelings of frustration and feelings of despair. Iris's role, as she saw it, was to take Poppy's mind off her scholastic woes, thus the dope-smoking and junk food.

Iris couldn't imagine what Mr. Lucas wanted with her. She'd gone for months without a detention slip and she wondered if he understood how much effort and self-discipline that took. She could use a pat on the back, positive reinforcement for what she'd achieved in the way of

maturity and self-control. Acting out was easier. She relished the feeling of being unleashed, free to act on impulse, doing whatever occurred to her.

Mr. Lucas entered the office and signaled to Iris, who got up and followed him. Once he settled at his desk, he seemed perplexed. “What can I do for you?”

“I don’t know. I got a note saying you wanted to see me.”

Mr. Lucas stared at her blankly and then recovered himself. “That’s right. Sorry. This isn’t actually about you. It’s about your friend Poppy.”

Iris looked at him with interest. This was a change in the script. “What about her?”

“She has a lot at stake academically and the faculty is concerned about her plummeting grades.”

Iris was taken aback. “I don’t get it. What’s this have to do with me?”

“She’s struggling. You probably see that as well as I do. In a curious way she looks up to you as a role model.”

“Yeah, curious, no shit. How can I be a role model when I’m fourteen years old?”

“You underestimate yourself. You’re a bright girl. You can afford to coast because you manage to keep up without putting in much effort. Poppy has to work much harder than you. She’s got the Proficiency Test coming up next week and it’s vital that she stay on point. If she doesn’t improve her academic standing, she won’t get into the college of her choice, which I understand is Vassar.”

Iris laughed. “Vassar? No way. She’ll be lucky to get into City College for a two-year degree.”

“That’s not ours to decide. The point is, you could be a big help if you’d encourage her to study instead of goofing off. She needs the support.”

Offended, Iris said, “She doesn’t need my ‘support.’ She does fine. I don’t understand why you’re blaming me if Poppy’s bored with school.”

“It’s more than boredom, isn’t it?” He made an O of his thumb and

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his index finger, putting them to his lips as though he were toking on a joint.

Iris kept her face blank. How the heck could he know about that? “If you’re implying Poppy and I smoke dope, I don’t know where you got that idea because you’re dead wrong. I might have done that a couple of times back in Michigan, but I’ve sworn off. Poppy, I don’t know about. You’d have to ask her.”

With exaggerated patience, Mr. Lucas said, “Look, Iris. I’m not here to argue. I was hoping to enlist your aid.”

“In doing what? Dumping my best friend? Because that’s what you’re suggesting, isn’t it?”

“Not dumping her. Cutting back on the time you spend together, just as a temporary measure.”

“So now you’re telling me who to hang out with?”

“I’m soliciting your help. In terms of schoolwork, Poppy’s done okay so far, but she’s faltering.”

“And that’s *my* fault?” Iris found it infuriating that she’d been called into Mr. Lucas’s office, not to reward her for good behavior, for which she’d made a special effort, but to heap phony praise on her in hopes she’d give Poppy Earl a boost.

“You’re an influence. You have a strong personality. Scholastically, she’s not as quick as you are. I’m suggesting it might be in her best interests if you backed off a bit and let her focus on her schoolwork.”

Iris started to protest and then she clamped her mouth shut. She could feel the heat rise in her cheeks at the notion that he’d blamed her for Poppy’s failing grades. Worse still was the idea that she should sacrifice a friendship for any reason whatsoever. If Poppy’s grades needed an assist, there were other ways to go about it than dropping a friend. She said, “I’ll think about it.”

Mr. Lucas seemed surprised that she’d yielded so easily. “Good. Well, that’s great. That’s really all we’re asking—that you’ll give some thought to your effect on her and ease up.”

“Right.”

He went on for a bit, but Iris had tuned him out. She was livid that the faculty had been discussing Poppy's mediocre grades and pointing the finger at Iris, like it was her responsibility. What the fuck was that about? She and Mr. Lucas continued to chat, going through a bullshit exchange, while she pretended everything was okay when in fact, she was furious.

The meeting ended and the minute Mr. Lucas closed his office door, she scurried into the hall, blind with rage. She halted, feeling the rush of anger narrow to a point. On the wall across the corridor, between the girls' restroom and the janitor's closet, there was a fire alarm box. The process was simple. Break glass, press here. She cast a glance in both directions and saw that the hallway was clear. She used a corner of her history book to break the glass. She pressed the button and an ear-splitting siren sounded. She walked into the girls' bathroom and closed herself into a stall, pulled her feet up, and rested them against the door so if anyone looked under, the stall would appear to be empty. Beyond the quiet of the bathroom, she could hear doors banging open, the high-pitched chatter of students pouring out of the classrooms.

Mr. Dorfman, the principal, was on the intercom, instructing teachers and students to proceed to their stations in an orderly fashion. The drill was one they'd done a hundred times, but the practice was usually announced in advance. She could tell from their shrill response that everyone was uncertain if this was the real deal or not. Something exciting about the idea of a school burning to the ground. Within minutes, the corridors were silent. Iris stood up and left the stall, peering around the door to see if anyone was patrolling for strays. No sign of a soul so she scooted back across the hall to the office, which was also empty.

She scanned the faculty mailboxes and lifted the first of the manila envelopes she spotted. This was in Mrs. Rose's cubbyhole, the envelope unsealed but secured with a clasp. The copy machine was still humming and it took less than a minute to reproduce the Proficiency Test and the accompanying answer sheet. She put the pages back in

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the envelope, pressed the clasp flat, and returned it to Mrs. Rose's cubbyhole. Then she went out into the hall and mingled with the students who were returning to the building. She couldn't wait to tell Poppy what she'd done. Thanks to her, Poppy Earl and Troy Rademaker were home free.

Later, Kinsey Millhone would wonder how differently events might have played out if she'd been present in the vice principal's office that day. No one could have predicted the consequences of Iris's impetuous actions in response to Mr. Lucas's summons. In point of fact, Kinsey wouldn't meet up with the principal players for another ten years and by then, the die would be cast. Odd how fate is so often embedded in the aftermath of a simple conversation.

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