

PALO ALTO, SATURDAY 8:55 P.M.

SHE NEVER KNEW WHAT HIT HER. OR IF SHE DID, SHE ONLY KNEW IT for a second, two at the most. In any event, not long enough for her to break stride, never mind jump out of the way or do anything to save herself, beyond looking over her shoulder and widening her eyes in terror.

Before that, though, she almost certainly noticed the sudden harsh glare of headlights swerving off the road and sweeping across her from behind, the LED high beams closing fast.

The grille of the EV SUV struck her dead center with such force that she was catapulted into the air like a 49ers' field goal attempt, sailing through the uprights for three points before crashing back to Earth fifty feet down the trail, piling face-first into the hard-packed gravel.

She lay motionless, in excruciating pain, unable to move, a pile of broken bones and internal bleeding, her earbuds spinning to a stop a few feet from her smashed-in head.

No sirens, screeching brakes, or car doors slamming in alarm. Nothing but the gentle sway of the tall eucalyptus trees lining the deserted path, serenading her plight in the evening breeze, along with Taylor Swift's faint crooning from her earbuds.

Then, footsteps! Crunching on fine gravel, getting closer. Help was coming!

“Please...” she gurgled weakly, blood oozing through shattered teeth. “Help...me.”

The Good Samaritan crouched next to her.

She tried to make eye contact with her savior but couldn't move her head.

“Allow me.” It was a man's voice, deep and reassuring, with an accent she couldn't quite place.

“Thank...you,” she coughed, spraying a fine mist of fresh blood.

Her savior placed his hands on either side of her head, gently but firmly gripping her skull.

As he did so, she noticed he was wearing surgical gloves.

That was the last thing she saw as he gave her head a sharp, quick twist.

ONE MONTH LATER

“This will be the best thing that ever happened to you!”

Dr. Katz’s parting words echoed in Madison’s head as the elevator came to a stop and the doors glided open. “Third floor,” the car’s disembodied voice intoned. “Global Marketing Group—Executive Level.”

Madison stepped off the elevator into a small, deserted lobby. The only sign of life was an LED video wall silently shimmering, its pristine shade of eggshell white perfectly matching the adjacent walls while offsetting a colorful corporate logo: K-N-O-W. The red, white, and blue 3D letters rotated in a playful, off-kilter fashion above the company mantra: “We Know Everything.”

She tamped down her butterflies and approached the entry door. Through the beveled glass, she could make out executive offices lining the outer walls as well as support staff busily tapping away at terminal keyboards in the open-plan grid of workstations.

Madison touched her newly minted keycard to the sensor pad. The door slid open and she strode inside, clutching the file folder she’d

been handed by the pleasant but detached older woman from HR who'd been waiting for her in the Main Reception Center.

"Building 14, 3rd Floor, Station D-9," she'd told Madison. "Just make yourself at home, your temporary log-in and password are in the file. Ask any of the other assistants if you have questions; they'll be more than happy to help." The HR woman must have seen the look on Madison's face, because she added, "This is Know Inc., Ms. Maxwell. We believe in empowering our employees from day one, even entry-level Executive Assistants. Learn by doing. Knowledge is power. Be 'in the know,' so to speak," she'd said, half-smiling. And that had been it for orientation.

Madison moved uncertainly down the rows of workstations, searching for D-9. Heads turned as her new coworkers gave her the once-over before returning to their work. She did her best not to make eye contact with any of them, but noticed they were all female, attractive, smartly dressed, and, like her, in their mid-twenties. She began to second-guess her choice of wardrobe and even the way she'd done her hair. She'd fussed for a good hour that morning picking out her first-day outfit, meant to impress but not overwhelm, before settling on pencil jeans, her favorite knee-high boots, and a cream-colored, long-sleeve rib-knit top. Her naturally curly strawberry-blond locks were swept back with a French clip to highlight her emerald green eyes that sparkled when she laughed, even though she rarely did. But as she kept walking, she realized none of that mattered. She'd been in other corporate work environments before, though that was always when she was temping; this was a whole other—

Maddie, just find your desk!

D-9 finally came into view. Madison quickened her stride as if it were some sort of oasis. The cubicle was barebones, just a roller chair, monitor, and keyboard; no frills, no welcome sign or any such thing.

What did you expect—balloons and a cupcake? What's wrong with you?

She sank into her chair and spun around once. At least it didn't squeak. As she took in her new workspace, her anxiety level started to rise. Something felt off—

“You must be Madison.”

A young woman was peering over the divider from the next workstation. She was a bit older than the others, late twenties, attractive, with close-cropped red hair, sharp eyes and a knowing smile. “You look like I did on my first day. It gets better. Hi, I’m Nicole.”

Madison did her best to look composed. “Oh, hi—thanks. Nice to meet you.”

Nicole gestured to Madison’s terminal. “There’s a set of tutorials to get you started. Happy to help if you get stuck.”

“I may take you up on that.”

“Madison, Know doesn’t pick new hires out of a hat. You got this job for a reason, just like me. Besides, I heard you were a psych major—E. A. Four will be a piece of cake. Just don’t start psychoanalyzing any of us and you’ll do fine.”

Madison cracked a smile. “I won’t. I promise.” She regarded her new coworker, “Hey, thanks for making me feel welcome.”

“That’s what I’m here for,” breezed Nicole. “You’ll be up and running like Sam before you know it.” As soon as she said it, she looked like she regretted it.

“Sam... Was she the one here before?”

Nicole nodded. Her expression had tightened.

“Did she get promoted or...?”

“No...” She paused, shook her head. “Hit-and-run—last month. Jogging by Stanford Golf Course.”

“Stanford Golf Course...?”

“Yeah, it’s not far from here.”

“I saw the sign. My bus goes right by it.”

“Anyway, it’s really sad. She was only twenty-seven. Everyone loved her.”

A tingle ran down Madison’s spine. Words stuck in her throat.

Nicole straightened up, back into work mode. “T. J. will be... Sorry, our boss, Mr. Khan—you’ll meet him tomorrow.” Her desk phone buzzed. “I’m right here if you need me.” She disappeared into her cubicle.

Madison sat perfectly still in her chair, surveying her workspace. It

was still barebones, devoid of any human touch; nothing had changed. But, just like that, it had taken on a completely different energy and feel.

The last person who sat here is dead.

I'm taking her place.

The tingle at the base of her spine began creeping back up—

This was a mistake.

MADISON COULDN'T HELP HERSELF. ONCE THAT SEED WAS PLANTED, like a dog with a bone, she just couldn't let it go. She'd been that way ever since she was twelve. She had described it to Dr. Katz as feeling like she was tied to the caboose of a train that was pulling her along as it sped down the track, destination unknown.

That feeling overtook her as she fought her way through the rest of her first day. Thankfully, the tutorials had eaten up most of the morning and a good part of the afternoon. The lunch with Nicole and a few others had been awkward, to say the least; Madison had picked at her avocado salad and did her best to fend off the questions about her life in Boston beyond the most superficial details. The others seemed to have lost interest and written her off as shy; she wasn't so sure about Nicole. A few times, Madison thought she'd noticed Nicole looking at her in an odd way, as if trying to figure her out.

When four-thirty finally arrived, Madison found her way to the transit station. As she waited to board her bus, alone in the throng of coworkers, she gave herself a talking to.

Why not just accept that one person's misfortune is another's good luck? Your good luck, Maddie! Say a prayer for that poor girl and be grateful. That's what normal people do!

It didn't help. If anything, it only made her feel worse, and the ride

home feel longer. Block after block, her voice of reason battled it out with her harsh inner critic.

Maddie, this is just you self-sabotaging again. That's what Dr. Katz would say.

Don't overthink every single stupid little—

The “Stanford Golf Course” sign caught her eye as the bus rolled past.

That's where it happened. Where she died.

The bus groaned to a stop in front of her apartment complex. Madison stepped off, still holding onto that troubling thought. The bus continued on its way, leaving her alone on the sidewalk.

She looked back up the deserted street. The feeling she had in her cubicle returned.

This was a mistake.

It stayed with her as she hurried into her building and up to her apartment.

As quickly as she could, Madison changed into her sweats and poured herself a glass of Cloudy Bay. She practically gulped the Sauvignon Blanc down, eager for the alcohol to dull the unsettling sensation. It didn't work.

How about a grilled cheese, Maddie? Will that make it better?

The pan sizzled as she lay the buttered brioche onto the hot cast iron. She watched attentively as the slice of Swiss began to melt and the bread bubbled around the edges.

After another minute, she deftly flipped the sandwich over, inspecting the cooked side: crispy and golden brown.

“Little Miss Maddie sat on her Daddy, eating a yummy grilled cheese.”

She recited the rhyme in a soft sing-song.

“Along came a spider who sat down beside her and said, ‘Could I have some, please?’”

A faint smile flickered across her face but didn't stay long. She drained her glass and reached for a plate.

The table was set for one. She took her seat and bit into her sandwich. As she chewed, she regarded her new but sparsely decorated

living room: a sofa, coffee table with matching side tables, and a floor lamp; that was it. No TV, no entertainment center, nothing on the walls, no personal touches. Simple; the way she liked it.

Her gaze settled on four white banker boxes stacked neatly in the far corner, labeled 1 through 4. She stopped chewing.

I wonder if it was on the news.

She wiped her hands and flipped open her laptop.

“The body of a local jogger was found just off Junipero Serra Boulevard early this morning by maintenance staff at the nearby Stanford Golf Course, the victim of an apparent hit-and-run.”

Madison scrutinized the news clip from the local NBC affiliate’s archive. “Samantha Dockett, twenty-seven, a two-year employee at local tech giant Know Inc.—”

She froze the clip and peered at Sam’s face: youthful, pretty, bright-eyed, and full of life. Clad in running gear, cheeks flushed and all smiles, fresh off an invigorating jog no doubt.

Madison switched to another clip, a remote segment at Stanford Golf Course with the Palo Alto Police’s Public Information officer standing at a phalanx of microphones, flanked by other law enforcement and local officials. “...Again, I am able to report that at this time, three weeks post-incident, the medical examiner has concluded that the decedent, Samantha Dockett, died from multiple severe internal injuries, including a broken neck, sustained as the result of being struck by an unknown vehicle traveling at a high rate of speed. Our investigation has found no evidence of foul play. Law enforcement continues to search for the driver involved in this tragic, senseless hit-and-run—”

She hit “pause” and studied the lineup of officials.

What is it, Maddie...?

The three on the right were local PD, one a sergeant, the other two in plain dark suits. On the left were two City Hall types, plus a supervisor from the Parks Department.

There—in the back!

Behind the lineup, three clean-cut men stood shoulder-to-shoulder off to one side, out of the limelight. One wore a tan suit. The other

two wore identical blue windbreakers with a small yellow logo on the left breast pocket: FBI.

She zeroed in on the two men in matching jackets. They looked just like the two who had come to her house when she was eight; not their faces, but their square jaws and dead-serious expressions.

Why are the FBI at a hit-and-run in Palo Alto...?

THE BLACK SUBURBAN STREAKED UP THE B-W PARKWAY, HEADED north out of DC in mid-morning traffic. Windows blacked out, bristling with antennas, the unmarked SUV weaved in and out of the HOV lane with impunity, passing cars left and right at high speed.

Lead Special Agent Niles rode in the back seat of the fast-moving SUV, phone cradled to his ear. “I keep tellin’ you, Dixon, no need to send a car every time we have a sit-down—FBI has its own damn cars.” He purposely emphasized his Southern accent, with its distinct Louisiana drawl, so his last word sounded more like “caws.”

Dixon laughed. “Yeah, but our caws go faster.”

That made Niles chuckle. “See y’all shortly.” He pocketed his phone and glanced at the instrument panel. “Eighty-five...?” That was pushing it, even for him. “I’d like to get there in one piece, if y’all don’t mind.”

The stone-faced driver and his partner riding shotgun ignored him.

Niles gave his shaved black head a rub as he returned his attention to the file open on his lap. The title page of the dog-eared document stared up at him: *The Evil that Men Do*.

He tapped the author’s last name thoughtfully a few times, his fingertip tracing lightly across the letters, then he adjusted his vintage “Malcolm X” browline glasses and began to read.

Perimeter security at Fort Meade, the sprawling Army installation that is home to the National Security Agency, is always understandably tight and deliberately intimidating, but the four heavily armed Marines manning the first checkpoint waved the Suburban through without stopping the vehicle to check the occupants. Same thing at Checkpoints Two and Three; just waved through. Niles half-smiled; that's why Dixon always sent the car.

The Suburban pulled up in front of the headquarters building, a ten-story, cube-shaped tower covered with black one-way glass. A Marine corporal waiting in the driveway opened the rear door. "Agent Niles, welcome to Fort Meade. Follow me, please."

The Marine corporal stood by in the reception area as Niles stepped through the body scanner and exchanged his Glock and smart-phone for a clip-on visitor badge.

Niles and the corporal strode briskly through the main tower lobby to a bank of elevators. The corporal placed his palm on a scanner and punched in a code on the keypad. The middle elevator's doors whirred open. The Marine waited until Niles entered the car, then snapped to attention. "Thank you, sir."

Instead of going up, the elevator began to descend, rapidly picking up speed, faster and faster, for a good thirty seconds.

"Jesus!" Niles exclaimed as his ears popped. The drop got him every time. He'd lost count of how many trips he'd made in this elevator with no buttons or screen, but he'd never gotten used to how thrill-ride fast he was transported to the SCIF deep underground.

When the elevator finally eased to a stop and the doors opened, two well-armed Marines were waiting for him. "Welcome back to the Fort, Agent Niles," said one. "This way, please."

The Marines escorted Niles at a rapid clip down the long, softly lit subterranean corridor to the end, stopping in front of an oversized, reinforced steel door. Niles removed his glasses and stepped up to a wall scanner. The red beam swept across his eyes.

"How's that baby?" asked Niles.

"Getting big, sir," beamed the Marine. "Starting to crawl."

A green light blinked and the door locks were released.

Niles donned his glasses. “He’ll be lookin’ for a little brother soon.”

The Marine cracked a smile. “Yes, sir. Working on it.” He signaled his fellow soldier, who pulled the eight-inch-thick door open with both hands.

“Good to see you again, sir.” The Marine motioned to Niles. “They’re waiting for you.”

“Good to see you, too, son.”

The Marines stood at attention. Niles stepped past them into the chamber.

The two soldiers pushed the door closed until it locked with a heavy click, then took up position on either side.

DAMMIT, MADDIE, BREATHE! IT'S ONLY DAY TWO!

Madison focused on her breathing, her eyes fixed on her monitor. The username and password boxes on her log-in screen were still blank, the cursor blinking. She remained like that, frozen in her barren cubicle, the office around her empty and dead quiet.

She was the first to arrive, catching the 6:15 bus and swiping her pass almost a full hour before the workday officially started. The security guard at the entrance had raised an eyebrow as she clocked in, but otherwise she had been able to avoid contact with anyone as she made her way through the near-deserted campus to her building and up to her floor.

Get it together, Maddie. Forget about the FBI, Sam, all that— You need this job. You want this job, remember? Yesterday was bad, but today will be—

She stopped herself. Who was she trying to kid? Yesterday hadn't been bad—it had been far worse; not at all what she had expected, or hoped for, on her first day. Even after she finally crawled between the sheets, she didn't sleep a wink, her thoughts running rampant, her mind doing backflips all night, and by the time she dragged herself into the shower just after five, it took every ounce of resolve not to just pack a bag and take the first plane back to—

Back to where? Boston? There's nothing there for you but bad memories. No, you made your bed—

It was true. She had convinced herself, once her mom had passed on New Year's Day, there was really nothing keeping her in the town she'd grown up in; her friends' careers were taking off, a handful were getting married, a few had even started a family. The more she was around them, the more she was reminded that she was nowhere close to any of those big milestones. So why not go out to California, she'd asked herself; it's the land of fresh starts—no one cares where you're from, or what you've left behind—

“Good morning!”

She snapped into focus as Nicole appeared in the next cubicle. Around them, the office was coming to life; she hadn't even noticed her coworkers streaming in.

Nicole set down her bag and regarded Madison. “You're here early.”

“Yeah, I, uh, I didn't want to be late.”

“That's good—T. J. likes commitment.”

She opened her mouth to respond but another voice beat her to it. A man's voice, booming from the entry door, “Good morning, my little Know-It-Alls!” It was as if God himself had spoken. Everyone, including Nicole, turned their attention to the man sweeping into the office.

“Speak of the Devil...” Nicole remarked under her breath.

Curious, Madison got to her feet.

T. J. Khan removed his designer sunglasses with a flourish. “Tell me one thing I don't know!” he demanded playfully. The words were barely out of his mouth when he laid eyes on Madison.

She wasn't prepared for how handsome he was. He had to be in his early fifties, she decided, and while he didn't appear to be much taller than her, she was immediately struck by his dark features, pampered bronzed skin, and neatly trimmed salt-and-pepper beard. His blazer and jeans looked expensive, as did his sneakers and T-shirt. And even though he was dressed like a typical tech exec, there was something different about him, she thought. It was his confident,

almost cocky manner, she realized, his effortlessly charming style, like a movie star who knows he has “it.” Probably a narcissist, she concluded.

“A new face!” Khan glanced around at his team. “There, you got me! One thing I do not know. Pray tell, who is this beautiful creature gracing our presence?!”

“Morning, T. J.,” said Nicole. “Everyone, this is Madison. She’s taking Sam’s place.”

Madison gave a shy wave. *Please don’t make me say anything!*

Khan placed his hand on his heart. “Ah, yes, our poor, dear Sam; may she rest in peace.” The room fell silent. Khan let the solemn moment pass, then nodded approvingly at Madison. “I’m sure she would be pleased to know you are filling her shoes—the office is already so much brighter with your truly luminous face! Welcome to KNOW, Madison.”

Madison averted her gaze. “Thank you,” was all she could manage.

Khan’s expression turned more serious. “And as the newest member of my team, I feel I must warn you now: This will be the most memorable job you will ever have.”

Madison looked up, struck by Khan’s change in tone.

“As KNOW’s senior vice president of Strategic Marketing, I will be the best boss. The smartest. Most caring. Most handsome. And most humble, I might add. In short, I will be the most memorable leader you will ever have the pleasure to serve!”

Everyone looked on, expressionless.

“Someday, you will tell your grandkids about working for the great T. J. Khan.” He surveyed the room, full of impassive faces. “Am I right, ladies, or am I right?”

The room burst out laughing. It was clear to Madison this was how Khan initiated his new employees, and everyone was enjoying it, especially Khan.

He smiled broadly at her.

But Madison had stopped paying attention to Khan’s words. The

more she looked at him, the stronger a vague feeling of familiarity became.

Déjà vu.

The term popped into her head. She'd studied the well-documented but poorly understood phenomenon in Introductory Psych, knew that it meant "already seen" in French, and that there was a perfectly logical neurological explanation for those rare occasions when the brain registered an experience as a memory a millisecond before registering the experience itself, creating a powerful illusion of having had it before. Madison understood the science of *déjà vu*, but she'd never really felt it herself. Until now.

She found herself focusing on his mouth—in particular his lips, and the specific, subtle, but very distinct way the corners of his mouth curled up when he smiled.

She shook it off and was about to look away when she noticed Khan's eyes were now roaming down her body, taking their time taking in her curves, all of which were shown off to best advantage, she suddenly realized, by her outfit. Then, Khan's eyes shifted back up to meet hers. He flashed another of his charming, disarming smiles and this time threw in a wink.

Madison flinched.

It was a reflex reaction, there was no mistaking it. But she couldn't tell if it was because her neurons were misfiring again, or because her new boss's open flirtation was perilously close to crossing the line. Or was it something else?

"Back to work, my little Know-It-Alls!" Khan commanded as he disappeared inside his corner office.

Madison sank into her chair, unnerved by what had just transpired with her new boss.

"Did you notice T. J. was checking you out?" Nicole asked in a low voice.

"How could I not?" Madison blurted.

Nicole motioned for her to keep her voice down.

Madison tried to collect herself. "Does he do that with everyone?"

"He's harmless, mostly. Actually, he's a really good boss—he

takes care of his staff, gets us raises and promotions, time off when we need it. Everybody adores him.”

“But—?”

Nicole chose her words carefully. “But—just be careful if you’re ever alone with him. Word is he likes to do even more than flirt in private—if you’re up for it.”

“That’ll be the day.”

Nicole studied Madison for a long moment. “Say, a bunch of us are going for drinks after—care to join us? Celebrate surviving your second day?”

Madison brightened. “That’s so nice of you. Sure, I’d—” She suddenly remembered. “Oh, it’s Tuesday, isn’t it... Sorry, I have a—a commitment.”

Nicole looked a little disappointed but shrugged. “No problem; another time.”