

# THE LAST DAY OF TEENAGE JOURNALISM

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An Avalon Hayes. Mystery

number  
5  
book

## AVALON HAYES, 2010

Mr. Chase noticed the Swatch. Once I'd started crying, he'd come around his desk, with the Kleenex, close. As I looked up, wiping my eye with one hand I now used to take the Kleenex, his eyes shifted back to mine – away from my other hand lying across my lap, the hand with the notebook Swatch my mother wore, my age, at this very school.

He'd looked at that watch like he'd seen a ghost, but only an instant before he started speaking again about my problems – getting out of this school, persuading my parents to allow it. I'd nodded and smiled, but I was slyly surveying the room for clues. My objective in this office had changed. Was it possible I was listening to my actual father lecture me about college? I couldn't think of much else until I knew the truth.

Behind Mr. Chase's desk was his wall of degrees, two from the same university I was trying to enter early, with his help, and one lower, between the others. I could see it was a high school degree, in familiar colors of blue and gold. Afraid to stare long at anything but him, it took me a few peeks to ascertain the cursive G and P. Mr. Chase had gone to Gulf Point High.

"My mom dropped out; she gets it."

I referenced her now and her history in response to a comment he'd made about my parents, without even thinking whether it was smart. If he knew my mother in high school, he certainly knew she'd dropped out. I studied his face as he spoke looking for a reaction, like I'd seen moments ago with the watch.

He only responded about her dropping out as some kind of tool I could use to get what I wanted. His face and tone stayed completely professional. If he knew my mother – if he was my father! – Mr. Chase held his secret close. It would take many more conversations to get to the truth, but I was determined. For the first time since I became a sexual joke at Gulf Point, I doubted my decision to leave.

But then something happened I did not expect. Coaching me about everything to say, giving me statistics to write down on a notepad, Mr. Chase asked me, next, to do two things – write down some numbers and not to mention his name to my parents.

The first was the answer to all my problems. He'd given me his home phone number, in case, I had problems -- *Oh, I have problems, and you are going to hear about them, in depth, Mr. Chase. Questions, too.* I wouldn't need to be at Gulf Point High to interview him. Mr. Chase wanted to stay in contact. Was it because he was my father?

The second part seemed consistent with my new hypothesis, too -- *Don't say my name to your parents.* What the fuck? He'd had a great explanation about my Dad not liking some man influencing me. I'd smiled and nodded, again, like I'd agreed. It was certainly true. Dad wouldn't like it. But what if it was Mom he was worried about -- Mom hearing that my real father was now my guidance counselor? Would she try to stop us from getting to know each other? If there was anyone as determined in keeping their secrets as Geoffrey Chase seemed, it was my mother. What a perfect couple.

I'd follow his instructions. Tell them it was Ms. Carruth who'd helped me today. Hide his phone number. I knew I'd call it, too. There was a story here, and I would get to the bottom of it.

### *ASTER PRICE, 1992*

*Geoffrey Chase performed a miracle the night before in my living room -- walking a grounded fugitive inside and soothing my angry mother/warden. He'd magically secured her permission for me to go to dinner at his house tonight. Seeing the neat little square of a note in his minuscule, precise handwriting on top of my books inside my locker before 6<sup>th</sup> period journalism, I panicked he was cancelling. I unfolded it quickly.*

Aster,

Mr. Demmy's assigned me to get tape of the drama competition after school today. I know you planned to come straight over, but I won't be home until 5:00. Please come at 5:00. But whatever you do, don't change.

I watched two jocks look up that little black dress you're wearing when you leaned over to talk to Ms. Levin at her desk. I felt a powerful urge to punch both of them in their dumb jock mouths though I'll admit I looked, too.

I'm allowed though. You have no idea the effect you have on my gender. I'm trying to be enlightened over here, and you bring out the beast in me in so many ways.

See you at 5:00.

Geoffrey

P.S. I plan to remove that dress as soon as I'm able.

*Was I ever glad I'd gone to the trouble of tucking that dress into my messenger bag and changing in the bathroom at school? Mom would lose her shit if she saw me right now; this letter and the thought of him taking it off were so worth it. The warning bell rang.*

*I folded the note, threw it inside and slammed my locker shut. The hallway was quiet. The bell had dispensed with most of the kids. A few stranglers raced towards doors, fears of detention quickening their steps. I didn't rush even when the tardy bell rang. Journalism with Ms. Karr meant tardiness was an infraction remedied with the most perfunctory of apologies, especially from me, her favorite.*

*"Sorry I'm late," I called out, pulling open the industrial strength door. My co-editor Dagan Sutton was hunched over, fully concentrated on the layout at our work table, my intended destination. I found myself stuck somewhere in-between Dagan and Ms. Karr's desk, perplexed at the sight of my boss, Louis Kristol.*

*What was The Guardian editor doing at school, weirdly close to my journalism teacher? Ms. Karr atop her desk, legs swinging, brushing against Mr. Kristol's in a way I knew could mean only just one thing. Then he reached over and rubbed her back.*

*I knew Ms. Karr knew Louis Kristol, from the internship but never suspected this. Rosalind Karr had secrets, too. She finally noticed me staring and motioned me to join them at her desk with a wave and a goofy smile. Louis Kristol, the very definition of a grumpy old man, was smiling, too. This had officially become the weirdest day of the weirdest week of my whole life.*

*Ms. Karr spoke first:*

*"Louis is here for you, Aster. Important newspaper business."*

*Ms. Karr spoke my love language -- newspaper business. Louis looked toward the door.*

*"Step outside a second?"*

*Was I in trouble? I couldn't imagine what I'd done. Louis didn't leave me in suspense long.*

*"I read your piece with Brooke, great, gonna be front page. I'm impressed, Aster."*

*Was it actually happening? Was he offering me a job at his paper for real? No more fights with my mom about college or boys? Had I arrived in the adult world somehow early as I always hoped?*

*"Thank you, Mr. Kristol."*

*"Spoke with Brooke this morning; she's investigating this Gulf Point Five thing. Did you see the story?"*

*"Yes, it's incredible."*

*"Well, I've got room for another UFO piece. I'm running Clark's last piece on the Ford girl, yesterday's news now, as they say. Brooke's new piece is a whopper, hoping it's going to evolve for next week, but I need something else UFO for the front page. Do you have anymore leads?"*

*Wracked my brain for an angle on the UFO story I could explore. Louis Kristol spoke the words just after they entered my own head:*

*"I mean, the other brother, have you talked to him yet? Never saw him quoted. What was his name?"*

*"Jamison."*

*"That's it. Think you can get an interview with him tonight? I'd need this by tomorrow."*



*I smiled. An assignment and a deadline that teased the possibility of a career and emancipation — why did I feel a pang, I tried to deny, looking at a notebook Swatch, 2:24, this decidedly strange fall afternoon?*

*“Supposed to be at his house in an hour.”*

*Mr. Kristol smiled.*

*I wasn't supposed to be going there in an hour, but I would.*

O-

*When the final bell rang, I raced out the back door of Ms. Karr's classroom around the perimeter of the school toward the front parking lot and my car. Decided against the interior path, the straight line, for fear of running into Geoffrey in the hall. I had a pretty strong feeling he'd look for me. He seemed to be the only person against me conversing with Jamison Chase, but Geoffrey wouldn't be home until 5:00. A thing I wouldn't know if I hadn't seen the note -- which I decided I hadn't.*

*Driving, I thought of my conversation with Ms. Karr, after Mr. Kristol left. Seated in her desk like a normal adult woman when I returned, she still had that silly smile that made her seem younger. When she saw me, she hopped up and danced her way to me, hips swaying and arms twirling, fingers pointing at a variety of angles like she was in a conga line and not front of a classroom of juvenile journalists.*

*None of these kids seemed to notice except for Dagan whose head popped up and eyed this strange movement sans music and then me with a little grin and a quizzical look.*

*“It's the newest writer at the Gulf Point Guardian.” Ms. Karr danced her way close now and hugged me tight. “I couldn't be more proud. I don't know how you got him to do it, but once again, you've found a way to exceed my expectations.”*

*These were words I'd imagined hearing from my mother. Words, I'd had countless dreams of my dad uttering. I wanted to believe him much as I wanted to believe in Geoffrey. Suddenly, like everything else, though, even Ms. Karr was suspect.*

*What I'd taken to be pure, her praise and belief in my writing, were tinged and tainted by sex and feelings. She'd told me when Louis Kristol chose me for the internship because of my words, my talent. Today it seemed more likely I had been “chosen” because a childless teacher loved me and was sleeping with the newspaper editor. I was beginning to feel growing up was learning nothing good was ever what you thought it was.*

*Putting on a smile for Ms. Karr, I thanked her and headed to Dagan. Tried to focus on the minuscule ink of the articles and lose myself in the comfort of the mundane and familiar. I couldn't even read the words, my eyes so full of tears defying gravity, hunched over with Dagan now, straining to stay contained in my lids.*

*“You okay?” Dagan questioned, distracted from his work by a wet smear where a tear escaped and marred an otherwise pristine layout. I was mortified.*

*"I'm fine. Sorry. Just my contact," I mimicked a gesture with my fingers on my eyelid I'd seen lots of kids make.*

*"Do you need drops? I have some in my backpack."*

*Having never worn glasses or contacts in my life, I certainly didn't. Funny how the lie escaped my mouth so easily. Is this how it starts? I was almost eighteen. Did lying just come natural once you were an adult?*

*"No, it's fine. I'll print again and fix it." Picking up my Exacto knife, I cut out the offending section and headed to the trash.*

*Somehow I'd made it through the rest of class and down Highway 98. Pulling into the Chase driveway next to a blue Ford Bronco I'd hadn't seen before; I knew it must belong to Jamison Chase. It had started to rain somewhere on the drive and become a full fledge pour by the time I made my way to the front door. Even the weather a bad omen. I was more nervous than the first time knocking on this navy front door.*

## **JAMISON CHASE, 1992**

*Everything bad happens on Mondays -- cliché to hate them, but cliché for a reason. Pretty damn lucky with school and girls, never struggled like so many guys I know -- even my brother. But Mondays, man, they're my cryptonite.*

*Of all the girls I've dated -- don't ask a number -- two broke up with me, both on a Monday. The only theater project I ever bombed, a playwriting class showcase, I drew the Monday slot. I could go on. Mondays, something in the atmosphere changes, and I'm just like anybody else.*

*My brother would chalk it up to karma -- say it was the universe's way of balancing things out though it's not something we've discussed. I just organized my life accordingly around it.*

*My course load on Mondays is one class -- Documentary Film and Television, and that's because Mondays, 10:00 - 12:00 are the only time it's offered. By 12:30, I'm back across the bridge, in the safety of bedroom cocoon by 12:45 grabbing lunch, doing homework, watching movies, reading.*

*This day was no exception. Sometime after 3:00, midway through my second viewing of Madonna's Truth or Dare, I was in my room, making copious notes in a spiral notebook. Mom barged in, purse on her shoulder.*

*"What in the world are you watching?"*

*"For my paper in my documentary class."*

*She made a funny face like what I was saying couldn't possibly be true.*

*“What? It totally is.”*

*“How many heads of hair did your father cut to pay for this class?”*

*I didn’t respond.*

*“Off to the store. Geoffrey’s bringing his friend -- you know, the girl, Aster?”*

*She delivered the name like a magical incantation, but she wasn’t making fun. Nobody was rooting for my brother more than my mom. I actually didn’t know anything about this development. Hadn’t been around Sunday or most of the weekend, really, so he hadn’t yet divulged his conquest. Happy for him though. Our little film had worked to his advantage, after all.*

*“Do you need anything?”*

*“Yeah. Dr. Pepper, Captain Crunch – oh, some string cheese.”*

*“I’ll leave you to your studies.”*

*The emphasis she put on the word ‘studies’ was, for sure, making fun. I was the child Mom could mock because I was the one who could take it.*

*Twenty minutes later, I heard the doorbell. Called out Geoffrey’s name hoping he’d come home, but then I heard it again. Even though it’s a Monday, and I knew better, I made my way to the door.*

*Opening it, I encountered an extremely attractive, tiny girl with wild, wet, red hair, delicate features, nervously smiling at me in a pair of black canvas Mary Janes. She wore a short black dress with long sleeves and those tiny holes in the fabric that drive men crazy, peeking into pinholes of skin. Dripping wet from a storm that popped out of nowhere, just like her, she shivered. Hadn’t spoken a word yet, but I knew this was Aster Price.*

*I had two immediate thoughts: 1.) Wow, my brother did good. 2.) Nothing good could come from my being alone with her.*

*On the latter point, let me be clear. Yes, I would be tempted. I’m a human male, but, for the record, I would never hurt my brother. My brother is, how shall I put this, a special, vulnerable character. The word “special” being loaded, I’ll again clarify. I don’t mean “mentally challenged,” not even close -- way smarter than me. He’s just had, until very recently, an extremely awkward way of relating to the world.*

*I learned of my own great luck – or perhaps gifts in the social arts by witnessing Geoffrey’s struggle. Helped my little brother out every way I knew -- shared friends, hobbies, tactful advice on clothing, conversation starters. Pretended not to notice him flirting with my girlfriends. Rationalized it with, “What’s the harm? It’s practice. He’s learning.”*

*If you think, however, my generosity inspired respect from my younger brother, you would be mistaken. A non-negotiable, unspoken, set of rules evolved in our pursuit of females: 1.) If a girl was of the slightest interest to Geoffrey, no matter how absurdly unobtainable, I became forbidden to ogle, converse or engage with said female – even responding to her overt actions. 2.) As for Geoffrey, he was completely free to say, think, do whatever he wanted to any girl -- even a girl I was actually sleeping with. Any challenge to this arrangement was met with a season of silence and sometimes violence until I relented and apologized.*

*Whenever I felt mad about it, and there were times ... I'd look at Geoffrey and remember that short, husky geeky kid, so alone, looking up to me. That kid had grown into something else as of late. Whether he was one hundred percent feeling it or not, he was doing a spot-on impression of a confident man. The proof of that resided on my porch shivering, soaked and blinking big grey fuck-me eyes. I looked to the driveway hoping to see Geoffrey pulling in, but there was just my car and hers.*

*"Hi, I'm Aster. Geoffrey's friend."*

*"Jamison, his brother. I'm being rude. Come in."*

*"Thanks."*

*Water shook off her clothes as she walked inside, droplets hitting my own bare skin. Marked by this forbidden interaction on a molecular level, sharing moisture, I felt doomed.*

*Following me into the living room, Aster looked as nervous as I felt. It was ironic -- I didn't get nervous around girls; that was Geoffrey. But this arbitrary stricture my brother enforced with years of tantrum, mad quarrels, a blight on an otherwise good relationship unique to the pursuit of females, served to make me doubt myself.*

*Sitting on our couch was a wet, interested girl, and now I was afraid to sit, even across the room in my own house. Neither of us said anything until she finally broke the tension.*

*"Geoffrey told me to come straight after school."*

*Determined to lock brain and body behind a door somewhere and not emerge until Geoffrey was here – or, at the minimum, a witness, I spoke nervously, "Well, I'm just – I was watching a video for school, paper due next week. Hate to leave you there by yourself, but I'm sure he's on his way."*

*Her small chest jutted out with determination. I should have fucking run, but I stood there like a Monday-doomed dumb ass.*

*"While I have you here, Jamison, I need to talk to you."*

*Pouting schoolgirl lips that screamed trouble, she had an agenda, this one. I didn't know what it was, but she was drawing me in -- and working, too. Any moment, my mother or Geoffrey was going to walk through that front door. Depending on which, the situation was going to be bad or worse.*

*"Look, I need to get back to what I was" – I started to turn, extricate myself physically from this trap, but she didn't let me finish.*

*"Please hear me out, okay?" her bottom lip quivered, and I stopped. "I'm a reporter for the Gulf Point Guardian. I wrote an article on Geoffrey and the UFO. It's going to be in the paper Wednesday, front page, my first article, shared byline with Brooke Newton, but still" ---*

*Oh, shit, oh, shit, oh, shit, oh, shit – my brain became a loop of shit. I thought you just wanted to give a cool speech and impress a girl, not print this lie. What were you thinking Geoffrey?*

*"I never talked to you for the story, and I should have. Sloppy journalism. It worked out, though, 'cause today my boss said I could do a second piece just with you, your perspective. This time, the byline would be all mine. My first."*

*Each word spoken, her vulnerability, those lips, "my first," all made me angrier at my dumb fuck brother and what I was beginning to realize he'd done. Still she kept talking even as the beat increased; I thought my head might explode.*

*"My editor needs it tomorrow, so this is my one chance to speak to you. I know it's – it's not a good time, but it's my only shot. So if it's all at possible, I'm asking for your help."*

*She was breathless by the end, waiting for my response, wide grey eyes gleaming with pleas. Processing it, the anger inside felt dangerous and explosive. Geoffrey made a rather large omission of facts about the nature of our film prank. An innocuous UFO hoax for a high school speech class turned out to be a front page story hoax in a newspaper read by our entire town, including our extremely principled father, who was going to lose his shit.*

*Not to mention he'd toyed with the heart and ambitions of a lovely, strange teenage girl who seemed to be as delicate inside as she looked -- an anime version of a porcelain fairy in an antique shop. A girl whose fine features and passionate heart would soon be in shards on my living room, when I was forced to wield a hammer called truth.*

*"When does the paper go to print?"*

*"Early Wednesday morning. Why this has to be tonight."*

*I felt genuinely remorse for this deluded girl on our couch, pulling her hair into a messy bun. She thought I was going to help her. In a way, I was, but it would not feel that way. It would feel like what it would be at first – a breaking.*

*"Can you retract it?"*

*"Retract the article?"*

*"Yes."*

*She looked baffled, like she was waiting for me to explain a joke. I was still trying to figure out the best words to deliver what was going to come as a blow.*

*"Why would I do that? Retract my first page story that's going to make my career?"*



*I exhaled and stood.*

*"Wait here. I'll be back."*

*Making my way to my room, to the bookshelf, I found the souvenir of our film, a visual aid and returned to the living room extending it towards her. She looked at it, confused, before grabbing it, thin fingers brushing against mine as she did.*

*"Do you recognize this?"*

*She looked at it, the model from our video which had caused so much trouble, considered it silently. I began to wonder if I was going to have to say more. What if she didn't believe me? Then a tear trickled down her cheek. I knew she understood.*

*"What do I do? If I tell Mr. Kristol this was a hoax, he'll think I was in on it or just too dumb to do my job. Either way, I'm finished. Journalism is what I want to do -- the only thing I've ever wanted to do. How could he do this to me? He knew what this meant to me."*

*She couldn't speak now overcome with sobbing. I reached for her hand, the least I could do after the role I'd played. Her breathing got deep. Was she angry at me? How could I blame her? I started to pull back, but she threw her whole small body against me, her head against my shoulder.*

*I did what any guy would at this point, the chivalric move. Held her tight and let her cry. Over her shoulder, moments later, I spied the shocked face of my mother witnessing her least favorite son entangled on her couch with her youngest's first real girlfriend. In my history of bad Mondays, this became the worst.*

## **DONNA CHASE, 1992**

*Setting the first grocery bag down, I heard the sound -- muffled animalistic noises coming from the living room. The random thought of a puppy flashed through my head. Nobody here had pets. Hurried through our small dining room where it adjoined the living room, and that is where I saw Jamison and Aster Price in an emotional, very intimate embrace.*

*Jamison made eye contact with me. He pulled away from the girl but looked annoyed more than contrite. The girl leapt up and turn away from me, wiping her wet, guilty little eyes.*

*"Jamison, come outside. Your cars are blocking me, and I've got groceries out there spoiling in the heat."*

*Jamison walked past me towards the car, rolling his eyes. I found myself stuck in place, unable to follow at first, staring at this redheaded floozy in a little black dress. She was straightening her clothes, oblivious to the damage she'd done. Damage none of us even knew the extent of yet.*

*I finally turned to meet Jamison. When I was halfway through my kitchen, I heard a scream, a little girl having a tantrum and then what sounded to me like an object propelled into the air and crashing into something -- a wall or the tile floor of my living room? When I ran back, she was gone, the front door open as she left it carelessly, in her retreat.*

*Her car squealed as she drove hazardonously away, and then I saw it, what looked, at first, to be a toy broken into several pieces on the floor. I picked one up and saw it was a part of a model like the ones my boys used to make compulsively on weekends and rainy days years ago, a space ship. I put it down and hurried out the door to Jamison, already at the trunk of my car, two bags of groceries in his arms.*

*"What in the world was that?"*

*I was studying every detail of my oldest son's countenance looking for hints of remorse in those perfect features, self-righteous and defiant.*

*"Of course, it's my fault."*

*"Who else's fault would it be, Jamison? Your brother has done nothing but look up to you his whole life and then you do something like this? I just — I — I can't --"*

*He slammed the bags on the trunk of the car.*

*"My brother is a liar who conned this girl, who writes for the newspaper, by the way, The Guardian. He lied about a UFO, so he could sleep with her. Now, because she believed him, she helped get his lies in print, she's gonna lose her job. On top of that, he lied to me to get my help because, as usual, Geoffrey couldn't do it by himself."*

*Flabbergasted and in a state of shock, I couldn't believe my son did these things Jamison said. Then I remembered the broken pieces of a spaceship I'd just held in my hands.*

*"But why were you — the two of you were" — I couldn't even say the words.*

*"Hugging? Yes, Mom, I hugged a crying girl. She asked me to do an interview for the paper about this fake UFO. Unlike my brother, see, I have a conscience, so, yeah, I'm the asshole who told the truth. And it turns out when you tell a girl her boyfriend's a liar, that she may lose her job, she sometimes goes hysterical on you and does something crazy like cry and hug you."*

*Clearly, Geoffrey brought this on himself. Still I knew, maybe more than anyone, what he'd done came from a place of desperate loneliness I'd watched bloom over the years. I prayed it would not have this kind of consequence*

**FREDERICK CHASE, 1992**

*A quarter to 5:00, Rick Kellerman, last customer of the day, exited my shop. When the door ring stopped, another started, the telephone, Donna. Her voice, before she even asked me to "come home right away," telegraphed something wasn't right.*

*"What's wrong?"*

*"It's the boys -- well, Geoffrey. Don't have time to explain. He's not home yet, but it seems he's deceived that girl -- Aster. Jamison's told her. Now, she's gone -- and when Geoffrey finds out, Frederick, I don't know what will happen."*

*Set down the broom and told her I was on my way. If it involved Geoffrey being deprived of something he was after, hellfire and brimstone were about to ascend. And if he felt his brother culpable in his unhappiness, violence was as certain as the rain shower that just passed, a half hour ago, a sunny blue sky left in its wake.*

*Grabbing keys, feeling my wallet, I headed straight out into that damned sky so bright it didn't connect with the storm brewing at home. More I thought, more I worried*

*Typical Geoffrey, if he was unhappy, all would pay, even the ones who loved him the most. I loved both my sons. I guess, just like my wife, one was, for me, a little easier to love.*

*My eyes had been opened to Geoffrey's defects of character around the time Jamison turned 16. Driving, in constant need of gas and date money, my perpetually responsible older son went through a phase of repeatedly losing money. I'd countlessly scolded him, "You're never going to make it in the real world if you cannot keep a hold of your money."*

*Again and again, he'd say "I swear, Dad, I put it in my wallet first thing. Double-checked, and it's gone." I'd counter with the usual, "Not calling you a liar, son, but this happens all the time. Take some responsibility."*

*Then, home from work early one day, I'd strolled down the hallway. So quiet I thought I was alone. Donna was at the grocery store, and Jamison out for a run. Figured Geoffrey was at the neighbor's. Eager for my ritual hot shower to remove that prickly, sickening familiar feeling of having other's people's hair trapped inside my clothes, I just wanted to relax.*

*Passing Jamison's room, I saw a figure, poked my head in to say a quick hello to my son -- only to see the wrong one. Geoffrey stood at Jamison's desk, back to the door, casually removing bills from his brother's wallet.*

*The instant I caught him, he'd turned to me, witness to his crime, with a look completely vacant of fear or guilt; I didn't recognize this face. Lasted only a second before the face changed and the explaining, rationalizing and actual tears began -- attempting to undo this thing I'd seen.*

*But I couldn't forget that first dead, empty stare I saw while my youngest son took what he wanted, consequences be damned. In this moment, he was a stranger. What lived inside this boy? I could not say.*

*It made me wonder if my decision to not force religion on my children the way it had been forced on me was a mistake. Perhaps, Geoffrey needed black and white spiritual guidance to awaken a dormant conscience. When he picked up this chanting mumbo-jumbo philosophy of his, as full-blown wacky as it seemed, I thought maybe it was his way of seeking guidance, on his own, to right his spirit.*

*Pulling in behind Geoffrey's car, I hit the button on the garage remote, leapt from my car and jogged into my kitchen. He was home, and I needed to get inside quick. Inside, I heard, from the back of the house, my wife squealing, guttural sounds of my sons, flesh and bone, objects colliding. I felt stuck in slow motion as I ran into my oldest son's room to the sight of my wife's hysteria, an overturned shelf, books and broken knickknacks, glass strewn about the floor. Geoffrey's face was as red as a demon as he lay on the ground covering Jamison pounding him over and over, Jamison flailing and kicking, hopelessly overpowered.*

*Neither of my sons was a fighter. Pitted against each other, though, my theatrical son was dominated easily by his younger, less principled brother. I, on the other hand, having kicked the shit out of some do-no-gooders in my day had muscle memory on my side. Didn't relish the idea of engaging like this with either of my sons, but Geoffrey had to be stopped.*

*Leaning over, I lifted Geoffrey with both hands, his hair in one and the back of his shirt in the other. Disabled his arms quickly before he even knew what was happening. So surprised, his feet shuffled underneath him to find his footing. He still struggled against me and swore at his brother. I corralled him into his own room like a toddler in need of a timeout.*

*"I'm taking Jamison on a drive; think we need to give everybody a little timeout."*

*I'd leave Donna to Geoffrey.*

*"Geoffrey needs a minute. I'll make tea and try to talk to him about it in a bit."*

*I'd had a shift in my way of thinking about Geoffrey. Maybe I did not have the tools to fix my son, but I could do what I could to protect others from a child I'd once enabled -- but no more.*

*A+*

*Left for work at 7:00 AM Tuesday, a top secret mission necessitated the privacy of my barbershop. Based on what Jamison had confided in me over Coronas and raw oysters last night, time was of the essence. I could not be a party to Geoffrey's lies, lies certain to cause a hysteria in a town I loved so much, to go into print.*

*I was calling The Guardian first thing. Odds were against them being open so early, but it was a newspaper, so it was possible. I'd get busy with customers later, so I had to take the chance. They'd have a machine. If nothing else, I'd leave a message.*

*At the shop, I called the paper even bothering to turn on the lights. The line rang and rang. Was it possible a newspaper didn't have an answering machine? A busy day ahead, I dreaded this chore going unaccomplished and weighing on me through who knows how many heads. Just when I was about to give up, a man answered breathless and annoyed, "Gulf Point Guardian."*

*I only knew Louis Kristol from pictures but didn't think this was him. The speaker sounded young – too disinterested to be a business owner.*

*"Hi. I'm trying to reach Louis Kristol. He available?"*

*"Ha, he was supposed to meet me a half hour ago, but, no, he's not here. Just tried him at home, and he's not answering so I have no clue."*

*"Well, could you take a message?"*

*"Sure. Go ahead."*

*From the tone of his voice and general impertinence, I had no idea if he was even writing anything down. This was going far worse than I hoped.*

*"Okay. I'm calling about an article in his upcoming paper about a UFO; I really need to speak to him. My name is Frederick Chase. He can contact me at Chase Barbers during business hours, 932-4532. If he's out and about in Gulf Point Proper, he could even drop by. I'm here all day."*

*"Of course, U-F-O," he said the letters like he was spelling out a curse word. It seemed the only piece of information he'd focused on enough to repeat.*

*"You want me to repeat that number?"*

*"I mean, I think I've —"*

*"932-4532."*

*"Right, gotcha. Thanks." Line went dead. Felt worse than before I made the call. I'd done my part, but the chances of this message reaching Louis Kristol seemed small.*

*"Why are you standing around in the dark?" Sterling Pearson stood in my doorway, hadn't even heard the bell.*

*"Oh, hi. Had an important call. Wasn't thinking, I guess."*

*"Got time for a quickie?"*

*My time allotted to Geoffrey and his antics was officially up. It was time to start my day.*

## **LOUIS KRISTOL, 1992**

*At the police station, Brooke Newton and I, were seeking any info on the status of the Gulf Point Five when I remembered I'd missed meeting Clark Ritchie at the paper an hour before.*



*"I need to make a call."*

*"Sure. I'll start roughing this out."*

*Brooke found a chair and got lost in her article. I approached Chief Cody's secretary Becky, who'd served us coffee earlier while we waited.*

*"There a phone I can use? Missed an appointment, just realized it, and I need to reschedule."*

*"Sure. Use mine."*

*"Thanks, Becky." I found Clarke's number and dialed. It rang twice, and then he answered. Not the pleasantest of exchanges, though hardly any were where Clark was involved. Recounting my activities of the morning, I clearly lost him with "ufo stuff," so I shifted into "I'm in Gulf Point Proper, the police station, I'll bring your money by your house." He'd perked up with this news. Already handing the phone back to Becky, with her faux patient southern smile that really meant, I need my damn phone back, I heard Clark exclaim, "Oh, hey Louis?"*

*I pulled the phone back to my ear and motioned one finger to Becky to beg her patience one more minute.*

*"Yes? Clark, what? Tying up the Chief's line."*

*"Took a message for you this morning. Don't remember the name offhand, a barber calling about a UFO story. I wrote it all down and put it on your desk but when you said UFO, I remembered."*

*"Thanks, Clark. I'll look later. See you in ten."*

*Being that this was Clark, I should be grateful he'd delivered even a partial message without an invoice for secretarial services. With Gulf Point Five info, culled this morning, and Aster's piece on the other Chase brother, this week's paper had enough UFOs. I'd give the barber a call and check it out soon enough.*

*AB-*

*I pulled into the visitor's space at Gulf Point High around 1:30. Remembered enough of Ros's schedule to know she didn't have her newspaper kids yet but figured she could summon Aster. Just needed the article or a time when it would be ready today. Walked into a cacophony of adolescent fingers beating on keys of word processors, freckled and acne spotted faces contorted in a painful concentration. Ros walked methodically down the aisles of work tables supervising.*

*"Speed test," she whispered with a wink as she moved past me.*

*"Okay, everybody. Trade papers, and count mistakes against the copy in the book. You know the drill. Number of mistakes at the top in a circle and turn them in at my desk. When you're done, free read at your desks while I check in with Mr. Kristol."*

*I took my cue, approached her desk. By the time I stepped up, I was already surrounded by kids lining up to turn in swiftly corrected papers. Their proximity made me nervous, and I guess it showed. Ros was laughing.*

*"You look positively terrified. You want to step outside?"*

*"Sure."*

*Ros followed me out.*

*"Came here for Aster's article, hope she has it. Know I'm early but."*

*"I have no doubt she does. She has journalism in an hour."*

*"Could you page her for me?"*

*"I can send a note to the office."*

*We made our way back inside where she scribbled a quick note then called out a name, Jodi, and a blonde girl hopped to retrieve it and rushed into the hall.*

*Jodi spoke to both of us when she returned.*

*"Not here, apparently. Office says her mother called her in sick this morning."*

*"Sick? She seemed fine yesterday, off to interview Jamison Chase."*

*"Well, she's human, Louis. People get sick, overnight even."*

*She could chide all she wanted. For all her excuses, Ros looked more upset by this than me. I had nothing to lose -- a teenage reporter I never wanted to hire in the first place.*

*"Don't worry about it. I'll give her a call at home, see if I can go by and pick it up."*

*"Good idea."*

*Her smile returned with this glimmer of hope. Still I knew she was torn up inside. Was the girl you were counting on with all your heart to succeed choking at the critical moment?*

*"Can I use the phone in your office?"*

*"Sure. I have to get on with the lesson. Help yourself."*

*I hurried into the office Ros shared with the teacher next door and dialed Aster's number. Her mother answered, soft spoken and polite. I introduced myself, stating my profession, before asking to speak to her teenage daughter. Our lack of familiarity didn't impede a harrowing and highly unnecessary detailed description of her daughter's current gastrointestinal workings. Cut her off as early on as I was able.*

*"Ms. Price, I only need to know if she has an article for me; I'm more than willing to come by and pick it up."*

*I heard what was clearly a scoff.*

*"Well, I can't imagine she does, but I can go and check."*

*After five more lost minutes on the phone, she returned with an apologetic tone that let me know right away this was a waste of time.*

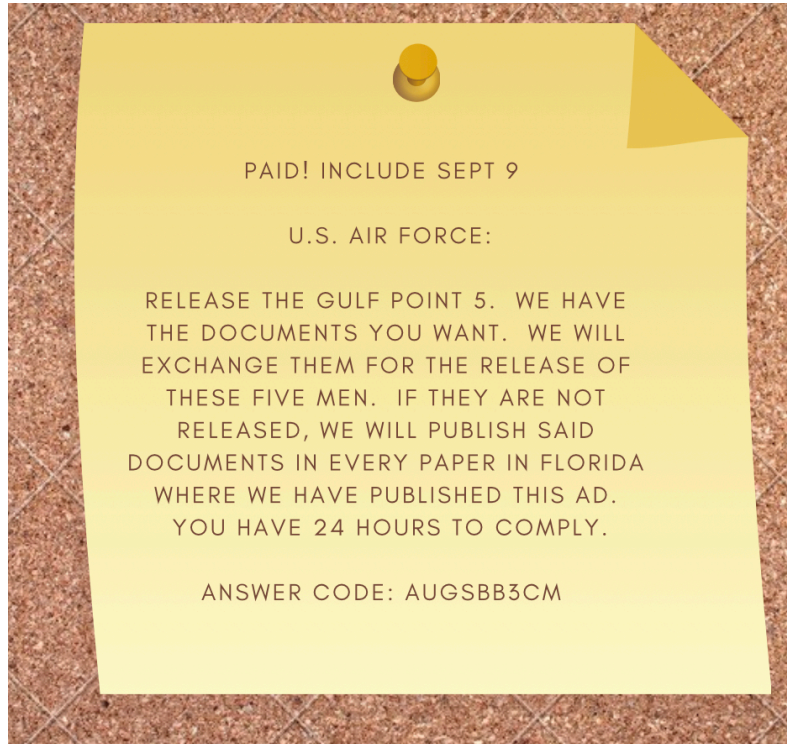
*"Mr. Kristol, she'd tell you herself, but she's positively weak in the knees. She didn't get the interview. She's very sorry and will be in touch as soon as she can. Thank you for calling."*

*Then she hung up. The whole encounter left me feeling sick myself, disgusted rather. This foray into the mentorship of adolescents was winding down to its natural conclusion. Ros had convinced me to do it as some sort of goodwill act for the community, but I'd figured out by now it had always just been about Aster Price. I'd tried, but internship had been a mistake from the start.*

B+

*I made it back to the office a quarter to 5:00. Didn't make it to my desk before I saw on my ad board, a note that started in capital letters: PAID INCLUDE SEPT 9. It was from Regina, a stringer, freelancer, who moonlighted as the Guardian's advertising sales executive, self-appointed title. Well-earned, though, she handled all the ads; the number on the card was a business line at her own home. Removed a chore from my plate. We communicated, often, like this, Sharpie scribbled correspondence -- a system that hadn't failed us yet.*

*Reading the ad text, I got the shakes. Perfect accompaniment to my UFO piece and the Gulf Point 5. Already decided to allot space for it not only in the classifieds, but right underneath Brooke's story, right in the mix of what was turning out to be the most explosive front page of the paper's history. So many questions I wanted to call and ask Regina -- who delivered this,? But no time. I had a layout to tinker with and finalize before I could head home for a quick bite and bed. By the time I left for the night, I hadn't even made it to my own desk.*



AB-

*Woke Wednesday morning, sleep deprived, though I'd gone to bed at 8:00, jumped into laid-out clothes, poured a travel mug, grabbed keys, wallet and raced out the door all by a brutal 5:00 a.m. Wednesday was press day. Everything about this day, for me, was a ritual of punishment and pleasure. Wednesday's stress rose to a crescendo then exploded into relief as tactile as pungent, oily type on warm, crisp freshly pressed pulpy newsprint, a violent cascade of paper shooting through a press — its roar, my own private waterfall.*

*HWY 98 was reliably barren when I headed to the office to load the essentials. Some days, I paid one of the other ladies, a couple times even Clark, to come along, help me pack mechanicals, cumbersome layout dummies in their perfected photo-ready state, and load them into the van. Had fantasies owning my own stat camera and cutting out a half hour of manual labor in the dark morning, but that was a fantasy, for me, as much as owning my own printing press.*

*Today, I worked alone. Aster would have been the perfect choice of an assistant. What true aspiring journalist would turn away a chance to see the majesty of a printing press in action? Yes, Wednesday was a school day, but Ros could have worked something out. A fantasy indeed, convincing a teenager to get up at 4:00 a.m. to make the hour long haul with me to the Destin Chronicle -- the closest daily paper who bid a remotely cost-effective number to publish my small weekly paper -- I couldn't even get her to write an article or even talk to me on the phone.*

*I made one last cursory glance around the office, feeling pretty darn smug, van packed, thoughts of a summer order in September of 4,500 papers (tourist numbers, and they were long gone; there were only 5,000 people in Gulf Point, counting babies and kids who don't read a paper. This was an astonishing success). From the door, the yellow Post-It resting on a mountain of debris and paperwork on my desk, caught my eye, sparked the memory of Clark's message. Almost left it for later, but I'd probably not be back again until tomorrow. I grabbed it, ran towards the door until I saw the word that made me stop: Chase.*

*Clark had said "barber," I remembered it plainly. Hadn't said a name – certainly not Chase. I would have made that connection – a barber's name Chase calling about a UFO story? A queasy feeling came on, but I pushed it aside. One hour to press, and Mr. Chase was obviously not in his shop cutting hair at 5:19 a.m.*

*Papers would be printed and in the cars of girls who'd distributed them to the stores and newstands in a few hours. By 11:00, I'd be a man of leisure with time to chat up a barber while I got a much-needed haircut. The whole thing felt like trouble. And the thing about trouble is it doesn't just go away; it waits.*

## **FREDERICK CHASE, 1992**

*Shuffling out of bed Wednesday and into the hallway, I heard my wife doling out hushed, fervid instructions to one of my sons. I wasn't sure which until I got close enough to hear, "it's plausible, I guess." Only one of my sons talked like this. Just glad he was speaking -- and sounding calm.*

*"Morning, everyone."*

*Donna looked hopeful. Sat down at my kitchen table, optimistic and ready to start off on an entirely new foot. After all the grim talk about Geoffrey the day before, the fact that Louis Kristol never got in touch seemed a sign. The peace at this breakfast table reinforced that feeling. Maybe I, too, got caught up in the emotions of Monday evening in a way that darkened my view -- even of my own son.*

*Geoffrey was across from me. He looked up, gave a little nod and looked back down, a step towards civility, and I'd take it. Then I heard Jamison rounding the corner from the living room to join us, and a feeling of dread overcame me. I focused on Geoffrey, ready to pounce, if need be, to intervene in any further combat. My younger son didn't flinch though, kept his eyes trained on his half-eaten waffle.*

*"Could I get some more orange juice?"*

*"Sure, honey." My wife set down Jamison's waffles to retrieve the carton from the fridge to refresh Geoffrey's glass. Jamison collected his breakfast from the counter. Everyone sat in an awkward and still very welcome silence. I finished and readied myself for work, eager to leave on such a relatively normal note.*



A-

*Wednesday was never the busiest of days, but today was painfully slow. Since 8:00, I'd had one customer, Stephen Fisher. Came in at 8:30 for a quick cut before he made his way across the bridge to Pensacola where he worked at the downtown library -- the whole exchange from scissors to cashout, no more than 15 minutes.*

*Bored, I'd made myself a pot of coffee and turned on the news, an interview with Admiral James Stockdale, Perot's VP pick. Watched a few minutes and changed the channel because I didn't like political talk in here, and I was certainly not a Perot man. He was gonna give the whole thing to Clinton. My sons would both be happy if he did.*

*I poured my coffee and looked at the time, 10:36. Grabbing change from the register and a paper from the newsstand out front, I perused the first page a second before it sunk in what I was reading, Geoffrey's UFO story, dead center, front page -- SECOND CONFIRMED UFO SIGHTING IN GULF POINT by Brooke Newton and Aster Price.*

*I'd tried to stop this article but not hard enough. Here was a real world consequence to both Geoffrey's actions and my inaction. I held it in my hands like every other literate citizen in this town would very soon.*

*Sitting idle in my shop, clutching front-page coverage of a hoax under a headline bearing my own name, a new fear emerged -- Geoffrey's psychological defects could affect my business. You can get a haircut anywhere. Why get one from a nut and a liar or at the very least a man who raised nuts and liars?*

*I wanted to go to that school and find my son and shake him until he understood the trouble he caused. But the ringing of a bell distracted me from this impulse. I turned toward the opening door to see a white-haired man enter. It was Louis Kristol.*

*"I'm sorry I didn't have a chance to get back to you before now, Chase. Been a ridiculously crazy few days. You can't imagine the messages we're getting."*

*"I think I probably can. It's been more than a little crazy for me, too."*

*"Got time to work me in for a cut while we chat?"*

*Making a mock survey of my lonely shop, "Think I might be able to squeeze you in."*

*I showed him to his seat and grabbed a smock and my electric clippers then made myself get to it, "You printed my son's story?"*

*"You've read it then. What did you think?"*

*His question carefully worded, like a politician, revealing nothing about his own opinions, only seeking mine.*

*"You do understand it's a bunch of lies?"*

*He turned around in the chair, the expression on his face, surprise and a hint of anger.*

*"Let's get this straight, Chase. You know your sons made this thing up?"*

*"Well, to be clear, it was one son. The other was deceived into cooperation, but, yes, Geoffrey made it up."*

*Louis Kristol slid forward in the chair.*

*"How is it you came to know this?"*

*"Monday night, Geoffrey's girlfriend came to the house before he got home, and my other son, Jamison, was there. The UFO thing, I only found out, had been a harmless prank for speech class, really to get a girl, this girl, Aster Price -- is what Jamison understood. When Aster told him it was going in the paper, Jamison told her the truth, wanted to stop it from being printed. Then he told me, too, and I called yesterday, but I never heard from you until right now, obviously far too late."*

*Louis Kristol sat in the chair silent. Felt awkward standing there in the tension, scissors in hand, so I put them down. Didn't know what Louis Kristol was thinking. Would he print a retraction? Would they do a story on what Geoffrey had done? Would all this turn out to be worse than if I'd just let the story die out on its own?*

*"Jesus Christ, man, you're saying Aster Price knew? She knew Monday night this story was a hoax?"*

*His anger seemed pointed at this girl rather than my son. Kind of understood it. I mean, she knew this as well as me and could have stopped it, chose not to. Didn't feel great about another less devious kid taking the brunt of all this anger for trouble started by my own.*

*Louis Kristol stood and took off the smock.*

*"Do you mind if I ask what you're going to do?"*

*"To Geoffrey? I mean, what can I do? Send one of my writers here to try to get quotes from you about your son or dig around in your trash or the high school trying to prove it? Just keep him the hell away from me and my newspaper."*

*Didn't know if hearing this news should make me feel better. I just know that it didn't.*

*"Understood."*

*"I had such sweet plans for a restful afternoon, now I'm off to fire a teenager."*

*Before I could protest, he was already slamming my door and gone.*

**ASTER PRICE, 1992**

*For any part I played in the disaster my life had recently become, faking an illness for two days with a pathologically codependent mother was punishment in and of itself. Tuesday was bad enough, the hourly checks as I pretended to sleep, endless bedside service of apple juice, assorted soups and crackers I was far too depressed to ingest.*

*Geoffrey, predictably, made things worse. He called again and again. Each call Mom answered and I declined made her more sure what was wrong with me was not physical at all, despite my performance. Required more and more theatrical bouts of faux vomiting, hurting my throat, humiliating and ridiculous, but absolutely essential to stay home from school that second day. One more item on a growing list of grievances, Geoffrey Chase, for which I have you to thank.*

*There was absolutely no way I could return to that institution of inconsequence and face that vile con artist who ruined my life. As if I could just stroll into newspaper class like any other day, "So, yeah, Ms. Karr, about that internship, I might have spread a hoax in your boyfriend's paper. Hope he doesn't find out and dump us both."*

*These thoughts made my head pound harder every second. I was sick, just not the way my mother thought. Not physically. I was sick in my soul -- didn't know if I'd ever recover.*

*Wednesday, mom crossed over to full-on stalker territory. It seemed she suddenly feared my "not getting better" directly resulted from inadequate maternal devotion. Now, she refused to leave my room, like I was an invalid on her deathbed, read her Marianne Williamson book in a chair by my bed for hours. When I finally saw her stand to tease me with a possible exit, she'd just moved to the overstuffed cushion in my window seat. At some point, she decided juice might be the culprit, so she took it out of rotation and replaced it with endless boring glasses of water and lukewarm cups of ginger tea.*

*The lack of privacy and bland refreshments all served to make me feel like a 90-year-old nursing home resident trapped in the body of an almost 18 year old girl. Or maybe mental patient? My mother's whispered, carefully chosen words and her ever-present silent evaluation, all felt like the worst insidious sort of control I could imagine. I felt as trapped in a prison of a bed as I ever had in my whole life. It made me want to claw at my own skin.*

*My stomach hurt, for real now. It took me a minute to put a name on the sensation – I was starving. It had to be close to lunchtime, and I was living on broth – all thanks to Geoffrey Chase.*

*Then the door bell rang. It meant nothing. No prospects of any serendipitous visitors. The best I could wish was some needy old neighbor to distract my mother from my bedside for long enough for me to wolf down some peanut butter and jelly.*

*Just when I'd reached an all new low, my mother returned to my room without even broth just a confused look.*

*"Louis Kristol is here."*

*I'd forgotten today was Wednesday. Should have been stalking newsstands to see my very first article in print – except I was already a has-been journalist at seventeen. I didn't need to hear it from Louis Kristol, as I knew I would. I laid there and willed my mother and her news and my certainly unhappy visitor to all just go away.*

*“Aster, you're going to have to talk to him. I hope what he's told me you've been involved in isn't true.”*

*Mom had all the rationale she needed to justify a crackdown in parenting that made me feel as woozy as I'd acted the last two days. She'd never wanted me to have a job, wanted me to go to college and figure out a career. Never understanding I had and was interning there -- so close to being a journalist and yet so far.*

*Getting out of bed, I watched her standing there looking more and more perturbed as I made my way to grab clothes. She was waiting for some kind of explanation, and I would not engage. I had bigger things on my mind now -- picking out an outfit for an execution.*

*“Are you planning on standing there and watching me undress?”*

*I didn't bother with trying to appear or sound sick anymore. The strength and anger in my voice surprised even me. Didn't have to look to know she was fuming, I felt it then heard it in the slamming of my bedroom door.*

*My hand was on a pair of jeans when I saw the little black dress I'd worn Monday night, across my desk chair, discarded the night my whole world fell apart. It was the perfect costume for a villain or a femme fatale, which is how I felt suddenly. I threw it on and shook my hair wild and peered at myself in the mirror.*

*The girl in the mirror didn't look sad though I was on the inside but growing more angry and determined. I looked like a different person – untamed and dangerous. Maybe, in fact, I was.*

## *AMELIA PRICE, 1992*

*After Aster dismissed me from her bedroom, hearing the deceit and fraud she'd spread through our community, something inside me snapped. I didn't care to protect her the way I tried my whole life. Perhaps that had been a mistake. Maybe I enabled this cruelty and entitlement. Today, I would not.*

*Aster emerged five minutes later in full makeup, a black dress I'd made the mistake of buying without seeing her try it on, because it was totally inappropriate, two years ago, before she grew two inches. Now, it was borderline obscene. I could not fathom my child's brain these days. Louis Kristol was equally unimpressed.*

*“Well, someone looks to have made a miraculous recovery.”*

*Aster didn't speak, but everything about her screamed defiance. I didn't recognize this brazen young woman standing in my living room, as much a stranger as this angry old man. Felt oddly detached from everything I observed on my barstool.*

*"Been trying to get in contact with you for days, but your mother's been telling me how deathly ill you've been."*

*"I know you're here to fire me, Mr. Kristol."*

*"Glad you understand where we stand, Aster. I've spoken to Geoffrey's father. I'm not looking to publicly embarrass anybody — especially not my own paper. The story's printed. I'm asking for your silence about the whole thing. You certainly didn't seem to have a problem keeping this secret from me, the guy who gave you a chance, against his better judgment, I might add."*

*"I understand," she said, humbled now, eyeing the carpet. "I should have told you. It's not something I want to discuss with anyone, I assure you."*

*He let out a big sigh and shook his head.*

*"I guess there's nothing left to say except you let me down. Now I get to go break Rosalind's heart when I have to tell her I fired her favorite student, so thank you for that."*

*"Just tell her I lied," Aster said, "that I messed up everything; it's not anybody's fault but mine."*

*Louis Kristol looked at her a second then away like she was a puzzle he couldn't solve and lost interest. He turned to me and made a gesture with his hand -- half-wave, half-question --- and made his way out the door.*

*Once I heard the door close, I looked at my daughter, deflated, in her short dress and makeup. Her shoulders hunched over and hollowed out her tiny frame, the grownup get-up looked like a costume. She seemed smaller, like the younger girl I thought I understood so well.*

*"I don't get it, Aster. Why would you lie and scare people like this?"*

*She turned, face defiant and mean, again, when she said, "God, do you know me at all? I didn't know it was a lie myself until Monday when I found out from Jamison. I was so upset about Geoffrey, why I didn't tell at first, but also maybe, yes, I just didn't want to ruin my story."*

*"But you just told him — you made it sound like you were a part of the whole thing. You could have tried to explain."*

*"He was firing me, Mom; it was over. I let him print a lie. I told him to tell Ms. Karr so she wouldn't be mad at him for doing what he had to do."*

*"I thought this made you happy, the writing."*

*"It did. It was the only thing that made me happy before Geoffrey. Now, I have nothing." The statement hit me as hard as the terrible slap I'd delivered the other night when all this trouble started.*



*I don't even think she wielded it as a weapon. Don't think I even registered as a target at this point. I was nobody. I was just a mother.*

## **AVALON HAYES, 2010**

“Mr. Chase?”

He hadn't spoken at first, maybe a little surprised I'd called. Maybe he didn't know who it was because I was so nervous, whispering in my room.

“Avalon?”

“Yes, I'm sorry. Geez. Like I've never talked on the telephone before.” I was trying so hard to play it cool, like I called guidance counselors at school who might be my father every day.

“You're fine. No worries.” He laughed, not sounding at all the way he did at school. I'd never spoken to a teacher or a counselor outside of school – not even Ms. Karr. I laughed, too, at the strangeness of it.

Then he'd asked, “What is it? Is this strange talking to me?”

I considered lying but decided against it.

“I mean, yeah, Mr. Chase.” It felt so weird I was possibly calling my dad this. What did one say in this circumstance? I truly had no idea.

As if he was reading my mind, he said, “Please call me, Geoffrey. We're not at school, and, in fact, as of tomorrow you're not even going to be technically a student anymore, I hope, so I think we can dispense with the formalities at 9:00 p.m.”

I'd never even called Ms. Karr, Rosalind, to her face, at least. And to think of calling my mom Aster – it was too weird. And, yet, I wanted him to feel comfortable with me enough to tell all his secrets. Geoffrey seemed like a good start.

“Okay, Geoffrey. And, yes, I did what you said, used all the statistics, and it worked like a charm. You made my mom tear up, that part about high school dropout parents.”

I couldn't resist working her in again. Though I couldn't see his face, which would have told me so much more, the phone had gone quiet a second before he spoke again. I'd made him uncomfortable – or my mom had.

Then he changed the subject.

“Okay. So tomorrow bring in the signed documents, and I’ll get you registered. You won’t need to go to any classes, but I’ll want to spend adequate time tomorrow going over everything about UNF with you. You’ve missed the usual orientation and all. Definitely want to set you up for success.”

“Of course, we can spend all the time we need.”

I could feel his satisfaction through the phone.

“Also, you have this number, and I want you to call it often as you need. Anything you’re having trouble with at college. It’s the best way to reach me now that you’re not going to be at Gulf Point.”

“I plan to stay in touch, Geoffrey.”

“That’s good, Avalon. I want that very much.”

I’d found out only this week my parents were liars and my father wasn’t my father. They’d kept so many secrets. How quickly were those unraveling now? Who knew if a week from now I’d know that Geoffrey Chase wasn’t that secret, wasn’t my father? For now, he was a maybe, and it felt good to be, maybe, close to the truth. I had a secret, too, and like my parents, I planned to keep it as long as I could.