



**ROSALIND KARR, 2010**

“The rules of detention are simple. No talking, no looking around, no passing notes. You can read. You can work on homework. You can draw. You get the picture. Failure to break any of these rules will automatically result in the offender being sent to Mr. Davenport’s office for referral to in-school suspension. The next 45 minutes, we will sit here together in silence.”

I’d delivered this speech countless times in the ten years since I’d handed over the stresses (and successes) of the newspaper to Ms. McElfresh for the easy, if not very inspiring,

assignment of after-school detention. It was as memorized as a flight attendant's pre-flight safety speech. And as there is no fate worse to a teenager than in-school suspension (suspension without the benefits of a staycation), violations were rare.

Once that speech left my lips, that was that, folks. 45 minutes were mine to read or count the days to my retirement (357). And yes, sometimes I daydreamed about a violent end befitting the psychopathic tendencies of the newest Gulf Point guidance counselor. Geoffrey Chase a guidance counselor?! Two years later, it still seemed as preposterous and dangerous an idea as it did that first day I discovered it in that fateful faculty meeting.

Plotting Mr. Chase's demise (or at least removal from this institution) was something I did more than I'd like to admit, even to myself, these days. Didn't even dare dream of admitting it to anyone else at GPHS fearing the certain loss of my job this time and my retirement.

No, siree, Geoffrey Chase, you won't get that. You may have ruined Aster Price. You may have ruined my reputation, but you will not take my hard-earned dollars. It's cold comfort, but it's all this old lady's got left. You will not take anything from me ever again.

After that vile Carson Winthrop frame-up job, I'd tried, one last time, to convince another human being, with a seemingly sound mind, of Geoffrey Chase's nefarious intentions. It was my teacher's union rep, Reggie Fountain. Reggie taught art at GPHS for almost 15 years now, post the class of 1992, the class of Geoffrey Chase and Aster Price. He did have a small familiarity with the UFO scandal, which somehow never seemed to register with anyone else to be all that damaging. Maybe because they didn't know Aster Price, before or after.

Before Geoffrey, Aster Price was the editor of the school newspaper with a promising internship at the Gulf Point Guardian. After her story on the hoax, the first major hoax of Geoffrey Chase's life but not the last, she lost her byline and her dream job. She dropped out of Gulf Point High, and, if the rumors were to be believed, danced topless before becoming a very young mother.

I knew the first part better than most, my boyfriend, at the time, being the editor of the Guardian, Louis Kristol. Louis Kristol, in some alternate Geoffrey Chaseless universe, was the father of my non-existent children. Louis Kristol, I broke off with when he fired Aster Price, the closest I ever came to having a daughter.

The stripping and baby parts I only learned about Aster Price secondhand, tidbits in grocery stores and whispers in school hallways. After she dropped out, my favorite student never returned to these halls to speak to me again. Geoffrey Chase took everything from Aster Price. He'd taken everything from me, as well. Now, he'd found a way to take more.

"Reggie, forget the sex part. Focus on the drinking for a second. I drink a glass of wine or two on the weekend, here and there, not even every weekend. I don't even drink vodka. That bottle was planted in my desk drawer. I swear to God. And between the two of us, I know just who did it."

"And who would that be, Rosalind?"

Reggie looked curious if a little nervous to hear my answer. I couldn't help but try one last time to make somebody understand the evil forces at work here at Gulf Point High.

“Geoffrey Chase. Maybe not with his own deceitful hands, but I promise you, as sure as I sit here beside you, it came from that devious, twisted mind. I called him out in front of everybody at that meeting, humiliated him, attacked – certainly from his narcissistic view.

By the end of that very week, I had my response. I have no evidence. No, I can’t prove it, but I know it in every bone of my body. Geoffrey Chase wants to destroy me.”

Reggie didn’t speak for a second. The silence gave me hope.

Then the scoff, “Rosalind, you need to calm down. Okay?”

I looked at the ground. The truth was something no one in this place could see. He continued.

“Look at me. You have to stop this, okay? I’ve talked to Mr. Davenport. I don’t know what the problem is, but this obsession you have with Mr. Chase is not helping me make a case you’re fit to stay here at this school. You’ve got tenure, yes, but you’re accused of some very serious misbehavior here – a crime. All you seemed to be focused on is this strange obsession you have with the new guidance counselor. Tell me you will say not another word about it. Promise me -- for your own sake, okay?”

I was so overcome with frustration and anger, but I pressed it down. This was clearly my burden. Like every other facet of my life, I was all alone. I could rely on no one to see the truth staring us all in the face.

“I can tell you’re upset, Rosalind. So let me put it like this, okay? Let’s say what you are saying is true. Let’s say, worst case scenario, you’ve framed by Mr. Chase. You don’t drink. We have, as you say, no proof to back this up. They have one of the best, unimpeachable students in this school, Carson Winthrop. That’s who they have. They clearly believe him. Do you get that? So even if you manage to prove to them you weren’t drinking, all you’ve done is established you’ve propositioned a teenage boy stone cold sober. Is that better? Certainly not if you want to work here.

Goddamn you, Geoffrey Chase.

“If there’s alcohol involved, I can make the case you get treatment and take family medical leave to do so. There are guidelines, parameters for this. You’ll come back and finish out your career and get your full retirement.

“The problem was the alcohol. It made you do something that wasn’t you. Without the alcohol, we don’t have that case to make. We have your word against this boy. And though I believe you, Mr. Davenport does not. Do you see the predicament you’re in? You have to get onboard with this strategy. It’s your only choice.

I came home and threw the crystal vase on my kitchen table straight into the wall – flowers, water and all. Cried while I cleaned up the sharp, stupid mess. I was grieving the last ounce of respectability I’d ever possess.

Maybe I got an hour of sleep all night. Then I’d woken, puffy eyed and resolved to accept my fate. As soon as I got to school, I found Reggie and told him to make the proffer. I’d do it all: confess to an alcohol problem I didn’t have, do the treatment, stay far away from Carson Winthrop, resume my job with a brand new attitude and never speak a word against Geoffrey Chase again.

Out loud, that is. In my head, you best believe I cursed that dark-haired demon every day. Each time I passed his smug, smirking face in the hall and felt those demented eyes on me

willing me to trip and fall, I held myself straighter with an inviolable determination and some good old fashioned anger, too.

Geoffrey Chase was the focus of every molecule of rage that lived inside me. I certainly saved none of my wrath for Carson Winthrop. He was just a boy. Well, not just. He had also been a weapon. A weapon wielded by a psychopath with a master's degree in psychology. But if I was shot, it wasn't the gun I was blaming. It was the well-trained shooter.

The silence of detention made it easy to get lost, like this, in fruitless arguments with the past. And even I, as damaged as I am, impose some limits on how much I let myself wander down certain roads of thought.

Rehab had its benefits. I learned some relaxation techniques that helped in times of internal stress like this. I closed my eyes and counted to ten, breathing deeper and ejecting the venom collecting in my body. By the time I got to ten, the rage felt far enough away to focused on something else – anything else, the pile of paper slips with the names of my newest detainees and the length of their incarceration.

Each paper I shuffled through, I transferred data onto the ever changing roll of attendees, many repeat offenders from last year with familiar names. Jacob Carroll was back again. Marnie Yates and her painful nose ring I felt like I'd been staring at every afternoon for years. Avalon Hayes, I wasn't familiar with. Though the name —I knew that name! It was a stab to the heart as I remembered it, a bit of information gleaned in a brief chat in Publix with Amelia Price.

Amelia Price, that lush red hair now sparse and short, just growing back from obvious treatment I, unfortunately, recognized but didn't acknowledge. She'd looked so tired. It was the first time I had seen her in years, since, in fact, her daughter dropped out of Gulf Point High with no goodbye and no explanation for her dear Ms. Karr she'd claimed to love so much.

But, even abandoned by her as I so clearly was, I couldn't restrain at this opportunity to inquire.

"How's Aster? Is she all right?"

I tried to hold back the dramatics, but I was less than successful. I had been worried for years, and it came through in my voice.

But the funniest thing happened that was exactly the opposite of what I might expect. The question actually brought color to Amelia's too-pale cheeks and produced a great big smile.

"Oh, yes. I should have — Aster is doing great! She's married to an architect, Neil Hayes. They live over in Pensacola. He's a little older, but he's just the most wonderful man you'd ever imagine. And they have a little girl now, Avalon, and another actually on the way. I just found out."

"Well, married and a baby girl, isn't that lovely? I'm so happy. So nice to see you."

We'd gone our separate ways then with our respective carts. And I truly was happy for Aster, even if it did hurt to find out about her like this, secondhand, by accident in a grocery store.

Now, after all these years, Aster's Price's daughter had found her way here, to detention, to me. I peeked around the faces for that familiar cheery shade of red hair I was expecting but found it nowhere. Nobody even halfway resembled this girl I'd imagined for years and actually prayed for her welfare, silly old fool I am.

“Avalon Hayes?”

I heard the words come out of my mouth without thought or consideration. It was pure heart. I had no idea what I’d even say to her, but before I could even formulate a plan, a blonde head popped up that had been reclined over a stack of books and framed by two long, pale outstretched arms. As soon as it did and its small heart-shaped face, gray, puffy, cried-out eyes revealed themselves to me, they produced such a pang in my heart with their familiarity I was shocked silent. I motioned her out to the hallway with a finger and pulled the door shut behind us.

“I’m sorry, Ms. Karr. I’ve never been in detention before. Are we not allowed to put our heads down? Please don’t be angry. I’m having the worst day of my whole life.”

A plump tear rolled its way down her face, and I wanted to run and grab the child a Kleenex, but I couldn’t bring myself to move away from that face I’d been longing to see for years. I was staring at Aster Price in the halls of Gulf Point, just as she was when all was right in the world, even if she had blonde hair.

She looked absolutely terrified of me. And who could blame her? I wasn’t the younger, optimistic cool teacher her mother had taken to so easily. I wasn’t what I once was.

“No, you’re absolutely fine, dear. It’s nothing bad at all. I — it’s just I knew your mother. I don’t know if you know that. She wrote for the paper here, was the editor, in fact, and I was her adviser. We were very close. Your face is like a nice walk down memory lane for me, I guess.”

“My mom doesn’t talk a lot about high school.”

“Well, I can understand that, I guess.”

“It’s all a bunch of secrets and lies.”

And then she was sobbing. Before I knew it and could think any better of it, I hugged her. Me an accused (and convicted in these walls) attempted child molester putting my actual hands around the body of a student in a way I would have sworn I’d never do again but had, without hesitation, in this surreal moment.

Until I thought of the cameras in the hallways and the chance of some busybody or god forbid Geoffrey, the devil himself, finding me like this and snapping a very strategic picture. I pulled away.

“Let me get you some Kleenex.”

My charges inside snapped back to their stoic expressions, upright postures from an obvious frantic, desperate gossip session. I had no doubt the subject. My reputation preceded me everywhere in these halls these days. And I was outside with an attractive young student, a female this time. These little degenerates were adding new twists to my infamous depravity every day. I didn’t even care. I grabbed the Kleenex and returned outside.

She was looking at the ground but spoke as soon as the door closed as if we were old friends.

“I just found out my dad isn’t my father.”

“Oh my God. Well, I mean — are you sure about that, honey? I mean, that’s a pretty big thing to say without absolute proof.”

She looked me straight in the eyes, and they were as fierce and determined as Aster's always had been.

"My blood's wrong. They can't be my parents. Just found out today."

"Well, honey, obviously your mother is your mother. I mean, it's written all over your face, as they say."

"But my dad, his blood and her blood can't make me. It's that simple. I pretty much knew already, but now it's all for real, and I don't know if I can take it. I have a father out there somewhere, Ms. Karr, who I don't even know."

I had no idea what to say. I wanted to hug her again, but my brain got in the way. I'd pushed things enough with the physical contact already. I patted her on the shoulder.

"So you knew my mother here at Gulf Point?"

"Oh, yes."

"Before she dropped out?"

"A tragedy."

"She won't say why. She won't even come to this place; it spooks her that bad. She had to come today because — well, the pictures. I don't know if you know."

Of course, I did.

"I don't keep up with the garbage talk around here except where it concerns a very few people I like to keep my finger on."

Or maybe really only one.

"It doesn't matter anyway. I'd rather not talk about it. I have more important things on my mind. You knew my mother. Tell me about her, please. Did she have a boyfriend when she was here, before she dropped out? Is it possible she got pregnant here and left because of that? This may be my only chance to get to the truth, to find out about my father."

So many things in life are possible, dear Avalon. This is what I wanted to say. I wanted to scream out all the things I knew in my heart about Geoffrey Chase.

Had I considered the possibility that he, with his lies and hoaxes, had fathered a child with Aster Price that some nice man was raising as his own? Of course, I had. I'd considered so many possibilities for why she left, beyond the simple humiliation of being fired from the newspaper and disappointing me, if that even mattered.

But did I have any evidence to back up anything I was about to say? Not even the teensiest, tiniest microscopic shred. And if I were to speak my mind, this poor sweet child would surely run straight to Geoffrey Chase, the man she now believed to be her father, desperate and longing to know, to confront him with my accusations.

I would be done here, like that. Maybe today, maybe later. Maybe helped along by another of Geoffrey's well-plotted scandals or maybe this final accusation being sufficient enough all on its own to do me in for good. Either way, I just could not bring myself to speak his name. I could not let him win.

"She had a boyfriend. I'm sure of that part. But I just can't make out his name in my head right now. It's been a long time ago now."

She looked so sad and almost like she didn't believe me.

"Well, do me a favor, will you? If you remember, it would mean the world to me to know."

I felt pretty awful at this point, nodded.

"If it comes to me, I'll look you up. Don't want you in here again though. This isn't a place for you."

She smiled.

"I don't think this school is the place for me at all anymore."

I didn't like the sound of that. Not another sweet, bright girl from this family throwing school away on my watch.

"Hey. Don't say that."

"Oh, don't worry. I'm not my mom, not dropping out. They're letting me switch to dual enrollment, get started on my future."

"Now, you're sounding like your mother, the way I like to remember her."

"Yeah. Now, I just have to convince my parents or whatever."

I looked at my watch.

"Let's get back inside."

"Try to remember, Ms. Karr."

Oh, Avalon, how I wish I could forget.

### **GEOFFREY CHASE, 1992**

*"So Jacob Nichols is saying he was taken by aliens into their UFO Saturday night and they still have his dog." That's how I first heard the story on a Monday night at the dinner table, two days before the Guardian would print it. It was the story that would take Bliss Ford, our local missing teenage girl, off the front page of the Guardian and off the lips of its paranoid residents at the softball fields and, more important to the Chase family, the barbershop.*

*After all, when your dad's the barber in a town of 5,000 people, with only a weekly paper, you get your news first relayed, like this, in a-matter-of-fact tone in-between bites of pot roast.*

*Jamison and I looked at each other immediately. We knew we were having exactly the same thought: sounds like a movie. Jamison is a film major at UWF though he still lives at home since it's only a half-hour commute.*

*I'm a cameraman for The Point Break, the school news show and shoot short films in my spare time, so film's the lens we look through at everything in life – our bond. We didn't say anything out loud though. Only Mom had a response putting down her fork and pausing first probably letting this strange story register a second in her mind.*

*"That poor man, how old is he exactly, Fred? Is he really old enough to be losing his hold on reality like this? Well, I guess he must be. How very sad for him and his wife."*

*Jamison and I both looked at my father now anxious for more details. My father traffics in gossip. In a tiny community like ours, the barbershop is the place you go for a haircut and all the latest news, sordid and otherwise, in as close to real time as you're going to get. Whatever you read in the Guardian each Wednesday has been argued, edited and sourced three times at Chase Barbers, most recently the whereabouts of Bliss Ford and now UFO abduction.*

*"I don't know, Donna. I heard it all from Paul Kirkland who lives on Dunwood with Nichols, three doors down. Paul says he himself personally didn't hear or see a thing. Doesn't exactly know what to believe himself – but the way he tells it, his friend's wife who lives right there, too, saw something that night she's saying was unnatural, a light so bright she was actually afraid. And it happened in the timeframe of Nichols' story.*

*"Don't know what to think myself, but I'm not ready to say he's not right -- and I definitely don't think he's an outright liar. Kirkland says some lady's been all up and down the street talking to neighbors for an article in the Guardian this week."*

*My mom was silent now though I could tell from her expression that she still wasn't on the same page as my dad. It wasn't surprising. She was far more worldly and cynical than my father (the superior student of human nature; perhaps where I acquired a bit of my own talent.*

*I looked at Jamison, laser focused on my father and each new detail he presented. You could see the anticipation in his face, ravenous for more information but scared to ask for fear of doing anything to make my father clam up. He wasn't used to us being that engaged in his shop talk.*

*My brother's eyes couldn't hide their Christmas morning gleam they got whenever the perfect idea became a series of images that would become a film. We were used to half listening to the gossip and far-fetched stories from our father, feigning interest, but this was science fiction right at our own kitchen table. We were in.*

*And that's when it occurred to me: my brilliant idea. We weren't the only teenagers who could easily get sucked into such a dramatic and cinematic tale. I was going to be able to redeem myself this Friday in speech class with an idea that would be sure to get everyone's attention -- most importantly Aster Price, a journalist. It would require Jamison's assistance, but by the look on his face across the table from me right now, I knew I would have it. He was ready for my pitch, and I could hardly wait to make it after dinner.*



# The Gulf Point GUARDIAN

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Editor In Chief Louis Dane Kristol

## RETIRED NAVAL OFFICER, GULF POINT RESIDENT ALLEGEDLY ABDUCTED BY UFO

By Brooke Newton



Jacob Nichols

Gulf Point proper resident and retired Naval Lt. Commander Jacob Nichols, 67, believes that he was abducted from his Gulf Point proper residence by a UFO on August 27<sup>th</sup>. Nichols exited his

property at approximately 8:30 p.m. on Saturday evening through the back gate of his fence with the family's pet Maltese, Nelson, for a nighttime stroll through the woods behind Gulf Pointe Elementary School. Nichols and Nelson routinely walk through the woods behind the elementary school to the open playing field behind the Gulf Point Middle School.

Nichols was about five minutes into this walk and "still in the patch of woods when I was surrounded

on all sides by a light so bright that my head felt like it was splitting into pieces. I wanted to shut my eyes so badly, but I couldn't move any part of my body. I was frozen there in place for I don't know how long exactly — long enough that I felt my muscles in my legs tingling and aching from not being able to move. And then I felt my stomach start to turn inside of me like I was on a ride at the fair, and that's when I realized that I was being pulled high."

After the sensation of being pulled into what Jacob Nichols now believes was an alien spacecraft, he has little information to relay about the incident or his captors. Nichols describes noises "like hearing electronic beeps muffled 'cause you're underwater, moving shadows. It was just enough stimulus to know that

I was taken into the presence of something, something strange to me and powerful and always moving about, a blur. I never saw their bodies or faces. I was sure I'd never seen my wife again."

And then Nichols says after a period of time that "felt like 15 minutes, I felt this wave of exhaustion pass over me like I had never experienced before. And then, the next thing I remember, I'm awake on the ground in that same patch of woods behind the school.

Nichols' Maltese Nelson, however, was nowhere to be found. Nichols made this realization soon after he was able to stand and regain his clouded senses. As he explains it, "It was like coming out of a fog, like I barely remembered who I even was and then I did, and I

## 12 Year Old Bliss Ford Missing Nine Days By Clark Ritchie

Nine days have passed since a Gulf Point Middle School student was abducted from the Beachcomber subdivision on August 24<sup>th</sup>, and authorities are still apparently without any promising leads in the case. FBI Field Bureau Chief Martin Thompson finds the lack of progress in this case as “baffling and frustrating” and describes the investigation as a “tireless, cooperative and diligent effort of federal agents



Bliss Ford

and Gulf Point Police Department officers.”

Thompson also praises “the many residents of Gulf Point, in particular those in the Beachcomber subdivision itself, who have helped investigators in diverse ways from volunteering on searches through acres of woods inside the neighborhood, allowing agents and detectives access to private property for investigative purposes and providing eyewitness testimony that has helped in narrowing the timeline in which this abduction may have occurred. It’s a testament to this community’s love and devotion to children in general and, in particular, this beloved young girl.”

Earlier in the week, due to efforts like those enumerated by Bureau Chief Thompson, police were able to clear an unidentified person of interest, a registered sexual offender residing in

### AVALON HAYES, 2010

Driving home from school, staring out at the churning waves of Pensacola Bay as agitated as my own brain, I remembered it. Tearing Mom’s room apart weeks ago, looking for that diary and all the answers I now no longer needed, I stumbled across something childish and out of place in the middle drawer of her mahogany jewelry armoire.

Ada and I used to raid these drawers for fun when Mom was away and dump their contents all over the hardwood floor. Then we’d layer each other in pearls and fill our tiny fingers with diamonds and rubies and emeralds. It was the best part of having a little sister, a built in

partner for dress up and make believe and magic. Until the inevitable fight over one especially choice piece (in our case, a gold ring with a pink gemstone in the shape of a heart probably less valuable than any of the others we were actually wearing but it was pink!) alerted Mom.

She swooped in and pulled us apart, removing all our accessories and scooping up the discards from the floor. I recalled the way she dumped them into the drawers with about as much care as she had for the pens and screwdrivers and matchbooks she'd tossed, half-heartedly, into the mess of the odds and end drawer in the kitchen. Useful knick-knacks without much meaning.

Watching my mom pick up her things more annoyed than angry and catching a gleam of a diamond that had been kicked under the bed, I took a step to retrieve it, to help. And my mother actually screamed.

"Avalon, don't move."

I stood there frozen in horror, having not a clue what I'd done so wrong. My mom scurried over, bent down and retrieved it, a watch that looked almost like one of our toys, with one black and white band like a notebook and another that looked like ruled paper. She held it carefully between her fingers and bent down so close to me I could feel her breath.

"You almost stepped on it, Avalon. It could have broken. You cannot touch this. It's the most valuable thing I own. The Swatch my daddy gave me. Do you understand?"

I nodded, but even at six years old, the hole in the explanation was so big it had to be acknowledged.

"I thought your dad died you were itty bitty like Ada."

"He did, sweetheart. My mom actually gave it to me, but she said it was from him, and I like to believe it is."

"Like from magic?"

"Like from magic."

"Why don't you wear it?"

"I don't know. I used to wear it every day of my whole life until I met your dad, and I just stopped. Maybe because he gave me all of these."

She giggled and nodded to a handful of watches she placed back into the middle drawer.

"But even if it sits here, it still means the world to me, and mommy would be so sad if she ever lost it. So you must never touch it. Do you understand?"

I'd nodded again. She had looked like she might cry. I would not disturb her magic. I'd kept my word, too, up to this point. To the point, I'd actually forgotten about it entirely. Until the diary, the poetry, led me to make my search in every nook and cranny I could imagine, even the jewelry armoire, the middle drawer where it lay, hands unmoving, undisturbed. And I couldn't help myself to touch its cool glass face and wonder if my own father's fingers touched it, too.

And approaching our house, it hit me that he most definitely had. This high school boyfriend who knew my mother when she wore it "every day of my whole life until I met your dad." How could he have not noticed such a thing? And how could he fail to notice it again on the arm of a girl with a face he surely could never forget?

I knew it was a long shot. He'd been a secret long, it must be a comfortable state for him. I knew he might be very good by now at keeping feelings pushed down deep, but maybe, if I was lucky, he wasn't.

And, of course, I knew I might never even run into him. A chance encounter alone would be a miracle, and yet Gulf Point was a very small town. It was possible, and the promise of possibility danced inside me and propelled me forward as I slammed my car door and raced inside up the stairs of the mercifully quiet house.

Once on the second floor, I headed straight down the hall into my parents' bedroom and pulled open that middle drawer. It sat there waiting for me, on top of a pile of twinklier pieces, just like I'd seen it weeks ago. And without allowing myself one second to reconsider or feel bad for my mother, or even shame for the actually thievery, I grabbed it and pushed it deep into the pocket of my denim miniskirt. And as soon as I did it, before I could even turn to head back to my room to hide it in my purse, I heard the one know-it-all voice that existed, it seemed, only to perpetually challenge and taunt me and ruin all my fun and plans.

"And what do you think you're up to now, you juvenile delinquent freak?"

It wasn't either of the liars.

Just a relentless nerdy tattletale truth-teller with the morals and fun of a grandma in the body of a 14-year-old girl. Even though, in the face, there was a resemblance, we were so different, it had always been a cause of amazement that we were even related. And I guess, after what I'd learn today, in fact, we only half were.

### **ADA HAYES, 2010**

"How'd you get home? Mom's not here; is she?"

"Gigi. And you look pretty freaking guilty right now."

"You can call her that stupid nickname all day, Ada, and it doesn't change the fact that you're best friends with a 60-year old woman, your own grandmother. Don't you have any friends your age?"

This was typical of the treatment I got from Avalon. Even today, when I'd actually come to check on her after a day so scandalous it actually affected my life, this is what I get: freaking hostility. If one more boy asked what color panties I was wearing, and did I want to bend over and take a picture, I might have kicked them straight in the nuts and wound up in detention, too.

I can't even imagine what they said to her. She was angry and picking on me, and still, today, I actually felt sorry for my sister.

"First of all, Gigi is not 60. She's 57. And I'm a freshman. Friends my age can't drive. And you're changing the subject. What are you doing going through Mom's jewelry box?"

"I was looking for a pair of earrings. Now, go and tattle tale on me like always and make my day even worse. You better not have told Grandma why I had to stay after."

"Well, if you mean the detention, ha -- no. I told her you had a pop-up cheer practice actually. I lied for you. And sarcasm and insults are what I get in return. But if you mean, what you did, you never even told me."

“I didn’t have time. You can’t be late for detention.”

We looked at each other in an awkward silence. Like she was actually not going to tell me what she did that I just had lied to my own grandmother to cover up. Unacceptable.

“Well?”

“Christina Frederick was harassing me, and so I harassed her back, loudly. I called her a cow.”

“Wow,” this was definitely out of character behavior for my sister who did things I thought ill-advised often but was never, ever mean like this, not even to me. “Harassing you about the picture?”

It really wasn’t even a question. But to say it otherwise would just be cruel.

“Of course, it was about the picture. That’s all anybody at school was talking about.”

It was true. The bent over crotch shot of my sister was all anybody was talking about. But the silence and tears welling up in Avalon’s face made me think that maybe something even uglier might have been the source of this cruelty.

“Are you sure it wasn’t something else, too?”

She looked like she was actually thinking of confiding in me now. Whatever it was, it looked so painful that it physically was cutting its way out of her from the inside as she resisted and tried to hold it in.

You see, my sister didn’t trust me at all. It was partly my fault. I had made a game of foiling her plans and ratting her out for years. Get my mom to make her let me in her rooms when her friends were there, then run and yell all their dirty secrets through the house.

The worst case happened when I was in fifth grade and Avalon was in eighth. Bridget Ryder was spending the night and called two football players, high school boys, and made a plan for a rendezvous at Bridget’s house while her parents were away.

Bridget was talking about “sucking cocks,” and my sister was giggling in the background. The boy on the phone was breathing so heavy he sounded like a phone sex commercial.

Unfortunately, Avalon and Bridget, who didn’t yet have cellphones, had made the mistake of having this conversation on the landline. And you’d be hard pressed to find as good of a phone eavesdropper as me.

Now, before I go further I should explain, I had pulled the phone cord into the living room and was not aware my dad was in the adjacent den. Even I, at this not my best of ages, would never have ratted out Avalon, knowingly, to our father whose religion made him a teensy weensy bit dramatic about anything remotely sexual. But overcome with a hysteria I could not hold in anymore, I did scream out “Avalon’s going to do sex with high school boys.” And that was the end of Avalon’s friendship with Bridget Ryder. My dad went into a depression for a week.

So, you know, I get it. When I was really honest with myself, I knew I would hate me, too. But that was elementary school (and middle, admittedly, too.) I was in high school now. I wish she could see I was changing because I really was.

She blinked and looked at the ground, and started to speak, but I already knew she’d decided I wasn’t a good risk.

“Yeah, the pictures, and she called me anorexic.”

This seemed like something a jealous girl would say, but it was absurd that it was hard for me to imagine that it was affecting Avalon so much. Still I was trying to show I was supportive and cool.

“What? You love to eat. What a jealous bitch.”

Avalon busted out laughing, and it made me feel so good I laughed, too. This is what I wanted, for my sister to see I was cool, even if I did drink tea and watch true crime shows with grandma and read books for fun. I also liked The Yeah, Yeah, Yeahs and had made a sacred vow to myself to find a way to go to Coachella before I turned 18. I was cool, too, in my own way, even if she couldn’t see it.

“What are you going to do, Avalon? Are you going to be okay?” I wish I could have hugged her, but I was afraid if I tried it would be too weird.

She wiped her eyes and looked at me kindly, like a friend.

“Well, I’m going to start over. I’m going to talk to my mom tonight. I want to do dual enrollment at UWF, get out of Gulf Point.”

“That’s awesome.”

I was actually impressed and a little jealous. I’d love to be at college. Even though she was older than me, I felt I belonged there more than her. There was something smaller about Avalon, when you got past the sassiness, she was so fragile on the inside, like a little girl playing dress up and using bad words.

“Yeah. Do you know where Mom is?”

I moved my arms back and forth in front of me pantomiming a jog.

“Where do you think?”

“Of course.”

“I’m never going to tell on you again, Avalon. Okay? I want to be actual friends.”

It had taken all the courage I had to put myself out there like that. I hadn’t said sorry, but I felt like it summed up how I felt nicely. She looked a little shock but happy, too.

“Thank you, Ada. I appreciate that. You’ve been a good sister.”

She was smiling when she said it, and the gratitude seemed genuine. But the words were weird. I’ve been a good sister? Not really. I want to be. But the way she said it, it sounded like whatever was between us, how minor it was, was already over when all I’d wanted was for something to begin.

I wanted to say something more, to go deeper and figure out what was really going beneath those grey eyes that looked exactly like mine and my mothers, a tribe of women who shared rooms and lives but never their deepest secrets. But Avalon was already leaving.

“I’ve got a headache. I’m going to take a shower before Mom gets home.”

And she closed her bedroom door with me far away on the other side. Giving up, I went to my own room and collapsed on my bed with *The Hunger Games*, a book Avalon would probably relate to very much right now if she gave it half a chance. That would never happen though. My sister didn’t like to read. Even the topic made her hostile.

Once when she was watching *Gossip Girl* with Mary Nell and I wandered through, I'd said, "You know, you could learn more about these characters if you read the books. There's an entire series."

She looked at me like I had a brain tumor and was speaking spontaneously in a foreign language.

"Okay, Mom. Why would I read something when I can watch it on TV, you freak? You're interrupting."

So I'll save my breath and skip the book recommendation. Maybe someday they'll make a movie, and maybe if I'm as good a sister as I plan to be, we'll even watch it together.

### **GEOFFREY CHASE, 2010**

Of course, like every other male at Gulf Point High, I'd seen the infamous blue crotch shot. It was a part of my job to be aware of various high school scandals and handle their repercussions to the mental health and safety of the student body. I was, after all, a guidance counselor.

While the crotch had, candidly, caught my eye, initially, like any of the other lustful, young (and perhaps not so young) simpletons perusing it on their cellphones and laptops. It was the upside down smile on the face of the girl in the photo that held my gaze -- the one visible grey eye in the photo that gutted me with its promise of similitude.

It was that impossible to match, impossible to forget eye. Its bashful mate hidden taunted a genetic guarantee of authenticity and satisfaction only cloning or an act of God could achieve. It hid from me, for the moment, behind one unmarred, pale, rather flexible teenage thigh. It was an eye and a face and a body I'd been chasing for 18 years in strip clubs and college and in my Technicolor pornographic dreams. Two children in the woods staring at the sky for the UFO that would bring us together -- and the one that tore us apart. I

It was an eye for which I'd completed graduate school in clinical psychology, bought a boat and returned here to my alma mater. It was for this eye, I'd won the coveted position of guidance counselor at this A+, Blue Ribbon school to walk these specific halls filled with such a tender, painful history just to perhaps see this eye, again. It hadn't even occurred to me, at that point in the planning and execution, the possibility, the serendipity of finding the same eye living inside a face that didn't hate me.

Even though this eyeball, sadly, sat inside the head of what appeared to be, from my discreet observations in the hall, a rather vacuous cheerleader with disappointingly pale hair and not a vibrant redheaded artist like her mother, I believed in this, my new, young eye. After all, I was, by this point in my life, a well-trained student of human nature, and she was my mentally malleable last and best opportunity for happiness.

I believed in this eye. I believed in this girl. Even with blonde hair, she was as close I could get to a time machine. And after 18 years of stasis, stagnation and lonely preparations, I would travel, and that grey eye would lead me back to my happiness like the ancient map it had always been.

### **GEOFFREY CHASE 1992**



*In three years, nobody here is going to remember me. It's a thing I've known since my first day at Gulf Point High, sharing these halls for an interminable year with an unforgettable brother. And for the most part, it had been okay. Despite my deficit in age, in this way I'd always credited myself with being a little more evolved than my brother.*

*It's not his fault exactly. He's lived an easy life center stage, literally in every play in high school. He played Stanley Kowalski, the Vicomte de Valmont and freaking Romeo. Had succeeding girlfriends who sought him out without any discernible effort on his behalf. My guru as of late and leader of the Rajneesh movement, Osbo, would have frowned at me that day in the Civic Center, a short, awkward, unenlightened freshmen's delight at his own brother's matriculation. When I watched him throw that blue cap into the air, it might as well have been a crown. I had no delusions I'd ever catch it. I was just glad to see him let it go.*

*Though he still haunts me here. Three years later, people here still remember him. In three years, nobody here is going to remember me.*

*Anais Nin describes a person like that when she says, "She lives on the reflection of herself in the eyes of others. She does not dare to be herself. I don't recognize this, even in my own admired brother, as an admirable quality. But then a paper floated across my path in junior English Honors and changed everything. Now, someone exists who must remember me in three years, someone for which I am willing to change and grow.*

*The Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote "Nothing is so difficult as not deceiving oneself." Self delusion serves no one. I refuse to partake in it anymore. So I chose speech as my senior year elective, sought it out bravely, an obstacle to overcome, a necessary debasement. It's a part of the most important course of study in my life: how to become a man. I just hadn't counted on having to undertake this painful and ugly transformation in front of my soulmate. I am not masochistic enough to have chosen that.*

*We'd delivered two speeches so far. I had yet another due on Friday — one a week for the entire semester. It would have been an overwhelming task in and of itself, much less in front of the love of your life (even if she didn't know it and might never acquiesce). Both of mine previous attempts had been unmitigated disasters: one, a ridiculous treatise on Stephen King sounded so intelligent and fresh in my ears practicing in the mirror the night before but suffered miserably in the execution; the words sounded so hokey and pretentious when I said them out loud I could hardly bring myself to finish.*

*Then there was my comparison of the active and passive meditation techniques, transcendental versus dynamic. It was apparently long and boring enough to make Joey Deaver nap and even snore and induce a classroom to laughter which only stopped when Ms. Levin, the speech teacher, threw an eraser and screamed "shut your goddamn mouths" at the top of her lungs the way only the older teachers, secure in tenure and close to retirement, occasionally would.*

*The shock factor worked, and everyone went silent. I summed up the rest of my speech (almost an entire page left) into a couple of hastily delivered sentences (that probably made zero sense), put my head down and headed back to my seat. Before I got there, I made unfortunate eye contact with my intended, at this, the truly lowest point of my life, and saw in their silvery gray depths the undeniable look of pity.*

*This is not the way she was supposed to finally notice me after all the years I've made a constant study of her angelic person. Thrown together, she and I in these rooms chock full of vile pretenders, she has sat there always, in front of me or at my side, a siren with long red hair and a mellifluous name: Aster. It means star, and she is truly the center of my orbit whether she comprehends it or not.*

*She is a star in every aspect of her life. She could easily rely on that undeniable beauty to live center-stage. She's positively a movie star compared to the artless vixens I film for The Point Break, our school news show, every day with their crassly made up faces, overly baked skin and artificial hair.*

*But Aster doesn't aspire to such a stage. She is a writer. She's content to let her words speak in place of that body and that magnificent visage while the mundane masses who surround us here are left to their puerile imaginations of such lyrical verbiage delivered from such modestly painted lips.*

*She's the editor of The Pointer, our high school paper, and, every month, I can't wait to get my hands on her fresh pages. She has no clue I'm her most loyal, devoted reader. Each story I read feels like the start of an impending, destined dialogue, and I catalogue each one inside my heart and head for future reference.*

*I can see us so clearly, years later, lying on a couch some cold winter evening, my arms wrapped around her at last, while I make some offhand comment about her fascinating story on the library remodel. And then she'd turn to me and realize how long I had wanted her, how loyal I'd always been, and we would laugh at all our foolishness, at all those wasted, lonely high schools years we'd circled each other so aimlessly, failing to touch.*

*She writes other things, too. Secret scribbles I just discovered last year watching her walk out the door of English class, sadly our solitary hour of silent communion junior year. Even as it killed me, the sight of her exit without the smallest pause or peak in my direction, I still never failed to sit and wait and watch her go. I relied upon that image of her back, that swish and wave of long red hair to get me through the loneliness of twenty-four long more hours until I'd see her again.*

*And then one day, a Friday, too, the loneliest goodbye glimpse of all was interrupted by a sheet of notebook paper, inadequately tucked inside a book, one of several on a heavy stack for such delicate arms, falling, almost seeming to leap and flutter to the ground. She'd kept on walking, as unaware of its departure as she was of me. And I jumped from my seat ready to retrieve it and perhaps return it to its owner, an excuse to make some, no doubt, some fledgling, futile effort at contact. And then I'd laid my fingers upon it and seen it was not some mere class assignment as I'd suspected but, obviously, a poem, handwritten, in her small, girlish script.*

*Of course, I'd kept it instead, retrieved my things and headed off to geometry with a piece of her.*

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*I swim around your boat for days before  
I catch an eye. On deck, the sun a blight  
that blocks a face just long enough to lure  
my head around distracting rays and right  
into your pirate heart. My tail begins  
to flip reflexive in the waves, and I cannot  
pretend I don't belong to you. The end  
for me is not a rod or net. You caught  
me with a look. My trembling hands descend,  
before my captain now. My hooked heart sunk  
the beast inside the girl. The piscine end,  
on board, transforms, subdued. The sun  
so warm against us while we rock and float.  
New legs around you first upon this boat.*

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GEOFFREY CHASE, 2010

My mind was a well-honed blade, not to be underestimated. I was reminded of it in the front office, retrieving my mail from the faculty slots and locking eyes for just a moment with Rosalind Karr, staring at me contemptuously, in a way she hadn't dared to in quite some time.

Here was a woman who had carelessly tried to take me from me, malign my carefully crafted reputation in front of a room of my peers, destroy a life's work. Here was a woman who had tried to take Avalon Hayes from me before I'd ever touched her. Here was a woman who had paid the price, a woman whose hateful eyes betrayed the fact she was still paying the price today.

I had to find a thing to take from Ms. Karr, the perfect negative punishment to cut this old woman off at the knees. Punishment, is after all a science of which I, a Skinnerian, am an educated practitioner, well equipped for the task. Karr's punishment presented itself to me in a most surprising way. It was a lesson from the universe that opportunity is always around us if your eyes and heart are open, and you're prepared to do what comes next.

Carson Winthrop, the future Mr. Gulf Point and my first Ivy league placement, sat down in my office and cried.

"I'm screwed, Mr. Chase. All the work I've done to get into Brown. It'll never happen now. My dad's going to beat the shit out of me. You don't understand. That bitch Ms. Karr's busted me getting \$50 for a paper I wrote for Jason Kellerman. It's just a harmless side business, but I'm so screwed now. I don't know what's going to happen, suspended at the least, but cheating on my record, I'll never get in. You don't know my father, what's going to happen to me. My life is over, Mr. Chase."

Looking at that angelic, handsome face across from me, the perfect punishment for Ms. Karr was clear. It was a face that would surely annihilate Ms. Karr as she had attempted to annihilate me.

"I could help you, Carson, if you'll allow me? Would you be willing to do everything I said?"

"You can get me out of this?"

"Oh, yes, easily. If you're willing to lie."

"I'm willing to do anything, Mr. Chase. I have to go to Brown. You don't understand."

"Actually, Carson, I understand quite well."

I had known he was the perfect weapon from the moment I looked into his eyes. He'd done almost all the heavy lifting. All I had to do was plant a bottle of liquor in Ms. Karr's desk, child's play. These moving tears I'd witnessed here first in my office only had to be repeated before Mr. Davenport. I watched him produce them on cue several times, again and again, in dry runs in my office executing the monologue I wrote him so exquisitely. It came as no surprise to me, two years later, when he e-mailed me from Brown that he was now a drama major. Just like in our mutual effort to destroy our common enemy, Ms. Karr, I had known he would be a shining success. I saw myself in him.

*ASTER PRICE, 1992*

*Is there anything more pathetic than the sight of a seventeen-year-old girl climbing steps of a school bus? Looking around, I'm the oldest passenger by a good two years.*

*I'm getting condescending looks from a middle schooler. In this moment, driving a ridiculous Sprint seems positively sophisticated.*

*Makes no difference my reason for being here is a real journalism assignment from a professional reporter (even if he's an arrogant asshole who obviously spends too much time on his hair). None of these kids care this is my only lead to get an interview with the newly no-longer-missing Bliss Ford, that I'm trying to further my career. None of these kids believes I have a career.*

*They're just laughing at me for being here on this bus, twice now, stalking a freshman.*

*It's all Daryl Boykins fault. After I begged mom for the fiftieth<sup>th</sup> time to call the Fords, she again refused saying she "has maybe spoken to them three times in her life" and "positively won't bother such nice people at a time like this." I realized she's never going to understand my dreams.*

*It was up to me to make life happen. I'm not a little girl anymore. Had to be prepared to use any tool in my admittedly modest arsenal – and that included talking to teenage boys. In high school, jock or nerd, all became the same on the inside: horndogs who only want to get in your pants and check you off some imaginary list.*

*Up to yesterday, I'd done my best to avoid them. There's just no avoiding them now.*

*It began like this: Daryl Boykins is in my speech class. His speech yesterday was on some stupid golfer, Long John or something. That's exactly how much I remember of the whole thing – and the snickering. How freaking one-dimensional can you get? But what do you expect from a low level football/golf jock.*

*To be fair, nobody was excited by my speech either. Mine was on my personal role model and American hero Bob Woodward. Nerdy maybe, but slightly more historically significant than a winner of some stupid golf game.*

*The only speech that got anybody's attention was Rob McArthur's on Charles Manson. Rob rented a PO Box to correspond with Charles Manson who, shocker, wrote him back. I wrote to Bob Woodward, too. Haven't heard a peep. It is election season, so Woodward's probably embedded with Clinton or Perot, documenting history. Maybe he's a little busier than some old psycho sitting in prison.*

*Anyway, I catch Daryl Boykins looking at me all the time. When I make eye contact with him to let him know I'm aware of what's going on here, he does that full-on creepy move of looking away like he's so smooth but can't help getting all red in the face like a busted stalker.*

*When I decided I needed to talk to him, I make sure to do it in the middle of the cafeteria, even though it's loud -- lots of witnesses.*

*You see Daryl Boykins is on the golf team with Chip Ford -- Chip Ford being the older brother of one Bliss Ford. You following me now? Daryl and Chip are both freshmen. I've seen them in the halls together with that jock crowd you can't ignore. So freaking loud and reek of the same Polo cologne/sweat mix because they wear lettermen jackets in our hot Florida weather all school year.*

*No way was I approaching Daryl while he sat at the jock table and get leered at, harassed and accomplish nothing in the process. Like any good journalist, I understood the importance of choosing a moment.*

*Only when I saw him pick up his tray and stand, move away from the crowd of Neanderthals to the tray return did I make my move. Pushed the remains of my lunch into the paper bag and headed to the trash cans near the tray return window.*

*"Daryl."*

*A jock with the usual height and muscles, Daryl has the chubbiest cheeks that make him seem, at least in the face, younger than a freshmen. When he gets nervous, not only does he blush, but those cheeks sort of jiggle. All of this happened.*

*“Hi, Aster,” he said, lowering the pitch of his still boyish voice and sounding incredibly ridiculous in the process.*

*“Look, I need to ask you a super important favor – something that could secure my destiny.”*

*No subtlety or intrigue, straight crazy desperation. Sharing air space with Daryl Boykins was already having an effect on me.*

*“Wow. Sure, absolutely, whatever I can do to help.”*

*Daryl Boykins crystal blue eyes I’d never noticed before were trained on me, wide and intense; Couldn’t really help but admire them a little. I’m sure his cooperative attitude was working on me, too.*

*“Look, I work for the paper now” —*

*“Oh, yeah. I read all your articles. Loved that one with Melissa Stanley about the cheerleaders, how we should really respect them as athletes. I think you’re great.”*

*Then he turned pink. Obviously, his last comment made its way from mouth to register in his horndog brain as a little much because he quickly amended it to: “You do a great job.”*

*Total stalker. I remained determined to play nice. It was beneficial he was a fan.*

*“Well, thanks. I’m not talking about the high school paper. I work for a real paper now, you know, the Guardian?”*

*“No, shit. For real?”*

*“One hundred percent for real. I’m working with my colleague Clark Ritchie on the Bliss Ford case. Been assigned to interview the family, any who would talk, you know, but, I mean, obviously Bliss, herself, if she’s interested in something like that. It could be helpful to talk about what happened -- less people bothering her about it because her story would be out there for everyone to read.”*

*His gaze shifted. I was beginning to lose him.*

*“Not counting on that, okay, Bliss herself?. Just an idea. I know you’re friends with Chip Ford. He hasn’t been at school, so I’m trying to make contact with the family, in a respectful way, of course. So, anyway, I thought that —“*

*I didn’t bother to finish because it was clear (as much as I didn’t want it to be the case) something was wrong. Daryl was avoiding eye contact now, looking past me over my shoulder. When he spoke, his voice was quieter, more natural, not trying to make an impression — in short, bad news for me.*

*“See, I’d like to help you, but I’m not close to Chip Ford is the thing. I mean, yes, we play golf, but I don’t even know his number. We’re not, like, friends.”*

*“Well, okay. Do you know anybody that does? I mean, anyone on the team?”*

*“Yeah, I mean, Steve O’Connor -- pretty sure they’re like best friends.*

*“Steve, O’Connor? I don’t know him.”*

*“Freshman. I think he lives close to you. You live in Beachcomber, right?”*

*How exactly do you know that, weirdo? Oh, that’s right, stalker.*

*“Really? He does? I had no idea. Do you know where exactly?”*

*“No, no, I don’t, but I know he rides the bus, I mean, your bus. He bitches about it all the time.”*



*“Really?” I’m having a vision of my afternoon and not enjoying it one little bit.*

*“Yeah.”*

*That’s how I chose to leave my dorky car at school to take a worse ride on the old cheese wagon looking for a boy I wouldn’t have even been able to pick out of a lineup. How I wound up seat hopping the entire 45 minutes ride (the notebook Swatch never lies) asking various children if they knew Steve O’Connor and was he present on the bus that afternoon.*

*He wasn’t. But each assured me he always rode the bus, that “my boyfriend,” as one maturely put it, would definitely be there in the morning.*

*This last info put me, unfortunately, back on the wagon today. It hadn’t seemed such an inconvenience since I’d need the ride back to school anyway for my abandoned car. But it turned out to be yet another dead end.*

*We made all the stops in Beachcomber and Greenway Estates (sadly I have learned the route), then to Highway 98 riding back to school with all the same smug characters as yesterday; no Rick O’Connor again, just everybody, years younger, looking at me like the loser I surely am at this point.*

*Thoughts of Daryl Boykins mixed with the potpourri of body odor I’m currently breathing is giving me a headache. Now, I’ll have to sit through school all day. I’ve encouraged Daryl without getting anywhere closer to becoming a professional journalist. I’ve got to reevaluate my life.*