

A microscopic view of several red blood cells, appearing as elongated, biconcave discs with a reddish-pink hue. The cells are set against a dark, blurred background, creating a sense of depth and focus on the cellular structure.

LET ME TELL YOU ABOUT THE LIARS

Kristin Garth

an Avalon Hayes mystery

PRINCIPAL CHARLES DAVENPORT, 2010

“Look at this, Felicia. A girl took this picture of another teenage girl. Have I — am I just that out of touch with humanity — is this humanity? You tell me, Felicia.”

“I mean, at least she has her drawers on, Mr. D. I guess it could be worse.”

“Come on, Felicia. Don’t try to be cute. What if this was your daughter?”

“Hold up now, Mr. D. No need to go there. I’m just saying. It happens now, boss. These kids got more money for camera phones than they have cells in their brains. I saw it on Oprah.”

Felicia McBride, my secretary, was at my desk staring at my computer screen. The screen filled with an awkward close-up picture of parts of Avalon Hayes, a GPHS senior varsity cheerleader, no less, in uniform, bent over, skirt hiked up. The nice parts include a slice of a peachy complexion, upside down, athletically posed against her knee, and just one gray-blue eye framed by a piece of long blonde hair. The scandalous part, the focal point of the picture, the part we’re about to discuss with her, her parents and another cheerleader at this school, is a crotch, a big blue crotch.

Well, it’s not big. It’s actually pretty small, but it’s the focus of the picture, the blue bullseye of this shot. Boy did they see, all of these lunatic hormone sacs I supervise here. It spread thru these walls like a wildfire until Ms. Clarkson turned in two boys looking at it in the library late yesterday afternoon, and now we’re here, Felicia and I, looking at some poor girl’s magnified blue crotch.

“How long until the Hayes’ get here?”

Felicia looked at her watch.

“Half-hour.”

“It’s the second day of school, for God’s sake, and I’m meeting with parents to look at pictures of their daughter in cheer panties.”

Felicia shook her head.

“Don’t say it like, Mr. D. It sounds real weird. What did Coach Appleton say they’re called?”

“Cheer briefs, excuse me. I’m turning this off. Wait ten minutes and call Liesel Pomerantz and Avalon Hayes down here. Put the Hayes girl somewhere separate from the deviant.”

“Way ahead of you there.”

“I’m going to get me some coffee. Maybe caffeine will clarify the proper etiquette and verbiage.”

“Wouldn’t want to be you.”

“Yeah. They didn’t exactly cover this one at Florida State.”

“I bet they do now.”

“Get out of here, Felicia.”

“Don’t say cheer panties.”

“Round up the deviant and the underwear model.”

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Back at my desk with my coffee, nothing seemed any better. A sexting scandal on the first week of school at Gulf Point High School, one of the top high schools in Florida. It was a bad omen for the year. The inmates were prematurely restless.

The last time we had a scandal this bad the first week, it hadn't been the students acting out but some of my own demented staff. It was two years ago, right after we got the new guidance counselor, and I discovered Rosalind Karr, a veteran teacher of 26 years, was nursing some blossoming mental defect that had gone long undetected.

It was at our first faculty meeting of the first week, always held that Monday, the one where we've traditionally introduced new staff, only three this year, all very mundane and uneventful. Then we got to the last, the new guidance counselor, candidly my favorite hire of the bunch, impeccably credentialed and enthusiastically recommended. I meant every word I uttered in his introductory remarks.

"And, finally, the last addition to the GPHS family is a GPHS alumni success story, class of '92. He has a master's in counseling and a certification as a licensed mental health counselor with an emphasis in educational psychology. I know Mrs. Carruth and the rest of the counselors are as excited to have him on staff as I am. Please welcome our newest guidance counselor and a valuable new member of the GPHS team, Geoffrey Chase."

I was expecting the half-hearted claps the last three received. What I had never expected was for a woman in her mid-60's to get up in a huff like one of our delinquent charges and call out in a mock whisper,

"Guidance counselor, that's bullshit" as she clomped out.

Geoffrey Chase stood there with an expression as stoic as mine was dumbfounded while everyone else was too busy whispering about the mysterious drama to even remember to clap.

Later, in my office, I had let myself explode at Ms. Karr, arms crossed against her chest in defiance.

"What in God's name were you thinking to treat a new member of this staff this way? A staff member chosen by myself, personally, exceedingly qualified, a testament to the quality of education of this very institution – he should have been welcomed back and held up as an exemplar. But you've made him an object of rumor and insinuation now. I'm just dying to hear the rationale behind such juvenile behavior from such a senior member of this staff."

Ms. Karr sat stone-faced, cantankerous as ever and maddeningly silent.

"Oh, no. You don't get to impugn someone's character in front of a room of their peers with vulgarities and clam up on me now. You'll sit here until I hear whatever horrible crime you've imagined Mr. Chase to have committed that could justify such unprofessional behavior, or I swear I'll write this up in your file."

I doubted, at the time, that the last threat had much teeth, but I was furious and had limited options dealing with a teacher so many years tenured as Ms. Karr. I don't think she had ever been written up, and I could only hope that the desire to retire with an unblemished record still resonated somewhere in that dusty old soul. Then I heard that tell-tale pre-confession

sigh anyone as well versed in adolescent interrogation as I would recognize -- the reliable harbinger of a withheld truth finding its way out of a reluctant mouth.

“You think it’s appropriate to have a guidance counselor at this school who committed a hoax against an entire community and used an unwitting student as an accomplice? You think such a person has the judgment and character to counsel adolescents?”

“What in the world are you speaking of, Ms. Karr? I don’t have time for riddles here.”

“He alone made up that story about the UFO, used a naive young girl, also from this school, who had an internship at the Gulf Post Guardian to spread his lies in the newspaper. I’m sure you know the story. You do live here, Mr. Davenport.”

I, of course, knew to what she was referring. Everyone who lived here heard about the UFO’s and that crazy fall in the early 90’s when it seemed like everybody in this town lost its collective minds. The fall an entire top secret Air Force unit decided to collectively go AWOL from their post in Germany and chased a UFO, here, to Gulf Point. Our sleepy little beach community made CNN, the only way we ever did – for weird bad news.

And as I thought about it, silently fuming at the ridiculousness of this whole thing, I did seem to remember one story had involved a teenage boy, the name, if I’d ever known it, long forgotten. Could it have been Geoffrey Chase? It was possible. Did it matter a 17-year-old boy made up a story about seeing a UFO? I don’t think so. And the fact that this was the explanation I was receiving for her earlier antics renewed my righteous anger.

“Are you telling me that gross display in there was about something Mr. Chase did when he was 17 years old? Making up a silly story? One of a rash of such stories, a contagion in our city that fall, as I remember it, told by much older, supposedly respectable members of this community? But let’s pick Geoffrey Chase out of the bunch and give him a life-sentence because Judge Karr thinks it should be so. I’m beyond disappointed with you, Ms. Karr.”

She didn’t look so haughty now, and I took some comfort in that. Maybe it was just her age. She didn’t seem to enjoy this place much now, obviously holding out to that critical 30-year retirement mark. She looked to the floor, sufficiently chastened.

“I don’t want to hear another word from your mouth about this man, shouted or whispered or otherwise. Do you understand me, Ms. Karr?”

She didn’t say anything.

“I require a response.”

“You’ve made your decision.”

“And that’s the end of it. He’s moved on with his life obviously, and however you think this involves you, you need to move on with yours if you want to end your career here on a positive note. Now, I have more pressing business to attend to, so if you’ll excuse me —“

She didn’t wait until I finished. Just got up and left, head appropriately down. I had hoped that would be the end of it, an isolated incident of malice from a crotchety busybody spinster who should have probably already retired.

But on Friday, when Carson Winthrop walked into my office to air his shocking grievance against Ms. Karr, far more disturbing and detrimental to her career than this faculty meeting debacle, any such hopes were completely dashed. Carson Winthrop was a handsome, beloved student by his teachers and peers alike, with a spotless academic record, a 3.97 GPA,

a star on the soccer field and debate team. That he later ended his senior year by being crowned Mr. Gulf Point High and receiving a full scholarship to Brown University surprised no one. But that day, Carson walked into my office with an uncharacteristically serious face and said a thing to me I had to ask him to repeat it stunned me so much.

“Ms. Karr offered me alcohol and asked to see my penis.”

It was the beginning of a story I’d hear again and again, so much so that now, two years later, the details still live in the front of my brain. One of the worst scandals I’d dealt with in my 10 years as principal and, like the cheer briefs, thrust upon us brutally in the rawness of the first week. I finished my coffee and felt as inadequate as I had to the task ahead as when I took the first sip. And then Felicia walked in.

“The Hayes’ here yet?”

“Nope. They’ve still got ten minutes.”

“Well, send in the deviant. Dying to hear what she has to say for herself.”

“She looks scared to death.”

“Oh, Felicia, I call that prepped and ready.”

LIESEL POMERANTZ, 2010

Never trust a virgin. That was my rookie mistake. Boy, did I ever regret it now and probably would until I escaped away to college -- if that was even a possibility. One more thought that made me shiver almost as much Mr. Davenport’s overly air conditioned, cheaply decorated office where I sat, half-listening, as he bellowed on about possible criminal charges and my imminent suspension.

He was trying to scare me. I was just trying to focus anywhere but those three half brown-gray greasy hair strands insufficient to cover a shiny skull the sight of which made me want to regurgitate my breakfast smoothie all over his shitty orange carpet. There wasn’t any point to all his efforts, hair and otherwise. I knew I was toast and totally screwed when my parents learned about the whole fiasco and my overly inflated role. Avalon Hayes might be a virgin, but she was screwing me here, in this very room, today, without a doubt.

I knew it as soon as I heard Ms. Clarkson had turned in two sophomore boys for looking at sexy pictures of a cheerleader on a computer in the library. And, of course, I heard that terrible news — we all heard it, as we heard most such things, stretching in the gym before cheer practice from the saintly, busy lips of Mary Nell, another virgin, and Avalon Hayes’ prior best friend. Just two silly little Beliebers until I picked out Avalon to promote from this life of sleepovers and turtle brownies and endless Gossip Girl reruns to a world of boys and parties and fun.

“Before me, you watched Gossip Girl, and now you live it.”

“You’re definitely Serena van der Woodsen.”

“No, shit. And you’re still a little Jenny Humphrey, but if you hang with me, I promise you’ll be Blair Waldorf by graduation.” Her eyes had gone wild with that one, and I knew I was speaking the language of her goody-goody heart. Then her cheeks got so pink I knew she was having a dirty little thought.

“But that means I’ll need to find my own Chuck Bass.”

“Oh, hell yeah, you dirty little slut. You need a little bad boy in your life. Any contenders? Whatever you do, don’t say Evan Richards. He may look like Robert Pattinson, but he lacks the equipment to back it up, if you know what I’m saying.”

“And how exactly would you know that?”

“First hand, of course. This one.”

I illustrated with a wiggle of fingers. She rolled her eyes.

“You’re such a whore.”

“And you’re a horny virgin. What’s worse?”

She shrugged her shoulders, and then quickly, like she might lose courage if she delayed one more second, she spit out a surprising name.

“Emile Vipond.”

Hearing that name uttered like a wish from such innocent lips was shockingly perverse. It took me a minute to process it and find the right response.

“Well, well, well, an ambitious choice. Have a taste for some French peen; do we?”

She looked at the ground, embarrassed, like I disapproved, which was far from the case. Emile Vipond was the new French foreign exchange student, a junior, but the closest thing here to a real man. Since the exchange students arrived at the beginning of August, Emile, who was staying with Garrett Levinger, the quarterback, had already attended enough parties to acquire a wicked reputation and a hot girlfriend.

Tall and built as the toughest jock but charming as hell with his clove cigarettes and rotating poetry book of the day, shoulder length dark hair he wore sometimes in a pony tail and sparkling blue eyes filled with secrets and sex. Emile Vipond had a voice and an accent that made even the most ordinary American girl name he uttered sound exotic and special. Even I, the worldliest girl you’ll find at ‘ole Gulf Point High, felt a little out of my league when I caught him staring at my ass, not even pretending to look away, that dreamy slow blink of appreciation that made you instantly wet.

It was the big news on the first day of school that the week before Emile Vipond had broken up with his girlfriend Chelsea Perkins, the female lead in all the GPHS drama productions. Chelsea Perkins had the hair, height and legs of a Victoria Secret model and definitely put out. Now, she was starting her senior year a teary-eyed basket case everybody felt sorry for. Speculation was rampant. Of course, we got the deets from Mary Nell.

“He dumped her because she wouldn’t do a threesome with Kelsey Fiveash.”

Emile Vipond was Chuck Bass on steroids, and he was single. Avalon Hayes was apparently a virgin who, when she decided to go, went hard. I touched her rosy embarrassed cheek.

“Hey, I’m impressed. I don’t think virgins are his fetish though. We’ll need to work on your image a little bit, but, I mean, it’s totally doable.”

She laughed.

“And that’s what I’m going for, totally doable.”

And there, lying in the grass of her own front yard, smoking her first cigarette of her sheltered small life, it was this sweet little virgin with an impressively dirty imagination who concocted every detail of this stupid plan. Even the detail of doing this in school in the

uniform, on the field to capture the attention of a mind as wild as that one -- a plan that had ended with me shivering in this pleather chair being yelled at like a criminal pervert.

“What in the world do you even have to say for yourself?”

“All I did was take a picture. Hiking up her skirt, the posing, sending it off to — whoever (I was neither a virgin or a rat) in the text, that was all her idea.”

His disgusted face said everything. I was disbelieved. My reputation preceded me here. I’d never tried to hide who I was behind some sweet little innocent face, like that traitor I knew was waiting somewhere in these offices to gut me, Avalon Hayes. But he wouldn’t get any of that. It was nothing anyone with hair that bad could ever understand.

So I’d sit here mute and let him have his say. Did I pass a note to Emile Vipond in study hall and ask him for his number? Absolutely. Did I take a picture of a girl bent over with her skirt hiked up like the DTF little freak she was? You betcha. Did I even send it from my phone to the horniest, hottest, most experienced guy in this whole school? Oh, yeah.

But was one second of any of this my idea? Hell no. But that very instant that Mary Nell Becker started running her mouth about a picture scandal and Avalon gasped and looked like she was about to freaking cry, did I know that little traitor would find a way to make this all my fault? Oh, you know I did.

And she’s right. It really is my fault. I knew better. You never trust a virgin. They’ll screw you every time. And I was screwed for sure. I felt it down deep in my shivering bones, but I swore this virgin was going to pay.

AVALON HAYES, 2010

“Avalon, honey, your parents and Mr. Davenport are already in there, and Liesel’s been escorted out, so it’s time. Okay?”

Ms. McBride’s gentle words as she led me from the mailroom to Mr. Davenport’s office, patting my hand as we went reassured me. The adults were ready to let me slide. At least, the ones who worked here were all treating me like I was this sweet, cracked thing if you talked too roughly to I’d break into a million pieces.

Walking into the office to take a seat in between my parents, my dad not even looking at me or Mom or Mr. Davenport, just the window, following a custodian on a riding lawn mower - - my mom looking as awkward and uncomfortable as I’d ever seen.

Maybe it was just weird to see her at my school, a place she never came, like the other mothers -- not even to see me cheer. Dad always brought videos home from the games, and she’d make a big deal with popcorn, and we’d all sit together, even Ada, on the couch. It was annoying, but you couldn’t get too mad about it when it was obvious she really did care, just had her “reasons.”

She wouldn’t go into things too deep except to say that she left Gulf Point senior year, before graduation, and finished up with a GED. The why of her leaving was always absent from the story, but she made up for it with the happiest ending I, for one, certainly couldn’t argue with:

“And thank God I did because I’d have been finishing out a senior year instead of getting a job at an architecture office where I met your father, and you, sweet girl, would not exist at all.”

Once when I was feeling sorry for myself I had the nerve to press further.

“I need to know why, Mom, why you left and why you won’t go back.”

“A lot of bad memories there, Avalon. I’m sorry. I just can’t.”

“Such bad memories you went out of your way to register us there out of district, using grandma’s address, make us go to a school you despise so much? It’s too terrible for you but great for us? I don’t get it, Mom.”

“It’s a person not the place – a person gone long ago. It’s the best place for you to go to school.”

“Then why can’t you come?”

“Because, for me, the person will always be there, like a ghost, you know, that haunts me.”

Yet, today, here she was. I’d finally done something monumental enough to require her attendance. If I wasn’t so ashamed, it would have felt like an accomplishment. I wondered if she’d seen her ghost. She did look pretty spooked.

It’d be one more thing to feel guilty for if I wasn’t so angry at the two of them already. Unlike both of their openly disappointed faces, mine was a secret anger, locked up tight. I might have to lie today, but I was in good company. I was surrounded, today, by liars.

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“Look, I know this is uncomfortable for all of us in this room today. No one is as unhappy as me to be a party to such a lurid conversation; I assure you. I’ve interviewed the young photographer. She’s unrepentant, actually tried to blame Avalon here a bit, ” Mr. Davenport spoke nervously, staring at my father.

My dad looked at me for the first time since we’d been here with a mix of shock and a question in his eyes. When he saw me now, the product of years of his devotion and attention, with shame and confusion, did it give him any comfort, his secret, that he was not my actual father? That this Latter Day Saint Boy Scout hadn’t really produced a thing as flawed from its beginning as me. He’d just done the best he could with somebody else’s mistake.

His disappointment overwhelmed me. I couldn’t hide my tears even as I dropped my head from his sullen gaze to the ground. Of course, my parents and the principal had no idea what was really wrong, just poor little Avalon contemplating her shame. My mom leaned over and rubbed my back so soft. Mr. Davenport actually walked over and put a Kleenex in my hand.

“There, there. I don’t trust one word out of that practiced liar’s mouth. It’s apparent from her defiant attitude. From what I gather from my discussion with Coach Appleton, she’s a very ribald character. While this action might shock our civilized sensibilities, it appears consistent with a certain defect in her nature.”

I wiped my eyes and looked at my dad's slow nodding, glad to be redirected down a far less disturbing path than the truth. Then Mr. Davenport looked at me very intently.

"It's just — I need to hear it from you, Avalon, yourself, that you were not involved in this besides being an unfortunate and unwitting object of a photograph."

He looked over at his computer screen, and I took a deep breath. Of course, I'd considered the possibility of a lie. Suddenly, though, it was as if he was doing most of the lying for me. All I had to do was go along. It hardly seemed to be a choice. Then he continued.

"I mean looking at it now, it certainly seems you could have been stretching and caught off guard by a teammate who snapped this picture without your knowledge. I don't mean to press the issue here, but you haven't said a word."

Dad grabbed my hand, like he was prompting to me to respond. Mr. Davenport continued with his speech.

"I know you're upset, but you need to tell me how this picture came to be taken, all right. It's very important I hear it from you."

If this was not enough, my dad, if not my father, leaned over towards me to look me in the eye. He was nodding his head, willing me with his eyes to clear this all up and be his innocent little daughter once again. I wanted nothing more for that to be the case.

"It's just like you said, Mr. Davenport. We were stretching. I didn't realize she'd taken the picture until after she'd texted it. Now everybody's seen it. Everybody's talking about it."

When I cried this time, I was crying for Liesel Pomerantz who would never be my friend again. Who could blame her? I was crying for Emile Vipond who I'd wanted so badly I would do anything for, but he had singlehanded turned me into a joke and put me in this terrible predicament. Even Mary Nell, who I'd abandoned for Liesel last year, surely thought I was a first class skank now. She always knew the gossip first. I was now friendless and fatherless.

Then it hit how cheer, for me, was over, as well. Liesel was the captain. Everyone looked up to her. It wasn't just being shunned. I was a flyer; they threw me into the air. These girls could do me serious bodily harm. All it would take is one sly little wink from Liesel to that ass-kisser base Christina Frederick and suddenly, "I don't know what happened, Coach Appleton. I lost my grip. I can't believe she fell and broke her leg. I feel so horrible."

I cried so hard I crumpled over in my chair. My dad pulled me over to him and rested my head on his shoulder and just let me go. For a moment, I forgot all the lies, even his.

Mr. Davenport gave us a minute, and then he cleared his throat.

"Mr. and Mrs. Hayes, I wish there was a way that I could construct a time machine and undo Ms. Pomerantz's photography and its subsequent proliferation. I would like nothing more than to unsee them myself. I cannot imagine your own discomfort or that of your daughter."

My dad nodded and finally spoke.

"Well, I appreciate the sentiment."

"I know it's not very helpful. I'm not going to lie to you, Avalon. I cannot see how this is going to be an easy year. I promise we will be on the lookout for any incidents of harassment. We'll dole out punishments, try to contain it, but it's a fantasy for any of us to believe that's going to be entirely effective."

“Well, there’s got to be some other option,” said my mute mother, moved by the hopelessness to speak.

“Well, I was getting to that, Ms. Hayes. I’ve talked to Ms. Carruth at guidance actually. They are, of course, ready to offer Avalon counseling support to stay here and get through this year. She has also suggested a possible alternative that might sound a bit extreme, but I’ll present it to you in case it’s something that does interest you. It actually might be the solution to everyone’s problems.”

I don’t know about my parents, but I was open to any alternative to a year of broken legs and endless “blue crotch” taunts in the hall.

“I’m sure you’re all aware that this school offers dual enrollment. Students can finish their senior year at either Pensacola Junior College or The University of West Florida and as a bonus get college credit for their work. Now, Pensacola Junior College has already started classes for the semester, so that’s no longer a valid option for Avalon. But The University of West Florida doesn’t start until next week. Ms. Carruth says there will be no problem enrolling Avalon there. She’s personally checked Avalon’s academic record, and she meets the criteria.”

I bounced in my seat with excitement at hearing this news. I turned to Mom, and she was shaking her head in agreement. She wouldn’t be the problem. Then I turned to the other side where I knew the resistance would come. I wasn’t wrong.

“Mr. Davenport, give me a second here. I’m still reeling from hearing about my daughter being turned into some kind of sex object at the high school, and now you people want me to ship her off to college.”

“Neil, it’s not that dramatic. No one would be shipping anyone off. The college is fifteen minutes from our house. She’d be here with us, just the same. It would just give her a fresh start,” argued my Mom.

I wanted to hug her, so grateful she was here. Mr. Davenport nodded.

“I’m sure this is all a lot to deal with right now, Mr. Hayes. And it may be an unappealing idea altogether. I only presented it to you as an option. Ms. Carruth says Avalon must be enrolled on Friday if she is to start, so you have a day to think it over before you totally rule it out.”

The expression on Dad’s face told me he was not doing much considering. I wanted to sign up right away. I never liked Mr. Davenport so much in my whole life. The possibility of UWF made me feel suddenly a little better, like I might make it through this year. Then I remembered Liesel and what she was facing. I suddenly I felt awful again.

“Mr. Davenport, what’s going to happen to Liesel?”

“Ah, yes, Ms. Pomerantz. My inclination is to suspend her, 10 days. Now, that being said, you are well within your rights to consider pressing charges. Your daughter is 17, a minor. Technically what Ms. Pomerantz has done here is disseminate child pornography —“

“Hold on. What? No! No charges.”

The words had come out of my throat like an uncontrollable explosion as soon as it registered the trouble I may have caused for my once friend,

Everybody was looking at me now, and then my dad spoke.

“Avalon, we can talk about that —“

“Absolutely not, Dad. It’s enough. This is all getting a little nuts. She’s a kid, too, you know?”

I couldn’t let this go any farther than it had even if it meant arguing with my dad.

Mr. Davenport stood up then, having spent all the time on my problems he intended to today.

“Well, I can certainly understand that point of view. And it is this school’s mission, Avalon to make this year as successful and productive and happy for you as possible. Do any of you have any further questions about any of the information or options I’ve presented to you?

Nobody spoke.

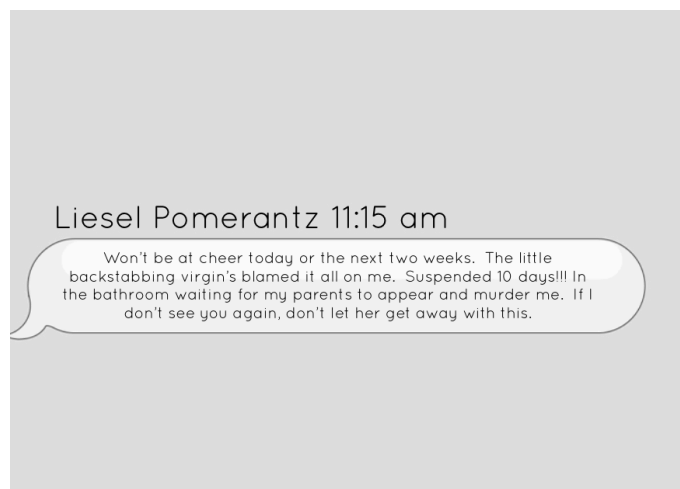
“Well, then, I’m going to get Avalon back to class, and I thank you both for taking the time to come in today. I apologize on behalf of the GPHS staff for this whole unpleasantness. Please do not hesitate to call myself or the guidance department with any questions or concerns. Remember that Friday deadline, Avalon, if you’re interested in the dual enrollment.”

Mr. Davenport ushered us out and shut his office door. Mom was grabbing her keys, and Dad was leaning over to kiss me on the cheek and whispering in my ear.

“Be strong, honey. If you have any problem today, you do what he said and let someone know. We’ll talk tonight.”

Mom gave me a quick pat on the shoulder then raced off to catch up with Dad on the way to the parking lot. I just stood there watching them walk off together, leaving me in this place like it was any other day. It was not. Everybody in school now thought I was a slut and a traitor, and now I was off to 3rd period like nothing ever happened. I knew as bad as my day had started, it was going to end much worse

CHRISTINA FREDERICK, 2010



Mr. Higgins had five kids at the board working on finding the total surface area in square inches of a pyramid, and none of their answers were the same. At least, in feeling like a hopeless dumbass, I was not alone. He was in between all of them, back to us, trying to guide them through it. Everybody at their seats had given up and moved on to talking or passing notes. I took the opportunity to check my phone.

I'd placed it carefully on the hill of MAC makeup, my chunky pink Kate Spade wallet in my Dooney & Bourke purse on the floor beside me, in good peeking range for moments just like this. My fingers longed to caress, reconnect with the long lost world, but that was impossible with the Nazi cellphone policy at this school. "If a phone is seen or heard by any member of the GPHS staff, it's considered 'in use.'" And a phone 'in use' is confiscated by the teacher until the end of the day, and the user receives detention.

There was no way my iPhone 3GS was ending up in Mr. Higgins black plastic bin with its ominous PHONE JAIL label. Do you know how many messages I'd miss in the next three hours? Unthinkable. No way my fat ass was trading cheer practice for afternoon school detention with that old molester Ms. Karr. I'd just get fatter and maybe even molested, if she's into girls now. I, for one, didn't want to find out.

Right when I was staring at it, like it was fate, the black screen lit up, to reveal a respectable-sized message that was too long for me to read before the light clicked off again. I only saw two things: the sender (Liesel Pomerantz) and two words (backstabbing virgin). But it was enough. I knew exactly whose tiny little hands had done the stabbing here: Avalon Hayes. The tiniest little bitch I cannot stand.

All the cheerleaders knew about the pictures and Emile Vipond. The photo shoot happened on the football field right before cheer practice. None of us had seen the actual photography. How I wish I had. I'd be in Mr. Higgins office right now outing all of Avalon's lies. By the time the rest of us approached them, you would have thought they were drunk the way they laughed like they had the best inside joke ever.

I'd looked at Liesel, not even bothering with the other one, and asked what everyone else was thinking.

"Are you guys high?"

That only made them both laugh harder. Liesel looked at me and said, "I just sent a dirty picture of this one to Emile Vipond."

And do you know what Avalon Hayes did?

Did she gasp in shock?

Did she yell in anger?

No. She'd crossed her tiny fingers.

I wish it was enough to convict her with Mr. Davenport, but I knew it wasn't. She had that baby angel face all the teachers fell for like idiots. He'd say I misunderstood, that it meant something else.

All I could do now was be there for Liesel Pomerantz, and I would. My hand flew up before I realized Mr. Higgins, still turned, couldn't see me with his back turned. Then I grabbed my purse and flew right up there and tapped him on the shoulder.

"Bathroom pass, female emergency."

Jesus, was it was ever!

Mr. Higgins turned completely red.

"All right, Ms. Frederick. I don't need extraneous detail. You know where it is."

I couldn't believe it had come to this. Liesel owed me big time. I raced over to his filing cabinet to extract the lavender toilet seat (yes, an actual toilet seat) from its space between the cabinet and the wall. This seat, with HIGGINS written on the underside in black Sharpie all caps, our hilarious math teacher insisted we use as a bathroom pass. It was for sure a definite violation of our human rights and an attempt to make us hold our pee which my mom says can give you a UTI.

Something more motivating than pee was in my head, and even as I heard the snickering, I raced past and out into the hall without even giving anybody a well-deserved middle finger. I had no time. My friend and mentor Liesel Pomerantz was in trouble. Even if she had chosen that little goody goody, instead of me, to make over and take to all the parties this summer and try to help land the hottest guy in school, I would not hold it against her.

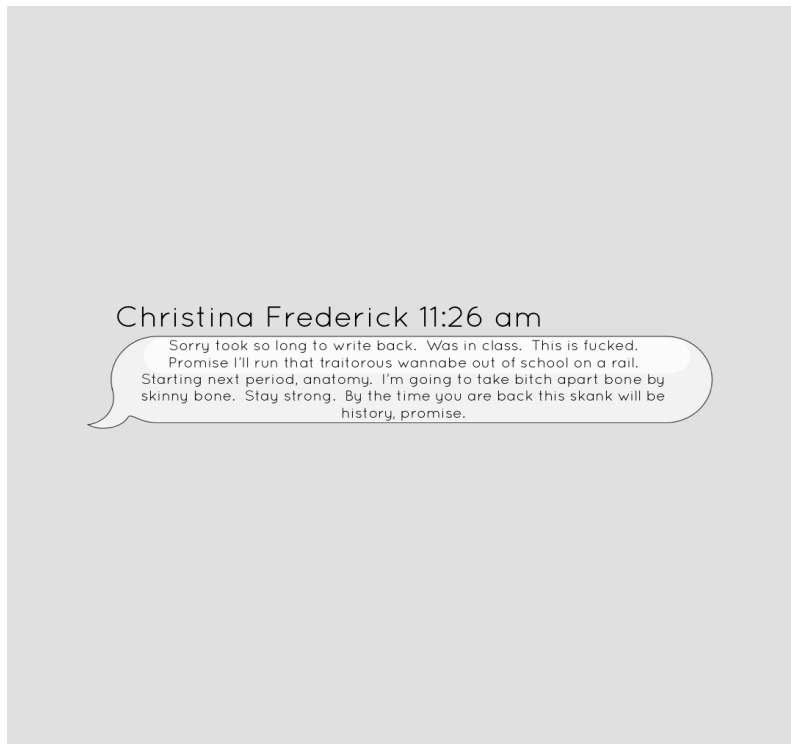
Since I'd gained 20 pounds from freshmen to junior year and demoted from flyer status to base, Liesel, the goddess of cheerleading at GPHS had never given up on me. Last year, she pretty much became my personal trainer. She wrote recipes for smoothies, had me run extra at home and was forever checking in. When I came to school Monday to start the new year, I was five pounds lighter than the day I'd left. It was working.

I had Liesel Pomerantz alone to thank. Nobody else cared. They all just sat around drinking endless Cokes, eating their Cheetos, Combos, Oreos looking at me confused, like I asked for this, for my body to change. Avalon Hayes, always stuffing those damn gummy bears into a Chanel lipstick pout, never gained a pound, kept flying high while my job became holding her up, me in drug store lipstick, shaky, on a diet of celery and carrot sticks.

The bathroom was quiet and empty. Still I opted for the privacy of a stall. Roaming teachers poked their heads in here all the time. It was obvious we were flush with rats and tattletales in this student body. Even the cheer squad, apparently, was not immune. I threw Mr. Higgins' toilet seat pass on the floor and pulled my phone out and read the message all the way through as quickly as I could.

Unbelievable. Ten day suspension! Liesel's GPA was better than the required 2.5 all Gulf Point cheerleaders had to maintain, but not by a lot. With ten days of zeros for missed assignments, it would end her cheer career at Gulf Point. And while I didn't know her college plans, there wasn't any doubt she had them. She had an older brother who was a National Merit Scholar. I'm not sure exactly what all it meant, but I know he got a scholarship and went to Princeton. Now, if Mr. and Mrs. Pomerantz decided to let her live, Liesel would be lucky to go to UWF. It was completely fucked up when you thought about it.

I wrote back as fast as my fingers would move, hoping for more details, an update, something:



I meant every word. I sat on the toilet seat for a good five minutes staring at my phone waiting for a response. I could not wait for Anatomy and Physiology. The blood typing project was today. I hoped I'd remember my permission slip, check as soon as I got back to geometry. It would be a pity to get sent to the library with all the other losers whose parents thought they were too immature to handle needles and delay, for one second, the justice that scrawny traitor had coming to her.

I waited another five minutes, no further messages from Liesel. As much as I hated to do it I decided I better head back to class. Mr. Higgins would write me up if I stayed longer, and I'd wind up in detention after all. How they let Ms. Karr even work at this school after what she did, I'll never understand. My mom says teachers unions are powerful things. Apparently so.

I'm a powerful thing, too. I may not be little or cute like Avalon Hayes, but I'm a really good friend. Much better than she ever was. Avalon Hayes would soon see how loyal and true a friend I really am, and I, for one, was going to have a little fun

AVALON HAYES, 2010

Let me tell you about the liars ...

Everyone in 3rdrd period English was racing through the assigned writing prompt that awaited me in Ms. Owens small, ladylike cursive writing in turquoise marker on the board: How Are You Most Like Your Parents? By the time I pulled out a piece of paper. that first line, it just came right out. Then Ms. Owens came over to my desk and leaned in close.

"Avalon, I know you got started late, so no rush. You can finish it as homework and turn it in tomorrow."

"Okay. Thanks."

But I was writing away. Each character I scrawled on the lined paper muted a bit of the buzz of whispers I'd heard as I walked into the classroom. I lost myself in the story, my story.

Avalon Hayes

August 18th, 2010

English IV

3rd Period

HOW AM I MOST LIKE MY PARENTS?

Let me tell you about the liars. My mother is a mystery. She dropped out of high school for an unknown reason: a reason that is a person. A person so sinister she's afraid of the ghost they've left behind in this very building. Is it my father? Who knows? I sure wish I did.

But you'll never get the truth out of that one unless you find her secret nook where she keeps that little black diary, its cover so soft it feels like felt. God knows I've tried. The truth is in there somewhere. I've caught her scribbling in it furiously twice now, both times looking about as guilty as if I'd walk in on her kissing some strange man.

The first time, I'd surprised her at the kitchen island, coming home early from Mary Nell's after we'd had a fight (about Liesel Pomerantz, of course) last year. She'd blushed and pulled it tight to her chest before I was even close enough to see a thing. I'd asked her what she was writing, and she couldn't even look me in the eye when she lied and said, "Oh, just a to-do list, nothing." Then she'd said she had to change and took off, like a guilty criminal, on one of her long runs.

It was obviously a diary. I didn't even know my mom had one. When my mom went on runs, she'd be gone an hour, maybe two. I'm surprised she wasn't running marathons by now. I searched every drawer in her room and every cranny I could get to in her walk-in closet before Ada, my little sister, came home and started nosing around, like usual, and I had to abandon the whole thing.

It's a shame about Ada. She's snoop and smart and could maybe have helped, if only she wasn't such a hopeless snitch.

The second time I caught her, I learned more. It was the end of the first week of summer cheer camp, only a few weeks ago now. My stomach had been hurting all morning, but I hadn't put it together why. Then while we were stretching out, I felt that sneaky wetness and saw the tiniest dot of red come through my white shorts, my faced conveniently positioned as close as it would ever be to a perfect view.

"Coach Appleton, female emergency. I have to go home right now."

I was already running to my car while everybody laughed when I heard her call out.

"Be back in an hour, Hayes, or you get a demerit."

(Ever since she had to give me rides home, a few times sophomore year, across the bridge to Pensacola, Coach Appleton knew I wasn't really a Pointer (the slang kids from Gulf Point were called). She'd always been cool about it, like she was this day. Another cool person I'd lost today.)

So I'd returned unexpectedly only to find Mr. Falcon, our neighbor and handyman, fixing boards on the floor of our porch. Not wanting to disturb him, I'd run around through the gate into the back yard and used the back door. So this time when I spied Mom, in her same little seat at the island, I was coming from behind, her back to me. She was bent over writing, obviously not a clue anyone was home. I moved towards her as silently and rapidly as I could. Leaning over her shoulder, still undetected, I saw it: poetry.

"You write poetry!"

It wasn't a question. She was caught. Looked it, too.

"It's nothing, Avalon. Just scribbling I do here and there. Let's keep it to ourselves, okay?"

It had made me feel good in the moment to have a secret with Mom. But the more I thought about I realized two things: 1.) The truth was in that black book or others like it; I just knew it. She hid them well. I'll give her that. She had a hiding place I could not even begin to imagine. 2.) All my family besides me were artists. I had already known about Dad and Ada. Dad's an architect who also draws and paints in his little studio shack in the back. Ada's out there with him on the weekends and some week nights with their music and mutual masterpieces. He used to invited me to join; it was nothing but embarrassing. I'm all hearts and stick figures. It's not in me.

I wanted something of my own to bond with Dad. That's why I sometimes went to his church even though, it only makes me feel like a hopelessly bad person. Never religious enough to please him. My Dad is a Mormon. He doesn't drink coffee or cuss or watch R-rated movies or have impure thoughts. Yet he's been lying to me my whole life. He isn't my father at all, but he's never planning to let me know. He'll keep up the lie forever. He thinks he's gotten away with it, but he's wrong.

Two things happened this summer that confirmed my deepest fear. The first happened at Dad's office where I was going to work as an office assistant those few dead weeks between end of school and cheer camp. It started with what sounded like a nice comment on my appearance by Mabel McGuire, the receptionist, as I walked into the door that first day.

"Well, look at you, so grown up. You're a dead ringer for your mother minus the hair. I guess you get that blonde from your daddy."

Then she looked over to my Mr. McGill's secretary. Lorna Rice, worked at WFG forever, but I'm pretty sure doesn't really like any of us.

"Don't you think so, Lorna?"

Lorna eye's flashed with meanness like she was holding in a secret, inside joke, but then her lips turned into a fake smile.

"From her daddy indeed," each word filled with a menace that tightened up my throat from the inside.

Ms. McGuire looked confused. She motioned over to the reception area.

"Avalon, if you'll have a seat, I'm going to run to the ladies, and then we'll figure out a home base for you here, okay?"

"Sure."

My heart was pounding. I wanted to run over to Ms. Rice and make her explain herself and tell me all the wicked secrets she clearly knew about my family. I picked up a magazine and pretended to read it, but I was really watching Ms. Rice. When I saw her follow Ms. McGuire into the restroom, I waited a second, then I followed, too.

I pushed the door open just a crack, not sure if they'd be in the stalls or just standing, talking. From the echo and the distance, it sounded like they were in the stalls. I still didn't dare enter. I spied from the door and listened to Ms. Rice's words. As much as I needed to hear them, they were a poison in my heart:

"I'm telling you she was knocked up when she came to work here. Everybody knew. None of us were supposed to discuss it. Neil Hayes is not that girl's father."

I let go of the door without even worrying about being discreet. Then afraid they'd know it was me who'd been spying, I ran back to my seat, hid behind the magazine, tears burning their way out of my eyeballs. Later, I told Dad I was sorry, but I just didn't feel comfortable there. He tried to get me to talk about it, but I wouldn't. What was I supposed to say? "Oh, by the way, Dad, I know you're a liar and not my father."

And then the bell rang, right in the middle of me documenting the evidence. It brought me back to my senses though. This confession had turned into something far too truthful to turn in as a high school writing assignment. I crumpled up the pages into a tight ball, waited until the crowd of kids turning in papers at Ms. Owens' desk thinned before I threw my ball of truth into the trash.

"I'm sorry, Ms. Owens. I tried, but I was too rushed. Is it okay if I turn it in tomorrow like you said?"

Ms. Owens looked at me with big, round sympathetic brown eyes I was sure had seen me in my underwear, too.

"Absolutely, Avalon. Don't stress yourself about it. Just keep your head up, okay?"

Oh, she'd definitely seen or, at least, knew about the picture. My cheeks hot with shame, I nodded and walked out the door. I couldn't focus on this any longer. Anatomy and Physiology was next period, and I had, in my binder, a document granting admission to the most personally relevant science project ever. I could not be late.

A+

As soon as I walked into Ms. Pearson's classroom, I knew I was in trouble. We sat at black lab tables, two students per table. Mindy Gregory, a quiet girl who played clarinet in the marching band, next to me. Joseph McAlestor and Randy Woods normally sat at the lab table behind us. I noticed right away those boys were now two tables back, the one previously occupied by Penelope Marshall and Christina Frederick. The two girls were now directly behind me.

There was only one reason for the move. Liesel had sicced her hungry pitbull Christina Frederick on me. With Ms. Pearson out of the room, the two girls wicked laughter when they saw me sounded demonic. All the rest of the kids getting in their seats were quiet and looked away. Nobody wanted to get involved with this. Even Mindy Gregory, who was an actual Girl Scout, if the oldest one on the planet (or at least this school), wouldn't even give me the smallest glance of a greeting. Then I heard Christina's booming voice.

"I spy with my little eyes a lying, anorexic virgin."

Lying virgin, I get. But anorexic? I've never even been on a diet. I have a pack of gummy colas in my purse right now. Leave it to Christina Frederick to always make everything about weight. Penelope Marshall howled and cackled like the witch she looked like in that black lipstick and dyed black hair.

As bad as it was, I could write off the two of them. But the way everyone else just looked away was almost worse. Some kids had even actually laughed. I knocked the mean note that greeted me on my lab stool in black block letters, SNITCHING BITCHES GET STITCHES, to the ground and tried to stay strong. I wanted so much to just run to guidance right now like Mr. Davenport suggested. But Ms. Pearson would be here soon, and I couldn't risk missing out on the blood typing. There would be not a shred of doubt about the liars then.

"Hey, Christina, do you have Emile Vipond's number? I heard he's looking for a real woman, not a lying boobless virgin."

Christina howled. More laughs erupted from the almost full class. Mindy Gregory shook her head in disapproval, but she'd smiled a little, too. I had no allies here.

Encouraged by the audience, Christina continued.

"Oh, I don't know about that, P. Liesel says she's got first dibs on that French cock as soon as she gets out of lockdown."

I looked at my Hello Kitty watch. It was time for the bell. Where was Ms. Pearson? I'm sure those two would still tag-team me all period, but it would be with lowered voices, without such a large audience.

"Okay. Get out those permissions slips and pass them forward, folks."

It was Ms. Pearson. Thank you, God. The bell rang while she made her way to the desk.

I pulled my permission slip out of the binder and handed it to Reagan Summers who had turned to collect it with an awkward stare. Then before I could turn around to receive Penelope's permission slip, I felt something light bounce off the back of my head.

"Oh, be careful, Penelope. She's a rat, you know. She'll run and tell the teacher on you. Get you suspended for 10 days. Ruin your life over a paper airplane."

It was stupid I know, but I blinked back tears as I bent down to pick up the folded permission slip, unfolded it and brought it to the front myself.

“Forrest and Veronica, would you distribute the blood lab kits. Nobody open anything until I give further instructions. Avalon, since you’re up here, hand out blood type charts. Everybody else, please get out the list of blood types you’ve collected and put them to the side of your desk. We’ll get to that later.”

I took the sheets, still a little warm from the copier, made my walk of shame, to distribute them, dropping two at the corner of each table. I didn’t bother with even the smallest of pleasantries like eye contact. All I got were scoffs and snickers.

Then I hurried back to my seat just as Ms. Pearson was telling everybody to take out their materials and giving out the instructions.

“Since we’re working with actual blood here, people, there are strict safety protocols that will be observed. I’m passing out disposable work mats. At the end of this exercise, all of these materials we use will be rolled up in this mat, I will collect it in my biohazard trash bag. No one moves or talks until this process is complete unless it is a question with a hand raised. Any deviation from these rules will cause the entire project to be suspended, and the offender to be removed from the classroom. Is that understood?”

Everybody got silent now. No one wanted to be removed from this project. And no one was more happy for the peace and excited for the impending information than me.

“I want everybody to open up their alcohol swab and place it right on the package, at the ready. Next, I need you to remove the four collection sticks. Place them in close proximity to your other materials. Then remove the lancet from the case. Do not do anything with it yet until I say. Make sure both hands are well over the placemat to make sure any escaped blood droplets will be collected here.”

Ms. Pearson was straining to make sure everyone was following her specific directions to the letter, and my hands were shaking so much. What if I dropped the lancet and got evicted? Too much was at stake here.

“All right. When I give the signal, you’re going to place a droplet of blood on each of those four sticks. So we’re about to ready to use our lancets. Is everyone ready?”

Everyone nodded, and my heart pounded. I was more ready for this than anything in my whole life. I could almost feel the blood move inside me now anxious as I was to exit and to tell me a truth no one else my life dared. It seemed like an eternity before Ms. Pearson’s said it with a twinkle in her eye.

“Begin.”

AB-

Serums mixed and the bubble charts completed, we had our results. My blood was B+. Then, as instructed, we’d all transferred our newly discovered blood type to the page at the corner of the desk where we all had our collected blood types ready for the second (and much more essential, to me) part of the lesson.

Ms. Pearson had stressed these blood types could have come from anyone. It could but didn't have to include our actual parents. The chart would just show whether two types you picked could actually be your parents. It was truth time. As much as the answer shouldn't have surprised me, it cut me in two when I didn't see a B+ in that rectangular box where my mom (O-) and dad (A+) intersected on this page.

I was trying to hold it together, but all the lies of this day had officially taken their toll. Tears landed on the sheet smearing the ink the way I wish I could wipe out this truth I'd so desperately wanted to know.

"Avalon Hayes, are you all right?"

Apparently, my grief was visible all the way from the front of the class. I was mortified. It was bad enough I was crying. Now, Ms. Pearson had just alerted the natives. As I feared, coming from behind me, I heard a wicked laugh I knew meant the knives at my back were sharpened and ready.

"Awww. Did the little virgin just found out mommy is a whore?"

Christina Frederick delivered this at the perfect volume guaranteed to reach the ears of an impressive amount of students but not the teacher at the front of the class. This sucker punch, so to the gut, even if it had maybe been just evil luck, hurt me more than I could stand. And when I reacted to it, standing up and projecting the words chosen to wound the most. I was dunzo.

"Shut your mouth, you cow."

Penelope Marshall's hand clapped over her mouth. Christina Frederick, wounded in just the right spot, broke out into sobs. And everybody else in class laughed — at someone else at last.

Ms. Pearson's face got almost as red as the blood we'd just drawn.

"Avalon Hayes, come up here right now."

I walked to the front of class knowing I was in trouble, feeling terrible regardless. I knew there was the smallest possibility I could talk my way out of this if I explained the situation, but I didn't care. Whatever punishment was coming I deserved. I deserved it for the lie I'd just told about Christina just to hurt her. I deserved it for the lie I told in Mr. Davenport's office earlier. I thought back to English class earlier this afternoon: How Are You Most Like Your Parents? I didn't know