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KATE WHITE

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A NOVEL

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An Imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers

Dedication

To Seth Holbrook
Stepson Extraordinaire

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1

SOMETHING WASN'T RIGHT. She sensed it as soon as she began to walk across the quad that night. The weather was practically balmy, weird for late October, and yet the air carried the pungent smell of wood smoke. But that wasn't the reason things seemed strange to her. It was the deserted pathways. Though Phoebe wasn't really used to the place yet, she expected to find more than just a few people crossing campus at eight o'clock on a Friday night.

She'd veered left, planning to exit through the eastern gate, when with a start she discovered where everyone was. About forty people—both students and faculty—were congregated in front of Curry Hall. In the two months she'd been at Lyle College, she'd noticed that kids often relaxed outside this particular dorm, tossing Frisbees or lolling on the slope of the balding lawn, but tonight everyone was standing, their arms folded and their backs stiff, as if poised for news.

As she drew closer, she saw what was drawing their attention: two campus police, as well as a local town cop, were speaking to an auburn-haired girl who appeared to be fighting back tears. The dean of students—Tom something—was there, too, head lowered and listening intently to the girl.

Phoebe's first reaction was to just keep moving. There were things she

needed to do in Pennsylvania, but getting involved in someone else's drama wasn't one of them.

She started to walk away and then stopped. She knew that ten minutes later she'd regret not finding out what all the fuss was about.

She edged back toward the crowd and sidled up next to two young men on the fringe, who also looked like they'd just stopped to check out the action.

"What's going on?" she asked the one closest to her. He glanced at her and shrugged.

"No idea—I just got here," he said. He turned to the guy to his right, whose blond hair was closely cropped. "Any idea what's up?" he asked.

"Not sure," the other guy said, "but I think it has something to do with this girl named Lily Mack. That's her roommate over there."

Phoebe took a moment to process the name. It wasn't someone in either of the two classes she taught.

"Thanks," she said and snaked toward the front of the crowd, hoping to score more info there. A second later she realized she was now standing directly behind Val Porter, whose long, prematurely gray hair gleamed, even in the dark. Val was a women's studies professor with an office just down the hall from the one Phoebe was squatting in this semester, and though on the surface Val was courteous enough, Phoebe had detected a mild disdain ever since their first encounter. Maybe, Phoebe had thought wryly, Val thinks I set the women's movement back on its ass by my behavior.

Phoebe started to shift positions, not in the mood for a Val moment tonight. But uncannily the woman seemed to sense her presence, and she turned around. The movement stirred the scent of patchouli from Val's skin.

"Hello, Phoebe," Val said. There was a slightly disapproving tone to her voice, as if Phoebe had burst in late for an important meeting.

"Hi, Val," she said pleasantly. Her MO at Lyle was to play nice, not create any unnecessary ripples. She'd had enough of those in her life this past year. "Is there some kind of problem?"

"A student is missing," Val said bluntly. "Lily Mack—a junior. Her roommate reported it to the campus police a little while ago. No one's seen her since last night."

"How awful," Phoebe said. The revelation caught her like the nick from a razor, and she found herself grabbing a breath. "Well, kids this age can be pretty irresponsible at times," she said, recovering. "Is it possible she's just gone off with a new boyfriend?"

Val gave her a withering look, suggesting that Phoebe didn't know a damn thing about "kids this age."

"Anything is possible, of course," Val said dryly. "But according to Tom Stockton, she's not the type to just go AWOL."

"I take it someone's called Glenda?" Phoebe asked, referring to Glenda Johns, the president of the college.

"Of course. This could get very, very messy."

"How do you mean?" Phoebe asked.

"This girl's boyfriend disappeared this past spring. He was a senior here, and he took off without a trace."

"Do they—"

"Will you excuse me?" Val said abruptly. "I better check in with Tom and see if there's anything he'd like me to do."

It was more than a dismissal. It implied that Phoebe's help wouldn't be needed—ever.

"Good luck," Phoebe said, keeping her voice even. "Let me know if I can do anything."

Val started to turn but then looked back, giving Phoebe's outfit the once-over. That's rich, Phoebe thought. Val's fashion style could only be described as high priestess meets seductress—lots of crushed velvet, jangling bracelets, and deeply scooped necklines—and yet she always eyed Phoebe's clothes as if her fairly classic style didn't pass muster.

"Doing something fun tonight?" Val asked in a tone that suggested she hoped the answer was no.

Phoebe was tempted to deliver a zinger, like, "Actually, I have a hot date with the captain of the men's lacrosse team," but that was precisely the kind of ripple-making she needed to avoid.

"Just grabbing a bite to eat," she said instead. "'Night."

Phoebe turned away and continued down the path across the quad, heading east once again. Lyle wasn't exactly a gorgeous college. All the buildings were either nondescript red brick or concrete, without an inch of ivy shooting up their sides. But there were dozens of big maples on campus, planted when the school was built in the 1950s, and at night, illuminated by moonlight and streetlamps, they looked majestic and almost magical.

As Phoebe hurried along the path, she thought about the missing girl. She also considered the impact the situation could have on both the college and Glenda Johns, who was not only the president but also Phoebe's friend. Two

and a half years ago Glenda had been recruited by Lyle College to boost its lackluster reputation and flabby endowment, and though she'd been making progress, it had been tough going. A second missing student in a year would hardly help.

Outside East Gate, Phoebe waited for the traffic light to change, crossed the street, and then walked three blocks down the Bridge Street hill to Tony's, a small Italian restaurant she'd discovered after she'd arrived in Lyle in late August. It was one of those land-that-time-forgot kind of restaurants, with an amateurish wall mural of Venice, dust-coated plastic ferns, and platters of shrimp scampi reeking of garlic, but Phoebe found the small, candlelit rooms to be comforting.

She'd already eaten at Tony's earlier this week and hadn't planned to go back so soon, but a psychology professor named Duncan Shaw had more or less forced her hand. The two of them had ended up on an impromptu committee together, and she'd sensed his interest in her from the start. Several days ago, to her dismay, he'd asked if she'd like to join him and a few friends Friday night for dinner. He was attractive, a little mysterious-looking, even, with his dark beard and mustache. Engaging, too—affable without giving too much of himself away—with a wry sense of humor. But she was on a self-imposed sabbatical from anything romantic, so she wasn't going to be stupid and bite. She'd told him sorry, she had plans tonight, but thank you, and prayed he'd taken the hint.

She'd originally planned to eat at the bar of a new restaurant at the edge of town, where the food and ambience were surprisingly upscale, but now she couldn't take the chance of bumping into Duncan there. After her last class she'd picked up the ingredients for a salad with the intention of staying in. But then, feeling too restless to face a night alone in the tiny house she was renting, she decided she'd sneak off to Tony's. She figured it was the last place in the world Duncan and his pals would be welcoming the weekend.

When she reached the restaurant, she paused for a moment outside, trying to shake the twinge of melancholy she felt. Metallic chips in the old sidewalk caught the moonlight and sparkled like crazy. From a few blocks farther downhill, she could pick up the smell of the Winamac River—muddy, fishy, but rousing in a strange, earthy way. Sometimes from outside Tony's she could hear music wafting up from the taverns along River Street, but it was too early right now. Hopefully, she thought, Lily Mack had hooked up with a guy last night and spent the day in bed with him, oblivious to anything but