

PALO ALTO, SATURDAY 8:55 P.M.

SHE NEVER KNEW what hit her. Or if she did, she only knew it for a second, two at the most. In any event, not long enough for her to break stride, never mind jump out of the way or do anything to save herself, beyond looking over her shoulder and widening her eyes in terror.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Good Samaritan crouched next to her.

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

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

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

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

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

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

ONE MONTH Later

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

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

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

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

Madison touched her newly minted keycard to the sensor pad. The door slid open and she strode inside, clutching the file folder she’d been handed by the pleasant but detached older woman from HR who’d been waiting for her in the Main Reception Center.

“Building 14, 3rd Floor, Station D-9,” she’d told Madison. “Just

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

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

Maddie, just find your desk!

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

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

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

"You must be Madison."

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

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

Nicole gestured to Madison's terminal. "There's a set of tutorials to get you started. Happy to help if you get stuck."

"I may take you up on that."

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

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

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

"Sam... Was she the one here before?"

Nicole nodded. Her expression had tightened.

"Did she get promoted or...?"

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

"Stanford Golf Course...?"

"Yeah, it's not far from here."

"I saw the sign. My bus goes right by it."

"Anyway, it's really sad. She was only twenty-seven. Everyone loved her."

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

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

Madison sat perfectly still in her chair, surveying her workspace. It was still barebones, devoid of any human touch; nothing had changed. But, just like that, it had taken on a completely different energy and feel.

The last person who sat here is dead.

I'm taking her place.

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

This was a mistake.