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Chapter One

CHAPTER ONE

The night I watch Athena Liu die, we're celebrating her TV deal with Netflix.

Off the bat, for this story to make sense, you should know two things about Athena:

First, she has everything: a multi-book deal straight out of college at a major publishing house, an MFA from the one writing workshop everyone's heard of, a resume of prestigious artist residencies, and a history of award nominations longer than my grocery list. At twenty-seven, she's published three novels, each one a successively bigger hit. For Athena, the Netflix deal was not a life-changing event, just another feather in her cap; one of the side perks of the road to literary stardom she's been hurtling down since graduation.

Second, perhaps as a consequence of the first, she has almost no friends. Writers our age–young, ambitious up and comers just this side of thirty–tend to run in packs. You'll find evidence of cliques all over Twitter and Instagram–writers gushing over excerpts of one another's unpublished manuscripts ("LOSING MY HEAD OVER THIS WIP!"), squealing over cover reveals ("THIS IS SO GORGEOUS I WILL DIE!!!"), and posting selfies of group hangs in New York and literary festivals across the globe. But Athena's Instagram photos feature no one else. She regularly tweets career updates and quirky jokes to her seventy thousand followers, but she rarely @s other people. She doesn't name drop, doesn't blurb or recommend her colleagues' books, and doesn't publicly rub shoulders in that ostentatious, desperate way early career writers do. In the entire time I've known her, I've never heard her reference any close friends but me.

I used to think that she was simply aloof. Athena is so stupidly, ridiculously successful that it makes sense she wouldn't want to mingle with mere mortals. Athena, presumably, chats

exclusively with blue check holders and fellow bestselling authors who can entertain her with their rarefied observations on modern society. Athena doesn't have time to make friends with proletarians.

But in recent years, I've developed another theory, which is that everyone else finds her as unbearable as I do. It's hard, after all, to be friends with someone who outshines you at every turn. Probably no one else can stand Athena because they can't stand constantly failing to measure up to her. Probably I'm here because I'm just that pathetic.

So that night it's only me and Athena at a loud, overpriced rooftop bar in Georgetown. She's flinging back cocktails like she has a duty to prove she's having a good time, and I'm drinking to dull the bitch in me that wishes she was dead.