

whisper network



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roar of a novel.
Furiously funny
and just plain
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sphere

S P H E R E

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PROLOGUE

If only you'd listened to us, none of this would have happened.

Eyewitness Accounts

12-Apr

Eyewitness 1: I'd just stepped outside when I saw a flash of – I don't know – something, movement, I guess, on the other side of the plaza and at first I thought it was a giant fucking bird and then – shit – some terrorist bomb. Another split second and I realized it was a person. I couldn't tell if it was a man or woman. People in this district are all pretty old school. They still wear suits. Traditional. Black pants and blazer flapping. Anyway, it's a pretty good fall from up there.

Eyewitness 2: It was around 1:30 in the afternoon. I was just leaving lunch with a client at Dakota's. I nearly threw up my steak salad.

Eyewitness 3: I'm not saying I don't feel bad. I do. It's awful. But also you have to be pretty selfish to do a thing like that, you know? There were people on the street. It was just after lunch-time. If you really have to, if you really must, then do that on your own time without so many people around. That's all I'm saying.

CHAPTER ONE

Two Months Earlier: The Day It Began

20-Mar

Before that day, our lives raced along an invisible roller coaster track, a cart fastened to the rails through engineering and forces we couldn't wholly grasp, despite our superabundance of academic degrees. We moved with a sense of controlled chaos.

We were connoisseurs of dry shampoo brands. It took us four days to watch a complete episode of *The Bachelor* on our DVRs. We fell asleep with the heat of laptops burning our thighs. We took two-hour breaks to read bedtime stories to toddlers and tried not to calculate the total number of hours spent working as mothers and employees, confused as to which came first. We were overqualified and underutilized, bossy and always right. We had firm handshakes and hefty credit card balances. We forgot our lunches on kitchen countertops.

Each day the same. Until it wasn't. The morning that our CEO died, we looked up suddenly to realize the roller coaster had a

faulty wheel and we were about to be thrown off the rails.

Ardie Valdez – a patient, stoical person, with practical, well-made Italian shoes – was the first to have an inkling of the crash ahead. She heard the news and decided to take cover. ‘Grace?’ She stood in the hallway – sterile, but with unaffordable art – and knocked on a plain closet door with a cow magnet stuck to its front. ‘It’s me, Ardie. Can I come in?’

She waited, listening, until she heard a rustling behind the door. The legally mandated lock flipped out of place.

Ardie ducked into the small room and latched the door behind her. Grace was already settling back onto the leather sofa, her silk blouse hitched cockeyed over two plastic cones fastened to her breasts.

Ardie surveyed the room. A mini-fridge. The beat-up sofa on which Grace sat. A small television set playing *Ellen*. Outside she could hear voices, quick steps, phones being answered and copies being made. She frowned, approvingly. ‘It’s like your own little hideout in here.’

Grace reached for the dial of the breast bump and it began its methodical, mechanic whir. ‘Or like my own little tomb,’ she said lightly.

Grace’s dark sense of humor always managed to catch Ardie off guard. From the outside, Grace seemed so *uncomplicated*. She had teased, bleached blonde hair, was an active member of the TriDelta Alumni Club, and attended church at Preston Hollow Presbyterian with her tall, dark and checkered shirt-wearing husband, Liam. They’d been on the personal invite list to the opening of the George W. Bush Presidential Library and identified as ‘compassionate conservatives’ which Ardie took to mean that they wanted gay people to get married, but preferred to pay as little in taxes as possible. Also, they owned at least one

handgun in a lock safe, that they kept on a garment shelf in Grace's walk-in closet, and the fact that Ardie liked Grace in spite of all that, said something.

'How much should babies eat anyway? I am *always* pumping. I mean, *fuck*, Ardie, look at me, I'm watching *Ellen* during the day.'

Grace didn't usually say 'fuck.'

Ardie remembered how long the days felt when her son, Michael, had slept only a few hours at a time. Her entire body had felt heavy and – what else – was it dirty? Yes, she remembered that, too. Feeling as if she had a thin layer of grime over her whole body, like unbrushed teeth.

She rummaged through her tote bag and pulled out two sweaty cans of La Croix. She handed one to Grace and dropped down on the floor in front of the couch. Ardie could do things like sit on floors at work because – and she'd be the first one to admit this – she had opted out. Years ago actually. She slept in instead of spending an extra hour in the morning on hair and makeup. She went shopping almost never. She didn't spend a minute of her precious time in Pilates. It was the most liberating thing she'd ever done.

She glanced down at her phone. *Still* nothing.

'So apparently,' Ardie said. 'Bankole died. At home this morning when he was getting ready for work.' She delivered the news matter-of-factly. Ardie didn't know another way to deliver news. It was always, *My mother has cancer* or *Tony and I are getting a divorce*.

'What? *How?*' Grace dropped the tubes she'd been busy trying to re-insert into the funnel-like contraptions poking out of her nursing bra.

'He had a heart attack. His wife found him in the bathroom.' Ardie propped her elbows on her knees, staring up at Grace. 'I

just found out.'

Ardie had met the company's CEO, Desmond Bankole, only once, a handshake in the elevator because he'd made a point to meet every person who worked in his building, down to the cleaning staff, at least once. His teeth were very white. He was smaller than she thought he'd be, with birdlike wrists peeking out underneath his suit jacket.

'I'm hiding, by the way,' Ardie said – and before Grace could ask – 'From Ames. He keeps asking where Sloane is. I told him she was probably out for lunch. He said that he hadn't approved her leaving for lunch today. I said she's the Senior Vice President of North American Legal Affairs and she doesn't need his approval to go to lunch and—'

'You said that to him?' Grace sat up, eyes wide. Sloane was their friend, but also technically their boss, which made Ames their boss's boss.

'Of course, I didn't really say that to him. Are you crazy?'

'Oh,' Grace said, blinking. She toyed with the small diamond cross dangling from her necklace. The electric whir of her pump counted off time between them.

'So I'm hiding in here like a coward,' Ardie continued. 'Waiting for Sloane to call me back.' As a rule, men like Ames didn't care for Ardie. He hated having to listen to someone he didn't enjoy looking at. When he asked her where Sloane was, his eyes skirted over and around her and he moved on as soon as he could. She didn't mention this part to Grace.

Ardie cringed. Grace's breasts could not be ignored in this small room. 'It just sucks them up like torpedoes. Doesn't that hurt?' Ardie's son Michael was adopted almost four years ago, a happy end to years of infertility struggles. She'd never done any breastfeeding herself, but she'd always imagined serene suckling,

coveted skin-to-skin contact, a loosely draped handwoven scarf to conceal those who were too modest. Not this violent yanking that she was now witnessing up close.

‘Not as much as Emma Kate’s mouth, to be honest.’ (Breastfeeding was supposed to be *painless* they told us. Breastfeeding was *beautiful*, they said. Well, we would like to drag their nipples over asphalt and see how painless and beautiful they thought it was.)

‘God, we can invent smart toothbrushes,’ said Ardie. ‘My robotic vacuum can find its home and put itself to bed at the end of the night and we can’t invent a thing-a-ma-jig to suck out milk that works a little better than *that*?’ The machine was sort of grotesquely mesmerizing.

‘Men have teeth.’ Grace raised her eyebrows. ‘And floors.’

Ardie took a long swig of grapefruit flavored sparkling water as, on screen, Ellen DeGeneres welcomed a young man on stage. He looked like a teenager and Ardie didn’t have the slightest clue who he was. She tapped her phone screen again. Nothing new.

‘I just had a scary thought,’ she said, after a beat. ‘Ames could be the next CEO.’

‘No. You think?’

‘He looks like a CEO. He’s tall. People like tall.’ Ardie clenched and unclenched her fist, stretching out the carpal tunnel that was a constant threat to her wrist. ‘I’m telling you,’ she said. ‘That son of a bitch could run this company and then where will we be?’

It wasn’t just the rumors involving an intern. Or what had happened with his executive assistant two years earlier at the Byron Nelson golf tournament after which guess who had been fired? Spoiler alert: not Ames. It wasn’t even the idea that culture started at the top and a Truviv with Ames at its helm would be like announcing open season.

It was that Ames Garrett hated Ardie.

'I don't know,' said Grace. 'He's always been nice to me.'

Ardie let the issue sit. Grace was a few years younger than Ardie and Sloane and still clung to the notion that someone could be a 'good person' despite their actions, as though actions weren't the very indicator of one's person. And Ardie had seen Ames Garrett in action.

Still, there were issues one didn't discuss, even amongst friends – religion, money, and, perhaps, Ames.

Grace turned the dial on her pump to increase the intensity. One of the tubes popped out of place and quivered along the floor. A white drop spilled onto Grace's skirt. She closed her eyes and tilted her head back, her nostrils caving. When she opened them, her eyes shone. She rubbed her wrist into her nose and picked up the errant tube with purposeful calm. She missed the hole twice when she attempted to reconnect the attachments. The third try was a success. She gingerly sat back into the couch. 'That really is depressing about Bankole, though.' She trained her glassy gaze on the TV screen. 'Is it wrong that we're not more sad?'

Ardie didn't reply. Grace actually did seem very sad.

Ardie checked her phone again. A single bar of service.

Where the hell was Sloane?

CHAPTER TWO

20-Mar

Sloane stared at the ceiling of an elevator willing it to move faster until the very second the doors split apart on floor fifteen at which point she dashed through them like a racehorse.

‘They’re all in the conference room—’ Her secretary, Beatrice, leaned over her vestibule, her coiled phone cord stretched from where she had the handset pressed to her ear.

‘I know, Beatrice. I know.’ Sloane tore past her through the hallway. ‘And I am already royally screwed.’

For the record, all had been *fine* a couple of hours ago when she’d sat down with her husband and her ten-year-old daughter, Abigail’s, school principal. She had responsibly tucked her phone inside her landfill of a purse because she was a *good* mother, which in that place, meant an *undistracted* mother. Or that was the part she’d been intent on playing in front of Principal Clark anyway.

And now look.

She’d fished out her cell post-meeting to find the text messages

from Ardie:

Desmond dropped dead this morning.

Heart attack.

Ames is looking for you.

Ok, seriously, where are you??

Sloane??

She'd not even have said goodbye to her husband.

At last, she stood outside the North conference room, heart pounding so hard she worried that she, too, might have a heart attack. Number one killer of women over forty! She'd heard that somewhere. Maybe on *The View*. She pulled the handle to let herself inside.

Seven lawyers at the director level or higher sat around the table. Ames – General Counsel. Kunal from Communications, Mark for Employment, Ardie from Tax, Philip covered Risk, Joe, Litigation, and Grace was Director of Compliance. Plus another younger woman with a chestnut-colored pixie cut and Snow White cheeks that Sloane had never met before. Every face in the room turned to watch Sloane enter.

'Sorry I'm late.' She slid into the empty seat beside Ames. The woman with the pixie cut smiled politely at her.

Ames glanced up from a stack of papers. A stripe of white ran a wavering line through his thick hair, otherwise the color of black coffee, save for the silvering that had begun to take root above his ears. 'Where have you been?'

'I was—' Sloane paused for a fraction, weighing how to finish the sentence. (We all did this. Whether in dating or the office, we realized the power of pretending our children didn't exist. A man could say he was taking the day to go fishing with his son, while a

mother was usually better off hiding the fact that she took a long lunch to run her child to the doctor's office. Children turned men into heroes and mothers into lesser employees if we didn't play our cards right.) 'I stepped out briefly.' She cleared her throat.

'Without your cellphone?' Ames licked his fingertip to help him flip through the pages. Bodies shifted uncomfortably around the table.

'I was momentarily out of pocket, yes,' she said. 'Poor reception.' Not a great excuse in her world.

Ames made a nondescript noise and shifted the wad of Hot Tamales in his mouth.

She stared at him, resisting the urge to meet the seven pairs of eyes trained on her around the room.

Then Ames winked. Always his left eye. The delicate crow's feet branching quickly out to his temples. He was one of the only men she knew who still reached for the wink. He could pull it off, actually. It said at once: *we're fine here* but also: *I'm the one in charge*.

He opened his palms to the rest of the room. 'Sloane Glover everybody.' As if he were introducing a comedian to the stage. Sloane bristled, while her face stayed placid. Working with Ames was like sitting next to someone who was constantly kicking your shin under the table. 'So nice that we can finally begin. Shall we?'

Awkward nods of acknowledgment followed. Beside her, Philip quietly pushed his legal pad and pen in front of Sloane's place. She pressed her hand to the spot between her ribs and blew out a breath. *Thank you*, she mouthed and Philip, whose tie was always crooked, simply shrugged. If only all men at the office could be more like Philip.

'I assume by now everyone has heard about the unfortunate passing of our chief executive officer, Desmond Bankole,' Ames

began. ‘Memorial services will be announced in the coming days. I’m sure I’m not off base in expecting to see many of you at the funeral.’

As Ames talked about Bankole’s accomplishments, Sloane furiously downloaded from pen to paper the action items she’d been formulating as she drove back to the office.

Ames cut a look to her.

She set down her pen.

‘Let’s try to stay on the same page here.’ He folded his hands on the table. ‘I asked Grace to start us off discussing any legal obligations Truviv has as a public company. Grace?’

Grace straightened. Sloane often wondered if her face underwent the same transformative process when *she* had to put on an air of authority about a subject at work. In her twenties, she knew that it had. Then, she could feel herself pulling on the mask of confidence, lowering her voice, removing the ‘likes’ from her speech, stilling her knee, reminding herself that, yes, she *was* qualified. Grace’s tells were subtler. In Grace she saw a lift of the chin. A squaring of shoulders. Sloane – like most of us – rarely spotted these tiny betrayals of self-assurance in male colleagues. Was it because they weren’t there? Or were we not in tune enough to see them?

‘Sure,’ Grace said and launched into a discussion of the SEC, about 8-K filings, and updating the company’s website. In a CEO’s unexpected absence, transparency, Grace explained, was key. ‘I’ll circulate a memo that will be easier to digest,’ she finished.

‘And we’re working on a statement.’ Kunal pointed his finger, touching it to the table for emphasis. ‘Until that’s available, please answer any press calls by saying that we are very saddened by Desmond’s loss both personally and professionally.’ His wide

brown eyes took notice of each face in the room. 'Do not respond with the words 'No comment,' whatever you do. Shareholders *hate* 'no comment.' Understood? We'll shoot for having the statement tomorrow morning. Does that sound good to you, Sloane?'

Sloane sat back in her chair. 'Sounds doable,' she said decisively. Men could get away with hedging. It came across as thoughtful. If Sloane waffled it would sound like she didn't know what the hell she was doing. 'We need to emphasize the firm's succession plan and look at recent examples of companies that handled a CEO's death or illness particularly well. A couple spring to mind like Mc—'

'Actually,' Ames interrupted. Sloane's toes contracted reflexively. 'I think we should be looking at McDonald's. They had a similar situation. Two CEO's dying in two years. The first one was sudden. And Imation. Those are the two examples I'd go with, Kunal.'

Sloane absorbed a spike of frustration. She'd used all the potential reactions by this point in her career. Her favorite was a polite: 'Interesting, that sounds a lot like what I just said' in her best Southern accent. But to this she said simply, 'Great idea, Ames.'

Ames rubbed his palms together, satisfied. 'Alright, we all have our marching orders. My office door is always open if you need me.'

They stood to go. Sloane clicked the pen closed. Ink stains peppered the inside of her right middle finger. Ardie and Grace who had been seated side-by-side across from her skirted the room to pass by on their way out. 'Sorry,' Ardie leaned in and whispered while shaking her head slowly.

Ames glanced across. 'Oh good, Ardie's here to apologize for my behavior. Knew I hired her for something.' He snapped a

binder shut.

Ardie froze for an instant before righting herself.

Grace pressed her lips together and caught Sloane's hand for a quick squeeze. Sloane noticed a damp stain on the front of Grace's silk blouse that she knew, without thinking, wouldn't come out. It was useless to wear any kind of silk while breast-feeding. She'd have to tell Grace.

'Katherine.' Ames held up a finger, talking to the new woman, who still lingered while everyone else had filtered his or her way out. 'You can wait in here one moment. I just need to go pull the draft announcement from my desk for Sloane.' He looked at Sloane. 'You don't mind stopping by my office, do you?'

###

Ames's office door was not actually, as he'd said, always open. Neither literally nor figuratively. Sloane had followed him down the hall as he walked two steps in front of her along the narrow corridor.

He opened the door to his office, and together they stepped inside The Shrine – a gallery wall of Ames with famous athletes. Truviv, Inc. was the world's foremost athletic apparel brand, sponsoring all the country's biggest athletes. There he was playing golf with Tiger Woods. Now, here he sat court-side with an injured Kevin Durant. Then – look! – another candid photo playing catch with Justin Verlander and his, wife, Kate Upton. If Ames realized that the men and women memorialized on his wall might only be his friends because Truviv wrote a large portion of their sponsorship checks, he didn't care. Either way, Sloane considered The Shrine the semi-socially acceptable equivalent of a dick pic.

'So,' he said, turning to lean on his desk. He was a middle-aged man, who wore a charcoal suit well and managed to look better

with age. At least this was what Sloane objectively knew to be true, though she herself had a hard time recognizing his good looks anymore. They'd become just another fact about Ames that she didn't quite believe. 'Desmond's gone.' He stuck his thumbs deep into his eye sockets and kneaded his eyes. 'That was something I didn't see coming.'

'I'm . . . yes, I'm so sorry.' Sloane allowed herself to drift further in past the threshold. Since hearing the news, it was the first time she'd mentally framed the CEO's death around condolences. It was terrible. He had children, two she thought, each only a little bit older than Abigail. She planned to process his passing tonight with her husband, Derek, over a glass of wine – the finest chardonnay their refrigerator had to offer. She would remember Desmond for his lively, attentive face as he sat in the first chair on the left side of the conference table, listening as she gave quarterly presentations to the company's executives.

'Remember how he always called you Miss Sloane?' Ames folded his arms. His shoulders shook with a quiet, good-natured laugh. 'Like you were a preschool teacher?' The memory triggered a faint smile. 'Yes, god. You caught that? It didn't actually bother me. Coming from him.'

'He liked you.' Ames pushed his weight off the desk and went round to the other side where he began typing on the keyboard without committing to sitting down. She waited for a few moments, unsure of how much attention was required for whatever he was doing behind the computer.

'I'm sorry to change the subject, but who was that woman?' Sloane asked. 'Katherine, was it?'

He slid open a drawer, shook out a couple Hot Tamales – an oral fixation to curb his smoking habit – and popped them in his mouth. 'That was Katherine Bell. I'll introduce you. Slipped my

mind with everything going on. One second, please.’ He struck a few more keys and then looked up at Sloane again.

She had the idea that Ames sometimes had a touch of selective amnesia about their early years at the firm. Other times, it was the only thing he seemed to remember about her at all. Today, he was clearly in the mood to pretend history didn’t exist. ‘She’s our new hire,’ he said. ‘Lots of corporate experience. She’ll be working in your section. I think you’re going to find her to be a really valuable asset.’

Sloane cocked her ear toward Ames, as though she’d misheard him. ‘My section?’ she repeated it as a question.

‘That’s right.’

‘And you didn’t think to consult me about hiring someone new for *my* section?’ Her voice sounded too high-pitched. *Shrill*, he might call it. ‘I’m SVP of that section.’

It had been years since Ames had pulled something like this on her – years! And Sloane nearly undid all of them, all those months upon months of keeping her cool, of dealing with Ames and his Grade A bullshit, with a sudden outburst of unadulterated anger.

Ames stooped to look at his computer screen again. ‘And I’m the General Counsel,’ he said. ‘Should we swap resumes?’

Sloane could already feel herself going over this conversation tonight in the mirror while brushing her teeth, wishing it had gone differently.

‘Where is Katherine’s office?’ She changed tacks.

‘I figured you could take care of all that. After all,’ he flashed a disarming smile and his chin dimpled. ‘You are Senior Vice President.’

‘Right.’ She took a deep breath and compartmentalized. It wasn’t as though they could leave an attorney, even one Sloane

hadn't asked for, idling in the conference room forever. She rested her legal pad on her forearm and added *Find Katherine an office* to the list of action items, right at the top. What an inauspicious day to begin. And hadn't she looked young, her skin so well *hydrated*? The word 'ingenue' had come to mind, though that was ridiculous. She had to be at least thirty, older than Sloane was when she'd started here.

Sloane turned to leave, forgetting for a moment the reason she'd come in the first place.

'Sloane. The draft.' Ames had finally made a decision to sit and was clicking through something she couldn't see because his screen was tilted. He nodded toward the legal pad on his desk. 'I took a first stab. I want to see it before it goes out.'

Sloane walked back to his desk. A pair of scissors lay open atop the legal pad. Their silver blades left a violent X against the yellow pages. She felt lack of sleep and stacks of unopened bills and anger. Her fingers lingered over the cool metal. Sometimes when Sloane stood in very high places, she worried an urge to jump would seize her and she'd find herself tumbling off the side of a building. We all understood this feeling, how with just a twitch of fingers, Sloane – or any one of us – could snatch up the scissors and snip the artery in Ames's neck.

She pulled the legal pad, her fingertips sticking to the pages with faint perspiration. 'I'll have this back to you in an hour,' she said, a false note creeping into her voice as she escaped Ames Garrett's office, not for the first time.

Deposition Transcript
26-Apr

Ms. Sharpe: State your name, please.

Respondent: Sloane Glover.

Ms. Sharpe: What is your occupation, Mrs. Glover?

Respondent: I work at Truviv as a lawyer. My formal title is Senior Vice President of North American Legal Affairs.

Ms. Sharpe: How long have you worked at Truviv?

Respondent: About thirteen years.

Ms. Sharpe: That's a respectable length of time. Longer than most people stay at their jobs, I imagine. What has kept you at Truviv for so many years?

Respondent: I hold a highly coveted position. In house jobs, especially ones that pay well, are hard to come by. Truviv is a household name. Many people would have killed – sorry, I didn't mean – there were lots of people who would want my job.

Ms. Sharpe: And how did you come to know Ames Garrett?

Respondent: Ames was part of the group I interviewed with before making the move over from Jaxon Brockwell, so I suppose we first met then.

Ms. Sharpe: Did you work closely with Mr. Garrett?

Respondent: Not until we worked on a divestiture of an affiliate brand, I guess. He had been with the company about five years at that point, I believe. He was coordinating the diligence materials to be sent to opposing counsel and I was assisting him.

Ms. Sharpe: And how would you characterize your relationship back then?

Respondent: It was fine.

Ms. Sharpe: What do you mean by 'fine', Ms. Glover?

Respondent: I thought Ames was smart and ambitious. He taught me a lot about running a sales process. We got along.

Ms. Sharpe: I see. And when did your affair begin?

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