The Accusation

Novel excerpt / Commercial thriller

Portfolio title. Character names have been changed.

Chapter 1

“She’s lying.”

Without Clara Bennett’s consent, her face adjusted itself: her eyes closed, her teeth clamped down on her lower lip, and her head shook slowly and rhythmically, like a ventriloquist’s dummy. Twenty-four, with almond eyes, blonde highlights over auburn roots, and a petite gymnast form, she lay prone on the queen bed in her Chelsea studio unbefitting a queen. Imagine what $2,400 a month would get you in Minnesota. Her dad had scoffed when he co-signed the lease. But…then I’d be in Minnesota, she’d snarked. Abe Bennett had just shrugged as though Manhattan was simply a phase his daughter would get over. Maybe it was.

“You know you just say that, right?”

“I seem to remember a bunch of old white guys penning a tome where it says I can.”

“You know what I mean; you can’t say it out loud, to… someone who isn’t me.”

Evan Hale, Clara’s boyfriend of seven months (her longest relationship by five of those months) was on his tablet-cum-laptop, reading more of the latest regarding Adrian Vale. The Queens-born billionaire hedge-fund manager and philanthropist was a fixture at both Mets games and The Met Gala. He’d recently graced the cover of The New York Adrianes Magazine, staring out at the city that bred him and grew him from a kid with nothing to a man with everything. The subtitle, “The Man Who Would be King of New York,” hadn’t aged well.

One of Adrian’s employees, a twenty-five-year-old named Maya Ellison, had leveled the kind of accusations that’ll get you canceled awful quick these days. A grand jury had believed her, sending the case the trial and the story from Page Six to above the fold.

Maya was an underprivileged girl who’d come to the big city and made good: after graduating summa cum laude from Columbia, she’d secured a job at one of the most well-regarded financial institutions on Wall Street. Gorgeous, brilliant, and armed with an earnestness rare for someone with her bona fides and

vocation, she was the apple of the media's eye.

"Because if I don't summarily believe a woman who accuses a man of something bad, it means I'm asleep, right?"

"Asleep?"

"Isn't that the opposite of woke?" Evan unleashed that coltish grin, the one that sprouted his dimples (which one could drive a school bus through) and melted Clara's heart every time.

Last week, Clara had confessed to her mother (her mother, of all people!) that she was in love with Evan. Her mother had dismissed it as puppy love without overtly saying so. Later, Clara had realized that she'd told her mother and not one of her girlfriends because she hadn't wanted confirmation; that would've been too scary.

Evan was a journalist for Dispatch, and the most self-assured and charming guy she'd ever met. The kind of person who can make you feel like the sun's setting on you alone. Maybe it was her Midwestern sensibilities or her love goggles, but he seemed to embody New York City in all the good ways. He embraced the cloak of anonymity that the big city provided without losing his individuality, he seemed to be on good terms with everyone he knew (and he knew a lot of people), and from where Clara sat, didn't have a guileful bone in his body.

All of which made what he'd said all the more curious. Not that he wanted to hear more, or he was reserving judgment or wanting to give Adrian Vale the benefit of the doubt.

She's lying.

From a writer who chooses his words with great care, nonetheless.

"I mean, you've told me about times you regretted jumping to rash conclusions."

"Believe me, there is nothing rash about this conclusion."

"Walk me through that…" Clara replied, turning her head, their eyes meeting.

Evan got up, walked to the fridge, extricated a beer from the back of the top shelf, and popped its lid on the counter before taking a sudsy chug; Clara could see the wheels turning.

"It was all a secret, right? A secret is trust. Do you really think Adrian Vale trusts anyone? Let alone some chick in her 20's?"

Clara hemmed and hawed and shook her head. "Not a good enough reason."

Evan sat on Clara's white form-over-function Crate & Barrel chair, for what he knew would be the last time. He'd miss her, to some degree, but he would not miss this sardine can.

“How about a super ‘on-brand’ reason?”

“As a person or a journalist?”

Evan offered an impish shrug, as if to ask the difference, and said:

“A secret is like currency. Right? Its value is exactly what the other person stands to lose if it gets out.” He nodded at the photo still pulled up on his device, showing Adrian Vale in a Kiton suit, a Rolex Daytona on his left wrist, getting into a tinted Range Rover. “Say whatever you want about him, but that guy is not in the business of losing money.”

Clara didn’t reply. Maybe she would have if she knew this was the last time that Evan would step foot in her apartment.

“She’s lying, Kel. And yours truly is going to be the one to prove it.”

Chapter 2

For the first time in Maya Ellison’s life, today really did feel like the first day of the rest of the rest of her life.

She lived alone on the third floor of a brownstone in Crown Heights. It was never meant to be permanent, but she’d lived there for three years: her senior year at Columbia and her first (and almost certainly last) two years working at Halcyon Capital. She hadn’t even met Adrian until her third week there.

He’d prided himself on the firm being “a family” and his door “always being open” (both of which the internet would have a field day with - Maya could already see the gross memology: you don’t bang family, but if you do, close the door) but he was always wanted, needed, for something; a meeting, a consultation, a mediation. When they finally met, his eyes had betrayed an attraction to her, not that she thought he’d ever act on it.

Had it really been two years since that girl - and that’s what she’d been: a self-conscious, uncertain, unrefined girl - strolled into that viper’s nest? The imposter syndrome had waned by the day. Maya was great at her job; she listened more than she spoke, chose her words with care and respect, and always made the next best play.

Her self-confidence shouldn’t have been affected by anything any guy said, let alone one of her co-workers, but she’d been out to drinks with a few of them, and Greg Palmer, a Wharton grad one year her senior, leaned over to her after she’d given an opinion-cum-lecture on the dangers stemming from social media’s appropriation and wanton use of WWII-era semiotics.

“You know, it’s pretty rare that God gives with both hands,” Greg had whisper-yelled over the music at Vela, a chic lounge-bar-restaurant. It was the kind of place with no decimal points on the menu, a DJ with a MacBook Pro whose strange musical stylings seemed paired with the fusion food menu, a median age of 29, and a median salary of half a million. She hadn’t known how to reply. “It was a compliment…” he’d followed up with, maybe reading too much into her facial expression, which she’d set at neutral; she could do that, like working a dial. “Oh. Well, thank you, then,” she’d offered in a noncommittal but sweet tone. He’d shaken his head and leaned in close enough for her to see the traces of devil’s dandruff on his nose.

“They never see you coming, do they, Maya?”

One of the 249 texts was from Greg: hey, E - i know you might not want to or be able to talk to ppl from work, but if you ever wanna/can, text or call me whenever. and in the most asexual way ever, thinking abt u. keep ur head up.

Amidst the catalogue of senders was a 651 number. She knew who it was. Stay strong, it read. She rolled her eyes and deleted it.

The rest of the texts had a wide spectrum. Some from family and friends in Minneapolis, people she’d known forever; others were from college friends and city friends (insofar as those existed); plenty were from near-strangers - college hook-ups, girls she’d gotten drinks with off a nudge from a mutual, people she followed on social but rarely talked to.

Some lauded her for her braveness and tried to make her feel loved and comforted. A few (she wasn’t sure how her number got out, but it couldn’t have been that hard) called her a money-chasing slut or a total cunt or worse.

Adrian Vale was a beloved figure in this city, and in an industry fraught with enemies, frenemies, cold wars, corporate espionage, and double-crosses - all with astronomical sums of money at play - Adrian seemed to get along with everyone. Even his competitors. Waves formed fast, though, and they were big and tall and threatened to drown him.

The flowery prose he typically received from the press transformed to shaming and bewilderment. Maya kept up with it all. Her lawyer, Nora Reyes, champion for wronged women from Manhattan, NY to Manhattan, KS, had told her to avoid the press, but she’d done so with a lilt that seemed to double as a wink: good luck with that, hun.

Speaking of The Good Counselor, one of the texts was from Amanda: E - Today’s gonna be tough but you’re gonna get through it. WE are going to get through it, all of it. Some asshat on Fox News just asked ‘is this girl serious’. He and everyone else are gonna see just how serious we are. Call or text if u need me. Talk soon - A

Her phone was on DND, the torrent of pings hushed into silence, but she saw a surprising number - and name - pop up on her caller ID: Evan Hale.

She'd had a class with Evan at Columbia. He was in J-School and she was an econ major, but they'd both taken the same elective junior year: Femme Fatales in Film Noir. It was a bit of a joke of a class in that everyone got an A and they mostly just watched and talked about movies (she'd wondered at the time if that was any different from film school, which, for reasons she couldn't comprehend, people paid the same amount of tuition money for).

Maya had been only mildly attracted to Evan, but she was very drawn to him. How his smile lit up a room, how self-possessed he was, his seemingly limitless fount of knowledge.

He was one of the few writers she'd met who was able to speak the way he wrote, as though he'd managed to edit all the umm's and like's and fucking…uh…'s out of his speech. They'd never hooked up, but they'd come close a couple of times: once, he'd been too drunk and wound up getting sick; the other time, it was the inverse. Otherwise, she was pretty sure they'd have slept together.

The precious years in her early-to-mid 20's would be the only time she'd be able to sleep with other guys. Unless she did something about her situation back home, of course; if past was prologue, though, she never would.

Since they graduated, she'd run into Evan a few times at bars or restaurants, and they'd done the awkward hug-and-catch-up thing, each pledging coffee meets that never transpired. Looking back on it, Maya was pretty sure that her promises for coffee were empty, but Evan's had been real. It was hard to imagine Evan saying something he didn't mean. Which is why it gave Maya pause that he was calling her.

Maybe there was a world where his editor discovered that he knew Maya and asked him to get some kind of exclusive piece? But that didn't jive with the Evan she knew. Why else would he be calling, though? Only one way to find out…

"Hey, Evan. How are you?"