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The Hourglass Hotel

Senior Paper

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The Hourglass Hotel

A work of fiction by

Emily Banner

The Hourglass Hotel

To my parents
for hanging in there.

To my sister, Heather
for keeping me calm.

To Russell
for your love.

Jackson

Jackson Gibbons approached the sliding glass doors that marked the front entrance of The Hourglass Hotel. Each step crunched an imprint of his shoes into a fresh layer of snow, adding his mark to the collage that strangers before him started to make. His brisk pace matched his eagerness to get inside as a cold wind wrapped around his face like a scarf, bit at his neck, and slipped down the front of his jacket.

The same storm dropped into North Carolina quickly. Fat flakes had stuck to the frozen asphalt of I26 as he made his way back home to Charlotte from Johnson City. He would have kept on driving too, had his tires not began to slip, so smoothly, towards the guardrail on his right. They caught traction again just as he passed the green sign that read “Asheville” and well, he took that as a sign.

Jackson had not slept in a hotel for nearly three years. On that occasion, he had discovered a condom floating in his bathroom toilet. It wasn't the condom per say that made his stomach rise, but the fact that it floated there so defiantly missed by the housekeeper. What else had he or she neglected? He thought of many things and lay on top of the covers that night, careful to touch nothing.

The Hourglass Hotel had the highest reviews of any hotel Jackson had read about. He comforted himself with that fact as the front doors slid open and he stepped onto the first floor. A young man abandoned his wooden stand, gold buttons shining like little suns against his red blazer, and rushed toward Jackson with a huge smile and outstretched hand. *I don't want to shake your hand*, Jackson thought but then realized the boy only wished to take his bag; which he also did not want. A respectful decline and the boy returned to his post, still smiling – chipped incisor and all.

Jackson continued walking through the first floor and found that it already annoyed him. It wasn't the main lobby, just a large room dedicated to one question; should I take the stairs or the elevator to the front desk? In an attempt to add some flare to the otherwise useless space, the wall on the right side of the room had a large curve to it – as if something on the other side were trying to push through. Small, silver, cell-shaped ceramics mounted to the wall like a school of fish and hung over a long grey couch. The couch held many small pillows and was custom built to mimic the shapely sheet rock. Jackson ascended the staircase that led to the second floor and main lobby.

He reached the landing, turning right towards the next flight of stairs, and stepped down hard on to a puddle of water (probably melted snow from the shoes of other guests). There was only enough time to fling desperate arms out towards the hand rail before his back hit the tiled floor, knocking the breath from his lungs. Gold Buttons flew to his side and asked if he was okay just as two middle-aged women leaned over the railing of the second floor.

“Are you okay?” the women yelled down at Jackson. More heads poked out over the railing and stared at him and his empty lungs. *For God's sake people*. He wished they would all turn away and pretend like nothing happened. That's what he did, the courteous thing, when

someone tripped or fell. If the person really needed help, they'd ask for it. Jackson was not asking for anything. He got back to his feet, nodded at Gold Buttons and assured him that he was fine. He waved to the women at the top of the stairs to signal the same thing and attempted to rush past them. But there was nowhere to flee.

Jackson teetered on the threshold of the huge room that spilled out before him. He assumed that such a large space had furniture but he could not see anything past the people. People were everywhere and those nearest were all looking at him, all mumbling, and all whispering and pointing at the man who just slipped. He very seriously considered returning to his car to chance the journey down the mountain. He looked past the crowd of strangers and out the large glass doors that made up half of the wall on the opposite side of the room. Snow continued to fall at a rapid pace. The wet whiteness dropped down from the darkening sky and claimed all that it touched. The trees, street signs, and window seals were all lost under inches of snow – even the road was a white blanket.

There were no other options that Jackson could see and so, he took his place at the end of a short line of people who waited to check in. The front desk was a circular piece of concrete that marked the very center of the lobby. Two women wore identical blue button-ups and each faced a computer and each smiled at the people in front of them. He half listened as they answered questions and gave instructions on how to use the room key inside the elevator. One of the women, whose line he was not in, lifted a piece of paper and pointed her pen at the blank spaces that broke the lines of text.

“Mrs. Henline, if you could please read through and fill out this pet waiver for us and sign and date the bottom when completed,” she said.

Pet waiver. The words clung to Jackson's ears. *The Hourglass Hotel is pet friendly?* And just as if the little dogs could read his mind, two Yorkshire Terrier's poked their heads over the edge of a baby stroller, (their hot pink ribbons matching its color) and gave a confirmative "arr roof!"

The little things triggered a procession of barking that seemed to come from all sides of the lobby. Jackson's embarrassment at falling down distracted him, and he did not catch this detail when first scanning the lobby. But each four-legged shedding machine made its location known; low and loud, deep and howly, high and yappy, they barked, pulling their leashes tight. He counted six dogs, not including the ones in the stroller. Jackson didn't dislike all dogs. On the contrary, if he visited a friend at their home shared with a pup, he was fine. He might have even rubbed a belly or two. But something about being forced to interact with dogs in shared public places made Jackson feel...*uncomfortable*. He grew aware of each surface they seemed to be allowed on. All of them. *This hotel has excellent reviews*, he reminded himself. *The room will be clean.*

A man's raised voice drew Jackson's attention back to the front desk.

"This is bullshit," the man said. He wore nice dress pants, a tailored white button-up, held his matching jacket in one hand and with the other, pointed his finger at the front desk woman.

"I'm a platinum member," the man continued. "I stay in nicer hotels than this one all the time."

"Yes, I understand, sir," the woman replied.

"You obviously don't understand," he said. His voice grew louder and other people started to notice as well.

“I’m sorry but there aren’t any upgrades available tonight,” she said. The man continued to stare at her and then leaned his face over her computer, his words dropping onto her keyboard.

“Stop being stupid, and just upgrade my fucking room,” he said. The woman’s professional demeanor slipped. Jackson saw anger leak into her eyes as she shrunk away from him. Jackson couldn’t take it.

She started to say, “I’m sorry” again but Jackson stepped forward, reading her name tag quickly and interrupted her apology.

“Jessica there is no need to apologize to this guy again,” Jackson said.

Her mouth hung open in surprise and the man’s head whipped around to look at him. Times like these made Jackson grateful for his own size. The man was not as tall, or as muscular as Jackson.

“This doesn’t involve you,” the man said.

“Look,” Jackson said. “I’m just trying to help you understand this situation you seem incapable of grasping.

The man gaped at him.

“Jessica said she doesn’t have an upgrade,” Jackson said. “And I’m sure she would much rather give you one, then listen to you bitch about it. So take your keys and move on so the rest of us can get checked in.”

The man clenched his jaw but didn’t say anything else. He glanced around at the people looking at him and the ones who nodded their heads in agreement with Jackson. Jessica put the key packet on the counter and the man snatched it up. He stalked to the elevators that were right in front of the desk, and punched the up button.

“I’m so sorry you have to deal with assholes like that,” Jackson said, pointing a thumb at the man still within ear shot.

Jessica smiled up at Jackson. He enjoyed making her smile and there was no trace of anger in her eyes. He noticed they were hazel, and shadowed by a row of full lashes. She had waves of blonde hair that fell past her collar bone and she tucked a piece behind her ears.

“Ah” she said and waved her hand dismissively. “He’s harmless.”

The man rolled his eyes and stepped inside the elevator.

“But hey, if you’re offering,” Jessica said, “I’ll hire you to stand here and scare people away who are mean to me.”

“Done,” Jackson said.

Jessica laughed and then asked if he needed to check in. He didn’t have a reservation yet and she offered him a good rate for a mountain-view room.

“I’m Jackson,” he said. He extended his hand to her and she shook it with a firm grip.

“It’s very nice to meet you, Jackson,” she said. “And thank you for sticking up for me.”

He held her gaze for a few extended seconds and then got on the elevators. *This place isn’t so bad*, he thought.

The doors slid open and he walked out on to the 6th floor of The Hourglass Hotel. Short, dark gray carpet stretched down the hallway and he walked almost to the end before reaching his room on the left. He looked down at the key packet and noticed that Jessica had written her name and drawn a smiley face.

Room 627 seemed to be clean. The bathroom had a faint smell of bleach (a good sign), the toilet bowl held only water, and he was unable to find any stains on the carpet. He pulled

back the duvet and inspected the sheets. He searched for stray hair, or stains, or dirt and found nothing.

Jackson wasn't quite a germaphobe but he had become very aware of germs as a young boy with a weak immune system. He didn't get sick often anymore but some of his old habits were triggered in busy, public places. He grabbed the thin, plastic liner that had been neatly folded over the ice bucket and used it like a glove to pick up the TV remote. He sat on his king sized bed and flipped through the channels mindlessly.

About one sitcom later, Jackson heard a dog bark - a familiar "arr roof!" from the room next door. A few seconds of silence went by and then another bark. Soon, he had to assume that there were two small dogs in one room and they held a very intense conversation with each other. *Why even bring your dogs with you if you're just going to leave them in the room?* Jackson turned the volume of the TV up louder and tried to ignore the yapping. How long could they really keep going?

Twenty minutes later, Jackson concluded that they could bark continuously until the end of time. He picked up the telephone and hit the front desk button.

"Guest services, this is Jessica," she said on the other end of the line.

"Hey, it's Jackson," he said. "I'm sorry to bother you, but there are some pretty vocal dogs in the room next door."

Jessica apologized and told Jackson she had a number on file for them. She would call immediately and tell them to return and calm their dogs. They couldn't be far with a snow storm like this still growing outside.

Jackson returned his attention to his TV, waiting for the barking to stop. About fifteen minutes later, the phone rang from his nightstand, dogs still barking in the background. It was Jessica.

“I left your neighbors a voicemail but they haven’t called back yet,” she said. “Are they still at it?”

“Yep,” he said. “I’m impressed by their persistence.”

“I’m coming to get them,” Jessica said. “In the pet waiver they signed, it says that we can if there is a disturbance.”

And sure enough, just a moment later Jackson heard light footsteps and a jingle of keys. There were two firm knocks on the door beside his and Jessica’s voice rang out, “front desk.” Jackson wondered if she needed assistance – and also wanted to see her again. He got off of his bed and walked to the door.

He opened it precisely as Jessica opened the door next to his and two Yorkshire Terriers sprinted from the room. They were the same hot pink wearing pups who had started the barking procession from their baby stroller down stairs. One of them continued bolting down the hallway and Jessica ran after it. The other dog ran right in between Jackson legs and in to his room. He jumped after it but the little thing was very quick. It dodged left and dodged right as Jackson tried get ahold of it and then it dashed under his bed. Jackson bent down to all fours and peered under the bed skirt. It laid down right in the middle and gave another yappy bark – a taunting bark, Jackson thought.

Jackson snapped his finger and made noises with his mouth. The kind of noises he had heard other people make when luring a pet to them. He sucked his lips together and produced something like an exaggerated kissing sound.

“That’s a good girl” he said.

The dog barked again but didn’t budge.

“Come here,” he said in an excited tone, patting the carpet floor.

Nothing.

“Oh for fucks sake,” he finally said.

He pressed his stomach to the ground and reached his arm underneath the bed. The dog barked at him furiously but he didn’t care. He grabbed its scruff and drug it out from the under the bed, holding it tight to his chest as he stood up.

“That’s a good dog,” he said.

The dog barked again.

Jackson opened his door and stepped out into the hall. Jessica had his neighbors door cracked and tossed the other dog back inside the room. At the sight of its comrade, the dog in Jackson’s arms became extremely hostile. A low growl erupted from its belly and its lips lifted, baring its teeth. Jackson wrapped both arms around its little waist and held it out, parallel to the ground, as far away from himself as he could. It snapped and yapped and growled. Jessica’s eyes grew wider, and she took a step towards Jackson. She lifted out her arms as if to take it away from Jackson but then dropped them again, thinking better of it.

“What do I do?” Jackson asked.

Jessica opened her mouth to say something just as the dog slipped from his grip and hit the hallway floor with a thud. It paused for one second and then turned, facing Jackson. He took a step backward but not quickly enough. The little monster lunged, and snapped its mouth down hard around its captor’s ankle. Jackson yelled out in pain and lifted his leg into the air. The dog

also lifted into the air, unwilling to let go. Jackson balanced on one foot like this and then began to shake his leg in the air, hoping the dog would let go.

“Gretel, no!” Jessica yelled, pointing a finger at it. “Bad dog!” She clapped loudly a couple of times but Gretel held on, unfazed.

Jackson gave another hard kick just as his neighbor’s door opened, and Gretel finally released her grip. A disheveled Mrs. Henline stood in the doorway and watched, eyes bulging, as her dog hit the wall right beside her, and slid to the floor.

Jackson put his hands by his head, like criminals do right before they are arrested, and limped backwards away from Mrs. Henline.

The old woman lifted her dog from the ground (it started licking her arms) and began to yell at Jackson. At least, he thought she was yelling, but he didn’t recognize any of the sounds as words. *She’s casting a curse on me*, he thought, only half joking.

Jessica was quick to step in. She wrapped an arm around Mrs. Henline’s shoulder and led her back inside her room. *What a brave woman*.

“I’ll be right back,” Jessica mouthed over her shoulder to him.

Jackson leaned against the hallway wall and looked down at his stinging ankle. He could see that a little bit of blood had started to soak through his pant leg.

A few moments later a petite woman in dress clothes and curly brown hair came striding down the hall. She smiled and nodded at Jackson and then unlocked Mrs. Henline’s door. He heard her begin to introduce herself just as the door closed behind her. A few seconds later, the door opened again and Jessica stepped out into the hall.

She lifted her eyebrows at Jackson, maybe a little surprised to find him in the same spot she left him in. *You said you’d be right back*.

He had rolled the bottom cuff of his pants up and Jessica looked down at his ankle.

“I’m impressed,” she said. She stepped beside him and wrapped her arm around his waist. He shifted his weight from the wall and leaned against her. She looked so small beside him – at least a foot shorter than he was. He wrapped his hand around her shoulder, holding on tightly.

“It’s the little one’s you’ve got to look out for,” he said. At this, she looked up and smiled at him. He studied her eyes, imprinting them to memory. She held his gaze for a second longer and then looked back down, biting her bottom lip, and she led him across the hall back to his room. Jackson felt the warmth of her body against his side and he pressed against her a bit more as they walked through his room. She kept her arm around his waist and he held his grip on her shoulder as they both set down on the edge of his bed. It would have been weird to keep holding on to her so he slowly let go, sliding his hand down her back as he did. He shifted his weight, accidentally putting pressure on his left foot and he winced as his ankle stung painfully again.

Jessica slid off the bed and kneeled down in front of him. She lifted his pant leg over his knee to get a better look at the bite. He looked down at her in this position – she looked up - and couldn’t help but wonder if she were good at giving blow jobs.

“What happened here?” she asked, pointing to a scar just below his knee.

She grabbed a couple of tissues from the night stand and pressed it against his wound while he told her about the time he got a BB gun for Christmas. His younger brother had been jealous, and “accidentally” shot him with it while they played in the yard.

She laughed, dabbing away the blood that had already begun to dry. She told him she was going to go find a first aid kit and she would be right back. He watched, admiring her as she walked out of his room. A second later, the door opened again.

“That was fast,” he said. But then saw that it wasn’t Jessica walking towards him. It was the same woman from the hallway who had gone into Mrs. Henline’s room.

“Hello, Mr. Gibbons,” she said. “I’m Brooke, the Front Desk Manager and I just wanted to personally apologize for what just happened to you. I can assure you that loose dogs are not a common occurrence here at The Hourglass Hotel.”

“It’s okay,” Jackson said. “I think your staff handled the situation well.”

Brooke smiled and nodded. She held up a bottle of Advil and a glass of water.

“I also come bearing pain reliever if you’d like some,” Brooke said.

Jackson thanked her as she placed the two pills in his palm and she handed him a glass. He tilted his head back, swallowing them quickly. And almost instantly, he became extremely tired; like he hadn’t slept in days. He yawned loudly and blinked his eyes closed as his bed and sleep swallowed him up.

Jessica

Jackson's eyes grew wider as they looked from Jessica to the small dog that he held in his hands. His arms were extended straight out, parallel with the ground, trying to keep the little thing as far away as possible without actually letting it go. But the dog was wriggling and yapping and snapping – trying to bite any part of Jackson it could reach.

Jessica shrugged her shoulders - like she wasn't unwilling to help but she also wasn't sure where to begin. She was indeed, a front desk associate at The Hourglass Hotel and was confident in her ability to handle almost any situation. But this was a different story.

“What do I do?” Jackson asked her anyway.

Jessica was embarrassed by her lack of initiative. You see, Jackson was quite attractive and she was pretty sure they had shared a moment downstairs when she checked him into his room. But now her confidence was slipping away faster than the barking dog had slipped out of Mrs. Henline's room.

She opened her mouth to say something but the wriggling dog slipped from Jackson's fingers and hit the hallway floor with a thud. It paused there for a moment, unsure of whether it was actually free or not, and then it turned on its captor. The small beast gave a yelp of a war cry and then latched on to his leg.

“What the fuck,” Jackson said, leaning back and balancing on one leg while he lifted the other. The dog, too, lifted into the air, unwilling to let go.

Jessica was pointing a finger at the dog and pleading with it in her most stern voice.

“Gretel, no. Bad dog.” She started to clap at it, hoping the loud noise would scare it into submission. It did not.

Jackson, still balancing on one leg, started to kick, hoping to shake the dog off. Suddenly, the door to his right flung upon and revealed a very upset Mrs. Henline (who must have been asleep this entire time). Her lilac mumu was half unzipped and she clutched the top of it with one hand. Large rollers hung loosely from thin strands of white hair. Just as she started to open her mouth, Jackson gave another hard kick and Mrs. Henline's dog hit the wall beside her and slid, almost in slow motion, to the ground by her feet.

Jackson immediately put his hands up beside his head, in an “I didn't mean to sort of way” and took a step backward.

The sounds that started to flow out of Mrs. Henline's mouth might have been words but Jessica wasn't sure. She thought of that saying, if looks could kill, and suppressed the urge to reach out to Jackson and check his vitals. Jessica led the old woman back into her room hoping she wouldn't have to be alone with her for long. She was sure that Brooke had been notified by now – had already seen what happened. And sure enough, Jessica only had to sit, listen, and nod

at the shaking Mrs. Henline for a minute or two before Brooke swept into the room. Brooke gave her most convincing smile and explained that she was here to make sure that Gretel was okay.

“She most certainly is not okay,” the old woman replied. She clutched the dog so tightly to her chest, Jessica feared it might suffocate. But instead of saying anything, Jessica slipped from the room while Mrs. Henline projected her dissatisfaction on to Brooke. She knew that in just a few minutes, the old woman would forget everything that happened within the last hour. The door shut behind Jessica and she was surprised to find Jackson still leaned up against the hallway wall.

The small dog’s teeth had sunk deeper into Jackson’s ankle than Jessica anticipated. Blood flowed freely from two tiny holes where the incisors had punctured his skin. Like a string of red Christmas lights, broken blood vessels stood out against Jackson’s flesh, outlining the rest of the dog’s crooked bite.

“I’m impressed,” Jessica said, wrapping her arm around Jackson’s torso. His muscles flexed beneath her hand, his thin T-shirt folding between her fingers, as he shifted his weight from the hallway wall, to her. He stood on his good leg, reaching an arm across her upper back, holding on to her shoulder. His arm was so long that the bend of his elbow reached past the middle of her back.

“It’s the little ones you gotta look out for,” Jackson said, looking down at her.

The top of Jessica’s head barely touched his collar bone and she lifted her eyes, peaking through a fan of lashes, to look at him. His eyes were a strange green-blue, unlike any color she had ever seen. A sea of freckles covered his pale skin and she started to count them without thinking. *Don’t be weird*, she thought, and suddenly grew self-conscious of the way her blue button up bunched around her middle, no matter how many times she tried tucking, stuffing it in,

the starched fabric always slipped back out – determined to bulge. And the heat under her arms grew warmer as she helped Jackson limp back into his room. She would be sure not to lift her arms too high, for any reason, in hopes to hide the sweat stains she knew were already seeping through the fabric.

If Jackson could hobble through his room without her help, he didn't show it. He leaned against her, pressing his side to hers, holding her shoulder tightly, and they took each step in sync - an obvious sign of their deep connection. A strand of her blonde hair was trapped under his arm, tugging painfully at the nape of her neck. But she didn't say anything.

They made it to the side of Jackson's bed, and as he sank to sit on its edge, Jessica sat down beside him. He took his time releasing his grip on her shoulder and slowly slid his hand down her back, letting her go. She looked at him again. God, he even had pouty, full lips. He was looking down at her, at her eyes one second and then her lips and back to her eyes. He shifted, maybe trying to scoot closer, and then winced.

"Shit. Your ankle," Jessica said.

Jessica kneeled on the floor in front of him. He sat up - looked down at her as she lifted his pant leg. She tried hard not to look up at him. He was probably thinking about a blow job. She was thinking about giving one. *Don't look up*, she thought and immediately did anyways. He flashed a smile at her.

She noticed a scar on his knee and asked him what happened. She wiped away the blood with tissues and listened as he told how his little brother had shot him with a BB gun one day when they were young.

“Thank you,” Jackson said as she slowly stood up. The tips of her fingers brushed against the top of his knee. Time seemed to slow down as they both became very still. Only their eyes moved – darting from each other’s lips to eyes to lips again. Then Jessica looked to the ground and took a step back.

“You sit tight,” she said. “I’m gonna go find a first aid kit.” She thought that Jackson was probably looking at her ass as she walked out of the room and hoped that her front desk slacks didn’t ruin it for him.

It took her a few minutes but she finally found some bandages in the housekeeping closet on the 3rd floor. She walked back into his room, a smile already creeping across her face, and then froze. Brooke was standing in the middle of Jackson’s room and he sprawled out across his bed, fast asleep.

Jessica’s lips parted, a protest trapped somewhere between her throat and her tongue. Her eyes grew wider as the realization of what Brooke had just done hit hard in her chest. She took a step towards his unconscious body.

Brooke’s head tilted sideways.

“Is something wrong?” She asked.

“You didn’t have to erase his memory,” Jessica said, trying hard to keep her voice steady. “He wasn’t upset, he wasn’t going to complain.”

“Jess, you know that I can’t take any chances,” Brooke said. “Even for the cute ones.”

Jessica didn’t respond and Brooke turned her back abruptly.

“You should get back downstairs,” she called over her shoulder and strode from the room.

Jessica lingered for a moment more, looking at Jackson. His face was relaxed – peaceful almost - and his chest rose and fell to the rhythm of his breath. She wanted to touch him. To see if his skin was as soft as it looked. To trace his lips with the tip of her finger. But more than anything, she wanted him to remember her.

She didn't want to be a part of the Brookes game anymore. She didn't want to play. But Brooke was smart. Smarter than most people knew and she had Jessica tangled up in her mess nice and tight. She had hooked Jessica from the beginning; line and sinker, too. But the bait was all gone now, and Jessica could feel the sharp barbs tugging at the flesh of her mouth, manipulating what she said, dragging her where Brooke needed her to go. Jessica could hardly believe just how much had changed over the last year. She remembered the first time she ever met Brooke, and how excited they all were to have a new Front Desk Manager. She remembered how much she admired Brooke.

*

The first year that The Hourglass hotel was open, things weren't going so well. Like any new property, there were kinks that needed working out and people that needed pruning. A survey was emailed with the bill to every guest at the end of their stay. And while most of the reviews weren't terrible, they weren't great either: "The parking garage was too confusing." "The front desk person didn't seem to know anything about the area." "My platinum status with this hotel wasn't recognized when I checked-in and I didn't get an upgrade."

Mr. Goldman, the private owner of The Hourglass, had one goal; to be the number one hotel in the nation. And that first year, they weren't cutting it. He figured that since the front desk was the very first part of the guests' experience, that it was top priority. Each front desk associate had to participate in an eight hour training session. That day, they snacked on junk food and learned how to apologize. How to apologize appropriately, that is. "Repeat the guests issue back to them so they know you're listening." They learned how to empathize. "Be sure to say that you, too, would be upset if you requested an early check-in but was unable to get one." And they learned how to resolve problems. "Do whatever you have to do to make the guest happy." Their mock encounters were videotaped and then played back to them on the large projection screen hanging from the ceiling at the front of the room. They raised their hands in turn and pointed out what each person did wrong, or right.

Shortly after this training session, the Front Desk Manager was let go and they brought in Brooke as his replacement. At first, they all thought her beauty and charm had gotten her the job. How can you turn down that smile and those freckles? Her eye contact was unbeatable and when in conversation with her, she had this way of making you feel like you were the only two people in the room. She listened to you when you spoke; a trait lacking in the other managers. And it soon became clear that her work came before everything else in her life. To be honest, she never spoke about anything other than work. No known boyfriend waiting for her at home. No mother or sister coming in town for a visit. No mention of a favorite movie, or band. She wore her name tag like a cape; a sign that she was invincible. At first, Jessica loved Brooke - beautiful, driven, powerful woman.

When Jessica was on her way to work, she started to text Brooke and ask if she wanted any coffee, or food (free of charge,). If anyone needed their shift covered, Jessica always

volunteered hoping that Brooke would notice her dedication. Jessica beamed the day Brooke showed her how to do invoices – a seemingly easy task but no other front desk employee had been shown. She was Brooke’s go-to girl and loved it.

After Brooke had been there three months, the survey scores were already creeping up. But Jessica began to notice that even the smallest of negative feedback would make Brooke’s eyes shift. The muscles in her jaw would flex as she clenched, and unclenched her teeth.

“Good job team,” she would say. “But I know we can do better than this. What do we do?”

“Fake it till we make it,” they’d all say back to her. Brooke taught them to leave their personal lives at the door. If it wasn’t work-related, she didn’t want to hear about it. If you’re not feeling well, you better pretend to be.

By the sixth month, The Hourglass hotel’s reputation was growing large. The guest’s checking in would say how their friends had stayed with us a few weeks ago and had gone on and on about how nice it was. How the décor was so cool, the rooms so efficient, and the staff so nice. But the reviews still weren’t perfect, and Brooke wasn’t happy. After reading a particularly ridiculous complaint about the parking garage not being accessible enough to the hotel, she closed her eyes and pinched the bridge of her nose.

“It’s attached to the first fucking floor,” she whispered. Brooke and Jessica were alone in at the desk.

“You can’t cure stupidity,” Jessica said.

Brooked looked at Jessica with the kind of eye contact that made Jessica forget the rest of the room.

“Do you trust me?” Brooke first asked.

Jessica nodded.

“Can I trust you?” Brooke asked next.

“Of course,” Jessica said. A little hurt that this wasn’t obvious.

“I’ve been working on something,” Brooke said. “A little project, of sorts. But not everyone can know about it.”

Jessica resisted the urge to bounce on her toes...she wanted to clap her hands and shimmy her shoulders. The satisfaction of being one of the favorites tasted sweet in her mouth. She kept it cool, though, and squared her shoulders, lifted her chin (like Brooke did) and quietly listened.

Brooke had already chosen a very small group of employees to work directly under her on this new project. A project that they couldn’t tell anyone else about. She would pay each of them a weekly bonus, under the table, and the amount would fluctuate depending on how much extra work they did that week. Just like Jessica had said, they couldn’t cure stupidity. But Brooke had an idea on how to control it. She was prepared to do whatever it took to control the experience that each guest had...especially those who were determined to complain.

“You see, there’s this serum I came across when I was in Mexico,”

“You lived in Mexico?” Jessica interrupted.

“That’s beside the point,” Brooke said. “The point is that I have...WE have the power to ensure that each unsatisfied guest will forget what they wanted to complain about.” Brooke explained how most people don’t understand her type of dedication. That most people wouldn’t get what she was trying to achieve. To be good wasn’t enough. She strove for perfection. Jessica understand, right?

Jessica understood that she liked Brooke and desperately wanted to please her. And that she would do anything Brooke said. And hell, she could make extra money to mess with shitty strangers? Of course she said yes. The dosing part was the only thing that made Jessica nervous. Not the erasing of memories, or lying. She had worked at a hotel for too long and she knew the type of guest that Brooke planned to target – they deserved what was coming. But she couldn't quite rap her head around physically dosing the guest. How would it be done?

“Don't worry, Jess,” Brooke said. “I'll teach you everything you need to know.”

And she did. Brooke invited Jessica to her apartment and held one on one session's with her. Jessica enjoyed the intimacy. She had sat on one end of Brooke's couch, a half drunken glass of red wine swirling in her hand. Unpacked boxes were shoved against bare beige walls. Jessica glanced around, searching for a picture or memento, any sign of Brooke's past, but found nothing.

Brooke explained that she was in the process of setting up cameras and recorders all through the hotel. She had recruited two people to be in charge of monitoring her devices and they notify her of any guests that seemed likely to complain. Brooke also showed Jessica how easy it would be to drug someone. She held up the tiny glass vile in her hand and shook the invisible liquid.

“You can literally put this stuff in anything,” Brooke said. “It doesn't have a smell or a taste.”

“So how are you able to do this?” Jessica asked. “Like, financially.”

Brooke gave a crooked smile, her second glass of wine nearly empty, giving her cheeks a rosy glow.

“Let's just say someone else is equally invested in our success,” Brooke said.

“Is it Mr. Goldman?” Jessica asked.

Brooke tilted her head back and laughed.

Jessica laughed too. Of course it was Mr. Goldman. Who else had a large some of expendable money and was willing to fund a secret, illegal project to promote his hotel?

“I know this whole thing seems drastic,” Brooke said. “But I’ve got to at least try.”

Jessica nodded, encouraging Brooke to explain because honestly, she didn’t really understand. Brooke hesitated for a long moment and Jessica wasn’t sure if she was going to keep talking.

“The pressure has been there since my final interview,” Brook eventually said.

Jessica crossed one leg over the other and smoothed out the creases in her shirt, tried to look worthy of the Brookes trust.

*

Brooke

Brooke sat down in one to the two chairs that faced Mr. Goldman’s desk. It held no cushion and the cool wood chilled the backs of her legs through her sheer tights. She shifted a few times but found no comfort. She wondered if Mr. Goldman did this to every potential new hire or just the females - a secretary had opened the door to his empty office and left her there to wait for him. Either way, she had dealt with wealthy, powerful men before and had an idea of what to expect from Mr. Goldman. This was the fourth and final interview for the Front Desk Manager position at his property, The Hourglass Hotel.

Brooke wore her favorite black power suite. It was her favorite for many reasons. The pants themselves made her feel like she had a leg up on any other woman in a skirt or dress - that she was more prepared for any given situation. It complimented her lean figure while also

covering it. It was black and therefore classic - powerful. And, it had never failed her when landing a job.

She heard muffled voices approaching and took one deep breath before the door swung forward. Mr. Goldman held his iPhone against his ear. Brooke stood up as he walked through the room and around his desk. He smiled and tipped his head at her but remained standing, listening to whoever spoke on the other end of the line. He faced the large window that stretched across the right side of the room and held the back of his leather chair.

He was younger than Brooke anticipated; in his thirties she guessed but it was hard to tell with his lack of facial hair. His tailored grey suit fit him perfectly and Brooke's eyes glanced at his left hand - unmarried. He rarely spoke - only saying "yes" or "no" and then finally, "yes, that is all for now."

Mr. Goldman slipped his phone back into his pocket and turned to Brooke.

"Please, have a seat," he said.

Brooke hesitated until he pulled out his own chair and she sat down as he did. He placed both elbows on his desk and folded one hand over the other. She looked at his eyes for the first time and was surprised by their darkness. Even though rays of mid-day sunlight fell into all corners of the room, illuminating the specks of dust and skin cells that floated through the air, the light didn't reach his eyes. And even as he smiled at her, not even a hint of warmth reached his them.

"I assume that you know why I've asked you here," he stated.

"For an interview," Brooke said.

"The job is yours," he said. "If you want it. But first, there are some things you need to understand."

Brooke straightened her back, and crossed one leg over the other. She was careful not to bounce her foot - to suppress any kind of nervous tick. She folded her hands in her lap and became still. She listened carefully as Mr. Goldman began to speak.

Mr. Goldman was the sole owner of The Hourglass Hotel; Brooke knew this. But she didn't know that it was his only business. The hotel had just reached its one year mark and while it didn't do terrible, guest's reviews were not nearly where he wanted them to be. Where he needed them to be. His goal was to be the number one hotel in the nation and anything less was considered failure.

"Your apparent drive and dedication have gotten you to this point," Mr. Goldman said. "But this is only the beginning."

"How do you plan on making it to number one, she asked.

He stared at her for a moment.

"That's where you come in," he said. His gaze was intense. As if he were examining the fibers that made up her being. Like he was trying to see if she was the one he had been searching for.

"The last Front Desk Manager - let's just say, he didn't cut it," he said. Brooke was a little uneasy by his ambiguity but didn't question him about it.

Mr. Goldman wanted to succeed so badly that he was willing to do anything it took. And that is exactly what he wanted Brooke to do as well. His plan was to give Brooke complete power at the hotel. He would provide her with a special fund and free reign to make the changes she thought were necessary to succeed. The salary that he offered her was far more than she had ever made. She liked a good challenge and this was certainly the biggest one to have faced her.

"You will answer only to me. Do you understand?" he asked her.

“Yes, sir,” she said, nodding once.

“And if you start to slip - if negative reviews are written about my hotel,” he continued, “you are the one I will blame.”

“I understand,” she said.

And at that, Mr. Goldman stood up, and extended his hand out to Brooke. She concentrated on keeping a firm grip and shook his hand.

“I’ll give you until the end of the week to decide,” he said as she walked towards the door.

One of her hands gripped the round, brass handle and she turned her head to look back at him.

“I’ll take it,” she said.

Jessica

Jessica returned to the front desk. There were fifty more arrivals and a lot more rooms to sell. Alison, the other front desk girl, had three people on hold and another two filed in line in front of her. She didn’t say anything to Jessica. She spoke only to the guest, funneling information into his ears, hoping he would remember to use his room key in the elevator. Alison just pointed at the blinking telephone and Jessica went back to work.

“Thank you for holding, this is Jessica. How may I help you?”

She forced her attention away from Jackson, away from his bleeding ankle, away from what might have been.

The next two hours passed by quickly as the lobby stayed thumping with activity. In the brief moments that things slowed down, and Jackson floated back into her mind, Jessica tried to distract herself and talk to Alison. Alison never turned from her computer, pouting from her Pinterest page and Jessica figured it was because she had abandoned her at the desk for the last thirty minutes. Jessica perpetually fought this battle. As one of Brooke's minions, she couldn't tell Alison why she was really gone. *Sorry girl, just had to erase someone's memory real quick.* It sounded stupid even from her head. Jessica tried to work extra hard, racing to answer every phone call before her co-working could, greeting guests first, inviting them to her side of the circle desk with their questions, so Alison didn't have to. Most of the time, this tactic worked. It took too much of Alison's energy to stay mad at Jessica. She would slowly shift her body away from her computer, opening her stance, a signal that she was now willing to accept conversation.

"Sorry about earlier," Jessica said. "Mrs. Henline's dogs escaped." She gave her best "I'm sorry" face, but in vein because Alison didn't even look at her.

"It's fine," is all she said.

Jessica gave up on Alison and turned to her own computer, waiting for the phone to ring. Waiting for someone to approach the desk. Waiting for a distraction. She pulled up her favorite website, jigzone.com, and picked a puzzle to pass the time. She chose the picture of a bare tree, standing alone on top of a hill. The grass around its base was brown, and a light fog filled the background, hiding whatever was really there from view. The photographer had captured a vulnerable moment of transition – stripped naked by autumn, bent over by an invisible wind, the tree waited to be buried by snow. And starting with the edges, as Jessica began to piece the picture back together and she thought about how her own situation had already started to bury her. And how Brooke held the shovel.

The first time Jessica dosed someone went pretty well. It had been an elderly woman, very similar to Mrs. Henline, and Jessica had been the one to check her into the hotel.

“That kid you all have running the Valet stand is too slow,” she had said, opening the conversation with a complaint. Jessica smiled, sure that one of Brooke’s other minions would be listening.

“I am so sorry about that ma’am,” Jessica said.

“No you’re not,” said the old woman. “The last name is McCormick,” she continued before Jessica could respond.

“Evelyn?” Jessica asked.

“Is there another McCormick checking in today?”

Jessica shook her head no and the old woman scoffed.

“Well that was a stupid question, then.”

Jessica briefly imagined punching Mrs. McCormick in her wrinkly face. But instead, she smiled and encoded her two room keys. Not ten minutes passed by before Mrs. McCormick called down to the front desk demanding help with her television.

“Yes ma’am. Someone will be up to assist you in just a moment,” Jessica said. She hung up the phone and the next second, Brooke was standing in front of her.

“You know what you have to do, Jess,” she said and did not wait to hear if she replied or not. If she was ready or not. It didn’t matter – Brooke was not in a mood to be argued with.

Jessica stood outside of Mrs. McCormick’s door, inhaling and exhaling deeply before she finally gave two firm knocks. She heard the old woman yell for her to just come in already,

“I’m the one who called YOU, remember?”

Jessica entered the room, carrying a shining silver tray with a fine plate of warm cookies and a tall glass of whole milk. She sat them on the old woman's bedside table.

"I didn't ask for cookies," Mrs. McCormick said.

"I know, ma'am," Jessica said, "Our chef made too many and I thought you might like some."

The old woman huffed and Jessica patiently waited as she explained how she had tried pressing the 'on' button but nothing happened and then this button and still nothing happened and how the hotel was obviously not as good as everyone cracked it up to be. She would be sure to have her grandson help her to write this on "the world wide web." She was sitting on her bed, smacking the back of the TV remote into the palm of her sun damaged hand. Jessica asked if she could see the remote and then Mrs. McCormick held it out to her.

Mrs. McCormick grabbed a cookie and ate it as Jessica looked at the remote. The old woman gave a big yawn and then very slowly fell back onto her bed, closing her eyes, and giving one great snore. Jessica turned the television on (it was not broken) and left FOX news blaring.

She returned to the desk to find Brooke already waiting on her.

"Nicely done, Jess," she said.

Jessica basked in the compliment. She had done a good job.

Allison's voice brought Jessica back to the front desk.

"I'm going to leave early tonight," she said. It was a statement. Normally they asked each other if they minded before one of them left early. Not that Jessica would have cared. Things had slowed way down at the front desk. There had been a lot of cancellations because of the storm

and there weren't very many guests left to check-in. It just would have been courteous to ask Jessica first before asking Brooke. But Allison said that her boyfriend was already on his to pick her up in his truck.

It was nearly 8:00PM when Allison waved goodbye and left the desk to go clock out. Jessica turned back to her computer and started to piece together another puzzle. Barley any time had gone by when the elevator doors opened up and Jessica's heart fluttered. Jackson strode through the doors and looked directly at her. She held her breath. Did he remember? She smiled at him. He smiled back but never slowed his pace as we walked right past her and took a seat at the far end of the bar. She watched as Vanesa, The Hourglass's cutest bartender, sashayed up to him. Jackson flashed a smile at her and they talked easily as Vanesa poured him a beer from the tap.

She hadn't anticipated this to hurt so much. He was just one guy after all - practically a stranger. She hated the part of herself that liked him so much already. Was he one of the most attractive men she had ever seen? Yes. But then what she was feeling should just be lust. But this pain came from somewhere deeper. Seeing him walk away with absolutely no recognition of her literally made her heart ache.

She remembered the way he interrupted that jerk from earlier and stood up for her. And the way his eyes bore into hers in the 6th floor hallway as he held on to her tightly – surely those eyes could read minds. Did he feel that too?

The front desk phone rang.

“This is Jessica,” she said.

“Hey, the roads are getting pretty slick outside,” Brooke said. “You can stay here tonight if you need to.”

“Thanks,” Jessica said. “We’ll see how bad it is at eleven.”

“And try not to look so miserable up there,” Brooke added. “You’ll scare the guests away.”

Jessica lifted her head to the camera and gave a big, joker-ish smile.

“Much better,” she said and hung up.

Jessica held her exaggerated smile while cursing her manager under her breath. She redirected the anger she felt for herself at Brooke instead.

God, things had changed so much. Jessica had helplessly watched as their relationship shifted further away from the friendship she cherished to...she didn't know how to describe it. Brooke eventually stopped asking Jessica to do things, and instead, told her to do them. She stopped talking to Jessica, and rather, spoke at or down to her. She remembered in great detail the night that she gave up on ever being Brooke's friend.

A man had gotten increasingly drunk as day turned to night. He was rather short and exceptionally round. He reminded Jessica of an avocado. He stumbled through the lobby, looking down his big, crooked nose and yelled at the cocktail waitress for another drink. She refused, said he was cut off, and advised him to go to his room. He sat down on a couch, evidently incapable of standing any longer. He yelled about how that was bullshit. How she needed to stop being so stuck up. How he could make her get him a drink and reached a greasy hand out and grabbed ahold of her upper arm. She dodged out of reach and walked quickly back

into the kitchen. He swayed from his seat on the couch. The bartender brought him a glass of water and encouraged him to go to bed.

“Gert out of meh damn face,” the man yelled. Other customers settled their tabs and cleared the area. Jessica’s front desk phone rang. It was Brooke from the back office.

“It’s time for that guy to go to sleep,” she said, and hung up.

Great, Jessica thought, *this outa be fun*. She didn’t know what to do exactly but she also didn’t want to ask Brooke, and have to endure being spoken to like a child. There was a small vile of serum in her pocket, like always, and she walked across lobby. She stood over the man, his eyes were half closed and he didn’t move or acknowledge her arrival. She didn’t think he was aware of his surroundings, let alone, her. She pulled out the vile and poured three drops into his water. She turned to walk back to the desk.

“Hey! What tha hell didchu just pour in meh drink,” he yelled after her.

Jessica froze. Those still in the lobby looked at him, and then at her. She opened her mouth, but the words weren’t coming.

“Nothing,” she finally said. She could hear her own shaky tone – like a child lying about eating a cookie before dinner. He asked her the same question and she turned and kept walking to the desk. He stood up, and followed her, looking the most sober he had all night.

“She just tried to drug me,” he said, pointing a finger.

“No, sir, I didn’t,” she said.

They argued back and forth until finally the security officer on duty in the parking garage arrived and herded him on to the elevator. All the while, the man repeated “she tried to drug me” over and over again. Jessica’s heart was pounding. Everyone saw how belligerent he was. No

one actually believed him...right? The security guard came back down a little while later and said that the man was safely in his room.

Jessica assumed someone else was sent to erase his memory because Brooke hadn't asked her to do it. Brooke didn't talk to her the rest of the night. When she passed by the front desk, she kept her gaze cold, and didn't look at Jessica. When 11:00pm came, and the night shift ended, Brooke called Jessica into her office.

Brooke pointed to one of the two chairs that faced her desk and Jessica sat down. Instead of sitting in her own chair, Brooke stood in front of her desk, leaning against its wooden edge loomed over Jessica.

"What happened?" Brooke asked.

Jessica started to respond, tried to explain

"I'm sorry..." she started.

Brooke raised her hand and stopped her from continuing.

"Actually, I already know what happened," Brooke said. "Because I see everything. I hear everything. Nothing happens in this hotel that I don't know about. And what I know is that you. Fucked. Up." She spoke the last three words slowly, emphasizing each syllable with a jab of her finger. Brooke's eyes were cold and they bore down on Jessica who shrunk deeper into the chair. She had never seen Brooke quite this angry before.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" Brooke asked. "Pulling that vile out in the lobby, right in front of his face."

"I'm sorry," Jessica started again.

"I had no idea you were so stupid," Brooke said. "When I said it was time for him to go to sleep, I meant in his damn room. We don't want a fucking fat ass passed out in the lobby."

Brooke stared at Jessica, daring her to say something back. She didn't. Jessica's eyes started to sting, but she held back the tears. She wasn't going to cry in front of her. Brooke noticed this.

"Atta girl," Brooke said. "You hold it back because that's what we have to do. We fake it till we make it, little girl." Brooke stood all the way up, and turned her back to Jessica as she walked around her desk shaking her head the entire way.

She slowly sank into her chair. She closed her eyes and pinched the bridge of her nose. Jessica wasn't sure how much time passed but she didn't dare to move. Slowly Brooke released her nose and folded her hands across her desk.

"Look, I hate to say it, but I need you," Brooke said. "And you're probably thinking about quitting, but you can't. I have you on video now, dosing a man's drink in the lobby."

Jessica knew she was right. There was other evidence of her drugging people in guest rooms, sure, but Brooke couldn't use any other that against her without explaining why there were video cameras in the rooms. But the lobby...that was a different story. This time, Jessica could have acted alone.

"You can go now," Brooke said.

Jessica stood up quickly and reached the door in one step, starting to turn the knob.

"And please," Brooke said.

Jessica didn't let go of the handle, she only turned an ear over her shoulder.

"Don't ever fuck up like that again."

Jessica nodded and closed the door hard behind her.

Jessica answered the phone from her bubble of a front desk when Jackson rose from his bar stool waved goodbye to Vanesa, and headed back toward the desk. She assured the guest on the other end of the line that she would have an extra blanket sent up right away and hung up the phone just as Jackson walked past. He pressed the silver button for the elevator and slightly swayed as he waited for it. She looked at him every three seconds or so trying to catch his eye but to no avail. The white circle that hung above the elevator flashed red, *it never gets here that fast*, she thought, and Jackson disappeared into its depths.

Jessica picked up her two-way radio and asked the houseman to deliver the extra blanket to room 527 and she had sat the radio back down when the elevator doors opened again. Jackson swept out of the lift and walked straight to Jessica. He smiled at her and small wrinkles formed around his eyes. She beamed back at him, searching for a hint of recognition. He hesitated for just a second, parting his lips as if he were about to say something, but didn't. Jessica subconsciously bit her bottom lip, a nervous tick, remembering how soft his worn t-shirt had felt beneath her palm.

But then Jackson looked away from her, swiftly patting himself down (first his front pockets, and then his back). He even patted his chest, despite not having a jacket on, and stared down at his feet as if the concrete floor might uncover what he was looking for.

"I seem to have lost my room key," Jackson said.

"That's too bad," she teased. "I guess you'll have to sleep on one of these couches."

Jackson feigned offense. He turned his head and spoke to the empty space beside him as if someone were standing there, and pointed a thumb at Jessica.

"Front desk girl's got jokes," he said. He looked sideways at her and chuckled.

"What can I say?" Jessica asked.

She encoded a duplicate room key and offered it to him. He furrowed his eyebrows and slowly reached for the key.

“I didn’t give you my name,” he stated. But it was also a question.

Her shoulders sank – but not enough for Jackson to notice. It was silly for this to make her sad again when she already knew that he didn’t remember her but something about the way her failure could still speak – as if Brooke were mocking her through Jackson.

“Ouch,” she said and mimicked what Jackson had done. She turned to an invisible person beside her and pointed her thumb at him.

“This guy doesn’t remember that I checked him in,” she said.

Jackson looked embarrassed and mumbled something about “the beer in this town,” and how desperately he must need sleep. He pressed the button for the elevator again and stood facing it while he waited. She kept her eyes on her computer this time. The white circle lit up red again and as the doors slid open Jackson looked at her.

“I promise I won’t forget you again,” he said and ducked into the elevator.

The rest of Jessica’s shift slowly ticked by. She watched a man step inside from the outdoor ledge – the one that looked over Biltmore Avenue – and shook fresh snow from his hair and shoulders, the tip of his nose red from his brief encounter with the dropping temperature. The man held up a ruler and announced to his friends that a solid ten inches blanketed the balcony. Even devout smokers abandoned their addictions that night; their needs for nicotine no longer cause enough to face the bitter cold. The snow didn’t fall vertically anymore. According to Jessica’s weather app on her phone, the wind speed had reached 30mph and she watched it force the fat flakes sideways. Her weather app also predicted that the temperature would rise slightly over the next few hours, and the snow was likely to turn into ice.

Jessica turned back to her computer screen and abandoned the last bit of hope she had of driving back to her apartment that night. Even with a 4-wheel drive car (which she didn't have), there was nothing she could do against ice. She scanned her screen with the list of all vacant/clean rooms in the hotel – there were a handful of rooms on each floor and without hesitation she chose one on the sixth. She wanted to tell herself her choice was made based on how pretty downtown would look from her window in the morning, but to be honest, it was the closest one to Jackson's room.

11:00pm finally came and Jessica prepared to clock out. She had meticulously scraped, and bitten off her deep purple nail polish and she swept the scattered remnants into the trash can. She studied her fingers in their plainness, sighing at the specks of color that refused to be stripped away from the corners of her nailbeds. She wondered if memories could be like that. Jessica's coworker arrived to take her place at the desk and she rushed through the pass on information she had to tell him (there were three more arrivals left but only one confirmed, the hotel was only half full due to all the cancellations, that cell phone there was found in the men's bathroom, and the foster dog probably needed to go out soon). She stuffed her room key into her pocket, grabbed her bag, and waved goodbye to the desk.

Jessica held her breath in the elevator as it lifted her to the sixth floor. She stepped out and scanned the hallway. Large rectangular lights were spaced out across the ceiling; each one issued an orange light that was too soft to fully illuminate the space, casting sections of shadow down the carpeted hall. Jackson's room was about a third of the way down, and she slowed as she neared it, half expecting to find his tall figure leaning against the wall. But she found only silence. She imagined herself knocking on his door, delivering some witty line as he invited her

in. She'd tip back a pint of beer as he tipped back his head, laughing at the joke she had just nailed. They would tipsily giggle together as his perfect fingers fumbled to unhook her bra. And then Brooke would barge in, eyes bulging, hands holding two drinks, laughing as she poured them down their throats. *Ah, she even ruins day dreams.*

A door opened to Jessica's left, bringing her back to reality and the fact that she had become completely idle outside her crushes door. *Not creepy at all.* A middle-aged man in navy pajamas and pillow-pressed hair shuffled out of his room holding an ice-bucket. She flashed him a large, front desk smile (a reflex at this point) and continued on to her room at the very end of the hall.

She almost started to undress in the bedroom before she remembered creepy Randy in the basement with all his monitors. She went to the bathroom and traded in her worn out uniform for a pair of red checkered PJ pants and a black tank top. She didn't feel like brushing her teeth (she'd just go extra hard in the morning), or washing her face and jumped into the king sized bed. Even though she had been in these room's a million times, the space looked different from her horizontal perspective. She made a star-fish with her body, stretching out each limb, and let out a little moan of satisfaction. Remote in hand, Jessica flipped through the channels on the TV and wondered what Jackson might be watching. Her eyelids grew heavy and after just one episode of Archer, she fell asleep with both the TV and lights still on.

There was an audible click as the TV cut off and Jessica's room was thrust into darkness. She woke up and blinked her eyes, urging them to adjust. Her ears tingled, almost rang as her hearing compensated for loss of sight. She grabbed her cell phone from underneath her pillow and checked the time – 1:37a.m. She reached a hand out and twisted the knob of the lamp on her

nightstand – nothing. She slid out of bed and peered out of her frosted window; the lights were out at the bar across the street. Ice glistened from street signs, handrails, and weighed down tree branches. She squinted her eyes and saw that ice continued to fall from the sky.

Maybe the power went out, she thought while already crawling back to the warmth of her covers. Her head touched her pillow. Her eyes closed. They closed for one long second before she opened them wide again. She sat straight up, checked the time on her phone again, looked out the window again, and realization quickly dawned. If it was true, if the power was really off, then Brooke wasn't able to monitor anything in the hotel. No cameras. No recorders. She pictured Brooke's minion down in the basement, fumbling with his monitors and checking his cable connections with a phone pressed to his ear, Brooke's words hitting like a slap in the face from the other end of the line. Jessica rushed to the light switch, flipping it on and off until she was satisfied with the conclusion; there was no power.

Her heart beat accelerated and she could feel adrenaline being released through her body. Her feet moved before she had fully decided what to do next and one hand wrapped around the door handle, pulling it open. She only had a few minutes – definitely less than thirty – before the hotel would become alive again; before she would become trapped again. She jumped as her own door slammed closed behind her and the darkness of the hallway swallowed her up. Her earlier decision to just let Jackson go was easily dismissed and flew farther from her mind with every hurried step she took towards his door. This was her opportunity save Jackson. To confess what Brooke had done to him, Had done to so many other guests. She used her phone like a flashlight and lit her path to his room. She tapped her knuckle against the door three times and then cursed herself for not taking the extra three seconds to do a mirror check. There was no sound from his

room. She knocked louder and ran her fingers through her slightly greasy hair. She almost knocked again just as the handle of his door turned and it inched inward.

“Jessica?” Jackson asked, bending his head down to get a better look at her.

She walked into his room without asking and he pivoted out of her way.

“Afraid of the dark?” he asked.

“Not exactly,” Jessica said.

Freckles covered his bare chest and shoulders and Jessica couldn't stop her eyes from noticing the way his hipbones peaked out above his red basketball shorts and her mouth was probably open. She then saw his t-shirt lying on the floor by her feet. She picked it up and threw to him, trying not to count his freckles. She mumbled something about how this was important and she couldn't be distracted. She sat her cellphone on the bed, now shining against the ceiling, but still proved enough light for them to see each other. Jessica began to pace as he pulled his shirt on. She told him about the ice outside and how she thinks it must have broken a power line and how she didn't know how long it would be out so she had to come right away.

He took a step towards her and reached out to grab her shoulder. She stopped pacing. He stared down at her.

“What's going on?” he asked. “Why do you look scared?”

“I'm afraid to tell you and I'm afraid to not tell you,” Jessica said.

“To tell me what?” he asked.

“Why you don't remember checking in to the hotel,” she said.

“Alcohol?” Jackson said.

“No, just listen to me,” she said. “This place,” she held her arms out, gesturing to all of the room, “it isn't what you think.”

“What are you talking about?” he asked. His eyebrows were furrowed – she wasn’t making any sense.

“Look, I don’t really know how to tell you this,” she said, “But, earlier today, you were drugged and part of your memory was erased.”

He stood very still. Processing. And then a smile slowly crept across his face.

“Front desk girl’s got jokes,” he said.

“No, Jackson, I’m being serious,” she said.

Jessica started to pace again and tried to keep her voice low as she explained everything that happened to Jackson earlier that day. He sat down on the side of his bed and stared at the thin, carpeted floor. She told him about the asshole at the front desk and how he had stuck up for her, she told him about the barking dogs and how they escaped Mrs. Henlines room and how Gretel ran into his – how she had bitten his ankle. She told him about Brooke, and how she had snuck into the room, giving him Advil and “water” when Jessica left to get the first aid kit. She told him when she returned, it was too late. She told him what Brooke did to guests to stop them from complaining and writing a bad review. Jackson stood up and began pacing the small area around the bed.

“I was right here, in your room,” Jessica said, “pressing tissues against your bleeding ankle. You have a scar on your knee where your brother shot you with a BB gun.”

This made Jackson look up. How could she have known that unless she was telling the truth?

“Why are you telling me this?” Jackson asked her.

She paused. All of her feelings for him swirled around inside of her like a load of clothes in a washing machine. There was no time to dry them before wearing them out in the open.

She couldn't look at him. She stared down at her hands and picked at a piece of polish still stuck to her nail.

"It's just that," she started. "Well. I couldn't stand the way I felt when you didn't remember me."

She could feel Jackson staring at her but she kept her gaze down. Had she made a mistake? Maybe she had read in to signal that Jackson wasn't putting out at all. Of course he didn't feel the same way, how could she have been so stupid? Her cheeks grew warmer and she suddenly felt like leaving the room – like sprinting from it. She pictured hiding back under her covers and forgetting that this entire day even happened at all. She turned and started to walk out.

Jackson stood up and stepped in front of her.

"Woah there," he said. "Where are you going?"

"Look, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have come." She said. "Just forget everything I said."

She still wasn't looking at him. She tried to step around his tall figure but he moved with her, staying in her path. He grabbed each of her shoulders and gave them a light squeeze.

"Look at me," he said.

She lifted her head slowly and peeked through her lashes at him.

He stared down at her. His eyes doing that mind reading thing again.

"I can't deny that there is something...familiar about you," Jackson said. "About being close to you."

She didn't say anything and tried to look away again. But he let go of one of her shoulders and held her chin, pulling her face up towards his again.

"I just need a minute to process," he said.

“Okay.”

“But I believe you,” he said. “So don’t try to run away.”

He let her go and she kept her feet planted on the ground. He stepped away from her and started pacing the length of the room again.

“So what do we do,” he finally asked her.

Truthfully, Jessica hadn’t thought that far yet. She realized that Brooke’s cameras were down and her body moved into action before her mind did.

Jessica and Jackson both agreed that they couldn’t do anything about it tonight. Jessica told him that she didn’t even know exactly where all of Brooke’s cameras and microphones were but it was safe to assume that they were everywhere. When the power came back on, they had to be careful with what they said and how they acted around each other. And the power could be back on any minute.

“We don’t have much time,” Jessica said. “I should get back to my room.”

“Here,” Jackson said. He grabbed her phone that was still gently illuminating his room and handed it back to her.

“Put my number in,” he said. “We can text, at least.”

She typed the numbers into her phone as he read them out to her. When she finished, he was standing very close to her again. He wrapped a piece of her blonde hair around his index finger, rubbing its end, and then gently tucked it behind her ear. His fingertips traced down the side of her neck and he held his hand there, thumb brushing the side of her jaw. Jessica pressed her face into his hand, loving its warmth. They both paused for split second; Jessica inhaled softly just as he bent his head, and kissed her.

“You aren’t alone in this anymore,” he whispered.

Tears flooded to Jessica's eyes. *Oh God. Pull yourself together*, she thought as she let go of him quickly and left his room. It was way too soon for him to see her cry.

Her heartbeat didn't begin to slow down until she got back into her own bed. She pulled the covers up over her head. She closed her eyes and lay there, inhaling and exhaling, pressing her fingers to her lips, trying to hold on to Jackson kiss as long as she could. Fat tear rolled down her cheeks and she didn't bother to wipe them away. Everything she had been holding on to, all the lies she had hidden, all of her hurt, the immense fear that lived inside of her – all of it a parasite that had slowly grown stronger and her self-identity grown weaker – it all unraveled and fell from her eyes like the ice that fell outside.

She fumbled for her phone and text Jackson.

“Thank you,” she said.

“You're very welcome,” he sent back instantly.

“Goodnight, Jackson.”

“See in the morning.”

Jessica wasn't sure when she fell asleep and she wasn't sure when the power had come back on. But when she woke up it was already 9:30, she was toasty warm, and couldn't remember the last time she had felt so rested. For a year she had been a part of this secret and she didn't realize how much of it had truly affected her until now. She sat up in her bed, and looked out her window.

The sky was the most seamless shade of Carolina blue; not a single cloud pattered it. The frozen world of ice was dripping away under the sun's blazing gaze. She smiled to herself, feeling like she had been thawed overnight.

Jessica text Jackson good morning, making sure he took note of the beautiful day. He said it was crazy how the sudden storm of yesterday was already disappearing. Her phone lit up again.

“So are you going to go to the police?” Jackson asked.

This made Jessica pause. She had thought about it – had thought about it a lot and each time she couldn't go through with it. She was too afraid of what would happen to her if she did. She knew that it was Brooke's idea – that Mr. Goldman, too, were truly the one's responsible. She thought about all times she had slipped drops of the serum into guests' drinks, or food. How she hadn't minded doing it to most of them – the assholes who were mean to her one moment and then poof, they forgot about being mad at all. She told Jackson that she was afraid to tell the police.

Jackson disagreed with her.

“Brooke manipulated you,” he said. “This whole operation is on her and Mr. Goldman, not you.”

Jessica took a minute to respond.

“You're right,” she finally said. “I don't see any other way of stopping her.”

Jackson said that he had been awake for a while and that he was anxious to escape the hotel. He was going to go for a walk and grab breakfast down the street.

“I'll meet you back in the lobby?” she asked.

He didn't respond.

Jessica got ready and left her room about an hour later. Her door closed hard behind her and as she walked down the hall, she didn't feel as optimistic as she had from under the covers of her bed. She took the elevator down to the second floor, and stepped out onto the main lobby.

"What's up, Jess?" one of her co-workers called from the desk. She smiled back at them but kept walking as a guest demanded their attention. The lobby was crowded with people, like the day before. She wanted to get coffee but that side of the room seemed to be the densest. They peered at the breakfast menu and waited for their Starbucks drinks. She strode the opposite way, past the pool table, and found a vacant chair.

She had just sat down when Brooke appeared by her side. Jessica hoped she hadn't heard her heart skip.

"How'd you sleep?" Brooke asked.

"Fine" Jessica said. She casually scanned the room, looking for Jackson, but didn't see him.

"I noticed that the clock was blinking twelve this morning," Jessica said. "Did the power go out?" she asked.

Brooke nodded and said that it had gone off sometime around 1:30AM.

"Someone stupid enough to drive on ice slid right into a telephone pole and fucked up the lines," she said. "It took electricians a little over an hour to fix."

Jessica shook her head. She glanced around, still no sign of Jackson. When she glanced back to Brooke, she was looking very intensely down at Jessica. Brooke waited until Jessica held her gaze and then spoke again.

"Some people can be so stupid" she said.

Jessica forced out a stiff laugh but didn't know what to say. A cold sting inched its way up her spine, raising the hair on the back of her neck. Did Brooke know? Had she found out?

There's no way, she assured herself. *The power was out. The cameras were out.*

Jessica stood up and stretched her arms out, giving a fake yawn.

"I think it's about time for caffeine," Jessica said. "Want anything?"

"Yeah, get me a latte," Brooke said.

Fuck. She hadn't expected her to say yes. She normally always had her own drink by now.

"You got it," she said anyways. She turned and walked towards the coffee bar. Brooke followed close behind her. Jessica took her spot in the back of the line and Brooke paused.

"I'll be in my office," she said. "Be a doll, and bring it back to me."

She walked away before Jessica could respond.

Jessica was thankful for the crowds of people now. She wished that there more. She wished that they could somehow protect her. She wished that they could stop...whatever it was Brooke was up to. And that was the scariest part. She didn't know what Brooke was planning. But she was also sure that there was no way she could know. She was ready to leave as soon as Jackson got back

Her turn in line came and she ordered two lattes. The girl behind the counter raised her eyebrows at Jessica.

"One's for Brooke, she explained."

The barista grabbed one cup from the stack on the counter and wrote the letter “B” on the side. She walked to the espresso machine and started to make Brooke’s drink. And from the corner of her eye, Jessica saw the barista grab a cup from underneath the counter. She wrote the letter “J.”

Jessica paid for both coffees and headed down the long hallway just beside the breakfast counter. She ignored her tingling spine, put a smile on her face, and walked into the room. Brooke was sitting in at her desk, reading the over a small stack of papers. Jessica sat the coffee down on her desk and turned to walk right back out.

“Eager to go somewhere?” Brooke asked. Jessica paused at the door and shook her head no.

“Please, won’t you sit for a moment?”

“Of course,” Jessica said.

Brooke sat her elbows on top of her desk and looked at Jessica over folded hands. There were dark, puffy circles under her eyes – as if he hadn’t slept at all that night.

“Did you have a good night?” Brooke asked.

Jessica didn’t say anything, just nodded.

“Okay let’s just cut to the chase,” Brooke said. “God, you are so wonderfully stupid sometimes, Jessica.” She started to chuckle. Jessica pressed her lips into a tight line.

“It’s true that the power did, indeed, go out last night,” she continued. “And it is also true that all of my cameras went out as well. And I must admit, I’m a little shocked at how quickly you made it down to Mr. Gibbons room.”

Jessica’s heart pounded furiously inside her chest and she was suddenly incapable of taking deep breaths – only shallow, desperate ones, like a fish out of water.

“And I am also shocked that you didn’t know that all of my microphones are battery powered,” she said. Brooke’s shoulders bounced up and down as she started to laugh again. She laughed and laughed, until tears rolled down her cheeks, bringing globs of black mascara with them. She looked manic.

“Where is Jackson?” Jessica asked.

Brooke choked on one last laugh and steadied her eyes on Jessica.

“Where’s Jackson?” she mocked in a high pitched, baby’s voice. “Oh, I’d say he’s almost half way back to Charlotte by now.”

Jessica didn’t understand.

“What did you do?” she yelled at Brooke.

“Oh, honey,” Brooke said, waving a hand dismissively in the air. “I didn’t do a thing to Jackson. You chased that one off on your own.” Brooke turned her computer monitor around and played the video that was already up on her screen. It was from a camera in the parking garage. And after a few seconds, Jackson came into view on the bottom right side. He nearly jogged to his car, threw his bag in the back seat and peeled out of his parking spot.

Jessica thought she had cried all the water out of her body but her eyes suddenly stung with them again. Jackson had left her. Had gotten up that morning and decided she wasn’t worth the trouble.

Brooke was staring at Jessica, studying her reaction. She turned her computer screen back around.

“You feel stupid, don’t you?” Brooke asked. “Who would believe such a crazy story?”

Jessica didn’t say anything.

“I erased his memory!” Brooke yelled. “And like all the others, he forgot. He forgot you.”

Jessica pressed her back against her chair, clenching her hands into fists. Her nails dug into her flesh of her palms. Still, she didn't speak. Another minute went by and when Brooke spoke again, it was unnaturally calm.

“Look, I'm willing to let bygones be bygones here,” she said. “I've had my fun, I wanted to see your reaction and now I have and now I'm bored.”

Jessica had stopped crying and she dried her cheeks with the corner of her sleeve. She glared at Brooke across the desk.

“Atta girl,” Brooke said, “Fake it till you make it.” She raise her Starbucks coffee cup into the air and said, “Cheers to faking it.”

Jessica raised her cup too and they both took drank at the same time. Brooke's eyes gleamed at Jessica, watching her swallow as she tilted back her own cup.

And then it was Jessica who smiled.

“I bet you feel stupid, don't you?” she said.

Brooke began to sway as her head grew heavy and the weights of her eyelids were too much to bear. Her coffee cup fell from her hand and on to the floor at the same rate that her head fell to her desk, immediately unconscious.

Jessica pulled her cellphone out of her pocket and pressed stop, on the record button. After seeing the barista's little slip up, she assumed that she was another one of Brooke's minions and that she planned to erase Jessica's memory. And thanks to Brooke's own ego, Jessica had the evidence she needed to go to the police.

The bit about Jackson really was a surprise to Jessica. And the pain of it hummed deep inside her – changing her – hardening her heart. She looked down at Brooke’s sleeping body; she would not let herself be manipulated like that again. She pushed the computer monitor and watched it crash to the floor; she would never be so easily trusting.

Jessica strode out of Brooke’s office and glided down the stairs. She walked through the sliding glass doors and never again returned to The Hourglass Hotel.