

the
unbecoming
of
maria
dyer

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SIMON & SCHUSTER | BFYR

NEW YORK LONDON TORONTO SYDNEY

My name is not Mara Dyer, but my lawyer told me I had to choose something. A pseudonym. A nom de plume, for all of us studying for the SATs. I know that having a fake name is strange, but trust me—it's the most normal thing about my life right now. Even telling you this much probably isn't smart. But without my big mouth, no one would know that a seventeen-year-old who likes Death Cab for Cutie was responsible for the murders. No one would know that somewhere out there is a 'B' student with a body count. And it's important that you know, so you're not next.

Rachel's birthday was the beginning. This is what I remember.

"Mara Dyer"

██████████, New York City

██████████

I

BEFORE

Laurelton, Rhode Island



HE ORNATE SCRIPT ON THE BOARD TWISTED in the candlelight, making the letters and numbers dance in my head. They were jumbled and indistinct, like alphabet soup. When Claire pushed the heart-shaped piece into my hand, I startled. I wasn't normally so twitchy, and hoped Rachel wouldn't notice. The Ouija board was her favorite present that night, and Claire gave it to her. I got her a bracelet. She wasn't wearing it.

Kneeling on the carpet, I passed the piece to Rachel. Claire shook her head, oozing disdain. Rachel put down the piece.

"It's just a game, Mara." She smiled, her teeth looking even whiter in the dim light. Rachel and I had been best friends

since preschool, and where she was dark and wild, I was pale and cautious. But less so when we were together. She made me feel bold. Usually.

“I don’t have anything to ask dead people,” I said to her. And at sixteen, we’re too old for this, I didn’t say.

“Ask whether Jude will ever like you back.”

Claire’s voice was innocent, but I knew better. My cheeks flamed, but I stifled the urge to snap at her and laughed it off. “Can I ask it for a car? Is this like a dead Santa scenario?”

“Actually, since it’s my birthday, I’m going first.” Rachel put her fingers on the piece. Claire and I followed her.

“Oh! Rachel, ask it how you’re going to die.”

Rachel squealed her assent, and I shot a dark look at Claire. Since moving here six months ago, she’d latched onto my best friend like a starving leech. Her twin missions in life were now to make me feel like the third wheel, and to torture me for my crush on her brother, Jude. I was equally sick of both.

“Remember not to push,” Claire ordered me.

“Got it, thanks. Anything else?”

But Rachel interrupted us before we could descend into bickering. “How am I going to die?”

The three of us watched the board. My calves prickled from kneeling on Rachel’s carpet for so long, and the backs of my knees felt clammy. Nothing happened.

Then something did. We looked at each other as the piece

moved under our hands. It semi-circled the board, sailing past *A* through *K*, and crept past *L*.

It settled on *M*.

“Murder?” Claire’s voice was soaked with excitement. She was so sketchy. What did Rachel see in her?

The piece glided in the wrong direction. Away from *U* and *R*.
Landing on *A*.

Rachel looked confused. “Matches?” she guessed.

“Mauling?” Claire asked. “Maybe you start a forest fire and get eaten by Smokey the Bear?” Rachel laughed, briefly dissolving the panic that had slithered into my stomach. When we first sat down to play, I had to resist the urge to roll my eyes at Claire’s melodramatics. Now, not so much.

The piece zigzagged across the board, cutting her laughter short.

R.

We were silent. Our eyes didn’t leave the board as the piece jerked back to the beginning.

To *A*.

Then stopped.

We waited for the piece to point out the next letter, but it remained still. After three minutes, Rachel and Claire withdrew their hands. I felt them watching me.

“It wants you to ask something,” Rachel said softly.

“If by ‘it’ you mean Claire, I’m sure that’s true.” I stood up, shaking and nauseous. I was done.

“I didn’t push it,” Claire said, wide-eyed as she looked at Rachel, then at me.

“Pinky swear?” I asked, with sarcasm.

“Why not,” Claire answered, with malice. She stood and walked closer to me. Too close. Her green eyes were dangerous. “I didn’t push it,” she said again. “It wants *you* to play.”

Rachel grabbed my hand and pulled herself up off the floor. She looked straight at Claire. “I believe you,” she said, “but let’s do something else?”

“Like what?” Claire’s voice was flat, and I stared right back at her, unflinching. Here we go.

“We can watch *The Blair Witch Project*.” Claire’s favorite, naturally. “How about it?” Rachel’s voice was tentative, but firm.

I tore my eyes away from Claire’s and nodded, managing a smile. Claire did the same. Rachel relaxed, but I didn’t. For her sake, though, I tried to swallow my anger and unease as we settled in to watch the movie. Rachel popped in the DVD and blew out the candles.

Six months later, they were both dead.