

Chapter Excerpt from *The Great Experiment*:

We heard the music before we got to the house. I was surprised that the cops hadn't already showed up, but maybe rich people didn't get cops called on them or maybe none of the neighbors were home. We were definitely in the upper-class region of town. There were only a few houses since there were only a few rich people in this small town. Most of the houses were vacation homes for those who worked in the city, but I'm not sure most of the owners ever came back after building them. I figured they probably picked our town because the real-estate was cheap but realized too late that the town was lame, so they never came back.

The houses were more open concept, with the windows on all the houses large and exposing. The yards were massive and a few of them had vibrant green grass. Either they weren't listening to the governor telling us to conserve water, or it wasn't real grass. The buildings were mostly white or off white with modern architecture. None of the houses we passed by had lights on inside, making me wonder if they were one of the abandoned vacation homes, or if the occupants had gone to Fresno for the weekend.

As we got closer to Christine's house, I recognized the music and stopped.

"Wait, is that No Rush?" I asked.

Jenny stopped too and put her hands up. "Don't be mad," she said. "They were asked to do a quick show at the party, but that's why we left so late. They should be almost finished with their set."

"Don't you think the band members will hang around after the party?" I said, my voice was close to a shriek now.

She sighed and put her arm around me, dragging me towards the house. “Relax,” she said. “I’ll protect you from the big bad Leo.”

I considered going limp when we got to the door, but Jenny was right. When she opened the door to the house, No Rush just finished their set and the partygoers were cheering. I liked to pretend they were cheering that they didn’t have to listen to their music anymore, but even I had to admit they were good.

The house was huge, with the foyer opening up to the spacious living room. The living room had two-story floor-to-ceiling windows that observed the pool and spa in the back yard. A makeshift stage was set up in front of the windows and it faced the L-shaped gray couch, which was on the verge of snapping in two with the amount of teenagers that were hanging on it.

There was a stone fireplace on the side of the room with another teen-covered couch facing the caged fire. There were also a few empty pedestals around the room and I could only assume they usually carried expensive vases or busts, but they were put away for the party.

The kitchen was open concept, observing the living room with a large island that was now covered in snacks and drinks. They had a double oven and one of those sink faucets that could be moved around like a hose.

Christine manifested out of thin air to welcome us. She was one of those drop-dead gorgeous Cali girls with long beach-blonde waves and sparkling blue eyes. Everyone thought she’d escape to LA and become a movie star, but she was adamant about going to D.C. to become a politician. She gave both of us a one-armed hug, holding her red plastic cup high in the other hand. She and I weren’t close enough to be hugging, so it felt a little awkward.

“You just missed a killer show from No Rush,” she said. The music from the stereo was so loud she was screaming at us and I could still barely hear her. “But don’t worry, they might play again a little later.”

“I’m not worried,” I said.

“What?” she said, moving her hair behind her ear to listen better.

“Sounds awesome,” Jenny said, and pointed to Christine’s cup. “Where can we get something to drink?”

Christine pointed to the kitchen with her cup hand and gave us a little wave.

“Be smart, girls,” she said as she walked away. “Watch your drinks,” she added, taking a big sip from her cup.

In the kitchen there were quite a few selections of drinks scattered around the island. I hadn’t ever drunk before, so I didn’t know where to start. I thought about just grabbing a soda and pouring it in a red cup. I turned to ask Jenny, but she looked like she was searching for someone in the crowd. I was going to ask who she was looking for when someone called our names.

“Jenny! Delilah! So cool to see you guys here,” Spencer said. He was a year above us, but he was friends with everyone. He put his arms around us. “It’s your first party at Christine’s, right?”

We both nodded and he smiled wide. He moved to the other side of us and used his hands to shape his 90’s style flat-top.

“Then I’ll be your bartender,” he said. “What can I make for you, ladies?”

I looked at the bottles of liquor when I heard laughter from my side. I looked over to see Leo with his head thrown back. I didn’t know what he was laughing at, but it pissed me off.

“Please,” Leo said. “Delilah would never do something as scary as underage drinking.”

Leo was in the same grade as me and had a vendetta against me ever since we were kids. I never did anything to him, but he always felt the need to annoy me every time we were near each other. And since our last names were so close (White and Whitman) we were always in the same classes and always placed next to each other for picture day.

I turned to Spencer. “I’ll have an Old Fashioned,” I said. I had no idea what an Old Fashioned was, but I had heard it in music and TV, so I figured it was good.

Spencer’s eyebrows quirked up and he turned to the drinks looking a little lost. He shrugged and made quick work to make me the drink. Leo laughed again, his single, long earring’s glint laughing with him.

“Wow,” he said. “You gave in to peer pressure pretty fast there, White. Didn’t you learn anything in school?” He pointed his cup at me. “Just say no!” He smirked and took a drink. I wondered if he was already drunk.

He was 6’1” even as a freshman and had black hair that was wavy on a normal day, but he usually got it permed before a show. He hit a growth spurt last year and it bothered me that I now had to look up at him. He seemed to revel in looking down at me.

Spencer finished making my drink and handed it to me. Without looking away from Leo, I chugged the whole drink, ignoring the eye-watering burn in my throat. His smirk never left his face.

“Oof,” Leo said after I finished. “I bet that didn’t feel good.” He poured some whiskey into his cup. “If you were looking for respect from me, you lost it when you asked for a drink, White.” He tsked at me and walked back into the party.

I turned to Jenny and Spencer who were looking at me with wide eyes.

“Are you okay, kid?” Spencer asked. “I made that pretty strong.”

“Delilah, what the hell were you thinking?” Jenny asked putting her hand on my shoulder. “Do you even know what’s in an Old Fashioned?”

“Jet fuel?” I choked out. My throat still burned and my mouth felt numb. I blinked back tears as Spencer patted my back.