



Mayfair (Girls of Spindrift 3)

Author: V.C. Andrews

Category: Young Adult

Description: Such is the burden of being brilliant.

Mayfair arrives at Spindrift School, and quickly begins to feel its walls are a prison, its teachers her wardens. Having become best friends with Corliss and Donna, the three of them become the de facto It Girls of Spindrift; the other students call them the Supremes—and not for their singing talents.

Jogging the grounds of Spindrift one day, the girls notices a hole in the fence leading to the nearby town that the students are never permitted to visit. Gathering up their nerve for an off-campus excursion, they venture to a local bar, and into the presence of a man Mayfair becomes enchanted by. Thrilling and new, this affair of the heart is the opposite of the rigorous study Spindrift demands of its pupils. And so for this ultra-smart girl, the question becomes: which is smarter, which brings more self-satisfaction, the path of the brain, or the wilds of the heart?

Total Pages (Source): 26

Mayfair Cummings lay in her bed and studied the crown molding in her otherwise spartan room at Spindrift. It had been painted over with the same milky oil-based product used to whitewash the walls in the hallways of the converted Victorian mansion. Every bedroom was the same. The paint obviously had been applied with a roller, and in haste, probably completed by one of the maintenance men, who had no concept of what intricate, hand-carved work he was covering, she thought. He simply wanted to get the chore over and done.

She could still smell the fresh paint and concluded that it was probably redone for every new student. She regretted that. It was too bland. The paint job stole any character the room might have had and reinforced her theory that the whole place, Spindrift, the institution itself, was some kind of great experiment, a study of the exceptionally gifted, those with IQ scores over 180. It gave her the impression that she, along with the others, was in a giant test tube. Who could blame her or any of the students here for being a little paranoid? They would always be suspect. They all thought too much, didn't they? And thinkers were dangerous. They challenged the status quo and too often asked "Why?"

She also would have liked to have discovered revealing personal evidence left by the former genius housed in the room, some etchings on the walls like the scribbles of a prisoner in a dungeon, even if it was only a wry comment about Einstein's theory of relativity or a brilliant variation of the Pythagorean theorem. What did he or she think about when alone? Was there a thought about the place itself, the teachers? Did someone have a crush on someone? Did someone miss his or her family? Was there a lover left behind? Were they afraid, and afraid to say it in a more direct way?

Unlike in college dorms, there was no music thumping through the walls, no laughter, and no giggling over embarrassing statements or actions. Silence was the doorway to deep introspection about yourself, about where you were and why you were here. But there was no evidence of that in any of the rooms. It was as if the new layers of paint could cover ghosts as well. When she eventually left, she was sure the new tenant wouldn't know she had been here either.

Well, maybe never knowing that she had been here was a good thing.

It had been more than three months since she had been brought to Spindrift, partly as punishment for how she had embarrassed her stepmother by cleverly planning revenge on her stepsister's English teacher, Alan Taylor, the man with whom Mayfair had a . . . what should she call it? A brief affair? Sounded too romantic, she thought. It was definitely brief, but brief sex sounded more accurate now—a deflowering or simply a loss of virginity, even better.

Yet loss didn't seem to be an accurate term, either. It implied it could be found again. Death was a more precise description. It was something gone forever . . . her innocence. Exciting as it might have been for a while, it left her with a bitter taste for relationships, a taste that she envisioned would last a lifetime in her bank of memories. Would she now always believe that romantic relationships demanded too much trust, too much risk?

Thinking back, she didn't regret a moment of her revenge. Should she be proud of that?

Did every woman grow to hate the man who was responsible for that traumatic event—especially if he was an older man? How rare it was, especially in this day and age, for any of these men to marry the girl he seduces or even to carry on an extended relationship. What was that old expression? Wham bam, thank you, ma'am?

Maybe it didn't quite apply, but somehow, even though she had consensual sex, she still felt abused. He should have been ready to give up his career, rearrange his life, and invest his whole future in her. Look at what she had given him. What greater trust could a woman invest in a man? What did he give her in return? Only a memory.

And one quite disturbingly vague, too.

Of course, she knew she was being unreasonable and, what was worse, illogical—a dumb, starry-eyed romantic—something she had scorned and ridiculed in other girls her whole life. She sat up, looked at herself in the mirror above her desk, and ran her fingers through her newly trimmed, medium-length wheat-colored hair.

Oh, poor, poor you, she thought, smirking at herself. Get over it. Leap out of your personal romance novel. You're not the first, and for sure you're not the last to feel like a victim of some man.

But how could she not feel like a victim? She wouldn't admit it to anyone, certainly not Dr. Lester, the school therapist here, who knew the nitty-gritty details of her background. The bitter truth was that her assignation with Alan Taylor had left her with the fear that loving someone, finding that soul mate, was now impossible. The moment after she felt something for a man, that crust of pessimism surely would form and make her so impenetrable that any man would quickly retreat. Why make the extra effort for her? She wouldn't even have the echo of his first words bouncing around in the caverns of her memory.

There was a knock on her door, a welcome interruption of her troubled musings. Indeed, she concluded, we all do think too much, but ironically, that makes us more dangerous to ourselves than to others.

"Entrare," she called. She was suddenly feeling Italian this morning. Like almost everyone here, she was fluent in at least three languages.

A girl named Kelly Boson could rattle off in Latin, the so-called dead language, and was always reading mythology in ancient Greek. “Translators have us by the short hairs,” she declared when Mayfair asked her why she was so determined to read in the original tongue. “I don’t trust them as far as I could throw them. They’re just looking for a quick buck and choose cruddy expressions, losing the images and feelings.”

Corliss Simon thrust the door open with a deliberately exaggerated flair and stood gazing at her with those piercing black-diamond eyes. She wore a retro flame pre-tied head scarf, a white and black compression sports bra, and a pair of black cotton joggers with her black running shoes. Mayfair’s fellow “drifter,” as they called themselves because they were at Spindrift, this special and rather secret school for the exceptionally gifted, also wore a single pearl rope drop earring in her right ear.

Such affectation, Mayfair thought, but admittedly quite effective. Why didn’t she have any of those same feminine impulses? Was that where she would go now in retreat, into indifference? She wouldn’t deny it. Lately, Blah was her middle name.

“Are you in a play or something?” Mayfair asked. She didn’t have to explain; the students were all keen when it came to sarcasm and understatement.

“Always,” Corliss replied, and assumed a pose. Looking like a black Statue of Liberty, she recited, “‘Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage.’?” She then put her hands on her hips and scowled. “We’re all in a play, Mayfairy.” Corliss had been calling her that almost from the beginning, and others had picked up on it. She smiled triumphantly. “It’s simply that most don’t realize it until after the curtain falls.”

“Don’t I know it?” Mayfair replied in a tone that made her seem aged. She sighed. “I’m not ready for breakfast.”

She waved at Corliss as though to dismiss her, as though she was on an ocean liner pulling away from the dock, saying good-bye to family and friends.

But then she was always pulling away from some dock or another, and she was always o

Page 2

Source Creation Date: June 26, 2025, 2:19 pm

n the Titanic.

Corliss jerked her head and shoulders back, recoiling like a cobra. “Did you conveniently forget? You, Donna, and I are going for a jog this morning on the infamous Darwin Trail. Survival-of-the-fittest time, remember? We signed out for it last night after dinner.”

Mayfair groaned. “You two were serious?”

“Yes, we were,” Donna Ramanez said, stepping up beside Corliss. She, too, was dressed in athletic gear and running shoes, wearing a pink scarf gripper without the scarf. Donna was childlike with her diminutive figure. The daughter of a Mexican man and an Irishwoman, she had a caramel complexion and light brown hair, and as far as Mayfair was concerned, both of her new girlfriends were more attractive than she. Seeing them in their workout gear didn’t help matters.

But then again, Mayfair herself was often unexpectedly accused of being naturally beautiful. Accused was precisely the way to describe it; until she had her brief tryst with Alan Taylor, she wasn’t very concerned about her femininity, and then it became seen as a weapon. Being called attractive really did take her by surprise. She wasn’t unduly modest. It simply hadn’t been a priority. Fully understanding a black hole in the universe was more important than perfecting her makeup or getting a hairdo that complemented her facial structure.

“Were you not impressed with Dr. Morton’s lecture on the importance of balancing the cerebral and the physical, the Athens and Sparta syndrome?” Corliss asked, then widened her eyes in feigned surprise.

Corliss was five foot ten, with long, shapely legs. Everything about her radiated health. She looked like she had been poured out of a mold for perfect figures. Lars Stensen, the super-IQ from Copenhagen, was smitten with her the moment he entered the science lab and saw her working with the rats in the maze. Mayfair thought the blond, blue-eyed, six-foot Dane was quite good-looking and almost moaned with disappointment when his eyes washed over her without any reaction and then fixed on Corliss with obvious instant infatuation. She could practically see the bubble over his head go Whack! Bam!

Disappointment tightened Mayfair's chest, along with indignation.

Beware of the green-eyed monster, she told herself, especially here, where this trio were but three of fifteen, all with IQ scores so off the charts that they were practically incomprehensible. Statistically, each was one in three million. They were all competitors, rising to any challenge at Spindrift, a school with students so superior that a Rhodes scholar wouldn't meet the entrance test.

Just like all the other drifters, she had never really had a competitor when it came to anything cerebral, right from grade one until now. Everyone here had been capable of achieving a high school diploma at age ten, maximum. All had attained the equivalent of a graduate degree's worth of knowledge by twelve. David Kantor, from Portland, was actually reading grade-school books at eleven months. The only thing that held any of them back from somewhat intelligent conversations before they were a year old was the physiology of their vocal abilities. Their bodies literally had to catch up with their brains.

"No," Mayfair said. "I wasn't impressed with his little talk. I was bored by the time he spoke his third word, as I usually am with Morton's droning lectures in personality and health management."

She paused. Her two new brilliant friends were showing deep disappointment in her.

Their eyes darkened with their frustration. They wore identical smirks.

“Okay,” Corliss said. “Okay. Don’t blow up a Bunsen burner. My study of the causes of genetic drift in the prairie chicken and its low reproductive success will have to wait.”

The other girls both laughed.

“Get your ass in gear, girl,” Corliss ordered. “Wasting time is worse than wasting money.”

Mayfair groaned emphatically at the platitude and rose to search for her athletic clothes, if they could be called that. She didn’t separate her wardrobe into daily outfits, evening dress, or recreational clothes. Clothes in general were never a high priority for her, something that annoyed her stepmother to the point where the woman would actually have nervous breakdowns wondering how a teenage girl could be bored by shopping, especially when she had deigned to take her along to an expensive, exquisite boutique. It was another nail driven into the coffin her stepmother labeled unnatural, her code word for freak.

“I don’t suppose either of you had any breakfast,” Mayfair said as she plucked a pair of faded blue jeans from her bottom dresser drawer. She held them up and away from herself, as if they crawled with red ants, and shrugged. It was the best she had for this.

“Visions of breakfast will be something to urge us to finish,” Donna said. “Ricompenza for work well done.”

Mayfair lowered her chin and raised her eyes. “Spare me the attempt at motivation. We hear enough of that from Marlowe.”

Motivation was a sore point for Mayfair. Her interest in learning required no stimulants, as it didn't for almost all drifters, but Dr. Jessie Marlowe, the fifty-year-old head of Spindrift, was constantly referring to it. Her fear was that someone would get so bored with his or her studies that they would procrastinate, which would spread like the flu, infecting all fifteen. Mayfair envisioned Marlowe having nightmares in which her prize students were all doodling or simply staring into space while clocks ticked the time away. Nothing new would be invented or discovered, no ingenious comment would be uttered and recorded, and no new suggestion for human progress in social, mental, or political work would be made.

She slipped out of her nightgown and put on an ordinary bra. Never in her life did she have a sports bra. She found a stretched-out, faded green sweatshirt that she thought was perfect. She did have running shoes, although she hadn't bought them for that purpose. Her two friends shook their heads when she was finally ready.

"We have a lot of work to do with you when it comes to fashion," Donna said.

Mayfair knew that was true, despite also knowing that the other girls considered the three of them the most attractive of all the girls at Spindrift. Those girls had already nicknamed them the Supremes, and not because they sang together. Those girls looked at them enviously. That green-eyed monster was having a ball here, dancing gleefully on everyone's psyche. Maybe that was the true glue that bonded them, others' reactions to their exceptional and unique beauty.

"Spare me," Mayfair said sarcastically. "I still have the scars my stepmother imprinted on my sensitive self-image."

"Do you have your card?" Corliss asked her.

"Don't one of you?"

“What if one of us decides to turn back or something?” Corliss asked. “As Dr. Marlowe says, ‘Click on your foreshadowing.’?”

As if that remark triggered an automatic response, the three simultaneously recited, “Intuition has replaced instinct. Pay attention to your vision.”

They laughed.

However, the implication about her access card was clear to Mayfair. Corliss thought that of the three of them, Mayfair probably would give up early in the run. It was, after all, a three-mile jog, and not over a level track. The path cleared through the forest went up inclines and down through small gullies, turned, and zigzagged. It was designed to be strenuous. The ground was a little rocky. One had to watch for uncovered tree and bush roots. And there was wildlife—coyotes, bobcats, and an occasional red racer or even a rattler. But nature, after all, was another laboratory for them. They shouldn’t mind any of it.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: June 26, 2025, 2:19 pm

The rationale behind the key cards was not that the students were incarcerated, even though it was easy to feel that way, but that they were heavily protected. The complex had a security guard at the main gate 24/7, and there was a ten-foot-high barbed-wire fence all around the property. Of course, there was CCTV around most of the building, with motion lights to spotlight an intruder.

The worst fear the board of governors for Spindrift had was that one of its prize students would be kidnapped by a foreign agent. After all, many of these students already had mastered nuclear energy and laser technology. The C

IA and NASA employed some of the graduates, and others were in brain trusts, secret brain trusts that dealt with military issues, too. Or they could be kidnapped simply for the ransom.

“Right,” Mayfair said. She went to her desk and got her key card. She held it up. “Shall we dance?”

They started down the hallway. Most of the other students were still in bed. The sun was just peeking over the tops of the trees. The shadows below in the lobby were reluctantly retreating as the light drifted in through the panel windows. It was as if the shadows were stuck to the floor, walls, and ceilings and were being ripped away. You could almost hear the sound of them being torn from the cocoa-colored tile floors and rich walnut walls.

But it was really only the work in the kitchen that interrupted the mansion’s still sleepy morning silence, that and the ticking of the early-twentieth-century grandfather clock that stood beside one of the small dark brown leather settees toward

the rear. Above it was a large portrait of the billionaire whose foundation had created Spindrift: Dr. Norman Lazarus, one of the world's most renowned biochemists.

Clocks weren't a big thing at Spindrift. Matter of fact, there was only one other, a rather large, simple, round atomic clock in the cafeteria, a subtle suggestion not to waste time with idle chitchat. There were no specific classes as such. No bells rang for any other reason than a fire alarm test. A student here went from one subject area to another at his or her own pace, often not attending a class for weeks at a time or, if they liked, never. Each was, in fact, encouraged to become a specialist as soon as possible. After all, they all had already mastered most basic knowledge, undergraduate and graduate.

Mayfair, despite the lecture on the importance of the physical body that Dr. Morton had given them, did not expect to see any of the other drifters dressed and ready to do the Darwin Trail. There was a full fitness center and an indoor pool in a building added onto the large mansion. Some of the fifteen students did something physical for themselves there, albeit more as a token tossed at Dr. Morton and always reluctantly.

Of the three of them, only Corliss had been running the trail from the first week she had arrived. She was at Spindrift a good month before Donna and Mayfair were. On nights when they "spilled the beans" about themselves, they revealed the social reasons and the unpleasant personal events that had been the primary catalysts for their school's guidance counselors to suggest and then find them a place at Spindrift.

It had always been difficult for each of them, indeed for everyone here at Spindrift, not to think of herself as abnormal. That was the way others their chronological ages at their former public schools thought of them. Every negative name in the book was thrown at them at one time or another. Those familiar with Star Trek called them Spocks. Others tritely referred to them as eggheads, which Merriam-Webster defined as a highly educated person who may not know much about real life, real life being a social life. Still others used meaner, crueller words.

Consequently, each of them was a loner before coming here. The social contacts they eventually had at their public schools had only led them to bigger problems.

Which students here had parents who were upset that they were no longer at home? None. After all, they had done the right thing, donating them to political, social, and scientific progress for the good of humanity. From this group of geniuses, surely there would come Nobel Prize winners. Trouble was, most of them really didn't yet feel like winners, least of all Mayfair, who was still crawling up and out of a pit of depression and didn't have any real ambitions for herself yet. Maybe she never would.

Lately, Corliss and Donna were competing for that unflattering honor, the honor of caring the least about her practical future or being recognized as someone special, someone important. This general lack of direction for themselves was another thing that helped them bond. They were truly "drifting" together.

The three quietly started down the circular stairway, with its polished mahogany banister and gray-carpeted steps. Spindrift was located in the Coachella Valley of Southern California, about a mile and a half outside the small city of Piñon Pine Grove, so named for the piñon pine trees that populated its borders. It was mid-April, and the lower desert was already experiencing temperatures in the mid-eighties with occasional high eighties and low nineties.

One of the problems some of the students at Spindrift worked on was the subject of climate change. Many places in the world were already experiencing unusually high temperatures, and the extended ocean warmth was creating longer and more vicious hurricanes and tornadoes. Peter Townsend, Spindrift's current resident pessimist, whose father was a well-known weather expert at the University of Missouri, claimed the planet was already lost. Civilization was sliding toward oblivion at a rate impossible to stop.

“Why study if you can’t save it?” Mayfair asked him after he had made one of his dire comments in the science lab.

“I’m an observer. I diagnose.”

“You’re a walking microscope,” she told him. “When you look at other people, what you see is cells.”

He pulled in his face with such indignation she had to laugh. She was starting to enjoy this place, especially how she could get under the skin of some of the other drifters, who were never supposed to succumb to peer pressure.

The girls stepped out once Corliss unlocked the side door. Spindrift was located in the high desert, which fortunately provided for temperatures five to ten degrees lower than in the low desert. This morning, the Supremes would be jogging in the low sixties. There were some high clouds as well, but once they entered the heavy foliage of the surrounding forest, it would feel more like the mid-fifties.

The security guard on duty looked their way. He was a tall, lanky man with graying, thinning dark brown hair, spidery with his long arms and legs.

“I hope he’s a reader,” Donna said. “It has to be the most boring job. You can count the number of visitors, excluding teachers, on the fingers of one hand.”

“Every one of them is a retiree looking to supplement his income,” Corliss said. “My father, who, as you know, heads security at Ram Studios in Burbank, hires some for what he calls the ‘dead hours.’?”

“You have to wonder what’s left of the self-esteem of someone like that,” Mayfair said. “A recent survey of adults by the American Psychological Association determined that self-esteem is the most important factor in happiness and well-

being.”

“No wonder we’re all so unhappy,” Corliss said. They all laughed.

The security guard was still staring at them.

“Creepy,” Donna said. Corliss and Mayfair looked at her and then back at him.

“Forget it,” Mayfair said. “Dr. Marlowe surely had his DNA checked back through his great-grandparents.”

“He probably just thinks we’re all weird,” Donna said. “Maybe even aliens.”

“Aren’t we?” Corliss asked, and started for the entrance to the Darwin Trail.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: June 26, 2025, 2:19 pm

Mayfair looked at Donna. “I’m not going to keep up with her.”

“Maybe she has Kenyan ancestors,” Donna said as they started out. “The combination of high-altitude training, consumption of a low-fat, high-protein diet, and expectations make them long-distance champions. It’s not simply because she’s African-American. I read Kerr’s *The Myth of Racial Superiority in Sports* yesterday.”

“You’re just trying to get me to run faster,” Mayfair said.

“So I am,” Donna replied, and pulled ahead.

Mayfair glanced back. The security guard had returned to his booth but still looked their way. She picked up the pace, and soon they were only six or seven feet apart.

After ten minutes of running, Mayfair had to confess to herself that she was feeling invigorated despite her attitude. She knew every aspect of the physiological changes her body was experiencing as she quickened and lengthened her stride. The cooler fresh air was sharpening all her senses. She inhaled the scent of the fresh foliage and then the heavy fragrance of pine. She could practically taste it when she opened her mouth. Small branches crackled like popcorn beneath her feet.

As the sun threaded its rays through the leaves and around the thicker, older trees, the forest seemed to awaken. She heard the mourning doves off to her left and an enthusiastic ladder-backed woodpecker to her right. Her own deep breathing resonated in her ears, as did the trailing sound of a fighter jet leaving the Palm Springs airport and then booming above them. Reluctantly, Mayfair admitted to herself that she liked being away from all the urban static. She was obviously not the

only one.

Corliss, who had grown up in the urban jungle of Los Angeles, truly seemed to undergo a metamorphosis in nature. She took longer strides, seeming to float over the dark earth, fairylike.

“She looks like she sprang wings,” Donna called back.

“Yes,” Mayfair said. This was crazy, but her new girlfriends’ energy spurred on her own, and she found the urge to run faster. If only her stepmother could see her now, she thought, and smiled to herself at her envisioned look of shock and disgust. Sweat? Ugh. You could ruin your makeup.

They all slowed at a turn that soon opened to a short incline. Coming down from it, they had to slow and be careful because of the small area of rocks. They hit another straightaway and sped up and then came to another turn, descended, and went up another short incline that dropped into another turn. When Donna and Mayfair completed it, they stopped.

Corliss had already stopped. She was standing there, barely breathing hard, and staring at something.

“What’s happening?” Donna said. “I was just getting into it.”

“Check out the bottom of the fence at around one o’clock,” Corliss said, nodding in the direction she was looking.

Both girls joined her and looked.

“How did you spot that?” Mayfair asked.

“I saw a small coyote go under and charge over the hill.”

“That’s man-made for sure,” Donna said.

Corliss looked at her, nodded, and started through the brush to

ward the fence. The other two girls followed. It was clear to all of them that someone had dug a deep, wide path under the fence to either get out or get in.

“Shall we?” Corliss asked them.

Donna looked around.

“Stop worrying, Donna. We’re too deep in for the security cameras to pick us up,” Mayfair said.

“It’s still a serious violation,” Donna said. “Going off property without written permission.”

“Going off property? Sounds like Daddy’s talking,” Mayfair said.

Donna stepped back indignantly. “Excuse me?”

“Serious violation? Please. Spare me,” Mayfair said.

“Well, it is, isn’t it?” Donna asked Corliss.

“I’d just like to see where it goes, why someone would dig here, and what’s to see beyond that hill,” Corliss said, nodding at the incline just a dozen or so yards from the fence. She knelt and studied the ditch. “This isn’t recently done. See these roots? New extensions.” She looked to her left at the large red maple tree. “Red maples have

thick, strong roots that grow near or above the surface of the soil, but this took some time.”

“Let’s go through,” Mayfair said.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: June 26, 2025, 2:19 pm

“Donna?”

“I think we’d all feel better if we did it together,” Mayfair added quickly.

Donna looked back.

“We weren’t followed, Donna,” Corliss said. “Mayfairy is right. Stop worrying so much.”

“Okay, okay.”

Corliss moved first, slithering under the fence as carefully as she could, and then stood up on the other side and smiled back at them.

“The air is different here,” she joked.

Mayfair laughed and followed. They waited for Donna, and then all three started for the top of the rise. When they got there, they realized they were looking down at the village of Piñon Pine. There was a clearly worked pathway down the slope, leading off toward what looked like the rear of a large, U-shaped mall.

“Little less than a mile, I’d say,” Corliss said.

“Someone from there went through all this trouble to invade Spindrift?” Mayfair wondered aloud.

The girls stared down at the community below. It was as if they were looking at

another planet with an alien population.

“Invade?” Donna said. “That’s a bit of an exaggeration, wouldn’t you say?”

“You pointed it out first, Donna. We’re off-limits, aren’t we?” Corliss said. “For us, mingling with mere humans is another one of your serious violations, social problems for us, and for them it will be . . .” She ran her right forefinger across her throat.

Mayfair laughed.

“Not me,” Donna said sharply. “It wasn’t always a problem for me.”

“But it was big enough at least once to get you a first-class ticket here,” Corliss reminded her.

Donna looked back. “We’d better return before someone sees us. Someone else could have decided to jog this morning,” she quickly added.

Neither Corliss nor Mayfair moved.

“You do remember that if we are expelled from here, our families lose whatever money they invested in our education. My parents worked very hard to save for my future.”

Corliss turned to her. “I’m here on a full scholarship, but it would not please my parents, either.”

“My stepmother would be devastated. She finally got rid of me, and here I am being sent back,” Mayfair said. “I could be tried at least for involuntary manslaughter when she died from the sight of me.”

“Still,” Corliss said, “it’s tantalizing, isn’t it? The possibility of meeting average, normal people our age again, and secretly. I love secretly.”

The three stared in silence at the community below, a toy world, so close and yet so far.

“I’m going back,” Donna suddenly said sharply, then turned and hurried toward the fence and the ditch.

Corliss watched her. Mayfair continued to stare at what had quickly become the Forbidden Village.

“Let’s finish the trail,” Corliss said. “Come on, before she uses us as an excuse and turns back.”

“Not the worst idea I’ve heard this morning,” Mayfair said.

They caught up to Donna, who was slipping under the fence.

“Maybe we should report this,” Donna said from the other side.

“Don’t you dare,” Corliss said. “This is our secret.”

Page 6

Source Creation Date: June 26, 2025, 2:19 pm

“I don’t want Marlowe to think we dug it,” Donna said.

Corliss and Mayfair slipped under.

“Like I said, it had to have been dug a while back, certainly before we arrived. Get real. Marlowe would realize that.”

Donna looked down at it.

“It’s not a grave,” Mayfair said. “Stop fixating on it. Unless it calls to you and fills your mind with wonderful sexual possibilities.”

Corliss laughed.

“Oh, you’re so funny,” Donna said.

“Let’s go, wimps,” Corliss declared. “Don’t look at this as an excuse to abort the jog.” She hurried back to the trail and continued.

“I’m envisioning breakfast,” Mayfair said, and hurried after her.

Donna suddenly became the slowest of the three. It was as if she wasn’t in a rush to get back.

After all, something new had been added to Spindrift: fear of what awaited them on the other side of that hole.

Dr. Jessie Marlowe stood in the cafeteria doorway and keenly observed some of her student population getting their breakfast. How they interrelated with one another was always of interest. Her expertise was in child psychology. It was mainly why the board of directors had chosen her to oversee this institution.

The three whom she knew had been tagged the Supremes by the others entered. She was aware that they had gone on a morning run. They looked revitalized. Maybe the other students would see and decide to engage in more physical pursuits. That was always a concern. It was why she insisted that Carl Morton do his lecture on what had become known as the Athens and Sparta syndrome. Besides, she thought it was mentally healthy for them to care about their bodies as well as their minds. She had no expectation of turning any of them into what even they referred to in group therapy with Dr. Lester as “normal, more well-rounded people,” but she wanted them to at least be concerned about physical fitness.

When they finally left Spindrift, they would have to live in the “outside world” and learn how to integrate, have romances, and perhaps marry and have children, although the success rates for that sort of lifestyle were not very high for these unique young people. She was continually looking for ways to improve their social skills. Sports was one pathway to that. However, few had participated in extracurricular activities in their previous schools, and there were no clubs or teams here. They didn’t put on plays or hold dances. Even birthday parties were rare, because the individuals sometimes refused to be so honored.

The Supremes got their food and sat at their own table. Rarely did any of the others join them. But it was also true that none of the other twelve had formed close relationships with anyone else to the extent that they ate together regularly. These three were somewhat different, and they recognized that difference in themselves. In fact, she thought they feathered it. She wondered if that was good. It did keep them

from socializing with others, and others seemed to avoid them. There was good reason to observe them more. There was truly something special about them in the midst of very special young people as it was.

She approached them when they sat and began eating breakfast.

“How was your run, girls?”

The three paused and looked at her and then at one another, as if they couldn’t decide which one of them should respond.

Corliss finally did. “Stimulating,” she said.

“Fascinating,” Mayfair added.

Donna remained silent.

“I wish you would spread the word a bit,” Jessie Marlowe said, looking at the other students. “Most are not doing much in th

e way of physical activity. For some, it’s like pulling teeth to jog like you just did or even to do some yoga, and I can count on the fingers of one hand how many have even tried swimming in our beautiful pool.”

“Perhaps it’s wrong for you not to make some so-called ordinary things mandatory,” Mayfair said. “Unless this whole thing about the importance of the physical is just lip service to please the board of directors.”

Jessie Marlowe didn’t even wince. Caustic comments were common for the students she oversaw here. None was shy about expressing their opinions, and for most, hurting someone’s feelings with a statement of fact was not even a consideration for a

bad conscience. The ones who didn't express their opinions weren't being considerate, either; they were basically saying they didn't think you were worthy of them. You could almost smell the arrogance in the rooms and hallways.

"I'm toying with that idea," she replied.

"Just add it to your list of serious violations," Mayfair continued. "'Going two days without any physical activity such as swimming, jogging, or exercising under one of the programs outlined is forbidden.'?" She glanced at Donna, who quickly looked away.

"Why don't you write it up for me, and I'll consider it?" Jessie Marlowe said.

"Surely you can write that up for yourself, Dr. Marlowe," Mayfair replied.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: June 26, 2025, 2:19 pm

“I’ll do it if you like,” Donna said quickly.

“Thank you, Donna. I appreciate it when any of you volunteer to do something for the good of Spindrift. We all need to expand beyond ourselves.”

“‘I am a part of all that I have met,’?” Mayfair quoted from Tennyson’s poem Ulysses. “By definition, we expand beyond ourselves every moment we are alive.”

Dr. Marlowe smiled and swallowed back her pang of annoyance. Such condescension stung. She did, however, take a deep breath. “I agree,” she said, hiding her true feelings. “We simply have to show it so others will appreciate it even more. Enjoy the remainder of your day, girls. And thank you again, Donna.” She walked to another table.

“Kissing ass?” Mayfair said, spinning sharply on Donna.

“No,” Donna replied, looking outraged. “Why were you so curt to her?”

“Was I? I thought I was simply stating what was true.” She looked at Corliss. “What say you?”

“I think we’re all going to suffer from cabin fever more than we think,” Corliss said. “Irritability is a symptom despite the many opportunities for expansion, some new ones surprising.”

Mayfair smiled. She knew what Corliss was implying. She looked at Donna, who had grasped it as quickly if not more. Only instead of smiling, she looked worried.

“You expand from within,” Donna recited. “There are worlds within us yet to explore. We don’t have to look outside ourselves.”

“Right off the brochure,” Corliss said.

Donna blanched.

“Yes,” Mayfair said. “‘How many goodly creatures are there here! How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world that has such people in it.’?”

“The Tempest, Act Five, Scene One,” Corliss recited.

They both laughed and looked at Donna, who protested, “Mock me if you will, but I know you know, just as I do, that we are very lucky being here and shouldn’t be so cavalier about losing the opportunities.” She continued to eat, now ravenously, mostly out of nervous anger.

Corliss shrugged. “Too much of any good thing is eventually bad,” she said. “Even too much water—hyponatremia. You dilute sodium levels in your blood.”

“Osmosis then draws water from the blood into body cells to equalize sodium levels,” Mayfair continued.

“And the cells swell. Bloating in the brain can be fatal.”

Donna looked at the full glass of water before her, picked it up, and spilled half into Mayfair’s glass. All three laughed.

“Where are you off to this morning?” Mayfair asked Corliss.

“Still toying with Tryon’s and Rosenthal’s experiments with rats, separating the bred

superior from the dull and then mixing with new variables. Actually,” she said, leaning in, “I find a clear analogy between the rats and us.”

Donna stopped eating. “What are you saying? They want to breed us? Encourage us to mate with one another? There’s no empirical evidence to support that thesis. None of the three of us comes from parents with superior IQs. Genes don’t make up the whole explanation.”

“Don’t sound so outraged with her analogy, Donna,” Mayfair said. “And don’t be so jumpy. Each of us has admitted to past love indiscretions, and all three of us have not had what you would call successful romances with so-called normal males. Inevitably, the young man you fancy will feel inferior and resent you. The only logical solution is to mate with an exceptionally gifted guy. Then you would be left only with the normal competitive challenges in life.”

“You said you dreamed that your Mr. Taylor would continue your romance,” Donna shot back.

Mayfair sat back thoughtfully and nodded. “I did. Back then. But when I analyze it now, I understand that he tossed me because he realized I would make him feel inferior. It’s not in the male psyche to permit that.”

“She’s right,” Corliss said. “Men have domination built in.”

Donna grimaced. “I’m not having the man I’m attracted to take an IQ test before I commit to a relationship. ‘Love is not love which alters when it alteration finds, or bends with the remover to remove.’ Some Shakespeare for you two.”

“Romantic drivel,” Mayfair said, smiling. “Reality is thunderous. By the third time you correct him about something, he’ll be looking elsewhere. And don’t think you can prevent yourself from doing it,” she quickly added. “That, Donna dear, is what’s

built-in with us.”

Donna’s look of frustration brought a smile to Corliss’s face, too.

“Maybe that’s true for you, but it’s not for me,” Donna insisted. “We are not rats in a maze. We are not absolutely predictable. At least, I know I’m not.”

Page 8

Source Creation Date: June 26, 2025, 2:19 pm

“Relax,” Corliss said, and then suddenly brightened. “Wait. This is brilliant. Thank you, Donna.”

“What is?” Mayfair asked. “What am I missing?”

Corliss leaned in, and the other two did the same. They looked like conspirators.

“We’re not predictable, but everything we do here is carefully controlled. You might laugh at my analogies, Donna, but don’t tell me you don’t feel observed a lot of the time. We are in a maze of sorts. Where we go, why we go there, what we do there, how we react to others, it’s all being planned and analyzed. Especially by our good friend Dr. Marlowe. She obviously singled us out just now. We’re under her microscope. Mayfair?”

“She’s right.”

Corliss nodded. Her look of real excitement affected both Donna and Mayfair.

“I’m not saying we weren’t under microscopes of sorts at our public schools and at home, but it was nothing as complete and scientific as this,” Corliss said. “Don’t tell me you don’t feel like you’re in a fishbowl sometimes, and then there’s our psychologist, Dr. Lester, continually exploring our feelings about everything we do or hear about ourselves. Sometimes I want to reach out, grab her neck, and shake the questions out of her.”

She sat back. The other two did, too. Neither could disagree.

“What are you thinking?” Mayfair asked. “What’s your solution?” For the first time in a long time, she felt excited, and she had yet to learn why.

“We step out of the maze.”

“How?”

“The ditch under the fence,” Donna said. Mayfair looked at her, a little annoyed that she had realized what Corliss meant before she did. “Right, Corliss? That’s what you’re implying.”

“Exactly. Serendipity. We were meant to find it this morning.”

“You don’t really believe that, do you?” Donna asked. “Serendipity and a ditch?”

“Part of what I’m studying with the maze experiments is the accumulated impact of choice as opposed to coincidence or, if you want, fate, some sort of divine intervention. When people are lucky, they thank God.”

“So?” Donna said. “I don’t see the relationship with the discovery of a ditch under the fence. It certainly isn’t divine intervention to me.”

“Who can say absolutely what is and what isn’t? Once, when I was with my father coming home from the studio, it was raining hard,” Corliss said. “People in Los Angeles drive terribly in the rain, because they don’t see as much of it as other people do in other places. At least, that’s my father’s explanation.

“Anyway, we were driving on a very curvy road, and as we came around a turn, someone in a pickup truck in the other lane had his brights on, blinding my father and me enough that neither he nor I saw the coyote in the road. As a consequence, we ran over it.”

“Ugh,” Donna said.

“Yes, ugh. My father is the type of person who would have swerved to avoid hitting it, and we would have gone head-on into the pickup truck. The truck’s lights really saved us. Coincidence? Divine intervention? He immediately said, ‘Thank God for that idiot leaving his brights on.’”

“Look,” she continued, “I’m certainly aware that statistics and logic easily disprove divine intervention, unless you accept that you do not have the intelligence to understand divinity, a clergyman’s fallback answer to everything. But the truth is that bad people are just as lucky as good people, often more so. How did Hitler escape being killed at least the six cited times it was attempted?”

“I like where this is going,” Mayfair said. “Fascinating.”

“All I’m saying is we three have been through dreadful experiences with men, some our age, some older.”

“Some men,” Donna qualified. “So?”

“I suggest that it’s enough to make us question whether that’s our fate, inevitable fate. Let’s find out. Along comes this opportunity for an experiment that we can control ourselves.”

“I like this,” Mayfair said.

“Stop saying that,” Donna insist

ed. “What’s the experiment?”

“We go to the village and mingle with the normal alphas and betas and maybe some

gammas and deltas. Just no epsilons. That's too much democracy, even for Brave New World citizens. If we do it together, we can help one another analyze and make the right decisions. Let's see how we do, what we do. Until now, none of us had anyone even close to our intelligence to rely on for advice. The benefit is we'll have three opinions that we all respect before any of us does anything. Assuming we respect our own opinion," she added with a smile.

Mayfair nodded. "I—"

Page 9

Source Creation Date: June 26, 2025, 2:19 pm

Donna shook her head. “Don’t say it.” She thought for a moment while the other two waited. “We don’t have to sneak out. Let’s propose it to Dr. Marlowe. Ask that we be permitted to spend some time in Piñon Pine.”

“It would be under her control, if she even considered it, which she won’t. We have to be on our own, make our own rules. If we did it under someone’s supervision, we wouldn’t have the variables we need,” Corliss said.

“I like it,” Mayfair said quickly, and looked at Donna.

“Look, having the courage to violate the rules and do this is already a step out of the maze,” Corliss said. “Right?”

Donna looked down at her food. “I’ve got to get to the math lab. I’m doing a problem in topology.”

She stood and picked up her tray. She started to turn away, then stopped to turn back to Corliss and Mayfair.

“You’d better think hard and long about this. You could lose everything.”

“But that’s the question, isn’t it, Donna?” Mayfair asked. “What does everything mean to you?”

Donna pursed her lips and then took a deep breath and walked away to deposit her tray.

“Even if she doesn’t come along,” Mayfair said, “we still go?”

Corliss nodded. “We plan, and then we go.”

They rose together. Maybe it was just her imagination, but when Mayfair looked at Dr. Marlowe across the room, she thought she was staring particularly hard at them. For a wild moment, she wondered if their conversations were bugged. She looked at the plain table at which they had sat.

“Wait,” she said, and forced her fork to fall off the tray.

She bent down to pick it up and searched the underside of the table. As far as she could tell, there was nothing there, nothing she could see.

Corliss knew what she was doing. “We’ll know pretty soon if our conversations are bugged in this place, won’t we?” she asked when Mayfair stood.

“How?”

“The ditch, Mayfairy. It will be filled in,” Corliss said, and started away.

Mayfair smiled, looked at Dr. Marlowe, and then headed out of the cafeteria, too.

Corliss and she didn’t see each other again until dinner. For a few moments, they questioned whether Donna was going to join them at their table. She looked their way, hesitated, and then turned to talk to Kelly Boson before she started toward them.

“How has your day been?” Corliss asked her as she sat.

“Dr. Martin singled me out for a compliment in math. He said I had solved the problem with a unique approach, something he has never seen or thought of. He

wants me to move deeper into quantum physics now.”

“Terrific,” Mayfair said. “You sound like you’re going to be extra busy.”

“No, not any more than usual,” Donna replied. She looked at Corliss and then at Mayfair. “You two were just teasing this morning, right?”

“Actually, no,” Corliss said. “I’ve done some private investigating, research. Once when I had left the Darwin Trail before you two had arrived, I took a shortcut back. Didn’t quite finish the run. It brought me out on the southeast rear of the building. I had a flash of memory this afternoon thinking about it and realized there are no cameras on that section, an older section. The door goes to the cafeteria and the kitchen pantry. Used for deliveries, I guess. Also, there are no motion lights.”

“That doesn’t sound too bright,” Mayfair joked.

Donna didn’t even smile.

“We could slip out that door and head back to the fence, to the ditch, easily, and we can return the same way. I say we take our first exploratory trip tonight. It should take us about forty-five minutes to get down to the mall. We’ll spend an hour or so and return,” Corliss summed up.

Donna seemed to freeze in her chair.

“I wonder what I’ll wear,” Mayfair said. “You guys will have to help me choose from my pathetic wardrobe.”

“I haven’t much money,” Donna said. “We don’t need money here. Why go to a mall?”

Page 10

Source Creation Date: June 26, 2025, 2:19 pm

“You don’t always go to a mall to buy things. There are hangouts, right, Mayfair?”

“No worries anyway. I have an ATM card with a thousand-dollar limit daily. Plenty of money,” Mayfair said. “I know what I’ll do. I’ll buy something new right away. You two will help me pick it out. I’ll change right there, dump the clothes I wore, and then we’ll explore the sperm throwers, whether they be alphas or deltas. That’s the way it was in Brave New World.”

“Great. It’s better if we go separately through the cafeteria to the pantry,” Corliss said. “Less chance of attracting attention. We’ll synchronize our watches. Be sure you wear something warm. It still dips at night in the desert this time of year.”

“I didn’t say I would go,” Donna said. “I just said I have no money to spend at a mall.”

“So say it,” Mayfair challenged her.

Donna looked at Corliss and then at Mayfair. “What time would we meet?”

Corliss looked at her watch. “Seven forty. It will take about six minutes to get to the pantry from our rooms.”

“Great plan. The kitchen pantry. Someone will surely be there. Dinner hours end at seven thirty,” Donna said.

“Cafeteria workers. They’re not going to question our comings and goings. We could be doing something school-related. They barely look at us.”

“Sounds okay with me,” Mayfair said. “When you look like you know what you’re doing, people don’t question you. Just don’t look sneaky, Donna.”

“I wouldn’t be able to help it,” she said, shaking her head. “I would be sneaking.”

“No false-face ability. How will you survive in this world?” Mayfair asked.

“We’ll wait until exactly seven forty-one,” Corliss said, not hiding her impatience with Donna. “With you or without you, we’re gone.”

Donna looked like she had lost her appetite. She stared at her food. The other two ate with renewed hunger.

“Got to get nourished for the journey,” Mayfair said, and Corliss laughed.

Mayfair and Corliss hurried up to their rooms after eating. Donna lingered and then followed slowly, obviously still deciding. Mayfair put on some warmer clothing and her running shoes and then actually, for the first time here, put on some lipstick and took a brush to her hair.

She was out first and down the stairway. The cafeteria was empty. She saw the employees going about cleaning up and circled carefully around to slip through the kitchen and to the pantry. As Corliss had predicted, no one paid any attention to her. The students at Spindrift were surely a curiosity to the employees who did the cleaning, maintenance, and food preparation. They had some vague understanding of how brilliant the students were. But the employees were afraid to ask too many questions of any of them, not only because they feared they might look stupid but also because they were afraid of offending one of them. They were convinced that they could be fired for something like that; these students were special and important.

Corliss appeared right on time. “Anyone see you?” she asked Mayfair.

“They looked at me, but they didn’t see me.”

“Exactly. Me, too.” Corliss looked at her watch. “She’s not coming. Let’s go.”

They went to the door, looked back, and then slipped out, making sure the door didn’t lock behind them. It was a partly cloudy evening, but in the high desert, where there were no stre

etlights, it took only moments for their eyes to adjust to and benefit from the starlight. Corliss started for the woods, Mayfair a step or two behind. They were almost there when they heard the door open and close behind them.

They froze. Were they being watched all the time? Was Dr. Marlowe coming after them? Had their table indeed been bugged? Maybe even their rooms?

The silhouetted figure stepped out of the shadows.

It was Donna, hurrying to catch up. “Just go,” she said, anticipating some wise-ass remark about her surge of courage.

“Did you make sure the door didn’t lock behind you?” Mayfair asked.

“Of course. You’re not the only one who can think ahead, Mayfair.”

Corliss smiled to herself and led them through the brush until they reached the Darwin Trail and made their way back to the ditch. It was there that Corliss paused and looked at the other two. Sneaking out of the building was one thing; this was quite another. She held out her hands. Mayfair understood the gesture, grasped them, and looked at Donna. After a moment, she clasped hands with them, and then the three went through the ditch and made their way to the incline.

“Careful,” Corliss said. “It’s not steep, but you could ruin your makeup.”

“Oh, so funny,” Donna said.

Source Creation Date: June 26, 2025, 2:19 pm

They started down. Halfway there, the sounds from below grew louder—car horns, music, and voices of people going to and from the mall. It was a sea of life that was in direct contrast to the silent halls of Spindrift, designed to be conducive to reading, analyzing, and creating. There was an excitement below that each of them admittedly missed.

They broke out at the edge of the rear parking lot and paused. All three looked back up the hill.

“Yes, it’s easier coming down,” Corliss quipped.

“It always is,” Mayfair said. “Especially when you’ve been moved to Mount Olympus.”

“We’re no Greek goddesses,” Donna said. “At least, I don’t feel like one.”

Hovering close to one another, they started around the corner of the mall and then felt like they had exploded in the light and action. Corliss took Mayfair’s hand, and she took Donna’s. They hurried to the main entrance and burst into the mall, laughing, more like three refugees who had finally made it to the free world or something.

Corliss paused at the directory. “I’ve seen this chain,” she said, pointing to a women’s clothing store called Ooh La La.

“I actually wanted to go into it once, but my stepmother wouldn’t lower herself to go there,” Mayfair said. “She said the styles were too offbeat for her taste and no recognizable designers. To me, that’s the stamp of approval. Let’s get to that ATM

first.”

They started right. Their strut seemed to come naturally to them now. It was the way the three walked through the halls and rooms of Spindrift whenever they were together. Not only did they have perfect posture, but they also kept their focus on where they were going. They looked unstoppable and moved in a simultaneous rhythm that was both authoritative and sexy. It was truly as if they heard their own music and moved to their own rhythm.

Almost everyone who saw them paused to watch them go by. After Mayfair withdrew a thousand dollars from the ATM, they found Ooh La La, entered, and considered the clothing displayed.

“I like that blouse,” Corliss said immediately.

“That skirt with the frills,” Donna added, and nodded in another direction.

Corliss brightened and moved quickly to the blouse she admired.

“I’ll try on the skirt,” Donna said, excited.

They separated and began sorting through the merchandise, looking like any other group of teenage girls. Every once in a while, each paused to look at the others to see what was attracting them. How simple this was compared to almost everything else they did, this burst of shopping together. No one had to say it, but they all felt . . . human. They giggled at their appearance when they tried things on. They challenged one another to wear something more astonishing. The salespeople were amused by them and were encouraged to suggest other things. These three did behave as if they had just been released from solitary confinement.

Eventually, Corliss settled on a long-sleeved cable-knit white sweater with a crew

neck and tunic length. Donna chose a casual knit turtleneck with classic long sleeves. Mayfair chose a semisheer blouse with a notched collar, long sleeves, and flared cuffs. She tried on a color-block cardigan with an open front, long sleeves, and oversize pockets and at once fell in love with the look, along with a very sexy pair of deliberately overdyed super-stretch pants. She stepped out of the dressing room with her new things on.

“You can’t be the same girl who blew away graduate-level exams when you were in seventh grade,” Corliss said.

“Don’t feel like her. Don’t even remember her.”

“What next?” Donna asked after everything was paid for and they stepped out of the store.

“Explore. Remember, this is a social experiment,” Corliss said.

They strutted through the mall, pausing to look in windows and occasionally at other girls their age. A microbrewery restaurant called Olaf’s was at the far end of the mall. They paused to look through the doorway at the crowd of young people drinking, eating at tall tables, and, whether they liked it or not, listening to the loud music.

“Have to be twenty-one,” Corliss said.

“Only to sit at the bar or order something alcoholic,” Mayfair said. “Let’s get a cup of coffee or a soft drink and observe the natives.”

“How late are we staying?” Donna asked.

“About a half hour more,” Corliss suggested. Fortunately for them, there were no room checks at Spindrift. Privacy was highly prized. After all, you could interrupt

some genius on the verge of discovering the cure for cancer or something.

They entered Olaf's and found a tall table with three chairs. A waitress in a short black skirt and a white top came over immediately.

"Coffee," Mayfair said. "Please."

"Do you have lemonade?" Donna asked.

"We do," the waitress said. "Homemade, too."

"Make it two," Corliss said. "Please."

Page 12

Source Creation Date: June 26, 2025, 2:19 pm

“Want a side of twirls?” the waitress asked.

“What’s that?” Donna said.

“Fried onions.”

“Okay,” Mayfair said. “But change my coffee to lemonade.”

The waitress left, and they all sat silently, looking at the way girls just a few years older were dressed and how they behaved. There was a joie de vivre, a lightness, anyone could see they envied.

“Don’t you get the feeling sometimes that you’re in another country?” Corliss asked.

Donna and Mayfair nodded.

Mayfair turned slowly to her left. She could feel his eyes on her. A man who looked like a teenager but had to be twenty-one, evidenced by the glass of brew in his hand, was staring at her with a wry smile on his lips. His dark brown hair was swept back on the sides, but his bangs fell to the right on his forehead, reaching just above his eyebrow. He wore a navy-blue leather jacket, a black V-neck T-shirt, and a pair of black jeans that dropped halfway down what looked like grayish-black cowboy boots.

He lifted his glass of beer in a toast to her and sipped it, not moving from the wall against which he leaned. The lights from behind the bar cast a shadow over him, but she could see his softly carved jaw and firm, full lips. In this light, his eyes were dark orbs. He had a Roman nose. His smile tightened the corners of his mouth. Something

about her and Donna and Corliss obviously amused him. When they were served their lemonade and fried onion rings, he laughed and then looked away as if his suspicions were correct. She felt as though he had dismissed them.

Slim but with firm shoulders, he looked at everyone else with what she thought was an arrogant disinterest. He shifted and turned, barely washing his gaze over her as he looked to his right. Why the mere sight of him and his obvious dismissal of everyone and everything around him annoyed her she couldn't say. They just did.

But in a strange way, they also attracted her. She started to analyze why and stopped herself.

Brain, she thought, take a rest. You've got the night off.

Why did that feel even more dangerous than sneaking through the fence?

3

The waitress had brought them their drinks and fried onion rings, and for the moment, Corliss and Donna seemed engrossed with that, not seeming to notice the man Mayfair was becoming fixated on. Fried onions, any fast food, was a no-no at Spindrift. The logic was simply that if you could be brilliant about math and science, you certainly could be brilliant about what was healthy to eat and what was not. She wouldn't be the first at Spindrift to think that sometimes it was a drag to be brilliant.

Mayfair turned back to look at the young man who had smiled and toasted her. He was looking at her again. Why not acknowledge him? She smiled and toasted him, now that she had something with which to toast. His smile brightened, and he literally put his right foot against the wall and kicked himself forward in her direction. Here's hoping his first words don't confirm he's a dumb redneck, she thought. Corliss and Donna finally realized something was happening and looked up in his direction.

“Fish out of water?” he said, stepping close to their table.

“How can you tell?” Mayfair asked.

“I know my fish,” he said. He glanced at Corliss and Donna but focused his gaze firmly on Mayfair. “Why come to a brewpub and not order any brew, unless you’re not old enough to be served any?”

“Maybe we’re just planning our future,” Mayfair said.

He laughed, silently, tossing his head back just a little.

“Are you an undercover detective?” Donna asked him. “Making sure they don’t serve minors?”

He shook his head. “Just undercover. But I’ll take a wild stab at it and say you three are not from here.”

“Now, how can you tell that?” Corliss asked, as if what he’d said was an insult.

“Oh, it’s a lot of things that altogether boil down to my instincts. Let’s sum it up by saying you have a different . . .” He paused, debating the right word. Mayfair was impressed that such a choice was important to him. “Air about you. So? Am I right?”

“Everybody is from so

mewhere else,” Donna said. “Even you.”

“I didn’t say I was from here. Maybe I’m like you, a visitor observing the local yokels.”

Mayfair took a closer look at him. He had unique eyes, almost a gray-black, with eyelashes any girl would envy, a slight beard, trimmed, the hair somewhat lighter, more brown, and a strong, firm mouth that he curled up in the right corner after he spoke. She estimated him to be only an inch or so taller than she was, but his rock-solid look gave the impression he was taller. Although well put together, he radiated an indifference to his appearance. His boots were scuffed badly. Mayfair learned early in her life to look at a man's shoes first. How well he kept them, how worn they were, and even their style told her things she more often than not confirmed about him later.

“Is there so much here to entice people to visit?” Donna asked. “We skipped the travel brochure.”

Page 13

Source Creation Date: June 26, 2025, 2:19 pm

His eyes took on a sparkle as he realized the comments and answers from any of these three girls were equally sharp, yet his attention returned to Mayfair. She sensed it and, for the moment, welcomed it.

“It has its charm,” he said. “At least to me.”

“Maybe you’re too easily pleased,” Corliss said dryly.

“What’s sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander, I guess,” he said, shrugging.

Mayfair looked at Corliss and then at Donna to see how they were reacting to his responses. She saw they wore identical looks of distrust and wondered just how much of a mirror image of herself they presented. Each had been wounded deeply enough by romantic relationships, especially her, to lean heavily toward the cynical. It almost didn’t matter who had approached their table to talk to one of them. The bridge across the moat wasn’t readily lifted, and there were alligators waiting in the water, jaws open. Who wouldn’t be driven away?

But he just smiled, pulled out the fourth chair, and turned it around so he could sit on it with the back of it between him and them like some shield.

“So, you don’t strike me as high school girls. There’s a community college nearby, but most of the girls there are not twenty-one and don’t come here.”

He leaned in to speak in a voice just above a whisper.

“There are places they can go where they’ll be served, but not here. No, most of the

women you see at the bar are either married to someone, going with someone, or working women. I don't mean 'working women' like it might sound."

"And how might it sound?" Donna asked.

He looked toward the bar. "Call girls, prostitutes. These girls are secretaries, salespeople, some working in this mall. There's even a nurse or two."

He sipped his beer. Corliss and Donna looked at Mayfair, obviously to see if she or they should continue talking with him.

"For a visitor, you sure know a lot about the locals," Donna said.

"I'm a quick study."

"So we admit we don't come from here and we're not in high school," Mayfair said. "You've obviously been around here long enough to reach some conclusions about us. What are you willing to reveal about yourself, or are you the mysterious stranger?"

"Me? I'm an open book. I'm at the end of a journey. This might be as far as I go before I turn back. That's why I've lingered a bit."

"So what are you, a writer looking for a story?"

"You don't have to be a writer to look for a story," he said. He finished his beer and twirled the glass in his hand.

"Then you're trying to find yourself," Donna said in the tone of someone who had heard this explanation many times.

“Aren’t you?” he countered. “You have that deer-in-the-headlights look.”

“I beg your pardon. I’m not confused or surprised about anything I see here. If we are trying to find ourselves, I don’t expect we’ll find ourselves here,” Donna said. She looked at Corliss, who closed and opened her eyes in approval, and then she looked at Mayfair. She looked thoughtful, as if searching for ways to be more clever.

“Which doesn’t preclude the possibility that we are looking for ourselves,” Mayfair said.

“Preclude? I knew I should have carried my thesaurus tonight.” He smiled. “College girls, then?”

“Which reminds me,” Donna said. “Curfew?”

“Yes, time to say good-bye,” Corliss said. She signaled the waitress.

“Not just good night? Good-bye sounds so permanent.”

“Probably is,” Donna said.

“Sensitive types,” he said to Mayfair.

She smiled. “I wish we were.”

“Under a curfew?” He looked at his watch. “It isn’t that late.”

Page 14

Source Creation Date: June 26, 2025, 2:19 pm

The waitress arrived. Mayfair handed her a twenty, and she took it and their bill back to the bar.

He looked at them more suspiciously, perhaps because she hadn't answered.

"You don't seem like you're under twenty-one. What am I missing here?"

"A purpose," Donna quipped.

Corliss laughed.

He looked like he was between laughing and getting angry. He turned to Mayfair. "Just in case we meet again, my name's Leo, short for Leonardo."

"Where are you staying?" Mayfair asked him.

"A motel about four miles toward Palm Springs."

"Just in case. My name is Mayfair, short for Mayfair," she said.

He laughed and stood when the waitress returned with her change. She put a tip on the table.

"How long are you staying?" she asked him.

"I have no pending appointments, so it depends on you," he replied.

Mayfair looked at the other two and laughed. “Then it’s a mystery, I suppose,” she said. “Girls?”

“Why is it I feel like I was just in a game of tennis?” he asked. He was smiling, but he looked a little stunned.

“It’s more fun, don’t you think?” Mayfair replied. “More of a challenge for you. Later you’ll thank us.”

They all rose and started out. He didn’t follow them. He returned to the bar. Mayfair looked back at him, but he didn’t turn their way. Was he feeling blown off? She felt an unexpected dread sink to the base of her stomach. Corliss and Donna looked at her and walked faster.

“You guys are acting quite frightened. Should I? What am I missing?”

Corliss stopped. “I just thought we wouldn’t want him to follow us.”

Mayfair looked back. “I doubt he will.”

“He liked you,” Donna said. “He spoke to us, but it was as if we weren’t there.”

They all walked slower toward the exit.

“He was interesting,” Mayfair admitted.

“Maybe a little too interesting?” Corliss posed.

“If someone drifting through his life is interesting,” Donna said, “then he’s interesting.”

“Isn’t that us?” Mayfair countered.

No one spoke again until they were around the mall and heading for the path back up the hill.

Corliss paused and looked back. Then both Mayfair and Donna did.

“Maybe our smart-ass answers blew him off,” Mayfair said. “It was three against one.”

“Regrets?”

They started up the hill.

Source Creation Date: June 26, 2025, 2:19 pm

“Let’s just say I want to come back down. It didn’t feel meaningless.”

Corliss paused. “Serendipity?”

“Maybe,” Mayfair said. “Or maybe I’m just desperate to get out of myself, and he looked like another way under the fence.”

Neither Corliss nor Donna replied. They walked to the fence in silence.

As they made their way through the woods and the rear entrance of Spindrift, Corliss paused again. “I never thought of it that way, exactly. Like you, I didn’t have a joyful youth and actually had anxiety every morning on my way to school. I suppose I’ve been looking for a hole in the fence for a long time.”

“Isn’t that a bit over the top?” Donna asked. “A bit too dramatic?”

“Is it?” She loo

ked at Mayfair.

“Not for me. You know what I fear the most right now?” Mayfair asked them.

Donna shook her head. “There’s a list from here to the Atlantic, I suppose,” she said.

“No, for me only one thing tonight.”

“Which is what?” Corliss asked.

“That I’ll go back under the fence and down the hill tomorrow night, and he won’t be there,” she said. “It’s not a feeling I’ve had about anyone lately.”

“The hungriest eat poison the fastest,” Donna said.

“We’re all so full of wisdom,” Mayfair muttered. “We’ll have to rewrite Alexander Pope’s warning that a little learning is a dangerous thing. In our case, it’s a lot of learning that’s dangerous.”

Corliss nodded. “Don’t let Dr. Marlowe hear you say that. She’ll have a nervous breakdown.”

Laughter was a welcome relief, but after that, they walked in silence again until they were inside the building.

“Let’s not get caught coming out of here together,” Corliss said. “Don’t go right to your room, either. Make it seem like you’re coming from somewhere else or had another purpose.”

“Pity we’re not really evil,” Donna said. “We could give law enforcement quite a challenge.”

“We’d give everyone that,” Mayfair said, “not just law enforcement.”

They timed their exits. Donna went to the library, Corliss to the science lab, and Mayfair to the lounge area. After an appropriate delay, each made her way to her room. Mayfair, who got into a conversation with Kelly Boson about the moral implications of DNA implants in in vitro fertilization, was the last to reach her room. Neither Kelly nor anyone else who saw Mayfair, for that matter, had made a comment about her new clothes. She didn’t want their opinions to matter, but suddenly their indifference mattered.

When she got into bed, she lay there staring into the darkness. After Alan Taylor had let her down and made her ashamed of her own feelings, she thought it would be impossible to feel any interest in or excitement about another man. She had analyzed herself until she was tired of looking at her own image in a mirror. In her heart of hearts, she had no real expectations for this little escapade with Corliss and Donna. There was some new delight in breaking a cardinal rule at Spindrift, but nothing more to anticipate. Except for what she had done with her stepsister's teacher, she had never violated a commandment, whether at school or at home. It offered her no self-satisfaction, and most of the time, if there was some regulation against something she wanted to do, she found a legal way around it. There was always something she was able to think of, some weakness in the armor.

Despite what she had told Corliss and Donna, she really didn't expect they or she would do this again. If she had any expectation for it, it was that it would prove boring a second time. Buying clothes was fun because it was different from buying clothes with her stepmother, but that was as far as she had expected they would go. She wished she could believe in fate and destiny, just as Corliss had suggested. Meeting Leo did seem serendipitous. If Corliss hadn't seen that coyote go under the fence, they might not have challenged one another to go off the grounds, and if they hadn't done that, there would be no chance even in an infinite universe for her to have met someone like him.

Could she believe in something so intangible, something that had no empirical evidence to support it, an event that couldn't be shown to be true in a laboratory and something that depended so much on inexplicable feelings, almost magic? Deep in her heart, she wanted to believe it.

I'm behaving foolishly, she thought, just like some of the airheads at my previous school I won't go back there tomorrow night. Why bother?

Convinced, she turned over to go to sleep, but when she closed her eyes, despite

herself, all she saw was Leo smiling at her. The image had her tossing and turning most of the night.

• • •

Neither Corliss nor Donna spoke to her about it before lunch. When she saw them in the morning, it was as if she had imagined it all. She wondered if they had talked about it without her and had decided to pretend none of it had happened.

Finally, at lunch, Corliss made an announcement. “Neither Donna nor I think we should go back to the mall. Analyzing it from all angles, we concluded there’s no positive result for you or for us. The chances are probably slim that this Leo guy will be there, and even if he is, what percentage is there in anything meaningful happening? He’s a drifter, and I don’t mean like us.”

“This was supposed to be our little experiment,” Donna added. “We thought having all our observations would make anything that happened different. We’d weigh the pros and cons so that none of us would do anything foolish.”

Page 16

Source Creation Date: June 26, 2025, 2:19 pm

The definiteness of their conclusion annoyed Mayfair for some reason. Perhaps they were jealous, she thought. Leo had concentrated on her mostly. She wondered if she sounded as arrogant as they did when she offered an opinion. Was it simply in their nature to be that way, something that came from their confidence that whatever they said had to be certain, had to be true?

“I’m not sure we gave it enough time,” Mayfair said after a moment.

“There are some conclusions that don’t require much time to be reached,” Donna said.

“What makes you so sure this was one of them?” she fired back, now not hiding her annoyance.

“All this is hypothetical anyway,” Corliss added. “He won’t be there tonight, and even if he was, the chances are he’d ignore us. We didn’t give him enough satisfaction.”

“And you know this because . . .”

Corliss smiled. “Experience, and before you say it, some things don’t require all that much experience.”

Mayfair nodded.

“Why don’t we wait a week or so and do it again?” Corliss suggested. She could see the displeasure on Mayfair’s face. “Fresh eyes.”

“Good idea,” Donna seconded.

“Whatever,” Mayfair said. She knew they were looking for a compromise that would save everyone’s ego.

“Thanks for bankrolling us,” Corliss said. “We’ll pay you back when our parents send us some money or come to visit.”

Mayfair nodded. The small knot of contradictory emotions seemed to tighten inside her. She ate silently, listening to them talk about their work, their letters from home. She thought about her emails from her stepsister. The girl relies too much on my advice, Mayfair thought. I don’t have the experience Donna and Corliss refer to, and I certainly don’t feel qualified to give her any guidance when it comes to boys. Her mother is a waste of time for her, though, and there is just so much my father can do for her.

She looked around the dining hall. Most of the other students were in animated conversations about their favorite subjects. From the way the listeners at these tables reacted, she thought most were really talking to themselves. Everyone here thought what he or she had to say was more important than what the others were saying. They never stopped competing for attention and the superior position.

“Once in a while,” she blurted, as if Corliss and Donna were able to hear her thoughts, “it might be a good idea to plant an ordinary student in here. He or she could be a normal A student, but the contrast might help us geniuses come back to earth.”

The two stared at her as if she had just landed from another planet.

“We’ve been through all that, Mayfair,” Donna said. “They’d either be bored or intimidated by us.”

“And most people here don’t have the patience to explain every word said,” Corliss added. “It would be a form of punishment to put a so-called normal A student in this place. I’d feel sorry for him or her. It would be like throwing Christians to the lions.”

“So we’re destined to live in our own minds,” Mayfair said. “Is that it?”

“Whatever,” Donna said. “I plan on being very rich. I don’t care about fame.”

“Sounds good to me,” Corliss added, smiling. “Run again tomorrow morning?”

“Sure,” Donna said. “Mayfair?”

“We’ll become Dr. Marlowe’s little darlings,” Mayfair said, sounding neither positive nor negative.

They waited for her to answer.

“Sure,” she said, relenting. “All progress requires some form of sacrifice and punishment.”

“Heavy, heavy,” Corliss joked.

They left to go their separate ways. No matter what Mayfair did that afternoon, however, she found her mind drifting, not that any of her teachers would notice. Unlike at a regular school, no one ever pointed out that you weren’t paying sufficient attention. The teachers at Spindrift were very subtle when it came to directing a drifter toward one topic or another. The philosophy was simply that the student had to make up his or her mind solely on the basis of his or her own inclinations. You chose your own path, and they simply helped guide you toward your own goals. If you looked bored with what you were doing, they expected that you would change direction on your own.

Mayfair told herself she was still exploring her options when it came to what she wanted to do with her life, what subject she could be passionate about; but deep inside herself, she lived in fear that she would never find one, never discover a path or a direction, and simply float in this universe of knowledge like an asteroid, without any destination. She thought she was a true drifter.

On the other hand, Corliss and Donna seemed to be moving toward something, despite their attempts to sympathize with her and claim that same fear. Those two were more centered, perhaps because they had real family. Losing her mother when she was young, her father remarrying a woman who basically feared and despised her, and her distance both mentally and emotionally from her stepsister left her feeling quite a bit more alone than her two friends. They had every reason to be more cautious and determined. They really wanted to please someone else besides themselves.

She had her father, of course, but was pleasing her father important anymore? She felt like an astronaut whose last tie to the space station had snapped the day she was brought here. Her father's rationalizations and sincere emotions lingered, but only for a while, like the echo of a laugh, the image of a smile, and the whisper of "I love you."

Page 17

Source Creation Date: June 26, 2025, 2:20 pm

Suddenly, the silence in Spindrift was deafening to Mayfair. Her dislike for her room was palpable. She felt like clawing at the walls. When Corliss and Donna stopped by to say it was time to go to dinner, she told them she would be right down.

Corliss's eyes narrowed with suspicion. "Are you upset with us about our comments concerning this Leo guy?"

Mayfair was never great at hiding her feelings, because she never believed it was necessary.

What was a more futile lie than that? Sooner or later, even the dimmest of friends and relatives would sense your unhappiness if you were unhappy, your anger if you were angry, she thought.

"Upset is too strong a word. Disappointed, maybe, but maybe that's my own failing," Mayfair said.

"We'll talk more about it," Donna promised. "The only thing final is the word final."

"Oh, spare me, little Buddha," Mayfair said, and both Corliss and Donna laughed. It eased her mood and lessened her tension. "Let's eat," she said. "I'm ready."

The Supremes marched down to the dining room.

Mayfair deliberately avoided discussing their conclusions about the evening now known to her as the Night Below the Fence. Although both Donna and Corliss knew she was deliberately avoiding the subject, they let her direct their conversation to

gossip about some of the other drifters. Maybe they wanted to avoid talking about it themselves.

They had a choice of things to do after dinner. An old but famous silent movie, Battleship Potemkin, was being shown in the media center. Peter Townsend, because he was good at it himself, had proposed a Ping-Pong contest in the game room, and a guest NASA scientist who had been given the Presidential Early Career Award for Scientists and Engineers was available tonight and tomorrow for conversations about oceanography and public health. One had to be impressed with the expense Spindrift would go to for only a handful of students. But as Dr. Marlowe had said on more than one occasion, every one of them was a potential new Einstein.

Corliss decided she was going to the Ping-Pong contest. She declared she wanted to beat Peter Townsend's ass. Donna wanted Mayfair to go with her to the NASA scientist's forum, but Mayfair said she wanted to see the movie. She had read about it but had never seen it.

"Boring," Donna declared.

"If it is, I'll join you, or I'll go watch Corliss play Ping-Pong."

The compromise worked, and the three parted, attracting the surprise of Dr. Marlowe, who had observed how the three did almost everything together. Thirty minutes later, with everyone off someplace, the lobby, cafeteria, and lounge were empty and silent.

Twenty minutes into the film, Mayfair rose.

On the way out of the media center, she felt Dr. Marlowe's hand on her wrist.

"Bored?"

“No, I realized I had seen it,” she said. “I’m going to watch Corliss win the Ping-Pong contest.”

Dr. Marlowe nodded. She was sitting with Lars Stensen, who perked up at the sound of Corliss’s name.

“I’ll join you,” he said. “I realized I saw this, too.”

Dr. Marlowe gave her a knowing smile. Lars’s infatuation with Corliss was obvious, especially to Corliss. Mayfair and he left the media center.

“I wasn’t lying,” he said. “I know all about that film. It has the scene with the flag that was hand-painted on the film itself. Startled the audience in those days.”

“Yes. Human ingenuity is fascinating,” Mayfair said dryly. “Go on without me. I have to do something first.”

He nodded and hurried away. She turned the moment he was gone and headed toward the kitchen. She had made up her mind the moment she woke up this morning, actually. Minutes later, she was out the door and crossing to the woods.

• • •

For a few moments after she had gone under the fence, she paused and debated with herself.

It took only that long to dismiss fear and put aside any caution. She practically ran down the hill and once nearly toppled.

That would have been utter disaster. But she was fine.

She broke out exactly where the three of them had the night before and hurried to the entrance of the mall. She thought someone was playing the drums but realized quickly that it was only her heart pounding.

The mall was a little busier than it had been the night before, but this time, without her companions walking in sync, she wasn't attracting the same attention. She didn't mind that, but she almost wanted to touch base and turn right around as if she was in some relay race. That way, she could get herself back to Spindrift before her absence was noticed even by Corliss or Donna.

Source Creation Date: June 26, 2025, 2:20 pm

She almost did just that when she reached Olaf's microbrewery restaurant, because she looked in and didn't see Leo. She hesitated a moment in the doorway, glanced at her watch, and then entered and went to the same table she, Corliss, and Donna had taken before. The same waitress, in fact, came over to her. This table was probably part of her assignment. She obviously remembered Mayfair.

"Lemonade?"

"Do you have Perrier?"

"Perrier?"

"Mineral water?"

"Oh." She thought a moment and nodded. "Onion rings?"

"No, nothing else for now."

The waitress smiled and headed off. Mayfair sat back and took a breath. It had been so long since she had been anywhere by herself at night. Men had it better when it came to being alone. They attracted little attention, but at one point or another during the next five or six minutes, everyone in the place had glanced at her, some gazing longer than a glance. One woman was obviously annoyed with her escort, her boyfriend or husband, because he stared at Mayfair too long.

The waitress had brought her a small bottle of mineral water and a glass. She looked like she was going to stay to talk to her, but someone signaled and she walked off.

Mayfair filled the glass and sipped at it.

Why am I doing this? she wondered. Is it simply because those two decided I shouldn't?

She sat forward and hovered over her glass, looking down at the table to avoid eye contact with anyone else. Minutes seemed to take longer than sixty seconds. When she looked at the clock on the wall across from the bar, she saw that she hadn't been here more than seven or so. She began to plan her return. For now, she would rather that neither Corliss nor Donna knew she had gone back to the mall and the brewpub. There would be that damn I told you so look that was practically a mask worn by everyone at Spindrift at one time or another.

She took what she expected to be her final sip of the mineral water and looked up to find the waitress. Instead, he was standing there smiling down at her.

"Lost some weight, I see," he said.

"Excuse me?"

"Your bodyguards aren't here."

She stared up at him. He didn't change expression. Then she smiled and shook her head. "They'd beat your ego to a pulp if they were here and heard you refer to them as bodyguards."

He looked around as if he were terrified. Then he put his hand on the chair across from her. "Okay?"

He sat before she said yes.

“Maybe you’re the undercover agent,” he said, and signaled to the waitress. When she approached, he ordered a beer before turning back to Mayfair. “Want those onion things?”

“No.”

“We’re fine for now,” he told the waitress, and she left.

“What kept you here another day?” she asked him.

“Truthfully?”

“Yes, for a change, why not?”

“Hoping to see you,” he said.

She shook her head.

“What?” he asked with a feigned look of indignation.

“Did it take you a long time?”

“To do what?”

“Get around the block. You’ve obviously been a number of times, I bet, to develop that smooth a come-on.”

Source Creation Date: June 26, 2025, 2:20 pm

“Not really. I’m too much of a loner to be a ladies’ man. Was it that smooth?”

She nodded and sipped her drink. The waitress brought his brew. He took a sip, keeping his eyes on Mayfair.

“Is it true,” he asked, “that women favor men who are inexperienced?”

“I haven’t read any statistics on it, but I imagine there’s a certain safety in getting involved with a relatively inexperienced man,” she said, and thought about Alan Taylor. “It’s always better for us when it’s weighted more on our side. So little is otherwise.”

If he challenged her, she was ready to rattle off facts like how much a woman makes compared to a man for the same work. She was glad he didn’t question her. She desperately wanted to be different and sound different with him. That desire interested her more than anything. In fact, she was genuinely more curious about herself at this moment than she was about him.

“Okay,” he said, putting his glass down and looking at it. “Here I go. I was in college when one day, I asked myself why I was there. I didn’t have a satisfactory answer, so I got up, gathered some things, got on my motorcycle, and left. In my case, it was heading west. That was about five months ago.”

“And for money?” she asked.

“I had some, but I took an odd job here and there for both the experience, companionship, and some bucks. I’m pretty handy when it comes to auto mechanics.

On my way here, I helped two families who had broken down on the highway, in fact. Easy fixes, but I could see the man of the house rarely used a can opener, much less a wrench.”

“What about your family?”

He sipped his beer. “I haven’t told anyone any of this since I left,” he said, and looked away for a moment. She thought he wasn’t going to answer. “Funny, but no one I’ve worked for or met has asked,” he said when he turned back.

“Maybe you scared them off from asking.”

He smiled. “Could be.”

He drank some more of his beer but kept his eyes on her. “My parents died in a brutal car accident involving a tractor trailer. I’m an only child. They had set up my college fund. I was sixteen at the time and lived with my mother’s sister and her family until I started college. Once I was eighteen, I was on my own, not that I didn’t like my aunt and uncle. I just—”

“Wanted to be on your own.”

“Exactly.”

“No friends you didn’t want to leave?”

“I’m not sure you know, because I’m not sure you’re out of high school, but once you leave high school, those friends drift into different lives, as do you. You might hold on to one or two, but it’s not usual.”

“You said you were in college. What about college friends?”

“No one in particular I regretted leaving behind,” he said. “So?”

“So what?”

“Do I pass the test?”

“Too soon to tell,” she said.

“You’re not in high school, are you?”

“No.”

“Are you in community college, college, what?”

“I’m in a private school that is far beyond high school or college. It’s called Spindrift.”

“The castle on the hill,” he said, nodding.

“It’s not a castle.”

“I asked about it when I saw it from a road on the other side of the hill. I got closer but saw that there was a guard at the entry, so I turned around. No one really knows that much about it. ’Least that’s how it struck me. They did say it was some sort of special school. What is it?”

“A special school,” she said.

Source Creation Date: June 26, 2025, 2:20 pm

He nodded. "It's not run by the government, is it?"

"No. A famous biochemist who made a lot of money created it."

"Well, what sort of kids go there?"

"Very smart ones." She finished her mineral water and glanced at her watch.

In fifteen minutes or so, everyone at Spindrift would be heading for their rooms or the lounge. Corliss and Donna would realize she wasn't there.

She looked at him. "Don't you have any ambitions for yourself?" she asked.

He shrugged. "Part of what I'm looking for, I guess. What about you?"

"Ditto."

He smiled. "Well, isn't that something?"

"What?"

"You and I are at the same crossroads."

She laughed. "'Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,'" she said.

"'And sorry I could not travel both,'" he added.

She felt the smile freeze on her face.

“English major?”

He leaned toward her. “Don’t tell your friends.”

“What?”

“I’m going to write that novel someday.”

She laughed.

“I bet you will.” She looked at her watch again. “I’d better go.”

“Is there really a curfew this early?”

“No. There’s not a curfew because there is no permission to leave,” she said, and stood.

“AWOL?”

“Exactly.”

“Need a ride back? If you’re not afraid of hanging on, I’d be glad to run you up at least close enough for you to walk in the gate.”

“Too complicated. I’d rather sneak back in.”

He signaled the waitress and asked for the check. She handed it to him, and he left money on the table.

“How will you get back up the hill?” he asked, walking her out.

“There’s a path and a hole under the fence.”

“Fence? You mean the place is fenced in, too?”

Source Creation Date: June 26, 2025, 2:20 pm

“In more ways than one,” she said.

They headed for the exit.

“I don’t know you well enough to say it, but I don’t think you’re a happy camper,” he said when they stepped out.

She stood there just looking at him. It was time for Donna’s Buddha-like pronouncements about happiness. She opted for something else: honesty.

“I’m not,” she said.

He looked toward the top of the hill. Of course, Spindrift wasn’t visible from this angle. “Why go back?” he asked. His question was so simple. He was at a place in his life where he didn’t do anything he didn’t want to do or anything that might displease him. He didn’t have much, but he had that, and for the moment, she envied him.

“Where else would I go?”

“Away,” he said. “Wherever. It’s sort of . . . invigorating to just leave and not have a specific destination other than anywhere but here. You go to A, and because you’ve gone to A, you go to B.” He shrugged, then added, “That’s about it. For now, at least.”

“A rebel without a cause,” she said.

He shook his head. “Not true. My cause is myself.”

She smiled.

“Why is that funny?”

“I wasn’t thinking about you. I was thinking about my schoolmates. Nobody up there comes right out and says that, but they live by it.”

“But not you?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Your friends didn’t want to come back here tonight, but you did. That’s something. I don’t know what’s up there, but you’re looking for an answer you don’t think you’ll find there.”

She simply stared at him.

He put up his hands. “Don’t say it. I don’t know what I’m talking about. It’s been . . . different,” he said, and started away.

“Okay,” she said. He paused and turned back to her.

“Okay what?”

“I’ll try it.”

“What?”

“Hanging on,” she said.

She liked that he didn’t smile or laugh. He just waited for her and walked silently

with her toward the parking lot.

4

What Mayfair thought was remarkable about all this was her lack of fear. She wasn't indifferent, nor was she as excited as she knew most teenagers her age would be when they were about to do something expressly forbidden. But she actually wanted to feel fear or some fascination with being reckless. Unfortunately, instead of riding her emotions when she first mounted his motorcycle, she was thinking deeply, as usual, and she hated it.

She began with logic, reviewing what she had in her possession and how long or successful that would make this . . . what should she call it, her flight? She had a little over two hundred dollars, her Spindrift door key and Spindrift ID card, two credit cards and her medical insurance card in her pink leather wallet, and the clothes she was wearing.

She drove the analysis back, screaming at herself inside, clamping down hard on her cerebrum, that part of the brain that she knew was responsible for higher-order functioning, thinking, perceiving, and planning. No thoughts, she told herself, no philosophy, and no statistics will be in my mind tonight. There was only one conclusion she'd permit, one thing she knew for sure: she hadn't wanted to return to that aseptic white room and address some problem in higher math or molecular theory tonight, maybe not ever.

No, she told herself, what she wanted was to . . . breathe. That was it. She wanted to feel the wind in her hair and for a while be no one or nowhere, a nonentity, a blank page on which she could write everything new. After he had taken off with her sitting behind him on his motorcycle, she felt as if she was clinging to something wild, a creature who rode the wind. Seconds into it, she felt more alive than she had in the past few months, maybe the entire past year.

But he should know what he was in for, too, she thought.

Page 22

Source Creation Date: June 26, 2025, 2:20 pm

When he stopped at a traffic light, she leaned forward to speak in his ear and not shout over the sound of the idling engine.

“I should tell you,” she said, “that I’m not quite eighteen.”

He turned sharply to look at her. “What does ‘not quite’ mean?”

“A month or so.”

He looked like he was worried, and then he smiled and shrugged.

“You’re worth the risk,” he said, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world, and accelerated.

She laughed and told herself this was good; this was what she wanted, an utter disrespect and lack of concern for rules and authority. They weren’t simply rebels without a cause; they were rebels without names, rebels without families, without countries, even without a planet.

Away from

the mall and the city lights of Piñon Pines, the sky seemed to open to reveal more stars in the moonless night than she had ever seen. She imagined they were flying toward them, thrust into space. They did look like they were getting brighter and larger with every passing moment.

Odd, she thought, how all this time, no one had mentioned how the evening sky

above Spindrift was so clear and the constellations so visible in what was known as the high desert. All the time she had been there, no one had suggested a walk in the evening or even simply sitting outside. The only time she experienced the evening was two nights ago, when she, Corliss, and finally Donna had decided to venture off the property, but their attention was focused on the escape and not appreciation of the universe.

In LA, it had been nearly impossible. Streetlights and billboards, spotlights and windows lit in tall buildings washed out the stars. Most of the time, people were looking at one another, at cars, or at television or smartphone screens anyway; they rarely cranked their heads back, maybe because there wasn't much to see, or maybe they, all of them, including her, were afraid to confront how small people were and how distant everything else was from them.

In the darker areas and on side roads, the air felt a lot cooler. She leaned forward to lay her head against him, tightening her grip around his waist. She saw herself as an Anggitay, a mythological creature with the upper body of a female human and a horse from the waist down, but instead of a horse, there was the motorcycle. Anggitays were said to be drawn to precious gemstones. She imagined that out there somewhere, a great diamond awaited her. She could see it reflecting the light of the stars in the darkness. Touch it, and become something magical yourself. She couldn't recall the last time she had permitted her imagination such freedom.

When she had tightened her grip around him, his body had tightened, but in a good way. She could feel his inner strength; she felt protected, safe. At one point, he brought his right hand back a little just to touch her leg. It was as if he wanted to convince himself she was really still there.

"Oh, I'm here," she whispered, not expecting he could hear her. "I'm really here."

He made a turn and began to slow down. Up ahead, she saw a motel. It wasn't very

impressive, a U-shaped structure with a cream stucco facing, the office in the center, and what looked like a dozen cars parked in front of rooms. It was truly an inexpensive stopover. There were no facilities, no pool, nothing to resemble anything that had as its purpose being more than a rest stop, a hiccup located just off one of the main highways connecting cities and states. Leo was probably its longest-term resident.

He pulled up in front of the next-to-last room on the right and shut off the engine.

“Home, sweet home,” he said.

She slipped off and watched him stabilize his motorcycle.

“There’s a small refrigerator and a microwave inside. I have a few things.”

She nodded and looked at the other rooms that had lit windows. One had a panel truck outside. She imagined this was mostly a stopover for salesmen.

“Know anyone?” she asked as he started for his door.

He paused and looked at the motel. “No. People who stop at places like this aren’t really interested in making friends. ‘Where are you from?’ and ‘Where are you headed?’ are typical greetings, but no one listens to anyone’s answer unless it turns out to be that they’re headed for the same destination. That might make for some small talk, but these people . . . they’re like ghosts to me, and I’m sure I am to them. We’re all shadows passing in the night.”

He turned and unlocked his room door.

She contemplated it and then looked back down the dark road they had followed to get here. Somewhere beyond it, Corliss and Donna might be realizing she was gone

and discussing what they should do about it. She felt sorry for them. The cost of friendship could be enough to bankrupt someone emotionally.

“Second thoughts?” he asked when she didn’t immediately follow him.

“Eighth or ninth would be closer to the truth.”

He waited. She started into the room, and he stepped back, turned on the light, and closed the door behind them. She laughed when she looked around.

“What’s funny?”

“Despite what this place is,” she said, “your room has more character than mine, and I’m in a multimillion-dollar institution.”

“Luxury beyond expectations,” he said.

Source Creation Date: June 26, 2025, 2:20 pm

The walls were a faded yellow, the flow interrupted by inexpensive, derivative prints of desert scenes. The queen-size bed had a black-laminated particle headboard. The bed was unmade, the gray blanket curled back on the right, and only one pillow had been used. There was a matching dresser with a mirror framed in the same material as the headboard, a small table with a phone, and a twenty-inch television on a stand. Beside that was the small refrigerator he had mentioned, and on a table next to it was the microwave. Directly across from her was the door to the bathroom, and she saw the shower curtain on the tub was pulled back. What looked like two saddle bags were on the floor near the telephone table.

“Your room can’t be worse than this,” he said. “You can hear the roaches crawling in the walls. I’ve actually stayed in some pretty nice ones for about the same cost in the Midwest.”

He opened the small refrigerator and held up a bottle of beer.

“No, thanks,” she said. She was suddenly drawn to the mirror above the sink in the bathroom. “Be right out.” She went in, closing the door behind her.

She stood there gazing at herself. It was always easier to talk to yourself when you looked in a mirror. Sometimes she imagined that it wasn’t a mirror. It was a window, and she was speaking to someone completely different, a stranger, in fact. It was always a more comfortable way to question her actions and her thoughts and analyze her plans.

What are you doing? she asked herself. Where are you going? You really don’t know anything about him. He could be a descendant of Jack the Ripper.

She waited, as if she really believed the image in the mirror would come up with a totally independent response.

Instead, it asked her a question. Weren't you asking yourself that question the day before, and the day before that, and the day before that day? Where am I going?

What do you want? she asked.

I want what you want, it replied.

She heard Leo knock. Did he hear her talking to herself? Maybe he thinks I'm the descendant of Jack the Ripper, she thought. Statistically, women make up an average of eleven to twelve percent of serial killers in the U.S.

"You all right?" he asked. "I can take you back, Mayfair, if you regret doing this."

She thought a moment and then turned around and opened the door, facing him.

"Trying to get rid of me already?" she asked. "I thought you were going to be my knight in shining leather and kill all the dragons threatening me."

He smiled, stepped back, and performed an elaborate stage bow. "At your complete disposal, madam," he said.

She stepped out. This was it, she thought. She looked at the bed and then, without any further hesitation, began to undress. She didn't look at him while she did. When she was completely naked, she slipped under the blanket and put her hands behind her head and finally looked at him.

He stood there, smiling but obviously overwhelmed. "What did I do to be this lucky?" he asked.

“Maybe it’s pure serendipity,” she replied.

How shocked Corliss and Donna would be at this moment, she thought. How shocked am I?

He hurried to join her. When he was beside her, he leaned on his left elbow and looked down at her. “I don’t want to rush this,” he said. “Not a second of it. I want to convince myself I’m not dreaming.”

“That’s fine, but let’s be sure to be safe,” she said.

When he had turned back to her, he hesitated again. She saw the caution in his eyes.

“What?” she asked.

“Who are you? What is that

place, Spindrift? You’re not from outer space or anything like that, right? This isn’t Invasion of the Body Snatchers or something, is it?”

She laughed. “Maybe. We’re working on trying to find out. There are fifteen of us right now. We’re all what they call gifted; actually, each of us is one in three million.”

“Why?”

“Our IQs are off the charts. We’ve already done what most people take ten years of schooling to accomplish, some of us having done it before we were twelve. Scared now?”

“No.”

“How come?”

Source Creation Date: June 26, 2025, 2:20 pm

“I don’t see some big-brainy girl beside me. I see a clever, creative, and beautiful girl. Maybe I’ll say something stupid every other sentence, maybe she’ll know so much more than me about everything there is, but I don’t think I’ll care. I lost my ego somewhere outside Kansas.”

“What if I can’t stop thinking, even when you kiss me? For example, there is clinical evidence that a kiss has health benefits. It triggers a whole spectrum of physiological processes that boost your immunity. What if I couldn’t stop rattling off information and ruin everything romantic between us?”

He smiled with an air of self-confidence that took her breath away. “Oh, I think I can make you stop doing that,” he said, and he kissed her.

Before Alan Taylor had made love to her, she had drunk more than she should have. It had made her even more vulnerable. She was sure that before she and Leo would stop, she would think deeply despite what she had promised herself, but she would be thinking that Shakespeare was right when he had the porter in Macbeth describe the effect of alcohol on lovemaking: “It provokes the desire, but it takes away the performance.”

That wouldn’t happen here. They were drunk only on each other. His first kiss was soft but determined. He held his lips millimeters from hers right afterward, drawing her in, giving her the taste that would drive her to be the aggressor, forcing her to make an even greater commitment. She pressed her lips harder to his. He moved his hands under the blanket, caressing her shoulder with his left hand, gently lifting her breast with his right, exploring her nipple with his thumb as he pressed his lips to hers and brought himself over her, leaning to kiss her breasts. There was no rushing, no

sense of the forbidden that would cause either of them to hurry before it was too late. That had been her only experience; it wouldn't be now.

Every time some fact about the process tried to invade her thoughts, she pressed it down. He had no idea how hard she was battling herself. If he sensed it, he would get it wrong. He would think she was struggling with her conscience, but morality never had entered the room. All her doubts came from different places, and none of them was strong enough to weaken her desire. It came in little explosions inside her. The excitement she had sought was rushing over her in waves. She wanted to drown in it.

When he finally entered her, her first thoughts weren't about what was going to happen physiologically. Her first thought was, as strange as it might seem, I am becoming a woman, not a teenage girl who has been violated, not a gifted student who knows twenty times as much about her sex as a woman three times her age, just a woman being touched so deeply inside herself in places no textbook describes.

Her pleasure wasn't as great as her satisfaction. She realized she really was quite different from the other girls at Spindrift, even Corliss and Donna, both of whom she believed had the wherewithal to reach this place. She was simply there first, and she wouldn't retreat. There were so few times in her life before this when she hoped something would never end.

Afterward, she and Leo lay back and stared up at their own thoughts floating above them.

"Okay," he said finally, "now I am worried."

"About what?"

"You, lying there, reviewing everything in ways beyond me. I'm afraid of the conclusions, especially if you're measuring me by some scientific ruler."

“I’m not reviewing or measuring anything. I’m soaking in the afterward, just the way any woman should. I don’t want the feeling to end too soon. I like the feeling of floating in the afterward.”

“That’s really nice. I could easily get addicted to you,” he said.

She laughed. “Careful. The rehab for that could be long and painful.”

He leaned over and looked down at her. “What should we do? I mean, in the afterward?”

For once, she did not want to be the one with all the answers.

“You told me when you get to point A, you simply go to point B. Maybe we’re at point A.”

“You sure of that?”

“No, but you know what?”

“What?”

“I suddenly like being unsure. It’s something I rarely, if ever, felt. It’s like . . .”

“Like what?”

“Being reborn.”

He laughed. “I knew I had powers . . .”

He lay back, and they were quiet for a while. Someone’s headlights washed across

the window and the opposite wall. Darkness quickly closed in again. They heard a car door close and some mumbling voices. Another unit was entered two or three doors from where they were, and it was very quiet again.

“Seriously, do I take you back now?” he asked.

“I’m not sure,” she said.

“And you like that, the uncertainty?”

“Do you want to take me back? Is that why you’re asking?”

Source Creation Date: June 26, 2025, 2:20 pm

“No. And I have no trouble being sure about it,” he added.

She smiled and then laughed.

“What?”

“You’re traveling, running around looking for yourself, and the truth is that you’ve already found yourself. You know who you are. You’re just not sure what shoes to wear yet.”

“I knew it. I knew you’d make me feel dumb,” he said.

She turned to him. This time, she was the one looking down. “But you don’t care,” she said, and played with his hair.

“No. I don’t care.”

“That’s why I could be addicted to you, too.”

He raised his head so they could kiss. Outside, the stars were blazing even more. She imagined it was because of them, their fire. She turned and lay back so she could welcome what he had brought to her before and would bring to her again.

They exhausted each other with their passion. She fell asleep with her arm over his back, her face snuggled in the pillow, inches from his. Maybe he was afraid to move, afraid to wake her, but when she did open her eyes to the sunlight that threaded through the open blinds, he was exactly where he had been, his eyes closed. Gently,

she lifted her arm from his back and turned. She had anticipated feeling guilty and afraid now, but she only felt hungry, or at least, that was all she would acknowledge.

When she sat up, he still didn't wake. She went to the bathroom, carrying her clothes in with her, showered, and dressed. She used his hairbrush on her hair, and then, when she opened the door, she saw he had awakened and was lying on his back, his hands behind his head, waiting.

"You want me to take you back to the mall or back to Spindrift?" he asked.

"I was thinking of some breakfast. Is there somewhere close by? I'll treat."

"Sure," he said, smiling. "I'll just shower and dress, too."

"I'll be outside. I want to take a little walk."

"If you're going to disappear, let me know now," he said.

"I disappeared a long time ago," she said, and walked out.

The motel was very quiet. No one else was outside his or her room. There were fewer cars. It was too early for new people to arrive. This was a place you came to when you realized it was getting late or you were getting tired. For reasons she didn't understand, that pleased her.

She walked to the road and stood looking first to her right and then to her left. To the right was going back, retreat; to the left was . . . the unknown. From this place, there was nothing different about either direction. Both sides of the road were bordered by undeveloped land, woods, and bushes. Her legs were tight from her nervousness. Her body was making her rational, thoughtful.

You don't understand, she told herself. The others still have families. Both Donna and Corliss worry about what their parents will think of them. My father left my teddy bear with me the day he brought me to Spindrift. It was really the only thing left that would remind me I was a child once, with parents and a home. Now it's the only reason I can think of to return to Spindrift, to get my teddy bear.

But maybe it's good that I leave it behind. Soon my father, or the father I once knew, will be there, and they might hand him the teddy bear with my other things. He will look at it and see me as a child, or maybe, maybe, he never saw me as a child, not the way my mother could, and she is gone.

If I return to Spindrift, no one will see me, perhaps ever.

She waited to hear disagreement, the way it came whenever she debated something inside herself, but it didn't come. The silence, in fact, was loud, overwhelming.

Yes, she thought, and she started down the road to her left. She walked with her head down, her arms folded under her breasts. No one could see. A car went by occasionally, but neither the driver nor the passengers could see she was smiling.

She didn't look up until Leo pulled up beside her on his motorcycle.

"Hey," he said. "Where are you going? You walked quite a ways."

"Isn't breakfast waiting up ahead?"

He smiled. "Yeah. It is. Then what?"

She stared at the road in front of them for a moment. "That's point B, isn't it?"

"I guess it is."

Source Creation Date: June 26, 2025, 2:20 pm

“Then we just go to point C.”

“Hop on,” he said. “The rest of the alphabet is waiting for us.”

She laughed, wrapped her arms around him, laid her head against his back, and whispered good-bye.

It was captured in the wind that washed over them and drifted off to find someone to hear it somewhere.

For now, it really didn't matter who that was.