

The day before: Hannah: The Plus-One

The day before, I had dismissed my lingering anxiety as nothing more than exhaustion, but now, as I sit there, a creeping unease takes hold, my pulse quickening as my eyes lock onto the shadowy figure outside. The flickering candlelight distorts its form, casting it in an eerie glow, and for a moment, it feels as though the figure is staring directly at me. My breath catches in my throat, and the fine hairs on my arms rise instinctively, as if my body recognizes a threat before my mind can fully comprehend it. This must be my imagination—perhaps a trick of the dim light—but the intensity of the moment grips me with a fear I cannot shake. I let out an involuntary gasp, causing Charlie to turn toward me, his expression one of mild curiosity rather than concern. He follows my gaze to the window, but by the time he looks, the figure has vanished, leaving only the shifting shadows cast by the wind against the glass.

“What is it?” Charlie asks, his voice tinged with impatience, as if he assumes I am overreacting.

“There was someone... outside,” I whisper, barely able to form the words as I continue scanning the darkness.

Charlie peers through the glass, but there is nothing now—only the distorted reflection of the room’s golden light against the pitch-black night. Others notice our exchange and follow his lead, glancing toward the window with fleeting curiosity before returning to their conversations. No one sees what I saw, and the realization leaves me feeling ridiculous, as though my fear is nothing more than a foolish misinterpretation of shadows and candlelight. Yet, despite my best efforts to dismiss it, the dread clings to me, an unsettling weight that settles deep in my chest, making it impossible to relax.

The evening, despite its carefully curated charm, feels increasingly artificial, as though beneath its polished surface lies something darker, something waiting to unravel. My

attempts to fit into this world, to move seamlessly among these people, feel forced, each interaction highlighting just how out of place I am. The brief conversation with Will, filled with awkward pauses and veiled indifference, reminds me of how invisible I have become in the eyes of men since becoming a mother. It is a strange realization, this slow fading from view, as if my existence has been quietly edited out of the narrative unfolding around me. The laughter that fills the space, the playful ribbing among old friends, the easy familiarity between those who have known each other for years—all of it feels like an elaborate stage play in which I have been cast in the wrong role. Charlie, who once saw me as his equal, now barely acknowledges my presence, his attention drawn elsewhere, his laughter too loud, too eager to belong.

The social fabric of this gathering is tightly woven, an intricate web of implicit rules and unspoken hierarchies that I have yet to decipher. I am an outsider, fumbling my way through a world where each step I take feels either like an effort toward belonging or a deeper plunge into isolation. The ominous presence at the window—real or imagined—feels like an extension of this unease, a physical manifestation of my growing sense of vulnerability. The thought that I could have imagined it should bring comfort, but instead, it unsettles me further. If my mind is playing tricks on me, what else have I been misinterpreting? The celebration around me, the lighthearted banter, the flowing champagne—are they merely distractions, illusions meant to disguise something far less benign?

The thought lingers, gnawing at the edges of my consciousness, turning the warmth of the marquee into something suffocating. This place, this event, feels less like a gathering of friends and more like a beautifully adorned cage, one where expectations and appearances hold more weight than sincerity. The laughter is too forced, the camaraderie too rehearsed, as if everyone is playing their part in a script written long before I arrived. And at the heart of it all, I find myself questioning not only my place among them but the very nature of the relationships that have bound this group together. Are we truly here to celebrate, or is there something else beneath the surface, something we are all pretending not to see?

The chapter unfolds as an exploration of social anxiety, of the unspoken rules that define belonging, and of the subtle but profound ways in which perception can distort reality. Through the protagonist's eyes, we witness the struggle to navigate a world where appearances are everything and the fear of being an outsider is as tangible as the shifting shadows outside the window. The evening may be one of celebration, but the undercurrent of unease lingers, leaving us to wonder whether the real threat lies beyond the glass—or within the carefully guarded dynamics of the people inside.

