

exclusive excerpt

"[A] binge-worthy thriller
that made me scared of
my phone for days."

—David Yoon,
New York Times
bestselling author of
Version Zero

No one escapes
real life.

incarnate

a novel

alma katsu

Bram Stoker Award-winning author of *Fiend*

PUTNAM

prologue

Dorothy Wagner sat in the waiting area outside the doctor's office. Her heart banged hard against her ribs but she didn't dare show how afraid she was, even though it was perfectly normal under the circumstances.

Sounds drifted in from elsewhere in the facility—shouts, manic bursts of laughter, angry raised voices—but it was quiet in the waiting room. They were trying for tranquil, was her guess. A wall of windows looked out on a sweep of lawn and a leafy grove of beautifully maintained trees. The words her parents had used to describe the place: *campus, grounds, treatment center*. Not *looney bin, prison, psych ward*. She'd learned the proper terminology fast even though she hadn't been there twenty-four hours. Dorothy's parents had assured her when they'd dropped her off in the family minivan that she'd only be there a day or two. A week at most.

Two voices could be heard from behind the door to the doctor's office. One had to be Dr. Gruber's; it was his office, according to the plate on the wall. The second—probably belonging to a fellow inmate—oops! *Patient*—was much softer, too quiet to make out what was being said, but it was just as well. Dorothy didn't want to meet any of them, and she didn't want to hear about their problems. She had enough trouble dealing with her own.

The door opened, and there stood the doctor. He was unimpressive, an off-season mall Santa Claus in a beige cardigan stretched hopelessly out of shape, chinos, and bifocals that slid down his nose.

His flabby face was covered with several days' growth of hair. He did not inspire confidence in either himself or the clinic.

He extended a big meaty hand. "Hello, I'm Dr. Gruber. You must be Dorothy."

She followed the doctor into his office and sat on the couch gingerly, as though it might be booby-trapped. His office offered no distraction at all. It was utilitarian, sparsely furnished with what looked like institutional retreads from a vast storage facility somewhere piled with old desks and filing cabinets. Which only confirmed Dorothy's suspicion that this was a state hospital. Of course it would be; her parents couldn't afford a private place. Dorothy looked for the patient she'd heard speaking, expecting to see someone cowering in the corner, anxious to scoot by on her or his way to freedom.

But there was no one else in the room.

Gruber sat and opened his notebook. He licked a finger and made a show of flicking through the pages. "Good morning, Dorothy. Do you know why you're here?"

Of course she did. She wasn't an idiot. "The incident."

"That's right." He clicked the button on the end of his pen with more force than was needed. "The parties involved, well, um . . . thought it would be best if you came in for an evaluation."

The parties involved: her parents, the school, the police. Amber's, Megan's, and Hailey's parents. No one had asked her because Dorothy was only twelve, used to being subjected to the decisions of adults.

"So, why don't you tell me what happened? In your own words?"

In your own words—sounded like something you heard on a courtroom drama. The whole thing was mortifying. She'd told her story so many times now—to her parents, to her teacher and the principal, to the police—that she couldn't believe she was being forced to repeat it again. Even after telling her story, it hadn't done any good, had it?

"They were bullying me." She picked up one of the two throw

pillows on the doctor's couch and hugged it tight to her chest like a shield.

"The three girls? Megan, Amber, and Hailey?"

Dorothy nodded.

"And . . . could you be more specific? *How* did they bully you, Dorothy?"

Every way possible, it seemed. With their eyes, which followed her everywhere in school, until she met their gaze, and then they'd look away coldly. They tormented her with their knowing smirks and the way they'd turn on their heels to avoid crossing paths with her. They bullied her with their cutting laughs and the things they whispered to each other after she spoke in class, always quiet enough that no one else noticed.

When Dorothy didn't answer, the doctor tried again. "Did they send threatening texts, Dorothy? That sort of thing?"

"Yes. But it started with texts to the rest of the class. They made fun of me." The whole thing had come to light after one kid from school, the only one she might consider a friend, reluctantly told her what was going on. Dorothy wasn't part of the group chat and didn't know what they were saying about her.

"What did these messages say? Do you know?"

She squirmed. What was the point of making her talk about this *again*? Obviously, someone had told him everything already. Her parents, the police. He was a sadist, making her relive it.

"They made fun of me. Said I was ugly, fat." She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I wasn't the only one. They made fun of other girls at school, too. I was just the latest."

Again, the sympathetic murmuring. "But they took things further with you, didn't they?"

She dropped her head, chin to chest. Burning with shame.

"Why do you think that was?"

They did it because they were right. Because I'm not popular. I'm not pretty. I don't get a hundred likes every time I post a selfie like they do. Because my family doesn't have a big house with an in-ground pool and I

don't go on awesome vacations that I can post about on Instagram. Because no one invites me to dance on their vids. Because this is who I am and there's nothing I can do to make them stop.

Because being unpopular is the worst thing you can be.

Apparently she had done something to make them hate her.

Besides just exist.

When she didn't speak, Gruber shifted in his seat, leaning toward Dorothy. "I've been told, Dorothy, that you're a really bright girl. Gifted, even."

Nice try, but Dorothy had learned not to trust flattery. People only said nice things so they could take them back later, to knock your legs out from under you. They didn't mean it.

"That makes you different, and at your age, it's really hard to be different. There's—jealousy. Your peers can be . . . merciless. The pressure to conform, to fit in, it's intense. Anyone who sticks out can become a target. It's not right, we all know it's not, but that's the way it is."

She forced herself not to roll her eyes. She'd heard this all before, and it was of no help.

He continued, ignoring Dorothy's disdain. "Teasing can be part of growing up. It's part of being in a tribe, understanding our place in the world. But it's gotten a lot worse in the past twenty years or so, with social media. I know"—he rushed to continue, before she could turn away from him in disgust—"that sounds weak, but it's true. You grew up with social media, so you don't know what it was like before. But there have been a lot of studies on how mental health has worsened, particularly for your demographic. It's given bullies a new tool they can use, another means to torment others. Put a new twist on an age-old problem."

That's where this was going. He was going to tell her to stay off social media, like her mom had said. That was adults' answer to everything: Social media is evil. They didn't get it, though. They might as well tell Dorothy to stop breathing air.

She hadn't attacked these girls, so why was *she* the one being

punished? Were they having their phones taken away from *them*? That was the real question in her mind: Why was she in this facility, being evaluated by this doctor like a bug under a microscope, when she wasn't the one who'd done the bullying? Amber, Megan, and Hailey were the ones who should be locked up. They were the sick ones. The ones who'd done something wrong. Megan and Amber and Hailey were all being "spoken to," Dorothy (and more important, Dorothy's parents) had been assured by school authorities, but in practice they were still free to torment and harass anyone they wanted. The school was powerless against them.

Because in the eyes of everyone who mattered, those three girls were *anointed*. Blond and pretty and popular, they could do no wrong—and when they did, it was never their fault. *Yes, Dorothy, tell us what you did to make these girls hate you.* As though those girls had the right to torture whomever they pleased. They were liked and Dorothy was not and there was nothing Dorothy could do about it.

It was that simple.

Gruber was scrambling through his notes, the rustling of pages sounding like an animal burrowing in the walls. He stopped flipping the pages and looked up at her. "I see here that you're a talented artist."

She had a feeling it would come back to this. The picture she'd drawn of Amber. It had been a little challenge she'd set for herself, that was all. An exercise. Her art teacher had loved it—*so realistic, so lifelike*—and insisted they put it in the art fair, hang it in the hallway at school, though Dorothy had begged her not to. She hadn't meant anything by it and she certainly hadn't meant for it to seem creepy, as Amber claimed. Amber should've been flattered, the art teacher, a clueless woman a year or two away from retirement, had said, bewildered by the drama that had followed, but Amber had said it was proof that Dorothy was obsessed with her. *She must've followed me everywhere . . . spied on me . . .*

I feel violated.

"I just drew her picture," Dorothy said miserably. "That's it. Kids draw pictures of their friends all the time."

But Amber was not her friend.

The doctor licked his lips, thinking . . . but electing not to ask the questions she knew were churning in his head. The questions that everyone had but no one had asked—yet.

Instead, he shifted again in his chair. "So . . . I need you to help me understand, Dorothy, how things got to the point they did. So, after the drawing, these girls started texting you, saying you should . . . kill yourself."

Hearing her shame said aloud, the words coming out of a stranger's mouth, was like having boiling oil poured over her head. How she wished she could melt into the ground and disappear. "Yeah," she croaked.

"But when the police searched your phone, they didn't find these texts, did they?"

She'd deleted them, she told them. The texts made her feel bad. She wanted them gone. He had to have that in his notes. She wasn't going to say it again. She wasn't going to go round and round this same argument every time. She wanted it over. She wanted it behind her.

The doctor was studying her, so Dorothy tried to squash every possible tell, every twitch, every blink.

"You weren't saying that for attention, were you?"

Dorothy squeezed her eyes shut.

I must become invisible.

"And so that's when you—"

She cut him off. "I just wanted those girls to stop picking on me. I wanted them to leave me alone."

"We understand that, of course. That was definitely wrong of them. And we're lucky that you're smart enough to know that suicide is not the answer."

Of course she knew. She was smart enough to see three or four steps ahead of most people, as smart as the adults said she was. She got what the teachers were saying before anyone else in her class. She got great grades. Her intelligence didn't get her respect, though. It didn't get her friends. It made her a freak, an outsider.

And every once in a while, her brains led her down the wrong path. They lied to her.

Still . . . she was smart enough to protect herself. To make everyone else go down the wrong path, too.

"Are they going to be punished? For what they did?" she asked.

Gruber cleared his throat a second time. "Well, the authorities are looking into your statements . . . and what the girls have told them, of course, their side of the story, and it's still not clear, is it? Who did what to whom? It looks like there's plenty of blame on both sides."

She gritted her teeth. Of course, there was no evidence. The girls claimed to have deleted Dorothy's posts. Those girls were the popular ones, so they got kids at school to support their side of the story.

And as to their claims? They could put anything they wanted on their phones. Make up stuff, bad stuff, incriminating stuff, and pretend Dorothy had sent it to them.

It was her word against theirs, and Dot knew how the police and the school authorities would react. *Kids will be kids. Especially girls. Girls can be the meanest. What are you going to do?*

The doctor continued to stare at her, turning something over in his mind. His iris twitched nervously, did he know that? That had to be a sign of some kind of illness, heart trouble or maybe neurological. Someone should tell him, she thought.

Then he came to life, brushing away the sweat on his upper lip before flipping his notebook shut and gathering his things. "All right, Dorothy, I think we're done here. I think I've heard enough for my report."

She sat up straighter. He was cutting things short. Like she thought he might.

“Your parents have agreed for you to change schools. St. Ignatius.” That was a private school. Dorothy didn’t think this was something her parents could afford. “They think you’ll like it better. Class sizes are smaller. Phones aren’t allowed in the classrooms.” Gruber stood. “Look, Dorothy, the best thing is to put this awful experience behind you, okay? You’ll go to a new school and get a fresh start. I think everyone would be happy if you just agree never to try something like this again. Okay?”

She smothered a smile. It had gone as planned, though maybe Gruber was caving a little quicker than expected. But she had predicted that the adults would be cowards. She was being released from this facility as though nothing had happened; oh, there’d be follow-up visits with Gruber or someone like him. There’d be no avoiding that after what she’d tried to do.

Then it came to her, why Gruber was letting her go.

It wasn’t because of her brilliant plan or its masterful execution.

It was only because of Jurgen.

No one wanted to heap more grief on poor Teresa Wagner, Dorothy’s mother, a woman who’d suffered so much already. As for the poor little girl who’d lost a sibling . . . that had to figure somewhere in this, to have had an effect on a growing child’s psyche. At least, that’s what the police and school authorities and even this doctor were happy to believe.

Jurgen. Somehow, she’d forgotten all about him.

She could’ve kicked herself. What a waste of all her efforts.