

*In My Dreams
I Hold a Knife*

a novel

ASHLEY WINSTEAD



For Don and Linda Tannenbaum, whose kindness changed my life.

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Published by Sourcebooks Landmark, an imprint of Sourcebooks
P.O. Box 4410, Naperville, Illinois 60567-4410
(630) 961-3900
sourcebooks.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is on file with the publisher.

Printed and bound in [Country of Origin—confirm when printer is selected].
XX 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

CONTENT WARNING: CONTAINS
PHYSICAL AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE

CHAPTER 1

NOW

Your body has a knowing. Like an antenna, attuned to tremors in the air, or a dowsing rod, tracing things so deeply buried you have no language for them yet. The Saturday it arrived, I woke taut as a guitar string. All day I felt a hum of something straightening my spine, something I didn't recognize as anticipation until the moment my key slid into the mailbox, turned the lock, and there it was. With all the pomp and circumstance you could count on Duquette University to deliver: a thick, creamy envelope, stamped with the blood-red emblem of Blackwell Tower in wax along the seam. The moment I pulled it out, my hands began to tremble. I'd waited for a long time, and it was finally here.

As if in a dream, I crossed the marble floor of my building and entered the elevator, faintly aware of other people, stops on other floors, until finally we reached eighteen. Inside my apartment, I locked the door, kicked my shoes to the corner, and tossed my keys on the counter. Against my rules, I dropped onto my ivory couch in workout clothes, my spandex tights still damp with sweat.

I slid my finger under the flap and tugged, slitting the envelope open, ignoring the small bite of the paper against my skin. The heavy invitation sprang into my lap, the words bold and raised. *You are formally invited to Duquette University Homecoming, October 5–7.* A sketch of Blackwell Tower in red ink, so tall the top of the spire nearly broke into the words. *We look forward to welcoming you back for reunion weekend, a beloved Duquette tradition. Enclosed please find your invitation to the Class of 2009 ten-year reunion party. Come relive your Duquette days and celebrate your many successes—and those of your classmates—since leaving Crimson Campus.*

A small red invitation slid out of the envelope when I shook it. I laid it next to the larger one in a perfect line on the coffee table, smoothing my hands over the embossed letters, tapping the sharp right angles of each corner. My breath hitched, lungs working like I was back on the stationary bike. *Duquette Homecoming.* I couldn't pinpoint when it had become an obsession—gradually, perhaps, as my plan grew, solidified into a richly detailed vision.

I looked at the banner hanging over my dining table, spelling out C-O-N-G-R-A-T-U-L-A-T-I-O-N-S-! I'd left it there since my party two weeks ago, celebrating my promotion—the youngest woman ever named partner at consulting giant Coldwell & Company New York. There'd even been a short write-up about it in the *Daily News*, taking a feminist angle about young female corporate climbers. I had the piece hanging on my fridge—removed when friends came over—and six more copies stuffed into my desk drawer. The seventh I'd mailed to my mother in Virginia.

That victory, perfectly timed ahead of this. I sprang from the couch to the bathroom, leaving the curtains open to look over the city, despite the lack of privacy. I was an Upper East Side girl now; I had been an East House girl in college. I liked the continuity of it, how my life was still connected to who I'd been back then. *Come relive your Duquette days,*

the invitation said. Standing in front of the bathroom mirror, the words acted like a spell. I closed my eyes and remembered.

Walking across campus, under soaring Gothic towers, the dramatic architecture softened by magnolia trees, their thick curved branches, waxy leaves, and white blooms so dizzyingly perfumed they could pull you in, close enough to touch, before you blinked and realized you'd wandered off the sidewalk. College: a freedom so profound the joy of it didn't wear off the entire four years.

The brick walls of East House, still the picture in my head when I thought of home, though I'd lived there only a single year. And the Phi Delt house at midnight, music thundering behind closed doors, strobe lights flashing through the windows, students dressed for one of the theme parties Mint was always dreaming up. The spark in my stomach every time I walked up the stone steps, eyes rimmed in black liner, arm laced through Caro's. The whole of it intoxicating, even before the red cups came out.

Four years of living life like it was some kind of fauvist painting, days soaked in vivid colors, emotions thick as gesso. Like it was some kind of play, the highs dramatic cliff tops, the lows dark valleys. Our ensemble was cast as stars, or at the very least infamous, ever since the fall of freshman year, when we'd won our notoriety and our nickname. The East House Seven. Mint, Caro, Frankie, Coop, Heather, Jack, and me.

The people responsible for the best days of my life, and the worst.

But even at our worst, no one could have predicted what happened. That one of us would never make it out of college. Another, accused of murdering her. The rest of us, spun adrift. East House Seven no longer an honor, but an accusation, splashed across headlines.

I opened my eyes to the bathroom mirror. For a second, eighteen-year-old Jessica Miller looked back at me, virgin hair undyed and in need of the kind of haircut that didn't exist in Norfolk, Virginia. Bony-elbowed with the skinniness of a teenager, wearing one of those pleated skirts, painted nails. Desperate to be seen.

A flash, and then she was gone. In her place stood thirty-two-year-old Jessica, red-faced and sweaty, yes, but polished in every way a New York consultant's salary could manage: blonder, whiter-teethed, smoother-skinned, leaner and more muscled.

I studied myself the way I'd done my whole life, searching for what others saw when they looked at me.

I wanted them to see perfection. I ached for it in the deep, dark core of me: to be so good I left other people in the dust. It wasn't an endearing thing to admit, so I'd never told anyone, save a therapist, once. She'd asked if I thought it was possible to be perfect, and I'd amended that I didn't need to be perfect, *per se*, as long as I was the best.

An even less endearing confession: sometimes—rarely, but *sometimes*—I felt I truly was perfect, or at least close.

Sometimes I stood in front of the bathroom mirror, like now, slowly brushing my hair, examining the straight line of my nose, the pronounced curves of my cheekbones, thinking: *You are beautiful, Jessica Miller*. Sometimes, when I thought of myself like a spreadsheet, all my assets tallied up, I was filled with pride at how *objectively good* I'd become. At thirty-two, career on the rise, summa cum laude degree from Duquette, Kappa sorority alum, salutatorian of Lake Granville High. An enviable list of past boyfriends, my own apartment in the most prestigious city in the world, a full closet and a fuller passport, high SAT scores. Any way you sliced it, I was *good, good, good*. Top percentile of human beings, you could say, in terms of success.

But no matter how good it sounded, how much I tried to cling to the shining jewels of my accomplishments, it never took long before my shadow list surfaced. Everything I'd ever failed at, every second place, every loss, every rejection, *mounting, mounting, mounting*. Until the suspicion became unbearable, and the hairbrush clattered to the sink. In the mirror, a new vision. The blond hair and white teeth and expensive cycling tights, all pathetic attempts to cover the

truth: that I, Jessica Miller, was utterly mediocre, and had been my entire life.

No matter how I tried to deny it, the shadow list would whisper: *You only became a consultant out of desperation, when the path you wanted was ripped away. Kappa, salutatorian? Always second-best. Your SAT scores, not as high as you were hoping*. It said I was as ordinary and unoriginal as my name promised: *Jessica*, the most common girl's name the year I was born; *Miller*, one of the most common surnames in America for the last hundred years. The whole world awash in Jessica Millers. A dime a dozen.

I still couldn't tell which story was right—Exceptional Jessica, or Mediocre Jessica. My life was a narrative I couldn't parse, full of conflicting evidence.

I picked the brush out of the sink and placed it carefully on the bathroom counter, then thought better, picking it up and ripping a nest of blond hair from the bristles. I balled the hair in my fingers, feeling the strands tear.

This was why Homecoming was so important. No part of my life looked like I'd imagined it would during college. Every dream, every plan had been crushed. But still, in the ten years since I'd graduated, I'd worked tirelessly to be beautiful, successful, fascinating. To make undeniable the version of myself I'd always wanted people to see. Had it worked? If I could go back to Duquette and reveal myself to the people whose opinions mattered most, I would read the truth in their eyes. And then I'd know, once and for all, who I really was.

I would go to Homecoming, and walk the familiar halls, talk to the familiar people, insert New Jessica into Old Jessica's story, and see how it all measured up. See how New Jessica changed things. Then I'd know if all the things I'd done were worth it.

I closed my eyes and called up the vision, by now so familiar it was like I'd already lived it. Walking into the Class of 2009 party, everyone

gathered in cocktail finery. All eyes turning to me, conversations halting, music cutting out, champagne flutes lowering to get a better look. Parting the sea of former students, hearing them whisper, *Is that Jessica Miller? She looks incredible. Now that I think about it, I guess she always was the most beautiful girl in school, and Did you know she's the youngest-ever female partner at Coldwell New York? I heard she's being featured in Forbes. I guess she always was a genius. Wonder why I never paid more attention.*

And finally, arriving at my destination: where I always gravitated, no matter the miles or the years. The people who pulled me into their orbit. Mint, Caro, Frankie, Coop. Except this time, no Heather or Jack. This time, Courtney would be there, since she'd reinserted herself so unavoidably. But it would be okay, because this time, I would be the star. Caro would gasp when she saw me, and Frankie would say that even though he ran with models, I was still the prettiest girl he'd ever seen, and Courtney would turn green with envy, too embarrassed by how successful I was, how much money I made, to talk about her ridiculous career as a fitness influencer. Mint would drop Courtney's hand like it was on fire, unable to take his eyes off me, and Coop...Coop...

That's where I lost the thread every time.

It was a ridiculous vision. I knew that, but it didn't stop me from wanting it. And thirty-two-year-old Jessica Miller lived by a lesson college Jessica had only started to learn: If you wanted something bad enough, you did anything to get it. Yes, I'd go back and relive my Duquette days, like the invitation said, but this time, I'd do it better. I would be Exceptional Jessica. *Perfect* Jessica. I'd show them they'd been wrong not to see it before, when they'd had the chance. Homecoming would be my triumph.

I released the ball of hair into the trash. Even tangled, the highlights were pretty against the Q-tips and wads of white tissue paper.

But in a flash, a vision of torn blond hair, sticky and red, matted

against white sheets. I shook my head, pushing away the glitch, quickly, quickly.

I would show them all. And then I would finally rid myself of that dark suspicion, that insidious whisper—the one that said I'd done it all wrong, made the worst possible mistakes, ever since the day East House first loomed into view through my parents' cracked windshield. And maybe long before then.

At long last, I was going back.

CHAPTER 2

NOW

The night before I left for Homecoming, I met Jack for a drink. In the weeks since the invite arrived, my excitement had been tempered with guilt, knowing Jack had gotten one, too, but couldn't go back, not in a million years. Traveling across the city to his favorite bar—a quiet, unpretentious dive—was small penance for all the things I'd never be able to atone for. Chief among them, the fact that my whole life hadn't come crashing down around me when I was twenty-two, like his.

I slid into the booth across from him. He tipped his whiskey and smiled. "Hello, friend. I take it you're Duquette-bound?"

We never talked about college. I took a deep breath and folded my hands on the table. "I fly out tomorrow."

"You know..." Jack smiled down at his glass. "I really miss that place. All the gargoyles, and the stained glass, and the flying buttresses." He lifted his eyes back to me. "So pretentious, especially for North Carolina, but so beautiful, you know?"

I nodded, studying him. Out of all of us, Jack wasn't the most

changed—that was probably Frankie, maybe Mint—but he'd certainly aged more than ten years warranted. He wore his hair long, tucked behind his ears, and he'd covered his baby face with a beard, like a mask. There were premature wrinkles in the corners of his eyes. He was still handsome, but not in the way of the past, that clean-cut handsomeness you'd expect out of a youth-group leader, the boy in the neighborhood you wouldn't think twice about letting babysit.

"I wonder how campus has changed." Jack wore a dreamy smile. "You think the old Frothy Monkey coffee shop is still there?"

"I don't know." The affection in his voice slayed me. My gaze dropped to my hands.

"Hey." Jack's tone changed, and I looked up, catching his eyes. Brown, long-lashed, and as earnest as always. How he'd managed to preserve that, I'd never know. "I hope you're not feeling weird on my account. I want you to have fun. I'll be waiting to hear about it as soon as you get back. Do me a favor and check on the Monkey, okay? Heather and I used to go there every Sun—" He cut himself off, but at least his voice didn't catch like it used to. He was getting better. It had been years since he'd called me in the middle of one of his panic attacks, his voice high as a child's, telling me over and over, *I can't stop seeing her body*.

"Of course I'll go." One of the bar's two waitresses, the extra-surly one, slid a glass of wine in front of me and left without comment. "Thanks." I called to her back, sipping and doing my best not to wince while Jack was watching. My usual order was the bar's most expensive glass of red, but that wasn't saying much.

I forced myself to swallow. "What else should I report back on?"

Jack straightened, excited, and for a second, he looked eighteen again. "Oh man, what do I want to know? Okay, first, I want all the details about Caro and Coop—how did he pop the question, when's the date, what's she wearing?" Jack barreled on, neatly sidestepping the fact that he wasn't invited. "Do you think they hooked up in college and kept

it a secret from the rest of us? *Ask her.* I want the dirt. Who would have pictured the two of them together? It's so unexpected."

I tipped my glass back and lifted my finger for another, though I knew the waitress hated when I did that. "Mm-hmm," I said, swallowing. "Sure, sure."

Jack grinned. "I need the *full* report on what Coop looks like now. I need to know how many tattoos he has, if he's still rocking that *Outsiders* vibe, if he cut his hair." He tugged a strand of his own hair. "What do you think... Did I get close to the way Coop used to wear it?"

Death by a million paper cuts. "It's very *zero fucks* meets Ponyboy. Classic Coop. Um, what about Caro, anything?"

Jack's gaze turned thoughtful. "I guess I just want to know she's happy. I don't know... Caro never really changes. You talk about her the most, anyway."

He was right. Caro looked and acted exactly the same now as she did then. She still texted me regularly, albeit not every five minutes, like in college. In fact, the only thing that had really changed about Caro was the addition of Coop.

"You have to tell me if Mint still looks like a movie star," Jack said, "or if his hairline is finally receding like his dad's. God, I don't know whether I want you to say he's even more handsome, or his hair is falling out, 'cause that would serve him right. I can't believe he left law school to rescue the family business. There was always something off about his parents, right? His dad, or was it his mom? I remember that one time senior year, when Mint lost it—" Jack stopped midsentence, eyes widening. "Oh *crap*, I'm sorry. I'm an idiot."

And there it was. Pity, even from Jack. Because I'd lost Mint, the person who used to make me valuable just by association. And even though no one had been there to witness the breakup, to see how deep the blow had struck, how I'd crumbled, it seemed everyone could sense it anyway.

"First of all," I said, trading the waitress my empty glass for a full one, "that was a long time ago, and I *literally* could not care less. I'm actually looking forward to seeing Mint. And Courtney. I'm sure they're very happy together." I blinked away a vision of my laptop, shattered against the wall, screen still stuttering on a picture of their wedding. "Second, *crap*? I find it adorable that you still don't curse. Once a Boy Scout, always a Boy Scout. Hey," I continued, "did you know Frankie just bought one of Mint's houses?"

Knife, twist. Tit for tat.

"Really?" Jack shrugged, playing nonchalant, but his Adam's apple rose and fell as he swallowed hard. "Good for him. I guess he's getting everything he wanted." Jack tossed his hair, another stolen Coopism. "Whatever... Everyone in the world sees Frankie every Sunday. Not hard to tell how he's doing. What I really want is for you to come back and tell me that Courtney's into new age crystals and meditation, and she's let go of all that negative energy. Or she does physical therapy with retired racehorses. Something charitable and unexpected."

I almost snorted wine out of my nose. "*Courtney*? If she's even one iota less of a mean girl, I will consider that immense personal growth."

Jack rolled his eyes. "I said it was my *hope*, not my expectation, Miss Literally-Could-Not-Care-Less."

"Ha."

"You know, I always felt bad for her. Underneath the designer clothes and bitchiness, Courtney seemed like an insecure little girl, desperate to be liked." He gasped, lifting a hand to his chest. "Will you look at that... I *cursed*. Soak it in, 'cause it's not happening again. The Baptist guilt hangover is already setting in."

I shook my head, trying to keep the smile on my face, but inside my heart was breaking.

"Jess." Jack laid his hand over mine. "I really do want you to have fun. For both of us."

Fun. I was going back for so much more than that. I cleared my throat. “After I give you my report on everyone, my reward is that I finally get to meet Will.”

Jack withdrew his hand. “Maybe. You know I like to keep things... separate.”

Jack had never introduced me to his boyfriend. Not once in the years since we’d been friends again, which was itself a strange story. When Jack was first accused of murdering Heather our senior year, in the few months before he left campus for good, the other students crossed the street wherever he walked, sure down to their bones they were looking at a killer. If he entered a room, everyone stiffened and fled.

But not me. My limbs had remained relaxed, limber, fluid around him—no escalating heartbeat, no tremor in the hands—despite the police’s nearly airtight case.

It wasn’t a logical reaction. Jack was Heather’s boyfriend, the person most likely to kill her, according to statistics. The scissors crusted with Heather’s blood—used to stab her, over and over—were found in his dorm room. Witnesses saw Jack and Heather screaming at each other hours before her body was found. The evidence was damning.

But in the end, the police weren’t able to convict Jack. In some ways, it didn’t matter. He was a murderer in everyone’s eyes.

Everyone except for me.

Slowly, inch by inch, my body’s knowing filtered into my brain. One night, a year or so after I moved to New York City, I woke in a cold sweat, sitting up rigid as a board in my tiny rented bedroom, filled to the brim with a single conviction: Jack was innocent.

It took me another three months to reach out to him. He was also living in the city, trying to disappear. I’d told him I thought he was innocent, and from that day forward, I’d been one of his few friends. I was his only friend from college, where, until Heather died, he’d been

popular. Student body president. Phi Delt treasurer. Duquette University Volunteer of the Year.

To this day, I hadn’t told anyone I still saw Jack. He was my secret. One of them, at least.

Looking at him now, radiating kindness, filled me with anger. Jack was undeniably *good*, so easy to read. The fact that so many believed he was capable of brutal violence was baffling. I’d met dangerous people—*truly* dangerous people—and seen the violence in their eyes, heard it brimming in their voices. Jack wasn’t like that.

So I did understand why he wanted to shield the new people in his life from his past, the horror of the accusation that remained unresolved, despite the dropped charges. It’s not like he could ever truly hide it from someone, not with the internet, or the fact that his whole life, he was doomed to menial jobs that wouldn’t fire him after a startling Google search. *Or* the fact that he barely spoke to his family. Though, to be fair, that was because of more than Heather, because of their southernness, their Baptistness, their rigidness...

I understood why Jack would want to draw a solid, impenetrable line between *now* and *then*. But still, it was hard to wrap my mind around it, because the past was still so much with me. I lived with the constant unfolding of memories, past scenes still rolling, still playing out. I heard my friends’ voices in my head, kept our conversations alive, even if for years now, it had just been me talking, one-sided, saying, *Just you wait*.

A thrill lifted the small hairs on my arms. Tomorrow, there’d be no more waiting.

Jack sighed. “Thanks for coming to see me before you left. You know, I’m glad you never changed. Seriously. Ten years, and same old Jess.”

I nearly dropped my glass. “What are you talking about?” I waved at myself. “I’ve changed so much. This dress is Rodarte. Look at this hair, these nails. I’ve been in Page Six. I’ve been to Europe, like, *eight times*. I’m totally different now.”

Jack laughed as if I was joking and rose from his seat, leaning forward to kiss my forehead. “Never stop being a sweetheart, okay? You’re one of the good ones.”

I didn’t want to be a sweetheart. How uninteresting, how pathetic. But I did want to be one of the good ones, which sounded like an exclusive club. I didn’t know how to respond. At least Jack had given me what I’d come here looking for, besides the penance: his blessing. Now I could go to Duquette guilt-free. For that, I held my tongue as he tugged his coat over his shoulders.

He stepped away from the table, then turned back, and there was something in his eyes—worry? Fear? I couldn’t quite pin it. “One more thing. I’ve been getting these letters—”

“Please don’t tell me it’s the Jesus freaks again, saying you’re going to burn in hell for all eternity.”

Jack winced. “No. Kind of the opposite.” He looked down at me, at my raised brows. “You know what, it’s not important. It might not mean anything in the end.” He squared his shoulders. “Put your wine on my tab. Clara never makes me pay.”

Jack squeezed my shoulder and took off, winding around the bar’s motley collection of chairs. He paused by the door and looked over his shoulder. “Just... When you get to Duquette, say hi to Eric Shelby for me.” Then he was out the door, on the sidewalk, carried away by a sea of people.

This time, I actually did spit out my wine. *Eric Shelby*—Heather’s younger brother? Eric had been a freshman when we were seniors. I’d never forget the look on his face when he came flying around the corner the day they found Heather, saw the crowd gathered outside our dorm room, scanned it for his sister’s face, didn’t find her...

The last time I’d seen Eric and Jack in the same place, it was outside the library ten years ago. A crowd had gathered around them. Eric was screaming at Jack that he was a murderer, that he was going to pay for

what he’d done to his sister, that even though the cops had let him go, Eric wouldn’t stop until he found out the truth. Jack’s face had gone white as a ghost’s, but he hadn’t walked away. He’d stood there taking it with fists clenched as Eric screamed, his friends trying to hold him back by his scrawny, flailing arms. If there was anyone alive who hated Jack Carroll more than Eric Shelby, I didn’t know them.

So why in the hell would Jack tell me to say hi to him?