

one

“BUT WHAT IS a *demimonde*, anyway?” said Alison.

The guy she was talking to, someone named Seth, smiled like he knew the secret answer to that. He wrote a column about celebrity bedside reading for *Vanity Fair* and his name had shown up once even as a byline on a feature for that esteemed publication. Alison did not fully realize the import of this accomplishment but he did.

“*The* demimonde, actually,” he told her. “There’s only one of them, grammatically speaking.”

“What?” said Alison, confused.

“The demimonde. It’s called *the* demimonde. Not like *a* demimonde, not a demimonde like there’s a lot of demimondes and this might be one of them. There’s only one to begin with, so it’s *the*.”

“Is there only one of them if you’re speaking any other way?” Alison asked.

“Apparently not; it’s all the same demimonde, no matter where you find it,” he noted, pleased with the inane complication that had grown like a flower out of his correction of her grammar. “It’s okay,” he told her kindly.

“What’s okay?”

“That you didn’t know.”

“That I didn’t know that people call it *the demimonde*?” she asked.

“I just mean, you don’t have to be embarrassed,” he said.

“I’m not,” she replied, unembarrassed. The pleasure he had been taking in the grammatical discussion was fleeing quickly, and in fact it was occurring to him that the young woman was not quite as attractive as she had seemed mere moments before. She smiled at him with that sort of absurd warmth that transplanted Midwesterners tossed about New York like an unappreciated breeze. Because of that *Vanity Fair* byline, in addition to his rangy height, he was used to having a different effect on the women upon whom he bestowed his attention in social situations. Usually they sparkled more, with a charming willingness to acknowledge the sexual undertones of any discussion and the innate superiority of his position in the demimonde. He had often mocked them, frankly, to his male comrades, for that very thing—their eagerness to attract was, finally, a bit of a bore, he thought. But this girl, who was clearly some sort of nobody, didn’t get any points for avoiding all that. She was unsettling. Attractive, but not attractive enough to get over that bump of her own sense of equality.

“Should I be embarrassed?” she asked. She sipped one of those relentless glasses of white wine and grinned slightly while tilting her head, so that she had to glance up at him under long dark bangs. Her eyes were a startling green and they looked like they were laughing at him, but not unpleasantly. This was actually better flirting than he’d had in months. Why didn’t he like it more?

“No, no,” he said, but a whisper of polite dismissal had snuck into his tone. It smacked her enough for a crinkle of worry to appear between her eyes, and he felt bad. He felt bad! This girl was really no fun at all.

“Oh, well. Oh! Okay,” she said, recovering from the startling appear-

ance of male aggression over what to her, frankly, seemed like a nearly nonsensical discussion. Her friend Lisa had invited her over just a few hours ago for drinks in her loft, which wasn't actually a loft; it was more like sixteen square feet and a skylight. And now a total stranger was clearly miffed with her because of some weird obsession he had with the demimonde, and whether or not it was "a" demimonde or "the" demimonde. *This isn't eighteenth-century France*, she thought. *Who gives a shit?*

"Well," she laughed, opting for good humor, "I did know generally more or less *about* the demimonde. I was an English major in college and we tossed the whole thing about during one *endless* class on Trollope and I finally figured it out, that there really is only one in general, that it's a general sort of thing. But it's not a bad question, 'the' versus 'a.' I just never quite put it all together so specifically. Until tonight! Thank you so much for clearing that up."

This was, of course, both completely true and utterly sardonic, but the wry amusement of her tone didn't win her any points. These seemingly simple situations were frankly problematic for Alison, whose untamed heart and effortless intelligence combined to create an unfortunately toxic cocktail for a certain breed of male ego. An ex-friend of her ex-boyfriend Kyle once told her that he got sick of how she had to show off how smart she was all the time. It was an irrational misreading of her character—Alison wasn't particularly interested in showing off; she just was not a fool and felt no need to pretend to be one, under any circumstances or for any reason. Unfortunately, her ex-boyfriend's ex-friend was not the only male creature who had ever mistaken this trait for something less defined and more blameworthy.

"Where was that?" Seth the OCD word fanatic asked.

"Where was what?" Alison asked, confused again.

"Where'd you do your undergrad?"

"Undergrad?" she repeated. "Oh, I went to Notre Dame."

As soon as she had admitted this, she wished she hadn't. Having arrived in New York only five months before, she was already acquainted with the eagerness with which those interminable Ivy Leaguers pried into the facts around your college education just so they had an excuse to bludgeon you with their own. And she had stepped into his trap! "Let me guess. You went to Harvard," she said, beating him to the punch line. She tilted her chin at him, aiming for charming defiance.

"Well, yes, actually," Seth admitted with a nod. Unfortunately, the charming defiance didn't manage to outshine the leaden fact of Notre Dame. He glanced over her shoulder, to see if anyone more worthy of his attention had drifted into view behind her. She hated New York at times like this, so full of intellectual phonies desperate to take any opportunity to assert their superiority in ways that, honestly, would have been considered just rude in the Midwest. "Guess they weren't supposed to let girls from Ohio into this particular corner of the demimonde," she told him tartly. "A Harvard boy who writes for *Vanity Fair*, how on earth did you get stuck talking to a loser like me?"

"Just lucky, I guess." He shrugged, playing the double negative now. "And what do you do, Alison?"

She looked him straight in the face. "I'm, actually, I'm an actress." She tried to keep her confidence up but she knew how idiotic this would sound to him, or anyone, in point of fact.

"So how is that going for you?" he asked, with deliberate disinterest. *Too bad*, she thought. *I thought he was kind of cute*. He was already someone she had known in the past. "I'm going to get another glass of wine," she told him.

"Terrific," he noted flatly. It was so dismissive she blinked a little, and took a step back. He had turned away, and was saying hello to some other loser friend of Lisa's, a girl with an eager smile and enormous breasts. Alison felt her heart constrict with a tinge of fear and disappoint-

ment. *Whatever, he's a creep*, she told herself. Then she pushed through the bitter little crowd of young professionals who had gathered for a fun evening in Lisa's ugly and overpriced apartment, trying to get to that table in the corner where people had dumped the wine bottles they'd delivered as party gifts.

"You met Seth!" Lisa exclaimed, sticking her head out of the closet-sized kitchen and raising her eyebrows with smug, conspiratorial glee. "He's so fabulous. Really it is ridiculous how successful he is, he has his own column for *Vanity Fair* and he's had pieces everywhere, I think he's doing something for *Vogue* right now. Maybe *GQ*. Or that piece maybe already came out, I can't remember. He's very prolific and he knows a ton of people plus I think he's really hot, he's so *tall*. His family has buckets of money, his father is something huge at Goldman Sachs and you should see where he lives in Tribeca."

"Goldman Sachs is like the institutional version of the anti-Christ, Lisa," Alison reported with an air of sincere regret that this fact had somehow escaped her friend's notice.

"I'd put up with people calling me the anti-Christ if I had money like that," Lisa tossed back at her.

"Yeah, well, I think your friend mostly wanted to get laid, so it's fine. I'm from the Midwest, we don't do that on a first date," Alison reported. "Plus he's an asshole."

"No, he's great!" Lisa insisted, pretending that Alison's position on sex with strangers was so outdated and ludicrous she didn't even have to acknowledge it. "He's juggling a lot of different commitments, magazine people have to have so many things going on that sometimes it takes them a little time to unwind and just be themselves. Plus he told me he just got here from a big meeting with the *Times* Sunday magazine, which he's been really worried about . . . So he's probably still just thinking about that; he's under a lot of pressure because so much is happening for

him right now. And tomorrow he's running out to the Hamptons, his parents have a place in Amagansett and there's some big family party he has to go to."

Alison could not for the life of her understand why going to a party in the Hamptons tomorrow might be considered an excuse for lousy behavior today, and she sincerely wished that she might be asked to care more about the young man's character than his résumé. But Lisa's attention had moved on to other subjects. Alison watched as her friend found herself caught in a web of arms and hands reaching desperately for the half-empty bottles of cheap wine, which cluttered the table behind her. Lisa was an elegant, slender blonde who moved with an amused grace through the center of it all. The apparently ravenous young professionals who surrounded her were consuming a simple tray of grapes and cheeses in mere seconds in a piranha-like frenzy. Blonde Lisa laughed with delight and threw her hands up in a gesture of mock despair. "I never get enough food," she admitted happily.

In the Midwest, there's always enough food, Alison thought. She thought of her mother's housewarming parties, where neighbors who had known one another for thirty years would gather on the back porch and talk about golf scores and school functions and the weather. Her mother would serve hot hors d'oeuvres, sesame chicken with a honey-mayonnaise dressing, toasted cheese rounds, and everyone's favorite, sausage balls, a spectacular concoction made of grated cheddar, Jimmy Dean sausage, and Bisquick all mashed together and cooked in the broiler. Then Mom would load the dining room table with platters heaped with sliced ham and turkey and roast beef, alongside a breadbasket filled with miniature sandwich rolls, around which she had curled lovely little dishes of ketchup and mustard and even more mayonnaise. And down there at the far end of the table, a big bowl of salad for anyone who was maybe thinking of trying to eat healthy. After everyone had gorged themselves on sand-

wiches and finger food and a few bites of salad, there would be plates of cookies and brownies and, if Aunt Sis was coming, a chocolate sheet cake, or an extra plate of those crazy peanut butter cookies with an entire Hershey's Kiss shoved into the middle of each.

Beside the memory of this plenty, the one platter of Brie, Swiss, crackers, and seedless grapes that Lisa had bought at a deli two blocks away looked exactly like what it was—lame. It was already finished off a mere thirty-five minutes after the first guests had arrived; the piranhas had swept it clean and moved on to the consumption of more wine and booze, of which there was a river.

Lisa picked up the empty platter and held it over her head. "Go back and talk to Seth," she ordered Alison.

"We didn't like each other, Lisa," Alison said clearly, hoping this would put an end to the discussion.

"You talked to him for three minutes! You have to try harder, I mean it. I've been in New York a lot longer than you and I know what's out there. Trust me. He's the only guy in the room smarter than you." Having delivered this pronouncement with definitive finality, she sailed off into her minuscule kitchen.

He's not smarter than me, Alison said to herself. Which, she admitted in her proud and lonely heart, was the problem.



two

“NO, HE *DOESN'T* have a temperature but he's been extremely fussy for five days, it's been five days and his nose is running *nonstop*,” the determined woman announced. She clutched a miserable two-year-old on her knee and talked over the kid's head impatiently, like he was some kind of unmanageable ventriloquist's dummy, although he was really quite patient, Kyle noticed. Not listless, just tired. Slightly heightened color in the cheeks but no tears or frustration, no fussiness whatsoever. “I saw Dr. Grisholm last week and *he* said that it was a virus and there's nothing anyone can do for a virus but this has been going on much too long and he needs an *antibiotic*. I don't know why you people can't just prescribe that stuff over the phone, it's not going to hurt *anybody* and we *need* it and I'll tell you I know you make us come down here to pick up the prescription just so you can charge us for the office visit and it's ridiculous, the way you are *gouging* us when all we need is an antibiotic! He's sick! He's really sick! And I'm tired of all this messing around with the insurance company. If there was someone to complain to I would, I

would really complain but, well, you've fixed that, haven't you, no one is even allowed to have an *opinion* without being *charged* for it."

Kyle reached out his hands with a gentle confidence, holding them open toward the child with a simple gesture. "May I?" The bottle-blonde mother was only too willing to get the kid off her lap. She handed him over abruptly. The baby looked up with mournful brown eyes as Kyle swung him through the air with a breezy lift—that always made them grin or giggle, no matter how bad they felt—and set him on the edge of the stainless steel counter, rather than the examining table. They liked that too.

"Is that safe?" the dreary mother asked.

"It is when you have a big boy, like Joseph, who's not reeeceally sick," Kyle observed, ruffling the kid's curls easily, like he was some kind of pet dog. He floated his fingers under both sides of the boy's jaw, palpating the glands so gently the kid thought he was being petted. The little boy looked up at Kyle with contented adoration while Kyle carefully wiped his nose with a Kleenex. "Let's just take a peek into your brain here, Joseph, just for the heck of it," he said.

"I don't care what you do 'just for the heck of it,'" the mother snapped, refusing to fall for the young doctor's charms. "As long as I get a prescription."

Kyle cupped his left hand around the child's chin, to hold his head steady, while he gently inserted the otoscope into the tiny ear. It took only seconds to record the tinge of pink around the drum and the suggestion of a clear discharge; it wasn't much but it did put forward the possibility that the cold might be moving into the ears, and he might in fact assuage the woman with a scrip for Zithromax without completely compromising his principles. Even as the thought passed through his consciousness, he regretted the impulse. There was no question that antibiotics were still rampantly overprescribed in children, they rarely did

any good, and the consequences both immediately, in terms of diarrhea and other digestive disorders, and in the long run—ever more refined strains of bacterial infection which increasingly resisted these previously effective treatments—were not insubstantial.

“Has he been pulling at his ears?” Kyle asked, hoping the hideous mother might provide him with more reason to just do what she wanted, so that he could be done with this.

“I don’t know. Maybe. Why can’t you tell if he even has an ear infection? Isn’t that what that thing is for?”

The woman was awful, no question. That didn’t mean he could do something his medical training warned him would be potentially damaging to her child.

“There’s some indication of a slight infection but honestly I’m not convinced this is bacterial,” he started, cautious. “Unless it develops further there’s really no indication that an antibiotic is going to do anything more than give him a stomachache, on top of the cold. I’m inclined to agree with Dr. Grisholm; it’s probably viral. In a couple of days I think you’ll start to see some improvement.”

The horrible mother didn’t go for it. He had known she wouldn’t. “I came *down* here,” she informed him, her voice rising. “I came all the way down here and all you can do is tell me he’s sick? That’s ludicrous. And you know I’m going to be charged for this, there will be a copay, or a deductible, and I didn’t want to come *anyway*, I *said*, ‘Just give me the prescription!’ And your nurse—whatever her name is, on the phone, she was the one who insisted he had to be seen by a doctor and now I came all the way *down* here to be charged for *nothing*? Are you kidding me? I mean, seriously, are you kidding me?”

“I’m giving you my best advice,” Kyle began again.

“Your best advice is not what I want,” she informed him. She took a step forward, reaching out to snatch her child back from Kyle’s now-suspect

care. Startled by the suddenness of her move, he took a step backward and relinquished the boy without argument. "I want to see another doctor," the woman announced. "I want another doctor!"

She had not yet made it out the door, but her voice was loud and had already breached the privacy of the examination room. Kyle knew that she was well within her rights to ask for a third or even fourth opinion on this matter, and that as soon as she had stepped out into the hallway with her impatience and her complaints, the nurses and aides on shift would scurry about and do her bidding, avoiding his gaze as they bowed to the patient's right to usurp his authority. He also knew there were two other doctors present in the building who would have little trouble issuing a scrip for Zithromax, which is the easiest thing in the world, without even examining the child.

"Could someone help me here?" she yelled. It was excruciating, watching her swing that kid to her shoulder just roughly enough to startle tears and a wail of anxiety out of him. She tossed a contemptuous gaze back at Kyle, as if to accuse him of making her child cry, and turned the doorknob uselessly, while she struggled to bend over and pick up her purse, a brown-and-black designer sack which clearly cost a fortune while simultaneously looking like knocked-off sophomore junk. He had known girls in college who carried bags like that, from which experience he also knew that women who carried designer bags were not to be messed with. In addition, he was aware that if he didn't issue the prescription and someone else did, the office manager, Linda, would make note of it in the daily report she emailed to the local headquarters of the HMO which administrated their practice. And then that report would worm its way through seventeen levels of health care bureaucracy, before winding up as a reprimand in the file they kept on him and examined every six months when his performance came up for review.

The kid was wailing. The horrible mother was hissing a long string

of complaints under her breath as she struggled with the kid, the designer bag, and the doorknob. It wasn't worth the headache. "I'm happy to give you a prescription, if that's what you want," Kyle said, without inflection. He reached into his jacket and pulled out a pen. "I just wanted to make sure you understood the drawbacks."

"I understand the drawbacks for you, if I don't get that prescription," she snapped back. He stopped, pen in midair, and stared at her. If he was going to be bullied into writing a scrip against his better judgment, he was not going to let her be hateful about it. They stared at each other for the briefest of instants before she smiled tightly and nodded. "Sorry. I am just really on my last nerve. You know how it is when your kid is sick! Just everything wears you out."

"Of course," he said, pulling out the prescription pad and scribbling silently. He ripped the top page off and handed it to her. She took it with little grace, but then, he offered it with none. With his left hand he reached behind him and opened the door for her with the careless ease of a magician. The casual gesture revealed her wild struggle with the doorknob for what it was: cheap drama.

Completely fried, and it was only two o'clock. His shift went until seven. Most of the young patients of Pediatrics West were brought in by women like this one, upper-middle-class suburbanites who didn't have the good grace to be thankful for the money and the schools and the parks and the half-acre lots every single house stood on, much less the immediate access to health care anytime some kid looked sideways, or sneezed. The whole northwestern suburban sprawl around Cincinnati was a veritable slap in the face to Betty Friedan and the seminal revelations of *The Feminine Mystique*. It was 2012, and these women were perfectly happy to have their husbands run off to high-paying jobs halfway across town, leaving them bored and alone with children whom they didn't like and who didn't particularly like them back. As long as the money

came in and they didn't have to do anything for it aside from wiping noses and making lunch, they were content in a kind of nasty, she-devil way. Again Kyle felt a pang of guilt as soon as the snarling judgment flitted through his consciousness—there were plenty of women whom he knew personally who were vastly more caring than this harridan—but he had little time with which to berate himself for the quick spite of his exhausted brain. In the waiting room, the bedraggled crowd of infected kids was stacking up. He had to stop thinking and move on.

“Kyle?” A voice behind him shook him out of his tailspin and he turned, the gentle, practiced smile which was his physician's calling card at the ready. The woman who stood before him returned it with a good-natured sincerity which shamed him in its innocence. “I thought that was you! Do you work here?”

“Mrs. Moore, hello!” Kyle felt a fast and fierce jolt in his heart, which he quickly moved past as he shook her hand with his best presentation of calm competence. “Yes, I'm doing my pediatrics residency here. What, what are you doing here?” He looked around quickly to see if she was somehow attached to any of the sick children—or the young mothers—in the waiting room but she laughed and shook her head. “Howard has been having some trouble with kidney stones, and he is really in a lot of pain; it's been horrible, he can't keep the painkillers down, he just vomits up everything,” she said, assuming like everyone that any doctor must be interested in the most intimate facts of even a near-stranger's health. “He's been seeing Dr. Drake, in the urologist's office down the hall, but he couldn't even get out of bed this morning, so I had to bring in the urine sample.”

“Oh, I'm sorry to hear that,” Kyle told her, sounding sorry.

“My daughter Megan—do you remember Megan?—she's due with twins in two months and she's been looking into different pediatricians and I thought I'd just stop by here. I told her that there's a big pediatrics

office right down the hall from your father's urologist, you should look into that too because that's so close! I didn't know you were here, I'll tell her I saw you."

"Please do." Kyle both wanted to flee and couldn't bring himself to move. Just standing there and listening to Mrs. Moore's chatter brought back for him a rush of affection for this woman, who had fed him dinner, served him tea, listened to his dreams, and kicked him out of her house more than once during four long, tumultuous years of his youth. "It must be so nice for your parents to have you right in the neighborhood!" Mrs. Moore continued. "Your sister is still here as well, isn't she? I think I heard from Louise Breslin that she saw your sister, she's living in Clifton!"

"Susan is a nurse, she's over at Good Sam," he reported.

"Your parents must be so proud," Mrs. Moore noted. Then, quickly, a shadow of some grief passed over her face; she was not the kind of woman who knew how to hide feelings; she never had been. "You know, until Megan moved back, not one of my children stayed in Cincinnati. Not one! Last year, I was so mad at all of them!" She laughed self-consciously, as if to let him know that this wasn't the life-crushing disappointment she had just admitted it was. "The Dilmeyers, did you go to school with any of them? Ten children and *all* of them stayed here! Margaret Dilmeyer can't stop bragging about it, she has twelve grandchildren already, I hear about it *all* the time. I don't mean to complain; I'm not complaining! Well, I'm glad that Megan's here, at any rate. She just moved back! So that's nice. Your parents must be so happy, to have you both living in the same city."

"I think they enjoy it, yes," Kyle acknowledged. He was touched by her confession and leaned back on his left foot, acknowledging with that simple gesture that he didn't really have to run off; he had a few minutes to chat. "But everyone's well?" He wanted to suck the words back into his soul as soon as he had uttered them.

“Oh, they’re all great. Just great!” she bubbled, a conscious brittleness entering her tone. “Jeff is in Germany, of all places, on a Fulbright. He’s got all this research with DNA. Nobody knows what he’s talking about half the time but he’s successful. He’s always being published in big science magazines. *Nature*. He’s got an article in that one, coming out, he’s really proud.”

“Well, I don’t actually know a lot about research publications but I know that a Fulbright is a big deal,” Kyle said, grateful that she had had the good grace to pretend that he actually cared about Jeff, her patently favorite son. Both of them knew there was really only one of her eight children in whom he had any interest at all. But he really had to get out of these waters before they got any more perilous. The nurse at the desk had raised her eyes impatiently more than once, and he could tell from her familiar tics that she was about to butt in and embarrass him for taking five minutes off to chat with an old friend, when the waiting room was turning into a veritable petri dish of infected toddlers. “It’s great to see you,” he told her. “Please tell Mr. Moore I hope he feels better. Kidney stones are no fun.”

“Alison’s still in New York!” she announced. He wished he could have kept his heart from hammering in his chest, but barring that, he could at least control any sign of interest in this line of discussion. He had known as soon as he saw Alison’s mother that he would not get out of this conversation without hearing about her, but that didn’t make it any easier when it finally happened. He forced a nod which he hoped carried with it an air of professional disinterest.

“Yes, I had heard that,” he said politely.

“She’s still crazy about this acting thing, but she hasn’t had much luck yet,” Mrs. Moore continued. “A couple of *auditions*. It’s a big deal, apparently, even getting into the hallway *outside* the auditions. She has lots of stories, it’s a big adventure, I understand that, but I finally said to

her, don't you have to actually get *in* something, a television show, or something that pays you something, isn't that the point? Well, that wasn't the right thing to say, obviously. But I'm worried. You can't blame me for worrying. She has no money. She was working in an office for a while but she didn't like that, I guess there were a lot of people there who were really unethical and they expected her to do things that just bothered her too much. She wouldn't tell me anything specific. Anyway, she finally quit that and now she's waitressing for some company that does private events. So she makes a lot of money when they call her but they only call her once in a while and I think she should get a real job, something with health insurance, but she says she went to New York to act. But she's not doing that either! At least in Seattle, she wasn't making any money but she was *acting*, which I thought you won't get anywhere by acting in Seattle, but in New York she's not even doing that much." All of this information was excruciating to Kyle. He stared at the floor and nodded diligently, hoping that she would somehow understand that she was making him miserable, and do the decent thing and shut up. She did not. "She hasn't asked for money," the woman continued, again offering up the most private details imaginable, at the top of her lungs, in the middle of a waiting room full of strangers. "She's too proud for that! She was always too proud, no one could tell her anything. Her father says she's going to have to come to us sooner or later. I wanted her to fly home for the weekend a couple months ago, just to get out of that *city*, and she said she couldn't afford the plane fare! And fares are low now. But she doesn't have any extra money at all. She just can't keep going on with nothing! Her father is really disappointed. She did so well in school, he really thought she might go on and do something with herself. He said to me, it just seems like a waste, a total waste of her time and her twenties. I don't know, maybe she'll get tired of it and come home."

He knew she was offering this possibility to him as a hope. Kyle

thought about what to say, as he looked at the floor. There he found something resembling courage and raised his eyes. "I don't," he said. "I hope she finds everything she wants there. Okay, where's Heather?" he asked, glancing at the name on the file in his hand and tossing his question confidently back toward the nurse at the desk.

"She's in four," the nurse replied, sour. Kyle tipped his head toward Mrs. Moore with a quiet nod of respect and left. *If you gave that woman any more leeway, he thought, she'd keep talking about nothing for the rest of the afternoon.*