

Such a Fun Age



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF KYLIE REID

Kiley Reid was born in Los Angeles, California, in 1987 and spent most of her childhood in Tucson, Arizona. She studied acting at Marymount Manhattan College. Reid worked numerous jobs to support herself through college, including nannying and babysitting for wealthy Manhattan families—experiences she undoubtedly drew from years later, when she began writing *Such a Fun Age*. Reid eventually earned a graduate degree from the Iowa Writers' Workshop. Her short stories have been published in *Ploughshares*, *December*, and *New South*, among other literary journals. She began to write her first novel, *Such a Fun Age*, as she applied to graduate school. The novel was published in 2019 and received high praise from critics; in addition to being longlisted for the Booker Prize in 2020, it won the International Book of the Year at the 2021 Australian Book Industry Awards. Reid is currently at work on a screenplay for the film adaptation of *Such a Fun Age*. She currently lives in Philadelphia with her husband.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The incident that drives Alix Chamberlain to befriend and empower her part-time babysitter, Emira Tucker, is a racist altercation between Emira and a security guard at a local upscale grocery store—an altercation that Kelley Copeland dutifully records, should Emira wish to share her experience with the public. Using social media to fight for racial justice places *Such a Fun Age* firmly in the 21st century, where it seems that every month a new video showing a person of color experiencing racism—and in more extreme cases, police brutality and murder—spreads across social media platforms. Social media's role in raising awareness about social justice issues and encouraging activism became particularly apparent after the video recording of the 2020 killing of George Floyd, an unarmed Black man, by a white Minneapolis police officer, led to public outrage and widespread protests. According to the Pew Research Center, 60 percent of Black social media users report that social media plays a vital role in finding other people who share their views about important issues, and 60 percent of Black social media users also report that social media is important in actually getting involved with political or social problems. Long before the footage of George Floyd's murder entered the public sphere, Black Twitter (an internet community focused on predominantly African American issues) has been a space for users to share messages of humor and support about shared experiences of Black life in America. Some notable hashtags to emerge from Black Twitter include

#SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen, which critiques mainstream feminism for catering to white women and disregarding the needs of Black women; and, perhaps the most recognizable hashtag to come out of Black Twitter, #BlackLivesMatter, which was created in 2013 by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi in response to law enforcement's systemic mistreatment of Black Americans.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Such a Fun Age is a work of fiction that explores the small and big ways that Emira, a young Black woman from a working-class background, experiences racism in her professional and personal life. The book examines the intersection between race, class, gender, and privilege. Other recent fiction that explores race, class, gender, and privilege—and in particular, from the perspective of a young woman—include Asali Solomon's *Disgruntled*, a coming-of-age novel that follows a young Black woman, Kenya, as she navigates a white world. Like *Such a Fun Age*, *Disgruntled* examines complex issues of class and race. The book is based on Solomon's personal experiences growing up in West Philadelphia. *Girl, Woman, Other* by Bernadine Evaristo follows 12 characters in the United Kingdom, most of them Black women, as they navigate life. The novel examines, among other issues, the intersection of racism, feminism, and patriarchy. *Such a Fun Age* is considered adult literature, but younger readers could also manage its thematic content and prose. A recent young adult novel that examines similar issues is Angie Thomas's [The Hate U Give](#), which is told from the perspective of Starr Carter, an African American girl from a poor neighborhood who attends a private high school in a wealthy, predominantly white part of the city. Starr witnesses a white police officer shoot and kill her childhood friend, and when she begins to speak out about systemic racism and the failures of the criminal justice system, it creates tension between Starr and her friends at school. Along with race, the novel also examines class issues in the contemporary United States. One of the main ideas *Such a Fun Age* grapples with is how Alix Chamberlain's financial stability enables her to become successful as a businesswoman and champion of female empowerment. By contrast, people like Emira, who do the caregiving and domestic labor that enables their wealthy employers to focus on their work outside of the home, often fail to receive sufficient recognition. *Maid* is a memoir by Stephanie Land that follows Land's struggles to support her daughter as a single mother while living in poverty, experiencing homelessness, and working maid service jobs.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Such a Fun Age*
- **When Written:** 2010s
- **Where Written:** Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
- **When Published:** 2019
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Novel
- **Setting:** Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
- **Climax:** Emira learns that it was Mrs. Chamberlain who leaked video footage of the Market Depot incident to news outlets (not Kelley, as Emira had originally thought). As a result, Emira derails her and Alix's interview with Laney Thacker, diverging from the prepared script and humiliating Alix on live TV to announce that she will no longer be working for the Chamberlains.
- **Antagonist:** There are no clear antagonists in *Such a Fun Age*, but Alix Chamberlain's ignorant (though well-intentioned) efforts to empower Emira have an antagonistic role.
- **Point of View:** Third Person

EXTRA CREDIT

From Page to Screen. Prior to its publication in 2019, actress and producer Lena Waithe's production company Hillman Grad Productions and Sight Unseen pictures acquired the film and television rights for *Such a Fun Age*. Reid is currently working on the film's screenplay.

Art Imitates Life. One of the recurring anxieties of Emira Tucker, the protagonist of *Such a Fun Age*, is the looming reality that she'll lose her health insurance once she turns 26 and is removed from her parents' health insurance policy. Reid, who worked as caregiver for the children of wealthy Manhattan families for the better part of a decade, struggled with similar anxieties. In an interview, she recalls being hypervigilant about cutting cakes at children's birthday parties, since accidentally cutting herself could set her back thousands of dollars and drastically undermine her financial security.



PLOT SUMMARY

Emira Tucker is at a party with her friends—Zara, Shaunie, and Josefa—late one Saturday night when Alix Chamberlain, the woman Emira babysits for, calls Emira and begs her to watch Briar Chamberlain, Alix's two-year-old child. Alix explains that she has a family emergency and doesn't want Briar around. Emira needs the money and reluctantly agrees, so she heads over to the Chamberlains' house. Zara accompanies her. When they arrive, they see a hole in the Chamberlains' window. Per Alix's recommendation, they go to Market Depot, a nearby upscale supermarket, to kill some time. There, they have an impromptu dance party in one of the aisles. After Zara leaves, though, a security guard accuses Emira of kidnapping Briar and

refuses to believe that Emira is Briar's babysitter. It's only after Peter Chamberlain arrives that the guard backs off. A bystander (Kelley Copeland) records the altercation. Afterward, Kelley urges Emira to post the video online, but Emira doesn't want to. When Kelley won't back down, Emira relents and allows Kelley to at least forward her the video.

Alix Chamberlain recalls the details of her life that led to this point: when Alix is in college, she starts writing letters to companies and receiving free products in exchange for her written reviews. She then posts everything to her blog. Over time, Alix's blog gains a respectable following. Eventually, it becomes LetHer Speak, a business and social media campaign that teaches women to find their voices and empower themselves through letter writing. Alix meets her future husband, Peter Chamberlain, around this time, and he is supportive of her business. Then Alix becomes pregnant with Briar. Though the couple has talked about returning to Philadelphia, Alix's hometown, to raise their family, Alix is too excited about her business's recent success to quit just yet. In fact, after Briar is born, Alix struggles to find motherhood rewarding. Not long after Briar's birth, Alix becomes pregnant with Catherine, and the family moves to Philadelphia. In Philadelphia, Alix works from home, but she misses her friends and life in New York. Alix adores the newborn Catherine, who is calm and quiet—the opposite of Briar—but she struggles to balance caring for Briar with working on the book deal she's recently been offered, so she hires Emira to care for Briar part-time.

Peter, meanwhile, is enjoying his new job as a local station news anchor. But things turn for the worse when he accidentally makes a racist and sexist comment on air. The comment leads some kids to throw eggs at the Chamberlains' window, and it's this act of vandalism that requires the Chamberlains to call the police—and compels Alix to call Emira and ask her to take care of Briar. And now, just as Alix has begun to settle into her new life, she fears that Emira will quit working for her once she finds out about Peter's remark and decides he's racist. That's when Alix decides that she's going to befriend and help Emira so that she wants to stick around.

Alix, still worried that Emira plans to quit, is surprised when Emira says she will still attend Briar's birthday party as they'd planned—in fact, Emira is acting suspiciously normal. Emira arrives at the Chamberlains' house later that day with a pet goldfish for Briar (Briar names the fish **Spoons**). Alix tries to talk to Emira about the Market Depot incident, but Emira insists that she just wants to forget about it. Most party guests are Peter's coworkers and their children, and Alix feels immature (Peter is nearly a decade older) and lonely. Laney Thacker, Peter's co-anchor, is kind to Alix, but Alix thinks Laney is corny and doesn't think they'll be friends.

Emira notices that Alix is trying to treat her more like a friend than an employee, but she refuses to play along. One night,

when Emira is riding the subway to meet her friends for dinner, she runs into Kelley Copeland. He bugs her about the video, and Emira compromises by offering to let Kelley buy her a drink later that night, which he does. Emira and Kelley get drunk together and then return to Kelley's apartment to have sex.

When time goes by and Alix's attempts to befriend Emira remain unsuccessful, Alix starts to look at the notifications on Emira's phone to learn more about her. Alix's snooping reveals that Emira is seeing a new guy. One night, Alix opens a bottle of wine to get Emira to confide in her. To Alix's delight, Emira admits that she's seeing her new guy tonight. At their dinner that night, Kelley tells Emira that he dated the wealthiest girl in town when he was in high school—and that she was an entitled snob.

Meanwhile, Alix recalls a time she confided in her friends about her most embarrassing moment, which happened when she was in high school, around the time her parents won a lawsuit and became rich and snobby almost overnight. They also hired a Black woman, Claudette, to care for Alix and her sister Betheny. Alix (who went by Alex then) was ashamed of the people her parents had become. Around this time, she wrote her high school boyfriend an embarrassing love letter to ask him over while her parents were out of town. The boy showed the letter to Robbie Cormier, a popular kid in their school, and Robbie invited all his friends over, ruining Alex's plans for a romantic evening. Enraged at her boyfriend's betrayal, Alex called the police on the kids, ultimately leading to Robbie losing his college scholarship. Everyone, including Alex's boyfriend, turned on Alex and accused her of being elitist and racist. (However, a flashback at the end of the book will ultimately reveal that Alix has known for years that Kelley had nothing to do with Robbie showing up, and she only continues to tell this story because it's easier than admitting she's wrong.)

Back in the present, Spoons dies, and Alix tells Emira to pick up a replacement fish on her way over; Briar will never notice, and Briar's tears would ruin the evening. Emira tries to protest—she and Briar had been looking forward to attending a Halloween recital at Briar's ballet studio that day, and they will miss it if Emira has to stop by the pet store first. But Alix insists that Briar won't care. Emira relents and picks up the fish. After work that night, Emira goes to her friend Shaunie's apartment, where everyone is celebrating Shaunie's recent promotion. But Emira is too exhausted from work and bitter over how easily good things seem to come to Shaunie to want to party with everyone.

Alix looks forward to having her friends over for Thanksgiving. Things get even better when Emira's flight home is canceled due to winter weather. Thinking that this is her chance to finally make Emira feel like part of the family, Alix invites Emira and her new boyfriend over for Thanksgiving dinner. But the day is awkward: Kelley and Alix realize that they are each other's high school ex, and their mutual connection to Emira creates tension. Though Emira is initially angry at Kelley for being rude

to Alix, she sympathizes with him after he fills her in on what Alix did to Robbie.

After Thanksgiving, Alix spends some time in Manhattan, and she brings Catherine with her. Alix's friends commiserate with her about the Kelley-Emira situation and help restore her confidence. Tamra also connects Alix with a professor friend who hires Alix to teach a weekly class in Manhattan next spring. Meanwhile, in Philadelphia, Emira enjoys her days alone with Briar, and they go on many adventures. After Alix returns from New York, she confronts Emira about Kelley, claiming that Kelley isn't a great guy and is probably just dating Emira because he thinks that dating Black women will earn him social points. Emira takes offense and refuses to end things with Kelley.

After Emira leaves, Alix goes to Kelley's work and confronts him about seeing Emira. In turn, Kelley accuses Alix of exploiting Emira. He claims that she's no better than her awful parents, comparing the **polo shirt** "uniform" with LetHer Speak printed on it that Emira wears to the shirt with "Murphy" stitched across its back that her parents made Claudette wear. Alix leaves feeling defeated. When she gets home, she logs onto the computer and discovers that Emira has forgotten to log out of her email account. Then she finds the video recording Kelley sent Emira, downloads it onto her computer, and calls Laney Thacker to ask for a favor.

Emira celebrates her 26th birthday at a bar with her friends and Kelley. Everything is great—until Emira's friends show her that somebody has published the video of the Market Depot incident online, and it's quickly going viral. Emira is mortified. When Zara discovers that Kelley still has the video on his phone (earlier, he'd promised Emira he would delete it), Emira assumes that Kelley must have published the video. She leaves and breaks things off with Kelley.

The next day, Alix and her children visit Emira at home. Alix tells Emira about the class she's teaching next semester and asks if Emira would like to babysit Briar full time; Emira agrees. Alix also asks Emira if she'll agree to an interview with Laney Thacker to clear things up about the video, and Emira agrees again. Early Monday morning, Emira arrives at the Chamberlains' house for the interview. Zara comes with her, and Alix's friend Tamra is there, too. Emira and Zara go upstairs so Emira can get ready in the bathroom. Zara overhears Tamra telling Alix that Alix was right to release the Market Depot video. Shocked, Zara immediately delivers this news to Emira. Then she helps Emira negotiate a salary with benefits at the Green Party, Emira's other job, which offered her a full-time position following the video's release.

Emira derails the interview by quitting her babysitting job on live TV. Afterward, Emira says a tearful goodbye to Briar. Alix interrupts the moment to yell at Emira. She demands to know how Emira could humiliate her when she was only trying to help. Emira realizes that Alix will never understand and doesn't

bother to argue with her.

Emira works for the Green Party for just over a month after she quits her babysitting job. Then she works as an administrative assistant for Paula Christi, the regional director of the U.S. Census Bureau. It's not a glamorous job, but Paula is a nice boss, and Emira is proud that she can finally support herself and afford to accompany her friends on a trip to Mexico. Sometime in the future, Emira will see Kelley at a farmer's market—accompanied by a new Black girlfriend. She might have texted Alix about it in another life, but not in this one. Emira will also see Alix and her children at a Halloween parade. It still pains Emira to think about how she abandoned Briar. Now, she wonders whether Briar will grow up to become confident and self-assured—or whether she'll simply pay somebody to figure things out for her, just like her mother before her.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Emira Tucker – The protagonist, Emira Tucker is a young Black woman and recent college graduate who feels aimless and inadequately prepared for adulthood. To support herself, Emira works part-time as a transcriptionist for the Philadelphia Green Party and babysits Briar Chamberlain part time. Not long into her employment with the Chamberlains, Emira, at Alix's suggestion, takes Briar to Market Depot, an upscale grocery store. While there, a security guard racially profiles Emira and accuses her of kidnapping Briar. Worried that Emira will resign over the incident, Alix obsessively—and unsuccessfully—strives to befriend and empower Emira. But Emira never warms to Alix—in fact, Emira is one of the few people who calls Alix Mrs. Chamberlain, a decision that reflects Emira's consciousness of the uneven power dynamics that shape their employer-employee relationship. Emira hates working for the Chamberlains, but she loves Briar and feels guilty about leaving the child with people who don't like or value her. Emira is best friends with Zara, a nurse, as well as Shaunie and Josefa. Emira loves her friends, but she also envies their ambition, successful careers, and financial stability. She also has a complicated relationship with Kelley Copeland, the young white man who happened to record the Market Depot incident, and her eventual boyfriend. Though Kelley seems to respect Black culture, his privilege prevents him from fully understanding the struggles Emira endures as a Black woman. Besides this, Kelley just so happens to be Alix's old high school boyfriend, with whom things ended badly. And while Emira and Kelley do genuinely seem to like each other—and though Emira scoffs at Alix's attempts to interfere in the relationship—the possibility that Kelley fetishizes Black people and so objectifies her seems to linger in Emira's mind, if only subconsciously. Things come to a head when Alix secretly releases the Market Depot video

footage to Laney Thacker and arranges for Laney to interview Alix and Emira about the incident. Emira initially thinks that Kelley leaked the footage and breaks up with him over it. But when Emira finds out that Alix is responsible, she resigns from her position during the live interview, humiliating Alix, and announces her plans to work full time for the Green Party instead. Emira doesn't rekindle her relationship with Kelley, seemingly done dealing with well-intentioned but ignorant white people who want to help her. Emira's ending is thus bittersweet; though she misses Briar, she learns to find her voice—on her own terms.

Alix Chamberlain/Alex Murphy – Alix Chamberlain (formerly Alex Murphy) is a wealthy, white businesswoman/social media influencer. She is married to Peter Chamberlain, and the couple has two young daughters, Briar and Catherine. When Alix was in her 20s, she grew her personal blog into LetHer Speak, a business/social media campaign that empowers women to find their voices through letter writing. Though Alix might be outwardly successful, she's highly insecure and constantly seeks others' approval. She's also ashamed of her wealthy upbringing and determined to prove that she's more socially conscious than her parents. The Chamberlains have recently moved from Manhattan to Philadelphia, and Alix misses the friends (Tamra, Rachel, and Jodi) and professional life she left behind, and she doesn't feel fulfilled by motherhood. Though Alix enjoys carrying around the infant Catherine as an accessory, she sees Briar as a nuisance and mostly ignores her. Alix hires Emira to babysit Briar part time so she has more time to focus on her upcoming book, though she never actually does any writing. At the start of the novel, a security officer at an upscale grocery store that Alix sends Emira to racially profiles Emira and accuses her of kidnapping Briar. Alix feels responsible for the incident—and terrified that Emira will quit over it—and becomes obsessed with befriending and helping Emira. She's disappointed and confused when Emira isn't receptive to her advances. Things get worse once Emira starts dating Kelley Copeland, Alix's high school boyfriend. Kelley and Alix had a traumatic breakup Alix's senior year after Alix called the police on a group of predominantly Black kids who showed up at her house. Alix never accepts that she was in the wrong, and Kelley sees Alix's actions as evidence of her racism and elitism. Meanwhile, Alix thinks that Kelley befriends Black people for personal validation. Ironically, though, Alix is guilty of this very offense. Despite her good intentions, Alix is ultimately helping Emira to assuage her guilt, start anew, and prove wrong the people who have misjudged her—including Kelley. Alix's misguided efforts to help Emira come to a head when she secretly leaks the videorecording of the Market Depot incident to the press, completely disregarding Emira's wish to put the incident behind her. When Emira finds out, she resigns during a live interview with Alix and Laney Thacker, humiliating Alix, who still fails to understand what she's done wrong.

Kelley Copeland – Kelley Copeland is Emira’s current boyfriend and Alix Chamberlain’s ex-boyfriend. Alix resents Kelley for their traumatic breakup. In high school, Alix wrote an embarrassing love letter to Kelley to invite him to her empty house (her parents would be away that weekend). When Robbie Cormier and his popular (and predominantly Black) friends showed up too, Alix (incorrectly) believed that Kelley shared the letter with Robbie to score social points. Alix calls the police on the kids, Robbie is arrested, and the whole school—Kelley included—accuses her of being racist and elitist. Alix soon realizes that she’s wrong—a locker malfunction, not Kelley, caused the letter to fall into Robbie’s locker—but she doesn’t admit it to anybody and continues to play the victim. She also maintains that Kelley fetishizes Black people. Later, when she discovers that Kelley is dating Emira, she uses this claim to try to break up their relationship. Kelley first meets Emira when he videorecords her altercation with the security guard who racially profiles her at Market Depot. They reconnect later on and start a relationship. Though Kelley and Emira seem to genuinely like each other, their relationship is complicated. Kelley repeatedly tries to convince Emira to release the video footage he recorded at Market Depot and demand justice, and he doesn’t understand why Emira just wants to put everything behind her. Meanwhile, though Kelley clearly likes and respects Black culture, Alix’s claim about Kelley’s supposed fetishization of Black people might have some truth to it. Years after Kelley and Emira break up (Emira breaks up with Kelley after incorrectly assuming that he, not Alix, released the Market Depot video), Emira spots Kelley walking with a new Black girlfriend, which suggests to her that Black women are mere cultural currency to him—not people in their own right. Ultimately, Emira removes Kelley and Alix from her life for the same reason: maintaining relationships with well-intentioned but ignorant white people requires emotional energy she’s no longer willing to give.

Briar Chamberlain – Briar Chamberlain is Alix’s young daughter—she’s two years old when the novel begins, but she celebrates her third birthday later on. Briar is a sensitive, intelligent, and inquisitive child who is constantly asking questions and making zany observations about the world around her. Alix became pregnant with Briar just as her business venture, LetHer Speak, was taking off, and she has always viewed Briar as an inconvenience. Unlike Emira, who loves and celebrates Briar’s weirdness, Alix resents it and wishes Briar would be quieter and more normal—more like Bella, Laney Thacker’s child. And in an ironic twist for a woman whose whole business focuses on helping women find their voices, Alix detests the sound of Briar’s voice. Alix’s conflicted feelings about motherhood only grow when the Chamberlains relocate from Manhattan to Philadelphia, and so Alix hires Emira to care for Briar, supposedly so that Alix has more time to work (though Alix does hardly any work at all during her free time). It often seems that Emira is the only person in Briar’s life

who sees Briar as a person and takes an active interest in her life—it’s Emira who recognizes Briar’s love of fish and buys her a goldfish (**Spoons**) for Briar’s birthday and later takes Briar to the aquarium. Briar is the only reason Emira works for the Chamberlains as long as she does: though Briar is young, she’s highly perceptive and can already sense that her younger sister Catherine is Alix’s favorite. Before Emira parts ways with the Chamberlains once and for all, she urges Alix to start acting like she likes Briar before it’s too late.

Zara – Zara is Emira’s best friend. She’s confident and outspoken. Zara is a nurse—a longtime dream of hers—and though she’s always known what she’s wanted to do with her life, she doesn’t judge Emira for being less certain about her future. Zara supports Emira, but she also is honest with her: when Emira is too busy pouting over her own financial woes to be happy for their friend Shaunie for getting a promotion, Zara tells Emira to get over herself. Emira sometimes feels like an outsider in her friend group, since all her friends are further ahead in their careers and have more financial stability than she does. Zara accompanies Emira to the Chamberlains’ house to support her during the interview with Laney Thacker that Alix has arranged for them to talk about the recently-leaked footage of Emira’s altercation with a security guard at Market Depot. While there, Zara overhears Alix ask Tamra if she was right to release the Market Depot footage. She immediately relays this information to Emira and tells Emira that she can no longer work for the Chamberlains. With Zara’s help, Emira successfully secures a reasonable salary with benefits with Beverly, her boss at the Green Party, which allows Emira the financial stability she needs to quit babysitting. She also jumps in front of Laney Thacker’s news crew’s cameras and makes a scene in support of Emira after Emira announces her resignation and humiliates Alix on live TV.

Peter Chamberlain – Peter Chamberlain is Alix’s husband. He is a news anchor for a local Philadelphia station. Peter often expresses his support for Alix in her business pursuits—and it does seem that he genuinely believes in her and wants her to succeed. At the same time, though, it’s Peter who initiates the Chamberlains’ move from their crowded Manhattan apartment to a larger house in Philadelphia—a decision that isolates Alix from the friends and business acquaintances that motivate her and give her a sense of meaning. In addition, despite the fact that Peter is just as much his children’s parent as Alix, there’s hardly any mention of him doing child care of any kind. At the beginning of the novel, when Peter is still new to the Philadelphia station, he makes a careless joke that many viewers consider to have a racist and sexist connotation. As a result, some kids throw an egg through the Chamberlains’ front window, prompting the Chamberlains to call the police. This is the family emergency that compels Alix to call Emira to watch Briar, a decision that culminates in the Market Depot incident that sets in motion the novel’s central conflicts. Peter isn’t a

huge presence in the book, but his character does illustrate how gender, in addition to class and race, plays a role in a person's ability to succeed in life. As an example, Peter's gaffe in the beginning of the novel is serious enough for people to vandalize the Chamberlains' house—yet people almost immediately forget about or forgive him for his mistake, while the book's female characters—and especially Black female characters—don't have nearly as much freedom to mess up.

Tamra – Tamra is one of Alix's best friends. Like all the women in Alix's Manhattan friend group, Tamra is a smart, confident, and snarky woman with children and a successful career. Tamra is the principal of an elite private school in Manhattan and mother to two young children, Imani and Cleo. She has a husband, though he doesn't appear in the novel. Like the other women in Alix's friend group, Tamra pays a nanny (Shelby) to care for her children. When Alix lived in Manhattan, she and her friends supported each other through their careers and motherhood, and Alix misses them greatly when she relocates to Philadelphia. Tamra, who is Black, is especially skeptical of Kelley and Emira's relationship—she believes that Kelley fetishizes Black women and is using Emira for personal validation. But Tamra's Black identity is complicated. When Tamra meets Emira, she eagerly tries to connect with Emira over their shared Black identity, encouraging Emira to set goals for herself and do everything she can to achieve them—including using her relationship with the Chamberlains, who are well-connected. Yet Tamra also supports Alix's decision to disregard Emira's wishes and leak the Market Depot footage to news outlets. She even claims that meeting Alix is the best thing that has ever happened to Emira. Toward the end of the book, Zara describes Tamra as “that Uncle Tom Tamra woman.” “Uncle Tom” is a term that alludes to the titular character of the 1852 novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. It describes a Black person who betrays their cultural or social identity, opting instead to be excessively obedient to or accommodating of white people and white culture. Zara is suggesting that Tamra has compromised her Black identity to be accepted and successful in the white, privileged world that Alix's friend group inhabits—and that she's trying to get Emira to do the same.

Rachel – Rachel is one of Alix's best friends. Like all the women in Alix's Manhattan friend group, Rachel is a smart, confident, and snarky woman who balances motherhood with a successful career. Rachel manages a firm that designs book covers. She is Jewish and Japanese, twice divorced, and mother to a five-year-old son, Hudson. When Alix lived in Manhattan, she and her friends would regularly get together to commiserate and drink wine, and Alix misses them greatly when she relocates from Manhattan to Philadelphia. Rachel can be extremely bold and direct. Like the other women in Alix's friend group, Rachel pays a woman (Arnetta) to care for her children. Rachel, Jodi, and Tamra are celebrating Thanksgiving at Alix's house on the fateful day that Alix discovers that Emira just so happens to be

dating Kelley Copeland, Alix's high school boyfriend. Alix's friends only know Alix's (fabricated) version of Alix's high school drama with Kelley Copeland and Robbie Cormier, and so they stand by her when she expresses concern over Emira's relationship with Kelley.

Jodi – Jodi is one of Alix's best friends. Alix met Jodi in the waiting room at Briar's four-month checkup, and Jodi introduced her to Tamra and Rachel, who quickly welcomed Alix into their friend group. Like Tamra and Rachel, Jodi is a smart, confident, and snarky woman with a successful career and children—she is a children's casting director, and she and her husband Walter have two children together, Prudence and Payne. When Alix lived in Manhattan, she and her friends would regularly get together to talk and drink wine. They'd support each other as they navigated the challenges of their careers and motherhood, and Alix misses her friends greatly when she moves to Philadelphia. Like the other women, Jodi pays a regular sitter, Carmen, to care for her children. Jodi is the more caring and compassionate friend of the group, particularly in comparison to Rachel, who can be overly direct and unfeeling at times. Because Alix's friends only know Alix's (incomplete) version of her high school drama with Kelley Copeland, they stand by her when she expresses concern over Emira and Kelley's relationship.

Robbie Cormier – Robbie Cormier is a Black student who attended Beacon Smith High School with Alix and Kelley in Allentown, Pennsylvania. In high school, Robbie was a star athlete, and he was also funny, attractive, and popular with students and teachers alike. Kelley and Robbie became friends following Kelley's breakup with Alix, and they remain good friends as adults. Robbie played a major role in Kelley's breakup with Alix, though at the end of the novel, it's revealed that Alix has misconstrued this role. In high school, a locker malfunction (Robbie's locker is directly below Kelley's) causes a love letter that Alix had written for Kelley to slip into Robbie's locker. In the letter, Alix invited Kelley to come over to her house while her parents were away for the weekend. When Robbie and his friends (many of whom, like Robbie, were Black) later arrived at Alix's house uninvited, Alix assumed that Kelley broke her trust, showed Robbie the letter, and orchestrated the situation to get Robbie's popular, predominantly Black friend group to accept him. Enraged, Alix ended up calling the police on the kids; Robbie was arrested, and he lost his college scholarship as a result. In no time, everyone turned on Alix and accused her of being racist and elitist; Kelley broke up with her and became close friends with Robbie and his crowd. Even though Alix soon discovers the truth about the letter, she publicly maintains her initial story to continue playing the victim. She also cites Kelley's friendship with Robbie as evidence that Kelley is fetishizing Emira's Blackness.

Laney Thacker – Laney Thacker is Peter Chamberlain's co-anchor at the news station. She has a four-year-old daughter,

Bella, who is cute, graceful, and quiet—the exact opposite of Briar. Laney is a kind and supportive woman who goes out of her way to make Alix feel welcome in Philadelphia. Nevertheless, Alix finds Laney to be overly friendly, corny, and unsophisticated compared to her New York friends. Though Alix isn't overt in her feelings about Laney, Emira can sense that Alix dislikes and looks down on Laney, and she doesn't think it speaks well of Alix's character—she's seen how hard Laney has tried to be kind to Alix and views Alix's disdain as catty and cruel. Toward the end of the novel, on the morning of the WNFT Morning News interview Laney is holding at the Chamberlains' house, Alix makes a joke at Laney's expense, and this is what sends Emira over the edge and compels her to announce her resignation and humiliate Alix on live TV. Still, though, Laney is hardly blameless—it's Laney to whom Alix releases the Market Depot footage. And then, not only does Laney ensure that the footage spreads to the right people, but she also makes sure that she's first in line for an interview with Alix and Emira. She also claims that releasing the footage is in everyone's best interest, since it lets Laney have her interview, it gives Emira the chance to save her reputation, and it gives Alix the chance to plug her upcoming book. So, while Laney is friendly and supportive and aspires to do the right thing, she—like so many of the book's well-intentioned white characters—allows self-interest and privilege to corrupt her good intentions.

Claudette – Claudette was the Black housekeeper and caregiver the Murphys, Alix's parents, hired to do housekeeping and care for Alix and Alix's younger sister, Betheny. When Alix (then Alex) calls the police on Robbie Cormier and his friends for showing up at the Murphy house uninvited, she claims that she is doing so to protect Claudette and Betheny, but this is only an excuse Alix has created to justify her poor decision. The Murphys made Claudette wear a **shirt** with "Murphy" stitched across the back, which Kelley sees as evidence that the Murphys felt that Claudette was their property. Although Alix loved (and still loves) Claudette, she fails to understand the extent to which their relationship was founded on problematic power dynamics that always gave Alix, as the daughter of Claudette's employers, the upper hand. Furthermore, though Alix strives to be more socially conscious than her parents, she ends up repeating the cycle of oppression and systemic racism they began for her, hiring a Black woman (Emira) to care for her own child.

Shaunie – Shaunie is one of Emira's friends. She is roommates with Josefa. She is successful in her career and earns a promotion to associate marketing specialist at Sony Philadelphia midway through the novel. Above all, though, Shaunie is upbeat, reliable, fun, and a great friend. Her parents are very wealthy and help with her finances—her father cosigned her lease, for example—but she is always generous with her wealth and often treats her friends to drinks and

nights out. Still, Emira sometimes feels bitter about how much easier things seem for Shaunie because of this extra layer of financial stability. Meanwhile, Shaunie's privilege leaves her ignorant about many of Emira's financial anxieties.

Josefa – Josefa is one of Emira's friends. She's roommates with Shaunie. People refer to their apartment as "Shaunie's" place—Shaunie, whose parents are wealthy and support her financially, has furnished much of the place—but Josefa doesn't seem to mind. Where Shaunie is reliable, generous, and always caring, Josefa is socially "inconsistent," opting either to stay home and scroll through her phone or else deciding to go out and party until morning. She has a mother and sister whom she speaks Spanish with over video chat. Josefa is currently a research assistant and fellow at Drexel—and her parents have promised to support her financially so long as she is a student. Though Emira loves her friends, she sometimes feels alienated by their ambitions and the stable financial situations that allow them to pursue them.

Catherine Chamberlain Catherine Chamberlain is Alix and Peter's infant daughter—and she's clearly Alix's favorite child: while Alix takes Catherine everywhere with her, she hires Emira to care for Briar. Still, Alix seems to view Catherine as more of an accessory than a person: she likes her because she's sweet and docile and doesn't disrupt Alix's life very much. Though Briar is barely three years old, she can already sense that Catherine is Alix's favorite child, and she cries about this to Emira on Thanksgiving. Emira's (harsh but reasonable) parting words to Alix are to start acting like she likes Briar before it's too late.

Beverly – Beverly is Emira's boss at the Philadelphia Green Party, where Emira works as a transcriptionist. After the video footage of the Market Depot incident leaks, Beverly (and many other potential employers) reach out to Emira to offer her full-time work. With Zara's help, Emira successfully negotiates a reasonable salary with benefits, and this allows her to stop working for the Chamberlains after she finds out that it was Alix who released the Market Depot footage.

The Murphys – The Murphys are Alix's parents. When Alix was in high school, her parents came into a large sum of money after successfully suing a funeral home for accidentally cremating (rather than burying) Grandma and Grandpa Murphy. Then, according to Alix, they instantly became "crazy, trashy rich people" who spent their money on gaudy displays of wealth like instruments that famous musicians once owned and even a McMansion. They also hired an older Black woman, Claudette, to care for Alix and her younger sister, Betheny—and made the woman wear a **uniform** with the name "Murphy" stitched across the back, as though to mark her as their possession. Alix is ashamed of her parents—she changes her name to Alix in part to distance herself from them—and wasn't too sad when they died. Nevertheless, Alix unwittingly mimics some of the problematic behaviors she once resented in

her parents. For instance, she, too, hires a Black woman to care for her child.

Paula Christi – Paula Christi is the regional director of the U.S. Census Bureau. Emira becomes Paula’s administrative assistant only weeks after she quits working for the Chamberlains. Paula is a fair, approachable boss, and Emira enjoys working for her. After Emira has worked for Paula for two years, Paula suggests that Emira should stop working for her and pursue something she’s really passionate about, but Emira is content where she is.

The Woman with Short Gray Hair – Emira encounters the woman with short gray hair at Market Depot the night a security guard accuses Emira of kidnapping Briar Chamberlain. It’s this woman who reports Emira to the security guard—she claims that she saw Emira, Zara, and Briar “booty dancing” and decided that the situation didn’t “feel right.”

The Security Guard – In response to a racist complaint the woman with short gray hair makes, the security guard confronts Emira and Briar at Market Depot, an upscale grocery store, and accuses Emira of kidnapping Briar. Though Emira initially tries to keep her cool, she becomes angry as the guard and the woman twist her words and refuse to believe her. It’s only after Emira calls Peter Chamberlain—“an old white guy”—to the store to explain the situation that the guard backs off. Kelley records the altercation—this is how he and Emira meet—and tries to convince her to publish it online.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Maura – Maura is Alix’s editor. Though patient with Alix at first, Maura eventually threatens to change Alix’s contract if Alix continues to ignore her emails and fail to meet deadlines.

Betheny – Betheny is Alix’s younger sister. When Alix calls the police on Robbie Cormier and his friends, she claims that it’s to protect Betheny and Claudette, but this is really just an excuse she’s come up with to justify her actions.

Mr. Tucker – Mr. Tucker is Emira’s father. He keeps bees. Emira feels inadequate and aimless compared to the rest of her family, who share “a proclivity toward craftsmanship.”

Mrs. Tucker – Mrs. Tucker is Emira’s mother. She’s a book binder. Emira feels inadequate and aimless compared to the rest of her family, who share “a proclivity toward craftsmanship.”

Alfie Tucker – Alfie Tucker is Emira’s 21-year-old brother. He won second place in the 2013 National Latte Art Competition and now apprentices at a roastery in Austin, Texas. Emira feels inadequate and aimless compared to the rest of her family, who share “a proclivity toward craftsmanship.”

Justyne Tucker – Justyne Tucker is Emira’s 19-year-old sister. She sews and sells clothing and also has a job designing costumes for a community college’s theatrical productions. Emira feels inadequate and aimless compared to the rest of her

family, who share “a proclivity toward craftsmanship.”

Bella Thacker – Bella Thacker is the four-year-old daughter of Laney Thacker. She’s cute and quiet and graceful—the opposite of Briar (in Alix’s opinion), and Alix seems to envy Laney because of this, contributing to her overall dislike of Laney.

Imani – Imani is one of Tamra’s young daughters.

Cleo – Cleo is one of Tamra’s young daughters.

Prudence – Prudence is Jodi’s four-and-a-half-year-old daughter.

Payne – Payne is Jodi’s one-year-old son.

Walter – Walter is Jodi’s husband.

Hudson – Hudson is Rachel’s young son.

Suzanne – Suzanne is a friend of Laney’s who accompanies Laney to a get-together at Alix’s house.

Ramona – Ramona is a friend of Laney’s who accompanies Laney to a get-together at Alix’s house.

Troy – Troy is Shaunie’s boyfriend. All of Shaunie’s friends dislike Troy but put up with him for Shaunie’s sake.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don’t have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



EXTERNAL BEHAVIOR VS. INTERNAL TRUTH

Such a Fun Age features many characters who behave in ways that contradict what they feel on the inside. This phenomenon features most prominently in Alix Chamberlain, a social media influencer, businesswoman, and champion of female empowerment (she heads a business called LetHer Speak) who employs college graduate Emira Tucker to babysit her two-year-old daughter Briar. The closest thing the novel has to an antagonist, Alix is the embodiment of performative white feminism. Though she’s often uncomfortable with the privileges her wealth and whiteness afford her, she nevertheless takes full advantage of them, often in ways that contradict her outward support for progressive ideals. Alix’s business, LetHer Speak, urges women to find their voices and empower themselves through self-confidence and career development. Yet it soon becomes clear that the values Alix and her brand preach are performative, superficial, and insincere. For example, while LetHer Speak is supposedly about helping women find their voices and become self-reliant, Alix finds her daughter Briar’s confident, curious nature to be a nuisance, and she resents the sound of Briar’s voice—she even

describes it as “loud and hoarse” and compares it to a “fire alarm.”

Meanwhile, Alix has no qualms about using Briar as a prop to make a splash on social media and expand her business. At one point, Alix breastfeeds Briar onstage at a panel discussion to make a point about empowering working mothers. Yet once there are no cameras around to document Alix in supermom mode, she becomes disinterested in motherhood and dismissive of Briar, and so she hires Emira to take care of her. And while Alix considers herself far more progressive than her parents, she repeats many of their misguided actions in her adult life: for instance, she pays a Black woman to care for her children, just like her parents did before her. And Alix also has Emira wear a LetHer Speak polo as an unofficial babysitting uniform, a detail that uncannily mirrors the way her parents made their hired caregiver, Claudette, wear a polo with the family’s last name, Murphy, stitched across its back. *Such a Fun Age* examines the disparities between characters’ external behaviors and their internal truths and, in so doing, satirizes contemporary progressivism. The novel suggests that racism, classism, and sexism are still alive and well in contemporary American society—even if people choose not to talk about them.



WHITE GUILT, IGNORANCE, AND REDEMPTION

Throughout the novel, Emira encounters many characters who are determined to empower and improve her. And while many of these characters believe (or want to believe) that they are acting purely out of concern for Emira’s wellbeing, it’s more often the case that guilt and self-interest motivate their acts of goodwill. After a grocery store security guard racially profiles Emira while she is watching Briar and accuses her of kidnapping the toddler, Alix is overcome with guilt for the role she played in this act of injustice: Emira wouldn’t have been out with Briar so late at night had Alix not called on Emira to watch Briar during a family crisis. In an effort to assuage her guilt, Alix makes Emira her personal project: she tries to become friends with Emira and make her feel like part of the family, and she also becomes obsessed with seeking justice for the racist treatment Emira experienced at Market Depot.

But Alix’s determination to atone for Emira’s traumatic experience—and for a much earlier act of injustice Alix committed as a high school senior—blinds her to the ways that her efforts to empower Emira make Emira uncomfortable and unhappy. Alix might want to be friends with Emira, but the power imbalance at the core of their employer-employee relationship prevents Emira from feeling that she and Alix can be equals. Eventually, Alix’s determination to find justice for Emira leads her to leak a recording of the Market Depot incident to the press—despite Emira’s repeated insistence that

she wants to put the incident behind her. It eventually becomes clear that Alix’s acts of solidarity only serve to alleviate Alix’s guilt over the direct and indirect ways that her wealth and white privilege contribute to Emira’s suffering. Similarly, Emira’s boyfriend (and, awkwardly, Alix’s ex-boyfriend from high school) Kelley Copeland aspires to progressive ideals—all the while objectifying and fetishizing Black people and Black culture. The novel thus shows how white guilt and ignorance can corrupt otherwise good intentions, ultimately leading people to harm the very people they claim to empower.



THE QUEST FOR MEANING

Though in many ways Alix Chamberlain and Emira Tucker couldn’t be more different, they both experience feelings of inadequacy and struggle to find meaning and purpose in their lives. Alix, a social media influencer and businesswoman, feels irrelevant and purposeless when she becomes a mother and relocates from Manhattan to Philadelphia. She struggles to find motherhood as rewarding and meaningful as the business endeavors she enjoyed before undertaking the demands of domestic life. Meanwhile, Emira, the recent college graduate whom Alix employs to care for (and love) Briar, the firstborn child Alix has come to resent, struggles with her own identity crisis. Emira comes from a family of creative, hardworking artisans: Emira’s mother binds books, Emira’s father keeps bees, Emira’s sister Justyne sews clothing, and Emira’s brother Alfie is a nationally-acclaimed latte artist. Emira might be the first person in her family to attend a four-year university, but she struggles to find something she’s genuinely passionate about. And though she adores Briar and enjoys caring for her, she simultaneously struggles to see babysitting as valid work in a society that often fails to recognize childrearing and domestic labor as meaningful. Beyond this, Emira struggles to make ends meet, and she constantly compares herself to her more financially stable and professionally successful friends, like Zara and Shaunie. One of Emira’s biggest anxieties is that she has reached adulthood without becoming an adult. Alix’s economic stability and white privilege certainly afford her more opportunities to improve herself superficially, but she and Emira contend with similar feelings of unfulfillment, uncertainty, and inadequacy. *Such a Fun Age* thus construes the quest to find meaning and purpose as a fundamental part of the human experience. While privilege can disguise or distract from that quest, it doesn’t fully eradicate it.



RACE, CLASS, AND PRIVILEGE

In *Such a Fun Age*, characters who come from privileged backgrounds—such as Alix Chamberlain, her career-driven mom friends Jodi, Tamra, and Rachel, or Kelley Copeland—enjoy (and take for granted) opportunities that people who come from more modest origins

or experience racial prejudice, such as Emira, rarely experience. Alix and her husband's economic stability, for instance, allows Alix to hire Emira to look after her children while Alix attends to other tasks. (In theory, she's supposed to be working on a book, though she fails to produce any writing over the course of the novel.) Meanwhile, Emira comes from a working-class background. Unlike her friends Shaunie and Josefa, whose parents support them financially as they transition into full-fledged adulthood, find their passions, and work their way up in their chosen fields, Emira has no financial support, and no time, energy, or funds to put toward finding herself, her voice, and her passion. For Emira, every spare ounce of energy must go toward the day-to-day challenge of making ends meet.

While gender inequality isn't the book's main focus, white male privilege undoubtedly contributes to the success that the book's male characters achieve, as well as the margin of error that society allows them. Whereas Alix Chamberlain is shamed and ruined for her hypocrisy, white privilege, and racial prejudice, her news-anchor husband, Peter Chamberlain, experiences virtually zero consequences for a racially charged remark he makes on live TV at the beginning of the novel. Similarly, Kelley Copeland, Emira's boyfriend, is arguably just as guilty as Alix of objectifying and using Black people for personal validation. However, Kelley is never really punished or called out for his actions. After Kelley and Emira break up, Kelley simply finds a new Black girlfriend and continues to associate with Black people, Black love interests, and Black culture for potentially dubious reasons (the novel implies that he fetishizes Black culture for social credibility and self-validation). *Such a Fun Age* thus examines the complex and varied ways that race, class, and privilege come together to influence a person's success.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



SPOONS THE FISH

Spoons the Fish symbolizes Emira's meaningful connection with Briar—and Alix's lack thereof. Briar loves fish, but Alix doesn't know this. For the most part, she's only interested in Briar when it's convenient for her—or when having Briar by her side looks good for her business. In contrast, Emira takes an active interest in Briar's life and cares about her zany, unusual interests for the simple reason that Briar cares about them. So, bearing in mind Briar's obsession with fish, Emira arrives at Briar's third birthday party with a goldfish in a bowl for Briar (Briar names the goldfish Spoons.) Alix's reaction to Spoons's death further illustrates her complete disregard for Briar's feelings. When Spoons dies

suddenly, just before Halloween, Alix asks Emira to pick up a new fish on her way over—Alix wants to replace Spoons before Briar can notice that he has died. Alix's mindset further illustrates how little she knows about her daughter. When Emira explains that stopping by the pet store will make them late for the Halloween recital at Briar's ballet studio that afternoon, Alix brushes Emira's concern aside, convinced that Briar doesn't care about the recital and won't remember it anyway. Emira consents, and it's only later, when Alix comes across a pair of new cat ears in Emira's purse (a costume Emira had intended to wear to the recital) and a text message from Kelley to Emira wishing her and Briar good luck, that she understands that she had underestimated how much Briar cared about the recital—and how much Emira cares about Briar.

Finally, Alix's reaction to Spoons's death also shows how misplaced her priorities are in a broader sense. Specifically, her reaction shows that she prioritizes outer appearances above inner truth. One of the main reasons that Alix wants to avoid telling Briar about Spoons's death is that she doesn't want Briar's grief to ruin the get-together Alix is having that night with Laney Thacker—in short, Alix would rather lie to Briar and maintain the outer illusion of a happy, functional family life than appear less than perfect in front of others to validate Briar's perfectly reasonable grief and share a learning experience with her daughter.



THE LETHER SPEAK POLO

The LetHer Speak Polo—Emira's unofficial babysitting uniform—symbolizes how Alix's privilege makes her ignorant of Emira's struggles. It also shows how Alix's privilege prevents her from supporting Emira positively and meaningfully. Alix doesn't explicitly tell Emira to wear the LetHer Speak polo when she babysits—she only offers Emira one of the polos so that Emira doesn't get her clothes dirty when she is painting with Briar one day. And yet, from that day forth, Emira starts each shift by changing into the polo until it gradually becomes just another part of her routine. Alix is thrilled when she realizes this.

That Alix reacts to Emira wearing a uniform—and especially one that displays the name of Alix's business in bold letters for all to see—with delight instead of horror shows how unaware she is of the power dynamics that govern her and Emira's relationship. It never occurs to Alix that Emira wearing a polo with the name of Alix's business on it might visually suggest that Alix possesses or controls Emira (Kelley has to point this out to her). As a white, wealthy woman, Alix is rarely on the receiving end of systemic injustice, so she's seldom placed in situations where somebody has such a fundamental advantage over her. Alix's relative power makes her believe, incorrectly, that life is a level playing field for everyone.

But as a young Black woman who also lacks Alix's financial stability, Emira is constantly aware of how systemic issues of race and class put certain people at a fundamental disadvantage--and give people like Alix the upper hand. While it's true that Alix asked rather than ordered Emira to put on the polo, how free could Emira really have felt to say no to her employer, who can fire her at any moment, for any reason? Finally, Emira's LetHer Speak polo bears an uncanny resemblance to the polo that Alix's parents made their Black housekeeper and caregiver, Claudette, wear. Claudette's uniform carries more obviously problematic symbolism than Emira's—it featured the family's last name, "Murphy," stitched across the polo, visually identifying Claudette as their property. Nevertheless, delight over Emira's polo shows how Alix unwittingly mimics problematic behavior she has long vowed never to repeat. Though Alix may disapprove of her parents' views and behaviors, her economic and racial identity imbues her with a degree of privilege that makes these problematic behaviors come easily and unnoticeably. Emira's LetHer Speak polo shows how privilege can corrupt otherwise good intentions.


the guard's response to her anger. In his expression, she can see him say, "*I see you now. I know exactly who you are.*" At this moment, Emira becomes the aggressive and dangerous Black woman the guard assumed her to be when he profiled her. Though she only became this way once the guard physically threatened and unlawfully detained her, none of this matters to the guard—his prejudice makes him disregard his own poor behavior and see only what he wants to see.

This passage illustrates how systemic racism and personal prejudice put Black people at a disadvantage by being held to an unreasonable standard of behavior. The guard doesn't see Emira as a person who is responding reasonably to being threatened and pushed beyond her limits—he sees her actively proving that his racist stereotypes about Black people are correct.

Chapter 2 Quotes

☝ On thick, textured stationery and with dreamy cursive handwriting, Alix asked nicely for the things she wanted, and it became a rare occurrence when she didn't receive them.

Related Characters: Alix Chamberlain/Alex Murphy, Emira Tucker, The Security Guard, Briar Chamberlain

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 20

Explanation and Analysis

Chapter Two gives some background on the origins of Alix Chamberlain's business, LetHer Speak. Alix got her start writing letters to businesses, asking for free products in exchange for handwritten reviews, which she'd then post to her blog. Many businesses accepted Alix's requests, and she learned that if she "asked nicely for the things she wanted," she'd most likely receive them. This is an apt distillation of Alix's privilege and how it shapes her worldview. As a white, wealthy woman, she's learned that working hard, following the rules, and asking for things nicely are all a person needs to succeed. She assumes this is true for everyone, even those who don't have all the privileges and opportunities she has had.

This is the core flaw of the specific brand of feminism that Alix promotes with her business. It assumes, incorrectly, that every woman has access to the same treatments and opportunities as Alix. Still, the reality is that Alix's class background and race have given her an advantage. Women like Emira, by contrast, may have to work harder to prove





QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the G.P. Putnam's Sons edition of *Such a Fun Age* published in 2021.

Chapter 1 Quotes

☝ With her phone pressed to her face and Briar's hands in her hair, Emira screamed, "You're not even a real cop, so you back up, son!" And then she watched his face shift. His eyes said, *I see you now. I know exactly who you are*, and Emira held her breath as he began to call for backup.

Related Characters: Emira Tucker (speaker), The Security Guard, Briar Chamberlain, Alix Chamberlain/Alex Murphy

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 15

Explanation and Analysis



At Alix Chamberlain's request, Emira takes Emira to Market Depot, an upscale grocery store, to kill time while the Chamberlains deal with the police (kids have just thrown eggs at their house in response to Peter making an accidental racist joke on the air). There, a security guard racially profiles Emira and accuses her of kidnapping Briar. Emira tries to defend herself calmly, but the situation escalates, and she loses her temper after the guard tries to physically take her phone from her. Here, Emira describes

their worth and get the things they want. Emira's traumatic experience with the racist security guard at Market Depot demonstrates this. She explains to the guard that she's Briar's babysitter and asks him to believe her, but his prejudice (and broader systemic racism) prevents him from believing her.

Chapter 4 Quotes

☛ If the decision had been Briar's, the theme of her party would have been glasses because the toddler savagely wanted glasses, and to touch everyone else's glasses, and to see how she looked in all of the glasses. But Briar also loved airplanes and pointing at them and the sounds they made, and Alix felt that this, out of all of Briar's other interests (smelling tea bags, other people's belly buttons, touching the soft skin on Mama's earlobe), should be openly encouraged.

Related Characters: Alix Chamberlain/Alex Murphy, Briar Chamberlain, Catherine Chamberlain

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 48

Explanation and Analysis

Alix observes Briar's ongoing birthday party and considers its airplane theme, which Alix chose because, "out of all of Briar's other interests," it's the one Alix thinks she ought to "openly encourage[.]" Alix's thought process offers insight into how she feels about Briar, particularly how she resents Briar's quirkiness. By this point in the book, it's clear that Alix favors her younger daughter, Catherine, who is calm, quiet, and normal. With Catherine strapped to her chest, Alix achieves the picture of a confident and successful working mother that she wants to project to the world. By contrast, she resents Briar's quirkiness—which is such a major part of Briar's personality—because Briar's quirkiness embarrasses Alix and cuts into Alix's attempts to portray herself as the perfect mother of normal little girls.


So, this scene shows that Alix doesn't really see Briar as a person whose interests, needs, and wants deserve to be valued and respected. Instead, she sees Briar as an accessory that can help her achieve the appearance of an ideal life—or as a nuisance that can destroy it. Ultimately, then, Alix doesn't choose the airplane theme to make Briar happy—she chooses it because she thinks having a daughter who's interested in aviation, a conventionally masculine field, fits in with LetHer Speak's mission of female empowerment. By contrast, Alix tries to suppress Briar's

quirky or inane interests—her love of tea bags and belly buttons—because they contribute nothing to the outer image of female empowerment she wants to project to the world and, therefore, do nothing to advance her business.

☛ In her first week of babysitting for the Chamberlains, Emira took Briar to a painting class. She'd been wearing an oversized knit cardigan, the kind that paint would never come out of, and Alix offered her one of her many white LetHer Speak polos. "I actually have tons of these and you're the same size as my old interns," she'd said. "Well, they might be a bit big on you, but you're welcome to wear one anytime." This became Emira's uniform. Three times a week, Alix came downstairs to find Emira slipping a white polo over her head. She hung it up on the coatrack just before she left. And suddenly, as Alix walked through blue ribbons hanging from the balloons above, the tenderness of this tradition made her throat start to close.

Related Characters: Alix Chamberlain/Alex Murphy, Emira Tucker, Briar Chamberlain

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 49

Explanation and Analysis



Alix walks downstairs the day of Briar's birthday party and sees Emira wearing one of Alix's old LetHer Speak polos, and she remembers how "Emira's uniform" came to be. Early in Emira's time working for the Chamberlains, Alix offers her a LetHer Speak polo and tells Emira she's free to wear one any time. Though it's true that Alix hadn't explicitly asked Emira to wear the polo as a uniform, she also hasn't ensured that Emira knows it's okay to wear her own clothes while she's on the job, either. Alix is ignorant of how her and Emira's differing levels of power influence their relationship and compromise Emira's ability to speak freely with Alix. As Emira's employer, Alix has the upper hand in their relationship, which places the burden on Emira to ensure that she does things to remain in Alix's good graces—in this case, by continuing to wear Alix's LetHer Speak polo.


In this scene, the polo becomes a symbol of not only the power dynamics that rule their relationship, but also Alix's total obliviousness to those power dynamics. In her quest to make Emira feel like an equal—like part of the family—Alix fails to see how her power over Emira compromises their ability to interact as equals. A true friendship is a

relationship people enter into voluntarily, and it's based on mutual understanding and trust. If a person doesn't have the agency to dictate how they enter or leave a friendship, then it's not friendship—it's servitude. But Alix doesn't realize this, so she sees Emira's habit of wearing the LetHer Speak polos as a heartwarming "tradition" that Emira upholds voluntarily rather than a calculated decision based on Emira's need to keep her job and continue getting paid.

●● As she turned the bowl so that the ribbon faced forward, Alix remembered. Yes. Emira had asked if she could get Briar a fish for her birthday. She'd asked both Alix and Peter days ago. Alix hadn't considered it would be a real one, because she hadn't really been listening, but here it was, gold and wiggling.

Related Characters: Briar Chamberlain, Peter Chamberlain, Alix Chamberlain/Alex Murphy, Emira Tucker

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 51

Explanation and Analysis

When Emira shows up at Briar's birthday party with a live goldfish for Briar, Alix is initially totally caught off guard. At first, she fails to recall how Emira had asked her and Peter for permission to give Briar the present. Alix's forgetfulness shows what little interest she has in Briar's life. Typically, Alix sees Briar as a nuisance. She thinks that Briar's constant chatter is annoying, and she feels that having to take care of Briar and answer her seemingly endless questions distracts her from the more outwardly impressive work of writing her book and operating her business. As such, Alix doesn't take the time to learn about or encourage many of Briar's interests, especially those which do not contribute to Alix's idea of an ideal life or cohere with the values of professional success and female empowerment that are central to Alix's business, LetHer Speak.

So when Alix at first does not remember Emira's request to get Briar a fish for her birthday, it's not because she has a lot on her plate and the detail simply slipped through the cracks—it's because "she hadn't really been listening," because she actively disregards any of Briar's interests that aren't useful to her or her business. By contrast, the fact that Emira thinks of getting Briar a fish for her birthday shows that Emira *does* listen to Briar and values Briar's

interests. Emira cares about Briar as a person in her own right, so Briar's interests matter to Emira because they're essential to Briar—not because they reflect well on Emira.

Chapter 6 Quotes

●● There were moments like this that Alix tried to breeze over, but they got stuck somewhere between her heart and ears. She knew Emira had gone to college. She knew Emira had majored in English. But sometimes, after seeing her paused songs with titles like "Dope Bitch" and "Y'all Already Know," and then hearing her use words like *connoisseur*, Alix was filled with feelings that went from confused and highly impressed to low and guilty in response to the first reaction. There was no reason for Emira to be unfamiliar with this word. And there was no reason for Alix to be impressed. Alix completely knew these things, but only when she reminded herself to stop thinking them in the first place.

Related Characters: Alix Chamberlain/Alex Murphy, Emira Tucker

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 79

Explanation and Analysis

As Emira continues to resist Alix's attempts at friendship, Alix takes things into her own hands and starts snooping around in Emira's phone. But Alix doesn't know what to make of the information she finds there. She finds it contradictory and confusing that Emira, who "had gone to college" and "majored in English," should be a fan of "songs with titles like "Dope Bitch" and "Y'all Already Know." And she doesn't think that people who listen to these songs "use words like *connoisseur*"—or that they even know what words like this mean. Alix's inability to make sense of Emira's personality and interests reveals her subconscious personal prejudices against Black culture. It surprises Alix that Emira should use a word like *connoisseur* because she subconsciously believes that hip hop or rap ("Dope Bitch" and "Y'all Already Know" are songs by hip hop artists Kamaiyah and Slaughterhouse, respectively), genres developed by inner-city African American people, is a lower art form that should be below the standards of a college-educated person.

Thus, the music that Alix finds on Emira's phone doesn't cohere with the image of Emira that Alix has constructed in her head. While Alix believes that she is a socially conscious person who believes in equality, this passage suggests that she maintains subconscious prejudices against Black people

and culture. And this compromises her ability to adequately support and empower Emira, since it limits the degree to which Alix sees Emira's Blackness as a positive trait rather than something that ought to be suppressed. Alix thinks she wants to empower Emira, but what she really wants is to change Emira to conform to her white, privileged vision of success.

Chapter 7 Quotes

☛☛ Emira had dated one white guy before, and repeatedly hooked up with another during the summer after college. They both loved bringing her to parties, and they told her she should try wearing her hair naturally. And suddenly, in a way they hadn't in the first few interactions, these white men had a lot to say about government-funded housing, minimum wage, and the quotes from Martin Luther King Jr. [...] But Kelley seemed different. [...] but still . . . shouldn't he have said "the N-word" instead? [...] Sitting across from him, she wrestled with feeling moderately appalled that he had said the whole thing, with that painfully distinctive hard r sound at the end, but as she watched the veins in his hands move as he took a last bite, she settled on, *You know what? Imma let you get away with that too.*

Related Characters: Emira Tucker, Kelley Copeland

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 93

Explanation and Analysis

After Kelley shocks Emira by saying "nigger" instead of "the N-word" on one of their first dates, she considers how Kelley, who is white, approaches their interracial relationship compared to other white men she's dated in the past.

These men "loved bringing her to parties, and they told her she should try wearing her hair naturally." They also started to "ha[ve] a lot to say about government-funded housing, minimum wage, and the quotes from Martin Luther King Jr. about moderates, the ones that 'people don't want to hear.'" In remembering these details as representative of her relationships with white men in the past, Emira is suggesting that white men who've wanted to date her have viewed her as an asset. Dating a Black girl, these men may have reasoned, shows the world that they are open minded and champions of Black people and Black culture.

The irony of this, of course, is that by reducing Emira to a symbol of Blackness, these men are really insinuating that Emira's race defines her on some fundamental,

unchangeable level—that she has no value to them outside of her race and her ability to make them look like progressive, socially conscious people to the rest of the world. When Emira expresses that she'd thought Kelley was different than these men, she's saying that she'd thought that Kelley appreciated her for who she is—not for the way being with her makes him look in front of others. So when Kelley's careless use of "the N-word" makes Emira doubt her initial thoughts on Kelley, it also calls into question her certainty that race won't create issues in their relationship.

Chapter 8 Quotes

☛☛ Somehow, even worse, that night at the Murphy house accomplished everything Kelley had evidently hoped it would. Alex learned that Kelley had left her house only to run into Robbie's fleeing friends on the street. He drove them to the precinct, where they waited all night until Robbie was released. Kelley was the one to drive Robbie home.

Related Characters: Alix Chamberlain/Alex Murphy, Kelley Copeland, Emira Tucker, Robbie Cormier

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 109

Explanation and Analysis

Alix remembers when she and her friends confided in one another about their most embarrassing moments. Alix had told them about her traumatic senior year of high school when everyone ostracized her—and Kelley even broke up with her—for calling the police on a group of Black kids who showed up at her parents' house uninvited. The police arrested Robbie Cormier, a popular Black athlete, when they found cocaine in his pocket. Thinking back on the incident, Alix decides that the way Kelley seized the opportunity to ingratiate himself with Robbie Cormier and his popular crowd was even more hurtful than her social ostracization. Alix believes that this is precisely the outcome Kelley had in mind when he showed Robbie Cormier her note inviting Kelley over to her house that night.



This passage is important because it's the first time readers hear Alix's perspective on her feud with Kelley Copeland. Of course, near the end of the book, the novel will reveal that Alix has known all along that Kelley had nothing to do with Robbie and his friends showing up. Yet, she chooses to believe that Kelley orchestrated the event because it's easier for her to demonize Kelley than admit that her actions that night were misguided and arguably racist. When Alix states that the worst part of that night was that it


went down exactly the way Kelley intended, she seems to be insinuating that Kelley's betrayal—not his fetishization of Black people or her peers characterizing her as racist and elitist—is what she's actually still mad about after all these years. Knowing this, one can argue that Alix's mission to break up Emira and Kelley isn't out of concern for Emira but to get back at Kelley, which reveals just how performative and insincere her anti-racist crusade truly is.

Chapter 9 Quotes

☝☝ “Bri, look.” Alix picked up a pink ball from a bin of toys and tossed it down the hall. Briar gasped, overjoyed, and dutifully pumped her arms as she went running after it.

Related Characters: Alix Chamberlain/Alex Murphy (speaker), Briar Chamberlain, Emira Tucker

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 114


Explanation and Analysis

Alix is on the phone with Emira, discreetly ordering her to pick up a new goldfish to replace Spoons, who has just died. When the unceasingly curious Briar won't stop asking Alix questions about birds, Alix throws a pink ball down the hallway to get Briar to leave her alone. This darkly humorous (but also depressing) scene shows what little concern Alix has for Briar's emotions. Not only is Alix purposefully covering up the death of Briar's beloved pet fish, but she's also literally treating Briar like a dog, throwing a ball for her to fetch. This scene shows that the supermom persona Alix puts on to promote her female-empowerment focused business, LetHer Speak, is little more than an illusion. In reality, Alix is not balancing motherhood and a career—as this scene demonstrates, she repeatedly fails to provide Briar with the attention and emotional nourishment she requires. The disregard for Briar that Alix exhibits here is part of a problematic pattern of behavior that persists regardless of how busy Alix is with her business.

☝☝ Whenever Alix was afraid that Emira was mad at her, she came back to the same line of thought: *Oh God, did she finally see what Peter said on the news? No, she couldn't have. She's always like this, right?* Emira came upstairs as Alix finished washing her hands.

Related Characters: Alix Chamberlain/Alex Murphy, Emira Tucker, Laney Thacker, Briar Chamberlain, Peter Chamberlain

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 117

Explanation and Analysis

Emira arrives with a goldfish to replace Spoons, and she seems upset with Alix. Alix's first thought now—and every other time Emira seems upset—is that Emira has found out about the unintentional (but nevertheless racist) remark Peter made on the news and is going to quit over it. Alix, of course, is wrong about this. Emira is mad, but it's not because of Peter's remark—it's because of how badly Alix is handling Spoons's death. Before Alix arrived for her shift that day, Alix ordered her to pick up a replacement goldfish so that Alix wouldn't have to tell Briar about Spoons's death. She doesn't want Briar's grief to infringe on the evening get-together she has planned with Laney Thacker. Emira was hesitant to stop by the pet store, since doing so would make Briar miss her ballet studio's special Halloween recital—something Briar has been looking forward to—but Alix told Emira that it wasn't a big deal and that getting the goldfish should take precedent.

Alix's actions upset Emira because they show how little Alix knows about Briar. She doesn't know what's important to her daughter, and she repeatedly prioritizes her own feelings above Briar's. This passage also shows how ignorant Alix is about her own behavior; it never crosses her mind that Emira might be mad at her, rather than at her husband. This is one of many instances where Alix's ignorance about herself undermines her otherwise good intentions and leads her to hurt Emira.

Chapter 10 Quotes

☝☝ Shaunie's two-bedroom apartment had a kitchen with an exposed brick wall and a fire escape outside the window. Josefa lived there too, but Josefa never objected to anyone referring to the space as “Shaunie's.” It was filled with Shaunie's things, and co-signed by Shaunie's dad.

Related Characters: Emira Tucker, Shaunie, Josefa

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 124

Explanation and Analysis

Emira joins her friends at Shaunie's apartment, where everyone is celebrating Shaunie's recent promotion. Emira is too tired from her long and emotionally trying day at work to feel much like celebrating. Furthermore, she's feeling bitter about her friends' comparatively more secure financial situations and how having a financial safety net (in Shaunie's case, parental support) gives them many advantages that Emira simply doesn't have. Here, Emira considers the apartment that Shaunie shares with Josefa. Though both women live in the apartment, everyone thinks of the place as "Shaunie's" because the place is "filled with Shaunie's things, and co-signed by Shaunie's dad." Emira's simple observation articulates how a person's class can give them advantages over others.

When people refer to Shaunie and Josefa's apartment as "Shaunie's," they symbolically erase Josefa's claim to the apartment, even though both of them live there. Instead, Shaunie's wealth—symbolized by her many things and the fact that she has a father who is willing and able to co-sign a lease with her—gives Shaunie the right to claim the place as her own. Emira's observation, then, shows how Shaunie's inherited wealth (and not necessarily her hard work or ambition) gives her an advantage over Josefa. More broadly, Emira's observation challenges the assumption that a person's success in life is the product of hard work and determination alone. Often, the privileges a person was fortunate enough to be born with play a more significant role in determining success.

Chapter 11 Quotes

☛☛ Alix also found herself reorganizing her lifestyle around Emira, despite the fact that she didn't have an explicit reason to. If Alix went shopping, she took the tags off clothes and other items immediately so Emira couldn't see how much she'd spent, even though Emira wasn't the type to show interest or ask. Alix no longer felt comfortable leaving out certain books or magazines, because she feared Emira eyeing her Marie Kondo book and subsequently thinking, *Wow, how privileged are you that you need to buy a hardcover book that tells you how to get rid of all your other expensive shit.*

Related Characters: Alix Chamberlain/Alex Murphy, Emira Tucker

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 138

Explanation and Analysis

As Alix continues to fail at her project of becoming friends with Emira, she begins to consider that "her lifestyle" might be the problem—that Emira dislikes Alix because she thinks she's an out-of-touch snob. To try to counteract this, Alix starts to hide the evidence of her material wealth, removing the price tags of the clothes she buys and hiding "certain books or magazines" that cater to affluent people. The Marie Kondo book referenced here is *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up: The Japanese Art of Decluttering and Organizing*, a book that instructs its reader how to improve their lives by getting rid of frivolous items and living a minimalist lifestyle. Alix fears that Emira would see the book as a hallmark of privilege, since it caters to an audience whose biggest problem is that they have too many things—when there are so many people who struggle to get by with not enough. Alix's belief that hiding the physical signs of her wealth will be enough to level the playing field for her and Emira, though, misses the bigger issue. In reality, it's Alix's actual privilege—not material symbols of it—that prevents her and Emira from associating with each other as friends and equals.

Chapter 13 Quotes

☛☛ The reality of how completely different this run-in was from the last fifteen years of Kelley Copeland fantasies came down on Alix and crushed her lungs. She was still eight pounds heavier than she'd been before Catherine. The current state of her home wasn't the modern, minimalist environment she'd worked so hard to achieve. And there were babies everywhere, not just the sleeping cute kind but Briar with her questions [...] Throughout marriage, motherhood, and monumental career changes, Alix had always found herself forming ideal scenarios of how she would see a grown-up Kelley Copeland, or rather, how he'd see her. There were the cliché pipe dreams (seeing him after a particularly good blowout, running into him while wearing heels at the airport), but there were elaborate premises that took Alix entire showers and subway rides to fully flesh out the logistics of.

Related Characters: Alix Chamberlain/Alex Murphy, Emira Tucker, Kelley Copeland, Briar Chamberlain

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 157

Explanation and Analysis

When Emira shows up at the Chamberlain residence on

Thanksgiving with Kelley, Alix is shocked, furious, and devastated to learn that Emira is dating her high school ex-boyfriend with whom she had a bad breakup and hasn't seen since high school. In this passage, Alix compares how strikingly different her actual reunion with Kelley is compared to the fantasies she's concocted in her mind over the years.

In her imagination, Alix encounters Kelley looking her best and at the height of her professional ascent. The reality, however, is far less glamorous: Alix sees Kelley in the chaotic environment of her house on Thanksgiving. She's heavier than she'd like to be, and she's surrounded by her own unruly child, Briar, and her friends' children. When Alix observes that this current environment is an anomaly—not “the modern, minimalist environment she'd worked so hard to achieve,” it reinforces how much Alix fixates on outer appearances. Alix wants to look good in front of others—and especially Kelley.

Still, her observation also hints at her misguided belief that outer appearance indicates how things really are. She acts as though her authentic life is “the modern, minimalist environment” of her home when in reality, the chaotic, disorganized house full of rowdy children and stress is a far more accurate representation of what her life is like. Alix built her business on curating an artificial brand for herself on her blog and social media, and it's apparent in this passage that she's begun to believe that this artificial representation of her life is genuine and not fabricated.


This passage also shows how much Alix still cares about what Kelley thinks. Knowing this helps the reader better ascertain Alix's motives for interfering with Emira and Kelley's relationship. Alix claims—to herself and her friends—that she's looking out for Emira, but this passage makes a compelling case that she's still affected by her and Kelley's breakup, and so she interferes with Kelley's current love life to get back at him.

Chapter 14 Quotes

☛☛ Emira said, “Sure,” but this all felt very strange. Not only did she not know how to fold silverware into napkins, but the pile of hand towels seemed careless in a way that didn't match Mrs. Chamberlain. Mrs. Chamberlain definitely would have completed this task before guests arrived. Had Tamra unassembled them just so she and Emira could have this moment? Weren't they all about to have dinner together anyway? Emira looked down and she was almost startled to find her own olive green dress, instead of the oversized white polo she wore every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday.

Related Characters: Emira Tucker (speaker), Alix Chamberlain/Alex Murphy, Tamra, Kelley Copeland

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 164

Explanation and Analysis

Alix is shocked to learn that Emira is dating Kelley, the high school boyfriend with whom she had a traumatic breakup. She rounds up her friends to clue them in on the situation, and Tamra agrees to keep Emira occupied before Kelley can fill her in on the situation. In this passage, Emira considers the oddness of her present situation. She knows something is up because Mrs. Chamberlain—Alix—would never leave a task like folding silverware for after guests had arrived. That Emira finds this odd speaks to how much keeping up appearances is part of Alix's character.

Another important detail in this passage is when Emira “[is] almost startled to find [that she is wearing] her own olive green dress, instead of the oversized white polo she w[ears] every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday.” The polo shirt is Emira's unofficial babysitting uniform. It's a symbol of the inequality inherent in Emira and Alix's relationship. The polo has the name of Alix's business, LetHer Speak, on it, so when Emira wears it, it's as though Alix and her business are staking their claim on Emira—owning and controlling her. So when it's a surprise to Emira to see that she's wearing her own clothes and not the shirt that signifies her subservience to Alix, she's implying that her current task is making her feel that Alix is trying to control her, even though Alix had insisted that Emira would be treated as a guest rather than an employee on Thanksgiving.

Chapter 18 Quotes

☛☛ “You're not better than anyone,” she said, “when you hang up your own coat and take your plate to the trash. I've been those girls helping out tonight. I fucking am those girls helping out tonight, and you're not making anything easier by giving them less to do. It's like eating everything on your plate 'cause you think someone else won't go hungry if you don't. You're not helping anyone but yourself.”

Related Characters: Emira Tucker (speaker), Kelley Copeland, Alix Chamberlain/Alex Murphy, Briar Chamberlain, The Security Guard

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 191

Explanation and Analysis

Emira and Kelley go to a bar after leaving the disastrous Thanksgiving at the Chamberlain residence (Kelley has just learned that Emira works for Alix Chamberlain, whom he dated in high school and believes to be a fake, racist elitist). Kelley behaved rudely to Alix at the dinner, and when he tries to defend himself by explaining what a bad person Alix is, Emira refuses to go along with him. She insinuates that Kelley thinks he's better than Alix because he practices outward displays of solidarity with disadvantaged people, such as behavior he displayed at the Thanksgiving gathering earlier that day. "You're not better than anyone," Emira tells Kelley, "When you hang up your own coat and take your plate to the trash." With this, Emira criticizes Kelley's performative solidarity, specifically (what she assumes is) Kelley's theory that if he appears outwardly helpful to working-class people, it somehow cancels out the infinite number of other ways he benefits from his own higher-class status.

In reality, Kelley's outward displays of solidarity don't do anything beyond making him feel good about himself and making other people see him as charitable or socially conscious. This is what Emira means when she says to him, "You're not helping anyone but yourself." In this way, then, Kelley is not so different from Alix, though he doesn't see it this way. Like Kelley, Alix thinks she's doing good by befriending and acting as an ally to Emira after the Market Depot incident in which a security guard racially profiled Emira. But in reality, Emira doesn't want Alix's help. Thus, Alix's actions only make her feel better about herself (Alix blames herself for the Market Depot incident because it was her idea for Emira to take Briar there so late at night).

Chapter 21 Quotes

☞☞ Alix pivoted. "At first I was just so stunned to see him at all. But knowing him as well as I did, I became a little concerned about his reasons for dating you." Emira flinched and looked at the floor. "I don't know. I think I'm like . . . pretty chill and dateable."

Related Characters: Alix Chamberlain/Alex Murphy, Emira Tucker (speaker), Kelley Copeland, Robbie Cormier

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 218-219

Explanation and Analysis

Alix returns from a brief getaway to Manhattan, feeling emboldened and self-assured enough to confront Emira about Emira's relationship with Kelley. She'd discussed with her friends how she would interfere in the relationship—but only to protect Emira. This is how Alix frames her intervention here to Emira when she confronts Emira about it in the Chamberlain residence. But Emira implicitly calls Alix out on her uncalled-for, dehumanizing attempt to interfere in Emira's personal affairs as though Emira herself isn't perfectly capable of handling her own life and relationships. Alix suggests that she's looking out for Emira—that knowing what she knows about Kelley, she is "a little concerned about his reasons for dating [Emira]," referring to her belief that Kelley fetishizes Black people and is only dating Emira to look good or cool.

But Emira shows that Alix is in fact the one who is robbing Emira of personal agency and worth, since it's she who is insinuating that there is little to Emira beyond her race. "I don't know. I think I'm like...pretty chill and dateable," Emira says to Alix, suggesting that Alix is wrong about Kelley and, what's more, guilty of the very offense of which she accuses Kelley. That is, Alix sees Emira only for her Blackness, which in this view can be celebrated or destroyed, but which constitutes the whole of her identity regardless. Emira's remark here is cutting and gets at Alix's hypocrisy. Alix claims to be about female empowerment and trying to help Emira, but the reality is that ignorance underscores all of Alix's efforts, including this one.

☞☞ "I'm not finished." Alix held up a flat hand in the air. "If you think I'm going to sit back while you try to look cool with someone who is like family to me, then you're crazy." Alix took a second to pause for effect. "If you're still okay fetishizing black people like you did in high school, fine. Just don't pull that shit with my sitter."

Related Characters: Alix Chamberlain/Alex Murphy (speaker), Emira Tucker, Kelley Copeland, Peter Chamberlain, Robbie Cormier

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 224

Explanation and Analysis

After Emira is unreceptive to Alix's attempts to interfere in her relationship with Kelley, Alix leaves her house and confronts Kelley on his lunch break. Her interaction with Kelley isn't any more successful, but it does reaffirm some of the problematic ways Alix thinks of Emira, as well as the irony of Alix's attack on Kelley for "fetishizing black people" when she herself is doing exactly that. Alix angrily accuses Kelley's decision to date Emira as yet another instance of him "fetishizing black people like [he] did in high school." She believes that Kelley associated with Black athletes like Robbie Cormier in high school to become popular, and that his present relationship with Emira is simply the latest iteration of this problematic pattern of behavior.

And yet, how Alix expresses her concern shows that she is guilty of the very thing she accuses Kelley of. She claims that Emira is "like family to [her]," yet this simply isn't true: Emira has only been working for the Chamberlains for a handful of months. Alix has only decided to befriend and become close with Emira after Emira is racially profiled while on the job, and after Peter makes a racially insensitive comment while on the air. Thus, Alix has only decided to consider Emira "family" to assuage her own guilt at sending Emira to Market Depot (an upscale supermarket) and making her vulnerable to racism. She's trying very hard to convince Emira and the rest of the world that despite Peter's gaffe, the Chamberlains are a progressive, good family that couldn't possibly be racist—they think of their Black babysitter as family, after all.

Finally, Alix shows her flawed relationship to Emira with the particular words she uses to describe her. She calls Emira "my sitter," the possessive pronoun signifying ownership and control, not friendship and equality. Whether Alix realizes it or not, she's not interested in Emira as a friend and equal—she's interested in controlling Emira and using their relationship to repair her family's relationship following Peter's offensive on-air remark and to atone for the mistake she made in calling the police on Robbie Cormier and his friends so many years ago.

“You act like what happened to you was worse than what happened to Robbie, even though—let’s not even go there. If you love Emira so much, then let her wear what she wants,” Kelley jeered. “I’m sure I didn’t handle things well back in high school. I was seventeen, I was an idiot. But at least I’m not still requiring a uniform for someone who works for me so I can pretend like I own them.”


“Ohmygod!” Alix formed fists with both hands on the table. “You have no idea what you’re talking about. She asked! I lent her a shirt!”

“You lend her the same shirt? Every day? In the business we call that a uniform.”

“You are so completely out of line.”

Related Characters: Kelley Copeland, Alix Chamberlain/Alex Murphy (speaker), Robbie Cormier, Emira Tucker, Claudette, The Murphys

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 227-228

Explanation and Analysis

After Emira is unreceptive to Alix's attempts to warn her about Kelley and interfere in the couple's relationship, Alix leaves her house and confronts Kelley during his lunch break. The confrontation goes poorly, with Kelley accusing Alix of the very racism she set out to accuse him of. Here, Kelley brings up the LetHer Speak polo—Emira's unofficial uniform—as evidence of Alix's inherent racism and classism. When Alix was in high school, her formerly middle-class parents became wealthy and snobbish and hired a Black woman, Claudette, to take care of their house and children. They even made Claudette wear a shirt with their last name, Murphy, stitched across its back in big letters, an action Kelley deems as symbolic of their belief that their wealth and racial privilege gave them the right to own Claudette.

Alix has always insisted that she has resented her parents' problematic behavior patterns. Yet, Kelley argues here that she repeatedly (if unconsciously) mimics the same behavior she supposedly condemns. Here, Kelley identifies Emira's unofficial babysitting uniform, a polo shirt with the name of Alix's business, LetHer Speak, stitched across it, as uncannily similar to the shirt that the Murphys made Claudette wear. Kelley suggests that Alix can say all she wants about how she sees Emira as a friend, family member, and equal—but until her actions match her words, she's just as prejudiced and problematic as her

parents were before her.

☛ Alix had started her day in Manhattan, ready to tell Kelley, *I know who you really are*. But now she sat in Philadelphia, participating in a losing game called “Which One of Us Is Actually More Racist?”

Related Characters: Alix Chamberlain/Alex Murphy (speaker), Emira Tucker, Peter Chamberlain, Kelley Copeland

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 228

Explanation and Analysis

After Emira is unreceptive to Alix’s attempts to warn her about Kelley and interfere in the couple’s relationship, Alix leaves the house and confronts Kelley during his lunch break. She accuses him of fetishizing Emira and using Black people to elevate his social status. The confrontation doesn’t go well, and Kelley ends up accusing Alix of the very racism that she has accused him of. Alix recognizes this, noting how she and Kelley are engaged “in a losing game called ‘Which One of Us Is Actually More Racist?’” Though Alix is mostly ignorant about the microaggression she commits against Emira and the self-serving reasons that she has made it her mission to befriend her (she wants to redeem herself after calling the police on a group of Black kids in high school, and she wants to clear her family’s name after her husband Peter made a racially insensitive joke on the air) she is correct about the “game” that she and Kelley are currently playing. Kelley and Alix are both white, wealthy, and privileged characters. And though they are well-intentioned—neither can be said to be overtly racist or prejudiced—the desire to appear socially conscious and morally correct that preempts the way they interact with Black people like Emira corrupts their capacity to treat Black people with respect and consideration. So determined are they both not to seem racist that they end up dehumanizing and disregarding the wishes of the people they want to be anti-racist toward. Instead of an impassioned effort to protect Emira against Kelley’s fetishizing, Alix’s attack on Kelley thus becomes about getting back at Kelley for (supposedly) wronging her in high school and exposing his concealed racism.

Chapter 23 Quotes

☛☛ Tamra’s eyes went small in an exaggerated and confident expression. “Oh girl, yes,” she said. “One hundred percent. This is probably the best thing to ever happen to Emira.”

Related Characters: Tamra (speaker), Alix Chamberlain/Alex Murphy, Kelley Copeland, Peter Chamberlain, Laney Thacker, Zara, Emira Tucker

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 262

Explanation and Analysis

This passage takes place the morning of the interview Laney Thacker conducts with Alix and Emira. Tamra comes to provide moral support, and Alix, thinking that she and Tamra are alone and out of earshot, asks Tamra if she was right to release the Market Depot video. Tamra replies, enthusiastically, that Alix was absolutely right to do so—and she even argues that the video’s release “is probably the best thing to ever happen to Emira.” This passage is important because it reaffirms how so many of the well-intentioned, privileged adults in Emira’s life think they know what’s best for her—and that Emira herself does not.

The passage also underscores a key aspect of Alix’s character, which is her need for external validation. Alix doesn’t feel confident or fulfilled in anything she does in life unless she has the approval of a receptive and attentive audience. This is why she scheduled this interview in the first place: she wants to repair her family’s reputation in the aftermath of an unintentionally racist remark Peter made during a local news segment, she wants to promote her new book, and, most pettily, she wants to prove to Kelley, her ex-boyfriend (who until recently was dating Emira) that she is not the racist elitist he claims she is.

But this moment is also important to the novel’s overall plot, specifically the climactic scene in which Emira goes off-script and resigns from her babysitting position on live TV, shocking and humiliating Alix. Though Alix thinks she and Tamra are alone when she asks for Tamra’s approval, Zara, on a mission to find Emira’s misplaced comb, walks back from the bathroom, overhears Alix and Tamra, and reports back to Emira. It’s then that Emira realizes that Alix betrayed her by leaking the Market Depot video to Laney Thacker, and it’s upon realizing this that Emira finally musters the strength to find her voice and speak out against Alix.

Chapter 25 Quotes

“Everybody wins with this,” Laney promised her. “Emira gets to clear her name. Peter’s little mix-up will be smoothed over. And you’ll get to come back into the spotlight a bit. And don’t worry, I know exactly how to plug your book without plugging your book. You know what I mean.”

Related Characters: Laney Thacker (speaker), Peter Chamberlain, Emira Tucker, Alix Chamberlain/Alex Murphy

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 277

Explanation and Analysis

In private, the morning of Laney Thacker’s interview with Alix and Emira, Alix asks Laney if she’s done the right thing (Alix got ahold of the video recording of the Market Depot incident via Emira’s private email account and then forwarded the video to Laney, who forwarded the video to news sources). Laney assures Alix that she has: “Everybody wins with this,” she tells Alix, framing Alix’s (and her own) decision to betray Emira’s trust as a morally dubious action that was defensible because it benefited the greater good. Laney’s defense of Alix’s actions is flimsy at best. Not only does it ignore how wrong it was for Alix to go into Emira’s private email account, but it also fails to condemn Alix for disregarding Emira’s wishes. (Emira has repeatedly insisted that she doesn’t want the video to go public and just wants to move on with her life.) Finally, Laney’s approval of Alix’s decision implies that Alix and Laney—rather than Emira—know what’s best for Emira. Laney’s words imply that Emira doesn’t know how to empower herself, so it’s in her best interest that Alix act on her behalf.


Of course, Laney isn’t knowingly being unfair to Emira. Her relatively privileged position makes her genuinely ignorant about what is most important to Emira’s empowerment. She thinks she and Alix are actually helping Emira by leaking the video and holding the interview. So, Laney’s positive assessment of Alix’s actions demonstrates the devastating consequences that can come about when well-intentioned people remain ignorant about the needs and wants of the people they want to help.

“She chose you. Emira and Kelley are no longer together. Stay with it, Alix. You’re almost there.”

Related Characters: Alix Chamberlain/Alex Murphy (speaker), Emira Tucker, Zara, Tamra, Kelley Copeland,

Laney Thacker

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 283

Explanation and Analysis

Emira’s friend Zara overhears Alix and Tamra talking and discovers that it was Alix who leaked the Market Depot video to news outlets. She tells Emira, and Emira proceeds to derail her and Alix’s interview with Laney Thacker, making subtly subversive comments that stray from the general script they’d all agree on, and then ultimately resigning from her babysitting position on live TV. These lines are Alix’s thoughts when Emira makes her first off-script remark by referring to the LetHer Speak polo she wears when she works as her “babysitting uniform.”

Alix tries to calm herself. Kelley had called the polo Emira’s uniform and accused Alix of making Emira wear it so she could feel like she owns her. So when Emira calls the shirt her “uniform,” Alix begins to doubt Emira’s loyalty to her over Kelley. Alix’s anxious thoughts here show just how misplaced her priorities are. Though she pretends that her recent actions—leaking the Market Depot video to Laney, trying to befriend Emira, interfering in Emira’s relationship with Kelley—are all for Emira’s greater good, her inner thoughts tell a different story. They show that a significant motivating factor for Alix is getting even with Kelley for humiliating her in high school by abandoning her for Robbie Cormier and the other popular Black athletes. She sees her actions as trying to make Emira loyal to her rather than Kelley, thus doing to Kelley the same thing he did to Alix so many years before. So, Alix’s anxious thoughts here show that her actions are selfish and motivated by pity. She’s not motivated by some socially conscious desire to rescue Emira from an unhealthy relationship with someone who fetishizes Black people, and she doesn’t genuinely care about seeking justice for the racial profiling Emira experienced at Market Depot.

Chapter 26 Quotes

☝☝ “All of this was for you!” Mrs. Chamberlain cried. “We wanted to help you clear your name and you turn around and do this? Whatever Kelley said, I . . . Emira. Everything we’ve done was for you. *Everything*,” she said. Her focused stare seemed to say, *I know you know what I did, and I also don’t care*. “You might be too young to understand this right now, but we have always had your best interests at heart. Emira, we, we love you.” Mrs. Chamberlain threw her hands up in surrender as she said this, as if loving Emira was despite her family’s other best interests. “I don’t . . .” She shook her head. “I don’t know what to say.”

Related Characters: Alix Chamberlain/Alex Murphy (speaker), Emira Tucker, Peter Chamberlain, Kelley Copeland

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 294

Explanation and Analysis

After Emira derails the interview between herself, Alix, and Laney Thacker by going off-script and resigning from her babysitting job on live TV, Alix confronts Emira as Emira tries to leave the Chamberlain residence. She angrily accuses Emira of humiliating her—all the while Alix and Peter Chamberlain were only trying to help Emira. Alix claims that the Chamberlains “wanted to help [Emira] clear [her] name” and empower her. But when Emira looks into Alix’s eyes, she can see the depth of Alix’s well-intentioned but ignorant actions. “I know you know what I did, and I also don’t care,” she thinks she can see in Alix’s eyes, referring to Alix’s betrayal of Emira’s trust when she went into Emira’s email account, found the video recording of the Market Depot incident, and then released the video to Laney Thacker.

Alix turns the tables on Emira, insinuating that Emira is in the wrong for implicitly calling Alix out for her bad behavior—when in fact Alix is the only person who is in the wrong. Was it humiliating and cruel for Emira to quit working for Alix so publicly and embarrassingly on live TV? Perhaps, however, Alix refuses to acknowledge how her recent actions have repeatedly gone against Emira’s wishes. Not only is Emira perfectly within her rights to quit working for the Chamberlains, but she’s justified in doing so as well.

This passage also shows that, despite Alix’s repeated insistence to Emira and herself that she wants to be friends with Emira, she doesn’t actually want this. Friendship is based on equality and mutual respect and trust. Not only has Alix shown that Emira cannot trust her, but she shows

that she’s incapable of dealing with Emira when Emira acts of her own volition. She wants to be friends with Emira, sure, but only on her own terms—only to make herself feel better for her wealth and racial privilege by having a Black friend. But her wanting this is performative and superficial at best, for the moment Emira acts of her own volition, Alix breaks down and doesn’t know what to do. Alix might claim that she and her family “love” Emira, but the only thing they love is how Emira makes them look in public. They don’t love Emira herself.

Chapter 27 Quotes

☝☝ Kelley was the guy who ruined her senior year, much in the same way that her name was spelled A-l-i-x.

Related Characters: Alix Chamberlain/Alex Murphy, Kelley Copeland, Robbie Cormier, The Murphys

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 298-299

Explanation and Analysis

This is the final line of Chapter Twenty-Seven, in which the novel finally reveals the full truth of Alix’s breakup with Kelly her senior year of high school. For years, Alix has been telling her friends—and herself—that Kelley betrayed her trust by showing her letter to Robbie Cormier and, through this, invited Robbie and his friends to Alix’s house without her knowledge or permission. It’s revealed in this chapter, though, that Alix has long known that, due to a locker malfunction, the letter ended up in Robbie’s locker instead of Kelley’s, and that Kelley never even received the letter in the first place. Despite this, though, Alix continues to tell people that “Kelley was the guy who ruined her senior year” and purporting to be the hapless victim of his betrayal and the resultant social ostracization she experienced after she called the police on Robbie and his friends.

This passage shows the degree to which superficiality rules Alix’s life. Her entire identity is based on the lie that she is a victim of Kelley’s, when in fact this is simply a story she’s told others—and made herself believe—to avoid the additional humiliation she’d incur if she were to admit that she’s been wrong all these years. Furthermore, the final part of this line, which states that Kelley ruined Alix’s life “much in the same way that her name was spelled A-l-i-x” speaks to the limitations of Alix’s self-inventions. Her name used to be Alex Murphy, yet she changed her first name (and when she married Peter, her last name) to distance herself from her parents, whose material wealth she claims to be ashamed of.

Alix's name change, then, is an effort to reinvent herself as a better, more socially conscious person than her parents were. But, just as her lie that Kelley ruined her life doesn't change the fact that Kelley did not, in fact, ruin her life, Alix's name change doesn't change the fact that she has become like her parents, despite her efforts not to—and that she has inherited many privileges because of her upbringing, even if she's ashamed of them.

Chapter 28 Quotes

Deep into her thirties, Emira would wrestle with what to take from her time at the Chamberlain house. Some days she carried the sweet relief that Briar would learn to become a self-sufficient person. And some days, Emira would carry the dread that if Briar ever struggled to find herself, she'd probably just hire someone to do it for her.

Related Characters: The Murphys, Emira Tucker, Alix Chamberlain/Alex Murphy, Briar Chamberlain

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 305

Explanation and Analysis

These are the final lines of the novel. Emira looks back on the months she spent babysitting and tries to decide “what to take from her time at the Chamberlain house.” She wonders if Briar will grow up to be “a self-sufficient person”

who knows herself and can look after herself (as Emira tried to teach her to do) or whether she will become like her mother, and “just hire someone to do it for her.” This passage is important in highlighting the idea that privilege and oppression are cyclical and inherited. Even if Briar has learned (through Emira) to be self-aware, the fact of the matter is that she will inherit financial security and whiteness from her parents, both attributes that make it easier for her to not deal with any personal insecurities she doesn't want to deal with. So even if Briar wants to be better than her parents (just as Alix had wanted as a young person), the temptation to simply give in to her privilege and pay somebody else to take care of the things she's too busy or insecure to deal with will always be there. So, just as Alix's class status allowed her to become exactly like her elitist, ignorant parents, Briar, too, will have this same opportunity.

When Emira observes that Briar can “just hire somebody to do it for her,” she's alluding to the way that Alix hired—and then used—Emira to care for her child (thus making her life easier) and then used her to feel better about herself. Emira, from a removed perspective years into the future, now sees the extent to which Alix used her. It goes beyond simply providing care for her children to free up her days. Alix he also used Emira to feel socially conscious and redeemed—to feel as though she were helping a disadvantaged person despite her socially and economically superior status. In reality, though, Alix was never helping Emira; she was only using Emira to feel better about herself. Emira fears that Briar, despite everything Emira has taught her, may well fall into the same trap.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

Mrs. Chamberlain, the woman Emira babysits for, calls Emira late one Saturday night. She offers to pay Emira double to take care of two-year-old Briar. The police will be there soon, Mrs. Chamberlain explains, and she doesn't want Briar to be there when they arrive. Mrs. Chamberlain mentions something about Peter and a "broken window," but Emira is at her friend Shaunie's 26th birthday party, and it's too loud to hear much of what Mrs. Chamberlain is saying. Emira doesn't want to leave the party—but her nearly empty bank account convinces her to take up Mrs. Chamberlain's request.

Emira explains to Mrs. Chamberlain that she doesn't "look" like a babysitter right now—she's wearing heavy makeup and a bodycon dress. Also, she's had a drink. Mrs. Chamberlain seems to realize she's interrupting Emira's night and apologetically tells her that she doesn't have to leave her party. Emira can hear Catherine, the Chamberlains' infant daughter, crying in the background, though, and tells Mrs. Chamberlain that she'll be there soon. Emira gets ready to leave. Emira's friend Zara offers to accompany her to the Chamberlain house. Josefa, their other friend, is upset about Emira and Zara bailing on Shaunie's party. But Emira tells Josefa that Shaunie—who is very heavily intoxicated—is "leaving" her own birthday party, too.

When Emira and Zara reach the Chamberlain residence, they can hear Catherine crying inside. Emira sees a small hole in the front window. A clear, slimy substance drips from the hole. Emira and Zara walk inside and find Mrs. Chamberlain arranging two-year-old Briar's blond hair into a ponytail. Mrs. Chamberlain greets Zara politely, the way she always does.

Mrs. Chamberlain doesn't specify what exactly is going on beyond the fact that they're calling the police to their house over a "broken window." How and why the window came to be broken remains a mystery, but it's possible that the Chamberlains were targeted for some reason. That Emira abandons her friend's party to make money—even though she doesn't want to—shows the degree to which class shapes her life and decision-making. Somebody of greater means, for instance, would have the freedom to turn down Mrs. Chamberlain's request.



That Josefa doesn't seem to sympathize with Emira's need to leave the party—she needs to babysit because she doesn't have much money—suggests that, perhaps, Josefa comes from a wealthier background. This scene also shows how Mrs. Chamberlain's better financial situation gives her more choices than Emira. That she (presumably) had disposable income grants her the freedom to hire Emira to look after Briar instead of having to deal with Briar herself. She can buy away her life's stressors in a way that Emira, perhaps, cannot.



It's unclear exactly what the slimy substance on the window is. But it could be an egg. Egging a house can either be a cruel but random prank, or it can be a targeted attack. It's still possible that the Chamberlains have done something to make somebody mad at them, but the novel leaves this uncertain for now. Finally, the politeness with which Mrs. Chamberlain greets Zara suggests a certain distance between them. Even if Mrs. Chamberlain is polite with Emira and her friends, the fact that she and Emira have an employer-employee relationship instead of a friendship makes them treat each other impersonally.



Zara, Emira, and Briar leave the Chamberlain residence and walk to Market Depot, an upscale grocery store that sells things like bone broths and truffle butters. Once there, Emira carries Briar in her arms as Zara guffaws at an eight-dollar box of raisins. They wander around the store, and Emira waits for a call from Mrs. Chamberlain telling them it's okay to come back. Zara plays Whitney Houston on her phone, and she, Briar, and Emira hold an impromptu dance party in the aisle. A gray-haired, middle-aged woman watches them and smiles at Briar.

Zara gets a text and then tells Emira that she has to leave—she might have a chance to hook up with the boy she'd been talking to at the party that night. Emira half-jokingly reminds her friend that “that boy is real white.” Zara tells her friend, “It's 2015, Emira! Yes we can!” Then she leaves. Emira and Briar continue to wander around the store.

Suddenly, a security guard approaches Emira and Briar. The gray-haired woman who'd watched them dancing earlier is standing behind the guard; the woman's arms are folded in front of her chest. The security guard asks if Emira is Briar's mother. Emira laughs—it should be obvious that the white child isn't hers—and tries to explain that she's Briar's babysitter. But the guard won't listen and twists Emira's words. The gray-haired woman mentions that she saw them “booty-dancing” and thought that something didn't seem right.

Emira tries to stay calm, but she's agitated, especially after the security guard asks if she's been drinking. Emira tells the guard that she'll call Peter Chamberlain, the little girl's father—he's an old white man, which should satisfy everyone here. As she speaks with Peter, the guard tries to take Emira's phone out of her hands. She lashes out at him. A man in the background has begun to film the scene; he tells Emira she might want a recording of the altercation later on.

The high-priced groceries that line the shelves of Market Depot, a supermarket local to the Chamberlains' residence, visually demonstrates the class differences between the Chamberlains and Emira (and Zara). Mrs. Chamberlain possibly wouldn't think twice about spending eight dollars on a box of raisins, while for Zara, the idea is ludicrous. Also note how the gray-haired woman is smiling at Briar alone—she's seemingly happy to see a little white girl goof around in the grocery store but perhaps holds Zara, a Black woman, to a different set of standards.



Issues of race affect many aspects of Zara and Emira's lives as young Black women, even this casual exchange about Zara's potential hook-up. Zara's quip “Yes we can!” is a reference to Barack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign slogan. Zara is joking that since Obama's election in 2008, Black people are equal and can do anything they want to do. Zara is making the quip to jokingly shame Emira for criticizing her desire to hook up with a white guy, but she's simultaneously referencing the misguided attitude many racially privileged people hold that Obama's election eradicated racism forever (when in reality, Black people and other people of color continue to experience racism in their daily lives).



Sure enough, that the gray-haired woman was smiling at Briar—but not at Emira or Zara—was an ominous sign that she was judging Emira and Zara's behavior on a higher set of standards. Briar's dancing is innocent and acceptable, but Zara and Emira's is scandalous “booty-dancing” and surely a sign that something is amiss with them. She racially profiles Emira and uses harmless behavior like dancing to accuse Emira of, it seems, the serious crime of kidnapping.



It's true that Emira is wearing a party dress, has come from a party, and might not look the part of a babysitter. But this is only the case because Mrs. Chamberlain called her in a state of emergency to come help out. The treatment Emira is receiving here now suggests that as a Black woman, she's held to a higher standard of behavior. Anything she does may be used against her, while the same isn't necessarily true of somebody like Mrs. Chamberlain, whose class and race protect her.



Peter Chamberlain arrives. He yells at the guard for escalating the situation and for questioning his parenting. He is embarrassed and overly apologetic to Emira. He even offers to pay her on the spot, but Emira refuses—she’s always paid on Fridays, and there’s no need to change things now. Emira tells Briar she’ll see her at Briar’s birthday, then she leaves the store.

Just as Emira predicted, Peter Chamberlain’s presence suddenly—almost magically—resolves the issue. This suggests that the guard values Peter’s word over Emira’s, seemingly due to his status as a white, wealthy male. Peter’s flustered and angry response to the altercation shows how abnormal it is to him. It’s shocking to him because he doesn’t experience racial profiling directed toward him or toward people in his life. Emira’s refusal to accept an early payment—to accept special treatment—however, suggests that things like this have happened to her too often for her to make a fuss over it.



Outside, Emira runs into the man who videotaped Emira’s altercation with security. He insists that Emira forward the video to a news outlet—she could get an op-ed out of it, or at least a free year of groceries from Market Depot. But Emira insists that the man delete the video—what does she need a year’s worth of kombucha for anyway? The man insists that Emira at least let him email her the video before he deletes it in case she changes her mind later; Emira reluctantly acquiesces. Emira looks in her inbox and sees a new message from KelleyTCopeland@gmail.com. The man introduces himself as Kelley. Emira watches Kelley delete the video from his phone, then they part ways.

Like Peter Chamberlain, Kelley Copeland experiences racial profiling so rarely that he is compelled to make a big deal about Emira’s run-in with the Market Depot security guard. In his efforts to seek justice for Emira, though, he disregards her obvious wish to simply put the incident behind her. In the end, it’s Emira who must yield to his wishes, giving him her email address to send the video.



Emira doesn’t take a cab home, though she knows Mrs. Chamberlain would pay for it. She texts Zara to come over. When Zara arrives, Emira tells her about everything that happened. Zara can’t believe it—since when is the moon walk considered booty dancing? Emira jokes that everyone at the store decided that Emira was a better dancer than Zara. Zara rolls her eyes, but then she turns serious: things could have ended badly. Emira laughs, but then she starts to cry.

Though Emira acts unbothered by the Market Depot incident in public, her tears in this scene show that the incident has deeply affected her. This scene also shows that Emira’s level of comfort with visible emotional vulnerability varies depending on the people she’s around. Though she assumes a straight face in public, with Zara, who as a young Black woman, may be able to sympathize with Emira in ways that Kelley Copeland and Peter Chamberlain cannot, she abandons the charade of toughness and shows her hurt.



CHAPTER 2

Alix Chamberlain looks back on the years leading up to the night of Emira's Market Depot incident. Between 2001 and 2004, when Alix is a student at NYU, she sends countless letters to companies and receives nearly \$1000 of free products, from nutrition bars to candles to makeup. Eventually, she quits her job at the school paper and starts working as a beauty intern at a small company. She continues asking companies for things, "and it bec[o]me[s] a rare occurrence when she d[oesn't] receive them." She writes letters of praise and offers advice for improvement, and she accompanies her reviews with high-quality photos of the product in question. Then she posts everything to her blog. Over time, her blog amasses a small but notable internet following.

When Alix is 25, she meets Peter Chamberlain in a bar. Their personalities mesh perfectly, and they're both "fancy but not showy." And Peter also treats Alix's internet activities "like an actual job," even though she downplays her business the first time she tries to describe it to him. When Alix and Peter marry three years later, she receives many of the party favors and refreshments for free in exchange for the promise of a positive review.

Later, when Alix is working in the student recruitment department at Hunter College, a high school English teacher friend recruits her to give a cover-letter-writing workshop to one of her classes. A few months later, one of the students, Lucie, a rich girl with a massive Instagram following, posts the cover letters that earned her acceptances to prestigious colleges to her Instagram account. She writes a caption thanking Alix—"I owe all of my acceptances to Alix," it reads, along with the hashtag "LetHer." Almost overnight, Alix becomes a brand. Alix changes her Instagram bio to #LetHerSpeak.

At 29, Alix quits her job at Hunter College and starts holding cover letter and interview workshops at halfway houses and sorority houses. She's invited to serve on panels and speak about issues like "Hospitality in the Workplace" and "Designing Leaders for Creative Change." She appears as a guest on feminist podcasts.

Alix's positive experiences receiving free products in exchange for reviews has taught her that hard work pays off and asking for something is a reliable way to receive something. And, based on what readers know about Alix so far (she's a white, wealthy woman with enough disposable income to hire a regular babysitter) Alix's positive experiences writing letters are indicative of her life as a whole—she gets what she wants and doesn't experience many setbacks. It will be interesting to see how Alix's successes impact her worldview. Does she acknowledge the role that privilege plays in her success? Or does she think that anybody, with enough grit and determination, could experience the success that she has?



That the Chamberlains pride themselves on being "fancy but not showy" shows how highly they value outer appearances—but not necessarily inner truth. What's important to Alix is that she appears modest, frugal, and subtle on the outside—she's ashamed of her economic good fortune, it seems, but doesn't want to part with it in a real way. She wants to benefit from her wealth but not be hated for it.



Had Alix not had a friend who taught English at a (presumably) wealthy high school, Alix would not have encountered Lucie, who would not have promoted Alix to her many Instagram followers. Alix isn't wrong to have seized these opportunities, of course, but the fact remains that her success—regardless of her talent or work ethic—ultimately happened due to chance and access to opportunity, not hard work alone.



The financial stability Alix achieves through her blog's success allows her to quit her day job and focus on developing her brand. Again, it's only by coincidence, luck, and the privilege of forming important connections that Alix's business becomes so successful.



One day, during a brunch function, Alix feels a sudden wave of nausea, and it turns out that she's pregnant. Alix and Peter consider going through with their plan to return to Philadelphia, Alix's hometown, to raise their child. In Philadelphia, they could have a house and a backyard. But Alix decides to postpone the move in order to focus on her career.

Expecting their first child forces Alix to think consciously about how the changes that come with parenthood (relocating to Philadelphia from Manhattan) will affect her career. Meanwhile, Peter doesn't (at least consciously) consider how parenthood will affect his professional life. This points toward issues of gender inequality as they affect new parents.



When Briar is born, Alix's life is suddenly full of Pack-'n-Plays, chafed nipples, and other childrearing responsibilities. She starts referring to herself in the third person ("Mama's on the phone"). The Chamberlains have clearly outgrown their Upper West Side apartment, and Peter isn't becoming the New York City news anchor he once dreamed he'd be. But Alix is too tied to the city to leave just yet. In addition to her blossoming career, she now has a group of girlfriends—Rachel, Jodi, and Tamra—for the first time since college. Alix's friends have young kids and careers, too, and they support one other.

Motherhood totally transforms Alix's life—even her identity (she's no longer Alix, but "Mama"). To that end, motherhood seems to wear on Alix. Suddenly, she's forced to balance her professional life with the physical changes pregnancy has wrought on her body and the mental exertion of having to care for an infant. The insinuation that the Chamberlains should move to Philadelphia because Peter's career isn't taking off in New York (while Alix's is thriving) demonstrates how gender inequality seeps into their otherwise progressive partnership.



Then Briar starts to talk, and her voice drives Alix crazy. Briar talks about everything—that she likes hot dogs, that she is or isn't tired, that she sees a turtle. When Briar naps, Alix feels like the fire alarm inside her head has finally stopped shrieking. Then she realizes she's pregnant again. When she tells Peter the news, he's less than excited—they both thought it couldn't happen while she was breastfeeding.

It's rather ironic that Alix has begun to loathe Briar's voice when Alix's business, LetHer Speak, is all about empowering women to find their voice—shouldn't Alix be most supportive of her daughter, and most excited that she has given Briar a privileged environment where she feels confident and secure enough to make her thoughts and opinions known?



A couple days later, Peter tells Alix that he's going to call a broker in Philadelphia. Alix feels that she can't say no this time; after all, she does work from home, and Philly isn't so far from New York. Plus, when Alix first met Peter, she told him she could only stand to live in the city for a few more years. And he's always liked that she's the kind of person who doesn't need to be at every event.

Peter doesn't exactly force the family to move—and Alix even acknowledges how unsustainable it would be for her growing family to continue living in Manhattan—yet it's ultimately Peter who initiates the move. Through his actions, he decides that Alix's commitment to domestic life takes precedent over her commitment to her career.



Still, the move comes at the worst time. Alix is in the middle of writing a letter to Hillary Clinton's campaign team; Clinton has just announced her candidacy and her "feminist platform completely matched [Alix's] brand." Alix hopes a link to Clinton will help her remain relevant, even after she moves to a less-relevant city.

Clinton is undeniably a pioneering force in women's involvement in U.S. politics. But among more left-leaning people, her politics and particular brand of feminism can be seen as elitist and exclusionary—she very much belongs to the second-wave era of modern feminism, which has been criticized for leaving underprivileged women (minorities and women of the lower classes) out of the picture. So it's telling that Alix, herself a privileged white woman, identifies with Clinton's "feminist platform."



For Alix's last engagement in New York City before the move, she speaks on a panel at an event called Small Business Femme, which focuses on reproductive care and empowering books for girls. Alix decides not to use her breast pump at the event. Instead, she brings Briar to the talk and breastfeeds her on stage. The crowd cheers. Photographers snap photos of Alix, pregnant, breastfeeding, and seated between two business-suit-clad men. The stunt earns Alix thousands of followers and many interview requests. Alix starts paying her small team of interns double to keep up with all the attention. Hillary Clinton's campaign finally returns Alix's letter, and Alix gets a book deal. Alix doesn't make a public announcement about leaving New York, figuring that she'll take the train in when she's needed there. She plans to move back once her daughters are older.

Not long after the move, Alix gives birth to Catherine May, and things start to look up. Alix welcomes the lower cost of living and the bigger house—the Chamberlains could afford to move into a three-story brownstone only a short walk from Rittenhouse Square. Still, she longs to share the happy moments of her new life with her old friends she left behind in New York City.

Alix had never hired a regular babysitter before moving to Philadelphia—in New York, Peter's mother could always watch Briar. Peter's new colleagues at the news station send him home with recommendations "of Carlys and Caitlyns." These girls all tell Alix what huge fans they are of LetHer Speak. But Alix knows these young hopefuls "would never work." So Alix redirects her "knack for acquiring merchandise" toward acquiring a sitter. She makes a profile on SitterTown.com, and she finds Emira.

Alix's stunt at the Small Business Femme event shows how much she values appearances and the opinions of others. Thus far, the novel has suggested that Alix resents Briar and sees her as an impediment on her career. Yet she's more than willing to use Briar as a prop when doing so could promote her business and portray Alix a champion of women in the workplace. Again, Alex is clearly being pulled in multiple directions in ways that Peter isn't (she, for instance, is the only one of them who has to balance breastfeeding with her career). Yet her willingness to exploit Briar for professional gain comes off as insincere and selfish.



Alix seems happier about Catherine's birth than she was about Briar's, which was characterized by stress, big changes, and having to compromise her career. So it will be interesting to see whether Alix's initial favoritism toward Catherine will continue as the children grow—and how this will affect Briar. Finally, this section reaffirms just how much Alix is giving up—professionally and personally—to relocate to Philadelphia.



It's a small detail, but it's worth noting how the privilege of free childcare (through Peter's mother) has allowed the Chamberlains to save up and achieve greater financial security than people who don't have the luxury of free childcare. Alix's decision to seek out Emira over the "Carlys and Caitlyns" (in this context, names that evoke the type of privileged and progressive young woman who Peter's white-collar colleagues would hire to watch their children) seems to be motivated by her fixation on outer appearances. She wants the world to see her as the type of person who passes on young women of means to give a woman like Emira (who readers already know is Black and not particularly wealthy) a chance. Yet, that Alix frames her seeking out of Alix as akin to "acquiring merchandise" (and thus dehumanizes Emira) should make readers consider whether Alix's inner reality matches the outward appearance of social consciousness.



Emira's profile had no picture. All it revealed was that Emira went to Temple University, knows beginner sign language, and can type 125 words per minute. When Emira arrives at Alix's house for an interview, she continues to confound Alix. While the other girls asked Alix about her plans for her book and future pregnancies, Emira hasn't even heard of LetHer Speak. And when Alix tells Emira she's writing a book, Emira doesn't even ask what the book is about or who Alix's publisher is. That day, Alix asks Emira when she could start.

And now, Emira watches Briar three times each week. When Emira is there, Alix sits in the sun with Catherine and reads all the trashy magazines she never would have read in Manhattan. In bed one night, Peter remarks how Alix seems so much happier here. Alix wonders if this is true, or if she just cares less now.

But all that changes when, late one Saturday night in September, someone throws an egg through the Chamberlains' window. Alix hears someone shout "Racist piece of shit!" followed by the sound of laughter and running feet. "I *told* you this would happen," Peter says to Alix as he calls the police.

The egg is a response to a mistake Peter made at work. Earlier, Peter's co-anchor Laney Thacker ran a segment about the creative ways local students were asking their dates to the Beacon Smith High School homecoming. Peter introduced footage of students presenting their elaborate homecoming invitations. The last clip featured a Black student and his friends as they marched toward a group of girls with a boombox. The friends started to dance, eventually revealing a white flag with Homecoming written on it. The Black teen held out a rose to his invite. The news cut back to the studio. Peter said, "Let's hope that last one asked her father first." His comment sparked immediate backlash, and online commenters accused Peter of sexism and racism. Peter immediately apologized to his producers, and they let him off the hook, since he's young and new at the job. But Alix still worried that pressure from local students would make Peter's bosses reconsider.

By all accounts, Emira certainly isn't making the ideal first impression. She's downplaying her credentials, and she's not showing an active interest in Alix or her work, as Alix seems to expect a prospective employee to do to ingratiate themselves with the person they want to hire them. Yet Alix hires her anyway, possibly to make a point and build a personal brand around female empowerment, much as she does with her business.



One could interpret Alix's lack of motivation as a response to feeling down and unfulfilled since leaving New York and having fewer social and business engagements. Peter's observation that Alix seems happier in Philadelphia doesn't seem to align with Alix's inner truth, which gestures toward Alix's tendency to project the appearance of happiness and fulfillment to the world, even though it might not match how she feels on the inside. It also shows how Peter's white, male privilege blinds him to the degree to which Alix's new domesticity-centered identity has affected her mental state.



Somebody in the Chamberlain household—presumably Alix or Peter—has done or said something to make people think they're racist. Peter is a newscaster who would have more visibility among locals, so he's the likelier candidate.



Peter's comment insinuates that the Black student would need to receive special permission to go to homecoming with the girl since she's white and therefore out of his league. It's also sexist in that it implies that the girl's father ought to control her love life. Peter's comment is inappropriate, yet it seems more indicative of his unexamined gender and racial biases than of overt, intentional racism. That Peter's higher-ups immediately forgave his honest mistake suggests that society affords white, privileged men a higher margin of error than people of color and women. Alix's anxieties about Peter's mistake reinforce her obsession with external appearance.



And so, when Emira arrives at their house on that fateful night to take care of Briar, guilt over Peter's words overwhelms Alix. That's why later that night, Alix decides to get out of her slump once and for all: she vows to live in Philadelphia, write her book, and get to know Emira Tucker.

Given what the novel has revealed about Alix's fixation on appearances, the reader should be wary of her motivations for befriending Emira. It seems likely that she's more interested in repairing her and Peter's reputation than in actually forming a bond with Emira.



CHAPTER 3

Emira Tucker grew up in a town in Maryland called Sewell Bridge, where 6.5 percent of the population is deaf. Though the Tuckers all had perfect hearing, Sewell Bridge lent itself well to the family's "proclivity toward craftsmanship." Mr. Tucker owns a bee steer and keeps beehives year-round. Mrs. Tucker binds books. Alfie Tucker won second place in the 2013 National Latte Art Competition and was invited to apprentice at a roastery in Austin, Texas. Justyne Tucker sews Halloween costumes and flower girl clothing and sells her creations on her Etsy shop.

In many respects, Alix and Emira are very different—they come from different racial and class backgrounds, for starters. Yet this passage shows that they are alike in the way they feel lost and unfulfilled with the present state of their lives. Alix feels left out from her Manhattan professional life and social scene, and Emira feels under-accomplished and untalented compared to the rest of her family.



In an effort to help "her hands to find themselves," Emira enrolled at Temple University, and she was the first person in her family to attend a four-year college. One of Emira's early projects was learning formal sign language, but she found it hard to stop using the conversational slang she spoke in Sewell Bridge. She tried transcription, too, and then made money typing up class notes for deaf students. She eventually earned an English degree. But while she didn't mind doing anything, she didn't love doing anything either. She moved back home the summer after Philadelphia, and she missed the city. Her father ordered her to find something and stick with it. Emira enrolled in transcription school but hated it and quit. She didn't tell her family.

Emira's status as a first-generation college student means that she hasn't had the same opportunities and financial stability to find herself, identify her passions, and build a career as somebody like Alix who, it seems, has had no shortage of opportunities throughout her life. And again, while Emira's family members seem to have fallen into their respective jobs easily and seem to love what they do, Emira enjoys no such luck.



Emira was working part time jobs and struggling to keep herself afloat when Alix Chamberlain hired her. Emira found caring for Briar to be a great way to keep her anxieties about what to do with her hands at bay. So what upset her about the altercation at Market Depot wasn't so much the guard's racial bias against her, but the fact that she could have avoided the situation altogether if she'd had a real job. She anguishes about her financial situation and lack of direction all the time. Emira is almost 26, at which point she'll be removed from her parents' health insurance policy.

A lot of what prevents Emira from seeing babysitting as a "real job" likely has to do with the fact that the job isn't salaried and doesn't come with benefits like health insurance. Yet it also hints at the broader systemic issue of society undervaluing domestic labor, which is disproportionately performed by women.



Emira sometimes tells herself that having a 9-to-5 job would make her into a full-fledged adult: she'd start making her bed, and she'd start liking coffee. But she'd also stop staying up late into the night discovering new music. She tells herself she can find another family to work for; they'd hire her as a full-time nanny and take her on vacations and consider her part of the family. But Emira can't imagine caring for a child other than Briar. Briar is special: she makes interesting observations and is "constantly struggling with demons of propriety."

Already, it's clear that Emira takes a greater interest in Briar's interests and personality than Alix does. Alix simply sees Briar as a prop she can use to curate a working mom identity that is beneficial to her business ventures. But Emira, by contrast, sees Briar as a real person with real inner and outer struggles.



CHAPTER 4

The next day, Alix straps her kids into a double stroller and goes for a jog. After a few miles, she buys a coffee and sits down on a bench outside the café. Then she sends a group text to Jodi, Rachel, and Tamra telling them she urgently needs to talk to them. Alix considers her friends. Jodi is a children's casting director, and she and her husband Walter have two young, redheaded children of their own. Rachel is Jewish and Japanese, and she manages a firm that designs book covers. She also has a five-year-old son named Hudson. And Tamra is the principal of a private school in Manhattan. She has two girls with afros, Imani and Cleo. The older child, though only four years old, is already fully literate and speaks French.

The novel portrays Alix as a stereotypical upper-class stay-at-home mom who carts her children around in an expensive stroller (when she's not paying another less privileged woman to take care of them for her) and spends leisurely afternoons sipping fancy coffees. From the elite-sounding careers of Alix's friends (and the posh activities of their children), readers can assume that they, too, belong to the upper class.



Sitting on the bench, Alix has a group phone call with her friends and tells them about everything that's happened lately. Everyone is shocked. Rachel thinks none of this would've happened in New York. Inwardly, Alix anguishes over how little attention she's paid Emira as a person in the months Emira has worked for her. Rachel suggests that the Chamberlains could help Emira sue the store. Alix agonizes to her friends about the possibility of losing Emira because of the incident: if Emira quits, Alix will never be able to finish her book. She hasn't been doing well. Alix also admits to her friends that she's gained weight since leaving the city.

Alix tries to convince her friends—and herself—that she's concerned about the Market Depot incident for the way it has affected Emira, yet this scene suggests that Alix is really concerned about herself: she's afraid that the incident will make Emira want to quit working for the Chamberlains, which will make it more difficult for Alix to finish her book. Not only is Alix's response selfish and ignorant, but it's also blatantly untrue—Alix, through Peter's coworkers, would have no shortage of totally qualified and trustworthy replacements for Emira, should she decide to quit.



Alix's friends help her brainstorm about what to do. Tamra thinks Alix should be honest and apologize to Emira—but she should also understand that Emira might not respond. Alix wonders aloud if the whole thing is her fault, since she's the one who sent Emira to Market Depot. Jodi changes the subject and, her voice heavy with concern, asks Alix how much weight she's gained. Alix admits that she's gained quite a few pounds. Alix's friends then stage "a very kind and very supportive [intervention]." Rachel suggests a juice cleanse.

Tamra offers sound advice about how to handle the Market Depot incident. But Jodi and Rachel's feedback is considerably less helpful; Jodi's concern over Alix's weight gain shows that Alix's friends care about external appearances at least as much as Alix does, and perhaps enable and encourage Alix's superficiality.



Alix calls Emira the morning of Briar's birthday, but Emira doesn't pick up. When Alix tries again later, Emira picks up, but it's clear she's just woken up. Emira tells Alix she'll be at Briar's birthday party later that day. She doesn't say anything about the Market Depot incident.

Briar's birthday party is airplane-themed—Alix thinks it's worthwhile to encourage Briar's interest in airplanes, which is one of her more conventional interests. The house is decorated with a cloud-covered tapestry, white balloons, and Alix has assembled aviation-themed party favors for Briar's young guests.

Emira arrives at 11:45 carrying a bowl with a ribbon tied around it; a **goldfish** swims inside the bowl. Alix runs downstairs to greet Emira as Emira hangs her backpack on the coatrack and slips on one of Alix's old **LetHer Speak polos**, which had become Emira's unofficial "uniform" after Alix loaned her one so she wouldn't dirty her clothes while painting with Briar. Alix recalls this memory fondly and asks Emira if she can give her a hug. They hug, but it's awkward. Alix tries to get Emira to talk about the Market Depot incident and offers to help her file a civil suit. But Emira only laughs and shrugs the whole thing off—she doesn't want to make a big deal of the incident.

The party guests arrive, including Peter's coworkers. Alix has never really noticed her and Peter's age difference, but being around his coworkers makes her feel like she's hanging out with a group of her parents' friends. The female coworkers arrive in fit-and-flare dresses that are overly formal and gaudy. The men look like Ken dolls in their polo shirts and khakis. Peter's coworkers joke about the still-broken window—they act like Peter has been the victim of a harmless hazing ritual and is now part of the club. Nobody at the party has heard of Alix or LetHer Speak, and nobody seems to understand exactly what she does.

Emira continues to act as though the Market Depot incident didn't happen. This just shows how much more used to witnessing injustice she is than Alix, who it's possible has only infrequently—if ever—seen racial profiling.



It's plausible that Alix wants to encourage Briar's interest in airplanes (but not her more unusual interests) not for Briar's sake, but because it conforms to her business's brand of empowering women to speak up and infiltrate male-dominated workspaces (an overwhelming majority of pilots are men).



Whereas Alix plans Briar's birthday party around a theme that will support her business's message of female empowerment, Emira gets Briar a fish for the simple fact that little kids tend to like fish—she has no ulterior motives. The LetHer Speak polo will gain more significance later on, but for now, it's important to note that Emira's "uniform" is a visual reminder that Emira works for Alix and, indirectly, Alix's business (since watching Briar theoretically allows Alix to spend more time on her work). This moment is also important for Alix because how Emira acts at this party will indicate whether the Market Depot incident was enough to make Emira want to quit working for the Chamberlains, or whether she will be able to move past it. Right now, it seems that Alix is far more upset over the incident than Emira, which perhaps reflects how accustomed Emira is to racial profiling versus how alien an experience it is for Alix.



Peter is only eight years older than Alix—hardly a huge age gap in the grand scheme of things—so Alix's feeling out of place and childish surrounded by Peter's coworkers reinforces the idea that she feels unfulfilled and lost in life. The way Alix judges the coworkers' clothing as over-the-top reinforces the high value she places on appearances.



Laney Thacker, Peter's co-anchor, arrives with her four-year-old daughter, Bella. Laney hugs Alix and introduces herself in an overly friendly way. Back in New York, Alix used to go to birthday parties with her friends all the time. They'd stand to the side and drink wine and scoff at overly extravagant décor and party favors. Alix thinks the women here are pretending they live in Manhattan but doing a horrible job of it—they're trying too hard. Alix longs to find a friend she wouldn't mind just hanging out with or going to yoga classes together.

Later, it's time for presents. Briar decides she's bored of this almost immediately. As Emira and Peter take care of Briar, Alix unwraps all the gifts for her daughter. When she has a moment to herself, Alix texts her friends about how much she hates everyone here. Her home is filled with the type of mother that Alix hates: they all sport a full face of makeup and cork wedge sandals. Alix isn't like these women and doesn't want to be. Laney keeps trying to connect with Alix, suggesting they have a cocktail hour while their kids are napping sometime. Alix realizes that Laney is trying to show Alix that she's "a girl's girl" and not up to anything with Peter even though they're coworkers. Alix feels guilty that the thought hadn't ever crossed her mind—Laney has an off-putting personality and isn't horribly attractive.

Alix watches Emira interact with Briar. She texts her friends again and amends her earlier statement: "I hate everyone except my sitter." Tamra replies that Alix should give Emira a raise; Rachel suggests an Edible Arrangement. That night, Briar falls asleep watching **Spoons** (her new goldfish) swim in circles.

CHAPTER 5

Mrs. Chamberlain has started acting differently, and Emira knows it's because of the Market Depot incident. Mrs. Chamberlain's new "forced casualness" makes Emira feel uncomfortable. All of a sudden, Mrs. Chamberlain is returning home early and making a show of taking an active interest in Emira's life. Two weeks after the Market Depot incident, Mrs. Chamberlain hands Emira her bimonthly payment envelope. This time, it contains \$1200—twice Emira's normal payment—and a handwritten thank you note written on card stock. Emira immediately uses a couple hundred dollars to buy herself her first leather jacket.

Alix's criticisms about the Philadelphia women reveal her lack of introspection. She's acting as though she doesn't care about appearances and so resents these women's superficiality, when her real issue with them is their taste. Alix prides herself on her minimalism, yet minimalism is still a choice—a way of presenting oneself to the world to put forth a specific, curated image about what one's values are.



Again, Alix is critiquing these women's put-on appearances as though her own appearance isn't a conscious decision—a way she is choosing to look and act so that the outer world sees her the way she wants to be seen. And Alix's catty judgment of Laney as non-threatening due to Laney's looks suggests that Alix is capable of just as much fakery as the women she critiques. Still, Alix feels guilty for being mean to Laney, if only in her head, which adds another dynamic to Alix's character: she's overly concerned with appearances, yet, but she's also a person who wants to actually be a good person, not just appear like one to others.



Coming after Alix's extended criticism of Peter's coworkers' appearances, it seems reasonable to take Alix's approval of Emira with a grain of salt. Does she love Emira for how much Emira cares about Briar, or does she like how having somebody like Emira in her life makes Alix appear to others?



The fact that Emira still calls Alix "Mrs. Chamberlain" after working for her for so long shows that, despite Alix's attempts at friendliness, Emira doesn't see Alix as anything more than an employer. Their class backgrounds and unequal positions of power maintains a distance between them. And though Alix is trying to be nice and compensate Emira for the Market Depot trauma, the bonus paycheck only reaffirms the financial power she wields over Emira.



Emira is on the subway to meet her friends for dinner that night when she runs into Kelley. With his lanky frame, prominent chin, and dark hair, he's cuter than she remembered. Kelley recognizes Emira right away and admits to writing—but not sending—six emails to her. He asks if she quit her nanny job and is surprised when Emira admits that she hasn't. Emira tells him that her employers “took care of [her],” though. Feeling a boost of confidence from her hefty paycheck, Emira tells Kelley he can buy her a drink at Luca's, the club where she's meeting her friends that night, if he wants.

Emira meets up with her friends at Luca's. Shaunie reserves a balcony with bottle service—Shaunie's parents are rich, and Shaunie is very generous with her money. Josefa, Shaunie's roommate, is unreliable—she either wants to stay in and scroll through her phone or be out drinking until morning. She's a research assistant at Drexel and pursuing her second master's degree; her parents have agreed to support her as long as she's going to school.

Emira checks her phone obsessively to see if Kelley has emailed her. He finally arrives awhile later—accompanied by four Black friends. They make introductions. After Kelley and his friends leave to get drinks, Zara critiques Emira for pursuing a white guy when she criticized Zara for the same thing the other night. Zara settles down, and Emira's friends all agree that Kelley is attractive—though Josefa questions why all of his friends are Black. Emira insinuates that Josefa (who is Latina) should ask herself why all *her* friends are Black. Josefa retorts that her DNA test results show that she's actually 11% West African. Anyway, she's mostly worried that Kelley might fetishize Black people. Zara agrees to support Emira, though, and claims one of Kelley's friends to dance with.

Sometime later, Kelley, calling Emira “miss,” reminds Emira that he owes her a drink, and they make their way down to the bar. He asks her about the Market Depot incident some more. She tells him about her other work—she's a transcriptionist and does clerical work for the Green Party Philadelphia office. Kelley won't stop asking questions, and Emira feels like she's in a job interview. But Emira is feeling tipsy and outspoken, and she doesn't hold back. She asks Kelley if he works in HR or something and reminds him about how he told her she could write an op-ed the other night. Kelley seems embarrassed and asks if he's an asshole. Emira says he probably is, but it's okay. They take a cab back to Kelley's place.

Much like Alix, Kelley Copeland has been expending considerably more emotional labor on the Market Depot incident than Emira has. Readers don't yet have too much reason to suspect that Kelley has ulterior motives for being so concerned, but he does seem discernably overconcerned about helping Emira, perhaps to assuage some sense of guilt he has about his race and class privilege.



Class difference is constantly on Emira's mind, even as she socializes with her friends. This suggests that people whose class puts them at a disadvantage have more class consciousness than people whose class privilege allows them to succeed. The broader implication of this is that privileged people remain ignorant to the ways their privilege benefits them at the expense of others.



Emira and her friends find something comical in the fact that Kelley, a white guy who's apparently (and stereotypically) wealthy and hip enough to shop at the ultra-white Market Depot, shows up at a club surrounded by Black men—especially after he's showed signs that he's interested in pursuing Emira, a Black woman. Could there be some truth to Josefa's joke about Kelley fetishizing Black people?



Kelley continues to badger Emira about the Market Depot incident, even after she's made it clear that she's not interested in discussing it. Like Alix, Kelley purports to only want what's best for Emira—yet in acting as though he knows what's best for Emira more than Emira herself, he's infantilizing her and disregarding her needs, wants, and inner experiences. Still, for all Kelley's annoying traits, Emira seems interested enough in him to accompany him back to his place.



Kelley's apartment smells clean and is full of nice furniture. He and Emira are both drunk, and they start to kiss. Kelley asks how old Emira is—she's 25 and he's 32—and when she tells him, the age difference makes him a little uncomfortable, but Emira tells him it's fine. Kelley gives Emira oral sex. She insinuates that she doesn't want to return the favor when he's done, but Kelley is fine with it.

Afterward, Emira asks for "an Uber and a snack." Kelley agrees to arrange for an Uber, but he tells her she has to give him her number if she wants a snack. Emira laughs and agrees. As she waits for the Uber, she looks through Kelley's record collection, which includes the *Waiting to Exhale* soundtrack and some Otis Redding albums. She comments on this, and Kelley jokes that he "ha[s] the music tastes of a middle-aged black woman." Emira rolls her eyes at the comment, but Kelley doesn't notice. Emira looks at a blueprint map of Allentown, Pennsylvania hanging on Kelley's wall and wonders if she knows someone from Allentown—the name sounds familiar. Emira doesn't know it, but the blueprint displays the place where, in 2000, Kelley "completely ruined Alex Murphy's senior year"—before she became Alix Chamberlain, that is.

CHAPTER 6

Alix has begun to look at the notifications on Emira's phone when Emira leaves it unattended to charge in the front vestibule. Alix knows it's a bad habit, but she never unlocks the phone—she doesn't know the password—and only scrolls through the notifications on the home screen. It's now been a month since the Market Depot incident, and Alix has developed something of a weird crush on Emira—she's excited when Emira arrives for her shift and disappointed when she leaves.

Through her snooping, Alix has learned that Emira is always texting Zara (labeled Kween Zara). She's also learned a lot about Emira's musical tastes. Some artists she recognizes. But others, like Childish Gambino and Tyga, she has to Google. Alix has also discovered that Emira is seeing a guy—she's labelled him Kenan&Kel in her phone.

Kelley's apartment evokes a minimalist aesthetic similar to Alix's. With this, on top of his and Alix's shared desire for Emira to seek justice for the Market Depot incident, the novel seems to want to play up their similarities. Its reasons for doing so, though, remain a mystery.



Kelley's stereotypically Black taste in music—combined with his self-awareness about this quirk—raises another red flag. It's becoming less of a stretch to believe that he really does fetishize Black people and Black culture. This seems to annoy Emira, but again, she's seemingly so used to white people annoying her or putting her out in daily life that she decides to ignore it. This scene also shows that the novel has indeed been playing up Kelley and Alix's similarities, revealing that they aren't only similar but have been personally acquainted with each other in a meaningful (and apparently traumatic) way, albeit many years ago. Finally, there's probably more to the story of how and why Alix came to change her name, but this remains a mystery for now.



Alix's goal to become friends with Emira has become inappropriate and a little creepy. It's a clear violation of Emira's privacy that Alix snoops through her phone, even if she doesn't click beyond the notifications on the phone's home screen. Again, the novel shows how Alix's desire to befriend Emira is selfish and self-serving.



Alix's interest in Emira seems almost scientific—she's observing Emira as a researcher might examine some mysterious animal species. In this way, she dehumanizes Emira, even as she tries to empower her. Kenan&Kel is, undoubtedly, Kelley. Since readers now know that Kelley and Alix share a checkered past, Alix likely won't be happy if she finds out that Kelley and Emira are seeing each other.



One night, Alix decides to see if Emira will open up to her about her love life. It's October, and they're sitting in the kitchen while Briar colors a picture of a ghost. Alix lights some candles, turns on some music and pours Emira a glass of wine. She tells Emira, who is about to give Briar a quick bath, that she can take the wine into the bathroom with her. When Emira emerges, she tells Alix the wine is really good—Emira likes wine but is mostly used to boxed wine. Alix laughs but tells Emira that she rarely pays for wine, since she gets companies to send it to her for free in exchange for writing reviews.

Alix gets down to business and—unbeknownst to Emira, referencing a text she saw earlier—asks Emira if she has any fun plans for the evening. Emira smiles as she admits that she's going to dinner with a guy. She lies and says they met on a train. She doesn't admit much else besides the fact that he's tall and cute. When Alix asks if the relationship is serious, Emira shrugs and says she's "not tryna get like...wifed up anytime soon." Emira's words make Alix "squeal inside." She wants to tell her that her own mother had gotten married at 25. She also wants to ask Emira if she's ever had any serious relationships before. But she doesn't say anything besides "Good for you." She also tells Emira that she can take the rest of the wine with her to dinner.

CHAPTER 7

Emira walks to the two-story Starbucks near the Chamberlain house to change her clothes and apply some lipstick. Then she rushes over to meet Kelley at Gloria's, a BYOB Mexican restaurant. Luckily, Kelley doesn't seem too annoyed that she's late. After their first date, Kelley invited Emira to get coffee. The meetup was oddly formal—it felt more like a job interview than a date.

Tonight, when Kelley asks about Emira's employer, Emira remembers the wine that Mrs. Chamberlain gave her. She takes it out of the bag and places it on the table. Kelley is taken aback when he googles the wine and finds out that it cost nearly \$60. He asks what Emira's employer does for work, and Emira admits that she doesn't really know. Inwardly, Emira considers how strange it is that Mrs. Chamberlain is so excited to score deals on things she could clearly afford at full price.

Alix's actions contradict her stated intention to become friends with Emira. A true friendship is based on a foundation of equality, honesty, and vulnerability. Yet Alix, in this scene, has complete control of the social situation: first (like a predator) she tries to loosen up Emira with alcohol. Alix will then presumably steer the conversation toward Emira's love life, acting as though she's asking out the blue when she (unbeknownst to Emira) knows full well that Emira is seeing someone new.



Again, Alix uses insider knowledge to which Emira isn't privy to steer their conversation in the direction she wants it to go. Though she tells herself she wants to be friends with Emira, her impulse to control and manipulate social situations prevents that from actually happening. This should make the reader question her intentions for befriending Emira in the first place.



Emira must like Kelley if she's continuing to see him, yet there's clearly something a little off about their relationship. For instance, why is Kelley pushing for a formal atmosphere? And if Emira feels like Kelley is interviewing her for a job, it also suggests a subtle asymmetry of power in their relationship.



The reader knows that Kelley and Alix have a past together, but none of the central characters do. This is an instance of dramatic irony, where the reader or audience is privy to the significance of a character's actions or words, but the characters are not. Alix's frugality confuses Emira because it's totally alien to her—she's never had enough disposal income to have the freedom to choose how she spends her money.



Over dinner, Kelley brings up the topic of exes. Emira shares that she dated someone over the summer for a few months, and a musician in college. Kelley sees this as proof that Emira hasn't had a serious relationship. She teases him—is he about to tell her he's been married with kids? He laughs and gives his own history: he's had a couple of long-term girlfriends. And in high school, he dated the richest girl in town. Once, on a school trip to Washington, D.C., she placed her luggage in the aisle of the plane—apparently, she'd thought a flight attendant would handle it for her. Kelley remembers the moment as one that showed him how different rich people's lives are. Emira recalls an opposite experience, where she went to a poor classmate's house and saw cockroaches crawling on the floor.

Still reflecting on the past, Kelley recalls how his brother once went to a friend's house in elementary school. The kid's father apparently walked in on them watching *Moesha* and called it “nigger shit.” Kelley uses the full word when he tells the story, which shocks Emira, though she doesn't show it. Emira and Kelley have only jokingly discussed race. She's only dated one white guy before and hooked up with another. Both men loved showing her off at parties, and after they started seeing her, they'd suddenly become really interested in social justice issues.

Later, at Kelley's apartment, Kelley reads the printed text across the plastic bag that contains the wine: “Little Lulu's Ballet Academy.” Kelley thinks the academy sounds awful, but Emira says that it's actually her favorite thing to do with Briar—she loves watching Briar's feistiness clash with the rest of the class's more graceful, subdued demeanor. Next week, the class will hold a Halloween party; Emira is going as a cat, and Briar is going as a hot dog.

Kelley and Emira have some of the wine. It's amazing. Emira jokingly asks Kelley if his rich high school girlfriend is drinking this wine in first class right now. Kelley laughs before asking Emira if he wants to know why they broke up. She does. Kelley prefaces the story with the fact that he was young and there was a lot of drama in the relationship. Then he explains that his girlfriend used to write him dramatic, emotional letters all the time, and that he'd thought he had to use an equally dramatic breakup line to end things. He recites the line he used to break up with her: “I think it would be best if we went our separate ways, and that those paths never again connected.” Emira thinks the breakup line is harsh, but its boldness impresses her, too.

Given what the reader knows about Kelley and Alix's past together, it's likely that Alix is the rich ex-girlfriend he's talking about now. If Kelley is telling the truth about the luggage story, it should make the reader rethink the way they see Alix, who today makes such a show of downplaying her wealth with a minimalist aesthetic. Certainly, this detail should make the reader assess Alix's minimalism more critically: it's not that Alix has moral concerns about her finances, it's that sometime between high school and now, she decided it's unfashionable to flaunt her privilege and material wealth.



That Kelley has no qualms about using the N-word in front of Emira suggests that he is less conscious of race and racial microaggressions than Emira. The white men Emira recalls in this scene embody the sort of fetishizing of which Josefa earlier suspected Kelley: these men seem to have gone out with Emira to score social points and portray themselves (visually) as progressive believers in equality. Ultimately, though, their actions implicitly suggest that Emira is meaningful only in terms of her race (and not as an individual person), and so they dehumanize and devalue Emira.



Emira is bonding with Briar over experiences that, perhaps, Alix should be involved in (but isn't). This is further evidence of Alix's disregard for her child and disinterest in the mundane and sometimes annoying elements of parenthood. It seems increasingly clear that if Alix can't post something on Instagram to contribute to her empowered working-mom image, then she has no interest in it.



Emira's question is ironic—she doesn't realize that she and Kelley are literally drinking Kelley's rich high school girlfriend's wine. Kelley's recollection about Alix reveals that she's been writing letters for a long time. And, if their breakup really was as traumatic as Kelley is suggesting it was, it's likely because it was one of the few times in Alix's life where her letter writing didn't elicit the positive results she desires. In other words, the times someone wrongs her or that she doesn't get what she wants stick out because they are so few and far between.



CHAPTER 8

Alix remembers a time when she still lived in New York: She and her friends are sitting in Rachel's backyard to talk, eat pizza, and drink wine. They decide to tell each other their most embarrassing secrets. Rachel begins, recalling how, when her son was a toddler, he would talk—loudly and in public places—about penises. Jodi, then pregnant with her son, Payne, goes next. A children's casting director, she recalls a summer when her daughter, Prudence, went to summer camp and told one of the counselors that her mommy's job involved putting little boys and girls in front of a video camera and making them do exactly what she says. Jodi had to go to the camp and explain that she wasn't a pedophile. Tamra goes next and tells a story about getting her period during a lecture on her second day at Brown.

Then it's Alix's turn. She tells everyone about how her parents, Mr. and Mrs. Murphy, came into a large inheritance and used it to sue the funeral home that had accidentally cremated (rather than burying) her deceased grandparents. The Murphys won, and suddenly, the family was wealthy—at least by Allentown standards. They immediately went crazy spending their money on gaudy displays of wealth, like a McMansion and flying first class (Alix—who was still Alex, then, hadn't even been on a plane before that.) They also employed Mrs. Claudette Laurens, an older Black woman, to cook, clean, and care for Alex and her younger sister Betheny.

Then, in Alex's senior year of high school, she got her first boyfriend, Kelley Copeland. Alex wrote Kelley tons of embarrassing love letters. One day, Kelley showed Robbie Cormier, a popular Black student athlete, one of the more embarrassing letters. In the letter, Alex wrote that her parents would be out of town and that she wanted to use the opportunity to lose her virginity to Kelley; she included her address, driveway code, and a map to the house so that Kelley could make Alex's plan a reality. Robbie approached the unsuspecting Alex later that day about her parents being out of town. He asked to throw a party at her mansion. Back then, Alex hadn't known why Robbie was talking to her—she and Kelley weren't outcasts, but they weren't popular, either.

The placement of this scene right after Kelley alludes to his and Alix's horrible breakup suggests that Alix's embarrassing moment is going to be about the breakup. It will be interesting to see how Alix's version of events differs from Kelley's. And because readers know that Alix places a high value on external appearances, readers should take her version of events with a grain of salt. Even among her friends, she's likely going to spin events to portray herself in a more flattering light.



This scene confirms, with Alix's own words, that she comes from money—even if that money came later in her adolescence, and even if she was ashamed of it. Alix criticizes her parents' gaudy displays of wealth, but she remains ignorant to the fact that her own minimalist aesthetic is itself a display of wealth—just one that's updated for the modern era. Another detail about which Alix remains ignorant is how she is repeating her parents' problematic behavior by, like them, hiring a Black woman to perform domestic labor. Finally, note how in this flashback, Alix goes by Alex, since this was her original name, and the name she went by in high school. That she felt compelled to change her name reinforces her defining personality trait: that she can reconfigure her life to embody a certain narrative or image, and that superficial changes like appearances or a name change count as much as actionable change. Also, her name change shows how desperately Alix wants to distance herself from this period of her life.



This scene seems to lay the groundwork for whatever drama brought about Alix (Alex) and Kelley's breakup. The conflict here is that Robbie seems to know about Alex's invitation to Kelley, even though Alex invited Kelley in a private letter intended for Kelley's eyes only. So Alex is left to wonder how Robbie found out about her parents being out of town; has Kelley shared the letter with Robbie? Readers know Kelley did share the letter with Robbie—however, it's also worth keeping in mind that this story is Alix's retelling, and she hasn't proven herself a reliable narrator thus far. It's worth taking her story with a grain of salt, given her unreliability.



When Alex confronted Kelley about Robbie's request later that day, Kelley denied showing the letter to Robbie. In fact, he claimed he'd never even received it. Alex was livid, especially after Kelley suggested that Robbie's idea to have a party would be fun. Alex had long been annoyed by Kelley's obsession with Robbie and the other popular star athletes at school, and she hated how desperately Kelley wanted them to like him. She immediately vetoed Kelley's suggestion to hold the party.

Kelley came over that weekend as planned, and he and Alex had sex. Later, though, Robbie and the other popular kids came over even though they weren't invited. Alex saw security footage of Robbie punching in the garage code, which confirmed her suspicion that Kelley had showed Robbie the note. The kids started goofing off around the pool, and many of them were intoxicated. Things got worse when Kelley suggested that Alex just go through with the party since everybody was there anyway. Alex was livid; she saw this as Kelley taking advantage of the situation to climb the school social ladder. Then Claudette came home with Alex's younger sister, Betheny, and asked Alex if she should call the police. Alex said yes. Kelley tried to reason with her, but she was resolute. "You don't even know them!" she said, though what she really meant to say was "They don't know you for a reason."

Alex never intended to press charges—she'd only wanted the kids to leave—but when the police arrived, they caught Robbie, found a small bag of cocaine in his pockets, and arrested him. Robbie's arrest was bad news for Alex's reputation. Soon, the whole school was calling her "Princess Murphy" and accusing her family of being "new money trash." Once, when Robbie ran into Alex at a Jamba Juice, he called her "Massa Murphy." Kelley broke up with Alex on Monday and told her he was going to go to prom with Robbie's cousin Sasha instead. Alex couldn't believe Kelley was breaking up with her over her mistake. It also seemed like he was breaking up with her for Robbie. Then Kelley added insult to injury with his parting line to Alex: "I think it would be best...if we went our separate ways? And that those paths never again...connected."

The last time Alex saw Kelley was at a gas station the day before graduation. He was wearing Fila flip-flops with white tube socks, just like Robbie and his friends wore. By this point, Kelley was an accepted member of Robbie's popular crowd; meanwhile, the whole school ostracized Alex. Furious, she told him he had no right to share her letter with Robbie. She also reiterated that she only called the police to protect Claudette and Betheny. Kelley seemed confused as he asked, "You had to protect your sister from *Robbie*?"

Alix assumes Kelley is lying and has really showed Robbie the private letter to ingratiate himself with the popular Black kids at their school. If Alix is telling the truth, it lends credence to Kelley fetishizing (or at least, having a problematic relationship to) Black people and Black culture. And again, remember that Alix is telling this story to her friends, so her version of events might not be the true one.



Even if Kelley is telling the truth and he didn't show Robbie Alex's letter, he's still being an insensitive jerk. It's clear that Alex, infatuated with her first boyfriend, wants to have a romantic evening alone, yet Kelley is asking her to share their evening with people she doesn't know all that well. The more uncertain aspect of this evening, though, is whether Kelley's actions are unfeeling but not untypical of the average teenage boy, or whether (as Alex claims) they are symptomatic of Kelley's fetishization of Black people. When Alix (inwardly) observes that Robbie and his friends "don't know [Kelley] for a reason," she seems to suggest that racial difference has prevented Kelley from orbiting the same social circle as Robbie and his friends.



Alex's privilege prevents her from anticipating the consequences of her so-called mistake. As a white teenager with wealthy parents, calling the police means something different for her than it does for a Black kid like Robbie. Adding to her ignorance is her implicit belief that everyone is overreacting to her actions. She thinks Kelley is being petty by breaking up with her and hanging out with Robbie's crowd instead (and perhaps he is). Further, she fails to acknowledge that the breakup is the result of ideological or moral incompatibility—that Kelley doesn't want to be with somebody who weaponizes their privilege against others yet simultaneously plays the victim.



Alex's insistence that she's not racist is called into question when she claims that she was only "protect[ing]" her sister and Claudette from Robbie. Why would she need to protect her younger sister from some random kid? Was her apprehension rooted in a racist assumption that Black people are more aggressive?



Alex decided to go to college out of state to get away from everyone, and that's how she ended up at NYU. Her parents wouldn't pay for it, so she took out loans and supported herself. Now, as she recounts the story to her friends, she wishes she could go back in time and comfort her teenage self. Alix's friends comfort her, reminding her that they'd never have met her if she hadn't "become a Pennsylvania pariah." Then Briar interrupts the women to ask for Alix. Alix jokingly remarks, "Someone could tell I was having too much fun."

Alix's narrative (the one she tells her Manhattan friends) that she's the victim of this situation is not all that convincing. She acts as though not having parents who could afford to put her through a very expensive private university is a unique experience among Americans, when student loan debt is an enormously widespread problem. Finally, Alix's response to Briar's interruption reaffirms how inconvenienced and unfulfilled Alix feels by motherhood. She sees her real and fun life and her life as a mother as totally incompatible.



CHAPTER 9

Spoons dies the morning of Friday, October 30. Alix notices before Briar does and texts her friends about what to do. They assure her that it's fine to ask Emira to pick up a replacement fish on her way over—she's on the clock, after all. In the kitchen, Briar asks Alix if birds can fly when their wings get wet, but Alix throws a pink ball down the hallway to distract Briar, who runs to fetch it.

When Alix throws the pink ball to distract Briar, she's effectively treating her daughter like a dog. Again, this scene reinforces how Alix mostly views Briar as a nuisance and fails to respect her as a fully formed human with real feelings, curiosities, and needs.



Alix calls Emira and asks her to pick up a new **fish**. Emira says they'll be late to Briar's ballet class if she stops by the pet store first. Alix says she can't take Briar because Laney Thacker is coming over later that day. Emira asks if Laney is the coworker of Peter's whom Alix dislikes. Alix doesn't like Laney, but she's ashamed that Emira has picked up on this, since Emira has witnessed Laney being kind to Alix on numerous occasions. Trying to correct her mistake now, Alix absently says that Laney is "fine."

Once more, Alix places her own life—here, her scheduled engagement with Laney Thacker—above her daughter's emotional needs. Parents needn't totally disregard their own needs for their children, of course, but Alix doesn't seem interested in giving even an inch for Briar. Furthermore, her failure to recognize what Emira is seemingly hinting at—that Briar's ballet class is important to Briar and something she shouldn't miss—goes over Alix's head completely.



Alix tells Emira to go to the pet store; Briar will just have to miss the party—she won't care or remember about missing the party anyway. Alix thinks she can hear Emira laugh in disbelief, but Emira agrees to go to the pet store. After Alix hangs up with Emira, she receives a text from Laney asking if it's okay for two other women to join them tonight. Inwardly, Alix isn't happy, but she responds, "The more the merrier!" to Laney.

Alix is unaware of Briar's interests and feelings, and she doesn't really care. That she assumes Briar will quickly forget all about the missed ballet class suggests that Alix thinks Briar's inner life isn't important or meaningful. Emira's laugh could be in disbelief that Alix is being so oblivious and unfeeling about Briar's feelings and interests. Alix's fake response to Laney reinforces Alix's superficiality.



When Emira arrives, she's carrying a **goldfish** that looks totally different than Spoons, and she seems annoyed. Alix keeps her thoughts to herself and accepts the fish. Inwardly, Alix wonders if Emira's finally found out about the racist comment Peter made on air. Then she wonders if Emira is mad about the fish. But why would she be? After all, Alix is giving Emira a break by not making her sit in on Briar's ballet class, which is "boring and tedious" and full of annoyingly "hypersupportive" mothers.

Alix tells Emira about a Halloween-themed dog parade she found for them to go to in another neighborhood. Briar tries to ask questions, but Alix brushes her off as she straps Catherine into her stroller. In the front vestibule on her way out, she passes by Emira's phone plugged into the outlet. She sees a text on the screen from Kenan&Kel wishing Emira and Briar good luck on the Halloween ballet performance. Alix also spots a headband with cat ears in Emira's purse with its price tag still attached.

That afternoon, Alix buys food, drinks, and Halloween coloring books. Then she returns home and rearranges the girls' bedroom so the children can watch movies there while the women hang out downstairs. Laney, Suzanne, Ramona, and Laney's kid, Bella, arrive at 6:00. Alix tells herself that having Emira replace the **fish** was the right thing to do, since it's important for Alix to give Laney a fun evening, and a grieving toddler would've ruined the atmosphere.

Alix observes Bella Thacker, who is overly sweet, polite, and cute. Then she remembers a time last year when Briar bruised her vagina riding a tricycle—and then told everyone about her condition. Alix cringes as she thinks about Briar's habit of oversharing.

Emira and Briar have since returned from their outing. They walk downstairs to greet the guests. Alix notes Briar's old T-shirt and purple leggings and wishes Emira would've put her in cuter pajamas (Bella is wearing a matching striped set). Alix tells Briar to show the guests the upstairs. Meanwhile, Emira takes her purse off its hook on the wall. Then she removes her **LetHer Speak polo** and hangs it on the wall.

That Alix's instinct is to assume that Emira is in a bad mood because she's found out about Peter's racist remark—and not about Alix's bad parenting—shows how ignorant Alix is about her own flaws. She's also totally underestimating how much Emira cares about Briar: she assumes Emira will be glad to forgo the "boring and tedious" ballet class, when in fact, Emira finds the class fun—and even if she didn't, she cares about Briar enough to suffer through boredom if it'll make Briar happy.



This scene really highlights the differences between Briar and Catherine, and it helps explain why Alix clearly favors Catherine. While Briar is constantly asking questions and annoying Alix, Catherine is silent and demure—the perfect accessory for Alix to strap to her chest to complete the working-mother aesthetic she wants to project to the world. Finally, the cat ears that Alix finds in Emira's purse (not to mention Kelley's text message) should make Alix realize how much she misjudged the dance class situation, but she fails to reflect on this and thus remains ignorant that she's made a mistake.



This scene is also pretty damning for Alix as a parent. It reveals that Alix prioritizes looking good in front of others to tending to the emotional needs of her child. She sees the grief Briar would have experienced, had she learned of Spoons's death, as an impediment on her social gathering rather than serious, valid emotions.



Alix implicitly compares Briar to Bella Thacker, almost jealously assessing how conventionally cute and unobtrusive Bella is compared to Briar, who has no understanding of social nuance or politeness. Bella, however, is also several years older than Briar—she's learned more about how to fit in, just due to her age.



Alix implicitly compares Briar to Bella yet again, noting how Briar's physical appearance isn't as cute as Bella's. Because Alix's main use for Briar is to promote her brand of a put-together and competent working mother, it doesn't look good for her if her child wears mismatched, frumpy pajamas.



Alone with Emira, Alix apologizes for making Emira and Briar miss the ballet class. Emira tells Alix that she was right, though—Briar hadn't remembered the class anyway. Alix tries to make small talk with Emira, but it's awkward. Finally, Emira points to an envelope in Alix's back pocket and asks if it's her paycheck. Alix remembers the envelope and, embarrassed, hands it to Emira. Emira thanks her and leaves. Alix watches Emira walk down the stairs. She hears one of the women inside exclaiming "wine o'clock." Inwardly, Alix pleads, "*Mira, please don't leave me.*"

Alix seems to apologize to Emira about the dance class in a calculated effort to make amends with her (and thus continue in her quest to befriend Emira). But Emira rejects Alix's attempts to get closer yet again, responding to Alix's attempt at friendliness by asking for her paycheck and reaffirming the reality of their impersonal employer-employee relationship.



CHAPTER 10

Later that night, Emira heads to Shaunie's apartment. Shaunie greets Emira excitedly and announces that she's been hired as a marketing specialist at Sony Philadelphia. Zara, still dressed in scrubs, sings a song to celebrate Shaunie's latest achievement. Josefa calls to Emira from the kitchen, asking if she'd like a drink. Emira tells her she'll take whatever alcohol they have. Emira looks around Shaunie's apartment (Shaunie's father co-signed the lease) as she waits for her drink. It looks a little like a college dorm, but the overall atmosphere is distinctly adult—and now Shaunie has an adult job to go with it.

Once more, Emira remains aware of her and her friends' class differences, even as they are preparing to leave for a night out. The detail about Shaunie's father co-signing the lease of her apartment gestures toward how having wealthy parents has made Shaunie's life easier. Another important idea this scene reveals is how Emira associates material wealth with adulthood. She feels like less of a grown-up next to her friends, who all have successful careers.



Josefa passes Emira a glass of wine. Then she announces that they're going out tonight. This is a surprise to Emira, who thought the plan was to watch Netflix, order takeout, and drink wine. Emira tells Josefa she's a little tired. Really, though, Emira is mostly concerned about money—it's almost the first of the month, and soon, almost all her money will go toward rent. Josefa doesn't understand why Emira is so tired—she only babysat today. Inwardly, Emira notes that Josefa would never tell Zara that she "*only nursed today.*" But she keeps her thoughts to herself. Josefa tells Emira that she aced an exam today and wants to celebrate. Emira responds unenthusiastically, but nobody seems to notice.

Emira makes a valid point about the way society undervalues domestic labor and caregiving. Yet Josefa's offhanded comment about Emira "only" babysitting today seems less Josefa's attempt to harm Emira than it is Emira's projecting her own insecurities onto other people. Emira doesn't think her work matters, and so she thinks that the rest of the world thinks this, too.



Emira worries that if Zara goes out without her, she might realize that Emira isn't her closest friend and dump her. Shaunie tells Emira she can borrow any going-out clothes she'd like. Zara follows Shaunie into her bedroom to raid Shaunie's closet while Emira locks herself in the bathroom. Alone, Emira thinks about all the constant praise Shaunie receives. It seems like she has something new to celebrate every week, whether it be her cute new boyfriend or her amazing new internship.

Emira is possessive of Zara because of her own insecurities. She's worried that her lack of ambition, her lack of a career, and her lack of funds make her less valuable as a person. This shows how Emira's shortage of privilege affects her emotionally as well as practically. This chapter also makes it clear that Emira is jealous and even somewhat resentful of her friends' successes.



But what's really upsetting Emira is the fact that Mrs. Chamberlain lied to Briar about her dead **fish**. Emira remembers a time she witnessed Mrs. Chamberlain being a good mother. Emira had seen them from afar at the post office. Briar was overstimulated by everything going on around her, and Mrs. Chamberlain sang to Briar to calm her. Having seen this, Emira realizes that when Mrs. Chamberlain is being a bad mother, it's a choice she's making—not a flaw she can't control. Also, Emira thinks now, Laney Thacker is actually really nice; she'd offered to help Emira at the birthday party, and she'd tucked in the tag on **Emira's polo shirt**.

Zara knocks on the bathroom door but then barges in anyway. Emira appreciates Zara. Even though Zara has always known she's wanted to be a nurse, she doesn't judge Emira for being a little lost in life. Now, Emira tells Zara she's had a bad day. Inwardly, Emira reflects on everything that's troubling her, such as Mrs. Chamberlain's indifference toward Briar and how Emira's guilt about leaving Briar complicates her desire to stop working for the Chamberlains. But Emira doesn't tell Zara any of this.

Zara understands that Emira's had a bad day. But she also insists that Emira get over herself and act happy for Shaunie. When Emira tells Zara that she hates her job and needs to quit, Zara offers to help Emira fill out job applications. Then she reminds Emira that she has to join them on their trip to Mexico. Emira plays along, but she secretly anguishes over how different her financial situation is from her friends': unlike them, Emira doesn't have vacation days, and so she loses money any day she isn't working.

After her chat with Zara, Emira approaches Shaunie, invites her to do a shot, and congratulates her on her new job. Shaunie hugs Emira. Then she quietly tells her that she plans to move into a studio or one-bedroom apartment—and that Emira is welcome to move into her old room once she finds a new place. Emira's current roommate is a Temple graduate student who spends half the week at her boyfriend's place. Their apartment is small and falling apart, but the rent is cheap. Shaunie's apartment is undoubtedly nicer and in a cooler location. But Shaunie would take all her things from it when she moved out, including the HBO subscription (which her father pays for). Still, Emira is interested—at least until Shaunie replies that the rent is \$1150, which is way more than Emira can afford. Before Emira can respond, Shaunie leaves to take a call from her boyfriend, Troy.

That Emira is still hung up on the way Alix handled Spoons's death and Briar's Halloween ballet recital shows how deeply and genuinely Emira cares for Briar. It's a bit ironic, then, that Emira thinks she has no ambition or passion in life, since it's clear that she has an instinct for childcare and takes her babysitting work seriously. Her inability to see this reflects the depth of her insecurity, as well as society's broader lack of regard for childcare and other forms of domestic labor.



Even though Emira is totally preoccupied with thoughts about Briar and Mrs. Chamberlain, she doesn't reveal them to Zara. This suggests that Emira is embarrassed by how much she cares—that she thinks Zara will judge her or think Emira's priorities aren't straight. Again, Emira's inability to open up to Zara shows how insecure she is about her place in life and how much she undervalues her babysitting work.



Zara makes a good point—it's only hurting Emira and the people she cares about to sulk about her own shortcomings and not be happy for Shaunie. At the same time, though, Zara's relative financial security prevents her from understanding how significantly and constantly issues of class and financial hardship weigh on Emira. When her economic position consistently closes doors for her, it's hard for Emira to simply ignore her financial woes.



Emira's effort to set aside her money anxieties to support Shaunie last only a short while—when Shaunie characterizes \$1150 per month as reasonable and affordable rent, it immediately reminds Emira of how different her world is than her more financially stable friends. Not only does Shaunie's employment give her more financial stability, but the help she receives from her wealthy parents (like how she doesn't have to pay for cable subscriptions) cuts down on costs, too.



After speaking with Shaunie, Emira sneaks out onto the fire escape and closes the window behind her. She calls Kelley, who picks up on the second ring. He's at a tech conference in Cleveland but senses something is wrong. Emira tells him she had a bad day. Kelley did, too. They exchange stories, and Emira tells Kelley about **Spoons** and about Briar's missed Halloween party. Kelley sympathizes. Then he tells her that even though he won't be back until tomorrow morning, Emira is free to sleep at his place tonight if she just wants to get away from everything—he'll tell the doorman to expect her. Emira tell him she'll think about it.

Kelley is at least as financially secure as Emira's friends—he makes enough to live in a place with a doorman, at least. But his outward sympathy toward Emira's struggles and insecurities makes her gravitate toward him, while her friends' lack of sympathy alienates Emira from them. At any rate, though Kelley has raised some red flags, his and Emira's relationship seems to be moving in a positive direction, and this opens the possibility that Alix, so desperate to insert herself into Emira's private life, will eventually meet Kelley—and then, undoubtedly, drama will ensue.



CHAPTER 11

Alix is still eight pounds above her pre-baby weight, she and Peter haven't had sex in nearly three weeks, and she's made no progress on her book. None of this matters, though, because Rachel, Jodi, and Tamra are coming to Philadelphia for Thanksgiving. And then Alix will return to New York with them for five days—the Clinton campaign has invited her to attend a women's event in Manhattan.

Alix's excitement about her friends coming to visit seems to be less about her actual friends and more about reconnecting with her old life in Manhattan, which gave her fulfillment and social credibility in a way that her new life in Philadelphia does not.



Alix has just returned home from running errands for Thanksgiving. It's snowing heavily outside. As Alix removes her coat in the front vestibule, she sees Emira's phone light up with a notification about a flight cancellation.

Once again, Alix's snooping in Emira's phone is a blatant betrayal of Emira's trust. In this scene, it makes Alix privy to the bad news that Emira's (likely) flight home has been cancelled. Based on Alix's pattern of manipulative behavior, it seems likely that she'll try to use this knowledge to further her mission to make Emira part of the family.



Things have been weird between Alix and Emira ever since the **fish** incident. Last Friday, Emira turned down Alix's offer of a glass of wine. Emira's coldness is driving Alix crazy, and she can't stop thinking about her. Lately, she's been feeling more self-conscious about her lifestyle. She's started to pretend that she's eating leftovers for dinner when Emira is around—only to go right to the computer to order sushi for takeout the minute Emira leaves.

So much of Alix's business success has come from projecting a certain image to the world, and she thinks that she can use the same strategy to ingratiate herself with Emira, hiding physical signs of her wealth that (she thinks) Emira must resent. But as she does this, she doesn't make any real changes to her lifestyle or use her privilege to actually help Emira.



Alix tries to stalk Emira on social media, even though she knows Emira doesn't have any accounts. She tells herself that she's doing this for her children's safety. Alix looks through her own feed and wonders how Emira would judge it. She knows that Emira sees her as a stereotypical rich white lady, but she also knows that Emira would see that this just isn't true, if she only gave Alix a chance. For instance, Emira might change her mind about Alix if she knew that one of Alix's closest friends is Black, or if she knew Alix has read everything by Toni Morrison. But, if everything goes according to plan, Emira will discover these things tomorrow.

Alix thinks that superficial details that signify her anti-racism, such as the fact that she's read Toni Morrison (a prolific 20th-century Black American writer) or that she has a Black friend, are enough to make Emira like her. But the fact is that these superficial details don't change the fact that Alix is a stereotypical rich white lady—particularly in the way that she remains ignorant about her privilege and what it takes to be a real ally to Emira.



Emira stands behind Briar at the window. As they watch the storm, Emira tells Alix how crazy it was for her to brave the winter conditions to run errands. Alix agrees. Then she suggests that Emira check the status of her flight—there’s a possibility it’s been canceled due to weather. Alix wonders if it’s cruel of her to act like she doesn’t know that Emira’s flight has been cancelled, but she’s too excited by the prospect of Emira joining them for Thanksgiving to care; finally, she’ll have a chance to make Emira part of their family—to show her that she hasn’t forgotten about that awful night at Market Depot. Emira checks her phone and sees that her flight’s been cancelled. Alix feigns shock and disappointment. Emira goes upstairs to call her parents, who bought her the ticket.

Emira returns to the kitchen and tells Alix that there aren’t any flights until after Thanksgiving. Alix tells Emira that she’s more than welcome to join the Chamberlains for Thanksgiving. Emira tries to decline, explaining that she can spend Thanksgiving with her boyfriend, since his flight was also cancelled. But Alix insists that he can join, too. Alix tells Emira to come at 4:00 on Thursday—and that she’ll be there as a guest, not the sitter. Emira is reluctant, but Briar’s pleading wins her over. She texts Kelley to see what he thinks. He responds almost instantly to tell Emira that he’d love to join her.

Alix is overjoyed. Emira turns to Catherine and asks if it’s okay if she joins them for Thanksgiving. Catherine smiles and says, “Hi,” which shocks Emira and Alix. Alix starts to cry. Then she tells Emira to go home early today. Emira protests, but Alix insists. Inwardly, Alix fears that if Emira stays any longer, Alix will say something stupid, like “I love you.” So instead, Alix sends Emira home with a bag of frozen tortellini, some canned soups, a package of animal cookies, and a bottle of wine for the road—it’s better than anything Emira will find at the scant grocery stores now, Alix explains. Emira thanks her and awkwardly tells Alix that she’ll see her on Thanksgiving.

Alix knows it’s wrong to pretend not to know about Emira’s cancelled flight. Yet she pushes aside these feelings to advance her quest invite Emira to Thanksgiving and make her part of the family. And so, though Alix continues to tell herself that she wants to make Emira part of the family, her actions, which are cruel and inconsiderate of Emira’s feelings, contradict these intentions.



This scene foreshadows what is sure to be an uncomfortable and unexpected Thanksgiving for all involved. When Kelley shows up as Emira’s date, he and Alix will reunite for the first time since high school. And the fact that Emira is dating somebody who, according to Alix, ruined Alix’s life, will throw a major wrench in Alix’s efforts to befriend Emira. At the same time, Kelley and Alix have both shown that they think they know what’s best for Emira (Kelley tries to make her publish the Market Depot video, Alix tries to make her sue Market Depot), so, given that they are sworn enemies, it seems possible that they’ll also try to get Emira to remove the other from her life.



That Alix is so overjoyed at (what appears to be) Catherine’s first word—all the while she hates the sound of Briar’s constant chatter—reinforces that Catherine is her favorite. Briar doesn’t much seem to recognize this, but she’s now three years old, so it’ll only become more apparent from here on out, unless Alix changes her behavior. Finally, Alix’s gesture of sending Emira home with groceries is nice, but it also kind of seems like she’s just dumping superfluous things from her pantry onto her in advance of the Thanksgiving holiday, which will likely demand considerable food storage space. So, again, Alix does the right thing—but for the wrong reasons.



CHAPTER 12

It's Thanksgiving Day. Emira and Kelley step out of a cab in front of the Chamberlains' house. Emira feels weird letting herself in with her key, so she rings the doorbell. As they wait to be let in, Kelley asks Emira what her employer's name is. "Uh-leeks?" Emira guesses, unsure of how to pronounce Mrs. Chamberlain's unusual name. Kelley wonders if she's European or something; Emira laughs and says, "she's white." They lean in for a quick kiss but pull away when the door opens. Alix greets them; she's happy at first—then she recognizes Kelley and freezes. "Alex?" asks Kelley.

When Kelley addresses Alix by her old name, Alex, it propels her back into the past—to the year that (according to Alix) Kelley betrayed her trust and turned everyone against her. With this, readers can assume that the evening isn't going to go well; Alix's happiness relies on her ability to control her surroundings and the way people see her, and Kelley deprives her of this control when he misidentifies her.



CHAPTER 13

Alix examines herself in the mirror before walking downstairs to greet Emira. When she opens the door, she's suddenly face-to-face with Emira—and Kelley Copeland. Seeing Kelley sends Alix 15 years into the past. The way he said her name, "Alex," is full of pity and disgust. She can't believe this is happening. Emira, unaware of what's going on, laughs at Alix's puzzled expression. As Alix leads Kelley and Emira into her house, all of her Thanksgiving decorations suddenly look gaudy and wrong; they look like the kind of thing her parents would get—even though Alix had bought all the kitschy stuff as a joke.

Alix's kitschy Thanksgiving decorations now embarrass her—even if she intended for them to be ironic—because she's hyper sensitive about flaunting her material wealth in front of Kelley, who rejected her so many years ago on the basis that she was prejudiced and elitist. She's further alluding to this anxiety when she thinks that they look like something her parents would get. She knows that Kelley will seize on a detail like this and use it against her. So, just like that, Alix's Thanksgiving presentation doesn't reflect the life she wants to project to someone like Kelley, and so she loses the power to control how others perceive her.



Alix's friends have no idea what's going on. They greet Emira warmly and excitedly; Tamra says, "Bring it in, sister," and wraps Emira in a hug. Meanwhile, Alix addresses Kelley, noting that he looks exactly the same. Kelley replies, "I see nothing has changed for you either." But before Alix can respond, Peter walks over and introduces himself to Kelley, saying "Peter Chamberlain" in his news anchor voice.

Tamra, a Black woman, makes an effort to connect with Emira over their racial identity. Meanwhile, Kelley's remark that "nothing has changed for [Alix]" confirms Alix's fear that Kelley will see her kitschy Thanksgiving decorations and assume she's just as put-on and out-of-touch as her parents. Peter's confident, booming news anchor voice, so evocative of white male privilege, heightens the effect.



Alix stands to the side and watches her friends fuss over Emira. Then Alix catches Jodi's eye and discreetly calls her over. They head into the laundry room, and the other friends eventually follow. Once they are alone, Alix tells them that Kelley is the high school boyfriend who "ruined [her] fucking life." Alix starts to panic over how *wrong* everything is: she's still overweight, and her house is filled with annoying children. She considers all the fantasies she's had about how her and Kelley's reunion would play out. In one scenario, she runs into Kelley and a girlfriend when they're on a vacation in New York and gives them tips about where to go. In another, she imagines running into a fat, middle-aged Kelley at a book-signing for her latest book. Kelley stands beside his young daughter—a huge fan of Alix's—as Alix signs her book.

Tamra reminds Alix that there's a party going on and it's weird for her to be holed up in the laundry room. Meanwhile, the collective children cry out for their mothers. As Tamra lifts Cleo up to sniff her diaper, Alix thinks to herself, "Oh my God, my friends are such MOMS." She's suddenly embarrassed about many aspects of her life—such as the fact that she went to bed happy last night once she realized that she would have *five* African American guests at her Thanksgiving.

Alix decides not to hold off on telling Emira and Peter about the Kelley situation. In the meantime, Tamra volunteers to handle Emira. Rachel notes what a shame the situation is, though, since Emira and Kelley would have such beautiful babies together.

Alix's fantasies about seeing Kelley again share the element of control that Alix relies on to feel happy, successful, and fulfilled in her life. This unexpected reunion is so unsettling for Alix, then, because she hasn't been able to prepare for it, and it robs her of the ability to control the situation. If she had the choice, she might have decorated more minimally, for instance. Another important detail to note is that Alix is obviously still affected by her breakup with Kelley, even 15 years later. So the reader should interpret any move Alix might make to interfere in Kelley and Emira's relationship with this in mind. As the novel has made abundantly clear, Alix often does the right thing—but often for the wrong, selfish reason.



Again, Alix's Thanksgiving isn't projecting the sleek, professional atmosphere she's wanted for her and Kelley's reunion. It's painfully domestic and uncool. Not only does this reinforce Alix's fixation on outer appearances, but it also reinforces how unfulfilling she finds motherhood. She's ashamed to be a mother and have mother-friends—she thinks Kelley will find it unattractive and uninteresting. Alix's excitement about having so many African American guests at her Thanksgiving also reinforces her superficiality, as she's obsessed with seeming socially conscious.



Alix's decision not to tell Emira is self-centered, as usual: she assumes that Kelley, Emira's boyfriend, hasn't already filled Emira in on the situation. Rachel's remark about Kelley and Emira making beautiful babies is further evidence of the shallowness of Alix's friends, too.



CHAPTER 14

Emira has to stop herself from laughing when she sees Mrs. Chamberlain's face. She'd had to do the same thing five months ago when they first met and Emira ended up being "much darker" than the person Mrs. Chamberlain had imagined Emira to be. Now, though, Emira hears Kelley call Mrs. Chamberlain "Alex," and it's clear that something strange is going on. But before Emira can find out more, Mrs. Chamberlain's friends are all over her. After the women head upstairs, Emira greets Briar, saying "Hey, pickle." Briar hugs Emira, and Emira introduces Briar to Kelley. Kelley pretends that he's three years old, which makes Briar giggle. Emira is happy they're getting along.

That Emira can discern from Alix's aghast facial expression that something is up further reinforces how much Kelley's appearance has caught Alix off guard and robbed her of her ability to control the situation. When Emira greets Briar, "Hey, pickle," she uses a pet name and shows more love and affection for Briar than Alix has the entire novel.



Just as Kelley is about to pull Emira aside to talk, Tamra comes between them and asks Emira to help her with something in the kitchen. Emira follows Tamra into the kitchen. Once there, Tamra asks Emira to help her fold silverware into napkins. Emira agrees, but something seems off: the napkins don't match the rest of the décor, and there's no way Mrs. Chamberlain *wouldn't* have completed this task before guests arrived. As they work, Tamra asks Emira about her natural hair (Emira wears her hair in braids now) and talks about what she uses on her daughters' hair. Emira is used to well-meaning white hosts throwing Black guests together, but Tamra seems to be talking to Emira of her own volition.

After Tamra finishes folding the silverware, Emira brings it downstairs. She runs into Kelley and apologizes for the weirdness. Kelley, clearly uncomfortable, tells Emira to check her phone. Emira does this and finds a string of texts from Kelley informing her that Mrs. Chamberlain is his rich girlfriend from high school; his last text says, "I DON'T WANT TO BE HERE ANYMORE."

CHAPTER 15

Emira and Kelley stay for dinner. Emira compliments Alix's decorations, even though she thinks they're ugly. Alix, still flustered, tries to explain that they were meant to be a joke, but Jodi cuts her off and says that they're nice. Alix is grateful for her friend's support. Everyone starts to eat. Alix listens to the sound of clunking silverware. It might *sound* like Thanksgiving, but everything feels so wrong.

Peter asks Emira and Kelley how they met. Alix watches Emira and Kelley look at each other, clearly unsure of what to say. When neither speaks, Alix tells everyone that they met on the train. But Kelley corrects her and tells the table that he and Emira actually met at Market Depot the night that Emira was being held by the police. Suddenly, Peter remembers seeing Kelley there—he was the one who recorded the incident on his phone. Tamra seems excited to hear that there's a video of the altercation out there. Meanwhile, Kelley tells everyone that the video is Emira's property now. Alix feels betrayed by Emira lying to her about where she and Kelley met.

Tamra continues to bond with Emira over their racial identity, just as she did when Emira first walked in the door. That Emira is immediately wary of the unfolded silverware further reinforces both how Kelley's unexpected appearance has robbed Alix of her sense of control, as well as how much control and appearances are part of Alix's identity in the first place.



In another blow to Alix's ability to control her surroundings, it's Kelley who tells Emira about his and Alix's relationship, not Alix. So, needless to say, Alix's mission to officially make Emira one of the family on Thanksgiving has been severely compromised.



So much of Alix's life—from her business to her personal affairs—relies on her ability to control her surroundings and curate her version of perfection. But Kelley's appearance shows her the limitations of this. For even though it sounds and appears like Thanksgiving, everything feels—and is—all wrong.



Alix announces that Emira and Kelley met on a train because this is what Emira had told her when she asked—but Emira lied then, because doing so was less awkward than having to mention the Market Depot incident yet again. However, Kelley doesn't know that Emira lied to Alix, so to him, it may seem as though Alix is lying about where he and Emira met to conceal the fact that she sent Emira into a situation that led to Emira being racially profiled.



Peter thanks Kelley for recording the incident. He also says he's glad that something good could come out of such an awful night. And, knowing now that a video exists, he reminds Emira that she could totally sue Market Depot if she wanted. Emira reiterates that she has no desire to share the video, and then she changes the subject to ask Alix and Peter how they met. Peter tells the story about how Alix "pursue[d]" him in an awful dive bar. Alix has heard Peter tell the story a million times, but this is the first time it's annoyed her—Kelley's presence makes her incredibly self-conscious. Tamra asks Alix if she met Peter when she was working at Hunter, and Alix says yes—though she wishes she could tell Emira and Kelley that the reason she frequented dive bars back then was that she was making under \$40,000.

Kelley changes the subject, theatrically asking Alix about the book she's working on—Emira has told him it's a "history" book. Alix's friends and Peter laugh at this. Alix blushes, then she explains that the book is really just a history of her business—a collection of the most important letters she's written and received over the years. Kelley asks Alix when she started her business. When she tells him 2009, he rudely observes that this isn't much of a history. Finally—to Alix's relief and horror—Peter decides to make a toast. He thanks the strong women in Alix's life—Emira included—who have supported her as she grows her business.

CHAPTER 16

Peter's toast embarrasses Emira. Kelley squeezes Emira's knee throughout dinner, but she has no idea what he's trying to tell her—is he mad she hadn't told him that she lied to Mrs. Chamberlain about how they met? Emira is also mad at Mrs. Chamberlain for lying about writing a history book. All this time, Emira has mistakenly thought that Mrs. Chamberlain is doing serious scholarly work when all she's really doing is writing a coffee table book.

Tamra interrupts Emira's musings to ask about her plans for the future. When Emira admits that her GPA was only a 3.1, Tamra agrees that this isn't great. However, Tamra says, Alix and Peter love Emira, and they also have a lot of connections and would pull whatever strings they can to help Emira.

Peter is yet another well-intentioned white person in Emira's life who thinks they know what's best for her—who thinks that the payoff of going public with the video will be worth the emotional labor involved in that endeavor. And yet, as is evident with her words and the swiftness with which she changes the subject, Emira has no desire to share the video. Alix's desire to let Kelley and Emira know that she was making \$40,000 back when she worked at Hunter reinforces how guilty she feels about her privilege. At the same time, though, her desire for Emira to relate to her also reinforces her privilege. Alix might not have been making much, but she had a salaried position that gave her opportunities for networking and career advancement.



Just as Emira's white lie to Alix about how she and Kelley met backfires, so too does Alix's white lie about writing a history book (when all she's really doing is compiling letters she's received over the years). Little by little, Alix's carefully curated, superficial world starts to crumple as her lies come to light and reveal that she's not as successful or fulfilled as she presents herself as being.



These few chapters build tension as the narrative perspective bounces back and forth between Emira and Alix. By moving between these two perspectives, the novel emphasizes how Alix's efforts to present her life as different than her inner reality breed conflict and misunderstanding.



Tamra and the Chamberlains want what's best for Emira, but in suggesting that Emira use their connections to better herself, they implicitly dehumanize Emira, suggesting that Emira is incapable of bettering herself without the help of the white, privileged people in her life.



Emira notices that Briar looks sick and uncomfortable. She asks if Briar is okay, but nobody notices. Briar says she wants Mama, but Mrs. Chamberlain tells Briar that she's talking. Then, she turns back to Catherine, urging her to say "Hi," like she did yesterday. When Briar vomits seconds later, Emira instinctively leaps across the table and covers the little girl's mouth with an expensive napkin.

That it's Emira—not Alix—who recognizes that Briar isn't feeling well illustrates how little in touch with Briar's feelings Alix is, mentally and physically. She's too invested in her favorite daughter—the one who doesn't disrupt her image of a perfect life with incessant chatter and quirks—to pay any attention to Briar.



CHAPTER 17

The night Alix lost her virginity to Kelley, she'd been happy and thought she'd remember the night forever. Now, she realizes her attraction for him hasn't waned. But Briar's sudden illness interrupts Alix's musings. She watches as Kelley grabs Emira around the waist to stop her from hitting the table. In the midst of all this chaos, Alix can barely digest the fact that her kid is sick. Instead, she thinks about how Kelley used to "use[] his hands to steady her." Now, his hands are wrapped around Emira. Alix wants to slap him and say, "Don't touch. That's Mama's." When Jodi squeezes Alix's hand and says, "grab your girl," Alix initially thinks Jodi's referring to Emira, not Briar.

Alix explicitly confirms what the novel has already made clear: that she's still hung up on Kelley all these years later. The reader, thus, should keep Alix's mental state in mind if and when she confronts Emira about her relationship with Kelley. Even if Alix claims that it's out of concern for Emira that she interferes in the relationship, her lingering feelings for Kelley—combined with her lingering resentment over his betrayal—will affect her actions to a certain degree. Finally, when Alix thinks Jodi is referring to Emira when she tells Alix to "grab [her] girl," it reinforces the inequality that colors Alix and Emira's relationship. Alix claims she wants to be friends with Emira, but she's really more interested in controlling and possessing her—in using her as an accessory that can redeem her for her past and for the offensive remark Peter made on the air.



CHAPTER 18

Briar cries into the vomit-filled napkin. Mrs. Chamberlain tries to pick up Briar, but Emira stops her—she'll handle Briar. Emira scoops the crying toddler into her arms and carries her upstairs. Once they're alone in the bathroom, Emira wets a towel and cleans Briar's face. In between her tears, Briar timidly says, "I don't like when Catherine bees the favorite." Emira hurts for the little girl and promises her everyone is the same in families—that there are no favorites—even though she knows this is rarely true.

Emira more instinctively knows how to care for Briar, which underscores how uninvolved Alix is in Briar's life. Further suggesting this is the fact that Briar confides in Emira—not Alix—about feeling slighted by Alix. Though Briar is still young, she can sense Alix's disregard. She can feel that Alix prefers Catherine for what Catherine contributes to Alix's vision of an ideal life.



By the time Emira heads back downstairs, the bartenders are clearing the table. Kelley makes a big show of clearing his own plate and helping the staff clean up the table. Then Mrs. Chamberlain's friends start to clear out for the evening. Emira and Kelley offer awkward goodbyes, and then they leave, too.

Kelley may accuse Alix of being put-on and fake, but the show he puts on of helping the waitstaff clear the table shows that he's just as performative and desiring of others' approval. And he has just as much white guilt as she does.



Emira and Kelley are initially going to take a cab back to Kelley's place, but Kelley changes his mind and makes the driver stop at a nearby bar instead. It's a dingy dive bar with only a few old white men inside and a picture of John Wayne on the wall. Emira and Kelley sit at the bar; Kelley orders a drink, but Emira doesn't get anything. She feels uncomfortable and doesn't want to be here. Though some of what she learned tonight bothered her, it all happened a long time ago, and she can't bring herself to care all that much. Kelley drinks and doesn't say anything.

Kelley finally breaks the silence to tell Emira that Alex Murphy is a bad person, and that Emira can't work for her anymore. Emira reminds him that she works for Alix Chamberlain, not Alex Murphy. She doesn't understand why he cares so much. Kelley pauses, then he tells Emira that she's not the first person Alex's family has hired to work for them. This doesn't faze Emira, though. She's met many people like Mrs. Chamberlain before: rich white women who try too hard to be nice to the people they employ. If she weren't working for this Mrs. Chamberlain, Emira thinks to herself, she'd be working for a different one.

Kelley tells Emira that there's more to the story of his and Alex's breakup. Then he briefly tells Emira about Robbie. He insists that Alex should have known the consequences of calling the police on a bunch of Black kids. He tells her about the Black housekeeper Alex's parents employed. And though Alex always acted embarrassed about her parents' wealth, Kelley says, she's grown up to be exactly the way they were. Emira pauses before telling Kelley that working for Alix is her job, and she can't afford to quit.

Kelley refuses to back down. He tells Emira about the uniform Alex's parents made their Black housekeeper wear—a **polo shirt** that had "Murphy" stitched across the back. The word "polo" makes Emira freeze. Kelley notices her response. Emira falters, then she explains that she does wear the same shirt during her shifts at the Chamberlains—but nobody makes her wear it. It's just so that her own clothes don't get dirty when she and Briar are painting or are at the park. When Kelley asks Emira whose name is on the shirt, Emira goes defensive and tells him to back off. When he brings up the Market Depot video again, she suggests that he cares more about shaming Mrs. Chamberlain than about racism.

Another way that Kelley and Alix are more alike than they realize is in their tendency to make Emira's problems about themselves. Kelley drags Emira to a bar she clearly feels uncomfortable in—this bar has a palpable white, masculine energy that makes her uneasy—because he is worked up about running into Alix tonight. It's also worth considering that Emira's livelihood could be in danger, since the fact that she's dating Alix's sworn enemy could jeopardize her employment.



Referring to Alix by her old name, "Alex Murphy," is a clear power play on Kelley's part; he knows that Alix's self-worth is tied up in her ability to present herself to the world in a particular way, and he uses her old name to rob her of the ability to reinvent herself. It's also pretty bold of him to order Emira not to work for Alix anymore. Once again, Emira is faced with a white, well-intentioned person who thinks they know what's best for her. But in reality, Kelley's stance only betrays his own privilege: for Kelley, having incompatible values with his employer is enough to warrant quitting. His financial security gives him a safety net to fall back on as he searches for a new job. But for Emira, who is living paycheck to paycheck, things aren't so simple.



Kelley's version of events, if his version is in fact true, makes Emira sympathize with his perspective. Still, Kelley's insistence that Emira quit over her boss's latent racism reinforces his privilege. Kelley can afford to quit because he dislikes or disagrees with his boss, but Emira's dire financial situation simply doesn't allow her this freedom—she literally cannot afford to quit.



Emira's visibly shocked response to Kelley's remark about the polo shirt is telling. Her horrified expression suggests that she's genuinely seeing things from Kelley's perspective now—she sees how her LetHer Speak polo symbolically ties her to Alix in much the same way that the Murphy's housekeeper's uniform tied her to the Murphys. At the same time, though, Emira also recognizes an important subtext to Kelley's words: that moral righteousness isn't the only thing that makes him irate toward Alix. Lingering feelings of resentment over their breakup motivates him, too. And Emira is sick of being the token minority they're fighting over.



Kelley tells Emira that if she's worried about money, she can move in with him. Emira has had enough and gets up to leave. She exits the bar, and Kelley runs out after her. Outside, Emira goes off on Kelley for acting like he's better than the Chamberlains—he works for a cool start-up company and lives in a building with a doorman, so who is he to talk? What's more, he was incredibly rude tonight. Emira also tells him that the big show he made of helping the hired staff doesn't help anybody but himself.

Then Emira starts to cry as she admits that she wants to leave her job but can't, since she can't bear to leave Briar. Kelley realizes he's been too harsh and tries to comfort Emira. Then he says he "more than just like[s] her." Emira understands his meaning but can't bring herself to return the sentiment. An hour later, they're back at Kelley's apartment. Emira sits in bed as Kelley chats with his family, who are in Florida. His voice changes as he speaks with different family members.

When Kelley is done talking to his family, Emira tells him she has some things to get off her back. First, she knows it's not her job to raise Briar, but she needs to decide how and when to quit on her own. Next, she tells Kelley to stop bringing up the Market Depot tape. She knows he has a lot of Black friends and is into Black culture, but the video could have real consequences for her life—consequences that he could never even imagine. Kelley doesn't understand but promises not to bring up the tape again.

Inwardly, Emira considers how little she and Kelley have talked about race. She wonders what a real future with Kelley would be like. Would he take their child to get his hair cut? Would he know to tell their son not to stand too close to white women on public transportation? Then she addresses Kelley again. She tells him he doesn't have to change things about his life for her. Mrs. Chamberlain has made a big deal about boycotting Market Depot, for example, but what does this actually do for Emira?

Again, Kelley's offer to help Emira out financially is well-intentioned but ignorant. Giving her a place to stay and funds to help her get by might allow her to take her time and find a new job, but it's paternalistic, too. It just indebts her to another well-intentioned white person who thinks they know what's best for her. Emira also reinforces another important point here, which is that Kelley's big show of helping the waitstaff is as phony and put-on as Alix's efforts to befriend Emira. In either instance, a white person who feels guilty about their privilege is using an underprivileged person to feel better about themselves.



Emira's admission about Briar reveals that she's not only working for the Chamberlains for financial reasons, but for personal, emotional reasons, too. This makes it all the more ironic that Emira continues not to see her babysitting as real work and herself as lacking in ambition, since she clearly is invested in childcare in a meaningful, real way.



This is an important moment because how Kelley responds to Emira's requests likely will determine the chances of them having a future together. If Kelley continues to try to act as though he knows what's best for Emira, they won't have a future together. And if he continues to think that his awareness of the oppression Black people face is the equivalent of understanding and experiencing that oppression himself, then they cannot have a future together either.



Emira seems to wonder if her and Kelley's differing degrees of privilege makes them incompatible after all. Can she and Kelley really have a future together if they cannot see eye-to-eye on so many critical issues? Is Kelley's mere sympathy to the plight of Black people and other people of color enough to cancel out the fact that he will never understand all that she goes through? Are his good intentions enough to counteract his ignorance?



When Emira is finished speaking, Kelley apologizes for insinuating that she wouldn't be able to find a new job on her own. Emira laughs—she may need his help if Mrs. Chamberlain fires her after the awkwardness tonight. Kelley promises that firing Emira is the last thing that someone like Mrs. Chamberlain would do, since it would say more about *her* than Emira. Then Kelley changes the subject and asks Emira if she wants to talk about what he said at the bar about not just liking her. But Emira can't handle any talk of the L-word tonight, so she says no.

CHAPTER 19

The next morning, Alix wakes up before Peter. She lies in bed and looks at a picture of Briar and Catherine on her nightstand. Near the photo is the iPad Alix used to scroll through Kelley Copeland's social media profiles after her family went to sleep last night. Alix's research proved that her suspicions about Kelley are correct: all his girlfriends over the past year have been Black (or ethnically ambiguous). Still, Kelley's exes seem different than Emira—they seem more driven. Women like that could easily recover from a breakup. But Emira is different—she's more fragile and uncertain about herself. Alix thinks about Kelley some more. He'd wanted status in high school and done what he needed to get it—at Alix's expense. But what is Kelley using Emira for? Alix wonders if Kelley gets off on telling people the story of how he and Emira met.

Later that day, Alix discusses the Kelley situation with her friends over brunch. Tamra laughs wryly and tells Alix that the situation makes total sense to her. Jodi doesn't understand exactly what's wrong with Kelley—doesn't he obviously like Emira? And is it racist that "he likes black people too much?" Tamra explains that Kelley is one of those white guys who fetishizes Black women. Alix agrees with Tamra's assessment, recalling how Kelley used their high school's Black athletes to become popular.

Alix reaffirms that she's not upset about Emira dating her ex—she's not still hung up on him—it's that she's concerned about him hurting Emira. Jodi interjects, cautiously, to say that it seems like Kelley genuinely likes Emira. And even if Kelley is using Emira, Rachel counters, Emira is a grown woman, and Alix has no say over Emira's love life. Alix loudly and suddenly insists that Emira isn't grown up—she's young and naïve. Then Alix starts to cry.

Talking things through seems to have calmed the tension that Thanksgiving dinner created between Emira and Kelley—for now, at least. But Emira's going to have to return to work for the Chamberlains, and it seems likely that Alix will try to interfere in Emira and Kelley's relationship when Emira does return.



The plot thickens as Alix's snooping reveals that Kelley may well fetishize Black people; it raises a red flag that most (if not all) of his past girlfriends have been Black or racially ambiguous. What is he really doing with Emira? Is he, like Alix, using her to create a specific image that he's anti-racist? Still, even if this is true, the reader should remain wary of Alix's motives for interfering in Emira and Kelley's relationship. Ultimately, it will likely be for self-serving reasons that she meddles in the relationship rather than genuine concern for Emira. When Alix considers Emira's fragile, emotional, and naïve nature, she's being unconsciously and misguidedly paternalistic toward her. Once more, she insists that Emira doesn't know what's best for herself and assumes that Emira needs Alix's superior perspective to set herself on the right path.



Jodi's question is well-intentioned but misguided. While it's the lesser of two evils that Kelley "likes black people too much" instead of too little, it's dehumanizing and essentialist to see Black people as Kelley's "type," like a person might prefer brunettes or people with glasses, for instance. Doing so suggests that a Black person's worth rests entirely on their Blackness and denies them the right to exist as a person independent of their race.



Alix's friends normally enable her superficial, paternalistic attitude toward Emira. Here, though, they become the voices of reason, suggesting that Alix's bad experience with Kelley in high school doesn't necessarily mean that he'll also mistreat Emira, and even if he does, it's not Alix's place to hijack Emira's life and make important decisions for her. Alix, faced with criticism, breaks down and cries, transforming herself into the victim of this situation. Her pitiful reaction here should raise a red flag—is it possible that she also played the victim in high school and that there's more to her and Kelley's breakup than she's letting on?



Tamra suggests they go outside for some fresh air. Outside, Tamra tells Alix that she needs to come clean to Emira about her concerns. Tamra thinks that Alix is the best thing that's happened to Emira, and Alix needs to use her influence to guide Emira in the right direction. Being under the influence of a controlling jerk like Kelley will only make Emira more lost.

Tamra is a complex character. On the one hand, she, like Alix, genuinely wants what's best for Emira. And as a Black woman, she undoubtedly knows what's best more than Alix does. But Tamra has gained what privilege she has in a white world by integrating herself within the broader white culture. And this means buying into the idea that the white, privileged class knows the best way to live. And she's pushing this ideology onto Emira when she suggests that Emira doesn't know what's best for herself.



Alix continues to cry, and Tamra urges her to be strong. She suggests that Alix return to New York more regularly so she can start to feel like herself again. Tamra even knows of a professor at the New School who needs someone to facilitate a class, and she thinks Alix would be perfect for the job. Also, if Alix has to go to Manhattan every Tuesday evening, she could give Emira more hours—which would mean Emira is spending less time around Kelley.

Alix's unceasing tears are almost comical at this point. She acts as though she's the victim of this situation between Kelley, Emira, and herself, yet who Emira dates really doesn't concern her. Furthermore, as usual, her connections and privilege continue to afford her new opportunities, as happens here, with Tamra helping secure her a teaching position in the spring.



CHAPTER 20

Emira shows up at the Chamberlains' on Monday morning. Alix and Catherine are in New York. After Peter leaves for work, Emira takes Briar for a fun day out. They go to the House of Tea, where (much to the waitress's confusion) Emira orders a selection of tea bags without mugs for Briar to sniff and arrange to her liking. Briar has a blast. On Tuesday, they go sledding. On Wednesday, they go to the mall with Zara and take photos with Santa. On Thursday, Emira takes Briar to Camden, New Jersey, to see the Adventure Aquarium; she doesn't even think to ask Mrs. Chamberlain, since Mrs. Chamberlain isn't around. The blue walls and endless **fish** enchant Briar. As Emira cares for Briar later that night, she thinks about how much she'll miss the little girl if she finds a new job—looking after Briar gives her life structure and meaning.

With Alix and Catherine away in New York, life around the Chamberlain household feels almost idyllic for Emira. Briar is free to be her quirky, curious self, as her and Emira's trip to the House of Tea shows. It's ironic that Briar is finally free to truly be herself when Alix leaves; the motto of Alix's business is "LetHer Speak," yet Briar may only speak openly, in a way, in Alix's absence. Emira and Briar's close relationship further comes through symbolically in their trip to the aquarium. It's a gesture on par with Emira's move to gift Briar Spoons the fish for her birthday.



CHAPTER 21

Alix returns from New York, puts Catherine in her room to nap, and gives Briar an iPad. Then she and Peter have sex in the bathroom. Alix hears Emira come through the front door only seconds after she and Peter finish, which fills her with glee. New York has rejuvenated Alix. She visited all her favorite places, bought Catherine a beanie, and attended a Hillary Clinton campaign event in high heels. She took enough photos to fill her Instagram feed for weeks. And she's been in contact with Tamra's professor friend at the New School, who is looking forward to working with Alix.

While being a mother doesn't mean that Alix's children have to be her only priority in life, it seems rather unfeeling that Alix would immediately sit Briar down in front of an iPad instead of reconnecting with her—especially when Alix also notes that she only bought a souvenir for Catherine. This scene reaffirms how little Alix cares about Briar's inner life when she can't use it to promote her brand and her business.



Alix walks downstairs and energetically greets Emira and Briar. Alix realizes how much she's missed them both. After Peter leaves for work, Alix gets down to business: being in New York has given her the confidence she needs to confront Emira about Kelley. Alix tells Emira she needs to talk. Emira says okay, but she's distracted—she's taking Briar to a “mommy-and-me” movie at the theater that afternoon, and she doesn't want to be late. Alix says, “Neat!” but cringes at her forced cheerfulness. Emira asks Alix if she can use the computer to check the movie showtime. She confirms that the movie is at 12:45, and then she logs in to her email to send the theater's address to herself. Then, she returns to Alix to resume their chat.

Alix begins by thanking Emira “for being such a superwoman” about everything that night. She promises Emira that she doesn't want the situation with Kelley to be weird. Emira laughs—Alix and Kelley dated in high school, which was such a long time ago. Emira's response stings and makes Alix feel old, but she tries to conceal her hurt. She tells Emira that she's okay with Emira seeing Kelley, but she also needs Emira to know that Kelley isn't a good person. Alix knows that people can change, but Kelley has a history of fetishizing Black people and Black culture, and Alix is afraid the Kelley is just using Emira for validation.

Emira pauses. Then she tells Alix that she actually thinks Kelley is dating her because she's “pretty chill and dateable,” not because of her race. Alix realizes she's messing up and starts to panic. Emira continues. Everybody does dumb things in high school, she reasons. Emira used to call things “so gay,” for example. Inwardly, Alix recalls how she used to use the word “Oriental” before a college friend corrected her. But the Kelley situation is more serious. And Alix knows that protecting Emira from him is “the right thing” to do. When Emira asks Alix if it's okay that she continues to see Kelley, Alix says yes, knowing that her answer won't impact Emira's decision. Emira stands there silently before awkwardly telling Alix that Peter usually just leaves cash for her on the counter. Alix hands Emira \$30, and Emira and Briar leave for the movie theater.

Alix is more in her element not because of anything she's actually done but because of the way New York has made her look and feel. She can act like an empowered working mom playing mentor to her younger babysitter because she feels and looks the part. That Emira—and not Alix—is taking Briar to a “mommy-and-me” movie reinforces what an inactive role Alix plays in Briar's life. And perhaps she doesn't care about missing out on this experience, either, because there's no place for it in the sleek, cool working-mom persona she's revitalized during her time in New York.



Alix calls Emira “such a superwoman” to try to level with Emira, empowered woman to empowered woman, but Emira refuses to play along. She and Alix aren't equals, and she makes this clear when she implicitly calls Alix old with the comment that high school was many years ago for Alix and Kelley. Alix tries again, though, this time trying to reach Emira by insinuating that she is only talking about Kelley out of concern for Emira. But based on all that readers know about Alix's lingering resentment toward Kelley, it's clear that Alix's reasons for interfering in the relationship are selfishly motivated, too: she wants to get back at Kelley for wronging her all those years ago.



Alix tries to control this awkward conversation with Emira, but Emira refuses to let her gain the upper hand. She thwarts Alix's attempt to seem like she cares about Emira, insinuating that it's Alix herself, not Kelley, who undervalues Emira. When Emira suggests that Kelley is dating her because she's “pretty chill and dateable,” not because she's Black, she's forcing Alix to acknowledge that she (Alix) is guilty of the exact thing of which she accuses Kelley: of valuing Emira for her Blackness alone and discounting all the other aspects of her character. Finally, when Alix tries to tell herself that protecting Emira is “the right thing to do,” it complicates the situation a bit. The novel doesn't simply paint Alix as an unambiguous villain. Rather, it shows how Alix's ignorance about Emira's struggles and Alix's own motivations corrupts her desire to do well by Emira. Alix really does seem to believe she's doing the right thing for Emira, but it's complicated by the fact that she arrived there through questionable means—through petty anger toward Kelley, not a pure intention to help Emira.



After Emira and Briar leave, Alix puts on some lipstick, smooths her hair, and walks to Rittenhouse Square. She knows from reading Emira's texts where Kelley works and when he breaks for lunch. She arrives at Rittenhouse Square and spots Kelley on the sidewalk, sandwiched between two well-dressed Black men. "Oh, you're good," thinks Alix. When Kelley sees Alix, he looks like a kid whose mother is embarrassing him in front of his friends. Kelley reluctantly parts ways with the other men and approaches Alix. He's annoyed and asks what she wants. Alix orders him to follow her next door. They go inside the building and sit down at some café tables in the lobby.

Alix gets down to business. She tells Kelley that she's "concerned" about him dating Emira (whom she calls "my sitter"). Inwardly, Alix observes how cute Kelley looks, even when he's irritated. Aloud, Alix insists that Kelley doesn't understand "privacy" and accuses him of using their high school's Black athletes to become popular. She refuses to let him do the same thing "with someone who is like family to [her]."

Kelley expresses disbelief that, all these years later, Alix still can't understand that she was wrong to call the police on Robbie and his friends. He angrily tells her to get over herself—that the only thing he ever did was break up with her. Break-ups are hard, but at the end of the day, what happened between them is not unique. He also denies fetishizing Emira and says that he's in love with her. Also, Emira is a grown woman who can make decisions for herself. Kelley's calm and collected demeanor enrages Alix. They had been in love—and now he's dating her sitter. How is this situation not supposed to make her crazy?

When Alix sees Kelley surrounded by Black men, it bolsters her confidence. It proves to her that Kelley does fetishize Black people, and she also believes it proves that she's morally correct to interfere in Emira's relationship with him (even if Emira herself has told Alix that this isn't necessary). As Alix has done on numerous occasions, she creates in her mind a version of reality that she can live with. And sometimes, this means projecting blame or guilt onto others so that she can better live with her own guilt.



Alix's language here is telling. She claims that she's acting out of concern for Emira. But when she repeatedly refers to Emira as "my sitter," she betrays her real (and perhaps unconscious) desire to possess and control Emira. Thus, Alix's attack on Kelley becomes more about herself than about Emira. Alix's lack of self-awareness also comes through in this scene when she ironically accuses Kelley of not understanding "privacy." Alix is, at present, actively invading Emira's privacy by reading her texts and interfering in her love life.



Kelley belittles Alix when he recasts her attack as her being bitter about their long-ago breakup. It's a power play meant to cut into Alix's moral righteousness and make her feel like a lovesick young girl. And yet, Kelley is pretty spot-on in his observation. That Alix, a woman in her 30s, should be so worked up over her high school boyfriend dating her child's babysitter is incredibly immature and petty. Overall, Kelley is making a better case here. He sees the hurt Alix did to Robbie as the only mistake worth still being upset about. Alix's misguided decision to call the police on Robbie robbed Robbie of his scholarship, whereas Kelley's supposed betrayal of Alix didn't really affect her life in a meaningful way.



Alix collects herself. She smiles and tells Kelley that if he doesn't tell Emira what he did to Alix, then Alix will tell Emira herself. Kelley groans in frustration. There's nothing to tell—the only thing he did to Alix was break up with her. He never received the letter she's talking about. Then he turns the tables on Alix: has she told Emira what she did to Robbie? Kelley tells Alix that Emira deserves to work for people who let her wear her own clothes. He suggests that Alix should have known that sending Emira and Briar to “a super-white grocery store” late at night would have bad consequences for Emira. Finally, he asks Alix why she's making Emira work on her birthday if Emira is really like family to her.

Alix returns home, enraged. She checks her email and sees two messages from her editor, Maura, who has apparently seen Alix's New York Instagram posts and knows Alix is messing around when she should be writing. Maura's first email is only lightly passive aggressive, but in the second email, she threatens to alter their contract if Alix continues to ignore her.

Suddenly, Alix hears a noise coming from the baby monitor, and she freezes when she realizes that she'd left Catherine alone in her crib when she went to confront Kelley. In a panic, Alix runs to retrieve Catherine. “Had Kelley really made her forget her own baby?” she asks herself.

Alix returns to the computer, Catherine in her arms, and notices another tab pulled up. She clicks on it and sees Emira's email account. Then, very purposefully, Alix types in Kelley's name and pulls up the email he sent Emira with a video attachment of the recording he made the night of the Market Depot incident. Alix downloads the file to her computer and hides it in a folder labeled *Spring Blog Posts*. Then she deletes the search history from Emira's account and calls Laney Thacker to ask for a favor.

For Kelley, Alix's thoughtless decision to send Emira to “a super-white grocery store” late at night with Alix's young child in tow is uncannily similar to the mistake Alix made years ago in calling the police on Robbie and Robbie's friends. In both cases, Alix's privilege prevented her from seeing how her experiences as an upper-class white woman are fundamentally different from the experiences of racial minorities like Robbie and Emira. Just as Alix (Alex) hadn't thought that calling the police on Robbie would have real consequences for Robbie, she didn't think that sending Emira to Market Depot late at night might put Emira in harm's way. Finally, Kelley's remark about Emira deserving to wear her own clothes, a dig at the LetHer Speak polo that has become Emira's unofficial babysitting uniform, suggests that Alix has become as possessive of Emira as Alix's parents were of Claudette. Kelley is suggesting that Alix has become just as problematic as her parents, whom she has long claimed to despise.



Alix returns home and receives a highly unusual type of (electronic) letter: an email that threatens to take something away from her. Maura's message shakes Alix up because she's normally so accustomed to people and businesses giving her what she wants. It turns out that simply appearing successful and motivated isn't actually enough for Alix to be successful—she actually has to do the work, too.



Alix's obsession with Kelley is really what caused her to make the careless mistake of leaving Catherine unattended in her crib. Yet Alix revises the narrative, suggesting that “Kelley really made her forget her own baby.” Alix crafts a story that makes Kelley the aggressor and herself the victim.



In a moment of almost comically un-self-aware irony, Alix goes into Emira's email and steals the Market Depot incident, which is Emira's personal property. She does this almost immediately after criticizing Kelley for not understanding privacy. Yet Alix seemingly remains unaware of her hypocrisy. She's been telling stories that paint herself as Kelley's victim or Emira's savior for so long that she seems to believe them herself.



CHAPTER 22

Emira sits in a red booth beneath neon signs and fake palm trees. It's her birthday, and everyone is at Tropicana 187 to celebrate. She's wearing a tight black dress, sheer tights, and a plastic tiara. The club isn't as upscale as the places Zara, Shaunie, and Josefa favor, but Emira is happy. She orders a round of tequila shots for everyone.

After the movie let out earlier that day, Emira took Briar to a bakery, and they split a red velvet cupcake. Emira has felt good about her work lately: she's spent the week introducing Briar to new words, places, and ideas. At night, she scours the Internet for job postings, and she's sent out six résumés. Emira even has an interview for a childcare manager position at Body World Fitness lined up, though the job doesn't pay well, and she has a hard time imagining caring for kids other than Briar. And best of all, Kelley remembered it was her birthday and sent flowers to her apartment that morning.

Emira and her friends finish eating and head downstairs to the bar area. Kelley shows up with some of his friends. "Hey, pretty," Kelley says to Emira when he sees her. She tells him about her day and her new job prospects. Kelley is shocked to hear that Emira is thinking of leaving the Chamberlains, but he's happy for her. Emira tells him about the awkward conversation she had with Mrs. Chamberlain earlier that day. Kelley wants to tell Emira about *his* meeting with Alix, but he holds off, not wanting to ruin the evening. Instead, he offers to buy the next round of drinks. Shaunie demands champagne. In between taking pictures and drinking drinks, Josefa quietly signals for Zara to come over. Then Zara pretends that Emira is bleeding, grabs her arm, and pulls her into the bathroom. Shaunie and Josefa follow. Something is up.

Emira and her friends crowd into the accessible stall. Zara asks Emira if she shared the Market Depot video. Emira doesn't know what Zara is talking about. Josefa pulls up the video on her phone. Emira grabs the phone, sees herself on the screen, and starts to panic. Who could've leaked the video? She'd thought that she was the only one who had it, but now it's on Twitter for the whole world to see. Emira scrolls through the comments. Many of them are positive, but a lot of them make light of the incident.

Twenty-six doesn't seem like an important birthday on the surface, but it's a big deal for Emira, since she noted earlier that it's the year she'll be kicked off her parents' health insurance plan.



By all accounts, Emira's life seems to be headed in a positive direction. She's taking the initiative to fill out job applications and enjoying the time she spends with Briar—even though she seems to recognize that their days together are limited, since she's actively trying to find a new job. And it seems that Alix hasn't managed to mess things up between Emira and Kelley, despite her vain efforts to do just that. Of course, the novel has yet to reveal exactly what Alix did with the Market Depot video she stole from Emira's email account earlier that day, or what kind of favor she's asked Laney Thacker for.



It seems that Emira's happy night was too good to last; her friends' discreet efforts to get her into the bathroom (without letting Kelley in on whatever is going on) are suspicious, to say the least. It seems likely that whatever is going on has to do with the Market Depot video that Alix stole from Emira's email account earlier that day. And if Alix has released the video, it's particularly thoughtless (and even cruel) of her to do so on Emira's birthday. Increasingly, it's becoming hard to sympathize with Alix's actions, as well-intentioned as they may be.



This is another moment of dramatic irony. It's clear to the reader that Alix is the one who released this video (or forwarded it to Laney, who then used her media connections to release the video for her). Emira's traumatized response to seeing herself in an embarrassing moment of extreme vulnerability—and knowing that the rest of the world is seeing it too—reaffirms how wrong Alix was to release the video. And this is true even if, in the back of her mind, Alix believes that doing so is best for Emira.



Emira's friends suspect that Kelley may have leaked the video. Inwardly, Emira tries to convince herself that it isn't true: Kelley has been good to her, and she has no reason to doubt him—right? Before Emira can stop her, Zara runs out of the bathroom and heads toward Kelley and his friends. She pretends she's lost her phone and asks Kelley to call it for her. As soon as he punches in his password, Zara snatches the phone and scrolls through its contents until she finds the video in Kelley's outgoing mailbox. Emira freezes. She looks at Kelley and says, "Fuck you."

Kelley tries to explain himself, but Emira and her friends grab their things and exit the club. Kelley runs out after them. He tries to tell Emira he had nothing to do with the leaked video. "Literally no one else wanted this but you," Emira tells him. Then she accuses Kelley of wanting to change her. She claims that Kelley hates the run-down neighborhood she lives in, and the fact that she works as a babysitter. Kelley replies Emira is the only one who cares that she's a babysitter. "Cool," Emira replies. Then she turns to leave with her friends. Before Emira gets in the Uber, Kelley tells her that Alix likely leaked the video. But Emira ignores him, climbs into the car with her friends, and leaves. Inside the car, Zara takes Emira's phone and relabels Kelley's number "Don't Answer."

CHAPTER 23

The following afternoon, Alix wanders through Emira's unfamiliar neighborhood, trying to walk at a pace "that f[alls] somewhere between feeling safe and looking offensively scared." She hasn't called Emira to say that she's coming since she doesn't want to chance Emira turning her away. Alix carries Catherine strapped to her chest, and Briar pushes a children's scooter beside them. They reach Emira's building, and Alix presses the button for Emira's unit. Emira's fuzzy voice crackles through the intercom. She sounds confused, but she buzzes them in.

Emira appears downstairs. She's wearing sweatpants, a T-shirt, and a denim jacket, and her hair is pulled up into a silk wrap. She's not wearing makeup, and her eyes are puffy. Alix sees Emira's appearance as evidence that Emira and Kelley have broken up. Alix and her kids follow Emira upstairs. The decrepit apartment building depresses Alix; the feeling continues as she enters Emira's apartment, which is furnished with old, mismatched furniture. Alix looks disapprovingly at an old futon and remembers an old blog post in which she called futons "glorified bean bags." A lidless aquarium rests on the floor next to the couch. It's filled with potted plants. Briar runs to it, immediately fascinated. Alix tells her not to touch.

Again, though the reader knows that Alix, not Kelley, released the video, Emira and her friends aren't privy to this information. And since what information they do gain in this scene shows that Kelley had the means to release the video, it makes sense that they would blame him for the incident (that is, even though Kelley deleted the video off his phone, he still had the video stored in his email program). That they so easily believe in Kelley's guilt also shows how nobody in Emira's circle—and even Emira herself—felt at ease enough to fully trust Kelley. Social conditioning has taught them to be wary of privileged, white men like Kelley.



The reader may view Kelley sympathetically in this scene. After all, Kelley did not leak the video, and there's undeniable truth to his observation that Emira is the only person who's unsatisfied with where she is in her life. Still, he's failing to acknowledge how Emira may have internalized the judgement cast upon her by all the white people in her life who have thought they know what's best for her and have told her what to do. So, Emira's present feelings of inadequacy are as much a consequence of social conditioning as they are feelings Emira has come to on her own.



Alix pretends to be openminded and accepting of people who haven't had the privileges that she has had, but the fear she feels as she walks through Emira's neighborhood shows how totally out of her element she feels when she's actually forced to exist in impoverished spaces. Ultimately, her social consciousness is just a performance—not something she wants to live out in her real life.



Alix's actions the day before become even more nefarious when it's revealed that she released the video to break up Emira and Kelley—not just so Emira could receive justice for her mistreatment at Market Depot. That Alix sees Emira's obviously distressed, disheveled appearance as a success is telling. It shows that she's perfectly willing to cause Emira suffering—even as she purports to be helping her. Again, Alix's ignorant but well-intentioned actions are becoming harder to view with even a hint of sympathy.



Alix and Emira sit down to talk. Emira asks if she can go first. She assumes that Alix is here to fire her after seeing how she behaved in the now-viral Market Depot video. Emira promises that she's never used bad language in front of Briar before—it's just that she was so afraid that the guard would take Briar away from her.

Alix assures Emira that she and Peter aren't mad at her in the slightest—in fact, they're so grateful that they have someone strong and confident to protect their children. Then she pulls a small, wrapped box out of her purse and hands it to Briar to give to Emira. "I want to open dis," says Briar, taking the gift from her mother. Alix tells Briar to let Emira open it, but Emira lets Briar help her. They unwrap the box to reveal a 2016 pocket calendar. Emira is confused. Alix tells her to look inside, and she sees her name printed on all the Mondays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. Alix explains that she has accepted an offer to teach at the New School on Tuesday evenings, and they'd love for Emira to watch the kids overnight then. They can employ her full-time and offer her benefits and vacation time.

Emira starts to cry, and Alix apologizes for thrusting such a big decision on her. She tells Emira that she can get back to her next week with her decision. Emira, looking simultaneously happy and sad, regains her composure and tells Alix, "No, I'm sorry, yeah. Yeah, that sounds really good." Alix overenthusiastically tells Emira what "amazing news" this is. Before Alix leaves, she tells Emira that she and Peter want to help Emira with the video problem. And this time, Emira says yes.

Early Monday morning, Laney Thacker and her camera crew set up at the Chamberlain residence. Not long after, Emira and Zara arrive. Tamra is there, too—she took the train in from New York and arrived early with coffee and pastries for everyone. As Alix prepares to make her own local-news debut, she asks Tamra if she "did the right thing." Tamra assures Alix that she did: "This is probably the best thing to ever happen to Emira."

Emira's assumption that Alix has come here to fire her shows just how in the dark she is about Alix. It doesn't even occur to her that Alix could be responsible for the leaked video. Emira's ignorance makes Alix's actions all the more craven and unforgivable.



That Alix can deliver this rehearsed, self-righteous speech without admitting to her complicity in the video's release further paints her as an unsympathetic villain. Alix has pushed the limits of her willingness to betray Emira's trust ever since she began to snoop through Emira's phone, but she's reached a whole new level by this point in the novel. It's also disturbing that Alix is framing the offer of fulltime work to Emira as a gift; she's almost implying that hiring Emira in spite of the agitation and unprofessionalism that Emira demonstrated in the video is proof of Alix's good will and empathy. In reality, though, Alix's actions in this scene are really evidence of her poor character: she's lying to Emira's face to recast herself as Emira's savior, when in reality, Emira wouldn't need saving if Alix hadn't released the video.



Repeatedly, this interaction has presented numerous opportunities for Alix to come clean about her complicity in the video's release, and yet she fails to do so. In fact, she only doubles down on her deceitfulness, going so far as to offer to help Emira out of the video problem that only exists because she leaked the video.



That Alix needs Tamra's reassurance to convince herself that she's done the right thing in releasing the tape reaffirms how much Alix relies on others' opinions of her for validation. She doesn't feel fulfilled unless she looks good to others. Tamra's observation that the video's release "is probably the best thing to ever happen to Emira" is paternalistic and dehumanizing. It suggests that Emira is incapable of empowering herself without the assistance of a white, wealthy woman like Alix. Tamra has learned to achieve success through assimilating into the broader white world, and so she believes that the same goes for Emira.



CHAPTER 24

Mrs. Chamberlain opens the front door and lets Emira and Zara inside. Zara gasps at the interior. They've arrived with Dunkin' Donuts coffees, but Zara ditches hers for one of Tamra's cold brews. Mrs. Chamberlain calls Emira "sweetie," which feels weird to Emira, but she tries to convince herself that Mrs. Chamberlain's affection will feel more natural with time. Laney Thacker greets Emira warmly and tells her to quickly finish up her makeup—they'll start recording in 20 minutes. Emira and Zara head to the girls' bathroom. Once inside, Zara remarks, "They's some mad plantation vibes up in here." Emira tells Zara to cool it—she's going to be spending a lot of time here.

Emira can't find her baby comb in her makeup bag and assumes it must be in her backpack. She asks Zara to go get it for her. Zara jokingly guffaws at Emira's newfound confidence. "She think she cute now that she got a job but okay," she says. But she leaves to retrieve the backpack. Emira turns back toward the mirror and works on her makeup. She thinks about the video. She spent the weekend looking through Google comments—she couldn't help herself. Most of them are supportive, but they've also made a joke of the incident. One comment read, "This is fucked up but I'm also dying laughing." Emira thinks the video has generated so much amusement because "no one got hurt." It's a way for people to witness racism "without seeing any blood or ruining the rest of [their] day."

Kelley has been calling Emira all weekend, but she hasn't picked up. She's been receiving a lot of other calls, too—from people who suddenly want to interview or hire her. In fact, Beverly, her boss at the Green Party office, has offered to take on Emira full-time. Emira thinks about her future with the Chamberlains. Their Thanksgiving invitation didn't make her feel like family—but her new contract and tax forms have done just that. Now, she'll be making more money than she ever has. And now, it will be her name that's listed as the emergency contact on Briar's ballet and swim class documents.

Everything has changed now that Emira has agreed to humor Alix and do this interview with Laney Thacker. Alix sees Emira's cooperation as evidence of their budding friendship. She doesn't seem to see how her status as Emira's (soon-to-be fulltime) employer pressures Emira into doing the interview. All that matters to Alix is that she gets what she wants out of her friendship with Emira—not that Emira gets anything out of it in return. Meanwhile, Zara's observation about the "plantation vibes" suggests she can tell that there's something sinister going on here—that the Chamberlains, like slaveholders on a plantation, are abusing Emira.



The disparaging comments that Emira's video has received only reaffirm how ignorant Alix is if she thinks that releasing the video was in Emira's best interest. In the short term, at least, all it's done is force Emira to relive the vulnerability and judgment of that night. Again, though well-intentioned, Alix ultimately makes decisions based on what will benefit her—how her decisions make her appear in the public eye. She's only secondarily concerned with how her actions will affect Emira.



Emira's refusal to accept Kelley calls reaffirms her ignorance about Alix. She still believes that Kelley, not Alix, released the video. Emira's observation about how her higher paychecks will make her feel more like family that Thanksgiving had reinforces how transactional her relationship with the Chamberlains is. Alix wants to see Emira as a friend, but this will never be possible so long as Emira's financial security is in her hands.



Zara reappears, interrupting Emira's fantasies about the future. There's a serious expression on her face as she tells Emira that they have to talk: Emira can't work for the Chamberlains anymore. Zara explains how when she went downstairs to retrieve Emira's backpack, she overheard Mrs. Chamberlain ask "that Uncle Tom Tamra woman" if she did the right thing, and Tamra said yes. Emira freezes, trying to think of an innocent explanation for the conversation. But she comes up blank. "That lady leaked your tape," Zara says bluntly. In a flash, Emira thinks back to the day she used the Chamberlains' computer to look up the movie showtime. She'd emailed herself the theater's address, and she hadn't logged out of her account. All at once, Emira realizes that Zara is right.

Emira knows she can't work for the Chamberlains after what Alix did to her. But she also realizes she won't have a job. Zara asks if Emira can survive on her typing job alone. Emira mentions how Beverly, her Green Party boss, called her about taking her on full-time as a receptionist.

Zara tells Emira to call Beverly back immediately and work out the offer. Outside, Laney calls out to them, "Five minutes to places, ladies!" Emira hurriedly dials Beverly's number, trying her best to sound professional. Beverly answers. At first, she offers to take Emira on at \$16 per hour, 35 hours a week, but Zara says Emira won't get benefits at that rate. Eventually, they negotiate the offer: Emira will accept a rate of \$13 per hour with full benefits. It's less than she's making now, but it's full-time, and she can tell that Beverly will do everything she can to advocate for a higher rate. Zara takes her hand: this new job is only temporary, and it'll look good on her resume. Unlike her current babysitting job.

Emira accepts the offer just as Mrs. Chamberlain knocks on the bathroom door. Zara opens the door as Emira ends the call. Mrs. Chamberlain tells Emira she looks pretty, then she tells them that they have to hurry: the interview will start soon. As they head downstairs, Laney cheerily tells everyone to get to their places. In response to Laney's order, Mrs. Chamberlain discreetly turns to Emira and makes a face, as though to say "God, she's a lot, am I right?" Though Emira had planned to just ditch the interview altogether, Mrs. Chamberlain's cruelty toward Laney sets her off. She tells Zara to be ready to "make a scene" when Emira gives her the signal. Emira and Zara jump up and down, silently celebrating Emira's new, promising future. But in the back of Emira's mind, she thinks about how soon, Briar won't remember her.

Zara's description of Tamra as "that Uncle Tom Tamra woman" references the 19th-century American novel Uncle Tom's Cabin by Harriet Beecher Stowe. An "Uncle Tom," referencing the book's title character, is a Black person who betrays their cultural or social identity to be excessively obedient toward or accommodating of white people and white culture. So when Zara calls Tamra an "Uncle Tom," she's suggesting that Tamra has betrayed her allegiance to her Black racial identity to achieve success among the predominantly white, privileged society that people like Alix inhabit. This moment is also important because it's the moment that Emira realizes that Kelley has been right about Alix all along.



Once again, Emira's ability to control her destiny is limited by her relative lack of privilege; however, her circumstances have improved with the release of the video, and she now has more opportunities to find immediate work elsewhere than she had before.



Beverly's offer of employment gives Emira the financial security she needs to make decisions that are in her best interest—a freedom she didn't have before. This scene is also critical because it illustrates what women helping women actually looks like. Alix's LetHer Speak purports to be about female empowerment, but in reality, every action Alix made to improve Emira mostly benefited Alix herself, and not Emira. Alix acted to improve her public image, not to improve Emira's life. Zara, on the other hand, helps Emira land the best job she's ever had.



When Alix compliments Emira's physical appearance, it reaffirms the superficiality of Alix's efforts to improve Emira. Alix's catty criticism of Laney in this scene seems to be a moment of reckoning to Emira. Before, Emira thought she would feel satisfied by simply walking out on the interview and leaving her time working for the Chamberlains behind her. Now, though, she seems to feel a renewed sense of obligation to put Alix in her place and show her that her superficiality and ignorance are unacceptable. So with Alix's fateful mistake of making a joke at Laney's expense, and with Emira's ambiguous direction to Zara to "make a scene," readers may rest assured that something dramatic will go down during the Laney Thacker interview.



CHAPTER 25

Laney is the first person to arrive at the Chamberlains' house that morning. Alix asks her if she did the right thing. Laney assures her she has; she recalls how a high school coach assaulted a student on the soccer team. When the other students found out, they offered to report the assault, but the girl—her name was Mona, or maybe Monica—told them not to. Laney is sure that Monica would go back and change things, if she could.

The narrative backtracks to the moment that Laney Thacker arrives at the Chamberlain residence early Monday morning. This sequence of chapters, which go backward and forward in time, and replay the same condensed sequence of events from different perspectives, mirrors the dramatic Thanksgiving scene earlier in the novel. This narrative strategy builds tension and foreshadows the climactic interview scene that lies ahead. Also important in this scene is Laney's recollection of Mona-or-Monica from her high school days. Laney references Monica's story to show Alix that she was right to leak Emira's Market Depot footage to the press—but all Laney's story really does is show how wrong Alix was. In reality, for both Laney and Alix, the women they purport to want to save—Mona/Monica and Emira, respectively—are only incidental pawns they use to craft a narrative where they are saviors. The fact that Laney can't even remember Mona/Monica's name, and the fact that Alix continually disregards Emira's needs and wants and betrays her trust, is evidence of this.



Alix feels marginally reassured, but she still wants to receive Tamra's "better confirmation" later. Still, she's grateful for Laney. Alix reflects how three days ago, Laney had discreetly forwarded the video to a source that posted it online. And Laney also told her that the interview would benefit everyone: Peter's offensive remark would be forgotten, Emira can clear her name, and Alix can use the opportunity to plug her upcoming book. Alix will have to come clean to the world that she lives in Philadelphia now, but she's considering it "a secret penance" for emerging from the Kelley mess "unscathed."

That Alix needs Tamra's reassurance in addition to Laney's reinforces how much Alix relies on others' perceptions of her to feel fulfilled and validated. Laney's remark about everyone benefiting from the leaked footage and resultant interview also shows the ulterior motives behind Alix's actions. Laney makes it clear that she, Alix, and everyone else involved have their own best interests at heart—even as they claim to want to help Emira. Furthermore, that Alix sees having to admit publicly that she lives in Philadelphia as "a secret penance" for betraying Emira is almost comical. The consequences that Alix suffers from her immoral actions are inconsequential compared to the trauma and humiliation that Emira has suffered.



Everyone walks into the living room. Alix watches Zara and Emira share "a precious exchange." Alix and Emira sit next to each other on the couch. Laney sits on a chair across from them. She reminds them to keep their answers short and their eyes open. Laney snaps at Briar to pay attention, and Briar looks up, scared, as though Laney has just screamed at her. Then the *WNFT Morning News* live broadcast begins.

Alix's description of Zara and Emira's eye contact as "a precious exchange" is rather patronizing. It shows how little respect Alix has for Emira. She has long spoken of wanting Emira to be like a friend or family member to her, yet she continuously belittles and infantilizes her.



At the station, Peter and his coworker Misty introduce and summarize the Market Depot incident. Peter explains how the incident has impacted his family—Emira included. He expresses his and his wife’s hopes that talking about this incident now will “put the matter to bed” once and for all. As Laney’s prerecorded voiceover describes how everything began when somebody threw a “rock” through the Chamberlains’ window (Laney thought a rock would play better with viewers than an egg), Alix considers how silly it seems, in retrospect, that she’d spent months agonizing over what would happen if Emira figured out the real reason that kids had thrown the egg. She’s relieved as she thinks that all this will soon be over.

Laney’s prerecorded introduction ends, and the live interview begins. At first, everything happens the way they’ve rehearsed. Laney addresses Alix first. Alix talks about being new to Philadelphia and unfamiliar with the neighborhood. Laney asks Emira to describe the evening. Emira does. When she describes how the guard didn’t think she looked like a babysitter, Alix interjects to clarify that Emira had come from a party and was dressed for that. Emira smiles at Alix and Laney before she explains that, usually, she wears “a **babysitting uniform**.” Inwardly, Alix starts to panic, but she tries to tell herself that Emira is only speaking “*figuratively*.”

When Laney asks Emira if she thinks the security guard needs to lose his job in order for justice to be served, Emira says no; she’s less mad at the guard than she is at the person who leaked her video—that person obviously doesn’t understand consent or care about Emira. Alix’s smile strains—does Emira know that she leaked the video? She decides this is impossible; and besides, it’s more important that she broke up Emira and Kelley before Kelley has the opportunity to hurt Emira in a bigger way.

As the interview winds down, Laney turns to Alix and observes how “Emira embodies much of the spirit of LetHer Speak.” Then Laney mentions how Emira will be around more often next year, as Alix continues work on her first book. Alix laughs and confirms that Emira will be working for them full-time. Though Laney’s plug was a little more explicit than she’d thought it would be, she feels validated by it.

Like Alix, Peter’s wording manages to make the Market Depot incident about his family and their reputation. He accounts for the impact the incident has had on Emira, too, but he disproportionately makes it about himself. Further adding the segment’s portrayal of the Chamberlains as victims is the white lie of claiming that the egg that was thrown at the Chamberlains’ window was in fact a rock. It’s a small lie, but it recasts the situation to suggest that the Chamberlains were more victimized than they really were.



Emira’s mention of her “babysitting uniform” is the first sign to Alix that something is off—that this interview won’t go as planned. This is because Kelley was the last person to describe the uniform as problematic. So when Emira implicitly describes the LetHer Speak polo in this way, it signifies to Alix that Emira’s allegiances are with Kelley and not with Alix.



Emira’s comment about the LetHer Speak polo was suspicious to Alix, but it didn’t totally prove that Emira knows she leaked the video footage. Emira’s condemnation of the person who leaked her video and betrayed her trust, though, is more on the nose, and Alix is starting to realize—even as she tries desperately to ignore her gut feeling—that Emira knows what Alix did and isn’t happy about it. If Alix had thought she could get away with betraying Emira, that illusion is now starting to crumble.



When Laney plugs Alix’s book, Alix immediately forgets about her fear that Emira is on to her. She’s so validated by public recognition of her professional success and book deal that she ignores everything else. As the novel has made gradually more certain, the person Alix most wants to help is herself—not Emira.



Finally, Laney turns to Emira and asks if she has any advice for caretakers who find themselves in a similar position. Inwardly, Emira reviews the lines they'd rehearsed earlier—generic advice for others “to stick up for themselves, to hold their ground.” Emira pauses. Then she tells Laney that not only does she not have any advice, but she won't actually be working for the Chamberlains anymore. Alix is suddenly alert—but she reassures herself that Emira must just be confused. But Emira continues, explaining that the leaked video has “put some things in perspective.” As a result, she's opted to work full-time for the Green Party Philadelphia instead.

Alix is so shocked that she laughs. She attempts to correct Emira, but Emira doesn't back down. Then she looks Alix in the eyes and says, “I just think it would be best if we went our separate ways and...that those paths never like...came back together.” Alix suddenly feels like she's having an out-of-body experience. She feels like Alex Murphy again as she realizes that Kelley and Emira have been ridiculing her behind her back. Alix sees Tamra gasp in the background. Then Emira gets up and leaves. Briar follows her, crying out, “Mira, way fo' me!” Emira gives Zara the signal, and Zara runs in front of the camera and says, “Homegirl is out, okay?! She ain't need this!” Zara continues to make a scene, and Laney urgently signals for the cameraman to cut.

CHAPTER 26

Emira calls for Briar to come to her. In the back of her head, she wonders what would happen if she just scooped her up and ran away with her. She squats down and tells Briar to look at her. As Emira watches Briar brush a lock of hair out of her eyes, she realizes that this is really goodbye. Emira tries to convey this to Briar, but she realizes that Briar is too young to understand what it means to say goodbye. In the distance, Zara continues to make a scene, Tamra yells at Zara to stop, and Mrs. Chamberlain asks where Briar is. Emira kisses Briar's cheek and smells her scent one last time. Then Zara appears and tells Emira that they need to get out of here. Emira tells her to order an Uber. Then she turns back toward Briar.

Alix's self-delusion becomes abundantly clear in this scene. Even as Emira explicitly states that she's not going to be working for the Chamberlains anymore, Alix tries to convince herself that Emira has misspoken—that Emira doesn't know what she's saying. As she has done repeatedly throughout the novel, Alix reconfigures uncomfortable or unwanted situations to fit a narrative that she can accept.



So far, Alix has been able to convince herself that Emira is confused and doesn't know what she's saying. But once Emira repeats Kelley's brutal breakup lines, there's no more denying reality. Hearing these recycled words propels Alix back to her past and shows her that despite her efforts to reinvent and reform herself—to create a new and improved persona that allows her to repent for the mistakes and humiliations of her past—she is still herself, and no superficial transformations will change that.



Emira may have gone out with a bang, but only because her circumstances offered her no other means to defend herself. Given how deeply Emira cares for Briar, it's unlikely that she wants to resign from her babysitting position in a way that harms Briar. And yet, Alix has repeatedly gone against Emira's wishes and betrayed her trust, and so she has left Emira with no good way to say goodbye. This is a tender moment between Emira and Briar and reaffirms how, despite all the psychological warfare, manipulation, and power plays Emira has endured in her time spent working for the Chamberlains, she has not wavered in her sincere commitment to making Briar feel loved, seen, and understood.



When Emira turns around again, Mrs. Chamberlain is there. In a purposeful, powerful voice, she tells Emira to get away from Briar. Emira looks at Mrs. Chamberlain, amazed that she's really going to end things by "playing the matchless mom card." In all the time Emira has worked for her, this is the most concern Mrs. Chamberlain has ever shown for Briar—and ironically, it's "the safest place Briar could ever be."

Emira realizes she doesn't have her backpack. Zara motions toward the stairs—Emira will have to walk past Mrs. Chamberlain to get it. She does this, even as Mrs. Chamberlain screams at her to stop. Finally, Emira can't ignore Mrs. Chamberlain any longer, and they speak face-to-face. Mrs. Chamberlain demands to know what Emira was thinking when she sabotaged the interview. "You. Just *humiliated* me and my *entire* business," she says. She asks Emira if she decided to work for the Green Party just because Mrs. Chamberlain is working for the Clinton campaign. Amused, Emira tells Mrs. Chamberlain that she was working for the Green Party way before she'd even met Mrs. Chamberlain. Mrs. Chamberlain is totally shocked, and Emira thinks about pointing out how despite Mrs. Chamberlain's supposed interest in getting to know Emira, she really doesn't know anything about Emira at all. But Emira decides it's not worth it and brushes past her to retrieve her backpack instead.

"All of this was for you!" screams Mrs. Chamberlain. Emira realizes that there's no way she can convince Mrs. Chamberlain that her actions were wrong. So instead, she offers Mrs. Chamberlain some advice that might actually help her. She tells Mrs. Chamberlain to start caring about Briar. Because Briar has already started to realize that her mother doesn't like her—and soon, she'll really know. Mrs. Chamberlain can't keep "waiting for her to change." The entire room goes silent. Mrs. Chamberlain doesn't respond—she can only stare back at Emira with an "empty and embarrassed" expression. Then Zara and Emira leave the Chamberlains' for the last time.

In this moment, Alix becomes the gray-haired woman at Market Depot who racially profiled Emira and set into motion the central conflicts of the novel. It's a particularly cruel power play on Alix's part, since Alix, after all this time, must know that "the safest place Briar could ever be" is with Emira, and yet she ruins Emira and Briar's meaningful and emotional goodbye to put Emira in her place for humiliating her on live TV. Alix is effectively showing Emira that even if Emira is right and Alix is wrong, none of this matters, since Emira is the belligerent Black woman who made a scene in a now-viral video. In contrast, Alix is the wealthy white woman who, outwardly, society will deem more trustworthy.



Again, Alix reconfigures reality to make herself the victim and Emira the aggressor. Alix claims that Emira has "humiliated" her but completely ignores the countless ways she has humiliated, betrayed, and manipulated Emira over the time she's worked for the Chamberlains. She further makes herself the center of attention when she suggests that Emira only decided to work for the Green Party, an opposing political party, to spite and antagonize Alix, whose alliances lay with Hillary Clinton. Alix is presumptuous enough to believe that Emira has rearranged her future to get back at Alix. But the irony is that Alix's accusations are mere protection. Emira has never done anything specifically to spite Alix—at least not before today's interview. Instead, it's been Alix who has reconfigured her life to complete her mission of getting back at Kelley Copeland for their breakup which is, by now, ancient history.



Alix hurls this line at Emira, purportedly to shame Emira and make Emira feel bad about embarrassing her on live TV. Yet for Emira—and for the reader—it couldn't be clearer that most of Alix's actions have been not for Emira, but for Alix herself. Every attempt she's made to help Emira has really been to make Alix herself look good in front of others or prove that she's not like her elitist, problematic parents. When Emira realizes that that there's no convincing Alix of this fact, it shows that Emira has fully come to terms with how seriously Alix's privilege corrupts and limits her ability to assess her motivations objectively and be considerate of people who have less privilege. Emira's parting advice to Alix is harsh, but ultimately, Emira doesn't offer it to be cruel—she offers it for Briar's sake, so that she might one day have a mother who takes an active interest in her life. This says a lot about Emira's character. In this end, she makes a genuine effort to do good by Briar. And this effort is much more genuine and actionable than any attempt Alix has made to help Emira.



CHAPTER 27

In a flashback to her senior year, Alix—now Alex—remembers being a senior class representative at William Massey High. It's customary for representatives to wear a Student Council polo and deliver announcements on Fridays, but Alex has received so much hate since everyone found out it was her fault that Robbie Cormier lost his volleyball scholarship to George Mason University that she doesn't feel very spirited.

Graduation has just concluded. The Student Council is supposed to clean up afterward, but Alex has begged her advisor to give her a less public task, so that's why she's been assigned the behind-the-scenes task of cleaning out the senior-patio lockers. When Alex reaches Kelley Copeland's locker, she feels something made of paper wedged between Kelley's locker and the locker beneath it. She initially thinks it might be a dirty magazine that someone stored there for safekeeping. But what she finds is much worse: it's her letters to Kelley.

Alex looks at the name on the locker beneath Kelley's: it's Robbie Cormier's. She's spent weeks thinking that Kelley had given her letter to Robbie. But now she realizes that they'd gotten stuck or slipped into Robbie's locker below, and that Kelley has been telling the truth all along. Realizing that the malfunctioning locker is to blame for her social ostracization is much worse than thinking that Kelley is to blame; and so she chooses to believe that the former is still true. And over time, she starts to really believe it. And so, it's the truth that Kelley was the one who ruined Alex's life—"much in the same way that her name was spelled A-l-i-x."

CHAPTER 28

Emira has only been working as a receptionist for the Green Party for five weeks when, at a fundraising event, she helps a little boy transfer some crackers from a flimsy plate to a paper cup. The boy turns out to be the child of Paula Christi, the regional director of the U.S. Census Bureau. Paula hires Emira as an administrative assistant. Emira spends the next two years working for her.

With Chapter Twenty-Seven, the novel finally offers the full truth about Alix (Alex) and Kelley's high school breakup. Will it turn out that Alix has been telling the truth all along, or has she altered the story maker herself out to be the victim? While it's understandable that Alex feels self-pity in this moment—social ostracization is no fun, deserved or not—it's telling of her character that she sees herself as the victim. Alex will still be able to go to college as planned, but her actions have drastically altered Robbie's life.



Alex's discovery here is critical. If her letters to Kelley are wedged in this discreet spot between Kelley's locker and the locker below it, it's possible that Kelley has been telling the truth all along about not receiving the letter inviting him to Alex's house. And if this is the case—and if Alex knows this is the case—it means she's been intentionally misrepresenting the story in the novel's present.



The novel finally reveals that Alix has been misleading others—and herself—all these years about Kelley being “the one who ruined Alex's life.” Like so many other aspects of her life, she's molded this incident between Kelley, Robbie, and herself to fit a narrative she can live with—that will make others look upon her favorably. And yet, after all this, the fact remains that Kelley did not ruin Alex's life. Even if Alix has changed her name to distance herself from her loathsome parents and traumatic high school experience, she remains the same petty, self-absorbed person.



That Emira's knack for childcare is what lands her a new job is telling—one wonders why she doesn't pursue this career path if she enjoys it and is good at it. Perhaps the tricky power dynamics involved in working for wealthy people isn't worth it. Or perhaps society's undervaluation of domestic labor still prevents her from seeing childcare as a worthwhile career.



Just before her 28th birthday, Paula asks Emira if she has plans to leave soon—no other administrative assistant has stuck around so long without moving on to bigger things. But Emira has no plans to leave. She might not be as successful as her friends—Shaunie is engaged, Josefa is teaching at Drexel, and Zara is supporting herself and her sister—but she’s content. She was able to join her friends in Mexico, she has a savings account, and she makes her bed every day. And Paula is a supportive boss who isn’t threatened by Emira’s success. After she’s been working for Paula for four years, she’s making over \$50,000.

Emira is content working for Paula because the job offers her a steady income and a boss who doesn’t manipulate her for personal gain or betray her trust. It speaks to how mistreated Emira really was working for Alix that she would prefer this job, about which she doesn’t seem to be all that passionate, to caring for Briar, which was something Emira was highly invested in. It also shows just how significantly the quest for financial security influences Emira’s big life decisions.



After the news segment first aired, Emira had wondered if she’d hear from Kelley. She finally did, one week later. He texted her to say that he was proud of her and knew she could do it. But that’s all. Emira is disappointed, but she also knows that there’s no world in which she and Kelley will ever get back together.

Kelley’s supportive but impersonal response suggests that his and Emira’s relationship is over. Perhaps this speaks to how little she meant to him in the long run—perhaps, as Alix suspected, he was more into the idea of Emira, of her Blackness, than he was Emira herself, and this is why he’s so ready to part ways with her.



Emira sees Kelley one more time, though he doesn’t see her. She’s at a farmer’s market with Shaunie, and they’ve gotten separated. As Emira browses the produce tables, she sees Kelley Copeland holding hands with a light-skinned Black woman. The woman asks Kelley to hold her smoothie while she checks out another table, and he replies, “Okay, miss.” If things were different, Emira would have texted Mrs. Chamberlain to tell her: “Because even though Kelley had been right about her, Alix had been right about him too.” She wonders if things could have been different if she’d called Mrs. Chamberlain by her first name. But things happened the way they did, and so Emira doesn’t reach out.

This scene all but confirms that Alix’s concerns about Kelley fetishizing Black people were true; the detail of Kelley calling his new girlfriend “miss,” just as he did with Emira before this woman, reinforces how easily he switches out old Black girlfriends for new ones. He calls them by the same pet name because they fulfill the same role for him. Emira’s slight temptation to call Mrs. Chamberlain to tell her about this encounter reveals more about Emira’s character. After all that Mrs. Chamberlain did to her, Emira’s natural instinct is to sympathize with and forgive her.



The same year that Emira sees Kelley, she also spots Mrs. Chamberlain, Briar, and Catherine. It’s only a few days before Halloween, and they’re at a carnival in Rittenhouse Square. Emira hides, not wanting them to see her. She watches as five-year-old Briar, who is wearing a hamburger costume, tries to reach a pumpkin propped up against a brick ledge. Briar turns around to two Black nannies and asks them to help her—Alix is preoccupied with Catherine. The nannies are amused by Briar, and they help her. Mrs. Chamberlain turns around, thanks the women, and apologizes.

This is undoubtedly an emotional moment for Emira, given how much Briar meant to her. The scene is also painful since it shows how accustomed Briar has become to accepting help from Black domestic staff—her motion to ask these women for help is innocent now, but over time, it’s possible that her privilege will acclimate her to expect people with less privilege than her to help her.



Much later, in her thirties, Emira will still struggle to decide what her time working for the Chamberlains meant to her. Some days, she hopes that Briar has become independent and capable. Other days, she wonders if Briar will give up trying to find out who she is and the person she wants to be, and instead “just hire someone to do it for her.”

Emira wonders whether the things she taught Briar will be enough to encourage Briar to think for herself—or whether the privilege she’s inherited from Alix will outweigh this and allow Briar to become just as superficial and entitled as Alix was before her. After all, Alix was once ashamed of her parents’ wealth—and then she turned around and became just like them anyway.





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