



Pre-Launch Preview

Rules exist for a reason. Sometimes that reason is to hide what's underneath.

In *The Willow Forge Academy for Girls*, debut author Maggie Adams Weaver follows Sloane Harper-Grey—too smart, too bored, and freshly expelled—as she's deposited at one of North Carolina's most prestigious boarding schools and immediately sets about taking it apart, one prank at a time.

But Willow Forge has secrets older than its ivy walls. Behind the locked wing, beneath the polished legacy of "Excellence Since 1857," lies a history the school has spent decades burying — and Sloane is exactly the kind of girl it

was built to contain. The deeper she digs, the more she realizes that someone at Willow Forge will do anything to keep the truth from surfacing.

Sharp • Chilling • Unforgettable

Plausible deniability. Public confidence. Containment. Sloane learned those terms in history class. She didn't expect to hear their echo. A crossover fiction novel written for adults but with strong appeal to older teens and the reader who has aged out of YA, but has yet to find their footing in literary fiction.

CHAPTER ONE

Iron Gates, Stone Walls

Sloane Harper-Grey had been expelled before.

Not dramatically. Not with police cars or weeping administrators, like others she had seen. Just the quiet, professional kind—meetings behind closed doors, with words like *disruptive* and *potential unmet*, followed by a folder being closed with deliberate care.

So she wasn't sure why her father thought this one would be different.

The Willow Forge Academy for Girls rose behind iron gates and ivy like a formidable opponent. Stone buildings sprawled across manicured lawns, their windows tall and watchful, the grates set into them looking more prison than protection. It was the sort of place brochures described as *historic* and *transformative*, which usually meant no one had bothered to update it in decades.

Sloane stepped out of the car and took it in with practiced disinterest.

Her father didn't look at her or even at the school. His gaze was firmly fixed on her suitcase.

"Just... please. Try," he said, puffing the words out like a last-ditch attempt at authority. As if that one phrase were a revelation that might finally bend her into compliance.

"I always do," Sloane said, flashing him her well-trained smile over her shoulder. She didn't add, *just not in the way you want*.

Behind him, his wife—the woman Sloane referred to exclusively, and not at all affectionately, as the "step-monster"—adjusted the blanket on the baby carrier with all the reverence of someone handling a museum artifact. The baby slept through it all, blissfully unaware that his arrival had made this last dumping-off necessary, completing a family portrait that worked better without her in it.

Sloane dragged her suitcase across the cobblestones. The wheels rattled. Loudly. Deliberately.

A woman in a tailored navy suit turned toward the sound the way someone would turn toward an offensive smell. Her silver hair was pulled into a severe chignon, and her smile looked like something a finishing school had sanded into place.

"Ms. Harper-Grey," she squeezed out of too-tight lips. But it wasn't a greeting. It was an assessment. "Welcome to Willow Forge."

She gestured toward the gates, where the silence pressed in—not the absence of sound, but the kind of heavy stillness that demanded compliance. The kind that made people lower their voices without realizing why.

"We value good manners here," the woman added.

Sloane smiled. "Of course. I wouldn't want to make anyone uncomfortable."

The woman's eyes flicked to the suitcase, then back to Sloane's face. "I'm Dr. Hallowell, by the way," she said. "Headmistress."

Sloane inclined her head. "Of course you are."

A few girls nearby snickered. One did not.

She stood slightly apart from the others, posture immaculate, blazer pressed to within an inch of its life. Her hair was pinned back neatly, not a strand out of place. She watched Sloane the way someone watches a storm forming over a lake—alert, calculating, intrigued.

Dr. Hallowell followed Sloane's gaze.

"That is Evelyn Grant," she said. "You'll be sharing a room."

Evelyn stepped forward, offering a hand as though this were a social engagement rather than a sentence.

"I'm so glad you're finally here," she said warmly.

The words were perfect. The smile, too. But her grip was firm—almost proprietary.

Sloane shook her hand. "You say that now."

Evelyn laughed, light and practiced. "You'll love it here. We're going to be best friends."

Sloane doubted both things. Deeply.

Inside, the main hall gleamed with polished marble and lemon oil. Portraits lined the walls—women in stiff dresses, their expressions uniformly displeased, as though eternity had turned out to be a disappointment.

Sloane felt their eyes on her. Already judging.

The housemother, Ms. Kaplan, led her upstairs with brisk efficiency, reciting schedules and rules and expectations in a tone that suggested deviation was not only punished but *remembered*.

"This is your room," she said, unlocking the door.

Inside, Evelyn had already staked her claim on the room. Books lined one shelf, ordered precisely by size. A vase of silk flowers sat on the windowsill, positioned just so.

"Why are you starting so late?" Evelyn asked like she was starting a cross-examination.

"I like to build suspense," Sloane replied, dropping her suitcase onto the hardwood floor. The sound echoed too loudly in the pristine space.

She was starting in late September, well after the school year had found its footing. After she'd been asked to leave the Redmond School, five weeks in, a personal record. Her father had declared that co-ed schools were no longer an option, as if separating her from boys might suddenly correct the problem.

Evelyn winced, then smoothed the expression away. "I'm sure we'll find a rhythm."

"Let's not rush into anything," Sloane said. She took in the room—symmetrical, immaculate, aggressively calm. "Do you organize under pressure, or is this recreational?"

Evelyn smiled again. "Order helps me think."

"Chaos helps me breathe."

A pause. Something flickered in Evelyn's eyes—interest, perhaps. Or calculation.

A girl appeared in the doorway, clutching a clipboard like a shield.

"Hi. You must be Sloane. I'm Eliza Crowder," she said briskly. "I'm a student assigned to this floor. I help Ms. Kaplan."

"Thrilling," Sloane said.

Eliza ignored her tone and wrote something down. Her handwriting was precise, narrow, and unambiguous. "Lights out is at ten. Study hall is mandatory. Detentions are cumulative."

"Good to know," Sloane said. "I like to plan ahead."

Eliza looked up then, eyes sharp behind her glasses. "People who say that usually don't."

Behind her, another girl hovered—taller, softer around the edges, a worn paperback tucked under her arm like the morning newspaper. She hadn't bothered with a blazer. Her shoes were scuffed; her hair pulled back in a lopsided ponytail.

"Beatrice Collins," she said, after a beat. "But Bea is fine."

Sloane clocked the pause, the lack of presentation.

"Finally," she said. "Somebody I can relate to."

Bea's smile widened. Eliza frowned, turned on her heel and walked back to her room.

Ms. Kaplan cleared her throat. "Miss Collins, you look like an unmade bed. Go fix yourself before dinner. And Miss Harper-Grey," she added, "I trust you understand the expectations placed upon you here."

Sloane glanced around the room—at the perfect shelves, the pressed blazers, the watchful eyes in the hallway— finally recalling the portraits downstairs, she could feel judging her from beyond the grave.

"Oh, yes," she said. "They are crystal clear."

What she didn't say was this: places like Willow Forge didn't exist to educate girls like her. They existed to correct them. To smooth the sharp edges. To teach silence where there had once been noise.

She had survived schools like this before. She doubted Willow Forge would enjoy surviving her.

There was still an hour until dinner. After unpacking her things, Sloane decided to take a walk around campus—partly to see it, and partly because sitting still in the room with Evelyn tapping out her homework felt stifling.

The Willow Forge Academy for Girls sat high in the mountains of western North Carolina, miles from the nearest town, the kind of place chosen as much for its isolation as for its beauty. Sloane breathed in the cool mountain air, appreciating its freshness after the exhaust and stale heat she had grown used to at home and at her last school.

The dormitory, Hawthorne House, sat near the front of Willow Forge's grounds, where the buildings presented their most public face to the world: authenticity, tradition, dignity. Stone masonry darkened by time. Imposing ironwork. Tall leaded-glass windows that caught the late afternoon light and fractured it into pale colors. Everything here felt dramatic. Majestic. Built to last longer than the people inside it.

The walking paths curved away from the dorm in gentle, deliberate arcs, the first fallen leaves crunching softly underfoot. Sloane followed one downhill, hands in her jacket pockets, wishing she'd brought her bike. The grounds were enormous—too big to cross casually, especially once winter set in. It was the kind of campus designed to make you wander slowly, to notice what you were supposed to notice and miss what you weren't.

She passed Bauber Hall first, its columned front rising out of the hillside like a statement. Offices glowed dimly inside. Beyond it sat the Chapel of St. Brigid, small and solemn, its bell tower slightly off-center, as if it had been added later—or repaired one too many times. Sloane had read that the bell no longer rang, and looking at it now, she found that comforting. A bell sounding out here, in the middle of nowhere, would have felt wrong. Eerie. Ominous.

Farther along, the paths bent again, leading her to the Langford Library.

She climbed the concrete steps and pulled open the heavy oak door.

Inside, the air changed immediately—cooler, quieter, saturated with the smell of old paper, must, and polished wood. Dark shelves climbed the walls, interrupted by brass fixtures and tidy labels. Green-shaded lamps lined long tables. Rows of books stretched away from her: modern textbooks pressed shoulder to shoulder with leather-bound volumes that looked as old as the building itself, their spines cracked, titles faded into mere suggestions.

It felt calmer here. Not welcoming, exactly—but less watchful.

"Can I help you find something?"

The librarian sat behind a wide oak desk, and gave Sloane a genuine smile in a way she hadn't encountered yet that day.

"I'm just looking," Sloane said. "I'm new. Sloane Harper-Grey."

"Well, Sloane, I'm Ms. Bancroft," the woman said. "And you're welcome to look as long as you like. If you ever need help—research, quiet, or an excuse to hide for a while—this is a good place for it. Just ask."

Sloane blinked. Then smiled. For real this time.

"Good to know," she said. "Thanks."

Outside again, the campus shifted as she moved farther from the front grounds. The buildings toward the back were newer—glassier, cleaner, more modern—built or updated within the last few decades. The Academic Building, Gwynedd Hall, had wide windows and bright interiors. The Loyola Arts Annex smelled faintly of clay and paint even from the path. The Wellness Center looked almost cheerful, all modern signage and pale stone, though it sat oddly close to the treeline. A service road slipped behind it into the woods. A locked gate marked the back entrance.

At the lowest edge of the property, fog pooled low over the small lake, the water beneath it unnaturally still. Beyond it, a stone wall traced the ridgeline, half-hidden by brush. Students referred to it as *The Boundary*, as if it were less architecture and more rule.

By the time Sloane reached Founders Commons for dinner, dusk had settled in. Lights glowed warmly through the tall windows. Voices drifted out in a low, collective hum.

She stopped short inside the doorway.

Every girl wore her uniform. Blazers. Plaid skirts. Polished shoes.

Sloane looked down at herself—jeans, boots, jacket—and felt heat creep up her neck.

People stared. Not all of them. But enough.

"Sloane!" Evelyn appeared almost instantly, stepping out from between tables and waving at her like she'd been waiting.

"Come sit with me," she said, grabbing Sloane's arm, and then quickly added, "It's fine. You're new. You didn't know. Nobody'll notice."

"I'm guessing this isn't the approved look," Sloane said. "Damn. Look at that—I've already broken a rule."

"Uniforms are mandatory at meals except on weekends," Evelyn said, already steering her toward a table in the back near one of the thick stone columns. "But no one expects transfers to get it right on the first day."

She angled them just enough that the column blocked Sloane from view.

"There," Evelyn said softly. "You're practically invisible."

Something in Sloane loosened.

"Thank you," she said—and meant it.

Across the room, Eliza Crowder sat rigidly at another table, her clipboard beside her tray. She glanced up, took in the scene, made a small, precise note—and then stood and crossed the room to where Dr. Hollowell sat with the other teachers. Sloane didn't notice.

She was too busy feeling, for the first time since she'd arrived, that maybe—just maybe—she had found an ally.

Dr. Hollowell stood up and walked briskly toward Sloane, her focus never wavering.

"Miss Harper-Grey. Was it not perfectly clear in the handbook that you were to be dressed in your uniform for all meals during the week?" She said loud enough for the surrounding tables to hear.

"Yes, ma'am," Sloane replied dryly.

Dr. Hollowell pointed toward the exit and waited, arms crossed, until Sloane left. Then she turned on her heel and returned to her table.

About the Author

Kyle Smith McGowan, writing as Maggie Adams Weaver, is a Pennsylvania-based author and independent publisher with six titles to her name — The *Embers* Series (three gothic novels) under the pen name Rowan Kade, *Inherited* (speculative fiction) under the pen name Alex Creveling, a nonfiction title—*God vs The Consumer*, and a writer's guide. She is also the founder of Pine Veil Press, a small, full-service indie press.

The Willow Forge Academy for Girls marks a new direction: crossover fiction for readers who have aged out of YA but haven't yet found their footing in literary fiction. Sharp, chilling, and a little unruly — much like its protagonist.

Continue the Conversation.

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