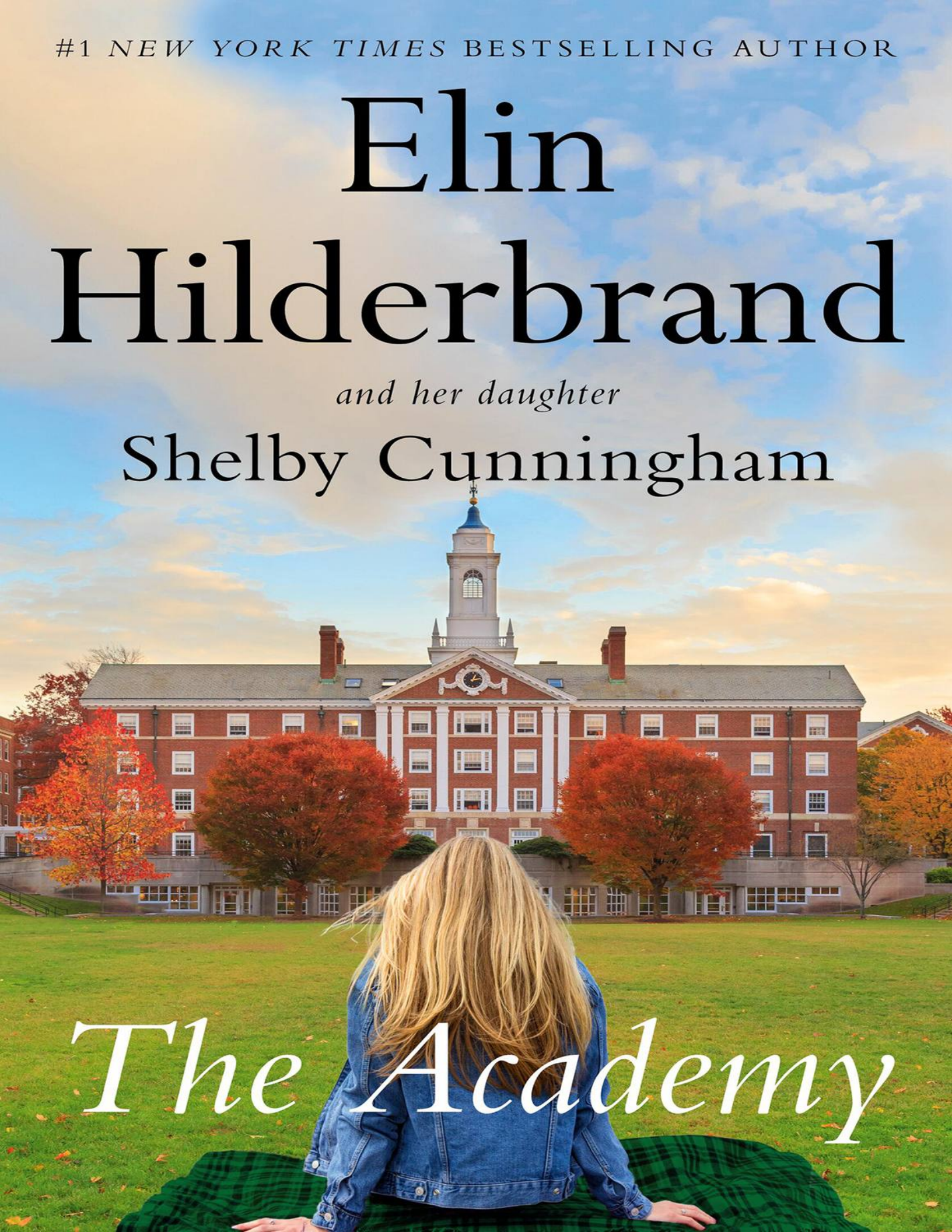


#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Elin Hilderbrand

and her daughter

Shelby Cunningham



The Academy

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Elin Hilderbrand and
Shelby Cunningham



Little, Brown and Company
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For our beloved mother/grandmother

Dr. Sally Hilderbrand,

lifelong educator.

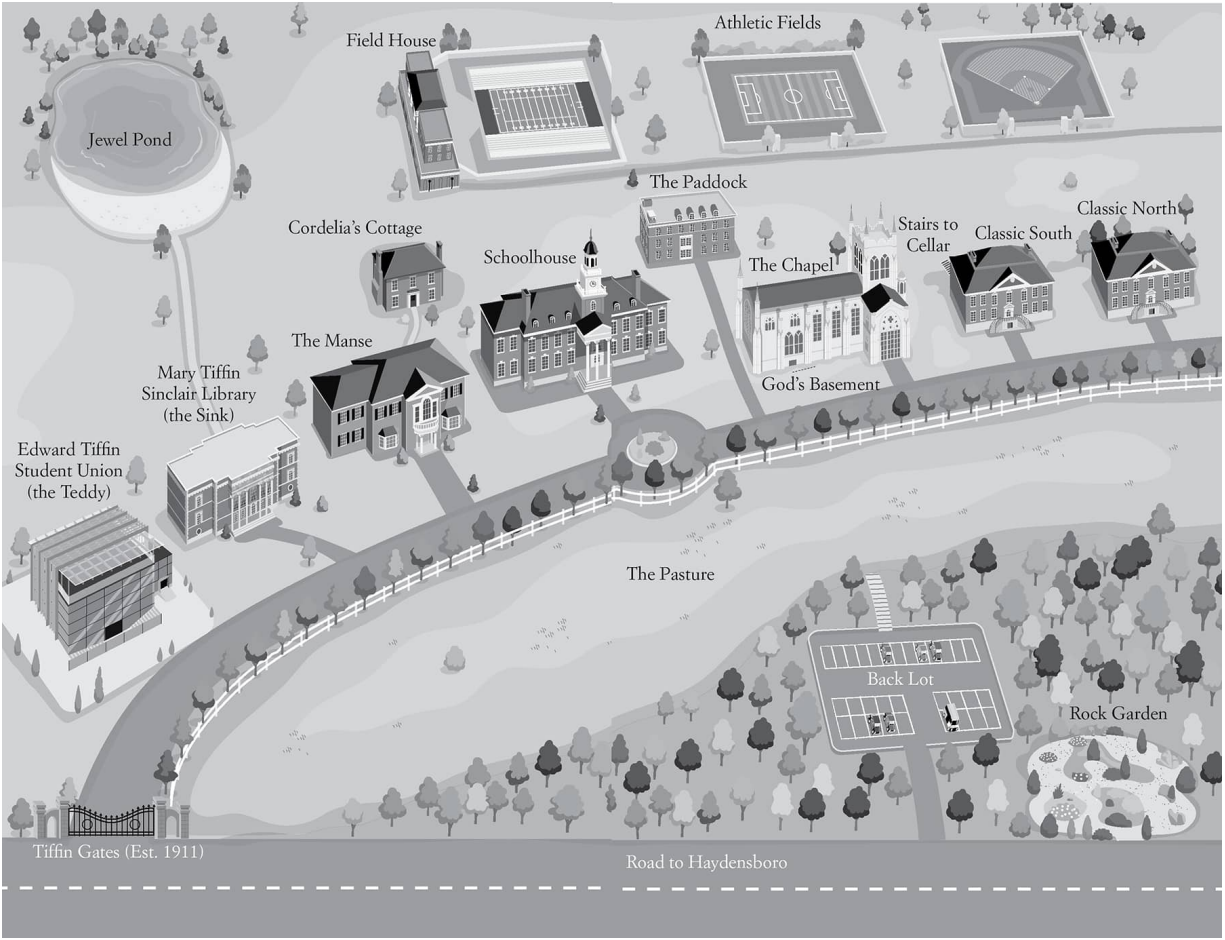
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Who's Who at Tiffin Academy

The Administration



President, Board of Directors: Jesse Eastman

Head of School: Audre Robinson

Director of Tiffin Admissions: Cordelia Spooner

Head of Security: Michael James

Head Chef: Harrison “Haz” Flanders

School Chaplain: Laura Rae Splaine

College Counselor: Honey Vandermeid

Athletic Director: Coach Pete Bosworth

The Faculty



Simone Bergeron (History)

Felipe Chuy (Music and Theater Director)

Roy Ewanick (Math)

Alejandro Perez (Spanish)

Rhode Rivera (English)

Kent Wully (Science)

Ruth Wully (English)

The Students

Notable Fifth-Formers



Webber “Dub” Austin

Davi Banerjee

Tilly Benbow

Andrew “East” Eastman

Charlotte “Charley” Hicks

Olivia Hudezech-Tottingknaffer

Madison J. (Floor Prefect)

Willow Levy

Hakeem Pryce

Royce Stringfellow

Taylor Wilson

In Memoriam: Cinnamon Peters

Notable Sixth-Formers



Teague Baldwin

Lisa Kim (Head Prefect)

Ravenna Rapsicoli (Editor, *'Bred Bulletin*)

Annabelle Tuckerman

September

1. Move-In Day

At nine a.m. on Tuesday, September 2, just as the chapel bells are heralding the start of a new school year, the first vehicles proceed onto the campus of Tiffin Academy. Every student for the past 114 years has traveled the same route: through the wrought-iron gates, down the Pasture lined with shade maples and white horse fencing, past the “Teddy” (the Edward Tiffin Student Union) and the “Sink” (the Mary Tiffin Sinclair Library), around the circle in front of the Schoolhouse, and along the stretch of freshly mowed athletic fields to the dormitories—Classic North (boys) and Classic South (girls).

Monogrammed duffel bags, mini fridges, field hockey sticks, guitar cases, snowshoes, beanbag chairs, cross-country skis, wireless speakers, makeup mirrors, LED strip lights, extra-long twin sheet sets, skateboards, scooters, a Frank Ocean poster. Audre Robinson—who is in her sixth year as Head of School—helps unload exactly one item from each vehicle. In her first year as Head, she wore a raspberry linen sheath and stacked heels and stood atop the Schoolhouse steps waving to the procession of cars as though she were some kind of royalty. This was how the Heads of School who preceded Audre—all of them white men—comported themselves on Move-In Day. But Audre found it made her feel silly and uncomfortable, not to mention lonely, and so in year two, she donned a pair of mom jeans and a hunter-green Tiffin Thoroughbreds T-shirt (available from the school store for \$17.95) and greeted each student and their parent(s) or guardian(s) with a smile, a handshake or (for the returning students she favored) a hug, and the ceremonial unloading assistance.

Audre thinks of each new school year as a blank composition book, a fresh box of sharpened pencils—but this reveals her age. To these kids, it’s... what? An empty Google doc, the cursor blinking at the top of a laptop

screen?

Audre is also thinking, *Nothing bad has happened... yet*. For example, no one has appeared at Audre's residence between breakfast and Chapel to say that the door to 111 South is jammed and Cinnamon Peters isn't responding to either knocks or FaceTimes.

She's always the first one up, Cinnamon's best friend, Davi Banerjee, said on that fateful day last spring. It was Davi, the queen bee of her class, who was dispatched to the Residence to alert Audre because the head of security, Mr. James, didn't come on duty until ten. *I think something's wrong*.

Something was, in fact, wrong. Hideously, tragically wrong.

Audre shivers despite the heat of the day—early September is still full summer; the temperature is nearing eighty even at this early hour—and she forces a smile for the next car, a Hyundai Sonata with Georgia plates, a rental. Audre sees a woman with a graying ponytail wearing a GO 'BREDS T-shirt in the driver's seat, and on the passenger side, a boy hunched over his knees. *That's what happens*, Audre thinks, *when you accordion a six-foot-four frame into a midsize sedan*.

It's Webber "Dub" Austin, the Thoroughbreds' starting quarterback. He unfolds himself from the car, removes his massive headphones, and rolls his sunglasses up into his bushy hair, which has gotten a few shades lighter over the summer. He has tan lines on his face where his sunglasses rest. *What does Dub do for a summer job?* Audre wonders. *Park ranger? Ranch hand?* The hair will be shaved off by tomorrow. In his cowboy accent, Dub says, "Mornin', Ms. Robinson."

"Dub," Audre says, and she rounds the car to give the boy a hug.

By the end of the month, Audre will know every student by name, though she occasionally gets tripped up by all the Madisons and Olivias. She tries not to have favorites—but she feels extra protective of this year's fifth-form. They've been through a lot.

The mother climbs out. The students have a joke where they call one

another's mothers "Karen," but Dub's mother is actually named Karen, Karen Austin. She's the single mom of four boys, of whom Dub is number three; he's attending on a full scholarship (athletic, though in his case, need-based as well). Dub's oldest brother played football at Colorado State; the second brother is a wide receiver at CU Boulder. Then there's Dub. But the real star is apparently the youngest brother, who is starting quarterback as a freshman for their high school back in Durango.

Audre doesn't usually retain this much information about the students' families—especially those who never donate—but she has had an earful on the Austin family from Coach Pete Bosworth.

Audre gives Karen a hug as well, and Karen says in her ear, "How're you doing?"

Audre has anticipated being asked this question several times today, and so she's formulated an answer that she hopes strikes the right tone. (What is the right tone when a student has died by suicide on your watch, but you have 239 other kids in your care who deserve a top-notch educational experience?)

"We're all still hurting," Audre says. "But optimistic about the year ahead."

Karen releases Audre and says with watering eyes, "Good for you."

"How's Dub handling it?" Audre asks in a whisper, though it's doubtful he'll hear her. He's been out of the car for mere seconds and is already being swarmed by Olivia P., Madison R., and Olivia H-T.

Karen stares at the car key she's gripping in her hand. "You know, he's my sensitive one." Then she snaps back into her no-nonsense boy-mom persona and calls out, "Hey, Romeo, help me get this shit out of the car, please."

Audre opens the Sonata's back door. Sticking out of a gaping duffel bag is a framed picture of Dub and Cinnamon Peters last Halloween—they went as Travis Kelce and Taylor Swift—with Dub's hand placed chastely on Cinnamon's upper back. All the other students considered them #couplegoals. They weren't gross, they didn't make out in public, you never

heard rumors about them “joining the Harkness Society” (having sex on the Harkness tables) or sneaking down to God’s Basement below the chapel, though they were always together, deep in conversation, laughing. Cinnamon cheered from the sidelines with her face painted green and gold when Dub played football. Dub sat in the front row on the opening night of the high school musical, a bouquet of convenience store roses on his lap. Cinnamon was Sandy in *Grease*.

At the memorial service in the chapel, Dub called Cinnamon a “friend of his heart.” Not a dry eye, of course.

Audre leaves the duffel bag where it is and grabs a bulk-size box of protein bars from the trunk instead. Her cell phone buzzes in the back pocket of her jeans, but she has to wait for a break between cars before she can check it.

It’s a text from Jesse Eastman, known to all, including Audre’s phone, as “Big East,” the president of Tiffin’s board of directors. Have you seen the rankings yet?

Ugh, Audre thinks.

Before coming to Tiffin, Audre served as Head at an all-girls day school in New Orleans. She didn’t know a national ranking of boarding schools even existed, much less how important the rankings in *America Today* were to the board, the alumni, and the parents.

When Audre took over as Head of School, Tiffin was a study in mediocrity, the gentleman’s C of boarding schools. Its heyday was long past; the whole place felt like a once-grand hotel desperately in need of a renovation. But alas, there was no money for improvements—they were barely getting by on their operating budget and the teachers hadn’t had a raise in four years. Tiffin’s ranking in *America Today* (released annually the day after Labor Day) reflected their complacency: They usually appeared somewhere in the lowest tenth of the top fifty—numbers forty-six through forty-nine—and this probably only as a nod to their esteemed past.

But three years ago, Audre—and Cordelia Spooner, head of admissions—met with New York real estate magnate Jesse Eastman about his son,