

## PRAISE FOR *Not the girls you're looking for*

"Engaging and unexpected, voice-y and full of verve, this a whip-smart swan dive into all the messiness of best friendships and new romance, fitting in and growing up."

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—Sara Farizan, author of *If You Could Be Mine*

For Steven—  
You definitely told me so.

A FEIWEL AND FRIENDS BOOK

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# 1

## *Rakeish*

Lulu swatted her way through the unfamiliar coat closet. After tearing down several of what felt like rather expensive fur coats and a couple of potentially cashmere jackets off their hooks, she managed to hit her head against a dangling light switch chain. She swore. Not that there was anyone left to hear her. She pulled the switch, located the closet door, and made her swift exit. She looked left, then she looked right. The coast was clear. She took a deep, relieved breath. What a night it had already been.

Of course, that's when she heard the tutting. Across the hall, Dane Anderson perked up from his lean against the wall. He was the sort of boy who was extensively practiced at leaning against things—walls, lockers, overly large trucks. He was an expert leaner. The only light in the hallway was that streaming out of the closet, and as Dane moved toward her, his face shifted from the shadows to the light.

Lulu stopped straightening out her clothing. She was acutely aware of every tousled hair on her head. She could feel the back zipper of her skirt disobediently tickling her hip. She assumed her shirt was buttoned back up

incorrectly, because that was the sort of luck she had. But she'd be damned if she let her nerves show. Not to him.

Because nature had already given Dane Anderson plenty. His sandy brown hair waved beautifully, effortlessly. His warm, friendly eyes were heavy-lidded and half-open. Whether that was from alcohol or the sudden light, it was difficult to say. The sleeves to his oxford shirt were rolled lazily up to reveal his suntanned, muscular forearms. The top of the shirt was unbuttoned so as to display his crisp white undershirt. His throat bobbed. *"Qu'est-ce qui se passe avec toi?"*

Lulu blinked. What was going on with her? Nothing. Nothing at all. The hallway filled with her silence. She stole a glance at the stairway. She could hear the muffled din of the party below.

Before she could move, Dane took a step forward and put his hand on the wall, his arm blocking her path to escape. "You gonna answer the question, honey, or do you need it in English?"

Lulu's heart hammered so hard that her pulse rang in her own ears. Retreating back into the closet wasn't an option. Not with Dane. Not when they were so alone. But he wasn't one to fight fair, either.

"Nothing's up with me," she said.

"I can see that." Dane eyed her from head to toe, back to head again. His gaze lingered in the middle.

Lulu took a shallow breath. Then another as her stomach clenched. She had to find some scrap of truth to throw his way. "I fell."

"Fall in all by yourself, did you?" A grin pulled at Dane's mouth. It was a Clark Gable kind of grin—all charm and menace. Another gift of his birth and breeding.

"Maybe. Why do you care?" Lulu looked him dead in the eye. That was her first mistake. Dane had beautiful eyes. They were brown with flecks of green in them, dusted with thick lashes. Lulu gripped the wall behind her, a

spin overtaking her head. It was all the alcohol she had drunk. Alcohol spins. Not beautiful, terrible boy spins.

Dane closed the gap between their bodies to next to nothing. Lulu—God help her—flattened her back against the wall. Dane had never been unaware of the effect he had on women. Lulu had never been unaware of the effect Dane had on her. In that, at least, they were equals.

“Why don’t you like me, Lulu?” Even slurring slightly, he sounded like he had a thousand years of good ol’ boys behind him, like he could carry a thousand more after him. There had been four generations in his line—he, after all, was only Daniel Dodge Anderson IV. But his voice bore the weight of a never-ending, never-broken string of gentlemen. A voice of infinity. “Why can’t we be friendly?”

“You know why.” Lulu gritted her teeth.

Dane’s expression stretched into a full-blown, Cheshire cat grin. The world tilted on its axis slightly. Lulu could have had a crush on him for three weeks straight if she’d wanted, at the mere flash of this smile. In fact, at some point in her freshman year, she had. And that was two years ago. Lulu willed her breath even and buried that feeling away as deeply as she could. Lulu didn’t think about freshman year, if she could help it.

“Explain it again.” His breath fanned across her cheek as he leaned in.

Lulu’s mouth fell open, ever so slightly. Why couldn’t *nice* boys smell like peppermint and gin?

Lulu offered up a silent prayer to whoever watched over the dignity of girls like her. Soft, cold lips whispered against hers when a series of repetitive thunks echoed up the stairs. Dane looked up—toward the sound. Lulu didn’t think; she simply took advantage and ducked under his arm. She fled toward the stairs.

Unfortunately, Lulu hardly looked up as she ran away from Dane. She smacked right into a tall, lanky boy—more limbs than anything else. Limbs

she fell into, like some horrible moment in a rom-com. She disentangled herself with much more effort than it should have taken.

Lulu clenched her hand into a fist. The boy raised his arms as if to say, “Whoa, lady. Not my fault.” Fine. Not his fault. Nobody’s fault but her own. She relaxed her hand; the boy nodded like he appreciated the restraint.

Lulu leaped down the steps—two at a time—toward the safety of the ground floor. Toward people. Toward Audrey and whatever lecture was in store from that quarter. From above, Lulu heard the boys’ subdued voices. She didn’t stop moving until the sound was a distant memory. Until the cacophony of the kitchen swallowed her up.

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In hindsight, Lulu ought to have fixed her shirt before looking for Audrey.

Audrey Bachmann took in Lulu’s state of undress and in less than half a second had pulled Lulu out of the kitchen and into a quieter, less populated room. Audrey might have been holding a red Solo cup, but her white and pink floral sundress was still spotless and unrumpled. Her face was flush—she must have only been half a drink into her evening—but her fair hair was still smooth and neat.

“Hold this.” Audrey handed Lulu her drink cup. She pinched a lock of Lulu’s hair between her fingers, then dropped it with a sigh. Audrey fussed over the buttons on Lulu’s shirt—unbuttoning then smoothing as she rebuttoned.

Lulu swatted away Audrey’s hands. One mother was enough.

“Aren’t you going to let me lend a hand at all?” Audrey’s voice was more of a screech and less of a question.

The wild hammering in Lulu’s heart had faded to nothing. Her head swam. Relief hollowed Lulu out, leaving her dizzy. Behind her was an inevitability she’d avoided for now. Ahead were only consequences and a lecture.

A desire to lash out tore through her, obstructing any number of reasonable thoughts in her head. “No.”

Audrey jerked so hard on Lulu’s shirt that the drink in Lulu’s hand jostled. Sticky pink liquid splashed across both of their clothes. Because of course it would.

“Fantastic,” muttered Audrey. “Now we’ll for sure smell like liquor when we get back to my house. You better pray my mother isn’t awake.”

“You could’ve set your drink down.”

Audrey’s lips pressed into a firm line. She snatched the cup from Lulu’s hands and threw back the rest of her drink in one swallow. “Fine. I’m getting a refill. Deal with your boy drama all by yourself.”

Lulu winced as she watched Audrey turn on her heels. That wobbly, hollowing nothing surged again. Lulu didn’t want to be responsible for Audrey spiraling tonight, too. “Wait,” she called.

Audrey whipped back around.

“I got stuck in a hall closet with Brian,” said Lulu.

As anticipated, Audrey wiped her hand down her face in pure exasperation. “How stuck?”

Lulu ran through any number of explanations she could have given. Entangled in his arms and mouth. Pressed up against coat hangers and a wooden closet rod. Pinned by her own curiosity but not by any real interest. She settled on, “Very.”

Audrey reached out and smoothed the front of Lulu’s shirt, then tugged the bottom hem. This time, Lulu let her.

“What the *fuck*, Lulu?” said Audrey, nearly at a whisper. Audrey didn’t say curse words at full volume if she could help it.

“I was promised a telescope.”

“Naturally.” Audrey tried to take a drink out of her cup, then scowled. She must have forgotten she’d finished it. She set the empty cup onto a

sideboard with one of the provided coasters there. She turned her glare onto Lulu. "They're not all your big brothers. You have to be careful."

Lulu giggled, as though she were teetering off the edge of a cliff and laughter would steer her away from a plunge. Her brothers weren't here right now, thank God. They were away at school. "It was only Brian."

Audrey arched a perfectly manicured eyebrow. "Did anyone see you?"

Nearly. "No."

Audrey pinched the bridge of her nose. "Thank goodness."

The sting of Audrey's judgment lit a fire in Lulu's temper again, at least keeping her away from that awful, flooding nothing. "Well, screw you, too."

Audrey closed her eyes for a moment. She took a deep breath before she reopened them. "I'm looking out for you, you know. Keeping your reputation intact."

"Joke's on you, 'cause I don't have a tactful reputation." Lulu forced out a single laugh.

Audrey raised her eyebrow again. "As soon as you're finished throwing your little theatrics, I'm going to get another drink." That was pure Mrs. Bachmann, Audrey's mother. Audrey looked down her straight, aquiline nose and everything.

"I'm only getting started." Lulu put a hand on her hip. She had never been cowed by that look when Mrs. Bachmann gave it, and she wouldn't quaver before it now. Except as she jutted her hip, Lulu's jelly legs finally gave out. She wobbled once, then simply toppled to the ground. She landed with her legs splayed and her tailbone potentially bruised. She could already tell she was going to feel wonderful tomorrow, even if the liquor was taking the edge off tonight.

Audrey sighed. She bent over, holding out her hands. Lulu pushed herself up halfway, then accepted the offering. Audrey yanked Lulu to her feet.



“I need a fresh drink,” said Audrey at the same time as Lulu said, “I need some air.”

The two stared at each other for a long, silent moment.

“I just need to breathe, Audrey Louise,” said Lulu. “I’m not sick or anything. Closets aren’t as roomy as they look. Swear.” Lulu held out her pinkie.

Audrey groaned but locked it with her own. They touched thumbs and twisted their hooked pinkies apart. That was still sacrosanct between them.

“Be good,” Audrey said, her tone still sharp. Judgment came so easily to her.

“I always am.” Lulu was sure of her success. It’s not like she could get into much trouble outside.



The back corner of the large, rectangular pool was banked by reclining chairs—not the blue kind you’d find at a community pool. These were impossibly white and elegantly shaped. Still, they were slatted, and Lulu anticipated the wide, cherry-red stripes that they would imprint onto the backs of her thighs. She sloshed her foot through the pool briefly before she flopped onto one of them. She sprawled out, trying to relax. A littering of plastic cups indicated that whatever crowd had been out here had already migrated back in again, deterred by the wet, heavy air of Southeast Texas.

Wet, heavy air that was becoming a problem.

Though the season was technically fall, summer lingered. The humidity that stifled her breath also pushed her previously tamed mane outward into puffy spirals. She was not *Lo*—and everyone called Dolores Campo *Lo*—who never let humidity alter her appearance. No, Lulu’s hair would be ruined. A necessary casualty of the evening, along with her tailbone and her pride. Lulu closed her eyes; she was going to ride the melt. At least until the spinning stopped.

A scraping noise sounded—metal on concrete. Lulu’s eyes flew open. Around the corner of the pool and three chairs over from her, the boy she’d run into upstairs was adjusting the back of one of the recliners to a more upward position.

Or, he was trying to. The metal must have been stuck in its hinges, rusted over from the humidity. Lulu watched as he dragged the chair back and forth, trying to jiggle the joint free. But the chair would not come unstuck from its current position. That piercing, grating noise continued.

Lulu coughed. The boy’s head snapped up. His eyes widened momentarily with recognition. He must have thought she’d been passed out. He must have wanted to avoid any interaction. Lulu swiped her teeth with her tongue, waiting. He eyed her, then the chair in his hands, seemingly unsure of what he should do next.

Lulu pointed two chairs over from herself. “That one’s already in the upright-and-locked position.”

The boy stood frozen like a deer in the headlights. Or a cartoon rabbit caught in the gaze of a hypnotizing snake. Lulu didn’t look away. She bit the inside of her mouth to prevent a smile from creeping across her face. Finally, she raised her eyebrows. That broke the spell. He moved to the chair she’d indicated. Lulu turned back to face the pool.

Out of the corner of her eye, she continued to watch him. He stretched his body out along the lounge chair, crossing his long legs, one over the other, and resting his hands behind his head. There was no fluidity in his movements. His height must have been newly acquired. He wore a short-sleeved undershirt as a shirt. A patch of skin flashed for a moment above his jeans—soft and pale. A curious impulse flashed: to reach out and touch him there. Who knows what would happen if she did. Lulu rolled her hands under her. She could still hear Audrey’s piercing shrill ringing through her head. No need for another lecture tonight.

“Good call.” His deep, gravelly baritone had no slur whatsoever. “On the chair.”

“Yes,” Lulu deadpanned as she recovered her wits. The tone of his voice had hummed through her. *Keep it together for five minutes, Saad.* “They tell me that all the time. So many good calls.”

“Full of wisdom?”

A low laugh built in Lulu’s throat. “A font of it. They will remember me as Lulu the Wise.”

“Lulu,” he said. “That’s got to be short for something.”

Lulu sighed. “Leila. It’s short for Leila.”

And, right on cue, the boy began to wail, “Layyyylaaaaa,” like he was Eric Fucking Clapton. He looked over, a grin spreading across his face until it crinkled into the corners of his eyes. He caught Lulu’s eye. The singing immediately stopped. “Bad call?”

“Absolutely horrendous.”

“Horrendous? Why horrendous?” But there was no demand in his tone. “Please.”

Lulu turned over onto her side to face him fully. He just looked at her, his face wide and open. Her pretty smile fell. Raw honesty wasn’t something Lulu got much of in her neck of the woods. She stared, waiting for the sarcastic bite, the playful joke to his words. The light from the pool glimmered across his face. And his round, unflinching eyes just kept on staring. As if the rabbit could transfix the snake.

“I’ve never wanted any man on his knees, not really. Or worrying some kind of ease, or whatever the lyric is. I dunno. I don’t wanna be Leila, or Carmen, or Belle de Jour. I just want to be me. Without some dude strumming a guitar or writing an opera or filming a movie trying to tell me how to do that. The singing reminds me that no matter what I go by somebody is gonna step in and remind me what some obsessed asshole thinks of my

name. Reminds me that Clapton's Layla is cruel and Bizet's Carmen dies. So Lulu. That's me. It's mine. And it's just as real as any other fiction. No serenade required." Lulu took a deep breath. She'd managed to run out of air by the end of her confession. She didn't expect him to understand, because the only person who really got it was Lo.

"Okay, Lulu," he said. "I'm James."

Lulu held out her arm and gave a pretend handshake in the air. "Why don't I know you?"

"Just moved back from Florida."

"I'd never have pegged you for a Florida type."

His mouth twitched upward. "And I'd never have pegged you for a Buñuel type."

"What's a bunwell?"

"Luis Buñuel? You know, the director of *Belle de Jour*, the movie you were just complaining about?"

Recognition flitted through Lulu's mind. Damn. "Not a fan. Or a type. I've just been taking French forever. And you know how French teachers are: they don't want you only to speak French, they want you to know what it is to *be* French. Hence the French opera and the French cinema. And sometimes French rap." Lulu nodded seriously and furrowed her brow with exaggerated severity.

"Guess it worked, though. I mean, you made an artsy film reference at a house party."

"God, you're depressing," said Lulu, but without any real conviction. "I hated the movie, but sometimes things you hate stick with you, you know?"

Lulu waited for an answer. Frogs hidden in the grass around the pool croaked in a vibrating, syncopated rhythm. A slow, heavy breeze blew through humid air. Better than nothing, but still sticky and frizz-inducing. A whispering, slithering sensation crawled up Lulu's spine. She ought not to

have confessed to him. She ought to have stayed hidden. She stared at the pool until her gaze went fuzzy and wide. Her vision transformed into a blur of blue and white light.

“You’re different.”

The pool snapped into focus. She turned to James. Keen, wide eyes watched her.

Lulu took a deep breath, because Emma would have told her to take a deep breath. Emma Walker was always reminding Lulu to take deep breaths. But the deep breaths weren’t helping, and she wasn’t going to play this game and lose in public. She stood up, gripping the back of the nearest chair to steady herself. “Oh, what. Am I not like the other girls?”

“That’s not what I said.” James frowned.

Good. Lulu was snatching the conversation out from under him. He didn’t know it yet, but from watching his face, he sensed it. Lulu backed away from him. “Isn’t it?”

James stood. He stared for a long moment. “You’re twisting my words.”

He didn’t know the half of what she was capable of twisting. Lulu took one more step back. She could picture Emma’s disappointment, Audrey’s judgment, and Lo’s joy at the plan forming in her mind. “You said I was different. Not like the other girls. Not like everyone else you saw in there, including my best friends. *Different*. Isn’t that right?”

“Yes. No.” James took a step toward her, between her and the edge of the deep end. “That’s not what I meant.”

“Explain it to me, then. Since I’m too stupid to understand.” Lulu smiled so she could bare her teeth.

James crossed his arms. “You know? I don’t think I will.”

And that was it—Lulu’s cue.

Lulu took two steps forward and she shoved James hard. Somehow he didn’t expect it. And then everything happened in slow motion. Lulu

watched as he lost his balance and flailed once—no, twice—then splashed into the pool behind him. She smirked.

*Oops.*

Lulu watched for James to come up for air, but she didn't see him. It was the deep end, after all. Maybe he had to swim to the surface. But she didn't see any bubbles anymore. Lulu waited a beat. And another. He couldn't have hit his head. The pool was too deep here, at least eight feet. She'd only been trying to push him away. Not harm him. She couldn't kill a boy. Not tonight. And not this one.

He still hadn't come up for air, though.

Lulu swallowed. She hadn't marked the time when she'd pushed him in. Not that she remembered the difference between a normal amount of time or a not-normal amount of time to be submerged in a pool. That slithering down her spine made a tight grip on her breath, made her fingers tingle, made her head spin. There was only one thing left to do.

Lulu dove in.

She saw James at the bottom of the pool—his limbs sprawled out and his head down. Lulu grabbed for him and swam to the surface, kicking with all her might. She gasped when she reached the top. He was much heavier than she could have anticipated. Dead weight. Except he wasn't dead. He couldn't be dead. It was not possible for him to be dead. No one was dead. Except the already dead people, wherever they were.

Treading water in the middle of the pool, Lulu didn't know what to do. He hadn't gasped at the top. She didn't see any blood—so maybe he hadn't hit his head. Everything was fine. Tonight was going swimmingly. Lulu choked on a laugh. Chlorinated water burned through her nostrils.

Why, oh why, hadn't she paid attention the day they did CPR training. All she remembered was laughing as Lo licked the mannequin in front of the class. It had seemed terribly funny at the time. Not so, anymore. Lulu

swam for the closest edge, the oversized boy filling her arms. Lulu didn't know how she was going to hoist him over the tile ledge onto the concrete.

That's when James's head snapped up and he looked straight at her. "Never be a lifeguard. I would've been dead sixty seconds ago."

Lulu had heard the expression "seeing red" before. But she'd never before had red flicker into the edges of her vision. Never known that her rage could light through her in that way. She scrambled out of the pool. James followed. He was laughing. She'd nearly killed him and he was laughing. Lulu put her hands on her knees. She almost vomited. She took two deep breaths. The nausea dissipated a little. One more deep breath and she found her footing again.

"You!" she screamed. She tried to think of all the curses she knew in all the languages she knew them. But her mind blanked. All she could get out was, "You!"

He was laughing harder now. Lulu didn't think; she started swinging.

"How. Dare. You." She was punching wildly, but effectively. "I am going to kill you. Murder you. I thought I *had* killed you."

James had, by this point, put his arms up to cover his face. "Ouch! It was only a joke."

He backed away, making space between them. Lulu didn't give chase. She stood there sopping wet and breathing heavy, her hands balled into fists.

"Fair's fair. You pushed me into the pool," James said.

"And there's no way you did anything to deserve that!" Lulu's voice echoed into the night.

James remained silent on that point. The sound of dripping reverberated across the lawn. Lulu looked down. She was all wet. This was going to be difficult to explain. Particularly to Audrey's mother. To any mother.

Lulu did what she could given the situation: she gave him the finger. Then she stalked away with as much grace as she could muster. She could

hear the sad sloshing against the pavement as she walked. It did not feel dignified. At least she hadn't stuck out her tongue. That would have brought shame onto the family. She was her mother's daughter; there were standards to be upheld. Lulu dripped her way through the house, grabbing her purse in the kitchen and heading out the door. Everybody stared. Lulu didn't blame them. She held her chin high, though. At least she didn't need to text Audrey to meet by the car. Rumor had worked faster than data service.

Once Audrey caught sight of Lulu, she screeched, the disbelief raw on her throat. "You had better hope my mother is asleep."

Lulu's hopes came to nothing. Mrs. Bachmann was wide-awake for the girls' entrance. The night did not get any better from there.



## 2

### *Sins of Omission*

Sealy Hall was situated on the edge of a Houston neighborhood filled with stately homes, long winding driveways, and expansive manicured lawns. The kind of place where homeowners were routinely complimented on landscaping that they refused to do themselves. The school itself was a local institution—storied cloisters, a quadrangle, a chapel, and a dining hall—the real deal. An aging public school even sat catty-corner, perfectly situated to offset Sealy Hall’s institutional authority. That was a joke Lulu regularly told herself: she’d been institutionalized. She was being shaped into the spitting image of success.

And voluntarily, too.

She didn’t have the requisite last name, but she was being taught the rest. Many would be resentful of this. But Lulu knew her options in this world. She was the daughter of an immigrant and a Louisiana woman. Blending wasn’t a party trick. Blending was survival. Lulu took what Sealy Hall had to offer, with her eyes and hands open wide.

The dining hall—not a cafeteria—sat at the bottom of the student

center—an expansive space filled with intimate round tables. To foster discussion and camaraderie, that’s what the pamphlet said. The perfect size for gossip, was more of Lulu’s experience with the layout.

“And then, I swear to God, I saw her give him a hickey. He’s going to have a purple mark on his neck for at least a week.” Lo—and nobody dared to call Dolores Campo *Lola* or, shudder to think, *Lolita*—sat cross-legged in her chair. Lo habitually took up more space than her body required.

“We saw it all happen Saturday night. We don’t need a blow by blow.” Lulu stole a french fry off Audrey’s plate and ignored the resulting grimace.

Lo, however, was a hurricane. She could not be stopped; she could only be weathered. She pushed her hands through her hair, deliberately mussing her tousled mane. “It’s not a blow, Lulu. It’s a suck. That causes capillary bruising. It’s just physics plus biology.”

“Literally. How fascinating.” Lulu tried to take another fry but was blocked by Audrey’s strategically placed elbows.

“Lulu’s just upset because she made out with Brian Connor this weekend.” Audrey’s eyes lit up with an inaudible laugh.

One pilfered fry and Audrey had turned traitor. To think Lulu had taken the fall for her this weekend. Lulu took a deep breath. She hadn’t cared that night, not really, and she wouldn’t care now. Or at least, she cared in a different way than most people would anticipate. So she lied without ever actually lying. Her mother would call that a sin of omission.

Lulu snorted. “Whatever.”

Lo arched an eyebrow. “Whatever?”

Emma Walker—two chairs over from Lulu—quietly watched her two friends. Her eyes flitted back and forth, taking in the scene. That was how Emma gauged threat levels.

“It was an accident.” Lulu hoped a shrug might shake Lo off. It didn’t.

“Then you’re kind of accident-prone, Daphne.” Satisfaction slid across Lo’s face.

Lulu didn’t hesitate. “It’s danger-prone. If you’re referencing *Scooby-Doo*. It’s ‘Danger-Prone Daphne.’”

That was as close to a “fuck you” as Lulu could get while they were still moderately supervised by the faculty. Lo knew it too, because her eyes narrowed and her chin tilted down. She was ready for a fight. Excellent. So was Lulu.

“Why’d you do it anyways?” Emma asked, in a soft tone that still managed to carry across the table. She didn’t have to speak loudly to be heard, somehow, even among this group.

Of all the friends, Emma Walker blended into the background the best. She took easy refuge in the shade of their personalities. Her romanticism—fed on a diet of fairy tales, Disney princesses, and Molly Ringwald movies—was of the incurable variety. And she stayed in the safe, comfortable groups of girls she had always known whenever they went out. Or stayed in. Or just sat in the dining hall for lunch. She was a creature of careful habits. She composed perfect bites of her lunch, cutting her cafeteria pizza into neat little squares.

“He was there. I was there. It just happened, you know?” Lulu shrugged. A safe truth.

Lo laughed, dry and full of pretention. “God. Lulu. You mess.”

Lulu glared. “Better than constantly taking someone’s sloppy seconds.”

Audrey gasped. Emma held her breath.

Lo, however, laughed again. “Touché. At least I’m not the one who got grounded for falling into a pool.”

“I did not fall,” said Lulu. “I pushed a boy in. He looked like he was drowning. I *tried* to save his life. I definitely did not fall into a pool.”

“You still fell for his wily ways,” said Lo.

“Like you could tell the difference between a fake drowning and a real drowning.” Lulu rolled her eyes.

“Maybe.” Lo turned away from Lulu’s incredulity. “And anyway, you getting grounded is the worst because there’s a battle of the bands this week. It’s gonna be epic, y’all.”

Lo leaned back magnificently, but as the front legs of her chair kicked out, the back of it ran into an unsuspecting freshman girl. Lo, of course, landed back on her feet. The poor girl, however, toppled over with a near-comedic finesse—arms akimbo, legs sprawled, the remains of a cornbread muffin flying. For a moment the area around the table went as silent as any room Lulu walked into the day after she’d had a particularly notable hook-up.

Emma was the first to reach out. “Are you okay?”

“It’s fine.” The girl, still plopped on the floor, began by straightening out her bangs. “I’m fine.”

“Of course it’s not fine. Lo’s an absolute brute.” Emma tsked.

“Hey!” cried Lo, but she was ignored.

“She legit has no sense of where she is in space at all. Ever.” Emma reached her hand out farther.

This time the girl took it. She got to her feet and straightened her skirt. The corners of her mouth had turned up into a hint of a smile. “Thanks.”

Emma smiled, bright and earnest. “Anytime.”

The girl walked off, meeting back up with a friend a few paces away. She exited the dining hall, turning around once to meet Emma’s eye.

Lo tapped her finger against the table. “As I was saying. Before I was interrupted.”

Lulu and Audrey shared a quick glance. Lo could be so self-important.

“Nina Holmes told me about the Battle of the Bands.” Lo’s eyes, gleaming with possibility, danced around the table. When they stopped finally, they rested on Lulu. “And you’re going to miss it.”

Lulu refused to be cowed by this. “Didn’t Nina puke all over the lawn on Saturday?”

“Yes, but this was before the puking, not after.” Lo slurped her Coke.

Lulu did her best to stand her ground. “Whatever.”

Lo didn’t break her focus. This expression—where her eyebrows pushed together and her mouth found a firm line and her eyes locked onto their target—was why so many people would follow Lo anywhere. Or run from her when they saw her headed their way. “Figure it out, Lulu. We’re all going on Thursday. You’re clever enough to get out of anything. Including a grounding.”

Of that, however, Lulu was not so sure.

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If asked, Lulu would have admitted that the purpose of being grounded was inconvenience. Trouble now meant a loss of privilege later. It was, in many ways, the perfect punishment for the sins of instant gratification. But this particular grounding had come at an especially inconvenient time. And the way out was murky.

The youngest of three, Lulu often went to her father to get her out of trouble. But Ahmed Saad didn’t know she was grounded this time. This was partly because Lulu’s mother, Aimee Saad, was quick to punish but slow to tell. The effects of her own upbringing, no doubt. This was also because Aimee had learned the hard way about Lulu’s persistent commitment to reversing her punishments.

Desperate and wishful of a distraction, Lulu swiveled back and forth in

the desk chair in her room. But Lulu should have been more careful. Once, her grandmother had told her wishes were the province of the jinn and, like gifts from faeries, were not to be trusted or taken so lightly.

“Lulu, phone,” said her mother, waltzing into Lulu’s room like she owned the place. Considering her name was on the mortgage, she did own the place, but it didn’t soothe Lulu’s injured pride to think about it that way. Her mother laughed, as though the voice on the other end had told a joke, then held out the phone for Lulu to take. Lulu noticed a newspaper in her mother’s other hand.

“Who is it?”

“It’s your grandmother.”

“Which grandmother?” It was a petty question, and Lulu knew better than to ask it. But a pit had fallen into Lulu’s stomach. She took back her wish for a distraction. She tried to look busy with a textbook.

The only reason Aimee’s people had tolerated her unorthodox marriage to a Muslim and an immigrant was the stern-fisted will of Lulu’s other grandmother. Mimi the Matriarch—a Louisiana spitfire if there ever was one—had held her family together, if not always with love then with purpose and determination. It hadn’t quite been kindness. She had refused to acknowledge arguments from either side. To Mimi, family was family. She’d hear of nothing else but mutual toleration. The Saads would be invited and they would stay silent and behave while the Natales fed them a feast of seven fishes and hundreds of insults. When Mimi had died, Aimee’s people had stopped inviting the Saads for Christmas. When Mimi had died, Aimee took off the gold cross she’d worn at her neck since first communion. She had never put it back on again. When Mimi had died, the rest of the Saads knew not to bring her up unless Aimee did so first.

Lulu’s mama stared. The laughter was gone now. “The only grandmother you’ve got left, darlin’. Your *bibi*.”

Lulu swallowed the guilt collecting in her throat. Her mother didn't even speak Arabic, and yet Bibi was always making Lulu's mother laugh. There was a strange camaraderie there she didn't understand. Lulu took the phone. Her mother turned and left the room, leaving the door open as she went.

"Hello?"

"Halloo," bounced back a thickly accented echo into Lulu's ear.

"Hello?" There were times when Lulu could only be relieved at having no obligation to say anything other than hello and good-bye to her father's mother. She'd already lived through the dark side of a family that perfectly understands one another. Other times, like today, regret that she couldn't communicate a full sentence with her grandmother overshadowed all of Lulu's thoughts.

"Halloo!" Static traipsed across her grandmother's answer.

Lulu cradled the phone to her ear with her shoulder. She grabbed a pen and began doodling across her arm. "Bibi?"

"Hallo, Bibi!" the cracked voice responded, distorted across continents and wires until it ought to have been unintelligible.

Lulu thought a good deal on the repetitive nature of her phone conversations with her family overseas. She'd narrowed down the potential culprit to any of these: poor transmission, linguistic barrier, or a cultural difference in handling the telephone. Maybe all three. A large piece of her needed a definitive answer. But, truth be told, she'd never asked anyone else if their experience was the same. Anytime she got close, the question sounded so foolish. So she'd stayed silent, waiting to see if she could figure it out on her own.

"How are you?" Lulu swirled and whirled the pen across her arm, leaving a trail of ink in its wake.

"*Kefiq ya, habibti?*" Love and care radiated out of her grandmother's voice. She had a warm, gruff cadence.

The pen caught on Lulu's forearm, skidding across her skin. Lulu set it down. "*Zienna, Bibi. Wa anti?*"

The Arabic phrases that Lulu knew mostly related to food, and she could, in fact, only speak a little Arabic. Every once in a while, Lulu remembered how to tell someone if she was hot or cold. She knew a choice selection of curse words picked up from the other Arab American boys who were, to her, something between friends and cousins. Her brothers had taught her how to say "eat shit." And there was one word that she only heard in whispers; it came with knowing looks and expectant glances. Lulu pretended never to know it, not even to hear it. She buried that word in a place she hoped she could never find again.

This knowledge base, apparently, had been enough to satisfy a grandmother who lived thousands of miles away. Lulu hadn't stopped waiting for the day when it wouldn't be enough. Lulu could overhear her grandmother repeating Lulu's words to the room at large. She wondered how many relatives surrounded the phone call. Lulu's chest went tight.

"*Alhamdulillah, hayati,*" crackled Bibi through the receiver. "*Hathe amtich, hathe amtich.*"

The phone was passed around, relative to relative—aunt to cousin to uncle to cousin again. Each time Lulu had a nearly identical conversation as the one before, with each phrase and each question repeated like a glitch in a video game. Depending on the new speaker, the language of the conversation jolted from English to Arabic and back again, with Lulu attempting her best Arabic, while her relatives with an actual mastery of English shamed her.

"Hallo, Lulu!" A small, breathless voice had taken charge of the phone. This was Lulu's baby cousin, Rana.

The Saads didn't have many girls. They were rare to the family, and therefore all the more precious. There wasn't a girl born into the Saads or



one of its tributaries that did not take advantage of this. That's why Rana could grab the phone right out from the hands of her older cousin.

"Hello, Rana," said Lulu.

Rana's breath was still catching up with her words. She must have run across the room to take the phone. "I'm going to e-mail you."

Lulu laughed. "All right."

"Good!" said Rana. "Oh, here is Bibi."

Lulu barely had time to recover from the tempo switch.

"Halloo, Bibi!" Lulu's grandmother was back on the line.

Thank goodness Rana had warned her before handing over the phone. Truthfully, Lulu couldn't always tell when the phone switched over between speakers. In her mind they were all disembodied voices. Not that she hadn't been shown pictures of her relatives, but the voices were separate from the faces, which in turn were entirely separate from the family histories related by her father.

The only person who stuck out in her memory as complete—a face, a voice, and a story—was her grandfather, and that was only because she had the glimmer of a memory of having met him as a tiny child. The story of that was a famous one, told so often that Lulu was sick of hearing it.

*"Ahibich, 'azizati. Ahibich,"* said Bibi.

"Miss you," said Lulu. "Love you."

*"Ma'asalama 'oyooni. Ma'asalama."*

*"Alaykum Masalam, Bibi."* Lulu heard the phone click shut. That was it. Lulu set the phone down next to her in the chair. But that wasn't enough. She took it and buried it under her leg. The plastic bit into her thighs. Uncomfortable, yes, but at least she didn't have to keep looking at the phone. It was as though the device had grown eyes and was watching her. She didn't want to be seen.

Not a moment later, her mother popped back into the room.

“Your father left this for you.” She handed Lulu a folded section of newspaper. From the stilted, direct movements she used, she still hadn’t forgiven Lulu for bringing up Mimi. She would, eventually. She always did. “He set it by your place at breakfast, but you left it.”

Lulu stared blankly for a moment. Recognition dawned as the headline came into focus. Lulu could only see the words *Iraqi* and *art collection*, but they were enough. Lulu reached out to take the paper. “Thanks.”

Her mother leaned down. Lulu roughly kissed her on the cheek—more velocity than affection. Then Lulu bent her head over the newspaper. The door to her bedroom clicked shut.

Once alone, Lulu set down the article. It could wait. She placed it atop a stack of similar articles, all patiently awaiting her attention. She told herself she’d get to them. And she meant it, too. She looked out the window. The sun would set soon. Time would keep going on with or without her.

Lulu reached for the phone under her leg. She had a quick call to make.



Liza Pazornik—a senior girl of the ambitious variety—had not gotten to be editor in chief of *The Sealy Examiner* by sitting on her laurels or by being gullible. But she played into Lulu’s plan beautifully, if unwittingly.

Having just lost the cell-phone connection with Lulu—a staff member—giving her a good story tip, Liza called back at the landline number listed in her copy of the school directory. Lulu’s dad picked up. Liza informed him she had a possible newspaper assignment for Lulu. He passed the call along gladly.

Lulu took the call from Liza with as much surprise as she could muster. She suppressed the triumph that ran through her. She walked out of the room as she normally would have, had the call been truly unexpected.

She’d have to play this as cool as humanly possible.

A couple of minutes later, Lulu reentered the living room. She held her hand over the phone mic. She cleared her throat, a notch louder than necessary but not suspiciously so. Her mom looked up. Her father kept his eyes on his opened newspaper.

“Baba? I’ve got a newspaper assignment,” Lulu said. “A last-minute one.”

Ahmed turned the page with a crinkling swish. He must have been one of the only people left who read a real newspaper anymore. Said he only liked the news if it got his hands dirty. Aimee froze—she had been working through a stack of papers from where she sat on the couch.

Lulu didn’t flinch. “I need to cover this Battle of the Bands tonight.”

Aimee’s face went rigid.

“For school,” Lulu emphasized, trying not to gulp. She kept a tight hold of the phone. Yes, she had called Liza with the hot tip for the story about covering the Battle of the Bands. And yes, she had purposefully hung up so that Liza would have to call the house line rather than Lulu’s cell. But those weren’t details her parents needed to know.

Ahmed turned a page in his newspaper. Without looking up, he said, “Of course, *habibti*.”

Aimee coughed. “Honey, do you really think she should go out on a school night?”

Ahmed put down his paper and appraised his youngest. “Where do you need to go?”

He had no softness to his voice. His tones were all consonants, clipped and hit hard. To his credit, he’d grown up speaking a dialect of Arabic that necessitated the use of such sounds. But the annunciation did not lend itself well to English, not when attempting kindness or sympathy. English, unlike Arabic, was not a poetic language. English had been cobbled together by too many unknown parents, too many unsure users. English lacked the single word that differentiated an attacking lion from one at rest. Nor did English

have the capacity to relay the succinct, linguistic separation of a maternal uncle from a paternal one. English was not a thoughtful language. Ahmed was kind, though his English was not.

“Between Montrose and downtown,” said Lulu.

As Ahmed looked at Lulu, sweat built up in her armpits. She hailed from a nice enclave inside a much larger city. Sometimes that made getting out a little tricky. She was headed to the less savory edge of the arts district. “I can call Audrey, see if I can take her, so I won’t be driving alone,” Lulu added. That had been part of her plan all along, but it sounded better if she suggested it as a solution to her father’s hesitations rather than as her own particular desire.

“Okay. You’ll be back,” he said.

“Yes.” Lulu preferred to start out in agreement.

“Nine thirty.” He nodded once.

“Yes, but, Baba, the band goes on at nine.” Lulu tried to keep the wheeling out of her voice.

For a long moment, the only things in the room that moved were Aimee’s eyes, which ping-ponged between Lulu and Ahmed.

“All right. Ten thirty,” Ahmed said with finality. “And don’t forget to take your mobile phone.”

Lulu crossed the room, leaning over to give her father an unnecessary squeeze. He accepted it heartily. As Lulu looked back over at her mother, she made sure her smile was wiped clean off her face. If there was one thing Aimee hated, it was one parent overruling the other in front of one of the children.

Of course, Lulu knew this.

That thought caught in the back of Lulu’s throat for a moment. She swallowed it. Lulu took her hand off the phone and put it back to her ear. “Liza? I can do it.”

Ahmed continued smiling behind his paper, as though he had done a good deed. Aimee gave Lulu a long, hard stare, straightening her work papers into a neat stack on the coffee table. There was an unsettling quietness to the movement. Winding up her mother had yet to pan out as a good idea. Aimee wouldn't forget.

But it was Thursday and Lulu had gotten out of her punishment. She wouldn't let the lingering image of Aimee's promising grimace invade her joy. Instead, Lulu stayed on the phone with Liza as she walked out of the room. After they'd run down the necessary information, Lulu went and grabbed her phone off her mother's desk. She texted only one word to Audrey—*Jailbreak*.

# 3

## *Somebody's Yoda*

Her shoes riding shotgun, Lulu curled her bare feet around the gas and clutch pedals. Warm, humid air invaded the car through the open windows. She inhaled the sweet, wet air deeply. The back of her thighs were slicked up with sweat against her vinyl seats, but she didn't mind. Lulu loved to drive. She loved the single-purposed focus she had when she sat behind the wheel. So few things in her life gave Lulu that clearheadedness. That driving barefoot was illegal in the state of Texas only heightened the thrill.

Houston itself was not a beautiful city. It was a resilient one. If Austin was the crown jewel of Texas, and San Antonio was its tourist trap, and Dallas was where bankers and stereotypes made dividends, then Houston was the begrudging East Texas swamp that nobody wanted to acknowledge as maturing. But Houston did matter. The kind of swampy city that withstands mosquitoes and floodplains and hurricanes—not unlike New Orleans or Versailles. Except not a quarter so architecturally fine. Not a third so bent on flashing itself for the crowd. No. Houston was built on oil and energy, on

rolling up your sleeves and doing the kind of work that was necessary, if not actually good.

Lulu honked twice as she pulled up to Audrey's driveway, taunting Mrs. Bachmann with her conspicuous display of freedom. She only did it half on purpose.

"What's up, slut?" Audrey slid into the car, shoving the shoes onto the floorboard and turning up the radio all in one fluid move.

Lulu cringed, but said nothing. Audrey was already talking a mile a minute. Thanks to the volume of the radio, Lulu could barely hear Audrey over the sound of the bass thumping.

"I thought you were going to be grounded until Halloween at least," Audrey finished.

"No thanks to you." Lulu waited a moment, then ticked the volume back down a few notches.

"Next time, if I'm the one taking a drunken swim, feel free to lay the blame at my doorstep," said Audrey.

"It wasn't a swim!"

"Of course not." Audrey turned the radio back up.

All things considered, she was taking Lulu's accusations startlingly well. Lulu turned the volume back down. "You're in a bubbly mood."

"I swiped my sister's ID on my way out. Sucker." Audrey smiled an irreverent smile. There was a clear, secretive pleasure written across her face.

"I mean, really, who's going to believe we're twenty-two? Or that you look anything like your sister? You two barely pass as cousins." Lulu went on unnecessarily. "No one, that's who. Besides, they're letting sixteen and up in for this gig."

"It's a matter of principle." Audrey crossed her arms.

When it came to Audrey and her sister, everything was a matter of principle. Lulu shrugged. What Lulu knew of sisters, apart from Audrey, she

had taken from fiction. Lulu suspected that Audrey found her sister to be a Mary Bennet—priggish and pedantic—while Audrey’s sister probably thought of Audrey as a Lydia Bennet—thoughtless and selfish. Or maybe they were Amy and Jo March, and this was all about a burned manuscript and an heiress of a boy. Lulu found the idea of sisters fascinating, but her only vocabulary for the relationship was borrowed. She did the best she could to follow, given the circumstance.

Audrey turned the radio back up. Lulu flicked Audrey’s fingers, like swatting a fly, and turned the radio down. Audrey sighed. After waiting a beat, she raised the radio volume in one grand, sweeping effort. “So where to first?”

“Emma’s, then Lo’s.” Lulu punched off the radio with her knuckles. Her ears vibrated from the aftermath of that decibel level. “Then I’m thinking tacos. We haven’t had tacos in forever.”

“Two weeks. Yes, that was *forever* ago.” Audrey used as much condescension as she had in her. And Audrey had been bred to hold plenty of condescension.

Lulu laughed. Her freshly won freedom made her gracious enough not to hold a grudge. She had taken the blame for the night of the pool incident, getting Audrey off nearly scot-free. But Audrey would do the same for her, even if Audrey knew the world to be a certain way. A way that didn’t hold water, but still.

Lulu made an unprotected left turn, and Audrey swooped in to turn the radio back up. Lulu paid these antics no further attention. They constantly danced around like this, attracting each other with what ought to repel. The two girls chatted and laughed until they became four. How any of them could hear one another, over each other, or the music, or the wind coming into the car as it sped along, was anyone’s guess.



The venue for the Battle of the Bands was going for a kind of cool, industrial loft look. It was on the edge of downtown without being in downtown. It was near the gay bars without being one itself. Almost in the arts district, but not quite. It was hopelessly in between, desperately on the edge. And tonight it was too full of a hopeful, underage crowd to achieve its most basic, casually cool aim. The bathroom echoed this attempt at a hipster vibe—concrete littered with fliers. Plus a faint odor of vomit that would never wash out.

Lulu rubbed her shoulder. She had been dragged—literally—into the bathroom by Lo. A sophomore girl at one of the sinks was attempting to wash off the UNDERAGE that had been inked across her hand. After a brief tussle with the venue-provided soap, the girl finally gave up hope and shuffled out of the bathroom, defeated. Lo watched her sad exit with narrowed eyes.

Lo muttered her disdain under her breath. A stall opened up, and Lo pulled Lulu in with her. She whipped out a travel-sized bottle of makeup remover and grabbed for Lulu's hand. But Lulu yanked away.

"Dude, no." Lulu's voice was stern, probably louder than it needed to be. "My mom knows where I am and what I'm doing. She'll be expecting a hand mark."

"That's no fun." Lo ostentatiously pushed her hands through her hair, which still looked perfectly tousled despite the humidity. As always.

Lulu's own hair looked like it had gotten into a tussle with a badly behaved house cat. She didn't know how Lo did it. Nobody did.

Lo took the bottle of makeup remover and tilted it toward a wad of toilet paper, which she in turn put to work against her own hand. The ink across her hand dissolved quickly. There wasn't a single red mark left over to show visible evidence of scrubbing. Lo was a pro.

"I can't believe she tried scrubbing. With the soap!" Lo's voice was a

harsh whisper. “And like right at the sinks, in front of everyone. You can see that sink from outside. What an amateur!”

Lulu shrugged. “You could adopt her. Teach her your ways.”

“I don’t babysit.” Lo wiped the residue of the makeup remover with an individually packaged face wipe. Lo was also thorough.

“It wouldn’t be babysitting. You’d, like, be her Yoda. Everyone wants to be somebody’s Yoda,” said Lulu.

Lo gave Lulu a scathing look. Lulu knew where this was going.

Lo threw the makeup wipe away in the tampon bin. “No. Everyone does *not*. You’re such a freak.”

“Seriously?” Lulu could have sidestepped the ages-old argument, but Lulu didn’t particularly enjoy avoiding a fight with Lo. They were verbal sparring partners. They learned from each other, honed their individual arguments so that when they faced real opponents, these others didn’t stand a chance.

Lo squatted down to pee. “Seriously. Why the hell would you be Yoda, when you could be Boba Fett. The man survives the sarlacc’s pit. He’s got the, like, sickest helmet, ever. He’s a bounty hunter; he’s definitely in it for the money. And he doesn’t waffle like Han does.”

“Waffle?” Lulu’s voice echoed well beyond their stall. “You call turning to the aid of the rebellion, being the sole reason Luke can safely blow up the Death Star, *waffling*?”

Lo pulled her skirt back down and flushed. “Boba Fett knows what he wants. And he gets it. Including Han.”

“Who he could’ve killed, but didn’t. What do you say to that?” Lulu put her hand on her hip, partially blocking the stall door.

“That says, that even when a fellow runner turns, Boba still has a code he lives by. That’s what I say to that.” Lo sniffed, fully satisfied that her point had ground this argument to a halt.

“Anyways.” Lo tapped her upper thigh, a metallic sound tingling slightly.

“Find me if you need me. I always bring backup.” She pushed Lulu out of the way to open the stall to the door, majestically exiting as though everyone’s eyes would be on her. And to further Lulu’s annoyance, they all were.

Squeezing out of the bathroom and into a hallway, Lulu shuffled by a girl who was crouched on the floor, crying. The girl’s makeup drizzled down her face, and Lulu couldn’t believe someone was already having such a horrible time. She looked a little bit like Nina Holmes. But Lo yanked Lulu onward before she could be sure. Lulu yanked back. Lo gave up then, abandoning Lulu to the crowd. Lulu passed a couple kissing. The two boys were of a similar height, similarly sized shoulders—one fair and the other dark. They made a cute couple. Then again, Lulu was disposed to like mixed couples, being the product of one herself.

Alone, Lulu pressed forward into the open floor space. She scanned the darkened dance floor, none of her friends in sight. As she turned, she saw Dane Anderson holding two open beers and smiling with delightful malice.

“Look who it is.” He flexed slightly as she eyed the drinks. “I didn’t know they let you out unsupervised on school nights.”

“I didn’t know they let seventeen-year-olds drink in clubs.” Lulu gave a mean, flirtatious grin. Mostly to keep from staring at his now-taut arms.

“Fun fact: they do let twenty-two-year-olds drink.” A smug satisfaction coated Dane’s face. He reached out and draped his arm around her.

“God, Anderson, you’re going to spill beer on me. What?” His name rolled off her tongue like one of her favorite swear words. Lulu crossed her arms in defiance. She made no move to shove him off, as that seemed to be the object of his taunting. Instead she stood there, feeling the pressure of his frame against her body.

“What do you mean, what?” He slung her closer, sloshing some beer onto her shoulder.

“I mean *what*.”

A few people glanced over now. Lulu couldn’t recognize them in the obscured lighting, but she felt watched. Lulu ran her hands through her hair, attempting to smooth any flyaways.

“Do you?” Dane had a grin that rewrote reality.

Lulu leaned in, like she was only going to smell the fresh-baked pie but not eat it. There it was—that gin and peppermint again. She caught the faint scent of smoke. “I do.”

“Damn, Lulu. You look good tonight.”

Lulu stiffened. She forced herself to lean away from the almost certain peril. “Do I? I hadn’t noticed. Your observations are necessary and appreciated as always.”

“Christ, are you on your period?” Dane rolled his eyes, and his beautiful face contorted into an ironic sneer. In a just world, he would have looked uglier.

Lulu remembered afresh why she had put up a wall of defense between herself and this boy, all those years ago. Her body often forgot, but her mind wouldn’t. “No, are you?”

Dane clutched Lulu closer, crunching Lulu’s shoulders as more beer dribbled down her arm. “Great. Then we’re good to go.”

Lulu grabbed his shirt where the lapels of his coat ought to have been. She could feel his chest underneath her knuckles. She watched the confusion cross his face, which nearly brought on a smile that would have spoiled the entire affectation. For added drama, she put a swooning hand across her forehead. “How did you know? I can’t live without you. Take me now.”

She bowed backward, across his still-outstretched arm, in a posed faint. For a moment, Dane Anderson stayed impossibly still.

Lulu popped upright, laughing. “Get over yourself, Anderson.”

“You think you’re so clever, don’t you? I’ll bet you think you’re special,

huh?” There was an edge to Dane’s voice. A tension Lulu couldn’t quite read. His eyes narrowed, the unnatural lighting catching his too-long lashes in their blue tint. His looks and his power would ruin him, if they hadn’t already.

He was a boy made to be conquered, maybe even saved. But not by Lulu. She was neither a knight nor a Nightingale. She was a girl made to be selfish. She would have her own adventures. “Don’t worry, I don’t think I’m special. But I’m not stupid, either. I know what you try.”

“Honey,” he said, “if I’d ever tried with you—”

Lulu placed the tips of her fingers across his pouting lips, staying their movement. So soft, and yet so pliant to such meanness. She removed her hand quickly. “Do yourself a favor. Don’t finish that.”

Lulu made a move to swing out from under his arm, but he leaned in close to whisper into her ear, blocking her face from view. “Oh, Lulu. Innocent little Lulu. I don’t need to finish it. I can tell. You’ve got the imagination to fill it in perfectly.” He touched her temples.

Lulu stood so still she thought her pulse paused along with her. “You’re a douche, Dane.” She pushed out from under him, but she needn’t have. He released her immediately, making Lulu wonder if he’d been holding on all that tightly to begin with.

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Emma stood close to the stage, like this was a garden party and she could reserve a nice seat for herself. Emma was an inherently endearing sort. She and Lulu had been friends since freshman year, but they’d known each other since they were eleven. It had taken Emma three years to be pulled into Lulu’s orbit. And even then it was only a mutual newspaper assignment where Emma had been the photographer. That they were an odd pair of friends made their bond inevitable, like a milkshake with french fries.

Emma tilted her head as Lulu approached. “Was Dane bothering you?”

Lulu snorted. “Man, you are such a shutterbug. You miss nothing, do you?”

Emma touched the camera around her neck as though to double-check she still had it. She had agreed to take photos for the article Lulu was now writing. “That’s not an answer.”

“Don’t worry about it,” said Lulu. “I can handle Anderson.”

Emma frowned. “Nobody should have to handle him.”

“True,” said Lulu. “But forget him. Because you, oh wondrous photographer and friend of mine, you staked out a fantastic spot.”

“Thanks!” Emma’s responding smile beamed with pride. Emma didn’t crave approval, but she thrived under its care.

“But you do know the stage is that way.” Lulu pointed behind them. She waited to see what Emma would do next.

“Obviously.” Emma shrugged with such a forced nonchalance that Lulu had to swallow her laugh in a cough.

“Whatcha been looking at?” Lulu batted her eyelashes and offered a charming grin.

“Nothing,” said Emma, far too quickly. She was hiding something.

Lulu looked around, trying to find the source of Emma’s interest. “Not the stage, that’s for sure.”

“No.” Emma squirmed slightly—clearly desperate not to be caught. “But why would I look at the stage when there’s nothing on it?”

Lulu scanned the crowd and stroked her chin with her thumb, like a pensive villain. “Hmmm, let’s see. I spy, with my little eye . . .”

“No! Don’t!” Emma yanked Lulu’s hand off her chin. The camera jostled.

Lulu couldn’t contain the laugh she’d trapped in the back of her throat any longer. “Please, let me have a little fun.”

“Is that all you care about?” A worried edge crept into Emma’s voice.

“What’s wrong with having fun?”

Emma paused, her mouth twisting to the side of her face. That was how Emma planned her carefully chosen words.

If that wasn’t a case in point, Lulu didn’t know what was. “See, you can’t think of anything, can you?”

“Please,” said Emma in her quiet, resonant way.

Lulu opened her mouth, but the next words were not her own.

“Lo. Lo Campo. Stop this instant. You are all of fifteen seconds away from dislocating my shoulder.” Audrey skidded to a halt beside Lo. She nearly tackled Lulu in the process.

Lo let go of Audrey. She held a drink in her hand, and her eyes flitted between Lulu and Emma, but Lo said nothing on the subject.

Audrey rubbed her shoulder, her jaw set into a hard line. “Much appreciated.”

Lo rolled her eyes. “Please. You’re such a baby.”

“You *are* stronger than you think,” said Emma, in a calming tone.

“True,” said Lo. “There’s Nina; I’m going to say hi.”

And Lo was off again, away from the stage. Lulu turned her head to follow Lo’s movements, and she discovered Emma’s direct line of vision. The plot thickened. Brian Connor stood beside a fresh-faced freshman girl, whose name Lulu couldn’t quite remember but who always wore her hair with a thick fringe. The one who’d fallen by their table that week, thanks to Lo’s chair tilting.

The only two things anyone needed to know about Brian Connor were that he liked fast cars and smoking weed. No wonder straitlaced Emma was embarrassed. Plus she knew Lulu had recently made out with him in a hall closet, and Emma was an entirely honorable sort. He was an unusual target for Emma’s lust, but maybe she liked boys who talked a big talk about

engines. It's not like Lulu had been able to pin down Emma's interests definitively before.

Then Lulu was granted the pleasure of spying Dane Anderson as he pulled that heavily fringed freshman away from Brian. Anderson employed his signature move, a casual low-slung arm around the waist. The poor girl had no idea what was about to hit on her.

"Why are you frowning?" asked Audrey, interrupting Lulu's thoughts.

"I'm not frowning." Lulu rearranged her face into a smile.

"Yes, you were. You were frowning. And looking that way. Y'all both were, actually." Audrey pointed her arm toward Dane in a manner so unsubtle, it was practically a wave.

Emma turned abruptly, her eyes wide.

Lulu cringed. She had come to expect a lack of discretion from her friend when alcohol was involved, but every once in a while, Audrey could still surprise her. "You maniac. You nearly took Emma's eye out with your arm."

Emma shook her head. "It's all right. I'm all right."

Lulu put her hand on her hip. "No, it's not. Audrey Louise, aren't you going to apologize?"

Audrey, however, had stopped in her spot, staring. She sighed a great sigh. "Scumbag Luke. He's here."

"No," said Emma at the same time Lulu said, "Where?"

"There." Audrey pointed, with no more diplomacy than before. But Lulu wasn't fazed in the slightest by the rudeness this time. Nor was Emma. They both stared openly.

Lulu turned to watch Lo, who had found Nina in the crowd. Nina wasn't by her boyfriend, and Lulu had a sense of why she had been crying in the bathroom hallway earlier. Every moment or two, Lo's eyes casually flickered over to where Luke stood. Lo was slowly herding her group toward him.

"Shit," said Lulu.



“Agreed,” said Emma.

There were only three things that anyone needed to know about Luke Westin. The first was that he had the kind of hair a girl would want to run her fingers through—soft and thick and perfect. The second was that he played shortstop for the public school down the road. And the third was that he was the kind of guy who confirmed every stereotype about Texas that Lulu had spent her whole life struggling against. For the first two, Lulu could understand how Lo might find him interesting. But for the last one, Lulu went over and grabbed Lo’s arm in a vise grip and pulled her aside.

“Lulu. What are you doing.” Lo had a calmness about her, like she was trying to stop Lulu from behaving stupidly, rather than the other way around.

“Come on,” said Lulu. “Don’t go over there.”

“Over where?” asked Lo.

“Don’t play dumb with me.” Lulu nodded toward Luke.

Lo leaned into Lulu’s space, speaking so only they two could hear. “I’m only gonna say this once. I don’t tell you whose mouth to stick your tongue in. So don’t tell me what to do with mine.”

“But he’s so—”

“I know.” There was a certainty in Lo’s eyes that Lulu couldn’t ignore, no matter how much she might have wanted to do so.

No matter how many times Lulu reminded her friend that Luke had a girlfriend. That Luke was the worst sort of boy. That he was Scumbag Luke. It never sank in. Or, worse, it did sink in and Lo simply didn’t care. Lo was drawn to the darkness like a bad after-school special.

“Doesn’t it bother you?” Lulu could have been referring to anything—the awful things that came out of Luke’s mouth, that he dated while dating, that he rarely acknowledged Lo in public unless he was drunk. Lo shrugged as her answer.

“I mean, you don’t have to prove anything,” said Lulu.

“Maybe I do have to. Nobody else is going to climb the social pecking order among the four of us. You don’t. Emma won’t. Audrey can’t,” said Lo. “Or, maybe I get my kicks knowing Luke doesn’t want to want me but I can still make him anyways. I get to watch his hate fight with his lust.”

Lulu didn’t like it, even if Lo could take care of herself. “I’m not sure which is worse: your cynicism or mine. I could never date someone only to make them want me. I’d rather be alone.”

Lulu laughed as Lo raised an eyebrow. “Which is why I make out with them all and wind up abandoned in upstairs closets. It’s a romantic life, but somebody’s got to live it.”

Lo raised her glass. “To the romantic life.” She downed the rest of her drink in a gulp and tossed the cup to the floor. A magnificent departure, if ever Lulu had seen one. She catalogued it in her memory as an excellent maneuver of both power and style, though Lulu would cut off all her own hair before she’d admit that to Lo.



Lulu loved to dance. While the beat of the band thrummed in the background, she could be free. And if she could only hear music in her head, she didn’t feel afraid of making a fool of herself, either. She wasn’t a particularly talented dancer. But neither was she in any way lacking. She loved the thoughtlessness of her body under the sway of a song. The feeling was sensual and ridiculous, frivolous and powerful, and she flourished in such soil.

Emma *would* stand off to the side, overly aware of her body and swaying lightly. Poor Emma. She’d start taking pictures soon to avoid any further obligation to the dance floor. What Audrey lacked in fluidity, she made up for in sheer effort. Lulu loved the energy behind Audrey’s stilted labors. Lo

was the true dancer. She ought to have been there in their circle to put them all to shame. But Lo wasn't with them right now. She was off with Luke. The other three girls were left to their own devices. Sweat stuck Lulu's shirt to her back and matted down bits of her hair. She lifted her elbows, trying to circulate air under her armpits, but to no avail. She pulled at her shirt, but that only further suctioned fabric to the sweat down her spine.

"Water?" Lulu's voice carried barely beyond a murmur, though she shouted. Audrey shook her head no. Emma, who was now taking photos, also declined. Alone, Lulu pushed her way through the undulating crowd. She approached the bar and received a skeptical appraisal by the bartender.

Lulu put her to rights quickly. "Water, please!"

The bartender nodded. Lulu bobbed her head and thrummed her fingers against the bar as she waited. Lulu looked over. She saw a lanky, boyish figure across the way. And while Lulu often appreciated a tall, lean body and a head of tousled hair, there was something else about this one in particular. Something familiar. Something, somehow *known*. She couldn't quite place why. Then the boy turned and met her gaze.

Hell and damnation.

The last time she had seen him, she had been screaming and drenched in pool water. It was James the Falsifier. The instinct to turn and run flooded through Lulu, but she wasn't a coward. She'd face him again. Even if she didn't want to. Besides, it wasn't like she had been honestly staring at him. Not *staring*, staring. Not that she was going to explain that to him. But he was moving rapidly toward her, and explanations were becoming unavoidable. Lulu looked at the bar, hoping her drink was ready. But the bartender was nowhere in sight. She'd been forgotten. She'd have to handle this all on her own.

"If it isn't Cinderella." James smiled as he reached her.

"Cinderella's a blonde. She also lost a shoe. I would never lose a shoe."

Lulu couldn't let him go unpunished. "And besides, Ariel was the one who saved a drowning fool."

James's teeth looked stuck in their too-bright smile. "I meant. I mean. You ran off. At midnight. It was a metaphor."

"It was eleven."

James's smile fell. He stared, with his big, brown eyes. Doe-like. And before she could regret it, or even think the better of it, Lulu said, "I'm writing an article."

"About youth culture?" He smiled again, like he'd told a funny joke. Like he was someone who didn't give up hope. James reminded Lulu of things best forgotten, of the cost of survival and the price of high living.

Lulu had paid the price by trading in her tongue. Lo had cut out her heart. Audrey, who had been born into this world, had no ability to see beyond its borders. Emma alone seemed untouched by any kind of deal with the devil. But Lulu didn't believe that to be true. Nobody could go without paying the price. The prize of being accepted into the fold of the one-day rich and powerful was too tempting, too all-encompassing. Emma's bargain must have been the worst of all to stay so neat and invisible.

"No. I'm reviewing the band."

The bartender caught Lulu's gaze then, perhaps sensing the tension radiating off her body. She nodded, like that was reassuring. Lulu sighed, though the noise was lost in the ambient sounds of the venue.

"How do you like the band?" James asked.

It was a taunt. Lulu had been taunted well enough by her older brothers to know one immediately. She didn't need to prove she knew the band's name. This was her scene, and not his. "I've always liked *the band*."

"Why'd you bother to come, then?" He tilted his head, and a bit of his hair sagged into his eye. He pushed the unruly lock back. "I mean, if you'll like the show regardless, why review it?"

With that, Lulu found her venom. “Because I’m good at my job. That’s why they gave me the assignment. I’m not sure where you got the idea I’m rainbows and sunshine but I’m not some magical fucking princess who can’t form a serious opinion just because I’m having a good time. I know the difference between fun and good.”

The air between them shifted. The lingering tension that had been there was now sharper, a live wire. The fin in the water belonged to a circling shark.

“What’s your favorite band?” he asked, crossing his arms over his chest.

Lulu barked a laugh. “Of course you’d ask that.”

James narrowed his eyes. Good. Then she wouldn’t be distracted by them and their naturally helpless expression. Though they crinkled rather adorably in their new position.

“Please, then, Oh Magnificent Queen of the Universe, tell me what else I should have asked?”

Lulu nodded, like she took his epithet at face value. “You could ask what I’m listening to right now. I mean, it’s still obviously a line to be judgmental, but at least it doesn’t require the same kind of ponderous pretension of picking a favorite.”

Lulu watched, waiting. She enjoyed testing people’s mettle. It gave her a lay of the land. Not that she wanted to survey James’s land. At all. Not even a little bit. James’s face fell into that trapped expression she’d seen however many nights ago by the pool, when he couldn’t unstick the lawn chair.

“Are you always this aggressive?”

“Is asshole your default setting?”

“What? No,” James said, his voice considerably more quiet.

Lulu read his lips more than she heard the words. “No? Because, honestly, it seems that way.”

He opened his mouth. Lulu raised her eyebrows, challenging. She

expected a frown. Instead, he smiled and Lulu mistrusted herself, watching his mouth move like that.

“You’re right.” And with a light shrug, he made his exit. “See you around. Maybe.”

Lulu let out a high-pitched grunt followed by a stomp, which only served to alarm the bartender. The bartender, finally having gotten all the other drink orders together, tossed Lulu a bottle of water. Lulu paid and stalked away, back to her friends in the crowd. How dare James take the last word. How dare he. Lulu joined her friends in the crowd again, but she could not muster her earlier enthusiasm. The poor performing bands would suffer the price in her review.

And when Lulu got home, she had more good news delivered to her.

“We’re going to the Alkati house this weekend, habibti,” said Ahmed, still sitting in his same chair, but now reading a book instead of a newspaper.

“Why?” asked Lulu.

Ahmed looked up. “Ramadan is Sunday.”

Lulu closed her eyes. “Wonderful.” She trudged upstairs, desirous of the oblivion of sleep.