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ONLY IF YOU'RE LUCKY

A Novel

STACY
WILLINGHAM

Author of the *New York Times* bestseller *A FLICKER IN THE DARK*

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IF YOU'RE LUCKY

A NOVEL

STACY WILLINGHAM



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For my mom, my hero

If I ever read Satan's signature upon a face, it is on that of your new friend.

—ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON

PROLOGUE

One day we were strangers and the next we were friends. That's usually how it works with girls.

How effortlessly we glide from cold shoulders in public to applying each other's lipstick in sweaty bar bathrooms, fingertips touching in a swarm of warm bodies. From spreading hot-breathed rumors behind cupped hands to tossing compliments across the room like darts, aiming for a bull's-eye, but really just hoping for something to stick. I remember thinking she chose me, specifically, for some reason I'd never understand. Like she spotted me from across the hall, eyes on the carpet and shoulders hunched high as I tried to hide my underwear at the bottom of the laundry basket—flowers and stars and little pink pinstripes, embarrassingly high school—and decided: I was it, it was me. Her best friend.

And from that moment on, I was.

“Spin it,” Lucy says, and I feel myself blink. My eyelids are heavy, the room twirling gently like our old dorm washing machines, slow and clunky and always broken. There's a permanent cloud of smoke in the house—cigarette, candle, incense, weed—caked into the blankets, the couch cushions. Like if you slapped them, they'd cough.

I can still picture all my mom's country clubbers tucking my hair behind my ear, fingers lingering against my cheek like I was their own personal porcelain doll. Thinking me delicate, breakable, as I loaded boxes into the trunk while they gushed about their own time at school with distant smiles and tears in their eyes.

How sure they were that I would finally find *my people, my girls*.

“*Just you wait,*” they had said, strings of pearls wound tight around their necks like designer nooses, my own mother watching curiously from the lawn. “*College is different. They’ll be your friends for life.*”

That’s what I had been hoping for. Different. But *friends for life* is a myth, a fable. A feel-good fairy tale we tell ourselves to avoid having to think too hard about facing the world alone. I had believed it once. I had held it tight against my chest like some kind of feral animal I’d claimed as my own before it scratched my neck and wriggled itself free, leaving me battered and bloodied and alone.

“Margot.”

I look up to find Lucy staring straight at me, her pupils wide and round like cigarette butts. I swear there’s smoke coming from her eyes, curling into nothing.

“*Spin.*”

I blink again like I just woke up from a dream and found myself here: thighs stuck to the hardwood, back digging into the corner of the coffee table. Everything feels dreamlike, hazy, faded like the milky bottom of the stale water glass sitting neglected on my nightstand. We’re in a circle—Lucy, Sloane, and I—our legs pretzeled on the floor with the knife Lucy yanked from the kitchen block between us. Nicole is on the couch, detached as usual, and I reach for the knife, finally flicking it with my fingers. Watching as the shiny tip rotates in a circle like we’re a strange kind of clock: three, six, nine, twelve.

We all hold our breath as it slows to a stop, the point aimed directly at Lucy.

I see Sloane perk up out of the corner of my eye, her back lengthening like a meerkat suddenly aware of some distant danger. Even Nicole darts a look in our direction, skinny frame slumped over a pillow. Hugging it hard with toothpick arms.

“Truth or dare,” I say, my voice raspy and raw. My lips are pulsing, tingling, and I take another swig from the Svedka bottle between us because I need something to coat my throat.

Lucy smiles, like the question is rhetorical. Like I shouldn’t have even bothered to ask. Then she leans over and grabs the knife, her fingers curling

around the handle, one by one, as naturally as grabbing the base of a curling iron, a bottle of beer. The same way her hand grips my wrist when she finds me in a crowded room, pulling me away and into the night.

They were right, those women. College friends are different. We would do anything for each other.

Anything.

CHAPTER 1

We're seated next to each other, shoulders touching, side by side like a prison lineup.

I can feel Nicole's hip bone jutting into my side; Sloane can't stop picking at her cuticles, sprinkling dead skin across the floor like salt. We're in our pajamas, cheeks still smeared with last night's mascara, and Nicole looks about five years younger with her baby-faced skin and braided pigtails, barely a teenager. Sloane's dark hair is knotted up in a scrunchie, a single curl jutting out like a corkscrew, and I don't even know what I'm wearing. Some T-shirt I probably picked up off someone else's floor and claimed as my own, armpit stains and everything.

"Girls."

I look up at the detective in front of us, hands on his hips. I don't like the way he says that—*Girls*—like we're children being scolded. Some words should be ours to own, at-times-vicious yet tender terms of endearment we toss around like glitter that suddenly taste sour in the mouths of men.

Girls is one of them.

"When was the last time you saw your roommate, Lucy Sharpe?"

I glance to my left, my right. Nicole is staring at the table; Sloane's staring at her nails. We're all thinking about that night, I'm sure. Just last week but also a lifetime ago. We're all thinking about sitting on the floor, the knife spinning in circles between us, metal tip catching the lamplight and casting shapes across the wall. Lucy's wild eyes as she reached out and grabbed it and that Cheshire cat grin curling up into her cheeks, baring her

fangs. The way she raised the blade higher and the glimpse I had caught of myself in the metal.

I remember thinking that I looked different in that moment. Distorted. Rabid and wild and alive.

“Someone’s gonna have to say something eventually.”

I look at the detective again, forehead like an old tire, cracked and slick. His face looks red and swollen like someone is squeezing him from the bottom, waiting for him to pop. I take in his hands next, finger skin bulging around his wedding ring like a sausage link. They’re still on his hips with his legs spread wide like he’s trying to copy some old Western gunslinger or a stance he saw on an episode of *Cops*.

“It’s been three days, I think.”

He looks at me, the first to speak up. “You think?”

I nod. “Yeah. I think.”

Sloane and Nicole keep staring at the floor, their silence loud enough to fill the room, curling and twisting and seeping into the corners like the lingering smoke I can still smell in my hair.

“Nobody is getting into trouble, girls, but she hasn’t been accounted for since Friday. She didn’t show up to work all weekend. Have you talked to anyone in her classes?”

“Lucy doesn’t go to class,” Sloane says, and Nicole grunts, stifling a laugh.

“So you aren’t at all concerned?” he asks, shifting his weight from one leg to the other. “Your roommate is missing and you aren’t worried about where she might be?”

“Detective”—Sloane stops, making a point to stare at the nameplate pinned to his chest—“Frank, if you knew Lucy at all, you’d know this isn’t unusual.”

“Meaning?” he asks.

“*Meaning*,” she sighs, “she probably decided to go out of town with some guy for the weekend, I don’t know. If you find her, tell her the rent’s due and we’re not covering for her again.”

I shoot Sloane a look, hypnotized at the chill in her tone: menthol cool and sharp as an ice pick, almost like he’s boring her.

Detective Frank shifts again, switching gears, and I think I see him flush a bit more, heat rising into those chipmunk cheeks like he's embarrassed or flustered or a little bit of both.

"So, three days ago," he says to me next. "Where were you?"

"We stayed in that night, just hung out in the living room."

"All of you?"

We nod.

"What were you doing?"

"Girl things." I smile.

"How was Lucy acting?" he asks, not taking the bait. "Any different?"

"No," I lie, the first of many. I remember the depth of her pupils, oversized like two black holes, swallowing everything. The way she kept sucking on that Tootsie Pop, an orb of red, until it looked like her teeth were bleeding. "Just Lucy."

We're all quiet and I'm starting to feel squirmy in my seat. My eyes dart to the clock—it's almost eleven—and I think about opening my mouth, making up another lie about running late to class, when Detective Frank takes a step forward and rests his hands against the table, leveling his eyes with ours.

I hear the wood creak, straining under his weight. Almost like he's hurting it.

"Did Lucy tell you girls we brought her in for questioning?"

Nicole perks up, finally. "Questioning for what?" she asks, even though, of course, we know. We know so much more than this man thinks we do and I see his lips twitch at this little victory—at thinking he's finally said something important enough to make us care—as he drums his fingers against the table, preparing his quick draw.

"For the murder of Levi Butler."