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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.”

CHAPTER 2

BEFORE

She was everything and I was nothing. That's always what I thought, anyway.

We spent our entire freshman year just a few doors down from each other. We were in the all-girls dorm, the unlucky few who got placed in the only same-sex building on campus: Hines Hall. It sat at the top of the single hill downtown, trapping us inside like a bunch of Rapunzels, untouchable, though it only made us more desirable. Like things to be won. I still think about move-in day: pulling my pile of boxes on a metal trolley, a neon 9 taped to the back and the hot flash of embarrassment every time a wheel squeaked too loud. Watching the boys loll past with their hands punched into their pockets, craning their necks, already scheming on how to get inside.

Everybody whined about it at first, skin slick with sweat and throwing scowls in every direction as we lugged comforters and futons up that long, winding stairwell, blaming each other for our own anatomy.

I remember that first night so vividly: the twenty-four girls of hall 9B being called into the common room. We stood there in oversized T-shirts and gym shorts so short we might as well be bottomless, arms like seat belts wound tight around our waists. Our RA was a junior named Janice, who recited the rules in a cursory clip: no drinking, no boys. Silence after midnight. And we just stood there quietly, nodding, mentally chewing over the fact that we had finally escaped to college just to be met with the same old restrictions, with a glorified babysitter to boot. Then she walked out and left the rest of us to *get to know one another*, everyone simply staring in a timid unease until Lucy seemed to appear out of nowhere, stepping forward

from the corner and unzipping her bag.

We watched in silence as she pulled out a case of beer before plopping it onto the carpet, bottles jangling.

“Now that *that’s* over,” she had said, as if Janice had been nothing more than her own opening act. “Everyone, grab one.”

I can still hear the uncomfortable murmur rippling across the room; the nervous laughs and darting eyes. Then, as if showing us how, Lucy leaned forward and grabbed the first bottle, twisting off the cap and taking a sip.

“To us,” she had said, tipping the lip in our direction. “Nine floors of whores.”

After that, I always knew she was there—it was impossible to miss her, and that was probably the point. I’d catch a glimpse of her raven-black curls as she walked past my open door or pushed her way into the bathroom, neon-green shower caddy hooked into the crook of her arm. She used to bring canned wine coolers into the communal showers, sickly sweet smells like strawberry mango and peach fizz rising with the steam and fogging up the mirror; the *crunch* of the empties before her hand popped out of the curtain and dropped them onto the tile like crumpled candy wrappers. She was the only one who never covered up before stepping back out. While the rest of us swathed ourselves in towel wraps or monogrammed bathrobes, self-consciously gripping the gap before ripping back the curtain and flip-flopping past the stalls in our shower shoes, she would just step out naked, brazen and beautiful, like she owned the place.

And in a lot of ways, she did.

“I don’t know what they see in her.”

I glance up at my roommate now, trying to blink away the memory like a speck of dirt stuck in my eye. Lucy’s presence is like the first blast of air from an AC unit: noisy, chilling. The kind of thing that demands attention and makes your skin prickle. Her eyes are so blue they’re almost white, glacial water iced over until it turned cold and hard, and when she caught me staring at her once through a hand-swiped section of the fogged-up mirror, it made me physically shiver, the feeling of her gaze traveling down my spine like an ice cube dropped down the back of my shirt.

“Hmm?” I ask at last.

“Don’t act like you weren’t staring.”

Maggie and I are lying on the grass outside Hines, psychology textbooks splayed out in front of us and a torn-open bag of Cheetos wedged in the middle. She flips from her stomach to her back, propping herself up on two kickstand elbows.

“Everyone’s staring.”

She’s right: everyone is staring. I can see their eyes darting in Lucy’s direction from behind their sunglasses, their notebooks. Stealing a glance as she pushes her bikini top an inch to the right, head flopped back as she stares into the sun. She acts like she doesn’t even notice; like she’s on her own private beach somewhere, not sunning herself in the middle of campus. A busy intersection of horny teenagers who watch her rub lotion on her skin and immediately start to salivate like Pavlov’s dogs.

“She’s crazy.”

I peel my eyes from Lucy and look back at Maggie, jealousy radiating from her skin like a bad smell. “Why do you say that?”

“Because she *is*,” she says. “I heard she blinded her boyfriend in high school.”

“What? No way.”

“I’m serious. They were arguing about something, fighting at a party, and she reached out and scratched him across the face,” she says, clawing at the air. “Like a fucking cat.”

“I don’t believe that,” I say, eyeing her closely. Maggie isn’t usually like this: gossipy, mean. She’s one of the nicest people I know, actually. Irritatingly so. But at the same time, Lucy seems to bring out this side of people. It’s like her existence alone is somehow threatening to the rest of us—we know we can’t compete, so instead, we recoil, snarling at her from the corner to make ourselves feel safe.

“Swear to God, it’s true,” Maggie says, holding her hands up, defensive. “Her nail was kind of jagged or something and it ended up puncturing his cornea.”

“Where did you hear that?”

“Rachel down the hall had a friend visit a few months ago. She said her boyfriend knows a guy who saw it happen.”

I cock my eyebrow.

“I’m just relaying what I heard.”

I turn back toward Lucy, noticing the way her fingers itch absentmindedly against her chest; the way her long, skinny nails leave little white streaks in the angry red of her sunburn. It isn’t the first rumor I’ve heard about her, each one more outlandish than the last. Some other girl on our hall swears she’s a foreign exchange student, undercover royalty shipped over from somewhere rich and exotic, although I’ve detected zero trace of an accent any time I’ve heard her speak. Another is convinced she’s sleeping with her professors—all of them, females included—the only logical explanation for how she seems to get by without studying.

“Anyway,” Maggie says, rolling back over and grabbing a Cheeto before popping it in her mouth. “I think I found us an apartment for next year. Two bed, two bath. It’s on the second floor, thank God. No more elevators.”

I hear myself mumble some distant *mhms*, but I’m not listening. Not really. Two other girls have joined Lucy now—a blonde with braids and a dark-skinned girl with calves like baseballs that bulge beneath the skin. They live on 9B, too. Nicole Clausen and Sloane Peters. They’re almost always with Lucy, the three of them swigging from water bottles everybody knows aren’t filled with water before stumbling back hours later, eyes glassy and lipstick smeared. The first time I saw them, there was something about the way they walked that stuck with me: side by side, Lucy in the middle, arms hooked together like a chain-link fence. Like they couldn’t break apart even if they wanted to.

“Did you hear me?”

I whip back around at the sound of her voice to find Maggie looking at me, eyebrows raised.

“Sorry, what?”

“I said it’s close to the library so we won’t have to take the bus.”

“Oh, yeah. That’s great.” I smile, then turn back toward the girls. “Thanks for doing that.”

I watch as Sloane lays a towel on the grass and Nicole starts to slather sunscreen on her arms, though Lucy hasn’t even looked at them. Her eyes are still hidden behind her sunglasses as she stares up at the sky and the truth is, I

do know what everyone sees in her. I've seen it myself all year. It's the way her eyes seem to pierce you so deep, leaving behind microscopic little puncture wounds like a snake or spider bite. Something you can still feel on your skin long after she's left. It's the easy confidence she exudes, as natural as breathing, and the way she took control of that first night so effortlessly, just a handful of words making twenty-four strangers not only break the rules but simultaneously shatter some widely held belief about ourselves.

Some latent voice telling us to be embarrassed about our situation—*nine floors of whores*—when we should have been emboldened.

“All right, I'm done,” Maggie says suddenly, slapping her textbook shut with too much force. I crane my neck as she stands up, noticing the thin lines of sweat that have soaked their way through her tank top. Everyone is cramming for finals, meaning it's only May, but it's already hotter in Rutledge than it'll ever be in most of the country by August. We're used to it, though, students lugging backpacks through hundred-degree heat before stripping off their clothes and heading to the beach, drowning their stress in salt water and sweat.

“Do you want to grab dinner or something?” she adds, offering me one last chance at conversation I should probably take. Instead, I give her an apologetic smile, already feeling my neck threatening to turn back in Lucy's direction like a quivering magnet.

“I'm going to stay a little longer,” I say. “Sorry.”

I watch as Maggie shrugs and walks off, a little string of pollen dangling from her thigh, but by the time my gaze makes it back to the girls, I'm not staring at the side of Lucy's face anymore, her head tilted back with her face angled to the sun—instead, I'm staring straight into the sharp blue of her eyes as she looks into my own, sunglasses perched on the tip of her nose.

I feel a sudden jolt in my body, like the shock of wet fingers grazing the outside of an outlet. Then, before I can even realize what's happening, she waves.

CHAPTER 3

My room is empty by the time I make it back to the dorm. I was hoping to catch Maggie, maybe. Join her for dinner like she had asked. She's probably sitting in the dining hall by now, pretending to study or read something riveting on her phone to mask the embarrassment of eating alone. For a second, I consider walking down there, scooting in beside her. I can even picture her looking up at me, relief flooding her features as she realizes she won't have to pretend anymore. The silent apology we would exchange before launching into some pointless small talk about our summer plans.

Instead, I grab a carton of Easy Mac and rip off the lid, dumping a splash of water inside before popping it in the microwave.

It's not that I don't *like* Maggie. I like her fine. She's nice enough; the perfect roommate even, kind and considerate. Always letting me bum one of her Diet Cokes out of the mini fridge and never letting her dirty clothes pile up. We hang out together almost every night, sitting silently on the futon with some mid-tier movie drowning out the shrieks from the other girls down the hall; the laughs and the screams we pretend not to notice, instead munching on popcorn and convincing ourselves we chose this instead. During those first few weeks of freshman year, I remember watching the other girls scramble around, mad and frantic like headless chickens, everyone desperate to make their friends and find their place. Maggie and I never really found ours, so instead we just made our own and lived there quietly, settling into a friendship that was born out of nearness and necessity and sustained by a lack of effort on both of our parts to find anything better.

And the worst part is: she knows it, too.

I still remember meeting her, a blind-match pairing the college cobbled

together a month before move-in. It could have been awful; I had no idea what to expect. I spent the entire drive wondering what kind of person would need to rely on a campus questionnaire to find a single friend—a person like me, I supposed—but when I showed up, her overeagerness was the only flaw I could find. I remember her being antsy, fidgeting with her fingernails as she greeted me with an obviously rehearsed introduction the second I stepped inside. Her side of the room had already been decorated and I noticed that she had purchased two of everything: matching floral throw pillows for my bed and hers; two picture frames for each of our desks. I could tell she had dreams of us becoming instant best friends, filling those frames with photographs of us ... but the second I saw her there, all eager and excited like the runt of the litter just dying to be picked, I didn't see visions of us sharing clothes or pulling all-nighters or giggling uncontrollably after sneaking a bottle of wine into the dorm and passing it back and forth, lip gloss on the rim sticky and smeared.

Instead, all I saw was Eliza.

Eliza, my best friend since kindergarten who asked me to sleep over the first day we met. Eliza, who dipped her finger in sunscreen and drew broken hearts on our hips so when we lay out in the sun and our skin turned tan, we could push our stomachs together and make them whole. Eliza, who pierced my ears in her closet and taught me how to dive; who blasted oldies in her parents' convertible with the top dropped down the day she got her license, pushing eighty on abandoned back roads and letting her hair tangle in the wind.

Eliza, my would-be roommate who died three weeks into the summer after our senior year.

So, yeah, that's the problem: Maggie reminds me of everything I should have had. Eliza and me living together the way we had talked about for all those years, curled up in a blanket on her parents' dock, night after night, imagining us together in some other life. Decorating our dorm together just the way we wanted it, filling the walls with an entire decade of memories we already had and leaving room for the ones that would follow. I had applied to Rutledge *because* of her: my parents wanted me at Duke, somewhere prestigious and important, but Eliza convinced me that this was the place for