

The background of the book cover is a textured, painterly style with shades of teal and blue. A central figure, a woman's face, is partially visible, rendered in a high-contrast red and black color scheme. The title "I'll Follow You" is overlaid on this image.

I'll Follow *a novel* You

Charlene Wang

PRAISE FOR *I'LL FOLLOW YOU*

“Taut, fast-paced, *I'll Follow You* is a cunning novel about virality and friendships that derail. A triumphant addition to the genre of books I love and call ‘women at the edge,’ Charlene Wang’s debut is one to savor.”

—Ingrid Rojas Contreras, author of Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award finalist *The Man Who Could Move Clouds*

“*I'll Follow You* is a dark and twisty story of female friendship, belonging, and betrayal. Charlene Wang deftly explores the complicated power dynamics between women, the way we see ourselves and each other. This haunting and addictive page-turner will keep you guessing until the very end!”

—Jennifer Close, bestselling author of *Girls in White Dresses*

“A deeply satisfying campus novel about the allure of social media, the power of reclaiming your narrative, and what happens when you go poking around in places you don’t belong. In *Faith and Kayla*, Charlene Wang has written one of the most toxic female friendships in recent memory.”

—Daisy Alpert Florin, author of *My Last Innocent Year*

“Like the friendships we form in the crucible of young womanhood, *I'll Follow You* is unpredictable, layered, all-consuming. Charlene Wang’s debut boasts a fresh, surprising plot, razor-sharp social commentary, and a singular narrative voice laced with equal parts beauty and glittering dark humor. A bracing and completely intoxicating read.”

—Caitlin Mullen, Edgar Award–winning author of *Please See Us*

**I'LL
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MINDY'S BOOK STUDIO

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Otherwise, any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

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38, avenue John F. Kennedy, L-1855 Luxembourg
amazonpublishing-gpsr@amazon.com

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First edition



To Lao Ye, who taught me the power of stories

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A NOTE FROM MINDY KALING

If you grew up on *Pretty Little Liars*, binge-watched *Euphoria*, or have a soft spot for messy female friendships and unchecked entitlement (to read about, not live through!), then *I'll Follow You* will be your next obsession.

After best friends Faith and Kayla go viral, they catapult out of their trailer park and into the glitzy world of Instagram fame—Kayla as the face and Faith as the brains behind the camera. For a while, it's all glossy filters and brand deals, until Faith ditches Kayla for the elite halls of Harkness College. Naturally, Kayla follows with a ring light and a vendetta. At Harkness, the girls dive into a world of clout chasing, secret societies, and social media warfare. And as they scramble up the social (and social media) ladder, their ride-or-die friendship starts to sour. Set against dorm rooms, DMs, and sorority parties, *I'll Follow You* is an addictive thriller that kept me guessing who to trust . . . if anyone.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'MK' or a stylized version of the author's name.

Part I

Chapter 1

Kayla and I always said we'd get out of Gator Park together. It was the promise we made to each other, back when we thought promises meant something. Now, as an adult, when someone tells you—*I promise I'll call you back!* Or *Promise we'll go someday!*—you just roll your eyes. Promises, after all, are just stories—stories of how we see ourselves, stories of how we *think* the future should unfold. And in the story Kayla told over and over again, it was always us together.

LA after graduation. Roommates in a run-down apartment in a good neighborhood, where most of our rent went toward having a good sushi spot within walking distance. Sometimes the details changed—New York instead of LA, bagels instead of sushi—but our roles stayed the same.

Kayla was the architect of our futures, the getaway driver. I just pumped the gas and filled the tires.

For so long, I stuck to my plot beats as the sidekick. Only once, as a joke, did I ever bring up what to Kayla was the ultimate betrayal: Leaving Gator Park without her. Leaving *her* behind.

I can still see her now: The pure gleam of fury in her eyes. The rubber band snap of her Bubblicious gum. *Over my dead body*, she swore. *Over my dead body you beat me out of here first.*

Now, after all these years, after everything that has happened, Kayla's words haunt me. Last night, at a party in a city thousands of miles away from Gator Park—a city Kayla would never live to see—her words taunted me in the mirror when I caught my reflection. My eyebrows shooting up in surprise that it was *me* there with all these checkmarked names instead of her. That in the end, I did what I did.

Over my dead body. In that chillingly astute way of hers, Kayla had been right.



The first time I met Kayla, I was twelve. There I was in the back office of Gator Park's property management office, counting the rent that the lady in lot 57 had paid in ones and fives, listening to my uncle, Randy, explain on the phone that *no, we weren't the one located in Florida, and no, there weren't any actual alligators*, when in walked the new girl who'd driven from Biloxi last night with her mother. Randy had stayed up late to check in Gator Park's newest long-term residents, who carried with them a whiff of seedy glamour. Biloxi was only six hours away on the Gulf Coast, but it might as well have been the Caribbean to me back then.

"We need two sets of keys made," the girl announced in a queenly tone. This made me both hate her and like her in equal measure.

"Right behind you." I nodded toward the corner of the office, where a key-copying machine was maintained as a courtesy for the residents. It flashed *\$10 for 1 KEY, 2 for \$15!* across the screen. Then I returned to counting while keeping the corner of my eye on the new girl, who'd sauntered over to the machine and begun jabbing at the buttons on the screen.

She wore denim cutoffs and a blue-paisley bandanna that she'd repurposed as a halter top. It showed off her tan lines—something that struck me as impossibly adult.

At the time, it should be said, I was going through a massive upheaval in the friendship department. Eunice Lee, whose father ran the Chinese grocery in town, had been my best friend since kindergarten, but I'd gotten restless. All we did was do our homework together, sometimes sneaking episodes of *Gossip Girl* on her mother's iPad. But I didn't want to watch dangerous games of social deception; I wanted to *live* them. When I tried to explain it to Eunice, she just gave me a funny look; it was the same look she gave me for months after my mother died. Things got more and more strained, precipitating The Incident at Eunice's twelfth birthday party, i.e.,

her bursting into tears and telling me not to come over anymore. We hadn't talked since.

The girl gave one last yank, a long curtain of red hair falling in front of her face.

Suddenly, out of nowhere, I called out: "What's Biloxi like?"

Kayla looked up coolly. "The beach sucks. But the casinos are pretty cool. Brenda was a cocktail waitress at the Beau Rivage, so they always let me in."

Now I was double-impressed, having worked out that Kayla called her mother by her first name. "You have to put money in," I told her, flustered by the silence that followed. "It doesn't take cards."

Kayla's face flickered. "Do I look like I have a card? Do *you* have a card?"

A nervous giggle escaped my lips. "No."

Kayla glanced at the cash I was counting. Then, as if we both just *knew* before the other had said anything, we looked back at Randy, who was still on the phone.

"What if you gave me a five?" she asked, her voice low and amused.

I stared at her. "This isn't mine," I said.

She laughed, as if that wasn't the point at all. "C'mon," she said, and there was that dangerous coaxing tone I'd come to know so well over the years. "You've never once thought about it?"



I ended up slipping her a twenty that day. She got her two keys made, and with the leftover cash we bought two Cokes and a packet of Sour Straws and ate them while sitting on the curb outside the Circle K across the highway, our tongues turning cherry red as we drew the judgmental stares of the Baptist ladies on their way to church. It was easy to laugh it off with my new friend, this dazzling girl. But as soon as I got home, I went into my piggy

bank, where I'd kept all the money I'd saved up helping Randy out, and counted out twenty dollars. That night I put it back.

I didn't care that it fell to me to clean up after Kayla. Twenty dollars seemed a low price for what Kayla was offering me: danger, excitement, that electric charge of *possibility* beyond the dusty edges of our trailer park. But over time, the messes I'd be stuck cleaning up would get bigger and bigger. Breaking open my piggy bank wouldn't be enough. It would take all my nerve and cunning and wits to be Kayla's accomplice, to help her get away with whatever she set her sights on.

And the summer we turned fourteen, it would nearly take my life.

That summer, Kayla had gotten it into her head to go to the old well. It was the day after our freshman year had wrapped up, and the week before, a parkour craze had swept the school—blame boredom, the end of statewide tests, the heat of June like curdled milk. It started in homeroom with Doug McCombs, who got up in the middle of the darkened room while *Citizen Kane* was playing, and with the screech of his chair, yelled "*Parkour!*" Then he sprinted with a leap onto Mrs. Robert's desk and clipped the RBG bobblehead she kept on the corner. According to some kids, it arced in the air before falling to the ground, the head popping off and peering up with a macabre smile. People later said it was some kind of political statement. Kayla said Doug just wanted attention, and, as it turned out, she was right: His cousin, from a few towns over, had gotten thirteen thousand views on his YouTube video parkouring in the aisles of a Piggly Wiggly.

The greatest thing to come out of Paradise, Mississippi, a Delta town of three stoplights surrounding a courthouse square, had been a backup NFL quarterback. This teensy sliver of internet notoriety was, therefore, deeply aspirational. Copycats abounded: kids running up walls in the hallway, their friends sniggering and recording on their phones; kids leaping over cafeteria tables and rolling off trash cans. Four of our classmates ended up at the nurse's with broken arms and sprained ankles.

Poor Principal Walker's voice crackled with exasperation over the intercom: *I can't believe I need to spell this out for y'all, but when the rules*

are “no running in the hallway” this also means no running on the walls, no jumping, no leaping, nothing. Then, when he thought the intercom was turned off, we heard him mutter: “Assholes.”

Kayla’s idea was subversive. All the parkour videos on YouTube were almost mind-numbingly straightforward: “*Parkour to KFC*,” “*Parkour NYC Rooftop POV*,” “*INSANE PARKOUR ESCAPE!*” Our video, Kayla decided, would open with her parkouring through the woods, but when she got to the old well, she’d yell “Parkour!” and then make a spectacular leap over the edge—only to disappear. For a few minutes after, the video would keep rolling.

That was it. A dark, edgy joke about the stupidity of parkour. *It probably helps*, I remembered thinking, *that Kayla is really hot*.

“Wait,” I said, watching her Google on my laptop, somewhat ominously: *How much weight can two carabiners support?*

The consensus on the internet was that a carabiner can hold the weight of a car, or a very small, calm rhino.

“Ha!” Kayla said, snapping the laptop shut.

“But how’re you going to get *out* of the well?” I persisted. “And how deep is it?” At the precipice of our budding YouTube fame, this seemed like a set of important questions.

“I’ll tie myself to some rope, and you’ll pull me up afterward,” Kayla said, unconcerned. “We’ll edit the rope out later.”

“I’ll *pull you up*? Kayla, this is a terrible idea—”

“Chill.” Kayla rolled her eyes. “I’ve got a plan. We’ll just use, like, a pulley.”



The old stone well was deep in the woods, off an unpaved road marked with no trespassing signs. There were wells all over the county, once famous for their red water, which was touted to have had medicinal properties. Before

she'd gotten sick, my mother told me about them: the flocks of people who drove from all parts of the US, the battered sign outside Paradise's limits that read **PARADISE—HOME OF THE FAMOUS RED WELL!** before Hurricane Camille blew it down. Arms laden with supplies, Kayla and I walked across Gator Park to the head of the overgrown trail into the woods. Coils of long sturdy rope circled Kayla's torso, and in my backpack were three red carabiners we'd taken from Randy's toolbox.

On a Saturday in June, the trailer park was steamy with grilling fumes and shimmering in the heat of the midday sun. Outside double-wides painted pretty colors like robin's-egg blue or baby pink or purple, our neighbors grilled hot dogs on stovetops and played cards over a cooler of beers. One of them waved at us, shouting, "What're you twins up to?" No matter how many times I heard this joke, I still bristled. The punch line that went unsaid: We were inseparable, but, physically, we were as far apart as humanly possible. Kayla was a couple of notches above what passed as pretty in Paradise; when people called her *stunning*, they meant it, and not just because she had that coveted, heroine-in-a-romance-novel combination of red hair and green eyes. She was tall and thin too. Whereas I was chubby with limp dark hair that I could never decide how to part.

We ran across the two-lane highway to the other side of Gator Park, where the poorest, most run-down trailers were set back in the woods, hot wires running between any two double-wides and eviction notices fluttering in the breeze on rusted screen doors. Kayla took the long way, cutting a left at the Winnebago on concrete blocks, away from the trailer at the end of the lane where she lived with Brenda and her stepfather. She never liked going by there, and I didn't blame her.

Up on the road ahead, stray dogs lifted their heads, tongues hanging out in the heat. No matter how many times Randy chased them off, the strays always came back. They were stuck here, just like us. Pitiful creatures: ribs sticking out, eyes wild and milky and haunted. They howled all night, fought viciously for the most meager of scraps. The only person who fed them was Kayla, and as we walked, she tossed fistfuls of kibble from her

pocket that she had shoplifted from the Dollar General. “When I get out of here, I’m going to adopt all of you,” she cooed as they got riled up, jumping and snapping at her outstretched fingers.

Their barks fell away once we were in the woods. As we walked down the overgrown trail that led to a clearing, Kayla’s prognostication kicked into high gear: We’d go viral overnight, become influencers, and move to LA. I nodded in the right places and stepped between the twisted vines, the tree roots bulging like veins, feeling my anxiety build. We’d watched only one YouTube video about how to make a pulley. It seemed to me that we should’ve watched at least three.

The opening of the well was slick with blackish-green algae and stank of sulfur. “We’re gonna get famous!” Kayla yelled into its black depths. The gaping black hole loomed back at us, and I imagined Kayla’s ponytail, flashing bright like the underbelly of a minnow before disappearing into its depths. Suddenly I was frightened; I was frightened like a child was frightened—of shadows under beds, of old abandoned houses, of cracks in the sidewalk. Kayla, meanwhile, was tying the rope to the beam running across the well under the thatched roof.

My stomach was knotted as I took the carabiners from my backpack and set to work securing them to the rope on the beam, then clipping the last one through the loop in Kayla’s jean shorts. Kayla was as flushed and excited as I was nervous. “Keep the camera still,” she commanded. “Nothing’s worse than a shaky video. Make sure you pan out when I’m running up to the well.”

I pulled on the rope, testing the slack. “Pan out,” I repeated. “Got it.”

“Watch your shadow.”

“Okay.”

Kayla fidgeted with a strand of hair. “Up or down, you think?”

I took a step back and looked at Kayla. There was a new intensity about her: Her eyes had a clear, feverish tint, and I half expected to see the blood thrumming through the pale-green veins on her temples. “You’re actually serious about this.”