

Fen

Two summers ago

I was in a daze. That's the only explanation I have for why I thought Eddie and I could sneak inside the villa without anyone noticing. It was nearly one in the morning—past house curfew. Of *course* Mama was waiting in her nightgown on the bench by the staircase. I just didn't expect her to be sitting in the dark.

She turned to us like a haunted doll in a horror movie, face lit eerily by her phone's screen, and I couldn't tell if she was angry or upset. That couldn't be good.

"Don't tell Dad I let you drive his car," Eddie whispered as he closed the Mediterranean wrought iron security gate in front of the door. "I forgot the code. You re-larm it. Relarm. Ha! Rlaaarm." He snorted a laugh and finally looked across the foyer. "Oh, shiiit . . . Mama. You scared me. What's that movie where the doll is haunted? You know the one, Fen."

I didn't answer because he was obviously still drunk, and that was the main reason why tonight was such a disaster. The other being that my brother thought he was a god.

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“Why haven’t you answered my texts?” Mama asked me. Not Eddie. Even though he was eighteen and would start college in the fall. He was the oldest. “I’ve been calling like the world is coming to an end. Do you think I enjoy leaving voicemails? I do not.”

“My phone isn’t working. It got wet. I need to put it in rice or something. So much for that waterproof thing.”

“It’s only waterproof to a certain deepness, duh,” Eddie said, kicking off his shoes.

“Depth,” I corrected wearily. And what would he know? Nothing, that’s what.

Mama hurried across the dark foyer, nightgown swishing, and stopped in a slant of moonlight that streamed through the door gate. As she pushed dark curls away from her face, her gaze jumped from Eddie (disgust—she knew he was drunk) to my face (angry that I was involved) to the watery footprints on the terra-cotta tile around my sneakers. “What is this? You’re soaked? What happened? Are you okay? Fennec? Why won’t you answer me?”

When Jasmine Sarafian asks Too Many Questions, it’s only a matter of time. She fires them like a volley of arrows, knowing one will hit its mark and kill you.

“He jumped in the dam. *Kapoosh!*” Eddie said. “And saved a girl who was drowning when we were checking out a band at Betty’s.”

You freakin’ peanut brain. I swear. . . . How could I help him when he was *trying* to get us caught? I mean, that’s what it felt like.

Mama went very still. “You were out at the dam?”

“Sorry,” Eddie said, shrugging. “Some friends talked us into it. You know how it is.”

“Us? You took Fen? I know what kids do out there, Eddie. They drink and get high. Your brother just turned sixteen!”

“Never too young to be a hero,” Eddie said, golden face dimpling as he flashed her a drunken smile. “Be proud, Mama.”

Oh, how I was hoping to avoid this conversation. If Eddie had been smarter—and trust me, he was not—he would’ve lied. Because listening to a band that was playing at Betty’s on the Pier was exactly where we were not supposed to be. Betty’s was a bar with a pavilioned stage at the end of its pier. If you were old enough to pay the cover charge, you got to watch the show under its outdoor pavilion. If you weren’t? Well . . . you caught shows from boats around the pier—or a little way off, where Blue Snake River met the lake, up on the Condor Dam. BYOB, and bring your younger brother along to lug the beer from the car while you’re partying with your friends.

Is drinking on the dam dangerous at night? Yes. Is it dumb? Absolutely. Everyone’s gone there to catch free shows at Betty’s for years. It’s practically a Condor Lake tradition, and the cops only bust it up at the end of the month when they need to make their quotas.

“Fennec,” Mama said, “I think you need to explain about this girl. Is it true?”

I tried to make my voice sound calm. “The dam is dark at night. She fell over the railing and went in the water. I think she

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hit her head on the rocks—she floated down toward the lake, and no one was helping her.”

“The band was loud,” Eddie clarified unhelpfully. “We didn’t hear her.”

Weren’t paying attention was more like it. My brother never paid attention to anyone but himself. “Anyway, I dove in and swam. I found her.”

“She wasn’t breathing,” Eddie added.

She died. I think she died. For a minute. A few seconds. I think she was dead.

There was no breath.

No life.

“*What?*” Mama said, eyes widening.

I just wish Eddie would have kept that between us. He was the one who nearly had a breakdown back on the beach and begged me not to tell our mom. Now he was yapping like this? I didn’t know if it was because he was drunk or just not bright upstairs.

Either way, now I had to explain the rest of it to Mama. “It wasn’t a big deal,” I told her in the most casual voice I could muster. “I found her in the water and pulled her in to shore. She wasn’t moving, so I did CPR on her. It didn’t take much. She coughed up water after a couple compressions.”

Push hard, push fast. She wasn’t a CPR dummy. She was a dying human, so small, and I didn’t know how hard to press. What if I broke her? What if I screwed it up?

It was the scariest thing I’d ever done in my life.

“Mother of God,” Mama whispered, clutching her chest. “I

told your father those CPR classes were important. Thank you, Saint Gregory!”

Here come the saints. Gotta wind this up and *fast*. “Anyway, her head was bleeding—”

So much blood. I thought she was dead.

“—and she was out of it. Someone called an ambulance.”

“By then, the band stopped because people across the lake had noticed what was happening,” Eddie added.

“The ambulance came and took her away, just to monitor for concussion, or whatever. They said she’d be okay,” I assured Mama. They said she might have memory loss.

She might not remember that I pulled her out of the dam.

“Hero!” Eddie said, slapping me too hard on the back for the millionth time that night. I slugged him in the arm, and he staggered. “Ow, dude. That hurt, you freak.”

“Calm down,” I told him. “You’ll wake the twins.” If our brother and sister woke up, then Dad would be next. I couldn’t handle him right now.

Mama shook her head slowly, holding her mouth as if she couldn’t believe it. “Who, my baby? Who was the girl?”

I gave Eddie a quick but dirty look: *Don’t blow this*. Then I told Mama, “No idea. Just some summer girl, here for the festival.” Summer people: what we called the out-of-towners who flew, drove, and carpooled to turn two thousand of us into two hundred thousand by late July.

“You don’t know her name?” she asked, dark hair frizzing wildly around her temples.

And here's where the *real* lying began. I knew exactly who she was. And I knew why she was at the dam: she was one of Eddie's devotees who treated him like he was some kind of Pope.

I didn't get it. He farted in his sleep, told dumb jokes, and had the worst taste in music. Yet, he could do no wrong. And it wasn't just girls. His teachers adored him too. The only reason he even graduated from high school was because he charmed his way through makeup tests. I'd bet everything in my wallet that he couldn't name the current US president; he thought Switzerland and Sweden were the same country.

And yet, one smile was all it took, and he had a passing grade. My dad was one of the most important people in town, but you wouldn't know it. Eddie Sarafian was the real star.

"Who is this girl, Eduard?" Mama asked. "Was she with you?"

For once, Eddie had enough sense not to elaborate and incriminate himself. He just shook his head. A little too much, maybe, but he didn't say anything. Like we'd rehearsed in the car. Like he'd begged me. *I asked her to come to the dam. People are going to say this is my fault because that's how people are. Cover for me, bro*, he'd said, crying a little. I hadn't seen him cry since we were kids. I wasn't sure if it was the beer, or if he was scared of getting caught, or if he was upset about the girl because he genuinely liked her. Maybe all three, but it was still weird.

My mom's brown eyes glinted in the moonlight as she stared at him, then me. My pulse sped. I didn't think she was buying it. Why should she? Everyone knew Eddie, and Eddie knew every-

one. He even knew the girl who almost drowned. He shouldn't. She was my age—too young for Eddie. But I saw them talking earlier that night. Then I saw her crying.

That was a few minutes before she fell in the water.

Look. I'm not saying he was to blame. I didn't even know what the two of them did. Eddie damn sure wouldn't tell me. But I *did* know if Mama found out he was hitting on a sophomore, she'd be pissed. And she would explode in white-hot fury if she knew who the girl was.

Jane Marlow, the chauffeur's daughter—Mad Dog Larsen's chauffeur.

Oh, yes, *that* Mad Dog. The famous rock producer. Owner of Rabid Records.

Forget his Grammys. Forget the fact that he'd produced some of the biggest albums of the last couple decades. The problem was that Mad Dog only spent the summers here at Condor Lake because my dad sold him the dream of this town like he sold it to everyone, a fairy tale in the Sierra Nevada. My father was the last of the great music promoters. Serj Sarafian.

My dad created one of the biggest indie music festivals in California.

But he'd have lost the amphitheater and festival grounds that hosted it if he didn't have a cash infusion from a major player. His nightmare was being forced to sell the whole thing off for half of what it was worth to a national events promoter.

Unless someone with a lot of money was willing to invest. Someone like Mad Dog.

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And he came. He brought his family and his name to a multimillion-dollar summer house on the other side of the lake. And he started working with us, little by little. But the contract for the amphitheater was coming due in two years.

Mad Dog was extremely private about his family: four daughters by three different wives. But the rumor going around the lake was that the girl I pulled out of the water tonight *could* be his illegitimate daughter by one of the housekeepers who died years ago—and that the chauffeur might be raising her as his own kid. Who knew if that was even true, but if it was? If my mom found out that Eddie was messing around with Mad Dog's youngest daughter while she fell off the watchtower and almost died—*please, please, please don't let her die tonight*—and if Mad Dog found out Eddie had anything to do with her being out there?

My family could lose everything.

So I was lying for their sake—for my mom and the twins. Erasing Jane Marlow for them. Not for Eddie, who I resented tonight with a heavy blackness that sat in the pit of my stomach like a rock.

But it didn't stop me from thinking about Jane's face when I closed my eyes.

A light flicked to life in the arched doorway past the stairs. Ms. Makruhi, our nosy housekeeper. And was that the sound of twin feet above us? *Please, no!* I was on the verge of having a breakdown. I just wanted to get upstairs and go fall apart in the privacy of my own room without waking my father.

Was that too much to ask?

“My baby? My shining star?” my mom said, holding my face.
“Fen-jan?”

“I’m okay, Mama.”

She nodded. “You’re a good boy. So honorable. Always thinking of others.”

That gutted me. Made me sick inside. I *hated* lying to her. My dad could fall in the dam for all I cared, but I did not enjoy lying to her. All I wanted to do was tell her that this was the worst night of my life, and that nothing was going to be okay again. But I said nothing.

“The family can always count on you,” Eddie said to me behind her back. The tone in his voice held something I couldn’t quite understand.

For a moment, I wondered if my brother wasn’t as dumb as I thought he was.

Condor Festival Freaks Private Messages

Eddie Sarafian:

What up remember me hozws it been girl

Jane Marlow:

Eddie?

Eddie Sarafian:

Ya haha its me, official checkmark and all wuzup

I saw yr name pop up on that thread in the app about band lighting

Thot id hit ya up. Howz LA? Been a few weeeeks

Jane Marlow:

Wow. So surprising to hear from you. But good!

LA is the same. How's Condor Lake? Hate that I missed the festival

Eddie Sarafian:

All good all good.

You recovered from the dam?

Heard u had speech theraapy??

Jane Marlow:

Small brain issues from being underwater so long. Not back in school yet

Eddie Sarafian:

Ugh. But no school? Sounds sweet hahaaha enjoy!

Jane Marlow:

Not really. It sucks

But my doctors say I should be OK in a few months

Eddie Sarafian:

Shit I feel awful.. Cannot tell you how sorry god

Jane Marlow:

Not your fault that I'm clumsy

Eddie Sarafian:

Glad you say that..

Bc if you could keep itt on downlow abt us kicking it

I dotn want the big dog hating me if you havnt told him

Jane Marlow:

Why would I?

???

Eddie Sarafian:

Cool you are the sweetest best best best

Hey I might be drivin down to LA in the fall

Musikbiz stuff

Wanna meet up? Just you and me . . .

Track [2] "Dreaming"/Blondie

Jane

Now

All I'd wanted was for them to like each other. Leo Marlow and Eddie Sarafian, aka Dad and Boyfriend. The two most important men in my life. But after a disastrous introduction, my father now stood at the side of the private airport's tarmac, brooding like the Hulk near our employer's 1965 Fintail Mercedes. Dad was *not* impressed by my S.O. "Like" was out the window. We weren't even at ambivalence. Oh no: this was contempt with a side of I-dream-of-your-death.

Dad held Frida's leash for me, and she was whining, trying to break free.

My father. The dog. Me. Eddie. No one on this airstrip was happy.

I gave Dad a signal: *Just a little longer.* Eddie was about to fly overseas with a couple of entertainment lawyers, and this catastrophic meeting was affecting more than my heart. It was affecting my brain. Literally.

"Hey, I've got to take this call. Yoo-hoo," Eddie said to me,

whistling as wind blew across the tarmac. “Ground control to space cadet. Baby?” He gave me a pitying look.

“Take the call,” I insisted as he held up his phone. Honestly, it was a relief to have him walk away for a second. I needed a break to catch up. Words unraveled at the tails of his sentences, and I was having trouble concentrating on what he was telling me. The part of my brain that was injured in the accident was agitated about all this stress.

The doctors called my condition “aphasia.” In a nutshell, it was a communication disorder caused by my fall into the dam. I wasn’t dumb or damaged or slow. I just had problems with a few words now and then. Like, when people got chatty (long speeches, yawn), my brain blocked out pieces of it—which is why it was better if you sent me directions on my phone rather than tried to tell me where to go. And when I was under a ton of pressure, I sometimes reached for certain words, but they disappeared before they could make it out of my mouth. Poof! Gone.

And that was the worst part. The rest of it, I could cover up. But people tended to notice when you forgot simple words.

Sometimes it felt like a demonic word-eating pixie was living inside my brain.

I hated that fucking word-pixie.

Thing was, I hadn’t had problems for weeks, so it was beyond frustrating that my word-pixie was rearing her ugly head right now at the start of summer vacation. Right when I was ready to burst out of my cocoon.

Dad and I were on our way to spend the summer at Condor

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Lake in the Sierras. We'd just driven over three hours from Mad Dog's Bel Air house in Los Angeles. The rest of Mad Dog's domestic staff already arrived yesterday to get the lodge ready, and Mad Dog and "the Family," as we called them, had flown in by private plane earlier today. One that was sitting on the tarmac now.

Dad and I were the last to arrive at the lake because I'd attended my high school graduation this morning. (No big deal.) And I was the caretaker for Frida Kahlo—that was the excited, pointy-eared Mexican hairless miniature trying to lurch away from my father. She belonged to Mad Dog's daughter Velvet, and this pooch did *not* like to fly. So she'd ridden up here in the car with me instead.

The Condor Lake private airport was a few miles outside of the lake proper, so we'd stopped on our way in, but it had delayed Dad's military-tight schedule. On top of that, afternoon sun was hot on my neck, because I'd gone and cut off all my dark hair in a wild whim last night. *Whoosh!* Cropped pixie cut to match my pixie body. After the hairstylist was finished, he said it was a *Rosemary's Baby* haircut, which didn't bother me until we arrived here a few minutes ago and Eddie told me it made me look "way younger."

Now I was paranoid.

Dad's sharp, unhappy eyes followed Eddie across the private airport tarmac. Eddie had one hand pressed to his ear, trying to talk on the phone as wind whipped through his white T-shirt and long shorts. He was minutes away from boarding a plane headed

to the Philippines for a couple of weeks. I hadn't seen him since spring break. These precious few moments we had in person were going down the tube. Eddie didn't seem to care. Everything rolled off him.

Frida gave me a plaintive bark, not understanding that Eddie was allergic to dogs.

I was just trying to hold it together.

"What's that thing when an old male lion sees a young male lion, and he gets paranoid that his pride is in danger for no good reason?" I asked the tall Black man in the expensive suit who approached on the airport tarmac.

"Law of the jungle?" he guessed, moving his carry-on bag from one shoulder to the other. Gordon Goodman was Mad Dog's top entertainment lawyer. He lived in L.A. and was always at the Bel Air house. He came up here early with Mad Dog.

"The old male only has one cub, and she's not in danger," I added unhelpfully. The word was right there. . . .

"He's being a good king," Gordon said.

"No, that's not it either. It's overprotective pissing . . . something."

"Territorial?"

I clapped my hands. "That's it! Territorial pissing."

"Leo is your father, Jane. Territorial pissing is his duty. He does it for Mad Dog all day long—weeds out the threats. It's second nature."

"Eddie's not a threat," I insisted.

"Hey. Don't know the boy," Gordon said matter-of-factly as

he headed toward the open door of the plane, holding on to his hat. “But I’m about to spend some time with him. The flight to Manila alone is well over fourteen hours, and then we have to travel by car, ferry, and helicopter to get to this remote island. So I guess I’ll be forming an opinion, won’t I?” He didn’t sound thrilled. “See you later this month, Miss Marlow.”

Gordon was flying to some beautiful private island in the Philippines with Eddie and the Sarafians’ lawyer to sign a leasing contract that would affect the future of the Condor Music Festival. I didn’t quite understand the ins and outs of it, except that they had to get it signed by the end of June or next month’s festival was in jeopardy. Like, cancelled. Millions upon millions of dollars were on the line. Tickets were already sold, band visas were procured, advertising was running, hotel rooms booked.

But Eddie was going to make sure everything went smoothly. He was heir to the Sarafian empire, and his father, Serj, legendary music promoter, was teaching him the ropes. In the few months that Eddie and I had been dating—online, mostly—I’d learned a completely different side of the music business from him than I had from living in the domestic quarters of Mad Dog Larsen my entire life. Maybe more.

Eddie wanted to teach me the biz and introduce me to musicians.

Mad Dog wanted me to take care of his pets and fetch him lemonade.

Eddie pocketed his phone and smiled at me, brown eyes squinting in the afternoon sun. Wow. He really was goddamn

stunning. Everyone said he could model. He'd clipped his hair short and lightened it, so he truly looked golden from head to foot. "Gotta run, babe," he said, rubbing his nose. "We've gotta make a flight at LAX. This crop duster only goes so far."

Crop duster? Please. I couldn't fathom how much it cost to fly them to L.A. by private jet. This one was Mad Dog's regular charter home. I'd never stepped foot on it. The only domestic in our house who had was Mad Dog's personal bodyguard.

"You've got to leave now?" I complained. "But I've barely seen you."

"Well . . . when you said you were meeting me here, I didn't know you meant you were bringing Daddy along," he said, laughing a little stiltedly as he flicked his gaze toward my father. When I protested, he amended, "He'll warm up to me. Everyone does."

True. He had a way of charming people into doing things. One minute, you were trying to decipher his nonsensical texts, the next, you'd lost your best bra in the backseat of an Italian racing car.

"You'll be back at the . . ." I couldn't find a word—big blue thing with water in it . . . ? I panicked a little and tried to rescue myself before he noticed. "In a couple weeks?"

He gave me another sad face that told me he was feeling sorry for me and my brain struggles. "Should be. This mogul dude's house is remote, so service is weird. I'll try to call, but if you don't hear from me for a few days, I'll send word by slow turtle from China."

"Okay?" I said, squinting.

He smiled. “It’s a joke. Get it? Slow boat from China? But I’ll be in the Philippines, so they’ll have turtles instead of boats.”

Right . . . No use pointing out the obvious to Eddie. I used to think it was my word-pixie stopping me from realizing his potential as avant-garde humorist, but no: he just wasn’t all that bright. But he was very pretty. And sweet. I’d been gaga over him since I was in pigtails. The first time he’d ever noticed me was that night he invited me to come to the dam. The second time was when we reconnected online after the accident. That’s when I found out that he was the one who ended up pulling me out of the dam and saving my life.

His one saving grace in my father’s eyes today. I think. My father’s hard to read.

Anyway, funny that such a horrible thing could bring two people together who had nothing in common. Silver linings, I supposed.

My phone buzzed. Norma. Mad Dog’s head housekeeper, asking where we were. And another text, asking us to pick up ice, because the freezer in the lodge’s prep kitchen wasn’t making ice fast enough. Ugh.

“You’re blowing up,” Eddie said.

“Work,” I mumbled.

“The big dog? You’re on vacation, bae. He needs to chill and leave you be. You’re my girl, not his.”

No, I was not on vacation. I was being paid to do a job, and as long as I lived under Mad Dog’s roof, with my room and board provided, I wasn’t just on the clock, I was one with the clock. Besides, I wasn’t sure how in tune Mad Dog was to my affairs. We

saw each other in passing every day and had a conversation now and then, but when I asked Dad if Mad Dog knew that Eddie and I were seeing each other, he just grunted and said, “He’s aware there’s something going on.”

Whatever *that* meant.

“Hey, make sure they put my blue bag on there,” Eddie called to the Sarafians’ family lawyer, who was boarding the plane. “I’m right behind you!”

Crap. This was it. He checked his phone again. Time to go.

“So when you come back, we’ll spend time together at the lake?” I knew I sounded clingy. I *felt* clingy. I hated that. But Eddie made me feel that way, because he was never there, and I could never pin him down to anything. Would he answer my texts? Would he call when he said he would? Would he fly into town this weekend? I never knew, and everything was “our little secret.” It was exciting but exhausting. I knew he was busy helping his dad. And yet.

He was always promising me tomorrow.

Tomorrow, tomorrow, tomorrow.

I didn’t want to cry, but I felt tears prickling the backs of my eyelids. How dumb was that? This whole day was just too much. Graduation. Returning to the lake. Eddie and my dad.

“Hey! *Hey*,” he said, eyes flicking back and forth over mine. “None of that, now.”

“I’m okay,” I told him, reeling in my emotions. “I just wish we had more time.”

“Listen. When I get back, let’s look for an apartment at the

lake. Like we talked about. You and me. If we find one, maybe you don't go back to L.A. after the summer's over . . . maybe? You're not in school anymore. You could go to college here if you wanted, or maybe work for my dad. Or just chill. All kinds of possibilities. Whatcha think? Would you be down for that?"

"Eddie," I said in the lowest voice I could manage over the sound of the jet's engine in the distance, afraid to look back at my father. "Are you serious?"

He put his hands around my neck. "No cap. Just think about where you'd want to live at the lake. I'll have a word with my old man. Nothing can happen without his approval, so I'd need to finesse it with him first. No promises. But it *should* be fine? Let's keep it between us for now. We'll talk more when I get back, okay?"

He was talking a mile a second, and I couldn't answer. My heart was filled with too much joy. He'd said that, right? I hadn't gotten it wrong? This wasn't a word-pixie brain mix-up?

"The two of us living together? Our own place?" I asked.

"Hey," he said instead of answering me, "remember to tell Velvet to vote for Tell & Show at Battle of the Bands. That's *super* important. You're her assistant now, so make sure she gets that right, because it's what my dad wants. It's this weekend—don't forget, okay? Promise?"

I didn't care about Battle of the Bands. I cared about moving in together. "Wait! The apartment—"

"Wish me luck!" he said, pulling away and putting a finger to his lips. Our little secret. "See you in a couple weeks! We'll talk more then."

He skipped away backward, flashing me a princely smile, and then jogged onto the plane. Just like that, he was gone. I wished he'd kissed me goodbye, but maybe he was worried about my father watching. And maybe it didn't matter. Who needed a kiss when I had a promise about moving in together?