



Your Perfect Life: A Novel

By Liz Fenton, Lisa Steinke



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Waking up in each other's bodies the next morning, they must figure out how to navigate their altered realities. Rachel is forced to face the broadcasting dreams she gave up when she got pregnant in college, and Casey finally steps out of the spotlight to face the real reason why she's alone. And they soon discover that they don't know themselves—or their best friend—nearly as well as they thought they did.

Liz Fenton and Lisa Steinke bring their “witty, winning style” (Sarah Pekkanen, author of *The Best of Us*) to every page of this novel that is sure to please fans of *In Her Shoes* and *The Opposite of Me*. *Your Perfect Life* is a story of humor and heart about two best friends, what they didn't know about each other, and how, by switching lives, each learns to appreciate her own.

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Editorial Review

Review

"I loved this from the very first line (which will go down in history as the funniest, bravest first line ever). Hilarious, honest and truly touching, Liz Fenton and Lisa Steinke are two important new voices in women's fiction who write about life in such a real, relatable way." (Sarah Jio *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Violets of March*)

"*Your Perfect Life* has all of the ingredients that I love in a book—relatable characters who make me laugh out loud, a delicious, page-turning premise, and sweet and surprising insights about the perfect life may be the one you've already got." (Jen Lancaster *New York Times* bestselling author)

"Sassy, heartfelt, and smart, *Your Perfect Life* is a clever take on switched identities that will make you think hard about the choices you've made in your life and what matters most to us all in the end." (Amy Hatvany author of *Heart Like Mine*)

"For every woman who's ever wondered about the path not taken, Fenton and Steinke mine—with tremendous humor and insight—the mixed blessing of unexpected second chances." (Emma McLaughlin and Nicola Kraus *New York Times* bestselling authors)

"Liz Fenton and Lisa Steinke blend their voices seamlessly and hilariously and remind us that even though the grass often looks greener under our friends' lives, nobody gets happily ever unless they go after it. *Your Perfect Life* is clever, quirky, fresh, and ultimately, empowering!" (Claire Cook bestselling author of *Must Love Dogs* and *Time Flies*)

"Liz and Lisa's voices are warm and comforting, like a relaxed chat with great friends while wearing cozy PJ's and sipping wine. I highly recommend *Your Perfect Life*!" (Beth Harbison *New York Times* bestselling author of *When in Doubt, Add Butter*)

"*Your Perfect Life* puts a fresh twist on a 'Freaky Friday'-scenario: What if you switched bodies with your best friend, and got the life you'd always secretly coveted? I adore Liz Fenton and Lisa Steinke's witty, winning style and gobbled up their debut novel." (Sarah Pekkanen author of *The Best of Us*)

About the Author

Liz Fenton and Lisa Steinke have been best friends for twenty-five years and survived high school and college together. Liz lives in San Diego with her husband and two children. Lisa, a former talk show producer, now lives in Chicago with her husband, daughter, and two bonus children.

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Your Perfect Life

CHAPTER 2

rachel

The house is quiet. The bedroom is dark. When it's peaceful like this, I can almost convince myself that I'm satisfied with my life.

I look over at John, the light coming through the blinds hitting him across the face. He still looks like the man I fell in love with over twenty years ago, just a little bit older. His brown hair is graying slightly at the temples and there were more lines around his blue eyes. His jawline is still strong, his body still toned from his daily runs. He's aging well, the bastard. Me, on the other hand, not so much. My age shows in the lines in my forehead and the stretch marks on my belly.

I feel every one of my thirty-eight years. I reach for John's hand, but just as I do, his alarm goes off and he's in the shower before I can even muster a hello. My hand is still resting where his body used to be. The baby cries as if on cue. The day has officially begun. And this is a day I'm not ready for at all. Because at the end of it, I'm going to be wearing a Hello My Name Is sticker and feeling fat in a pre-pregnancy dress.

"Don't you have your high school reunion tonight?" Audrey, my sixteen-year-old, asks at breakfast.

"You must feel so old!" My fourteen-year-old, Sophie, chimes in.

"God. I can't even imagine!" Audrey rolls her eyes and fake gags.

"Can't imagine what?" John rushes into the kitchen and takes a swig from my coffee cup.

"What it's going to feel like to be twenty years older."

"It feels old." John laughs, looking in my direction. "Gotta go," he says, kissing the baby, then the girls, but not me. I run my finger over a crack in the granite countertop and add it to my mental to-do list, right below the leaky faucet in the girls' shared bathroom, the loose floorboard in the entryway, and the temperamental water heater that needs to be replaced. We've definitely outgrown our once-cozy Spanish-style house nestled on the corner of a cul-de-sac in Culver City—the closest neighborhood to John's pharmaceutical sales territory in Santa Monica we could afford when we bought it over a decade ago. But even though he had long since been promoted to regional sales manager and was no longer pounding the pavement with the latest and greatest antibiotic or asthma inhaler, we were still here.

"I'm out of here too." Audrey grabs her car keys off the counter. I still can't wrap my head around the fact she's driving. Wasn't she just a gap-toothed seven-year-old? And now she's taller than I am with legs for days—legs that cause John to get a frightened look in his eyes whenever he takes notice of them. Her hair falls down her back in long, loose natural curls and her eyes are a piercing blue, like John's.

"Ready?" she asks Sophie.

And she's driving my fourteen-year-old, who looks almost older than Audrey, her beautiful long hair recently chopped off, without my consent, to resemble her favorite singer. Her green eyes—that match mine—are rimmed with too much eyeliner, her lips obliterated by dark lipstick. I sigh, too tired to battle it out with her this morning.

"Bye, Mom," they say in unison.

"Be safe," I say, to the already-closed door. I pull the tie of my robe tighter and begin to feed our baby, Charlotte, wondering if any of my former classmates are unemployed, sitting in a kitchen with walls

desperately in need of a new coat of paint, trying to coax a bite of banana into a fussy baby's mouth.

When I told John I was pregnant, he thought I was joking. When I kept insisting it was true, he'd asked for the proof. Together we'd dug through the bathroom trash can until finally, I'd found it. As I held the white stick with the word *yes* illuminated in pink high in the air like an Olympic torch, we burst into a nervous fit of uncontrollable laughter, finding it much easier to laugh than talk about how this baby was going to change things.

We parked ourselves on the bathroom floor and struggled with the math until we figured out that we conceived Charlotte the night of our anniversary dinner. We were drunk before our entrées arrived. Something came over me at the table. Maybe it was the second bottle of wine or the fact that I'd splurged to get my hair and makeup done and felt uncharacteristically sexy. But I'd reached under the table and grabbed him, and suggested he meet me in the bathroom. Of course the last thing we were thinking about was birth control; neither of us could remember the last time we'd even had sex, let alone hot sex.

The second person I told about the baby was my best friend, Casey. She looked at me blankly, waiting for the punch line.

I told her the part about seducing him and doing it in the bathroom but left out the part about how long it had been since I'd seen him with his pants down. I always left that kind of thing out of our conversations. Casey is happily single, goes to Hollywood parties, and regularly has sex with smoking-hot twenty-year-olds. The last thing I wanted her to know was that I could barely get laid by my own husband. Or worse, how I barely wanted to get laid by him. Something about not saying it out loud made it easier to justify and deny my part in it. I wish I still had the urge to have rip-roaring sex with John, or better yet, I wish we still laughed together, like the teenagers we once were, like my mom and dad still do, and they've been married for fifty years last summer.

Charlotte drops her sippy cup on the floor and giggles. Of course I can't imagine my life without her. But my life in general is not at all how I thought it would be. When I'm asked about it tonight, I won't be able to explain why I'm not in broadcasting, like Casey. None of them want to hear how, against everyone's advice, I dropped out of college when I got pregnant with Audrey. Something about my due date and graduation date being the same day threw me off. I always planned to go back and finish, but the timing was never right. And then somewhere along the way, I lost interest, or desire. Or maybe a little bit of both. Hopefully, tonight, everyone will be focused on Casey and will not even ask.

Ten hours later, John and I ride the elevator in silence as it ascends to the floor where our reunion is being held. I look down at my dress, hoping my Spanx are doing their job. As the doors open, John reaches for my hand and we walk in together, smiling. It's funny how quickly we can transform into the people we ought to be. |Your Perfect Life

CHAPTER 1

casey

My mouth tastes like ass.

Rolling over, I grab for the water I always leave on the nightstand and silently pray that there are also two Advil waiting for me to help numb the pounding in my head. Why did I think that last shot of Patrón was a

good idea? I rack my brains trying to remember what happened after that, but it's just a blur.

"Hey, sleepyhead."

I startle at the sound of a man's voice next to me and instinctively pull the sheets over my naked body as memories of last night come crashing back. Being sent a tequila shot by a good-looking twenty-something. Motioning for him to join me. Four drinks and two shots later, us, fumbling in the back of the cab, making out like two teenagers. Coming back here, to my penthouse apartment in the Wilshire area of Los Angeles. And now, waking up to him in my bed, unable to recall his name. Was it Cody? Carl?

"Hey, you." I decide a you will have to do as I run my fingers through my hair and glance around the room for anything I can put on. Our clothes are strewn everywhere, my bra is lying on the TV, and my underwear is ripped in half on the floor. Wow. Cody or Carl or whatever his name was didn't mess around last night.

"Come here." He pulls me by the waist into the fold of his body and I feel myself stiffen, my inhibitions no longer blunted by alcohol. He kisses my neck and I smile despite myself, suddenly remembering the reason I let him rip my La Perlas last night. But I don't have time for a repeat performance, I think, as I glance at the clock. I'm due in the studio in less than an hour. And at thirty-eight, I don't bounce back from these nights the way I used to.

I detach myself from him gently. "Sorry, I'll have to take a rain check," I say, knowing I'll never see him again. "I'm late for work."

"No worries," he replies and rolls out of bed and grabs his pants from the chair in the corner. "I've got an audition later anyway."

That's right. He's an actor. I vaguely remember discussing his role as "man number three" in the next Will Smith movie. I sigh. My penchant for twenty-something struggling thespians has always been my downfall.

Stepping out of bed with the sheet wrapped tightly around me, I kiss his cheek. "Thanks, and sorry, I don't mean to kick you out of here." But we both know that I do.

He wraps his chiseled arms around me. "It's fine."

"Great. Well, I guess I'll see you around?" He lingers by the front door, his shirt still unbuttoned, his jeans slung low on his hips revealing the Calvin Klein waistband of his boxer briefs.

I know what's coming next. Happens every time. "Hey, so, in case your agent is looking for fresh talent, would you mind talking to her for me?"

"Sure," I reply, cringing at the thought of pitching my latest sexual conquest to my agent. "Just email your résumé to my assistant." I write down her email address and swiftly escort him out the door and lean my head against it.

I'm getting too old for this shit.

•••

I rush out of hair and makeup and toward the GossipTV set just as the taping is about to start. "Three

minutes!” my producer, Charlie, calls to me as I sprint past him expertly in my high-heel ankle boots.

I hurry into place and glance over at Dean Anders, my cohost. He grimaces at my tardiness without looking up from his notes. “Nice of you to show up.”

“No problem,” I answer sarcastically. “What would you do without me?”

He smirks and opens his mouth, but before he can speak the stage manager cuts him off. “Four, three, two,” he says before pointing at me as the red light on the camera comes to life. I may have been flustered a minute ago, but now I’m in my element.

“Welcome to GossipTV! I’m Casey Lee and we’ve got the freshest scoop coming your way right now!”

Thirty minutes later, the relenting red light turns off and I pull off my boots. “Why do great shoes have to hurt so much?” I say to no one in particular.

“That’s the price you pay for high fashion.” My assistant, Destiny, sweeps by and takes the boots out of my hand, twirling them by their four-inch heels.

“Ain’t that the truth?” I mutter as I make my way back to my dressing room. I glance in the mirror. Even after an hour in hair and makeup, I can still see the circles under my bright sapphire eyes and the lines around them when I smile. Like always, there’s a small part of me that hates that I’ve chosen a profession where age forty is considered ancient, where the Kelly Ripas of the world are the exception not the rule. This past year, I’ve felt the clock start ticking. Not my biological clock—I’m talking about the clock that exists in the minds of all the executives who determine when on-air talent gets stale. I’d been pretty fortunate in my career, starting right out of college as a researcher at Entertainment Tonight and eventually working my way up to on-air correspondent. And for the past three years, I’ve been the cohost of GossipTV.

But I know that I’m only as good as my last sweeps number, and I’m starting to live on borrowed time. It’s a fact that Dean likes to bring up often. He is twenty-eight and arrogant because he doesn’t have that damn clock ticking in his ear.

I lie on the couch in my dressing room and close my eyes, practicing the meditations my yoga teacher taught me. But I can’t concentrate—it feels like the walls in my painfully small dressing room are closing in on me. I might be on-air talent, but it doesn’t afford me much more than a nameplate on the door, a pleather couch, and if you ask me, way too many mirrors. And then there it is again—the tight ball of anxiety lodged in the base of my throat. Breathe, Casey. Just breathe.

Destiny glides in the door a moment later, iPad in hand. “Ready to go over your schedule?” she asks.

“Am I ever ready?” I joke and take a sip of the water she wisely brought me.

“Oh, did Colby wear you out last night?” The sides of her mouth curl up as she tries unsuccessfully to keep a straight face.

Colby! So that was his name. I knew it started with a C.

“He emailed you already?” I groan.

“Yes, he sent his résumé and said he had a very productive meeting with you.”

I put my hands over my face. “It’s the last time, I promise.”

“Like I’ve never heard that one before,” she says with a snort.

Destiny has been with me since my first on-air job and is more than just an assistant to me. From the minute she strutted into her interview, I knew she was the one. She told me that if I hired her, she’d always have my best interests at heart, I’d never be late for anything, and, most important, she’d be the best damn gatekeeper I ever had. Ex-boyfriends from hell? No worries. Bad dates? She had me covered. My mother? Piece of cake. Having already called her list of references, I was well aware of those facts and then some—she’d been given a five-star review from each. I needed someone who wasn’t going to call *Us Weekly* when I had a meltdown over low ratings, someone who wouldn’t feed damaging information to people like my cohost Dean’s assistant and rumored lover, Fiona, a long-legged ex-beauty queen who’d do just about anything to take me down. I needed someone I could trust. When I listened to Destiny, sitting cross-legged in my worn leather chair, telling me a story about putting herself through college by working two jobs, I knew in my gut I had found a hardworking assistant and someone I could trust. Only later would I realize I’d also found a lifelong friend.

“Okay, so let’s talk about the next few days,” she says as she taps on the iPad and pulls up my calendar. “You’ve got an interview with the L.A. Times Calendar section after lunch today. Tomorrow the car service will pick you up at five thirty for your high school reunion.”

I groan. I’d forgotten all about it, or more likely, I’d just blocked it out. It would be a ballroom full of people triggering memories that I’d been trying to forget for twenty years. “Why am I going again? And who schedules a high school reunion in the middle of winter?”

Destiny sighs. “Is it ever really winter in Southern California? We’ve been over this. You know you need to go. People will be expecting you to show up—you’re a celebrity now.” She laughs and I roll my eyes. “Plus, you promised Rachel. You haven’t seen her much lately.” She shows me the calendar on the iPad like it’s exhibit A in a courtroom. “Three months is a long time not to see your best friend. What’s going on with you two anyway?”

I wish I knew. Our last few conversations had been filled with awkward pauses, and I’d felt more like I was suffering through a bad date than talking to someone I’d known forever.

We’d been friends since the day she walked into my seventh-grade English class. She was the new girl, but stood tall and had an air of confidence that was unusual for a girl in middle school. It wasn’t until we’d had our first sleepover, when she scrutinized her flawless face in my vanity mirror—the side that magnified it—that I realized she’d been putting on an act that day, probably hoping she, as much as her classmates, would believe it. While the teacher introduced her, she’d caught my eye and smiled, and I noticed a worn copy of *All Night Long* from the Sweet Valley High series under her arm, a book I’d read countless times. We’d been best friends ever since, surviving junior high, high school, and even college together. And when she’d called about the reunion, I’d promised I wouldn’t flake on her, even though I had absolutely no desire to go.

“Hey, I can feel you judging me over there. We’ve both been busy, you know.”

Destiny raises her eyebrow. “Mmm . . . okay.”

“Oh, come on. You know how insane my schedule’s been and she’s got three kids.” I crinkle my nose at the thought of her domesticated life. I love Rachel. But she always seems so . . . frazzled. “And I may have had to cancel the last few times we had dinner plans, but I’m not going to flake on her, she’s my oldest friend. It will be good for us to spend some time together. And John too,” I add, referring to her high school sweetheart and husband, also a friend of mine.

Destiny nods her head with approval. “And it will be good for you to flirt with some men your own age.”

“We both know that’s not going to happen!” I say with a laugh, but there’s a part of me that hopes there will be someone my own age to flirt with. Someone mature and kind who doesn’t care if I can get him a job. Someone who wants to know the part of me that has nothing to do with TV. |Your Perfect Life

CHAPTER 4

rachel

“Rachel Cole. Where are you? Come on up here and get your award!” Julie is grinning widely, completely unaware that I’d rather give birth to triplets than accept the Least Changed award.

So what if it’s technically an honor for someone who still looks the same—a compliment even. I know what it really means, what everyone’s really thinking: that I’ve done nothing with my life.

I’m not sure if I should collect my award with the dignity of an Academy Award winner or get up there and tell everyone off. The four Belvedere and sodas I’ve downed are pulling for me to give the crowd the finger. With each step toward the stage, I feel my anger mount. I can hear nothing but the sound of my out-of-style high heels on the linoleum floor.

I walk up the stairs to the podium and Julie congratulates me yet again and hands me a plastic award. A trinket I’ve seen at the dollar store. I think of Sophie’s cheap soccer trophies and medals, which she recently relegated to a box in the garage, and I realize they look like Olympic medals compared to this.

I scan the sea of my classmates and see a man holding up his glass to me and cheering and it takes a moment for it to register that it’s Jake Johnson, our senior class president and captain of the volleyball team. He’s got a paunch and a comb-over now, but a huge smile is plastered across his face. He’s obviously having a great time even though he no longer looks like an Abercrombie & Fitch model. He swings his arm over the shoulders of the editor of our high school newspaper, Nancy Myers. She smiles my way, not a care in the world, even though she looks older than her thirty-eight years, gray at the temples and deep lines around her eyes. She’s having fun too—the kind of time I hoped I’d have.

I had been so excited to see my old friends and relive fun memories, never expecting the moment I walked in that I’d become consumed with insecurity, instantly transforming into a gangly fifteen-year-old who never felt she was pretty enough or smart enough or just enough in general. Not for John or for anyone. But somehow, back then, I was able to mask it, only whispering my true feelings to Casey late at night on the cordless phone I sneaked into my bedroom, the darkness giving me the courage to say the words. At school, I became an overachiever, taking on one more extracurricular activity, joining one more club, anything to prove myself. But now, standing here as a grown woman, I’m finding it almost impossible to swallow my tears. I quickly mumble a sarcastic “thanks a lot” into the microphone and stumble down the stairs, leaving a wide-eyed Julie behind, still clasping my trinket in her hand. I head toward the double doors leading out of

the ballroom.

“Where are you going? You okay?” Casey calls after me.

I turn around slowly, ready to tell her how I’m feeling, until I see the Most Successful award dangling from her perfectly manicured left hand. Her hair is styled expertly, her makeup was obviously done by the award-winning makeup artist at her studio, and the designer minidress is hugging her in all the right places. Not only has she realized all of her dreams professionally, she looks more gorgeous than ever.

“I need to be alone.” I turn toward the door again so she won’t see my eyes filling with tears.

“Hey, don’t go. Talk to me,” Casey says quietly.

“Talk to you? You have no idea what I’m feeling.”

I ignore the hurt look in Casey’s eyes and snap, “Oh, wait, you probably have people to call for this. A life coach on speed dial, perhaps?”

I see John approaching, a concerned look on his face, but I shake my head to warn him not to get in the middle of this.

“What crawled up your ass? Don’t let some silly award mess with your head. It’s not worth it,” Casey pleads.

“Said the most successful to the least successful.”

“For the last time, your award was for still looking the same, which is meant as a compliment. You haven’t aged a day since you were eighteen. You should be flattered!”

“Flattered? Just look at them.” I motion toward no one in particular. “They know I haven’t lived up to their expectations. I was voted most likely to succeed in high school yet my biggest accomplishment is what? President of the PTA? No, wait, I’ve got something better than that: I won the brownie bake-off at Sophie’s school two years ago.” I glare at John, still watching us from a safe distance. I think of the headhunter I’d secretly met with just days before finding out I was pregnant with Charlotte; the résumé we’d crafted; the excitement I’d felt as I thought of working outside of the home again.

I hated to admit it, but having another baby had changed us. Suddenly we were fighting about everything: who would get up with her, who should get up with her; another college tuition on a single income; my refusal to let John continue with his weekly poker night because I needed help. I don’t remember it being this hard before, but then again, it was sixteen years ago and I was a much different mom and wife back then; more patient and less exhausted.

“No one here is thinking you aren’t a success except you. No one is pitying you except you. Don’t tell me you’re actually jealous of this?” Casey waves her trophy in front of me. “You want it? Take it!” Casey tries to push it into my hand, but I step back and it falls on the floor between us and a group of classmates looks our way.

“I don’t want your award. It doesn’t matter. I wouldn’t expect you to understand. You have everything you ever wanted.”

Casey shakes her head. “Okay, fine. You want to have this out. We’ll have this out. Why don’t you have everything you ever wanted? Why didn’t you ever go back to work? Why did you give up?” Casey challenges.

“You think having a baby is giving up? God, you have no clue what you’re talking about. It wasn’t as simple as you thought it was. You think I could’ve finished college while I was pregnant and then gotten a job at some TV station all while trying to take care of a newborn?”

“If you wanted it bad enough,” she says, her words slicing through me.

“You just don’t get it. You’ve never actually had a baby.”

Casey scoffs then looks away, sadness crossing her eyes. And then I know I’ve gone too far.

“Okay, you two, let’s end this thing right now,” John says in a hushed tone as he walks up with the bartender, who is carrying two drinks. “These are from our friend Brian,” he says. “He wisely suggested you two need to drink these and let go of whatever it is you’re fighting about.”

Brian smiles broadly, eyeing the two shot glasses full of a bright purple liquid. “I made these extra special for the two of you.”

Casey rolls her eyes. “You think it’s so simple. Like a couple of shots can make us forget all the BS that’s gone on tonight? A lot’s been said.”

John puts his arms around both of us. “You guys have been fighting like sisters for years. Angry one minute, best friends again the next. Why should tonight be any different?” He gives me a supportive look, “It’s just a high school reunion, right?” He kisses me on the cheek. Then he turns to Casey, “Just knock back one of these and call a truce.”

Brian holds out the shots proudly. “C’mon, ladies. I promise these will make you both realize how silly you’re being.”

“Fine,” I say, grabbing one of the shot glasses.

“Whatever.” Casey takes the other.

“We might as well make a toast while we’re at it,” I say.

Casey lifts her shot glass and says sarcastically, “To your perfect life.”

“No,” I say, clinking my glass against hers. “To your perfect life.”|Your Perfect Life

CHAPTER 3

casey

Sidling up to the still-empty bar, I order a double Belvedere and soda. A very young bartender gives me a conspiratorial wink as he sets my drink in front of me, like my boozing is going to be our little secret. I

knock it back, and he swiftly replaces it with another. As I give him a flirtatious smile, I hear Destiny's words ringing in my ears: Flirt with someone your own age! I ignore them. "How are you?" I ask as I take my hand and pin a strand of my golden hair behind my ear.

"I'm great. These are my favorite events."

"Why? Do drunken has-beens from high school tend to tip well?" I quip, sounding a little more jaded than I intend to.

"Actually, no. You'd be surprised how regret and bitterness inspires cheapness in people," he says as he wipes the zinc bar with a towel and nods at a man dressed in an expensive charcoal suit who sits three bar stools over. I recognize him as Patrick Sanders, former science club geek who earned a full scholarship to MIT, and then went on to start his own biotech company. I smile and give a small wave before looking away, not wanting him to take it as an invitation to join me. I wasn't ready to explain why I was one of the few unmarried, childless people here. I drain the rest of my vodka and soda and swish the ice cubes around. I could use about ten more of these.

Patrick orders a Jack and Coke and I watch him sip it greedily. Maybe he's as nervous as I am. I watch him glance around the crowd, tugging at the knot of his silk tie, a distant look in his eyes. Could his past be gnawing at him as much as mine?

When I received the invitation to the reunion, I'd immediately tossed it into the trash. But then Rachel had called—talking a mile a minute. What was I going to wear? Who was I nervous to see? Wouldn't it be fun to be there together? When I didn't respond, I could hear her inhale deeply. And then in a voice that didn't even sound like hers, she'd said that everything wasn't always about me. I was surprised not only by her attack—which came out of nowhere—but by how much the words had stung. Still sting.

I thought about what going would mean, the unhappy memories that would try to surface, the emotions I'd have to fend off. In my day-to-day life it was easy not to think about my lack of a family, but being in a room full of people I'd known twenty years ago—people who had other halves and cars with more than two seats—would force me to focus on it. But then I thought about Rachel and all of our shared memories. Even though it was the last place on Earth I wanted to be, I told her I'd RSVP yes. She's my best friend and that's what we do; she would've done the same for me. At least I hope so.

"Ready for another?" The bartender nods toward my empty glass and I can't help but stare a beat too long at his deep brown eyes, sun-kissed skin, and sandy blond hair. If I didn't know any better, I'd think there was a surfboard behind the bar.

"Only if you tell me your name. And the real reason why you love these events," I say playfully. Patrick hears me and gives me a sideways glance, probably wondering why I'm hitting on a guy half my age, even though he looks like the type who takes out girls so young it prompts people to wonder Is that his date or his daughter?

The bartender begins a long pour of the Belvedere. "My name is Brian," he says as he slides the cocktail across the bar expertly. "And I love these events because it brings out the best and worst in people. Want to truly see inside someone? Shadow them at their high school reunion."

I take a long sip of my drink. "Do you really believe that?"

He leans in close. “See that guy over there?” he whispers, bobbing his head in the direction of Patrick. “He has everything. Multimillionaire, private airplane, trophy wife. He runs a Fortune 500 company. He could buy and sell every person here.”

“So?” I whisper back.

“So, he’s downing his drink like it’s water because he’s worried about what you and everyone else he went to high school with will think. That he’s still the nerd that the head cheerleader rejected, the guy the football players bullied.”

“Are you sure you just haven’t been watching too many reruns of Gossip Girl?” I snort and cover my mouth quickly, hoping no one else heard. “Besides, how would you get all that from serving him one drink?”

“You’d be surprised what I know,” he says seductively.

I’m about to ask him what he knows about me when a couple walks up, the man impatiently waving a twenty at Brian. They survey the bar quickly and begin to whisper. Are they talking about me?

Not wanting to know the answer, I turn my back to them and scan the room, taking in my classmates. Some look exactly the same. Others, much older. I shudder at the thought that someone in this room could be judging me and my choice to wear a cranberry red minidress, instead of a nondescript pantsuit, like most of the women here.

The room buzzes with conversation, of which I hear snippets. “I have two kids . . .” “Then we moved to Grand Rapids . . .” “So what do you do?” And I wonder again what it would be like to be able to say I’ve been married for five years, have two kids, live in the suburbs.

I know I should mingle, especially because people will notice if I don’t. But I hesitate. Just signing in and getting my name tag was enough to send me straight to the bar. Yes, I’ve met Jennifer Aniston. No, I don’t know if she hates Angelina Jolie. Yes, I’m pretty much resigned to answering questions like this all night. But part of me is relieved. The more they ask about the latest celebrity gossip, the less they’ll ask about me.

Rachel texts me that she and John are on their way up and I’m glad when I see them walk in, hand in hand. Rachel smiles apprehensively as she makes her way toward me. I take in her simple black dress and diamond earrings, the ones John gave her for their ten-year anniversary. Her shoulder-length chocolate brown hair flows freely and I can see from here that she spent considerable time perfecting her makeup, making her green eyes sparkle. She looks beautiful.

I wave them over and watch the envious glances as they walk my way, one of very few high school sweetheart couples from our class that passed the test of time. Back when I was still wondering which bar was hosting Ladies Night on Wednesday, Rachel and John were getting ready for their first baby. I’d begged her not to drop out of college when she discovered she was pregnant. She was so close to graduation. But no, she’d said, this is my life now.

I signal to Brian the bartender for two more drinks as Rachel and John approach. “Here’s to officially being old,” I call out as I hand one to each of them. John brings me in for a small side hug as he takes a large gulp.

“What’s up, Little C?” he says, using the nickname he gave me in high school. I’d met John my freshman year when I sat next to him in Mr. Roberts’s biology class. He was a total jock who’d transferred from out of

state, and I'd harbored a small crush on him at first. But he was literally speechless when I introduced him to Rachel for the first time at the water tower where we used to sneak to drink wine coolers with the upper classmen. And from that point on, they were an item and I was their third wheel. But I didn't mind. John always looked out for me like a big brother and some of my best memories were of the three of us together.

I reach over and poke Rachel in the arm. "You look nice."

She touches her simple black dress self-consciously. "Thanks. You sure it's okay? I don't look old?"

"You are the one person who doesn't have to worry about that. You look exactly the same!"

"What do you mean?" Her tone lets me know this wasn't the right thing to say. But it's true. Rachel could throw on her old cheerleading uniform and blend right in, her dark hair still worn in the same style, and not a single crease in her un-Botoxed forehead. Meanwhile, I hadn't been able to lift my eyebrows properly in years.

John steps in before I can answer. "She means it as a compliment."

She shoots him a death stare. "Stay out of it."

John turns to me. "She's upset about the ballot."

"The ballot?" I ask.

"You know when you checked in downstairs and they gave you a name tag? They also handed out a ballot. We're supposed to vote—"

Rachel cuts him off. "We're supposed to vote on things like who traveled the farthest . . ."

"Well, I can see how that would be incredibly upsetting," I say, laughing.

"Let me finish. There's also other awards like most successful and least successful."

"Least successful? Are you kidding me?" Brian was right. These things really do bring out the worst in people.

"No. There's not a least successful award. That's just what Rachel thinks it is." John rolls his eyes like she's not standing there. "It's called Least Changed."

"Same thing." Rachel crosses her arms over her chest looking even more like an eighteen-year-old.

"Anyway," John continues. "Since the moment we checked in, people have been marveling at how she hasn't changed a bit and she's afraid she'll win the award."

"Didn't you guys just get here? Like five minutes ago?"

"All the more reason why I think I'm going to win," Rachel says, looking terrified.

"Well, all I meant when I said that you looked the same is that you look beautiful. And if you win, the reason

will be because you haven't changed, not because you're not successful." I touch her arm gently to let her know I mean it, but she looks away. John and I exchange a look. Rachel's in a mood tonight. I swallow the lump that's been building in my throat since I rode up in the elevator with two couples bantering about how lucky they were to have found a babysitter while I'd stared down at the velvet five-inch stilettos that were already pinching my pinkie toes, the pain a welcome distraction from the chatter around me. How could she not realize that this night might be hard for me too?

"Rachel! Casey! John! Of course I'd find the three of you together. I mean, how crazy that nothing has changed in twenty years!" Class president, head cheerleader, and resident mean girl Julie Meyers bounces up looking nothing like her high school self, an extra fifty pounds hanging from her formerly petite frame. I think about Patrick Sanders drowning his high school memories of being rejected by her in a stiff drink and want to tell him he's better off.

"Wow, y'all look great!" She grabs Rachel and twirls her around. "Girl, you look exactly the same!"

John and I share another look. I signal Brian for another round. He gives me a knowing look. See, I told you this brings out the worst in people. I roll my eyes at him.

But once the drinks kick in, it seems like everyone's having fun, even Rachel. I've been trying to follow Destiny's advice, even hauling my ass off the bar stool and flirting with a few men my own age. Apparently, this twenty-year reunion is packed with recent divorcées. I had felt some apprehension about coming here without ever having been married, but now I wonder if it was worse to come here saying you tried and failed. I try to keep the smile pasted on my face as they discuss their child custody schedule and bitterness over alimony payments and think that while twenty-somethings may be lacking in maturity, at least they don't have this kind of baggage.

I try to catch Rachel's eye from across the room. I'm trapped talking to the former chess club president and his wife and I think they're pitching me some sort of chess reality show, but I tuned out a few minutes ago when the DJ started playing Cutting Crew. She finally comes over to rescue me. She's much more relaxed than she was earlier, her cheeks are flushed, and her eyes are shiny from the alcohol. I'm reminded again of the girl who charmed John at the water tower so many years ago.

"Are you having fun yet?" I ask tentatively, looking for signs that her insecurities from earlier are gone. She'd seemed down lately and I certainly hadn't succeeded in making her feel better, not that I'd tried that hard. Our conversations only seem to go from bad to worse because I can never say—or as in the case of the phone call about this reunion—not say—the right thing. I definitely don't know what to tell her when she complains about Charlotte being up all night or Sophie throwing a tantrum over some outfit. I just listen, because what am I supposed to say? I don't get what's that stressful about her life. We were both broadcasting majors in college, but I often think that even though she was immensely talented, Rachel would have gotten eaten alive had she ended up with a career in TV.

"You know what? I am having a good time," Rachel says as she loops her arm through mine, making me miss the girls we used to be.

"Where's John?" I ask, glancing around before finding him leaning against the bar talking to a woman whose name I can't remember. By the way he's gesturing, it's clear he's telling a story, and by the way she's leaning in, just a little too close, it's obvious she'd listen to that story on repeat for hours. John's always been a good-looking guy who, at six foot four, has turned more than his share of heads. I remember in high school and college Rachel used to get so jealous, secretly confiding in me that she wondered if she was pretty

enough for him. And of course she was—and still is.

I elbow Rachel. “Look at that woman throwing herself at John; so pathetic. I should go over there and save him.” I motion toward the nameless woman with the large, hungry eyes who looks like she wants to take a big bite out of him.

She waves it off. “Oh please. Let him have the attention. We’ve been together forever and we’re so boring. Boring as hell.” She smiles and twirls the straw in her empty glass. “Ready for another drink?”

“Welcome, everyone!” Julie Meyers is up at the podium demanding our attention. “It’s time for the awards!”

Rachel stiffens and John walks back to us and drapes his arms around her possessively. She leans into him and exhales and I feel a pang in my stomach. Even if it’s boring as hell, it must be nice to be someone’s someone. Someone you can exhale into.

Julie starts calling out the awards: Most Likely to Star in a Reality Show on Bravo; Person with the Fewest Original Body Parts; and my favorite, The Number-One MILF and Number-One DILF. People are running up to the stage with the excitement of an audience member selected to be on *The Price Is Right*.

“I think you showed less emotion when you won your Emmy last year!” Rachel whispers to me and we share a laugh.

“Okay, next up, our most successful graduate. Now I think we can all guess who this is!” Julie locks eyes with me as she calls my name. “Casey Lee, get up here!”

I look over at Rachel and John. John is whistling and Rachel’s face is frozen until I catch her eye and she quickly composes herself and starts to clap. I walk up to the podium and grab my award, say a hurried thank-you, and head back down as quickly as possible, Rachel’s expressionless face etched in my mind. “It’s nothing,” I say to her when I return, trying to let her know that she wouldn’t have been so upset that I won if she understood how much I’ve given up to get it. She nods silently and looks away.

I look over to my right and watch Patrick Sanders walking dejectedly over to the bar. How the hell did I win this over him? He could buy this hotel if he wanted. Brian has his drink waiting when he walks up and looks over at me with a knowing smile that says I told you so.

Julie’s voice shrills over the microphone again. “And now for our last award, Least Changed!”

John and I exchange a panicked look.

“Rachel Cole!”

Users Review

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