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**Bully... or
Bullied?**

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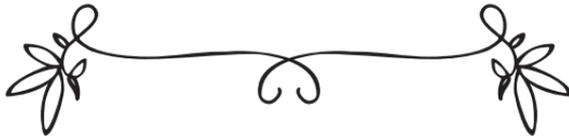
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Chapter One



“I’m telling Mom!” Jo Jo yelled, waving the cell phone above his head that he had just pulled out of my backpack.

“Give it to me right now, you little freak,” I screamed back. “It is not even mine.”

“Oh right, like Mom will believe that,” Jo Jo said. “You are going to be in such trouble.”

“I’m holding it for a friend so her parents don’t find it,” I said defiantly. “Come on, Jo Jo, please give it back.” It was the truth, too. Sarah, the new girl in my 8th grade math class, had asked me to hold on

to the phone because she said her mom had threatened to take it away and she had nowhere else to hide it.

Jo Jo, in the meantime, was darting around the room like a little ninja, so there was no way I could catch him and grab the phone.

“OK, so what do you want in return?” I pleaded, knowing he always has something in mind to blackmail me with. Jo Jo, by the way, is my annoying eleven-year-old brother, who I am sure is headed for a life of crime, as he has perfected the art of blackmailing me. Over the past few years I have given him many of my favorite possessions and, worst of all, allowed him to hang with me and my friends in return for his vow of silence.

“There is a new Full Throttle video game that just came out,” he said confidently. “It costs \$49.95 and is at GameParadise.”

“\$49.95! I don’t have that kind of money, and you know it, Jo Jo!” I yelled, my anger rising to a fever. At the same time I was thinking how lame it

is that we all call him Jo Jo when his name is Joseph. Jo Jo sounds like a name for a clown or a stuffed monkey—and at this moment I was wishing he was one or the other.

“Mom!” Jo Jo called, looking at me with a smirk on his face. “Mom, Lyndie has a cell phone in her backpack!”

I crumpled into the flowered armchair as I heard my mom’s footsteps coming around the corner from the laundry room.

“I’m going to get you for this, you little creep,” I hissed at Jo Jo. He looked back at me with absolutely no fear in his face. In fact he had turned on his angelic face as Mom came into the room, as he held out the cell phone to her.

“Lyndie!” Mom began as she took the phone from Jo Jo’s sickeningly sweet face. “What in the world are you doing with this?” Her face was growing dark with concern.

“I never saw it before, Mom. I have no idea where it came from. Some kid at school must have

thought they were putting it in their own backpack and put it in mine by mistake.” I tried my hardest to look honest and believable. “I will take it to the school office tomorrow first thing so they can try to find who lost it.” I put on my best *Believe me, I am so telling the truth* face, as I looked at her squarely in the eyes.

“Well, I may have to talk to your dad about this,” she started. “I am not sure what to believe right now, but if I find anything like this again, you will be in huge trouble, young lady!” She took the phone and glared at me, then turned to go get her phone.

I looked over at Jo Jo, who was clearly enjoying all of this. I wanted to smack him on the top of his curly blond head. Instead I gave him my *You’re dead!* look, which most likely had absolutely no impact on him. I headed up the stairs to my room, fairly confident that my mom wouldn’t be able to reach my dad at work because he was always on the phone with clients, and by the time she did get a chance to talk to him, they would get in an argument about how to handle us in these kinds of situations and

would never reach an agreement. My parents had gotten divorced five years ago, and still pretty much hated each other. Jo Jo and I figured out a few years back how to work them against each other, so we rarely suffered any huge consequences for anything we did wrong. It is about the only thing that is good about the divorce. It doesn't make up for the horrible disruption to our lives by having to go back and forth between two homes in accordance with some crazy judge-decided custody schedule. Half the time I am not even sure where I am supposed to be on a daily basis. I was getting off track--right now I needed to hope Sarah wouldn't show up at the front door looking for her phone. It would be pretty hard to explain why my mom has it, after she trusted me with it.

Sarah has only been at the school for two months, but she has managed to become the most popular girl among the girls **and** the boys. I am constantly trying to figure out how she does it. I have been with pretty much the same group of kids since grammar school, and I am so far from being

in the popular crowd it hurts. Here is how we stack up against each other in the areas that count. She has long brown hair, I have long blonde hair. She is a little thick in the middle, I am thin, no doubt from the five days of ballet classes I have every week. She has a huge forehead, mine is normal. She has brown eyes, I have blue. She plays soccer on a club team; I can't kick or catch a ball if my life depended on it. She has a way of putting someone down in a heartbeat; I am always stunned into silence.

Here's a classic Sarah comment. We were at the lunch table with a group of boys, which usually meant the girls were talking to the girls and the boys are ignoring us. Sarah in her loudest voice said to me, "Why are your teeth so yellow?" This of course got all the boys at the table to stop ignoring us and stare at my teeth--which by the way are a very nice shade of white. And my response? Turn bright red in embarrassment and say nothing, as I had a huge bite of pasta in my mouth at the time. But for the rest of the day I swear the boys were trying to get a glimpse of my teeth, because if Sarah

said it, it must be true. How does she do it? And yet when she asked me take her phone and hide it for her, I couldn't say OK fast enough, hoping that maybe now I would be on her good side and escape the mortifying comments she dishes out.

I heard the doorbell ring, followed by the skidding sound of Jo Jo sliding in his socks to beat me to answering the door.

"Please don't be Sarah, please don't be Sarah," I said to myself.

"Lyndie, it's for you!" I heard Jo Jo yell.

I walked in dread to the front hall. Standing inside is Sarah, laughing and talking to Jo Jo, who was looking enraptured by her! She could even charm twerpy little eleven-year-olds. It figures.

"Oh, hi Sarah," I said weakly, hoping for the first time in my life that Jo Jo wouldn't leave the hall, because I knew she wouldn't ask for the phone in front of him.

"I would love that lemonade," she was saying to Jo Jo. "Do you want me to come with you to get it?"

Can't Jo Jo see how fake that smile is? I thought.

“Oh, no--I will be right back,” he said, heading off to the kitchen, and disappearing around the corner.

“I need my phone,” Sarah said to me hurriedly, looking over her shoulder nervously.

“Ah, well, about that,” I started.

“You have it, right?!” she said indignantly.

“Well, my mom found it in my backpack and....”

Before I could finish, Sarah shrieked, “Are you kidding me? I should have known better than to trust someone lame like you. I need that phone and you better get it back--tonight!” Her face was contorted in anger. Just then Jo Jo came rushing back into the hall with a glass of lemonade, and Sarah’s face went from devil to angel in an instant.

“Oh you are too sweet!” she gushed, taking the glass from him. “Why didn’t you tell me you had such an adorable brother? Or is he your twin?” Things couldn’t get worse, I thought. Jo Jo was

beaming--I wanted to barf. This girl has no limits on her power.

“I am so forgetful!” she said coyly, still focusing her big brown eyes on Jo Jo. He looked mesmerized. “I came over to ask your help on the math, and I totally forgot the assignment.” She rolled her eyes, in an “I am just too cute to remember everything” kind of look. “I am going to zip back home and I will be back in fifteen minutes.” Her eyes pierced mine. I knew exactly what she was saying--get that phone or else. And as usual, I had no response. I just stood there helplessly.

“See you soon, Jo Jo!” She smiled sweetly at him. “Oh, and you too, Lyndie.” With that afterthought she turned and headed out the door.

“She is so hot!” Jo Jo exclaimed as he shut the door. “I can’t wait until she comes back!” He ran up the stairs-- probably to actually go comb his hair for once. Unbelievable.

So this day was turning into one of the worst days of my life. How in the world was I going to get that phone back? Time to find Mom and the phone.

I went into the kitchen and saw her thumbing through one of the hundreds of cookbooks that she buys and then never uses. My mom really wanted to be able to cook a decent meal, but never bothered to get all the necessary ingredients, so ended up cooking pasta or we would go out to eat. It is always OK with me because the few times she did try something different it was a total disaster. The last fiasco was a meatless chili that was so spicy we were all downing gallons of water for days after.

I scanned the kitchen, and there was the phone, sitting next to hers on the counter by her purse. *I need a diversion*, I thought. “Mom, Jo Jo is up in your bathroom trying to shave,” I said offhandedly. “Just thought you might be interested.” I had a huge twinge of guilt, but it lasted only momentarily. *Serves him right for all the stuff he does to get me in trouble*, I thought. And I was pretty proud of myself for coming up with such a brilliant idea so quickly. Maybe Sarah’s evilness is rubbing off on me.

“WHAT!” she exclaimed. “He will cut himself for sure.” She raced out of the kitchen.

The second she was gone, I grabbed the phone. My backpack was hanging on the kitchen chair, so I shoved it inside the zipper pouch and grabbed the backpack. Now where to put it so it would accessible when Sarah came back, but my mom wouldn't see it. I ran to the front door and stuck it behind the stone dog on the porch, then raced back into the kitchen trying to look composed as I heard her coming back down the stairs.

“Lyndie, Jo Jo is in his own room brushing his teeth,” she exclaimed. “He was nowhere near my room.”

“Wow,” I responded, “He must have heard you coming up and dashed out. You know how sneaky he can be. Well it's a good thing he heard you coming, so he didn't get hurt. What are we having for dinner? Maybe we should go out?” I figured if I just kept talking it would distract her and she would forget about the phone.

“I was going to try this new skillet lasagna, but it looks like you need basil and ricotta cheese and

I don't think we have that," she started, "so how about pasta with butter?"

"Sounds great!" I said, checking the clock. Ten more minutes and Sarah would be back. That should be just about the time it would take her to make the pasta. "Can I help?" I offered, only so I could make sure she didn't remember the phone. I placed myself strategically between her and the counter where her purse and phone were.

Just then, the house phone rang. I froze, fearing it would be my dad calling her back, and so I raced to grab it before she did.

"Hello" I answered weakly. As soon as I heard the voice of my mom's sister on the phone, I let out my breath. "Sure, hang on, here she is," I said. "Mom, it is Diane for you." I couldn't have wished for a better phone call. Now my mom would forget all about dinner for at least a half hour, while she gossiped with her sister about their older sister, who just moved to the wilderness in Montana. I

handed her the portable phone and walked back to the front hall to watch for Sarah.

“Is she back yet?” I heard Jo Jo say from the stairs. Oh, good grief--now I had to deal with his interference again. I couldn’t catch a break today!

“No!” I said curtly. “Can’t you mind your own business for once?”

“I think she likes me, and no, in answer to your question,” he stated.

“Look, you little pest, I need to help her with some math problem, and then she is all yours, OK?” I pleaded. “Just give me a minute with her outside to talk about the math and then I will bring her inside and you can drool all over her.”

Jo Jo looked suspiciously at me, but he was so lovestruck that he was not thinking clearly. “All right, but you better bring her in right after you do the math whatever it is.”

I’m going to need a therapy session if I can get through the rest of this afternoon, I thought. Just then, I saw Sarah coming up the walk.

“Just stay there!” I commanded Jo Jo. “We will be right in.”

I opened the door as she was getting ready to ring the bell.

“Do you have it?” she said, glaring at me.

I grabbed the backpack and pulled the phone from the zipper compartment and handed it to her, relieved to get it out of my control.

“Sorry,” I said nervously. She took the phone and stuffed it in her sweatshirt pocket.

“Next time I will know who I can and can’t trust,” she said haughtily. “Oh, and your little brother is a nerd.” She turned, flipped her hair, and started to leave. *Really*, I thought, *did she really just flip her hair at me? That’s such a made for TV movie move and she just used it on me.* I waited and watched until she was out of sight. Now I just had to deal with the wrath of Jo Jo, and then my mom finding out the phone was missing. I was so wishing it was tomorrow already. I turned and went back into the house.