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## Foolish

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## Foolish

A tap on the shoulder.

“Excuse me, Bailey? I need to talk to you.”

The voice of Mrs. Doose, the middle school counselor, takes me by surprise. There are only twenty minutes left in the school day.

“You might as well pack up your things,” she says, her voice tight in her throat.

My heart knocks against my ribcage. My stomach drops like an anchor. Even though I’m only 14, Mrs. Doose and I are practically best friends. I babysit for her regularly, and she loves to joke or chat with me when I pass her office between classes. She has never once looked this serious in any of her conversations with me.

Something is wrong.

As I gather my books and zip up my backpack, my mind is racing. Last I knew, my grandparents were all in good health. My two brothers were both safely in school. My dad was at work, and my mom was working from home. What could have happened?

“Follow me,” Mrs. Doose says.

I trail her out of the computer lab where my technology class was taking place. She walks briskly down the hallway, always a step ahead of me. She doesn’t say a word, and she doesn’t look me in the eye. Suddenly I’m coughing, trying to catch my breath. I didn’t realize I was holding it.

We pass Mrs. Doose’s office, which is both concerning and confusing. We pass classrooms, the library, and more offices. Everything around me becomes a blur, and I nearly trip trying to keep up with her.

Eventually we reach a foreboding black door at the very end of the hallway—a door I hardly realized existed—and she motions for me to enter the room. “Officer Albers would like a word with you,” Mrs. Doose says.

She quickly closes the door behind me, leaving me in the world’s smallest office with the world’s scariest police officer.

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The barren white walls of the converted closet-office immediately close in on my small body. The room is cold—far too cold for April, and the only light within its windowless walls emanates from a plastic lamp on the laminate desk. Even the lamplight seems cold as it casts a bright glare on Officer Albers' bald head.

“Miss Zallek,” Officer Albers says after a prolonged moment of silence. I look him straight in the eye, searching for any signs of concern or distress. His beady eyes stare me down, and suddenly mine are incapable of blinking. “You are here because we believe you may have information about an incident that took place last night.”

An incident?

“At approximately 10:35 p.m. at a private residence in Mankato, Minnesota,” he says without taking a breath, “two cars were vandalized by what we believe to be a group of adolescent and adult individuals.”

It takes me a moment to register the words coming out of his mouth. I stare at him, perplexed. Last night? Vandalism? Me? Suddenly, it hits me. I understand everything that's going on, and a warm surge of relief gushes through my entire body. Why, this isn't about a family tragedy or a horrific accident or any of the other terrible things I had imagined! This is simply a big misunderstanding. Officer Albers' closet-office suddenly seems to grow three sizes bigger, the lights become brighter, and my heartbeat returns to a calm, steady pace.

“Sir,” I say, a broad smile spreading across my face and a chuckle escaping from my mouth, “I can explain.”

Officer Albers leans across his desk, one eyebrow rising up onto his glossy forehead. He is clearly curious to see what information I am willing to offer up so readily.

“You see,” I say, collapsing with relief into the chair across from his desk, “my family gets really into April Fool's.”

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I go on to explain the history of pranks my family has played on one another over the years, which most commonly occurred between my immediate family and my dear uncle Mark and his family. I tell Officer Albers about everything from the more mild shenanigans, like when we

put hot sauce in my uncle's post-workout drink, to the more elaborate endeavors, such as the time my aunt and uncle wrapped my entire bedroom in Saran Wrap or the time we dragged furniture onto their roof.

"We are very close," I say, "but we show our love by making fun of each other." I try to explain that family doesn't take anything too seriously, especially ourselves. The basic rule of thumb is as follows: if we don't make fun of you, we probably don't like you.

"So you see," I continue, motioning across the desk to Officer Albers, "yesterday was April first, so my family and I were morally obligated to do something to my uncle and his family."

I laugh as I say this, inviting Officer Albers to join in with me.

His eyes narrow.

"We know the code to his garage," I continue, slowly, hoping Officer Albers will soon start to catch wind of how funny this, "so we 'broke in' last night and filled my uncle's and my cousin's cars with thousands and thousands of Kleenex tissues. Then we wrapped the cars in Saran Wrap, and then we covered them with Post-It notes." I snicker as I say this, remembering how ridiculous the cars looked when had finished the "evil" deed. By the time we had finished, the cars were unrecognizable; they looked more like first grade craft projects than automobiles. I would later learn that my cousin's car left a significant impression on the neighborhood that day, leaving a trail of pink and green Post-It notes between their driveway and his high school.

"I know it might sound crazy," I add, "but it was all in good fun. Nothing we did could have caused any damage, and we only did it to make my uncle laugh."

Officer Albers takes a painfully slow, deep breath and removes the stiff wire-rim glasses from his face. "Miss Zallek," he says in a low voice, wiping the glasses with his sleeve, "I don't know about you, but I have never considered trespassing and property damage to be a laughing matter."

For the first time in my short little life, I'm at a loss for words. I've always been a good kid—a chronic perfectionist, in fact, with an arguably unhealthy straight-A addiction. Officer Albers wouldn't even

know my name if I hadn't been the one to ask him to chaperone school dances—dances which I had planned as student council president! Clearly, I am anything but a scofflaw. If anything, I'm a bit of a dork.

"I'm going to need you to give me the names of everyone involved in this incident," Officer Albers continues. He pulls out a pen and a yellow legal pad from his desk and stares me down over the top of his glasses. The 3:00 bell rings and I hear the muffled sounds of middle- and high-schoolers racing to leave the building. I search Officer Albers' face for signs that he might let me leave, but he doesn't blink.

It's clear that I have relinquished my rights to personal freedom.

As panic makes itself at home in my body, I start to mutter the first few names I can think of. "Um, my dad was there. Mark Zallek. And my mom was there too. Nancy Zallek," I stammer, suddenly a stranger to the words spilling out of my own mouth. A sizzling bead of sweat plummets down my chest as my mind races to figure out what to do, what to say. I am a good kid, and no one has ever prepared me for this kind of situation. Is this legal? Am I supposed to call a lawyer? Suddenly I'm kicking myself for spending my youth watching Friends instead of CSI or Law and Order or anything that would help me in my current situation.

"My brother, Taylor Zallek," I hear myself saying, as if I'm not in control of my own mouth anymore. "And my brother Brett Zallek... but he's only ten! He didn't know what he was doing." I hear my voice becoming higher—more pitiful and pleading.

The phone on Officer Albers' desk rings and I jump. He looks at it, annoyed, and stops taking notes to answer it.

"Mhmm, mhmm," he mutters into the mouthpiece. "Yes, she's here. Okay. Thanks."

Click.

Clearly "she" is me, but I don't know what anything else he says could mean. Was that another police officer? A judge? A local news station wanting information about the straight-A teen who's gone rogue?

Officer Albers continues to press me about each detail of the night before—what time we left, what we were wearing, what materials

were used. My brain feels like a scrambled egg as I try to rack my memory for every aspect of the night while simultaneously trying to prevent a nervous breakdown. I wring out every last detail from my memory. I describe every Kleenex, every roll of Saran Wrap. I begin to wonder if this is what running a marathon is like.

Leaning back in his chair, Officer Albers gently sets his notepad on the desk and looks me over with his x-ray police vision. “Miss Zallek, I appreciate your cooperation. However, I must ask you one last question.”

I brace myself, gripping the handles of my chair with my sweat-laden palms. At this point, I’m not sure I can handle any more.

“So,” he says, clasping his hands together over his protruding belly, “...are you sweatin’ bullets yet?”

For the second time, I am speechless. What? What does he mean? Is there something I’m missing here?

My cell phone beeps. I assume it’s my mom, concerned about why I’m not home from school yet. I look pleadingly at Officer Albers, and he motions toward my phone. “It’s okay. You can answer it.”

I reach down, my hand shaking, and open up the flip screen. In bold black letters my phone tells me that I have one new text message. I open it up, and discover that it’s not my mom. It’s a text from my uncle Mark.

One word. Lowercase.

*“gotcha.”*

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