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LONDON OXFORD NEW YORK NEW DELHI SYDNEY



MIRI

So, tell me about Fatima Ro. There are a lot of people who are curious about her right now.

All right. But I'm just going to say this outright because it's probably the one thing we still agree on—me, Soleil, and Penny. We were shallow before we met Fatima Ro. We were all about the scene. You know what I mean about the scene: the parties, the trinkets, the lifestyle. We hosted.

Hosted?

House parties at Penny's place. It feels like forever ago. Ugh. [shakes head] All those people, the throbbing music . . . handling all that money.

What money?

We collected a cover charge to fund subsequent parties.

Very industrious.

That's us. [sighs] We met on Orientation Day in seventh grade when we were grouped together for the Graham scavenger hunt. Winners become orientation leaders the following year. We won by splitting up and then finding the last clue together—the school seal on the roof.

You're a good team.

We were, yes . . . before this. Anyway, our parties were epic. The last one we hosted was casino night. We had game tables and chocolate poker chips. It won't be outdone for years.

That's pretty impressive.

[laughs] Oh, please. We thought taking selfies on the roulette table was the stuff of life. The reality was we were bored out of our skulls. You see, the basic human need for emotional intimacy can't be satisfied by a sushi station or a celebrity DJ. Fatima made us realize that. She changed everything for us. Even that phrase, "the stuff of life," that's something I picked up from her.

I wouldn't have said that just now if it weren't for her; I probably would've said something more like "We thought taking selfies was so *Vogue*-worthy." But now, I'm saying "the stuff of life" because Fatima pretty much gave us a whole new language, a new way of thinking, of living. When she took us in, all of a sudden I realized . . . we *all* realized that we were starving to be part of something meaningful. Becoming friends with Fatima Ro—I mean, actually being part of her inner circle—was *it*.

Were you a fan of her novel Undertow*?*

Definitely. That's how this whole thing started. Absolutely. All of us were fans. Well, we girls were, anyway. Jonah was along for the company. But still, even he was fascinated by her. I read *Undertow* when it first came out. When I found out how young Fatima was—barely out of college—it made sense that I felt close to her writing. She got me. I love *Undertow* as if it's a living being, which is passion in its truest form. That's what separates a casual interest from a passion. I credit Fatima for my understanding of that.

You see, you can be in love with a thing the way you can be in love with a person. A thing can physically trigger the same chemical responses as another human can: oxytocin and vasopressin. Fatima taught me this. Her book proved it. But I just cringe at how the media is comparing it to other novels. Because

what you have to understand is that *Undertow* was never a Harry Potter phenomenon. I mean, nobody's wearing *Undertow* Halloween costumes. There's no *Undertow* Disney theme park. But that's what's so authentic about it. If you love *Undertow* it's because you get it, not because there's a Tom Hanks movie and a Happy Meal. This book has a much quieter, more thoughtful following. And to me, it feels more genuine to be part of something personal like that.

Think about it: if you know and love *Undertow* and you meet someone else who truly knows and loves *Undertow*, instantly she's your kind of person. [snaps] You cannot possibly feel that kind of connection with, say, a Hunger Games fan, because that fandom is just too big; it's too *commercial*. It's like, of *course* you like the Hunger Games. Everyone likes it, so big deal, right? But Fatima's following is simply more intimate. Her novel takes a certain, more concerning, er, uh, *dis*cerning reader. So to be a fan of *Undertow* is deeper . . . there's an understanding between people who love it. We share an appreciation for the depths of its messages and for its language. There's a simpatico between *Undertow* fans. It's one beating heart meeting another beating heart. [laughs] There I go, I'm sounding like her again. I know. But I'm grateful for that, for her words—the simpatico and the beating hearts. [laughs] Do you know why I agreed to speak with you, Nelson?

You were impressed that Naked Truth *is number forty-seven in the ratings?*

Hardly. It's because you were the only reporter who actually read both *Undertow* and *The Absolution of Brady Stevenson*. I asked every journalist who contacted me.

Oh, really?

I don't care about ratings or Emmys or how famous a journalist is or isn't.

Thanks.

I wanted to talk to someone who isn't out to persecute Fatima for her art and who would understand how incredibly lucky we were to connect with her. And you do get it, don't you?

Yes. I really do. That's why I want you to tell the side of this story that no one else is telling, about the real Fatima Ro. No one knew her the way you did. This is your forum, Miri.

[smiles] I can't tell you how much I appreciate that, Nelson. I knew I chose the right person. Oh, I'm sorry. I've been so rude. I should've offered you something to drink. May I get you something?

No, thank you.

Water? Iced tea? We have a SodaStream.

I'm good, thanks.

Suit yourself.

Can you talk about how you met Fatima?

Yes. You see, we had a plan when we met her. Soleil will never admit to this now, but we went to Fatima's signing at Book Revue with—I exaggerate you not—a premeditated *plan* to get close to her. It was our *goal* to get noticed by her. That's why I cannot and will not understand their outrage over the new book. Seriously, Soleil and Penny have become so ungrateful when what we wanted from the beginning was to be associated with her. It's sad, really, how bitter Soleil and Penny have grown. I should pity them, honestly. I feel sorry for people who don't believe in loyalty.

They have reason to be upset, though. Fatima did base her new book on you girls and Jonah without even telling you. The book isn't flattering. You're not angry at Fatima at all?

We befriended Fatima *because* she's a writer. You can't hug a lion

and then be surprised when he bites you.

But Jonah was beaten into a coma in the Graham School parking lot because of what Fatima wrote.

It wasn't her fault.

The cops found a copy of Absolution *at the crime scene. The perpetrators left it on Jonah's chest while he was fighting for his life.*

Dateline and Mario Lopez just love to play up that detail, don't they? It's sick the way attractive women are portrayed by the media. They're either victims or villains, because those make the sexiest headlines. [sighs] It's easy to win ratings by connecting the crime to a young, pretty writer, isn't it? Think for a second. What do they plaster on the screen every single time they cover this story? Fatima's face.

You're right.

Half the time they don't even show Jonah's. "Beautiful author who seduced teens into revealing their dirty secrets now responsible for boy's coma. Full story at eleven." That's cheap bait. That's not the truth.

Then what is the truth?

That there isn't anyone to blame. You read the book. Art doesn't harm. Art saves. [shakes head] You know, we shared hours upon hours of conversations with Fatima about creative freedom and artistic expression. Soleil documented every word from Fatima's mouth on her phone and her laptop, so I thought she respected all of that. Really, you couldn't stop Soleil from documenting. She was nothing less than obsessed. Her notes were all "Fatima this, Fatima that." Ask her.

I'm not interviewing Soleil. She turned me down. Low ratings. Penny agreed only when I told her that you were in.

Huh. [pauses] Then you should look into getting ahold of Soleil's journal. That would shed light on how desperate she was for Fatima's attention. Seriously, get her journal and her emails with Fatima, too.

I made an offer, but she already sold them to New York City *magazine.*

You're kidding. [picks up her phone]

No. They're featuring them in a series of online articles starting today, actually. The public's been glued to stories about high school violence for a couple of years now. Fatima, whatever her involvement, has added a whole new element of interest.

[browses on phone] Well. There it is, side by side with an article about Jonah and Fatima Ro. Oh look, a photo of Fatima. What did I tell you? And nice byline, Soleil! [laughs] What a hypocrite!

How do you mean?

Soleil hates Fatima for writing about her, but she's publishing journal entries about Fatima? She can't possibly defend that.

I hear you.

Screw her, right? If Soleil's publishing her side, I'm not holding back.

You shouldn't. Don't let her control public opinion. Don't let her get the last word.

No way in hell.

So, talk to me. Tell me more. What happened at the book signing?

[clears throat] The night of the book signing we took the back of the line on purpose; we strategized that we could talk with Fatima for longer if we were last. We might even get a chance to walk her out; we wanted pictures and to ask her to follow our Instagrams.

The back of the line was all Soleil's idea. She was the writer, as you well know. As the whole free world now knows. She was the one who wanted to wriggle her way into Fatima's life. No. That's not even the extent of it. Soleil didn't just want to be in Fatima's life. She wanted to *be* Fatima. Like I said, people always want to be in the front of the line. But there's a different strategy for everything. Well, I was terrified to meet her, to be honest. I'd built up that moment in my mind; it felt so once-in-a-lifetime. I didn't want to make a fool of myself. Have you ever met someone famous that you loved? Isn't it surreal? To suddenly, after dreaming about it for so long, see that person in front of you? I mean, flesh and blood and breathing and moving and talking and you can reach out and touch them if you wanted to?

I saw Quentin Tarantino once.

So then, you know.

Yeah, I get it.

Well, Fatima was poised and very striking. She's attractive, that's a fact. But in person it's more about her presence than her looks; she's so completely self-possessed that you really can't help but just . . . *stare* at her. Plus, what was so amazing was to look at her and know that *Undertow* came out of her brain. I don't even

know how to describe that. I kept thinking about how she had conceptualized this novel that I love; she had crafted it and created it out of her own head. And she was so petite. I don't know why, but that was surprising to me. I just kept marveling at her: How could all these words and thoughts come out of her? Am I sounding like an insane person? [laughs]

Not at all. I couldn't get over how tall Tarantino was.

Really?

Six feet, easily.

See? It's overwhelming when you see these people in a room with you.

Tarantino was on the street. I passed him on my way to the subway.

Great. Well, with Fatima I was so nervous; I had to keep going to the bathroom. We waited in that line for an hour. But when our turn came, Soleil, who'd orchestrated the entire outing, she shook my arm and told me to go up first, so I did. Someone had to take control of the situation. I had my copy of *Undertow* in my arms; I was hugging the thing like a blankie. [laughs] [pause] Excuse me. [blows nose] Allergies. [clears throat] I had the book against my chest like this, and I just talked with her.

What did you talk about?

It's funny because I can hardly remember what I said, but I memorized everything she said to me. I must've introduced myself, and I probably quoted my favorite line from *Undertow* and told her how it affected me. I'm sure I did, since I rehearsed it. I'm not embarrassed to admit that. Each of us rehearsed what we were going to say. We talked about it in the car. If they tell you otherwise, they're lying. Fatima looked straight at me and said, "I'm very pleased to meet you. You have such great energy about you, Miri." That's what she told me. I had great energy. Imagine if Tarantino told you that you had great energy?

That'd be pretty cool.

That's exactly how I felt about Fatima. And she addressed me by name just like that. She was intense. But strangely, at the same time, she *calmed* me. That was her aura. [sighs]

Then I gave her my book to sign, and I introduced Soleil and Penny and Jonah. I was lucky to be first. I think Fatima and I had a special bond because I was first. She considered me a leader, you know.

Do you remember the conversation between Fatima and your friends?

[laughs] Jonah was so funny about the whole thing because he hadn't even read *Undertow*, but you had to buy a copy to be in the line, so he bought one. He didn't have a thing to say to Fatima, so he rambled something utterly ridiculous about novelists being today's most valuable artists. He went on and on about technology—iPads versus television versus books—I don't know what he was babbling about. [laughs] [sighs] [silence]

Is there something you'd like to add?

[checks her phone]

Miri?

Sorry. I'm just anxious about Jonah.

Any news?

No. [sets phone down] Do you think they'll catch the guys that jumped him? They're probably all from his old school. It shouldn't be a huge mystery.

They're working on it.

They'd better. And then everyone can finally lay the blame where it belongs instead of on Fatima Ro.

I'd be down for that. So, after Fatima signed your books . . .

Right. [drinks from a water bottle] It was late. We were the last ones in the bookstore. The staff was stacking chairs, and the lights were off in the back. The register was already closed. Fatima gathered her bags, and the next thing we knew, we were actually, literally walking her out, just like we had fantasized. It was fantastic. I would've said fate, but Fatima doesn't believe in fate, and neither do I now. We carve our own paths.

Does that go for Jonah? Do you believe he's in a coma because he carved his own path?

Maybe I do. You probably think that makes me a terrible person.

Not at all.

I'm just being honest.

I appreciate it.

Anyway, Fatima asked us what school we went to. When we said the Graham School on the North Shore, she was thrilled because she'd just moved into the area—Old Westbury! Are you from around here?

Yes.

So you know it's only two towns from Graham. That's ten minutes from me, five minutes from Penny and Soleil. How did we not know that she'd moved in? We were *neighbors.* [shakes head] We couldn't believe it. We chatted about our school and the shops at Americana. And then, get this—I couldn't even make this up—Fatima said [clears throat], "If you're not busy Thursday night, you should come to the Witches Brew café. I'm giving a book talk at eight."

Awesome.

We were *undone.* I could have died right there on that sidewalk. Cuddling my *Undertow.*

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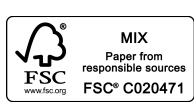
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