



**BELLE OF
THE BRAWL**

**AN ALPHAS NOVEL BY
LISI HARRISON**



POPPY

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ZEN CENTER
MEDITATION POOL
FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 24TH
8:28 A.M.

“OHHMMMMM.”

As she sat in full lotus position on a silver blue yoga mat, Charlie Deery’s Chap Sticked lips formed a perfect circle as she chanted the sacred sound of the universe. But while her mouth was saying *om*, her mind was screaming *ommmhmuh-gud*. *Scared* had become the new sacred.

She opened one coffee-brown eye and peeked at Alpha Academy’s holographic meditation yogi.

“No . . . ohhhhmmmm . . . Peeking . . . ohmmmm,” chanted Tran, his lids still blissfully shut. “Keeeeeep breathing . . . ohmmmmmm.”

The chubby monk—or “Chunk”—wore a flowing saffron robe and floated a few inches above the Zen Center’s meditation pool. Conceived by Shira Brazille, head Alpha and creator of the academy’s @-shaped island, Tran’s purpose was to

teach the girls at the fiercely competitive high school how to relax. And it was completely stressing Charlie out.

The meditation courtyard in the belly of the Buddha-shaped Zen Center should have been a calming respite, but after last night, Charlie wouldn't have been able to find peace at a Woodstock reunion. After one more deep inhalation of jasmine-scented air Charlie gave up.

"Sorry, Tran," she sighed, her mahogany bangs blowing up off her forehead. "I just can't focus."

Tran's puffy cheeks expanded with his smile, slicing his double chin into a quad. His eyes crinkled into crescents as his hologram face flickered out for a split-second and then reappeared. "Buddha says: The way is not in the sky. The way is in the heart."

"I don't even know which way is *up*," Charlie answered, her voice shaken by confusion and stirred with exhaustion. She had spent the night playing ref to an endless wrestling match between her heart and her brain, and still, there was no clear winner in sight.

She lifted her eyes to the patch of blue sky above the meditation courtyard. But instead of neon-colored parrots and personal airplanes, she saw a cloud-shaped Darwin and Allie, each silently imploring her to choose a side—their side.

"You are still looking outside yourself for answers," he said, patting his virtual heart. "Look in."

"*How?*" Charlie asked, her sage-rage mounting.

Tran flickered again. He opened his mouth to speak, but she didn't want to hear it. The only thing Charlie wanted to "look in" was a pint of *Tell Me What to Do Before I Go Nuts* ice cream. Was he ever going to give her some *real* advice? If not she'd be better off with a Magic 8 Ball. At least that gave answers.

"Namaste," she said, aiming her aPod at his muffin top, and pushing END SESSION. "Namaste," he bowed and then disintegrated.

Now what?

She never should have let Shira connive her into breaking up with Darwin. She never should have convinced Allie to date him so she could keep tabs on him. She never should have confessed to Darwin that the dump was committed under duress. And she never should have stood there when he said he wanted her back. Because she had already promised him to Allie. But was he hers to promise?

Loyalty vs. Love? Head vs. Heart? BFFs vs. BFs? The answer was harder to come by than an iPad 4G.

Charlie unwound her legs from lotus position and reached toward the stone bench where she'd set down her breakfast, a frosted beaker full of a brain-stimulating protein shake specially concocted for invention majors. She placed the silver straw between her lips and took an aggressive sip. Hopefully the ice-cold green goo would cause brain freeze and grant her a moment of much-needed peace. But instead, all the green tea, ginger, and honey blend left behind was the metal-

lic tinge of panic on her tongue and a mild stomachache.

Double now what?

Charlie pulled out her aPod again and began pacing the perimeter of the meditation courtyard like a caged circus lion. She had one option left. Thumbing the screen she located the Alpha Class Selector app and started to scroll through her options to see what else she could add to her schedule. Overwhelmed by the 322 current courses, Charlie decided to start with the A's and quickly selected Acrobatics, Animation, Arabic, and Astronomy, bringing her total class periods up to eleven. Now she wouldn't have a spare second to fret about her life.

Time	Class	Location
7:30 a.m.	BREAKFAST AND MOTIVATIONAL LECTURE	Pavilion
8:00 a.m.	(RE)INVENTION (IM's ONLY) Mentored lab hour for Alpha experimentation, innovation, motivation.	Marie Curie Invention Laboratory
9:00 a.m.	3-D RENDERING & ANIMATION Create, then replicate. Programs to reproduce your inventions on a global scale.	Melinda Gates Computer Lab
9:40 a.m.	INTRO TO ARABIC Prerequisite: Fluency in Spanish, French, and German	Sculpture Garden
10:10 a.m.	PROTEIN BREAK Nourish your mind and body with a personalized smoothie. Drink fast. Your next class starts in ten minutes.	Health Food Court

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10:20 a.m.	THE ART OF EXCELLENCE Betas work to live. Alphas live to work. Map your professional goals with a life coach and plot your path to the top.	Elizabeth I Lecture Hall
11:30 a.m.	HONE IT: FOR WRITERS Whether fact or fiction, when Alphas write, the world reads.	The Fuselage
12:40 p.m.	LUNCH AND SYMPHONY Digest lunch and life as you commune with Beethoven, Brahms, and Tchaikovsky.	Pavilion
1:50 p.m.	GREENER PASTURES Learn how to keep your carbon footprint small while still wearing fabulous shoes.	Vertical Farm
2:55 p.m.	PHYSICS & QUANTUM LEAPS An Alpha in motion stays in motion. Advanced mechanical/philosophical investigations in matter and mind.	Newton's Apple Orchard
4:10 p.m.	ALPHAS THROUGH HISTORY Great women have always risen to the top. Follow their example!	Golda Meir Globe
5:10 p.m.	FIGURE DRAWING It's all in the details. Train your eye and your hands. The spirit will follow.	Sculpture Garden
6:00 p.m.	AERODYNAMIC TRAPEZE Soar to the top of your potential—Alphas dare to fly.	Achilles Track
8:00 p.m.	ASTRONOMY/ASTROLOGY Harness the constellations and reach for the stars.	Delphi Observatory

Setting her iPod down next to what remained of her breakfast, Charlie took a few cautious steps toward the reflection pool and leaned over until she could see herself in the placid water. She shivered and wrapped her arms around her bare shoulders, going over the situation for the hundredth time. Her relationships were tied in more knots than a cable-knit sweater. Wherever she pulled, she would end up with the same result: her life unraveling.

Best friend or boyfriend? Who should she choose? Who would she lose? She turned away from the pool and walked to the Zen garden, a rectangular patch of sand encrusted with polished pink quartz and black obsidian rocks. Picking up a small rake, she began to scratch a list of pros and cons into the sand.

STAY TRUE	ALLIE WHO?
I have a best friend for the first time in my life—and I don't want to lose her.	Darwin is my soul mate. How can I pick a girl I just met over the boy I've loved my entire life?
Enrolling in Alpha Academy is all about making the most of myself. I need to impress Shira, not worry about Darwin!	But how can I be my best self without Darwin, the one person who makes me feel most confident and secure?
If Darwin and I are meant to be it will happen for us . . . someday. Why not let Allie be happy in the short term?	Wait! Darwin doesn't even like Allie. He likes me! Turning him down for Allie won't make a difference for their relationship.
Darwin and I are young. A break might be healthy.	Brakes are only good for one thing—screeching to a stop.

Charlie nibbled her cuticles and studied her list. One wrong yank and the fabric of her life would collapse.

“Buddha? What should I do?” Charlie shouted up through the cavity of the giant deity. Her low, sensible voice struck her as screechy and desperate as it echoed off the hammered-silver walls. “I need a sign. And I need it fast.” She turned in a slow circle, like a satellite searching for a signal. A bird passed over the open sky above—was that the sign? Was it telling her to leave? Charlie bit her lip and struggled to interpret it, but it was so vague.

Ping!

A text from Buddha! How very modern.

She ran to her aPod.

Allie: Where R U? Hash browns at brkfst!

A slow smile spread across her face.

“Thanks, Buddha,” Charlie whispered, stepping out into the tropical sunshine of Alpha Island. She yanked the elastic out of her ponytail and liberated her brown waves. She had her answer. She finally knew what to do. The only question left was: could she go through with it?

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