OVER, UNDER, SIDEWAYS, DOWN

Written by

 Rachel Maya and Hans Bauer

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Rachel Maya

r.maya@ca.rr.com

Hans Bauer

hansbca@aol.com

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PROLOGUE

This is a story about a year in my life, and it’s mostly from my perspective. Here and there, things happened that I couldn’t know about at the time. I had my imagination and my imagination liked to fill in the blanks, but I, like most of us, have never perfected the art of being in two places at once.

A few years after these events took place my father supplied me with some details, as did our beloved housekeeper whose English skills improved greatly over time. One particular nugget came from a run-in with a not-quite-former boyfriend on the set of his “reality” show. But the bulk of my story’s “missing parts,” the parts I didn’t see, hear, or know, came from one very special person who contributed more than just words, but gave me insight mixed with lots and lots of encouragement.

At any rate, there are parts to my story that were filled in by others, and although those experiences are not my own, they’re nothing less than I would have wanted them to be.

S. L. S.

1

BIRTHDAY GIRL

If I could squander a do-over in my altogether short life, I’d start with a certain Paris afternoon on the last day of my fourteenth year. Sure, it might sound like the perfect backdrop for the start of a teen romance novel–rain swept streets, Ferris wheel, more than one really famous person, but it wasn’t. When I look back now, whether I like it or not, that day was exactly where it all began, and it went something like this–

It was 2004 and I was bored. The kind of bored a person could be back in 2004. I’d been hanging out in my room for two whole days and was hoping to finally have dinner with my father that night–the night before my “big birthday” as he liked to call it. My dad tended to call all my birthdays “big” for some reason, but he was an exaggerator by nature. I pictured the two of us having a nice little meal someplace pretty or even charming, but of course, it didn’t happen. As usual, Dad said he was feeling kind of off, or maybe he used the word “peckish.” Since he’s such a gigantic baby, even when his nose runs, I didn’t push it. Instead, I went down the hall and knocked on all the other doors trying to get the guys in the band to come out with me–this *was* Parisafter all–but each and every one of them had a headache or a hangnail, and they all bowed out with the usual list of lame excuses. Consequently, there was no enthusiasm *or* joy to be found in Mudville. I had no idea what that meant, but Dad always said it, and it sounded perfect for the occasion.

I was kind of dressed up and put together which isn’t typical for me. I mean, I’m not a mess or a slob or anything, but I haven’t developed my own personal sense of style yet. At least that’s what my dad thinks. And since for a change I was looking okay, I really thought I shouldn’t waste it. I figured I’d go to the hotel restaurant and order a burger and a shake, and maybe sit there and ponder the year to come. I had no idea if I could find a milkshake in Paris, or if the hotel kitchen would even try to create one, especially a strawberry one, but like I said, it was the night before my “big birthday,” and I wanted to say *au revoi*r and goodbye to my fourteenth year with some kind of meaningful ritual or at least a meaningful meal. And I considered, maybe after dinner, the slightly scary idea of venturing out and seeing the sights all by my almost-fifteen-year-old self, something I’d never actually done before. But the restaurant turned out to be pretty stuffy and mostly deserted and the thought of being the only person sitting there with a bunch of waiters standing around gave me a serious case of the sads. I decided right then to walk out of that grand hotel with the always bowing doorman, and go do anything else but sit in a deserted restaurant all by myself.

It was cold out, colder than I expected, and everything on the Rue de Rivoli was shiny wet. It had rained like crazy all day and even though it was just after five, it was already dark. Across the street from the hotel stood a huge park and a carnival that had a big Ferris wheel with boxed glass cars that lit up and swung back and forth. Because of the weather or maybe because it was the middle of the week, all the cars were empty except for one, where some crazy teenagers were making out like the end of the world was coming. The whole thing was kind of depressing and a little cheesy–the wet kiddy rides, the empty food stands, the damp stuffed animals–all that sad cardboardy stuff sitting in the rain, right next door to the Louvre. You’d think the French wouldn’t allow it, but from a distance, the lights were pretty so I guess they didn’t mind. The Louvre, if you don’t already know, but you probably do, is the world’s greatest museum. The Mona Lisa hangs there. Not that I’ve seen her, or even been inside, but I’ve heard a thing or two.

Actually, I had been toParis before, but I hadn’t been *in* Paris, walking around–and certainly not by myself. I imagined it would be all fireworks and perfume commercials and incoherent Frenchmen kissing your hand every five seconds, but this old arcaded street had nothing to do with the Paris of my dreams. Still, I was feeling kind of elated to be out in the world by myself, though I didn’t want to stray too far from the hotel or even leave the street it was on. And I wondered how it was that I could be a little scared and a lot excited at the same time. Did adults ever feel this way, exhilarated and sick to their stomachs all at once? I’d spent my whole life around them and I still had no idea how they felt or what they thought. They were mysterious and confusing and pretty random to me. They tended to use power when it wasn’t necessary and became powerless when it was. Dad called it shooting flies with a cannon. He should know. He did it all the time. Poor flies.

I had been walking around for twenty minutes when I remembered nobody knew where I was. Nobody. Not Dad, or his manager, or the guys in the band. But they probably wouldn’t notice. That’s what I was thinking as I crossed the street and a gust of wind blew the scarf off my neck. It flew up in the air and twirled like a ribbon, landing silently in a puddle at the base of a completely golden statue. I’m talking head to toe, completely blinged out Joan of Arc, sitting on a gold horse, wearing gold armor, holding a gold staff with a gold flag. And even though she was about my age, *she* wasn’t scared to be out by herself. Of course, she was nuts–at least that’s what they say. I saw a movie once where she dressed up like a guy and led an army against the English, like hundreds of years ago. Voices in her head told her to do it, voices she figured weren’t her own–not unlike mine telling me to go for a walk.

Leaving my scarf behind, I buttoned my jacket up to my neck and walked faster now, hitting that part of the boulevard where fancy schmancy turned into funky monkey–a nice boutique here, a jewelry store there, but then tons of tacky souvenir shops. They were brightly lit and stood side by side and I wandered in and out of each one, checking the coffee mugs and inspecting the magnets and gargoyles, all made nowhere near France. All I knew was that if you were a souvenir junky, you would’ve thought you’d died and gone to heaven.

I had walked maybe five blocks when I noticed a window display with a mannequin wearing bright gold high tops (Joan of Arc would’ve loved them) and cut-off jeans, posed against a backdrop of crepe paper palm trees and blue tinsel ocean. It was the middle of winter and the display didn’t make sense, but I sighed. High tops, and cut-offs, and palm trees, and sea. My eyes watered up at the sight of them. I was homesick. Seven months on the road, one hotel after another, sky that wasn’t California sky. I got a lump in my throat.

I looked away and back again and saw a reflection in the glass that I hadn’t noticed before. I turned around. Across the street from where I stood was an escalator going down to an underground shopping mall. A mall in the middle of Paris that even had a food court with a McDonald’s! I remembered reading about it in a hotel magazine, that some genius stuck a mall under the greatest museum in the world. And I read that people were mad (not in a good way) about those old Golden Arches being a part of it, serving up hamburger number twelve hundred and fifty billion directly below all that priceless art. Honestly, a Burger King might have been a better choice because, well, obviously there’s royalty involved.

For the first time in a long time, I was almost happy. I found my way to the food court, and after double fries, a Big M, and a shake, I wandered around to get a look at the stores. It had been a week or maybe more since my father suggested I go pick out a birthday present for myself. Dad has many talents, but buying gifts was not one of them. He tries but always fails. Miserably. Once, when I was eight or nine, I asked for an Izod shirt because my tennis instructor had one, and I loved that little alligator on the front. I guess Dad kind of heard me but not quite. His brain morphed the word “Izod” into something else, and unbelievably, through some crazy personal connection, he arranged a place for me in the Iditarod dog sled race in Alaska. Needless to say, I didn’t go.

When it came to material things, I guess I had more than any person could ask for, but a CD and DVD store was a place I could never resist. You could be anywhere in the world–Tokyo, Sydney, or St. Louis, Missouri–and just like McDonald’s, you could walk in and feel like you’d never left home. Now, here I was in Paris, in a mall under the Louvre, and the music lovers and movie lovers, French as they were, looked strangely familiar to me.

The place was crowded, but way in the back, standing in the farthest corner was this little group of people huddled around some guy. All the shoppers were staring in that direction, giving one another that raised eyebrow thing and the elbow nudge thing, so I looked, too. It didn't register at first or even at second, but there he was, Justin Timberlake, wearing headphones, guarded by his six-foot-six handler. I gulped. I looked, but I didn't look, not wanting to be obvious. All around people were edging closer to him, goading each other to talk to him, at least that’s what I think they were doing since it was all in French, but it was infinitely clear that his bodyguard didn’t want anyone getting near.

I circled. I walked away. I hesitated. I went back.

Finally, I got up the nerve and walked up to the bodyguard. I mean, here I was in Paris, sort of by myself. What did I have to lose? I blurted out, "I really don't want to be uncool, but I’m American and it's my fifteenth birthday tomorrow and I would love to tell Mr. Timberlake (it felt really weird saying "Mr. Timberlake,” by the way) how much I love his music. The big guy didn't say a word but lifted Justin's headphones and whispered something in his ear. Justin Timberlake took off the headphones, turned around, and smiled. I moved closer and he reached for my hands. I told my name and that I was turning fifteen tomorrow, and most importantly, that I loved his music, then I thanked him for sharing his gift with the world. He laughed and thanked me in return, then very quietly in his sweetest voice, he sang “Happy Birthday” to me. That’s right, Justin Timberlake held both my hands tight to his chest in a store under the Louvre where the Mona Lisa hangs and sang Happy Birthday to me. Me! It blew my mind. Seriously, it did. And this is where I have to share something. At least twice in my life, my father has belted out “happy birthday” to me in front of a crowd of thirty thousand or more, but it wasn’t anywhere near the same.

Anyway, I don’t remember how I got back to the hotel, maybe I walked or maybe I floated, but there I was in my room on the fourth floor of the “Hotel of Kings,” the amazing Le Meurice. Okay, maybe it wasn’t just a room but more like a suite, a presidential one–where I cleared a narrow space on the bed in between all that French refinement and all my American mess and sat down hard. My mind drifted and I couldn’t help but smile. Then my eyes drifted and I couldn’t help but frown.

So maybe I *was* a slob. Maybe it’s not a good idea to leave an open bottle of pea green nail polish in the cup of a push-up bra on top of a cashmere sweater under a pile of strappy sandals. And maybe my favorite bracelet was sitting in a pool of neon hair gel on a room service tray with a half-eaten omelet. And maybe, just maybe, that beautiful leather jacket I got in London–or was it Berlin–got torn and was sitting on the bathroom floor in a pile of wet towels. Sure, you might look at all my stuff in that wreckage of a formerly beautiful room and think, uh huh; “spoiled,” “jaded,” “rich,” and “teen.” Those four words for sure might have summed me up back then–but those words, small by any measure, belonged to that year, the year I was fourteen. Fifteen, I had decided, would be a completely different story.

2

BACK IN THE U.S.A.

We were down to one last stop after three nights in Chicago. Just one last stop. New York. Manhattan. *The* City. And then home to L.A., as much as I could call it home. It was where I was born and where I’d spent the most time in all of my fifteen years and I was pretty sure Dad had something up his sleeve for when we returned. Or at least his realtor did.

My name, if I hadn’t already mentioned it, is Scarlet. Scarlet Sunder. Last name sound familiar? Maybe like the last name of a rock legend? Well, it’s one and the same. Now, I’ve heard that some people might want to trade places with me, and of course, tons of people might not, but if you ask me, the second group is way smarter than the first. What I’m saying is this; nearly everyone has a father, right? So, just as an experiment, picture your dad. Right now, picture him. Imagine *your* dad, like in his underwear first thing in the morning, before he gets a coffee down his throat or a comb through his hair. Okay, now imagine this same guy–we’re talking about *your* dad now–is famous. I mean over-the-top, worldwide, everyone on the planet knows him, women scream his name, people want to *be* him, famous.

“Scarlet! C’mon, chop-chop, while we’re young. And please, for the love of God, don’t make me come in there.”

That’s him right there, Danny Sunder, banging, rhythmically, mind you, on my hotel room door. He doesn’t want to come in because despite the oath I took in Paris to make my fifteenth year better and more organized than my fourteenth, that vow hadn’t quite spilled over into my housekeeping skills. Not even a little. Despite the fact that we lived in hotels half the time and those very same hotels have a ton of staff for this, I tended not to ever let them in, because, well, because.

So I’ll tell you about my world, my reality, or whatever you want to call it while I pack. Wait a minute. How did this toothpaste get all over my Hello Kitty pajamas? I must sleepwalk or something. Okay, so returning to my father. It’s like, the world looks at him and sees this god, and you–or I should say *I*–look at him and see this nearsighted guy with gnarly toes and a bad set of veneers. Believe me when I tell you it’s really weird. Plus, he wears nail polish, which, as much as he’d like to believe it, doesn’t exactly make him Mother of the Year. *She,* my mom that is, ran away ages ago with this other gnarly-toed musician and moved to some island off Scotland. I read somewhere they’ve got a bunch of kids now–all of them girls, I think.

What I have left of her is this black and white photo in a very nice silver frame (oh, how I love Harrod’s). You can’t quite see her face because she’s looking down at me, although I’m told she was beautiful. That’s me there, that cutie-pie in her lap. I might have been two, maybe three. I barely have a memory of her or anything else before I was five. The only thing I kind of remember is that she hugged me a lot and she loved movies and watched them all the time but that’s pretty much it. My dad won’t talk about it or her. No one will, so I guess it’s a sore spot for everybody. Doesn’t matter though because Dad and me, we don’t look back. That’s how we are. And girlfriends, sure, he always keeps one around, but nothing’s ever that serious, and so far not one has lasted. And that’s exactly how I like it. I mean, I’m not exaggerating when I say that every woman under seventy-five thinks they can make my dad fall in love with them. But that won’t happen. Not as long as I’m around.

Anyway, Nicole Walker was the “girlfriend” of the moment, and I mean moment. She was eight years older than me, maybe nine, I don’t know for sure. I usually felt older than her in most situations because she’s never been anywhere and wasn’t very sophisticated, in fact, this was her first time on tour. But she was definitely miles ahead of me when it came to looks and men and love and seduction. Nicole borrowed my clothes and my jewelry all the time and never gave anything back, but I didn’t mind. She was fun to be with. Fun in the way an older sister might be fun, like a bad older sister, but in truth, I knew nothing of sisters. Like I said before, somewhere in the world was my biological mother who now had a litter of daughters, but I hadn’t met them and probably never would. Sometimes I wonder if any of them look like me. Sometimes I wondered if my mother even told them I existed.

“Scarlet–who ya talking to? What’s going on in there?”

Now I’m in trouble. “What, Daddy?”

“Don’t “daddy” me. C’mon. The bellmen are here.”

I reach for the doorknob and close my eyes because this may be the master disaster of all time, right here in Chicago, in this three-room suite in the Peninsula Hotel.

“Oh, my God, Scarlet Louise Sunder. Have you lost your mind? This is a disaster. Worse than any third-rate rock band could do chained to a room for a month. This is disgusting even to *me!”*

I open my eyes and actually see what Dad’s seeing. And he’s right. Every bit of clothing I own is hanging from a lamp, or a picture frame, or a doorknob, or worse, on the floor. Every shoe, except for the pile on the sofa, is on the bed. My stack of old DVD’s is about to slide off the dresser, and right next to them I’ve piled dirty laundry, torn jeans, three curling irons, one flat iron, two bottles of Perrier, my wet bathing suit, and a wad of crumpled cash. On either nightstand is a miniature city of soda cans and hand lotion, hair care products, and skin cream, not to mention all my make-up and jewelry.

“I thought you’d topped yourself in Paris, I really did,” Dad said. “What about that new leaf you were turning over? The one we’ve all heard so much about? Did it dry up and blow away?”

In the tiniest voice, I said, “I was just celebrating. You know, that we’re home. Not home exactly, but back in the U.S.”

“The U.S. could toss us out for this mess. C’mon, help me get all this stuff in your bags.”

So Dad started in on me, doing his old “dad thing,” scolding me for this or that, showing off his tough side, which wasn’t really tough at all.

“Why are these clothes wet? How did you burn this sleeve? Isn’t that my hat? And what’s this ashtray doing here with two cigarette butts in it?”

Uh oh, I thought I got rid of that.

“Both with lipstick marks. What’s going on, Scarlet?”

“It was here when we checked in. I asked housekeeping to take it away. I did! But as you can see,” I made a wide, sweeping gesture, “I never let housekeeping back into the room and then I just piled things on top of it and then–”

Dad picked up a stubbed-out butt and studied it closely.

“It’s funny, kind of amazing in fact, that the person who left this half-smoked cigarette in your room, wore the exact same shade of lipstick you’re wearing today. Must be a very popular color.”

“It is. Everyone’s wearing it. It’s way the most popular–”

He cut me off.

“Enough. Just help me gather your things. We’ll deal with you and your little story later. Right now, Madison Square Garden is waiting.”

3

ALL I WANT

“Magic. That’s how it would be, baby. I don’t have a doubt. Not even a little one. Please tell me you’ll think it over. Please? It’s been forever. It’s been a lifetime.” Dad was crooning this into his cell phone as we walked, well, he walked and I dragged my feet across the tarmac from the jet to the limo. He was laughing and smiling and then he mumbled something I couldn’t hear, and before he clicked off, he looked down at his cell all mushy and goo-goo eyed. Probably some female who’d caught his eye, I thought, and kind of annoying.

“Dad! Wait. C’mon,” I called out after him. “I didn’t finish what I was saying.”

“Believe me, you did.” I stopped walking and stood there like the temperamental teen I could easily become if I needed to. Dad turned and doubled back, planting himself right in front of me. “What? What is it you want, Scarlet?”

“Look,” I said in my most polished grown-up voice, “all I want is a little boob job, a pierced tongue, and two smallish tattoos on my shoulder or my ankle. I was thinking maybe a hummingbird or a barcode, and oh, yeah, a couple of driving lessons.”

I figured if I asked for the totally insane stuff up front, the driving lessons would seem pretty tame by comparison. Dad put his hand on my shoulder as he always did whenever I was being unreasonable.

“On the way to the hotel, I’ll have the driver pull into a strip mall and you can deface your whole body at one convenient location. That work for you?” He stuck out his tongue and poked it in the middle with his index finger pretending it was a power drill.

“So funny,” I said. “You must have been hilarious back in the eighties. People are still probably talking about it–the ones who aren’t dead.” I’d used that line about a hundred times in the past year. I hauled it out whenever I felt I’d been denied or unjustly wronged. Plus, he absolutely hated it.

Dad walked away a little angry or maybe a lot angry. He always said that we knew exactly how to push each other’s buttons because we installed them, but I’m no elevator and neither is he. I took off after him grabbing his sleeve. “Daaaaad, c’mon. Pleeeeease.”

“No, and, uh–let me think for a second. Hmmm, that would be, no.” He kept walking and refused to look at me, even when we got to the limo.

“When do I ever ask for anything?” I’d used that line about a hundred thousand times, but that afternoon I was at a loss in the manipulation department. I was definitely going to have to come up with some new material.

“Oh, my Goodness!” Dad clutched his chest and fluttered his eyes like he was having some kind of crazy religious experience. “Imagine all that untarnished selflessness rolled into one pint-sized human being! My darling, little teenaged Mother Theresa. May I touch your hem?”

“You may not,” I said, in my most uppity voice. Then I socked him in the arm.

We drove to the hotel in absolute silence. My dad’s band, everyone knows them as the Void, of course, stretched across the wrap-around seats between their various girlfriends. Their manager, Sam, sat the farthest away, and Dad’s latest companion of four months, Nicole, put herself right there in the middle of his lap, and not one of us made a peep for at least twenty minutes. This was pretty unusual since the guys are all major blabbermouths, but Sam was reading the Wall Street Journal, and Rick was lost in his little Nintendo device. Meanwhile, Stephen, who was dozing, was somehow still strumming his fingers, and Brian, who they all called Toad, was lost in his knitting, which had become a total obsession. I can attest to his latest mania because for Christmas, Valentine’s Day, and Easter, he knitted me a pair of big yellow knee socks, a mile long pea green muffler, and a huge baby blue sweater with pockets the size of FedEx envelopes. I liked the muffler, but I wish he’d used another color. Honestly, I think he was knitting for giants.

We had arrived at the hotel and were packed into the elevator when Sam turned to my dad and motioned slightly to me. “So, what’s with the kid?”

“She wants a boob job,” Dad mumbled under his breath. Of course, I could hear him–I was three feet away.

I scowled a bit as I stood at the front of the mirrored elevator car. Dad and Sam were watching my reflection from the rear. I never liked to disappoint when it came to a show of misery. Somehow it always paid off. Still, I was beginning to think I was looking a little too grown up for my classic pout, which I had perfected by seven and polished to a shimmering brilliance by eight and a half. “What the hell’s happening to everyone?” Sam asked no one in particular as he ran a hand through his thinning hair. “Used to be you could find happiness without going to a surgeon.”

Dad raised his brows, scratched his head, and shrugged in agreement.

“Did you make that call?” Sam asked changing his tone.

Dad flashed his biggest smile and pulled out his cell phone, wiggling it for Sam to see.

“Did she sound interested?” Sam punctuated the question with a hopeful smile. A bell dinged and the doors slid opened. Sam gave Dad a “keep working on it” thumbs up and moved off down the elegant hallway with the other band members straggling behind while the concierge led Dad, Nicole, and me in the opposite direction.

There’s not all that much to say about Nicole, so I’ll keep it brief. Of course, she’s as stunning as you’d expect. Most of the time she’s as vacant as a mall parking lot at dawn, and she’s clearly too young for my dad. But she makes me laugh, and she’s sort of innocent in that wide-eyed model-slash-actress kind of way. Did I mention she’s a model and an actress? What a surprise, right? Anyway, we get along just fine and sometimes she even helps me get my way with Dad, so I have no complaints there.

Dad was squinting, trying to remember something as we walked down the hall. He tapped me on the shoulder and pointed to the double doors of our suite as the concierge opened them wide. “Hey, didn’t we stay here before? And didn’t we hate this room?”

 I plowed in ahead of him and everyone else. “We never stayed here before, so we don’t hate it–yet.” After a while, all hotel rooms start to look the same, even the extra fancy ones, *especially* the extra fancy ones.

Dad followed me in, then Nicole, and behind her the concierge. They all stood back waiting for my verdict while I surveyed each room in the suite. When I returned to the living room, I spotted a large gold box on the coffee table. I flipped it open, grabbed a truffle, and scarfed it down. Then another. I turned to the concierge and spoke with my mouth full.

“These aren’t the ones we like.”

“Those aren’t the ones we like,” Dad repeated.

“I’m so sorry, Miss Sunder, Mr. Sunder. We’ll replace them immediately,” he said and quickly backed out of the room as I munched away.

“Not bad, really. Here.”

I pushed the box over to Nicole who’d been staring longingly at the chocolates the whole time. Mostly, she lived on coffee, carrot sticks, and hard-boiled eggs, so I knew she was always close to starvation. Honestly, she never ate.

“Well, don’t come crying to me when school starts and your whole face looks like one big mega zit,” Dad laughed. “Like pimple pizza.”

Nicole, her chocolate defenses nearly broken, was just about to bite into a truffle when Dad said what he said. Nicole dropped the chocolate onto the coffee table, making a face like she’d just been served a bowl of fish heads.

“The visual–so disgusting, Dad. And as far as school is concerned, I’m not going back. If you need to know, I’m done with school, and I’m shooting a reality show, a pilot, about us. I’m submitting it as soon as I’ve got enough footage. Nicole’s my assistant. Didn’t she tell you?”

“Huh?” That was Nicole’s response. I told you she was vacant.

I lowered my eyes and shot her my very best superfast 2.0 version of a piercing look. You could call it a glare, but it wasn’t over the top.

“Dad, listen! MTV, VH-1, and E! they all called me. They’re desperate for material.”

“MTV? MTV called you?” Dad rolled his eyes and shook his head, and then, Nicole sneezed. It was a cute, diminutive kitty cat sneeze, which was unfortunately followed by my very own twenty-one gun ACHOOOOO! Dad looked panicked as he backed away from the two of us.

“Yes! MTV! Goddd, Dad! Do I have to say everything twice?”

He moved to the door as I wiped my nose across my Void ‘Blond-Eyed-Blue World Tour’ T-shirt.

“No. Once is too much. Listen, I hate to leave you two media moguls in the middle of your global take-over, but I have to get away from your germs.” He covered his nose and reached for the doorknob with his sleeve, slamming the door behind him. Dad could move pretty fast when he was trying to avoid a cold and it always cracked me up. It’s not very compassionate on my part, but he reminded me of a crazed squirrel.

Nicole yawned and stretched. “What’s a mogul?” she asked.

“Some kind of dog, I think. Doesn’t make sense though, unless he’s calling us–”

“Bitches?” The offending word exited our mouths at exactly the same time. We didn’t stop laughing until all the sneezing and all the coughing began.

Two days later I was sacked out on a king-sized bed at the tail end of a very slight cold, which maybe I had exaggerated into something just shy of pneumonia. My suite within a suite was filled with flowers, fruit baskets, and an assortment of gifts from people I didn’t even know. I was lying there doing what I usually do when I’m alone–pointing my camera at the TV screen and filming pieces of movies. This time it was ‘Working Girl’ and of course I was parroting all of Melanie Griffith’s best lines, which I already knew by heart.

“I’ve got a mind for business and a bod for sin,” I said, in my most whispery grown-up baby voice, just like Melanie’s.

I turned the camera on myself as my nose started running and spoke right into it going for that cinema verité effect, or whatever they call it. “Hey,” I wiped my nose with my sleeve, “even in the most glamorous life,” I did a camera sweep around the room, “when you’ve got a cold, you’ve got a cold, and all the room service in the world won’t change it.”

Dad tapped on the door, poking his head into my room with his phone glued to his ear. For a guy who hated being on the phone, that cell phone thing seemed to be happening a lot lately.

“You alive?” he asked with a frown that was part smile.

I shrugged, feeling a little sorry for myself.

Dad sat down as far away as he could and held his phone flat to his thigh.

“I know I haven’t been around much. Sorry, honey.”

“Don’t say you’re sorry when you’re obviously not. It’s annoying.”

“Okay, okay,” he conceded way too quickly. “Listen, if you’re bored,” he whispered, “Nicole’s right next door.”

“You moved her out of your suite?” I was honestly surprised.

“Scarlet,” he became very serious, “it’s the end of our farewell tour. Three concerts right here. All sold out.” Dad’s eyes grew wide as his hand touched his throat. “She’s been coughing for days, poor thing, but I can’t take any chances. You know that.” Then he remembered he was still on a call. “You still there, darling?’” He said this almost tenderly but cut himself short as Nicole shuffled in carrying a giant box of tissues and a pile of magazines. Dad backed away, giving her a very wide berth.

“I need room service and lots of it,” she announced, dumping a load of magazines on my side of the bed.

“Like you ever eat anything,” I scoffed.

Dad bowed out the door as Nicole dropped down on the other side of the bed, tossing a big box of Kleenex and a bag of raw carrots between us.

“Supplies.” She coughed and turned her attention to the TV screen just as Melanie Griffith was getting a new briefcase from Harrison Ford.

“You always watch such old stuff,” Nicole said.

“It’s *Working Girl* and it’s not that old. And it’s really good, even though it’s about *working.”*

“I worked once,” Nicole glanced up at the ceiling as she tried to conjure up some ancient memory, “in an office, I think. They told me to file, so I did my nails.”

She held out her manicured hand and wriggled her delicate fingers. “Pretty, aren’t they?”

“What does it feel like to be so vain?” I laughed.

“It feels, ah, it feels, ah, great!” She sneezed hard, and I bopped her on the head with the room service menu. We laughed like loons the rest of the afternoon.

4

OUT OF THE PAST

The night, the hour, the moment had finally arrived for the last ever, once and for all, going out of business, never to be repeated, farewell concert of the Void’s nearly endless ‘Blond-Eyed-Blue World Tour. *Adios, au revoir, sayonara*, b’dee, b’dee, b’dee, that’s all folks. To tell you the truth, it felt like we’d started this thing when I was about five.

Tonight, of course, was beyond special. Nearly sixty-four thousand seats had sold out in less than ninety seconds, a new record according to Sam. The house, from the VIP section down in front to the kids up in the nosebleed section, was on fire and the deafening cheers of ecstatic fans flooded the venue like a tsunami. From one end of the stage to the other, Dad exploded, strutting his crazy stuff, ripping the air with his falsetto scream as the Void’s guitarists ramped up an impenetrable wall of throbbing, brain numbing sound. The guys were into their third or maybe fourth encore, saving the best for last, a grab bag of their greatest hits available on two dozen “best of” compilations or downloadable on iTunes for a mere ninety-nine cents, a bargain if you ask me.

Like every one of their concerts on any given night, the backstage scene was beyond crowded. But tonight the place seemed packed with wall-to-wall people I had never met or even seen before. I stood off to one side stuffing my face with crab salad and smiling weakly at everyone passing me by. Not a single person smiled back, not even a little. It wasn’t until I caught my reflection in a can of Coke that I noticed the pink frothy line across my upper lip giving me an infantile version of a moustache. The people who ignored me–that would be everyone–squished together in cliquish knots, smoking and drinking and measuring up everyone else’s degree of unapproachable cool. As usual, there were tons of gorgeous women hoping to fill someone’s fantasy. And there were bodyguards and hangers-on, girlfriends and groupies, posing for themselves or each other, but not a single one of them managed to score a crab salad moustache like mine.

“Scar! Scarlet!” Finally, a familiar voice.

I turned as Sam came up behind me. “You alone? Nicole still sick?”

I nodded as the fast-talking Sam pointed to someone across the room. “See that woman over there?”

I stood on my tiptoes and looked. “Which woman?” There were dozens.

“That one. She’s an old friend of your dads.”

“Every woman’s an old friend of my dads.”

“That one’s different. She knew the band when they had hair,” he said, pointing to what was left of his own thinning strands, “and you when you didn’t.”

I cocked my head, having no idea what he meant. “You were a baby,” Sam clarified.

“Me?”

“Yeah, you. Come say, ‘hi.’” I still had no clue who he was talking about, but I followed him anyway while I thought about my father’s questionable taste in the opposite sex. As you can imagine, he thinks his taste is exotic and unusual but I think it’s forced. What he likes to tell people is that he’d rather have a cockatoo on his shoulder than keep a canary in a cage, which doesn’t make any sense since he’s completely terrified of birds.

I was following Sam through the swarm when a roadie pulled him aside, dragging him into a big technical discussion. While they talked synthesizers, I looked around trying to figure out which one of these women Sam was leading me to. God, I hoped it wasn’t that artist from all those years back. She was totally crazy, like the villain in every bad horror film. My mind became a slideshow of morphing images from the distant and not so distant past, all of them weird. Suddenly, that artist person came to me clear as a bell. Tanya was her name, and I could see her dressed in nothing but overalls, standing in front of a huge canvas splattered with red paint and mannequin body parts, wielding a paintbrush like a knife. The artist I would describe as the angry type. After that mess came Stephanie the runway model, who I called Skelator. One time, when we were out at our favorite burger place in L.A., Dad and I stuffing our faces, Stephanie munching a pickle wrapped in a lettuce leaf, she started to cry (and didn’t stop for a three whole days) when our order of cheese fries came. Stephanie, I would describe as the hungry type. Then, about a month after that nuclear meltdown, Dad started seeing this deranged actress named Heather, who went all *Fatal Attraction* on him when he finally, thank goodness, broke it off. A week after that, keeping with the blood and food theme, Heather tracked us down at the Beverly Hills Hotel and dumped a pillowcase full of stuffed animal heads on our bungalow doorstep–and then covered them with a gallon of salsa. I would definitely describe Heather as the dramatic type.

I hadn’t completely returned to reality when I heard Sam’s voice again.

“Scarlet?” I was facing a woman in her late forties, clearly a grown up, smart, confident, and pretty–very, very pretty.

“Oh, to be fifteen again,” Sam was saying. He snapped his fingers twice in front of my face. “Scar. Wake up.”

I blinked once, shivered, and stared.

The woman seemed to be soaking me up. I came back to earth as her eyes watered up and she caught her breath and offered me her hand.

“Scarlet. Hello! I’m Ellie, Ellie Hughes.” She took a deep breath. “Oh, wow, I can’t believe–”

“Ellie worked with your dad years ago, even co-wrote some of the band’s early stuff, their best if you ask me.” Sam’s usual deadpan delivery was gone, replaced by an enthusiasm I’d never seen in him before.

Ellie Hughes’ graceful hand still hung in midair. I don’t know why, but I reached out and gave her a seriously fierce handshake.

“My goodness,” she said. “You must be a piano player.”

“Nah. I got that move from *TV Land*. No one shakes in real life anymore.” Well, not in my real life.

Sam cupped his earpiece and listened hard. “Ladies, girls, forgive me. I gotta check on the cars.” He turned back to the Hughes woman. “Promise me you’ll think about what we discussed.” Ellie gave a little smile and nodded. Sam hugged her and rushed off.

We, the fifteen-year-old hand shaker and the blinking adult lady, faced one another and sized each other up.

“You’re so grown-up. And tall. And lovely. And you look more like your dad than I remember.”

“Oh god, I hope not. Ugh.” Was she trying to be rude or something? “So, what are you, a musician? You don’t look like one.” She really didn’t.

“Well, sort of,” she sighed. “I’m a songwriter.” She nodded a few too many times.

“Sam said you used to know the band like a hundred years ago.” I wiped my nose on my sleeve. “Did you know my mother?” I can’t imagine why I asked, but the words flew out of my mouth before I could stop them. “Look, it doesn’t really matter.” I shrugged like I didn’t care and avoided looking in her eyes and kept talking. “I don’t usually meet people who knew her.”

“I did. A long time ago. She was–” Ellie Hughes’ eyes narrowed and then her eyebrows raised up high. She scratched her head and seemed upset when she said, “Wait. Are you saying she has no contact with you?”

“Please.” I rolled my eyes. “I have no contact with *her.”* I rubbed my nose hard. “Anyway, forget all that. What I want to know is, I’ve always heard she was some kind of rock and roll goddess knockout beauty queen. Was she?” My eyes followed a rail thin model-type as she floated past. “And was she that thin, or thinner?”

Ellie squinted in the direction of the passing woman. I didn’t wait for an answer. “All we do on tour is eat. It’s like we’re trapped inside the *Food Channel*.”

Ellie giggled and lifted her hand. I think she wanted to brush some hair off my cheek but decided not to.

“The *Food Channel*, huh?” she laughed. “And when you’re not trapped there, where do you go to school?”

“Oh, that.” This time I grabbed a napkin and blew my nose. “I *went* to four or five different private schools, but with all the touring and everything, well, you know.” I shrugged and didn’t know why I was feeling so defensive. Maybe it was because no one ever asked me anything personal or important. “Anyway, school’s not what it’s cracked up to be and it’s completely full of losers. Besides, I already know what I need to know. Obviously.” Somehow, I was still feeling like I had to prove something to her.

“And traveling? You must love that, right? I bet you’ve seen some remarkable places and done some–”

I cut her off. “I don’t want to burst your bubble or anything.” I was about to launch into one of my famous world-weary speeches about first class hotels and stretch limos when a deafening explosion of metallic sound shredded the air.

I knew that sound. I had heard it a hundred times before. But tonight’s explosion was special because tonight, that very explosion was the final chord of the Void’s very last song on their very last tour. Well, at least for now.

A giant punchbowl filled to the brim with rainbow-colored jellybeans vibrated right to the edge of the craft table. Levitating beans danced in the air for what seemed forever before they rained back down into the bowl. Obviously, lots had changed since a few years back when the band’s backstage demands included things like a twelve-foot boa constrictor, a bonsai tree, five or six cases of a particularly wonderful chocolate milk flown in from Switzerland and, of course, an attractive female chef at a permanent omelet station.

But back to that final chord. It was as loud as an earthquake and the crowd froze in place until the room stopped shaking. Next, a pure moment of silence flashed by, shattered big time when the audience exploded into wild cheers and the thunderous sound of sixty-four thousand pairs of stomping feet.

If the backstage was crowded before, it was packed even tighter as Dad’s band, their backup singers, their stringy haired technicians, and beefy roadies all burst into the room, high on adrenaline and sticky with sweat. Towels, club soda, cigarettes, and vitamins were handed out like refreshments for marathon runners.

Dad bounced backstage like he was made of rubber, but as soon as he was out of the public eye, he winced in pain and grabbed his lower back. I watched him straighten up when he spotted Ellie and me, and he smiled as he limped our way and hugged us both.

“So, you’ve met,” he said this rubbing his back and smiling through the pain. “Scarlet, sweetheart, this is Ellie, the woman I told you about.”

“You didn’t tell me about any–”

He put his fingers to my lips. Clearly he had me confused with someone else.

“Ellie, you look radiant tonight,” Dad said, ignoring me. “Really, *really* radiant.”

She thanked him and told him he looked radiant, too. I waited, but no one told me I looked radiant. Dad brushed himself off and smiled at Ellie. I folded my arms. I tapped my foot. I cleared my throat, making Dad’s eyes dart around exactly the way forgetful people’s eyes dart around.

“What?” Finally, he noticed me. “Oh, come on now, Scarlet. Of course, you look radiant, but you already knew that.”

“Enough with the radiant, Dan. She’s gorgeous,” said Ellie.

I shuffled, uncomfortable with a stranger complimenting me.

“Well, you are,” she repeated in case it was news to me. I looked away, not wanting, and at the same time really wanting her approval. Dad reached out and drew us to him in a big huddle. At first, I thought he just needed to lean on something.

“Let’s get out of here, go back to my suite and order up the whole sushi menu.” He fixed Ellie with a sexy stare, one that was probably bearable once upon a time, but had settled into something kind of wonky about ten years ago. He let me go, but kept one arm around her.

I gave him the poisoned eagle-eye stare but he ignored me and turned to Ellie. “C’mon,” he said lowering his voice, “we’ll have time to talk. Alone.”

Ellie delivered a half-smile at Dad’s half come-on.

“Your suite, Dad? At the hotel? *Our* hotel?” I asked, my voice squeaking.

“Yeah. Our hotel. That big building with all the pretty lights. What’s your problem tonight, Scar?” He was getting snippy with me.

“Hey, no problem here. I’m open-minded,” I came back with a dose of attitude.

Dad looked utterly bewildered and then my cell rang.

“Hey.” I listened. “Yeah, they’re done.” I listened some more. “Okay, just a sec.” I looked Dad dead in the eye. “Mr. *Nicole-son* wants to talk to you.”

Ellie’s eyes grew wide. “It’s not Jack, is it?”

Dad touched his forehead and grabbed the phone. He walked a few feet away and turned his back to us. But *Jack Nicholson?* Really? Sure. Okay. I get it, like if you’re eighty or something. I saw *The Shining*. He was losing his hair *back* then. This had nothing to do with Jack Nicholson and everything to do with Dad and the women in his life.

Suddenly, I just wanted to get out of there. I didn’t quite understand what was going on and was getting nervous that something uncomfortable was going to happen. I started backing away when Dad tossed me my phone. Ellie called after me.

“Oh, don’t go yet.”

I kept moving but I didn’t go so far that I couldn’t hear what they were saying.

“I think I’m in shock. She’s so grown up.” Ellie reached for Dad and he wrapped his arms around her waist.

“Yeah. Too grown up sometimes.” He paused and looked all sad-eyed. “Listen, El, you have to forgive me. I’ve got this really stupid thing that I can’t get out of. I promise I’ll call you later and we can talk then, okay?”

“Ahhh,” she nodded her head slowly, “a thing.” She said it in a way that made me feel she really knew him. I was even starting to feel sorry for her.

“No, no, really, it’s so dumb.” Dad was shaking his head, backpedaling all over the place. “So, so dumb. Really, *really* dumb.”

Ellie wasn’t buying any of it. She looked right through him and hardened. “Honey, truth is, I’ve got to go. I’ve got a score that has to be done by noon tomorrow.” She gave him a dismissive peck on the cheek. “Thanks for the memories, Danny Boy.”

Instead of letting her go, Dad grabbed her hand and tried to keep her from walking away. Whatever this was, something about it was different. Ellie was twice the age of his usual fare. Maybe that was it.

“Aw, c’mon. Don’t say memories, baby.” Dad was pleading with her now. I didn’t know if I should be embarrassed for him but I was. “Say you’ll think about everything we talked about. I really *miss* you.” She gave him a long look, her eyes somewhere between soft and hard.

Dad sighed and released her. “I’ve always missed you. I just didn’t know how much until I saw you this week.”

I heard someone’s voice shouting loud and clear over the racket backstage. “Let’s go everyone! Nowww!” Good old Sam, bless his unsuspecting heart. Without knowing it he’d come to the rescue. I circled back and stood by Dad’s side.

“Scarlet, just go.” He took me by the shoulders and pointed me toward the exit. “I’ll be there in a minute.” He gave me a firm shove toward the door and turned back to kiss that Ellie person. Whatever was going on, it was happening too fast. I had to do something so I took two quick steps backwards and grabbed Dad’s shirttail with all my might. “Dad, come on!”

“Stop it, Scarlet. The cars won’t leave without us.”

He pried my fingers off his shirt and pushed me toward the door again. Despite his aching back, his advanced age, and his superhot girlfriend back at the hotel, he turned and wrapped his arms around middle-aged Ellie. And it looked like he genuinely didn’t want to let go.

“I want us to work together again. We were amazing, Ellie, and I need you to get back to that place.”

“No. No, you don’t. I know you, Sunder. You’re just bored and you’ve got this big, bad case of misdirected nostalgia.”

Dad looked like he was truly sad and not just faking. He also looked misunderstood, which is harder to describe.

Ellie leaned in closer. “You don’t really want to stir up that sorry old pot again, do you?”

“Yessssss, pretty please,” he pleaded. I’m surprised he didn’t drop to his knees and grab her ankles.

“Fine. I’ll think about it, but, honey, you’re no Mick.”

“You always liked him better,” Dad laughed.

“Damn straight. Now go. Scarlet’s waiting for you.”

Dad took her face in his hands and peered deep into her eyes, which is when I made my move. I’d been edging in his direction until I was close enough to grab his arm. A solid yank and he was off balance and we were swept away by the surging crowd where all he could manage was a quick shout and a wave goodbye.

When we got to the exit, I was the one who looked back. Imagine my surprise when I caught a glimpse of Ellie Hughes wiping tears from her eyes.

5

CASA PACIFICA

Two weeks after the very last and supposedly final Void concert, I found myself behind the wheel of a cream-colored Bentley, a convertible. I don’t know if we owned the car, but if we did, I’m sure we paid a fortune for it. Well, not me. I didn’t pay a fortune. I didn’t pay anything except attention to the fact that my dad, who never, ever drove, who even had a mortal fear of driving, seemed to be buying a car. And I can tell you this: for once, the brochure didn’t lie, not even a little. Hand-stitched, soft touch leather? Antique dash dials? Dark stained burr walnut trim? You better believe it.

I knew I wasn’t in a dream, because my dad was sitting right there beside me, and though I love him dearly, I mean it’s always him and me against the world, he remains the last person I’d choose to ride shotgun going anywhere, especially up this canyon road. This steep, narrow, dangerous canyon road that was leading away from Pacific Coast Highway up into the hills that overlooked Malibu and the entire Pacific Ocean.

“Are you serious about her, Dad?”

“Who?”

“I hate it when you do that. You know exactly who.”

“Scarlet, please. Can we try to go half a day without an inquisition?” Dad looked like he was rubbing his forehead but he was really covering his eyes, trying not to see the steep drop at every turn.

“I think she thinks you might be *the one*.”

“You know how much confidence I have in what Nicole thinks?” He held his thumb and index finger together. “This much. And by the way, she also thinks *The Wizard of Oz* is a documentary.”

I took my eyes off the road and turned to him. “You mean it’s not?” I laughed.

“Scarlet!” He grabbed the steering wheel and swerved us back to the center of the road. “Good God, stay away from the edge and stop trying to be funny. I’m not enjoying this.”

“Oh, pull yourself together. It’s not like we we’re spinning out of control, flying over the side, tumbling to our bloody deaths or anything.” I don’t know why, but I just loved torturing him.

Dad was sweating like a cold drink left in the sun. I decided to ease up and let him catch his breath before I started in again. I pulled to the shoulder and parked on a turnout where all we could see beyond the dry hills below us was a ribbon of sand and the Pacific stretching into forever. The tiny brown dots riding the little blue waves were surfers who probably looked up at us, two tiny brown dots on the road, and wondered why we weren’t in the water, too.

“So, are you?” I searched my father’s face for the truth buried beneath the usual knee-jerk answers he gave me.

“Am I what, Scarlet?”

“Are you interested in Nicole for more than a friend? She’s been with us longer than usual.”

For me, it was a legitimate question with life altering possibilities and any daughter, at least in my opinion, had a right to know the answer.

“You’re asking because I’m getting older, aren’t you?” He looked me straight in the eye but turned his head this way and that so I could examine his face. He took his time before he spoke again and shifted sideways in the passenger seat. He cracked his knuckles and cleared his throat. “I’m not all that good at relationships. That’s why I keep them short. Somebody’s always disappointed. I am or they are. I suppose I can’t keep living like this, can I? I don’t know the answer.” He pulled his hair back like he always did when he was really thinking and leaned his head on the headrest and shut his eyes. “I haven’t been with anyone who mattered to me in years. Maybe I planned it that way–I probably did. Now I’ve got Nicole who’s awfully pretty but not exactly the sharpest note in the chord. She’s easy-going, though.” He talked like he was trying to convince himself. “I like easy going. I really do.”

He sounded more like a man resigned than a man in love. It was as if the touring part of his life was over and he didn’t have a single idea of what to do next. Sure, I could’ve tried to come up with an exotic vacation suggestion (safari, sky diving, archeological dig?), or some trick to get him back into his studio and music writing mode, but I had some very important needs of my own.

“Obviously, you like Nicole enough to send her to a spa, so how come I didn’t get to go? I love spas and I have waaaay more weight to lose than she does. Have you seen my stomach lately?”

“Five grand to lose two pounds.” He shook his head in disbelief.” Now he was irritated. “I thought you were getting tired of her.”

“You know what? I was. I was getting a little tired of her. She doesn’t know anything about anything, and she doesn’t like old movies, but she sure redeemed herself. You know why, Dad? Before you got me those driving lessons, and even without my learner’s permit, she was the only one who took me out to practice, and she did it three whole times, which is more than I can say for you.” Well, maybe that’s not entirely true. Dad had *once* given me a driving lesson in a stretch limo on an abandoned airstrip somewhere in Italy. I was twelve at the time. Before that, we shared the Autopia ride at Disneyland, where he let me sit in the driver’s seat *twice.* I don’t even remember how old I was for that.

“Little Scarlet Sunder sold out for three spins in a Bentley.” Dad smirked.

“Shut up, Dad.”

“What happened to all your so-called standards?”

“What happened to yours?” I shot back.

“I never had any,” he laughed. “Wait a minute. You don’t have a learner’s–?” I started the car and pulled onto the road pretty aggressively.

“Irregardless,” I continued, “Nicole taught me more than enough.”

“Regardless. It’s ‘regardless.’ And you shouldn’t be driving without a permit and you know damn well I can’t teach you or anyone else how to operate a vehicle. It’s not what I do. And get away from the edge already!”

“I got the stupid permit,” I lied. Just then, a gorgeous woman wearing aviators and a pork pie hat honked and waved from her little sports car as she sailed past us down the canyon road. She was probably one of Dad’s “weeklings,” as I called them–a starlet he dated for a week or less. This one, I’m absolutely sure, was on her way to an audition. Good luck with that.

Dad craned his neck and gave her a little wave back. He looked back at me to remind him who she was. I raised my shoulders in the universal sign of “heck, I don’t know,” and then returned to the subject at hand.

“Look, I won’t bring it up again, but could you please keep Nicole around for the summer? She promised to hook me up with some guys.”

“Hook you up? What does that mean?”

“Introduce me.”

“I don’t know if I like that idea. The men she knows have to be twice your age.”

I rolled my eyes and snorted at him.

“My bad habits don’t need to become your bad habits, young lady.”

“Dad! How am I ever going to meet anyone when I spend every waking hour with a bunch of middle-aged head bangers? *How*? It’s sooooo depressing.”

He didn’t answer. He was losing steam and so was I. Dad and I did some form of this verbal Tae Kwon Do every day, and right now, thinking about my situation AND concentrating on my driving was proving to be too much. Thankfully, a moment later I pulled into the graveled courtyard of Casa Pacifica, just missing the fountain but definitely clipping a large potted palm.

Casa Pacifica was the name of the place and “peaceful house” or “house on the Pacific” was what it meant, but I wouldn’t exactly call it a house. It was more like a gigantic mountaintop compound with a lagoon-sized swimming pool ringed by a circle of white cabanas overlooking a jaw-dropping expanse of ocean as far as the eye could see. There was an eight-car garage, five master suites, all with sunset views, four more guest bedrooms, two dens, a great room (and believe me, it was great) with 16’ foot ceilings, a state-of-the-art movie theater, a wine cellar, a chef’s kitchen, an outdoor kitchen and lounging area with a flat screen TV, two vine covered courtyards, an indoor lap pool with a sauna, a big security gate with loads of cameras, and a kennel if we ever decided to breed dogs. Not too shabby for two people.

This was quite a change from our last “home” a few years back; a group of suites at the Pierre in Manhattan. Dad had fallen off the stage in Jersey, breaking his leg and two ribs. He stayed in New York to recuperate and after three months of being a hermit and complaining about his health and age, he finally, on the very last week we were there, took me on a carriage ride through Central Park, my only close up view of the place.

Mostly, I was bored all those months except for the movies I watched and the strange assortment of visitors who came by to cheer Dad on. Steven Tyler, that funky rocker guy who looks like an old lady who fell into a laundry basket, came by the hotel every week and he and Dad compared war stories. He was a sweetheart and brought me a stack of CD’s or a pile of good movies every time he visited.

I guess, if you added it up, we’ve stayed in a lot of places, most of them in California, but none of them, not since I was little, could actually be called “home.” Casa Pacifica was a start.

That afternoon Dad and I foraged for lunch in the gigantic kitchen that seemed to be mysteriously and abundantly stocked with all things wonderful and delicious. I sat yoga-style on the marble countertop in my bathing suit filming him with my camera while he poked through the contents of both Sub-Zeros. He pulled out a container of pre-cooked bratwurst and stuck one in his mouth like a big cigar.

“So tell me,” he said, removing his wurst and pretending to tap off the ashes, “is it the boyfriend thing, or lack thereof, that’s making you smoke?”

Hard as it was, I kept a straight face. “Who smokes? I don’t smoke.” I hate lying to my father but it seems to be happening a lot lately.

He dropped his head and looked at me sideways. He tossed the bratwurst into the sink and tapped his fingers on the countertop. “C’mon, Scarlet, I can smell it.”

“Okay.” I stopped filming and put my camera down. “Okay, so maybe I do. Maybe I smoke a little,” I confessed to yet another lie. “Because, well, because I don’t have a boyfriend and can’t imagine getting one, but more than that, I can’t handle the idea of going to some strange new school in the fall. You have no idea, Dad. It’s really stressing me out.” Truth was, I was lighting a cigarette, taking a puff and putting it out. I was mostly interested in creating a fake problem to use as a bargaining chip. Hard to believe, but for a major rock icon, Dad was pretty conservative. “It’s like, I won’t know anyone, and I won’t fit in, and forget about making any friends. I just want to stay home with you, Daddy.”

He stood up tall and rested his hands on his hips. “Scarlet, please. I barely finished high school. Look at me. I’m practically illiterate.”

“It worked for you.”

“By *accident.* You can’t plan your life around an accident.”

What Dad said about being illiterate wasn’t even a little true. He was a voracious reader and seemed to know something about everything. But two could play this game. I pushed off the counter and landed square on my feet.

“Dad, everything’s an accident. Everything.” I moved to the pantry grabbing a bag of salt and vinegar potato chips. I loved all things sour and puckery and wondered if that might be a clue to my underlying personality “disorder” these days. “Tell you what. I’ll give up smoking if I don’t have to go to school.”

“What kind of deal is that? It makes no sense. You offer to give up something that’s terrible to avoid something that’s wonderful? I’ll tell *you* what. When you sign up for classes, take a course in logic. Maybe you’ll meet a boy in school, did you ever think of that?”

He turned back to the still open fridge, sticking two fingers into the top of a lemon meringue pie. I ignored his words and didn’t panic, figuring he’d forget all about my looming education crises as the summer months rolled by. But, just for insurance, I milked it, tossing out a pinch of guilt. “You know what, Dad? I don’t think you’re very happy anymore, especially when it’s just the two of us.”

I pushed in beside him at the fridge and dipped a big potato chip into the lemon meringue pie.

“Scarlet, you know I’m happy when we’re together. Of course I am. Look at me. Don’t I look happy?” He grabbed my camera and snapped a picture of his beaming phony smile. “Proof,” he said and handed it back.

“But really, Daddy, I’m serious. How come I’m never enough?” I wasn’t milking anything now. I truly wanted to know. “I mean, every time I turn around, there’s always someone here, some new girlfriend, or Sam, or the guys, or their friends. Am I boring or something?”

Just then, Dad struck pay dirt when he found a tray of lasagna in the second fridge. He opened the container and set it on the counter. “You’re more than enough, sweetheart. And you’re certainly not boring. You could keep anyone on their toes.” He grabbed a spoon and shoved a mound of cheesy, creamy, meaty pasta in his mouth. “It’s just that,” he grabbed a dishtowel and wiped his face, “*I’m* not enough. In fact, no matter who I’m with, excluding you of course, I always feel kind of empty. Why do you think we’re called the Void?”

I looked at my father, my parent, my playmate, my best friend and hugged him hard. “You never have to worry, Daddy. You’ll always have me.”

“Not for long, sweetheart. Not for long.”

What I didn’t know as we hugged in that world-class, state-of-the- art, French Provincial kitchen, was that a long line of cars–Range Rovers and Jaguars and vintage cherry red Mustangs–were snaking their way up that winding canyon road to our brand new pad. And those cars were filled with friends of my dad’s and friends of *those* friends, and all of them were ready to par-tay.

6

THE BOY WHO FELL TO EARTH

The sun had gone up and down more than a few times before I made an actual “appearance.” There *had* been a party, honestly the word “party” or “fiesta” or “bash,” was weak for whatever epic thing went on downstairs, but I was in no mood to participate in any of it. I’d been royally stuck on tour with some of those people for what seemed like an eternity, and I was done. I mean seriously done.

I picked up my camera and slowly opened my bedroom door. I never knew if I’d find some strange person on the other side, crashed out on the floor, maybe dressed, maybe not. It had happened before, and it didn’t seem to matter if we were living in a penthouse, a beach house, or a hotel. No one in Dad’s crowd, except for Sam, had manners, and common sense was pretty uncommon. Luckily, it looked like I’d escaped the prospect of a snoring human doormat for one more day.

I shuffled along the hallway in my SpongeBob slippers shooting my feet as I walked. I had filmed my “Bobs” walking everywhere, from fabulous hotel rooms to a prince’s insanely over the top palace we once stayed at in Dubai. The Bobs had been with me for three years and they were good travelers. Sure, I had plenty of other slippers and sandals and flip-flops that were way prettier and obviously more expensive, but they all sat unloved and untouched in the closet. My big, yellow “Bobs” were the ones that, no matter where I was, said “home,” Plus, they were much more interesting to film.

The camera pointed at my feet, I walked along pigeon-toed having one Bob “talk” to the other (definitely a side-effect of being an only child), until I reached the top of the grand staircase. Not to use what’s so grossly overused, but O.M.G. It couldn’t be true and who would believe me if I didn’t film it? I counted twelve, yes, twelve people sleeping on every other step, like a human logjam, but on a big, curvy slant. There were models and roadies, and still more models, and the rest I just couldn’t identify. Really? In such a humongous house, no one could find somewhere else to sleep? Somewhere that wasn’t a step? This was a brand new kind of weird.

I turned and tiptoed in the opposite direction to a hidden staircase that led to the main hall on the first floor. No one, thank goodness, was using it as a bunk bed. When I got downstairs, I checked the time. It was after ten, but every room in the house was absolutely dark. Someone had shut all the curtains and lowered the blackout shades and my eyes could barely make out a thing.

Unfortunately for me, my eyes adjusted when I reached the den. Okay. We’ve established I’m a slob. You know it. I know it. But this? This*?* This was the opening ceremony of the slob Olympics. If they gave an Academy Award for slobdom, this would have won. On a coffee table big enough to land a plane were the remains of a giant half-demolished cake with the number 5 propped on top. The number 3 that once stood beside it was half-eaten, which was really strange because it was a candle. There were glasses and bottles and boxes and ribbon and it looked like it had snowed cake *and* hors d’oeuvres, because not only was there food on every table, shelf, and lamp, there was food all over the couches and the floor. Stranger yet, the room was empty.

Something was off here. Something seemed a little crazy and not the usual kind of crazy. This particular disaster did not resemble the doings of my father’s crowd.

I walked around filming, trying not to make any noise, but the party people who had crashed all over the house were starting to wake up. I could hear someone moan in another room. A second person burped. I heard a woman ask what sounded like a question, then a man’s voice, irritated, answer back with a bunch of garbled words. Nothing I heard made sense, and none of the voices came from Dad or anyone else I knew, I was certain of that. When I got to the kitchen, I shut the door behind me and propped a chair against it, setting my phone on the sticky counter.

“Rosa? Rosa? *Donde es el*–?” I called out to our really sweet, really nice fourth housekeeper in a row, but she’d probably run off screaming after she walked through the door that morning. Without her help, I had to rummage through every cabinet until I found what I was looking for, that beautiful bag of Jamaican Blue coffee that I plunked down next to the espresso machine like it might somehow make itself. I realized right then that I had never, not even once, made a single cup of coffee in my life. Where was room service when you needed it? I took a deep breath and examined the espresso machine. It was big and complicated with tons of valves and knobs and whatever was written on it was in Italian. There was no way I was going to figure that one out anytime soon.

Creative minds seek creative solutions is what Dad always says. In that spirit I tore off the top of the bag of coffee and inhaled–not exactly an actual cup of coffee, but coffee fumes. I armed myself with a pair of barbecue tongs and kept the bag of beans under my nose, poking through the withered hors d’oeuvres and shriveled up sushi like a ninja warrior princess from a broken-down planet. I was hungry, but I wasn’t desperate.

The kitchen fridges were trashed but maybe there was still something in the outdoor fridge? I stepped into the glaring daylight of the backyard and soaked up the damage. The pool and spa were filled with balls and balloons, lounge chair cushions, and giant sea serpent floats. The outdoor kitchen was as big a mess as the indoor one except for a sticky layer of rust-colored BBQ sauce everywhere. Out in the sun, a tray of hot dogs curled and another birthday cake, beautifully decorated, seemed to be melting. There had to be some mistake. I must have wandered into the wrong dream. This was not what I imagined when Dad said we were finally going to get a real house and settle down. It seemed like the only thing we could realistically do was move to another house and start over because only a hazmat team could clean this up.

That awful sinking feeling came over me. Another set of expectations, another set of disappointments. How did this happen? Who were all these strangers? It was the opposite of everything I had hoped for. It was worse than opposite–it was unimaginable. “Some new start, thanks a million, Dad,” I muttered, feeling profoundly sorry for myself and seriously considering the idea of staying permanently angry for a year or two. It was then that I heard a soft rustle coming from the nearest cabana off the pool. “Rosa?” I called out. I hoped, if it wasn’t Rosa, it would at least be somebody I knew. I dropped the barbeque tongs but kept the coffee bag to my nose and approached the cabana, pulling back its canvas flap.

Standing there with his back to me–his tanned, toned, *naked* back–was a guy in swim trunks. “Oh! Sorry. I thought you were someone else,” I said. When he turned to face me, I nearly stumbled backwards. He was on the tall side, maybe about nineteen, and absolutely, positively, unbelievably beautiful. Sun bleached hair, deep green eyes, and dimples, oh, kill me now, *dimples*. I pulled the coffee bag from my nose and gave him my most alluring, super-rehearsed, hours-in-front-of-the-mirror smile. I thought I would faint when he moved toward me, his lips easing into this sexy smile, and yes, the dimples, now fully activated by his smile, were heartbreakers.

“Uh, you got some, uh, stuff on your, uh–” He pointed to my face and made a vague circle near my mouth. I was completely mortified. I had finally run into a living, breathing Greek god and there I was, dumbstruck, with a big, fat coating of brown coffee dust from my nose to my chin. I brushed the powder away as fast as I could and grabbed a nearby towel to rub the bottom half of my face until it was raw.

“Scarlet, right?”

“Do I know you?” I asked as he smiled again. Radiantly. I could get used to this.

“Not yet. I’m Jake. Jake Thomas. Nicole invited me.” Everything he said sounded more like a question than a statement. “I was supposed to meet you, like Saturday, but you never came out of your room,” he added.

“You’ve been here since Saturday?”

“Yeah.” He ran his fingers through his hair. “You missed an awesome party. Man, if I had a dad like yours,” he shook his head slowly, “I’d come out of my room, like, all the time.”

His pretty face was almost–what was the word? Unsettling. I needed to look down and away every few seconds to rest my eyes. And then I saw them there on my feet, my SpongeBob slippers. He saw them too and an awkward silence hung between us until I spotted a cigarette on the ground. I thought I could re-cool myself by scooping it up.

“You don’t smoke, do you?” he asked, disgusted.

“No. Never. Hate it,” I said almost too quickly, tossing the cigarette in the pool and wiping my hands on the cabana curtain like I’d just touched a dead rat.

“Nice slippers,” he laughed.

I did my best to change the subject. “You wouldn’t happen to know how to make coffee, would you?”

“Me?”

Yes, him, what other Greek god was I talking to?

He grabbed the bag of coffee from my hands and took a whiff. “Ahhh! I love the smell of Jamaican in the morning.” Carefully, he resealed the bag and brushed it clean of powder.

“*Apocalypse Now*?” I asked, thinking he was quoting a line from one of Dad’s favorite films.

He tossed the bag up high in the air, “A pot of coffee *now,”* and caught it behind his back. “You’re talking to the king, here. Java Man. Master barrista. Main dude of the macchiato. And, get this, I was actually *born* in Seattle. *Born there.”*

I had just met him but was strangely happy for him and his geographic pedigree, which seemed to give him some sort of indisputable coffee-making advantage.

Jake Thomas sauntered back to the house and I followed him every step of the way, taking in the full splendor of this gorgeous hunk who’d somehow dropped from the sky and into my life. Thank you, sun, moon, stars, and thank you, Nicole.

Five minutes later, the house was awake and alive and I went from room to room looking for Dad and Nicole. I needed to find out everything about Jake Thomas as soon as possible. I’d reluctantly left him in the kitchen surrounded by tons of bagged coffee and every kind of cup. But now it was proving hard to even walk through the house, let alone find Dad or Nicole, plus I couldn’t think straight with music blaring from every single speaker in the overloaded sound system.

At the bottom of the now empty staircase, I stopped and watched Dad’s collection of dashboard hula girls and baseball player bobble-headed dolls bounce and sway in their Lucite display boxes while the art on the walls around them shook to the deafening beat. Upstairs, I found a dozen runway models in one of the master suites, trying to salvage last night’s hair and make-up. I didn’t recognize any of them, but they all seemed to know who I was. Back downstairs in the library, I saw one of my dad’s roadies (finally, someone I knew!) carefully stacking dirty glasses on a tray. He picked up a tumbler with a chipped edge and held it high. “Baccarat,” he grunted sounding really pissed. He set the heavy glass down on the tray and it trembled. “Bunch of peasants,” he hissed. He looked up and saw me as I walked past. “Appreciate beautiful things, Scarlet,” he called after me. Well, now. What a coincidence. That was exactly what I was about to do.

Just then I heard my father’s voice booming from the kitchen. Toad was pulling a steaming tray of muffins from the oven when I walked in, but all I could see was Jake Thomas at the espresso machine, expertly crafting a two-shot macchiato. I was starry-eyed, maybe even close to drooling when my gaze landed on Dad sitting on the counter laughing hard, wearing a leopard skin robe and matching slippers, his skinny white legs dangling and his Daffy Duck tattoo peeking out from the bottom of his pj’s. Beside him was Nicole, and next to her was her friend Penelope, who not surprisingly, was also utterly, heart-stopping gorgeous.

And then I remembered.

“Dad!” I shouted. “Happy birthday!” He hopped off the counter with a little grimace while I slipped past Jake to give him a bear hug like I hadn’t seen him in years. How could I forget his birthday? The trails of ribbon, the shredded wrapping paper, the empty boxes should have given it away. And then, of course, there was always the cake.

“Shhh. Aging rockers don’t have birthdays, especially those dumb little, odd-numbered, *mundane* ones,” he laughed, hugging me hard and at the same time trying to twirl me like we were some kind of dance team. Instead he sort of dragged me in a half circle without my feet ever leaving the floor. Awkward. *Très, très* awkward*.* I remembered some French I’d heard in Paris and felt rather sophisticated for all of a split-second. What brought me back to earth was my new and sudden awareness of being completely concerned with how this, but more importantly, how *I,* looked to Jake Thomas.

Nicole’s face scrunched up like she hadn’t heard Dad right. “Mundane,” she repeated. “He means *Monday,* ‘cause you know, that’s what today is,” she explained to Penelope, who nodded in agreement. That it happened to be Tuesday was another matter entirely, but whatever.

Dad released me with a little grunt–his back was probably acting up–and I bent backwards and almost fell. I tried to balance myself and dipped like I was doing some stupid dance move, but all it amounted to was a slightly clumsy save. At least I didn’t snap my fingers at the end. Then for some reason, Nicole reached over to pinch Dad on the waist and he flinched hard, knocking a blender off the counter, which Toad caught before it hit the floor. I looked over at Jake, mortified, but his eyes seemed to say that this was all normal, and suddenly that was the only thing that mattered.

“What happened to all the maids?” Nicole eyed the kitchen with a squint.

“They’re not called maids anymore,” I mumbled, not taking my eyes off Jake.

“Domestic technician’s the term,” offered Toad, “and I’d bet serious money the last one quit and went home an hour ago. You guys are pigs.” Crumbs flew everywhere as he spoke with half a muffin in his mouth. “Real swine.”

“I’m a pig *and* a swine?” Dad said, giving Toad a good-natured poke in his beer-belly. “Looks more like *you’re* the pig.” Good one, Sherlock. Uh huh.

Jake turned away to make yet another espresso, leaving me staring hard at the back of his head, virtually hypnotized. I didn’t sense Nicole at my side until she whispered something in my ear and I jumped. Just then, Jake turned and winked at me across the kitchen island and I blushed from my knees to my forehead. Luckily, Nicole grabbed my arm and pulled me outside.

“Soooooo? Did I do good?”

“Are you serious? You did brilliant.” I blurted out. “He’s gorgeous. Where’d you find him? How’d you meet him?”

“I think it was an acting class, or maybe it was a voice class. I meet so many people, I don’t remember.”

“How old is he?”

“I don’t know. Maybe nineteen?”

“And he doesn’t have a girlfriend?”

“Why would I introduce you to a guy with a girlfriend? Would you introduce me to a guy with a girlfriend, I mean, even though I’m with your dad? Like, that wouldn’t happen, right?” Clearly, a whole jumble of thoughts were swirling inside her brain, because her forehead rolled up like a window shade, which it hardly ever did. “You–you know what I mean.”

“I’m sorry, but he’s just so beautiful, I can’t imagine him being single.” I gazed at him through the kitchen window and sighed, “Do you think he could ever be attracted to me?” I wasn’t fishing. I needed an honest assessment.

“Definitely,” said Nicole, without hesitation. “I think I’m even picking up a vibe between you two.”

The word “two” was leaving her mouth when a pair of tech guys from Dad’s entourage banged through the back door, fencing like some crazy urban swordsmen with a fireplace shovel and a broom. I steered them back inside and slammed the door behind them without missing a beat.

“A vibe? Like, like what kind of vibe?”

“Like a, uh, a spiritual connection. I really think there’s something there. Um, unfortunately.” Her forehead wrinkled again and now it worried me.

“What do you mean, *unfortunately*?”

“You know your dad a lot better than I do, but from what I’ve seen, I don’t think he’s ready to let you date anybody, even if I introduced you.”

My head was spinning when Jake leaned out the door as if he’d read my mind. When he flashed his thousand-watt smile, it was like the sun breaking through the clouds. “Hey, girls, I’m gettin’ kinda lonely in here,” he said. Was it my imagination or did those bedroom eyes linger on me extralong before he disappeared back inside?

Like an over-eager puppy, I turned to Nicole and grabbed her hands. “Help me, Nicole! Please, please, *please!* C’mon, you just have to. Please?”

“But what can I do?” She blinked and raised her brows.

“If Dad won’t let me date, I’ll have to sneak around and you’ll have to cover for me.”

She gulped, “Cover? Gosh, I don’t know.”

My head was spinning with ideas and I couldn’t talk fast enough. “Yeah, I mean, first try to soften him up about me dating, and whatever you do, don’t tell him Jake’s nineteen, but if softening him up doesn’t work, divert him, keep him busy, happy, occupied. You know what to do.”

“Hmmmm. I do, don’t I?” She giggled. “I guess I could do that. I am sort of crazy about him.”

I really didn’t want to hear that. I was still clinging to the notion that it was as much a fling for her as it was for him, that way it would last longer. If Nicole was now falling into “sort of crazy about” territory, Dad would sense it, and soon enough everything would be over and I’d be left without a connection to the world of future boyfriends.

“Look, I’ll help you if you help me, okay? Whatever you do, don’t tell my Dad you’re crazy about him, even a little, even sort of. You have to be cool with him, otherwise–”

“But I thought he felt the same.” She frowned and looked sad and bewildered.

“Yeah, yeah, he does, but you just can’t talk about it. It makes him really uncomfortable. He’s not good with *feelings*. Get it?” She nodded, her spirits rising. That was close!

“Anyway, you don’t need to focus on Dad right now. You guys are fine. It’s me who needs help because if I don’t find a guy even remotely in my age group, like this week, I’ll go crazy.” Nicole shook her head sympathetically. She was the kind of girl who probably had a boyfriend straight out of the womb, a girl who never went through an awkward period, or had a bad hair day, or a bad face day, or spent one single birthday, Valentine’s Day, New Year’s Eve, or Saturday night alone.

“I know that ultimately I’ll have to sneak out, but I promise I won’t get caught. And if I do, I won’t say a word about you. Ever.”

“Pinky swear?” she asked, sticking out her little finger.

“Pinky swear,” I answered as we hooked our fingers tight.

Nicole sighed and seemed to be calculating something. “Your father usually falls asleep around eleven unless he’s got a new book. I guess if Jake asks you out, you’d have to meet up kind of late.” Suddenly, she looked concerned. “I know you’re a lot smarter than me, Scarlet, and I sure did my share of sneaking around and being a bad girl once upon a time, but don’t be dumb, okay?”

Dumb? No. Happy? Soon. That is, with any luck. I’d been hoping and praying for a boyfriend for the longest time but that seemed to be the one thing that all my father’s money couldn’t buy.

7

A NIGHT OUT

By eight the following night, everyone had cleared out. Even Dad, who loved a crowd, was sick of the chaos and the mess caused by people who were more like friends of friends than actual friends. They were all pretty amazing looking and they were all looking for a pretty amazing time and they found it at Casa Pacifica, a name that no longer seemed to apply.

Dad and Nicole had gone to their bedroom around eight and I sat on the balcony off my bedroom and thought about Jake Thomas and what it would be like to kiss him. I didn't want to, or maybe I did, but either way, I didn't seem to have much choice about it. In the movie in my mind, Jake and I stood face to face, his arms around me, my hands on his broad shoulders. Maybe it was sunset or it could have been dawn. We were on a beach in Hawaii or a rooftop in Paris. It was light and it was dark, and I lost myself in his eyes for what seemed like days. He mouthed the words “I love you” and held my face, oh so gently as he moved in to kiss me. But before the kiss could happen, before our lips could even touch, I’d start my mental movie all over again, readjusting every little detail.

In the past, I never would’ve called myself boy crazy. There were never any boys around to be crazy about. Toad had twin sons named Caper and Heist who were awfully cute but they were a year younger than me and they never came along on the road. Then, for a month last year, the Void tried out a new bass player in their back-up band. He was twenty-two and British and his name was Jasper and I took one look at him and melted. I followed him around like a lost puppy until he took another gig. I’m pretty sure Dad had everything to do with that. The last person he’d want me falling for is a musician but ironically, that’s all I was ever around.

As for boys in school, my last experience in a classroom had been maybe three years ago. Dad had enrolled me in a very private, totally snooty school in L.A. where everyone was supposed to be super evolved and welcoming, but that turned out to be a big hoax. I was so busy trying not to feel like a friendless dork that I never noticed the boys, or the girls for that matter. I spent a miserable semester there, mostly with bangs in my eyes and a scowl on my face, before the Void went on tour and, once again, Dad found me a travelling tutor. She was cute and nice and funny, so you can pretty well imagine what happened with that. And if Dad didn’t fall for them, at least temporarily, the tutors always fell for him, even the ones that *weren’t* cute or nice or funny. Even one guy. Evidently, Danny Sunder was irresistible to everyone (honestly, so hard to imagine).

Anyway, my years of being on the road with the band was not this wild rock and roll ride that you’d imagine it to be, but really a life of very expensive aloneness that took place in a very luxurious bubble. Don't get me wrong, it was totally cush and over-the-top and I never lacked for anything, but I ask you, was this any way to raise a kid?

Which brings me back to Jake who asked me out when the party was winding down. I told him the best I could do was to meet up with him at a club somewhere later that night, and maybe down the road when my dad got used to the idea, we could have a real me pick up at the front door kind of date. I was completely new at this. I didn't know how or what to arrange but I thought if Nicole was working on him I’d take a chance and ask Dad for permission to go out before I actually snuck out, praying he’d give me that one in a million “yes.”

A few minutes before nine I tiptoed down the hall and peeked through Dad’s bedroom door. Nicole was lying next to him on the bed, stretching like a cat and yawning like a truck driver.

“Jake and Scarlet, Scarlet and Jake, what a couple, huh?” She was trying hard to seem casual and that included more yawning. “He likes movies and she likes movies.”

“Everyone likes movies, Nicole,” Dad said, not looking up from his book. “It’s like liking ice cream.”

He was in his bright red samurai pajamas, reading a book on Chinese philosophy while Nicole admired her perfectly perfect teeth in a hand mirror. She scrunched up her eyebrows and blinked. “What about gelato?” she asked.

“Gelato?” Dad stared at her hard, scratched his chin and shook his head. “Listen, a–a–a passing cinematic interest does not a bond make,” Dad stuttered. “How old is he anyway?”

Nicole made a series of contorted yoga faces in the mirror. “Eighteen, maybe.”

“Eighteen. No one’s eighteen,” Dad grumbled, then he sat up and became totally serious. “This might be hard for you to understand,” he paused and watched Nicole’s facial gymnastics in mock-horror, “but Scarlet’s led a very sheltered life. She’s never been on a date, and she’s never had a boyfriend, especially one who’s *eighteen*.”

“Duh.”

“Please don’t say ‘duh.’” Dad shuddered and stuck his nose back in his book.

“Jake’s a really sweet guy and I invited him to the party just to meet her and he liked her so much.”

“Yeah. Thanks. How did I ever get along without you?” Dad was being sarcastic, but it went right over Nicole’s exceptionally pretty head.

“I know! We’re perfect together!” she exclaimed, but caught herself too late. “We’re not *perfect* perfect. We’re just okay, really. I mean, average. The usual.”

Dad ignored this and continued on his singular thought. “What you don’t seem to understand is that my little Scarlet and *that boy* talked for all of ten minutes. *Ten.* Count ‘em, Nicole.” He held up all his fingers and exhaled loud and deep, usually a sign he was losing patience.

“Well, wetalked for ten minutes when we met.”

“Exactly, I–” Dad stopped himself and plopped his open book down on his belly. “I just think she’d be better off with a moderately unattractive fifteen-year-old with bad skin and a pitchy voice.”

I decided to announce myself before he came up with more requirements for my squeaky-voiced, acne-prone phantom boyfriend, so I knocked on the door.

“What?” Dad barked.

I didn’t walk in but poked my ever-present camera (my techie shield) through the door, filming Dad as I spoke. “Can I order a limo?”

He shook his head “no,” like it was a perfectly normal question and the answer just happened to be “no.” He went back to reading.

“Then can Nicole drive me to Hollywood?”

Silence.

“Can I drive myself?”

More silence as I stepped into the bedroom.

“C’mon, Dad, I’m meeting friends somewhere.”

“What friends?”

“Some people. Friends.”

“You’re always telling me you have no friends. Did you order some on Amazon?”

“Goddddd. I’m meeting someone somewhere, okay?”

“Stop filming me, Scarlet.”

I lowered my camera. He was irritated and I was making it worse. “Don’t you have to be over twenty-one to go *somewhere,* especially somewherein Hollywood*?”* There were times I could get nothing past my father. This was one of them.

“Maybe.”

“So, how do you expect to get into *somewhere?”*

I turned sideways and stepped backward into the hallway. “Like this.”

“Don’t be such a smart ass.”

“It’s just a club. I’ll get in and it’ll be cool. Nothing will happen. Please, Daddy.”

He shook his head “no” again. “Out of the question. You’re fifteen.”

“Maybe I could take her?” Nicole chimed in.

“Absolutely not. She’s too young for clubs.”

“Forget it, Nicole,” I took my cue and put on my best angry but resigned voice. “If he wants me to be a big baby, I’ll be one. I’m going back to my crib now, and I don’t mean that in a hip-hop way.”

Dad gave Nicole a triumphant nod and propped his book in front of his face. He was done. End of discussion.

“And I hope the fact that you’re ruining my life won’t keep you up all night.” I delivered that one with just the right amount of venom, I thought.

“It won’t.” He didn’t even look up, but Nicole did. She gave me a split-second sideways look, like “are you really going through with this?” I looked away, shut the door, and went back my bedroom, a smile on my face.

I’d never before in my life done the sneaking out thing and except for that one night in Paris, I’d never wanted to try, but my world was suddenly changing and I had to follow that change whatever it might take me. My attraction to Jake happened fast, I’ll admit, but not as fast as Dad thought. I’d talked to him for an hour. He was handsome and fun and wrote music and played guitar. He was goofy and perfect and he seemed to be as interested in me as I was in him. And best of all, Nicole delivered him right to my door. It was a sign, definitely a sign. And the sign said, “sneak out as soon as possible.”

Later that night, I did my make-up as glam and sophisticated as I could. I put on deodorant maybe three times and posed in the mirror a full ten minutes, occasionally throwing my head back in imaginary laughter during an imaginary conversation. Finally, a little after ten, I threw my favorite jacket over my shoulders and tiptoed quietly out the front door with my knees shaking just a little.

8

GREY GOOSE

Twelve hours later, my knees were still shaking, but for a whole different reason. I trudged up the canyon in my platforms, sticking close to the inside shoulder of the road for what little shade there was. It was probably around ten in the morning–I didn’t know because my phone had died–and it was already scorching. By the final stretch, I had fallen even deeper into that sick, tired, blistered, mad at myself kind of unhappiness when a small white car inched past me up the road. I couldn’t see the driver who was holding up a map and seemed lost. There were never that many cars up here (unless someone had a party) mostly because there weren’t many houses on top of the hill. It was just our compound and some big movie producer’s mansion and the enormous estate of a shampoo tycoon who was completely bald.

As I dragged my feet around the last turn, I was annoyed to find the white car parked in our driveway. I could see now it was a woman driver and she had pulled all the way up to the intercom and was pushing a button. I didn’t want whoever it was to see me so I hung back behind some bushes and watched. At first nothing happened. Then came a loud crackling sound and a voice answered.

“Yes? Hello? Si?” Even from where I stood, I could hear Blanca.

Blanca was our new maid, I mean, “domestic technician,” and another truly wonderful person who would probably quit by that afternoon and join her smart sisters down on some beach in Cabo. We hadn’t had much luck with gardeners or technicians or anyone. They all would last a week or two, then poof, like clockwork they were gone. And really, who could blame them? We were more than a handful. I mean, you couldn’t pay meenough money to work for us. We were hopeless.

“*Como*?” said Blanca through the intercom. ”What?”

“Hi, hello. I’m Ellie Hughes. I’m here to see Mr. Sunder,” the woman explained to the speaker box.

Ellie Hughes? Ellie. Hughes. Why did I know that name? Oh. Yeah. *Her*. It came back to me. She was that woman from backstage at the final concert. The one who knew the band all those years ago. The one my father seemed to like a whole lot in a completely different way.

“I–I–don’t know,” Blanca stammered.

“I’m here to see Danny Sunder. He’s expecting me.”

“I start here last week.”

“That’s nice but–”

There was more crackling, then some silence.

“He sleepin’ today and say don’ bother him for nobody.”

“Is Scarlet home?”

Silence.

“Hello?”

The intercom went dead. Ellie pushed the buzzer again but nothing happened. Maybe Blanca had already slipped out the back.

Ellie checked her watch, pulled out her phone and dialed. I’m guessing she was calling Dad, but he didn’t answer (he hardly ever did), so she got out of her car and walked around. After a minute or two, she stood on tiptoes and tried to see over the high wall, but that was impossible, so she plunked herself back down in the driver’s seat. After a moment, she backed her car to the shoulder, parked, rolled down all the windows, and opened a magazine. Clearly, she wasn’t happy about being stuck outside the gate but she wasn’t leaving either.

I stayed off to the side still not wanting to be seen. Maybe if I waited long enough, she’d go away. I edged backward a few feet and sat down in the shade of Mr. Shampoo’s rock wall and counted the minutes. Finally, it looked like Ellie Hughes had dozed off. It had become so hot I nearly fell asleep, too. But I pinched myself awake and thought about how I could dial in the gate code without waking her up. As it turned out, I didn’t need to worry about that.

The night before, when I’d left home to meet Jake at the club, I ordered a cab and had the driver meet me down the road in front of the house below us. It was the only way to do it because once you were on the road you couldn’t get a signal in the canyon. The cab picked me up and the ride was scary and exhilarating. I got to Hollywood early and even managed to get myself into the club without a hassle. Jake was nowhere to be found, but our date was for midnight and it was only a little past eleven. I checked my phone for calls or messages but there weren’t any. Then I realized I didn’t have his number. I’d written it on a napkin, stuck it in a drawer, and promised to call his phone so he’d have my number, too. But I was so used to someone else taking care of details that I simply forgot. Now, I was panicked. Was I in the wrong place? Was it Crimson or was it Red? Or was it the Red Room at Velvet or the Crimson room at Bardot’s? There was no way I could reach Nicole without also waking Dad. And so, I waited. And waited. And when I finally decided to take a chance and call Nicole, my phone died. Still, Jake had to show up. He *had* to.

But he didn’t.

The place closed at four and I followed some of the clubbers to an all night coffee shop across the street. Who knew, maybe he’d still show? After a while, I started to talk to some young guy sitting at the counter. He was cute but he was no Jake. His name was Spider or Spidey and he didn’t believe me when I told him who I was.

An hour later, the sun was coming up. I was working on my fourth coffee and I was beyond tired and getting queasy. Spider, whose real name was Scott, offered to drive me back to Malibu, not because of my charm and beauty, but most likely to check out if I really was Danny Sunder’s daughter. I knew I should have called a taxi but I didn’t. Spider-Scott had a noisy, beat-up old Camaro painted a washed out electric blue. When I got in, he handed me a bottle of Grey Goose. I told him I didn’t drink but he said it was water and I should take a swig because I was starting to look green. He wasn’t lying. It really *was* water and I nursed it sitting low in my seat with the window rolled down and the fresh air blowing in my face. By the time we reached Pacific Coast Highway, I not only looked green, I felt green. And by the second hard curve of the canyon, I asked Spider-Scott to please pull over so I could be sick. He didn’t and I was–all over his car.

He dropped me off on the side of the road with a disgusted look that I hope never to see on anyone’s face again. He told me to keep the lousy bottle and tossed my sweater out the window. I offered to pay for the mess but he couldn’t pull away fast enough. An hour later, I was hiding from Ellie Hughes forty feet from my front gate, afraid that the noisy, revved up car sound I was now hearing was Spider-Scott coming back up the canyon for who knows what.

He flew past me really close, kicking up a wall of dust before he spun around, doing it again. “I want three hundred bucks,” he yelled.

“Big fat moron!” I yelled. “Are you insane?”

Ellie woke with a start and looked through her windshield just as a bottle of Grey Goose went flying through the air and barely missed the taillight of his old vomity car. The bottle hit the ground and shattered as he sped away. There was no hiding from Ellie Hughes anymore.

I dragged myself up to the gate, coughing and swatting the dirty air.

“Boyfriend trouble?” Ellie leaned out her car window with a look of genuinely concern.

“What are youdoing here?” I asked, acting surprised and innocent like I hadn’t been sitting there for what felt like a month.

Ellie got out of her car, straightened her blouse, touched an old locket on a chain around her neck, and gave me a tired smile.

“I came to work with your dad for a week, maybe two.” She wiped her forehead. It was beyond hot now. “Scarlet, are you okay? You look a little sick.”

I shook my head “yes,” then “no.” It wasn’t any of her business.

“I–he–wow, I guess Danny didn’t tell you I was coming, did he?” Ellie pushed up her sleeves and swatted at a flying bug at least three times. “I’m really sorry,” she continued and sounded like she meant it. “No one likes surprises.”

“No one I know,” I said under my breath. I punched the code into the keypad and waited for the big gates to slide open. “And you’re parked out here because?”

“Because I took French instead of Spanish in high school. Does your father still sleep all day?”

I gave a slight nod and led the way through the open gate. Ellie climbed back into her car and threw it in reverse.

“Hey! You leaving?” I shouted.

“No.” She smiled. “Not yet, anyway.”

She drove into the compound trying to take it all in while I walked alongside her car.

“Listen, I’d appreciate if you don’t say anything about what you saw out there. And for the record, I wasn’t drinking.” She drove slowly, looking straight ahead. “I wasn’t,” I added, defensively.

“I didn’t say anything.” She glanced at me and shrugged.

“You thought it, though.” Then I spotted the suitcase on the back seat.

“You’re staying here?” It was hard to keep the alarm out of my voice.

“Well, I don’t have to, but your dad thought we might get more work done if I weren’t driving up and down the canyon twice a day.” Ellie gazed up at the house and swallowed. “Looks like you might be able to squeeze me in somewhere.”

I looked up at the house, too, trying to take it all in like I was seeing it for the first time. It was huge, grand, massive, ginormous.

“What about your husband?” I fished. “Won’t he be, you know, like pissed that you’re staying here?”

“He’d bepissed alright, if I had one.”

Ellie Hughes drove her inexpensive, probably rented sedan slowly around the circular driveway and parked it very straight and neat next to the five-car garage beside Dad’s priceless Bentley parked crooked and careless like some giant had tossed it there.

So this was how it was going to be, huh? My heart sank. The feeling swept over me that the chances for an excellent summer were growing slimmer by the minute.

9

SUNDER AND HUGHES

I put Ellie Hughes and her suitcase in a bedroom down the hall from my room and left her there to figure things out for herself. She looked like a woman who could find a drawer or a hanger and use them well. I, on the other hand, had my own problems, the biggest being the uncomfortable realization that sneaking out was nothing like that old 1980’s film fantasy I’d had for years. Trust me on this; barfing in some strange guy’s strange car bears absolutely no resemblance to *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off*. None.

I knew I was jaded. I had no doubt. I just had no idea there was any room left inside me for being disillusioned. Evidently, there was still a lot. And now, I had to worry about Dad and what he was going to do when he saw Ellie Hughes. He had never really mentioned her again after the night we first met, except for that one time he attempted to talk about his past. He became all tongue-tied and embarrassed and it went nowhere fast. I was pretty sure he had forgotten about her, and I figured he was going to be extremely unhappy when he realized she was in the house, which meant we were all going to be unhappy. I couldn’t afford to be sidetracked by a bunch of adult drama when I was, okay, fine, I’ll say it, falling for Jake. Sure, I didn’t know much about him, but I knew as soon as I opened my nightstand drawer and found his number I’d be talking to him today. Somehow, in just seventy-two hours Jake Thomas had gotten under my skin like a bad splinter and it was starting to hurt.

I went to my bathroom and stared at my face in the mirror. I was okay, right? I was cute. Sometimes I had style. Sometimes I even knew what I was doing. Jake would ask me out again. I was positive there was a mix-up, or that he thought I wouldn’t come. It had to be one or the other. It had to.

I was way too exhausted to take off my clothes and climbed into bed with my shoes still stuck to my blistered feet. I grabbed for my sleep mask, a satiny thing with a skull and crossed bones printed over each eye that looked like it belonged to a tired but trendy pirate. Within a minute, I was asleep.

My dreams swirled around in the nonsensical way that dreams often do. I was sitting in Spidey-Scott’s car coming home up the hill and I held a small ferret in my lap. Jake was driving, or someone who was supposed to be Jake but looked like one of Dad’s roadies. Outside the car window was Malibu, beyond the turn, Paris. I was back at the Meurice putting gold sandals on my feet but they didn’t quite look like my feet and I could speak French really well but I couldn’t understand myself.

My dream suddenly shifted. I was back home again and it was very early in the morning. I was showing Ellie the bedroom right across the hall from me because I knew it was the farthest away from Dad (*and* Nicole), and I knew he’d appreciate how thoughtful I was. I also knew I could hold that thoughtfulness over his head if he made me get rid of the ferret or if he found out I’d gone back to Paris all by myself.

In my dream, I watched Ellie settle in. She hung up her blouses and scarves and put her underwear away in a dresser drawer. She laid out her toiletries on the bathroom counter and gave the back of her neck a spray of floral perfume that had me smelling roses in my sleep. I wanted to take notes on how she did it, how she kept the room in order but there was nothing to write on or with. She was restless and examined the room down to the fineness of the very fine sheets. I watched her stand on the balcony and look out at the sea. I could tell she was waiting for someone, anyone, to appear, but it wasn’t me.

I woke up a few hours later feeling wonky and more than a little disoriented. Dad may have lived on a diet of all-nighters, but it was new to me and not at all enjoyable. When I heard a knock on the door across the hall, I knew I was really awake. I tiptoed over and opened my door a crack and saw Dad peeking into Ellie’s room as if he were nervous or scared. I sat down next to the door. I was tired enough to fall asleep again right there on the carpet, but I found myself listening.

“Oh, just come in. I’m not going to throw anything,” Ellie laughed.

Dad stepped into the room seeming embarrassed and relieved, but he stayed close to the door just in case. “Nobody told me you were here.”

“That’s because you don’t have a butler. If you had a butler, he would’ve announced me.” She was joking but Dad took her seriously. He stood by the door and yelled down the hall at the top of his lungs, “Blanca! Blaaaaanca!” Had I been asleep I definitely would have killed him.

Blanca bustled down the hallway smelling of lemons and cinnamon. She saw me sitting in the doorway but she didn’t say a word. She just kept going, dragging that huge vacuum cleaner behind her and smiling the whole way.

“Si, Mr. Danny?” She always found Dad amusing, like he was this magical, overgrown kid she was supposed to keep an eye on.

Dad grappled with his version of Spanglish and demanded, “Por que you didn’t tell me Ellie was aqui?”

“Ai, Mr. Danny,” Blanca blushed and laughed, “you say me no wake you. You say never, like this.” She wagged her finger and rolled her hips back and forth without knowing she was totally imitating Dad’s famous swagger.

“It’s not her fault,” Ellie said. “Scarlet let me in and gave me this beautiful room–and let me just say, nice. Very, very nice.” She looked around once more with approval.

Blanca looked back and forth between Dad and Ellie with a furtive glance in my direction. After a moment, she shrugged and left them alone, pushing her giant vacuum off to the next project.

“I should have been at the airport, but I was sure you told me you were arriving next Thursday.” Dad couldn’t even convince himself with that line. He stepped toward Ellie and held out his left arm. “See? I didn’t even write it down.” On the inside of his forearm was a big tattoo of a blank notepad.

“Does that work on regular people?” Ellie asked, trying to keep a straight face.

“I don’t know any regular people. The irregular ones go for it every time.” Dad, who never got embarrassed, looked down at the floor.

“Stanley Sunder,” Ellie whispered. She couldn’t stop herself from smiling at his half-staged, semi-real vulnerability. And her smile was exactly what allowed Dad to give her even more of his charming, self-effacing side.

“What kind of parents would take a cute little baby and name it Stanley? Stanley. Stannn-leeee.” He wailed like a man grossly shortchanged of the perfect stage name, like Ozzie, or Elton. Dad hated the name Stanley and got mad whenever I teased him about it.

“The kind of parents who figured you’d become an accountant or a very successful plumber.” Ellie reached out to stroke Dad’s hair but he grabbed her and spun her around, catching her completely off-guard. He held her close placing one hand on her back while he slow danced her around the room. Dad hummed as they stood at the balcony where the gray blue of the horizon melted into the sea and everything sparkled in the distance.

“I can’t believe we’ll be working together again,” Dad said. “Sunder and Hughes.”

“Hughes and Sunder,” Ellie corrected.

She laughed again and leaned in closer until they were almost nose-to-nose. They stood like that for a long time until Ellie closed her eyes, expecting to be kissed. But Dad let her go and moved quickly to the door, stopping only when he reached the threshold. He took a deep breath and turned back to her, almost shouting, “So listen, El, why don’t you unpack, relax, come downstairs around seven. We’ll get dinner someplace special. You, me, Scar and, uh–”

I decided to make my appearance then. I grabbed a pillow and pulled it over my head, pressing it to my ears like a down-filled pancake, as though I’d been trying to sleep over all the noise. I slid my sleep mask over my eyes and ripped open my bedroom door, not really able to see a thing.

“Dad! Did it ever occur to you that somebody might be sleeping?”

“Hey, somebody! How come you didn’t tell me Eleanor was here?”

I yanked off my mask and stood there looking cranky. “What are you talking about?”

Dad pushed the guestroom double doors all the way open. Ellie looked up and gave me a little wave from where she sat on the bed.

“Oh. Her,” I said, sheepishly. “Sorry.” I waved back in the weakest possible way, but that was a mistake.

“Is that a stamp on your hand?” Dad’s voice cracked as he spotted the smeared purple happy face stamped on the back of my hand. I stared down at the blurry imprint, then back at Dad. I stepped backwards into my room, saluted Dad and slammed the door so hard the house shook. If you can’t deny, then disappear. But make sure your exit is so annoying that no one will want to talk to you for at least a few hours.

Dad stood motionless stuck in the hallway between my room and Ellie’s open door. He exhaled and crossed his arms over his chest.

“Was that a stamp on her hand?”

“Maybe?” Ellie shrugged, not knowing what to say.

Dad turned back to close her door, but not before melting a small corner of her heart with the saddest smile you could ever imagine.

10

A BODY LIKE HERS

Casa Pacifica stood silent and spotless once Blanca was done for the day. That evening, the sun lowered itself into the waiting sea like a dinner plate dropped into a bathtub. The sky filled with wide swatches of color and the coast highway turned into a long ribbon of car lights. By seven-thirty, Ellie had circled the grand piano at least three times, having caressed a different set of keys on each pass. She moved to one of the four matching couches and sat down, checking her watch every minute or two. Finally, a door slammed somewhere, then another, the second bang followed by shouting.

“You’re not wearing that!”

“What’s wrong with it?”

“It says, ‘Hey, look at me, I’m Scarlet Skankleton.’”

“You need to seriously get over yourself, Dad. You are so not cool anymore. Not even a little.”

There was a distant shuffling and then a mumbling all the way down the stairs and into the foyer.

“I’m not cool? *Me?* Please. I invented cool. I hold the patent on it. *I’m not cool?* Who does she think she is? I’m cool personified.” Dad raised his fist to nothing and no one. “Cool, c‘est moi.”

He still held a fist to the ceiling as he shuffled into the living room wearing a pair of very nerdy 1950’s eyeglasses, leather overalls, a sleeveless button-down shirt and clogs. He spotted Ellie on the sofa, dropped his outraised hand to the top of his head, and pretended to fix the back of his very studied and styled mess of hair. He moved around the piano and made a beeline for her. “Ellie.” He grabbed her hands and pulled her to her feet.

“I don’t remember those,” she said, looking at his glasses.

He took them off and stashed them in his pocket.
“Age has blinded me, honey.”

“Saints and sinners are both myopic, at least that’s what they say.”

“That explains everything.” Dad plopped down on the sofa and patted the space beside him. Ellie sat down as instructed, but not as close as Dad would have liked. He inched closer and turned to face her, taking her hands in his, looking deep into her eyes. “Where do we begin, baby?”

“Um, I–uh–” Ellie stuttered.

“I mean tomorrow. Where do we begin tomorrow? Do you want to look at our old unfinished stuff or should we start in on the new?”

“Oh,” she cleared her throat. “Of course. Let’s just steer clear of the old stuff, right?” She looked at Dad, nodding and smiling, trying to hold her professional persona together, but when another door slammed harder than the last, Ellie jumped.

Dad took that opportunity to put his arm around her.
“You know,” his voice was low now, almost a whisper, “I didn’t think working with you would ever be in the cards again.”

“Cards get shuffled.” Ellie clung to being matter-of-fact, though she knew it would probably be a losing battle. “Things change.”

“You haven’t.”

“Put your glasses back on.” She fingered her locket and smiled, shaking her head at this person she rarely saw but knew so well.

“It wouldn’t make any difference.” He was serious now. “I think I forgot how much *you* there is in you.”

Ellie shifted in her seat and swallowed hard. Dad pulled her closer, so close that his nose skimmed her cheek, so close that their lips almost touched.

“A thousand years could pass and I’d still remember the smell of your hair.” Dad closed his eyes and inhaled.

“C’mon, Danny. Don’t. Don’t start making me nuts,” she said nervously. “We’ll never get any work done.”

“Is that bad?” Dad mumbled in a low voice as he touched her lips, “Or good?”

Ellie felt like she’d forgotten how to breathe, like all her confidence was gutted and all her finely tuned resolve was just a distant memory. “I suppose it’s–” but she never got to finish her thought.

“GOOD!!!!”

The word vibrated through the room and bounced off the walls like a haywire ping-pong ball, shattering the moment with a very significant and unsettling plop in the person and presence of Nicole. I saw it happen because I was standing in the doorway, and watched as the spell between Dad and Ellie snapped in two. Or at least it did for Ellie who sucked in her breath like someone completely and totally shocked. She jumped to her feet and spun around to see Nicole, her sculpted abs gleaming like neon tubes below a skimpy crop top, her hair streaked to sun-kissed perfection, her twenty-four-year-old features as amazingly beautiful as they could possibly be.

“Or is bad better?” Nicole said as a sultry afterthought, winking at Dad as she added insult to injury.

Ellie fell back on the sofa as Dad stood up. Nicole didn’t waste a second springing to his side.

“I’m Nicole,” she blurted.

Ellie blinked hard, dumbstruck by this shiny, glossy person.

“Danny’s girlfriend, Nicole,” she continued, adding the Danny’s girlfriend part in case Ellie somehow missed the picture. She pecked Dad on the cheek and then reapplied her creamy pink lip gloss.

Ellie looked from Nicole to Dad and back again and stammered, “I, I’m Hughes, Ellie, Hughes.” She found her legs and stood up, offering Nicole her hand and a tight, bewildered smile that froze on her face as her brain registered that she wasn’t too old to stumble and come down hard. Well, at least that’s what it looked like to me.

Nicole stared blankly at Ellie’s outstretched hand and placed her lip gloss in Ellie’s open palm.

“Hughes? Isn’t that a guy name?”

Which was precisely when I stepped into the room, wearing the same outfit Nicole had on. Okay, maybe mine was a size or two bigger, but it was the exact same outfit.

“It’s a last name. God, Nicole, you should get out more,” I announced.

Dad pointed at me, but turned to Ellie. “Can she go out like that?”

Ellie looked from me to Nicole and opened her mouth but nothing came out.

“Why are you asking *her?”* I demanded. “She has nothing to do with it. If it’s okay for Nicole, it’s okay for me. End of discussion.”

“Honey, with a body like hers all you need is, well, a body like hers.”

“Really? I can’t believe you just said that. Thank you so much, Dad. I feel incredibly special now.”

“Oh, c’mon, don’t get all huffy. You know what I mean.”

Ellie couldn’t stop blinking. “I really need to make a call,” she said, and left the room as fast as she could, averting her eyes as she passed me.

Dad rubbed his face and exhaled. “I’m such a schmuck.”

I felt bad for her. Ellie seemed like a nice enough person, but more than that, she hadn’t let on about everything she saw at the gate that morning. I decided to follow her upstairs and undo the damage of Nicole’s unwelcoming committee. I know she didn’t mean anything by it. I’m sure Nicole didn’t even know what she did but the damage was done and the effects weren’t good. I knew all about it. I’d been there before. I’d seen that unconscious behavior in girls when I was plunked down in one school or another at eight or ten or thirteen. It was brutal to live it, but somehow harder to watch in the middle of my living room. Which was why I was so confused.

Nicole and Dad were getting close, or so I thought. As much as he acted like he might never settle down, Nicole had been around an extra long time, like before Paris. Then, out of nowhere, Dad invited Ellie to stay at the house, and even though she didn’t fit his girlfriend demographic, he seemed to like her an awful lot. Of course, she was nothing like anyone I’d ever seen him with. They probably had tons in common and knew all the same things and liked the same things, too. If Ellie stayed it would be really strange and uncomfortable. On the upside, it might be nice to have a real grown-up in the house, one who could read the directions on the side of a box and follow them.

I stopped on the landing and thought back over the last few weeks. Dad had been acting strange since even before his birthday. He was sad and distracted and kind of jumpy. I ask you, what is it about getting older? What? You’re over fifty. Stop counting. Pass go. Collect $200. Have a good time. Enjoy your independence. Enjoy not answering to anyone. *Get over it.*

Ellie’s bedroom door was open. I tiptoed in and saw her in the bathroom drying her face with a big towel. I cleared my throat so she wouldn’t be surprised.

“Hey, are you okay?”

“Oh. Scarlet.” She looked up and heaved a big sigh, “I’m fine. How about you?”

I nodded. “He says stupid things all the time, like, all day long.” I nodded again and looked down at the big red blister showing right through my new, way too high strappy sandals. “I just came up to thank you for not ratting me out this morning. You saved my butt.”

Ellie nodded as she evened out the edges of a hanging towel. “That guy who drove you home–he’s not a friend, is he?”

“Ewww. Nooooo.”

“But you know him?”

“Ick, no. And, like, who knows guys anyway? They’re totally strange and mysterious.” I looked at myself in the mirror and started to play with my hair, piling it on top of my head.

“Like a tropical disease.” Ellie laughed and started to play with her own hair in the mirror. “Forget I said that.”

“It’s okay.” I hesitated and then decided to unload my story since Ellie could keep a secret. “You know that girl downstairs?”

“You mean, uh, Danny’s Nicole?”

“The same. I met this guy she invited to a party and now I really, really like him even though I don’t know him very well. Anyway, we were supposed to meet up at this club last night, but he never showed. Then I called him today like a bunch of times but he never answered. Do you think I’m fat?”

“Scarlet, I can’t believe you’re asking that. You’re a beautiful girl. Honestly, if I looked like you at fifteen, wow, I can’t even imagine. C’mon, now.”

She placed her hands on my shoulders the way Dad always did and looked me square in the eye.

“I hope this helps because it’s the one thing I know for sure about men–you can’t take what they do, or don’t do, personally. They don’t think like we do. They’re wired differently.” She tapped her head. “I always have to remind myself of that.”

She walked back to the bedroom and I followed her, watching as she changed from flats to heels. “Your job,” she continued, “is to figure out how you feel inside. If a guy makes you feel good, pay attention to that. If he makes you feel bad, there’s your answer. Don’t waste your time with guys who make you feel bad, period. Because, and trust me on this, it’s *always* a waste of time.”

I thought about what Ellie was saying. Besides Dad’s manager, Sam, I wasn’t used to anyone talking to me like I was a real person. I felt like the guys in the band saw me as some kind of mascot and I was pretty sure Dad was hoping to keep me permanently stuck in childhood. I pulled a big scarf off the dresser and tied it around my hips. “This is cool.”

“It’s from Brazil. I went down a few years ago for the music. You’ve been there, right?” Ellie looked through her cosmetic bag, taking out a compact.

“We stayed at a hotel in Rio once,” I said. “I wasn’t allowed out, except for that one time Toad put on a blond wig and took me to the beach. Some fan spotted him and we ended up running back to the hotel with a bunch of people chasing us. Sam was really mad.” I sat on the bed and watched Ellie put on lipstick. Maybe she *was* here just to work with Dad. Still, there were some things I needed to find out. “Do you have a boyfriend?”

“Nope.”

“Cats?”

“Uh, no.”

Then Dad suddenly shouted from the hallway, “Are you two okay in there?”

“Yes!” we yelled back in unison.

“No pets, huh?”

Ellie shook her head “no” and I slumped further down on the bed. I was so tired from the night before that all I wanted was a giant nap. But I couldn’t stop watching Ellie who seemed like someone who was really comfortable in her own skin. It was probably the first time I really understood that expression and what it looked like in person. Yeah, Ellie seemed normal, and easy, and maybe even happy outside of that Nicole surprise downstairs.

Dad might be ready for someone like her, someone who was pretty together but had her own life, like somewhere else. Suddenly, I looked deeply concerned. “He’s very, very lonely, you know.”

“He is? Danny Sunder? Your father?” She almost laughed.

I stood up and tied the scarf around my head like a turban. “Yeah, he’s a picture of misery,” I said.

“He looks pretty happy to me,” Ellie said, as she checked herself in a full-length mirror. “And he’s got a, well, hmmm, a very enthusiastic companion down there.” Although Ellie tried to sound casual, what came out next had a little edge. “Are they serious?”

“Who knows? Maybe. Maybe not. He’s a man of mystery, even to himself.”

“Point taken,” Ellie said. She turned from the mirror, grabbed her bag, and opened the bedroom door. “You ready?”

I looked down at my bare stomach. “Maybe I’ll grab a sweater.”

Ellie waited at the top of the stairs and smiled when I returned. Without being too obvious, I watched her as we walked back to the living room. It’s true I didn’t remember her, but maybe, just maybe, there was something familiar about her.

11

MALIBU WALTZ

Not one, not two, but a whole crew of waiters served our table that night in Malibu. It was the kind of restaurant that even had a special guy who swept up breadcrumbs when they fell out of your mouth. Of course, I was the one dropping them everywhere like Hansel and Gretel’s messy older sister who actually knew the way home. I was hitting the breadbasket hard and feeling really anxious sitting there between Nicole and Ellie, two women who couldn’t be more opposite. What did Dad have in mind? Were they supposed to become friends? Maybe share diet tips? Or go shopping? Was I supposed to be loyal to Nicole? I had no idea what to think and it sure didn’t help having twenty waiters hovering around me, but all that fuss had way more to do with Dad being Danny Sunder than anything else. It was just the usual, after all.

I finished the last remaining breadstick as we ordered and then focused my camera on Nicole, who’d been staring at the restaurant door since we arrived. I panned across to Dad who seemed more distracted than usual, then on to Ellie fiddling with her locket, her pretty face a study in patience and irony. For all of twenty seconds, I was exceedingly proud of myself for coming up with the ‘study in patience and irony’ thing until I remembered that I’d read it in a movie description the day before. Still, it was a useful phrase, especially when it came to Ellie Hughes.

At the table, no one bothered with small talk, and although he hardly ever drank, Dad put on his reading glasses and studied the wine list like it was an original copy of the Declaration of Independence. After that, he glanced around the restaurant until some agent guy at the bar caught his eye and gave him one of those thumb and pinky finger “call me” signals. Then the botoxed woman beside him did exactly the same, except she mouthed the words, “call me” with her great big over-sized lips. Meanwhile, every other person in the place appeared *not* to be looking in our direction while *really* looking in our direction, in that special way that only seems to happen in Los Angeles. As for me, I pretended not to notice.

We were served our dinners, including Nicole, who had her signature bowl of lettuce, no dressing, no tomatoes, no nothing. Even though I tried (and failed) to use some of her dieting strategies, it was clear that Nicole distracted herself from eating by making everyone else doubt whatever it was they ordered.

“That,” Nicole made a face, “looks icky.” She lifted her fork and pointed at Dad’s plate. “What *is* it?”

“Abalone steak,” Dad answered with his mouth full.

She blinked and smiled wide as if Dad were joking, “Oh, Danny. You don’t eat meat anymore.” Nicole went back to smacking her lips and stabbing her salad like an angry rabbit, but I knew she wished she could have anything else, even what Dad was eating, plus a side of fries.

“It’s not meat, it’s, what is it?” Dad asked Ellie who had a hard time taking her eyes off all the lip smacking and fork pointing Nicole was doing. Even me, who’d spent my whole life around rock bands hadn’t seen such awful table manners.

“Like, how would sheknow? Is she a scientist or something?” Nicole wasn’t doing a quick study in irony or anything. She was seriously asking.

“No, she’s smart. And she eats in restaurants. And she’s sitting right here.” Dad nodded at Ellie and leaned into her like some fancy gentleman at a formal dinner party. “Ellie, dear? What am I eating?”

“Pardon?” Ellie’s eyes had glazed over about ten minutes before. I was pretty sure her brain had completely shut down trying to figure out how she’d gotten stuck with us. “Oh. It’s shellfish, I think.”

I don’t know why but I rolled my eyes and said, “Probably endangered.” It was only a guess but I loved to act like I knew what I was talking about. I’d never heard of abalone before and I had no idea if shellfish could even be on an endangered list. “Big score in the karma department, Dad.” I threw that in because Dad was superstitious. I’d seen him catch a moth and set it free outside. Of course, he was hardly ever that conscious with larger life forms, like people.

“Well, excuse me,” Dad sounded uppity now, “but didn’t someone at this table beg for a mink backpack last week?”

Nicole shook her head “no.”

“It was already dead,” I snapped, making every head at the neighboring table turn our way.

Dad pointed to his plate. “So’s this, Einstein.”

“And for your information, it was fake fur,” I lied.

Nicole stood and held her stomach while the rest of us pushed our plates as far away as we could. “Death, bologna steaks, fake fur,” she moaned. “You’re all just grossing me out. I need some air.” She made a big show of gasping and fanning herself before she left the table. Then, I and everyone else in the place watched her rush to the nearest exit, once again driving home the true meaning of "head-turner.”

Dad may have been the only one whose eyes weren’t on Nicole. He looked down at his shirt, cleared his throat, and cracked his knuckles. I turned on my camera again and aimed it at no one in particular.

“The mental image of bologna steak stands a fair chance of haunting me forever,” Ellie sighed. “Nice dinner, though.”

Dad laughed and so did I. He inched closer to her and gently placed his hand over hers but she carefully lifted it off. It was unlike anything I’d ever seen. Suddenly, Ellie pushed back her chair and stood up, surprising even me. “Scarlet, would you point me to the ladies’, please?” I motioned to the back of the restaurant while Dad dropped his chin into his hands and blinked. He actually may have been, for the first time ever, completely out of his league. I felt weirdly elated but at the same time insecure. Dad’s life with women was pretty much predictable and strangely monotonous, but this sure wasn’t. Should I feel sorry for him or hold it over his head? Should I say something or pretend I wasn’t paying attention just like I always did? I had no idea how to play it, so I kept my mouth shut and blinked right along with him.

Ellie made her way across the restaurant, but not a single fork paused in mid-air as she passed. She entered the ladies’ room, a dimly lit Balinese concoction of milky glass and polished slate that smelled of jasmine and rose. There were three side-by-side stalls with doors of carved wood and a narrow window to the right of the sink slightly open to the outside, where a breeze blew in from the ocean.

Ellie rested her hands on the sink and studied her reflection in the mirror. She took a deep breath. “What am I doing here?” The sound of her own voice startled her, yet she repeated her words needing to hear them again. She sighed hard and rifled through her purse until she found a small bag of M&M’s. She poured out a handful and funneled them into her mouth, chewing furiously until she closed her eyes and exhaled deeply.

“I must have been nuts to think I could walk back in here and–” She was about to give herself a real talking to when the sound of a woman’s voice stopped her. At first, she thought someone was in one of the stalls, but after a moment she realized the voice was coming from just outside the bathroom door.

“I can’t believe it. Really, I can’t!” The voice belonged to a perky, redheaded twenty-something who bounded into the bathroom not once looking up at Ellie. She laughed and shouted into her phone, “Oh my god! Oh my god! Olivia, I swear you're literally gonna die it was so amazing. No, you have to wait. Literally, he’s so famous I have to tell you in person.” She entered a stall but her voice only became louder. “No. No, listen!” She yelled. “You have to waaaaaait. You're literally gonna die." Her words echoed off the walls but she didn’t seem to care who was listening. Ellie craned her neck and stepped back. She suspected this might have something to do with Danny Sunder.

The verbal concert continued, punctuated here and there by a trilling laugh rising between, "No. You're gonna die,” and, “No. Guess again!” Finally slowing down with, “No, I said someone really, *literally* famous.”

Ellie sat down on a bench by the sink. She popped one M&M after another, chewing fast and wondering why she was still listening. Maybe sitting here was like being invisible. Or maybe she felt it gave her a view into a different generation, one that took pictures of everything and said “literally” and “amazing” a lot.

More squealing escaped the stall, followed by, "Like a seriously amazing major rock star. No. I said *seriously* major. Guess again." The stall girl laughed hysterically and finally screeched, "No! It’s Danny Sunder! He's sooooo adorable! I always thought he was really, really old but he doesn’t look so bad in person. Yeah! Absolutely! Are you serious? Of course! I literally slipped him my number and I’m positive he’s gonna call."

It was then Ellie dropped the last of her M&M’s, which bounced off her lap and onto the floor. She watched them roll beneath the sink and under one of the stalls as she stood and brushed herself off. She left the bathroom with a single red M&M stuck to her skirt at the hip.

Ellie lifted off the candy as she reached the table and discreetly flicked it away. She watched as Dad swatted at Nicole trying to pluck a stray hair from his brow with a pair of rhinestone covered pink tweezers. She watched me, well tutored in boredom, panning the room with my camera. She watched Dad’s eyes, once so alive, now dulled with what looked like a hint of despair. She took it all in, the beautiful restaurant, the gorgeous meal, her rich, famous, and very good-looking dinner companions. I knew she was thinking, *you could have everything without having anything,* in fact I was sure of it. I had only known Ellie for a day, but I could tell she had things going on inside of her, things beyond an obsession with the latest fashion, or the newest gossip, or the trendiest diet.

“So, Helen*,* how long will you be staying with us?” Nicole asked, trying to sound interested while she checked out her make-up in a pocket mirror.

“Ellie. It’s Ellie,” Dad corrected.

“A week, two at the most.”

“That’s fourteen days.” Nicole smiled proudly as she said it.

“Are you a scientist or something?” I couldn’t help myself but you have to admit it was funny.

“Scarlet, c’mon now, *please*,” Dad closed his eyes and muttered.

Before I could come back with another snappy remark, I saw something that knocked the wind right out of me. “Oh, my God, it’s Jake,” I gasped. Everyone turned.

“Don’t look!” I croaked, but it was too late. All eyes were hot glued on Jake Thomas. Then my heart sank like the Titanic when I saw he wasn’t alone.

“Who are *they?”* I wailed as Jake stood at the front of the restaurant with two gorgeous actress-model types.

Nicole rose halfway out of her seat to get a better look but I pulled her back. “Don’t! He’ll see us!” I panic whispered.

“But we *want* him to see us.” Nicole stood up and waved as I tried to slide under the table. I was mortified and I had absolutely no idea why.

“But he’s with *those girls*,” I whined.

“No, Scar, they’re just friends from our acting class. I know them. They’ve got serious boyfriends.”

“Actresses?” Dad made a slightly pained face at Ellie but I had no idea why. “I’ve always had a soft spot for actresses.”

“I think it’s called a blind spot,” she said dryly.

“Which is quickly becoming a bald spot,” Dad said, touching the top of his head.

The conversation floated over my head while inside I crumbled. I wondered if I had food stuck in my teeth, if my skin was breaking out, if my make-up was still on, but then I glanced down and saw that my waistband had rolled down letting my stomach pooch out. What in the world was I thinking when I tried to dress like Nicole? And why did I put on pink lipstick like her? I looked awful in pink lipstick, like a big, dumb anime character with a bad fever. And my hair, what was happening with my hair? It seemed to jut in every direction and curl in all the wrong places. And now, where was Jake? All of a sudden, he wasn’t anywhere. He was gone.

All heads spun as Jake Thomas dropped like a six-foot hailstone at the foot of our table. His actress friends, whoever they were, had thankfully disappeared.

“Hey, what are you guysdoing here?” Jake directed his words at me but kept his eyes on Dad.

“Eating,” Dad said flatly.

I didn’t know if he was trying to be funny or snarky but I prayed like crazy he wouldn’t embarrass me. Jake came back with an enthusiastic, “Wow!” He shifted his weight back and forth and beamed a wide, beautiful smile that melted me all over again. “Scarlet,” he nodded, “so, like, I’m totally sorry about that mix up with–”

“Our pool date,” I cut him off before he could say anything about our botched club date. “But, hey, don’t worry, I’ll invite you over again.” Now what? Jake stood there, smiling and swaying. Dad motioned the waiter for the check. Nicole looked back and forth from me to Jake, smiling like a beauty queen who had just given what she thought was a really good answer to, “How would you bring about world peace?” Thankfully, Ellie spoke up.

“You must be Jake. So nice to meet you. I’m Ellie, an old friend of Danny’s. We’ve just had dinner, but you can certainly join us for coffee. C’mon, sit down.”

A waiter appeared with a chair and Ellie scooted over so Jake could sit next to me, which made me just love her. Jake touched my shoulder as he slid into his seat and I thought I would pass out from the nearness of him. He smelled like the color blue and sunshine and mint. I found it hard to concentrate, let alone breathe, but I had to say or do something.

“Oh, a menu.” I grabbed the long list of magical sounding pastries. “I hope you’re not too hungry because this is just desserts.” I fanned the menu in front of my face, trying to look flirty. “I’m sure you like something sweet once in a while, right?” It suddenly occurred to me that I was without a doubt my father’s daughter. “Tiramisu, mango sorbet, flourless double chocolate something or other?” I batted my lashes.

Dad crossed his arms, sat back, and stared at Jake. “Where’re those girls you were with? *They’d* probably like something sweet. Or maybe a nice dinner?” He lifted his eyebrows twice, “Or maybe just desserts?”

I kicked Dad under the table, not hard enough to break skin, but enough to let him know I meant business. He yelped, “Ouuuuch!” but was drowned out by Nicole, tap, tap, tapping her nails on the table, irritated that Dad was the least bit interested in Jake’s female friends. “It’ll just be us, Dad, and nobody else, okay?”

Ellie handed both Jake and Nicole a menu. “Order away you two, and eat something, *please*.” She directed that to Nicole who honestly looked as if she were starving. Dad bowed his head to Ellie and mouthed, “thanks.”

“Awesome,” said Jake. “So, um, should I get the girls, or not get the girls?” He looked at Dad but Dad didn’t answer. He only had eyes for Ellie who ignored him and looked at the rest of us.

Jake shrugged. “Ah, let them get their own dessert, right, Scarlet?”

He rubbed his shoulder against mine and suddenly I couldn’t swallow or think. Was my heart still beating? Could I still breathe? Could I even remember how? Time stopped. He leaned over and whispered, “You look beautiful tonight.”

I had arrived in heaven.

12

GOT TO BELIEVE IN SOME MAGIC

The next morning, I woke up extra early, and even though it took me an hour to decide what to wear, I was showered and dressed by eight.

By some miracle of miracles, Blanca hadn’t quit yet. Every morning, no matter when I came down to breakfast, she had a pot of coffee waiting for me and as usual I could already smell it from the foyer. Something about that aroma and Blanca’s sweet smile made me feel like we really, truly lived here and this house wasn’t just another fancy pit stop on an endless world tour.

And then there was Ellie, whose brief presence had already given the house a certain calmness I knew was only temporary. I watched her as I passed through the living room. She sat at the piano, stretching her fingers, playing chords and writing notes.

“I didn’t know you were an early bird,” she said, looking up at me.

“I’m not. I mean not really. Actually, not even a little.” I made my way over to the piano.

“I didn’t wake you, did I?” Ellie asked.

“No, I’ve been up for hours.” I leaned against the piano and considered not telling her why I was up so early but I figured she’d find out anyway. “You know that guy, the one from the restaurant last night? He’s coming over today.” I hesitated because I was a little embarrassed and then said the next part real fast. “But he didn’t say what time, so I thought I better get ready or something.”

“Did you invite him over for breakfast, because it’s–” she squinted at her watch, “eight fifteen.” She was right, it was early, but I had no idea how any of this dating stuff worked.

Ellie played a few chords and turned back to me. “Jake Thomas, right?” I nodded. “He’s awfully good-looking.”

I shrugged too fast or too much. I didn’t want to show anyone, including myself, how totally attracted I was. “I really didn’t notice,” I said, trying hard to sound cool and detached. Suddenly, my cheeks were on fire and I knew I was blushing, but again, I had no idea why. Then my stomach got jumpy and that was a mystery, too. This was new to me, whatever *this* was and I liked it and didn’t like it all at the same time, which made me want to change the subject as soon as possible. “So, um, did you work all night?”

“I did, or most of it anyway, and now I’m starving. Would you consider driving down the hill with me to get some breakfast at the beach? It’s beautiful out.”

“I don’t know. I better not. He might come early.”

“Honey, don’t wait around for anyone, especially a boy. That’s how they start taking you for granted.”

“Granite. I thought it was granite.” I had always pictured a bunch of old statues in a park that everyone got tired of looking at. Sounded reasonable to me.

“No, it’s gran*ted*. Trust me on this.” Ellie stood up and stretched. “Come on, Scarlet. Live dangerously. Have breakfast with me.”

“Okay,” I said, “but only if I can drive.”

We sat facing each other in a sunny booth with an ocean view. I did most of the talking because I didn’t want her to ask me about Jake. I threw out questions, grilling her about this and that, sometimes with a mouthful of scrambled eggs. “So, do you live in Chicago or New York?” And “What was Toad like when he was young?” And, “How about kids? Got any of those?” It was a wonder she understood me.

Ellie fingered her locket and shook her head “no.”
“Scarlet?” she said softly, but didn’t continue. I could feel her wanting to say something, something important, something personal, but she stopped herself and we ended up sitting in that sunny Malibu cafe not talking at all. Long silences have always made me uncomfortable, so I said whatever came to mind.

“I don’t understand why you’re not married. You’re, like, really, really nice.”

Ellie gave a graceful bow. “I guess it wasn’t exactly my fate. And fate is more about timing than anything else, just like music. Sometimes you’re ready and he’s not.” She made her point by tapping out some fast and slow beats on the tabletop. “Sometimes he’s ready, and you, well, you run away, even if you’re crazy in love because you’re just too stubborn to–,” she caught her breath and stopped. It felt like the thing she wanted to say was all about timing and crazy love and running far, far away. It was probably how she figured she could connect with me, like the way adults always tell you what a mess they were at your age, or how their first date was a total disaster.

“Don’t mind me,” she said. “All I’m trying to say is that timing is the magic that can pull your life in one direction or another.”

I thought for a moment and finished off the last of my hash browns. “I’ve seen it in movies, especially romantic comedies, like when the guy races to the airport to catch the girl at the last minute, but it hasn’t happened to me yet.” I sat back feeling a little too full.

“I think it’s happening all the time, in everyone’s life, like right this minute.” Ellie pointed to her watch. “I mean, once upon a time, I never thought I’d be sitting here with–”

My cell rang and vibrated at the same time, making me jump in my seat and cutting her off mid-sentence. Before I could say hello, I heard Nicole’s rapid-fire voice in a full-blown rant. “What? Okay, *okaaaaay*! I went to breakfast. I’ll be home in a minute. Well, tell him to swim or something.”

I hung up and shook my head. “I knew I should’ve stayed home. Jake woke up Dad and now Nicole’s totally angry at me because Dad’s angry at her. Why is everything always my fault?” I got up from the table as Ellie paid the bill. “Some magic,” I muttered.

Despite the jarring events of that morning, the next two weeks were out of a dream and the magic that Ellie talked about finally made its first appearance in my up-to-that-point strangely boring life. Each of us, Dad, Nicole, Ellie, and I, settled into a sort of routine, one day melting seamlessly into the next. And even though Ellie said she’d only be staying a week or two, after fourteen days had passed, she was still around working with Dad all day, with no obvious plans to leave.

Our daily routine went something like this; Dad would stumble into the kitchen around noon with Nicole tagging behind him like a pet Chihuahua. Ellie would pour Dad’s coffee and when the cup was full, Nicole would bust a move and try to hand him his mug before she could, but always with a great big smile. Meanwhile, Jake would come over in the afternoon and we’d swim or talk, or I’d talk and he’d swim. Most times, I talked out of nervousness, not being able to take my eyes off him. Other times, his amazing looks made it hard for me to say a word. He didn’t seem to mind if I spoke or not, as long as he got to tell and re-tell every detail of his most recent audition or play me the latest song he’d written on his guitar. He wasn’t bad. He wasn’t good, either, but I sure didn’t mind.

It was all so new and heady and perfect. It was all so beautiful and fun. With nothing and no one to stop me, I was tripping and tumbling head over heels, heels over head. I was smitten, infatuated, captivated, hooked.

Occasionally, we’d all go to lunch together and Dad would ask Jake questions he couldn’t answer, like who the vice-president was, or what language they speak in Spain. Dad was convinced Jake was a bonehead, but I thought he was so beautiful he didn’t need to clutter his mind with facts that anyone could easily look up. Plus, I knew he was going to be very famous someday and I planned to be right by his side.

Three times a week Ellie would take me driving in her rental car. She was patient and kind and actually knew the rules, as opposed to Nicole who made everything up as she went along. When traffic wasn’t bad, Ellie would talk to me about school, suggesting I think about film school because I loved movies so much. When we’d get home, she’d pull out her laptop and show me the campuses she’d researched.

For the first time ever, I was starting to get interested in the possibility of an actual education, but I didn’t want to let it show. Sooner or later, Ellie would leave and I’d have no one to help me find my way. I was terrified I’d end up alone in my room with a mountain of applications to every great school on the planet and no one to help me figure it all out. So, whenever I sat at the computer with Ellie and Dad came in, I’d act bored or snippy. Ellie would look at me sideways and then get quiet. I could tell she was on to me but I was also sure she knew she couldn’t help me in the long haul, so really, what could she say? Her real life was between Chicago and New York and sometimes even Nashville, while me, and all my teenage problems lived right here in Malibu, at the very top of this hill.

Finally, at the end of the day, and I mean the actual end of the day, not the over-used expression, Jake and I would curl up on the couch in the den and watch whatever he wanted. We’d kiss for hours, but I always wanted more. I kind of felt he was holding back, and not exactly feeling it, but he said he didn’t want us to get ahead of ourselves because I was young, and I respected him for that. Plus, he said, “us” a lot. I mean, now I was officially part of an “us.” Wow.

Down the hall in the great room, Dad and Ellie lived at the piano and worked night and day on things they’d written together. Ellie would sing quietly and Dad would sing at the top of his lungs until neither of them could stop laughing. Sometimes they’d harmonize on some new song, and I can tell you right here, those hours were probably some of the best moments of my life up to then. Wrapped in the arms of a truly gorgeous guy, the moon rising in the sky, and Dad busy with Ellie at the piano. It was pretty wonderful, except for two things.

One was Nicole, who couldn’t find anything to do with herself. Late one night she confessed that she’d fallen seriously in love with Dad but the intensity of his work made her feel terrifically left out and kind of bored. She wasn’t jealous of Ellie, and couldn’t imagine in a million years that Dad could prefer someone as old as Ellie over someone as young and spectacular as herself. So every day she filled her time with talking on the phone, showing me bridal magazines, tearing out pictures of engagement rings, and eating lettuce leaf after lettuce leaf. Nicole was hoping that when Ellie was finally gone and things were back to normal, she could make her move and get Dad to commit. And although she really liked Jake and supported our relationship, her unhappiness along with her wedding obsession was pretty distracting.

The other problem was Ellie. Every couple of hours she’d take a break to stretch her legs (or so she said) and somehow end up wherever Jake and I were hanging out. She’d linger too long in a doorway and never said anything directly, like she didn’t try to stop us from kissing or touching, but she was thinking about it and her presence always ruined the moment. From then on, if we weren’t in the pool, we were in my room, a place too out of the way for a casual walk-by.

Then, one Tuesday afternoon I found it unusually quiet at Casa Pacifica. For a change Nicole was up in the bedroom for hours, busy with something important, or so she claimed. The rest of us hung out by the pool–Dad on a doublewide chaise staring off into nowhere until he fell asleep, Ellie next to him taking notes and listening to her iPod, and Jake, beautiful Jake, sitting on the rim of the spa spinning a Frisbee on his finger. The pool surface sparkled and danced like a thousand fireflies on a field of turquoise, and I floated upon that surface in a cloud of contentment.

“Danny,” Ellie whispered, “listen to this.”

Dad was half-awake when she handed him her earphones but he listened for a long time. “Me likee,” he smiled sweetly. “Whose is it? Can we, you know, borrow it?” They were the first words either of them had spoken in about an hour.

“Borrow? Hmmm? Maybe we can,” Ellie said slyly, “because it’s mine. I tinkered with it on your equipment. Nice stuff you’ve got there.”

Danny looked down at himself, grinned, and snapped his waistband.

“Oh, stop,” Ellie said and gently nudged him.

Blanca appeared out of nowhere with a tray of plastic tumblers and a pitcher of iced tea. She stood very still over Dad’s chair, wearing a look of real unhappiness and deep concern. All I could think was, “Please, Blanca, please don’t quit.” But before I could invent an argument for her to stay, she lifted a tall glass from a low table and held it up for Dad and Ellie to see. She held the glass with great disapproval and said, “No glass by de pool.” She shook her head and narrowed her eyes at Dad. “Is dangerous, remember?”

“Forgive me, Blanca. Please?” Dad begged.

“I’m sorry, Blanca,” Ellie added.

She replaced their glasses with plastic tumblers and laid out a plate of coconut chocolate chip cookies, her specialty. When she turned back to the house, Dad gave her an affectionate pat on the behind. “Ai! Mr. Danny!” She jumped forward and swatted his hand away, laughing as she made her way over to Jake, who was also in possession of a real glass.

“She’s just like me mum,” Dad chirped with an English accent.

“That would be funny if you were British,” Ellie laughed.

“I’m not British? Then what the heck am I?”

She was about to answer when Nicole sauntered out of the house in an almost microscopic bikini. She walked a few steps and stopped, making an obvious show of bending down to adjust the straps of her high-heeled sandals.

“You’re confused,” Ellie answered but her eyes were glued to Nicole who was truly Victoria Secret runway model stunning.

What happened next was a total accident, I swear. First, Jake tossed the Frisbee in my direction but because I was also staring at the wonder of Nicole, it hit me smack on the forehead. I yelled and bolted from the pool and ran toward him, but lost my balance on the way, knocking Nicole off her mile-high strappy sandals into the arms of our gardener Eduardo, who was trimming a hedge. Nicole squirmed, pushing herself out of Eduardo’s arms while he smiled a big, embarrassed, gap-toothed smile, but not before crossing himself first. Nicole stamped her foot and screamed something totally incoherent just as Jake and I jumped back into the pool shouting “Marco! Polo!”

Nicole took off her clunky sandals and threw one at me and the other at Jake but missed by a mile. Jake laughed like a hyena and asked her why she couldn’t just be a good sport like me. Me. A good sport. I was vindicated. I, Scarlet Sunder, was now officially a good sport.

Jake lifted me up and twirled me around in the water while Nicole ran back to the house and no one saw or heard her for the rest of the day. And just like Ellie had mentioned that awkward morning when we went to breakfast together some strange magic started happening, the kind she’d said could turn your life this way or that.

13

IN MY ROOM

Dad stood back and admired his collection of record albums, of which he had thousands. Rows and shelves, shelves and rows captured the last fifty years of popular music and sat unlike anything else he owned: alphabetized and neatly housed in plastic sleeves. They were all there, every memory and every note, beautifully displayed in his new music room instead of packed away in some air-conditioned storage unit where they’d been sitting for years.

Days before, Dad and Ellie had moved from the big piano in the living room to the big piano in the music room. They were through fooling around and had to get some serious work done. Ellie told Dad the time she spent staring at the ocean cost her at least three hours a day. The music room with its paneled walls and Dad’s album collection had no view beyond the dry hills beyond the garden wall. What she was too polite to add was that in the living room, Nicole paraded past every fifteen minutes, usually wearing something revealing, and then interrupted Dad every hour on the hour with some question about our next vacation, or worse, if he liked her outfit, or her shoes, or her hair up or down. The music room was at the farthest end of the house in the wing under my bedroom, an area Nicole hadn’t yet explored. Another thing Ellie was too polite to mention was that her time at Casa Pacifica was definitely coming to an end.

In the music room, she stretched her fingers and played the bridge to the song she and Dad had been working on for days. Dad hummed and smiled as he looked through his albums, pulling one out after another.

“Remember years ago, when you’d take a chance and buy some band you’d never heard of because you liked the way the cover looked? I used to take Scarlet to that record store on Sunset when she was little. I wanted her to have that same experience. I’d let her pick out anything she wanted. We ended up with ten copies of the same Barney album.”

“You had more than a few copies of *Sgt Pepper* if I remember correctly.”

“I still do,” Dad laughed. He pulled out several copies of the exact same Beatles album and held them up proudly. “I think I have a dozen.” Ellie laughed and he pouted as he looked down at the iconic cover. “Well, they’re not making them anymore, so–”

He was interrupted by a very loud thump from the room directly above. Dad glared at the ceiling and shook his head.

“She’s up there with that Jake person again, isn’t she?” He put away the Beatles, returned with a stack of Rolling Stones and sat beside Ellie on the piano bench. When he spoke again, he seemed baffled.

“Where did all this come from? The hair flipping.” He threw back his head and tossed an imaginary mane. “The psychotic laughter.” He gave out a crazed, high-pitched squeal. “The complete blindness to that boy’s lack of–of–of intelligence? I’ve never seen her like this.” Dad smiled an insanely crazy smile, batting his lashes at Ellie, resting his chin on her shoulder. “Oh my god, Jake, you are so totally hysterical I could literally listen to you for days!!!” He fake flipped his hair again, cackled like a goose, and crossed his legs like a girl.

Ellie doubled over with laughter. “What do you want from her?” she choked. “She’s fifteen.”

Dad locked eyes with her. “I want her to be five,” he said, and sounded every bit like he meant it.

I was right above in my room and could hear them, or at least their faint laughter. I was sitting on my bed checking out schools on my laptop when Jake demonstrated the leap he’d made at his last audition. It made a big thump when he landed and not long after that I heard them laughing downstairs. Dad and Ellie, yeah, they always seemed to be having way too much fun for people who were supposed to be working so hard. Here’s the truth, and it isn’t all that easy or comfortable to admit. I found myself envying them, I mean *really* envying them, and that was completely new to me. They had everything in common; laughed at the same jokes, knew the same people, adored the Beatles and the Beach Boys and a bunch of groups no one ever talked about anymore. It was clear they genuinely liked and respected one another, but more than that, I knew deep inside they’d never grow bored with each other. And it wasn’t that I was bored with Jake, but I definitely wanted more. I wanted something deep and real and genuinely special. Were we that, Jake and I? After a few weeks, I wasn’t so sure.

I looked up as he plopped down beside me. He draped an arm over my shoulder and moved in close, but not before running his index finger over his well-tended eyebrows, making sure they were in working order.

“What’s that, a museum?” he asked, looking at the ivy-covered building on my laptop screen.

“It’s a school.”

“Oh. Is it far away?”

“It’s in New York. Manhattan, actually.”

He sighed, dropping his shoulders and wrinkling his forehead. “They’re not making you go there, are they?” He turned my face toward his and looked soulfully into my eyes. I swallowed hard and answered him in a defiant tone that surprised even me. “They can’t *make* me go anywhere. It’s just that Ellie won’t shut up about school. She keeps pushing me all the time, education *this* and education *that*.”

“Irregardless, she doesn’t own you.”

“*Regardless*. Jeez, it’s regardless.”

“Whatever,” he said, yawning before he walked across the room to my dresser. Jake stood in front of the mirror and absentmindedly soaked up the wonder of his own reflection, but I could tell he was thinking something more. He shifted back and forth, crossing and uncrossing his arms until he spun around to face me. “Listen, Scar, here’s what I don’t understand. You’re already rich, right? So why waste time in school?” He smiled but quickly followed it with a frown. “I mean, I want you to do great things in life, but I don’t want to lose you.”

I watched him for a long time and didn’t say a word. Maybe he was right. Maybe it was pointless for me to go to school. Then again, maybe he was really, really wrong.

“Money isn’t everything, you know.”

“Oh, I’m pretty sure it is,” he smiled. “Otherwise, people wouldn’t knock themselves out trying to get it.”

 “But don’t you think people should at least *try* to be well-rounded? I mean, that’s what my dad says.”

“You look pretty well-rounded to me.” He winked as he turned back to the mirror but not before glancing at my hips.

I tried not to look down at myself. I was sure we had just misunderstood each other, but that didn’t stop me from feeling a little diminished and very, very uncomfortable.

Down below, in the music room, Dad was still going on about Jake. In his imagination all kinds of troubling things were happening in the teenage romance department, but in reality, not much of it was true. As stupid as this sounds, I wasn’t even sure if *I* really knew what was going on. Weeks had gone by but Jake and I had only snuggled and kissed. We’d never been out alone together, like on a date. I hadn’t met any of his friends, or seen where he lived, or even been in his car. And outside of the infinite details of his every audition, or his struggles to make a music demo tape, I didn’t really know anything about him. It’s not like I didn’t ask. He just wasn’t all that crazy about talking.

“That boy,” Dad shuddered, “I don’t trust him. He’s too friendly, and pretty, and tone deaf. And his teeth are too white. When did people start having teeth you could read by in the dark?” He grinned as wide as a half-moon and pretended to flip open the pages of a book in front of his mouth.

Ellie straightened her back and ran her hands through her hair. She swallowed hard before she spoke, “Danny, you know me. And you know I make it a point to stay out of people’s business, your situation being no exception, but–”

“But???” Dad leaned forward sliding to the edge of his seat. “There’s a but?” He looked alarmed.

“Yeah,” Ellie sighed. “And this is it. I don’t think those kids have done much of anything *yet*, but it’s definitely not going to stay that way. And I honestly feel that Scarlet is way too young and inexperienced for anything even remotely like that.” She exhaled hard. “That’s all I wanted to say.”

Dad flipped through the stack of Stones in his lap. “You’re sure nothing’s happened yet?”

Ellie cleared her throat, “Yeah, I’m pretty sure.” She nodded but it was hard for her to smile.

Back in my room, Jake looked through a pile of my electronic goodies, picking up an iPod or two and looking through my playlists. He grabbed my earbuds and plugged them in his ears, clicked on a song, dialed up the volume and sang along completely off-key.

“Your life is so awesome, Scar!” he yelled. “I’d do anything to live like this!” He clicked to another song and threw himself down in my favorite chair, propping his sneakered feet, bottoms down, on my white ottoman. He scratched his ankle and spoke again in a very loud voice. “It’s too bad Ellie told your dad!”

“Told my dad what?”

When he didn’t answer I jumped up and yanked the earbuds out.

“Told my dad what?” I looked down at him, more disappointed than angry and feeling like I wanted to fight about something, nothing, anything.

“Ellie told him he should, you know, get rid of me and not let you see me anymore, *ever*. I heard her tell him in the kitchen last night when I went down to get a Power Bar. They didn’t see me but I heard everything.” He leaned back and stretched seductively.

“Are you serious?”

He nodded soulfully.

“Who does she think she is? She has no say over me. She doesn’t even know me and thinks she can control what I do? What a bitch!” I spit out the B word, something I tried hard not to use unless nothing else would do, and in that moment, nothing else did. “I’ve been sooooo nice to her. I let her come in when she first got here. I had breakfast with her and listened to her stories. I can’t believe I ever felt sorry for her.”

“Wow,” Jake said, half-listening. “What are we gonna do?”

“*We* don’t have to do anything. I’ll just tell Dad to get rid of her. He always does what I say.”

“Always?”

“Always.”

Downstairs again.

“Tell me what to do.” Dad was almost pleading. “Should I stop her from seeing him?”

“No. Absolutely not,” Ellie said. “She’ll hate you for it and want him all the more. Just get her into school this fall. Any school. It’ll be so good for her. With her brains, and she’s damn smart, she really needs focus and direction, but more than that, she needs something of her own.”

Dad moaned and rolled his head back. “I can’t. She won’t go.”

“Well, who’s the parent here?”

“You?” asked Dad as though he really wasn’t sure.

“C’mon, Danny. What about a tutor?”

“Yeah, well, hmm, a tutor. I don’t know.” Embarrassed, he stared at the albums in his lap.

“Please don’t tell me.” Ellie rubbed her forehead. “You slept with her tutor?” Her voice rose as she shook her head.

Dad covered his face with a Stones album.

“Oh, Danny,” Ellie exhaled, shaking her head. “What’s wrong with you?”

“I know, I know. It was years ago. I’m a big, pathetic jackass, okay?” His shoulders slumped and his head hung low. He looked up at Ellie with real pain in his eyes. “So, what does a big, old, truly pathetic, very clueless jackass do when the wrong boy starts hanging around his high school-challenged daughter?”

Ellie never got the chance to answer Dad’s heartfelt question. As she opened her mouth, a blood curdling scream came from somewhere in the house.

14

REALITY SHOWS

Jake and I ran past Blanca who stood frozen on the landing, pointing to Dad’s bedroom door. Behind us, Ellie pulled Dad, huffing and puffing up the stairs. Jake reached the door first and threw it open. Nicole was mid-air, hair flying, legs kicking, jumping up and down on Dad’s giant bed like it was a trampoline.

“I got it! I got it! I GOT IT!” she screamed.

“What? What’d you get?” Jake asked.

Dad stumbled through the door clutching his chest. “What the hell’s going on?” Ellie watched him closely, as if he might pass out.

“I got the part, Danny! The part! THE PAAAART!” Nicole screamed again.

Dad looked dumbstruck. He had no idea what she was talking about.

“The part on that show! On TV! I got it!” Nicole vaulted off the bed, bounced out of the bedroom and down the hall while Dad’s trembling hands moved from his chest to his ears.

It was hours before Nicole calmed down. Jake and I followed her around the house until we ended up in Dad’s bedroom again where we tried to help her pack. The job offer was sudden, an actress had dropped out and Nicole was going to have to leave that evening to make up for lost time. Ellie had taken Dad back to the quiet corner of the house with some aspirin and probably some cotton balls to stuff in his aching ears. They had a deadline to meet and not much interest in watching Nicole try on every last thing she owned before she put it in one of her seventeen suitcases.

Although I tried, Nicole didn’t want me to help. She didn’t even want me to fold anything. She just wanted an audience and an ear. I sat on the bed and watched Jake arrange a series of his headshots across the dresser top. He moved the piles back and forth, trying to put them in order of attractiveness, which wasn’t easy to do. I had my camera focused on him but lowered it when Nicole stepped out of the closet holding a gorgeous leather coat.

“Should I take this?” She slipped it on and did a spin.

“You won’t need it,” I said.

“I’m going to New York, Scar.” She tilted her head and looked at me like I didn’t understand. “*New York*.”

“Uh, yeah, and it’s summer there, too.”

She stopped for a moment, her face a series of confused tics, before she looked at her watch and darted back into the closet.

Oblivious to everything around him, Jake stood at the dresser and held up two different headshots. “Scarlet, my future depends on this so, like, which one’s better?” Nicole popped out of the closet just then and pointed to the photo in his left hand as I pointed to the one in his right. Jake put the two headshots down and started the process all over again.

Nicole sat down on the floor by one of her many suitcases and gently wrapped her shoes in tissue paper before she slipped each pair into its own carrying pouch. I got off the bed and sat beside her. What a strange girl she was and what a strange ritual this was. I was someone who packed like a tornado that hit a hurricane. I was messy and so were my looks. She was neat, down to her features, all of them perfect even from up close.

“How come you never said anything about auditioning for a show?” I noted that she seemed to have no pores. “I didn’t even know you were really serious about acting. I just thought everyone takes acting lessons out here because they’re supposed to, or because then they can tell everyone they take acting lessons.”

“Well, I am serious,” she said, sounding exactly that. “I auditioned for the show before I met Danny, before the tour even. Then I started to worry, if I actually got the part I’d have to leave him, but that didn’t happen and I forgot about it until today. Now, I’m thinking if he comes out there with me, even for a few days, he’ll see all those gorgeous men I’ll be working with and he’ll get jealous. Maybe then he’ll finally realize how much we belong together.” She looked down and caressed her shoes, then stuffed them in her suitcase.

She was right about one thing. Dad could sometimes get jealous. It never made any sense since he was always trying to get rid of people. But as soon as someone else, some other guy for example, wanted the same girl he’d just broke up with, then he’d somehow want her back. Anyway, if my father left with Nicole, Ellie would be out of here and I could be completely alone with Jake. Better than that, it would mean the end of all that school talk.

Jake stood over us and handed Nicole a thick packet. “You always said you’d help me if you got discovered first. I put fifty headshots in here, plus my demo reel and a CD of all my songs. I know you’ll get them to the right people.”

“I’ll do my best.” Nicole held the envelope to her heart before she slipped it in her suitcase. I guess it was an actor-slash-performer thing because the two of them suddenly became so quiet and solemn. And in that silent moment I wondered what it was like be that beautiful, to be the center of everything, to feel so comfortable with it all, to be so attractive and physically invincible, to want someone to hand your picture out to strangers, to wear microscopic bikinis, to put it all out there in an audition and then forget about the outcome. I found it unsettling even to wonder what that might be like. I looked away quickly from both their faces realizing I’d probably never know.

It was nearly three in the afternoon and no one had eaten a thing all day. Blanca had gone to her room to lie down after Nicole’s horror house scream. In the kitchen, Ellie made sandwiches while Dad eyed her affectionately. “You look damn good in my kitchen, woman.”

“Are men allowed to say that anymore?”

Dad moved behind her, put his arms around her waist, and nuzzled her ear. “This man is,” he whispered. “Ellie, I–”

He looked up and saw me standing in the doorway. I watched their whole exchange and was not in the least bit happy. But before I could try to ruin their moment, Jake charged in and nearly knocked me over.

“Nicole broke a nail. She’s totally freaked. Do you have some glue or something?”

“Here.” I opened a drawer and slapped a tube of Crazy Glue in his hand. “Calm down.”

“What part did she get? Ellie asked pleasantly without looking up. “Is it a good show?” I didn’t answer. My eyes lingered on Dad’s arms around Ellie’s waist. I wanted to burn a hole through the two of them with my stare.

“Ellie asked you something, Scarlet,” Dad said.

I turned my gaze on him and answered in a surly tone. “She got a small part on a reality show about young actors trying to get on Broadway, or something like that.”

“That would either be *The Real Stand-Ins of Seventh* Avenue or *Off Broadway Understudy*,” Jake chimed in. He turned to me. “Only a small part, huh? Bummer.”

“Are you saying there are actually two reality shows about actors on Broadway?” Ellie asked finding it hard to believe.

“Hey, ya gotta give the people what they want,” Jake said as he winked at me.

Dad caught the wink and didn’t like it one bit.

“No, you don’t,” he sneered. “You don’t have to give the people what they want. *The people* don’t know what they want. *The people* don’t have a clue what’s good for them. *The people* don’t know squat.”

Dad stared daggers at me and I stared them right back.

“Before I forget, *Dad*, Nicole wants to know if you guys are flying private plane or just first class?”

“We guys aren’t flying anything. I’m not going with her.”

I looked from Dad to Ellie. Alarm bells started clanging in my head. “Well, you can’t stay here. You can’t let her go alone,” I stammered. “She’s your girlfriend.”

Ellie shifted uncomfortably as I quickly decided to change my tone, which was bordering on hysteria. “Dad, listen, you don’t need to stay home for me. I’m way old enough to take care of myself. I’ll be fine. You should go, Dad, really.”

“You’re right. I should go. C’mon, Ellie, let’s blow this pop stand.”

Suddenly, everything was out of control. “No, Dad, wait!” I blurted. “What about Nicole? She needs you to be with her!”

“She’s a big girl. She’ll be fine by herself, and if she’s not, you can go with her. In fact, that’s probably a good idea.”

No, no no, NO! This was not supposed to happen like this. I was shocked. I was stunned. What was he talking about?

“Yep, a really, really good idea. I think you need to get out of the house and across the country.” Dad looked at Jake when he said it, then Ellie sighed a bit too loud. She was relieved, huh? Jake was telling the truth. Ellie was behind everything.

I stamped my foot as Dad handed Ellie the car keys. She pushed them away and shook her head. “We’re in the middle of working, Dan.” I stamped my foot again, but neither of them looked.

“Forget work.” Dad’s arms were once again around Ellie’s waist. He turned to me. “We’re going out.”

“I’m not talking to either of you.” I turned my back to Dad and Ellie.

“Jake,” Dad shouted, heading for the door, “tell my daughter that Ellie and I are going for a walk down memory lane.”

“Okay, but you took the car keys,” Jake noted.

Dad’s face turned deadpan and he stared back without answering.

“So, that’s like an expression?” Jake asked, taking a wild guess

Dad held the door open for Ellie and spoke over his shoulder. “Listen to me like your life depends on it. Do NOT,” he made the flapping hands signal for talking, “attempt to talk to my daughter again. Ever.” But the next part came out kind of sweet. “Will you do that for me, Jake? I’m counting on you.”

Jake answered after Dad was already out the door. “I’m your guy, Mr. S.”

15

QUEEN OF HEARTS

The sky was Tiffany box blue and the air felt like silk on their skin. There was hardly a car on the road and every traffic light turned green well before they approached it and remained green long after they passed. It was a perfectly perfect day.

Ellie drove along Sunset Boulevard, humming the new melodies she and Dad had written. He was happy. Maybe happier than he’d been in years but that was because he didn’t understand that his world should *still* have been all about me. Though he wasn’t quite aware of it yet, I was losing my foothold in the battle for Princess of Everything, but most especially, Bossy Queen of my Father’s Heart. Frighteningly, I didn’t even know a battle was going on until that day.

He pointed out things to Ellie as they drove. Things he remembered from the past and their time together “back in the day,” as he always called it. He stuck his arm out of the car and pointed to a used clothing shop on the far side of the street.

“Hey, that’s where I bought you that great kimono way back in the Bronze Age.”

“Also known as the Eighties, and I’m pretty sure you bought it for you.” Ellie laughed and sighed all at once. She leaned her head back on the headrest, turning her face to the sun. “I don’t know if it’s a funny thing or a sad thing or both,” she smiled, “but I still feel like I’m all of twenty-one on the inside. I really do.” Her voice became small and wistful as if she had cast herself back to a time when the world was completely different and far more wonderful.

Dad reached out and touched her shoulder. He looked up as they approached the Chateau Marmont, a beautiful, old hotel perched like a fairytale castle on a hill overlooking Sunset Boulevard. “You were twenty-one the summer we had the penthouse.”

“Twenty-four,” Ellie corrected.

“I could rent it again,” Dad smiled. “I could.” He clasped Ellie’s hand and glanced her way every few seconds. “I was such a fool.”

“Yes, you were,” she said, not taking her eyes off the winding street and the traffic that was now more congested.

“And, once upon a time,” Dad kissed her hand before he continued, “you were a fool, too.”

“Yes, I was. An even bigger one than you.” She let him hold onto her hand but she turned her head slightly so he couldn’t quite see her face.

Back home, I sat on the edge of my bed, jiggling a nervous foot while Nicole poked around my dresser top scrounging for treasures. My stomach was in knots and my head was starting to throb.

“I don’t think you should go,” I said.

“It’s the only way, Scar. I have to make your dad want me. It doesn’t even matter that he can’t fly to New York with me. I’ll text you pictures of the guys I’ll be working with and you’ll show him.” She worked her way through the tangle of chains and charms that spilled from my jewelry box onto a lacquer tray. She was like a brain surgeon on a mission, her attention unwavering. At last, she pulled something free, a pair of dangling earrings and a long, gold necklace, and held them up for a split-second before she pocketed them. “Can I borrow these?” was just a formality. I could already picture her wearing them in New York.

“You don’t understand how serious this is.”

“Scar, I know what I’m doing.” She glanced over at me, “I’ve done it before. I can make anyone jealous.” Her eyes wandered back to the dresser top, scanning the pile of jewelry for anything good she might have missed.

Jake poked his head in flashing his thousand-megawatt smile. “Hey, you guys, I gotta leave in a few ‘cause I just got a call-back for this ginormous part in this totally amazing commercial.” He wandered into the room and sat down on the bed, putting his arms loosely around me and rubbing my cheek with his nose. “It’s for foot fungus spray,” he smiled. “I’ve got a real shot at being the big toe.”

As pretty as he was, as incomparably beautiful as he was, as unforgettably handsome as he was, I still couldn’t help but roll my eyes when he finally left the room.

Dad and Ellie sat in the Bentley parked on a narrow street across from a 1920’s hacienda-style house in the Hollywood Hills. The walls of the house were bleached bright white and the Spanish tile roof was ablaze with a thick carpet of bright magenta-colored bougainvillea.

“Did it ever look this good when we lived here?” Danny asked.

Ellie shook her head “no” and stared at the house, narrowing her gaze. “If you squint, you can still see those yellow walls, that red trim, and those godawful purple shutters.”

Dad wiped his glasses and squinted. “A million gallons of paint could never hide our lovely little Spanish Colonial hemorrhoid.”

He reached for her hand while she tried not to laugh. “How do you do it? How can you be so nostalgic and so disgusting at the same time?”

Back at Casa Pacifica, Nicole trotted the length of the upstairs hallway carrying an armful of scarves and an overnight bag. From a doorway, a hand reached out and grabbed her, pulling her into a spare bedroom, the scarves cascading to the floor, the overnight bag dropping with a thud. Jake pulled her inside and held her tight in his arms as he shut the door with a kick of his heel.

“I know you’re going to be famous, but are you going to make sure my stuff gets to the right people?” he demanded, his voice a sexy whisper. He pinned Nicole to the back of the door but she didn’t fight him, not even a little. She lifted her eyes to meet his and stroked his hair.

“You know I’ll get them to the right people, but you also know I belong to Danny.” She gave him a smoky look before she moved her lips to his ear and whispered, “He’s going to take care of me. He’ll give me everything.”

“Everything?” Jake released her and stretched, a picture of languid disappointment with a little boredom thrown in. “Why don’t I meet you in New York next week? I can help pass out my headshots.”

Nicole shook her head “no.” She touched his arm and whispered, “I don’t think that’s such a good–” but before she could finish, Jake pulled her close, sliding one hand under her blouse and the other into her jeans. Nicole melted.

Minutes later, Nicole stepped through Dad’s bathroom door, the back of her hair a knotted mess. She opened one drawer after another and gathered more creams, tubes, and potions, and threw them into an overnight bag without looking over at me. I know it sounds crazy, but I felt Nicole was the only one who could stop everything from changing. I perched on the marble vanity, holding my camera, turning on the video recorder, pointing it at her. It was always my response to stress. If I could film something, I could control it.

“What took you so long?”

“Jake couldn’t figure out where the audition was,” she answered, still not looking at me. “I had to look it up.”

I nodded and cleared my throat. I desperately needed to try something else. If Nicole went away, Ellie might stay. Dad talked independence but he hated to be alone. I knew him. He’d try to convince Ellie to stay and it wouldn’t take much convincing. I could see it in her eyes. I took a deep breath, “Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

“About what?”

“About Dad. Sure, we both know he gets jealous, but he’s way more famous for dropping girlfriends than chasing them. Especially when something more interesting comes along.” I sighed. “*You* were something more interesting, once.”

“Look, he almost nearly talked about marriage when I came back from the spa. *He* did. Has anyone gotten that far with him? I doubt it.” Blusher in hand, nostrils flared, she turned to face the mirror. “I’m different.”

She was pretty much hypnotized by her own reflection and completely unaware of what was really happening here. It made me want to hit her over the head. What an idiot. I mean, everyone thinks they’re different, but no one’s *that* different. It’s like the most common human flaw, especially in the humans my dad dates. I put that thought away and tried to calm down. I turned back to Nicole and continued, hoping I could somehow reason with her because it was becoming very clear to me that she was about to lose everything, and so was I.

“I wish I had your confidence. I’d never leave a guy like Danny Sunder alone with another woman, not even for a second.” It would have been obvious to most people that I was baiting her, but not Nicole. I could just as well have been saying “macaroni and cheese” over and over again.

Finally, something fired in her brain and she came back to life. “First of all,” she lectured, “abstinence makes the heart grow fonder. And second of all, are you kidding me? Seriously, are you talking about *that middle-aged woman*? That Ellie person? *Please*. Honestly, Scar get real.”

I *was* being real, very, very real, and if she could get her head out of her you-know-what, she’d have realized that. Nicole hovered over her make-up bag with enormous deliberation, way more than she was giving to this life and death situation.

“It’s *absence*.” I bit my tongue to keep from adding *you* *idiot*. “It’s *absence,* Nicole*,* that makes the heart grow fonder, and she’s not that old.”

“Do the math, Scar. Ellie’s old enough to be my mother. Danny said so the first night she came to the house when I complained about her staying here.” She moved in close to her magnifying mirror and began to check her flawless skin. “I mean, look at her, she’s got wrinkles everywhere, especially when she smiles, and she’s probably, like, six whole pounds overweight and doesn’t even try to do anything about it.” She stopped for a moment and carefully lined her pouting lips. “And even if she did try to change herself, she still wouldn’t be Danny’s type. He even said so.” She smiled and checked her teeth. “I’m pretty sure he hates brunettes.”

I lowered the camera and fingered a lock of my own brown hair. “Why are you acting so weird? You used to be a lot nicer,” I said. I thought back to all the women Dad had known and how some of them, especially the prettier, younger ones, became affected by his fame, usually turning into way bigger prima donnas than he ever was.

“I’m just telling the truth, Scar. She’s old and she’s only here because of Sam. I’m sure Danny didn’t want to work with her,” Nicole went on, becoming more and more full of herself. “Sam forced him into it. That’s what I think and I’m never wrong.” I was finding her words hard to believe. Sam never forced anyone, especially Dad who was pretty much unforceable. And Dad seemed to be having the time of his life with Ellie, *which was precisely the whole problem.* I wondered if really beautiful people had a special type of denial that made them discount everyone in the world but themselves.

Nicole strolled back into the bedroom. I shifted nervously and followed her. She sat down on a lounge chair and admired her tanned legs.

“Tell me about Jake. Did you two do the dirty yet?”

I wasn’t expecting her to even think of asking me something that personal and confidential and it threw me for a loop. “Nooooo! God, Nicole!”

“Maybe that’s good. Make him wait. It’ll keep him around longer. Besides, I’d like to see him again when I get back.” She hesitated, “I mean, I’d like to see that he’s still here as your boyfriend.” She slipped on some heels and admired her legs again. “Don’t give it all away, Scar. Know what I mean?”

“Sure,” I whispered, “I know what you mean.” I heaved a loud sigh and flung myself face down on Dad’s bed burying my head in a pillow. After a few seconds, I rolled over on my back and stared up at the ceiling. “I really feel like Jake, well, like he doesn’t really know me yet, sort of.”

Nicole folded her arms as her eyes calculated some unknown equation. She swiveled around, put her elbows on her knees, and shifted her focus to me. “Stay mysterious. It’s better.”

I rolled on my side and looked at her. “But I want to be known, especially if I’m in love.”

“Look, it’s like you said with your dad. Don’t say too much and don’t give too much, either. You were right, so take your own advice, Scar.”

Me and my big mouth.

16

ONCE WAS

“I came here for inspiration and there it is, hitting me smack between the eyes.” Dad’s voice was barely above a whisper, his words raspy, his mouth dry. He reached for Ellie as she turned to him and they hugged with a depth of emotion that Ellie had hoped for on that very first day when she arrived at the Malibu house. The two of them stayed in the car for what seemed like an hour, parked across the street from the hacienda hemorrhoid as the Bentley’s engine purred, lulling them into the past, back into a dream.

My father, spry and young, and Ellie, longhaired and beautiful, waltzed barefoot through the rooms of that very same house. The bright paint on the walls had only just dried and the place was almost bare but they were happier than any two people could possibly be. It was long ago and far away, before i-things and laptops and flat screens and smartphones. A time when gas was ninety-seven cents a gallon, and Harry had just met Sally, while the country was beginning its love affair with a cartoon family named The Simpsons. It was back when Ellie’s dreams were big and Dad’s dreams were bigger and the little bougainvillea in the front yard was just beginning its long climb to the rooftop.

In their makeshift music room, empty but for a keyboard and a chair, my father sang and Ellie played. In the bedroom, in the kitchen, in the backyard and the den, they made music and they made love, captivated by their luck at having found each other, energized by the feeling that they had found the recipe for happiness and discovered the formula for love.

It stayed that way for a long, long time. Months passed and years rolled by. A Bean Bag sofa here, an art object there, a big new stove in the kitchen, a grand piano in the living room, each piece a thoughtful addition to their beautiful life together. Within the walls they prospered and flourished, growing up and growing into the people they were meant to be.

Ten years had passed or maybe it was eleven, when Dad and Ellie found themselves sitting in the living room one night with Tina, high strung and movie star gorgeous, holding a baby in her lap.

“She’s yours, believe me,” Tina said without a drop of emotion as she surveyed the room, her eyes landing on my father. “It was when you guys split up last summer, so don’t go all nuts on him, El.”

“You mean when I went to Juilliard? For that music seminar?” Ellie’s throat constricted as she asked.

“I thought you’d left me,” Dad said, really believing himself.

“*You thought that I left you*?” Ellie was genuinely astonished, and more than that, angry. “Are you nuts? Really, Dan, what’s wrong with you? And you–you knew exactly where I was and what I was doing, Tina.”

“Look, I’m sorry,” Tina snapped. “It was a huge mistake. Enormous. I picked myself up and got out of the way and laid low for a long, long time. And this, this is the truth, Ellie, it was over before it began, except for this.” She held the baby at arm’s length for all of two seconds before plunking the small bundle down on Ellie’s lap. A car horn blared outside, startling Dad and shaking Ellie, but Tina pulled herself together as if on cue. “It’s just while I’m on vacation, for a week, maybe two. She’s an easy kid. Really.” The horn sounded again. “I gotta go.” Tina raced across the living room tossing my father the diaper bag on the way. Her high-heeled feet clickety-clacked over the threshold and out the front door, her pretty head never turning once to look back.

“Hey! Wait! I don’t know what to do with a–” But my mother was gone before Ellie could say the word “baby.”

A year flew by.

The little baby grew into a cherubic version of me, Scarlet Sunder in toddler form, who liked to shake her curly head “no” every time Dad or Ellie tried to feed me in my high chair.

“Look what Mommy’s got for you,” Dad would say, trying to help, but feeling wholly inadequate. He’d take the spoon from Ellie’s hand and pretend to eat until he actually tasted the food, claiming it all for himself. “Yummm. Look what Mommy’s got for me,” he cooed.

Another year passed.

Their lives had become full, but their hearts were fuller. Every afternoon when the Void wasn’t on tour, Dad would nap in the bedroom piled high with books and VHS tapes, while I became more than a toddler and nearly a little girl who loved to curl beside Ellie and watch old movies on a big TV. That day it was Bette Davis in *All About Eve*.

“Lady?” I asked pointing to the television.

“Yes, that’s a lady! Now, can you say Bette Davis, honey?” Ellie whispered sweetly.

“Honnneeeyyy!”

She smothered me with kisses and we giggled until Dad stopped snoring and rolled over, throwing his long arms around his little family.

Another year had come and gone.

A gallon of gas wasn’t quite the bargain anymore but frozen yogurt with your choice of topping was all the rage, and cell phones, big and clunky as they were, were suddenly everywhere, even in the garden of the hacienda on a lazy summer afternoon. As my father took pictures with his newest camera, Ellie held her cell up to the sky searching for a signal. And I, little Scarlet, trailed behind her, clutching a toy phone, holding it up to the heavens, checking for a toy signal. Dad roamed the yard, clicking away, taking artsy shots of the sky, the flowers, and the swing set that hung from the Magnolia tree. He danced around Ellie and me, his little girl, taking one shot after another, finally snapping that very same photo of Ellie, her head bent forward, her arms holding three-year-old me in her lap. Me, who held my toy phone trying hard to flip it open while Ellie reached down to help. “Hold it.” The camera clicked. “Yeah,” Dad smiled, “that’s going to be a good one.”

Dad and Ellie cast their eyes away from the ghost of their old house and stared at each other without saying a word. They were still in the idling car, lost in a shared reverie of a past they couldn’t bring themselves to talk about. Dad cleared his throat and closed his eyes. “She’s still got that picture. She takes it with her everywhere.”

“Don’t tell her it’s me,” Ellie mumbled.

“Why not?” Dad asked, but Ellie could only look away.

Tina. Tina was back. She sat in the largest chair in the same living room but the décor had become far more opulent. Dad paced, bewildered and compromised but mostly scared. Ellie sheltered me in her arms, my frightened face buried in her hair.

“If you won’t let me stay, I’ll take her away from you, and don’t think I can’t. In fact, I’ll make sure you never see her again,” Tina threatened. She looked coolly and directly at Ellie who held me doubly tight.

And that’s how it came to be that Tina inserted herself into their lives, like a human thorn. She moved mountains of boxes into the house the next day and ordered the moving men to hang her three ‘B’ movie posters (in which she had small speaking parts) wherever Dad and Ellie’s fine art hung. She was quick to claim the living room shelves as her own, snatching up family photos and tossing them into a box marked “trash.” The only photo she missed was the one of Ellie with me in her lap, which had fallen behind a sofa in the middle of all the chaos.

Every day was a nightmare while they waited to see what Tina would do. Mostly, she wanted nothing from me, but some days she wanted everything. She would push past Ellie in the kitchen and grab me from my little chair, making me wail and cry and hold out my arms for Ellie.

“C’mon, Scar. Stop it. STOP IT! Say ‘mama.’ Look at me. C’mon. Say it!” Tina would yell.

Poor me. I could only twist my little body away, trying to break free, trying to reach for Ellie when my “mother” carried me out in an angry huff.

At night our troubles continued. Tina would bang hard on Dad and Ellie’s bedroom door wanting one thing or another. “Ellie, hey! Where’d you put my laundry, or cigarettes, or car keys? I can’t find a friggin’ thing in this damn place!”

On the other side of the door, Ellie grasped Dad by his arms, looking him full in the face. “I can’t live like this anymore, Danny. I can’t.”

“Just a few more weeks and I’ll–”

“You’ll what? Give her the house?”

“Don’t,” Dad said. “I’ve got to do this slowly, baby, or she’ll take Scarlet from us. I can feel it in my bones.”

“She’s bluffing,” Ellie countered. “Let’s talk to someone, a lawyer, somebody.”

Dad plopped down on the bed, cradling his head. “But if we go to a lawyer, and it turns out Scarlet’s not mine, I’ll die.”

The misery in his voice reached so deep into Ellie’s heart that she could feel it break. She sat on the bed beside him and held him close. “Honey, Scarlet is yours. She looks just like you. She’s got your eyes and your hair and your smile.” Ellie touched his face. “She’s your daughter, Danny. She is. And now she’s our little girl.” Ellie doubled over, holding her head in her hands. “Of all the people you could’ve slept with, why–why did you pick the one person who scares the hell out of you?” She said it with compassion for Dad’s shortcomings, but it was a real question, one that never got answered.

“I’ll get her out. I will. I just need a little more time.”

Ellie hung in for three more months, finally leaving on a stormy afternoon in November. She carried a single suitcase and a box of sheet music when she walked out the door for the very last time. She told Dad she would send for the rest of her things but she never did. My father stood crying at the window and I banged on the glass screaming as Ellie walked to her car. Tina appeared, grabbing me from my father before shutting the drapes with a grand gesture.

They were back in the now, in the present, their hearts beating fast. Ellie rocked her head against the headrest, her eyes closed, her brow wrinkled. She felt like she couldn’t breathe.

“That witch left the house after a few months, but you left forever,” Dad said.

“She stayed for a year, and it’s not always about you.”

Dad smacked the dashboard and yelled, “Why did you leave me? Why?” The pain in his voice rang deep, his wounds still fresh after so many years.

“You want to know? You really want to know? Then I’ll tell you why, Danny Sunder.” Ellie looked straight ahead and spun out a laundry list that cut into her soul. “Because I was young. Because I was headstrong. Because I was pissed. Because I was scared. Because you were scared, too, damn it!”

“And?”

“And? And? Okay! You want more? Fine! Because I loathed Tina. Because I was disappointed in you. Because I loved Scarlet. Because I hated that she wasn’t mine. Because I was careless. Because I was stupid. Because I was fickle. Because I thought that if I rode your coattails, I’d never ride my own.” Her voice lost its edge and grew softer. “Because I was happy. Because I was sad. Because having it all could only mean losing it all.”

Dad took her in his arms and she cried on his shoulder. “Because–I never wanted a family,” she wept. “And because–because I always wanted a family.” Ellie pulled away. She wiped her face with her sleeve and pushed her hair off her forehead. She took a deep breath and grabbed the wheel, steering the car away from the house and down the hill, going as fast as she could. “So, don’t tell her it’s me in that picture,” Ellie said with finality. “She doesn’t need to know she was abandoned twice.”

They rode in silence for the longest time until Dad held up a hand and counted slowly on his fingers. “I’ve had every girl in the world. How come I could never get over you?”

Ellie stared straight ahead. A tiny smile formed on her lips. “Because you had every *girl* in the world.”

Dad couldn’t help but laugh. “There were a couple of women in there, too, you know.”

“Ha!” Ellie laughed.

They’d been gone five hours and I was as close to convincing Nicole to stay in Malibu as I was to winning the Oscar for special effects. Piled at the bottom of the stairs like a giant hot pink avalanche were all of Nicole’s suitcases, while the lady herself stood on the landing practicing dramatic entrances for me to judge from below.

“This one, this one’s my Scarlet O’Hare,” she called out.

“O’Hare’s an airport,” I said. “It’s O’Hara. That’s who I’m named for.”

“They named you for an airport?”

Nicole looked perplexed as she slithered down the stairs, stopping to bat her eyes with each step. She cleared her throat and changed her demeanor, gripping the banister while blindly using her sandaled foot to feel around. “Watch me. This is my deaf mute.”

I was worried. Where was Dad? Where was Jake? I had absolutely no idea. I looked up and snapped, “Deaf mutes can walk, Nicole. They can also see.”

“That’s not what I heard.”

My cell phone finally rang and I was quick to answer it. “Hello? What? You nailed the pinky toe but you lost out on the big toe? Uh huh, uh huh. Yeah, I’m sure it’s still an awesome part. Ummm, I don’t know about celebrating. I need to talk to my father. Wait. I’ve got another call.” I put Jake on hold. “Dad? Dad, is that you?” It was a pocket call. I could hear muffled voices on the other end, but no matter how much I yelled Dad didn’t hear me. I clicked back to Jake. “It’s getting late and my father’s not back.” I looked up at Nicole posing in the mirror on the landing. “Yeah, maybe we better take her to the airport. How soon can you get here?”

We were parked on the highway at the farthest edge of LAX where the runway ended and the ocean began. The sun was setting and the sky turned electric blue as I stretched out on my back across the hood of a limo, Jake beside me. Jake who shouted in my ear, “I bet that’s Nicole’s plane!” I looked up at the underbelly of a screaming 747 as it streaked overhead, so near I could almost touch it. Meanwhile, our uniformed driver, who’d probably seen it all, was snoozing in the front seat.

“What?” I yelled.

“Nicole’s plane.” He pointed at the plane. “YOU HAVE TO SCREAM WHEN THEY FLY OVER!”

“WHAT?”

“YOU HAVE TO SCREAM WHEN THEY FLY OVER! LOOK, HERE COMES ANOTHER ONE! SCREAM!”

I screamed at the top of my lungs and so did he, but there was no competing with the roar of four jet engines all of ninety feet above our heads. Still, it was exhilarating and wonderful, and as the aircraft flew away we both laughed so hard we couldn’t stop. I turned to Jake and he turned to me. It was darker now but I could still make out the contours of his beautiful face and his eyes held mine like never before. He cupped my chin in his hand and for the first time in my life I felt really beautiful, and he kissed me so long and so deep I thought I would die. This. *This* was my first *real* kiss. Nothing, not one thing, counted before it. And if I lived another thousand years, I would never forget it.

17

MIRROR, MIRROR

People don’t usually think about fog when they think about summer at the beach in Malibu. For three days straight, the world as I knew it had disappeared beyond every window in every direction. No sun, no sea, no nothing, just a shifting wall of thick gray cloud that covered the view and blocked out the world. It might make someone else depressed, but for me it was just another version of one of my many cinematic fantasies; the beautiful but spunky heroine, stuck in her fabulously stocked mansion, with the world’s handsomest guy, and a bunch of fireplaces that worked by remote control.

I stood at the den window watching the fog roll past, writing and directing my mental movie while I examined my raw-faced reflection in the glass. I was blotchy pink and shiny red from my kissing marathon with Jake who slept like the king of the surfer gods on the sofa in the den. It could have been six in the morning or six in the evening, but I had no idea. I only knew that this amazing cocoon of fog had some of us acting like we were invisible.

Which was probably why Dad poked his head out of Ellie’s room every morning for the past few days, checking the hallway, trying not to be seen. He usually threw on her pink, flowery bathrobe that made him stand out all the more. He would tiptoe out her door like an over-sized cartoon character, sneaking back to his bedroom with a big goofy smile on his big goofy face. Of course, I spotted him right away, but I didn’t want him to see me with my cheeks rubbed raw and my bloodshot eyes. We were both trying to get away with something that neither of us could admit.

I wasn’t his keeper, and he wasn’t exactly mine, a quick look at our history could tell you that. Still, Dad tried, he really did. He went through the fatherly motions of making a stink every day, about where I was going or what I was doing, yet Jake was sleeping in the downstairs den and had been for the past week. I guess it was implied that I would be the good one (while Dad would be the bad one) and life would go on forever without anyone having to talk about anything specific. It had always been that way. We both knew that for better or for worse, eventually everything would blow over. Eventually, everyone became tiresome. Eventually, Dad got bored. Eventually, we went on tour or moved to a new hotel or took an exotic vacation. There was always an eventually.

But now, and for the past few days, I had a terrible feeling in the pit of my soul, and it was this; that Ellie wasn’t going to *ever* blow over or become tiresome *or* boring to Dad. That a tour wasn’t coming, or a new hotel, or a fabulous vacation. I was jittery and deep down scared that somehow Ellie would break through the impenetrable wall that surrounded his heart and nothing in Dad’s life or mine would ever be the same. That Jake was still allowed to hang around was just a consolation prize for everything awful that was about to come. A little advance, a pretty placeholder to keep me happy until my party was over.

That morning, the blanket of fog lifted and the sun made its first peek-a-boo appearance in days. I left Jake sleeping and snuck up the back stairs to my bedroom. I desperately needed a shower, a gallon of concealer, and a few hours of sleep. I needed to wash away my raccoon eyes and scrape the lipstick off my chin, but mostly I needed not to be seen. I was stealthy, or so I thought, ducking into empty bedrooms and bathrooms on the way, but before I reached my bedroom door, I bumped straight into Ellie.

“Are you spying on me now?” I said, in my most obnoxious tone.

“I just got up. I’m–I’m going to the kitchen.”

“Well, I wasn’t *doing* anything, not that it’s any of your business.”

“Scarlet,” she reached for me but I stepped back. “Why are you so angry with me? What did I do? Please tell me.”

“Like you don’t know. I thought you were different, but you’re just like the rest of them.”

“The rest of who?”

“Women!”

I stormed off and left her standing in the hall, thoroughly bewildered, exactly as I intended. Mission accomplished.

An hour later, we all shuffled into the kitchen from opposite ends of the house, stretching and yawning, overly innocent and way too polite. Blanca watched us carefully, her gaze jumping from face to face until she lowered her eyes, embarrassed by such an obvious show of complicity. Blanca still poured our coffee, moving around the table in a most careful way, but I knew she was nervous, like someone waiting for something really bad to happen.

“Blanca!” Dad spoke up, nearly shouting.

She jumped, sloshing coffee out of a cup and onto the table.

“Blanca, you need a few days off! Look at you!”

Blanca looked down at herself giggling nervously.

“No, I mean look how nervous you are,” Dad said. “You need a few days off starting now.”

“But, Dad, my room’s a disaster,” I wailed.

Dad rolled his eyes. “She’s taking time off, Scarlet.”

“Good idea, Mr. S,” Jake chimed in.

“Please don’t call me that.” Dad took a sip of coffee, set down his cup, and lit into Jake. “Don’t you have a job? How do you live? *Where* do you live? Don’t you have someplace else to go? How come you’re always around?”

I interrupted Dad’s stupid questions, jerking my head in Ellie’s direction. “Hey! Dad! Listen! If *she* wants to go, I’ve booked us a spa day so we won’t embarrass you tonight.”

“What’s tonight?” Dad and Ellie said at the same time.

“That benefit thing. You’re a presenter.” I rolled my eyes for good measure. “Dad, I can’t believe you forgot. I mean, really.” I nudged him with my elbow. “I put it on your calendar months ago.” There was no calendar, there was no nothing, but that didn’t stop me from wanting Ellie to think that there were tons of things she didn’t know and couldn’t know and that Dad and I were a highly competent team.

“Oh, that’s right. I’m presenting.”

Jake’s ears perked up. “Is it the Oscars?”

“It’s July, Jake,” Dad said flatly.

“I know. I love summer.”

Dad tossed him a newspaper. “Here, pretend to look for a job, just do it someplace else. I’ve got things to do. I need my space.”

“And you’ll get it,” Ellie stood up and stretched. “My time here is up. I’ve got other commitments. I’m leaving on Sunday.”

“The day after tomorrow?” Dad stuttered, surprised and more than a little hurt.

“The very same,” said Ellie.

That afternoon, we sat in black leather chairs at facing stations in a Santa Monica spa and salon, separated by a giant mirror and a long mobile of hanging crystals that were supposed to balance our energies. Good luck on that. Ellie on one side, me on the other, a barrier of glass between us literally and figuratively. Meanwhile, a female stylist was shaping my brows while a male makeup artist stood over Ellie, working his magic with a fistful of brushes.

Ellie had been especially quiet all day and it didn’t help that I wasn’t talking much, either. By now I could sense her restlessness and I watched as her feet moved back and forth while she tried to steal a look at herself in the mirror.

“Sorry I’m so antsy,” she apologized to the stylist who stood in front of her, blocking her view. He waved off her behavior as something routine.

“Hon, the woman before you wanted what I call the poor girl’s facelift. She had me pull her hair back so tight,” he demonstrated by pulling hard on the hair at his temples, “that if she sneezed, her forehead would’ve snapped like a window shade. Now, *she* was antsy.”

On the opposite side of the mirror, I examined my eyebrows with an interest I’d never mustered before. Inside, I felt like I was morphing into someone else, someone worldly and wise and pretty and now I wanted to look like that same person. I turned to the stylist, flipping my hair and crossing my legs like I was channeling some twenty-eight-year-old.

“Make me look sexy. And older.”

“How much older?”

“Old enough to cause some trouble but not enough to get arrested for it.” I couldn’t believe the snappy jumble of words that flew out of my mouth, but there they were, still echoing in my ears. And the truth was, that under all that tough girl talk and staged bravado was a person who was genuinely nervous and more than a little scared. I knew nothing about sex or love or anything, yet tonight could end up being *the* night. And tonight was only hours from now. I gripped the arms of my chair and felt my heart race. I had to do something to distract myself.

“Dad told me your real name is Eleanor,” I called over to Ellie like we’d just been introduced. She was still sitting opposite me shuffling her feet. “I never heard that name before.”

“So, you’re talking to me now?” Ellie sighed.

“I wasn’t *no*t talking to you,” I said, trying to keep the lid on my snark as I watched the make-up artist finish my cat eyes and start in on my cheekbones.

“I was named Eleanor because my grandmother loved Eleanor Roosevelt.”

“The Beatle’s song?”

Ellie let that pass. “I wish you’d just tell me why you’re so mad at me, Scarlet.”

“I wish you’d drop all that phony interest in me and quit acting like you care or something,” I snapped back.

Ellie’s make-up artist bent down close to her ear. “Mothers and daughters.” he whispered shaking his head. “It’s a battlefield.”

If you happened to be in the car behind us as we drove home on Pacific Coast Highway, you’d have seen two silhouettes; the driver moving her head back and forth checking her reflection in the vanity and rearview mirrors, and the passenger with one foot on the dashboard and the other out the window.

The driver was Ellie. She was highly distracted from the moment we left the salon and now she was having a hard time taking her eyes off her face in the mirror. She stopped short twice in all of three minutes, nearly rear-ending the car in front of us and causing the guy behind us to skid. As soon as she saw an opening, she pulled off the road into a parking lot where she checked the mirror for the hundredth time.

A bunch of emotions simmered in her eyes, waging a war behind a layer of smoky brown eye shadow. I have to admit for the record here, that she did look stunning. Her hair, blown out full and layered with golden highlights, framed her highly conflicted face. Her full lips, penetrating eyes, and high cheekbones completed the new Ellie, transforming her into a whole other person, just like me–because, honestly, I looked like I was old enough to buy my own apartment in Manhattan, and furnish it well.

Ellie parked and turned off the engine. She covered her face with her hands and took a deep breath.

“What’s wrong with you?” I baited her.

“Well, gee, let’s start with the fact that I look like a call girl.”

For some reason, I understood exactly what she meant without quite knowing what a “call girl” was. Still, it didn’t make me any nicer to her.

“Oh, get over yourself,” I said. “It’s not like you had plastic surgery or something.”

She ignored me that pulled a big wad of tissues from her purse, using one after another to wipe away her make-up.

“What are you doing?” I screeched, my pitch way too high.

“Taking it off.” She didn’t look at me but kept her eyes fixed on the mirror.

“Well, that’s just stupid.”

She stopped mid-wipe and dropped the tissue. I figured the next thing out of her mouth would be some kind of boring lecture, but instead she was kind and gentle and soft-spoken which made me even more annoyed.

“Don’t be angry. You did a lovely thing taking me out for a spa day. It’s just that I happen to look way too fabulous for me.”

“Looked. You *looked* fabulous. Now you’re just making a mess.”

“Scarlet, please tell me what’s wrong. *Please*.”

I planted my bare feet on the dash and examined the blood red polish on my toes. I took my time, staring at my manicured fingernails, then back at my feet again. After a small eternity, I indulged her with an answer.

“Did you really think you had a shot at my dad, looking like a normal middle-aged woman?” I wanted my words to sting and paused before I continued. “The truth is, I just don’t want you to get your hopes up about landing him.” I turned and looked her straight in the eye. “Many have tried. *All* have failed.”

“I know.” Ellie patted me gently on the knee and started the car. “The tabloids are littered with their skinny, blond remains. But I do appreciate you worrying about me, Scar. Really.”

It might have been the way she patted my knee, or how she sounded like she was talking to an eight-year-old, but the dam that held my anger back was about to burst and there was nothing to do but ride the wave that carried it. “You think you’re better than me, don’t you?” I sputtered.

“Better? No. Older? Definitely.”

“You can’t stop me from seeing Jake,” I yelled.

“I didn’t think I could.”

“Well, you can’t.”

“Glad we got that settled.”

“It so happens I’m in love with him.”

“Great. Wonderful. Tell me everything you love about him, and everything he loves about you.” Her face was free of make-up and glowing. She leaned back and looked at me, her eyes full of interest. What did I love about him? What? And what did he love about me? Suddenly, I didn’t know. Suddenly, I knew nothing at all. There I was in a parking lot in Malibu, stuck in a car with a woman who was ruining my life, drawing the biggest, blankest blank of my lousy fifteen years.

I know. I know. It’s hard to believe. But in that moment, on that day, I couldn’t think of one single thing to tell her. Not one. Zip, zilch, and a big, fat nada.

18

FIFTEEN FRAGMENTS

That night at the big ‘Heal the Bay’ benefit and concert, Dad had done his job and done it well. Despite the fact that our limo was late and traffic was a nightmare, he was in terrific form. He was unusually happy and unstressed. He smiled way more than normal. He complimented me without being prodded. When the time came for him to present an award, he bounced out on stage and was funny and charming and, most surprisingly, handsome, which is something I never noticed before. Who was this man now sitting next to me backstage? This super happy, extra relaxed guy who hummed under his breath as he watched the parade of movie stars and rock royalty stroll past? I stared without blinking at my father’s profile, so much like my own.

Dad moved closer and absentmindedly brushed a strand of carefully placed hair off my cheek. That afternoon, I was convinced I looked spectacular, but now, six hours and three hundred quick glances in my makeup mirror later, I wasn’t so sure. It was becoming evident that the vamp-to-tramp line might have been crossed. I was too made up, and now I was regretting everything I had asked the makeup artist to do. I pulled out my mirror and checked myself again. Maybe I should tone down the lipstick.

“So,” Dad sighed, “where’s your little friend?”

“Where’s yours?” I snapped back, raising a very manicured brow while I checked my phone.

He pointed to Ellie, clean-faced and pretty, chatting up some studio musician across the room.

“Jake is on his way whether you like it or not.”

“Scarlet, my love, my sweetheart, my darling,” Dad gently put his arm around my shoulders, “he’s a bonehead. And I’ve listened to his demo because he’s asked me a hundred times, and he’s, uh, how can I be diplomatic about this? Awful.”

“You know what, Dad? I don’t think you’re in any position to judge him, or me, or anybody else in a relationship since all of yours have been, oh, so successful. And as for his music, he loves it and so do I.” I shook his arm off and stood up. “You’re going to feel pretty stupid when you see what bonehead’s bringing you tonight.”

“A paycheck? Some groceries?” Dad tried not to laugh. “Maybe that leather jacket he borrowed last week? No, wait. It’s too late. I already saw it on Ebay.”

“You’re such a, such a–” I struggled to find a word. I was angry but out of focus. “Loser. And don’t you dare tell him his music sucks.”

“I didn’t say sucks. You did. But I may have said something about his lack of talent this afternoon.”

I walked away without looking back. I had never called my father a loser, never called him anything worse than ridiculous, or lame, but now he was ruining EVERYTHING! I pushed through the crowd and backed myself into a dark corner where I couldn’t see him and he couldn’t see me. I was beginning to measure my own happiness against his, and I was losing. Like today and tonight. I mean, this morning at breakfast it seemed to bother him that Ellie was leaving tomorrow, but now it didn’t seem to bother him at all. Danny Sunder was like Teflon. He could get over anything in the time it takes to brush your teeth. It was infuriating, all the more because here I was at this fabulous event waiting for a call from a guy I considered my boyfriend, and falling apart because there was nothing, not a whisper, not a message on my phone.

I dialed Jake and was shocked when he answered because everything always went straight to voicemail. I mean always.

“Where–where are you?” I stuttered. “You were supposed to be here twenty minutes ago.”

The crowd in front of me parted just enough to where I could see Ellie sit down beside Dad. He put his arm around her just like he’d put his arm around me, but she was happy about it. She leaned in close and said something and they both laughed. Dad reached for her hand and held it tight and she didn’t pull it away.

“What?” I was breathless and anxious as I gripped my phone. “No. Listen to me. Go straight to the *side* door and give them the pass. I’ll meet you there.” Jake asked me something but I couldn’t hear him. His words were choppy and muddled and then he was gone. I tried calling back but the call went straight to voicemail. I was about to cry.

I reached down and fumbled with my purse. A hand landed heavy on my shoulder and I jumped. It was Dad.

“We’re leaving,” he said.

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“I mean, I’ve done my thing and we’re leaving. Ellie, me, and you if you want to join us.”

“But Jake’s coming! He’s probably outside the door right now.”

“Well, when he gets inside the door, tell him I said ‘so long.’”

“Dad! You can’t go! He’s got this really BIG surprise for you!”

“Have him cart it over to the house. I’ll be home.”

I stamped my foot. This was not what I’d planned. “But, Dad!”

He looked around at the celebrity filled room, a room that anyone, anywhere, would die to be in. “Stay. Have fun. Wait for Mr. Wonderful. Introduce him to someone famous. He’ll love you for it. I’ll send the limo back for you.”

I looked down and tried to blink back my tears. This was supposed to be my night. I was supposed to be beautiful and everything, every major, big, gigantic, life-altering thing was supposed to happen tonight but absolutely nothing was. It was like the opposite. It was worse. It was like nothing. It was like I didn’t matter at all. Like I was invisible and powerless and insignificant. Dad came close and kissed me lightly on the top of my head. He had no idea what my state of mind was until my arms were suddenly wrapped so tight around him he could hardly breathe.

“Honey,” he laughed as he tried to wedge my face up and off his chest. “I’m not mad at you for calling me a loser. I *am* a loser. I’m not afraid to admit it. Guilty as charged.” I buried my head even deeper, wanting to wail like a baby but not wanting to make more of a scene than I already was. “I promise, I won’t make fun of Jake anymore. Scouts honor.” He tried lifting my head again, but I was immovable. “Okay, okay.” He patted my hair and hugged me back with equal measure. “Listen, I’m asking you to invite him over to the house later, hear me? *I’m* asking. We’ll watch a movie, and we’ll eat everything in the kitchen, even the secret Swiss chocolate stash, just the four of us.”

“I can’t,” I mumbled into his chest. “I’m too fat.” I still wasn’t ready to let go, but Dad stood straight and pulled back to look at me, me the crying mess in his arms.

“Not true, Scarlet Sunder,” he said in a slow, steady voice. “Not true at all. You’re perfect.”

I raised my head and gazed into my father’s eyes, the eyes I knew better than any eyes in the world, and managed somehow to give him a world-weary smile. The very real and very strange truth of that very specific moment was that I realized for the first time that I was both young and old. That I was both sad and happy. That I was lucky yet trapped. That my fortune was good and also bad. That I could be two things at the very same time and those two things could be opposites. The second part of that incredibly new truth was the realization that I would never be here again. Not in this time or in this moment. And last, but certainly not least, the hugest, scariest, most complicated and wonderful light bulb moment was that I would never, ever be this age again. Yet I knew, just like I knew my own name, that no matter how old I got or how long I lived, some part of me, some deeply placed, brightly colored, soulful, overly emotional, insecure, but still all-knowing jigsaw puzzle piece of me would *always* be this age.

Outside, a line of gleaming limos waited as cameras flashed and shouting fans pushed up against the police barriers. I could hear the commotion just beyond the exit as I tried to convince Dad that I was really okay and simply a very hormonal teenager. I put on my most sincere and happy face and spoke in my most even, reassuring voice to get them to move along and join the busy line at the exit door. I had to get them out. I had to think about everything I had just realized, and I couldn’t do that while they both looked at me with all that deep concern, especially Ellie, who I hoped never to see again after that night. Anyway, Jake would join me in a minute or two, and even though the timing of my big surprise got screwed up, we’d take the surprise up to the house and everything would go back to normal. After that, I’d have tons of time to contemplate it all.

Dad and Ellie waited for their ride under the canopy at the heavily guarded exit. I stood a few people behind them, but they couldn’t see me. I edged to the side of the giant door and scanned the crowd outside for Jake’s beautiful face, but he was nowhere. If I could see him, I could signal him to meet me back at the house. I’d jump into Dad’s limo and Jake would be waiting when we got home. I called him with my new plan but reached his voicemail for the hundredth time. I was leaving another message as everyone backstage turned their attention to a minimally clad, famous young actress who slithered into the room in a dress that looked like it was made out of dimes–like about three dollars worth. For the first time all night, I was relieved Jake hadn’t managed to get in. We’d seen that “actress” in a horror movie just days before, and he’d told me he thought she was really talented and beautiful.

When the actress moved toward the exit, I saw them. I saw them kiss. Dad and Ellie. Not a peck or a friendly kiss on the cheek. A real kiss. A kiss of substance. They lingered at the exit a few yards in front of me, locked in each other’s arms.

“He never kissed me like that.” Nicole stood at the edge of the crowd with a straight view to Dad. Jake was by her side still searching his pockets for the long-lost backstage pass.

“I don’t get it,” he mumbled. “I had those passes in my pocket when I picked you up at the airport. And I know I put them right in here.” He reached in one pocket after another, tapped his temple, cupped his chin and furrowed his brow. He blinked, looking up to the heavens with the same intensity that someone might summon when contemplating the age of the universe.

“How could that happen?” Nicole asked in amazement.

“Don’t worry. I’ll get us in,” Jake answered, oblivious to everything around him.

“No. How could *that* happen?”

She pointed as the crowd began to scream at the sight of Dad leading Ellie down a wide stretch of burgundy carpet to a waiting limo.

Jake watched blankly, Nicole in disbelief, as flashing cameras caught Dad kissing Ellie before they slid into the back seat of the car. Jake blinked, not quite understanding what he was seeing. He looked to Nicole for clarification, but her face was pale as a cloud and filled with bewilderment. Jake did what he knew best and draped a muscled arm around her shoulder, gently stroking Nicole’s hair while he drew her close.

19

A CHANGE OF PLANS

Jake.

Jake?

JAKE!

It was official. My heart was on the fast track to being broken. I lowered my head and ran my fingers across my chest, checking to see if there was something in there, something beating. It didn’t help that it was gorgeous outside or that the water in the pool was the most beautiful shade of blue. It only reminded me of Jake, Jake who I’d called a hundred times since last night. Jake who never answered and who I feared never would.

I sat down at the edge of the pool and let my feet dangle in the deep end. That was exactly what last night was supposed to be about, me dangling my heart and soul in the deep end with Jake, but it never happened. I looked out over the hills to the ocean. There was no fog. Only sun. Lots and lots of annoying sun. I shaded the screen on my phone and checked for messages. How many times can a person check for messages on a silent, seemingly dead phone without feeling crazy? Probably not this much. At least I didn’t leave him a hundred messages. Now, that would be nuts. Yeah, that would be pathetic. I raised the phone and called again. This was *only* message eight, or maybe it was ten. I had lost count, but never mind that.

“Hey, Jake,” I did my version of breezy, like this call was just an afterthought on my way to doing something more important. “So, um, are you coming by later? Honestly, I must have missed your call last night. I ran into these friends at the benefit and we all ended up at some club. Anyway, I’m still a little wasted and hanging by the pool, but (and now I was really digging myself in) I invited some people over who you might want to meet, you know, a few stars and an agent or two. By the way, I can’t reach Nicole. So, if you see her, tell her to call me. See ya.” I pressed the “End Call” button and stared at my phone. I felt queasy and embarrassed and worst of all, desperate. Why did I call him again? Why did I say what I said? I knew better. I had watched Danny Sunder operate for years. I knew how it worked. The only way to make someone want you was to act like it didn’t matter, like *they* didn’t matter. Ignore them and they’d gather at your feet. Forget them and they’d bang down your door. At that moment, I would’ve given anything for a “Take Back the Call” button on my phone.

Suddenly, I was more tired than I ever remember being. I laid down at the edge of the pool and looked up at the sky. The ground beneath me was warm and comforting. It was the only thing that felt good to me. I closed my eyes and thought about what did and didn’t happen last night.

For the longest time, I had hung back near the backstage exit door, hiding behind that sexy starlet and a well-known comedian twice her age trying way too hard to pick her up. Dad and Ellie were a few feet away and so focused on their last few hours together, they never turned around. I stood on my tiptoes to get a look through the double door but it was dark out and the crowd was huge. I called Jake again and again, hoping he’d pick up, or better yet, that he’d appear with Nicole looking more stunning than ever. As it turned out, her role had only lasted a few days. As usual, she was misinformed, thinking she’d be filming for months on end. She’d left me a message with the whole story a few days before. She hadn’t been able to reach Dad all week and was getting panicky. When I called her back, Jake jumped in with the idea that Nicole should catch the next plane back and surprise my father. Now, I couldn’t reach her or Jake.

I wandered around backstage and then waited outside until the driver came back for me. When he opened the limo door, I crawled in and stretched out across the backseat and tried not to cry. The ride home was nothing like that big, happy reunion I’d imagined–Nicole telling silly stories, Jake by my side kissing me now and then, and all of us laughing and happy except for Ellie who was finally leaving in the morning. I wiped my eyes and closed them so tight it hurt. And then the phone rang. I reached for my purse and knocked the phone across the floor. I dropped to my hands and knees and grabbed for my cell. The caller ID said “Jake!”

“Oh, thank god!” I gasped as my heart beat out of my chest. “Where are you, baby?” But all I could hear was a shuffling sound. “Jake?” I called out but could only make out the sound of footsteps on gravel. “Jake?” I squinted and listened harder. “Jake!” I shouted. “Jake!” I yelled even louder, so loud the driver turned around to see if I was okay. My long-awaited call from Jake wasn’t a call at all. Maybe if I really screamed he’d hear me.

“JAKE!”

“Scarlet?”

I opened my eyes, my cheek to the ground, the pool two feet away. “Scarlet?” It was Dad.

I pushed myself up and swung around hard. “Dad! You scared me. Do not sneak up on me!”

“I wasn’t sneaking. I was walking. Sneaking and walking are very different things. If I wanted to sneak up on you, you wouldn’t know what hit you. And why are you lying on the ground next to the pool? We’ve got lots of loungers and they’re all very comfortable.” Ellie, who was standing behind him, touched his shoulder and then moved to his side. He looked at her and cleared his throat. “Scarlet, Ellie and I–”

“Uh huh,” I said, as I picked up my phone and ignored the two of them as best I could.

“Scarlet, honey?” Dad fumbled with his watch and his bracelets and cleared his throat again. “Um, well.”

“Dan, how about if I stay out here with Scarlet, and you, well, you go back inside,” Ellie suggested gently.

I looked up. “Maybe *I* should go back inside.”

“No,” Dad said. “Let’s all stay right where we are. I have something important to say.”

Ellie put a finger to Dad’s lips and squatted down to my level. She looked into my eyes with great tenderness. “Scarlet, I know this might seem sudden and out of left field, but I’m hoping you’ll find it in your heart to–”

Dad cut her off. “I asked Ellie to marry me last night.”

“Oh, Danny!” Ellie said, exasperated.

I was dumbstruck. Staggered. Flabbergasted.

Dad put his hands on his hips. “I need to say this, so listen to me, Scar. I don’t want to lose Ellie and she doesn’t want to lose me, and I don’t want us all to lose each other.” There was a kind of conviction in Dad’s voice that I’d never heard before. “Ellie is the best thing that ever happened to me, Scarlet. I know you’ll understand this someday.” I wanted him to stop talking but he went on and on until I heard nothing but sounds. I know he was trying hard to fix that blown away look on my face and I couldn’t blame him for trying, but everything he said only made it worse.

What was I feeling when I looked from his face to hers and back again? Numb? Maybe more like dumb. This whole Ellie experiment had gone on way too long but it was all supposed to end by noon when a plane to Chicago would take her out of my life forever. Nicole was supposed to be here now, looking like a goddess in spiky heels, with tales of Broadway and a brand new diet plan in her hip pocket. I thought for sure by dinnertime Ellie would be a fading memory and the rest of us would be sitting in some great restaurant, eating salads, planning our next vacation to Bora Bora or St. Barts. And the fun would’ve continued day after day, without one annoying discussion about me getting an education *ever*.

I could barely speak but I managed to blather out the only thing I could think of to say. “But, but you live in Chicago or New York or someplace like that. You, you work there. You have a house there. You can’t move here. You can’t!” I screeched. Ellie’s eyes clouded and blinked back tears. I was glad my words hit her hard. At the same time, I was confused by the tiny part of me that actually liked her and wanted her to bring some order to our crazy lives. Was nothing ever clear? Was everything from now on going to be a bland gray instead of a sharp-edged black and white? Love/Hate. Right/Left. Yes/No. I couldn’t even do a decent job of disliking her. How pathetic!

Just then, Blanca came out the back door waving a phone. “*Hay una llamada por* Miss Ellie! Miss Ellie, *telefono*!”

Ellie reluctantly got to her feet. “Scarlet, I have to take that call. I’ll be right back and we can talk about everything, okay? Please don’t run off anywhere, please.” She touched my shoulder and rushed toward the house but turned back once more to say, “Please.”

Dad, who had been standing there the whole time, smiled as he watched Ellie walk away. His face held that same expression but his smile turned sad when he looked back at me. I was the new problem now, *his* new problem. He laughed a little and grumbled about his creaky knees as he sat down on the ground beside me. He tried to cross his legs into a half-lotus but failed. We silently scooted over to the edge of the pool and stuck our feet in. Dad put his arm around me.

“I know you, Scarlet. C’mon. Admit you’re happy for me, for us. C’mon.”

I glanced at him sideways and offered up a sneer.

“Happy? Are you crazy? Why would I be happy? Especially about her. She’s bossy and mean and I hate her and I know she hates me.” I kicked at the water to make my point.

“What are you talking about? No one hates anyone around here,” he sighed. “You’re just being difficult.”

“I am not! And what about Nicole? What about all the stuff she left here?”

“I had it moved out.”

“Did you move out my stuff, too?” I snarked.

“Honey. Please.”

“I bet you didn’t even bother to tell her to her face. You probably didn’t even tell her the truth.”

“Which truth, Scarlet? That I’m a coward? That I can’t handle confrontations? That I’m trying, and I emphasize “*trying,*” to grow up?”

“You? Grow up? Don’t make me laugh.”

“Listen, I called Nicole last night.”

“She answered her phone? Where was she?”

“How would I know?” He was getting snippy with me. Being accountable was something neither of us had any experience with. He took a deep breath and tried again. “Scarlet, I don’t know where she was or what she was doing. All I know is that I told her we’d run our course and that it was time for me to move on. She understood. She said she was okay.”

“And that was it? After all these months, that was all?”

“Maybe I said I’d buy her a car or a condo or something. She seemed to perk up after that.”

My head was pounding and the heat made it worse. I splashed water on my face and watched Dad pick at a loose tile at the pool’s edge. He pulled it free and stared at the tiny iridescent square and then tossed it across the yard into the bushes. He seemed to be the same guy, no visible regrets or fears, yet everything would be different from now on. Dad was getting married. He was marrying Ellie. How could it be that this commitment thing he avoided his whole life would be so easy for him now? Was he fooling himself? Could he cancel his rock star life and throw all those pretty women aside, including those he hadn’t met yet, like a shiny piece of tile? I shook my head as Dad stretched.

“So, where’s the young Adonis?”

“If you mean Jake, he’s coming over later,” I lied.

“I said I wouldn’t talk about him anymore, but I think you could do a lot better.”

“Just following in your footsteps, Dad. My whole life I watched you surround yourself with pretty young things. Now it’s my turn.”

Dad took me by the shoulders and looked me straight in the eye. “Don’t do what I did, Scarlet. You’ll end up lonely and miserable.”

“Let’s just see how long this stupid new adventure of yours lasts before you start giving me advice, okay?”

Dad winced at my acid tone, yet he reached out and gently touched my cheek. “Don’t be in such a hurry to grow up, my darling girl.” He blinked several times. “Life, Scarlet, life just simply evaporates.” He kissed my forehead and got to his feet, accidentally knocking my phone into the pool. “Oh, god! I’m sorry, baby! I’m such a clod,” he whined. “You can have mine. I still don’t know how to use it. Wait. I’ll go get it.” He shuffled back to the house. Halfway there he started to whistle.

I was now the personification of abandonment, the poster child of loneliness. I watched my cell sink to the bottom of the pool, a tiny stream of bubbles rising from it. Where was Jake when I needed him? I realized I didn’t know where he lived. How could I *not* know where he lived? I racked my brain trying to remember if he ever mentioned it. Did he say Van Nuys? Or was it Venice?

I looked back at the house as Ellie stepped outside carrying two lemonades. I threw myself back down on the ground and stared up at the cloudless sky.

And so it began. 20

miss Misery

It was Saturday, a sacred day for any teenager. But I wasn’t any teenager. I was a beyond miserable teen, and in my miserable estimation, I was soaring past a hundred on a misery scale of ten. My life and everything about it sucked, and even though I seemed to be living in a material paradise, none of it mattered. I lay across my unmade bed in the room I hadn’t left for a week. My face was breaking out, my hair looked like I’d combed it with a fork, and something, somewhere, was giving off a sour smell. It could have been me, but the pile of dirty dishes under my bed didn’t help.

It struck me that I might be circling the drain when I didn’t bother to watch ‘All About Eve’ on an all day TCM marathon of Bette Davis films. I didn’t even care. Instead, I downloaded everything I had filmed on my camera and watched it on TV, fast-forwarding to the best parts of my life. There we were, Dad, Nicole, and occasionally me, looking larger than life on my enormous flat screen. I watched us at that party in Barcelona, and at that post-concert bash in London. There was Nicole’s birthday in Berlin, and a long street sequence in Paris where I mostly filmed my feet in cowboy boots walking down the boulevard. Then came the tanning sequences; Dad and Nicole by a pool in Spain and one in Vegas, and then the country house in France and the villa in Italy. Next came more lounging in a totally cool suite in Miami, or New York, or Hong Kong, I couldn’t remember which, but it all looked incredibly good from where I sat. Why did it feel like it happened to someone else, like it had nothing to do with me? So maybe I looked unhappy most of the time. Well, guess what? I didn’t have a clue what unhappy was. Not a clue.

I turned off the volume and watched. I couldn’t bear to hear the sound of my own voice, scratchy and complaining in the middle of each place more beautiful than the next. Rio was too hot. The penthouse suite king-sized bed was too hard. Room service was too slow. I hit the pause button. I was a twenty-first century Goldilocks who had no idea how good she had it. I flipped over on my back and landed on crumbs.

Hours passed. I fell asleep and drooled on a pile of school catalogues stacked where my pillow should’ve been. When I woke up, the only thing clear to me was that I needed to paint my nails black. I started up the video again and reached for the tray of nail polish on my nightstand. All my colors were there except for ‘Eerie Black.’ Where was my ‘Eerie Black?’ I was too lazy to get up and find it. It had probably rolled under the bed and I wasn’t going to look there, at least not any time soon. I opened the nightstand drawer and found a black felt-tipped marker with the word, “permanent” printed on the side. Ha! What a joke. There’s no such thing as “permanent.”

I did the nails on my left hand. They turned out smudgy and awful, but that didn’t stop me from doing the toes on my right foot, or drawing on my ankle for that matter. I thought better of it halfway through an outline of a butterfly. Maybe it really *was* permanent. I glanced around to find something to rub off my handiwork when Dad came on the screen. We were alone together, Dad and me at Casa Pacifica a few days after we moved in. We were raiding the fridge and laughing. I rewound and turned up the volume and listened to myself yammer away about driving lessons and weight loss spas. I went on to say awful things about everyone we knew and complain about everything we did. Dad kept a straight face and only said awful things about himself. Then the footage turned to his birthday and the supermodels and musicians asleep on the stairs, and pool party scenes, and spoiled sushi platter close-ups. And suddenly there was Jake, beautiful as a dream and just as gone. I felt I was so much younger back then. How could three months make such a difference?

I rewound it again. The girl that was now me, the one with the smudged black nails and dirty hair, wanted to climb straight through the TV screen and never come out again. I wanted to go back, to rewind time, to fix everything and get it right. I had to. There had to be a way. The fantasy of that impossible idea drew me in deep until it was interrupted by a quiet tapping at the door. It took me a second to realize where the sound was coming from. I muted the TV and pushed back the hair stuck on my cheek. I pulled the school catalogues toward me making sure some of them covered my newly decorated foot. I stuck my black tipped fingers under the blanket.

Finally I barked out an irritated, “What?”

Ellie entered slowly, carrying a tray of tea and cookies.

“I thought you could use a break,” she said. I shrugged but kept my eyes on the tray.

“Need help with anything?” Ellie asked.

“No.”

Ellie glanced over at the TV screen. Nicole was prancing around Dad’s bedroom, packing for her trip to New York. We watched as she kissed a pair of red-soled heels before she tucked them in a suitcase.

“Didn’t you tell me you had a project you wanted to do, a kind of video memoir about your life on the road? What happened to that?” Ellie asked. “It was such a great idea.”

“I wasn’t serious about it,” I mumbled.

“I think you were.”

“Whatever.” I was rude and dismissive and barely looked at her. Ellie nodded and let it go. She put the tray down on the cluttered dresser and turned to the door, then hesitated.

“Scarlet? It would be so wonderful if you’d reconsider coming to Santa Fe. We’re leaving in an hour and it’s just for the weekend. Your dad would be so happy if you came with us.”

Slowly, I nudged the school brochures off the bed with my knee. One by one they fell, each shiny booklet making a loud thwack as it landed on the floor.

“Okay. I get it. I understand,” Ellie sighed taking a step back.

I turned up the volume on the TV and ignored her. She was about to leave but stopped when she saw Jake on the screen.

“I’m guessing some of this is about Jake,” Ellie said. “I’m sorry, Scarlet. I know it hurts. And I know what it feels like.” I understood she was trying to be kind but I didn’t want any of her sympathy.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I said. “I told him not to come around anymore and he doesn’t.” I turned away in a huff. I was ashamed of myself and at the same time annoyed that she was trying to invade my privacy.

“Please don’t feel embarrassed, honey. We all get hurt. Everyone does.” I caught her sad smile when I turned, but my eyes were drawn to the TV screen across from where she stood. I knew what was coming next and the worst part of my being overtook me.

“Everyone but you,” I answered, cool as an iceberg and hard as glass while I inched up the volume on the remote. The giant screen filled with Nicole’s flawless profile. She was leaning into the mirror above the vanity in Dad’s bathroom, seductively practicing her pout. It only took a second before the sound of her voice cut more than the silence in the room.

“Do the math, Scar. Ellie’s old enough to be my mother. Danny said so the first night she came to the house when I complained about her staying here,” Nicole bragged. “I mean, look at her–she’s got wrinkles everywhere, especially when she smiles, and she’s probably, like, six whole pounds overweight, and she doesn’t even try to do anything about it.” Nicole slithered off the marble counter and did a full-body stretch. She adjusted her bra and puffed out her chest and faced me and my camera all those months ago. “And even if she did try to change herself, she still wouldn’t be Danny’s type. He said so.” She smiled and checked her teeth. “I’m pretty sure he hates brunettes.”

I lowered the volume and watched Ellie’s face as she looked away from the screen and back to me, her color drained, her healthy glow morphing into a sick shade of wet sand. She stood up straight and cleared her throat. “I can be hurt, Scarlet. I’m not sure why you think I’m immune. But the pain stings less when the words come from someone who doesn’t know me well, or in this case, at all.”

 If my life depended on it, I couldn’t read Ellie’s face. All I know is that she gave me, and the image on the screen, one long last look before she left the room. I wasted no time in lobbing a hairbrush at the door, then flinging myself face down across my bed. Unfortunately, it was still covered in crumbs.

I slept for twenty-four hours straight and dreamed again and again that things were back to normal. On Sunday morning my eyes opened to the sight of my smudged black fingernails and my heart sank. More and more, I had come to realize that I wasn’t like my father at all, a guy who was always happy when some random girlfriend or “love interest” disappeared from his life. I didn't have that gene. I also didn't have a supply of people waiting in the wings, ready to take my breath away. I had met Jake through Nicole and had lost him through Ellie and that was all I could think about. I was sure Ellie had convinced my dad to secretly get rid of them, and I would never, ever forgive her for that. It was too much of a coincidence that they both disappeared on the same day Ellie officially nabbed my father.

I pulled myself out of bed and walked through the empty house. Blanca had left a pot of coffee and a pile of croissants on the kitchen table. I knew she wouldn’t be back until late that night and now, I was truly, absolutely on my own. I parked myself in front of the fridge, opening and closing the door, forgetting what I had seen inside as soon as I closed it. I was more bored than hungry and completely out of ideas on how to entertain myself for the rest of my life. The truth was, nothing interested me anymore.

I plunked myself down and ate a croissant without thinking. Dad’s cell, which he left for me, sat on the counter. I spun it, idly at first, then harder. On the third spin it skidded away but stopped when it hit a notepad with something written on it. It was the number of a Santa Fe hotel followed by “*Scarlet, if you change your mind, we’ll get you here in two hours. Just call. E.”* I was still staring at the note when Dad’s cell rang.

“Yeah?”

“Danny?”

“*Nicole?”*

“*Scar?”*

Thirty minutes later I sat at a table facing Nicole at the Reel InnCafe on Pacific Coast Highway. She was every bit as radiant as I was frumpy.

“You look amazing,” I said, and meant it. I was hoping she’d say the same in return, but I guess that was asking too much.

“Misery loves company,” Nicole said as she smiled sadly and pushed her food around the plate.

“What do you mean?” As far as I could remember, the “misery” thing wasn’t one of Nicole’s usual lines.

“Well, I’m hardly eating ‘cause I’m miserable, and now I’ve got more guys coming on to me than I can count. So misery loves company, or maybe company loves misery.”

She was making sense. I nodded while I chewed a French fry and then another. “I can’t believe you called my dad.”

“I can’t believe you answered his phone.”

“I’ve had it since he knocked mine in the pool, the day Jake disappeared. I left him my new number about a hundred times, but I never heard from him. You haven’t seen him, have you?”

“No.” She looked down and away. “I don’t know where he is.”

We picked at our food, neither of us sure of what to say.

“I miss you guys so much!” Nicole blurted out.

“Me, too!” I blurted back. I stuffed fries into my mouth as my eyes watered up. “I mean, I miss you and us and the way it used to be when we were all together on tour. God, I didn’t even know how happy I was, until I wasn’t.”

“Me, tooooo!” Nicole said, frowning beautifully.

“I hate everything,” I sighed.

“Me, too.” She nodded. Then we both stared mindlessly and sighed together. I poked a finger into the knot at the back of my hair and had trouble pulling it out. I took a deep breath.

“Nicole, I don’t know how to tell you this, but Dad and Ellie are getting married.”

“To each other?”

“Yes!”

Nicole gasped and fanned herself with a napkin.

“And Ellie, well, all she does is try to control me. She tells me what to do and how to think and she bosses me around and acts so phony like she loves me or something.”

“Wow.” Nicole sounded genuinely amazed.

“And the worst thing is, she’s convinced my father to send me back to school.” I crossed my arms and leaned back. “I hate her.”

Nicole took it all in. I could almost hear the wheels spinning in her head while she digested the various bits of information.

“That’s just awful. If it were up to me, I’d *never* make you go back to school.” She paused, letting it sink in that she really meant it. “Isn’t there *something* we could do?”

I leaned forward on my elbows, my chin in my hands and shook my head “no.” I looked around at the other tables, not really thinking. But it quickly became obvious that every guy on the patio, young, old, or otherwise, couldn’t keep his eyes off Nicole, despite the scowls of annoyed wives and the sneers of pissed girlfriends. I turned back to Nicole, probably the most remarkable looking women I’d ever met, and stared hard at her perfect features.

“Maybe there is,” I said.

21

ROCK THE KASBAH

When I was a little girl, I loved those connect-the-dot coloring books. I’d take them with me wherever I went, sitting backstage or on a couch at Dad’s studio, carefully linking miles of wobbly Crayola lines together. But no matter how many pages I’d done, no matter how simple or complicated they were, I was always surprised by the picture that emerged at the end. I could never foresee that bunny with the watering can, let alone the dancing pony in front of the princess castle. Years later, I still had trouble connecting the dots, right up until my lunch with Nicole.

 What occurred to me over a plate of cold French fries is that I was blind as a bat when it came to stupendous female beauty. The assortment of model-slash-actresses who wallpapered Dad’s life for as long as I could remember were all physical tens, if not fifteens, at least when it came to looks. Beautiful bone structure, legs for days, bodies to put runway models to shame, that was the norm. What I had forgotten, truly forgotten, was that Nicole was the most beautiful of them all. And her astounding beauty gave me an idea.

That night I tossed and turned trying to work out the details of a plan. This was by far the most ambitious thing I had ever done, and definitely the most important. It was no coincidence that Nicole called Dad, and Dad had long ago given me his cell phone. And it was no coincidence that Dad and Ellie were out of town, and I was home alone. It was also pretty weird that Jake wasn’t my first, second, or even third thought when I woke up the next morning.

I was sure now that what had seemed like a series of random events was actually the voice of destiny telling me that my new awful life was ending, and my old wonderful life was on its way back, and Nicole was the center of it all. The fact that she showed up out of nowhere was a definite sign that Jake would also be back. If I could have my old life again, I could make him love me this time around, and I could once again be the kind of happy I’d always taken for granted.

A week later, just as the sun was setting, the Bentley sailed past the gates of Casa Pacifica and headed downhill into town. Ellie was driving with Dad by her side, Dad, who since his return from Santa Fe had become “a new man,” someone who spent half the day whistling, who appeared to be insanely happy, who was suddenly *interested in my education*. At the same time, he was hyper-focused on courting Ellie, which was totally lame since she’d already agreed to marry him, but all their wining and dining was exactly what I needed to happen. I barely listened when Dad told me he wanted to make up for lost time and give Ellie back the years they’d spent apart. I barely listened when they invited me along every single time they went out. I always refused with one excuse or another, but not before finding out exactly where they were going and when. In truth, Dad’s new personality, annoying as it was, played right into my plan.

I talked to Nicole ten times a day. Her acting career hadn’t taken off the way she’d expected, and with no new prospects, she had nothing to look forward to. Soon, the Range Rover that Dad had given her as a parting gift got traded for some cash and an old Porsche. One afternoon, when Nicole stayed late at an audition, the Porsche got towed, and she was too short on money to get it back. Of course, in her opinion, as well as mine, every single part of this mess was Ellie’s fault. Ellie Hughes, who’d come out of nowhere and turned our lives over, under, sideways, down. She’d taken Dad away from Nicole and scared off Jake, and soon she’d be forcing me into some horrible school.

While no one was looking or even paying attention, Ellie had snuck into the power seat and taken over. She was *making* Dad go to the dentist, something he feared more than death itself. We were *forced* to recycle the trash. She *expected* me to donate clothes and shoes I didn’t wear anymore. She *believed* chores were good for your soul, and she usually washed the dishes even though we had a housekeeper *and* two dishwashers. She hung up her own clothes, she ironed things (I didn’t even know we had an iron), and she loved to bake. She even tried to teach me once, which made no sense since you could buy a muffin just about anywhere. All in all, she was ruining my once fabulous existence, but not for much longer.

 But something major clicked when I saw Nicole at that café on PCH. I realized exactly how I could get Ellie out of my life. I remembered her once telling me she tried hard not to let her insecurities run the show, which meant she had insecurities. She said no one could make you feel bad about yourself without your permission, but I could tell she only half believed it. I mean, anyone could make you feel awful about anything, and I was living proof. Just like in half the movies I’d ever seen, I knew that Ellie’s fears (her age, looks, figure) mixed with Dad’s world-famous ego (let’s face it, he could date any woman on the planet), would equal jealousy, big, ugly jealousy, the kind Dad couldn’t recognize in himself but hated in everyone else. It was the most obvious way to break them apart. He’d be jealous about Nicole, and so would Ellie, but for completely different reasons. It was genius, if I do say so myself.

Act One of my plan went like this; a Ferrari pulls up to the valet outside a West Hollywood restaurant. Nicole knows Dad and Ellie are already inside. She slithers out of the car and into the place escorted by one tall, buff, insanely handsome guy. Every head in the restaurant turns, including Dad, who sits with Ellie in a corner booth. His eyes follow Nicole as she enters and crosses the room. He even sits up taller once he gets a good look at her date. But he ends up blushing when his gaze returns to Ellie’s not too happy face, and he never once looks back at Nicole, although I’m pretty sure he wants to.

Nicole reported in after every encounter. For someone who I thought of as an airhead, she didn’t miss a beat, even Dad’s blushing face in a mostly dark restaurant. She had some kind of radar or night vision or the ability to know the exact impact she had on everyone within a hundred yards. I wondered what that might feel like because it was so completely foreign to me. Anyway, a few encounters safely behind us, we decided that the next time Nicole “bumped” into Dad, she had to raise the stakes and be with a seriously hot rocker-type, and more than that, she had to look happy. Like truly, deliriously happy, as if her break-up with Dad hadn’t ruined her life, but actually made it better.

A few days later, I decided to tag along for the next run-in so I could check out Dad’s reaction and fine-tune things going forward.

Act Two of my plan went like this; Dad and I and Ellie were walking out of Fred Segal’s in Santa Monica with a ton of shopping bags. We were almost to the Bentley when a shiny, red convertible screeched into a nearby parking space. Dad stopped in his tracks and dropped his bags. Maybe it was Nicole with her wild, sexy, windswept hair, or maybe it was the guy she was with, a virtual hotter Danny Sunder minus twenty years, who lifted Nicole from the car and carried her over his shoulder across the parking lot and into the store. Nicole, done up like a hipster Bridget Bardot, laughed all the way to the store entrance and never looked at us once.

Ellie was way behind Dad and me, reading a phone text. She’d missed the whole show, but I didn’t care. From the look on Dad’s face, I could see my plan had potential, but I knew it for sure when he handed me all the shopping bags, sucked in his gut and grabbed her around the waist, trying to lift her despite her protests. He managed to sling her over his shoulder without dropping her on her head and smiled proudly to himself, but it only took a second before he winced in pain and plunked her down again, grabbing his back in agony. Ellie put her arm around him as he limped back to the car and painfully lowered himself into the passenger seat.

“Honey, what’s gotten into you?” Ellie asked, totally clueless. Dad shot daggers at me with a look that said, “if you know what’s good for you, you’ll keep your mouth shut,” and I did, all the way home.

After that day, it was clear the time had come for Nicole to make actual contact. They had seen each other several times in two weeks, and I figured we had maybe another week left before the wedding plans solidified and all the back to school arguments began. For the moment, life at home was quiet. I kept to myself, trying not to engage or even look at anyone. If someone talked to me, I was polite. If Ellie was nice, I was nice back. I didn’t want to raise suspicion, and I didn’t want to show my excitement or my nerves, both of which I was experiencing to the max. I was keeping everything on the down low, and I was even watching movies again.

The evening of Act Three was warm and windy. The Santa Ana’s whipped up the trees and the dust. Somewhere to the north a brush fire had just been contained. I felt restless and anxious. Dad and Ellie had been hanging out at home for days, writing music, planning what was to be a casual wedding with a few close friends. I was panicking that they might never go out again, that Dad’s courting seemed to be over, when Ellie knocked on my bedroom door.

She poked her head in. “We’ve got cabin fever. I bet you’ve got it, too. Want to come out and have some dinner with us?” she asked sweetly.

“Hmmm. Like where?”

“Your father wants to go to that club on Sunset, the one with the Moroccan restaurant. I think they have dancing.” She cringed a little.

“Dancing? Yeah, I don’t think so, but thanks, anyway. Besides, I’m kind of into researching those schools in New York we talked about. And that one in Massachusetts, too.” Ellie took a few steps in and stood beside the door. As far as my room was concerned, she kept her distance the way you’d steer clear of an angry dog.

“You’re really interested?”

“Um, yeah. More than I thought I’d be.” Actually, I wasn’t lying. In the days I was stuck in the house I’d finally picked up a brochure and read it. I even went online. The schools seemed kind of great, but I wasn’t going to say that. If Dad got back together with Nicole, I could go to school if I wanted, but for sure no one was going to make me.

“Then, I’ll leave you to your research.” Ellie winked and was barely out the door before I grabbed the phone and speed dialed Nicole.

The Tangier Room at the Kasbah Club was a fantasy blend of all things Moroccan with some extra exotic stuff thrown in that you might find on a movie set. The restaurant was a cluster of small rooms and tiled alcoves surrounding a darkened dance floor. Every night, they played great music and served even greater food. You had to be someone to get in and, as usual, Dad’s face was his reservation, no matter how many people were ahead of him, no matter how many VIP’s were waiting in line. Luckily, Nicole knew the guy at the door and she and her date, *another* hot rocker, were already swaying to the music by the time Dad and Ellie arrived. A hostess done up like a Middle Eastern Pixar princess seated them at the best table in the prettiest alcove where they leaned into each other laughing and smiling until, at the exact the same moment, they both saw Nicole. According to Nicole, she gave a stellar performance and managed to act truly surprised to see Dad and Ellie, who fake-smiled at her but quickly looked away. Nicole used that moment to zero in on Dad, giving him an intense and sultry stare.

After the waitress took their order, Ellie looked up again and watched Nicole and the rocker guy dance. Being a grown-up and noticing that Nicole really seemed into the guy, she encouraged Dad to go say hello because it wasn’t right to ignore someone you’d shared your life with for the better part of a year. Dad got up reluctantly. He’d always had the luxury of rarely seeing, let alone talking to the women he was over and done with. He skulked over to Nicole with a half-smiling, slightly awkward, almost guilty look on his face. Nicole stepped away from the rocker guy in a single beat and accepted Dad’s clumsy and conciliatory handshake while at the same time leading him onto the dance floor.

As soon as he was in her arms, Nicole locked into Dad’s eyes and tried to work her magic while Ellie tried hard to look the other way.

“It’s great that you found someone,” Nicole purred into his ear, “someone your own age.”

Nicole swayed while Dad listened, thinking he owed her that much.

Meanwhile, Ellie stared deeply into the tablecloth, not as sure as she was five minutes ago that she’d done the right thing.

“You hurt me, Danny. You broke my heart,” Nicole sighed, “but I forgive you.” Dad, who wanted more than anything to get back to his table, could only nod. “Because I’m happier now than I’ve ever been,” Nicole went on. She looked up at him with the biggest, saddest eyes brimming with tears. For a microsecond, Dad was magnetized by the tenderness in her oh-so-perfect face, but the siren song of his old dog ways had truly lost its pull, and he stood there blinking and mostly blank which Nicole quickly mistook for a welcome back.

For her grand finale, Nicole gave Dad a full-body hug in the middle of the dance floor and wished him all the luck in the world. She kissed his cheek, breaking the embrace with a whispered, “I still want you,” and waved goodbye to Ellie who waved back, relieved that whatever had just gone down was over. Nicole bravely pushed through the crowd, grabbing her rocker boy by the hand, pulling him to the exit, convinced in her heart of hearts that she’d just hit a big one right out of the park.

22

THE GIFT

I was ready to go but my nerves were a mess. I sat on the edge of my bed and crossed and uncrossed my legs while I waited. I checked the clock every twenty seconds and looked at my face in the mirror every five. When the clock went from 1:29 to 1:30, I dialed.

“Ready?”

Nicole’s perky voice answered, “Yeah! I’m so excited, but here’s the thing–”

“You’re not backing out, are you?”

“No. But if you really, really want me to do this, you have to swear you’ll do whatever it takes to get me a legally binding commitment from Danny, and I mean immediately. I can’t take any more chances.”

I looked across the room and fixed on my own sad reflection. I was beyond anxious and probably scared. I turned away quickly and pretended I knew nothing about the fear in my eyes. My attention returned to Nicole and I couldn’t recall if she’d ever before used the words “binding” or “immediately,” but I answered her with an edge in my voice.

“Stop worrying,” I whispered. “I told you already, you’ll get whatever you want.” I lowered my voice even more. “I’ll call you from the fitting as soon as I can. You know what to do, right?”

There was a knock at the door.

“Scarlet?” It was Ellie.

“Gotta go,” I muttered into the phone before I called out to Ellie, “I’m coming!”

I tried to act all nonchalant while Ellie stood on a raised platform in the middle of the fitting room. I yawned a little too wide and long while a seamstress pinned the hem of her cream-colored wedding gown. It was beautiful, really beautiful, but I couldn’t let myself care. I eyeballed the clock. I played with my phone. If nerves made noise, I’d sound like Santa’s reindeer running a marathon. I stood up and paced. I sat down in all the different chairs in the room and finally asked no one in particular, “Is there a bathroom I could use?”

“Through those doors, Miss,” said the seamstress who motioned to the left.

I was feeling sick and headachy as I stepped inside the tiny room. I fumbled for the light switch and nearly dropped my cell into the toilet but made a quick save. My hands were shaking and sweaty and I wiped them hard across my jeans. Clutching the phone as tight as I could, I called Nicole.

“Are you ready?” I whispered.

“Huh?” Nicole sounded distracted.

“*Are you ready*?” I rasped, my voice sticking in my throat. She didn’t answer. I pushed the phone against my ear until it hurt. I could hear muffled sounds and another voice, a male voice, in the background. “Nicole?” I whispered as my heart pounded and then did a bad kind of flip-flop.

Nicole covered the mouthpiece and giggled, “Stop it!” to whoever was there. And whoever was there said, “Make me,” and in that instant, I realized something terrible.

“I’m leaving right now.” Nicole was talking to me, me who was stunned.

“Wait, was that Jake?”

“No.”

“You’re lying. Where are you?”

“Getting in my car.”

“I know that was Jake. What are you doing with him?”

“Nothing. We’ll talk about it later.”

“Nicole, what’s going on?” I couldn’t breathe, I couldn’t think. “Why is he with you?” There was a long silence and then an even longer sigh.

“He just kind of showed up.”

“How long?” It was all I could do to keep from screaming. “How long have you known where he was?”

“Not long, but it doesn’t matter, Scar. He’s so dying to see you, really, he is, but he doesn’t want to call you until he finds a real acting job to impress you. He’s been working so hard, I barely hang with him.”

I was incredulous. “Are you kidding me?”

“Scar, you’re making something out of nothing. He just showed up. Honestly.”

I lowered the phone. My heart was beating out of my chest and I could hear the blood rushing through my ears. I wanted to throw up but could only blink.

“He never really liked me,” I mumbled to myself. I put the cell back to my ear and said it again, “He never really liked me, did he? He just wanted to get his lousy demo to my dad.” Now, all I could hear was a crackling sound at the other end.

“Don’t be–” crackle, “It’s not what you–” crackle, “back to the way it was.” Crackle–pop–crackle.

“What? Nicole? What did you say?” But the call dropped and she, wherever she was, was gone.

I held a damp paper towel to my face and tried not to look at myself in the mirror. That was twice today I’d avoided looking at myself and now I knew why. I’d been duped, like, royally. The truth tumbled down on my heart like an avalanche. I’d been played by Jake and now I was being played by Nicole. He never cared about me or liked me all that much. And now I felt the same. I didn’t like me all that much, either.

I walked back to the fitting room on shaky legs, slumped in a chair, and stared at my hands.

“Hey, are you okay?” Ellie asked. She was off the pedestal and zipping up her jeans.

“Uh-huh.”

“You look pale, sweetie.”

Ellie reached for my forehead, brushed back my hair, and I let her.

“I’m fine. I’m okay. Really,” I said softly, which was a lie.

“You’re sure you’re not coming down with something?”

I managed a truly unconvincing, “No, I’m great.”

“In that case, would you grab my purse and look inside? I got you something.”

Dazed, I reached down for Ellie’s bag and fumbled around until I found a small box wrapped with a satin bow.

“I was waiting for the right time to give you this,” she said. “I found it in a little shop in Santa Fe and instantly knew when I saw it, it was meant for you.”

My hands shook as I untied the ribbon and opened the lavender box. I lifted an exquisite charm on a long, delicate chain. It was shaped like a tiny book that appeared to unfold on tiny gold hinges like some kind of intricate puzzle. I stared at her gift and my eyes watered up.

“It’s beautiful, but what is it?”

“Well, I think it’s Tibetan and I know it’s very old–and the card that it came with, oh, where is it? Wait a sec.” She searched her purse and pulled out a small slip of paper. “It says that it’s a talisman that one friend gives to another when their fates become intertwined.” She looked into my eyes and touched the charm. “Each little panel comes off, see? That’s so you can give a piece of your heart to the people you really love. The saleswoman said that when you give all but the last panel away, true love finds you.”

“Really?” I was getting all choked up.

“Uh-huh. Then you give that last little piece to the person who captures your heart.”

I held the charm up to the light and felt a tear roll down my cheek. And then, with a jolt, I remembered everything. “I’ll be right back,” I said as I rushed to the bathroom.

I banged my way through the door and paced like a caged weasel as I heard my call go straight to Nicole’s voicemail. “It’s me!” her recording shouted, “Leave your name, your fame, your number and game!”

“Nicole, where the hell are you?” I rasped. “You were supposed to leave your phone on.”

Everything came into focus as I wiped my sweaty face with the last of the paper towels. I was panicked and terrified and about to destroy lives and the happiness of those lives, and now I was one of those lives.

I redialed and got Nicole’s voicemail again, and this time I wasn’t whispering. “Hey, you better call me as soon as you get this, do you hear me? DO NOT, I repeat, do not go through with the plan. If you try, even if he ends up hating me, I will tell my father EVERYTHING!”

I leaned against the wall and rubbed my hands over my face breathing hard and fast. I shut my eyes and tried to regain some composure. I took a deep breath and opened the bathroom door. Ellie was standing right in front of me. I gasped and nearly choked.

“Scarlet, what’s going on?”

“Nothing. I swear.”

“Then let’s go home and show Danny our dresses, okay?”

“No. No. We can’t,” I almost pleaded. “It’s bad luck for the groom to see the dress before the wedding. *Extremely bad luck*.”

“You’re absolutely right. Why in the world would we want to tempt fate?” Ellie stroked my hair and kissed my cheek and walked away through the frilly curtains that led back to the fitting room.

23

ATTEMPTING FATE

“Wait! Can’t we eat or something?”

I followed Ellie through the fitting room and into the showroom where she picked up our dresses packed in garment bags. She’d decided against having her gown hemmed, and instead planned to wear heels tall enough to pick up the slack. When I thought about it, neither of us really needed a fitting, and it became clear that Ellie had arranged this unnecessary errand days ago to get me out of the house and my awful mood. Little did she know my mood and this outing had set in motion the wheels of my horrible plan.

The afternoon sun glared in my eyes as we stood by the trunk of Ellie’s rental car. While she fished around for her keys, I tried to think of ways to slow everything down.

“I’m starving. Can we stop somewhere?”

“Hon, I’d be happy to make you whatever you want when we get home, but Sam’s party starts in an hour and he’s been cooking for days. He’ll be so disappointed if we’re not hungry when we get there. You know how he is.” Ellie opened the trunk while I hung back racking my brain for an idea.

“But I’m hungry now. I might even faint, and doesn’t Sam have a chef.”

“That’s why this is so special. He’s got two chefs, but he’s cooking for us as an engagement present.” Ellie felt my forehead again. “I think we have to get you home. You’re feeling a little clammy to me.”

“I’m not clammy, just hungry. Can’t we stop somewhere and get something? Like maybe if I had some sugar, I’d feel better.”

Ellie carefully laid the dresses down in the trunk. She searched her purse and pulled out a small pack of M&M’s and handed them to me.

“I don’t know why, but I always carry these.” She smiled and I was screwed. Why didn’t I ask for a burger? “C’mon. You’ll feel better.” Ellie took stock of my disappointed face, or at least what she thought looked like disappointment. “Scarlet, it’ll take forever to get your dad up and dressed, and you know how Sam is when we’re late. We’ll find you something to snack on when we get home, but a restaurant will just take too long.” She shut the trunk with a bang that made me jump. “I need to return this car already,” she sighed.

“Why don’t you let me drive, you know, for old times’ sake?”

“You? You who dies of embarrassment every time we pull up in this thing?”

“I learned how to drive in this car, and we became friends in this car. This is probably the last time I’ll ever drive it.”

Ellie gave me a long look, then handed over the keys. I opened the door and positioned myself in the driver’s seat. I took my sweet time adjusting the seat and then the seatbelt. I pulled down the vanity mirror and put on lip gloss, wiped it off and put it on again but even more slowly. After stalling as much as I could, I started the car and let it run. “The engine needs to warm up.”

“It’s eighty degrees out, Scarlet.”

A few minutes later, we were weaving slowly in and out of traffic. When I saw a bus, I followed it. When I saw a clunker going fifteen miles an hour, I crept up behind it and stayed there for as long as I could. Yellow lights were equal to red, crosswalks were approached at a crawl. After a thirty-minute ride that should have taken ten, I turned up the canyon road that led to home.

Ellie kept her eyes on me as I stared straight ahead, never pushing the pedal over twenty miles an hour.

“Is your foot asleep?”

I didn’t answer.

“I know I’m talking to a teenager, but could you maybe drive a little faster?”

I pulled to the side of the road and stopped the car. I avoided looking at Ellie while I struggled with what I wanted to say and how I wanted to say it.

“I don’t know how to–” I sputtered as Ellie lifted her sunglasses “–say this, but I, I just thought that–” I looked down and picked at a tear in my jeans, “that you–” I stalled and squirmed and made sounds like I was struggling with more than just words. After a long, uncomfortable silence, Ellie cleared her throat.

“Maybe I can help,” she said.

I still wasn’t looking at her, but I could feel her searching my face.

“Maybe you’re unhappy and upset because you feel like you might be losing your father. But you’re not, Scarlet. I promise you’re not. As corny as it sounds, you’re gaining a true friend, in me.”

It took me a long time to find the nerve to look her in the eye, but that only lasted about a second before I started sobbing.

“And this friend owes you a very big apology for–” Ellie pressed her locket to her heart, the locket I noticed the first day we met, the one she always played with whenever she was nervous or searching for something to say.

“If it’s about the Jake thing,” I blubbered, “I forgive you.” Ellie tilted her head not understanding.

“The Jake thing?”

“Yeah,” I said, sobbing like an infant. “You don’t hate me, do you,” I sniffled, “for the way I’ve been treating you lately?”

“Hate you? Of course not!” She put a hand on my shoulder and gently squeezed.

“You promise you won’t hate me, no matter what?”

“No matter what.” Ellie said as she held her hand up scout’s honor style. I could tell she was hurting for me and whatever it was that I was going through. And I could see clearly for the first time that she loved me and that she had all along.

“Why don’t we leave the past in the past?” She smiled. “Is that a deal?”

I nodded “yes,” but I couldn’t have felt more rotten.

“Scarlet, honey, don’t worry so much. It’ll be fine. We’ll be happy together, I promise. I have a strong feeling that the bad times are over and the good are about to begin. Trust me. You’ll see.”

She reached over and hugged me with real tenderness and my already heavy heart sank even more. What had I done? What in the world had I done? I swallowed hard and started the car, this time driving even slower than before.

Finally, we reached the crest of the hill. The gates guarding Casa Pacifica slowly parted. I drove into the courtyard at a crawl, relieved that no other cars were there but the Bentley. I parked and dawdled as Ellie popped the trunk and pulled out the garment bags.

When we got to the front door, I opened it carefully, as if it were rigged with explosives. The house was silent. Blanca had the day off and the gardeners with their noisy leaf blowers had come and gone.

Ellie rushed up the stairs heading for Dad’s room. I was right behind her, but I sprinted out in front to cut her off at the landing.

“Wait!” I gasped. “Don’t go in there with your wedding dress. Let’s put it in my room.”

Ellie handed me the garment bag. “Okay, hang it in your room, but I need to get your father up and ready.”

“No! You have to hang it up yourself. It’s good luck, really, I swear. I’ll go wake him up. That way he’ll be mad at me instead of you.”

“Okay,” Ellie laughed. “Jeez, I had no idea you were so superstitious.” But her laugh froze and then vanished when a soft giggle floated out from Dad’s bedroom. I tried to pretend I hadn’t heard it, but I had. My legs felt paralyzed and the sound of wailing sirens screamed in my ears until I couldn’t hear. Ellie narrowed her eyes and tilted her head to the side. She put her hand on the knob of the closed bedroom door and hesitated just long enough to give me a look I’ll never forget. With one hard push, she threw the double doors wide open.

Dad lay in bed, his naked back turned to us, his lower half covered with a sheet. Beside him wearing nothing but a skimpy towel lay Nicole–Nicole, leaning close to show him an elaborate *DANNY* tat inked across the curve of her hip. Dad’s right arm was stretched out in her direction like he was reaching for her.

Ellie glanced from me to Nicole and back again. She shook her head “no,” then turned and ran.

“Ellie! Ellie!” I chased after her yelling. “WAIT! It’s a mistake! A MISTAKE!”

She flew down the stairs and stopped at the front door. “Yeah, it’s a mistake alright, a mistake I let happen all over again. What was I thinking?” She was breathing hard and her face was pale. “Why don’t I ever learn?” Her voice shook and her eyes filled with tears. “Why?” She choked out a miserable laugh and wiped her eyes. “Can you believe I honestly–honestly thought it wouldn’t be that hard to make us into a family. Can you *believe* that?” She unhooked the locket from around her neck. “Kind of makes me a fool, doesn’t it?” She looked hard at the small silver oval in her palm and let it drop from her fingers to the marble floor. “Foolish enough to think you both might love me again.”

The locket popped wide open when it hit and I scrambled to pick it up. Inside was a tiny copy of *my* beloved black and white photo, the one I’d always believed was me *and my mother*. I was dizzy and speechless as the contents of my astonished brain spun round and round.

Ellie held on to the open door and looked back at me.

“I’m not your mother, Scarlet,” she said, touching my cheek. “I came close once, but that was a lifetime ago.” And with that, she sprinted to her car.

“No! Ellie,” I begged, “PLEASE WAIT!”

Upstairs, Dad wasn’t reaching for Nicole, in fact, he didn’t even know she was there. He’d been sleeping like a rock through the whole disaster, and Nicole, unable to wake him, positioned herself over his snoring body. Yet somehow my scream of, “PLEASE WAIT” jerked Dad straight out of his usual coma. He sat upright and rubbed his eyes hard, astonished at the sight of Nicole. Wearing only his shorts, he scrambled out of bed like the place was on fire and backed as far away from her as he could. “What? What the hell are you doing here? What’s going on? Where’s Ellie?” he stuttered.

I bolted back upstairs and tore into his room. “Daddy, I’m sorry. Daddy!” I wailed.

He blinked, squinted, tried to make sense of the crazy scene, and turned to me. “Scarlet, where’s Ellie?”

I could only sob.

“WHERE IS SHE?” he demanded.

“She’s gone, Daddy.”

He took off down the stairs, taking them three at a time, and I bolted after him, fearful of what he might do.

“Dad! WAIT! DAD! YOU’RE NOT WEARING SHOES!”

He rushed out the front door but not before grabbing the keys to the Bentley. Behind the wheel, he started the car, gunned the engine, and took off down driveway to the gate, me chasing him every step of the way.

“DAD! STOP! DAD, YOU CAN’T DRIVE!”

I ran as fast as I could and pulled myself into the passenger seat of the moving car while he slowed down enough to let the front gates open. Dad, who didn’t seem to know or care that I was there, barreled through the gates before they’d opened all the way, scraping the full length of the car. Just beyond the gates, he made a sharp turn and clipped the post that held the speaker box. I fastened my seatbelt as he angled onto the canyon road leaving only a cloud of grit and the shriek of wheels.

Then came a long, long, *long* silence.

Birds twittered.

More silence.

A dog barked somewhere.

Silence.

Then, screeching brakes.

A loud scream followed by the sickening crunch of metal.

Silence.

And finally, the long, slow saucer roll of a spinning hubcap ending in a circular, rhythmic clatter.

Silence.

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OVER, UNDER, SIDEWAYS, DOWN

Breathing hard on my laptop screen I swiped at a smudge with my sleeve. I put my nose right up to the glass and breathed again. Tiny pixels glowed back at me and my eyes focused and re-focused as the pixels became letters, and the letters became words. I sat back and arched my fingers over the keyboard. Aside from my breathing, the only sound in the room was the dull thud of my typing–fast at first, then slow, then fast again. I stopped, flexed my wrists and scrolled back for what seemed like an eternity to the very beginning of my story.

Over, Under, Sideways, Down

A recollection

By Scarlet Sunder

I read the first few lines aloud.

“If I could squander a do-over in my altogether short life, I’d start with a certain Paris afternoon on the last day of my fourteenth year. Sure, it might sound like the perfect backdrop for the start of a teen romance novel–rain swept streets, Ferris wheel, more than one really famous person–but it wasn’t. When I look back, whether I like it or not, this is exactly where it all began, and it went something like this–”

I sat back and closed my eyes and thought about me and that year and who I was and what I’d written about it all. I needed something more. My fingers settled on the keys, quickly moving words and thoughts around on the page until the passage had almost re-written itself.

“*When I look back*–the one thing I could stand to change would be me, me at the start of a ten-month ride on a roller coaster made of raging hormones, teenage angst and chronic loneliness. This killer blend, a far cry from anything served at Starbucks, coursed through my veins and straight to my brain at a pace that never let up, not even on a perfect winter day in Paris, or a perfect summer day in Malibu. I had planted a flag deep in the soil of the new land of ‘Miserable’ and I was taking no prisoners. When I look back, knowing what I know now, it’s easy to see that fifteen is where it all began, and like it or not, it went something like this–”

The door to my dorm room was half-open. An adorable guy in dorky glasses stuck his head in. “Red, we go to press in an hour.”

“I’m done,” I said. “Just tinkering.”

“With your book or your column?”

“I finished the column an hour ago. It’s the book I keep messing with.” I looked at Max’s handsome face. “Max, please pull me away before I overwrite.”

“You, overwrite? Never. You’re perfect.” Max came in and spun me around in my chair. When he bent down to kiss me, a little panel from my Tibetan necklace swung forward from a chain around his neck. When I saw it, I smiled like I always do, but that’s mostly my expression these days. A smile. A real one.

Max pulled a cleaning cloth from his pocket and wiped away the smudge on my laptop screen. “Chocolate?” he asked.

“Jam. Boysenberry.” He stroked my hair, pulled up a chair and read a copy of my latest column waiting for him in the printer. My specialty for now was the indie music scene, a world, for better or for worse that I was very, very familiar with.

While Max read, I looked around my room. There were shelves up above my desk. The top three were lined with my favorite books and movies. The bottom one was empty except for five framed photographs.

The first was me in a cap and gown, tassel and all, holding a diploma that nearly covered my face. And although you can only see half my expression, it’s obvious I’m grinning ear to ear.

The second is me in a ruby red sweater sitting in the driver’s seat of a ruby red sports car with a giant bow on the hood. I was posing, or trying to, heavy on the sunglasses and the pout, but again, I simply look happy.

The third is a candid shot, Max and I brainstorming at the editorial desk of our college newspaper. I appear to be saying something important while Max waves a pencil in the air like an orchestra conductor. Although I look serious, I was definitely smiling on the inside.

The fourth and largest photo is a professional one. In it, I’m grinning again, my arm in a rose-covered sling, me standing next to Dad in a top hat and full body cast. Beside me is Blanca, laughing and raising an index finger to Dad. Right next to him is Ellie, flowers in her hair, a ring on her finger, her smile about to burst as she clutches Dad’s one good hand in hers.

The last is one you’ve seen before–the black and white of me, little Scarlet Sunder, cradled by a woman I believed was my mother. That photo is in a new frame now, a better one. It’s silver and elegant and etched beautifully across the bottom is the word “Mom” for the woman who’s now exactly that.

I leaned against Max, who was still reading, while I watched the TV I often left on with the sound turned down. A commercial had ended and a show I sometimes watched was just beginning. Max looked down at the screen and chuckled when he saw the condo in the Hollywood Hills and the logo of the semi-reality show about a group of bored and overly tempestuous twenty-something’s that seemed to be airing morning, noon, and night.

“This column is wonderful,” he blinked and kissed my lips, “but more importantly, did Derrick cheat on Angela?” He rolled his eyes and tried not to smirk.

Her shoulders shaking like Jell-o in an earthquake, Nicole stumbled across the screen and flung herself on the sofa, her eyes pouring tears.

“You don’t have to tell me,” Max teased. “I just want to know why you watch this stuff?”

“Who knows,” I shrugged as Jake appeared at Nicole’s front door, banging and yelling and just as handsome as ever. “I guess,” I sighed, “I guess maybe some of the actors remind me of some slightly ridiculous characters I used to know.”

Max stood and pulled me to my feet. “You want characters, babe? Ridiculous characters? I’ll show you some.” He helped me on with my coat. “There’s a whole crew of them down at the paper, and if we hurry, we might just score the last of the pizza.”

“Well, what are we waiting for?” I pecked him on the cheek and switched off the TV. Max walked out of my dorm room and bumped into a friend in the hallway. I was about to close my laptop, but instead scrolled to the last few lines I’d written and read them out loud.

“Movies, old ones, new ones, I can’t live without them. But life, your life and mine, that’s where all the real action happens; loss and love, hope and despair, tragedy and triumph and occasionally, if the timing is right, and those old Technicolor gods smile down on you, you end up with a wonderful co-star and a genuinely happy ending, long before the final credits roll and the screen goes black.”

“Red, who’re you talking to?” Max called out from the hallway.

I smiled to myself. Dad was happy for the first time in years because those Hollywood gods let him find love before it was too late. And me? Not only did I find love, I found myself. Yeah, it sounds corny, that old cliché you’ve heard a million times, but it’s true. I found focus and purpose and self-respect. It wasn’t as quick and easy as it looks in the movies, no editing and smash cuts to better times. I struggled and fell more than I care to admit, but hey, but I got up. Ellie taught me how to do that. She showed me how to stand on my own two feet, how to try again, how to embrace change and experience, good, bad, or otherwise, with grace and style and always humor. But that’s my mom for you.

I grabbed my laptop and walked to the door and as I shut it, the poster that hung behind it rustled.

It’s vintage, maybe thirty years old. The corner is torn and the colors are faded, but it’s the Void from their wild 80’s heyday, the one and only Danny Sunder front and center, catapulting three feet off the ground in a leap that’s purely rock and roll splendor.

Below that, tacked to a bulletin board is a *People* magazine cover from a few years back. In the picture, Dad holds Ellie tight, their smiling faces cheek to cheek, their arms outstretched to the camera. The banner reads: *They’re at it again*–*the writing team of Sunder and Hughes!*

And if you look closely, written within the tattooed note pad on the inside of Dad’s forearm are the words–

*ELEANOR AND STANLEY FOREVER*