

**this  
lullaby**

a novel by  
**S A R A H D E S S E N**



**VIKING**



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**SARAH DESSEN**



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NOVELS BY SARAH DESSEN

*That Summer*  
*Someone Like You*  
*Keeping the Moon*  
*Dreamland*  
*This Lullaby*

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lullaby**

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**SARAH DESSEN**



**VIKING**



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In the depth of winter,  
I finally learned that  
within me there lay  
an invincible summer.  
—Camus

She'll be back soon.  
She's just writing.  
—Caroline

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June



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# Chapter One



The name of the song is “This Lullaby.” At this point, I’ve probably heard it, oh, about a million times. Approximately.

All my life I’ve been told about how my father wrote it the day I was born. He was on the road somewhere in Texas, already split from my mom. The story goes that he got word of my birth, sat down with his guitar, and just came up with it, right there in a room at a Motel 6. An hour of his time, just a few chords, two verses and a chorus. He’d been writing music all his life, but in the end it would be the only song he was known for. Even in death, my father was a one-hit wonder. Or two, I guess, you count me.

Now, the song was playing overhead as I sat in a plastic chair at the car dealership, in the first week of June. It was warm, everything was blooming, and summer was practically here. Which meant, of course, that it was time for my mother to get married again.

This was her fourth time, fifth if you include my father. I chose not to. But they were, in her eyes, married—if being united in the middle of the desert by someone they’d met at a rest stop on a highway for a few moments before counts as married. It does to my mother. But then, she takes on husbands the way other people change their hair color: out of boredom, listlessness, or just feeling that this next one will fix everything, once and for all. Back when I was younger, when I asked about my dad and how they met, when I was actually still curious, she’d just sigh, waving her hand, and say, “Oh, Remy, it was the seventies. You know.”

My mother always thinks I know everything. But she’s wrong. All I knew about the seventies was what I’d learned in school and from the History Channel: Vietnam, President Carter, disco. And all I knew about my father, really, was “This Lullaby.” Through my life I’d heard it in the backgrounds of commercials and movies, at weddings, dedicated long-distance on radio countdowns. My father may be gone, but the song—schmaltzy, stupid, insipid—goes on. Eventually it will even outlive me.

It was in the middle of the second chorus that Don Davis of Don Davis Motors stuck his head out from his office and saw me. “Remy, honey, sorry you had to wait. Come on in.”

I got up and followed him. In eight days, Don would become my stepfather, joining a not-so-exclusive group. He was the first car salesman, the second Gemini, the only one with money of his own. He and my mother met right there in his office, when we came in to buy her a new Camry. I came along because I know my mother: she’d pay the list price right off the bat, assuming it was so simple like she was buying oranges or toilet paper at the grocery store, and of course they’d let her, because my mother is somewhat well known and everyone thinks she is rich.

Our first salesman looked right out of college and almost collapsed when my mother waltzed up in a fully loaded new-year model, then poked her head inside to get a whiff of that new-car smell. She took a deep gulp, smiled, and announced, “I’ll take it!” with characteristic flourish.

“Mom,” I said, trying not to grit my teeth. But she knew better. The entire ride over I’d been

prepping her, with specific instructions on what to say, how to act, everything we needed to do to get a good deal. She kept telling me she was listening, even as she kept fiddling with the air-conditioning vents and playing with my automatic windows. I swear that was what had really led to this new-car fever: the fact that I had just gotten one.

So after she'd blown it, it was up to me to take over. I started asking the salesman direct questions which made him nervous. He kept glancing past me, at her, as if I was some kind of trained attack dog she could easily put into a sit. I'm used to this. But just as he really started to squirm we were interrupted by Don Davis himself, who made quick work of sweeping us into his office and falling hard for my mother in a matter of about fifteen minutes. They sat there making googly eyes at each other while I haggled him down three thousand bucks and got him to throw in a maintenance plan, a sealant coat, and a changer for the CD player. It had to be the best bargain in Toyota history, not that anyone noticed. It is just expected that I will handle it, whatever it is, because I am my mother's business manager, therapist, handyman, and now, wedding coordinator. Lucky, lucky, me.

"So, Remy," Don said as we sat down, him in the big swiveling leather throne behind the desk, me in the just-uncomfortable-enough-to-hurry-the-sale chair opposite. Everything at the dealership was manufactured to brainwash customers. Like memos to salesmen encouraging great deals just casually "strewn" where you could read them, and the way the offices were set up so you could easily "overhear" your salesman pleading for a good deal with his manager. Plus the fact that the window was now facing opened up to the part of the lot where people picked up their brand-new cars. Every few minutes, one of the salesmen would walk someone right to the center of the window, hand them their shiny new keys, and then smile benevolently as they drove off into the sunset, just like in the commercials. What a bunch of shit.

Now, Don shifted in his seat, adjusting his tie. He was a portly guy, with an ample stomach and a bald spot: the word *doughy* came to mind. But he adored my mother, God help him. "What do you need from me today?"

"Okay," I said, reaching into my back pocket for the list I'd brought. "I double-checked with the caterer and they're expecting you this week for the final fitting. The rehearsal dinner list is pretty much set at seventy-five, and the caterer will need a check for the rest of the deposit by Monday."

"Fine." He opened a drawer and pulled out the leather binder where he kept his checkbook, then reached into his jacket pocket for a pen. "How much for the caterer?"

I glanced down at my paper, swallowed, and said, "Five thousand."

He nodded and started writing. To Don, five thousand bucks was hardly any money at all. The wedding itself was setting him back a good twenty, and that didn't seem to faze him either. Add to that the renovation that had been done on our house so we could all live together like one happy family, the debt Don was forgiving on my brother's truck, and just the day-to-day maintenance of living with my mother, and he was making quite an investment. But then again, this was his first wedding, first marriage. He was a rookie. My family, however, had long been of pro status.

He ripped out the check, slid it across the desk, and smiled. "What else?" he asked me.

I consulted my list again. "Okay, just the band, I think. The people at the reception hall were asking \_\_\_"

"It's under control," he said, waving his hand. "They'll be there. Tell your mother not to worry."

I smiled at this, because he expected me to, but we both knew she wasn't worrying at all about the wedding. She'd picked out her dress, decided on flowers, and then pushed the rest off on me, claiming she needed absolutely every free second to work on her latest book. But the truth was, my mother hated details. She loved to plunge into projects, tackle them for about ten minutes, and then lo

interest. All around our house were little piles of things that had once held her attention: aromatherapy kits, family tree software, stacks of Japanese cookbooks, an aquarium with four sides covered in algae and one sole survivor, a fat white fish who had eaten all the others.

Most people put off my mother's erratic behavior to the fact that she was a writer, as if that explained everything. To me that was just an excuse. I mean, brain surgeons can be crazy too, but no one says it's all right. Fortunately for my mother, I am alone in this opinion.

“. . . is so soon!” Don said, tapping his finger on the calendar. “Can you believe it?”

“No,” I said, wondering what the first part of his sentence had been. I added, “It's just amazing.”

He smiled at me, then glanced back down at the calendar, where I now saw the wedding day, June 10, was circled several times in different colors of pen. I guess you couldn't blame him for being excited. Before he met my mother, Don was at the age where most of his friends had given up on him ever getting married. For the last fifteen years he'd lived alone in a condo right off the highway, spending most of his waking hours selling more Toyotas than anyone else in the state. Now, in nine days, he would get not only Barbara Starr, romance novelist extraordinaire, but also, in a package deal, my brother Chris and me. And he was happy about it. It was amazing.

Just then the intercom on his desk buzzed, loudly, and a woman's voice came on. “Don, Jason has an eight fifty-seven on deck, needs your input. Should I send them in?”

Don glanced at me, then pushed down the button and said, “Sure. Give me five seconds.”

“Eight fifty-seven?” I asked.

“Just dealership lingo,” he said easily, standing up. He smoothed down his hair, covering the small bald spot I only noticed when he was seated. Behind him, on the other side of the window, a ruddy-faced salesman was handing a woman with a toddler the keys to her new car: she took them as the keys tugged on her skirt, trying to get her attention. She didn't seem to notice. “Hate to push you out, but \_\_\_”

“I'm done,” I told him, tucking the list back in my pocket.

“I really appreciate all you're doing for us, Remy,” he said as he came around the desk. He put one hand on my shoulder, Dad-style, and I tried not to remember all the stepfathers before him that had done the same thing, that same weight, carrying the same meaning. They all thought they were permanent too.

“No problem,” I said as he moved his hand and opened the door for me. Waiting for us out in the hallway was a salesman, standing with what had to be that eight fifty-seven—code for an on-the-fence customer, I assumed—a short woman who was clutching her handbag and wearing a sweatshirt with an appliquéd kitten on it.

“Don,” the salesman said smoothly, “this is Ruth, and we're trying our hardest to get her into a new Corolla today.”

Ruth looked nervously from Don to me, then back to Don. “I just—” she sputtered.

“Ruth, Ruth,” Don said soothingly. “Let's just all sit down for a minute and talk about what we can do for you. Okay?”

“That's right,” the salesman echoed, gently prodding her forward. “We'll just talk.”

“Okay,” Ruth said, somewhat uncertainly, and started into Don's office. As she passed she glanced at me, as if I were part of this, and it was all I could do not to tell her to run, fast, and not look back.

“Remy,” Don said, quietly, as if he'd noticed this, “I'll see you later, okay?”

“Okay,” I told them, then watched as Ruth made her way inside. The salesman steered her to the uncomfortable chair, facing the window. Now, an Asian couple was climbing into their new truck. Both of them were smiling as they adjusted the seats, admired the interior: the woman flipped down

the visor, checking her reflection in the mirror there. They were both breathing deep, taking in the new-car smell, as the husband stuck the key in the ignition. Then they drove off, waving to the salesman as they went. Cue that sunset.

“Now Ruth,” Don said, settling into his chair. The door was closing on them, and I could barely see his face now. “What can I do to make you happy?”

I was halfway across the showroom when I remembered that my mother had asked me to please remind Don about cocktails tonight. Her new editor was in town for the evening, ostensibly just passing through from Atlanta and wanting to stop in and be social. Her true motivation, however, was that my mother owed her publisher a novel, and everyone was starting to get a little antsy about it.

I turned around and walked back down the hallway to Don’s office. The door was still closed, and I could hear voices murmuring behind it.

The clock on the opposite wall was the school kind, with big black numbers and a wobbly second hand. It was already one-fifteen. The day after my high school graduation and here I was, not beat bound or sleeping off a hangover like everyone else. I was running wedding errands, like a part-time employee, while my mother lay in her king-size Sealy Posturepedic, with the shades drawn tight, getting the sleep she claimed was crucial to her creative process.

And that was all it took to feel it. That slow, simmering burn in my stomach that I always felt when I let myself see how far the scale had tipped in her favor. It was either resentment or what was left of my ulcer, or maybe both. The Muzak overhead was growing louder, as if someone was fiddling with the volume, so that now I was getting blasted with a rendition of some Barbra Streisand song. I crossed one leg over the other and closed my eyes, pressing my fingers into the arms of my chair. Just a few weeks of this, I told myself, and I’m gone.

Just then, someone plopped down hard into the chair on my left, knocking me sideways into the wall; it was jarring, and I hit my elbow on the molding there, right in the funny bone, which sent a tingling zap all the way up to my fingers. And suddenly, just like that, I was pissed. *Really* pissed. It’s amazing how all it takes is one shove to make you furious.

“What the *hell*,” I said, pushing off the wall, ready to take off the head of whatever stupid salesperson had decided to get cozy with me. My elbow was still buzzing, and I could feel a hot flush creeping up my neck: bad signs. I knew my temper.

I turned my head and saw it wasn’t a salesman at all. It was a guy with black curly hair, around middle age, wearing a bright orange T-shirt. And for some reason he was *smiling*.

“Hey there,” he said cheerfully. “How’s it going?”

“What is your problem?” I snapped, rubbing my elbow.

“Problem?”

“You just slammed me into the wall, asshole.”

He blinked. “Goodness,” he said finally. “Such *language*.”

I just looked at him. Wrong day, buddy, I thought. You caught me on the wrong day.

“The thing is,” he said, as if we’d been discussing the weather or world politics, “I saw you out the showroom. I was over by the tire display?”

I was sure I was glaring at him. But he kept talking.

“I just thought to myself, all of a sudden, that we had something in common. A natural chemistry, you will. And I had a feeling that something big was going to happen. To both of us. That we were, I

fact, meant to be together.”

“You got all this,” I said, clarifying, “at the tire display?”

“You didn’t feel it?” he asked.

“No. I did, however, feel you slamming me into the wall,” I said evenly.

“That,” he said, lowering his voice and leaning closer to me, “was an accident. An oversight. Just a unfortunate result of the enthusiasm I felt knowing I was about to talk to you.”

I just looked at him. Overhead, the Muzak was now playing a spirited version of the Don Dav Motors theme song, all plinking and plunking.

“Go away,” I told him.

He smiled again, running a hand through his hair. The Muzak was now building to a crescendo over us, the speaker popping, as if close to short-circuiting. We both glanced up, then at each other.

“You know what?” he said, pointing up at the speaker, which popped again, louder this time, then hissed before resuming the theme song at full blast. “From now on, forever”—he pointed up again jabbing with his finger—“*this* will be our song.”

“Oh, Jesus,” I said, and right then I was saved, hallelujah, as Don’s office door swung open and Ruth, led by her salesman, came out. She was holding a sheaf of papers and wore that stunned recently-depleted-of-thousands look on her tired face. But she did have the complimentary fake-gold plated key chain, all hers.

I stood up, and the guy beside me leapt to his feet. “Wait, I only want—”

“Don?” I called out, ignoring him.

“Just take this,” the guy said, grabbing my hand. He turned it palm up before I could even react, and pulled a pen out of his back pocket, then proceeded—I am not joking—to write a name and phone number in the space between my thumb and forefinger.

“You are insane,” I said, jerking my hand back, which caused the last digits to get smeared and knocked the pen out of his hand. It clattered to the floor, rolling under a nearby gumball machine.

“Yo, Romeo!” someone yelled from the showroom, and there was a burst of laughter. “Come on man, let’s go!”

I looked up at him, still incredulous. Talk about not respecting a person’s boundaries. I’d dumped drinks on guys for even brushing against me at a club, much less yanking my hand and actual *writing* on it.

He glanced behind him, then back at me. “I’ll see you soon,” he said, and grinned at me.

“Like hell,” I replied, but then he was already going, dodging the truck and minivan in the showroom and out the front glass door, where a beat-up white van was idling by the curb. The back door flung open and he moved to climb in, but then the van jerked forward, making him stumble before stopping again. He sighed, put his hands on his hips, and looked up at the sky, then grabbed the door handle again and started to pull himself up just as it moved again, this time accompanied by someone beeping the horn. This sequence repeated itself all the way across the parking lot, the salesman in the showroom chuckling, before someone stuck a hand out the back door, offering him a hand, which he ignored. The fingers on the hand wagged, a little at first, then wildly, and finally he reached up and grabbed hold, hoisting himself in. Then the door slammed, the horn beeped again, and the van chugged out of the lot, bumping its muffler on the way out.

I looked down at my hand, where in black ink was scrawled 933-54something something, with one word beneath it. God, his handwriting was sloppy. A big D, a smear on the last letter. And what a stupid name. Dexter.

---

When I got home, the first thing I noticed was the music. Classical, soaring, filling the house with wailing oboes and flowing violins. Then, the smell of candles, vanilla, just tangy sweet enough to make you wince. And finally, the dead giveaway, a trail of crumpled papers strewn like bread crumbs from the foyer, through the kitchen, and leading to the sunporch.

Thank God, I thought. She's writing again.

I dropped my keys on the table by the door and bent down, picking up one balled-up piece of paper by my feet, then un-crumpled it as I walked toward the kitchen. My mother was very superstitious about her work, and only wrote on the beat-up old typewriter she'd once dragged around the country when she did freelance music articles for a newspaper in San Francisco. It was loud, had a clanging bell that sounded whenever she reached the end of a line, and looked like some remnant from the days of the Pony Express. She had a brand-new top-of-the-line computer too, but she only used that to play solitaire.

The page in my hand had a 1 in the upper right-hand corner, and started with my mother's typical gusto.

*Melanie had always been the type of woman who loved a challenge. In her career, her loves, her spirit, she lived to find herself up against something that fought her back, tested her resolve, made the winning worthwhile. As she walked into the Plaza Hotel on a cold November day, she pulled the scarf from her hair and shook off the rain. Meeting Brock Dobbin hadn't been in her plans. She hadn't seen him since Prague, when they'd left things as bad as they'd started them. But now, a year later, with her wedding so close, he was back in the city. And she was here to meet him. This time, she would win. She was*

She was . . . what? There was only a smear of ink after the last word, trailing all the way down the page, from where it had been ripped from the machine.

I continued picking up discarded papers as I walked, balling them into my hand. They didn't vary much. In one, the setting was in L.A., not New York, and in another Brock Dobbin became Doc Brobbin, only to be switched back again. Small details, but it always took a little while for my mother to hit her stride. Once she did, though, watch out. She'd finished her last book in three and a half weeks, and it was big enough to function effectively as a doorstop.

The music, and the clanging of the typewriter, both got louder as I walked into the kitchen, where my brother, Chris, was ironing a shirt on the kitchen table, the salt and pepper shakers and napkin holder all pushed to one side.

"Hey," he said, brushing his hair out of his face. The iron hissed as he picked it up, then smoothed over the edge of the collar of the shirt, pressing down hard.

"How long's she been at it?" I asked, pulling the trash can out from under the sink and dumping the papers into it.

He shrugged, letting some steam hiss out and stretching his fingers. "A couple of hours now, I guess."

I glanced past him, through the dining room to the sunporch, where I could see my mother hunched over the typewriter, a candle beside her, pounding away. It was always weird to watch her. She really slammed the keys, throwing her whole body into it, as if she couldn't get the words out fast enough. She'd keep it up for hours at a time, finally emerging with her fingers cramped, back aching, and

good fifty pages, which would probably be enough to keep her editor in New York satisfied for the time being.

I sat down at the table and flipped through a stack of mail by the fruit bowl as Chris turned the shirt over, nudging the iron slowly around one cuff. He was a really slow ironer, to the point that more than once I'd just jerked it away, unable to stand how long it took him to do just the collar. The only thing I can't stand more than seeing something done wrong is seeing it done *slowly*.

"Big night tonight?" I asked him. He was leaning close to the shirt now, really focusing on the front pocket.

"Jennifer Anne's having a dinner party," he said. "It's smart casual."

"Smart casual?"

"It means," he said slowly, still concentrating, "no jeans, but not quite a sport jacket event either. Ties optional. That kind of thing."

I rolled my eyes. Six months ago, my brother wouldn't have been able to define *smart* much less *casual*. Ten months earlier, on his twenty-first birthday, Chris had gotten busted at a party selling pot. It wasn't his first brush with the law, by any means: during high school he'd racked up a few break-ins and enterings (plea-bargained), one DWI (dismissed), and one possession of a controlled substance (community service and a big fine, but just by the skin of his teeth). But the party bust did him in, and he did jail time. Only three months, but it scared him enough to shape up and get a job at the local Jiffy Lube, where he'd met Jennifer Anne when she'd brought her Saturn in for a thirty-thousand-mile checkup.

Jennifer Anne was what my mother called "a piece of work," which meant she wasn't scared of either of us and didn't care if we knew it. She was a small girl with big blond hair, whip smart—though we hated to admit it—and had done more with my brother in six months than we'd ever managed in twenty-one years. She had him dressing better, working harder, and using proper grammar, including wacky new terms like "networking" and "multitasking" and "smart casual." She worked as a receptionist for a conglomerate of doctors, but referred to herself as an "office specialist." Jennifer Anne could make anything sound better than it was. I'd recently overheard her describing Chris's job as a "multilevel automotive lubrication expert," which made working at Jiffy Lube sound on a par with heading up NASA.

Now Chris lifted the shirt off the table and held it up, shaking it slightly as the typewriter beeper clanged again from the other room. "What do you think?"

"Looks okay," I said. "You missed a big crease on the right sleeve, though."

He glanced down at it, then sighed. "This is so freaking hard," he said, putting it back on the table. "I don't see why people bother."

"I don't see why *you* bother," I said. "Since when do you need to be wrinkle free, anyway? You used to consider wearing pants dressing up."

"Cute," he said, making a face at me. "You wouldn't understand, anyway."

"Yeah, right. Excuse me, Eggbert, I keep forgetting you're the smart one."

He straightened the shirt, not looking at me. "What I mean," he said slowly, "is that you'd just have to know what it's like to want to do something nice for somebody else. Out of consideration. Out of *love*."

"Oh, Jesus," I said.

"Exactly." He picked up the shirt again. The wrinkle was still there, not that I was going to point it out now. "That's exactly what I'm talking about. Compassion. Relationships. Two things you are sadly, and sorely, lacking."

“I am the queen of relationships,” I said indignantly. “And hello, I just spent the entire morning planning our mother’s wedding. That is so freaking compassionate of me.”

“You,” he said, folding the shirt neatly over one arm, waiter-style, “have yet to experience any kind of serious commitment—”

“What?”

“—and you have bitched and moaned so much about the wedding I’d hardly call that compassionate.”

I just stood there, staring at him. There was no reasoning with him lately. It was like he’d been brainwashed by some religious cult. “Who are you?” I asked him.

“All I’m saying,” he replied, quietly, “is that I’m really happy. And I wish you could be happy too. Like this.”

“I am happy,” I snapped, and I meant it, although it sounded bitter just because I was so pissed off. “I am,” I repeated, in a more level voice.

He reached over and patted my shoulder, as if he knew better. “I’ll see you later,” he said, turning and heading up the kitchen stairs to his room. I watched him go, carrying his still-wrinkled shirt, and realized I was clenching my teeth, something I found myself doing too often lately.

*Bing!* went the typewriter bell from the other room, and my mother started another line. Melan and Brock Dobbin were probably halfway to heartbreak already, by the sound of it. My mother’s novels were the gasping romantic type, spreading across several exotic locales and peopled with characters that had everything and yet nothing. Riches yet poverty of the heart. And so on.

I walked over to the entrance of the sunroom, careful to be quiet, and looked in at her. When she wrote she seemed to be in another world, oblivious of us: even when we were little and screaming and squawking, she’d just lift her hand from where she was sitting, her back to us, the keys still clacking, and say, “Shhhhhhh.” As if that was enough to shut us up, making us see into whatever world she was in at that moment, at the Plaza Hotel or some beach in Capri, where an exquisitely dressed woman was pining for a man she was sure she had lost forever.

When Chris and I were in elementary school, my mom was pretty broke. She hadn’t published anything yet except newspaper stuff, and even that had petered out once the bands she was writing about—like my dad’s, all 1970s stuff, what they call “classic rock” now—began to die out or drop off the radio. She got a job teaching writing at the local community college, which paid practically nothing, and we lived in a series of nasty apartment complexes, all with names like Ridgewood Pines and Lakeview Forest, which had no lakes or pines or forests anywhere to be seen. Back then, she wrote at the kitchen table, usually during the evenings or late at night, and some afternoons. Even then, her stories were exotic; she always picked up the free brochures from the local travel agency and fished *Gourmet* magazine out of the stacks at the recycling center to use as research. While my brother was named after my mother’s favorite saint, my name was inspired by an expensive brand of cognac she’d seen advertised in *Harper’s Bazaar*. Never mind that we were living on Kraft macaroni and cheese while her characters favored Cristal and caviar, lounging in Dior pantsuits while we shopped at the thrift store. She always loved glamour, my mother, even if she’d never seen it up close.

Chris and I constantly interrupted her while she was working, which drove her crazy. Finally, at a flea market, she found one of those gypsy curtains, the kind that are made up of long strings of beads and attached it above the entryway to the kitchen. It became our understood symbol: if the curtain was pulled aside, out of the way, the kitchen was fair game. But if it was hanging there, my mother was working, and we had to find our snacks and entertainment elsewhere.

I was about six then, and I loved to stand there and brush my fingertips over the beads, watching

them swish back and forth. They made the softest sound, like little bells. I could peer through the curtain and still see my mother, but now she looked almost exotic, like a fortune-teller or a fairy, a maker of magic. Which was what she was, but I didn't know it then.

Most of the remnants of our apartment years had been long lost or given away, but the beaded curtain had made the trip to the Big New House, as we'd called it when we moved in. It was one of the first things my mother hung up, before even our school pictures or her favorite Picasso print in the living room. There was a nail so it could be pulled back out of sight, but now it was down, a little worse for wear, but still doing the job. I leaned closer, peering in at my mother. She was still hard at work, fingers flying, and I closed my eyes and listened. It was like music I'd heard all my life, even more than "This Lullaby." All those keystrokes, all those letters, so many words. I brushed my fingers over the beads and watched as her image rippled, like it was on water, breaking apart gently and shimmering before becoming whole again.

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## Chapter Two



It was time to dump Jonathan.

“Tell me again why you’re doing this?” Lissa asked me. She was sitting on my bed, flipping through my CDs and smoking a cigarette, which was fast stinking up my room even though she’d sworn it wouldn’t, since she had it halfway out the window. Even before I quit I’d hated the stink of smoking, but with Lissa I always let things slide more than I should have. I think everyone has at least one friend like that. “I mean, I like Jonathan.”

“You like everybody,” I told her, leaning closer to the mirror and examining my lip liner.

“That’s not true,” she said, picking up a CD and turning it over to examine the back. “I never liked Mr. Mitchell. He always looked at my boobs when I went up to do theorems on the board. He looked at *everybody’s* boobs.”

“Lissa,” I said, “high school is over. And besides, teachers don’t count.”

“I’m just saying,” she said.

“The thing is,” I went on as I lined my lips, turning the pencil slowly, “that it’s summer now, and I’m leaving for school in September. And Jonathan . . . I don’t know. He’s just not a keeper. He’s not worth working my schedule around if we’re only going to break up in a few weeks anyway.”

“But you might not break up.”

I leaned back, admiring my handiwork, and smudged a bit along my top lip, evening it out. “We’re breaking up,” I said. “I’m not going to Stanford with any other entanglements than absolutely necessary.”

She bit her lip, then tucked a springy curl behind one ear, ducking her head with the hurt expression she always got lately when we talked about the end of the summer. Lissa’s safe zone was the eight weeks left before we all split for different directions, and she hated to think past that. “Well, of course not,” she said quietly. “I mean, why would you?”

“Lissa,” I said, sighing. “I didn’t mean you. You know that. I just mean”—I gestured to the bedroom door, slightly ajar, beyond which we could hear my mother’s typewriter still clacking, with violins drifting in the background—“you know.”

She nodded. But in truth I knew she didn’t understand. Lissa was the only one of us who was even slightly sentimental about high school being over. She’d actually cried at graduation, great heaving sobs, ensuring that in every picture and video she’d be red-eyed and blotchy, giving her something to complain about for the next twenty years. Meanwhile, me, Jess, and Chloe couldn’t wait to get across that stage and grab our diploma, to be free at last, free at last. But Lissa had always felt things too deeply. That was what made us all so protective of her, and why I worried most about leaving her behind. She’d gotten accepted into the local university with a full scholarship, a deal too good to pass up. It helped that her boyfriend, Adam, was going there too. Lissa had it all planned out, how they’d go to freshman orientation together, live in dorms that were in close proximity, share a couple of classes. Just like high school, but bigger.

The very thought of it made me itch. But then, I wasn’t Lissa. I’d powered through the last two

years with my eyes on one thing, which was getting out. Getting gone. Making the grades I needed finally live a life that was all my own. No wedding planning. No messy romantic entanglements. No revolving door of stepfathers. Just me and the future, finally together. Now there was a happy ending I could believe in.

Lissa reached over and turned up the radio, filling the room with some boppy song with a la-la-chorus. I walked over to my closet, pulling open the door to examine my options.

“So what do you wear to dump somebody?” she asked me, twirling a lock of hair around one finger. “Black, for mourning? Or something cheerful and colorful, to distract them from their pain? Or maybe you wear some sort of camouflage, something that will help you disappear quickly in case they don’t take it well.”

“Personally,” I told her, pulling out a pair of black pants and turning them in my hands, “I’m thinking dark and slimming, a bit of cleavage. And clean underwear.”

“You wear that every night.”

“This is every night,” I replied. I knew I had a clean red shirt I liked somewhere in my closet, but I couldn’t find it in the shirt section. Which meant somebody had been in there, picking around. I kept my closet the way I kept everything: neat and tidy. My mother’s house was usually in chaos, so my room had always been the only place I could keep the way I chose. Which was in order, perfectly organized, everything where I could easily find it. Okay, so maybe I was a little obsessive. But so what? At least I wasn’t a slob.

“Not for Jonathan,” she said, and when I glanced at her she added, “I mean, this is a big night for him. He’s getting dumped. And he doesn’t even *know* it yet. He’s probably eating a cheese-burger or flossing or picking up his dry cleaning, and he has no idea. No inkling.”

I gave up on the red shirt, pulling out a tank top instead. I didn’t even know what to say to her. Yeah, it sucked getting dumped. But wasn’t it better to just be brutally honest? To admit that your feeling for someone is never going to be powerful enough to justify taking up any more of their time? I was doing him a favor, really. Freeing him up for a better opportunity. In fact, I was practically a saint, if you really thought about it.

Exactly.

A half hour later, when we pulled up to the Quik Zip, Jess was waiting for us. As usual, Chloe was late.

“Hey,” I said, walking over to her. She was leaning against her big tank of a car, an old Chevy with a sagging bumper, and sucking on an Extra Large Zip Coke, our drug of choice. They were the best bargain in town, at \$1.59, and served a multitude of uses.

“I’m getting Skittles,” Lissa called out, slamming her door. “Anybody want anything?”

“Zip Diet,” I told her, and reached for my money, but she shook me off, already heading inside. “Extra large!”

She nodded as the door swung shut behind her. She even walked perkily, hands jauntily in her pockets as she headed for the candy aisle. Lissa’s sweet tooth was infamous: she was the only person I knew who could discern between Raisinets and chocolate-covered raisins. There *was* a difference.

“Where’s Chloe?” I asked Jess, but she just shrugged, not even taking her lips off the straw of her Zip Coke. “Did we not say seven-thirty sharp?”

She raised an eyebrow at me. “Calm down, anal retentive,” she said, shaking her drink. The ice rattled around, sloshing in what was left of the liquid. “It’s just six right now.”

I sighed, leaning back against her car. I hated when people were late. But Chloe always ran five minutes behind, on a *good* day. Lissa was usually early, and Jess was Jess: solid as a rock, there right

on the dot. She'd been my best friend since the fifth grade, and was the only one I knew I could always depend on.

We'd met because our desks sat side by side, per Mrs. Douglas's alphabet system. Mike Scheme was the nose picker, then Jess, then me, with Adam Struck, who had bad adenoids, on my other side. It was practically required that we be best friends, seeing as we were surrounded by the booger twins.

Jess was big, even then. She wasn't fat, exactly, just like she wasn't fat now. More just large, big boned, tall and wide. Thick. Back then, she was larger than any of the boys in our class, brutal at dodgeball, able to hit you hard enough with one of those red medicine balls before school that it left a mark that lasted through final bell. A lot of people thought Jess was mean, but they were wrong. They didn't know what I knew: that her mom had died that summer, leaving her to raise two little brothers while her dad worked full-time at the power plant. That money was always tight, and Jess didn't get to be a kid anymore.

And eight years later, after making it through some hellish middle school and decent high school, years, we were still close. Mostly because I did know these things about her, and Jess still kept most of her stuff to herself. But also because she was one of the only people who just didn't take my shit, and I had to respect that.

"Looky look," she said now in her flat voice, crossing her arms over her chest. "The queen has arrived."

Chloe pulled up beside us, cutting the engine on her Mercedes and flipping down the visor to check her lipstick. Jess sighed, loudly, but I ignored her. This was old news, her and Chloe, like background music. Only if things were really quiet or dull did the rest of us even notice it anymore.

Chloe got out, slamming her door, and came over to us. She looked great, as usual: black pants, blue shirt, cool jacket I hadn't seen before. Her mom was a flight attendant and a compulsive shopper, a deadly combination that resulted in Chloe always having the newest stuff from the best places. Or, at least, a little trendsetter.

"Hey," she said, tucking her hair behind her ear. "Where's Lissa?"

I nodded toward the Quik Zip, where Lissa was now at the counter, chatting up the guy behind the counter as he rang up her candy. We watched as she waved good-bye to him and came out, a bag of Skittles already opened in one hand. "Who wants one?" she called out, smiling as she saw Chloe. "Hey! God, great jacket."

"Thanks," Chloe said, brushing her fingers over it. "It's new."

"Is that surprising?" Jess said sarcastically.

"Is that diet?" Chloe shot back, eyeing the drink in Jess's hand.

"All right, all right," I said, waving my hand between them. Lissa handed me my Zip Diet, and I took a big sip, savoring the taste. It was the nectar of the gods. Truly. "What's the plan?"

"I have to meet Adam at Double Burger at six-thirty," Lissa said, popping another Skittle into her mouth. "Then we'll catch up with you guys at Bendo or whatever."

"Who's at Bendo?" Chloe asked, jangling her keys.

"Don't know," Lissa said. "Some band. There's also a party we can go to in the Arbors, Matthew Ridgefield has a keg somewhere and, oh, and Remy has to dump Jonathan."

Now, everyone looked at me. "Not necessarily in that order," I added.

"So Jonathan's out." Chloe laughed, pulling a pack of cigarettes out of her jacket pocket. She held them out to me, and I shook my head.

"She quit," Jess said to her. "Remember?"

"She's always quitting," Chloe replied, striking a match and leaning into it, then shaking it out.

“What’d he do, Remy? Stand you up? Declare undying love?”

I just shook my head, knowing what was coming.

Jess grinned and said, “He wore a nonmatching outfit.”

“Smoked in her car,” Chloe said. “That’s got to be it.”

“Maybe,” Lissa offered, pinching my arm, “he made a major grammatical error and was fifteen minutes late.”

“Oh, the horror!” Chloe shrieked, and all three of them burst out laughing. I just stood there, taking it, realizing not for the first time that they only seemed to get along when ragging on me as a group.

“Funny,” I said finally. Okay, so maybe I did have a bit of history with expecting too much from relationships. But God, at least I had *standards*. Chloe only dated college guys who cheated on her. Jess avoided the issue by never dating anyone, and Lissa—well, Lissa was still with the guy she loaned her virginity to, so she hardly counted at all. Not that I was going to point this out. I mean, I was a little off about the high road.

“Okay, okay,” Jess said finally. “How are we doing this?”

“Lissa goes to meet Adam,” I said. “You, me, and Chloe hit the Spot and then go on to Bend. Okay?”

“Okay,” Lissa said. “I’ll see you guys later.” As she drove off, and Chloe moved her car to the church parking lot next door, Jess lifted up my hand, squinting at it.

“What’s this?” she asked me. I glanced down, seeing the black letters, smudged but still there, on my palm. Before leaving the house I’d meant to wash it off, then got distracted. “A phone number?”

“It’s nothing,” I said. “Just this stupid guy I met today.”

“You heartbreaker,” she said.

We piled into Jess’s car, me in front, Chloe in back. She made a face as she pushed aside a laundry hamper full of clothes, a football helmet, and some knee pads of Jess’s brothers, but she didn’t say anything. Chloe and Jess may have had their differences, but she knew where to draw the line.

“The Spot?” Jess asked me as she cranked the engine. I nodded, and she put the car in reverse, backing up slowly. I reached forward and turned on the radio while Chloe lit another cigarette in the backseat, tossing the match out the window. As we were about to pull out onto the road, Jess nodded toward a big metal trash can by the gas pumps, about twenty feet away.

“Bet me?” she asked, and I craned my neck, judging the distance, then picked up her mostly empty Zip Coke and shook it, feeling its weight.

“Sure,” I said. “Two bucks.”

“Oh, God,” Chloe said from the backseat, exhaling loudly. “Now that we’re out of high school, can we please move on from this?”

Jess ignored her, picking up the Zip Coke and pressing her hand around it, flexing her wrist, then stuck her arm out the driver’s-side window. She squinted, lifted her chin, and then, in one smooth movement, threw her arm up and released the Zip Coke, sending it arcing over our heads and the car. We watched as it turned end over end in the air, a perfect spiral, before disappearing with a crash, still on and straw engaged, in the trash can.

“Amazing,” I said to Jess. She smiled at me. “I never have been able to figure out how you do that.”

“Can we go now?” Chloe asked.

“Like everything else,” Jess said, turning out into traffic, “it’s all in the wrist.”

The Spot, where we always started our night, really belonged to Chloe. When her dad and mom divorced back in the third grade, he’d left town with his new girlfriend, selling off most of the property he’d amassed in town while working as a developer. He only kept one lot, out in the country.

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