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CITY OF LOST ANGELS

STORIES IN THE LIFE OF JOE SULLIVAN

WRITTEN BY  
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## FOREWORD

This is an ordinary story about an ordinary man in an extraordinary city.

Some of the tales in these pages may seem true. Rest assured, they are complete fabrications of reality. You could say the same about the people these tales surround. The famous, infamous and the insignificant of Los Angeles are all alike in this singular way: we exist as powerful fabrications of an individual. How often do you call someone "fake" in Los Angeles? Seriously, has anyone kept track? But these stories beg a deeper question of the people who come to this mystical paradise trapped between the high desert and the sea...perhaps we're more alike than we think.

First, though, there is one single rule you need to accept before diving into Joe's world: In the eyes of Our Local, everything happens for a reason in Los Angeles. If you've been to Los Angeles yourself, chances are you've met someone quite like him. It usually isn't a question of faith like which religion you practice, but a frequent sense that there are stronger forces at work around you...

**TWENTY-TWO POINTS, PLUS TRIPLE-WORD-SCORE, PLUS FIFTY  
POINTS FOR USING ALL MY LETTERS.  
GAME'S OVER. I'M OUTTA HERE.**

*-Bart Simpson*

## chapTer 1

I'm looking out of a window as my plane passes over the Santa Monica Mountains and into the glittering Los Angeles Basin. I watch the rivers of red and white flow through the heart of Southern California, racing along at a comparatively slow 65 MPH. My watch beeps at me. Turning away from the window, I look down at my wrist. Seven thirty. Maybe I'll be home in time to catch the Drew Carey Show after all, if Dan isn't late picking me up.

I've been on this plane for nearly twelve hours, but the built-in Nintendo system and endless supply of gin and tonics have made the flight from London feel more like a bus ride to school. Earlier, around tonic number six, I vaguely remember the flight attendant sitting down next to me and asking me out on a date. He's kind of cute. I hope I gave him my phone number. It happened about an hour after he had cut me off the drinks and I had been forced to sneak to the back of the plane and get them from the girls in the crew cabin. Every time I went back there, they asked me if I thought the weather would be good for sunbathing. "It's the middle of July," I'd told them. "The weather doesn't get any better for sunbathing."

Then again, even in March or October, the weather doesn't get any better for sunbathing. That's Los Angeles for you. Palm Trees, sunglasses and khaki shorts...even in the winter. No wonder they make movies here.

The plane is starting to pancake in a large circle above the city to position itself for landing, first flying out over the dark coastline, then back towards the downtown skyscrapers. I've never seen them from above like this. The lights on the buildings give one the look of a champagne glass, and another reminds me of a rocket ship. Three

months ago, when I had flown to London for the first time in my life, we had returned to Los Angeles during the day. As anyone here can tell you, this city is pretty drab by day. But at night, when the buildings are lit and the freeways are filled with rush hour traffic, you can truly see that the city is alive and breathing, sometimes farting.

I suck in a deep breath through my nose and part my lips just enough to push the air back out through my mouth. In a matter of minutes, I will be home, bringing with me few of the answers I had hoped to find on this trip. I had expected three days alone in London to reveal some truth about myself that the city now below me had tucked away somewhere behind the silicone and the lattes. Three days in London gave me more new questions than anything else. Last night, as I walked through the streets of SoHo and Leicester Square, staring at the theatre marquees and into the many pubs that all looked the same, all I could think about was my last trip to the city. It was spring break, and David and I thought we could spend the rest of our lives together in that wondrous city.

It's almost funny how wrong we can be sometimes, but if anything, at least we learned from each other just how wonderful and terrifying love can be. Another chapter written down, and yet there are even more questions than I started with. I hope this isn't what my whole life is going to be like.

I think I see the runway in the distance.

So at 22, I am still pondering what love is. I suppose I'm not shocked by the realization, considering how many people I know twice my age who are pondering the same thing. There's an inherent mystery to love that keeps us searching for a deeper understanding of why it is that sometimes, two people click together like a pair of Legos. Sadly, we more often find ourselves drifting apart from each other, wondering silently

what went wrong. Did we say too little? Did we tell too much? Is it even our fault that time changes people in ways we could never imagine?

God, this is depressing to think about. If only I had never met David Lambert, with his fiery blue eyes and soft voice. If I had looked beyond his charms, perhaps I wouldn't feel so empty and confused right now. At least I have that cute French flight attendant smiling at me every time he walks by. I've never been so glad that I took French in high school instead of Spanish like everyone else. Now I just have to remember how to say all those naughty phrases that we used to look up in the classroom dictionary. I wonder how you say "Yes, I would love to have you sit on my lap and bounce on it for awhile" in French? I'll have to remember to look that up when I get home.

The plane is landing.

I slip a Paul Van Dyk cd into my Discman as the jet races over the houses that surround Los Angeles International Airport at breakneck speed. Life has a soundtrack, I think, as "Forbidden Fruit" flows ambiently out of the headphones. I look out at the approaching ground and relax in my chair as the wheels bump and skid against the concrete runway. Closing my eyes, I take another deep breath while the plane rumbles slowly down the tarmac. The flight attendant comes on.

"Ladies and gentlemen, on behalf of Virgin Atlantic Airways, we would like to welcome you to Los Angeles. The current temperature is a warm seventy-two degrees. Local time is seven thirty-eight. We hope you enjoyed your flight with us, and thank you for flying Virgin."

\* \* \*

The lights in the cabin began to flicker on as the plane slowed to a stop outside the Tom Bradley terminal. As soon as the motor shut off, about half of the passengers flipped on their cell phones and started calling their friends and family waiting for them at the other end of the terminal. I stood up, stretched my legs a bit, and grabbed my red duffel bag from the overhead compartment. As I made my way forward through the plane, Eric, the flight attendant pulled me aside and into the flight crew area.

“What is it?”

Eric smiled mischievously. His dark curly hair and green eyes were suddenly pressed very close to my own face as he pressed me against a wall and kissed me softly on the lips. Just as quickly he backed off, still grinning, and brought me back to the door of the plane. He handed me a slip of paper as the crowd of passengers behind me forced me off the plane and into the jetway. A blast of warm, smoggy air hit me as I weaved my way up the jetway and into the terminal. The scent of the city was familiar and comforting. Still dazed from the amorous outburst that just happened, I took my time walking down to baggage claim and through customs. As I stepped through the sliding doors, I instantly recognized Dan Bernard.

His bleached hair and unbleached, slightly red goatee were a combination that made him hard to miss. His narrow face, accented with a pair of wild eyebrows, gave him almost a comic book appearance that most found disarming and cheerful. He could also look downright maniacal when he wanted to, which scared the crap out of his students at John Borroughs High. My best friend, he was also my housemate. I had moved into the guest room of his North Hollywood home after the breakup with David a

month ago. It was Dan who suggested the trip to London. If anything, he knew a few days away from this town would help me forget.

“Joe! How was the flight?”

“I just spent twelve hours on a plane and I landed only three hours after I took off. I feel like I’m in a time warp. Right now, I’d give my left nut for a cigarette. Can you grab this for a second?” I pointed to the red duffel that was sliding off my shoulder.

“I’ve got a pack in the car.” Daniel grabbed the bag from me and set it down.

“Oh I need one now,” I replied, pulling a pack of Winstons out of my backpack. I lit up, took a long drag and closed my eyes. The rush of nicotine gave me a light dizzy feeling. Dan picked up my duffel and started walking.

“So tell me about the trip! Did you get lucky?”

“No, but I got kissed in the strangest place.”

“What, your armpit?”

I laughed. “No, not like that. I meant location. This cute French flight attendant on the flight home pulled me aside for a smooch as I was getting off the plane.”

“Please tell me you got his number.”

“What kind of a guy do you think I am? Of course I did. So where are you parked?”

“The loading zone, of course. Come on, let’s go. I’ve got cocktails waiting.”

We hopped into Dan’s White ’65 Ford Mustang with the top down, of course. I threw my duffel bag and backpack into the backseat and sat down in the passenger seat. As we pulled out of the airport, I saw the restaurant Encounters to our left, next to the control tower, with its spidery legs reaching to the ground. The lights on the structure



slowly changed from green, to blue to purple. The thing looked like a spacecraft from Mars.

“I’ve always wanted to eat there, just for the view of the airport.”

Dan looked over for a moment. “Eh, it’s the view you pay for. The food’s ok, but not for the prices.”

“You’ve been there?”

“Nope, but I heard.”

I hear that a lot in L.A. Just about everything you hear about anything comes secondhand, but nobody here is willing to own up to actually doing the things they talk about. Either there is a secret entertainment gestapo running around keeping tabs on everything cool, or nobody here is willing to admit that they stumbled into a place that really sucked. God forbid your friends find out you spent an evening at Yankee Doodle’s.

In five minutes we were on the 405 freeway, passing through the mountains I had flown over less than an hour ago. On our left, the Getty Center was bathed in a warm yellow light, and I could see a tram slowly descending the side of the mountain back to the museum parking lot. As usual, we were in a traffic jam. If there’s one thing you could count on in this city...

“So where did you go this time?”

“Not many places. I spent most of my time at Kew Gardens, the National Portrait Gallery, and Starbucks.”

“Any shows?”

“Naw. David and I did that when we went. I wasn’t really there for the sights this time. The highlight of the trip for me was a return visit to Westminster Abbey.”

“Was it crowded?”

“Ridiculously. I just wandered around Poets’ Corner, since it was out of the way of the tour.”

“How fitting. The young writer visits the graves of the dead ones. Did you get inspired?”

I shook my head no. “More like depressed. I guess worse comes to worse, if I’m ever famous, maybe they’ll bury me in a church.”

“Just perfect for a recovering Catholic like you.”

“No kidding.” As we reached the peak of the Sepulveda Pass, the San Fernando Valley loomed below. The lights of the valley twinkled and winked at me, welcoming me back home to the land of SUV’s and shopping malls. Lord knows why, but even three days in London made me miss this place and all its annoying faults, San Andreas included. Twenty minutes later we pulled into the driveway of Dan’s home.

“Gin and tonic?” Dan asked as I threw my bags in my room.

“Sure, why not? I only had seven on the plane.”

“Love those international flights. So tell me about the flight attendant. What’s his name?”

“Eric,” I said, walking into the kitchen. “He’s cute and all, but he’s a flight attendant.”

“What’s wrong with that?”

“Well for starters,” I said, accepting a drink from Dan, “it probably means he’s just looking for a fling while he’s in town.”

“So?”

“Um, well, that really ain’t my thing. I’ve got the curse, remember?”

“Oh yeah.”

The curse I’m referring to is the fact that I’m a bit of a romantic. Okay, I’m one hell of a romantic, which probably explains why I have a boyfriend about as often as I have my charge cards paid off. David was actually the first guy I had a serious relationship with. Before that, my dating history was pocketed with a few dates here, a couple months there, but nothing worth bragging about. More often I’m out with my friends, the reliable ones that I don’t have to fret about the possibility of having to put out for at the end of the night. They’re more fun to get trashed with anyway.

Friends are about the only people you can trust in L.A. Even then, it’s only that close, tightly knit circle of five or so that you can really depend on. I’ve learned that you make a lot of “friends” simply by association here. You go to a party and everyone chats you up like they’ve known you for years. Then two weeks later when you run into each other on the street, you both stumble over something to talk about for two minutes before something “suddenly comes up” and you have to be on your way. It’s a miracle they manage to remember my name. I usually forget theirs an hour after meeting them. That’s just life in Los Angeles, though. You weed out the superficial idiots and look for the real thing. Believe it or not, sometimes you can find one.

“So you’re giving this Eric guy a pass?”

“Well, maybe I’ll take him out for a drink or two in WeHo later. I’m sure there he’ll find a nice, horny idiot to trick with.”

“You want him.”

“Whatever. You coming?”

“Of course. I have to see if he’s cute.”

I called Eric and we decided to meet up around 11 at the Normandie Room, one of the smaller bars in WeHo. It was one of my favorite bars to hit because they played cheesy movies from the 70’s and 80’s on the television. It was easy to spot him in the bar because of his European fashion sense. There’s nothing like seeing a red vinyl jacket with blue stripes matched up with khaki pants on a tourist. Outfits like that make Eurotrash sound like such a nice word. Dan’s reaction to the outfit was less than sublime.

“Oh Eric, that outfit of yours is something bordering on spectacular.”

“Wow, thanks,” he replied.

Dan leaned into me and whispered, “did I say spectacular? I meant disaster! What possesses Europeans to buy that crap?”

“I’d say the constant state of intoxication, but that would only apply to Germans.”

“And rightly so. They’re the worst of the lot.”

Our trio found a table, and while Dan ordered a round of drinks from the bar, Eric started in on me.

“So what do you like to do?”

“Besides school? Well, I like to rollerblade, hang out with my friends, read any Ann Rice book I can get my hands on...”

“That’s not what I mean, Joe.” The seductive look in his eyes told me exactly what he meant. How was I going to get out of this? One night stands just aren’t my thing.

“Um, well, I guess you could say I’m a romantic. I love the thrill of meeting someone you just know is meant for you. I like sitting somewhere with them, not feeling like we have to say anything to each other. Just knowing that they’re near you is enough.”

“And when you’re in bed?”

Just then, Dan returned with the drinks. As he handed Eric a beer, he noticed the discreet plea for help my eyes were giving him and spoke up for me.

“He likes to have a guy run his fingers through his back hair.” I glared at Dan. That was not the kind of help I wanted. For starters, it was a bold faced lie. I don’t even have back hair!

“Really?” Eric asked.

“Yep, it really turns him on.” Dan handed me a beer. “That should do the trick,” he whispered.

“Asshole. Now he thinks I’m a freak.” We both turned to Eric and raised our glasses. “To new friends.”

“And back hair,” Dan added.

Eric laughed. “To back hair!” Half of the bar crowd turned to look at the crazy Frenchman toasting to back hair. It was all I could do not to slide under the table.

After a few drinks, Eric got the hint that I wasn’t going to have international relations with him. He wanted to go someplace cruisy, so I gave him directions to a bar

named Mother Lode and wished him luck. Dan noticed I was on the verge of losing what remained of my consciousness, so we left the same time Eric did. Back home, I crawled into bed, put on my headphones and fell asleep to the sounds of Nina Simone singing some classic chansons of the thirties. I figured there was no harm having someone moan to me in French tonight, as long as they were still there in the morning.

## chapTer 2

Brace yourself, this is Los Angeles. Don't ask me how you got here, I haven't the faintest clue. I have an excuse, I was born here. I may not have had a choice in the matter, but honestly, I'm happy to be here. There's something about Southern California that holds my heart in a vise, refusing to let go. I mean that in a good way, I think. Just ask any native, and they will show you how truly beautiful this city can be...if they don't flip you off first.

Okay, I'll be the first to admit that there are a few bad apples in Los Angeles, at least a grove or two. Everyone here is trying to get an edge over somebody else, or so it seems. An hour on the freeway or in a mall will tell you as much. And sure, we have riots, gangs, and crazy homeless people at street corners, but there are a few nice folks here too. Like me for instance.

I'm just twenty-two years old. Just twenty-two. I feel obligated to say it that way, as if just because only 22 years has passed, I haven't grown up yet. Yes, I am young. I have a full head of thick brown hair that falls all over the place. My smile is still mischievous. I hate wearing a suit. I shop at stores like Structure, and I stay out until 2 AM at least twice a week. Basically, I'm like that movie star Matt Damon, except I'm not rich. Or popular. But all this doesn't mean that I haven't lived. Trust me on this. In L.A., you grow up fast because you have to. If you don't keep pace with the city, you get run over faster than a squirrel on the 101.

To my surprise, grown up doesn't necessarily mean mature. Maturity here doesn't come with age, it is a relative term. Anyone here will tell you that. Maturity is

about wanting to grow up on the inside. Some people just never do. Then again, we are the entertainment capitol of the world, so I guess you can get away with immaturity here. It's not like you have to sound sincere when you tell somebody you'll get back to them about their script.

Did I mention that I have a knack for meeting these people? I'd like to think that it is not at all intentional, that I truly am looking for someone with a respectable amount of gray matter who isn't afraid to use it. But for some reason, it is more often the mental children that find me. My current hypothesis is that the odds are simply against me, especially since I live in the valley. It's scary to think that I have friends just like the kids in the movie *Clueless*, but I love them all. It's what I'm finding in the boyfriend department that's depressing.

Out in West Hollywood you can see the problem at its worst. Thousands of beautiful, built guys wander from bar to bar to bed, and the cycle repeats. I'm amazed at how baffled a guy gets when I tell him that isn't what I want. Did the idea of romance and passion never occur? Is it simply too much to ask a guy for more than a bump here, a grind there? What brings these emotional cripples into my life? Is it my deodorant? I need some answers.

\* \* \*

"Dan, what am I doing wrong?"

"Nothing, Joe. It's your eyes."

"What?"

"Seriously. You've got really intense eyes. A lot of people find that attractive."



“I thought people liked them because they were blue. I mean, they go with almost anything.”

“Very funny. Do I turn here?”

“Yeah. Make a left, and then another left at Ventura Boulevard.” I looked out the window of Dan’s Mustang as we swung onto Laurel Canyon in our quest for morning coffee. We were bound to hit a Starbucks on Ventura. I think they passed a city ordinance to have one installed every five blocks of the street.

“Okay,” I continued, “so my eyes are intense. Why does that always attract a guy who has the maturity level of a thirteen year-old?”

”That has nothing to do with your eyes, hon. Almost every single guy out there has that level of maturity. This is L.A. for chrissakes.”

"Oh, I get it. They hit puberty and suddenly the brain shifts into park, is that it?"

"Pretty much. It all boils down to sex. They stop thinking with the big brain, and start thinking with the little one, therefore intense eyes means only one thing.

"Lemme make a wild guess. Intense sex?"

"Fucking genius, isn't it? I don't think they realize that there's the possibility that you might have some actual depth behind those eyes. The idea of a package deal doesn't even register, 'cause they're too focused on your 'package' to think about it."

"Maybe I should fine tune my eyes to serve as a warning instead of an invitation."

"There ya go. How about CAUTION: contents under pressure?"

"Yeah. Possible side effects include nausea, ecstasy, dizziness, headaches and a committed relationship."

"I'll get you a t-shirt that says 'open with caution.'" Dan looked out the window as he turned left onto Ventura. "Hey navigator, there's a Starbucks in my rearview mirror. Just how much did you drink last night?"

"You can make a U-Turn, Dan."

"On Ventura? Yeah, maybe at four in the morning. You're buying now, mister."

"Gee, all I have in my wallet are British Pounds..."

Dan shook his head. "Tourists. Can't live with 'em, can't chop 'em into pieces and bury them in your backyard."

Upon reaching said Starbucks, Dan and I secured a table on the front patio. The green umbrellas overhead did absolutely no good. At 8 AM, the sun is still low enough to annoy the fuck out of you, especially if you haven't had your coffee. This is why God invented sunglasses. I slipped on a pair of black Oakleys that used to belong to David as Dan slipped inside to get us two cups of that dark, magical elixer.

Coffee is the latest designer drug here. We got lattes, cappuccinos, flavors, non-fats, sweeteners, half-caffs. You name it, they make it. Can't decide? There's always plain old coffee, but hey, that's boring. In Los Angeles, you'll find more coffee shops on the streets than liquor stores. No mall is complete without a Starbucks, and I guarantee they must have known this would happen. There are just too many people in therapy here, and we're all addicted to coffee or cigarettes or both. Is anyone onto this conspiracy?

Dan poked his head out the door. "Creamer?"

"Yes!" I shouted.

"Sugar?"

“Yeah, the raw kind. Two bags!” God help me. I’m one of them too.

A minute later, Dan was back at the table with our java and the morning paper. He handed me the Southern California Living section and took the main news for himself.

"Dan, do you realize that we have evolved to a point where the bulk of our time is spent either at work, working out, or in therapy working things out?"

"You forgot the internet, Joe. I'm so disappointed in you."

"Don't you find that scary? I mean, do people have fun anymore? What ever happened to lazy days with your friends, and parties and shit?"

"Oh there's a term for what you're describing. It's called life after childhood syndrome. You got any cigarettes on you?"

"I thought you quit."

"I did. Twice. Now gimme."

I passed my box of Winston Lights across the green metal table to Dan. As he inhaled his first drag, he closed his hazel eyes and leaned back in his chair, savoring the nicotine rush the way every smoker does when they have their first smoke for the day. I turned my gaze to the boulevard, watching the hordes of sport utility vehicles carry their owners off to another boring day at work. It was the middle of July, but at last it was beginning to feel a little like summertime. I leaned back in my own chair, closed my eyes and let the early morning rays of sunlight brush across my face. The heat made my cheeks tingle slightly, as if Mother Nature herself were gently running her fingers under my eyes. I silently wished the touch were real.

I opened my eyes. Dan was looking at me. “Go ahead, Dan. Say it.”

“Say what?”

“That I’m a romantic. That my standards are too high. That I’ve lost touch with reality.”

“You’ve been watching too much Ally McBeal.” Dan leaned forward in his chair. “I mean, do *you* think your standards are to high?”

I sighed. “I’m beginning to wonder. I mean, how hard can it be to find somebody my age who actually has a brain, isn’t obsessed with sex, and might even be interested in having an intellectual relationship alongside a physical one?”

“You’re right. Your standards are too high.”

“Thanks.” I reached for a cigarette and fumbled with the lighter to get it to work. “And I don’t watch Ally McBeal *that* often.”

“Oh I’m just kidding, Joe. There’s one out there...somewhere. But you do have to realize that most guys your age aren’t as mature as you are. They’re still in school, they have no fucking clue what they’re going to do with their lives, and they’re horny. They tend to be pretty confused. Hell, a lot of the guys my age still don’t know what they want. Consider yourself lucky.”

Lucky? What’s so lucky about falling in love with people that don’t know what they want out of life? I can handle meeting a guy that isn’t looking for the same things I am because that’s more obvious to see. Things get more complicated when he hasn’t figured out his life yet. That’s when you get blindsided one day when he comes over and says, “I’m sorry, I guess this isn’t what I want.” There’s no real way to convince him otherwise...is there? I didn’t think so.

“Maybe you should date an older guy.”

“No thanks. I’ve been there already. If it’s not a maturity thing, it’s an age thing, and that can be just as weird. They get nervous, or they do that daddy-son shit, and that bugs me. Besides, it’s hard to relate to a guy fifteen years older than you.”

“Gee thanks. In case you forgot, I started high school the year you started kindergarten.”

“It was the second grade, and you don’t count. It’s different with friends, you know that.”

“Why is it different?”

“Because I’m not trying to impress you or make you want me. Friends don’t have the same rules to play by. With a boyfriend, the leash is much tighter.”

“And some of them get off on that.”

“Gross.”

“Here’s a thought, Joe. What if there’s a higher reason for you not having a boyfriend?”

“What, you mean like God wants me to be a priest?”

“I hope not. I was just thinking maybe you aren’t supposed to be with someone right now.”

“But I want to be. I was before.”

“And you broke up. Besides, you’re still in college, you’re working, it’s not like your life has room for a full time boyfriend right now.”

“I made it work for a year and a half with David. I didn’t think it was that hard.”

“Yeah, but look what your life revolved around. Either it was David, school, or work. Don’t you think you missed out?”

“On what?”

Dan sighed as he bent down to ash out his cigarette on the concrete sidewalk.

“Didn’t you miss your friends?”

“Sometimes. I fell out of touch with quite a few of them. I think some even moved away.”

“I bet they missed you. I know I did, Joe.”

He had a point there. While David and I were together, I probably saw Dan a total of five times. When we met for lunch Jerry’s Deli two months ago, we spent the entire two hours catching up with each others’ lives instead of our usual thing of talking about everyone else. The fact that the sandwich I ate had cost nine bucks didn’t help the feeling I had inside that something very important was missing from my life now.

“Let me see your eyes.”

“Huh?” I looked up at him.

Dan looked hard into my eyes for a moment, then frowned. “Just as I thought. They’re not as bright as they used to be.”

“Seriously?”

“I don’t know how to describe it. I’m looking at the face of a 22 year-old, but I see the eyes of a person twice that age.”

Flashback. My mother used to say that to me. Of course, I didn’t take her seriously when *she* said it.

“Come on, Joe, there had to be something you really missed while you were with David.”

I looked back at the street. A blue convertible sped by, and I could hear the music playing in the car. “Dancing,” I said softly.

\* \* \*

I used to go dancing at least once a week before I had met David. It was my release, my place away from reality where nothing mattered except the pulsing rhythm of the music that surrounded me. I seldom danced with anyone else because most of the time my eyes were closed. I was too busy in my own world to be part of anyone else’s. David didn’t care much for dancing.

There’s something that happens on a dance floor that borders on magic. You walk into a dimly lit club, and instantly you can feel, the music pulsing through you. The beats come quickly, covering up your own heartbeat and replacing your blood with something new, an energy you’ve never felt before. Adrenaline, Life. Harmony. Before you know it, you’re on the floor and moving your body in a way you wouldn’t dare move it in public, falling endlessly into and around the melody that swims around you. You are drowning, and it feels incredible.

The crazy thing is, everyone around you feels it too. It radiates from every pore on every arm, leg and torso around you. You feel it everywhere, like some cosmic radio signal that is blasting in every direction, saying “come, join us. Lose yourself for awhile.” You pray to yourself, hoping the music will never stop because this, ladies and gentlemen of the jury, is fantasyland. This moment is it, the ultimate chance to let go and be free and have a good time.

Of course, the music stops, it always does. At 2 AM, the real world opens up its arms and beckons us to return to our miserable lives and get back to business as usual.

You push your way out of the club and into the crisp, cool night, and you take a deep breath, and in that moment, you can taste the flowers, the beer, the exhaust fumes of cars, pizza, coffee, everything. For an instant, the world outside is a living creature, and it is beautiful. That is dancing.

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As powerful for me as it was, dancing vanished from my life when David became a part of it. Hard to believe, isn't it? Love makes you do strange things. And sadly, I didn't even realize what had happened until things between us went sour. At that point, I began to miss so many things, and I felt that I had lost my sense of humor. Is that what pissed me off the most?

"You didn't lose your sense of humor, Joe, you just got bitter."

"Thanks. I think I'll go and poison an old lady's dog now."

"Oh you know what I mean. It's still there, just a little rough around the edges."

"Hmm. So I guess the demure look won't work for me anymore, will it?"

"Oh honey, that look is toast. Now you gotta put fear in their eyes. Make him shiver *before* you get his clothes off."

"Yeah, if I can get him to come home with me first."

"Oh please. Will you ever get over this shy thing? It's time to take L.A. by storm. You've been put through the ringer! You've been bruised and broken. It's time to kick some ass, bitch!"

"Uh...Dan, the woman at the table next to us is staring."

"So?"

"She looks inspired."



“Hmm. Should we wave, or just invite her to join us?”

“Find out if she smokes first.”

Dan grabbed my Winstons and waved them toward her.

“No thanks,” she said, laughing.

“Hey, more for us,” Dan replied. He took out a cigarette and offered one to me.

“Why thank you sir. You’re such a gentleman.”

“Hah! Now that’s funny.”

“Should I put it in my act?”

“If you could act, I’d say yes.”

“Bitch.”

“And proud of it.” Dan winked. “Come on, let’s cause trouble somewhere...like Bloomingdale’s.”

“I wish I could join you,” the woman said.

“Well why the hell not?” Dan replied.

“For starters,” she replied, “I can’t really afford to go shopping right now.”

“That’s why God invented charge cards,” I said. I pulled out my wallet. “Behold the power of the plastic!”

The woman laughed. “True enough. My name’s Aubrey, by the way.”

“My name’s Joe, and this is my severely imbalanced friend Dan.” Dan made a polite nod to Aubrey.

“Come on,” he said. “We won’t bite...hard.”

“My kind of men,” Aubrey replied.

\* \* \*

“I actually have a gift to buy,” Dan said as the three of us walked through the entrance to Bloomingdale’s in Sherman Oaks. “My mother’s birthday is in a week, and I need to find something I can FedEx her.”

Aubrey looked around. “Then why are we in the men’s department?”

Dan shrugged. “It can’t hurt to look for myself too.” He pulled a blue silk shirt off a rack and studied it. “Ah, perfect summer clothing...for Maine. Do they really think anyone is going to buy silk here? It’s 9 AM and eighty degrees outside. What were they *thinking?*”

“That people in L.A. will wear just about anything if it looks good,” I offered.

“And costs ninety dollars,” added Aubrey. “This place is so overpriced. It blows me away that they manage to stay in business.”

“Image is everything,” Dan said as he grabbed a pair of gabardine slacks. “I have to try this on.”

Aubrey and I left Dan in the land of overpriced outerwear and wandered over to the fragrance counter. She picked up a bottle of the latest Liz Taylor scent, Compulsion. She sprayed some of it in the air and made a face. “This smells like ass.”

“Here, try this one.” I handed her a bottle of Escape, by Calvin Klein. “It’s my favorite.”

She sprayed it on her wrist and rubbed it in. “Not bad. Kinda light and fruity.” She turned to me. “So tell me all about yourself, kiddo. You from here?”

“Yeah. I grew up in the burbs and moved to the valley when I started college. Eighteen years with the family was more than enough. You?”

“Transplant. I’m from Michigan originally, but that place bored me to death. I came out here for school and ended up staying.” She handed me a bottle shaped like a torso. “Here, try this one.”

“Nice bottle,” I said. “If only it came in life size.”

“Tell me about it,” replied the guy behind the counter. “We’d sell out in minutes.”

Annoyed that we were being listened in on, we migrated to housewares. In the Waterford wall there was this beautiful ashtray sitting all by itself. It looked square, but the corners flared out slightly and the grooves were decorated to look like chevrons. The center was a circular indentation with a pair of squiggle lines engraved in the middle of a smaller circle. I’d always been fascinated by art deco design. “I have to show this to Dan.”

“Why?”

“He’ll have to have it.”

“But it’s a seventy-five dollar ashtray.”

“Exactly.”

Aubrey shook her head. “Dear God.”

When I returned with Dan, Aubrey was eyeballing the martini glasses. He had already managed to spend more money than he should have on a new summer outfit.

“So,” she asked, “What did you find for your mom?”

“Well. I sort of maxed out my card. I’ve got seven bucks in my wallet, though.”

Aubrey looked at me. “Did Joe show you the ashtray?”

Dan held up a small white box that said “Waterford” on the side. I smiled.

“See? I told you.”

With seven dollars left, the three of us wandered around trying to figure out what the hell we could buy for Dan's mother. A quick look around told us that there was no way we would find anything at Bloomie's for less than fifty. Dan was beginning to panic. His shameful glances at the ashtray were becoming more and more frequent, but I knew he would refuse to return it. As we wandered back through the fragrance section pondering what to do, Aubrey got an idea.

"Hey Joe, remember that guy behind the counter that was butting in?"

"Yeah," I replied. "Why?"

"Well, maybe you two could sweet talk him into selling one of those cheesy gift-with-purchase items to you for seven bucks."

Dan looked at Aubrey. "How are we going to do that?"

"Easy," she replied, turning towards the men's counter. "He's obviously gay. Flirt with him."

Dan stopped in his tracks. "That's absolutely brilliant," he whispered. We flipped a coin to see which of us would have the honor of hitting on fragrance boy. Unfortunately, I lost. I gathered up my charisma and walked over. God, he was already smiling at me. This would be easier than I thought.

"Sorry, still no life size," he said.

"Damn. So much for finding a date."

"Oh that can't be too hard for you with those eyes."

Yeesh, the eyes, always the eyes. What's with these things, anyway? Do I have special powers? I forced a blush. "It's harder than it looks. These eyes get me into trouble."

“I bet they do.” He smiled a sleazy, I want to get into your shorts right now smile that made it hard for me not to turn away and puke. I looked him in the eyes and got serious.

“Hey, I have a problem. I’ve got to get my mom a present, and all I have is seven bucks. What would I have to do to get you to sell me one of those gorgeous Channel gift-with-purchases?”

He raised an eyebrow. “Well, we’re really not supposed to do that.”

I gave him my puppy dog look. “pleeeeeease?”

He caved. “Well ok, but it’s gonna cost you.”

I grinned. “Name your price.”

He pulled out a Channel makeup kit and a piece of paper. “Your phone number. And don’t worry about the seven bucks. You’ll need it to buy me dinner tonight.”

I took the paper and scribbled down the first random phone number that came into my head. It was the office number for an old summer job I had at Magic Mountain, a theme park just north of L.A. He put the kit in a bag and handed it to me, along with his phone number. I walked back over to Dan and Aubrey, who were hiding behind the Great Wall of Mac, and handed Dan the bag. “You owe me big,” I said with a smile.

Aubrey did a little happy dance. “That was too cool. I have to learn how to do that.”

“Yeah right,” I replied. “Now I can never show my face in this store again.”

Dan laughed. “You gave him a bogus number?”

“Of course! He was creepy looking. Didn’t you notice his face? He plucks his eyebrows.”

Dan shrugged as we started walking. “So what? So do I sometimes. Can’t have the unibrow action going on now, can we?”

I pointed at Aubrey. “They were finer than hers.” The three of us giggled as we walked out of the store. “Come on guys, let’s grab some breakfast.”

Dan perked up. “How about Twains?”

Aubrey laughed. “Twains? The food there has more grease in it than a teenager!”

I nodded. “And the waitresses are all like, ninety years old.”

“Then it’s settled?” Dan asked us both.

Aubrey and I nodded together and the three of us piled into Dan’s car. After breakfast, Aubrey demanded a trip to Melrose, followed by a night of serious club hopping and boyfriend hunting on Santa Monica Boulevard. We didn’t get home until two-thirty in the morning.

## chapTer 3

Needless to say, Aubrey is now a close friend of ours. On our first day out, Dan and I learned she's a set designer who's lucky enough to get work on a regular basis. Aubrey attributes it to her looks. She's 5'10", with shoulder length red hair and these huge green eyes that turn heads, even ours when we first saw her. Thanks to her industry connections, she always gets me into these great Hollywood parties, but more often she gets me into trouble, like the time we sneaked into Drew Barrymore's backyard to steal some flowers. Outside of the few near-arrests, I think that's why I like her so much. Her mischievous smile combined with an unending energy makes her irresistible. We have this deal going on between us that I'll take her to all the best clubs in Los Angeles, and she'll tell me all the latest celebrity dirt. Sometimes we even dig it up together.

Dan, of course, loves every bit of it. One night the three of us were milling around the Virgin Megastore on Sunset Boulevard, waiting for a movie to start. I had wandered over to the book section to check out the latest gossip biographies of pop culture's finest when I noticed the woman next to me was checking me out. She had a new book about the rise and fall of Madonna's bust line in her hands, and was laughing softly to herself. I smiled as I picked up a copy of a recent bio on Marilyn Monroe. Without warning, she struck up a conversation with me about the trash we were both dying to read, but ashamed to admit to.

"I think this is the first one of these books I've read that doesn't have 'and then I woke up with a needle in my arm' in it."

“Aww, then it can’t be that good,” I replied. “Without the drugs, drinking and eating disorders, how are we going to feel better about being nobodies?”

She frowned at the book. “The only thing in here is money, sex, Sean Penn, sex, and her kid. How can I feel pity for that?”

As she put the book back, I noticed a tattoo on her wrist that looked strangely familiar. I glanced at her face. I knew her straight black hair and rough features from somewhere, but couldn’t place them. “Aww, who needs self-esteem anyway?” I replied.

She smirked at me. “Not I. I gave up on that shit years ago. It was bad for the image.”

“Yeah,” I said. “And surly is in right now.”

“Damn right it is.” She started to walk away. “Nice talking to you.”

“Same here.” Just then, Dan and Aubrey scurried over.

Dan grabbed me by the shoulders. “Were you talking to her?”

I looked at him quizzically. “Yeah, why?”

That was Janeane Garafolo!” Aubrey hissed.

Dan talked about that one for weeks. I’m not sure what had him more shocked, the fact that I didn’t recognize her and still managed to say exactly the right thing, or the fact that he wasn’t there to say it himself. The way he talked about it, you’d think he was right behind us, telling the folks at home exactly how the situation was developing. It’s no surprise, then, that his favorite game is one we call “celebrity.” Everywhere we go, it’s a contest to see who spots them first. Poor Dan, he wasn’t with us the night we met Kate Pierson of the B-52’s.



“Okay,” Aubrey said as we climbed out of her black Nissan 240SX, “this isn’t a huge party like the last one. I don’t even know if the cast is showing up. It’s mostly the crew getting together for drinks.”

“That would explain why we’re at the Whiskey and not Skybar.”

“Oh look! Somebody grew attitude over the weekend!”

“As if you can survive in this town without some?”

“Point taken. Oh hey, I was telling one of the makeup artists about you. You’re still single, right?”

“Ugh, don’t remind me. I did have a date two nights ago, though.”

“Really? Cool! What’s the outlook?”

“I’ve met roadkill with more personality. It’s my own fault, though. He was gorgeous. I should have known better.”

“Eeek, sweetie, don’t they teach you in homo class that if he’s cute, he knows it?”

“I think I slept through that lecture. It was the same day we learned about gym etiquette.”

“Figures. So here’s the game plan: If nobody fun shows up in an hour, it’s off to Dublin’s for frat boy night.”

“Isn’t every night at Dublin’s frat boy night?”

“Exactly. Isn’t it great?”

The Hollywood party is a world unto itself, and within the smoky haze and bad music are three types of people milling around and causing trouble. The first group, and by far the most obnoxious is the stars and their groupies. They huddle together around

one particular celebrity, gushing about her wondrous performance while she cries about how difficult the producer was. Aubrey calls the groupies “starfuckers.”

“See the brunette over there, Joe?”

“Yeah. Should I recognize her?”

“Shit no. That’s just my friend Kelly. Five bucks says she’s all over Ben Affleck in half an hour.”

“I didn’t even notice he was here.”

“Oh yeah. He’s hanging out with Christina Ricci by the bar.”

“I am so blind.” I fall into the second group of people, the ones who are so clueless about celebrities that they wouldn’t recognize Brendan Frasier if he bumped into them at a Burger King. The stars hate us because we don’t see them (or see right through them) and the groupies hate us because they think we’re just being aloof. The truth is, we’re just being stupid. “Jeez, Dan’s going to be pissed he couldn’t make it.”

“Why couldn’t he come?”

I had to remind Aubrey that it was the first week of September, and school started this week. “So is there anyone else here I should know about?”

“Um, I don’t think so, but it looks like the producer’s trying to seduce the best boy over in that corner.”

“Nice.” One of Aubrey’s crew friends showed up, so I excused myself and wandered over to the bar for a Long Beach Iced Tea. While I stood there sipping, two girls walked by, arguing over who got dibs on Jon Stewart. I decided to transfer to the smoking patio out back, where I found Aubrey standing against the doorjamb.

“Hey, where’s that makeup guy you wanted me to meet?”

“Beats me. I haven’t seen him yet. Bitch probably didn’t even show.”

I shrugged. “His loss. So, any news on what your next project is?”

“Not yet. I’m hoping to work on this new movie with Gwynneth Paltrow in it. It takes place in Bermuda.”

“Location shoot?”

Aubrey closed her eyes. “It better be.” She glanced inside the bar. “Well, no sign of your date, what do you say we hit Dublin’s?”

I peeked inside and drew in a breath. “Oh but look who *is* here,” I whispered. Our eyes fixed on an unusually large amount of red hair as it bobbed from a pool table over to the bar for a drink. “Aubrey, is that...”

“Uh-huh” was all she could say.

“Aubrey, her hair...it’s huge.”

“I had no idea it could get that big. I mean what does she use?”

“Unbelievable. What’s she doing here?”

“Joe, I don’t think she’s even wearing makeup, and she’s still fabulous.”

“Un-fucking believable...”

Aubrey shook her head. “I swear, she looks better than she did ten years ago. I wish I could do that.” Just then, Kate turned away from the bar and looked towards us. “Uh....Joe? I think she sees us staring.”

“And she’s waving us over! What do we do?”

“Go over and say hi, stupid. And hurry up, before she regrets it.”

I gathered up every ounce of strength and poured it into my knees to keep them from rattling against each other as I started across the floor. I didn’t understand why my

heart was beating so quickly...over a girl! But this was Kate, incredible Kate, the siren of the band that gave us "Love Shack." I thought I was in heaven. Only Tori Amos could top this. "Um, hi," I stammered as I reached her. "This must sound really stupid, but, you're Kate Pierson, right?"

"Sweetie, I don't think anyone else could get away with this." She looked up at her brilliant red hair and smiled.

"I love you."

I ended up talking to her for twenty minutes, and she politely accepted every gushing compliment I gave her. She was all smiles, and her voice was soft and buttery. She even wanted to do lunch with me sometime, the most prestigious of all L.A. dining rituals. It's funny, she didn't even ask me how old I was, but I guess a fan's a fan, right?

"So?" Aubrey asked as I sauntered back over to her. "What did she say?"

"She's an Aqua Net girl. Can't say I'm that surprised. And she wants to do lunch! I can't believe it!"

"Don't wet yourself, kiddo, but do congratulate yourself. You're in."

"Dare I ask what lunch with Kate Pierson got you into?"

Aubrey rested her arms on my shoulders. "You just got yourself into the club, Joe."

"Club? Oh dear God, am I a starfucker?"

Aubrey cackled. "No, silly! You just wedged yourself into the L.A. Elite. Cripes, you don't even work in the biz and you're having lunch with *her*."

"Whatever Aubrey. It's just lunch with Kate Pierson. It's not like everyone here is now dying to meet me."

Just then Kate walked over with a really gorgeous and strangely familiar guy in tow. “Hey Joe, this is my friend Skeet. We were just wondering if you like to play pool, ‘cause we’re starting a new game and I need a partner.”

Aubrey and I looked at each other and grinned. “Of course I play,” I replied.

“Awesome!” Kate grabbed Skeet Ulrich and headed back to the pool table. I did not fail to notice the smile she gave me when they left.

“Holy shit, Aubrey. Did that just happen?”

“The words ‘I told you so’ come to mind.” Aubrey laughed and dragged me back towards the bar. “Come on, Joe, I’ll buy ya a drink.”

\* \* \*

The next morning, Dan wore a scowl as we sat at our usual table outside Starbucks. Between us sat the ashtray he had bought a Bloomie’s back in July. Now that school had started for both of us, we were arriving much earlier than we had during the summer, and Dan is anything but a morning person.

“Somebody’s jealous,” I said.

“I am not. So when are you guys going out?”

“No idea. Kate’s back home in Georgia right now, but she promised we’d hang out when she came back to L.A.”

“I can’t believe you shot pool at the Whiskey with Kate Pierson and Skeet Ulrich! Why the hell wasn’t I there?”

“Because you were grading papers, remember? Besides, it lasted all of twenty minutes. Skeet and his partner kicked our asses. We celebrated the loss with tequila shooters and a vow to never play pool with him again.”

“Unbelievable. You know, we should take her to Miagi’s for sushi when she gets back.”

I raised an eyebrow at Dan. “We?”

Dan looked me dead in the eye. “You got another place to live?”

“Okay, we,” I said, laughing. “Christ, I didn’t realize Kate was such a hot commodity!”

“Well, she’s not a superstar, but I must insist that you share. It’s in the rules, you know.”

“Oh right, of course. Right after the rule about white pants after labor day being a cardinal sin.” I looked at my watch. “I wonder if Aubrey’s going to show.”

Daniel glanced around. “Doesn’t look like it, but some serious cute stuff is cleaning the door to Starbucks.”

I turned to look. “Hubba hubba. It can’t be legal to look that cute in a green apron.”

“I know,” Dan sighed. “What on earth is he doing working here? There must be something wrong with him.”

“Yeah. He’s probably an actor. Blech.”

“No he’s not,” Aubrey said as she walked over to our table. “I would have seen him around if he was. How are my boys this morning?” She sat down between us and planted a kiss on my cheek. “Did superstar here tell you about his wild night with Kate?”

Dan groaned. “Don’t remind me. As if the Janeane incident was bad enough.”

I stood up. “I need a refill. Aubrey, you want some coffee?”

“Love some. Two equals, and a dash of non-fat milk, ok?” She popped open her pack of smokes and looked down at the ashtray. “Oh you two did not bring that to Starbucks.”

Dan grinned. “You should see the looks we’ve gotten this morning. I’m bringing this every day.” He handed me his cup. “Refil, darling.”

“Yes, master,” I replied. I walked towards the entrance to the café and reached for the door just as cute stuff did. He smiled and opened it for me.

“Hi there.”

“Um, hi,” I replied. I blushed and smiled back. “Thanks.”

“No problem.”

Woof. Short brown hair and pretty blue eyes...my favorite. Of course, I didn’t have the balls to say anything else to him. I caught sight of his nametag, which had the name Chad neatly printed on it. Better remember that one, I told myself. I grabbed our coffee and hurried outside, praying that Chad wouldn’t say anything else to me that might require a response from a coherent person.

## chapTer 4

It is seven o'clock on Tuesday morning, and the fog that rolled in last night while I sat in the living room watching television has yet to burn off. From our usual green table on the patio of Starbucks, I can barely make out Laurel Canyon Boulevard in the thick haze. The street looks as if it makes a sharp turn a block up from us and vanishes into a distant universe. Of course, West Hollywood is on the other end of Laurel Canyon, so I guess that description is not too far from the truth. I live for the chilly November mornings here in valley. The mist slinks down every street and fills each neighborhood with a creepy, mysterious feeling. I keep waiting for Jamie Lee Curtis to walk by me and let out one of her screams. I swear, one day, just like this one, it will probably happen.

As is custom now, The Ashtray sits between us, patiently awaiting any sacrificial ash we offer to it. The looks people give us when they see it range from surprise to amusement to utter disbelief. Dan couldn't be prouder of his purchase.

"I tell you, Joe, image is everything in this town."

"And you're living proof."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

I looked him in the eye and smiled. "Let's just say I'd never guess you lived on a teacher's salary."

"That's because I'm very good at budgeting. Believe it or not, man can survive on beer and cigarettes alone."

"Yeah, and that's why those nice folks from the city turned off your power last summer, but hey, you looked damn good."



Dan gave me the best ‘fuck you’ look he could muster at this ungodly hour and went inside to get us some coffee. I pulled out my political science book and started to go over the study questions for the midterm I had today when my cell phone rang. Sometimes, I’m more LA than I’d like to admit. I took a quick glance at the screen, turned off the phone, and said a silent prayer to the caller-id gods as the dreaded ex was diverted to my voicemail. There was no way I was going to talk to David before I had my coffee, especially since just last week I came close to calling him. I didn’t though, because I already knew how that story would end. What I missed wasn’t David.

\* \* \*

Lately I’ve gotten tired of being lonely. I keep looking for some kind of love to fill the chambers of my heart, but all I’ve found so far are a bunch of duds. I remember, and I miss what I once had, but at 22, I’m still pondering what that love really is. London didn’t give me any answers, and L.A. still insists on keeping silent about matters of the heart. All I have to go on is what I know and felt when my heart was broken.

When David and I fell in love with each other, there was a feeling inside us both that went supernova without any warning at all. We felt it in every nerve fiber of our bodies, delighting in each other like nothing else existed. When he wasn’t around, I would hold one of his shirts to my face and remember the sweet fragrance that was distinctly his. One look at his fiery blue eyes would send chills through me, filling my soul with a desire I had never known before. I knew he felt it too, when he told me one night how he had cried on the way back from my apartment because he already missed me.

To this day, I don't know why that feeling had to end. It was out of my control, though, because he lost the feeling first. Perhaps moving in together was a mistake. All too quickly, we discovered each others' quirks and grew to resent them. It wasn't long before his attention began to wander elsewhere, away from me. Trying to love him more proved futile. At least in the end, I kept some honor by being faithful. But with that honor came the horror of discovering him with someone else.

Angry and betrayed, the only thing I could do was run. Never before had I felt so confused about what love was. That was when I called Dan.

"Dan?"

"It's 12:30 AM, Joe. This better be good."

"He cheated on me."

"Oh god, I'm so sorry."

"I...don't know what to do."

"Are you at a payphone? Where are you?"

Glancing at my surroundings for the first time, I gave him directions to the 7-11 four blocks from our apartment. I hadn't realized I ran so far.

"I'll be right there, hon. Don't go anywhere, ok?"

I leaned against the gray phone booth and sighed. "I won't. I'm too tired right now to go anywhere else." I hung up the phone and looked upwards. The lights of the San Fernando Valley had long ago banished all but the brightest of the stars. I stared at the blank sky as I slid gently down to the concrete sidewalk, crying. I didn't see Dan pull up to the curb, or even sit down next to me. I simply realized that someone had their arm around me, so I buried my face in Dan's shoulder and cried even harder.

“Come on, let’s get you home.”

Over the following two weeks I moved myself into the guest room. Every time I went back to the apartment, David would beg me to stay. It was all I could do not to look at him while I boxed up my memories and waited for Dan to pick them up. I broke on the last day. David sat on the floor of our apartment, crying, and begging me to just look at him once. Before staring into that fire one last time, I took every ounce of pain I felt it put it behind my eyes. He saw everything.

“I’m so sorry,” he said softly.

“So am I.” I broke the gaze to pick up the box, but turned to face him again as I opened the door. “I guess we took too much for granted,” I said. “If only you had known how much I loved you.” I stepped through the door, shutting it behind me. I couldn’t help but ponder my own words as I walked down the stone stairway of our apartment building. In my pocket was a ticket and a passport. I needed answers. There was no turning back.

Another chapter written down.

\* \* \*

As I stuffed my phone back into my pack, Dan came out with the coffee. “Guess what? Chad is working today. I haven’t seen him here in weeks. Who was that on the phone?”

“Nobody Important.” I replied, the memory suddenly distant, closed. “How’s Chad looking this morning?”

“Oh, as cute as ever. You ever going to get up the nerve to talk to him?”

“Never.”

This is probably a bad time to mention I'm modest. I know it sounds like a contradiction, but for some reason I just lack the ability to speak like a normal human being when I encounter a guy I think is cute. All of a sudden, my brain turns into Jell-O and my eyes suddenly become fascinated with my sneakers. Under normal circumstances, and Dan can attest to this, I am a pretty crazy individual. I even dyed my hair blue once for a week. All my friends joked that my home planet finally picked me up.

"Oh grow some balls." Dan lit up a cigarette and started smoking. "He's just a guy, what's the worst he can do to you?"

I scratched my chest and yawned. "I wish I knew. Then I wouldn't be so nervous." I took a sip of the coffee and swirled it around in my mouth, savoring the dark, nutty flavor mixed with cream and sugar. I let it slide past my tongue and down my throat, feeling the warmth trickle down all the way to my stomach. I could feel myself waking up to the aroma, and opened my eyes a little wider just in time to see Aubrey pull up in her car with the top down.

"Hi boys! How are you two this morning?"

"Jeezus, Aubrey," I said, "are you trying to catch a cold? Why is your top down in this weather?"

"Don't ask." She got out of the car and I could see she had at least two sweaters on under her black leather coat.

"Oh I have to," Dan said, eyeing her. "You look like a winter clearance sale at Macys. What's wrong with your car?"

Aubrey walked over to our table and sat down. “Well, I think I learned the hard way that it’s not a good idea to let the morning dew get into the electrical system that powers the top. I guess that’s the last time I let my boyfriend convince me to go on a late night joyride on Mulholland Drive.”

Dan and I looked at each other. “Aubrey,” I asked, “just what was the purpose of this joyride?”

Aubrey’s face flushed a pale shade of crimson that told us everything we needed to know about her little mountain escapade. “Um, I’m going inside to get my coffee.” She stood up turned towards the door to Starbucks. “And I’m not telling you two anything.”

“Promises promises, never kept,” I called out to her. “You know, I don’t know what shocks me more, the fact that they got down in her car, or the fact she didn’t get arrested for doing it.”

“What do you mean?” Dan replied. “I’ve done that.”

I am beginning to think there is a side to this city that I have been missing out on. Has everyone here done the deed in a car except for me? What am I doing wrong?

“What’s it like?”

Dan pulled on his goatee for a moment while he pondered my question. “Well, it’s not exactly comfortable in a car like...Aubrey’s. But I must say, it is pretty cool to look up and see the stars above you when you’re having an orgasm.”

“Okay, that’s enough,” I said, turning my gaze to the street as a blue Camaro sped by. Aubrey came back out and said a quick goodbye. She was off to the Warner Brothers studios to work on a new movie starring Geena Davis.

“I heard she’s really quiet,” Dan said as he sipped his coffee.

“Not so far,” Aubrey replied. “And you should see what she does to food.”

I looked at Dan. “Dare I ask?”

Aubrey sighed and walked over to her car. “No, and I won’t tell you if you do, Joe. Call me later tonight if you want to go out, ok?”

“What about me?” Dan asked.

“It’s Tuesday, Dan, you’ll have homework to grade.”

Dan pouted. “Don’t remind me.” We waved goodbye to Aubrey as she started up her car and pulled into the mess of traffic on Ventura Boulevard. Dan looked at me and smiled. “So?”

“So what?”

“How was the lunch date you had yesterday with that lifeguard from school?”

“Weird. I thought it went well, but when I called him last night to see if he wanted to go out again he gave me the runaround.”

“That sucks.”

“You’re telling me. I still don’t know what I did wrong.”

Dan laughed. “You didn’t pick your nose while he was eating his salad, did you?”

“Certainly not. I honestly thought things went well. We had a nice lunch, we talked about Marxism and Socialism, and then he went to his engineering class. He did, however, seem distracted a great deal of the time.”

“Well where did you have lunch?”

“Chili’s.”

Dan stared at me blankly. “Chili’s?”

“Yes...Chili’s,” I repeated. “What’s wrong?”

“Just what kind of gay finishing school did you go to? You don’t go to *Chili’s* on a first date. You go there much, much later.”

“Well, they have really good margaritas. It was close to school.”

Dan threw his arms up in disgust. “Have I taught you nothing? Image is *everything*. Think about it. Two guys ask you out. One takes you to Spago, the other takes you to Chuck E Cheese. Which one are you going to call back?”

“Chili’s is hardly at the same level as Chuck E. Cheese, Dan.”

“Yeah well, you get the idea.”

All I could do was nod in agreement.

As much as I love Los Angeles, the city still manages to get on my nerves. There are all these unspoken rules to live by if you want to survive. Hell, the traffic conditions on the 405 are enough to make some people pack up and leave. Now traffic jams don’t bug me, but something has to be done about the people! I am not trying to slam the Angelenos. Hell, I’ve lived here all my life, I am one too. But I just have to come out and say it, social ostracism be damned: The people here are too confusing!

I would like to think that I was brought up well by my parents. I believe in honesty. I believe in love. But most folks here are so afraid of getting screwed over that they do it to you first!

“I should have just grown up in Iowa. I wouldn’t have been nearly as disappointed by people.”

“Yes you would have.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because you would have been bored silly, that’s why. People like you can’t sit still for a minute, and Iowa is all about sitting still. And eating corn.”

“Cute. You know, maybe I’m like that because I grew up here. Besides, life there is simple and honest. My mom grew up there and loved it.”

“Well look at your mom...”

“Dan...”

“No, I mean it. She’s still living in Iowa as we speak. Her body may have left the Cornhusker State, but her heart never left Des Moines. You know you would be the exact same way if you left Southern California. Sure, you may hate it now, but the minute you left, you would miss living here.”

I suppose Dan’s right. I may not like the people all the time, but I am helplessly in love with this city. There’s Venice Beach, with all the crazy street performers. There are the Watts Towers, which stand above the surrounding slums like steel sentinels. There are the lights of downtown and of course, the valley. Palm Trees. There’s even something about watching the sun slip gracefully behind the Getty Center, an elaborate palace of white stone that lies perched atop the Santa Monica Mountains like a modern-day Acropolis. That sight, coupled with the dazzling effects LA smog has on the colors of our sunsets, is enough to calm even the most restless of hearts stuck in the Sepulveda Pass during rush hour.

I would miss the beaches, the Thai restaurants open until 4 AM, even the freakshow that is West Hollywood. Somehow, I have let all of this become a part of who I am, and what I want to be. How could I ever leave?



“I suppose you’re right. I mean, how exciting can a cornfield be, anyway?”

Dan nodded and sipped his coffee. For a brief moment, staring into the slowly lifting fog, I felt totally peaceful. Yeah, this town was my home. I could never leave. Dan smiled at me. “Alright, kiddo, it’s seven-thirty. I have to get to school before my students burn the place down.”

“What’s the lesson plan for today?”

“I have no idea.” Dan stood up and stretched his arms over his head. “Maybe I’ll confuse them with a bit of Faulkner. Lord knows I had a terrible time with it in high school.” He strode over to his Mustang, looked at the convertible top for a moment, then smiled. “I’m half tempted to take my top down just because I know how wretched Aubrey must be right now.”

“You can’t be serious.”

Dan opened the car door. “I said I was only half tempted, not totally stupid.” He looked up at the sky and turned back to me. “I may be crazy, but I think it’s a beautiful day today. Could it get any better?”

“Possibly. Maybe some cute guy will rear-end you on the freeway and feel so guilty that he’ll offer to buy you dinner.”

Dan laughed as he got into his car. “Usually I get dinner before he tries to rear-end me!” He slammed his door shut and headed off to work, leaving me at the table, snickering, to study for an hour or two before I had to grab a bus to school.

I would not be surprised if he managed to get a date today. Dan is lucky like that. He has a stable job, he knows what he wants, and he’s not afraid to go out and get it, if it doesn’t find him first. I am not so sure about myself. Even though I am only twenty-two

years old, does that mean I have to feel like I am? I wish more than anything that I could just figure out my life *before* things started to happen. I've only got one year of school left before I enter the real world, and the only thing I've managed to figure out is that I'm lonely. This sucks.

"What happened to your friend?"

I looked up. Chad, Starbucks hottie extraordinaire, was cleaning the table next to mine. "Oh, Dan? He had to go to work."

He frowned. "Well that wasn't very nice, leaving you all alone like that."

I smiled back. "Oh, I'm used to it. His life moves along much faster than mine does."

"I know just what you mean," Chad said as he rearranged the chairs at the table.

"Sometimes I feel like I blink, and something exciting passes right by me."

"I'll say. I could write a book on that feeling."

Chad laughed. "Not me. I'm a terrible writer." He moved on to a table across from me.

"I have to be a good one. It's my major." I mentally smacked myself. That sounded so lame!

"Really? Cool! I'm studying computer science, but I love to read. What do you write?"

I stumbled for words, distracted by the sight of his angular body bent over the green table as he wiped it clean. "Uh, short stories, mostly. It's all pretty much silly stuff, but I have fun doing it. The real stumper is whether or not I'll be able to do it for a living."

Chad caught me checking him out and smiled at me. "I'm sure you'll find a way." The look in his blue-green eyes had me believing him. I glanced away, towards the street.

"I suppose so. I just wish I knew now, you know?"

Again, he laughed. It was a light, pleasant sound that sounded so natural for him, and intoxicating for me. What was happening here? "Ah, the impatience of a creative mind, always wanting tomorrow to come yesterday. Listen, are you gonna be around for awhile?"

I pointed to my book. "Yeah. Midterms. Why?"

"I get a break in ten minutes. I'll keep you company for awhile, if you'd like."

Can't sound too eager. Can't sound excited!!! "I'd like that very much." Was that okay?

"Cool. I'll be out in a few." Chad looked back at me as he disappeared inside.

Cha-ching!!!! I must have smoked like a chimney during those ten minutes, running every possible scenario through my head. What if he doesn't like me? What if he thinks I'm a total dork? What if he asks me out? Aiiiigggh!!

"Okay, I'm back," he said as he walked out and sat down, removing a pack of Marlboros from his pants pocket. "You smoke, right?"

"More than I should." I winced. What a stupid reply!

"Same here. Got a lighter?" I handed him my blue Bic and watched as he lit up and took a drag, closing his eyes. "Ah, hail nicotine. Four hours behind an espresso machine, and this is just what I need."

"I can imagine. I've seen the people that go into Starbucks."

“I swear, if it wasn’t for the benefits, I’d be long gone. Do you work?”

I nodded. “Part time, for a small magazine. I help them with layout stuff when they need me.” Chad looked right at me. I looked down at the table.

“That’s really cool. Does it pay well?”

I looked up. He wasn’t looking. He was staring! Eeek!

“Um, it pays ok. My student loans pay most of my bills, so it’s all pretty much spending money.”

“Right on.” Chad kept looking at me.

“What is it?” I said.

He looked down. “Sorry, I was looking at your eyes. They’re very blue.”

*Please don’t say it...*

“Yours are pretty blue yourself,” I replied.

Suddenly, it was Chad’s turn to get bashful. “Well, yeah, but, but yours are more...”

*Damn. Another one bites the dust.* I might as well finish it for him.

“Intense?” I asked.

“Actually, I was thinking wise or intelligent, but yeah, I guess you could say that.”

A silent thrill shot through me. Finally! Someone who is not obsessed with sex! The Hallelujah Chorus rang in my ears, fully orchestrated and sung, of course, by the Mormon Tabernacle Choir. “Thanks,” I replied. “I was um, going to say the same thing about yours.”

Chad blushed and looked down. “Okay,” he said, “So I have to ask. What is the deal with your friend and his ashtray? Is he one of those obsessive-compulsive people?”

I laughed. “Only about style. About two weeks ago Dan decided we were regulars, and that as such, we have an image to uphold.”

“Oh I get it. Our black plastic ashtrays aren’t good enough for you anymore.”

I gave Chad a consoling pat on the hand. “This is LA, Chad, you know how it is.”

Chad looked at me in surprise. “How did you know my name?”

I gave him the most serious look I could muster. “It’s your nametag.”

Chad looked down at his nametag as if he had never seen it before. “No fair. I don’t know your name, so I can’t look you up in the phonebook and stalk you like I do with all my regulars.”

“My name’s Joe, and you can’t stalk me.”

Chad raised an eyebrow. “Why not?”

I raised an eyebrow back. “Because I’m not popular enough to be stalked yet. I have to write my novel first. Then you can stalk me all you want, but I’ll only break your heart.”

This time, Chad put his hand on mine...and left it there. “Impossible. I’ll break yours first.”

“Is that a dare?”

“Could be, Joe, could be.” Chad winked at me. “Crap. My break’s over.” He pulled a pen out of his pocket and scribbled his telephone number on my notebook. “Call me.” He got up and started for the door.

“Wait,” I said. “I have to ask you something.”

Chad turned. “What?”

“Do you like the B-52s?”

Chad smiled. “I *love* them. Kate Pierson is fabulous.”

I grinned back at him. “Maybe I’ll bring her on our second date.”

“Are you serious?”

“This is L.A., remember? Anything’s possible.”

## chapTer 5

Poor Chad didn't know what hit him. Even though I waited the requisite two days before calling the number he gave me, my attack was quite swift, even for my standards. Even with his stunning eyes and captivating laugh, Chad lost my interest quickly because well...he's really stupid. I don't mean street-wise stupid either. This boy could make Pauly Shore look like a Nobel laureate. I wonder if he's actually *passing* his computer science classes at school. Our first date was a lovely dinner where I learned all about the fascinating world of Starbucks. If it weren't for all the Chilean merlot I drank with my grilled ahi tuna steak, I probably would have got up and left somewhere around when he was explaining the intricacies of selecting the proper grind for my coffeemaker.

Luckily, merlot makes anybody fascinating. Especially the ones with pretty eyes and a handsome face. And a stunning body. All I have to say is...wow. Now I know why girls go after frat boys, even if they are stupid. Unfortunately for yours truly, however, this heart needs something more than just a pretty face. I lost interest in Chad after date three, and quickly altered my morning routine so as to not include the Starbucks at Laurel Canyon. No Kate Pierson sightings for him, I told myself, which worked out great because she never called me anyway. Bah. She's Hollywood, I should have known better. Thankfully, there's another Starbucks less than five blocks away on the same street. At least this city is good for one thing...avoiding people.

On the bright side, Dan appears to have finally met his match in the form of a bookstore manager named Kevin. Every time he comes over to the house, he leaves more of his own things here and Dan doesn't mind one bit. I'm thinking of quietly

bowing out and moving to my own place within the month. Besides the fact that Dan's in love, I think I've just about stayed my welcome here anyway. After all, it has been nine months since I moved in.

Oops, I suppose I forgot to mention that. I know it's mean to go and summarize things like this, but so much has happened that even I barely remember it all. Giving the short version right now is the best way for both of us. Trust me. This way I can leave out the fact that I got drunk out of my mind on New Year's and...I had better just stop there.

That's right, it's March here in Los Angeles, which of course means the weather is a warm 74 degrees and sunny just about every day. Not much changes here in the springtime, but the fog does linger a bit longer in the mornings than usual. Sometimes, if we're lucky, it even rains. My twenty-third birthday passed with little fanfare, and no, I don't feel any older. Perhaps a bit more tired, but that's more attributable to my job than anything else. I spent this past Christmas season working in the most evil of all American institutions, the local shopping mall. It is the same mall with the Bloomingdale's that I won't set foot in thanks to Dan and his goddamn ashtray.

On the bright side, my natural flair for gift-wrap made me a hit with the manager, and she made me her assistant. I was finally able to say goodbye to the world of low-paying internships and was welcomed into the wonderful world of retail with open arms and a full-time job with benefits...at the Gap. I know. I am such a fag.

I guess a lot has happened in the past few months. Life has felt like such a whirlwind, and yet I've made it through unscathed. I've managed to take everything that's happened so far and quietly file it away for future reference, but not lamentation. I've learned a great deal more over this past year than I ever expected to, and I'm actually



quite content. I think the thing I'm most excited about, however, is that I'm dancing again.

I've given up on the notorious clubs of West Hollywood, however. I came to realize that most of the guys there were looking for Mr. Right as they threw back countless beers and danced the night away. Dancing has never meant that for me. I know it sounds selfish, but I'm tired of going into a club and feeling embarrassed because everyone is sizing me up like a piece of meat. They do it to everyone who walks in the door, whether they're cute or not. I don't care what they think about my ass, I just wish they'd stop looking at it so much.

Luckily, I've discovered an alternative to the sex-driven nightclubs that I had thus far been a patron of. In the aftermath of my relationship with David, I had reclaimed many of the friends that I had wrongfully lost touch with over the past two years. One of them, Johnny, took me to a party on the outskirts of San Bernadino, and I have never been the same since. 32,000 kids were running wild through the fairgrounds and dancing to the sound of some truly fierce music. The lights in the exhibition halls blew every club I knew out of the water. The vibe was what I had always felt when I danced, but this time I could tell that everyone felt the same way. Never before had I seen such a celebration of music and life and everything that makes us happy. I found myself at a rave.

\* \* \*

"I can't believe you've never been to a rave, Joe. Of all the people I know, I would have pegged you for a candykid."

I blinked. "A candy what?"

Johnny laughed. “A candykid. They’re the kids at parties who cover themselves with beads and glow-in-the-dark shit and wave glow sticks around. They’re not hard to spot, trust me.”

I looked over at Johnny as I changed lanes on the 10 freeway. “What makes you think I’d be a candy raver? I’ve never even tried ecstasy, let alone gone to a rave.” I gave him a very visible once over. “Besides, I’m not the one with glitter on my face and a pacifier around my neck.”

“Hrm, well, tonight we plan to change all that, Joe.”

“Oh really?”

Johnny gave my leg a pat. “Trust me, you’re going to like this.”

“If I end up naked in a ditch somewhere tomorrow morning, I’m holding you personally responsible.” Johnny laughed and rolled down his window. As the air rushed into the car, I caught the faint smell of the cigarette he had just lit. I was about to roll down my window so I could pollute my own lungs when my cell phone rang. “Hello?”

“Hello, dahhling!”

“Hi Dan. What’s up?”

“I was just calling to see if you would be coming home tonight, or if you were out getting lucky for once.”

“You’re in luck,” I replied. “I’ll be out all night. I’m going to a party and staying with at my friend Johnny’s, so you and Kevin have the place to yourselves. Don’t break any furniture tonight, okay?”

“Why? Did we wake you up last time?”

“Um, no comment. Seriously though, I’ll be back tomorrow afternoon.”

“Lovely. We can all go out for cocktails when you get back then. Have fun tonight, honey!”

“Thanks Dan, you too.” I hit the END button on my phone and resumed rolling down my window.

“Who was that?”

“Oh that was Dan, the guy I’m staying with. Did I ever tell you about him?”

“You mean the guy who climbed up on his roof with a candelabra when the power company shut off his electricity?”

I nodded to Johnny. “That’s the one.”

I ended up parking my car a good three blocks from the fairgrounds to avoid a ten dollar parking charge. As soon as I shut off the engine, Johnny reached into his backpack and pulled out a tiny baggie with pills in it. He handed one to me.

“Put it in your pocket. You won’t want to swallow that without water.”

I stuffed the pill into my jeans pocket. “Why not?”

“Because it tastes like you’re eating pool chemicals.”

“Great. Now I know this stuff is good for me.”

Johnny laughed and got out of my car. “Joe, you have no idea.”

After a search by a gruff security officer that left me feeling quite violated, Johnny and I passed through the gates of the fairgrounds. I gently touched my front pocket to make sure Mr. Grumpy hadn’t smashed it when he was molesting my legs, and felt a single round piece waiting to go down that hatch. I looked around at the scene before us. Kids of all shapes, sizes and colors were running around the grassy areas between the exhibition halls, waving everything they could find that would glow. Small

groups of them were scattered around in little circles on the ground. Music came from every direction, and it all sounded so good. I turned to Johnny. “Well I see where you get your fashion tips. That girl who walked by just now could have fit her twin sister in those pants with her. Where do we find some water?”

“Follow me.” Johnny jogged over to a small trailer that was handing over small bottles of Arrowhead’s finest for the modest fee of three dollars. “What a rip off,” he muttered. “Two please.” We grabbed our waters and wandered back over to the grassy knolls where all the kids were chilling out on the ground. We sat down with some friends of his and I was introduced to a girl named Shayna with bright pink hair, pigtails, and a Pikachu backpack; Rick, whose pants could have easily held three of him; and James, who was dressed like one of the many yummy skater boys I drooled over back in the valley. His brown hair was closely shaved, and I could make out the bottom half of a tribal tattoo just below his left sleeve.

Johnny pulled out his pill and swallowed it, and motioned for me to do the same. I pulled it out of my pocket and stared at the pill. It was white, with a tiny picture of a Buddha on it. “What’s in here, anyways?”

Johnny took another gulp of water. “Ecstasy, and probably a little speed, too. They usually cut it with speed to make the high last longer.”

Shayna turned to me. “Is this your first rave, Joe?”

“Um, yeah. Don’t tell anyone, okay?” I giggled. “I don’t want to look like some loser newbie or anything.”

“Well in that case, you’ll need some candy.” Shayna pulled one of her bracelets off and handed it to me. Rick looked at his collection and then followed suit. James didn’t have any on, but he nodded and pulled a lollipop out of his backpack.

“You’ll want this later, trust me.”

I thanked them all and listened as they all told me about their first raves. Most of them, with the exception of Rick, had been going to parties for over two years. This one was only Rick’s fourth, but he was already hooked on the scene. Each of their stories was pretty much the same. The club scene sucked, the people were mean, and so they went looking for something better. Raves offered many different kinds of music, along with the advantage that they were all-ages. Everyone was welcome, and everyone new was made to feel welcome. Then it was my turn to talk.

“So what kind of music do they play at parties like this?”

“Well, there’s about five major types of music at raves,” James answered. “The first is house. That’s like the stuff they play at clubs. Then there’s trance, which is faster, more electronic sounding, and usually has no lyrics. Jungle, my favorite, has a lot of bass and break beats. There’s not much melody in the music, but it really thumps and gets you moving.

“The really fast stuff is hardcore and happy hardcore. Hardcore is really dark, evil sounding music that moves real fast, around 140 beats per minute. That’s where you’ll find all the speaker fuckers hanging out because hardcore’s beats are loud and fast. Happy hardcore though, sounds like house music that got sped up. It’s usually some high-pitched voice singing happy words to upbeat music that’s really fast.”

“That’s my favorite,” Shayna added. “Most candy kids are happy hardcore fans because the music is really happy and about love and stuff. And when you’re rolling, you get really happy.” Shayna giggled and popped her pacifier in her mouth.

I turned to Johnny. “What’s your favorite?”

Johnny stared off for a second before answering me. “Well, I used to be really big on happy hardcore, but now I dig jungle and drum n’ bass. The guys who dance to that stuff are insane. They do all kinds of eighties break dancing shit, and it’s way cool to watch.” He stared off in the distance again. “I think I’m rolling.”

I looked out at the crowds of kids on the grass. “How do you tell when you’re rolling?”

Rick sat up and smiled. “First things start to look a little prettier than before. Then you’ll start to feel fuzzy and want to touch everything. I’ll tell ya one thing, man. Nothing beats kissing someone when you’re rolling. It’s like no other kiss you’ve had before.”

Suddenly I felt very fuzzy. The night sky slowly lit up and became brighter than it had ever been before. The music seemed to get louder, surrounding me from a distance. I felt the grass beneath me for the first time. It was crisp, cool, and delicate. I could feel each and every blade on the tips of my fingers as my hands brushed across its surface. I looked down. “whoa.”

Suddenly, everyone broke into laughter and started clapping. Johnny grabbed my shoulders and shook them. “Welcome to the party, Joe!” He grabbed me and pulled me onto my feet. “We’ll catch you guys later. I’m going to take this boy dancing.”

Shayna stood up and gave me what had to be the best hug I’ve ever had in my entire life. “Have fun, Joe. We’ll see you later, ok?” I simply nodded and followed after

Johnny in a state of wonder. He led us into one of the exhibition halls and we pushed our way inside. The floor was packed with people bouncing and jumping to what had to be James' description of trance music. The electronic sounds and rhythms pulsed right through me like a wave of energy and I couldn't help dancing and bouncing around like everyone else. After only thirty seconds in the hall, I knew I was in love. I was dancing again.

In no time at all, I was copying the moves of all the other kids around me. And unlike the clubs where you bump and grind to the music, here your whole body just moves like there's no tomorrow. My feet kicked out in every direction and my arms followed suit. And every time a really good tune came soaring out over the crowd from the DJ's table on stage, I jumped and cheered right alongside everyone else in there. I felt like every breath I took brought me closer to some place where nothing but the music mattered. My entire soul was free, and the music had set it loose.

I danced until 7am. Even then, as Mr. Grumpy and his band of uniformed blue meanies were herding us out the gates of the fairgrounds, I could still feel the energy of the night flowing through my veins. I knew that I could never go to a club again and feel the same. Here there was no attitude, no meat market. Instead there was only this powerful connection to the music that everyone shared and loved. These people...they didn't come here to get laid. They simply came to dance. I felt like I had finally come home.

"I think I'm going to pass out."

I looked at Johnny and laughed. "Why? I swear, I could do this for at least three more hours."

Johnny groaned. “well then it’s good that you’re driving. When you’ve gone to as many parties as I have though, you’ll be singing a different tune. Are you really okay to drive?”

The effects of the ecstasy had worn off a good three hours ago, but I was still floating on the rush of adrenaline the night had given me. I nodded. “I don’t now why, but I’m still wired. I could really go for a Pepsi though.”

“Hell yeah. I’m so thirsty right now that I could drink a lake.”

We got in the car and pulled into the first gas station we saw. Inside, the mini mart was packed with kids cracked out from the night before. As I was standing in line, I felt a tap on my shoulder. It was Shayna.

“Hey you! Did you have fun?”

“Oh my god,” I replied. “Where has this been all my life?”

Shayna laughed and handed me another bracelet. “Now you’re on your own. You have to make some to give out to the cool people you meet at parties. They’re like friendship bracelets.”

“Right on. How many of yours did you make?”

Shayna looked at her arms. “Well, I only have two left. The rest of these are all from other kids I’ve met. That’s what’s so cool. Everyone just shares and has a good time. I gave out like ten bracelets last night, not counting you.”

“Wow, that’s so cool! I can’t wait to go to my next rave.”

Shayna smiled. “Then I’ll see you around. Peace!”

“Peace,” I said back. It sounded silly, but that was okay. I got back in the car and Johnny had already fallen asleep. As I drove back to his house in Huntington Beach, I



found myself bouncing in my seat to the music in my head. I dropped Him off, and drove back to Dan's by myself, enjoying the solitude of the early Los Angeles morning when everything is still quiet. I pulled into the driveway just in time to catch him and Kevin stepping out for breakfast at Twain's.

"Hey you," Dan called out. "How was the party?"

"Amazing. Those club kids have no idea what they're missing. The music is so much better!"

Dan laughed. "Well you look like you've been listening to it all night long. We're going to breakfast, wanna join?"

I shook my head. "No thanks, I think I need a nap. The night is finally catching up to me." I let out a nice long yawn and walked into the house. I fell down onto my bed without even undressing first and closed my eyes. All I could think about was my next party. I couldn't wait for my next chance to dance for an entire night with all those people. Maybe here, at these wonderful gatherings, these nocturnal wonderlands, I would find someone a bit like me. Maybe he would like the same stuff I do. Maybe he would even be worth dating.

## chapTer 6

The days are once again getting longer and warmer as June spreads its wings and hovers lazily over the west coast, most noticeably, at the beaches. It is a month I usually dread, because it signals that I have gone through another year, and must suffer a birthday to prove it. So what am I doing on this glorious day? I'm at the beach too, dammit. What better way to spend a summer afternoon than at the beach with friends? There's nothing quite like packing a car full of kids and driving out to Malibu for an afternoon of sand castles and sunburns. It wasn't actually my idea to come here, but I'm going along with it because, well, I didn't have anything better planned. Shayna called me this morning and told me I was being kidnapped. So here I am, with four other raver kids, basking in the southern California sun...and contemplating.

Blah, now I'm 23 years old. About the only thing this moment is doing for me is filling my head with questions about where I want to go, what I want to do and who I want to be. They are, in fact, the same questions that hit me hard in the chest last year when I turned 22. I don't know why I think I have come up with any answers yet. How can I possibly have any answers to such deep questions when I have trouble deciding what to eat for dinner each night? If there's anything I have learned so far, it is that life here changes much too quickly for me to have any long-term plans. These four people I'm with are a perfect example. Three months ago, you wouldn't have seen me hanging out with Shayna, Rick, James or Johnny on a regular basis. Why? Because I didn't know them, or the scene that they are a part of. You wouldn't have found me at a rave, Nordic-Tracking with all of them in the trance room, either. But here we are, with a boom box

belching out the latest cd from Christopher Lawrence, getting a few drops of sunlight before we go out partying tonight.

I suppose at least that much has changed about me. I'm letting go of the rules for once and really taking the time to have fun with my life, my friends. Who cares if I'm single? I'm having a blast! Guys are jerks, anyway! Before my very eyes, my pants are getting bigger. I have candy bracelets on my wrists. I'm dying my hair. Lord help me, I'm becoming a raver.

So this is 23. Sitting on the beach, blah blah blah, my life, blah blah blah. Let's hope it gets more interesting from here...

\* \* \*

"So how does it feel to be 23?"

I glanced over to my left at Shayna, who was laid out on her towel, shades securely fastened to her face. I was on my back, trying my hardest to convert my natural Casper-like skintone to a color more Californian. "Bleargh," I replied. "Not much different from 22, except for the walker I'm using to get around."

"Ooh, we'll have to decorate it," she said, nonplussed. "If It's any consolation, 21 wasn't all they made it out to be either. So you can buy vodka, big deal." Shayna rolled over onto her stomach so her backside could cook for a while. "I had my first drink at fifteen."

Either she inadvertently stumbled onto that little nugget of truth without realizing it, or she just knew something I didn't. Whatever the case, I couldn't have agreed more. So far, life had felt very much like a simple game of waiting to reach these turning points where something cool was supposed to happen. Except every time, I kept finding out I

had been doing that something already. “I’m just waiting to turn 25,” I said as I flipped onto my stomach, “so my car insurance will go down.” I let my face rest against the cool cotton of the towel as my back drank in the heat of the sun.

“Can I get an amen in here,” came Shayna’s voice from my right.

“Amen!” we all said back.

James was lying on the other side of me on his stomach, facing me. “You are so white.”

I turned my head to face him. “Why do you think I’m here? Not everyone is as golden brown as you.”

He smiled. “Genetics are a beautiful thing, my friend. Cigarette?”

“How could I say no?”

We both sat up on our towels and I accepted the cigarette James pulled out of his backpack. “These are special cigarettes. I made them this morning.”

I let him light it and took a drag, only to discover that he had filled the Camel light with some really good pot. “James, you are a prince.”

He grinned at me. “Don’t let it get out, okay? I got a reputation to uphold.” I took another drag off the pseudo-joint and offered it to Shayna, who hit it and passed it over to Johnny and Rick. James passed his to mine. “We’ll share this one. Let them have yours.” I nodded and took a hit before handing it back to James. He took a hit and held the smoke in as long as he could. When he exhaled, only the palest traces of smoke were visible. “I turn 23 in a week myself, you know.”

“Cool. We can be bitter old farts together.”

“Sounds like a plan to me, chief. Just remember that whatever we do, you’re responsible.”

“And why’s that?”

“Because you’re older, jackass,” came Shayna’s voice.

“You people suck!”

“And sometimes we swallow,” added Johnny.

## chapTer 7

The clock on my desk read 4 a.m., but I was far from tired. Inspiration always struck me at inconvenient times, which was why I always carried a notebook. Sometimes it would be on my lunch break, but more often it was during an important lecture on nineteenth century American drama. Occasionally, I was lucky enough for it to strike at home where my computer sat waiting for me to feed it another nugget of a story. But tonight the computer was off. I was in bed, writing in my trusty notebook with my favorite pen instead. Sometimes the words flowed easier when I was actually writing my thoughts down on paper instead of punching plastic keys.

I paused to flip through the pages of many unfinished chapters. Somehow I had to put them all together in a way that made sense. The desire was beginning to feel more personal these days. Creating a work of fiction for my senior project wasn't as important to me as finding an answer now was. It had become creativity for the most selfish of reasons. With each page I wrote, I became less worried over the lives of my characters and more worried about my own. Was I still writing a novel? I didn't know anymore. All I knew was that I had to keep writing.

Dan had gone to bed hours ago. The only sounds in the quiet that came this late at night were the chimes from the living room clock every fifteen minutes and the scribbling of a pen against notebook paper, college rule. I stopped to listen to the world around me and felt uneasiness settle into my stomach, a sensation only silence is allowed to bring. My answer, whatever it was, remained hidden in the shadows of consciousness. If I were ever to find it, I would have to keep writing. And thinking.

\* \* \*

I grew up in a suburb of a suburb of the great city in which the angels dwell. My hometown was surrounded by mountains that funneled the Santa Ana winds expertly along the valley floor with a ferocity that knocked oak trees down on a regular basis. In fact, the name of the city was derived from the language of the native Chumash Indians, and means “valley of the wind.” But the wind did not always come from the east. Sometimes, when the thick silence of one hundred thousand people going to sleep at a decent hour descended upon the city, I could hear winds coming from every direction. It was a sound I never got used to.

I spent my entire childhood growing up in one house with one mother and one father who were married to each other the whole time. This alone drew strange looks from my friends, whose broken families were the California norm. We lived on the western edge of the city, in a neighborhood that had been built upon an old orange grove. Every home on the surrounding six streets was custom built, so we had real backyards that you could actually play in. It frightens me to think how rare such neighborhoods are in Southern California. Everyone I know lives in a cookie cutter stucco house that is part of a tract of 500 houses or apartments that look just like it. *Everyone.*

In the springtime, our driveway would be blanketed with the orange blossoms that fell from the nine Valencias that lined the sides. They were so white that my mother used to call it “California snow.” She would say those words with a note of sadness that betrayed the fact that she had grown up in the Midwest. She and my father came from the same small town, about twenty miles away from Notre Dame University. I’ve only visited it five times, and three of those times were for funerals. Ironically, in that town of

only a few thousand, they didn't meet each other until high school. To this day, I don't think she has ever forgiven him for taking a job out west.

I was never alone in our house on Capri Street. My two brothers and I grew up together while our parents both worked to keep us in private school. We would play outdoors until the curtain of night made games impossible. Our neighborhood had no streetlights or sidewalks, so outside was forbidden after dark. Indoors was where imagination took over, especially for my younger brother Chris and I. We had every Hot Wheels car and Transformer toy there was. We built cities out of Legos and spent days pretending to be the people that lived there. We read books constantly, and would trade them back and forth like they were baseball cards. But we always stayed outside as long as we could. The outdoors was our true sanctuary.

I can remember lying in the backyard underneath this towering jacaranda tree that leaned against the small rolling hill that followed the side of our split-level house. Behind the tree sat a fat juniper bush that blocked the view of the concrete pathway that led from the side door to the lower patio in a wide descending arc. In the lazy spring afternoons when it was still possible to sit outside without breaking into a sweat, I would waste an entire afternoon just lying there under the shade of the tree with a good book.

This was especially true after our father came home from work. The three of us were quite adept at staying out of his way because we knew how short his temper could be. On the outside, I admired my father's courage to stop drinking when we were still young. Inside, however, there was always a tiny amount of fear next to a tower of pity for the man who could not control the anger that had replaced the bottle. My mother was the only one in the family who ever noticed the way I would sometimes look at him with a



mixture of sadness and charity upon my face. More than once she said I had the face of a child and the eyes of a wise old man.

If you saw my brothers and I out together, you wouldn't think we were brothers, not at least until we talked. Mike was the oldest, with black hair that he eventually wore down to the small of his back in high school. His skin was a muted olive color, a sharp contrast to Chris and I who were a very Irish shade of white. He usually wore a smile on his face that bordered between cocky and insane. His laughter was maniacal, especially when he was in the mood to practice the moves he saw on WWF wrestling on us. Being six years older than me, he had the power to fill me with awe or dread. Chris and I were always on our toes.

Chris was 15 months younger than I, and as skinny as the banister railing of our staircase. His dark brown hair fell in loose curls round his forehead, framing his hazel eyes and rosy cheeks. Chris was the really athletic one when we were kids. He did track and soccer until junior high, where he discovered the passion of playing music. He had a fascination with machinery that he inherited from our grandfather, a toolmaker back in Goshen. There was always curiosity on his face, which usually got him and I into shitloads of trouble. Once, after watching MacGuyver on television, we decided to be as inventive as him and make a bomb out of matchsticks, firecrackers and a plastic toy. When we lit the fuse, a cloud of smoke and the smell of burning plastic filled the backyard, getting us grounded for a week.

And then there was me. I rounded out our trio, literally. I was the neighborhood fat kid. My fat was sneaky about it, too. I was fine until about four or five, at which point I ballooned out like, well, a balloon. My floppy bangs, which had looked cute before,

now only served to round out my face even more. Streaks of blond would appear in my hair during the summer months, making me look like a poster boy for German sausages. Then, thankfully, I grew into my weight throughout high school and even lost some of it when I started college. My waist size today is smaller than it was in sixth grade. To this day, I can't take compliments well because I was so used to getting laughed at as a kid. But in all honesty, I'm thankful to be modest. In the long run, it saves you from getting hurt.

We brothers were united, if for anything, for one another. Although he seldom showed it openly, I knew Mike cared for us. Even when he was a complete jackass to us, I was never afraid of getting hurt if he was around. He had a strength that wasn't just muscle, but will. He got into more scrapes and bruises than Chris and I put together. At the time, I thought he alone possessed strength equal to our father's. Chris and I would simply escape to our imaginations or our books, but Mike actually stood up to him. Every time I looked in his eyes I saw so much struggle and pain. But I knew that he must have been really strong if he could keep taking more on. When I was 18, he moved with his girlfriend to San Francisco. I moved into the dorms at UCLA the following week. At that point I really understood how much he meant to me because of how badly I missed him, but living on our own was an intoxicating prospect to us both.

I spent a lot of time in my room growing up. Shutting out the world became such a normal thing for me to do when my parents fought, that I paid it no heed. I had no idea it would actually be beneficial. I started reading and listening to music at a very early age. I can remember sitting in my closet with a copy of Tom Sawyer and my walkman, with a Beach Boys tape from Chris and a Def Leppard tape from Mike. What I ended up doing

was creating a thirst for reading that caused me to get pulled out of private school and put into the public school's gifted program. Avoiding my father had now caused me to read Shakespeare in fourth grade. In high school I joined band, choir and drama like a good gay boy should, only I still didn't realize I was gay. The last two years were the hardest, because I realized I was falling in love with my football-playing best friend, but I couldn't understand why. In retrospect, I was pretty damn naïve all throughout my adolescence. My mother must have known early, though. When I was eight I asked for an Easy Bake Oven for Christmas. I had a dolly until I was twelve. I had homo written all over me since birth, and everyone saw it growing up except me. I wish the fuckers had said something.

Freshman year at UCLA was like a dream. I made some of my best friends while living in the dorms. I discovered the thrill of dancing at a club. I got stoned for the first time. I lost my virginity. Somehow, I got up the courage to go to the LGBT center on campus. I came out, first to mom, and then a year later to dad. That same year they got a divorce. Don't worry, it wasn't my fault. It just took them thirty years to realize they really didn't like each other enough to live together. What amazed me was that my mom stuck it out all those years until the three of us were grown up to hand him the papers. They decided to make it an amicable divorce and settle out of court. Two weeks later, she found out he had been sleeping with another woman for the past nine months. And here I was, thinking real life does not imitate the crap you see on television. The truth is, television can't even compete. The following year, I met Dan Bernard at a New Years Eve party in Encino that one of my friends from Internet chat threw. We became friends

instantly, and dated briefly. Although we realized a romance would never happen, the friendship we formed was and is unbreakable.

That same year I did something I never thought would happen to me while I was at college. I slept with one of my professors. The whole incident both shocked and titillated me, and I credit it to finally coming out of my shell. From the age of four to eighteen, I had been on medication to control a seizure disorder that I eventually grew out of. Getting off that medication was a turning on a light bulb. I had gone from zombie to crack monkey in a matter of months. It felt like my whole life was changing. And then I met David, and it got even crazier.

I was working the summer of my junior year at Magic Mountain, an amusement park near Los Angeles. We worked at the same restaurant as servers, a burger bar disguised as an alpine hunting lodge with animatronic moose. We dressed up like boy scouts and ran around tables with fake smiles before sneaking outside behind the kitchen to smoke cigarettes with the other servers and bitch about shitty tippers. I noticed his handsome face, and he noticed my legs. It wasn't long before we were making out in the back stockroom. For the first time in my life, I experienced the love that I had read about so often in novels. I would become speechless if I looked into his blue eyes too long. We lived together for a year before I caught him cheating on me. Again, that television drama had crept into my life, this time in the worst of ways. I had never felt so betrayed, ever. But the time we had together was priceless nevertheless. We went to London together for spring break, where David had lived with his mother for three years. It was the most intense year and a half of my life, but I had zero regrets about any of it, even losing him.

A look back at the past twenty years scares me. I wonder how I will be able to keep in touch with all the incredible people that have come in and out of my life. There are still so many I haven't even mentioned, and I've only met most of them in the past four years. No wonder everyone in this town has a cell phone. We all took networking to a new level without realizing it.

I went to high school with an amazing girl named Christina Garcia. We met in band camp, sophomore year. She once told me that everything happens for a reason. She said that throughout life, we met the people we were supposed to meet, and we learned something from each other. The trick was putting the pieces together and finding an answer that made sense. For all her wisdom, Christina always seemed just as far from an answer as I was. Nevertheless, I still think she's right.

\* \* \*

I set my pen down on the nightstand. My notebook slid casually off the bed and onto the floor, as if agreeing that it was bedtime. I turned off the bedside lamp and pulled the covers up to my shoulders. The book wouldn't fit on the nightstand anyway. I lay there in the darkness, wondering if I was any close to finding whatever it was that I was trying to find. My mind was exhausted by my memories of an innocent and educational childhood. I had to get up again in five hours, but it isn't hard to work retail on little or no sleep. Sometimes, it's even more enjoyable that way. I grabbed the remote to my stereo from the nightstand and switched it on. Ani DiFranco's voice whispered her aggression to me as I felt myself slipping into unconsciousness. There was a girl who had figured out how to make lemonade. When was it my turn?

## chapTer 8

I left Gray Cottage tonight to do something I haven't done in a long time...go clubbing. Perhaps my absence from the West Hollywood club scene for the past few months spawned some idealistic hope that it might be fun...yeah right. The honest truth is that Aubrey found this great club that plays all eighties and early nineties tunes, the stuff we grew up on. She's been trying to get me to go with her for a good three weeks now, and I'm so fed up with Dan that I've given in to her demands. He's given new depth to the concept of mood swings ever since The Great Love Disaster happened a week ago, and he still hasn't told me what happened between him and Kevin. Although I was not actually present at said disaster, I got the gist of it from Aubrey, who accidentally walked in on it when she was returning a few cd's of mine that she had borrowed.

The clue phone rang the moment she stepped inside the door and onto the remains of what was once a plate from Dan's china collection. When the words "you son of a bitch" echoed from the direction of his bedroom, she knew this was going to be good and ducked into my room and shut the door to escape being seen. True to her industry gossip whore nature, Aubrey was ready to record all the juicy details for further discussion over cocktails with yours truly. Tonight was the night she planned to spill the beans, as if learning from her about what really happened that day was reason enough to go out to a club with her. Dammit if she isn't right on the money.

She finally spilled the beans when I got into her car and we headed over the hill into Boystown. "So after I got into your room, the real screaming began. Dan started shouting about how shocked he was, and how he couldn't believe Kevin was into 'that kind of thing' or something. It was kind of hard to hear, so I had to go into your closet."

I looked over at Aubrey. “How wonderfully ironic. What kind of thing, did he mean?”

“Well, I wasn’t sure for a few minutes, but then he started talking about the internet and EBay.”

“EBay? What the hell was Kevin buying on EBay?”

Aubrey laughed. “That’s exactly what I was thinking. He kept saying Dan didn’t understand, and that it wasn’t what he thought it was. Then Dan screamed it wasn’t hard to understand what buying dirty underwear from college boys meant.”

“Oh my god,” I chuckled.

“It took every ounce of strength in my body not to wet myself! He kept screaming for Kevin to get out, and while he was protesting, I made my escape. It’s no wonder Dan’s so pissy right now.”

“Wow. It kind of makes you wonder just how many relationships Ebay has ruined over the years.”

“I want to know what they put on the divorce papers. Does it say Irreconcilable Auctions?”

As horrible as the whole situation was, we couldn’t help but make fun of Dan’s latest love wreck. The whole ride to West Hollywood was a nonstop joke fest between the two of us. I was finally able to control my giggles somewhere around Santa Monica Blvd and La Cienega. “So where are we off to this fine Monday night, Aubrey?”

“Have you ever been to Rage on a Monday night?”

“I haven’t been to Rage since I was 20. What’s so special about Monday nights?”

“Two things. No Cover, and mosh pit.”

“Mosh pit? You mean they play alternative music and not the regular stuff?”

“You got it, Bri. And let me just tell you how cute the boys are. You’re going to love it.”

*(Chapter Unfinished)*



## chapTer 9

Christmas was three days away, which meant my mom would be calling at any moment to find out just how long I would be staying so she could plan the 11 unnecessary meals she would need to prepare. Included in the inquisition was an open invitation to join her at midnight mass, something I had never been a fan of. Although my mother had accepted the fact that my religious beliefs were an unholy marriage of Buddha, Wicca and Yoda, there was always a tiny ray of hope that her son would come back to the flock. Every year my attempts to crush this light out of existence had failed miserably.

I suppose I shouldn't have started off by telling her at age 17 that I believed in The Force. Although this expression had been a simple way of describing what I felt to my friends, my mother was not the lover of *Star Wars* that we were. After long talks, however, she came to understand what I meant. The very next night she asked me if I was on drugs. I didn't even try pot until I was a freshman in college.

*(Chapter Unfinished)*

## chapTer 10

The leaves on the cement walkways that led to the liberal arts buildings were a mixture of green and jaundice, thanks to the erratic weather of another Southern California spring. As darkness began to ooze over the campus, I began to regret my decision to wear board shorts and a t-shirt to class. The day had started out at eight degrees, but Ma Nature had pulled one over on me yet again. A light breeze tickled my arms and legs as I walked towards room 202. It was easily 65 now. By the time class was over, it would be closer to 50. I was going to freeze my butt off tonight walking back to my car, but that was okay. In my hand was a receipt from the campus bookstore for the graduation announcements I had just ordered. In less than two month's time, I would be a college graduate.

I looked at the receipt and smiled. After five long years, it was finally coming to an end. College had been without a doubt the best time of my life. Where was I going to go from here? Only fate knew what lay in the chapters ahead. To me, the greatest mystery was whether or not the ending was any good. For now, another chapter was coming to a close...almost.

I sat down in the middle of a row next to the windows that lined the far wall of the classroom. Class started in five minutes, so low-volume chatter floated above the desks while we all waited for our professor to come in ten minutes late as usual. Most people were discussing what was going to be on next week's exam. I was focused on my book and reading the assigned poems for today's lecture. I didn't notice when Edgar sat down next to me because I was too busy reading Lucille Clifton's "Homage To My Hips." I

did, however, notice his foot nudging my backpack out of the corner of my eye as I scanned the poem. I looked up at him and smiled.

“Hey,” he said.

“Hey Edgar. How’s it going?”

He let a relaxed, impish smile creep across his face and disappear again. “What are you doing after class?”

I raised an eyebrow. “I usually go home, why?”

He leaned across the aisle. “You smoke?”

I nodded.

“Cool. Want to hang out for a bit after class? I live on campus.”

My head really wanted to know why he was inviting me over to his dorm to smoke a bowl. Until now, Edgar hadn’t said so much as “boo” to me, and the semester was half over. Why was a cute boy like Edgar suddenly inviting me over to his room? He must have sensed my hesitation.

“Um, I also wanted to know if you would read my paper for the class.”

“Ah.”

He stammered, “I mean, I know you write for the school paper. I just thought you could give me some pointers, you know?”

I didn’t remember having mentioned that little nugget of information in class, so I knew he wasn’t being completely honest with me about his motives. But what the hell? Who was I to resist a cute boy’s invitation to hang out in the dorms? It sounded positively lascivious. I smiled at him. “Sure, Edgar, that sounds cool.”

The grin reappeared on his face. “Awesome.” With that, he buried his face in his own textbook and pretended to occupy himself. I, however, did not go back to Miss Clifton and her hips. I was too busy watching Edgar. His brown hair was cut short on the sides, but he kept his bangs long enough just to splay them haphazardly around his forehead like he had just rolled out of bed. Some guys could do that look easily. Others, like me, spent 10 minutes in the bathroom trying to get their hair to look like that. I couldn’t really see his eyes, but I knew they were a shade somewhere between blue and green. His skin was somewhat golden, but not overdone. He looked like he spent about as much time worrying about his tan as he did with his hair. Twice during class, he caught me looking at him and both times he smiled mischievously. This was study date was looking more like a date every minute.

One and a half agonizing hours later, we left the classroom exhausted. I pulled my cigarettes out of my pocket and prepared to light one up. “It is my firm belief that classes on the study of poetry could replace capitol punishment cheaply and effectively.”

Edgar laughed. “In that case, I want to know what I did to get the sentence.”

We passed underneath a light and I caught his eye for a moment. “You and me both,” I replied. We walked in silence for a minute until we reached a fork in the campus pathway.

“This way,” he said, leading us up towards Sunset Village. “I’m in Courtside. Hey Joe, did you ever live in the dorms?”

“Yeah, they put me in Griffin. Not as nice. But I had some friends in one of the Village buildings. Nice rooms.”

“It was hard to get my own room there. Too many people want to live there to begin with. I started out the year with a roommate, but he had to go home, and they said I could pay more and keep the room to myself, so I did. So what do you do at the Daily Bruin, Sullivan?”

“What don’t I do,” I muttered. “I’ve written for just about every section, and edited three of them. Somehow I avoided being editor in chief. Nowadays, I write when I feel like it. Nobody objects when I do, and everyone there treats me like some wizened old sage. The EIC is constantly asking me for advice. It’s kind of half funny and half creepy. I imagine I’m going to miss it.”

“Wow, that’s...”

“Hey Edgar!”

We turned. A blonde who looked like a shorter version of Pamela Lee, complete with oversized breasts, was chasing after us. I glanced at Edgar and saw his face change from curious to cool. We stopped and waited for the Mini-Pam to catch up. “Her name’s Carolyn,” he whispered. “She lives on my floor.” He paused a moment, and an amused grin quickly crept across his face. “I think she likes me. Watch this.” He armed himself with what I thought was an obviously fake smile, which she took for sincere pleasure. I tried not to laugh as she hugged him.

“Hi,” I said, extending my hand. “I’m Joe.”

“Nice to meet you.” She looked at Edgar. “So what are you boys up to?”

Edgar looked at me. “We were headed over to my room to study for class. There’s this paper due next week and I’ve called in reinforcements.”

Carolyn's smile disappeared. "Oh, damn." She studied Edgar as if trying to decide if he was lying. "My roommate has the same problem. I was going to ask if you wanted to go see *Save Ferris* with me." She looked down at the ground and chuckled. "Actually, the closest Sharon will come to studying tonight is bent over a bookcase at her boyfriend's place."

Edgar howled with laughter. "Shit, that's funny. And I love Mo, but I have to get this done tonight. Maybe some other time?" I felt an awkward moment pass between the two of them. Time to distract myself. I shifted my backpack onto my left shoulder and looked up at the sky, knowing full well that the lights of Westwood would drown out all but the brightest few stars.

"Call me tomorrow," she said before hugging Edgar again. "It was nice meeting you, Joe."

I turned around. "Yeah, ditto Carolyn. See you around," I called to her as she started off again. We waited for a few seconds to give her some distance between us. I turned to Edgar and grinned. "You think she likes you? Shit, what was your first clue?"

"Yeah, shut up. She's nice and all, but..."

"But," I repeated, still looking at him.

Edgar held my gaze, shifting his feet. "I guess she's just not my type, you know?" He turned away and started up the path again. "So is your paper finished?"

"I already turned it in."

"Motherfucker. I think mine needs about eleven rewrites."

I laughed. “Well, I don’t usually get so productive with assignments, but I have to miss class next week. I didn’t have a choice. Usually I write them the day before they’re due. I’m a total procrastinator.”

“But you still get good grades, don’t you?”

“Sometimes,” I said with a grin.

“Bastard!”

\* \* \*

By the time we reached Edgar’s room, there was so much sexual tension in the air between us that I’m surprised MTV wasn’t filming us for a future episode of Undressed. Note to self: Track down a writer on that show and if this gets good, sell him the story.

“You can hang out as long as you want,” he said as he unlocked the door.

“What if my arms get tired? I mean, I enjoy hanging as much as the next guy, but I’m no Navy SEAL.”

Edgar opened the door and motioned me inside. “Wanna smoke before or after you read my paper, smartass?”

“Before,” I said absently as I looked at his room. “I won’t be as cruel.” His bed was under a window in the corner opposite the door. Next to the window was a poster for the Offspring. The typical dorm amenities were there- a desk, computer, 13” TV and a mini-fridge. “Gee, I think I lived here a couple of years ago...”

Edgar shut the door. “Yeah, they all pretty much look the same, don’t they? I guess there’s only so much you can do with a 12’x12’ box and a window.”

“No kidding,” I said. I took a seat at his desk and turned the chair to face the bed, where he was sitting. He reached under the bed and pulled out a gorgeous glass bong.

Swirls of blue and green danced around the base as if the glassblower had trapped the ocean in it.

“Birthday present,” he said, noticing my interest. “Before that, I just had one of those crappy metal pipes.”

I knew the pipes well. Every single pot smoking friend I knew had one. Shayna gave me one on my birthday, and the piece of shit was currently taking up residence in my sock drawer. I prefer a glass pipe, thanks.

Edgar set the bong down on the floor. “Can you hand me that box on the bookshelf?”

I looked behind me and grabbed a small hexagonal wooden box with gold patterns on the top that was sitting on the first shelf of the bookcase above his desk. “This one?”

Edgar nodded. “Open it.”

I lifted the top of the box and inhaled the herbal scent that always reminded me of fresh cut basil. “Nice,” I said as I passed the box to him.

“My term paper is on the desk too.” He added, “you might want to read it before you’re fucked up, though. This is pretty good stuff.”

I nodded, and since I had nothing better to do I picked up his paper, finishing it in the time it took him to pack a bowl. “It’s good. Your argument is strong, and you support it well. I think you’ll be fine, as long as you tighten up your grammar here and there.”

Edgar looked surprised. “Really? Damn, you didn’t even smoke yet. Wow, thanks. Truth be told, I pulled that paper out of my ass last night.”



I smiled. “The best papers I’ve ever written have been the ones that I finished at 4 a.m. the day they were due.”

“I wish I had your luck. Here.” Edgar passed the bong to me and handed me a lighter. I took a slow hit through the bong and exhaled out my nose before pulling the remaining smoke into my lungs. A series of coughs followed for about ten seconds.

“Do you smoke often?”

I passed the bong and lighter back to him. “Not really. In fact, I’ve only bought my own sack twice. I’m pretty much a social smoker. The only thing I’m hooked on is these damn cigarettes.”

“Ah, a pot whore.” Before I could protest his accusation, he hit the bong and the noise drowned out any counterpoint I would have made. We took turns taking hits until I was too faded to give him any more pointers on his paper that made sense. Edgar put on a Smashing Pumpkins CD and we both sat cross-legged on the floor of his dorm room, facing each other.

“I’ve got a confession to make,” he said as I turned his bong in my hand, examining it.

I set it down and looked up at him. “Oh?”

“Yeah. My paper wasn’t the only reason for bringing you here.”

My eyes held his in a stare. “It wasn’t?” I smiled. “Was there something else you wanted me to go over?”

“In a matter of speaking, yes.” Edgar scooted his knees closer, so they were touching mine. He leaned forward until our lips were touching too. A gentle shock went through my body as his full lips pressed lightly against my own, urging them to part. As I

let them, his tongue explored my mouth with the precision only an expert in the art of kissing has. I broke the kiss off just long enough to take my shirt off, and Edgar did the same. For a few moments, we sat there looking at each other's bodies. There was no trace of farmer tan on this boy. His golden skin was toned, but not overbuilt. The slightest trail of hair led from his navel down into his jeans. Jesus, this was like porn. Except it was actually happening...

"Nice," was all I had words to say.

I woke up to the sweet fragrance of Edgar's body pressed against mine, side-by-side in his twin bed. Dorms may have had tiny beds, but they were great for snuggling up to someone. I glanced over his shoulder towards the clock on his desk. It read nine-thirty. I had to be at work in an hour. "Shit," I muttered as I snuck out from behind him and began to hunt for my clothes on his floor. As I pulled my boxers on, I heard his voice behind me.

"Leaving so soon?"

"I have to be at work in an hour." I hesitated before adding, "Believe me, I'd rather sleep in with you."

Edgar climbed out of bed, giving me one last view of his naked body to savor. Sigh. It was going to be a long day at work. He padded over to me and gave me a long sensual kiss. "Well, if you must."

"Wow, swoon." I pulled my shorts on and threw my t-shirt over my head. Did I have work clothes in my car? I hoped so. I grabbed my backpack and headed for the door. I turned to look at him again. "I'll see you in class on Tuesday?"

"If I can wait that long, sure. Maybe we can study again after class, too."

I walked out the doorway with a smile so wide I'm surprised I got through it at all.