

CHAPTER 1 – FINDING IZZY

by Alisa Fisher

Walking into the bright light surrounding LAX was like being caught off guard—by a surprise camera flash. Carefully, I stepped down the metal stairs, eager to get my feet on solid ground. Except for a few lone palms, it was all white sunshine. My backpack felt twice as heavy as when I left, and for a second I panicked because I couldn't find my phone.

As usual, mom was nowhere to be found in the terminal. “Remember, she might run late,” echoed Dad's parting words at the airport. Running late—that was a thing out here in L.A. The culprits—at least for my mom—had something to do with treatments: Pilates, nails, facials, sculpting, extensions.

I wove my way through gobs of people at the baggage carousel. It was amazing how some folks just seemed to plop down in the most obnoxious places. I sidestepped a frazzled airline employee who was whisking away two kids on wheeled bags, sealed off from the world with their Beats-studded ears. My phone vibrated: B rite w/ u honey! Accident on Wilshire. Ugh. With the *oh no* emoji. See u at curb.

It happened this way every single time. Mom said she'd meet me somewhere inside the terminal and then text this or that reason about running late. Then I had to stand outside and chill which was nearly impossible when everyone driving by seemed to be giving me the once over. I pushed my ponytail deeper into my hat.

Suddenly a whistle blew and some commotion seemed to follow an approaching black car. Liquid black. Tinted windows. Gleaming silver trim. One of those ultra-private vehicles that always made me feel embarrassed. It came to a halt right in front of me. I couldn't think of anything else to do but study my toes.

“Honey, honey, it’s me!” A tan, manicured hand fluttered from the back window of the Mercedes. I recognized the voice and the sound of the jewelry jangling, but I swung my head around to the back because I heard a strange sound. An elderly gentleman was sorting through his wallet and a chubby valet was eyeing the Mercedes suspiciously.

“Come on honey!” A door clicked open and there was mom motioning for me to get in. And then I heard it again, *bahhh* like a sheep.

“Mom,” I said, staring at not one set of eyes, but two. Golden eyes, buck teeth and four cloven hooves, all in one package right on the seat next to mom.

“Look at you, sweetie! Oh, let me give my girl a big hug.” She pushed her chunky sunglasses onto her head and smacked a big fuchsia kiss onto my cheek. Mom always smelled so pretty, but when I edged closer to the goat, I held my breath. If we were lucky, it was a doe.

“Why is there a goat in the car?”

“Let me introduce you. Izzy, this is Sheena, Sheena meet Izzy.”

Bah-aaahhh. She must have been a smart one, because as if on cue, she brayed hello.

Mom giggled. “Awww. Sheena and I did yoga together this morning, didn’t we,” she said while stroking her back.

“Yoga?”

“Yep. It’s a new thing. They let goats walk around during class. It’s so fun, and they’re super cute. Like you.”

Until they’re not, I thought. We had two goats back home. Whenever Dumbledore got mischievous, we had to put tennis balls on his horns so he wouldn’t headbutt Fern.

“But why is Sheena with you?” I peeked at her hindquarters to see if it was really a she.

“Because she was limping, and I thought you’d know what to do.”

“She doesn’t seem to be limping now.”

“I know. It must be all the excitement.”

“Don’t you love it?” Mom said as she looked around the car. The interior was a stark contrast to the liquid black body. We were surrounded by smooth beige leather, cool to the touch from the air conditioning.

“One of the assistants backed her cart into Tom’s car, so the studio sent him home in this! Nice, huh!? They’re not working today so we get to use it. The producer is in Detroit scouting the location.”

“Well, I hope Sheena realizes how nice it is too,” I said, hinting to mom that she might want to be careful. I could just imagine what Nannie would be thinking—a goat in a fancy car!

Blah blah blah. I looked at mom as she rambled on and then back to Sheena again. I patted her wiry forelock, and she nuzzled my hand. “Good girl,” I said.

My mom was always talking about the studios ever since Tom’s script for the urban fantasy Concrete Wrinkle had been picked up. I had no idea what an urban fantasy even was. Almost weekly I received some text or other about it. So far I knew Bruce Willis was being considered for the lead, while some heavy negotiations were underway to try to get Angelina Jolie and her father Jon Voigt to sign on. She said, “Wouldn’t it be fun if we got to go to the Oscars!” Like this was my mother’s biggest goal in life.

Every time I visited we had to spend the afternoon in Hollywood, where she’d show me all the newest stars in the Walk of Fame. I tried to act interested, but half the time I didn’t even know who she was talking about. We’d go to this one shop of Hollywood memorabilia and mom always

seemed so happy there. She'd show me old movie posters of Montgomery Clift and Elizabeth Taylor. "They say her eyes were violet!"

I got so sick of hearing about those violet eyes, I finally Googled it. Turns out they are really just a striking blue, but if the pros play with the light and her clothes, they can make them seem violet. That good old Hollywood magic.

Compared to Munfordville, the people out here were obsessed with their looks. Even Mom had changed. Over the years her hair seemed to get thicker and blonder, and she always looked so fit. Her toned, tan knees pivoted out from beneath her white dress. It was dotted with pink seashells, and I could just picture her walking through the village of Munfordville in that outfit. The farmers coming out of the Feed & Seed would surely hit their brakes and gawk.

I looked down at my feet. Mom was probably horrified by my Birkenstocks and ragged, unpolished toenails. I don't even think I had cleaned all the mud off from our hike along the Green River. I knocked them down hard on the driveway before we left, but I bet there was still mud caught in the ridges. Dad would have laughed at me for even thinking about it now. It's a wonder Dad and mom ever got married in the first place. They seemed so different.

"Honey, I am so excited that you are going to be with us for an entire month!" said Mom as she patted my knee. "It's worked out just perfectly with your Dad being away." Actually Dad wanted me to come to Greece with him, but I knew mom would have a fit. I always visited in June once school was out, and she would have been beyond upset if I didn't come.

Traffic was flowing pretty well for L.A. A jeep blaring loud hip hop music pulled up alongside us at an intersection, and I could see three guys wedged into the back seat with a couple of gleaming white surfboards. The last time I had visited, mom had signed me up for surfing lessons in Malibu.

It wasn't nearly as exciting as it sounds. In fact, I ended up getting sun and sand burn. No one had warned me about the sand that got inside the wet suit and dug into my nooks and crannies every time I tried to hop up on the surfboard. Paul, the instructor, kept telling me I just had to build up my stomach muscles, and in no time I'd be riding the pipe. That's what they called it when you actually went coasting through a wave. I didn't plan on surfing long enough to find out.

Just then my phone lit up. A big, drooly grin smiled at me: Hermes! We named him that because he was our traveling companion. He was big and black, more of a Cerberus than a Hermes, but much nicer than his appearance made you think. Miss u said the text. I replied, I made it, heading home now :)

“Izzy, I have to tell you something before we get back.”

I stuck my phone back into my backpack pocket. Mom folded her hands in her lap and breathed in deeply. She fingered a moon shaped charm on her bracelet.

“Remember when Sally fell off the golf cart last year?” Sally was Tom's mother. She lived in a cottage in the backyard.

“Yeah, you couldn't stop laughing when you told me how she lost her balance driving around a sand trap. Didn't Sally say it jumped out at her?”

“Well, I shouldn't have laughed about that,” mom replied as she cleared her throat. “They did a chest X-ray to see if she broke any ribs, and they found a spot on her lung.

We had come to a dead stop on Ventura Boulevard.

“It was cancer. She’s been in treatment for the last three months or so—chemotherapy—and there hasn’t been a whole lot of improvement. In fact, they just did a body scan, and it’s in her liver now.”

“So, it’s lung cancer?”

“Yes, stage IV. I didn’t want to worry you and besides there wasn’t really anything you could have done anyway.”

I guess she was right. Sally was never a big fan of mine. I thought it was because she didn’t like having to be a grandmother to a kid who wasn’t technically her granddaughter. I didn’t blame her really. I had to pretend she was my grandmother, but trust me when I say she really wasn’t very grandmotherly. My Dad’s mom, Nannie, took me shopping and we made crafts together, but Sally only asked me questions about school or what I did in Ken-tucky. She always said it like that. Like it was a foreign country or something.

“The reason I’m telling you now is I don’t want you to act weird when you see her. She’s changed a lot. There are nurses’ aides coming in to care for her, but I usually drop by in the mornings to see what I can do. She’ll be happy to see you.”

Wow. Suddenly I was looking around, and I couldn’t figure out where we were. L.A. was feeling really unfamiliar. I touched my phone and felt a little pang in my stomach. It seemed like a pretty serious situation. I was going to have to step it up, as Nannie would say.

Ventura Boulevard

... world's longest avenue of contiguous businesses...Calabasas to Hollywood... https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ventura_Boulevard

Stage IV Lung Cancer

The five-year survival rate...less than 10 percent.

<https://www.cancercenter.com/lung-cancer/stages/tab/non-small-cell-lung-cancer-stage->

IV/

“Honey? Honey? Did you hear me? I just have to jump out a minute. Keep an eye on Sheena.”

“Sure,” I answered as I looked back down at the screen. The bandaged Red Cross cupcake was cute. Or the upside-down turtle that said, “I hope you’re back on your feet soon.” One had a picture of a green carpet that said, “At least it’s not herpes.” Ugh. What was that? Mom would have band aids and colored paper. Now that I had a mission, I felt a little better.

The door popped open, and I was assaulted by the sun. Mom was carrying a huge octopus-like house plant. “You better scoot back,” she said. This is an aloe plant. It’s for Sally. I’m going to let you give it to her when we get home. As if initiating me to the good will club, a spiky leg pricked at my arm.

“I’m going to make her a card.”

“Awww, sweetie that would be awesome. It will mean a lot to her.”

As the driver sped forward, I thought about Sally, with her cropped red hair, in a new way. I was about to meet someone who had cancer. In English class Mrs. Bishop had taught us about the connotations of words. “Cancer” had two normal enough sounding syllables, but that word was frightening.