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Finding Izzy, Act I
By Alisa Fisher
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Chapter 1

CARD 1: Rooting for You Get Well Card

When you step off a plane at the Los Angeles County airport, you better be ready. All that white sunshine will make your head hurt. Shielding my eyes, I tromped down the metal stairs, eager to get my feet on solid ground.

It wasn't like I was expecting this big welcome. But as usual, mom was nowhere to be seen. "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.

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 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.* With the *oh no* emoji. *See u at the curb.*

I heaved my backpack onto my other shoulder and scanned the sidewalk for a bench. It happened this way every single time. I had to stand there, breathing in car exhaust while people smacked hugs and kisses all over each. A valet's whistle screeched *keep moving*. All those sweet reunions in the pick-up lane made me want to gag. Meanwhile, mom was nowhere to be seen. I pushed my head deeper into my baseball cap, wishing I could disappear.

Suddenly the headlights of a luxury car flashed. The liquid black body glided to a stop right in front of me. Tinted windows. Gleaming silver trim. One of those ultra-private vehicles that always made me feel embarrassed. I couldn't think of anything to do but study my toes.

"Honey, honey, it's me!" A tan, manicured hand fluttered like a butterfly from the back window of the Mercedes. I recognized the voice and the sound of the jewelry jangling, but I swung my head around because I heard a strange sound. Behind me an elderly gentleman was rummaging through his carry on and a valet was eyeing the Mercedes suspiciously. "Come on honey!" A door clicked, and there was mom motioning for me to get in. And then I heard it again, *baaahhhh*, 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 her.

"Look at you, sweetie! Oh, let me give my girl a big hug." She pushed her tortoise shell 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.

“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, scratching between the pointed ears.

“Yoga?”

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

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 golf cart into Josh’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.” Josh was an up and coming screenwriter who also happened to be my mother’s husband.

“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 barnyard creature in a luxury car.

I looked at mom but had trouble following her words as she rambled on and then I looked back to Sheena again. I patted her spiky forelock, and she nuzzled my hand. “Good girl,” I said.

Mom was always talking about the studios ever since Josh’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. When I finally asked her what the movie was about, an image of an hourglass floating in outer space appeared on my phone. Like that cleared everything up.

The big news was that her next-door neighbor Chase Renfrow got his big Hollywood break by being cast as the male lead. Evidently, he got the part because he reminded Cliff Knowles, the director, of Josh Hutcherson from *The Hunger Games*. Chase was pretty hunky, alright, but every time his lips parted, all I saw was horse teeth. Those chompers belonged on a bridle, not a movie poster.

“Did I tell you they’re trying to get Zendaya?”

“Um. No.”

“Wouldn’t it be fun if we got to go to the Oscars with Chase *and* Zendaya!” Like this was my mother’s biggest goal in life. She paused and stared dreamily out the window. “We could really get dolled up.”

Compared to Munfordville, everyone at the airport *already* looked dolled up. 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 the slit of her wrap dress.

“Honey, I am so excited that you are going to be with us for an entire summer!” 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 once school was out, and she would have been crushed if I didn’t come. But this summer would be something new—two whole months instead of three weeks. As mom kept talking, I studied her face. Behind that mask of foundation, there was something different. Pillowy lips. Bigger eyelashes. Painted eyebrows.

“I got my eyebrows microbladed,” she said turning her cheek towards me.

“Did it hurt?”

“Oh no. They numb you.”

Traffic was flowing pretty well for L.A. A Jeep blaring hip hop music pulled up alongside us at an intersection, and I could see three guys wedged into the back seat with a pair of shiny white surfboards.

“Izzy, there’s something I need to tell you before we get home.”

I stuck my phone into my mesh backpack pocket, sensing the shift in her tone. Mom folded her hands in her lap and breathed deeply. Her fingers brushed the diamond charm on her bracelet like it was some kind of anchor.

“Remember when Sally fell off the golf cart last year?” Sally, Josh’s mother—my step-grandmother—lived in a cottage behind the pool.

“Yeah, I remember. 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?” The corner of my mouth curled up at the memory. Sally and I had never exactly had the cozy, grandmotherly relationship. She was more likely to be painting her girlfriend’s aura than baking chocolate chip cookies. Maybe she didn’t like having to be a grandmother to a kid who wasn’t technically her granddaughter. You couldn’t blame her, especially when I lived so far away. If she did ask me about what I did in *Ken-tucky*, she always said it like that. Like it was a foreign country.

“Well, I shouldn’t have laughed,” mom said quietly, her throat tightening. “They did a chest X-ray afterward to check for broken ribs, and they found something—a spot on her lung.”

We had come to a dead stop on Santa Monica Boulevard.

“It was cancer. She’s been in treatment for the last three months or so—chemo and radiation—but it’s spreading. It’s in her liver now.”

The jet of icy air hitting my elbow sent a shiver through my spine. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I didn’t want to worry you sweetie. There wasn’t anything you could have done.” Her arched eyebrows deflated under the weight of the news.

And *poof*, just like that, my summer changed. Would we still go to Big Sur? I had been dreaming of seeing the famous Redwood at Pfeiffer Park. And I couldn’t wait to sit at Nepenthe again, eating burgers while looking out over the Pacific. Mom always teased me about being a nature girl, but the truth was, anything was better than Tinseltown.

And what about Sally? She and I were never close.

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

I stared out the window. L.A. suddenly felt like a different planet. A block of stores stood beyond the sidewalk and their gaudy signs made me feel hollow. I felt a pang in my stomach. I pulled my phone out of my backpack and Googled Stage IV lung cancer.

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

As she leaped out the door toward a stucco greenhouse, I balanced my phone on the console. My other hand drifted across Sheena’s bony head while I pecked out the letters G-E-T W-E-L-L C-A-R-D. I scrolled through the images. Three cartoon root vegetables skipped arm and arm beneath the words, *Rooting for You*. Perfect. Now that I had a mission, I felt a little better.

Suddenly, the door popped open, and I was assaulted by the sun. Mom was carrying a huge octopus-like houseplant. "Scoot back," she said, maneuvering the botanical alien into the car. "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 my arm.

"I'm going to make her a card," I say, shielding my arm.

"Awww, sweetie that's so thoughtful. She'll love it."

As the driver sped forward, my thoughts drifted to Sally. In English class Mrs. Dempsey had taught us about the connotations of words. "Cancer" had two normal enough sounding syllables, but that word was frightening.

All the sudden windchimes erupted inside the car. Mom practically dropped the potted monster into my lap as she snatched at her phone.

"Hello? Ohh? We can? Oh!" She started to vibrate with the energy of a Harry Styles groupie. "Hold on. Frank! Pull a U-ey. There. At the sushi place!" She glanced at me. "Change of plans, honey. We're going to Burbank."

I blinked, still feeling the sting of Sally's diagnosis. All I wanted to do was get home so I could change out of my sweaty clothes and take a dip in the infinity pool. But no, I was my mother's captive.

Frank's shirt stretched tight against his biceps as he clenched the steering wheel. His sideburns flashed left then right. He slammed the gas sending us skidding across the double yellow line. Sheena's hooves dug into the leather seats. Our front bumper grazed a parked Tesla

outside the sushi place, but somehow, I knew we wouldn't be stopping. Surging ahead like an unbridled horse, soon we were neck in neck with a pack of luxury cars.

"We'll be there in eleven minutes." Mom's index finger slid across the screen. "Lucky us. There's no traffic on Ventura." She patted my knee, tossed an extension chicly over one shoulder, and said, "Here we come Cliff Knowles." She winked at me. "Only he might not actually be there."

"I thought we were going home," I said as I tried to wiggle away from the annoying plant that kept pinching me. Sunlight ricocheted off the car's silver trim and little stars danced across Mom's face.

"Shoo!" Sheena nipped at the edge of my seatbelt. I looked to Mom for help, but she was in galaxy far, far away. Her lips moved up and down like she was talking with an imaginary friend.

"What are you doing?" I said.

Her bronze face turned to me. Arching her tattooed eyebrows like she was in an Ulta commercial, she announced "I memorized Zendaya's scene with Chase—I mean, just in case they need me. To stand in. You never know."

What? My stomach sank. God had made a mistake and given me the wrong mother.

"Mom, can't we just go home? I'm hungry. And don't we have to check on Sally? She might need us."

“Don’t you worry your pretty little head. Sally’s favorite nurse will be there until 10:00 p.m. And they always have food on the set.” Mom rubbed her hands together briskly.

“On the *what?*”

“Warner Brothers! Don’t you love it Izzy. Your first day in Hollywood and we get to go to the studios. Josh’s got a special surprise for you too.”

“I don’t like surprises.” I laid my head against the window. It was glazed in warmth.

“C’mon Izzy. I want you to see the set and meet Cliff. It’s a once in a lifetime opportunity.” I could practically see the tinsel glittering in her eyes. Mom’s Hollywood obsession was like a giant whirlpool—and I refused to be sucked under. The car turned a sharp corner, and Sheena planted a hoof on my lap. Like she was trying to ground me. That was it—Sheena would be just the plot twist I needed.

Chapter 2

Card 2: My Hollywood Debut – An Interstellar Wipeout

As the car rolled to a stop at the security hut, Mom nudged Sheena's rump down and leaned over. "I have inside information."

"About—" I don't know why, but I whispered.

"Concrete Wrinkle." Mom looked around like someone might be watching.

"Lucky you," I replied, distracted by Frank's chit chat with the attendant. His arm disappeared out the window, and a moment later a shiny rectangle of vinyl was swinging from the rearview mirror.

“Izzy, I know how it ends,” she whispered. If the world’s future was hanging in the balance, mom had the scoop.

“Cool. I don’t even know how it begins,” I said. As we careened down the nameless streets, there wasn’t much to see. A pile of chairs and tables stacked on a pallet were the only clue that something might be happening in this ghost town. I spotted a blue and gold Warner Bros. logo on the side of a stucco building that made me think about the *Happy Feet* penguins.

Mom’s finger touched my knee. “A mysterious sinkhole appears at Rockefeller Center in New York City. Everything is disappearing into it. The scientists find out it’s a galactic wormhole, and growing bigger by the minute.” Half a fake lash hanging from the corner of her eye was threatening to jump ship. “Then it’s Chase Renfrow to the rescue.” The car nosed up to a stop sign that was faded pink from the sun. A golf crossed in front of us. A man lifted his coffee cup into the air, as if to say thanks.

I fiddled with my ponytail. “Let me guess. If he doesn’t go through it, he’ll never see his girlfriend again.”

Mom’s head jerked sideways. “How did you get so smart? There’s a little more to it than that, but I don’t want to spoil it for you.”

“I can’t wait to see where it goes,” I said, pretending like I cared.

“But the scene they’re shooting today is from the middle. They film the movie out of order.” A gazebo flanked by a bunch of magnolias made me think we might be on the set of the *Gilmore Girls*.

“Wouldn’t that be—confusing?” Sheena nuzzled at my backpack and I *shooshed* her away.

“Look.” Mom pointed at an orange brick building. “See that little red light? If it’s on, it means they’re filming.”

Wow, a red light. Cutting-edge technology right there, I thought.

I was starting to get hangry. Whatever scene they were shooting, I hoped it was short one. All I wanted to do was wolf down an In-and-Out burger, go home, unpack my stuff, and take a dip in the pool. *The Broken Mirror Diary* was getting really good, and I felt a reading marathon coming on. And what about Sally? Even though Mom said she was in good hands with her nurse, I couldn’t see how that would be better than family.

We came to a stop in front of a shingled white house. “C’mom. Let’s get out.” I followed mom, doused in the aura of her signature Dior scent. According to her, having a signature scent was a secret weapon in the battle against anonymity. The hint of citrus made my stomach grumble.

A half dozen golf carts lined the sidewalk. I stared up at the big blue sky. It was way too nice to be stuck inside. I pictured myself traipsing the path down to Santa Monica beach, an icy Frappuccino in one hand and a John Green paperback and beach towel in the other. I wondered if goats were allowed on the beach.

“Can I drive?” I asked, eyeing the steering wheel

Mom thumped me playfully on the shoulder. "No, you can't drive. You're not in Kentucky anymore."

Behind us a screen door banged, and Frank waddled down the porch steps, his pot belly bobbing out front. His face was flushed and he swiped a bead of sweat from the corner of his eyebrow. Searching the rear bumpers of the carts, he stopped in front of number fourteen.

"Ladies," he said, and held out his hairy arm. I slid across the hot vinyl and Mom followed. When Frank sat down the whole cart swayed like a tidal wave had rolled underneath us. Mom shot me a wide-eyed look. "Gremlins."

"Wait. What about Sheena?" She's limping again. We can't just leave her."

"Limping? I thought you said she was better?"

"The left patella is swollen. C'mon, I'll show you." I led mom back to the Mercedes and cracked the door. A black dome of a nose appeared, trembling, sniffing at my fingers. I opened the door a little wider and grabbed hold of her collar. Mom leaned down to inspect her leg.

"See, that part, I said rubbing the inside. It's her patellar ligament."

"Hmmm." She held the back of her hand against the knobby knee. "Doesn't feel warm."

"Mom, I can't leave her. It would be animal cruelty."

Frank had come over. "Geez," he said wiping his forehead with a white handkerchief, "it's getting hot out here. What's goin' on?"

"Frank, you're going to have to take Sheena to a vet while we go inside," Mom said.

“No. I want to stay with her,” I said, stroking the nook of soft fur beneath her chin. “If she’s hurting, she’ll need someone to take care of her. You go. We’ll wait for you here.”

“Izzy. You are a sweet-*heart*. But I don’t want you to miss the scene.” She made a little heart with her hands.

“I know, but we can come another time,” I said, secretly hoping that I was wrong. “Please mom.” I patted Sheena’s head. “We have to take good care of you.”

Mom’s eyes zoomed affectionately from our she-goat back to me.

“Let’s bring her with us. We can give her some water.”

“I think she’s better here—in a *natural* habitat.”

“Izzy, I’m not letting your compassion for this creature make us miss out. Sheena will come with us.” Mom’s face froze, but I couldn’t tell if it was from her intentions or the Botox.

Frank gave a little grunt. “Maybe they can use her as an extra.”

I thought about our options. Maybe bringing Sheena along would work. It wouldn’t be easy to keep her inside and once she pulled off her great disappearing act, so would I.

We all piled into the golf cart. Mom and I slid across the sun-kissed seats, and climbing stubbornly between our laps, like a true Hollywood scout, was Sheena. She gave us a sly wink, as if she’d just discovered the secret to golf cart joy. Whirring down the asphalt driveway, she batted her eyes.

My abs clenched as the cart swerved into a narrow alley. Brick faced houses with porches and rusted fire escapes lined the road. “Look,” mom said, spreading her fingers wide. “*Tada!* We’re in Brooklyn. They filmed so many famous movies here. *Ghostbusters. Batman Returns. Casablanca.*”

“Why don’t you get a job here?” I said.

Mom slid her fancy sunglasses to the middle of her nose. “I’m too old.”

“No, you’re not. You could be an assistant or something.”

Mom waved her hand in the air. “It’s drudgery from what Josh says.”

“But if you enjoyed it. You’d get to be around all the stars.” I turned, feeling annoyed by her sudden negativity, when a vision appeared. Sparkles exploded off a row of diamonds in Mom’s hair. A fancy barrette pinned up Mom’s hair—in a French twist now. A snow-white fur fell from her bare shoulders, and I could almost feel the silky softness brush her skin. A moment later the image was gone.

“Mom, maybe you could—” I closed my eyes trying to think. How did people get into the movies? “Act—take an acting class.”

Mom bit her thumb. “Actually I tried that right after Josh and I got married.”

“And?”

She clenched her jaw. “Let’s just say that it’s not as easy as it looks.”

“Maybe you didn’t practice enough,” I offered but Mom had a one-track mind and the current track was pointing straight ahead at a brick wall. I had no idea how this was going to be exciting when the studio resembled a factory building.

Mom’s eyes scanned the brick wall like she had x-ray vision. “We’re almost there Isabelle. Everyone wears black, but Cliff is really Texas.” Mom’s fingers made air quotes. “He always wears cowboy boots because he’s from the Panhandle. The first assistant is Nicole. You’ll like her. She keeps everything moving.”

Frank turned off the driveway and eased the cart into an empty spot. My stomach growled when I stepped out of the cart. Frank plodded up a trio of stairs held a narrow grey door open. I had to contort myself to scooch past his belly.

Blinded by the darkness, I tried to catch up with mom who was now a phantom a few feet ahead of me. I tugged at Sheena’s leash to keep her close. When things started to come into focus, it looked like we were inside of a big abandoned garage. Cardboard boxes stuffed with coils of wire were stacked against the dull black walls. Big dust bunnies in the corners made me think that the place needed a good cleaning. A woman dressed in a black t-shirt and jeans was checking something on an iPad. She looked up and smiled, “You made it. Welcome.”

“This is Nicole,” my mom said. I held out my hand, and Nicole shoved the iPad under her arm. “Great to meet you Izzy. And who is your friend?”

“This is Sheena. She’s got a knee situation.”

“Oh no. Do you want me to get an ice pack?”

“Yes. That would be perfect,” I said. I would volunteer to hold it on Sheena’s leg.

“Watch your step,” mom whispered as the two of us followed Nicole through an open door. I lurched forward down a ramp.

“Take it easy. Your eyes are still adjusting to the dark. I’ll be right back with some ice,” drifted Nicole’s voice from the void.

Across the room I could make out two cameras, big lights stacked on metal towers, and a bunch of folding tables. The cameras faced a stage with a giant Lifesaver roll on it. At one end, were four boosters that seemed like they were auditioning for a sci-fi action movie. In the middle, a pair of wings clung on for dear life. It looked like something salvaged from a junk yard.

“Isn’t it awesome?” said Mom. She swept her arm out. It wasn’t the most impressive spaceship I had ever seen.

I whispered. “Is this one of those low budget movies?”

“Jeesh, Izz. Can’t you give it a chance?” I could practically feel her eyes burning into me through the back of her head. If this was Hollywood, then it needed a facelift.

“Hey,” a voice greeted us. I turned around and there was Josh. His beard stubble pricked my cheek when we hugged. “You got taller, Izzy. Look, we’re almost eye to eye!” He lifted his hand to his head. “It’s so great to see you.”

He glanced down. “And Sheena. Your mom texted me. It’s good practice for you, right? Dr. Izzy, the Vet?”

Josh always asked me a thousand questions when I visited. He had grown up going to a racetrack with his father so he knew all about thoroughbreds. “Wait to you see—” I reached for my phone so I could show him Point Given, the million-dollar racehorse I had fed an apple to.

Josh raised his hand. “Hold tight, Izz.” Josh’s eyes shot past my shoulder to the stage. “They’re getting ready to block the scene.”

“For stand ins?” Mom mouthed. *Was she winking?*

“They’re behind. I don’t know what’s going to happen. But,” he paused, “they approved the—”

Duh dunt dunt dunt dah. Trumpets from the Milky Way heralded us. Josh reached into his pocket and swiped at the screen to silence the ringtone, shutting off the sound effect. A voice murmured something about scene five. “Yeah. It’s ready. I fixed it. Yep. He doesn’t see the alien anymore. We’re good to go.” He rolled his eyes, tapped the screen again, and stuffed the phone back into his pocket.

His hair had that tousled look like he had been driving his Porche with the top down. Josh had that Chris Evans aura— a sloppy charm that whispered, “I’m ready for both a red carpet event *and* a spontaneous adventure.”

“C’mon,” he said, as he led us over to the spaceship. “I want to show you —”

“Where Zendaya and Chase kiss?” said Mom.

“Ah, the final kiss,” said Josh. He shook his head in amusement.

Mom leaned over. “I memorized the whole scene.”

I was glad it was dark so Mom didn't see my eyes roll.

We stopped a few feet in front of the counter. Duct tape smoothed over a crack in the corner. If this was the loading dock for an interstellar space flight, then these people might not make it back to Earth.

Mom nudged me. "You might be able to get in too."

Huh? Suddenly a pack of people in black walked in. A woman with a mushroom top of curly blond hair approached Josh. She held out a book and it fell open at a wrinkled sticky note.

"Here." Strips of neon green sliced through the text. Then she glanced at me. "You'll start here," she said, pointing to the top of the facing page with her bitten nails. A corkscrew of hair slipped free from behind a row of gold studs in her ear.

"Oh, I have to take care of the goat." I said. "No thank you."

Cool brilliant light flooded the room. A guy with a clipboard appeared on the stage. The leash tightened against my hand. Sheena snorted.

"It's for you!" Mom squealed. "Go ahead."

I ignored her and crouched down to stroke Sheena's leg. "There Sheena. You're gonna be O.K. as soon as we get that ice."

"Izzy, here, let me help," said Mom. She grasped the leash from my hand.

"Mom!" We were in a tug of war.

"Let me help you, sweet—"

I pulled as hard as I could without choking Sheena.

“Sweetie, I'll take care of everything,” Mom said. She attempted to pry my fingers from the leash.

“Izzy?” A voice called out from the counter. “C’mon up. We’re ready for you.”

“Just give it a try.” Josh tapped me playfully on the shoulder and handed me the script. “Top of 84.”

My head was spinning. “Whaaaat?” I gave the death stare to mom.

“Go ahead. All you have to do is read it!”

“Read it?” My whole back tensed.

“The script, silly.”

I suddenly felt like a bug under a microscope. My feet were having trouble lifting off the ground. Where was the bathroom?

“Izzy, c’mon and stand right here. You’ll be fine.” The man at the counter smiled and waved me over. “There,” he said pointing to an x on the floor.

Mom chirped, “Go ahead, honey,” and gave me a push. She snagged the leash from my hand. I looked down at the script and the first line read, FLIGHT COORDINATOR, cheerful and professional. Oh god, I thought, as the muscles in my neck clenched. There was a reason I had never tried out for the school play.

I took a deep breath and crept onto the stage feeling stark-naked. A guy with a manbun approached me. “Hi, I’m Ben. Chase’s understudy. The scene’s going to move from left to right. For now, just stay on the x. You can completely flub your lines. We just need to get the lighting done.”

Who was I supposed to block? Flub my lines?

My eyes flew over the words trying to make sense of the scene. It looked like I was helping the lovebirds get ready for their adventure back to earth. I stared down at the masking tape x between my two Birkentstocks. A lady with a walkie talkie strapped to her back pocket stepped onto the stage. Apparently, she was going to play Jess, the Zendaya character.

“Just wait for action,” called out an assistant.

My ribs felt locked in plaster. My heart thudded like it was hammering to get out of my chest.

Ben winked at me. “Just have fun with it.”

Mom, the unofficial paparazzi, stationed herself in the camera zone, unleashing a barrage of encouraging smiles. She leveled her phone at me. A crew guy walked to center stage and stretched his cell phone out arm’s length. “Bring 3 in a little closer—perfect.” There was a whirr, and the lights amped up another notch.

“When I yell action, just start at the top of page 84, O.K.?” said Nicole.

My head nodded yes, but my body was screaming no.

A lady out by the camera gave me an annoying thumbs up. She looked back at the guy standing next to camera 3, and he said, “3, 2, 1.”

“Action,” called Nicole.

I cleared my throat. “Yes, sir. We have completed the Code 5 prelaunch protocol.”

“Cut!” rang out Nicole’s voice.

I looked up and Chase was standing next to Ben, grinning with his big chompers. “Izzy, you made it after all. We are gonna make a star out of you.”

The only star I needed was on a ticket home. I raked my fingers through my hair. After being on a plane for six hours I wasn’t exactly ready for my Hollywood close up. “You made it, Chase.” I turned my head a notch, as he came in for a kiss. I prayed he wouldn’t notice the zit brewing on my nostril.

“Promo pictures are in the bag. Look at all the crap they put in my hair.” Chase rapped his knuckles along the crown of his head. “Hard as a rock.”

“Gross,” I said. “Who knew there was hair gel in outer space.”

He squared his shoulders and dug his thumbs into his pockets. “But now we get to do the scene together. Your mom thinks you have—”

“—good instincts,” she chimed in. *Oh my god.* My mother was pining her Hollywood obsession on me. Smiling wistfully—she looked back and forth from Chase to me. I clenched the script so Chase wouldn’t see my shoulders trembling.

He turned and grabbed the script in Ben's hands. "The All Systems Go scene, right?"

"Yep, you're all set," said Ben, jumping off the stage.

Chase's lips curled, and I tried not to stare at his equine incisors. "You're not nervous are you? It's just for fun, right?"

My eyes skimmed my next line. "Ready for liftoff," I said, flicking my thumb up and forcing my cheeks to smile.

Nicole stepped downstage and lifted the clapper in the air. "Top of 84. Ready? Action."

"Yes, sir, we have completed the Code 5 prelaunch protocol." *Did I say it with enough umph?* "Star Screen is active. Navigation codes are in formation. We're standing by, ready to unleash the stellar rumble."

"Cut!" said Nicole. "Very funny, Izzy. Just stick with what's in the script."

"Sorry. It just popped into my head." I thought if I could distract them a little, Sheena would have more of a chance to escape—and me with her.

"Ok, let's try that again," said Nicole.

"Star Screen is active. Navigation codes are in formation," I said in my best Girl Scout voice. Chase needed to have confidence that the starship was ready for lift off.

"Thank you. Final check transponders, thrusters and elevons."

I gave a thumbs up and saluted. "Eleven and counting."

Chase shot me a funny look and whispered "Eleven and?"

“Oops,” I whispered. In a louder voice, “Eleven double zero and counting.”

“Roger that my galactic pal,” replied Chase.

“Izzy, your line,” said Nicole.

“The clock counts down—.”

“—Cut!”

I pointed to the block letters on the page. “It says ‘The clock counts down.’”

“That’s just a special instruction.” Nicole winked. “Everything in parentheses. You don’t have to say those parts.”

“Got it.” A wave of heat burned from my cheeks down to my neck. My eyes scanned the print on the facing page. I didn’t know if I could make it eleven more minutes because my head was about to explode. And I couldn’t see what was going on with Sheena. As the lights beat down on us, I wondered if you could get a sunburned from the spotlights.

“Let’s begin with—”

“Um,” I said. “It says ‘open hatch door.’ Do you want me to move over there?” I pointed to the gleaming entrance of the interstellar candy roll.

“Good call,” said Nicole. “Just don’t touch anything when you get over there.”

“Just pretend to open it,” said Chase.

“Perfect,” said Nicole. She gave me a reassuring thumbs up.

How was I supposed to concentrate on my lines when I didn't know what was coming? They could have let me at least read through the scene first.

"Action!" said Nicole.

Chase rambled on some more about all the technical take off stuff. Just when I thought I was going to have keep following orders, I made an interesting discovery on the bottom of the next page. *Slow kiss* in italic letters. That meant—

Chase pointed at the door. He cocked his head towards the spaceship.

As I marched towards the giant Lifesaver roll, in true Hollywood starlet fashion, my sandal snagged a corner of the red carpet, and I tumbled toward the capsule shaped door. Chase tried to ward off a collision, but that only sent me careening sideways. As my body karate chopped the wing, the foil covered pieces of cardboard fell like a house of cards.

A bunch of guys appeared at my side as Chase clasped my shoulders. "Are you OK?"

"Sweetie. You're not hurt, are you?" said Mom. She was down on all fours trying to find my missing Birkenstock. The set guys heaved me back onto my feet.

"Oh geez, Izzy. Are you sure you're OK?" said Nicole. Her hand cradled my elbow. "Let's sit you down," she said and led me over to a canvas chair that said "Knowles" in block letters.

After that fiasco, I thought they'd call it a day. But that's when the director arrived and put my mother under a magic spell.

Chapter 3

Card 3: You've Got This Clapperboard

That day in Hollywood I learned there were a lot of little phrases that made things happen. Action. Cut. That's a wrap. Shut the gate. Everyone on the set had a special role to fill. Unless you were my mom who was Mrs. Starstruck. Mom told me she was taking notes for Josh, so he could tweak the screenplay, but I knew where she really wanted to be—in front of the camera. I gulped down a bottle of Gatorade to make the cotton balls invading my mouth go away.

"Let's roll 'em," said Nicole from a stool near the camera. I turned to mom. "You take my part," I pleaded. "I'll go check on Sheena."

"But they're doing this very special thing for us."

I clenched my teeth. "I never wanted to do this in the first place. I only wanted to go home after being on a plane all day. It's ten o'clock in Munfordville."

"I'm sorry sweetie, but can't you just finish it out? We're in Hollywood. Movie capital of the whole world." I was ready to call it quits, but I could sense how much it meant to Mom.

I thought I saw stardust orbiting her head.

Suddenly a crest of light shot out from a far door. A group of movie people came inside and congregated around the center camera man. I turned my attention back to the awful script. Those two words glared out at me. *Slow kiss*. My eyes kept jumping back to try to figure out how that kiss evolved. I caught Chase studying me.

"Josh is such a hero. That's our fifth draft," he said, peering at the script.

A distinct voice boomed out. "You must be Izzy from Kentucky."

I peered into the hollow space. A silvery black head emerged from the ether. "Welcome to the set," said the man, extending a hammer of a hand.

"Thank you." My whole body quaked as he power-shook my palm. The faded El Paso tattoo and the way he drawled out *well-commm* told me this was Cliff, the famous director. Out of the corner of my eye, I caught mom wide eyed and straining. Like it was Brad Pitt who had appeared.

I quickly lowered my eyes to Cliff's feet and sure enough, there were the famous cowboy boots. The fancy embroidery stitching and worn pebbly leather screamed Texas.

He nodded down at my hands. "How do you like it?"

"I like it." I said. "But we had a little accident."

"That type of thing happens all the time. Don't you worry," Cliff said. "I'll have to hear that story another time. We have to nail this scene down by midnight."

Midnight? "Um, I don't think we can stay until midnight. We have to take our goat home."

Cliff gaped at me. "Your *what?*"

"A goat. Not mine—my mom's."

"Yours, Brooke?" he said, tossing his head back in amusement.

She shrugged playfully. "Ah ha." Mom's pearly whites sparkled in their perfection. "From yoga class. She had a little limp, and so I brought her along so Izzy could take a look. She wants to be a vet when she grows up."

"How cool," Cliff said. He looked at the script in my hands. "Oh no. Don't tell me they have you reading the flight assistant? That's no fun."

"It's fine for m—"

"Izzy, c'mon. You should be doing Jess's part. You can go home and tell all your friends you read Zendaya's lines."

"C'mon," he said motioning to mom. "Let's get your mom up here to take your part as the flight attendant, and you do the big scene with Chase."

In the background, a bunch of things clicked. The next thing I knew the lights went up another notch. Nicole walked in front of us, clapping the clapperboard. Lauren, the woman who was going to read Jess's part, handed me her script. "The pink lines," she said.

Nicole told me to go stand by the front of the spaceship. I would come in at my line at the bottom of pg. 86. It said, "What if it collapses? No one's ever tried to go back." But I couldn't tell if I was supposed to say that to my mom or Chase. I wanted to ask Nicole but all a sudden I heard a clap. "*Action!*"

I tracked back to the beginning of the scene, to my former lines, that ones that mom was now saying. She was extra wide-eyed and acting annoyingly perky. My eyes returned to the script, but under the mega lights all the words blurred together.

"Izzy." Mom snapped her fingers faintly.

I couldn't find the line, but I remembered seeing it before, so I said "What if it collapses? No one's ever tried to go back."

"Cut!" said Nicole. "That was perfect Izzy, but you have to move here before you say it. She pointed to a cruddy masking tape x on the floor by the interstellar Tootsie Roll. And turn to your right as you speak so we can get you on camera."

"O.K.," I said, side-stepping back to my original spot. The lights that were burning a hole into my head were making me sweat. I could feel droplets trickle from my armpits.

Cliff was talking to Josh, and he pointed to the shiny wing that they had patched back together with duct tape. "Can you believe it—" his voice trailed off and they both started to

laugh. He saw me looking and said, “You’re doing great up there. We’re going to have to get you to come back and be an extra.”

Nicole said, “Let’s try this.” She pointed to a new spot closer to the spaceship door.

“Mom,” I whispered. “I’m worried about Sheena. This is taking forever. When are we going to be done? They keep stopping us just when we get go—”

“Take your places,” said the camera guy.

Nicole was getting ready to snap her board. I said, “Once I hit my mark am I saying all the rest of the lines here?”

“Yes,” Josh yelled out from the black hole in the center of the room. “Right up until the kiss.”

“Don’t worry, Izzy,” Chase said. “You’ve got this.”

“Action!”

Mom was relishing her part as the cheery, helpful flight coordinator. Chase sounded a little more eager, and I could feel myself being pulled into the scene. I made my entrance on target, but then I accidentally skipped a line.

“Cut!”

Everyone stared. “Sorry” I said. My arm was shaking.

“Ben, can you cue her?” said Nicole. Ben nodded.

“Whoa, people,” thundered Cliff’s voice from the center of the room. “Marketing wants Chase back for another round of photos.”

“Hey, don’t wait for me,” said Chase, projecting his voice towards the camera. “I think Eric’s next door doing inventory for props. I bet he’d love to do the scene with Izzy.”

“Take five” called Nicole and the lights dimmed a notch. The stage felt noticeably cooler, and I prayed I would stop sweating.

Mom approached the edge of the stage. “Wanna get something to eat? The caterer just dropped off a tray of sandwiches.”

“What’s Eric doing here?” I said. Eric was Chase’s older brother.

Mom’s voice softened. “The start-up he was interning at ran out of money, so he had to find another position. When Josh found out he pulled a few strings, and they put him with Randy Collins, the guy who produced *Inception*. From what Patty tells me, they have him doing a little bit of everything. Oh look—”

There was a commotion near the cameras, and Cliff said, “Mr. Renfrow so glad you could join us. I know this isn’t your first rodeo.”

“You can thank the Dodgers for that. Randy never misses a home game. Before he left he said, ‘You’re in charge now.’”

Cliff grinned and tipped his head. “When the Blue Crew plays, the mice will stray.” He drawled out the *ayyy*. “Leave your stuff here and head on up.”

I hadn't seen Eric since he started college, but there was something different about him. Maybe it was the way the lights reflected off his chestnut hair, or the way his hips swayed in his jeans, but by the time he reached us, I found myself thinking that they had cast the wrong person for the *Conkrete Wrinkle* lead. And his teeth—perfectly normal.

"Mrs. Sheridan, hey. Izzy, it's good to see you," said Eric, extending his hand. "When did you get here?"

"Izzy arrived today. We're going to see if she catches the acting bug like Chase." Mom beamed her kilowatt smile at Eric.

"It's a bug, all right." Eric's mouth jeered to the side, and I wondered if maybe he hadn't bought into all this Hollywood bullcrap.

"Isn't she adorable?" Mom said, wrinkling up her nose.

I lowered my head back to the script. *Pink lines, pink lines*, I kept telling myself. I had no idea how this could be fun.

"Eric did this once before for us, so he's an old pro now," said Nicole as she sauntered over, her hair annoyingly bouncy. "Pg. 88. You start at the top."

Eric's eyes studied the page, and then he lowered his script next to mine. It was practically touching. "It looks like this is where we're going to start. Do you need a second to look the scene over?"

"Thanks. Yes. I do." I took a deep breath and tried to focus on the Hollywood hieroglyphs. I couldn't believe it. There was a sane person in the room. A *kind* person.

A couple minutes later, Nicole had organized us on the stage. I clung to the x beneath my feet like my life depended on it.

“Action!”

Eric glanced up at me reassuringly and then his eyes fell back to the script. “I programmed the flight path to recalibrate once I reach Andromeda. When the sensors detect the gravitational shift, my pod will initiate biological functions—”

I had to cut him off. “—and this time your body will have time to a—climb—a”

“Cut!”

I looked at Nicole. “Is that a word?” I detected a flicker of a smile coming alive in Eric’s splendid eyes.

Nicole shrugged. “I think it’s a-climb-a-*tize*. They mean thaw. Just say *thaw*.”

“We can ask Josh,” Mom chimed in. “Josh? Josh? Where did he go?” Thankfully, she shuffled away from the stage.

Eric whispered, “A-clima-tize? What the hell is that?”

Of course, the one impossible word was in my line.

“Alright, let’s begin again. Action!” Nicole clapped her board. Every time she clapped that thing it triggered my stage fright.

“I programmed the flight path to recalibrate once I reach Andromeda. When the sensors detect the gravitational shift, my pod will initiate biological functions—”

“—and this time your body will have time to thaw from cryosleep. You’re a genius,” I said, trying not to roll my eyes because it was anything *but* genius. Everyone knew interstellar travelers had to be frozen. Is this really what they paid Josh the big bucks to do?

Eric said, “Sweetheart, this is the trip of a lifetime. Just think of what I would see. Entire galaxies. A chance to understand the universe in a whole new way.”

I read the next line. “But there’s so much that could go wrong.”

Then Eric said, “Our new life is on the other side of that wormhole.”

“Stay with me,” I pleaded. And then something magical happened. I had a whole new feeling about what was taking place. We were two human beings who cared about each other. It made so much sense now. Even though I was tired and hungry, I could totally get the life-altering importance of the moment. If Zendaya let Eric go, he might disappear into the universe forever.

“Baby, if I made it here once, that means I can find my way back,” said Eric.

“And if time collapses?”

“We’re two hands on the same watch, Jess, whether it’s now, or back there, or ahead in the future. Don’t you see. Nothing can keep us apart.”

When the slow kiss finally came, it was over in a second-long fist bump. Eric and I smiled at each other, but inside I knew what was at stake.

“That’s a wrap. Great job everyone,” said Nicole. And just like that my Hollywood roller coaster came to a stop. Cliff came over to talk to Eric, and I spotted Mom in the corner where Sheena was tied up.

I squinted into the dark searching for a set of pointed ears. I felt bad about how we had treated her. “We abandoned her,” I said to mom.

“Actually, Sheena abandoned us. Look.”

Mom’s outstretched arm trembled. It was hard to make out the details. In the middle of the screen was a goat, standing on a heap of laundry with a pink shred of fabric in its mouth. Only it wasn’t laundry, and the fabric was famous.

By the time we got home that night, Mom needed to be put to bed. When Sheena got loose, she wandered into Studio 30. Where Eric had been inventorying props and costumes. The shred of pink fabric was Reese Witherspoon’s dress from *Legally Blond*.

Supposedly Sheena had some kind of allergic reaction to mustard and went berserk. At least that’s what the vet said. Before she went on the rampage, a stage hand fed her half of his sandwich. Sheena climbed up a fifteen-foot stack of a pallets near an open window and then jumped into the parking lot. She devoured all the roses off the bushes at the *La La Land* café before breaking inside Studio 30.

Two security guards were finally able to wrangle her to the floor by grabbing at something hanging out of her mouth. When mom found out it was Jennifer Aniston's hair extensions from *Friends*, she almost fainted.

In the back seat Josh kept shushing Mom like she was a little baby. As we inched forward on the freeway, the sky glowed pink around the dark outlines of palm trees.

"You must be exhausted Izzy," said Josh. "Go straight to bed when we get home."

"What about Sally?"

"She has a night nurse. I'll check on her, but you don't need to worry about her until the morning."

When I finally got under the covers, I didn't even take my clothes off. Images flashed chaotically through my mind. Lifesavers and goats and palm trees spun like debris inside a tornado. My hands swiped at the tattered pages of a script, but they only got ripped away by the wind. An old lady wrapped in a crocheted shawl rose like a phantom. Like some kind of kooky fortune teller, her gnarled finger beckoned to me. I shivered and told myself it wasn't real. But when I saw Sally the next morning, I realized it was her.

Chapter 4

Card 4: A Bucket Full of Dreams

“Surprise!” Looking like she stepped out of *Vogue*, there was mom, holding a tray with a glass of something shockingly red.

I cringed. “Is that—*blood*?”

Apparently, beet juice qualified as a breakfast food. Mom gave me an exasperated look while I mourned the Egg McMuffin that had been flitting around my brain since the moment I woke up.

Mom proclaimed the benefits of *kvass* to me—a fermented drink that was supposed to be good for your gut biome. I was learning so much out here in L.A.

“Do you drink it or smear it on your face?”

“Ha ha, Izzy. It’s a tonic. You drink it.” She leaned over the glass like it was the secret to immortality. How did someone manage to look so put together after the night we’d had? Maybe mom had doubled down on the kvass.

I lifted the magic potion to my lips. “Ewww. It smells like—vinegar.”

“Oh, just try it. Look what else is on the tray.” She started to bounce from foot to foot like a bottle of fizzy champagne that was about to explode. Of course. Mom would attempt to mend the studio disaster with an expensive gift. I lifted the tickets. A woman danced across the surface in a holographic hustle. “Beyonce? Seriously?”

“Yep. Third row seats at the Hollywood Bowl! Josh put a ring on it!”

Huh?

“He put a ring on it—he pulled some strings. Aren’t you excited?”

“Well, yeah. They don’t call her Queen B for nothing.” I pictured Beyonce in a shiny bodysuit, hair swaying in a slow-motion flip, exuding an aura of confidence.

“Can you believe it,” she shouted. Warner Bros. yesterday and Beyonce today!?”

I returned from my daydream. “I’m never doing that again.”

Mom’s smile faltered. “What do you mean, honey?”

I could just picture myself standing under those spotlights. “I made a fool out of myself.”

“Oh, sweetie. You were a natural.”

“A natural disaster. *Remember?* I collided with the spaceship.” I shoved the tickets back into the envelope.

“Honey, I had no idea you weren’t enjoying your acting adventure.”

“I told you—I told you I wanted to stay with Sheena. And look what happened.”

Mom put her hand on her hip. “I don’t think you realize how lucky we were to be able to do that. *Concrete Wrinkle* is a *huge* movie.”

Just then a woman’s voice sounded from the Echo on my desk. “Hi Mrs. Sheridan. She’s all ready. You can come over any time.”

“Oh, that’s the nurse. We use it like an intercom. When Sally’s finished with her sponge bath, they let me know so I can go over,” said Mom. She snapped her fingers. “Technology.” Then she lifted a pink tube from her pocket and swiped a line of gloss across her full lips. “C’mon. Let’s go see her. I’ll grab the plant. And Izzy, if you want to go back to Topanga Park or something—”

“Wait. Let me grab her card.” I rushed back to my room where I had propped up the card so it could dry out. Homemade cards were my specialty.

As mom and I padded down the cobblestone pavers to her cottage, I wondered what Sally would look like. I had never met a person who was sick with cancer.

Carefully, Mom pushed the sliding door open. I tiptoed after her.

“Good morning, Sally,” she said. “I have a special guest to see you.”

In the hush, I strained to catch any sounds.

“You don’t have to be so quiet. She’s awake,” said Mom, who twirled the blind wand to let more light in.

Sally reclined in a blue jean colored Lazy Boy chair, the footrest extended to create a makeshift bed. An antiseptic smell like Bactine hung in the air. Her tiny head was covered in an aqua and violet tie dye scarf. A tuft of orange hair stuck out from the hollow of her temple. Without moving she said, “Izzy, my beautiful granddaughter. Bella.” It was hard to make out her expression because her eyebrows were gone. My eyes settled on the shiny bottle of pills on the table next to her. *Me, a beautiful granddaughter?* Surely, words from a person under the influence of drugs.

“Hi Sally. It’s so good to see you. I made this for you.” I leaned over and held out the card.

“My goodness, Izzy. You’re an artist.” Although she said it “are-teest.”

Her finger traced the cartoon veggies. “Is that a turnip?”

“Yep, we grow them in our garden. We brought something else for you.” Her eyes widened as I extended the pot, although I was careful not to let the plant’s crazy legs pinch her.

“Look at that. Thank you, sweetheart.”

Then Sally told me what a cherished granddaughter I had always been and continued to fuss over my homemade card. I was shocked because the last time I had visited we had barely seen each other. Then Sally asked me to pull a seat over so we could chat. Just as I was starting to relax, Mom announced that it was time to leave.

“Sally loves Tuesdays because that’s when Nelda comes.” She patted Sally’s feet through the blanket.

“Es-mer-neld-a,” said Sally faintly. My ears pricked up around each syllable.

My mom winked at me. “She works wonders with Sally.”

Then Mom started prattling on about our day. “After Pilates we are having lunch at the Ivy and then 2 o’clock mani-pedis at Bijou.” Mom winked. “Where Khloe Kardashian is a regular.”

“Who’s Nelda?” I said.

Sally traced a circle on her chest. “Chakra healer. Nelda is going to balance me out so the cancer cells can get the hell out.” She gave a harrumph.

That sounded a lot more interesting than waiting for nail polish to dry.

Mom took a step toward Sally. “We’ll say goodbye for now. When we get back, we’ll come over and show you our nails.”

“Mom, I’m going to visit with Sally a little bit longer.”

“But sweetheart, we have a fun day ahead of us. And it’s time to get ready. I bought us coordinating Lululemon outfits.”

It had been ages since I’d seen Sally. Mom and I would have plenty of time for beautification later.

“Mom.” I spoke slowly. “I’d like to stay here.” I winked and bobbed my head towards Sally.

“But—” Her irises flitted back and forth from Sally to me. “—but I already reserved the class.” Mom nodded her head like everything was all settled. Just like when we were at Warner Bros.

“You go—and just tell them I got sick.”

A *clink clink* interrupted our words. Sally was dinging the half moon of her fingernail against a half empty water glass.

“Do I have any say in this?” Her cracked lips were begging for some Vaseline.

Mom hesitated. “Of course you do.”

“I’d be delighted if Izzy stayed. With Nelda coming, we can amp up the energy.” Sally’s cheeks rose up and her eyes grew wide like a little kid’s.

“C’mere, sweetie,” mouthed Mom.

I stood up, and Mom enclosed me in her long, graceful arms. The contours of her ribs poked at me through a layer of satin. I could almost hear Nannie's voice echoing, "She needs to get some meat on her bones."

Her breath tickled my ear. "Are you sure?"

I edged back. Her eyes looked a little misty, but I decided not to budge. I tried to soften my expression. "Tomorrow?"

"If that's what you want. But don't wear Sally out. She needs to rest."

"I promise." For the first time since I had arrived in L.A. I actually felt excited. Something about Sally had changed, and I wanted to find out what it was. Instead of being dragged all over town by Mom, I could actually be useful. If there was something I could do to help Sally take her mind off things—that was way more important than getting my nails done.

Mom lowered her head a notch towards Sally. "Well, you two catch up and I'll swing by when I get home." With a flourish of her slinky robe, she spun around, and vanished out the door.

Triumphant, I plopped back down on the chair next to Sally. The slit in her nightgown gaped a little, and I could see a big lump beneath her collarbone. She must have seen me staring because she touched the spot with her hand.

"That's my port. It's where they put the chemo in. Izzy, when you get sick, everything changes. Look at me now. My body barely works anymore."

"Is that what Nelda helps you with?"

She sighed and slowly turned her head toward me. “You start to accept that things change. I’ve had to let go of a lot of things—like my bucket list.” She paused and her hand opened slowly the way a starfish might release its grip on a seashell. An invisible force guided my hand to Sally’s. When her palm closed over mine, her muscles tightened a notch. It was the same hand I had seen in my dream.

“I’m glad you’re here.” She squeezed my hand twice like a heartbeat. A sensation of relief washed over me. Finally, I felt like I belonged somewhere.

“Me too. But what’s a bucket list?”

Chapter 5

Card 5: A Rainbow Cake and Tea for Two

“It’s a list of all the things you want to do before you—” Sally took a deep breath, “you know, depart.” I gulped.

Her hand floated up, mimicking a butterfly, and then dropped with a thud onto the blanket. Sally burrowed her chin deeper into the fuzzy blanket. “You know, I can’t even remember what I put on the list. I made it when I turned fifty. I went to some workshop about the second act of life. It was at a retreat center in Malibu.” Sally had a perplexed expression on her face as she seemed to float back in time.

“After we wrote it out on paper, they had us take it down to the beach and burn it. We let the ashes be carried away by the wind.” Sally’s eyes popped. “Isn’t that the stupidest thing you ever heard of!? We burned our only copy. No wonder I can’t remember anything about it.”

I had to agree with Sally. Adults did some strange things. “Wouldn’t it be better to plant the list or something?”

“Plant it? *Ooooh*,” Sally pinched her pale lips together. “That makes so much more sense. To make the wishes *grow*. You get it, Izzy.” Sally touched her hand to her cheek and winced. “My mouth hurts. Could I please have some water?”

I strolled over to the kitchen sink, where a bunch of mugs rested upside down in the dish rack. The words “Be You” stretched across the ceramic surface. Arching over the two words was a misty rainbow. Hopeful, colorful. Just what Sally needed.

When I passed the mug to her, she said, “You know, we should make a rainbow cake. There’s a way to make a cake that looks just like this.” She ran her finger over the ribbon of color.

“That would be awesome,” I said, even though I wasn’t much of a baker.

Sally took a few small sips, and then handed the mug back to me.

“ROY-G-BIV,” I said. Sally looked at me quizzically. I pointed to the rainbow, “Red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet. That’s what they teach you at school to learn the colors in the rainbow.”

Sally mouthed the strange syllables. “Roy, gee, biv. I’ll be damned. That is very clever.”

“I have an idea,” I said. Want to make a new bucket list and we can put the rainbow cake on it?”

Sally’s gaze rose to the ceiling. “No, I think that ship’s sailed,” she said glumly.

I had to get her mind off the cancer. “If the whole point of a bucket list is to dream, Sally, well anyone can do that. Including you.”

“Bucket lists are for people who have time and resources,” said Sally. “I only have resources.”

“What do you mean?”

“Moo-lah, Izzy. Cold hard cash,” she said with a dry laugh, slapping her palms on the armrests. “But what good is it? Heck, I can’t even drive anymore—my ankles are too weak.”

“I can drive.” A lie, technically. I didn’t have a license yet, but I knew my way around a stick shift. All the kids in Munfordville did.

“Already driving,” Sally sighed. “My goodness. You are making your grandmother feel old.”

“No, no, no—you’re not old, you’re... you’re vintage!” I blurted.

That got a laugh. A real one. She clasped her hands to her chest dramatically. “You’re a sweetie. But Izzy, you don’t need to waste your time on me. You should be making your own bucket list—you’ve got your whole life ahead of you.”

Her voice had a lift to it now, like she’d found a spark. “There’s paper in the drawer under the microwave,” she said, gesturing toward the kitchen.

I fished a pen and pad of paper from the junk drawer, then plopped back beside her. “Okay, you’ve got to show me how this works. What was the first thing you put on yours?”

Sally's lips curled into a smile. "Oh, I remember. It was a little... naughty." I passed her the pad and she scratched away. I found another scrap of paper and sat down to gather my ideas. By lunch time we had two bucket lists.

Sally

- 1). Go skinny dipping in the Pacific Ocean.
- 2). Sleep one night under the stars in Palm Springs.
- 3). Run up the stairs at the Philadelphia Art Museum so I can pump my hands at the top like Rocky.
- 4). Get a body piercing dedicated to world peace.
- 5). Take a limousine to attend the world premiere of *Concrete Wrinkle* at the Kodiak Theater.
- 6). Backpack the Range of Light in the High Sierra Mountains.
- 7). Attend Izzy's high school graduation in Kentucky.
- 8). Use a medium to ask Ed what the afterlife is like.
- 9). Bake a rainbow cake with Izzy.
- 10). Get all my chakras cleared so I can see reality through my third eye.

Izzy

- 1). Bake a rainbow cake with Sally.

- 2). Show my mom the Horse Walk of Fame in Paris, Kentucky.
- 3). Spend the summer in Greece with Dad.
- 4). Get a pony and raise him as my own.
- 5). Run a marathon.
- 6). Hike the entire Appalachian Trail.
- 7). Graduate from the University of Kentucky's Vet School.
- 8). Host a beautiful farm to table dinner where all the vegetables come from our garden.
- 9). Build my own house in Munfordville with the help of my Dad.
- 10). Take the blue ribbon for pygmy goats at the Hart County fair.

We exchanged the lists. "You're a runner?" said Sally.

"No, but it sounds impressive. So, yes, I'd like to say I did that."

"Oh, that's a good one—cook a special dinner with all the veggies from your garden.

Will you invite me?"

"Of course."

"Raise your own pony. I know you would be so good at it, Izzy. Look at that—we both have a hiking adventure. Yours, of course is close to your home, and mine is here."

"Have you ever gone backpacking?" I said.

"Not really, but when I look at the Patagonia catalogues, I get the itch."

I smiled. How did I never realize this before? That Sally was so free-spirited. Yet it was hard to imagine her taking a trip anywhere right now, much less backpacking through mountains. But I could see how happy she was just thinking about it. The possibilities.

“Maybe we could hike somewhere together before I leave,” I said.

“That’s nice of you to offer, but unless the angels bear my limbs, I don’t see that happening. We could go to the beach, though. But don’t expect me to skinny dip. I only do that here in the pool,” she said.

“What’s a medium?” I asked.

“That’s a person who can communicate with the dead.”

I zoomed in on Sally’s eyes. “There are people who can talk to the *dead*?”

“Yep, and some of them are very good at it.” She spread her fingers wide and lifted her hands into the air. Like she was sensing something invisible.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, Clarissa Moonlamb, who is my favorite L.A. medium—although she’s very expensive—has been able to get ahold of Ed several times. I always mean to ask about the afterlife, but I get so wrapped up in other things that I forget. I’m just dying to know what it’s like.”

Suddenly I was sorry I had asked. I hoped she wasn’t wondering about her dead husband’s afterlife because she thought—well, I didn’t want to think about that. I changed the subject.

“What part of you do you want to get pierced?”

“I want to get an earring in my navel with the ying yang symbol. I think it would be sexy.”

“Nice,” I said, trying to imagine that. I didn’t know what the ying yang was, but I had to give her credit. Here was Sally with a serious illness and she could still have fun thinking up cool stuff to do. Nannie would have thought she was nuts.

“Now, it’s my turn to ask questions,” said Sally. “Help me prop up these pillows, though. I’m going flat.”

Sally leaned forward and rested her head on my shoulder while I fluffed the pillows with my free hand. Her nightgown was all bunched up in the back.

“Ooooh, that feels good,” she said as I ran my hand down her back. The scent of baby powder drifted to my nose. “Perfect. Namaste. Now let me see here. This one is brilliant. Greece with your Dad. I can’t believe you haven’t done that yet. It seems like he’s been going forever.”

I set the list down on my lap and leaned back. “Well, the only reason I haven’t gone is mom.” I crossed my hands behind my head. “If I went, it means I wouldn’t be able to see her in the summer.”

“I see your point. *Hmmm*, maybe there’s a solution. Maybe your mom could go to Greece too. Like a girls’ trip.”

"I suppose," I said, "but mom never leaves L.A. I don't know what she would do in Greece."

"You'd be surprised Izzy. There are malls in the Mediterranean too." Sally picked at a loose thread in her afghan.

I laughed. "Then maybe it would work out."

Sally held her hand out and I passed her my bucket list. "Number 7. So, you're serious about becoming a vet?"

"I think so," I said. "We have rabbits, chickens, and goats. I spend a lot of time with them. When Hermes got a thorn caught in his foot, I took care of him. I soaked it and plucked it out with special tweezers."

"Wow. I see how good you are with Gertie. I think you will be an excellent veterinarian. Let your heart guide you," said Sally. She pointed to the words on her rainbow mug.

"Thank you," I said. Mom didn't like farm animals, so I didn't even bring it up with her anymore. She would just say, "Gross." And yet there she was doing yoga with a goat.

"Why do you want to build a house in Munfordville?"

"I guess I always want to be near dad. It's home."

"And you think you can build it yourself?"

“Maybe. Dad and I built a firewood shed last year. It was a lot of work, but when it was finished it was pretty cool. There would be plenty of room for all my animals if I built a house on our property.”

Sally flexed her feet beneath the covers. “Your own Kentucky homestead, huh?”

“Yep.” When I leaned back in my chair, the hairs on the back of my neck stood up. I looked out the window to see if a storm was coming. A shrill *tinnngggggg* rang out, and before I could figure out what was happening, Nelda and her dog materialized.

“We always start with a sound bath,” Sally said.

I decided to excuse myself because I didn’t want to get possessed. Maybe this was just more crazy California stuff, but if it helped Sally feel better, then what the heck.

When I got back to my room, I plunked down on my bed with my phone. According to Dictionary.com a bucket list was “A list of things a person wants to achieve or experience before a certain age or dying.” <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/bucket-list?s=t>

My stomach lurched at the last word. Dying? No, that couldn’t be right. There was just too much life left in Sally. And besides, for the first time, I was beginning to really like her.

I propped myself up onto my elbows and felt myself disappear into the bouquets of blue flowers scattered across the comforter. I felt better now that I had a plan. I was not going to become my mother’s Hollywood puppet. Sally needed me—I would make sure she completed her bucket list. I’d remind her what it meant to live.

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