

Clarissa sees Decker Bail before I do. He's with a group of his friends, about to walk into the Adidas store behind me. I know she sees something because her eyes get real big and she coughs on the sip of banana blueberry smoothie she'd just sucked up through her straw.

"Turn around, quick," she says.

And I do. When I see Decker and the two other boys I don't recognize, I turn back to Clarissa and sink into my chair. I pick up my Jamba Juice cup and wrap my lips around the tip of the straw, but I can't manage to suck anything through it because my throat's closed up altogether.

"Did you call him?" Clarissa asks.

I set the cup back on the table and look down at my chest, my unnatural cleavage staring back. It's a product of the extra-padded Victoria Secret push-up bra Mom bought me. I didn't call Decker. I wanted to, but I didn't.

"Mel!" Clarissa snaps. "He gave you his number. Why didn't you call him?"

*Because I'm not like you.*

I want to say the words out loud, but I don't. Clarissa's my best friend. Actually, she's my only friend. Like me, she's an actress and a model. Mom and I met her and her

mother, Juliette, on a commercial set ten years ago when Clarissa and I were both seven. Mom found out they lived just a few streets away from us in Brentwood, and Clarissa's mom had just hired one of the best tutors in the area—Elaine Orton. By the following Monday, Clarissa and I were being home-schooled by Mrs. Orton together. Ten years later, here we are, sitting across from each other at the 3rd Street Promenade in Santa Monica, sipping on smoothies.

Clarissa is looking past me now and at the Adidas store, her mouth working the end of her straw like she's shooting a Jamba Juice commercial. She drops her head a little and lifts her eyes, sultry-like. And she *is* gorgeous—five-foot-nine with long, wavy blonde hair and deep brown eyes. Even though we look nothing alike—I have straight brown hair and green eyes, and I'm an inch taller—we end up competing for the same spots in everything. Commercials, television, print. And we see Decker all the time at auditions. He always ends up going for the roles opposite of us.

The first time Decker spoke to me, I thought I was going to pass out. He has the most amazing blue eyes and ratty, bleached-blond hair. He's a total surfer with a surfer's body—all tanned and thin, with a washboard stomach. We booked a commercial spot together where we had to hold hands and pretend we were boyfriend and girlfriend. I remember wishing the writer had made us kiss at the end, but I wasn't so lucky. We just held hands and walked away from the camera, laughing. After the shoot, Decker gave me a hug. He smelled like Downey and some kind of woody cologne. The next time I saw him was at a print audition. Clarissa was there too, and I introduced them, but Decker kept his eyes on me. Later, when he gave me his business card, she swiped it away as soon as his back was turned.

“Holy shit, Mel,” she’d said. “He gave you his number. You gonna call him?”

I snatched the card back and tucked it into my purse. “Of course!”

Clarissa sets her cup on the table and stands up. She’s waving. My hands tingle, and then go numb.

“Decker!” she shouts.

I want to smack her across the face, tell her to shut up, but I slide even further down into my chair instead, until all I really want to do is crawl under the table.

“Hey Clarissa.” It’s Decker’s voice. He’s standing right behind me. “Melanie?”

Clarissa crosses her arms over her chest. “Yeah. That’s her.” She looks angry, but I don’t know why.

I push my chair back and stand, then turn to face Decker and his friends.

“Hi Decker,” I say, my voice cracking.

His blue eyes hold mine, and I feel my legs getting weak as my stomach turns, like I’ve just swallowed a glass full of sour milk.

“I told her she should’ve called you,” Clarissa says.

My cheeks burn, partly from anger and partly from embarrassment, and I drop my gaze to my pink flip-flops and my French pedicure, a tiny delicate flower painted on each big toe nail. Mom insists my feet always be pretty, just in case I meet somebody important in the industry who has a foot fetish.

“It’s cool,” Decker says. “Her loss.”

I look back at him, but he walks around me and toward Clarissa without meeting my eyes. The two other boys stare at me. One of them looks at my legs, then up to my waist

and breasts. He stays there for a second before looking at my face. The other boy whistles as he walks by me, close enough so I can feel the heat of him against my bare arms.

Clarissa giggles, and I want so badly to turn around and call her a bitch, but I don't have the guts. And she knows it, and later, she'll make some snide comment to me about how I'm always too nice to people, how I don't have a mean bone in my body, how if I don't grow some balls the world will walk all over me like my mom walks all over my stepdad.

"I just don't get it," she'll say. "Peter's this badass lawyer but when it comes to your mom, he's such a pussy."

It's true too. Peter's worshipped the ground Mom walks on since he met her at some Hollywood holiday party twelve years ago. He's an entertainment attorney, and he was there with one of his television clients. Mom was there with Kurt, my agent. Sometimes, I look at Mom and Peter and wonder how they ended up together. Peter's not ugly, but he's not Mom. He's my height with thinning gray hair, hazel eyes, and an awkward smile—he has a thin space between his two front teeth and when he grins, the right side of his mouth curves more sharply than the left. Mom's an inch taller than him with long copper hair and deep green eyes, and her smile is flawless—bright white, picket fence teeth and lips like Angelina Jolie's. Peter's also thirteen years older than Mom.

Clarissa thinks they hooked up because Mom was afraid that if she didn't hurry, she'd be too washed up to attract anybody with money. She was a model into her mid-twenties, then did commercial and television work until she accidentally got pregnant with me by some hotshot director who immediately dumped her when he found out. When I was four years old, Mom started dragging me to casting calls and auditions and

photo shoots and movie sets. I don't remember ever deciding I wanted to be a model or an actress, but that's what I became. Mom told me I was born to follow in her footsteps.

I keep my eyes on the ground as I turn and grab my purse from the table, leaving my Jamba Juice cup there. I walk away. Clarissa doesn't say anything. Neither does Decker, but when I look back briefly—a quick glance at my sweating Styrofoam smoothie cup—I see Clarissa's twisted little smile, her eyes clearly focused on me.

I run to the parking garage and to my silver MINI Cooper parked on the second level. My fingers shake as I unlock the doors, and when I drop into the warmth of the leather seat, I let the tears fall, knowing there won't be anybody coming after me. Not Clarissa, not Decker, not even the other two boys who gawked at me like I was a naked lady on a billboard. They'd seen me before, but I don't know them. Just as I don't know any of the faces who stare at me when I walk by and who whisper when I pass. I'm a beautiful face to them, a perfect body, the chick in the magazine or on the television. And they think because I look this way I have everything. I'm a spoiled little rich girl with a pretty smile.

I look at my eyes in the rearview mirror. They're Mom's eyes—that same deep green like polished circles of jade. But I'm nothing like Mom, and even though I'm glad I'm not like her, I sometimes wish I were as strong as she is. If I were, maybe I would've told her years ago that I didn't like this life, that I hated Clarissa and Kurt and the other people I have to be around everyday, all of them superficial like they're living in a comic book.

I start the MINI Cooper and exit the parking garage into a mass of cars and people and bright sunlight. I think about Clarissa and Decker and Mom, and I wish I could be home with Peter and Zach, my stepbrother. Zach's mom died during his birth from an aneurism. He was just a few months old when Peter and Mom met. There are times when

I wonder what would've happened if Peter's heart hadn't been so broken when he met Mom.

I take 7th Street to Santa Monica Boulevard and turn right, heading in the direction of 26th Street and then home. I can't stop crying. I don't want to do this anymore. After an audition or a shoot, Mom and I sometimes go to a mall—the Beverly Center or Westfield Century City. Mom watches the way people look at us when we pass. Men, and even boys my age, will follow her with their eyes. I see them, and even though Mom pretends she doesn't, I know she sees them too. I know because she sways her hips a little more and lifts her chin a little higher.

We'll sift through stores, sometimes buying a new shirt or jeans or a pair of shoes, but we're not there for shopping. Before we leave, we'll sit and have a coffee in the middle of an atrium, Mom letting her eyes drift from person to person. While she gathers silent attention, I seek out girls my age. They're always clumped in groups of three or four, sometimes five. When I'm with Clarissa, she mocks those girls.

"Oh my God, could you be more immature?" she'll say.

But I'm jealous and overwhelmed with a sense of loneliness. I feel the same way about them that I do about Zach—that I want to *be* them. I want to smile and giggle and whip at each other's hair. I want to link my arms with theirs and stomp through the mall wearing a sweatshirt with the name of my high school on it. I'm in the television show looking out into the real world, and all I want to do is shatter the glass.

My cell phone chimes, indicating I have a new text message. The stoplight ahead of me is green, turning yellow. I put my foot on the gas. Another chime. I look down as I turn left, for just a split second. A car horn wails, long and loud. My body jolts forward

and sideways as the other car hits the passenger side of my MINI Cooper. The seatbelt catches, the airbag deploys. Glass explodes all around me.

I open my eyes to a bright but fuzzy ceiling and blink a few times until the fuzziness gives way to sharp white. There's something on my face. When I bring my hand up to feel my cheek, my fingers touch something smooth, but rough too, like the Zapotec Indian runner on the dining room table at home. I try and sit up, but there's a tube in my arm.

*What the hell?*

The words sit on my tongue, but I can't get them out of my mouth because my lips are pressed together by the stuff that's on my face. And they're dry, like I haven't had a sip of water in weeks. A door opens. I try turning my head in the direction of the sound, but it feels like my skin is ripping under the Zapotec Indian runner so I stop. From the corner of my eye, I see Mom approaching.

She walks up to the side of my bed, a man in a white lab coat just behind her. I realize now I'm in a hospital. She takes my hand in hers—her fingers are freezing. Hospitals are always so damn cold. I've been in a few. The first real time I went (having nothing to do with a commercial or a television show or a photo shoot) was when I was

ten, not long before Peter's mother died. Mom and Peter and Zach and me went to see her after she fell and broke her hip. I hated being there—all cold and bright and smelly like a doctor's office. I remember being so happy when I left, and hoping I'd never, ever get hurt or sick.

The man in the white lab coat has thin black hair and dark eyes, and his nose is slightly crooked.

“She's lucky to be alive, Mrs. Kennicut,” he says. His voice is nice—deep, but soft.

Mom's eyes are all puffy and red. Her mascara is smeared. She brings a crumpled handkerchief to her nose, but she makes sure not to smudge her lipstick while she wipes. I can never understand how she keeps her lips so perfectly painted, all day. Even when she eats, it's as though the Lancôme Rouge Sensation in Red Desire is fixed to her mouth like permanent marker on skin. Whenever she takes me to an audition, she uses her fingernail to scrape any lipstick residue from the corners of my mouth.

“After all these years of teaching you how to properly apply lipstick, Melanie,” she'll say, “I just don't get how you always let it smear like this.”

“What are our options?” she asks the doctor.

He crosses his arms over his chest. “Once we remove the bandages, we'll have a better idea.”

Mom puts the handkerchief to her nose again. She squeezes her eyes shut. Her fingers have warmed against my skin, but her hand feels rigid like she's made of hard plastic, like she's a mannequin. She says something to the doctor, but I can't hear her. They both leave the room.

I turn my head to the right a little. Through the window, the sky is grayish blue with not a cloud anywhere. It must be late in the afternoon because it's May in Los Angeles. If it were morning, low soupy clouds—what the KTLA weather lady calls a “marine layer”—would be smashed against the outside of the window. I lift my arms into the air, carefully, so I don't yank the tube out of the right one. My left arm has just a few small patches of gauze pasted to my skin. The right is covered in a bandage from my wrist to my elbow.

I remember a car horn blaring, then tires screeching, then a crash. Not a small crash like a single glass plate dropped on a hard tile floor, but a massive crash. A whole box full of plates being thrown from a ten-story building. My ears were ringing for a split second, and then there was pain, and when the shock of the pain subsided, my shirt was soaking wet. My eyes were closed, but I heard people shouting, and later, sirens. Lots of them, swirling and spinning and looping like twirling ribbons.

The door opens again and the doctor walks in, without Mom. He touches my arm. His hand is soft. Not plastic. His fingers melt over my skin like hot fudge over ice cream—smooth and warm.

“You're going to be fine, Melanie,” he says.

The doctor said I was going to be fine. Lying in that hospital bed, I didn't think he was talking about my health. But he was. There was no internal damage. My heart was beating, my lungs were breathing in and out. My liver and stomach and kidneys were intact. And nobody else had been hurt. The man driving the car that hit me had a few lacerations, but nothing too terrible. Nothing like me. What the doctor meant by “fine”

was that I was clear of any danger of suddenly keeling over dead. What he should've said was, "You're going to be fine, Melanie, but you'll be ugly for awhile."

In my bathroom mirror is a reflection of a makeup artist's dummy. I'm a Freddy Kruger victim, but unlike the actors in the movies, I can't peel the rubber away when the shoot is finished. There's no soft, clear skin beneath the stitched-up ground beef. Just a red mess of torn flesh I can't get rid of. Not yet, anyway. I take some comfort in knowing there's a way to fix this, to repair the damage I'd silently wished for when I left Clarissa and Decker and the gawking boys at the 3rd Street Promenade. It's not the first time I wished to be somebody else, but this wasn't what I meant. Fortunately, Kurt knows just about every plastic surgeon in Los Angeles, and he made sure to have one of the most recognized call Mom and Peter. Of course, Mom took the call from Dr. Levington and made all the arrangements while Peter just sat beside her and listened.

Zach is standing just inside my bathroom door, his eyes glued to my left cheek like he's waiting for maggots to appear.

"Joanne says you're gonna have surgery at the end of the summer," he says. "You'll get your face back, Mel."

Even though Zach was just a baby when Peter and Mom married, he's never called her anything but Joanne. She didn't want him calling her Mom. And even though I was five when they married, I've never called Peter anything but Peter. Also Mom's request. It doesn't matter that Zach's not my real brother. I love him anyway. I know most seventeen-year-old girls who have little brothers or stepbrothers can't stand them, but I love mine. He's the sweetest kid I know—always smiling and sharing and saying nice

things. He got that from Peter, but I also think his mom must've been a pretty sweet lady, even though Peter has never said anything about her.

"I know, Zach," I say.

I've seen the before-and-after pictures on Dr. Levington's web site, and in most of his patients, you can't even tell they'd had injuries. I'm not scared. In fact, I'm relieved. He told Mom we needed to give the tissue time to heal. He would schedule the surgery for late August or early September.

"But that's three months away," Mom had replied. "What're we supposed to do until then? There's so much work she could be doing this summer."

Peter didn't say much. He just nodded his head, but he kept his eyes on me the whole time, and he smiled his awkward smile. He always does that. I think it's his way of telling me he understands, without having to open his mouth and interrupt Mom. He doesn't do that with Zach. They're just buddies. They have a connection I don't have with Mom, but I wish I did. I wish she and I could just be buddies, but I think it's too late for that now.

"You need a haircut," I say to Zach, his shaggy brown hair hanging in ringlets just below his ears. I try to smile at him, but it hurts.

"Whatever," he replies. He turns and walks away. Normally, he'd stay and talk more, but I think he can't look at me for too long without feeling bad.

I face the mirror again and take a deep breath, hoping the extra air will push down the rising lump in my throat, maybe shove it back into my gut where it came from.

*You're not going to cry, Melanie.*

It's been three weeks since the accident, and although the swelling has subsided, the wounds are still red and fleshy and lumpy. I was given a prescription of Vicodin when I

left the hospital. Now, I'm just taking Extra Strength Tylenol. But it's not the pain that makes me want to cry, or the ugly person staring back at me. I want to cry because for the first time in my life—even if it's for just a few months—I don't have to go on any auditions or shoots. Maybe, I can just be . . . normal?