

LIGHTS OUT, LOS ANGELES

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But to one and all, I must confess —
it's just basketball, nothing more, nothing less.
-Dick Bavetta

Sports do not build character, they reveal it.
-John Wooden

Throw it down, big man. Throw it *down*!
-Bill Walton

Chapter 1

"I'll take a non-scalding vanilla latte, please." I noticed a sheaf of papers sitting on the counter of the coffee shop. "And an application."

"You got it," the adorable twenty-something barista said with a winning smile.

I flashed one back and tried not to die a little inside. This was hardly the type of employment I should be pursuing. As I shuffled back to my best friend Andrew, I picked up a newspaper fully intending to scour the Classified section.

"Still looking for a job?" Andrew asked.

"I will be until I have a house in Malibu with a couple of Mercedes parked in the driveway," I responded.

"In that case, I think you better have a heartier breakfast."

"Have you noticed we're in LA? My size six goal from back home has shrunk down to a size two. I feel like a behemoth."

"I thought you had abs."

"I do."

He gave me a look.

"But I have love handles!"

He grabbed my side. "I better have a bigger breakfast. I might be searching all day."

"Oh please," I snorted as I slapped his hand away. "I hardly need health advice from someone who only consumes what? Four or is it now five items?"

"I've expanded to five."

"Let me guess." I counted with my fingers. "Hamburger, hot dog, grilled cheese, fries..."

"Pizza." He sat there thoughtfully. "You think I should get checked for scurvy?"

"At a minimum."

"I'll consider it." He gathered his stuff. "I'm heading out."

"Later." I gave his departing slender figure a look of scorn. A trans fat diet and not an ounce of body fat to show for it. Made me sick.

I opened the paper right to the sports section and combed the box scores for the Los Angeles Celebrities, or Celebs as they were more commonly known. My responsible self tapped me on the shoulder and reminded me that I had watched the game in its entirety the night before. I grudgingly turned to the want ads.

Andrew and I were recent graduates of UCLA—both philosophy majors without a sense of direction. Andrew was considering law school to become a public defender. We'd had a major disagreement junior year on ethics with me touting Ayn Rand's virtue of selfishness and him extolling the virtues of Marx's communism while lamenting our species' inability to live up to its moral standards. I'd come to appreciate his propensity toward goodness.

Still I was looking for riches with a bit of fame thrown in. I also wanted to know that my intelligence was being used for something unique and important. And lately I'd become attached to the idea of a villa with an ocean view.

This is why I chose to continue living in LA upon graduation. It wasn't necessarily a wise choice. Real estate had skyrocketed and living in Westwood for four years had put it in my head that I had to live according to a certain lifestyle. It had even driven me to consider answering one of the ads in the *Daily Bruin*, our college paper, for an egg donation. I had most of the requirements—good SAT scores, good GPA, attractive—just not the height. I ended up passing on the idea because I couldn't stand the thought of pain, even for tens of thousands of dollars.

Andrew moved back in with his mom in Brentwood so he wasn't experiencing the housing crunch like I was. In the end I chose style over substance and moved into a small room in a house in Pacific Palisades, just north of Santa Monica and south of Malibu. Utilitarian Andrew couldn't appreciate this sacrifice at all.

I scanned the ads looking for things in my neighborhood. It was becoming more evident the more I looked that I wasn't going to find a job that paid like I wanted, at least to start. On the one hand that was fine because I didn't want a job. I'd learned through various college gigs that I don't like working. On the other hand, a future of limitless debt wasn't going to work out either.

I briefly considered finding a sugar daddy. That was straggling the fence of degradation.

I regarded my situation. My only income was from a position as an instructor at LA Fitness. That was a sporadic enough endeavor to keep me below the poverty line. Who did I know that made decent money? Game show winners, CEOs, strippers... My reverie was interrupted by a thought of Sasha, a girl I knew in college.

Sasha's mom ran a high-end house cleaning service. Sasha had told me that her employees raked it in. This was partially made possible by a great deal of the clients simply having no concept of how much house cleaning should cost. I gave her a call.

"Sasha! What's up?" I asked enthusiastically.

"Hey, girl. I'm just walking around Rodeo," she answered with a yawn. "I heard they're filming something with Brad Pitt over here. I thought I'd give it a whirl." Sasha's hobby was stargazing—LA style.

"Give him a slap on the ass for me if you see him," I told her. "Listen, I was thinking about your mom's business."

"Uh huh."

“I was wondering if she had any openings.”

“For who?”

“For me.”

Sasha hooted. “You want to clean houses?”

“Let’s be realistic. I obviously don’t want to clean houses. I want to make some money.”

“Didn’t you say you had a maid growing up? Do you even know how to clean?” she asked skeptically.

“Of course I know how to clean. Who doesn’t know how to clean?”

“I have to say, I was surprised at how many kids didn’t know how to do their own laundry in college.”

Touché. I was in that group. “Well, that’s not me. I can clean with the best of them.” *Can* being the operative word.

“Right.”

I thought I sensed sarcasm—must press on. “So, could you talk to your mom about me? I think it could really work out. I mean, not forever, of course, but for now, definitely.”

“I’ll mention you to her tonight. I’m having dinner with the family at Benihana.”

“Sweet! So call me tomorrow?”

“Yeah, sure,” Sasha said like she meant it.

“Thanks so much. I owe you.”

“You really do,” she said seriously.

Aw crap. I hoped I didn’t owe her a pair of Armani shades or something.

We exchanged goodbyes and hung up. I sighed heavily. I better learn how to clean—and fast.

“Well, dear, there’s really not that much to it. You see dirt, you get rid of it,” my mother disinterestedly told me over the phone. “I even saw a commercial for something called a Dirt Devil.”

I wrote *Dirt Devil* down on my notepad and stretched out on my bed. I heard was slight cheering and then intense booing in the background. “What’s that noise?” I asked.

“That’s your father. He has money on a football game and he’s pretty excited.”

I could picture my parents in their suburban, Mediterranean style home enjoying a lazy Sunday afternoon. My dad had probably tossed his newspaper aside to yell at a referee and my mom was most likely in between reading a magazine and deciding on dinner.

“So you’re saying that I can figure this out no problem?”

“Absolutely!” my mom responded loyally. “You’re such a smart girl, I have no doubt you can clean houses.”

“I hope I can put you down as a reference,” I muttered as she went on.

“Honey, don’t you have a degree from UCLA now?”

I walked into the trap. “Uh huh.”

“And didn’t that piece of paper cost an awful lot of money?”

“Uh huh.”

“And doesn’t it prove to the world that you’re brilliant?”

“Well, I don’t know about *that*, Mom.”

She refused to adhere to the Socratic Method and overrode me. “So wouldn’t you be able to get a job that would involve someone cleaning up after *you*?”

“I don’t know. The world’s changed. People are looking for experience in addition to academics.”

“Maybe you should get some then,” she suggested brightly but with a veil of urgency that only a daughter could detect.

“I’ll think about that. I have to go. Andrew and I are going out.”

“Where to?”

“I’m not sure yet. All I can say is we’re definitely not staying in.”

“So are you two...” She trailed off.

“No. And we never will be. We’re just friends. It works well because for some reason we both find each other slightly repulsive,” I told her.

“Okay,” she said hesitantly. “I don’t necessarily think you’re right about his view—”

“Trust me,” I interrupted. “He saw my fat days, we’re all set.”

“Oh honey.”

“Talk to you later, Mom. Tell Dad I wish him luck.”

Chapter 2

I woke up the next morning to a ringing phone and a touch of a hangover. “Hello?” I answered groggily.

“You will never believe what happened,” a voice said.

“Who is this?” I asked warily.

“Sasha, you jerk. Anyway, my mom said she’d be willing to talk to you about a job.”

“Get out of here.”

“I’m not kidding,” she said sounding a little incredulous herself. “She wants to meet you at noon at the Coffee Bean in Westwood.”

“One thing, Sara,” Sasha warned.

“Yes, Sasha?”

“She’s not going to get your humor. Just be as demure as possible.”

“Demure happens to be my specialty!”

I swept into Coffee Bean wearing what I considered to be a responsible yet humble ensemble—knee-length black skirt, turquoise blouse. I was all confidence and smiles until I realized that I didn’t know exactly what Sasha’s mom looked like, or her name.

I tried to disguise the horror creeping over my face by reaching into my purse and pretending to turn off my cell phone.

“You must be Sara,” someone said while my head was still buried in my bag.

I looked up and smiled.

“I’m Tanya.” A redheaded woman in a sweater and long, flowing skirt reached out her hand.

“Nice to meet you,” I said, shaking firmly.

“Shall we?” She gestured to the line at the counter.

Once we were seated with our drinks she leveled with me. “Sara, what I’d be hiring you to do isn’t rocket science. Sasha tells me you’re intelligent but that doesn’t really translate to the world of cleaning. I need you to be punctual, responsible and discreet. How does that sound to you?”

“Doable. When I set out to do something, I do it right.”

“Sasha did say something like that about you.” She sized me up. “She also said she wasn’t sure about your experience in this field.”

Thanks a lot, Sasha. Luckily I didn’t have to form an answer because Tanya kept going.

“Frankly, I’m not that worried about it. If I tell you to go in and make a place sparkle, I’m sure you’ll know what to do. Just make sure to do it without drawing attention to yourself.”

She went on to say that most of the time the owners wouldn’t be home since we worked around their schedules. I had to do was go in, do my job and get out. And the pay was much better than Fourbucks.

She handed me some paperwork to fill out. “I almost forgot. You may be cleaning a high profile person’s house—doubtful, but possible. It’s imperative that you keep it confidential if you do. Our clients demand their privacy and I am extremely serious about guarding it.”

Sounds good to me!

“So can you start Saturday?” she asked.

Start on a weekend? What the— “Saturday works for me,” I found myself saying agreeably.

“Great. I’ll call you with the address and all that stuff.”

“Thanks, Tanya.” I started to gush, “I really appreciate this.”

”Sara, this is only a trial run. I start all my employees that way. But I think you’ll do just fine.”

“Oh, definitely,” I told her graciously.

I drove home giddy with delight. My first interview and I got the job! Walking up the steps to the house I was about to kick up my heels when my landlord approached.

“Sara!” she exclaimed like she’d been looking for me.

“Hi Kitty,” I replied.

“I’m so glad to see you. I have an idea for you that I think you’re going to love.”

“I’m all ears.”

Kitty led me through the house to the bench on the back porch. She told me she’d be just a minute while she grabbed some iced tea.

I sat back and breathed in the ocean air. Things were looking up. My parents were cutting me off the next month and I’d found more than just a safety net to land in with plenty of time to spare. My living situation was phenomenal. I had a room in a gorgeous mission style home with an ocean view. I liked Kitty. She stayed out of my way and didn’t nag.

Kitty was forty, divorced and loving it. She didn't have kids and had told me that that had been one of her biggest blessings in life. The freedom and the alimony allowed her to start her dream business—an upscale dog hotel.

Sometimes I thought her love life was more exciting than mine. Her honey-blond hair and sleek physique got her dates with handsome men regularly. My prowling got me questionable gyrations at clubs.

"Here you go." She handed me my drink and sat down. "Gorgeous today, isn't it?"

"You can say that again," I said happily.

"Well, let me tell you what I had in mind for you. I know you like to exercise," she began. "And I know that you love dogs."

I nodded. Sometimes she had to pry me away from her longhaired Chihuahua Taquito.

"So I thought who better to run my bigger guys on the beach in the mornings than you!"

I was shocked and pleased. When I moved in Kitty had told me that she only allowed very experienced people to work for her.

"I've been thinking about changing things around a little," she went on. "I've been taking care of a pop princess' Pomeranian that has the most interesting little dog syndrome I've ever seen. I think he's even making the Great Dane nervous. That's what got me thinking that some of my clients would appreciate a change of scenery and some more intense exercise while they're at it. What do you think?"

"You know I'd love to," I told her.

"So tomorrow we'll start you with a couple and see how that goes."

"Thanks, Kitty! I'm really excited."

"I'm just glad someone's going to help me tire them out, sweetie," she told me with a grin and a hair tousele.

I told Andrew the big news over a relaxing dinner at my favorite Chinese dive that night. He deigned to join me even though he wouldn't be eating.

He laughed until Coke shot out of his nose. "I'm sorry!" He took a deep breath and got his bearings. "I think you forgot that you have a degree from a highly ranked university."

"Of course I didn't. I use that fact to feel superior almost daily," I retorted. "And anyway, you sound just like my mother." I took an angry bite of beef and broccoli.

"Maybe that's what living with your mom does."

I sat up. "Hey, it's no fun if you're making fun of it too!"

“Once again, I’m sorry. I’ll do my best to leave making fun of my living situation to you.”

”Thank you. Just so you know, I’m going to reserve the right to make fun of my working situation.”

He raised his hand. “Doing the same.”

Andrew’s job as a bartender was handy ammo when he got going on one of his occasional self-righteous sermons.

“Tip off is in fifteen minutes,” I announced.

“You and your basketball. Really, it’s pathetic.” He mocked extreme disappointment.

“You’re just jealous because you’re missing the game.”

He threw a wonton in my direction. “Shut up and eat, girly.”

“I thought you’d be in a rush because of your hot date.” Andrew had had more luck at the club the night before than I.

“I marginally am.”

“Marginally?” I asked.

“Yeah. I’m actually a little nervous. I think this girl might be a little out of my league.”

“Because she’s a ten and you’re a six? Man, I’m relentless tonight!”

Andrew just smiled. “You know I’m not a six.”

He was right. Any guy with dark hair, light eyes and a toned body was not a six.

“No, I think she might be a little more intellectual,” he went on.

“Now I’m worried. Where are you taking her? The library?”

“Actually, I am,” Andrew said. “But it’s a high-end bar, not a place to study.”

“How appropriate. I just don’t get how you’re worried about her intellect when you met at a club. Do you have radar for that? I always think I’m having a totally different conversation than the guy I’m talking to because the music is so loud.”

”We went out for coffee after,” he explained.

“Oh. All right,” I said while throwing my napkin on my plate. “Let’s bail. Time for Jake Dalton!”

“Did I mention that you’re pathetic?” Andrew asked.

“You did,” I assured him.

The Celebs were on a four-game road trip starting tonight against the Chicago Toros so I wouldn't be enjoying the game at Scissors Center. I opted to watch at home rather than with my crowd at BJ's, a restaurant in Westwood. They were a fun group of fellow UCLA alumni but this way I didn't have to justify my drooling over Jake.

Three and a half intense hours later I was flying high. The Celebs trailed by twenty in the third quarter and then somehow tied to go into double overtime and win by eleven. Their star Angus had fifty-two points. Jake had sixteen with eleven assists

I wanted to go out and celebrate but had to make do with leaving a triumphant voicemail for Andrew. I had responsibilities now, like getting up at the crack of dawn to wrestle with some dogs.

Chapter 3

“Oooh, baby. And I am signed, sealed, delivered, I’m yours,” sang out my alarm clock.

Starting the day with Stevie Wonder had to be a good sign. I hefted myself out of bed and into the bathroom where I assessed myself in the mirror.

My maple colored hair is a bit on the unruly side. It’s naturally curly with natural highlights. My skin is mostly clear. For these reasons I tend not to dye my hair or use much makeup. I tan easily so I don’t go to a tanning salon. I used to be on the large side and my chest is still living in the past. All in all, I’m not a bad package. Once I get my hair tamed and a little eyeliner on I’m ready to go. Sometimes I fear I favor the shabby in the shabby chic style of LA a little more than I should but the fact of the matter is that I don’t have the patience for more than a natural look. I find more than five minutes spent on makeup to be cruel and unusual punishment.

At 7 a.m. sharp there was a knock on my door. “Sara?”

“Morning, Kitty,” I said, opening the door.

A Rottweiler and yellow Lab attempted to lunge into the room. Kitty’s restraint on them was impressive.

“I wanted to introduce you to Maverick,” she pointed at the Rottweiler. “And Sparky,” she pointed at the Lab.

“Nice to meet you,” I told them politely, allowing each to lick me on the face. They left about a cup of slobber each.

“These two are very excited to be joining you for your morning jog. Here’s a couple poop bags. I’ll pick them up in an hour. You ready?” asked Kitty, handing me the leashes.

“Uh…” I was mulling over the size of the poop bags. “Ready as I’ll ever be.” My Lord, they hardly fit in my pockets.

“Great, see you in a bit!” Kitty called over her shoulder as she headed for the door.

We ungracefully made our way down the hall and outside. Maverick and Sparky weren’t done greeting me hello. They kept jumping up. It was nice to feel so popular.

“Okay, boys,” I told them. “We’re going to kick this up a notch.”

I started to jog and was surprised to see them fall in line. Through the neighborhood it was smooth sailing.

Running along the beach I thought I saw a famous actor’s girlfriend jogging in my direction. She was gorgeous. Maverick wasn’t as impressed. Sparky and I were jerked to a standstill, anchored by Maverick. He walked in a slow circle and squatted. I cringed.

Sure enough the dog produced a steaming pile he could be proud of. He did a short, enthusiastic run to say he felt five pounds lighter. This convinced Sparky that there was no better time than the present to lose weight. He squatted as well.

“Oh, come on!” I protested.

No luck. It was time for the glamorous part of my job.

I approached Maverick’s pile cautiously, poop bag in hand and gagged as I picked up the mound. A shovel would have come in handy. I had to set the bag down to pick up Sparky’s mess. Now I had two full sacks and two exuberant, large dogs.

“Let’s find a trash can,” I suggested. Sparky had other ideas. He mounted Maverick and thrust.

“No, no, no!” I yelled, trying to yank apart this improvisational scene of Brokeback Dog while simultaneously being as far away from their crap as possible.

“Need some help?” a chuckling baritone voice asked.

I turned to the source gratefully. “Yes!”

He took the leashes from me and got the boys to sit. They looked adoringly at their new master, tails wagging. If I’d had one it would have been doing the same.

He was in his late twenties, tall, fit and despite the large mole on his cheek, pretty handsome with dark hair and brown eyes.

“Nice work,” I told him.

“You just have to let them know who’s boss,” my knight said. “I’ll keep an eye on them if you want to dump that in the trash can over there.”

“Okay, thanks! Back in a second.” I could have sworn he watched me walk away. When I returned he handed me back the reins.

“So, what’s your name?” he asked.

“Sara. You?”

“Jordan.”

“Nice to meet you, Jordan,” I said, meaning it. “I’d offer you my hand but I think you have a pretty good idea of where it’s been.”

He laughed. “Are these two yours?” He gestured to the dogs.

“They’re my charges.” I told him about Kitty and the dog hotel.

“A dog hotel? I just moved here from Missouri so that’s pretty wild to me. Talk about pampered pets,” Jordan snorted.

“You have no idea. What brought you to town?”

"I finished up my MBA at Washington University and was recruited by a venture capital firm in Santa Monica," Jordan explained.

A full on grown-up! "Anyone show you around yet?" I asked flirtatiously.

"Nope," he said with an encouraging smile.

"How do nosebleed seats at Friday's Celeb game sound to you?" I couldn't believe my boldness. It must have been the bleak future of finding romance at a club egging me on.

"They sound good."

"Great. Maybe before we could get a table by the bathroom at my favorite restaurant," I joked.

"I hope you're not over promising."

"Let me get your number."

We exchanged information and logged it in our cell phones.

"I have to go. These two will turn into pumpkins if they're not back by eight sharp." I pointed to the dogs who were now lolling about like beached seals.

"Okay," Jordan said. "I'll talk to you soon."

Soon! The dogs and I trotted off with matching grins.

I was useless for the rest of the day. I'd probably logged twenty dreamy sighs by the time I met Andrew for coffee.

"You'll never believe what happened," we said at the same time.

"Celebs won, I know," Andrew said.

"They did! It was great—total emotional roller coaster. Jake had a career high in assists. But that's not what I was going to tell you."

"What else could you have had time for since I last saw you?"

"I met a guy! And he's an adult." I told him about the dogs and Jordan.

"Well, I'd be upset about having my ticket given away but I was going to tell you I can't go," Andrew said after wishing me the best with Jordan and predicting that my dog job would last a week max.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"There's this event at the old Getty Museum that night that Natasha and I are going to."

“So last night went pretty well?”

“Extremely. We click,” he said excitedly like a schoolboy.

“You get lucky?” I asked.

He declined to state, claiming that he was too much of a gentleman to reveal those kinds of intimate details. A fool could deduce that he hadn’t scored.

“So what’s so great about her?” I questioned. “Is she hot?”

“She’s pretty hot.”

“And she gets turned on by black tie museum functions?”

“No,” Andrew said impatiently. “She has to go. It’s a benefit put on by her work. She helps organize exhibits at The Getty.”

“That’s kind of cool,” I said.

“I think so,” Andrew told me. “And you won’t believe who her dad is.”

I got to the bottom of the drink and made loud sucking sounds before asking him to tell me.

“The mayor.”

“Get the hell out of here,” I said in disbelief.

“No, I’m kidding,” he said. “He writes pop songs. He’s trying to integrate product placement.”

“Get the hell out of here,” I said again. That was incredibly lame but sort of interesting.

“I’m serious. And he does pretty well. Natasha is basically an heiress.”

“You’re dating an heiress!”

“I don’t know why I get verbal diarrhea around you so often.” He was embarrassed.

“It’s because you so desperately care about what I think,” I told him knowingly. “And what would be so terrible about dating an heiress? I’d think it was all perks.”

“I don’t want her to think I’m after her for the money,” he said.

“Are you?”

He said it quickly and emphatically. “No.”

“You need to relax, then. Live in the moment. I’m in the moment and loving it!” I sighed again over Jordan.

“I can see that.” He stood up. “I’m going to go attempt to study for the LSAT.”

“Maybe I’ll come with you. I love those logic games.” I got up to leave with him.

“You know sometimes I think maybe you overcame your nerdiness but you always come back with something to surprise me,” Andrew said with appreciation. “Like when you spelled pterodactyl correctly on your blog.”

“What about the fact that I actually discussed a pterodactyl in the first place?”

“Geeky but that’s my girl!” Andrew put his arm around me and led me out to the parking lot.

I spent most of my next few days wondering if I should call Jordan or wait for him to call me. I broke up the confliction by watching Celeb games with the crew at BJ’s, bugging Andrew during his LSAT preparation and hanging out with the dogs. By Wednesday when I hadn’t seen Jordan at the beach or heard from him I knew it was do or die. Sitting in my bedroom with Taquito in my lap for moral support I called him.

“Hello?” Jordan answered, sounding distracted.

“Hi!” I responded brightly. “It’s Sara.”

After exchanging pleasantries I asked him if we were still on for the game.

“I’m definitely in,” he said. “You want to get dinner first?”

“That would be great.”

“How about I pick you up at six?”

I gave him my address.

“Got it. I have to get going. Things are a little crazy around here today,” Jordan said.

“No problem. I’ll just see you Friday,” I told him.

We said goodbye and hung up.

“Woohoo, Taquito!” I picked him up over my head. “Did you hear that? I have a hot date!”

He grunted as I put him down, jumped off of my lap and headed for his pillow monogrammed with *The King Sleeps Here*.

“Well, I’m sorry for disturbing you, your highness,” I told him as I headed off to my closet to plan my outfit.

Friday night the doorbell rang right on time. I was headed off by Kitty.

“Well, hello! You must be here for Sara,” she greeted Jordan and threw me a sly, approving smile from behind the door.

I was pleased—until I saw Jordan wearing a Cleveland Cavaliers jersey.

“Hi! You ready?” he asked me.

“Oh, sure.” I confusedly followed him out the door.

Kitty grabbed my shirt. “Give the guy a chance. He’s cute!”

“Okay,” I agreed noncommittally.

Against my better judgment I got into his sports car and directed him to the restaurant. After ordering our organic Kobe beef burgers it was time to get to the point. “What’s with the jersey?” I asked him.

“Oh, this?” he asked, looking down and pulling on it. “Since I’m from Cleveland the Cavs are my favorite team. I’m psyched to see James LeBaron play tonight.”

“Huh,” I sniffed.

“That a problem?” He looked surprised.

“I guess not.” What? It was a huge problem. “I just thought you’d be rooting for the Celts.”

“Nope. I hope they get crushed tonight.” disagree

Whoa! “We’ll have to agree to disagree then.” It sounded heartfelt but I really wanted to give him a good shove. Since it wasn’t a playoff game we were disagreeing over—if it was a playoff game the date would have been over at my front door—I decided to stick around and see what the evening brought.

We made easy conversation throughout the rest of the meal. I learned that he had a sister who worked for the CDC in Atlanta and that his parents still lived in Cleveland. He got his undergrad degree in economics from Penn and missed authentic Philly cheese steaks. I told him about my time at UCLA and explained that while I liked college ball I’d been a big fan of the ABL—American Basketball League—since grade school. I never could get used to the thirty-five second shot clock in college, or the abundance of insane fans. The ABL was more my style. I also told him about my brother Luke, the overachiever who had gone to Stanford and was now an engineer in Silicon Valley.

When I got back into the car I was much more at ease. By the time we arrived at Scissors I was convinced we’d really smoothed things over. I did my usual talking to the scalpers.

Jordan looked worried. “I thought we had tickets.”

“We do. I just always check to see if they have any unbelievable deals.”

That wasn’t entirely the truth. I was specifically looking for a courtside seat next to, or at least remotely close to, Jack Nicholson. In college I had managed to save one thousand dollars. I

carried the sum with me to every game, hoping that someone would have the coveted ticket for a rock bottom price. It hadn't happened yet and it looked like it wasn't going to happen today.

Jordan kept his hand on my back as we maneuvered our way through the crowd to our high-altitude seats. I liked the gesture. And then the floor of Scissors appeared in front of me.

I absolutely love the moment when I get my first glimpse of the court. It's a rush—makes me want to jump up and down and clap with excitement. The Celebs and Cabs were warming up on the floor.

There was Jake Dalton, practicing his three pointers. This was Jake's third year in the league and his first year as a starter. His rookie season he'd been LA's darling because of his enthusiasm and energy. We would chant "Jaaaake" when he handled the ball in the few minutes of play that the coach allowed him. And, in fact, my baby tee read, "Go Jaaaake."

Jake was known for his laidback personality and his famous father, Phil Dalton. Phil happened to be a graduate of my alma mater. He went on to play in the ABL and was now a commentator for the game. We loved him for his indispensable comments like, "This is the point where the team really needs to score," as well as his off-the-wall observations like, "There's Tao Ching, the circus-like giant."

Byron Childs, Jake's best friend on the team, was practicing his mid-range game. This was also Byron's third year in the league. He had started in a few games as of late and was most definitely pulling his weight with his quick clutch shooting.

The buzzer sounded and the players headed back to their benches. It was time for introductions.

The Cabs were brought onto the court and shuffled back off with minimal fanfare, save for Jordan's cheering. I couldn't help giggling when he was shot disapproving looks.

The lights were turned off and the spotlight was turned on. A drum roll sounded as the PA announcer said, "And here are your Los Angeles Celebrities!"

Our cheering nearly blew the roof off. We carried it through as each starter ran onto the court and high-fived his teammates.

First up was Swoosh Park, the league's only Korean player and the point guard for the Celebs. Swoosh was only six feet tall but made up for his size with his quickness and technique. He was in the top twenty in the league for steals. Allen Binnam, the team's baby-faced center, followed. Allen had gone into the ABL directly from high school and was only eighteen years old in his first year. The rookie center stood seven feet tall and was getting noticed around the league for his presence in the paint. Byron Childs gave him a slap on the butt to hurry him along. Byron was shorter than Allen at six-feet, nine-inches. His position was forward and his strength was catch and shooting. Jake followed his buddy.

Jake stood six-foot-eight and played small forward. This early in the season his three point shooting percentage was ranked number one in the league. The commentators all agreed it wouldn't last through the all-star break but my starry eyes thought otherwise. Jake was regarded as a utility player—he had the fundamentals down and was a player you could count on. What I loved best about him was his playmaking ability. Jake was a league leader in

assists. If he had an open teammate, he was going to find him. He wasn't the most glamorous player—I'd rarely seen him participate in an alley oop and I only remembered him making one dunk so far this season—but he made sure the job got done.

Angus Brady completed the starting line-up. The six-foot, six-inch shooting guard was having a bad game if he scored under thirty points. In his tenth year in the league his reputation as a narcissistic, ball hog was fading. This season Angus had a decent amount of assists to his credit and even had been quoted as saying that he was happy to see his teammates getting Player of the Game. His fans almost went cross-eyed at the comment but once swallowed were realizing it went down quite nicely, especially since the promising young Celebs bench was getting more playing time. The team was deep.

Once the lights came back on I remembered Jordan. "Don't you think it would be wise of the players to sell tattoo ad space on their arms?" I asked him.

"There's an idea!" Jordan agreed. "Like, 'Icy hot pack goes here.'"

"Brilliant!" I cried.

He beamed.

We spent the first half of the game riling each other up in friendly competition. The first quarter the Celebs trailed by as many as ten. By the end of the second they had cut the spread down to five. Jordan was acting like that was something to gloat about.

"Oh please," I told him. "Celebs down by single digits at the half at Scissors? That translates to them winning. They're a second half team!"

"That's some pretty creative logic coming from a philosophy major," he returned. "And a team that might as well not show up for the third quarter."

I glowered. "Just wait and see, pal."

We watched the Celeb Girls shake their stuff during half time, one of us appreciating it more than the other. Making small talk, I asked Jordan about his job.

"We're working on this start-up that's doing support for outsourcing. It's really interesting actually," he went on. He was right, it was—until he started talking about his role in it and sounding like he was his own PR coordinator. If you believed what he was saying he was going to be CEO in a few months. I had to tune him out.

Celebs second half was exactly what I predicted. After some embarrassing free throw shooting from the Celebs second-string center Keewe Green—he air balled one!—the Celebs won the game with by eight points.

Jordan was properly chagrined and I couldn't stop grinning. The Celebs maintained their number two position in the division and number five spot in the conference. As far as I was concerned the West was the only conference there was. The winner of the semi-finals was the real champ to me.

There was a crush of people emerging from Scissors. I was getting jostled left and right. One time I almost called a guy on a hard foul for the elbow I got to my side.

“So, what do you want to do now?” Jordan asked once we were safely back in the car.

“Sorry for being a party pooper, but I have to head home. I’m starting a new job tomorrow.”

“New job?”

Oh no. I didn’t want to tell him about my work in the custodial arts. On second thought, why not? He was so self-impressed maybe he could learn something from my humility. I took a deep breath and let the cat out of the bag. “I clean houses.”

He raised his eyebrows until they practically touched his hairline. “Is that LA slang that I’m unaware of or…”

“Nope. It is what it is.”

“Okay, Cinderella. Let’s get you home.”

Chapter 4

The next morning I jumped into my Jetta, clicked on the radio and headed to get a bagel before work. Sure it's four servings of carbs topped with saturated fat but I'll be damned if it doesn't taste like heaven. A pop song by a five-member boy band came on. I was singing along until I realized just how corny the words were. "Baby, you are my shining star." And did I hear the words "trivection oven" in the second verse? Must be Natasha's dad at work.

I placed my order at the squawking intercom of Bagel Bagelry and pulled up to the drive thru window. I reached into my purse for my wallet and dug around. No wallet. I dumped the contents out on the passenger seat. Three lip glosses, checkbook, cell phone, dog treats. Still no wallet.

My heart caught in my throat. This couldn't be happening.

"Good morning! That'll be four fifty," the cashier said.

I grabbed the emergency twenty out of my glove compartment, shoved it at him and kept pawing through my pile. No, no, no!

By the time I was handed my bagel and change I couldn't deny it. My wallet was gone along with the thousand dollars. I was absolutely deflated.

I called Tanya to tell her I'd be running behind because I had to cancel my credit cards. Thankfully she understood.

First order of business was to inhale my bagel. As I munched I thought about the last time I had my wallet. That was at dinner with Jordan when I did the obligatory reach to pretend that I was going to pay half. I didn't need it at the game.

The crowd when we left! It must have happened when we were bumping into everybody. Hard foul guy had seemed surprisingly scared when I shot him a look that could kill. He must have thought I'd caught him in the act.

All I wanted to do was go home and hug Taquito while I cried. Unfortunately there wasn't anyone to hand my mess while I did that. I was going to have to clean this up myself. Stupid adulthood.

Two hours later I was pretty confident that I'd called everyone I needed to. And what was my reward? Work. Maybe grad school wasn't such a bad idea.

I got out Tanya's directions to what she called a small house in the Palisades. It seemed that Tanya considered any house less than three thousand square feet small. These homes tended not to have onsite staff so they'd hire us to come in once or twice a week.

The mere cottage was in a cul-de-sac at the top of a hill. It was a one-story home in the English country style set back on a sprawling lawn. I parked my car in the driveway and let myself in the front door feeling awkward about it even though Tanya had assured me that no one would be home.

A French bulldog that sounded like he was having a tough time breathing greeted me at the front door.

“Why hello!” I patted him on the head. “And what’s your name?” I checked his collar. “Napoleon! I should have known.”

He lumbered after me through the foyer and into the breakfast nook, nails clicking on the hardwood floors. The house was contemporary and comfortable with neutral colors on its walls and big, fun patterned rugs lying around. A piece of paper in the middle of the kitchen table caught my eye.

“For Sara” it began in flowing cursive. “While you were here we would appreciate it if you could do the following: Clean bathrooms including toilets and showers, clean refrigerator, do the laundry and iron, change out bed linens and wash the floors. Thanks!”

Hmmph. Cinderella was right. Why couldn’t I have gotten one of those houses with a compulsive woman who cleans for the cleaning lady?

Procrastinating I walked through the rest of the house. There were four bedrooms, two of which seemed frozen in time from when the two daughters were in high school. The rooms were decorated with posters of heartthrobs from ten years ago and equestrian trophies from the same era. I admired Zack from *Saved by the Bell*. Another bedroom held old gym equipment.

It was about noon and I was feeling lazy. “Napoleon! Show me your backyard,” I commanded him.

He happily obliged, taking me through the washroom and outside.

I sat down on a bench under a palm tree and sighed. “I have a confession to make,” I said, looking deeply into Napoleon’s brown eyes. “I’ve never cleaned a house.”

I had a maid growing up not because we were so wealthy but because my mom had had back and neck surgeries and couldn’t do it all herself. I guess she never asked me to do it because my dad already had me out mowing lawns. Plus, there was that time I made chocolate chip cookies and some dough ended up on the ceiling.

The woman she hired became like family. Her daughters even let me tag along to a few concerts and baseball games with them. From there I went on to live in the dorms for all four years at UCLA, a privilege granted by my Resident Advisor position for the last two years. And now I lived with Kitty who had a maid—the dreaded Nancy who just loved to chat. She was very nice which made me feel that much worse when I avoided her.

I took my cell phone out of my jacket pocket and called Andrew.

“Hey,” he answered.

“Andrew, I think the mole is a deal killer.” Wow, the subject change even surprised me.

“I’d agree,” he said, not missing a beat. “Who’s the dead weight?”

“Jordan. I mean, I was willing to overlook it because Anna Kournikova with Enrique Iglesias but I’m just not as strong as her. And I think Jordan might be a bit of a douche.” I was starting to suspect that his work priorities were screwed up.

“Then move on. You can upgrade and have a mole-less douche in no time,” Andrew assured me.

“It’s done. So next issue—I’m at my first cleaning gig and absolutely petrified. They left me a list of chores. My mom never even did that.”

“At least you won’t have to pick up poop at this job,” Andrew said optimistically.

“I wouldn’t be so sure,” I responded, eyeing Napoleon. “My only friend here leaves land mines in the backyard. But I’m thinking anything not mentioned on the list is not my business.”

“That sounds like the professional thing to do. What’s on it?”

I read it to him.

“I would think the hardest part would be maintaining an ego.”

“That would be up there. I’m going to go get started.”

“Good luck! I’ll take you out for a drink later if you survive,” Andrew trilled with annoying cheerfulness. Must be nice to be in love.

“I’m going to need it. Today I lost my wallet, decided to dump somebody and am attempting to clean a house.”

“The wallet also known as your Nicholson fund?”

“Let’s talk about it later or else I’m going to start crying,” I sniffed. “I’ll see you after I’ve swept what’s left of my ego off the floor.” With drooping shoulders I walked back to the house.

A brief assessment of the kitchen convinced me that something had to be done about the dirty dishes stacked up on the counter even if I hadn’t been directed to do so. It wasn’t so bad. I had a fun time teasing Napoleon with the extendable kitchen faucet. He jumped back and forth and barked in delight. What’s a little water here and there when I’d been asked to wash the floors?

“Caution,” I told Napoleon as I stacked the dishes in the dishwasher. “Piso mojado.” Living in Southern California afforded most residents the ability to express banalities in two languages.

Back home we never used the dishwasher to wash dishes. It was purely for storage. My mom is a collector, not of any one thing in particular, just of whatever is a good deal. This habit makes for an awkward house. You can find *Terminator 2* hats in a basket in the front hallway. I don’t think anyone in my family has even seen that movie. In her dishwasher are the most random platters shaped like turkeys and other poultry in addition to large pieces of Tupperware. Since these items could not be disturbed we were forced to hand wash everything, even on Thanksgiving.

The dirty dishes seemed to shove in to the dishwasher correctly. I took the bottle of soap off the counter, poured some into the slot on the door and clicked the on button.

Back to the list. If I got some laundry going I could really feel like I was working. Now where would the dirty clothes be?

I checked the laundry room. Nothing. That would be too easy. I checked the bedroom. There were two hampers. How sweet—his and hers hampers. I lugged them into the washroom and debated whose to start with. His was kind of gross but hers was terrifyingly delicate. I decided on whatever whites I could find. With a wrinkled nose and utter disdain I tossed his undies and socks into the washer. That accomplished I did a running in place, wringing my hands, high-pitched shrieking move. I threw some undershirts in. Then I located light colored workout shirts. They appeared to be sweat repellent. But then where does the sweat go? I looked for directions on how to wash them.

“Oh my gosh, Napoleon! These instructions are in hieroglyphics!” There was a triangle with lines through it, a box with what looked like a boob in it and Lord only knows what else. What the hell does that mean? Forget it. They go in too. None of her stuff made it into the load. It was all going on the delicate cycle.

I was starting to feel not so out of my element. Things were getting cleaner.

There were odd gurgling noises coming from the kitchen. Napoleon was running as best he could from there and his paws appeared to be wet. He seemed to be trying to tell me something.

Uh oh. The dishwasher was overflowing—not at an alarming rate but slowly and surely. I hit the stop button and panicked. I opened the door a little. There were huge soapsuds in there. The doorbell rang. I cursed.

Napoleon ran down the hallway barking and leaving footprints. I scooped him up and opened the door.

“Hi,” I grunted as I tried to move Napoleon into a more manageable position. He was a brick.

“Hi there. Is Janet in?” a middle-aged woman, overdressed for such a casual occasion as spying on the neighbor’s new maid, asked in a syrupy voice.

“Nope. She’s out.”

“Okay. I just wanted to ask her when we were going to play tennis at the Country Club. No big deal.” She was actually peering into the house like I wouldn’t notice.

I blocked her view and said through gritted teeth, “I’m sure she’ll be back later today.”

“Okay then,” she gave me a big, fake smile. “Bye!”

I shut the door and ran down the hall, sliding into the kitchen. I analyzed the dishwasher and cursed some more. At least the flooding was on hold and I had gotten a start on mopping.

Mopping! I looked around for a closet of cleaning products. There was a large cabinet next to the refrigerator that fit the bill. I grabbed it. What sea creature was this modeled after? You must absorb as much as you can and then stick it in the sink and twist.

I cleaned up the water as best I could. Then I checked on the huge bubbles. Hmm...those weren't just going away. I slammed the dishwasher shut in frustration, put my head in my hands and moaned.

I don't know what made me think of it but it occurred to me that there might be a draining option. Aha! I hit the button and was relieved to hear water exiting the area.

Now I had a dishwasher full of soapy dishes. Great. I hand washed them. After an hour and a half of work I'd washed some dishes and put in a load of laundry. And now the washer was beeping.

I threw the whites into the dryer and cringed over the delicates. Better do his work clothes instead. In went his slacks, shirts and socks. All systems were go in the laundry room. I opted to tackle the refrigerator next.

It was fully stocked and looked orderly. So what did clean the refrigerator mean? Remove all this stuff and wipe it down? Or was I supposed to discard the expired items? Probably both.

I stacked everything up on the counter and wiped down the interior with some Windex and paper towels. As far as I was concerned, Windex could clean anything. Then I started sniffing stuff.

What were these people eating? There was some goulash in a Styrofoam container. It smelled questionable but maybe that's the way they like it. I decided to only throw things away with past dates printed on them. Nothing was thrown away. I wiped down the freezer for extra credit and fought a pork chop away from Napoleon.

Bed linens, bathrooms or floors were my remaining options. I decided to try the bed linens. Hospital corners sounded like a fun challenge.

Someone had put extra sheets on each of the three beds in the house. The girls looked long gone, why did they need new sheets?

I changed their beds without incident. The master was a different story. These people had what seemed like a hundred pound comforter. News flash—this is California. We only get cold like two days a year. They must have had privileged information on an impending ice age.

I had the sheets on the bed perfectly, not a wrinkle anywhere. Then I wrestled the monster comforter onto the bed and half undid my work. I decided I deserved a break and laid down on the heap. A power nap later I was ready to do round two with the bed. Piece by piece it fell into submission. I got a look at the clock on the nightstand.

"How the heck is it four thirty already?!" I cried. The owners were supposed to be home in an hour.

I raced over to the washroom and added a load of bedding. No time to tackle the lady's clothes now. I folded the man's unmentionables in record time.

I got a bucket of water, dumped some of it on the floor in the foyer and mopped furiously. I mopped myself right into a corner. Damn it. I gave up on mopping.

I grabbed my Windex and paper towels and approached the first bathroom. It seemed harmless, not the dungeon of germs I was expecting. I sprayed down the shower, toilet and counter. I flushed the toilet and wiped off all the other surfaces.

My mom's cleaning lady had a wider arsenal of cleaning supplies than this. No time to ponder that now. I did the same drill with the other two bathrooms. Last thing on the agenda was ironing the guy's work clothes.

I set up the ironing board in the washroom, laid out a shirt and ironed it according to the instructions for cotton. It was still wrinkled. How the heck could that be? I ironed it two more times and got the same outcome. Oh no. That sounded like the definition of insanity—doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result.

I couldn't afford to spend any more time on the conundrum. I hung up the work clothes and left all the other clean clothes in a laundry basket next to the bed.

After leaving a note that there was still bedding in the dryer, I left, feeling less than proud. That was not a stellar performance. And don't maids dust? I hadn't dusted anything.

Chapter 5

"I don't get it. I can do calculus but I can't clean a house," I complained to Andrew over Coronas. We were enjoying his mom's new patio furniture in her backyard.

"You can't do calculus very well," Andrew offered as consolation.

"I can derive from that comment that you suck," I shot back.

"Good one!" He was honestly appreciative. "Things aren't hopeless. You can learn to clean. You're excellent at learning."

"Thank you! Finally my caring friend arrives. So who do you think could teach me?" I asked.

"Maybe your boss," he suggested.

"There's no way I'm going to clue her in on how terrible I am at this."

"Maybe me."

"What do you know about it?" I was skeptical. Andrew as my cleaning coach?

"Plenty. Mom!" he called through the screen door.

"Yeah?" She was unloading groceries just a room away so she responded quickly.

"Don't you think I'm qualified to teach Sara here how to clean a house?" Andrew asked her.

"I know you're qualified," she told him. "Food and board came at a price in our household. Why do you ask?"

"Because our dear Sara has somehow become a career woman despite the fact that she is not skilled in her field," Andrew said matter-of-factly.

I gave him a dirty look.

"Is that so?" Peggy was looking at me with amusement. "And whose houses are you cleaning?" she asked me.

"That's confidential."

"Right," she said choking back a laugh.

"Okay, Andrew. I officially ask you to become my maid mentor."

"I'll think about it," he said.

"Andrew!"

"We'll start tomorrow. Here's to you becoming a functional member of your company."

We clinked Coronas.

Sunday was not the best day for my first lesson. There was a Celeb game in the early afternoon that Andrew and I had tickets for. I had been planning on spending the morning making a witty and beautiful sign that would get me on the network that was airing the game. But duty called. I'd have to use an old one.

Andrew turned out to be a great teacher. He was patient and excellent at explaining things. I learned that there was bathroom cleaner for the bathroom, that you are supposed to use dishwashing soap in the dishwasher, and the art of using a mop before we had to leave for Scissors Center.

"So you're saying that Windex is really just good for glass surfaces?" I asked as we walked into the arena.

Andrew didn't respond because his one-track male mind was focused on a poster of the Celeb girls.

"Buddy," I said, nudging him. "You still with me?"

"Umm," he slowly dragged his eyes off the poster and onto me. His face was blank.

"Let's go see the real deal." I took his arm and led him up to our seats.

"You ever think about trying out?" he asked once he was sitting.

I was still standing. Priority number one was finding Jake on the floor. "What are you talking about?" I asked absent-mindedly.

"Trying out for the Celeb Girls. You ever think about it?" he repeated.

"Ha! Very funny." Me as a cheerleader?

"I thought you took some dance classes when you were getting certified for kickboxing and stuff."

"I did but that doesn't mean I'm ready to go professional," I answered. But a seed had been planted; I was thinking about it now. The Celeb Girls always looked like they were having so much fun.

"Well, what would you have to lose if you gave it a shot?"

"My dignity."

"You'd hardly miss it," he said dismissively.

"Here we go!" I clapped.

The lights went out and the conversation was forgotten for the evening.

The game was a blowout. The Celebs led Denver by as many as twenty-five points and held their leading scorer to fifteen points. Our baby faced Binnam was showing great improvement with a double double and three blocks. Jake had some highlight reel-worthy passes and got a lot of scoring done in the key. We chanted his name during his post-game interview. I was impressed by his poise. People say he could be a better commentator than his father. There's no need for the comparison but I agree. He has a better voice and consistently makes insightful observations.

"What now?" I asked Andrew when we were driving away from the game. I was taking off my Angus jersey.

"I didn't tell you I was going to dinner with Natasha?"

"No," I pouted.

"You're on your own for the evening, my friend."

He dropped me off at my house and sped off, obviously excited about his date. No fair.

I took Taquito out for a run. You wouldn't think the little dog could keep up but he'd surprise you. It must be due to the hyperactivity that runs in the breed.

I took the time to think about my financial predicament. Kitty was giving me a break on the rent since I was helping her out with the dogs. I wasn't sure what hours I was going to get from Tanya or even how secure that position was. I needed to call the gym to see about teaching some classes.

Monday morning I reached for my phone to call the gym. It rang before I could dial out. Oh no, caller ID reported that it was Tanya. This could be a tad unpleasant.

"Hello?" I answered.

"Good morning, Sara."

"How are you?" I asked nervously.

"A bit concerned actually."

I swallowed hard. "Why's that?"

"Mrs. Montgomery called and said that you didn't get everything done that she'd hoped. Plus, she had a problem with the dishwasher. Do you know anything about that?"

"Umm..." I hedged. I didn't want to lie and I didn't want to make excuses but I was running out of options. The truth wasn't going to work.

"I told her that you'd had a personal emergency and that you'd run short on time. Would that be accurate?"

Yes! An out. “That’s true,” I responded carefully.

“But that doesn’t answer the question about the dishwasher.”

“I might have made a mistake with the dishwasher.” I told her that it was possible that I mixed up the regular soap with the dishwashing soap.

She gave me an earful about how I had to be careful at the clients’ houses and make sure that I was focused on what I was doing. I gathered that she didn’t find the situation humorous at all.

“I fully intend to do that. This performance was not me. Frankly, it’s embarrassing,” I gave as my defense.

“I’m going to give you one more chance. On Wednesday you’re going to do an apartment. I’m giving you single guys’ houses only while you prove yourself. They’re not too picky about the job we do. But that doesn’t mean you can slack!” she warned.

“Of course not,” I responded with maturity. “I’ll do a great job.”

She gave me directions to a building on Wilshire, reminded me about the confidentiality agreement and said goodbye.

The gym was much more positive when I called over. They had a kickboxing class that I could start immediately and an advanced Pilates class that would begin in a couple weeks. Good. I needed the time to get back up to speed.

“Hey, Ronni?”

“Yeah?” the twenty-five year old assistant gym director answered.

“Are there any dance classes going on right now?” I asked.

“We have hip hop and salsa. Belly dancing starts next week.”

“Would it be okay if I stopped in on them once in awhile?”

“Of course. That’s one of the benefits of working here.” She gave me the days and times.

The seed was growing. I was thinking Celeb Girl would make a good addition to my increasingly eclectic resume. But in the meantime I would keep an eye out for ways to replenish my Nicholson fund.

I wasn’t ready to sit in a cubicle. I was too young to give in to something that I was almost positive would suck out my soul. I made a list of non-office possibilities. It looked like this:

1. Get a paper route
2. Start a dog stud service
3. Stuff envelopes at home
4. Dance in a cage at a club
5. Play the piano at Macy’s

6. Sell Mary Kay products

It was too depressing to go on after number six. The paper route would work if I was twelve. I didn't exactly want to be a dog pimp. The envelope stuffing had to be a scam; I mean, I'd only learned about it via email spam. Cage dancing would be possible if I drugged myself into a stupor, which I couldn't afford. Macy's would work great if I could play more than FÜR Elise by memory. As far as Mary Kay went—gag me. I'd just make do with what I had for now and keep my eyes and ears open for whatever opportunities arose.

I did a Pilates video and headed off to the gym. The hip-hop class had already started but I just jumped in. It was fun. Dancing offers a different release than kickboxing. It's easier to lose yourself in.

I checked in with Ronni on my way out. "So tomorrow afternoon?" I asked the pert redhead.

"Yup. Hour class."

"Any new staff you want to tell me about?" Ronni had the inside scoop on the gym's eligible bachelors and was forthcoming with the information ever since she dated one and had learned that you shouldn't mix business with pleasure.

"Actually..." She had a gleam in her eye. "There could be someone in the weight room you might need to be briefed on."

"Oh?"

"It probably wouldn't hurt to introduce yourself to Brian. I'm considering matching you two up for a cardio/weight class."

"Then I better say hi," I told her and sauntered over to the weight room.

I hate being in there. It's like walking into the guy's locker room. Ick! The only guy wearing a staff shirt was at least fifty years old. I turned around and walked out.

"Are you hooking me up with geriatrics?" I asked Ronni.

"Huh?" She was confused.

"The only staff in there was a baby boomer."

"Oh! That's Joel. Brian must be on lunch."

She told me he'd be working the next day and I could meet him then. And she forced me to admit that Joel wasn't too bad for fifty. Satisfied, I left for the beach and spent the rest of the afternoon soaking in the sun until I had to meet Andrew for my second cleaning lesson.

On Tuesday I cruised into the gym in an undeniably adorable workout outfit. I'd chosen a pink sports bra and matching black and pink kickboxing pants. My hair was pulled back into a ponytail.

Fifty roundhouses and seventy sidekicks later I was feeling good. My class was full of energy. I threw together intense combinations and they didn't miss a step. A handful of them could have been the instructor.

I found Ronni in the back folding towels.

"Hey! Where's Brian?" I asked her.

"Hi, Ronni. How are you today?" she asked pointedly.

"Oh, right," I said a little embarrassed and gave her an over-the-top greeting to make up for my rudeness.

"Okay, enough! I know what you want." She pointed me back to the weight room and assured me he was there this time.

Lingering in the window I checked him out. Good work, Ronni! He had the California surfer look—spiky blond hair, blue eyes, plus a great body even if it didn't top six feet.

I entered the room and walked purposefully over to him as he adjusted the weights on a bar. "Hi! I'm Sara."

He looked me up and down too obviously. Men! They can be so one-dimensional.

"Hi, Sara. I'm Brian." He extended a hand.

I accepted it warily. "Ronni says she's thinking about putting us together for a class."

He put his other hand around mine and pulled me closer, not without a glance at my chest. "Yeah, she mentioned that to me. I usually work alone but maybe I could make an exception in this case." He gave a sly grin and flexed his pecs.

For Chrissakes, this was shaping up to be a porno. He was obviously on testosterone overload. "Nice to meet you," I muttered and wandered back to Ronni.

"Ronni! That guy is a walking hard on," I told her.

She laughed. "I know! Totally disgusting but he looks like a Greek god."

"So you were just messing with me on this?"

She didn't even look guilty. She just laughed some more. "Yup!"

"You suck!" I complained, but I was laughing too. I threw her freshly folded towels at her. "You pair me up with him for a class and you'll be sorry, lady."

"Brian will not be working outside the locker room, at least not on my watch," she assured me.

"That's a relief. So maybe I'll see you tomorrow for salsa?" I asked.

“Yeah, I’m thinking about going.”

“I’m still up in the air on it, actually. It depends on how long the job goes.”

“Job? I don’t know about this. Maybe we should get margaritas instead and you could tell me all about it,” she suggested as an employee approached her.

“Alright. I’ll call you tomorrow.”

Ronni and I hung out every now and then. She was super fun. You never knew what adventure you’d get into with her.

“Sara, what are you doing?” Andrew yelled over the vacuum. We were in his mom’s living room.

I shut off the machine and looked at him. “What is the problem?”

“You’re going around everything. You’re only cleaning like half the room.”

“The rest of the room is covered with furniture,” I pointed out.

“Here’s an idea—move the furniture.”

He had to be kidding. I was not in the moving business. To appease him I moved the coffee table, which couldn’t have weighed more than thirty pounds.

“I’m not saying you have to move all of it, just the easy stuff,” Andrew explained.

I sighed. Maybe I’d picked the wrong job. I couldn’t deny my inherent laziness. Maybe a desk job wouldn’t be so bad. I still hadn’t beaten Minesweeper at the expert level.

Andrew eventually approved my vacuuming job. “I think you’re ready to take this out into the real world.”

“You don’t think I’ll leave a place messier than when I started?”

“Nope. And I think we’ve covered in depth everything you could break. It’s show time for you!”

I smiled weakly.

Chapter 6

I was a little nervous as I drove up to the apartment building on Wilshire. If I blew this, I'd probably be out of a job. My only consolation was that Andrew had given me his approval. He wasn't an easy critic to please.

The building was in the heart of a cluster of fine housing in Beverly Hills. That meant there were doormen and valet parking amidst the palm trees. I pulled into a guest parking spot and took a deep breath. I prayed that I'd turned into a professional in three days.

"Hello," the doorman greeted me brightly. He was a tall, well-built black man in his mid-thirties. His nametag read "Lamar."

"Hi," I returned.

"How are you doing today?"

"Pretty good since the Celebs won last night."

He looked surprised. "You're a fan?"

"Huge fan."

"Who's your favorite player?" he pressed.

I said it like it was obvious. "Jake Dalton!"

"Interesting."

I looked at him suspiciously. "Why?"

"No reason," he said evasively. "They beat the team with the best record in the league, eh?"

"And snapped their thirteen-game winning streak!"

We were talking about Dallas. I had a soft spot for them because their over seven-footer so desperately wanted to play point guard.

I found out that Lamar's favorite player was the Celebs' currently injured starting power forward Otis Lamond. He agreed that Byron Childs was picking up the slack pretty well. He also thought that the Celebs had a shot at the championship if they played some better defense.

I could have talked to Lamar all day but he had work to do and eventually I remembered that so did I. He gave me the key to the apartment I'd be working in and I regretfully took the elevator to the eighteenth floor.

I stepped into the apartment and sucked in my breath. This guy had to have hired a decorator.

The living room had a black leather sectional couch with matching leather ottoman sitting on plush carpet and facing a sixty-inch plasma television mounted over the fireplace. Canned lighting illuminated the room. There was a large, framed picture of last year's Celebs team on

the metallic highlight wall behind the couch. I thought that was kind of weird. I'm a huge fan and I don't even go that far. The living room featured a balcony that overlooked Wilshire and gave a smidge of an ocean view.

Past the living room were the dining room and kitchen. The minimalist theme of the space was continued with a black, sleek dining table and chairs. The kitchen had granite counters and stainless steel, state of the art appliances. I checked the refrigerator. There was hardly any food—mostly just Gatorade, water and milk. The cabinets held a couple boxes of cereal and some jumbo bags of chips.

I guessed that this guy was a mid-thirties banker who was still trying too hard to impress the ladies. That would explain the absence of food. He was probably taking someone out every night just to get shot down again. Apparently my opinion of men had taken a major dive since my exchange with Brian.

Next to the dining room was an office. It was carpeted and had a wall of bookshelves behind the executive desk on which a lonely laptop sat. I took a closer look at the shelves.

There was more Celebs stuff and stuff from Georgetown. That was funny. Jake Dalton went to Georgetown. Maybe they knew each other.

There were some family pictures. One was of a couple getting married. Another was of four guys, one of whom looked suspiciously like Jake. One was of Phil Dalton with a few of his teammates when he played ball in Boston. I was starting to think this guy was a stalker.

Wait a minute. I had to sit down. What if.... this was Jake Dalton's apartment?

I sat in shock for quite awhile. Then I ran down the hall to the bedroom to raid the closet.

There were huge Nike shoes and a few rather large Dalton jerseys. The picture on the nightstand of Jake and his mom confirmed it. Either this guy was a crazy, scary stalker or this was Jake Dalton's apartment.

I put my head in a pillow and screamed. I had to tell somebody but Tanya had sworn me to secrecy! Still, I could think of one person.

An elevator ride later I was in Lamar's face. "Tell me. Am I cleaning Jake Dalton's apartment?"

"Actually, I'm not allowed to discuss the residents," he told me calmly.

"Then don't discuss it. Blink your eyes twice if Jake Dalton lives in this building," I urged him.

He blinked twice and smiled. "What makes you think he lives here?"

"Because evidence has suggested that I am his new maid."

"Sara, I want to thank you," Lamar said seriously. "That is the funniest thing I've heard all day."

"Oh, be quiet," I told him and turned back to the elevator. Something occurred to me. "Lamar, one more thing."

“Yes?”

“Blink twice if any other Celebs live in this building.”

He blinked rapidly. My eyes grew as big as saucers. More Celebs! Lamar brought his finger up to his lips. I nodded conspiratorially and let him be. I needed to go stick my head in the pillow again.

It was mid-morning. That meant Jake was probably at practice since they'd had a home game the night before and were having a home game tomorrow night. Tanya had told me that the job should only take a few hours. I'd be gone before he got back. I didn't want to be gone! But I couldn't take a chance on losing the job either.

I used all the knowledge that Andrew had given me and still couldn't shake the feeling that I was cleaning an already clean apartment. The only time I felt like I made a difference was when I dusted. Lena must have been over a few days before. Tanya had informed me that Lena had been doing this apartment for a couple of years and had just gone on maternity leave. I applauded her timing for giving birth.

A couple of hours later I was vacuuming with my iPod on. I belted out a Kelly Clarkson ballad, occasionally using the vacuum as my microphone. My singing skills are pretty minimal so even I appreciated the headphones jammed into my ears. I did a teenybopper Christina Aguilera song. Then I shook my hips to Shakira. I try to be very careful when I'm listening to her music, avoiding it when I'm walking down busy streets. She has an uncanny ability to make you move.

The hip jiggling turned into belly dancing and then an attempted replication of the music video. I did a few turns and thought I saw something in the corner of my eye. I turned sharply and found Jake Dalton and Byron Childs standing in the doorway staring at me. Oh. My. God.

I froze. We all just looked at each other for a few seconds. Then I pulled the headphones out of my ears.

“Hi,” I said sheepishly.

“You don't have to stop just because we're here,” Byron said.

Jake shook his head at him. “I don't mean to be rude but who are you?” he asked me with his deep voice that had a hint of a drawl.

“It looks like she's trying out to be your wife,” Byron offered.

Now I was extremely embarrassed. “I'm S-Sara,” I stuttered. “I'm your cleaning lady.”

“What happened to Lena?” asked Jake.

“She went on maternity leave,” I explained.

They plopped down on the couch and considered me. This is not how I'd pictured this going. I had a scarf on my head and was wearing gym clothes. But they both looked kind of funny since their legs seemed to go on forever past the end of the couch. I wondered how they got

comfortable. Byron made me more at ease because he'd recently shaved his head. It didn't look exactly right. Or at least the fans still needed time to adjust.

"Well, I'm just about done here," I said hastily and wrapped up the vacuum cord.

"You hungry?" Byron asked me.

"Yeah," I answered matter-of-factly.

"You want to grab lunch with us?"

I must have given them the weirdest look because they both laughed.

"You don't even know us, why would you go to lunch with us?" Jake said.

"Oh please. I'd have to be dead not to know who you are," I responded.

"I'm going to go see if Melissa's home," Byron told us.

He got up and left. That left me alone with Jake. There were a thousand butterflies in my stomach.

"So, you like basketball?" Jake asked, trying to make conversation.

I gingerly sat down on the end of the couch. "It's okay."

"Just okay?" He was really interested.

I nodded my head slowly. I was so confused. I mean, what if I told him how much I liked the Celebs and he got totally freaked out? I had to think that over.

"Who's Melissa?" I asked.

"Byron's fiancée. They live down the hall."

I nodded slowly again. It was hard to take all of this in. This morning I was just another fan, now I was cleaning his apartment and hanging out with him. Plus, this conversation was making him into a borderline normal person. He was almost shy, obviously not a player in any way. He looked so hot in his t-shirt and shorts. I allowed myself to momentarily fantasize about jumping into his lap.

"So how long have you been doing this?" Jake asked.

"The cleaning?"

"Yeah."

That wasn't a good subject either. I didn't want him to know he had a rookie. "For awhile."

"You do this full-time?"

“No. I work at a gym and I work with dogs.”

It was his turn to nod.

“I just graduated from your dad’s alma mater,” I offered.

His face lit up. “So you do know something about basketball.”

“Yeah. I do,” I admitted.

“Do you follow UCLA?”

“A little bit.”

“What about the ABL?”

“More so.”

“Who’s your favorite team?”

“The Infernos,” I teased. They were my favorite team when I was a kid.

“Huh.” That caught him off-guard. You could tell that he didn’t think that I spoke the truth.

“But the only games I get to are Celeb games. It’s tough,” I told him with a sad shake of the head and then a smile.

He smiled back. Byron walked back in with a female in tow.

“Melissa’s hungry,” he reported.

“Hi,” she said to me. “I’m Melissa.”

I returned the greeting. This woman was so classy. Tall and graceful, she looked like she’d just stepped off a runway.

“I’m sure I’m not as starved as you boys but I could definitely go for some food,” she said to them.

“Then let’s go!” Byron called, heading for the door.

We all followed him down to the garage. Lamar gave me a secret wink as we passed by. I did a little jig to show him how excited I was. Thankfully, no one in my party saw it.

“We’ll drive our own car because we’re going grocery shopping after. Right, babe?” Byron asked Melissa as they approached a new, heavily tinted Escalade.

“Right,” she said.

Jake gave Byron a look that made me think something was up, like Byron was pushing him into hanging out with me. He didn't look upset, just kind of amused. Jake led me to a Lincoln Navigator and opened the passenger door.

"I thought you'd have a sports car," I said, climbing in.

"I do," he responded and shut the door.

He drove us onto Wilshire.

"So, where are we going?" I asked.

"Byron and I always go to this burger place in Manhattan Beach. They have great shakes."

"Weren't you just out there for practice?" I asked.

"Yeah, but Byron wanted to come back and get Melissa. Shoot, you know where we practice?"

I tried to cover. I still didn't want him to know what a crazed fan I was. "Only because I used to work across the street."

"Doing what?"

"Aeronautical engineering," I tried. It came out sounding like a question.

Jake just looked at me like I was slightly tweaked.

"Okay, I've never done any engineering." It was time to come clean. "I'm a die hard Celebrities fan. I just didn't want to scare you to death."

"I knew it! Who's your favorite player?" he asked quickly.

"Byron."

"And then?"

"Allen. I love his long lashes. I call him Babyface."

"I might use that," he said thoughtfully. "And then?"

"Hmm...I really hadn't thought about past that. But can you look into getting Keewe fired? He's driving me nuts with his stone hands."

"Nah, he'll get better. Just be patient," Jake said loyally. I could tell that he was a little disappointed about something.

"Jake!" I slapped him on the arm. "You're my favorite player, you dork!"

"You don't have to say that. It's cool. Byron's great."

I rolled my eyes. "Don't make me prove it."

“How would you do that?” He was curious.

“I could show you the signs I take to games. Or my shirt.”

“What do the signs say?”

“‘Jake Brings Class to the ABL.’ It works for most networks. And I have a ‘Go Jaaake’ t-shirt. I’m scaring you, aren’t I?” I was jittery with nerves.

He had a big smile on his face. “I’ve seen that sign. I like it. My mom comes to my games and she likes it too.”

“You deserve it,” I told him. “You work hard and you make your teammates better.” I needed a timeout. This was too much goodness. I might burst.

I loved how easygoing he was. Andrew and I were always in the middle of some verbal sparring, which was fun but could be exhausting. Being in Jake’s presence was flat out relaxing. I thought I’d be absolutely ridiculous if I ever met him but he wasn’t the type of person you wig out around. He wasn’t oozing glamour like I’d expected.

I studied him. He was as tall as I thought he’d be. In college I’d dated a guy who was a foot taller than me but Jake was even beyond that. These days he was wearing his hair short. In college he’d let his jet-black hair go somewhat long. It made him look a lot like his dad in his ABL days. I loved his brown eyes. They were set in such a way that in the right light it looked like he was wearing eyeliner. He also had wrinkles around his eyes when he smiled. It made him seem so kind.

“What?”

Oops. He’d caught me. “What?”

“You were staring at me and looking all serious.”

“Oh.” How do you cover staring? “I was feeling bad for you.”

“Why?”

“Because my brother used to give you hell in college.” My brother was a Stanford basketball nut. He sat courtside at every game with a group of people who were specifically there to torture the opposition with words. The nerdy Stanford students would research all the opposing players, find the perfect barb for each one and then collectively hurl it at the game.

“Who’s your brother?” Jake asked.

“Luke Banks. You wouldn’t know him or anything. He was in Stanford Sixth Man.”

“I don’t think I’m you’re brother’s biggest fan,” Jake said good-naturedly.

“Believe it or not, he’s a fan of yours,” I said. “In fact, he took a hilarious picture of you at a Queens game when he sat on the lower level. I should show it to you. I can’t figure out the

ridiculous look on your face during introductions. Even Angus is looking at you like you're crazy."

"Are you making fun of me?" He seemed surprised that I would talk to him like this but he also seemed to be enjoying it.

"I wouldn't do that," I answered with wide-eyed innocence.

At the stoplight he turned and looked me in the eyes. "Just between you and me, I'm extremely sensitive."

If that was a swoon test, I failed miserably. I gripped my door, swallowed hard and looked straight ahead. He had to be kidding. The guy went up against the toughest guys in basketball on a regular basis. He probably could have said, "Just between you and me, I steal babies" and it would have had the same effect. I figured he wanted to make me squirm. It wasn't in my nature to let something like that slide. I'd get him back.

During my silence he flicked on the radio. He went through a bunch of stations and didn't seem to find anything he liked. He switched to CD and Bob Dylan came out of the speakers. That was acceptable.

"So, are you from LA?" Jake asked.

"No. I grew up in a town about an hour north of Santa Barbara."

"I'm not from here either," Jake said.

"Right. I memorized more than your stats."

"You know my stats?"

"Roughly. I did stats for the girls team at my high school so I tend to think in those terms during games." I couldn't tell if that amused or impressed him.

"So you didn't play?"

"No. I wasn't very athletic back then."

"What were you?" he asked.

"Smart, I guess. I always had my nose in a book. A few universities even recruited me for academics. One of them was UCLA."

"I don't get it," Jake said, perplexed. "Then why do you clean my house?"

"I guess it's the typical college student turned cleaning lady story. I'm interested in so many things. I don't know what I'd go to grad school for. I want to do a bunch of stuff; no one thing really stands out," I rambled. "I guess you're lucky that way."

"Yeah, I guess so. But it's not like basketball is the only thing I want to do with my life."

“Oh, I know.” I leaned my head back on the headrest and quoted from his ABL profile. “‘Jake Dalton wants to work with disadvantaged youth after his ABL career.’ Is that really true?”

“Of course it’s true. Why wouldn’t it be?”

“My mother told me that if it sounds too good to be true, it probably is. I see you coaching, though. You see the game so clearly. You make plays happen.”

“We’ll just have to wait and see,” he said mysteriously. “So what are these things you’re interested in?”

“They come in phases. Senior year I thought I wanted to be an astrophysicist but that would have meant I’d have to start from scratch since I hardly took any math or science during college. I also wanted to be a fitness instructor. That actually happened. One month I wanted to work for a think tank, fly helicopters and start an online business.”

“So what do you want to do right now?” Jake asked.

“I don’t know. I still want to fly helicopters. Doesn’t dropping off a beating heart at a hospital sound so exciting? I thought about running a shore excursion for a cruise line in Alaska. I wouldn’t be opposed to being an ABL commentator either.”

“I’ll let you know if I hear of any openings,” Jake said with a chuckle. “So…” He did a funny cough. “Would your boyfriend mind if he knew I was taking you out to lunch?”

Whoa. I was not prepared for that. I fought off a swoon. “I doubt it.” I told him about Jordan and the Cleveland jersey, including the mole.

“Are you telling me his major turn-off wasn’t his mole but that he was a Cabs fan?”

“No. The worst thing was his ego. Then it was a tie between those two,” I said as we parked at the restaurant.

He was laughing as he shut my door. “You have to give the poor guy a break!”

“I don’t think so. Then to add insult to injury my wallet was stolen at the game!”

“Karma?” Jake suggested.

“No. That wouldn’t have been a fair exchange at all.”

He gave me a face that said ‘Aw, poor baby’ and led me to the counter where we met up with Byron and Melissa.

We all ordered. Jake paid for my chicken sandwich and iced tea. He said it was only fair since they’d practically kidnapped me. I assured him that I knew I had the option to jump out of the car at every stoplight.

We dined outdoors in a garden area sitting at a circular wooden table with mismatched chairs and an umbrella. Jake and Byron got into a discussion about practice which gave Melissa and me the opportunity to talk.

"I love your outfit," I told her.

"Thanks!" she said. "It's my work clothes."

"Where do you work?"

"Dior on Rodeo."

I was impressed. My life would be complete if I had a Dior purse and shades. "That doesn't sound too bad."

"It's not for now. I'm also trying to get into modeling but it's tough."

"Well, you certainly look the part. I'm sure you'll get a break soon," I told her.

"Thanks, Sara," she said with genuine appreciation.

"So tell me, how did you two meet?" I asked her, pointing my head at Byron.

Byron broke off his conversation with Jake. "You telling the story?" he asked Melissa. "She always gets it wrong," he told me.

"I do not!" Melissa argued. "But I'll let you tell it." She cuddled up to Byron.

"I'd be happy to," he said. "A couple years ago we were playing a game in Dallas. I noticed this beautiful cheerleader on the sidelines. And she was looking back at me!"

"That's not true," she told me. "I was looking at all the players. Cheerleaders have to pay attention to the game."

"See what I mean?" he asked me. "Anyway, I really wanted to meet her so I had our towel boy or mop boy or whoever give her a note. It said, 'Please do me the honor of allowing me to take you out to dinner tonight.' And then I signed my name. That's it. So she sent a note back that said, 'If you score twenty points, I'd love to.' It was totally unfair. I was a rookie. Coach didn't even give me enough minutes to do that."

"I knew you could do it," Melissa told him loyally.

"Well, I did. I told my team about it and they agreed to give me the ball as often as possible. But they were not happy about it. I got twenty-one points that night but we still lost."

"And you think I'm rough on the guys!" I said to Jake.

"You are," he said.

"Maybe we shouldn't let them hang out," Byron said to Jake.

"I'll take my chances," he said with a grin.

I caught Byron and Melissa exchanging surprised glances. I almost choked on my sandwich.

“So you moved out here from Dallas for him?” I asked Melissa when I recovered.

“Partially. But I also got the transfer I requested for my job. If I want to make it in modeling this or New York is the place to do it. Byron just made the decision easy.” They shared a quick kiss. “So tell us about you, Sara,” Melissa prodded.

I told her about UCLA and my few jobs.

“I go to that gym!” she said. “When’s your class?”

I told her when kickboxing was and about the Pilates class that was starting soon. She said she was into Pilates and would sign up.

“I have to go to the bathroom,” Melissa announced and stood up. She gave me a meaningful look.

“Oh! Me too,” I said and followed her.

“Sara.” She was looking at me seriously once we were in the bathroom. “Jake has made it clear that he is not looking for a girlfriend. He’s really intense when it comes to basketball. He wants to get better all the time and he puts in the hours to make it happen.”

“I know. I read all that in an interview,” I told her.

“Listen to me,” she said. “He’s had his one-night stands and stuff. Believe me, these guys are working out so much they’re practically sweating testosterone. Anyway, my point is, he’s acting differently around you and I just wanted to let you know that Byron and I think it’s great. We think he’d be happier with a girlfriend.”

“Melissa! Don’t tell me stuff like that! I’m just his maid. You’ll get my hopes up,” I said. “Plus, he seems pretty happy anyway.”

“Well, he is. He’s living his dream. But that doesn’t mean it can’t get better. Oh, I almost forgot. It’s best if you don’t mention this to anyone. Jake hates excessive media attention on his personal life. Who wouldn’t, right?”

“I guess a few girls who are out flashing their crotches for the paparazzi?” I suggested. “Don’t worry. I’m not telling anybody about Jake but you.”

“Great!” She applied some lipstick. “Byron and I are going to get going. But I’m sure we’ll see each other soon.”

We exchanged cell phone numbers and left the bathroom.

As if on cue Byron stood up and asked Melissa if she was ready to go.

“Yup! See you guys later,” she said to Jake and me.

“See ya,” Byron repeated.

Jake and I were alone once again. I was surprised that only a couple of people had asked him and Byron for autographs but it was an off time for lunch and the place wasn't too crowded.

"Ready to go?" Jake asked.

"Sure," I said.

We got back into the Navigator.

"Do you have to be anywhere?" Jake asked me.

"Nope. I was thinking about taking a salsa class today but that's it."

"Like making salsa?" he asked.

"No! Dancing," I told him.

"With you who knows? Maybe you want to be a chef this month." He pulled into traffic. "So you've taken dance classes?"

"Yeah. What you caught me doing today actually had some training behind it." I remembered an article I'd read that said that Jake preferred to listen than to talk. It was clear to me that it was the truth. I noticed that we weren't going the same way we'd come. "Where are we going?"

"We're going back, I just felt like going by the beach. Do you mind?"

"No." I started messing with his radio and selected a country station.

"How about something else?" Jake requested.

"Like what?"

"Anything."

"Oh come on! You're insulting my roots. I come from an agricultural town. I see these people at our fair," I complained.

"It makes me want to rip my ears off," he said.

"Fine." I changed the station to mariachi. "Better?"

"Actually, yeah," he said. "But I think we could still improve." He switched to classic rock.

"Boring!" I like classic rock but wasn't in the mood. I switched to hip-hop and started bobbing around.

"Did you take a class on this too?" he asked.

"Of course! It's so fun. Do you dance?"

“No,” he said flatly.

“I think you do,” I said, trying to egg him on.

“I don’t,” he said.

“I had this friend who signed up for modern dance at UCLA because he thought it would teach him how to dance at a club. He ended up having to do a performance on stage where he was a sack of flour stuck in a box on the ocean floor.”

“That’s terrible!” Jake laughed.

“What’s terrible is that I missed it,” I returned.

I reached for the radio to change back to classic rock just as he reached. Our hands brushed. Electricity shot up my arm. We both took back our hands without changing the station. Did he feel that?

“So...” He did that cough again. “Where do you live?”

“Palisades. I rent a room.” My body was tingling. I was going to float away on a cloud any second.

“Some of my teammates live out there,” Jake said.

“Yeah. A lot of cool people live out there. I love it.”

“Byron and I wish we’d bought a house together there instead of the apartments. We just didn’t know back then.”

“Your place isn’t too shabby,” I said.

“No, I like it. It really doesn’t matter much where I live during the season since I’m hardly home.”

“You live somewhere else in the off-season?”

“Yeah. San Diego. You didn’t know?”

“Well, I could have guessed, but no. I knew you were from there.”

Teasing, he said, “So I guess you’re not my number one fan.”

“Did I ever claim to be?” I asked.

“Geez! That was rough.”

I dug through my purse. “Maybe you could do me a favor.”

“What?”

I produced an Allen Binnam basketball card that I'd bought at a mall recently and had forgotten to unload. "Could you get this signed for me? I think he's going to be even better than Kent Kazam."

"Leave it on the dash and I'll see what I can do," he grumbled. "What else are you carrying around in there?"

"Not much." I showed him each item as I mentioned it. "Chicken poop lip-gloss. Wallet. Keys. Checkbook. Cell phone. USB pen."

"What's that?"

"I back up my documents from my computer on it," I explained, taking the top off to show him it was USB capable.

"So you're kind of a geek?"

"No. I'm just computer savvy," I countered. "And maybe a little bit of a geek."

"And the chicken poop lip-gloss?"

"I think it's funny."

"Let me see."

I handed it to him. He read the tube and agreed that it was funny.

"So the only basketball card you had in there was Allen's?" he asked.

"No, I was holding out. I have every Celebs' card in here." I showed him the stack.

"And you carry them around why?"

"In case I meet one and he can sign it. Should I leave them all?" I asked sweetly.

"No. God, no," he said.

The thought of him going around the locker room having everybody sign his card for me made me laugh out loud. "It's cool. I don't really care about autographs anyway. I've never really understood the appeal."

"So you're saying you don't want me to sign your bra or anything?"

I was surprised. It seemed a little bold coming from him. "No, thanks. I like it the way it is."

We approached his block.

"Are you going to the game tomorrow?" he asked as we pulled into the garage.

"Yeah," I said with a sigh. "I'll be fighting off vertigo at the top of Scissors." We got out of the car. "So road trip after tomorrow?"

“Yup, three games.”

“Good luck. I’ll be watching!” I said and skipped off to my car.

What happens between Jake and Sara?

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