

Chapter One

A normal day? Not even close.

June 6th

“Ugh, why can’t I just get back to sleep?” I covered my head with my quilt as I protested getting out of bed. Any normal sixteen year old girl would be excited about her birthday. Not me. My mother insists on throwing big parties. This year was no exception.

My curiosity got the best of me and I looked over at my dreaded alarm clock. I had four minutes until the six A.M. buzzer. I wanted to go back to sleep for a few reasons. First, I did not want to get out of my warm blanket. Second, I wanted to continue my dream. In it my best friend, Jen Barnes, and I sat in her father’s classic convertible. Her older brother Michael, drove, us after picking us up from school. I sat in the front seat as I let my long, light brown hair blow in the wind. We tried to annoy him. We sang as loud as we could off key. I knew it worked when he shot Jen a look of irritation. Then he looked over at me and smiled. At that point, I woke up.

Several things gave away that it could only be a dream. Alan refused anyone to drive his favorite car. He and Michael spent countless hours restoring it together. Second, it would be impossible for him to pick us up. Michael and my brother, Ricky, planned on flying home from school today.

My 23 year old brother Ricky, is finally graduating from college. Luckily, it’s not far from Michael’s boarding school, in Washington State. I’m glad he is finally done with college. Education was the perfect degree choice for him. He always had a big heart for kids. Teaching high school is what he has always wanted to do.

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I gave up on going back to sleep. I knew Jen would be here soon for our traditional birthday kidnapping. Our other friend Delia moved a few months ago. I knew she would ask Jen for pictures. The idea was to make the birthday girl wear something embarrassing to school. Back in April, Jen's parents, Katie and Alan, helped us out. They let her sleep in late. Katie only left a set of pink footed pajamas for Jen to wear. Her parents hid the rest of her clothes while she slept. After gym class, she cheated by staying in her gym clothes. I couldn't blame her because I did the same thing last year.

She got so mad she did not want me to get a ride with her after school. Alan talked her out of holding a grudge. He reminded her it was all in good fun. When he gave her his favorite phrase "The King of Pranks strikes again," she gave in and laughed. Katie got it on video and we later sent it to Delia. In return, she gave me a warning that Jen planned on continuing our silly tradition today.

To avoid complete humiliation I had a plan. I would wait in a set of pajamas that would be decent. Last year I fell back asleep. I wore my flannel nightgown to bed. She had me stay in the nightgown, added rollers in my hair, and an avocado mask. I made it to the locker room before school and changed into my gym clothes. I also washed off the avocado mask making me late for class. Not this year. I hid another set of clothes in my backpack to avoid embarrassment.

To pass the time until she got here, I started my morning routine with a quick shower. Something weird happened. The shower head leaked again making the water distribute unevenly. I got really annoyed when I had a hard time rinsing my hair out. Dad's list of things to fix now got longer. "*I WISH THIS SHOWER WOULD FIX ITSELF*," I whined.

Right after I said it a flash of light in the bathroom brightened the room for a brief second. I couldn't tell where it came from. I still had my eyes closed to avoid shampoo getting into them. Then suddenly the shower worked perfectly. I dismissed the flash as a light bulb going out.

I sat down at my vanity and read one of my favorite books. A knock at the door made me jump. Jen entered the room wishing

me a happy birthday. Immediately, I noticed her new haircut. Her shoulder length dark brown hair framed her face nicely. Her blue eyes stood out in contrast, catching my attention. We looked at my backpack at the same time.

“I WISH MY CLOTHES WERE IN MY LOCKER AT SCHOOL,” I said under my breath.

She picked up my backpack as I tried to grab it from her. We played a tug of war for a moment. With a quick hard yank, she got it out from my grip. She opened it to reveal the empty canvas. Briefly confused about their disappearance, I thought someone took my clothes as I took my shower.

She laughed at me. “Looks like I got you this year. So are you ready for your birthday makeover?”

I looked in the vanity mirror. The circles under my dark blue eyes gave away a rough night of sleep.

“I’m still in my pajamas and I don’t have the nightgown or avocado mask any more. I threw them out after last year,” I told her with a smirk. I hoped she wouldn’t remember the rollers. Our families always played pranks on each other. I wouldn’t be surprised if she had something else in mind for a backup.

“You’re no fun,” she said before sticking out her tongue at me. I threw a pillow at her to make her laugh. “Come on, your mom says breakfast is ready.”

I grabbed my backpack and then walked down the hall to the kitchen. The long, narrow hallway was filled with pictures of my brother and me as we grew up. I wanted them taken down and burned. No matter how hard I tried, I could never get them down. Mom used something that made the pictures stick to the walls. She says only a special solution would remove it.

“Good morning, honey. Happy birthday. I made some biscuits and gravy. If you want, I can whip up some bacon and eggs,” Mom offered as she poured a glass of juice for herself. The wonderful smell of the food made me hungry. When it came to cooking, she always made too much food.

“No, Mom, this is perfect. Thank you.” She handed me a plate before I sat down at the end of the dining table. Her lab coat hung on the back of a chair, revealing her hospital duties for the day. Her long, thick blonde hair pulled back in a bun showed

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off her blue eyes. She always told me the key to communication with her patients is eye contact. Hair gets in the way so back it went.

“Good morning everyone. Happy birthday, my princess.” Dad’s booming Welsh accent filled the room. He sounded, as he would say, cheerier than normal. He wore a pair of jeans and a brown polo shirt that matched his eyes. I knew he hated wearing his stuffy suit. My parents have very different careers from each other. Mom is obviously a doctor here in Bellevue, Nebraska. Dad works as an F.B.I. Assistant director in a top secret field. He once told me if he told me he would have to kill me.

Mom grew up in Peabody, Massachusetts. Dad’s from Hud Haven, Wales. He came over to the States as a foreign exchange student. My parents got married after Mom graduated high school. Visiting my dad’s side of the family became an annual spring break tradition. Despite the long flight and customs hassles, the trip proves to be always worth it. No matter where I go in Wales, the breathtaking view makes me feel at home. Then again, being born in Hud Haven, I really am at home there. Nothing compares in beauty to the rich rolling green hills of The British Isles.

“You made my favorite, you didn’t have to.” Dad kissed Mom before he grabbed his food. She pulled something off of his thick light brown goatee. “Thank you, Lovey.” he smiled at her as he walked to the table.

Living next door to my best friend, Jen, has been the greatest. Despite her being over a year older than me, we have always been friends. Her Dad, Alan, became the President at a private school system. Her mother Katie taught writing classes at the community college in Omaha. Like my parents, they came from different parts of the country. Alan had been brought up in Louisiana, while Katie grew up in Bellevue. Sometimes, if you upset Alan enough, he will rant in Creole. Between you and me, that’s has been entertaining to watch.

Katie and Mom have been best friends all of their lives. Over the years, Alan and my dad have become good friends. Until a few years ago, our brothers did not like each other. I don’t know why or how but Mom called it a miracle.

While Jen and I ate, I felt a light tug on my ponytail. I instantly turned to see my brother, Ricky. I did not expect to see him. That tug on my hair's his trademark hello. "When did you get back from school?" I got up to give him a hug. In return of the hair pull, I lightly flicked his right ear. You can clearly see both of my parents in him. He looks exactly like Dad with Mom's hair color. I didn't know who I take more after. Several family members from Mom's side say I look identical to an ancestor. I wouldn't know. I have never seen pictures of her.

"Hey, Squirt. I got back late last night. Alan pulled some strings and got Mike out of school early. You have no idea how glad I am that I am out of there. By the way, happy birthday." His college graduation is this Sunday afternoon. "Mom, are you still planning on the flight to Seattle for Sunday?"

"I'll get back to you later on that. Grab something to eat before it gets cold." The tone basically told him to shut up. Ricky laughed at her as if I missed a joke. I couldn't understand why he came home today. He would turn around to go back to school for his graduation.

Dad grumbled about a meeting at the office today. Mom said. "Babe, you don't want to be late for work. Why don't you go on over to Alan's for the carpool? I'll take the girls to school." She leaned over to him and kissed him. Watching my parents making out disgusted me. Thankfully, my brother thought along the same lines.

"Gross, would you two stop. We are trying to eat here," Ricky said.

Dad got up from his chair and whispered something to her and she lightly giggled while blushing at his comment.

Dad looked over at me and winked. "Princess, I must be off to work. Doctor's orders. Enjoy your birthday. Don't let me forget, we must have a chat tonight." Mom hit him lightly on the arm as if he gave something away.

Mom dropped us off at Bellevue West High School on her way to the hospital. The school bustled with parents dropping their kids off. After we got out of the car, Jen looked at me seriously. "I remember when we moved next door to you." She started to tear up. The other kids walked by us as if we didn't

exist. I could only focus on Jen. I hated to see her so upset. I wondered, what's wrong and I'd better ask before we get inside.

"Ok, spill it, what's wrong? It's the last day. Don't forget we will be the first to graduate Obama Senior High next year. Come on, you should be excited."

"I can't tell you," she sobbed. "My parents don't want me to tell anyone. Not even you. They said you would find out in time. It's really big news. It's just you, and I trust you with everything. You have to promise not to tell anyone I told you."

"I promise. Now tell me," I begged her.

We both stopped in front of the flag pole. The J.R.O.T.C. students finished putting up the flags for the day. Their chrome helmets and blue Air Force uniforms made them stand out. I had to make sure we did not get in their way.

"I am transferring to a school in South Dakota. The one my Mom graduated from. They said I would be carrying on the family tradition. I know it's only one school year. But I really don't want to let my family down. I hope you understand."

"Wow, I can't believe it. South Dakota. There's nothing up there but Mount Rushmore," I said with a light laugh. I tried to make light of the situation. I knew she kept more from me. I decided not to push it. I knew I would be losing my best friend to a private school and it would be hard to adjust. I pushed my emotions aside and decided to make my birthday a happy day. Not dwell on the negative. "Like you said. It's only one year. We have all summer to hang out. Come on, it's the last day we will be in this school. Besides, the birthday girl gets what she wants. So no more sadness. Birthday girl's orders?"

She laughed easing the tension. I grabbed her arm and dragged her along with me. We casually walked through the oversized gray double doors. I didn't care about being late on the last day of school. My uncaring mood quickly changed. The school diva Bethany Willingham snuck up behind us. She's one of those people you just want to smack in the face the instant you meet them. Anyways, Bethany thinks of herself as better than everyone else. All she is just a bully in a dress. We've never gotten along. In a way I'm glad we never became friends. There's no way I could hang out with someone as mean as she is.

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“Nice outfit. Where did you get it, the thrift store?” She and her little minion crowd of friends laughed. As usual, I ignored her as we kept walking to class.

“Well, at least you won’t have to deal with her next year,” I whispered to Jen.

We rushed through the increasingly crowded hallway to our lockers. Opening the purple locker door revealed the clothes I hid in my backpack earlier. That seemed weird. I had no idea how they got there. I knew I put them in my backpack. I took advantage of the situation. I quickly closed my locker most of the way so Jen didn’t see them. “Hey, Jen, I will meet up with you in History. I have to go to the bathroom.”

“Okay. Don’t be late, and no changing into your gym uniform. You know how cranky Mr. Oliver gets when someone is late. Tardiness is the first sign of non-reliability,” she said, mocking his usual lecture.

The moment she vanished from sight, I stuffed the clothes once again in my backpack. I held the backpack in front of me to make sure my clothes didn’t disappear again. I rushed to the bathroom and changed clothes in one of the stalls. Once I changed my clothes I rushed off to class. As I ran into my American History classroom. Mr. Oliver laughed at me not surprised to see me barely make it in time. The younger teacher with very short brown hair proved to be a favorite with some of the girls.

“Miss. Miller, once again, you skated in just in time not to be late. We will start class as soon as you take your seat.”

I sat at my desk behind Jen in the back of the room. She looked at me, irritated. I could hear her mumble something about me being a cheater.

With the exception of the students, the classroom seemed empty. Nothing on the walls or on the bookshelves. This reminded me of my final day at West. I had to pull myself together as the mixture of emotions tried to surface. Not much happened during class except turning in our textbooks. In exchange for them, Mr. Oliver would tell us our grades.

“Another A place for Miss. Miller,” he said loud enough for the class to hear.

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As I sat back down Bethany shot me a resentful look. I didn't care what she thought. I did better than I thought.

That did not stop her snarky comments from being thrown out in desperation. "What's with the change of clothes, Sarah?" Bethany asked.

"Not that I have to justify anything to you, but I want to be more comfortable," I answered back in the same tone.

"Really only to be more comfortable? I thought you wanted to bring us more trash can fashion. I mean you wear last season's clothes as if they came from the dumpster instead of the store."

Raven turned around in her seat and looked like she wanted to tell her off. "Hey, Bethany. You might want to enjoy Daddy's credit card while you can. From what I heard on the news that might not last long. I am not going to say much more. I'll let the truth speak for itself. Thieves and liars are always exposed sooner or later." Raven waited for a response, but Bethany stayed silent as she turned back around. Raven leaned over to us. "You don't know how long I have been wanting to do that."

"May I have your attention, students?" Mr. Oliver paced at the front of the room in full lecture mode. "Some of you may have heard I will be teaching at Obama Senior High. I am sorry to inform you the rumors are wrong and right. I have taken a position at another school. However, it is in another state and I won't see you as you had anticipated at Obama." He stopped and looked at us seriously. "I would like to thank you for making my last year at West a pleasant one." Some of the girls gave a disappointed sigh. "Because it's the last day for all of us relax. Chat amongst yourselves. Enjoy your last day of the year."

For the rest of the class hour we did exactly as instructed. We talked to other students about what we planned to do over the summer. Soon the bell rang and all of us headed to our next class as usual.

We kept up the pace of the other students in the hall. Soon we heard a familiar voice ask an annoying question. "Jen, last chance for the prettiest girl to go out with me before the year ends."

"Conrad Ullman. I wouldn't go out with you even if you paid me," she quickly responded. The boy slightly taller than me with

brown shaggy hair wouldn't give up. At this point I lost count of how many times he asked Jen out. You would think someone would take no for an answer.

I could tell he tried his hardest to think of a comeback. "Well, as I have said before, I don't think it would work out. There are all those girls who will do anything to go out with me."

"Can it with the movie quotes," Jen interrupted. "I have been saying no since the seventh grade, and my answer will stay the same." She sighed. "To quote the same movie, I don't think you can handle a classy woman like me." She patted Conrad on the back. He shook his hair away from his light brown eyes then turned around to go to his next class. I could see her cheeks brighten. Her hair slid over them hiding the evidence of a shy smile.

The best part about the last day of school remained the fact that we always got out early. One o'clock arrived and we said goodbyes to our classmates. Some of them, I would see next year at the new high school. Others would be staying here at Bellevue West Senior High School. We cleared out our lockers and threw out what we needed to. Jen threw everything out of her locker except a picture of us on a camping trip in California.

Outside the school door a tall, muscular junior wearing his purple and gold letterman's jacket greeted us. Jesse Silver became the popular athlete after Michael transferred to his private school. He towered over me by at least half a foot. I didn't like being around him. But I sucked it up for my student leadership class. I became his fourth chemistry tutor he had this year.

"Hey Sare-bear. I just wanted to say thanks for helping me pass Chemistry. Coach woulda' kicked me off the team." His military style haircut enhanced his brown hair and hazel eyes. He would be staying here at West while I transferred to Obama. Knowing I wouldn't see him after today made me feel better. I got tired of him constantly hitting on me since Delia broke up with him to move. He's *so* annoying. You just don't date your friend's former girlfriend or boyfriend. Jesse's the guy most of the girls wanted to go out with since Michael left. They can have him as far as I am concerned.

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“Thanks. So, how did you do?” I asked him. I continued trying to be polite. Secretly, I wanted to run away as fast as I could.

“I got a C, can you believe it? I’ve never gotten a C in anything before. My dad’s going to be proud. I never wouldn’t have passed if you didn’t help me. Thanks for not giving up on me like the other tutors did.” He came over to give me a hug. He squeezed me so hard I couldn’t breathe.

“Jesse put me down I’m suffocating,” I said, gasping for air.

“Sorry,” he said, putting me down. “So, how is Mike doing these days?”

Jen jumped in to save the day. “He’s fine. I will tell him you asked about him,” she answered. “We got to go, our ride is waiting for us.” She rescued me from another attempt of him asking me out.

I recognized our ride right away. Jen’s brother, Michael, sat on the hood of their dad’s blue 1964 Mustang. His short sandy blonde hair didn’t change from the last time I had seen him. He had the same baby blue eyes as Jen. I couldn’t believe the things that ran through my mind. I remembered him as a good looking guy, but whoa baby. Not only was he buff, but he turned into a full blown hottie. For some weird reason I wanted to run over to him and give him a big hug. When he smiled at us my heart feel like it skipped a beat. I totally didn’t expect this.

“I’m surprised Dad let you touch his precious car, let alone drive it to come and get us,” she commented. I could tell her envy by the tone of her voice.

“It’s not Dad’s anymore. He gave it to me for graduating,” he said with a smirk. The crowd of kids admiring the classic car didn’t bother him. I always dreamed of riding in it. Alan only drove it once a week to a classic car show on Sunday afternoons. As kids, Michael and Ricky would sneak in and pretended to drive somewhere. If he ever knew they played in the car they would be dead.

“No fair. I can’t believe he gave it to you,” Jen said as she went to sit in the front seat.

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“I think Sarah should sit in the front.” He surprised me by holding the door open. When he held the door, open Bethany and her little crowd of friends glared at me.

“What about me?” Jen pouted.

“You have sat in the front seat a hundred times. This is her first time in the convertible. It wouldn’t be fair for her to sit in the back seat.”

Jen walked around to the other side of the car to get in. I sat on the white vinyl bucket seat in the front. It felt more comfortable than I expected.

“Okay, but I got shotgun next time,” she said while climbing in. He started the engine, announcing its presence. He took off just before Mr. Lennon, the principal, came over.

I immediately noticed he drove in a different direction than home. “Where are we going?” I asked.

“The Willow Creek Mall,” he responded. I never noticed it before. Something about his voice I found to be smooth and velvety. I could talk to him all day long. “Your parents asked me to bring you two to shop until five. Or get sick of the mall. But we know that will never happen,” He said with a mischievous grin. I knew that smile meant mischief loomed near. I knew he would never lie to me. That didn’t mean he couldn’t hide anything from me.

We got there about one thirty, giving us a few hours to shop. Jen and I went to see the fourth Traveling Diary movies then walked around the slowly crowding mall. We went into our favorite fashion store, the Alabaster Pot, to look around. The dimly lit store teemed with the newest clothes in pristine order, as usual. Jen and I went straight to the clearance section, as usual. I could never afford anything new on my minuscule allowance. Jen sat in the same financial situation.

When we checked out, the store manager rang us up. The tall, blonde manager Kelly always treated us super nice. I always envied her because she looked like she could be a model for these clothes.

“Hey, you two, not to be nosy, but I notice you are in here a lot. I hope you don’t mind, but how old are you two?”

“Sixteen,” we said at the same time.

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“Wonderful. Is there any chance I could offer you two part time jobs now that summer is here? My last associate quit because she went home after college to Topeka. I have a good feeling I can trust you two. I’ve never had any problems with you as customers. I kind of overheard you talking about getting good grades. Here’s a hint; the key to getting a job at your age is keeping grades up. Anyways, here are your items and your change. I gave you an extra ten percent off for customer appreciation. If you two want to work here, come and see me. The best part about working here is fifty percent off new items.” We politely thanked her, considering her offer.

The time came for us to make our way to the car. But not without a quick stop at the antique store. The small, overly stuffed store packed with swords, shields, and tapestries reminded me of my grandmother’s house. Mr. Jakes displayed a full suit of armor. Nothing caught my eye until we got ready to leave the store. That’s when I saw a necklace in the locked case by the register. The peach-toned background made the white side profile of a young lady stand out. I knew the breathtaking masterpiece would not be cheap.

“Sir, how much is this necklace?”

“\$19.95, my lady,” he replied with his Scottish accent. He always had nice manners and treated everyone as royalty. “I just got her in yesterday. Quite the beauty, she is.” With his aged and shaky hands, he pulled it out to show me. “Do you know much about true cameos?” he asked me.

“No, sorry I don’t,” I answered.

“Each one is unique. Created by hand and it is near impossible to duplicate such craftsmanship. Would you like to try it on?” Putting on the necklace and admiring it in the mirror made me want it even more. “Would you care to purchase this one today?” I couldn’t afford it after the hoodie I just bought. I contemplated for a moment on returning it.

“I will just have to see if it is here after I get my next few allowances,” I told him taking the necklace off.

“Such a shame, she seems to be a good match for you. If she’s meant to be yours, then she will be here the next time.”

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“Sarah.” Michael caught me off guard. My heart started to race for no reason. “I’m sorry but it’s time to go.” I wondered how long he had been watching us. Turning to look at him, I nearly blushed.

“How long have you been standing?” I asked him, trying to scold him. It didn’t work. His eyes, something about his eyes caught my attention.

“Long enough to see you really got into that cheesy cameo story. I promised I would get you back in time.”

“Thank you,” I said to Mr. Jakes as Jen grabbed my arm and we walked out to the car.

When we got to the car, I didn’t see Michael anywhere. I looked back at the mall entrance. “Where did he disappear to? Should we wait here or go looking for him?” I asked.

“Let’s wait here. He probably met some girl and asked her out,” Jen responded. The thought of him asking another out girl made me envious. I couldn’t even think of a reason to be jealous.

We waited about five minutes before he got to the car. “Sorry I had to... make a quick stop.” He quickly placed his phone in his pocket.

Jen sat in the front seat. I sat directly behind Michael. The traffic seemed almost nonexistent for Friday rush hour. Sitting behind him, the wind blew the most amazing cologne I had ever smelled. I didn’t know why I liked so much. I sat back and let my hair blow in the wind during what seemed to be a short ride home. I didn’t let it bother me because I couldn’t stand slow traffic. There’s nothing more obnoxious than when you can walk faster than the car is moving.

Turning on to our street the amount of cars parked gave away the signs of a party in full swing. I dreaded getting out of the car. As we pulled up to the parking spot waiting for us, reality set in. I wanted to get this done and over with. Not paying attention, I automatically reached for the back seat to move it up. Michael’s warm hand stopped mine, sending goose bumps up my arm.

“One minute. Let me open it for the birthday girl,” he said, smiling at me.

Fighting smiling back at him, I felt a mixture of emotions, embarrassment and being flattered with. I couldn’t tell if he just

flirted with me or not. No one's ever done that before. Not wanting to assume anything. I took a deep breath to compose myself. That didn't last long. Then he did it again. I reached for my shopping bags, but he already had them. I looked at him to thank him for taking them, but I got distracted by that cologne again. It smelled so good. I instantly started to ease up about the party. I decided to be rational. There could be no way he could be flirting with me. He is a close family friend. That would be totally weird. He wanted to be nice because it's my birthday. Nothing else.

Walking into my house, I could smell the hickory from the barbeque pit. We walked up the short flight of stairs to the living room. I directed him to put the bags on the coffee table. Not a single person remained inside the house. Everyone waited for my arrival in the back yard.

"It smells like your dad is burning a cow again," Jen suggested sarcastically.

"You know my dad, never miss an opportunity to char a dead animal," I said back. We all laughed for a second and went to the sliding back door to open it. Michael reached for it. "Thank you, I think I can get it." His head jerked back in surprise. I didn't mean to offend him. "Sorry, I didn't mean to upset you. Go ahead, I'll wait." I set my hands down at my sides. He acted like he didn't know what to do. "Go ahead," I said again with a chuckle.

As I walked through the door everyone looked up and yelled, "Surprise!" and they didn't even notice the lack of surprise on my face. The party had expanded between both my yard and Jen's yard. Our families decided to take down the chain link fence between our backyards. A forested area behind our house made events like this private. We didn't have to worry about disturbing the neighbors in the back of the house.

Decorated with pink and white tablecloths, balloons and a huge cake, the tables sat positioned perfectly between our yards. Delia would say it looked like a pink party threw up all over the back yard. The cake spanned three tiers high. White and pink, smooth fondant held matching the icing flowers. Perfectly cut fondant letters spelling the phrase "Happy Sweet 16 Sarah"

covered the sides of the tiers. I didn't think turning sixteen would be such a big deal. I don't even think my brother's college graduation party last weekend rated this much work.

"Happy birthday, Princess. You know how your mother gets. When it comes to parties, she is a force to be reckoned with," Dad said as he hugged me.

"What's the big deal with sixteen?" I asked him.

"It's not every day you turn sweet sixteen. There is more to it, but we will sit down and have ourselves a chat over tea later," he said, tapping his index finger on the tip of my nose. I thought this had to be something big. I had to put my pessimism aside and greet everyone, feeling like I hugged what felt like a hundred people.

I felt a small set of cold hands cover my eyes. Instantly I knew who they belonged to. This had always been my cousin Mary's favorite way to greet me. "Happy birthday. Guess who?" I turned around.

"Mary," I said loudly.

She hugged me excitedly. "It's so good to see you again, it's been too long. It's been what, a week? Oh, and I never got the chance to thank you for going to my party last weekend. Thanks for the pen you got for me, I love it." Her long dark brown, sleek hair hung perfectly past her shoulders. This ended up being the fourth party in the last two weeks our family had either had or gone to. Between Ricky, Mary, and Michael all having their graduation parties and now my birthday party, I'm sure she is just as tired of attending parties as I am.

"Thanks. I'm glad you liked it. Mom picked it out a few months ago. I think she knew the USB drive on the end of the pen would come in handy." Mary and I continued to talk about general things for a while. I liked catching up with her despite all of the guests around. That's one advantage of being the guest of honor. In other words, it's my party so it's my day.

I did not realize how much time went by. My uncle Paul came over to say hello to me. I couldn't help but be happy to see him here.

"Happy birthday. Sarah, It's nice to see you've grown into a beautiful young lady." He hugged me and I could tell he forgot

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his strength again, making my back pop. I had to push myself away from his near suffocating bear hug. One bear hug a day is more than enough. He stood a few inches taller than I am with dark hair and eyes.

He looked different from most of my family. He owned a restaurant in the Bronx. Dad never liked him for being on what he called the wrong side of the law. He said Uncle Paul is no good. Mom's sister married him about a year after my parents' wedding. He didn't seem like a criminal or anything. If so, he didn't make it known to the rest of the family.

"Thanks. I'm surprised Dad isn't throwing a fit with you being here. The last time you two visited he forbade you to step inside of the house. Where is Aunt Connie? I want to say hello." I said.

"She is at home, making sure Rosie is studying for her finals. The kids don't get out of school for a few more weeks. I'm not breaking any rules, not inside of the house. Hey, I noticed one of the boys here has his eye on you." He looked over at Michael. "Are you dating anyone? 'Cause if not I can set you up with one of the guys that work for me."

"Who, Michael?" I asked in complete shock. "No, he just lives next door. Thanks, but no thanks. New York is a little far. It would be hard to date someone with all of that distance. I'm not sure if I am ready to start dating yet."

He looked at me like something made sense. "Good point. Boy, I wish your cousin Rosie acted more like you and Saul. She has dated I don't know how many boys. She says hello. I wish she would study books more than boys."

"Hey, how's Saul doing these days? Aren't he and Pauli Jr. graduating this year?"

"Yeah, the twins are graduating this year. Pauli, he is going to work for me. He is running the restaurant right now. Saul's decided he is going to be a minister. I think that's the reason he doesn't want to date anyone. He says he wants to help others before himself. He's too much like his mother's side of the family. "He's also at the restaurant cleaning up the payroll for me. The boy's a genius when it comes to numbers. I just fired my accountant. He made a mess of everything. If he didn't have

his heart set on going into the ministry, he would be a great accountant. I keep telling him all he's got to do is get on the internet and he can be licensed in a few minutes. He wants to go to school and do it the hard way." He paused and looked around. "I better not monopolize the guest of honor. Happy birthday and don't be a stranger. Come by and see us sometime. We would love to have you over for dinner."

I wondered why he invited me over for dinner as if I lived next door. It would take several hours to get to New York by plane. He must have forgotten he was here in Nebraska.

"Umm, alright, thanks for coming," I told him just before he walked away.

Mom came over to me and guided me towards the cake.

"You need to blow out your candles and make a wish," Mom called. Dad lit the candles and I could not think of a wish. I looked around for some ideas and I saw Jen. I knew how much I would miss her. How hard it would be going to school without her. She seemed more than my best friend, like a sister. Then I knew what to wish for. I squeezed my eyes tight and imagined us going to the same high school.

"I WISH JEN AND I COULD FINISH HIGH SCHOOL TOGETHER," I whispered desperately. Then I blew out all sixteen candles in one breath. Traditionally being served the first piece, I wasted no time in eating it. I noticed that this tasted like the best chocolate cake I ever had. I knew I would want a second piece.

As I reached for a gift, my grandma McGill handed me a black gift box with a gold ribbon around it.

"This is something that all girls in the family get at your age," she told me just before I opened it. She handed me a beautiful leather-bound diary. A painting of a golden oak tree on the cover raised above the leather stood out. The tree's interwoven roots came together in a Celtic knot. I recognized the symbol right away as the same symbol my mom and grandma had on their necklaces.

I thought I had opened all of my gifts when I noticed there was yet another one. A small lavender box with a silver bow wrapped around it, caught my eye before. With all of the other

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gifts, I missed it, being too distracted by all of the other birthday surprises. I found no label as to who it came from. I opened the box to find the cameo necklace from the shop in the mall. I knew right away who brought it. I looked to Michael. He had a smile on his face, confirming my suspicion.

“This is from the Barnes family,” he said once I found him. “We wanted to make sure you had the perfect gift. Happy Birthday.”

I thanked him and all of Jen’s family. I turned in another direction so I wouldn’t smile at him.

Mary pulled me aside and began whispering to me. “What’s up with you two?” she asked.

“He stood behind me when I looked at it at the mall. He had to be the only one with the opportunity to get it. And no, there isn’t anything going on between us, nosy.” I pulled up my hair as Mary helped me put it on.

“I don’t know, I think someone may have a thing for you?”

“Would you quit? First Uncle Paul, now you. We are just friends. Besides, he’s probably only being nice because it is my birthday.”

“Oh, come on. That boy has had it bad for you for years now. Whenever we are here for the holidays he is always smiling at you when you are not looking. I can tell he likes you more than you think. I wouldn’t be surprised if he asks you out.”

“It’s just not like that between us. He’s my best friend’s brother and Ricky’s best friend. I’ve known him all my life and he’s always been a brat to me. The stories I could tell you about what he’s done to us would give you nightmares. Besides, he probably has a handful of girlfriends stashed away somewhere. I highly doubt he likes me in that way.”

Mary rolled her eyes at me like she couldn’t believe what she heard. “Okay, well when he does ask you out, don’t be surprised to hear me say I told you so.” She laughed.

“I will believe it when it happens. Besides, it’s not like you have any room to talk. I noticed you aren’t seeing anyone. What’s up with that?” I playfully mocked the way she said it to me.

“Nothing, literally nothing. There is this guy back home. I don’t know what is going on. Lately he has turned into one of my best friends. He’s been working on his Master’s in Education. He’s starting a new teaching job this fall. He has little time to spare. He couldn’t make the party last week because he had a final that day. Other than that, there isn’t anyone I am interested in. So now you know everything.”

“Alright, so when he asks you out, don’t be surprised to hear me say I told you so too.” We joined the rest of the party. I ended up so busy between talking to guests and dancing the night flew by. After escaping another dance from my clumsy cousin Kevin, I made my way over to the cooler for a soda, where Jen, Ricky and Mary were hanging out.

As Alan came over to talk to us as he hung up his phone. Dad says if there isn’t a phone attached to his ear something is wrong. “Ricky, I just got official notice that Mr. Swain will not be returning in the fall to the Olympic Academy. They will be taking applications for a teaching position. With this being your strongest subject I thought you may want to put in your application for the position. If you would like to use me as a reference, I would be happy to give you one.” Ricky burst in excitement as he heard the news.

“Thank you, I will put in the application online as soon as I can,” Ricky said, trying not to overreact. Alan got a phone call interrupting their conversation. He excused himself to take the call.

As I turned around to talk to more people, I noticed Michael walking over to me. Everybody wanted to dance with the birthday girl. I had to turn some of them down. It’s not because I didn’t want to dance. My feet already throbbed. But Michael, he’s the one person I would have made an exception for. I kind of wanted to talk to him and find out why he treated me so nicely tonight.

Jen came into view from out of nowhere, surprising me. “Well, happy birthday again,” she said, handing me a box. “I know Mike picked out the necklace at the last minute, but I got you something.” I opened the box and saw a hard bound set of “the Traveling Diaries” books we have been reading.

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I opened it and saw she got it autographed from the author K. Nichole Andersen. “Wow, this is so cool! When, how?” I stood shocked to see all the first editions of the four books.

“Mom helped me get it from an online auction. I knew once I saw it you would like it.”

“Thanks Jen, this is the best.” I gave her a hug. “How long have you known about all of this?”

By now Michael walked over and started to talk to Ricky. “Mom told me about the party last night. I don’t think she can trust me keeping a secret from you.” She looked off to the other side of the yard.

Out of habit I turned my head to see what she looked at. I saw someone I never wanted to see again. Matt Wheeling, the neighborhood bully. His blazing red hair matched the terror he inflicted on us as kids. Dressed in a military uniform he walked towards us. I wanted to be polite and thank him for showing up. I also wanted him thrown out of the party.

“Loser alert,” Jen said while rolling her eyes. “I wonder what *he* is doing here,” I heard her mutter as he approached us.

“Happy birthday. I won’t stay long. I wanted to talk to the both of you. I want to apologize to both of you. Apologize for being mean to you two and everyone else in school. There is no excuse for how I behaved. I know I can’t take back what I did. I don’t ever expect you two to forgive me. I just wanted to say that I am sorry.” His small and narrow eyes looked full of evil. I didn’t believe him. This apology did not feel remorseful.

I looked over to our brothers. Michael watched Jen as usual. They looked really ticked to see him. “Thanks, but you might want to go and talk to the guys and tell them what you told us. By the way nice uniform.”

“Thanks. I just graduated from military school. I will be leaving in two weeks for basic. I decided to continue with the military and join the Air Force.” He stepped closer to me. “You look nice.”

I took two steps backwards away from him. There hung a moment of awkward silence. Not to mention he had very bad breath. “So, Sarah, are you going out with anyone?”

Okay, that was way too weird. First, he terrorized me as a kid. Now he's asking me if I am going out with anyone. "No, I'm not. I am in no rush to start seeing anyone either." I could see the disappointment filling his eyes. It looked like I got my point across.

"When you want to go out with me just let me know. I should get over there and talk to them." He turned around in a military pivot turn and walked away, showing off. I made sure he passed out of listening distance before I said anything to Jen.

"Okay, now that's weird. I can't believe he had the nerve to ask me out just after apologizing to us. He honestly thought I would date him? Why is it when you don't want to date you are being asked out from the guys you don't want to be with? Even if he didn't torture us as kids, I wouldn't go out with him. Ugh," I said, shivering in disgust.

"At least you don't have someone chasing you. Conrad won't get it that I don't like him like that," Jen said.

I knew her taste in boys pretty well. If he cleaned up, I could see her going out with him. We went over to the chairs set up by the table and sat down. I felt exhausted from everything and enjoyed sitting down.

"I wish I could find someone like my mom found my dad," she said.

"Me, too. I don't know the first thing about dating. I just wish that when I find mine, I won't have to look far. I'm sure I will meet my knight in shining armor sometime."

We went inside after the party ended. Jen and I originally planned for her to sleep over. Dad said no because we had to have our chat over tea. Translation, when Dad says chat over tea, he really means is a long discussion. Those never turn out good. I sat at the table, ready to get this over with. I felt tired and bed sounded really good. My grandmother prepared the tea for our family meeting. I heard her sigh as she looked out the window at my parents still dancing under the evening sky.

"Alright kids' time to come in," she yelled out of the kitchen window. "Don't forget we have some business to attend to."

She turned around then brought the teapot to the table. "Tea, Sarah."

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I held out my tea cup to discover she made blueberry tea. One of my favorites. As I inhaled the fragrance my parents finally came in through the back door along with Katie and Alan. I remember thinking it had to be really serious if they were involved.

“Sarah, we need to talk,” grandma said. “There is something about our families you need to know. We are different than most people.”

Everyone immediately sat down at the table. She continued to talk as if she had done this before. “All of us here in this room are witches or wizards, including you. Before you ask, let me explain. There is a very good reason why you didn’t know until now. There is a spell placed on all American witches and wizards, protecting our people here in the United States. The spell disables all magic abilities until the witch or wizard turns sixteen.”

“A few hundred years ago, Ronald Elwes saw a need to train young witches and wizards. His theory was. If you have magic abilities, then you should learn how to use them wisely. The first school opened in New Orleans. Because of the school’s success his wife, Elizabeth Elwes, started the girls’ school. I am the Dean of North Central Magic Academy for Girls. Your parents have applied for you in anticipation of you wanting to go. Because of your high grades, you also have a full scholarship.”

“Attending any of the schools is up to the student.” She pulled out a book from her purse. She pointed to the tree on it. “This tree is the school logo. The Tree of Life represents the earth and how our roots are all joined together. Your mother, Aunts Vickie, Connie, Mary and Katie have a shield necklace charm with the emblem on it. Every girl gets one in gold who graduates at the high school level. The college graduates receive a platinum one. Honor students are awarded with an additional pin. The boys get a keychain with their symbol on it. They also get a pin for graduating with honors. North Central is not the same kind of school that you’re used to. Ricky and Michael go to the Olympic Magic Academy for Boys in Washington State. Ricky will be graduating at the college level. Michael will be graduating the high school level and continuing at the academy

for college. Mary just graduated from North Central. She is starting the University of Nebraska at Lincoln this fall.”

“If you should decide to go, we will need to be discreet about the family link between us. The first day of class is September 2nd. There will be a bus to take you from Crescent, Iowa, to school the day before. The good news is, Jennifer has magic abilities and will be attending there, too. Again, the choice is up to you.”

Everyone in the room sat in silence waiting for my reaction. I thought this had to be a joke. Magic did not exist. I looked across the table at the king of the pranksters. I couldn’t tell if he smiled or tried to keep from laughing.

“Ha ha. Very funny. Nice one, guys,” I said cynically. “I get it, this is a joke. You can laugh all you want. I am still not going to fall for your silly prank.”

They all looked at me like they couldn’t believe what I said. Dad sat up in his chair. His expression became serious. “Princess, this is no joke. The book series you read about the schools in England aren’t that far off from the truth. There really is a magic world and you *really* are a witch.”

“Okay, well then prove it,” I challenged them.

Alan laughed at Dad. “See, Rick, I told you, you can’t put anything over her. You get to mow my lawn this weekend. Here, Sarah, I’ll show you.”

He pulled out a stick and pointed it at a spoon. “*RETRIEVE SPOON*,” he told it.

A soft golden ribbon from the wand wrapped around the spoon. It disappeared from across the table and popped in front of him. I picked up the spoon and looked at it. My reflection on the spoon wasn’t a trick.

Not a joke. I couldn’t argue with what I just saw. I sat shocked. In disbelief. I tried not to stutter. “So this means I’m a witch? A real spell-casting, broom-riding, cauldron-potion-brewing witch? No way!” I sat there quietly digesting all of this information. I couldn’t believe what I heard. That would explain a lot of things that happened around here.

“Yes, as your grandmother said, we are all witches or wizards, honey,” aunt Vickie answered. Complimenting her

perfectly styled, bright red hair her bright green eyes caught my attention. “But there have been some changes. We don’t ride brooms anymore. An agreement was made with the FAA to ban all broomstick flying all over the world. We use mirrors for travel now. That is how your brother is able to travel quickly between here and his school. Cauldrons are still around, but mainly used for potions in chemistry classes.”

“So, is it a high school or a college? Ricky is graduating college. Michael is in high school. How does that work?”

Alan sat up ready to take over the conversation. “It’s both. Let me explain how it works. I am the president of the American Magic School System. We start students at high school senior level. You can continue on to college. We do offer a Bachelor’s degree in varying fields. The Creole and Hudson schools offer Master’s degrees. High school students are required to stay on campus in the dorms. College level, it’s recommended, but not required. As she said, the choice is up to you. No student is forced to attend.”

Something still bothered me. I wondered if this is what made Jen so upset about this morning. “Gran, did you say Jen will be going to North Central? If I choose to go can we graduate together?” I asked excitedly.

“Yes, and more importantly, it means you can do magic,” she answered.

I forgot all about that. “Get out of here, I can do magic? Shut up!” The tension in the room eased a little bit. “How do I know if I can?”

“Why don’t find out right now? Just to be safe, I think a simple housekeeping spell could work. Jayne, has the yard been cleaned yet?” Grandma asked.

“No, it should be fine for her to clean it up. All of the mundane guests have left.”

I walked to the back door. I could see the left over party mess. My heart sank as I looked at the huge mess. “It will take hours to clean this up,” I complained.

Grandma chuckled at my whininess. “No worries. We are going to need a wand.”

Everyone in the room pulled out sticks similar to Alan's. Grandma handed me her wand to use. The small, sleek wooden stick fit in my hand comfortably. The ten inch long magic wand had a reddish tone to it. I noticed the name Virginia Eloise Donnelley McGill beautifully embossed on the wand in gold.

"Point it to your object and say a very simple spell, *clean*. Not only mean it, but say it with some force, otherwise just a few items will be affected," Grandma said.

"Clean, it's that easy?"

I pointed the wand at the mess of the back yard and said the spell "*CLEAN*," I commanded at the back yard. I closed one of my eyes, expecting the worst.

I sighed in relief that my spell didn't cause an explosion. I watched a small golden beam of light flow out of the wand just like Alan's. All of the wrappings, paper plates, and cups zoomed in to the trash can. The folding chairs placed themselves neatly together. The pristine tables stacked neatly one on top of another. I remember waiting for brooms and mops to start dancing around the back yard.

"Excellent. Now do it again, but this time put the wand down on the table. Point your right index finger at it and say *mise en place*. Again say it firmly. It means, everything in its place."

I did just what she asked me to do. Pointing my finger at the stacks of chairs and tables I commanded another spell. "*MISE-EN-PLACE*," I commanded. I felt weird talking to my hand. The same golden glow came from my finger. The shed door opened by itself. Then the stacks of tables and chairs floated their way into the shed. Gifts and shopping bags floated past me into my room. Within a few seconds all signs of a party vanished.

Everyone in the room looked stunned to see what I just did.

"What did I do something wrong?" I asked. By the looks on their faces I thought I just made the biggest mistake in magic history.

"No, no, not at all," Grandma said, smiling proudly at me. "Jayne, Rick, we have a natural golden witch in the family."

"What's that?"

Alan answered that one for me. He looked almost too excited to answer it. "There are six levels of witchcraft that we know of.

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The color of the beam from the wand and your hand indicates your level of magic. Most start at your age with a bronze beam. With practice, they get to a silver level before they finish their senior year. It usually takes hard work and practice to get to that level. A lot of students graduate magic school at a silver level progressing to golden. After that it is on to hand spells. The levels start over again with the hand spells. You have skipped straight ahead to what is called the natural golden level. I got to say it is remarkable for someone your age.”

Dad sat up to take over the conversation, as usual. “However, you will be issued your own wand and will be expected to use it during your training. As you know hand spells are possible. Each spell cast leaves a trace or trail. Hand spells are harder to trace than wand spells and are highly discouraged. In order to legally cast hand spells, a special license is needed. My job comes into this area. You know I work for the FBI. However, I am in a separate division dedicated to magic also known as the United States Department of Magic. We oversee all of the magical people and those who are new to the magic world, including those with no magic heritage. The law enforcement sector is known as the MFBI. It stands for the Magical Federal Bureau of Investigation. I am the Assistant Director of the MFBI. We are in charge of the issue and tracking of magic wands. We also work with crime involving magic. Please do not think of us as intrusive. The use of magic is of national safety. We need to know who has what powers. Owning a wand can be more dangerous than a gun in the wrong hands. That’s why we have issuance procedures and tracking procedures that we have. Having everyone registered helps us keep everyone protected. It’s like someone who owns a gun needs to have a permit. If you are found guilty of committing crimes using magic, your abilities can be suspended or permanently removed.

Just a few more things, princess. First, no matter what, you cannot tell anyone about this. It’s for the protection and safety of witches and non-magic people. We call them the mundane folks. Most of them don’t understand the gift we are given. There are still people in the world that are highly against witchcraft. Second, there are the people that would like you to solve all their

problems with the wave of a wand. Having magic abilities is a privilege and a big responsibility. The most important rule is never use magic to intentionally harm someone. Protecting yourself is one thing. However, the most important rule is to do no harm. I know this must be a shock for you to hear this. But your mother and I are confident you can handle this maturely. You have a big decision to make. We don't expect an answer right away. Take a couple of weeks. Keep in mind school starts in early September. We have all had a long night. It's time we wrapped this conversation up."

"We must be getting home now. We will see you at Thanksgiving." My aunt Vickie hugged me before they started to leave.

Mary came over to say goodbye to me. "Hey, don't worry about North Central. You are going to love it there. It's much smaller than public schools. You don't have to worry about walking to school in the snow. The food is pretty good there too. E-mail me and tell me how it goes. Oh," She began to whisper. "Let me know how that Michael thing goes."

"There is nothing to tell." I fought blushing, pretending to be mad at her for saying that.

After everyone left, I sat down on the couch to think about things. If I went to North Central, Jen and I could graduate together. I couldn't call her and talk to her about it. Dad wouldn't let me make any calls past eight P.M. This had to be the biggest decision of my life. I decided to be sensible about this. Dad did say he wanted me to think about it. I knew basing it on Jen going would not be a good idea. I decided to take my time. After all, I did have until September.

Today, my life got turned upside down. Nothing usually ever happens to me. My life has been dull and boring until today. I would have loved today to be a normal one. No such luck. A normal day? Not even close.