

ONE

Destiny is like a boulder. Bulky and hard to move. It's easier to leave it alone than to try to change it. But that never kept anyone from trying. Trust me: I'm a professional.

Reading people is a talent. I've always been a good observer, but as with any natural ability, if you want to be any good, you've got work at it. When I talk to people, I size them up. I listen to what they say and, more important, to what they don't. I notice what they wear, what brands they choose, how they style their hair. I watch their body language to see if it matches their words. The image they work so hard to show off tells me what they're trying to hide.

I make guesses and let them lead me. It's easier than it looks. Then again, most people aren't paying that much attention when someone tells them what they want to hear.

“What do you think, Skye — will it work out?” Sara leaned forward, ignoring the rest of what was going on in our school cafeteria. She chewed her lips. There were sticky pink clots of Sephora lip gloss on her teeth. Nerves. She was worried about what I would say. She’d have been better off worrying about why she wanted to stay with a guy who was a class-A jackass. However, she wasn’t paying me for love advice; she was paying for a psychic connection to the universe.

I shuffled the cards. They were worn and faded, more like fabric than paper. My official story was that my grandmother had passed down this deck of tarot cards to me on her deathbed because she believed I’d inherited her psychic ability. This was a complete lie. The only thing my grandma believed in was bourbon. However, no one trusts a psychic who works with brand-new cards. I ordered the deck from Amazon years ago. When it arrived, I soaked each card in a weak tea bath, then put them in the oven, set on low. It wasn’t exactly a Food Channel recipe, but it worked. I’d shuffled them over and over until the cards took on the look and feel of a deck that had been in the family for generations. I held the cards out to Sara.

“Cut these,” I said. “Make three piles and then stack them.” I pulled back as she reached for the deck, holding them just out of her reach. “It’s important that you focus on your question as you do this.” I fixed her with a stare as if this were a matter of life and death. Sara nodded solemnly. Her hands shook as she cut the deck and then passed it back to me. Part of my secret was making the other person touch the cards. It made them feel complicit in whatever happened next.

I dealt six of the cards into a Celtic Cross spread on the table between us. The cafeteria wasn't the ideal place for a reading. It was hard to feel a connection to something otherworldly when the smell of greasy industrial sloppy joes and overboiled canned corn hung like a cloud in the air. On the other hand, there was no way I was inviting people back home with me. I'd take the overcrowded café and people's judgment that I was a bit of a weirdo before letting my classmates see our salvaged-from-the-dumpster furniture. No thanks. I may be a fake psychic, but I've got *some* pride.

I tapped the table. "The first card represents you and your question. The one over it is what crosses you — got it?" I waited for her to nod and then lightly touched each of the others with the tip of my finger. "This is the basis of your question, the past, what hangs over you, and the final card is the future."

Sara took a deep breath. "Okay, my question is, what's going to happen with Darren and me?"

I flipped over the first card. The queen of cups. This was going to be easy. That is, if I believed in any of this, which I don't. What no one seemed to realize was I could read the tarot any way I wanted. There was no magic. What I had was my ability to memorize the meanings of the various cards, years of watching my mom, and an ability to spin a story. "This card represents you. This is associated with women who are creative and sensitive."

Sara's forehead wrinkled. "I'm not really creative. I mean, I want to be, but . . ."

"You're in the band," I pointed out.

Her shoulders slumped. “Only because my mom made me. She thinks it’ll look good on my college apps.”

“I suspect you have a creative side that you haven’t fully explored,” I offered. “Don’t think of it as just the arts. The queen represents creativity — someone who sees things in a new way.” Her friend Kesha, who was practically seated in her lap, nodded. Her elaborate African braids bounced up and down.

“You’re totally the most creative person in cheer,” Kesha said.

“The squad always does ask me to do the posters,” Sara admitted.

I fought the urge to sigh. Sara needed to broaden her horizons beyond being a good cheerleader. “There you go,” I said, tapping the rest of the deck with confidence on the scarred and chipped table. “Now, the card crossing you is the six of swords. That often means a journey or a separation.”

Her eyes grew wide. “Like a breakup?”

Only if you’re smart enough to dump his ass.

I shrugged. “Maybe, but it could also be a journey of the mind.”

Kesha’s forehead wrinkled up like one of those shar-pei dogs. “What does that mean?”

“It means that either Sara or Darren is at a stage where their life could go in a different direction. That they’re changing. Evolving.”

“What if he changes so much that he doesn’t want me anymore?” Sara’s voice came out tiny and small. Kesha reached over and squeezed her hand. Sara’s lip quivered. “He’s going downstate for college in the fall. He says we’ll date long distance,

but . . .” She was unable to put into words what she knew was coming.

I turned over another card. “This is the seven of cups. It means opportunities and possibilities.”

“Is that good?” Sara bit her lower lip.

“It’s always good to have options.” *Like choosing a guy who doesn’t sit with his Neanderthal friends and hold up a sheet of paper with a number rating girls as they walk by in the cafeteria.* “You have choices coming up. You could see who else is out there.” I saw her expression and switched my approach. She wasn’t interested in advice about who to date. “Or another option is figuring out what changes you could make to your relationship with Darren.”

“How can I do that?”

I turned another card. Death. The skeleton held his scythe at the ready. Kesha gasped. “That looks really bad,” she said.

They’re playing cards, I wanted to say, but I stuffed down the urge to ask if she was afraid of Monopoly or Chutes and Ladders. “The death card isn’t bad —”

“Death card?!” Sara’s voice cracked.

The effort to keep from rolling my eyes was giving me a headache. “It doesn’t mean *death*, not like physical death. It means that there’s a change coming. Something moving from one state to another. It can be a really good thing.” I flipped the next card. “Ah,” I said, and nodded knowingly.

Sara looked down and then back at me. “What does *that* mean?”

"It's called the hanging man."

"Oh Jesus." Kesha's hands twisted in her lap.

"See how he's suspended by his feet?" I pointed to the illustration. "His card represents seeing the world from a different perspective. It's not a bad card."

"I don't get it, Skye. What does that have to do with Darren and me?" Sara was leaning so far forward, her nose was practically on the table.

I smiled and spread my arms. "Don't you see? That card gives you the possible solution."

Sara exchanged glances with Kesha to see if it made more sense to her. Based on Kesha's expression, it didn't.

I sighed. "Tarot isn't about any one card. It's about how they work together. Look at what you have here, what cards *you* drew." It never hurt to remind the person that if they didn't like the outcome, they were partly to blame. "We started with you as a creative person. Then what's opposing you at this point is that Darren is undergoing a journey. That makes sense if he's going away in the fall. Then there are two forces — this card meaning change is coming. That tells me this can't be avoided."

Sara nodded. "I feel like I'm already losing him, and he hasn't even graduated yet."

"I understand," I said. "But how the situation turns out will depend on your ability to make him see you in a fresh way. Maybe change your look, or do something out of character that makes him rethink your role in his life."

"He always wants me to go camping," she mumbled. "It's usually not my kinda thing."

“There you go,” I said, pointing at her chest as if she’d just solved a really tricky problem. “Doing stuff outside your comfort zone is *exactly* the kind of thing you should be doing if you want to keep him.”

Someone a few aisles over tripped and dropped a tray with a loud crash and the shatter of exploding dishes. A cheer went up from the crowd in the cafeteria. Pain and humiliation is always amusing when it happens to someone else. Other psychics never had to work with these distractions.

“So, if I reinvent myself, then Darren and I will stay together?”

I shrugged. “That’s what the cards imply. Not that he needs someone different — just that he needs to *see* you differently.” At least I was giving her good advice, regardless of Darren. Everyone benefits from shaking up their routine once in a while.

The corners of Sara’s mouth started to turn up. “You know what this means . . .”

Kesha let out a squeal. “Makeover!” The two of them hugged. “We’ll go to the mall after school. When he sees you he’ll already be planning his first visit home before he even leaves.” Kesha’s face was determined. The woman was on a retail quest to help her bestie.

“There’s another way you could read the cards,” I said, kicking myself for not just leaving it alone. “Your card is creativity and strength. You could also see this situation as change is inevitable, but you’ll be fine no matter what Darren does. That you have the inner strength to move forward in a new direction on your own.”

Her mouth pinched. “But there’s still a chance for me to work things out with him, right?”

I gave up. If she wanted to waste all that energy on a boy, it wasn’t my problem. None of their problems were mine. I had plenty of my own. “Sure.”

Sara leaned back in her chair as if all of her energy had rushed out like air from a balloon. Now that she had a plan, she was exhausted.

I shuffled the cards back into a tidy stack. I took my time. Sometimes people decided once the cards were out that they might as well ask a few more questions. Fine with me. I charge for each deal, but after a beat I could tell Sara wasn’t going to ask anything else. Now that the great Darren mystery had been put to bed, she wasn’t interested. She was too busy plotting how to remake herself into Darren’s ideal. She could do better, but that wasn’t the question she’d asked.

That was always the awkward moment — when it came time for them to pay. I hated asking for the cash. It felt slimy, but not so distasteful that I was willing to do it for free. My mom made it easy with a sign by our door noting that she accepted both cash and PayPal. I cleared my throat and turned my hand palm up.

“Oh, sorry.” Sara pulled a ten out of her wallet and slid it over as if she didn’t want to touch me. “Thanks, Skye. That was awesome.” I shoved the bill into my pocket. She watched me tuck the deck of cards into the small paisley fabric bag I kept them in. “That was pretty cool.”

“The gift chose me,” I said with a shrug. I didn’t point out that the reason she thought I was amazing was because I told

her exactly what she wanted to hear. I knew Darren well enough to know he followed his dick around like a dog on a leash. Sara wasn't done crying over him. I'd have bet money on it. No psychic ability required for that prediction.

Sara wasn't some cheerleader cliché. She was on squad, but she was also an honor student. I'd heard she was in AP chemistry and calculus, and she was only a junior. You would think someone that smart wouldn't be so stupid. But they were all like that.

She waved to me over her shoulder as she scurried across to her friends, and I smiled back. Another happy customer. With any luck, a few of those friends would decide they wanted their own readings. They tended to come in clusters.

My stomach rumbled. Even with the ten bucks, I shouldn't make a Subway run. I was still way short of my goal. I should have saved the money, but it wasn't like ten bucks was going to make a huge difference. Screw it. I could already smell that fresh-baked bread.

TWO

The bright spring sun blinded me, and I had to use my hand to shade my face as I searched the parking lot of the school. My best friend, Drew, honked the horn of her polished silver VW convertible Bug as soon as she saw me. I bolted down the front stairs and into the street.

I held up the ten-dollar bill as if it were a golden ticket. “I’ve got a hankering for processed cheese that only Subway can satisfy.” I smiled as I squeezed into the front seat and pointed to her cheek where a tiny smear of blue pastel from art class could just be seen on her dark skin. Drew glanced in the mirror, licked a finger to wipe it off, and then hit the gas.

“Hi-yo, Silver — AWAY,” we yelled at the same time. It was a lame joke, but we’d made it ever since Drew got the car as a

sixteenth birthday present. We had a million inside jokes dating back to when we first met in third grade.

I didn't have any siblings, but Drew felt like my sister. I liked how she smelled like oil paints and how she left smudges on everything from the charcoal pencils she used. She was irrationally scared of hamsters, but totally fearless when it came to doing a backflip. She actually enjoyed all the old books they made us read in English class, and swore like a sailor when there weren't any adults around. I knew her better than any person on the planet, and she knew me too.

Well, she knew most things.

When the Subway was just barely in sight at the far end of the street, Drew put on her signal and started to slow down. She was a driver's ed instructor's wet dream. She pulled carefully into the lot and parked near the back.

"Did you look through that stuff I sent you on apartment brokers?" Drew asked.

I made a noncommittal noise as I pretended to fish for something in my bag, hoping she'd drop the subject.

She pulled open the door to the restaurant, and the steamy smell of lunch meat wrapped itself around us. "Look, I know you were set on Brooklyn, but everything I've seen makes me certain it will be easier to find someplace reasonable in another part of town."

Drew and I had been planning to move to New York for years. We talked about how we'd weave through the crowds of tourists in Times Square, past the half-price theater ticket booth and the chain restaurants with their neon signs. We'd know

which subway lines to take without having to check the map, and there'd be a guy at the corner deli who would save us a copy of the paper on Sunday mornings when we slept in. She'd be in school, and I'd get some kind of cool job — like working at an art gallery or for a fashion magazine. We knew what it would be like to live there, even though neither of us had ever set eyes on New York except for in movies and TV shows.

It had seemed like a harmless dream. Like picking prom dresses out of a magazine when you weren't even dating anyone. Now it was getting real, and that realization made my anxiety ratchet up several notches.

"Queens is an option," Drew added. She started listing the pros and cons of different areas of the city as we waited in line. She didn't need to worry about where she would be living. She'd been accepted to the School of Visual Arts, and her parents had put down a deposit on one of the dorms. I was the one with nowhere to go.

I stared up at the menu board, considering my sandwich options even though I always got the exact same thing. The clerk shoved the various vegetables I pointed at into my roll as I pushed my plastic tray down the line. "I'm sure I'll figure something out." I passed over my hard-earned ten to the cashier. Now I didn't have the money, but I did have a fresh pile of guilt. And one veggie sandwich.

Drew grabbed her sub and, after a pause, a bag of chips. She looked great, but she worried about her weight. "Yeah. But you don't want to wait too long. Finding the right place is going to take some time."

There was no right place. At least not for me. Her family had plenty of money for her to go. I didn't even have enough to cover first month's rent for an apartment. Not even a tiny studio. Hell, not enough for a *shared* tiny studio. I was going to have to tell Drew the truth soon; there was no way I could move with her. At least not this summer. I kept putting off breaking the news, and the longer I did it, the harder it became to tell her.

"Isn't that a great idea?" Drew said. I nodded, even though I hadn't been paying attention. She would keep brainstorming plans to make the move easier, but it wasn't going to happen.

Well, it would happen for Drew. She'd go to New York. I hated the tiny part of myself that resented her for that fact. It wasn't her fault she was who she was, or that our lives had been on different trajectories since we met, but I'd been able to ignore it until now. Now the division was speeding toward us like an out-of-control truck. The truth was graduation was coming, and I'd be the one still living in a small Michigan town trapped between the touristy towns like Traverse and the less desirable cities in the south. The boring middle. A town that could be exchanged for any other small town, with places like the Kwik Klip Hair Salon, where the K was a pair of scissors on the sign, and where the bowling alley still did big business on a Saturday night, and the most exotic restaurant in town was the run-down Chinese place. She'd do all the things we talked about, but I wouldn't. I'd be stuck working at the Burger Barn, or at the grocery store, dreaming about a life I'd never have. My stomach was as tight as a drum. I didn't even want my sandwich anymore.

Subway was packed. We grabbed the last empty table next to a group of the people from our school. I hoped their loud discussion of where to eat on prom night, which they were debating as if it were as important as nuclear disarmament, would take Drew's mind off moving.

"I'm still not sure about bringing my car," Drew said. "My dad thinks it's a waste, but then we'd have it if we ever wanted it. What do you think?"

I took a sip of my Diet Coke, letting the carbonation burn through the lies building up in my mouth. "I bet parking in New York is expensive. It may not be worth it to drive."

Lucy Lam turned around. "You can't drive in New York. It's, like, impossible." She tossed her hair over a shoulder. One long dark hair drifted down onto the table, landing on her salad. I considered telling her and then thought, *Screw it*. She'd moved to our school a year ago. Tragically for her, the role of school bitch had already been filled, but she was doing her best to be a skilled understudy for the part.

Drew arched an eyebrow. "So you're a New York traffic expert?"

"I've been there, like, a million times — my aunt lives there, so basically, yeah," Lucy said.

"I thought your aunt lived in Jersey," Paige Bonnet countered from the far end of the table where she sat as the official queen of the popular people. She smirked at Lucy, and the other people at the table exchanged awkward glances. Looked like there was a battle brewing in Popularlandia. I didn't even bother to try and keep up with the politics of who liked whom and who was

on the outs anymore. Allegiances in that group changed more often than I changed my socks.

Lucy's nostrils flared. "Yes, she *lives* in New Jersey, but we go into the city all the time."

"You guys are moving to New York, right? In the city, not the 'burbs." Paige looked at Lucy.

Drew nodded. She was beaming as if thrilled that Paige knew about our postgraduation plans. "We're still trying to find an apartment," she explained.

Lucy snorted. "You're *both* moving to New York?"

I swallowed the lump of bread that had expanded in my throat, cutting off oxygen. I should have eaten in the cafeteria.

"Yeah, Skye's going too," Drew said. She sat ramrod straight, as if daring Lucy to push it.

"You planning to go to Columbia?" Lucy asked, the corners of her mouth curling up.

I shook my head. I wasn't university bound, not even community college. I hadn't applied anywhere. It wasn't that I was stupid, and my grades were decent enough, but I didn't have the money to go, and it seemed pointless to take out a loan when I didn't even know what I wanted to do with my life. I had vague ideas about photography or maybe something in social work, but as soon as I tried to picture myself in the future, the image got blurry and faded away. Drew had always known what she wanted. She'd been drawing since we were kids. "I don't have any firm plans right now," I mumbled.

Lucy drew back as if shocked. "What, here I thought you'd tell us you had a full-ride offer from all the Ivy Leagues and an

apartment on Fifth Avenue.” She smirked. “I know how you love to tell a good story.”

Blood rushed to my face. I wanted to drop under the table and disappear. Just when I thought that people had forgotten the past, someone dug it back up. The joys of living in a small town. The bodies of your mistakes rarely stayed buried. They had a tendency to pop up when you least expected them.

“Hey, take it easy. That’s not cool,” Brandon said, nudging Lucy with his elbow. He smiled at me. His big sister had some kind of special needs, so he was, possibly, the nicest person in our entire school, but having him stick up for me made me want to puke my vegetarian sandwich onto the table.

Lucy tossed her hair again. “I’m *joking*,” she said to the group. Ah, the joking defense. The tried-and-true excuse for bullies everywhere. “I just didn’t think she’d have the money for someplace like that. You know the city’s really expensive, right?”

“Of course she knows,” Paige said. “Skye’s not an idiot. She’s not going to plan to move to New York without knowing what she’s getting into.”

Lucy’s mouth formed a tight line. “It’s no big deal to me. I’d just heard that in the past Skye’s confused what she *wants* to be true with what *is* true.” She turned to Drew. “All I’m saying is you might not have to worry about getting a moving van that fits both of your stuff.”

“I’m not worried,” Drew said. “I *know* she’s coming with me.”

“Uh,” I said.

Drew whipped out her phone. “I’d trust Skye with my life.”

Her fingers flew over the screen and then she slapped it down on the table. "There. I just cancelled my dorm reservation. Now Skye and I will get a place together. Maybe, if your aunt ever lets you stay in the big city, you can come visit. That is unless you need to get back to bridge-and-tunnel Jersey."

Paige laughed, and Brandon high-fived Drew. He turned his raised palm to me, but my hands lay in my lap like dead fish.

My breath came fast and shallow. *Drew hadn't really sent that email, had she?* Maybe she just wanted to make a point. There was a huge waitlist for residence space. If she'd given hers up, she wouldn't have anywhere to live. Her parents were going to kill her. Or me.

"Whatever." Lucy grabbed her giant leather Coach tote from under the table. "We should get going, or we're going to be late." They gathered their stuff and shuffled back to the parking lot. Paige looked over her shoulder at us and waved as she walked away.

Drew was flushed, and her eyes sparkled. She looked almost high. She'd always had a crush on Paige. She'd never pursued her, or any of her other crushes, but she held her out as that unobtainable beautiful thing. Deep down, I was certain Drew knew Paige wasn't worth her time, but it didn't stop how she felt. She noticed how I was breathing. Her face instantly turned serious. "Hey, take it easy. Are you okay?"

I tried to say something, but my heart was galloping full speed and I couldn't get enough air into my lungs.

"Close your eyes," Drew said, her voice was calm and firm. "You got this. Breathe in through your nose."

As she counted to three, I forced myself to follow her directions, blowing it out a few beats later. She breathed with me, counting softly several more times until I was breathing normally again.

“Better?” Drew patted me on the back.

I nodded. I wasn’t even remotely fine, but I had managed to avoid spiraling into a full panic attack, so that was a positive.

“Don’t let Lucy get to you. It was bitchy to bring that up.” Drew wadded up the sub wrapper into a tight ball. “She didn’t even live here when it happened, and she’s got no business acting like she’s somehow in the know.”

I nodded. I didn’t care about that at the moment. “You didn’t really just send an email to give up your space, did you?”

“No,” Drew said.

My lungs filled fully, relief streaming like cool water through every nerve.

She bounced in her hard plastic seat. “I sent my cancellation email last night! That’s what I was going to tell you. I told you I had a plan that you would flip over.”

Air stuttered in my chest. “Why?” My voice cracked.

Her face grew serious. “Lately you’ve been weird whenever we talk about New York, and I know why.” She patted my arm. “Money’s tight. Even with the cushion you’ve saved, and even if you get a job right away, you’ll have a hard time on your own, and I know you hate the idea of living with a stranger. I know I would. What kind of friend would it make me if I left you to handle this solo? This way we can pool our money and afford a

better place. With what you've got saved and the money I'll get from my parents, we'll be all set."

She had no idea. How was I going to tell her that I didn't have any cash to pool anything? It wasn't that I hadn't tried to save, but every time I did, something came up. Stuff like late electric bills and a need for shoes that didn't have a hole.

"What are your parents going to say?" I squeezed out.

Drew stood and dumped the trash on her tray into the garbage. "They're going to be pissed, but there isn't a thing they'll be able to do about it now. I don't want to live in a dorm if I can live with you."

Shit. I had to tell her. "Listen, Drew, you can't do this."

"Too late. It's already done." She laughed and tucked her curly hair behind her ears. "The school sent me an email this morning letting me know my spot has been filled. They also sent me a list of possible apartment brokers." She hauled me up from the seat. "We're going to be New Yorkers together!"

THREE

After school I told Drew I had stuff to do and headed to our town library. It was my favorite place on the planet. Built over a hundred years ago, with its granite blocks, scratched wooden floors, and deep-set windows, the library felt solid and permanent. It had a sense of peace, like a church without the religion.

My chosen spot was the reference room in the very back of the second floor. It was poorly lit and dusty, but it was almost always empty, and there was a cracked dark green leather bench on the back wall, perfect for curling up. I would lie there for hours reading, pretending it was my living room, until the librarian announced they were closing for the night by flashing the lights on and off.

My hand ran over the shelf, stopping at the spine of one of the outdated World Books. The letter *L*. I paused and then instead I pulled the giant maroon map book from the shelf below onto the worn table and flipped to the map of Manhattan. I'd looked at it so often I could have drawn a copy with my eyes closed. My fingers traced the roads, up Sixth Avenue to Rockefeller Plaza and Radio City Music Hall, then across to Fifth Avenue, skirting along Central Park and into Harlem, then across the East River and into Queens.

The sound of my finger whispering across the page relaxed me. I closed my eyes and imagined myself there. Our dream apartment would have an exposed brick wall, and we'd know that you couldn't have the light on in the living room and run the blender at the same time or you'd blow a circuit. Our neighbors would speak Cantonese, Spanish, Russian, and some language we couldn't place, but we'd play a made-up drinking game where we had to guess the subject of their conversations.

My hand shook. There was no way I could afford to go to New York. It wasn't just coming up with the monthly rent. I'd need a security deposit, plus utilities, cable, food, and everything else required to survive. A minimum-wage waitressing job wasn't going to cut it, and I wasn't qualified to do anything else, no matter how many fancy gallery jobs I dreamed up. I couldn't ask Drew to float me.

I should have told her months ago that it wasn't going to work, but I hadn't wanted to let her down. It was easier to pretend graduation was never going to arrive. When Drew asked,

I'd made up a number for my savings account. I liked that she felt proud of me for saving all that money. I wanted to be the kind of person who had that kind of discipline. There were a lot of times I could almost forget it was a total lie, until my bank statement would come in the mail.

Making big plans almost always turned out badly for me. My destiny was set before I was born. My mom was fifteen when she got pregnant and dropped out of school to have me. Then perhaps to punish me for ruining her life, she named me Candi. With an *i*, no less. You know what you never hear? "Let me introduce you to my neurosurgeon, Dr. Candi Thorn." Or, "All rise for the Honorable Judge Candi Thorn." A parent who names you Candi is setting you up to be a stripper, or a Walmart greeter complete with a wrinkled blue uniform vest festooned with various smiley-face buttons and flag pins. Or a lifer waitress at the Burger Barn. I had to go by my middle name, which was still pretty hippie dippy, but Skye is light years better than Candi.

When Drew and I became friends, I realized that there was this completely different world possible. At her house there were matching dishes, and their glasses weren't collectibles from some gas station promotion. The heat was never off because the bill hadn't been paid, and their fridge wasn't full of ketchup packages stolen from McDonald's. It wasn't that I didn't know people lived like Drew, but I'd never seen it up close. I knew that was what I wanted. I would become the kind of person who traveled, who went to art galleries and knew people who talked about real things like politics and books.

I wanted to be the kind of person who moved to New York.

But as much as I wanted life to be a certain way, wishing doesn't make things happen. For years I tried wishing my mom into a better job. Or there was the disaster of when I tried to fix her up with my fourth grade gym teacher so they could get married. That ended with the whole school witnessing my mom screaming at him in the parking lot.

Then there was the lie about my dad . . .

I sat in the corner of the bench and pulled my legs up. One reason for wanting to move to New York was to be in a city where every single person I came across hadn't been a part of the most humiliating experience of my life. I don't remember when I started lying about my dad. Early. First or second grade. And I didn't set out to lie as much as I wished the truth — that my dad was a car mechanic who dumped my mom as soon as he found out she was pregnant with me — weren't real.

My mom had always been honest: *I picked a real loser when I picked your father.* I used to wish that she'd told me he was dead instead of AWOL. It seemed better to have a dead dad than one who was very much alive and working at a garage three towns over but had no interest in my life.

So I made up a dad. He was in the military. That explained his long absence from home and why he and my mom divorced. She couldn't bear him being in harm's way. Deployment is so hard on those left behind. His job made me a bit more noble too, gave me a whiff of respectability that my mom's job at the grocery store didn't convey. I was the daughter of a real live American

hero. The kind of guy other people thanked for their service. And I might have gotten away with that lie. A distant dad, gone from my life not because he couldn't be bothered, but because he was called to a higher purpose — protecting America.

Then in eighth grade I pushed my luck. I told people my dad had been injured. I can't remember what made me add to the lie. To embroider the story with a roadside bomb, VA hospitals, and countless surgeries. Maybe the original story had become dull. Or people wondered why he never seemed to get leave to visit and I thought I needed to create a reason. But my lie went a step too far. Instead of merely keeping people from asking too many questions, it made people feel bad for me. To want to *do* something.

Without telling me, Drew got the ball rolling when she asked her parents if they would let her take money out of her savings account so I could fly to the veterans hospital in Washington, DC, to visit my dad. Her parents told people at their church, and suddenly the thing spiraled out of control. Weeks later there was an all-school assembly with my mom invited for a big surprise. The mayor of our town was there. A representative from the Rotary Club presented me with a check in front of everyone. Enough cash so I could travel to Washington with my mom. There was talk of the excess money going toward an accessible home for my poor amputated-legs dad. It was a great example of a town pulling together. A bunch of people were crying and waving these tiny American flags the local Walmart had donated for the event. It would have been amazing — made for TV — except for the part where I'd made him up. I'd just stood

on the stage and wished for a meteor to strike me dead while my mom looked around confused, trying to figure out what the hell everyone was talking about.

I still remember Drew's face when she realized I'd lied. She was with her parents, all dressed up for the occasion, and her face collapsed. Her response hurt almost as bad as the pitying looks from everyone else and the hushed snickers. The money had to be returned. No more big giant cardboard checks for me. I had to stand there next to my mom as she explained the truth. I knew, even at thirteen, that no one was ever going to let me forget this.

I did get a few things out of the situation, even if there was no dad or trip to our nation's capital. I got a standing appointment with a counselor to get at the root of my "issues," and the development of a full-blown anxiety disorder complete with panic attacks.

Drew forgave me. I felt bad that she'd tried to do this amazing thing for me and I'd ruined it. She felt bad that her plan had blown up so publicly in my face. Or maybe she felt bad because my life was so messed up that I had to make up an entire parent. Either way, we never talked about it much after that. We moved on. But I knew she never forgot.

I wasn't sure we'd move on from this. If Drew discovered I'd lied again, she wouldn't forgive quite so easily. She might finally decide she'd had enough.

Or maybe I'd had enough. Maybe the only way to make the life I'd been wishing for a reality was to do something big. If destiny was going to try and keep me here, I was going to have to do something bold to change it.

I jumped up and crossed the room with jerky steps to the set of World Book Encyclopedias, pulling out the *L* volume with a shaking hand. I flipped through, and the typed note was tucked in between the pages describing the Lindbergh kidnapping.

ARE YOU IN? Y or N?

My pen hovered above the page for just a split second and then I circled Y. I slammed the book's cover shut and put it back on the shelf. One step closer to my new life.

FOUR

Regret, unlike satisfaction, isn't hard to get. And by the time I got out of bed the next morning, I knew that I'd made a huge mistake. I'd tossed and turned all night, the sheets twisting tightly around me. There was no way I could go through with this. The fact of what I'd done filled my guts with wet, heavy cement. I wasn't the kind of person who would do anything to get what I wanted. Or at the very least, I didn't want to be the kind of person who would sink this low.

As soon as I was out of the apartment, I looked over my shoulder to make sure no one was around the bus stop and then whispered into the phone when he picked up. "I've been thinking. I'm not sure I want to be mixed up with this. I can't do it." I held my breath, waiting for the reaction.

He was silent for a beat. "Are you kidding me?"

"You don't need to worry. I won't tell anyone. You do whatever you need to, but I don't want to be involved." My tight chest loosened.

He barked out a laugh, shattering my fragile sense of relief. "That's a shame, because you're already involved. It's too late to back out. Things are already in motion. If I were you, I'd make sure I had an alibi for tonight."

I stared down at the phone. He'd already clicked off. I was screwed.