

LAUREN MORRILL

Better
Than the
Best Plan



FARRAR STRAUS GIROUX · NEW YORK

Farrar Straus Giroux Books for Young Readers
An imprint of Macmillan Publishing Group, LLC
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010

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Printed in the United States of America
Designed by Aimee Fleck

First edition, 2019

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

www.fiercereads.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Morrill, Lauren, author.

Title: Better than the best plan / Lauren Morrill.

Description: First edition. | New York : Farrar Straus Giroux, 2019. |

Summary: Seventeen-year-old Ritzy's carefully made summer plans are ruined when she is sent to a foster home with a cute boy next door, but when her old life catches up with her, plans and hopes collide.

Identifiers: LCCN 2018035462 | ISBN 9780374306199 (hardcover)

Subjects: | CYAC: Foster children—Fiction. | Mothers and daughters—Fiction. |

Family life—Florida—Fiction. | Dating (Social customs)—Fiction. |
Florida—Fiction.

Classification: LCC PZ7.M82718 Bet 2019 | DDC [Fic]—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2018035462>

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For Adam, who never stopped believing in me



PROLOGUE



THE DAY MY MOTHER LEFT, I WAS MOSTLY thinking about a chemistry test. Mr. Hearn's most fearsome exam wasn't his final, but the exercise in torture he inflicted on us two weeks before. Armed with nothing but a pencil, a ruler, and a blank legal-sized piece of white paper, we were supposed to draw the periodic table from memory. Elements, atomic weights, and all.

So when I woke up that morning and stumbled into the kitchen of our tiny apartment, I barely paid any attention to the note scrawled on a personalized notepad from a bank my mom must have wandered into once. I was too busy trying to burn the various metals and nonmetals into my brain. I blame that stupid test for my not reading that note and not realizing for nearly a day that it said my mom had gone to Mexico. It didn't say when she'd return, or *if* she'd return.

I bombed that test, by the way. It's like my brain rejected the information, because who is ever going to use that

knowledge? Even chemists have big posters of the periodic table on the walls of their labs, and you know, iPhones. And since I had no interest in being a chemist, it felt doubly ridiculous.

When I did finally read that note, sitting alone at the wobbly wooden table shoved next to the stove, eating ice cream to soothe the sting of my shellacking in chemistry, I wasn't even sure I believed it.

My mom has always marched to the beat of her own drummer, and that drummer is a white guy with dreads playing bongos in a public park. For my whole life, or as long as I've had memories of my life, my mom has been searching for her place. She's limited her search mostly to a specific corner of the world, the corner populated by handicrafts and people who earnestly discuss karma. She's never afraid to try on a new kind of enlightenment, even if that enlightenment lives on a commune in Oregon or at a yoga center in Arizona or requires her to eliminate gluten and sugar and happiness. And she's never had a problem shaking that enlightenment right off when it starts to feel like a wool sweater shrunk in the wash.

Because of this, she's never been the kind of mom who will proofread your papers or make dinner and ask you about your day. But it's never bothered me much. My mother's free spirit means plenty of freedom for me, too. *Curfew* is a word that's never been in my vocabulary, and I've never had to answer for any failing test grades (of which there have only been two) or

questionable boyfriends (of which there have been zero). She's one of those moms who I'm always surprised doesn't insist I call her by her first name, because "Mom" always feels like a dress that doesn't fit her quite right.

Which is why when she first told me about the Bodhi Foundation, it wasn't a shock. It was early May, the cool spring just starting to turn warm. It was my favorite time of year in Florida, when it was warm enough to be outside without sweating to death, and we had the doors to the deck open to let in the cool night air and the sound of traffic from the interstate. I was at the stove making a pot of store-brand macaroni and cheese while Mom paged through a yoga magazine she found in the recycling bin, dog-eared an article about newer, better sun salutations.

"I've been thinking it's time for me to set some intentions," she said, and my stomach flipped. *Here we go*, I thought. We'd been living in Jacksonville since just before the start of my freshman year. We'd come so Mom could apprentice with a friend who did massage therapy, but nearly three years later, she'd yet to enroll in any kind of certification program. Instead, she'd been working with her friend Rose, otherwise known as Rose Renee, roadside psychic and purveyor of the finest goods to help predict your future (activate eye-roll sequence *now*). We usually would have moved on by this point, but after I started high school, I begged her to let me stay put for a while. I'd jumped schools every six months to a year for most of my entire life, doing brief chunks of "unschooling,"

which is what my mother called her brand of homeschooling when her newest vision quest didn't leave room for a formal education for me. But to my surprise, she'd managed to keep her restlessness at bay these last three years, letting me make my way through Southwest High, build up a pretty good transcript, and actually have a shot at getting into college. She'd bopped around in a few different jobs (receptionist at a yoga studio, cashier at a craft store, and a brief stint selling mead at a Renaissance Faire), but hadn't said anything about leaving the city.

I should have known it was too good to be true.

"I've been turned on to this new program through an organization called the Bodhi Foundation," she said, as if I hadn't heard some version of this monologue a thousand times before. Somehow, she managed to be giddy and full of excitement each and every time. Her belief that *this* might finally be the *thing* never ceased to amaze me. "It's all about working toward your own personal level of enlightenment and not conforming to anyone else's standards. It's about knowing *yourself*. The program itself is a path, and each level of the path is a stone. So at the retreat center, I'll study and devote myself to working through each stone."

"This sounds like Scientology," I replied, stirring the neon-orange powder into my pasta.

She scoffed. "No! This is nothing like that. Once I've reached the tenth stone, I can go and run Bodhi workshops anywhere in the world, teaching new followers the method so

they can go teach the method, and onward it ripples like a pebble in a pond.”

And apparently, she’s swallowed the brochure.

“So it’s a pyramid scheme. It’s basically spiritual Tupperware.”

Mom sighed, then crossed the kitchen in this very deliberate way, like she was walking on water. She had this calmness to her that was unnerving. She took my chin gently in her hand.

“Oh, Maritza, I’ve tried so hard to raise you to be a person with an open mind and an open heart.”

Now it’s my turn to sigh, because what she’d really done was raise me to be a person skeptical of the open mind and open heart, because it was usually followed by a request for an open wallet.

“Where did you hear about this place?” I asked instead.

She dropped my chin and returned to the table, where she continued flipping through her magazine as if it were an act of meditation.

“I attended an info session,” she replied.

“Where?”

“The Hilton by the airport.”

I had to stop myself from snorting. Of course.

“The workshops are at the Bodhi Foundation’s retreat center in Mexico. It’s a lovely place, truly, right on the water,” she said. “The program begins in June, though they like you to arrive early to really *connect* with your surroundings, and the

program can take anywhere from four months to a year, depending on your dedication to the path.”

It took me just a moment to calculate that math. “Mom, we can’t go to this Bodhi place for four months!” I said. “I have senior year, and you promised we would stay here long enough for me to graduate!”

“And you will, Ritzy,” she said, but then she was noticeably silent. I felt that little itch in the back of my brain, something telling me that there was more.

“So you’re starting next summer?” I asked, even though I think I already knew the answer.

Once again, she was out of her chair, crossing the floor in a deliberate choreography. This time, she came and gripped my shoulders like she was trying to prove the connection between us.

“You’re on your own path, Ritzy,” she said, her voice low and breathy. “And I honor that.”

I wrinkled my nose. “What does that mean?”

“It means you can stay here for your senior year if you want, and then when you graduate, if you’d like to join me on my path, the Bodhi Foundation will be there for you, too. By then I’ll be qualified to be your sponsor!”

I shook her hands from my shoulders. “Gross, Mom. Don’t try to recruit me to your multilevel marketing scheme masking itself as religion.”

That was exactly the wrong thing to say. She shook her head, clearly disappointed in my lack of vision. I was losing

her. “I wish you’d join me now,” she said. “I’ve always felt it was important to reject the traditional schooling model in favor of a more self-directed brand of education.”

Only my mother would encourage me to drop out of school the summer before my senior year and ascribe it to virtue.

“Okay, well, we both know that’s not going to happen, so what then?” I asked. “Are you saying I’m going to stay here . . . by myself?”

“Why not?” she said. “I’ve been on my own since I was seventeen . . .”

“Oh, so I’m supposed to go bang a tambourine at an airport, that’s what you’re saying?” I asked, referring to Mom’s favorite story about her first foray into spirituality as a teenager. I was going for a joke, but it seemed to miss the mark, because she looked wounded. Again, I redirected. “How am I supposed to pay for stuff?”

“The universe provides, Ritzy,” she said. “So does your job.”

I knew the fact that I handled all the bills was going to come back to bite me eventually. She had absolutely no idea how our finances work if she thought twenty hours a week making tuna melts at Roasted is going to come close to covering the rent. This whole thing was sounding more nuts by the second.

When she got like this, with one of her new schemes gripped tightly in her psyche, there was no talking her out of

it. Not right away, anyway. Sometimes I could wait her out and hope she came to her senses before she dove in. It worked when she decided we were going to go live in a “silent community” for six months. I knew my mother wouldn’t last six minutes in a place like that. Talking is definitely her favorite pastime, after searching for higher power. I’d simply said, “Let’s talk about this tomorrow” for several days until she let the idea go completely.

“Can we talk about this more tomorrow?” I said. “I really need to study for my chemistry exam.”

The smile on her face told me I’d made the right move. “Ritzy, you know I love you, even when I don’t understand you.”

“Ditto, Mom.”

She leaned in and touched her forehead to mine, reaching her hand behind my neck to hold me close. It was a gesture she’d picked up at some Zen retreat somewhere, and even though she ditched *that* particular path a long time ago, I’m glad she hung on to this. It made me forget, for a moment, that my mom was a hippie flake who was proposing abandonment. It was a gesture that felt full of love and connection and protection, which was ironic, truly.

“I trust you and I believe in you,” she said finally.

She smiled and kissed me on the forehead. A bowl of macaroni and cheese in my hand, I shuffled out of the kitchen and back to my room, where I spent the next several hours flipping flashcards and trying to make my brain hold on to

the atomic weight for antimony. The next day I went to school, where I flailed my way through my exam, and when I got home, she was just gone. She'd left a note, a brochure on the Bodhi Foundation, and her house key. When I checked her room, I found her suitcase gone, along with a good portion of her wardrobe and toiletries.

Ritzy,

*I've gone to journey down my path.
I wish you well on yours, and will see
you soon. I love you. Stay true.*

*Love,
Mom*

There was four hundred dollars cash in tens and twenties in an envelope, which would *almost* cover a month of rent. Did that mean she'd be back by then? I reread the note several times a day for the next several days, looking for clues, still not quite believing she'd actually gone to Mexico. Sure, the Bodhi Foundation sounded exactly like the kind of nonsense my mother would be into. But she'd never undertaken a path or a vision quest or any other quirky scheme without bringing me along. Even though I had no interest in organic farming or sheep shearing or goat yoga or freecycling, I'd still been happy to be included. Our *Odd Couple* dynamic had been honed through

each of her wild journeys, and even when I was eating bean sprouts while sitting cross-legged by a bonfire, I found comfort in it. I maybe even liked following my mother down her own path.

But now, for the first time, my path was the only path, and I had no light to see where I was going.



CHAPTER ONE



“OH MY GOD, OH MY GOD, OH MY GOD, IS this really happening?”

Every part of me feels warm and clammy, and it's only partly because I'm standing on blacktop in 90-degree weather with 100 percent humidity. If I stand here much longer, my shoes are going to melt into the pavement.

“Josh told me during third period that Ali told *him* during homeroom that he was going to ask you out after school.” Lainey scans the parking lot and spots Ali coming out of the main entrance of the school. “There he is. Okay, are you ready?”

“For my eternal crush of forever to finally ask me out? I don't know, how do you get ready for that?” I have to will myself not to look at him, just in case he sees me and we have one of those awkward staring moments. I want to turn around and be all fresh-faced and *Hi!* about this, like I'm in a face wash

commercial or something. I want *awkward* to have no part of this, which, let's be real, is going to be an uphill battle.

Lainey's eyes dance from me to somewhere over my shoulder. She looks as giddy as I feel, but she's got the freedom to let it out. "I could slap you in the face. Do you want me to slap you in the face?"

"Why would I want that?"

"I don't know, it's a thing people do on television. Maybe it calms you down?" She shrugs.

I casually turn and bump her hip, like maybe she just said something funny or we're having a moment of solidarity or something. It brings me around to her side so that I can see Ali across the parking lot without staring over my shoulder, you know, like a weirdo.

"Smooth," Lainey whispers.

"I try," I reply.

She returns the hip bump. "I'll meet you at the car," she says, then trots off.

I see the exact moment when he spots me. He gets a wide grin on his face and gives this adorable little half wave, two of his fingers up in a lazy peace sign. His pace picks up to a trot as he heads for me. Ugh, he's so pretty. Tall and lanky from year-round soccer, with deep tan skin and dark wavy hair. He's got this great smile that uses his whole face in a way that you can't help but smile back. It's the most contagious grin I've ever seen.

"Sup, Ritzzy? Happy summer!" His eyes drop to his shoes,

those black flat sneakers that all the soccer players wear, before flicking back up to me. It's the only indication that he, too, might be a little bit nervous.

"Thanks," I reply. "Back atcha. Big plans?"

He cocks his head and shrugs. "The usual. Beach. Soccer. Working at the restaurant." His parents own this amazing Indian takeout place near the mall. His mom is super nice and always gives us discounts or free samosas. Ali has worked there since he was old enough to make correct change. "Probably doing college stuff. You know the drill."

"Totally," I say, though I won't be going on any college visits or taking SAT prep like Ali or some of my other classmates who just finished junior year. Even though we had to endure endless lectures from our teachers and an hour-long assembly in the gym where the guidance counselors acted like if we didn't tour *at least* five schools before the fall we might as well give up and join the circus, I have no plans to go anywhere. My future is a little up in the air right now, and all I know is that I need to spend the summer working as many hours at Roasted as Mr. Reynolds will give me. And I may even try to score a second gig, though the only places still hiring are probably the string of fast-food restaurants that line the road up from our apartment complex, and I really don't want to go there. The thought of spending the hot Florida summer smelling like a deep fat fryer kills a little bit of my soul. And I'm not totally convinced it won't clog my arteries by osmosis.

Still, rent is due at the end of the month, the electric bill

a week after that, and I have no idea how long paying those will be my responsibility. But that's a lot of backstory that I definitely don't want to get into with Ali, especially if he's about to ask me out.

"Hey, I was wondering if you had plans for tonight?" The words come out in a rush of a single breath.

This is it! Okay, be cool, Ritzy. Be. Cool.

The mental reminder keeps me from barking out, *Yes, I'll go out with you anytime anywhere AWESOME!* Instead, I manage an only slightly cooler, "Um, no, I don't think so. Why?"

"I was thinking maybe we could hang out. Grab food at the Mexican place on Division? Their queso rocks." He pauses, kicking at a pebble on the blacktop between us. He bites his lip, a tiny smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. When he glances up at me with those deep brown eyes, I nearly melt into a puddle right at his feet. "Just us?"

And there it is. Ali Anikhindi, my crush since freshman year, who has been solidly in my friend zone since we were first paired up for a group project on *To Kill a Mockingbird* in ninth grade, is asking me out on a date. An actual date. Just. Us.

Every cell in my body is vibrating, just begging me to explode with a *Hell YES!* And maybe even a fist pump for good measure. But I manage to wrestle the energy into a confident, yet still somehow cool, "That sounds great." Though I'm pretty sure I've got a manic smile on my face to give me

away. Which is fine, because Ali's giving me one of his trademark giant smiles. I swear, even his *ears* look happy.

"Awesome. Pick you up around six?"

"Perfect," I say, already mentally scanning the meager contents of my closet for the perfect, not-trying-too-hard outfit.

"Well, I guess I'll see you tonight," Ali says. He gives me one parting smile, then heads off to his car, his keys swinging around his index finger. I wait until he's backed out and his taillights are disappearing out of the parking lot before I race off toward Lainey's usual spot at the back of the lot. By the time I get to her, all of the excited energy is bursting out of me like a faulty water fountain. When I skid to a stop at her rear bumper, where she's leaning against Barney looking smug, I'm actually squealing.

"Dinner tonight at Margaritas!"

"The one on Division?"

"Yep."

"Good, because the one on Third is ass." Lainey grins and heads for the driver-side door. I take my spot at the passenger side, waiting for her to get in and lean over the center console to unlock my door. When she does, I pull it open, my shiver at the usual creak of metal coming a beat early. Barney, short for Barnacle, is what we call Lainey's ancient Volvo, so named for the ring of brown rust that clings to the lower half of the car. She inherited it from her grandmother who moved into a nursing home sophomore year. I climb in and adjust the frayed

beach towel on my seat so the old, cracked leather, which has been cooking in the parking lot all day, won't scorch my thighs. It's only May, but May in Florida is like late July anywhere else, hot and thick with humidity.

"Cherry limeades?" Lainey asks as she shifts the car into reverse. "My treat."

"Yes, please."

We roll down the windows, since the air conditioner in Lainey's car is barely a suggestion of cold air. I turn on the radio, tuned to STAR 102.1, the oldies station, and before we're even out of the parking lot, we're singing along at the top of our lungs to a Motown hit, attempting harmonies only dogs can hear.

There's usually a long wait to get out of the student parking lot after school, as people linger, rolling down their windows to chat with friends or make weekend plans. But today everyone puts the pedal to the metal, off to the beach or the pool or somewhere else to celebrate our three months of freedom. Some more free than others, of course.

"Did you hear Vera Braxton talking about going on a cruise?" I ask when we stop at a red light. "Apparently, her dad won it from his company."

"You couldn't *pay* me to go on a cruise," Lainey replies. She reaches into the center console and digs out a pair of sunglasses. "People are always getting norovirus on those boats. I can't imagine anything worse than crapping your pants on the high seas."

“Okay, but not *everyone* gets norovirus. And wouldn’t it be nice to take a trip?”

“Sure, a trip would be nice. But when Mommy and Daddy aren’t paying for it, the costs add up. And seriously, do you really want to spend every penny of your sandwich-making money on five days at the beach?” Lainey squints into the bright sun, her sunglasses no match. “When, by the way, there’s a perfectly good beach twenty minutes away.”

I sigh and prop my feet up on the dashboard, a move I’ve done so much there’s practically an outline of my flip-flops there.

“Buck up, Reed,” Lainey says, flipping her signal as she turns into the Sonic parking lot. “Soon enough we’ll graduate and leave here. And then you’ll be glad you saved all that money.”

I wince at her reference to my savings account, because it’s not exactly what it used to be. But even though I usually tell Lainey everything, I haven’t been able to bring myself to tell her *that* yet. I think I’m hoping the situation will resolve itself, but it’s been two weeks now with no end in sight.

Lainey’s been saving every penny she can from her paycheck at the library (minus the occasional Sonic splurge), which she took because it was the only job where she could both study and earn minimum wage. For Lainey, it’s all about leaving not just Jacksonville, or even Florida, but the south entirely. I don’t blame her. Lainey is one of the few black kids in our school. She tries to downplay all the ways that she feels like an

outsider at Southwest, but I've known her long enough that I see how much the lazy, offensive jokes of our classmates and casual bias of our teachers gets to her. I know her well enough to know that even as her best friend, I still can't grasp even a tenth of her experience here.

Lainey and I met freshman year in detention, which is notable because it's the only detention Lainey and I have ever had. Lainey was there because she poured her soda on Nate Blackburn after he pulled one of her braids in the cafeteria. I was there because my mother had embarked on a spiritual quest (her words) to live a simpler life, so she unplugged every electronic device in our apartment. This included my alarm clock. And Mr. Hardiman, my homeroom teacher, was a stickler about tardies.

I was halfway through writing an essay on punctuality (like I said, Mr. Hardiman equals stickler), when I heard a whisper coming from the table behind me. "You got a pencil?"

I turned to Lainey. "Just pens. You want one?"

"Nah. Doing math. Pencil's a must," she said with a shrug. "I like your sweater."

I was wearing my favorite cardigan, which I'd found at Darcy's Closet, a thrift store near my house. Not a trendy thrift store, with actual vintage clothes the girls in my school might think were stylish or cool. Darcy's Closet was a thrift store for people who actually needed to be thrifty. And since I was too young to have a job, I was still at the mercy of my mother's

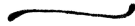
clothing budget. On top of her spiritual quest, she was also deep in her “make, do, mend” phase and had convinced herself that with just a little more practice she could knit all the clothes we’d ever need. Thus far, she’d only succeeded in crafting a series of wonky dishcloths, so I needed to buy my clothes on the cheap.

Darcy’s Closet had a back room with a dollar-a-pound pile, which was an enormous mountain of fabric. You pulled out what you wanted, the cashier weighed it on an old-fashioned produce scale like they have hanging in the grocery store, and you paid based on weight. It sounded like a great deal until you realized that 99.9 percent of the clothes in the pile were utter garbage. Stained, moth-eaten, smelling vaguely like attics and cigarettes and one time, in the case of a particularly putrid-looking puffer vest, tuna fish. Most of the stuff was decades old and not even in fashion when it was new. There were a lot of clothes that looked like they were once part of someone’s work uniform, a lot of khaki and button-up shirts and mom jeans. I almost never bought anything from the pile, but that didn’t stop me from digging.

Which was how I came to find my cardigan, my one and only big score. It had arms that were just a little too long, which was perfect for pulling my hands inside when the air-conditioning in school got too frigid (which was often). It was long enough to cover my bum, which meant every once in a while I could get away with wearing leggings to school, in direct defiance of the sexist dress code. It had two big pockets

on the front, perfect for holding a phone or some cash or a plastic baggie full of tortilla chips that I sometimes had to sneak during third period when we had last lunch. The best part? The cardigan was tie-dyed. *Rainbow* tie-dyed, and the colors were still completely vivid. My mother called it the fashion equivalent of a bad acid trip, but I loved it.

I told Lainey the whole story, and as soon as she nodded, familiar with Darcy's Closet and their dollar-a-pound policy (she'd scored a yellow rain slicker from the pile, which she said made her look like the Morton Salt Girl), I knew we could be friends.



We order our cherry limeades and bop along to the piped-in oldies, stumbling through the words to “Leader of the Pack,” a song that is 100 percent ridiculous and fun to sing. When our drinks arrive, we hand over our cash and an extra dollar for the carhop. Lainey takes a long sip, the only source of cool in the stagnant humidity. I pry off the lid to fish out the maraschino cherry. Lainey always saves hers for the end, but I can never wait. I love the sweet crunch of the fruit, which has been processed to the point that it barely resembles something that grew out of the ground. As soon as I pop the lid off, I grin. Sometimes I have to dig for the cherry, performing delicate surgery with the red straw to bring it to the surface amid the

lime wedges and crushed ice, but today, floating right on top, is not one but *two* cherries.

“Score!” I pop one off the stem, then fish out the other, letting the cold sweetness linger on my tongue. I throw my feet up on the dashboard and lean back into my seat, breathing out a satisfied sigh. “Best day ever.”



CHAPTER TWO



THE APARTMENT IS EMPTY WHEN WE GET there, just as it's been every day since my mom left. At first it was unnerving, being there alone. You never realize how much noise another person's mere existence makes until they're gone. Footsteps, sniffles, banging around the kitchen, even the occasional sleep talking all serve to fill up a space. The silence felt oppressive in the days after she left. I took to leaving the TV on all the time, until all my dreams started to involve home renovations and the words *stainless steel appliances*, and I had to stop.

But over the last two weeks I'd gotten used to my mother's absence. I became accustomed to living alone. I threw out the disgusting hemp milk she insisted upon and replaced it with a half gallon of skim. I moved my speakers into the living room and started to listen to music that wasn't chant based when I ate. I stopped closing the bathroom door. There was no one to see me pee anymore.

I'd managed to find more than a few upsides to abandonment.

Lainey and I drop our bags by the door, though since we turned in our textbooks today, they don't make much of a thud (which is good, because Mrs. Sazonov one floor down doesn't like it when we're loud, a fact she makes known by thumping her cane on her ceiling). Lainey heads for the bathroom while I make a beeline for the thermostat, cranking up the AC. According to the digital display, it's 84 degrees in the apartment. After the shock of the electric bill that arrived last week, I've been making an effort to cut costs by turning the AC off while I'm at school so I won't waste the electricity when I'm not home. But I've only been in here a few minutes and already I can feel my shirt starting to stick to my back, so I drop it down to a chill 68 and hope it won't take long to work its magic.

I wander into the living room and collapse onto the sofa, digging the remote out from between the cushions. I begin flipping through the channels, wondering how much longer I'll be able to afford the bill. If Mom doesn't come back soon, I'm going to have to cancel the cable.

"Looks like the options are the last half of a Lifetime movie, the last half of a James Bond movie, or a *Brady Bunch* marathon."

"Definitely the Bradys," Lainey says, plopping down next to me.

"But it's one of the Lifetime movies with Tori Spelling!"

I say, less out of enthusiasm for Tori and more out of apathy for the Bradys.

“Unless it’s the one where she’s the cheerleader who gets knifed, I’m not interested.”

“I think it’s the one where she’s the girlfriend who gets knifed. Or the sister. I can’t tell yet.”

Lainey rolls her eyes. “White girls screaming is not really my genre. *Brady Bunch*, please.”

Lainey is obsessed with retro TV. I can’t tell if it’s part of her love of history or if she just really enjoys a good laugh track. I find anything made before I was born to be 90 percent boring, but since she spotted me the money for the limeade, I go with it. But not happily.

“Ugh, fine,” I mumble, and flip to Marcia carefully brushing her hair a bazillion times. The episode bops along, hitting the familiar beats before each commercial break, cruising toward a lesson learned and a happily-ever-after, all in the span of twenty-eight minutes. We zone out in front of it as we let the end of the school year and the beginning of summer wash over us. On-screen, the *Brady Bunch*’s maid is wagging her finger and rolling her eyes at the boys as she wipes her hands on that blue dress she’s always wearing. When I was younger, I was sort of obsessed with the idea that maybe, if my mom met some nice architect or someone else who wore a tie to work, our family could double in size overnight like the Bradys’ did. I could go from lonely latchkey kid moving every couple of years (sometimes more, if my mother’s schemes came fast

and frequent) to being a sister with matching comforters and dinner at home every night. I liked imagining us moving from any of our string of crappy apartments to one of the Spanish-inspired subdivisions across town, where all the houses have tile roofs and stucco exteriors with elaborate palms as landscaping. Maybe we'd even have a pool, one that's just for us and not to share with the six million little kids in the complex and the creepy guy who likes to sit on a lounge chair and chain-smoke over his lunch break.

But it only took a few of my mom's boyfriends for me to realize that the *Brady Bunch* was not in my future. I mean, Hunter, the freegan lumberjack she dated when we lived in Oregon, was never going to move us into a subdivision (his screeds on the American suburb could have you trapped in a conversation against your will for hours). And Haven (whose real name was Bill, but his face got incredibly red if you pointed that out) was too busy rehearsing with his steel drum band (which I quickly learned was code for getting stoned with three guys named Jared) to attempt a home-cooked meal. No, my mother had a yen for guys whose futures involved a beanbag chair and long lectures on the evils of factory farming. I don't think a single one of them even owned a necktie, unless it was ironically.

And besides, even if Mom had stumbled into a relationship with some upwardly mobile, upstanding citizen with a job and a suit, she had no desire to get married. She never made any noise about shopping around for a dad for me. Mom loved

that it was *just us girls*, a sparkle in her eye always accompanying the phrase. Maybe it was left over from the semester she spent as a women's studies major, or maybe it was the womynist colony we lived in when I was five. Whatever it was, none of those dudes was ever going to put a ring on it, and after meeting a few of them, that was just fine with me.

"So what are you going to wear tonight?" Lainey asks when the show goes to a commercial break on a cliff-hanger over who Marcia is going to take to some dance.

"I hadn't thought about it," I say. I suck the last of my lime-ade through the straw until the ice rattles in the cup.

"Liar," Lainey replies. "You've been planning this date for forever."

I grin and spin on the couch, crossing my legs so I can face her. "Okay, true. I was thinking maybe that white eyelet lace skirt, the one that's short but not like 'come and get it'? And then just a tank. I'm not sure what's clean."

"You've got to wear the green one. It brings out your eyes," Lainey says. "There's probably time to run it to the laundry room if you need. I've got quarters in Barney."

I glance at the clock and start doing the math (twenty-three minutes on the short cycle, then probably thirty in the dryer if it's a small load), but my calculations are interrupted by a knock at the door. The sound nearly makes me drop my empty cup. The only people who knock on our apartment door are people who are going to cause a problem: our landlord, looking for the late check again, or a guy from the power

company, threatening to turn off our electricity. Sometimes it's Mrs. Sazonov, waving her cane and threatening to call the cops if we don't "walk nice."

Lainey is focused on the TV, where the Bradys are resolving their conflict right on schedule, so she doesn't see me get tense. I've never liked when people come to the door, but it's worse now that I live alone. If Lainey weren't here, I'd probably go grab one of the sharp knives out of the kitchen before checking the door.

The blinds are closed already, but the TV volume is up high enough that whoever it is might wait us out if properly motivated, so I decide I better face the music. I tiptoe over to the door and peer out the peephole. The view is blurry and more distorted than normal thanks to some condensation trapped inside. Despite that, I'm pretty sure I can see a woman standing there. I don't recognize her, and her clothes, polished and professional, are too nice for her to be from the electric company or the city water department. She's clutching what looks like one of those thick leather pad folios that lawyers have.

"Shit," I mutter, then take a few steps backward. A lawyer? What could a lawyer want with me? Sure, last month's rent came in a few days late, but I still paid it. And this month's isn't due for another couple of weeks. I know, because the date is circled on my calendar several times in red pen. I don't know what will happen if I get evicted from this apartment, but it won't be good.

“What is it?” Lainey asks, and I wave my arms wildly to shush her.

There’s another hard knock on the door, this one louder than the first, and after a beat of silence, a voice calls out, “Maritza? Maritza Reed?”

Okay, this is bad. Usually, people who come to the door are looking for my mom, and I can smile and put on my youngest-sounding girl voice and weasel out of whatever it is. But getting out of someone looking for *me*? That’s not a strategy I have in my arsenal.

“Maritza, I heard the TV. I know you’re in there,” the female voice says. It has a touch of a southern twang that she’s trying to mask with sounding official. “I promise you’re not in trouble. I just need to talk to you.”

I tiptoe back across the living room toward Lainey. “You should go out the back,” I say. I try to make it sound like I’m trying to protect her, but really I’m just protecting myself. At this moment, I wish I’d told Lainey right away, even called her the moment I realized Mom had actually gone. Why didn’t I? Maybe because I didn’t really believe she’d actually left, and by the time I did, it felt too weird to admit that my mom had abandoned me. And it definitely wasn’t as tragic as all that. So I was living alone. So what? Other than the need for money, which I was handling, it wasn’t that bad. Besides, Lainey has her own problems. I didn’t want to burden her with mine.

And to spill it all now would be a much bigger conversation than I have time for, especially with that business lady outside my door calling my name.

“You sure you don’t want me to stay?” she asks.

“Positive,” I say. “I’ll text you when I know what’s what.”

Her face tells me that she’s going to expect an explanation later, but she reaches for her bag and heads for the sliding door that leads to the deck and down the back stairs.

I take a deep breath and make my way back to the front door. I look through the peephole one more time to see if she’s given up and left, which would mean it probably wasn’t all that important. Maybe a surveyor or a solicitor. But no, she’s still there, her shoulders squared, her gaze leveled straight at the peephole, like she knows I’m standing here, looking out at her.

I’m going to have to deal with this one way or another, so I take a deep breath, open the door, and plaster on my best teacher-pleasing smile.

“Hi,” I say, trying to sound like she’s any other visitor. Now that the woman standing there isn’t magnified through a fuzzy lens, I can get a good look at her. She’s wearing a pair of black dress pants, cropped and cuffed, with a white button-down shirt with the sleeves rolled up and black patent leather ballet flats. She has a leather bag slung over her shoulder that looks stuffed just a little too full with papers and folders, her blond hair pulled back from her face. Despite the heat, she doesn’t seem to be sweating off any of her perfectly applied makeup.

She's definitely not a cop, and that somehow makes me feel more nervous.

"Maritza?" the woman asks.

I try to answer, but my voice feels trapped in my throat, so instead I nod.

She sticks her arm out, and her manicured hand reaches across the threshold of the front door. "Hi, I'm Tess Lloyd. I'm with the Florida Department of Children and Families. Do you mind if I come in?"

There's a brief moment where I consider slamming the door shut and cranking the dead bolt, then maybe running back to my room and burrowing under the covers. As if that will make whatever's coming next stop. But the door is open, and as soon as she introduces herself, passing a crisp white business card to me, I know that I'm in trouble.

Still, I try to salvage what I can. It takes everything I have, but I manage to open the door wider and step aside, ushering her into the living room like *hey, I've got nothing to hide*. I see Tess glance around, and I imagine her sweeping the room for drugs or weapons or other signs that I'm in trouble. Or that I *am* trouble. But of course, she doesn't find anything. I may be alone, but everything is fine. It's all under control. I'm handling it all better than my mother would, if she were here. I'm not starving. I'm healthy and my grades are fine. Hell, I'm seventeen, just a couple months away from being eighteen. Old enough to vote and buy lottery tickets and serve my country.

Certainly, I can be trusted to stay in a furnished, air-conditioned apartment with a decently stocked fridge all by myself.

But if I'm going to convince this very well-dressed social worker of that, I'm going to have to start doing the work, and fast.

“Can I get you anything?” I want to ask her what's going on, but I find it best in situations like this to make the other person say it first, in hopes that maybe they'll chicken out. We had a landlord once who did that when I was ten. We were living in Maryland, where we'd moved after my mother decided “professional political activist” was the nonpaying job she wanted next. That had meant a lot of days spent either making signs or holding them at some protest or another. I was never totally clear on the issues we were protesting, and sometimes I got the impression that my mom wasn't either. Our landlord at the time was this little old lady who wore velour tracksuits and visited the beauty parlor once a week. We were renting the mother-in-law cottage behind her house. She'd come over to inquire about the rent check, and my mother would simply act like it was a social call, offering her sweaty glasses of iced tea and packages of off-brand Fig Newtons, diving into the neighborhood gossip and treatises on the weather. It took poor Mrs. Healey four months before she could work herself up to asking my mother to actually pay her, at which point we packed up and moved out.

“No, I’m fine,” Tess says, and I hear the southern come out in the *fiiiine*, a word she flattens and stretches just a little too long. “But that’s sweet of you to offer. Why don’t we take a seat?”

And in that moment, I know I’m not dealing with a Mrs. Healey. Tess doesn’t seem nervous. She seems in charge, offering me a seat in my own house. And that makes me nervous, because if she’s in charge, then I’m not.

She reaches into her bag and pulls out a file folder, but I can’t read the label printed on it without making a spectacle of my attempt. She flips it open.

“Is your mother home, Maritza?”

I shake my head. “No, she’s not here right now.” A reply that has the virtue of being 100 percent true.

“When will she be home?”

“I’m not sure exactly.” *Still true.*

Tess flips the folder shut again, squares it on her knees, then folds her hands in her lap. She looks up at me with a smile that seems kind and sympathetic. “Okay, well, I really need to speak with her, so would it be okay if I wait?”

Crap. This lady clearly has my number already. Who ratted me out? Definitely not Mrs. Sazonov. If anything, she’s happy my mom is gone, because it means she’s no longer burning incense in the apartment. Mrs. Sazonov always claimed the smell drifted down through the ventilation system and aggravated her allergies. And I’d mailed in the rent check on time, so it wasn’t our landlord.

“Maritza, let me be honest with you,” Tess says, as if she can hear the thoughts running through my head. “We’ve received a report from your school that you’re living alone.”

Ah, Ms. Silverstein, my guidance counselor. When my mom didn’t show up to the end-of-the-year college-counseling session she hosted for all juniors and their parents, she started asking me a lot of questions. It was only two days after Mom had left, and I wasn’t prepared with answers. I fumbled, and she got curious. She made a few calls home that I’d tried to deflect by saying my mom was at work. But there was nothing I could do about the emails I’m sure she also sent, emails that I’m sure went unanswered. She may have even called my mom’s work number. Who knows how much her friend Rose, the psychic who paid Mom to run her little crystal shop part-time, knew or told. Ms. Silverstein had to have been the one.

Tess leaves a good, long silence for me to say something, but I’m out of somethings to say. So Tess continues. “In the state of Florida, a minor cannot live independently unless they’ve been emancipated.”

“I’m hardly a minor,” I say before I can think better of it. At this point, I’m just operating in damage-control mode. I need to reassure this woman that everything is fine so I can get her out of my living room. “I’ll be eighteen in September.”

She nods. “But you’re seventeen now.”

Now it’s my turn to nod.

“And your mother isn’t here.”

I leave my own good, long silence, but Tess is ready to wait me out. Finally, I nod again.

“See, that’s where we have a problem. I suspect your mother has been gone”—she glances down at her notes—“at least two weeks. And you have no idea when she’ll be back.” She looks up at me for confirmation, but all I can do is stare down at my lap. “You cannot continue on in this living situation.”

What does she mean “this living situation”? It’s not like I’m living in a tent. I look around the apartment, which I’d vacuumed a few days ago and which I tidied every night before going to bed. It honestly looked better than it did when my mom lived here with me. In the two weeks since Mom left, I hadn’t missed a single day of school. I’d eaten three decent meals every day, some of which included fruits and vegetables. I’d done laundry and washed my sheets and cleaned the apartment. How would adult supervision improve my living situation? I open my mouth to tell Tess all this, but she’s already shuffling papers, moving on to the next step.

“We have a few options. The first would be a kinship placement. Do you have any family in the area you could stay with? Maybe your dad?”

Her voice is tentative, like she knows it’s a long shot, and boy is it. I almost laugh out loud at the question. Family in the area? I don’t have family *anywhere* other than my mother. The only evidence of my father is my mere existence; otherwise, he’s just a passing thought to me, a fact of biology and

nothing more. I stopped asking my mother about him long ago, as soon as I was old enough to realize that her evasive responses were less about her sparing my feelings and more about sparing her own. Because it isn't just that he doesn't know about me, it's that she's not entirely sure who he is. And who wants to spend too much time thinking about *that*?

"No," I reply. "He's not . . . I mean, I don't even know . . ." I trail off, because I can tell from her face that I don't need to say more.

"That's fine," Tess says. She nods, ticking off a mental box in her head before moving on to the next item. "No grandparents? Aunts or uncles?"

I shake my head. My mom's an only child, and all I know about my grandparents is that they're dead, and before they died they definitely didn't approve of my mother's "journey."

Tess nods, taking it in, the fact that with my mother out of the picture, I'm as good as an orphan.

"Well, do you have a friend you could stay with? We could do a quick visit and background check to make sure everything's in order, and then we could pack up some of your things."

My mind flashes to Lainey, who is probably halfway to the little shotgun house she lives in with her mom. I've stayed over at her house plenty of times; I know it wouldn't be a problem with her mom, except for the whole social-worker thing. Lainey's mom has been working two full-time jobs for the last

few months to pay off some car repairs after an accident. Days at a factory that makes organic soap in neon colors (as if highlighter yellow is a color that occurs in nature), nights at the Salt and Pepper Diner near the airport, and doubles at the diner on the weekends. She's been working so hard Lainey has barely seen her lately. I have a feeling that if DCF knew that Lainey spends every night at home alone, cycling through a selection of the finest frozen dinners the 7-Eleven around the corner has to offer, Lainey would have her own social worker to deal with. I won't do that to her.

"I don't really, no," I reply. Part of me is hoping that with my options dwindling, Tess will decide that I'm really already in the best possible situation.

"Okay, well, in that case, we're going to need to head over to my office to make some arrangements," she says, confirming my very worst fears.

"This seems silly," I say, attempting one last-ditch effort at making this all go away. "I mean, I'm almost eighteen, and everything is fine here. Seriously, look around. You can make surprise visits whenever you want. I promise, I'll get to my eighteenth birthday unscathed and in one piece. And besides, my mom could come back anytime!"

But none of it penetrates. Tess keeps that kind, sympathetic smile on her face as she seals my fate. "And when she does, we can reassess. But for right now, you're a minor with no adult supervision, which is a problem we need to solve.

Luckily, you have me here to help you solve it. So let's head on over to the office, okay?"

I have this moment where I think of that old saying about kidnapping: Never let them take you to a second location, because the second location is where things go bad.

I think the saying applies to social workers, too.



CHAPTER THREE



MY PATH HAS LED ME DIRECTLY TO A vinyl-covered chair, where I'm trying to keep the peeling piece of duct tape that's covering a crack from poking into the back of my thigh, while a social worker tries to find a place for me to stay.

"Okay, Maritza Reed," Tess says as she squints at her computer screen. I'm not sure if she's asking me or just saying it out loud to fill the silence. Either way, it feels weird to hear it. *Maritza*. Mom always told me she picked the name up from a waitress at the Mexican restaurant she went to all the time when she was living in Taos and pregnant with me. "You were very nearly named Guacamole, but Maritza won out in the end," she liked to say, which is why I liked that she called me Ritzy. It seemed like something she came up with for *me*, something that grew out of her actually paying attention to who I was.

“Middle name?” Tess asks, as she squints at the computer screen.

“September,” I reply.

“Date of birth?”

“September fifteenth.” Again, my mom with the careful name selection. You wouldn’t think she’d had nine months to decide. I shouldn’t complain, though. I’m just lucky my name isn’t Harvest Moon or Karma Sunshine or something equally ridiculous.

I give Tess my address and my Social Security number, which I’ve had memorized since second grade (this was about the time when I realized my mom was never going to be very good with filling out forms for school).

Amid the *clackety-clack* of the keyboard, I hear my phone buzz in my back pocket. I pull it out to see a text from Lainey.

Lainey: Everything ok?

My thumbs are poised over the screen, but I have no idea what to type. And I’m so busy trying to come up with an answer that I don’t notice at first that Tess’s brow is furrowed as she clicks through something on her computer screen. It’s not until she leans into the screen and mutters, “This is interesting,” that I’m finally pulled back into reality.

I drop my phone into my lap. “What?” I ask.

“You already have a file.” She holds up a manicured finger. “Just give me a minute. I need to check a few things.”

And then she’s gone, leaving me with a thousand questions. Or maybe just a few questions repeating over and over again in my mind. *I already have a file? With DCF? How can that be?*

After what feels like an eternity, Tess returns. She sits down in her chair, then turns to face me. She leans forward, her elbows resting on her knees. And that’s how I know something is coming. Something big. Because no one makes that kind of full-body eye contact with you unless they’re about to turn your world upside down.

“Maritza, did you know that you’ve been in foster care before?”

This is *not* what I was expecting.

“What are you talking about?” I feel tears prick my eyes. “Are you sure?”

She nods. “You have a file. It indicates that you were in foster care when you were very young. Shortly after you were born, in fact. You wouldn’t remember it, but I didn’t know if anyone had told you.” The *anyone* hangs between us full of things literally unsaid.

“Wait, this was in Taos?”

Now it’s Tess’s turn to look confused. “No, here. In Jacksonsville.”

“But that can’t be right,” I say. “I was born in Taos, New Mexico. I only moved here three years ago.”

Tess glances at her computer screen, looking slightly pained. “Not according to our system. You were about six months old when you entered foster care here in Jacksonville, and you remained there for almost eighteen months.”

“This has to be a mistake,” I say.

“It’s your name and Social Security number,” she says gently. I know what she’s saying has to be true, but it still doesn’t feel right. Tess gives it time to sink in.

I try to think back. My mom has always been a bad keeper of our history. She’d mix up our stint in Oregon with our time in Maryland. She’d think it was San Diego where we tried our hand at freeganism, when really it was Portland. She misremembered dates all the time. But I would have thought at some point she would have mentioned that we lived in Jacksonville before. That was a hard thing to forget. So was me being in foster care. So if I didn’t know, it was on purpose.

“This is a lot of information, I know,” Tess says. She looks like she wants to reach out and pat my knee, but she stays in her own space. I immediately wonder if it’s part of some kind of protocol, if she’s not supposed to touch me. But I wish she would. I wish she’d reach out and put a hand on each of my shoulders and hold me down, because I feel like I’m going to float away if someone doesn’t grab hold of me right now. I need someone to do my mom’s hippie Zen forehead trick.

I need my mom.

After a moment of waiting, of letting this all wash over me, Tess gets back to business. “I actually spoke to the woman

who you stayed with when you were in foster care the first time. Her name is Kristin. There's a note in your file saying that should you ever end up back in foster care, she wanted to be notified. She had said back then that she was open to you returning to her if necessary. And while it's been a lot longer than she maybe thought, when I called, she said she was more than happy to have you come to stay. But if you'd rather I find another placement, I can do that."

A choice. The first one I've had since Tess showed up at my door and shook up my life like a snow globe. The fact that my mom's parting words to me were about following my own path seems so completely laughable right now. I'm not on a path, I'm on a loop, and apparently, it's leading me right back to where I started. I stand up from the chair so fast that it rocks backward, echoing on the linoleum floor. A look of concern flashes across Tess's face, so I gasp, "I have to go to the bathroom" before bolting out of the office and toward the door in the corner of the main room.

I shut myself in the bathroom, clicking the lock before anyone can follow me, then fumble along the wall for the light switch. The cold, buzzing glow of the fluorescent bulb fills the room, and immediately I catch sight of myself in the mirror on the opposite wall. My usually tanned skin looks pasty, and I can't tell if that's from the light or the shock of the day. My long, almost-black hair that I braided down my left shoulder this morning before school is now limp, and strands are falling out and curling all around my face.

I stare hard into the mirror, looking at my own reflection. Only this time I'm not looking for recognition, I'm searching for a memory. *Did I know this woman? Did Mom ever tell me about her? Was I just not listening? Did I just not care?* I can't recall anything, and for the first time since she left, I feel really and truly angry at my mother. How could she leave me? How could she leave out this giant piece of our—of *my*—history? What else did she omit? What else don't I know?

And then, like the last anchor on a hot-air balloon has snapped, I feel completely untethered, floating away, aimless and lost. It's just me. Alone.