



LORENCE ALISON

SOLSTICE

{Imprint}
MAKE YOUR MARK

NEW YORK



A part of Macmillan Publishing Group, LLC
120 Broadway, New York, NY 10271

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Printed in the United States of America.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available.

ISBN 978-1-250-21989-3 (hardcover) / ISBN 978-1-250-21990-9 (ebook)

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Book design by Elynn Cohen

Imprint logo designed by Amanda Spielman

First edition, 2020

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To whoever defaces this book, or illegally downloads it, or makes up lies about it, or uses its information to mislead a group of people to an uninhabited part of an island with no resources: Beware the creature of the deep, for it will spy you with its twelve eyes, devour you with its six tongues and three rows of sharp teeth, and you'll never be seen again.

FOR HENRY



2:27 / 6:66



The Solstice Festival YouTube Ad, January 2020

A fast, rhythmic beat. Camera fades in on a lush, green ISLAND surrounded by turquoise water. Cut to an image of a PRIVATE JET on the tarmac. Cut to a beautiful GIRL in a bikini, glancing over her shoulder, beckoning . . .

Voiceover: (masculine, seductive, yet edgy) *The experience of a lifetime . . .*

Aerial pan over waves crashing onto a white shore. Cut to a DRUMMER onstage. Cut to another bikini-clad GIRL, winking, laughing, dancing . . .

Voiceover: *Just the sun, the music, the moment . . .*

Cut to a boat darting across the water. Cut to a HIP-HOP STAR standing onstage, arms outstretched, the crowd cheering. Cut to a girl's TORSO in water, fingers gliding across the ocean's surface . . .

Voiceover: *Three extraordinary days of music from the planet's hottest artists, all on remote and private MYLA ISLAND, once plundered by pirates for its riches, once a playground for kings and queens, sultans and monarchs . . . but now it's your turn.*

Cut to a bikini-clad GIRL lying on the sand, eyes closed. Cut to a bikini-clad GIRL doing a perfect jackknife from the bow of a yacht. Cut to a bikini-clad GIRL sipping a fruity cocktail and blowing a kiss. Cut to light playing off the strings of an ELECTRIC GUITAR. Cut to a bikini-clad GIRL at a farmers' market, holding a basket of ripe, luscious mangoes . . .

Voiceover: *Everyone will be there. Will YOU?*

Cut to a GIRL, hair blowing in the wind, looking straight at the camera. As we fade out, the superimposed graphic: *The Solstice Festival. June 19–21. Book through our website now. LIMITED AVAILABILITY.*

3,492 comments:

darkboy66: So pumped about this! Lineup says Lavender, Jay-Z, and Blankface, WAT! Already booked!

mfreek: PARTY OF THE YEAR!

lattelato: Booking three extra suites! Who's in?

bellyrubz10: Uh are there going to be dudes at this festival or just girls? #ReallyWannaSolsticeFestFling

fryeguy: Just FYI, tix cost \$9,000 not including flight OR accommodations. But whatevs! Raiding dad's 401(k)!

@akellyz9: @fryeguy do you think that \$9,000 includes food?

Replies (3)

fryeguy: @akellyz9 Personally I think \$9,000 is a total STEAL for the vacay we're never going to forget!

Arkolatto23: @akellyz9 Doubtful food is included bc did you see the meals? Sushi, lobster tail, breakfasts in bed, organic only—we'll be eating like kings!

fryeguy: @arkolatto23 uh duh it's organic only. I wouldn't eat regular produce if you paid me a million bucks.

BLankin: Is this the Myla in the Caribbean? Cuz I heard something kinda sketchy about that place . . . can't remember what.

Replies (3):

ChrisJacobs: @BLankin Nah it looks sick!

JennyJenny: @BLankin It's sketchy bc it's a pirate island, didn't u listen? There's treasure buried in the sand!

GucciwithaY: @BLankin Yeah don't be a buzzkill! Zack Frazier is running it, so you know it's going to be incredible! Love me some Zack!

1

I WISH I COULD SAY that table nine was grateful when I set down the heavy tray of eggs, pancakes, Belgian waffles, and other random brunch items at their booth, but that would be a lie. Everyone at the table—they were college students, probably jonesing for sustenance to ease their hangovers—was staring intently at a video on a cell phone. They were so agape I thought something awful had happened—an assassination, a terrorist attack, the death of a major celebrity. But as I set down the scruffy-haired guy's western omelet and hot tea, I noticed it was a YouTube video shot on a pretty island beach. I figured it was a music video, but then I saw the logo: *The Solstice Festival*.

Oh, right. I'd heard about that.

Ms. One Egg White, No Toast, Black Coffee, and Large Fruit Platter—who was as skinny as you'd imagine—pressed her long, lithe fingers to the sides of her face. "Do you think this concert is for real? Lavender, Jay-Z, *and* Cardi B, all in one place?" She breathed in sharply. "I literally might die!"

“The weekend is after our exams,” her seatmate, a tall, gangly guy with a buzz cut said as he dug ravenously into his steaming bowl of steel-cut oatmeal—without, I might add, thanking me for delivering it. “If I got to party with Ice Cube, my summer would be made.”

“Do you really think the artists are going to have open-invite parties on their yachts?” Egg Whites cried, goggle-eyed.

“That’s what this says.” Scruffy Hair pushed his giant iPhone across the table. The title of the article read “The Music Festival for the 1%.” It was from a clickbait site, I noticed, and not a reputable news organization, like the *New York Times* or the *Journal-Constitution*.

“I’m going to ask for this as an end-of-the-school-year present,” said the fourth person at the table, an athletic girl with dangling gold hoop earrings. At least she’d cast me an appreciative smile when I set down her French toast. “But do you think there are still tickets available? And what about flights?”

“The flights will kick the cost well over ten thousand for sure.” Ms. Egg Whites daintily bit off a tiny piece of melon. “And my parents are still pissed at me for crashing the Mini Cooper they got me for graduation—”

“Oh please, they can’t say no,” Scruffy Hair interrupted. “It’s the concert of a lifetime. Surely *they* went to a concert of a lifetime when they were young? Like Woodstock or whatever?”

Egg Whites shot him a look. “My parents aren’t *seventy*.”

That was it. I could no longer resist. “I’m sorry,” I blurted as I placed a pitcher of maple syrup next to the ketchup. “But did you just say tickets to that music festival cost *ten thousand dollars*?”

Everyone looked up at me as if I’d dropped a dead mouse beside the salt and pepper shakers. I didn’t know what I’d done wrong—expressing astonishment over the steep price? From what I’d observed in people like this, wrinkling one’s nose at all things expensive was a major faux pas. Or was it the fact that I, the waitress, a lesser person in their eyes, dared to speak . . . *period*?

I got attitude from these students sometimes. The private Atlanta liberal arts college closest to my parents’ diner attracted wealthy and, let’s face it, spoiled teens who’d usually never worked a day in their lives—unless it was a cushy internship at their dad’s law firm or something, earning twenty dollars an hour for sitting around and every so often answering a phone. Maybe I should give them the benefit of the doubt; they had no perspective, insulated in their little bubbles as they were. But let’s be honest—they were often rude to people who were only trying to make their lives seamless and easy. Don’t get me wrong, they were good for our neighborhood’s economy, buying up two-hundred-dollar T-shirts in the boutique my friend Andrea’s mom owned up the

street, ordering Uber all hours of the night because they didn't want to walk home from the bars in their pinchy heels—and, more often than not, it was guys from the neighborhood who picked them up, Uber stickers on their dashboards.

But they also looked at everyone who wasn't like them with suspicion . . . and even disdain. I wished I could tell them that I could run rings around them academically. Then again, they'd probably just stare at me as blankly as they were staring now. Perhaps they thought I didn't know English. I didn't want to be obnoxious, and I didn't want to stereotype, but *you* try slogging through ungrateful shifts in this diner . . . and, well, maybe you'd be a little jaded, too.

I lifted my empty tray. "Anything else?" I muttered. My cheeks were burning. When no one said anything, I stormed to the kitchen, feeling humiliated, though I wasn't sure why. I'd asked them a totally legit question. Paying ten grand for a music festival made no sense to me, even if it was a whole bunch of cool artists on the roster and even if you did get the opportunity to party on a yacht with the bands.

"Adri!" my mother cried as I passed the hostess stand. "Come here for a sec, sweetie?"

My mom, Marguerite Sanchez, had an overexcited grin. Long ago, she'd declared she no longer wanted to work in the kitchen because bacon grease was giving her wrinkly skin, so she took over as hostess, which meant she got

to gossip with all the customers. A tall, slender, freckled woman in dark-framed glasses stood with her. My mom pointed at the stranger eagerly, as though she was a celebrity. “Honey, you remember Mrs. O’Hara, don’t you? She worked as an aide in your elementary school?”

I groaned internally. *Here it comes.* Every shift I worked, I prayed no one would come that we knew, but we’d lived on this block our whole lives, and our family diner had been here almost as long. And my mother was always looking for a way to humble-brag about my accomplishments.

My mom squeezed my wrist eagerly. “Tell her what you’re up to, Adrianna! Tell her about college!”

Mrs. O’Hara turned to me, smiling patiently. I didn’t recognize her, but then who recognized their aides from elementary school? “Oh, I don’t want to jinx it,” I said sheepishly. “It’s not a sure thing yet.”

“Oh please!” My mother turned to Mrs. O’Hara. “She’s interning at Richards, Canopy, and Cairl this summer—you should have seen the essay she wrote to get the job! And one of the lawyer’s wives is on the admissions board at Emory, which means Adri is a shoo-in!”

“My, my!” Mrs. O’Hara said. “Emory! How impressive!”

“Adri works so hard.” My mother looped an arm around me, and I smelled her familiar scents—Dove soap, cinnamon gum, and, for some reason, oatmeal cookies,

even though no one in our house eats them. “We’re finally going to have a lawyer in our family. Of course, my husband wants her to go into medicine, but I just don’t know. The malpractice insurance alone . . . and the *stress!*”

I hated when my mom got on this particular tear. It was 2020, music festivals were costing 10K a pop, women were CEOs and fed up and kicking ass, and yet I, Adrianna Sanchez, had no say in my future career. And my mom wanted the whole world to know it.

See, in my family, my destiny had always been mapped out like it was a square on the Game of Life board: Once I graduated from college, I would spin the rainbow wheel, and whatever number I landed on would determine whether I’d become a doctor or a lawyer. (Teacher and accountant were also job choices in the Life game, but those weren’t options for me.) It didn’t matter that I’d dropped lots of hints saying I didn’t *want* to be a doctor or a lawyer. If I dared to bring up that I wanted to be a journalist—like when that guy in the CNN ID badge came into the diner for lunch and I screwed up my confidence to talk to him—my parents would just laugh it off. Or worse, they would look at me hard, their foreheads wrinkled, and say, indignantly, “Why have we been busting our butts for all these years if you’re just going to be a *reporter?*”

“Anyway, nice to see you,” I said to Mrs. O’Hara. I looked apologetically at my mom. “I gotta go. There’s . . . toast burning.” It was the first excuse I could think of.

As I hustled through the double doors to the kitchen, steam from the dishwasher hit me like a wall. Pots and pans clanged, and there were thick, pungent, comforting smells from the fryer and stovetop. Jamieson, our dishwasher, hummed as he sprayed syrup off plates. Patty, our prepper, diced tomatoes with knife skills as deft as a chef on the Food Network. My father, Roberto, stood at the stove, simultaneously flipping pancakes and cracking a jumbo brown egg onto the griddle. Dad reminded me of an octopus when he multitasked, a tornado of flipping and stirring and sautéing and browning. In the fifteen years since my parents bought this diner, he'd never allowed anyone else to cook. He claimed it was because he was a micromanager, but in truth, he loved every minute of it.

My father turned, catching my eye—and seemingly noticing my glum expression. His brow knitted in concern, but I hurried away before he could ask me what was wrong. He could always read me better than my mom. I knew Mom meant well, but sometimes the Emory/lawyer talk put me into a funk. I *did* want to go to Emory—that much was true. And I knew my parents wanted the best for me. They'd saved their whole lives, forgoing all sorts of luxuries first to purchase the diner, and then to send me to a decent private school in our neighborhood—not my older sister, mind you, just *me*. “Because you’re smart,” my mother told me in confidence once. “Because you’re *different*.”

We skipped vacations and spendy Christmases so I could go to Huntley Academy. I did without name-brand clothes, and my mom drove around in a zillion-year-old Hyundai. I loved my private school, and it had been worth it . . . but now it was like my parents were expecting something in exchange for all their sacrifices: a daughter who did exactly what they wanted. Which was fine when it was delivering trays of eggs over easy and blueberry pancakes to snotty, hungry people—I liked working at the diner, most of the time. But it was different when it came to the rest of my life.

“Adri?” My mother poked her head through the double doors.

I straightened up. “Yeah?”

“Can you watch the hostess stand? I gotta pee.”

“Sure.” I wiped my hands on my apron and headed back out to the front. The hostess stand was littered with evidence of my mother: her old iPhone, clad in its cherry-red case, a copy of *War and Peace*—she’d heard somewhere that reading big, important novels could stave off Alzheimer’s—and, beneath that, a laminated menu, which had a picture of the diner on the cover. Our family’s restaurant wasn’t in an old classic Airstream trailer, but the outside was still pretty cool, with retro neon bars lining the roof and spelling out things like EAT and TAKEOUT and MAJESTIC, which was the name of the place when my parents bought it. My mother was an expert with Peruvian food, but my parents had decided

the dishes we served at home might be a little too . . . *adventurous* for this neighborhood. So we stuck with what the diner was serving before: burgers, fries, breakfast all day. We kept the decor the same, too: The inside had checkerboard floors and bright-red tables. A jukebox stocked with Elvis and Patsy Cline and other oldies stood against the far wall. For a while, my parents even had the waitresses wear fifties-style poodle skirts, but when I came aboard, I put my foot down, saying that no woman had *ever* wanted to traipse around carrying heavy trays in thick wool midi skirts and three-inch heels. It wasn't like the lone man waiter, a guy we'd known for years named Hal, wore a poodle skirt when *he* took everyone's orders.

The bells on the front door jingled. When I saw who was walking in, I ducked. Why was *he* here?

"Hello?" his voice called. I could sense him standing above me, staring at the top of my head.

I rose slowly from behind the hostess stand, pretending I had a perfectly good reason for crouching on the ground. "Hey," I said, tucking my hair behind my ear, praying my smile wasn't too twitchy and weird. "I was just . . . there was something on the floor . . ."

"It's cool," he—Hayden Collins—said, with an irresistible grin.

Hayden Collins. Tall—as in taller than most heads walking down the hall in my school. Thick eyebrows. Green-gray eyes that seemed to change color depending on what he was wearing. A square jaw, broad shoulders, a

quirky smile. I cursed not spending a little more time on my hair this morning. I also cursed the fact that I had a big chocolate smear on my Galaxy Diner T-shirt.

"I thought you worked here," Hayden said, smiling.

I wanted to gasp. Hayden was . . . *thinking* about me? "Yep, guilty as charged," I heard myself say. "So . . . what's up? You want some food?" *Duh, Adri!* my brain shouted. *Of course he wants food! He's at a diner!*

Hayden pointed to the kitchen doors. "I ordered takeout. Apparently you guys make a mean egg sandwich."

"You like egg sandwiches?" I blurted. "Me too." *Oh God. Stop talking. Just stop right now.*

But Hayden just nodded. "Oh yeah. I could eat eggs for every meal. In sandwiches, in salads . . . even in ice cream."

"Egg ice cream?" I asked, giggling.

Hayden winked. "And egg on a celery stick. Egg pretzel."

"Egg burgers," I suggested, getting into it. "Egg toothpaste."

"Egg toothpaste," Hayden repeated, stroking his chin like he was really thinking this through. "I like it. Don't think it would give you fresh breath, though."

We grinned at each other. Hayden had a goofy side. I liked that.

Then Hayden's eyes fell to the book on the hostess stand. "You like Tolstoy?"

“Oh.” I touched the plastic cover of the library book, and it crinkled. “My mom’s reading this. But I’ve read it, too.”

His mouth twisted. “Of course you have. You’ve read everything.”

I could feel the heat rising into my face. He *knew* this about me?

“No, it’s cool,” Hayden added, noting my red cheeks. “I work as a lifeguard at the rec center, and I *wish* I could read on the stands. But it’s not allowed. They say it might distract me from noticing if people were drowning.”

I giggled again. “Well, that *would* be kind of terrible.”

I felt myself leaning a little closer. It seemed like he was leaning closer to me, too. My heart thumped wildly. I hadn’t wanted to read too much into it at the time, but after our calculus final, when I came out the school’s front doors, Hayden was . . . *there*. Waiting, it seemed . . . for *me*. He’d fallen into step beside me, chattering about the questions, asking how I thought I’d done, asking what classes I was taking next year.

I told myself it wasn’t a big deal. Hayden was just being friendly. I didn’t have a lot of experience with guys—it had always been drilled into my head that I could concentrate on guys *later* . . . that now was for school and working hard and *getting somewhere*. So I didn’t know the cues.

“So,” Hayden said now, propping his elbow on the stand. Behind him, I noticed that Ms. One Egg White had

twisted around and was looking at Hayden with interest. I felt a little zing of satisfaction. "You going to Quinn's party tonight?"

"Uh . . ." I'd been invited to Quinn Carey's party—all of the Huntley juniors had. It was supposed to be epic: She had a huge swimming pool, a local band was coming to play, and I'm sure there'd be booze. It would be a mini Solstice Festival, actually—without the ten-thousand-dollar price tag.

I was about to tell him sure when I heard a voice behind me. "*What* party?"

My mother burst out of the kitchen, wiping her wet hands on her jeans. A brown takeout bag with a handwritten receipt stapled to the front dangled from her left hand. "A party?" she repeated, looking at me with narrowed eyes.

"Just this . . . end-of-school thing," I said meekly, wanting to melt into the checkerboard floor. "I won't be out late."

My mother set her mouth in a line. "You're meeting with Michael at the law firm in the morning, so that's probably not a good idea." Then she looked at Hayden, a businesslike smile on her face. "Are you picking up for Collins?"

Hayden nodded. She thrust the bag at him and punched the total into the register. A couple stepped through the front door just then, waiting to be served. My mother shot me a warning look, then scrambled off

to seat them. This meant I'd have a few seconds with Hayden to myself, but I could tell that was exactly what my mom *didn't* want.

I could feel him looking at me curiously. "Michael at the law firm?" he asked. "You suing someone?"

"No!" I cried, aghast, though I knew he was kidding. "I have this summer internship," I muttered glumly. "Of all the annoying things, the guy I'm working with wants to train me on a *Sunday*."

"That sucks." Hayden sounded genuinely disappointed. "But that's impressive. An internship at a law firm will look way better on a college application than my boring lifeguarding."

"Yeah, well, I'd *rather* lifeguard," I said under my breath, nudging the register closed with my elbow. "Actually, what I'd really want to do is . . ." I trailed off, then shrugged.

"Is what?" Hayden goaded me.

His eyes were on me, which gave me a little jolt just below my belly button. "Forget it," I muttered. I felt silly telling him about the internship I'd seen posted on CNN.com. It was something I'd desperately wanted to apply for. My advisor at the student newspaper, Mr. Richards, said I should. The ad probably wasn't even up anymore, though. I'm sure they'd filled the position.

"Adrianna?"

My mother stood at the far end of the aisle, hands on her hips. The people who'd just arrived were ready

to order, so I had to do my job. My mother's eyes flicked from Hayden to me, then back again.

I sighed, then gave Hayden a weary smile. "Back to work, I guess."

"Good luck," Hayden said, eyeing up my mother like perhaps he understood her type. "And I'm sorry you aren't coming tonight. Seriously."

"Me too." Abruptly, ridiculously, I felt like I might cry. *God, Adrianna, do not cry.*

Suddenly Hayden pulled out his cell phone and started tapping. My spirits sank—maybe I wasn't interesting anymore—but then I felt a buzz in my pocket, my own phone telling me I had an alert. Hayden gave me a cryptic wave before grabbing his takeout and turning for the door. I pulled my phone out and saw that someone named HHTK had followed my Instagram *and* sent me a DM. When I clicked on the profile picture, Hayden's own face stared back at me. I widened my eyes in surprise. Then I looked at the DM.

It was great to see you. Here's my cell.

My heart flipped. I wanted to text him with a dozen heart emojis right that second.

"Ahem."

When I looked up, I could feel my mother's steely, judging gaze. I tucked my phone back into my jeans pocket, trying to temper my glee. As she and I passed each other in the narrow aisle that separated the line of booths, I expected she'd be frosty, standoffish, maybe

even angry, but instead she suddenly grabbed me in a strong, crushing hug.

I let out a bleat of surprise. My mother patted my back. She rested her head on my shoulder for a millisecond. Make no mistake—this wasn't a hug that said, *It's okay. You can have a boyfriend.* It was more like, *I know I'm hard on you, baby. I know I suck the fun out of things sometimes. But it's because we love you.*

And what can I say? I loved her, too.

From the Solstice website:

Welcome, friends, explorers, pirates, and party people! This is the official site of the SOLSTICE MUSIC FESTIVAL taking place on the beautiful Caribbean Myla Island on June 19–21! Yes, we know those dates have popped up quick and you might have to rearrange your schedule, but we have a good thing going down here, so let's make this HAPPEN!

If you are coming, please peruse the website for which items to bring and what you can leave to us. (Bring: bug spray, medications, chill vibes only. Leave to us: a decadent experience that challenges the borders of the impossible!) Please note: All travel arrangements must be made through private carriers. Also, you MUST fly to MYLA ISLAND AIRPORT. Those who fly to Myla will be brought to the Solstice Festival by private limousine. Your chariot awaits!

Check out our official Twitter account: @SolsticeFestZa

Comments:

@JaredJ1920: Wow. By limo? Nice! Takes some of the sting out of the ridic price tag!

@DiamondsZ20: I'd much prefer a Range Rover.

@MoniMone: Are those girls in the YouTube ad going to be there? PLEASE SAY YES!

@_jbird43: Heard a rumor that Blink-182 is going to play a pop-up concert? Need deets!

@redflagatnight: I heard tix are already sold out. Scalpers selling at double the price. Still interested!

@BLankin: Dude, that island is infested with sea monsters! Abort abort abort!

@ruskybex99: @BLankin stop being a troll! Sea monsters? What you smoking?

@UlrichGreen1: @BLankin Uh do you realize how amazing a sea monster selfie would be? Think positive!

2

"AND HERE'S THE COPY MACHINE," Michael Graham, the associate training me at Richards, Canopy, and Cairl said as he led me into a small room off the main office. The copy room was littered with papers and smelled pleasantly of warm ink. "To make a copy, you lift this lid, put the paper in here, and press this big red button."

No way! I almost wanted to gasp in mock surprise. *I had no idea a copy machine could do such a thing!* The knee-jerk part of me wondered if Michael was treating me like a kindergartner because he knew my parents owned a diner—and perhaps figured I'd never been in an office in my life. I guess he forgot the part of my résumé that said I was the school's office assistant for the last three years running. I could probably out-Microsoft Excel him any day of the week.

Michael showed me the desk that would be mine for the next three months. It was a plain cubicle, separated from the other desks by three low, beige walls that had a weird, fuzzy quality to them. The flat-screen monitor

showed a screen saver bearing the company's logo. The keyboard was covered in one of those plastic protectors that always reminded me of the couch at my abuela's house. There was a tiny cactus plant in a ceramic pot next to the phone. I wondered who had put it there. The last intern, maybe? I wondered why they'd left. I wondered if they'd liked it here or felt as trapped as I already did.

"You're right next to my office," Michael went on. He was a slender guy about thirty-five with an eager face and thick, sandy hair that fell boyishly across his forehead. He wore clunky, square glasses and had a few tiny acne scars on his cheeks. "Which is great, because I'll need you to transcribe a lot of my depositions. It'll give you a good sense of how to interview people once you're a lawyer yourself."

He exchanged an excited glance with me that seemed to indicate we were part of the same club, like we'd just figured out we were both huge fans of the same superhero franchise. Then again, in the letter I'd written when applying for this job, I'd gushed about how I'd known I wanted to be a lawyer since I was three years old. Which was absolute BS. What kid wanted to be a lawyer at *three*?

Ping. I glanced down at my phone. I'd set up a Google Alert about the breaking news that this housing developer, Morris-Evens Homes LLC, was going to raze an entire neighborhood of Atlanta—a cool, cultural, *historical* neighborhood—so they could build more McMansions. Today's scheduled protest got about 300

percent more people than they'd expected. Whoa. That was *huge*.

"You need to get that?" Michael asked, eyeing my screen, his tone suddenly testy.

"What? No." I dropped the phone into my bag. But immediately it started pinging again. More updates about the protest. God, I wished I was canvassing the crowd for quotes and reports. This was just the kind of story that interested me and that—I hoped, someday—I'd get to work on. But obviously there was no way I could be there.

"Probably best if you turned that off," Michael said, making a little face.

"Oh my gosh, of course." I held down the OFF switch, heat rising into my cheeks. It wasn't like me to be reprimanded. I needed to focus.

Michael went through the various computer programs I would be using—the Microsoft Outlook calendar, Word—and sometimes I'd have to transcribe depositions. He talked about the case he was working on—some boring thing about an insurance claims adjuster who'd run a scam on a bunch of buildings around Brookhaven. "Turns out, all of the buildings that had policies with him filed for insurance payouts at one point or another," Michael said. "We'd never seen so many pipes burst or houses randomly explode or sewer lines fail. It was like the buildings were doomed . . . until we realized the disasters were rigged—*by the insurance guy*." He eyed me, a

way-too-excited smile on his face. “This guy got a big percentage for every claim paid out. The bigger the disaster, the bigger the payout for him.” He leaned back on the edge of my desk, proud of his detective work. “He’s going down.”

I made careful notes to show that I was being the best intern I could, but the details were sifting through me like sand. This insurance guy was a criminal, but this case wasn’t going to improve anyone’s lives—it was just going to make the insurance company richer. How could Michael get jazzed about that?

My eyes drifted to the clock at the bottom right-hand side of the computer screen. I *had* to find a way to make this job more interesting. I had to find a way to shine for Michael, too—his wife was the one who worked in Emory admissions, and that was my whole point of being here.

A million years later, we finally wrapped up. When I turned my phone back on and checked the news, it seemed that the protest had ended. I packed up my purse, and Michael walked me outside. The air felt stale and heavy. Sweat immediately prickled on the small of my back, making my blouse stick to my skin.

“Thank you for coming in on a Sunday,” Michael said. “I really appreciate it.”

“No problem,” I chirped.

The late-afternoon sun baked the top of my head as I walked to the parking garage. A whole day had passed,

and I'd been stuck in a cubicle. We'd barely even stopped for lunch. My phone buzzed in my purse. I was elated to see Hayden's name at the top.

How's office life?

I leaned against the side of a bus stop kiosk. *Boring. Absolutely nothing to report. And that's saying a lot, considering I want to be a reporter.*

He texted back: *Nothing to report at the pool, either. Well, except someone puked in the shallow end, and we had to shut the facility down for 45 minutes.*

I snorted. *That's big news!*

Not if you were the one who had to clean it up, it isn't.

I couldn't believe I was texting with Hayden. I'd taken a risk yesterday—before the party that I wasn't going to, I'd texted him a jokey: *Hey, someone DM'd me using your Insta, tossing out your cell number—think your identity's been hacked!*

That's right, he'd written back, *this isn't even Hayden. It's a scammer overseas. And now I've got your personal information, too!*

If it were up to Elena Sykes, my very best friend in the world, she'd tell me that I had to wait at least three days after a boy gave me his number to call him . . . but Hayden had seemed overjoyed that I'd reached out so quickly. Suck it, dating rules.

After that, he and I had texted and Snapchatted for almost an hour—I'd even made him late to Quinn's party.

We talked about silly things, mostly—like how when I was really little, my older sister Maria and I used to dress up in wigs and sparkly dresses, pretending like we were the Latina Destiny's Child. Or stories about Maria's failed attempts to find a career, first going to school for dog grooming, then deciding she wanted to be a potter, then almost filling out a form to get a certificate in organic farming until my father found out and put a stop to it. *Maria still lives in her old bedroom in our house, I'd written. Which is probably why my parents put all their faith in me.*

Yeah, let's stop talking about Maria, Hayden had written back. *I'd rather hear about you.*

By the thrill I'd gotten, you'd have thought he'd said he loved me.

Hayden told me his single mom was a nurse and worked just as hard as my parents did to send him to Huntley. His older brother had enlisted in the navy after high school, which would give him a free ride to college. Hayden had thought about following that path, too—especially since he wanted to go into engineering, for which there were a lot of opportunities in the military—but he wasn't sure he could endure boot camp.

I'd never really bonded with a boy before. I'd had a few brief boyfriends—hidden, of course, from my parents—but those had mostly been surface flings. Talking to Hayden didn't feel any different from talking to Elena. I liked that our trajectories were the same. I liked that we were square pegs in a round hole in the privileged, easy-life sea

that made up most of our high school class. For example, Hayden was lifeguarding not so he could work on his tan, but because he legitimately needed the money. We understood where each other was coming from in a way a lot of people around me didn't, and that felt like an instant bond. I just wish I'd gotten to know him sooner.

An added bonus: He was so *cute*. Whenever I saw those little bubbles appear on his end, indicating he was typing, I pictured his handsome face bent toward the screen, his lips pursed just so, his long, slender fingers tapping . . . and I got tingles all over.

Now, I was about to write back to Hayden when another alert came in. It was Elena, sending me a Snap. I opened the message and saw a picture of Elena with the koala filter—she had a cute round nose where her sloped one should have been and a pair of fuzzy gray ears on top of her head.

How's the internship? read big, round letters beneath her chin.

Meh, I answered back. *But it's over for today.*

A new Snap came in. *Maybe I should get a job there, too*, she wrote. *Then we could spend the whole summer together.*

I wrinkled my nose, trying not to feel exasperated. But I loved how Elena, who'd never had to work for anything in her life, simply thought she could just call up the law firm and score an internship—and that it'd be *fun*.

The office definitely isn't for you, I wrote back. *Do*

something cool this summer like working at your cousin's boutique on Peachtree.

A half minute went by with no new Snaps, but then Elena sent one that read: *Can you come over right now? I have something to tell you.*

Everything okay? I asked. *It's not about Steve again, is it?* Steve was Elena's on-again, off-again boyfriend. He was a college student and rubbed me the wrong way. Long, long story. Elena swore that the last breakup with him was for good, though. I hoped she'd finally learned her lesson.

Nope, Elena wrote back. *I have a surprise!*

I was at my car by then. I checked my watch. I probably had time to pop over to Elena's before my mother sent out a search party. It wasn't like we had a big Sunday dinner at the Sanchez house—usually, my parents were too busy finishing up at the diner to throw together much more than leftovers. A surprise seemed perfect right about now.



I always felt a little breathless and out of place when I pulled up to Elena's dad's house in Buckhead. The place looked like a fancy wedding cake: white facade, white columns, a fountain in the center of the circular drive. I didn't know what a weed would do if it found itself in her front yard—probably slink away in shame. There were Juliet balconies on the second floor and a long series

of double doors along the side that opened into a massive outdoor kitchen, seating area, and pool. And though Elena's father lived only a block from a major road, the property had a hushed feeling, as if it had an invisible barrier around it, stopping the noise.

I pressed the buzzer at the gate, feeling the usual mild embarrassment about coming here in my rattling old Toyota, which had primer spots all over it and sometimes sputtered to an agonizing slow speed on the highway. Elena's picture popped up on the video screen, and she squealed when she saw me. She buzzed the gate open, and by the time I pulled up to the house, she was bouncing out the door. "You are not going to believe it you are not going to believe it you are not going to *believe* it!" she shrieked as I stepped out of the car.

"Whoa, whoa, *whoa*," I said, pushing her back so I could breathe. "Slow down! What's happening?"

There were spots of pink on Elena's cheeks. She pushed a piece of butterscotch-blond hair over her shoulder and blinked her wide, lash-extended, sapphire-blue eyes. Elena was pretty. Like almost *I hate you* pretty . . . though I never got girls who hated other girls because they were good-looking. It struck me as a waste of energy—and besides, Elena's sweetness and humor and loyalty mattered more than her appearance. Okay, there were moments when I questioned why she was friends with *me*—I was pretty enough, but I wasn't *Elena* caliber, and I certainly didn't come from the same universe she did.

But I liked to think Elena appreciated the same qualities in me as I appreciated in her.

“Okay. Okay. Something really big just happened. Something that’s going to change *both* our lives.” Elena jiggled up and down.

I frowned. What could *that* be? Was Elena moving? No way. Maybe her parents were getting back together? But that wouldn’t affect my life. Besides, Elena’s parents famously hated each other. Their divorce was like a battle scene in the latest *Avengers* movie—mind-blowingly annihilating.

Elena dragged me through the door and sat me down in the living room, an enormous space off the kitchen. After Elena’s mom left, her dad had let Elena redecorate the place any way she wanted, sort of as a bargaining chip to get her to spend more time there. There were a lot of chunky knit blankets, glowing Moravian stars, a giant faux-tiger-skin rug, and some huge art prints that Elena had bought on eBay because they’d allegedly once belonged to Zendaya. I’d tried to argue her out of it—she could have bought a grand piano for what they cost, or donated the money to an animal shelter, and did anyone really *need* stuff that used to belong to Zendaya, anyway?

She plopped us down on one of the gray leather couches and held both my hands. She was literally vibrating with excitement, which reminded me of the day we’d met at casting for *My Fair Lady* in ninth grade. We’d both gotten parts in the chorus. I was kind of bummed—I’d

wanted a speaking part—but Elena was thrilled, because she'd thought she wouldn't get cast at all. That day, she'd turned to me and crowed, way overenthusiastically, "We're chorus buddies! Want to come to my house after this and run through our songs?" Which was so sweet because, well, no one actually *hears* the chorus. But it led to an instant friendship.

"My dad gave me a graduation present," Elena began.

I pulled my hands away, confused. "But you're only a junior."

"I know. I guess he lost track of the years. Which means I guess I'll get *two* graduation presents out of this—his loss, my gain. Yay, divorce!" She put her hands in the air in a raise-the-roof style, but I could sense the pain in her voice. The divorce hadn't been easy on Elena. She was often trapped in the middle of vicious arguments and never knew where she was spending Christmases, and then there was the awkwardness of meeting her parents' new significant others—neither of which she really liked. "Anyway, he gave it to me last night—and you're not going to believe what it is. *Guess*."

I shrugged. "A car?"

"Nope!" She threw her hands up again, gleeful. "Guess again!"

"Just tell me, El," I said, growing impatient. In Elena's world, the possibilities were endless. I wouldn't be surprised if she said a pet Bengal tiger.

She leaned forward a little. The way her eyes bugged

out, it looked like she was about to explode. “My father. Got us tickets. To the *Solstice Festival*.”

My jaw dropped. “That thing on the island?”

“Yes!” Elena was bouncing excitedly. “He got us tickets! And flights! And . . . *everything*! We’re going!”

I stared at her wide pink mouth. “What do you mean . . . *we’re*?”

“Me and you!” Elena gave me a look that telegraphed, *Duh, obviously!* “He said I could take a friend, and who *else* would I choose? Adri! You’re going to finally meet Lavender! Isn’t this amazing?”

“Yeah, but . . .” I ran my hands through my hair. Lavender, the singer who was better than Lady Gaga, Beyoncé, and Ariana Grande combined, had been my favorite for years—and she *never* toured. She was the biggest reason I was paying attention to Solstice in the first place. “The concert is ludicrously expensive. There’s no way I could pay for a ticket.”

Elena waved her hand. “We’ve got it covered. He doesn’t want me to go alone, and he *flipped* when I told him I was choosing you. You know how responsible my dad thinks you are.”

I frowned. “So I’m only coming because I’m responsible?”

Elena play-hit me, rolling her eyes like she wouldn’t even dignify that with a response. Then she flopped back onto the couch dramatically. “*Please* say you can come, Adri. Please?”

I stared at the large, blown-glass bowl that sat in the middle of the coffee table, remembering that this, too, cost as much as a small appliance. Should Elena have really poured *Doritos* into it? I did sometimes worry that Elena saw me as the “responsible friend”—book smart, reliable, boring. It was kind of true: I wasn’t a risk taker. I did my weekend homework as soon as I got home on Friday afternoon. The few times I’d drank I didn’t like it, and I stayed far, far away from drugs, terrified that my mother would surprise me with a drug test—they’d been through so much heartache with Maria, after all. I was always the designated driver. I’d never gotten a traffic ticket, not even for blowing a stop sign. I had a savings account with the money I’d earned from the diner, though it didn’t have nearly enough in it to pay for Solstice.

“Aren’t you afraid Solstice . . . isn’t me?” I then asked.

Elena cocked her head. “What do you mean?”

“Just . . .” I took a breath. “Everyone going can afford the huge price tag. What if I don’t fit in?”

Elena guffawed. “Of course you’ll fit in! You’ll *be* there, won’t you? No one’s gonna judge you or anything!”

But I wasn’t sure. My whole life, I’d felt judged for one thing or another. As a different ethnicity. As the daughter of a blue-collar family at a preppy private school. And now, as an outsider at a concert for the 1 percent. Or maybe that was irrational. Would I be able to get out of my own head and even enjoy myself? On the other hand,

it did sound amazing. The adventure of a lifetime. And it *would* be fun to bond with Elena.

But then I remembered my internship. And everything else. My shoulders slumped. “My parents will never go for it.”

Elena’s face fell. “But if you can’t go, then I can’t go!”

“I know, and I’m sorry. I guess you should take someone else.” It pained me to say it. Now that the festival was a possibility, I desperately wanted to go.

“We just have to convince them,” Elena decided. She sat up straighter, suddenly in debate mode. “What can our arguments be? That it’s a once-in-a-lifetime trip you’ll probably never get to do again?”

I thought for a moment. “Maybe we could give it some kind of this-will-be-good-for-a-college-essay angle.” I grabbed a Dorito from the bowl and crunched down loudly. “Who’s running it again?”

Elena narrowed her eyes. “Zack Frazier. The YouTube star.”

I wrinkled my nose. My parents wouldn’t be impressed by a YouTuber. “I could just say that I’m pretty certain Post Malone’s going to invite me on his Jet Ski, and I could write a college essay about *that*.” It was a joke, though. My parents wouldn’t buy that, either.

Elena snapped her fingers. “Or about how, on this trip, you’re going to become best friends with Lavender!”

“And a bunch of supermodels and influencers,” I snickered. “Or maybe I’ll become a supermodel myself.” I did a

few hip pops, though there was really no chance that was going to happen—I didn't know if I had a supermodel vibe or not, but the idea of living my life with a camera stuck in my face 24-7 made me twitchy with anxiety.

We collapsed into giggles, but then a weighty silence fell over us. I stared at the shimmering pink curtains I'd helped Elena choose. On top of the TV was the silver metal sculpture we'd found at a cool design store—Elena liked it because she said it looked like a metal cloud, though I'd said it looked like a boil on someone's butt. In less than a year, Elena and I would be off to college, starting new lives. Even next school year, we'd be in fewer classes together—I was in honors and AP everything, and Elena was more on an arts track.

I worried about us growing apart. This trip felt crucial, suddenly. If we went, we'd make more memories to carry our friendship through.

"I really want you to come," Elena said as though reading my mind. "Please say you'll talk to your parents."

I looked over at her, grateful she wanted to go with me as badly as I wanted to go with her. "Okay," I said, leaning my head on her shoulder. "I'll try."

@SolsticeFestZa: Greetings, fellow explorers, music lovers, and marauders! First things first, our lineup for next weekend is INCREDIBLE. Aside from the teasers we've already given, we're keeping the rest of the roster SUPER TOP SECRET—but know that your mind will be BLOWN. (1/4)

@SolsticeFestZa: Second, festival tickets are sold out—we repeat, SOLD THE F OUT. But! Tag two friends below and send us a pic of your \$250+ purchase at the SOLSTICE FESTIVAL ONLINE STORE, and we'll give two lucky winners tix for FREE! (2/4)

@SolsticeFestZa: We particularly like the Solstice cashmere sweatshirt (\$180), the Solstice Festival poster, signed by the artist (\$230, unframed), or the Solstice chemical-free bug spray in a limited-edition graffiti-inspired designer can (\$39 for 6 oz.). Shop on, my friends! (3/4)

@SolsticeFestZa: (Disclaimer: Prize tickets do not include transportation fees, food, lodging, drinks, medical services, merchandise, or other basic needs. But again, mind-blowing adventure comes free!) (4/4)

Replies:

@SeedSpore16: I'm in! Outfit ideas? How hot is it down there? Are we really going to need bug spray? The scent's going to clash with the perfume I had custom-mixed in Paris.

@Mahalo_Star: @SeedSpore16 I'm just bringing a big beach hat and TONS of bikinis! #BikinInfluencer

@jhhj99: @Mahalo_Star Ooh, then I'm bringing my camera!

@FinniganDefine: Is it me or does Myla look pretty uninhabited? I kind of can't believe they even have an airport. I have diabetes and I worry about medical attention/getting quickly off the island in case of emergency. Or am I freaking for nothing?

@bb8-kool: @FinniganDefine I'm sure Solstice has this all figured out! Or just raid Zack Frazier's boat! (Someone told me he travels with a 24-7, 365 on-call doctor and an MRI machine!)

@FinniganDefine: @bb8-kool Good thinking! By the way, is anyone else having trouble finding Myla on a map?

@MunchausenFantasee: @FinniganDefine Yep, I Google Earthed it a few days ago. Half the island looks like a big field of nothing.

@bb8-kool: @MunchausenFantasee A big field of AWESOMENESS!

3

IT WAS THE FOLLOWING NIGHT after dinner. Dishes were washed. The kitchen was clean. My older sister had already gone out for the evening, which was her routine because she didn't want to sit around with my parents watching *Masterpiece*. The house was quiet. Peaceful. The sun was setting, but it wasn't too-too late, and my parents had drunk their single glasses of wine at dinner, which meant they were as relaxed as they'd ever be.

Go time, then.

Butterflies did gymnastics in my stomach as I padded into the den and stood in front of the TV screen, blocking the image of a Victorian-era British woman in a bustle scuttling down a flight of gloomy stone stairs. My parents were in their normal places: my mother on the ancient velour couch, the diner's accounting books in her lap, my father in the La-Z-Boy, half watching *Masterpiece* and half skimming an article in *Gourmet* magazine. He read *Gourmet* to get inspired at the diner, though I found that laughable—the menu hadn't changed since I was

three, and gravy fries and western omelets were hardly gourmet food.

“Mom?” My voice croaked. “Dad? Can I talk to you?”

My mother hit PAUSE and lowered her hands to her lap. My father marked his place in the magazine. I fixed my gaze on the big bookcase in the corner that held our antiquated encyclopedias and about three hundred photo albums from when I was a baby because I was too afraid to look my parents in the eye. My heart was a jackhammer.

“So listen,” I said, starting the speech I’d spent the last hour constructing and memorizing. “I’ve worked really hard this school year. My grades are great. My SAT scores are great. I’ve never missed a day of work. And I’m looking forward to this internship at the law firm. But I’m wondering . . .” I took a breath. *Here goes.* “I’m wondering if I could take a little trip with Elena next weekend. To, um, this island called Myla in the Caribbean. To a music festival. To see my favorite singer.”

Their brows knit in confusion. My mother started twisting her plain gold wedding band around her finger, something she did when she was displeased.

“Her father is paying all the expenses,” I said quickly. “No questions asked. And I’ve looked into it—the facilities where we’ll be staying are safe, and there are security and medical teams on staff, and I promise I won’t drink. Like I said, my favorite singer, Lavender, is performing, and she *never* tours. And also, I’ve never been anywhere—

maybe this would be good for a college application. And as far as the internship goes, I'll only miss two days. I can work extra hours with Michael when I'm back, and obviously I won't take any time off for the rest of the summer. And Elena and I will keep each other safe. So . . . can I?"

It came out of me in a rush . . . but a persuasive rush, I hoped. A safe, secure, all-expenses-paid music festival that could also double as college-essay potential? A mercy gift for the girl who never did anything wrong? If Adrianna Sanchez were *my* daughter, I'd totally let her go.

My mother finally let out an incredulous snort. "You're joking, right?"

"It sounds like a disaster," my father added.

It felt like they'd sucker punched me. "Wait, what? Why?"

My mother's pencil tapped her accounting pad. "Myla Island? I've never heard of it, and I won the geography bee my senior year."

I gritted my teeth. My mother never let me forget she'd won that damn geography bee, probably because geography was the only subject I didn't score 100 percent in.

"And furthermore," my mother went on, "I've already read about this festival. It looks slapdash. Poorly planned. How do you know security is tight? From their *website*? What if they're lying? What will you do if you're in trouble? From what I've read, there's only one way off the island—*by boat*. What if there's an emergency?"

"They have medical facilities," I said weakly, though I wasn't entirely sure if this was true.

She looked at me hard. "What, a first-aid tent? And what about the threat of Zika? Is that present in that country? You want to have babies someday, don't you?"

I threw my hands up. "Are you kidding me? Zika? Babies?" I looked at my father. He often let my mother take the first round of offense. "What's your case against it?"

My father stroked his chin. "Adrianna, there are far better experiences you could be having this summer than going to some dirty music festival on a desert island."

"It won't be dirty! And Myla looks beautiful! There's . . . sea life! Endangered species! The people who live there look friendly and cool!"

"And more than that," he went on, seemingly not hearing me, "I take offense at you saying you've never *been* anywhere. We all went to Peru last year to visit your grandparents. That's a whole different continent."

"I wasn't talking about Peru," I grumbled. Not that I *saw* much in Peru except the inside of Abuela's house.

"And you went to New York City on a class trip," he added.

I shut my eyes. "With the debate team. And it was *outside* New York City. In a hotel in Newark, New Jersey."

"You don't have to go on a harebrained luxury trip to write a good college essay," my father added, crossing his arms over his chest.

I gritted my teeth. "Forget the essay part. It's just . . .

this means a lot to me. It will be great for Elena and me, and it will also be great to refresh my brain. I need a little break, okay?" My parents looked at me skeptically, but I rushed on. "And also, I sort of already promised her I'd go. If you guys say no, that means she doesn't get to go, either—and her dad's out all that money."

The corners of my father's mouth arched down. "You shouldn't have given Elena the impression that you were allowed before asking us."

"Nor should her father have bought a ticket for you," my mother added. "That's very wasteful. And I raised you better, Adrianna, than to accept someone else's charity."

"Charity?" I squeaked. "I'm going as Elena's guest. And her dad won't even *miss* the money." But I knew that wasn't the point—like me, my parents took offense at the cavalier way some people spent money. "If none of the ticket costs go to charity, I'll find a charitable organization *I* can donate to—I'll use some of my internship funds." Maybe that would make this karmically square with the universe.

"But also," my father piped up, barely hearing what I'd said, "We haven't taken you anywhere, as you say, because we're saving every penny for you to go to college. We always thought there was more to life than frivolous excess. We wanted to give you the best future we could."

I opened my mouth, about to protest that I *was* grateful, and *blah blah blah*. But there was no point. I'd wounded my parents' pride. To them, I sounded like a

bratty kid complaining that her family didn't go on all the fun trips her friends' families did. Which, yes, was the truth—how many times in elementary school did I quietly vibrate with jealousy when my classmates took weekend jaunts to Disney World while we slogged away at the diner? How many international class trips had I skipped because it wasn't in the budget? It was amazing that my parents sprang for that New York debate trip, actually. But it wasn't what I'd meant. I knew trips or material things weren't the meaning of life, nor did they necessarily make a person well-rounded. I'd hoped my parents knew that about me, too—but maybe they didn't.

I realized I had one last play and straightened up. "The thing is, I'm old enough to go without your permission. Having turned eighteen and all."

My parents stared at me hard. But it was true: I had just turned eighteen last week. It was a long story why I was eighteen going into my senior year—I was a summer baby, on the cusp of the school cutoff anyway, and I'd been anxious and shy in preschool, so much so that my teacher at the time had suggested that I hold off on going to kindergarten until I was six. All these years, my being a little older hadn't meant much . . . but today, it meant everything.

My mother's lips were set in a tight line. "You're going to have to tell Elena that you need to refuse her very generous offer. End of story."

"But . . ." My thoughts scattered. I didn't know what

else to say. I wanted to bring up that I'd never asked for anything before—and also, this was costing them *nothing*. Remind them of how good I was, how easy I'd been, how I wasn't prone to mood swings or wild behavior like my older brother and sister. It was why my parents were so strict with me—because they felt they'd failed with Anthony and Maria. But it didn't mean it was fair to *me*.

But I could tell nothing would convince them. My mother had already gone back to studying her accounting books, a clear indication the conversation was over. My father stared at the magazine.

I felt my whole body wilt. “Thanks for nothing,” I mumbled, and then went upstairs. I wasn't even enough of a moody adolescent to stomp. I just walked.



I didn't have the guts to tell Elena the news over the phone. Even writing a text seemed impossible. I erased three different versions before settling on *I'm so sorry, I tried, it's a no-go* and adding a string of sobbing-face emojis.

After I hit SEND, I flopped on my bed and stared at the ceiling. Above me, in the attic space we'd converted to a bedroom, I heard telltale creaks and thumps. Maria was home. Should I talk to *her* about this? Maria used to wheedle all kinds of unthinkable things out of my parents—like living at her best friend Lulu's house for the summer of her sophomore year, or auditioning for

a job as a character at Disney World (she didn't get it), or forming a band with her friends and practicing in our garage on weeknights. My parents didn't lord it over her schedule or decisions; she went to parties, dances, out on dates, lied about sleeping over at such-and-such's house when she was actually out with a guy, and one time, turned up on the eleven o'clock news for a crowd interview outside Eminem's tour bus after his concert in Atlanta—when she'd told my parents she was at the mall.

There were nights when my parents couldn't find her, when she didn't answer her phone. They stayed up all night, waiting for the police to knock on the door or someone from a hospital to call. The summer after her junior year, she ran away. For three whole days, Maria didn't come home. Didn't call. Went totally off the map.

I swear my father's hair turned completely gray just in that single weekend. They were grateful when she finally turned back up—she'd gone to Memphis for a few days with some friends but, oops, forgot to mention it to anyone—but also shattered and wounded. After that, they were just relieved she graduated high school without getting pregnant or arrested or kidnapped. Their standards were so low for her—they were never pushing her to actually do something with her life, certainly not to be a *lawyer*—but she also had freedom to do what she wanted as long as she paid for it with her own income.

Which way was better? Which life was more gratifying? What would Maria do if she were in this same situation as I was right now?

I couldn't talk to Maria. She was almost ten years older than I was; besides a brief stint of being friends when I was teeny-tiny, we'd always sort of been ships passing in the night. It would be strange to try to strike up a heart-to-heart after years of either being intimidated by her or ignoring her. As I lay in my bed, I wished we were closer. I needed a big sister to tell me what to do.

My phone rang. I felt a clench in my chest—it had to be Elena. She would be heartbroken, I figured, but not devastated. She'd probably just take someone else. While I was sitting in that windowless, airless cubicle at the law firm, transcribing depositions, my Instagram would be pinging with pictures of Elena and her guest on the beach, at the concert, on Lavender's yacht.

But it was Hayden's name on the caller ID. I answered it with a gloomy hello.

"You okay?" Hayden asked, sounding worried.

I sighed and explained as best I could about Elena's invitation and my parents' swift and decisive dashing of my dreams. "Wait a minute," Hayden interrupted. "You were offered a free ticket to the Solstice Festival?"

"I *was*," I muttered. "But I just gave it up."

"Adri, you have to go." Hayden's tone was urgent. "It's supposed to be the party of the century. Like, *history* will be made. You explained that to your parents, right?"

"Yeah, but they don't really care. They think Myla sounds dangerous. My mother can't find it on a map."

"That's because it's a tiny island. But the guy who set it up, Zack Frazier? You know who he is, right?"

"Sort of . . ."

"He, like, *invented* the concept of the YouTube influencer. His channel has one hundred million followers."

"Really?" I asked incredulously. I'd *sort* of heard of Zack Frazier, but YouTube wasn't really my thing. Still, 100 million followers was unthinkable.

"The guy's a marketing genius, and whatever he touches is really well done. The Solstice Festival is going to be safe; it's going to be well run; it's going to be an *experience*. This guy knows how to put things together. He threw a festival last year in New Orleans that was amazing."

"You sound like the president of his fan club."

"I admire what that guy's doing. So seriously, you need to find a way to go. With that guy running it, it's got to be legit."

"How can I go?" I slumped on my pillows. "They already said no."

"Couldn't you just . . . go anyway? You're eighteen, right?"

I'd told him about my birthday a few weeks ago. The bed creaked as I turned onto my side. Out the window, the streetlights turned on, casting long, golden shadows into my room. "I don't know. I'm not even

sure the concert is me, anyway. It's going to be a bunch of rich kids."

"I'm not going to tell you to do something you're not comfortable with," Hayden said. "But it really will be the experience of your life. And if you already have a ticket, you have nothing to lose. Call your parents once you're in Myla. It's not like they're going to fly down there and haul you back."

"Clearly you don't know them," I muttered. But maybe Hayden had a point. *Could* I sneak out? It was certainly what Maria would have done. I remembered, when Maria returned from her three-day stint in Memphis, how my mother had been so angry until the moment she saw her daughter's face, and then she'd burst into tears and thrown her arms around Maria tightly, sobbing into her shoulder, just grateful she was okay.

"Look," Hayden said. "I'm going to tell you a story. A few years ago, before our freshman year, my family went on this trip to Arizona. And we got in a car crash. A . . . a terrible one."

I drew in a breath. "*What?*"

"We were driving on this winding road, and my dad lost control of the car, and . . . I don't know what happened, really. I just remember rolling, and glass breaking, and then nothing. We were stuck, Adri. In the middle of nowhere, in the desert. No one could see us from the road, with no cell service, no way to yell. Nobody helped us for *hours*. I really thought it was the end."

“Oh my God.” My skin suddenly felt cold. How did I not know about this? But I’d come into Huntley as a sophomore; if people knew about this, the stories had blown over the following year. “I’m so sorry,” I whispered.

“Don’t be,” he said. “I mean, we were eventually rescued. It all turned out okay. No one was badly hurt. And in a weird way, it was a great thing. It gave me clarity. I don’t worry about the little things anymore. I mean, obviously I don’t make choices that are going to screw up my life, but instead of being afraid to go for something I want, I just remember those hours in that canyon, thinking I wasn’t going to live. If I were you, this concert would be a no-brainer. I’d absolutely go.”

“Huh,” I said thoughtfully. I was still rattled by the idea of a younger Hayden lying in a ditch in Arizona with no food or water or chance of help. Something like that *must* change a person. I wondered how that sort of trial would change my parents. I wondered how it would change *me*.

I told Hayden I’d text him tomorrow, then hung up. I felt unsettled but also honored he’d trusted me with his story. It felt so intimate. Were we becoming . . . *something*?

If I didn’t go to Solstice, I’d regret it. If I *did* go—sneak out, in other words—would I even enjoy the festival, or would I be riddled with guilt and worry? But then, what was I worrying about, exactly? What could my parents really *do*? They wouldn’t take my college fund away—

that would be like cutting off their noses to spite their faces. They certainly wouldn't kick me out of the house, either, when they were still letting Maria live here. Was it possible that if I went and sent them an "everything's okay" message once I landed, over the course of the three days, they'd realize they'd come down too hard? That I was busting my butt and doing everything they wanted, and I needed to have a little fun, too?

I *could* just go. I was eighteen. No one was going to arrest me. I wasn't doing anything illegal. And, like Elena said, I was the responsible one—I wasn't going to binge-drink or take weird drugs or even crowd-surf. I would work eighteen hours a day when I got back to make up for my missed internship time. I would work double shifts at the diner on weekends to say I was sorry. But, hopefully, I'd have an amazing experience that I'd always remember. And, like Hayden had said, that mattered.

I picked up my phone from the bedside table. Elena hadn't replied to my text yet—chances were she was sleeping and hadn't seen it. I pulled up my last message and started to type. *Forget that! Please don't take someone else! I'M COMING. Pick me up for the airport early Thursday morning!*

The text made a *whoosh* as I sent it off. This message Elena saw right away, and she quickly replied. *Yes! YES! Can't wait!*

I sat back, my heart hammering, my brain humming.

I had to keep quiet about this for two days, but I knew I could do it. This was the best decision. This would be the most amazing thing I'd ever done. Next weekend, I was going to have the time of my life.

Or so I thought.