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The Vegas Diaries: A Memoir

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

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in

Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts

by

Kristen Anne Brownell

June 2013

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

The Vegas Diaries: A Memoir

by

Kristen Anne Brownell

Master of Fine Arts, Graduate Program in Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts
University of California, Riverside, June 2013
Dr. Christopher Abani, Chairperson

Las Vegas has been endlessly mythologized in film, television, and literature, but there’s never been anything quite like The Vegas Diaries. This memoir is more than simply a salacious tale of sex, sin, sleaze, showgirls, and sabotage—it is a story that takes the experience of transitioning from girlhood to womanhood in the most objectifying environment ever and makes it universal. It is a story that explores our struggle to begin life away from the family and the trauma of choosing a path our parents don’t approve of. It is a story about learning to live life on our own, about the challenge and exhilaration of becoming independent, about making mistakes and having to live with them.

Much like the city of Vegas itself, The Vegas Diaries is populated with a vibrant cast of loveable but cracked characters. Stereotypes of familiar archetypes are, along with popular clichés of the city, stripped away. We get to know the cast members and through their stories gain insight into why people come to this city in the middle of the desert and why it’s so difficult to leave. There’s an addictive quality not just to the lifestyle Vegas perpetuates but to its landscape, the neon and hyperbole and striking juxtapositions the city is famous for.
The Vegas Diaries is about my improbable journey from nerd to Vegas showgirl dancing in the most popular casinos in the town; about my struggles with drugs and alcohol, abuse and an eating disorder; about my love affair with Bacchus’ favorite city; and how I managed to escape from its seductive grip and start over. The Vegas Diaries takes you behind the curtain and shares in scintillating detail what it’s like to be a showgirl: the backstabbing, camaraderie, celebrity encounters, excess, dejection, and glory. The memoir chronicles how even the worst trauma can be turned into something positive; how I was able to overcome what at the time seemed like insurmountable obstacles; how I was able to make peace with my demons; and most of all, how this journey has allowed me to discover my true self-worth.
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Prologue

The day I decided to kill myself started out like any other except for one little thing: my boyfriend Kevin was in jail. And I was the one who’d put him there.

I couldn’t tell what time it was when I woke up on the floor of the motel room Kevin and I were calling home. For almost a year, we’d been moving from motel to motel, packing up and moving the day before our weekly rent was due. We were running out of places to go because we’d skipped the bill so many times. That week, we were staying in a motel shaped like a medieval castle. It reminded me of a much smaller, much cruder, much shittier version of Excalibur. Instead of tourists wandering around the casino deciding which slot machine to spend the night with, we had junkies wandering around the lobby deciding which hooker to spend the night with. Instead of security guards walking around the hotel dressed like knights of King Arthur’s Court, we had drug dealers walking around dressed in hooded sweatshirts full of crack cocaine.

Excalibur is part of the four-mile stretch of ostentatious artificial perfection most people associate with Las Vegas; anything beyond this nucleus is either forgotten about or ignored. Like most of the motels we’d stayed in, our crumbling castle was part of the often-unacknowledged squalid landscape of the city. At one point, I’d been a big player in the exclusive nucleus, a full-blown diva who demanded thousands of dollars and always got what she wanted because everyone wanted to fuck her, men and women alike. The day I found myself on the scratchy blue carpet of that tiny motel room, I’d transformed into just another Las Vegas pity case. I’d become a paradigm of the have-it-all-then-lose-it-all cliché.
I gingerly moved from my back to my side, smacking my aching head against something hard in the process. I let my eyes adjust in the dim light and realized I was looking at a short, stumpy leg of our coffee table. The string of sunlight between the industrial-grade window curtains indicated that it was daytime. I didn’t know why I was on the floor or how I’d ended up there between the sofa and the coffee table, but the empty, overturned bottle of Absolut a few feet away was an obvious clue. The whole motel room reeked of vodka.

I slowly sat up, relying heavily on my elbows. The bony knobs pressed into the floor, and I could feel the hard concrete under the thin carpet. Years in the entertainment industry had resulted in a debilitating weight complex and an addiction to coke and speed, but at this time, a year after I’d been dumped by my talent agency, I was at my thinnest: five foot seven and just over one hundred pounds. I was obsessed with weighing myself, which I did using the Exact Weight scale in the Showcase Movie Theater restroom next to MGM Grand. Kevin was working sporadically in construction and I was making a pittance as an on-call cocktail waitress at the Fremont Hotel, so there wasn’t much money for food, and what little money we did have was blown on drugs and booze. For once in my life, I wasn’t struggling to stay slim. A combination of poverty and drug abuse is the most effective diet.

I sat fully upright, crossed my legs, and rocked back and forth with my chin to my chest. The motion was childlike, but I found that it helped curb the nausea. Despite five straight years of hard drinking, I still had a horribly weak stomach. I suddenly became aware of the fact that I was alone in the motel room. Normally, Kevin would’ve been
sprawled out on the bed or on the floor next to me snoring like a bear, but the unmade bed was empty and the only company I had on the carpet was the furniture. As I rocked, I lifted my head and looked toward the door. A suitcase, a box, and a white trash bag full of clothes were stacked beside it, and I vaguely remembered that we’d been in the process of moving some of our stuff from the hatchback of my old Honda Accord to our room on the third floor. We’d checked in a few days earlier—right?—but hadn’t bothered getting too settled in. We left most of our things in the car if we knew we wouldn’t be in one place for very long. We figured the less shit we moved, the less attention we’d draw to ourselves when we fled like refugees in the middle of the night.

The red message light on the motel phone blinked to a silent beat, like a visual alarm clock. Neither one of us had a cell phone, so our number changed when our living quarters changed, which was annoying as hell to my employer since I was on-call. Our motto had become “Don’t call us—we’ll call you”, a joking playback to my days as a model and showgirl. Kevin was in touch with a few friends and relatives, but aside from my relationship with him, I was on my own. Thanks to my lifestyle, I’d lost the few genuine friends I’d made in Las Vegas, I’d fallen out of touch with my childhood friends, and I was estranged from my family, so the only people who called for me were motel managers with a “friendly reminder” that rent was due. I hadn’t answered the phone in months. I communicated exclusively through answering machines.

I knew standing up would result in vertigo, so I crawled a few feet to the end table and reached for the phone. After two attempts, I punched in the correct combination for the voice message system. “You have one message,” a monotone computerized voice
informed me. I tried to remember the number of days we’d been in the castle motel versus how many days we’d planned to stay. My concept of time was pretty much nonexistent. I didn’t know the date, what day it was, what month, what year. My hands shook and I ground my teeth uncontrollably as drug withdrawal kicked in. I rested my head against the end table and waited for the message to start:

“Kristen? It’s me, Kevin. Where the fuck are you? I said wait by the phone because I only get one call.” He sighed loudly into the receiver. The steady roar of agitated voices in the background reminded me of watching a neck-and-neck baseball game on television. “Listen to me,” he lowered his voice, “you need to call a bail bondsman. Bail’s five thousand. You need five hundred to get me out.” He paused. “Did we pawn all your jewelry . . . ? Maybe you can pawn your purses or some shit to get the money.” Another pause. He sniffed, and I realized he was crying. His crying always irritated me. “See what you do to me, Kristen?” He whimpered. “It’s your fault. I’ve never been like this before. You bring out this side of me—” His voice was silenced by a click and the maddening drone of the dead telephone line.

I put the phone back in its cradle and continued leaning against the end table, my insides racing with panic and my motor skills struggling to catch up. I tried to piece together what’d happened the night before. How long had Kevin been in jail? Why was he there? When had he called? Where was he being held? Everything was fuzzy. I blacked out on a regular basis thanks to mixing a bottle of vodka a day with various drugs, but normally it didn’t matter if I remembered shit or not. I did remember that there was a warrant out for Kevin—I’d pressed domestic violence charges against him a year
earlier for breaking into my apartment and beating me with a crowbar—but I didn’t know what’d triggered his actual arrest. Violence was the only consistent aspect of our six-year on-and-off relationship and neighbors had called the cops on us regularly, but normally we simply didn’t answer the door when they showed up. Normalcy for us wasn’t talking out our problems—it was yelling, hitting, and throwing things at one another. No matter how many times I’d tried to leave Kevin, I always ended up going back, and it wasn’t just because he threatened to kill me or himself if things ended. People who haven’t been in an abusive relationship will never understand the difficulty of leaving it. It seems melodramatic to say, but in extreme cases like my relationship with Kevin, the relationship doesn’t end—sometimes it can’t end—until one person is dead.

This was the reality of the mess Kevin and I had created of our lives. Even though he’d never carried out his threat, I was convinced Kevin was capable of killing. He’d been a loose cannon long before I met him, and for some reason I brought out his darkest side and he brought out mine. I didn’t want to think about what he’d do once he was out of jail. Past experience told me it wouldn’t be good. In fact, past experience told me it would be extremely bad. Fear festered in my stomach. I swallowed the hot bile rising in my throat and forced it back down.

I turned away from the phone and searched the dark room for my purse. Kevin didn’t know it—at least I didn’t think he did—but I’d become highly dependent on prescription drugs, and he also didn’t know that I’d been seeing someone behind his back for almost a year, a man who was both my lover (I’d even been so bold as to invite him over to fuck me when Kevin worked) and my drug dealer. I hid the Xanax and Valium he
gave me in a secret compartment of my purse and took a few when I wanted to counteract
the jittery high of coke or speed. I usually had at least twenty or thirty pills on me at any
given time. I wasn’t hiding the pills from Kevin because I thought he’d get mad—I just
didn’t want him to ask where they came from. And, quite frankly, I didn’t want to share
them with him.

My purse was slouched beside the bed, a crumble of pink and white Louis
Vuitton. The bag had been a gift from a casino executive and was a reminder of the
decadent lifestyle I’d once lived. It looked horribly out of place, like a diamond necklace
in a dumpster. I crawled to it, still unable to stand. The sharp bones of my knees scraped
against the carpet. I winced in pain every time my left knee hit the floor. The torn
ligament and fractured kneecap had triggered my swift downfall as a professional
entertainer in Las Vegas a year earlier. I’d shown up to my gig at Caesar’s Palace
completely smashed, passed out in the middle of a performance, and fell hard on that
knee. Most days, I would drink before work and snort speed to keep myself going, but
that particular night I was out of everything but Valium, so that’s what I took. I couldn’t
function without at least one drug in my system. When I woke up, I was lying on a sofa
in the dressing room still wearing my costume—no one had even bothered to take me to a
hospital. It was just as well—I worked freelance and had no health benefits, and even
though I was making several thousand per week, Kevin and I blew it all on frivolous
bullshit, so there was no money to pay a huge medical bill. Before I’d defaulted on my
cell phone account, debt collectors were calling me daily.
I situated my back against the bed and pulled my purse into my lap. My hands were still shaking with withdrawal and with panic. How the fuck was I supposed to get Kevin out of jail with no money and no resources? I imagined him stewing in his jail cell, staring at the clock, beating himself in the head with his fists, his fury growing by the minute. His accusation that this situation was my fault repeated itself in my mind as I pulled each object out of my purse and hurled it at the wall directly across from me. When the purse was empty, I unzipped the secret compartment, turned it upside down, and shook it violently. Tiny blue and white pills spilled out like confetti, like little pieces of adult candy. I chose three, filled my mouth with saliva, and swallowed them together. They tasted chalky as they hit my tongue and traveled down my throat.

I don’t know how premeditated other people’s suicides are, but mine was, like most of my behavior since running away from home at seventeen and going to Las Vegas, completely spontaneous. I’d had suicidal thoughts before, especially after being blackballed in the entertainment industry, which was the foundation of my identity at the time. But even being canned, broke, homeless, friendless, familyless, trapped in a piece of shit relationship, and reduced to serving free cocktails at the biggest dump in town weren’t enough incentive for me to kill myself. Having to face the wrath when Kevin got out of jail, however, was enough to make me keep swallowing those pills. I was convinced that if I simply packed my stuff and drove away to some unknown destination, he’d find me. I didn’t know where to go. I was addicted to Las Vegas and couldn’t see myself leaving. Maybe I was even addicted to my tumultuous relationship with Kevin and the constant tug-of-war between love and hate. I always figured I’d die there, and I
figured since Kevin would probably off me when he got the chance, I’d beat him to the punch.

I don’t know how many pills I took, and I don’t know how long it took for them to start having an effect. All I remember is the horrible feeling I had before I passed out. I thought the pills would just knock me out, like a chemical TKO. But the interaction of all the drugs in my system caused me to start sweating and dry heaving, then convulsing. I resumed my nausea-reducing rocking motion, which only made things worse. I felt like I was on a merry-go-round, my plastic horse moving up and down, side-to-side, backward, upside down, through the roof and into the sky above. I turned to the side and fell shoulder-first into the floor. I was at eye level with the remaining pills, which seemed to dance on the carpet in front of me. My ears began ringing and my heart desperately tried to escape from my chest. Unconsciousness came slowly as my body reluctantly shut down. The motel phone was in my line of sight, its red light blinking again. I realized that the shrill buzzing in my ears was actually the phone ringing. The noise faded as my heart slowed and my eyes began to droop. I tried to force them back open, a sinking feeling of regret passing through my core as I realized the finality of what I’d done. I was going to die that day. The red message light on the phone is the last thing I remember seeing.

Then, darkness.
Chapter 1

“What does that tat on your tit mean?”

I’d like to say my relationship with Kevin started out romantically—witty banter, flowers and candy, elegant dinners, a formal courtship, and all that other bullshit Disney movies teach young girls to expect—but it didn’t. The truth is that my relationship with him and my relationship with Las Vegas started with a casino bar, a low-cut halter top, and a bet I’d made with my friends to get laid that night. In the true spirit of Las Vegas, the series of events that changed the course of my life started with a gamble.

I swiveled in my barstool and focused on the guy to my right. My tattoo was only two weeks old, so of course I was eager to show it off. I’d gone to the tattoo parlor with my friend Valerie, pointed to a Japanese character on the wall, and less than ten minutes later I was permanently branded in black and turquoise ink. That evening, the new tattoo was displayed in red spandex. I’d even rubbed lotion on it so it would stand out more.

What can I say? I was seventeen years old, it was all about me, and I was desperate for attention.

“It means beautiful in Japanese,” I said proudly (I found out later that the symbol actually translates as “job well done”. So much for spontaneous ink). I was sufficiently buzzed by then, but I wasn’t wearing vodka goggles. I could see this guy was young and reasonably good-looking. His ash-blonde military cut, the deep scar across his nose, and hazel eyes the color of burnt grass reminded me of Kiefer Sutherland. He wasn’t the type I was typically attracted to—I had a thing for effeminate guys with unkempt hair, facial scruff, and slender bodies—but the fact that he looked under thirty excited me. My friends
and I were hanging out at Bellagio, which has a reputation for attracting fuddy-duddies, so we’d been hit on by nothing but old geezers all night. This meant lots of free drinks but no feasible opportunities to fuck someone and win the bet.

“That’s a good description of you. Can I see the whole thing?”

I pulled down my halter top without a second thought and showed off the one-inch by one-inch black and turquoise symbol on my right breast. Thirty seconds into the conversation and I was practically showing nipple.

“Cool. I have a few myself.” He rolled up the sleeve of his black dress shirt and revealed a tattoo on his left forearm. I cocked my head and read it: “Lost Cause”. The artistry was crappy, but I was impressed anyway. I didn’t have much experience with men, but I had an affinity for men with tattoos and tattoo culture in general, probably because they were my parents’ worst nightmare.

“Does that describe you?”

He laughed. “Sort of. It’s the name of my band.”

“Oh, really? Are you a singer?”

“Nah, I play drums. Miguel here’s the singer.” He gestured to the lanky Hispanic guy covered in tattoos sitting next to him. Miguel flashed a peace sign without looking up from his video poker machine. “Oh, and I’m Kevin, by the way.”

I held out my hand. “I’m Kristen.” We shook hands like old college buddies. His hand was strong and callused. “Nice to meet you.”

He pointed to my empty highball glass. “Want another drink?”

“Sure. Vodka cranberry.”
“Cool. Be right back.”

I looked over my shoulder at the empty casino and wondered what time it was. My friends Valerie and Reema had gone in search of a bathroom twenty minutes earlier and I hadn’t seen them since. They were both drunk and I’d started to worry after ten minutes, but the thought of searching for them in a monstrous casino seemed more pointless than waiting at the bar. This was 1999, which meant that only rich kids had cell phones. But I was driving, so they couldn’t leave without me. I turned back to the bar just as Kevin came back with the drinks.

“Here, beautiful.” He clinked his Budweiser bottle against my glass. “Cheers to . . . fuck, I dunno . . . cheers to meeting new people and changing lives.” He laughed, revealing a chipped front tooth. “So . . . you here alone? I seen you sitting here by yourself for a while.”

“I came with some friends. They’re in the bathroom.”

“Oh, yeah? You guys live here?”

“No, we’re from Southern California. Ever heard of Diamond Bar?”

He grinned broadly. I stared at the tooth. “Fuck yeah! I’m from Anaheim. Grew up across the street from Disneyland.”

“Seriously? That’s right down the freeway. Do you live in Anaheim now?”

“Nah, I live here in Vegas. Moved here six years ago.”

“Oh, wow. I can’t imagine living here. Everything’s so . . . I don’t know. Fast.”
“Yeah, it’s like that. But you can make good money. I just got a job as a bartender at a restaurant inside the Venetian. You know, the hotel that looks like Saint Mark’s Square? It just opened this year.”

“Oh, really? So you must be twenty-one, then.”

“Yeah, I’m twenty-four. How old are you?”

“Eighteen,” I lied.

“Cool. How long you in town for?”

“Just for tonight. We have to leave in a few hours.”

“Why? It’s Saturday.”

“Um . . .” I didn’t want to admit I had to leave because my mom thought I was at a slumber party at Valerie’s house. “I have a lot of stuff to do this weekend.”

He leaned in closer. His breath smelled like beer and peppermint. “Well, if you have to leave soon, maybe we can finish our drinks and go back to our place.” He gestured to Miguel again, who seemed to have fallen asleep on the poker machine. “We rent a house over on Desert Inn. It’s not too far from here. We got vodka and shit there.”

“Um . . .” I looked over my shoulder again. Still no sign of Valerie and Reema.

“Can you wait here for a sec? I’m going to look for my friends.”

“Sure. I’ll cash out.”

As I walked in the direction I’d seen my friends walk in, I wondered if Kevin would still be at the bar when I returned. I wondered if I even wanted to return. In spite of the bold wager I’d placed, going home with a random guy was something I’d never done before. In fact, I’d never even had sex before. It’s not that I was holding on to my
virginity for moral reasons—my little hormones were just begging to be indulged—there simply hadn’t been an opportunity to lose it. Up until the summer before my senior year started, I’d been an ugly duckling in every sense: glasses, headgear, baby fat, a back brace to correct scoliosis, and a nasty case of lazy eye. My transformation had happened swiftly. During the course of a few months, the brace and the headgear came off, I had eye surgery, and I got contacts. Suddenly, there were rumors that all the boys at school wanted to date me, but I had no idea how to react. None of them had the balls to approach me and I wasn’t confident enough to approach them, so even after I’d transformed, I remained untouched and unexplored. At the time I met Kevin, I was desperate for someone to discover my America, and he happened to be my Columbus: in the right place at the right time under the right circumstances.

“Hey! Kristen!”

I turned around and saw Reema punching buttons on a slot machine while Valerie leaned against it and smoked a cigarette. Seeing Valerie smoke was still jarring to me. I’d only been hanging out with these girls for a few months and they were completely different from the studious goody-goodies I usually hung out with. Valerie and Reema did everything the “hoochie-coochie” girls (as my father called them) did: smoked, drank, dabbled in drugs, slept with petty criminals years their senior, and drove to Las Vegas in the middle of the night when their parents thought they were at a slumber party. I was desperate to distance myself from my nerdy bookworm image, and the best way to do so was to become a hoochie-coochie girl. This trip to Las Vegas and the bet I’d made with
Valerie and Reema to get laid was almost like a sorority challenge to become an official member of their group.

“Were you here the whole time? I’ve been waiting at the bar for, like, half an hour.”

“Sorry. Reema wanted to hit some slots before we leave.” Reema had been gambling since we’d arrived in Las Vegas a few hours earlier. She was Muslim and gambling was a big no-no, but that and her other transgressions didn’t seem to faze her. I wondered if her drug-dealing boyfriend was funding her Bellagio gambling spree, because her job at McDonald’s certainly couldn’t be. “Are you ready? What time is it?”

I looked around the casino for a clock, a window, a door, or some other indication of time, but all I could see were slot machines and patterned carpet. “I don’t know, but we can find out at the bar. I met this guy and he invited us back to his place. What do you think?”

“No shit! Maybe you really will get laid tonight. Is he cute?” Reema asked.

“Yeah, I think so. He has a friend, Val.”

Valerie’s eyes lit up and she blew smoke out of her mouth haltingly. Whenever the three of us went out, Valerie’s pants were the last pair the guys tried to get into. She was a beautiful girl with big brown eyes, pouty lips, and curly auburn hair, but she was fifty pounds overweight. If Miguel falling asleep at the bar was any indication, I figured he was probably drunk enough to fool around with her.

“That sounds like fun,” Valerie said. “We gotta be home by noon, though, or my mom will have a cow. I don’t want her to call Reema’s house like she did last time.”
“Well, let’s go to the bar and see what time it is and you can check out the friend,” I suggested.

“Reema, let’s go,” Valerie urged. She stamped out her cigarette in a nearby ashtray, pulled out a compact, and began powdering her nose.

“Now?” Reema whined. She punched the button again and looked at the numbers on the slot machine eagerly. At that time, I didn’t understand the appeal of gambling. I couldn’t imagine getting a thrill out of pulling a lever or punching a button for hours at a time and hoping I’d be that one-in-a-billion person to hit the jackpot. It seemed like such a waste of time and money.

“Reem, even if you won the jackpot, they wouldn’t give it to you.” I leaned in close and whispered in her ear. “We’re not old enough to gamble, remember?”

Reema rolled her eyes at the reminder. “I know that, Kris.” She leaned back in her seat and stretched. “Look, I know you want to get laid, but Robbie’ll be pissed if he found out I went to some random dude’s house.”

“C’mon, it’ll only be for a little while. Just tell Robbie we were at Bellagio the whole time.”

“Yeah, Reem, Robbie won’t find out,” Valerie said.

Reema sighed. “Fine.” She punched the button one last time and the machine vomited quarters. “Let’s go. But just for a little while.”

I half expected Kevin to be gone when we walked around the corner and headed back toward the bar—his friend was wasted and I was just some chick he’d talked to for five minutes—but he was still there. His back was to us and he was trying to wake up
Miguel. A recessed light from the hood of the bar blazed down on Kevin’s head and accentuated a small bald spot, which I thought was sort of endearing.

I walked up behind him and gently touched his back. It felt solid and muscular through the fabric of his shirt. “Hey—I found them.”

He turned around and grimaced at the three of us. He was clearly having a hard time with Miguel. “Hey, girls. Just gotta get my bro up and then we’re outta here.”

“What time is it?” Reema asked loudly.

“The bartender said it’s almost seven,” Kevin answered.

“Seven AM?” Reema exclaimed. “Shit, I didn’t know we’d been here that long.”

“Here, let me help you,” Valerie offered. She bounced up to Miguel, smiled, and flipped her hair. “I’m Valerie. What’s your name, sweetie?” Although she was usually left out of bar flirtation, she was great at it when given the opportunity.

Miguel let out a hearty belch. “Miguel.” He looked Valerie up and down and grinned stupidly. “Hey, you’re pretty cute.”

Jackpot. I was going to get laid that night.

This may be hard to believe, but up until the moment I stepped inside Kevin and Miguel’s house, I’d never smelled marijuana. Valerie and Reema dabbled in drugs, but they knew I disapproved and never did them around me, probably because I had an annoying habit of reminding them how many brain cells drugs kill. So when Kevin took my hand and led me through the foyer, I couldn’t put my finger on the awful skunky stench in the air.

“What’s that smell?” I asked.
Kevin looked at me in surprise. “Haven’t you ever blazed?”

“Blazed?”

“Yeah. You know—weed?”

“Oh.” I wrinkled my nose. “No.”

“Dude, you’re missing out,” Miguel said. He sank into the green couch in the living room and pulled Valerie down with him. Reema hesitated before sitting on a folding chair next to the couch. Aside from the state-of-the-art entertainment center and stereo, the décor was pretty dismal. A drum set and amplifier kit stood in place of a dining room table. “Lost Cause” was spelled out in gray duct tape across the bass drum.

“So is this where you guys practice?” I asked.

“Yes.” Kevin walked to the drum set and picked up a pair of sticks. He twirled them in his fingers, impressing me with his coordination. “You play any instruments?”

“I played French horn in junior high.”

“Cool. Wanna try this?” He sat on the stool behind the drums and motioned for me to join him. Reema gave me a look. Valerie and Miguel were making out on the couch and she was officially a fifth wheel. I made a mental note to buy her breakfast on the way home.

I slid behind the drum set and sat on Kevin’s lap. I’d never been especially coordinated, which was quickly apparent as I took the sticks from Kevin and began to bang on the drums like a toddler with a pot and a spoon. He laughed into my hair. I looked up distractedly as Valerie and Miguel disappeared through a door just off the
living room. Valerie was practically dragging Miguel. She slammed the door shut with her foot. Reema glared at the door, then at me again. I shrugged apologetically.

“Here, lemme show you.” Kevin took my wrists and stepped on the pedal. Together, we played a basic beat. Reema watched for a minute before moving to the couch, lying down, and closing her eyes. I could see through the vertical blinds that the sun was completely up. I leaned back against Kevin and whispered in his ear.

“I have to leave soon.”

He lowered my wrists and took the drumsticks from me. “Let’s go talk in my room.”

I followed him through the cluttered kitchen and down a hallway. I’d seen enough to know that the place was small, stinky, messy, and outdated, but I didn’t think much of it. I figured after that night, I’d probably never see Kevin or this house again.

I was surprised to see that Kevin’s bed was made when we entered his bedroom, but everything else about the room disgusted me. The walls were covered with posters of marijuana leaves and porn stars, and a confederate flag was tacked to the ceiling. The wooden entertainment center was falling apart and piled with junk. A cardboard box served as a nightstand. And like the rest of the house, the bedroom had that skunky stench.

“Well, this is it.” Kevin tossed his wallet and house keys on the cardboard box and sat on the bed. He patted the comforter and smiled coyly. “C’mere and relax.”

I walked across the room, suddenly unsure about my decision to go home with a stranger, about my decision to go to Las Vegas in the first place. I looked at Kevin’s shit-
brown bedspread and thought about the comfort of my own bedroom. My mom and I had just redecorated a month earlier. I considered turning around, gathering my friends, and going home, but my competitive nature and aversion to failure reminded me that I’d made a bet and I was going to see it through.

I dropped my purse on the carpet and sat stiffly beside Kevin. He rubbed the patch of bare skin smiling over the top of my black pleather pants. My scalp tingled as he kneaded my back. I’d never been intimately touched by a man before, but I didn’t want Kevin to know that. He leaned in and started kissing my neck. I turned toward him and we began to make out. I wondered if he could tell I was inexperienced by the awkward way I kissed. I could tell he knew what he was doing by the way he grazed my body with his fingertips, the way he rolled his tongue slowly around mine, and the way he effortlessly unbuttoned my pants. When he pulled them down, he quickly discovered that, as usual, I wasn’t wearing underwear.

“That’s so hot,” he murmured. “I love your shaved little pussy.”

Not exactly romantic, but I smiled with pride nevertheless.

We adjusted on the bed so that Kevin was lying on top of me. I could feel his rock-hard erection rubbing against my thigh, and it occurred to me that I’d never seen a dick in real life. He slithered up and down my bare legs and pressed it against me. I lay under him like a mummy in a tomb. He seemed to be expecting me to undress him, but I was too busy trying to remember the oral sex tips Reema had given Valerie and me when we were on our way to Las Vegas several hours earlier: “Make sure you lather it up with lots of saliva”, “Rub the shaft up and down with your hand while you lick the head”, and
“Watch your teeth!”. The conversation had just been a way to kill time during the drive, but at that moment I wish I’d paid more attention.

Kevin lifted himself off the bed and stood next to it. I turned and watched as he unbuttoned his shirt, unfastened his belt, and stepped out of his jeans. He wore Christmas-themed boxers underneath, and I couldn’t help but giggle. He looked down and shrugged at the reindeer and snowmen dancing across his crotch. Then he pulled the boxers down and revealed his manhood.

At the time, I didn’t have anything but textbook illustrations from junior high to compare Kevin’s dick to, but as I’m writing this now after having seen many dicks, I must say he had a great one. In spite of the thoroughness of the sex ed teachers at South Pointe Middle School, seeing it up close was still a shock. I would’ve killed to see the expression on my face when his rather large member came tumbling out like a Christmas morning surprise.

Kevin watched me watching him. “What’s wrong? Never seen a cock before or what?”

I propped myself up on one elbow and looked at him. “I’ve seen plenty. I just . . . I just want to look at it for a sec.”

He directed his torso toward my face and began to stroke himself. I swallowed hard as that funny-looking thing, that pole with a mushroom head stuck on top, came closer and closer until it was resting on my bottom lip. I stuck out my tongue and licked it timidly for several minutes, afraid to look up and see the “What the fuck?” expression I imagined was on Kevin’s face. I held onto his hips for leverage, stared at his patch of
wild pubes, and pretended I was licking a Thrifty’s ice cream cone. He sighed impatiently and shifted his weight, and I could feel the frustration in his muscles. His dick tasted like sweat and sautéed mushrooms. After a few minutes of tentative licking, I stopped and looked up at him, wondering when we could move on to the next thing. I opened my mouth to speak when suddenly, he grabbed my head, pushed his dick down my throat, and forced me to deep throat him. He ignored my gagging and my attempts to pull away and catch my breath. I was stunned by the violent shift in his behavior. I closed my eyes and waited for it to be over. I thought about my parents and how much they’d disapprove of what I was doing.

After several minutes, he pulled out of my mouth and pushed me down on the bed. He pulled my breasts out of my halter top and began to suck on my nipples. I was distracted by some voices in the kitchen, but Kevin didn’t seem to notice. I lifted his head to mine and tried to kiss him, but he pulled away.

“You got blow job breath,” he complained. He sat on my stomach and began stroking himself again. I winced as he poked my clit with his free hand. His fingers were dry and rough. My vagina was so tight he couldn’t even get his pinky inside me. He sighed again with frustration, still holding his dick in his hand. Then a look of realization crossed his face.

“Hey,” he said accusingly. “You’re a fucking virgin, aren’t you?”

I had my chance to tell him the truth, but I didn’t know what was worse: admitting I was completely inexperienced or letting him think I was horrible in bed. Both options seemed equally humiliating. Ultimately, I chose to keep lying. Even on the first
night I met him, I couldn’t seem to be honest with Kevin. Maybe it was the tone in his voice or the look of abhorrence on his face.

“No. I’m just nervous, okay? I mean, I just met you, like, an hour ago.”

“Yeah, I know. But your—”

We both looked up as someone knocked loudly on the door. “Kristen? It’s eight o’clock. You almost ready to go?” Reema asked through the wood.

“Really? Eight? Shit.” The drive back to L.A. was four hours and I was supposed to be home no later than noon. I looked around Kevin’s bedroom for an alarm clock, but didn’t see one. “Is it really eight o’clock?”

“Yep,” I heard Valerie say. I wondered how long they’d been listening at the door.

“Alright, alright. I’ll be out in a sec.” I looked at Kevin apologetically “I’m really sorry, but I have to go.”

“I still don’t get why you have to leave so early. You got a curfew or something?”

The mattress squeaked under me as I leapt off the bed and started to get dressed. “I told you—I have a lot to do today.”

“Well . . . it was nice to meet you, I guess.” He leaned back on the pillows and closed his eyes. His dick was now limp, and it reminded me of a slug that’d lost its shell. “You can find your way out, right?”

My cheeks sizzled with humiliation. He didn’t even care enough to walk me out. “Yeah.” I picked up my purse and started for the door. “Hey—do you want to exchange numbers?” I found myself saying. “Maybe we can hang out again next time I’m in town.”
He was silent, and for a moment I thought he’d fallen asleep. Then:

“Fuck it—why not? You got a pen?”
Chapter 2

I met Kevin in November of 1999, and by the time January of 2000 rolled around, I’d gone to Las Vegas four more times on my own to see him. In spite of our disastrous one-night stand, we kind of grew on each other. Sure, I was making most of the effort to keep things going—calling, sending gift packages, driving eight hours round-trip to visit, using my allowance to pay for everything we did together—but I didn’t mind. I was in love and he was in lust. I knew he didn’t share my passion, but I was determined to make him fall in love with me.

My performance in school began to decline when I started hanging around with Valerie and Reema, which was at the beginning of senior year. As a result, my father had sent me to live with my mother full-time because he said he couldn’t handle my antics. I always found this to be comical given that at the time, he knew nothing about Las Vegas or my relationship with Kevin. I think it had more to do with the fact that he and the woman who’d triggered my parents’ divorce had just gotten married and she wasn’t interested in having my little brother and me around.

Mom had always been fond of drinking, but after Dad left her for a woman ten years his junior, she became a full-blown alcoholic. On my initial trips to Las Vegas, I was afraid she’d find out what I was up to and ground me for a year. But I soon realized that Mom was no longer living for my brother and I, her job, or anything else in life—she was living for her love affair with Popov vodka and boxed wine. I hated coming home to her drunken ramblings and tirades, so I spent most of my time at Valerie’s house. Dad was pretty much out of the picture at this time except when we needed him to pay for
something. Mom stopped using his name altogether and started referring to him as “the money”.

Kevin knew how much I loathed my situation at home. I called him almost every night to vent and told him I wished I could start a new life with him in Las Vegas. He always chuckled at this suggestion, and neither one of us took it very seriously. I was six months away from graduating, and in spite of his absence, Dad was hounding me to apply for college as a pre-law major even though he knew I wanted to be a writer. I don’t know why he was stuck on the law thing—probably because he thought it would impress our extended family.

On the day I decided to run away, Mom was waiting for me when I got home from school. Actually, I hadn’t gone to school at all, which was a habit that had become frequent. Instead, I’d spent the day window-shopping at the mall with Valerie and Reema. After spending a few hours at Valerie’s house, I went home to scrounge up something for dinner. Mom was sitting in the living room with the cordless phone in her lap and a highball glass in her hand.

“Where’ve you been, Kris?”

“I was at Valerie’s,” I answered as I shut the front door. “Why?”

“Ms. Irving called me this afternoon.” Ms. Irving was my high school guidance counselor. “She’s concerned that you’ve missed over thirty days of school in the past two months and she wanted to know why I’ve allowed you to be absent so much. She thought you had a serious illness or something. Did you forge my signature on some sick notes?”
“No,” I lied. “I don’t know what she’s talking about. The teachers probably marked me absent by mistake.”

“Thirty times?” Mom shouted. “Thirty fucking times, Kris! That’s a month of school!”

“I don’t know, Mom!” I shouted back. “Those teachers are idiots and so is Ms. Irving. I don’t know what else to tell you and I don’t care if you believe me or not.” I threw my empty backpack on the carpet and headed towards the stairs.

“You don’t care if I believe you or not?” Her shrill voice echoed off the walls of the stairwell. “You’re grounded. And I’m putting The Club on your car. Maybe I should send you to live with the money and his whore wife. How’d you like that?”

“Better than living in this shithole with you!” I called behind me. I reached the top of the stairs and slammed my bedroom door behind me. I wondered if my brother had heard anything from the confines of his bedroom. He was only ten at the time, but he’d quickly learned to retreat to his room when Mom got home and poured herself a stiff one. He knew she wasn’t the happiest drunk.

I went to the phone on my nightstand and dialed Kevin’s number from memory. My hand was shaking as I held the receiver to my ear.

“Hello?”

“Miguel? It’s Kristen. Is Kevin home?”

“No, dude, he’s at work.”
“Oh.” I paced the length of my room and contemplated calling Kevin at work. I’d done that once and the manager had gotten pissed. “Alright, well . . . I guess I’ll call back later.”

“Yeah, sure. Later.”

I let the dial tone ring in my ear for a while as I considered my limited options. No car meant no more freedom and no more trips to Las Vegas. I’d only known him for a couple months, but I couldn’t stand the thought of losing Kevin. You know how it is when you’re a teenager in love: the thought of losing that love is on par with losing your life even if your lover only sees you as a bar fuck. At the time, Kevin was amused by the whole situation, I think. He liked that my life revolved around him. He liked that I went out of my way for him. The way I treated him made him feel special and important. He knew I had strong feelings for him, but I don’t think he ever anticipated what I was about to do.

It was chilly that night, especially since Reema’s mother refused to turn on the heater. Mrs. Malik was from a small town in India where heaters were a luxury most people couldn’t afford, and even though Reema’s father was the busiest pediatrician in town, her mother still maintained her frugal ways.

“Haram da! That heater costs a fortune to run,” she scolded Reema in her heavy Punjabi accent. I was eavesdropping from the floor of Reema’s closet. “Use the blankets to keep warm.” Then she pushed past Reema and sniffed around the bedroom suspiciously, her ruby red sari flowing behind her.

“Someone else here?” She asked suspiciously.
I rolled my eyes as Reema glanced at the closet. I wondered if she could see me peeping through the crack between the mirrored door and the wall.

“No, Amman. I was just talking to Robbie on the phone.”

“Oh.” She clucked her tongue. “You know Baba and I don’t like that boy, Reema. Trouble, he is.” She circled the room once more and patted the lump of blankets on Reema’s bed, presumably searching for a body, before backing toward the door. “Go to sleep now, mera larki.”

“Okay. Goodnight.” She shut the door and waited a minute before coming over to the closet. “Sorry,” she hissed, pushing the door open a few inches. “I know it’s cold in there. Just layer up in some of my sweaters.”

“Okay,” I grumbled, pulling a wire hanger out from under my thigh. At that point, I’d been sitting in the same position for over four hours, afraid to move or make a sound. I wondered if Mom had discovered the farewell note I’d left on the kitchen table after our blowout earlier that night. Probably not. I’d snuck out when I heard her stumble up the stairs and into her bedroom. The stumbling usually meant she was down for the night.

Because sleeping conditions were so dreadful—a cold wall against my back, curry-scented clothes grazing the top of my head, and wire hangers poking me in the ass—I didn’t sleep a wink that night. You’d think nerves would’ve contributed to my sleeplessness as well, but I wasn’t nervous at all. Once I made the decision to leave home and go to Las Vegas to be with Kevin, everything else was strictly logistical. Mom had locked the steering wheel on my Corolla with The Club just as she’d threatened, so I’d called Reema and begged her to drive me to Las Vegas in the morning. I’d asked her
instead of Valerie because Valerie had a big mouth and I was afraid she’d blow my cover. I knew that once I started the process of running away, there was no turning back. If I got caught, I’d never live it down and I could kiss my freedom goodbye for good.

Kevin didn’t know anything about my impending plans. I hadn’t tried calling him back that night, partly because he didn’t get off until 1AM and partly because I didn’t want him to talk me out of it. My rationale was that if I just showed up on his doorstep, earnestly holding my suitcase in my hand and explaining how much the world had wronged me, he wouldn’t have the heart to turn me away. I never considered what would happen if he did turn me away—I was too determined.

At 4AM, Reema’s alarm clock exploded on the nightstand. I untangled myself from the mess in the closet, my ankles and knees popping as I stood up. We gathered my things—two suitcases full of shoes and clothes, my makeup box, and a duffel bag packed with books—and tiptoed through the house, careful not to disturb Reema’s parents. We were so concerned about waking them that we didn’t bother brushing our teeth or washing our faces. I figured we could stop somewhere along the way where I could get dolled up for Kevin.

We quietly packed Reema’s old blue Honda, our breath escaping like timorous clouds in the chilly winter air. I kept my eye on the front door as Reema started the engine and let it warm up. No sign of Mr. and Mrs. Malik. So far, everything was going smoothly.

We stopped at the Shell station down the street from Reema’s house, and she used a gas card she’d stolen from her mother’s wallet to fill her tank. Two coffees and two Egg
McMuffins later, we were on our way. We drove past the ice cream parlor, the post office, Bob’s Big Boy, the high school—all the places that’d been a part of my life since birth. I didn’t feel the slightest bit nostalgic. I was too focused on the future to reflect on the past.

My fascination with the desert started early. I’m taken with the barren landscape, the way the curves of the sand dunes meet the sky like ocean waves, the long stretches of nothing but tumbleweeds, canyons, and telephone poles. Then a spatter of life appears out of nowhere—an old dusty town, a GAS-CIGS-EAT sign, a truck stop, an abandoned water park, a cluster of trailer homes—and it makes me wonder why people choose to live in isolation, what they’re escaping from, how they ended up there, what they’re hiding.

The morning I ran away from home was the first time I’d seen the sun break over the Mojave Desert, and over the years it’s become my favorite time of day to drive through it. On a clear morning, the sunlight snakes across the horizon and illuminates the dunes in a soft rose and lilac glow. The shadows of the Joshua trees ink the sand and the rocks with long, strange thin lines; the geometry of their branches are beautiful and spooky at the same time. In the winter, patches of snow litter the ground and trail through the canyons like white veins. In the summer, steam seems to rise from the boiling asphalt and water mirages tease the eyes. In the fall, cool wind blows through the high desert and rattles the car windows like an earthquake. In the spring, patches of yellow and white flowers line the side of the road and intermingle with scraps of tire rubber and fast food bags. The stretch of open road seems endless, and before you know it, the odometer is
creeping past eighty, eighty-five, ninety, ninety-five, one hundred. It’s absolutely
magnificent. Until a cop pulls you over, that is.

California Highway Patrol officers are quite sneaky, at least the ones who work
the L.A. to Vegas route. They hide behind highway exit signs, in turnout areas, between
boulders, and beyond the curves in the road and wait for pedal-happy speed demons to fly
by. At any given time, there’s usually someone with a flashy Porche or Corvette who’s
going several miles faster than you are, but when it’s six in the morning and you’re one
of the only cars on the road, fifteen miles over the speed limit is enough to get you nailed.
And that’s exactly what happened to Reema and me that morning in January.

In all the times I’d gone to Las Vegas on my own, I’d never even seen a fucking
cop. What were the chances we’d be pulled over the day I decided to move there? I
glared at Reema as she pulled the car over and switched off the ignition. I convinced
myself that this never would’ve happened if I were driving.

As Reema and I waited for the cop to approach the window, I looked at her glove
compartment and wondered if any of Robbie’s drugs were in it. Reema seemed relatively
calm, but my heart was hammering in my chest. I’d been around cops my entire life—
there were several on my dad’s side of the family—but I’d never been pulled over by one
before. I wasn’t used to being on this side of the law. I wiped my shaking palms on my
jeans and wondered if criminals ever got over the psychological effects of their job.

The cop’s torso appeared in the glass next to Reema. He bent his knees and
peered down at us through thick wraparound sunglasses. He knocked loudly on the glass
with gloved knuckles. Reema cranked down the window and smiled up at him. A blast of cool air hit my forehead, which was starting to bead with sweat.

“Hi, officer,” she greeted him. “Cold out there today, huh?”

He lowered his head so that he was at eye level with Reema. “You were going a little fast back there. Speed limit’s seventy and I clocked you at ninety.”

“Oh, really?” Reema laughed. “Sorry about that. I really need to go to the bathroom.”

He looked at her for a long moment, then gave the car’s interior a quick onceover. I was grateful for Reema’s suggestion to put my stuff in the trunk instead of the backseat. “License and registration, please.”

I rummaged through Reema’s purse and produced her license while she reached for the glove box to get the registration. I could feel the cop’s eyes burning into the side of my face. I stared straight ahead, refusing to look at him. My heart began to sink as I pondered the prospect of returning home to face my parents, suitcases in hand, indefinite house arrest, The Club preventing me from escaping, Saturday detention until graduation, therapy, perpetual reminders of how badly I’d fucked up, and, worst of all, losing all contact with Kevin.

I held my breath as Reema opened the glove box. No drugs.

Reema handed the requested items to the officer. He studied them for a long time, glancing at the license, then Reema, the license, then Reema. Then he looked at me again. “Can I see your I.D., young lady?”
I made a big show of reaching into the backseat, opening my purse, struggling to find my wallet, and pulling out my license. He studied it for a while and repeated the same process: the license, then me, the license, then me.

“So where you girls headed? Vegas?”

“Yeah,” we answered together.

He looked at our licenses again. “Do you girls know you have to be at least eighteen to cross state lines?”

My heart sank even lower. I mean, really—what were the chances? What a fucked up coincidence.

“Well, we’re just going there for the day,” Reema said.

“For the day?”

“Yeah, you know—sightseeing and stuff like that.”

“Shouldn’t you girls be in school right now?”

“We have the day off today. Parent-teacher conferences,” she replied without missing a beat. I was impressed by the way the lies rolled so effortlessly off her tongue.

The cop looked at his watch, then out at the horizon, then down the licenses, then back at us. According to my uncle, who was a deputy sheriff, this cycle of glances was an intimidation method cops were taught during training. Reema was a different story, but it was working like a charm on me.

“I should write you a ticket for going so fast back there,” he scolded. “In fact, I should call both of your parents, turn you around right here, and make you go home.”
We looked at him expectantly. I thought about the note on the kitchen table. It was after 6AM now, which meant that Mom was headed downstairs to make her morning coffee. I was sure she’d seen the note by then. She’d probably called Dad. Maybe she’d even called the police. My note didn’t specify where I was going—it simply indicated that I was going somewhere far away and that I had no plans of returning. It indicated that my parents were assholes and that they’d ruined my life. It indicated that high school was a joke and there was no point in staying until graduation. Maybe the police were searching the neighborhood, the school, my friends’ homes, the local park where I sometimes played hooky. Maybe a missing persons report had been filed and this cop at the window had gotten word of it. Maybe—

“. . . but you got lucky today. My lunch break’s in ten minutes.”

And, just like that, he handed back the licenses and the registration.

“Be careful in Las Vegas. It’s not a town for little girls to play around in.” He gave us one last look before he slipped on his sunglasses, stepped away from the car, and returned to his motorcycle. We watched as he fired up the ignition and sped off into the rising glow of the sun, quickly disappearing behind a chain of big rigs.

Reema and I sat there for a moment, trying to absorb what had just happened. We turned and stared at each other for a moment. Then, we both burst out laughing.

“You should’ve seen your face!” Reema exclaimed. “I thought you were gonna blow it!”

“I can’t believe how calm you were!”
At the time, I couldn’t believe how lucky I’d gotten. I took it as a sign that dropping out of high school, running away from home, and going to Las Vegas to be with Kevin was my destiny. It didn’t occur to me that the reason I’d been able to go through with my plan was because a single cop let hunger get the best of him. I’m still not sure if I should thank that cop or if I should berate him. If he had contacted our parents, turned us around, and made us go home, I probably never would’ve made it back to Las Vegas—at least not for a very long time. When I returned home, I’m sure my parents would’ve monitored my every move until I graduated from high school. Maybe I would’ve gotten my diploma and gone off to live the life of a typical college student. Maybe I’d be sitting at a desk in some office right now with my law degree displayed on the wall. Maybe the law degree would be surrounded by a collage of pictures memorializing family vacations, graduations, holidays, birthdays, reunions. Maybe there’d even be a portrait of me at my wedding, smiling and gazing lovingly at my college sweetheart.

But obviously, that’s not the way things played out. And if they had, I wouldn’t be able to tell you everything that happened next.
Chapter 3

Three months after I showed up on Kevin’s doorstep with no money, no work experience, no high school diploma, no connections, and no one else to turn to, I was still walking the streets of Las Vegas begging for a job. I can’t tell you how many times I trudged up and down the Strip, sweat dripping down my face and my fair skin red from combating the sun all day. I probably could’ve gotten a job at Walmart or Jack in the Box with relative ease, but I was too proud to take something so menial. At the time, I didn’t understand that adults do what they have to do to make ends meet. I wanted to hold out for something I deemed acceptable—like working in a clothing boutique or a hair salon, for example—but Kevin and I were having a hard time living on his bartending wages alone. He’d even resorted to smuggling food out of Pinot Brasserie, the restaurant where he worked, just to survive.

Kevin thought my looks and outgoing personality were well suited for the service industry, so I narrowed my search to restaurants. It was the same story every time: I showed up at the hostess stand in sweat-soaked jeans and a tank top, asked if they were hiring, filled out an application, had a word with the manager if I was lucky, and was promptly told that not only was I too young to serve alcohol, I didn’t have nearly enough experience to work in their fine establishment. Then I’d go to the next place. More rejection. Rejection and I became fast friends during my time in Las Vegas. I couldn’t compete with the statuesque, fit, tan, busty, designer-clothed, every-hair-in-place, white-toothed, French-manicured, impossibly gorgeous women the city attracts. Even the cocktail waitresses, female bartenders, and food servers looked like Playboy models. I
was just a sheltered, uncultured kid from the suburbs of Los Angeles and had only seen people like this on television and in the movies. I quickly discovered that landing a decent job at a resort on the Strip is much harder than it seems. And my horrendous makeup application, split ends, and lack of style certainly weren’t helping. Kevin and I couldn’t even afford food, let alone a haircut and proper job-seeking outfit for me.

Kevin didn’t have a car and I’d given up mine when I left home, so every day, I took the bus from the house on Desert Inn and got off on the Tropicana/Las Vegas Boulevard stop. I started out at Mandalay Bay, which was the southernmost megaresort on the Strip at the time, and moved north from there: Luxor, Excalibur, Tropicana, MGM Grand, New York, New York, Monte Carlo, Bellagio, Paris. I applied to every single restaurant in every single one of these hotels. I had just turned eighteen and hostess positions were the most hopeful since they don’t require handling liquor. I must’ve submitted over one hundred applications. No callbacks, no interviews, no interest. Only rejection. Every day, I searched from midmorning to early evening. As I traveled the hot sidewalks alongside half-drunk tourists and avoided the seedy-looking people handing out fliers for escorts, I tried not to think about the fact that my classmates back home were participating in senior activities like picnics, carnivals, beach bonfires, and group trips to Disneyland. I hadn’t seen Valerie or Reema since arriving in Las Vegas, and neither one of them had called me. I didn’t call them because Kevin said the phone bill would be too expensive. I also hadn’t called my parents, and they hadn’t called me. As far as I knew, they still didn’t know where I was. Maybe they thought I was dead. I imagined them having a memorial service in my honor and throwing photos, momentos,
stuffed animals, and flowers into an empty casket, a large portrait of me propped up beside it. I quickly put those thoughts out of my mind.

Kevin didn’t like me riding the bus after dark, so when I was dead on my feet and drained from the walking, the sun, and a fresh batch of dismissals, I went to Pinot and waited at the bar until he was off work. Sometimes I sat at the bar for six, seven, eight hours straight. When I got bored, I walked around the Venetian and people-watched. Sometimes I went upstairs to the Grand Canal Shops and looked at the fancy clothes, shoes, and handbags displayed in the windows, imagining how they would look on me, convincing myself I’d be able to afford them someday. But mostly, I sat at the Pinot bar, watched Kevin work, and felt sorry for myself.

On a particularly bad day (I’d been rejected at a 24-hour prime rib buffet inside the San Remo. Imagine the nerve!), I showed up at Pinot earlier than usual and in desperate need of a drink. I wasn’t a big drinker at the time—I was only able to handle what Kevin called “pussy cocktails” like Bailey’s and wine spritzers—and usually I only drank Diet Coke or iced tea. But that day, I would’ve injected the liquor if I could have.

“What’s wrong with you?” Kevin asked as I sank dejectedly into a red cushioned barstool. It was a slow night and there was no one else at the bar.

“I’m so sick of this shit, Kevin. Am I really so pathetic that no one will hire me? I can’t even get a job at a fucking prime rib buffet in a shitty-ass hotel.”

Kevin reached for a glass and a bottle of Bailey’s. He must’ve seen the desperately-need-to-get-fucked-up look on my face. “I know it sucks, Kristen, but you
have to keep trying. I can’t support you. I told you that when you came here and it’s already, like, three months later.”

“I know.” He set the cocktail in front of me and I took a long sip. “I just wish someone would give me a chance, you know?”

As I said this, I felt someone pinch my sides playfully. I turned around and was face to face with Brian, the head chef at Pinot Brasserie. Most people referred to him as Chef Brian. He grinned and sat in the stool beside me.

“What’s shakin’, Spaz?” He called me Spaz because I was known to knock my glass over at the bar on a frequent basis. “How’s the job hunt going?”

“Shitty,” I replied shortly.

Chef Brian motioned for Kevin to get him a whiskey. Like most Las Vegas restaurant managers, he drank on the job regularly. “Look, honey, if we were lookin’ for a hostess, I’d get Alicia to hire you in a second.” Alicia was Pinot’s general manager. I didn’t know her very well, but I got the impression she didn’t like me. Maybe she thought I was a distraction to Kevin. “But all we have open is a pantry position.”

“What’s that?” I asked.

“It’s someone who preps and plates salads, cold appetizers, and desserts. It’s not all that hard, but Pinot likes to hire people with culinary degrees for kitchen jobs. You don’t happen to have a culinary degree, do ya?”

*I don’t even have a fucking high school diploma,* I wanted to say. My status as a dropout was something I didn’t want anyone to know. On job applications, I lied and said I’d already graduated. Kevin was the only one in Las Vegas who knew the truth.
“No,” I mumbled.

Kevin set a shot of brown liquid in front of Chef Brian. The scent of it made me want to gag. Then a look of realization crossed Kevin’s face. It reminded me of the first time we’d had sex.

“Hey, Brian, you should see if they’d hire Kristen to do the pantry job. It sounds easy as shit. It’s not like she’d be cooking the dinners.”

Chef Brian downed his whiskey. He ran a hand through his shaggy blonde hair and considered the suggestion. I wasn’t sure how I felt about working in a kitchen—I had no experience with cooking and I wasn’t one for getting my hands dirty—but at that point I didn’t have a choice. Kevin was right—he didn’t make enough to support us both, and stealing food from the restaurant was something that could get him fired. And then we’d both be screwed. Besides, working in the kitchen of a fancy French bistro at the Venetian sounded better than resorting to Walmart or Jack in the Box.

“Tell you what, Spaz—I’ll talk to Alicia tonight and see what she thinks. I hire all the kitchen people, but she gets final say. Maybe we’ll fudge and say you’re a culinary prodigy.” He laughed and rubbed my shoulder.

“Hey, man—hands off my girlfriend,” Kevin said. I thought he was joking, but his face clearly showed he wasn’t.

Chef Brian put his hands up in mock surrender. “Sorry, Kev. I can’t help myself around gorgeous women.” He winked at me, stood up, and pushed the shot glass toward Kevin. “Anywho, time to get back to work. Thanks for the refreshment, chief.”

“Welcome,” Kevin replied curtly.
“Stop by here tomorrow afternoon and I’ll let you know either way, Spaz.”

“Sounds good,” I agreed. “Thanks, Chef.”

“No problem, kiddo. Hope I’ll be able to help.” He turned and started walking back toward the kitchen, whistling “I Love The Nightlife” all the while.

“Well, that sounds promising, I guess. I hope there won’t be a lot of cooking,” I said. Kevin polished glasses in silence.

“What’s wrong?” I asked. “Aren’t you happy? If I get the job, we should be cool, right? It probably pays at least minimum wage.”

“I guess,” he mumbled. “But I don’t know if I want you working with all them guys back there. They cream their pants every time one of the waitresses walks by. They act like they never seen a woman before. And some of the chicks who work here . . . they start out all nice and then they turn into whores.” He leaned in close and lowered his voice. “You know that redhead Vanessa? She fucked a cook and two waiters and she’s only been working here two months.”

I waved my hand dismissively. “Kevin, you know I’d never do something like that. And I’m sure the guys won’t bother me if they know I’m with you.”

“Yeah. I’ll have to let those fuckers know what’s up.”

“Baby, you have nothing to worry about,” I cooed. I reached across the bar and took his callused hand in mine. “You’re everything to me. I just want us to have a good life together.” I almost told him I loved him, but stopped myself.

He finally cracked a smile. “Alright, then. I’ll talk to Alicia about getting you the job, too—she likes me.” He pulled his hand away as an elderly couple approached the
bar. On his way to greet them, he turned around and looked at me, his green eyes narrowing.

“Kristen?”

“Yeah?” I asked timidly. As our relationship went on, I started referring to this look as the Death Gaze. It was a look of condescension and contempt, even hatred. It was a silent warning that instilled more fear in me than anything verbal.

“If you get the job, I just hope you don’t do anything stupid.”

One week into my new job as a pantry worker at Pinot Brasserie, I quickly realized I was nothing more than a glorified dishwasher. I’d been hired to replace Hisanori, a Japanese exchange student who’d been promoted to garde manger (in kitchenspeak, this is the person who manages the pantry). On busy nights I helped Hisanori plate salads and desserts, but mostly I watched him do it from my position behind the big stainless-steel double sink. The sink with the never-ending stack of soiled plates, saucers, cups, and cookware. The sink overflowing with dirty water and industrial grade bleach. The sink filled with pan droppings floating like misshapen canoes in an angry sea. The sink that had become the bane of my existence.

The Pinot Brasserie kitchen was small and there weren’t many places to hide, but when the stress of the scrub, wash, and dry cycle became overwhelming, no one thought to look for me in the pantry walk-in refrigerator. I would sit in there on a stack of crates and eat mango sorbet from the container until the chilly air or Hisanori drove me out. In spite of our completely different backgrounds and the language barrier, Hisanori and I
became instant friends. He was the only man in the kitchen who didn’t stare at my ass and look at me with a lascivious gaze.

On the anniversary of my first month at Pinot, Hisanori surprised me by presenting me with the best dessert on the menu: chocolate soufflé. Chef Brian was fairly lenient when it came to the cooks giving employees free food, but he had a strict policy against soufflés because they were difficult and time-consuming to make. The execution of a soufflé has to be perfect: the measurements of the ingredients, the temperature, the level of water in the baking pan, the amount of cooking time. My mouth watered every time one of the servers walked by with one.

I was sitting on a crate in the walk-in catching my breath after a busy shift when Hisanori walked in, a ceramic dish cupped in his hand. He was tall for a Japanese man with a layer of too-much-free-food-at-work fat around his middle. He wore large, square glasses that he was always pushing up his nose with his index finger. He wasn’t a hunk, but he was never without a smile or a kind word.

“What is that?” I asked through a mouthful of sorbet.

He shut the walk-in door behind him and giggled. “Chocolate soufflé! I sneak it for you. You work one month today, yes? We celebrate!” He held out the dish and a spoon.

“Hisanori!” I said in delight. I tossed the sorbet container aside and eagerly took the soufflé. He’d even decorated it with a strawberry cut into the shape of a fan. “That’s so nice! God, I can’t believe it’s only been a month. Feels like forever.”
He sat on a stack of crates across from me and pulled a piece of raw foie gras from his smock pocket. “You like job no better?”

I sighed and dug into the soft chocolate. It was rich, warm, and creamy in my mouth. “I don’t know. I guess I saw something better in my future when I came to Vegas, you know? Something more glamorous. Something that pays better. Something where I don’t go home smelling like burnt meat and raw eggs.”

Hisanori ate the duck liver with his fingers and looked at me thoughtfully. “In Japan, no one complain about job. People happy to have any job.”

“You’re right. I should be more grateful,” I said out of obligation.

Hisanori smiled. “But you not. You look for other job?”

I shook my head. “No. It took me three months to get this one and I only got it because of Kevin and Chef Brian. No one wants to hire someone with no experience. Plus, it’s hard to look for another job when you don’t have a car. Cabs are expensive and I hate riding the bus with the scum of the earth.”

“I ride bus.”

“You’re different,” I said as I stood up. “You’re cool.”

“Cool?” He asked in confusion. “Cool like walk-in?”

I laughed. “No, no. Cool like . . . fun to talk to. Fun to work with. Fun to spend time with.”

He stood up and popped the rest of the liver in his mouth. “Oh, hai. You cool, also, Kristen.”
I patted him on the arm and slid the small soufflé dish into my pocket. “Thanks for the dessert. I hope you won’t get in trouble.”

“No. Chef Brian go home.” He held the walk-in door open for me and we both stepped out. The last table had been served and everyone was starting to clean up. We rounded a corner to go back to our stations and I found Kevin leaning against the sink, his white apron stained with a rainbow liquids.

“Where were you?” He asked accusingly.

“In the bathroom,” I replied. I didn’t want Kevin to know where my hiding place was. Hisanori was the only one who knew. “It was busy tonight. I wasn’t even able to take a break.”

“No shit. We were slammed at the bar.” He looked at the disarray of the dishwashing area. “Looks like you have a lot to clean up.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “I won’t be out for at least an hour.”

“Mmm.” He removed his apron and looked at the clock behind my head. “Me and Miguel invited some people over tonight to have a jam session. You mind taking a cab home by yourself?”

I tried to hide my displeasure at the thought of going home to a jam session. Lost Cause’s jam sessions were fueled by drugs—ecstacy and pot, mostly—and booze, and they usually lasted into the wee hours of the morning. The last thing I wanted to do was listen to loud, shitty music and deal with drunks and druggies after a long night at work, but my opinion didn’t matter. Kevin knew I didn’t like the house parties, which were
always attended by lots of girls wearing slutty outfits, but he threw them anyway. In
many ways, he behaved like he was still single even though we lived together.

“Okay.”

He pulled a wad of bills from his pocket and handed me two twenties. “Cool. See
you at home.” He pecked my lips and hurried toward the back of the kitchen. I watched
him disappear behind the meat grinder before turning to the mess in front of me. I could
see Hisanori peeking at me across the way through a stack of dishes.

“He leave?”

“Uh-huh,” I replied. I turned on the water and tackled a frying pan with a metal
sponge.

After a few moments of silence, Hisanori said, “I meet guys in sports book when I
finish. You come drink us? I pay.”

Almost every night after work, a group of Pinot employees met at the Venetian
Race and Sports Book to have a few drinks and play video poker. Kevin and I had the
same schedule—we’d asked Alicia and Chef Brian to do this so we could take the same
cab to and from work—and he disliked most of the people we worked with, so we’d
never joined the Pinot party at the bar. I still had no friends in Las Vegas even though I’d
lived there for four months, and the idea of hanging out with people other than Kevin,
Miguel, and their jam session attendees was enticing.

“I don’t know. It sounds like fun, but . . .”

“What?”
I recalled Kevin’s warning and his anecdote about Vanessa. I knew he wouldn’t approve of my having drinks at the bar without him. “I don’t want Kevin to get mad.”

“Mad? Why?”

“For going out without him.”

“He no trust you?” Hisanori walked across the aisle and began helping me with the dishes.

“I think he trusts me. It’s other people he’s worried about.”

“No worry—I protect you.”

I chuckled. “Yeah? You’ll watch my back?”

He twisted his neck and looked at the space between my shoulder blades. “Why? What wrong with back?”

“No, I mean will you make sure the guys don’t bother me? Will you make sure they don’t do anything stupid?”

Hisanori grinned and handed me a freshly scrubbed plate. “Hai. We have fun. It be—how you say?—cool.”

I turned around and looked at the clock. With Hisanori’s help, I could finish the dishes in half the time, have a drink, and be home when Kevin expected me to be home. I’d simply ask the guys not to mention it to anyone else at work. No harm done. No big deal. If Kevin could be social and hang out with his buddies, so could I.

“Alright,” I finally agreed. “Let’s do it. It’s only one drink, right?”

Every casino in Las Vegas has a race and sports book where gamblers can bet on sports games and horse races, but the bars in the race and sports books are often
overlooked by tourists who favor the grander watering holes in the hotel. This means that in any given race and sports book in town, you’ll find hotel restaurant employees sitting around the bar bitching about work and doing shots of Petron Silver. It’s the perfect place for weary servers and kitchen workers looking for quick access to alcohol and Double Down while still avoiding running into someone they served earlier in the evening. If you ever have a bad experience at a hotel restaurant but dropped the ball on confronting the server in the heat of the moment, look for them in the race and sports book.

At fifteen feet away from the employee entrance, the Venetian race and sports book is especially convenient for its restaurant workers. When Hisanori and I walked through the double doors and shuffled across the salmon and gold-colored hotel carpet in our hideous kitchen shoes, our coworkers were already three drinks ahead. They looked surprised to see that, for once, Kevin wasn’t by my side.

“Look who finally made it! I saved your favorite poker machine, buddy.” Eric, a line cook, slapped Hisanori on the back and signaled the bartender. We called Eric Biggie because of his watermelon belly and six foot six frame. “Get this guy a shot of Petron Silver.”

“And for the lady?” The bartender asked. My heart pounded as I waited for him to ask for ID, but he didn’t.

“Uh . . . Bailey’s on the rocks,” I finally said. The bartender nodded and went about making the drinks. My chest swelled with the triumph of getting away with underage drinking. Hisanori sat on the end of the bar next to Eric and I sat between Eric
and Michael, another line cook. I began randomly punching buttons on the poker machine, pretending I was gambling.

Let me pause here and say a few things about Michael. I was instantly attracted to him when we met on my first day at Pinot. His frame was petite, his light brown hair was on the long side, and his delicate features were somewhat feminine. His nickname in the kitchen was Cherry because his cheeks had a rosy glow most women would envy. Kevin referred to Michael as “that fag” and thought he was weird for quoting Shakespeare and reading books in French during his breaks. They were opposite in every way, and it seemed strange that I could be attracted to them both. But in truth, my attraction to Kevin was a bigger leap than my attraction to Michael. He was twenty-four and doing things I could only dream of doing: living on his own, pursuing his genuine interests in college, majoring in French and English, writing, studying Renaissance literature, and spending semesters abroad in Paris and London. If my parents had let me choose my own educational path instead of pushing for law school, these are the things I would’ve done. But I liked living vicariously through Michael. I didn’t interact with him much at work for fear of sounding like a dumb kid and for fear that it would upset Kevin, but I eavesdropped on his conversations with others. He was the most well spoken, erudite, and sophisticated person I’d ever known at that time. I knew talking to him would lead to trouble, so I was half pleased and half displeased to see him sitting at the bar.

“So where’s Kevin?” Michael asked as I settled in. “I thought you couldn’t do anything without him.”
I turned in my stool and faced Michael. I tried not to think about how handsome he was. I avoided looking too deeply into his stunning blue eyes. There was always a playful, mischievous twinkle in them. “What do you mean? I do things without Kevin.”

I watched as he curled his lips around his beer bottle and took a swig. “Oh, really? Like what?”

“Like . . .” I trailed off and thought about my daily routine. Kevin and I lived together, slept together, worked together, ate together, and ran errands together. He sometimes went places with his friends, but for the most part we were always together. I’d never really acknowledged how much time we spent together until then. “. . . showering?”

Michael laughed. “If he isn’t trying to sneak into the shower with you, there must be something wrong with him. I’d be in there every morning just waiting.”

I looked away and hid a smile. Michael may not have been the epitome of masculinity, but he knew how to talk to women. All the girls at Pinot thought he was the most desirable guy there. I wondered if he was the cook Vanessa had slept with.

“Well, I live with him, so of course we’re going to spend a lot of time together.”

Michael shook his head. “I never thought Kevin would get a woman to date him, much less move in with him. I’ve worked with him since Pinot opened and he’s always been a grade A prick. No offense.”

I looked down at the beige liquid in my cocktail glass and swirled my straw between the ice cubes. Other people at Pinot criticized Kevin behind his back, and I never knew what to say. As his girlfriend, I knew I should’ve stood up for him, but I didn’t.
Deep down, I knew they were right: Kevin was a hothead, he was hard to get along with, and he had a negative outlook on humanity and on life. Even his friends said that. It seemed like I was the only one who could see his potential to be sweet, kind, caring, and expressive. I believed I was the only one who could bring these qualities out in him. The only question was how.

“Do you have a girlfriend?” I asked, not sure I wanted to hear the answer.

“Not at the moment. I was interested in a girl I met in France, but that fizzled out. The long-distance thing is tough.”

“Yeah, tell me about it. Kevin and I did the long-distance thing when we first met.”

He took another swig of beer. “I know. He told some people at Pinot about it when you two first met. He said all he had to do was snap his fingers and you’d do anything he wanted.”

Embarrassment burned my cheeks. “He said that?”

“That’s what I heard. You know how it is in restaurants – everyone knows everyone else’s business.”

I looked down the bar at Eric and Hisanori. They were oblivious to everything else but poker. Across the bar, servers from other restaurants inside the Venetian were starting to fill the stools. It’s funny how every upscale restaurant in Las Vegas seems to have the same uniform: white button down shirt, black pants, black shoes, defeated expression.

“It wasn’t exactly like that. We were both into it.”
“It’s just that you were making all the effort.”

I turned and faced him again, annoyed. “Where are you going with all this? I’m just curious.”

“Nowhere, mon cherie. I just think you’re too young, too nice, and too pretty to be involved with such an asshole.”

“You sure are up front with people you’ve just met.”

“We didn’t just meet. I’ve known you for, what, a month?”

“Yeah, but we’ve never really talked before.”

“Sorry, but I don’t want your boyfriend to kill me. I do pay attention, though. Hisanori keeps me in the loop. He didn’t tell me you were hanging out with us tonight, though.”

I was flattered that Michael was interested enough to ask about me. “I hadn’t planned on it. Kevin’s having a jam session tonight, so he left right after work.”

Michael twirled his index finger in the air as if it were a party favor. “What a hoot. I bet that’ll be lovely to go home to. Does he know you’re here?”

I sucked the Bailey’s through my straw. “No, he thinks I’m still working. I have to leave soon.”

“Or else what?”

“Or else . . . I don’t know. Kevin will be pissed.”

“Doesn’t he trust you?”

“Maybe he doesn’t trust you.”

“Maybe you don’t trust you. If I were you, I wouldn’t trust myself around me.”
“Why?”

He glanced around, leaned forward, and gently kissed my cheek. His hand lingered on my knee. “Parce que je désire avoir le sexe avec vous,” he whispered in my ear.

All the blood in my body seemed to rush to the area where his lips and hand had been. “Uh . . . what does that mean?” I asked dumbly.

“I’d rather show than tell,” he said with a wink.

I looked over at Eric and Hisanori again. They were both observing Michael and I with interest. Hisanori gave me the let’s-talk-about-it-in-the-walk-in look. I looked around nervously, afraid Kevin would pop out from behind a slot machine at any moment.

“What time is it?” I asked no one in particular.

“Almost midnight,” Eric answered.

I slid out of my stool and gathered my purse. “I have to go.”

“Already? You only had one drink,” Eric said.

“One more drink, Kristen. It cool,” Hisanori said with a laugh and a goofy smile. I could tell the Petron was making him feel good. Michael looked at me with mock expectation.

“No, I have to go. It’s been fun.” I went down the line and hugged Hisanori, high-fived Eric, and awkwardly shook Michael’s hand, which seemed to greatly amuse him.

“See you guys.”

“Soon, I hope,” Michael said with a smile.
Chapter 4

I knew it was only a matter of time before my parents found out where I was, but I didn’t think it’d take them five months to find me. When the call from Dad came, I was home alone sampling the porn collection I’d discovered under Kevin’s bed. He was working six days a week, which meant I had one full day to myself to experience the joys of adult entertainment, although I didn’t tell him I’d found the well-used VHS tapes with big-breasted blonde women decorating the box covers. Between that and daytime soap operas, my days were full.

I hardly ever answered the phone because no one called for me, but when I was home and Kevin was working, he sometimes called on his break. He always came home in a fit if I didn’t answer, so I had the cordless phone sitting on the cardboard box/nightstand that night. I was deeply engrossed in “Nippin’ in the Bud” when the sound of the phone startled me. I hit the pause button and pressed the answer button on the cordless, expecting to hear Kevin’s usual “Hey, baby—what’re you wearing?” greeting.

“Hello?” I asked in my best bedroom voice.

“Krissy? This is your dad.”

The sound of my dad’s voice shocked me so much, I dropped the phone. I quickly picked it back up and hesitated, not sure if I should hang up or tell him he had the wrong number.

“Dad?” I finally said incredulously. “How—how did you find me?”
“Your mom found this number on her phone records,” he said evenly. Dad wasn’t one to raise his voice or lose control. Even in this situation he was as cool as the pantry walk-in.

“Oh.” I’d never considered that they might find me this way. I figured I’d have to be the one to call them eventually.

“Las Vegas? What the heck is in Las Vegas, Krissy?”

“I—I met someone. His name is Kevin.”

He was silent for a moment. “How did you meet him?”

“My friends and I came out here and—I—I met him at a hotel.”

“Which friends? That Valerie girl? I called her house about ten times and she said she didn’t know where you were. Did she drive you out there?”

“No, Reema did,” I sniffed.

“I called her house, too. Said she had no clue where you were.” He sighed into the phone and was silent for a long time. I thought he’d hung up until I heard the faint sound of a car horn and the oldies radio station in the background. Tears were rolling freely down my cheeks. I pictured him sitting at his workbench in the garage staring out at the neighborhood children playing in the street, spraying each other with water guns, completely oblivious to the harsh reality of being an adult. I walked across the room and turned off the television, no longer in the mood for the hardcore blowjob scene I’d been watching a few minutes before.

“Look, Dad, I’m—I’m sorry,” I said meekly.
“You’re sorry? Do you know how worried we’ve been? We thought you’d been kidnapped or murdered or some other God-awful thing. Your mom took a leave of absence from work because she’s been so upset. I haven’t slept in months. Your brother’s been crying every day and asking where you are and when you’re coming back. And all you can say is ‘I’m sorry’?”

I swallowed hard, but the bulge in my throat remained. “Dad, I—I don’t know what else to say.”

“Are you really planning on staying there? What’s the story with this guy you’re with? Is he your boyfriend?”

“Yes, he’s my boyfriend. He works at the Venetian . . . he’s a bartender.”

“A bartender? You left school and your entire family for a bartender, Krissy? And what are you doing for work? Isn’t it hard for a dropout to find a job?”

“I have a job, Dad.”

“Doing what? Stripping?”

“No, not stripping,” I said angrily. It was so typical of Dad to draw this conclusion. “I’m working at a restaurant.”

“A restaurant!” He said this as if it were worse than stripping. “Doing what?”

I looked out the bedroom window. Kevin and I had a view of the backyard, which was a dirt lot littered with trash and dog shit. Miguel had two pit bulls named Lucifer and Angel. Somehow, I doubted he recognized the irony of their names. Over the expanse of crumbling rooftops in our neighborhood, the sun was setting, its light illuminating the landscape like rays of spent embers. “I’m a pantry worker. It’s a decent job, Dad.”
“A pantry worker? What does that mean? You stock shelves or something?”

I sighed. “There’s more to it than that.” I didn’t want to tell him that the bulk of my job involved cleaning up after everyone else.

More silence. At this point, I expected Dad to beg me to come home. *Please come home. We miss you. It’ll be okay. We can work everything out.* But he said nothing of the sort. Instead:

“Well, I hope you’re happy with the mess you’ve made. Good luck in Las Vegas, Kristen.” My parents only called me by my full name when they were really pissed. “You need to call your mother. She’s worried about you.”

With that, he hung up.

I threw the phone across the carpet and wiped my face with the back of my hands. “Fucking asshole,” I shouted at the naked actors frozen on the television screen. I said this so loudly it hurt my throat. I paced around the room, not sure what to do. Then the phone rang again. I hustled toward the other side of the room, my heart pumping with angry adrenaline. I couldn’t wait to tell my father off when I hit the answer button.

“Yeah?” I spat into the receiver.

“Kristen?” Kevin asked.

“Oh.” I took a deep breath. “Hi.”

“What’s wrong with you?”

“My dad just called.”

“No shit? How’d he get the number?”

“From my mom’s phone records.”
“Crazy. What’d he say?”

“He scolded me for running away, then wished me good luck and hung up. He didn’t even ask if I was okay or anything. He just fucking hung up.”

“I don’t know why you’re surprised. From what I heard about your parents, they don’t give a shit about you. That’s why you left in the first place, right?”

In my heart, I knew my parents did give a shit, but I nodded in agreement anyway. “Yeah, that’s right. I guess that’s how I ended up here.”

“Just forget about them, Kristen. Forget about all that past bullshit. You’re here now. It’s just you and me.” He paused. “I know I haven’t officially asked you, but . . . will you be my girlfriend and shit?”

I was surprised by his proposal. I assumed that living together meant we were a committed couple, boyfriend and girlfriend by default. I hadn’t even thought to discuss it with him. A wave of jealousy passed through me as I thought about all the times he’d partied at the house while I was at work. What had he been doing when I wasn’t around? What did he tell the jam session sluts about our relationship? I couldn’t help but wonder.

“Yes,” I agreed. “I’ll be your girlfriend.”

I’d seen myself as Kevin’s girlfriend for months, so this moment was less about our status as a couple and more about my commitment to Las Vegas. There was no going back now, no changing my mind and returning home, no resuming high school, no heading off to college in the fall. I’d devoted myself to this journey for the long haul. But like most vows of faith made in this city, my official commitment to Kevin didn’t last long. Temptation was challenging me to a match the second I thought I had it beat.
After the encounter at the bar, I avoided Michael even more than usual. No one said anything to Kevin about my having a drink with our coworkers, and I suspected this was because Hisanori had told them to be discreet. But the more I avoided Michael, the more aware I was of his presence at work and the more I thought about him outside of work. Whenever Kevin walked into the kitchen to get something and we were all on shift together, I was sure he could read my thoughts and feel the sexual tension between Michael and I. When he left the kitchen, Michael would look over and wink at me. This went on for a few weeks until one night, Michael and I found ourselves alone in the meat locker.

“What do we have here?”

I turned away from the rows of lamb, duck, steaks, and whole chickens and there were those eyes.

“Hey, Michael,” I said shyly.

“Aren’t you in the wrong walk-in?” He teased.

“I was just looking for some . . .” I glanced around until I saw something that might be of use in the pantry, “. . . celery.” I pointed to a pile of green stalks. “Hisanori needs it for one of the salads.”

Michael smiled. “Hmm. I wasn’t aware we had a salad on the menu with celery in it.”

“We’re . . . experimenting.”
He stepped closer until we were just a foot apart. At five foot seven, we were about the same height, which made it difficult to look away. “Has anyone ever told you you’re a horrible liar?”

I laughed. “Am I? I thought the celery excuse was pretty good.”

He reached out and playfully flipped my long chocolate brown ponytail behind my shoulder. “So why are you really in here?”

I bit my lip. We both knew why I was in there: to “accidentally” run into him. I was slicker in my mind than I was in actuality. “Do you want to have a drink after work?” I blurted out. “Kevin’s having another jam session tonight.”

“Just the two of us?”

“Yeah. But not at the sports book.”

“Ah. Because you’ll get in trouble if someone sees us.”

I nodded, keeping a close eye on the walk-in door.

“I know where we can go.” He fingered a button on my smock, his hand resting just under my left breast. “Do you like sushi?”

“I love it.” Kevin hated sushi and we couldn’t afford it anyway, so I hadn’t had it since before I’d left home.

“Meet me by the Level Four elevator in the Treasure Island parking garage tonight after work. I know of a great place over on Flamingo. We’ll have some drinks, some food, some dessert.” He winked, then reached behind my head, grabbed a stack of ribeye steaks, and headed toward the door. “But don’t waste my time if you’re going to chicken out.”
“I’ll be there,” I said. He looked at me and smiled before letting the door slam behind him. I let a few minutes pass before I left the meat locker and walked back to my station. Chef Brian’s voice filled the kitchen as he hollered orders to the line cooks. Hisanori was frantically putting together an order of fifteen Caesar salads and eight fois gras appetizers. He pushed his glasses up on his nose with a latex gloved finger and motioned for me to help.

“Where you were? Big party in private room tonight!”

For the next seven hours, I worked distractedly alongside Hisanori and in the dishwashing station, anxious for the shift to be over, giddy with anticipation, thrilled yet frightened by the prospect of doing something I shouldn’t. When Kevin stopped by to let me know he was leaving and that I should find my own way home, I waved him off as I furiously scrubbed stacks of dishes. Michael gave me a look as he walked through the kitchen and tossed his smock in the big laundry basket by the exit, presumably on his way to the Treasure Island parking garage. I looked at the time and the work I still had left to do. I wondered how long Michael would wait, how long he’d stand there, how long it’d take him to come to the conclusion that I’d chickened out. My heart pumped with anxiety as the minutes ticked by.

“Hisanori,” I called out ten minutes after Michael left, “can I ask you a favor?”

He wiped his large hands on his apron and walked over to my station, which was a disaster zone, as usual. I still hadn’t mastered the art of kitchen organization. “Hai.”
“I have to be somewhere right now, and I’ll never get there on time with all this work.” I gestured to the full sink. “Will you finish up for me? Just this once? I’ll make it up to you, I promise.”

“Where you have to be?” He asked curiously. “Home?”

I glanced around, making sure no one was within earshot. “I’m going out with Michael tonight.”

“Cherry?” Hisanori hissed. “You tell this to Kevin?”

“No, of course not,” I hissed back as I shrugged out of my smock. “It’ll only be for an hour or two.”

Hisanori pursed his lips and began loading the giant dishwasher. “Okay. Be careful.”

I left him there to clean up and hurried through the kitchen. Just as I was rounding the corner toward the exit, I slammed into Chef Brian. His smock and apron were like a map of the Pinot Brasserie menu: duck broth near his armpit, coq au vin splashed across his chest, juice from a chateaubriand tenderloin running down his thigh, vanilla bean seeds marching up his sleeve. He looked me up and down and grinned, and I could smell whisky on his breath.

“Hot damn, Spaz! You’re a ten in street clothes.” I was wearing a form-fitting low-cut red top and skintight jeans (I was still in my hoochie mama faze). I was in decent shape at the time, but after working at Pinot for two months and sampling rich French cuisine on a daily basis, I was starting to develop a potbelly, which Kevin didn’t hesitate
to point out. I wrapped my arms around myself and looked down at the ground as Chef Brian stared at me.

“Thanks, Chef.”

“Where you headed? I thought I saw your boy leave a while ago.”

“I’m . . . on my way home, too.”

“You need a ride?”

“Oh, no thanks,” I said quickly. “I’ll just cab it.”

“ Alright, then.” He bowed gallantly and made room for me to pass. “See ya mañana.”

I waved over my shoulder as I left the kitchen, walked down the dungeon-like employee entrance hallway, and pushed through the exit doors. I studied the race and sports book bar, checking for Pinot employees, checking to make sure Kevin hadn’t decided to stay and wait for me. The bar was surprisingly empty. I shuffled across the carpet and wished I’d brought an extra pair of shoes. My black kitchen shoes were splattered with food matter and they made my feet look twice their actual size. Not a cute look. I figured Michael would understand since he worked in a kitchen, too. I left the casino through the heavy glass doors, the hotel music and bells and dings of slot machines gradually fading out.

At the time, the Venetian had a parking lot reserved for employees, but it was so far you had to take a shuttle to get to it, so most of us who had cars parked in the Treasure Island parking garage and prayed we wouldn’t get caught. There’s a bridge that connects the two hotels, and sometimes when we arrived early, Kevin and I would stand on the
bridge and gaze down at the Strip. He’d complain about the stifling heat and I’d ask for just a few more minutes to gawk. It’s a magnificent sight at night when each hotel is buzzing in all its gaudy neon glory. I never tired of this view, never tired of staring out the window of a cab and taking in this breathtakingly superficial environment, never wavered from the deep sense of fascination I had with it. I fell hard for Las Vegas. I still question what really kept me there: my feelings for Kevin or my feelings for this adult amusement park in the middle of the desert.

I crossed the bridge, not stopping to admire the view. I wondered what time it was and how long Michael had been waiting. I began to run. In my shoes, it was more like clunking. Everyone walking in front of me seemed to be traveling at a glacial pace. I felt my potbelly jiggling and made a vow to start an exercise routine the following day. I punched the button on the elevator and waited impatiently for one of the doors to open. Once inside, I was so frazzled I pressed the button for Level Five instead of Level Four. When the elevator finally reached my destination, I checked my hair in the mirrored doors and took a deep breath before heading into the garage. I didn’t know what Michael’s car looked like, but I assumed it was something compact like him.

I searched the area outside of the elevator. It was quiet and empty, and there was no sign of Michael. My heart dropped. It’d never occurred to me that he might be the one to chicken out. Tears of humiliation filled my eyes, and I scolded myself for being so hypersensitive. As I was standing there in defeat, a car honked behind me. I turned around and was face to face with an old lifted pickup truck that had a horrible matte gray paint job, mismatched tires, and a thick layer of dirt. It looked like a beater you’d take
off-roading somewhere in the deep South. I was about to move out of the way when a familiar face stuck his head out of the driver’s window.

“Bonjour, mon cherie!” Michael called down. “I thought you got cold feet.”

I tried to hide my surprise at Michael’s vehicle of choice. “Sorry—it took longer than I thought to get out of there.”

He jumped out of the truck, walked around to the passenger’s side, and opened the door. He had to stand on the tips of his toes to reach the handle. “You chariot awaits, mademoiselle.”

He helped me into the truck and slammed the door shut after two attempts. My thighs vibrated as the car idled loudly below. The interior smelled like gasoline and pine-scented air freshener. Michael hopped in beside me and grinned.

“Are you ready for some fresh fish? I know I am.”
Chapter 5

“We’re moving.”

The cab was heading north on Decatur Boulevard when Kevin shared this news with me. We were on our way home from work, and I’d been in the middle of a fantasy that involved giving Michael mind-blowing oral sex. It was now the middle of summer and our late-night dates had been going on for a month. I wanted to accept his open invitation to go back to his place, but there was never enough time. For the first time in our relationship, I was encouraging Kevin to have jam sessions. Longer jam sessions, even. “Really? I thought you hated them,” he’d say. “No, it’s cool. You guys are getting better,” I’d fib. By that time, my deception skills had improved exponentially. It’s amazing how carrying on with someone else helps you to become an expert liar.

“Moving? Where? Why?”

“Don’t know yet. I heard Kelli and her boyfriend are trying to rent out the guest house at their place.” Kelli was a waitress at Pinot. I didn’t know her well because she worked day shift, but everyone was in awe of her because she was a professional dancer in the Siegfried and Roy show at the Mirage. Sometimes the performers in the show at the Venetian visited the Pinot bar during intermission, which always caused a buzz in the kitchen. The guys would make excuses to go to the bar for a Coke or some cooking sherry just to get a look at the dancers. I spied on the dancers through the wine storage room, which was directly across from the bar. They were a breathtaking sight with their toned, lithe bodies and beautiful faces sculpted with makeup. They laughed at guys who
tried to flirt with them. They expected VIP treatment and got everything for free. They were demanding and bitchy, even downright nasty, yet no one ever called them out. I could only dream of living that life, being at the center of the universe, snapping my fingers and getting anything I wanted. At that time, I was still the quintessential nobody, a girl in a kitchen smock watching life happen from the corner.

“But why? Why do we have to move?”

“Remember that bathroom leak we had fixed last week? Well, the fucking asshole who repaired it told the landlord he seen pot in the house, so the landlord came over today and found the garden in Miguel’s closet and shit. He called me at work and told me. We gotta be out by Sunday.”

“The garden” was the name of the collection of marijuana plants Miguel was nurturing. It was actually very sophisticated with its automatic watering system, artificial lighting, and the number of different strains of the plant: Kush, Buddha, Purple Power, Venus, and countless others. Miguel wasn’t the brightest guy, but he knew weed. In six short months, I’d gone from no exposure to marijuana to daily exposure. I’d tried to smoke it a couple times, but it didn’t sit well in my system. I always got the spins and felt nauseous, and I still hated the smell of it.

“So in other words, the landlord is kicking us out.”

Kevin nodded sheepishly. “Yeah.”

“This Sunday, Kevin? How the hell are we supposed to pack and find a place to live by Sunday? That’s five days away!” The cab driver looked at us curiously through the rearview mirror.
It’s amazing what people are willing to say in cabs. It’s almost like going to confessional: passengers share the details of their transgressions through the glass barrier between the seats while the cabbie listens silently on the other side, nodding and throwing out the occasional, “You don’t say?” The same is true of bartenders and hairstylists. They’re the keepers of the world’s dirtiest secrets.

“Just calm the fuck down, okay? I’ll figure it out. I’m gonna talk to Kelli tomorrow.”

“Where does she live?”

“Off of Rancho, I think. I went to a party at her house once. It’s a nice place.”

“How far is it from work?” I asked, thinking about how much we’d have to pay for cab fare.

“I don’t know. I think it’s farther than where we are now.”

I leaned back against the cold leather of the seat and sighed. *Michael would never let something like this happen*, I thought to myself. I’d been constantly comparing Kevin to Michael, and Michael always seemed to come out on top even though I barely knew him. Our meetings were brief and usually involved me trying to justify why I was with Kevin, why I was working as a dishwasher, why I was living in a dump, why I was in Las Vegas at all. The scary part was that I could never come up with solid answers to these questions.

The cab pulled into our driveway. Kevin threw two twenties over the seat. Every day we worked, we paid forty dollars to get to the Venetian and forty dollars to get home. At five days a week, we were spending sixteen hundred dollars a month for
transportation. I’d been searching halfheartedly for a used car, but now that we were
going to be living even further away from work, it was time to kick the search up a notch.
Kevin was convinced he wouldn’t qualify for a car loan because he had bad credit, which
meant it was all up to me.

When we entered the house, Miguel was in the kitchen putting our hodgepodge of
utensils, dishware, and glassware into boxes. “Hey, dudes,” he greeted us. “What’s up?”

“So we gotta be out by Sunday and shit?” Kevin asked.

“That’s what the fuckwad said,” Miguel replied.

“What are you gonna do? I’m gonna call Kelli and see if me and Kristen can rent
out that guest house.”

“Shit, I dunno. Probably move in with my brother. He lives on the north side. It’s
fuckin’ far, but at least I can grow my plants there.”

I shook my head and walked down the hallway to our bedroom, anger building in
my chest. I looked at the bed and had the sudden urge to watch a porn flick. I wished
Kevin would go away so I could pleasure myself while thinking about Michael. Instead,
he followed me into the room and shut the door, a look of urgency on his face.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

He came forward and began to grope me, and I quickly realized he wanted to get
laid. I turned my lips away from his and pulled away.

“Not tonight, Kevin. I’m tired.”

He looked at me incredulously. “Tired? You’re always in the mood to fuck.”
“Well, I’m sorry, but you just told me five minutes ago that we have five days to
pack our shit and find a new place to live. I’m a little stressed out.”

“But fucking will relieve your stress.”

I began to undress, shielding my private parts from his view. “I said not tonight.”

I slipped into one of Kevin’s oversized T-shirts and got into bed. He showed his
displeasure by loudly unpacking his pockets and throwing his clothes on the floor. He
slid into bed beside me and lay motionless on his back. I turned on my side and stared at
the wall. Just as my eyelids started to get heavy and I was close to falling asleep, the
mattress shifted as Kevin got on his knees, forced me on my back, and straddled my
stomach.

“What are you doing?” I tried to push him off of me. “Stop!”

“Fuck this,” he muttered, pulling down his boxers and revealing his hard dick. He
began to stroke himself as I lay stunned beneath him, unable to move. He fondled my
breasts and looked somewhere beyond my head, maybe at one of the porn stars plastered
on the wall, and rubbed his shaft faster and faster. When he was ready to fire, he held my
jaw in place with his left hand and a stream of semen shot out and landed on my mouth
and chin, hot and sour to taste. When he was finished, he pulled his boxers back up, got
off the bed, and left the room, not bothering to clean up the sticky mess he’d made of my
face, not saying a word.

I lay there for several minutes and tried to take in what’d just happened. Through
the wall, I heard Kevin start the shower. I couldn’t decide if what he’d done was out of
line or not, but I didn’t want to be in the same room with him. I thought back on the first
time we were together and he’d forced me to deep throat him. This time, I couldn’t just get in my car and go home. This was my home.

I used the shirt I was wearing to wipe myself off. I put on a fresh shirt, grabbed my pillow and one of the blankets from the bed, and went into the spare bedroom of the house, which we used to store junk. Among the empty suitcases, broken furniture, and discarded clothes, I wrapped myself in the blanket and lay on the stained carpet. I squeezed my eyes shut and tried to fall asleep. I thought about Michael. I thought about my parents. I wondered what my old friends were up to. They had graduated from high school by then.

“Hey.” Kevin opened the door and turned on the overhead light, a yellow towel wrapped around his torso. He looked down at me as if I were out of my mind. “I’ve been looking all over for you. What the fuck are you doing?”

“I don’t want to sleep in there with you,” I mumbled through my cotton cocoon.

“Why?”

I sat up and wiped my eyes. “Because of what you just did.”

“What? You mean jerking off?”

“Yes, that.”

“So what? Kristen, you’re my fucking girlfriend. You should pleasure me when I need it and shit. If you don’t . . . well, I gotta get off somehow. I wouldn’t leave you hanging if you needed it.”

I stared down at my hands and considered his argument. “I know I’m your girlfriend, but . . . I don’t know. It made me feel . . . weird.”
He scratched his head. “I’m sorry. I thought you were into it.”

I knew that was bullshit, but I said nothing.

“C’mon, baby.” He knelt down and took my hands. “Stop being silly. Come to bed. We have a lot of packing to do tomorrow.”

I reluctantly followed him back to the bedroom, climbed into the bed, and turned to face the wall again. He wrapped his arms around me and quickly fell asleep with his head buried in my hair, his limp dick resting against my lower back. I replayed what’d happened in my mind and wondered if I was making a fuss over nothing. Maybe I was only upset because I wanted Michael’s cum all over me more than I wanted Kevin’s. This made me feel guilty. Maybe Kevin was right: I was his girlfriend and it was my job to fulfill his needs. I had no prior relationships to compare ours to, no experience with any other man besides Kevin, and no clue what was normal and what was not. So rather than seeing this incident as a foreshadowing of things to come, I decided to put it out of my mind. Little did I know this was only a small taste of what Kevin was capable of.

Kelli and her boyfriend Nick’s house was a breath of fresh air compared to the Desert Inn shithole. It was on a tree-lined street called Buehler in an older section of town with well-maintained ranch-style homes and manicured lawns. It was relatively close to Fremont Street and downtown Las Vegas and was one of the first tracts built when the city started booming in the sixties. It reminded me very much of the neighborhood I’d grown up in. As the cab pulled into the driveway, the anxiety I felt over having to pack and move as quickly as possible turned into excitement.
We knocked on the front door, which was decorated with a summer wreath. Kelli answered it wearing a tiny leopard string bikini and a lot of baby oil. She was blonde, bubbly, and in killer shape. I sucked my gut in self-consciously and tried not to be jealous. It wasn’t hard—Kelli was so nice you couldn’t help but like her in spite of her physical perfection. Unlike the dancers who went to the Pinot bar, she wasn’t stuck up or conceited. She showed us around the main house, which was on the small side but impeccably decorated. Kelli was a quarter Japanese and the art on the walls reflected that. Then she led us through the French doors and into the backyard, where an azure blue pool sparkled in the midday Las Vegas sun. Beyond the pool was a rectangle of green grass and a willow tree. Up until then, I’d seen little but sand and palm trees.

“Wow. I didn’t know you could grow willow trees in Vegas,” I said.

Kelli laughed. “Oh, yeah. Our water bill is a fortune, but anything’s possible here if you have the money.”

Next to the rectangle of grass was a two-car garage that had been converted into a mother-in-law suite. I didn’t like the fact that there were no windows—even the door leading into it was windowless—but inside, we had everything we needed: a living room, a kitchenette, a bathroom, and a bedroom. There was no room for a kitchen table, but we’d been living without one for so long that I’d grown used to eating off a TV tray. I opened my mouth to ask about doing laundry, but Kevin stopped me with his eyes. Apparently he wanted to do all the talking.

“What about my drum set?” Kevin asked. I rolled my eyes behind his back.
“Hmm,” Kelli tapped her bottom lip with her finger, thinking. I noticed Kevin staring at her body, probably wishing I looked that good. “I think we can make some room in the office. Nick’s guitars are in there. Maybe you two could play together.”

I was almost disappointed to hear this until I remembered that more jam sessions meant more time with Michael.

“Cool.” Kevin looked around the guesthouse again and nodded approvingly. “We’ll take it.” He said this grandly, as if we’d just purchased a mansion in the ritzy Lake Las Vegas community.

“Great!” Kelli exclaimed, clapping her hands. “You can start moving your stuff in whenever you want. Here, let me get you the key.” We followed her back to the main house. Kevin walked closely behind Kelli, admiring her backside. She handed Kevin the key. “By the way, you guys can park your cars in the driveway if you want. There’s plenty of room. Did you park on the street?”

“We don’t—”

“We’re looking for a new car right now and shit,” Kevin said over me. “We’ve been taking cabs everywhere.”

“Oh,” Kelli said with surprise. “Gosh, that must be expensive.”

Kevin squeezed my shoulder. “Kristen here’s gonna start looking once we get all moved in.”

I nodded meekly.

Over the next three days, Kevin and I took an extra day off from work and finished packing. Miguel had split with his garden the day after the landlord called,
leaving us to clean up the place and dump everything we didn’t absolutely need. We
rented a U-Haul and threw everything we owned in it. Our T-shirts were drenched in
mid-August sweat and our backs ached from bending, lifting, pushing, and throwing.
Other than running away from home, I had little experience with moving and did a
horrible job of packing efficiently. Kevin, on the other hand, was an excellent packer and
mover. When I asked if he’d moved much throughout his life, he grimaced and changed
the subject.

The day after we moved into the Buehler house, I kicked the car search into high
gear. My motivation was ignited by the fact that a big portion of our budget went to cabs,
which meant we couldn’t go out and do things on our days off, which meant Kevin and I
were always together and it was driving me crazy. I also secretly hoped that having a car
would finally allow me to accept Michael’s invitation to “hang out” at his place, although
I wasn’t quite sure how that’d work since Kevin and I would be sharing the car. I
borrowed Nick and Kelli’s phone and their copy of the yellow pages and started calling
car dealerships that seemed to suit our needs: used cars, repossessed cars, auctions, cars
for bad credit, cars for no credit. The conversation with the car salespeople usually went
like this:

“Hi . . . I’m, uh, looking to buy a car?”

“What kind of car are you looking for?”

“A cheap one.”

“How cheap is cheap? Fifteen thousand? Ten thousand?”
“Oh, I don’t know.” I knew nothing about financing, interest rates, or how much payments and insurance costs were. I thought all we had to do was show up, choose a vehicle on the lot, and drive off into the sunset. “Ten thousand?”

“How’s your credit?”

“My credit? You mean, like, a credit card?”

A chuckle. “So I take it you have no credit. Do you have a cosigner?”

“Cosigner?”

“Yeah, someone who’ll take over payments on the car if you default.”

To me, the salesperson was speaking Greek. “Uh . . . my boyfriend, maybe?”

“Okay, good. A boyfriend. How’s his credit?”

“Bad.” That was all Kevin had told me.

A sigh of impatience. “Look, if you have no credit and your boyfriend has bad credit, I suggest saving up and paying in cash. Otherwise you probably won’t qualify for financing. But you can come in and try. Just ask for me when you get here.”

Dial tone.

I had never shopped for a car before, so the thought of buying private party didn’t occur to me. Mom and Dad had always bought new, including the Corolla I’d left behind when I ran away. I often wondered what had become of my old car. I found out later that Dad had waited over a year for me to return home, realized I wasn’t, then sold the car to a neighbor for a pittance.

After a week of searching and no help from Kevin, I was ready to give up. I had no clue what I was doing and no clue that a seemingly simple thing like buying a car
would be so difficult. I stood at the big sink at Pinot and washed absentmindedly, scheming of ways to come up with ten thousand dollars, an amount I couldn’t fathom. The move had halted the jam sessions, which meant I hadn’t been able to see Michael outside of work for almost two weeks. The restaurant had been busy, so “chance” encounters in the walk-in had been out of the question. I was down in the dumps and I didn’t know how to dig my way out.

Toward the end of my shift, I went to my hiding place in the walk-in, sat on a crate, and began eating sorbet out of the container. After several minutes of staring off into space, Hisanori suddenly appeared above me.

“Something wrong?” He asked, sitting on a crate across from me.

I passed the sorbet container to him and he used his finger to take a bite. “It’s this whole car thing. I didn’t know it was going to be so hard. Who knew buying a car was so goddamn hard?”

“Kevin no help?”

“Kevin hasn’t done a fucking thing.” Hisanori cringed. He always did when I cussed. He said it was unladylike.

“What the problem?”

“We have no money, I have no credit, and Kevin has bad credit, whatever that means. I called all these places and they said I have to pay cash. Cash! Like I have ten thousand dollars lying around.”

“If you give big down payment, you should get finance,” Hisanori said thoughtfully. He handed over the sorbet container. “Just high interest rate.”
Even Hisanori, a foreigner who’d been in the U.S. for less than a year, knew more about buying a car than I did.

“But that’s the problem—we’ll never save enough money for a big down payment. We’re paying over a thousand a month for cabs!” I said through a mouthful.

“Take bus for two month and you get down payment.”

I shook my head. The cab rides were expensive, but I’d been spoiled by them. I refused to ride the bus again, even if it meant more cash in my pocket for a down payment. “I can’t wait that long, Hisanori. I’ll never be able to—I mean, I can’t do anything right now. I feel like I’m in junior high, having to beg people for rides.”

“I no have car. I take bus.”

“I know, I know.” But you’re Japanese, I wanted to say. “But you and me, we’re different.”

Hisanori nodded. “Americans . . . you all need so much. In Japan, many people without car.”

I put the empty sorbet container at my feet, crossed my arms over my chest, and pouted. Hisanori watched me quietly.

“I have idea,” he said slowly.

“What?” I asked flatly, not looking up.

“I borrow you money for car.”

I raised my eyes, wondering if I’d heard him correctly. “What?”

“You have five grand in the bank? Oh, my god.” At the time, that sounded like huge money to me.

“More than five grand. I never buy. I save. What I need to buy?”

I sat up straight, my energy quickly returning. “I don’t think I can borrow five grand from you, Hisanori. That’s a lot of money. But maybe two grand. Two grand could be enough for a down payment.” *And some new clothes, some makeup, and a haircut*, I thought.

“*Hai,*” he agreed. “Two grand—cool. Cool like walk-in,” he laughed. “Cool” was his new favorite American slang word. “I bring money tomorrow.” He checked his watch and nodded toward the door. “We get back before Chef Brian have fit.”

“Hisanori.” I reached out impulsively and hugged my two hundred and fifty pound Japanese benefactor. He smelled like garlic and Caesar dressing. “Thank you for doing this. I promise I’ll pay you back every dollar.”

He smiled. “I know you pay me back, Kristen.”

My promise was made with the best intentions, but deep down I knew I’d never be able to pay Hisanori back. Maybe he knew it, too. He’s probably the most generous and unconditionally kind person I encountered during my time in Las Vegas, and while I wish I had done a lot of things differently, not paying Hisanori back tops the list. I never told Kevin where the money for the down payment really came from—I told him my parents gave it to me—but I’m here to point out that without Hisanori’s help, I would never have been able to take that next crucial step toward adulthood.
If you ever pick this up and read it someday, Hisanori, wherever you are, I hope you can find it in your heart to forgive me.
Chapter 6

The used car dealership we went to with Hisanori’s money was on West Tropicana Avenue. We were drawn to this dealership because of the “Been Turned Down Everywhere Else? Bad Credit? No Credit? Bankruptcy? Financing GARUANTEED For ALL!” banner stretched across the entrance. The rainbow of balloons arching over rows of impeccably waxed used cars almost made me forget that this place was a last resort. A thick fog of desperation hung over the crowd of people walking up and down the aisles. They shook their heads as they looked at the prices painted on the windshields, carefully avoiding the polyester-clad salesman scouting the lot like vultures.

On the cab ride to the dealership, Kevin and I had discussed what kind of car we would buy. He wanted a truck or SUV and I wanted something compact. When I suggested a Volkswagen Beatle or Dodge Neon, he scoffed and said he refused to be seen driving a “bitch car”. When I reminded him that I was the one who’d done the research and come up with the money for a down payment, he reminded me that he’d been the one paying for our cab rides. Kevin and I constantly bickered about money and who was obligated to pay for what, and I usually backed down because he was the breadwinner and there was no way I could survive without him. I felt that I wasn’t contributing enough to question where our money was going. The person with the money has all the power, which I quickly realized after living with Kevin for nine months.

“Hey,” Kevin grabbed my arm as we began to walk under the ballooned archway. “Give me the money,” he whispered in my ear.

“Why?” I instinctively covered the flap of my purse with my hand.
“I wanna do all the business here.”

“You said you’ve never bought a car from a dealership before.”

“Yeah, but I’m older. Plus, people think you’re ditzy.”

“Ditzy?” I asked incredulously. No one had ever told me that before. “Who thinks that?”

“Doesn’t matter.” He pulled my hand away from my purse and opened the flap.

“Just trust me, okay? I know what I’m doing.”

My mind was still preoccupied by the revelation that I came across as ditzy. I dropped my arms to my sides and allowed Kevin to reach into my purse, take out my pocketbook, and transfer the stack of bills into his wallet. He looked around as he did this, making sure no one was watching.

“Okay. Ready?” He grabbed my hand and held it firmly, as if we were a parent and child walking through an amusement park.

As we strolled through the aisles, I pointed to cars I liked and Kevin did the same. Neither one of us agreed with the other’s picks. After a few minutes of searching, we realized that most of the decent cars in our price range were stick shifts. I hadn’t driven a car since leaving home, and before that I only had a few months of driving experience, so the thought of dealing with five gears and a clutch in addition to the accelerator, the brake, and everything else involved in driving a car scared the shit out of me. Kevin assured me that driving a stick was no big deal and that he’d teach me how, but I was still wary.
Near the back of the lot, there was a green Chevy truck parked off to the side dejectedly, as if it were the last kid being picked for kickball. The neon yellow numbers painted on the left side of the windshield told us that the car was going for ten thousand, our target number. Although the dealership claimed any average reject could score a car there for any price, we hadn’t seen anything going for less than twelve thousand. The place was false advertizing at its best.

“She’s a beaut, ain’t she?” A salesman with what looked like a barbeque stain on his blue dress shirt appeared at my elbow.

“No,” I muttered under my breath.

Kevin glared at me. “Ten thousand, huh?”

Barbeque Stain leaned on the hood of the car and grinned. “Ten thousand, bud. That the range you’re goin’ for?”

I had a sinking feeling as I saw Kevin smile out of the corner of my eye. He was intrigued by the truck. I tried to imagine myself driving it. Some girls look hot driving trucks, but I’m definitely not one of them.

“Yup.”

“Come check it out, guys! Don’t be bashful.” Barbeque Stain opened the driver’s door and held his arm out gallantly. Kevin stepped forward eagerly and I slowly followed. We stood side by side at the opening of the door and looked at the truck’s interior. It was pretty beat-up: tears in the seats, missing pieces of plastic, a nub where the stick shift handle used to be. The stick shift was long and phallic. There were dents and scratches in the evergreen-colored paint. The places where each limb of the truck came
together were awkward and uneven, as if it were a hybrid animal. The thing was a total piece of shit. This was definitely not what I’d pictured as the car Kevin and I would share.

“Oh, by the way—the radio don’t work, but you could always have it replaced,” Barbeque Stain said from behind us.

We walked around the truck, pretending like we knew what to look for. Neither one of us knew the right questions to ask: how many miles? Accidents? Number of previous owners? Will you knock the price down because of the cosmetic damage? We didn’t even ask to take it for a test drive. Next thing I knew, Kevin was nodding enthusiastically and Barbeque Stain was whisking us into the office. We sat at the table and nodded in agreement as he ran both our names through the system, verified that we were both as un-creditworthy as un-creditworthy could be, and quickly explained the financing agreement. There was something about a double-digit interest rate, five hundred dollar monthly payments, and a fifteen hundred dollar down payment (Kevin didn’t know about the other five hundred—I was keeping it for myself). Kevin pulled out his wallet and laid Hisanori’s money on the table. Barbeque Stain counted it and slid the contract across the table for both of us to sign. Kevin’s was the main name on the title and I was the cosigner. Even as I signed my name, I had no idea what those things meant.

As the keys were handed over and we walked outside to collect our new financial responsibility, I wasn’t as excited as I thought I’d be. I sat in the tattered passenger’s seat and remembered the day Dad had surprised me with the Corolla. He’d given it to me as an early graduation gift. I could still smell the new car scent, feel the leather under my
legs, see the shiny wood trim around the control panel. That seemed like it’d happened in a different lifetime.

The clutch popped out of gear several times and filled the air with exhaust as we tooted out of the dealership. Barbeque Stain was framed in the back window of the truck, waving and shouting for Kevin to stay in first gear until he hit fifteen miles per hour, then shift to second. Kevin followed this advice and we were on our way. I held the side of the door fearfully as we joined the traffic on Tropicana. Kevin’s eyes were wide and glowed in the light streaming in through the windshield.

“It’s been a while since I done this,” he said as he wrestled with the gears.

The drive home was one of the most stressful things I’ve ever been through. Kevin became angrier by the second as the clutch continued popping out of gear. We quickly realized that the fifth gear was broken. He looked over at me every time something went wrong.

“Stop looking at me like that!” He yelled.

“I’m not looking at you!” I yelled back.

When we finally reached the house, both of us were upset and exhausted. The thrill of buying our first car was gone, if it’d ever existed in the first place. All I wanted to do was go inside our little shack and lie down before work, but Kevin had other plans.

“You need to learn how to drive this thing,” he informed me. He got out of the truck and walked around the hood to my side. “Switch with me.”

“Now? But—”

“Yes, now.” He pulled my out of the seat. “Get behind the wheel.”
I circled around the car and hesitantly settled into the driver’s seat. Kevin started barking off instructions, telling me where to put my feet and how to shift into first gear. The coordination required for driving a stick was overwhelming. We inched down the street and onto the next one, popping out of gear all the way. Kevin hit the dash with both hands and asked if I was even listening. I began to cry as he told me how stupid I was. I watched in disbelief as he hit himself in the head with both hands. I’d seen his temper come out before, but not like this. He told me to turn around and go back. We were only five minutes into the driving lesson.

I managed to get the car back to the house and into the driveway. Kelli and Nick’s cars were both gone. I was glad they weren’t there to see how inept I was. Were they the ones who thought I was ditzy? Who thought I was? Did Michael?

I headed toward the guesthouse and Kevin followed closely behind. He shut the door behind us and I headed toward the bedroom. Would I be able to see Michael that night? I had to tell someone about the happenings of the day. I sat on the side of the bed and began to remove my shoes. I could hear Kevin rummaging around for something in the other room. I bent down to undo the clasp on my sandal.

When the objects started hitting me in the back, I thought I was in the middle of an earthquake, but I quickly realized it was an act of Kevin’s rage and not nature’s. I fell off the bed as something large and heavy plummeted into my shoulders and part of my head. When it toppled to the floor, I recognized it as my own suitcase, the one I’d been carrying when I showed up on Kevin’s doorstep. Other objects hit me at closer range: a glass candle, a hand mirror, a coffee mug, some of my books. Anything Kevin could get
his hands on. I covered my head and buried my face in the carpet, waiting for it to be over, wondering if it ever would be over.

The spray of wrath stopped. I peeked out at the room through the crook of my arm. Kevin was now in the other room. I heard the car keys jangling in his pocket as he opened the front door and slammed it, the guesthouse rattling behind him. I sat up and looked at the fan of household items around me, trying to associate the pain of impact with each one.

Some say that only people who were abused as children or experienced other physical trauma put up with abusive relationships, but I’m proof that that’s not true. I was never physically abused as a child, never raped, never molested by a relative, never exposed to domestic violence. Sure, Mom and Dad spanked me a couple times, but nothing worth noting. My justification for Kevin’s behavior was simply that I deserved it. I thought about how frustrated he’d been in the car and blamed it on my being a ditzy idiot and not catching on quickly enough. I believed I’d pushed him to violence.

I did consider leaving. I thought about throwing my things in my suitcase and taking off without a word the way I had when I ran away from home. But there was a problem: I had nowhere else to go. My family wasn’t speaking to me, I had no friends, and I couldn’t ask Hisanori to stay with him rent-free after I’d just borrowed two thousand dollars. I had five hundred dollars to my name and a car that wasn’t mine. Where the fuck was I supposed to go? I was completely powerless, completely dependent on Kevin.
I slowly stood and began to gather the objects on the ground and put them back in their place. I wondered where Kevin had gone and if he was coming back before it was time to go to work. I picked up my suitcase and repositioned it next to the front door. I straightened up the bedroom. It was as if nothing had happened. If the house could forget, so could I.

I was a zombie at work that night. Kevin never came home—Alicia told me with a look of surprise that he’d spontaneously asked for the night off—“Oh, didn’t you know?”—so once again I was stuck relying on a cab to get around. It was a slow night and Hisanori was off. I sat on the stainless steel counter and watched the minutes tick by, hating my job, hating my life.

Toward the end of the shift, Michael walked into the dishwashing station with a stack of pots and began to wash them himself. I watched him for a moment before getting off the counter lethargically and helping him scrub.

“Everything alright, sugarplum?”

“Yeah.”

“I need more convincing than that.”

I sighed. “Kevin and I got into a fight today.”

“What a surprise. Over what?”

“Well, we bought a car today—”

“Hey, that’s great! Maybe we can finally hang out like normal people now. What are you doing after work?”
“I don’t know. Kevin took the car out this afternoon and never came home. Then he called and asked for the night off.”

“You don’t know where he is?”

I looked down at the filthy dishwater and shook my head.

“Sounds like the perfect night to hang out. Maybe he went somewhere and shot himself.”

“Michael,” I scolded.

“Sorry.” He wiped his hands on his apron. “But seriously—why don’t you come over tonight? I’ve got some wine at home, some gourmet cheese, some music . . . ” He began to rub my butt with his hand.

Hisanori, the voice of reason, wasn’t there to remind me of the potential consequences of going to Michael’s apartment. Michael took my hand and led it to the waistband of his pants. Then my hand was cupping his hard dick (evidently he wasn’t fond of underwear, either). I kept my eyes on the aisle to make sure no one was walking by. I wanted to feel his hands on my body, wanted him to plunge himself deep inside me.

“Okay. Let’s do it.”

When our shift was over, we met at our usual spot: the Treasure Island parking structure. We were both unusually quiet as we rode in Michael’s big gray truck and headed east on Flamingo Road. His apartment was across the street from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. He parked the truck and we zigzagged through the complex, the sounds of television voices and the smells of dinner cooking on the stove wafting through the apartment windows. The concrete pathway was wet from the planter sprinklers.
Michael’s place was on the first floor. We stood together at the front door and I watched him open it. I thought about Kevin. Then I thought about what he’d done that afternoon. My back was still sore from the suitcase he’d thrown.

“Welcome to my humble abode.” Michael led me through the small foyer and into the apartment. It was small but tidy and nicely furnished. There was a big blue sofa in the middle of the living room, and perched on the back of it was a gray tabby cat. I squealed and walked over to it immediately. I’ve always had a weakness for felines. Forget a man with a dog—a man with a cat melts my heart every time.

“Kristen, meet Bob,” Michael told me. He watched me pet Bob. Then, his arms were around my waist and his lips were on my neck. I turned back and faced him, and our mouths met. Bob jumped off the couch and Michael turned me around to face him. He walked backwards with his arms still around my waist and through a door just off the living room. It was his bedroom. He flipped on the light as we stumbled into it. His bed was a California king and took up most of the space. We fell on it together and began undressing one another urgently, shirts and belts flying across the room.

Now, I know I mentioned before that I hardly ever wear underwear, but that night I happened to be wearing a pair. They were white with a pattern of stills from the “Garfield” cartoon: Garfield eating lasagna, Garfield giving Odie an order, Garfield making an excuse to John. I didn’t remember I was wearing them until Michael pulled my jeans down and started laughing. I followed his gaze to my crotch and saw why.

“Oh, my god,” I said, completely mortified.
He kissed one of the Garfields. “Garfield never looked so sexy.” He pulled the panties down and put his mouth on me. I ran my fingers through his hair and he looked up and made eye contact with me. I looked away, too shy to meet his gaze while he flicked my clit with his tongue. Then his mouth was on mine again, warm and tangy. He positioned himself on my torso and began stroking himself. It reminded me of the day Kevin told me were moving except that Michael was gentle and tender. He ran his fingers over my stomach and breasts as he rubbed his shaft. Then he exploded. I watched his face, loving every minute of it.

“Sorry,” he said breathlessly. “I couldn’t help myself. You have great tits.”

I became unaware of time as we made love, took breaks, and made love again. Bob watched us from the corner of the bedroom, licking himself as Michael and I explored each other in every way we possibly could. After four rounds, we fell into the pillows, exhausted. We lay side by side on our backs. I looked over at him. His eyes were closed, and I thought he was asleep. I closed mine and started to drift off. Then:

“Does Kevin hit you?”

My eyes snapped open. I could feel him looking at me. “Why do you ask?”

“I saw some bruises on your back.”

I was silent. Did I want to answer? Did I need to answer? My eyes filled with tears of shame. Would he think I was pathetic if I said yes?

“No . . . I fell earlier.”

“Where?”

“At work.”
“When?”

“Tonight.”

“Bruises don’t form that quickly.”

“Well, that’s what happened.”

He didn’t say anything else, but I knew he knew and I couldn’t stand that he knew. I turned my face toward the door, not wanting him to see my wet cheeks. Bob was still watching us. Michael slid his hand under the sheet and curled his fingers around mine. I closed my eyes.

When I reopened them, it was morning. Weak sunlight spied on us through the mini-blinds. I looked around the bedroom, completely disoriented. I looked to my side and saw Michael, his light brown hair embracing the side of his face. I searched the room for a clock.

“Shit!” I gasped when I saw the time. It was after 6am. I shook his shoulder. “Michael? I have to go. Now.”

He stirred and opened his eyes slowly. He licked his lips and looked up at me. “What, sugarplum?”

I got up and searched for my clothes. “I seriously have to go.” Had Kevin been looking for me all night? Had he been sitting on the couch in our little house with a pile of stuff ready to throw at me? I finished dressing and waited impatiently by the door as Michael put on his clothes and looked for his keys.

We were both quiet as Michael guided the truck onto Flamingo, then the I-15. The closer we got to the Buehler house, the sicker I became to my stomach. I shielded my
eyes against the sun. It was the middle of September, but Las Vegas remained hot as hell. I still wasn’t quite used to the extreme heat. I looked over at Michael. His hair was disheveled and his eyes were heavy with sleep. I opened my mouth several times to make small talk, but I didn’t know what to say.

When he reached my neighborhood, I told Michael to turn one street before Buehler. Neither one of us thought it was a good idea for him to drop me off in front of the house. He pulled over in front of a strange house and put the truck in park.

“You going to be okay?” He asked. He took my hand and played with my fingers.

“I hope so.”

“Are you sure you want to go in there?”

“I have to.”

He nodded. His face was contemplative. “Listen, I think it’d be best if we kept last night to ourselves. Don’t you think?”

“For sure. If Kevin found out, he’d kill us both.”

“I don’t doubt that.” He lifted my hand to his mouth and kissed it. “I had a lovely time with you.”

I smiled. “I did, too. I hope we can do it again.”

“Me, too. See you at work tonight?”

“No, it’s my weekend.”

“Well . . . try to call me later and let me know you’re alright, okay?”

“Okay.” I leaned forward and we shared a long kiss. I got out of the car and slammed the door. He waved through the window and drove away. I watched him round
the corner and disappear before I started heading toward the house. I thought about what excuse I’d use. Kevin knew I didn’t have any friends, so saying I’d been out with the girls was out of the question. I could say I’d been out with our coworkers, but I knew he’d ask around and find out I hadn’t been. Should I say I’d been kidnapped? The cab broke down and it took me all night to walk home? I’d fallen asleep in the storage room at Pinot? Chef Brian had asked me to work overtime? Nothing sounded even slightly believable.

I walked around the corner and approached the house, my fear building by the minute. Nick’s white Honda and Kelli’s green Ford were both in the driveway, but I didn’t see the truck. Was Kevin out looking for me? Was he walking around the Venetian asking people if they’d seen me? Did he have any suspicion that I’d been with Michael? Did he know where Michael lived? By the time I reached the door of the guesthouse, I was trembling with panic.

I opened the door and peeked around it. All the lights were off. Through the bedroom door, I could see that our bed was still made. An empty container of chicken tenders from Carl’s Junior was on the coffee table. They were Kevin’s favorite item on the menu. There was also something else on the coffee table: a note written on the brown bag the chicken tenders had come in. It was written in black marker and capital letters.

I sat on the couch with the note in my hand. I couldn’t believe my luck. I couldn’t believe my luck. It didn’t matter to me why Kevin was in California or the fact that he’d been gone since the afternoon before—I was off the hook. I’d slept with Michael and gotten away with it. It
never occurred to me that in spite of what he’d said, Michael would be the one who ended up blowing our cover.
Chapter 7

“Why are you doing it, anyway?”

I turned and looked lazily to my right. It was the day after I’d slept with Michael, and Kelli and I were lying out by the backyard pool, she in her signature leopard bikini and me in a bra and shorts. Kevin was out, probably visiting Miguel and getting high. He’d come home just a few hours after Michael dropped me off with no explanation of why he’d gone to California or what he’d done there. After fucking someone else all night, I felt I had no right to be upset at him, so I didn’t ask questions. When I felt guilt tapping me on the shoulder, reminding me what a horrible person I was, I thought about the tirade after the driving lesson and promptly told guilt to piss off.

“What?” I asked.

“Dishwashing.” She sat up and began rubbing oil on herself. She removed her bikini top and slathered the oil on her breasts. They were the color of brown sugar and covered in little freckles. Because she’d been a topless dancer for years, Kelli was perfectly comfortable walking around in next to nothing, even if there were several other people around. Kevin called her behavior “an abomination” behind her back, yet ogled her when she roamed the house in bathing suits and underwear. I felt exposed enough in my bra and shorts. The thought of walking around with no top and a thong was horrifying.

“Because it was the only job I could get.”

“Do you like it?”

“Um . . . yeah, it’s okay.”
Kelli pushed her sunglasses on top of her head and looked at me skeptically.

“Really? Come on—you can be honest. I won’t tell anyone.”

I shook my head and laughed. “Okay, okay—I hate it! I like the people, but I hate the job. And the pay is terrible. I’m worried about the new truck payments . . . they start next month.”

Kelli gazed at the pool thoughtfully. “Have you ever thought about going to some of the local talent agencies?”

“Talent agencies?” The only thing I’d ever done that required talent was the Miss Diamond Bar beauty pageant, and I hated every second of it. I hated walking around in my bathing suit, hated the heavy makeup, hated the big curly hair, hated the fake smiles, hated having to pick a talent to perform other than writing. The loud and obese director of the pageant couldn’t wrap her mind around my wanting to make writing my talent:

Me: “Can’t I just read something I wrote, like a short story or poem?”

Her: “What category would we put that under?”

Me: “Um . . . writing?”

Her: “Writing? That’ll bore the audience to tears.”

I was in drama in high school, so I chose acting as an alternative. On top of all the other things I hated about the pageant experience, the director didn’t take well to the Hamlet monologue I insisted on performing, so I’d dropped out of the race a month before it was to take place.

“No . . . never thought about it.”
“You’d be making so much more money. I could pay all the bills here by myself if I wanted to. All the money I make at the restaurant is just extra cash Nick and I use it to travel. We’re going to Amsterdam again next month.”

“Wow.” The farthest I’d been from home was the Grand Canyon.

“Can you dance or sing, anything like that?”

I thought about it. Could I? I definitely couldn’t sing—I knew that much. My family had always complained about how terrible and off-pitch my voice was. And other than a square dancing class I’d been forced to take in sixth grade, I’d never really danced. Sure, I put New Kids On The Block in my cassette player and danced around my room like every other adolescent girl of my generation, but no real dancing. I’d never even been to a school dance. Wearing orthopedic shoes to correct scoliosis and oversized glasses didn’t exactly cause the boys to line up around the block. The orthopedic shoes were awful: white with weird yellow platforms built into the soles. I used to hide an extra pair of shoes in a planter at school and make a daily switch. The back problems I developed as a result are still well worth it. I just wanted to be cool and wear Converse like Kurt Cobain.

“What kind of dancing?”

“Well, my agency prefers classically trained dancers, but sometimes they take girls who haven’t had formal lessons.” She leaned back in her lounge chair, her breasts fanning out. “You know, I think the agency’s hiring belly dancers for the Aladdin. The hotel’s reopening next month. I think Cliff’s the property manager there.”
“Really? That’s cool,” I said, humoring her. The idea of me as a belly dancer was laughable.

“Yeah.” She twisted in her chair and examined me. “You have exactly the look they’re going for. What nationality are you, anyway?”

“Italian,” I said quietly. At one time, being part of a big Italian family had been the foundation of my identity. My family appeared in my mind like flashcards: Dad putting bait on a fishing line, Mom planting flowers, Great Grandma Mary cutting squares of ravioli, my little brother dressed as a Ninja Turtle for Halloween, Grandma Gloria yelling at my cousins and I for jumping on the bed, Grandpa sipping his Crown Royal, aunts and uncles filling the house with boorish banter on Thanksgiving, Christmas, Easter. They’re loud and obnoxious and they make fun of each other and they burp and fart at the dinner table and they crack crude jokes and they watch reruns of “Cops” during family gatherings. They’re a spaghetti and meatball-devouring borta-bing freak show. They never say I love you but you know they do. They were going to castrate me for running away and betraying them, for going to Las Vegas, for doing things they couldn’t fathom, for making everybody worry. It’d be years before I grew the balls to face them again.

Kelli leapt out of her chair. “Seriously, Kristen, I think you should talk to my agency. Hang on a sec.” She disappeared through the French doors and remerged with a business card. She handed it to me. “Go down there right away. Those spots’ll fill up fast.”
I held the card hesitantly, as if it had been thrust upon me by an aggressive salesperson at a mall kiosk. “Um . . . okay.”

“Seriously—go put that card in a safe place.” Kelli turned me around and gently pushed me toward the guesthouse. I shrugged and took the card to the house, prepared to toss it on the kitchen counter where it’d quickly be lost, thrown away, or used as a piece of scrap paper. I dropped it on the tile, walked away, and sat on the couch. I turned on the television and waited for my subconscious to erase the memory of the card and of Kelli’s suggestion. But they both lingered in the room and filled the space with their presence. It was the presence of possibility. Could it really be as simple as Kelli made it out to be? Would they make me audition or hire me on looks alone? Would they think I was fat? Would they notice my potbelly? Would they laugh me out of the room? What the hell did I know about belly dancing? Would I be stuck working at the restaurant forever? How were Kevin and I going to make the first truck payment? How would Kevin feel about my being a dancer? What would—

“You fucked that gay little fag?”

I turned to the door. Kevin was standing there with a crowbar in his hand. I hadn’t heard him come in.

“What?” I stammered.

“That fucking fag Michael. That line cook.” He stepped closer. Was Kelli still outside? “You fuck him the other night? Don’t lie to me.”

“Where did you hear that?” I slid off the couch and stepped backward as he stepped forward. I stared at the crowbar. How many blows would it take? Just one? A
few? Where would he bury my body? How would my parents find out? Was I afraid to
die? Did heaven exist? Did I believe in God?

“Chris the busser. He says Michael told a bunch of people at the restaurant and
shit. Is it true?”

My heart fell ten stories. “Michael told people that?”

“That’s what the fuck I said.”

My back was against the kitchen counter. “He’s lying,” I blurted out.

Kevin was in my face. The crowbar was clenched in his hand. He looked down at
me accusingly. His striking green eyes were his best and worst feature. When he was
content, I could see the leaves of Eden in them. When he was upset, I could see the horror
of Dante’s *Inferno*.

“Why would he lie about it?”

“I don’t know.” Could he tell I was lying?

He looked at me searchingly. “So if I ask that pussy if he fucked you, he’ll say it’s
all bullshit?”

How could Michael have done this? The fear I felt was quickly turning into anger.

What the *fuck*? “Yes. It’s all bullshit,” I insisted. I put my hands on his shoulders.

“Kevin, I swear—it’s all bullshit.”

He sighed. His grip on the crowbar loosened. He turned away from me and started
pacing the length of the living room. “Kristen, I told you before you got the job not to do
anything stupid. I really hope you didn’t. If I find out that motherfucker fucked you, I’ll
kill him. Do you understand?”
I nodded. I wasn’t sure if I believed him or not.

He slid the crowbar between his palms, thinking. “I want you to quit.”

“What? But—why?”

“I don’t want you around them guys anymore. I want you to quit. Call Brian tonight and tell him.”

“I can’t quit, Kevin—we need the money. We just bought that truck! What are we supposed to do?”

“Find something else. I’ll cover the first truck payment.”

“But—”

“Kristen.” He took a deep breath and steadied himself. “Please. Just do it. Go use Nick and Kelli’s phone. Do it now.” He opened the door and gestured toward the main house with the crowbar. I followed the order, too scared to argue.

Leaving a job abruptly is the strangest thing. There are so many unsettled feelings, so many things you wish you would’ve said and done during your last shift but you didn’t because, well, how could you have known it was your last shift? Calling Chef Brian that day and telling him I was never coming back was the first of many jobs I quit on a whim. You imagine people hearing the news and wondering what happened. The Hisanoris and Michaels you worked with will feel betrayed. They will feel that you at least owed them a fucking phone call, goddamnit. Your Japanese benefactor will never get his two thousand dollars back because you will never see him again. Your departure will become a massive game of Telephone. Years later, you may run into one of your old coworkers and they’ll say they thought you’d gone to Arkansas and become a prostitute.
But you move on and you try to forget. You try to erase that period in your life like an Etch a Sketch drawing because that’s all you can do. But the drawings are never really gone—just buried under sketches of other mistakes. They are always there, always waiting to reemerge. And eventually, they do.

The business card Kelli had given me was still on the counter. It hadn’t moved since I’d put it there three weeks earlier. I’d been aware of it as I conducted the second job search of my life, circled ads in the Las Vegas Sun, drove around town applying for positions in restaurants on and off the Strip. Having a car helped, but the six months I’d worked at the restaurant weren’t. It was still the same story—I was too young and too inexperienced. You did what at your last job? Washed dishes? Ha! An invalid could do that. How old are you? Eighteen? Fuck off until you’re twenty-one, sweetie.

The card and I were both so stubborn. I refused to pick it up because I was convinced that I’d never get hired by a talent agency and the card refused to disappear into the ether. There it was day after day, proud and defiant on the white kitchen tile. When Kevin saw the card, he asked where it’d come from. I said I didn’t know. Not sure, babe—must’ve been there before we moved in. I didn’t want to tell him I was considering paying a visit to the agency. I knew he’d discourage me and say what a stupid idea it was. And maybe it was a stupid idea. But it was an idea I couldn’t let go of. I had to find out one way or the other before I resigned myself to scrubbing pots and pans for the rest of my life.

I tried calling the agency several times to make an appointment, but couldn’t get through. After two days of busy signals, I decided to fuck everything and go down there
in person. I put on my best outfit—a black blazer and black pants purchased from Goodwill—and told Kevin I had an interview at a made-up restaurant so he’d let me take the car. He only let me take the car when I had a specific purpose like grocery shopping, going to the post office, or job-hunting. I’d taught myself how to navigate the stick shift and was getting better at it, but I still popped out of gear every time the light turned from red to green. I looked at the directions I’d written on a magazine ad for Maybelline makeup. Part of a direction had been lost in the model’s dark hair. I took three wrong turns before I found the address. Las Vegas was still so big to me at that time, still so foreign.

I pulled into the parking lot. The building was unassuming enough—a plain white office building with tinted windows—but my heart began hammering the second I killed the ignition. I sat in the truck and stared at the entrance. There was still time to reconsider. I turned the rearview mirror downward, took my sunglasses off, and studied myself. Was I beautiful? Everyone said I was, but I wasn’t convinced. I had wavy waist-length hair, dark and thick like my grandmother’s when she was a girl. Like my father, my eyes couldn’t make up their mind about what color they wanted to be: sometimes they were green, sometimes amber, sometimes brown. My eyebrows were full like Brooke Shields’. My cheeks had the plumpness of a girl who hasn’t lost all her baby fat. My teeth were straight other than one crooked bottom tooth. Looking at myself was still a strange experience. I’d worn glasses for so long that I was still getting used to seeing myself without them.
I got out of the truck and headed to the door. I kept telling myself I didn’t care what happened, but the more I thought about the possibilities, the more I wanted to imitate what Kelli was doing. If I was a dancer like her—if I made enough money to pay a mortgage, buy my own car, go out on the town, travel to exotic locations, shop at Saks Fifth Avenue—my life would improve exponentially and I could show everyone back home that I’d made it on my own, thankyouverymuch. I imagined my family going to Las Vegas after hearing about my success, driving down the Strip, seeing my name on a marquee, slamming on the brakes in disbelief, leaving the car abandoned in the road, running into the hotel, searching frantically for the box office, buying front-row seats, watching in shock as I sashayed on stage in my sequins and feathers, everyone cheering for me, the star! The high school dropout who gave up everything for a bartender! There I’d be, the center of the world! Then I’d look down at my family, smile, and give them the finger. Hell, I’d use both hands and give ‘em the double bird! The crowd would erupt in cheers, gobble it up, imitate my gesture, beg for more, stare in awe at this vulgar goddess on stage, this—

“Can I help you?”

I was standing at the reception desk. The woman behind the counter reminded me of Camryn Manheim. “Uh, yes—I’m here about the audition?”

She looked at me over the gray counter. It was so high I could only see her head.

“Okay,” she said slowly and patronizingly. “Which audition?”

“The belly dancing one at the Aladdin?”

“Who referred you?”

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“What?”

“Who referred you? We only take referrals.”

“Um, Kelli?”

“Kelli who?”

Shit. I’d been Kelli’s roommate for almost two months and I didn’t know her last name. “The one who dances in the Siegfried and Roy show?”

Camryn shrugged.

“Blonde hair, blue eyes, petite?”

“That describes seventy percent of our talent. Look, if you don’t have a referral, I can’t let you—”

“Cliff,” I blurted out, remembering the name Kelli had mentioned. “Cliff referred me.”

Camryn looked skeptical. “Cliff?”

“Yeah . . . he’s at the Aladdin, right?”

She tapped her pen against her chin. “Yes.” She looked down at something on her desk. “I’m sorry—did you say you had an appointment?”

“No. Cliff said I should just come down here,” I lied.

She looked down a hallway to her right. “Alright, well—there’s someone in screening right now, but I can squeeze you in after her.”

“Screening?”

“Yes, screening. We screen all our girls here before we send them to audition at the properties.”
“Oh—right.”

“Have a seat. What’s your name, by the way?”

“Kristen.”

She shook her head disapprovingly. “Is that your real name?”

“Yeah. Why?”

“I’d chose a stage name if I were you. Kristen doesn’t really cut it. It’s a little . . . homely.”

This coming from a chick who looked like Camryn Manheim.

On the drive to the agency, I’d pictured a lobby of gorgeous women looking each other up and down, holding thick portfolios, and talking on their cell phones as if they were the most important person in the building. But the only competition in the room was the poster-sized black and white portraits on the walls. Scantily clad men and women looked down at me, eyes narrowed and lips parted. Some posed on stools, some lay on animal rugs, and some perched on rocks in the desert. They were perfection frozen in time. Their sexuality seemed raw and natural, but there was something artificial about it. They smiled, but there was something distant and cold in their expressions. Their eyes gave them away—dead, lifeless, bored, disgusted. I turned and faced the window, not wanting to look at them. Was that gaze a hazard of the job or were they just acting?

I sat on a black leather sofa and leafed through an old issue of Las Vegas Weekly. Five minutes later, a shockingly thin blonde girl burst through a door and walked down the hallway, her heels clicking unevenly on the tile. She was crying. Camryn and I watched as she passed the reception counter and pushed angrily through the entrance.
door. It slammed behind her, sending a wave of hot air through the air-conditioned lobby.

I turned back to the hallway, expecting someone to run out apologetically. No one did.

Camryn picked up a phone and spoke hushed words into the receiver.

“‘You can go in there now,’” she informed me.

“On that note,” I muttered under my breath.

I walked down the hallway. More black and white models observed me from the walls. The door to the “screening” room was closed. I knocked softly.

“Come in.”

The room was plain: a metal desk with a phone and a pad of paper, one chair for the screener, and one chair for the—what were we, anyway? Could we call ourselves applicants? The walls were white and undecorated, the carpet navy blue. The screener was an attractive woman with jet-black hair and white skin. She wore red lipstick and heavy black eyeliner. She did not smile as I made my way across the room and sat in the chair across from hers. She watched me as I sat down, crossed my legs, then re-crossed them. I clutched my purse to my stomach. Her stare made me nervous. I cleared my throat and studied her shoes. They were shiny and black and looked expensive.

“You’re interested in the belly-dancing position at the Aladdin?”

“Yes! Yes, I am.” Did I seem overeager?

“Stand up.”

I put my purse on the floor and stood up.

“Do you normally wear that when you go to casting calls? You’re not applying for an office job, are you?”
Casting calls? “Well, I—”

“Turn to the right.”

I turned to the right, sucking in my gut.

“Turn to the left.”

Did the blazer make me look bigger than I was?

“Turn your back to me.”

I knew my ass was kind of flat. I was all tits and no ass.

“Take the jacket off.”

I shrugged out of the blazer and hung it on the chair. I was wearing a white tank top underneath. She was staring at my chest. I glanced down. My tattoo was peeking out over the bust line.

“Is that temporary?”

“What?”

“The tattoo?”

“Oh. No.”

She pursed her lips. “You’ll have to cover that with makeup. What’s your cup size?”

“Cup size? You mean my bra?”

“No, the cups in your kitchen cabinet.” She rolled her eyes. “Yes, your bra size. How big are your breasts?”

“Thirty-four double D. Depends on the brand. Sometimes triple D.”
She raised an eyebrow. “I see.” She stood up and walked over to me. She was at least four inches taller. She put her hand under my chin and titled my face in different directions. I hoped I didn’t have any boogers. She touched my hair and ran a section of it through her fingers. Then she turned around and walked to the desk. She reached for the pad. She scribbled something on it and handed it to me. It was a series of numbers.

“Go to the Aladdin and take the guest elevator to that room. Your audition is at six tonight.”

“Tonight?”

“Yes, tonight. Is that a problem?”

“No, no. Tonight is good. Tonight is perfect.”

“Good. We’re all done here.” She pointed to the door. I gathered my blazer and purse and began to leave.

“Oh—one more thing,” she called after me.

“Yeah?”

“Wear something else to the audition.”
Chapter 8

Las Vegas is like Disneyland: the themed environment, the workers dressed in gaudy costumes, the simultaneous accosting of all the senses, the masses of people walking around in wonder, the ability to believe that the fantasy laid out before you is real. Even locals get sucked into the mirage that is Las Vegas. The city is a bubble of perpetual fantasy and endless debauchery, of artificial happiness and instant gratification. Once you walk through those hotel doors, you’re immediately sucked into an alternate universe. It’s a place where your imagined self becomes your actual self. The outside world, the problems of your life, your abusive boyfriend, your estranged family, your empty wallet—they disappear from your memory as the smoke-filled casino air hugs you and welcomes you back like an old friend. It’s fucking glorious.

Kevin had taken the truck to work, so I took a cab to my audition. As I rode down Las Vegas Boulevard in the back of the cab, I looked out the window and gazed up at the Aladdin. The building was shaped like an open book, its façade a soft sandy color against the dark sky. I’d never been inside. The cab pulled into the valet area and I stepped out. I had borrowed a red Spandex dress from Kelli and a pair of red heels. On top of being too small, the dress was short and sleeveless, and my bare skin was cold in the breeze. The Indian summer was finally surrendering to fall.

I rode the escalator up one level and walked through the hotel, wondering where the dancers performed. I looked around in awe. The pathway leading through the hotel was called the Desert Passage, and its structure reflected its name. Awnings with geometric patterns covered the entrances to the shops. Arabic music played softly in the
background. Kiosk workers wore fez hats and curly shoes. Aside from familiar store names like The Body Shop and Victoria’s Secret, I almost felt as if I were walking through a marketplace in Persia.

As I entered the casino, I saw a large group of people gathered. I approached the crowd and found a line of sight through the uneven landscape of heads. At the center of the circle, five women were dancing and two men were playing drums. The women wore long sheer skirts and jeweled bras. Gold bands snaked around their forearms. Some wore wigs, some didn’t. They were all insanely fit. Bells sang from their skirts as they twisted and gyrated. The crowd was clapping along to the beat. The dancers smiled as they shook their hips. They moved their arms gracefully. The dancer who seemed to be leading the others wore the most ornamented costume. She had smooth, creamy skin and ash blonde hair. She was shorter than her counterparts and not as attractive, but all eyes were on her. She had charisma.

After a few minutes of watching the show, the realization hit me: Were these the people I’d be working with? Was that going to be my costume? That? Holy crap. Could I shake my hips like that? Could I smile while moving my arms in those wavy motions? How long had these women been dancers? Had they trained professionally? Were they those girls on the high school dance team, the cheerleaders, the girls who could do the splits in their sleep? I’d always been the nerd watching from the sidelines.

The performance ended and people lined up to take pictures with the dancers. The piece of paper the agency’s screener had given me was in my hand. I crushed it between my fingers and considered leaving. I watched the girls exchange words and pose with
smiling tourists. There were still people waiting in line when the dancers waved farewell to the crowd and started heading to another part of the casino. I followed them, as did many other people. They entered an elevator bank. Security guards forced the crowd back. The drums and colorful costumes disappeared, taking the bystanders’ energy and excitement with them. I waited for the crowd to disperse before I timidly approached the elevators.

“Need help, miss?” A security guard wearing a red jacket stopped me. All hotel security guards in Las Vegas wear red jackets. There must be a conspiracy at the uniform company.

I hesitated. I could’ve declined the offer for help and walked away, taken the escalator back to valet, and caught a cab. I could’ve gone home, given Kelli her dress back, and settled on the couch with the classified section of the newspaper. But I was determined to prove to myself, Kevin, and everyone back home that I was more than just an uneducated teenager who was only good for washing dishes. And I was curious. I didn’t think I’d get the gig, but what if I did? What if I did and I was able to call myself a Las Vegas showgirl? Me, a Las Vegas showgirl! I couldn’t imagine being able to say that to people.

“Yeah. I’m here for an audition With Cliff?” I showed him the room number on the crumbled slip of paper. He gave me a hard look and let me pass.

I tapped the button for the appropriate floor and the elevator doors opened with a ding. I stepped inside the box and watched the security guard disappear. I could see myself in the uneven gold reflection of the doors. I pulled the hemline of the dress down
self-consciously. *What are you doing?* I asked my distorted self. If someone had asked me a year earlier where I’d be in November 2000, I would’ve said I’d be living in some college dorm, going to pre-law classes, dating some guy on the mock trial team, continuing to be my family’s 4.0 pride and joy. What did Mom and Dad tell people who asked what I was up to? *So what’s Kristen up to these days?* Maybe they were vague. *Oh, she’s taking some time off from school, figuring out what she wants to do.* Maybe they lied. *Oh, she’s doing her thing in college. Everything is well!* Maybe they told some version of what they thought was the truth. *Oh, she dropped out of high school back in January. Haven’t seen her in almost a year. She’s living with some bartender slash drug dealer in Las Vegas. She’s probably stripping, probably completely fucked up on drugs, probably on her way to becoming a broke, heroin-addicted teenage mother. That’s our girl. You know—kids these days!*

I stepped out of the elevator and tripped over the heel of my borrowed shoe in the process. I teetered down the hallway, searching the doors for the correct room number. I could hear voices and music behind the door of the room listed on the piece of paper in my hand. I knocked. No one answered. I knocked again with more purpose. The door swung open.

“Yes?” A tiny woman with a measuring tape around her neck stared at me quizzically.

“Hi . . . I’m here to see Cliff?”

“Oh—right.” She opened the door wider and motioned for me to come in. The hotel suite was hot and loud. Thong-clad dancers smoked cigarettes, drank cans of Diet
Coke, and talked animatedly to one another. Some sat at tables and applied makeup. One was napping in the nude on the floor. Costume racks lined the walls. There were mirrors everywhere. A radio was on in the background. The room smelled like hairspray and baby powder. No one seemed to notice as the lady with the tape measure led me through the suite to a room in the back. A bedroom had been converted into an office, and in it a beautiful man with black hair, olive skin, and a square jaw was talking on the phone. He had the face of a movie star. He looked up and motioned for us to come in.

“You must be the girl Charlene sent over,” he said as he hung up the phone. So that was the screener’s name. He stood up and held his hand out. He was tall and moved gracefully. We shook hands. “I’m Cliff.”

“Kristen.”

He touched my cheek with cold fingers. “You’re gorgeous, honey. And those lovely ta-tas! If I played for your team, I’d marry you.”

“My team? What do you mean?”

Cliff laughed. “How old are you?”

“Eighteen.”

“Oh, my.” He turned to Tape Measure Lady. “Looks like I have my work cut out for me, Anita. Can you get her a costume?” He turned back to me. “What size are you, dear?”

“Six.”

Cliff touched his purple necktie, aghast. “I think the biggest size we have is a four. Is that right, Anita?”
“We only have a couple fours. Mostly twos.”

I looked down at the carpet, humiliated. Six was the biggest fucking size they had? Six was actually an exaggeration—eating free food at the restaurant for six months had put me closer to a seven. Maybe an eight. I felt like a sausage in most of my pants and shorts.

“I think she can audition in what she’s got on,” Cliff said reassuringly. “Thanks, Anita.”

“Good luck,” Anita said as she left the room. I wasn’t sure if she was talking to Cliff or me. She closed the door behind her.

Cliff returned to his chair. I continued standing before him. “So—do you have any experience as a performer, Kristen?”

“Well, that’s a start. Any musicals?”

“I was in drama in high school.”

“I’d auditioned for the drama department’s annual musical three years in a row and had failed miserably. The only play I’d ever gotten a part in was *Witness for the Prosecution*, a murder mystery. I was Juror Number 5. All I’d had to do was switch between nodding my head thoughtfully and shaking my head in disapproval. It was my one shining moment on the high school stage.

“Yeah.”

“Which ones?”

“Um . . .” I searched my brain. The only musical that came to mind was *Calamity Jane*, my mother’s favorite movie. “Calamity Jane?”
Cliff looked at me skeptically. “Calamity Jane? That western with Doris Day?”

“Yeah, that one.”

He raised his eyebrows. I knew he knew I was lying. “Okay, moving on. Have you trained professionally as a dancer?”

“I was in a beauty pageant . . . we had to dance in the opening number.” I left out the part about dropping out of the contest. In fact, I’d only practiced the number once with the other girls.

Cliff reached for a boom box on the desk. He pressed the play button and a drum beat, the same one the drummers had been playing while the dancers performed in the casino, filled the room. He crossed his legs and smiled at me. “Well—let’s see what you can do. I’ll count the beats.” Beats? “One, two, three, four, one, two, three, four . . .” he began.

I stood motionless for a minute while I tried to remember what the dancers had done downstairs. When Cliff reached beat one again, I started moving my hips in a circular motion. Like my other Italian female relatives, I have an hourglass shape, which made shaking my hips surprisingly easy. I closed my eyes and focused on the drums and Cliff’s steady, velvety voice. After eight beats, I incorporated my arms, moving them in waves around my head. I turned in a circle while I shook my hips. I lost my rhythm several times, but kept going. I don’t know how long Cliff played the tape. Probably only a few minutes, but it felt like an hour. Did I look ridiculous? Was my body jiggling? Was he laughing? My eyes were still closed. Then, the music stopped.

“That’s good right there,” Cliff said.
I opened my eyes and lowered my arms. “That’s it?”

“That’s it.”

“Was that—I mean, how’d I do?”

“You’ve never danced before in your life, have you?”

Was it that obvious? My eyes filled with tears. I had failed. I was going to have to go back to washing dishes, smelling like raw eggs and burnt meat at the end of every shift, making seven dollars an hour, being ordered around by everyone in the kitchen, wasting away my youth behind an industrial sink, going home with dry-red-blistery hands every night. I’d have to go back to being poor. This was my future.

“No,” I finally choked. I began crying freely. Cliff’s head became a blur of bronze and black. He passed me a box of tissues and let me wail for a while. Then:

“Calm down, dear. I’m giving you the job.”

Huh?

“Wh—what?”

“With some practice, I think you’ll be a great performer. You have charisma. That’s more important than being able to dance. Anyone can learn the steps, but not everyone’s entertaining to watch. You are.”

I wiped my cheeks with a tissue. The makeup Kelli had helped me apply came off in smears of beige, pink, and red. “Really? Cliff, I—thank you so much.”

“Don’t thank me yet, dear. You need to drop some weight before we put you on the floor.”

I touched my stomach. “How much weight?”
He looked at me carefully. “I’d say fifteen pounds. You can lose that in a couple weeks.”

A couple weeks? Fifteen pounds sounded like a lot to me. “Should I join a gym or something?”

Cliff chuckled. “Yes, you should, but that’s not how our girls drop fifteen pounds in two weeks.”

“How do they do it?”

He smiled and shook his head. “I knew I had my work cut out for me.”

“That’s incredible.”

Anita was on her knees in front of me, her eyes level with my navel. We were in the same room I’d auditioned in, and I was in full costume for the first time. The size four skirt I wouldn’t have been able to squeeze into two weeks before hugged my waist perfectly. The love handles I’d had were nowhere in sight. The jeweled bra pushed my breasts up toward my clavicle and created a deep line of cleavage. My belly button was an oval shape instead of its usual wide O. My weight had fluctuated throughout my life, but I’d always been at least ten or fifteen pounds overweight. At that moment during my first fitting, I was the thinnest I’d ever been. No more potbelly, no more jiggle, no more horror at the thought of wearing this getup in front of hundreds of people. Well, maybe a little horror.

Anita stood up and nodded approvingly. “Looks great. You’re starting tonight, right?”
“Yeah,” I said proudly. I looked in the mirror and admired my lithe physique. Kevin loved my new shape, but was flabbergasted by how I’d lost weight so quickly. I told him it was simply a result of not working in a restaurant. Now that I’d proved I could fit into the costume, the agency was going to officially hire me. They’d promised to start me at twenty-five dollars an hour, which was more than I’d ever dreamed of making. I’d made minimum wage at Pinot. Kevin wasn’t thrilled by the nature of my job—“Sounds whorish,” he’d said—but when I told him how much they were paying me, he quickly changed his outlook—“Hey, at least it’s not topless”. He didn’t know what the costume looked like, and I’d discouraged him from going to the hotel and watching my first performance. “I’ll get too nervous, babe,” I told him. True, it wasn’t topless, but the outfit was skimpy and I knew he’d throw a fit if he saw it.

Cliff walked into the room as I was checking myself out. He clapped loudly and whistled. “Gorgeous, honey. Stunning.”

“Yes, really. Didn’t I tell you it’d be a piece of cake?” He winked.

The day after the audition, I had gone back to the Aladdin to pick up the “care package” Cliff had prepared for me. In it was a bottle of ephedrine pills, a packet of cocaine, and a box of cigarettes. He’d written simple instructions on a piece of hotel stationery: “take twelve pills per day (no skipping!!), use coke and cigs if still hungry”.

Ephedrine has several uses. If you’re using it for weight loss, it’s basically speed in a pill. Within three days, I’d lost five pounds. I hated cigarettes, so those went untouched. I used the cocaine a few times just to see what it was like, but stopped

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because it made me feel like a drug addict. I didn’t need it for weight loss—the pills alone not only killed my appetite, they made me throw up when I did eat. They also caused extreme moodiness—Kevin had knocked me around a few times for mouthing off. I felt amped, angry, nervous, and exhausted all at once. I couldn’t stop wringing my hands. I’d barely slept since starting the “diet routine”, as Cliff called it. But hey—I was skinny, I was a dancer, and I was going to start making a shitload of money. Fuck the side effects!

There’d been other instructions. A few days after I began taking the ephedrine, Cliff called to see how things were going. He told me that on top of losing weight, I needed to get a haircut, visit a tanning salon, get my eyebrows waxed, and have some acrylic nails put on. I used the rest of the five hundred dollars I’d saved from the two thousand Hisanori had given me to do these things. The tanning salon had left me sunburned for a week, and the nails were a total pain in the ass—I was still having trouble writing in my journal because of them. But they looked good, and that was all that mattered. Fuck the side effects!

On top of the cosmetic improvements, I had to learn the dance routine, which was harder than anything I’d ever done. I couldn’t afford dance lessons and the agency didn’t provide them—I guess they figured any talent they hired would have a background in dance—so Cliff suggested I take some classes at the gym and watch instructional videos to learn the basics. Kevin sat on the couch and made fun of me while I followed along with the instructors in the videos, so I started doing them when he wasn’t home. I stumbled, lost my balance, and crashed into the coffee table more times than I can count.
I cried in frustration. I wanted to quit. I felt like a character in Dante’s *Purgatorio* who must perform the same task over and over again without an end in sight, without any improvement whatsoever. But by the end of the first week of practicing almost nonstop, I did start to improve. During the second week, I went to the Aladdin and observed my castmates, determined to perform as effortlessly when it came time to join them. Cliff and I shut ourselves in his office and went over the routine with the tape-recorded music in the background. I became obsessed. I danced in my sleep. I danced in the shower. It became my life. I was years behind the other dancers, but still—I was determined to become the best.

“Why don’t you head into the dressing room for makeup?” Cliff suggested. “I’ll introduce you to the girls.”

We walked into the room next to the office. Three other girls were in there applying makeup. They all turned and stared at me.

“Girls, this is our newbie. Let’s make her feel welcome.”

Two of them turned back to the mirror without waving or saying hello. One of them, a stunning girl with skin the color of dark chocolate and hazel eyes, got out of her chair and approached me. “Hi! I’m Danielle.”

“Hi,” I said gratefully. I turned around. Cliff was gone. I was officially on my own.

“You can sit over here.” Danielle cleared some space for me in front of the mirror. She glanced at my empty hands. “Where’s your makeup box?”

“Makeup box?”
“Yeah—we all bring our own makeup.”

All I had in my purse was a tube of drugstore lipstick and a compact. I looked at the cosmetics laid out on towels in front of the dancers: tubes of foundation, loose powder, bronzing powder, shimmer powder, contouring powder, rouge, glitter, eyeliner pencils, eyebrow pencils, lip liners, lipstick, lip gloss, mascara, eyeshadow palettes in every color of the rainbow, makeup brushes, sponges, Q-Tips, eyelash curlers, false eyelashes, body makeup. Mirrors in all shapes and sizes were scattered among the cosmetics. Because I’d worn glasses from the time I was nine months old to the time I was sixteen, I’d never really worn makeup. I didn’t know which products to buy or how to apply them. My stepmother had been a model when she was young and had tried several times to teach me about makeup, but I never caught on.

“Oh. I, uh, forgot my makeup box.”

“Hmm.” Danielle looked at her spread. “We obviously don’t have the same skin tone, but you can use the mascara and eyeliner and stuff. You don’t even need much makeup, anyway.” She leaned in confidentially. “You should see some of the other girls without it.” She made a face and shuddered. “It’s ugly.”

Danielle sat down and gestured for me to join her. I eased into the chair and watched as she began to apply her makeup. When she was finished with a product, she handed it to me. I put rouge on first, applying it in wide circles. The nails made it difficult to get a steady grip on the tools. Then came the eyeshadow. I applied a maroon color all over my eyelid and brow bone. Next, eyeliner. I picked up a hand mirror and drew a thick, uneven line above my lashes. I used the mascara but passed on the eyelash curler,
afraid I’d poke my eye out with the thing. I filled my lips in with the red lipstick Danielle handed me. She finished her face and turned to me for inspection. The other dancers were also looking at me. They shook their heads and stood up, laughing amongst themselves. Danielle waited for them to leave, then turned to me and smiled sympathetically.

“Have you ever worn makeup before, honey?”

I looked at myself in the mirror. The makeup did look pretty bad compared to everyone else’s. My rouge application reminded me of a clown picture my grandparents had given me for Christmas one year.

“Not really,” I muttered.

She leaned forward and wiped the color from my cheeks and eyelids with a tissue. She reapplied it with quick, expert strokes the way Kelli had before my audition. She admired her handiwork, then turned me toward the mirror. A full face of well-done makeup actually made me look like a woman. Combined with the costume, I felt like a completely different person. Danielle stood behind me and began playing with my hair. She plucked some bobby pins from the dressing table and pulled the wavy strands into a half up/half down style.

“Gorgeous,” she said. “They’re all going to be staring at you tonight.”

I lowered my eyes and smiled. I couldn’t get used to such compliments. I always resisted the urge to ask, “Really?” or “Are you talking to me?”

Danielle looked at the alarm clock on the dressing table. “Time to go, hon. Are you ready?”
I nodded, dizzy with nerves and disbelief. I was about to make my official debut as a Las Vegas showgirl. Me, the last kid picked at tetherball. Me, the girl who read Shakespeare while everyone else swung from the monkey bars at recess. Me, the girl who had to square dance with a teacher because none of the boys wanted to be her partner. Me, the girl who spent prom night watching reruns of “Golden Girls”. Me, the girl who spent lunchtime alone in the library. Me, the girl everyone voted most likely to become a children’s librarian. Here, no one knew that girl. Here, that girl had never existed. Here, Kristen was gone, replaced by a waif in a flashy costume with a fancy stage name. I had been reinvented.

Danielle took my arm and led me through the hotel suite. We met the other dancers and the two drummers, who wore nothing but sheer genie pants and curly shoes, at the door. Cliff assembled the group and Anita darted between us, making sure every component of our costumes was perfectly in place. Cliff inspected me and nodded with approval before he let me pass. I brought up the rear of the group. I looked over my shoulder as I followed everyone else down the hallway. Cliff stood in the doorway like a proud parent, waving and beaming with pride. He blew a kiss and mouthed one word:

“Showtime.”
Chapter 9

She never said anything, but I think Kelli knew. Sometimes she’d knock on the door when she heard Kevin and I yelling or when she heard something shatter against the wall of the guesthouse. Kevin would answer and act as if nothing had happened while I listened from the bathroom, covering my mouth with a hand towel to stifle the sobs. Sometimes when we went to the gym together, I saw her eyes linger on the bruises. They were usually on my arms, legs, and back. I spent an hour covering those bruises with makeup every night before work. Sometimes, usually the day after an incident, she would remind me that I was only eighteen and that Kevin didn’t have to be the last notch in my bedpost. I’d nod and change the subject. Tell me that story about Siegfried falling into the pool at that cocktail party again. Yeah, that one! So fucking hilarious. Then her eyes would linger on the bruises again before she launched into the story.

She never said anything, but I’m almost certain she knew. And when she walked in on Kevin and I that day, any doubt she had was obliterated.

“You lied to me,” Kevin was saying.

I turned away from the bathroom mirror and looked at him, my face wet and frothy with soap and the remnants of mascara. “What?”

“You lied to me.” He was standing in the doorway. At over six feet tall, he always towered over me. “I went to the hotel and seen you perform tonight. You never said them costumes were so slutty.”

I quickly wiped my face with a towel, not bothering to wash off the soap. “You were there? I thought you were working tonight.”
“I got off early. I tried to talk to you and shit, but there were too many people. All them guys staring at your tits . . .” He punched the doorframe. “I wanted to kill those motherfuckers.”

Kevin’s face turned a deep berry color. When his cheeks turned that shade, I knew the conversation would end in violence. It meant he was so worked up, he couldn’t calm down unless his fist connected with bone. He was in bar fights regularly, but always managed to escape before the police came. I didn’t know if he had a criminal record—he changed the subject whenever I asked.

“I want you to quit.”

“No,” I said firmly. “I’m not quitting. This job pays twenty-five dollars an hour, Kevin. There’s no way I’d get that anywhere else. I don’t want to go back to washing dishes.”

“I’d rather you be a dishwasher than a slut.”

“I’m not a slut,” I said, my voice rising. “It’s entertainment. You don’t see me going out every night like the other girls. I don’t do shit—I come home to you.”

Michael’s face flashed through my mind. I wondered what he was up to. I’d tried to call him after I quit Pinot, but he’d changed his phone number.

“You say that now. But sooner or later you’ll be doing the same thing as them bitches.”

From the start, Kevin treated me as if I didn’t have a mind of my own. He treated me like a child, a child unable to make her own decisions and decide what was good for her and what wasn’t (yet at the same time, he made it my responsibility to take care of the
household finances). I couldn’t tell if this was because he thought I was naïve or just stupid. Although I never admitted it, I recognized there was a lot I didn’t know about life. Pumping gas, balancing a checkbook, opening a bank account, applying for a job, buying a car—these were logistics of adulthood I’d been forced to learn quickly, and I’d definitely fucked up on many of them. But until I met Kevin, I never questioned my God-given intelligence. I was insecure about most everything else, but never about that. Less than a year into our relationship, I was questioning it all the time. And it was really starting to piss me off.

“You know what? Maybe I will. Maybe I will start going out all the time like the girls I work with.”

Kevin was now blocking the doorway. My only way out.

“What?”

“You heard me.”

Next thing I knew, he’d pushed my back against the wall and his hands were around my throat. I pulled at his forearms, struggling to breathe. In that instant, I was less worried about him strangling me to death and more worried about his fingers leaving marks around my neck. In the line of work I was in, physical perfection is everything. When I realized he had no intention of stopping me, that he wasn’t just trying to scare me straight, I began kicking his shins. This only caused him to squeeze my throat tighter. I felt dizzy and lightheaded as I stared at the rubber ducky picture on the wall beyond his head. How long did it take to cut off someone’s airflow? How long could I survive without oxygen? If I passed out and didn’t die, would I be brain dead when I woke up? I
thought back to high school and Mr. Malloy’s biology class. Hell, it’d only been a couple years earlier. I turned away from the ducky and looked into Kevin’s eyes, something I rarely did when he was in the middle of a tirade. They were crazed, blank, emotionless, unhuman. I don’t think he even saw me. Was this how it ended?

“He, what’s going on here?”

Kevin released my throat and we both turned to the doorway. Kelli was standing there wearing her pink bathrobe. You’d think she would’ve had a horrified expression on her face, but she didn’t. She wasn’t surprised. She knew.

“Nothing,” Kevin muttered. “How’d you get in, anyway?”

Kelli tried to make eye contact with me. I pretended to be interested in the red polish on my fingernails. “The door was unlocked. I wanted to know if you were ever gonna get your clothes out of the dryer.”

“Oh. Yeah. Sorry.”

We stood there in awkward silence for what seemed like an hour. Finally, Kevin squeezed past Kelli saying, “I’ll get my clothes.” His Vans squeaked across the tile floor and the door slammed behind him. I raised my eyes and met Kelli’s gaze.

“Are you alright?” she asked.

This was my chance. This was my chance to respond to a loaded question with a loaded answer. But, same as when Michael asked me about the marks on my body, I was too ashamed to answer truthfully. No, I was not alright. Being in an abusive relationship is never alright. But no one wants to know about that sort of thing. No one wants to talk about it. No one wants to be dragged into it. Even if you see it happening right in front of
you, it’s easier to remain blind to it. Kelli asking me if I was alright was simply her way of keeping up a disingenuously concerned appearance, and we both knew it.

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

I waited until she returned to the main house before I let the tears fall.

The day after Kelli walked in on Kevin strangling me, there was a note on our door.

I should back up and mention that Kelli had a thing for leaving notes. Pink Post-It notes shaped like hearts, to be exact. Instead of directly telling us things—the bills were due, the truck was leaving oil leaks in the driveway, our clothes had been sitting in the washer or dryer for too long—she left a note written in tiny handwriting on our door. Because we were on a similar schedule, Kelli and I saw each other a lot and even worked out together from time to time, yet I always came home to find one of those fucking Post-It notes. The childlike sweetness of those magenta hearts made the messages even more obnoxious and annoying. Like the cheeriness of the paper was supposed to make up for Kelli’s inability to communicate with us. That’s why her walking in on Kevin and I was so odd. Maybe she just needed confirmation. Maybe she just needed an excuse to kick us out. I suspected the landlord thing was total bullshit. In any case, we were out on our asses again because of Kevin.

Over the next few days, I picked up a rental magazine and searched for apartments while Kevin asked around at work. I was still shy around my castmates and didn’t feel comfortable telling them I was being kicked out and needed to find a place to live immediately. I wanted everyone at the agency to think I was everything I wasn’t:
stable, independent, and in control. I didn’t want them to think I was some sort of trailer trash nomad.

About a week after we found Kelli’s note on the door, Kevin said he’d found a new place for us.

“It’s a house,” he said to my surprise as he guided the truck down Interstate 215 toward Henderson and Lake Mead.

“A house? Are you sure we can afford that?” I was making a lot more money as a dancer, but Kevin and I were still breaking even. I’d quickly become the unspoken breadwinner, which meant Kevin had started giving his shifts away so he could stay home and get high. When I complained, he said I “owed him” for the first few months I didn’t have a job after I’d moved to Las Vegas.

“We’re getting a good deal. Same price as an apartment and shit.”

“How’d you find this place?”

“A friend.” Whenever Kevin referred to someone as “a friend”, it was usually one of his drug dealers.

I leaned my head against the cool window and watched exit signs appear one after another like microfilm: Boulder Highway, Warm Springs, Eastern, St. Rose Parkway. They were a pristine shade of emerald green and the letters sparkled in the sun, all shiny and new. In 2000, Las Vegas was the fastest-growing city in the United States. If you went to a high point in the hills south of the city at night and looked down at the atlas of lights, the spatter of illumination surrounding the neon nucleus in the center grew by the week. Golden streetlights penetrated the inky darkness like stars. What was once a black
hole became a galaxy of life. It was like the big bang of construction and it was extraordinary to witness. Every time Kevin and I drove past a familiar place, a new restaurant or shopping center or housing track or apartment complex had sprung up like a patch of dandelions. New PT’s Pub casinos, the most popular local gaming chain in Las Vegas, expanded more quickly than McDonalds and Starbucks. Everyone wanted a shot at happily ever after in Sin City.

Twenty-five minutes outside of the city and we were in Henderson, a suburb east of Las Vegas. At the time Kevin and I moved there, it was still being developed. The further we drove, the less indications there were of civilization. I’d never been there before, but I remembered some coworkers at Pinot talking about it. Other than Walmart, there were no big shopping centers or recognizable chain stores out here, just RV and boat storage lots and a few run-down bars and casinos. It quickly became evident that this was a rinky-dink little town mostly inhabited by lake people. Swamp people, as I would later call them (Lake Mead isn’t really a lake. It’s just a big puddle of muddy water).

Kevin got off on Horizon Ridge and we traveled down a long dirt road. He seemed to know exactly where he was going. A heap of rocks that resembled a mountain lay ahead. We turned left at the mountain and found ourselves in a fairly modern housing track. It stuck out like a corn kernel in a pea bowl in this desolate desert landscape. It was as if someone had closed their eyes and pointed to a place on the map when they decided to build it. Aside from the rusty boat hitches, dusty pickup trucks, and old trailers occupying the driveways, the neighborhood was decent enough. It was the typical Las Vegas track with its close cluster of white stucco boxes, tiled roofs, palms tress, and
rocks in place of grass. A quadrant of cheapie cookie-cutter homes that took very little time, money, and effort to build.

When we reached a street called Coach House Road, Kevin turned left. He stopped the car in front of a house at the end. I opened my mouth to ask if he’d been there before, but changed my mind. It seemed obvious that he had.

“Well, here she is. Dun’it just dill your pickle?” Kevin said as we got out of the truck. Kevin was from Orange County, California, yet sometimes he spoke as if he’d been raised on a ranch in the South. “I done hate this”, “I done hate that”, “I'm sweatin' like a whore in church on Sunday”, “He’s busier than a one-legged man at a butt kickin’ contest”. Even after a year of being with him, the colloquialisms of his speech were still jarring to me.

I wrapped my black Salvation Army coat around my body and studied the exterior of the house. The yard needed some work, but I was happy to see it had some grass, albeit dead grass. There were even some rose bushes lining the path to the front door. I’d grown up in a town with rolling jade hills and had lived in a house with a big grassy yard, and I missed the sight of those things. I didn’t realize until that moment how much I missed vegetation and greenery. I surveyed the yard and considered the possibilities. I even felt a pang of excitement about the prospect of living in this home and fixing it up. It was the first time Kevin and I would be living without roommates, and while I was partly frightened by this, I was also partly relieved. No more Post-It notes, no more being kicked out on someone else’s whim, no more worrying about whether or not other people could hear us arguing. We were free.
Kevin pushed a key in the lock and we walked inside. As soon as my eyes adjusted to the light, my excitement evaporated.

The living room was a mess of boxes and dilapidated furniture. A faux Christmas tree decorated with red and gold balls stood in a corner, grossly out of place. Like the Desert Inn house, this place reeked of weed. The pink carpet was a cobblestone of stains. Beyond the living room was a family room that’d been converted into a home office. The desk was the build-it-yourself kind from K-Mart or Target, and it was falling apart at the joints. The kitchen was cluttered with broken dishes and cookware and hadn’t been cleaned in a long time. The condiments and liquids in the fridge were expired by several months. Kevin opened the sliding glass door and went to check out the backyard while I walked down the hallway to inspect the bedrooms. The door to what I assumed was the master bedroom was locked. Same with the door to the garage. There were two additional bedrooms, one of which was painted a blood red color. Both were packed with old toys, cheap artwork, Hustler magazines, and dirty mattresses. A filthy bathroom and laundry room completed the shithole. My heart plunged as I walked back to the main part of the house and joined Kevin outside. He was looking at the brown pool and waterless spa thoughtfully.

“Do you know how long it’s going to take to clean this place up?” I asked after several minutes. We stood side-by-side and stared at the logs of dry dog shit littering the concrete. A car alarm went off somewhere in the distance.

“I know.” He rubbed my shoulder. “But Miguel’ll help us.”
“Miguel?” From what I remembered, Miguel hadn’t lifted a finger to help out with household chores when he was our roommate. Why the fuck would he come over and help out of the goodness of his heart?

“Yeah. He’s moving in with us and shit.”

Huh?

“Huh?”

Kevin bent down and picked up an old Styrafoam cup. “I hate it when you say ‘huh?’ like that. Makes you sound like a dumbass.”

“Why is Miguel moving in with us? You said this place—”

“Because I said so.” He threw the cup back on the ground. “I don’t want to hear any shit, okay? Please.” He opened the slider and walked back into the house.

I stood there fuming, deciding if I wanted to press the issue or not. I didn’t want our new neighbors to hear us arguing before we’d even officially moved in, so I decided to keep my mouth shut. I followed him inside. He was checking out the blood red bedroom at the end of the hallway.

“This’ll be our room,” he said.

“This? For two people? What about the master?”

Kevin shook his head. “We’re using that for something else.”

“Something else?”

“Yeah. The greenhouse.”

I watched as he used his foot to pick through the junk on the floor. “Huh?”

“You know—for weed. Like the DI house.”
“You’re going to use the entire master bedroom to grow weed? You guys only used one closet in the DI house.”

“It’ll be worth it, Kristen. We’re gonna make lots of money with this business.”

Business? He made at-home weed-growing sound so official. “If it goes good, I can quit Pinot and do it full time.”

“Quit Pinot? Kevin, that’s—”

“Calm the fuck down. I said if it goes well.” He nodded toward the other side of the house. “Start cleaning up the kitchen. Miguel’ll be here soon.”

I fumed as I left the crimson chamber. So much for freedom.
Chapter 10

At the time, Aladdin wasn’t the most sought-after place for celebrities to hang out. Next to Venetian and Bellagio, it was a dump. But it did have one thing the grander hotels didn’t: a brand-new, state-of-the-art auditorium. Which meant that sightings of pop stars and rock stars and country music stars and comedians were a regular occurrence. Sometimes they’d come watch us perform, especially the tail-chasing male musicians. When this happened, Cliff came downstairs and spoke in a hushed voice to the tail-chasing musician’s manager or bodyguard or whoever was acting as mediator. In the dressing room after the show, Cliff would nonchalantly tell a select few of us that the celebrity wanted to “hang out” backstage or in his hotel suite. Cliff had encouraged me to attend these backstage/hotel suite parties several times, but I always declined, afraid Kevin would find out. But more so than that, none of the musicians had been worth facing the consequences of staying out all night.

Until Prince rolled into town.

I didn’t know he was performing that night until five minutes before our last performance. I loitered in the hallway outside the dressing room, waiting for the other dancers to emerge. Sarah, the lead, always took her sweet time getting ready and we were all at her mercy. Cliff tried to convince me otherwise, but I got the impression Sarah didn’t like me. “She’s like that with everyone,” he said. But I knew better. When I said hello, she ignored me. When we rehearsed as a group, she pretended not to hear my questions. When we posed for pictures with tourists, she made sure we weren’t standing
next to one another. When we moved into formation during performances, she made sure I was behind her.

Sarah and the rest of the cast filed into the hallway a minute after our scheduled show time. I was anxious about the fact that we were late and the audience was waiting, but no one else seemed to care. I was four weeks into the new gig at Aladdin, and aside from Danielle, I was still shy around the other dancers—they were all much older and more experienced than I—so I hung back and eavesdropped on their conversations, as usual. They allowed me into the elevator behind them almost as an afterthought. I stood in the corner and studied the jewels on my gold dance shoes as the others chatted. My ears perked up when I heard Sarah say his name.

“Did you hear Prince is playing tonight?” she asked no one in particular.

“Really?” everyone responded excitedly. In the short time it’d been open, some pretty big names had played the auditorium, but no one as iconic as Prince.

“Yeah.” She leaned her tailbone against the elevator railing and admired her nails.

“Cliff just told me.”

“You gonna party with him after the show?” someone asked.

I raised my eyes and looked at Sarah. She had long light brown hair, blue eyes, a perfect complexion, and an upturned nose that made her look perpetually disgusted. She and I were the shortest dancers in the group—5’4 and 5’6 respectively—but I looked taller than 5’6 thanks to my long legs and thin crash diet frame. Sarah was thick and muscular. She reminded me of the girls I’d played softball and soccer with when my parents forced me to participate in organized sports as a kid. We were alike in that, aside
from our unusually large breasts, we weren’t typical Las Vegas showgirls. I looked like one, but had no dancing experience to speak of; she looked like anything but one, but had twenty years’ worth of dancing experience (or so she liked to brag). Because she was the star of the show, she got to hang out with the celebrities by default. I looked at the deep line of her cleavage and wondered what partying backstage entailed.

Sarah smiled slyly. “You know it.” The others laughed like this was the funniest thing in the world. What was it like to have everyone kiss your ass like that?

The elevator reached the casino and we all walked out of it with our performance faces on: inch of makeup, big smile, coquettish eyelash batting. People stared as we walked through the casino toward the performance area. The drummers and I brought up the rear. The newest girl always got the shittiest position in the formation, I’d learned from Danielle. The entry-level position. Like any other industry, being an entertainer in Las Vegas is a hierarchy of time and experience. Sure, Sarah was talented and she had charisma, but there were better dancers in the cast. There were prettier dancers in the cast. There were taller, shapelier dancers in the cast. But Sarah had been with the agency for a long time, she knew the owners well, and she knew all the property managers. No matter how much more qualified the rest of us were, we’d never be the star of the show, never be paid the same, never experience the same perks. Unless Sarah quit or was fired, we’d all be in her shadow indefinitely.

We began to dance, and the audience clapped enthusiastically. As we were shaking our hips and gyrating seductively, I noticed Cliff had followed us downstairs. He stood to the side of the audience and chatted with a large black man wearing a black shirt,
black sports coat, and black slacks. I’d begun to recognize this as a bodyguard’s uniform. The bodyguard spoke into Cliff’s ear and Cliff nodded every so often, his eyes passing over the cast. Was I paranoid, or was he looking at me more than the others? Was Sarah witnessing all of this? She had an eagle eye for tail-chasing musician’s employees hanging out in the audience scouting for fresh tail.

The show ended. Security guards supervised as the audience lined up for pictures. As I was getting into position for the first camera flash, Cliff took my arm and pulled me aside. Bodyguard was standing next to him. He looked at me with a knowing smile.

“Sweetie, this gentleman here is a friend of Prince’s. Do you know Prince? He’s performing here tonight.”

Did I know Prince? He’s only one of my favorite artists of all time.

“Yes, I—I know Prince,” I stammered.

“Prince’d like to know you, too,” Bodyguard said. “You’re exactly his type.”

I looked at Cliff, unsure of how respond.

“We thought you might like to catch the end of the concert, then hang out with him backstage,” Cliff said. He and Bodyguard looked at me expectantly. I looked over my shoulder at my cast mates. A few of them, including Sarah, were looking at us curiously.

“Follow me and I’ll take you to the auditorium,” Bodyguard said. He held his arm out like a tour guide. Cliff gave me a slight but firm nudge forward.

“Shouldn’t I change first?” I asked, looking down at my ornamented bra and sheer skirt. I wore nothing but a thong underneath.
“Nah. He’ll love the outfit,” Bodyguard assured me, his eyes glued to my breasts. I looked down. The makeup I’d used to conceal my tattoo was starting to fade. I wrapped my arms around myself, suddenly feeling exposed.

“Okay,” I finally agreed. I’d always dreamed of meeting Prince, just not in a gaudy belly-dancing costume. I looked over my shoulder at Cliff as Bodyguard took my arm and led me away. He smiled and winked.

I followed Bodyguard through the casino. I could feel Sarah’s eyes on my back. Would she be there too, or was I the only one who’d been chosen to “party” with Prince? The girls talked about going backstage and to the hotel suites, but they never talked about what they did there. *We just, you know…hung out.*

The auditorium entrance was directly across from the casino entrance. Even before we entered it, I could hear the audience screaming and clapping. As performers, we were nothing compared to this. My skin erupted in goose bumps as Prince belted out the chorus of “Purple Rain”, his voice lovely and powerful beyond the walls. Bodyguard led me through the lobby and opened a side door. He hadn’t stopped grinning since the conversation with Cliff. Theater employees looked at me with interest as we weaved through halls and doorways. Could I find my way out on my own if I needed to? After what seemed like a mile, we reached an unmarked door. Bodyguard opened it and held his arm out again, the ever-faithful tour guide.

“Make yourself comfortable. He’ll be here in a bit.”

“I thought I was going to watch the show?” I asked. Bodyguard was blocking the doorway.
“It’ll be over in a few minutes. Just sit tight, okay? Make yourself a drink.” He pointed to a table covered with food and liquor bottles in the corner. Before I could protest, he shut the door with a firm click.

I turned away from the door and looked around. Aside from the multiple bouquets of flowers, the dressing room wasn’t much different from ours: lighted mirror, table, chair, cosmetics, costume rack, sofa, mini-fridge. I breathed in the scent of fresh roses and baby’s breath. I walked to the fridge and opened it. A cool blast of air hit my face. A bottle of white wine was lying on its side. Two wineglasses were overturned beside it, cloudy with frost. There were bottles of vodka and tequila on the table, but wine seemed like a sexier and more sophisticated beverage to drink with one of the world’s greatest pop stars. I plucked one of the glasses out and grabbed the neck of the bottle. A corkscrew was on top of the fridge, as if it’d been expecting me. I studied the label of the bottle. I didn’t have much experience with wine but I decided it was probably a good brand. Hell, it had to be if it was in Prince’s dressing room.

I wrestled with the cork for several minutes before it finally came out in chunks. I poured myself a tall glass and took a long gulp. I went to the mirror and checked my hair and makeup. What would he think of the tattoo on my breast? I’d discovered that people had mixed reactions to it. Some thought it was cool and sexy, some thought it was ghetto and skanky. I couldn’t help but feel ridiculous in my costume.

I drank the rest of the wine in my glass and poured myself more. The alcohol flowed through my veins and dulled the nervousness. I had no idea what time it was or how long I’d have to wait. How long would it be before Kevin started calling the dressing
room upstairs? Giving him the number had been a big mistake. He called so many times at the end of the shift, it was embarrassing. I noticed a phone on the dressing table. I considered calling, but didn’t want Prince to walk in on me choking out some lame “I’m gonna be home late” excuse to my boyfriend. I’d have to face the music later. I couldn’t imagine Prince would want to hang out with me for longer than an hour or two, anyway.

I sat on the sofa and waited. I don’t know how much time passed. I drained the bottle of wine. I heard voices and laughter outside the door. I laid my head against the arm of the sofa and closed my eyes, drowsy from the wine.

“Have you been waiting long?”

I opened my eyes, startled. Prince was kneeling in front of me, smiling. He wore a shiny blue jacket. His silky black hair fell in waves around his shoulders. A large gold hoop hung from his right ear. His mouth was framed by a well-trimmed goatee. His eyes were rimmed with black liner. His small hand was warm and gentle on my knee. It was like a dream. I lifted my head off the arm of the sofa, mortified. I’d fallen asleep on Prince, of all people. Prince!

“Not too long,” I said, clearing my throat. My mouth was thick with the aftertaste of wine. I laughed nervously. “Hi.”

“I told them to take you to my room upstairs.” His voice was soft and feminine. He shook his head. “Sorry about that.”

Prince was apologizing to me. Me! A nobody!

“Oh,” I said dumbly.
He sat beside me on the sofa. “How was the wine?” He gestured to the empty wineglass in my hand. “They said it was a good one.”

“It was good.” My cheeks were hot with embarrassment. “I’m sorry. I thought—I was going to—”

He laughed and took the glass out of my hand. “No, no. I’m glad you drank it. I was worried you’d get lonely in here and leave.”

Prince had been worried about me? Me. Holy crap. This was so surreal. I thought about all the times I’d danced around to “I Wanna Be Your Lover” in my bedroom when I was in elementary school. He set the glass on a side table and put his arm around me. He kissed my bare shoulder. His lips were soft, his breath warm.

“What’s your name?” he asked.

I hesitated. Should I use my stage name or my actual name? None of my cast mates were consistent with their stage names, and I quickly developed the same habit. My name changed with my mood. I stole names from Shakespeare plays I’d read during my formative years: Viola, Cordelia, Katherina, Miranda, Portia, Ophelia if I was feeling especially saucy. I favored names that ended with an “a”. For some reason, they made me feel more exotic, more fuckable. More un-Kristen.

“Kristen,” I finally answered. His lips were on my neck.

“I knew a Kristen once. Great girl. Great dancer. But not as beautiful as you.” He fingered the fabric of my skirt. I wondered if he thought my costume was hokey. “Do you spell it with an ‘i’ or an ‘e’?”

“With an ‘e’. “
He touched my jawbone with his fingers and turned my face toward his. He was such a pretty man. His femininity reminded me of Michael. He kissed me. His lips were soft and full. He was clearly an experienced kisser. I imagined he had years of experience. I only had a year, tops. Did he think I was horrible at it?

Someone knocked on the door. Prince got up and answered it. He spoke quietly to whoever was on the other side. I wiped a string of saliva from the side of my mouth. I looked down at my breasts and readjusted them, trying to make them look as supple and appealing as possible. I looked back up and admired the backside of Prince’s petite frame. Prince! I was making out with Prince! If only my friends back home could see me now. He shut the door, turned to me, and smiled.

“Would you like to go up to my room? It’s more comfortable there.”

I nodded without hesitation.
Chapter 11

Christmas fell a few days after my encounter with Prince. I still couldn’t believe I’d spent the night with such a huge star. I’d never seen anything like the opulence of his suite: the size, the marble, the crystal, the silk bedding, the extravagant flower arrangements, the view of Las Vegas Boulevard, the mini-bar stocked with the best liquors, wines, and champagnes. We hadn’t popped open any of the bottles, choosing instead to go straight to the large, luxurious bed and stay there. He’d been gone when I woke up midmorning, but there was a note written in gentle handwriting.

I left the suite wearing my rumpled costume, rode the elevator to the dressing room, and changed back into my street clothes. The red message light on the hotel phone blinked angrily on the dressing table. I punched in the code and listened to one message left by someone else’s husband, one left by someone else’s girlfriend (I hadn’t realized until this moment that Danielle was a lesbian), and twelve left by Kevin. I deleted each recorded tirade, my dread worsening with each one. I was grateful no one had gotten to the messages before I had.

Kevin was furious when I arrived home at noon. I told him I’d fallen asleep in the dressing room and he didn’t believe me. He beat his fists against his chest and head before he turned them on me. Up until then, he’d never hit me in the face, but that morning he punched me square in the nose. It wasn’t broken, but it hurt like hell and swelled and bruised right away. I didn’t want to see a doctor because I didn’t want to explain the injury. The swelling and bruising were so bad, I had to call in sick three days in a row, which immensely annoyed Cliff. Prince was long gone by then. I was more
pissed off about Kevin ruining any chance I might’ve had to see him again than I was about him almost breaking my nose.

On Christmas, I still looked like I’d been in a bar fight. We were supposed to spend the holiday with Kevin’s family, but I didn’t want to see anyone, especially not his mother. I’d met her a couple times and she was nice enough, but when I was around her, I couldn’t help but think about how much she’d fucked up in raising her son. In spite of my protests, Kevin insisted we put on our happy faces and spend Christmas with his family as planned. The camouflage makeup I used to cover my tattoo was more helpful than it’d ever been.

As if my muddled appearance weren’t enough, I’d been dreading Christmas for weeks. It was my first ever away from home. I’d worked on Thanksgiving, which meant I didn’t have to think much about my family and what they were doing and if they were thinking about me, talking about me, criticizing me, cursing me, missing me. Growing up, Christmas had always been the holiday I looked forward to most. It was a huge event in my family: weeks of cooking, decorating, shopping, wrapping, anticipating. We arrived at Grandma’s house in the afternoon on Christmas Eve and didn’t leave until the following morning. The tree, lit up and almost touching the ceiling, was bright in her living room window, gifts piled high underneath it. In spite of my pay increase, Kevin and I were too broke to buy a tree, let alone gifts.

There were other reasons I’d been dreading Christmas. The only time I’d met Kevin’s family—his mother, Uncle Clint, and Aunt Bonnie—Uncle Clint complained that Kevin didn’t help his mother enough, his mother complained about what a “chicken
shit” his long-gone father was, and Aunt Bonnie, who was mentally ill, had an episode in the middle of the meal. I’d never been around anything like that before and I felt guilty for wanting to get the hell out of there. Kevin had driven us home in silence, and I’d wondered what was going through his mind. We never talked about his family again until he informed me we were going there for Christmas dinner.

His mother lived in a trailer near Sam’s Town Gambling Hall, about twenty minutes from our house in Henderson. I offered to invite them to our place because it was bigger, but Kevin said he didn’t want them knowing where we lived. “They’ll be over here every day asking for money and shit,” he said. I held a store-bought apple pie on my lap and listened to Kevin rattle off the menu his mother had planned: ham, mashed potatoes, yams, corn, green bean casserole, macaroni and cheese, an assortment of pies. It was much different from the Italian feast I was used to eating on Christmas Eve. It didn’t really matter—there was no way I could eat any of that stuff, anyway.

I played with the tin foil covering the pie tin and wondered if the dose of ephedrine I’d taken before we left would hold me over for the night. I felt nauseous, which meant it was working. I was terrified of overeating. At work the day before, Cliff had reminded me “not to overdo it on the food” during the holiday festivities. I was going through a bottle of ephedrine once every two weeks to maintain my weight, and I’d also begun snorting a few lines of cocaine every day to keep my energy level high. Eating very little and exercising every day made me feel exhausted. I’d signed up at Las Vegas Athletic Club so Kelli and I could work out together. We ran sprints, climbed stairs, lifted free weights, rode the stationary bike to nowhere. I couldn’t keep up with her—she’d
been a dancer and gymnast since childhood and I’d been a carb-loving chunker for most of mine—but my stamina was improving, especially with a few hits of white powder. Most of the cast used cocaine. There were vials of it all over the dressing room, in the bathroom, in the dancer’s bras, in the drummers’ curly genie shoes. It was easily available and I never had to pay for it. Kevin knew I was using ephedrine—he said I acted like a “super bitch” when I was on it—but he didn’t know about the cocaine. I had a feeling he went through my purse when I wasn’t around, so I hid the drug in my pockets, in the back of my bathroom drawer, in a shoebox in my closet. That evening, it was tucked away in my bra.

We pulled up in front of the trailer. Uncle Clint’s pickup truck was already in the carport. Kevin’s mother answered the door wearing a pink housedress, slippers, and a red apron. She was just under five feet tall and was missing a few teeth. Aside from her job at a dry cleaner’s and her former addiction to meth, I didn’t know much about her. She took the pie from my hands and motioned for us to come inside.

“Come in—it’s cold as the dickens tonight,” she said, shivering. Why was she wearing a housedress in December? “You’re a little late, eh?”

“The pie took longer to bake than we thought,” Kevin replied. He pointed at me and rolled his eyes. I smiled at his mother apologetically.

Uncle Clint and Aunt Bonnie were sitting on plastic patio chairs in the living room. Uncle Clint was short and bald; Aunt Bonnie had platinum blonde hair and the face of a child. Clint was loudly asking Bonnie if she’d taken her walk that day. Bonnie shook her head and stared straight ahead, rocking back and forth in her chair. I looked at Kevin.
There was an agitated expression on his face. Uncle Clint looked at us as if we were intruding.

“Look who decided to show up,” he greeted us. He looked at me and squinted.

“Something wrong with your face?”

I touched my nose instinctively and looked at Kevin, unsure of what to say.

Kevin quickly changed the subject. “Merry Christmas to you, too, Clint,” he said. He sat in the plastic chair next to Uncle Clint. I stood behind him, feeling awkward. The three of us watched Aunt Bonnie rock back and forth. In the kitchen, Kevin’s mother was banging pots around and muttering to herself. There was no television or radio, no background noise whatsoever. Christmas at Grandma’s house was an orgy of voices, music, and laughter. I was afraid to breathe in that trailer.

“What’s wrong with her?” Kevin asked Uncle Clint.

“Who?”

“Bonnie.”

“She ain’t right, son. You know that.”

“I know, but she looks real bad today.”

Uncle Clint leaned back in his chair and took a swig from a Budwiser can.

“Welcome to our world. You come around more, you’d see this shit every day.”

Kevin’s mother entered the living room carrying a plate of sausage cut into bite-sized pieces. Uncle Clint and Kevin took several and ate them out of their palms. I declined. She held the plate out to Aunt Bonnie. Bonnie didn’t seem to see her.

“Do you need help in the kitchen?” I asked.
Kevin’s mother eyed Bonnie. “We’re just about ready. You can all go grab a plate. Everything’s on the stove. Clint, get Bonnie a plate, will ya?”

Uncle Clint grumbled as he headed to the kitchen. Kevin and I followed him. We filled our plates in silence. To my dismay, there was no salad or any other light dish. I spooned some corn and a slice of ham onto my plate.

“Eat up, honey. There’s no poison in the food,” Uncle Clint snapped in my direction.

We carried our plates to the living room. I sat on the floor beside Kevin. We ate in silence while Kevin’s mother consoled Bonnie. Bonnie’s face was red and her rocking was becoming louder and faster.

“Where’s Bonnie’s plate?” Kevin’s mother asked Uncle Clint.

“I forgot,” he said through a mouthful. She sighed and returned to the kitchen, slinging a dishtowel over her shoulder.

“How’s Mom been?” Kevin asked. He ate a slice of ham with his fingers.

Uncle Clint shrugged. “Fine, I guess. If you called her more, you’d know how she’s been.”

“C’mon, Clint. Don’t start. I have a job, I have a girlfriend…I’m busy.”

“Yeah, we know. Always too busy for the family.”

“Look.” Kevin placed his plate in the floor beside me. “It’s Christmas. Do you have to bring this shit up every single time I come over?”

“Hey, I’m just tellin’ the facts, Kevin.”
“What’re you two talkin’ about?” Kevin’s mother asked from the kitchen doorway.

“I was just tellin’ your son here that he should call you more.”

“Oh, Clint.” She shook her head. “Don’t—”

“Mom, this is bullshit. We come over for a nice Christmas dinner and he pulls this shit.” Kevin stood up angrily, his sneaker dangerously close to his plate. “This is why I hate coming over here.”

“Kevin, please sit down,” his mother pleaded. She looked at me, desperate for help. I gently touched Kevin’s leg.

“Finish your meal,” I suggested.

“Not until this fool promises to shut the fuck up about the family shit.” Kevin pointed at Uncle Clint.

“Don’t talk to me like that.” Uncle Clint pointed back with his fork. “You oughta be grateful for all them times I—”

“Shut up! Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!”

We all turned and looked at Bonnie. She was screaming at the top of her lungs. She stood up and held her hands over her ears. Her face was as red as Kevin’s mother’s apron. Uncle Clint and Kevin’s mother ran to Bonnie and put their arms around her.

“See what you did?” Uncle Clint asked Kevin. He shook his head, disgusted. They led Bonnie down a hallway leading to the back of the trailer. Clint cursed as Bonnie tried to break free from his grasp. They disappeared through a doorway.
Kevin grabbed his jacket from the chair and motioned for me to get up. “C’mon. We’re leaving. Just leave that plate there.”

I stood up hesitantly. “Shouldn’t we tell them—”

“Fuck them. Hurry up—let’s go.”

He took my arm and led me to the door. The screen door shut loudly behind us.

We got in the truck and Kevin pulled out of the carport. As we sped away, I looked back and saw Uncle Clint standing in the carport. He was yelling and flipping us the bird.

Kevin laughed bitterly as we rounded the corner.

“Merry Christmas,” he said to no one in particular.
Chapter 12

On New Year’s Eve, I decided to call my parents. Part of it was I felt obligated to give them my new address and phone number. The other part was the holidays had me missing them. For the first time in my life, there’d been no family gatherings, no massive pine tree in the living room, no decorating, no helping Dad hang the lights the house, no viewing of the annual Christmas play at the Candlelight Theater, no gift exchanges, no decadent Christmas morning breakfast. Aside from the disastrous gathering with Kevin’s family, the only indication of Christmas was the decorations in the Aladdin employee cafeteria. I’d worked on Christmas Day and I was also working New Year’s Eve, something I’d never conceived of before. When I complained to Kevin, he told me to grow up. “You’re not a kid anymore, Kristen. Adults have to work even if they don’t feel like it,” he’d say just before calling in sick and lighting his bong.

After the argument in the guesthouse about my job at the Aladdin, Kevin hadn’t brought up quitting again. Once the paychecks started rolling in, “them slutty costumes” didn’t seem to bother him. He asked for money all the time and had started deferring bills to me. He said he’d make up for it once the plants in the master bedroom were ready to harvest and sell. The only time I saw his tender side was when he was nursing those fucking plants. He spent hours fiddling with the irrigation system, the lights, and the arrangement of the sprouts. He could determine different strains just by sight and scent. When he wasn’t doing that, he was sitting on the couch playing video games and getting high with Miguel. Miguel was like Kevin—he only worked when he felt compelled to. I came home most nights to find them in the living room discussing what they believed
were profound matters like the side effects of Ecstasy, the best beers to drink on tap, and Ashley Judd’s breasts. Most nights I fell asleep alone in the red chamber. Once in a while Kevin and I would have sex, but after almost a year together, that part of our relationship had become routine, predictable, passionless, and distant. I was starving for affection, the kind of affection I could only seem to get from one-night stands.

Kevin dropped me off at work on New Year’s Eve so he could meet up with his friends at some bar off the Strip. As we sat in bumper-to-bumper traffic on Koval Lane, he expressed how grateful he was that someone had taken his shift. How much money would he have made in tips on a busy night like this? Enough to pay for one month’s rent, probably. I also couldn’t help but dwell on the fact that he and Miguel would be out partying while I worked. The more I thought about the unjustness of it all, the angrier I became. And the angrier I became, the more I thought about my family and old high school friends. How were they bringing in the New Year? Had Dad gone to the Ahwahnee Hotel in Yosemite like he sometimes did? Were Mom and her boyfriend having cocktails at the Fisherman restaurant in San Clemente? Who was my brother spending the holiday with this year? Were they thinking of me, acknowledging my absence, lamenting, picking up the phone to call and realizing I no longer lived with Kelli?

I’ve never admitted this, but I often thought about going home. The entire time I was in Las Vegas, I thought about going home. As addicted as I was becoming to it, I never completely surrendered myself to the city. I still drove around with my California license and held it out proudly when I was carded for rated R movies and cigarettes. I still
longed for the inky blue ocean I’d loved since childhood, that contaminated ocean crashing into the sand littered with wrappers and bottle caps. The sand that supports the deteriorating wooden piers that see off the freight ships passing in and out of Long Beach harbor. I even missed the veil of smog that hangs over the Los Angeles skyline, that charcoal-colored veil visible from miles away. The veil that defines the city and contributes to its sullied charm. When I was on the road and noticed a California plate on another car, I became weepy. If Kevin was in the truck, I hid behind my sunglasses and turned my face toward the window, toward the flatness of the desert landscape that was still foreign to me. As good as I was at hiding it, I was homesick.

Kevin stopped the car in front of the parking garage elevators. He turned and looked at me. He looked at me with a concern I hardly ever saw. I’d been quiet on the ride there, but I didn’t think he’d noticed. I always muted myself around him.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

I knew Kevin knew when something was bothering me, but he rarely took the time to find out what. The sincerity in his voice and the way he searched my eyes with his made me want to open up. There were so many things I wanted to say. I wanted to say I missed California. I wanted to say I missed my family. I wanted to share my desire to go back to school. I wanted to say I was pissed he wasn’t working that night. I wanted to ask what it was about me that drove him to violence. I wanted to ask if he loved me. I wanted to ask if he thought I was pathetic. I wanted to ask if he thought I was beautiful. I wanted to ask why he wouldn’t make eye contact when we had sex. I wanted to say I was
afraid of him. I opened my mouth, ready to fire. Then his eyes flicked to the clock on the dash and I knew I’d lost him.

“Nothing,” I said.

He leaned forward and kissed me with unusual tenderness. “Alright, then. Happy New Year, baby.”

I gathered my duffel bag and opened the door. Before I was completely out of the car, he put his hand on my thigh and stopped me. “Hey—you think I could borrow your debit card? I left my wallet at the house and there’s no time to go back and get it. Those guys’re waiting for me and shit. I’d be late as an overbooked whore.”

I’d seen him put his wallet in his back pocket when we were getting ready to leave. I’d seen the rectangular outline of it in his tan Dickies as we walked out to the car. I knew it was buried under the weight of his body as he sat in the driver’s seat and lied to me. But I didn’t want a public confrontation. If I said no, if I said I knew the truth, his face would turn red and he’d start yelling. I didn’t want to risk one of my castmates walking by and seeing that, so I reached into my bag, pulled out my pocketbook, and handed him the card. The two thousand dollars I had to my name were now in his hand.

“Call me when you get off,” he said. I nodded and shut the door. Then he was gone. I turned and walked toward the elevator, my steps heavy with regret, my eyes wet for reasons I couldn’t quite understand.

I was eighteen during this initial New Year’s Eve in Las Vegas, and until I stepped out of the elevator and saw how packed the hotel was, I never realized what a big deal the holiday is in the city. It’s everything. People book rooms years in advance. By
that time I was well aware of the perpetual debauchery that drowns the air of Las Vegas, but the hours leading up to 2001 were unlike any I’d seen before. It was a complete madhouse. Bodies were jammed into every available space at the bars, slot machines, and lounges. A frenzied roar of voices rang in my ears as I walked through the casino to the guest elevators. There was usually a good-sized crowd for our performances, and as I looked around, I predicted the crowd would be two or three times as large that night. For the first time since I’d started, I was nervous. The bumps I’d done and the ephedrine I’d taken back at the house didn’t help.

I was an hour early for work and there was no one else in the dressing room. I turned on the television for background noise. Dick Clark was in Times Square. The camera shifted between him, the musicians performing for the crowd, and snapshots of festivity in other countries like Sydney and Tokyo where it was already 2001. New York was a mass of colorful hats, scarves, and teeth. Strangers hugged strangers. People’s cheeks puffed out like blowfish as they tooted on little plastic horns. It was hard to believe we were less than a year away from 9/11. The neon of the Square flashed cheerfully behind Dick’s head.

As an adolescent, I’d fantasized about going to Columbia or NYU for college. Like most young writers, I thought New York was the place to be, the place where I’d pen the next great American novel in a funky corner café full of artists and musicians and beat poets. I never anticipated the neon I’d eventually live among would be that of Las Vegas Boulevard.
I set my cosmetics up in my usual spot, on the end of the counter next to Danielle’s spot. Danielle was the only person who was friendly to me. When I told Cliff this, he said it was probably because she was into chicks. When I worked at the restaurant, everyone was always friendly, always chatty, always cracking jokes. There was shit talking, of course, but no one openly displayed their contempt for one another at work. Here, if someone didn’t like you, you knew it. They just wouldn’t talk to you or they wouldn’t respond when you tried to talk to them. Sarah was the worst. With the exception of Danielle, she controlled the other dancers like voodoo dolls. I wasn’t quite sure why she never challenged Danielle. Maybe it was because Danielle was confident in herself and didn’t take any crap. Or maybe it was because for her, this was just a job, not a lifestyle. When Danielle and Cliff weren’t there, I felt isolated. The others treated me like I was invisible. Sometimes I’d go home in tears. Sometimes I’d hide in the bathroom during my breaks so the others wouldn’t see my anguish. I hated the fact that I was such a fucking milquetoast. Like I needed to run home and cry on Mommy and Daddy’s shoulder. When I was a kid, I had no friends. My parents were the only people I had to confide in. Being an outcast at work was like being the four-eyed monster all over again.

A stifling wave of sadness passed through my body. I sat down and tried to force my emotions into submission. The last thing Cliff wanted to see was a dancer with eyes puffy and red from crying. I looked at the hotel phone on the end of the counter. Impulsively, I picked it up and dialed Dad’s home number. One ring. Two. Three. Four—

“Hello?”
I cringed at the sound of my stepmother Janelle’s voice. It was always saturated with phoniness, always a few octaves higher than it should’ve been. I considered hanging up, but figured I’d come this far.

“Hi, Janelle—it’s Krissy.” Krissy was my family nickname. It felt strange to refer to myself by it.

“Who?”

Who? Was she fucking serious?

“Krissy—Kristen. You know—Bob’s daughter?” I rolled my eyes. I could never tell if Janelle played ignorant because she truly was or because she wanted to piss me off.

“Oh,” she said flatly. There was a long pause. I was suddenly aware of my hand shaking as I held the phone. Nerves or the side effects of the drugs? Hard to tell. “What do you want?”

My chest seized at the tone of her voice. Years of unexpressed anger toward Janelle festered inside me. Toward all of my parents, really, but especially toward her. I was twelve when my parents separated. Dad and Janelle are a cliché story of a secretary and manager who met at work and started fucking each other, although they’ll never admit it. Mom found out through a phone call from Janelle’s husband, though we all suspected something long before that. Dad started coming home later and later. I couldn’t sleep until I heard the garage door rumble and the backdoor slam. Sometimes he’d come in my room eating hot dogs from the package and ask about my day, but I knew he wasn’t really there. His mind was with someone else.
Janelle moved in a month after Mom moved out. While Mom and my brother and I settled into a shitty little condo—the only thing Mom could afford on twelve bucks an hour—Janelle redecorated the house and slept in the same bed my parents had shared. She even slept on the same side as my mother. When my brother and I stayed there, her and Dad ate dinner in their bedroom while my brother and I ate alone in the kitchen. Dad reorganized his entire life to make Janelle happy. He bought her cars. He allowed her to waste thousands of dollars on Home Shopping Network novelties like back stretchers and shoe polishers. He allowed her to quit work and pursue things she never saw through like interior design classes and getting a real estate license. Dad’s side of the family was in awe of his new young wife, this tall, blonde, former model. She was the submissive trophy wife he’d always wanted. Instantly, my mother and all she’d been to the family and to my father were forgotten. It was like Mom had never existed. It was easy to understand why she numbed herself with booze.

“Well, I wanted to tell Dad I moved . . . I have a new address and phone number.” Saying I wanted to wish him a happy new year somehow didn’t seem appropriate, somehow.

“You moved again?”

“Yeah.” A moment of silence passed between us. I could’ve sworn I heard the echo of Dick Clark’s voice on her end. I imagined her standing at the kitchen counter holding the phone, her blonde hair in a French twist, her nails perfectly manicured, her blue eyes glazed over, her face layered with too much makeup, the house smelling of cat shit because she was too lazy to clean the litter box.
“He’s busy right now.”

“Doing what?”

“Why do you care? You haven’t called in months.”

“Look, can you just put him on, Janelle? It’ll only take a second.” Why did it have to be like this between us? Always a competition.

“I don’t want to upset him.”

“Why would he be upset? He should be happy to hear from me. It’s New Year’s Eve.”

She laughed bitterly. “Do you really believe that? Do you really think he’d be happy to hear from you? You’ve put us through heck, Kristen. We can’t wait for this year to be over.”

Her calling me by my full name taunted my anger. Who the hell did this bitch think she was, preventing me from talking to my father? Hadn’t she stolen enough of his time from my childhood? She was probably stoked I’d run away. She’d never given a fuck about my brother and me. Drugs and rage surged through my body. My heart was a trephine. My chest was Hiroshima. The ball in Time’s Square dropped into my stomach.

“You know what, Janelle? Go fuck yourself.”

“Excuse me?” I imagined her putting a hand to her throat the way she did when someone swore in her presence. She acted like such a self-righteous goody-goody, conveniently forgetting about the fact that she’d cheated on her husband to blow my married father under the desk at work. Her behavior had caused her to lose custody of her son, yet I was the fuck-up. Right.
“I said go fuck yourself. Happy New Year.”

I dropped the phone into its cradle, not quite believing what I’d just done. I was ashamed and thrilled at the same time. It felt good to have the last word, to tell someone off, to not care about the consequences. It was completely out of character for me. I was tired of being the nice one, sick of being the pushover, fed up with being empathetic. Being these things had done nothing but cause turmoil. I didn’t want to be that girl crumbling in the bathroom anymore.

On television, New Yorkers cheered for the band onstage. I pretended they were cheering for me. The new me I was determined to become.
Chapter 13

Aside from Cliff, Danielle, and a few bodyguards, no one knew about the night I’d spent with Prince. At least, that’s what I thought. But when I went into work and saw the words “PURPLE SLUT” (the unofficial nickname for Prince groupies) written in lipstick on the dressing room counter where I always got ready, I wondered if someone had spilled the beans.

It became worse from there. As if not speaking to me weren’t bad enough, Sarah and her besties began to ignore me completely. When it was time to ride the elevator down to the casino, they closed the doors before I could slide it. When I came back from my lunch break, some of my cosmetics would be broken or missing. I began taking my makeup bag with me to the cafeteria, the little pink pouch intermingling with the dry salad on my tray. I began leaving my wallet at home, paranoid someone would hide or steal it. I didn’t trust anyone, not even Cliff or Danielle. Every day, I changed my mind about which one of them had blabbed. When Danielle left to work at another property, I missed the opportunity to confront her. Not that I had the balls to, anyway.

I didn’t exactly know who was participating in this torment, but I had a pretty good idea who was executing the orders. I halfheartedly complained to Cliff, afraid I’d lose my job if I made too much of a fuss. It wouldn’t have surprised me if Kevin drove down to the hotel and confronted the suspects during a performance, so I didn’t tell him what was going on. I kept the torment to myself for three solid months. But the night I discovered that my costume had been fucked with, I finally broke.
A dancer knows when her costume’s been fucked with. There’s a big difference between an accidental rip and an intentional rip, a loose thread and a sheared thread, a fallen sequin and a plucked sequin. But the funny thing is, everyone pretends it might have been an accident. Everyone pretends the pettiness doesn’t exist, that it’s not more noticeable than a pair of exposed breasts onstage. Even Cliff, a guy who’d been in the business for over twenty years, played dumb. Even when there was evidence, he played dumb. Fucking unbelievable.

“Maybe it was an accident,” he said as he examined a big hole in the bejeweled bra where my nipple would’ve been.

“Bullshit, Cliff. You know who did this.” I stood in his office with a hotel towel wrapped around myself. I was too shy to walk around naked like the other girls. He looked up at me over the rims of his reading glasses, an amused smile dancing on his lips.

“I’ve never heard you swear before, dear. It doesn’t sound right coming out of that sweet little mouth.”

“Don’t change the subject.”

His smile faded. He dropped my bra into his lap, picked up the phone, and punched in some numbers. “Yes, Anita? Could you come in here for a sec? Thanks.” Less than ten seconds later, she was standing next to me. Cliff handed her my crippled costume, gesturing to the hole.

“How long?”

She studied the hole thoughtfully. “Give me half an hour.”
“Great.” He followed her to the door and shut it behind her. He pulled up a chair and positioned it across from his. “Sit down for a minute, doll.”

I sat heavily, readjusted my towel, and crossed my arms over my chest. I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror behind Cliff’s desk. My eyes were narrow, my lips twisted into a pout. My family calls this “the shit look”. Cliff returned to his chair. The air whistled out of the cushion as he lowered his rump into it.

“Listen, I know dealing with the other girls hasn’t been easy these past few months. Some of them can be really intimidating. But sometimes you have to grin and bear it, especially when you’re just starting out.”

“I don’t understand what I’ve done to deserve this, Cliff. What have I ever done to her?”

“Who?”

I rolled my eyes. “Sarah, Cliff. Sarah.”

Cliff leaned back in his chair and threw his hands up. He was always so melodramatic. “Oh, God, not this business again. I thought we’d moved on.”

“We can’t move on from something we’ve never even talked about!”

“You’ve never talked to me about it – you’ve just complained about it.”

“Is there a difference?”

He sighed. “Look, I’m sorry, doll, but there’s nothing I can do. Sarah’s been with the company for a long time. She has seniority. The owners like her. My hands are tied.”

“Why? She’s rude, she’s negative, and she’s not that great of a dancer.”
“Another year in this industry and you’ll realize that in Vegas, it’s not about ability—it’s about sex. No one cares about how well you dance—they care about how well you seduce the crowd. Sarah does that. You do that. You’d do it even better if you had more confidence.”

“Well, it’s tough to have confidence when your coworkers hate you.”

“Don’t you understand anything about women? The hate comes from jealousy, darling. Clearly you haven’t had many girlfriends.”

“Clearly,” I said sarcastically. But he was right. I didn’t know much about the dynamics between women. My best friend growing up was a boy. The only close girlfriends I’d ever had were Valerie and Reema, and we were too busy getting fucked up to get to know each other. When I imagined the way women were supposed to get along, I thought about sisters in a Jane Austen or Louisa May Alcott novel. Weren’t we were supposed to be nurturing, supportive, and respectful of one another? Wasn’t it supposed to be like *Little Women*? Why couldn’t it be? Years later, I discovered the answer to this question.

Cliff leaned forward and put his hands on my bare knees. “Every dancer has to pay her dues, Kristen. This is your time to do that. Just smile and endure. You’re not going to be the new girl on the block forever.” He stood up and offered his hand. “Come on, now. Let’s go see how Anita’s doing with that tear. A little mouse must’ve gotten in here or something, huh?” He winked.

I forced a smile and followed him out of the room, knuckles red from my death grip on the terry.
The patch over my nipple was unsightly. Anita didn’t have the right fabric on hand, and the patch was a different texture and color than the rest of my bra. I looked at myself in the mirrored doors of the elevator and shook my head. I had pirate boobs. I was Janet Jackson four years before Nipplegate.

The reflection of Sarah’s face appeared next to mine. I turned and greeted her with a nod, pulling my hair across my breast to hide the patch. What had she used? A Swiss Army knife? A nail file? Manicure scissors? I pictured her sitting in my chair and smirking as she went to town on my cup. I was amazed by how accurate her estimation was of my areola circumference. That bitch had done her homework. Did she spy on me when I was getting dressed? Note to self: lock the door.

The other dancers followed close behind. They snickered and whispered to one another. I was certain they were talking about me, laughing at my misfortune, saying I looked like an idiot. I stood to the side as they filed into the elevator. The second the doors closed, I was in tears. All I wanted to do was go home. Not marijuana haven home. Home home. Had Janelle told Dad what I’d said to her on New Year’s Eve? I hadn’t spoken to either of my parents since 1999. Were Mom and Bobby okay? I worried about Mom’s drinking and my little brother’s exposure to it. I worried about Mom being by herself when Bobby was at Dad’s.

I’m such a fucking asshole for leaving.

I punched the button for the casino floor.

I hurried through the labyrinth of slot machines. The cast never waited for me once they made it downstairs – they just kept on walking. We wore nothing but a thong
underneath our sheer skirts, and I could always feel the breeze as I took long strides through the chilly, cigarette-laced air. It seemed especially breezy that night. There was some sort of comedy show in the theatre and the place was packed. I spotted a feather in one of the drummer’s headpieces and brushed past people to get to it. By then, I was used to the stares. Walking around in full costume with your castmates is one thing – spectators can see you’re part of a dance troupe – but when you’re alone, they think you’re just some genie-obsessed nutcase who didn’t get the memo that Halloween falls once a year.

I covered the nipple patch with my hair until I made it to the performance area. I resumed my position in the back row and hoped the dancers in front of me would distract from Pirate Boobs. Right before we were about to start, Sarah turned around, met my gaze, and smiled broadly. It was the first time she’d ever directed a smile toward me. I smiled back instinctively, instantly feeling guilty about blaming her for the hole incident. Maybe it really was an accident. Maybe there really was a spandex-hungry mouse in the dressing room. Maybe my coworkers didn’t hate me after all. Maybe this was the beginning of a beautiful Little Women-like friendship between Sarah and I. I suddenly felt less self-conscious. I raised my arms and began to dance. I still preferred dancing with my eyes closed. I shook my hips. I felt the beat of the drum in the core of my soul. I listened to the crowd. They were cheering. Clapping. Whistling. Roaring. Laughing. Laughing?

I opened my eyes. Hundreds of pairs stared back at me gleefully. I looked down.
My turquoise skirt was in a puddle around my feet. The thread looked as if someone had pulled it out of the elastic waistband like a slippery belt. Which meant I was standing in the middle of a crowded casino in nothing but a flesh-colored thong and a fucked up bra.

I picked up my skirt and ran. I pushed through the crowd with muscle I never knew I had. Duane, the night shift security guard who checked room keys at the elevator, grabbed my arm as I ran past.

“Hey—what happened? You okay?” There was a slight chuckle in his voice.

I shook my head, unable to speak. I pressed the button over and over until a set of doors finally opened. I sank against the wall of the elevator, still clutching the skirt in my hand. I untangled it and examined the thread. Typically, our skirts were double-stitched to the waistband to avoid “accidents” like these. Mine had been altered to a single-stitch that was barely attached to the elastic. Could Anita have done this? What could she possibly have against me? Did Sarah ask her to? Had they been conspiring for weeks? I was more paranoid than a Grassy Knoll theorist.

A group of executives waiting to go down stared as I stormed out of the elevator toward the dressing room. Aside from the time in sixth grade when I’d been forced to square dance with a teacher because all the boys refused to be my partner, I’d never felt so humiliated. I was angry at myself for not checking the skirt before I’d put it on. The bra had hogged all my attention.

I banged on the door with my fist, my hand throbbing from the impact. Anita opened it.
“What’s wrong?”

I threw my skirt on the floor and gestured to myself. “What does it look like?”

I brushed past her and went to the dressing room. I pulled on the sweatpants and sweatshirt I’d worn to work. I went to my place at the table and swept my makeup and hair products into my bag. When I turned to leave, Cliff was blocking the doorway.

“What’s going on, doll?”

“I’m done, Cliff. I’m over it.”

“Look, sometimes accidents happen—”

“Accident! You know this wasn’t an accident.” I pulled his arm away from the doorframe. He followed me down the hallway. Anita bit her fingernails and looked on.

“What does this mean? Are you quitting?”

Was I? I wasn’t sure. I didn’t know what the implications were of walking out that door. In my heart, I believed Sarah would be fired over this episode. My taking a couple days off would give Cliff and the agency the time and space to get rid of her.

I took a deep breath. When I was upset, I could never tell if my pulse was racing from emotion or ephedrine. “I’m giving you a chance to straighten things out,” I said, my voice wobbling like a pubescent boy’s.

“I can’t promise you anything, Kristen. I wish you wouldn’t leave.”

“How can I stay after this? Dogs are treated better than I’m treated here.”

We stood in the hallway and stared at each other. The 80s station was on in the background (“Take On Me”). I realized then that Cliff had become somewhat of a surrogate parent. Maybe not the best parent, but a parent nonetheless. He knew things
weren’t peachy at home. Sometimes he asked nosy questions. Sometimes I answered, sometimes I didn’t. I think he felt responsible for me in many ways. He’d hired me, he’d nurtured me, and he believed in my when others didn’t. He saw something in me I never knew I had. I was still desperately fond of him, but I was furious that he wasn’t standing up for me. Leaving would teach him a lesson: I wasn’t fucking around anymore.

I opened the door and left.
Chapter 14

It was a week after the costume debacle. Aside from working out, cleaning constantly (a side effect of the drugs), and writing in my journal to keep myself busy, I had sat by the phone nearly the entire time waiting for Cliff or someone at the agency to call and announce Sarah had been canned. But the only people who called were drug dealers, telemarketers, and a bill collector looking for Kevin. On the night of the third day, I couldn’t stand it. I picked up the phone and dialed Cliff’s direct line.

“This is Anita.”

“Hey, Anita—it’s Kristen. Is Cliff there?”

She was silent.

“Hello?” Is the bitch deaf?

“Um . . . hold on.”

I sat on a chair in our bedroom and stared at the acid and marijuana posters hanging on the wall. I had convinced Kevin to get rid of the Confederate flag and the naked chick pictures, but he insisted on keeping the ones announcing his love of vice. I had managed to buy us a new bed, dresser, and nightstand that, for once, weren’t from Rent-A-Center, but the décor still put me in a foul mood. The blood color on the walls teased my adrenaline, threw coal into my cocaine and ephedrine boiler. Kevin and I constantly talked about repainting, but never found time to do it. He didn’t care much. Mostly, he was out in the living room blazing with Miguel and watching “The Real World: Back to New York”. I was the one who spent all of my time in this room. I knew
every chip in the paint, the crack in the door, every stain on the ceiling. It was my scarlet prison.

“Kristen?”

I cleared my throat. “Cliff?”

“Yes. What’s going on?”

I didn’t like his tone. “What do you mean?”

“I mean where’ve you been? It’s been a week.”

“I know . . . I said I was going to give you a chance to straighten things out with Sarah, remember?”

“But I haven’t heard anything from you, Kristen. Not a peep. You can’t just not come in because you don’t get on with one of the girls. You don’t show for a week, you basically say, ‘I quit’.”

“No one even tried to call me, Cliff.”

“Look, doll, you know how fond I am of you. But your job isn’t my responsibility—it’s yours. Especially a job like this. Do you know how many girls I see a week? What they’d do to get this gig?” Drop twenty pounds in a drug-fueled frenzy, perhaps?

“So what are you saying? I can’t come back?”

He sighed into the phone. “I just auditioned a girl yesterday. I think the agency’s going to hire her.”

“That fast?” She probably isn’t a fat ass like you were.

“We need someone.”
“But Cliff—I need this job. What am I supposed to do?”

“I’m not sure if any of the other properties need girls, but you should call the agency and check.” A crash in the background, muffled voices. “Listen, doll, I have to go.”

Click.

As swiftly as it had begun, my dancing career was over. For a while, anyway. Hot sidewalks, job applications, dirty kitchens, ugly shoes, hairnets. Square one. Again.

I burst into tears. I wanted my dad, my mom. We were barely on speaking terms. If they saw me in person, would they know I was on drugs? Their sweet little girl had officially become a derelict. I thought of them every time I took a pill, did a line, drank too many cocktails. The fear they would somehow find out was always there. My drug use was actually pretty tame compared to most people in the industry. In all of Las Vegas, really. At the time, drugs and booze weren’t escapism or an outlet. My motivation was to control my weight.

Food has always been the cornerstone of my family. Italians like to eat. Every event revolves around the menu. Almost everyone on Dad’s side is overweight or has been at some point. Dad’s father—Grandpa Brown, we called him—was so big, he could only get around in a wheelchair. Growing up, Bobby and I were raised to go big or go home at the dinner table. I was never skinny like the other girls at school. I was a porker. But it wasn’t until I my twelfth birthday that I became aware of my fatness.

For the big 1-2, Dad took us to Peacock Palace, the local Indian restaurant in Diamond Bar, for the first time. He was good about that—always exposing Bobby and I
to new things, different cultures. I took an instant liking to Indian food and gorged myself on garlic naan, chicken tikka masala, lamb with mint sauce, aloo gobi, and rice pudding for dessert. I ate until I was pregnant with a food baby. Afterward, we got in the car and I looked down at my thighs. They expanded as I eased into my seat, two blobs of dough against leather.

“Dad, do you think my thighs are big?”

He considered the question, his own belly nine months pregnant. “They’re a little hearty.”

To this day, I can’t stand the word “hearty”. Hearty soups, hearty stews, hearty breakfasts, hearty cuts of prime rib. You will never hear me utter it or order it.

I was chubby through most of high school, too. It wasn’t until I entered the Miss Diamond Bar beauty pageant that I slimmed down. The thought of winning money for my Ivy League aspirations was my motivation back then. Now, I was obsessed with my weight so we could put food I never ate on the table. I was terrified at the thought of working in a restaurant again, of being surrounded by all that edible temptation. I looked down at my thighs, the word “hearty” going round and round in my head like balls on a roulette table.

“Kristen? What happened?”

Kevin was sitting next to me on the bed. His glassy, bloodshot eyes told me he was high as a cloud.

“I—I lost my job,” I finally choked out.
I expected him to yell, to flip out, to point out the stack of utility bills on the
dresser. I expected him to punch his fist against the wall, maybe turn it towards me.
Instead, he took the bottom of his shirt and wiped my cheeks with it.

“Fuck those people, baby. They’re snakes, all of ‘em. Miguel and I are making
some money off the shit we’re growing, so that’ll give you time to get a new job. Okay?”
He tilted my chin and kissed my nose, his pupils wide. Astonishing.

What does he want from you now?

“Okay.” I remembered Kevin telling me it was just the two of us. “It’s me and
you now.” So far, that was turning out to be the only consistency, the only truth about my
life in Las Vegas.

Our lips met. We kissed with a passion I hadn’t felt since the beginning of our
relationship. Clothes came off and he was inside me, his pelvis rocking gently forward
instead of violently slamming, his lips on mine, his hands stroking my hair. Just like I did
every time he tossed the smallest bone of affection toward me, I forgave him for
everything that had happened before and vowed to recommit myself to him.

Later that night when he had gone out with his buddies for a beer, I realized my
debit card was missing.

The week after I lost my job, I went to the bank and checked my account. I hadn’t
gotten a paycheck in almost three weeks and I was scared to look at things after paying
rent and utilities. But the low balance wasn’t what jumped out at me—it was the number
of transactions at a place called Olympic Gardens. There were ten to fifteen of them in
various amounts—twenty dollars, sixty, one hundred—and they dated all the way back to New Year’s Eve. The most recent date was a month earlier.

I had never heard of Olympic Gardens. Was it a nursery? A place where athletes stocked up on Speedos and leotards? I walked to the payphone outside the bank, picked up the Yellow Pages dangling beneath it, and flipped to the O section. Old Grand Saloon, Olive Garden, Ollie Green’s Auto Repair . . . Olympic Gardens.

Unlike the other businesses, this one had an ad covering half a page. A heavily made-up woman swung from a pole and licked her top lip, dollar bills waving from her G-string. “Olympic Gardens Gentleman’s Club – The Strip Starts Here”, it said just below her impossibly large breasts.

When I was working at Pinot, Vanessa, the waitress Kevin called a whore behind her back, invited me to her thirtieth birthday party. Vanessa was bisexual and frequented strip clubs, so naturally, she chose this as the venue. When I told Kevin about the invite, he immediately shot down the idea of my going. “I don’t want you in a place like that. You’ll become like Vanessa quicker than a scalded dog,” he had said. So it remained that the only portrayal of stripping I had ever seen was the in movie “Showgirls”. I saw it during an honors band trip to Arizona in junior high, laughing in the hotel room with Ahmad as kids do when they see sex onscreen. I gawked at Elizabeth Berkley, not believing my brainy “Saved By The Bell” idol was playing an exotic dancer, wondering how real life girls fall into that line of work, how their significant others feel about it, what their parents think, their fathers. Even at age thirteen, I didn’t judge the profession; I
was simply fascinated by it. What I wasn’t fascinated by was the fact that my boyfriend was patronizing it. *With your fucking money!*

I didn’t know what to do. I picked up the phone and hit it against the metal box surrounding it. Swamp people entering the bank stared at me. At that moment, I realized had become one of them—living in a piece of shit house, driving a beater, hiding domestic bruises, flirting with overdrafts. *You’ve become a trailer trash hillbilly like the rest of them.*

I got in the truck. I couldn’t go home. I drove around recklessly, running stop signs, darting through traffic, flipping off a truck driver, my rage amplified when I drove past a strip club in the old section of Henderson. Just like when I first arrived in Las Vegas and was learning my way around the convoluted casinos, I lost my sense of direction, going nowhere and everywhere. I had been like most tourists: confused and bewildered by the pews of machines, their levers sticking out like open arms, the people behind the cashier’s cage counting out Junior’s college money, Frank Sinatra impersonators singing in the lounges, dealers shouting out things I didn’t understand like “five on red!” and “two pair!”, the empty cocktail glasses, the cigarette butts, the line at the ATM machine, directories above pointing to another quadrant of the maze, no windows, no doors, no clocks, no daylight, bars thriving twenty-four hours a day, no last call, call your drink, your vice, anything you like, the eye in the sky catching it all, the silent witness to everything. Even now, a year and a half after arriving in Las Vegas, I still lost myself in the casinos, liked losing myself in them. Even if no one else does, casinos always welcome you.
I looked to my right and saw the Community College of Southern Nevada across the divider. I drove past it every time I went to the bank or the market. I had even stopped in and picked up a brochure once. I made a U-turn and pulled into the school’s lot, not quite sure why I was doing it. *You think college is in the cards now? In your dreams, honey.*


I sat on a patch of grass near a bustling building and watched the eager legs march past, pretending I belonged there, that I was one of them. I was used to being an observer, but I had never been on this side before, on the outside of the academic bubble looking in. Academia had been my world, my sanctuary, the place I belonged, the place I felt wanted, the place where I was the best performer. I had only felt that in one other world: dancing. That was gone now, too.
“Excuse me—do you have the time?”

An earnest face stared down at me. He wore glasses, a Chewbacca t-shirt, and one of those heavy-duty backpacks that straps across the chest. He was an extra out of “Revenge of the Nerds”. Exactly the type of person I would have been hanging out with had I gone to college.

I shook my head dumbly. When he was gone, I thought of a good one-liner:
“There's a sale at the Maul.... everything's half off.” I’m never good at saying the right thing in the moment like Dad. We both have quick wits, but my mouth is crippled by lull.

I sat there until the sun disappeared behind the cartoonish Las Vegas skyline, its light reincarnating itself in the windows of each hotel, eyes dry from crying, nose stuffy, soul spent. The parking lot was nearly empty when I got back in the truck and headed home. It was almost time for Kevin to be at work. When I opened the front door and saw his bong and favorite coffee mug on the table, all of the anger I had felt at the bank returned. I walked down the hallway toward the rectangle outline of the bathroom, my rage building with every step. I stood in the doorway and stared at him silently. He jumped when he saw me.

“Fuck. You scared me and shit.” He turned back to the mirror and wrestled with his bartender’s bowtie. “You been gone a while. Everything go okay at the bank?”

Did he know? Was he afraid I would find his indiscretions written in black and white? Did he care? My mouth was broken, frozen like the Statue of David in the Caesars Palace casino (what would Michaelangelo think about his masterpiece becoming kitsch, I wonder?).
My mind drifted to the night I walked out on my job. It was the best night I had ever had with Kevin. He was waiting for me when I got home, and I predicted he would fucking ululate when I told him what happened. But instead, he was relieved. “Fuck those people, Kristen. They’re bad influences, anyways. I’m gonna start making a shitload of money when them crops mature. I’ll take care of you.” His eyes were wide, pupils dilated. He was calmer than I had ever seen him, even more so than we he smoked pot. Miguel was lying on the couch, smiling to himself and running his hands up and down his arms. “We’re gonna be the kings of Vegas weed, dude,” he laughed in my direction. He hardly ever acknowledged my presence, let alone talked to me. Kevin grinned stupidly. He couldn’t take his hands off me. I was instantly suspicious of his affection.

“Are you drunk or something?”

“No . . . we bought some E from Mike the busser. Took it about an hour ago.”

“E? What’s that?”

“Ecstasy.” He dug into his pocket and pulled out a small baggie. It reminded me of the packets we used for coke at the Aladdin. “Here, take this. I got one for you.”

He dropped the tiny white pill in my palm. It was about the same size as the mole on my inner thigh: blink and you’ll miss it. The guys watched and waited for me to swallow. I hesitated. Could I die from taking one pill?

By that time I had been taking weight loss drugs, doing coke here and there, and drinking from time to time, but it was no biggie. It was just what people did in Vegas, in our industry. Standard. Same as a nine-to-fiver having a donut and coffee in the morning. But taking pill pills was another story. Aside from ephedrine (not a drug, as far as I was
concerned. Hey, if you can get it over the counter . . .), I didn’t know much about pill popping. It was something I was freaked out by, something I thought only hardcore druggies did. My parents stormed my mind like a blizzard.

“Are you sure this is safe?”

“Safer’n a cowboy without reigns,” Kevin snickered. “Don’t be a pussy. You’ll be fine.” He handed me his forty-ounce Miller to wash it down with.

Twenty minutes later, I was convinced Death was coming. I lay on the dirty pink carpet in the fetal position, damp with sweat and certain I could hear groundhogs digging a hole under the house. Kevin and Miguel sat on the couch and laughed. “She’s faded!” Kevin was suddenly lying on the carpet next to me, stroking my hair and wiping the drops from my forehead.

“Don’t fight it, baby. Just give in and shit.”

Heaven. Death came and sent me to Heaven. The pink carpet became cotton candy. Kevin’s voice was music. His touch was magic. His words were lyrical. We talked for hours. About what, I’ll never recall. I had a conversation with Miguel for the first time ever. Laughed for the first time in months. My parents didn’t exist. I was happy, outgoing, carefree. For a few hours, the world and my place in it was perfect. When I woke up the next day, I wondered if it was all a dream. The only evidence I had that it wasn’t was my obese pupils and raging headache. Kevin and I never talked about that night.

“Yoo-hoo! Kristen?”

“Huh?”
He finished tying the bow and turned to face me, the dirty bathroom bulbs glowing in his eyes. “I asked if everything’s okay.”

_No, it’s not okay, fucktard. This is your chance. Wail on this bastard!_

“Everything’s fine.”
Chapter 15

For the third time in eighteen months, I walked the Strip looking for a job. I fell back on restaurants, the old faithful of employment. I didn’t have the luxury of time, of going on auditions, of trying to find another Cliff to take pity on me. We were behind on rent and Kevin’s “I’ll work when I feel like it” attitude wasn’t cutting it. Now, the problem wasn’t lack of work history—it was that I had made so much at the talent agency. “There’s no way we can match that. How does eight an hour sound? You ‘member how to use an industrial washer?”

I crossed the Boulevard and headed toward Caesars Palace, one of my last stops of the day. The pantheon columns were pristine in the sinking sun, shiny and white as if it were still 126 AD. I pulled the sweaty wedgie out of my crack and thought about the sensibility of togas. So much more conducive to the fucking heat. Four years earlier when I was a freshman in high school, I had abandoned my wallflower role for a day and dressed up as Cicero for Halloween. I wore a pomegranate red toga, Roman sandals, and a gold civic crown. I carried De Oratore as if I were Cicero walking to the podium to make a speech. All day, my classmates asked what I was supposed to be:

“You a hobo or something?”

“No, I’m Cicero.”

“Cisco?”

“Who?”

“The rapper.”

“No—Cicero.”
“Who?”

“The great Roman orator. You know—De Oratore?”

“Dude, I could use some oratore right now.”

It was the last time I ever wore a costume. At least until the Aladdin.

The fountains leading to the valet area sparkled Fiji blue. Caesar himself guarded the limos, taxis, and airport shuttles with marble muscles and abs of stone. The casino was dark, smoky. Low ceilings, gaudy chandeliers, faded carpet, wrinkled craps dealers. Different from the newer, brighter monstrosities like the Aladdin and the Venetian with their white baseboards and youthful vitality. The fresh hotels were full of hope; their predecessors knew better. The ghost of old Vegas haunted the Palace.

It wasn’t yet five, but the lobby bar was packed. Hawaiian shirts mingled with suits; beers danced with bellinis. I had come to realize after a year in Las Vegas that nothing squashes hierarchy like liquor. A Sammy Davis Jr. impersonator played the piano and sang an old Rat Pack tune. The song reminded me of the oldies radio station Dad made Bobby and I listen to growing up. “What song is this?” he would ask while driving us home from day care or soccer practice. We came to know these old jingles so well, we could point out when Dad was singing the wrong verse. He would look at us in the rearview mirror and smile sheepishly. My throat began to close at the memory. I swallowed and forced it to retreat. I wanted to cross the ersatz stone fence surrounding the bar and join the party, forget my troubles, forget my past, forget Cicero costumes and du-wop songs. Instead, I kept on walking. Rent, bills, rent, bills, rent, bills, rent, bills.
When I was working as a dancer and making decent money, The Forum, the indoor mall at Caesars, had been my favorite place to shop. Unlike the ordinary mall I had grown up going to, it was an orgy of lights, sounds, mimes, aquariums, and a faux sky ceiling that changes from dawn to midday to sunset to twilight. Now, instead of shopping there, I was looking to join the minimum wage crew again. How swiftly my fortunes had changed.

I walked down the crowded corridor, searching for places to apply. I looked at each store lasciviously. I wanted money. I was hungry for it. I wanted clothes and shoes and handbags and cars and diamonds. I wanted a library full of books. I wanted to shop and go out to dinner without calling the bank and checking my balance first. I wanted to send overdraft fees to the guillotine.

The belly-dancing gig hadn’t provided the means to shop at Prada and Versace, but Guess and Bebe had been fine with me. It was the first time in my life I had been interested in fashion, maybe because it was the first time I was actually being noticed. In junior high, my favorite outfit was a “Don’t Worry, Be Happy” T-shirt and green biker shorts. Now, it was a little black dress and five-inch heels, which I had taught myself to walk in pretty damn well. Swiping my debit card through the machine at those shops was a distant memory.

Around the corner from Spago and across the way from Victoria’s Secret was Planet Hollywood. When I was a kid, this restaurant had been the coolest thing ever. I had gone to the one in Los Angeles several times with my family and loved walking around looking at the film props, costumes, and celebrity memorabilia, the hats and
baseball bats and photos signed by Sellest Stalone and Bruce Willis and Demi Moore. I walked into the restaurant and studied the “Terminator 2” prop in a case near the bar. Seeing the picture of Arnold Schwarzenegger next to it reminded me of Mom.

The hostess gave me an application. I took it to the bar, figuring I could have a drink while I was at it, convincing myself a few dollars was worth my sanity. I ordered the cheapest glass of wine on the menu. It was pink and had a sour aftertaste. Nothing like Prince’s wine. I picked a pen out of my purse, my fingers sore from filling out so many lines and boxes.

“Kristen?” I heard faintly over the sound of Smashmouth singing “Allstar”. I looked up from the application. Duane, a security guard from the Aladdin, was sitting a few stools down. He sipped a pink blended drink and grinned at me. He was Filipino with long, bleach-blond hair he wore in a ponytail. I had seen him a lot while walking to and from the elevators, but the only conversation we had ever had was about his girlfriend making “stacks a money” as a stripper. He seemed nice enough, but something about him creeped me out.

“Hi, Duane.” I was embarrassed about being seen there, the showgirl who had lost her gig. “What’re you doing here?”

“Just having a drink before work.”

“Before work?” I couldn’t fathom this.

He laughed. “Yeah. Helps me deal with the drunks.” He picked up his drink, moved to the seat next to mine, and lit a cigarette. “What’re you up to?”
Obviously he hadn’t heard. Did they even think about me at work anymore? Did Cliff? Did they tell whoever had taken my place the story about losing my skirt during the show? *You’re just another slut who came and went.* I considered lying.

“Well, I . . .” Bad wine was liquid truth. “I’m looking for a new job,” I admitted. *You are such a loser.*

He laughed, loud and high-pitched. He flicked the straw out of his glass and started slurping the frothy fluid. “So that’s why you haven’t been around. What happened?”

“There were . . . issues.”

“With who? Other dancers?”

I nodded and looked down at the bar. It was plastic and lit from underneath, its surface the color of molten lava. It looked the way my face felt.

He shook his head. “You gonna deal with bullshit, make it worthwhile. I don’t know how much they pay at Aladdin, but I bet you could make more stripping. Ever thought about it?”

I was horrified. Stripping? That would be my parents’ worst fear come true. Dad would have flipped out if he had seen the belly-dancing costume, and that was tame compared to pasties and G-strings like Elizabeth Berkley’s. Anger passed through me as I thought about the charges on my card. Did Kevin go to places like that because I wasn’t giving him something? *Well, he sure hasn’t been fucking you much lately.*

“No.”
“Easy money for no work.” He lit a new cigarette with the old one. “I run a service, you know.”

“A service?”

“Yeah. I hire dancers for bachelor parties and private events, things like that. My girls make stacks a money.”

He was staring at my tattoo. Where’s an overcoat when you need one? I folded my arms across my chest and looked to the bartender for help. He was busy flirting with a waitress. “Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah. We need more brunettes. Got mostly blondes.”

I focused on the application and started filling it out.

“You’re really beautiful, you know?”

I pretended not to hear.

“What’s your tattoo mean?” He lifted his shirt, revealing a series of tribal bands bordering his navel like rings of Saturn. “I got a few.”

“That’s cool.”

He let the shirt fall and waited for me to say something more. Instead, I began filling in the work history section, trying to make my experience sound better than it was. Dishwasher became “Pastry Chef” (hey, I had thrown the soufflés in the oven for Hisanori once or twice); backup dancer became “Professional Entertainer”. In my periphery, Duane took out his wallet and laid two twenties on the bar. Forty bucks? How much had the dude drunk? I turned back to the application, jealous I couldn’t afford
to drop that much cash on tropical cocktails. When it seemed he was about to turn and leave, he leaned over and slid a napkin against my hand. A phone number.

“You ever wanna make some extra cash, give me a call.” Then, like a bad movie, he winked and shrugged his red uniform jacket over his thin shoulders, a cigarette tucked behind his ear. He checked out some girls walking past the restaurant before going about his way. I rolled my eyes. Fucking weasel.

I finished the application and took it back to the hostess, leaving Duane’s number behind on the bar. She couldn’t have been much older than me, but she looked over it as if she were the manager, mumbling, “Mmm-hmm,” as her eyes moved down the page.

“Do you know if there’re any openings?”

She nawed on her gum. “Well, Hector just quit the other day. He was the porter.”

“The what?”

“It’s like a janitor.” An obese family walked up to the podium, eyes as big as their bellies. She shoved my application in a drawer and grabbed four menus. “We’ll call you, okay? Thanks, Christine.”

“Kristen,” I corrected the empty air. I realized for the first time that “Allstar” was playing on a loop. The music video was playing on all the televisions in the restaurant. It reminded me of gabbing on the phone with Ahmad while watching “Total Request Live”, swooning over Carson Daly, complaining about math homework.

Look at you. Your friends are almost done with their first year of college and you’re applying for a job as a fucking janitor. Bills, rent, bills, rent, bills, rent, bills, rent.
And how will you keep buying that ephedrine with no money? Soap? Toilet paper?
Tampons? EPHEDRINE?

The bartender hadn’t cleared my spot at the bar. I went back, stuffed the napkin in
my purse, and went home.

Duane’s apartment was in a high-rise a few blocks east of the Strip near the Hard
Rock Hotel. From the street, the place looked alabaster and regal. But when I pulled the
truck into the parking lot, I started to see the cracks.

I didn’t know what to expect. The day after our run-in at Planet Hollywood, I had
called Duane to follow up on the job offer. I referred to our proposed meeting as an
interview; he called it a “try-out”. Aside from the address, details were vague.

In spite of the weird vibe I got from him, I placed a lot of trust in Duane because
he was a security guard. It was his job to protect civilians from drunkards, from weirdos,
from peddlers, from thieves, from themselves. My relatives who were cops had the same
duty. They wouldn’t dream of taking advantage of a young, broke-ass woman. Surely
Duane wouldn’t, either.

I took the shaky elevator to Duane’s floor. The overhead lights leading to his door
were the color of candy corn; the carpet was a mossy green. The hallway smelled like cat
pee. A baby cried inside one of the apartments. Our house actually seemed decent in
comparison.

At the time, I didn’t trust my instincts. When the siren started spinning inside,
those red and blue bulbs flashing round and round in my brain declaring a state of
emergency, a state of “Get out while you still can, dum dum!” , I ignored them and kept
going. As I stood in front of Duane’s door, my fingers curled into a knock, the siren was wailing, but I refused to acknowledge it. *Rent, bills, rent, bills, rent, bills, rent, bills. And ephedrine, fatass! Lots and lots of ephedrine!*

“Hey.” Duane stood in the doorway wearing nothing but a pair of navy blue gym shorts. He was brown and bony. His ribcage reminded me of the shell of bones Dad leaves on the platter after he strips a Thanksgiving turkey. It was the first time I’d seen him with his hair down. The crypt keeper’s stunt double. “Tales From The Crypt”. Mom’s favorite show. Sirens.

“Hey!” He opened his bony arms and hugged me. I’m normally a hugger, but this creeped me out.

“Hey.”

“Come in.” He stepped backward and gestured to the tornado behind him. “It’s kinda messy—party last night. The usual.” He laughed that annoying fucking laugh and walked to the makeshift mini-bar. The place looked like what our place would if I didn’t clean up after Kevin and Miguel. It smelled like weed. Always the weed. Did everyone in Vegas smoke it?

I hesitated. The door was still open behind me. *But what about all those bills? And how long is the rent grace period, again?*

“Yes, a drink. At ten in the morning? C’mon—it’ll make this weasel more tolerable. Drinking at an interview didn’t seem like a good idea. *Don’t be such a goody-goody—you’re in Vegas now.*
I shut the door. “Okay.”

Duane had fixed a drink without waiting for a response. He handed me what looked like rum and Coke.

“Rum and Coke?”

“Spiced rum and Coke.” He tapped his glass against mine. Drops of liquid fell on my red toenails. “Is this the best try-out you’ve ever had?” He laughed.

“I haven’t tried out much.”

He sat on the white sectional and lit a cigarette. A blanket and pillow with an outline of someone’s head was on the other side of the L-shaped sofa. “Really? Thought you’d been dancing a long time.”

“No.” I leaned against the kitchen counter, not wanting to sit on the sliver of space next to Duane, him and his outie belly button with the Saturn rings. I just wanted to discuss the job and leave. Maybe we should’ve met for coffee instead. That’s what normal people do for normal jobs. “The Aladdin was my first.”

Smoke shot out of his nostrils. He nodded at my glass. “How’s it taste? Better spiced, right?”

I took a sip. I always drink too fast when I’m nervous. The cocktail had a slight chalky taste, like a pill that gets stuck in your mouth when you try to swallow it. “Yeah, I guess.”

“Sit down.”
I took another long sip as I crossed the room and sat next to the party ghost’s pillow. *Enough chit-chat—how about the money?* “So what’s involved in this job, exactly?”

He set his drink on the smudged glass coffee table and lit another cigarette. “Clients call me looking for girls to come to their private events. Sometimes they just want you to stand there and look pretty, but usually they want dancers.”

“What kind of dancers?”

“Depends on the client. Sometimes topless, sometimes nude.”

Nude?

“Nude?”

“Yeah. That’s how come my girls make stacks a money.”

“How much money?”

“Minimum thousand dollars a night. I don’t send girls out for anything less.” He waved his hand around the room, ashes falling on the sofa. “I gotta pay for this place with my fifty percent.”

Fifty percent! “Fifty?”

“Yeah, fifty. I set everything up. All you have to do is show up.” He studied my outfit, a white blouse and black slacks. “Do you normally wear that to auditions? Looks like you’re going to an office.”

Was this guy friends with Charlene the screener or what? I shrugged. I was starting to feel dizzy, sleepy.
“Come with me.” He took my arm and led me down a hallway toward the bedroom. Sheets of newspaper covered the windows. Why would a guy making fifty percent off his gaggle of dancers be living in such a shithole? Why would he need to work as a security guard? Why hadn’t I asked myself that earlier? And why was I so dizzy? Blue and red lights swirled in my head. How much do you have in your account right now, anyway? Twelve dollars?

Duane opened the closet door. It was a muddle of clothes a stripper would wear: corsets, thongs, thigh-high boots, six-inch Plexiglass heels, Spandex dresses with nipple cutouts. A police hat in the corner reminded me of my family. Duane picked up a purple pleather dress from the floor and handed it to me. He had two heads. I held the doorframe to steady myself.

“Here, put this on. I can’t try you out in those clothes.”

“Duane . . . I don’t feel well.” Were those spots on the wall real?

“Lemme help you.”


Chapter 16

I was a wreck after the rape. I couldn’t sleep, couldn’t eat, couldn’t get out of bed, couldn’t shower. A month went by, then another. Kevin didn’t know what was wrong with me. I was on the brink of telling him dozens of times, but I never did, embarrassed and ashamed for putting myself in such a foolish situation, for being so trusting. Maybe I deserved it for being a whore, for being willing to take my clothes off for money, for being unhappy with my modest lifestyle. The fragmented memories played in a loop in my mind like the “Allstar” video. My “tard at recess” state of mind, as Kevin called it, prevented me from taking care of myself, let alone contributing to the household. Every night when he left for work, Kevin told me to “get the fuck up and do something”. I had become a burden, a liability. Bill collectors called and left messages. Our electricity was shut off. I called Nevada Power and begged them to turn it back on. Summer was upon us again and it was hotter than fuck. “Okay, Ms. Brownell,” they relented when I lied and said we had animals and children in the house, “but you’ve got to pay it by the fifteenth.” Fat chance.

As it was when I was growing up, food went from enemy to best friend again. Lovehatelovehatelovehatelovehate. I hated my body. I hated the way all the weight gathered around my belly like an oversized wetsuit. My thighs became David Coppefield, making the chair disappear when I sat down like post-Peacock Palace. You’re a little hearty. I had probably only gained about fifteen pounds, but it felt like I had sandbags tied to my waist. The worst part was that I couldn’t stop myself. I couldn’t afford ephedrine and cocaine to be my personal trainers, the ones who kept me in check. Food
was the only reason I got out of bed, made a halfhearted attempt to comb my hair, put on some mismatched clothes that showed off my growing muffin top, and rode into town with Kevin. I told him I was job-hunting, but really I was using my old Aladdin ID card to get into the employee cafeteria. I held my breath each time I swiped the card through the turnstile, waiting for an alarm to go off. *Stop that banished fatfuck! Food thief!*

Sometimes I saw the dancers I used to work with, but they never saw me. Once I saw Cliff. My eyes burned as he chose a booth in front of the television, ate his salad, and watched “Days of Our Lives”. He didn’t see me, either. I had become old Kristen again, the chubby mousy one, the invisible one. I didn’t want them to see me. I didn’t want anyone to see me. If I became hearty Kristen again, maybe men wouldn’t look at me like hungry dogs. Maybe I wouldn’t attract any more Duanes. I certainly wasn’t attracting Kevin anymore. We hadn’t had sex since I my gig at the Aladdin ended.

When we lived on Desert Inn, I often wondered how Kevin interacted with girls who attended the jam sessions. I liked to think he simply sat behind the drum set and played, that he concentrated on the music and not the breasts, the midriffs, the butt cleavage. When I met Michael, I thought about the jam sessions less and concentrated on hiding my own interaction with the opposite sex. Now that I had nothing in my life, I became obsessed with what Kevin was up to. Along with food, it was the one thing that motivated me to leave the bedroom, to do something, to live.

I knew he was cheating. And it wasn’t just because he got mysterious rides home from work after “a night out with the guys and shit” or his not wanting to fuck me anymore. I could see it in his eyes, the way he looked at me, the way he zoned out when I
spoke. Just like when Dad came into my bedroom eating hot dogs from the package, his mind clearly with Janelle, Kevin’s mind was with someone else. I was determined to figure out who.

After eating a meal that would make the obese family at Planet Hollywood proud, I took the truck back to the Venetian and spied on Kevin. I skulked around the casino, hid behind slot machines and pay phones, ducked into restrooms when I saw a familiar face. I wrote down everything Kevin did in my journal. I stood in the gift shop across from Pinot and watched his every move through the window: the way he interacted with customers, with coworkers, the expression on his face when he poured the drinks. I tried to read his lips. I wrote down the time he appeared behind the bar and the time he left, his break times, the length of his conversations. I ignored dirty looks from the gift shop clerks. “Fuck all ya’ll,” I muttered Mom’s favorite phrase to the glass, my steamy breath temporarily blocking Kevin’s image across the way.

_Fucking psycho._

After a few weeks of doing this, I noticed a new girl behind the bar. My eyesight is terrible and I couldn’t get a good look at her from the gift shop, but from what I could see she was petite, tweaker-thin, really, and pale with short brown hair. Kind of plain, nothing special. But there was something special about the way Kevin looked at her. I don’t know if he ever looked at me that way. I could only seem to remember the bad things, the fucked up times, the way he clenched his jaw when he hit me. Now, he didn’t even care enough to hit me, to get angry. What was worse—passion any way I could get
it or complete indifference? *Do you want to be invisible or do you want attention? Make up your fucking mind.*

“How’s the view?”

I twisted toward the baritone, knocking a gondola keychain off a rack with my belly. I was nose to nose with David, another bartender at Pinot. We made small talk when I sat at the bar and waited for Kevin, but I didn’t know him well. All I knew was that he was from Ohio and had a fiancée named Christina.

“How, David.”

“You know, you could just go in there and talk to him.”

I picked up the keychain and hung it back on the rack. “He’s working…I don’t want to bother him.”

He pulled a pack of cigarettes out of his pocket. “Well, I’m done for tonight and having a cigarette – want to join me?”

I hesitated. What would Kevin say if he saw me talking to another guy? Would he care? Where was Michael at that very moment? And who the fuck was the skank behind the bar? *Does she suck his cock better than you do?* I turned and looked at the bar. Kevin and the mystery girl were gone.

“Okay.”

David led me to a bank of Betty Boop slot machines near the craps tables. Growing up, I loved old cartoons. While my friends watched “He-Man” and “Care Bears”, I watched “Betty Boop” and “Scrappy”. They were so old and hard to find, Mom had to special order them. I got a new set of tapes every year for Christmas. She knew
exactly what to get me and Bobby, the kind of gifts we never knew we always wanted. The smell of cigarette smoke traveling through the casino like an angry storm cloud reminded me of Mom’s favorite habit. She depended on Virginia Slims more than the toxic air she breathed. David leaned forward and offered me a Marlboro Light.

“No, thanks.”

“Oh, come on. Looks like you could use one.” He met my gaze.

I hadn’t realized until then how attractive David was, maybe because I had only ever seen him in the dim light of the bar. He had dark hair, dark eyes, and that brooding James Dean expression women always fall for. He rarely smiled. He was a serious guy, an only-happy-when-it-rains kind of guy. Kevin shared the same negativity, but it wasn’t sexy like David’s. My mind drifted. Could he kiss? Was he a hot lay? Was he big? Would his face look good between my legs? Your belly would probably block the view.

The last face between my legs had been Duane’s, his disgusting hair irritating my inner thighs, his bony fingers all over my body. My eyes stung. I put the cigarette in my mouth.

“What’s going on in that pretty little head?”

“Nothing,” I said around the nasty-tasting stick. He brought a lighter to it.

“This is the part where you start sucking.”

I looked down to the tip of the cigarette and sucked until the paper started burning. Even after all those years of second-hand smoke, my lungs protested. A cough bomb went off in David’s face.

“I’m sorry,” I choked, waving the cloud away from his face.
He laughed without showing teeth. “You’ve really never smoked before?” He
plucked the cigarette from my hand and took a drag. I imagined his lips on both sets of
my lips. Then Duane and that cigarette tucked behind his ear floated through my mind,
the ghost rapist haunting me. Motherfucker. And who are you going to tell? You have no
friends. You have no family. Kevin would never understand. This is your dirty little
secret, your dirty little fucked up secret. Stupid bitch.

“Never.”

He took another long drag. “So what’s with the spying, sweetheart? I’ve seen you
doing it for, what—three weeks now?”

Why couldn’t I ever be slick, stealthy? I was always the bumbling, idiotic court
jester in a Shakespeare play. I was Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

“I—I wasn’t spying.”

“Really? What do you call staring at your boyfriend through a glass window all
day, then?”

I sighed. An old lady sitting a few slots down squeaked as her machine puked a
pile of quarters. I glanced around for a familiar face, suddenly becoming aware of the
people, the elevator music, the bells and dings, the chatter, a live band somewhere in the
distance. After a while, it becomes white noise and all you can hear is the voice in your
head. Here I am, sucka! I leaned in toward David.

“I think he’s cheating on me.”

David nodded. “He is.”

“Huh?”
He stamped out the cigarette. “He is. With Dana.”

My insides crawled with anger and shock. Bells and dings, music, chatter, Betty Boop machines, quarters dropping, ladies squeaking—the crescendo shattered my skull like glass. Spots clouded my vision like cigarette clouds. It was the same feeling as wandering through the parking lot at Duane’s apartment in a roofie haze. *Why the fuck are you so surprised? You knew it. You knew it weeks ago. Months, even.*

“Who’s Dana?”

“She’s the new barback. Skinny, short hair, scorpion tattoo on her neck.” A fucking scorpion tattoo? Skank. “She used to work at Olympic Gardens.”

“That strip club?”

“Yeah. You been there?”

“No.” *You just patronize it from afar. Betcha some of your money’s gone into Skank Girl’s thong.*

“But how do you know Kevin’s…sleeping with her?” The words tasted nastier than the Marlboro Light.

David lit another cigarette. “Dana told me. He goes to her house after work sometimes.”

The old lady squeaked again. “They’re only quarters,” I snapped in her direction. She stared at me with her mouth open, teeth yellow as Duane’s hair. She gathered her money and hobbled away. I felt bad instantly. *Fuck her—she’s only got a few years left, anyway.*

“I thought you should know. You deserve better.”
“Why does everyone keep saying that?”

“Maybe because it’s true?”

“But I love him.”

David blew smoke toward Betty. “Really?”

Did I? I felt like I should. Wasn’t that why I put up with the abuse, the bullshit? Saying I did it because I was in love with Kevin was the easiest explanation.

I nodded.

“Maybe you should tell him that.” He gestured toward the restaurant. Pinot was shutting down and Kevin was walking out the front entrance with Dana. Out the front fucking entrance! How dare he not sludge around like me? I waited for the two of them to see me and stop, recognize, and run away in terror. I wanted to have that effect on Kevin, on everyone. *Ha! Never.* Instead, they kept on walking, oblivious to anyone but each other. Rage took me by the throat and began to strangle me the way Kevin had so many times. *She used to work at Olympic Gardens. He goes to her house after work sometimes.*

I followed them down the hallway, David calling after me: “Nice chatting with you!” Then a wave of Japanese tourists. I could see the back of Kevin’s head, his bald spot shiny as the tears that sometimes gathered in his eyes when he smacked me. The scorpion bobbed next to it, red and pointed downward, using Skank Girl’s spine as a tightrope. Then a hot blast of summer air. Kevin reached for her hand. Their steps were sprightly, mine mire. I trailed them across the bridge, my favorite view in the city. Bald Spot and Scorpion walked into the neon sunset of Treasure Island. Then the parking garage. Her car. A black Nissan. He waited for her to unlock it. It was time to stop at the
red light, but I couldn’t. Then the back of Kevin’s collar was in my hand. My feet connected with the back of his legs, my fists with his back. I screamed things I can’t remember. He screamed things I do remember. Crazy bitch! See why I wanna leave her?

Get the fuck off me! You’re ruining my shirt and shit! Fucking psycho! You fat piece of shit!

Security!

Security!

Security!
Chapter 17

A criminal. I had become a fucking criminal.

After I popped like a champagne cork in the parking garage, security detained me for an hour. They insisted I “take a breather”, “relax”, and “put my mind at ease”, cliché lines they probably picked up from “Beverly Hills Cop”. Fucking security guards. To me, they had all become Duane. I sat alone in an office wondering if people were spying on me through a funny mirror hidden in the cottage painting on the wall. Every doctor’s office in America seems to have that awful painting. I stared at the quaint little shack frozen in time until, even when I looked away, I couldn’t see anything else. I imagined I was in an episode of “Twilight Zone” and that I had been sucked into the painting. What would I do in a world that perfect, a world where roses bloomed year-round, where a picket fence was all the protection I needed.

“Young lady? You can go now.”

I blinked. “Huh?”

“You can go. You’ve had enough time to cool down, eh?”

What is this bozo, a fucking Canadian?

“Will this…go on my record?”

The Canadian laughed. “Oh, no. We deal with lovers’ quarrels all the time. And, eh, since your boyfriend didn’t stay to file a report, there’s nothing to, eh…report.”

The walk back to the Venetian was a blur, blind rage replaced by the shame of what I had become. Could the happy drunks walking by tell I was a thug? A “hoodlum”, as Dad would say? What would my old teachers say, my friends, my family? I had always been the good girl, the teacher’s pet, the one who gets scared when she sees the FBI warning at the beginning of a videotape. Now, I had been detained. Jobless, moneyless, diplomaless criminal. “Cops” material. Maybe the family will see you on the show when they watch it on Christmas Eve. Hey, at least you’ll get to join them – you’ll just be on the other side of the television this time.

I didn’t expect Kevin to be home when I got there. I assumed he was off fucking the Scorpion Queen in the Nissan or some apartment or a motel room downtown with an hourly rate. Had he ever brought her to our house? Maybe when you were at the Aladdin stuffing your pie hole. Had he splashed his cum all over her? Had it dripped onto our yellow Walmart comforter? Had she used one of the hand towels in the bathroom to clean herself up afterward? My head was a solitary confinement cell, these thoughts the inmate. I didn’t need a generic office and a Canadian to detain me – my mind had its own SWAT team.

My eyesight isn’t great, but even in the dark and from down the street, I could see the pile in the front yard – boxes, suitcases, a mottle of clothes. My stuff. My fucking stuff! What the fuck!

“What the fuck!” Security!

I parked crooked as a smirk in the driveway, tapping the garage door with the bumper. I wanted to ram into the house like Sharon Stone in “Casino”, but my balls
weren’t as big as hers. I got out of the truck and slammed the door as hard as I could.

Everything I owned was on the lawn. It looked like the shithead had simply emptied the
dresser drawers onto the grass. Making room for Skank Girl, no doubt.

I knocked on the front door until my hands throbbed, kicked until my toes went
numb. No one answered. I thought about breaking a window with one of the landscape
rocks out front—why not? You’re already a criminal—but I had no strength left. I sat on
the rotting bench near the rose bush I had so carefully pruned, too tired to even cry. Then:

“Tell your parents to come pick you up and shit. You don’t live here no more.”

Kevin was speaking through a sliver in the doorway. By the time I turned around,
it was shut and locked again. I rammed each shoulder into the door until they hurt, too.
No answer. There was nothing else to say, to do. Kevin had dumped me as quickly as the
talent agency.

I went to the lawn and began to pick through the mess, this yard sale with one
customer, buying myself time, reviewing my options. In the end, there was only one. I
took only what I could carry, what was absolutely necessary: an expensive outfit I bought
during the Aladdin days, a copy of The Complete Works of Shakespeare, a pink stuffed
Beanie Baby bear Mom had gotten me in junior high. I had grabbed it impulsively when I
ran away from home. I sat on my suitcase and forced the zipper to close. Over a year of
my life condensed into a box with a hokey flowered pattern. I placed the rest of my things
in impossible-to-reach places like the thorny rose bushes and the roof. I wanted Kevin
and Miguel to spend all morning cleaning up. I even threw a hair dryer in the palm tree in
front of the house. It dangled there like an ornament, shiny and red in the glow of the streetlight. A poor man’s desert Christmas tree.

I walked to the next-door neighbor’s house, who I had never met, and rang the bell.

“Yes?” A woman who resembled Blanche from “Golden Girls” looked at me curiously. Unlike Blanche’s flashy nightgown and robe sets, she wore a faded flannel nightshirt.

“Hi…I’m your—well, I was your neighbor.” I pointed to my former house. “I was wondering if I could use your phone?”

“Hmph. Always lots of racket coming from that place. Kept me and Elmer up tonight.” She stood aside and made way for me to pass. Her house smelled like drugstore potpourri and cat litter. Like Grandma Gloria’s minus the marinara sauce.

Flannel Nightshirt’s phone was an old rotary dial. After two tries, I got through.

“Hello?” Her voice was bundled in deep sleep and nicotine.

“Mom? It’s me. Can you come pick me up?”

“Kris?”

“Yeah.”

“What’s going on?”

“Nothing, I just—I need you to pick me up.”

“What time is it?”

I looked at the clock in Flannel Nightshirt’s kitchen. “Two.”
Mom started coughing violently. She always did that when she first woke up. Before I left, Bobby and I had tried to talk her into quitting smoking. Electronic cigarettes had just come out and it seemed like the perfect option. But she was too set in her ways. Each cough was like a ticking clock, one more minute of Mom’s life gone, sand sprinting through the hourglass like it was trying to win a gold medal. Stubborn broad.

“Well, I can’t get there till six or seven. That’s if I leave now.”

“I know.”

“Where should I go? Where are you living? I don’t have your address.”

“Henderson.” Flannel busied herself at the sink and pretended not to hear. Where was this Elmer guy? Were they happy? Had he ever fucked a girl with an insect tattoo on her neck?

“Should I come to your house?”

“No. There’s a Jack-In-The-Box down the street from me. It’s on—damn, what’s the name of that street—”

“Horizon Ridge,” the old woman said over the sound of dishes and running water.

“Horizon Ridge in Henderson. Can you meet me there?”

Mom coughed again. “Why? Are you okay?”

For the first time that night, my eyes watered. “It’s a long story.”

“Okay. I’ll be there in a few hours.” Mom knows when to stop asking questions.

“Bye.”

My eyes began to leak like my ex-neighbor’s kitchen faucet.
I couldn’t go asking an elderly couple for a ride to Jack’s in the middle of the night, so I walked. *You’re just like one of those homeless people on Fremont Street with your crappy little suitcase, the kind of person people wish would die.* The walk to fast food salvation seemed longer than it was. When I got there, the restaurant was closed. I parked myself on a bus bench nearby, carefully avoiding the rainbow of gum wads stuck to the seat. *A bus bench? This is a new low.* A UNLV ad on the backrest reminded me of Ahmad. We had lost touch, years of talking every day to no contact whatsoever. He would have just finished his first year of college at Berkeley, on his way to becoming a doctor. *And look at your ass.*

I had no plan for what I would do when Mom brought me back to Diamond Bar. *You mean Diamond Bore?* I wasn’t ready to leave Las Vegas. What to do, what to do? The bus stop was decent shelter – shade in the summer, shield in the winter. And it was a good place to panhandle, a turnstile of Hendersonians coming and going twenty-four seven, earnings from one of the many Pete’s Pubs around town in their pockets, whiskey opening their hearts and wallets. Screw Berkeley doctors – I could be a professional freeloader! With my suitcase serving as a pillow, the bench made halfway decent bed. My craned neck would just have to man the fuck up. This could really work!

In high school, our history teacher showed us a story about an L.A. “bum” who stood at a freeway exit ramp with a tear-jerker sign in her hand for about five hours a day, three days a week, and somehow it was discovered that she drove a new BMW and lived in a luxury condo. The only difference between her and I was that she was pretending to be a bum—I wasn’t. If not for Mom coming to my rescue, I was a bum. I could make it
work as a career bum. I could hitchhike to Cambridge, sleep in the Harvard Library basement like Joe Pesci in “With Honors”. I could sneak in at night and steal books, have all the time in the world to read them, throw some yellowed, annotated pages in the fire afterward to stay warm. Hell, it would probably be the only time in my life I could say, “Yeah – I live on campus.”

Eventually, the pain in my neck went away and I drifted into sub-sleep, dreamed of Pete’s Pub and gum wads and Rue McClanahan and scorpions and Canada and Chris Farley and metal bars and Beanie Babies and, “Bad boys, bad boys – watchya gonna do? Watchya gonna do when they come for you?” Every twenty minutes, I heard the CAT bus rumble by, the driver stopping briefly to see if I was waiting for a ride, noticing I was just a bum, and continuing on. I didn’t even have enough money for bus fare.

At the time, Mom drove an old jaybird blue Mazda minivan, one of the few things she got out of her split with Dad. The engine sounded like a diesel, the paint was faded, and the driver’s side window wouldn’t roll down. Whenever she pulled up to the window of a drive-through, she had to open the door to pay. The cashier would always look at her with saucer eyes, as if she were about to pull a gun and rob the place. When the greasy bags were handed over, she would peal away in embarrassment. “Fucking Bob,” she would mutter as Bobby and I searched for toys and burned our tongues on hot fries.

I heard the van before I saw it. The rising sun seemed to be locked behind it as Mom crepted down the street. I shielded my eyes against the light and sat up. Did I look like shit? Of course you do, Fatty Fatty Coconut. I waved when she was close enough. She waved back, a curt snap of the wrist. I expected her to get out and hug me, stood still
as Caesar before I realized she wasn’t. Instead, she honked the horn. *Hurry the fuck up, bitch!* It reminded me of when she used to pick Bobby and I up from Dad’s house, horn honking from the driveway until we hustled out with backpacks and instrument cases. Mom was a New York taxi driver in a past life.

I dragged my suitcase to the car and opened the backdoor, looking at the side of Mom’s face as I secured my life with a seatbelt. She looked straight ahead, her soft brown eyes glowing in the sunlight, the lines around her mouth reaching toward her neck. She looked sad. Or was she stoned? Did her and her boyfriend still do that? Just tired, hopefully. A lump the size of a pair of socks blocked my throat. I waited for her to say something, she waited for me. Neither of us wanted to be first. I had to slam the door twice before it shut completely. *Piece of shit. What kind of car is Janelle driving these days? Did Dad get her that Lexus she wanted?*

I slid into the passenger’s seat, feeling like a middle school band nerd once again. The familiar scent of Mom’s Virginia Slims filled my mouth and nose. Her cars had always smelled like an old Vegas casino, like Binion’s Horseshoe on wheels. It made me feel at home.

“When do I go?”

I pointed straight ahead, my finger becoming a human blinker. It was a habit Kevin hated, the blinker thing. “Even a blind hog could see your fucking hand, Kristen.”

“Are you hungry?” She glanced at my potbelly, nodded her hear toward Jack’s.

“I could eat.” *Of course you could.*
She yelled our orders to the intercom, pulled around the corner, opened the door to give the hungover-looking cashier the money, snatched the paper bag from him, peeled away. As we peeled back the wrappers and ate our breakfast sandwiches, Las Vegas disappearing through the back window, talk radio blaring from the speakers (it’s all Mom listens to in the car), I somehow felt as if I’d never lived there at all, as if it’d been something I’d read about in a book, seen on television. Mom sat silently in my periphery, her shoulders slumped forward, her head just a few inches above the steering wheel. I turned away and looked out the window, tract homes with white walls and tile roofs whizzing by. What the fuck was I going to do when I got home? How could I go back to a place I loathed, a place where everyone either ignored me or hated me? In Las Vegas, people had hated me, but at least I had been somebody.

Just south of the Strip, there’s a sign that says, “Welcome to Fabulous Las Vegas, Nevada”. It’s a pop icon, the unofficial eighth Wonder of the World. But what most people don’t see is its backside.

Seeing this image as Mom zoomed past it released the flood lingering behind my eyes. “Soon” seemed more like “never”. I couldn’t have known at that time, but it turns out my first year and a half in Las Vegas was just a prequel.
Chapter 18

I had been living with Mom for a few weeks, but I was still on Las Vegas time—sleep all day, stay up all night—so when I woke up and saw American Airlines Flight 11 crash into the World Trade Center, it was hours after the world had changed.

In eighth grade, I went on a class trip to New York City. Ahmad also went, my partner-in-crime, my travel buddy. We did all the usual tourist stuff: Met, Smithsonian, Empire State Building, Ellis Island, Statue of Liberty, “Cats” on Broadway (which, sadly, I fell asleep during. With no parents around, the kids on the trip stayed up all night watching scrambled porn). On our last day, we took a bus over to the World Trade Center. “Best view you’ll ever have in your fuckin’ life!” our tour guide claimed, pouring his Brooklyn accent over his words like marinara. We filed into Tower 1 at our leisurely California pace, quickly brushed aside by New Yorkers with a purpose. Men and women walked by so fast, their black and grey and navy business suits became a color blur like neon does when you speed down Las Vegas Boulevard. I loved it, wanted to be part of this collective determination. Then we were riding the elevator to the sky lobby, then another to the observation deck. Then we were in God’s lair, a bird’s eye view to the madness below, on top of the world. The only other time I’ve had this feeling was watching people walk along the Strip from Prince’s hotel suite. Japanese tourists peered through binoculars and posed for pictures, same way they do in front of the Mirage volcano. It was overcast that day, but you could still see the Statue of Liberty, the Hudson, cargo ships dwarfing ferries, New Jersey, grey clouds decorating the sky, Earth’s transient wallpaper. Our tour guide had been wrong about a lot of things in New
York (the subway is safe at night! no one will steal your backpack in Central Park! street hot dogs are totally sanitary!), but he was right about the view. It was the best in the world, not just New York.

When we left, I wanted to go to the observation deck again, write about that view, the people taking it in, the birds and helicopters soaring weightlessly over water, the building bending and swaying like a branch in the wind, Ahmad trying to communicate to a German couple via hand signals that it was his turn to use the binoculars, me snapping a picture of him with my disposable camera, the German couple smiling and posing in the background thinking I was capturing them, too.

Now, it was gone.

I immediately became obsessed with the World Trade Center, with 9/11. It didn’t seem real. I watched the plane crashes over and over, dreamed about them, had nightmares about Mohammed Atta. My obsession was a guilty one; I never felt I had the right to it. I didn’t know anyone who had been affected by the attacks; I didn’t understand the intentions of the hijackers or the political implications of what they had done. Islamic fundamentalism? Osama Bin Laden? Huh? I was just an ignorant teenager who, like millions of others, had visited the towers once. But I couldn’t stop thinking about the people—the people on the planes, in the buildings, who they were, how scared they must have been, what they said and did in their final moments.

For the first time since running away from home, I started writing again. I wrote stories about people I didn’t know, people who, by a morbid twist of fate, were caught in
the crossfire of conflicting agendas. Mom and Dad thought my writing was a waste of time.

“You can’t make money doing that, Krissy. Get a job. Playtime’s over,” Mom would say every night before she went to her room.

“What about college?”

She turned, wineglass in hand, head moving mechanically toward me until her eyes met mine, glassy and stunned. When Mom’s drunk, she moves like an animatronic doll on the “It’s A Small World” ride at Disneyland. “College?” She snorted. “You never even finished high school.”

Being back in Diamond Bar made me feel as obliterated as the Twin Towers. I was avalanching into despair. My parents were barely speaking to me. They didn't care to know what had happened, why I had ended my time in Vegas on a bus bench, why I had been forced home, why I had left home in the first place. Fuck it. Fuck. It. They didn't care to know and I didn't care to tell them. How was I supposed to bring it up, anyway? Call a family meeting and say, "Hey, Mom and Dad, in case you’re wondering, which you’re probably not, your daughter's a slut, a liar, a cheater, a druggie, quickly becoming a drunk, and feels like whacking you both in the head with a hammer. Fair enough? Okay. So what’s for dinner tonight? That beef stroganoff from a box that looks like shit on a plate for the third time this week? Awesome." They didn't care to know. I didn’t care to tell them.

The only person I talked to was my brother. At twelve, Bobby didn’t know what it was to hold a grudge, to truly understand my mistakes, my wrongdoing. He welcomed
me back as if I had never left, all smiles and jokes like the old days. But still, I felt isolated. The few friends I had in high school were long gone, in college and discovering new places and new things. I was right back in the place I had tried so desperately to escape. Home was purgatory. I thought about Kevin constantly. I called him impulsively one day and discovered the number was out of service. I had no car, no way of driving out there to see if he was alright, if he was still living on Coach House, if he had moved in with scorpion bitch, if his love for her drove him to violence like it had with me.

Las Vegas is an easy city to get around if you don’t have a car. But when you live in Los Angeles, you’re immobile without one. This was making it hard for me to look for work; the bike that had been hanging in Mom’s garage since I retired it in junior high wasn’t cutting it. So, after briefly considering stripping, hooking, panhandling, cashing in Bobby’s piggybank, and robbing a convenience store, I turned to Dad for help.

We met at Shanghai Palace, the family’s favorite local Chinese restaurant. My parents started taking me there when I was a toddler. When I was in my terrible twos, we went to Shanghai to celebrate Dad’s birthday. As the story goes, Dad had a few drinks too many, and, as he does, befriended the table next door. Mom went outside to have a smoke, thinking I would be okay for a couple minutes. While Dad was chatting away, I took an interest in the hot mustard. I grabbed a big serving spoon, opened wide, and put it in my mouth.

My screams were so mighty, Dad couldn’t hear out of his right ear for a week (or so he says).
When I walked in to meet him nearly twenty years later, the same Chinese couple still owned the place. I don’t know how, but they remembered me. The wife giggled as she led me to the table. She didn’t seem to sense the tension between father and daughter as I slid into the booth.

“Lots spicy mustard for you!” She pointed to the condiments on the table. The way she spoke reminded me of Hisanori and the money and the fuckhead I was for not paying him back. Dad and I both forced smiles that promptly faded when she walked away. He eyed me as I adjusted in my seat. Did he notice the weight I had put on? The bags under my eyes? I had never looked so bad.

“Get here okay?” He sipped from a large bottle of Harbin beer. I thought to order one, but realized I was still two years shy of twenty-one. For the first time in months, I felt my age. Small. The screaming kid in the highchair again. Penthouse suites and Cristal were no more.

“Yeah.”

“Been a while since the last time. When was it, you ‘member?”

I played with my napkin, twisting it around my forefingers. “Um . . . when I interviewed Grandma Gloria for that history project. We came here for lunch, ‘member?”

The waiter brought water. I drained the glass, wishing it were Grey Goose. He asked for our order. I glanced at my unopened menu as Dad rattled off dishes I didn’t want, asking about the price breakdown for each. My eyes drifted to the fish tank behind his head. A father stood at the glass, the toddler in his arms trying to grab the koi darting
back and forth. She giggled, that universal toddler giggle that sounds like hiccups and champagne bubbles.

When my parents broke up, they fought bitterly over the collection of family photo albums. This made no fucking sense to me since the albums never seemed important up until then, gathering dust in the coat closet along with some old hand weights and Bobby’s green pogo stick, a birthday gift he had begged for but never once used. Finally, they split the albums fifty-fifty – five for Mom and five for Dad. Mom was furious when she looked through her share one day and discovered some of the best photos were missing, the ones with the most sentimental value. There was one gaping hole in particular, a shot of Dad carrying me on his back up a hiking trail in Yosemite. Mom had picked a flower from a bush along the way and placed it right on top of my head. I’m smiling, one of the few captures of me doing so at that age, the same age as the baby squealing over the fish. That’s why my parents both loved it. Mom figured Dad must have stolen the pictures when she was moving from the house to the condo, living in two places at once while Dad stayed with Grandma Gloria. “Fucking buffalo head asshole!”

“She’s sick, you know.”

“Huh? Who?”

“Grandma. Doctor found a brain aneurism. Apparently it’s the size of a baseball,” he pointed to the middle of his forehead, “right here.”

“Really?” I didn’t know what else to say.

“Yeah. Going to the hospital after this.”
The hot and sour soup (didn’t Dad know I preferred wonton?) arrived, then the short ribs (what about pot stickers or crab rangoons?), then the three ingredients and orange chicken (broccoli beef? Moo shu pork? Hello?). I picked at the food, watching the father feed his baby daughter across the room, his fork making a playful figure 8 before landing in the girl’s mouth.

“Not hungry?” Dad brushed orange sauce from his white polo shirt.

“I’m eating.”

“Looks like they fed you well at the restaurant or wherever.” Dad didn’t know about my stint as a dancer. No one in the family did. I looked down at the lip of fat hanging over my jeans. *Hearty.* Where in California could I find ephedrine? Was it close enough to ride a bike?

We ate in silence, neither of us making eye contact. Dad looked somewhere behind my head, pushing his glasses up on his nose every sixth chew.
Chapter 19

After three horrific months in Diamond Bar, I stood on Kevin doorstep, suitcase in hand, and rang the bell. Again.

Round 2.

I was as destitute as I’d been a year before with one difference: I had a car. A 1988 Honda Accord hatchback with peeling tint, seats covered in ash burns, and an engine that leaked oil like it was the first day of her period. It was Mom’s mercy gift to me. After all the arguing we’d done during my stay, she was probably hoping I’d use it to get the fuck out. Again.

Kristen = 1, Mom = 0.

Maybe it was the other way around. In any case, I was tired of seeing her kill herself with cigarettes and booze. I was tired of being her friend instead of her daughter. Dad, of course, was nowhere to be found.

I left in the middle of the night, scribbling a note to Mom in purple crayon and taping it to the fridge:

*Going back to LV. Number and address to follow.*

I made the four-hour trip in three, bulleted through empty highways, black sky, Wayne Newton billboards, abandoned gas stations, truck stops, one radio station keeping my company, country-western, Darryl Worley:

*Till I catch my second wind, get back up and gain control again*

*Find the strength I lost back when you stopped loving me*

*I guess I’ll just stay out here until I know the coast is clear*
Sit and watch the tide roll in till I catch my second wind.

Driving down that last grade and into the neon has the same effect on me as a shot of tequila, a massage after a marathon, an orgasm after a dry spell. Each hotel, the colored glass and boxy curves and volcanoes and lakes and roller coasters and pyramids and lions and gondolas and pirate ships, the marquees and the headliners, “Prime Rib for $7.99!”, “Loosest Slots in Town!”, “Most Beautiful Dancers in Vegas!”, “$2 Drink Specials!”, “All You Can Eat, All Day and All Night!”, the yellow moon hanging in the background like an afterthought. Punch-drunk love.

Las Vegas is my soul mate, and I used Kevin to be reunited.

In the time I was gone, he’d moved from Henderson to the north side of town, a house down the street from University Medical Center, the hospital where Tupac Shakur died. On any given day, you can see fans snapping pictures of each other in front of it and holding vigils on the anniversary of his death. The neighborhood is also known for its hookers and street peddlers, which I discovered after living there for a few weeks. But when I pulled into the driveway on Hyacinth Lane my first night back and waited for Kevin to open the door, my new home was still under the forgiving light of darkness.