

Santa Cruz

The Morning Before

Dad would be here in five minutes, and I was leaving to go on tour with my band, C-Side, tomorrow. The first tour of my life. The biggest opportunity I'd ever had.

I hadn't even packed yet. Our entire living room reeked of sweat, pot smoke, and day-old sour cream dip from last night's party. Someone had left their Kermit the Frog bong on our coffee table—who does that?—and my bandmates Felix and Veta were draped across the couch, still groggy and talking about irritable bowel syndrome.

Did I mention my dad would be here in five—make that *four* minutes?

He'd never come to visit me, but apparently today of all days was the day to do it. No warning, either. He'd just called up and said, "Hey, I had a meeting in Capitola. I'm about ten minutes away. Thought I'd drop by."

Funny thing about my dad, besides his impeccable timing. He'd kicked me out almost two months ago, right after my high school graduation, because I'd deferred my admission to Stanford for a year to pursue music. He considered it tough love. He didn't care that I was seventeen with nowhere to go and only sixteen hundred bucks to my name. Or that my car had broken down as soon as I got to Santa Cruz, and I didn't have enough money to fix it. For all he knew, I could've sold my body to pay for it. Luckily our bassist replaced my gasket and was willing to take payments, but that was beside the point.

Dad *would* care that I was living with three guys. Three very straight guys. I'd kind of given him the impression that Veta, our lead singer, lived here, too. She actually lived with her mom and sister above their psychic shop where I worked.

I might've also let him believe our cross-dressing keyboardist, Felix, was a girl. I'd mentioned Felix took hour-long showers and then spent another hour putting on makeup, and Dad asked, "Felix is kind of an unusual name for a girl, isn't it?" To which I'd answered, "Yeah."

Not that he was one to talk—my name was Jasmine Kiss. Google *that* and see what comes up.

There was one more thing. I'd told him our drummer, Bryn, was gay. In reality, Bryn changed girls like boxers and preferred walking around the house half naked. Not something my dad needed to know.

That just left Sean, our brainiac bassist, to corrupt me. Which he almost did once. But that wasn't important right then.

I'd cracked every window downstairs, sprayed gag-inducing amounts of "citrus zest" air freshener, and thrown

away most of the trash decorating our living room and kitchen.

Our carpet, on the other hand, was still covered with crumbs. Every step I took made a crunching sound.

“Here’s a thought,” Veta said, eyeing me like I was the most idiotic person on the planet. “Don’t invite him in.”

“Good plan,” Felix said, munching on a Dorito he’d picked up off the coffee table.

Their hairstyles matched right now—sloppy morning-after pigtails. Only Veta’s were cherry red and Felix’s were a fading blue. Their hair always made me think of those red-white-and-blue Popsicles.

“And if he insists?” I threw yet another plastic cup in the trash bag, wishing for gloves. There were some crusty people here last night. “Even if he doesn’t, he’s going to wonder why I’m not letting him in.” And then he’d start asking a lot of questions. My dad was a nosy bastard. Chances were this “unannounced” visit had been planned.

“Then you say, ‘Hey, Dad. The weather is lovely right now. Let’s go for a walk.’” Veta batted her eyelashes at me. Even with yesterday’s eyeliner smeared under her hazel eyes and two hours’ sleep, she looked gorgeous.

“Tell him one of us has the bubonic plague,” Felix said with a grin.

“That’s what antibiotics are for,” I said.

He rubbed his hands together like a supervillain. “But it sounds so nice and deadly.”

“Be careful what you wish for, Felix,” Veta said. “You’re bound to get something eating off that coffee table.”

I picked up Kermit the bong. “Any idea who this belongs to?”

They shrugged.

“We can put it on the front lawn,” Veta said. “It’ll be gone in five minutes.”

I handed it to Felix. “Just make it go away. Please?”

He huffed and pushed himself off the couch, like it caused him immense pain to do so. Then he went up the stairs, taking heavy, exaggerated steps.

“Here’s the thing,” I said to Veta, cringing on the inside. No more lies—that was our deal. “You live here, okay?”

She stared up at me, not blinking. “Uh-huh.”

“Also, he thinks Felix is a girl.”

“Oh, boy.”

“And Bryn is gay.” And not here, thankfully. I was hoping he’d gone surfing, which kept him out all morning.

Veta laughed. The piercing kind, right from her stomach. The kind that said, *You are such an idiot*. “Ohhh, Jasmine.”

I winced, knowing what was coming.

“Have you learned nothing?” she continued. “Do we need to send you to Liars Anonymous?”

It was a fair comment. I’d lied my way into C-Side, telling them I had experience playing live when I’d never played a show in my life. They were this amazing band looking for a guitarist and a roommate. I was a homeless guitarist looking for a band. To me, it was like fate. I did what I thought I had to. And I thought I could handle the stage, that I could just will my stage fright away.

I couldn’t.

I bombed our first show, humiliating everyone. If it wasn’t for Veta and Sean defending me, I would’ve been out of the band.

Hell, Veta had fought for me from day one. Getting me

a job at her mom's psychic shop, going head-to-head with Bryn and her own brother Sean to give me a chance in the first place. She was the big sister I never knew I wanted. I owed her everything.

"This is different," I told Veta.

"How?"

"I'm still a minor. What if he can force me back home or something?"

"He threw you out, babe. I'm pretty sure the powers that be frown on that kind of thing. It's called neglect."

"And?"

She hugged a pillow to her chest. "If he pulls something, threaten to report him. I'm betting he'll back off."

But I didn't want things to get ugly again. My dad and me were just barely moving forward.

Felix jogged back down the stairs. He'd changed into a blue velvet skirt and a Care Bears T-shirt that said "free hugs." He had this thing for eighties cartoons.

"Maybe it's better if you guys disappear?" I asked. "Just until he leaves."

Veta made a scoffing sound. "What—are you ashamed of us?"

I wasn't, but I knew Dad would give them that analytical doctor stare. Make them completely uncomfortable. Possibly interrogate them. And then give me his assessment later. "Trust me on this one, okay?"

"Trust you. Right." Veta folded her arms. "Nah, I'm good right here. Thanks." She turned to face Felix. "Popcorn?"

"You make it." He smirked and collapsed back on the couch, resting his size-fourteen feet on the coffee table.

"Veta—" I already knew it was hopeless. Once she had

her mind made up...

“Don’t worry,” she said. “I’ll let you do all the talking.”

The doorbell rang. I stiffened, giving her one last pleading look. Her eyebrows rose. She wasn’t budging.

Dad stood on the porch, his sharp blue eyes taking me in. My blond ponytail, complete with numerous flyaway strands. My Gibson T-shirt, the one with the hole in the shoulder. And the oldest pair of jeans I owned.

I could hear the voice in his head. *“Would it kill her to wear something without holes?”*

“Hi,” I said, gripping the doorknob so hard my fingers ached. I’d only seen him once since he kicked me out. And that was for about twenty minutes when Sean drove me up to get my bed and some other furniture.

“That’s quite a view you got there,” he said.

West Cliff Drive was pretty amazing. Houses on one side. Cliffs overlooking miles of Pacific Ocean on the other. The water matched the clear sky right now, almost a cobalt blue.

“It’s... It’s good to see you,” I said.

“You, too.”

Now what?

It was almost surreal. My ultra-conservative cardiologist dad standing on one side of the door, his hands stuffed into the pockets of his pleated shorts. My anything-goes, colorful bandmates on the other, both of them slumped against the couch like dead bodies.

Make that my worst nightmare.

Dad’s eyes widened expectantly.

“So how’ve you been?” I asked. There was a hushed laugh and a whisper behind me.

“Good.” His brow crinkled, and his smile grew. But there was nothing happy about it. “Can I come in?”

And there it was. The question I still hadn’t figured out how to answer. “It’s a mess right now.”

He shrugged. “I don’t care about that.”

Yes, he did. He’d pace around, scanning any room in view, every wall, even the ceiling. But what choice did I have?

I stepped aside, holding the door open for him.

The sight of Veta and Felix on our murky yellow couch stopped Dad from looking anywhere else. “Uh, hi,” he said.

“Hey. I’m Veta.” She smiled and sized him up at the same time. “This is Felix.”

“Nice to meet you,” Felix said. Clearly not a girl’s voice.

Dad gave them a curt nod, his gaze shifting to our circa 1985 turquoise carpet. He took another step.

Crunch.

Dad lifted his shoe up, inspecting the sole.

“Someone spilled chips,” I said. “Haven’t had a chance to vacuum yet.”

His eyebrows arched. “You know how to use one?”

Veta’s mouth dropped open a little, like she didn’t know whether to laugh or be offended for me. My dad specialized in making digs sound like jokes.

“I figured it out,” I said.

“I think I’ve seen her clean once in seventeen years,” Dad said to Veta and Felix.

They responded with awkward half smiles, their eyes questioning me.

Dad scanned the band posters on our walls. One of them featured bare breasts—why hadn’t I noticed that before? “Better vacuum soon,” he said. “You’ll get ants.”

Already had them. Fruit flies, too, since Felix always bought bananas but never ate them. They'd sit in a bowl until they withered and turned black.

"How about a tour?" His eyes had that challenging glint, the expression he got whenever he thought I had something to hide.

"There's not much to see. This is where we watch TV." I pointed to the archway leading to the kitchen. "That's where we cook. And upstairs is where we sleep."

"Come on." He chuckled. To Felix and Veta, it probably sounded jovial. It wasn't. "Show me around."

"She's just trying to save your eyes," Veta said, standing. "My brother Sean is the only one around here who cleans regularly. The rest of them—*us*—are slob."

Dad nodded, his constipated smile remaining. "I met him a few weeks ago. Nice kid."

Actually, my dad's comments were: "He's not a big talker, huh? What's with all the black—he a sniper?"

"Eh..." Veta made a fly-swatting motion with her hand. "He's all right."

I led Dad into the kitchen first, cringing at how messy it still was. A wobbly tower of dishes sat in the sink. And, as if on cue, a line of ants were marching across the vinyl floor and circling a piece of a brownie. At least, I hoped it was a brownie.

"It's not always this bad," I said.

"Yes, it is." Veta gave me a wicked grin.

Dad's faced was scrunched up, like he'd smelled a fart. "Right..."

"We've got ant traps everywhere," I added in quickly. "They're just not working that well."

“Try cleaning,” he said. “That helps.”

I hustled him upstairs, a loft area that separated four bedrooms and a bathroom. Wait, four bedrooms. Five people. Crap.

“Just one bathroom?” Dad nodded toward the only open door.

“Bryn has his own. In the master bedroom. Him and Felix.” I did not just say that. Why the hell did I say that? “Um, I mean. Never mind...”

Dad took in the black felt pool table, the matching beanbag chairs, and the shelves of CDs and vinyl lining the walls. Everything but the music collection belonged to Bryn’s uncle, the homeowner. The below-market rent he charged Bryn was the only reason any of us could afford to live here. Although six hundred fifty dollars per month plus utilities was still a stretch for me—I was slowly learning the many ways one could dress up rice and beans.

I opened the door to my room, which looked better now that I actually had furniture and a bed in it. It used to just be Bryn’s ratty old sleeping bag on the floor. Of course it might’ve helped if my purple blanket and sheets weren’t a tangled mass at the foot of the bed or if I didn’t have a pile of bras and underwear on my white dresser, waiting to be packed.

“Guess some things never change, huh?” Dad asked, the hint of a real smile on his face. His eyes went straight to the double doors that led to my balcony and a completely unobstructed view of the Pacific Ocean. Orbs of sunlight tangoed with the ripples in the water.

“It’s amazing, isn’t it?” I said. The moment I saw this room and that balcony, I knew I’d do just about anything

to live here. The ocean was my muse. My inspiration. Every night I sat out there and wrote songs on my acoustic. I'd never been so productive.

Dad didn't leave my doorway. It was as if there was some invisible line he couldn't cross. "It's hot up here," he said.

"We don't have AC." The breeze coming through my open window was stiff and warm. We'd probably hit the nineties again today. Rubbing my skin with an ice cube and lying in front of my massive fan was about all that helped.

The sound of Veta's laugh startled me. She and Felix were standing in front of the pool table, watching my dad like they expected him to start break dancing at any moment.

Dad's head reared back a little at the sight of Felix upright. It wasn't every day you saw a beefy six-foot-four dude wearing a skirt and pigtails.

"She's got the best room in the house," Veta said.

"Well, almost," Felix said. "If you can handle Bryn's—"

"Noise," I finished, giving him a warning look. Was he seriously going to mention Bryn's sexcapades in front of my dad? "He loves blasting music at two a.m."

"That's not very considerate," Dad said, focusing on Felix. "How do you get any sleep?"

Oh, shit.

"I'm fine," Felix said. "It's a lot worse for Jasmine."

"How's that?" Dad pressed.

Felix's brow crinkled as he glanced between my dad and me.

I fanned my neck. "Do you want to go for a walk, Dad?"

"Hey, you should take him to the shop," Veta said. "I'm betting Mom will give him a free session." She smirked in a joking way, knowing my dad would never go for such a thing.

Only she didn't know I'd told him I worked at a gift shop, which the psychic shop actually was in part.

"Session?" Dad asked, his attention completely on me.

"Veta and her mom give, um, psychic readings." I'd said the last part quickly, hoping he'd somehow miss it.

"Well, it's a lot more in depth than that," Veta began. "We—"

"I thought you said it was a gift shop." Dad's voice was cutting. Bordering on hostile. He usually controlled himself better in front of other people.

"It is, sort of..."

"Not really." Veta folded her arms, her eyes daring me. She thought I was embarrassed by what she did.

I didn't believe in psychic ability, but I had no doubt she and her mom believed in what they did. They were good people. Honest people. But my dad wouldn't see it that way. In his mind, anyone who claimed to be a psychic was a liar. A criminal. Just like my mom.

The front door opened and slammed, making my body jerk.

"Hey!" Bryn's gravelly voice echoed upstairs. "Whose douchemobile is in our driveway?"

He was referring to my dad's top-of-the-line Lexus SUV. The one I forgot to tell him to park on the street.

Felix covered his mouth. Veta winced. I prayed for something to fall from the sky. Bryn was the last person I wanted my dad to meet. This was why.

"That would be Jasmine's dad," Veta called back. "Who is standing right here with us?"

"Sorry," I said.

Dad nodded, with tight lips and no comment. Quiet with

my dad was bad. Quiet meant impending fury.

Veta cast an icy glance at me. “I should go. I’ve got *gifts* to sell. Nice meeting you, Mr. Kiss.”

“Likewise,” he said.

I wanted to call after her, explain things, but there wasn’t much I could say with my dad standing there.

Veta headed down the stairs as Bryn ran up. He appeared in the loft, in all his born-to-be-noticed glory. Long black dreads. Blue eyes against sepia skin. Tattoo sleeves featuring cryptic symbols and shapes. And of course, no shirt. Shirts were against his religion.

“Hello,” my dad said, unsmiling. “Should I move my *douchemobile*?” That word sounded all wrong coming from his mouth.

“Uh...” Bryn gaped at him. If I didn’t know better, I’d say he seemed almost scared. “Sorry, man. You’d be surprised how many tourists park in our driveway to get a”—he used air quotes—“quick pic.”

This wasn’t a lie. On some weekends, it was near impossible to find an open parking spot on West Cliff.

There was more silence. More painful, awkward silence. My clenched hands were starting to sweat.

Dad cleared his throat. “So are you both students?” Of course he’d ask that. He’d probably been dying to ask that.

“We go to UCSC,” Felix said.

“Nope,” Bryn said at the same time.

“Aren’t you still enrolled, though?” Felix asked.

“They finally kicked me out.”

“You say that like it’s an accomplishment,” Dad said.

Bryn smiled. “It is.”

Oh, no. Please, no.

“Why’s that?” Dad pressed.

“‘Cause college is the biggest scam in the world?”

Dad let out his dismissive chuckle. The kind that made me feel pin-sized. “Huh...okay.”

“Most of my friends who’ve graduated work in retail,” Bryn continued. “If they can find a job at all.”

“What did they major in?” Dad asked. “You can’t write poetry for four years and expect to get a job when you graduate.”

“I major in creative writing,” Felix said, his expression somewhere between fearful and offended.

Say something, Jasmine. Stop the train wreck.

“Why not try marketing?” Dad asked.

“So people shouldn’t study what they’re interested in?” Bryn broke in.

“I’m saying it’s smart to get a marketable degree.”

“Hey, Dad? We should—”

“What happens when you’re forty?” Dad went on, ignoring me. “Your pursuit to be...Axl Rose or whoever hasn’t worked out—”

“What?” Bryn laughed.

My dad didn’t listen to music. He listened to talk radio. In fact, he probably hadn’t played music in his car since Mom left. Eighties metal was *her* thing.

“You’ve got no degree,” Dad continued. “No job history. What are you going to do? Live off your parents?” He motioned to Felix. “Live off your boyfriend?”

Felix’s brows pinched together. “Um, he’s not. We’re not...”

“Dad!” I said, my face hot. My stomach in knots. “Just stop, okay?”

Bryn held his hand up. “Axl *Rose*? Does that guy even still have a pulse?” Dad opened his mouth to respond, but Bryn continued over him. “I don’t know where you get your ideas, but Felix ain’t my type. And I’ll worry about being forty when I’m forty.”

Dad didn’t say anything for what felt like minutes. I swore the air got hotter, thicker.

“Well,” Dad said, “good luck with that.”

“Thanks, man.” With that Bryn headed for his room, mumbling, “What the hell,” before slamming the door behind him.

Dad focused his glare on me. I wanted to crawl into a hole and not come out for a century.