



HOLLYWOOD

LIGHTS, CAMERA, ALI

The Daily

CHILD STAR MISSING:
Brennan Elliot Kidnapped?

Brennan Elliot, 5, the son of Margo Schaefer and Dennis Elliot, and star of the reality show Triple Trouble, disappeared from the playground at Venice each Saturday afternoon. The playground with his sisters and co-stars, Joelle and Sophie, Brennan was under the supervision of his half-sister Alissandra Caldwell, 14, when he went missing. Also with the child were their half-brother Mark Caldwell and Lily Franklin and Lily Franklin's brother Arnold. Despite the search, the child's whereabouts are still unknown.

By
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LIGHTS,
CAMERA,
ALI!

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ZUMAYA THRESHOLDS

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AUSTIN TX

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons or events is purely coincidental.

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*To my parents, who gave me wings so
I could fly.*

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Chapter 1

The sun glinted off the cafeteria tables as I headed to my customary seat by the window. Liam Waters, my boyfriend, was already there, digging into a cheesesteak.

“I have a plan!” I said, flashing him my brightest smile and putting down my tray.

Liam paused in his eating.

“What is it this week? You going to take over the world?”

“No!” I shrugged out of my jacket. It was too cold outside without one, and too warm inside to keep it on. I sat next to him. “I can go home with you for Thanksgiving. We’ve been dating a month now. Don’t you think it’s time I met your parents?” I batted my eyelashes in an exaggerated way. “We can hold hands under the table.”

Liam nearly choked on his bite of sandwich.

“It’s just...you know...a family holiday and everything, Ali. Grandparents in guest room.”

I touched his hand.

“Relax, Liam. Joking. There’s nothing that would get me out of this visit to my mother’s. Believe me, I’ve tried.” I took a sip of my water. I’d tried to convince Dad to let Mark and me come out and see him in Japan, where he was on an extended business trip, but he said we had to go to Mom. I’d pointed out that going to Japan would be very educational. He wasn’t swayed.

From behind me, someone gave a quick tug on my scarf. I craned my neck, knowing I would see Mark.

“Don’t do that.” I reached up to adjust the scarf.

“Three o’clock,” he said, balancing his tray loaded with burgers and

fries. That food better not end up spilled on me. Been there, done that, have the viral video to prove it. “Be ready.”

Then he was gone, heading to a table with other juniors.

“What was that all about?” Liam asked.

“My brother’s way of telling me what time we’re leaving for the airport.” I sighed, I really didn’t want to go, and not only because I was going to be leaving my boyfriend behind. “Hey, new plan! You can come with us.”

I winked at him. I could turn him into a California boy. Get him to wear board shorts and muscle shirts instead of polos. Maybe even drag him away from the computer and walk on the beach. Or he could learn to surf. Mark would have to teach him. I was hopeless at it.

“What? You think you’re going to turn me into a surfer dude or something?”

“Why not?”

“My parents are kind of expecting me to be there for Thanksgiving.”

Of course they were. Because his parents, like normal parents, really wanted to see him, not use him as a pawn in some game only they knew the rules to.

Liam stared at my brown-and-gold scarf. Or maybe at my scar. Had I not adjusted it right? I reached up, but he grabbed my hand, gently touching the scarf as he did.

“Is this new?” he said. “Very fall-like. Like Thanksgiving.” He squeezed my hand before letting it go and taking a potato chip off his plate. “You gonna have a special one for every holiday?”

“That’s the plan,” I took another sip of my water. “Christmas will be easy. Maybe something with shamrocks for St. Patrick’s Day. Maybe I can find one with fireworks on it for the Fourth of July.”

“You’re still going to wear them in summer?” Liam glanced at me through the dark hair that always fell in front of his eyes.

“Of course,” I said. “No one wants to see my scar.”

He looked away again.

“It’s not so bad, Ali.”

I studied the tuna salad on my plate.

“It’s bad enough.” I didn’t want to look at my scar, and I didn’t want to talk about it. I wanted nothing to remind me of the day the crazy stalker grabbed me and tried to kill me by slitting my throat.

Liam fumbled with his sandwich.

“It’s a badge of honor,” he said and took a bite.

“Hardly.”

But he had been instrumental in saving me. Maybe he saw it differ-

ently than I did.

Or maybe he didn't mind the scar because he liked me. I smiled. That was a good sign in a boyfriend, when he likes you for who you were and not for what you looked like.

"How am I going to get through this week without you?" This time I wasn't joking.

"You'll have Mark."

I glared at him. That was barely even worthy of a response.

"It's not exactly the same."

Liam pushed his dark hair away from his eyes and gave me that lopsided grin I'd grown to love.

"That's probably a good thing."

I wrinkled my nose at him, but I wasn't done scheming yet.

"Maybe you can come out for the first part of the week and still be with your family for Thanksgiving Day. How about that?"

He put one hand over mine.

"I'm going to miss you, Ali, but I have to go home. And so do you."

"It's not my home." That came out a lot harsher than I'd meant it to.

"She's your mom."

I couldn't really argue that point.

"Yeah, but I don't like her very much." Not the kind of thing nice people admitted to, but there it was.

Liam bit his lower lip but didn't say anything right away. He'd met my mother; he knew she didn't fall into the normal "I love my Mommy" category.

"I'll text you all the time," he promised.

"You better." It was better than nothing.

"Not that I don't wish I could go," he said. "It would be awesome to really film a behind-the-scenes look at the making of *Triple Trouble*."

I frowned at him, picked up a carrot stick and waved it in his direction.

"Seriously? That's why you wish you could go? Not, you know, being with your girlfriend?"

He grinned. "I thought that part was understood." He leaned in and gave me a kiss on the nose, an action that was one part weird and two parts endearing. "So, do you think she'll convince you to be in the holiday special?"

"Not a chance."

This was something I had no doubts about whatsoever. I was done being on Mom's show. I was done making a pretense of my real life.

Ever since my mom's triplets were born five years ago, I'd wanted to be on her reality show. When Mark and I visited, we'd always had to be

careful to stay out of the way. I'd hated it. I'd wanted to be a part of all that was going on.

In September, I'd found out what it was like to be "a part of it all"—always being "on," never having privacy. I touched my scarf. Crazy stalkers who tried to kill you on TV. This Thanksgiving, I didn't want anything to do with the show, but now Mom wanted us on. Oh, the irony.

"I'm not even going to do her the honor of pretending it's Christmas when it's really Thanksgiving. I won't pack anything red or green. Not even a scarf."

"That will show her," he said and gave me another kiss, this time much closer to my lips.

"Get a room!" Jay Jankowski, his hair a perpetual mess and his collar half up and half down, plopped into a chair. So much for privacy.

Sanjita Sharma, my roommate, took the seat next to him.

"I cannot wait to get on the plane to go home," she said. "It's been too long since I've seen Texas. I think I'm going through withdrawal."

Before I even got to comment on that, Heather and Lily Franklin, with their matching red hair and school uniforms arrived.

"I'm going to be on TV again. Finally! On *Cool School!*" Heather blurted as she put her tray down.

"Chet?" I asked. It made sense. Chet Arnold was the star of *Cool School*, and her boyfriend.

"Yes!" She took a quick swallow of water. "I'm going to film with him."

"That's awesome!" And it was. Up to a point. "I thought we were going to hang out," I said. That had been the one bright point to the enforced week in California—Heather and Lily would be there, too.

"You can hang out with me," Lily said, taking the pickles off her burger. "I don't plan on being on *Cool School* or any other TV show this week."

"But, Ali, *you're* going to be on TV," Sanjita pointed out. "You have to be on your mom's holiday special, right?"

I glanced at Liam and he grinned back at me.

"There's no way I'm going to let myself be filmed while I'm out there. This is strictly a private time."

"I'm glad you've seen the light." Lily gave her twin sister a meaningful glare.

"She's not even packing anything red-and-green," Liam added helpfully.

"Then clearly, you won't be on the special." Heather laughed. She knew as well as I did that anything as minor as that would make no difference whatsoever to my mother. It made me feel like I had some control, though. "But let me tell you about my guest spot on *Cool School!*"

I knew she was dying to spill all the details.

“You’re an extra in the hallway,” I said, teasing. With her star credentials, it would be a more substantial part than that.

“No, not quite that bad. I’m going to play a waitress who accidentally spills a tray of sodas on Chet.”

“It’s been done.” Jay said, and snorted a laugh before taking the pickles from Lily’s tray and adding them to his own burger.

My face burned.

“Where do you think they got the idea?” Heather said.

Okay, when it gets to the point that my real life is influencing TV shows, I know the world has seriously tilted on its axis.

“Shouldn’t my fifteen minutes of fame be over by now?” I asked, poking at my tuna salad with my fork. I should have taken a burger, or maybe some pizza. Thanksgiving week wasn’t the time to try to eat healthy.

“Once fame sticks to you, it’s hard to shake off.”

“Jeez, Lily, you make it sound like a bloodsucking tick,” Heather said.

Lily shrugged. “It kind of feels like it sometimes. Did you see what was on SCZ today?”

“Of course not.”

Lily already had her phone out and handed it to her sister. Heather looked then handed it back without a word, but with a warning glance toward me.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Nothing,” they said at the same time.

What liars. I pulled out my phone—it wasn’t like I couldn’t check SCZ on my own.

A picture of me and Chet from back at the dance popped up on my screen with the caption: “When Margo’s daughter makes her annual visit to her mother, will the romance be rekindled?”

I snorted.

“Romance. Ha!” They didn’t even go into what had happened the rest of that night—that Chet danced with Heather and I danced with Liam, and then, when someone tried to kill me, it was Liam and Mark who had my back and kept me alive.

Jay and Sanjita both had their phones out to see what we were looking at. Liam took mine from me. His smile faded and his eyes narrowed as he studied the picture. Then he looked up at Heather.

“You’ll be keeping Chet busy, right?”

“No fear,” she said and laughed. “You know this is all crazy stuff. You were there! The only romance Ali had going on that night was with you.”

“Yeah,” he said, but there was no conviction in his voice.

“Liam!” I took the phone from him. “Don’t be silly. The fact that I’m going to be in the same state as Chet means nothing! First of all, he’s Heather’s boyfriend.”

“That’s a biggie, right there,” Heather agreed.

“And second, he’s not my type. You are.”

“What? You don’t go for buff surfer movie stars?”

“No, I go for computer geeks.” I leaned in and kissed him on the cheek.

“You don’t have a thing to worry about.”

“How do they know these things?” Sanjita asked. “How do they know you’re going to be in California next week? Do they spy on you or check plane reservations or something?”

As creepy, and possible, as those ideas were, I knew the answer was much simpler.

“My mother probably told them. Trying to drum up some excitement for her holiday show...” I looked around the table at my friends and said, rather emphatically, “...which I’m not going to be on.”

None of them seemed particularly convinced. Okay, true, my mother came on like a tsunami and could do almost as much damage. But I could be strong.

I hoped.

Chapter 2

Mark jostled my shoulder. I brushed his hand away without opening my eyes.

“Wake up, sis.”

Over the loudspeaker came instructions to put seats in the upright position. I forced my eyes open. The *fasten seatbelt* sign had come on.

“I wasn’t sleeping.” I adjusted my seat.

“Right, because you snore while you’re awake.”

As if!

“I do not snore.” I slipped my feet into my shoes.

“Think whatever you want,” Mark said.

Fine, I would choose to think that I did not snore.

I raised the plastic shade. The city lights of Los Angeles glowed in the distance. Last time we had been here I’d still hoped to be famous somehow. I hadn’t known how overrated fame could be.

The plane circled and banked. I yawned to relieve the pressure in my ears and dug around in my bag for a piece of gum but didn’t find one. Poor planning on my part. We landed and taxied to a gate. People pulled out cellphones and were texting or calling loved ones. I pulled out my phone, too. I could tell Liam how much I missed him.

Then my internal clock reminded me it was after midnight back on the East Coast. Probably not a good idea to be texting Liam right now.

The plane came to a stop, and I stood, shouldering my bag. I was not ready to face my mother. At least we had almost an hour’s ride to her house from here. Maybe Mark and I should have checked some luggage; then it would have delayed my seeing her even longer.

Mark put his hand on my back and guided me out of the plane and through the airbridge. I yawned and wished I were back in Pennsylvania,

either at home or at school, in bed and asleep.

We traveled down the concourse, past tourists who seemed amazed by the fact they were in LA, business travelers who looked bored and tired with the whole airport experience, and frazzled parents dragging dawdling children.

Once past the secure area, I scanned the crowd of drivers with signs, looking for one that said “Caldwell.” Instead, what caught my eye was a crowd of photographers training their attention on someone I couldn’t see. Two twenty-something women next to us, both of whom had that wide-eyed “I can’t believe I’m in California” look, started pointing and squealing.

“Who is it over there? Can you tell?”

“Margo Schaefer,” a man walking past answered. “She’s here to meet her two older kids who are visiting for Thanksgiving.”

I stopped, my feet unwilling to take me one step closer to Mom and her craziness. Mark continued a couple more steps before turning and coming back to me.

“Did you hear that?” I asked him.

“I heard.”

“What’s she doing here?” I hissed.

“Apparently, she’s meeting us. Let’s go.”

She never came to the airport. She always sent a driver. Mom didn’t waste time on things that weren’t profitable to her, like driving back and forth to the airport, when she could just pay someone to do them. Unless...

What was the one reason Mom would come here? If there was something in it for her. Like a good photo op.

My knees felt weak, and my mouth went dry. Was it too late to turn around and get back on the plane and go home?

“I can’t do this.”

Mark sighed. His eyes looked tired. Maybe this wasn’t easy for him, either.

“Don’t be ridiculous. Every other year you complain that she’s not here. Now she is. Does nothing make you happy?”

“Nothing.” I folded my arms and stood my ground. I was not in the mood to be part of a media circus right now. “She’s using us for a photo op.”

Mark glanced toward the circle of photographers.

“It’s what she does, Ali. Come on, let’s go.” He took me by the arm and propelled me down the concourse.

I hadn’t faced reporters since the day I left the hospital after the stalker cut my throat. I put my hand up to make sure the scarf still covered the scar. My heart beat too fast, and my palms started sweating. I couldn’t do

this. I didn't care what Mark said. I really couldn't do it. Why couldn't Dad have let me go to see him in Japan? Dad never had crowds of photographers following him around.

The point of no-return was reached. Mom spotted us.

"Ali! Mark!" she called out, parental love dripping from her voice. She looked like she just stepped out of a modeling session. Not a strand of her honey-blond hair escaped from her graceful up-do. Her denim skirt and peasant top created the perfect effect of casual, yet dressy. I don't know how she does it. I felt like a slug after the long flight.

The cameras turned and started snapping our pictures. Mark squeezed my hand. I closed my eyes, took one deep breath and told myself I could do this. I could because I had no choice.

I opened my eyes and pretended to be the happiest teenager in the world, home to visit her mother. Mom was pretending to be happy to see us. Why shouldn't I play along?

"Mom! It's great to see you," I said, letting the cloying sweetness in my voice match hers.

She didn't seem to notice any insincerity on my part. Instead, she hurried to us and hugged us each in turn, then looped her arms through ours and, smiling for the cameras, led us out of the airport.

"It's so wonderful to see both of you," she said. "You look wonderful, Ali. No ill effects from that attack at all."

No, of course not. Why would I have ill effects from a crazed man slitting my throat and trying to kill me? Did nightmares count as ill effects?

"And, Mark, look at you. So handsome! You know, I do believe you could be the next teen heartthrob if you wanted to. I'm sure we could find a movie for you to star in."

"Not really my thing, Mom," Mark said. How could he always be so cool and casual? I'd have to get him to teach me.

"If you ever change your mind..."

We couldn't get out to the car fast enough.

There was a limousine waiting when we exited the terminal, and the driver opened the door for us. Mom climbed in first, and I followed, sitting as far from her as I could. Mark gave me a dirty look as he struggled to climb over me to a free seat.

As soon as the door closed, Mom dropped the act and became all business.

"Now, we'll be filming the holiday special this week. A show like this, even though it technically takes place on one day, will be filmed over the course of the week." She poured a glass of wine from the minibar. "I'm sure you don't mind having Christmas twice in one year."

“Will Santa know to come?” I asked.

Mom sighed. “Ali, please. Grow up.” She took a sip of her wine.

“I’m doing my best,” I muttered, and rested my head against the side of the car. I just wanted to sleep.

“You are both well-versed in how we produce the show at this point, so I don’t imagine there will be any problems.”

“I’m planning on surfing,” Mark said. “All week. If you want to film me out there, fine.”

“You can’t surf all week,” Mom answered.

He shrugged. “Either surfing the waves or the Internet. That’s my plan. Go ahead and film me if you think it’s interesting.”

“Ali, I thought you could make a gingerbread house with the triplets,” Mom said, switching her attention back to me.

“Why?” I didn’t even open my eyes.

“Because it would be a charming holiday tradition to show.”

The motion of the car was lulling me back to sleep.

“I’ve never made a gingerbread house,” I said. In Germany, where we always spent Christmas, my grandmother never made the gingerbread into houses, just wonderful, glorious cookies.

“Then it’s a perfect time to start.”

I opened my eyes and looked across the dim back of the car at her.

“How can it be a tradition if I’ve never done it before?”

Mom took another sip of her wine, staring at me over the rim of her glass.

“Traditions can be started at any time.”

“I think they need a little fermenting before they can be called traditions.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” Mom said, “No one will know you haven’t been doing it together for years.”

“Oh. Of course.” It was all a show. I needed to remember that.

“And perhaps you can bake cookies with them.”

“I can’t bake.” I closed my eyes again.

“We’ll have someone else bake them, then. You can decorate.”

“So, basically, I’m going to spend the week entertaining five-year-olds for the camera.” What fun.

“They are your siblings. You should be happy to do things with them.”

“Happy,” I muttered, and let the car lull me to sleep.



Mark nudged me awake as the limousine stopped and waited for the security gates at the beach house to open.

“We’re home,” Mom said.

“Not my home,” I mumbled, and Mark gave my shin a kick. Okay, maybe

that wasn't the smartest thing to say. But it *wasn't* my home. My home was in Pennsylvania with Mark and Dad. This was Mom's home. Mom and her second husband, Dennis Elliot, and their three monsters, I mean, five-year-olds.

It had felt a little more like our second home before the triplets were born and the whole house was turned into a sound stage for the filming of *Triple Trouble*. Now it was just a place to spend two weeks a year.

The car pulled into the parking area, and the driver opened the door for us. I took a deep breath, letting the salty air fill my lungs. The crashing of waves immediately soothed me. I certainly couldn't complain about the location of the house. Tomorrow I'd have breakfast out on the veranda overlooking the Pacific and let my worries wash away. For now—bed.

I got out of the car and stretched; there had been entirely too much sitting today. I grabbed my carryon bag and started toward the house.

"The triplets stayed up to welcome you home," Mom said.

I turned and stared at her.

"They're still up? It's, like, one in the morning."

"It's only ten-thirty here," Mark pointed out.

Fine, let him be logical about it.

"That's still way too late for five-year-olds to be up," I said. "We always had to be in bed by eight when we were that age."

"It's a weekend, and they want to see you," Mom said, coming around the car and leading the way into the house, her stiletto heels making a staccato tapping on the paving stones.

Or perhaps they found that a convenient excuse to stay up way too late.

The white brick of the rambling house gleamed in the glow of decorative spotlights. Lights illuminated nearly every window, even the third floor. The marble foyer, with its high ceilings and modern sculptures, felt more like the entrance to an art museum than a house. Jazz drifted from some other room. The triplets were nowhere to be seen.

We followed Mom down the hall toward the sunken living room with its Pacific views, although this time of night it was too dark to see anything except the moon shining high overhead. Dennis came around the corner, a beer bottle in his hand. Even in sleep pants and a T-shirt, he looked awesome. If he wasn't my stepfather I might agree with my friends that he was pretty hot stuff.

He wrapped his arm around Mom and gave her a light kiss then turned to us.

"Ho-ho-ho. Merry Christmas! I hope you brought your elf hats."

Kill me now.

“Right next to my Mardi Gras beads,” Mark said.

Dennis chuckled. He tended to find Mark amusing.

“Are you two ready for a fun-filled week?”

No. “Sure,” I said.

“Is my surfboard waxed and ready to go?” Mark asked. It must be nice to have a one-track mind.

“It’s all ready. You can hit the waves early tomorrow.”

I yawned. “Since it seems Brennan, Sophie and Phoebe are in bed, that’s where I’m going, too,” I said. “I’m beat.”

“They’re not in bed,” Dennis said. “They’re in the game room. They’re very excited about you coming.”

I dropped my bag, and he put his arm around my shoulders and steered my down the hall.

“You’re getting more beautiful every day, Ali,” he said. “Just like your mother.”

My ideal role model.

In the game room, Phoebe and Sophie were playing Wii Dance Party, their blond hair flying and their hips swaying as they jumped and bopped to the music. Brennan sat curled up in a game chair playing with his 3DS. None of them noticed when we walked into the room.

“Children,” Mom said, her voice unnaturally cheerful and somewhat shrill, “your brother and sister are here. Aren’t you going to say hello?”

The girls never looked away from the TV screen, just called out a perfunctory “hello” without bothering to wave because it would mess up their dance rhythm. Brennan’s eyes glanced up from his game long enough to see that we were there; he said “hi” and went right back to what he was doing.

“I’m going to bed,” I said and ducked out from under Dennis’s arm. No one seemed to notice.

I grabbed my bag from the living room and made my way upstairs. I turned on the light to reveal an impeccably decorated, completely generic bedroom. I called it my room, but really, it was the guest room I was allocated. The only concession toward it being mine in any meaningful way was that whenever I showed up there were clothes for me in the closet. I had no guarantee they were there at other times, though.

I tossed my bag on the bed and pulled out what I needed for tonight. Within minutes, I was tucked into bed. Of course, now I couldn’t sleep. I pulled out my phone and sent Liam a text even though *he* was probably asleep. If he *was* awake, he’d know I was thinking about him.

My phone buzzed with a text, and I smiled. He was up.

But the message was from Heather.

Safely here. Let's get together tomorrow. Maybe Venice Beach?

I sent her a reply.

Sounds good.

And finally, I was able to go to sleep.

Chapter 3

The sky still had that pearl gray, sun-not-quite-up-yet look, but I was wide awake. The time difference would mess with me all week. Then I'd get adjusted and go back to school, and be all discombobulated again.

There was no point in wasting my time in California sitting in my room. I showered and dressed in jeans and the Mickey Mouse T-shirt Mom had bought me when I was in the hospital. I made sure my scarf was arranged properly around my neck. Maybe I'd grab a quick breakfast then go for an early walk on the beach.

The kitchen gleamed white, recessed overhead lights shining down on the work and eating areas. A young woman no more than twenty-five, her hair wound up in a loose bun, was standing at the counter cutting up a pineapple.

This was always awkward. "Make yourself at home" I was told, but Mom went through household staff like Donald Trump goes through apprentices. I never knew any of the people working in the house.

"Hi," I said and snatched a piece of pineapple.

She looked up and smiled a wary, uncertain smile. If I worked for my mother I'd have the same kind of look, I'm sure.

"You are the older daughter, sí?"

"Si. Yes. I'm Ali."

"Elena. You like a crepe? How you say? Pancake?" Her hands fluttered as if not sure what task to undertake next.

"Just a cup of tea and some of that fruit would be great, *por favor*."

"Tea and fruit?"

"Si."

"Sugar in the tea? Milk? Lemon?"

“A little lemon,” I said.

I sat on one of the stools at the kitchen island, while Elena put the water on for tea. I’d learned, from living in houses with kitchen staff, that usually they preferred if I stayed out of their way instead of trying to help. Of course, I understood this meant I would never learn how to cook. I could live with that.

“Have you worked here long?” I asked.

“Work here?” Elena pushed at her hair with one hand. “Two week. Margo Schaefer good to work for, si?”

I wasn’t too fond of being her daughter, so I wasn’t about to hazard a guess as to how she was as an employer.

“She certainly needs someone in the kitchen,” I said. “She can’t cook at all.”

Elena flashed me a conspiratorial look.

“On *Triple Trouble* they show her cooking. But the food?” She winked. “I cook it all.”

That did not come as a surprise to me at all. Mom couldn’t even boil water or make toast.

Elena went back to chopping fruit, but she kept stealing glances at me. Maybe I made her nervous. I didn’t like people watching me do my homework; maybe she felt the same way about her work in the kitchen.

“I’m going out to the veranda,” I said. “Do you mind bringing the tea there when it’s ready?”

“I bring it,” she said with a smile.

I stepped outside and shivered. Yes, it was southern California, but it was also November, and early morning. I ran back to my room for a sweat-shirt before settling onto a deck chair on the veranda. The house was situated on a bluff above the Pacific, and the veranda offered the perfect view of the ocean. The waves rhythmically pushed up against the sand below. It was soothing and relaxing. I never got bored sitting out here.

The glass doors opened, and Elena stepped out carrying a tray with my tea and a bowl of cut fruit.

“Is good? Need more?” she asked.

“This is perfect,” I said, and she ducked back inside to the safety and seclusion of her kitchen.

The tea was hot, and I watched the steam curl in the early morning air. I wrapped my fingers around the cup and let the heat warm them through. If the whole week could be like this, I wouldn’t mind so much being out here. But that was probably too much to hope for.

The sliding door opened again, and Mark came out wearing a red-and-black wetsuit and holding his surfboard.

“I figured you’d sleep late,” I said to him.

“Do you see those waves down there?” He snatched a piece of pineapple from my bowl. “I’m not wasting them.”

“Going to have breakfast first?”

“I’ll have something later.”

He opened the gate in the railing and headed down the winding path to the beach. I took my tea and bowl of fruit and followed him. The stone pavers underfoot were gritty with sand. There was no shade except for a couple of palm trees as the path wound back and forth down the cliff face.

“Are you ever going to learn to surf?” he turned to ask as we descended.

I laughed. Every summer, I tried and wiped out a couple of times before deciding I liked my ocean sports to look more like splashing in the waves than riding them.

“You’re the one who keeps trying to teach me,” I said. “What do you think, will I ever learn?”

“Honestly? It doesn’t look good.”

Yeah, that about summed it up.

We got to the bottom, and I sat in the cool sand and watched Mark head out into the water.

Technically, we came out to California twice a year, to spend our required time with Mom, but this was what the visits were really like. Mark surfed, and I watched, or swam if it was warm enough. I loved watching him surf. He looked so natural on his board you’d think he got to do it all the time, not just a couple times a year.

My phone buzzed in my sweatshirt pocket, and I settled my mug of tea in the sand so I could check it. It was probably Heather firming up our plans for going to Venice Beach today.

But it wasn’t Heather, it was Liam.

How’s it going? he asked.

Right now peace and quiet and watching Mark surf. I miss you.

We texted back and forth for a few minutes, and then I heard shouts and giggling as the triplets raced down the path to the beach. The girls, blond hair unbrushed and loose, wearing nightgowns with Disney princesses on them, and Brennan in Spiderman pajamas, tumbled onto the beach like a litter of puppies. Brennan brushed himself off and headed right for the water. The girls came over and sat by me.

“Brennan wants to learn to surf,” Phoebe said, digging her bare toes into the sand. “Daddy says he has to wait until he’s bigger.”

Sophie drew a circle in the sand with her fingertip.

“Mommy says you’re going to make a gingerbread house with us,” she said.

Ah, yes, the unfermented tradition.

“That’s what she says.”

Sophie eyed me critically.

“Do you know how to do that?”

“I think I can figure it out.”

Sophie and Phoebe exchanged glances and shook their heads. Maybe they figured I was as helpless in the kitchen as Mom was. I probably was, although I did know both how to make toast and boil water. Skills I’m sure will get me far in life.

“Whenever Mom tries to get an amateur involved in the show it never works out well,” Phoebe said, sounding way older than five.

“I’m not exactly an amateur.” What nerve. This kid was, like, a third my age, and she was calling me an amateur. I picked up my tea and took a sip. It had cooled off a little too much and was now at that unpleasant stage between hot tea and iced. I suppose, though, when it came right down to it, the triplets had acquired a lot more TV experience in their five years than I had in my almost fifteen.

Phoebe raised one eyebrow in an expression that, on an older person, would have seemed cynical. On a five-year-old it just looked ridiculous.

“You could hardly be considered a professional.” She wrapped her arms around her bony knees and studied me. Nothing like feeling completely inferior to a kindergartner, even if she did have a point. Didn’t they have a nanny or something to keep them occupied so I could sit out here in peace?

“I was on the show, you know,” I said. “And it helped ratings.” The fact that I even felt it necessary to defend myself to them was irritating.

“You were a novelty,” Phoebe said, and the big word sounded strange coming out of her little mouth. “That’s all. That’s what Daddy said.”

Yeah, I could see Dennis saying something like that. The big phony.

“You’re not a natural, like us,” Sophie said. “That’s okay.” She patted my hand in a consoling gesture.

I looked out across the Pacific. *Oh, Dad, why did you not let me come visit you?*

Brennan was in the surf up to his knees.

“Brennan, get out of there,” I called.

He ignored me. Or maybe he didn’t hear me over the sound of the ocean. I stood and walked to the edge of the water.

“Come out of there, Brennan.”

He turned and looked at me. Clearly, he’d heard me this time, but he just took a step farther out. If I was going to get him, I’d have to get wet.

Mark rode a wave in just then. He left his board, jogged over and plucked Brennan out of the water.

“What are you doing, old man?” he asked him. “Does Mom know you’re going swimming without a suit?”

“You’re swimming,” Brennan answered.

“And I’m dressed for it.”

“Brennan! Phoebe! Sophie!” an unfamiliar voice called from the path. Phoebe and Sophie sifted sand through their fingers, and Brennan tried to get his toes back in the water. None of them seemed interested in answering whoever it was.

The person called again, and the voice was soon followed by a harried-looking woman in her twenties, hair in a messy ponytail, sweater buttoned crooked and one shoe untied.

“There you are!” She marched over to Phoebe and Sophie and grabbed each by the hand. “Come on, Brennan, let’s go. You’re not dressed. You haven’t had breakfast yet.”

Mark put Brennan down, but instead of rushing to his nanny, he headed back into the water. Mark scooped him back up again.

“Should I carry him up to the house for you?”

Her relief was so evident, it was almost depressing.

“Would you? Thank you!”

“Ali, watch my board for me, will you?” I wonder if he’d have been so quick to help if she wasn’t blond, adorable, and clearly in way over her head.

I pulled out my phone and sent Liam a text.

After invasion by triplets I now have beach to myself. Wish you were here.

He answered with *Brother just shot Nerf pellets at my head. Wish I was there too.*

I laughed and picked up my cup of tea. It was cold now. And my fruit had sand all over it. Okay, so maybe everything wasn’t ideal. At least it was quiet.

Mark was back a few minutes later, picking up his board again and heading for the water.

“The cook is making a huge batch of waffles,” he said over his shoulder. “I’m going to catch a few more waves and then head in.”

My stomach growled. A fresh-baked waffle with maybe some strawberries and sugar on it would be wonderful. I left Mark to his waves and headed back up the path.

Sophie, Phoebe and Brennan were running around the veranda in some wild game of tag while their nanny reached for one then another and never caught any of them. I couldn’t imagine she’d been on this job long, and I had a feeling that by the next time we came out there’d be a new nanny. There always was.

I skirted the chaos and went back into the kitchen with my sandy fruit and tea.

“Fruit no good?” Elena asked.

“Fruit’s all sandy.” I showed her before dumping it in the garbage.

She nodded, as if it made perfect sense. And if she had lived in this house for very many days, I suppose it did make perfect sense.

“Mark said you were making waffles.”

“Si. You like?”

“Yes, please.” This time I stayed in the kitchen and watched her work—it was more peaceful than being out on the veranda with the crazy children. I pulled out my phone and texted with Liam some more while I waited for my breakfast to be ready.

Elena’s waffles were heavenly, and I enjoyed them in the quiet of the kitchen while the triplets ate outside on the veranda, still in their pajamas, possibly throwing food at each other. The less I knew about that, the better.

I finished eating, but I still hadn’t heard from Heather. I sent her a text to see what she had in mind for today and grabbed a book and ducked into the solarium. Other than the veranda and actually being on the beach, the solarium was my favorite room. It had a long wall of windows overlooking the ocean and an abundance of hanging and floor plants. The furniture was rattan with thick floral cushions. And the triplets hardly ever came in here.

The staccato tapping of my mother’s heels interrupted my quiet.

“I’ve fired the nanny,” she announced. “She had no control.”

I stuck my finger in my book and looked up at her.

“The triplets did seem to get the better of her.”

“She never should have let them go down to the beach by themselves.”

“Mark and I were there,” I said. “We made sure they didn’t get into trouble.” I opened my book again.

“It’s her responsibility to keep an eye on them.”

“Wait. That’s the only reason you fired her? Because they went down to the beach? Isn’t that extreme?”

Then again, there was never the same nanny here whenever we visited. I had always figured they quit because they couldn’t stand either the triplets or my mother. But maybe it was that Mom kept firing them.

“Nothing is too extreme when it comes to the safety of my children.”

I touched the scarf at my throat and stared at her, trying not to let my mother see the tears that came to my eyes. She’d been happy when someone was stalking *me* last year, because it improved her ratings. Me, she’d throw to the wolves, but the triplets? Let their nanny lose sight of them

for ten minutes, and she loses her job. Nice to know where I stood in the scheme of things.

“Right.” I closed my book, not even bothering to mark my place, and left the room. If I was going to survive a week in this house it would have to be by spending as little time in the presence of my mother as possible.



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