

### *Labor Day Weekend*

Alexa O’Connell clicked send, potentially ending her career. As her final *Discovering Real California* article hit the editor’s inbox, she let out a sigh and thought, that’s it. I’m done. Scanning the titles of the articles she’d written for the series, she thought about how the summer had unfolded. Her best friend Aileen’s prediction was spot on; it *had* turned into an adventure like none other. She took a deep breath, pushed the chair back and closed her laptop. Finishing such a lengthy assignment should feel like a huge accomplishment. And it did...but not in the way she’d anticipated. Maybe it would be different if she knew for sure what was next. Walking over to the French doors, Alexa, or Alex as nearly everyone called her, looked out at the Mendocino coast line. She closed her grey-green eyes (her grandfather used to say they were steel grey) and listened to the waves crash in the distance. The late afternoon sun filtering through the trees filled the cozy room at her favorite Bed & Breakfast with soft golden light. Staying there was a splurge she wouldn’t expense; a celebration to mark the end of her three-month assignment.

Stepping out onto the little balcony, Alex inhaled the intoxicating scent of the ocean. The overcast sky she'd seen that morning had long since cleared, revealing bright blue and a late summer sun reflecting on the ocean. She periodically treated herself to a stay at the inn and never tired of looking out the windows at an ocean which seemed wonderfully different every time she saw it. Stiff from sitting for the last two hours, she reached her arms over her head and stretched, side to side, then folded forward, feeling the tension in her back let go. She stood up straight, then leaning her forearms on the rough deck railing, looked out at the trees; the same ones that her grandfather had admired many years ago. Going back inside and running a hand through her long, wavy hair, Alex picked up her ringing phone and smiled when she saw it was Aileen calling.

“Hey Lena, how are you?”

“Pretty good. I've had a mostly lazy day. How are you? Are you ready to come home?”

Settling into a plush wing back chair by a bookcase, Alex responded,

“Yes and no. I miss you and I'm more than ready to sleep in my own bed, but I'm not sure about spending my days at a desk again.”

“You knew that might happen when you jumped at this assignment.”

“Yeah, I did,” Alex agreed. “I also knew this might be my journalistic swan song.”

Alex, a staff writer at the *Marin Gazette*, had spent the summer wondering about her future. Well aware of the rate at which daily newspapers were disappearing, she was wrestling

with the idea of reinventing herself for online-only journalism, or getting out entirely, a thought that both intrigued and frightened her.

“True,” Aileen said. “But can you really walk away from a steady job, regardless of what happens to our little corner of the biz?”

Alex sighed. “Good question...I don’t know. But how much longer will staff writer *be* a steady job, at the *Gazette* or anywhere else? Let’s face it; it’s all pretty uncertain at this point, so who knows what’s next?”

“Depressing but true,” said Aileen. “You know how much I’ve struggled with that very issue myself lately. And as far as boldly going into the paper-less world, I’m still not sure about that. When I decided to go into journalism, it meant *print*. The whole landscape is shifting; look how many dailies have folded recently and how many magazines have moved to online-only.”

“No kidding. Hear that wheezing sound? That’s yet another newspaper biting the dust. And thanks to bloggers, anyone with a computer or smartphone has a potential audience.”

“Right. It’s not all bad though,” Aileen said, “I mean, I like how quickly we can share new ideas, but we’ve reached the point where no one thinks they should have to pay for news anymore.”

“Exactly. That sums it up perfectly,” Alex said.

Quitting was a scary thought. She’d never left a job without having another lined up. She’d be walking away from not only a steady income, but an expense account, a gas credit card and the clout of a daily newspaper behind her. Not a decision to be made lightly.

“I’ve been thinking about my grandfather a lot lately. He was a carpenter his entire working life and he never wondered if he should be doing something else. Neither has my dad; he’s stayed on the same career path with no regrets. And now here we are. Have things really changed that much?”

“I think they have,” Aileen said, and it looks like it’s up to us to create the road map.”

“Yeah,” Alex agreed, “lucky us.”

“So have you thought any more about your book?”

Alex laughed. “A bit...I’ve talked myself into and out of it a few hundred times.”

Did she really have what it took to write a novel? Could she maintain the energy and the focus?

“That sounds like you. But if you don’t do it—or at least try—won’t you always wonder if you could have?” Aileen said.

“Of course. That’s why this is so crazy-making. Freelancing is one thing. I’ve done magazine articles, website copy, even those few short fiction pieces have been no big deal. But a novel, an entire book...that just seems like a nearly impossible undertaking.”

“Nothing is impossible once you decide to go after it. Remember how hard you worked to get on at the *Gazette*?

The *Gazette*...Alex had been thrilled when she first landed the job. She still loved writing, interviewing people and being a part of the staff that created a newspaper every day. For the most part, she liked the office and the people she worked with. The energy and activity of the newsroom, even when it was chaotic, inspired her.

“I’ll never forget that; how excited I was walking into the newsroom that first day. Not to mention how cool it was when you came on board a few years later. You’re right though. It comes down to what I really want.”

“It always does. Okay, enough with the depressing stuff. What are we doing for our birthdays?”

Their birthdays, a week apart in late September, provided an excuse to plan something special, not necessarily extravagant, just something out of the ordinary.

“Excellent question. What sounds good? A spa day? Wine tasting? A day in the City?”

“All of the above. Any adults-only day sounds good right now. I don’t suppose you’ll want two small house guests the minute you get home?”

Alex laughed. “Summer’s over, Mom. Your first-grader will be in school most of the day and you can have your somewhat normal routine back.”

“Yeah, *normal*. School will help. They’re both done with the summer daycare program. Mikayla says it’s boring and your godson told me he hates it and he’s not going anymore. What does a four-year-old have to hate? Where did he even hear that word?”

“Daycare would be my guess,” Alex said.

Aileen laughed. “Of course, silly me.”

They chatted more about getting caught up when Alex finally got home on Monday afternoon, then Aileen said she needed to get going to get dinner started.

“Okay, my friend. Have a good night and hug the kids for me. I’ll call you when I get home.”

“All right, Al, see you soon.”

Alex disconnected and went to the desk to get her laptop. Settling back into the chair and opening the computer, she found the letter she’d written and rewritten a dozen times over the past few weeks: her resignation.

“Am I really brave enough to send this?” She wondered aloud.

She heard her father’s voice, advising her to be practical. It’s never a good idea to walk away from a steady income. She had lived carefully over the last few years, finding comfort in simplicity, and had saved enough to get by for about a year just relying on freelancing. Was she brave enough to take that leap? She thought about the bumper sticker she’d seen recently, which read, ‘Summon the Audacity.’ Could she? Did she have it in her? What would her life be like if she left not only the *Gazette*, but journalism altogether? Good question. Scary question. For someone who wasn’t driven to aggressively seek promotion and advance her career, contemplating leaving the paper made Alex realize how much of her self-identity was wrapped up in her job.

Part of it was societal; when people meet for the first time, “What do you do” is inevitably one of the first questions they ask. “I’m a journalist” is a simple—and truthful—reply, but maybe it would be better to say, “I write for a newspaper.” Being a journalist was only one layer of who Alex was; what would she find if she were to peel that layer away? What if she dug deeper and didn’t think about her means of making a living as being tied into her idea of who she

was? Scary stuff to be sure. When did her self-identity become so inextricably linked to her job? Thanks to the pressure (from society and herself) to be financially independent, that link felt unbreakable. She could always make money freelancing, but was that enough? Did it count if it wasn't regular income? After a summer on the road, Alex's idea of what was normal had shifted and she felt the need to redefine herself and reassess what was important in her life. At times, the beginning of June seemed much longer than three months ago and yet she also felt as if only a few weeks had gone by. After her initial anxiety over the idea, Alex had jumped at the opportunity to be out of the office and *in the field*, her romantic notion of what a *real* journalist did. So now, at the end of what Aileen had called her epic adventure, had she found what she'd been looking for? Was anything different? Wasn't everything different?

Alex thought about the past few months, the miles she'd traveled, the people she'd met and interviewed and all the articles she'd written. She'd lived in California her entire life, yet so much of it was new to her. Spending the summer going from small town to small town had given her a different perspective on her home state. At the beginning of June, she couldn't wait to get out of the office and thought she'd return with a wiser perspective. Now, thinking about going home, she wondered if she still belonged in that, or any office. That first day, the sense of freedom was intoxicating...

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*June*

Traffic on southbound Highway 101 was still light as Alex reached South San Francisco. Even driving through the city wasn't that bad. She reached for her iPod, suddenly in the mood to hear the Beatles. Every adventure needs a soundtrack and with nearly 40 GB worth of songs, she was set for the summer. Music and driving had always gone together for Alex, a habit she picked up from her older brother. The iPod sync in her new Mustang was her favorite feature. She took a sip of iced latte, thrilled at the thought that she wouldn't be back in the office until after Labor Day. Alex was nearly as surprised as Ellen, her boss, when she requested the assignment that would keep her on the road. The idea of spending the whole summer away from the office was exhilarating, not to mention frightening. But what better way to feel alive than to do something that scared you silly? Thinking about life without a script made her giddy. Her daily routine had become a little too predictable and the pace she'd settled into had begun to feel stifling. There was nothing new; no excitement.

Taking the exit for highway 92 and heading west toward Half Moon Bay, Alex drove past green fields that would turn brown under the summer sun and then be dotted with orange as



the pumpkin crop matured toward harvest. Still thinking about the future, there was no denying that daily newspapers were slowly disappearing. If she wanted to continue with journalism, it meant eventually making the leap to the online-only world. Alex had to be honest and admit that she just wasn't sure about reinventing herself for that realm. As the landscape shifted and bloggers began to compete with traditional journalists for readers, fewer people were turning to print, instead seeking the immediacy of the internet. Alex had worked for some kind of publication since she wrote for the campus newspaper at San Francisco State University. Intellectually, she knew she'd still be a journalist if she took her career online. But she had an emotional attachment to print; somehow it just wouldn't feel the same. And if she left journalism altogether...that was a completely overwhelming thought. What would she do instead? Who would she be? She cringed at the cliché of journalist turned novelist, but she'd been working on an idea off and on for the past few years. She'd talked herself into and out of it countless times, but kept coming back to wondering if she really did have a book in her, if she had the courage to quit her day job, declare, "I am a novelist," and just sit down and write it.

Alex looked forward to getting into town and beginning her first interview with two young women who had recently opened a children's bookstore. Hearing about a new independent in a landscape dominated by big box chains always made her happy. The traditional bookstore might be struggling, but was far from being down for the count. Downshifting as she left the highway, she thought that as many times as she'd been to Half Moon Bay, she was still captivated by its charm. She lowered the windows and breathed in the damp morning air, knowing that the clouds would burn off and reveal the perfectly blue sky later that day. She had the entire summer ahead of her; three months of meeting people and learning their stories. That was what she loved most about journalism, even more than writing; getting to know people and

tell their stories. Isn't that what a novelist did in a more abstract way? She drove past the bookstore, found the motel and checked in. After verifying that she had a Wi-Fi signal, she sent a check-in email to her boss, then a text to Aileen.

Made it to HMB, talk to you tonight. :)

Her phone rang as she was about to leave the motel and Alex rolled her eyes and sighed when she saw it was her boss calling.

"Hi Ellen," she said, forcing a smile into her voice.

Never one for small talk, Ellen jumped right into the conversation. "I just want to make sure we're clear on how this assignment is going to work."

"Okay..." Alex said.

"I expect to know where you are at all times. If you're going to make a change in your schedule, I need to know about it. I want an email when you get to a new location and we'll have a weekly check-in call every Wednesday at 10 am. A blog about what you're doing this summer will be a good addition to our website. I want to see posts at least three times a week. And I don't think I need to tell you what will happen if you miss a deadline."

"No, you don't."

"I won't hesitate to shut this down and bring you back here or give this assignment to someone else if I don't like the way you're handling it. Are we clear?"

"Perfectly," Alex said, slowly exhaling.

“All right then, I’ll talk to you on Wednesday.”

“Okay, talk to you then,” Alex said into thin air, as Ellen had already hung up.

She smiled, thinking there was no way she could invent a character like her boss. She’d gladly take terse comments and tense weekly calls in exchange for an entire summer of freedom. The fact that she’d be away from the most difficult boss she’d ever had until after Labor Day was still sinking in. She heard her grandfather’s voice advising her how to deal with bullies (let them think they’re winning), let out a deep breath, and was glad she was no longer 25 and given to reacting first and thinking later. She grabbed her bag, made sure she had the room key and walked back toward the bookstore. Alex thought about what Aileen had said about this summer being her grand adventure. Yeah; let it begin.

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Cole Elliot downshifted and turned onto Skyway Blvd., heading toward the Salinas airport. Lowering the driver’s side window of his dark green 1966 Mustang Fastback, he breathed deeply of the early morning air. He loved to be out and about this time of day, when the sun was barely peeking over Bluerock Mountain, the roads were quiet and the airport mostly deserted. Driving wasn’t nearly as pleasurable as flying for Cole, but he did enjoy cruising along an empty road. At 17, he got his pilot’s and driver’s licenses in the same month, having been far too busy with learning to fly and all things related to aviation to be in line at the DMV on his 16<sup>th</sup> birthday like most of his friends. Truth be told, his main motivation for learning to drive had been to have a way to get to the airport. While his high school pals were busy cruising, flirting with girls and tinkering with auto engines, Cole was at the airport, watching planes, looking over

mechanics' shoulders and hanging out with pilots just to hear their stories and soak up every bit of knowledge he could.

One year at UC Santa Cruz, pursuing a degree in Environmental Studies, was enough to convince him that college wasn't where he wanted to be, so he continued to concentrate on flying, a decision he had never second-guessed. Cole followed up his private pilot's license with a commercial one, which led him to jobs with shipping companies, and then he eventually landed at a large freight company. He soon tired of the monotony of flying cargo jets, but it was actually the politics of a large corporation that drove him away. He simply had no patience for posturing and pretending to care about climbing the corporate ladder. In fact, it was his disdain for playing the part of Company Man that was as much to blame for the end of his relationship as coming to the realization that he and his girlfriend just wanted different things. Melissa thrived within order and structure. Cole did better making it up as he went along. Try as they might, they just couldn't seem to meet in the middle, so they went their separate ways. Knowing he could fall back on flying cargo if he had to allowed him to get by giving aerial tours and flying with pilots in training. That was Cole's version of living in the moment and not worrying about what would happen next.

Driving into the airport, Cole thought about the summer stretching out before him, a time for easy money as tourist season went into overdrive and there was no shortage of student pilots looking for hours to get their certificates. Parking in his usual spot near the hangar that housed his Cessna, he checked his phone for new messages. He had found that student pilots were sometimes less than reliable about showing up on time, especially early in the day. Excellent: no

cancellations. He didn't have any new messages, which was good; that meant none to return. Cole wasn't much for emailing and texting, preferring face-to-face conversations.

The insect buzz of sodium vapor lights on the hangars cut through the still morning air, echoing between the buildings and making him think of summer evenings in the park, playing baseball with his friends. He hadn't thought about that in ages; funny how a sound could do that to you all of a sudden, or at least it seemed to be happening to him a lot. Cole wasn't sure what was going on, but he seemed to be more aware of his past lately and found himself thinking about people and places he hadn't thought of in years. Maybe everyone did that as they got older, but it was beginning to be distracting. Not being one to dwell on the past, Cole liked to focus on what lay ahead rather than what he'd left behind.

Looking up at the early morning sky, he took another deep breath of the cool, clean air and slowly exhaled. Enough of this, he thought, time to get airborne. Flying didn't solve everything, but most of the time it sure felt like it did. He'd take to the sky, clear the cobwebs and land with a renewed perspective. Or at the very least he'd have the few hours of peace he always found in the air. He went into the hangar, nodded a greeting to another pilot and felt the same thrill he found every time he readied his plane to take it out onto the tarmac. He'd been flying since he was a teenager, and yet he knew it would never get old; he would never tire of the thrill of liftoff and the exhilaration of being in the air.

Cole walked around his 172 SP Skyhawk, giving it a visual inspection as he did before every take-off. Flying was so much a part of him; routine tasks such as pre-flight checks were second nature. He thought more about the upcoming summer, when he'd be able to work as much or as little as he wanted, depending on how many students he wanted to take on and how

many tourists he felt like putting up with. That kind of freedom meant everything to Cole. He took his aviator glasses out of his pocket, and cleaning them on the tail of his faded denim shirt, looked up to see his first student of the day approaching; a new pilot eager to complete the required hours so he could make his first solo flight. Well why not? There's nothing like taking off by yourself that first time, that first solo journey. Just you, the plane, your reflexes and instincts. Flight. Humans have been fascinated by the idea ever since we first looked skyward to see birds circling overhead. How could we not want to join them?

“Good morning, I'm Jesse. Are you Cole?”

Cole nodded and offered his hand. “Hi Jesse, good to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you. Thanks for being okay with getting started this early—I love this time of day,” Jesse said, shaking Cole's hand. “Here's my student pilot certificate.” He offered his pilot learner's permit, which Cole glanced at and said,

“Jesse J. Wright?”

Jesse sighed. “Yes, my middle name is James and my last name is Wright and I want to be a pilot.”

“Take it easy,” Cole said, laughing.

“Sorry, old habits die hard,” Jesse said with a grin. “I've been taking crap about my name since grade school.”

“You'll get no crap from me,” Cole said, “my fifth grade teacher spelled my name C-O-A-L on the chalkboard the first day of school and I lived with that for the rest of the year.”

Jesse laughed, and looking at Cole's plane, said, "My grandfather had an old Skyhawk, a 172L. He used to take me to the Lodi airport with him so I could watch the planes take off and land. Unfortunately, he was gone before I was old enough for him to teach me to fly."

Cole didn't know how to respond to that, so he didn't.

"I've wanted to fly since I was a kid," Jesse continued. "While my friends were out playing, I was reading about planes and building models."

Cole nodded, appreciating the similarities between himself and this latest student.

"A few things before we get going," Cole said. "If you're looking for stimulating conversation or the history of aviation, you might want to find another pilot. I don't like to talk much in the air."

"Fine by me," Jesse replied. "I'm not looking for anything other than getting my hours to get my certificate. I just want to fly."

Cole nodded again, thinking he and Jesse would get along just fine.

"All right then, Jesse James Wright, are you ready to take off?"

Jesse enthusiastically said, "Yes, let's get going!"

He asked for Cole's log and walked around the plane, which made Cole smile. This kid was on the ball. After verifying that the Skyhawk was fueled up and ready for flight, they climbed inside and Jesse taxied out to the runway with a big grin lighting up his boyish face. Cole couldn't help but smile in return, thinking about his own student pilot days. Although he wasn't sure he could

imagine himself in a classroom, maybe teaching was something to think about as a permanent part of his future. A future that was looming ever closer, it seemed.

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Alex let herself into her room and set down her bags, thinking that all motels must have been designed by the same person. Not that you could do much with a single room and bathroom, but still, they seemed interchangeable. She started her computer, so she could send Ellen her obligatory new location email, and glancing at her phone, saw that she had two new texts from Aileen, the first asking about her schedule and when she'd have time to talk and the second one reading,

Call me before you talk to Ellen!

Alex hit a speed dial key, wondering what was up. Aileen wasn't prone to drama; she usually just sent a text and waited for a reply.

"Hey Al, how are you?"

"Good. Just got into Salinas...how are you and what's going on?"

"I'm kind of freaking out. It looks like the rumors that have been flying around for the past few months are actually based in reality. It hasn't been officially announced of course, but we're definitely for sale. In fact, it might be pending."

"Oh crap, really? Does anyone know who's buying?"

"No. None of the likely suspects seem to be at the table."



Alex stood up and stretched. “This could still turn out to be a good thing...”

“Right, like we’ve been saying all along. If it’s someone who doesn’t already have a media staff, they’re likely to keep most of us. But, if they do...it’s not knowing that’s going to drive me insane.”

“Yeah, me too,” Alex said, thinking that her dream assignment might turn out to be much shorter than planned. “So what happened today? Has Ellen said anything?”

“That’s why I wanted to talk to you before she does. I went to her first thing this morning to ask about job sharing again.”

“Ah, her favorite subject. How did that go?” Alex asked, beginning to pace around the tiny room.

“Much worse than usual. She went off on me; like I thought her head was going to start spinning around. Then in the middle of her rant, she stopped and told me to close the door.”

“Never a good sign...” Alex said. They were all so used to Ellen’s blow ups throughout the day, no one paid much attention. But if she bothered to close the door, something significant was going on.

“No. She suddenly switched into reasonable human being mode and told me she can’t make any staffing changes right now with a sale pending. I thought about playing dumb, but she said she was sure we all know what’s going on—we *are* journalists after all. She’s convinced she’s on her way out, Al, regardless of what happens.”

“Wow. No wonder she’s been so prickly,” Alex said, sitting back down.

“Yeah. I wanted you to know that before you talk to her. I don’t know what this means for you. I wanted to ask, but didn’t dare after she swore me to secrecy.”

“She knew you’d tell me—Ellen’s a lot of things, but she isn’t dumb.”

“No, she’s not, but I didn’t need to be obvious by asking about you.”

Alex sighed. “Well hell, I guess I might be coming home much sooner than I thought. And my decision about staying at the paper might be made for me.”

“Right. I know you’ve been thinking about this for a while, but will you be okay if we’re all let go?”

“Presumably we’ll have unemployment, which will keep me from starving to death while I try to line up some freelance gigs, and I can always downsize even more, so yeah, I think I can manage. It just feels a lot different to think that it may not be my decision, you know? What about you?”

“Well, even if Matt gets the promotion he’s up for, I’d be worried about just relying on unemployment—I’ll still need some kind of income. That’s why I thought job sharing would work so well. Although, if we don’t have to pay for daycare at all...maybe we’d be okay. Damn. Did you ever think it would come to this?”

“No; never. So why does Ellen think she’ll be out for sure?”

“She’s convinced that whoever buys us will immediately get rid of all the managers. Besides, you know how she is, she likes to think of herself as a no-nonsense old-school reporter, but I think she kind of feels like a dinosaur sometimes.”

“She drives us all crazy on a weekly—no, make that *daily*—basis, but it’s really messed up that after a career like hers she’s waiting to be cut loose, probably by someone who doesn’t even know the biz.”

“Yeah; that’s just not right.” Aileen sighed.

“Did she give you any idea of who’s in the running to be our new overlords?”

“Not even a hint. I think she knows, but she’s not going to tell anyone. I knew we wouldn’t be at the *Gazette* forever, but if we’re all let go...having to be the ‘new guy’ again after three years isn’t something I even want to think about. I guess I’ve been taking it for granted how comfortable I am there. Not to mention how lucky I feel to work with my best friend.”

“No kidding,” Alex agreed, “we’ve got it pretty damn good. You know how much I hate job hunting, but the thought of all of us ending up at different places...yes, Ellen drives us nuts, but she does know the biz and she knows what she’s doing. Plus, we have a really good core group.”

“Yes we do. The thought of all of us scattering is really depressing.”

“Seriously. We’ll never work with a crowd like ours again.”

“That’s for sure. Alright my friend, I have to let you go. Matt will be home in a few minutes and after dinner I’m going to pour us each a glass of wine and we’ll try to figure out a game plan.”

“Good idea. Forewarned is forearmed and all of that.”

Aileen laughed. “Yeah, but the part of being forewarned that you never hear about is all the stress that goes with it.”

“Yeah, no kidding”, Alex agreed. “Okay, give my love to Matt & the kids and we’ll talk soon.”

“Good night, Al.”

Rumors of the *Gazette* being for sale had been circulating for months, and she and Aileen had talked about what they’d have to do if the worst happened and they were let go, but Alex had been thinking in hypothetical terms only, not really believing they’d have to face it. That was pretty naïve, given the current state of the industry, but she really didn’t think they’d have to worry about it, at least not yet. Her considering leaving the paper or even getting out of journalism entirely was one thing; it was still abstract at this point, something she was just mulling over to see how it felt. But if she suddenly lost her job because the paper was sold...the thought of having such a huge decision forced upon her was overwhelming, nearly enough to bring on a panic attack. It was bad enough that her dream gig might be over so shortly after it began, but what would she do next? Unemployment would only last so long, and in an uncertain economy, there was no telling how long it would take her to land a decent job. She’d have to line up a steady stream of freelance work while she thought about her next move. Everything really could change in the blink of an eye. How maddening is it when a cliché is right on?

Freaking out wasn’t going to get her anywhere. She took a deep breath and slowly exhaled. She’d learned that the best way to get out of her head when she was worrying was to do something physical. She kicked her shoes off and stood up; stretching her arms up toward the

ceiling, then leaned over and touched the floor. After a few rounds of yoga Sun Salutations, she felt like she could think a bit more clearly. She imagined her father telling her to make a list; by putting her biggest concerns on paper, she could break them down into manageable chunks. First things first. If the worst happened and she lost her job when the *Gazette* was sold, how would she support herself? Beyond unemployment, there was freelance work. She'd make a list of recent projects and who she might contact for additional jobs. She'd built up enough savings to get by for almost a year relying only on freelancing, although now that she had a car payment, she'd have to be very frugal. But, better to deal with the payment than to find herself in desperate need of a car while unemployed. Okay, she wouldn't starve, she had a reliable vehicle and she wouldn't lose her apartment. What then? Write a book? Forget journalism and try something completely different? There was that intriguing yet terrifying thought again. What was she if not a journalist? Maybe it was time to find out.

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Alex got a refill on her tea and sat back down. The café was clearing out after the morning rush so she didn't feel guilty about staying at her table. She'd just wrapped up an interview with Stephany, the owner of a new art gallery in town and wanted to go over her notes while the conversation was still fresh in her mind. She'd already decided that except for writing final drafts, that required her to be completely free from distractions, she would avoid writing in motel rooms, preferring to be around people. It seemed contradictory to be out and about, meeting people and learning their stories, only to isolate herself in a motel room to tell those stories. She felt energized by a shift in how she was approaching writing. It seemed this

assignment was already affecting her in more ways than she thought it would. Score another one for unexpected benefits.

Alex remembered the exact moment when she knew she wanted to be a journalist. She was in seventh grade, and her English teacher announced that he'd been given permission to form an extra-curricular journalism club and create a school newspaper. If enough students signed up, there could be a class offered the following year. A light bulb went on and Alex knew she had to join; the club would give her the means to channel her love of writing and telling stories. She'd learned about the five Ws—Who, What, Where, When and Why—in English class. Now she'd have a place to put them into practice. She was first in line to sign up for the club.

The “newspaper” was a single, double-sided 11 x 17” page, but it had a masthead, photos, articles written by students, and most important to Alex, bylines. It wasn't so much having her name in the paper; it was seeing it attached—in print—to something she'd written. She brought the first issue home to show her parents her article, and there it was in black and white, a story that she'd decided was worth telling, approved by her teacher, acting as editor in chief, beneath her name. She was hooked. Her grandfather was so proud of her he framed that first issue and hung it on the wall in his study. She hadn't thought about that in years, but suddenly wondered what had happened to it when he passed away. She made a mental note to ask her father. It was a silly thing to want, but she decided she'd like to have it. Hearing the commotion around her, Alex snapped out of her musing and looked around to see that the café was once again full of people. She smiled at her mental detour and decided she may as well head over to the motel to get her car and go to her next appointment.

Alex took the long way back, enjoying the late morning sunshine. The valley could be uncomfortably hot by the middle of August, but for now, she'd soak up the sun. She passed by shops and cafes, watching people go about their daily tasks, doing their jobs, living their lives. And as she often did when in a new or unfamiliar place, she imagined what her life would be like if she lived there, picturing herself going about her business and calling this place home. What would it feel like to live here? Would she be a regular at the café she just left? Would she see the same people on the sidewalk every morning? Arriving at the motel, she let herself into her room, and began to run through her pre-interview mental checklist as she brushed her hair and considered her reflection in the mirror. Being a bit of a tom-boy, Alex favored casual clothing, but she still wanted to look professional. She decided to dress up the cropped jeans and silk tank top she'd put on that morning with a linen jacket for her next two interviews. Satisfied with the look, she grabbed a fresh tape for her mini recorder and was about to leave when her phone rang.

“Hey Lena, what's up?”

“Hi Al. Got a few minutes?”

“Yeah, about 20 before I have to leave for an interview. You okay?”

Aileen sighed. “It's been one of those mornings. Gabe had a complete melt-down over going to daycare and there was no way I could call in today—I've got way too much going on here. He was still crying when I dropped him off and I feel like I put my job before my child. Sign me up for Mother of the Year.”

“Oh honey, I'm sorry. I can't even imagine what that feels like.”

“It’s pretty freakin’ horrible. Intellectually, I know I’m not really neglecting him, but that’s how it feels. And of course it’s been a ridiculous day here already. I’m not sure what Evan left on Ellen’s desk, but she actually crumbled it up and threw it in his face.”

“Seriously? That’s outrageous even for her. What did he do?”

“He stared at her for about ten seconds and then picked it up, very calmly said, “I guess we’ll talk about this later, and walked out.”

“Holy crap he’s good,” Alex said.

“No kidding,” Aileen agreed, “I dream of making that kind of exit. Then it was my turn. I had just sent her my latest article and she said she’s seen better writing in her niece’s junior high school newspaper.”

“Oh damn. You know she doesn’t really mean that though—you just got caught in one of her tirades that has nothing to do with you,” Alex said.

“Yeah, I know, but I couldn’t help but think, *this* is what I’m doing when I should be taking care of my four-year-old?”

“A fair question. I’m sorry I’m not there to walk around the building with you, Lena.”

“It’s okay, Al, just talking to you has helped a lot. I feel like I can go back inside now.”

Alex smiled. No amount of distance could really separate her from Aileen. “Good. Glad I could help. Okay, my friend, I need to get going. I’m off to the Steinbeck House, then the museum.”

“Ooh, I’m jealous—I’ll be there in spirit. Thanks for talking me off the ledge, Al.”



“Anytime, my friend. I’ll call you tonight.”

#

Cole looked over at his client, a successful business owner from Chicago, nodded and gave a small strained smile. He was beginning to wonder if the guy would ever stop talking. He expected a fair amount of chatter from tourists, especially those who’d never taken an aerial tour, but this guy had been yammering non-stop since he’d shown up at the airport. Once they were in the air, he’d had even more to say. Cole felt he needed to at least feign interest; Walt Anderson was paying nearly twice the normal amount for an hour-long flight over the Salinas farm country and surrounding hills, but would a few minutes of quiet be too much to ask? Anderson, a small, wiry guy full of nervous energy, was once again telling Cole about his latest venture: home delivery of farm-fresh produce for people too busy to go shopping.

“I know I’m not the first one to try something like this,” he said, “so I just need to make sure we do it better than everyone else.”

“Hmm...” Cole answered.

“I knew I needed to come see the Salad Bowl of the World for myself,” he continued.

Cole thought he might push Anderson out of the plane if he said the words ‘salad bowl’ one more time.

“You Californians don’t know how good you have it, living right in the middle of all of this.”

“I think most of us do,” Cole answered, wishing he hadn’t disclosed being a native. Anderson clearly thought small towns equaled small minds and lack of ambition. Growing up in a town like Salinas, surrounded by nothing but farmland, Cole was one of many who had their sights set on a future elsewhere. His elsewhere just happened to compel him to look skyward.

Sneaking a glance at his watch, Cole thought about what he would do with his free afternoon. In fact, he had nothing lined up for the next several days. Maybe he’d just get back in the plane and go after he got rid of Mr. Chatterbox. Anderson ignored Cole’s comment and continued; talking about how different it was in the rest of the country, as if California were a distant, exotic land. Cole was only half-listening, hoping he was tossing out “hmm” and “uhuh” at the appropriate times. Glancing over at Anderson, he realized it didn’t matter. His client was clearly used to being the one doing most of the talking and didn’t appear to be very concerned with what anyone else had to say. At last it was time to start back and Cole made a wide, sweeping turn to head back to the airport.

#

Alex drove up to the top level of the garage and parked under a cloudless blue sky. She headed down the stairs to walk the few blocks to the Steinbeck House, the boyhood home of the author that was now a restaurant owned by a guild of volunteers whose mission was to preserve the house as a literary landmark. Approaching the Queen Anne Victorian that was built in the late 1890s, Alex imagined Steinbeck living there in his youth. Did he tell stories and create characters as a boy? Did he gaze out of those windows thinking about his future? She wondered if being a writer was something a person just was rather than something they decided to be. She went inside and was warmly welcomed by two of the founding Valley Guild members, who

insisted the interview should take place over lunch. How could Alex argue with that? She sat down with the women, who were eager to tell her how the guild came about.

#

After a fabulous meal and more than enough material for an article and a lengthy blog post, Alex walked over to the Steinbeck Center. She was due to interview the Executive Director later that afternoon, but had timed her visit so she could enjoy the museum for a few hours first. Fishing her phone out of her bag, she made sure it was set to vibrate, and then sent a quick text to Aileen

Heading into Steinbeck Center! Call you later tonight. :)

She was thrilled to once again visit the museum that celebrated the life and work of one of her favorite authors. The early summer sun reflected off the high windows, showcasing the building for the architectural marvel that it is, as Alex walked up the front steps and went inside. She and Aileen had made a trip to the center shortly after it opened, during their senior year, doubting at times that Aileen's battered old Toyota would get them there, let alone back, but they decided the trip was well worth the risk. It was the perfect way for them to escape the stress of their upcoming midterm exams, and the fact that Alex was writing a paper on Steinbeck's most famous novel provided a good excuse to spend the weekend doing something other than homework.

Alex walked into the main exhibition hall and was transported back to her bookstore days during college, remembering when it felt like her every waking hour outside of class was devoted to reading, studying, or working. When she and Aileen weren't taking off for a concert,

that is. How did she survive on so little sleep for three years? She often joked that taking a yoga class on a whim her junior year saved her sanity, but it wasn't far from the truth. The campus newspaper plus a part-time job at a local independent bookstore left little room for down time, or exercise apart from yoga, but her twin passions fed each other and she rarely felt overwhelmed except during finals week. Going to school in the Bay Area put her in the prime location to land a job at a well-established bookstore that felt like the perfect fit, as she worked beside fellow students and industry veterans, all passionate about books. Alex had read everything Steinbeck had written, whether it was assigned or not, and stepping into the museum she remembered the feeling reading his work never failed to impart, reliving the vivid imagery conjured by his prose.

#

Cole loved the Steinbeck Center and made an effort to visit whenever he had time in Salinas. Besides the fact that it was all things Steinbeck—his favorite author—there was something about the building itself and the way the early afternoon light filled the main lobby; the sun streaming in through the large, high windows, that always filled him with a sense of peace. He had just stepped into the main wing when he saw her, the woman he'd noticed a few weeks ago in Half Moon Bay. He walked past her while she was absorbed in the *East of Eden* display and doubled back; yes, that was her, the petite, athletic-looking woman with long, wavy auburn hair. She was striking, the kind of woman that made a man look again. She had golden-hued skin, fine features and moved with a fluid grace that said she was an athlete, or maybe a dancer.

He had asked around and learned that she was a journalist; a staff writer at one of the daily papers up north, which he decided meant she was part of all the corporate nonsense he

worked so hard to avoid. He intended to walk by without saying anything to her, but she turned and smiled as he approached, stopping him in his tracks as if she'd reached out a hand and blocked his passage. He faltered, and then recovered, tossing out a joke.

“Come here often?”

She laughed, her eyes full of delight.

“Every chance I get, how about you?”

The fact that she not only appreciated his lame attempt at humor, but decided to respond as if it were a genuine inquiry disarmed Cole. He smiled, offered his hand and said,

“Same here. I'm Cole.”

“Alexa, but everyone calls me Alex,” she said, shaking his hand.

“Nice to meet you, Alexa who goes by Alex.”

“And you, Cole,” she said with a smile.

Without discussing it, they fell into walking around together, occasionally commenting on the displays created to honor Steinbeck's works, including canisters from Doc's lab in *Cannery Row* and letters and journals that inspired *East of Eden*, *The Grapes of Wrath* and other stories. Cole noticed that Alex was particularly fascinated with the journals, which was fitting for a writer, he supposed.

“Can you picture the people who filled these journals? Sitting there late at night, after a day of back-breaking labor, writing by lantern, describing the struggles of their daily lives?” She

asked, looking intently at worn pages covered with faded scrawls, hands in the back pockets of her cropped jeans. “Why do you think it was so important for them to write their stories?”

As many times as Cole had been to the museum, he’d never thought about who’d written those diaries, only the effect they’d had on Steinbeck when he’d read them. What an interesting shift of perspective Alex had given him.

“I wrote a paper on *The Grapes of Wrath* for Honors English my senior year,” she said. “I obsessed over every word, but I got an A, so I told myself it was worth it.”

“English major?” Cole asked, not letting on that he already knew she was a journalist.

“Double major—English and Journalism,” she answered.

They continued to walk around the hall, talking about Steinbeck’s work and when they’d read each book. Cole was struck by the fact that Alex seemed fine with not talking as well as talking; as if she didn’t feel the need to fill up every bit of silence with meaningless chatter and he immediately liked that about her. They entered into the inevitable “what brings you here?” conversation, to which Alex replied,

“I’m with the *Marin Gazette*. I’m working on a series of articles for a real California feature. How about you?”

“I’m between jobs at the moment,” he said. “I’m a pilot; sometimes I give flight lessons, sometimes I do aerial tours. For the next few days, it’s neither.”

“That sounds like a good gig, how about an interview sometime?”

Though the question caught him off guard, he answered,

“Yeah, okay. Why not?”

She ran a hand through her hair, brushing long bangs away from her eyes, considering him. Cole felt like she was looking right through the cool façade he habitually wore in public.

When they'd gone through the agriculture wing and come back into the main lobby, he hesitated. It was his inclination to play it cool, not worrying if she'd really follow through with an interview, or if he'd never see her again, but at the last moment, when it seemed Alex was already on her way to wherever she was headed next, he changed his mind.

“If you don't have anywhere you need to be, could I interest you in a cup of coffee?”

Looking at her watch, she said, “Sure, that sounds good. I have about 45 minutes until I'm due to interview the Director here.”

Surprised at how happy her response made him, he smiled and led the way to a small café nearby.

The late afternoon sun offered a pleasing warmth after the air conditioned chill of the museum. Alex found a vacant table near the window as Cole went to stand in line and order. He joined her a few minutes later with two iced coffees, handed her one and sat down across from her.

“Tell me about this series you're working on,” he said, taking a sip of his coffee and rolling up the sleeves of his faded denim shirt.

Alex put a straw into her drink and tucked a lock of hair behind her ear, revealing a small diamond earring.

“It’s a total dream assignment. I’ll be out of the office for the entire summer, traveling around, meeting and interviewing people, and painting a picture of the people and towns that make up authentic California.”

“That sounds pretty amazing,” agreed Cole, who couldn’t imagine being cooped up in an office five days a week. “How did you score that?”

“To be honest, I’m not really sure. My boss is not the easiest person to work for, and I didn’t think she’d go for something like this at all. But her boss wanted new ideas from his managing editors and once the list was finalized, this gig was up for grabs. I was up against two other writers, both of whom have more time at the paper than I do. We had to submit a game plan outlining how we’d approach such an assignment and apparently she liked mine. Believe me; no one was more surprised than I was.”

“Well done, you,” Cole said, raising his to-go cup and nodding.

“So what brings you to Salinas if not a job?” Alex asked.

He hesitated, not wanting to sound like a deadbeat with no prospects. He’d just met this woman and here he was worrying about making a good impression; not something he was used to. Alexa O’Connell was already getting under his skin, a realization that thrilled him as much as it needled him.

“I had a client this morning—an aerial tour of the ‘Salad Bowl of the World’ as he repeatedly called it, but I don’t have anything else lined up for a bit. I live in Salinas actually, but don’t really spend much time here, especially during the summer. I don’t have anything going for the rest of this week, so I’m hoping to get a tune up. A buddy of mine is the head mechanic at



the airport and if I drop in when they aren't too busy, I can get the benefit of his experience. Hopefully he'll be able to squeeze me in sometime in the next few days. Also, small airports are usually where I find most of my jobs. There's always someone needing hours to get their license or looking for an aerial tour."

Cole sipped his coffee in silence, as the conversation hit a natural lull. He scrutinized Alex while trying not to be obvious about it. She was a very intriguing woman, and her habit of maintaining eye contact while speaking to him made her even more attractive.

#

Cole looked over the mechanic's shoulder as he frowned at the Cessna's engine.

"Yeah, that doesn't sound quite right," Glenn said, wiping a greasy hand on his leg. "I can do a complete tune up and inspection, but there're two guys in front of you. I probably won't be able to get to it until tomorrow afternoon at the earliest."

Cole sighed, wishing that he'd been able to get a tune up before he'd left Salinas. He didn't know Glenn very well and had no idea if he was as good a mechanic as his pal in Salinas. "Okay, go ahead. I guess I'm grounded for the time being. Oh well, there are worse places to be stranded."

"That's for sure," answered Glenn. "You should check out those old motels down by the beach. They're a little run down but they're only a block or so from the ocean."

They settled on the cost of the tune up as Glenn started back toward the hangar, then stopped to watch Cole pull his bicycle out of the back of the plane.

"How'd you get that thing in there without taking the front tire off?"

“Very carefully.”

Glenn walked away chuckling as Cole transferred a few essentials from his suitcase to a backpack. He then rode his bike into town and checked into a motel. As the mechanic had told him, the place was old and a little shabby, but it was clean and about as close to the beach as it could be without being on the sand. He found a little café offering the day’s catch, and sat down with a book to enjoy an early dinner.

Cole was unable to concentrate, re-reading the same sentences repeatedly. The sense of restlessness that had been creeping in over the last few months was becoming more and more distracting. Where was it coming from? For more years than he’d like to count, Cole had been content to fly from town to town, job to job; going home to Salinas periodically to make sure his condo was still standing. That much solitude was beginning to feel less appealing as the years went by. Maybe he really couldn’t just keep winging it forever, without a solid plan. Long term plans had never been Cole’s strong suit, something that Melissa, the last woman he’d had a serious relationship with loved to point out. Was it time to do something about that? He’d been thinking of Melissa a lot lately too, which was unsettling to say the least. Theirs had been a passionate but stormy relationship that had ended with a lot of bitterness and hurt feelings. Always adept at pushing his feelings aside, Cole wasn’t one to brood over romantic trials, but he’d begun to wonder if he was destined to be a loner from now on. He gave up on the book and finished his dinner hoping that maybe he just needed a good night’s sleep.

#

Cole rose early the next morning and dressed in sweatpants and an old t-shirt. He thought it might be a bit chilly at first, but he knew he'd warm up quickly. Stepping outside, he breathed deeply of the damp, salty air. After making sure he had his phone and the room key, he laced up his running shoes, stretched and set off at a brisk pace toward the ocean. Cole loved running; it suited his lanky, long-legged build. Running on the beach was best; he felt like he gained strength from the power of the ocean, liked the resistance of running on the sand and the purity of the air. Running was similar to flying for him. He felt completely in control, he decided how hard to push himself and for how long, he felt completely free and it was best done solo. He ran down the wooden stairs that led to the beach and took off over the sand. He quickly settled into a comfortable pace, pushing himself just enough to feel challenged, as he concentrated on nothing but putting one foot in front of the other. After about 20 minutes, he slowed as he came to a rocky outcrop that nearly reached the water. With the tide out, as it was now, it was possible to walk around. If it rose quickly, he'd have to climb over the rocks on the way back.

Walking around the outcrop, he came upon a small, sheltered cove, surrounded by steep cliffs. Cole was surprised to see another person, as he assumed he'd have the beach to himself this early, and then realized it was Alex—there was no mistaking that long, wavy, reddish hair. He stopped to watch her, struck once again by the graceful way she moved. She was dressed in exercise clothing: dark gray pants and a teal long-sleeved t-shirt that flattered her petite figure, practicing a sequence of slow, fluid movements and poses that Cole supposed was yoga. He felt guilty about watching Alex without her knowledge but couldn't make himself leave. Great, he thought, I'm a stalker. The way she moved through the routine was truly beautiful. He wasn't sure how long he watched her, but by the time he thought about the tide, it had indeed come in

and he had to make his way over the rocks to return to the open area of the beach and finish his run. He set off at a fast pace to make up for being idle and assuage his guilt.

#

Alex finished the last Sun Salutation and stood looking at the ocean. She closed her eyes and breathed deeply, taking in the fresh salt air. It was still early, yet she felt the sun beginning to burn through the marine layer. The sky had changed; the clouds were thinner and lighter since she'd stumbled on the secluded little cove about an hour earlier. The sun was visible, a dimly glowing orb within the clouds, promising a beautiful, sunny day. She took one last deep, cleansing breath and reluctantly turned away from the ocean to head back to her motel to finish her latest article and write a new blog post. Climbing the rickety wooden stairs leading to the path that ran parallel to the beach, she removed the clip that held her hair back. She was attempting to detangle it with her fingers when she ran into Cole, almost literally. What was he doing there?

“Hey! Cole...hi, how are you?”

“Well Good Morning, Alex” he said, “I’m good, how are you? Great day for a run, isn’t it?”

“I’m well, thanks. Yeah, it’s hard to beat a morning on the beach,” she said, self-consciously trying to smooth her bangs. The damp air made her wavy hair go a little crazy.

“Are you on your way somewhere? Can I interest you in cup of coffee or a smoothie?”

Alex hesitated. She needed to write an article, but an hour or so wouldn't make any difference, would it?

"I'd like that, thanks," she answered. "I just finished doing yoga though, so I'll skip the caffeine, but a smoothie sounds great."

"Excellent," Cole said with a smile. "Smoothies it is. I just came back from a run so I should really skip the coffee too."

They turned away from the ocean, toward a cluster of shops that faced the beach.

The trendy, upscale Rain Forest Café may have catered to tourists and out-of-towners, but even the locals raved about their famous smoothies and juices made from fresh, local ingredients. After getting their drinks, Alex and Cole found a table on the patio facing the ocean.

"Cheers," Cole said, raising his smoothie toward Alex.

Smiling, she touched her cup to his.

"So you were doing yoga on the beach?" Cole asked. "Don't you usually do that in a class?"

"Not necessarily," Alex answered. "Most people do practice in classes or groups, but it can be incredibly grounding as a solitary exercise."

"How do you know what to do without watching a teacher?" Cole asked.

She smiled. “I’ve been doing it long enough that I have a number of sequences memorized. I don’t have to think about the poses—and in fact, that’s the point—to get out of my head and just concentrate on breathing and moving.”

“So it’s sort of like meditating?” Cole asked, taking a sip of his smoothie.

“Yeah, it is. I first discovered it in college—it was a great way to balance the stress of a full course load plus a job. I was an assistant instructor for a few years, and then life got in the way, like it does, and I just didn’t have the time to devote to it anymore, so I never did get my certification to teach on my own.”

“But you’ve continued to practice?”

Alex sipped her drink and nodded. “As much as I can fit into my schedule. If I go too long without at least practicing at home I really feel it. Yoga is still the best way to beat stress I’ve ever come up with.”

“That’s what running does for me,” Cole said.

“So you run...and you fly. How long have you been doing that?”

“Since I was 16, when I got my student certificate. I tested for my private pilot’s license the day I turned 17, and then had the 40 hours of flight time required by the FAA by the end of the month.”

“You can get a pilot’s license at 17?” Alex asked. “That seems young.”

Cole shrugged. “I guess, but, in addition to written and oral tests, you have to log a minimum of 20 hours with a flight instructor and 10 hours of solo flight plus night training. That will weed out anyone who isn’t serious.”

Alex still wasn’t sure she was comfortable with the idea of teenage pilots, given the behavior she’d seen from a number of young people on the road, but nodded politely. Cole clearly loved everything about flying. He became more animated as he continued, telling Alex about his first cross-country solo flight. She found herself listening intently, thinking that there was a lot to Cole Elliot. She wanted to ask him about an interview, but sneaking a glance at her watch, was amazed to see that more than an hour had gone by. An interview would have to wait.

“I could yammer on all day,” Cole said, “I hope I haven’t bored you.”

“Not at all. And I’d still like to interview you at some point, but I have to get going,” she said. “I have an article due this afternoon.”

“Ah, deadlines, one of the pitfalls of steady employment. It’s been nice talking to you, Alex. We’ll have to run into each other on purpose sometime soon.”

“Yes,” Alex said, smiling, “we will. Thanks for the smoothie.”

“My pleasure.”

They exchanged phone numbers, said goodbye and Alex left.

#

Cole watched her walk away until she rounded a corner and was out of his sight. As he turned to head back to the motel, his phone chimed. The text was from an unfamiliar number with an East Bay area code.

C...I know this is out of the blue but I want to talk to you. M

What? Was that really from Melissa? Why would she want to talk to him now, after all this time? How the hell did she even get his number? Cole wasn't one to buy into mystical connections, but he couldn't ignore the fact that Melissa had crept into his thoughts more than a few times over the last month. She'd obviously been asking around, trying to find someone who'd give up his number. Did he sense that somehow? And, who would do that without his permission? He couldn't think of one person they had in common anymore. Irritated by his growing anxiety, he told himself he didn't have to respond; he didn't owe Melissa a thing at this point. But then there was Caitlin...

#

Alex waded into a tide of people heading for the beach on her way back to the motel. Running into Cole had certainly been a nice surprise. Chance encounters with handsome strangers just might be the best perk of this gig so far, she thought. She'd have to hustle to update the blog plus get her article finished and filed on time, but she decided the morning's detour from her schedule was worth a little deadline stress. She wondered when she might have a chance to tell Aileen about Cole. Alex was still getting used to the fact that she wouldn't see her best friend all summer. They'd been sitting at neighboring desks for the past three years at the *Gazette*, but even before they worked together, they were rarely apart for more than a few weeks at a time.



They both enjoyed telling the story of how they met. Alex had waited in her dorm for a roommate who never showed up and Aileen had gone to her assigned room to find it fully occupied. The Residential Advisor never did determine what happened, but was pleased that a simple solution that didn't involve the admissions office had presented itself. Alex and Aileen had bonded almost instantly, discovering they had much more in common than their journalism majors and a love of writing. The fact that they liked the same types of music and shared their favorite band was a huge relief. Alex smiled at the memory of thinking she'd lucked out in the roommate game as she approached the motel. She had friends who weren't as fortunate; those who spent the semester wishing they'd been paired with someone—anyone—else. Sometimes fate wins. She fished the key out of her pocket and let herself into her room.

After a quick shower, Alex sat in front of her laptop, combing out her hair. She reread the opening of her article. It seemed a little flat but she wasn't sure how to remedy that. She got up and paced the tiny room, smiling when she thought about how many times she'd seen her father respond to a conundrum the same way.

“Sometimes just standing up is enough to shake the cobwebs loose,” he liked to say.

With each piece, she wanted to set the scene and put the reader into the town she was writing about. Not only what it looked like, but what it smelled like. What was the vibe? How did the locals describe it? She thought about the two women she'd interviewed and the catering company they'd started in their kitchens. Both natives of the area, they described their little coastal community as ‘not quite ready to grow up.’ And there it was, score one for Dad—again.

Sitting down, Alex quickly rewrote her intro and found a much better flow. Her looming deadline seemed less daunting now and it wasn't long before she was satisfied with the final draft. Not a bad afternoon's work. She saved a copy; on her laptop and a thumb drive, and emailed it to the editor, copying her boss.

Now that her article was filed, and she'd posted on the blog, she checked her email to find two new messages from Aileen, the second asking to let her know when she had time to talk. Alex replied saying she was ready when Aileen was and went on to tell her about Cole. Her phone rang two minutes later.

"Hey Lena."

"Hi. A pilot, huh? Alright, dish..."

Alex laughed and settled back in a chair by the window, eager to fill Aileen in on her two encounters with Cole. Thank goodness for the newspaper's unlimited talk & text plan.

"Well, like I said, I met him at the Steinbeck Center, so he gets bonus points just for that. He's tall and lanky and has a sort of relaxed air about him. He doesn't seem like someone who ever bothers to be in a hurry."

"That could be an interesting contrast to you, Miss Type A. So what does he look like?"

Alex laughed. "Very funny. He's pretty damn fine. Deep blue eyes, dark brown hair and a really nice smile."

"So he's gainfully employed, he's a reader and a looker. Sounds like a winner," Aileen said.

“Well, I’m not so sure about the gainfully employed part. He said he’s between gigs at the moment. He works with student pilots who need hours to get their certificates and flies tourists around, but doesn’t really have a steady job.”

“Really? That’s a pretty care-free lifestyle. I guess you’d have to be laid back to live like that. How old is this guy?” Aileen asked.

“I’d guess a few years older than we are. But yeah, can you imagine living like that? I’d break out in hives if I didn’t know where my next paycheck was coming from. He obviously wasn’t raised by an accountant father who preached the virtues of a steady income. Boredom be damned: stability is what we should all strive for.”

“Yeah, I was taught that one too. Well, if nothing else, you had a nice morning talking to an interesting guy. And if he’s flying around the state, who knows when you might run into him again.”

“Good point; there’s something to look forward to. What are you working on this week?”

“Nothing terribly exciting for the next few days...the standardized tests debate is ramping up again, so I get to cover both sides of that, but I’m going out to Angel Island on Friday to talk to one of the docents.”

“Excellent; that will be a nice way to start the weekend. So what’s going on with the sale? Any new rumors?” Alex asked.

“No, and it still hasn’t been formally announced, of course. I’m beginning to think they’re going to keep us in the dark until it’s a done deal.”

“That would suck, but it wouldn’t surprise me.”

“Yeah, me neither.”

“Alright, my friend, I think I’ll go find something for dinner. Hugs to Matt and the kids.”

“Talk to you later, Al.”

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