

I called Mama Karen on Wednesday of the following week, hoping that she could lift my spirits. Jasmine wasn't with me this time. I figured she had her own problems to worry about. My mom asked me how I was doing as soon as she answered, and I told her I was fine. Yet I immediately backpedaled and told her the truth.

"No, I'm *not* fine," I said. "I've been lyin' to you this whole time. Everything sucks! My parents hate each other, and now they've split up!"

"No, really?" Mama Karen gasped.

"Yeah, and they're not such wonderful parents either!" I said. "They cheated on each other!"

"Oh, no... that's terrible," she said, sounding deeply disturbed by the news. "I feel bad for you, son. I wish there was something I could do."

"What if I was to come live with you?" I asked her bluntly.

"Now you know as well as *I* do that that's impossible," she said.

"Why?" I asked. "I already know where you're at. You live in San Francisco."

She hesitated then said, "It's San Romero, actually... just south of San Francisco."

"Oh, good to know," I muttered.

"We have to be realistic, Daniel," she said. "There's no way you can come live with me. You're underage and you belong to your parents. I'm sorry for what you're going through, I really am. But things will get better, I promise." After a pause, she asked, "Are with your mom or your dad?"

"Mom," I replied.

"Well then, you need to stay there and help her get through this," she said. "I'm sure she's very fragile right now, and she needs you more than ever—"

"No, she doesn't," I said with a chuckle. "She's never even home. It's like I don't have parents anymore." Then I pleaded, "Please, let me come stay with you. We belong together; we're the same, you and me—"

"Stop it, Daniel!" she snapped. "You're talkin' nonsense! I mean, how would you even get here?"

"I'll ride my bike there if I have to—"

"More nonsense," she said. "Your parents love you very much. They'd be heartbroken if you were to suddenly disappear, and they'd *never* stop looking for you."

"Ha! Wanna bet?" I scoffed. "They don't give two shits about me *or* my brother and sister. They only care about themselves."

"You're so wrong," she said, which made me want to run away just to prove to her that I wasn't.

But she had no desire to see me, apparently. It made me wonder if she was really enjoying our conversations or just pretending.

"Did you ever love me?" I asked her curiously.

"I love you more than anything in this world," she replied, sounding offended.

"Then why did you give me up?"

She sighed heavily and said, "I was hoping you would never ask." Then she informed me that she used to be heroin addict and was in really bad shape when she had me.

"So, I was a mistake?" I asked a bit hesitantly.

"You certainly weren't planned," she said. "But giving birth to you was one of the happiest days of my life. I just

wish I hadn't been a junkie. *That* was the mistake. I would've been the worst mom on the planet."

"But you're not that person anymore," I argued. "You can have a do-over... we both can."

"No, Daniel, there's no do-overs; there's no going back," she said.

"Bull!" I exclaimed. "People are starting over all the time! My parents are doing it; now it's my turn! I want to start over with you!"

"It's never gonna happen... so please, just let it go," she said, sounding deeply frustrated. Then she muttered, "I never should've agreed to this."

"Agreed to what?" I asked.

"This!" she exclaimed. "We shouldn't even be talking to each other. It isn't right—"

"No, it was meant to be!" I exclaimed. "Fate brought us back together!"

"Goodbye, Daniel," she said. "Please don't call me again."

She quickly hung up the phone, leaving me in utter despair as I stood there listening to an empty dial tone. It felt as though my lifeline had been severed. *Way to go, asshole!* I

thought. *You scared her off for good this time! You couldn't be happy just talking to her on the phone occasionally, could you? You had to shoot for the moon!*

Though her rejection wounded me deeply, my resolve was stronger than ever. If she refused to speak to me over the phone, then I'd have no choice but to head to California and see her in person. I wasn't about to let her shut me out of her life now that we'd found each other. We were meant to be together, and she knew it. She was just afraid to admit it. I met up with my friends in the cafeteria to tell them my plan, putting on a brave face as I sat down next to Jasmine.

"Well, my mom finally told me where she lives," I said.
"San Romero, California."

"Okay, but did she give you her address?" Javier asked.

"No," I said with a sigh.

"What does he need her address for?" Carl snapped at Javier. "It's not like he's gonna go see her."

"That's exactly what I'm gonna do," I declared, and they all looked at me dumbfoundedly. "I won't need an address either. I'll just take a bus to San Romero and call her when I get there, have her come pick me up."

"Do you trust her that much?" Jasmine asked with a worried expression. "What if she says no and leaves you stranded out in the middle of nowhere?"

"She won't," I replied, beaming with confidence. "She loves me. I'm her son."

Appearing unconvinced and still full of worry, she said, "I'm going with you."

"No way!" I exclaimed, briskly shaking my head. There was no reason for her to put *her* life in jeopardy.

"Forget it; I'm going," she said resolutely. "You think I'm gonna let you leave without me? There's nothing left for me here. My parents are falling apart; Chelsea's heading off to college... You're all I've got." We intuitively grabbed each other's hand. "We stick together," she said, and I nodded yieldingly.

"So now you're both leavin' us?" Sun-Hi said, looking glum. "How sad."

"Yeah," Javier concurred. "It won't be the same without you guys."

"Don't worry, they'll come back," Sarah said. "Won't you?"

Jasmine and I looked at her cluelessly.

"I wouldn't," Carl advised us, seeming downright bitter over our decision. "If I had the balls to run away, you cats would never see me again. I'd be long gone from this shithole." He immediately stood up and grabbed his tray. "Forget about us losers," he added before storming off. "Just go... and don't look back."

I'm sure the others felt the same sense of betrayal, even though they were gracious enough to remain seated. We were abandoning them and the thing we helped create—a vibrant gang of misfits. But that adventure had run its course, and a new one was about to begin for Jasmine and me. It was time to take our friendship to the next level as runaway kids. We quickly came up with a plan and began carrying it out the following day—as soon as we got home.