

BETH MILLER

# A Whole New Playlist Sample

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# Chapter 1

The '68 Camaro hugged the road as Macy maneuvered effortlessly around the other cars. She watched the speedometer creep steadily toward a hundred, the rumble of the V-8 engine sinking into her bones. She knew her friends would laugh at her for wanting to drive a car twice as old as she was, but with adrenaline pumping through her veins and all the power of a big-block Chevy at her fingertips, what other people thought didn't matter.

Wylie gave her total freedom to photograph his cars anywhere, but in the middle of winter her options were limited. The areas closest to the dealership were covered in new-fallen snow and, without a cloud in the sky, it would be nearly impossible to balance the intense brightness of sun on snow with the glossy black of the car.

She'd opted to head north of Hartford, to the old tobacco barns that lined both sides of the highway. They'd create plenty of shade and their weathered red paint, rough and peeling, would contrast the smooth lines of the car perfectly.

Anticipation mingled with the adrenaline; she couldn't decide if she was more excited about driving the car or photographing it.

The road straightened in front of her. She glanced to the passenger's seat and tapped the play button on her phone. Drums, then guitars, filled the air as Steppenwolf began singing about being born to be wild.

The sound wasn't as full as she'd get if she could stream through a

sound system, but the car's previous owner had kept everything original and in 1968 that meant the vehicle had come equipped with an 8-track player. *I could probably get Steppenwolf on 8-track, on eBay.*

She didn't mind listening through her phone, though. Most of the time she had no choice. The bulk of Wylie's inventory were big classics; if they had radios at all they were only AM. Plus, streaming music meant she could design a playlist for every era, every car she photographed.

"Born To Be Wild" ended and "Magic Carpet Ride" began. Macy settled into driving. *I could buy this car. Then I could drive it every day.* She caressed the steering wheel. *That'd be amazing.* She brushed that idea aside; she thought that about at least half the cars she photographed. It was a ridiculous notion anyway. At 23 years old, still living at home and only working freelance, she wasn't in the position to buy any car. *Someday, though.*

She crested a hill, saw a sedan at the bottom veer erratically left, then right, into the snow.

*Shit! Ice!* She hit the brakes, desperate to slow down before it was too late.

The Camaro began to slide.

*Don't lock the brakes! Left— no right! Stop stop please stop.* She downshifted, pumped the brakes. *Shit shit please don't—*

The squeal of metal on metal drowned out everything else.

She sat, gripping the steering wheel, her feet jammed on the brake and the clutch, even after the car had stopped. Blood pounded in her ears. Her whole body shook.

*You're okay. Breathe. Just breathe.*

The frantic pace of her heart began to slow as she acknowledged that she was unhurt. She forced her fingers to uncurl from the steering wheel and opened the door. Ignoring the snow that filled her shoes, she made her way to the front of the car. A new wave of panic welled in her chest.

## CHAPTER 1

She'd gone off the shoulder and through the snow before sliding, the side of the car against the guardrail, for a good twenty feet. The front bumper was hanging, the headlight dangling from its socket, and the whole passenger side of the beautiful classic Camaro, a car that didn't belong to her, was wrecked.

She might have been better off dead.

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Work was never steady for Macy, but this was the third week in a row she hadn't had a single job and she was really starting to worry. Wylie had been her only regular client. She'd destroyed the trust he'd had in her and any chance of working for him again. And since all her other clients had been his friends, wrecking the Camaro had wrecked those jobs, too.

She replayed the accident over and over in her mind, as she had since it had happened. It had been so stupid to drive like that in a car that didn't belong to her. *Dad always says you drive too fast.*

She flopped to her back and stared at the Imagine Dragons poster she'd hung on the ceiling when she'd still been in high school. She and Logan had seen them in Boston, back when they'd still spent every day together. Before he'd met Jennifer, who didn't want her boyfriend hanging out with another woman. It didn't matter that they'd been friends for their entire lives. According to Logan, Jennifer felt threatened by Macy and therefore they were only allowed to hang out in a group. *Ridiculous. He's never been interested—*

The knock on her door broke into her thoughts. Wishing for about the millionth time that she didn't still live at home, she called, "Come in."

Her mom poked her head around the door. "I'm going shopping. Dad needs a tie to match the shirt Grandma just bought him, and I'm going

to look at shoes. Why don't you come with me? We'll have lunch at Panera."

Not bothering to sit up, she said, "I hate shopping."

"They're having a sale at JCPenney's. I thought we could see about buying you some new outfits."

Even if she'd wanted to go someplace, shopping with her mother was not the slightest bit appealing. "I've got too many clothes already." She pointed to the piles of concert t-shirts stacked on top of the dresser because they wouldn't fit in the drawers.

"I was thinking of something... nicer. Slacks, a blouse or two, maybe even a dress."

Appalled at the idea, she said, "A dress?"

Her mom came all the way in and sat on the edge of the bed. "Aunt Holly was just telling me they're looking for an office assistant where she works. It's not glamorous, but it's full time."

*What the hell?* "I'm a photographer."

"I know that. And Aunt Holly knows that. But it's been a while since you worked, and we thought this could be something to do. While you wait for your next job."

Disbelievingly, she asked, "You want me to get an *office job*? With Aunt Holly?"

"It's a great opportunity. You'll have benefits, holidays off, and there's room for advancement. You've already got a semester of QuickBooks, if you went back to community college and finished—"

"I sucked at that. I suck at everything except photographing cars, remember?"

Gently, her mom said, "It just might be time to try something...else."

"Mom, sitting at a desk all day? Doing paperwork?"

"It's not as bad as you think." She added, "Emma loves it."

Macy snorted at the mention of her best friend. "Yeah. Because where she works there's a bunch of women who spend all day gossiping and

avoiding doing any actual work. I'm not into that. At all."

"Maybe not, but you need a job. You've got school loans and your cell phone, and with a totaled car on your record your insurance premiums are going to go up."

"I've got it under control."

She raised her eyebrows. "So you've got jobs lined up?"

Not willing to admit she didn't, Macy stayed silent.

"I'll tell Aunt Holly you'll send her your resume."

As soon as she was alone again, Macy rolled over and hugged her pillow. She didn't want to do something else. Especially not something her mother wanted her to do. That's how she'd ended up taking that semester of QuickBooks in the first place, which she'd hated. And why she'd tried going to school for nursing. And a million other things her mother had "suggested" that hadn't worked out.

Photography was the one thing she'd chosen for herself, and she'd had to go through her father because her mother had insisted it was a waste of time. When Macy had asked, she'd laughed it off, *'How are you going to make a living at that?'*

Maybe she wasn't raking in millions, but she'd been working really hard, building a reputation and a client base. *Until you wrecked it.*

An overwhelming feeling of helplessness welled in her chest. She knew her mother was right. This was her fault. She didn't deserve to get to do what she wanted.

But it was the only thing she wanted. And she wasn't about to give up something she loved because she'd made a stupid mistake.

She'd just have to change her focus. Maybe contact Ford. They had car photographers, probably on staff. Although that might not be the best fit. Once she'd proven herself, Wylie had let her shoot cars any way she wanted. She doubted Ford would give her that kind of freedom.

She could offer "car sittings," like family portrait sittings except she'd photograph people's cars. Even as she thought it, she knew that was

ridiculous.

There were tons of other uses for car pictures besides dealer advertising. Calendars, postcards, mouse pads. She could do a whole line of car-themed products and sell them online. Maybe on Etsy? Or she could—

The phone rang, interrupting her musing. It was an out of state number, most likely “Rachel, from Card Services.” Robo-call or not, she answered, “Macy LaPorte.”

A man’s voice, deep and smooth, said, “Hi, Macy. My name is Gage Dawson. I hear you photograph cars.”

“I do.”

“Great. If you’ve got time I’d like to sit down and see if we can help each other out.”

Hope mingled with nerves. She went to her desk and moved random papers around, trying to make it sound like she was really busy. “I’d love to. I’ve got an opening,” she fluttered the papers once more, “Thursday at eleven.”

He cleared his throat. “I’m on a bit of a tight schedule. Is there any way I can swing by today?”

Sweat broke out on her back. *Stay calm. And don’t sound desperate!* “Um, I think I can re-arrange my schedule. I work strictly on location, though, so either I can come to you or I can meet you somewhere.” No matter how badly she wanted this, there was no way in hell she was going to meet someone at her mom’s kitchen table.

“How’s noon? You pick the place.”

She glanced at the Hello Kitty clock her oldest brother had given her for her eighth birthday. *It’s ten-thirty. Crap, that’s soon. I can make it, if I hustle.* “Where are you coming from?”

“Branford.”

Her mind raced. *Branford, okay, so not out of state. Maybe an old cell number. Irrelevant. What’s between here and... New Haven.* “There’s a



coffee shop, Book Traders?” She gave him the location and told him to look for someone with long, curly blonde hair, knowing that was the first thing people noticed about her.

As soon as she hung up, she texted her mom to let her know she was going out. She kept it purposely vague in case this turned out to be nothing. *Last thing I need is Mom reminding me that I don’t have a real job.*

She began putting things together for an interview; her laptop, price lists and contracts, trade magazines and catalogs that her images were in, copyright information, a list of referrals. *Maybe not the referrals.* Gage Dawson hadn’t told her where he’d gotten her name, or what kind of cars he had. If he was a hot-rodder or raced street cars there was a chance he wouldn’t know Wylie, or any of his friends. *Branford, though. There’s car guys there. Guys I’ve worked for.*

She pushed a pile of clothes off her desk chair, ignoring that they landed on the floor, and sat. “Yeah, okay. So maybe he knows about the Camaro. But he still called. So even if he does know, it doesn’t matter to him. And,” she put the list aside, “if he already knows, then he probably knows the people on my referral list.”

With her bag set and time slipping away, she pulled on black dress pants and the blue button-down shirt her mom had bought her specifically for interviews because it matched her eyes perfectly. The outfit didn’t suit her, but her mother had insisted that it was vital she presented a professional appearance when she met with prospective clients. Macy didn’t think the guys she worked for cared what she wore, or that her eyes and shirt were both blue, but she’d booked every car job she’d interviewed for, so she figured it couldn’t hurt to wear the outfit. At least for the initial interview. When she was shooting she wore jeans and t-shirts; photographing cars was a dirty job.

She paused to collect herself. She’d never liked interviews. And there was a lot riding on this one.

As soon as she was dressed and calm, she climbed into the driver's seat of her mom's old minivan. Her parents kept the van for her, and she appreciated that she could take it any time she needed to, but she still hated driving it. *No matter how loud you crank the music, it's still a minivan.*

Someday she'd choose her own car. One that suited her. There were so many she loved. Classic Mustangs, the new Challengers, Jeep Wranglers, vintage Firebirds with the decal on the hood. She checked out cars on the highway, sometimes wrinkling her nose, sometimes nodding appreciatively.

There was always a ton of traffic in New Haven and she almost missed her exit because she couldn't get over to the right lane. She finally cut off some guy in a blue BMW, ignoring the blast of his horn. Driving wasn't any better off the highway. Between city busses, college students crossing the street, and a zillion people trying to get where they were going, she started to wish she'd chosen a different meeting place.

The calm that she'd worked so hard for evaporated as she hunted for a parking space. She couldn't be late; she had enough stacked against her already. It took twenty minutes of driving back and forth on side streets to finally find an open spot, two full blocks from where she needed to go. She slung her bag and purse over her shoulder and tried to think through her sales pitch as she hurried down the sidewalk, head bent against the frigid air.

Outside the coffee shop, she pulled herself up straight, pushed her shoulders back, and reminded herself that she was a damn good car photographer. Stepping inside, she glanced around, not sure who she was looking for. The guy behind the counter looked up and smiled in welcome; she knew that wasn't Gage Dawson. She moved into the room off to the right, ignoring the book lined walls as she scanned the studious-looking people typing on laptops or talking quietly to each other. The guy at the table right inside the door stood and asked,

“Macy?”

He was probably little older than she was, maybe late twenties, and had the look of a car salesman. It was more than the slicked back hair and red power tie. It was the confident attitude she could feel from across the table. Smiling nervously, she held out her hand. “You must be Gage.”

He shook firmly, his hand soft and warm against her still cold fingers. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.” He gestured for her to sit and asked, “Can I get you something? A cup of coffee or something to eat?”

“A coffee would be great.”

“Be right back.”

While he went to get her drink, she settled into a chair. She’d taken sales classes in photography school and knew his welcoming smile was supposed to put her at ease, as much as his blue shirt was supposed to make her trust him.

Once he was back with her drink, she let him start. “Macy, I’m glad you could fit me into your schedule.” When she didn’t say anything, he continued, “You come very highly recommended.”

It was amazing how fast her hands went from freezing cold to clammy. “You’ve seen my work?”

“You did those pictures of the ’38 Packard 12 in last month’s *Old Car Spotlight*, right?”

“I did.” She relaxed a little. That was Wylie’s car, but he always gave her photo credit and lots of people read that magazine.

“I thought you did an excellent job. It can be tough to photograph a barn fresh car. I appreciate that you didn’t gloss over the effects sitting in storage for forty years had.”

“My clients are trying to sell their cars. My job is to provide an accurate representation of the vehicle. So, if a car needs new upholstery, or there’s rot or whatever, I’m going to show it.” She shrugged. “I’d hate for a buyer to come back and say the dealership misrepresented a car

based on my pictures.”

He pointed at her. “That is exactly what I need.”

He gave her what she thought of as a ‘trust me’ smile, which only served to put her more on edge. She smiled back, although she didn’t feel at all like smiling. All she really wanted was for Gage to cut to the chase and tell her what he needed. “Gage, why don’t you tell me about your cars.”

He smiled a little before he began. “My dad owns an auction house, and four times a year he holds an auction for classic and special interest cars. We post pictures to our website and print a catalog for all registered bidders. For the most part we have the owners submit pictures, which means we never know what we’re going to get. A snapshot taken in front of a garage, a picture of the car from twenty years ago.” He shook his head slightly. “Something that doesn’t look remotely like the car they deliver.”

She nodded. “And you’re on the hook for that.”

“We are. And it’s not just owners who do it. We’ve had professional photographers retouch pictures, or fail to show a major issue. At Dawson’s Auctions, we pride ourselves on presenting the cars we sell exactly as they are.” He kept his gaze locked on her. “Macy, I like what I’ve seen of your work. The creativity, the eye for detail, and the honesty in representation.”

Her heart beat harder. There were auction houses where they had staff photographers, people who made sure every car in their catalog looked amazing. If this was something like that, it was literally her dream job.

He continued, “I understand that you have a very casual arrangement with the dealers around here. What I’m looking for is a more formal arrangement. Someone willing to work exclusively for Dawson’s Auctions. I’d want you full time, to shoot whatever comes in.”

*Full time! Holy shit!* Claspings her hands tightly in her lap and working

to keep her voice steady, she said, “Just to clarify, I’ve got a number of regular clients. You’re saying I wouldn’t be able to work with them if I accept your offer?”

He folded his hands on the table. “Even if continuing to work with your previous clients was an option, you’d have to refer them to someone else. Dawson’s Auctions is located in Arizona.”

*Arizona? Shit!* Heat rose to her face and she desperately wanted to break eye contact. *You can’t look away.*

“And, just to clarify, you won’t be driving any of the cars.”

The heat in her face drained, replaced by cold. *He knows I have no other options.* Gage waited; his icy blue eyes locked on hers. She swallowed, “Can I think about it?”

“I can give you until Monday morning.”

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Macy stood at a table by the dance floor, trying to shout over the thumping of house music. She wasn’t into clubbing at all, but it was the only thing Emma ever wanted to do. “I don’t know. I mean, Arizona?”

Emma tipped her drink in Macy’s general direction. “Why don’t you take that job with your aunt?”

“Because it’s not photography.”

“Who cares? It’s a job.” Emma grinned. “And maybe there’s a cute mail room guy or something.”

It annoyed Macy that Emma wasn’t taking this seriously. “Mail room guy?”

“Would you rather get with one of the accountants?” Emma snickered, “Maybe he can check your balance?”

Logan leaned over, sloshing his drink in the process. “Mace, babe, you don’t gotta take that from her.”

She hated when Logan called her ‘babe’. She turned away, watched

people on the dance floor. Behind her, Emma and Logan started going through a list of Macy's old boyfriends and how she'd met them. *What the fuck? Why do they even care?*

"Hey, there!" Emma grabbed the arm of a guy she apparently knew as he walked past.

"Hey." He smiled, obviously happy to see Emma. "I was on my way to get a drink. You wanna come?"

"Sure." Emma let him lead her towards the bar.

Logan picked up Emma's nearly untouched beer. "Think she'll mind?" He didn't wait for an answer before he drank.

Macy half-listened as he talked about some party he'd gone to with his girlfriend, his words becoming less clear as the night went on. *I should've expected this.* Since Emma's last relationship had ended she was totally desperate to find the next one. And Logan... things just weren't the way they used to be.

The worst part was that Macy had, as usual, ended up as the designated driver so she got to deal with all of this stone cold sober.

After a while Macy texted Emma, asking where she was. When she didn't answer, Macy called.

Emma answered, yelling into her phone. "Hey, Macy!"

"Where are you?"

"Down the street."

"What the hell, Emma!"

Laughing, she said, "Don't wait for me. I'll call you tomorrow."

Macy snapped back, "Whatever." She hung up and shoved her phone back in her purse. "Logan, let's go."

He protested when she grabbed his arm and began pulling him through the crowd. She didn't care. All she wanted was to go home.

In the car, he talked incessantly. She tried her best to ignore him, but when he started talking about when they'd been kids she couldn't take it anymore. "Logan, I don't give a shit if my hair was pink when we were

fourteen. It was a goddamn phase.”

“It was cute.” Drunkenly, he added, “You’re cute. ‘Specially your freckles.” He reached for her, as if to run his fingers over her freckled skin.

There had been a time she’d have given just about anything to have him touch her. Now, she pushed him away.

“Hey, remember how we used to sneak out? Go to the graveyard in the middle of the night.”

“Yeah. I do.” *Don’t encourage him. Maybe he’ll just stop talking.*

“All of us from the neighborhood. Me ’n you, ’n that chick I was with and that dude, what was his name? You and him had a thing.”

“Stop.”

“Come on, you remember.”

“Just stop.” It didn’t matter if she did remember. She did not want to talk about this.

“Man, those were— Ryan. That dude was Ryan.” He laughed, “Come on, right? He was the guy—”

“Logan, you can either shut up or you can walk home from here.”

His head lolled against the seat. “You wouldn’t do that.”

“Wanna try me?”

“You loooove me. You’d never leave me like that.” Leaning towards her again, he added, “You,” he pointed at her, “will never leave again.”

Not wanting to be reminded of any more of her mistakes, she turned the radio on. Some woman, probably Taylor Swift although Macy wasn’t sure, was singing about how shitty some guy was to her. *Practically my theme song.*

“How can you listen to this shit?”

“Emma left it on.” Macy had given up on trying to assert her musical tastes years ago.

Logan reached forward to change the station. The heartsick woman’s voice was replaced by Twenty-One Pilots’ instantly recognizable blend

of rock, rap and anything else that caught their fancy. It wasn't what Macy'd have picked in her current mood, but at least it was something she liked.

Logan tried to sing, making up the words he couldn't remember and laughing hysterically at himself. Macy didn't find it funny at all and she wished she hadn't turned the radio on. *This is you, Macy, all day long. Always doing shit you wish you hadn't.*

It was a relief when she finally pulled into Logan's driveway. He sat in the car until she opened his door. She pulled him up and half dragged him into his apartment. Once she'd gotten him to his bed, she yanked his shoes off and left him lying on top of the covers.

As she turned away, he slurred, "Stay with me."

She hated that she hesitated, hated even more that she turned back. If he hadn't started talking about all that shit from when they were kids she probably wouldn't have. Tears welled in her eyes. "You don't want that."

"Yeah, I do."

For a moment he seemed completely sober. She knew better. "Logan, I have to leave before Jennifer gets home. We both know she won't appreciate me being here." Quietly, she added, "Besides, when you wake up you're going to wish you'd never said that."

"How'd'ya know?" He squinted at her blearily, unable to hold focus for that long.

"Because I do. And if you weren't drunk you'd know, too." She watched as he leaned over the side of the bed and puked into the trash can. When he was done and she was sure he was okay, she whispered, "Bye, Logan."

*You don't need this shit. None of it.* As she closed the door, she knew it was the last time she'd walk out of his apartment. First thing in the morning she was going to call Gage Dawson.



## Chapter 2

Of all the possible places to be, his father's office was not the one Talan would have chosen. Ideally, he'd be home working on the song that had been circling in his brain for days. Or at a bar, drinking a beer and checking out the next up and coming band. But at this point he'd take his own office, where he could sit in peace and listen to music while he worked on the pile of papers that had accumulated seemingly of their own accord on his desk.

Instead, he sat swiveling back and forth in one of the black leather chairs normally reserved for the big-wigs his father dealt with himself, idly staring at framed posters of million-dollar cars adorning the otherwise boring white walls.

His brother, Gage, was going on and on about contracts, reserves, commission; things that were irrelevant to what Talan did at Dawson's Auctions. He researched the history and validated the specifics of every car that came through the classics division, regardless of what kind of deals Gage made.

His father began asking a series of questions. Talan tuned him out and instead listened to the music in his head. He'd been hearing the same riff for days, had actually worked out the lead guitar already. The problem was, in his head he heard something he didn't personally own. "Piano."

"What?"

The sound of his father's voice pulled him out of this thoughts. Trying to pretend he'd been paying attention, he said, "Piano black."

Glaring, Nate leaned forward. "The car is maroon." His sharp blue eyes narrowed. "And there is no such thing as piano black."

Leaning casually on the arm of his chair, Talan said, "There should be."

"If you're not going to take this seriously then get out."

He sat up quickly. "Yeah?"

"No. Sit your ass in that chair and listen. How the hell else are you going to know what's going on?" Nate turned his fierce gaze back to Gage. "The paperwork was completed this morning. The car will be here by the end of next week."

Gage nodded. "Excellent."

"When is that photographer starting?"

"Monday."

Running a hand over his military-cut grey hair, Nate said, "You better know what you're doing."

Gage assured him, "It's under control."

The conversation moved on to the estate of a car collector who had died recently, a line of discussion Talan didn't care to follow. He'd worry about the cars if they handled the deal.

After what felt like hours, their father dismissed them. Outside his office, Gage grabbed Talan's arm. "What is your problem?"

Yanking his arm away from his brother's grip, he kept his tone cool. "I have a ton of shit to do and these meetings are a waste of my time."

"This is your company as much as it is mine."

"Not by my choice."

Staring intently into his face, his blue eyes an exact match to their father's, Gage said, "You agreed to this."

"I agreed to help you not go to jail for fraud. Not work for Dad for the rest of my life."

“Because you’ve got something more pressing to do?”

Not into arguing the point, Talan didn’t say anything.

“Come on, Talan. Playing dive bars wasn’t exactly a solid career path.”

The dig hurt. He considered firing back, reminding Gage that *he* was only there because he’d screwed up *his* life so badly he didn’t have any other options. Instead, he said, “I don’t play bars at all anymore, remember? Because you need me here.” He turned and headed down the hall, leaving Gage staring after him.

He wasn’t even five steps away before the guilt set in. Gage had gotten his now ex-girlfriend pregnant, flunked out of college, and with no other options had begged his father to hire him. But he’d also worked hard to rebuild his life and to be there for his daughter, and Talan respected that.

He also respected what Gage had accomplished at Dawson’s. Since their father had shifted his focus to dealer auctions, he’d let the classics division slide. Gage had come in and revived it.

Except that had almost cost Gage, and their father, everything. Talan couldn’t forget the fear that had radiated from his brother the day he’d come to beg Talan to work for him. *Travis is in jail, for falsifying paperwork. Half my fucking inventory came from him. I gotta figure out if we sold cars with faked titles, and I have no idea how.* Talan had spent his first months at Dawson’s researching retroactively.

He knew, no matter how badly he wanted to, he wouldn’t leave Dawson’s unless there was someone he could trust to take his place. Someone who understood that, although selling cars was vital to Dawson’s success, making sales based on lies could land them in jail. And regardless of how he felt about his family, he didn’t want them in that kind of trouble.

As he stepped into his assistant’s office, he briefly considered if Keira could replace him. It was a fleeting thought. Keira was great at completing the exact tasks he gave her, but she wasn’t motivated to

do the kind of in-depth searching he did. *Not unless what she's searching for is a deal on shoes.*

She smiled her too-polished smile as she greeted him. "Hi, Talan. How'd your meeting go?"

"Fine." He tried getting past her desk without saying more. Talking to Keira was always risky. He'd learned the hard way that she could take the simplest comment and turn it into gossip, which would land him in his father's office, which was something he avoided as much as possible.

"Fred called back about that Cadillac that supposedly that actress took to the Academy Awards. I didn't want to bother you so I took the information down and put it on your desk. He said if you need anything else to call him back. And that book I ordered for you from eBay came in. It's on your desk, too."

"Thanks." He walked the rest of the way to his office. Finally alone, he dropped into his chair, pulled the elastic out of his hair and shook his head. He hated that his father forced him to wear his hair in a ponytail at work. His hair wasn't even that long, and the rule was just stupid.

He picked up the note Keira had left him, read the message from Fred. *Has seen a pic of actress Dorothy Fulton in a 1953 Eldo, can't verify beyond that.*

If Dorothy Fulton had been driven to the 1953 Academy Awards in this Cadillac Eldorado, it would increase the value of the car. If the story told by the current owner of the Eldo was false, and they included it in the ad, the buyer could sue them for misrepresenting the vehicle. If he was going to include that piece of trivia, he'd have to do better than that Fred had seen a picture.

There were other people he could call. Car aficionados he'd met over a lifetime of being dragged with his father to car shows and meetings with both buyers and sellers. People like Fred, who housed massive stores of car history in their brains. That's how his father had pieced together histories of the cars he'd sold.

## CHAPTER 2

Now, though, the stories from the old-timers needed to be backed up by proof. No matter how many people “said” they’d seen that photo, or that they “knew” what had gone down, if Dawson’s was going to include the story in the ad for the car Talan needed to find the photo himself. Then he’d need to prove the car in the image was the same car currently sitting on Dawson’s lot.

He turned to his computer and began searching.

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Talan definitely felt like he deserved a night out, far away from cars and paperwork and anything having to do with Dawson’s Auctions. He paid the cover charge at the door of Foundry 41 and stepped into the old brick building. He never minded paying to get into a bar. He knew the money went to the band and they deserved to be paid for what they did. He hadn’t appreciated his brother reminding him, but Gage had had a point. Very few musicians actually made a living playing music.

The sheer number of people milling around the open area in front of the stage confirmed that the band playing that night, Shuffle, already had a very strong following. That was a good sign.

He made his way to the bar, got himself a beer, and found an empty table at the edge of the room. He sat in the shadows and watched the band tuning. They bantered back and forth, the kind of easy camaraderie that came from working together for countless hours.

He’d had that once.

Gage’s words resurfaced; *playing dive bars wasn’t exactly a solid career path*. Talan hadn’t been playing dive bars when Gage had appeared at his door, begging for help. He hadn’t been playing anywhere, because his life had just turned to shit and he hadn’t even begun to pick up the pieces. *If Gage hadn’t shown up on that exact freaking day, there’s no way I’d have said yes.*

That wasn't true, though. Gage was his brother, and Talan would have done what he could to help him no matter what. The only difference was, if he'd had something to go back to, he wouldn't have stayed at Dawson's this long.

Lately, he'd been thinking it'd been long enough.

The seemingly random sounds from the stage coalesced into an actual song. The chatter from the audience morphed into cheers. Rock and roll, leaning towards bluegrass, filled the room. Talan pushed aside all thoughts of Gage and what could have been and let the music carry him away.

During the set break he checked out the band's merch table. He picked out a t-shirt and bought their CD. *Another thirty bucks in the band's pocket.*

Back in his spot he nursed his beer and looked over the flier that had been tucked inside the CD case, listing upcoming shows. None of the venues were local, but he was happy to see Shuffle would be playing the Sounds In The Sand Festival he was planning to go to that summer.

"Holy fuck. Talan Dawson."

He looked up, to a guy he didn't recognize.

"James. James Camp?" When he didn't get a response he added, "From high school?" The guy grinned. "You don't remember me."

"Sorry, no."

"Not surprising. We didn't travel in the same circles. I was friends with Gage."

A very vague memory surfaced of a face in the crowd that had always surrounded his older brother. "Hey, James. It's been... a while."

"How is Gage? I haven't seen him since graduation."

"He's fine."

Giving Talan a curious look, he said, "I'm surprised to see you here. I thought your tastes were more... metal."

He smiled a little. If the last time James had seen him was when they'd

been in high school, he'd remember a very different Talan. "Not so much these days."

"Ya know," he paused, glanced up to the stage. "I was just telling Roland about you this afternoon. Being back in Arizona, you were the first person who popped into my head." James gave him a look, the kind of look Gage got when he was working out a deal with a client. "You still play piano?"

"No." He shook his head. "Not for a long time."

"Any interest in going back?"

"No."

"Too bad." James indicated the stage. "Roland, the front man, is working on some new material." He smiled apologetically. "It doesn't matter, since you don't play anymore." Holding out his hand, he said, "It was good to see you."

Talan took the offered hand. "Yeah. You too."

"Tell Gage I said hello." James started to walk away, then turned back. "I've always wondered. Why'd you leave?"

"Sorry?"

"Cyanide Suicide."

"How'd you—" He stopped dead. His old band was not something he talked about. Ever.

"I didn't keep in touch with Gage, but when your name started to come up I paid attention. It's too bad shit went down the way it did."

Talan had no idea what James had heard, but it was obviously inaccurate. He hadn't "left" Cyanide Suicide. He'd been left *by* them. Just days before signing a recording contract.

James held out a business card. "If you change your mind about going back to piano."

Talan took the card and watched as James maneuvered through the crowd, greeting people here and there as he went, until he was out of sight.

The card was nice. Thick card stock in matte black, with 'James Camp, Talent Manager' in crisp white type. He stared at it for long moments before he stuck it in his pocket. He had no desire to go back to piano, or to join another band, but it didn't hurt to keep the card.



## Chapter 3

Absently pushing his hair behind his ears, Talan scanned the information on his screen. He mumbled, “Come on. Where are you?” He retyped his search criteria and clicked a different website. The one single piece of information that held the entire story of the car together seemed to be non-existent. It wouldn’t be the first time someone had invented a story to make a car more interesting. *Fabricated stories, fabricated cars, you straight up can’t pull that shit anymore.* There were still guys out there who tried, though.

He sang under his breath, The Lumineers playing softly enough that no one outside his office would be able to hear it.

Then, it was there, just like the owner had said. Relieved, because he never liked having to tell his dad when a story didn’t pan out, he scribbled the source on scrap paper. He shut off the music, grabbed a clipboard and headed out. He stopped at Keira’s desk on his way. “I need you to get a copy of this for me.”

Reading the note he handed her, she raised a perfectly shaped eyebrow. “You want an original copy of a car club newsletter from sixty years ago?”

“Yeah.” He left her to it and went out to the lot. Squinting against the glare of the sun, he scanned the cars out front for the Hemi ‘Cuda he was doing next.

It was parked near the road, so passers-by could admire it. A woman,

her blonde hair a mass of curls falling halfway to her waist, wearing a Weezer concert t-shirt, jeans, and purple Converse, walked slowly along the side of the car.

The way she moved, the sultry glide of her fingers down the bright red hood, had his head spinning. *Damn. And she's into Weezer.*

He asked, "Can I help you?"

The woman looked up, her startlingly blue eyes intense in contrast to the dreamy smile lingering on her lips. "Sorry, I was just admiring this car. The contrast of the matte black stripe against high gloss red, the curve down the side," her smile turned quirky, "I find it so appealing."

Thinking he found *her* so appealing, he moved closer. "This is a great car. They made just," he knew without looking but he glanced at his clipboard anyway, "two-thousand seven hundred twenty-seven of them."

"That's a damn shame."

The way she said it, he had to agree. Trying to keep her talking, he said, "This one's for sale, if you're in the market."

Her eyes found his and held them. "Maybe, someday."

He held out his hand. "Talan Dawson."

"Macy LaPorte." Taking his hand, sending a wave of heat shooting through his veins, she said, "You must be Gage's brother."

Disappointment dampened his reaction. "I am."

Gage appeared from behind him. "Macy, glad you made it. Come on in."

"Talan," Macy tipped her chin down and, looking up at him, smiled a tiny bit before following Gage to the office.

Talan watched her walk through the lot. He was about to turn back to the car when Macy paused, one hand on the door, and looked back at him. Her blue eyes caught his and his gut clenched. Then she was gone.

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The heat in Macy's face had nothing to do with the Arizona sun. She paused, her hand on the door, and looked back at the Hemi 'Cuda. It wasn't the car that caught her attention, though. It was the guy next to it. Her skin still tingling from Talan's touch, she turned away and hurried across the foyer.

Gage waited at the receptionist's desk, tapping his fingers impatiently until she caught up. "Macy, this is Celeste."

An older woman, looking very professional in slacks and a tailored shirt, her grey hair cut stylishly short, held out her hand. "It's a pleasure to finally meet you. We've heard great things."

Startled that someone besides Gage would care that she was coming, she didn't know what to say. She settled on, "Thank you."

Gage immediately set off down the hall. "I'll give you a quick tour, then we can get started."

She tried to remember the things he pointed out as they made their way through the building. Where the bathroom was, that the foyer was at the center of the building, what office belonged to whom.

It was all much more formal than what she was expecting. Gage introduced her to the people in the financing and accounting departments, where the women were dressed like they'd just stepped off the set of the talk shows her mom watched. Then there was the woman Gage identified as the research assistant, who looked Macy over so obviously, her eyes narrowed critically, it made Macy want to hide behind the door.

And there was Gage's father. Technically Nate would be her boss, which she wasn't too thrilled with. She felt like she understood Gage already, and that they wanted the same things— great pictures of beautiful cars. Nate, on the other hand, took their first meeting as an opportunity to tell her he was taking a chance hiring her. And he gave her a look that said he didn't have much confidence in his choice. Everything about Dawson's already had her feeling less than adequate

and Nate's obvious lack of confidence didn't help.

The only person who made her feel welcome was the graphics guy, Paul. When Gage introduced him, he turned in his chair and greeted her warmly. "Macy. It's a pleasure. You and I will be seeing a lot of each other."

Gage elaborated, "Paul manages our website, designs our catalogs, does basically everything Dawson's puts out for the world to see. You'll be giving the pictures to him."

She smiled weakly. She'd never worked with a 'graphics guy'. She'd always just given the files to her clients and let them do what they wanted with them.

Paul indicated her shirt. "Weezer fan, huh?"

"Yeah." She hadn't given her shirt any thought that morning, but now she desperately wished she'd chosen something different. Like her blue interview shirt, which she'd left back in Connecticut.

Gage said, "We've got paperwork to fill out, then we can get started on shooting cars."

As he led her to the other end of the building, she was acutely aware of the click of his dress shoes on the white marble floor, and of the fact that she didn't own shoes that clicked. The fear she'd tried to squash since she'd said yes to this threatened to engulf her.

*I'm so far out of my league.* The guys she'd worked for in Connecticut had sunk all their money into cars. They didn't care about fancy offices or personnel who looked like Wall Street executives. And they didn't care if their photographer wore concert t-shirts to work, as long as she took spectacular pictures.

And no one had ever given her an employee handbook, or required a W-4. The knots in her stomach tightened as she filled out forms, using her parent's address. Soon enough, though, it was official. She was a Dawson's Auction employee.

Back in the foyer, Gage asked, "Do you want to grab your camera?"

*Oh shit.* He'd expect her to have a plan, to know where to take the cars. But she'd been distracted on her way in and hadn't paid enough attention to the grounds. She said, "I'd like to see the rest of the facility first."

"Sure." He set out into the yard, leading her through row after row of cars.

Dawson's inventory included everything from rusted out barn finds that probably didn't run to near-new cars that must have been just off lease. Fords sat next to Studebakers parked next to Volkswagens. There were some of her favorites, and some she secretly despised. She paused at a Chevy Nova SuperSport, its pristine paint gleaming in the sun. "This car looks fantastic in orange."

"It's for sale, if you're looking."

It took her a second to respond. He'd said almost exactly the same thing Talan had said earlier, but it sounded so different. When Talan had said it, he'd sounded cute. Like he was fishing for something to say. When Gage said it, he sounded like he was ready to start negotiating. "As much as I'd love to, I'm not ready to start building a collection." She felt her face flush. "I don't even have a daily driver. In Connecticut I was driving my mom's old minivan, and here I just have a rental car."

"If you see something on the lot that you like, for your daily driver, let me know. I'm sure we can give you a deal."

She couldn't help smiling. He really was a salesman. "Where do you usually take pictures?"

"At the front of the lot." He pointed to the four-lane road that fronted Dawson's property.

There was no way in hell she was taking pictures there. She squinted at the strip mall across the street, thinking. "That's not going to work." She continued through the lot, looking for a background big enough to put a car in front of and plain enough not to be distracting.

Dawson's was sandwiched between a busy road and a highway; neither

made a decent background. The tan stucco on the front of the office would work in a pinch, but with giant windows breaking the continuity of the wall it wasn't great. She pointed to a line of corrugated stainless-steel Quonset huts along the far side of the property. "Are those yours?"

"They are. We hold auctions in the first one." He pointed. "The second is where we detail cars, then there's the body shop, garage, and the last one is my father's personal storage."

The fronts of the buildings all had bay doors, which she preferred to avoid. Inside might work, but she knew without having to look that neither shops or storage buildings would have room. "What's inside the auction building?"

"Come on, I'll show you."

As she stepped inside, she was reminded of an airplane hangar; a bare metal shell and concrete floor, flanked by garage doors on both ends. Except there were bleachers along one side and an auctioneer's platform in the center of the opposite wall. "Can we use this? It'd be perfect for studio set-ups." She'd been expecting to work exclusively outdoors and hadn't brought lights or backgrounds, but she could have her mom ship all her equipment.

"Besides holding auctions here, my dad uses this as a showroom. It happens to be empty today, but it isn't usually."

"Too bad." Still hoping she'd find something useful on Dawson's property, she went through the building and out the back door.

The back side of the detailing building had serious potential. Unlike the auction building, it didn't have a back door and the uninterrupted corrugated steel made a decent background. But it would only work for a certain type of car. "This is perfect for that Nova, or the Hemi 'Cuda out front. But big classics need open space. Trees, hills. Photographers call it a neutral background." She gestured to the building. "If you're going to put them in front of buildings they need to be something like Brownstones or graceful mansions. And some of the cars you've got on

the lot, like that blue pickup truck? They need a barn.”

“We don’t take cars off the property.”

Thinking about what he’d said he wanted when they’d met back in Connecticut, she said, “If I have to do pictures here you’re not going to get the kind of thing I did for Wylie. He let me take cars wherever I wanted.”

“That’s not happening.” He paced a few times, then stopped in front of her. “There’s nowhere on our property that’ll work?”

“Do you see anything that you want behind your cars? The best I could do, besides this, would be the front of the office. But there’s a commuter lot one exit away that’s perfect.”

Startled, he asked, “How do you know that?”

“That’s what you hired me for.”

He glanced around once more. “Okay. Let’s go see my dad.”

As they walked back through the lot, she asked, “So, the cars we’re doing are for the next auction?”

“They are.”

“You’ve already got them here?”

“We do.”

Curious, because that was unusual, she said, “Whenever Wylie put cars in an auction he sent them so they’d arrive the day before.”

Gage glanced at her. “Every car that comes through our classics division is verified, including physical inspections. So, we require that cars be on our property long before the auction. And because we’re responsible for representing their condition accurately, they don’t leave.”

“Huh.”

Five minutes later she sat on the black leather couch in the waiting area between Gage’s office and his father’s, flipping through an auction catalog and listening to angry voices drifting through the closed door. She couldn’t hear what they were saying, but she knew Gage was trying

to talk Nate into letting her take cars out.

It didn't seem to be going well.

Putting the catalog back on the glass coffee table, she went to the window and looked out at the front lot. Movement caught her attention as Talan made his way between cars, stopping at a Cadillac. He walked around it, made notes on his clipboard, opened the driver's door and squatted to look at the door jamb. He pushed at his hair, despite that it was held back in a short ponytail.

The memory of the heat she'd felt the moment his gaze had met hers was fresh in her mind. She'd looked up and been transfixed by eyes so dark the pupils were barely distinguishable. She'd struggled to sound normal as they talked about the Hemi 'Cuda. That had been the only reason she'd been able to speak at all; she could talk about cars in her sleep.

It hadn't been until he'd introduced himself that she'd realized Talan was Gage's brother. Although their hair was the same sun-streaked dark blonde, they looked nothing alike. With his striking blue eyes, square jaw, and perfectly styled hair, Gage looked like he belonged on the cover of a magazine. Talan's face was thinner, the bridge of his nose slightly flattened as if it had been broken. She could picture him in jeans and a t-shirt, a beer in his hand, kicking back—

*Stop! You're being stupid.* It was too easy to spin an entire scenario in her mind without ever knowing a single thing about a guy.

"Macy?"

She jumped at the sound of Gage's voice from behind her. "Yes?"

"Let's go." As he led her to their first car, he said, "My dad is going to allow us to take cars as far as the commuter lot, under the condition that I drive."

She'd have preferred to drive herself, but she'd take what she could get.



## CHAPTER 3

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The Packard sat at the edge of the commuter lot, sunlight glinting off chrome, the tan paint in harmony with the reds and oranges of a desert background marred only by tumbleweeds and cacti. Macy would have loved to play music, to get in the mood, but she didn't feel comfortable with Gage right there. She contented herself with walking slowly around the car, getting to know it as best as she could.

The square corners of the roof and hood gave it a boxy look, despite the curve of the fenders. The rumble seat was open, breaking the line of the trunk. She could imagine kids, a girl in an ankle length dress and a boy in freshly pressed pants, climbing in for the ride to church. They'd sit nicely, afraid that if they messed around their parents would make them walk next time. Their dad, in a tailored suit and a Fedora, would hold the passenger's side door open for his wife. She would step carefully on the running board, holding layers of petticoats as she struggled to get into the car.

Macy stood on her toes to shoot down into the rumble seat. That wasn't good enough; she stepped on the running board, then finally up onto the rear bumper. There was plenty of room in the compartment, even if the little girl's dress was as fancy as her mom's. The little boy would put his shiny black shoes on the foot rail, making sure not to get mud on his daddy's floor. The chrome bar at the bottom of the compartment was a well thought out touch, something Packard was good at.

Climbing back down, she focused on the other details, things that were just as practical but showed an attention to aesthetics that she appreciated. The radiator arched gracefully at the top, a shape repeated on the housing of the huge headlights, and again on the side mirrors. The wire wheels, Packard 8's in the center of each, gleamed.

A hand painted brown stripe began as a complex pattern of swirls

and loops on the flat front of the fenders before it flowed in a long, thin line following the curve of the wheel wells. That would have been done later, the last time the car had been restored. Pinstriping had never been a factory option.

Squatting low to focus on the front of the fender, she adjusted the camera settings to make sure the crisp focus on the swirls would quickly fade to dreamy softness around the edges of the image. Shallow depth of field was one of her favorite techniques for drawing the viewer's eye to the most important element in her images and she also used it on the door handles, the emblem on the grill, and the hood ornament.

Finished with the first side, she asked Gage, "Could you please turn the car? I need it in the same spot, turned the other direction."

"You can't just walk around to the other side?"

She already missed working for Wylie. She was used to doing what she wanted without having to explain herself to anyone. "The light's not good that way. Plus, I want the desert in the background, not the parking lot."

Once he had the car back in the same spot, facing the other way, she repeated everything she'd done the first time, then moved on to the interior. She did pictures of the wood grain dash, its golden veneer glowing in the sun. The buttery soft leather seats had been stitched with brown thread to contrast the tan upholstery and tie in the pinstriping. The interior door handles and window cranks, curved to match the exterior chrome, and the custom shift knob were all details she knew set this car apart from any other, and each detail received her attention.

When she was satisfied, they headed back to Dawson's. Gage spent the ride talking to a client on his cell. Macy was more than happy to let him talk. It gave her the freedom to watch out the window for other places to take pictures. Dawson's had so many different cars, she was going to have to find better locations than a commuter lot and the back side of a warehouse.

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The timer on Talan's screen ticked away the seconds. If he didn't commit soon the website would reset and he'd lose his order. The cursor hovered over the quantity box. *One ticket or two?*

Some of his favorite indie bands were playing the Sounds In The Sand Festival. If he chose one ticket, it meant he'd get to spend three days completely immersed in music. If he chose two, he'd potentially have someone to share it with.

Part of him didn't mind being alone. But part of him thought it'd be nice to have someone to go with. The image of that girl, the one in the Weezer shirt, flashed through his mind.

*Genius, Talan. Go invite some girl you don't even know to a concert you really want to see. Seriously, what if she's one of those people who talks over the music?*

Definitely a bad idea. Besides that she was into Weezer, he knew literally nothing else about her. *Other than she likes Hemi 'Cudas. That's reason enough not to invite her.* He knew how car people were. They talked about cars all the time. He dealt with that enough at work, he didn't want to continue at home.

Not that he could invite her anyway. He didn't have any way to contact her. *Except that's not true. Her name's Macy LaPorte.*

Not the most common name. He could potentially find her on social media. Or he could try to figure out what car she'd been there to buy and check the records.

*Does her being a client put her off limits?* There were rules at Dawson's about employee relationships, but as far as he knew there was nothing about dating a client. *What's Dad gonna do? Take back the car she bought? Fire me?*

If he'd been anyone else, that's exactly what would happen. But he was a Dawson, and he knew damn well his dad wouldn't fire him, no

matter what. Gage had slept with their previous receptionist and the only repercussions he'd suffered were a stern talking to and a warning not to do it again. And an immediate end to the relationship, since Stephanie had no interest in continuing to see Gage after she'd been fired for sleeping with him.

Since this woman wasn't risking her job, there was nothing stopping Talan from pursuing her. *Except, do you really want to?*

The seconds on the screen ticked down. Whatever had passed between him and Macy LaPorte had been a momentary blip on his radar, and not something he was actually going to follow up on. But he still liked the idea of having the option to invite someone if he decided to. He left it at two tickets and clicked the checkout button with eight seconds left.

As soon as he'd finished paying, he pulled his hair back and wrapped a hair elastic around it. He needed a cup of coffee and leaving the privacy of his office carried the risk of running into his father. He hoped that didn't happen. His dad would want an update on the cars he was supposed to be working on and he didn't have one. He'd checked out each car, gotten the information he needed— VINs, features, condition— then he'd gone back to his desk to research. But instead of cars, he'd researched concert tickets.

He stepped into Keira's office and stopped dead. Gage was leaning over the spare desk their father had stuck in the corner, looking at a laptop screen. Sitting next to Gage was Macy LaPorte.

Gage straightened and turned around. "Talan, Macy's going to use this desk for now."

Macy swiveled in the chair, her blue eyes just as striking as they'd been outside. *Not cold blue. More like they have their own light.*

Trying to hide that he was staring, he asked, "I'm going for coffee. Anyone want anything?"

Macy smiled, "Coffee would be great, thank you."

All he could think about was his ridiculous attempt to hit on her. Like she gave a shit about production numbers for Hemi 'Cudas. "How do you take it?"

"Regular."

He wasn't sure where she was from, but guessing from her accent it was New England. Remembering their annual trips to the northeast for car shows, and how frustrated his dad got when they put cream and sugar in his coffee every morning, he asked, "Do you want anything in it?"

A puzzled look crossed her face. "Cream and sugar." She swiveled back to the screen.

In the break room, he stood at the counter and stared at the coffee machine. What was Macy doing there? Definitely was not buying a car, or selling one, because those people would never have been at Talan's end of the building. But it had to be work-related. *Shoulda listened in those meetings.*

"Hi, Talan." Celeste opened the refrigerator and started rummaging around. With her head hidden by the door, she asked, "Have you met Macy?"

Hoping he could get through this conversation without Celeste realizing he was clueless, he said, "Yeah. She's using the spare desk in Keira's office."

"Glad Gage found a spot for her." She pulled her lunch from the back of the fridge and transferred it to the microwave. Once she had it heating, she leaned her back side against the counter and looked at him. "We really need a professional photographer. And from what I've heard, she's the best."

He stared at Celeste. The hot girl, the one who had him tongue-tied and thinking crazy shit, was the new photographer. He turned back to the coffee machine. *So much for taking her to Sounds In The Sand.*

"You have to push the blue button, if you want that to brew."

Embarrassed, he mumbled, “Thanks.” He knew how to work the machine, he’d just gotten caught spacing out. He pushed the button and almost instantly coffee streamed into the cup.

He added an ice cube to his cup, cream and sugar to the other, and took both back down the hall. He promised himself that, for his own sanity, he was going to give Macy her coffee and go to his office. She was hot, and he could appreciate that, without doing any more than appreciating her looks. The way he’d appreciate a woman in a movie.

He set the cup on her desk and, without speaking to her, went back to what he was supposed to be doing.

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Macy dragged the comforter off her hotel bed and dropped it on the floor, pulled back the top sheet and blanket and settled on the bed to eat the salad she’d picked up for dinner.

She’d only taken two bites of lettuce when her phone rang. “Mom” flashed across the screen. She swiped, answered, “Hi, Mom.”

“Hi, Sweetie. How was your first day?”

That was a loaded question. *Well, there’s this really cute guy named Talan who brought me coffee. And there’s his brother, Gage, who’s all business all the time. And I was supremely uncomfortable and I’m not sure this is going to work out.* “Fine.”

“Did you make any friends?”

She nearly choked on a cucumber. “Mom, it was my first day at a new job. Not kindergarten.”

“You can have friends at work.”

“I didn’t have time to make friends.”

“I’m sure you will tomorrow.”

Time wasn’t really the issue. It was that she knew she didn’t belong there. She didn’t want to get into it with her mom, to give her an opening

to mention the job with Aunt Holly again. “Maybe.”

“Did you have dinner?”

“I’m eating now.”

“What are you eating?”

“Salad. From Panera.”

Her mom grilled her about what else she’d eaten, if she’d remembered to check for bedbugs before she’d brought her luggage in, if she’d sanitized the steering wheel in the rental car. She assured her she’d taken care of everything, assured her she wasn’t going to starve by rattling off a list of the nearby restaurants, and promised she’d call as soon as she got out of work the next day.

Finally, her mom said, “Macy, if this doesn’t work out you can always take the job with Aunt Holly.”

*Ignore it.* “I’ll call you tomorrow.”

In the quiet of her hotel room, she let her mind wander. Maybe her first day hadn’t been great. But she’d gotten permission to take the cars someplace decent, even if she wasn’t allowed to drive them herself. And there was the potential of making friends. Just because the women dressed up at work didn’t necessarily mean they dressed up at home, too. Her oldest brother, Alex, didn’t. He wore a suit to work but at home he still wore jeans and t-shirts any time he could get away with it.

Plus, it’s not like work was the only place to meet people. Maybe she’d see what the local music scene was like. Smiling to herself at the idea, she searched “music venues near me” as she finished her salad.

-End of Sample-

