

HOLLYWOOD CONFESSIONS

by

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Ebook Edition

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HOLLYWOOD CONFESSIONS

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Chapter One

"Well, we are all very impressed with your *body* of work, Miss Quick."

Was he talking about my tits?

I wasn't sure, but I nodded at the man sitting across from me anyway. Balding, paunchy, nondescript gray suit. Your typical managing editor.

"Thank you, Mr. Callahan," I said, keeping my voice as even as possible, despite the anxiety that had been building throughout our interview. He and I both knew my portfolio contained a very small body of

work. So small that I almost hadn't even bothered submitting it when I'd heard the *L.A. Times* was looking to fill a desk. I'd only been a working reporter for just under a year, not long compared to most veteran newshounds. Then again, it was the *L.A. Times*. I'd have to be a moron not to at least apply for the job. And, moron was one thing I was not.

"I've shown your clippings to my colleagues, and they all agreed that your *assets* would be a wonderful addition to the paper." He glanced down at my chest.

Yeah, he was totally talking about my tits.

I shifted in my seat, adjusting my neckline. I knew I should have gone for a higher-cut blouse, but this one matched the pink pinstripes in my skirt so perfectly.

"Wonderful," I said, giving him a big offer-me-a-salary smile.

"After consulting with my assistant editor, we've decided we'd like to offer you a freelance opportunity here at the *L.A. Times*."

"Really?" I did a mental fist pump, and even though I was trying my best to play it cool, I heard my voice rise an octave, sounding instead of a professional business woman more like a kid who'd just been told she could have ice-cream for dinner. "Ohmigod, that would be...wow. Really?"

He nodded, a grin spreading across his paunchy cheeks. "Really. Now, I know you were hoping for a staff position, but if this opportunity goes well there's a chance to transition from freelance into something more permanent."

Freelance, staff, one-shot deal, I didn't care. It was the *L.A. Times*! The holy grail of any reporter's career. And they wanted me! I had died and gone to heaven.

"That sounds great! Amazing. Wow, thanks."

"Wonderful! We think you'll be perfect to write a weekly women's interest column."

I felt my face freeze mid goofy grin. "Women's interest...you mean, like, relationship stuff?"

"No, no," he said, shaking his head. "Nothing so limiting."

"Oh, good."

"Not just relationships. We'd love for you to write about *anything* important to women. Lipstick, shoes, cleaning product reviews."

I felt that ice-cream dinner melting into a soft, mushy puddle. "Cleaning product reviews?"

He nodded, his jowls wobbling with aftershocks. "And lipstick and shoes. You know, women's subjects."

I felt my eyes narrowing. "Mr. Callahan, I graduated at the top of my class from UCLA. Didn't you read my resume? I'm an *investigative journalist*. I write stories, hard-hitting news stories. Did you see the one I wrote about the misappropriation of campaign funds last fall?"

"I did."

"And the Catholic Church scandal?"

"Sure."

"And the way I busted that story about middle-school drug dealers in the heights wide open?"

He nodded again. "Yes, they were all very good," he said.

"But?"

"Miss Quick, we are a serious paper here."

"And I'm a serious journalist!"

He looked down at my skirt, the tiny frown

between his bushy eyebrows clearly not convinced that serious reporters wore pink.

"Mr. Callahan," I tried again, the desperation in my voice clear even to my ears, "I know I may not have the experience that many of your reporters do, but I'm a hard worker. I love long hours, overtime, and I will do anything to get the story."

"I'm sorry, Miss Quick. But my assistant and I have reviewed your file, and we both agree that someone with your..." he paused, "...*assets* would best serve us writing a women's column." His eyes flickered to my chest again then looked away so fast I could tell his mandatory corporate sensitivity training had been a success.

But not so fast that I didn't catch him.

I narrowed my eyes. "Thirty-four D."

Mr. Callahan blinked. "Excuse me?"

"The pair of tits you've been staring at for the last hour? They're a thirty-four D."

"I...I..." he stammered, his cheeks tingeing red.

"And if you like that number, I have a few more for you," I said, gaining steam. "One-thirty-four: my I.Q. Twenty-three-eighty-five: my SAT score. Four-point-O: my grade point average at UCLA. And finally," I said, standing and hiking my purse onto my shoulder, "Zero: the chance that I will degrade not only myself but my entire gender by writing a column that supposes having ovaries somehow limits our intelligence level to complexities of eyeshadow and sponge mops."

Mr. Callahan stared at me, blinking beneath his bushy brows, his mouth stuck open, jowls slack on his jaw.

But I didn't give him a chance to respond. Instead I forced one foot in front of the other as I marched back through the busy newsroom that I would not be a part of, down the hallways of my dream paper, and out into the deceptively optimistic sunshine.

I made it all the way to my VW Bug before I let my indignation and anger morph into big, fat tears. Goddammit, I was not just a pair of headlights and a short skirt! I had a brain, a pretty damned functional one, if I did say so myself. I was a smart, diligent reporter.

But all anyone at any of the major newspapers I'd interviewed with since graduation had seen was Allie Quick: 36, 26, 36.

Seriously, you'd think boobs wouldn't be such a novelty in L.A.

I wiped my cheeks with the back of my hand, slid into my car and slammed my door shut, taking out my aggression on Daisy (Yes, I named my car. But don't worry, I'd stopped just short of putting big daisy decals on the side doors. I only had one small daisy decal on the trunk. A pink one. To match the pink silk Gerbera daisy stuck in my dash.). I immediately slipped my polyester skirt off and threw it in the backseat. Hey, it was California. It was summer. And my air conditioning had broken three paychecks ago. Don't worry, I had a pair of bikini bottoms on underneath. Then I pulled out of the parking lot and pointed my car toward the 101 Freeway.

My life hadn't always been like this. I'd grown up in a normal, suburban home in Reseda. I'd never known my dad, but Mom did a pretty decent job of keeping me in grilled cheese sandwiches and the latest

trends in sneakers while building up her own wedding planning business. In fact, she'd built it so well that by the time I hit college, we were living pretty nicely. Unfortunately, Mom had died unexpectedly my junior year. So unexpectedly, she hadn't left a will. Everything had gone into probate, and once all her business creditors were paid, along with probate fees and the attorney I'd hired to get her stuff out of probate, there was *just* enough left for me to finish journalism school. But not much more. Which had been fine. I'd never expected to live off Mom forever, but I also hadn't expected how hard it would be for the valedictorian of her class to land a job at a newspaper.

At least, one that didn't involve cleaning product reviews.

I exited the freeway, traveling through the Hollywood streets until I pulled up to a squat, stuccoed building on Hollywood Boulevard stuck between two souvenir shops. At one time the building might have been white, but years of smog and rainless winters had turned it a dingy grey. The windows were covered in cheap vertical blinds, and a distinct odor of stale take-out emanated from the place.

I looked up at the slightly askew sign above the door. The *L.A. Informer*, my current place of employment. A tabloid. The lowest form of journalism in the known universe. I felt familiar shame curl in my belly at the fact that I actually worked here.

At last it was a step above sponge mops.

Maybe.

A very small one.

I pulled Daisy into a space near the back of the lot with a sigh, slipping my skirt back over my hips before

trudging up the one flight of stairs to the offices.

The interior was buzzing as usual, dozens of reporters hammering out the latest celebrity gossip on their keyboards to the tune of ringing telephones and beeping IMs. My cube was in the center of the room, just outside the door of my editor's glass-walled office. Luckily, at the moment his back was turned to me, a hand to his Bluetooth, shouting at someone on the other side just loudly enough that I could hear the occasional muffled expletive.

I ducked my head down, slipping into my chair before he could notice what a long lunch I'd taken. I quickly pulled up the story I'd been working on before I left that morning: Megan Fox's boobs—real, or fake.

Yeah, CNN we were not.

Swallowing down every dream I'd ever had of following in Diane Sawyer's footsteps, I hammered out a 2- by 3-inch column on the size, shape and possible plasticity of the actress's chest. I was just about finished (concluding that, duh, there was no way those puppies were organic), when an IM popped up on my screen. My editor.

Where have you been?

I peeked up over the top of my cube. He was still shouting into his earpiece but was now seated at his computer, eyes on the 32-inch flat screen mounted on his desk.

I ducked back down. *At lunch.*

Pretty long lunch.

I bit my lip. *I was hungry.*

There was a pause. Then: *Come into my office in three minutes.*

Great. Busted.

I glanced at the time on my computer. 1:42. I finished up my article, hit save, and two minutes and forty-three seconds later got up from my chair, smoothed my skirt, puckered to redistribute my lipgloss and pushed through the glass doors of his office to face the music.

He was still on the phone, nodding at what the guy on the other end said. "Yes. Fine. Great," came his lilting British accent. He motioned for me to sit in one of the two folding chairs in front of his desk. I did, tugging at my hem again as I watched him pace the office.

Felix Dunn was somewhere between late thirties and early forties, at least a good ten years my senior. Old enough that fine laugh lines creased the corners of his mouth, but young enough that his sandy blonde hair was cut in the same shaggy style I'd seen high school skateboarders wear. He was tall with the lean lines of a runner, though I'd never actually seen him jog. He was dressed today in his usual uniform of a pair of khaki pants and a white button-down shirt, paired with tan Sketchers. His clothes were wrinkled, looking like he'd slept in them, and his hair stood up just a little on top. I would've said he was pulling a casual chic thing, but I knew Felix well enough to know it was more laziness than a practiced look.

Not that Felix couldn't afford to look every bit the metro-sexual, but he had his own priorities. He was what you'd call a cheap rich guy. He lived in a multi-million dollar home in the Hollywood Hills, thanks to old family money, but still opted to buy his socks on sale at the drugstore. I'd heard a rumor going around the office that he was actually a British lord, some

distant relation to the queen, but he always seemed to have left his wallet at home when the check came at lunch.

"Listen, I've got a meeting now," Felix said into his earpiece. "I've got to go, but I'll call you tomorrow." He hit the end button on his Bluetooth then turned to me without skipping a beat. "The Megan Fox bit, where are we?"

"Done. Just need to proof it, and it'll be on your desk."

"Conclusion?"

"They're fake."

"You're sure?"

I gave him a look. "Seriously? I had more faith in your boob connoisseur status."

He shook his head as if disappointed. "Can't trust anything to be authentic these days."

"If it makes you feel any better, her ass is real."

He grinned. "I'm ecstatic. Listen, I have a new story I want you to work on."

Even though I knew it likely involved the man vs. natural-made status of a celebrity's body parts, I still got a little surge of adrenalin in my belly. I couldn't help it. I loved the thrill of ferreting out the truth, making sense of a chaotic series of facts. I hadn't been lying when I told Mr. Callahan at the *Times* that I lived for the story.

"Shoot," I told Felix. "I'm all ears."

"It involves—"

But he didn't get to finish. The door to his office flew open again and one of the other reporters, burst through. She had violet hair and wore a hot-pink baby-T featuring a picture of Oscar the Grouch and black

jeans with little skulls on the back pockets over a pair of shit-kicker black boots. Tina Bender.

"I got it!" she said triumphantly, holding a photo high above her head.

Felix raised an eyebrow her way. "And what might 'it' be?"

"The frickin' story of the century." She slammed the photo down on Felix's desk.

He leaned forward to get a good look. I did the same.

The photo was of the outside of a gated home. If I had to guess, I'd say a mansion somewhere nearby. Beverly Hills or Malibu, if the palms lining the impressive driveway were any indication.

"Chester Barker's estate," Tina said, confirming my suspicions. "In Beverly Hills."

Felix leaned in. "The dead producer?"

Tina nodded. "Murdered, to be precise. This was taken just before his body was found by the maid."

I remembered the story. Chester Barker, a reality TV show producer, was found dead in his Beverly Hills estate two weeks ago, face-down on his bathroom floor and foaming at the mouth. At first the consensus had been accidental drug overdose, but upon further inspection the police had found evidence that Barker had been drugged on purpose. The verdict of murder had sent the media—both tabloid and legit—into a virtual feeding frenzy, the *Informer* staff included. Personally, I'd been searching high and low for any angle on Barker for days.

Unfortunately it appeared Tina had found it first.

"Where did you get this photo?" Felix asked.

"One of my informants."

Tina had informants all over Hollywood, her network farther reaching than Verizon's. Something I sorely envied. The first thing they'd taught us in journalism class was that a reporter was only as good as her informants. And unfortunately, Tina's outnumbered mine ten to one.

"Check out the right corner," she said, pointing to the picture.

Felix and I did, both leaning in. In the corner of the picture, near the iron gates, was a figure, his back to the camera, a baseball cap with a squiggly red snake on the brim of it pulled low on his head.

"Who's that?" I asked.

Tina ignored me. As always. For some reason, she and I had gotten off on the wrong foot when I'd first come on board here. Probably because Felix had given me her biggest story right off the bat. While I'd felt kinda bad for her, my bank account had been hovering low enough that my Visa was rejected at the dollar store. I needed the job, and I'd needed that story to prove to Felix I deserved a paycheck, despite my minuscule portfolio. So, despite feeling sorry for Tina's loss, I'd taken the story and run with it. Luckily I'd delivered, Felix had kept me on, and my bank account now afforded me the luxury of shopping at Walmart's clearance bin.

I know, decadent.

But Tina had never forgiven me, and a hard and fast rivalry between the two of us had been born.

"Who's that?" Felix asked, repeating my query.

Predictably, Tina did *not* ignore him. "That, my dear editor, is Chester Barker's killer."

Felix raised an eyebrow.

She shrugged. "Or at least, it could be. A shadowy figure seen outside the mansion at the time of the death. Pretty suspicious, huh?"

Felix nodded, eyes still on the photo. "Any idea who our suspicious character is?"

She shook her head. "But I am *so* on this story. Give me twenty-four hours, and I'll have his name, address and credit score."

Felix bit the inside of his cheek for a moment, thinking over the proposition. Finally he said, "Okay. Run with it. The Barker story is all yours, Tina."

Her grin was twice the size of her face. "Ay-ay, chief!" She gave him a mock salute before fairly skipping out the door.

Felix pulled out a magnifying glass, training it on the photo. I waited while he silently scrutinized the shadowy figure, trying to make out any identifying marks.

Finally I couldn't take it anymore. I cleared my throat.

Felix's eyes jolted upward, as if surprised to still find me there.

"Uh, you said you had a story for *me*?"

"Oh. Right. Allie. Yeah." He cleared his throat, setting the photo of the would-be killer aside. "I got a tip this morning that Pippi Mississippi changed her hair color. I want you to go talk to her hairdresser and either confirm or deny."

Tina got a murder, and I got a dye job. Figures. Even at a tabloid no one took my journalism skills seriously.

Chapter Two

Jennifer Wood was the young teen actress who played the title character Pippi Mississippi on the hit tween cable show, launching not only the teen's acting career but also a singing contract, a line of clothing for eight-year-olds and a fragrance called "Totally Pippi" sold at finer department stores everywhere. Last year Jennifer starred in her big screen debut, *Pippi Mississippi: The Movie*, which had opened to the highest box office take since James Cameron's latest, launching Pippi into the realm of mega-celebrities. I think it was safe to say that Pippi Watching had officially passed baseball as America's favorite pastime.

Sadly, a picture of Pippi's new 'do in the *Informer* would probably outsell copies of *Time* with the president's picture on it.

According to the Hollywood grapevine, Pippi got her hair done at Fernando's salon, a Beverly Hills staple nestled smack in the center of the BH golden triangle, where real estate was worth an arm and a leg, and noses were changed as often as the seasons.

I pushed through the glass front doors of Fernando's, immediately assaulted by the scents of hair dye, frying perms and botanical conditioners with French names. The interior of the salon was done in a minimalist chic style—plain white walls, white sofa in the waiting area, white marble tiles on the floor and white plastic chairs at every station lining the middle of the salon floor. Two large red paintings were an unexpected splash of color along the back wall, providing one bold focal point.

The guy behind the reception desk provided the other. "Allie, love of my life, how are you, dahling!" he shouted, coming at me with air-kisses.

"Great, Marco." I air-smooched him back and gave a little shoulders-only hug.

Marco was a slim, Hispanic guy with eyeliner thicker than Tammy Faye's, outfits louder than Lady Gaga's and a vocabulary straight out of the movie *Clueless*. He was currently holding a bottle of sparkly silver glitter in one hand and a glue stick in the other. I almost hesitated to ask. "What's with the glitter?"

Marco looked down at the bottle in his hand. "We're having a sale on conditioner. I'm sprucing up the sign a little."

I looked over at his desk. A generic "sale" sign now had a glittery silver "20%" drawn across it in scrolling script.

"Very...sparkly."

"Thank you!" Marco beamed like a proud papa. "So, what can I do for you, dahling? We're on a tight schedule today, but for you I could bump someone."

"I appreciate the sentiment, Marco, but I'm actually here for..." I leaned in and whispered, "a little information."

He closed his heavily lined eyes and shook his head in the negative. "Sorry, dahling, no can do. You know my lips are sealed. What would happen if I tongue-wagged about every celebutant who came through here? I'd be out on my hot little fanny, that's what."

I grinned. "You know that would never happen. Fernando couldn't function without you."

Marco pursed his lips. Then nodded. "Well, that's

true."

"Listen, I just need a confirm or deny over a new hair color."

He shook his head again. "Sorry. I have taken the celebrity hairdresser's oath. 'What happens in the salon stays in the salon.'"

"Hmmm." I narrowed my eyes. "What if I made it worth your while?"

He raised one drawn-in eyebrow at me. "Worth my while?"

"I happen to have an informant that happens to follow the club scene very closely. And happens to know where one very desirable celebrity is planning on partying this very evening."

Marco leaned in. "I'm intrigued. A-lister?"

I shrugged. "At least a B-plus."

"Who?"

I looked over both shoulders, trying to match his level of drama as I leaned in and whispered, "Adam Lambert."

"Shut the front door!" Marco said, almost spilling his glitter on the marble floor. "Where?"

"I'll tell you...if you can tell me a little something."

He narrowed his eyes at me. "Ooh, you are wicked, girl. Fine. You cracked me." He paused, looked over both shoulders for prying ears then nodded, setting finger to the side of his nose. "Come into my office, dahling."

He turned and led the way through the salon. I followed him past buzzing drying stations and flying straight razors until we hit a door at the back. He opened it, doing an exaggerated over the shoulder

again, and led the way inside.

I followed, trying not to smirk as I saw we were in a supply closet. Very cloak-and-dagger.

"So, what do you want to know?" he asked in a low whisper.

"Jennifer Wood. Is it true Pippi Mississippi has a new hair color?"

"Ah." He steepled his fingers. "She was in here the other day."

"And?"

"And America's favorite blonde teeny bopper?"

"Yes?"

"Now a redhead."

Bingo. "I don't suppose you got any pictures of her?"

He looked offended. "I don't suppose I did! What do you think I am, some sort of gossip?" Heaven forbid. "But," he said.

"But?"

"*Fernando* did take a snapshot for his wall of fame."

Double bingo.

"I'll throw in Adam's home address if you get me a copy."

Marco squealed like a second grader. "Done!" Then he scuttled off to find the picture in question.

I exited his "office" and sat down in the all white lobby to wait. While I did, I browsed through *Fernando's* magazine selection. Three out of four had Chester Barker's picture plastered on the front.

God, I wanted that story.

And not just because Tina had it, though I'll admit, after the way she'd gloated this afternoon, the thought

of besting her did give me warm fuzzies. But Barker's death was the kind of serious story that serious journalists covered. *L.A. Times* serious, even. If I had that kind of story under my belt maybe I wouldn't be automatically relegated to the fluff pages.

I grabbed the magazine on top, this week's *People*, and began flipping through their take on Barker's death, complete with lots of glossy photos. I was about a page and a half in when the glass front doors beside me opened, and a tall woman walked in. She was dressed in black, form-fitting yoga pants and a tight little T-shirt. Her blonde hair was pulled back in ponytail, and she wore a ball cap pulled down low over her face.

I froze, staring at her cap. It was black with a red squiggly snake on the brim. Just like the mystery man in Tina's photos.

No. Way.

I blinked back surprise as I watched her cross the salon and greet one of the stylists, who quickly ushered her into a room in the back. I jumped up from the sofa to follow her, just as Marco re-emerged from the back with a framed photo of Pippi Mississippi in hand.

"Okay, here's your pic-ey! Just do not under any circumstance reveal where you got it, because if Fernando found out—"

I grabbed him by the shoulders mid-sentence. "The woman who just came in here. In the ballcap. Do you know who she is?"

"Ay, easy on the shirt, chica. It's an Armani."

My grasp tightened. "The woman, Marco. It's important."

"Okay, okay. Geeze, girl. It's Dana Dasher."

I gave him a blank look. "Who?"

"You know, from that HBO series *Lady Justice*?"

She plays the porn lawyer."

"Riiiiight..." I knew the show. It was this season's naughty breakout hit about a mild-mannered woman who inadvertently becomes the go-to-attorney for porn stars. Lots of stars, lots of scandal, very little clothing. A no-brainer to top the ratings.

"Listen, I have to talk to her," I told Marco, still grasping his shoulders.

He shook his head. "No can do, honey. She's an exclusive client. Photos are one thing, but I cannot have a tabloid reporter conducting interviews in here. Unless you're her bikini waxer, there is no way you are getting into that room."

I looked from Marco to the closed door, desperation bubbling up in my throat. But I could tell by the look on his face that this time he really wasn't cracking. "Fine," I said. "Look, email me a copy of Pippi's photo and I'll send back the deets on Adam's party tonight, cool?"

Marco looked immeasurably relieved. "That I can do."

"Thanks," I said then turned to go. I slipped out the glass doors, watching over my shoulder as Marco took the photo out of its frame and to his desk, fussed a little with his scanner, and popped the photo back into its frame. A minute later he picked it up and headed back to the back of the salon to re-hang it.

The second his back was turned I pushed through the front doors again and half-walked, half-jogged past the cut and color stations to the storeroom Marco had

used as his "office". Once inside I grabbed a white coat from the shelf. I thrust it on then peeked out of the door. Marco was back at the reception desk, his back to me. I quickly slipped out of the storeroom and crossed the three big steps to the waxing room Dana occupied. I opened the door and went inside, shutting it behind me with a soft click.

The blonde lay on a table in the center of the sterile room, a white sheet covering her body. Her eyes were closed, a tiny lavender scented pillow draped across them. On a chair beside her sat her yoga clothes, and on top of them the ball cap. No doubt about it, it was the same one the shadowy figure outside Barker's had worn.

Maybe my luck was turning.

Standing over Dana was a woman wearing a coat identical to mine and an expression that said she clearly had not expected to be interrupted.

"May I help you?" she asked, though the tone in her voice was more, *What the hell are you doing in my waxing room?*

"Uh...yes," I said, clearing my throat. "I'm ...here to wax Dana."

She raised an eyebrow my way. "*You* are?"

"Fernando asked that I take this one. As a personal favor."

"And you are?"

"Allie. I'm new here."

She frowned, biting the corner of her lip. "Okay. I guess," she said. Then handed me a tub of gooey stuff that smelled like more lavender. "She's all yours," she said, walking out.

I looked down at the prone actress, lying perfectly

still on the table. I wondered if she was asleep or just going into a zen-like state in anticipation of the wax to come.

I looked down at the tub in my hands, stirring the wooden stick. Not to get into TMI territory, but I've never been a huge fan of waxing. Mostly because I'm not a huge fan of pain. Just once I'd been suckered into it. I'd been up late watching infomercials, and some Australian woman came on touting a no-pain waxing kit. I'd ordered one (Hey, they weren't sold in stores, and they threw in a second kit absolutely free!), and as soon as it arrived in the mail (just four to six weeks later) I'd smothered my legs in the patented wax formula, applied the reusable organic cotton strips and let 'er rip.

I howled louder than my neighbor's cat in heat. No pain, my ass! My legs had been covered in red stripes for a week. I'd been a strictly Nair gal ever since.

"I have to be on set in an hour," the woman beneath the sheet said, jarring me from my painful memory. "So, not to rush you, but..." she trailed off.

"Right. Sure."

I looked down at the items the white-coated woman had set out on the side table. A pile of little white, cotton strips and a bottle of essential oils. Okay, sure. Easy. What was there to it but wax on, wax off, right?

I stirred the lavender-scented goop again as I lifted the sheet to reveal my starlet au natural.

I scooped a bit of the wax with my wooden stick then slapped it on her inner thigh. "So," I said, smoothing out the warm glob. "You are awesome on *Lady Justice*."

"Thanks," Danae said, eyes still closed behind her relaxation pillow. "It's a great show to work on. The writers are awesome."

"Yeah. I can tell." I laid a white cotton strip down on the wax glob. I gritted my teeth and pulled.

Dana jumped. "Holy hell!"

I winced. "Sorry." Though I noticed fine hairs on the strip I'd pulled away. Okay, so far so good.

I laid down another glob of wax next to the bare spot, moving inward. "I guess you must meet a lot of interesting people on the show?"

"Sure," she agreed. "A lot of porn stars come guest for us. Though I wish they didn't show quite so much skin. Makes it hard for people to take me seriously as an actress—holy mother of God!" Dana jumped on the table as I ripped another strip off.

"Sorry," I mumbled again, watching her skin redden. On the up side, it was smooth as a baby's butt.

"That's okay," she gritted through her teeth. "No pain, no bikini, right?"

"Right." I laid down another glob just that much farther inward.

"So, speaking of interesting people...did Chester Barker work on your show?"

"Barker?"

"Yeah. The producer?"

"Oh, right. The dead guy." She paused a moment. "Not that I know of. Why?"

"Oh, no reason. I just wondered if you knew him. Or had ever visited his house," I said, watching her expression closely. (Well, as closely as I could with half her face obscured under the scented pillow.)

She shrugged under the sheet. "I think I might

have met him once at a party or something. But, no, I've never seen his house." She paused. "Why do you want to know about his place?"

Actually, I could care less about his place. It was who had been there the night of his murder I was interested in. "Oh, no reason," I lied. "I just heard it was a spectacular mansion, that's all."

"Oh. Well, I wouldn't know."

Bummer. I mentally recalculated my tactic as I laid down another cotton strip and pulled.

"Hot damn!" Dana's right foot jumped in the air, narrowly avoiding the tub of wax in my hands. "You sure you know what you're doing? Olga's waxes never hurt quite this much."

"Sorry," I said on autopilot. "Hey, you know, that was a great hat you were wearing when you came in," I said, gesturing the ballcap on the chair.

"What? Oh, right. Yeah, thanks."

"It looks very unique. I've never seen that design before." I laid another glob of wax down, this one ensuring she could go Brazilian.

"Actually," Dana responded, "they handed those hats out to everyone on the *Lady Justice* set at the beginning of the season."

"Oh." I felt my spirits sink, my chance at hopping on the Barker train slipping through my fingers.

"Everyone got one?"

She nodded. "Yep. Everyone on set that day. All the cast, crew, producers, everyone."

Great. That was what, like, two hundred people? So much for narrowing my suspect down.

"Oh, hey! You know what?"

"What?" I asked, laying down the next cotton strip.

"You were asking about Barker's place earlier, right?"

"Yes?"

"Well, one of the execs who works on our show might know more about what his home was like. He's Barker's business partner. Or was, I guess."

Lucky streak, here I come. "Barker's partner worked on *Lady Justice*?" I confirmed.

"Yep. He was on set all season."

"So, he would own one of these ballcaps too?"

"Um, I guess so."

"What's his name?"

"Alec Davies."

What did you want to bet that the shadowy figure outside Barker's was Alec Davies? "Fabulous. Thanks!" I said.

Then I ripped the last white strip off.

In hindsight, maybe my excitement at having a real lead made me a little too vigorous. Maybe I should have gone little more slowly. Maybe a little more gently. Maybe I should have waited for Olga.

"Sonofa—" Dana lifted off the table, her right foot kicking in the air, connecting squarely with the tub of wax in my hand. Which tipped over, spilling white, sticky stuff all over the floor.

And all over me.

I looked down. My pink blouse and pinstriped skirt were completely covered in wax, not to mention my hands, legs, and cleavage.

Dana pulled the lavender pillow off her eyes. "Oh, wow. Sorry." She frowned. "Maybe next time I should just ask for Olga."

Ya think?

"I'll go get her now," I promised, feeling the wax set up as I slipped out the door.

I looked down at my watch. Twenty minutes until the *Informer* edition closed for the day. If I sped, there was a slim chance I could make it to the office before we went to print.

I ripped off the white coat (taking a few waxed arm hairs with it) and took my sticky self back out through the lobby.

"Allie?" Marco looked up, a wrinkle of confusion on his forehead. "What are you doing here again?"

Oops. I'd forgotten about him.

"Uh. Hi. I, uh, forgot something in the back..." I said, trailing off. I ducked my head down to cover my terribly delivered lie and made for the front doors.

Unfortunately, with my head ducked in shame, I failed to see the edge off Marco's desk, bumping into it. Which jostled the sign he'd been making. And the bottle of glitter. Dumping the entire thing down the front of me.

Glitter stuck to the semi-hardened wax, turning me into a kindergartener's project.

"Oh, honey," Marco said, a smirk playing at the corner of his mouth. "Look at you sparkle, girl!"

I closed my eyes, thought a really bad word then plowed my sparkly self out through the doors.

I looked down at my watch—4:42. I had 18 minutes left. I ran to my Bug, revved the engine and pulled into traffic down Wilshire while I simultaneously flipped my laptop open on the passenger seat beside me and powered it on. At the next red light, I opened my speech-to-type program. "A shadowy figure was seen outside Chester Barker's

estate the night of his death, and we have an exclusive on his identity," I said out loud, watching the words appear as type on my screen.

The light changed, and I surged forward, continuing to dictate what I'd learned at Fernando's as I crossed town.

Exactly sixteen minutes later, I screeched into the lot of the *Informer*, grabbed my laptop and flew out of my car, not even bothering to beep it locked behind me.

I shoved through the building's front doors, stabbing the up button on the elevator. I waited a two count. Too long! I took the stairs two at a time in my heels, hit the second floor and ran into the newsroom, weaving through the cubes toward Felix's office. 4:59. Thirty seconds left. I didn't bother knocking, shoving my shoulder into Felix's door and pushing my way in.

Felix was behind his desk, Tina hovering just to his right, a piece of paper in hand. No doubt, her take on Barker's shadowy figure. I mentally crossed my fingers, hoping for once my informers trumped hers.

"Stop the presses!" I yelled. Cliché, I know. But I'd always wanted to say that. I dropped my computer down on Felix's desk with a thud.

He looked down at my laptop. Then up at me as I panted like an Olympic sprinter (The Stairmaster at the gym was one thing, but have you ever tried to run up metal fire stairs in three-inch heels and a miniskirt? I think I deserved at least the silver for that.).

Felix raised an eyebrow at the wax and glitter covering my entire person (and, incidentally, now all of my car upholstery), but had the good sense not to mention it. Instead, he gestured to my laptop and

asked, "What's this?"

"The Chester Barker story you're running in tomorrow's edition."

He raised the other eyebrow but reserved comment, looking down at the copy typed on the screen.

Tina, on the other hand, never reserved her comments. "What the hell! Barker is *my* story, New Girl."

I hated it when she called me New Girl. I'd been here almost a year. And just because I was new didn't mean I wasn't good. New was fresh. New was hungry. And, I thought, not able to hide my smirk, new had just beaten her to the headline.

"Then I'm sure you know who the figure outside Chester's house is," I countered.

She opened her mouth to respond, did a couple guppy faces, and shut it. Clearly she did not.

"I take it you do?" Felix asked me, his eyes quickly scanning the copy.

I nodded triumphantly. "I do, indeed. Alec Davies."

Felix glanced up at me. "The producer?"

"Correct. And he was Chester Barker's partner."

"How did you get this information?" Tina asked, dancing around Felix, trying to read my copy over his shoulder.

I shrugged. "I have my sources."

"What kind of sources?" Felix pressed. "This is a pretty big accusation to make blind."

"The hat," I said. "The one with the snake on it that the figure was wearing in the photo? They gave them out to the cast and crew of *Lady Justice*. Davies

worked on that show. He owns the hat."

"So must dozens of other people," Tina jumped in. "If they gave them to everyone on the set, it's hardly a one-of-a-kind."

"True," I conceded. "But, it's quite a coincidence. What are the chances anyone else on the set had that close of a connection to Barker?"

Felix paused a moment, taking in both of our arguments. Finally he said, "Well done, Allie."

I felt my chest swell with pride. "So you'll print it?"

Felix nodded slowly. "Let me read it over first, but if it's solid, yes, it'll lead tomorrow's edition."

Tina threw her hands up on the air. "Oh, come on! You gave *me* this story."

"Did you know about Davies?" Felix asked, turning on her.

"Well, no, not exactly. But I have some very good feelers out there right now."

"Great. Let me know when those pan out. In the meantime, Allie, I want you to follow up with Davies tomorrow at the studio. Find out what he was doing there and what he knows about Barker's death."

"Yes, sir!" I did a mock salute, glitter raining down onto his brown carpet.

Tina rolled her eyes. "I can't believe this shit. You're giving my headline to the glitter queen."

"Tina," Felix warned.

But she plowed ahead. "Though, why should I be surprised? It's no secret she's editor's pet."

"*Tina...*"

"I mean, we all know the only reason you even hired her was because she waltzed in here with her

shirt unbuttoned to her navel and her skirt hiked to her doo-dah."

"Bender!" Felix shouted. "That's enough."

Tina shut her mouth with a click.

"If and when your leads get back to you, type it up," Felix barked. "Until then, Allie is lead on Barker. Do I make myself clear?"

Tina shot me a look that could freeze Mt. Saint Helens. "Crystal," she spit out.

"Good. Dismissed, Bender."

Tina turned and stalked out of the office, clomping her boots all the way back to her cube. I watched her go, feeling my satisfaction at besting her slowly slip down a notch. Felix never raised his voice. In fact, I'd only heard him do it once in all the time I'd known him. He was forceful, yes. Commanding, yes. But in true Brit fashion, he always kept a tight reign on his emotions.

So the fact that Tina had rattled him meant she must have hit a nerve.

I paused in the doorway. I knew I should just take my story and go. But instead of turning to go, that hit nerve had me turning back to my boss.

"Um, Felix?"

"What?" he asked. His eyes were still dark, flashes of navy shooting through them as his chest rose and fell faster than normal.

I bit my lip. "I have to ask...you gave me the story because I'm a good journalist, right?"

He gave me a blank look.

"What I mean is...what Tina said has no merit, right? When you hired me, it was totally because you knew what a great writer I was and that I would deliver

copy and sell papers for you. And not..." I trailed off, feeling my cheeks burn, wishing I'd just left it alone.

Felix's eyes met mine, his sandy eyebrows still hovering menacingly over his blue eyes. "And not what, Allie? Spit it out."

I took a deep breath. And spit. "And not because we slept together?"

Chapter Three

My history with Felix was complicated, at best. Completely fucked up, at worst.

I'd first met Felix two years ago when he was the *Informer's* top reporter and I was still studying journalism at UCLA. He'd been covering a story at the time, and I'd been fascinated at his information-gathering tactics, none of which they taught in my classes. Hacking databases, picking locks, breaking and entering. I was intrigued. Throw in the fact that Felix was not entirely hard on the eyes, and I'm woman enough to admit I'd had a teeny tiny schoolgirl crush on him.

Unfortunately, he'd also had a crush of his own at the time, and not on me. There was this fashion designer who was also involved in the story he was working on. And she was everything I was not—sophisticated, worldly and stylish enough to have walked out from a magazine cover. It wasn't hard to see how a college kid suddenly became invisible in her shadow.

Still, when Felix had let me tag along on his story, I'd jumped at the chance. In fact, I'd jumped so much that I ended up getting myself kidnapped by a killer, bound, gagged, and shoved in the back of a bakery van. I'd spent a day and a half surrounded by stale muffins and pure fear before Felix had tracked the killer down and come to my rescue.

That was when things had really become complicated between us. The fashion designer

Felix was into? Well, as soon as the story wrapped up, she ran off to Vegas and married another guy. Felix was crushed and, lucky me, I was the closest blonde at hand when he went on the rebound.

The blonde he'd just swooped in and rescued action-hero style, causing my little crush to swell to ridiculous proportions. Ridiculous enough that I'd gone home with him, let one thing lead right into another, and I'd ended the evening between Felix's 500-thread-count Egyptian cotton sheets. Naked. On top of Felix.

Of course, in the morning we'd both realized with startling clarity what a mistake it had been. Felix was clearly still in love with the fashion designer, and I had acted like the pathetic equivalent of a journalism groupie.

So, we'd parted ways.

Or, more accurately, I'd dressed in the dark, claimed an early class and slunk out with my tail (and inside-out panties) between my legs.

It wasn't until a year later, after I'd graduated and was desperate for a job, that I'd contacted Felix again. He'd been promoted to managing editor by then and was the only person I knew working at an actual paper, even if it was a tabloid. I'd pleaded my case, telling him he was the only thing standing between me and certain starvation. Despite my lack of experience, he'd finally relented. Probably out of guilt. Possibly out of lust. For sure out of pity.

No matter the reason, I'd gratefully taken the job, and we'd maintained a professional

editor/reporter relationship ever since, never once speaking of *The Night*.

Until now.

And, I could tell by the look on his face, he wished as much as I did that we'd maintained that silence.

"What?" he asked blinking at me.

"You heard me," I said, sticking to my guns even as a thick film of awkwardness settled over the room. "Did you hire me because I can write, or because we slept together?"

He didn't answer me right away. Instead his eyes narrowed, assessing me. So intently that I began to fidget, picking at the waxy glitter under my fingernails. Then finally he moved from the barrier behind the desk, crossed the room until he was standing in front of me. Close in front of me. So close I could smell warm coffee on his breath.

I licked my lips, fighting off the instinct to take one giant step back. The awkwardness in the air had shifted to something else. Just as thick. Just as potent. Ten times more uncomfortable.

Felix leaned in, coming almost nose to nose with me. His voice was low, intimate, barely audible above the humming newsroom just outside his door. "You might be good in bed, Allie, but if all you were was a great lay, I'd have fired you months ago."

I'm not sure what I expected him to say, but his frank language took me by surprise. I swallowed,

opened my mouth to respond.

But he cut me off, stepping away and diffusing the moment as quickly as he'd charged it. "Go home. Quick. And tomorrow I want an interview with Davies on my desk by five. Sharp."

I cleared my throat and nodded. "Right. Five."

"And this lead better pan out," he warned me, "or the story is Tina's, no matter how low your necklines go."

I opened my mouth to protest, but it died on my tongue as I saw the corner of his lips quirk up. He was mocking me. Jerk.

"You'll have your story by *four*," I countered. Then pushed out of his office.

* * *

As much as I was itching to get to Davies, I knew Felix was right. The best time to catch him would be at the studios tomorrow. And it would probably be a good idea to conduct the interview sans glitter. So instead of diving into my headline story, I hopped in my Bug and headed toward home for a much-needed shower.

I lived in a one bedroom on the bottom level of a fourplex on the outskirts of Glendale, tucked up against the foothills of the San Gabriel Mountains. It was as rural as you could get in L.A. Which didn't really mean *rural* rural, but trees lined the

streets, the hills provided a backdrop of green when you could see them through the smog haze, and at night I only heard the distant hum of a single freeway instead of four. All in all, it was the most peaceful escape I could find on a tabloid reporter's budget.

I parked in my reserved spot beneath our building and took the stairs up to my place on the ground floor. While the outside of the building was standard Southern California grey stucco, I did my best to make the interior my own. The brown renter's carpet on the floor was covered in colorful throw rugs in shades of purple and pink. The free couch I'd gotten off Craigslist was covered in a white slipcover, accented by hot pink pillows I'd sewn myself, featuring little gold tassels at the corners. A vase of gerbera daisies sat on my pink coffee table, and I'd hand painted the plain wooden kitchen table and chairs with pink flowers and yellow smiley faces. My last boyfriend had said walking into my place was like walking into Barbie's dream apartment. I'll admit, it was a lot of pink. But pink made me happy. And if you can't be happy in your own home, what have you got?

I set my keys down on the pink end table by the door and grabbed the stack of mail that had been shoved through my door slot while I'd been at work. A Macy's bill, a Banana Republic bill, a Limited bill, and a coupon for half off graphic T's at Old Navy. I ripped the coupon out, put it in my purse then shoved the bills into the heart-shaped cookie jar on my counter. Seeing bills did not make

me happy.

I took a quick shower, removing most of the glitter (though a couple patches of stubborn wax still clung to my ankles) then dug into the refrigerator for dinner. Half of a pizza and a salad with low-fat dressing stared back at me. I did a mental *eeenie meenie minie moe*, but it was pretty clear which one was going to win out. I opened the pizza box and indulged in a Hawaiian with extra pineapple. While it always made me feel better about myself to buy salad, it usually just sat in my fridge until it wilted, died, and I went out to buy more. I mentally calculated how much time I had to do on the stepper at the gym to make up for the Hawaiian calories and decided it was well worth it.

I took my pizza into the living room and plopped on the sofa. Immediately my lap was filled with a white, fluffy ball of purring fur.

"Well, hello, Mr. Fluffykins," I said. Yes, out loud. Call me crazy, but I talk to my cat. I fed him a piece of Canadian bacon as he pawed at my thighs, creating himself a nice little nest. I flipped on the TV and went to my DVR, scrolling through my recorded shows.

"Are we in the mood for Wolf Blitzer or Katie Couric?" I asked my cat.

Mr. Fluffykins cocked his head to the side and mewed.

"Couric it is." I selected the program and settled in to get my fill of what was going on in the news world that didn't revolved around a

teenebrity's hair color.

* * *

I was jolted awake by a splash of water hitting my face and the sound of something slamming into the side of the building. My eyes shot open and I bolted upright in bed, adrenalin immediately pumping through my system. It was pitch-black. I blinked through the darkness, trying to get my bearings. Finally shapes came into focus...my Hello Kitty alarm clock, the flower-shaped mirror on my wall, Mr. Fluffykins dozing at my feet.

I was just about to write off my jolt as a bad dream when the sound erupted again. Water, hitting the side of my building with the velocity of a firehose. Instinctively I turned to the window... and felt water raining down on me.

I jumped up from my bed and watched as a stream of water shot through my window, landing on my pink bedsheets.

What the hell?

I pulled aside my plastic renter's blinds and peered out into the yard.

Between my building and the fourplex next door sat a strip of grass. At current there was more mud than greenery, but a few patch of crabgrass looked hopeful they might become a lawn one day.

Apparently so were my neighbors, as a brand-

new, industrial-sized sprinkler head jutted out of the muddy crabgrass, spraying a rotating stream of water at dangerous speeds between the buildings. I jumped back when it turned my way again, narrowly avoiding another power blast as it shot through my window.

Unfortunately Mr. Fluffykins wasn't so lucky, getting the full force of it on his tail. He yowled and jumped almost as high I as had, running for the safety of the living room.

I quickly shut the window, making a mental note to visit my neighbors tomorrow morning. Then I looked down at my sheets.

Soaked.

Fab.

I grabbed a pillow and shuffled out after Mr. Fluffykins to the sofa.

Three hours and one fat, snoring cat later, I awoke with a crick in my neck, a pain in my side, and cat hair in my mouth.

Ick.

I looked at the clock. Six am.

I grabbed a cup of coffee then went into my room to survey the damage to my sheets in the light of day. It looked like I'd wet my bed. Several times. I stripped them off, trudged to the back of the building and threw them in the coin-operated laundry. I crossed the muddy lawn, now squishing wet beneath my fuzzy pink slippers, and banged on my neighbor's door.

Two beats later a squat, Russian guy answered. He had a bald head, a paunchy middle barely encased in a bathrobe, and a cigar sticking out the side of his face. "Dah?"

"I'm so sorry to bother you, but your sprinkler is turned up very too high."

He beamed. "Dah. Is good sprinkler, no?"

I shook my head. "No. Is not good. Is pelting my bedroom window."

His massive unibrow hunkered down over his beady eyes. "Too loud?"

"Too wet. The window was open, and it soaked my bed."

He grinned. "Ha! That wake you up, huh?"

I narrowed my eyes. "Oh, yeah. It wake me up."

He nodded. "Okay, okay. I fix it. Promise. Today, I fix it."

"Thanks," I mumbled, then trudged back home to take the longest, hottest shower on record. Seriously, if my paycheck didn't afford an apartment upgrade soon, I might shoot myself. Or my neighbor.

I went with peach-scented body wash today, needing the pick-me-up, then did my hair and make-up, adding an extra layer of mascara to show just how serious I was about this Barker story. I dressed in a white denim skirt, pink tank top with ruffles down the front and a pair of silver roman-

style sandals with glittery glass diamonds on the top. Totally cute. Totally hot. Totally going to get me into any place I wanted to go, press pass or no.

Which was good, because Barker's production company, Real Life Productions, was housed on the Sunset Studios lot. The Sunset Studios were located off the 101, just west of Griffith Park, in the heart of tinseltown. They were the largest studio in town, taking up two full city blocks, and surrounded by a large cement wall topped by massive spiky iron bars. San Quentin was easier to break into than the Sunset Studios. It was the only fortress in Hollywood impenetrable by the average reporter.

Luckily, I wasn't just average.

I grabbed a knock-off Juicy bag from my closet and matched it with a pair of big, black sunglasses. They looked just like Christian Dior shades, right down to the CD on the sides. I'd actually bought them at a gas station halfway between here and Oxnard, used a sharpie to obliterate the generic brand name, then glued on the sparkly "CD" with a hot glue gun. Not bad, even if I did say so myself.

Then, instead of jumping in my Bug, I dialed a car service and waited while it rang three times on the other end.

"Elite cars, how may I help you?" a woman answered the phone.

"Hi," I said, giving my voice just the slightest nasally tone to it. "This is Paris Hilton's assistant. I need a car to pick her up in Glendale at the

Starbucks on Brand, and take her to the Sunset Studios in Hollywood."

"No problem," the woman on the other end said, and I could hear the sound of a keyboard keys as she typed info into her system. "When you would like it?" she asked.

"ASAP. She's shooting a commercial there this morning."

More typing. "Okay, we have a town car limousine that can pick her up in fifteen minutes. Will that be acceptable?"

"Fabulous!" I said.

"I just need a credit card to process the order, and I'll dispatch him right away."

"No problem," I said. Then rattled of the digits of the *Informer's* account. Not that I was supposed to have unlimited access to such digits, but if Felix really hadn't wanted me using it, he shouldn't have left his card out where anyone could see it and memorize the number. Besides, this was a bona fide business expense. And not one I had the funds to cover, I realized, as the woman on the phone gave me the total.

I thanked her and hung up then wrapped a pink silk scarf over my head, put on my faux designer sunglasses, and hightailed it to Starbucks to wait for my limo.

It arrived exactly fifteen minutes later. The driver got out and opened the back door for me with a, "Good morning, Miss Hilton."

I gave him an aloof nod, hopped in and promptly closed the partition between us.

Twenty minutes later, the driver pulled up to the front gate of the Sunset Studios. I held my breath in the backseat, thinking heiress-like thoughts.

The driver stopped at the guardhouse and rolled down his window. A guy with a clipboard who didn't look a day over a hundred hobbled out of the tiny structure and up to the window. His skin was wrinkled and tanned to a crisp, like he'd spent one too many days on duty in the guardhouse without sunscreen. Or he really dug tanning beds.

I cracked the partition to hear the exchange.

"Name?" the guard asked.

"Elite car service. I've got Paris Hilton here."

The guard looked to my tinted window, squinting in. "Can you have her roll her window down, please?" he asked.

I felt butterflies take hold in my stomach as I slowly rolled down my window, praying the guard was a nearsighted as he seemed. I gave him a little wave.

The guard nodded. "Morning, Miss Hilton," he said.

I did a sigh of relief.

"Go on ahead," the ancient guy said, waving the driver on and stepping back into his house.

That was almost too easy.

I quickly rolled up my window, instructing the driver to let me out near the production offices to the left.

Sunset Studios was a huge place, laid out like a miniature city. Only the city was a little schizophrenic. We had Boston brownstones down one street, Victorian mansions on the next. Gritty New York graffiti covered the walls of a pizza joint just around the corner from a suburban tree-lined street that could have been home to Wally and the Beave. Near the back of the lot were rows of squat warehouses where sitcoms and movies-of-the-week were filmed. And to the left was a colony of small bungalows that held the production offices of countless companies, all with cute little names from the Hollywood of old.

I'd done a little digging this morning on my cell while I'd waited at Starbucks and ascertained that Real Life productions was housed in the *Gone With the Wind* bungalow, which turned out to look nothing like antebellum Georgia. It was brick, short and had a faux-thatched roof that made it look like it belonged to a quaint English villager and not the biggest name in reality TV.

I shoved my sunglasses up on my head and was just about to knock on the door when a voice hailed me from behind.

"Excuse me?"

Uh-oh.

I turned to find a tall, dark haired guy standing behind me. He was dressed in jeans and a button-

down shirt, untucked in a casual dressy kind of way. His square jaw, honey-colored tan and perfectly gelled hair screamed *movie star*, though his face didn't look familiar.

"Yeah?" I asked, doing my best Paris impression—fifty percent valley girl, fifty percent bored to tears.

"How did you get in here?" he asked.

I cocked a hip and twirled a lock of hair, consciously dropping about 50 IQ points from my voice. "Waddaya mean?"

"Last I checked, Sunset was closed to reporters."

I froze, anxiety suddenly swirling in my gut. "Reporter? What do you mean reporter? I'm not a reporter," I lied, twirling furiously. "I'm Paris Hilton."

He grinned at me, a pair of dimples creasing his cheeks. "Oh, really?"

"Um, ya, really."

"That's funny."

"And why is that?" I asked, hating the way nerves made my voice about two octaves too high.

"Because you look a lot more like Allie Quick to me."

Uh-oh. Busted.

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