

The sun *was a molten copper coin on the horizon*. Clouds scattered sparsely across the bright blue expanse above. The waves crashed in and slipped silently back out. *She had been here before, soaking up the sun's warmth, feeling so gloriously free...*

Now she was limping down the street with a suitcase in one hand and a cat tucked under her other arm. No one stopped to talk to her or help. They probably think I'm homeless, she thought. Then she realized that's exactly what she was.

Maggie rolled over on the thin hotel *matress* to stare blearily up at the ceiling. Her shoulder throbbed as she struggled to untangle herself from the mess of blankets and sheets that still smelled faintly of bleach. *She caught her shoulder on* the corner of the night stand as she pulled herself up. She sucked in her breath sharply, her hand instinctively going to her shoulder, *as her eyes teared up* in pain.

She tossed the covers back and went into the bathroom to remove the bandage. She inspected the long, jagged cut, *which* was deeper than *she originally thought*. *She* probably needed stitches, but there was no way she was going to the hospital. They *would* ask too many questions.

Re-bandaging *her shoulder* took *fifteen* minutes because she could only use one hand. She was already late. She had forgotten to bring an alarm and *didn't think* to ask *the hotel* for a wake-up call. She *didn't have time to think about* much, *really*. *She had grabbed her suitcase and filled it with* clothes, a few personal *items*, extra bandages, *her* guitar, and of course, *her cat* Romeo, *who was her faithful companion* since she was twelve.

Romeo *was now* stretched out contentedly on the dresser, *watching her* as she got ready.

"Be good, lover." She picked Romeo up and cradled him lovingly in her good arm. "And keep quiet, or you're out of here, got it?"

He mewed loudly and she kissed his pink-tipped nose, her eyes tearing up as she swallowed *past* the lump in her throat. *The hotel didn't allow pets*, but she *could never* leave him in that house with *him*. The thought made her shudder. Romeo was the only thing in the world that she loved. If that meant breaking a few rules to keep him, *then so be it*.

"See ya tonight." She *said before* once more *before shutting the door behind her*, his thin white tail rising in the air. *She hung* the "Do Not Disturb—No Maid Service Required" sign on the knob. It was going to be strange, calling a hotel room home. She checked her watch. Almost noon! She was nearly an hour late. *That's all I need--to lose my job now!* She stopped at the elevator and pushed the arrow pointing down.

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She tried to pull her jacket on while she was waiting, but it turned into an ordeal. She got one arm in, but her injured arm didn't want to lift high enough. Struggling, she managed to almost get her arm in, but the pain was too much, and the jacket fell over her head. The elevator dinged and the doors whooshed open. Stepping inside, she was still pulling at her jacket and she stumbled into something. Her shoulder ached, but her jacket finally managed to slip into place as she realized that, more accurately, she had run into someone. She looked up, ready to apologize.

"Hey there beautiful..." His eyes smiled at her, but something about him seemed smug. "Watch where you're going, huh?"

"Sorry." She turned her back to him as the elevator started down again.

"Oops, didn't mean to offend." He leaned toward her, trying to catch her eye, but she focused only on the elevator doors, willing them to open. "Promise you won't sue me for sexual harassment?"

Maggie waved her hand at him, shaking her brunette head, still refusing to meet his eyes.

"So..." He stepped a little closer to her, trying to catch her eye. Damn, she 's beautiful, he thought. "What's your name?"

She rolled her eyes, wishing the hotel didn't have so many damned floors. "Do you ask every woman you meet in an elevator for her name?"

"No." He grinned. "Just the pretty ones."

Snorting, she turned her back to him again. "Am I supposed to be flattered?"

"Come on, just your name," he said, gently poking her. Unfortunately, he chose the wrong shoulder and she winced, drawing further back. "Can't I just have your name?"

Holding her injured shoulder, she snapped, "Why, don't you have your own?"

"Ouch!" Out of the corner of her eye, she saw him clutch his chest and stagger backward. "I've been mortally wounded."

The elevator was nearing the ground floor and Maggie stepped toward the doors. "Look, I'm not your type, okay?"

He edged forward, too, crossing his arms and leaning against the wall. "And how do you know that?"

The elevator came to a stop and she waited for the doors to open before she turned and said. "Because I'm not inflatable."

He laughed and then winked. "Now that's what I call a comeback!"

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“Snappy comebacks laced with sarcasm are just one of the many services we offer.” Maggie stepped off the elevator, weeding her way through the crowd waiting to get on. She was afraid he would follow her and she rushed through the lobby without glancing back. Once in her car, she scanned the parking lot, glad she didn’t see him anywhere.

With a sigh of relief, she checked her watch, and then started. She was really going to be late *now*. It was only a 15 minute drive, but in L.A. traffic, that could mean anywhere from *30* to 45 minutes. But she zipped her little Kia through *traffic* in record time, pulling up to the studio and cutting the engine.

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The day was already warm and hazy and Maggie breathed in the air conditioning gratefully as she stepped through the main lobby doors.

“Uh-oh.” Delia set down the phone and looked over her desk. “You’re late.”

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Maggie nodded, out of breath. “I know. Is Rufus here?”

Delia laughed. “Does he ever leave?”

“That’s what I figured.” Maggie’s heart fell to her stomach. “Is the band already here?”

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“No.” Delia’s eyes brightened. “Not yet, but believe me, I’m keeping an eye out. You better get inside.”

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“Yeah.” Maggie smiled weakly and opened the door to the studio, heading down the long hallway toward the mixing room. The studio was dark and eerily quiet.

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“You’re late,” Rufus said, not looking up from the computer as she *entered*.

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“Sorry.” Maggie apologized meekly and slid into a chair. “Hi, Nick,” *she acknowledged*.

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“Nice of you to make it.” Nick snorted, rolling his eyes. “Hey, Ruf, do you want another coffee?”

Rufus, still not glancing *up* from the screen, held his mug out to his assistant. “Thanks.”

Not the best time to ask for a raise, Maggie thought, ignoring the bullets that Nick was shooting into her skull with his eyes on his way out.

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“I’m sorry I was late,” she apologized again, taking the chair closest to Rufus and peering over her shoulder at his work on the computer screen.

He waved her words away. “It’s alright. Mr Rock Star isn’t here yet, anyway.”

“Who is this guy?” Maggie leaned back in the chair, watching Rufus work. Everything in mixing was done by computer now, *and* she’d earned every bit of her status as the company’s top audio engineer in the last five years bringing them up to speed.

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Rufus raised an eyebrow in her direction, looking at her for the first time since she'd come in. "Do you live in a bubble? How can you not know Jesse Miles?"

"Ohhhh is this the soap opera guy?" Maggie leaned forward and, with a few keystrokes, corrected something. Rufus nodded. "The one Delia's been talking about non-stop for the past week?"

"The same." He clicked "save" and closed down the program. He ejected the CD from the drive and handed it to her. "And my dear, I'm afraid I'm going to have to leave you both to it because I've got a meeting over at RCA this afternoon. And the top execs at RCA take precedence over soap-hunk-turned-pop-star, Jesse Miles."

"I think I can handle him." Maggie took the disk, not turning as the door opened, assuming it was just Nick coming back with the coffee. "Is this the master mix?" she asked, seemingly to the air.

"Handle me!" The voice bounded from the door, and Maggie looked up, startled. "Oh yes, please, handle me all you want."

It was the guy from the elevator, with the same dumb smile.

"I know, I'm late." He took a seat next to Maggie with a grin. "But at least now I know why you were in such a hurry to get here, huh, beautiful?"

Rufus looked back and forth between them, his eyebrows raised.

"You've met?"

"Not formally." He held out his hand. "Hi, I'm the soap opera guy, Jesse Miles."

"Hi." Maggie winced, glancing at Rufus, who stood and gave her a wide-eyed shrug. She shook Jesse's outstretched hand. "Nice to meet you," she offered, trying to be professional.

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