

LINDSEY SCHEIBE



One summer.
Endless possibilities.

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one

Surfing is for life.

—Bruce Jenkins, *North Shore Chronicles*

I stretch out my legs, enjoying the hot sand against my calves. Early morning sun creates an orange sheen on the ocean as I search for a big set of waves. The endless white formations roll in; lines of blurred corduroy become distinct opportunities—or not—as they roll closer to the local surf break. A few surfers are already out there, dotting the horizon and catching waves. Alluring, sexy waves. The kind that promise to wash away anything but the moment you're riding them.

I look over my shoulder to see Ford walking toward me, his board under his arm. He's late. But no point in being frustrated. Ford is Ford. I put up with it because he's one of the major reasons I'm sane. Well, him and surfing. I flex my toes and bend them down, digging them into the sand. Ford's been my best friend since the summer before sophomore year—he was a newbie from Huntington, wearing surfer clothes and looking the part. I was obsessed with surfing that entire summer. After a couple of arguments about which surfers on the junior tour had the best sessions on YouTube videos, we agreed to disagree until one of us kicked enough ass to compete.

Ford lays his board down and sits next to me. "There's a set coming in and you're catching rays? C'mon on now, Grace."

"At least I show up early to pay homage to the waves. Where's your dedication, Mr. Surf God?"

"I'm dedicated to my friends and the waves. It's Esmerelda's fault I'm late."

Ford could drive almost any truck in existence, as tricked-out as it gets. But he prefers Esmerelda, a wonderful old beater he can work on. He probably had to coax her to life this morning. Lately, she's had a funny knocking sound.

I try not to check him out too obviously. His dark legs and lean body have changed for the better since last summer. I can't help crushing on him, but we're BFs and that's off-limits. Besides, every ounce of energy I have this summer is going toward figuring out how to get a surf scholarship to UCSD.

He kicks off his Reefs and I add, "Nice board shorts. You have excellent taste."

"Yeah, since you picked them out, Gidget." His eyebrows rise and his left dimple shows. There's a playful challenge in his grin, one I can't ignore.

"Oh yeah? Gidget?" When people hear that name, regular folks might not know what it means. Older folks might think about the old movies, TV series, or books. But when surfers hear "Gidget," they usually think about a woman who still gets listed as one of the top surfer girls ever. They also think "pint-sized."

Standing up to my full height, I come eye-to-chest with Ford. I give him my best intimidating stare. Fighting a smile probably isn't helping the stare-down thing.

Ford throws his head back and laughs. I step toward him, hands on my hips. In one quick swoop, he bends down and slings me over his shoulder. I hang onto his torso, trying to lessen the jostle, as he runs toward the water.

Flailing and slapping his back, I protest. "Ford Watson, put me down."

"Ford *Watson*," he mocks, simultaneously laughing and wading into knee-deep water before tossing me in. I squeal in protest at the cold. My butt hits the hard sand before I spring up, ready to get even, but by the time I wipe salty water from my eyes Ford is on the beach waxing his board—a ten-foot Stewart Regal, single fin. The seductiveness of his surfboard is ridiculous, a new take on a retro design. Tribal spears hug the outsides of the board, which is a blue that blends in with the ocean, making him a god commanding the waves.

Charging out of the water, I make a beeline for him.

He waves me off. "Aww. Be a good sport. Go wax your board."

"Fine, but only 'cause a solid set is coming in."

Since it's the summer before senior year, this is *the* year—my last chance to get noticed by college surf coaches. If I want to have a snowball's chance in the Bahamas of making it happen, then I gotta tweak my skills and make a local presence. That's what it takes to get noticed.

My board is an old yellow beak-nosed from the 70s. It's a six-foot ten-inch Bing model with faded red lettering. Dings show off the vintage factor, if the shape of the nose weren't telltale enough. Thin red lines outline the edges. A couple of patches draw attention, screaming *fixed by girl owner*. I love it.

"Grace, the waves ain't gonna wait."

I flick sand at Ford's feet. Feeling antsy to catch some, I go tug on my summer wetsuit. It may be June, but the water around here is still in the upper sixties.

I slide my suit over my legs and hop a little as I try to pull it over my shoulders. My boobs jiggle a little in the process. I glance over at Ford and notice how he turns his head quickly. I tug at the sleeves of my wetsuit, slightly amused and slightly embarrassed. I turn around so he can zip me up. It's not like I can't; it's just something nice he does for me.

My leash is all knotted up. Ford untangles it and attaches it to my surfboard. Most boards have a place embedded on the underbelly to attach the leash, but for some reason, mine is special. It attaches to the fin.

"Thanks, Ford."

"I'll be an old man by the time you're finished if I don't help."

"Whatev."

I wax my board while he grabs my ankle, attaching my leash. For a split second his hand lingers there. Last night's dream flickers and I stand up, aware of the inch of skin his hand touched. I grab my board and run toward the water with a long-short, long-short gallop as my leash holds one leg back.

"Last one in loads the boards," I holler, running at half speed and knowing there's no chance of Ford catching me when I'm this far ahead.

I reach the waterline, toss my board in victoriously, wade out as far as I can, and then begin the arduous task of getting raked over as I paddle out.

Ford may have reached the water second, but he paddles fast and soon makes it out there to the big dogs waiting for the Wave.

I keep my eye on the locals as I paddle out to the lineup. The water turns rough as a set of waves pass through. I sputter, hang on, and try to paddle past. Two strokes forward, one knocked back. After repeating this scenario several times, I join the rest of the surfers.

"Hey, Parker. Over here," Ford directs, staking his claim on me. Really, he's protecting me from a few hormone-raging, I-only-think-below-the-waist

potheads. Though not all surf guys are like that. There really are a lot of super-talented, artsy surfers ... contrary to some people's opinions, like my mom's...

The two other girls out here, Carrie and Talia, usually hang together. They're stud surfers and sometimes I wish we could be friends. But my mom taught me a long time ago that women aren't to be trusted. Most girls would think I'm a weirdo or something anyway, because I wouldn't have a lot to say. The great thing about having guy friends is not having to talk about things you don't want to.

I paddle to Ford. He's straddling his longboard, black hair glistening; he greets me with a grin. His left dimple makes me think of the practical jokes he pulled on me after we first met. It also draws my eyes to his full lips.

When I reach his vicinity, I push up off my board and straddle it. Our boards bob up and down, announcing the next set's arrival.

Damien, a local surfer with gorgeous dreads, says, "Hey babe. Why don't you come catch some waves over here? They're a lot bigger." His insinuation is obvious, but I kind of enjoy being noticed even if he has a reputation for being a horndog. Personally, I think his reputation is more smoke than fire.

Ford steps in. "Prove it."

The other guys laugh. A few make the *ooh whatcha gonna do now* sound.

Even though Damien talks big, I think he's really a good guy. He's always been nice to me. I don't understand that instant rivalry Ford feels toward Damien.

The perfect wave comes our way. It's solid, peeling off the water into a tight curl while the face of it keeps growing. Ford starts paddling to snag it at the crucial moment. I laugh; he's freaking awesome. He comes down off the face, does a bottom turn, and carves down the line to the right. He turns up and down the face the rest of the ride before he exits the wave and paddles toward me.

"Gnar ride, man," I say.

Ford basks in the warmth of my praise like a Beach Betty soaking up sun. With a *beat that* smirk, he looks toward Damien and shoots him the bird using both hands.

Damien happily returns the greeting and I try not to laugh. Damien's so cute about giving the one-fingered salute.

Ford says, "Hey, this next one's yours."

I look over my shoulder to see an epic wave barreling toward us.

“Hello? Look at the size of that monster.”

“Parker. It’s *your* turn.” Ford always pushes me. “C’mon. Represent the ladies.”

Ford knows what to say to get my dander up. I eye the wave and paddle for dear life. If I don’t catch it, I’ll drown trying. The wave catches up to me, and I start to get sucked up to the top. Falling off your board is one thing, but getting stuck in the wave when it comes crashing down is another. The force of the water pummels you, and rolls you until you don’t know which end is up. Desperate, I try to paddle my way back toward the bottom of the wave. To represent. To show the guys what’s up. More than anything, to prove to myself I’m tough.

I pop up on deck, right foot forward. I barely make the bottom turn, and then I notice the wave curling over my shoulders. For the first time in my life, I’m inside the barrel of a wave. Amped, I let out a tribal yell. The rush is incredible. Zooming through a wall of water, still breathing like normal, I enjoy the magic of feeling free and alone. I would stay in this water wonderland forever if I could. But the ride won’t last; I bear down and transfer my weight to my front foot, accelerating my speed, and throw my left arm out to graze the wall of water as I shoot through it before it crumbles.

Euphoric, I cut back and ride what’s left of the line. Cheers erupt. Whistles and applause. I paddle back toward the group. I swear I’m on top of the freaking world. Ford winks and gives me the *sweet move* thumbs-up. The two of us might be acting low-key, but the truth is, I’ve trained for this moment. Hard work makes victory that much sweeter. The whooshing sound of being barreled, and the feeling of running my hand through an ocean wall, play on repeat as I make my way toward the crew.

After another hour of surfing—and laughing at the guys jawing back and forth about their boards, their “packages,” and the waves—I paddle in. Actually, I catch a wave and ride it in as long as I can, savoring the floating, lazy sensation of letting the ocean carry me toward shore until I’m in knee-deep water.

Once my feet hit the sand, I walk out of my Pacific haven and disengage my leash. That’s when I feel the reality of life hit me head-on. I dig frantically through my bag and slather on more sunscreen in case the ocean washed off the

first application. Then I fish for my visor and sunglasses. If I come home with one more sunburn I'm gonna be grounded for life, or worse—I'll receive the hour-long lecture about skin cancer, leathery skin, and rapid aging.

It's fun watching the breakers roll in and surfers catching rides. There are some girls who are ripping extra hard this morning. It's hypnotic watching them. Women bring fluidity and grace to the sport that not many men can claim. Watching a woman catch a wave is like watching a dance where the partners take turns leading.

Doubt creeps in like the ocean tide. My getting barreled once, here at Ponto, won't attract buzz. There are so many more tricks to learn, and I'm not even sure I can repeat today's victory. How much was luck and how much was preparation? Then I remember a quote Ford once wrote on a notecard for me to carry in my wallet, since he knows what a freak I am about quotes.

Luck is what happens when preparation meets opportunity.—Lucius
Annaeus Seneca

I plop down in the sand and frown, wondering how in the world I'm going to convince my mom to let me enter a couple of local comps in the fall, not to mention wanting to go to college in-state. Maybe I can get Dad to help convince her on the competition front, but that will be about as tricky as catching a seven-foot double-up at Big Rock. I grab my surfboard wax and play around with it, molding it with my fingers.

For me, surfing is survival. It transcends everyday life; it's all about the ride and the moment.

Every.

Single.

Time.

Everything else disappears.

two

mija: contraction of "mi" and "hija" ("my" and "daughter"), used as a term of endearment

I set my board down on the sand and nudge Grace's foot with mine, so freaking proud of her. "So about that tube ride ... "

She knocks her hoodie back and does a seated victory dance, complete with squeal, while bouncing her feet in the sand.

I sit down by her, enjoying how cute she is when she gets excited. "Chill. Don't let it go to your head or I'm gonna have to buy you a visor three times bigger."

"Whatever. You know you're proud of me." She pokes my chest.

"You know, I charge people for that." I brush wet hair out of my face.

She laughs at my dumb joke. "Really? I thought it was the other way around."

"Ha ha. And while we're on our little bragfest, I got news." Holding this in, waiting for the perfect moment to share, has been epic hard.

She crinkles her nose. "What kind?"

"News of the one-more-reason-moms-in-San-Diego-County-would-love-for-me-to-date-their-daughter variety." I'm half joking about that. Her mom always seems so stiff; it feels like she's icing me out.

Grace rolls her eyes. "Well?"

"I've got an internship."

"Where?"

I bust out with a massive smile. "At the best law firm in town."

She scrunches her brows together. "Haha. Funny. You losing surf time over the summer, on purpose? I haven't heard Dad say anything about that. Besides, you would've asked me to hook you up, right? I mean, I do have the connections."

Her response floors me. “Really? You don’t think I could get an internship on my own?”

“C’mon,” Grace says. “That’s not how I meant it. It’s just that if you really were going for an internship at my dad’s firm, I would think you’d have told me. And I think my dad would’ve said something about giving you a spot on his how-I’m-going-to-make-senior-partner program. That’s all.”

“Well, one, I did go for it, and two, remember that my first name isn’t technically Ford—it’s Ferdinand. If your dad had interviewed me, he would have found out just who this ‘Ferdinand Watson’ was. It’s not like Watson is a unique last name! C’mon, I wanted to be treated like anybody else. No favors. But apparently he was caught up in some major case, so some junior-partner person met with me. And, by the way, three—your dad is like a freaking hero. His last high-profile pro bono case, where he saved that little old lady from deportation? He kicked some major ass. This internship is huge, and I thought you’d be ecstatic for me. Guess I was confused.”

Grace lunges toward me and gives me a big hug. “Hey, I’m sorry.”

I wrap my arms around her, my forearms resting across the top of her hips, fingers curved around her waist. She leans into me and rests against me, like for this minute everything unspoken that weighs down on her is in my hands. I wish I knew what goes on in Grace’s head when she stares off, looking lost.

She pulls back and her smile is sweet as honey. “Congrats. Really. It’ll be huge for your college apps, and I think you’ll be awesome. They’re lucky to have you. And you’re right, Dad kicks major ass.”

I pull her back for a quick hug and nuzzle the top of her head with my chin, wishing this hug was something more than it is. “Thanks, Grace.”

“I really am—happy—for you. Let’s celebrate.”

I pull back and grin. “With a date?”

Crap.

Grace has this panicked look. She grabs her bag and digs around. She plucks her ChapStick, opens it, and smears it nervously across her lips. “Um. Sure, we can totally go on a friend date.”

Crash and burn. I should have been smoother. Been romantic.

Retreat, retreat.

I frown. “Okay. Well, I’m pretty booked this week getting ready for the internship. How about we just do lunch like normal?”

Grace grins, and the awkwardness of the moment passes. “Let’s grab a bite to eat. I’m starving.”

“Translation: Why don’t we go to Ford’s house, where he’ll fix me tortillas with chorizo and eggs?”

“Well?”

“Fine,” I say. “I’ll fix you lunch, but only ’cause my cooking blows yours away.”

Grace wags her finger at me, all cute. “I *know* you didn’t go there. I know you didn’t. A few burnt pieces of toast and a gal’s reputation goes down the tubes. Because I’m a nice girl and all, I’m gonna pretend you didn’t say that.”

Some bunnies are just that—bunnies who like to get all fancy but got nothing to say. They’re blank boards, nothing on them. And, for sure, there are plenty of hotties out there. But Grace? She’s off the charts—every guy with a brain and a pair of nads drools when she walks past in those comfy surf T-shirts that hug her in all the right ways. To me, she’s hot. She’s fun. She surfs, likes to work out. Laughs at my dumb jokes. She’s cool. When I pull up to the beach, Grace sitting next to me in Esmerelda, I know all the guys are wishing she was in their truck instead, letting them help her with her surfboard.

For the past two years, I haven’t progressed one bit past the best-friend-ometer. And I’ve been so gone over Grace that I haven’t even considered another girl. Heck, I talk big in the lineup, but what guy doesn’t? The truth is, I’m inexperienced when it comes to girls. Grace is the only one I’ve had eyes for and she hasn’t shown interest, at least not that I can be sure about. This summer it’s time to steer my own ship, and there are two destinations I plan on sailing for: one, dating Grace, and two, impressing colleges with my internship at one of the top law firms in San Diego. So far, number one ain’t looking so hot. ’Cause the whole deer-in-the-headlights *sure, we can go on a friend date?* Not exactly encouraging.

The ride to my house is filled with music, no convo, and mental replays of this morning. I wish Grace had been more excited about my internship. Sometimes I

feel like she's hot and cold about things. About me. Sometimes chasing her gets me all bent, like a crap end to a decent ride.

I pull up the gravel drive to *mi casa*, listening to the usual crunch of pebbles under my wheels. Esmerelda's engine cuts with a sigh and I hop out. As I walk around the front of the car, Grace bursts out of the truck, legs flailing cartoon-style as she lands on the grass.

She mutters, "Stupid door sticks."

I crack up.

She whacks me on the arm. "You *know*—it's easier to open the door from the outside."

"If someone would wait, instead of getting her panties in a wad, I might be able to get to the door in time to help out."

"If someone didn't feel the need to drive around in an old truck with rusted hinges ... " Her voice fades off in a singsong trail.

"Sacrilege! Wash that mouth out with soap."

She smiles and shakes her head.

"Careful now, Esmerelda's sensitive."

Grace follows me up the gravel path and then separates when I start crossing the grass. She keeps to the sidewalk like always. For a while, I told her it's okay to walk on our grass. Grass is grass. You know? But Grace can't help herself. It's like she's destined to color inside the lines. Me? I figure lines are more of a suggestion—like speed limits.

All the windows are open and the screen door is letting the breeze into the house, which means one thing. Ma, God help us all, is on a cleaning spree. Unfortunately, she's not really good at it. So, there will be piles of laundry left on the couch or a cleaning rag abandoned on the countertop, mid-swipe. Anytime I've seen the inside of Grace's house, it's spotless. It's dumb, but sometimes I'm kind of embarrassed about the little messes here and there.

We walk through the entry and I hurry past what Grace calls *The Great Wall of Watsons*. Basically, it's the worst wall in America. It's chock-full of crap like little league plaques, karate trophies, and Ma's four diplomas. Yep, that's four. Most people are content to get a bachelor's. Some spring for a master's and a few driven souls get their doctorates. But Ma? She had to get two master's

degrees. It drives me nuts how Grace lingers when we pass the way-to-go show. She knows it too.

“*Mammi*. Grace and I are home for lunch.”

Ma enters from the hallway.

Grace says, “Great skirt, Mrs. Watson.”

Ma pads across, gives me a big hug, and plants a loud kiss on my cheek. Then she wipes at my hair like I’m in kindergarten. “*Mammi* ! Come on.” I bob away from her like a boxer, footwork included. This is the routine. Never fails. I look over at Grace, slightly embarrassed again.

Her response? A tiny amused smirk.

I look back at Ma and roll my eyes, which is quickly returned with a swat to the top of my head, “Ah *Mammi* ... ”

“Well, don’t roll your eyes at me.”

“I wasn’t—” Crap. The Look. That one. I back off fast. “Okay okay, I was just kidding. Sorry.”

Grace laughs hysterically.

“Ah, *mijo*.” Ma waves at me as if I have no right to embarrassment. She greets Grace. “*Mija*.” Ma chuckles and gives her a big hug and smooch on the cheek. She pulls back and looks her up and down, wagging her long red nail, which I assume means she thinks Grace needs to fatten up. She usually makes some sort of reference to anyone’s need to eat more.

“Grace, it’s good to see you. You’re so tan—I might be able to get away with claiming you as my own. *Mijo*, fix this girl some lunch.”

Which, of course, is the whole reason we’re here.

Ma asks, “Weren’t you two out surfing?”

“Yes, and we’re starving,” Grace quickly responds.

Ma quips, “Which is the precise reason you need to get some real food in this girl. Now that the house is clean, I have research projects to grade.” She wanders off down the hall humming, clueless about the mop still leaning against the kitchen counter. She’s the stereotypical genius who can never find her laptop. And Dad? He almost always has grease stains rubbed into creases on his hands.

Ma is a marine biology professor at the University of San Diego, a guru in the field. Guru meaning badass, in all respects. She knows her stuff.

We *vámonos* to the kitchen. An article boasting the latest buzz on her most recent academic feat hangs on the refrigerator. It's titled *Patricia Watson—Local Genius*. I slide the article down and say, "There goes Mom, kicking butt and taking names."

"Must run in the family."

"Me? Ha." I open the fridge and hum while sorting through the ridiculously crowded shelves. Fixing vehicles and excelling in academics runs in our family; cleaning out the refrigerator does not. In fact, I'd go so far as to say it's a dirty phrase in our house.

I grab a carton of eggs, *queso fresco*, chorizo, and then the key to it all, a container full of Ma's homemade tortillas.

Grace says, "Maybe this will fatten me up."

"Ai." I focus my energy on chopping the chorizo before I say, "You don't need to be fattened up, and you don't need to lose weight."

"Says you. My curves barely exist." Grace sidles over and bumps her hip against me as if to prove her point. The girl has some curves. Enough curves to make my heart beat faster.

"Don't underestimate yourself." She lets loose a small smile. Score.

I love cooking, and if it weren't for the fact that I want to actually do something with my life like help people, especially my peeps, I might go all gourmet chef. I crack the eggs one-handed over the cast iron skillet. I let the eggshells rest in the palm of my hand and bump my hand from underneath to make the eggshells fly onto a nearby plate. I glance over at Grace to see if she was watching. Her smile widens. Bingo.

I focus on flipping the tortillas on the second skillet and try to come up with something to say. "So today was a great day, huh?"

"Yeah. It was."

Grace puts the magazine down and pours a cup of coffee, watching me flip the tortillas using my fingertips. Little bubbles of brown pop up on one. I add it to my *abuelita*'s hand-stitched tortilla warmer, which she gave Ma when my folks married.

Even though we still aren't a couple, lunch this afternoon is different—and in a weird way. I think it might be different-good, but if that's true, then why'd she pull the friend card earlier?

I always have fun with Grace, but there's something about her lately; I can't quite put my finger on it. I've been making little comments here and there, like a litmus test for our relationship moving to the next level. Problem is, it feels like the results keep changing.

three

Fairy tales do not tell children that dragons exist. Children already know that dragons exist. Fairy tales tell the children that dragons can be killed.

—G. K. Chesterton

During the ride back to my house, I try to hang on to the fun from surfing this morning. But it's like it's not in my DNA. That whole out-of-sight-out-of-mind thing only works when I'm on my surfboard. When the ocean isn't there to command my attention or Ford isn't around making me laugh, I get sucked back toward my family like it's a black hole. I've spent my whole life keeping my worlds separate—school, beach friends, home. And now, what with Ford interning for my dad, two of them are colliding like particles in an atom smasher. It's all I can do not to come unhinged.

I shake the thoughts out of my head and refocus on the scenery as Ford slows Esmerelda to a stop. Dad's car is parked in the drive. A sudden tightness in my stomach makes me clutch the edge of the seat.

Great, just great.

Ford says, "Smell ya later."

"Yeah, sure."

Ford uses his underarm to make a fart noise, indicating my lack of comeback, before Esmerelda burps a loud good-bye.

I carry my board over to the garage and lay it against the inside wall by the door. Then I plaster a smile on my face, steel my nerves, and walk inside the house via our immaculate laundry room.

It's best to get it over with and say hi to Dad. That's the only way to gauge his mood. I head over to the kitchen and then go into the living room.

He's combing through the mail, a mug of beer on the coffee table.

"Hey, Daddy. How's your morning been?"

"Could have been better. I came home to take a quick break and regroup. This Thompson case is getting out of control." He looks up and frowns. "Where have you been all day?"

"I went surfing with Ford, remember?" I shift my weight from side to side.

Dad flings an envelope on the coffee table, creating a trash pile that will be cleaned immediately after the mail has been sorted. "Are you sunburned? You know how your mother feels about too much sun. Let me see your arms." He grabs my arm to inspect it.

My eyes widen as I check out my skin with him. "No, I'm not sunburned, Daddy. I slathered sunscreen on this morning. The strongest stuff we have."

He drops my arm. He seems disappointed. "Have you done your chores?"

His hands are now full of mail; I relax a little. "No, I'll finish those this evening. I haven't had a chance to do them yet."

He tosses the papers down. His voice turns ugly. "You had time to surf."

"I'll start my chores now." I bite my lip.

He zeroes in on my fear like a shark sensing blood in the water. "What about your college applications?"

"Well, I'll do those after my chores."

"Well, which is it?" he growls. "Are you going to do your applications or your chores?"

"Both. Which would you like me to do first? Obviously, I'm not getting what you want me to do."

As soon as this flies out of my mouth, I know I've given him the opening he wants. Every muscle in my body tenses expectantly. I'm caught inside a twenty-foot swell and don't know a maneuver worth a damn.

His face turns red and it twists into something frightening and malicious. "Why, you little—" He raises his hand to hit me and pulls back just before making contact.

I flinch and cringe. God, I hate showing fear.

Instead of following through with it, he closes in on me and crushes my upper arm. "I don't care how you do it. You better get your damn work done by tonight. And I mean all of it."

I run down the hall before he decides to follow after me. Once I'm safe in my room, I slide down against the doorframe and cry without sound. As I hug my knees, I notice the red fingerprints on my arm. I touch them lightly, close my eyes, and lower my head between my knees. My existence diminishes like a boat on the horizon. I become nothing.

When it feels like everything is slipping out of my reach, I do what I always do. While hugging my favorite stuffed animal—a pajama-clad bear from when I was little—I open my journal of quotes and flip to a good one:

A woman is like a tea bag; you never know how strong she is until she gets into hot water.—Eleanor Roosevelt

Quotes are buoys in the ocean. I hang on to them for sanity, for life, for hope. Quotes keep me going. Sometimes having someone else's words encourages me. They give shape to my feelings.

I should have lied. Told him I'd finished a stupid college app. Next time, I will. You'd think I'd have learned better by now, about lying to make things right. Whatever ... what difference does it make?

I snap to it. There are applications to work on and chores to finish. I take a quick shower—the shower is one of the only places in my house where I feel safe—and let the hot water beat against my skin. Little drops constantly raining down, washing the finger marks off my arm. Washing the humiliation down the drain. Me wishing I could slip down those pipes and come out somewhere else. Anywhere else.

I wish I could stay in the shower forever, but I can't, so I shut it off. I'm determined to beat him at his own game. I'll accomplish everything with time to spare. So I throw some clothes on and get started. I vacuum the house and then sweep and mop the kitchen and bathrooms. I chip away at the tasks before me, taking mini-breaks to fill in tedious, never-ending blanks on college apps to places I don't want to attend.

By the time my mom arrives home from shopping, dusting the living room is the one thing unfinished. My dad hasn't spoken to me since earlier. He's engrossed in whatever case information he's reviewing. Whenever he has a particularly tough case, sometimes he works from home so no one from the office interrupts him. It's good for him but not for me.

Mom breezes in, shopping bags in hand. “Hey, kiddos. How was your afternoon?”

Dad answers, “Everything’s great. I’m working on the Thompson case and Grace has been cleaning.”

I quietly dust a lamp. He’s so full of BS. It’s an unwritten rule that we keep our mouth shut about Dad’s “outbursts,” and if it ever does come up, I get the whole *it’s better to have a father than not speech*. Or *sure, you can call CPS and go live with someone else. Good luck on your foster family. Have you heard the horror stories from those kids?* And I know she’s right. I’ve heard enough to know the grass isn’t always greener.

“What’s going on?” Mom asks, brows furrowed.

I shrug and say nothing. Maybe I’ll say something next time we jog together. Then again, maybe not. She never cares enough to leave him. She never sees the shit go down either, which is real convenient. And it’s not like the marks stay—or if they do, they aren’t in the shape of hand. It could have been from falling on my surfboard. Right?

Mom surveys me. Her eyes move straight to the cutoff jean shorts I changed into. “I hope you’re not planning on wearing those things out in public.”

“No ma’am. I don’t have any plans to go anywhere.” Someday, I’m going to walk out of this house in whatever I want. Until then, frayed or unacceptable clothes get hidden in whatever bag I’m carrying when I walk out the door.

“They make it look like your parents can’t afford to buy you anything better.”

“I didn’t want to risk getting bleach on my nice shorts.”

She takes off her three-inch business heels and rubs at a frown line on her forehead. “Throw those out and go put on acceptable shorts for the dinner table—something tailored.”

If I weren’t in front of Miss Highbrow Fashion, aka Mom, I would so fake-barf at the mention of wearing something tailored. Bleh and grr.

“Jeez, Elaine. Frayed clothes are in right now. Grace always looks pretty.”

Mom’s lips are pursed in disapproval, but they’re also closed and for that I’m thankful.

Dad changes the subject. “So, how was shopping? Show me all your goodies.”

I glance over at Dad. We make eye contact. His face is kinder, almost sorry. The tension begins to fade away like it never happened.

I escape to my room. I hear Mom rattling on about the different purchases she made.

I close my eyes, exhausted.

The alarm on my cell goes off. I slam my book shut, shoot off the couch, and make a running grab for my purse as I blast through the front door, relieved to see that I've beat my dad. I sit on the front porch steps and wait. After yesterday's showdown, a pleasant afternoon is what we need, if for nothing else than to clear the air between us. It makes Dad happy to spoil me. He likes to take me shopping and, before Ford got a truck, he would take me to the beach on Saturday mornings. Dad's the one who taught me how to surf and helped me learn how to know which wave would be a good ride.

He's the one who was with me when I bought my surfboard. Dad was driving me to the beach in his Jeep, his longish blond hair blowing all over the place. When I saw it in the window of Goodwill, I knew it was mine. "Dad, stop. Please! There's a surfboard for sale!"

Dad U-turned. It was one of those blue-sky days in our relationship. "Grace, are you sure you want a beat-up old board? I'd be happy to buy you a brand-new one with all the bells and whistles."

"No way. Old-school boards are cool. They have *history*."

Dad laughed and shrugged his shoulders. I like it when he laughs; it's contagious. Sometimes for a brief moment, I'm able to forget ...

Mom had a conniption; she didn't like me surfing from day one. She never approved of anything that could be construed as dangerous. Somehow, surfing made it into that category. Maybe it's the sharks.

It's kind of ironic considering the state of our family dynamics.

I struggle with the mixed backwash of feelings about hanging out with Dad, about shopping with him. It's stressful at home, but outings with him are fun. It feels good and I know he cares. I mean, really ... how many dads spend time with their kids? My grandfather didn't. He split before Dad ever entered the world, so Dad never met him. My grandfather wasn't around to protect Dad or teach him how to fight for himself when the neighborhood kids went after him, and *believe me, we didn't live in the kind of place you walk around in at night.*

I know shopping trips are his way of saying *sorry, I screwed up, and this is my apology*. But sometimes I wish he would just say it. But then I think about how hard his life was as a kid and how he's always been there for us. For my birthdays and Christmas. To take me surfing and shopping. Those are the times with my dad when I know I'm one hundred percent safe; when I know to savor what we have while we have it. And that's what I try to do.

Dad pulls up in his red convertible BMW, top down, a smile on his face. He reaches across and pushes open the door.

I hop in. "Thanks, Dad. You rock." Part of me means it; part of me knows I need to say it.

"Summer's just getting started and there are bound to be some special summer occasions. I can't have my daughter feeling anything less than a princess, now can I?" He pats my arm, backs out of our driveway, and speeds down the road.

As we shoot down the highway, a sense of cautious ease overtakes me. Nothing spoils a shopping day with Dad. These are moments he lives for. Moments he can be the good guy, the guy I know he wants to be all the time. I stay quiet, not wanting to mess things up, not wanting to make him frustrated. I can drive myself crazy with what ifs, or I can accept the reality of the moment. And this one should be good. The salty wind on my face tastes like freedom as we drive down the main drag to my favorite surf shop.

Dad pulls into the almost-empty parking lot. I exit his convertible and follow him toward Surf Stuff. A bell jingles when he opens a door that's covered in surf stickers. Loud music greets us, and a sick video of big wave surfing plays on a large flat-screen hanging on the back wall.

There's a sale rack I head straight for, eager to scope out the goods. Almost all the spring stuff is on sale. I grab three dresses that look pretty cute.

"Pick whatever you want." Dad reassures me with a smile.

"Thanks." I smile back and duck into a changing room.

I hang them up where I can compare them. An orange retro shift, a yellow empire-waist tank dress, and a classic white A-frame. According to Dad, all dresses should be mid-thigh to knee length. Not too short, not too long.

The shift is way too baggy and unflattering. My chest becomes non-existent. The A-frame is cute, but I have no bra that would be inconspicuous underneath.

By the time I try on the empire waist, I'm feeling low on luck. I pull it over my head, adjust the straps, and voila. I feel confident and pretty.

I step outside to welcome Dad's opinion. He nods his approval.

"That looks good, honey. Do you have a lightweight sweater to wear with it?"

"Yep. Do you remember the short-sleeved white one from last summer?"

He smiles wide—it was a sweater he bought for me on a shopping trip. "Sure do. We bought it at Nordstrom's."

I grin and try not to remember the reason we bought it. "It's a perfect match."

"Good choice. Did you like the other dresses?" He glances at his watch.

I shrug. "They were cuter on the hangers."

I twirl around in front of the mirror. Dresses with the perfect twirl make me smile. This one swirls just right.

Dad tilts his head and smiles at me. "I can't believe my little girl's going off to college soon."

"Me neither." In this kind of situation, I play along, knowing he means every word, and I hang on them wishing this was our norm. It's hard not knowing what sets him off, living life trying to guess what color he wants me to fill in on his paint-by-numbers-with-no-color-key kit.

"And I think you've got a real shot at the Ivy Leagues if you don't mess up." Dad leans against the wall. "Was there anything else you want to browse?"

"Nope. This is perfect." I shift back and forth on my feet, feeling awkward but better. I know there's something really screwed up about this, and I feel like it's my fault somehow.

The only other dark cloud hanging over me is the fact that I'm not sure how to tell my parents I don't even want to leave San Diego for college—I want to attend UCSD.

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