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Disneylanders

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of

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in

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by

Kate Elizabeth Abbott

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The Thesis of Kate Elizabeth Abbott is approved:

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Chapter 1: “Remain Seated, Please” — *Matterhorn safety announcement*

*Ow!* I woke up when my forehead thudded against the window. Embarrassing, definitely, but as soon as I opened my eyes, I was too excited to be humiliated. Outside, rows of green crops flickered as we drove past — a boring view to some, but it made me want to bounce in my seat. It meant we were one-third of the way to Disneyland.

“Are you okay back there, Casey?” My mom twisted around to see if I’d managed to smash my skull open while buckled into the backseat of a sedan. “I heard a clunk.”

“Don’t worry, she’s got a hard head,” my dad said, clearly amusing himself. He said that every time my mom overreacted to a minor injury. “Maybe you ought to wear a helmet on the next trip, Acacia.” He glanced at me in the rearview mirror, and I pretended I was fixing my ponytail instead of rubbing my forehead.

“I’m fine. Just waking up.” It was too bad our annual trip to Disneyland started with a ten-hour confinement with parents. I pressed my forehead to the glass, on purpose this time, and closed my eyes. Maybe the bumpy freeway would put me back to sleep.

My mom started to root around in the glove compartment for her first-aid book, and debated with my dad over whether I might need an icepack. I scrunched as low as my seatbelt would let me and retreated behind a magazine — a special edition, my favorite, full of quizzes. I opened to “Who’s Your Celebrity Twin?” featuring actresses wearing not much clothing but a lot of makeup. I looked up at my reflection in the window. None of those girls could be mistaken for my twin. I barely owned any makeup, and that was only because my old friend Kiley bought me some for my birthday last year, and then gave me a “make over” that I hadn’t really wanted. I still wore the lip gloss every day;

the rest of the stuff was stashed in my dresser. The foundation had felt heavy on my face, and covered up my few freckles, making me look not much like me. Kiley had told me that I needed to use pink eye shadows to bring out my green eyes, but I couldn't make myself put on eye color called "Sinful Rose." The only paint I liked on my skin was from *real* painting, like painting clouds on my bedroom ceiling. I still had some blue under my fingernails from my project three days ago, and, I just noticed, a dried white paint blob that was making my yellow blonde hair tangled at the tips. It looked like I had bird poop in my hair. For the first time since Kiley and I stopped talking, I was glad she wasn't around to see that.

I glimpsed the caption of an especially smiley actress/singer, a high schooler, like me. Technically. I graduated middle school a week ago, but I counted as a high schooler now. Except I didn't want to be. I picked at the faux-bird poop and thought, *I am never going to survive the next year.*

I wiggled in my seat and pulled at the seatbelt strap across my chest. It was strangling me. I wanted to put the strap behind my back, but I knew my mom would freak out and then I'd have to hear her car safety lecture again. Maybe it would be worth it. The seatbelt was pressing my new underwire bra into my chest, and I wanted to unhook the bra and throw it out the window. I looked down, and tried to covertly adjust it underneath my Mickey Mouse t-shirt. How did girls wear these things all day? Why had I ever wanted to wear one? Well, that was Kiley again. Who wasn't even here now so I could complain to her about this torture device.

Three years ago, when I was eleven and about to start middle school, I practiced exactly how I'd tell my mom I wanted to wear an "unmentionable" (as my mom referred to bras). Just the word made me blush. I had waited all Saturday morning, until my dad had gone out to mow the lawn, and my mom was all alone at the kitchen table.

I crept in the doorway. "Mom? Can I get some new back-to-school clothes?"

"Sure. I saw some cute skirts at the mall last week, actually...or did you already have something in mind?" she added, a little too late to hide the fact that she'd forgotten I had my own opinions.

"Yeah, I marked some pages here." I brought over the gargantuan JC Penney fall catalog. I chose it because it seemed innocent enough.

We flipped through the pages, about to get to the unmentionables section, when my dad came busting in, sweating with bits of grass still stuck to him. Definitely not the time to talk about bras.

"Um, I just remembered, I...have to call Kiley," I said, reaching for the catalog. It was so heavy, I stuck out both arms.

"That's okay, sweetie, I wanted to look in here anyway. I'll check out your stuff and we can plan a shopping trip later."

*Even better!* I thought. I wouldn't even have to ask her directly. She'd see the page, she'd know what I wanted.

The next morning, we were alone at the kitchen table again. I was eating cheese puffs that left orange powder on my fingers when she brought out the catalog.

“I think we can manage some of this, Case,” she said, turning pages she’d flagged herself, the corners bent down over my own tiny flaps. “But for this sweater, what about pink instead of green?”

I couldn’t have cared less about the sweater — the hundreds of dollars of clothes I’d selected were only chosen to bury my desired underwear and to show I picked more grown-up things. Nothing from the kids’ section.

“Okay, Mom,” I said, watching the pages flick closer to the important one. She finally paused on it, mid-page-turn, and said, “Ah, I was going to ask you about this.”

Whew. Finally. “Well, I’d need some sizing help...”

“Oh, I don’t think so. They’re usually pretty one-size-fits-all, if I remember.”

“What?”

“The training bras,” my mom said, pointing at some Playtex brand “bras.” It looked like a short undershirt.

“Um...”

“Oh, look, this one comes in a pink Scottie dog print!” she said, delighted.

“Um, no, Mom — I was thinking more about one of those...other kind.” This was not how I’d practiced it. I knew what Kiley wore, and I knew what all her new band friends at her last sleepover wore. They made sure everyone noticed their lacy, bright colored underwire bras. I had changed into my pajamas in the bathroom.

“What, these bras?” She was practically yelling. She squinted at the page, with its busty, tan models, and at my chest, clearly indicating her belief that I had no need for their undergarments, and finally said, “Well, I don’t really think...”



“Well it doesn’t have to be...*that* one,” I interrupted. I was *not* going to give her the chance to finish that sentence. “It could be plain, but still look nice.”

“Mmm...” She wrinkled her nose. “I don’t think so. Besides, it’s not like anyone’s going to see it, right?” She laughed to herself.

“But Mom,” I said, panicking, “they are! In PE! The locker room, at middle school next year....” I broke off. I couldn’t even think of wearing a training bra with eighth grade girls right next to me, looking like mini Victoria’s Secret models.

“Well, I don’t think...I don’t think your dad would like you wearing those kinds of grown-up things yet.”

“Dad?” What had just happened? She was flipping the pages ahead, moving on to socks...with bows on them. It was over. My mom was never going to let me grow up. In middle school, I became a master of changing into my gym clothes while still wearing a shirt.

A month ago, I had bought a more normal-looking “unmentionable” on a secret mall trip with Kiley, and kept it at the bottom of my drawer, underneath the Mom-purchased pastel training bras and socks. I never mentioned it to my mom. Kiley told me what ones I should get and what would look cute, and even though I thought the ones without all the lacy stuff were more comfortable, I still bought the tiny, fancy, itchy bras with my babysitting money. They were serious bras: they were hard and stiff and gave me more shape than I actually had. I kind of liked that, but I still wore crewneck t-shirts. I

wasn't going to show off like Kiley. Too bad this underwire thing was a huge pain.

Especially on a long car trip. I guess I would have to get used to it.

Sighing, I started a new quiz to distract myself: "Does He *Really* Like You?" I filled it out imagining what would have happened if I talked to anyone I liked in eighth grade. None of those guys were even going to my new high school, though — except for Kiley, hardly anyone I knew would be at my new school, which was starting in two months and two weeks. *You will not think about high school*, I told myself. *You got out of middle school a week ago*. Next year I promised myself I would talk to guys, and not just ask about homework. Maybe I would even go to a dance. Maybe even with a guy. Wasn't that what people did in high school? So I would do it too. Even if it meant talking to boys and talking to my parents about boys, which I had never done. And didn't really want to.

I could see my mom holding the cold pack in the front seat, ready in case I needed it after all. She thought I was an injury-prone toddler; what would she do if I told her I wanted to go on my first date? I couldn't think about that right now.

My mom half-turned to see me, and I was already rolling my eyes at her about the icepack when she said, "Casey, I've been meaning to ask you — how is Kiley doing? Is she all right? Do you think I should call her mom when we get home and —"

"Mom! Um, no," I said, caught completely off guard and not sure what to say. I suddenly blanked on the story I had told them about why Kiley wasn't coming on our Disneyland vacation with us, like she had done for the last four years. My mom and dad didn't know, and would never know, that Kiley had basically dumped me as her best

friend. As any kind of friend. It was bad enough I had to know it. I didn't want their sympathy and help. "Mom, do not call Kiley's mom. She's totally fine. It's a...flu."

"It's an awfully strange time of year to get the flu, don't you think?" my mom asked my dad. He shrugged.

"Oh you know, kids are germ factories," he said, laughing. He always said this. Every time I got sick, from when I was in kindergarten.

"Dad. We are not little kids and we are not germ factories," I said, trying to be calm but knowing that my shaking voice and blush would give me away if they noticed. "Kiley is just sick. With something normal." It was sort of true. At first, I thought she was acting like this to fit in with her new friends, but now I thought maybe she wasn't acting. Maybe she was being a normal ninth grader. Maybe I was the one who wasn't normal.

My mom pretended to flip through her magazine. "But she's been sick for a whole week, since the last day of school. Was she even there? I didn't notice you two leaving together, doing your little happy vacation dance you always —"

Couldn't she let this go? I squished into the corner of the car, hoping she couldn't see my burning face in the mirror. "She's fine. We did our dance earlier that day. I — I talked to her last night. She was sorry she couldn't come," I lied. "She wants us to have fun and not worry or talk about her," I added. I was such a bad liar. I didn't have any practice at it. Except for the last week.

My mom didn't seem to notice the lie. "Well, maybe we can buy her a present from Disneyland. I bet that would cheer her up. She likes Tinker Bell, right? Maybe a

nice sparkly shirt or hat or something.” I tried to imagine the new and popular Kiley wearing a Tinker Bell shirt. She wouldn’t even get near it, or anyone who thought she would like that kind of stuff anymore.

“Okay, Mom. I’ll get her something.” She nodded, and I held my magazine in front of my face, so she wouldn’t see the tears that came out of nowhere.

It was so pathetic. I really did miss her. But not this new Kiley. I missed my friend Kiley from a year ago. We hadn’t even had an official argument, but she started ignoring me since she had discovered a new group of friends (mostly guys) who suddenly wanted to hang out with her. At least in school she’d answer the phone when I called. Since we got out of school and she didn’t have to see me in class every day, she never even called me back. Even when I asked about Disneyland. She sent me a three-word text, “cant go. sry.” It was almost worse than if she hadn’t said anything.

Those new friends didn’t even notice Kiley at the beginning of eighth grade, when she and I ate lunch together. They noticed her after she started wearing short shorts in March and tops that showed her fancy bras’ fancy straps. *I hate bras*, I thought. I wasn’t going to turn into the kind of person she was now, that’s for sure. Even if I didn’t have anyone to eat lunch with next year. I sniffled too loud and crumpled up a page to hide the noise.

I turned to the relief of the ridiculous “What’s Your Shoe Style?” page as the car turned into a familiar coffee shop’s parking lot. We visited the same rest stops and diners every year, because that’s the way we’d always done it, not because anyone actually

needed to stop. Our trips from Northern California took all day. My parents didn't get that I no longer needed to use the restroom every hour.

We piled back into the car after an hour-long stop at The Cracked Walnut, which I hadn't liked since they stopped serving chocolate chip pancakes three years ago. I crawled around the backseat, trying to find my earbuds. As I listened to the Disneyland soundtrack album, quietly singing "Yo ho, yo ho, a pirate's life for me," I made a list of all the photos I wanted to take on this trip; it was all posed stuff or still lifes of places in the park — the empty Motorboat Cruise lagoon, Snow White's grotto with weird, giant dwarfs, the Haunted Mansion's healthy plants that managed to look dead. I was looking forward to working on a still life. Disneyland was a still life. It was always the same. It wouldn't ditch me or look at me like I wasn't good enough to hang out with it. Despite the happy music, my eyes stung with tears and I wiped at them quickly, before my mom could notice. I was glad I wasn't wearing mascara, like every other high school girl was probably wearing.

I blocked out my parents and stuffed the magazine in my bag. I concentrated only on the lyrics to "Grim Grinning Ghosts" and looked for the next sign. Los Angeles was 175 miles away, and Anaheim wouldn't be much farther. Even with my dad's under-the-speed-limit driving, no matter what, soon I'd be able to escape all of my problems in Disneyland, my actual Happiest Place on Earth. I would feel like myself again there.

Chapter 2: “Here You Leave Today” — *Disneyland entrance plaque*

The next morning, I bolted out of bed. I was not a morning person back home, but in Anaheim, I could get dressed and ready in 20 minutes. But when the hot water hit me in the shower, I was hit with a sick feeling. Kiley really wasn't here. I didn't have to race her to get ready. I didn't have her to wear mouse ears with, either. They were still in my suitcase from our trip last summer, but I was shyer to wear them by myself. I got dressed slowly, wishing I were still groggy and sleepy enough to forget about Kiley.

I had already planned what I'd wear, but I still took my time. Today was the black-and-white striped tank with my favorite jeans, faded purple sneakers, and green Cheshire Cat baseball hat. I leaned against our door and fiddled with the security bolt as I waited for my mom to finish stuffing Band-Aids into her completely lame fanny pack from 1986. Even with me moving in slow motion, I was still faster than my mom.

“Mom, let's go,” I said, eyeing the clock. It would be better when I was in Disneyland. Everyone was happy in Disneyland. I just had to get there. My mom continued darting into the bathroom for more tissues.

I slung my messenger bag across my body and adjusted it into place. My bag was dotted with Disney pins and, most importantly, was big enough to hold the clunky film camera that my middle-school photography teacher had let me borrow for the summer. I would be glad to return it in the fall, and I was excited to visit my old middle school again.

I peeked at the Ziploc bursting with black-and-white T-Max 400 film rolls that I'd tucked in an outside pocket. "Those are going to cost a fortune to develop, Casey," my dad said, noticing the bulging bag of film.

"I've got my babysitting money, Dad." I quickly stuffed the film deep inside my bag. He always said that. "Besides, I usually develop the film myself. When I'm back in school, I can use the lab and it won't cost anything."

"Does the high school have a photo lab?" The thought that it might not hadn't occurred to me, but it was built only a couple of years ago, near our house in the new subdivision. I thought one of the only perks of having to go to this school would be nicer-looking buildings with bathrooms that might actually be clean. Now I felt betrayed by its newness and most definite lack of a film photography lab. I had learned about photography in middle school, and I loved being in the darkroom with all the chemicals and red lights and watching pictures appear like magic on my photo paper in the developer. I liked the oldness of it, and that most of the other people in my class didn't like it. They got frustrated. But anybody could take pictures with a digital camera. I could make them special in a darkroom, which I was now certain my new school would not have.

I absolutely could not think about that now. I leaned into the bathroom and said, "Mom, we need to go!" She dashed by me with Kleenexes fluttering out of her sleeve.

We finally got out the door and I speed-walked to the park. Our usual hotel, the not-so-cleverly named Vacationer Inn, was only an eight-minute walk to the main gate, but I felt I could get there in six minutes this morning. After an agonizingly long wait in

the entrance lines, we stepped under the left entrance gate (we only entered through the left one; we only entered on the right side at nighttime) and its welcoming plaque. I didn't need to read the words, but smiled at them as I passed underneath: "Here you leave today and enter the world of yesterday, tomorrow, and fantasy." *Exactly.*

The *Ward Kimball* pulled into Main Street Station above us as we walked under the train tunnel. Its steam whistle sounded as I said hello to all the old attraction posters, set up like movie displays in a theater lobby. I breathed in the smell of sugar from the Candy Palace as the echoing train announcement mixed with kids' shrieking and glossy maps being opened. I'm here! I said to myself, and instantly realized that even being in Disneyland was not going to help me forget about Kiley. It actually made it even worse, not to have her here to laugh with and point out cute cast members and share popcorn.

I walked ahead of my parents, focusing on Main Street's tinkling music, even if it was accompanied by my mom saying, "Don't walk in the streetcar tracks! Watch out for the horse!" (The horse was currently halfway down Main Street.) I let out a long breath. I must not ruin my vacation on the first morning by yelling at my mom. I would head off on my own for a few precious hours later in the afternoon, when my parents would go back to the hotel for a nap, and take pictures. Then would swim a little bit back at the hotel before they woke up again. I would fill every minute with doing stuff. I would be busy having fun.

"Pirates?" I said, before my mom could issue any more warnings about the horses. Pirates of the Caribbean was always our first ride. I made a break for New



Orleans Square, and breathed in the ride's familiar, humid air with relief when we walked inside. At least that same Pirates water smell hadn't changed.

I bobbed along on our boat peacefully for about 15 seconds, until my dad said, "Hmm...the shooting star effect isn't working," as we floated away from Laffite's Landing. *He's already talking?* I thought. He kept it up, making me notice that there weren't as many lightning bugs glowing. And then my chest hurt because Kiley wasn't there to help me make fun of my parents.

We spent the rest of the morning wandering the park, going on rides we all knew we liked, while I tried to keep some distance away from my parents. In line for Autopia, my mom decided to smear on a ton of sunscreen, despite having thoroughly coated herself that morning, and tried to dab some on my nose. After a brief struggle that resulted in sunscreen splatting on my jeans, I saw a cluster of older girls watching us, and smirking to each other. Ugh. I shouldn't have to deal with high school girls until fall. I folded my arms and leaned against the polished railing corralling us together, determined not to look at them. I wiped at my nose the rest of the time in line, feeling like I still had my mom's thick sunscreen smeared across it.

While riding the train to go to our traditional first snack spot, the bakery on Main Street, my dad pointed out all the banners advertising the new parade, but I could tell right away that the floats were the exact same ones we'd seen before. My parents decided they wanted to watch the parade, anyway, and in the middle of Main Street, my dad busted out a park map to find when it started.

"Dad, you're making us look like tourists!"

“We are tourists, Casey,” he said, not glancing up from the map.

“No we’re not. We come here all the time. We already know where everything is and where we’re going. We have the same vacation every year.” I took a shaky breath. My parents continued to huddle around the map like they’d never been to the park before, and I backed farther away from them to wipe my eyes.

Mid-morning, as we stood in the air-conditioned Indiana Jones queue, I tried to tune out my mom’s jabbering about the latest safety recall she’d read about, for some product we didn’t own. All the family magazines she stockpiled for the drive down to Disneyland freaked her out, whether about dangerous products or kids’ latest stupid trends, which, like my magazine quizzes, never applied to me. They also always featured at least one article on how to trick your teenager into being reasonable, articles that I also didn’t think applied to me.

I surveyed my parents from a distance. If they were reasonable, I wouldn’t need to be standing three feet from them in line, pretending I didn’t notice my mom adjusting her fanny pack, sending Tic Tacs and Kleenex flying, or my dad talking loudly on his cell phone to his brother, holding it two inches away from his ear, saying, “You’ll never guess where we are!” I’d heard him call my uncle before we left home to tell him about our trip. *How did they get to be like this?* I wondered. Had I been too distracted with Kiley to notice them?

I slowly stretched my foot out behind me — maybe I could pretend to join another group, at least while my parents were in full view of the whole queue. I stared down underneath my baseball cap at the clean faux-stone floor, spying a nasty wad of

gum wrappers by my dad's left Teva. Luckily, he stepped past it, and I also gave thanks that he hadn't worn his usual socks-and-sandals combo today. I glared at the glob of gum wrappers and stopped my reflex to pick them up. They weren't supposed to be here — Disneyland was usually spotless.

I ran my hand along the smooth, faux-bamboo railing in the breezy tunnel leading into the Indy building, and felt the ridges of the graffiti carved into the railing by bored line-standers. I traced around the jagged initials and wondered — had the park always been a little bit more like the real world than I thought, with graffiti and dirty gum wrappers, or was I just too young to notice before? Or having too much fun? And why were my mom and dad marveling at the pretend “bat guano” decorating the queue?

They were moving even slower than the gray-haired lady in front of me, who wore a pair of pink antennae with fuzzy Mickey heads bobbling at the ends. I was embarrassed for her silly headpiece, for her husband, who had to totter along next to that headpiece all day, and for my parents' outright enthusiasm at fake bat poop. If Kiley were here....

It was too much. I took a fast step away from them — but it was too fast.

My heart jumped, my knees buckled, and as I fell over sideways as I collided with another pair of legs. All I could think was *Please don't let me fall on that nasty gum wrapper*. I thudded against the bamboo railing, grabbing desperately to avoid hitting the floor, and whirled around to see a little girl, who had wrapped herself around my legs and was clinging onto my jeans to break her fall.

I could see only a puff of blonde hair at first, but as we both caught our breath, she looked up at me with enormous eyes. She looked terrified and her lips were shaking, but she was still clutching at my pocket, with a firm grip on my butt. No one had heard our collision — we were near the room with the trick ceiling, and the unsuspecting line-standers were screaming as it rumbled down above their heads.

I twisted around, catching my breath. “Hi.” She came up to my tailbone, and her hair was popping out in stringy waves below a pair of red Minnie Mouse ears. She made a little grunt that may have been a giggle, and ducked her head down. She took one hand off of my bottom to adjust her Minnie ears, and patted their bow, still in place.

No one seemed to notice our introduction. My mom was trying to show my dad how to add my uncle’s name to his cell phone, and the cluster of people who must belong to the girl were all poring over a park schedule. I bent down and took the girl’s hand. I thought it would be sticky for some reason — weren’t kids always covered with paste or glitter? — but it was refreshingly dry and normal. Just small.

I shook her hand like she might explode, but I couldn’t keep from grinning. “Nice to meet you,” I said. I bobbed her hand up and down, showing her how to shake hands. Like I was an expert on social etiquette. Well, she was maybe six, so I could get away with it. Besides, we were in Disneyland — nobody else knew that I was a social outcast back home.

The girl did laugh this time, looked up at me, and shrieked, “Goofy!”

“What?” I said. Little kids are weird.

“I think she’s talking about my hat, not me personally. I hope,” came a quiet voice above us. I looked up to find a brown-haired guy, maybe a little older than me, wearing a Goofy baseball cap and a wide smile.

“Yeah, me too,” I said, standing up and dusting off my pants quickly. I took a quick peek around at my parents. I would be mortified if they saw me talking to a guy — I doubt they even knew other girls in my class, like Kiley, actually dated them last year — but for once, they were oblivious to what I was doing. The guy was squatting on the ground, rummaging for what looked like a bunch of markers that had spilled. He handed the girl a shiny pink backpack, which she solemnly held while he filed the spilled markers away.

Fortunately, this gave me some time to look him over without being seen. Even in the dim “torchlight” of our hallway, I could see his short hair had some rich golden spots near his neck, like he’d been in the sun, and his arms and legs were lightly tanned and showed a few freckles. He reached back into the shadows of the line, sticking a leg out for balance, and stretched to collect the last of the markers. I could tell that he wore his jeans at a normal level on his hips because they hadn’t fallen down yet. I said a silent thank you to the Imagineers who had designed this queue area to be dark, because I could feel a steady blush creeping over me the longer I watched him.

The guy stood up after the girl started to whimper, and gave her a hug. I looked away, checking that my parents were still occupied, and turned to him when he cleared his throat. A pair of clear, light brown eyes looked back at me, and I saw that standing up,

he was only a couple of inches taller than me, which gave me an odd feeling of relief. I wasn't prepared to deal with an attractive guy who was also towering over me.

The fuzzy lighting and his cap cast shadows across his face, but I could see that his smile, even an embarrassed one like he was giving me now, lit up his eyes. I was sure his cheekbones would stand out in a photograph, and I wanted to grab my camera, but of course, I could not do that in front of this guy. I realized I could barely breathe in front of him. He was like a sculpture, handsome and athletic, but wearing a silly baseball cap. I wanted to hug him, I wanted to run away from him. I kept still.

He ran a hand quickly under his cap, and leaned toward me. "I'm really sorry. I was talking to those people behind us about the parade, and I didn't see...." He ducked his head toward the girl. "Um, I'm not sure how to tell you this, but I think...my sister might have ruined your pants." He held up an empty red Sharpie cap, and pointed to the fat marker that had rolled into the shadows against a stone wall behind me.

"What...oh no!" I twisted to see more, but the scribble went firmly across one pocket, at least. My embarrassment overwhelmed my instincts to hold as still as possible and not say anything. "How bad is it?"

"Well..." The guy seemed gallantly caught between acting on my request, and staring at the area in question.

I sighed. "Just tell me."

He stepped back on one foot and surveyed the damage. "Pretty bad. She's marked all over your, um, pockets."

I turned around, covering my pockets with my green canvas shoulder bag, and the girl looked scared. The guy squatted down.

“Miss Margaret, what happened?” He put his hands on both of her shoulders, and looked into her eyes. She looked up at us both, clenched her hands together, and started crying.

“I tripped!” She stuck out a sandaled foot. “They’re too big.” Her parents had dressed her in frilly socks decorated with kittens batting at yarn. *Grandma socks for sure*, I thought. “I’m sorry!” She started to sniff uncontrollably.

“Where’d you get the big marker?”

“Grandma’s bag. She didn’t know I had it,” the girl said quietly, staring at the ground. I knew there was a grandma involved in those socks.

As much as I loved my jeans, I couldn’t bring myself to be the reason for a little girl crying in Disneyland. “It’s okay,” I said, making myself smile at her. I automatically repeated what my mom had said to me many times: “Accidents happen. But be careful, okay?”

Margaret — a funny name for a little girl, I thought — sniffled and nodded, covering her face with one hand, while still holding onto the guy with the other, but she stopped crying and squeaked out a tiny “Sorry!”

Relieved, the guy tugged at his hat’s brim to adjust it again. He squeezed the girl’s hand, and I saw he had matching red streaks across his arm. We had the same marker tattoo. “I’m sorry I let her get away from me,” he said, looking up at me. “I’m usually really good about watching her, but she ran off when she heard all that screaming

and I was talking and turned around and....” Screaming? He pointed above us, and I realized the line had moved into the falling-ceiling room. I hadn’t even noticed. Usually I couldn’t wait to get there and pull the fake pole that let the ceiling drop.

I nodded, about to say that I didn’t blame her, when my parents chose this moment to abandon their cell phone troubles. My dad turned around to find me grinning at the teenage guy kneeling down next to me. Margaret hid behind her brother’s legs, making herself invisible.

My dad said loudly, “Well now, who is your new friend?” I was sick with total terror and humiliation. If Kiley were here, she would know what to do! I thought, with a surge of anger. But...if Kiley were here, this guy probably wouldn’t be talking to *me*. He would be talking to the girl with the short-shorts and the sparkly flip-flops that showed her toenails decorated with rhinestones. And he’d probably be looking at her butt even if it didn’t have marker all over it. I had to get a grip.

“Uh, this is Margaret,” I said, pointing in her direction and trying to hide my face with the other. My dad’s eyebrows rose above his glasses, glinting in the torchlight, and I added, “She’s hiding.” I realized I didn’t know whose legs she was behind.

Jumping up, the owner of the legs said, “I’m so sorry, I’m Robert, and my sister, Margaret — Maggie — accidentally scribbled on, um...” He paused, also realizing that although I had given him permission to check out my rear end, I had not told him my name.

“Casey,” I supplied.



“On Casey’s jeans,” he finished. “I’ll pay for a new pair, of course,” he added quickly.

“Oh, now, that’s very nice of you, but it’s not necessary.” My dad squinted down, and for a horrifying second, I thought he was going to want to inspect the damage. I pressed my bag against my bottom.

My mom joined the conversation and smiled a little too much. “Those jeans have seen better days, anyway,” she said, poking at a hole — a very small hole — by a belt loop. She was wearing a fanny pack that I knew she’d worn on every trip since the mid-’80s, and now *she* was critiquing my fashion sense in front of a cute guy? *No, it would be just as bad in front of anyone*, I corrected myself. Right.

“Mom!” I looked down to admire the aquamarine paint spot on the knee, from my painting of the sky on my bedroom ceiling, and the frayed cuffs from walking around barefoot. It’s true, they were already slightly spattered with paint, but it was cool. That was why I liked them. Of course, today’s sunscreen smear covering my thigh didn’t help.

Glancing at Maggie, who was tearing up, I added, “But it’s okay. They’re just pants.”

Robert, held up his hand. I noticed a shiny Mickey Mouse watch on his wrist. “Of course we’ll pay you back. I understand about important things.” My parents discussed their options — I heard my mom clearly say that my jeans couldn’t be worth more than five dollars, and she had seen some pants on sale at her favorite shop in the mall. I saw the guy sneak a glance down at his watch when they weren’t looking. I’d better speak up before they went on much longer.

“Thanks, but it’s really okay,” I insisted.

My mom said, “Now I can take you shopping and get you in some new jeans for school! And try not to mess up the next pair you get, Acacia,” she added, pointing to the frayed cuff. She would have to use my full name.

The line started moving and they turned away, racing to catch up with the people four feet in front of them.

“Well, your sister made my mom happy, Robert,” I said, patting at my pockets self-consciously.

“You can call me Bert,” he said.

“Like in *Mary Poppins*?” It was my favorite movie. As a kid and probably now, too.

Bert laughed. “No one has *ever* said that before. They usually think Bert and Ernie.”

“Typical,” I said, as we walked along, with Maggie now walking in front of us, behind my parents. At least Bert had secured the markers in her backpack.

“People don’t appreciate movies with dancing penguin waiters like they should,” he said. Seeing me adjust my bag to cover the stain, he added, “Really, I am sorry about that. How much money do you need to get a pair you’ll like?” he asked casually, almost yawning, but his neck muscles tightened. I pretended not to notice. If it were anyone else, I wouldn’t have been looking hard enough to notice.

“It’s okay. I bet my mom is sorry she didn’t think of scribbling on my pants herself. She’s been dying for an excuse to take me shopping, and there’s no way she’ll let

me pick out my own pants this time.” My mom turned around at her name, and shushed my dad, who was saying, “Oh no, she’s too young for that.” I had the feeling they were talking about Bert.

I snuck glances at Bert for the next few minutes. He was tickling Maggie’s neck, and he looked so happy about it. Without seeing it, I bumped into the wooden divider that makes the line go two different ways, and looked up to see who else had seen me. But my parents were already climbing the steps on the left side of the line, and Maggie was darting up the right side. I followed my parents, and Bert and I smiled at each other and at Maggie while the line wound up to the top of the stairs. I smelled the fuel from the cars we were going to board, and realized that I was going to have to go to one side, and Bert and Maggie were moving to the other. I had been in a blissed out trance, watching Bert. I couldn’t not see him again. I hadn’t thought of Kiley once while he was standing next to me, though now I wished more than ever I could talk to her and ask her what to do.

Bert said, “Well,” loudly, and I looked back. My line was zooming ahead, and his was stuck. He inched forward, and I stopped. I could feel the hundreds of impatient strangers waiting behind me, I could feel the space between me and my parents getting bigger, and I could feel the weight of Kiley being gone start to creep over me. I had to do something. What would Kiley tell me to do?

“Bert!” I waved. He inched forward. I wanted to grab for his hand. I could almost touch it on the railing between us. The people behind me were practically pushing against me to move. I took a deep breath, feeling like I was about to jump off a cliff. “Can you meet me later?”

He tilted his head, like he wasn't sure he had heard me, but he smiled. "Meet me later!" I said again, stumbling forward a foot as some kid behind me raced around me. We could go anyplace my parents wouldn't want to. "Space Mountain!"

"Space Mountain?" he called back. He was getting farther away from me, since I had to keep moving forward. The people in line crowded in the space between us.

I felt dizzy and giddy. "In an hour!" I yelled, hearing my voice echo around the cramped hallway full of other people grumbling. I waved frantically and then practically tripped down the stairs to the loading area. I couldn't believe what I'd done. I had asked a guy out on a date! My first date. I pushed past the kid who'd cut in front of me in line and caught up to my parents, totally oblivious to the monumental event that had just happened behind them.

It was usually one of my favorite sights in the park: the boarding area for a favorite ride, with dark shadows and Indiana Jones–costumed employees, with the fumes from the jeeps signaling that the wait was finally over, and now the ride would begin. But now I didn't even look at the car as I stepped inside and sat next to my mom. I swiveled around to find Bert's face in the crowd.

I missed my seatbelt buckle three times while I watched him stick out his tongue at Maggie, and then turn to wave at me. I waved back. My mom reached across my dad's seat, blocking my view, and yanked on the seatbelt herself, raising an eyebrow at me. I made myself look straight ahead, with my stupid grin stuck in place, and tried to think about the ride.

Chapter 3: “No Need to Expose Your Superstructure” — *Pirates of the Caribbean*  
*dialogue*

While my mom and dad browsed through Adventure Outfitters, looking for rubber snakes, I tried to explain my date in any way that did not make it sound like a date. I had never gone on a date and I did not want to see my parents freak out about my first date while we were in Disneyland. They’d been pretty oblivious about me and Bert talking in line, but my mom did notice who I’d been looking at and was now smiling at me while I babbled.

What was her deal? Had she been worried about me, about why I never talked about any crushes or had friends over anymore? She didn’t seem to know that Kiley had dumped me — but as she started whispering to my dad, I thought that maybe she knew more than I thought. Which was terrible. It was bad enough to have people at school know that Kiley wasn’t my friend; my parents definitely did not need to know.

At least my dad was acting like a normal parent. He gave me a hard stare the whole time I was talking and didn’t look at all pleased about the situation. I had been expecting that.

“But Dad,” I said, “Bert is actually sort of helping you. I won’t be wandering around by myself while you guys are taking a nap later.” His eyebrows returned to a normal position on his face. I could see he thought better of the Bert situation immediately.

Although my mom was practically a professional worrywart, both of my parents felt safer at Disneyland. They would keep up their routine and head back to the hotel early to take a nap, so I would have been allowed to roam the park by myself, anyway. I suspected they liked knowing how to contact Bert rather than trust me to unreachable random strangers.

But even as I was convincing my parents of my very responsible plan, I wasn't fooling myself. I turned a whole new shade of crimson as I realized I the enormity of what I'd done: I'd asked a guy on my first date *ever* in front of my parents. *There aren't any magazine quizzes to help me handle this*, I thought, as my parents traded cell phone numbers with Bert.

Before I left them, I heard Mom tell Dad that Bert babysat his sister all the time, and I realized, horrified, that she thought of this as Bert practically babysitting *me*. My mom didn't see me as being old enough for a real date. I could only be glad that Bert had already gone off with Maggie in search of their grandma.

As soon as I said goodbye, I bolted to the Tomorrowland restrooms to make an attempt at controlling my hair. After redoing three ponytails, I gave up. The crowded corridor outside the restrooms was filled with a pack of males sprawled out on benches and planters, waiting for their girls to appear. It was a funny, kind of pathetic picture, but romantic in a way. I grabbed for my camera, tucked securely in the depths of my bag, and took pictures of strangers.

"Casey!" I whirled around, and my bag smashed into Bert's bowling shirt. He put out a hand to stop my bag from whomping his hip, and I jumped.

“Oh — hi,” I said. I tried to gracefully swing my giant bag behind me. I didn’t expect to see Bert yet. I felt my bag’s cloth strap stick and slide down my shoulder, pulling my tank top down with it, and hoped Bert didn’t notice.

“Taking pictures?” Bert said.

“Uh...yeah.” He looked over and saw throngs of guys, and I flushed. “It’s for my project.”

“Cool,” Bert said, and didn’t ask me why I’d been photographing a bunch of guys. Instead he pulled two small tickets out of his back pocket. “Look, I got FastPasses!” My heart fell. FastPasses? I was looking forward to a nice, long wait with Bert. He seemed proud of himself as he handed me my ticket, but I hesitated. I definitely did not want to FastPass our sort-of date.

But I couldn’t just tell Bert I wanted to drag out our wait time as long as possible. I grabbed it and bit my lip — the ticket was warm from being in his pocket. I was holding his body heat. I wanted to giggle, but I would curse myself forever if I did in fact giggle right now.

“Thank you.” There. A perfectly mature response. “So, what’s the stand-by wait time?”

Bert turned around to squint at the digital sign. “Looks like about 65 minutes.” His neck was a little shiny with sweat — gross, I told myself. But I liked looking at him. I could have looked at him for 65 minutes easy.

“For us, though...” He turned around, and I looked up to meet his eyes. “It’ll be a lot faster.” I managed a smile back, and he said, “And because you’ve suffered today, I

thought you deserved something extra.” He produced two more tickets from his other pocket.

“You got more?” Maybe it wouldn’t be so bad, after all — more time with Bert, and twice the rides.

“Yup — I used Maggie’s and my grandma’s tickets. They’re in Critter Country, going on Winnie the Pooh twenty times.”

“That’s really great,” I said. “Well, maybe not for your grandma.”

“Better her than me,” he said.

“Thanks. For the extra FastPasses, and, you know, this.” I waved my hand around toward the glistening white peaks of Space Mountain. “My mom and dad *hate* it. I think they’re asleep at the Vacationer by now.”

“It’s my honor. Plus, it gets me out of Winnie the Pooh. Shall we?” Bert stretched his arm toward the entrance.

We sauntered past the stand-by crowd, feeling pleased with ourselves. The line was wrapped around itself three times, the lucky ones standing in the shade of an overhang. It always surprised me that so many hot, tired people would wait more than an hour for a ride that took two minutes. People will wait for fun, I guess.

Even though I was happy to skip standing in the sun, I didn’t enjoy the wave of whining that followed us around the line as we passed by. I whisked past the crowd, hands awkwardly but firmly clasped behind me, over my bag. There was no reason to expose my ink-stained backside to the scrutiny of the bored herds. I rushed inside the



building and finally slowed down when the cold air hit my face, glad to escape the crowd and the heat.

Bert trotted to catch up with me. He wiped an arm across his mouth, and I realized he'd stopped at the water fountain outside the building's entrance, but in my bolt for the building, I hadn't even noticed. "Sorry about that — I didn't mean to leave you behind." Wow, I was already an awesome date. Rule number one: stay with your partner.

The water made Bert's grin look glossy. "Are you always ready to run a marathon?"

"They are called *Fast* Passes, you know," I joked. We caught up to the regular line, and both leaned against the walls of the narrow, blue-lit hallway on opposite sides, surveying each other.

Bert caught me staring into his face, and I immediately moved my gaze up to his hat. I felt like I did when I'd been nervous about the coaster itself before my first ride, when I was ten. I only went on it because my uncle, who had come with my family on the trip that summer, dared me. I was glad he did; I'd secretly wanted to ride it for a year. Now I was anxious again, and I hugged my stomach.

Bert pushed up his cap's brim and I glimpsed his watch. The Mickey Mouse on it wore gloves that were yellowed, and the face showed bold, red numbers. The pie-eyed Mickey grinned back at me encouragingly. I didn't think it was a retro-styled watch — it looked really old, and I regarded Bert with new respect. He met my look and we smiled, and I couldn't look away. He didn't either, until it got so embarrassing I had to cough in a

stupid obvious way to break our eye contact. I dug through my purse, pretending to search for something, anything, and snuck another peek at his watch.

Even in the hazy lighting, I could tell that the face was scratched, the tan leather band was practically made of wrinkles, and then I finally noticed the time: 10:10. Broken. Why was Bert wearing a broken watch?

I took in his antique watch, scuffed suede sneakers, and neat bowling shirt wrapped around him, and thought he was the cutest guy I'd ever seen in real life. And he was here with me! I bowed my head and slid on some watermelon lip balm.

It suddenly occurred to me that neither of us had spoken in a while. "Erm..." I started. "So, no, I would never like to run a marathon."

"Ah," Bert said, nodding a few times, and then, "Um...what?"

I laughed. "You asked if I was ready to run a marathon. I hate running. Except to Space Mountain," I corrected.

"Ah," he said again. "So what sports do you like?"

"Uh...I like swimming," I said. "But I don't compete or anything. I just like it." Too bad I didn't have any race times to impress him with. I now desperately wished I had joined the swim team. "What do you like?"

"I'm on my school's tennis team. I like watching baseball. The Angels, of course." He must be a local. Funny how I also considered myself a Disneyland local, even though I lived hundreds of miles north. This reminded me that I really wasn't.

"Tennis is fun. I took a class once." Bert nodded, and silence filled the space between us. What else could I say? "My friend Kiley took the class with me. She would

always get the ball stuck in her racket. She'd swing at it, and the ball would be stuck above the handle and below the, uh, string part." *What is the freaking name of the string part of a tennis racquet?* And why did Kiley pop into my date? Like I didn't have any stories I could tell about myself without her in them. I racked my mind for various magazine quiz answers — but I didn't think Bert would want to hear that it turns out I am a "stylin' sneaker" (that "shoe personality" quiz was not very helpful). This was not going great.

Fortunately, Bert started telling stories about the guys on his tennis team and bus rides they took to games. He went to school in Citrus Springs, where he lived. It was near Disneyland, and about 500 miles south of me in Oak Crest.

As though he could hear what I was thinking, he asked, "So where do you live?"

I told him, and scrutinized his expression — was he sorry we lived so far apart? But he seemed calm, as usual. I added, "I'm starting high school in September. I think it'll be, um, interesting." I gave him my best pageant smile.

We shuffled down the metallic ramp, through the building, and into the sleek corridors glowing with dim neon light. Bert glanced at me sideways and tilted his head, so he could see me better under his baseball cap. I kept my smile on, even though the panic was rising in my chest.

"Are you excited about it?"

"Oh, yeah," I said. I had to change the subject again, before I started panicking in front of this cute guy. Kiley and school...the two topics I most wanted to forget on this trip, and I couldn't stop talking about them.

At least in Disneyland, it wasn't hard to find a distraction. I heard a chorus of giggles and turned to see a pack of girls flip-flopping their way down the sloping walkway. The light caught the metal on all four of the girls' exposed bra straps, gleaming against darkly tanned shoulders. They looked like they could be seniors. A girl in a pink top made an elaborate show of whispering to an aqua-topped girl, and two boys next to them laughed, obviously fascinated. I leaned back against the railing and puffed out air as I evaluated their strategy. It was a sad sight, but seemed effective. Bert followed my gaze.

"Bra straps must be part of the required uniform," I said without thinking, remembering Kiley's spring wardrobe. I tugged my shirt's hem down to make sure it covered my jeans' waistband.

Bert laughed, a low sound that contrasted with the still-giggling girls, making me painfully aware that I had talked about girls' underwear, like he was Kiley. His cap shaded his eyes, so I couldn't see what he was thinking, but I bet he was glad he'd gotten us those FastPasses. I must sound nuts, talking to myself about bra straps. But even the Bra-Strap Girls reminded me of school — would everyone look like them? Apparently I was going to need fancier bras. And I would have to get a tan.

The overhead speaker crackled and startled me into attention. I caught only a few words through the bubbling crowd, but I could tell it was the most dreaded announcement: "Slight delay, folks...Expect to resume operations in about thirty minutes...If you choose to exit, please use the doors to..." My pulse began pounding in my ears, and I couldn't hear any more. Bert and I might get more time together, after all. If he wanted to wait it out with me.

Bert pushed off the wall to lean over to me. “Guess we’re lucky,” he said, smiling at me.

I felt a thrill that he said “we.” It might be temporary, but at least I had him to myself right now. Bert could be the most popular guy at his school, I had no idea, but right now he was with me, and he didn’t know I was invisible at my school. I was far away from Kiley, from high school, and even my parents, probably snoring at the hotel now. I agreed about our luck, wondering what he’d do. This was his chance to escape early, and go back to his normal vacation. I couldn’t breathe. If he wanted to bail, he could do it now.

Then he slid against the wall down to the floor, ready to wait, and I beamed up at the speaker, in silent thanks for the broken-down ride. I plopped down to join him, and thought my luck was pretty good today.

\* \* \*

Bert sat with his legs crossed, staring at his broken watch. He looked like he was meditating. I leaned my head back, trying not to clonk it on the handrail above me, and heard the high giggles and gum-popping of the Bra-Strap Girls. I imagined Bert looking up at me earnestly, and saying, “Of course they’re pathetic, but not everyone has the natural charms that you do, Casey.”

I smiled to myself, and then inspected the dirt under my clear-polished fingernails. Not very charming. *Say something!* I yelled in my head. *Stop talking to yourself and talk to him!*

My argument with myself was interrupted by a fit of squeals. I looked at the Bra-Strappers sideways, so I wouldn't give them the satisfaction of outright attention. One of the guys was attempting to pick up a yellow-shorts-wearing girl, and her flip-flop went flying. I decided they were not only a discredit to my fellow blondes, but also to teenagers in general. A line of dialogue from the auction scene in *Pirates of the Caribbean* floated through my head: "No need to expose your superstructure." Exactly.

I looked away, and saw Bert studying a Coke bottle top by my foot. The kid standing behind him was watching the girls like they were on TV. Aqua-top girl was perched on the railing with her legs crossed in a way that showed them off very well, if hazardously, and it was no surprise when the kid tried to jump up on the railing, too. Fortunately, her mom pulled her off.

Bert turned around to see what all the clanging was about. He stretched his legs out in front of him in imitation and fell over sideways on the floor, laughing.

"Nice try," I said.

"Thanks." He looked into my eyes again. "So, you're starting high school?"

*Oh great, we're back to that.* "Yeah." I nodded toward the girls. "I haven't gotten into the undergarment-showing phase yet, I guess."

"I'm going to be a sophomore, and I haven't been in that phase yet, either. Maybe next year."

"That's good to know. Too bad you aren't going to my school." I picked at the tiny orange paint splat on my knee nervously. "I live across town from all of my friends" — *All one of them*, I privately added — "and they're not going to be there with me."

I looked up, and suddenly Bert was no longer on the opposite wall. He had inched closer to me while I'd been focused on my paint splat and finally, for a moment, not thinking of Kiley, and his blue shoe brushed against my foot. He looked worried, ready to ask me more about school.

I needed another distraction. *If I sneeze right now, I'll probably sneeze on him*, I thought. *Why didn't I bring any Kleenex for myself?* I really was nuts. I just had to keep him from finding out for another — I checked my watch — 15 minutes till the ride started. And a half hour for our second one.

“What time is it?” Bert asked.

“Almost one.” I pointed at his wrist, although I wanted to touch his arm. “I like your Mickey watch. Does it work?”

He looked into its face, and held out his right hand to show it to me. *He must be a leftie*, I thought, adding the fact to the “All About Bert” file in my brain. I leaned over his watch, examining it and the freckles on his arm.

“It’s my grandpa’s watch. He and my grandma and Mom and Dad and I used to all go to Disneyland when I was little. He always told me about the engineering stuff — how the rides worked, how the cars on Main Street worked — “

“The Gurr-mobiles,” I couldn’t help bursting out. That was what a lifetime of Disneyland trivia did to a person. Fortunately, he smiled.

“Yeah...no one I’ve talked to but him knows that,” he said. I felt like he’d given me a gold star. “My grandpa was an engineer himself and he really liked Bob Gurr.

Anyway, when my grandpa died a couple years ago, my grandma gave me his watch. It broke while he was sick, but my grandma never got to fix it for him.” Bert swallowed.

“Oh,” was all I could get out. “I’m really sorry.” And sorry to have brought it up.

“Someday I’ll get it fixed.” He had been staring at his watch but now looked at me. He rubbed the leather watch band and shook his head. “I guess that’s pretty dumb.”

I patted the Minnie Mouse, Jessica Rabbit, and Tinker Bell pins on my bag’s strap. “No, it’s not,” I said. “I know what you mean.” Kiley had given me the Tinker Bell pin for my twelfth birthday. I looked up quickly, to ask Bert about anything else so I wouldn’t have to think of Kiley, and saw that he was very interested in spinning the dial around and setting the hands back in the same place. I wasn’t the only one trying not to think of somebody here. I pinched off the Tinker Bell pin and tucked it into one of my bag’s many compartments, and wondered what I could say to make him feel better.

Bert saw my move, though. “Do you have something against Tinker Bell?”

I laughed, which I was grateful for, since I felt like crying. “She reminded me of someone that I used to come here with. We aren’t friends anymore.”

“Too bad for Tink,” Bert said, and nudged my foot.

“Yeah, too bad for her,” I said, and for a moment, I kind of meant it. It *was* too bad for Kiley.

“You know, it’s not so bad waiting in line with you.” I looked into his eyes in shock. He was actually saying he liked hanging out with me. I instantly wanted to tell Kiley, and then hated myself for wanting to tell her.



I couldn't speak. We needed a topic. We didn't even know each other's full names, so I asked Bert for his.

“Ro-BERT Armstrong. And you?”

“Acacia Allison. But do not call me Acacia.”

“Nice to meet you, Casey.” We shook hands, and I felt a zing through my body. His hands were warm in the icy room.

Well, that was covered. What else could I say? “What's your favorite color?”  
Dumb! What was I, eight?

“Blue. Yours?”

“Green,” I said, grateful he didn't make fun of my question. “But lots of different shades.”

“Ah. Mine is Buzz Lightyear blue,” he said.

I felt a thrill of instant camaraderie. “I know what you mean.” The Buzz Lightyear ride building in Tomorrowland featured lots of primary blue. Accented with green. Our favorite colors complemented each other. At that instant the line — what was left of it, anyway — surged forward, and we scrambled to get up. I tried to subtly stomp around on my foot that had fallen asleep, gasping at the pins and needles.

As we trotted down the corridors, getting excited to hear the *pishhh* of air as each rocket was loaded below us, I heard grumbling from passers-by as our group split into two lines. “Fifty-two minutes after the ride broke, and they said only thirty!” the woman in front of us complained.

It was true — we'd been waiting almost twice as long as we'd expected, but I hadn't even noticed. I was thrilled to tell the cast member that we were a party of two. I was nearly dancing as we piled into our rocket — finally getting on a ride always made me excited, but it was nothing compared with my hand brushing Bert's leg as I pulled my lap bar down.

“Whooh!” I squeaked as we began to move and the soundtrack filled our seat compartments, arranged close enough that our shoulders fit snugly together. We turned to each other and grinned in shared triumph, having conquered the wait, and our heads nearly touched during the slow climb through the light tunnel. I was still looking at Bert's silhouette in the darkness when we blasted into space.

\* \* \*

Our second trip on Space Mountain flew by, not having any ride breakdowns or delays, and as we were jolted out of the dizzying tunnel at the end of the ride, I felt a pang in my stomach not related to the ride at all. I was sorry that our FastPasses had been so efficient the second time around, and that we didn't have to see each other anymore. We wandered out of the building, stopping to make fun of our photo taken at the end of the ride. I covertly snapped a picture of the image on the screen.

“We got through fast that time,” Bert said. I smiled at his hair, which was both windblown from space and flattened out from his hat.

“Yeah. There's still time before I have to meet my parents for dinner,” I said, squinting in the summer sunshine. Coming out of the darkness of deep space, from our own little world, surprised me.

“Enough for another ride, maybe?” Bert paused next to the Star Trader shop’s window, pulling his hat back on, and I wavered. “Pirates? The Matterhorn?”

I would have to go on both with my parents at some point on this trip, but I wasn’t about to tell Bert that. I wanted to spend every second of my parent-free time with him. But I also felt kind of guilty. I didn’t want him to hang around me out of *his* guilt at the pants. “You know, you are, technically, officially released from our, um, agreement. You don’t have to...” I pretended to examine the floating neon Mickey shapes decorating the outside of the shop, but snuck a glance at Bert.

He nudged my arm, and warmth rushed through me. “Thanks, Casey. But I’d like to go, anyway. Do you want to?”

I couldn’t contain my smile as I headed for the Matterhorn, leaving Bert to trot after me and my wonderfully messed-up jeans.

#### Chapter 4: “Sympathetic Vibrations” — *Haunted Mansion* narration

The Matterhorn Bobsleds had two tracks, and two different queues. I made a quick circuit around the mountain to see which line was shorter before deciding on the side near Tomorrowland. We ducked into the line near the submarine lagoon, and I stared up at the mountain’s snow-capped peaks on my left and the lagoon’s palm trees on my right. I thought the alpine mountain-and-tropical plants combo was beautiful. It was one of the many weird combinations that I loved about Disneyland.

In addition to the mountain’s two distinct tracks, there was another unique feature that travel writers never mention about the Matterhorn, and that was what I thought about now, even as I babbled on about the bumpiness of the ride. On the Matterhorn bobsleds, you sit between your companion’s legs, with no barrier between you. You could ask for a separate seat, I guess — but I didn’t want to, and thought it would be kind of rude, anyway. I wondered if Bert had thought about it yet — or at all. He mentioned that he thought the safety recording sounded different than he remembered (I found out he used to come to the park all the time with his family when he was little, but they all hadn’t been together in years). I explained that the beloved recording we had both grown up with had changed — updated with newer, longer warnings — and quoting the old recording (“*Permancer sentavos, por favor*” — “remain seated, please”) kept us occupied for a while. But I still thought about the upcoming seating arrangement and picked all the polish off my nails behind my back.

We wound through the queue, bobbing to the polka music. I rambled about Matterhorn trivia to cover my nervousness: it opened in 1959 as the first tubular steel-track coaster in the world (that fact, lodged in my head courtesy of my dad); it had been placed on the park maps in both Fantasyland and Tomorrowland at various points; I once saw a record in the little building between the two queues, when I peeked through the window slats, called *Vienna in 3/4 Time*. Bert was nice enough to act interested, and before I could fidget and spew any more facts, the moment was upon us: I held up two fingers to the cast member — who was pleasant, but not wearing the dorky lederhosen costume I fondly remembered — and we were pointed toward the front compartment of the next bobsled.

Bert complained. “Aw, the front’s not as good as the back — you don’t get the drops so much.”

I said something about the front having a better view, but I was now bobbing a little too nervously to argue the point. I could only nod with Bert in agreement about the lack of fun dropping, but thought I had enough stomach flips of my own to deal with.

The bobsled pulled up behind us, at the unloading platform, and I watched people maneuver their way out with a new intensity. How did they do it without touching each other? Well, I guess they didn’t — but I was going to try, or be unable to speak to or look at Bert again if I squished any of his more sensitive areas. But still...I wouldn’t mind being near them. I started blushing madly and forced myself to concentrate on picking the last bit of nail polish off.

Our bobsled pulled up next to us too fast. Bert climbed in casually, tossing his long leg over the bench seat. I tried to clutch my bag over my bottom to hide the ink stain, balance between the loading platform and the sled, and delicately sit down without waving my butt near Bert. I didn't pull off the graceful part, but at least I didn't fall into his lap in a heap. I scooted forward until a small child could probably fit between us, and thought it might not turn out hopelessly awkward after all, until Bert reached around me with both arms, offering me the two halves of the seatbelt.

He helped untangle the left half and tugged it across me, and I fumbled with my half of the buckle. Maneuvering the seatbelt parts was making me hysterical with repressed giggles, and I had to breathe deeply to compose myself. *I can use a seatbelt like a mature person*, I told myself. *Get a grip, Casey!*

The sled lunged forward, threw me back against Bert's chest, and stopped short at the Matterhorn's entrance, a dark gaping hole that always made me a little uneasy. I knew what to expect on this ride, but it still always gave me butterflies. Feeling Bert's legs wrapped around my body didn't make them settle down.

We sat still for a minute, and, desperate with the feeling that I ought to say something, I blurted, "I miss the lederhosen." *Never mind, Casey. Don't talk anymore, ever.*

Bert's chest shook against my back while he laughed.

Fortunately, before he could feel the heat radiating off of my cheeks, we were shot into the tunnel.

\* \* \*

The ride came to an abrupt stop about halfway through, as we were about to plunge down a short drop into a cavern below.

“Hey! It’s only been, like, a minute!” I cried, hands still gripping the cushiony bar at the front of the bobsled. My body was still anticipating the dip I knew would be coming, and although I wanted to see Bert, I didn’t want to turn toward him and have the ride start up again. I stared into the icy caverns.

I could hear the smile in Bert’s voice as he said, “I don’t care if we’re stopped or not — this is my favorite ride so far.” He pressed his legs together daringly, making me jump.

I smacked his knee in surprise, and noticed that his legs stayed closer to my arms. His faded blue sneaker was touching my foot — just barely, but enough that it sent a tremor through me. “Seriously, though...this is *so cool*.... I’ve never been stuck on the Matterhorn before! Ooh, maybe they’ll let us walk off!” I peered over the bobsled. We were on the edge, with an amazing view of the Monorail quietly passing by on the nearby track.

A light came on inside the Matterhorn, and I squealed in dorkish delight. The polite delay announcement sounded, and I cheered a tiny bit.

“We might as well get comfortable,” Bert said. I twisted backward. He already looked about as comfortable as a tall guy could get, wedged into a bobsled. He was reclining against the hard blue seat, and stretched his legs out so they *almost* extended

past my own into the front of the sled. “We’ve got the first-class bobsled. Extra legroom.” He wiggled his feet to demonstrate.

In contrast to Bert’s laid-back attitude, I was perched forward, peering into the caverns around us. Too bad the Skyway buckets didn’t travel through the Matterhorn anymore. I would have liked to see them from this view — I’d looked down on the bobsleds from above so many times when I was little. It would be nice to have the opposite perspective. I slumped into my seat, mourning the loss of the Skyway, but bolted into perfect posture when my spine touched Bert’s torso.

“You can lean back, Casey — it’s okay, I know it must not be comfortable sitting like that. We might be here awhile.” He didn’t say it like he was complaining.

I twisted around halfway, and he was beaming at our surroundings. *I am stuck in a bobsled with this guy*, I thought. I wanted to lean back against him, but I couldn’t. I inched forward in my seat and reached for my bag, and pretended to be too focused on taking pictures to acknowledge that his legs were wrapped around me.

“Oh, come on, I won’t bite!” he said. “But I might squish you a little,” he added, squeezing his legs harder and making me yelp, and probably making that frame blurry, too.

“Everything okay up there?” someone behind us called out.

Bert was shaking the bobsled with suppressed laughter. A loud teenage doofus, older than us, yelled, “When that bobsled’s a-rockin’, don’t go a-knockin’!” and I heard an eruption of high-pitched giggles and squeaks. I turned around to see who was heckling us, and to my horror, I thought I glimpsed a blue sparkly tank top, surrounded by a sea of



lingerie straps. I couldn't be sure, though, because I spun back around, and shoved back into Bert harder than necessary. This time, I hoped I *had* squashed him.

Instead, he settled against me again, with his neck touching my shoulder for an instant. A breeze lifted some strands of my ponytail, and he sneezed as they touched his face. I'd only been to one school dance, and had danced with the guys that Kiley had picked out for me — but leaning against Bert, feeling every move he made in our tiny seat, was totally different. We were doing our own very careful dance to not freak each other out.

After the rest of the group went back to their own conversations and the breeze had cooled my face back to a normal shade, I started to relax a little. We had a view of the Mad Tea Cups, Small World's towers, and sometimes a passing Monorail. I wrangled with the seatbelt to get my camera out of the bag between my feet and spent the next ten minutes taking pictures. A lot with extreme close-ups of Bert.

I clicked the frame through and found I had one shot left on the roll. *Here is where a digital camera would be nice*, I thought. "One more, Bert," I said. I leaned as far back as I could, and he took his hat off, ruffled his hair, and pursed his lips. I giggled. "One more, and be normal," I said.

He sighed and gave me a huge, cheesy smile. He thought he was being silly again, but as I looked through the lens at him, I felt butterflies. Bert didn't look silly at all. He looked like an ad for Disneyland. He looked like a boy from one of my magazines. I realized my viewfinder was fogging up — I was taking too long looking at him with the

camera pressed to my face. I got a shot of him with the Monorail flying by in the background, but I knew the best part of that picture would be Bert's smile.

From behind me, Bert said, "You know what I miss? The Skyway." He sighed deeply, and it blew my hair onto my shoulders, giving me a chill.

"Me too," I said, winding the film more carefully than I ever had before. This roll had important pictures. It had Bert.

"I always told my mom I would drop something out of one of the baskets. Or spit at somebody."

"You would not spit at somebody on the Skyway!" I didn't know Bert well, but I was sure about that. That was something a boy that Kinsey liked would do. It was not something a boy I liked could ever do.

"I thought I would when I was older, and then they took it down, so I didn't get a chance to do it." I stuck my elbow in his ribs as I popped open the camera's back. "Hey! Well, since it's gone now, at least nobody can spit at us while we're stuck here."

"Nobody can get to us," I said. That wasn't really true — there was a tiny walkway next to the track, in case you actually needed to walk out of the Matterhorn — but it was fun to think of us stranded together on a mountain. I'd always wanted to walk out of a ride, but not this time.

Bert stretched his arms around me, holding onto the bobsled's handles. A breeze from the tunnel in front of us blew my ponytail back into his face, and he kept making noises like he was spitting it out. I laughed every time. I leaned back into him, and

pretended to be very interested in the teacups below, spinning into a blur of pastel colors. It was a confused but happy mess. They looked like I felt.

My empty stomach chose that moment to rumble. Bert could probably feel it. He poked at my sides and said, “Hey, maybe they’ll bring us lunch up here if we’re really stuck!”

“I doubt that,” I said, crossing my arms over my lap and praying my body would not humiliate me right now. I didn’t even care that I was hungry, I just didn’t want my stomach to make noises again.

“Well, if we make it out of this mountain, maybe we can get lunch.”

Bert was asking me out on a date-within-a-date! “Yeah, if we ever — “ I said, and was cut off by a scratchy-sounding speaker hidden in a rock announcing the ride was working again. We felt the sled vibrate back to life. It was a sign. Definitely a sign. The universe was telling us we should hang out together some more before I had to meet my parents and officially end the fun part of this trip.

When we finally pulled to a stop, I scooted forward before stepping out. I swung my bag behind me to cover my ink-stained butt, and unfortunately whacked Bert in the leg.

“Sorry!” But I pressed my hands to the bag to make sure it covered up the ink.

Bert noticed. “Look, I am still sorry, Case. What can I do? Do you want to trade pants with me?”

I blushed hard. “Uh...no, it’s totally okay, Bert.” I looked away and hoped he hadn’t seen me. “Let’s get something to eat!” I said, walking off.

We decided on the Tomorrowland Terrace, on the other side of the Matterhorn. I ordered my usual fried apple slices with caramel dip, and Bert got a sandwich. It took awhile for my fried apples. While Bert and I waited, he told me about the mechanics of the stage that rose out of the ground. He must have talked to his grandfather a lot about engineering. While he was talking, he casually scanned the area.

“What are you looking for?”

“A popcorn cart.”

“Didn’t you just order a sandwich?”

“I wanted to have a well-balanced meal.”

“Right. I think there’s one around the Matterhorn, back toward Small World. You can even have some caramel apple slices if you want. That’s totally healthy.”

“Thanks, Case. I think I’m low on my daily popcorn intake, though. Let’s get some after our food.”

“Yes, we’ll get our food after the food.” Bert didn’t hear me; he peered in the window, entranced as the apples were plopped in to be fried. He was as fascinated with the food making as the little kid waiting next to us. It could have been one of the most boring moments of my life — watching someone else watch apples being deep-fried — but as it was, I appreciated the chance to examine Bert. I liked his freckles across his cheeks, from afternoons playing tennis. I liked that I knew that about him.

After we collected our sandwich, apples, Coke, and a tiny tub of hot caramel sauce, we trekked off in search of popcorn, and then bounced pieces into our mouths on our way to an empty bench. We plopped down by the old Motorboat Cruise lagoon. Bert

started to toss popcorn toward my mouth, but he kept hitting my nose. I didn't care where the popcorn went. I did care that he was looking at me a lot.

A sweeper came by and silently scooped up our spilled popcorn, reaching his broom between our legs. "Oh, sorry," I said. The sweeper nodded and walked on. "Look what you did," I said to Bert. He grabbed a whole handful of popcorn and was about to toss it all at me when the sweeper turned around and he stuffed it all in his mouth instead. I picked up a couple of spilled pieces and threw them into the old lagoon at some ducks.

"This was my favorite ride when I was little," I said, watching ducks scoot across the empty water toward the popcorn. "I thought I really steered the boat. My parents used to tell me I was."

"Yeah? That's cool." Bert took a giant bite of his sandwich.

"I guess." I watched my caramel sauce, oozing and dripping from an apple wedge. "I was pretty mad when I was on the motor boats when I was older, though, and realized I wasn't steering."

"Yeah?" Bert was alternately lobbing handfuls of the popcorn into his mouth and into the green-colored water for the crowd of ducks that had appeared, but I was pretty sure he was listening.

"I think I was seven. I remember telling my mom and dad that I'd drive the boat out of the 'lake' and into the submarine lagoon — that was my dad's favorite ride. They laughed, so to show them I was serious, I cranked the wheel around fast, and we started to turn, and then the boat hit the track and kept going in the other direction. I still

pretended to steer, but I was so mad at them for all the times they had acted like I had such a big responsibility, you know?”

Bert nodded. “Yeah, but at least they pretended for you. They thought it made it fun.”

I speared another apple slice. “I guess. But it bugged me after that, that they would still say, ‘Whoa, watch out for that rock!’ and stuff. They knew I knew — so what’s the point? They did that until the ride closed. It was like I had to pretend for *them*.”

“But it was still your favorite ride,” Bert reminded me.

“Yeah, I guess.” I swirled an apple in caramel sauce. “But then I rode Big Thunder and that was my favorite. I liked that I was old enough to go on it by myself.” I didn’t like being by myself in a crowd anymore. I wanted to have a friend to hang out with, instead of being alone or with my parents. A friend was proof to the gawking groups of girls that I wasn’t as lame as I felt. Bert was proof of it for today. Even if it was for only a little longer.

Bert had finished his sandwich and was balling up the shiny silver wrapper. It caught the lights around the water, and sparkled in his hands. His hands were big and knuckle-y, and displayed a couple of faint ridges from scars. They were so different from mine, which were smaller and had paint stuck underneath the fingernails. I could imagine Bert’s hands wrapped around a tennis racquet, swinging with speed. A piece of trash had never looked so pretty, I thought, admiring the delicate way he was handling the foil.

He looked as though he wanted to throw it into the nearest can, which was about ten feet away, but glanced at me, poking at my apple slices but not eating them, and didn't throw it. "But you're here with your mom and dad, right? You guys still go on trips together."

"Yeah. We all *like* Disneyland — and I especially like it because it's one of the only places where they'll let me be away from them without harassing me. Like now."

Bert wadded up the wrapper as tight as he could, and it made crinkling noises as he squeezed it. He looked sad and didn't say anything. *Way to depress your date*, Casey, I thought. "So, um...you're here with your grandma, right?" I asked.

"Uh..."

I could see his jaw clench a little. He picked at the ball of foil, unwrapping it to start over again. When he had it completely open and flat again, he said, "Yeah, this trip. My mom and dad used to take me here all the time, with my grandma and granddad. But lately, it's like they're too busy to see their own family." He cleared his throat a little too loud.

"I mean, obviously it doesn't matter much for *me*, since I'm older, but it makes me mad for my sister. They should *want* to take their own little kid to the park, to Disneyland, to hang out with us, with her. They *say* they do, but they just...don't." He started crinkling the wrapper again. "I know they're busy, but Maggie doesn't understand, when they tell us we'll go someplace that weekend, and then they bail." Bert looked down at his shoes, and his jaw was tightening again. "I guess I don't really understand it either."

“Bert, I’m...sorry,” I said. I leaned over to hug him, and my hand hovered over his shoulder too long, but then he tensed up when I touched him. I backed off.

“I don’t even think they care that they’re not here with us. They haven’t called me or anything.” He smashed a popcorn puff into bits with his shoe.

I felt like an idiot. I’d been complaining all day about trying to *ditch* my parents, and Bert’s parents didn’t even want to be around him. “Well,” I started, trying to think of something to say that might be true but not too Pollyanna-like, “just because they don’t want to go to Disneyland doesn’t mean they don’t have any interest in you — and Maggie,” I added quickly, at his glance. “I’m sure not everyone needs to go to Disneyland all the time. My parents are kind of weird about it. It’s like a ritual for them.”

Bert’s chest rose and fell. “Yeah, I know. But it’s not just that. They don’t seem to care what we do, ever. They could ask how tennis is going or know what classes I was taking, or at least turn away from the computer when I tell them stuff. When I go out, they don’t even ask who I’m going with!” I gave him an envious look, and he added, “Really, Casey, it’s not as great as it sounds.”

“But your grandma is here with you and Maggie.”

He smiled at the ground and stopped smashing popcorn kernels. “Yeah, my grandma knows more about me than my mom and dad put together. *She’s* always on my case about where I’m going, when I’ll be home...and she’ll wait up for me to see if I’m late.” He laughed. “I came home fifteen minutes late once, and she was up watching *Letterman* when I came in. I think there were penguins on that night. She’s scared of birds. She was sitting there in her chair, though, waiting for me but pretending to watch



these penguins waddling around. And she made me feel so guilty for being late, just by being awake for me. If I'd known she was waiting, I would have tried to get home on time." He rubbed his broken watch.

"Anyway, she's the one taking me and Maggie on this trip. My parents have been promising us — her — forever that we'd go this summer. It's Maggie's first trip here. And then last week they said my mom was going to be working on some project at work this week, and my dad has 'a great opportunity' to fly to Seattle for some other work thing, so...my grandma said she was taking us instead, and that was all there was to it. And she did."

"That's a good grandma," I said.

"She is." Bert didn't seem to look much happier, though. "Without my grandma, I don't know what we'd do, especially Maggie. After my granddad died...." He swallowed. "My grandma moved in with us. I'm glad she did. But, I don't know how long she'll be able to take care of Maggie...." He shook his head. "I'm sorry, Casey. You barely know me and I'm telling you all this stuff about my messed-up family." He looked like he was blushing underneath his tan.

"It's okay. I get it," I said.

"It's easier, talking to you here. Even though I just met you. I don't even tell this stuff to my friends at home. They think it's great that they can come over and we can play video games all night while my parents are gone. They don't see me or my grandma trying to make Maggie feel better when our mom and dad aren't there."

“I’m sorry, Bert.” He was slumped over on the bench. “They don’t know what they’re missing, not being here with you. It’s their loss.” He smiled and sat up straighter, and we stared into space until I looked at my watch.

“Ohhh...almost no time left until dinner. My parents eat insanely early.” I felt a sudden panic. There was no way I could say goodbye to Bert right now. “But maybe time for a quick trip through the Haunted Mansion...I’ve been *dying* to go.”

I nudged him and he snickered appropriately, so I said I’d call my parents to let them know. I was forming a plan, but didn’t want to tell Bert yet. I wanted to make sure I could do it before asking him. I wasn’t going to be another flake in his life, even if he’d only know me for this afternoon.

Bert watched me stand up and readjust my bag behind my bottom. “Okay, Case, seriously, I’ll buy you new pants. Or something to help. Let me, all right?” I agreed.

We walked through Fantasyland, on the way to New Orleans Square. As we passed Storybook Land, Bert reached over, put his arm around my shoulder, and squeezed me to his side for a couple of seconds. I let my bag fall away. For the first time all afternoon, I felt like strutting in my blemished jeans.

Chapter 5: “Do You Want to Know a Secret?” — *Snow White’s Grotto song*

We took the shortcut to the Haunted Mansion through the Big Thunder trail to Frontierland. I loved that area, not only because it led to my favorite spot in the park, New Orleans Square, but because it was usually shady, quiet, and empty. It was peaceful, which seemed impossible since the Big Thunder trains’ high-pitched whistles sounded every minute as they roared past us, but it was. It was such a familiar sound that even the screaming was relaxing to me.

It was also one of the only places in the park where my cell phone worked — mine and a lot of others, too, since there was a cluster of people on the hill, straining to hear our conversations between screams from the coasters rushing by. But I was able to set the plan: My parents, who had overslept from their nap and sounded cranky (I guess because they were already off their schedule), would meet both me *and* Bert at the Blue Bayou in an hour. I bounced along next to Bert, not caring to contain my joy at another two hours with him.

We watched the slanted beams of sunlight shine through the clusters of trees on our path. I closed my eyes while I walked a few steps to make the sight of my favorite place in the world a little more real when I opened them again.

If only the McDonald’s fry cart wasn’t there. It jarred me back to the outside world. Kiley loved the fry cart — she *would*, I added to myself — and she didn’t really appreciate the whole idea of completely immersing yourself in another place and time.

Plus, she didn't appreciate that those fries are gross. As soon as that fry smell hit me, a bitter taste flooded my throat. I was instantly in her house after a long day at school.

I used to hang out with her after school almost every day. At least once a week, she would get her mom to stop at McDonald's for fries, and it would stink up her room for the rest of the week. I remembered one day, with that fry smell still hanging in the air, after we had an argument...I found out that day in PE that Kiley had told some guys she didn't even know an embarrassing story about me, and I was infuriated with her, and her stupid fries.

We'd co-founded a secret club when we were little, but no one else ever knew about it. Our club and our club stories were between us, sacred, one of our bonds that we shared. Lately, our history seemed like one of the only things we even had in common. But that day, Kiley had told a pack of lame, mean guys (she thought they were cute) about our club and our secret, silly rituals, involving running around the block after dark during a sleepover. That was her idea. I would only venture out for the ritual in my biggest sweatshirt and plaid pajama pants. Last year, someone in a passing car had yelled out the window that the "girl and boy" running around should be inside sleeping — the ultimate in anonymous humiliation for me. I had wanted to cry. I knew Kiley was getting prettier and more popular, but did I really look like a boy?! She never said anything about it to me. But she did start suggesting make-up to me and telling me what clothes to wear after that.

Now other people knew that I was actually mistaken for a boy, just because I didn't want to show off my boobs like Kiley. The guys kept calling me "bro" in gym and

I didn't get it until a girl who'd overheard told me what Kiley had said. I had a feeling it was even worse than the girl told me, but she was probably being nice to me.

I had the maybe-unreasonable-but-still-strong feeling that Kiley had cut off our only solid link as friends by telling this story. When we were little, Kiley had made me vow not to tell our secrets to anyone. I knew she had once stolen a piece of used gum spit out by a guy she had a crush on. I didn't tell anybody.

I glared backward in the fry cart's direction. We were now halfway around the river to the Mansion, and I was missing out my favorite place. Because of stupid Kiley. How could she still be mean to me when she wasn't even here?

"Bert, did you ever have someone tell a secret about you?"

Bert didn't look surprised at the new conversation topic. "Yeah, Maggie tattles all the time."

"No, I mean, like a personal thing."

"Yeah, I guess so. Why?"

"Well...my friend — "

"Kiley?"

"Yeah...she, well, she told a dumb story about me, and I feel stupid for even caring, but I do." I scrunched my hands in my hair. I seriously needed to get over it.

We walked on, and I kicked at peanut shells that a sweeper would whisk away in a few minutes.

"What made you think of that?"

“The fry cart.”

Bert didn't even question it, which I was grateful for. “Kiley sucks. She's not a good friend.”

“She's not now. But she was.” I felt my eyes tearing up. Oh no.

“Maybe you just need a new secret story. To replace the old one.”

“Like what?” I rubbed at my eyes.

We walked along without talking. “Well, instead of thinking about Kiley when you go by the fry cart, you should think of the Mark Twain's whistle and the people yelling on Big Thunder, and that we secretly kissed each other here.” He looked at me sideways.

I only had time to say, “But — “ when my body caught up before my brain. My stomach flipped. Then Bert grabbed my shoulders lightly, and kissed my cheek.

Only it wasn't supposed to be my cheek. I had panicked and turned at the last second, when we were at that point where the other person's two eyes merge as one in some kind of mutant trick. I saw one Cyclops-like brown eye coming at me and panicked.

Bert brushed his mouth on my hot cheek, sending a shiver down my neck, and pulled back slowly. “Oh, I'm sorry, Casey.”

“No...”

He looked hurt.

“No, not that kind of sorry,” I said, not making sense. *Not sorry you tried! I'm ready now, I want you to try again!* But I knew I had blown my chance.

He smiled at the ground, and adjusted his hat. “That’s okay.” He reached into the popcorn box I was holding, and I could feel his hand inside it, with only a thin, crackling layer of cardboard and melted butter between my hand and his.

“We’d better get going,” he said, stuffing a handful of popcorn into his mouth, and took off. I stared at him, looking around at the trees and the *Columbia*, almost ready to be put to bed for the night in its dock near the Mansion. I had a new secret: I would now remember the fry cart as the place where I had messed up my chance. I sighed, crumpled the box in my fist, and trotted to catch up with Bert. He wouldn’t tell anyone about our secret, no matter how our kiss had turned out. But I hated that fry cart.

Chapter 6: “Hot and Cold Running Chills” — *Haunted Mansion narration*

We stopped at Le Bat en Rouge, the Haunted Mansion shop that was located by Pirates for some reason, but the only pants to be found were gaudy, sequined pajama bottoms with Mickey emblazoned across the rear. I held them up to me in the mirror, but decided I'd rather wear my stained jeans than pants with writing or pictures across the butt.

Fortunately, the Pirates shop had a zip-up hoodie I could use to cover up with. It featured a grinning skull on the front with red, glittery eyes, and the Pirates ride logo on the back. I looked at the crossbones design around the cuffs. “I'll think of you every time I wear it.”

“Thanks a lot!” he said, laughing.

No matter what a skull design might look like to someone back home, my sweatshirt would always remind me of the feeling that had been flickering in my chest all day. The skull's eyes flashed at me and I hoped that the feeling would last.

\* \* \*

I pulled the sweatshirt down around my waist as we walked through the Haunted Mansion graveyard line area. I heard only two people calling the Haunted Mansion the “Haunted House,” so I was in a pretty good mood when we finally filed into the packed, dark entrance. I loved the cold blast of air as we wandered into the Mansion. Especially with my new sweatshirt from Bert wrapped around me.

We let the crowd squish us together in the elevator, and hung back to let them swarm by so we could be alone. We watched the changing portraits in the gallery, and



wandered to the boarding area. Even though we weren't touching, I could feel Bert next to me in the dark. I tripped off the moving ramp and fell into our Doom Buggy. Bert caught my arm as I fell, so at least I didn't bang my head. He helped pull me onto the bench seat, and our lap bar sealed us in.

The darkness was almost too much. The Doom Buggy pulled us along, spinning us and sometimes pushing us together. I tried to control my breathing. Then we jerked to a stop. The announcement rang out around us that we'd been interrupted by "playful spirits" and we sat in silence, listening to the music. We had stopped facing a rare blank area — looking at a black wall, giving us no distractions — and I played with my sweatshirt's sleeve.

"Do you notice that we get stuck on a lot of rides?" I whispered.

"We're lucky, I guess." His voice sounded disembodied in our private corner of the mansion.

I so wanted Bert to try to kiss me again. Or maybe I was supposed to do it, since I'd messed up the first time. How was I supposed to know this kind of stuff? Kiley would know how to get a guy to kiss her. Not that I'd ever do things her way.

*Just do it yourself*, I said in my head so loudly I wondered if Bert could hear. But I actually said, "I think we have good luck," smiled into the shadows, and realized that he couldn't see me smiling. He touched the back of my hand, making me jump, and played with my fingertips, and I felt like passing out. *Do it!* I screamed in my head. The ride jolted to life again before I could turn my head, and our moment was gone, again. The rest of the ride passed in a blur.

\* \* \*

We wandered through New Orleans Square's tight streets, winding through the crowds as I gazed up at the pastel balconies with wrought iron on each building. Normally, when I walked through here alone, I ended up at 33 Royal Street to stalk the entrance to Club 33, watching as any members of the exclusive club would use the speakerbox and open the door. I once caught a peek at the lobby for about a minute; there was a giant party going in, and the door was open for a while — long enough for me to see a dark, red-lit room, with a big staircase on the far wall, and a fancy wood desk to the right. I was hoping for a peek at the antique lift, but the last guest had snuck in before I could see in any farther. Before I realized it, I found that Bert and I had wandered into the crystal shop.

I caught my reflection in the mirror-backed shelves, as we leaned to examine Swarovski-studded Mickey figures and gleaming Cinderella slippers made of glass (of course). Then I saw them: The dangly earrings I'd been eyeing since last summer, each earring an inch-long waterfall of tiny Mickey-shaped crystals set in silver. They were mostly crystal, not diamonds — maybe someday, when I was grown-up and rich, I'd get diamond Mickey earrings. For now, though, the crystal ones were enough to set me back months of babysitting money. I sighed, and breathed on the glass they were sitting under.

Bert saw me admiring them, and said he'd wait for me over on the other side of the store. He walked over to the station where a cast member was etching a set of champagne flutes, and look hypnotized by the carving and the fine dust flying from the delicate glasses.

I *could* buy my earrings. I had all of my cash in my wallet, saved from my birthday, Christmas, and job money since last summer. I didn't have to ask anybody if I could get them, and I didn't have to keep visiting my earrings in the store. I really didn't want to walk in and find an empty shelf someday. I couldn't blow my chances again today on something as easy to get as a pair of earrings.

A woman in her 30s brushed past me. She wore a pearl necklace and heels. *Going to eat at Club 33*, I thought, crossing my arms and watching her with an intense jealousy. I restrained myself from stepping in front of her to block my earrings — I felt a strong urge to knock her over, grab the earrings, and hug them to my chest. Instead, I held my breath and watched the woman, staring at her curly brown hair and breathing in her strong perfume, as she bent over to examine the contents of the case my earrings lay in. Why hadn't I claimed them when I had the chance? Why was I always such a total wimp?

Finally, the woman moved on and I let out a puff of air, stepped up to the counter, and rested a hand lightly on the metal edge of the case — territorial without leaving fingerprints. I glanced at Bert; he looked entranced by the etching going on. I hadn't told him about my earrings, but I saw him peek at me. My first date happened on this Disneyland trip; I should buy my grown-up earrings today.

While I waited for the girl to help me, I watched the light glint off the earrings' shiny, polished silver. These earrings were worth hours of reading stories and force-feeding vegetables to the neighbors' kids, and passing up the clothes that Kiley told me to

wear. Guilt washed over me about spending all of my money. I felt sweaty and panicky, and I hadn't even bought them yet.

As I stood in the middle of the sparkling store, being bumped into by shoppers trying to show their loved ones back home that they had been thinking of them, I had to start fanning myself. How many more rolls of film and packs of printing paper did these earrings equal? Kiley would get these. If she were here, she'd tell me to do it. She had told me to get them on our last trip here.

But she wasn't here with me. I thought about Bert's parents, not here for him either. It was their loss, and it was Kiley's loss that she wasn't around for me anymore. I didn't want to do what she would have done, about anything. I patted my borrowed camera, resting in my beat-up bag. I wanted these earrings, but suddenly I wanted to act like a real adult more. I patted the case in good-bye, and walked away, grabbing Bert on my way out. I was a tiny bit glad that I had left fingerprints on the glass.

Chapter 7: “Properly Warned Ye Be” — *Pirates of the Caribbean narration*

Ordinarily, I loved strolling through New Orleans Square, touching the leaves of huge potted plants, ducking into the Christmas shop to get in the spirit, even if it was the middle of summer, and doing it while taking small sips of a Disneyland mint julep, bright green, non-alcoholic (of course), and with double cherries on top. After it was gone, I’d stick my tongue through one of the ice cubes with the holes through the centers, and play with the ice as I walked around the buildings. I would imagine I had gone back in time a hundred years to whatever the real version of New Orleans might be.

On this trip, though, after escaping from the crystal shop, I wove between the crowds, dodging strollers and kids, dragging Bert behind me. I was completely missing out on the atmosphere because, thanks to my earring dilemma, we were five minutes late to the Blue Bayou. Okay, so it wasn’t exclusive and therefore, not as cool as Club 33, *but* that also meant that I could go inside and actually eat, which was a plus. And eating inside Pirates of the Caribbean was pretty cool in its own way.

Bert trotted to catch up to me. “Sorry, Bert,” I said over my shoulder, out of breath. I snuck a peek at him; he had stuffed his hat in a giant pocket on his pants and was smoothing his hair down as he jogged behind me. Apparently I wasn’t alone in my nervousness about eating with my parents. Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea. “You know how my parents are, Bert. Are you sure you’re okay with this?”

“I’ve been warned. Don’t worry, Case.” He gave me a confident smile, and I could believe he was entirely sure of himself — until I saw he kept wiping his hands on his jeans.

Even if Bert could handle himself and my parents, a thought worried me: We were about to eat in a dark, candle-lit restaurant. For a theme park, it’s pretty romantic, even with the passing boats full of people pretending to be pirates. Except that my parents were going to be there with us. How could I be romantic with Bert in front of my parents? I had never even mentioned a boy’s name to them. Hopefully it would be dark enough to hide my blushes.

I tried to remind myself that Bert was never going to see me or (lucky him) my parents, ever again — he was just along for a hopefully not entirely excruciating dinner with my family. When Kiley was with us last year, my parents actually informed her of what the Blue Bayou’s silverware pattern was called (my mom had turned over her fork to check). My dad had chimed in with the fascinating tidbit that we were sitting exactly three tables from where we sat last time, and weren’t the cricket sounds louder over here? I should have brainstormed possible non-embarrassing conversation topics in advance, but I hadn’t thought of it. I dreaded seeing the green Club 33 door, because it meant that as soon as we rounded the crowded corner, we would be at the entrance to the Blue Bayou. And, I could now see as I slid through the throng, my parents were right out front, waiting for us.

I gave silent thanks that my mom had left her teal fanny pack at the hotel, in favor of a big, shapeless mom-style purse, and that my dad was wearing pants and actual shoes

instead of sandals with socks, sparing me severe mortification. I tugged on my skull sweatshirt, which had bunched up around my hips and was now exposing my ink-smearred pant pockets, and realized that I was the worst-dressed member of our party of four.

I pulled my hair back into what I hoped was a neat ponytail and waved at my parents. “Hi — um, you know Bert. Uh, Robert,” I added, unsure of what adults called him.

“Well, not quite yet, but nice to see you again, Robert.” My mom smiled at him and adjusted her purse so it looked less poufy and straightened her blouse. I squinted at her. Did *she* care what Bert thought of *her*?

“Great to see you again,” he said, shaking my dad’s hand and smiling at them both. None of my friends had ever shaken my parents’ hands before, and I could see from the surprise on my dad’s face (and the long handshake that was still going on) that he had the same thought.

But maybe he was thinking that Bert was too old for me to hang around with. My suspicion was immediately confirmed. He oh-so-subtly said, “So, Robert, how old are you?” I thought about throwing myself into the nearby Rivers of America.

“Fifteen, Mr. Allison.”

“Roger,” my dad interrupted. He and my mom exchanged a brief but completely obvious look of shared relief. How old had they thought he was? I turned to examine Bert with new scrutiny. I thought he looked only slightly older than me. His politeness must have thrown off my parents.

Bert and my parents walked into the waiting area together, and my mom looked like she was dangerously close to reaching for her wallet. I had seen her hand emerge too often with a ladder of pictures unfold of me at various stages of life and bad hairstyles. I rushed in and sat down on an available bench seat, leaving room only for Bert on my right, and my parents on the left.

Unfortunately, they didn't get my hint: My parents plopped down on either side of me, leaving my dad next to Bert, who was perched on the edge of the bench but doing a nice job of looking comfortable. At least he was safe from my mom's photos.

"So, Casey, have you had fun?" she asked casually.

"Yes, Mom," I said as quietly as I could over the chatter in the waiting area.

"Well, tell me what you've done!" she said.

"I'll, uh, I'll tell you later, okay?" Which I wouldn't ever do, but I didn't want to get into it now.

She turned and watched Bert look genuinely interested as my dad talked about the awards the Blue Bayou had won for its food — even though my dad's only knowledge of those awards was from reading the framed certificates on the walls, which we could all see clearly from our bench. My mom leaned into me, with her hands hugging her crossed legs.

"Bert seems nice. And you know we trust you." She said that last part a little menacingly. Hmm. Maybe she had finally realized that Bert might see me as someone other than a kid to babysit.

"Mom! I know. Like I'm some little kid."



“No, Casey, it’s only, well...At least it’s only Disneyland, anyway,” she ended, like that explained it.

“What are you talking about?”

“Well, your dad...” she said, trailing off, and I ground my teeth together. I stared into a potted plant in the corner and fumed. My mom always put the blame for restricting me on my dad. Was she about to turn my day with Bert into the training bra disaster all over again? I glared into the plant because I couldn’t glare at her. At least not in front of Bert.

“Casey?”

“Huh?” I jumped, making the vinyl padded seat squeak, and looked up at my dad, who seemed concerned that I’d been staring at a plant for several minutes.

“Time for Pirates and food, matey!” Bert said by my side, and I almost grabbed for his hand, but I caught myself before my mom could see. What horrible thing would she say if she actually saw Bert in action? She was embarrassing enough talking about him.

We squinted as we entered the restaurant and went back outside. Only not really. The real outside was sweaty and hot. The dark, paper-lantern-lit “patio” inside the restaurant was air-conditioned and calm. I looked up at the “sky” and saw a shooting star. I didn’t know if it would count, but I made a wish that Bert would still like me after this meal.

The restaurant was busy, with clinking plates and chatter and soothing bayou sounds. Must have been the crickets chirping. I added to the noise as I squealed when I

saw the hostess was leading us to my favorite table by the water. I pulled my own chair out, seeing too late that Bert was standing by it, with his hand on the top rung. I practically crushed his fingers as I sat down. I blushed, and Bert played it off like he was standing up to look at the scenery.

Fortunately, Bert wasn't one of those annoying people who would comment on that kind of awkwardness, anyway. My mom, however...

"Acacia, are you okay? You look a little off." She squinted at me, and actually stuck out her hand to feel my forehead. "You're hot!" she said to what seemed like the entire restaurant, and I got hotter.

"I'm fine, Mom!" I swatted her hand away, and got very busy arranging my cloth napkin on my lap. When I finally dared to look up again, after my mom stopped staring at me and scrutinized the menu instead, Bert peeked at me over the top of his menu. I could see only his eyes, but I could tell he was smiling at me. I wanted to feel for his foot under the table, but I kicked into someone's chair instead and, to cover the clang, said, "Gumbo!" His eyebrows went up. "Uh, I think I'll get the vegetable gumbo," I said. Bert grinned at me now — he knew I wasn't at all hungry, having eaten at least half of his fried apple slices.

He decided on a Monte Cristo sandwich, and looked at the boats full of riders floating by. Despite the peaceful, nighttime bayou scene, with flickering fireflies and noisy frogs, some riders couldn't contain themselves. They *had* to scream or yell for apparently no reason, or laugh way too loudly, as if they couldn't deal with a few seconds of serenity in a theme park. Personally, those moments were what I was beginning to love

about Disneyland. Maybe I didn't need to run around screaming with Kiley every minute to have fun. Especially with Bert.

My temporary Zen-like state was replaced with annoyance as the latest group of loud wannabe pirates went by, all frantically shushing and yelling at each other to be quiet.

"Do you think I'd make it from here?" Bert whispered across the table. He was holding a roll in his left hand pretending to aim. Well, maybe he was aiming for real. I had only met him this afternoon. Was he the kind of guy who'd bean an unsuspecting — but deserving — guest with a warm dinner roll?

He arched his eyebrows at me, and I checked on either side — my parents were still absorbed in the menus, even though they ordered the same things every time. Bert had pulled on a loose, chunky sweater to fend off the air conditioning, and a sleeve slipped back down his arm as he held his hand raised. I caught a peek of his grandfathers' broken watch, and I knew I was in no danger of being thrown out of the restaurant.

"Mmm... You could hit a boat for sure, but I don't think you could hit anyone in particular," I said back, leaning over the candle.

"Wanna find out?"

We laughed, but he began to butter his roll, rather than aiming with it.

"So, Robert," my dad said, apparently noticing I was enjoying myself and feeling the need to stop it immediately, "I see you and Casey are already good friends. Who else are you here with?"

Bert swallowed his bite carefully. “My grandma and little sister, Maggie. They both wanted a nap this afternoon.”

“Can’t say that I blame them,” my dad said, stuffing a large wedge of bread in his mouth.

“So, anyway,” I said, before Bert could get a view of my dad’s molars, “did you guys go on any rides this afternoon?”

“Nope, we slept too long. We came straight here. We wanted to be on time for our reservations,” my mom said, and rested her chin on her hand, looking at me sideways. Ugh. Why couldn’t she just ask why I was late?

“I’m sorry we were a little late, Mom.”

“Well, we worry about you, you know,” she said. Yeah, I knew. But this was Disneyland! Usually her worry alarm system was turned off. My Mom gave Bert a quick little smile, and I knew that this wasn’t about my safety in Disneyland. It was that she had realized this afternoon that maybe I was older than she thought.

“Sorry, Mom. I didn’t think about calling you after a few minutes.” I almost rolled my eyes, but I didn’t want to look juvenile in front of Bert. I glanced at him, and he wasn’t letting on if he thought my parents were unbelievably dorky.

Fortunately, my mom’s answer was delayed by the arrival of our drinks. I had seen the look on her face, though — the one where I knew I was in for a long lecture. I wilted into my chair, and stared into the mint leaves floating in my drink.

“Casey,” my mom began, “you know we think Disneyland is a perfectly safe place — otherwise we wouldn’t let you go around by yourself...or with Bert.”

I gave her a secret evil scowl from behind my glass. “I know you think Disneyland is safe, Mom. But we really were delayed on *every* ride.” She looked like she was gearing up to question me when Bert broke in.

“I got stuck on Small World once. The boats were all backed up, bumper to bumper. We were already going insane, and then Maggie started crying. They finally turned off the music after 10 minutes, though.” I was relieved to be able to laugh — and he even got my parents to laugh. “The dolls *did* look kind of scary moving and singing with no sound, though.” He silently imitated a doll singing, making my mom laugh more. I was glad he had come. I got the feeling he was trying to protect me from my own parents, which was a new kind of comfort.

“So you were stuck on a ride?” my mom continued, having been only temporarily distracted by Bert’s charm. Did she have a tracking device on me or something? How did she know I hadn’t been on a ride?

“No, I made us late because I took too long in the crystal shop,” I began.

“Did you finally buy those earrings?” my dad said. He was sick of looking at them with me each trip.

“Not yet,” I said.

“But we were also delayed on every ride,” Bert said, perfectly changing the subject.

“Oh, that’s too bad,” my dad said. Although it looked like he was more concerned with buttering another roll.

“It was still fun,” I said, not daring another glance at Bert. “There were no major break-downs or anything.” Except the one I was having mentally, during this meal.

“Well, speaking of dangerous things,” my mom said, even though we hadn’t been, “have you heard about this insane trend the kids are doing now?” *Oh no. Her favorite subject: crazy teenage antics from “the kids.”* Before I could protest, she went on: “I heard about it on the news at the hotel today. They try to ski behind a moving car, on a skateboard! And last year alone, over thirty teenagers were seriously injured or killed doing it!”

I looked to my dad for help, but there was none. I thought he had stuffed his face with another roll on purpose. “And, there was one case where they actually tried to *parasail* behind a *truck!*” Leave it to my mother to love to gossip about depressing news while waiting for dinner at Disneyland. “Casey, if you *ever think* of trying something like that — I will tie you up to your desk chair and stand guard outside your room, and will not let you out of my sight until you are eighteen!”

“So it’ll pretty much be the same at home as now, then,” I said behind my bread roll. Bert gave me a half-smile, and I remembered that I was an idiot. *His* parents didn’t care what he did, but at least they trusted him to stay alive all by himself...and he was bothered by that. Whereas *my* parents thought I was the kind of person who could be persuaded to skateboard behind a moving vehicle.

I realized my mom was still going on about all the ways she would save me from myself: “...steal all your shoes, hide anything with wheels...”

“*Mom*. You seriously think I would do something like that if you and Dad weren’t there to watch me? Like I would actually parasail. Behind. Cars. Come on!” I gave a huge sigh.

Cheers and a chorus of “Yo ho!” from a passing boat distracted everyone.

“Well, Casey, you know, peer pressure and all...Bert,” she said suddenly, remembering he was there, “would you have done something like that at Casey’s age?” Forget the Rivers of America. I could throw myself into the fake bayou waters right from our table.

“*Mom*, Bert’s not even two years older — “ I began, when I noticed she had quietly been shredding her napkin while we were talking. The candlelight lit up her hand, and I saw she had bitten a cuticle. There was a tiny line of dried blood around the base of her thumb, and it stood out against her otherwise carefully manicured fingernails. (Done by her, of course, because of some article she read about hygiene in nail salons.) I was so tired of her constant complaining and babying and nagging, but that little bit of red outlining her nails was enough to make me drink instead of talk. The more I looked, I saw some chips at the tips and base of her other fingers, and then, as Bert somehow got her to listen to an entertaining story, I saw her flick her finger against her thumbnail, making an even bigger hole on the surface. I could even hear the quick click-click her fingernail made, now that I was listening for it.

She never did that. She was the one who bugged me if she caught me picking at my nails.

Bert seemed to be handling the conversation fine, and my mom was focused on him and not me, anyway, so I sat back in my chair. Dad was choosing the oblivious route, head down and always messing with either bread or his phone, nodding along sometimes. But my mom, leaning forward, seemed to be noticing everything, especially the way Bert's hand inched toward mine between our chairs.

She bumped my dad, leaned over to whisper to him in an obvious way, like a maneuver out of the 'corny parents' manual. Fortunately for me, my dad didn't seem to be worked up. He nodded some more, and she gave up when a waiter came over. I saw her sitting so alone on the other side of the table, and I wondered what she was thinking. When the waiter left and I had a clear view, she looked almost teary, but then, it was hard to see in here. For a second, I felt a stab of guilt. I had never thought how she felt about me hanging out with this boy here, or about not telling her about Kiley. She knew something was up. I wondered when she'd figured out that I bought my own bras and didn't wear undershirts anymore. From the look on her face, I thought maybe she had realized all of it today.

I was starting to feel bad for her when she said, "Well, at least you're still too young for any of *those* antics, Casey!" and then surged with anger again. She could say it all she wanted, even in front of Bert, but it wouldn't make it true. I knew I was old enough to make these decisions for myself, and I didn't have to get her to agree. The finger flicking started again, though, and I thought maybe she already knew that.

But she wasn't giving up. "Casey," she started up, "I'm glad you and Robert are having such a good time together, but I was wondering..."



*Oh please let her stop talking right now, I thought.*

“...wondering if you had a chance to call Kiley yet today?”

I dropped my spoon. “What?”

“Well, I’m sure she’s upset to miss the trip. I know she looks forward to coming with us. And she’s such a friendly girl. I kind of miss having her along,” she said. Did she know what was up? Was she trying to torture me? Or was she truly this clueless? And she *missed* her? *She* missed *my* friend? Why did she even think she knew anything about what kind of a friend Kiley really was?

“Uh, yeah. Right.” *Think!* I told myself. I darted a look to Bert, who was watching us like a tennis match.

“Maybe we should get her a present,” my mom said to my dad. “To show we’re thinking of her.”

“Mom, *no*,” I said.

She looked at me so confused and annoyed that she couldn’t have known that Kiley had dumped me. She really did want to buy her a present. Because she’s such a good friend and so nice. My mom and Kiley, BFFs. “What’s wrong, Casey?”

“Look, Mom. Kiley...” What was I going to say? “My only friend dumped me. We broke up. You can’t buy her presents anymore”? Did my parents finally have to find out what a total loser I was, and in front of Bert?

“I liked that pin,” Bert said, randomly.

“What?”

“The pin. The Tinker Bell pin?” I got it. I wasn’t going to have to reveal my loser-ness yet.

“Right. I already have a pin for her,” I said. I fished it out of my bag, and it poked my fingertips. My parents wouldn’t notice it was the one that had been on my bag forever. “See? So, uh, don’t get her anything.” I cleared my throat, which had tightened up. “I...I want to be the one to, uh, give her what she deserves.” *Well, that was pretty cheesy*, I thought, but Bert grinned and my mother stopped talking about presents and Kiley, so I guess it worked. I sighed and sat back in my chair.

Bert nudged my sneaker, finding my foot under the table, getting me to look over at him. He clinked my glass with his while our food came, and he half-smiled at me over the flickering candle at our table. He knew exactly what was going on here, and that was all I cared about right now.

Orange and yellow paper lanterns floated above his head, and cast a warm light across his cheekbones. Halfway through, I got out my camera to take some long-exposure non-flash pictures of my sparkling mint julep glass, but I secretly angled my camera up to fit Bert’s face in the frame. I made sure not to get my mom’s hands in the picture.

Chapter 8: “Get Ready, Screamers” — *California Screamin’ narration*

After we stuffed ourselves, my parents only wanted to ride “the train and the benches,” to quote my dad, and I guess Bert had passed the lengthy parental inspection, or my dad gave my mom a Xanax at dinner, so I had permission to go with Bert over to California Adventure to ride California Screamin’. As we left Disneyland and crossed the esplanade, my stomach started to flip — and not in the pleasant way it had been flipping all day.

“Maybe we should do this when I haven’t eaten a gallon of gumbo,” I said as we hiked over the wooden bridge to reach Paradise Pier. It was dusk, and the boardwalk was lit up with thousands of white lightbulbs. The lagoon reflected the smudgy glow of the Orange Zinger and the blue lights that formed the Mickey outline on the side of Screamin’. Each step we took over the wooden planks on the pier made me increasingly jittery. My anxiety about the ride, mixed with my excitement at stealing another couple of hours with Bert, made me feel dizzy and pukey, and we were still on the ground.

“You can say that you’re scared, Case, you don’t have to make gumbo excuses.” Bert nudged me and grinned. He was teasing me. The jingly boardwalk music bounced around my ears. *No way am I going to miss spending every second possible with Bert. Even if it means possibly throwing up on him.* And then he’d feel bad for teasing me.

“Oh, I’ll go,” I said. “But let me remind you that *I’m* not the one who ate two complete dinners tonight.” He flashed his eyebrows, extended his hand toward the coaster, and I walked toward it with new purpose.

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Although Bert's voice did comfort me, I couldn't really listen to his whispered observations about our fellow line-standers.

"What do you think those people are saying?" he said into my ear, pointing at the couple a few feet in front of us. "*I told you,*" he said in a ridiculously high female voice, "*today was matching cowboy boots day. Why did you have to wear your red ones? We were both supposed to wear the black with shredded stuff!*"

"That's called fringe," I said, giggling because he was funny and whispering in my ear and every part of this was making me nervous and giddy.

Before he could add more to their pretend conversation, we were being called on deck to stand in row eleven. Bert bounced a little as we waited our turn. I crossed my arms over myself and picked at my last long nail. That only reminded me of my mom, so I stopped and had no distraction from the ride. Seeing Bert's sideways smile, there was no way I would chicken out now. We were in it together. Even a gut-wrenching coaster was worth that.

My hands were shaking by the time the gates swung open for us to climb into the shiny seats, and I focused all my attention on getting in and stowing my bag away. My heart was pounding, and pulling down the harness was too tough for me to do successfully.

Bert, seeing me grasping at it, reached over me, and gently pulled it down over my head. He had been trying not to laugh, but finally failed as he caught my expression, then strapped himself in.

He was jiggling his harness when the train pulled away. It took off at a crawl and stopped over the water as annoyingly suspenseful music played in our ears. I shut my eyes and tried to focus on hearing only the waves lapping in the miniature ocean around us.

“Okay, now *I’m* nervous!” Bert said, rattling the harness that had already locked into place. “I can’t breathe!” He laughed a little, but it came out high-pitched, and a lot like he’d sounded a few minutes before when he was doing his impression.

I squinted at him. “Well, how do you think I’ve felt for the last half hour in line?” I was in the middle of a silent and quick prayer for our safety and my gumbo to stay inside me. When were we ever going to take off? They made us sit here, listening to the music, on top of the water and with the misters blowing at us.

“No, look what I did!” he said. I heard him sucking in air rapidly and laughing at the same time, so I peeked over the harness around my neck. He turned toward me, too, and I saw that his brown eyes weren’t so cool and relaxed now. Panic mixed with embarrassment — that was more like me, really, and I thought it looked pretty funny on Bert.

“What’s wrong?” Clearly he was strapped in, with no danger of falling out. He wasn’t wheezing — not like it was an asthma attack or anything. He was seriously freaked out, but seemed to think it was funny. Watching the calm and cool Bert so nervous made *me* a lot braver. I liked being so close to him, having an excuse to look at him close-up, although it would be more romantic if he were maybe looking back at me and not hyperventilating.

It was probably my obvious staring, but he suddenly looked straight into my eyes, and his clear, strong gaze made me radiate warmth from the center of my body. I was the only other person he'd ever share this exact moment with. How many girls would ever get to see Bert this totally uncool?

“I must have taken too-deep-of-a-breath or something...” he gasped, “before...” — he breathed in, and tugged on the handles — “it locked, and now it's too-tight-and-I-can't breathe!” A giant breath came out, and he laughed at the same time.

Okay, so maybe he wouldn't *want* to remember this moment ever again — but I would. Who would have known that out of the two of us, he'd be the one gasping for no reason other than his own crazy excitement? I was actually the cool one, right now.

I bit my lip, but couldn't stop my smile. “You're fine.” I touched the cold, puffy padding around his neck, and overlapped my fingers with his, just a little. I couldn't resist adding, “Maybe if you hadn't been laughing at me while you locked your harness in — “ He squawked, so I said with more sympathy, “Look, all you have to do is stop gasping like that, sit up as straight as you can, and you'll be okay.” He adjusted himself, complaining, but did stop thrashing around in his seat. His grip on the harness relaxed, and he looked at me with relief.

His eyes locked on mine. Now I was a little short of breath myself. I felt the tiny droplets of mist in the air around us, and breathed in his coconut sunscreen. I forgot about the ride and hoped we could stay here, exactly like this, when the speakers blasted on — “Get ready, screamers!” — and the countdown to launch sounded. For once, I didn't close my eyes as we blasted off, although I did manage to make my head face forward, as

all the warning signs told us to do. I stole a glance at Bert's face as it transformed into total mouth-dropping thrill, as he raised his perfectly arched eyebrows and let out a "Whooh hoooooo!" while we careened into the distance.

For once I didn't care as much what was going to come on the ride, as I did about who was sitting next to me right now. I peeked sideways at him through the first drops, which seemed endless, shrieking as my stomach seemed to fly up while we plummeted. I watched him as he started to mess with the harness during the slow, halting climb back up again mid-track.

"Having problems?"

"Oh, nothing much — only I can't breathe again!" Bert clutched his hat between his knees, and his short hair was sticking straight up. He was trying to look directly under his chin at the harness, which made him look like a wild-haired, panicky turtle.

"You're fine!" I yelled, as we made it over the peak and flew downward.

"You are not...going to let me...forget this...are you?" he said between the screams of the other riders.

"No waaaay!" I said, as we swung around a corner and flew over the water lapping at the edge of the boardwalk below. Bert's eyes mirrored the sparkle of the boardwalk's lights, the gold on his watch gleamed, and the glow beneath us illuminated his face. Far in the distance behind him, I could see the Matterhorn's craggy top and the sleek peaks of Space Mountain, both a clean, bright white against the darkening sky.

It was all dazzling for a couple of seconds at 55 miles an hour. *No, I'm definitely not going to let myself forget this, either*, I vowed, as we careened up and down the last dips, grinning and screaming until our throats hurt.



Chapter 9: “Some Image of His Own Precious Dreams” — *Phrase from Walt Disney’s introduction to booklet about Sleeping Beauty Castle*

Because of Bert, I had the most amazing couple of hours in California Adventure ever. Bert and I headed back to Disneyland to go on Fantasyland rides, thinking that the little kids had finally cleared out. After phoning my parents four times before one of them heard the ring, they decided they were too tired to meet us and were heading to the hotel for the night. My mom broke into my conversation with my dad to ask if I wanted to go to Tiffany’s for some ice cream with them, and when I passed, she abruptly reminded me that we were getting to the park early the next morning and I shouldn’t stay out too late.

After hanging up, I pushed thoughts of her and waking up early out of my head — our vacation was the one time of the year that I didn’t have a curfew, other than Disneyland’s own closing time, and now I was getting to spend it with Bert.

We raced each other to Dumbo, the Mad Tea Party, and the King Arthur Carrousel. Our night flew by in a whirling blur set to calliope music. Bert loudly protested that we go on Storybook Land, saying something about the short skirts the female cast members have to wear, but he never actually headed in that direction. Finally, we heard the closing announcement, pleasantly but firmly telling everyone to go home.

As we wandered down the lit-up Main Street, I concentrated on not tripping on the trolley tracks while studying how the various blinking lights showed Bert’s cheekbones to the best advantage.

“You know, you have a perfect Rembrandt triangle highlight on your cheek right now,” I said, partly to give myself a reason for gawking at him, and partly because I was excited to get to use a photography term in real life.

“Do I? Well, if you want to take my picture, let’s do it.” Bert stopped on the spot, and the river of traffic flowed around him.

“Maybe I will,” I said. I was already digging through the inner pockets of my bag, groping for the camera while popping off the lens cap. I lightly touched his shoulders and positioned him near a decorative trash can that I could balance my arms on for the nighttime exposure, and fortunately, the triangle of light still filtered down onto Bert’s cheek.

He looked into my lens intently, and although I had the F-stop and shutter speed set in seconds, I fiddled with the camera longer so that I could shamelessly stare into Bert’s eyes through the viewfinder. He stared back at me through the lens. When I thought I’d messed with buttons as long as I could get away with undetected, I started taking pictures. His gaze into my lens grew so deep that it was hard to think about the camera, and I kept forgetting to wind the film after each frame. I wanted to absorb our moment, our private seconds alone in the swirling crowd.

Half a roll later, I emerged from behind the camera when some careening kids bumped into me. It broke me out of our world and back into the crowd, and we started walking again down the street, but slowly. I wondered if any of these pictures would turn out, what they’d look like back home when I took them to the one photo lab in town that

still developed film. “Did you ever take a picture at night that turned out like you thought it would?”

“Mmm...no, I guess not,” Bert said, turning back to look at the lit-up castle with electric lights on all the buildings in the foreground. “Whenever I’ve tried to take a picture of the castle at night — or of New Orleans Square or even the River — “ he added, naming all of my favorite spots — “it looks too dark, or out-of-focus.”

“Exactly,” I agreed. “It’s such a let-down to see how it doesn’t match real life.”

Bert had the lights of his favorite place — and mine — shining on his face, but we both looked sad now. Maybe it was leaving the park, although I knew I’d be back the next day, but I thought that maybe it was knowing that some things can’t last, whether it was in a cheap disposable paper-covered camera or a digital camera or a camera phone or even in my borrowed fancy Nikon. I didn’t know for sure what this feeling was between us, but I didn’t think my camera could figure it out, either.

We had stopped in the middle of the street, and a mini bra-strap-girl-in-training bumped into me and stepped on my shoe. She must have been a sixth grader, but she was dressed better than me, other than her underwear on display. Maybe I needed to leave now, to get away from all these people. Closing time — time to head back to my parents. But I didn’t want to leave Bert behind.

“Well, maybe it’s because we really don’t see things like they are, but our cameras do.” I whirled around and pointed at the trees lining the Hub that I had loved my whole life. My stomach, though still stuffed with Blue Bayou food, now seemed hollow,

and I wrapped my arms around myself. “Maybe things don’t turn out in pictures because then you notice all the fake stuff.”

Bert’s shoulder brushed mine. “Well, maybe. But you really think that? Everything’s fake?” He gestured around the Town Square, and I saw the light on in the window of Walt’s old apartment above the firehouse. It was on in honor of his memory. In the fake firehouse on the fake Main Street.

“Well, it is. They’re not real buildings. It is a theme park.” I was feeling desperate now; I was losing Bert and somehow losing the magic of this place with him. “Do you ever feel silly liking it? How can you ever grow up when you’re obsessed with Disneyland?”

I was horrified to feel my eyes tearing up, making the gas lamps lining the sidewalk blurry. Like how my pictures of Bert and the glimmering Main Street would probably turn out. I sniffled loudly, uncontrollably, and felt more immature than ever.

I didn’t want to look at Bert, who guided us onto a bench, under what shadows were possible in all of the artificial light. *Can’t a person get any privacy around here?* I thought. But I realized no one was paying any attention to us. They were all juggling bags of souvenirs and kids on leashes up way past their bedtime. Back home. Well, I guess I was one of them.

“Case, Main Street sucks at closing time, you know that,” Bert said, “You can’t start being sad now. Or to start worrying about having a great day, or about pictures that might not develop.” *Or relationships*, I thought.

“But...I’m saying, what if this — the pictures we took —” I corrected, “don’t hold up back home? We’re here in this fake place. What if everything is really just *fake*?” I was confused and mad about it. Each step we’d taken toward the exit reminded me that our feelings couldn’t possibly hold up back home, apart, and I couldn’t deal with the awful thought that maybe Bert didn’t even like me that much — he was just glad to be on vacation, like I was. And that we wouldn’t see each other again, anyway. And that I wouldn’t be able to have fun and laugh and flirt when I got back home.

Bert looked around and leaned over, resting his arms on his knees. “Okay, pretty fake houses and giant mice are not why I come here. Right?” His knee bumped mine. I stared into the crowd, not looking at him.

“I like seeing kids having fun. I like remembering when we did that — my family. I like remembering when it was easier. Know what I mean?” he said. I hugged my green bag to me and touched the spot where Kiley’s pin used to be. It was hard to see, but I could feel there was still a little hole in the canvas. It would always be there. I knew what he meant.

“Case, I don’t care what the pictures look like or if the houses are fake. We had a good day. Right?” He nudged his leg closer to mine on the bench, and I put my hand down near it, inches away from him, but close enough to feel his tiny movements vibrate the bench.

He took my hand, and my nervous thoughts disappeared. My silver snake-shaped ring, bought in Adventureland two years ago, grinned up at us. It looked so funny next to Bert’s antique gold watch. And then I realized, *This is my chance. I can get it right this*

*time*. I was so focused on psyching myself up that I didn't notice that he was now closer to me until I could smell his sunscreen as it mingled with the scent of cinnamon from a nearby churro cart.

He touched my cheek and neck and with a final thought of *Now!*, I leaned into him to give him a kiss that was definitely real. This time, I didn't chicken out, but bumped against his nose, and almost pulled away, until I felt the warmth of his lips and tasted the mint chocolate candy we'd eaten for dessert at the Blue Bayou. I could hear the squeaky strollers and shrieking kids and giggling girls around us, but then I felt Bert's thumb circling my ear and his fingers brush the base of my hair, making my whole head and neck tingle, and the voices blended into a soft hum while a warm shiver ran down my back. We stayed together on the bench until the train pulled up to the station in front of us, startling us with its steam whistle and clanging bell. I almost jumped away, surprised by the intrusion into our world. But I moved toward Bert, who wrapped his arms around me. I leaned against his neck, closed my eyes, and listened to him breathe until the train started chugging. I was shaking and trying not to seem crazy, even though I felt like jumping up and dancing. Did he want to, also? Did he want me here? Did he want to go? He held onto me, though, and I thought I would stay.

When I finally scooted across the bench from Bert, I realized noticed the hundreds of people rushing around us to get back to their hotels or homes and get off their feet. My head was spinning and I felt like I'd come out of the dip on a roller coaster, but Bert's warmth and the cold bench grounded me. I smiled at him and held his hand until the

“Main Street will be closing...” loudspeaker announcement blared out above our heads.

All of my thoughts of reality rushed back into my head.

“Bert — “ I began, as though he’d said something. He looked into my eyes and I almost caved, but I had to let the reality I was trying to ignore into our world: “When can we see each other again?” I thought I was going to turn into one of those crying kids who didn’t want to leave the park. When *would* I see him again? Tomorrow? Maybe, if my parents didn’t freak out. Not likely, with the way my mom was acting. And after that — ever? I backed away from his eyes. “What will happen after vacation?” I fiddled with my camera and said, “We’ll get home and all we’ll have are pictures of each other.”

“Well, that’s something,” he said, putting his hand over mine on top of the camera.

“Yeah, but they’re still just pictures.” I blinked hard. “You know, not real.” He didn’t like that.

He took his hand away, and sat back on the bench. I had said the wrong thing. Of course. I saw he was hurt, although he was so practiced at looking relaxed that it was hard to tell. The slats of the bench were hard under my thighs and I squirmed, trying to get comfortable. The cold of the painted wood seemed to be seeping through my sweatshirt and jeans.

“I mean, um, aren’t you worried that when you get home, it won’t seem as...”  
Bert’s face was getting darker in the shadows. Now I had confused myself, but I had a point somewhere. I couldn’t make him understand how afraid I was that I would lose him

and who I was with him when we left. When I went home again...without Bert around...wouldn't I be the same pathetic, friendless girl I was a couple of days ago?

“We had fun together at Disneyland, okay? It doesn't have to be harder than that, right?”

I appreciated that the darkness of our little bench must be covering part of my face. Didn't he know how hard it was to be with him now, knowing I wasn't going to see him again? “Yeah. We had a happy day.” Lame. We had an awesomely mind-blowing day and I couldn't say that. I could only say happy.

I stared at the ground. A polished foot in a flip-flop came into my field of view, and I realized an anonymous Bra-Strap Girl had chosen our little area as the place where she had to stop and check her phone. Directly in front of Bert. I wouldn't stand a chance with him among the attractive bra-strappers out there in realityland. He pretended not to see the girl and stared at his watch. Then she smiled at him, and leaned over to ask what time it was.

“Closing time,” he said. I glared at her glittery toenails until she finally flip-flopped away and I let out a sigh. I felt defeated. Bert, however, was moving around a lot, crossing his arms and sitting down again, only to bounce his leg and make me shake.

He ruffled his hands through his hair and left them there, crunching the hairs on the top of his head. What did that mean? Was he really mad at me? Was he tired? Did he want to go and get this goodbye over with? I stretched my legs in front of me and leaned over them. My feet throbbed and my head pounded the farther I leaned over, but I



couldn't face him, so I looked at my shoelaces, one of which had become unraveled.

"Bert, I'm...I don't want to go. I don't want to leave...Disneyland."

He moved his hand as though to take mine, but stopped short of touching me.

"Yeah, me too. I would hate to leave...Disneyland." I smiled, small, but he smiled back.

"But you have another day tomorrow, and I have another day tomorrow. So we don't have to leave yet."

"Well, maybe we'll run into each other tomorrow," I said carefully and held my breath.

"Maybe we will. Like in the morning. At the bakery, maybe. We always eat breakfast before the park opens at the bakery." I could breathe again.

"Maybe I'll see you there. I like the bakery." My family did not. A waste of time, my dad would say. He ate PowerBars in the hotel room for breakfast.

I moved next to him and hugged his waist. I felt his back muscles tense at my touch and then relax as he leaned against me. I said, "We'll definitely run into each other tomorrow."

He grabbed my hands in his. "Well, we can still hang out tonight. What can we do? Downtown Disney?"

I looked around at the crowd thronging out, into Downtown Disney. "Nah, all of these people are going to be there." I needed to calm down, and I suddenly felt hot and sticky with the crowd swarming around us. "Want to go swimming?"

"Now?"

“Yeah. I think we can at my hotel.” Of course, we couldn’t. The pool was closed already, and my parents would never let me. But we would find a way. I wasn’t going to let our night end yet.

He looked less than excited.

“Bert, I am *not* ready to go and listen to my parents snore yet. Don’t make me go back to that now.”

He laughed. I exhaled. I gave him detailed directions to the Vacationer’s pool. Finally, he said, “Okay. I’ll meet you at your pool gate in a half hour.”

I squeezed his hand and I was flooded with heat and suddenly I wanted more than anything to get out of here and go to the pool. With Bert.

#### Chapter 10: “A Bit Watery” — *Pirates of the Caribbean warning sign*

It hadn’t been easy to keep from exploding into my parents’ dark hotel room. I used to think the cheesy musicals my mom liked to watch were completely lame, but now I kind of understood. Right now I wanted to bust into the room and sing “I Feel Pretty.”

Instead, I slid my key card in quietly, opened the squeaky door far enough to sneak inside, and dug through my suitcase in the dark to find my swimsuit. I stuffed my red tank top and plaid boxers that I slept in into my bag, for later, and headed into the bathroom to change and braid my hair (also in the dark). I heard both of my parents’ snores as I crept out into the bright hallway.

Bert had already walked from his room at the Grand Californian to my hotel's pool, a half mile down Harbor Blvd., by the time I met him. I scanned him up and down, expecting to see some leg showing, but he looked exactly the same as when we'd left Disneyland.

“Are you going commando?”

He laughed. Why did he never blush? “Not now, anyway.” He turned around to fake-moon me and I caught a glimpse of fluorescent orange-and-yellow striped swim trunks underneath his jeans.

“Now I can see why you only swim in the dark,” I said.

“You don't like my grandma's choice in clothes? These were a present before the trip.” He dropped his jeans dramatically (I did blush, even though I knew he was well hidden beneath the hideous trunks), strutted around modeling, and I rolled my eyes. He stuck his hands on his hips. “Do you want to be thrown in the pool, Casey? I can make that happen.”

“Tough talk for a guy in neon shorts,” I said, as we walked toward the pool area. We turned to the menacing black iron gate, and I wanted to bash it in when I saw the dreaded words — open 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. The alarm clock's glaring green numbers had read 12:02 when I left.

“Aw, I put on my suit and everything!” By “everything,” I meant I had also shaved my legs that morning, and I didn't want to waste the effort.

“Well,” Bert said, unlatching the hook at the top of the gate, “I guess we'll have to be quiet.”

“What, go in? Now?” I couldn’t help it — I glanced all around us, expecting to see a security guard burst out from the shadows of the palm trees. “Won’t we get in trouble?”

“We won’t if nobody sees us,” Bert said. I looked up quickly from picking at my nails. “Nah, Casey, forget it. We don’t have to go in. We can hang out here.” He pulled his hand away from the latch.

I cracked my knuckles. “No. Let’s do it.” I swam in the community pool at least once a week, practicing laps. I always thought I’d be a lifeguard at some point. *Plus*, I told myself, *it’s not like this pool ever has a lifeguard, even in the daytime*. “You’re safe with me,” I said to Bert.

Bert raised an eyebrow at me, and I added, “I’m almost a lifeguard.”

“Oh, I see,” he said. “Well, if I could ask for anyone to resuscitate me, it’d be you.” I kind of hoped I’d need to. He popped open the latch with one hand as he whipped his towel against my leg with the other, and silently swung the gate open for me to walk through.

“You wish.” I grinned at him. I wanted to plunge right in, but I was terrified of getting caught and losing this secret time with Bert. I tiptoed to the edge of the shallow section, and unwrapped my hotel towel. My toes were freezing — I was in my bare feet, not noisy flip-flops. I was not a natural rule-breaker. I didn’t get the feeling Bert was, either — but I think we both thought it was worth it to steal an extra few minutes together.

Behind us, the gate fell into its latch with a metallic clang, making me jump, but I had to laugh at my own paranoia. *Yes, swimming after 10 p.m. is just so crazy.* But my mom would completely freak out if she found out — not for the swimming, but for the overall rule-breaking, and the fact that she didn't know I was here. What if there was an accident? What if my hair got sucked into a filter? Or if the hotel manager saw us and called my family to come get us? I balanced on the edge of the pool, swirling my toe in the water.

“I'm only going in for a minute.” I took a deep breath and stepped in slowly, barely making waves. My toes clenched at the icy water. When the water rose above my knees, I took a deep breath and glided underneath the surface. I wanted to shriek with cold. But I pushed off the concrete bottom, and swam underwater until I reached the middle of the pool, where I bobbed in place, shivering. Swishing my arms to warm up, I floated onto my back and looked up at the Big Dipper surrounded by the silhouettes of the hotel's lighted palm trees.

“Then it had better be a good minute!” Bert said. I turned to “shh” him, and saw in horror that he was backed up against the gate, with a focused look on his face, staring at the shimmering water. I wanted to shout “No running!”, but he was already charging toward the smooth water. He reminded me of a Hot Wheels car I used to play with ten years ago — the kind you pull back to wind up, and then let shoot off. I had enough time to register his feet slapping against cement, his arms wrapped around his long legs, and his delirious, silent expression of “Whoop hoo!” before he plunged in.

His splash sent me bobbing to the deep end. As the last wave washed around me, I let it push me all the way around the pool, back to the steps, trying to decide if I should laugh or yell, and how I'd do either of them silently. I ended up dunking my head under, letting out a giddy scream heard only by me and the pool filter, and surfaced to find Bert sitting on the step next to me.

“You could have told me it wasn't heated,” he said.

I grinned. “You could have not cannonballed in.”

Bert's short hair stuck straight up, and sections of my hair had spilled out of my braid and hung in front of my cheeks. We tried to stifle our snorts of laughter, but that only made it worse. I fell against him laughing hysterically, coughing water.

“Hey, Case — I'm glad we ran into each other. Or, I'm glad Maggie ran into you. This wouldn't be as fun with my grandma.”

“Yeah.” We sat, watching the water ripple over our fingers. I let my arms float in the water, suspended below the surface. Sitting here in the pool was like being in another world. Not like ordinary life. That was back in the hotel room, listening to my snoring parents. But it wasn't like at Disneyland, either. Here it was just me and Bert and quiet all around us. I could only hear our breathing and the sprinklers watering the hotel's lawn.

Our world was still, silent, and perfect. Except that I was freezing. Whoever thinks it doesn't ever get cold in Southern California has never been swimming at night. “You're looking a little purple-lipped, Casey,” Bert said. I *felt* purple, and he pulled my hand up as we stepped out of the pool together. Bert held my towel for me to slip into like

it was a designer jacket. I was suddenly not as cold, despite my dripping hair, but I realized it wasn't because of my towel. It was Bert's arm around my shoulder.

"You are a bad influence, Casey Allison," he said as we ran across the concrete to the gate.

"I wasn't the one who broke the gate open." I leaned over to give him a light kiss on his cheek. He tasted like chlorine and the day's coconut sunscreen. Our fluffy, white hotel towels were wrapped around our shoulders, keeping us apart, but I inched my leg closer to his and our ankles touched.

All I could hear was his breathing and drops of water plinking against the plastic lounge chair next to me when we were yanked back to the rest of the world by the elevator ding and businesslike shoes clicking across the tiled floor of the lobby 10 feet from us. Bert and I pushed each other into some tall Birds of Paradise plants (like the ones in the Tiki Room, only without the singing), away from the sound of the shoes. I hoped no one would notice our path of wet footprints, slowly disappearing behind us as they dried.

We huddled between two shrubs, and wet dirt squished between my toes. *I really wish I had worn flip-flops*, I thought. Bert looked down at my muddy feet and smiled. "Well, we're hiding in the bushes. That's pretty much how I think a great date should end."

I nodded, listening to the echoes of the dress shoes fading down a distant hallway, but all I could focus on was *He said date!* A maintenance cart rumbled along the path near our hiding spot. I was sinking into the mud and a stick poked at my foot. "Yeah, I

guess we should probably go to sleep. Um...” I turned to peek out of the leaves, and Bert put his hands around my damp waist. “So...we’ll meet up tomorrow.” There wasn’t a maybe about it. We had to make it happen.

The glow from a distant tiki torch let me see his eyes, shining at me in the dark. We whispered our plans for the next morning, and climbed out of our hiding place.

“I guess we should say goodnight,” I said, pushing down a large leaf that had sprung up against my backside. Bert touched my neck, sending drops of pool water trailing down my back. He kissed my cheek like such a gentleman, it made make me deliciously dizzy and completely not caring that my feet were now buried in mud.

I couldn’t talk, so I waved as he flip-flopped past the pool, away from me, but a few seconds closer to seeing him again tomorrow. I stayed, happily stuck in the mud, for a while longer, and picked a few leaves to take back to my room with me. Even as I looked forward to our last day together, I was already dreading saying goodbye for real. I needed to start collecting some solid souvenirs of our time together. I would never let myself forget it, or forget who I was when I was here with Bert.



Chapter 11: “My Siestas Are Getting Shorter and Shorter” — *Enchanted Tiki Room*

*dialogue*

I woke up groggy and giddy — I didn’t even know that was possible — and panicked. I had gone to sleep at 3:06 a.m. the night before (at least, that was the last time I bothered to check the clock). I had gotten into bed an hour before, but couldn’t sleep. Even with my earplugs, I could still hear my parents’ synchronized snoring. I kept thinking it would have been more comfortable to sleep wedged beneath a Bird of Paradise...shared with Bert. And then I was totally unable to sleep, imagining various scenarios in which we might get the chance to share a hiding spot together. It didn’t seem likely, but I wanted it to. We would only have a little bit of time this morning, before we would have to go back to our separate vacations.

I crept around the hotel room, running into the dresser and stubbing my toe on suitcases, trying not to wake my parents. How could they be sleeping through all of this? My whole life was changing and they were asleep. Maybe it was changing because they were asleep.

This morning, I was on a secret mission to ditch my family and meet Bert’s. For a little while, at least. My eyes felt fuzzy and my legs were limp, but my jitters overwhelmed any tiredness. That combo of excitement and exhaustion were unique to two times in my life: Christmas morning when I was little, and waking up to go to Disneyland. Especially today.

As I hopped around, gathering up a bright blue Mickey polo shirt and a clean pair of jeans, I cursed the chair that hooked into my toe and I collapsed on the squeaky old bed, landing in front of the alarm clock. I needed to leave before my parents' alarm went off at 7:30, and would meet Bert's family on Main Street at 8:30 a.m., before the park officially opened at 9, which meant...I needed to find my socks already, get in the bathroom, and make myself look as good as possible on three hours' sleep.

I rinsed last night's chlorine from my hair, and breathed in that comforting, chemical smell of vacations. I wondered if Bert was as tired and delirious as I was, and as I scrubbed dried mud off my calves, I felt a weird twinge of happiness to know he was feeling the same scratches on his legs and covered in the same mud.

I left my mom and dad a note taped to the bathroom mirror (only my mom would think to bring Scotch tape on vacation), saying that I'd meet them at the castle at 9:00. I knew my parents would eat breakfast in the room, anyway; I talked myself into thinking they couldn't be mad at me for being in the park when it opened. Why would they care if I didn't eat a granola bar with them in the room? Since Main Street opened earlier than the rest of the park, I'd have time to rendezvous with Bert's family before meeting up with my own set of parents. They would never know. My dad might even be happy I was ready to go so early in the morning, waiting for them when they got there.

I caught the hotel's shuttle to the park, but maybe walking would have been better to calm me down. As the shuttle poked around the side streets off of Harbor Blvd., stopping at three other hotels before finally heading to the park, I got more and more nervous, like near the end of Splash Mountain when the logs climb the hill, being heckled

by audio-animatronic vultures, before making the big drop. I would meet Bert's grandma, mom, and dad in only twenty minutes. He had called me the night before, almost when I was about to fall asleep, fully waking me up with my phone buzzing off the nightstand, to tell me that his parents were also going to make an appearance at the park the next morning at the bakery.

I crossed under the threshold into the park, not seeing the welcoming plaque or the ride posters, or even the Omnibus beeping its old-fashioned horn until it was right in front of me. After being almost run into, I ran to the nearest bench, closed my eyes, took a deep breath, held it, and started counting to ten. My mom always told me to do that, but I noticed it only made me feel worse. What I should say, how should I say hi, could I eat a sticky bun without getting it in my hair?

I heard the train's steam whistle, and I rubbed at my eyes. Then I remembered I was wearing mascara.

As I tried to clean up my face in the City Hall restroom, being jostled by the mob trying to get to the mirror, I vowed not to wear mascara for a long time. Who was I trying to impress, anyway? Bert and I couldn't date — we had had our dates, and that would be it. We would be long-distance friends, like the pen pals I wrote to in sixth grade. I looked sympathetically at my own smudgy reflection.

But when I finally marched toward the tiny alley called East Center Street, and saw Bert sprawled out in a dainty white wrought-iron chair surrounded by a planter box of daisies, all my thoughts of his being just a pen pal were replaced by an overwhelming rush of not-pen-pal-like thoughts. He was overwhelmingly cute.

My nerves were back. “Bert! What are their names again?” I asked.

“Hi, Case. What a nice morning,” he said, looking at the overcast sky.

“Hi, Bert. Seriously, tell me their names.”

“My grandma’s name is Vivian.” Bert turned away from me to stare at a butterfly, hovering over the clusters of flowers packed into the planters. “You don’t need to worry about my parents’ names.”

“Why not?”

He finally looked up at me, and seemed even more tired than spending a night in a bush would explain. “Because they flaked. Again. They made some lame excuse this morning and aren’t coming at all. Maggie’s all upset. She’s in the bathroom by the Carnation Café with my grandma.” I looked down the street, catching a glimpse of the colorful pink-and-blue Sleeping Beauty Castle, and thought how strange to imagine a little kid sobbing here because of how her family had disappointed her. Maybe it happened all the time, but I had never known one of those kids personally before. “But their names are Joyce and Daniel. And now you know them better than they know you.”

The dental drill recording from the “dentist’s office” in a nearby building started up, buzzing and grating on my nerves. We both sat for what seemed like the only part of our time together that dragged. Finally I said, “Bert, I — “

“Casey, it’s okay. I know you’re going to try to go all Pollyanna on me, but really, I’m glad they aren’t here because they’re hugely annoying, but I still can’t believe they can be so lame.”

We watched families rushing down the street, heading toward the castle, with the occasional offshoot down our street, to the lockers, and speed-walking back out again to start their day together. Maggie emerged from the anonymous throng. A face I knew in all that chaos seemed so unexpected, I waved her down like she was my own sister.

“Casey!” She nearly face-planted into the street as she leapt off the curb, but an older lady with a white bob haircut and a fuzzy purple hat caught her arm just in time. She wore a sweater with sequined Mickeys exploding across the fabric, and a tired but relieved smile as Maggie raced across the street. It had to be Bert’s grandma.

“Can I take a picture of you?” I blurted out, before even saying hello.

Fortunately, Bert’s grandma smiled. “You must be Casey. Bert can’t stop talking about you.” I turned to look at him, and he pretended to be very busy tying his shoe. I’m Vivian. Call me Viv.” I nodded, and before I could get out any sort of polite reply, she added, “That’s a nice camera.” I stopped staring at her sequins and glittery Mickey-shaped earrings, too big to be real diamonds, and looked down at my camera.

“Thanks. Bert’s been a very good photo model for me.”

She grinned at him — it was his same smile, wide and toothy, but outlined in deep cranberry lipstick and with more gums. All the gums showing made her look even more delighted. I liked her already.

“Robbie always was a talented fellow,” she said. “He would sketch all sorts of little things at our house when he was little, and was always drawing up these very elaborate family trees.”

I smiled back, and we both beamed at Bert, who was trying to entertain Maggie with a stuffed Minnie she'd been carrying around. It still had the price tag on. I already knew enough about Bert that the family tree-making didn't surprise me, but the sketching did. "Hey, I didn't know you liked to draw."

Bert looked uncomfortable. He jingled some coins in his pocket. "Oh, well...when I was little, I did."

"He was very good, too," his grandma added. "He spent hours sketching the trees in our yard. Robbie's family trees really *looked* like trees."

"That's great," I said sincerely. I wondered why he'd never mentioned anything when we talked about art. "Did you stop?"

"Uh, yeah. My mom and dad, they said I should do other things instead." He poked at my camera and looked uncomfortable.

"What do you like to take pictures of, Casey?" Bert's grandma asked.

"Still lifes, usually, but today I think I'll just take candid people pictures," I said, although the thought hadn't occurred to me until I met her. "The light's good right now," I added.

"But it's cloudy," Maggie said. I hadn't realized she was paying attention, and saw she was rocking the white wrought iron chair back and forth, making loud thumps, and making a face. Her eyes were still a little red and puffy.

"That's true, but that means it's perfect for taking pictures of people," I said. "It makes everyone look good...but you don't need any help," I said to Viv and Bert.

Bert's grandma waved her hand and said, "Oh, phooey, I need all the help I can get." She pulled Maggie onto her lap, and I used up a whole roll of film in minutes while they made faces at each other.

As I changed my film, Bert crouched next to me, tucking my used film into my purse's secret compartment, and asked me why I didn't have a digital camera.

I sighed. "I do want one, I guess, but we can't take digital in school until we've had the old-school classes first. But," I added as I snapped the back shut, "I like the darkroom." My old school didn't have a darkroom, but my parents had let me take an after-school photo class last semester, and I had loved spending hours in the red-lit room, watching my photos appear on the developing paper, like happy haunts. "My high school has one, at least," I added. My parents had found out that the high school I was going to next year actually still had one — the school across town, the one that Kiley was going to, had closed its darkroom a long time ago.

"I like picking up my pictures after I turn in my film," Bert's grandma said. "I'm always surprised at what they look like."

"Yeah, but sometimes it's not a good surprise," I said. I thought of the precious frames lost forever as I messed up at some stage of the film developing, or even loading. One of my recurring nightmares was of accidentally opening the back of my camera and exposing a used roll of film to the light.

"But they also seem more special to me, when they work," Bert's grandma said. "Now, Casey, would you please take one of me and these two kids with my camera?"

“Sure,” I said. She reached in her knapsack and pulled out a tiny, shiny pink digital camera.

I laughed. “Viv!”

Bert squatted next to her chair, and she brought Maggie onto her lap. The Disneyland Band marched along behind us, and Maggie clapped at them. “Well, sometimes you want to know what you’ve gotten,” she said, as her camera silently captured Maggie’s reaction to the trombones.

She handed me her camera, and I smiled. “Yeah, I know what you mean,” I said, and snapped a shot of all of them, clustered close around our tiny table.

I handed her tiny camera back, and Viv, Maggie, and Bert huddled over its screen as I snapped a few more frames of them. Bert caught me looking at him through my camera’s viewfinder, but I clicked away before he realized it.

“It won’t hurt to see what develops,” I said to him, and made a very obvious wink.

Viv was still playing with Maggie, but I saw her smile.

\* \* \*

We had devoured our pile of cinnamon rolls and treats from the Blue Ribbon Bakery, and were giggling about Maggie’s Minnie Mouse ears when I felt a tap on my shoulder. I was filled with sudden dread. The only people I wanted to see were all sitting in front of me. I had a quick flashback to an embarrassing incident five years ago, when walking through Triton’s Garden with Kiley — Goofy had been stalking me for three minutes, following me around, before I realized it. Kiley, of course, hadn’t tipped me off.



I turned around, ready to face whatever lurking character awaited me, but it was much worse than that. It was my parents.

I tried hard to give my best face-character smile, a la Snow White or Belle. “Hi Mom. Hi Dad.” I swallowed hard and tried to do the Bert trick of making my face obey me. I don’t think it was cooperating. “This is Bert’s grandma, Vivian, and his sister — “

“Margaret,” she said seriously. She straightened her mouse ears.

My mom’s expression flickered for a second, overwhelmed with her adorableness, and I thought I was safe. “Very nice to meet you,” she said warmly to them, but then turned to scowl at me.

“Yes, we’ve been wondering what Casey’s found so fascinating that she can’t spend her vacation with us,” my dad said. “I mean, we *are* only her parents.”

I sighed. Why should they even care about this morning? They were eating instant oatmeal and PowerBars in the hotel, it wasn’t exactly like I’d missed Thanksgiving dinner. I glanced at my watch, trying to understand, but it wasn’t even time to meet up yet. “Dad, I’m not late, you’re just early. And I’ve been in a very safe, supervised place,” I added to my mom.

She ignored me, saying to Viv, “I swear, you can’t control teenagers,” like she had never met me before, like I was now just a random Teenager. And like eating cinnamon rolls with a 75-year-old was the wildest thing a teenager could do.

“Well, come on, Casey,” my dad said, looking at his watch that had started beeping. I could practically see him consulting his mental trip schedule. “We can make it

to Tomorrowland after opening in a couple of minutes. We'll need to do three more rides before lunch or we'll never get back on track."

"Dad," I whispered, turning from Bert and his family, "I don't want to have a ride schedule."

My mom leaned over, but didn't whisper. "Acacia, this is what we always do. And you always have fun."

"Well, right now I'm not!" I whispered loudly, fuming. "Can we go over here?" I shoved my chair back, causing a screechy scraping noise on the faux-stone patio, and scurried to the empty ice cream area.

My dad shifted from one Teva to the other, eyeing the bustling locker storage area next to us. I could tell he was thinking, *Look at all these people on track for the day! We used to be like that, when Casey was little and cute and reasonable.*

"I don't want to be on a schedule anymore," I said as quietly as possible over the marching band down the street, and the blend of laughing and wailing of overexcited kids surging out of the lockers. "At least, I don't want to be on *your* schedule. I want to make my own day." I didn't know what else to say.

"You don't want to be seen with us," my mom said. I actually thought she would cry if she weren't so mad, and guilt washed over me.

"It's not that." Although it kind of was. "But I want to make my own plans."

"And you don't want to be with us," my mom repeated.

My dad had to restrain my mom from burrowing in her fanny pack for Kleenex.

“Look, it’s just...when I’m with Bert....” I stopped myself from saying how much I liked being with him. “...it’s more...relaxed.”

My parents exchanged a glance, and my dad said, “What, you don’t like being on vacation with us? We relax!” The speaker next to us popped on, making me jump, and announced that the park was officially open. My dad looked longingly at the families rushing down the street, heading to rides, getting in line in front of him.

“Yeah, Dad, I know.”

“Well you always liked hanging around us before! When Kiley was here!” my mom said. She was apparently not trying to keep this whole argument quiet. I peeked around to look at Bert and his family. They were doing a good job of not looking at us.

“Mom, I know it’s different. But it’s not about Kiley. Not really.” Why did she keep talking about Kiley? Couldn’t she see I didn’t want her to? Did she really miss my friend that much? “Besides, you don’t even know Kiley.”

“Acacia, I’ve known Kiley since she was this tall and — ” my mom started.

“She’s different now.” I wanted her to stop talking about Kiley, but I also felt a sudden, childish urge to want to tell on Kiley, to want my mom to know she wasn’t as good as she thought. But that would be even more embarrassing than this whole scene was already, to have to say how mean Kiley had been to me. I looked from my mom’s angry face to my dad’s anxious face, eager to get all this talking over with.

“Kiley has been acting really...different. She’s...not nice anymore,” I said. “We don’t hang around with each other anymore. She’s not nice to be around.”

“What does that mean? What happened with Kiley?”

“I don’t want to get into it right now.”

My mom folded her arms across her chest. “You know, *you* haven’t been all that nice to be around lately, either.”

I was mad that it hurt me. “You think *I’m* bad? Trust me, you wouldn’t want me to hang out with Kiley anymore.”

“I can’t imagine that, Casey. What did she do that was so bad? Are you sure you aren’t being just a little overly dramatic about all of this? I’m sure if you and Kiley talked about whatever it is you’re arguing about, she’d — ”

“Mom. I don’t want to hang out with her. It’s not going to happen.” I pushed down the rage that filled my chest and turned to my dad. He was staring at a group of organized people that wore matching neon green shirts.

“Dad!” Couldn’t he see my mom was being insane?

He sighed. “I’m sorry that Kiley has caused so much trouble.” Well, at least he’d been listening, sort of. He patted my shoulder and then my mom’s arm. She looked like she wanted to throttle him. I did, too. “But we’re all together, see? Everything is fine. Now, let’s start our day together and we’ll forget about all this and have some fun!” He was already rooting around in his pocket for a notepad.

“Dad, no. I don’t want to follow your notes for the day.” I sniffled, and tried to cover it with a loud cough. My mom had her hands on her hips now. She still thought I was a bad daughter, I knew it. “Look, Mom, your shirt’s all bunched up here,” I said, pulling at the fanny pack and trying to un-bunch her. And that was part of it, too: it wasn’t just my dad’s dumb schedule, but also that when I was with them, I felt

responsible for them, with their inability to dress themselves like normal people or use their cell phone like normal people, or do anything like normal people. I didn't have to think about that with Bert or his family. I could really relax with them, and with him. I didn't have to try hard to get him to like me, like with Kiley and now, with my parents. He just did.

My mom swatted my hand away and straightened her shirt herself. Bert was talking loudly to Maggie to keep from hearing us, which probably hadn't worked but I was glad he tried.

"So you're saying you do not intend to spend the day with us. Again," my mom said. Her shirt was bunched up again.

I couldn't think of any part of this day that I wanted to spend with them. Especially now that they had completely humiliated me in front of Bert, Viv, and Maggie. "Well, I was *going* to, and I even thought we could all go around together, but you totally ruined this morning for me, and I don't really want to be here with you at all now!"

My mom crossed her arms again. "If you don't want to spend all your time with us here, we won't *force* you to. Honestly, you're in such a mood that I think we'll have a better time *without* you," she said, getting more worked up. "But you do have to tolerate us for some of it. Meet us at La Brea Bakery in Downtown Disney at four-thirty for dinner. We'll do fireworks later," my mom said, and my parents marched away, my mom making noisy threats about me to my dad, who looked glad to be walking somewhere.

Watching them blend into the mess of people crowding down Main Street, I thought I'd feel relieved. But my cinnamon roll was a lump in my stomach, and I felt sick with too much sugar and blame. I didn't want to turn around to explain to Bert and his family, who had only just met me, that I wasn't actually as horrible as I seemed. Hadn't I been a perfect daughter for thirteen years? Hadn't we all stuck to the same vacation schedule enough times? Hadn't I put up with following their plans forever and now that I wanted to do something for myself, they thought they'd like it better *without* me?

*Well, maybe I am horrible*, I thought. But I still didn't want to go after my parents. I was mad, too — if they'd come up like nice, normal people, instead of hunting me down, we could have gone off and started our day. Maybe even with Bert and his family. I had every intention of spending the day with them, and then they had to go and embarrass me in front of Bert and even his grandma, and now I couldn't face them, either. I didn't want to be with anybody. I wanted to wander into the stream of strangers and get lost.

"Case," Bert touched my arm. I didn't turn around.

"I don't think I can hang out with you today," I said.

"Did your parents ...?"

"No," I said. "I don't know. I just — I can't. I feel bad. About everything." I turned around and waved a quick goodbye to Viv and Maggie, and was going to give Bert a hug, but I started crying as I turned to him and instead spun around and stepped in the nearest opening in the throng, had a stroller clip my heel, and sped off down the street

toward the one place I knew would comfort me, the Enchanted Tiki Room, grateful for being anonymous in the sea of strangers.

Chapter 12: “Just Hanging On” — *Enchanted Garden dialogue*

I blazed through the hordes of vacationers, under the threshold of Adventureland, and into the Tiki Room. I wasn't in the mood for a Dole Whip with a paper umbrella, so I sat on a rock in the corner of the Enchanted Garden, transfixed by the mechanical pattern of the tiki god Maui's bamboo water fountain. Fill, clunk, pour, snap up. Fill, clunk, pour, snap up... I stared at the plaque about Maui — not really reading it, because I had it memorized years ago, but still repeating the words in my head: *Maui, the god who roped the playful sun and gave his people time*. If I repeated the different tiki gods' lines enough times, maybe I could forget about what my mom had said to me, what I had said to her, and that I was, probably, a really terrible person who Bert and my own parents wouldn't want to talk to anymore.

I spaced out for ten minutes, the familiar soundtrack of the Dole pineapple movie not even registering. The short film was over before I looked up to see my favorite part: when a guy finally bites into a juicy piece of pineapple, and looks at peace with the universe. *I need more than pineapple*, I thought. The garden's pre-show started, and I narrated the speeches to myself as the audio-gods and goddesses recited their parts, like they did three times an hour, every day, every year. Every moment there was quiet between each god and goddess, I was filled with new thoughts of what I should have said instead, how I could have made it right with my parents. I forced myself to listen to the tiki gods pre-show so I wouldn't have to think about my mom and the look on her face as she had said they'd have a better time without me.



I listened to the Pele statue roar and tried to stop thinking. “I am Pele, goddess of fire and volcanoes. Some say I torment poor Ngendi, the earth balancer, for when my violent temper rises, the earth trembles at its foundation!” She rumbled, and some little kids screamed. *I hear ya, Pele.*

“Legends say I’m balancing the earth, but sad to say, I’m just hanging on,” said Ngendi. I watched the sculpture shake and rock back and forth. *Ngendi, I know just how you feel.* I sniffled and grabbed a clean paper napkin that had floated into the shrub next to me to wipe at my nose. I was insane. I wasn’t hanging on at all. I was sitting here, by myself, talking to tiki god statues instead of real people. Even my parents.

The doors opened, and I shuffled inside the dark room, staring up at the vaulted thatched ceilings and frozen birds and plants that would soon sing, feeling safer. I wanted to sit in the dark where nobody could see I was all alone. Everything was still in the room; time in the Tiki Room stopped after each show ended. It was exactly what I wanted.

Still, although my irritation at my parents and myself prevented me from fully enjoying the silly jokes at the beginning of the show, the same ones since the sixties, by the time the Bird Mobile dropped from the ceiling and the makeup-wearing cockatoos started with “Let’s All Sing Like the Birdies Sing,” I couldn’t help but feel a little bit better. It was like a musical. Maybe I could find my mom and apologize. Or find Bert and apologize and say goodbye.

Halfway through the fountain’s water dance, a burst of whining broke into my thoughts. High-pitched voices behind me were complaining about cell phones not

working inside the “tacky tiki hut.” I felt like they’d kicked the bench out from under me. It was like someone cursing in church.

I didn’t have to turn around to know that it was the Bra-Strap Girls. *Why are they here? And why are they here so early in the day?* The Tiki Room had barely opened. I heard them chatting about the guys they were with, and could ignore the giggling and rustling going on, but then the back of my seat started being wiggled by someone’s foot and it definitely distracted from the Hawaiian War Chant.

“Those birds are la-ame!” one of the girls sang, not bothering to keep her voice down. A chorus of agreement and many “Oh my Gods” accompanied by snorts followed, and I swear I could hear their eyes rolling. Finally, when the little kid next to me told her mom she couldn’t hear the birdies, I did a half-head turn and hissed “Shhh!” at them, which was followed by waves of giggles directed at me. I did see one of their guys unsuccessfully shushing them. Maybe he was the one who actually wanted to see the show. *That’s what you get for choosing them to hang out with*, I thought, and tried to glare at them through the back of my head.

The girls kept it up all the way through “Hi-ho, hi-ho, it’s out the door you go...” and for once, I rocketed out of my seat to escape. My parents didn’t think I was mature enough to make my own decisions, but would they rather I grow up and turn out like the Bra-Straps? So what if I wanted some independence — at least I wasn’t like these girls. I wasn’t like Kiley. They really had no idea who I was. I emerged from the rain showers of the Tiki Room, not pausing to enjoy the sensation of being pushed back out

into the actual weather. I didn't know where to go, but I wanted to get away from the girls and their entourage.

I took off down the steps and headed toward Big Thunder. Maybe some screaming would help me. But when I got there, I was faced with it: a 30-minute line and no one to share it with. I hovered by the river, near the fake hanging laundry that my mom always liked to comment on: "Oh, how do they get those clothes up there! Do you think they ever fall in the water?" How did she care more about hanging laundry than about listening to me? Was it better to stand in line by myself, or with my parents? But the best was with Bert. And I'd left him behind on our last day together. And I didn't have anyone else.

I stood, half leaning against the fence, crossing and uncrossing my arms, as I watched the line grow pair by pair, or group by group. I turned and headed to Big Thunder Trail to watch the jumping fish in the pond. That seemed more like a solo activity.

Unfortunately, it wasn't. I'd only been peering into the dark green water underneath the bridge for a few minutes when I heard an approaching smacking of flip-flops. I kept my eyes fixed on the murky, artificially green-colored water, but the girls and their entourage filed in along the bridge, and ended up next to me.

The blue-topped girl I had seen yesterday, a blonde, and her friend were having an argument about who was the most tan. The guys were trying to throw the third girl into the water. I resolved not to look their way again and tried to tune them out.

Suddenly, like she just saw me there, the blonde said, “Hey, what are you looking at?”

I couldn't not say anything. “The fish.”

“There are *not* fish!” she shrieked.

“Fake fish. They jump.” I felt annoyed at having my little path invaded and protective of the fake jumping fish. And I didn't want to have to talk to the Bra-Strap Girls. I would leave if they didn't.

“That is *lame*.” The brown-haired girl snapped her gum and poked a toe toward the pond. “Like that stupid — “

“Tiki show,” the girls shrieked together. They giggled, and recited the traditional “jinx” song: “Pinch, poke, buy me a Coke!” They didn't pinch, but pretended to. The blonde did, however, poke the other in her exposed stomach, and said “Bink!”

It was too much. I had to get out of there.

“Hey!” she squealed. I didn't know how their rules worked, but I guessed the poke was usually omitted. Watching them, I thought maybe it was good to not have any friends at my new school.

I turned to go, as the gum-snapper said, “Well, I totally don't see any fish.”

I saw one jumping behind her, so I pointed and said, “There,” out of pure, unrestrained Disneyland habit. Unfortunately, the blonde girl also pointed and echoed my statement.

She screamed and started laughing. I didn't say anything, but as she said, “Pinch,” she lunged at me and pinched my upper arm. I jumped.

“What are you doing?” I said, shocked.

“It’s how it goes,” she said, clearly delighted at the attention-getting. The girls had looked up at my squeak and the guys were looking now, too. The gum-snapper was still rubbing her stomach absently. “See...pinch — “ she reached out and did it again, “poke — “ and jabbed me, smiling, in my other arm — “buy me a Coke,” she finished proudly.

I stood there staring, holding my hand across my chest and over the red spot where she poked me. What planet had I landed on, and how could these girls invade my private Disneyland? I was destined to get thrown into a trash can at school, I knew it.

They looked at me, decided I was no longer interesting, and started to turn away.

“Hey Brit, I bet I can hit one of those things,” Gum Girl said, pointing at a group of ducks and chomping her gum extra hard.

“No way,” Brit giggled.

“Bet. Wanna see?”

I threw my hand down on the wooden bridge. “You know those are *real* ducks, right? They’re not like the birds in the Tiki Room.” The gum-snapper paused with her mouth open and Brit started a whole new chorus of “Oh-my-Gods!” I wanted to hit them both, for spitting on Disneyland birds, for possibly not realizing they were actual birds, for existing just to remind me that I could either stay a kid forever or morph into them when I got to high school.

I crossed to the other side of the bridge, out of earshot of the Bra-Strap Girls’ stupidity. I leaned back on the bridge and closed my eyes, listening to the birds calling

each other and ducks splashing, and the rush of water falling from Big Thunder's fabulously fake mountain. I heard footsteps shuffling by me, but I tried to morph myself into the fence and tried to ignore everything other than the sounds of Disneyland, although I soon realized that all the sounds — the clicking of the coaster's track, the crunching of popcorn, the crying of kids, the giggles of Bra-Strap Girls — blended together with my mom's departing words and I couldn't get them out of my head.

Eventually, the sun got too hot on my face and I wanted to find some water. In the distance, I saw some familiar faces that leapt out at me from the others clustered around the Fantasyland restrooms and water fountains. I walked toward them, relieved to find someone recognizable in what now seemed like a foreign place. I trotted up to Viv and waved, and ducked my head for a long drink before greeting her.

She eyed me, glanced at my arm, and said, "How'd you manage that?" I folded my arms across each other, too late to hide the red spot where I'd been pinched.

"I ran into something. Very annoying."

Bert appeared by my side, with a giant lollipop, bigger than his hand. He gestured at my arm with it. "Looking lovely as ever, Acacia. Did a tiki bird bite you after you ran off?" He crunched into the colorful spiral and I heard the candy grinding in his teeth as I thought what I should say. How did he know where I would have gone? How could he know me better than my own parents? But he was right — and I had run out on him this morning. I was a flake. Exactly what I knew Bert didn't need.

“It was a pack of Bra-Strap Girls. But...I’m good.” I smiled in a tiny bit of triumph. I was proud that I had at least prevented an unsuspecting Disneyland bird from their stupidity. Even if I had gotten a bruise in the deal. Bert nodded seriously.

Viv’s eyebrows, perfectly arched, like Bert’s, were wrinkled in decision as she watched me and Bert talking. Viv scooped up Maggie, plucked Bert’s lollipop from his hand, placed it in Maggie’s, and declared that they had to visit the Mad Hatter, and we should meet them in there in a little while.

I smiled at her gratefully — she must have known I needed to talk to Bert — but my heart sank when I saw Bert’s face. He clearly did not appreciate his grandmother leaving him alone with me now. He walked off, following them. I stood in the center of the path, getting pushed around by strollers, until I couldn’t stand to see him walking alone. I ran after him, grabbed him around the waist, and pulled him over to the abandoned Fantasyland Skyway entrance.

We faced each other, hidden from everyone in the shadows of the big trees. “Bert, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have ditched you all. I needed to be alone, but I shouldn’t have been mean about it. I hope your grandma isn’t mad.”

“She’s fine. She understands about, um, family stuff.” He bit into his lollipop, a little hard, and we stood together while he crunched. “She found this, though,” he finally said, and pulled a new roll of film out of his pocket. “She said it fell out of your bag.”

I’d never lost a roll of film before. I patted my bag, feeling the ridges of the camera and the rolls of film inside. I hadn’t even noticed one was missing.

I reached out, and closed my hand around the roll of film, still so full of potential,

and squeezed Bert's hand at the same time. "Thanks, Bert. And I am really sorry. I hope you might let me hang around with you now. Otherwise, I'm going to go looking for another fight."

"You're kind of violent, Casey. I think we better go on a calm ride." He put his arm around my shoulders, and I eased myself against his side. We wandered past the bubbly music of the King Arthur Carrousel and Dumbo. I heard the Mad Tea Party music's high squeaks, and I felt more like myself again.

"What do you want to go on?" I said, as we strolled through the door of the hat shop.

"I don't know. Something dark." Bert nudged my hip.

But Maggie piped up first. She ran over to us, wearing a pointy cone-shaped Princess hat, with its trailing veil wrapped around her shoulders, and chanted, "Small World! Small World!" I saw Viv behind her, trying on an old-fashioned Minnie Mouse-style hat with a red daisy sticking out of the center. She put her face in her hands — I guess they'd already been on It's a Small World several times yesterday. But, when she came over to Maggie, she was all smiles and all for it.

Bert was not so subtle. He groaned. Even though it was completely out of the way, I suggested that a ride through the Haunted Mansion might cheer us up, and we could meet them at Small World. Really, I just wanted to sit next to Bert in the dark again, in a cozy, safe Doom Buggy.



Chapter 13: “A Disquieting Metamorphosis” — *Haunted Mansion narration*

Bert and I abandoned Fantasyland and headed back to the Haunted Mansion.

Unfortunately, this meant walking across the bridge where the Bra-Strap confrontation had occurred. I rubbed my arm and scanned the traffic; no bra straps in sight, but the morning’s bad feelings still lingered. I tried not to imagine the Bra-Strap Girls giggling with their boys over what a loser I was. I tried not to imagine my parents, spending all day on a park bench and talking about what a disappointment I had turned out to be. I shoved it all to the back of my mind; I had to enjoy the Mansion’s mood lighting with Bert.

“Which Mansion stretching portrait is your favorite?” I asked, mostly to distract myself from the sick feeling I still had in my stomach from the cinnamon roll. And from my parents.

Bert tilted his head, looking thoughtful. I liked him even more for thinking about his answer. I started to feel more relaxed, just walking next to him.

“The one with the old lady with the rose, sitting on her husband’s tombstone. With the axe in his head,” he added. I smiled at the thought, because it reminded me of happy times crammed into the ride (not because of the violent death).

“That was Walt Disney’s favorite, too,” I said.

Bert shrugged. “Walt and I have good taste. What about you? Do you like that one?”

We rounded the little hill and the river spread out in front of us. A breeze kicked up and cooled my cheeks. This was where Bert had almost kissed me for the first time, before I screwed it up. I wondered if Bert was thinking the same thing, so I rushed ahead a little bit. “I don’t really like that one. It’s too creepy. But I like that it’s the only one where it seems like the person in the picture who’s still alive isn’t going to die. It’s...empowering,” I decided.

Bert laughed. “I never thought of it like that. I guess you’re right. But, Case, you might not want to tell guys about your theory of female empowerment through axe murder.”

I punched him in the shoulder, and, rubbing his arm, he said, “See, you’re getting violent already!”

“I think you’re safe.”

Bert dodged some running kids, and asked over the tops of their heads, “So, which one’s *your* favorite?”

I didn’t have to think about it. I had the same favorite since my first trip through the Mansion when I was six: “The ballerina/tightrope girl, with the pink parasol, balancing over the alligator/crocodile thing,” I said.

He joined me again. “How come?”

“Well, I used to like her outfit — the purple top with poofy flowered skirt and pink ballet shoes. I used to take ballet.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. And I always thought that balancing on a tightrope should have been part of dance class. I was pretty sure I’d do well at it.” It would make a good photo, if I could figure out how to do it. I’d have to remember that. “I always thought the girl in the portrait would be able to keep balancing, if she wanted to.”

“You don’t think she does?”

“No, I don’t think so. I’ll show you what I mean.” We arrived at the Mansion’s tall iron gates. Bert held out his hand for me to go first.

While we sunk in the Mansion’s elevator, we watched as the full stretching portraits were revealed. It was like being in a claustrophobic moving art gallery. I pointed at the painting (pointlessly, since it was dark) and leaned close to Bert’s ear, glad to have an excuse to whisper to him like we were in a museum. “For one thing, how would she have *gotten* up on a tightrope? No one could really have *put* her there...unlike those guys in the quick sand, who accidentally fell in...she had to walk out there by herself.”

Bert’s voice came disembodied from the darkness next to me. “Okay, I see that.” The Mansion narration was loud and I leaned closer to him, until my cheek was almost touching his face.

“The other thing is that she *is* balancing, but look how the rope is sagging. You know she’s going to start wobbling. So why’d she go out there?”

“Yeah. She’s got that umbrella, though. To help balance.”

“Parasol,” I said. “Yeah, or maybe she could use that to, I don’t know, beat the gator. If she wanted to. It seems like she’s got options. The other people...” I pointed at the other three paintings, high above us now. “It seems like they have less of a choice.”

“Well, couldn’t the fancy guy get off the barrel of dynamite?”

“Yeah...hang on.” We stood silent for a second. The crowd in the elevator screamed as the elevator “crashed” at the bottom and the fake hanged guy appeared above us. What a weird ride. No wonder I had nightmares when I was little. They quieted again, everybody giggling at their screaming, like everybody always did. “Anyway, I guess he could...but I don’t think he wants too, either. He seems dignified, proud, and —

“ The kid next to me grabbed at me, thinking I was his mom, I guess, and I jumped.

Ignoring the dead man above our heads, I continued on, “ — and determined about his choice. The girl, I don’t think she knows how to feel. Her face is sad, her head is tilted. I always feel like she’s asking me for help in what to do. She could beat the gator, or maybe keep walking — but she doesn’t know if she wants to.” I should really see if I could do essays on Disney art for my new English class.

“She could be swayed. Ha ha,” Bert said and poked at me.

“Ha ha. But yeah, that’s what I mean.” My favorite portrait seemed more depressing, the more I thought about it. The fact that my pretty ballerina girl appeared to have chosen to possibly get eaten by an alligator seemed incredibly sad, and even more because I’d never thought of it before right now.

“Well, she opted to be one of the nine hundred and ninety-nine happy haunts, right? So she must have decided.”

“Or she changed her mind, but couldn’t keep her balance.” Now I disliked my painting. I stared at it while the crowd bumped past me to get through the elevator doors into the hallway. The dim lighting came on, enough to see by, but I kept looking at my

painting. That girl was even more pathetic than the other portrait people. At least they were done in by somebody else. This girl thought she could handle her situation, but after she got into it, she couldn't. She couldn't keep her balance. She would fall, she would fail. She was just like me. OK, so I had a mild run-in with stupid Bra-Strap Girls in Disneyland, but how would I handle a whole world of them in high school? How would I handle my parents after we went back home? I couldn't even deal with them in Disneyland. They would all tear me up like a pack of gators.

We were alone in the elevator, and Bert's cheek touched my forehead. "You can handle yourself, Case. Unlike the tightrope girl."

I smiled. I guess I had taken on a pack of the girls and come out alive, but I didn't see why Bert was so confident in me. He barely knew me. I had known myself a lot longer. "The Mansion really scared me when I was little," I said, walking down the gallery.

"Well, you're not little anymore," he said.

Fake thunder clapped outside, and lightning flashed at us as we walked down the hall. I didn't pay attention to it. "I guess I'm not." I coughed. "But I will be a freshman in high school. Everyone else will be older than me. I'll be like a little kid again." I walked past the fake statues that followed you with their eyes. I still didn't like those things watching me.

Bert said, "Hey, I didn't know anyone at my high school, we'd just moved, my parents had new jobs, and..." Even though he was trying to make me feel better, he sounded like he was making himself feel worse. The ominous organ music in the

background wasn't helping. "But it got a lot better." He squeezed my shoulder. "You're okay at making new friends, you know."

I smiled in spite of myself. Bert understood me in a way that Kiley and my parents didn't — I'd wondered how it was possible, since he only just met me. Now, as he studied my face, I thought it was *because* he'd just met me. He didn't have any old ideas of who I was or what I should do. Kiley and my parents were talking to me from ten years ago. Sometimes I was talking to myself like it was me from ten years ago. Bert got me as I was right now.

Bert threaded his fingers through mine as we approached the Doom Buggies, and I blushed, but was comforted at the same time. I had anticipated another giddy romantic ride, but at the moment, I was content to hold his hand and feel his warmth next to me in the cold air conditioning. I pulled Bert into our Buggy from the moving ramp, making him wobble and fall down on the seat next to me, and I thought that maybe I could keep my balance better than I thought.

Chapter 14: “A Word of Hopes and a World of Fears” — *“it’s a small world” lyrics*

Breaking down on Small World isn’t that bad after all. We’d been floating in the same spot for five minutes, with panic rising at each chorus, when finally the ride operators shut off the sound, as Bert predicted they would. Unfortunately, they didn’t shut off the dolls, so Bert, Maggie, Viv, and I sat in silence with hundreds of dancing, blinking dolls surrounding us, the only noise the mechanical clicking and snapping from their mouths and dancing bodies.

It was no surprise when Maggie started to cry.

Bert shifted in the bench seat, and the boat swayed a bit. I was sitting between wailing Maggie and Bert. The afternoon was getting late, and I was getting a headache. Even though we had a nice time in the Mansion, I couldn’t entirely shake my down mood.

“I think I’m going home after this. If we ever make it out of here,” I said to Bert. I was staring at the Tahitian dolls, who were busy swinging their hips and shaking their arms. “I need a nap.”

“That’s a long drive, and I don’t think you have your license yet.”

“I meant to the hotel.” The Vacationer Inn was my second home.

“Aren’t your parents going to be there? It’s naptime on their schedule, right?”

I groaned. I was so glad to have Bert not mad at me anymore, I had mostly forgotten how my parents were both furious with me. And I was mad at them, too.

“Besides, don’t you have to meet your parents later tonight for dinner? This morning, they said — “

“Thanks a lot for reminding me!” I glared off into space.

“What are you looking at? Are you mad at me or that doll?”

“You’re both equally annoying.” And I instantly felt bad. I restrained my urge to apologize to the doll, and apologized to Bert instead. The dolls twirled beside us, clicking as they moved, looking delighted that we were there. I am sure my parents missed the days when I acted like that too.

I fidgeted with my camera lens, and took some slow-shutter speed pictures of wiggling dolls. They would show up as a blur on the film, like quiet ghost dolls. I felt the dreaded stop as I wound my film forward — I was out of frames. I patted my bag. I was completely out of film. I had a few more rolls in my suitcase. Back at the hotel, back with my parents, who would not like me wasting so much expensive film, who would not like me spending all my hard-earned babysitting money on something they thought was unnecessary. Especially on creepy Small World doll pictures.

Bert didn’t notice my panic. “Well, you are welcome to lean on me and take a nap, Casey.” He spread his arms out, and almost touched the scenery next to the boat. His knees were practically in his chest. “We have a nice cozy spot right here.”

“Now I really have to go back to the hotel.” I held up the empty Ziploc bag.

“Out of film? You know, I think Disneyland sells film on Main Street...wait, that was probably like ten years ago,” he corrected.



“I know.” My film habit finally caught up to me. I was completely stranded, on this boat and without film. It made me feel uneasy. What if something amazing happened? How would I keep that amazing thing with me, how would I be able to take it here back home, if I didn’t have my camera to make it stay? Could I remember it as well without a picture? Could I keep up this feeling? Especially with my parents insisting I was a child at best and a horrible teenager at worst? “If my parents are in the room, I’ll have to avoid them and try to find all the hiding places in my suitcase for my film.”

“Casey, why do you hide film like it’s drugs?” Bert said, a little too loudly. A mom in the row in front of us half-turned around. Now I wished Maggie’s whining would be a little louder or that even the music would start up again.

“Because to my parents, it’s an equal waste of money.” I tried to flop back into our seat, but there wasn’t enough room even for that. “They don’t understand why I want to buy film and then pay for the pictures to be developed, or to buy paper to develop and print them myself.” I shrugged. “I like it. It’s science, but it’s magic. They don’t care about that.”

Bert nodded. “I get that.” He was staring at the water by the side of the boat. He dangled his fingers in it, making swirling patterns. “It’s like how I feel, when I look at my grandpa’s old notebooks and drawings. He was an engineer. He could make boring stuff look so cool — lamps, bridges, the weirdest tricycle ever.” He grinned, and touched Viv’s arm. “Remember that crazy tricycle Grandpa made me?”

She smiled his same smile back at him. “Of course. You wouldn’t get off of that thing for about two years.” She looked up at him, quickly, but I caught the slight quiver

of her lip. I don't know how Bert could have noticed, since Viv was three people away from him, but he reached out to squeeze her shoulder, and she patted his hand. I noticed she still wore her wedding ring. "You were always a good boy." Maggie pouted, and she added, "Just like your sister!" and tickled Maggie.

Bert drew his arm back and played with the water again. I noticed he was careful to keep his watch out of the water by several inches.

"Do you like it? Engineering stuff?"

"He did. I guess it would be cool. You can design rides."

"Oh, right — Imagineers." The cutesy Disney name made me completely forget that they were actually engineers. Still, though, the way Bert was playing with the water made me ask, "Is that what you like, though?"

"Why not?"

"I don't know. Maybe there's something else?"

"When I think of engineering or Disneyland, I think of my grandpa. I like history, too, so I could get into that or something, just for fun. And maybe take some art classes, like drawing," he said, then added quickly, "just for fun."

"You say 'just for fun' like it's a bad thing."

He kept quiet, and flicked water droplets from his fingertips. One somehow landed on his watch, and he instantly wiped it off on his shirt, and kept his hands on his knees.

"So when you're all grown up and adult-like, why don't you work in art?"

“Oh, Casey, what do you know about it anyway.” He reached into the water again, brushed the water off his hand, and nearly got drops on the cardboard scenery. Very unlike him. I realized we’d both had a disappointing day here.

“It’s — hey, what do your parents do, anyway?” I realized I didn’t know. From the look he shot at me, I could guess. One or both of them must be an engineer, too. “Bert, you can’t act like you’re interested in something just because —” I stopped myself. Even though I felt I knew Bert, I didn’t *really*. How could I tell him what to do? Especially when I felt like lately, *I* never knew what to do.

Maggie chose that second to announce to the entire boat that she needed to use the bathroom right away, and I sat in silence between her squirming and Bert sulking until we got moving twenty minutes later.

“I need to go back to the hotel,” I said to Bert, as our boat finally emerged into the too-bright sunlight and we prepared to disembark.

“Nooo, Toontown!” Maggie said, and kept on shrieking. I thought she might have an accident in the boat.

“Maggie, you guys go on to Toontown. I need to get going,” I said quietly.

She was too consumed with needing to use the bathroom to have much of a reaction. As our boat jolted to a hard stop and everyone got up and stretched before stepping out, it hit me that this might be the last time I’d see Maggie. And Viv. I watched them high-five each other to celebrate the boat trip finally being over. I had a feeling Maggie wasn’t going to be begging to go on Small World again anytime soon. Even though when we were inside the ride, I was too annoyed to think much of Maggie’s

suffering, it hit me that it was a little heartbreaking for her, what had happened. She'd had some of the magic taken away by having the ride break down. Wasn't she too young to have to see her dancing dolls as the robots that they really were? I kind of didn't even want to see it.

Viv shuffled off behind Maggie, who was already running for the restrooms, but glanced over her shoulder at me and Bert before leaving. She shuttled Maggie back over to us quickly, and gave Bert a big, embarrassing hug, blocking the exit, and not caring. I laughed, and so did Bert. He didn't care, either.

She leaned over to me and patted my arm. "He is a good boy, isn't he?" I nodded, and she gave me a big hug too, but it didn't embarrass me. She grinned at us, and waved as Maggie pulled her away. I waved back until they were lost in the crowd.

"We'll meet up later tonight, for the parade," I said decisively to Bert, and he gave only the tiniest nod to me before we went our own ways. I felt a crushing pressure in my chest, and realized that the next time we said goodbye, it would be for real. "Bert, wait!" I ran over to him, already in the gift shop that was the exit.

I wanted to say I was sorry, that I didn't mean to bring up a bad subject, and that I was sorry he felt like he should be an engineer even if he didn't want to. But instead, I thought I saw my parents, and instinctively shoved my bulging Ziploc bag full of used film farther into my purse, ducking behind a rack of toys. The woman turned and I saw it was clearly not my mom.

"What are you doing, Casey?" Bert said.

“I thought I saw my parents,” I said. “Look, I use up a lot of film, and my parents don’t need to know that it takes me fifteen rolls to come out with maybe a dozen decent pictures, okay?” I snapped my bag closed.

“Weirdo.”

“Hey, it’s not like you don’t have parent issues, either.” I wished I had let him keep walking.

“You probably haven’t even told your parents how much you like photography. Maybe they wouldn’t even care if they knew you really liked it. They seem like they’d be happy whatever you did.” His voice had an edge.

“Sure, happy to tell me exactly what to do and how to do it. And anyway, you’re thinking of a whole adult job you don’t even want, just to get some attention from your parents!”

Bert looked like I’d hit him. I knew I was right, but it felt terrible.

“I think if you talked to them —”

“Casey, I don’t think you should give advice on being honest with parents. Do yours even know anything about you now? Photography? Kiley? Me?” From my blank face, he knew he was right too. “You won’t even tell your parents about film, or friends, or boyf —” He stopped, recovered, and repeated, “friends.”

“Hold on!” I grabbed his arm. My hand was still shaking with irritation and regret at what I’d said, but my body hadn’t caught up with my head yet. “Did you say ‘boyfriend?’”

“No,” Bert said, calmly — *too* calmly, I thought. He adjusted the brim of his cap casually. “Of course not.”

“You did!”

“I didn’t, and even *if* I did, I was all distracted.” I fixed my eyes on him and he sighed. “I’m sorry, Case. You’re right. You’re the only person who tells me stuff like that, even if it is harsh. You and my grandma.” He sighed. “You’re a good...friend.” He kissed my forehead. I hung onto him.

“I’m sorry about your parents. It was mean of me. I swear, I started off trying to help.”

“Yeah, me too. You’re not the one I’m upset with. I actually thought they might show up here today.” He turned toward Toontown, looking into the crowd. “But I’m also mad that Maggie didn’t even think they’d come. I don’t know which is worse. I’m glad she wasn’t disappointed, but really, why should a little kid already need to know that her parents are flakes?” That was probably worse than the dolls, I thought. Maggie got a little too much reality, even in Disneyland.

We wandered around the gift shop. I noticed a whole display of Tinker Bell pins. Kiley would love one, I thought, automatically, before I remembered I was not even her friend anymore, much less a friend who bought her presents. But just because we weren’t friends, I couldn’t shut off my brain’s Kiley memory. Kiley and I hadn’t even gotten into any big fights; we just stopped being friends. I guess we didn’t really care enough to have a fight over it. I was starting to spiral into feeling sorry for myself again when I saw Bert clenching his jaw and hugged him hard.

“Tell your family what you want. Even if you think they don’t care, you care and they should know.” Bert looked skeptical. “Or at least talk to your grandma,” I added, “about what you care about.” He looked at me and raised his eyebrows. “I mean about your parents and your life dreams and all that stuff.”

He stretched his arms behind him in a way that made me want to grab him and wrap my arms around his back. “I can’t believe I’m taking advice from a freshman, but there’s a chance you might be right.”

“See?”

“So then wouldn’t you say that there’s the slightest chance *I’m* right?”

Darn. “Yeah, there might be. But...”

“Case, at least your parents *care* about you. I’ll probably tell my parents about wanting to go to college to study art and they’ll be convinced of my total worthlessness to them.”

“Bert, how can you say that? Of course they’ll care about *you*.”

“Well, they’ll at least think I’m wasting their money. They are not going to want to send me to an art school. Or even a liberal arts school.”

I gestured around us at the carefully designed environment. “Look what you can make, studying art.” Bert seemed unconvinced. “So, forget them, get a scholarship, go to community college...but it seems a lot bigger waste to spend their money studying something you don’t even like, right?” I nudged his foot.

“Or to hide what you love.” Bert turned it around on me again.

I clutched my bag, full of secret film. “I’ll work on it, okay?”

“You’ll tell them?”

“Yes. When I get back home.”

“Me too.”

“Funny how you need a freshman girl to dare you to do it,” I teased.

Bert took my hand. “Not when it’s you,” he said, and kissed me before we said  
goodbye.



Chapter 15: “Liquid Space” — *Submarine Voyage* narration

I snuck back to the hotel at 3 p.m. — plenty of time to grab my film. When I found the room vacant, I figured I might as well go for a swim. My suit was still damp from the night before; I tugged it on, shivering in the air conditioning, and crept back to the elevator, ready to hide behind a potted plant if my parents suddenly appeared.

I flip-flopped past the kids’ pool, full of slides and fountains, splashing and screaming. Part of me still felt like going over to the slide and the little kids’ goofing off, but I mostly felt it would be more fun to be alone. I headed to the shady, small pool where Bert and I swam together. It was quiet and deserted, not even a ripple disturbing the unnaturally blue water. I creaked the gate open and stepped inside, shutting it behind me with a click as the latch locked into place. Anyone could see in through the wrought iron gate, but I felt like by shutting it, I could shut out the rest of the world — my parents, mostly. I smiled as I spotted the secret shrubbery. I could still see a pair of footprints in the dry mud next to it.

I floated around, swishing my sore feet and making small waves. After a while of drifting, I pushed off the wall, and as soon as I felt the cold water wash over my head, I dove down and pushed hard off the bottom, and swam underwater as long as I could until I had to come up for air. As I swam laps, I got caught up in the odd combination of the urgency to breathe mixed with being totally relaxed. When I was worn out, I pulled myself up and flopped backward to sit in the sun. Even though I didn’t want it to, the maneuver reminded me of Kiley. When she was at a pool, she was an expert at checking

out who was watching her and making the most of it. When she lounged by a pool, she was always flirting. I could never do that. I flopped on the warm concrete, glad for the privacy, glad that no one was here to flirt with or not flirt with, and felt the sun dry my hair. It occurred to me that even though I was alone, without my parents, without Kiley, without Bert, I didn't feel self-conscious and lonely, like I was used to. I didn't miss Kiley's unnaturally high giggles for the benefit of whatever guy she'd targeted, and I didn't miss my mom pretending to read but peeking over her book to make sure I hadn't drowned yet. The only improvement might be if Bert were here, I thought. If Bert were here and nobody else and somehow we had to hide in the bushes again...only with fluffy hotel towels wrapped around us, not poking branches...and his hair was wet and we were so close, his hair with pool water dripping onto his shoulders and onto me and I would touch his neck and....

The gate clanged, and I threw my towel over myself. I looked back, and saw Bert gently pushing the gate back into place.

“Sorry to scare you, Case,” Bert said, whispering like I'd been sleeping.

“Hey, what are you doing here?” I sat up and tried to stuff the escaped strands of hair back into my braid and act casual, like he could somehow tell he'd caught me thinking about him.

“I'm not stalking you, I promise.” My eyebrows shot up, and he laughed. “Okay, not the best way to start out. I mean... I wanted to hang out with you some more, all right?”

Chlorine stung my eyes. Oh no, I would not let myself get all teary. *Get it together, Case.*

“Plus, my grandma and Maggie are both sleeping at our hotel now. I wanted to swim, but I like your pool better than ours.” I snorted. The Grand Californian had tons of gorgeous pools, including one with a view of California Adventure and a waterslide that twisted around a fake tree. It was obviously way better than this one.

In two steps, Bert crossed over to me kissed me until I could taste his sunscreen. Being relaxed and zen-like was good, but this was pretty great too. Bert was hot and his neck was a little sweaty — evidence of his long walk here from his much fancier hotel.

At that moment, I heard the smack of flip-flops and the gate clanged again, and I eyed the entrance. I pulled away from Bert, still holding his arm. My heart sunk, which I didn’t know was possible while next to Bert.

Not my parents, but possibly worse: the two main offending Bra-Strap Girls, Brit and the gum-chewer, now wearing bikini tops underneath the thinnest of “cover up” dresses. Of course, their bikini bra straps prominently stuck out of the cover ups. I clutched my stomach, feeling the mass of fabric on my sporty one-piece, designed for swimming — compared to them, I felt like an old lady, in one of those old-time bathing suits made of wool. I tugged the small hotel towel around my waist, tucking in the tops to make a skirt.

I was now dripping water onto Bert’s sandals, but he was oblivious to me — as if I couldn’t feel worse already, to my horror he was staring at the girls, who were whipping

their towels dramatically over the lounge chairs. I wanted to hit them. I wanted to hit him. I tapped him on the shoulder.

“Excuse me, Robert? You know you’re watching them like they’re on TV, right?”

He turned toward me, leaning close, and said, “Why do you think that of all the empty spots, they choose to sit right next to your chair?” I peered around the rows of vacant lounge chairs, and then at them, now stretching out on their backs, with giant sunglasses covering most of their faces. It was hard to tell when they had noticed us, but they had definitely noticed Bert. Even though I couldn’t see their eyes, I could feel them looking at him. I was glaring at the girls, leaning together and loudly whispering and nodding. Bert developed an urgent problem with his shoe that required him to duck down and fiddle with the strap, successfully avoiding both their stares and mine.

As I watched, Brit whipped around yet another fluffy towel to tuck behind her head, knocking off my bag, book, and sunglasses from my lounge chair with frantic towel flapping. My belongings fell in a heap into a puddle on the cement. Even from here, I could see my paperback absorbing water into its pages.

“Ohhhh.” I was glad for my cold swimsuit. It cooled me off as an angry heat rushed through me. I thought I might actually have steam rising off of me, cartoon-style.

I reached down and touched Bert’s shoulder. “Excuse me, Bert, I have to go and retrieve my belongings.” I didn’t want to talk to them, but like this morning, I couldn’t let them do the stupid things they were doing. I would not let them get away with spitting on ducks, and I would not let them dump my stuff into a puddle and take Bert away from

me. I shook a little with anger and fear at the thought of another Bra-Strap Girl encounter in one day. What would they say when they saw it was me?

“Case, why don’t I...” Bert started.

It would be tempting to let him do the dirty work for me. I’m sure the girls would love it. Maybe they were even hoping he’d come over to pick up the stuff. Freaking evil geniuses, I thought. They reminded me of Kiley, always calculating for a guy.

“What, you want to go over to them?” I asked, trying for casual but not making it.

They were still looking at Bert. This time, though, Bert looked back, and Brit took her sunglasses off. She sent him a radiant smile, brighter than the white concrete now burning my feet. Next to me, I could feel Bert stand up taller. He rubbed his neck and looked back at her a second too long. My stomach plunged and my blood shot up to my head. I thought I was going to have heatstroke.

“Going swimming?” Brit called across the pool. She adjusted her noodle-thin bikini strap and stretched out her tan legs. I could see the gold glint of a toe ring.

“Nope,” Bert said, his voice as even as if he were making conversation in a grocery store with an elderly woman.

“It’s pretty hot out today,” the gum-chewing sunglasses girl said, putting down her *OK!* and slowly stretching her arms above her head. Her bikini top strained against her bony chest. “I was thinking about a swim —”

Her friend smacked her in the arm with *Star*. Sunglasses girl giggled, and put her arms down.

“Oh right, like you swim,” Brit said. “Maybe we’ll go in if you go in first,” she said to Bert, in a very different voice than she had used with her friend. I felt a sizzle cross through me. Bert could not swim with these girls. Bert could not *want* to swim with these girls, could he?

“Uh, I don’t think so. We...” Bert trailed off and glanced at me. I saw a small spark of panic in his eyes.

He said “we.” He didn’t like the girls’ flirting. That was all I needed. Confidence surged through me.

More chatter from across the pool: “Oh, come on.” Now I couldn’t tell which one was talking. They were both leaning forward, running their mouths. “We’ll go in if you do.” For the first time, Brit looked at me. She pointed with her rolled up magazine. “Maybe even...your sister? Could come in if she wants?”

I heard Bert take a deep breath. “Ohhh no,” I said to Bert, and myself. I put my hands on my hips. “This is *not* happening.” Before I could think more, I took another deep breath, got dizzy, but walked around the pool to claim what was mine. Bert stayed behind me, still, like one of the potted palm trees.

“Hi again,” I said. I gave a stupid wave as I approached. They looked at me blankly. “Weird that we ran into each other again today.” I pointed at the ground. “Look, I don’t think you noticed, but my stuff got dumped into this giant puddle. I need to get it.” Even though I disliked these girls, it was hard not to add “sorry.” I told myself, *Do not apologize for getting your own stuff that they knocked on the ground.* I wanted so badly to tell them off, but I didn’t have the words. Now I felt like I was begging for my

things back. I gestured under the lounge chair. Would I have to crawl over there now? I hadn't quite thought this through.

Brit had been concentrating on putting sunscreen on her stomach while I was standing right in front of her, talking to her. The pink bottle read SPF level 4, I noticed. What was the point? Her skin sparkled — I think the sunscreen was half glitter— and I understood. It was like the rhinestones on her underwear, only for her body. Was there nothing this girl wouldn't accessorize? Her friend tapped her with the magazine and they exchanged looks. It made me feel like they were talking about me in some kind of secret popular-girl magazine-tapping code.

“Wait, what?” Brit sat up, facing me, and acted like it required a lot of effort. She seemed annoyed and confused, but clearly thought she had never seen me before in her life.

Her eyes focused behind me, and I heard Bert approach. She sprang up, leaning back on her arms. Up close, I could see she was wearing a crocheted bikini top. Obviously not for swimming. She was also wearing low white capris with black bikini strings peeking out around the waist. You could see the rest of the bikini quite clearly through her white pants.

“Oh, I'll get them for you,” Brit said, looking past me to smile at Bert. She was in arm's reach of my book, but made a dramatic show of reaching for it. I almost snickered. I dared to peek at Bert, and fell in crush with him harder than ever — he looked dangerously close to laughing, and was covering his mouth with his hand, acting like he was rubbing in some sunscreen. With Bert behind me, instead of shaking with

nervousness, I was now trying not to explode into giggles. The girl was wearing a knitted bikini and glitter! She was like some animatronic figure programmed with cliché flirting moves.

Gum Snapper reached the soggy book first, picked it up, and held it out with two fingers. I took it from her, flapping the pages to get rid of water, and she shrieked as drops splashed on her skin.

Not noticing her friend's drama, Glitter Girl said, "My name's Brit," to Bert.

"I'm Robert. This is Casey." He paused. "Not my sister."

"Oh, hi," Brit said, barely looking at me. She really did not recognize me. How was it possible? I'd seen her all throughout the park, even before the whole duck incident today. I saw her everywhere. How could she not remember actually *pinching* me this morning? I put my hands on my hips, letting my bruised arm stick out toward her. I felt Bert's hand on my waist, and realized I was clenching my hands into fists.

I handed Bert my things as the girls made a big show of getting them for me. Bert smirked at me when they were digging around under their chairs. They were so obvious, so pathetic. I thought of the guys they'd been with at Disneyland. I wondered where they were now, if they even mattered.

It would have been fantastic to knock them both into the pool, like in a movie, but I couldn't do that. Besides, they didn't care about *me*. They only cared about what a cute guy like Bert thought of them. I was only important to them as long as I let them show off in front of a guy. It had nothing to do with me. That was just the kind of girls they were.



I handed Bert my dripping book, and asked him if he could please towel it off. He gave me a crooked smile and touched my back for an instant, making me feel electric, and sauntered away to the other side of the pool. The girls deflated as he turned away. At their disappointed faces, not making any effort to look pretty now that Bert was gone, I felt my anger and insecurity evaporate, drying in the sun along with my swimsuit made for swimming and my book. I felt sorry for them.

“Do you recognize me?” I asked, curious.

“Um, no. Do we...know you?” Brit said, peering at me. She must have decided I wasn't worth looking at, and pulled her giant sunglasses down over her face. I couldn't quite see her eyes through the blue lenses.

“This morning. After the Tiki Room. You were all spitting at ducks you thought were animatronics?” Brit looked genuinely baffled, and played with a dangly earring. I wondered if this was her equivalent of scratching her head to think.

Her friend leaned over and said, “Oh, the ducks? She was there, right? Watching us?” She squirmed and pulled on her bikini bottom. Maybe it occurred to her that spitting on ducks wasn't decent or attractive.

“Oh yeah,” Brit said, clearly not caring much. I couldn't tell whether she remembered or not, but either way, it didn't seem to bother her. She shrugged at her friend. “Weird.” She propped up her magazine on her knees and flipped through, looking at pictures.

I stared at the pair of them for a little longer. The friend looked a little anxious that I was still there, and kept shifting in her chair, causing it to make plastic sucking

noises. Brit said, “That is SO annoying!” and Gum Snapper stuck her tongue out, like she was in second grade.

I smiled genuinely at them for the first time. *I cannot believe I was obsessed with these girls.* Brit and her friend really needed to grow up a little bit. “No, you don’t know me.” I stood up straight and leaned toward them. Brit looked up at me, dripping on her feet, and I could see myself in her sunglass lenses, with the pool water rippling behind me. I took a mental picture of myself, looking tall and happy, towering over Brit.

“Well, I just wanted to tell you...” I lowered my voice, confidentially. They instinctively leaned toward me, lured by the hint of gossip, even from someone they didn’t know. It was what I’d been wanting to tell them ever since I first saw them in line at Space Mountain: “Your bra straps show.” Brit stopped twirling her earring. “I just thought someone should let you know. That can be kind of embarrassing.” Gum Snapper stopped snapping and squinted at me under her giant lenses.

I grinned at them, said, “Bye!” cheerily, and turned to Bert. He appeared instantly by my side, nodded to the girls, and we linked arms, walked together around the pool, and pushed through the gate.

“What’d you say to them, Case?” Bert asked as we clanged the gate shut behind us. He was tall enough to see over the shrubbery around the pool. “They’re pulling at their tops, looking all confused.”

“I was trying to help them out.” I hugged him as we walked, and we stumbled down the path. “Bert, would you like to come to dinner with me and my parents tonight?”

“If you want me to, of course I’ll go.” We stopped at the steps to my building. Bert took my hand. “Miss Allison, would you care to accompany me to Disneyland afterward?”

Thoughts of my parents’ disappointment swirled through me, but my total victory over the Bra-Strap Girls made even my parents seem manageable. “Definitely. Let’s meet up later. I just need to put some clothes on.” Because *that* was just the kind of girl I was.

Chapter 16: “The Backside of Water” — *Jungle Cruise skipper joke*

I pressed my hand against our thick hotel room door. I expected it to be hot for some reason, as if there were a fire on the other side. I turned the knob slowly, squeezed through, and held the handle behind me so it wouldn't slam shut. I stood still in the dark room. If my parents were taking a nap, I wasn't about to wake them up.

But I found my mom sitting up at the table, tucked into the corner of the room, with a half-read true-crime book and an ancient, giant booklight illuminating her face. She wore a look that told me she hadn't actually been reading but rather plotting my demise instead. The digital clock by their bed, where my dad was snoring away, showed 4:10. I had to shower and get dressed in time to leave for dinner, which would be practically impossible even without dealing with my mom. I had that feeling you get after stubbing a toe, when you *know* it's going to be bad, and you're waiting to feel it.

I would have to move — my wet hair was dripping a puddle on the thin carpet. I turned around to pull the door shut, but stood facing it, with my back to the now-lit room, staring at the “Exit route in case of emergency” sign taunting me. *Someone, anyone, please set a non-dangerous-but-still-evacuation-worthy fire to the building right now.*

“Casey. You're back,” my mom said, way too casually.

I had to turn around now. I squeezed the doorknob goodbye.

“I went swimming.” I was trying to whisper so my dad wouldn't wake up. That subtlety was lost on my mom, who was talking too loudly over the roar of the air conditioner next to her.

“Well, yes, I can see that. But that doesn’t explain why we haven’t heard from you all day, or why you went to the pool without telling us.”

Was I supposed to check in with them? Hadn’t she said she’d have a better time *without* me? I was getting cold in my wet suit in the air-conditioned room. “I just wanted to swim.”

“That’s *not* all, Acacia.” I sensed she was regretting not giving me a longer name now. She seemed to want more syllables to say. “It was very irresponsible of you.” My dad rolled over, yawned, and scowled at me. Well, at least it wasn’t *my* fault he woke up.

“I go swimming all the time, Mom. I’ve been able to do laps since I was five. What exactly were you worried about?” I patted my towel around me. My victorious feelings from the successful Bra-Strap Girl encounter were fading.

“Don’t antagonize your mother,” my dad started in, yawning.

“You don’t think I can handle some laps in that little pool? That pool I’ve swam in since I was learning to swim?”

“That is not the issue,” Mom said. She stood up and pulled on a Mickey sweatshirt that had been folded next to her. I suddenly felt too underdressed to argue, but I cinched my towel skirt tighter and kept my hands on it.

“It *is* the issue. If you trusted me, you’d know I was safe and you wouldn’t have been worried.” That definitely sounded logical.

“Trust? You haven’t even let us know where you were all day!”

“Mom, I was downstairs and that way” — I pointed back toward the blessed pool — “about 100 feet. You wouldn’t think I was safe if I took a long bath!”

“You are missing the point,” Dad said.

“I think *you* are both missing the point that I am practically in high school and I can keep myself alive for periods of time without you or someone else supervising me!” No point in being quiet now. My throat was dry. I wanted to suck some water off of my dripping hair.

My head and ears pounded. I definitely did not want to stay here with them. Or eat dinner with them like we were all normal again. Or come back here to sleep and listen to them snore at each other. How could I finish my vacation with them now? How could I ever have a vacation, or any freedom, when they questioned everything I did?

“You treat me — like — “ I sniffled, appalled but not able to do anything about it — “like I am a little *kid*. But — I — am — *not!*” I clutched at my towel, aware too late that it probably looked to them like I was holding my blankie. They were looking at me, unimpressed and annoyed that I was messing up their plans. “And besides,” I added, “didn’t you tell me this morning that you had more fun without me? Why would you even care where I went if *I’m* such a drag to be around now that I’m not actually three years old?!”

My mom opened and closed her mouth. “Acacia, I simply meant that you were acting incredibly rude to me and I didn’t want you to act like that all day. What a mood you’re in!”

“It’s not a *mood*, Mom, it’s who I am! I’m in high school now and you don’t like it and I can’t help it that I don’t want to follow you guys around all day anymore!”

“Well, you know what? I did like you better when you were a little girl! We didn’t fight! We didn’t waste our whole vacation! And I didn’t wonder where you were all day.”

“Why is everybody being so mean to me lately?!”

“Bert seems pretty friendly,” my mom said. Wait, what? What was she even talking about?

“Don’t even talk about him,” I said.

“Who is ‘everybody’ then?”

“You. And Dad. And...and my friends at school,” I added, even though it wasn’t quite true, “and especially stupid Kiley!”

“What are you talking about?” Mom waved her booklight around and it kept blinding me. I don’t think she realized she was still holding it.

“Kiley. Your favorite person, Kiley. Kiley that you want to buy presents for and think is so great. She’s not, Mom. She’s mean and she totally ditched me!”

“Casey, she didn’t ditch you, she’s sick.”

“Mom, she’s not sick. She just didn’t want to come on our trip this time, okay?”

My parents looked at each other. They couldn’t believe it. I realized they must have thought of her as part of this trip, as part of our family. She had ditched them, too.

“She dumped me, okay? She was horrible to me at school and now she won’t even talk to me.”

“But...Kiley loves Disneyland.”

“Kiley is over Disneyland. At least with us. With me. She is over you guys and she is totally over me.” And at that, my anger crumbled. I teared up, hating it but not able to help it. “I know you wish she was here and it would be like last year, and the year before that, and the year before that. I know you wish that I was little again. But I’m *not*.”

“Casey...” she said. And nothing else. No words of wisdom for me? I turned to my dad. He was staring at his notebook, the one he’d carried on last year’s trip, the one Kiley and I had doodled on the cover of when we were bored in line.

“Forget it. I’m going. Like you said, you’ll be happier without Crazy Teenager Casey with you. You and Kiley and everyone else at school.” I flushed and turned and put my hand on the knob. I didn’t know where I was going. I couldn’t really go anywhere. But I couldn’t stay here. I’d rather sleep in a lounge chair by the pool than here.

“Casey, you are acting like a spoiled brat!” my dad said, shocking me enough to turn around. How could he turn against me so completely, too? He hadn’t even been worried about me today, he’d been asleep! He was only angry that I’d messed up his itinerary. My mom was staring at me in an emotionless way, like she was trying to figure out what *Woman’s Day* or *Good Housekeeping* would advise in this situation about troublesome teens. They both acted like they didn’t even know me, like I hadn’t been a perfect swimmer, daughter, and friend my whole life.

“Excuse me?” I said. “Dad. You didn’t even try to find out what was going on this morning. You didn’t care about what I was saying. You didn’t care why I wanted to go off by myself and make my own plans. You wanted to do whatever it was that would get



this whole thing over with so you could get on with the trip, right? Well, here you go. Have your trip. I'm not on it."

My dad sat, sleepy and stunned, on the bed.

"Well it hasn't seemed like you've been on it at all," Mom said.

I turned to her. I was hot and the water from my wet suit cooled me. I felt like steam was rising up from my swimsuit. "You think you'd have a better vacation without me. You probably would. Kiley thinks her life is better without me. Yours probably is too."

My mom shook my words off.

"You know, I don't want Kiley here," I said. "I don't care if she was the one who dumped me, I wouldn't even want her here now, anyway. She didn't like me like I am. You don't either!"

My dad seemed to think it was time to wrap this up. "Casey, of course we —" I shot him a look. He stopped. "Well you could be nicer, it's true."

"Nicer? I was being nicer. Like on every trip, going along with your stupid plans. And then when I made my own, you thought I wasn't being nice starting then. It doesn't matter. Things are not going to be the same. Ever."

We stood in silence. The air conditioner whirred on and buzzed. My mother was shaking. I thought she was cold, but then I realized she was just really, really mad.

"But last year..." my dad said.

"It is not last year. It's right *now*. And I'm sorry if you think you'll have a better time without me or that you think — " I started to cry again, but didn't care — "you

don't like me now that I can think for myself, but it's your problem. Other people do like me like I am right now. And I am going to go be with *them!*"

I darted to my pile of luggage sprawled out in the corner by my bed. I grabbed a pile of my crumpled clothes, and shoved my comb and a magazine into my bag around my shoulder, and grabbed the rest of the fresh film, too. I headed for the door.

As I banged on the door's automatic safety latches, my mom said, "You are uninvited to dinner!"

"No kidding!" I said. "Who wants to eat dinner at 4:30 anyway? That's for *old* people! You changed too, you know!" I flung the door open. I flip-flopped down the fluorescent hallway clutching my small bundle of clothes. I was probably bleaching my clothes with the chlorine, but I still clung to them. I hugged them to my chest and watched the floor numbers light up while I waited for the elevator to come and get me out of here.

When I burst out of the elevator, where I had left another chlorine puddle, I headed back to the pool. I didn't know where else to go. I tripped over a twig, banged my elbow on the iron gate, and clanged it shut. I slammed down on a lounge chair, sure it would break under me, but the plastic strips bounced back.

I didn't care if the Bra-Strap Girls were still there — *Just let them try to mess with me now!* I thought — but prime tanning time was over for the day and the pool area was deserted and shady from all the decorative trees. At least Bert wasn't back yet. I sat, staring at the water, watched leaves swirl around the surface, and noticed dirty spots and pebbles on the bottom. I looked into the dark bushes and plants, and built a cushion on

the lounge chair from the towel station's offerings. I sat and breathed and tried to calm down my heart. My suit was still damp where I sat. I wanted to change.

\* \* \*

After a while of fuming, my stomach rumbled, my wet swimsuit irritated me, and I started to feel nauseous. It was easier to think about being hungry than wrong. I dug in my bag, came up with some mini-packages of smashed saltines from the Blue Bayou, and crunched on the crumbs. My anger was further fueled by my realization that I'd left my cell phone charging on my nightstand in the room.

I felt in my bag for a piece of hotel stationery with Bert's cell number printed across it in red marker. Taking my little pile of belongings with me, I went to the lobby's pay phone, and could almost feel Bert's number in the receiver; it seemed to make the phone heavier in my hand. It would be the first time I actually called him because I was upset, like he was a friend from home.

I listened to the phone dial the song of Bert's numbers. He picked up on one ring. "Hi Bert, it's Casey," I said, rushing. It had been so long since I used a pay phone, I worried it would cut me off and demand more money at any second. "Meet me here at the pool. Please. I'm in a big fight with my parents. And I'm hungry. Um, bye."

I didn't know what else to say, and I couldn't talk about the argument right then or I'd cry, so I didn't wait for an answer and hung up. So that wasn't quite the chat I would have had with Kiley. But maybe this was better, I thought. She would have wanted the gory details and would take an hour to dress herself before coming over. I knew Bert

would come soon. I knew he would think I was right. I left wet spots across the tiled lobby as I went to change.

I slid into the large, one-person restroom, tugged off my clingy suit, and threw it in the sink. I stared at myself in the mirror, studying the slightly tan outline from my swimsuit around my shoulders and thighs. My mom would probably accuse me of not wearing sunscreen when we got home, but I could feel it still sticking to me — SPF 45, of course.

I scrubbed at my arms and neck with a fistful of wet paper towels, trying to get the overprotective sunblock off of me. What my parents had said today meant less right now than what Bert thought of me. He understood that I wasn't a kid, and knew me for who I was right now. Even if I was awful, at least his opinion would be based on my personality as me *now*, and not as I was when I was a toddler. He couldn't compare me to my old self or Kiley or anybody I wasn't.

I dunked my head under the faucet, rinsing out the chlorine as best I could, and was comforted at the thought of the classic Jungle Cruise skipper joke, told when the boat passed underneath Schweitzer Falls: "You may never have seen this before...the backside of water! Don't try to see this at home, because you'll hit the back of your head on the faucet." I cracked a smile, glad that I could think of a Disneyland quote that made me feel better in almost any situation. I pulled on my dry clothes with relief, and slid into my new pirate sweatshirt.

As I combed out my hair with my fingers, spraying drops across the counter, I tried to make a mental list of what I might want to do tonight, but I didn't want to think orderly; I didn't care what we did, I just had to be next to Bert.

I stuck my head under the hand dryer and hoped it worked on hair. It blew hot air on my face and warmed my shoulders. I hadn't realized how cold I'd been. As I thought about the night ahead, spent with Bert, wandering together, I also realized that there would be fireworks. My family always watched the fireworks together. I jerked up at that, and bonked my forehead on the hot metal. It was what we did on the last night of our trip. My mom, mad as she was, hadn't un-invited me to that. Maybe I could bail on everything else, but if I ditched them at fireworks time, I honestly thought I might not have a ride home. Which maybe wouldn't be so bad. I thought of my mom's lame comeback about the early-bird dinner, and guilt crawled over me. I thought of how mad she must have been to say what she said. That she didn't love me now. Well, I would show up, for this one last stupid tradition, so at least they couldn't say that I had ditched them completely, even if they deserved it. My mom deserved to feel awful. So did my dad. They'd feel worse if I showed up and made them look bad. The rest of the night, I would be free. I tried to detangle my hair, studying myself in the mirror. I didn't know how I could watch the fireworks with my parents and pretend like we were the same family we used to be, one that had spent yet another summer vacation at Disneyland having fun together. I wasn't the same; that meant none of us were the same. But I would still stand there with them. And Bert would be there, too.

\* \* \*

I heard the clink of the gate, but didn't look up. Bert hesitated to come to my side and sat down on the plastic chair across from me. I was hungry and glad he came — I was surprised at how good I felt that he had come. But at the same time, I felt empty, and sad that he was the only person I knew that could comfort me, this boy I hadn't even met until yesterday.

“So, I'd ask you if you came here often, but I think I already know you do,” he said.

I smiled up at him half-heartedly. “It's weird to be by a pool with my normal clothes on.” Bert was wearing a black Pirates of the Caribbean long-sleeved shirt. We matched each other. We were like a team. A team against thoughtless, mean, clueless parents.

“I wasn't sure what you'd want, so I got a selection from the mini mart,” he said. Like Mary Poppins' carpet bag, Bert's cargo pants pockets produced an array of wonders: Snickers, Milky Way, and Hershey's bars; bags of peanuts and cashews; three small packages of Doritos in assorted flavors; a fruit roll-up and applesauce; and — my favorite — a York peppermint patty.

I reached for the patty, and Bert handed it over while he rubbed my shoulder with his other hand.

I attacked the chocolate with a large bite. Usually I rationed out my patty by taking small nibbles, but I thought this was a special situation. My parents had basically admitted that I was, to them, barely potty trained and that they liked me better when I *had* been barely potty trained. I had run out on them in the middle of an argument to sit on a

plastic lounge chair, where I guessed I would spend the night, and the only person that I could talk to was Bert, whom I'd met the day before. I took another big bite.

Eyeing my little stack of supplies, Bert waited until I'd finished eating the Peppermint Patty and flopped back on the chair before he leaned toward me and said, "So, I'm guessing you aren't sitting on a pile of towels outside because it's fun. What happened?" He produced a miniature can of Pringles from another mysteriously deep pocket, and popped the top, watching me.

"I had a fight with my parents." I tried to say it as blandly as possible, and it didn't sound all that dramatic, except that my voice quivered.

Bert handed over some applesauce and a plastic spoon. I realized that I'd been zoning out, staring at the applesauce. It was the same kind my mom packed in my school lunches. "I'm sorry, Case, it's all my fault. Of course your parents want to spend time with you on your vacation. You'd be doing that if you weren't with me. They should really hate *me*."

"It's not you," I said. "I mean, it's not just me being with you. I found out they think I am completely unreasonable, irresponsible...." My eyes immediately teared up, stinging from chlorine, and the pool became a blur of blue light. "My mom actually said she didn't love me."

"She said that?"

"Yeah. Well..." I thought about it. "Basically. She said she liked me more when I was little." I sniffled.

I told Bert the whole story and that I had left puddles on the hotel's ugly paisley carpet. He listened the whole time, looking thoughtful as he chewed his chips.

I had finished the bag of Cool Ranch Doritos when I finally finished, and wiped at my eyes and my fingers with a towel. "So, I called you." *My new friend. My only friend.*

Bert smiled. "Well, I'm not getting a very relaxing vacation thanks to you, but it is interesting." I shivered, crossing my arms over my chest. Bert produced an orange, puffy jacket from behind his back. He wrapped it around me, and I nestled against it. We stared into the pool until I thought to ask, "Aren't *you* going to get into trouble? For seeing me so much?"

He shifted, and the plastic strips under my bottom danced. "Nah. My grandma and Maggie are going to Ariel's Grotto for dinner, and my grandma said it was okay if I came to see you instead. I am missing out on seeing Ariel, though, and I do like her seashells," he added, poking me.

I was glad to have anything to laugh at, even at Ariel's seashells, and we sat for a while, eating junk food. Bert traced around his grandfather's watch band. I could now see that the brown leather was still shiny around the edges, even though it was lighter in patches along the top, where Bert was touching it now.

"Did your grandpa, and grandma...did they see you a lot?"

"Yeah, they would pick me up from school sometimes, or when I got sick, and I'd get to go to their house. My grandma would make these crazy sandwiches for me out of whatever she had around — 'hot dog sandwiches' were my favorite. I realized last year, when she was making Maggie and me lunch, that she got creative when she didn't have



any hot dog buns around.” We giggled, and he continued, “And my grandpa would let me help him work on his model railroad. We would talk about the trains and how good my grandma could cook.”

“How long...have you had his watch?” I asked carefully.

Bert put his hand on mine. He appreciated my effort. “He died two years ago. I wore it to the memorial and I wear it a lot since then. But I don’t wear it to school or anything. I don’t exactly tell people about it.” He looked directly at me, and our gazes met before he cleared his throat and continued. “You’re not a secret agent or anything, right?”

“If I were, I wouldn’t *tell* you,” I reminded him, giving him a sly smile.

We sat, chomping on our snacks for a few minutes, until he cracked open a bottled Sprite, took a long drink, and said, “Well, whoever you are, I’m glad you’re here.”

“Thanks. I’m glad somebody is.” I knew we were both thinking about tomorrow, and the days after, when we wouldn’t see each other anymore, but I sensed it was an unspoken rule that tonight, we were not going to talk about that.

Bert looked at me, and I saw that his brown eyes had turned golden in the sun’s slanting rays, spilling around the pool’s palm trees and birds-of-paradise. “Yeah,” he said, squeezing me. We settled back on the plastic chair and watched the full moon rise in the late afternoon sky.

Chapter 17: “Date Night at Disneyland” — *Plaza Gardens song*

We walked to the park briskly, but held hands the whole way. Tonight was no time to be shy. I arrived in the esplanade relaxed and eager to take pictures of Bert and of my favorite place. Bert’s orange jacket made him stand out from all the other people waiting in line, and I didn’t see how I could have ever thought he was just some guy. It was impossible he was a stranger to me only days ago. But it also seemed impossible that only days ago, this seemed like any other vacation, and my family was getting along even when I wanted to get away.

I threw my arms around Bert’s neck. His shirt had a soft, nubby texture that made me want to keep holding him, and I breathed in the scent of the Grand Californian’s shampoo on his hair. Our line hadn’t moved — of course, it was our luck — and I was glad. I caught a glimpse of my watch; it was an ominous reminder that tomorrow at this time, we’d be only long-distance friends; I was going a day’s drive north and he would go two hours south. I pressed my face against his shoulder and told myself that no matter what dismal fate would await me in the car with my parents tomorrow, tonight I still had Bert.

He looked at me with small creases wrinkling his eyebrows. I saw him take in my still-wet hair, splotchy cheeks, and pale lips, pressed together from a sick feeling in my stomach about the fight. He tossed his arm around my shoulder, touched his head to mine, and said sincerely, “Case, you look great tonight.”

No, he was definitely not just some guy. He was *Bert*.

He squeezed my hand. “I know we’re short on time, but let’s not run around all crazy.” I nodded, and we whistled at each other, imitating the ticket machines’ noises that sounded like perky bird calls, while we waited our turn.

It was stupid to want to cry while we still had the night in front of us. Disneyland didn’t close until midnight. Adventurous Indiana Jones music filled the air, and we needed to get on with having fun together. I guess I *did* sometimes act like a little kid, getting teary-eyed at the prospect of leaving. Maybe I was a huge toddler. People had real problems — and I was sad about my vacation ending. I pushed through the turnstile, and we walked together through the entrance tunnel.

We strolled down Main Street’s candy-scented air, and exclaimed over the twinkling lights in the trees, all the different shapes of illuminated signs on the old-fashioned buildings, and the castle’s nighttime color scheme, with the sky turning darker by the second. The last night of vacation always seemed the best; I noticed the hundreds of tiny details I loved most when I knew that my time was running out — the balding guy wearing mouse ears too small for his head (there was always one of those guys around); the sweepers swishing their brooms quietly around oblivious people; the names on the shop windows honoring people who did great things for the park. I eyed the “second floor” of the camera shop, thinking that my name would look excellent on a window right about there.

Bert followed my gaze. As we walked on, I gushed about Disneyland’s many charms. From our current spot, I could see the Matterhorn; the castle that was glowing

pink and blue and beautiful, even if it was technically facing backwards; and the thatched roof of the Enchanted Tiki Room. I took in a deep breath, hoping to infuse myself with the atmosphere. We passed the “Partners” statue, with Walt Disney and Mickey holding hands. I guess it was a little cheesier than my usual tastes in art would allow, but tonight, I held Bert’s warm hand in mine as we passed by Walt and I thought, *I don’t know how you did this, but thanks.*

Bert waved at a passing stroller, full of tiny triplets. The stroller’s occupants waved back. I pulled my hand out of my new sweatshirt to wave too, and realized that I hadn’t seen Bert buy himself a present yet. He’d probably spent all his money on this sweatshirt, to try and fix his sister’s accident. Now *he* was mature for real, even if he did wave at little kids. It reminded me that there was one more souvenir I had to buy, my big purchase — and I needed to do it now, before closing time, when Main Street’s cozy, peaceful atmosphere would be overcome by a last-minutes-before-closing shopping frenzy.

“Bert, I have to go to the bathroom,” I said quickly, as we lingered in the hub. “I’ll meet you over by the wait time board, okay?” I had to visit the shop in secret. This was my adult purchase, and I had to do it by myself.

Bert agreed, and sauntered down the street. I raced to the jewelry shop to finally buy my grown-up souvenir with no hesitation, and then hurried back to him, with the small box buried safe in my bag. I had never been so satisfied to hand over my money for a purchase. I knew it was worth it. After all I’d been through, I had to buy this today.

We meandered under the Adventureland threshold, and I was so overwhelmed with good feeling that I had to share with Bert. I pointed up above the Tiki Room's entrance. "That's where the Barker Bird used to sit when the Tiki Room first opened. The story is that they had to take it down because so many people stopped to stare at it, they clogged up the entrance to Adventureland."

"They were that amazed by a fake parrot?"

"They were *enchanted*."

"Me too," Bert said.

We collected an Indy FastPass (I couldn't help it, I sighed as we approached the ride — Indiana Jones would, from this trip on, always be the place where I met Bert), and got in line for the Jungle Cruise. As we wandered through the tour departing dock, I babbled about the Jungle Cruise, saying, "I liked the piranhas that they added. I mean, it is an original attraction, but I do like what they did to update it." I paused. I loved hearing the boat engines. Bert agreed enthusiastically, as though the piranhas were fascinating to him, too. Really, I think we both knew we were more fascinated with each other, leaning against each other in line.

We passed two blissful hours in Adventureland, Tomorrowland, and Frontierland. We didn't get to go on Indy, because it was so busy our FastPass time hadn't come yet, and I decided I'd rather walk around the park with Bert. Even though it was out of the way, I led us to the castle to admire it at night.

We took the quiet path from Frontierland through the deserted back route. I stopped to look at the gargoyles. OK, I stopped to be alone in the dark, hidden from the public, with Bert.

“They’re squirrels from the side,” I said.

“What?”

“The gargoyles. They look like scary gargoyles from the front, but — look,” I grabbed Bert’s arm, and felt his forearm tighten under my hand. I scooted over a couple steps, and pointed. “They look like cute squirrels from the side.”

Bert grinned, and I saw his face change as he saw the squirrels materialize from the ugly gargoyles. “That is bizarre.” He examined the squirrels again. “You sound like a tour guide, Case.”

“You wish. I’m not wearing that outfit.” Knee-high socks with a plaid mini skirt. But I had to admit, Bert was right — I did sound like a tour guide.

Or like my dad.

I groaned, and my stomach fell. When he was boring us all with miniscule trivia, making it sound as though Disneyland was a collection of facts to memorize, or places to check off on a list, was that his way of being excited about being here? I had never thought of it that way before. I always assumed he just liked tormenting us.

My new, unsettling thoughts were followed by guilt for all the years of wishing my dad would be quiet so we could have some fun already. My dad *was* having fun. Bert touched my arm, nicely interrupting my thoughts. “Let’s go over there.” He pointed to Plaza Gardens.

“They used to have dances there. It was called ‘Date Night at Disneyland.’ I think they still do swing dancing on Saturday nights,” I said. I really couldn’t shut off tour guide mode once I started. We walked toward the pavilion. It was empty — no band tonight — but still played big-band music from speakers.

Around the shiny dance floor, we saw a family of three exhausted kids and an older couple on the curvy chairs, sprawled out with kids and packages everywhere. The old people looked kind of familiar — then I saw the woman’s pink Mickey antenna-ball headpiece resting on the table, and I recognized her from the Indiana Jones line yesterday morning. How crazy that out of so many thousands of visitors, you could run into the same people over and over again. Usually, it was with people I never wanted to see (such as the Bra-Strap Girls, or people who wore velour pants with words printed across their butts). A cute old couple was a better option. I wondered if the woman had noticed me in line. She was there when I met Bert. I felt like that made her some kind of fairy godmother.

I stopped staring and asked, “So do you want to check out the grotto?” Snow White’s Grotto was on the other side of the castle. It had a wishing well, and I figured it couldn’t hurt to test it out.

Bert pulled my arm. “Hey, the grotto is that way!” I said.

“I know — but it can wait while we, um....” Bert waved his arm at the empty dance floor.

“Huh?” I said.

“Do you like to dance?”

“I don’t know. I used to take ballet classes, but I wasn’t very good at it.”

Bert sighed. He held out his arm and made an exaggerated head-tilt at the dance floor. “Would you like to dance with me?” he said. “Not ballet?”

“Oh! Well, I mean, I’d like to dance with *you*. But — “ We had attracted the attention of the kids, and the old folks were eyeing us. “There’s no one else dancing.”

“Good. More room for my moves.” He touched my waist at a respectably high level. I stretched my arm toward his waist too, then waved my hands in frustration. I had been to exactly one school dance, and had jumped around with Kiley the whole time. I didn’t know how to dance for real.

“I don’t know how.” I had a ridiculous impulse to pirouette.

Fortunately, Bert took my wrists in his hands and placed them behind his neck. “I don’t know how either. But I don’t care.” He pulled me closer.

At first I wished our audience would go away, but they disappeared into the blurry background the longer I held onto Bert. He was the only person in my frame. We swayed around in a small circle, and I wished I had on a full, puffy skirt to swish around in.

The song ended only about twenty seconds into it, just as I was starting to get comfortable. A quiet instrumental version of “So This Is Love” tinkled out of the speakers and I blushed.

“What are you thinking about, Case?”

The electric lights strung around the ceiling sparkled back at me in his eyes. I stood on my tiptoes to put my cheek against his and said, “Nothing, just the song.” I



didn't know if he recognized it, but I felt his cheeks rise up against mine as he smiled and we danced.

Our song ended, and we stopped our circle-dance. We both giggled as I swayed on my feet, and unfortunately, I bumped into the old man, who had been dancing with his wife. I apologized, but they grinned and bobbed away, giving us a little wave. Their packages were lying on the floor by their vacant seats and the sleeping kids.

Bert pointed his elbow toward me. We linked arms, and as we stepped out into the clusters of delicately detailed Victorian chairs and tables, the cheerful beginning of "Jolly Holiday" sounded.

I let out a very un-Mary Poppins-like snort. Bert raised an eyebrow at me.

"You're Bert, and this is 'Jolly Holiday,'" I said, between giggles. "That means I am Mary Poppins!"

"I never heard her snort," Bert said, but he was laughing, too. "Let's go," he said, and started to set off, then jumped back and lifted his knee high before stepping out again. I stood staring at him, until I realized that he was doing the dance from the movie that Mary and Bert do after they jump into Bert's chalk drawing. On their "date."

"Have you ever seen the grass so green, or a bluer sky?" I sang to myself, looking out into the dark, as Bert and I did the *Mary Poppins* dance and walked. The words weren't right, but the feeling was. We dance-stepped our way toward the castle, with the trees' twinkling branches, bright against the cloudy night sky, winking at us.

Chapter 18: “Main Street Is Everyone’s Hometown” — *Walt Disney’s opening-day dedication*

After our grotto visit — which consisted of several coin tosses over my shoulder into the well, and Bert lip-synching to Snow White’s singing — we headed for Main Street and the way out. We wanted to see the Electrical Parade in California Adventure. We walked along the cute, tidy street facades, and I told Bert that they reminded me of the houses on my street. My neighborhood’s houses look like a movie set.

“What do you mean?”

“My neighborhood back home,” I felt a slight pang at the thought of home, but kept going, “looks adorable. The yards are clean and the houses are blue and green and yellow. Except on my street, I hardly ever see kids running around, or neighbors talking, or...anything.” We merged into the throng crowding the street. Some people had parked themselves on the sidewalk, waiting for the fireworks in two hours. The thought of the fireworks made my stomach sink. I would meet my parents then. At least Bert could be with me tonight while I faced them, but a little cloud of doom had settled over our last hours together.

After I glared at the third stroller to wheel into me, we pulled over and I leaned against a bright blue fake door — well, I think it was a real door, but only for cast members — watching the families stroll by, chatting, excited, or fussing, and I realized that Main Street in Disneyland was a lot more real than my own neighborhood. At least

here, people were all out together. How could I make friends at home when nobody was there?

I guess here we are just temporary neighbors, but that was the case in the outside world, too. I thought of my neighbor at home, the old lady who spoke only Spanish but always said, “Hello” to me, who used to live next door until she sold her house for a bigger one when prices were high. I wonder if her new, fancier house had worked out for her. Back home right now, there were four bright white “for sale” or “foreclosed” signs that had grown out of the lawns on my street the last month alone. My neighbors weren’t much more permanent on my real street. And my friends at home didn’t seem very permanent, either.

We joined the crowd and set off again. “Bert, does Main Street seem nicer than your own street?”

“Yeah, there aren’t any sweet buns on my street.” We were passing the Blue Ribbon Bakery.

“No, I mean, really...do you know your neighbors?”

“Yeah, I know a lot of them. Well...some of them. Some are weird and I don’t even *want* to know them.” He paused. “But, Main Street isn’t homes, it’s businesses. It’s different.”

“Well, I feel more at home here sometimes than *at* home.”

“I know what you mean,” he said, and I kept staring at the people around us.

“My neighbors, they check in on me and Maggie after school sometimes,” Bert said. “It’s kind of — no, it’s *really* annoying, but they bring food. They know my parents work a lot.” I nodded. “Maybe you should try to get to know your real neighbors.”

“Yeah.” I should. And they should get to know me. But I didn’t see it happening. I was too embarrassed to go and introduce myself. Now that I was in high school, did I have to do stuff like that? “Well, I guess my real neighbors wouldn’t shove me aside to watch a parade.”

“Ha! Yeah, in my neighborhood, on Fourth of July all the houses have little firecrackers and they all go out around eight-thirty and set them off. We have lawn chairs out. But no pushing...well, maybe to see who gets to light the fuse,” he added.

“I wish we did things like that. I don’t think fireworks are legal in my city.”

“Well, you know, I’m not sure they’re legal in mine, either.” He grinned. “Hey, since you don’t have any, let’s go be good neighbors while we’re here.” He pulled out the unused Indiana Jones FastPass ticket.

“Huh?”

“We can do a good deed. Maybe we’ll get some good karma or something.” I shook my head, confused. “See, this FastPass time isn’t up yet, but we’re going to the other park now, and I bet we won’t even need it later tonight, after the fireworks.” After the little kids left, he meant.

I whipped my ticket out of my bag’s special pocket that I used just for FastPass tickets. “Okay, let’s be neighborly,” I agreed. I could use some good karma tonight.

Chapter 19: “A Great Place to Be Headed” — *Jungle Cruise skipper joke*

With determination, we set off to find the lucky recipients of our FastPasses, giddy because we knew we were about to make someone’s night.

“We are such nice people.” I strutted down the middle of the streetcar tracks.

“We are,” Bert agreed. “Although I think I to be a really nice person, you’re supposed to be a little more modest.”

“Probably,” I said, but I felt like a game show host a second before informing a contestant she had won a prize. My excitement pushed past my guilt. A little bit.

We lingered on the sidewalk. “How should we pick?” Bert asked. “Should we go hang around Indy?”

“We could. Or we could go to the ride time board and see what’s the longest, and then go there! They’ll probably appreciate a freebie ride later.” I was a genius. A kind-hearted genius. I told Bert so, and he agreed, although he pointed out that we might not be early enough for a good spot at the Electrical Parade. I didn’t mind.

The bass from the band playing at the Tomorrowland Terrace thundered around us before we even got there, but it only made me more excited. “I love Tomorrowland at night!” I said, gawking at the neon lights and people dancing like I’d never seen it before.

We finally got through the crowd bottled up around the Monorail platform to Space Mountain, which currently had a wait of 65 minutes; someone around here would appreciate getting a short Indy line later.

“Look for some desperate people hovering around,” I suggested.

Bert scanned the mob, and pointed covertly at two middle-aged men, currently engaged in a debate. “How about them?”

“Mmm...I don’t know, they seem a little cranky. How about...” We scanned the crowd. Now I felt like a secret-agent game show host.

We picked a pair of women with banana clips in their hair. Bert approached, with the tickets held out.

“Excuse me,” he said loudly, smiling — he seemed to be picking up the game show prize-bestower vibe, too.

The women turned around quickly. “Yes?” said a blonde one. She wore enormous hoop earrings that banged against her cheeks when she turned.

“My friend and I can’t use our FastPass tickets. We were wondering if you...”

The curly-haired one interrupted, “We’re not giving you cuts in line. You’ll have to wait your turn.” They scurried up the ramp to the line, leaving behind a whiff of hairspray.

Bert turned around, holding his arms out, palms up, clearly offended. “They’re nuts,” I suggested. “Come on, we’ll find someone better.”

“Why would they think I wanted to cut in line? They weren’t even *in* line yet, and I only said...”

I wasn’t sure if Bert was talking to me or himself, but I said, “Look, what about those two?”

Bert eyed the pair of pre-teen girls across the way, who seemed to be engrossed in conversation. “All right, but *you* do it this time.”

“I’ll show you how it’s done.” I adjusted my pant waist, grabbed the tickets, and marched toward the girls. I felt good. For the first time in hours, I felt good. It didn’t even matter that the girls looked at me sideways.

“Hi there!” I began. “Do you want some FastPass tickets? My friend and I — “ I pointed to Bert, who was standing back where I’d left him — “can’t use them, so we thought — “

“Are you trying to sell those?” This eleven-year-old was wearing green eyeliner.

“What?” Tomorrowland was noisy everywhere. The band at the Terrace started playing “Sweet Child o’ Mine.” I must have heard her wrong.

“No, I’m just — “

“You’re just *giving* your FastPass tickets to us?

“Yeah, we — “

“Why?”

“To be nice,” I said, frustrated.

The green-eyeliner girl’s friend looked at me behind her long bangs, shot a glimpse at her friend, and they both turned and walked away, whispering and casting glances at me.

I stormed back to Bert. “What just happened there? What, people can’t even believe you’re just being *nice* in Disneyland?”

Bert was leading me to the train station. I was worked up and thought walking it off would be a good idea, but, as Bert pointed out, we didn’t have much time left before the Electrical Parade started.

“We could leave them on top of a garbage can or something?” he said hopefully.

“No! I want to hand them to someone. I want to make someone happy. Game show hosts never have to deal with this.”

“What?” But we heard the train whistle and ran to the station before I could explain.

“I hate this station,” I said, eyeing the orange-rust-colored metal. “Why can’t they make it look nice, like the others? Is our future going to look all rusty?” In response, Bert tried to make some sort of “fowl” mood / Donald Duck joke, but I glared at him and he stopped.

We slid into our bench seats, and I watched people pushing each other, scrambling for spots in our car, even though there were plenty in the next car over. “Why,” I asked, “do all of these people insist on coming to the Happiest Place on Earth, and then being *rude* to everyone once they’re here?”

Bert shrugged. “What’s wrong, Case?”

“What do you mean, what’s wrong? We can’t even give away our FastPasses, and I just realized that almost everyone is cranky here! These random people, me, my parents! Haven’t you noticed that?”

“I’m sorry, I was just so busy being happy, I didn’t hear you.”

“Argh!”

He put his arm around my shoulder. I started to shrug it off, but it did calm me down. I stretched my legs and arms, and took some slow breaths. My parents and even a rude crowd would not waste my happy time with Bert.



I vowed to be less frustrated with the crowd, and smiled and waved at a baby sitting next to us, who stared at me, entranced.

“Okay, maybe not *everyone* here is nuts,” I said.

Bert crossed his arms. “If I weren’t so manly, I would roll my eyes at you.” I swatted at him.

“It’ll be okay, Casey. Maybe people just can’t get why anyone would be nice for no reason,” Bert said. The last of the strollers piled on, and the train jolted and rocked as we started to move.

“But we’re in Disneyland!” I cried. That was the only explanation necessary, and Bert nodded and we left the ugly Tomorrowland train station behind us.

Primeval World, ridiculously outdated, always the same, also always made me smile. I liked the sound effects, and, oddly, even the thought of my dad saying the same jokes every time. Then, from behind, I heard: “That dinosaur has been chewing that plant for almost forty years!”

I did some quick mental math as the dinosaurs battled it out, and realized the person was right. It had opened in 1966. “I found our people,” I whispered to Bert.

Over the train sounds echoing in the tunnel, I heard, “So off to the Jungle Cruise next?”

“It’s a great place to be...headed,” the guy replied, and I snorted. Quoting Jungle Cruise skippers — yes! Bert saw me giggle, and *did* roll his eyes.

I felt like I knew these strangers. It was hard to hear their voices over the train, though. The thought occurred to me — what if they *were* my parents? *Why would it*

*bother you to be nice to your own family?* I asked myself. But strangers were more fun, weren't they? And my family had declared that they hated me, anyway. But even before the fight...I wouldn't have cared about surprising my parents with FastPasses. I guess I didn't think about them like that. Like people.

I sat staring vacantly at the scenery as we emerged from the tunnel, waiting until I could turn around, appearing to study the entrance lines but actually spying on my targets. A pair of 30-somethings in bride-and-groom mouse ears were laughing.

"Excuse me," I said, perched backward on the seat as the train came to a halt at Main Street Station. "Are you on your honeymoon?"

The woman grinned. "Yup! We were married yesterday."

"Here is a wedding present," I said, and handed over the two tickets. The woman held them up, and the train lantern's light gleamed off her shiny, silvery ring.

"Hey, cool!" her husband said. "You're sure? You don't want them?"

"Nope," I said, as we scrambled off, "We've got to go!" We turned and ran off the train, leaving the couple plotting their strategy for the night, one of many they'd get to share. I wanted to look back again, but Bert was racing ahead already, and I ran to catch up.

Chapter 20: Walk of Memories — *Name of personalized brick area in esplanade*

We dashed down Main Street Station's steps, and were halfway across the huge esplanade when I realized I had left Disneyland for the last time with Bert. It was a sad enough thought to stop me from running toward him. I took a deep breath and looked down to get myself together. I would not cry and ruin our night now.

I was standing on one of the hundreds of commemorative bricks Disneyland sold. My family had one here, somewhere. We had spent one trip always trying to remember where it was to say hello to it, but I had a hard time finding it. It got lost in the sea of thousands of other names, and I hadn't bothered to try and remember where it was. They had been more excited about it than me. The bricks were still for sale, and for a second I thought about asking Bert to buy one with me, to always have our names at least together here. I ducked my head down, looking at the wedding bells and hearts engraved on so many stones. We couldn't do that. It would be weird to try. And they were expensive, anyway, and I needed to use my money for my awesome souvenir.

The brick at my feet was owned by Hester and Raymond, displaying a date from 1955, the year Disneyland opened, with Mickey hands forming a heart shape. I smiled, and was instantly a little jealous of Hester and Raymond — to think they had all that time with each other, to come to this place together, and now, to admire their shared brick.

Bert, finally noticing that I was 20 feet behind him, spun around and scanned the crowd. There was no one around me — or, at least, I was the only one standing in one spot, making me feel like an island surrounded by a churning ocean of tourists. He trotted over.

“Got a cramp or something?” I fake-smiled, but didn’t quite pull it off. I realized my face was becoming hot and blotchy and my vision was clouded with totally juvenile tears.

“Case?”

I was afraid to blink, for fear of dislodging them, so I stared down at Hester’s name and said quickly, “I’m the biggest idiot, that’s all. I — I am so lucky — “ Bert was now looking at me with alarm, as though I might be sick. “Look, what I’m trying to say is that I’m fine, I’m sorry to leave, and — I’m acting like a five-year-old, I know, but — well, we’re all kids here, right?” I laughed uncomfortably, and Bert wrapped his arm around me.

“I know.” He stared down at the bricks with me.

I squeezed his hand. “I don’t know what I’m saying. We’ll have a great last night. I guess I just realized we won’t be in Disneyland together again.”

“Well, yeah, but it’s not like we’ll never be back,” he said, and we both looked down again. I gripped his hand tighter, as though I could keep us grounded here the harder I hung on. But the thought crept in: Of course we’ll be back, but we won’t be back here *together*.

“I just — wanted to walk by the River again with you, that’s all. It’s my favorite at night.” My eyes clouded again, and I said, “I want you to watch the fireworks with me, too. Even though my parents are there. It’ll be okay. My parents probably like you more than me right now, too.” We both got shy, and Bert nudged his toe toward me, his sneaker against mine.

“You’re standing on Raymond,” I said, and Bert hopped off and landed on someone else. I wondered if Ray and Hester really would come back again to visit their brick together. Maybe they lived far away. Maybe one, or both, had....well, maybe they’d already had their last trip together. Maybe their kids bought a brick for them, in their memory.

I stared at their names, wondering who they were, if they ever thought a couple of teenagers would be standing around here talking about them. I wondered how old they were when they met each other. I realized that although their lives seemed so permanent here, engraved in the ground together, they couldn’t have known they would last almost 50 years when they got married. They couldn’t have known anything, but they still went for it.

A breeze caught my ponytail, and I shivered as hairs tickled the back of my neck. I straightened up, gazed into the colorful glow of California Adventure at night, and linked my arm with Bert’s. I whispered goodbye to Hester and Raymond, too quiet for Bert to possibly hear, but he turned and waved at their brick as we walked away.

Chapter 21: “Ladies and Gentlemen, Boys and Girls” — *Electrical Parade*

*announcement*

California Adventure is colorful and clean. But there is one building that riles me up every time I see it, and it’s so tall it’s hard not to.

“Why does the Hollywood Tower Hotel have to look like a bomb hit it?” I demanded to no one in particular, but Bert answered, anyway.

“The ride says the building was hit by lightning, right?”

“Yeah,” I said. “But it looks ugly.”

“Well, it’s creepy,” Bert said.

“So’s the Haunted Mansion, but it still looks nice on the outside.” That building looked like it belonged in the real world, where buildings were vulnerable and falling elevators were scary, not fun. I did not like the Tower of Terror. Who would want to imagine they were in that place?

The Tower of Terror’s bombed-building look gave me an unwelcome jolt and put me in a cranky mood as we walked down the street that looked like a Los Angeles street, and past a Los Angeles souvenir store that looked like a Los Angeles souvenir store. I wanted to feel like we were someplace else. All the crowds wandering the street reminded me of freeway traffic, of driving home, of a packed hallway at a new school.

“We should have stayed in Disneyland,” I said, pulling off my sweatshirt and knotting its arms around my hips.

Bert set his hand on mine, and his eyes reflected the florescent red spinning toys some kids were waving. “Let’s buy a glow thing,” he said, pointing toward the cart that sold the new high-tech, battery-powered spinning toys, and also the old-school glowing necklaces I used to buy with my allowance money when I was little.

I shoved thoughts of the freeway and the school year aside. They were crowding in around me, but I’d deal with them later. “I would love to,” I said. I focused on deciding if I wanted the green or the purple glow necklace.

After our purchase, we rushed along down the street, already lined with people watching the rest of us frantically look for a good spot.

“Come on, Bert, how about here?” I pointed to a spot behind a couple of kids and their 40ish-year-old guardian, who appeared to be asleep on the sidewalk.

“Nah, we can do better.”

As we kept walking farther and farther down the parade route, down the street lined with people, I felt more like *we* were the attraction. With no other entertainment, all eyes followed us and our glowing necks and wrists as we trotted down the near-empty street. I pulled Bert closer to me.

“Slow down, Bert, I’m going to trip in front of everybody!”

He stopped, and said, “You’re right, Casey. Let’s slow down.”

Bert faced me, and bowed his head. He held out his arms, glowing purple with the arm bands I made him wrap around his wrists. I wove my fingers in his, grinning and blushing but not worrying, because it was dark and it was our last night, and these were

only strangers who I'd never see again, anyway. We danced each other down the street. The world was a blur of moving glow sticks.

Until I got dizzy, and we came to a stop as I toppled into Bert, and he knocked into a trash can. I laughed, almost crying, and a little kid by the can clapped and shrieked along with me.

Fortunately, we'd ended up in a relatively deserted area. I pointed, and we collapsed on a wide stretch of clean ground. We sprawled out and listened to the nearby waterfall from the back of Grizzly Peak tumble down the Yosemite-like mountain. Soon, though, our own little temporary campsite area filled with others, minutes before the parade would come by.

Even so, we had a few feet around us both, so we felt isolated. Parents were thankful to sit down, even if it was on cement, and half of the little kids were asleep, so it was peaceful. Was this the right time to show Bert the beloved souvenir I had bought? I glanced around, and discreetly dug through my bag, until I accidentally found my mom's hairbrush. She must have stuck it in by mistake. I didn't really see how she could confuse my fun green messenger bag with her offensive fanny pack, but she did it all the time. Unless...it hit me that of course she could not confuse our bags. She was trying to help me look presentable, as she'd say, when I went out. I felt a small surge of anger at her control-freak nature, even wanting to be in charge of my hair, but then I held the little wooden brush, that still had one graying hair strand in it, and felt a bigger surge of guilt. I guess she thought she was helping me. I wondered what they were doing, if they might be



here somewhere watching the parade we always watched together, but the guilt made me want to throw up.

I wiggled my arms to gaze at the glowsticks' pattern of figure-eight-shaped light. Unveiling the new souvenir would have to wait. I needed distraction.

Bert was reclining on his hands, and he seemed equally mesmerized by the glow. We took turns choreographing our arms in a light show, and pretended not to notice the booming announcement that the parade would start soon: "Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, in just twenty minutes..." The chipper announcements that sounded every five minutes thereafter only reminded me that our time together was ticking away. After the final "in just a few minutes" call sounded, I sighed with relief, glad to not have to hear a countdown anymore, when...

"Oops, excuse me," I said, automatically apologizing to the woman who bumped into me with her stroller. I silently cursed at myself — why did I say "excuse me" to her?

The woman looked down her glasses at me and Bert — why was she wearing sunglasses at night? — and then opened her mouth. I was already smiling in an it's-okay-don't-worry-about-it way, when she turned to a tall guy with ashy blonde hair and too-tan skin. She said something quietly, and I couldn't hear over the noise of parade-watchers surrounding us, but from the look the guy cast down at us, I didn't think we were going to get an apology.

I shrugged and turned back to Bert, watching the kids next to us play with their new stuffed animals, Mickey and Chip. The kids seemed to be in some sort of popcorn-eating contest. Watching them spill handfuls of popcorn into their mouths (and seeing

one of the ever-present park sweepers milling around, debating whether he should scoop up the fallen kernels from under the kids) should have occupied my attention, but I could feel the couple still staring at me and Bert. Then I clearly heard, “Disneyland is for *kids*,” coming from behind us.

I turned my head around and saw, surprised, that both the sunglasses-wearing woman and her orange-skinned companion were somehow directing this observation at me and Bert. I was confused — like when a teacher calls on you, and even though you’ve been paying attention, you’re too surprised to think.

As usual when I didn’t know the right response, I smiled as blandly as possible. Next to me, Bert shifted and sighed, which made me wonder what I had missed. Then I felt a prod from a greasy stroller wheel in the small of my back, and I got it: They wanted us to give up our space for the stroller.

I whispered, “Okay, let’s just move over,” and we smashed together (well, that wasn’t a sacrifice) and as close to our neighbors as we dared.

The kids, now knee-to-knee with Bert, threw Chip into my lap and I tossed him back, relaxing. Our move had managed to come up with an extra couple of feet of free space, which was plenty of room for someone to sit and hold the kid. Or even to fit in a stroller.

Satisfied with our brilliance (but not with having tire tracks on my non-stained pair of pants), I checked my watch —the parade had started three minutes ago on the other end of the street, and it would reach us soon. I thought I could hear the music already, tinkling in the distance over the sounds of popcorn crunching next to me.

Then the guy reached between us and tapped Bert on the shoulder.

“Disneyland is for kids,” he said again, even louder than before, despite now being only a foot away. I stared at his hand near my ear.

“And we’ve made room for another,” Bert said. He spread his arm toward the prime parking spot to my right, which the woman was still standing behind, and glaring at, for some reason. I noticed their baby was asleep.

“No. Parades are for *kids*.”

“Sure. And whoever else is here, who’s been waiting to see it,” Bert said calmly. I caught a very small emphasis on “waiting” and wondered at the nerve of these people — just because they didn’t want to wait or plan their day, they expected *us* to leave so they could all sit down? And thought that running me over with their Hummer stroller was a good way to do that? I was grateful that Bert was talking — he seemed a lot cooler than me.

The guy sputtered a little, and glanced at his wife. I swear she was actually pushing the stroller onto me now.

“The stroller is on my leg,” I said to her. She looked down, but didn’t say — or do — anything.

I squashed into Bert, practically sitting on him. “They are not going to drive me out of here,” I said. He squeezed my hand.

“Of course not.” He turned back. “I’m not sure what it is you want us to do.”

“We’ve made room for the baby,” I pointed out.

The man must have realized it was outrageous to actually tell us to move so he and his wife could sit down, but he was frustrated anyway. He said, “For kids, not *teenagers*,” and stood behind me and Bert, pressing his white athletic shoes into me. I sat down on them, hard, and he moved back a step. I was shaking with anger. Who were these anonymous people, telling us we were too old to deserve to see a parade? (Were we too old to see a parade?)

“Pardon me,” I heard an elderly woman’s voice, a little shaky with age but still loud. I turned full around this time to find her standing behind us, leaning against a railing, looking at the man with a pleasant smile. “I’m sure you don’t realize, but you are blocking all of our views from back here, and *we’ve* been waiting. As have that couple.” She gestured to us.

Bert and I grinned at each other quickly, then turned back, fascinated.

She lowered her voice, and said something else to the guy. Then he and his sunglass-wearing wife, loudly clicking her stroller’s wheels around, abruptly left, spewing out comments about teenagers and all the inconsiderate people. Had I sounded like that earlier, when I was convinced humanity was doomed?

Bert and I stared. The woman and her husband, both with matching white hair and smiles, waved at us. We waved back. She put a hand to her head, and switched on a pair of light-up pink antennae, with flashing Mickeys bobbing on the ends.

The pink antennae! Pre-Bert, when I first saw her standing in the Indiana Jones line and felt embarrassed for her, for wearing those silly antennae. I don’t know how, maybe from the pink glow surrounding her head, but I saw her wink at me in the

darkness, and I beamed. *You know, those Mickey-head antennae are kind of cool after all,*  
I thought, and smiled at absolutely everyone.

Chapter 22: “Nighttime Magic and Imagination” — *Electrical Parade narration*

Bert and I sat in awed silence at the elderly woman who had chased away the rude people. Of course, since it was both a festive and sad night, my wonder didn’t last as long as Bert’s, and I couldn’t stop thinking of the crazy people and of what the orange guy had said.

“Bert, are we too old for this?”

“For what?”

“I don’t know. A parade with giant light-up bugs? Disneyland?”

“Not old in general, but maybe too old for wearing glow-in-the-dark jewelry while watching the Electrical Parade,” he said, and waved his wrists around, and the green glow-bracelets wiggled like snakes. The little kid next to him clapped. I hated to admit to even thinking about them again, but I didn’t see any bra-strap-girl types lining the streets. They would never be my role models, but they were probably using the parade time to go on coasters, which was sort of smart. I frowned.

“Case, I *like* that you want to watch a parade, and that you’ve been staring at that girl’s caramel apple since we sat down.” He was right; even then I had to look away from it. I covered my cheeks — even I hadn’t realized I’d been ogling a kid’s snack. “It’s who you are. It’s part of your charm.”

“My charm is that I act like a third-grader?” If that. I swear that earlier on the trip, I’d seen a nine-year-old’s thong showing as she scrambled out of her Dumbo ride.

“Your charm is that you are you, and not a clone of anyone else, and you are confident enough to know who you are.”

“I am?” I said, elbowing him.

“Ha ha. You wouldn’t fight with yourself so much about how to act or dress or think if you didn’t already know that you don’t need to be like everyone else.” I crossed my arms and peered down the street, to see if I could make out the first float yet, but saw only throngs of clapping people. Mostly people with kids.

“Casey, even if you like to watch a parade, it doesn’t mean you are immature. It’s one part of you. You’re also way more responsible than most people I’ve ever known, and way more mature than those adults who trying to steal our spot. And you’re still going to meet your parents for fireworks later, even though you don’t want to, because you know it would make them feel even worse if you did. It’s grown up for real.” I wasn’t so sure about going out of kindness toward my parents. But I did still feel guilty. Even though they were totally mean to me, too. I clapped my hands so my glow-bracelets danced. “Well, sort of.” Bert said, and put his arm around me.

The giant speakers hidden overhead popped to life, filling the air with the same familiar electronic music I’d heard all my life. The first float passed us, and I didn’t try to restrain myself from leaning over to peek at my favorite part of the parade coming up next: the lightning bugs, spinning and sparkling their way toward us. I was consumed with clapping along to the music with the now wide-awake kid next to me, and we were both trying to clap and wave frantically at the enormous glowing bugs.

I heard a hoot as the lightning bug whirled by, and turned back to see the old lady who had saved us, sitting on a bench. She was whistling with her fingers in her mouth. The dancing lights gleamed off of her teeth, which might be dentures I guess, but also shone on her huge grin. The shadows and flashing lights hid her wrinkles and made her white hair look dark.

Bert tapped me on the shoulder. “She asked me why you’re not paying attention.” He pointed to the toddler next to me, who had filled in the vacant spot sometime after the rude people left. I hadn’t noticed her and her dad sit down. Her dad was wearing my dad’s same sandals with wool socks, like he’d been following an official Cheesy Parents’ manual. The girl looked pretty happy to be there, anyway. I sighed. I guess some things don’t bother you so much when you’re little. But I couldn’t help that I wasn’t, and didn’t want to be, some little girl forever.

I turned to the parade, waving at Alice in Wonderland, riding on top of a lighted mushroom, but I couldn’t resist a longer look at the old woman behind me, and the little girl next to me. We were all forgetting to act our age amid the thousands of sparkling lights and electro-syntho-magnetic musical sounds. “I am now,” I said to Bert, and clapped along to the rest of the show.



Chapter 23: “Loved by Our Mommies and Dads” — *Pirates of the Caribbean lyrics*

We filed out of California Adventure, through the main concourse, listening to one of the several California-themed songs that played constantly in the area. As we crowded together, trying to escape back into Disneyland in time for the fireworks, I overheard the family in front of us arguing. But it wasn't typical kid whining; the two girls, dressed in new Snow White and Belle costumes with the tags still on, didn't seem to want to hold their mom's hand. One girl was sniffing to the other that she didn't like Cinderella now; it was so long ago she had wanted this doll! Her sister took the tiny Cinderella toy and stuffed it in her jacket pocket.

“I'm sorry, I can't believe I didn't know that,” the mom said to the dad. “We'll stop on the way out and get her a Belle instead.”

“It's okay,” the dad said. “That just happened, really.” The mom looked like she might cry. “They need some more time, that's all.”

“I know.” The mom nodded firmly. She turned to the side, to touch her daughter's tiara lightly, and I saw she was wearing an Army sweatshirt. I couldn't move for a second, despite the shuffling behind me, overwhelmed with thoughts of this mom having to leave her family and not knowing if she'd see them again. And then having to adjust to being a family again, a family who'd changed while she'd been gone. Maybe the girls didn't like the same stories anymore. Maybe they'd changed in other ways she didn't even know about yet.

I got teary eyed. How weird and wonderful that their family — and a lot of others — wanted to come here to be with each other for whatever time they had together. Why didn't I want that anymore?

I had to turn away from them, and ran into the people next to us, a couple carrying clipboards, methodically crossing rides off a list they had compiled. One of them accidentally bonked the little Belle in the head, and she started crying. The clipboard people threw a quick “sorry” at the Belle, looked embarrassed, and disappeared into the crowd. The mom bent down, and Belle grabbed her hand. By the time we'd crossed under the Golden Gate replica on our way out of California Adventure, the mom was holding the girl in her arms, while the other one clasped her hand. Just like that. Maybe getting bonked on the head wasn't the ideal way family togetherness enchantment works — but maybe it did work if people let it.

I thought of my own little Sleeping Beauty dress I had worn for years. I thought of my mom making me wear sneakers with it so I wouldn't trip, and a jacket over it so I wouldn't get cold, and how much I had resisted her on that. Sleeping Beauty did not wear sneakers. But as I watched the dad looking at his family, and his wife give him a secret smile over the head of the Belle, I knew my mom had never meant to ruin my costume, or ruin my vacation, or ruin my life. She thought she was helping me, always. She was scared for me, always. The mom and I both wiped at our eyes quickly.

Crossing the esplanade, my feet throbbed less and I bounced a little more the closer we got to the main gate of Disneyland. We were still part of a massive throng of

people crossing through, although I noticed some people weren't jostling toward Disneyland. They sat on blankets, facing the train station to watch the fireworks.

Bert was maneuvering through the sitters and I was making my way a little more slowly. He noticed, and slowed down his pace while I joined him. "Why are so many people waiting out here? Did they give up on the crowds or what?" he whispered.

I had been looking around at all the families, with kids alert and upright, watching the dark sky and bobbing to the jingling music playing over speakers. "I think they came here just to watch the fireworks. I don't think they're going into the park at all."

Bert nodded, and I filled with gratitude that we were fortunate enough to get to go inside. *I guess they don't need a checklist to have fun, either*, I thought, and for once I enjoyed waiting in line to get into the park. I realized with some embarrassment that I hadn't thought about it before, how lucky I was to be able to do it, and with a sickening twist of my stomach, I knew that it was because of my parents that we could.

I knew where they would be. There was only one spot they could possibly be right now: the railing near the Casey Jr. Circus Train in Fantasyland. It used to be my favorite ride because it shared my name. My dad told me the ride was named after me, and I believed him until I was in second grade and finally saw *Dumbo*.

It wasn't the best place to view the fireworks from anymore, but we thought it had been a few years ago, when Kiley and I liked to watch the guy dressed up as Tinker Bell crash into mattresses at the end of the line after the flight down the zipline from the top of the Matterhorn. My parents insisted we watch the show from here every year.

Except that when we got there, the railing was empty. I spun around slowly, but there were only empty strollers parked there.

*They aren't here?* I couldn't believe it. They must not be watching the fireworks, then. If they were, they would have been right here. They wouldn't think of watching from anyplace else.

"Casey! You're here!" my mom said, and I whirled around. She was coming out of the Fantasyland restroom. "Hi, Bert," she said, smiling and looking at him like he was an old friend, and not a surprise intruder as I'd expected.

"Where's Dad?" I asked.

"He's over by Small World."

"You're going on Small World now?"

"Of course not. We're watching the fireworks from over there," my mom said, looking at me like everyone knew that and like we hadn't had a huge fight a couple of hours ago. "I thought you'd be here, though, so I was going to wait for you. I know how you like to watch the fireworks from this spot." She was already trotting ahead of us on her way to Small World, and I ran after her.

"What?"

"I said, I know you like to watch the fireworks from there, but did you know that the view is so much better over by Small World?" I looked at her with my mouth open, and she said, "Hey, even I can learn some new things, right?"

"Mom, *what?*"

She squeezed my shoulder, lightly, like she didn't know if she could touch me. She leaned toward me. "I'm sorry, Casey. About before. I didn't mean... I was worried but I was wrong, and...I need time to get used to things. I guess we all do. But I can do it," she said. "And your dad and I love you no matter how old you are, or how old *we* are. And I guess *we are* all pretty old now." She smiled at us, and walked slightly ahead.

I stopped in my tracks, and Bert ran into me. "What's going on, Case?" he said.

"They, um, they changed their spot." Bert looked at me oddly, and we finally got going again and caught up with my mom and dad.

My parents didn't seem angry with me. They weren't acting weird. They didn't even question Bert's presence. I didn't know what to say. My parents filled in the silence by telling Bert stories of how I used to cover my ears and scream at the fireworks' booming when I was six, until the lights around us dimmed and the present-day booming took over.

I couldn't stop sneaking glances around at all of us. My mom used to run inside a shop or a restaurant with me when I was scared of the fireworks, and now we were out in the masses like normal people. Finally. I thought of my dad, entertaining me inside a shop the next night while my mom stood outside by herself to watch the show. How many fireworks shows had they each seen alone, because of me?

And now that I was thinking of it...I used to cry every time we went on Pirates of the Caribbean, so my parents would have to switch off riding that until I was about six years old. Six years of never getting to ride Pirates together, and I hadn't thought of it at

all since then. And now I get mad at my dad for talking during the ride, or my mom, for singing along — when they're probably just glad to be on the ride at the same time.

A rush of blame flooded through me — because of the hassle I must have caused, but more because I had never even thought it must have *been* a hassle until right now.

I looked at my mom and dad, each with their necks craned back, looking up at the sky. My dad had his camera plastered to his face, so I could only see a lens instead of his eyes, but I could see his slight smile. It looked so much like that four-year-old kid's next to me at the Electrical Parade, it startled me. I guess he did have a slight beard, but the look was the same. I stared at my mom, who was watching each explosion, blinking at every boom.

Bert tapped me and mouthed, "Are you okay?" I nodded, rubbing under my eyes as he turned back to the sky. He was considerate enough not to watch me embarrass myself, misting up during the fireworks.

Maybe it was the familiar, grand music, or the spectacle, or the re-created nostalgia of standing here, watching a new show with the same people — *plus one*, I thought, touching Bert's arm — but I couldn't see the fireworks clearly anymore at all. All at once I realized that my parents — with their teal fanny packs, and sandals with socks, and behind-the-times rules, and perpetual image of me as a three-year-old — were also regular people. They could have told me to quit whining and watch the fireworks show ten years ago; or now, they could have said that they were paying for my ticket, and I was not about to spend *any* of my vacation with some strange guy. But they didn't. And they had hoped I would show up for the fireworks, still.

And they had smiled at Bert when he came with me. I wished I hadn't screamed at them to mind their own business so many times. Maybe they actually wanted to get to know me. My eyes cleared for a brief instant and a golden curly-cue firework exploded in perfect clarity the second before I did start crying.

Of course, I was never going to tell them any of this. They were nosy and embarrassing and overprotective. But I guess I had just figured out that I was kind of OK with that, anyway. I peeked at Bert, thinking of his grandma and sister, probably watching the show from their Grand Californian room — at least he had them. But I wished on the last of the flashing, glittering sparks that his parents would realize what *they* were missing before it was gone completely.

“Whew!” My mom wiped at her eyes with one of the tissues she could infinitely produce from her purse. “Good show!”

I had never noticed before that she cried at the fireworks. I rubbed under my own eyes with my finger and had a new, strange feeling of comfort at our similarity. Maybe it was genetic. My dad talked about the pictures he'd taken with her and Bert, and they walked on ahead. I stared at them for a second and quickly gave thanks that at least I hadn't inherited the fanny pack-wearing gene, and ran to catch up.

Chapter 24: “Now It’s Time to Say Goodbye” — *Mickey Mouse Club lyrics*

If I were a clipboard-carrying checklist-maker, I might use some sort of military term to imply our time was running out. As it was, I understood the truth of my dad’s statement, “It’s go time,” that I didn’t cringe.

Bert glanced at his broken watch. “Hey, according to my time we still have two hours together,” he said.

“Your watch lies,” I blurted before thinking. *I am such an idiot.* “Oh, I’m sorry, Bert.” Bert rubbed the worn band and nodded at me, looking down, but he didn’t check it again.

“Okay, Casey, we’re going to take a spin on the teacups,” my dad said brightly. That snapped me out of regretting my idiocy. I turned from watching Bert’s face to staring at my dad. It was a known fact that my parents had never enjoyed the teacups. I opened my mouth to ask if they’d gone crazy, but caught my mom’s eye and said a silent thanks that she didn’t actually wink at me. I understood: They were giving me permission to go off with Bert on our last night. And they were actually being kind of cool about it. Maybe trying too much, I noticed, looking at my dad who actually winked at me, but still.

“But, um, Mom,” I started. Maybe I should actually spend some time with them on this trip.

She nodded her head to the side, away from Bert, and I walked over, baffled. She said quietly, “Casey, I know this has been a...different kind of vacation. But your dad and I realize that it is special for you” — she smiled at Bert and waved, I blushed, and she



pretended not to notice — “and we can see you’re old enough to have your own vacation time, too.”

I couldn’t take it anymore. “I’m sorry for before, Mom....” My voice broke, and she started tearing up again. “I’m sorry I ignored you and Dad and made you worry and messed up your trip.”

She pulled me to her and hugged me. I could smell our laundry detergent from home. “I am so sorry, too, Casey. Your dad didn’t — we didn’t realize you had grown up. We do now. That doesn’t mean you get to go out and not tell us where you are,” I nodded. “But we are sorry for not seeing it sooner.” She sniffled and I gave her a Kleenex she had tucked into my pocket a minute ago.

I couldn’t comprehend this. “But, it’s our last night. Don’t you want to...” The four of us could all go on rides together. I’d been doing it with Bert’s family, after all.

“Exactly. It’s our last night here.” She took a breath, and had a smile that she couldn’t hide. “Go with Bert tonight.” Then she patted me on the back, sending me off into this weird new world where we understood each other.

“Uh...okay.” I said. “Um, yeah. Thanks, Mom.” I shook my head a little, grinning myself now, and turned to Bert and my Dad. “Well, Bert, we can go wherever. Where should we go?”

“New Orleans Square,” Bert said.

My parents played it pretty cool and waved us goodbye as they headed off, not even remotely in the direction of the teacups, but I saw them smile at each other with raised eyebrows as they left us. They could see that Bert was thoughtful and knew my

favorite spot in Disneyland and that he wanted to go there because I wanted to. And maybe they could see that I would be able to make good choices at home, too. I stared at them as they walked away, and saw them grab hands as they trailed off into the crowd. I'd never seen my parents holding hands, other than my own. I guess having some time by themselves wasn't so bad for them, either.

I took Bert's hand and we swung our arms together as we set off toward my favorite place in the world. But we slowed down as we crossed the secret threshold of Frontierland, past where my Bra-Strap Girl encounter had been. They had cancelled the second showing of "Fantasmic!" tonight, so I got to see the peaceful New Orleans Square I loved: the *Mark Twain*, aglow at the dock, retired for the night, its paddlewheel mirrored in the dark water; the reflection of the old-fashioned streetlamps curving around the river. Yes, it was a reproduction of some other setting — but that didn't mean that my love for this place was any less real.

"I don't know if we'll have time for many rides," Bert said, as we approached the crowds once more.

"I don't mind," I said.

"How about one trip through the bayou?"

The way I got over my fear of Pirates of the Caribbean when I was little was to ride with a (usually newly purchased) stuffed animal over my eyes. Now, I couldn't think of a better way to end this vacation than to sit close to Bert on a dark ride for fifteen minutes, and maybe I would close my eyes.

“If I have a garden at my future house, I want to have a fountain just like that one,” I said as we walked by the stone lion’s head in the queue, spewing water.

Bert laughed. “Seems kind of fancy. How come?”

“It will remind me of right now.” We walked through the rest of the nearly empty queue in silence, with Bert’s palm pressed to mine.

As we were boarding our boat in the last row, he said, “You know, Case, I hear you can’t live in the past.”

The boat surged forward on its tracks, then bobbed peacefully. “I guess not. But maybe you can visit sometimes.” We both hummed “Yo Ho” to each other. I leaned against Bert, closed my eyes, breathed in the humid Pirates air and Bert’s smell, and tried to fix in my memory every second of feeling him next to me.

After walking through my beloved streets and passing by courtyards, stepping out of the way of running kids and fast-walking adults who wanted to run, we made our way around the Rivers of America.

My eyes were blurry with chlorine, and cast a soft-focus halo around lights and the people illuminated by them. Bert looked fuzzy and bright. I suddenly remembered my camera, and wondered if I could find a way to make him look like this in a picture, and adjusted the focus on my camera for a half a roll of film. He stared intently into my lens, looking alternately flirtatious, mischievous, and sad, and I finished off the roll, hoping that one frame had captured exactly what I saw and felt. I didn’t know if that was possible, but finding out was part of why I liked taking pictures.

We heard the announcement that the park was closing in ten minutes. I had a perfectly functional watch, but it didn't keep an unexpected panic from stabbing me.

"Ten minutes!" I said. And we had been so peaceful, leaning on the green wrought iron railing, looking out at the water next to us.

"We could hang out on Main Street?" Bert suggested. It closed an hour after the park.

Tempting, but..."Main Street after closing is nuts. Everyone's crazy, running around, buying anything." This reminded me of my own grown-up gift I'd purchased. My heart hammered as a bolt of adrenaline shot through me.

Bert was looking off at Splash Mountain, where distant shrieks of delight were coming from across the river. I rifled through my bag in the dark, and grasped the box. "Bert...this is for you." I held it out, feeling awkward. "I wanted to give you something. To help you remember...your trip." *And me*, I added privately. *You have to remember me.*

Bert looked more surprised than I thought seemed reasonable. I was still holding the box out to him, and he was staring at it.

"What's wrong? It's too weird that I'm giving you a present, right? Look, don't worry, it's no big deal, I just thought you'd like it. Please take it, okay?" I was starting to feel dumb standing there.

He reached into his pocket and held out a Disneyland bag, tightly folded around a rectangle shape. "Casey, I did the same thing! I have something for you." I laughed with relief, and we traded presents.

I dug into the bag, and for a second I could only feel crinkly plastic and hard layers of tissue paper. After unwrapping it, I could finally see a crystal picture frame, gleaming up at me and reflecting the streetlamp overhead. I held up the frame to the light, and out of the darkness, an etching of our initials and the date appeared, carved into the frame, beneath a photo of us. We were grinning at each other, holding hands across the small table on Main Street, near the Blue Ribbon Bakery. Viv must have taken the picture. I looked up quickly, mouth open, and saw Bert, with a matching expression of surprise, staring at his new Mickey Mouse pocket watch.

“Ah, Case — “

“Bert, I — “

I giggled so I wouldn't cry, but I couldn't speak. I was staring too hard at the photo and the shining frame, cradling it in my hand. He must have bought it and had it etched at the crystal shop in New Orleans Square, where I'd been so obsessed with debating about the still unbought earrings that I hadn't even noticed what he was looking at.

We were quiet, studying our prizes. I folded the tissue around the frame carefully, hugged it to my chest, and unwrapped it again to study the picture more. Bert was holding up the shiny new pocket watch, studying the embossing of the *Ward Kimball* train on its cover in the glow of the light.

I hesitated, but said, “I thought that maybe you can wear this new watch and your grandpa's watch at the same time.”

He still hadn't looked at me yet, but he cleared his throat in an overly loud way and I thought maybe he was kind of teary, too. He understood. I helped him undo the clip, and looped it around his belt loop. He looked so handsome with the shiny chain glistening against his hip. He touched the face lightly, and slipped it into his pocket, but kept his hand on it, looking up at me with his eyes shining. "Case, it's the best present I ever got. Especially from someone who's only known me for two days. Actually, it's the only present I've gotten from someone who's known me for two days." I laughed and tears fell down my cheeks, and I wiped at them with my sweatshirt's sleeve.

"I'm so glad Maggie marked up my jeans," was the only thought I could get out. "I love my picture frame. I love the picture. Thank you so much," I added, when I realized I had been too stunned to say it when I first saw his gift. "Did Viv take that picture? How'd you get it printed so fast?"

"The wonders of digital cameras, Miss Allison. It turns out, there are some advantages to moving into modern times," he said, and checked his pocket watch. I'd set it so it matched my watch, which was still on Tiki Room time. I told him so, in case he wanted to reset it, but he shook his head and said that was perfect.

We leaned against each other, listening to the water lapping against the edges of its giant pool. The lamps dotting the water's edge sparkled back at us in the river, like hundreds of flashbulbs going off.

"I can't wait until we can see each other again, Case."

"I can see you every day," I said, elbowing him and slipping the frame back into its bag, then tucked it safely into my purse. I scooted back on the railing, and tried to

adopt a casual, carefree, perched-on-the-railing posture. But I kept shifting. It wasn't entirely comfortable, sitting on the fence.

“Well, it's still not exactly the same as seeing me in person,” he said, “but I'm glad you like it.” He stood close to me, and held my hand in his. “Maybe we'll see each other in person on our next Disneyland trip?”

“You are my Disneyland date,” I said.

“I would love to be your Disneyland date,” Bert smiled. “And maybe your date for other places too...if we ever can.”

“Deal.” I pushed aside my usual worries about the next time I might be able to swing his hand or smell his hairspray. It would be sometime, it had to be, and that was enough for now. I threw my arms around him, and he swung me off the railing and we spun around. “Now, I have to take one picture here with my old-fashioned camera.” He posed, holding up his watch, and then we took ten more shots of the two of our faces together, with my arm extended as far as it could go to release the shutter.

“Thanks,” I said, and took a deep breath. “Now let's go home.”

We linked arms and walked out along the path as it wove around the Rivers of America and the ground changed from smooth cement to horseshoe-stamped “dirt.” I couldn't resist looking back for a last view of the river lit up — the next time I'd see this would be next summer, after I'd finished my first year of high school. It would be over with — the beginning, at least. I wondered how I'd be different when I saw this again, and if I'd be with Bert or my parents or by myself or with someone I hadn't even met yet.

I didn't know what was going to happen this year. But I knew I would come back here again when it was done, and everything in between trips would be OK.

“Casey, you're making us walk sideways,” Bert said, and I turned around to face the direction we were headed — out, onto Main Street, then out to Anaheim, I-5, home, and high school. I could understand why all these people were flocking into the shops, delaying their return and needing something to help them remember their time away from home. This vacation especially wasn't an escape from “real life,” I realized now — because I'd been thinking about my real life waiting for me the whole trip — but it was a time where I didn't have to face it just yet. “We can do this,” I said, as we stopped in front of the train station's right exit tunnel.

“You will do great in high school. Just don't let your underwear hang out to please other people,” Bert said, touching my shoulder. “And be nice to your mom and dad. They're trying.”

“You will do great at home. Just tell the truth. And hug your grandma. And wear your new watch sometimes. And your old one other times. Or wear them at the same time.”

We laughed, and headed into the tunnel, quiet until we emerged on the other side of the turnstiles. We stuck out our fists for a returning hand stamp. “Souvenir,” I said.

Bert read the stamped dwarf's name on his hand and laughed. “Happy.”

I smiled into his face, studying his perfectly arched eyebrows, which I had now captured on film and now had preserved in solid form, on paper and under glass. “Yes.”



We stood in the esplanade, on all those anonymous but permanent names, and leaned into each other. I hugged him tight. His neck was still glowing with the light from our necklaces, and I imagined I smelled the chlorine from the pool the first night, along with churros and cinnamon rolls.

“Send me pictures,” he said.

“Of course.”

“We’ll be okay,” he said, squeezing me.

“I know. See you real soon,” I said, and we grinned.

“Why? Because I like you,” Bert said, skipping to the important line from the Mickey Mouse Club theme song. I hugged him hard and kissed him.

We finally had to face each other and then make ourselves turn away, like the duelist portraits in the Mansion. I waved goodbye, and Bert waved back, sending a glow of streaking light from his neon bracelets over his head. I smiled and turned toward home, with the image of Bert’s light burned into my eyes. As I walked to the hotel, I adjusted the strap on my green bag, which held countless, undeveloped photos of Bert and my trip, and still held Kiley’s Tinker Bell pin, buried underneath my new souvenirs. Whatever else would happen with us, Bert was a real friend — and I would look for more of them from now on. If I could make such a good friend on vacation, I had to be able to meet someone at my new school.

As I walked through the end-of-day blur of tired people around me, I could hear the train chugging into Main Street Station behind me with its bell dinging, the kids

crying, and thousands of sore feet shuffling toward the parking lot trams. But, for the first time at a trip's end, I felt like I could easily make my way home.

The End