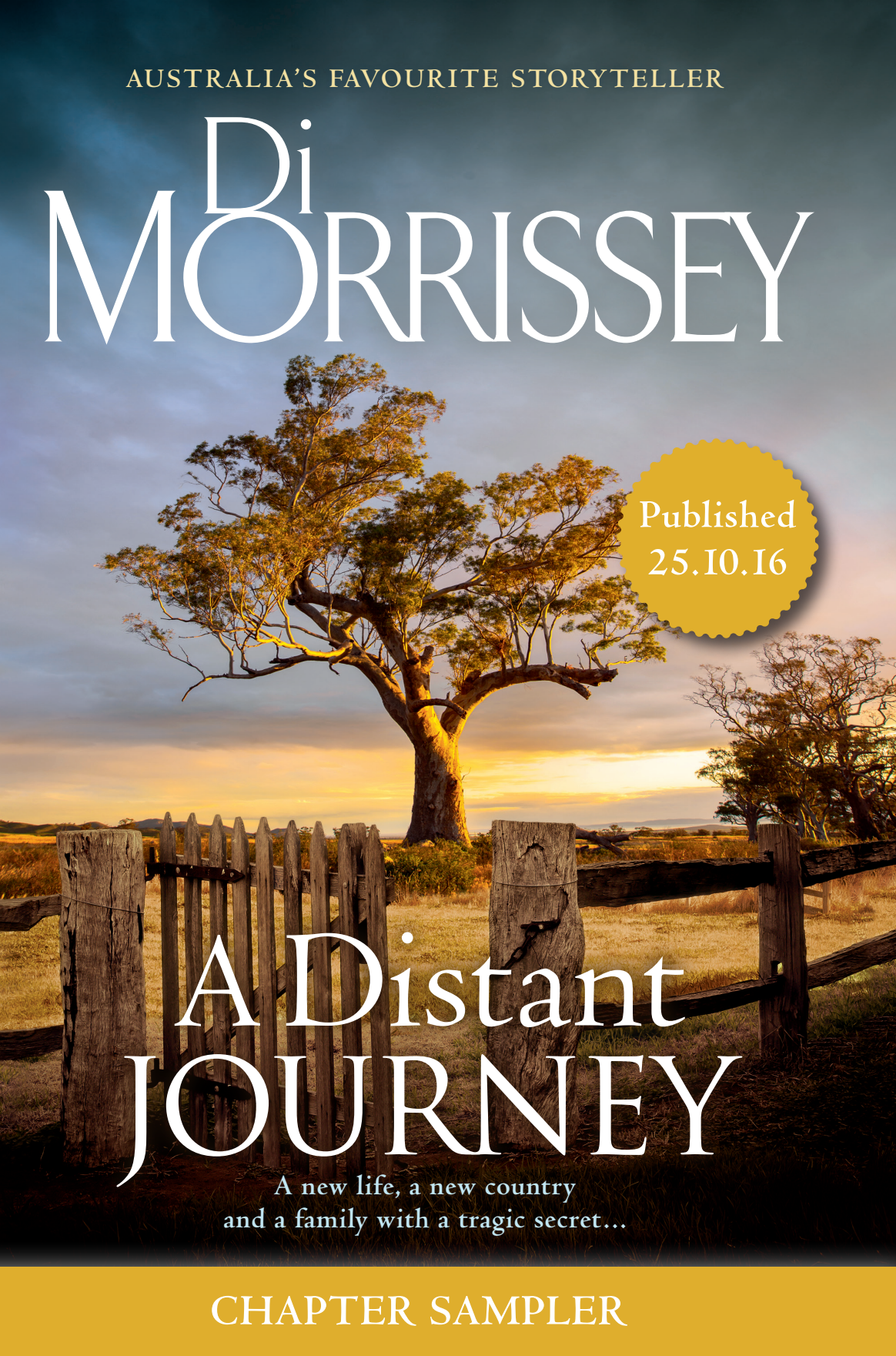


AUSTRALIA'S FAVOURITE STORYTELLER

Di MORRISSEY

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A Distant JOURNEY

A new life, a new country
and a family with a tragic secret...

CHAPTER SAMPLER

Prologue



SHE COULD SMELL IT coming. Taste it. Feel it.

The rasping dryness in her nostrils and throat, the thick stickiness of the air, the burning behind her eyeballs. Her skin felt like old paper. She strained her reddened eyes at the horizon, dreading the changing colour of the sky, fearful of a golden puff, a sliver, curling above the skyline.

The stillness was all around, broken only by edgy horses, silent birds, dogs lying under the house on their bellies, ears flattened. Sheep in the paddocks, huddled together in fear.

They knew it was coming towards them. Their fate would depend on the turn of the wind. There was nowhere to go.

It was the waiting that was hardest. Men and women stood poised with whatever they had to hand, no matter

how ineffectual, ready to fight their worst nightmare – an Australian bushfire.

The pregnant woman was alone, pressed to her mattress. The oppressive heat and air pressure had exhausted her, drained her of energy, of hope. They'd soaked the walls outside, even the verandah, with precious water. Containers of dam water waited, as well as blankets, towels and hessian sacks ready to soak and use as weapons against the flames.

She heard the fire truck scream uphill from the muddy dam, the weight of water in its belly challenging its tyres to grip the hot, dry grass. It made her feel less isolated, if only for a moment. She climbed off the bed and went out onto the verandah.

The heat of the day had not diminished. Across the parched brown paddocks, ominous colours had begun to bleed into the searing sky: oily red, evil orange.

The surreal sunset only confirmed her fears. As she stood gripping the rail, night closed in around her. The smell of smoke was stronger now, the air temperature and pressure changing, as though some yawning mouth was sucking the air upwards before spitting it back as specks of ash that drifted through the charred sky.

She heard rumbles in the distance as vehicles sped off to where the sneaky advances of orange tongues had begun to lick through paddocks, shrubs and trees.

Now it was real.

She pictured the crouching and rising beast, marshalling hordes of fiery sparks. The fire would form a front that stretched for miles, pushed ever forward by the howling wind behind. A single guerrilla spark could ignite trees, forests, hillsides. The relentless surge would spare nothing; growth, creature or person. Irascible, mercurial, leaping roads and rivers, it would race across the land, changing direction in a breath, allowing no escape.

She knew that the men would spread out through the paddocks, damp towels turbaned on their heads, wet cloths knotted at their throats, alert to any lick of flame, any glowing ember. They would swiftly pound at the fire with their primitive equipment, snuffing out its red heart, until another fire came to life somewhere else and threatened to race away beyond their control. Sometimes there was no help for it; the sparks would catch and a new fire would flare up to form a snapping, crackling, searing wall of flames, forcing the men to retreat as best they could before being encircled.

The smell of smoke menaced the air now. She gasped for breath and stumbled back inside. She made her way to her bed and lay down, her eyes stinging.

Not long afterwards, she heard the wind rattle against the window. Did this signal a change in its direction? Was she in the fire's path, or had it turned away?

She was so alone. She went to the bathroom and looked down at the bathtub, which was partially filled with water. *Do not leave. Keep low to the ground where the last breath of fresh air might be. If the fire comes, lie low in the water with a wet blanket over you,* she'd been told. She'd been drilled and warned. But now she was consumed by fear. Surely someone would come for her?

Time passed. Conditions deteriorated. She waited. The noise of the wind outside grew and grew, snarling and roaring like an animal released from its cage. The smoke in her eyes and throat grew worse and despair crept inside her like a shadow.

She prayed for herself. Prayed for her child. Prayed that someone, anyone, would come and find her before it was too late.

I



AS THE TAXICAB STOPPED in front of the small apartment complex of Hacienda Hideaway, Babs Mason brushed her fair curls from her face and craned forward. She was immediately captivated by the pueblo-style building with its wide balconies, stucco walls and shingled roof. She turned to the small blond boy sitting next to her and forced a smile onto her tired face.

‘Well, Joey, we made it. This is Palm Desert,’ she said.

Though they had been on a long bus ride, the boy bounced on his seat in anticipation. At first Joey had been skittish and shy, but their fellow passengers had been kind to him, sharing candy and crackers. The changing scenery had kept him entertained, as had the occasional commentary from the Greyhound driver. But in spite of his excitement, he reached now for Babs’s hand.

‘Is this our new home, Mommy?’ he asked as they climbed out of the cab.

‘Sure is. C’mon, let’s go explore.’ Babs opened her handbag and carefully counted out the change for the cab driver, who’d driven them from the Palm Springs bus station some thirty minutes away. She glanced at the carefully folded notes in her purse. The money would have to last for some time. A taxi was a luxury, but she’d felt it was worth it for the final leg of their journey. She snapped her purse shut. The driver took her bags and a portable sewing machine from the trunk and left them beside the front door. He wished her luck, and then walked briskly back to his cab.

‘Mommy, can we see the pool now?’ Joey hopped impatiently from one leg to the other. Babs smiled at his enthusiasm. He’d endured such a long journey to see this much-promised pool, so Babs left their things by the entryway as the two of them went to search for it.

Hand in hand, mother and son strolled across the neatly clipped green lawns around the complex of six apartments. In the centre was a kidney-shaped swimming pool and several sun lounges. Joey raced to the edge and dipped his hand in the blue water.

‘What do you think, Joey?’ Babs asked.

Joey grinned. ‘Can I get in now?’

‘I think we should get settled first, don’t you?’

Joey frowned and seemed about to argue, but one glance at Babs’s face and he reluctantly nodded his head. Walking back towards their apartment, Babs saw the communal laundry, complete with modern washing machines, dryers and ironing boards. ‘Goodness, you’d think with all this sun, you wouldn’t need a clothes dryer,’ she murmured to Joey.

‘Oh, you’re not allowed to hang anything outdoors,’ said an older woman who was walking past them, carrying a basket of dirty washing. ‘And you can’t hang towels

over the railings, either. They're strict about it, but it keeps standards up.' She stopped for a moment and gave Babs a welcoming smile. 'Are you going to be staying here?' she asked.

Joey hid himself behind Babs as the woman leaned down to greet him. 'Hi there,' she said. 'My name is Deidre Kramer. My husband, Sol, and I are in number two.'

Babs gave a small smile. 'I'm Barbara Mason, though everyone calls me Babs, and this is Joey, my son. We've just arrived from Portland, Oregon.'

'Well, welcome to Palm Desert,' said Deidre with a wide smile. 'That's a big trip for a little guy. I bet you and your mother are both tired after such a trip. Say, why don't you come up and have a cold drink with me. I'm sure you'd like a cookie, wouldn't you, little man?' Joey nodded shyly. Deidre dumped the basket inside the laundry. 'I can always do this later. Come on.'

Babs felt a bit hesitant about taking up Deidre's offer. She would really have preferred just to settle into the place quietly and without fuss, but the woman seemed so nice and welcoming that she thought it churlish to refuse. Besides, Babs thought, she might need a friend in the future, and Deidre might turn out to be that person.

'Thank you very much for your offer. That would be lovely.'

As Joey sat quietly eating his cookie and sipping his lemonade through a plastic straw, his mother looked admiringly around Deidre's apartment. The living area was small, but Babs thought it very stylish. The plush red lounge with its wooden legs was teamed beautifully with a low wooden buffet which sat next to the television set in its polished wooden cabinet on the far side of the room. A small but very modern dining table setting was just outside the kitchen. There was a small drinks bar in the corner of the living room, its red vinyl-covered stools matching the

lounge. *How chic*, Babs thought. Several framed paintings of the surrounding desert hung on the walls.

‘Deidre, you have a really lovely home. I love the way you’ve decorated it,’ she said. ‘Those paintings are beautiful.’

‘Well, thank you, Babs. My husband did them,’ said Deidre, plumping a pillow next to her on the couch. ‘Palm Desert might not be as ritzy as Palm Springs, but it’s a handy place, quiet, and not at all pricey like Palm Springs, which is going crazy with those new houses they’re building. Have you heard about those?’ She rolled her eyes. ‘They call them “Alexanders” after the construction company that’s making them. Very smart, compact and a simple design. They’re also building a development they’ve called Twin Palms Estates. Every apartment has its own swimming pool and I can tell you, you won’t get much change from twenty thousand if you want to buy one.’

Babs’s jaw dropped. ‘Heavens, who has that sort of money?’ she exclaimed. ‘Anyway, like you said, it seems quiet and clean here. I’m sure we’ll be just fine.’

‘Certainly the peace and quiet and the convenience here suits me and Sol, and Palm Springs is only twenty-five minutes away by bus. But don’t get me wrong, Palm Desert is a go-ahead place, too. This land used to be where General Patton’s tank repair facility was during the war, but after the war Edgar Bergen and some of his buddies got together and developed it. Now look at us,’ Deidre said proudly.

‘You mean *the* Edgar Bergen, the ventriloquist?’ asked Babs, her face lighting up. ‘How exciting.’

Deidre smiled. ‘Is that what brought you here? The film stars?’

‘Sort of,’ replied Babs vaguely, looking away. ‘I’d seen a lot of magazines that featured Palm Springs and I thought it looked like a very glamorous place.’

‘Long way from Portland, though,’ said Deidre, eyeing her guest speculatively.

Babs gazed out the window at the sunny view and shrugged her shoulders. ‘Portland’s not very nice in winter. It’s cold and wet, and I wanted to raise my son someplace pleasant and sunny.’

‘Joey seems a very nice little boy,’ said Deidre, looking at the lad, whose blond head was bent intently over his drink. ‘How old is he?’

‘Six.’ Babs glanced fondly at her son.

‘He seems tall for six. Takes after his father, does he?’ Deidre shot Babs a curious look.

Babs had no intention of discussing Joey’s father with Deidre on such a short acquaintance, so she cleared her throat and returned to the subject of Portland.

‘Yes, I wanted to live someplace where the sun shines all the time. Besides, Portland isn’t always a very safe city to live in. There’s a lot of crime.’

Deidre nodded. ‘Well, you’ll get a lot of sun here, all right. It gets up over a hundred degrees in summer. But don’t worry, you’ll get used to it. It’s a dry heat, but you can’t go running around in the middle of the day, young man,’ Deidre said, turning to Joey. ‘Still, I expect you’ll enjoy using the pool. Can he have another cookie, Babs?’

Joey gravely accepted another cookie from Deidre.

‘Joey, say thank you to Mrs Kramer,’ prompted Babs. Joey nodded but didn’t speak. He slouched down in his chair and nibbled on the cookie despondently. He looked tired. Babs gathered her handbag and stood up. ‘Well, Deidre, it’s been so nice chatting to you. I’d better get our bags up to our apartment. Can you tell me if there’s a diner close by? I simply couldn’t cook this evening after our trip.’ Babs took Joey by the hand and helped him up.

‘Oh, there sure is. Betsy Morgan has a cute little place half a block down called Betsy’s,’ Deidre said as she walked

them to the door. ‘Not a very adventurous name, but she does good food. It’s all decked out in red and white, you can’t miss it. Can I help you with your bags?’

‘That’s kind of you, but I’ll manage. I haven’t got very much.’

‘So it’s just the two of you, then?’ asked Deidre as Joey finished the last of the cookie.

‘Yes, that’s right. Just Joey and me,’ said Babs as she steered Joey out the front door. ‘What do you say to Mrs Kramer, Joey?’

Joey murmured a thank you as Deidre patted his head and waved them off. ‘You and I will be friends, Joey. You’ll see.’ She turned to smile at Babs. ‘Just holler if there’s anything you need, Babs. It’s a nice bunch of folk around here, you’ll soon fit in.’

*

As soon as Babs opened the door of their apartment, she smiled. It had exactly the same layout as the Kramers’ and was wonderfully light and airy, although the furniture that came with it was not nearly as smart as Deidre’s. In one corner of the living area was a brown sofa. There was no buffet or television set, although there was a small bookcase and an incongruously large dining table surrounded by four solid, if unfashionable, chairs.

Just the perfect place for my sewing machine, Babs thought to herself.

Putting her bags and sewing machine down, she and Joey explored the bedrooms. There was a large main bedroom and a smaller one off to one side. She was pleased to see that there was an air-conditioning unit as well as large built-in closets. *How modern,* she thought. Next to the bedrooms was a good-sized bathroom.

Although the furnishings in the apartment were basic, everything seemed clean and functional. She hoped they

would do well here. She had taken such a big gamble with their lives. She took a deep breath and closed her eyes for a moment. She tried to quell the anxious knot in her stomach. She just had to trust that she had made the right decision.

After supper at Betsy's Diner, Babs and Joey walked hand in hand in the late afternoon light along the dusty road at the edge of town. Joey was subdued and Babs peered at him. He was often anxious and she was worried about how he would handle the move. She hoped this fresh start was the right thing for him. They paused and stood on the edge of the road. Behind them lay the small village of Palm Desert with its neat rows of houses and apartments, the carefully planned streets coupled with well-watered emerald green grass verges. In front of them the desert valley stretched out towards the base of the mountains.

'Joey, will you just look at that view. So much space.' She pointed to a distant mountain topped with white snow. 'That mountain looks like an ice-cream cone, doesn't it?'

A small grin appeared on Joey's pinched face. 'Can we make snowballs, Mom?'

'The snow's too far away to walk to, honey, but maybe one day we'll go up there.'

Joey grew serious again. 'Mom, when am I going to see Dad? Is he coming to Palm Desert, too?' he asked anxiously.

Babs inhaled sharply. She had been dreading this question. She knelt down in front of Joey. 'Darling, I think it might be better if we don't see Daddy for a while,' she said gently. 'But you're going to love it here. It's so beautiful. We're going to have a marvellous new life, a better one, you'll see.' Joey nodded and Babs put her arms around him and hugged him briefly. Releasing Joey, Babs straightened up and looked across to the serene mountains. She thought about her plans for the future. She wondered

if she had been too optimistic about them. What if she failed? She couldn't go back to Portland. She felt fear rise in her chest.

'Mom, look at the horse!' said Joey. He tugged at her hand and pointed down the road. A horse was trotting towards them, whinnying loudly. Sacks of what looked like corn hung behind the saddle, and in front of the rider sat a small boy, younger than Joey. The man was dressed in leather chaps and a faded blue shirt, while the boy had straight dark hair, cut below his ears. Joey stared at them, fascinated.

'Indians,' said Babs quietly. 'That's something you don't see in Portland.'

As she stood there with Joey, watching the Indians, a car drove by, slowing as it passed, its occupants giving her a curious look, then a nod and a smile. The graceful woman with sad blue eyes smiled back, then, swinging her son's arm, she turned and they walked back to their apartment. In the distance glittered the glamorous town of Palm Springs, waiting there for them to discover.

*

The next day, after Babs had unpacked their belongings, she and Joey made their first foray into the swimming pool. Joey was beside himself with excitement and Babs spent quite some time with him, splashing and playing. When she saw Deidre Kramer coming over to the pool, Babs stepped from the water, still keeping a watchful eye on Joey, who was under strict instructions to stay at the shallow end.

Deidre greeted Babs warmly. 'I see you've made it into the pool.'

Babs shyly returned her smile. 'It's wonderful. I never thought I'd be able to swim in a private pool like this. Joey is in seventh heaven. I hope he learns to swim properly quickly.'

‘I’m sure he will, if you bring him here every day.’ The two women settled themselves on the plastic sun lounges and Babs mentioned the Indians she and Joey had seen the previous evening.

‘They’re the local Agua Calientes,’ Deidre explained. ‘They tend to keep to themselves on their missions, even though they pretty much own the joint.’

‘What do you mean by that?’ Babs asked, keeping Joey in sight as she glanced at Deidre.

‘The Indians own all the land around these parts. They just lease it to us whitefaces.’ Deidre laughed and adjusted her sunglasses. ‘Say, did you hear that the Rat Pack have moved into Palm Springs? Frank Sinatra has built a beautiful home over there. I’m told his pool is shaped like a piano!’ Babs sensed that Deidre liked nothing better than to talk about the film stars who lived and stayed in Palm Springs. She was somewhat relieved not to have to talk about her own situation.

‘Imagine that. I just love him, and Dean Martin, too. Deano is so funny with Jerry Lewis,’ said Babs. ‘I can’t wait to see Palm Springs properly. We’re getting settled in today, but we might go over there tomorrow and look around and maybe have a little lunch.’ She said it lightly, but going out to lunch was not something she would be doing very often. She thought again of her limited funds, but decided it would be worth the expense to see Palm Springs. Besides, she knew she needed to bite the bullet and start looking for work, which would more than justify the bus fare.

‘You do that, Babs. There’s a whole bunch of new stores in the plaza: I. Magnin, Bullock’s, and so many other pretty places for shopping. Beats LA and San Francisco, if you ask me.’

Babs nodded. She wouldn’t be buying anything for herself there. She had spent a year saving hard for this move to California, carefully squirrelling money away until she

had enough to afford the Greyhound bus fare as well as three months' rent on the apartment in Palm Desert, which she had quietly been able to secure with the help of a trusted realtor friend back in Portland. She had sworn her friend to secrecy about her plans and she could only hope that he kept his word to stay silent. She fidgeted on the lounge chair and pushed away the scary thought that she and Joey might be found here in Palm Desert. She tried to focus on the here and now. She was eager to catch the bus into Palm Springs not just because it was famous as a playground for the stars, but because she yearned to see the place she had dreamed of for so long. The idea of Palm Springs had kept her going. She needed to see it with her own eyes.

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The following day Babs was agog as she walked down Palm Canyon Drive holding Joey's hand. She walked slowly so Joey could keep up and to give her time to take in everything: the stores, the sights, the people strolling in the sunshine. She noticed that the teenage girls mostly dressed in a uniform of colourful tops and tapered pants, some capri length, although she saw one or two in dungarees, carefully folded up at the hem. The boys wore shirts with tightly rolled-up sleeves, their hairdos slick and shiny. She noticed that a lot of older men sported checked shirts enhanced with embroidery, their outfits complemented by shoestring ties and fancy cowboy boots. It seemed to Babs that almost anything went in desert attire.

'Mom, look at those cars!' Joey pointed to the shiny cars of all colours with gleaming chrome grilles, elaborate trims and enormous tailfins that were parked on either side of the street. Then he stopped and stared in fascination as a convertible cruised down the block.

'The car roof slides down so you can be in the sunshine,' Babs explained. 'It must be nice to have the wind in your

face,' she added, looking at a passenger wearing a scarf knotted under her chin and sunglasses that turned up at the corners like cats' eyes.

Babs was awed by the fancy stores they passed. Taking a deep breath, she squeezed Joey's hand and steered him into a clothing shop. The saleswomen in the store were heavily made-up and expensively dressed, with lots of jangly gold jewellery, and looked rather unfriendly. Suddenly Babs felt self-conscious. She knew she must look out of place in a store like this, wearing just sandals and a simple cotton sundress she'd made herself. *Maybe they are allowed to wear clothes from their shops*, Babs told herself.

Politely she asked if they needed a shop assistant. When she said that she'd had no experience at all in retail, she was given a withering look and her inquiry was dismissed out of hand. She tried a few more stores and received the same treatment. She and Joey continued to wander along the main street for a while, but by lunch-time Joey was tired, hot and hungry, and Babs was feeling dispirited.

'These restaurants look too expensive. Let's get a soda at that drugstore over there,' she suggested. The pair sat in silence as they slowly drank their sodas, making them last. Eventually Babs spoke, trying to inject some light-heartedness into her voice.

'So, do you think you're going to like living in the desert, Joey?' She forced a smile.

Her son dragged his straw around the bottom of his glass, trying to suck up the last of the creamy bubbles. He nodded. 'I guess.'

'That's good, honey, so do I. Shh, don't slurp, that's not nice.' Joey stopped and then sat silently flicking his straw. Babs smoothed her son's hair and gently turned down the collar on his shirt. She'd spent a couple of evenings embroidering the red and yellow train, which

she'd copied from one of his picture books, on the pocket, and then she'd trimmed around the collar, the buttonholes and the edge of the short sleeves with the same red thread. His shorts were made from material the same dark red as the trim on the shirt. Babs loved sewing and she knew that she had a talent for it. Her grandmother had taught her as well as her sisters, and they rarely bought ready-made clothes. Grandma French had been a wonderful seamstress. She had made Grandad's suits as well as overcoats and jackets for all of them. Babs smiled to herself when she thought of the formal portrait her grandparents had always proudly displayed, a picture of herself with her teenaged sisters, Alice and Deborah, all wearing pretty dresses lovingly made by their grandmother. In the portrait Deborah had a serious expression while their older sister Alice looked poised and beautiful, as usual. But Babs, very much the baby of the family, wore a big fat bow in her hair and shiny Mary Jane shoes, and had one of her socks sliding down her calf. Babs had never been quite as elegant or as self-assured as her sisters, but she'd taken to sewing as if she'd been born to it, and was very grateful to her late grandmother for passing on her skills.

Thinking of the well-dressed young people she'd seen out on the street, Babs recalled the way young women dating local boys and going to parties and dances hated wearing the same dress more than twice, and Babs was no exception. For very little money she could buy attractive fabric and create pretty outfits for all occasions. She had developed an eye for quality early on and had begun experimenting with her own ideas and patterns. She always felt confident with her skills. She sighed. That all seemed a long time ago now. She counted out some money from her purse to pay the bill and frowned at the number of notes and coins left. She was trying to be as frugal as possible, but her money wouldn't last forever. She needed to find a

job quickly. Taking Joey by the hand, she led him to the bus stop. Finding work would have to begin in earnest very soon.

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A few days later, Babs enrolled Joey in the local elementary school. He was clingy and anxious about starting at a new school but his teacher seemed kind and distracted him with the promise of a cuddle with the class pet, a guinea pig, while Babs snuck out. She decided to go into Palm Springs and try again for a job, this time unencumbered by a small boy. She took the bus and began where she'd left off on Palm Canyon Drive, asking in several shops if there were any positions for shop assistants. No one was willing to employ an unskilled shop assistant. As she went from store to store, she became increasingly distressed. She had really thought that she would have no trouble finding a job, but no one seemed interested in her. She was not prepared to give up, however, so for the next week she continued to take the bus into Palm Springs while Joey was at school. But when asking for work, the answer was always the same. Finally, in one very up-market shop, where the response to her request was also negative, Babs asked pleadingly, 'But how can I get experience if no one gives me a chance?'

The woman shrugged. 'I see your point. I'm sorry that I can't be of more help.'

'So am I,' said Babs. She turned and began to walk towards the door. Passing a rack of children's clothes, she picked up a little girl's smocked dress and looked at the price. 'Heavens, you could almost buy a car for that,' she exclaimed.

'People around here have plenty of money. They are quite prepared to pay for the best, and they do,' said the sales assistant.

Babs stood looking at the little dress and then said slowly, 'How does the shop go about getting the best clothes?'

The assistant sniffed. 'Mrs Bourke is the buyer for our children's range. She sources them through the big stores and manufacturers, but sometimes buys handmade one-offs. People bring her samples and she decides what to take. She's a bit of a dragon, but she has excellent taste, and this place is well known for its exclusive babywear, although it's only a very small part of our stock.'

Babs looked closely at the children's clothes and an idea bloomed in her mind. 'I'm sure I can make clothes as good as these,' said Babs as confidently as she could. 'Can anyone bring in samples?'

The assistant shrugged. 'I don't see why not.'

'Great,' said Babs, smiling broadly. How silly she had been. She would do something that she was good at, not something about which she knew nothing. She told the shop assistant that she would be back sometime soon to see Mrs Bourke, and, her head filled with ideas, she caught the bus back to Palm Desert. As soon as Joey went to bed that night, she began writing lists of what she would need to start her sewing enterprise.

The next day, after Joey had gone to school, Deidre asked Babs in for a morning coffee and the younger woman shyly revealed her plans for making children's clothes. 'But the thing is, Deidre, I have no idea where to buy what I need. I hope you can help.'

'That's a wonderful scheme,' said Deidre. 'I noticed Joey was dressed beautifully, but I hadn't realised you'd made the outfits. And your clothes . . . now I understand how you had the right kind of wardrobe for the desert after living in Portland! Clever you. Now, what do you need?'

'I brought my grandmother's sewing machine with me, but I had to leave most of my materials behind in

Portland. I'll need to source fabrics and threads and that sort of thing,' Babs explained.

'Sol can take you tomorrow. He knows everyone and everything around here, so you'll be able to find what you need, I'm sure.'

Sol was almost as round as he was tall, always cheerful and utterly in love with Palm Springs. Babs sometimes thought that the city had been founded just to make him happy. The following afternoon he drove her to places like Cathedral City, Bermuda Dunes, Indian Wells and Indio, where Babs bought fabrics, trims, needles and threads and a couple of new attachments for her old machine. In one of the shops, she was excited to find a small smocking pleater.

'Wow, having one of these will save me so much time!' Babs exclaimed. 'It will be a wonderful investment. I'll have to finish the smocking by hand, but having this will sure speed things up.'

Although it was obvious that Sol didn't understand a thing about the art of smocking, he smiled indulgently at her excitement.

Babs was delighted to find that shopping with Sol meant that no one expected her to pay retail prices so, later that night, when she added up what she'd spent, she realised to her relief that, thanks to her kind neighbour, she had saved quite a bit.

For the next three weeks, as soon as Joey had left for school, Babs set up her sewing machine on the dining room table and established a working routine. She drafted patterns, sewed and smocked and embroidered. Her dainty baby dresses were decorated with little animals and delicate flowers in lazy daisy, bullion and fly stitches, as well as neat French knots. She enjoyed the work and thought the outfits she'd created were adorable. She just hoped the buyer at the boutique liked them too. She didn't want to think about what would happen if no one bought her stock.

Then, just before Joey was due to arrive home from school, she would pack everything up and be ready to take her son for a swim in the kidney-shaped swimming pool. Joey was thriving in his new environment, no longer withdrawn and anxious, so Babs was reassured that she had done the right thing in moving them both to California. At night sometimes she still felt frightened, afraid that at any moment they would be dragged home, but as the weeks passed, her fear dimmed and she too began to enjoy their sunny new home.

Most afternoons they were joined by Deidre and Sol. Sol had owned a string of laundromats in Sacramento and Santa Barbara, but had sold them when he retired. In his new-found free time he'd taken up painting as a hobby and, much to Deidre's surprise, he was actually quite good. Sol had offered to teach Joey to paint. So one afternoon Babs and Joey went to Sol and Deidre's apartment for Joey's first lesson. Sol had somehow found a small easel and had set up a little canvas with several cans of bright paint and a paintbrush sitting on a stool nearby. He began patiently showing the boy a few painting techniques, encouraging Joey to try painting the desert scenery, while Deidre and Babs watched.

'What else do you do now that you've retired, Sol?' Babs asked, sipping some lemonade that Deidre had made for the four of them.

'Oh, he's quite the big cheese at the Historical Society,' said Deidre, before Sol could speak. 'Can't stop him talking about the history of Palm Springs. He gives talks and tours, you know.'

'We'll have to do a tour with you sometime then,' said Babs. She glanced at Joey's canvas. He had painted a bright blue sky and a large sun, and was now attempting to add a four-legged blob that Babs guessed might be a horse.

'You're doing so well, Joey,' she said. He beamed.

‘You know, Joey, many famous artists have been inspired by the desert and its beautiful landscape,’ said Sol. He disappeared into the back of the house and returned with a print. ‘This one is by one of my favourites, Carl Eytel.’ The artist had captured the dry, scrubby plains perfectly. Babs glanced around the room and her gaze fell upon a pile of large canvases leaning against a chair. She got up and went over to the paintings, tilting one forward to glance at the canvas behind.

‘These paintings are beautiful,’ said Babs. ‘Are they yours, Sol?’

‘Yes,’ said Sol, looking pleased. ‘Actually, those paintings are a series about the founding of Palm Springs.’ He turned to Joey. ‘They tell a story. Would you like to hear it?’

‘Yes, please,’ said Joey, putting down his paintbrush.

Sol pulled out the first painting and gestured at three figures, two larger and one smaller, travelling with a horse and burro through boulders, dunes, cacti, clumps of agave, mesquite trees and the tough, thorny plants growing amongst rocks and sand. ‘About seventy years ago, an Indian agent, that’s a man who’s supposed to look after the Indians, his son and a guide were travelling through the hot, dry desert. The boy was sick and Pablo, their Indian guide, had promised to show them some magic springs that would make the boy well again.’

‘What was wrong with the boy?’ asked Joey, frowning.

‘He had an illness called tuberculosis,’ said Sol. He pulled the second painting forward. ‘One evening, they made camp.’ He showed Joey a picture of the horse and the sturdy little burro tethered in the shade of an ancient fig tree. Beside them stood a buckboard and a wagon, both covered with a film of sand and desert dust. Everything was dwarfed by the arrow-straight palms that rose majestically overhead.

Sol gestured to another figure on horseback in a corner of the painting. ‘On a nearby rise, Pablo halted his horse as he surveyed the valley below.’

Joey was looking at the painting with interest. He pointed to the shadowy mountain ranges circled by sand dunes in the background.

‘I’ve seen these mountains,’ he said.

‘I’m sure you have,’ said Sol, smiling at the boy. He turned back to the painting. ‘To the south-east was an ancient lake and directly to the south rose the Santa Rosa ranges. In the south-west were canyons lined with palms, and towering eleven thousand feet above it all were the San Jacinto Mountains.’ Babs spied the jagged peaks of the mountain range ringing the edge of the picture.

‘Wow,’ said Joey.

Sol pulled another painting from the pile. It depicted the ranges in a soft lavender colour, their outlines etched against the late afternoon sky. In the picture, the man and his son had removed their boots and clothes and were standing in a bubbling pool of water, while their guide was watching nearby. Babs could almost imagine what it would be like to be there: the air dry and fresh, a little breeze rustling the palms. Looking closely, she noticed the detail of the painting. The man was stocky but the boy, though smiling, looked frail and thin. The guide was squatting by the pool, smoking a roughly made cigar.

Sol returned to his story. ‘Finally, after their long trip, they reached the magic springs and the boy laughed as he paddled in the water.

“‘It’s warmer than a bath, Papa!’” he said.

“‘These are healing waters, son. They will make you well and strong,’” said his father.’

Sol pulled out another painting of the valley with the magic pool. Water coursed down from the mountain peaks.

Simple thatched huts nestled close to the hot springs, and Babs could see Indians painted in the foreground.

‘The man and his son stayed with Pablo in his village and Pablo’s wife served them mushy beans and baked hearts of agave on flat roasted breads cooked over the small fire outside the huts. Each day the three of them would return to the springs in the lingering light of the afternoon to soak their bodies in the healing waters.

‘Now, the man’s name was John Guthrie McCallum, and he thought that the only way his son would get better would be if he moved his family away from the damp and cold climate of San Francisco to start a new life where the weather was warmer and drier. So he purchased some land to build a home for himself.’ Sol paused and pulled out the final painting. It showed the same man, his wife, more children and more Indians in front of a simple adobe home surrounded by planted fruit trees. ‘He called the place Palm Springs,’ said Sol.

‘So that’s how the place started,’ said Babs.

‘Did the little boy get better?’ Joey asked.

Sol paused and answered slowly. ‘Yes, the little boy was fine.’

Babs and Sol exchanged a glance. Babs appreciated Sol telling Joey a white lie. Joey would have had nightmares for weeks if he’d realised that the boy had died.

‘Poor old John McCallum,’ said Sol. ‘Things didn’t go well for him at all. He and a friend devised a scheme to irrigate Palm Springs, and spent a lot of money trying to make the desert bloom, but he sold the land to the wrong people. Most of them were sick, so they couldn’t make a go of it and went back to the coast without paying for their land. As a result, old John almost went broke.’

‘Then why did Palm Springs keep growing?’ asked Babs.

Deidre took up the story. ‘McCallum had several children, but it was his youngest, Pearl, who carried on his legacy. She married Austin McManus, who was a property developer, and she utilised her father’s land much more successfully,’ she said.

‘She built the Oasis Hotel in the twenties. You know, that’s the tower you can see on Palm Canyon Drive,’ said Sol. ‘All the movie stars used to stay in the rooms in that tower.’

‘Which movie stars?’ asked Babs.

‘Oh, Clark Gable, John Wayne, Loretta Young, even Shirley Temple,’ said Deidre, returning to her favourite subject. ‘Pearl also developed some estates, as well as establishing the tennis club.’

‘I wish I could see some of the famous stars,’ said Babs wistfully.

‘You will,’ Deidre assured her.

‘Mom, what do you think of my painting?’ Joey asked. Babs glanced at the canvas, which was now covered in bright splodges.

‘It’s marvellous, darling, well done.’ Babs hugged Joey. ‘Now say thank you to Sol for teaching you.’

‘Thank you, Sol,’ said Joey, smiling brightly.

‘Come back and paint any time, little man,’ said Sol.

*

Working all day and every day, Babs had eventually managed to design and make a dozen little outfits for babies and toddlers. One morning, after Joey left for school, she made her way into Palm Springs carrying her small suitcase of clothes carefully folded in tissue paper. Her money was now all but gone and she was feeling very anxious. What if no one wanted to buy her clothes? What would she do for money? How would she pay the rent? She tried to steady her nerves as she headed along North

Palm Canyon Drive to the shop where she'd seen the expensive baby clothes. As soon as she walked in, she saw the same shop assistant she'd spoken to on the previous occasion and went over to greet her.

'I don't know if you remember me,' said Babs nervously, 'but I was talking with you a few weeks ago about children's clothes.'

The assistant peered at her. 'Yes, I do. How can I help you now?'

'You told me that your buyer Mrs Bourke might be interested in handmade clothes. I've spent the last few weeks designing and hand-making baby clothes and I was hoping that she would consider stocking them here.'

The assistant pursed her lips. 'I can't guarantee that she will without an appointment.'

Babs's heart sank. 'I see. I didn't understand. I haven't done this before,' she said despondently. She felt completely out of her depth in this unknown commercial world. But then she thought of Joey, who was being so brave in this new place, and tried to pluck up some courage. She'd gone to a lot of trouble, and she knew her clothes were pretty and well made. She couldn't just give up. Taking a deep breath, she took one of her designs out of her suitcase. 'It would just take a moment.'

The assistant studied the sample. 'Wait a moment, I'll go and have a talk with her. It can't do any harm.'

As the woman hurried away, Babs looked around the store. She had to admit that the clothes in the shop were beautiful. There were silk, lace and embroidered cocktail dresses, stylish capri pants, fashionable halter-neck tops, as well as the glitziest sandals she had ever seen. It was certainly a world away from the clothes stores in Portland. And the prices! She couldn't believe that anyone in the world would be prepared to pay so much for a pair of shoes.

‘So you want to see me, do you?’ said a voice behind her.

Babs turned around to be met by an elegantly dressed woman who she guessed was in her mid-fifties.

‘I’m Mrs Bourke, and I believe you have some items you want to show me. Please come to my office and I’ll take a look. I understand you’ve been quite persistent.’ She was brisk but not unfriendly.

As soon as they arrived in Mrs Bourke’s wood-panelled office, Babs introduced herself and opened her suitcase. She began to lay out little girls’ dresses, boys’ shirts and baby clothes on the office desk.

Silently Mrs Bourke picked up the clothes and examined them. Finally she said, ‘I take it that you made these yourself? I think that some are quite saleable.’

Babs almost collapsed with relief.

‘I think I can take this,’ said Mrs Bourke, lifting up a daintily smocked baby’s dress. ‘And this little boy’s outfit with the yellow ducks is quite charming. Perhaps I’ll have this little frock in white as well. Now, I’ll need them in a variety of sizes. Do you think I could have them by next week? If the standard remains as good as this, we have a deal.’

On a piece of paper, Mrs Bourke wrote down the sizes and quantities of the clothes she wanted Babs to make and the price she would pay, so that there would be no mistakes. Babs’s elation was tempered only slightly by the fact that not all her handmade clothes were wanted, but when she saw the price Mrs Bourke was offering, she felt her face flushing with outrage. It was a pittance in comparison with what the store would charge for them. Nevertheless, Babs thought she had no choice other than to agree. She needed the money. And she figured she had to start somewhere, so she nodded and thanked Mrs Bourke for her time, promising to get the order to the shop by the

end of the following week, although she wondered how she would ever be able to accomplish it.

‘By the way,’ said Mrs Bourke, ‘what age range do your designs intend to cover?’

‘From newborn up until six or seven,’ replied Babs. She didn’t want to limit herself just to baby clothes.

‘And what is the name of your label, or shall I put my store name on them?’

Babs was about to say that she didn’t have a design label, but suddenly an idea popped into her head.

‘I’m sorry I didn’t have time to do the labels. It’s “Heaven to Seven”, Mrs Bourke. I’ll have my labels on the clothes when I bring them in next week.’

After she left the shop, she felt her knees go weak. She sat down on a nearby bench and took a deep breath. She’d done it. She’d made a sale. She and Joey would be able to stay in Palm Desert. Gathering her things, she smiled to herself as she walked down the street, but as she swung the suitcase, she realised that her bag was still full of unwanted samples. Maybe she should show them to other stores? But which ones? Over the road she saw the tower of the El Mirador Hotel. They must have a shop in there, she thought, as she hurried across to the spacious portecochère. From the luxurious foyer she looked out at lawns and cabanas as she made her way across to the hotel shop. She could see right away that it would be unlikely to sell baby clothes, but now that she was here, she thought there was no harm in asking. Fortunately, the young man behind the counter turned out to be a mine of information.

‘You’re right. We don’t sell baby clothes. This is more gifts for the ladies,’ he said. ‘Flowers, chocolates and jewellery, that sort of thing, but you could try I. Magnin. And if you keep going in that direction,’ he pointed, ‘you’ll come to a store that sells nothing but kids’ clothes. I bet you could do well in there.’

Babs thanked him for his suggestions and said, 'It must be great working here. I bet you see lots of film stars all the time.'

'Sure do.' Suddenly the young man lowered his voice and in a conspiratorial tone said, 'Say, if you want to see some now, just wander out to the pool. No one will stop you, and if they do, just say you're a friend of Mac's. That's me.'

Thanking him, Babs quietly made her way towards the hotel pool. She walked outside and there, sitting on sun lounges, were Tony Curtis and his wife, Janet Leigh, talking to Robert Wagner and Natalie Wood. She tried not to stare, but she found it almost impossible to believe that she was so close to some of her favourite film stars. Babs retreated into the hotel lobby before anyone asked any awkward questions, and headed out into the sun again.

Taking the young man's advice, she found the store which specialised in baby clothes and they were pleased to give her an order, although what they were willing to pay her was only marginally better than Mrs Bourke's offer. The saleslady at I. Magnin was enthusiastic about her clothes, but said they'd want them exclusively and that their buyer was in Los Angeles. Still, on the whole, Babs felt pleased with the way things had gone. She felt that she had a toe in the water and was sure that if she could maintain a supply of clothes to these stores, things could only get better. At least she'd be able to pay the rent, and maybe even save enough to buy a television set. Things were finally looking up.

*

That night, after she'd tucked Joey into bed, Babs gazed at the view from her bedroom window. For the first time in a long time, she felt positive about her future. It had

been a hard road. Unbidden, memories of the past she'd fought to escape washed over her. Howard's face flashed into her mind and she shivered. She went to the front door and checked it was locked. Satisfied, she returned to her bedroom. She hoped she would never have to see Howard again. She sighed as she lay down on her bed and gazed out at the darkened sky. She'd been so young, so naïve, when she'd met Howard. He was older than her and had seemed so dashing. He'd impressed her with his stories about the war, where he'd won a Purple Heart. He had seemed so sophisticated compared to her high school friends. He'd pursued her and Babs had been smitten by him. One evening, in the back of his roomy old Buick, Howard had persuaded her to make love. It was painful and rough and, when it was finally all over, Babs had felt confused, disillusioned and frightened. Not long afterwards, she had discovered she was pregnant. Howard was reluctant to get married, but her father insisted. The wedding had been simple and rushed. The trousseau, beautiful wedding gown and blissful entry into marriage that Babs had always dreamed about hadn't eventuated. Her father had been tight-lipped, sad and stoic, and Babs had felt ashamed that she'd let him down.

At first the marriage had worked just fine, but gradually their relationship deteriorated and rows became commonplace. Then one night Howard had hit her. Babs was shocked and horrified. Howard apologised and promised it would never happen again. Babs forgave him, and for the sake of their marriage and Joey, she vowed to try harder. But it had happened again and again. Her efforts to tiptoe around him, trying to please him, only seemed to make him more furious. On and on went the cycle of blows, tears and apologies. Babs had felt desperate and trapped. She'd tried to speak to her father about her situation, but he'd just told her to stop making Howard angry

and urged her to stay with her husband for the sake of their child. His lack of empathy had made Babs wish, not for the first time, that her beautiful mother had not died when she was a child, so that she was still around to help her find a solution. Her sisters had not been a lot of help either. Deborah, the sibling with whom she'd had the closest relationship, had moved to Spokane, in Washington, nearly four hundred miles away, and Alice was too bound up in her own life to be of much use. When Babs had tried to bring it up, neither of them quite understood what was happening, and Babs just hadn't been able to bring herself to explain in detail. She felt too ashamed about her disastrous marriage to really tell them what was going on. When her father had died suddenly of a heart attack, Babs had been devastated. She had always felt that, if things between herself and Howard became too bad, her father would be there as a refuge and now even that safe haven had been taken from her.

Then one day, in a rage, Howard had slapped Babs in front of Joey. The little boy cried. Howard had stormed out of the house, shouting that he was sick of the sight of both of them. Babs had taken Joey in her arms and soothed him. Holding her son, she'd decided that the only way she could give him a happy future was by running away. The prospect of leaving home had terrified her. She had never held a proper job and never travelled far. Still, she'd known that she had to get out, so for a year she'd saved every cent she could and she hadn't given Howard any clue of her plans, hoping that before he knew what had happened, they'd be long gone. She'd heard from Alice that Howard had asked around after he'd discovered them gone, but hadn't been able to locate them. Babs feverishly hoped her luck would hold and Howard would stay away. She had longed to live in Palm Springs, a place where, she had been sure, dreams came true; a place

where she and Joey could start over. And here they were. She raised her chin as her eyes drank in the skyline. A new home. A new life. She'd done it.

*

Over the next week, Babs worked hard to meet the orders she had taken. Deidre and Sol were always there to look after Joey when the need arose, but gradually, as she got into a routine, Babs was usually able to pack up her sewing and clear the dining room table just before Joey got home, so that the two of them could spend time together before she prepared dinner.

All the shops were pleased with Babs's work and they continued to give her orders. Babs and Joey settled into the pleasant life of the village and Babs even joined the tennis club, playing at night under lights when it was cool, which she thought was a wonderful novelty. Joey grew more confident as he became accustomed to life in Palm Desert. He loved his school, his new friends and swimming. He asked about his father less and less as the weeks went by, and Babs heard nothing from Howard. Gradually, she relaxed, letting go of the anxiety that had gripped her for so long. Seeing Joey flourish, Babs knew the decision to leave Portland had been the right one.

With her work, a growing son and new friends, Babs's life was full, and one day she was astonished to realise that two years had passed since she and Joey had arrived in Palm Desert. But then a small cloud appeared on the horizon in the form of her eldest sister, Alice, who had written to announce she was coming to visit. *And maybe if I like it, I'll stay.* Alice could be so overbearing and bossy. As fond as she was of her sister, Babs was also fond of her new-found independence and feared that Alice would try to undermine it.

*

The morning of her sister's arrival, Babs was nervous. She stood in front of the mirror and smoothed her hair, which she'd had straightened at the beauty salon. She'd painted her nails in the coral shade that everyone was wearing lately. Babs thought about the relationships she'd had with her two sisters. Deb had been gentle and easy to get along with, but she had married a furniture salesman and moved to Washington state when Babs was still young, so Babs had seen less and less of her over the years. Deb had one child, Cynthia, who was always called Cindy. Although Babs didn't see a lot of her niece, she loved sending her pretty little dresses to wear. In spite of the distance between them, Babs had always loved Deb and was shocked when she learned that her sister had been diagnosed with cancer, just as their mother had been. When she died, leaving her husband to raise their teenage daughter alone, Babs had carried on making an effort to keep in touch with her niece, writing her letters, ringing occasionally, and continuing to sew special clothes for her.

Her other sister, Alice, had married rather well, but Mitchell, who had been an attorney and quite a few years older than Alice, had died a year ago. Babs was in no doubt that he had left her sister a tidy sum. Not that Alice was any slouch at making money herself. She had a real head for business. When Alice had announced her impending arrival, Babs had told her that she was welcome to use her bedroom and volunteered to sleep on the sofa until her sister decided what her plans were to be.

When Babs told Deidre the news, the older woman had remarked tartly, 'Well, I wouldn't be giving up my bed for anyone! But it will be nice for you both to have some family around. Does your sister have any children to keep Joey company?'

'No, Mitchell and Alice never had any, so Alice dabbled in business instead. She's very clever at that sort

of thing. If she decides to stay in Palm Springs, she'll find something to do right away, I bet.'

'Well, so did you, Babs. You're making quite a name for yourself with your Heaven to Seven clothes.'

'Alice is clever with her hands, too. Our grandmother taught us all to sew, and she makes her own clothes sometimes. She copies them out of the smart magazines. Very haute couture.'

Deidre snorted. 'The desert isn't very haute!'

'Alice is very striking,' explained Babs. 'She'll make her mark, I'm sure.'

'Babs, if you ask me, it sounds like you have a bit of an inferiority complex as far as your sister is concerned,' said Deidre, with an eyebrow arched.

Babs shook her head. 'Deidre, you'll understand when you meet Alice. She's always so clever, so in control. At school she was always bandbox smart and perfectly turned out, while I always seemed to be untidy. My hair used to escape my ribbons and my dresses got crushed. Mom used to call Alice "Little Miss Perfect". Deb never cared, but I did.'

'Well, you shouldn't be intimidated by your sister. I've seen what you can create and I would call your children's clothes just about perfect,' said Deidre staunchly.

All the same, when Babs heard a car pull into the courtyard parking lot her heart started to beat faster.

'It's a grey Oldsmobile, Mom,' Joey called out as he leaned over the balcony.

'That will be your Aunt Alice. Let's go down and meet her.'

As they came through the front door, Alice Collins got out from behind the steering wheel and straightened up, looking over at the apartment complex. She was immaculately dressed. Her wide-legged cream linen slacks were barely creased. The red and cream striped knit top was

tucked into her slacks and a wide red and silver leather belt showed off her narrow waist. Her hair was short and smartly styled into a smooth bob and she wore red and black high heels. Her wrists and throat were heavy with silver jewellery.

‘I thought I was driving to the end of the earth!’ she exclaimed as she stretched her back. ‘What have you done to your hair?’ she asked as Babs came forward to greet her and give her a kiss on the cheek.

‘Oh, I had it straightened at the beauty shop, it’s a new thing they do,’ said Babs, touching her hair self-consciously. ‘Joey, give Aunt Alice a kiss.’

‘Well, if you ask me, it was a waste of money. It doesn’t suit you, and besides, those curls of yours will bounce back in no time. Nothing could ever keep them under control.’ She leaned down so Joey could peck at her cheek. ‘Heavens, he’s not a baby any more, that’s for sure,’ said his aunt.

Babs sighed inwardly. She was the same old Alice, then. ‘Come on inside and have a cool drink. We’ll get your bags later,’ she suggested, as Alice reached for her smart leather handbag.

Alice pursed her perfectly painted lips. ‘Why does this place look like something Mexicans live in? I saw some very smart places when I drove through Palm Springs.’

‘It’s all we can afford at present, but I like it. We might move later,’ Babs replied defensively.

‘If you can’t afford anything else, then I suppose you can’t move,’ said Alice crushingly.

Babs tried to smile. ‘It suits us just fine, and the neighbours are lovely. I’ve given you my bedroom, Alice, and Joey drew you a welcome picture.’

Alice sniffed. ‘I hope the room has AC. This weather will take some getting used to and it’s not even summer.’ She strode towards the front door.

Babs sighed and followed her sister inside and up to the apartment. Alice stepped through the doorway and glanced around, examining the room but being careful not to touch anything. She turned to Babs. ‘What are the plans for this evening?’

Babs moved towards the kitchen to prepare their drinks. ‘Ah, I hadn’t actually planned anything, Alice,’ she stammered. ‘I thought you might like to rest a bit after your long drive and spend a little time with Joey and me. I made some chili con carne and we recently bought a little TV . . .’

‘I’m not so ancient that I need to be rested!’ said Alice forcefully. ‘And I don’t eat spicy food. I have a whole new food regime, as I’m determined to live healthily. You’ll feel much better if you do that, too. Five vegetables, five fruits a day. No bread or sugar. No meat or very little. Meat killed Mitchell, you know. You should try it, maybe you could lose a few of those unwanted pounds.’ She eyed Babs’s curves.

Babs placed her hands on her hips. ‘I’m still the same size as I was in Portland, Alice.’ She called out to Joey. ‘Joey, please show your aunt to the bedroom while I get the lemonade. It’s homemade.’ Babs escaped into the kitchen before she said something she would regret.

‘Thank you, Joey, although it’s not as though you could get lost in this apartment,’ tinkled Alice as she followed Joey to the main bedroom.

After Alice had unpacked and tried some of Babs’s lemonade, which she pronounced too sweet, she agreed to spend some time at the pool so Joey could show her how well he swam. Babs wasn’t sure if Alice was actually watching him. Her sister’s sunglasses had impenetrable black lenses and a large floppy hat shaded her face. Babs sensed that her eyes were closed. Although Alice wore a swimsuit under a short sarong-style pair of shorts, she refused to get wet. ‘You don’t know who’s been in that water,’ she announced.

‘It’s only for residents and their guests,’ said Babs.

‘When you wrote you said that you’d been to the pool at the Desert Inn.’

‘Not very often. It’s too far away without a car.’

Alice pushed her sunglasses up her nose. ‘I think you need to make new friends who’ll take you to interesting places. My, when I think of the devoted friends I have back at home. They were all so devastated at the idea of my moving away. I can’t tell you the parties they all gave me to send me off.’

‘Don’t you think that moving away from all your friends is a big step? I hope you don’t feel you have to come and help me. We’re managing just fine. Please don’t change your life on account of us,’ said Babs.

‘Of course I’m not! I wouldn’t do that.’ Alice shook her head vigorously in exasperation. Babs felt irritated when Alice’s hair fell neatly back into place.

‘It was so unfair that Mitchell went first and left me,’ said Alice in a tone which intimated that Mitchell had chosen to die just to inconvenience her.

‘Yes, it was very sad. Mitchell was a lovely man,’ said Babs. ‘I wasn’t so lucky in my choice of husband.’

‘Luck has nothing to do with choosing a husband, Babs. You can’t get too emotional and rush into things. You don’t buy any pair of shoes or piece of fruit without checking them out, do you? The same goes for a husband, as far as I’m concerned.’

Babs burst out laughing. ‘Alice, that’s ridiculous! You fall in love or you don’t.’

‘Nonsense. Anyway, it wasn’t as though you really had a choice about getting married, did you?’

Babs refused to dignify that remark with a response.

Alice sailed on. ‘No, my mind is made up. I really didn’t think I could go on living in Portland without dear Mitchell, and you made Palm Springs sound quite

interesting in your letters – although, of course, what you and I find interesting might be quite different things. Anyway, you know how organised I am. And I've had the very best advice from my dear friends – they're lawyers and financial advisers, you know. They look after me. Everyone thinks I'm so adventurous. They just know I'll be a success here.'

Babs felt that she too had been very brave in taking the risk of leaving her husband and striking out for California, but she held her tongue. There wasn't much point making a fuss; Alice never changed.

'I'm sure you'll find something to do,' Babs replied. 'Palm Springs is full of tourists and retired people, so there must be something to interest you. I'm sorry I can't help much, but between Joey's school hours and my sewing workload I don't have a lot of spare time. It's fortunate I can work from home.'

'I think what you're doing is ridiculous! A production line on your dining room table, whirring away into the night. Your neighbours must be sick of the sound of Grandma's sewing machine!'

'I wouldn't dream of disturbing them. I never use it in the evening, I just hand-sew or cut out,' Babs retorted.

Alice held up a perfectly manicured hand. 'No, no, we have to move your cottage industry into a proper business, with our own outlet. I bet you get paid a pittance for the work you do. I know all about the mark-ups in those fancy stores, and I bet you didn't bother negotiating a reasonable price for your work. I'm right, aren't I? Well, I have a million ideas,' she continued. 'And as I'll be bank-rolling this next step, we'll have to come to a business arrangement . . .'

Babs felt herself beginning to shrivel. Here was Alice steamrolling over her, yet again. Her delight in her new life began to fade before her eyes. Alice had stopped

speaking and was staring at her as Babs began fanning herself, struggling to find the right words.

‘Good gracious, what’s the matter with you? Has the heat got to you? Do you want me to get you some water?’ asked Alice, making no attempt to do so.

Babs tried to regain her composure, but rather than shout, *Go away, Alice! Let me live my life!* she only managed to mutter, ‘I don’t want to put you out . . . you do whatever you’d like to do, Alice . . .’

‘Of course I will. You’ve gone about it all wrong, but for once you have hit on an idea with a bit of potential. You need me to put it right and see to it that it really works. I think I’ve come at just the right time.’

‘But I was enjoying doing my designs and sewing them,’ Babs said faintly, but Alice airily waved a hand.

‘You might be all right at that, but you’re no good at selling, and that’s the important part of any business. You need to leave that to me.’

‘So what exactly are you thinking?’ Babs wondered how Alice could arrive on the scene and work out a way to take over her entire business in the space of a few hours. Then again, maybe she shouldn’t be so surprised. Alice was Alice.

‘Let me lay it all out for you later. I need to do a bit more research first. You know, soak up the local atmosphere, get the lay of the land, get a feel for this place. Have you been to any clubs in Palm Springs?’

‘What sort of clubs?’

‘The smart ones. The nightclubs and the tennis and golf clubs and private clubs.’

Babs frowned. ‘I belong to our local tennis club, but the private clubs, like the Thunderbird Club or the Racquet Club, cost a fortune to join – not that I know anyone who would put me up for membership in the first place.’

Alice smirked. ‘Honey, what have you been doing all this time? Just leave things to me.’

She leaned back, lifting her face to the sun, and closed her eyes. Babs pursed her lips and walked over to Joey, who was climbing out of the pool. She sat on the edge of the pool and dangled her feet in the water as Joey prepared to dive in. She glanced over at her sister, stretched languidly on the lounge, seemingly without a care in the world, until Joey’s bellyflop splashed cold water all over her precious-not-to-get-wet outfit. Babs stifled a laugh as Alice stalked back to the apartment. Alice hadn’t changed. Still, it might be nice for Joey to have some family around, even if Alice could be overbearing at times. Besides, knowing her sister, it wouldn’t be long before Alice had her own circle of friends, and Babs thought that her sister’s enthusiasm for the baby clothes business might then begin to wane.

Within two weeks, Alice had rented a house in Twin Palms, a new estate in Palm Springs, and had already met some acquaintances from Portland who’d promised to nominate her for membership to the Thunderbird Club. Alice also joined the Racquet Club, though she rarely played tennis or golf, and took to lunching at all the smart clubs and restaurants in the plush hotels with her new-found friends, who also included her in their visits to nightclubs and supper dances.

Babs was never included in these occasions, not that she wanted to go – she was much too busy and had Joey to consider – but, as Alice explained, it was all about business, making the right connections with the right people, and Babs would be quite out of her depth in such company. So Babs kept quietly stitching and embroidering and smocking little dresses and pinafores, packing up her work when Alice came around to avoid facing her ‘helpful’ criticism.

But then one morning, Alice's voice cut in over the whirring of her sewing machine.

'Babs! Bar-ba-ra!'

'What is it? What's happened? Is everything all right?'

Alice swept into the apartment. 'It's all settled. We have a shop!' She waved a sheet of paper. 'And you'll never guess where!'

'What do you mean? We can't afford a shop!'

'It's small, I'll grant you that, but I know just how to make it work for us. It's inside the Desert Inn! Close your mouth, you look like a goldfish. Aren't you pleased?'

'How? I mean, I didn't know. This is all a bit of a surprise.' Babs was flabbergasted. She was not at all sure that she wanted to sell her baby clothes in a hotel. Did she really want to get into the retail side of things? 'How did you manage it, Alice?' she asked weakly.

'I'm doing some design work for the hotel. The place needs freshening up in some areas; I have to find the right people to do the work and oversee them, make sure that it's all being done properly. I mean, you really can't trust contractors. Anyway, there's a space available in the lobby. It's only small and the hotel management was not entirely sure how to make the best use of it, so I suggested that I could turn it into a kiddies' boutique. I thought I'd dress the window with a western desert theme for children. Good for our business and it will attract business for the hotel, too.'

In spite of her resentment that Alice had taken such a step without consulting her, Babs found her sister's excitement contagious. 'Oh my gosh, I can't believe it! A store for Heaven to Seven, that's so thrilling. What about stock . . . How long before it opens?'

'Well, you can't do everything yourself, Babs. We'll never keep up with demand with your little output. We can buy some things and you can design some of the outfits and we'll get other people to make them. And we

need a name for the shop. I thought “The Little Folk’s Cottage” sounded cute. The interior designer can help with the signage . . .’

‘Oh. Well, I guess it is kinda cute. But I insist the clothes I make and design still carry my label,’ said Babs, finally finding some courage.

‘Sure, sure,’ said Alice, waving her hand, ‘although I think we might want to change it to “Heaven to Eleven” so that we can cover a wider range of children’s wear. Why limit ourselves?’

Babs swallowed. She supposed she could live with that. ‘I don’t know how you did all this,’ she said.

‘I got lucky,’ Alice replied with false modesty. But Babs knew there was nothing lucky about it. Alice always knew what she was about and nothing in her life ever seemed to happen by luck or accident. ‘You have to believe in yourself,’ was one of her favourite aphorisms.

And so The Little Folk’s Cottage opened and *The Desert Sun* newspaper took a photograph of the two sisters and Joey at the entrance to the shop. The window displayed a child mannequin dressed in a Heaven to Eleven cowboy outfit standing beside a large patchwork burro that Alice had made. The toy donkey was a big hit. The shop started quietly – so quietly in fact that Babs wondered if Alice had made the right decision to open a store – until one day Alice rang her.

‘Babs, we’re made. You will never guess who came in and bought three different cowboy outfits – Gene Autry! So if we now have the singing cowboy’s seal of approval, the sky’s the limit.’

And Alice was right. With a photograph of the famous cowboy star shopping at The Little Folk’s Cottage displayed in the window, business started to take off. Other film stars began to buy children’s clothes there as well, both for their own families and their friends.

Now Babs was working long hours at home as well as supervising the other seamstresses whom she managed to hire with Sol's help. Since they all worked from their own homes as well, she seemed to be forever travelling around the Palm Springs area, in the cheap secondhand car she'd bought on hire purchase.

'I know we're able to make more clothes for the store, but honestly, the work they do can be pretty rough. Look at this,' said Babs, holding up a little girl's dress. 'This work is far from perfect. It worries me that we're selling inferior clothes.'

'You need to keep a better eye on things,' replied Alice tartly. 'Make them unpick the shoddy work and don't pay them until it's fixed. You need to make more of an effort, Babs. I can't do it all myself.'

The shop became even more successful and Babs found herself working even longer and harder. She hardly ever got to work in the little shop and she missed the quiet evenings when she and Joey used to watch television while she cut out patterns and he sorted and rolled up threads and ribbons and bits of trimming and put them in the right boxes.

Alice, on the other hand, had carved a niche for herself in desert life with gusto. As she'd promised, she'd really got things happening. She was making plans for another store where she could sell expensive women's fashions aimed at the top end of the market. She'd bought a house in Palm Springs and traded in her Oldsmobile for a Cadillac coupe, and was dating an attorney called Spencer.

One evening, after Joey had gone to bed, Babs flopped on the sofa and put her feet up. She'd spent the day driving around, chasing up orders and wondering how she would ever keep the store stocked with clothes that matched her exacting standards. Still, when she reflected

on how much she had achieved in the last few years – a growing, popular children’s clothing brand and a shop, whose success admittedly was due in no small part to the work of her sister – Babs felt that she could take some pride in her own efforts.

She was just about to get herself a glass of iced tea when there was a frantic knock at the door. Alarmed by the urgent rapping, Babs hurried to open it, thinking it might be Alice, impatient to float some new idea.

Instead, on the doorstep was a small, bedraggled young woman. Even though she hadn’t seen her for years, Babs recognised her at once.

‘Cindy?’

‘Auntie Babs, can I come in? I’ve run away.’

2



CINDY STOOD IN THE doorway of the Palm Desert apartment in the cool evening air, tears rolling down her cheeks.

She was relieved now that she was here, but what if her Aunt Babs wouldn't let her come in? Maybe she'd insist that Cindy return home right away. What if her aunt rang her father? She felt a wave of panic surge through her as she tried to read Babs's expression. Maybe running away had not been such a good idea after all.

'Good heavens, run away?' Babs exclaimed. But then she put her arms around Cindy and held her close. 'Come in and tell me what's happened,' she added kindly.

When Cindy heard the gentleness in her aunt's voice, she put her hands to her face and started to sob afresh. Babs patted her back and held her until she felt calmer. With a rush of relief, Cindy knew she'd made the right

decision in turning up unannounced, even though it had been years since she had seen Babs and cousin Joey.

Babs picked up Cindy's small bag, led her into the living room and sat her on the couch. Cindy looked around the little room. It was neatly but sparsely furnished, with an old sofa against one wall and a bookcase full of books on the other, next to a new-looking television set which clearly had pride of place in the room. The dining room table was covered in fabrics, and patterns sat beside a portable sewing machine.

'You look exhausted. Before you tell me anything, Cindy, how about I get you some food and something to drink? Would a sandwich and an iced tea be all right?' asked Babs.

Cindy sniffed and nodded. She was relieved to find that her favourite aunt was exactly as she remembered her, so calm and caring.

'Thank you, Aunt Babs. I'm sorry that I turned up like this, but I just had to get away from home. Where's Joey?'

'He's asleep. He'll be thrilled to see you in the morning.' Babs went into the kitchen, leaving the anxious girl twisting her handkerchief in her hands. 'Cindy, come and keep me company.'

Babs smiled at her niece as the teenager pulled up a stool at the breakfast bar. 'I don't know what's wrong, but I'm so glad that you could come to me with your troubles. I'm sure we'll be able to sort them out, whatever they are. Do you want to tell me what's happened?' she asked gently.

Cindy sat for a moment in silence as Babs made her a pastrami sandwich, then took a breath and raced head-long into an explanation.

'I know it's going to sound silly, but I just hate Spokane. It is the most boring place on earth!' Cindy

shuddered. ‘Dad and Lisa are making me go to secretarial college! I don’t want to be a secretary! I want to get out and travel and *live!*’ She flung her arms out as if to embrace the wide world. ‘Dad and Lisa want me to get a boring steady job. Lisa’s not my real mom anyway.’ She frowned at the thought of her father’s second wife. ‘The idea of another day in Spokane made me feel so miserable, I just couldn’t stay there anymore. Then I thought of you, and we all know how you took the plunge and came here to Palm Springs and then how Aunt Alice followed you, and I thought, why don’t I do that as well? And so I have, and I couldn’t bear it if you sent me back.’ Her eyes filled with tears again as she looked imploringly at her aunt.

Babs handed Cindy a tissue and patted her hand. ‘There, there now. There’s no need to be quite so dramatic. I’m not going to send you home.’ She paused a moment as Cindy blew her nose. ‘You’ve just finished high school, haven’t you?’

Cindy nodded. ‘Yes, and that’s why I thought it was time to leave. Nothing ever happens at home and I thought of all the fun you must have in a place like this, what with all the film stars and celebrities.’

‘And a lot of hard work, too,’ said Babs grimly. ‘So how did you get here?’

‘My girlfriend was going to visit her grandparents in San Francisco and her parents said I could go with her. I told Dad that’s what I was doing, but when I got to San Francisco, I’d already made up my mind that I wanted to see you. I explained everything to my friend, then caught a bus to Los Angeles and another to Palm Springs.’

Babs shook her head. ‘So your father still thinks you’re in San Francisco, does he? Cindy, I know you might object, but I must ring him to tell him you’re staying here for a while. What if he calls your friend’s parents or grandparents and discovers you aren’t there? We certainly don’t

want him contacting the police or anything like that, do we? I'll just tell him you're having a bit of a vacation with us.'

Cindy leaned over and hugged her aunt.

'I knew you wouldn't send me back, Aunt Babs,' she exclaimed. 'I can't thank you enough.'

In the small apartment, it was impossible not to hear her aunt's conversation with her father. It was handled diplomatically and, in less than fifteen minutes, Aunt Babs had persuaded him to let Cindy stay for the summer vacation. She heard Babs add calmly, 'Yes, Deborah was such a dear sister to me; having Cindy stay is no imposition at all.'

After Cindy had eaten her sandwich, she helped her aunt make up a bed on the sofa.

'Try to get a good night's sleep, sweetie,' said Babs. 'You've had a very long and stressful day.' She kissed her niece good night.

Before she fell into a deep sleep, Cindy lay in the dark thinking how lucky she was that Aunt Babs was such an understanding person. Finally she was going to experience the sort of exciting life that had seemed impossible only a few days ago.

*

She woke the next morning to find a young boy with blond hair and a serious face looking down at her.

'I'm Joey,' he announced as soon as her eyes had opened properly.

Cindy smiled at him. 'I know you are. You've certainly grown since last time I saw you! How old are you now, seven?'

'*Eight*,' said Joey in a tone which suggested that Cindy should have been aware of that fact. 'Mom explained you came in the night. It'll be fun to have you stay with us. I'm

having a tennis lesson, but when I get back, I'll show you our pool. You can come swimming too, if you want.'

'Thank you, Joey, that sounds great,' said Cindy.

'See ya, I've got to go.' With that, Joey grabbed his tennis racquet and bolted out the door.

'Morning, Cindy,' said Babs as she came into the room. 'I hope you slept okay? It's not the best of beds, but I think I have a solution to that. Now, would you like some breakfast? I've rung your Aunt Alice and she's on the way over. She can't believe you're here either, and she's dying to see you.'

Half an hour later, Alice arrived in an efficient and energetic flurry. She looked Cindy up and down and then said to Babs, as if Cindy wasn't actually present, 'You're telling me she ran away from home? Why would she do that? Still, I have to say that she's become a very pretty girl, don't you think, Babs? I can see Deb in her, that's for sure.' Cindy had her mother's creamy skin and lovely red-gold hair. Alice carried on brusquely, addressing Cindy this time, 'I hope you won't be bored here. And I hope there'll be no hijinks. I know what teenagers get up to.'

Cindy noticed Babs raise an eyebrow, as though to question Alice's knowledge of teenagers, and Cindy wondered if Alice had ever come into contact with that age group at all.

'I'm so anxious to see your little shop, Aunt Alice,' Cindy said politely.

'It's not so little,' said Alice tartly. 'Are you keen on fashion? I have plans to open a dress shop of my own.'

Cindy nodded. 'I like clothes, of course. I just can't afford to buy them very often.'

'You look very pretty in that,' said Babs, admiring Cindy's full skirt, puffed out with stiffened petticoats. Tucked into its narrow waistband was a white short-sleeved

blouse with a scalloped lace Peter Pan collar. Cindy had added white ankle socks and flat red shoes to complete the outfit.

‘Do you make your own clothes?’ asked Alice.

Cindy shook her head. ‘I have no idea how to sew.’

‘Can you cook?’ asked Alice.

‘No, I can’t do that either. Lisa is always telling me I’m hopeless around the house.’

‘You’ll never land a husband if you can’t do something practical,’ said Alice, throwing up her hands. ‘I can’t believe you can’t sew! What did they teach you at high school, for goodness sake?’

Cindy stifled a groan. ‘Just because I can’t sew, doesn’t mean that I don’t want to learn about fashion, Aunt Alice,’ she said. ‘I’m interested in proper fashion, made by famous designers, and what musicians and film stars like Grace Kelly wear.’

‘Princess Grace has wonderful style,’ agreed Alice. ‘But unfortunately, the same cannot be said for a lot of rock and roll singers, whose influence on teenagers can only be described as unfortunate.’

‘But Aunt Alice, nowadays teenagers are setting their own style. Hey, why don’t you open a teenagers’ clothing store? That’d be sensational,’ suggested Cindy.

‘I hardly think so,’ said Alice, looking like she’d bitten a lemon. ‘I would not like my name associated with anything so tasteless. And who would pay for these clothes? Teenagers don’t have money.’

‘Some do,’ answered Cindy. ‘If they have rich parents. And lots of my friends have part-time jobs, although that’s also to help pay for college.’

‘And which college are you planning on going to?’ asked Alice.

‘Dad wants me to go to *secretarial* college,’ Cindy answered mournfully. ‘Can’t I go to a real college out here?’

‘Of course,’ said Alice briskly. ‘You won’t find a good husband in a college filled with other women!’

‘What do you want to study?’ asked Babs, turning to Cindy.

Cindy shrugged. ‘I don’t really know. I don’t have a burning passion for any one particular career, I’m afraid. Maybe I could become a journalist? I love math, so maybe I could do something with that.’ She cocked her head to one side. ‘I know I would like to travel, so I’d like to do something that would take me anywhere in the world.’

‘Then perhaps you should wait another year or so before you make up your mind,’ said Babs. ‘Wait until your ambition is a little clearer.’

‘Good heavens, Babs, Cindy can’t wait. Everyone goes to college these days and she needs to go right away,’ said Alice emphatically.

‘But we didn’t go to college,’ protested Babs. ‘And you’ve never shown much interest in higher education before.’

‘Different times,’ said Alice briskly. ‘I am now fully aware of the fact that the best way to get a good husband is to meet one at college. They say that if you haven’t got a ring on your finger by the time you graduate, you’ve wasted time and money. If Cindy waits about before actually going, she will be the oldest girl in her class and that will severely limit her chances.’ She held up her hand when she saw Babs trying to interject. ‘No, she must go to a proper college. That’s something she can do over summer: start applying to colleges. Of course, her father will have to pay, but I’ll talk to him and I think we can also help by letting Cindy work for us during the break. All the college kids are mad to find work in summer.’

Cindy beamed at her aunt. Alice was certainly forceful. Cindy could see there was no point arguing with her. Instead she imagined meeting new people and experiencing a different, more exciting lifestyle in college. She would

enjoy her summer break in Palm Springs and then head off to her new life. Then something else occurred to her.

‘My father won’t be too pleased,’ she said quietly.

‘We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it. We can’t always get what we want, your father included. We have to make decisions that are best in the long run,’ said Alice.

‘You’ve always got what you wanted, Alice,’ murmured Babs.

Alice ignored the comment and continued, ‘I don’t think you can stay here with Babs while you’re waiting to get into college, Cindy. There simply isn’t the room.’

‘I don’t mind sleeping on the couch,’ said Cindy hastily.

‘No, Alice is right,’ said Babs regretfully. ‘As much as I would love you to stay with Joey and me, you’d have no privacy, and I get up very early to start work and I’d disturb you. Alice has more space in her place. It’s not so far away, so you can visit, and Cindy, you will always be welcome here. I’ll even give you a key, so you can let yourself in any time you like.’

Cindy thanked her aunt, thinking again how kind Babs was, and how thoughtful. She always seemed to know the right thing to say. Joey was so lucky to have such a wonderful mother. It was times like these she missed her own mother very much.

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Alice’s place was small but cleverly designed and sported lots of white, gilt, glass and mirrored décor. There were ornaments and photo frames everywhere and, as Cindy found out, these were never to be moved from their precise positions. The bathroom displayed a lot of cosmetics, including many free samples, and one shelf by the window was filled with Alice’s collection of elaborate perfume bottles, backlit by the sunlight but never used. In the kitchen, leopard-print giftware paper had been

glued to every surface, including the floor, and Alice had painted over it in layers of clear lacquer to make a hard, shiny surface. The kitchen was small and compact, which suited Alice as she rarely cooked, preferring raw foods like fruit and salads. On the kitchen bench stood several large glass jars holding raw cashews, peanuts, dried apricots and the fresh dates she constantly nibbled on. Her freezer contained organic ice-cream, yoghurt and frozen berries. Hidden in the back of the refrigerator (behind bowls of leftovers she kept till they were too awful to eat, but which seemed to imply that she wasted nothing), she kept a supply of dark chocolate, which, she explained to Cindy, was specifically for her blood and could not be shared. On her small patio a glass-topped table and white metal chairs were surrounded by pots of decorative cacti.

‘I hope you’ll be comfortable here,’ said Alice. ‘But no shenanigans, all right?’

Cindy loved staying in Palm Springs and working with her aunts in the little shop in the hotel lobby. As time passed she managed to curtail her excitement whenever a famous film star walked into the store, and instead was able to point proudly to the beautiful work on the handmade pieces. But she couldn’t help but admire Alice’s brilliant strategy of selling an outfit to just about anyone. She waged psychological warfare on every customer. Nor was Alice averse to a little set dressing. On the desk beside the cash register in full view of her customers, she kept a beautifully wrapped package with a note that she changed every few days. For example, she might write, *Hold for Dolores Hope*, implying that Bob and Dolores Hope were stalwarts of The Little Folk’s Cottage.

Alice was as good as her word when it came to finding a suitable college for Cindy and talking Cindy’s father into paying. One day she announced, ‘My friend Spencer has suggested that you enrol in the University of California at

the Santa Barbara campus, and I agree that it's an excellent choice. I'll speak with your father about the fees, and you can keep working for us over the summer to help cover the costs. However, you might have to look for a part-time job in Santa Barbara as well.' Cindy was only too happy to agree.

Alice made no secret of the fact that she was now committed to going full-steam ahead with her fashionable dress shop and had begun to look for suitable stock.

'I've found just the place for the store. Spencer has helped me so much. Being an attorney here, he knows what's what. Evidently, the man who originally leased the premises is in some financial trouble, so I can take over his lease at a good price,' she told Cindy one evening. Then, after a buying trip to Los Angeles, she decided to get Cindy to model the samples she'd brought back. Cindy smiled with pleasure and disappeared into the bedroom to change.

'Just be very careful putting them on. I don't want you doing any damage.'

There was a knock at the door and Babs let herself in to Alice's apartment as Cindy walked gracefully into the living room modelling a shantung sheath dress.

'Cindy, you look beautiful!' cried Babs.

Alice studied Cindy closely. 'I think I might put on a fashion luncheon at the Racquet Club. I know so many people there, and they always admire what I'm wearing, so I'll have no difficulty in arranging it. I think a fashion parade would be an excellent way of bringing my business to people's attention. And Spencer will know all the right people to ask. He has wonderful contacts, not just here, but in LA as well.'

'Spencer has certainly been a help. Very attentive to you,' said Babs with a raised eyebrow and a slight smile, both of which Alice ignored.

‘What are you going to call the shop?’ asked Cindy.

‘It will be “The Sun Garden”,’ said Alice emphatically. ‘The place has a little courtyard in the front, so I thought I’d put in a pretty garden setting with just a few tables, some umbrellas and wrought-iron chairs, then we can serve cream teas, sandwiches and coffees as well as cold drinks. Homemade food, of course.’

‘How cute!’ said Cindy.

‘Sounds like a lot of work,’ said Babs. ‘Is that necessary in a dress shop?’

Alice threw her hands in the air dramatically. ‘Of course it is. Haven’t you noticed how people browse and try things on then go away for lunch to “think about it” and never come back? If they can eat on the spot, they’ll buy at the same time. I just know it.’

Cindy looked at Babs, who gave her a wry smile. Alice certainly was formidable. Although The Sun Garden was exclusively Alice’s venture, the two sisters talked about the new shop together: which suppliers to contact, how to get the best deals. Cindy returned to the bedroom and changed into her regular clothes. Listening to her aunts talk, she felt her mind wander. She loved her aunts and was enjoying her time with them, but sometimes she still felt a sense of restlessness. She would never say that to her aunts, because she didn’t want to appear ungrateful, and it wasn’t as though she wasn’t having a good time. She wasn’t trapped in Spokane any more, but at this time of year there were few visitors to Palm Springs, and Cindy had begun to feel bored. She found that she was counting down the days to the start of the college year.

*

Cindy found a welcome distraction in talking to her aunt’s neighbours, Deidre and Sol, who could be very interesting company. It was Deidre who introduced her to Adsila, an

Agua Caliente Indian who came in once a week to do the ironing and help clean the Kramers's apartment.

Adsila lived on Section 14 on the edge of the town with her quiet and gentle husband Francis, who brought his alfalfa, dates and figs into town to sell each week at the market.

When she had the opportunity, Cindy loved to talk to the Indian woman as she ironed, although Adsila was usually quite reticent. One day, when they were talking, Adsila mentioned that she would have to catch the bus home that evening as her husband had to remain in town longer than usual and she didn't want to stay back. Deidre, who was obviously fond of the woman, immediately offered to drive her, and Cindy asked if she could come too.

Deidre drove out to Section 14, which wasn't far from the centre of Palm Springs, but the contrast between the two places was startling. The dwellings in Section 14 were made of bark and mud brick and it was clear that most of the living took place outside, by the open cooking fires. Most of the buildings had been erected before the building codes of Palm Springs had even existed, and Cindy was shocked to see that they were not much better than shanties.

Adsila got out of the car and asked the others to follow her, ushering them over to her little house with its dirt floor. They sat outside on stools as Adsila brought out some baked corn chips on a woven tray, and dates in a bowl.

When Cindy admired the beautiful woven baskets and painted clay cooking pots outside the door, Adsila looked pleased. 'I make these,' she said in her softly spoken way.

Cindy thought that the fine workmanship and intricate patterns, so tightly and smoothly woven together, made the baskets more like works of art than merely

functional pieces. After they'd eaten, Adsila took them into a thatched granary where her food supplies were kept and showed them the dried grasses she used for weaving. When Cindy saw the huge storage baskets there, she was enthralled. She could see Adsila was also working on other baskets, their tightly bound coils kept in water so the grass stayed flaccid and soft and easier to weave.

'What do these patterns mean, Adsila?' asked Cindy as they sat down beside her on the beaten-earth floor.

In her careful, deliberate manner, Adsila explained that they were symbols for what she saw around her, the jagged yucca plants, delicate desert flowers, lightning in the sky, bird feathers and the whorls of a dust storm.

'Some patterns are traditional, but some I created myself,' she explained modestly. 'After white people came here many years ago, our people began to use metal and stopped making baskets. But I think weaving is important to maintain our culture, so I continue to make them. There are some white people who value what we do and like to collect our work.'

Cindy was fascinated as she watched Adsila's brown leathery hands demonstrate how she twisted the grass coils so smoothly and expertly. Smiling, Adsila handed the work to Cindy and slowly guided her hands, showing her the weaving technique the Indian woman had made look so simple and fluid.

'It's quite hard. I feel so clumsy.' Cindy laughed. 'What patience you need for this. Thank you so much for showing me.'

The women got to their feet, brushing the dust from their skirts, and, farewelling Adsila, made their way back to the car. Suddenly Adsila ran back into the hut. 'Please wait,' she called. A minute later she appeared at Cindy's window and pushed a small woven bowl towards her.

'From me,' she said simply.

‘That’s so generous. Thank you so much!’ exclaimed Cindy. She clasped Adsila’s hands in thanks as Deidre started the engine. As the dust whirled under their wheels, Cindy waved to Adsila.

‘It’s a shame their crafts aren’t more appreciated,’ Cindy commented to Deidre on the way home. ‘Aunt Alice should buy some. They would make a lovely decoration for her new shop. She could even sell them.’

But when Cindy showed Alice the woven basket, her aunt dismissed the idea.

‘Good heavens, Cindy. Whatever are you thinking? I’m starting a fashionable dress shop, not opening an Indian trading store.’

So Cindy put the woven bowl with its beautiful pattern in her room and treasured it.

*

Finally, the launch day of The Sun Garden arrived. Although the weather was still very hot and Palm Springs was bereft of tourists, Alice had decided to go ahead anyway.

‘Not much point in paying rent and not opening. There are enough locals to make it work, at least until the crowds start arriving again.’

True to her word, Alice had organised a fashion parade at the Racquet Club. She had plenty of volunteer models, including Cindy, and considering that the event was out of season, a large crowd of women turned up. The guests sat under shady umbrellas that were set around the pool and Alice took centre stage with the microphone, describing each dress in detail. As the models made their way around the club’s pool and through the appreciative audience, the outfits were much admired. By the end of the parade, when everyone was milling around with cool drinks, it was clear that there had been enough interest and orders taken for the event to be declared a success.

Although Cindy preferred to work in The Little Folk's Cottage, Alice demanded that she also work at The Sun Garden once it had opened.

'You need to expand your horizons,' she said. 'Selling baby clothes is too limiting.'

Cindy had to admit that Aunt Alice certainly knew how to sell fashionable dresses.

'Now listen to me, Cindy,' Alice instructed her niece on her first day in the store. 'When a woman shows an interest in something, don't rush at her. Always check out the stock first. Know what sizes and colours we have and if we don't have a bigger size, tell her the dress is the new hug-the-hip look, and it makes her look slim. If we don't have the frock in green, casually mention that this season's most fashionable colour is orange.'

And Cindy had seen Alice in action. When one customer had managed to squeeze her rolls of fat into a sequined cocktail dress and then asked seriously, 'So, how do I look in this?' Alice had clapped her hands to her face. 'Madame, really . . . words fail me. Simply fail me.' And proceeded to kiss her fingertips and gesture like a chef recommending the day's special. Naturally, a sale was made. Cindy enjoyed working in the shop, although she never seemed to reach her aunt's exacting standards.

A short time after the shop opened, Cindy was thrilled when Deidre invited all the family, including Alice and Spencer to a big charity fundraiser at the Thunderbird Club. Pearl McCallum-McManus had a table and Bob Hope was to be the MC. Babs declined the invitation, even after Cindy had offered to babysit Joey, saying that it really wasn't her sort of thing. Cindy really wished that Babs would go out a bit more. It seemed a shame that such a lovely and attractive woman did not have a chance to socialise more.

Wearing a full-skirted, pleated chiffon cocktail dress, and with her hair up in a French roll, Cindy looked older than her eighteen years. The young waiters, who'd returned home from college or had taken summer jobs, were clearly impressed. But Cindy took little notice of them; she was far too excited watching the celebrities as they moved around the room, chatting to each other or dancing to the band music.

The round tables were covered with starched cloths and decorated with elaborate centrepieces of fresh flowers. The laughter and chatter, the band and the popular singer made the room noisy but exciting. There were raffles with fabulous prizes and the silent charity auction produced bids of dizzying sums. Most people danced the quickstep and slower-paced dances, but when the band played rock and roll numbers there were plenty of participants. For Cindy the whole atmosphere was like she imagined champagne to be: bubbles and light-headedness.

She was sitting by herself at the table, as Sol and Deidre were on the dance floor and Alice had taken herself to the bathroom to freshen up, when Spencer came over to her with a friend.

'What, no Alice? I wanted to introduce her to one of my favourite clients,' he said to Cindy. Turning to his friend, he added, 'This is Alice's niece, Kirk. This is Cindy.'

Cindy turned around and found herself looking at one of Hollywood's biggest stars, Kirk Douglas.

'How are you, Cindy?' he asked. 'Enjoying your night?'

Cindy, completely starstruck, could only manage a faint, 'Yes, Mr Douglas.' He was so tanned, such blue eyes, such white teeth.

'I suppose you're on your college break,' Kirk said.

'I haven't actually started yet. I go next week, Mr Douglas.'

‘Where are you enrolled?’

‘UC Santa Barbara. I’m so excited. Nervous too, though.’

‘For heaven’s sake, that’s where my son Michael wants to go next year. I’ll have to tell him I’ve met one very pretty gal who goes there already. Do you think you could manage a dance with someone who has a son nearly your age?’

‘Of course! Thank you.’ Cindy couldn’t stop smiling, and for the next few minutes she could hardly believe she was twirling around the dance floor with one of Hollywood’s biggest film stars. After the dance, Kirk Douglas returned her to the table and wished her luck. When Alice came back, Cindy told her what had happened.

‘You were lucky,’ said her aunt. ‘Had I not been in the bathroom, he would have danced with me instead.’

During the next week, Cindy couldn’t stop talking about the wonderful time she’d had, the people she’d seen and the sheer glamour and fun of it all. This was why she had left Spokane! And she was looking forward to going to college as well. With only days remaining till she left for Santa Barbara, she packed and repacked a dozen times in nervous anticipation. She pictured her dorm, her classmates, the teachers and campus, and she was filled with excitement.

Before she left for college, Babs asked Cindy and Alice over for a farewell dinner. After the meal, Joey announced that he was in the middle of a very exciting Hardy Boys book and that he couldn’t wait to find out what would happen next, so he went to his room to read, leaving the three women talking around the table.

‘Cindy, I hope you enjoy yourself at college,’ said Babs. ‘I wish I’d had the chance to go. If you want my advice, you should play the field. Get to know lots of boys, so that when the right one comes along you’ll know he’s

Mr Right.’ Babs sighed and looked down at her hands. ‘I never got the chance to enjoy just being carefree and doing things with my friends. I met and married Howard so young and suddenly all other doors were closed to me. Joey is the only good thing to have come from my marriage.’

‘I have to disagree,’ said Alice, predictably, ‘though Babs is half right. I think you should meet lots of young men, but don’t wait too long before settling on someone suitable. If you hold back, someone else will get there first. Those boys from good families get snapped up fast.’

‘The rich boys won’t be interested in a girl like me. I bet they stick to their own kind,’ said Cindy bashfully.

‘I’m sure you’ll meet someone wonderful,’ said Babs, patting Cindy’s hand.

‘I hope so,’ said Cindy. ‘But I hope I get the chance to travel too.’ She looked wistful. ‘There’s a big world out there and I’m just itching to find out all about it.’

Two days later, Cindy set off for college in the little second-hand car she’d bought for herself with some of the money she’d earned over the summer break. As soon as she arrived on campus at Santa Barbara, she fell in love with the school. Set dramatically on cliffs above the Pacific Ocean, UCSB boasted its own beach. With the Californian climate, much use was made of the outdoor settings for social and class events. Fraternities and sororities flourished, most established in boarding houses and shared homes in the surrounding district. Cindy was unsure which of the seven sororities she should join, but after attending the sorority teas and meeting members and being assessed in turn, she was thrilled when what she considered to be one of the best sororities invited her to be a member.

She shared a large room with a girl from La Jolla named Chrissie Simmons, who had a huge poster of John F. Kennedy on the wall.

‘Isn’t he the most gorgeous man you’ve ever seen? Way better than Tricky Dicky Nixon, don’t you think?’ she asked Cindy. ‘I just love JFK. You are happy to have him on the wall, aren’t you?’

Cindy looked at the picture of the handsome young candidate. ‘He can stay, as far as I’m concerned,’ she said. ‘I think that Jackie Kennedy is one lucky woman.’

Chrissie was sports mad and spent most of her time playing softball, volleyball, or tennis. Cindy was less keen on sport, but she loved going to the beach with her sorority sisters. Here they would often meet the ‘frats’ from the men’s fraternity houses, and swim together and then cook marshmallows over a fire on the sand after the sun had gone down. Some of the boys played guitars and they all sang along. Cindy found that, while others were homesick, she thrived on being in a new place and meeting new people. She loved the novelty of college and being able to be independent and make her own decisions, while others struggled to find themselves and fit in. She was conscientious about her work; her grades were always above average, and she excelled at math.

Her father paid her semester tuition, but she was responsible for paying for her food, rent, books and everything else, and Cindy quickly realised that the money she’d earned in Palm Springs would not be enough to last all year. So once she’d settled in she applied for a job as a sales assistant in a women’s clothing store in downtown Santa Barbara. After a ten-minute interview, she had the job. Cindy mentally thanked Alice for the crash course she’d received in selling fashion. Even working some hours in the shop and attending classes, she still had plenty of time for an active social life. She was regularly asked out on dates by eligible young men, but none of them seemed quite what she was looking for. Then one day her sorority decided to have an open house and asked the college

football team and cheerleaders over for a party. It was at this party that Cindy met star quarterback Robbie Wilson.

As soon as she met him, she was bowled over. He was unbelievably good-looking. At just over six feet tall and with thick blond hair and a laugh that made people stop to look at him with a smile, he turned heads everywhere he went. He arrived at the party smartly dressed in a preppy striped Brooks Brothers shirt with a button-down collar, a neat pair of sand-coloured chinos and tan brogues. Cindy noticed him as soon as he entered the room and they seemed drawn to one another. Cindy approached him, welcoming him to the sorority open house, and their conversation flowed effortlessly. Robbie told her that he was from Sacramento, where his family had lived for more than a hundred years. Cindy explained how she'd moved from Washington state to Palm Springs.

'The desert, huh?' said Robbie, flashing his movie-star smile. 'Cool place. Well, really it's not. It's hot.' They both laughed. Sitting on a sofa, a bowl of popcorn between them, they talked, laughed a lot and even flirted a little. Cindy felt interesting and attractive. Robbie was disarmingly modest, even though every other girl in the room had her eyes on him. At the end of the evening, he asked if he could visit Cindy at the sorority house. Cindy was ecstatic.

'Wow,' said Chrissie, when Cindy told her what had happened. 'That guy is a serious jock. Everyone will be so envious when he comes over. Just about every woman on campus has tried to get Robbie Wilson to show an interest, and he's never bothered with any other girl.'

It wasn't long before Cindy and Robbie became an item. Robbie was two years older than Cindy and more than halfway through his degree. He planned to go to law school when he finished at UCSB, but, as he pointed out, that was still some way off. In the meantime, they met

regularly, though Robbie's training and games took up a lot of his time. Cindy went to the games, revelling in being his girl.

Despite having a very full calendar, Cindy liked to get back to Palm Springs to see her aunts when she had the chance, even at Thanksgiving and Christmas, when there was not enough time to drive back to Spokane to see her father. However, she was bitterly disappointed that she could not get away for the weekend of Alice's wedding to Spencer. Babs told her afterwards that it was a surprisingly low-key affair, very intimate and chic. Alice and Spencer were now busy building a house for themselves and were up to their elbows in plans, landscaping and décor. With The Little Folk's Cottage doing well, Babs had decided to rent a slightly bigger house not far from Hacienda Hideaway and Deidre and Sol. It was not much larger than her old apartment, but as it had three bedrooms, Cindy slept in Babs's sewing room cum guest room each time she visited and she found the new arrangements much more comfortable than staying with Alice.

When she was in Palm Springs, Cindy talked constantly about Robbie. 'I can't wait for you to meet him. He's promised to come here some time. I've told him all about you and Joey.'

'You seem very pleased with Robbie,' said Babs. 'But I still think you should look around. Don't get tied down with one person. Play the field.'

Alice shook her head impatiently and ignored Babs's comment. 'When he comes to visit, I'll get Spencer to talk to him about law schools. Spencer will be able to point him in the right direction. And you're not letting him take any liberties, are you?' she added bluntly. 'We don't want you ending up with an unwanted pregnancy.'

Cindy was shocked that Alice could be so tactless in front of Babs.

‘Aunt Alice!’ she said. ‘No, Robbie is a perfect gentleman.’ Cindy’s sorority sisters frequently complained about fending off their overfamiliar boyfriends, but, much to Cindy’s relief, Robbie respected Cindy’s determination to save herself for her wedding night. She frowned at Alice and brusquely changed the subject. ‘A group of us are thinking about taking a trip to Mexico during the spring break. Would you be upset if I went, rather than coming back here?’

‘No, of course not. You just have a good time, but Cindy, do be careful,’ said Babs.

‘Personally, I don’t think it’s safe,’ said Alice emphatically. ‘Mexico is full of drugs and bandits and villains. Terrible place. Why would you want to go there?’

‘We’ll be fine, Aunt Alice. It’s not like I’m going by myself. I’ll be in a group. Please don’t worry.’

*

Several weeks later, Cindy, Chrissie and a group of their sorority and fraternity friends headed south. Cindy and Robbie went separately, as they both took their cars. It took two days for them all to reach the beachside township where they planned to stay. The queues of cars and inspections at the border in Tijuana were slightly intimidating, but once they were through that, they all felt they were south of the border in more ways than one.

They stayed in a very basic hotel, which Chrissie described as being minus one star. Thin mattresses, no hot water and certainly no air conditioning, but its location was amazing. Cindy was stunned by the brilliant blue warm water, miles of sandy beaches, and rustic cafés and bars. The boys quickly flung themselves into the waves while the girls organised the rooms: the women in the ones nearest the beach, the men in the row behind. Several of the boys who were short on cash planned to sleep on

the beach. Everyone quickly got into the spirit of Mexico and began ordering local long-necked beers with lime wedges jammed in the top and fresh shrimps in tall cocktail glasses soaked in tequila and tomato juice.

The food was spicy, the days hot and languid, and the stories and jokes they told each other became more and more outlandish. Everyone was drinking far too much of the cheap and plentiful alcohol. Cindy found out for herself that tequila really was potent stuff and once, after a big night, she woke up the next morning with a splitting headache. She was a bit more circumspect after that. But most of the boys continued to drink heavily, and after a while Cindy found their behaviour boorish, and it seemed to get worse when a group from Fresno joined them. She was glad that Robbie, who was a little older than the others, was not inclined to show off by getting drunk. And they both quickly found that they liked to get away from the others now and then by wandering into the little town behind the beach to look around and sample the Mexican food.

The night before they were due to leave, Cindy and Robbie walked hand in hand along the beach. They talked about the future and planned many more trips abroad.

‘Have you had a good time on this trip, Cindy?’ Robbie asked.

‘It’s been wonderful,’ Cindy replied. ‘But I can’t help but notice how poor the people around here are. It makes me feel a bit uncomfortable when it’s clear that we have so much and they have so little. They seem happy, though.’

‘Maybe that’s because they are perfectly content with their lives,’ suggested Robbie.

Cindy considered this. ‘Or maybe it’s because they don’t know any other way to live. Maybe they don’t think there are any alternatives.’

‘Perhaps for some people there *are* no alternatives,’ said Robbie quietly.

‘I think there are always alternatives,’ said Cindy brightly, though as she spoke she wondered if she really believed this.

‘I hope you’re right,’ Robbie murmured, then he bent over and kissed her, and she returned his kiss with passion, but Robbie seemed distracted.

‘Robbie, are you okay?’ she asked softly.

Robbie looked away. ‘I’m sorry. I’m spoiling our last night. Let’s have a swim in the moonlight while we still have the chance.’

As Cindy swam in the warm waters of the Pacific Ocean, she felt her heart overflow with emotion. She hoped she would have the chance to travel again soon. Seeing new places, meeting different types of people and experiencing new cultures fulfilled a deep need inside her, as though it was something that was meant to be. And as she glanced at Robbie, Cindy sighed with happiness. It had been a perfect trip.

As she drove back to Palm Springs at the end of her freshman year, Cindy thought about how happy she was with the way things had gone for her at UCSB. Although she had not topped any of her classes, she felt that she had done well enough academically. She had some great friends amongst her sorority sisters, and then there was Robbie. He seemed so much more mature than the other boys and she was pleased that he was single-minded about wanting to pursue a legal career and wasn’t just attending college to have a good time. Robbie was so nice and so much fun to be with and all the other sorority sisters envied her good luck in finding such a wonderful boyfriend. In fact, Cindy hoped that soon he would be more than her boyfriend. She didn’t want to jinx it, but she felt sure he would propose soon. When he put his arm around her, she felt a warm glow that went right down to her toes. Robbie had promised to visit her

over the summer vacation and she desperately hoped he would keep his promise.

‘You certainly seem infatuated with this Robbie,’ said Alice, when Cindy went over to see her. ‘But be careful, don’t throw yourself away on the first boy who comes along.’

‘But you said not to wait too long, or someone else would grab the good ones!’ Cindy spluttered.

‘Nonsense, Cindy, you can do better, I have no doubt. Besides, you need to make a good career for yourself. You can’t just rely on a man to look after you. Your mother was far too wishy-washy. You need to be more like me. Independent.’

As much as Cindy loved her aunt, Alice always swung with the wind, so it was difficult to know just where things really stood with her. ‘You haven’t even met him yet. When he comes to visit, you’ll see just how great he is,’ she retorted.

Luckily Cindy didn’t have long to wait. Only two weeks into the vacation, Robbie called to ask if it would be convenient for him to come and stay a few days. He had landed a summer job in a law firm in Sacramento, he said, and wanted to see Cindy before he started there. ‘I’ll just be an office boy, really, but it’s going to be so exciting being part of a busy law firm. One more year and then I’ll be in law school. I’m sorry that I can’t visit for long, but I really can’t let this opportunity go.’ The enthusiasm was clear in his voice and Cindy hoped she was part of the future he was building towards.

As Robbie’s arrival approached she found she was beside herself with excitement, and when Robbie pulled up outside Aunt Babs’s house and climbed out of his car looking so handsome and so nicely dressed and presentable, Cindy felt as if her heart would burst. Even Alice couldn’t find a critical comment to make.

Alice invited them all around to her new house for dinner the next evening, and all the men dressed in a jacket and tie, even Joey. Robbie, who had not expected to be attending such a formal event, had to go and buy a tie.

‘It’s such a shame Spencer is in Beverly Hills seeing a client this evening,’ said Alice. ‘But let me show you round. A little *tour de la maison*. This place is the latest in desert chic. One of the magazines is coming to take photos.’

Alice, in new sandals made of Perspex with plastic flowers trapped in the clear high heels, click-clacked her way across the patio. The house had a large open-plan living room, where the focal point was an enormous fire-place set in a wall made entirely of slabs of local stones. The furniture was sleek ultra-modern Danish. The kitchen had all the latest appliances, which amused Cindy as she knew her aunt was not at all interested in cooking. *Maybe Spencer cooks*, she thought. But then they were shown the barbecue and bar, which Alice told them was Spencer’s domain. The roof of the house was flat, so anyone in the vast swimming pool had uninterrupted views of the mountains that rose in the distance behind the house. The living room had a plate-glass, floor-to-ceiling window that looked across the green lawn with its geometrically placed potted plants towards the desert and snow-capped mountains.

‘Cindy tells me that you’ll be working in a law firm over the summer vacation. My first husband was an attorney and Spencer is, too,’ said Alice. ‘I think it is the only real profession.’

‘Alice, there are lots of real professions,’ retorted Babs. ‘What about doctors, or accountants, or dentists, for that matter?’

‘I suppose you’re right about doctors, but they tend to keep very long hours, which would spoil one’s social life. And I think that all the other professions are not really on

a par with attorneys. No, young man, you've made the right choice for a career. Money and prestige, that's what it's all about.'

'I'm quite interested in the law, too,' Robbie pointed out.

'Oh, that,' said Alice blithely. 'Well, I suppose Spencer is too, sometimes.'

'What law school do you want to get into?' asked Babs.

'I've applied for both Stanford and Harvard, but I would really love to get into Harvard. It's the best school in the States, and I would make such great contacts there, as well.'

Cindy gulped. Robbie had never mentioned Harvard to her. What would happen to their relationship if he got in there? Stanford was bad enough, but at least it was in California. Harvard was on the other side of the country! It didn't bear thinking about. Still, he might not get the marks. As soon as that thought occurred to Cindy, she felt mean. Of course she wanted Robbie to get into the best law school he could.

Dinner turned out to be a bit of a disaster. It started well enough when Alice presented everyone with a salad that she had made herself. It was beautifully decorated and only marred by the fact that the ranch-style dressing had sat in the refrigerator too long and had set. Then she brought a pie to the table.

'It's chicken pot pie,' she said. 'Now I hope that everyone is up for a big serve. Of course I shan't have any, I've had plenty of salad. As my family knows, Robbie, I don't think that cooked foods are very healthy. I try only to eat food that is in its raw state.'

So saying, Alice served up enormous slices of pie to everyone else. Unfortunately, she had bought a frozen pie from the supermarket and had not bothered to defrost it

properly before putting it in the oven and then had not given it enough time to cook all the way through. Cindy realised straight away that the pie was only cooked at the edges and still frozen in the centre. Everyone dutifully tried to eat the edible bits, but Alice noticed how much they all left on their plates.

‘Perhaps I shouldn’t have commented on my dislike for unhealthy cooked food, because it seems to have put you all off your chicken pie. Never mind, I have a lovely Key lime pie for dessert.’

The Key lime pie certainly looked splendid and was piled high with meringue and thick cream on top, the whole confection standing at least eight inches high on the plate.

‘This is lovely,’ Robbie said politely. ‘Did you make it yourself?’

‘Why, thank you, Robbie. Actually, it’s a Sara Lee, but I added all the extra cream myself.’

Cindy couldn’t look at Robbie in case she started giggling.

*

In many ways, Cindy’s sophomore year proved to be even better than her freshman year. She did not try for another part-time job because she thought that if she budgeted carefully enough, her summer earnings from working for her aunts plus babysitting for a wealthy client of Spencer’s would be enough to see her through. She performed well academically, excelling in math as always.

Her relationship with Robbie was her one disappointment. She saw a good deal less of him that year than she had in her freshman year. He still seemed to delight in her company and was as affectionate as ever, and she was sure that there was no one else, but he didn’t come around to the sorority house as he had the previous year, nor did he

want to come out with their friends as often. When Cindy said something about hardly ever seeing him, Robbie said that everything was fine and he was just studying as hard as he could to get into law school.

Cindy told Babs that she was worried about him.

‘Sometimes I think he puts way too much pressure on himself so he can get into one of the Ivy League law schools. Did I tell you he’s decided not to play football this year because it will take too much of his time?’

‘He sounds like a sensible young man looking out for his future,’ said Babs. ‘I hope that Joey is as single-minded when it comes to his future, too. You have to admire him.’

But Cindy didn’t feel reassured. ‘Auntie Babs, what if he gets into Harvard? That’s all the way on the other side of the country. I’ll never see him.’

‘Well, then we just have to hope that he gets into Stanford,’ replied Babs.

Robbie continued to reassure Cindy that, as far as he was concerned, their relationship hadn’t changed, but Cindy wasn’t so sure. At Christmas, instead of the engagement ring she had been hoping for, he gave her a single pearl pendant instead. Though she was a bit disappointed, the necklace was so lovely that Cindy decided to think of it as a sign of things to come. She vowed she would never take it off.

‘That’s just beautiful,’ said Babs, as she admired the gleaming trinket.

‘It looks to me like one of those Japanese cultured pearls,’ said Alice. ‘Still, I suppose it’s the thought that counts.’

On the day of Robbie’s commencement ceremony, she was almost as excited as Robbie himself. She sat proudly near his parents, pleased that his hard work had paid off, as he’d not only come third in his year, he had been

chosen to give the valedictory speech on behalf of all the graduating students. Cindy felt very tenderly towards him as he leaned into the microphone and began to talk about the promise of tomorrow.

Afterwards, she posed for lots of photographs with Robbie and his parents. As he left with them to return to Sacramento, he assured her he would ring her regularly. 'Nothing is going to change between us, I promise you, Cindy,' he said as he kissed her goodbye.

Cindy returned to Palm Springs for the summer after briefly visiting her father in Spokane. Seeing her old town again confirmed that the move to California had been the right thing to do.

Robbie rang her as promised for the first couple of weeks. No, he hadn't heard back from the law schools where he'd applied, but as soon as he got any news, he'd let her know.

Then the phone calls became irregular. Robbie often sounded distracted and sometimes they struggled to talk at length. Cindy was upset, but she knew he was working again in the law office in Sacramento, and that he was probably busy, as indeed she was, working between her aunts' two shops.

Then a letter arrived from Robbie.

His excitement was clear in the opening line: *Wonderful news! I've been accepted into Harvard Law School!* But she had to reread again and again the next lines: *So I think it best if we break up our friendship now. You are so lovely, but if we try to keep the relationship going, I'll never be able to concentrate fully on my studies. I know this may seem unfair, as you've done nothing but support me and my ambitions in all the time I've known you, but in the end I feel that I must put my career first. I've struggled to make this decision as I truly had feelings for you, but now I must move on. I hope one day you*

find someone who is really deserving of your love. I wish you all the best for the future and I will never stop caring for you, and hope we will continue to be friends. Love, Robbie.

Friends! Cindy burst into tears. She tore off her pearl pendant and flung it to the other side of the room, where it hit the wall and then slid down behind the bookcase. How dare Robbie break it off! Everything he'd said about nothing changing between them had been a lie. How cruel and selfish he was!

She read the letter through several times, trying to make sense of it. 'What is he saying? He loves me so much that I'll ruin his career?' she asked the empty room. But she didn't want him to leave her. She loved him and she knew that she would never be able to love anyone as much again. She was convinced that Robbie was the only man who could make her happy. All her wedding day dreams disintegrated before her eyes.

When Babs got home later that evening, she found Cindy on the sofa, her eyes red and swollen from crying.

'Oh, you poor girl,' she said, when Cindy had choked out what had happened. 'What a terrible, self-serving letter. You might not realise it now, but if that is the sort of person Robbie is, then you're well rid of him. I know you don't believe me, but you'll find out that I'm right.'

'But I love him,' sobbed Cindy, burying her face in her aunt's lap. 'I thought he was going to propose!'

Babs stroked her hair. 'I know, sweetheart. It's your first great love. We all get our hearts broken at some stage. I know that's no consolation.'

'I told you he wasn't up to par,' said Alice bluntly, when she heard about the letter. 'Move on. You can do a lot better. Personally, I think he has piggy, calculating eyes. You can tell so much about a person by their eyes. I had my doubts right from the start.'

‘Oh, Alice. He does not have piggy eyes,’ Cindy protested. ‘They’re a lovely blue, and sort of haunting.’ Then she burst into tears again.

For the next few weeks, Cindy moped. She refused to talk to her girlfriends, not even Chrissie. She felt she could never again trust any man not to lie to her and besides, she just knew that none of them could ever compare to Robbie.

‘What will I tell my friends back at college? Everyone thought that Robbie and I were the perfect couple. What will they think when I tell them that he dumped me?’ she said to Babs.

‘They’ll think he made a very silly decision,’ said Babs.

‘Say *you* dumped *him*,’ advised Alice. ‘Many more fish in the sea, Cindy, but you won’t catch them if you don’t go fishing. You’d better get back out there soon! Besides, your mopey face isn’t good for business. Who wants to buy an expensive dress from someone who looks so doomed?’

The thought of having to smile, chat brightly and put on her happy face for the rest of the summer seemed too hard. Cindy felt bruised and sad. She lay down on her bed and hugged her pillow to her chest. She caught a glimpse of the pearl necklace lying under the bookcase, the sunlight making its polished surface gleam. The sight of it caused her to burst into fresh tears. It was no use. Her heart was broken, her future in tatters, and she wondered how she would ever heal.

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