



‘Quite frankly, you’re making a tremendous mistake,’ Simone Glass’s sister Greta said while watching her pack up her Jeep.

Simone could have said a lot of things in response. She could have mentioned that Greta had uttered this exact sentence at least five or six hundred times since Simone had announced her decision to move to Los Angeles, and, *quite frankly*, she was sick and tired of hearing it. She could have added that it would be nice – *tremendously* nice – if Greta would shut up, bend over, and help load these boxes before Simone’s spine *quite frankly* split in two.

Instead, she said nothing. It was easier on the lungs.

Greta said, ‘On top of everything else, it will be Santa Ana season in a month.’

Simone could feel a statistic coming . . .

‘Do you realize that during Santa Ana season, violent crime in LA increases by ninety-eight percent?’

*Yep, there it is. Regular as sunrise.* ‘Really, Greta? Ninety-eight percent? And all because of some warm winds.’ Simone shoved her last box of books in the back of the Wrangler and gave her older sister a long, steady glare. To the core of Greta’s soul, she was a cable TV news anchor. She oozed hyperbole. ‘Good thing it doesn’t snow

in LA,' said Simone. 'Or else we'd be talking . . . what? Anarchy?'

'Look, I could understand it if you were going out there for a real job—'

'Excuse me, but the *LA Edge* happens to be one of the most respected weekly newspapers in the United—'

'I'm sure it's very nice.'

Simone's jaw tightened. She felt her cheeks heat up. She was glad she'd been exerting herself so she could blame the red face on that, but still . . . 'Twenty-five people from my class at Columbia tried for this job and . . .' She could hear the hurt in her voice. 'Forget it.'

'Listen, I don't mean to upset you. But I've been a journalist a lot longer than you and LA is no place to start a career.' She put a hand on Simone's shoulder, and her face went serious. 'Did you hear about Nia Lawson?'

Simone squinted at her. 'You mean that actress who had an affair with . . . the congressman . . . What was his name?'

'She killed herself.' Greta's tone was hushed and pained, as if she were talking about a dear friend rather than a Trivial Pursuit answer.

For a moment, Simone thought her sister was going to start crying. 'Did you know her or something?' she said.

'No, but we're doing a story on her.'

'Ah. Well, I'm sorry for your loss.'

'Nia Lawson took a dozen Nembutal so she could die just like her idol, Marilyn Monroe. And when she couldn't keep the pills down, she cut her own throat with some kind of . . . fish-gutting knife.'

'Why are you telling me this?'

Greta gazed at her sister as if she had a red ON AIR sign blinking atop her head. 'Dreams don't just get crushed in LA, Simone. They crush you.'

Simone rolled her eyes. ‘Good night, Greta, and have a pleasant tomorrow.’ She opened the Jeep’s driver’s-side door and got in.

Greta said, ‘You’re leaving? Now?’

‘Yes,’ said Simone. ‘And by the way, I think you do.’

‘Think I do what?’

‘Mean to upset me.’

She pulled away from the curb without saying good-bye. Throughout her five-day drive across the country, Simone received text messages from her sister. (*U need 2 grow up*. Honestly, how could anyone *not* see the irony in that?) And Simone ignored them, telling herself she didn’t care what Greta thought about her new job; she was more of a journalist at birth than Greta had been in her whole teeth-bleaching, spray-on-tanning, nose-job-getting lifetime.

But then there was that one night in the Best Western, just outside of Carson City, Nevada. Unable to sleep, Simone turned on the TV to a rebroadcast of Greta’s new criminal law show, *Legal Tender*. She was about to snap it right off, until Nia Lawson’s picture flashed on-screen and Simone finally remembered the name of the congressman and her curiosity got the best of her.

Simone turned the sound up. ‘. . . most disturbing and poignant of all,’ Greta was saying in voice-over. ‘No one has found the other open-toed Jimmy Choo stiletto heel. Nia Lawson killed herself wearing one silver shoe.’ Greta’s face – as somber as a headstone – replaced Nia Lawson’s. She spoke slowly, carefully. ‘As if to tell the world that in Hollywood there is no such thing as a Simo— sorry, I mean to say no such thing as a *Cinderella* story.’ Simone gaped at the TV. ‘You did that on purpose!’ she said. ‘You started to say my name *on purpose*.’

‘Next up, Ms Lawson’s manager, Randi DuMonde.’

Simone flipped off the TV and said, 'Next up, *nothing*.' But as she closed her eyes and waited for sleep, she couldn't stop her mind from replaying the image of Greta's face on the afternoon she'd left, her chlorine blue contact lenses sparkling from indignation and New York City sunlight and something else . . . Was it concern?

*Dreams don't just get crushed in LA, Simone. They crush you.*

She realized she had no idea what she'd be doing a week from now, what her life would be like, whom she would know. And she whispered, so quietly she couldn't hear the words as they came out of her own mouth: 'Please don't let Greta be right.'

'Please let me get this job,' Simone whispered as she steered into the parking lot of the sleek white building in Beverly Hills. She'd been living in LA for a month – easily the worst month in the twenty-six years she had spent on this planet. And she was applying for a job as a super-market tabloid reporter.

Nothing had turned out the way she'd hoped, dreamed about, or even expected. Her North Hollywood apartment, on which she'd signed a yearlong lease sight unseen, was . . . well, it was in North Hollywood, which, as it turned out, was nowhere near West Hollywood (where the *LA Edge* was located), or Hollywood, for that matter. North Hollywood was in the San Fernando Valley, which looked like Wappingers Falls – the Poughkeepsie, New York, suburb where Simone had grown up, or like any suburb anywhere, only with spindly palm trees, way too much traffic, and such potent sunlight that Simone's pupils shrieked if she didn't wear sunglasses.

To get to West Hollywood, she had to drive up Coldwater Canyon, a winding mountain road where

everyone drove quickly and bitterly – as if they'd *all* signed their leases unaware of this annoying commute. Always, there were headlights pressed up against the rear of Simone's poor Jeep as she drove up crumbling, twisted Coldwater, desperately trying not to re-create the last scene of *Thelma and Louise*.

But Simone was adaptable, and anything beat going back to New York and telling Greta, 'You were right.' So she would have gotten used to LA by now – probably would have even grown to appreciate its sprawling, treacherous beauty – if she hadn't lost her job at the *LA Edge* before it even started.

On her first day of work, Simone had been greeted by a typed piece of paper, taped to the locked office door, informing her that the *Edge* was 'closed indefinitely.' Unable to pay its staff and suppliers, the fifteen-year-old paper had folded during Simone's drive across the country.

She still hadn't gotten around to telling her family. Her pride wouldn't let her do that – though it would let her get down on her knees and beg for a job at the *Asteroid* if she had to. Because even though the *Asteroid* had recently been dubbed 'the lowest form of sleaze' by the editor of the *National Enquirer*, it had advertised for reporters. And after a full month of sending out résumés that never got read and making calls that were never returned and scanning the classifieds with a lump in her throat that grew larger by the day, that ad read like a love song.

*Dreams don't just get crushed in LA . . .*

Simone was ten minutes early for the interview – a good thing, because it meant she didn't have to run through the parking lot in this weather. Santa Ana season had just begun. And, though Greta may have exaggerated

her statistics, Simone could easily see how the Santa Anas could raise the violent crime rate.

They were not just warm winds. They blew in from the mountains as hot as breath, so dry they sucked the moisture right out of you. They were winds that violated, air that may as well have been wearing a Hawaiian shirt and a Shriner's hat, pushing you up against your car and blowing heat on you, blowing and blowing until you felt like passing out, or screaming, or both.

When she walked into the building and that blast of air conditioning slapped her in the face, Simone felt as if she were finally breaking the surface of a deep, churning sea. *I can breathe!* Of course, her breath left her as soon as she saw the *Asteroid's* lurid red logo on the directory listing.

What if they didn't want her? Tens of thousands of dollars of her parents' money spent on college and journalism school and she couldn't even get a job reporting on some *American Idol* winner's boob job? She heard her mother's voice in her head: *Don't worry, dear. I'm sure Greta could find you something at her network. Come to think of it, I heard her saying she needed an assistant!*

*Stop it.* She got into the elevator and pressed the button for floor eight, trying not to think of anything at all.

When Simone had called to set up the interview, it had been five thirty p.m. – after hours – and the phone had been answered by the bureau chief, a fast-talking British man named Nigel Bloom. Nigel said 'right' instead of 'hello,' and 'very good' instead of 'good-bye,' and in the middle of Simone's sentence he'd hung up on her.

Immediately, Simone had started to wonder about Nigel Bloom's staff. Was everyone at the *Asteroid* stuck on

fast-forward? Had they learned to speak in abbreviations? Did they consider breathing between words to be a waste of time?

If the receptionist was any indication . . . no.

A balding, middle-aged guy with a soft, pleasant face, he was on the phone when she entered. 'So you're saying it's alopecia? Okay . . . And what proof do you have she wears a wig on the show? Interesting . . .' His voice was mellow to the point of anesthesia. Just listening to him slowed Simone's pulse. 'You know, my mother has that same problem. Poor thing can't even go outside, what with these winds . . .'

Simone sat on the white leather couch and gazed up at the series of framed *Asteroid* covers: *BRITNEY GOES BERSERK!* *BRANGELINA BABY SCARE!* *CELEBRITY CELLULITE HALL OF SHAME!* It was like an exclamation point convention up there.

'You're a very kind person,' the receptionist was saying. 'I'm going to put you through to Kathy Kinney. She handles most of the female hair loss stories, but can you give me the number of that wig maker first? Wonderful . . . Can I help you?'

It took Simone a few seconds to realize he was talking to her, not another caller, but he didn't repeat himself. He just waited for her to look up at him.

When she told the receptionist she was here to interview for the reporting job, he smiled – but Simone looked into his eyes and saw nothing but pity. 'Don't let him scare you,' he said.

Nigel Bloom was short and wiry, with a face full of angles and tense, darting eyes. He spoke even faster in person than he did on the phone, words rushing out of his mouth and bumping into each other as if they were trying to

escape the danger in his head. Meeting Simone in the reception area, Nigel gave her a tic of a nod and yanked the résumé out of her hands before she was able to think of offering it to him.

‘You’re applying for the reporters’ job, very good then, right this way.’

She followed him down a long hallway lined with older *Asteroid* covers (*CHER DUMPS BAGEL BOY! MADONNA AND SEAN’S SEXXX-RATED SECRET!*) past a large room, no doubt the reporters’ room, where muffled phone conversations barely penetrated the closed door. Finally, they reached Nigel’s office. She looked around at the blank white walls. The desk, too, was empty, save for the phone and computer. *Strange*. In the entire space, the only sign of life was the empty Red Bull cans, which filled the wastebasket to near overflow.

Simone tried looking into Nigel’s eyes. She’d always been able to tell a lot about people this way – Greta used to call it her lie detector stare – but she couldn’t get the bureau chief to meet her gaze. He kept looking her up and down in this strange, self-protective way. She half expected him to frisk her for wires.

‘Faseet,’ said Nigel. It took her a few seconds to translate. *Have a seat*.

She sat in the hard-backed chair across from his desk as he scanned her résumé.

Nigel said, ‘You’ve never worked for the *Enquirer*, have you?’

‘Uh, no.’

‘What about the *Interloper*?’ He scowled at her. ‘I could swear I’ve seen the name Simone Glass on their masthead at one time or another.’

Simone’s skin jumped. ‘It wasn’t me. Must have been another—’

‘Relatives? Friends? You have a boyfriend, perhaps, with a connection to the *Interloper*, *Enquirer*, *Globe*, or one of the British newspapers? The *Sun*? *News of the World*?’

‘No . . . I . . . I swear.’

He closed his eyes for a long, uncomfortable moment – then returned to the résumé. ‘I suppose I’ll have to believe you.’

Simone exhaled heavily. ‘Thank you.’

Nigel said, ‘You went to Columbia University’s Graduate School of Journalism.’

‘Yes, I did. I really enjoyed the—’

‘Graduated with high honors.’

‘Yes.’

Nigel raised an eyebrow. ‘So, why in God’s name do you want to work *here*?’

Simone had prepared an answer to this very question – an enthusiastic but humble speech about the challenge of celebrity journalism. About how, when it came to reporting jobs, hands-on experience trumped subject matter every time, and how a daring publication like the *Asteroid* would be the ideal venue for Simone’s well-honed investigative skills. But hearing the question now, asked at a hundred miles per hour in this safe house of an office, with Nigel Bloom’s flinty gaze boring into her near-nonexistent job history, Simone could only think of Greta and her parents and the PAY RENT OR QUIT notice on her apartment door.

‘I’m desperate,’ she said.

‘Right,’ said Nigel. ‘We’ll try you out, then, at a day rate of one hundred thirty dollars.’

‘You will?!’ Simone would have hugged Nigel Bloom, if she didn’t think it would make him call security. When he told her to ‘bugger off for now’ and come back at eleven

thirty p.m., ‘in head-to-toe black,’ she had to blink back tears of gratitude.

It wasn’t until she got back into her Jeep and started driving home that she wondered what the ‘head-to-toe black’ was all about . . . and what type of reporting could be done half an hour before midnight.

Santa Ana season was no time to be wearing a black T-shirt and jeans. Though night had fallen hours ago, Simone still felt as if she were trapped in an evil blow-dryer. She was close to swooning as she walked through the *Asteroid’s* parking lot with the other reporter, Elliot, but she tried not to show it. Elliot seemed fine with the whole head-to-toe black thing.

Simone didn’t know whether Elliot had a last name, but he looked just like Ted Kaczynski after a bar fight – wild hair and beard, skin so pale it glowed a little, and an angry purple welt under his left eye that Simone had no desire to ask about.

Nigel had introduced him as ‘our domestic refuse expert.’ Simone couldn’t place his age; he could’ve been anywhere from twenty-five to fifty under all that hair. But his age didn’t matter. Elliot had that stillness, that steady, calm gaze that said *experience*. He came armed with two pairs of thick rubber gloves – one for Simone, one for himself.

*God help me*, thought Simone as she slid behind the wheel of the rented Chevy Malibu, the domestic refuse expert riding shotgun. *I’m about to steal someone’s trash.*

Twin rivulets of sweat trickled down her ribs, settled somewhere in the waistband of her jeans. It was a cold sweat, like runoff from ice cubes, and it made her heart pound. She craved a beer.

‘Isn’t this illegal?’ Simone said.

Elliot shrugged.

‘That a yes or a no?’

He shrugged again.

She turned the ignition, flipped on the air conditioner, adjusted her seat, and cleared her throat – just to hear a noise that wasn’t mechanical. *Does Elliot ever say anything? Was he born without a tongue?* Then she pulled out of the parking lot onto the road.

Simone knew the address. She’d looked it up on MapQuest back at the office: 1020 Linda Vista, in the Hollywood Hills. With no traffic, MapQuest had said, the ride should take around twenty minutes. Twenty minutes and she’d be getting out of this car, putting on the gloves, and sifting through the trash can of Emerald Deegan – the youngest, skinniest housewife on the popular nighttime soap *Suburban Indiscretions*. They were supposed to be looking, Nigel had said, ‘for evidence of cocaine addiction and/or eating disorder.’

*Think of it as investigative reporting. A fact-finding mission. No one will mind. You’re not hurting anyone . . .*

Elliot said, ‘You like Duran Duran?’ and Simone jumped a little. His voice was higher than she’d expected, reedy.

‘Ummm . . .’

Elliot slipped a CD into the player, and when the song started, he turned the volume up so high that Simone could feel the thumping bass in her kidneys, her intestine.

‘Hungry Like the Wolf.’ A song nearly as old as Simone. *One minute you’re a baby, the next you’re three thousand miles from home, driving a rental car up Beverly Drive at midnight with a Unabomber lookalike, getting ready to pick through some soap star’s used Kleenex . . .*

She saw a row of green traffic lights in front of her, a path beckoning her all the way up Beverly. She looked down at the rubber gloves bunched up in her lap and tried to think of something to say.

Elliot was harmonizing pretty well. His voice had a sort of woodwind quality. *'Do, do, do, do, do, do, do . . .'* When Simone turned to look at him, though, he stopped. *'Don't worry,'* he said.

*'How did you know I was worried?'*

*'I'm guessing you've never driven a getaway car before.'*

*'A getaway . . .'*

*'Sssshhh.'* He put a finger to his lips and pointed to the CD player. *'My favorite part.'* Still watching Simone, he mouthed words about catching the scent of human prey and being lost, then found . . .

Simone braked at Sunset – a four-way stop on a very busy street, with no traffic lights, just signs. LA had a lot of these, and Simone wondered why. Maybe it was some city planner's way to force people to pay attention to one another. *Stop talking on your cell phone and staring at your reflection and look at your fellow human beings, just for a moment. Take enough interest in them to determine whether they're stopping or going. It could mean your life.*

Whatever, it was annoying.

It seemed Simone always let five or six people cross the intersection before she worked up the guts to do it herself. And tonight, she was even more reticent about it than usual.

Elliot was singing about his mouth being alive with juices like wine. She didn't want to think about juices in Elliot's mouth. *Okay, deep breath . . .*

Soon, she would take a right on Sunset, head toward

Hollywood. She'd pass some of those mansions she'd seen on the Map of the Stars' Homes she'd bought on her first day here. Excited as only someone who'd never been to LA could be, Simone had sat in the front seat of her Jeep and skimmed through the color-coded name index on the inside flap: Ava Gardner, Shelley Winters, Sammy Davis Jr., Freddie Prinze . . . *Unbelievable*. Every star on the map was dead.

Elliot stopped singing and said, 'Hey, what's on your mind?'

'Dead celebrities.'

'Cool.' To their left was the Beverly Hills Hotel. Its garden lights illuminated Elliot's eyes. They were white blue, like a malamute's. They scared her a little.

Emerald Deegan lived somewhere behind a wrought-iron gate, out of which glinted the beady red eye of a surveillance camera. 'Big Brother's watching,' Elliot hissed when Simone climbed Linda Vista and pulled up to the curb, just in front of Emerald's garbage cans.

'Oh, shit. Sorry.'

He opened the glove compartment and took out a map. 'Pretend you're reading this, count to eight, then pull away from the curb and drive thirty more feet.'

By no mistake did Linda Vista mean 'pretty view' in Spanish. The street ran straight up a mountain, on a near ninety-degree angle. Thirty more feet, and Linda Vista ended in a cul-de-sac, easily a mile up in the air. This city was all heights and depths – a testing ground for emergency brakes. As Simone parked, she yawned to stop her ears from clicking.

Elliot said, 'I think you're better off staying in the car.'

'I'm not sleepy,' said Simone. 'Just getting used to the alt—'

‘I know.’

She looked at him. ‘So . . . I’m not good enough to steal garbage?’

‘Not yet,’ he said. ‘Keep the car running.’

*At least he trusts you to drive the getaway car.* Simone sighed, raked her fingers through her short, spiky hair.

Doing this, touching her own hair, felt as strange as anything else did tonight. Her whole life she’d worn it blunt-cut at the shoulders. Shiny, medium brown – wholesome, as her mother liked to say. But she’d lopped it off and poured henna all over it before driving across the country.

Back then, Simone thought the hairstyle added a few years to her face, made her less approachable. After she’d washed the dye out and fixed it a little, she’d looked at herself in her bathroom mirror and whispered, ‘Intimidating.’ She’d pictured a layout in the *New York Times Magazine* – Simone leaning against a brick wall, unsmiling in her favorite black tank top, THE NEW FACE OF INVESTIGATIVE REPORTING hovering over her head in a bold red font that brought out the maroon in her hair. That night, Greta had dropped by her apartment, taken one look at Simone, and said, ‘Well, it’s a good thing you want to go into print.’

Simone closed her eyes and felt the silence thickening. What was Elliot doing out there, anyway?

She turned around. At first she saw nothing but the olive green plastic garbage cans outside Emerald’s gate. Then she noticed the lids were open. Finally, she saw Elliot – the black-clad shadow that was Elliot – replacing the lids and trotting up the steep sidewalk with a shocking grace. Swift despite the heat and the three overstuffed bags he’d slung over his narrow shoulders. *A trash ninja – that’s what he is.* What an

incredibly weird thing to be skilled at.

Simone popped the trunk as Elliot opened the back door. 'No trunks, man,' he said.

The smell of the garbage was overpowering. She gritted her teeth. 'Are you kidding me?'

'I don't trust trunks. Gotta be able to see the take.'

He slammed the trunk closed and leapt into the passenger's seat. *Gotta be able to see the take? What is that supposed to mean?* Simone winced and turned the air conditioner up full blast.

As she hung a U-turn she glanced at the three garbage bags, side by side in the backseat like fat, stinking schoolchildren.

'I forgot the recycling,' said Elliot.

'Do you want me to—'

'Nah, screw it. Nothing newsworthy in the recycling bins. She's not in AA.'

'I thought we were supposed to go through the bags there,' she said. 'You know, take out the important stuff and leave the . . . rest.'

'We'd get arrested if we stuck around that long.'

'So this *is* illegal.'

'No, it's not. Once the trash hits the can, it's public property.'

'Then what—'

'Trespassing, impersonating sanitation workers . . . Emerald's people would trump something up, and with those fucking stalker laws, it'd probably stick.' Elliot's hand shot in front of Simone's eyes, a small pot of goo clasped between his thumb and index finger. 'Rose salve,' he said. 'Wipe a little under your nose.'

Now the car smelled like sewage *and* roses.

'It's the great equalizer, you know,' said Elliot.

'Rose salve?'

'Trash,' he said. 'You see what Emerald Deegan wore to the Emmys?'

She shook her head.

'Let's just say the earrings alone could keep me in hookers and Courvoisier for at least five years.'

'Okay . . .'

'But lo and behold, her trash stinks just as much as mine.'

'You can say that again.' Simone tried opening a window, but that only made it worse, the hot Santa Anas rushing into the car, sucking the sour, decaying smell out of the tightly closed bags and swirling it straight up Simone's nostrils.

'You know whose garbage really reeks? That chick who used to sleep with . . . George Clooney, I think. Or maybe Nic Cage. No, wait a minute, I think she was nailin' that guy from the reality show who ate the live rats . . .'

Elliot kept talking, barely taking a breath between words. He went from zero to one hundred, this guy. Quiet as a gravestone 'til he stole a few trash bags and turned into Chatty Cathy. Simone could tell he was on some kind of professional high, and that perplexed her as much as anything else.

On the most practical level, she couldn't figure out how he could even open his mouth, what with that stench. Santa Anas or not, there was something else in there besides food scraps and . . . what was it they were supposed to be looking for? Razors edged with white dust? Empty boxes of Ex-Lax?

No, this was earthier, more clinging.

'Elizabeth Taylor,' Elliot was saying now. 'She'd put a little jasmine oil in her Heftys, sometimes a clove potpourri, just to make our job easier. Now that's a star. They don't make 'em like that anymore . . .'

‘Elliot,’ Simone said, ‘do you have any idea what that smell could be?’

‘If I give you my professional opinion, you have to promise you won’t freak out.’

‘Try me.’

Elliot aimed his eyes at Simone’s tense profile. ‘It’s death.’