



if my life were a movie, it would start with this moment. The scene would open with one of those expansive overhead shots of a vast, forested landscape, the bleached summer sky threaded with clouds. The music would be something rumbling, like thunder, or maybe more liquid as the shot found the curve of our river cutting through granite mountains, its waters famous for their inky green swirl, reflecting all the pine and sky. In that introductory, melting sort of way, the camera would dip in, fastening to the yellow line of the single band of a remote highway leading into our small town tucked into the endless mass of Tahoe National Forest, zeroing in on the passing of a road sign:

LITTLE, CA

3 MILES

Next, the shot would pass that sign and slide into the slender downtown of Little, California. My town. It would move along the pretty pastel rows of Victorian shops and houses, the corners of streets marked with wrought-iron lampposts, past gaggles of people at outdoor cafés or leaning their bikes against storefronts or waving as they crossed the street. It would highlight the way our

town had a sort of sunlit glaze in the summer, a slow ease that built the slimmest of armor between us and the rest of the world.

In the movie version of my life, the shot would slow as a sleek black Range Rover turned the corner and made its way like a mirage up our main street, people stopping to shield their eyes from the sunlight glinting off its perfectly washed windows.

The audience would know instantly that nestled inside that air-conditioned car sat someone bigger than our small town.

But this wasn't a movie.

This was my life.

And I still had three more hours before my shift ended.

My friend Chloe, though, could make any moment feel like a movie. So Chloe would make sure to magnify it for both of us. "Carter, that's him!" she shrieked, clenching my arm as we cleared dishes from the patio of Little Eats, my family's café on the main street of downtown Little. A half-filled cappuccino mug slipped from her hand, breaking into two clean pieces on the cement of the patio, the handle separating from its white porcelain body.

"Ouch, Chloe." I unpeeled her death grip, quite sure my circulation had been compromised. "That's coming out of your paycheck, not mine." We watched the onyx car glide by, our café a watery and strange reflection in its tinted back windows. In the front passenger seat, a man in his thirties rested his tanned arm on the rim of the window, tapping absently to music we couldn't hear, his mirrored sunglasses miniature versions of the tinted backseat windows.

The car came to rest at the stop sign right outside our patio.

"Do you think he can see us?" Chloe breathed, drinking in the Range Rover's idling purr.

As if in response, the back window slid open, and before we could blink, we had a full view of its famous passenger.

Adam Jakes.

Movie star.

Chloe gasped, her face going slack with shock. Framed in the backseat window, Adam Jakes peered out, his famous blue eyes hidden behind sunglasses. Everyone in the café patio stilled, as if a mountain lion had entered a field and all inferior wildlife held their breath. There, framed in that window, was the same tousle of burnt-sugar hair, the symmetrical face, the same pair of wide shoulders, the slouchy look of his mouth that always seemed to say, Yeah, this is how I look when I wake up. The last time I'd seen one of his movies, he'd been playing some sort of teenage James-Bond-goes-to-high-school. The plot escaped me. Still, seeing him there in the window, I felt a strange ribbon of nerves move through my stomach.

He reached out the window, dumped a cup of ice, and then the window slid closed again, its tint reflecting our astonishment before the Range Rover moved away up the street.

Chloe shrieked, "Get me a cup!"

I shook my head. "Oh, you are not going to —" But before I could finish, a woman with a blond bob tossed the remains of her iced tea into a shrub and thrust her glass into Chloe's outstretched hand. As if she'd unearthed a treasure of gold, Chloe hurried to scoop up the fallen ice.

The door of our café banged open, and my dad emerged with two plates of mango chicken salad for the women sitting near the small fountain in front, the dinner plates like saucers in his large

hands. He checked to make sure they didn't need anything else before noticing that one of his employees was in the gutter scooping up dirty ice cubes.

He frowned and glanced at me. "Do I want to know?"

I grinned. "Nope."

He disappeared back inside.

Chloe held up the glass, triumphant, the melted bits of ice glimmering in the afternoon light. She blew a strand of dark hair from her face. "Take a picture."

Shaking my head, I clicked a picture with my phone and sent it to her. "You're ridiculous. Now get back to work before I have you fired." I nodded toward her empty busing tray. "You can start with the glass you're holding."

Her look suggested I'd asked her to move to Yemen. "I'm not throwing this out." She placed it gently on a nearby table. "I'm keeping it."

"It'll melt, brainiac."

Chloe plopped her nearly empty busing tray back on the rack. "I love you, Carter, but I worry about you. This ice belonged to Adam Jakes. *Adam Jakes*. That's going in my freezer. I don't care if your dad makes me pay for this glass, too."

I laughed, picking up the pieces of the broken cup Chloe had abandoned earlier, knowing Dad wouldn't make her pay for either of them. "You're a highly disturbed individual."

She squinted after the departed car, wiping absently at a coffee spill on one of the empty two-top marbled tables near the fence. "Did you see the guy in front? That was Parker Hill, Adam Jakes's manager. He's thirty-two, British, and a Pisces."

I tossed the broken cup into the garbage. “Why do you know that?” I pulled my long brown hair away from my neck. We’d only been outside a few minutes, but already the heat was getting to me.

Chloe handed me a hair tie. “I know things. And how can you not think that was exciting? Adam Jakes just drove right by us. Adam Jakes just dumped his ice on *our street*.” She pointed at the small pool of wet his ice had left, now quickly drying in the sun.

I frowned. “Kind of rude, if you ask me. When Crazy Jay dumps his ice on our sidewalk, you think he’s disgusting.”

She frowned at me. “You’re hopeless.”

“I know.” I grinned, clearing a stack of dishes. “But that’s why you love me.”

Shaking her head, she leaned against the fence, the tables behind her forgotten.

The café door banged open again, and Dad emerged with two more salads for a different table. Pausing, he caught Chloe idling against the fence. “Funny thing, Chlo — those dishes still haven’t learned how to wash themselves.”

She pushed away from the fence. “I’m on it, Mr. Moon.”

“I’ll be inside, not holding my breath.” Dad disappeared back through the front door, wiping his hands on the burgundy half apron I almost never saw him without.

I filled the rest of my busing tray with the remaining dishes (sans Chloe’s celebrity ice) and checked to make sure one of our regulars, Mr. Michaels, was okay on coffee. He smiled at me from his roost at the farthest table tucked back against the side of the café, his wrinkled face even more dappled with the afternoon light coming through the leaves of the old maple that made umbrellas

unnecessary for most of our patio seats. He raised his coffee cup, so I scooted over with a pot of decaf.

He gave my arm a nice squeeze and nodded toward Chloe. “What’s all the excitement about?” His voice had that whispery sort of fatigue people got in their seventies, like they’d just gone and talked themselves out over the years and didn’t have much left.

“That car that just passed there,” I told him, putting my hand on his flannel-shirted shoulder; it was pushing ninety degrees outside, but Mr. Michaels was always in flannel. “It had a movie star in it. Adam Jakes. The one who’s filming here for the next few weeks.”

Mr. Michaels swirled the remaining coffee in his cup. “I read something about that in the paper. He’s filming a Christmas movie?”

I nodded. “Right. For the next few weeks, Hollywood will be filming a Christmas movie. Even though it’s June. And Chloe’s freaking out because she got to touch Adam Jakes’s ice.” I widened my eyes, clasping the hand that wasn’t holding the coffee over my heart. “His *ice*, Mr. Michaels!”

Chloe scrunched up her nose, a busing tray full of dishes against her slim hip, her face a mask of disappointment at our sad lack of pop culture appreciation. “You both should be freaking out. This is a big deal.” She held up the sacred glass, the ice mostly melted now.

“That,” I told her, not bothering to hide my amusement, “is a glass of water.”

Chloe stomped inside in a huff.



“He’s filming tomorrow downtown. We have to go.” Chloe squinted at her laptop, tucking her short hair behind her ears.

“I’m working tomorrow.” I sipped some iced peppermint tea and waited for her to finish checking her various celebrity sites. We were late to meet her boyfriend, Alien Drake, for stargazing, but it was no use pushing her until she was done.

Chewing my straw, I stared at the pictures plastered on the massive bulletin board above her desk, a layered collection that spilled off in all directions. Pinned amid magazine cutouts of swoon-worthy actors, at least a dozen of the pictures featured seventeen-year-old Adam Jakes, his six-foot frame always muscular and tan, his hair with just the right amount of tousle, his eyes oceanic. There were a few of him smiling, his face lit up, and one of him obviously laughing. But in the more recent photos, he looked gloomy and distant, his face showing the wear of his recent scandal.

Even *I* knew how much trouble he’d been in. You’d have to live in a hole not to have noticed his face splashed all over *Star* and *Celebrity!* last November, documenting his reckless involvement with an unknown twenty-two-year-old redhead, a fast car (also red), and an amount of cocaine the tabloids kept referring to as “substantial.” In one of the larger black-and-white photos Chloe had pinned up, I thought he just looked sad.

She had some other pictures up there, too — pictures of Alien Drake, some of me, and some of the three of us together, usually at one of our star-watching nights. These were my favorites, but it felt strange to see them sandwiched in between all the celebrities, like we could ever be part of the same galaxy. I squinted at a new one I hadn’t seen before of me in profile tugging at the end of my ponytail, staring off over the roofline of Alien Drake’s house, the sky darkening.

“When’d you take that?” I asked her, pointing to it.

“HmMMM.”

She wasn't listening to me, still focused on the screen in front of her. I scanned the rest of the wall, smiling at the glossy Adam Jakes's glass-of-ice print newly taped over an old picture of Adam Jakes at a Lakers game. Chloe never took anything down. She just kept pasting things over other things, papering her walls like some sort of room-sized decoupage project. Every so often, a pale purple wall peeked through, but only rarely. Many a roll of Scotch tape had been sacrificed in the name of Chloe's wall collages.

One of the things I loved about Chloe was she'd always been a fan girl, pure of heart and obsessed. Even though we'd only started hanging out in ninth grade, her room still held fragments of the girl who'd loved any book, movie, or game featuring fairies or superheroes. Every concert ticket, every play, every actor crush of her past still existed somewhere in the layers of those walls. If you started unpeeling, you'd unearth Chloe's seventeen years of life. Even if I didn't share her Hollywood obsession, I admired her for loving it so completely.

My phone buzzed.

Where the asterisk! are you guys?

I texted Alien Drake back:

C's drooling over Adam Jakes — in case you've been living under a rock, he's in town!!!?

Seconds later:

Gee, hadn't heard. Tell her to bring a towel & get over here.

“Alien Drake's waiting.” I picked up the quilt I knew she liked from her bed. Alien Drake was Drake Masuda, my neighbor and best friend of twelve years and Chloe's boyfriend for the last six months. My phone buzzed again.

A cattle prod works nicely.

I laughed out loud. “Your boyfriend suggested I use a cattle prod if you don’t get a move on. You ready? I’d prefer not to resort to violence.”

“Almost.” Chloe frowned at something on the screen, making no move to hurry. As usual. “He has an early call. I wonder what that means?”

Annoyance bubbled up in me. I was trying to be patient but, seriously, we were going to miss my favorite part of the night, when the sky purpled and the stars suddenly jumped out from the velvet dark. I sighed in a sort of overdramatic way I hoped she’d notice.

She didn’t.

As much as Chloe was obsessed with this stuff, I was the exact opposite. Why should I care about actors? They just happened to be good at acting, the way some people were good at fixing cars or building bridges. Just because they were splashed all over magazines, television, the Internet, did that mean I should listen to their opinions about the world energy crisis or hear what they ate for dinner? It was so weird.

“I think early call means he has to show up to work early,” I told her, hoping to move her along. No wonder Alien Drake had to threaten farm equipment. This girl had her own time zone. “As do I. As do you. So let’s go. This is getting ridiculous.” Nothing. “Chloe!”

“Fine.” She slammed her laptop shut, flashing me her own trademark Hollywood smile, the one that usually came right before she needed something from me. The one I could never refuse. “But you’re coming with me tomorrow to see him, right?” There it was.

“Of course I am.” Anything to get her out of this room and up on that roof.

yesterday's sightings

Things Are Looking Up in Little, CA

Morning, sky watchers. Last night, we sat on the roof and thought about nebulas.

No, that's not dirty (get your mind out of the gutter and into the sky).

A nebula is where a star is born. It's all the junk that has to come together — dust, helium, hydrogen, ionized gases — to create the right conditions for a star. Think about it: There are so many stars in the sky, we can't even count them — it'd be like counting every grain of sand on the beach. Still, they aren't just up there. It takes something, the exact right sort of condition, to make a star. It got us thinking about how everything in life needs a nebula. If we don't have the right sort of conditions, what chance do we have?

See you tonight, under the sky.