

Fall Daze

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Chapter 1 Undone

“We’re moving to Virginia.” My dad chattered with nutcracker teeth. His smile never flinched.

His four little words exploded into gray debris. The shrapnel of my perfect life.

“Big promotion,” he said. “The firm’s got a transport corridor development project off the highway two hours west of Arlington. They need an engineer to manage the plan. Maybe not the ideal time, but best for all of us at the end of the day.”

Right on cue, my mom dove in, all sweetness and light. Her jaw shimmied with forced enthusiasm. “We’re all in this together,” she said. “It’ll be great.”

I counted the stitches up the left side of my jeans. Lots. I watched my fingers walk down the goldthread seam, and tried to remember when I painted my nails flamingo pink. Tuesday. I wondered if there was pistachio ice cream in the freezer. I remembered. Yes.

To focus my attention, Mom pounded the

message home. “Niks, we’ve already talked to the guidance counselor, you can take all the same senior honors classes. The new school’s smaller than Springdale, and they’ve got a terrific music program. You’ll make friends in no time.”

“Nicole, we know this won’t be easy,” Dad said. “But it’s important that we approach this whole experience as a family adventure. We need you on board.”

The air ballooned and gushed to fill the space in my head. Half-sentences fizzed at the back of my throat. With the summer heat sinking, my parents talked until the frogs in our neighbor’s birdbath passed out from boredom. I tuned out while their words buzzed in my ears, a chainsaw swirl.

Like a stubby scarecrow, my eleven-year-old brother’s arms and legs poked out from a Spider-Man t-shirt and cut-off shorts. Josh pestered my parents with stupid questions. “When are soccer tryouts? Can I swim backstroke in the relay?”

Mom hugged him and laughed. “Plenty of time for all that. Let’s get through the move first.”

I sat on the corduroy armchair and listened to

them plan the last days of my future. Dad paced with his hands across his chest. Mom rocked on the edge of the daisy-print sofa, eyes hammering me into acceptance. My parents wobbled back and forth on the see-saw of weak excuses.

“New school, new friends—”

“Small town—”

“Fresh air—”

My life. Going, going, gone!

August of the last summer before graduation, I was clear on my priorities: work, guys, hanging with my buds, and saxophone practice. Maybe not in that order. In Boston, summer cruised in on a dry thunderstorm and stayed static hot for three months. When I didn't have a day shift at the diner, I chilled in the hammock in our backyard, phone Velcroed to my chin. Despite the ongoing disaster of bad skin and nothing to wear on a Friday night at the mall, my life was good. Until 'The Announcement.' I knew what they expected. Between Mom's glare and Dad's restlessness, they assumed I'd head for an easy game of 'you're so unfair' and 'I can't believe you're doing this

to me.’ I dropped that line and totally sideswiped them.

“You don’t have to worry about me.”

I waited a half-time measure. Two. The wings of their relief crowded the room. Busted.

“It’s no big deal, because I’m not going. I can move in with Sam. They’ve got space with Dan at college and her parents adore me.”

I mumbled, “Unlike some people.”

Before they could reply, I scooted out the den and up the stairs. Every loose step growled as I stomped. The burgundy-and-cream striped wallpaper in my room was covered in Art Deco jazz posters, which I pulled off and shredded onto the aqua blue rug. My favorite, a 1940s Charlie Parker bill from Birdland, clung to the back of the door. Stuttering a breath, I popped a rubber band around it and dropped it in my closet. I called my friends.

Like an offended sea lion, Jess jumped in to protect me when she heard the news. “Look, Niks, you gotta take a stand. I mean, you’re not a kid anymore, right? They can’t do this to you. No way. You could pack a bag and sneak out, pretend you ran away and hang at my house for a bit. You can sleep over the

garage and I'll make sure you don't starve to death."

Sam, the science-nerd-turned-basketball-star when she grew five inches in tenth grade, was cooler but still pissed off. "Don't your parents get it? Your whole life is here! Bad enough that you're planning the West Coast for college and I've got that MIT scholarship, so we'd never even see each other except for vacations. And now there's not even that? Let me talk it over with my mom. We'll figure something out, okay?"

Sam was right, her parents offered up a possibility if my family agreed. She called me before ten with a done deal. Sam talked me through the plot to rattle the crazy adults in my house.

"That'll work, right, Niks? Your mom and dad are gonna flip out, but you have to stand up to them, okay? Want some practice breaking the news, or are you cool with it?"

"Let's rehearse. You know what my parents are like."

"Yeah. All that 'rational discussion' that your mom's hung up on from her college prof days would drive me insane. My parents and I go right to the

screaming and smashing the good china.” Sam didn’t exaggerate. I’d been at her house during a family feud.

“I’ll focus on the academic side. You know, college admissions, keeping my grades up. If I go down the social life track they’ll zone out for sure.”

“Agreed. Reel them in with the schoolwork, and don’t forget to tell them how strict my parents are about curfew.”

Back home that night, over another family dinner, chewy spaghetti with pesto sauce and broccoli, I broke my silence.

“Sam’s parents said yes.”

My dad held his glass of apple juice at eye level. The liquid sloshed over the rim and dripped on the tablecloth. He didn’t blink. “Oh?”

“Yes, that I can live with them next year.”

I hyped the scenario, filling in the blanks. “Mr. and Mrs. Bandera are fine with it. This is a really bad time to be disrupting my studies. I’m only halfway through my AP biology credits, and Mr. Nall is teaching calculus this year. First semester senior year is majorly important for college decisions, right? You’re

always telling me to take responsibility for my own choices. This is my choice.”

My mom scraped green chunks from her fork and pushed away her bowl with both hands. She wedged a wilted strand of brown hair into her ponytail. “Nicole, this is absurd. I understand you’re upset, but this is a very immature attitude. We’ll all have to adjust. Let’s look at this logically.”

Her voice was a cleaver on a glass board, slicing into my stomach. I scrunched my eyes to concentrate harder. Calm.

“Logically,” I said, “academics are really important in my last year of high school. I’ll do better at Springdale than if I have to start all over again in some other town. And Sam’s parents have more house rules than you do, so you don’t have to worry about being out late on school nights. I can even fly down for vacations.”

My parents sized me up like a jury with a guilty defendant. Scraping her thumbnail over a gardening callus, Mom waited. Dad tapped his foot on the linoleum, floppy sneakers thwap-thwapping under the table.

“Excuse me,” Josh said.

“Okay.” My dad chugged his drink.

Mistaking his response for Josh’s permission, I curled another oily string on my fork. Mom jolted. Her greyhound eyebrows twitched and she shook her head.

“Okay, Nicole,” my dad said. “You’re old enough to make this decision. We’d like you to come with us, but we won’t force you.”

The resignation in his voice was a dried-up leaf. Halfway to lighting a fire under our hibernating argument, my mom gathered the dishes and flushed a lake of running water down the kitchen sink. They left it up to me. No reason to change my mind.

Ten days of packing surrendered the house to an avalanche of cardboard and duct tape. By the musty armload, basement junk climbed into grateful Salvation Army pickups. The For Sale sign vanished with the phantoms of new owners, leaving behind a halo of exhausted grass.

Eleven-year-old boys are dorks. Josh and his loser friends were always getting into my stuff. I heard him slide down the hallway as I stuffed a duffel bag

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