

Reality Jane

SHANNON NERING



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To Josh and my mom.

Prologue

Today, and only for a day, I planned to make a seven-year-old girl named Madeline my best friend.

She was adorable—a sweet young thing with a mother genuinely worried about her health. Barely through kindergarten and already considered obese, Madeline loved to eat. And it showed. She was undeniably fat.

Normally, growing up a wheat-fed prairie girl, I could relate. But at this particular juncture, I was the skinniest I had ever been, like Twiggy skinny minus the purple pea coat. The *Fix Your Life* show “Airplane Diet” had done the trick—I was nearing starvation.

Genius, really. I was completely denied access to food because my directing career had me air-bound 22/6, squeezed into economy class, tummy grumbling, praying for a pretzel. I did, however, get to indulge in bottomless cups of chicory-roasted coffee, brewed in the sky’s finest tap water, served up in a totally anti-eco Styrofoam cup. Nervously chewing the rim provided a stress-busting burst of foamy Polystyrene in my mouth. Always fun after my morning fondle by airport security (which I was strangely beginning to enjoy, and probably the real reason I declined the Rapiscan), en route to produce the next great talk show vignette about yet another American family in crisis.

Ah, the glamorous life!

But this was precisely what I’d signed on for. I was reality TV’s current “It Girl,” at my peak, a star producer on the

legendary *Fix Your Life* talk show with Ricky Dean. My life was like a tampon commercial: *She can do it all!* Rushing around in trendy clothes and a sensible haircut, commuting daily with a laptop in my clutch, able to leap tall buildings while capturing America's problems one *glue-'em-to-the-tube* interview at a time—my generation's Diane Sawyer and everything I ever wanted to be.

Today, they told me my job was simple: Get a seven-year-old girl to unveil her greatest fear on national television—that her mommy didn't love her—because she was fat. Somewhere deep in my Canadian prairie girl soul, this didn't seem right. But that girl was lost. I was a producer on a mission.

Job one: build trust.

Job two: make her my friend—my best friend.

Job three: make her talk.

As I sat on the carpet with Mr. Teddy in hand, little Madeline waddled into the room, her lips in a pout. My cameraman and soundman stood poised to record. All eyes were on this young girl as she sat down on the corner of the rug surrounded by mega-watt lights, foreboding metal tripods, and overlapping cable—her living room morphed into a bonafide television studio. Folding her knees into her chest, she looked utterly helpless.

I quickly reviewed the notes from my senior producer:

She must say, "My mommy likes my cousin better than me because she's skinny." Preferably crying (see notes from pre-interview). Have her say it to camera! CALL ME if she doesn't.

"Now Madeline, this won't be hard." I had gotten good at lying. I had also gotten good at getting what I needed. "I just want to ask you a few questions about your mom and you and why your mom is worried about you. Do you know why we're here?"

"Yes," she mumbled, hugging her dinosaur.

“Then you know we’re here to help. And you’re going to be on national TV, and it’s going to be a really *great* experience,” I said, nearly choking as I droned the party line.

“Okay,” she burred.

I motioned to my cameraman to make sure he was rolling. “Let’s start with your favorite foods. What are they?”

“Broccoli, carrots . . .” she rattled off while looking down at her dinosaur. We had a perfectly framed shot of her forehead.

“Please look up, sweetie.” I gently nudged her chin upwards so I could see her eyes. “You’re so pretty,” I gushed. “We don’t want to hide that pretty face of yours. Now, broccoli? Really?” I said in my most syrupy voice. “I like those foods too, sometimes, but I also really like chocolate and cookies. How ’bout you?”

Nothing.

“What? I can’t hear you. Just a little louder.” I felt my eyebrows climbing up my forehead as I forced my face into a silly grimace, like Elmo or Barney, or a birthday clown gone wrong.

Still nothing.

“Can you say it in a sentence? You know, like, ‘My . . . favorite . . . sweets . . . are...’ ” I rolled my hands as if that might help.

“My sweets chocolate.”

“No, you need to say ‘favorite’ in a sentence, and then give me a list.” My eyes were so wide and hopeful that my eyebrows were now scraping my hairline. “I just love all that stuff too. Let’s talk about it. Tell me *all* your favorites.”

Fifteen minutes had passed and I’d barely gotten a usable sentence out of her. I had to try harder. I had to get the story. I had to—for my promotion, for my career.

I continued with renewed enthusiasm: “Do kids make fun of you at school?”

“Yes.” Madeline again glanced downward.

“What do they say?” I was making headway.

“They” . . . *sniff* . . . “call” . . . *sniff* . . . “me” . . . *sniff* . . . “hip-po.”

Still barely audible.

"I'm sorry, Madeline. I can't hear you. I know this is hard. Just please tell me, what do they say?" I forced a crooked smile.

"They" . . . *sniff, sniff* . . . "call" . . . *sniff, sniff, swallow* . . . "me" . . . *sniff* . . . "hip-po." *Swallow, sniff, sniff.*

Even less audible this time, and now the tears had begun. My eyebrows dropped down into the folds of my eyelids. This was not fun. And this was certainly not what I'd thought I'd need to do to join the ranks of young, upwardly mobile (as in jet propelled) Hollywood producers. For some reason, that didn't stop me.

"How do they say it? Are they mean? I don't like them either. What words do they use?" Desperate for a decent sound-bite, the sub-human uber-producer in me had taken over my brain.

"They" . . . *sniff, blubber, blubber, sniff, something totally unintelligible* . . . "po."

Madeline's tears now came down in torrents—at least she (and I) had the *crying* part down. We stopped camera to get a box of tissues. As I reached forward to wipe her innocent face and chubby little cheeks, her sniffles got louder. Tiny white fragments of tissue stuck to her pretty little eyebrows. Being so close to her made it all too real. With her supple nose, her delicate chin, her sweet eyes with their curly lashes, she was beautiful, vulnerable, soft, and oh-so traumatized.

I suddenly felt this deep connection to her. What if she was my daughter? What if this had been *me* 20 years ago? Chubby little Jane forced to confront her food demons at age seven. Before I knew what a personal demon was. Before I knew that skinny trumped fat by a long mile, and that food was a girl's one true enemy. *Move over Taliban. Mr. Ice Cream's in town!* To think, all those years of Grandma telling me I was big-boned, of loving me for me, when, like Madeline, I could have been whipped into an eating disorder and joined the legions of trendily emaciated.

Don't let this get to you! I told myself. *Keep going. Do it for the job, the promotion. Do it for your career!*

"Do you think your mommy loves you? Or does your

mommy love your skinny cousin more? . . . What's that? She thinks your skinny cousin is prettier. You can do it—your mom says people will like your cousin better because she's skinny? . . . Wait. Don't whisper. No, no, no, please don't cry again. I can't understand you. Just one more time, for the camera. Who does your mommy love better? Come on. Just say it clear . . . ly . . . in . . . to . . . the . . . cam . . . era!"

"Mommy loves—she likes—my cous—*waaaaaaah!*"

Madeline could no longer speak.

And I didn't get my clip . . . or my new best friend.



This isn't how things had started out for me.

In the beginning, there was no production Gestapo—just me, a solitary new arrival on “the island.” I fancied myself the next great documentary producer, covering meaningful topics like “colony collapse disorder” or the “plastic vortex in the middle of the Pacific.” Hollywood was my ticket to greatness. First stop? Reality shows—to cut my chops. Next stop? The Oscars—ringside with Morgan Spurlock and Michael Moore. *Hello, beautiful golden statue!*

I was the cliché Hollywood hopeful: ambitious, cute (but possibly forgettable), with a few extra pounds of baby flab that, at 28, could no longer be considered “baby” anything, transplanted from the great plains of Canada, armed with friendly pleases and thank-yous. It was a big ball of excitement back then. As far as I was concerned, I had won the lottery—my first real producer job in the big-time.

Chapter 1

“Hey, don’t I know you from TV? Aren’t you someone famous?”

I was completely in the clouds, strolling the Third Street Promenade in Santa Monica. Little Miss Fancy Pants bouncing through the crowd like Sofia Coppola, or some other big-league Hollywood creative type, effervescent in Italian designer garb. I half-felt people might stop me for my autograph, as if they could read my mind or know what I’d accomplished in little under a week.

“Yo! Yo, pretty lady!”

“Huh?” I searched for the voice.

“Show a little love,” the bearded man said, shaking an empty tin partly hidden beneath a pile of grimy clothes.

So the picture on the ground was a little different than the one in my head. Instead of adoring fans with gushing accolades, I had Hobo Harry mooching change. Just as well. Ballet flats and an Abercrombie hoodie didn’t exactly scream television tycoon, even if that was precisely how I felt.

In a matter of a weekend, as in last weekend, I had gone from part-time TV reporter in drizzly Vancouver to full-time Hollywood producer in the land of perpetually beaming sun. They had hired me on Friday, after a month of occupational purgatory, when I’d constantly wondered whether I’d be relegated to mid-sized-market mediocrity, or sent to play with the gods of big-time television. Fate, God, Zeus, Oprah—whoever is in charge—picked the latter. It went like this: “It’s a

go. You're hired. We need you, like yesterday."

Hyperventilating, I packed my car that afternoon, bee-lined it south on Saturday, drove through the night, and arrived late Sunday. I began work on Monday, and met the team on Tuesday. By Wednesday, we had bonded. By Thursday, we had outlined the season. And today—Friday—my heart rate still in the stratosphere, we'd do our first real shoot, in Beverly Hills no less.

The homeless man shook his cup. "Yo, lady, I charge rent. If you're moving in," he said with a wink, "we better talk."

"Whoops, sorry." I jumped to the side. Monsieur Hobo was a flirt and, by the looks of it, a real estate tycoon too. At more than a million bucks a quarter-acre, his was the choicest real estate in the country—beachfront Santa Monica.

I fished around in my bag and found some loonies at the bottom. "Here you go," I said. "I think the dollar is on par right now."

"Canadian, eh?" he said.

"Can you tell?"

He jingled his cup. "The big coin with the duck gave it away. You an actress?"

"Ha, that's funny. An actress. No, I'm a TV producer." I liked the sound of that so much, I had to say it again. "I produce reality TV."

"Huh?"

"Well, it's like a serialized documentary, only, you know, a little fluffier. It's pretty cool."

He nodded, which was my cue to continue. "Ultimately, I want to produce long-form documentaries on more meaningful subjects, or be the next Diane Sawyer. But for now, I'm just happy to be here. I mean, it's LA, after all. And, and," I said with great drama, finally having an audience besides my mother, "I'm working with Lucy Lane. Heard of her? I'm her new producer!"

A black convertible BMW, sliding into the curb, interrupted our conversation.

“Hey, Canada, hop in or we’ll be late for your first big shoot,” Rose shouted from the driver’s seat, taking a pull from an extra large Big Gulp.

“That’s my AP,” I said to my homeless buddy as I trotted off toward the car, triple shot Americano in my grip. “Got to run!”

“Stop by anytime.” He waved me away with a weathered paw.

The tires practically squealed as Rose drove north for San Vicente.

“Slumming it?” she said sideways. “You might be a *snowback*, but you can do better than that,” she laughed.

I smiled cautiously. “*Snowback?*”

“Yeah, like wetback, only colder.” Her ring-tone began pounding out an electronic Lady Gaga as she slapped my knee. “Kidding, Blondie. Don’t be so sensitive. Whazzup, Corinne?” she said animatedly into the phone, driving and talking and gulping and laughing.

Rose was a card—gruff and sarcastic but also fun and homey. Her body was apple shaped and she wore a short 1920’s hairdo, with pin-curls that looped around her square face, and she loved to cook, talking ad nauseam about soufflés and persimmon pies. For some reason, she had taken to calling me my home country’s namesake, and when performing for others, butchered it into “Janada.” That would be Canada with a “J” for Jane. When that didn’t work for her, I was simply “Blondie.” None of which bothered me. In fact, it was refreshing—skip the niceness and, like family, go straight to sarcasm. Rose was just one of the women who in five short days had become my new world.

I felt as if I had been warped to the moon. Beyond landing the job of a lifetime—“show producer” on *The Purrfect Life* with Lucy Lane, thank you very much—I had nabbed this star-studded collection of true-blue tinsel-town girlfriends who, as far as I could tell, pretty much walked on water. Cue golden sunbeam. These girls were velvet cool—hybrids of Hollywood hip and New York street smart.

The host of the show, Lucy, was gorgeous, a curvy blonde with chutzpah galore. Famous for posing in *Purr Magazine* at the age of 19, and marrying and divorcing Purr magnate Brock Barrington in the span of a month, Lucy had built an online empire—\$25 per month to watch her on sexy dates with B-list actors and bad-boy rockers. She was now on her second reality show. The first was titled, *Who Loves Lucy Lane?*, a *Bachelorette* derivative where fifteen hunky, monosyllabic dudes vied for her affection. It bombed. But the networks still loved her.

Then there was my co-producer, Corinne, a sassy redhead with an angled bob whose machinations could make Machiavelli look like an amateur. She had the goods on everyone from Bobby De Niro to Tyra Banks. I saw her chew some poor sap a new a-hole at the W Hotel on Tuesday and thanked sweet Jesus she was on my team.

Finally, besides Rose, who was my associate producer, there was Toni, the production assistant. Together, their job was to support me. They handled everything from research and craft service to locations, all with a helpful glint. Day two, Toni lined me up with my first ever lunchtime laser pedicure/facial at America's only human car wash: "We'll buff you out from head to toe in 20 minutes or less. Satisfaction guaranteed or your next buff is free!"

Rose and I pulled up to Lucy's abode in Beverly Hills, where we were scheduled to shoot pool-side portraits of Lucy looking *Sex Kitten* sultry in a bikini. This included Lucy wet, under the waterfall, climbing out of the water, slinking over rocks, and myriad other sexy poses to be wallpapered over the opening credits. A nice man in a black suit shuttled Rose's car underground.

"Okay, Janada, follow me." Rose held the elevator door open as I wandered semi-awestruck by the yellow-swirl marble columns and roof-free hallways, with palm trees thriving amongst the concrete. This was beyond exotic next to the bricks, blocks, snow, and evergreens that framed my childhood memories.

"This place is posh," I said, entering Lucy's home.

Her living space had a warm vibe with neutral colors, gold trim, crystal chandeliers, and impressive twenty-foot ceilings. The bedroom, no surprise, was pink, with a life-sized picture of Lucy above the headboard, naked but for a g-string hiked high on her hips, and elbows touching across the navel to emphasize cleavage and to hide those pesky triple X-rated nipples.

Rose and I could hear Lucy's voice from the closet as we ventured closer.

"Tell me the truth," Lucy glared at Corinne. "Don't bull-shit me."

"You look *skinny*. Trust me," Corinne said, turning toward us as we entered Lucy's garage-sized walk-in. "Morning, ladies."

"Morning," Rose and I said in unison.

"Is this, like, what people call a muffin top?" Lucy pinched a piece of skin that sat nearly invisible above her bikini bottom. "Look at this. It's disgusting! I hate fat! How do people do it? Like fat people. I would shoot myself! I swear."

"Relax. Women would kill for your body," Corinne said indifferently, as if she had told her a thousand times.

"Seriously, I'm not as tight as I used to be," Lucy whined. "Somebody call Dr. 9-0-2-1-0!"

"Ladies," Rose interrupted, "now *this* is what you call badonkadonk!" She stepped into the mirror and shook her over-sized booty for the girls.

Lucy's eyes bulged in momentary disgust before all the girls burst into gales of laughter. I chuckled awkwardly, thinking Rose remarkable for rising above some serious big-girl bigotry.

No doubt it bothered her. En route to Lucy's, Rose had me open her online shopping purchase: two pairs of Addition Elle black skinny jeans, size 16, which she intended to pass off to "the girls" as tailor-made originals, so "mum's the word, Canada." Apparently, Corinne would have killed her if she knew she shopped at a plus-size fashion depot. I decided then and there to keep any Old Navy tags tucked far, far away.

After slinking in and out of no less than fifteen bikinis, Lucy

finally made it to the pool, where the crew sat patiently, knocking off the occasional scenic shot while sipping coffee supplied by our ever efficient production assistant, Toni. She bounced up and down effortlessly with tape stock and munchies for everyone. I was shocked and pleased to see a fully stocked craft service table with fresh fruit, gummy bears, turkey jerky, string cheese, and chocolate yummys, all with the same mysterious label, Trader Joe's.

"My new mission," I whispered to Toni, "is to find this trader named Joe, and thank him for such amazingly creative snacks. Fortune cookies all flat and round like little coins? Brilliant!"

Toni laughed. "There's one 'round every corner."

"Let's roll, people!" Corinne shouted.

Corinne had Lucy start by stretching out over the rocks on her back, turning her head slowly to camera to blow a kiss. She then placed her in the pool and had Lucy do the famous Bo Derek climb to land, filmed six ways to Sunday. Following that, we did waterfall shots where Lucy, mouth open and sensuous, showered in the cold wet spray, cheating toward camera, basically naked except for the purple string around her privates.

Everyone amazed me with their infinite professionalism. Our camera crew didn't bat an eyelash, as if they were used to seeing females with perfectly sculpted bodies that didn't sag without underwire, and faces that looked equally gorgeous, soaking or dry. I imagined myself in a waterfall, choking and spitting, with water blasting out of my nose, eyeliner dripping to my kneecaps. Lucy had serious skill to make a water assault look Zen-sexy. But I was most impressed with Corinne. She handled Lucy expertly, knowing what to say, when to say it, and how to shoot just the right amount of sunshine where the sun don't shine (rather, "don't shine" for the majority of non-nude model folk). All this was to keep Lucy from tantrumming to Venus, which in my five short days I had come to learn was a fairly common occurrence and had me progressively more nerve-wracked.

Hence, my chosen spot was beside Corinne, shadowing her

every move, hoping that whatever magic she had might somehow rub off on me. She was due to depart Sunday for a totally different show in New York and I would be taking over for her, directing and managing Lucy the rest of the season.

"I'm freezing," Lucy squealed, climbing out of the pool.

"Coming!" In a nanosecond, Lucy's hair and wardrobe entourage scuttled over, wrapping her in plush towels, then shuttling her inside for a hair/make-up do-over.

"Break for lunch!" Corinne called.

Toni stepped up for her part in the day's duties, beginning with drinks. "Lemon water?"

"Here," said Corinne.

"Diet Coke?"

"Here," said Rose.

"Another lemon water?"

"Lucy's," said her assistant, snatching it up.

"Triple shot Americano, inch of cream, and three sugars?" Toni said unfazed.

"Right here," I said. "Thank you. Sorry to be a pain in the ass."

Corinne looked at me funny. "Whoa, girl, isn't that your third coffee today?"

"I've lost count," I said quietly, not wanting to draw attention to what clearly had turned into an addiction. "Haven't slept in a week."

"How come?" Corinne asked, delicately squeezing her lemon so its juice trickled through the ice cubes.

"An overnight move to a foreign country will do that," I started.

"Not exactly foreign," she said. "It's *just* Canada."

"I guess," I said, trying to find the right words to please Corinne. "But it was still tiring. I drove pretty much non-stop from Vancouver last weekend. It took 22 hours. I pulled an all-nighter, and the only thing that got me through was about eight cups of coffee and a coupla packs of cigarettes. But who's counting?" I giggled. "Anyway, I haven't had a good night's

sleep all week. I don't know why."

"You *drove*?" Corinne nearly choked on her lemon water.

"Uh-huh," I said nonchalantly, as if packing up my life and busting out to California was something I did every weekend.

"By *yourself*?" She looked aghast for the second time in only a few seconds.

"Of course. I didn't know anyone else moving to LA."

"Wow, you are so . . ." Corinne hesitated while she waited for the right word . . . "Canadian."

She had a curious look on her face, as if I might balance a bone on my nose or juggle some back-bacon. From what I could tell, Corinne would never have driven 1,500 miles, let alone done it alone, let alone moved by herself. She would have hired professional movers, and had other pros unpack her dishes and hang her clothes. And her parents would have thrown her a theme party with palm tree-shaped balloons and a fabulous new beach wardrobe.

Then lunch arrived.

"Garden salad dressing on the side, no bread?"

"Mine," answered Corinne.

"Burger and fries?"

"That would be me," I said, again reluctant to admit it, slipping on my sunglasses as if that might hide the fact that I'd clearly just fallen off the turnip truck.

Small-town do-it-yourselfer who eats like a lumberjack wasn't exactly the trend *du jour* in Hollywood. A trust fund and a Pygmy Chihuahua in my purse would have made a far better impression.

I didn't bother to ask for the extra side of mayonnaise I'd ordered to dip my French fries into, certain Corinne would have tossed her undressed salad or, at the very least, mocked the idea of mixing mayo and ketchup to fatten up an already mega-greasy deep-fried potato.

After lunch, Lucy returned with hair blown out and make-up redone, looking nearly perfect. She snatched one of my left-over French fries.

“You must be the last female producer in Los Angeles who actually eats this crap,” she said, stuffing it in her mouth. “Christ, that’s foul.” She practically licked her fingers. “But strangely irresistible.” She winked and smiled.

I couldn’t help but be intensely curious about her. Never before had I met someone so casual about her body and so difficult about everything else, and utterly gorgeous, of course. She was how I imagined the ever iconic Madonna to be: powerful, flawless, sharp, magnetic, sarcastic, and rude. And the only woman I knew who could comfortably *drop trow* in front of a crew of ten.

“Must be nice to look like that, eh?” whispered Toni, as if reading my thoughts.

“No kidding,” I replied. “But is it all, like, her bod? Her boobs—are they . . .?”

Though she was for real—there was no airbrush or “Navajo rug” filter between my eyes and Lucy’s person—she did appear a little molded: breasts so precisely shaped (cantaloupe firm and round), and nipples pointing to the sky, like a dolphin begging for a sardine.

“They’re real,” Lucy said, squeezing her tit and staring at me.

Everybody laughed. My face turned six shades of red. It took me a moment to realize she was joking.

“Okay, back to one, everybody,” Corinne said, trying to herd in the crew. “Just a few more lines and we can wrap for the day!”

By five o’clock, we had shot six tapes with nine wardrobe changes. Lucy cracked a bottle of Argyle sparkler to celebrate our little achievement and Corinne’s big promotion.

“This calls for a real party,” Lucy said, reaching for her phone. “I’m making us a reservation at Rebecca’s!”

“That’s my girl.” Corinne high-fived Lucy and Rose. “Only *the* number one chill spot in Santa Monica. Looks like those boobs are good for more than just a photo shoot.”

Everyone giggled.

"We're in!" Lucy said, slamming down the phone and clapping her hands enthusiastically. "Corinne, you can get ready here. Wear something of mine."

Like yippy schoolgirls, Lucy and Corinne ran to the bedroom to try on clothes. Rose trailed behind obediently. The rest of the crew quickly chugged down their wine and blazed home to change in preparation for the big night. Which left Toni and I alone on the couch sipping fizzy Chardonnay.

"I've got some gloss and eye-liner in my purse," Toni said.

"I could use a touch-up." I followed Toni into the powder room.

Truth be told, I could have used more than a touch-up. I was tired. And the first thing sacrificed in favor of early morning zzz's had been my usual primping ritual. So my hair was pulled into a nape-of-the-neck ponytail that looked like a little yellow buffer brush, and yesterday's make-up featured an early morning coat of mascara and bronzer that had long since flaked away. Thankfully, youth was still on my side.

"How 'bout these dark circles?" I said, studying my reflection in the mirror. "Nerves, I guess. Just hoping I'll do a good job."

"You look great." Toni smiled through her pout as she piled on the lip gloss. "And you're doing a fine job."

Toni was too good to be a PA, TV's entry-level grunt job. She was a "take no-crap" type with a confidence that belied her years. I instantly liked her. On Wednesday, she'd driven us on a location scout. In rush-hour traffic, halfway down Wilshire Boulevard, she did a U-ball near the 405 underpass, across four lanes of traffic, in a maneuver that would have awed Danica Patrick. The fact she did it with me in the car made it even ballsier.

"Now these are real," she said indifferently, pulling her breasts up from her bra, only not for cleavage, but for comfort.

"I know," I giggled, fluffing my bangs, a hint of pride that this one hadn't gotten past me. "I can tell."

"So, it's pretty crazy they had to go to Canada to find a producer for this show," Toni said casually. "Guess it's good for

you, though. Not many *foreigners* land a cush producer gig overnight, even if she is the world's biggest pain in the ass."

"You mean Lucy?" I sputtered, stunned by the insight.

"Yeah, her reputation precedes her. They literally couldn't find a single LA producer who would take the job. We've been through four director/producers this season already. Corinne's the only one who can manage her, and even she struggles!" Toni laughed. "You got your work cut out for you, babe."

And I'd thought it was my zippy can-do personality, together with a well-honed skill to put out fires, whether stovetop or mountaintop, that had gotten me in.

"You knew that's why they hired you, didn't you?" Toni said.

"Yes, of course," I nodded as if I planned it—little old Janada up against the Goliath of TV hosts. *Goliath?* I gulped.

"Don't worry. You'll rock it." Toni winked at me.

"Or die trying." I smiled nervously, suddenly fearful of the challenge ahead.

This job meant the world to me. Sure, it wasn't my dream job. We didn't help anyone, or educate audiences, and we barely provided any good candy-coated trivia to aid folks doing the crossword puzzles in the back of a *Star* magazine. And I was quite certain my idol, journalist extraordinaire Diane Sawyer, hadn't made any pit stops in reality TV before hitting the big-time. But it was a step in the right direction. I was in the right city; I had the right title; I was making connections; I worked for a good company; it was a big paycheck; and finally, and most importantly, it was a blast, at least so far!

"Don't ever say anything about why you got the job," Toni said, as if it were her escape clause.

"I wouldn't," I said, trying to be casual. "Seriously, I'm just here to do a good job and finish the season."

"That's the attitude," she announced. "Hey, we should go to San Diego together some weekend. The beaches are awesome, and I know a great pub on the water where hot surfer dudes hang out."

"Sold!" I replied giddily.

Rose came tripping down the hallway. “Come on, Janada. Let’s go.”

“Bye, everyone. See you at . . .” I forgot the name . . . “the club!” I said excitedly.

Rose and I left Lucy’s and hopped into her car. She was unusually quiet. I wondered what our dynamic would be after Corinne left the show. Perhaps she would start treating me like her boss. After all, she *was* my associate producer. In TV Land, that meant *assistant* to the producer—i.e., me. Not that I expected special treatment, but a little polite conversation now and then, in place of the endless ribbing, would be nice.

Rose’s phone rang five minutes into our trip home. Without a word of apology, she yapped into her swanky pink headset the entire ride back to her apartment. I stared out the window, attempting to drown out her conversation with the sound of the road and the wind, thinking it must be an LA thing to blather obliviously. Friends didn’t do that back home.

“You wait here,” Rose said to me as she parked her car. “I’m just going to run upstairs and freshen up. Then we’ll head out.”

“Oh, I’ll come with you,” I replied. “Better than sitting here.”

“No,” she said. “My place is a mess. I don’t want anyone to see it.”

“What are you talking about? No big deal.”

“Seriously, it’s embarrassing.”

“Nothing I haven’t seen before.” I grabbed the door handle, thinking she was being modest.

“No, I insist. Wait here.” Her insistence bordered on rude.

Feeling scolded, I sulked into my seat. Then I figured I was being overly sensitive because of fatigue and the endless supply of caffeine and sugar I’d hard-wired into my veins. Besides, the top was off her convertible and I could finally take a moment to enjoy the sun and decompress.

The sun was starting to make its way down the horizon and the warm Santa Ana winds were kicking up, enveloping me like a cashmere blanket. I was staring languidly at the clouds as they drifted beyond the leaf pads of the coral trees, when I finally

checked my watch. I'd been waiting 30 minutes!

"This is lame," I muttered as I walked up to the gate and buzzed Rose's apartment. "Hey, everything okay?" My heart beat quickly.

"Just a minute, Blondie," she said coolly. "I'm on my way down."

I tried to relax. "No worries."

Rose walked toward me in her sweats and slippers. I felt a shiver through my chest. Something was wrong. She opened the gate just wide enough to poke her head through the door, ensuring I didn't enter the foyer.

"It's off. The girls can't make it now," she said, shrugging her shoulders.

"*What the!?*" I said, totally shell-shocked.

"Yup, everyone bailed." She grimaced.

"But we just left Lucy's. They were all getting ready. What happened?"

"After we left, Lucy called and said she suddenly felt exhausted. I guess the wine got to her. Apparently, Corinne felt the same. She just got her period and her flight leaves early tomorrow morning. She still has to pack. And come to think of it, I've got cramps."

"*Cramps?* Really? But we're celebrating Corinne's promotion. She's leaving for New York. We won't see her for a long time. Isn't this everyone's last chance to get together? They were all so gung ho before. I don't understand."

"Don't shoot the messenger," she cawed.

"Geez." I didn't know what else to say. "Do you . . . do you want to get a quick bite?"

"Really, I'm pooped. I'm going to stay in and heat up leftovers. Got a date with Tivo," she said casually. "By the way, the promenade is just two blocks south. Your car should be close. Good luck. See you Monday." She closed the gate, practically catching my nose in it.

About five minutes after I left Rose's apartment, a nasty pang hit me. I began to feel dizzy and a little sick.

At first, I figured the whirlwind of my week had finally caught up with me. I then blamed Rose. Couldn't we at least have grabbed a burrito together? What a way to start a friendship. Then, I decided, Rose was just being Rose—more thorn, less Rose, but no big deal. Besides, after a week of averaging less than three hours of sleep a night, I could use the extra bedtime. Everything was fine.



Pajamas on, I climbed into my king-sized bed at the Loews Santa Monica and stared dreamily at the water. *Why can't I just live here in the hotel?* I yawned as I began to justify how much better it was that we were all staying in. My body felt like a lead weight. The perfect Savasana: first my head, then my feet and legs, into my arms, all body parts sinking deep into the mattress, like being vacuumed into the bed, vacuumed into sleep.

"Bzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzz." The company phone vibrated from the dresser.

"Bzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzz," it vibrated again.

"Bzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzz," and again.

"Shit!" I said, smushing a pillow into the side of my head.

"Bzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzz."

"No!"

"Bzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzz."

"You're going to just keep buzzing every three minutes or so, aren't ya?" I said, lifting my head.

I dragged my listless body from the bed to the dresser, picking up the phone.

"Three missed calls," the small screen read. I hit the "1" key for messages.

"Please enter your pass-code," the electronic lady insisted.

"Crap," I said to the invisible lady.

She asked again.

"Double crap."

“Please enter your pass-code,” she insisted for the last time, oblivious to my frustration—they always shut down after three tries.

“I don’t know the piece-of-crap pass-code.” I shook the phone violently.

It was shocking. I didn’t actually know the pass-code and I’d been using the phone since Tuesday. No one gave it to me and I hadn’t needed it, given I was putting in ten-hour days surrounded by anyone who could have possibly needed to reach me. Meanwhile, my Canadian cell phone was dead weight—roaming at a buck-fifty per minute and seventy-five cents a text.

I dialed Toni knowing she would have the code. Toni didn’t pick up. So I tried Rose. No answer. Then Corinne. Her phone was off. I was reluctant to call Lucy—she would have blasted me for wasting her precious time, especially knowing she had just begun her “period.” So I tried Toni again. No luck. It occurred to me that Hollywood types might not be as completely addicted to their phones as the world assumed. Seemed all my girls had shut theirs off.

Because I’m a sleuthy journalist type, I figured my next step was to collect home numbers from “reverse look up” and catch everybody settling down for the night. Natch, I tried Rose first. She was supposed to be plugging away at left-over shepherd’s pie and logging some Tivo time with “Dance Your Ass Off.” Couldn’t reach her. Then Toni, then Corinne, and then even Lucy. All the calls proved fruitless.

No longer in the mood to sleep, I was bleary-eyed, grumpy, and wide awake. After splashing the entire Colorado basin on my face, I stripped out of my pajamas into a pair of old-school Sevens, slipped on a pair of Aldo slouch boots with a sensible heel for walking, and a tulip-sleeved t-shirt I’d picked up during my location scout with Toni—she insisted they were all the rage—and made my way up to the promenade, where I’d begun my day. Now I was in search of a fresh LA fusion salad—yes, “salad, extra dressing please!”—and a fresh outlook.

Never mind that I owed about six grand on my Visa, a mere five hundred shy of maxing out, and had over 30 G's in outstanding student loans. I rightly declared that tonight would be my night. Whatever I wanted. Thirty-dollar salad nicoise? Go for it. Eighteen dollar mango cheesecake from the Viceroy? All mine. A bottle of Duckhorn Vineyard's 2006 Merlot to smuggle back into my room? Charge it. I suddenly felt carefree.

"Ouch." I pinched my side. "That hurts."

As thrilled as I was about my food prospects and my exciting first week in Los Angeles, something wasn't sitting right. None of the girls answering their phone was the first bit of strangeness, but I tried not to think about that. There was also the fact that the company would only cover my hotel expenses until Sunday, giving me a mere two days, over the weekend, to find and lease an apartment. Never mind that I'd become fully accustomed to the hotel's crisp linens, the spectacular view, and having a world class Belgian chocolate waiting for me on my pillow every night—amazing how quickly one settles into luxury.

"Hey, Canada!"

I looked around for the voice. *Who the hell else is calling me Canada?* He sounded vaguely familiar.

"How was your first shoot?"

"Well hello," I said, picking out my homeless buddy on a park bench beachside of Ocean Avenue, sitting gleefully across from a strip of glam hotels and restaurants.

"It was *interesting*," I replied.

"Interesting good or interesting bad?" He adjusted the volume on his ghetto blaster, circa 1982.

"Always good," I laughed. Something about this guy made me smile.

"Rock on," he said, smiling warmly. "And hey, watch out for those Hollywood vultures—they eat nice folk for breakfast!"

"I'm tougher than I look," I said, forcing some bravado. "See?" I flexed my bicep à la Arnold.

"Go, girl!" He winked as he cranked up the volume on his

radio, blasting Steppenwolf. “See you around.”

I waved happily and crossed the street. At least I had one good friend in the city.

My next sighting was of beautiful people, by the dozens, who popped in and out of Mercedes sedans and BMW convertibles driven away by valets. I thought I could be one of them, flashing the keys for some fancy German car. *Jeez, if both Toni and Rose could own such cars on assistant salaries, why not me?* It was finally stamped on my brain: not only did I live in the mecca of all things TV, but I was an actual TV producer with a staff (albeit a small one) and a regular paycheck. For real!

I checked my phone to see if I’d missed a return call or still had it on vibrate. *Nope, no calls.* Needing to check my phone every minute or so was further proof I was an industry mogul, or so I told myself.

The sky was turning a brilliant psychedelic pink, making the sidewalks glow orange. Faces, each blessed with their very own heaven-made spotlight, took on a golden hue. The street reminded me of a scene from *Some Like it Hot*, with the retro hotels sitting sweetly on the boulevard and the ocean twinkling out to the horizon. Palm trees shuffled their fronds as the scent of salt air swept me away into full surreal mode. I imagined meeting my very own Mr. Hollywood.

“Hey, babe!” the Clark Gable type would call. “You, me, dinner, and candlelight.”

“Fiddle dee dee, naturally,” I would reply with eyelashes fluttering.

Then I would co-star in his next movie, we would turn up at the Oscars, with me in Valentino and he in Prada, and I would enjoy a cushy ride to the top—driver, personal assistant, et al. Stranger things have happened.

These thoughts, miles away from my day, made me giggle and I nearly began to skip when I noticed a sign jutting out from the corner of a building. Its sharp metal edges caught the slivers of light from the street lamp and made it glisten. It read: Rebecca’s.

I stopped. The street went silent. I thought about the lounge Lucy had mentioned earlier in the evening. *Could it have been Rebecca's?* What were the odds of that? Smack dab in front of me, beckoning for a peek, Santa Monica's chilliest chill lounge, *the* place to see and be seen in the city, and only the hippest city in the world at that . . .

Then it hit me. "They didn't," I whispered. "They wouldn't."

My stomach was in my throat. The only thing between me and the answer was a wall of thirty-foot timber bamboo.

I heard the buzz of animated discourse wafting up from the patio. I imagined beautiful, chiseled women swilling mojitos while equally beautiful men lit their cigarettes and downed dry martinis.

"This is crazy," I said under my breath. "Keep walking."

I shook my head and turned away. But the pang became a wallop. I stopped again. I had to know. I had to find out if that sick feeling my body felt was there for a valid reason. Would these women who I so admired, who had befriended me, who were to be my new colleagues, bully me out of their evening? *Not possible.*

I crept up to the bamboo with my fingers shaking and my breath shallow. I didn't notice the line-up behind me, or the bouncer giving me the once-over. It was as if time had stopped. I reluctantly pushed the bamboo apart and peered into the patio: a wall of people, with so many heads and bodies that, in the dim light, I couldn't make out the faces. I let out a deep sigh. *Not there. You're being ridiculous.*

Just as I released the bamboo, I noticed a familiar shape. Triangular. It was a bob—a shimmery, copper bob. A cold shiver ran through my body. I looked closer. There, legs crossed, arms flinging in pulsating conversation, and outfitted head-to-toe in Lucy's garb, was Corinne. Then I saw boobs—big, fake melons tugging away at a red- and gold-striped bustier. Lucy. Then chomping away on crunchy, gourmet deep-fry. Rose. *Leftovers my ass.* Then long, bony fingers taking a big fat draw on a cigarette. Toni. Finally, I saw the make-up girl and Lucy's

clothing stylist. Everyone from today's shoot was sitting comfortably, drinking, laughing, enjoying—everyone but me.

I felt an overwhelming urge to throw up. My body became feverish; my face turned fire-engine red. It was complete and utter disgrace.

This isn't happening. This isn't real. I wondered how to reverse the day, undo whatever I'd done. *What could I pull off to make them like me, to make them take it all back, to make it all better?*

Fight or cry? Fight or cry? Fight or cry? Adrenalin pumped through my body as I teetered: knock their faces in or bawl my eyes out? Tears welled up in my eye sockets, curtailing any conscious decision. I felt crushed, defeated, pummeled, all before the end of the first inning.

Then it came to me: *Nobody messes with a prairie girl!*

My legs moved me forward. The decision was made. No turning back now.

"Excuse me," I said to the bouncer, my heart pounding.

"Sorry, Blondie, we're full." He moved into the doorway.

Why the hell is everyone here suddenly calling me Blondie?

I smiled a sadistic smile. "I have a reservation on the balcony with Lucy Lane of *The Purrfect Life*. You might have heard of it." I almost sounded sweet, but for the eerie screech of claws bursting from my cuticles.

"All right, they're on the balcony." He waved me through.

"I know," I said, practically bull-doing his ape-like body.

The music pounded. Legs, torsos, and arms attached to sticky drinks flew across my path as if providing a shield to the enemy. But my mind was still. Only one thought consumed me. *Confront.*

Suddenly, I was before them, stone-faced at the end of their table.

"Oh . . . s . . . h . . . i . . . t," Rose, the first to spot me, said in slow motion.

Everyone froze. I trembled, folding my arms across my chest to mask my weakness. My lungs tightened as I gasped for

breath. “Why?”

Nothing. Toni dropped her head in embarrassment, unable to look at me.

“Why would you do this?” My eyes went to Corinne and Rose. My lips wavered.

Silence. Nobody moved.

“Well?” If I said one more word, I’d cry.

Corinne spoke first.

“It’s my night!” she spat. “I’m the one leaving. I wanted a night out alone with my friends.”

I fully expected red horns to sprout from her skull.

“*What?!*” This was total horror.

Where could I go with that? I expected an apology, sympathy, an appeal for forgiveness, not *Mean Girls* the movie. I mean, that was a movie, wasn’t it? People didn’t act like this in real life! Did they?

“But we work together. This is the crew, the team. You guys planned this night in front of me, with me included. I mean—I don’t get it. I wouldn’t do this to a sworn enemy!”

“Sit down,” Corinne hissed. “You’re making a scene.”

“No. I’m not sitting with you—you . . . phonies.” *Oh, that’s good—“phonies.” Harsh, real harsh. That’s telling ‘em, Blondie!*

Corinne grabbed my arm and pulled me into the empty chair beside her—it must have been Lucy’s, because she was conveniently missing. I looked up at Toni and Rose and shook my head.

“You two, you’re my new assistants. I need to trust you.” I felt lost.

Maybe my sudden promotion was too good to be true. Maybe I didn’t deserve any of this: the job, LA, the supposed uber-cool friends. It was the universe getting back at me for playing out of my league—the cement boots’ equivalent of emotional payback.

“Look, just have a drink. It’s no big deal,” Corinne said sternly as she motioned for a waiter. “And whatever you do,” she leaned into me, “don’t tell Naomi.”

Lucy pranced to the table, all boobs and booty, with a hearty martini buzz. She nearly hit the ceiling at the sight of me.

"Hi, Jane. Awesome you made it," she said about an octave higher than her normal range. "I was wondering where you were."

Before I could answer, she turned around to return to some drunken richy-rich manager/agent type at the bar.

"I can't do this." I got up to leave.

"Naomi doesn't need to know," Corinne whispered sternly.

I shook my head in disgust. "You guys are—never mind, not worth it."

"Jane, stay!" Corinne said, forcing civility into her voice. "Your drink is here."

I turned to walk away.

The earlier pink sky now was a smoggy gray, with dots of burnt orange. The street lamps hummed painfully, as if even they wanted to hide. I smelled garbage and exhaust. The wind poked and spit at me. Strangers seemed to sneer. Even the bums lost their hobo charm.

I knelt beside a back alley dumpster and cried.