

beneath a starlet sky

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the smattering of movie posters that read “FORGETTING PETUNIA Holt,” “EVEN THE DOG THOUGHT YOU WERE A BITCH, PETUNIA HOLT,” and “SATAN COULD BE YOUR SISTER” are lit up in an explosion of lights from the cacophony of cameras going off like fireworks on the vertigo-inducing Palais steps, the most famous red carpet in the world. Tonight’s premiere is one of the hottest tickets in town. The town being Cannes. Because this is the Cannes Film Festival, the *grand-père* of all movie festivals. It’s surreal that my brother Christopher’s first feature film is at the center of this white-hot vortex. I’m about to chuckle at the tag lines—brilliant viral marketing; there are twenty-seven *Forgetting Petunia Holt* fan clubs on Facebook at last count—until I think of my best friend, Kate Woods, and how she’s going to feel when she sees them here. Bad

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enough that the promo campaign was already spinning into overdrive back in L.A. I try and push her out of my thoughts and revel in all the attention my brother's getting.

The wide expanse of the Palais steps is crammed with journalists, photogs, movie execs, and well-wishers, all angling for time with my big brother. As the flashbulbs erupt in Christopher's face, he seems to be transformed in the bright white glow, his usual mess of hair smoothed back, his traditionally slumped shoulders rolled upright in his tux jacket. Christopher may look like he's following in the steps of our father, Paulie Santisi, the two-time Academy Award-winning director, but in fact he's finally stepping out of the very large, dark shadow Papa casts and standing tall on his own two, trademark red Converse high-tops.

Please let Christopher get a positive reception. Please. I suddenly remember how they booed Sofia Coppola's *Marie Antoinette* at Cannes—how could they *do* that to all those delicious Manolo Blahniks *and* Kirsten Dunst? I have a panicked vision of the crowd booing and the French critics having a field day at my brother's expense and I feel an instantaneous knot in my stomach. The only thing the public loves more than a *Hollywood Kid Of* success story is one with a *Hollywood Kid Of* miserably bombing. These French audiences at Cannes are notoriously harsh—Lars von Trier and Vincent Gallo, sure, but all that Gallic disdain for Wim Wenders . . . and *Pamela Anderson*? My stomach drops when a journalist sidles up to Chris with a question.

"So, who is Petunia Holt?" the journalist asks, shoving a mic in my brother's face. Christopher swore on his Leica that once belonged to François Truffaut that he would never reveal the truth. I hold my breath and wait for his reply.

"You're about to find out," Chris says coyly, pointing to the theater where the lights will shortly go down for the screening.

I breathe a huge sigh of relief until I hear, “Darling!” My mother calls from across the Palais steps, her *Wristwatch Wives* camera crew, all decked out in tuxes, in tow. Yup, that would be my mother joining the ranks of Bethenny and the Countess in her new *reality show*. How’d she get clearance for her cameras to be *here*?

I yank on the arm of my Best Gay Forever (BGF). “Quick, Julian, let’s get out of here. I can’t deal with her freaking cameras right now.”

“Too late,” he says as my mother comes bounding toward me, a paint-erly floral print, ruffled Chanel shrugging off of one of her slender shoulders. Her blond hair is in a tousled Bardot beehive.

“Hi, Blanca,” Julian says, giving my mother double air kisses. “You look absolutely ravishing.”

“Thank you. Isn’t Karl an absolute genius,” my mother says, fanning out the billowy skirt of her gown for Julian. “I promise that I’ll be wear-ing one of your designs, Julian darling, the night of Fête-ing Santisi.”

“Fête-ing Santisi?!” I repeat.

“I was going to call the party the Santisi Cannes-Cannes or the San-tisi Conquer Cannes but Fête-ing Santisi just feels more all-encompassing with my TV show, your debut bridal collection, Julian, and Paulie and Christopher competing to win the Palme d’Or,” Mom says.

“I think Fête-ing Santisi is perfect, Blanca,” Julian says. What a suck-up. Or maybe he’s just angling for more publicity for the bridal couture line our company’s about to debut, with Mom’s camera crew ten feet away.

Wristwatch Wives is Mom’s latest reinvention. She was on a medita-tion retreat hanging off the side of a cliff at Esalen on her 108th chant of So-hum when it came to her. She realized that she’d been support-ing others (read my father) in their creative pursuits for long enough. She was tired of Hollywood women being treated as nothing more than expensive accessories. And *Wristwatch Wives* was born—the show that showcases the famous Wives-Of, the Powers Behind the Throne.

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“Did you get the script, Lola?” my mother whispers out of her cameramen’s earshot.

“Script?” I ask. “What script, Mom?”

“For the party, darling,” my mother says in a low voice.

“You have *got* to be kidding. You don’t actually expect us to follow a script, do you?” I say. “Mom, what part of ‘reality TV’ do you not get?”

Mom draws me into a tighter huddle. “Lola, I’ve been working my bum off on this party, not to mention all the money I’m spending, which your father doesn’t even *know* about, so it has to *perfect*. And the only way for it to be perfect is to script it. I got one of the writers from *Keeping Up with The Kardashians*.”

“Ooooooh, I love *Keeping Up with The Kardashians*,” Julian says. “Did they tell you what’s going to happen next season?” I shoot Julian one of my infamous death daggers.

“Lola, please, this is important to me. I’ve even been editing old family movies together for the party. They’re just so wonderful. They’re such a beautiful expression of our closeness,” Mom says.

“Closeness to what, Mom? The Hollywood sign?” I say.

“Oh, please, Lola, this party is going to be not only a celebration of our family, but a celebration for *all* families. In these difficult economic times, family is all that we have,” she says. She delivers this last line while beaming at Alex, her lead cameraman. I can’t tell if she’s speaking to me, or to the camera.

“Did you come up with that on your own or did your new scribe write that for you?” I ask, when I find myself being dragged out of earshot again, stage left.

“Okay, look, Lola, this episode is going to air during sweeps and I just found out that one of the other wives is letting the cameras film the delivery of her surrogate’s twins who, it turns out, has been having an affair with her husband,” my mother pleads. “And I’m sure the footage of

Christine and her husband and their team of lawyers signing the paperwork for a trial separation is sure to be a big ratings bonanza. And Francesca has footage of her sixteen-year-old daughter getting more than just the standard post-op nose job visit with her *married* plastic surgeon. That's why I really need this party to be *perfect*."

"Oh, great, Mom, so we're just pawns in your scheme to steal the WWW limelight," I say.

"Darling, please just smile and do this for me, *please*," she says, linking my arm in hers. "Now let's go find Christopher. I'm so nervous for him," my mother says a little too loudly before barreling through the throng of journalists and photogs and landing us smack-dab in front of my brother, her camera crew struggling to keep up with us. "Darling," my Mom says, dropping my arm, spreading her suntanned arms wide, and hugging Chris. "I'm so proud of you," she says, stretching her hands around his neck. It's not much of a reach; she's nearly as tall as his six feet two inches in her towering four-inch silver stilettos.

"Thanks, Mom," Chris says, smiling, at which point my mother doesn't just begin to cry, she begins to weep like they're putting down Old Yeller.

"You okay, Mom?" Christopher asks, a bit startled.

"Shit, the battery just went out, we need to switch them out," I hear Alex say to his Assistant Camera, at which point my mother instantaneously turns off her Oscar-worthy waterworks and turns to face them.

"So you didn't get that?" Mom asks squarely.

"I don't think so," the cameraman says.

"Well let's do it again then," my mother says. "Byron, I think I need a touch-up," she says, summoning her hair-and-makeup guru while they reload the battery. Damn if she doesn't execute a perfect second take. Why she didn't take her famous seventies' supermodel looks into acting is beyond me. Too tall for Robert Redford? Or maybe she's been flexing those acting chops after all, putting up with my dad's antics all these years.

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“Okay, I gotta go,” my brother says, giving my mother a little peck on the forehead before heading into the theater.

“Wait, I wanted to get a shot with your father as well,” my mother calls after Christopher, who doesn’t turn back.

“Where is Papa? Why aren’t you with him?” I ask, searching the crowded steps for my father.

“He’s allergic to the cameras,” Mom says.

“He’s allergic to *your* cameras,” I point out. “He doesn’t seem to be allergic to those. Those cameras he seems to love,” I say, spotting my father in the middle of a firestorm of flashbulbs.

I overhear one of the many French journalists surrounding my father ask, “What do you think of your son’s movie?” and my breath catches in my throat.

“Haven’t seen it,” is the curt response.

“And how do you feel about being in competition here at Cannes against your only son?”

My father takes off the straw fedora he’s paired with his tux and strokes his graying beard. “There’s no competition, he’s my son,” he says, and just when I think my father’s actually going to act like a father for once, he adds, “He’s got no experience, this is his first movie, and I’ve been making movies for four decades.” Geezus. Can’t he just let this freaking moment be about Christopher? This is a man who probably fought for his name above the title on Chris’s birth announcement.

“Dad is such an asshole,” slips out before I can stop myself. “Did you hear what he just said about Christopher?” I ask my mother.

“No, darling, I didn’t,” Mom says. “Alex, were you rolling?” my mother asks her cameraman.

“Oh geezus, did you just get me saying that about my father?” I ask him.

“Oh don’t worry about it,” my mother says, linking her arm with

mine again and pulling us in the direction of the theater, “We’ll cut it out in the editing room.” But I can’t help but imagine my verbal gaffe in promo all over Sweeps Week.

Inside the Palais, I lean back in my plush red velvet seat. I’m nervous for my brother as his premiere is about to begin.

“Stop fidgeting,” Julian says softly. “You’re going to destroy the sequins.”

“Sorry,” I whisper trying to smooth out the couple of them I inadvertently gnarled on my cobalt blue, one-shoulder minidress Julian made especially for tonight.

“OMG, Lo, is that Rob Pattinson?” Julian asks, gesturing with his eyes toward the row in front of us. “He’s even more gorgeous in person,” Julian says breathlessly. “Is he or is he not a god among men? Maybe we should pray to him to let everything work out with our fashion show. C’mon, Lo, pray with me.” He closes his eyes and folds his hands in prayer, “Please, dear Rob, let us—”

“Stop it, Julian, breathe!” I say, trying to prevent Julian from having a full-on twelve-year-old-girl freak-out.

“Sorry.” Julian takes my hand in his. “The movie’s going to be great,” he says in a hushed voice.

“Thanks,” I say, squeezing his hand, wishing it were Lev’s. But Luke Levin, MD, my live-in love of the last nine months, is back in LA. Lev, whose first love is the ER and whose knowledge of pop culture ended the day he started his residency at Cedars-Sinai three years ago. (He thinks the HD in HD-TV stands for “high dose,” and the last movie he saw was *Crash* because he thought it would have an interesting take on trauma center stabilization techniques. I mean, how adorable is that?)

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Exactly one year, two months, and twelve days ago (but who's counting?) I fell headfirst off a gurney (and out of my Louboutin stilettos) and in love with the good doctor who saved me from more than a broken ankle on Oscar Night. He not only fixed my busted foot, but cured me of an undiagnosed case of Actorholism, my near-fatal addiction to dating the world's most narcissistic men. He got me straight on an IV drip of anti-actor (IV in my case stands for *inter-vention*), and straight onto him. Not that kind of straight onto him. Well yes, that kind, too, but that came later.

That's right. I, Lola Santisi—the CEO of a struggling fashion line, former Hollywood ambassador, and daughter of Hollywood Royalty without a kingdom—or even a condo—to call my own—scored a real, live Doctor in Shining Armor with a kingdom to call *our* own. Okay, maybe not a kingdom, but a really nice house in—*Sherman Oaks*—which makes it absolutely perfect because it's on the *other* side of the hill from Hollywood.

I clutch Julian's hand, thankful to have any hand to hold right now.

Finally the theater goes dark and *Forgetting Petunia Holt* appears in simple Courier font against a black screen.

An hour and forty-five minutes later, as the movie ends and the lights go up, I spot Kate, standing in the back of the theater alone. She must have snuck in when the lights went down. When we lock eyes she's already bolting for the door.

"Oh my god, she came," Julian says, following my eye line.

"I've got to go," I say, scurrying through my row. "Kate," I yell once we're outside. "Kate!" I catch up with her and lay a hand on her shoulder.

"What?" she says, finally turning to face me, her red lips pursed. If looking good really is the best revenge, then my best friend is getting hers. She's wearing one of the prettiest, sexiest black silk slip-dresses I've ever seen. It's spliced with tulle to create these supersexy peekaboo pan-

els flaring out from her taut midriff and down her perfect legs. Her chocolate hair is in a soft wave and her dewy skin is positively radiant.

"I'm not sure what to say." I look down at the red carpet underneath us, not sure whether I just said that out loud or I'm just thinking it.

"Relax. I'm here to sign the actress who plays Petunia Holt—Gigi Summer. She's going to be huge. Bryan told me to bring back a signed contract or not bother coming back." Kate is a rising star at Bryan Lourd's Creative Artists Agency. But we both know that's not why Kate's *really* here tonight. Her voice is detached, unemotional, all business, her feelings swept right under that red carpet she's standing on. She shifts on her needle-heeled stilettos. I grab her arm to steady her, startled by this rare moment of imbalance from my best friend, who's trying so hard to mask the heartache she must be feeling.

I know that nothing I say will make it better for Kate so I don't say anything at all. Instead I wrap her in a hug. She doesn't even try and push me away. She actually hugs me back. Hard.

"I love you," I whisper in her ear.

"Thank you," she says, not letting go of our embrace.

Suddenly the theater starts to unload and I spot Christopher through the throng. I look over at my brother and then over to Kate. Chris. Kate. Chris. Kate. God I hate this. Why did I ever think a romance between my best friend and brother would ever work? I want to go and congratulate my brother, but it feels like such a betrayal to my best friend.

"Go. Tell him what an amazing movie it is," Kate says, as if she's somehow read my mind. But just as I'm about to head toward him, he's suddenly standing right in front of us.

"Chris," I shout, throwing my arms around him. "It was incredible. I'm so proud of you." I look back at Kate and mumble an added, "Sorry."

"It's going to be a huge success," Kate says.

"Kate, it's really . . . can we talk for a min—" but just as Christopher's

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trying to finish his sentence, Gigi Summer, his leading lady, sidles up next to him in a glittery strapless short dress with a nipped-in waist and a balloon skirt showing off her long legs. She gives him a kiss on the cheek. Was that a kiss-kiss? Or just a friend kiss? “Gigi, hi!” Chris says after a beat. “Have you met my sister, Lola?”

I’m about to return the greeting when Kate immediately thrusts her hand out to Gigi. “Congratulations. You were really great.”

“Thank you, I owe it all to my director,” she says, giggling in Christopher’s direction. “I’m Gigi.” She reaches out to shake Kate’s hand.

“Kate,” she says. “Woods.”

“Oh . . . wow . . . you’re Kate,” Gigi says. Maybe she’s not that good an actress after all because she’s unable to stop the surprise from showing on her face. After a few silent, tense beats, she says, “Wow, this is kind of awkward.”

“Not for me,” Kate says, seeming to relish in Gigi’s discomfort. “I hear you’re at Gersh. I suspect you’ll be looking for new representation soon. Here’s my card. CAA sees you in some huge projects. I’d love the chance to talk with you more about it.” She fishes one of her business cards out of her black cut-crystal clutch and hands it to Gigi.

“Thanks,” Gigi says, overwhelmed. “It was nice to meet you. I’ll . . . I’ll definitely give you a call. And nice to meet you too, Lola.” To her credit, Gigi looks as puzzled as she is excited. “Well . . . I’m going to go and mingle. Are you coming, Chris?” she asks.

“In a minute,” he says. He reaches out and gives Gigi’s hand a lingering squeeze as she melts into the crowd.

“Kate, I really hope we can talk at some point, I want to explain,” Christopher says.

“Go enjoy your moment in the sun, Chris. You should be talking to all the journalists, not me. You need to capitalize on this,” Kate says, safely back in agent mode, which is far less painful than ex-girlfriend mode.

"I hope you're coming to the after-party," he says.

"I'll try," Kate says, but we both know she won't.

As Christopher disappears into the crowd, I turn to Kate.

"Are you okay?" I ask as her cell phone starts ringing.

"Saved by the bell," she says. She reads the caller ID. "Okay, Lola, here's the other disaster I'm dealing with. Hello," she says, clicking on the speaker.

"The eagle has landed in Cannes. Let all prepare to rejoice and let Kate be down waiting for me in the lobby of the Hôtel Du Cap in ten minutes," Nic Knight's voice booms. The only thing worse than thinking it was a good idea for my brother to date my best friend is thinking it was a good idea for Kate to put one of her most loose-cannon clients, Nic Knight, in my father's own bid for the Palme d'Or, *San Quentin Cartel*. Nic makes Sean Penn, Mickey Rourke, and Robert Downey Jr. 1.0 look like paragons of sobriety and self-control.

"I'll be there soon, Nic," she says, before hanging up. "Do you believe this shit?"

"What's with the fake accent? He sounds like Ricardo Montalban," I say.

"More bullshit. He says he's gonna stay in character until after the premiere. I've never met a more pretentious, full-of-himself actor in my life, and I've met a lot of 'em. But I'm just glad he actually made it here. He let his passport expire, and you have no idea the strings I had to pull to get him a new one in twenty-four hours. Not to mention Nic violated parole *again* by causing a public disturbance when he went commando into the hot mugwort tea pool of the all-women's spa in Koreatown and missed another mandatory drug test. I had to bribe his parole officer with premier tickets and a free trip to Cannes just so he can personally make sure Nic stays out of trouble."

"I was going to offer you a trade but now I'm not so sure," I say. I've been having major headaches with a certain supermodel who seems

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hell-bent on finalizing her fittings for a jail cell instead of for Julian's runway show, which is only four days away.

"I gotta go, I'll call you later," Kate says.

"Good luck with Nic," I say before Kate walks away down the Palais steps.

I head off to find Julian when my own cell starts chirping.

"Hello?" I ask.

"I just left Grace Frost's office," Coz, the Senior Bitchitor at *Vain* magazine says over the phone line. "I simply cannot imagine why you've been calling her. I'm returning the call on her behalf."

I feel my stomach plummet to the floor along with our chances of being in *Vain*, the hottest fashion magazine around. I wouldn't have even dreamed of calling the editor in chief herself, except that Coz left me no choice. I *had* to call Grace Frost. Julian's new bridal collection *deserves* to be on the cover of *Vain*. And without it, I'm not even sure if there will be a JT Inc. any longer.

"I, um, well, I can explain," I stumble and imagine Coz on the other end of the phone, basking in this moment from behind her big black sunglasses.

"As much as I'd derive immense pleasure from listening to you grovel for the next few hours, I'm actually really busy so I'm going to cut to the chase," Coz says. "I called my friends at *Vogue*, *Elle*, *Bazaar*, and *Marie Claire* and I know that there are no other offers for a Julian Tennant cover. Did you imagine for one second that I wouldn't check?"

"I—" I shouldn't have lied to Grace Frost's assistant. But can you blame me? I'm desperate and I'm not Criss Angel or God or Stacy London, so what else could I do? It's taken me my entire twenty-seven years to find a career that I love and I'm actually good at, so I'm going to do whatever it takes to get the world's most talented designer that I can't seem to make famous no matter how hard I try on the cover of *Vain*.

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"I'm *still* speaking. I'll let you know when it's your turn," Coz says. God I hate her. "We're going to give you the cover and a twelve-page layout inside to coincide with the release of *Four Weddings and a Bris* in August."

"You're *what*!?" I ask, flabbergasted. Julian beat out John Galiano, Vivienne Westwood, Marchesa, and Jason Wu to be one of the four designers to create wedding dresses for Baz Luhrmann's latest musical extravaganza, also set to premiere at Cannes. It stars Hollywood's hottest supernova, Saffron Sykes, the Best Actress Oscar winner who has Spielberg, the Coen brothers, *and* Clint Eastwood all fighting to work with her—and pay her twenty mil—all at the ripe old age of *twenty-five*. Could it possibly be that Coz is our miracle worker after all? "Is this a joke?"

"Does it sound like I'm joking?" Coz says icily. Other than *sounding* as if she's got a pair of her Dior studded platform skyscrapers shoved up her flat bum, I can't tell if she's serious or not. Could she be serious? "*Are* you listening?" she demands.

"I'm here," I say, still in shock.

"Just so we're clear, I'm not doing this for you or Julian," she says, as if she's *ever* done anything for me—or Julian. Except waterboard our careers. "I'm doing it for Chili."

"Chili?" I repeat. That's Charles "Chili" Lu, fashion's rising wunderkind, who Coz thinks is the second coming. And did I mention the kid is only *sixteen*? Yes, sixteen. He's accomplished more in his sixteen years than I have in all of my twenty-seven. Chili was the first winner of *Cut-throat Couture*, the reality TV show brainchild of *Vain's* very own Coz, its most tart-tongued judge. He also created wedding gowns for Baz's film. Except Baz and Saffron weren't clamoring for gowns with iPod portals and solar panels after all. So Baz replaced Chili with Julian and Coz forced us to hire the Christian Siriano wannabe as Julian's assistant after convincing Baz that it would be bad PR for his movie to draw attention

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to firing a designer on a film where the costuming is *everything*. Chili's transition over to our team would make all appear to be smooth sailing.

"Grace agreed that it was a complete travesty that Chili's divine wedding gowns ended up on Baz's cutting room floor, so she thought it was a wonderful idea to let his gowns see the light of day in *Vain*."

I know that Coz is speaking but I can't compute what's she's actually saying.

"What about Julian?" I'm finally able to get out.

"Saffron and Cricket will do the cover together. Saffron will wear Chili and Cricket can wear Julian," Coz says. My Best Actress Forever (BAF), Cricket Curtis, landed the part of Saffron's wisecracking sidekick in *Four Weddings and a Bris*. "I've already booked Patrick Demarchelier, Gucci Westman, and Orlando Pita and called the Du Cap and arranged to shoot in their gardens. Chili and I are flying out tomorrow. *Jusqu'à demain. Bisous. Bisous*," she says, and then just as abruptly hangs up.

I try and recover from the Coz tsunami that just hit me. So what if Julian has to share the cover with little Chili Lu? At least Julian is going to *be* on the cover of *Vain*. This could catapult Julian into becoming the *next* Vera Wang. He could rule the Hollywood brides. Everything I've killed myself for as CEO of Julian Tennant Inc.

Oh god. Oh no. I still haven't actually *asked* Cricket or Saffron if they'd be willing to pose for the cover. What if they say no?

My head is spinning. I feel faint. I speed-dial Cricket. It goes straight to voice mail. I leave her a very long rambling, bumbling, begging message.

I contemplate hurling myself down the Palais steps, the most prestigious red carpet in the world but decide against it. I'm fairly certain that the throng of international paparazzi and fans camped out at the bottom of the steps would only break my fall. Not to mention the last thing I want is another video of me all over TMZ.

I drop to my knees on the red carpet and clasp my hands together.

Please Rob Pattinson, please Rob Pattinson, let Cricket and Saffron agree to pose together for the cover of *Vain*. Please.

“What are you doing?” Julian asks. “This is the red carpet, not a mosque.”

I look up at Julian. “I can explain.”

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