

CHAPTER 2

Graduation Day dawned sunny and warm and golden. Of course, this was L.A., so the weather was not particularly unusual. What *was* unusual were the hordes of people who had descended upon our college. They trampled the grass, looking confusedly at their campus maps and yelling at their kids to stay close, and took pictures of everything, as if this chaos were something to be remembered and preserved instead of forgotten as quickly as possible with a very dry martini.

But the excitement was palpable in the air, and even Adam, who tried to be blasé about most everything, was giddy. He'd bought a new suit for the occasion, even

though he'd known it would be hidden beneath one of the hideous maroon polyester gowns we all had to wear. In his silly cap, he looked like a boy playing dress-up.

"That's a good color on you, you know," I told him as we lingered in the shade of a large elm tree. "It really brings out the red in your eyes."

"Very funny," he said. He pulled out a camera from beneath the folds of his robe and took a picture of me trying to finish my chili relleno burrito before we had to file into the auditorium. "You've got beans in your teeth," he told me.

I waved this observation away. "I'll worry about that when I'm done eating. What I'm really concerned about is this ridiculous cap. It makes my head look potatoy, doesn't it?"

Adam laughed. "Potatoy? They're about to give you an English degree, and that's the best adjective you can come up with?"

I stood taller and puffed out my chest. "A cum laude English degree."

Adam knocked himself in the forehead theatrically. "Oh, of course, how could I forget?"

I couldn't help but feel proud—I'd worked hard for my grades, even if I couldn't think of a better adjective than "potatoy." As I finished the burrito and attempted to remove the beans from my teeth, I looked around at all my

fellow graduates and wondered if they, too, felt such satisfaction at the end of their college careers. I hoped so.

“So where’s your family?” Adam asked. He pointed to my mouth. “Still one more little bean piece.”

“Thanks,” I said. “I don’t know where they are. They’re running late, they said. Which isn’t really that unusual.”

I was starting to get a little concerned, though. The ceremony was due to start in moments and they weren’t anywhere in sight. I wasn’t surprised—in my family, twenty minutes late is on time, and on time is considered early—but I’d thought they’d be able to organize themselves better than usual, seeing as how it was a pretty big occasion. They’d said they’d meet me by the administration building at four, but then they’d called to say that they were delayed because Hunter, my seven-year-old brother, had refused to put his clothes on right side out until he was bribed by a milkshake at In-N-Out Burger. (He claimed that wearing one’s clothes the normal way was capitulating to the fashion-industrial complex. Actually those were my words. Hunter merely said he thought wearing clothes the normal way was boring. But doesn’t my phrasing make him sound smarter?)

So as I scanned the sea of people, looking for my mom in her favorite dress (blue with white dots), my dad in his good tie (the only one without stains), Hunter with his clothes on correctly (hopefully), and my grandma in one of

her atrocious hats (she had a thing for crazy chapeaux), there was a tiny, tiny part of me that hoped they wouldn't show up at all. That they'd decide they were having such a nice time at In-N-Out that they'd stay there for the afternoon. And that they would opt to pay \$49.99 for the videotape of graduation, which they would then watch in the den with a big tub of popcorn. I mean, I love my family, but sometimes I love them better when I'm not around them.

As Adam and I walked into the auditorium I felt butterflies in my stomach, just like I'd felt the first day I ever set foot on campus. Even though I was ready to leave, I couldn't believe the time had gone by so quickly. Four years ago, I'd never even heard of Willa Cather or E. L. Doctorow, never read Turgenev or Wollstonecraft. I'd thought that George Orwell's most important work was *1984*. Incidentally, I'd also never done a body shot, pulled an all-nighter, or lost my clothes in a game of strip poker, all of which were as important to my education as any of the books I'd read.

"Are you nervous?" I asked as I followed Adam down to our seats.

"Hardly," he said, tipping his cap at me. "In fact I'm already bored."

See what I mean? Congenitally blasé.

I felt a hand on my shoulder then, and I turned to see

Jessica Bard's Whitestripped teeth gleaming as she smiled at Adam and me.

"How are we doing, graduates?" she chirped. I noticed that she'd purchased a pair of sandals that were the exact color of our graduation robes.

"Great," I said, offering her a rather insincere smile in return. "You got your speech all memorized?" I didn't care whether she did or not, of course—I was just trying to be polite.

"Oh, I don't really believe in preparing too much," she said breezily, squeezing my shoulder and then reaching over to do the same to Adam. "I think it sucks the energy and intensity out of things. Plus I read a lot and most of it just sticks. So I think it'll be good. I mean, everything else about this event is so *canned*. I want to be spontaneous. An extemporaneous speech is the true test of one's intelligence, don't you think?"

I looked over Jessica's head at Adam, who rolled his eyes and then made a gagging motion. I tried not to laugh.

"I'm sure you'll be fantastic," I said. And I *was* sure. Because Jessica Bard had a freakishly big brain, not to mention balls that would make a bull jealous. And did I mention that in addition to being pretty, she also had a really excellent sense of style? (Barring those ugly maroon sandals, of course.)

“Well,” she said, “I’ve got to be off. They’re waving for me to come up on stage.”

“Break a leg,” Adam said. “No, really.”

Jessica was impervious to his sarcasm. “See you two later!” she cried and strode up to the stage.

“Well,” Adam said, watching her retreating back, “her speech will either be brilliant or total bullshit.”

“Probably the former,” I said glumly. It’s not that I didn’t want my friends to do well—I was thrilled for my roommate when she graduated early and went off on a Fulbright to Africa—but Jessica Bard was not my friend. “Look at her. She’s, like, dripping with confidence. And her posture is perfect.”

“I’ll bet you five bucks the speech is crap,” Adam said, and I shook his hand and told him he was on.

We found our seats and pretty soon the ceremony began, only twenty minutes behind schedule. It was your standard commencement, from what I could tell—there was a band playing and balloons floating gaily around above the stage. And of course there were people who’d decorated their graduation caps (I saw an alligator, a stethoscope, and what looked like a beer bong, each affixed to a cap on someone in my row), and I’m pretty sure I heard champagne corks popping in the rows behind me. And then it was time for Jessica’s speech.

She was introduced by the short, squat president of our college, and she stood behind the podium as confidently as if it were her very own. She beamed out at all of us, a single yellow rose pinned to her gown. (Of course she hadn't decorated her cap—she was far too sophisticated for that.) “Class of 2008. It is my great honor to welcome you to today's graduation ceremony.” I could almost see her breathe deeply, taking in the pleasure of being the center of attention. “I stand before you, classmates and peers, with optimism in my heart and passion in my throat when I pronounce to you two age-old words: ‘carpe diem.’”

Adam and I exchanged befuddled glances. He raised his eyebrows up until they almost vanished behind his sandy bangs. “Carpe diem? Are we on the set of *Dead Poets Society* or something?” he whispered. “You are *so* going to owe me five bucks.”

“Shhh,” I said, not because I cared what Jessica had to say but because I needed to figure out which one of us was going to win.

Jessica smiled happily and touched her cap. “You must not see this day—or the days that led up to it (your classes, your exams, the papers you wrote)—as preparation for real life. *Every moment of your life is real life*. Real life isn't starting now, my friends; it already began. So you'd better make the most of every moment. When we walk out these doors, I challenge each of us to not only seize the

day, but to clutch it with both hands, squeeze it with all our strength, and drain the victory out of every last living moment . . .”

“That’s not horrible,” I whispered. “The part about how every moment is your real life?”

Adam snorted. “Please. Cough up the money.”

“I don’t have it on me,” I said. “In case you haven’t noticed I’m not carrying a purse. And I don’t have cash stuffed in my bra. That’s my grandma’s department.”

“I thought she hid it in her hats?”

I giggled. “She keeps twenties in her hats, but any smaller bills go into her bra.”

“What does she have against purses again?” Adam asked.

“Who knows.” I sighed. “She’s a strange old lady.”

Speaking of my grandma, where was she? I wondered. Where were all of them? Was it possible that they really weren’t going to get here in time to see this, my proudest moment?

I turned around, peering into the crowd, and that’s when I saw them, picking their way across a front row in the auditorium, heading for a group of empty seats. My dad was clumsily edging his way past people’s knees (and, no doubt, stepping on their toes), my mom was carrying Hunter—who is way too old for that—on her hip, and my grandma, who had moved in with us when I was still in

high school, was bringing up the rear in red nails, powder-blue hair, and a hot-pink dress that looked like it belonged on a *Real Housewife of Orange County*. Oh, and she was also wearing a hat with a large red parrot on it. Oh, and Hunter was waving around this awful sock puppet he has, which Grandma made for him when he was three and which he calls Larry. Hunter loves Larry and takes him practically everywhere he goes, which is why Larry is always filthy.

I turned to Adam, cringing. “The crazies are here,” I said.

“Oh, good,” he said. “I was getting worried.”

Adam actually liked my family, which was one of the reasons he was the Best Friend Ever.

Jessica blathered on up there behind the podium, something about how our generation was stronger, smarter, and better equipped than all those that came before us. And how it was our responsibility—no, our *destiny*, she said—to forge ahead and stake our rightful claim at the top of the pyramid of life . . .

Blab blab blab, I said to myself. Maybe I *would* owe Adam five dollars. But it was kind of hard to concentrate because I kept turning around to check on my family. They had settled into their seats, and I could see that my grandma, apparently under the impression that she was at a movie theater, had brought out a bag of Smartfood pop-

corn. My little brother was kneeling in his chair, waving Larry around, and at one point it seemed as if Larry were lovingly and inappropriately caressing the hair of the woman in front of him. (I seriously hoped my eyes were playing tricks on me.)

But I tried to stop worrying about them. Tried to pay attention to Jessica so as to settle the bet with Adam. Tried to enjoy the last moments before I was officially a college graduate. My attempts worked well enough, and pretty soon Jessica finished, our names were called, and Adam and I walked, single file with the rest of our row, toward the stage to accept our diplomas. (Which, incidentally, were not our real diplomas, but blank stand-ins in brown, fake-leather folders. Not wanting to be responsible for ensuring the correct student/diploma matchup, the college had simply informed us to watch our mail for the actual thing.)

Adam received his degree, along with a handshake from the president, and a cheer went up as he waved to the various girls who'd been such fans of his campus rock band, Captain Corduroy. The clapping was not as loud for me, but it wasn't embarrassingly quiet, either, as it had been for poor Tim Kelly, the guy from our row who'd majored in Special Nerd Math and had never been seen outside of the library or the dining hall. Anyway, I accepted my fake-diploma folder, took in the applause, and turned to smile at my proud family.

Which was when I realized that they had come not to support me, but to humiliate me. My dad snatched Larry away from Hunter, who began to scream bloody murder. My grandma removed her hat and began to use it as a very ineffectual weapon against my dad, which in turn made my mother try to throw herself in the midst of the scrum, clearly begging for them all to calm down.

Half of my classmates and their parents had also turned to watch my family as they behaved like a pack of rabid hyenas. *Kill me now*, I thought. *Just kill me now*. For a moment I closed my eyes and pretended none of it was happening. That's why, in my graduation picture—you know, the one they snap of you at your supposedly proudest moment—I look like someone who is about to pass out. And believe me, unconsciousness at that instant would have been a gift.

I walked off stage, head hung low, and went to stand by Adam.

"I can't believe them!" I cried, burying my face in his chest. "Can you believe them?"

Adam glanced over to the stands and said, "It's safe to look now. I think they've settled down. Hunter has that sock thing back."

"Larry," I said miserably.

Adam pushed me away and looked in my eyes. "Hey, at least your family came. My dad didn't even show."

I smiled faintly and put my arm around his waist. “You’re lucky, then. Did you hear Hunter shrieking? Thank God I’m officially a grown-up now. I’m finally free of those freaks.”

“You’re never free of your family,” Adam said, playfully tapping me on the head with his pleather folder. Little did I know how right he was.