

COLOR ME ORANGE

By Selma J. Lewis

Color Me Orange

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Color Me Orange

is dedicated to all who
search for their place in the world.

Contents

Color Reference Guide	13
Prologue	15
Chapter 1	17
Chapter 2	21
Chapter 3	41
Chapter 4	57
Chapter 5	77
Chapter 6	89
Chapter 7	95
Chapter 8	107
Chapter 9	113
Chapter 10	119
Chapter 11	123
Chapter 12	133
Chapter 13	139
Chapter 14	147
Chapter 15	153
Chapter 16	163
Chapter 17	167
Chapter 18	175
Chapter 19	185
Chapter 20	193
Chapter 21	201
Chapter 22	207
Chapter 23	217
Chapter 24	223
Chapter 25	231
Chapter 26	239
Chapter 27	247
Chapter 28	259
Chapter 29	269
Chapter 30	277
Epilogue	279
Color Reference Guide	283

Welcome to a world where human beings evolved with – instead of melanin – the same skin pigmentation found in chameleons, changing color according to mood. A sleeping baby will be some shade of lavender. A playing child is gold or orange, while an argument brings on red.

With emotions so clearly manifest on the skin, human facial expressions, voice tone and volume, and body language would be unnecessary, so those traits would not evolve culturally. In this world, the language of color is highly complex and sometimes subtle.

The following guide may help navigate this rainbow world.

Color Reference Guide

Basic Human Emotion Color Palette ¹			
Color	Light	Medium	Dark
Blue	Bored	Sad	Depressed
Teal	Solitary	Lonely	Abandoned
Turquoise	Nervous	Embarrassed	Guilty
Pink	Offended	Hurt	Distressed
Red	Critical	Mad	Hostile
Burgundy	Envious	Jealous	Bitter
Yellow	Confused	Scared	Stressed
Orange	Cheerful	Happy	Excited
Gold	Amused	Playful	Eager
Green	Valuable	Proud	Strong
Mint	Startled	Surprised	Astonished
Sage	Contemplative	Confident	Assertive
Lilac	Obliged	Grateful	Indebted
Lavender	Calm	Relaxed	Tranquil
Purple	Thoughtful	Loving	In love

¹ Based on the work of Patton, et al

Prologue

Lila's parents noticed it the moment she was born. The delivery nurse and physician saw it, too, though they didn't say anything. The nurse wrapped the child in swaddling clothes and handed her over to her mother, avoiding eye contact and making up an excuse to leave the Labor and Delivery room.

Lila's father looked at the doctor, wanting to ask what had gone wrong but not knowing how to phrase it without upsetting his wife. The doctor completed the post-birth suturing, then also escaped the room as if it had been cursed.

The new mother gazed at her first-born daughter, instantly attached to her offspring yet wondering how often children were born with the... defect. Then she studied the newborn's face and convinced herself she could see it after all. Surely, Lila's mother thought, children were born with varying strengths; her child's aura was simply weaker than others.

There was much whispering in the maternity ward halls that day and the day after. The obstetrician and nurses dutifully made their checks on mother and child, discharging them from the hospital despite not knowing what had caused the birth defect – or even knowing what, exactly, the birth defect was. The unfortunate child's parents took her home.

Her father threw himself into his job, working long hours and minimizing contact with the baby when he was at home. Her mother cared for her full-time, refusing visitors who wanted to meet little Lila, making excuses about fragile health and an immature immune system. The truth was she didn't want to see the same expression of horror that was clear as yellow on the people in the hospital. Deep down, Lila's mother knew Lila's aura wasn't just weak; it was missing.

Lila was completely colorless.

Chapter 1

It's hopeless. I should just give up. Yeah, giving up is always a viable option.

But I worked hard for that tassel, so I continue to hunt around on the football field after the ceremony, searching between the rows of white folding chairs for my mortar board.

I knew it was a stupid idea for all three hundred graduates to throw their caps in the air. I considered leaving mine safely bobby-pinned to my head, but did I really need another thing to make me different from everyone else in my high school? No. I really didn't.

My art teacher, a man with thinning brown hair and a dad bod, suddenly appears next to me, interrupting my hunt. "Lila, I'm glad I found you. I wanted to give this back before you leave." Mr. Disegno hands me the portrait I drew months ago. It's been hanging in the office for the past semester with three others my teacher had deemed "outstanding." He glances past me, spotting Liam taking selfies with his friends. "Ah, the subject."

I take a quick look over my shoulder. "Yeah."

"It's a good likeness, Lila. You have talent. Too bad you didn't come to me before your senior year. I teach more advanced classes..."

"Um, yeah. Sorry." A breeze kicks up and threatens to blow away my artwork. I put the portrait of Liam together with my diploma to get control of both.

Mr. Disegno rocks back on his heels. “Well, maybe you can take art classes in college. Where are you going next year?”

“Just the community college.”

“Oh, Canterrel College has a good art department. I recommend it.”

“Okay. Thanks.”

“Well, good luck, Lila. It’s been a pleasure to have you in class.”

I stop fidgeting with my diploma and look at his lavender-hued face, lowering my well-honed defenses. Has he been this friendly all year?

“Thank you,” I say. “I really enjoyed your class.”

“Take care, Lila.”

I watch Mr. Disegno stroll away, congratulating former students as he goes. He’s an outlier – not at all like my other teachers who spent the last four years avoiding looking at me.

I took Art 1 in my senior year because I needed an elective and figured it was a good place for hiding in a corner, just doing my own thing.

For the first semester’s final project, we were to do a black-and-white portrait of anyone in the school. I chose to draw Liam. I took last year’s yearbook and flipped to the junior portraits. We had a week to complete the project, and although it was the week before finals, full of reviews and stress in every other class, I relaxed whenever I got to Art class, working on my portrait of Liam and remembering the good times.

My mom finds me on the field, off to the side of most of the cap-and-gown crowd, as I’m staring at my portrait of Liam. “Congratulations, Lila!” Mom hops her-orange-little-self up and down on her toes before hugging me tightly.

“Thanks, Mom. Where’s Dad?”

“He’s looking for your cap.”

Of course he is. Heaven forbid he be caught talking to me in public. Hell, he hardly talks to me at home. I’m

surprised, actually, that he came to graduation. He never came to anything else that had anything to do with me. Not one soccer game. Not even when we were playing for the championship.

Mom came to every game with the same enthusiasm she showed when she found me on the field a minute ago. I have to stop wishing my dad would be a Dad to me.

“Oh, there’s Liam,” Mom says. “Look at all the cords he’s got around his neck.”

“Yep. He’s a smartie.” I have one cord – for varsity sports. No other honors on my transcript.

“Della!” Mom turns when she hears my dad call from twenty yards away. “I found it. I’m going to put it in the car.”

She nods. “I guess it’s time to go. Are you finished saying bye to everyone?”

Cute. Saying bye to *everyone*. “I’ll catch up to you in a minute. I just have one more person to see, okay?”

“Okay. We’re parked on Oakdale Lane. Lucky to get a spot at all this morning. It was so crowded...” Her voice fades out as she walks away from me, talking as if I’m right next to her.

I look at the portrait in my hand, then at the subject. Spotting an opening, I take a deep breath and walk right up to Liam, hiding the drawing behind my diploma. “Hi.”

“Hi.”

Crap. I should’ve thought about what to say before I found myself standing in front of him. “So... where are you headed?”

“Home. My family’s having a barbecue.”

“I meant what college,” I clarified.

“Oh. MIT.”

“Wow. I’m not surprised. You always were smart. You’ll do great there.”

“Thanks. What about you?”

“Canterrel.”

“That’s good.” He paused for a beat. “You, uh, going to try out for soccer there?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

“You should. You really threw the other teams off their games.” Suddenly, Liam turns turquoise. “Oh, shit. I didn’t mean it like that, Lila. I meant the fake-outs you did with the other strikers. Not the color—”

“It’s okay. I know what you meant.” I’m glad Liam can’t see I’m feeling pink on the inside. No one sees that comments about my birth defect always hurt, especially when they come from Liam – as seldom as that is. We used to talk openly about it, confiding in each other, but not in the last three years.

“Lila, I regret that we, you know, drifted apart. Ever since fourth grade you made me feel light green when no one else gave a shit about me,” he says, settling down to lilac.

Surprised by his grateful hue, I smile at Liam and he understands me. “I don’t have a face thing for lilac, Liam, but that’s how I feel, too.” Then I feel something new as Liam and I gaze at each other.

Purple. I want to kiss him. *Holy shit!* He’s leaning in to kiss me, beginning to show purple too.

“Yo, Liam. Coming?”

I curse the unwelcome interruption from Michael, the president of the science club who wears too-short khakis and argyle socks. Even though Liam hangs with the nerds and brainiacs, he’s so much cooler than them, with the looks of a prom king and the smarts of a... guy going to MIT. He’s in the senior yearbook as “most likely to succeed.” I made the yearbook awards, too: most likely to take over tower duty from Quasimodo at Notre-Dame.

Liam looks at our classmate and calls back, “Be right there.” When he looks back at me, our moment is gone. He’s no longer purple, and I feel teal. I smile anyway. He attempts one of his lame blink-winks and takes off in the direction of his friend. I watch him go... out of my life.

Chapter 2

First week of community college and I find myself feeling light blue about more years of school. It feels like high school, only on a bigger campus with many more dark red and yellow people staring at me. Some manage to stifle their WTF outbursts, but most don't.

And I can't decide on a major. Nothing strikes me as, "Yes. Dark orange. That's what I want to do with my life."

Drawn to the only thing that gave me any kind of green or orange emotions in high school, I decide to follow Liam's advice and try out for the school's soccer team: the Canterrel Cougars.

There are so many people at try-outs; it's not like the high school at all. Several coaches, each specializing in one aspect of the game – offense, defense, goalkeeping – stand on the field, arms crossed in front of their chests, whistles hanging around their necks, scrutinizing us as we run drills.

This first day is just how I expected it would be. Lots of frightened yellow stares and angry red comments, but it doesn't take long for the coaches to realize that my deformity is an asset as I dribble around defenders, faking the beginnings of a kick, then zipping past, leaving them a surprised mint or an embarrassed turquoise.

"Lila, over here," the offensive coach calls. I jog to her. "Where'd you play before?"

"Santa Ana High School."

“Santa Ana. Your team won the championship a few years back.”

“Year before last.”

“How’d you communicate with your team?”

“Uh, I talked to them...” The coach starts toward red. *Shit.* I wasn’t trying to be a smartass. “Maybe I don’t understand your question,” I say quickly.

She settles down when she sees I’m not just being a jerk. “Did you, uh... your emotions, they’re not visible... how did your team work with you?” She’s light yellow, as if asking a person without arms how they manage to do a cartwheel: sincerely confused.

“Oh, well, we set up signals and calls so I could tell them my intentions, but it was really great because the other team didn’t know the signals.”

Light orange, the coach nods, thinking about how that might work in her favor. “I want you to partner up with Joanne over there and work out a few plays. You have ten minutes to come up with something, then I want to see you run it against my best defenders.”

“Yes, Coach,” I say, jogging off to intercept Joanne, thinking, *How on earth am I supposed to do that in ten minutes?*

Joanne’s a little yellow when I pull her aside and tell her what the coach wants us to do. “It’s okay,” I assure her. “You’ll get used to me. Here’s what I did with my last team.” I explain the play and ask her point-blank, “Are you good with this?”

“Yeah. I’ll do it,” Joanne answers, sage confidence starting to build on her.

I smile. She goes instantly light yellow at my weird facial configuration. “Oh, sorry. That’s something I used with a friend of mine,” I explain quickly.

“What does it mean?”

“Orange.”

“Oh.” She shades toward orange. “That’s great.”

“Thanks. I think we can make a good partnership. I do my best to be understood.” Joanne and I are ready to show the coach what we can do together.

Two versus three. Joanne dribbles forward, glancing up to see where I am. I raise my hand and cut behind a defender. She passes the ball through the legs of the fullback who challenges her, then cuts across to be on my other side. “Banjo!” I call, stopping the ball.

“Yo!” Joanne calls and I know where she is. With the heel of my boot, I roll the ball backwards to her and take off running. When Joanne dribbles the ball forward, a defender cuts her off and she has to pass back to me. I receive the ball and hold for a second. The defender who’s chasing me stops when I stop, leaving three yards between us, watching to see where I’ll go next.

She stands between me and the goal, reacting to my every twitch. “You got no shot, freak,” she taunts.

I look at Joanne and point toward the center ring of the field. My defender sees the signal and shifts her weight, turning sage because she thinks she knows what I’m about to do. That’s when I dribble the ball right past her. With a grunt, I kick hard to get the ball to Joanne who heads it into the goal.

“Yes,” I shout, running to high five Joanne. “That was great. Green. *Green.*”

“Nice pass,” she replies, beaming dark green. She looks at the coach; I turn around to see her reaction, too.

“She’s orange, right?”

“She was mint a second ago.”

The turquoise defenders gather with the red goalkeeper, arguing about what went wrong. I turn back to Joanne. “Of course she was mint. That was freakin’ awesome. Everyone was mint.”



Joanne and I make the team, both as freshman strikers, and Joanne insists we go to the student union pub to celebrate. She pulls out a fake ID. “What do you want? I’ll get it for you.”

“Orange soda.”

“No, what kind of beer do you want?” She’s pure sage, like she’s done this a hundred times before.

I’ve never had beer. I was never invited to parties where beer was available.

“You’re not in high school anymore. Branch out.”

I want to say yes so Joanne won’t think I’m an immature kid. But I don’t want to get kicked off the team for breaking the law. What if we get busted?

“Just soda. Here.” I hand her a dollar and she takes it.

“Okay.” Sage as can be, she approaches the bartender. I snag a table while she returns with our drinks. “So, what’s your soccer story?”

“My story?”

“Yeah, how long have you played? Were you always a striker?”

“Not much of a story,” I concede. “I used to kick a ball around with my friend at recess in the DY school.”

“What the hell is a DY school?” she asks before being distracted by a fellow player who stops by our table to talk to her. Not to me. Just her.

My mind wanders. What’s a DY school? It’s kind-of an inside joke between Liam and me. Well, it was... when we were friends.

Somewhere along the way in my grade-school career, the people-who-know-things decided I needed to be in a special classroom – with all the other deviants. They sent me to the D.Y. Carlton School.

D.Y. stood for Disturbed Youth.

Really, it was some guy’s name: Dominic Ysidro or something. To me, it was the school for Disturbed Youth – like me. Like Kevin, who didn’t really talk and was always some shade of yellow or red. He completely dominated one of the

aide's time since he didn't do anything the teacher wanted him to do. But he didn't give me any trouble, so it was no skin off my nose.

Then there was Heather who talked constantly about mundane things that somehow made her orange, despite the banality of her monologue. If she was writing, she was talking. If she was playing a game, she was talking. If she was reading, she was talking. And it didn't match what she was reading. Still don't know how she did that. Maybe she wasn't really reading. Whatever the case, she was orange about it, and she did what the teachers asked her to do, so she was mostly left to herself.

Most days, Mike was energetic and wouldn't sit still for more than five seconds. On lucky days, he was light blue. I overheard the aides talking once. They pretended that Mike's boredom was contentment. It had the same result: Mike planted himself in a beanbag chair and went to sleep. It was one less child to lasso in the classroom, so the aides were always orange on Mike's lucky light blue days.

I met Liam when he joined our dysfunctional class in fourth grade. I was doing my normal daily activities of reading textbooks, filling out worksheets, and practicing my penmanship. The teachers didn't spend a lot of time tutoring me. I wasn't dumb. I learned all the stuff that was taught in normal fourth grade, only I learned it from books as Kevin, Mike, and the other five DYs required all the adults' attention.

I'd figured out back in kindergarten that I was sent to the DY school not because I was disturbed, but because I disturbed everyone else. If they had just left me alone in the back of the room, I would've done my work. I wouldn't have tried to raise my hand or give an answer or anything that would have bothered my classmates.

Now that I think about it, maybe it wasn't the other kids who were bothered by me. Maybe it was the teacher.

When he came in on his first day, Liam looked around, dark yellow, at all the strange people in the room. The teacher sat him down next to me. I told him there was nothing to

worry about, that most of the time things were all lavender in the classroom.

“Can you see my color?” he asked me.

“Yeah. And before you ask, I don’t know why you can’t see my color. I was just born that way.”

“What way?”

“Colorless.”

“You have no colors?”

“Don’t be a jerk,” I said, feeling red.

Also red, Liam turned away from me and said nothing more... until he needed to go to the bathroom and didn’t know where it was. He looked around and found all the adults occupied with other children, and all the children occupied with their own dysfunctions. Turquoise, he asked, “Um, where’s the bathroom?”

“Go out that door. It’s the next door on the left.”

“Do I need to tell the teachers?”

“I don’t. I just go.”

Liam wandered out into the hallway and turned left. Of course, that’s when Ms. Walton wanted to give him a stack of worksheets to do. “Where’s Liam?”

“Bathroom,” I answered.

“Are you helping Liam getting acclimated?”

“What’s acclimated?”

“Accustomed. Used to. Lavender.”

“Oh. Well, I tried, but he was a jerk.”

Ms. Walton, light yellow suddenly, asked, “Did he mock you?”

“He pretended that he couldn’t tell I was colorless,” I explained. “What’s his problem, anyway?”

“His problem?”

“His dysfunction.”

Slightly red, Ms. Walton gave me that look she always did when I called our class “disturbed youth”. I had switched to “dysfunctional”, but she didn’t like that any better. I dared not go to “deformed,” lest she go completely dark red.

“Lila, I’ve asked you not to characterize your classmates— Oh, Liam. There you are. Let’s get you started

over here. I'd like to see what you know about math first. These questions get more advanced as you proceed. When you find three in a row that you don't know how to answer, that's when you stop."

She didn't say, "Understand?" like she always asked me after she told me what to do. She saw his lavender and left him alone to get started. She didn't finish scolding me; she seemed to forget things when she was interrupted mid-sentence like she was when Liam re-entered the room. I watched him take his placement test, steady lavender through the first twenty questions. Finally, a question brought on his light yellow, but it passed as he skipped it and went on. It was fifteen minutes before he was steadily light yellow. He put his pencil down and looked up from his paper. He caught me watching him and turned red again. I decided to be the bigger person.

"Hey, sorry for calling you a jerk. All my life people have looked at me all red or yellow. I can't do anything about being colorless, so why treat me like it's my fault?"

"So, you really are colorless? I knew there was something about you that was different."

"Very funny. I thought we were starting over." I grabbed my color card and pointed to pink.

"What's that?"

"My color card, so I can tell people how I feel since they can't see it."

"And what color did you point to?"

My mood had changed to light yellow, but I told him I had pointed to pink. "Don't you know the names of colors?"

"I know the names," he said defensively.

"Then why're you asking what color—"

"Cuz I can't see 'em, okay?" Liam was red.

I puzzled over his outburst. "Why did you go louder?" I asked. "I could hear you just fine before."

Liam looked at his math test. "When I feel red, I get loud."

"But... what for? Everyone can see you're red."

"I can't," he said very softly, turning dark turquoise.

I was just a kid back then. I didn't get what he was telling me because I had never encountered anyone who couldn't see colors. I asked the insensitive questions kids ask other kids, not knowing what color I might cause. "So, if you can't see people's colors, you don't know what people are feeling?"

He nodded.

"But everyone can see your colors."

He nodded again.

I pointed to mint out of habit. "Oh, sorry. That doesn't help. Does it? Do you want me to tell you what color I feel?"

"If you want to," Liam said, starting to shift to lavender.

"Okay. I can do that. Hey," I said suddenly, "orange now. You know, you're the only other person I know who's color dysfunctional."

Liam's color morphed toward orange. "Yeah. This is kind of nice."

"Is that your only problem?" I asked, wondering why he was put in the school for DYs.

"Yeah. Is your problem your only problem?"

"Colorless? Yeah. Pretty much. Oh, lavender, by the way."

"What's your name?"

"Lila."

"I'm Liam."

"Liam and Lila, the color weirdos," I said. "Gold," I added so he'd know I was kidding around.

"That helps, telling me the colors. My family does that for me sometimes, but I think they get tired of doing it. They don't know how hard it is to be color-blind."

"It's not hard to be colorless, except that everyone looks at me all reds and yellows. My mom's had a lot of blues over me."

"She gave you that color card thing?"

"Yeah. Things were better after that, but it adds an extra step, you know? Makes life clumsier."

"Exactly," he answered, lilac. "You get it."

I snap out of my memory trance when Joanne calls my name. The other player is gone and Joanne's staring at me. "What were we talking about before Kim came over?" she asks.

Wondering how long I've been sitting here daydreaming, I remind her, "You asked what a DY school is."

"Oh yeah. So what is it?"

"It's a special ed school."

"You were special ed?"

"In grade school. I was mainstreamed in high school."

"What's your... problem? Are you dyslexic or something?"

"No. Nothing like that. It's just because I'm colorless. Since people can't see my emotions, they don't know how to deal with me, so they sent me off to the school for freaks. My friend, Liam, he didn't need special ed either, except that he was kind-of inept, socially."

"Why?"

"He was color blind."

"Shit. What a sucko disability to have." Joanne finishes her first beer and gets back in line for another.

Liam's color blindness was definitely a sucko disability. To him, everyone in the world looked like me. No way to tell what *anyone* was feeling. That's what Liam dealt with and why he always reacted weirdly to people. He couldn't tell if they were kidding or mad or embarrassed. He didn't know what colors even were, nor could he see his own emotional manifestations.

"What is it you see, exactly?" I asked Liam at recess one day. We used to kick a soccer ball back and forth way out on the far end of the field, away from where all the normal kids played in their rainbow recess hues.

Our school shared the outside area with a regular elementary school around the corner. The Carlton people had made arrangements with the other school's people to let the DYs get mainstreamed during lunch and recess. I always thought it was a futile attempt to make DYs feel normal, because to the DYs, their dysfunctional life *was* normal.

Letting them loose to be teased by Normals was cruel, though I'm not sure my classmates were even aware of the harassment. Kevin, especially, was in his own world.

I brought it up one day to Ms. Walton and she gave me some bullshit about the mainstreaming being good for the normal kids, because they would learn to accept people with differences as being just like them.

“But we're not like them,” I asserted.

Ms. Walton turned light red. “Then... to accept all people as people, no matter how different.”

“Are they learning, do you think?”

I knew Ms. Walton couldn't tell if I was being serious or sarcastic because of her light yellow. “What color are you, Lila?”

I had to give her credit. At least she asked. “Light red,” I told her.

“Ah. I take it you don't think they're learning.”

“No, I don't. They call me Lila-Miss the Colorless.”

Ms. Walton went dark red. “Who does that?”

“All of them.”

I think Ms. Walton marched over to the normal school to have red words with the teachers over there, but little changed. I didn't really care since Liam came to Carlton. We always ate lunch together and played during recess. We stayed away from the crowded playground and tossed a baseball or kicked a soccer ball where no one bothered us – far away from the normal kids.

So, when I asked Liam at recess that day what it was he saw on people, he put his foot on the ball and thought for a moment. “It's like something is emanating from them, but it has no color. It's like when you get out of the pool and you're covered with water, all stuck to your skin, you know? It's clear, like water.”

“And what do you see on me?”

Liam looked at me. “You're dry.”

“Huh. No one ever put it that way before.”

“What do other people say?”

“Well, I only asked my mom and she said something mushy about the important thing is what I feel on the inside.”

“That’s easy to say when your insides are clearly visible on the outside, like everybody else.”

“Yeah. Hey, kick the ball already.” Liam and I passed the ball several times without talking. I could tell by his lavender that all was well with him, but I had a nagging question I had never asked anyone. I thought maybe Liam would have an answer. “Light purple. Why were we born like this?”

I had knocked Liam from lavender to blue with my question. He passed the ball back to me and muttered, “I don’t know.”

“But do you think there’s a reason?”

“I don’t know.”

Joanne had asked me about my soccer history. Really, it was non-existent until high school. It was in Freshman PE class that I felt my first green moment in the presence of thirty Normals. We started the semester with running. Over the first weeks we went from barely able to make a lap to easily completing four. I liked the way it felt to run and run and not get exhausted. Running was great. I noticed that as my classmates ran, their colors shifted individually as they each lost themselves in their own thoughts. Some were dark yellow about an upcoming test in another class. Some were light blue, not giving a damn about PE. Some were lavender.

There were lots of yellows in high school. The ones who were perpetually dark yellow or dark red were the ones who ended up taking drugs or smoking, which I considered to be a serious defect. Why would they actively acquire a handicap? I would’ve jettisoned my birth defect in a heartbeat if I could’ve.

In PE, though, I was light green about my defect for the first time. We had moved on to a soccer unit and though I had never played on a team in an organized league, Liam and I had spent plenty of time practicing our ball-handling skills during those years of recess-in-exile. Still, I was nervous about the first game. Add to that, Mick was on my team. All the girls

liked Mick. When we were deciding on positions, Mick took over and made assignments, and no one countered him. He looked at me and paused. “Can you play?”

“You didn’t ask anyone else if they could play. Why’re you asking me?”

He was a little mint at my nerve but shrugged. “Fine. You’re left wing.”

At the kick-off, the ball came to me. I trapped the ball and looked around for a teammate to pass to. An opponent swooped by, stealing it from me while Mick and others cursed. I ran after that ball thief, but she had already passed it up the line. As I watched the other kids play, I noticed that their colors shifted right before they made a move, and everyone responded accordingly.

My team was running the ball up the field. I knew Jan was going to pass to me because of her light orange. I took the ball and dribbled past a midfielder. The defender ahead of me showed light yellow confusion because he couldn’t guess my intentions. I saw Cam off to the left. I faked like I was going to pass left. The defender backed off to try to intercept, but I dribbled past him. Mick ran forward with me and the last defender abandoned him to cut me off, thinking I was going for the goal. That’s when I passed to Mick, turning the whole defense mint, then red when Mick scored.

I turned a lot of people mint on the field. But I was green as Mick and Cam jogged over to high five me.

The PE teacher loved it. He recommended me to the girls’ soccer coach, and I made JV, despite having no experience.

Playing on the school team changed my life. For the first time, peers treated me like my deformity was a superpower.

My mom never missed a game. It made her so orange to watch me play – and succeed. I’d look up to the stands during substitutions and such, and she was always there. It was easy to spot her. It was girls’ soccer, after all – the cooked spinach of intermural sports.

Mom didn’t sit with the other parents. I asked her once why she always sat apart from them. She said she didn’t like

the comments the parents made to each other about the lousy reffing, or the coach's nit-wit decision to take their kid out, or thoughtless comments about the colorless player: "I mean, it's good she's on the team. She helps them win, that's for sure. But it's unnerving to see a person like that."

So, she sat alone, unless it was a home game. Then Liam sat with her. Liam came to all the home games. He was orange for me that I had found a place where people treated me all right, but I think he was also a little burgundy that there wasn't a similar place for him. And he tried to fit in; he really did. But I couldn't be with him every minute, and without me telling him what colors people were, he just couldn't determine what they were feeling, so he didn't respond appropriately. He couldn't spot sarcasm or timidity or impudence, and since his disability was invisible to people, they didn't understand his inappropriate reactions. He came to be known as the psycho.

"Liam," I told him one day at lunch, "you need to tell people you can't see their colors. Why don't you speak up?"

"Because when I've done that, people are mean to me."

"Well, the way you're going along, everyone misunderstands you. It's gotta be worse than a few people being mean to you."

"You don't know," he said, red.

"Well, I think I do. Sage. Look, Liam, you're gonna have to come up with survival strategies 'cause I'm not gonna be next to you every minute of your whole life telling you what color people are."

Liam took his pink self to a different lunch table.

A couple of girls were about to sit down, then noticed who sat there. One turned light red and started to walk away when the other, sage, convinced her it was okay to sit with Liam. The red friend hesitated, then followed her friend's lead.

"Hi, Liam," the sage one said, sitting next to him while her friend sat across the table, farther away from the DY.

Liam turned light yellow. As the girl talked to him too softly for me to overhear, he slowly shifted to light orange,

then lavender. The one who sat across from them began to enjoy the show, shifting to light gold.

I was dark red. They must've figured it out. His color-blindness, I mean. And they were using it against him, pretending to be nice. And he was falling for it.

Of course he was. He had no idea they were lying to him, saying kind words with very unkind colors. I didn't think colorful people could lie in person. I guess they can't – unless the person they're lying to is color-blind. I felt a sickness in my stomach and a dark red urge to knock those two pretty heads together.

I marched over to that table. "I know what you're doing. And if you don't cut it out, I'm gonna drop you on your asses."

"Lila –" Liam said through clenched teeth, turning red.

"Get outta here already," I raised my voice at the girls. People all around looked at us. The bitches casually gathered their lunches and left the table, green and light gold, whispering together. Guaranteed, they would soon be whispering to others around the school.

Liam stared at me, red as a stop sign. He was red at *me*, not at the girls who made it their lunchtime entertainment to trick the DY. "What is wrong with you?" Liam asked.

I sat down and lowered my voice. "What's wrong with you?"

"For the first time, someone treats me normally and you barge in and wreck it."

"I...? Are you serious? Dark red," I said, out of habit. "And, by the way, that's my real color right now."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" he snapped.

"Those Normals' colors were not nice, Liam. How dense can you be?"

Liam turned dark red, but I saw turquoise, too. "Dense enough not to see your true colors, apparently."

It was my turn to say, "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

“You have your teammates, and everyone thinks you’re so great at soccer. Ever since you made the team you’ve treated me like I’m the only DY left in the school.”

“What? No, I haven’t. I’m the same as I’ve always been.”

“You think you know everything, Lila, now that you’re a big shot. You think you can tell me what I should do about my color-blindness? You don’t know what it’s like.”

Light yellow. “I thought that’s why we’re friends – the color weirdos – because we understand each other.” Liam stared at me, trying to figure out my color. Like an idiot – with *his* color-blindness and *my* colorlessness – he was trying to *see* my color. My frustration got the better of me as I said, “Double no-go, double dumbass.” Pink and red morphed back and forth on him. “And after everything I’ve done for you. After what I did for you just now.”

“All you did was ruin a great lunch for me.”

“You’re unbelievable.” I left, solid blues for the rest of the day. Soccer practice perked me up a little, but at home, after lying to my mother that I was perfectly orange with my life that day, I went to my room to be blue in peace.

When Joanne returns with her refill, she’s forgotten what she asked me earlier, as have I with all my daydreaming about high school. “Oh, look. Check it out. A poker game.” She points to a table of four people playing cards.

“Do you know how to play poker?” I ask.

“It’s easy.” She grabs a spare deck of cards and shuffles them on the table we share. “So, it’s just a betting game. Mostly luck. There’s a little strategy in the bets you put down and the cards you trade in.”

“Okay.”

She deals five cards to each of us, face up. “Usually you don’t show your cards, but this is just to teach you. Look here: two fives, a jack, an ace, and a seven. Not a great hand, but at least there’s a pair. You’re trying to get all four of one number, or a string of numbers in a row, or all the same suit. The best hand wins. You have one chance to trade in cards, so on this

one I'd probably hold the two fives and trade the rest in." She demonstrates with the cards. When she gets another five, she glows light orange. "This is pretty good. Three of a kind. Now let's do your set. Two, three, four, eight, jack. You could go for a straight. I don't really see anything better to do."

"So, I keep the two, three, and four, and trade in the other two."

"Right. And here are your two." She sets down a nine and another four and says, "That leaves you with a pair. So, between our two hands, I'd win because three of a kind beats a pair."

"So, what do you win?"

"Oh, that's the betting. You start with ante. That's the amount required to play a hand. It gets the pot started. After you get cards, you can bet more if you think it's a good hand. Everyone else has to match your bet to stay in the game. If someone raises the bet, everyone else has to match that or fold, which means you drop out of the hand. With me so far?"

"What about trading in cards?"

"Right, so then we go around the table and everyone trades in cards like we did before. Then the betting goes around the table again. If you think your hand beats everyone else's, you raise the bet on your turn. The higher it goes, the more people drop out if they didn't have good hands."

"They take their money back?" I ask.

"No. That's the beauty. Once the money's in the pot, it stays. That's why people might drop out as soon as they get their cards. If you get a shit hand, you don't want to bet more, right?"

"Cut your losses," I agree.

"Exactly. So, once everyone's bet as much as they're willing to, they show their cards and we see who's got the best hand. That person wins the whole pot."

"Awesome. What's the best hand?"

"You can pull up the list of what beats what on your phone," she says, shuffling the cards again.

No, I can't. I don't have a smart phone. I pat my pockets, pretending to look for it. "I must've left it... at home."

“Quick rundown, starting at the lowest. High Card is a hand with no matching cards. One Pair is what it sounds like: two of the same card, like two fives. Two Pair, obvious. Then Three of a Kind beats Two Pair. Then there’s a Straight, which is five cards in number order, but not the same suit. A Flush is any five cards of the same suit. What’s next? Uh, a Full House. Yeah. A Three of a Kind plus a Pair. Then Four of a Kind. A Straight Flush is just what it sounds like: a Straight and a Flush at the same time, five cards in a row, all the same suit. Then the best hand, but super rare, is a Royal Flush. It’s a Straight Flush but it has to be ten, jack, queen, king, and ace, all the same suit, all the highest cards.”

“I’ll never remember that,” I admit.

“Make yourself a little cheat sheet,” Joanne says with a shrug. “Oh, and if two people have the same thing, like they both have a pair, the higher pair wins. Ante up, Lila.”

She deals the cards and we each put in a quarter. I look at my cards and find two pair right off the bat. We start betting and the pot’s quickly up to a dollar and a half. I trade in my trash card but still end up with just the two pair. I figure it’s a pretty good hand, and Joanne’s looking light blue – not some form of orange – so on my turn I raise her bet by a full dollar. “I fold,” she says, slapping her cards down on the table.

“What happened?”

“I didn’t want to match your bet when I only had a pair, so I bowed out. You win the pot.”

I start to smile but rein it in. She pushes the pile of quarters and a crumpled dollar bill toward me. “Can we try again?” I ask, feeling a rare dark orange.

Joanne shuffles and deals. We ante up our quarters and look at our cards. I’ve got nothing. “Can I trade them all in?”

Joanne shines light gold. “You have to keep one. Usually the highest one.”

“Oh.”

“I guess your first-round bet will not be very high.”

“You guess right.” I bet a quarter.

She matches it, saying, “I call.”

“You call what?”

“Call. It means I’ll match your bet and not raise it.”

“Oh.” I trade in four cards; I still end up with squat.
“Can I fold right now?”

“Sure. But you never know. You might have something better than me.”

“I’ve got nothin’.” I show my cards.

Her color brightens. “You would’ve won. I’ve got nothing, too, but your highest card beats my highest card. But you folded, so, too bad.” She slides the small pot to her side of the table.

“One more time,” I say eagerly.

She obliges. This time, I study her color carefully, trying to ascertain how good her hand is based on previous reactions to her hands. She’s slightly blue, so I take a chance on my pair of kings. I bet everything I have, which is only two dollars. She looks at her quarters and her cards, then she looks at me. My colorlessness tells her nothing about my cards. *Aha*, I think, feeling sage. I’ve got this.

“It’s hard to play against you, Lila. That’s not fair.” She’s not red, so I don’t worry. “But I’ll call.”

We put down our cards and my pair of kings beats her pair of tens.

“I like this game. Orange,” I say, gathering the deck together.

“You’re orange right now?”

“I try to tell my friends how I’m feeling since you can’t tell by looking at me.”

“Oh. That’s nice. Good idea. Can you tell me while we’re playing?” she asks, playfully gold. Then she flips over to sage. “You’ve got to play at their table. You’ll beat them for sure. How much money do you have?”

“Just the four bucks here on the table.”

“Let’s go.”



After the poker players get over the shock of seeing a colorless person, they settle into lavender and let me sit in. Three guys and one girl besides me. Joanne pulls up a chair behind me.

“What’s she doing back there?” one of the players questions.

“She’s teaching me how to play.”

“Long as she stays put,” another one states, light orange. I’m sure he’s thinking a newbie at the table is good for his game. The dealer passes out the cards and everyone antes up with very used dollar bills. I have a crap hand, even after taking four new cards. One girl’s light orange tells me I have no hope. I fold, losing two of my four dollars. Everyone around the table’s orange when I quit the hand.

A few rounds into the game, I haven’t gotten very far. I realize that Joanne’s colors are tipping them off to my hands.

“Hey, no offense or anything, but can I play alone?” I whisper to her.

She’s pink for a split second, then catches on to why I’m asking her to stop “helping” me. She gets up, slipping me her few dollars so I can make decent bets.

To make a long story short, the players start leaving the table as I clean them out of their small caches. Joanne watches from afar, orange with each hand I win. I walk away from the game with four red enemies and fifty bucks in cash. I give half of it to Joanne. She’s mint. “I only gave you five and a half dollars.”

“You taught me how to play. Lilac. Thanks.”

Chapter 3

Okay, so now I'm hooked on poker. I start cruising student hangouts in the evenings, looking for a poker game. But poker's not the main form of entertainment on campus, it turns out. I come across lots of drinking and sex. It's like people are perfectly lavender if you catch them hooking up.

With my lack of color, no one's ever been interested in me in that way, neither in high school nor in college. Even my teammates – who are lavender around me – avoid me outside of soccer practices and games. The season's almost over, so I don't suppose I'll have even part-time friends after our last game.

Sometimes when I feel teal, I daydream about Liam. I lie awake many lonely teal nights, wondering about what might've happened on graduation day if Liam's friend hadn't interrupted our "moment."

Then reality sets in; he's gone. Two thousand miles away at an elite technical school where there are plenty of normal girls he can kiss. If someone had told me in freshman year that by graduation, he would be surrounded by girls trying to get his attention, I wouldn't have believed them. We both struggled so much in the transition to the school of teenage torture.

Those first weeks, hundreds of teens stared at me and my abnormality, feeling a need to make comments. They didn't know anything about me or why I was colorless, much less

how I felt being a colorless person. If I could've seen their dysfunctions – and I know they had them – I could've teased them mercilessly in return. But like Liam's color-blindness, most people's weaknesses were well hidden.

I shared my wisdom on that subject with Liam one morning while waiting for freshman English class to start. It was the only class Liam and I had together. Other than that, we only saw each other at lunch.

A boy walked between us, heading for a seat near the back. His backpack hit Liam in the head. Assuming the boy had done it on purpose – like the sophomore who accidentally spilled (read: threw) his soda on us in the lunch line – Liam went dark red and called the boy an asshole. The boy turned around.

“What?” he said, light yellow.

Liam glared at him. “You hit me in the head with your backpack. I know you did it on purpose.”

“I did? Shit, sorry, man,” the boy said, dark turquoise.

Liam stood, ready to storm down the aisle. I grabbed his arm. “He's turquoise,” I whispered. Liam looked down at me. “He means it.”

Liam turned turquoise also. He glanced at the boy. “Okay.” Liam's turquoise darkened. He ran from the classroom. I covered for him the best I could, telling the teacher Liam had to use the restroom.

Yeah, freshman year was tough, and he took his anger out on me, of all people. Ever since I told him that those mean girls were fooling him, he stopped talking to me. I guess he thought I was telling him what to do, or he was turquoise about being fooled and burgundy about me finding a place in girls' soccer.

Now I'm a freshman again, and it's just like high school. No one but Joanne ever invites me to go out with them. And really, Joanne and I only went out that night when the roster was posted.

Discontent grows every day until I can't stand it anymore. I need to go – somewhere away from here. Away

from home. I finish the season and the semester, then run, run, run away to the tribal lands belonging to the Koshona. Random, I know.

But not so random... because everywhere else, I'd have to be twenty-one to gamble, but at the Koshona casino, the minimum gambling age is eighteen. And I want to play poker.

Before I even sit down at a Koshona card table, a gray-haired tribal man sees me and pulls me aside.

"Hey," I say, "I don't want trouble; I just want to play." I pull out my ID. "I'm nineteen."

"Neither do I want trouble, young woman. I am Chief Norman Wohali. You came to play what?" He speaks deliberately, carefully, but not with an accent as if English is his second language.

"Poker," I tell him.

"You prefer the games of skill, then."

"I don't want to throw money away in the slot machine, if that's what you mean."

Chief Wohali nods his salt-and-pepper head. "With what money do you gamble?"

"Not that it's any of your business, but I have a little left from a successful game at college."

"You hope to grow an acorn into an oak tree."

"I guess."

"What's your name, young woman?"

"Lila."

"Were you born colorless?"

"Yes."

"My ancestor, Toseke, which means 'pure air,' was also colorless. The legend of Toseke was thought to be a myth. You know, a story to teach a lesson to children. But now I see you, I believe the old tale."

"Really? You've heard of another colorless person? I thought I was the only one."

"Perhaps you are the only one now, as Toseke was in his time. Perhaps you are of the same spirit as Toseke." Chief Wohali's orange color shifts toward light purple. "That is an interesting idea, isn't it?"

“Yes.”

“Miss Lila, you are a college student.”

“Was. I dropped out.”

“To go to college is our hope for every youth of our tribe.”

“Your youth have colors. They fit in.”

Chief Wohali slips into a brief blue hue. “I’m afraid that’s not always the case.” I don’t know what he means by that, but he doesn’t linger on the point. “Then you are in need of income. Is that why you applied for employment on our tribal lands? We usually hire Koshona exclusively.”

“Well, that’s great because I didn’t apply.”

“Let me see you handle the cards.” He walks to an empty blackjack table and sits down, waiting for me to follow. I’m not sure why, but I follow him and choose one of the chairs. “No. You stand there.” He points to the dealer’s place. “Three ancestors play blackjack at your table. You may not see them. Please deal.”

Again, not knowing what compels me to do everything this chief tells me to, I pull my deck of cards out of my jacket pocket and start to shuffle. Then I deal the cards to the imaginary players.

Chief Wohali stares at me, seeming to ignore my hands and the cards sliding to three spots on the table. He stares at my face and gives the impression he can see to my insides, as his next words are, “There’s nothing to be yellow about. You’re doing fine.”

“What, exactly, am I doing? What do you want from me?”

“You may have left college, but we’re students all our lives, aren’t we? Let me show you something.” He holds out his hand for the cards and after a quick shuffle and tap of the side of the deck on the table, he deals three sets of cards in front of me. “If you do it this way, there’s no chance players will spy other players’ cards. See?”

“I get it.”

“And you must not allow them the slightest chance to see the dealer’s cards. You’d be surprised what tricks people

have up their sleeves.” Chief Wohali points at the lighting on the table. “You see that the players are in the light but you, at the dealer’s spot, are in a bit of shadow. That is so they can’t see the dealer’s reactions to the cards. Of course, with you, it doesn’t matter. Does it?” His face shines orange. “Try again.” I gather up the cards and reshuffle. I imitate the way he dealt the cards. “That’s it. When can you start?”

“Start?”

“Your new job.”

“My new job?”

“Are you a parrot, Miss Lila, or a blackjack dealer?”

A smile starts to spread across my face, but I press my lips together to hide it. “I’m a blackjack dealer, Chief Wohali.”

“That’s what I thought.” He gets up and walks to a man in a suit, says something to him, points at me, then leaves the casino.

The other man approaches me. His name badge says Bart. “Lila?”

“Yes?”

“You’ll need to do paperwork.”

I follow Bart, wondering what kind of story Koshona parents tell their children about Toseke, the colorless ancestor. Is it a hero epic, or a cautionary tale?



I didn’t intend to run away from home forever when I hopped on a bus heading out of town. But when Bart hands me my uniform and name badge, I call home to tell Mom that I got a job and I’ll be renting an RV a tribal family has sitting on their one-acre plot of land. She’s none too happy, but understands I need to find my own way. I can always go back to college, I tell her, but I’m pretty sure I never will.

The rent is cheap, and the RV is hooked up with water and electrics, so... perfect. My job is also good. The people I work for are nice and I get to hide my defect in the shadowed spaces of a windowless casino. It's *tino*, as the Koshona say: perfect. I deal cards and collect a paycheck twice a month.

I know my mom's disappointed that I live in an old RV and work for minimum wage instead of going to college. Well, my dad, at least, should be happy since I'm no longer a drain on the family budget. He was always tight with the money. Take the phone situation. When I went to high school, my parents gave me a cell phone so I could call for rides and keep Mom informed about where I was.

It was a flip phone.

I had sixty minutes a month. "Plenty for what you'll need it for," Dad said.

I still have it.



Busloads of seniors arrive every day around eleven in the morning. They play the nickel slots and roulette, and some of them play blackjack at my table. Seniors are not shy about commenting on my colorlessness – when they can see me through their cataract eyeballs – but I've gotten used to their light red comments and just work my table.

Seniors are lousy tippers. Worse tippers are the college students who come to the gaming land dark orange and leave red or blue. The house always wins when you're not smart enough to quit while you're ahead. They're losing money and I'm making it. Besides minimum wage, I get a small – I mean *small* – cut of my table's profits. So, the more people I can get at my table, and the faster I run the games, the more bonus I earn.

From the one-dollar-minimum table, I watch Cash – yes, that’s his name – at his ten-dollar table. That’s my end game. The bigger the bets, the bigger the tips, and the bigger the bonus. He makes twenty times what I make in a night.

On a break, Cash and I get to talking. “So, is Cash short for something?”

“No. Just weird parents.” He shades toward light red. “Those old folks drive me crazy.”

“I think they’re kinda cute. Some of them, anyway.”

“They don’t make stupid jokes about your... er, you?”

“Not jokes so much as theories on why I’m colorless. My father drank too much, or my mother had an abortion before she had me, or both my parents were gay but trying to live a straight life, hiding their true selves, you know?”

“Oh, brother.”

“What jokes do you get?”

“Joke. Just one. ‘Cash, huh? Can I take you home with me?’ They’re all light gold, like they’re the first ones to think of that funny, funny, funny joke.”

“That’s hilarious. Gold, by the way.”

“I figured.”

“You’re pretty lavender about my defect.”

“Were you born colorless?” Cash asks bluntly.

“Yeah. I think I scared the doctors shitless.”

“Yeah. I was a little yellow when I first saw you. But then I thought, who cares? We all have something weird about us.”

“What’s your weird thing?” I ask.

“One leg’s longer than the other.”

“Really? Mint. I’d think you’d walk with a limp or something.”

“My shoes,” he says, sticking them out for me to see. One sole is an inch thicker than the other.

“Easy fix. Burgundy,” I comment. “Oh, damn.”

“What?”

“Not burgundy. Uh, orange.”

“Burgundy about what?” Cash asks.

“I just told you I wasn’t burgundy.”

He stares at me, sage.

I sigh. “I get burgundy when other defects can be so easily fixed, and mine can’t.”

The conversation throws me back in time to the beginning of sophomore year of high school. I hadn’t talked to Liam in months because he was mad at me. I had realized after an evening’s reflection on our fight that I’d been pretty mean to him, calling him a double dumbass and all. I’d felt bad about that, but when I’d tried to talk to him the next day, he’d turned away from me.

He never sat by me in English class again, and he disappeared at lunch every day. I have no idea where he went to eat.

The revelation of Liam’s color-blindness had spread like wildfire among the student body. I could tell he struggled, but he didn’t ask me for help, and I didn’t offer it. He’d ask people what color they were; sometimes they’d tell the truth and sometimes they’d lie, sharing an invisible joke with a comrade. It was pathetic and made me blue, but no one could see my colors.

Liam disappeared over the summer, not that I ever saw him much over summers. We didn’t live near each other. School was the only thing we had in common, after all.

When school started, soccer training also started with a preseason training regimen the coaches felt might actually propel the team to the league finals this year or the next. We had lots of good, young players. With seven seniors graduated last spring, there were seven openings on the varsity team. I was hell-bent on getting one of those spots.

I was so busy with my new classes and soccer conditioning every day after school, it was almost a week before I bumped into Liam on campus. I was mint when I saw him looking taller and more filled out. He was an entirely different person. Gone were the teal and blue of last year. He wore glasses that somehow made him cooler instead of nerdier.

“Wow, Liam, look at you.”

He looked down at himself, green. “Yep.”

“Uh, have a good summer?” I asked, trying to be cordial.

He looked around and over my head, then, light red, looked at my face. “Now *you’re* the only DY around here.” Then he walked away.

What... the... hell?

Liam never gave me another glance. Not that day. Not that week. He didn’t come to our home games anymore. I was blue when I looked up into the stands and saw my mom sitting alone. But she was orange at my games, so I was orange about that.

Liam’s new attitude hurt a lot. I mean, we had been friends for a long time. I knew I kind-of ignored him the last year, but I didn’t think I deserved such hostility.

One day, I decided I’d had enough of his superiority. “What’s with the green judgement, Liam?”

“Poor Lila. Doomed to spend your life calling out your colors. What color are you now?” he asked sarcastically.

“What color do you think I am, smartass?”

“I’d guess, blue. Red, maybe.”

“Plus light yellow,” I informed him.

“I suppose I should explain.”

“That’d be nice.”

“I had a good summer, Lila. I met a doctor who gave me these.” He touched his glasses along the temple. “Hue lenses.”

I suddenly understood his dig that now I was the only DY at school. As his friend, I should’ve felt orange for his lucky break. He had overcome his disability with a simple pair of glasses. Probably not so simple, technologically, but a simple life-change for him. Half the population wore glasses for some kind of sight impairment.

Dammit.

I should’ve congratulated him on the great news, but I was fifteen. I was red. I was burgundy. I was so burgundy that I wanted to grab those glasses off his face, throw them to the concrete, and stomp on them.

I’m orange to report that I didn’t do that. Instead, I sucked up my reds and said, “I’m orange for you. That’s great news.”

He looked at my oddly, momentarily light yellow. “You’ve never lied to me before,” he said after studying me.

I shook my head.

Liam stared, apparently not knowing what to say next.

My mood shifted as I stared back at him. He was good-looking, confident, popular: all the things he thought I had been when he was hurting last year. Dark turquoise. “I shouldn’t have treated you like I did last year. I’m sorry.”

Liam was still tongue-tied.

“Congrats, Liam. I’m orange for you, really.”

I walked away, unable to look at him anymore with my burgundy jealousy taking the place of the dark turquoise guilt again.

“Lila,” he called, but I didn’t stop. I couldn’t. I couldn’t face him.

The current conversation with Cash about his easily fixed birth defect versus my non-fixable one subdues him as he looks down at his feet, dark turquoise.

“Sorry,” he says.

“Nah. Don’t feel guilty. I was just thinking about a childhood friend of mine. He was color-blind.”

“Shit. That would suck.”

“It did. He got hue glasses, though. Easy fix. There’s nothing to fix me.”

“That sucks, too.” Cash throws away his paper coffee cup. “Gotta get back to my table.”

“Yeah, me too.”



One morning the poker dealer calls in sick and my manager puts me at that table. I’m not allowed to play hands or make bets, but I learn a lot from watching the players. They

play against each other, not the house, so my table only makes money by snagging a portion of each pot. That's my job: deal cards, keep track of the pot, and collect the casino's share.

This morning, an old, bent-over, wispy-haired man who wears a sweater over his button-up shirt sits down at my table. He doesn't wear jeans like normal adults. He wears brown polyester pants – the no-wrinkle, wash-and-wear variety. He's bluish from the moment he enters the casino until the moment he leaves, two hours later.

In that time, however, he rakes in three hundred dollars in the poker game. I study his gameplay, looking for color tells. He wins a huge pot with a trio of kings, but his persistent blue gave everyone the impression he had nothing. Any other person would have been dark orange with a hand like that. I was fooled, too.

The next hand, he remains shades of blue. The other players eye him carefully, folding early after the painful loss of the previous hand. The pot's not as big, but Mr. Blue rakes it in, being the only one not to fold. When he turns in his cards, I peek at them. All he had was a pair of threes. If the other players knew, they'd be so red, but they only get to see a player's cards if they don't drop out of the hand.

I'm light gold; I like this blue character.

When that old man gets up with an "urrrrh," he tosses me a ten-dollar tip. I guess he likes my dealing. I wink to him before catching myself, and to my great surprise, he winks back before walking away at a surprisingly spry pace.

"Hey, dealer. Deal."

I focus on the players who are left. "Ante up."



I wonder about Mr. Blue's wink. I thought that was a Lila-Liam exclusive.

Back in grade school, I was talking to Liam about something great – who knows what anymore? And he said, “Why do you do that with your face?”

“What?” I hadn’t done anything with my face.

“Your cheeks went up.”

“They did? Mint.”

“Yeah, and now your forehead got all crinkly. It always does that when you’re mint.”

“Nuh-uh,” I said, consciously not crinkling my forehead.

“You can say that, but you always do it.”

I felt turquoise, but I didn’t tell him that. “What else do I do?”

“Well, when you’re orange, your cheeks go up. I know you’re orange before you say so. And when you’re red, your eyebrows go in.” He put his fingertips on his eyebrows and forced them toward each other, making a mess of wrinkles over his nose.

“Why didn’t you tell me I was being weird?” I asked, red.

“Don’t get red. It’s not a big deal. I was just wondering why you do that. Actually, I kind-of like it, being able to sort-of see your colors without you saying.”

“You can do this with everyone?”

“Just you. It’s like your face is trying to make colors, but it can’t.”

“I can’t believe you didn’t tell me this. When did I start doing it?”

“I don’t know. Last year?”

“Turquoise.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s weird.”

“I don’t think so. I think we should make up lots of face things so you don’t have to tell me your colors all the time.”

I started to feel light orange about the idea. “Your cheeks...” Liam said. I touched my cheeks and realized they were, indeed, higher and stiffer than usual. My mouth was spread sideways, too. “You look pretty when you do that,” Liam added, then turned turquoise.

We were thirteen, older than everyone on the playground at recess. Carlton School went to eighth grade, but the normal school around the corner only went to fifth. Those kids switched to middle school for sixth through eighth grade, leaving Liam and me to navigate puberty on our own.

Liam called my orange cheek thing a smile because he said it reminded him of the Smile Company logo. I didn't understand his comparison, even when I watched myself in a mirror doing the smile. But it sort-of stuck, so whenever I was orange, I "smiled" and skipped supplying Liam with a color name.

It was kind-of cool to have a secret language between us. We made up all kinds of facial expressions that went with colors. The crinkled forehead when my eyebrows went up was for when I was mint. The eyebrows smushed together was red. He noticed that the corners of my mouth turned down when I was pink or blue.

I remembered that when we first met, he got louder when he was red. I used that one, too. My favorite was when I'd blink one eye at him. It was fun to do it without anyone catching me. I'd say something to the teacher adding "orange" or "lavender," for instance, sounding serious, but then I'd one-blink to Liam and he'd turn light gold. I'd smile a little and the teacher wouldn't have a clue that we'd shared a joke.

"That one-blink you do... You know, that's too long. *Wuhn buhlink*," he enunciated. "We should call it... *Wuhlink*. No, w'ink."

I smiled broadly, giving him a "wink" just for fun. He tried to wink back but could only blink both eyes together. "Big-time light gold," I said, "with orange icing on top."

Fun times.



A week after meeting Mr. Blue, I ask the floor supervisor, Bart, where Chief Wohali is and he tells me the chief works in the tribal government offices. Color me light yellow. “He was only here that one day he interviewed me?”

“He stops in to play craps once in a while, but he doesn’t work here.”

“Then... why...?”

“When the chief tells me to hire someone, I hire that person.”

“Oh.” I feel turquoise. “So, if he hadn’t told you to...”

“I’ll admit. I was a little freaked out by you, Lila. And you’re not Koshona. We try to give jobs to Koshona first. But you’re a good hire. Norman was right.”

“Oh. Uh, thank you.”

“You like running the poker table?”

“Yeah. Much better than blackjack.”

“It’s yours today.” Dark orange. More tips, more fun, more learning.

A group of five tourists, who played two dozen hands without anyone getting ahead, all leave my table at the same time to go to lunch. The old, bent-over, polyester-panted, blue-hued man wanders over. “Good afternoon. Care to sit down and wait for more players?” I ask.

He aims his sagging posterior at the seat and drops himself into the chair. He squints at my nametag. “Lily?”

“Lila.”

“Oh. Lila. How’s business?” He hooks his cane onto the edge of the table and arranges his possessions in front of himself.

“Lavender. Had a tableful of tourists, but they just went off to lunch. How’s your day?”

“Lavender.”

I look at him. He’s blue. “Can I do anything for you while you wait? Call you a waiter, maybe?”

“No, thanks, Lila. I’ll just catch my breath and get ready to clean out a few unsuspecting tourists.” For a second, he’s light gold. Then he’s back to blue.

“Can I ask you something?”

“You can ask. Then I’ll decide if I’ll answer. Depends what it is.”

I like this old guy. “How do you control your colors to be in the blues when you play? You never get green about a good hand or anything.”

His blues lighten, as if some happier color is trying to emerge again. “Just sort-of lost most of my colors as I got older... especially after my wife died.”

“Oh. I’m sorry for your loss.”

“Me too. Every day. We were married for forty-eight years.”

I’m at a total loss for what to say next. Then my curiosity gets the best of me. “Why did you wink at me?”

“Wink?”

I demonstrate a wink.

“Ah. Slink. A single-blink. That was something my wife and I came up with when we teased each other. All golds and oranges...”

“What a coincidence. My friend, Liam, and I came up with the same thing in grade school.”

“Coincidence?” He shakes his head. “Everything happens for a reason. Where is your friend, Liam, now?”

“MIT. Doing some kind of science or tech or some such nerdy thing.”

“You keep in touch?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

I start to feel blue. “He’s busy, I guess. And I’m busy here.”

“Young people are so busy these days. You should make time for your friends.”

The conversation is making me teal. “Uh, I don’t know when other players will show up. Maybe another table...”

“Perhaps you will play a few hands with me.”

I’m not supposed to play while on duty, but the whole floor is dead as if the senior-bus drivers have gone on strike today. I look around. My supervisor is nowhere in sight. “I can’t bet with company chips...”

“I’ll give you some of mine and you can give ‘em back at the end. I just want to play.”

“Okay.” He splits his chips in half and slides them over to me. I deal the cards. I’m used to winning when playing with Normals, but this old man is blues. Just blues. He might as well be colorless, like me. Poker’s not so easy with him.

On one hand, he goes all in. I don’t have enough to call, so I fold. *Dang*. I had a great hand, too. When he sets his cards down, I see that he has a pair of sevens. “That’s all you had?”

“Yep.”

“You bet the farm.”

“Yep.”

“What made you think your two sevens would beat anything I might’ve had?”

“I didn’t.”

“Then why’d you—”

“Bluffing.”

I stare at him, mint. “You lied.”

“Bluffing isn’t lying.”

A smile spreads across my face. He doesn’t notice me as he stacks his chips. “That’s a great strategy.”

“Yep,” he says, still concentrating on his chips.

“You bet too much, though. I couldn’t call. If you’d bet lower, I might’ve put more in the pot before folding.”

“It does me no good to win my own money.” He looks up and winks at me.

“Another hand?”

“Yep.”

When he collects all his chips and leaves my table, neither up nor down for the day, he greets the floor manager as they pass each other. “Afternoon, Bart.”

“Afternoon, Grandfather Wohali.”

Chapter 4

The bluffing I learned from Grandfather Wohali serves me well in poker games. On my days off, I take a bus to the Hupa tribal casino and come home with more money than three full days of working earn me. After four or five really successful treks, the Hupa casino floor manager asks me to find another place to play. Seems I'm driving away some of the regulars. Maybe I should point out that *I'm* a regular, but I don't really want word getting back to Bart that I'm persona non grata in Hupa land. And I can't gamble in the Koshona casino because I'm an employee. I think it's a dumb rule, but rules are put in place because someone abused the system in the past. *Rat bastards always ruining a good thing for the rest of us.*

I sock my winnings away as a plan begins to hatch in my mind: I want to buy a used car, something I can sleep in, and make my way through all the tribal-land casinos within five hundred miles. I have never been on a trip and never been more than fifty miles from home. I want to see the world. And as grateful as I am to the Koshona for giving me a job and a place to live, dealing cards for minimum wage is not a long-term life plan.

After work I like to go to my rented RV and pour over a map, charting the most efficient route that will take me to the most casinos. It's taking a long time, but I think I'll have enough to buy a van and quit my job by the end of this month.

Next month at the latest. Whenever I daydream about what sights I might see, I just get a dark orange feeling and I can't wait to be driving on the highway. But wait, I must.

The Koshona tribe has lots of interesting cultural sculptures and amazing natural sites that I like to visit when I'm not working. My favorite is the giant totem pole. Beautifully carved animals and nature scenes blend into each other, telling a story as I gaze from the bottom to the top of the pole. My phone is a freakin' flip phone, so no camera. Instead, I take out my sketch book and draw the totem pole three times, each from a different angle since the carvings go all the way around the enormous vertical log. It's my own little triptych.

I spot Grandfather Wohali going into the casino in his little old man outfit and cane. Bummer I'm not working today. Then I get an idea. I take my sketch book inside and plant myself at an empty card table where I have a good view of my favorite regular. He sits so still, holding the cards close to his chest with a shaky hand, giving nothing away to the other players at the table. The only times he moves are when he picks up cards or tosses in chips. And, of course, when he collects the pot with two aged, outstretched arms.

I draw him as I see him, like Mr. Disegno taught me. "Draw what you see, not what your mind tells you." Like looking at a road. My brain knows the road is just as wide in the distance as it is where I stand, but when I draw it, I have to make it narrow as it stretches away from me to give it diminishing perspective.

Wow. I remembered something from high school. Mint. The cosine of theta? Um, seven? No, pi. Or tomato. Who knows? That all fell out of my brain right after the final exam.

My portrait of Grandfather Wohali is almost finished. It's grayscale, but I add a little pale blue to his face and neck, and a little casino scenery in the background. I'm so focused on my work, I don't notice that the man himself is standing next to me, checking out my drawing. "Oh, mint. I didn't see you come over here."

"Hello, Lila. Your day off and you're in the casino?"

“Just drawing some of my favorite things around here, for when I leave.” *Shit*. I shouldn’t have let that slip.

“Where are you going?”

“Just... moving on. Sometime. Not tomorrow or anything.”

“We all move on, don’t we?” He says it like a statement, not a question. “So, I am one of your favorite things around here?” Gold tries to push through his perpetual blues. It’s enough to let me know it’s a playful question.

“Absolutely. Maybe the number one favorite.”

He pats my hand in a grandfatherly way.

“Would you sign my drawing?” I ask.

“Isn’t the artist normally supposed to sign it?”

“You should know by now that I’m not a normal person.”

“No, you’re not, are you? But you are definitely one of my favorite things around here. Maybe the number one favorite.” He takes my blue pencil and writes his name on the portrait. “Now you.”

I take the black pencil and sign in the lower, right corner. “There. Done.”

He pats my hand again, says, “I like it,” then shuffles away... out of my life.



“My money’s as good as anyone’s, and I’m ready to spend it. Are you saying you don’t want my business?”

“No, no. I’m not saying that at all, little miss.”

“I’m nineteen, dude. Don’t call me little or miss.” Used car salesman. *Ugh*.

“It’s just... I never saw someone like you before.”

“Are you over it yet? Can you show me used vans now?”

“Absolutely. Right this way, ma’am.” The salesman leads me out of the showroom to the huge parking lot where there are dozens and dozens of used cars. “Over here, the white one is a five-year-old, 235 horsepower, 6.2-liter V-8. And the brown one is a seven-year-old, 220 horsepower, 5.8-liter, V-6.”

I climb into the white van’s driver’s seat and inspect the dashboard. I look over my shoulder and see two more rows of seats. That won’t work. I get out to check the brown one. The salesman has the hood open on the white one and starts talking about powertrains, torque, hoses, and strokes. “Um, it has seats in the back. I need a van I can put a bed in the back of.”

“Oh. Camping, huh?”

“Something like that.” The salesman looks at me like I’m planning to run a prostitution business out of the back of a van. And he was the one talking about stroking and harnesses. “It’s my mobile home.”

“Okay, I see. Yeah, this other one was used as a cargo van, so nothing in the back and no side windows so you’ll have privacy when you’re sleeping.”

“A windowless van,” I say, remembering the stranger-danger talks we had in elementary school. “Sounds creepy.”

“You got windows in the back doors...” He skips all the engine talk with this one and points out the accessories instead. “You’ve got your 12-volt outlet here. With a ten-dollar adaptor you’ll have a USB charger for your phone. And you’ve got your cup holders right here, and these big door pockets for your purse and other female items.”

I let that one go. I’ve never carried a purse. My motto is, if it don’t fit in my pocket, I don’t carry it.

“Go ahead and crawl into the back. See how much room there is. A full-size mattress will definitely fit back there.” I crawl between the front seats while Mr. Salesman walks around to the back doors and opens them, flooding the cargo area with sunlight. “Roomy, huh?”

“Yeah. I’d definitely fit back here.”

“Sure. I’ll bet there’s even room to toss a bean bag chair in the corner there. I’m sure you could make this a great home away from home.”

“How much is it?”

The guy looks at the sticker on the side window. “\$1900.”

“Can I look at that blue one over there?”

“It’s got seats in the back.”

“Do any of these other vans have no seats in the back?”

“I’m afraid this is the only one. Of course, we could take the seats out of one of the others for you.”

I go to look at the blue one. It’s newer than the brown one and has more liters, apparently. And more horses under the hood...? It also has a higher price.

“And our service bay can take the seats out for you for no more than... a hundred bucks.”

“A hundred?”

“Each.”

“So, two hundred just to take out two bench seats?” I don’t even look inside the blue one. I pay cash for the brown van and drive it off the lot.

Next stop, mattress store. Once I get a cheap mattress loaded into the back and get over the shock of handing over more than two thousand of my hard-earned dollars in one day, I start to feel orange. With each mile added to *my* odometer on *my* dashboard on *my* van-home, my excitement builds. I can’t even describe the dark orange I feel driving down the highway toward a new destination.

Then a rock drops into my stomach: blue and red lights in my rearview mirror. Should’ve watched *my* speedometer.

A highway patrolman pulls me over. In my mirror I see the overweight, uniformed man getting out of his squad car and moseying up to my door. “Do you know how fast—?” He takes a step back and puts his hand on his holstered pistol. “What the—?”

I’m yellow, just like him, but he doesn’t know that. “Put your hands on the wheel,” he orders me. I obey. Of course, I

obey. He's got a freakin' gun. Light red, he steps closer and studies me. "What the hell?"

"It's a birth defect."

"You were born like that?"

"Yes, sir."

His hand drops off the gun. "You have a license to drive?"

"Yes."

"Let's see it." I retrieve my license and hand it over. "You borrow this van from someone?"

"No. I bought it."

"Where?"

"Kentville."

"Where'd you get the money for it?"

"I worked at the Koshona casino. Saved up." I'm not sure why this patrolman finds it so impossible that I'm able to hold a job and buy a van. I could just as well ask him how he's a cop with that beer gut hanging over his belt. But I hold my tongue. Mama din't raise no fool.

"Let's see the registration for this heap."

Red. He called my wonderful purchase a 'heap'. Sure, it's old, but it's clean and almost dent-free and big enough for the mattress I threw into the back. It's my home.

I hand over the registration card and he comes to the conclusion that I own the van. But he seems to forget why he stopped me in the first place. "Well, get going, then." He hands my license and registration back and waddles to his patrol car. With the driver's door open and one foot already in the car, he hollers to me, "And slow down."

I wait for him to take off before I start my engine. Then I drive at the speed limit until I near my first destination. Five miles shy of the tribal lands of the Makota I find a truck stop that has showers and laundry equipment. I don't have towels or sheets or anything besides a suitcase full of clothes. What I need is a department store.

Low on cash after purchasing the van, I go to the cheapest department store I can find in the nearby town of Huntsville and buy the hundred-thread-count linens and

toiletries I need. Everywhere I go in Huntsville, people look at me the way the patrolman did, backing away and balling their hands into fists. When they see I just mind my own business and leave, they go back to their own shopping and work, whispering to each other behind my back.

It's nothing new. I'm used to it. But the people in this area are especially spooked. They are reds on top of yellows, as if I'm a threat instead of just an upsetting oddity. I try to ignore the rude colors and prepare myself for a night of poker. I drive the rest of the way to the Makota land and enter the nice, dark casino. I turn all my remaining cash into chips and head for the tables. There's one empty chair.

Before I can sit down, though, the dealer and players catch sight of me and physically lean away, their colors what I expect. "What? Do I smell?" I ask. "I just took a shower." *Hmm*. No light golds. Status report: sense of humor – missing. "C'mon. I just want to play poker."

"That chair ain't free," the nearest player informs me.

I look at it. "Seems empty to me."

"Well, it... my buddy's... back any minute," he babbles.

I sit in the chair and get comfortable. Mr. Babbles grabs his chips and leaves. I guess the other players feel sufficiently safe with the vacated chair between me and them. "You get a lot of players from Huntsville, I take it," I say to the dealer.

"Mostly." He resumes shuffling the cards. "Ante's ten bucks."

"Got it," I reply, tossing a chip to the middle of the table. The other gamblers follow suit. When they lose the first hand to me, I tell them, "Settle, fellas. I'm not dangerous." They slump a little in their seats and settle into subdued hues again. Light orange inside of me because that makes their playing colors much more reliable. Easy pickin's.



I've been here three days. I freak the locals out and they freak me out. But I need to go to the Huntsville hardware store and buy a metal lock box and super glue. I wonder: if I wear long sleeves, gloves, and a scarf around my head, neck, and face, would I get fewer stares? I have a feeling that would just be a different kind of weird. Maybe I'll try that someday. But right now, I need to install my safe.

I attach the box to the floor of my van behind the driver's seat and lock my money inside. It's well hidden and unstealable. But that gives me another idea. In the hardware store where the dick at the Customer Service desk swears because I'm back, I buy portable storage drawers. "I think that's the last thing I need," I call over to Customer Service Dick. "You can relax now."

He actually flipped me off. A paying customer. I have a mind to put a note in the suggestion box—I'm kidding. I have nothing but time, but I won't waste even a minute of it on these hicks.

With my new drawers mounted on top of both wheel wells inside my van, I open my suitcase and move all my clothes to the one called Dresser. The opposite set of drawers is called Pantry and I toss my last granola bars and fruit snacks into it.

At the bottom of the suitcase, where it stays nice and flat, is my sketch book. I flip through it and find the loose portrait of Liam that I drew in high school safely stashed between two blank pages. I don't have any other pictures with me. I'm not even sure why I packed this one when I left home.

As I look at the drawing, I get a purple feeling, like I'm looking at the real thing, like I could talk to him if I wanted to. Geez, I remember being in middle school when we never ran out of things to talk about. Then I remember high school when we had no clue what to say to each other.

That day he called me the only DY left in the school, I sort-of went into a tailspin. I was so depressed that his disability was cured and mine never would be. We used to be a team: the color weirdos. And then we weren't.

Soccer try-outs didn't go as I had hoped that year; I just barely made JV. I was so dark blue that I didn't care anymore if we won or lost. Winning didn't bring me any orange, so why work so hard for it? The coach started sitting me out during games, and lecturing me during practices, trying to get back the "secret weapon" he had recruited.

"C'mon, Lila. This is a team. Doesn't matter what any one person wants or feels. You have to support the team. You have to give one hundred and ten percent."

I was light red every time a coach said to give a hundred and ten percent. Didn't they know it's impossible to give more than you've got? And considering I had about a quarter of the oomph I had the year before, even "a hundred and ten percent" wouldn't add up to much.

One teammate from freshman year, Chloe, had always been more sensitive to my feelings than the other players were. Off the pitch, she'd go out of her way to ask what color I was, and on the pitch, we'd made a scoring powerhouse. But she was a year older than me, and she made the varsity team when I was stuck on JV for a second year. I missed playing with her.

She found me sitting alone one day after the end of the season and sat down next to me. "Lila," she began, then didn't continue.

"What?"

"What happened?"

"What happened when?"

"This season. You suddenly went blues," she said.

"Light gold. How would you know I went blues?"

"I'm right, right?"

"Yeah, you're right," I admitted.

"Well, what happened?"

"It's stupid. Turquoise."

"Lila, c'mon. You can talk to me."

I didn't make eye contact, but I did confide in my friend. "Liam got his birth defect fixed. He said now I'm the only DY around here."

She nodded. She knew my story about the D.Y. Carlton school and my definition of DY. And she, like everyone, knew Liam had made a fantastic transformation. “That was a mean thing to say.”

“I deserved it. I wasn’t very nice to him last year.”

“Still. Not nice. Anyway, you can call yourself a DY, but last year you didn’t act like one. Why change now?”

“Because I can’t get my birth defect fixed with a pair of glasses like Liam did. There’s no hope for me. Dark blue.”

Chloe put an arm around me and kissed my cheek. “You don’t need a fix, Lila. You were doing great on your own. You just need to remember how great you were and get that person back in charge of your body.”

“Light gold, Chloe.”

“That’s better.”

“I understand what you’re saying, but I don’t know how.”

“You can’t control what happens to you, only how you react to it. Being green is a choice.”

I started to feel less blue. “Thanks, Chloe.”

With Chloe’s support, my mood started to turn around. By the next soccer season, I was pretty much my old self again. It was Chloe’s senior year and I really wanted it to be successful. I worked hard to make the varsity team and I played my heart out. I gave one hundred percent effort, because, you know, one hundred and ten percent was still impossible.

I saw Liam at a couple of home games, along with a few dozen other students who decided it wouldn’t be a complete waste of time to watch girls’ soccer if the girls’ soccer team was heading for a championship. As we won more games, the crowds got bigger. It was green to play in front of more than eight parents. Their energy fed our energy and the coach beamed sage on the sideline.

Before the semi-finals, the school scheduled a pep rally. We were told to wear our jersey tops to school that day. The pep band played in the gym where everyone gathered in the bleachers. The cheerleaders did their dancing and kicking

thing to the music as my team took our places on the front row. The vibe was electric with boys, surprisingly, hooting out school cheers and trumpets blaring fight songs.

Some senior boy was in charge of pepping up the student body ahead of our game that afternoon, urging everyone to come out and watch. He called the players to the middle of the basketball court one at a time. After each name, the band played a little fanfare and the cheerleaders did their jumping and pompom shaking. Chloe and I sat on the bench, waiting to be called. We cheered our teammates as they went to center court. Substitutes were called first, then he got to the starters.

“In the goal, we have Miranda Baker! This season, Miranda’s only allowed four goals in twelve games. Let’s hear it for number one, Miranda Baker!” Miranda ran to center court while the band played the fanfare and the cheerleaders did their thing. She high fived the players already there and turned toward the orange crowd. Once the cheering died down, the guy said, “At center defense, let’s hear it for number three, Jenny Matthews!” Band, cheerleaders, crowd. “Left defense is number seven, Carli Chi!” Band, cheerleaders, crowd. “Right defense, number five...” On and on he named the starting lineup. “Left midfielder, number eleven...” Band, cheerleaders, crowd.

“Left wing, with four goals and twelve assists this season, number thirteen, Lila Buchanan!” Band, cheerleaders... I jogged to the center of the court, high fiving the line of girls already standing there, just like everyone else had done. I took my place at the end of the line and faced the crowd. Chloe whooped and clapped for me. The crowd, in general, applauded pitifully.

Gone were the steady oranges from before. The cheering was so weak that I could pick Liam out of the throng because he was whooping for me, too. Everyone around him stared. Some tried to wave down his enthusiasm. My teammates tried to make up for the sad ovation by clapping louder and hollering “Yeah! Lila!”

I looked around. The band had played their fanfare normally, playing on the cue given by the band leader, not

paying attention to whose name had been called. But the cheerleaders' pompoms looked wilted compared to Laura's cheer, just before mine.

Quickly, the guy announced, "Striker, with seven goals and five assists this season, number six, Chloe Fernandez!" I know the humiliation only lasted a few seconds, but it felt like the lack of pep surrounding the announcement of my name dragged on for several minutes, at least.

Chloe came down the line of players, high fiving everyone as the band played and the crowd cheered loudly. She came to the end of the line, giving me a high five before taking her place at the end. She threw an arm over my shoulders as the last two players were announced, but I was in a fog after the embarrassing snub.

I looked up at Liam in the bleachers; he was dark red, exchanging heated words with the light red people around him. The guy behind Liam shoved him forward, causing Liam to fall into the person in front of him, making that guy red and ready for a brawl. He turned around and shoved Liam backwards. Liam left that guy alone but turned to face the one who started the shoving. He hit the boy. I couldn't believe my eyes. I mean, I had seen Liam riled up before – before he got the hue lenses. But this?

Liam disappeared into a melee of flying arms and shoved bodies until the coach ran into the stands blowing his whistle loudly. He tore people apart until he got to the center of the scuffle where he found Liam wedged between bleacher rows. "This rally is over!" the coach yelled. "Go to class!" Dark red and panting with fury, he blew his whistle again. "Go to class!"

The announcer, a student himself, stumbled over his words in an attempt to end on a positive note. "Uh, don't forget. Today. Um, four o'clock. Support the team. Come out and watch the Lady Vikings beat Windham High in the semi-finals. Get in free with your student ID card. Thank you." The band jumped in with a quick fight song as students began to file out, flowing down the bleachers like a wide

waterfall, deflected in one place: the spot where Liam sat, enduring our coach berating him in public.

I looked at my teammates who usually treated me normally. They met my eyes, then averted theirs, knowing it was because of me the fight broke out causing the abrupt end of the rally. A rally for a soccer team. A rally for a girls' soccer team. It was unprecedented. And it was suddenly over – because of me. “Come on,” Chloe said. “I’ve got physics. Where are you going?”

“Modern Lit,” I replied, allowing her to walk me out of the gym. I glanced back at the empty bleachers, empty save Liam, the coach, and now the principal and vice-principal. He sat there, dark red, as they railed at him. “See ya later, Chloe,” I said, breaking off to go to my next classroom.

“Shake it off, Lila.”

“Yeah.” I started toward my Lit class but couldn’t get the image of Liam out of my mind. I turned back and saw him being escorted to the office. My coach stood outside the gym, watching the troublemaker being led away.

“Oh, Lila. You oughta get to class,” he said when he saw me. His red was fading back to his normal sage, tinged with dark yellow.

“What’s gonna happen to Liam?”

Coach pointed at Liam. “Him? Detention, at least. Suspension, possibly.”

“But, Coach, he was just...”

“What?”

“Standing up for me. Him and me, we look out for each other.”

“Go to class, Lila.”

I didn’t go to class. I waited for Coach to go back to wherever he spent his days, then snuck over to the school office. “Yes?” the secretary said, hardly looking up from her desk work.

I stood behind the counter where several flyers sat waiting to be picked up by interested students. “I, uh... I was a witness at the rally. I saw they took the boy in here...”

“You want to testify or something?”

“I want to tell them that Liam didn’t start that fight. It was the guy behind him.”

She looked up at me and flinched. “You’re the...”

“Yeah. Can I see Liam, please?”

“Wait there.”

I waited. My eyes fell on a flyer for the school musical. *Who wants to see a stupid old musical?* I wondered. Then I realized, *who wants to see a stupid girls’ soccer game?* The drama department probably only got parents to sit in the audience, just like at our games.

The secretary came back. “Last office on the right.”

“Thanks.” I went down the hall and found Liam sitting in an office with the nameplate *Sylvia Metz, Principal* on the door. The principal faced the door while Liam’s back was toward me. She waved me in and pointed to an empty chair next to Liam’s. He started when he saw me sit down beside him, then turned turquoise before returning his gaze to the wall.

“You have something to say about the fight in the gym?”

“Yes,” I answered, trying to act calm when, really, I was nervous about addressing the principal. I never had a problem speaking my mind to adults before, but this woman gave off a dark green vibe that I could feel as well as see. “Um, I’m Lila Buchanan...” She nodded, like she’d heard of me before. “...and I’ve known Liam since fourth grade when we were in the Carlton school. We’ve always looked out for each other, and I think that’s what happened in the gym. The kids were not very nice to me... like they were to the other players... except Liam. He was cheering the same for me as for all the others. The guy behind him shoved him off his bench. Liam didn’t start the fight.”

Principal Metz stared at me, nodding slightly.

“Please don’t suspend Liam. He’s really smart. Please don’t kick him out of school. And he’s the soccer team’s biggest supporter. Please don’t punish him for standing up for us. I mean, for me.”

Liam stared at me, his jaw tight. He was purple-turquoise. I never knew anyone else who could show

two colors at the same time like he did. I glanced at him and raised the corner of my mouth in a hidden smile I hoped the principal didn't see. He closed his eyes as his colors fluctuated. The principal watched him intently. "Thank you, Lila," she said, excusing me from her office.

Hesitantly, I got up. "People threw drinks on us and purposely tried to trick us and make fun of us all the time. Why don't they get in trouble for that? Liam never hurt anyone—"

"Thank you, Lila," Principal Metz repeated. "Please go to class."

I looked down at Liam, his head leaning on his upturned arm. He didn't look at me. Tentatively, I left, but I didn't go to class. I waited in the lobby out by the secretary's desk. It was twenty minutes before Liam was excused and came down the hall, dragging his feet. When he saw me, he stopped. "Lila."

"Everything okay?"

"Guess so." He walked on, passing me and going out the door.

I followed him. "I'm sorry..."

He stopped and turned around to face me. "Why?"

"I... I don't know. I just am. Just telling you my feeling."

He nodded once, then started to walk away.

"Liam," I blurted.

He faced me again, waiting for me to speak.

"Why can't we..." I looked around uselessly. "We used to... Do you want to go with me to the school musical?" Liam was one color now. "Why are you so dark turquoise? You didn't start that fight."

He bit his bottom lip and shook his head.

"I'm sorry, Liam. I only wanted to help. Are you gonna be okay?" He looked at the ground, then ran away from me toward the parking lot. He kept running until he got to the street, turned right, and ran out of sight.

I worried about Liam for the rest of the day. I didn't see him at lunch or after school, and he wasn't in the bleachers for

the game. If not for the intensity of the match with Windham High, I would've worried about him all afternoon.

After the game, my mom came down from the stands to hug me and congratulate us on our win. "You're going to the finals," she said, orange as fire.

"I wish Liam had been here."

"I saw him."

"Really?"

Mom turned and pointed to the corner of the stands. "He was standing over there."

"How did he look?"

"Lavender, I guess."

"That's... good. He got in trouble in school today. I hope he's all right."

"I'm sure he's fine," Mom said, the way moms do because they don't get what's a big deal in high school.

After that, Liam reappeared in school seeming like himself again, but I kept my distance because I didn't want to cause him any more trouble with the Normals. He was a Normal now, fully integrated into the school with its tech clubs and advanced-placement science classes. It seemed he was on the nerd track – but the good kind of nerd, the kind who became successful and wealthy.

Our soccer team went to the finals. The school didn't let us have another rally, but they made plenty of announcements wishing us a win and encouraging the students to come out and support us. Lots of students showed up. I saw Liam there, too. He held a sign that said "Super 13 Striker" in large letters and giant numbers. I smiled when I saw it. Everyone on the team was represented on posters like that, made – I found out later – by the JV team.

Some parents brought balloons. It was all really fun. And we won. After the trophy was awarded, the spectators came onto the field. Mom came down holding the sign Liam had before, banging it into my head as she insisted on hugging me with her hands full. "Great game, Lila," she said. "You were so good."

"I didn't even score."

“You assisted twice. That’s just as good.”

Mothers. What can I say? “Where’s Liam?”

Mom let go of me. “I don’t know. He asked me to give you this. It’s really nice, don’t you think?”

I nodded. “I think the team is going out for dinner. Can I go?”

“Yes, of course. Have fun. Call me if you need a ride home.”

“I will.”

“Call me if you’re going to be out past nine, okay?”

“Yes, Mom.”

“Okay. Well, have fun with your friends. I’ll take this home for you.” She left the stadium by herself. I kinda felt sorry for her. It was like she didn’t have any friends to have fun with, and Dad was no fun, and I was hardly home. But I could see she was orange, so I didn’t worry for long. It was time to celebrate.

I have to stop thinking about high school and Liam. Makes me blue. It’s not like it was *the good old days* or anything, because it wasn’t. There were moments like that one, but they were vastly outnumbered and overshadowed by hurtful, disappointing moments. A pink and dark blue existence.

Shake it off, Lila. I look around my van as I sit in the middle of the mattress. It’s coming along. I’ve got furniture.

This is what I need to think about. The present. My van-home. My career – if you can call gambling for a living a career. I put my sketch book away and go to the casino.



Three straight nights of respectable winnings off the neighboring townsfolk and the casino manager asks me to hit

the highway. But it's too late to start driving to the next destination on my map, so I drive back to the Huntsville truck stop, take a shower, and go to bed in my wonderfully updated home.

I lock my van when I sleep, but I leave the windows open a crack for fresh air. I need to get a roof vent with a screen, I think, because bugs fly in through the windows at night, and I hate bugs. Every morning I have to open the back doors until they all fly out again.

I'm just about asleep when someone bangs on my front window with a stick. I crawl to the front and see a cop outside my driver's window, and a few yards from the van, a circle of townfolk with flashlights and sticks. "What the hell?" I mutter to myself. I crawl into the driver's seat and roll the window down another inch. "What is it?"

"Ma'am, it's illegal to sleep in your vehicle in the parking lot," the cop informs me. Nevermind all the truckers who are parked in the lot for the night, sleeping in their cab bunks...

"Oh. I didn't know. No one's ever..." I glance around. The people are red. "What's everyone doing?" I ask the cop.

"They want to make sure you leave this town – right after you return their money." The cop's red, too. *Shit.*

Though I'm seriously yellow, I try to act sage. "The money I won fair and square?"

"The money you won by cheating. Hand it over."

"I didn't cheat. I just play better than them."

The cop pulls out his gun. "Now."

"Whoa. Okay. It's in the back. I'll get it." I'm so beyond yellow, I'm shaking. I crawl behind the driver's seat and open my money box with the key. They can't see my box, so I only take out a portion of the money. I need *something* to live on. I stack up all the small bills, trying to make a biggish wad. I keep twelve skinny fifties in my safe. I hope four hundred will appease the mob.

Without lowering the window any more than the two inches it currently is, I slip the stack of bills out. With a hesitancy I don't understand, the cop reaches for it, keeping

his pistol trained on me. Does he think he'll catch my "disease" if he touches my money? Maybe he thinks I have the power to hex him. All I know is that I'm staring down the barrel of a gun. I've never seen a gun up close, and I'm seeing this one from the wrong angle. My hands tremble uncontrollably. He takes my cash with a nasty, "Now git."

He don't gotta tell me twice. I turn the key and start rolling. The crowd parts in front of me. I drive away, careful not to hurt anyone, but they just can't leave it at that. Bang! Thump! Thud!

In the mirrors I can see them hurling sticks and rocks at my van while the cop slowly holsters his weapon. I punch it and get the heck out of Dodge – full speed, with my heart pounding in my chest.

"Hicks," I mutter as I drive. The adrenaline's ebbing, and I feel tired. I hadn't even gotten one hour of sleep before the hicks from Hicksville came after me with their pitchforks and torches. "That was a little over-the-top, don't you think? Did they think I was a ghost haunting their little hick-town?" Note to self: mark that stupid little town with a big red X on my master map so I'll never go through there again. Freaky, yellow jerks.

I'm surprised how dark blue I feel about the incident. I mean, I've spent my whole life dealing with people's fearful or hostile reactions to me, but not since the soda-throwing episode in freshman year of high school was I physically attacked. And this time, I didn't have Liam with me to... to...

To just... be there.

Up ahead I see a sign for an RV park. That makes a lot more sense. I vow to stay in RV parks from now on. I also decide to shop in bigger towns where people don't think I'm the boogeyman. In bigger towns, people hardly notice each other at all, and that's the way I like it.

Chapter 5

My van looks like a junker after Hicksville. There are small dents all over. And in some places the paint has even chipped off and the metal underneath is starting to rust. My darling van – which I’ve named Cocoa – is turning into a rust bucket right before my eyes.

Then luck strikes and I see a billboard for a car painting service. I pull over and call to ask for a quote. “Can’t really give a quote until I see the damage,” the guy on the phone says. So, I bring my van in and he walks around it slowly, making marks with a grease pencil. “What color are you thinking?”

I hadn’t thought about a new color for Cocoa. “I was just thinking you’d match the current...”

“You like this sickly brown? You can see it, right?” says the guy dressed in blue coveralls. His brown hair looks like he combs it once in the morning, then lets nature have her way with it. The breeze that’s currently blowing tousles his hair even more.

“Of course, I can see it. What the hell?”

“Well, you don’t have any color, so I thought maybe you don’t see any either.”

“Those are different handicaps. Not related. And it’s not *sickly* brown. It’s *cocoa* brown.”

This paint guy is lavender; nothing ruffles him. He stares at my van. “Cocoa, huh? I think a midnight blue with pinpoint stars would look nice. You sleep in it, yeah?”

“Yeah. But I was just thinking of fixing the dings.”

He looks at me. “This is your home. Don’t you want it to look nice? Come here.” He leads me to a cluttered office with bookshelves lining one wall. Instead of books, the shelves are filled with a hundred small sample cans of paint. Despite the desk holding a mess of mail and papers, the paints are arranged orderly in rainbow sequence, only none of the colors have simple names like red, orange, yellow...

Instead, he has Plum Crazy, Viper Blue, Inferno Orange, Mystic Purple, Glacier Blue, Firemist Red, Titanium Gray, Tahitian Black, Cherry Bomb, Hot Pink, and dozens more. For a person who has to call out her colors, this is a whole new vocabulary for me.

I’ve always used the basic colors in my speech. In poetry, authors write things like *understated lilac*, or *harsh burgundy*, or *delicate sage*. I can hardly go around talking like that. Can you imagine? “I’m concentrated mint that you called me.” Come on.

As I marvel at all the colors on the shelves, the paint guy types on his computer. He turns the screen toward me, showing the most beautiful paint job ever. A van, much newer than mine, spins slowly on the screen, painted a dark, metallic blue. I mean, really dark. Almost black. But when the light hits it, I can see the shimmering blue that is its true color. In a swoop that starts at the driver’s window and ends at the top corner of the back, a subtle trail of scattered pinpricks of pure white starlight shimmer against the dark, dark blue.

The guy must know I’m orange on the inside by the way my eyes are glued to the screen. “Pretty awesome, huh?”

“It’s beautiful,” I whisper. Then I snap out of it. “But that looks really expensive.”

“Yeah, it is.”

“Just give me the touch-ups.”

“You know, I’ve gotta hammer out the dents and sand and blend and match... it’s only a little more if you let me paint the whole thing.”

“How much is that dark blue?”

“All together, with the body work, no stars, I could do it for five hundred.”

“Five hundred? The whole van only cost me nineteen hundred.”

“You paid nineteen hundred for a beat-up heap like that?”

Super pink, dude! “Uh, ru-ude. It wasn’t like that when I bought it.”

“Really? What happened?”

“A bunch of hicks threw rocks and sticks at it after robbing me and sending me out of town at gunpoint.”

“No shit? Why?”

I stare at him and run my upturned palm down the front of my body. He still doesn’t get it. “I’m colorless. They thought that was satanic or something.”

“They never saw a colorless person before?”

“You have?”

“Yeah. On TV. There was a show about this tribe in some jungle somewhere, and they were all colorless.”

“Seriously?” I’m more than a little mint at this breaking news. “You don’t remember where?”

“Real far away. Are you descended from those people?”

“I have no idea. My parents had colors. I think mine is just a birth defect.”

“Some latent gene, probably, that made a comeback in you.”

“You know about genetics?”

“No more than the average college grad.”

“You have a degree? Why are you working in a —” I catch myself, but not in time to undo the insult.

“I’m betting you’re turquoise right now, huh?” he says.

“Sorry. That was a stupid thing to say.”

“I hear it from my parents all the time. But you gotta do what makes you orange, don’t you think? What do you do? Or are you just homeless, sleeping in your van?”

“I play poker.”

“For a living?”

“Yeah.”

“Is it a good living?”

“Well, I haven’t made enough to cash out yet. Just starting my ‘career’.”

The guy, whose shirt has the name Ricardo sewn into it, is enduringly sage and – might I add? – kinda hot. “Where are you staying while your van’s in the shop?”

“Uh, I hadn’t thought about that. I guess I’ll just, you know, sleep in the van.”

“You’re not sleeping in my shop overnight.”

I gain back a little sage of my own. “I haven’t even hired you yet.”

Light gold, he locks his dreamy brown eyes with mine. “May I please paint your van, ma’am?”

I feel gold, too. “Can you come down on the price, sir?”

“No, but I can give you a place to stay. Free.”

I was never more thankful to be colorless. He may be a hottie but I’m not *going back to his place*. “I don’t think so, Ricardo.”

“Call me Ric. And it’s not like that. I have a small flat over my garage. My renter just moved out. You can stay there.”

“Oh.”

“Let’s get the work order written up, shall we?” He turns the computer screen back toward himself and starts typing. “Name?”

“Lila Buchanan.”

“Address? Oh. None. We’ll just put, 1900 Vanback Drive.”

“Cute.”

“What’s the mileage?”

“I don’t know. I’ll go check.” I walk out of the shop. My darling Cocoa suddenly looks like a beat-up heap to me, too.

While I'm getting the mileage, I unlock my cash box and take all the money out. I pack my suitcase with a change of clothes and my toiletries, stuff the money in my jacket pocket, and report the mileage to Ric.

"Now that that's done, I'll need the keys."

I hand them over with a smile. Ric doesn't ask what I'm doing with my face. He just radiates sage and puts the keys in his pocket. "There's a strip mall a block that way. They've got a bank and a restaurant and things like that. Be back here at five-fifteen. I'll take you home."

Thankfully colorless, I nod and leave his shop. The strip mall he'd suggested doesn't have a restaurant. It has a fast-food place. But it's the bank that's got my attention. Having recently lost almost half the money I owned, I decide carrying cash around is stupid. So, I go into the bank with my stack of green and come out with a debit card.



After putzing around the area until five-fifteen, I head back to Ric's shop just as he's locking up the big roll-up doors with my van on the outside. "You didn't do anything yet?"

"Got other cars ahead of yours, sweetheart."

"What did you call me?"

"Ma'am," he says, light gold.

I'd never admit it to him, but I find his sense of humor charming. "I guess I can drive myself, then. Hand over the keys."

"I locked them up in the shop."

"Go get 'em."

"What's the big deal? Just ride with me." He walks off to the side of the shop where the most beautiful metallic green vintage sports car sits waiting for him.

"What do you call that?"

“A Spyder.”

“No, the color.”

“Rally Green Metallic.”

“It’s beautiful.”

“Thanks. Hop in.”

He tosses my suitcase into the space behind the seat and drives us to the residential part of town and up a suburban street much like the one my parents live on. Pulling the car into the driveway carefully, he centers it between the garage walls – walls filled with two-by-fours randomly nailed between studs in the unfinished interior. More paints. More tools. More junk. I can’t imagine myself ever having enough stuff to fill a house, garage, and shop with so much clutter. Life in my van is minimalistic to the nth degree.

“I’ll go get the key to the flat.” Ric hits the button that closes the garage door once I’m out of the way. Standing there on his driveway in his suburban neighborhood, I start feeling teal again. I miss my mom and the loving environment she provided for me, despite all the blue and turquoise feelings I caused her. She really was a great mom who deserves more than a runaway daughter with no potential and no plan. If she knew I’m a gambling vagabond, sleeping in strangers’ spare rooms, she’d be so yellow right now.

Ric interrupts my ruminations with a jingle of a key ring. “Got it.” He ascends the outdoor staircase and unlocks the door. “Here we go. Bathroom,” he points. “Kitchenette. Furniture. That’s it.” That’s the sum total of the flat, but I’m grateful.

“It’s great. How much do you usually charge for rent? Just curious...”

“Five hundred a month.”

“Do you just charge five hundred for everything? Light gold.”

He’s light gold, too. “Really like that number. And thanks for the color report. I’m gonna throw a couple steaks on the barbeque. You like steak?”

“Dinner’s included? This all seems too much. What are you expecting?”

His dark pink isn't what I anticipated. "Just trying to be friendly."

"How friendly?"

"Neighborly. Those people were really bad to you in the last town. It's costing you hundreds to get it fixed. I just thought, with your..."

"Birth defect."

"...yeah, you could use someone being nice to you."

Are you for real? I want to ask. "Well, thank you, uh, Ric. If you're willing, I'd love a steak."

"It's not filet mignon or anything." He shifts back to orange, then turns and leaves the upstairs studio, closing the door behind him.

I watch him through the window as he fires up the small grill in the yard. He goes in and out of the house half a dozen times and finally calls up to me, "Lila. Dinner's ready."

In the tiny bathroom I wash my face and hands and brush my hair. I check myself in the mirror. Too bad I don't have better clothes to wear for my dinner with Ric. If only I had a necklace or something, I'd be more presentable. With a sigh, I give up trying to improve my appearance. Skipping eagerly down the steps outside the building, I'm stopped in my tracks when I get to the bottom: Ric's handing a steak-laden plate to a very pretty woman.

"Oh, Lila. There you are. This is Antonia, my fiancée. Toni, this is Lila."

Toni puts out her hand. "Nice to meet you, Lila."

Never, ever, ever was I more grateful to be colorless. To say I'm turquoise is a huge understatement. How stupid to think there might've been something between Ric and me. But he wasn't flirting; he was really just a neighborly kind of guy. Toni drops her extended hand as they both stare at me, stuck on the spot. "Uh, Lila? Would you like some dinner?" Ric asks.

"No, uh, no, thank you. I just came down to tell you I'm feeling a little under the weather and I'm just going to bed. Thanks, though. Sorry. Thanks, anyway." I start back up the stairs. "Um, do you think my van will be finished tomorrow?"

“It’s not that fast, Lila. Gotta hammer out the dents, sand away the rust, prime the whole thing, then paint it. Four days, at least.”

I focus on the steps in front of me. “I didn’t know it’d take so long. I don’t want to take advantage of your... generosity, letting me stay in the flat.”

“It’s no big deal. Don’t have a new renter coming in until the first of next month. Just keep it clean as you can.”

“I will.” I climb the rest of the steps without another word or glance at Ric and Toni. The bed catches me with a small bounce as I throw my colorless body onto it, swearing at myself for getting my hopes up that a nice man might be interested in me. I can hear the two of them talking outside as they eat dinner – not what they’re saying, just indistinct voices. At the window, I watch them in their oranges and purples. Then I hear one sentence that makes me dark blue. “She’s just a kid. Eighteen, nineteen, maybe. Lives in her van.”

Toni turns blue. “Poor thing.”

“I’m almost twenty,” I whisper, retreating from the window. I turn on the TV to drown them out and put my dark blue self to bed.



Ric’s gone. He’s stranded me in this suburban purgatory. Well, crap. What am I going to do today? Figuring there might be a convenience store or market nearby, I head out to go exploring, nearly tripping over a bag of groceries on the landing outside my door.

“Damn pity.” But I’m hungry, so I take the bag inside and unpack it. A loaf of bread, a pack of deli turkey, mayo, mustard, peanut butter, apples, bananas, and a chocolate bar.

Sigh. Antonia is the luckiest person in the world.

Every evening, Ric comes home and knocks on my door. “Join us for dinner tonight?” Every evening, I decline his invitation. There’s no way I can sit through even one hour of watching Ricardo and Antonia being so purple together when I’m so teal. Last night I had to watch reruns of old game shows to drown out their voices. Is there anything more pathetic than watching thirty-year-old games shows and not getting the references the contestants are using? *Where’s the beef*, and *Nanu nanu*.

Huh?

The next afternoon, in a fit of teal I dig up that drawing of Liam from my suitcase and stare at it, just sitting on the steps of the studio, thinking about him. “I can see it, Liam. My future. I’ll always be alone. Maybe I won’t feel teal all the time, but the path I’m on is a lone path, for sure. What are you doing, Liam? How do you like college? Making lots of new friends?”

Get real, Lila.

Of course he’s made new friends, set new goals, and probably never given me another thought. Or maybe he has. Maybe, over beers, he’s told his college buddies about the DY he used to know. “*I swear, I’m not making it up. She was one-hundred-percent colorless.*” I bury my face in my hands, hiding from the laughter and calls of bullshit in my head.

I hate wondering what Liam’s doing. My imagination always ends the exercise with a scene like that. In reality, Liam wouldn’t act that way. Not sober, anyway. I think for the sake of our years of best-friendship, he’d hold my memory at little bit sacred – if he thinks of me at all. It’s wrong of me to attribute such nasty comments to a person I used to care about. I would never imagine my mom saying something mean like that, so why Liam?

I remember the rally in the gym, how he cheered loudly for me in front of the whole school. A guy like that wouldn’t turn on me, even in my absence, would he?

I lift my head and try to shake the confusing thoughts away. Ricardo pulls into the driveway, sticking his hand out

the open window, waving. I wave back, getting up to retreat to the studio.

“Hey, wait.” He gets out of the Spyder with bags in his hands. “You like Chinese food?” he asks, starting toward the stairs. “I thought maybe you were afraid of my cooking, so I got take-out.”

“I... You shouldn’t be spending money on me. In fact, I want you to add the cost of the bag of groceries to my bill.”

“That’s all right. It wasn’t that much. Come on down. I have good news for you.”

I put the portrait of Liam inside, slowly descend the stairs, and meet him on the patio. “Good news?”

“Yeah. Your van will be ready tomorrow and it looks great. I can still add the stars...”

“How much does that cost? Sorry to be so fixated on money. I just haven’t made any all week.”

“I get it. You’re responsible. Careful with your money. That’s good.” He starts unpacking the food containers. “I’d actually have to subcontract out to a guy who specializes in the hand-painted stuff. Flames, pinstripes, things like that. I called him today and he said he’ll do it for three hundred. Both sides. Three days.”

My mouth drops open, but Ric doesn’t see it. He just keeps talking. “One-fifty per side. That’s pretty good.”

“If I had a spare three hundred lying around...”

He looks up at me, light orange. “Too much?”

“Afraid so.”

“How long would it take for you to make three hundred at the poker tables?”

“Two nights, probably.”

“Really? How steady is your income?”

“Pretty steady, when I get to play.”

“Tell ya what. You pay him three hundred, give me two hundred now, and send me the other three when you make it.”

“No.”

He stops opening boxes. “Why not?”

“I don’t want to be in debt to anyone.”

“Admirable, but I know you’re good for it.”

“No, you don’t. You don’t know anything about me. You don’t know where I’m going or how to find me again if I don’t pay you. You’d be stupid to let me leave without paying you.”

Antonia shows up. Great. “Lila. Hi. I hope this means you’ll eat with us tonight.” She looks at Ric who’s not his usual orange self anymore. “Ric?”

“Got Chinese for tonight. Hope you’re okay with that,” he says to Antonia, turning back to his boxes. “Need forks.” Abruptly, he goes into the kitchen for forks. Antonia looks at me, light yellow, then follows Ricardo into the house.

“What’s going on?” she asks. I fly up the stairs to the studio and bury my face in the pillow of the bed, hitting the mattress a few times because I’m mad at myself for insulting Ric’s generosity. He’s right. I’m good for the money. No way would I leave a debt unpaid.

A soft knock on the door... “Lila, it’s Toni. Can I come in?”

I sit up and straighten my hair the best I can. “O-okay.” She comes in with a plate of Chinese food.

“I didn’t know what you like, so I put a little of everything on the plate.”

“Thanks, but...”

“But nothing. You need to eat, young lady.”

I’m instantly red, but she’s light gold, trying to be light-hearted about everything. I’m over-reacting. Again. “Thank you,” I whisper, taking the plate and putting it on the small table next to the drawing of Liam. “Can you... can you please tell Ric I’m sorry... for what I said?”

“I can... or you can.”

I shake my head. “Turquoise,” I tell her, looking away.

“I know. But you should know something about Ric. When he was a teenager, his family had a rough time. Got hit with a layoff and medical bills at the same time. Could’ve lost their house, everything. Someone they didn’t know helped them get through a tough couple of months until they got back on their feet. His family was all right after that. Found a job, paid off the bills. And that person who helped, all he wanted in return was for them to pay it forward. Ric really took that to

heart. I think he's paid it forward at least three times over by now. He's grateful for what he has, knowing it was so close to being lost. It's in his nature, now, to be generous."

"I don't meet a lot of people like that. Most people treat me..."

"Pretty badly, I'd guess."

"I've come to expect the worst from people."

"He's come to expect the best from people. That's why he trusts you to pay him later."

"Is he for real?"

Antonia turns dark purple. "That's why I love him."

"You're so lucky." She nods. "I mean, I'm sure he's lucky, too... to have you. You have each other..." She's light gold, amused with my fumbling.

"There's someone out there for you, too." She spies the drawing, then looks at me. "Right?"

I disagree with her but don't say so out loud. "Thanks for the plate. I want to, um, pay for my share of the food... but I don't have cash. I only have a debit card."

"Pay it forward, Lila." Toni leaves the studio, green as a lucky four-leafed clover. I watch out the window as she meets up with Ric on the patio, hugs him, and he turns purple in her embrace. Then they sit down and have dinner together. I just can't bring myself to go down there and socialize with them.

Burgundy. I can't wait to get out of this town, certainly not three more days to get the stars painted on, much as I would like to have them.

Chapter 6

On the road again. Playing cards again. Sleeping in my van again.

I paid Ricardo in full for the paint job, telling him I really liked it, thanking him for his hospitality, and leaving as fast as I could. Very often, after I left that place, the gorgeous paint job he'd done on my van reminded me of him. Then I'd remember Toni – and kick the tire. It was weeks, many weeks, before I could look at the midnight blue, sparkle-in-the-sunlight van and not feel teal. But I did get over it eventually. I had games to play, money to win, a new phone to buy. Yes, my sad, old flip-phone bit the dust. In reality, I dropped it once too often and the flip part broke off.

Today's the day. The first thing I'm going to do with my brand-new smart phone with indestructible cover is call home.

"Hi, Mom. It's Lila."

"Lila. It's been so long. How are you?"

"I'm doing fine, Mom. My phone broke and it took a little while to save up for a new one."

"Well, good for you. Very grown up. Tell me, what've you been up to? How are things?"

"Just working, earning money, saving as much as I can. I have a v— a car now. It's used, but I like it."

"Sounds like you're supporting yourself very well. How's the casino?"

Dark turquoise. “The casino’s great. I meet interesting people. Manager’s nice.”

“Lila, have you considered coming back home and finishing college?”

I roll my eyes. “College *costs* money. I’m *making* money.”

“I know, but everyone says you can make better money with a degree.”

“The community college doesn’t give out degrees, Mom. And can you see me at some big university? I’m not Liam.”

“That reminds me, Liam called for you a while back.”

“He did?” Color me mint.

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“He just said he wanted to know how you’re doing. Oh, here, I took down his phone number. Ready?”

“Yeah.”

My mom reads the number out to me as I stoically don’t write it down. What would I do with it? Call him? Picture that: “*Hi, Liam. How are things in your ivy league institution of higher learning? Me? I’m living in the back of a van and playing poker for a living.*” What would he think of me?

“Oh, I should get your number, too, Lila. What is it?”

Lilac for the change in subject, I give Mom my new number. “Don’t give it out to anyone from high school, okay?”

“Okay,” my mom says. I can almost hear the light yellow in her voice.

“How’s Dad?”

“Oh, uh, fine. Um, Lila, I got a job and I’ve been saving a lot of money. I could pay for you to go back to college.”

Sigh. “Save it for your retirement, Mom. Don’t worry about me. You know, though, I’ve got to get ready for work. Sorry I can’t talk longer. But I’ll text you more often, okay?”

“Okay. Thanks for calling, Lila. I miss you, but if you’re orange, I’m orange.”

“Orange, greens, all good. I miss you, too, Mom. Say hi to Dad for me.”

“Take care, baby.”

“I will. Bye.” I touch the hang-up dot and stare at the screen. I remember the first time I lied to my mom. I was five. I’m good at lying to my mom, but I don’t like it.



A year into my casino course plan, I’ve developed a pretty good routine. I make good money and only work a few hours per day. Per night, I should say. That’s when the bigger betters go to the casinos. And weekends are much busier. In my spare time, I surf the internet on my phone – which I charge from the van’s cigarette lighter socket.

I’ve been taking pictures with my phone and having my favorites printed up big in drug stores. Then I tape them up on the inside walls of my van. *Voila!* Art.

It was in one of those drug stores yesterday that I saw a stack of electric blankets on sale. What brilliance. My bed is so cold when I climb in late at night. I bought the blanket and brought it back to my van. *Well, shit.* It didn’t plug into the cigarette lighter. Back inside the drug store I went to get an adaptor. But, oh, it was all worth it. Last night was the most comfortable night in winter I’ve ever had.

But now I’m in a pickle: my van won’t start. I don’t know anything about engines. My dad always took care of car things. I’m slightly panicked. I have to get my van to a fix-it shop, and it won’t start, so how do I get it there? I search around for how to open the hood and finally find a handle to pull. The hood pops open a little and I lift it the rest of the way, then stare at the inert engine. Well, staring doesn’t do anything except confirm that the engine is, indeed, still in my vehicle. I look around at the other RVers in the park and decide to talk to the nearest camper who’s outside his rolling house. “Um, excuse me. Do you know anything about cars?”

The grey-haired man looks up from his own vehicle maintenance and sees me standing there, all colorless as I am. “What the f—?”

“Yes, I’m colorless. It’s not contagious. Can you help me figure out why my van won’t start?”

“Uh, yeah. I guess so.” He follows me back to my open hood. “What happens when you turn the key?”

“Nothing.”

“Doesn’t even try to turn over?”

“I don’t know.”

“Give it a try.” I get in the driver’s seat and turn the key. *Click.* “It’s your battery. It’s dead.”

I hop out. “Where do I get a new one?”

He looks at me strangely. “You don’t need a new one. You need a jump.”

Now I look at him strangely. “I need ta jump?”

He’s light gold. “Don’t worry. I’ll get the jumper cables.” He calls on another camper who has a more manageable pickup truck and that guy maneuvers his car to nearly kiss bumpers with mine. The older man comes back with big black and red cables. “I’ll show you how this works so next time you know.”

“Okay.” I’m turquoise. He probably knows that, even with me having no colors. This is humiliating.

He connects the two batteries, explaining where things go and what not to do – ever – unless I want to be electrocuted. I think he’s trying to make yellow show up on me. The other man starts his truck and Old Guy tells me to start mine. Miracle – my van starts.

“Y’see, the battery is used to start the engine but also when you use the electrics inside, like lights or the power socket. When you drive, the battery gets recharged by the engine. So, go take a drive for ten, fifteen minutes before you turn it off.”

I nod. “Thanks a lot.”

“You travelling alone?” the old man asks as he unhooks his cables.

“Yeah.”

“You got internet?”

“When I can find Wi-Fi.”

“Look up basic maintenance for your van. You don’t wanna get stuck at the side of the road.”

“Okay.” I’m feeling stupid – not just because I don’t know anything about my van, but because I killed my own battery with my electric blanket. “Um, how do you run the lights and stuff in your RV? Don’t you drain the battery?”

“Solar panels on the roof. We have a whole bank of batteries under the kitchen floor.”

“Oh, smart.”

“Good luck,” he says with a friendly wave of the cables in his hand.

“Thanks, again.” I turn to the guy with the truck. “Thank you.”

“You bet.” He backs away and goes about his own business. I do as the Good Samaritan says and drive – way more than fifteen minutes, just to be sure.

The next time I’m in a town that has a hardware store, I’m looking for solar panels.



Between the internet and installation manuals, I figure out how to hook up solar panels to a separate battery so my engine will be able to start every morning. I wire up an outlet and plug in an actual lamp. No more reading take-out menus by the old, dim dome light of the van.

I install one-way film on the back windows of my van, giving me privacy. I can see out, but no one can see in. I wire my van with upgraded speakers to play downloaded songs on my phone. The scariest thing I still have to do: cut a hole in my roof.

I'm trying to rent a circular saw with a metal-cutting blade at the same home improvement store where I found a DIY skylight. The guy is hesitant to rent me the power saw. He asks me all kinds of questions I'll bet he doesn't ask other customers. I can't tell if he thinks being colorless renders me incapable of using tools, or being female renders me incapable of using tools. Probably both. In any case, he seems to think I'm incapable of using tools.

A guy in line behind me overhears the whole thing. "C'mon dude. Give her the saw. She's an adult."

I turn around. "Thank you." That's when he sees the front of me. With long sleeves and pants and my hair covering the back of my neck, he hadn't seen my colorless face.

"Then again..." he backpedals.

Give me strength. Back to Renter Guy. "Look, I signed the release. I have legal tender. Let's just do this."

With a resigned shrug, he takes my money and hands me a well-used circular saw in a hard-plastic case. As I carry it away, the customer who was behind me in line blesses me with his expert advice: "Measure twice, cut once."

"Cheers." I go straight to the tape measures.

Good thing I picked one up because the cut I need to make in the roof of my van is very precise. But I read the instructions three times, measure twice, and cut once, making a perfect square hole. After that, installing the skylight over it is a breeze. A little adhesive caulk, a few metal screws, and my screened-in roof window is finished. I pop it up and down to test it. Then I pour out my bottle of water on top of it: no leaks. Perfect.

Feeling green, I return the circular saw to the rental counter. "Still have ten fingers *and* a new skylight."

Chapter 7

At the end of my first day of kindergarten, my mom picked me up and asked how I felt about school. The other mothers didn't need to ask; they could see clearly how their children responded to their first foray into independence. I was teal and blue, but I said I was orange – for Mom's sake.

It wasn't very long before I was transferred to the DY school. I wasn't leaving behind any friends, and I didn't make any new friends until Liam came. So, I never had birthday parties when I was a kid, but my mom always made me a chocolate cake and served it with a side of vanilla ice cream. My parents sang the birthday song to me, my mom purple, my dad light pink. He really couldn't hide his disappointment that I was the daughter Fate had given him. The day of my birth was not something he wanted to celebrate. So, I focused on my mom.

Today, I'm twenty-one. Legal to drink. Legal to gamble in every state. The diner waitress brings me a lava cake *a la mode*. I video-call my mom and show her my personal party. I regret it almost instantly, though, as she feels the need to question why I'm celebrating alone. Where are my co-workers? Where are my friends? Aren't my co-workers my friends?

I could tell her the truth: that I have no friends. I don't even have co-workers anymore, and even if I did, they wouldn't be friends. I mean, Cash and Bart and the others

were nice enough to me, but no one ever said, “Hey, let’s grab a bite.” I could tell her these truths, but for her peace of mind I fall back on habit: I lie to my mom.

“It’s my day off. Everyone else is working. Besides, I wanted to celebrate with you, for old times’ sake.”

She buys it, shading over to light orange. “Got any plans after your cake and ice cream?”

I start eating the dessert since the ice cream is melting. I pretend to ponder her question. “Yeah, I’ll probably get drunk, then go home with the best dancer I can find in the club. Good dancers make good lov—”

“Lila,” Mom cuts me off, dark yellow taking over.

“Gold, Mom.”

“Oh. Oh, good.” Light gold overtakes her dark yellow.

I smile absentmindedly and take a combo cake-and-ice-cream bite. “What have you been up to?”

“Same old things. I miss you, Lila. Is there any chance you can come home for a visit sometime?”

“I can sure try,” I lie again. I’ve been away from home for over two years. I really should go see my parents. “I don’t know when, but I’ll try.”

“That’s all I can ask.”

Dark turquoise. Mom never asks for anything, never complains. I know she hasn’t given me a guilt trip on purpose, but I’m driving down Camino de Guilt nonetheless. “Um, they’re giving me the stink eye for using my cell phone in the restaurant. I gotta go.” Another lie.

“Oh, all right. Thanks for sharing your birthday with me. I’m so happy you called.”

“Me, too, Mom. I love you.” Not a lie.

“I love you, Lila. Happy birthday!”

“Thanks, Mom. Love you. Bye.” End of call.

I drop my head onto the table. And, crap, some of my hair lands in the hot fudge on my lava cake. Well, now I know what I’m doing after my birthday dessert: shampooing the chocolate sauce out of my hair in the communal washroom of the RV park. Now that’s how to celebrate turning twenty-one.



I'm legal to gamble anywhere, so I'm going where gamblers go: the biggest casino strip in the country. *Viva Las Vegas!* Driving down the main drag, I'm dark mint: casino after casino after casino, brightly lit, adorned with water fountains and elaborate, themed, animatronic scenes, and topped with giant hotels.

It's all very glitzy. But once I get past the themed hotel lobbies, each casino looks basically the same as, but much more than, the tribal casinos. More lights. More noise. More smoke. At first, the security guys stop me from sitting down until I show my ID to prove I'm legal. Some ask about the missing colors, some just get away from me as fast as they can. But after playing in each casino several times, I no longer have any problems with them. In fact, after two months on the strip, they greet me by name when they see me.

I cycle through the casinos to meet new suckers, er... players every night. Ah, tourists. They're such bad gamblers. I almost feel sorry taking their money, but a girl's gotta do what a girl's gotta do. They knew the risk when they sat down.

There are other serial gamblers. Some are pros, like me. Some are just pathetic. Most of the pros don't like to play with me because they know my record. I have never left a table down for the night. I've never left a table less than two hundred up, in fact. Most games, I win between two hundred and a thousand. Okay, so the night I raked in a thousand was a one-off, but a typical game day nets me two-to-five hundred. So, if I'm at a table, my fellow pros choose other tables or other casinos for the night. It's actually a sign of respect.

I see Fallon. I don't know if that's his first name or his last name. Or maybe he's one of those *I only have one name affectation* people. We make eye contact. He comes over to say hi before heading out in search of somewhere else to play,

greeting me with that other affectation: air kisses beside my cheeks. “Lila, how are you, chéri?”

Is he French? Who knows? He doesn’t have an accent, which makes me think he just has a thing for European affectations. That’s three, for those keeping score. But I like Fallon. “I’m fine. How are you?”

“Oh, you know, it’s hot as blazes outside and I’m not a fan of the heat.”

“Well, one, you’re inside and it’s air conditioned, and two, you don’t *have to* live here.”

“True. True.” He’s lavender, no matter what we’re talking about. “Well, what can you do?”

I’m light gold inside. Every conversation with Fallon ends with *Well, what can you do?* It tells me he’s lost interest in our exchange and is ready to join a table. “Okay, so I guess I’ll see you later.”

“What table are you playing?”

“Seven,” I answer.

“Lucky seven. I’d say, ‘good luck, chéri,’ but you don’t need it. Ta.” And... he’s gone. A typical length conversation with one of the guys. I sit down at table seven where three men and a woman are playing poker.

“Hi, Davy,” I say to the dealer.

“Evening, Lila.” The players hardly look up from their own chips and cards, but once they do, they do a double take on me. Wide eyes. Yellow color. Sharp intake of breath. *Are we over it yet?*

They take a moment to refocus on the game, taking the cue that the dealer knows me as a sign that I’m harmless. I join in the next hand, and several more after that. Then one of those pathetic serial gamblers sits down. “Hi, Kent,” the dealer says.

“Davy.” Kent sets down his pile of chips and looks around the table, sees me, and drops his head. The cards fly across the felt from Davy’s hand and slide under Kent’s nose. He’s the last of the six of us to pick them up. After the first round of betting and taking new cards, I have a decent hand: two pair. Tourist Number One has a pair, at best, but stays in.

Tourist Number Two might have two pair, but probably only one. Tourist Numbers Three and Four fold. Kent stays in with, at best, two pair. He's light orange. But Kent is always overly optimistic.

I raise aggressively to get the tourists to fold. It's just Kent and me now. His left hand holds his cards tightly, his wedding ring glinting from the overhead spotlight. He runs his right hand through his hair as he eyes me before declaring he's going to raise. He must have two pair. It's possible he has a winning hand, but I'm pretty sure my high pairs will beat his. As I stare at him, his colors shade toward yellow. There it is: he has low pairs at best.

"I fold." I set my cards face down. Kent returns to orange and drops his cards. He lets the dealer take the house's cut, then gathers the rest to his place with two outstretched arms. "Davy, I need to stretch. Deal me out of the next hand."

"Sure thing, Lila." The tourists turn orange. I watch the next round as I walk around the table, peeking at everyone's hands. I stand behind Kent and have a look. A pair. *Fold*, I advise telepathically. He doesn't. He loses.

"Kent."

He startles in his chair, then turns around to face me. "Oh, Lila. What?"

"Should've folded. You know that."

"Was on a lucky streak."

"I'll give you twenty bucks to walk away."

Sarcastically light gold, if that's possible, he says, "Twenty's not enough to get me out of the mess I'm in."

"How much to get you out of it?"

"Fifteen hundred in bills and credit cards."

I grab him by the arm and yank him out of his chair. "What are you doing?"

"I'm saving your ass."

He snaps his elbow out of my grasp. "The hell you say."

"Kent, look at you. You're a good-looking man with a job. You have a wife at home. How 'bout kids?"

"A baby."

“You’ve got the best life has to offer, and you’re squandering it in a stinking casino.”

Kent’s shoulders slump. “I don’t make enough to support my family.”

“You make more than you’re taking home after you stop here. Do you ever win at the tables?” He shakes his head slowly, dark turquoise dominating. “Does your wife know you’re here?” He shakes his head again, looking down at the floor now. “What do you tell her happens to all the money?”

“She doesn’t see the credit card bill.”

Sigh. “Kent, go home. Use your casino time to get a second job or take a college class or panhandle at the stoplight. *Anything* will make you more money than gambling.” Kent’s so turquoise, I know he knows I’m right.

“But... I won that big pot – against *you*.”

“I had kings and tens. You had maybe two pair, low.”

Kent instantly turns mint. “Why’d you fold?”

“I won’t take food out of your baby’s mouth.” Dark turquoise returns, showing me clearly that Kent is swamped with guilt. “Those other guys will, though. Look, Kent, fate’s been good to you. You have a good life, right?” He nods. “This pit you’ve dug for yourself, you’re gonna have to get out of yourself. You hear me? If I was given the normal life you were given, I wouldn’t be spending every night at a poker table.” He starts to say something, but I interrupt. “Just... go home.”

Kent nods sheepishly, cashes out, and takes his turquoise ass home.



Billy Bob’s Barbeque: my favorite dinner hangout. Tonight, I plan to play at the Cordoba, which is right next to BBB’s. Stella, the hostess, greets me by name and gives me a

booth as far away from the entrance as possible. My waitress, Nadine, as usual, asks, “Cola?”

“Not today. Today I want something better. Espresso martini.”

“Can I see your ID?”

“Really? I’ve been coming here for months.”

“Never ordered a real drink before. We card everyone.”

“Okay.” I pull out the two cards I keep in my pocket: my driver’s license and my debit card. I show her the ID and she leaves to get my drink. The only other things I carry with me are my phone and car keys. No purse, remember. I only wear clothes with pockets.

I set all my stuff on the table before me and stare at the sum total of my life. My ID – the thing that gives me legitimacy. My debit card – the thing that gets me what I need. My van – the thing that brought me here. My phone – the thing that shows me the world outside dark casinos and RV parks.

Nadine returns with my drink and takes my order. “The usual, but can I get a baked potato instead of tots?”

“You got it, honey.”

I tap the photos app on my phone and scroll through the record of my travels. I’ve seen mountains, forests, lakes, beaches, rivers, and lots of casinos. I’ve put fifteen thousand miles on my van since I bought it, and I’ve never had the urge to turn around and go back to my Koshona tribal casino job, or the community college, or even my hometown.

I’m not homesick. There’s nothing for me there. My greatest accomplishment was a high school soccer championship, but as I found out, once you leave, the things that were so important in high school seem insignificant. I can hardly remember the names of classmates. Gun to my head, I wouldn’t be able to name the whole varsity team that championship season. What was my whole world as a teenager is nothing but a memory now – and not a very important memory at that.

Nadine serves my plate of meat and potatoes with a nod to vegetables in the form of cole slaw. It’s my favorite meal, in

my favorite restaurant. It's as good as things get in my little vagabond life. When I look up to thank Nadine, I'm a bit startled to see how old she looks to me. When did that happen? I watch her hustle around in her tennis shoes, struggling somewhat to pick up a tray full of plates destined for a big party in the opposite corner. *How long has Nadine been a waitress?* Twenty years? Thirty? Forty?

Where will I be years from now? Sleeping in a van, bluffing my way through the nights in falsely cheerful casinos? Still?

Liam invades my thoughts. Liam: now, he's going someplace, progressing, graduating soon, planning a future. He probably has a girlfriend...

"Oh, hi, Lila." A fellow professional gambler follows the hostess to the booth next to mine. Above average height and better than average build, he has sandy-blond hair and eyes so dark brown they remind me of the big, black eyes of an adorable teddy bear.

"Hi, Milo."

"Mind if I join you?"

I wave my open hand at the opposite bench in my booth. "Where you playing tonight?"

"I'm not. I'm going to a show."

"You're kidding."

"Won a pair of tickets off a tourist whose wife is gonna be pissed."

"Light gold," I reply, tearing a piece of meat off a rib bone with my teeth.

Milo's orange. "Wanna go?"

"Go where?"

"The show."

"What is it?"

"Magic. Darin Sinclair."

"That sounds fun."

Nadine's back. "Hey, Milo."

"Hi, Nadine. Can I get ribs with the usual sides?"

"Comin' right up, honey."

"You come here a lot, too, I guess," I say to Milo.

“Yeah. Best ribs in town.” Milo looks at the dregs of my martini glass. “What was that?”

“Espresso martini.”

“That sounds... awful.”

“It was all right. Not worth the price, I think. I’ll stick with soft drinks.”

“Let me buy you a drink.”

“I’ve already had a drink.”

“You have a one-drink limit?” He’s gold.

“I have a budget.”

“I said I’d buy you the drink. You dense or something?”

I glare at him, feeling red. He just sits there, gold and lavender. I let down my overactive defenses. “Sure. Buy me a drink.”

“If I get to choose it for you.”

“Conditions?”

“You red?” he asks.

I’m not about to tell him I’m dark orange. I mean, no one ever bought me a drink before, or took me to a show. This resembles a date – a night on the town. Of course I’m dark orange. But for him, I tone it down to, “Lavender.”

“Oh, good. What a puzzle to figure you out...”

“I usually tell my friends my colors.”

“Am I included in your friends?”

“Sure. Why not?”

“Great. So, your drink. It’s going to be...” he waves to Nadine who is on her way over with his plate anyway. “Can you get us two whiskey sours?”

She looks at him, then at me. “That’s what you want, Lila?”

“Let’s give it a try,” I say, trying to sound casual.

“It’s a great palate cleanser, after all that.” Milo points to our plates.

“I’m game.” I finish my dinner ahead of Milo and, while he eats, give him the summary of my life up to this point. I’m not a narcissist; he asked. “So, now that I’m legal, here I am,” I wrap up.

“Where you going next?”

“Funny you should ask. I was just pondering that question before dinner.” Nadine drops off the whiskey sours.

“Tell me what you think,” Milo says, nodding upward toward my drink, his fingers knuckle-deep in barbeque sauce.

I try a sip. “Whoa. Not kidding about the sour, are they?”

Milo grabs a stack of napkins to wipe his hands clean, then picks up his glass and takes a large sip, lets it sit in his mouth for a second, then swallows, followed by a loud, “Ahhh. Why didn’t you go for a soccer career?”

“Light gold. I’m gonna get whiplash with your subject changes, Milo.”

He’s gold as he puts his elbow on the table and his chin in his hand. “You’re fascinating.”

“First I’m a puzzle. Now I’m fascinating?”

“Your life is hardly run-of-the-mill, Lila. I mean, you go your whole life with people treating you – initially, at least – like a freak, yet here you are, out in public, doing your own thing. You didn’t hide yourself away.”

A dark orange stirring messes with my insides, but I’m not telling him that. I don’t want him thinking I’m some inexperienced kid who never went on a date before when, in truth, I’ve never been on a date before. My experience with men consists of an almost-kiss with Liam, and an almost-dinner-date with Ricardo. Would Milo give me my first, real, good-night kiss after the show?

Thank god Milo can’t see my colors. I sip my whiskey sour, as does he. We stare at each other’s eyes, in a trance almost – a dark orange trance that makes my heart beat a little faster. Then Nadine slaps down two checks.



We have an hour before the show starts and Milo suggests we walk the strip and see the sights. I’ve seen the

sights a hundred times, but somehow, with Milo next to me, it's all brighter and more orange-feeling. The fountains put on their hourly show as we're walking by, so we stop to watch. "I've never watched this all the way through."

"Then you've never seen the finale. This, you must see." He's standing behind me, enough taller than me to see over my head. Then I feel his hands on my waist, causing a thrill to run through my body. I play it lavender, though, still trying to keep up the charade that I know what dates are all about.

After the water show finale, we have to hurry to the casino where Darin Sinclaire does his magic show. The theater is stunning on the inside. Long, velvet curtains drawn across the stage hide the magician's secrets. Ethereal sounds – not quite music – float out of the giant speakers, almost too soft to be heard over the chatter in the audience. Spotlights on the velvet dim down gradually, as slow as fading sunlight at dusk, until there's nothing illuminating the curtains. Milo monologs about other shows he's seen, but I'm not really listening.

Everything fades to dark silence in the theater just before music blares from the speakers above the stage. The heavy curtains whisk open, the top dragging the bottom edge along. Lights, music, dazzled applause assaults my senses as Darin Sinclaire emerges from darkness at the back of the stage, stands in the spotlight, and bows. "Not much of a trick," Milo jests in my ear.

"Light gold," I whisper back. We share a glance then turn our attention back to the star of the show. Darin Sinclaire has an ego as big as my wingspan, and the audience feeds it with hearty applause after each trick. About twenty minutes into the show, the house lights come up and Sinclaire saunters up the aisle looking for a shill – which he calls a volunteer. As if my lack of color struck him like lightning, he stops in his tracks and stares at me. *Oh, no.*

"What's your name?" I look around. Everyone around me is looking at me. Milo elbows me.

"Uh, Lila."

"Lila, would you come up on stage with me?"

Chapter 8

“Yellow,” I whisper to Milo. “Super turquoise.”

“It’s all in fun. Go on. This’ll be an adventure for your memoirs, huh? Hey, give me your phone. I’ll take a picture of you on stage.”

I stand up, yellow and turquoise competing to be strongest – on the inside. Slipping my phone to Milo, I step over his knees into the aisle.

“Let’s hear it for Lila,” Sinclaire declares loudly. The audience applauds, but it feels light yellow, like they don’t know what to make of me. Perhaps they’re thinking I’m the shill, a freak sideshow for the magician. They whisper to each other, and I hear one person say, as I pass him in the aisle, “Maybe he’s gonna give her colors.”

I climb the stairs to the stage where Sinclaire beckons me onward. “Right up here, Lila. That’s right.” I stand on the taped “X” he points to on the floor and look out at the throng. I’ve never been so dark yellow in my life. I’m sure everyone can see my hands shaking. “Where are you from, Lila?” Sinclaire asks conversationally, picking up a deck of cards from a small table in front of us.

“I live here.” My voice is quaking.

“A local. Wonderful. Now don’t be nervous, Lila.” *Yeah, right.* “Have a look at this deck of cards.” He hands me the cards; they don’t feel right. I put my fingers on the edges to straighten the stack, but he takes them back from me, saying,

“A normal deck of cards. I want you to choose any card from the deck.” He fans them out broadly. I choose one – or do I? It all feels manipulated. “Show it to the audience.” I hold it up. “Seven of hearts,” Sinclaire announces. “Now, take this pen, Lila, and sign the card. Will you?”

“Yes.” What else can I say? I sign the card and put it back as he directs. Then he makes a weird cut of the deck before shuffling. I’m pretty sure he forced my card to the bottom.

And I thought *I* was a bluffer. The guy made me take the card he wanted me to have, then kept track of where it went after I signed it.

As he shuffles, he says casually, “So, Lila, obviously, you’re colorless.”

Turquoise. Turquoise. Turquoise. How could he do that to me in front of all these people? What can I do besides agree with the obvious observation? “Yes.”

“How would you like me to create colors for you out of thin air?”

I look at him. “How?” He’s careful not to put the microphone in front of me that time.

“Wouldn’t you like that, Lila? What do you say, folks?” The crowd cheers and claps for the charlatan. “Say ‘yes’,” he prompts, somehow not amplified to the entire theater. He puts the mic in front of my mouth.

“Yes.”

“Well, Lila, I’m a magician, not a faith healer.”

Him: dark green. The crowd erupts in light gold cheers. Yeah, hilarious.

Me: intensely turquoise, but because I’m colorless, he takes no responsibility for my discomfort. For all anyone knows, I thought it was the best freakin’ joke I ever heard. I’m sorely tempted to clip him behind the knees – a move I learned in college soccer – and drop him on his egotistical ass.

He continues his trick. *When will this be over?* “Now, Lila. I’m going to spread these cards out on this table, and I want you to find the one you signed.” I glare at him. “Ouch,” he says, again muting himself from the theater patrons. Of

course, my card is not on the table. *Play along, Lila. It will be over soon. Please let this be over soon.*

“Where is it?” I ask, falsely mint. Overly mint, actually.

“Who is that you were sitting with?”

I look out over the audience. “Milo.”

“I perceive that you have a strong connection with Milo,” Sinclair reveals silkily, sounding like a fortune teller.

Shit. Don't ask me to confirm that. Don't embarrass me more. Not in front of Milo.

“So strong, that time and space cease to exist between you two.”

Please, stop. Don't make me look desperate in front of Milo.

“For you put your signed card in this deck on stage, Lila, just seconds ago. Did you not?”

I nod nervously.

“Milo,” Sinclair calls, “would you check your pocket please?”

Milo looks down at his shirt pocket as a spotlight swivels to light him. He pulls out a seven of hearts card with my signature on it. Orange, he holds the card over his head. The crowd showers their approval. Sinclair bows, as if his card trick was something spectacular. Then he turns to me again. “You picked that card randomly out of a full deck, did you not?”

“Yes.” *Can I go now?*

“And this table, this box, has been here as long as you’ve been here on stage. Correct?”

“Yes.” *Are we done here?*

“And no one has touched this box as long as you’ve been standing here. Is that right?”

“Yes.” *Last question, dude.*

“Lila. Please. Open. The. Box.” I do as I’m directed and open the blasted wooden box. In it is a folded paper. “Show the audience what’s on that paper.” I unfold and look at it, then hold it up in front of me. The crowd cheers Sinclair’s brilliance, and he laps it up like a thirsty dog. The paper’s

large writing says: *You will pick the seven of hearts.* “Let’s give Lila a big hand for helping me out.”

Sinclair lays a hand at the small of my back and nudges me toward the stairs. I hurry off the stage and up the aisle. People sitting in the aisle seats put up their hands for a high five. I skip all of them and keep walking past my row, all the way to the back and out the door.

I sit on the steps that go up to the mezzanine. Milo comes through the back door and looks around, then sits down next to me. “That wasn’t cool.”

If I had colors, Milo would know why I can’t say anything right now. He puts an arm around my shoulders. I cross my arms over my knees and bury my face in them. Pink. So pink.

Milo bumps my shoulder with his. “Come on, let’s go get shaved ice, huh?”

“You can watch the end of the show if you want. I’ll wait for you here.”

“He’s a hack. Worth every dollar I spent on the tickets.”

I smile into my arms, then look up. “Thanks, Milo.”

We head out. Walking side by side, not saying much, Milo finally asks, “Where’s your van?”

“It’s on State Street. I need to take it back to the RV park. No overnight parking on the street.”

“I’ll walk you back there.”

I’m getting sleepy. Those two drinks and the dark blue letdown of the show are beating me down. Or is it *beating me up*? I can’t think. I also can’t walk, it seems, because Milo puts his arm around me to keep me going straight. “There it is.”

“That’s a beauty,” Milo remarks.

“It’s really nice in the sun. The blue sparkles.”

“I can kinda see it from the lights.”

“Really tricked out on the inside, too,” I boast.

“Show me?”

“Sure.” I unlock my van and open the back doors. “I installed those shelves and speakers and the skylight and took those pictures with my phone.”

“Homey. I like it.”

“Thanks.”

“And that’s where you sleep?” Milo glances to the mattress.

“Every night.”

“All alone?”

“Every night.”

“Even tonight?” Looking down at me with his dark brown teddy bear eyes, he brushes some hair off my forehead.

Not sleepy anymore. Those dark orange feelings come back a hundred-fold, wreaking havoc with my insides. “Was planning on it,” I whisper.

“Plans change.” He leans down, aiming for my lips.

Cue the singing angels, because there it is: my first kiss with a man – a man who doesn’t make me feel like a freak. A gorgeous man, I notice, now that his face is pressed up against mine. *Wait, I’m seeing his face. Should my eyes be open? His eyes are closed. They always close their eyes in the movies...* His hands slip around to the back of my waist. Not sure what I’m supposed to do, I copy what I’ve seen in films: I close my eyes and put my arms around his neck.

While we kiss, he gently backs me into the van. I crawl backwards and he follows, closing the doors behind him. “Lila,” he says dreamily, as if asking permission to continue. I breath heavily, staring at his eyes as he advances on me. “Lila?” His lips are so close that we share the air we breathe. *Red alert!* What am I supposed to say? Take me? Do me? What good was reading all those romance novels if I can’t remember how this is supposed to go? Those stories taught me everything I know about love, or how *other* people fall in love, anyway. That would never be me. I know that. The buff bad boy, irresistible and – in his heart – a good and decent man, giving up his evil ways for the love of a hot, special woman. I’m not hot. I’m not special. *I am* unique, for sure, but not in a good way.

Still, here he is, in my van, on my bed, wanting me. Not a chiseled badass, but a good-looking man who shares my lifestyle, knows my situation, and wants me anyway. But what

should I say? In the books, the female would say, *F*** me now*, but I wasn't raised to talk like that. I can't even say it in my head. *F-me?* How childish would that be? It feels like minutes have gone by, breathing into each other's mouths. I hope for the sake of everything that's sexy that it hasn't really been minutes. I hope it's only been a second or two. I need to answer him.

I muster all my nerve and say the stupidest thing I could've: "Uh huh."

Chapter 9

Days pass before I bump into Milo again. I've been walking around in a daze since the night of our date. Haven't even played poker. I've taken up day drinking instead.

The encounter in the back of my van was awkward and, at times, painful. He didn't know I was inexperienced. I probably did everything wrong. When it was over, he made excuses and left me there alone feeling turquoise and dark blue.

That's not how it was supposed to be. I saw plenty of movies and that's *not* how it was supposed to go. He was supposed to hold me, purple, and tell me I was beautiful, and sleep next to me until morning. We were supposed to wake up and be purple together. I felt blue. And so pink.

I got myself together enough to get into the driver's seat and make my way to the RV park. I went to the rest room to shower the shame off. The turquoise I felt on stage was nothing compared to the way Milo made me feel when he left my van after getting what he wanted. Thank god he used a condom, or I'd have all that to worry about, too. A long, hot shower helped a little, but when I went back to my van and looked at the bed, I felt turquoise again. I sat in the front, tilted the seat back as far as it would go, and slept there, wrapped in a blanket.

Days later, I bump into Milo outside the Palace. "Hi, Lila," he says. "How are things?" He's lavender, as if nothing

at all happened between us. I'm dumbstruck, as in, struck dumb – unable to say *anything* to him. “What’s the matter?”

What’s the matter, he asks.

“Pink, Milo,” I manage, at last.

“Pink? Why? Are you still upset about the magician?”

“Red. Dark, fucking *red*.”

“What? At me?”

How can he be light yellow? He’s light yellow, dammit.

“You used— You— You— and then you just left.”

His hand goes to the back of his neck. “It was just a hook up, wasn’t it?”

Intense pink. “Maybe for you,” I tell him, looking down.

“Come on, Lila. We’re all drifters. We don’t hang around in one place and have relationships.” The last word seems to leave a bitter taste in his mouth. “I’m going to the gulf coast next week. You’re going wherever you’re going.”

“You suck.”

He turns light red. “You suck in bed,” he snaps.

“Of course I do. I’ve never done it before.” *Dammit.*

Why did I say that?

Mint on him; turquoise inside me. “Shit, Lila. I didn’t know. You should’ve told me.”

“Why? What difference does it make?”

“I could’ve... gone slower. Been gentler.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m not a monster, Lila. And how was I supposed to know you had all kinds of feelings wrapped up in it? I can’t see your damn colors.”

Dark pink sucker punch in the gut. “Every shade of blue,” I report. I walk past him, leaving Milo behind me forever.



While drinking in a bar in a casino – I don't know which one – who should appear but Darin Sinclaire. "Kill me now," I mutter into my glass.

"Lila, right? I recognize you because of your... you know."

I flip him off.

"What's eating you?" he asks, sitting down next to me at the bar.

"Go away."

"I'm actually glad I ran into you. I've been thinking a lot about your... condition."

"Why are you thinking about me at all?"

"I've got an idea for a fantastic illusion. Remember the 'faith healer' joke?"

"Did I say go away? I meant, go to hell."

"Hear me out. You come on stage nightly, all colorless like you are. Then I give you colors."

"How would you do that?"

"Lights and mirrors. Illusion."

"People will know it's lights and mirrors, dumbass."

"You're right. Better to take them away. I mean, who's ever seen a colorless person before? That alone is a trick. Maybe you'll have to come on stage with some portable aura generator..." Darin loses himself in thought.

"Drop dead, Sinclaire. You suck, just like Milo."

"Milo? Your date? What'd he do?"

"None of your business."

"Jilted ya, huh?"

"It's not funny," I mope.

"I know it's not funny. That kind of thing hurts." I finally look at Darin. He's light purple, not the light gold I expected him to be.

"I didn't know you had it in you."

"What?"

"Purples. I thought everything was about you, you, you."

"Stage presence. It's an act. Entertainment, you know?"

"So, deep down, you're a thoughtful gentleman, not a complete jerk?" He turns a tad pink. "What? No one ever told

the Amazing Darin that he's an asshole? What you did to me that night was cruel."

"Lila, I'm sorry. Truly. I was in the moment – adrenaline and all – and I saw you near the aisle. Most people are light gold about it in the end."

"I was *not* light gold about it – beginning, middle, or end. And your trick was lame. *Ooo, the magic box predicted the card you forced on me.*"

"You know how I did that?"

"Nice shuffling, Tex. I was a blackjack dealer. I know what normal cards feel like." I leave him and my drink at the bar.

I get half-way down the block before Sinclaire comes jogging up behind me. "Lila, wait." I don't. "What will it take for you just to listen?"

"A million dollars."

"You need money? I'll pay you to be in my show."

I admit, that catches my ear. Though I like poker, I don't like the smokey casinos. "How much?"

"A hundred a night, just like my other assistants."

"How many assistants do you have?"

"Twelve."

"Seriously? You have twelve people doing half the magic for you and you take all the credit."

"That's the show. We all do our jobs. Come on, let's work out a deal. I'll buy you lunch."

"Why is this so important to you?"

"No other magician will have this illusion. A Darin Sinclaire exclusive."

"You want me to listen? I want lobster and filet mignon."

"After you." He holds out his arm magnanimously.



Once settled at a table, Darin dives into business. “So, here’s what I’m thinking—”

“How did Milo get the card?”

Darin stares at me for a moment. “Magicians don’t tell—”

“If you want me in your show, I’m gonna find out anyway.”

He sighs, but he’s light orange. “As a token of good faith... Magic is all about distraction. While I was talking to you on stage, I handed off your card to an assistant who handed it to another assistant who was dressed like an usher. That one went down the aisle and slipped it on him. It’s like a reverse pick-pocket.”

“How did no one see that?”

“Misdirection. House lights were down, and I had them laughing at the faith healer joke.”

“Sonuvabitch. What do you do with regular people?”

“Tease them about something else. Usually the shirt they’re wearing. I pick my own pigeons, so I look for someone with a ridiculous shirt.”

I’m almost light gold. “You’re just a big faker. And believe me, I know all about faking.”

“That’s what makes this perfect,” Darin insists.

“But I work at night. I don’t have two hours to be in your lame show.”

Pink, he stares at me.

“You can dish it out, but you can’t take it,” I scoff.

“What do you mean by that?”

“You ‘tease’ people every night, but I call your show lame and you’re all pink. Poor baby.”

He takes a deep breath and lets it out. “You’re right. I have pretty low self-esteem.”

“That’s a joke. You’re the biggest ham I ever met.”

“That’s the show. How many times do I have to tell you that?”

Our expensive food arrives; we stare at our plates. “Sorry,” I say curtly.

“Sorry about that night on stage.”

“Let’s eat. Then we’ll discuss.”

His mood switches to lavender as he picks up his fork and impales a carrot.

I stare at the red beast on my plate. “How do you eat a lobster?”

Chapter 10

So, here are two things I learned that day: Darin is a regular person doing his job, and I don't like crustaceans. We agreed that I didn't have to be present for the whole show every night. I'd be the third or fourth trick, then I could leave. It took him a few weeks to work out the details. It's pretty clever, actually.

An hour before each show, I have to rub special oil on my arms and neck and face – everything that's exposed. He mixed little bits of reflective something into the oil and worked out with the lighting crew how to light me so that I appear to be turquoise or dark orange. The point is to look like I have some normal emotional reaction when he chooses me out of the audience. The oil reflects and refracts color, so I look just like a colorful person. We chat on stage for half a minute, him telling me everything's going to be fine, all while the lights are transitioning to orange or lavender – it's a little different each night. Then he launches into a rehearsed speech about the witch doctor who taught him how to take away a person's colors. He shakes "magic" water out of a holy water sprinkler as he walks around me. We had to rehearse that several times so he knew how not to interfere with the lighting illusion. And if I'm not exactly on my mark, well, the illusion's kinda blown.

Once he builds up the anticipation, he lifts a stick that's laying on the floor in front of me. As he lifts it, a long, silky,

black cloth drapes in front of me. In the two seconds it takes Darin to pull the cloth up and over my body, dropping it to the floor behind me, the lighting crew douses the special lights on me, and – *ta da* – my color's all gone in the white spotlight. The audience gasps and applauds wildly.

Darin assures everyone that the witch doctor curse will wear off eventually, and he sends me off stage where his assistants attend to me until I'm "back to normal." All they do is hand me a wet cloth so I can rub the oil off. Then I leave, sometimes to go play poker, sometimes not. I have a bunch of money in the bank and super low living expenses, so I don't need much. It's nice to avoid the smoke and noise of the casinos.

The next night, I do it all again, supplying a different name and hometown, and wearing different clothes and one of a half-dozen wigs Darin has ready for me in wardrobe just in case someone comes to the show twice. It has to look like I'm just another audience member. To that end, I have to be seated in the audience just as the house lights are dimming down at the start of the show. Lucky me: I get to see Darin's green entrance and first few tricks nightly. The hardest part is applauding and acting amazed by his tricks. Pardon me: illusions. He insists they are illusions, not tricks.

For my participation and discretion, he pays me a hundred bucks a night.



I guess Milo went to the gulf coast, like he said, because I never see him on the strip anymore. Who cares? Darin's good to me. I'd say we're friends. Backstage, he always asks how I'm doing. If he's in a hurry, he at least says hi. We don't do shows on Mondays, so sometimes – once a month or so – on those days off, Darin and I take a drive out of town and

explore the desert or stroll down the main street of a small town, window shopping and talking about anything and everything.

Today is one of those days. We're minding our own business in Hapland when someone who's seen the show spots Darin and wants to get a selfie with him. He agrees, of course, being the minor celebrity that he is. "Thank you, Mr. Sinclair. I really enjoyed your show. I'm a big fa—" She notices me and my colorlessness. "Oh my gosh! The curse never wore off?"

Darin is sage as ever. I cover my mouth which has broken into a smile. I pretended to yawn. "Have no fear, madam. We're on our way to someone who knows what to do." Appeased, she leaves and we resume our window-shopping stroll.

"How did you stay sage? I would've been light gold all over."

"Practice. You can't panic or lose concentration on stage. As soon as she asked for a selfie, I was on stage again."

"You definitely have talent, Darin."

"Thanks, Lila." He sounds almost touched.

I look at him. "What?"

"What?"

"You seem... emotional that I said you have talent. People fawn over you every day." I point at the tourist behind us. "Everyone's 'such a big fan'."

"But your opinion means something," he says.

"My opinion? Why?"

"Because you're honest. You're not trying to get something out of me. You're my friend."

I bump his shoulder with mine as we walk. He takes my hand and we continue on... until I see a twisted silver necklace in a window and drag him to a stop. It's a simple chain, but the twist makes it sparkle in the sunlight. "Hold on, Darin. I want to go in and see that."

"What?"

"That necklace." I enter the store and inquire about the chain.

“Let me put that on for you,” Darin offers. He takes the necklace from the salesclerk, and I hold up my hair. He drapes the chain in front of my neck and closes the clasp in the back. I look in the mirror on the counter. “That looks really nice on you, Lila.”

“Thanks. I always wanted something to make me look a little... better.”

“Not that you need anything... it looks very nice.” Darin stifles a flash of turquoise. I never knew anybody who could constrain emotions the way Darin can.

I hand over my debit card and the cashier looks at Darin, then back at me. “What?”

“Usually... with jewelry... the boyfriend buys...”

“I have my own money,” I say as Darin says simultaneously, “I’m not her boyfriend.”

I snap my face to Darin. “Since when? What are you saying?” He’s so light yellow, then dark yellow, it’s hysterical. I let him off the hook. “Gold, Darin. You’re so gullible.”



Darin’s a good employer and a good friend. His hundred per night feeds my gambling, and my gambling feeds my lifestyle. And with no address and no paystubs, I don’t have to pay taxes. I’m a non-person as far as the government is concerned: a non-colored non-person. And I’m fine with that. I don’t vote and I don’t complain about who’s elected. The casino strip and the RV park make up my whole world and I don’t much care what happens outside of it.

Then one night, the outside world comes crashing in.

Chapter 11

It's a nice spring night, one I savor because I know summer is coming and with it the intense heat of the desert. In summer, even when the sun goes down, heat just radiates off the streets and sidewalks for hours into the evening. But today wasn't too hot so tonight is pleasant.

I finished my obligation at the magic show and I'm heading over to the Colosseum casino. I buy my usual hundred dollars' worth of chips and sit down at the poker table. While the other players adjust emotionally to the weird, colorless person, I glance around the room to see if anyone I know is here. None of the regulars are at the tables yet.

I do spot someone I know, but he's not a regular.

He's my father.

He doesn't see me because he's too fixated on his companion – who is *not* my mother. *Dark, dark, darkest red.* Without an explanation to the players, I leave the table, hide behind a pillar, and watch my dad in his oranges and purples, showering the woman with attention. He gives that hussy more attention in ten minutes than I ever saw him give my mother in the nineteen years I lived in their house.

I'm so dark pink and red for my mom. How could he do this to her? Mom is the most giving, patient, and long-suffering person, dealing with me full-time while he worked long days, every day. I suddenly realize that my dad is

giving that stranger more attention than he ever gave *me* in nineteen years, too.

Clarity crashes down on me: my dad wasn't incapable of purple, family feelings. He was incapable of purple, family feelings for a colorless daughter and the woman who produced her.

Garroting burgundy jealousy makes me run out of the casino, bumping a tray out of a cocktail waitress' hand. I can't stop running until I get to my van. I lock myself inside and fall onto my mattress and hit it repeatedly with all my strength. I pound on that mattress, grunting as I tire, until someone on the sidewalk outside hoots. "When the van's rockin', don't bother knockin'." I freeze, turquoise and exhausted – physically and emotionally.

I fall flat on the bed and suffer in silent reflection of the night's revelations. I try to distract myself by watching videos of self-important nobodies doing unimportant things. Interesting that when I was orange, I felt like those people taught me a lot about life after high school. Now they seem like idiots.

With no forethought, I climb into the driver's seat and start up my van.

And I drive.

I drive out of town. I drive past the state line. I drive on. I stop for gas, coffee, and snacks, then drive some more, not stopping until I get home.

It's ten in the morning; my mom's at work. Using the key she keeps under a flowerpot, I let myself in. The house is exactly as I remember it. There's no evidence of an alteration anywhere in my family's dwelling. If I didn't know my dad was ten hours away playing kissy face with his mistress, I'd think he had just gone to work and would return in time for dinner and an evening of solitude in his study.

His study. His man-cave. His off-limits, private space. I'd always thought he had more work to do after dinner, but now I'm considering the very real possibility he was carrying on romances with other women online.

Fatigue threatens to drop me on the couch after the night-long drive, so I head for my old bedroom and find it still looking the way I'd decorated it in high school. I had been so proud of our championship, I'd painted the school name and year on my wall. I can't believe my parents haven't painted over it in the last four years. I plop onto the bed and feel a familiar lavender in my refuge from the cruel world of high school. Once horizontal, I'm asleep in seconds.



Next thing I know, Mom is screaming at me to get out of her house. I wake up, of course, and turn over to face her.

She gasps, "Lila," then rushes to my bed and sits on the edge, leaning over to hug me.

"Hi, Mom. How are you?" I ask as I hug her back.

"Oh my god, I didn't know it was you."

"Sorry to scare you. I fell asleep while I was waiting for you to come home." She keeps hugging me and I have no plans to stop her.

When she finally releases me, I sit up so we can face each other properly. "When did you get here? Just now?" she asks.

"I've been here," I look at my phone, surprised to see it's five thirty, "uh, since this morning."

"I'm sorry. I was at work. Why didn't you tell me you were coming home?"

"I didn't know I was coming home. I had a sudden urge and just started driving. I've missed you."

"I've missed you, too. What a wonderful surprise. How long can you stay? A while, I hope. Or are you back for good?"

"Really, Mom, I'm flying by the seat of my pants. I don't know."

“Well, however long, I’m going to enjoy you being here.” She’s so blissfully, innocently, orange. I hate to ruin it, but I have to unload what I know.

“Mom, I have something to tell you, and it’s not good news.”

She morphs to yellows. “What is it?”

“Do you know where Dad is?”

“Uh...”

“Mom, I saw him at the Colosseum casino. He was with someone else.”

My mom looks down and fiddles with her hands. “That must be his new...”

“New what?”

“New wife.”

“What?”

“He left, Lila. After you graduated from high school, he left me.” My mom isn’t blue. She isn’t red. Amazingly, she’s sage.

“You never told me he left you. Why wouldn’t you tell me that?”

“Well, after you quit college and took that job, I didn’t hear from you for such a long time. When you called, I was so orange to hear from you, and you were doing so well, I didn’t want to hurt you.”

I put my arms around my mom. “You’ve been all alone for the past four years?”

“It’s okay, Lila. I’m okay.”

“No, it’s not okay, Mom.” I let go and look her in the eye. “You’re the best mom I ever could’ve asked for. You deserve to be orange and purple, not blue and teal.”

“I’m not those colors, Lila. Look at me. I’m fine. Now, tell me what you’ve been up to lately.”

As usual, my mom is only concerned about me. The guilt swamps me. I’m the reason Dad ignored her and finally abandoned her. Dark turquoise.

“No, Mom. This time we’re going to talk about you. You’ve spent enough time thinking about me. It’s your turn to be the center of attention.”

“You’re my child, Lila. What makes me orange is knowing that you are.”

“I’ll only be orange if you are.”

Mom is orange as we speak. “Lila, I’ve met someone new. Really, I’m fine.”

“Oh,” I stammer. “Oh. Okay. Well, that’s good... to hear. Who is he?”



Mom’s beau, Simon, is here for dinner, as I think he is most nights after work. When Mom introduces us, he doesn’t react at all to my defect. He’s perfectly polite. “Lila, it’s so good to meet you. Your mom’s told me so many stories. She’s incredibly proud of you.”

“Oh. Thanks. I think I caused her lots of blues.”

Light purple, Simon nods. “All children are challenging in their own ways. Parents adore them, nonetheless.”

“You have children?”

“Yes, I have two boys. All grown up and busy with their own families.”

“Well, then, it’s good you and my mom found each other to... confide... in.” I turn away. I don’t know why. He can’t see the pink and burgundy I feel wishing my dad was the one who found my mom and me interesting enough to talk to. I run a hand lightly over my face to make sure I’m not crinkling anything that might confuse Simon. “So,” I try to stay composed, “what do you do for a living, Simon?”

The three of us chat superficially over dinner. When he asks me what I do, I panic for a second. “Well, I have a small part in a magic show on the strip.”

“Oh? That’s... unique. What do you do?”

I explain my part in Darin’s show. “And that’s enough to live on?” Mom asks.

“My expenses are extremely low.”

“What do you do all day?”

“Well... most mornings I take a couple classes at the college.”

“What are you studying?” Simon asks innocently.

“You know, just general education classes. Haven’t really settled on a... major or anything.”

Mom’s orange. “I’m so glad to hear this, Lila. Did you have your credits from here transferred over?”

“No, not yet.”

“Well, don’t forget to do that. You should get credit for the work you’ve already done.”

“Okay.”

“So, are you attending USN or State?” Simon asks.

“No... not those. The community college.”

“Oh, yes, of course. Much more economical. Good thinking. You can transfer to a university when you have enough credits.”

“Yeah. That’s the plan,” I lie.

“I used to live not too far from there. What’s the name of the college? Slips my mind...”

“Um, Desert... Valley... College.”

Simon’s light yellow. “I don’t—”

“Can I refill your glass?” I interrupt.

“Oh, no. Thank you. I’m fine.”

Mom looks at me, light red. It feels like she’s looking inside me. “Is that all you do? Does that fill up all your time?”

“Well, some afternoons I go to the soup kitchen and chop vegetables.”

She stares at me accusingly.

“But I can’t stay and serve dinner to the homeless because I have to get over to Darin’s show an hour early.”

“My goodness, not many people your age think about the less fortunate instead of themselves,” Simon compliments me. Mom just stares – into my soul. “Your daughter is one in a million, Della.”

“I’m a gambler,” I blurt. “I gamble, Mom. I’m sorry. I know you expected more, but I’m really good at it. I never lose.”

Though clearly red, Mom regroups. “I suppose... you have no regret for taking people’s hard-earned money.”

“I have no idea if their money is hard-earned, won, or stolen. If they’re willing to gamble with it, they’re willing to lose it. I’m willing to win it.”

With Mom speechless, Simon breaks the tension. “Never lose, you say. What’s your game, Lila?”

“Poker.”

Simon nods, light purple. “Good choice, considering your unique qualities.”

“Quality. Just one, but it’s perfect for poker.”

“I can see it would be.”

“Do you know, I can win with a trash hand? Just keep raising until everyone folds.”

Light gold on Simon. Deep pink on Mom.

“Okay, Mom. I can see you’re upset about this. Let’s just hash it out and move on.”

“All those weekend trips your father took? They weren’t business trips, Lila. Didn’t you wonder why you got a flip phone instead of a smart phone? Why we never got you even a cheap, used car when you got your license? Why we never went on vacations? Why we never threw you birthday parties?”

“Because I was colorless,” I answer belligerently. “Why else? Dad didn’t want to be seen with me on vacation, explaining to every ogling prick why his daughter was deformed. And I didn’t have any friends to invite over for birthday parties. I only had one friend: Liam. Wait. What do you mean they weren’t business trips?”

“Your father was a gambler. All those other things you said are... also true,” my mom admits, blue now. “Lila, he couldn’t handle it. Said it was one-in-a-billion, and with ‘luck’ against odds like that, he should be playing roulette. It was just an outburst, but one day he was so dark blue, he took a hopper to the strip and gambled away a week’s pay.”

I'm stunned. "Mom, I... didn't know. I thought he just worked all the time to avoid... me."

"It started with online gambling in his study. Then he'd go to the strip - once a month at first."

"Dark turquoise, Mom. I'm so sorry I caused him to do that... to leave you stuck with me with no money."

"You're not to blame. It was *his* weakness. But now you're gambling too..."

"I don't play the luck games. I only play poker, and only for a couple hours a night. Not every day, even. Two or three nights a week. I never lose, Mom. I take home five hundred when I play."

"Five hundred?" Simon asks, dark mint.

"Give or take."

"In two hours?"

"More or less."

"How can I get in on this line of work?"

"Lose your colors."

Simon shifts over to light purple. "I know we just met, Lila, but your mom's told me a lot about your life together and how hard things were for you growing up. The way you've turned a negative into a positive... I just think it's fantastic."

I check my mother's colors. She's beaming dark purple at Simon. He glances at her and takes her hand. I never, ever saw such an exchange between my mom and my dad. Why couldn't Simon have been my dad?



After several days, Darin calls to ask where the hell I am. "That's not kosher, Lila. I was dark yellow about you. Ever hear of giving notice?"

"Are you red, Darin?"

"Are you coming back?"

“Yeah.”

“Then I’m only a little red.”

“I can hear your lavender through the phone, magic man.”

“Then you’re color-deaf. I’m darkest red.”

“Yeah, right. Gold. I’ll be back soon. Wednesday, probably.”

“Drive safely.”



As I drive back to my casino-land life, I ponder Simon and wonder why I can’t meet someone like that who’d take the time to understand me. As always when I wish someone could understand me, my mind goes back to Liam. His birth defect was worse than mine, and I always felt a little protective of him. Yet, I needed him, too. And he was there for me. I almost wish that high school hadn’t happened. If Liam and I hadn’t gone to high school, we might still be friends, still supporting each other emotionally, like Simon and Mom do.

I know someone might look at my situation and say, “But you have Darin.” I don’t *have* Darin. He doesn’t care about me – or know me – the way Liam did. He likes me, I suppose. We’re friends. But I think I’m more valuable to him as an assistant than a human being. Hell, my days are almost completely free, as are his. And is he spending his time with me? The occasional day off, maybe.

Then there are the ladies I see going upstairs with him. Both times I was gambling in that casino after the show I saw him take a woman home. No judgement. I’m only saying it’s not me he’s spending his time with.

When I stop for gas, I look up Liam’s social page. His picture comes up on my screen and my heart beats a little harder when I see it. I’ve looked up his page before, but this is

a new picture of him in a cap and gown, graduating from MIT. I feel so small compared to him. While he earned a college degree, I learned to gamble. While he read textbooks, I read novels. While he had romances with beautiful girls, I had familiar “hellos” with security guards and dealers.

I could send Liam a message, something generic like, *Congrats on graduating from MIT*. But as I look over his many pictures and comments from friends using technical jargon and inside jokes, I realize that he’s moved on. Completely. Thinking about him doesn’t make him think about me.

I need to snap out of it and focus on the life I have, not the life I wish I had.

After driving another three hours, I stop for the night in a cheap motel in a tiny town that has one gas station, one diner, and the motel. Where do people live? I mean, there are several dozen people working in these businesses, so where do they live? The highway runs perfectly straight through the desert, and there’s nothing around this little rest stop. *What a life*. Get up in the middle of nowhere, go to work in the middle of nowhere, go home to the middle of nowhere.

Like... my life.

Chapter 12

First thing I do when I get back to town is check out of the RV park. It's time to upgrade my living standard and improve my future. I rent a hotel room by the month on the seventh floor of the Caraway Bay. A crisply made bed – remade for me every day – and a clean, private bathroom – recleaned every day – and a small kitchenette so I can eat at home when all I want is toast with jam... and I call it home. It *is* home. My van's parked in the garage under the hotel, and now that I don't need to go back and forth between the strip and the RV park, I have even more free time.

And I'm not going to waste it reading trashy novels, going to matinees, and day drinking. I'm going to do what I lied to my mom about: I'm going to sign up for a class. Just one to start with, plus a PE class so I can get healthier.

I'll need a laptop for my classwork – my third major purchase, well, fourth if I count Ricardo's paint job. Besides the van and my phone, I don't really have any big-ticket items in my possession.

Now with rent and tuition, I need to play poker more than two nights a week. But that's okay. I can handle it. I don't love to play poker. I don't hate it, either. I'm just good at it.

It's summer, but not unbearably hot today, so I decide to walk the three miles to school. I've never walked along these roads outside the tourist area. Once I get half a mile from the major casinos, there are only small businesses on the main

street and suburban homes on the side streets. It's an older part of town, but not run down or anything. In fact, one business window catches my eye: Tasteful Women's Body Art.

I don't know why, but I go inside. The whole shop is a small room containing a receptionist counter and four chairs set in front of the curtained window. The walls are painted fuchsia on the top half, and off-white on the wainscoting below. Framed photographs hang at eye-level, forming a line around the walls, showing the breadth of artistry possessed by the tattooist.

The receptionist seems to be AWOL, so I sit down with the photo album they have on display and flip through the pages, marveling at the colorful and monochrome works of art. Before I even get half-way through the book, a slice of the wall opens, taking its framed pictures with it. A woman emerges, mint to see me sitting there, then a little yellow to see *me* sitting there. "Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't know anyone was waiting. Can I help you?"

"I didn't know anyone was here. Didn't even see that door."

"It's cool, huh? I love hidden passageways and secret rooms." She closes the door fully, renewing the illusion that it's a solid wall.

"That *is* cool," I agree.

"So, what can I do for you? What are you looking for, tattoo-wise?"

"I'm not sure. I wasn't even thinking about a tattoo when I got up this morning. I was just walking past and..."

"No need to choose this instant. Take your time. A tattoo is permanent, so you want to make sure it's right."

That word – permanent – hits me like a truckload of poker chips. Nothing in my life is permanent – except my birth defect. Everything so far has been temporary, nothing lasting more than a few years. Some things, only a few months. Some things, only a few minutes. My mind flashes back to Milo and my ridiculous fantasy that we were developing a relationship, bonding over the best ribs in town

and sharing what I thought would be an intimate, purple experience. It turned out to be empty and fleeting.

What could I put on my body that would be meaningful? Permanently meaningful.

“What do you call that... condition?”

“Colorless.”

She nods. “Makes sense. Were you born like that?”

“Yep.” I flip the pages in the sample album.

“May I touch your skin?”

I look up. “Why? I mean, I don’t mind, but why?”

“I’ve never put ink on someone without color. I wonder if your skin is different in some way.”

I hold out my arm. She holds my wrist with one hand and gently strokes my forearm with her other. “Feels the same. But the ink, I think it will be striking, having no colors to compete with on a daily basis. It could be lovely, like a painting on a canvas.” She releases my wrist. “I think maybe we should try a little test spot, just to make sure it works the same.”

“A test spot?”

“Yes. A small mark, someplace inconspicuous – like behind your ear.”

“Okay. Is it quick? I have to get to class.”

She opens the secret door, inviting me into her workshop. In the center of the well-lit and organized room sits an old barber’s chair, reupholstered in flowery fabric with a little extra stuffing to make it cushier. She directs me to sit in it and relax. I do the first thing.

She goes to a big metal table behind the chair where she collects gloves, ink, gauze pads, and all the other things she needs for tattooing, then sets them on a rolling table.

“All that for a little dot?”

“Less ink, same equipment.” She dons the latex gloves and asks me to pull my hair away from my ear. As she sterilizes the site, she chats casually. “Ever thought of piercing your ears?”

“Sometimes.”

“That’s easy. I can do that for you if you like.”

“Really?”

“Sure.”

“How much?”

“Thirty per piercing.”

“Yeah, maybe I should— ow!”

“Hold still. Almost done.”

The pain continues for a full minute. When it’s over, she rolls back a foot on her roller-stool and looks at her work.

“Well, application was normal.”

“I’m glad something about me is normal,” I mutter.

“Have to see how it sticks. Want me to do the ears now?”

“Um...”

“Doesn’t hurt nearly as much,” she promises. “Ear lobes are not very sensitive.”

“Okay.” The spot behind my ear is burning. It really hurts.

The tattooist puts away the tattooing supplies and loads the rolling table with ear piercing supplies. “One in each lobe?”

“Yeah.”

She was right: the piercing doesn’t hurt as much. “They look great on you. Now, let’s have a look at that tatt.” She folds my ear forward and touches the spot with her gloved finger. “Still hurt?”

“A little,” I say when I mean *a lot*.

“That’s good. Behind the ear is one of the most painful places. If you didn’t mind that, a tattoo somewhere less sensitive will be a piece of cake for you.” Shoving my pain to the side, I ask how it looks. “I think you’ll have no problem with a tattoo. Would you like to make an appointment?”

“I don’t even know what I want... or how much it costs... or...”

“Tell ya what. You go home and think about it and call me when you’re ready to discuss a design. I’ll sketch something up and we’ll go from there.” She hands me a business card: Monique. No last name.

“And the cost?”

“Depends on the size, the colors, how many sessions.”

“How many sessions? How long does it take?”

“Depends on the size, the colors...”

“I get it.” She collects my payment for the piercing. I spot the clock on the wall. “Shit, I’m gonna be late.”

“Want me to call you a rideshare?”

I do. She does. But I’m still late for class.

The professor says, in front of the whole class, “My lecture began fifteen minutes ago, Miss.”

“I’m sorry. It won’t happen again.” Turquoise, but kind-of orange, too. He embarrassed me for being late, not for being colorless. There’s a first time for everything.

Chapter 13

“You know a good dentist around here?” I ask Darin as he sits in his make-up chair.

“I like my dentist. I’ll get you the contact info after the show.”

“I don’t usually stick around that long.”

“Oh, yeah. Right. Well, can you come back tonight? If I’m not here, I’m in my suite. Twenty-four fifteen.”

“I don’t want to go to your room after the show when you’re... entertaining.”

Darin looks at his make-upper and fidgets, turquoise. “Lila –”

“All done,” the powder-patter says, walking briskly away.

“Lila, why would you say that in front of Sandy?”

“Why wouldn’t I say that in front of anybody? It’s not like you hide taking people up there.”

“Sandy, she’s... old-fashioned. She’ll lose respect for me.”

“Give me a break. You take one stranger after another to your room, but you have a crush on Sandy?”

“Could you be a little more discreet?” he whispers forcefully. He stands up and gets in my face. “I don’t have a crush on Sandy, dammit. But all these people work for me. I need a certain level of respect or the show goes to hell. And for your information, Lila-know-it-all, I don’t take women to

my room. We go to the mezzanine bar for a drink. You know? The same one I met you in? I'm not stupid enough to sleep with a bunch of strangers. What do you take me for?"

"Dark turquoise, Darin. I'm sorry. I just saw you going upstairs... and I assumed..."

Yanking the tissue-paper collar guard away, he turns to leave. Then he stops. "Lila, you're the most real person I know. I consider you a friend. I've been real with you. I'm hurt that you think I'm like that." He *is* pink. And he's turning teal before my eyes.

"I'm sorry." It's a useless thing to say, but it's all I can think of.

He faces me again. "I thought you, of all people, understood feeling like this."

"But... I didn't know you felt so alone. You're surrounded by people and fans and everyone."

"Not real friends." He breaks eye contact with me and looks at the floor.

I'm at a loss for what to say next. "Um, I'll be here after the show," I try. "Maybe we can... talk. Like real friends."

Darin's lavender tells me he likes the idea. All signs of red gone, he looks at me a moment longer, nodding slightly. Softly, he says, "See you on stage."



During the act, when Darin takes my hand as I ascend the stairs to the stage, he squeezes it and makes eye-contact. I bask in his stage greens, feeling a little like I did in the presence of my mom's beau, Simon – like I didn't want to be anywhere else in the world. When I exit, stage left, I look back at him. He's already on to the next thing. I watch him from the wings for the rest of the show.



“I’ve never seen your whole show before.”

“You’re kidding. What about that first time?”

“I left right after you humiliated me.”

Uncharacteristically turquoise for a second, Darin regains his sage. “Want to talk in my place? You go on up. Here’s a keycard. I’ll be up shortly.”

I take the key. “What about the bar?”

“We shouldn’t really be seen together around here.”

Right. I head for the elevator while Darin briefly discusses this and that with stagehands and assistants. I open the door to twenty-four fifteen and flick on the light. A panoramic view of the city backdrops an apartment that looks like a penthouse from the movies. Two sofas, giant TV, doors to other rooms, and a full kitchen. “Wow-za.” Much as I want to snoop around and see what rooms are behind the doors, I just get a glass of water and make myself comfortable on the sofa facing the window.

Darin comes in ten minutes later. “Oh, good. You found the glasses. Want anything besides water?”

“No, thanks.”

“So, before I forget, let me get you the name of my dentist.” He looks up the contact information on his computer, forwarding it to my phone. “There you go. I hope you like him.”

“If he can fix my tooth, I like him.” Darin pours himself a soda and sits down next to me. He puts his feet up on the coffee table. “Can I do that, too?”

“Be my guest.” We sit there like bumps on a log, staring out at the skyline. “How are you, Lila?”

“Fine.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Why would I not be?”

“When people say ‘fine’ they’re often just saying what’s expected, even if they’re not okay.”

“How are you, Darin?”

“Fine,” he says, gold. I elbow him.

“I got my ears pierced.”

He looks. “I knew there was something new on you. They look nice.”

“Birthday present to myself...”

“Today’s your birthday?”

“Day after tomorrow.”

“Seriously? We’re going to have to celebrate. Unless there’s someone you’d rather party with.”

“I don’t really know anyone. I mean, not as well as you and the crew at the show.”

Darin stands suddenly. “Wait here.” He disappears into his bedroom and comes out with a wrapped box. “Now that you have a necklace *and* earrings, you’ll need this.”

“What is it?”

“Open it and find out, silly.”

It’s been a long time since I opened a birthday present. Years, in fact. “Maybe I should save it until my birthday.”

“If you want. But I think we’re close enough for it to count.” He sits down next to me.

In a fit of dark orange excitement, I rip the paper off. I run my hand over the smooth finish of a beautiful wooden jewelry box. Dark inlay adorns the lighter-shaded wood on the hinged lid. “Open it.” Inside, velvet lined compartments, perfect for holding delicate jewelry, are all empty except one. In it I find a silver bracelet that matches the necklace I bought in Darin’s presence. I look at him; he’s beaming orange. I’m momentarily unable to form words.

“Do you like it? I thought since you had jewelry, you could use a jewelry box.”

“Darin, I love it. This is such a thoughtful gift. And this,” I lift the bracelet. “How do I put it on?”

“You ask a friend for help.” Darin takes the bracelet from me and opens the clasp. I hold out my arm and he closes the chain on my wrist. “There. Lila’s third bling thing.”

I turn my hand and admire the sparkles caused by the twisted silver bracelet. “But you didn’t know my birthday was in two days. How do you have a present ready?”

“I got this right after you bought the necklace. I didn’t know when I’d have a good opportunity to give it to you. Then you disappeared for a week. And you never stay ‘til the end of the show.”

“Okay, okay. I see. It’s all my fault. Gold. Really, Darin, lilac. Thank you. I hope you didn’t overspend, though. This looks much nicer than the necklace I bought.”

“Well, I didn’t buy it at the same place. I saw it in the window of Brown and Simpson’s, over at the Caraway Bay.”

“I live there now. I’ve seen that store. It’s really expensive. You shouldn’t have spent money like that on me.”

“Why not? What’s money for?”

Exactly. What’s money for? I’ve saved up thousands of dollars in the bank. And what for? It’s time to splurge. “Darin, I want to have a party. I want to throw a party in my room at the Caraway Bay. Will you come?”

“Of course. I’d love to. Day after tomorrow?”

“Yeah. A birthday party. Dark orange.”

“Don’t forget the booze.”

“Light gold. I’ll have lots of drinks. This will be fun.”

“Hey, I didn’t know you moved into that hotel. When did that happen?”

“Right after I got back and wondered why I was living like a hobo when I can make five hundred in a night.”

“Shit, what? Five hundred? A night?”

“Not every night...”

“How are you making that much money in a night?” He turns light red. “Are you a...?”

“What the hell, Darin? I’m not a prostitute. Dark red.”

He shakes the shock out of his head. “No. No, of course not. I didn’t mean to imply—”

“Yes, you did. You thought the only way I could make that much money is to sell myself. And you got all red about me thinking you slept with your fans. How two-faced can you be?”

“Wait. Wait. Let’s start over. We were both wrong about each other, okay? Please, Lila, let’s just start over.”

I take a deep breath and try to settle. “Okay.”

“I’ll restart. Shit, Lila, how do you make five hundred a night?”

“I’m a very good poker player.”

We stare at each other. He starts to show orange. I start to feel orange. “That’s fantastic,” he says. “So, you live in the hotel now. How do you like it?”

“Compared to the RV park? It’s a huge upgrade. It’s not like your place here, but it’s more than I had before.”

“I’m sure it’s lovely.” He stares at me, turning purplish. He takes the jewelry box from my lap and sets it on the coffee table. Then he takes my hand, the one with the bracelet wrapped around it. “I know it’s two days early, but happy birthday, Lila.”

“Thank you for the very thoughtful present.”

“It’s my pleasure,” he whispers.

He’s turned toward me, his arm on top of the couch back, his hand touching my hair, while his other hand still holds mine. I focus on the bracelet. “It’s really sparkly,” I say, frantic to think of something to talk about. The problem is, all I can think about – with the whispering and the hand holding and the purple – is that he’s going to kiss me. But I’m not going to fall for that again. “Um, I think I’d better get on home.”

“It’s early. Stay a while.” His purple is deepening as he leans closer, twisting my hair around his fingers.

“I have to call the dentist in the morning and get an appointment. My tooth is killing me.” I pull my hand away from his.

Darin’s purple fades, and he acts like everything’s normal. “And you have a party to plan. Can I do anything to contribute?”

“Nope.” I stand, picking up my box. “Just come and have fun. Thank you, again, for the jewelry box and the bracelet. They’re both beautiful.”

“You’re welcome, Lila. I’m glad you like them.”

As soon as I'm in the hall, I rush to the elevator. My heart's pounding, but not from rushing. I take several breaths, trying to calm myself. *Why the hell didn't I let him kiss me? Maybe it would've been different this time.*

My mind reels as I walk back to the Caraway. It wouldn't have been different: I would suck, he would blow me off, and a perfectly good friendship would be ruined. I was smart.

Chapter 14

Last night, I invited the whole crew to my party. Today, I go shopping. But I've never thrown a party. The closest thing to a party in my life was a pizza dinner after the soccer games we won. This party, though, is for adults, and pizza will not do.

I'm standing in the frozen food aisle, looking at the heat-and-eat appetizers. Mini quiche, spanakopita, samosas, artichoke kale swiss chard bites, stuffed mushrooms, rumaki, dumplings, brie bites with mostarda... *what?* I don't know what people like. I'll just get all of them.

The booze aisle is worse. I have no idea what I'm doing. I just get a variety of beers and some brand of red and white wines, and gin and rum because they sound grown up.

What I should have done was order from the hotel's restaurant: call, pay, and it's there, hot and perfect. But I don't think of that until I'm driving back to my place.

Next stop: a department store in the suburban part of town to buy a dress in the prom department. I've never gone to prom, never owned an evening dress, never went anywhere fancy. But for my party, I'm going to look good. I choose a black sleeveless dress with sequins from the shoulder straps to the waist. The skirt flows silkily down to my ankles, where my bare feet scream: *new shoes*. To the shoe store I go.

I figure the crew will arrive around eleven after wrapping up the show and cleaning up. I'm ready, wearing my evening gown, my earrings, my necklace, and my bracelet. It's ten-thirty. Am I dark orange about my first party? Yes. Yes, I am. I didn't even gamble tonight.

I heat up the appetizers in the microwave, then realize I don't have napkins. Diner next door: to the rescue. I rush downstairs and swipe a large handful of napkins out of the dispenser nearest the exit. On my way back, I remember in the lobby that I don't have glasses for the wine and gin and rum. *Shit*. Okay, who has glasses near here, or plastic cups, even? I spin around and my eyes settle on the front desk. "You know those cups you leave in the rooms for water?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Could I get about forty of those?"

"Forty?"

"Yes."

The clerk looks at me suspiciously: in an evening gown with a handful of paper napkins with a hot dog logo printed on them.

"Look, I'll pay for them. Add them to my rent," I say, getting antsy.

"You're a long-term guest?"

"Yes," I answer impatiently. "But I could move to the Colosseum if you want."

"No. I'll have the cups sent up right away. Room?"

"Seven twenty-five." I dash upstairs, hoping no one has beaten me there.

Whew. I'm first, but it's after eleven. Crap, now I'm sweaty. Standing in front of the air conditioner fan, I hold up my arms to dry my pits. Guests start showing up at eleven-fifteen. Darin's in the first group. "Happy birthday, Lila," he says, orange. "You look wonderful."

"Thank you." Wayne, Trent, and Sylvie head for the booze in the kitchenette. "Just, uh... help yourselves." They look at each other, light red, as they extract plastic cups from plastic wrappings. Trent makes some comment to the others and they all turn light gold. Darin asks me about my day – my

birthday. "I spent the whole day getting everything ready," I lower my voice, "and I still forgot things."

"Don't worry about it. Everything's great. Do you have music you can play on your phone or something?"

"Oh, yeah. I'll get that." More people come in the open door and the chatter increases as the new arrivals head for the make-shift bar. I play the music app on my phone, but I can hardly hear it.

More people show up. Like a hostess, I greet them. "Hi, Lila," they say before joining the growing group in the booze area. It's getting crowded and people are starting to sit on all the edges of my queen size bed. A second ring of people stand around the bed. No one can move in the crush, and worse yet, almost everyone's light blue. I try to make conversation with my show business co-workers. I have a short chat with Sandy, the make-up person who gives me the oil every night for the show. "How do you like working on stage?" she asks me.

"It's fun. Kind-of repetitive, though."

"Show biz: not the glamorous world people think it is. Just doing the same exact thing every night."

"That's true," I agree.

"Hey, Sandy." She turns toward Mark and gets involved in a new conversation. I stand there, against the wall where I'm pretty much stuck for the press of people in my hotel room.

Over the hour as guests arrive, the first ones leave, and by twelve-thirty everyone except Darin is gone.

They came. They drank. They whispered to each other about the soggy hors d'oeuvres. They talked amongst themselves. They left. Hardly a word was spoken to me and no one wished me a happy birthday, except Darin. He shaded red whenever someone left with a light blue, "Bye, Lila. Thanks."

I'm grateful my colors don't show. I seem to say that a lot, don't I? I was so pink and turquoise and unexpectedly teal at my own party. My hotel room was full of people, yet I was teal. I wish Darin would leave so I can be depressed in peace.

But he insists on helping me clean up. We work side-by-side in silence, me still ridiculously overdressed for

the fiasco of a party. Darin looks around and declares my room clean enough for the real maids to come in. I sit at the foot of my bed. “Thanks.”

Darin pulls up the desk chair and sits in front of me. “Tell me what you’re feeling, Lila.”

I feel my face contorting in an attempt to speak without my voice breaking. “Turquoise.” I close my eyes and wish for the magician to make himself disappear.

“You look wonderful tonight. Absolutely gorgeous.” I open my eyes to see Darin’s purple.

“Please don’t tease me. I think I’ve been humiliated enough.”

“I’m not teasing. I care about you, and you *are* gorgeous. That bracelet, especially, pulls the whole outfit together.” In spite of myself, I feel light gold. He shades over to orange, then back to purple. “Lila, we’re real with each other, right?” I nod. “Then let me give it to you straight. People will be like that everywhere you go, every day of your life. They don’t think they acted selfishly or insensitively. They’re just blind to how fantastic you are. And it’s their loss not to get to know you.”

“Then why do I feel like the loser?”

“Because you’re thinking about a bunch of insensitive assholes instead of the fantastic man in front of you.”

“Yay. I’m fantastic. You’re fantastic.”

“You know, Lila, it’s not easy to talk to you, not knowing your colors and all. But I try. Why won’t you let me in?”

I look at him closely. Not since Liam, did I feel like someone was trying to see my colors, as if colors were just under the surface and if they tried hard enough, they’d see them. “You make me feel light green.”

“Well, you *are* valuable.” This time, he kisses me before I can parry with a sarcastic comment or an excuse to leave. His kiss isn’t like Milo’s. Darin’s kiss is sincere and makes me feel more valuable than an entire bank vault.

But I put my hand on his chest and gently push him away. “I can’t do this with you.” He stares at me and his color

changes. But what he's feeling, I'm not quite sure. "After Milo—"

"Who cares about Milo? He was an idiot."

"He was my first." I immediately curse myself for admitting it to Darin. But Darin's hue changes to a clear light purple. He cares. I look down at my lap. "Milo said... I sucked."

Darin moves to sit next to me on the bed and puts his purple arms around me. "Fuck Milo."

"I don't want to wreck the friendship we have. I don't know what to do, Darin. And I don't know how to feel."

"You feel what you feel, Lila. What color are you right now?"

"Pretty blue. I'm just a defective person. I'll always be inferior to everyone else. Who would want me?" He squeezes me but doesn't have anything to say to that. "Darin, what are you thinking?"

"I'm... I'm torn. I like you – the way you are. You're fun and real and beautiful. You asked who would want you. Well, I would. I wanted you the other night. And I want you now. But more than that, I want you to be orange. I don't want to hurt you the way Milo did. I don't want to start something I can't keep going."

"You just want to sleep with me."

"I hate myself for this, Lila. I do care about you. I really do."

"I know."

"I just don't know if I can deal with colorlessness all the time – in daily life. I'm always wondering where you are, emotionally. It's not easy like it is with other people."

"I know."

"I'm sorry. I wish I were a better person."

I bite my lip before asking, "Will you teach me?"

"Teach you what?"

"What it's supposed to be like."

Darin's staring into my eyes, searching. "I'm not sure I understand what you're saying."

“I don’t love you; you don’t love me. But we’re friends, right? I want you to be real with me. If you really think I’m beautiful, then kiss me again. If you really like me, then—”

His sudden kiss stops me. Dark orange excitement surges through my body. Our lips press together sensuously as he caresses my bare arms. He delves past my lips while lowering the zipper on the back of my dress. Now loose, Darin gently brushes the straps off my shoulders as he pulls his mouth away from mine. He makes eye contact, checking in, before pulling me close and nuzzling my neck, his hands caressing my back.

“I’ll get the lights,” he whispers before getting up. The lights go out and I take that opportunity to crawl out of my dress and under the sheets. He returns to the bed, dropping clothes as he goes.

“Darin, you n—”

“I know.” He opens his wallet to extract a condom, then lifts the sheets and joins me. He sidles up next to me and props himself up on one elbow while his other hand reaches over my waist and tucks up under my shoulder blade. His warm, gentle embrace calms my fears. He looks into my eyes, so close that our noses nearly touch. “What it’s supposed to be like,” he whispers, “is comfortable and exciting and fulfilling. You tell me what you need.”

“I don’t know what I need. Help me?”

Darin answers with a kiss that thrills me like nothing has before. We don’t talk anymore. We communicate in gasps and gasps, moans and shudders, leaving me so exquisitely fulfilled that the memory of my experience with Milo just fades away. This is what I’ll always choose to think of as my first time.

Most importantly, Darin stays with me. We lie together, deeply relaxed, caressing gently, falling asleep.

“Darin,” I whisper.

“Hm?”

“I kinda love you.”

“Me too.”

Chapter 15

Darin and I have breakfast together the next morning, then go for a drive out to the river and walk along the path near the river's edge. He holds my hand which still wears the bracelet he gave me. I wear it every day, though I have to stuff it in my pocket during the magic show. Always, there's the threat of someone seeing the show twice and noticing I'm a shill.

After that day, we mostly only see each other backstage and on stage. I make sure to announce my colors when talking to him, and I never lie. He's the only one who seems to care what my colors are. Sometimes, before a show, he invites me to meet him in his suite after. I still have his keycard; he never asked to have it back. Whenever he invites me, I always accept, heading over there after an hour of poker, and relaxing in his luxurious living room until he comes home.

"You know, you can help yourself to anything in the kitchen. You don't have to limit yourself to soda," he says tonight.

"Booze gives me a headache. Don't really like it all that much anyway."

"Then I'll always have soda stocked for you." Darin plops down next to me on the sofa and puts his feet up on the coffee table. I'm already in potato posture. He takes my hand and drinks his beer as we stare out at the skyline view. "How was your day?"

“Good. Lavender. I bought new earrings for when I can take these studs out.”

“Oh? What do they look like?” Darin asks.

“They’re hoops, but not giant ones like the hookers wear. They’re tasteful.”

“You should get a whole collection to help change your look every night.”

“I’ll get right to work on that, boss.” He squeezes my hand. “How was your day?” I ask him.

“Fine. Nothing extraordinary.”

“Aren’t we exciting people?”

“Most people are not exciting people. Not all the time, anyway. After a show, I just like to relax.”

“Want to trade shoulder rubs?” I suggest.

“Sure. Who’s first?”

“I’ll do you first. Then you’ll have to live up to my high standard when you do me. Gold.” I get up on my knees while Darin turns his back toward me. “Take your shirt off.”

He complies and I begin to massage his neck and shoulders. “You know, Lila, I can usually tell when you’re gold. I don’t think you have to tell me that one anymore.”

“Okay.”

“Ah, that feels great.”

“Then I have great expectations.” I massage him for twenty minutes, then declare my hands tired. He puts his shirt back on and we both turn around.

“Take your shirt off.” I know it’s not sexual. It’s just the way massages are supposed to be: hand on skin, no barriers. Besides, he’s behind me – nothing to see but my bare back. Shirt and bra: gone.

Oh, my god, he’s great at this, relaxing me from neck to waist, so relaxed that I fall asleep sitting sideways on his sofa. “Lila,” he whispers, kissing the side of my neck.

“Huh?” I ask sleepily.

“You want to sleep here tonight?”

“Uh-huh.”

In the morning, I find myself curled up on his sofa, covered with a blanket and a soft pillow wedged under my

head. I pick up my wadded-up clothes and redress. I really need to get home and brush my teeth.

Tiptoeing into Darin's bedroom, I climb up next to him on top of the covers. He's on his stomach, his color the faint lavender most people are when they sleep – unless they're having a nightmare. His lavender darkens a smidgeon as he becomes conscious of my presence on his bed. His head is turned toward me, but his eyes are still closed. "Thanks, D," I whisper.

"What for?" he mumbles into his pillow.

"Letting me sleep on the couch."

"No worries." He wrenches his eyes open. "I got to fondle you, so, even-steven." He's gold, so I know he's kidding. But he has to pay. I get up on my knees and jump on the bed hard. "Hey. Knock it off. I was only joking."

I lie next to him again and put my arm over his blanketed body. "Now we're even-steven."

"Last time I invite you over..."

"No, it's not."

"No, it's not," he agrees. "You have big plans for today?"

"Just school. You?"

"I have a meeting with the theater managers. My contract is up next month and we have to renegotiate."

"Aren't you the wheeler-dealer?"

"Nah. My agent does most of the talking. I just sit there and sign whatever contract they agree on."

"You must really trust that agent."

"He's been good for me."

"Well, good luck. I hope they sign you for a long time for a lot of money."

"Me too."

"Kinda love you."

"Me too."

I roll off the bed and go home.



I've just put the oil on my skin for tonight's show. I like hanging out backstage until just before the show starts, watching everyone dash around getting things ready. Darin's standing over by the curtain controls, hanging onto a rope that's only used when the motor doesn't work. He's light pink. I start to go to him to ask what's wrong when the stage manager barrels through calling, "Places, everyone. Two minutes." That's my cue to get my ass in my seat in the audience, but Darin's hurting and I want to help. I start toward him, but he lets go of the rope and strides to the darkness at the back of the stage. I have no choice. I rush to my seat.

The curtain sweeps open. Darin emerges from the darkness, stepping forward into the spotlight where he greets the audience in his stage greens. How does he do that? Two minutes ago...

When he picks me out of the audience, he recites the whole script without making eye contact with me. After my bit, I watch him from stage left, sensing he needs something. His glance falls on me once, then he makes sure not to look to the wings again.

What have I done? Is it because I said, "Kinda love you," in his suite this morning? I've said that before. It's not a clingy love thing. It's a best-friend thing. I'm pink that he won't look at me when all I want to do is be there for him. Hell, I could be at the poker tables, but I'm standing here *for him*.

Well, fine. I'm out of here. I go and play poker longer than usual, trying to forget my own hurt. But on my way home, I'm compelled to walk past my hotel and go to Darin's, feeling dark yellow on the elevator ride up. I hesitate in front of his door.

Finally, I knock. No response. Not home yet?

I let myself in to wait for him. But when I get inside, I find him lying on the sofa, half a bottle of vodka on the coffee table and an empty bar glass in his hand sitting tipped on his chest. Softly, “Darin.”

He opens his eyes and looks at me wearily. “What do you want, Lila?” I sit on the sofa next to his feet. He puts his arm over his eyes.

“I want to be your friend. Did I do something?” He shakes his head under his arm. “Then what’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” An answer in complete opposition to his dark blue color.

“Bullshit.”

“Nothing you can fix.”

I drop to my knees on the floor between the sofa and the coffee table, putting my hand on his hand that holds the glass. “I can listen.”

“Got nothing to tell you.”

“Darin...”

He rips his hand away from mine, swinging the arm away and slamming the empty glass on the edge of the coffee table, shattering it.

My eye. Instant pain. I cry out. In a flurry of disjointed thoughts brought on by the shock, the saying, “better than a stick in the eye” flashes through my mind. Now I know that anything’s better than a freakin’ stick in the eye because that shard of glass hurts like hell. Holding my hand over my eye does nothing for the pain. Swearing doesn’t do anything either. Finally, I just babble for help.

“Oh my god. Lila. I’m sorry. Oh god. What should I do?”

“You need to take this thing outta my eye. It hurts so much.”

“Okay, lemme see.” I try to open my eye but it keeps shutting, making things worse with every blink. “We need to get you to the ER. Come on. I’ll take you.”

“You can’t drive. You’re drunk.”

“We’ll take a cab. Keep your eyes closed; I’ll lead you.”

“The drunk leading the blind,” I moan, yet he puts his arm around me and leads me to the elevator. “Darin, this is so painful. Help me.”

“I’m doing everything I can, Lila. Don’t worry. I’ll take care of you.” At the lobby, he yells ahead to the doorman to hail a cab for us. By the time we’re outside, the cab is waiting. Cabs are always waiting outside casinos.

It takes forever to get to the emergency room, like the hospital’s in the next county or something. Finally, the car stops and we get out. Darin has nothing to pay the driver. I pull my debit card out of my back pocket. “Here. Just hurry.” Darin leads me to the ER. “Did you get my card back?” I ask.

“This is more important.”

“That card is attached to all my money in the world. Get it back, Darin.”

“Okay. Stay here.” He’s back almost immediately. “Let’s get you fixed.”

“You got my card?”

“Come on, Lila. Excuse me,” he calls, “we have an emergency here.”

“Darin,” I raise my voice.

“He’s gone, Lila. We’ll take care of that later. First your eye.”

“What’s happened here?” A new voice.

“Glass shard in her eye.”

“And what about you?”

“Me? Nothing. Take care of Lila.”

“Your hand...”

“Huh? Nevermind. Later. Lila first.”

“Follow me.”

I’ll forego the gruesome details and say that a lot of pain and blood later, I’m discharged with a wad of gauze on my eye and a stiff metal eye patch taped over it. Darin has a bandaged hand. I mean, the whole hand. He’s got seven significant cuts on his palm and fingers.

Before we even get out of the room, a man in business clothes – not a doctor or nurse – comes in. The hospital wants to be paid for their services. “My debit card was just stolen.”

“My wallet’s at the hotel,” Darin slurs. Between the vodka and the turmoil, he’s wiped out. “Look, I’m good for it. My name’s Darin Sinclaire. I have a show at the Piazza Hotel.”

“Hey, yeah, you are, aren’t you?” the suit says. “You get mail there?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll send you the bill.” No “*I hope you feel better,*” or “*take care, now.*” Just... gone.

“How are we getting back there with no money?” I ask. Darin closes his eyes and bows his head, nothing left in the tank. The pain meds the doctors gave me work great, so I take charge. “Come on.” I pull on Darin’s arm until we’re on the bench at the circular driveway. I study my phone. “I can access my account and maybe... something... What do you know?”

“What?” Darin’s head leans on my shoulder, his eyes closed.

“Nothing’s gone. ‘Cept the card. He didn’t take anything.”

“Didn’t know your PIN.”

“Right. The PIN. But why’d he leave?”

“Who knows? You can cancel your card and get a new one.”

“That still leaves us unable to get home.”

One of the ER doctors walks past just as I say that. He stops. “You folks need a ride somewhere?”

“The Piazza,” I reply.

“I can take you there.” He’s a young doctor wearing blue scrubs and athletic shoes. His blue eyes droop a little after probably working the last twenty-four hours or so, yet he’s willing to help us.

“Really? That’s very generous of you.”

“No problem. My car’s in the employee lot ‘round back.”

“Darin, wake up. We got a ride,” I say as I try to rouse my friend.

“Huh?”

“Nevermind, I’ll bring the car around. Stay here.” The doctor walks off, and within minutes he has pulled over in front of us. We wrestle Darin into the back seat. I get in the front and the doctor takes the driver’s seat. “Next stop: Piazza. You two on a vacation?”

“No, we both work here. Darin has a magic show at the Piazza.”

“And what do you do?”

“Me? Nothing. I gamble.”

“For a living?”

“Yeah.”

“Must be good at it. I thought the house always wins.”

“In poker, the house takes a cut, but you play against other players.”

“And you always win.”

“Not every hand, but every night... yeah.”

“Wow. That’s some lucky streak.”

“It’s not luck. Well, maybe it’s luck, but bad luck.”

“What do you mean?”

“The only reason I can win so much is because I’m colorless.”

“I didn’t want to ask, but since you brought it up...”

“What do you want to know?”

“Were you born this way?”

“Yes.”

“Were your parents this way?”

“No.”

“Any ancestors? Some gene that skipped several generations?”

“Don’t know.”

“Have you talked to other colorless people?”

“There aren’t any.”

“Sure, there are. It’s extremely rare, but not unheard of – in medical circles at least.”

“Really? I’m mint.”

“It’s a condition called achromatism.”

“No shit... What causes it?”

“No one knows. Yet.”

“Is there a cure?”

“Not yet.”

“Not ever. Who’s gonna spend time working on something that’s extremely rare?”

“Well, you never know what young doctor might become interested in someone’s extremely rare condition.”

“You want to study me?”

“I’m aiming for a research position after I finish my residency rotation. Maybe I can get your contact info. Who knows what the future holds?”

“I’ve got a phone number. My address is... fluid.”

“A phone number’s great.”

The doctor stops at the front doors of the Piazza. The doorman practically has to carry Darin along. He dumps him in a lobby chair.

“Thanks so much,” I say to the doctor. “I’m sorry I can’t pay you. My card was stolen.”

“Your company was payment enough. Thanks for talking to me about your achromatism.”

“Thanks for giving it a disease-sounding name. Light gold.”

The doctor’s the same color. “Take care.”

In the lobby, I find Darin passed out in the chair where he was dumped. “Can I get some help here?” I make the bellhop swear that he’ll never tell anyone how we get Darin up to room twenty-four fifteen: curled up on a baggage cart like a lumpy old duffle bag. Luckily, it’s four a.m. and no one’s around. “Well, if you tell the story, don’t use names, okay?”

Chapter 16

It's two in the afternoon before Darin and I wake up. Hotel black-out curtains are really effective. First thing I do is take more pain pills and bring a couple to Darin with a glass of water. Sitting up, he takes the proffered pills. "How'd I get in bed?"

"Wasn't easy," I reply. "Light gold."

"You're going to make me suffer for this, aren't you?"

"Look what you did to me." I point to the metal patch over my eye. "You know how hard it is to sleep with a metal eye patch?"

He looks at my face and turns dark turquoise. "Oh, crap. I did that to you."

"Darn right."

"I'm sorry, Lila. I'm so sorry." His head falls into his hands. "I can't do anything right."

"Settle down. I'll heal."

"Will you? Will your eyesight be all right?" He looks back up at me, dark yellow all over. "Lila, please tell me you can still see with that eye."

"No, I can't. There's a big ol' patch over it. See?"

"Lila. Tell me the truth." His colors rotate through dark yellows and blues – a jumbled mess.

"You said you could tell when I'm gold."

"Please..."

“They said it will be fine. Just need to keep it covered for a while and use the eye drops.”

He sighs deeply. “Good.”

“Your hand – on the other hand... get it?”

“I can’t process humor right now.”

“Do you remember what they said about your hand?”

“No.”

“You cut a ligament in your finger. Might not be able to move that finger the way you used to.”

Darin looks at his bandaged hand and wiggles his fingers gently. Then he tries to close it into a fist. He tries again. He looks up at me, dark yellow. “My hands are my tools.”

I sit down facing him. “Maybe surgery will fix it.”

He drops his head. “Doesn’t matter.”

“What do you mean, it doesn’t matter? You’ll get fixed up and back to work before you know it.”

“My contract isn’t getting renewed. In a month, I’m finished here. Well, I guess I’m finished today. I can’t do my show like this.” His blues overshadow everything else. When he falls forward, I catch him.

I hold him, caress his hair, and whisper platitudes that probably don’t help. “You can get another contract somewhere else.”

“Not in this city.”

“Then go somewhere else. This desert sucks anyway.”

“It’s not just me. My crew. They have lives. I can’t just make them pack up their families and go somewhere else.”

“People do that all the time. Whoever doesn’t want to move, you replace at the new theater.”

“What about you?”

“Me?”

“Would you go somewhere new with my show?”

“I... I never thought about it. I don’t plan too far ahead. Obviously.”

He falls back onto the bed. “I knew you wouldn’t want to follow a loser.”

“What the hell?”

“This strip – *the* strip – is the top of the ladder. Going anywhere after this is a step down.”

I lie down next to him. “I don’t know what to tell you. Maybe your agent...”

“My agent dumped me. He knows we only go down from here.”

I put an arm around his torso. “That really sucks.”

“Lila, you’re my only real friend. I don’t think I can handle this without you.”

“Well, I’m not going anywhere, so no worries.”

He pulls away and looks at my face seriously. “Will you move in here with me?”

Um... Light yellow. I want to ask “why?” or “what does it mean?” or anything sensical. What comes out of my mouth is, “What, you need help paying the rent?”

The reds on that man...

“Wait, Darin. I was only joking. Please don’t be red.”

“I’m at the lowest point in my life, I admit that I need you, and you’re making jokes?”

I put my head on his chest and hug him. “I’m sorry. I wasn’t thinking straight. You blew me away, asking me to move in with you. I don’t know what it means.”

He wraps his arms around me. “I don’t know either. I just blurted it out as soon as it entered my brain. The only thing I know is that I need you. You’re my best friend. I just need you.”

I don’t know where the thought came from, but I say, “Want to play poker with me tonight?”

“What?”

“I’ve watched you work. You’ve never seen me work. You won’t believe your eyes,” I say, borrowing a line from his promotional poster in the lobby. Chin on his chest, I look at his face. “Wanna?”

“I’d love to see you work.” He gains a little orange.

“Only bet what you’re willing to lose,” I warn with a smile.

“That thing you do with your mouth and your cheeks. It makes you... you look prettier when you do that.”

“That’s what Liam said, too.”

“Who’s Liam?”

“School friend.”

“Sounds like he had a crush on you.”

“From that one sentence, you decide he had a crush on me?”

“From that one sentence plus knowing you all these months, I know he had a crush on you.”

There’s an urge, and I act on it: I kiss Darin. He puts his uninjured hand on the back of my neck, holding me against his lips – *as if I want to get away*. I scoot up along his body to be closer to his face and more comfortable with his enduring hold on me. I can feel his heartbeat and, I swear, it’s speeding up as we kiss. He slings his injured hand around my back, not able to squeeze or caress, but able to add to the number of our skin cells that are in contact with each other. My hand slides from his chest around his ribcage and settles behind his shoulder blade so that I’m in the exact position he was when he began to teach me about physical love.

All the while, as we pull each other closer in the embrace, his lips make love to mine. Darin seizes my top lip for a sensual hug between his, then focuses on my lower lip, nibbling and sucking it gently. When he releases it, he tilts his head and captures my entire mouth within his. I surrender and let him pass, and I’m rewarded with reminiscent mimicry of what we did on the night of my birthday.

After the kiss, we just stare at each other. He’s purple. Dark purple. “Lila, tell me your colors.”

“I... kinda love you.”

“I... completely love you.”

I smile. “Me too.”

Chapter 17

I stand by Darin as he informs the theater owner that he won't be able to perform anymore. I stand by him as he gathers the crew together and breaks the bad news that everything has gone down the crapper and the gig is over. I stand by him when his promo poster in the lobby gets a big, white sticker pasted over it: CANCELLED. He stares at that for a long time.

Then he helps me check out of the Caraway Bay and move my stuff to his suite at the Piazza. "Can you afford to stay here?" I ask him.

"I'm already paid up through the end of the month. We have three more weeks of luxury, kiddo."

"I'll pay for the next month 'cause you have to pay my ER bill," I tease, putting my clothes away in dresser drawers Darin emptied for me. I hang my evening gown in the closet. My beautiful jewelry box – my favorite possession – goes on top of the dresser. He watches me unpack, not responding to my dig about the emergency room bill.

Finally, he says, "I'll pay anything to make you whole again."

I look at him. "Light purple. I'm okay, Darin. Don't worry about that. I'll be fine."

He steps up and puts his arms around me, pulling me into a tight hug. "I'm so sorry I lost my temper. I never wanted to hurt you. I was dark red about losing the gig..."

“I know. But, you know, life is always changing. I was dealing cards at a tribal casino when I learned bluffing from an old guy. It changed my life, but I didn’t know it was coming. You never know what’s coming.”

“How are you so young, and yet so wise?” He pulls back to look at my face, still holding me around the waist.

“People with achromatism are naturally wise.”

“Achromatism?”

“That’s what the doctor said my defect is called.”

“I don’t like when you call it a defect. I think achromatism is what made you you. And *you* are wonderful.”

“I caused my parents to split up. That’s not wonderful. They were happy before I was born.”

“Lila, you didn’t make your parents’ decisions. They were adults with free will.”

We continue the conversation on the sofa. “I saw my dad at the Colosseum with a new wife. I didn’t know she was his wife. I thought my dad was cheating on my mom. That’s when I drove home – that time I vanished. My mom told me he left her four years ago.”

“I had no idea you were going through that. When you came back you seemed orange enough.”

“I think she’s better off now. She has a boyfriend who’s great. Treated me nicely; not awkward at all.”

“What do you feel about it all?”

“Honestly, I found myself wishing this new guy had been my father. I mean, my dad was hardly around. I thought his job was just that demanding. When he was home, I still didn’t get any attention from him. I thought maybe he just wasn’t an affectionate person. But he was plenty affectionate with that other woman. I guess he’s finally orange.”

“Everyone deserves to be orange,” Darin points out. “Whatever hard feelings were in the past, they’ve both moved on to better situations.”

I look at Darin’s sage face and can’t resist teasing him. “How are you so old, and yet so wise?” He mirrors my internal light gold. I smile. “You really do see my colors sometimes.”

Darin cups my cheek with his uninjured hand. He kisses the other cheek. "I'm learning."

"Let's get dinner before poker, huh?"

"Whatever you say. I'm following you."

"Then follow me to Billy Bob's BBQ." We start out of the suite. "How old are you, anyway?"

"Old enough to be your father," Darin replies with a light gold hue.

"No, really."

"Really. I'm almost forty."

"Cradle-robber."

He spanks my butt. "Brat."



By the time we get to the casinos, the gambling's in full swing. There's a table with two open chairs. I whisper to Darin, "We don't know each other." I sit down and wait for everyone to acclimate to the weirdo. Darin sits across from me, dark yellow about my feelings regarding the uncouth players. I flash him a smile and he settles back into lavender-blue. The dealer deals the next hand as we all ante up. The players' colors betray the strength of their hands. My hand is crap, so on my turn I trade in four cards.

Player One eyes his new cards, turns light red and folds. Darin's light orange about his hand. Player Three holds a dark orange hand. Player Four is lavender – I'll have to watch him carefully. I still have crap, so I fold; I never bluff on the first hand. Player Six hovers between shades of orange.

As the betting goes around the table, it comes down to Darin and Player Three. When they finally compare cards, Darin holds the losing hand. The original players all lighten to oranges and greens, seeing that Darin and I are not much of a threat. But as I start winning hands, Darin starts to show his

stage greens. It's impossible to tell if he has a good or bad hand because he always looks like he has a winner.

We're about twenty hands into this game when he makes eye contact with me – just a second longer than a glance. Somehow, I know he wants to jack up the bets. I look around. Player Four is sage about his cards. Sage usually means three-of-a-kind or better. I have two pair. But Darin must have something great, because he catches my eye again, so I play along. I raise by small amounts when my turns come. Three of the players drop out, leaving Darin, me, and the sage player.

Player Four starts to yellow as Darin and I up the bets on every round. He's too invested to abandon the pot. With each of us in for over a hundred, we show our cards. Player four turns dark orange when he sees my cards. He sets down his three-of-a-kind. Darin, green as ever, sets down a straight.

Player four swears, grabs his remaining chips, and leaves the table. Now Darin's the target of everyone's gazes. "That's quite a lucky hand," I say.

"First bit of luck in two days," he replies, stacking his chips and paying out the house's cut to the dealer. I stare at him, wondering what sleight of hand he used to come up with the straight. "Maybe I should cash out now."

"Stay," I urge. "Give us a chance to make a little back."

"I've got medical bills," he says, holding up his bandaged hand.

"So do I," I say, pointing to the eye patch. I smile discreetly at him, signaling it's time for him to get out while the gettin's good.

"Sorry, folks. Got obligations." He takes his chips to the cashier while I play on.

I can see Darin watching me from afar. He's leaning against the side of a slot machine, his arms crossed over his chest, his colors all oranges. I only play another twenty minutes in which I clean out the other players with a fantastic bluff. After the round with Darin, they all thought I'd bet big on a fairly weak hand, so they refused to fold until they were out of chips. Players One, Three, and Six leave the table red and swearing.

“Nicely done, Lila. As usual,” the dealer, Nate, says. He’d been silent throughout the game, knowing how it would work out in the end. “But one got away with a haul.”

“Ya win some. Ya lose some.”

“You win most. What happened there?”

“I thought he was cute. I let him win. In fact, I’m gonna see if I can find him and let him buy me a drink.”

“Let him buy for you? You should buy for him,” Nate says, stacking cards and cleaning up his table. “What happened to your eye?”

“An accident. Piece of glass.”

“Ouch.”

“You said it. You know what? You’re right. I’m gonna buy that guy a drink. Have a good night.” I toss Nate a generous tip and take my winnings to the cashier, then meet Darin by the slots. “Nate says I should buy you a drink.”

“Why?”

“Cause I said you were cute.”

“I’m cute?”

“Why else would I let you win?”

Darin turns a little pink. “You didn’t let me win. I had the best hand.”

“About that: how did you get such a great hand?”

Darin shakes his head, light yellow. “Luck?”

“You mean, luck?” I fly my hands around like he does on stage.

“You *so* owe me a drink for accusing me of using my SOH skills to cheat at poker.”

I smile. “It was really luck?”

“Completely.” He puts an arm around my waist and starts walking. “I’m gonna choose the most expensive drink on the menu, Miss Steak-and-Lobster.”



Darin's win got me thinking that we could pull off fantastic bluffs if we came up with signals and rehearsed a bit. That night as we lie side by side in bed, I suggest the idea. "You know how to misdirect. How can we use that?"

"Magic is just small-time conning. Like what you do."

"I don't con people. I play legitimate poker and beat them."

"Bullshit. You lull them into a false sense of security, then fake a good hand to win it all. That's magic: you lull the audience into a false sense of reality, then fake a new reality. Like the witch doctor routine."

"And that's a con?" I ask.

"Yeah. Mine's a little more legitimate than yours..."

"Why?"

"They pay me knowing they're going to be conned. You take people by surprise."

I scoff. "They know what they're doing. They're adults."

"True. But you're a con man."

"I'm not a man."

He rolls on his side to look at me. "Thank goodness."

I roll on my side to look at him. "Why?"

"Cause I'm not gay. I don't want to share a bed with a man."

"I liked a girl in high school," I reveal.

"Like, liked her, or *liked* her?"

"Like, wanting to hold her hand and hug her."

"What happened?"

"Nothing. No one liked me that way. No one liked me in any way."

Darin was quiet for a few seconds. "What about that Liam fella? What's the story with him?"

"Liam and I... were put in special ed in school."

"Why? You dyslexic or something?"

"No. I'm colorless. Liam was color blind. He didn't interact with students well because he couldn't see their colors. I was just defective."

"Lila..."

I sigh, looking past Darin. “Okay, I wasn’t defective. I just bothered other people by existing in their classrooms. It was okay. We had each other. I helped him with colors and he...”

“Yeah?”

“He treated me normally. It was so refreshing to have someone who saw me the same way he saw everyone else. Until high school.”

“What happened in high school?”

“Got special glasses. He became normal. Didn’t need me anymore.”

“Oh, Lila. You still needed him, didn’t you?”

“I had my soccer team, but no one ever treated me the way Liam used to.”

“What happened to him?”

“Went to fancy college. Forgot about me. I don’t blame him. He’s normal now.”

“You’re not over him, are you?”

“Over him? We weren’t... a thing. We were best friends, like you and me.” Darin goes a little blue. “What?”

“Nothing. Just thinking about...” He trails off.

“Spit it out.”

“Nothing. Really.” He sighs. “Just had a little spike of pain in my hand which reminded me of this afternoon with the crew...”

I’m pretty sure he’s lying. Gently, I ask, “You okay?”

“Yeah. Good night, Lila.”

“G’night, Darin.” We each roll away from the middle, but I don’t go right to sleep. I’m thinking about Liam again. About a day in senior year when I was eating lunch in the quad. It was a sunny day and midterms were over, so almost everyone was orange or lavender. Luckily, my invisible teal didn’t interfere with the visual consistency on campus. A bunch of girls from my team shared a table, but it was full, and they didn’t invite me over anyway, so I just sat alone on the grass under an oak tree.

I heard Liam’s voice somewhere behind me. He was talking animatedly. I peeked around the tree to see who he was

talking to and found him, dark orange, talking to a girl named Charla. She was listening, light purple, as he described some project he was doing in AP Physics. Charla's purple was darkening but he seemed completely oblivious. She inched closer to him, but he inched away so he could keep drawing things in the air in front of him.

I watched him, wishing he was telling me about his project. As another friend walked by, Liam paused long enough to greet him, then returned to his conversation with Charla, which she managed to turn to a less scholastic focus. His attention was completely on her. I couldn't hear what she said that made him turquoise, but he soon recovered to sage and nodded in response to whatever she had suggested. As they started toward the cafeteria together, Liam caught me looking at them.

I yanked my head back behind the tree and leaned on the trunk, trying to dissolve into it. The pair walked past, only a few yards from where I sat. I kept my head turned away and took a bite of my sandwich, trying in vain to appear nonchalant. I monitored them from the corner of my eye, and when they were near the cafeteria door, I relaxed. Liam held the door open for Charla and, as she entered, he glanced back my way. I was so relieved he couldn't see my burgundy. I mean, he and I used to have lunch together every day. Now he had lunch with any of a number of friends, but he never had lunch with me.

As he glanced back at me, he paused for just a second. I thought I saw purple flash over him, but maybe I was mistaken. It was such a bright day and the glare from the glass doors was in my eyes...

If he was purple about Charla, I didn't want to know anyway. He disappeared inside the cafeteria.

Chapter 18

Darin and I have lived in the suite for the last three months. My eye healed completely, and his hand is fine except for one finger that won't bend in all the way. Unfortunately, it's the finger that did all the palming of cards and things. Darin's dark blue a lot of the time, trying to retrain his hand to palm things differently.

I try to distract him, pointing out the great things about not having a nightly job, like camping out of my van at national parks. We've done that a few times. On regular days at home, we go grocery shopping and learn to fix meals in the suite's kitchen. We like cooking together, though he's become more of a cook while I specialize in desserts. I blew him away one day with my crême brulee. It's actually not that hard to make, but being the con man that I am, I let him believe it's very complicated.

Class today was brutal. When I get home from school, I just want to relax. "Darin?" *Okay, not home, I guess.* I put my laptop down, not ready to tackle my homework. I need lunch first. Feeling lazy, I make a simple PB&J and sit down with my computer to surf the internet. The sandwich reminds me of grade-school lunches, which reminds me of Liam. I look up his social page again.

"Master's degree? Wow. I knew you were smart." I scroll through his photos and public posts. Under a heading of *Then and Now* he's got pictures from his childhood, school

years, and most recent events. His fourth-grade school portrait is there. I smile; his hair always flopped over his forehead, even when the teacher tried to help him with a comb right before the picture was snapped.

Eighth grade: awkward teen, but familiar and comfortable to me.

High school: glasses, confidence, friends. I'm not in a single picture with Liam, though now that I think about it, I can't remember anyone ever taking a photograph of the two of us, except class pictures in the D.Y. Carlton school. Thinking back to high school, I realize what awkward, immature kids we were, never talking things out. If I had it to do over again, I wouldn't have let those years slip past without trying to regain the friendship we once had. And maybe there was more there, but...

Hell, it's in the past. Nothing to do about it now. Back to Liam's page. College: confidence, friends, accolades. And now a master's degree. I fixate on a picture of him standing in front of a big MIT sign. I zoom in to see his face better. His hair is shorter, more manageable, and looking good. He wears the same glasses. No, these are a little different. More collegiate looking, like hip scientists wear. His color in the picture is pure sage. And why not? He is exactly what I thought he'd become: the kind of nerd who would be successful and rich. And he's on the threshold of a great career; I'm sure of it.

I linger on his face, my sandwich abandoned on my plate. I don't even hear Darin come in until he's right behind my chair. "How's Liam?" he asks.

I jump. "Next time, could you announce yourself at the door instead right behind me?"

"Sorry."

I close my laptop. "Where you been?"

"Barber."

I turn to look at him. "Looks good."

"Thanks. I used to get it trimmed every week for the show."

"I liked it getting longer, but this is your regular look."

“I should’ve left it?”

“No. I like it both ways. I guess it was a little overgrown.” Poor Darin. He’s lost his confidence in almost everything. Now a haircut? I stand to put my arms around his neck. “You can’t do anything to make yourself look bad, hot stuff.”

He puts his hands on my waist. “You’re still a con man,” he says, a little light gold showing through.

“I’m completely serious.”

He runs a finger over my lips, staring at them, pining. I don’t know what he’s waiting for. I kiss his finger, which seems to startle him. “Darin, what’s the matter?”

He lets go of me. “Nothing. I was thinking I’d like to go for a swim today.”

“Have fun.”

“Lila, why won’t you go swimming with me?”

“I don’t have a swimsuit.”

He returns to the door and picks up a shopping bag he’d dropped there. “Yes, you do.”

“You picked out a swimsuit for me? That’s kind-of...”

“Helpful?”

“Light gold. I was thinking, presumptuous.”

“Presumptuous. You learn that big word in school today?”

“Shut up.” I smile. “People like to choose their own level of modesty. You probably got a little string thing I’d never be caught dead in...” I pull the swimsuit out of the bag. “Oh. This is really nice. But I’m still not going down to the pool.”

“Give me one good reason.”

“Achromatism.”

“That’s not a *good* reason.”

“Darin, it’s bad enough to torture people with my face and arms. Can you imagine if they see my legs and stomach and back? Overload.”

“How about night swimming?”

“Pool’s closed at night.”

“I still have a few friends in this hotel.”

“You mean you slipped someone some bills...”

Light gold, he takes the empty bag from me, heading for the kitchen. “Tonight, Lila.”



Well, he’s gone to so much trouble to make it happen, how can I disappoint him? At ten o’clock, when kids are tucked in bed and adults are at shows and bars, Darin uses a special keycard someone had given him and opens the gate to the pool. “Not too much noise,” he warns. “Don’t want to get busted.”

All lights are off, even the underwater lights. We drop our towels on a plastic chaise and go to the edge. Darin slips into the deep end quietly.

“I’m gonna take the steps.” At the shallow end, I step into the pool, going down two steps and sitting on the top one.

“That’s not swimming,” Darin calls softly.

“I’m in the pool.”

He swims to the steps and kneels on the bottom of the pool in front of me. “Come on. It’s not cold.” He reaches out for my hands, but I don’t take them. He drops his hands on my knees instead. “No one’s here.”

“I don’t know how to swim,” I admit. “My parents never took me to swim lessons or anything.”

Darin, purple, pulls on my legs. “Come on. I’ll help you. Stand up.” Together, we go to the middle of the shallow end. “Just get used to the water on your body. Kneel down.” We both kneel on the bottom, the water covering us to our necks. I’m nearly panting. “Stay calm,” Darin soothes. “Now we’re just gonna put our heads under for a second.”

I’m shaking. “I don’t think...”

“Lila, I’ve never seen you yellow about anything. What are you afraid of?”

“Drowning. Duh.”

“You’re not gonna drown. You have your very own lifeguard right here.” He puts his arm around me. “Trust me.” I look at him, at his sage face. He hasn’t been sage in... months.

“I trust you.”

“Good. Dip your face in.” I hold my breath and drop my face into the water – not even as far as my ears – and I don’t drown. That’s a good sign. I come up, hair dripping, and wipe my eyes clear. My personal lifeguard is orange.

I smile. “Pretty small accomplishment.”

“Not if you’re afraid. Then it’s a big accomplishment.” He gathers me in his arms and floats on his back. “Stay relaxed. Just float.” I hold my head above the water and let him pull me along.

“Not the deep end, Darin.”

“It’s okay. I’ve got you. Kick your feet a little bit.” Before I know it, we’re across the pool. I grab the edge and sigh deeply. “There’s a little ledge in the corner,” he tells me.

I shimmy along the wall to the corner seat and sit, only my shoulders and head above the water. “Whew.”

“I’m gonna take a lap, okay?”

“Yeah. Go ahead.” Darin swims under the surface of the water, making no sound until he comes up for air ten yards away. He continues to the other end, then flips over and swims back, coming straight for me as I sit in the corner. He pops his head up over my knees, planting his hands on the seat, one on each side of me. His face is within inches of mine. “Hi.”

“Hi,” he replies. “How are you feeling?”

“Fine.”

“Mind if I check?”

“Huh?”

He runs a hand on my thigh, down to my calf, and back up again. “Yeah, you feel fine.” Gold, I push him away. He springs right back, also gold. “Let’s see if the rest of you is fine.”

“This was your plan all along?”

“My plan was to get you in a bathing suit. This is more than I hoped for.”

Gold. "Dirty old man."

He kisses my shoulder, then my neck, then the area below my neck. His arms snake around my middle, pulling me toward the edge of the seat. "No, Darin!"

"Shh. You'll get us caught."

"Then don't pull me off the seat." I grab the edge of the pool on both sides of me.

"I won't pull you off. I just want you... closer." He wedges himself between my knees and pulls me to the very brink of my safe perch. "You can hold on to me..." He kisses the top curve of my breast. I let go of the sides and put my hands on his head, kissing the top as he kissed below. His hands move back to the seat and he hoists himself up so that our corresponding parts line up. His gaze melts me even before he presses his lips to mine, pushing his chest against mine, touching my swimsuit with his erect—

A light. "Hey. What are you doing in the pool? It's closed."

Darin pulls away and addresses the security guard. "What? The keycard opened the gate, so we thought it was okay."

"Con man," I whisper in his ear.

"Well, it's not. Pool's closed. You have to get out of there."

"Okay. Will do." Darin waves a hand at the guard, but the guy doesn't leave. He's determined to stand there until we're gone. Darin looks at me, gold. "If I get out right now..."

"I'll go first and bring you a towel."

"Thanks, Lila." He sinks into the water as I climb out of the pool. The guard looks me up and down as I go to the chaise for my towel. His ogling complete, he suddenly realizes I have no color.

"What the —"

"Shut up," I mutter, wrapping the towel around my shoulders. I walk back to Darin at the corner of the deep end. He climbs out as I hold his towel open for him.

"Thanks. Owe you one," he says.

"One what?" I smile.

“That didn’t help, Lila. Shit... stop turning me on.”

“What did I do?” I ask innocently. “You’re the one who bought the swimsuit. I’ll just throw it away.”

“Oh, no you don’t.” He kisses me as he wraps the towel around his waist. We slip on our sandals and head inside.

That little adventure in the pool was the happiest we’d been since we left the ER three months ago. It was good to see Darin in light golds and oranges. Damn that guard for interrupting us, because the elevator ride back up to the suite ruins everything.

A man enters the lift just before the door closes. Even before the elevator starts moving, the man clings to the rail like he’s on a stormy sea. I nearly gag when he burps unapologetically. The big man looks over at us and, recognizing Darin, asks why his show was cancelled. “My wife badgers me for months to take her to see *Darin Sinclair*,” he practically spits out the name, “and we get here and – no show.”

“It’s been over for three months,” Darin says quietly. “Should’ve checked the website before you made the trip.”

“Fat lot o’ good that does me now.”

“It’s your own fault, fat lot o’ lard,” I hiss. “You should mind your own business. People have lives, you know. It’s none of your business why the show’s cancelled.”

“What the hell’s wrong with you? You look like a z—”

“Don’t say another word.” Darin’s voice is a dark, menacing growl. I thought I’d seen Darin red before, but not like this.

“What are you going to do about it?” the slob slurs. Luckily, the elevator is at our floor. I pull on Darin’s arm and we leave the lift. “That’s right. Run away, you little coward.” The doors close.

I put my hands on Darin’s face. “He’s just a drunk blowhard. No brains in his head. His words aren’t worth anything. They’re not worth one second of your feelings.”

Darin leans his forehead against mine and puts a hand on my back. His red dissipates and blue takes its place.

Damn. Default blue. “Darin, please don’t listen to people like that. Don’t give them the time of day.”

“It’s not what he said to me. It’s what he said to you.”

“If I let go of that, will you?” He nods, our foreheads still attached. “Good. I let go of it. Your turn.”

He looks into my eyes. “How are you so strong?”

I smile. “I eat my spinach.” With a hint of light gold on Darin’s face, we start down the hall toward our door. “Not cooked or canned. Gross. I order my smoothies with fresh spinach in ‘em. Can’t even taste it. Hey, we should get a blender and make our own smoothies.”

“Anything for you.” Darin squeezes me as we walk lazily down the hall.



A week later I announce, “I’m gonna play poker tonight, okay?”

“Course. Where?”

“Montaña.”

“All right. Uh, you know, Lila, I was thinking... we could rent a real apartment.”

“I like this one.”

“But it’s expensive. Clearly, I’m not going to be able to book new gigs, and I’d feel like a leech if you’re paying for it. Apartments are cheaper.”

“Yeah, but I don’t mind playing poker, and the casinos are here, and we don’t have any furniture for an apartment. And I don’t think apartments come with Housekeeping. And I don’t know how to do those kinds of things. And I don’t *want* to know how to do those things. I like Housekeeping – the department, not the chore – you know?”

“That’s a lot of reasons why you don’t want to move.”

“This is the life, Darin. I never want to move.” He looks at me with that purple look that tugs at my heart. It was the look he had on my birthday when he was there for me in my lowest hour. “Darin, what are you thinking?”

“I... just... love you, Lila. I don’t know where I’d be without you.”

“You’d be renting some shabby apartment instead of giving in to me and staying here.” I smile.

He wraps his arms around me. One hand slips down my back while the other holds my chest against his. He kisses me. I mean *kisses* me. Not like the playful stuff in the pool, or a casual kiss hello. He’s caught me by surprise, but it’s dark orange. I follow his lead and he leads me to the bedroom.

I thought that night, on my birthday, was dark orange. I thought we were close when I moved in with him. But this is more orange, more close, more purple than ever before.

He loves me with his whole heart. I feel it. He loves me like I’m the most important person in the world. He loves me with such care and devotion, I can’t call him a friend anymore. His love for me ignites a fiery love in my heart. So, I tell him.

I tell him I’m purple. Dark, dark purple. And his color matches mine.

We fall asleep afterward.

I wake up an hour later but don’t want to disturb him. He’s finally completely relaxed. I slip out of the apartment to play poker. The suite, after all, doesn’t pay for itself. I play for a couple of hours, and stop for eggs on the way home, planning to make cupcakes for him. He loves cupcakes.

He’s still in bed... a glass of water on the nightstand that wasn’t there before. “You got up and went back to sleep? Lazy b—”

Ice stabs me.

He has no color at all. Then I notice the folded paper on my pillow.

My heart freezes.

“Darin!” I yell. “Darin! Wake up!”

Chapter 19

I am so red with Darin. How could he make me love him, and then leave me like that?

But I don't blame him for the mess I'm in now. He couldn't have known the police would think I gave him the sleeping pills. Even his note didn't convince them he took his own life. Nothing outweighed the fact that he had named me as sole beneficiary in his will two days before he was found dead in our shared suite.

The fact that I had thousands of dollars in the bank but never paid a dime of income tax didn't help my case. But the most damning evidence of my guilt was that I was colorless about his death. Somehow, in their minds, being devoid of colors meant I was a sociopath.

In reality, my feelings run deep in the blues. I'm absolutely devastated. The police took Darin's note for evidence, but my court-appointed lawyer, Mailyn, got a copy for me. I read it twenty times a day, at least. I can recite it by memory now.

My dearest Lila,

I hope any pain this causes will be short-lived. You are my best friend, and I love you in every way there is to love another person. You're young. You have a future. And it's not with me. You

deserve someone your own age – someone who can do better by you than I ever can.

I'm lost, Lila. I have no path forward. I'm drowning and I won't drag you down with me. I know you tried to help. You buoyed me up, but there's no fixing what's wrong with me.

What are your colors, Lila? Me? I'm hopelessly deep blue unless I'm with you. With you, I'm purples. But you should be with someone who can be everything you deserve. I wish I was worthy.

Be orange, Lila.

All my love,

Darin

How in hell am I supposed to be orange without him? How did he think that would work? I don't want his money or the assets he acquired during his years as a magician. I don't want to find someone else. I was all oranges with him. Oranges and purples. What more would I want? I've read his letter hundreds of times and, for the life of me, can't figure out why he couldn't stay with me.

My lawyer says she's light orange about my case. She thinks the psychiatrist expert witness will convince the judge that there's no case here. She also thinks I shouldn't be in the courtroom, and considering how people equate my achromatism with sociopathy, I agree. I told her about the doctor who said my defect was a known medical condition. She said she'd get a medical doctor as an expert witness as well.

They took my phone away, but they gave me one phone call on their landline; I called my mom. She rushed over, but there's nothing she can do. She stays in some cheap hotel and visits me every day. I told her to go on home. I told her things would work out. But, mothers.

Things move very slowly in prison. Every few days the lawyer drops by to tell me things are moving along, but she isn't the one who decides what dates we get in court, or things about continuances and other legal stuff I don't understand.

She did tell me that once the case is settled, I'll have to face the IRS. I asked if she'd represent me for that and she said no. That's not her specialty. She said I'd have to hire a tax attorney plus pay all the back taxes I owed. Turns out, it doesn't matter how you get money; the government wants a piece of it, even if you win it.

Who knew? Maybe everyone knows that. I didn't. Well, that probably would've caught up with me sooner or later. Might as well get all the shit shoveled up at once.



More than a month in prison, Mailyn tells me that the case is going to trial, unless I want to accept a plea deal. I don't understand any of it, so she explains that I can plead guilty and get a shorter sentence or plead innocent and take my chances: acquittal or life in prison.

"What? You said it wouldn't go that far. You said the case would get tossed out."

"There are stories about you, Lila. In the papers. The prosecutor called all sorts of witnesses to the stand who claim you swindled them at the poker table."

"How did he track down random poker players?"

"They called in to the tip line."

"I didn't swindle anyone. Ask the dealers. They watched me play."

"The police say you were a generous tipper – to keep them quiet."

"I can't believe this. I was a generous tipper because I used to be a dealer. I know how they feel. Why do the police have it in for me?"

"In a suspicious death, the spouse – or companion – is always the leading suspect."

“What suspicious death? He spelled it all out in the letter.”

“Writing didn’t match a sample of his earlier writing.”

“Because his hand was messed up. His middle fingers didn’t work right. We went to the ER. There must be a record of that.”

“Unfortunately, that gives you another motive – he nearly blinded you.”

“Damn it all to hell. I didn’t blame him for that. I mean, he caused it, but he was so sorry. I didn’t hold a grudge about that. Plus, my eye’s fine now.”

“Let’s discuss the plea deal.”

“I’m not guilty. I didn’t kill him. I called nine-one-one when I found him.”

“Just hear me out. You can take a twenty-year sentence in minimum security. Lots of outside time. TV. Phone. Internet. Library. You could earn a degree...”

“A twenty-year degree program?” I’m light red. “You’ve got to be kidding. I’m not guilty. Don’t you believe me?” Mailyn hesitates. “Are you serious? Aren’t you paid to believe me?”

“I’m paid to defend you. It doesn’t matter what I believe.”

“You really think I killed Darin for his money? I have plenty of my own.”

“Maybe you didn’t plan it. Maybe he told you about the new will and you had a sudden idea.”

“He had just made the most beautiful love to me. I couldn’t have killed him. I loved him. And I never knew about any will.”

“Think about the deal. We have to respond tomorrow morning.”

“My answer is no.”

“Think it over, Lila.”



Next day, I tell Mailyn again: no deal. There is no way I'm going to say I killed Darin when I didn't. She seems light red about my decision, but I don't know if that's because she thinks I'll get convicted or because she doesn't want to spend any more time on the colorless weirdo's case.

Mom is here, as usual. She agrees with my decision. She's green. "You stand up for yourself like you always have. I'm right behind you."

I love my mom.



Seven weeks after my arrest, they're in jury selection. I have to be in the courtroom for that since the judge and prosecutor want to see the prospective jurors' reactions to me. They need to find twelve people who can overlook my defect. Well, Mailyn needs twelve jurors who can overlook my defect. I'm sure the prosecutor would take biased trolls in a second.

Jury selection is brutal. They go through dozens of horrified potential jurors – dismissing them for already seeing me as an abomination before hearing any facts of the case. And abominations are evil, and evil people are guilty. Even the judge seems light red.

I sit still, showing no emotions to the outside world when I'm yellow and blue beyond belief inside. I'm silent while everyone talks around me about me. The prosecutor acts like it's all a game to win, sharing light-orange whispers with his assistant – or whoever it is sitting next to him.

Mailyn works alone. She accepts jurors I think she should reject, but when I ask her about it, she explains that she can only dismiss a certain number without a concrete reason to do so. And their light red feelings toward me, apparently, are not concrete enough.

Finally, the tedious process is over, and the jury is set. I'm doomed.



I have a lot of time in my cell to think about my choices. Why did I leave Darin that night? If only I had stayed home, he couldn't have taken those sleeping pills. Why did I bother him when I found him drunk on his couch? If only I hadn't been there, he never would've cut his hand. Why did I take the job in his show? If I hadn't, we never would've become friends. Why did I have to go to Darin's show with Milo? If I wasn't there, we never would've met. Why did I have to come to the strip in the first place?

I keep going further back in time, finding places and choices that would've led anywhere but where I am. But when I made those choices, I didn't know where they'd lead.

Darin didn't know choosing me out of the audience would lead to this. He didn't know hiring me would lead to this. He didn't know getting drunk would lead to this. He didn't know any better than I did, but I'm starting to wonder if he had asked himself these questions, like I'm doing now. They add such a weight to my heart and mind.

I also spend time thinking about the people who are trying to convict me. It's amazing to me that people can take my ordinary, hum-drum facts of life and spin a criminal mastermind tale out of them. The "witnesses" I beat at the poker tables were just sore losers. Why does their testimony count for anything?

When Mom visits again, I ask her why my poker playing is so blown out of proportion. She informs me that it's been a media free-for-all on the outside, with Darin being a headliner at the Piazza for the last few years. His fortune's vastly over-estimated; his depression, vastly under-estimated. I knew he was still dark blue after losing the Piazza gig and cutting his hand. But we were happy together. Especially that last day. He was lavender, no hint of turmoil. My mom guesses it was because he had made his decision and was lavender about it.

"How could he be lavender about leaving me alone?"

"I guess he thought he was leaving you better off than you were."

"Big, dumb dork... I'm so tired, Mom. It's exhausting to be blue and yellow all the time."

And then it hits me. *I get it.*

Darin was exhausted, emotionally. His feelings couldn't take anymore. His love for me wasn't enough to overcome default blue.

But he went out of this life purple. How lilac I am that I told him how I felt about him, too: dark, dark, purple. If I'd missed that opportunity to tell him, I'd be forever red.

It's this realization that begins to heal my broken heart.

Chapter 20

I sit out the trial at Mailyn's advice. She thinks that listening colorlessly to the opening statements and beginning of the prosecutor's case will not help my defense. Having no emotional reactions, she says, sends a message to the jury: guilty. And they already don't like me.

The other inmates in the prison don't like me either. But that's mutual. I have a solo cell since the warden fears for my safety. He doesn't want a knifing on the record under his watch. When we line up for meals, no one shoves me around or touches me at all. They don't want to catch my achromatism, a disease-sounding malady I was orange to supply them in the beginning. Once, someone tripped me with her big old foot, trusting the canvas shoes to protect her. Green auras and stupid hoots came from all over the cafeteria.

"Good luck," I said, getting up in front of her and gently slapping her face with my bare hand. That bruiser ran away from me so fast. Light gold.



Another lonely night on my cot, thinking about what happened today. Mailyn reported back that the

cross-examination of the investigators went well. They couldn't really point to any physical evidence that I gave him the pills. Darin's fingerprints were the only ones on the bottle and the glass. Case closed, I would think.

I asked Mom to watch for me and let me know how Mailyn's defense is going. Mom reported that the jury seemed unconvinced by her points. "Prejudiced bastards" actually came out of my mom's mouth. I told her the story of the hicks in Hicksville who dented my van while running me out of town. She was so red, I thought she was going to break something.

"And don't you forget it!" floats in from down the corridor. It's Rigs. As in, Big Rigs. She's a truck driver who killed someone in a brawl in a tavern beside the highway. I don't know her real name. Don't want to. I just want to get out of here.



Mailyn arrives today while my mom is visiting. The three of us sit together. "I'm getting ready to rest the defense. The prosecutor offered one last chance to plea bargain. Same deal as before."

"They must not think they can win, then," I say. Mailyn looks at Mom. "What? That's a good sign, right?"

"No. They know we're on the ropes," Mailyn admits.

"The prosecutors are sage," Mom adds.

"Why? What happened? Is it because I'm colorless?"

Mailyn sighs. "That's part of it. The gambling. The tax evasion. The lack of permanent residence. The prosecution has painted you as a self-serving sociopath."

"You were supposed to defend me against all those allegations. I am *red* if you didn't know."

“I’ve done everything I can do. I recommend, as your legal counsel, you take the plea deal.”

“No. I didn’t kill him. I didn’t steal or cheat. Mom, what do you think? Has she done everything possible?”

Mom hesitates. “Maybe you should go in there and tell them the truth.”

“I don’t advise that,” my lawyer says.

I round on Maily. “The only thing you’ve offered me is prison or more prison. Let me tell my own story. At least let me face the people who are trying to put me away.”

“They won’t believe you, Lila. They won’t trust you without colors,” Maily insists.

“I have to try. I’m not going down without a fight. What’s to lose at this point?”

“You have the right.” Maily sighs again. “I’ll make the arrangements.”

She leaves and I look at Mom. “I don’t think she even believes me.”

“I haven’t wanted to be negative, but I thought her defense was half-hearted. You need to speak for yourself. Maily’s not getting it done for you.”

“Mom, you believe me, right?”

“Of course, Lila. Never in a million years would I believe you could hurt someone like that.”

“Thanks, Mom.” I hug her.

“No touching,” the guard hollers. We break apart.

“I love you, Mom.”

“I love you, Lila. Be strong. Be sage.”

“I will.”



The next day, Maily brings me a simple navy-blue dress to wear. I get as put together as I can inside a prison

consultation room. The prison bus takes me to the courthouse in cuffs. In the courtroom, I can't look at my mom even though I know she's in the gallery. When I'm in handcuffs, I don't want her to look at me either.

They remove the handcuffs and I sit down next to Mailyn. The jury is led into their special box seats, and I look at each and every one of them. They avert their eyes, or stare at me with hostile-colored feedback.

The weight of my mission here today descends on my shoulders. The jury looks ready to convict me. The only thing between me and a very long prison sentence is testifying in my own defense. But what if they don't listen to me? What if they don't believe me? A serious yellow anxiety grips my heart.

I look down at the plain dress Mailyn gave me to wear. It's got short sleeves and a V-neck, exposing way more colorless skin than I think is wise for the current circumstances. What kind of lawyer doesn't think through something like that? But maybe it's the only thing she could get ahold of. I know I don't own a dress, myself.

I look over my shoulder. My mom gives me a nod, but she's also yellow. My gaze locks with hers for a few seconds; I'm afraid if I break the connection with my only supporter, then all hope is lost. I feel a sudden chill on my arms, but I don't think it's from the air conditioning. A weird thought pops into my head: I hope Darin doesn't know what's going on here; he'd feel even worse than he did on earth, and he doesn't deserve that.

I don't know where Darin is, or what Darin is, or if he even *is* at all. God, I miss him so much. How can these people think I killed him?

The bailiff hollers. After all the standing-for-the-judge business, Mailyn calls me to the stand. The bailiff escorts me – as if I can't find it on my own – and I swear to tell the truth.

Mailyn stands in front of me, but not too close. She sort-of faces me and the jury on the side at the same time. I look up at the judge. He no longer looks at me with reds, but definitely not lavender. *Way to give me a sporting chance, old man.* The jury, too, are reds and yellows. Some look away

from me while others stare like kindergartners, maybe wondering if my voice will be demonic-sounding.

“What is your name?” Mailyn asks.

“Lila Buchanan.” My voice is shaky. I clear my throat to try to gain control over my nerves.

“What was your relationship with the deceased, Mr. Darin Sinclaire?”

“We were...” *The deceased, she says. Mr. Darin Sinclaire, she calls him.* He was just Darin. There was no formality between us. We shared a suite. We went camping sometimes. We joked around. He quizzed me before midterm exams. We took walks in the early morning coolness and chopped vegetables in the charity kitchen twice a week. On the evenings I didn’t go out to play poker, we stayed home and watched a movie or played Scrabble. He was teaching me how to play chess...

“Best friends,” I answer. Some of the jurors – and Mailyn – turn mint. “What did you think I’d say?”

“Just answer the questions. You may not ask questions of the jury,” the judge says.

“I’m asking my lawyer.”

Light yellow, the judge looks back and forth between us. “Ms. Dawson, please continue your examination of the witness.”

Mailyn regroups. “You weren’t lovers?”

I ponder that for a few seconds. “Can you define that?”

“Lovers? Uh, having a romantic or sexual relationship.”

“It wasn’t really *romantic*, but we loved each other.”

“You lived together, didn’t you?”

“Yes.”

“But it wasn’t romantic?”

“Right.”

“Why were you living together? Was it for financial reasons?”

“Darin’s contract with the Piazza wasn’t renewed. He lost his temper and broke a glass, severely cutting his hand. When we got back from the ER, he asked me to move in,

because – he said – he needed me because I was his best friend.”

“Did you sleep together?”

“We slept in the same bed ‘cause there was only one.”

Mailyn seems light yellow about my answers. I don’t understand what she wants me to say; I’m telling the truth. “Did you share finances?” she asks.

“He had already paid that month’s rent. I paid the next month. The next two, we split.”

“Were you aware of how much money Mr. Sinclair had?”

“No. He always said he had more than I did, but I didn’t know how much more.”

“You were not aware that his estate is worth two point six million dollars?”

“It is? Shit. I didn’t know that.”

“Were you aware he made you the sole beneficiary in his will?”

“No. He never said anything about his will. We never talked about money more than paying the rent.”

“Were you aware Mr. Sinclair was depressed?”

“Of course. He was blue a lot. Sometimes orange if we were doing something fun.”

“You weren’t concerned about him?”

“Not more than anyone going through a rough time. I’ve been blue many times in my life. Haven’t you?”

“Lila, did you never think that maybe he might try to end his life?”

“No. We were together. Why would he do that? He said he didn’t know where he’d be without me. I thought we were staying together.”

“Did you want to stay together?”

“Of course. I loved him. He was my best friend. He treated me like I was normal.”

“What does that mean, Lila?”

“He didn’t treat me like a freak because of my achromatism.”

“Can you tell the jury what achromatism is?”

Light yellow. “Didn’t the doctor explain it?”

Mailyn turns dark turquoise. Everyone sees it.

“Counsels, approach the bench,” the judge interrupts. I can’t hear what they’re talking about, even though I’m the closest person to them. After a few minutes, the judge sends the lawyers back to their tables. “The witness may step down.”

“What? Why?” I ask.

“Please, Miss Buchanan, step down.”

“But I want to defend myself.”

“Bailiff.”

The uniformed guy with the gun starts toward me. “Okay. Okay. I’m going.” Back to Mailyn’s table.

“This court is in recess until ten a.m. day after tomorrow.” He smacks his wooden hammer and leaves the courtroom. I look at Mom, wondering if she knows what’s happening. She’s as light yellow as I am.

“Mailyn, what’s going on?”

“I’ll be in touch.” She gets up.

“No,” I say loudly. “You talk to me now. What the hell is going on?”

She turns to me, turquoise as hell. She whispers forcefully, “I’m not your lawyer anymore, okay? Someone else will contact you in the morning.”

Light yellow. I just stand there while the bailiff approaches me with handcuffs.

Chapter 21

Yesterday, the trial flipped upside down. Today, I'm led out of my cell to the consultation room at six a.m. A man I've never met greets me without looking up. He digs around in his briefcase, shuffling papers. He's taller than me and has nice, thick brown hair, though it looks like he's run his hand through it a thousand times. The suit he wears isn't high end, but it fits him well, if a little wrinkled this morning. His tie is loose at the knot and the top button of his shirt is undone. As he stands hunched over his briefcase, pulling out folders and documents and setting them on the table between us, I wonder who this man is.

"I'm Thomas Grandier. I'm picking up this case from Mailyn Dawson."

"What happened?"

"The judge found your counsel to be less than dedicated to your case." He finally looks up from his papers and sees me for the first time – and flinches. "Uh, full disclosure. I was given this case yesterday at five p.m. and I've been up all night trying to catch up. Forgive my poor manners."

"No problem."

"I understand that you were in the middle of testifying yesterday."

"We had just started."

"What kind of testimony prep did Ms. Dawson do with you?"

“Nothing.”

“None at all?”

I shake my head. “She kept telling me to take the plea deal.”

Thomas sighs and sits down. I sit on the other side of the table from him. “You go back on the stand tomorrow morning. We have one day to prepare.”

“Okay. What do we do?”

“I’m going to ask you questions that lead the jury to believe that you are innocent of the charges. You’re going to answer my questions in the most succinct way possible.”

“Okay.”

“Let’s give it a try. Miss Buchanan—”

“Can’t you just call me Lila?”

“Does that make you more comfortable?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. Lila, did you know Mr. Sinclair had sleeping pills in the suite?”

“No.”

“You never saw sleeping pills?”

“No.”

“You never bought sleeping pills?”

“No.”

“Did you share the bathroom?”

“Not at the same time.”

A hint of light gold flashes on Thomas. “Did you ever supply Mr. Sinclair with medications or sleep aids?”

“The day after the ER, I brought him pain pills ‘cause his hand was hurting. After that, he was a big boy and got his own.”

“Don’t get sarcastic on the stand.”

“Well, what’s the point of these questions?”

“The prosecutor has created the picture that you were in the habit of running Mr. Sinclair’s life because he was incapable.”

“What? Where did he get that idea?”

Thomas flips through his papers. “A bellhop described you and him taking a passed-out Sinclair to his suite on a luggage dolly.”

“Oh brother. Yes, Darin was drunk. Once. He’d just lost his contract and his agent.”

“And you took charge of the pain medications for both of you as you left the ER.”

“His hand was in bandages. He was exhausted. He could hardly walk at that point. Of course I took care of him.”

“Even though he caused the glass shard to penetrate your eyeball?”

“It was an accident. He felt dark turquoise about it, but I wasn’t red.”

Thomas stares at me as he sits back in his chair. “How would you describe your relationship?”

“Best friends.”

“You loved him, didn’t you?”

“Yes.”

“You took care of him.”

“We took care of each other. That’s what friends do.”

“You ever sleep together?”

“Every night since I moved in.”

“I mean, sex.”

“Oh. Yes. A couple times.”

“How many is that?”

“Twice.”

“Seriously?”

“Yes.”

“Did you want your relationship to be more than ‘best friends’?”

I shrug one shoulder. “I was happy with how things were. I thought he was, too.”

“What led to the two sexual incidents?”

“Is that really relevant?”

“I believe it is.”

“Well, the first time was on my birthday when I threw a disaster of a party. He stayed to help clean up. Then we were talking, and I asked him to...”

“Yes?”

I close my eyes. “...to show me how making love was supposed to be, since my only other...” Silence takes over for a few beats of my heart.

“Lila, were you victimized before you met Darin?”

“Traumatized... by a bad date.”

“Were you date-raped?”

My eyes meet his. “No. Not that. It was just awkward and embarrassing; physically and emotionally painful.”

“And your experience with Darin was... therapeutic?”

“He was so good to me. I didn’t know it could be like that.”

“But you only did it once more?”

“The day he died.”

“Why did you do it that day, and not any other time in the intervening months?”

“I don’t know. We could’ve, but I don’t think he was *in the mood*. ‘Cept one night in the pool... Anyway, that last day, he looked at me all dark purple and said he loved me. Then he kissed me so...” Something’s running down my face. I touch my cheek and my hand comes back wet. “What is this?”

“It came out of your eyes.”

“Am I bleeding? My eye was bleeding before – with the glass in it.”

“No. Not bleeding.” Thomas leans forward, staring at my eyes. “They’re overflowing.”

“I’m not enough of a freak. Now my eyes overflow.” I sniff. “And now I’m getting a cold. Great.”

“Lila, have you ever been examined by a specialist in rare disorders?”

“No. But one of the ER doctors said my condition is called achromatism.” Thomas looks the term up on his phone, scrolling through much more information than I thought would be there.

“It seems that achromatics tend to express emotions in other ways. Facial movements, body posture, and tearing. That’s the overflowing eyes.”

“That’s for blues. My eyes have hurt before... when I’m blue. It’s for blues, right?”

“Can you tell me the rest of what happened the day Darin died?”

“We were talking about moving to an apartment because he said it was cheaper. I said I wanted to stay where we were.”

“You argued?”

“Not at all. He made a suggestion; I was willing to play more poker to be able to stay in the Piazza. He didn’t seem disappointed or anything.”

“What next?”

“Well, like I said, he had that look. Deep purple. It touched me.” I press my flat hand to my heart. “He kissed me, and we went to the bedroom.”

“And you left at some point.”

“Yes. I let him sleep and went to the Montaña to play poker. It was our only income, so I thought I’d better not shirk. I stopped at the grocery on the way home, and when I got home, he was still asleep. Things were different in the room, so I knew he’d been up while I was out. I got nervous because I couldn’t see any colors on him. I tried to wake him up. I yelled at him to wake up, but he didn’t. I called nine-one-one.” Another tear rolls down my face. I wipe it away.

“I believe you, Lila,” Thomas says. “You shouldn’t take a plea deal.”

I sigh deeply. “Thank you.”

Chapter 22

The new day in court seems so much better. While I'm there, Thomas gets a doctor on the stand to testify to the characteristics of achromatism. "Do achromatics lack emotions?" he asks.

"Definitely not. They experience all emotions like everyone else. They simply lack the outward manifestation of emotion."

When the prosecutor cross-examines, he gets the doctor to admit that *he* had not examined me personally, so he couldn't be sure *I* had emotions. Any hope I had that the doctor's testimony had helped my case is deflated soon after.



Thomas puts me on the stand again. He asks me the questions he asked the day before in the prison. I answer as briefly as I can. With questions, he leads me through the whole last day of Darin's life.

"So, to be clear, he was the one who suggested a cheaper place to live."

"Yes."

"Why do you suppose he suggested that?"

“Because he lost his contract at the Piazza and didn’t think he could get another gig with his injured hand.”

“Why didn’t he propose using his vast stores of wealth to pay the bills?”

“I don’t know. He never mentioned having vast stores of wealth. He implied he made more money than I did, but he had no current income. I didn’t know there was back-up money.”

“Did you know the Piazza was suing Darin for breach of contract for the last month that he didn’t fulfill?”

“They did?” A new pink for the stresses that drove Darin to suicide flows through me. “How could they treat him like that? He couldn’t perform because of his hand. They knew that.”

“How do you feel about this news?”

“I’m pink. On top of everything else, Darin was dealing with that? No, I’m red. How can people kick a man when he’s down? Sue a guy right after you yank away his contract? What kind of heartless bastards are running the world anyway?”

“Can you fathom why Darin would take his life at that time?”

“No.”

“No? Losing the contract. Feeling guilty for the cast and crew losing their jobs. Damaging his hand when he relied on sleight of hand for his living. Being sued by the hotel that previously employed him. All this doesn’t help you understand his suicide?”

“Logically, I guess I can understand that. Emotionally, I can’t. I thought we could weather any storm if we helped each other. He got me through a hard time. I tried to be there when his life was in the crapper. I thought I was helping. I guess... not enough.” *Shit*. Those tears again. I wipe them away.

Thomas, sage, says, “No further questions for this witness.”

The prosecutor stands to ask his questions. “How did you meet Darin Sinclair?”

“I saw his show and he picked me out of the audience for a trick on stage.”

“What was the trick?”

“It was a card trick. I picked a card and signed it. He made it move to my date’s shirt pocket.”

“Didn’t he first embarrass you with a joke about a faith healing?”

“Yes.”

“That didn’t faze you?”

“It did.”

“What did you do?”

“As soon as the trick was over, I left the theater.”

“Why?”

“Because I was humiliated.”

“You held a grudge about this humiliation?”

“For about an hour.”

“Did you look for a way to pay him back for the humiliation?”

“Of course not. How would I even have contact with him again?”

“But you did. How did you insinuate yourself into his life?”

“What do you mean, insinuate?” I ask.

“Wheedle. Worm your way in. Cozy up to him.”

“I didn’t go after him. I was in a bar, and he spotted me. He came to me. He talked about a new illusion he’d been thinking about that involved me.”

“What was the illusion?”

I turn to the judge. “Do I have to tell that? It was one of Darin’s trade secrets.”

“Describe what the audience would see.”

“But that would give it away,” I protest.

“The man is dead,” the prosecutor says. “The secret does him no good now.”

Dark red as hell. “I know he’s dead.” I enunciate. “I live with that pain every day. I’m tortured with questions of why I didn’t see it coming. What should I have done that I didn’t do? Why wasn’t I enough for him? Why did he draw me into his life and then leave me alone?”

“The illusion, ma’am?”

“The least I can do for him now is protect his reputation and his memory. I can protect his secrets.”

“Those are lovely sentiments, but you could be lying about your feelings about him, and we would never know it.”

“I’m not lying,” I state loudly. The jury flinches away from me.

Thomas stands. “Your honor, I object to counsel’s badgering of the witness about her disability.”

“I am trying to show the court, your honor, that the witness is capable of lying to us, lying to Mr. Sinclair, and lying about her responsibility for his death, and no one would have a clue.”

While the prosecutor explains his tactic, a woman in a smart-looking business suit enters the courtroom through the back door and leans over the rail to hand something to Thomas. He reads it and nods to the woman. “Your honor, I request a recess to look into new information that has come to my attention.”

“Court is in recess for lunch. Be back at one o’clock.”
Bang.

I look around, not sure what’s happening. Thomas beckons me to come off the stand. “Lila,” he whispers, “I might have something that’ll help.”

“What?”

“I’m not sure, exactly. I need to go check it out. Bailiff will get you lunch. I’ll see you at one.”

“Okay.” I watch Thomas leave the courtroom in a hurry. My mom approaches me as the bailiff takes my hand to put a cuff on it. “Can I have lunch with my mom?” I ask the bailiff.

“She can come to the holding cell.” I look at my mom and she nods. She follows her cuffed daughter to a jail cell.

“Why do they have to do that?” Mom asks after the bailiff sets me loose in the holding cell.

“I don’t know. I guess I’m such a huge threat...”

“No mistaking your sarcasm.” I smile at my mom. “There’s my girl.”

“What?”

“That face you make when you’re light gold.”

“Oh. Liam named it: smile.”

“If only everyone could see what I can see.”

“What do you see, Mom?”

“Your capacity to love. Your caring nature. I remember you used to bring home stray animals. You’d put up ‘found’ posters in the neighborhood.”

“No one ever came for them. I wanted to keep them.”

“Well, I didn’t want to alienate your father more than he already was...”

“I know. We couldn’t keep a pet. We couldn’t force another unwelcome creature on him.”

“Lila...” Mom’s pink.

“I’m sorry, Mom. I’m sorry for wrecking your marriage.”

“You didn’t wreck anything. He just didn’t have the capacity...” she trails off.

“He has plenty of capacity for love and affection. I saw it when he was with his *new wife*.”

My mom looks away. “Nothing was your fault, Lila.” Her pink starts toward dark turquoise.

“No, Mom. Don’t do that. Nothing was your fault, either.”

“I must have done something wrong when I was pregnant with you. For the life of me, I don’t know what it was.”

“Right. You, alone, made the one mistake no one else in the world ever did and made me colorless. Did you drink stain remover? Did you watch black-and-white TV constantly?”

Mom lightens to a soft light gold. “I’m so proud of what you’ve accomplished in this world when everyone looks at you the way they do.” She points toward the courtroom.

“I’m used to it.”

“Still.” She settles into a hard chair. “Tell me about Darin.”

Sigh. “On stage he was all greens, but off stage, he had his yellows. And teal.” I sit down with my mom. “I think he struggled with the color thing at first. But after a while – before he lost the gig – he was orange and lavender around

me. He accepted me and made me feel normal. Better than normal. I was orange when I was around him... And he was sensitive and sweet. He was the only person in the whole city who gave a damn about me. And we could talk about anything... Do you remember Liam, from grade school?"

"Sure."

"Darin was a lot like him, only there were no magic glasses to fix his depression. There was no magic for the magician. All illusions..."

Tears fall out of my eyes. My eyes hurt. My head hurts. My heart hurts.



At one o'clock, we're all back in the courtroom and Thomas stands. "Your honor, before the cross-examination of the defendant resumes, defense wishes to call a new witness to the stand."

"This is irregular. Who is your new witness?" the judge says.

"An expert on the outward manifestation of achromatism."

"I object, your honor." The other lawyer is on his feet.

"Your honor, my client is facing life in prison for a crime the prosecution says is a result of her nonexistent emotions. Not only is my client abundant in normal human emotions, we can prove it."

"I'll allow it." The judge's decision makes the prosecutor sit down.

Thomas stands confidently. "The defense calls Liam Hansen to the stand."

What?

From the back of the gallery, Liam stands and walks forward.

How is he here?

He's tall and handsome and sage. He's a grown-up version of the high school teen I last saw more than five years ago, wearing a suit and tie, shined shoes, and perfect hair. He takes his oath and sits in the witness chair. He looks at me, light green. I guess graduating from MIT has catapulted him to some great job. But I thought he was a tech guy, not an achromatism expert.

Why is he here?

"State your name," Thomas says.

"Liam Hansen."

"Do you know the defendant, Lila Buchanan?"

"Yes."

"How do you know her?"

"We grew up together."

"Were you friends?"

"Yes."

"When was the last time you saw Lila?"

"High school graduation."

"What was the thing that drew you to Lila as a friend?"

"We were both put in special education because of our birth defects. I was new to the school. She interacted with me kindly, and our friendship grew out of that."

"Your birth defect?"

"I was born color blind," Liam explains.

"So, to you, Lila looked like everyone else."

"Yes."

"So, to you, she seemed perfectly normal."

"Yes."

"Did you ever get the sense that she had no emotions?"

"No. She had normal emotions. She got in the habit of tossing out descriptions mid-sentence."

"Can you give an example?"

"Sure. 'Soccer practice was great today. Green. I scored twice.'"

"I see. So, she narrated her emotional state to you."

"Yes."

"When did she start doing this?"

“First day I was in that school.”

“Tell me your opinion of Lila.”

“Lila’s a compassionate friend. As you might imagine, I had trouble understanding colors. I didn’t know the subtleties of light and dark. She did for me what even my family didn’t do: she trained me in color definitions.”

“I don’t understand. Can you elaborate?”

“Lila could see my colors. I couldn’t, but I felt my feelings. She trained me by telling me what she saw on me, so I would know what light red felt like, what gold was, what people meant by ‘light yellow’ or ‘pink.’ So when she’d tell me what color she felt, I understood. For the first time in my life, I understood what people were talking about when they described emotions with names of colors. My family sometimes called out their colors, but it was meaningless to me until Lila taught me. She also told me other people’s colors, because I’d always misinterpret people’s motivations or state of mind.”

“I see. Did Lila ever lie to you about what colors she or other people were?”

“No.”

“How do you know? You couldn’t see if her colors contradicted her words.”

“I spent seven hours a day with Lila for five years. We knew how to communicate.” Liam turns his gaze to me, lilac. I smile at him.

I can’t explain the light green I feel with Liam in the room. Even more than Darin did, Liam understood me. I think Darin and I would’ve gotten there eventually, but I only knew Darin for... not even a year. I know we could’ve gotten there if he’d stayed with me. On top of my gratitude for Liam standing up for me yet again, a keen loss stabs me because Darin and I didn’t get the chance to grow into that. I bow my head and hide the drops that leak out of my eyes.

“Mr. Hansen, are you still color blind?” Thomas asks.

“I am. But I have hue lenses that give me color sight.”

“Is there something like hue lenses for an achromatic, like Lila?”

“Yes.”

My head snaps up. Liam stares at me, sage.

“Can you describe it?” Thomas asks.

“I can demonstrate, if you like.”

The prosecutor stands. “Objection. Whatever this man claims to have, it can be simple trickery.”

“Sustained,” the judge says. “Mr. Hansen, can you prove this... device... is not a trick?”

“I believe so, sir. This isn’t a trick; it’s technology.” Liam pulls a string of white beads out of his suit jacket pocket. “This is a collection of proiciente motus modules.”

“Say again?”

“Emotional projection beads.”

Thomas reenters the arena. “Mr. Hansen, can you please explain these modules?”

“Yes. These are highly sensitive monitors of various bodily autonomic functions, the body’s reactions that are not under the control of the conscious mind.”

“Can you name a few of these functions?”

“Heart rate, perspiration, internal temperature, reflexes, breathing rate, blood pressure, you want more?”

Thomas shakes his head slightly. “I think we get the idea. What do these modules do?”

“They monitor those measurable functions of the body – the things we don’t control, the things our brain stems control for us automatically – and translate them into color. The colors represent the emotional spectrum of a normal human.”

“How do you make it work?” Thomas asks.

“You mean the science behind it?” Liam asks.

“No, how do you turn it on?”

“It just needs to be worn over the sternum, similar to a necklace.”

“Your honor,” Thomas says, “we ask the court to allow the defense to test this device on a subject of your choosing.”

“The bench defers the choice to the prosecution.”

The prosecutor flusters and stands slowly. “Uh, prosecution accepts the offer.” He looks to his assistant. They

whisper together. “Prosecution requests assistant prosecutor be the test subject.”

Thomas looks to Liam; Liam remains sage. “Are you sure?” Thomas mouths, answered by Liam’s nod. “Defense accepts prosecutor’s choice.” The assistant prosecutor stands in the middle of the courtroom. The bailiff secures the beads around his neck, hanging over his chest. “Mr. Hansen, is skin contact necessary?” Thomas asks.

“Yes.”

“The subject will open his shirt,” the judge orders.

The man is turquoise as he removes his tie and unbuttons the top three buttons of his dress shirt. When the beads touch his skin, they turn turquoise. The man looks down at the beads and turns mint. The beads transition to mint, an exact match. The courtroom is buzzing with fifty whispered outbursts.

Thomas steps up to the man. “Forgive me, Seymour,” he says quietly near the man’s head. “Your haircut looks like you stuck your head in a blender.” Seymour instantly turns red at the insult, and so do the beads.

I am utterly dark mint. I look at Liam, wondering how he did it. He winks at me. I smile widely.

It takes a few minutes for the judge to get everyone to settle down, then Thomas asks to recall me to the stand. Liam sits next to my mom now, just like he did at all those soccer games. I sit in the chair up front. Thomas hands the beads to me, and I put them around my neck. They instantly glow yellow, then light orange, and after a few seconds, lilac as I look at Liam with gratitude. Thomas, sage, says two words: “Your witness.”

Chapter 23

The prosecutor hesitantly stands. “Uh, Miss Buchanan, how did you feel about Mr. Sinclair?”

The beads beat me to the punch. They glow purple. “I loved him.”

He paces in front of his table for a few seconds, then says, “None of this alters the fact that you benefitted greatly from Mr. Sinclair’s death in the form of a hefty inheritance.”

The beads tell the court I’m pink. “I had my own money. I didn’t know about his will, I didn’t know about his estate, and I didn’t know he was planning to kill himself.” The beads match my teal. “I didn’t want him to die.”

“So, you regret it now?”

“I am not dark turquoise,” I say, pointing to the red beads. “I’m not guilty. I didn’t kill him.” I collect myself; the beads turn sage. “I had nothing to do with his suicide. If I could go back and stop it, I would.” I look around the room and settle on the jury. They no longer look at me light red. The beads around my neck tell them I’m sincere.

I turn back to the prosecutor. “I’ll pay the back taxes. I’ll pay the penalties. I didn’t do things wrong on purpose. I’ll forfeit the inheritance if you say I have to.” The beads return to teal. “I miss him so much, I’d give it all up to be able to go back and stop him.”



Next day, Thomas meets me in the consultation room after lunch. “Closing arguments are done. Jury’s deliberating.”

“What do you think will happen?”

“Prosecutor’s argument was weak. We have a good chance.”

“How did you find Liam?” I’ve wondered all night how Liam ended up in my courtroom.

“He came to us.”

“Really? Out of nowhere?”

“Out of MIT. The proiciente motus necklace was his master’s project.”

“I hope they awarded the degree,” I say. “Orange.”

“He deserves it,” Thomas agrees.

“Did he go back to MIT?”

“No. He was in court today. He asked if you were all right, why you weren’t there.”

“Did you tell him?”

“Yes.”

“I can’t believe he did all this for me. I haven’t seen him or spoken to him in five years. I didn’t think he gave me one thought after he left for college.”

“Sounds to me like he feels indebted to you.”

“We were friends. You help your friends, right?”

Thomas nods, light purple. His phone buzzes. When he looks at it, he turns mint. “Jury’s back.”

Instant dark yellow. “What do we do?”

“Get your travelling clothes on. We’re going for the verdict.”



Within an hour, we're all back in the courtroom. I look behind our table and find my mom and Liam sitting in the front row, dark yellow. "Don't worry, Mom."

"The court will come to order," the bailiff hollers, instantly settling the noise down to nil. The judge and jury come in, one at a time. Most of them are sage. I suppose they're confident in their decision, but what's the decision? I'm dyin' here.

"Has the jury reach a verdict?" the judge asks.

One of them stands. "We have, your honor."

"What say you?"

I hold my breath.

"On the count of first-degree murder, we, the jury, find the defendant, Lila Buchanan, not guilty." My mom exhales loudly behind me. I do too, feeling lavender for the first time in months.

The judge talks to various people, "The court would like to thank..." I don't know what. I'm not listening. When he hits the wooden hammer on the desk, I look at Thomas. "Is it over?"

"It's over. You're free to go, Lila."

I throw my arms around him. "Thank you for believing me. Thank you. Thank you."

"Live a good life – for Darin."

"I will." I turn to my mom who's ready to jump over the barrier. "Mom, thank you for being here for me." We hug long and hard. She lets go of me and turns me toward Liam. We stare at each other. "Lilac. Thank you," I tell him.

Purple, Liam holds out his arms. I throw my arms around his neck; he hugs me back. "You saved me," I whisper.

"You saved me first," he whispers in reply.

"Lila, the press is outside. They'd like a statement. Are you willing?" Thomas asks.

Liam and I loosen our grip on each other. "Don't leave, please. I want to catch up with you."

"I'll be here," he promises.

I go with Thomas out in front of the courthouse. Not just press have shown up; about a hundred people are here with signs. “I can see Lila” and “Lila’s beyond colors” and many more I can’t even focus on. “What’s all this?” I ask Thomas.

“You have supporters.”

“I do?”

Thomas takes the microphone and talks to the press in his lawyerly way about justice prevailing and stuff. I stand behind him with Mom and Liam close by. Then he asks me to say something to the press. “Just your feelings about the trial and verdict. Mr. Hansen, can we use those beads again?”

Liam looks at me for confirmation. “I don’t think you need them,” he says, holding them out to me in his open hand.

“But you worked so hard on them...”

“Nah. It was easy. A weekend project.”

I smile at Liam. “You never lied to me before.” I squeeze his hand closed over the beads, then step up to the microphone. Strangers hold out their own mics and carry video cameras on their shoulders. “I, um, I’m orange that this is all over. It’s been difficult to be accused of a crime I could never, ever commit, but all of that’s overshadowed by the loss I feel,” I clear my throat, “the loss of Darin Sinclair, a caring, generous person who was nothing like the man you saw on stage. On stage, he was confident and showy. Off stage, he was humble and giving. The greed and meanness that drove him to suicide should be on trial. The forces that care more about money than people should be restrained behind bars. The world is worse off with people like his employer and his agent in it. The world is worse off *without* Darin in it. My world is crushed.”

I back away from the microphone stand but reporters start shouting questions at me. “Lila, why do you think the police focused on you as a suspect instead of determining Darin Sinclair’s death was a suicide?”

I turn to Thomas. “I don’t know why.”

“Shall I take that one?” he offers.

“Yes, please.”

“Ladies and gentlemen, Lila was suspected of orchestrating Mr. Sinclair’s death for one reason and one reason only: prejudice. Lila was pre-judged to be a shady character simply because she exhibits no color. The police say that it was the inheritance, which Lila didn’t even know about. But they didn’t believe her denial because she’s colorless. Her condition, called achromatism, is not understood by modern science. Why she was born with it, no one knows. But because it is rare and different and even disconcerting, people have condemned her as a sociopath, an unnatural person, even an evil being.

“She’s been run out of town at gunpoint, she’s been shunned and ridiculed, she’s been treated like a leper, and even railroaded into a near-conviction all because she was born without colors. No matter the truth that she felt emotions as deeply as anyone else, her inability to display them branded her a menace to society and a murderer. It’s shameful. Absolutely disgraceful that this accusation was even made. Mr. Sinclair’s letter was clear. His attorney, who updated his will before he died, deemed him to be of sound mind and body, and perfectly capable of making financial and life decisions.

“It’s clear to me that Darin Sinclair decided to leave this life on his own terms. He arranged for all his worldly possessions to go to the person he loved. He explained his decision in a letter. He expressed his love to Lila in a way she couldn’t misunderstand, then took his own life. He left on his own terms.

“And Lila has suffered enough. I ask you to respect her privacy and let her move freely. Thank you.”

Liam’s arm is around me. I look up at him, tears streaming down my face. He wipes them gently off my cheeks. “Come on. Let’s get out of here.”

Chapter 24

Mom, Liam, and I order drinks in an upscale bar where they know what discretion means. “Where are you staying, Liam?” I ask.

“Poor grad student here. Lucky Dice Motel.”

“Are you still at the Oasis, Mom?”

“Yes.”

“If my money’s been unfrozen, I’ll get us all rooms at the Caraway Bay. It’s really nice. Comfortable. Not like the Piazza, but...”

“That’s not necessary, Lila,” my mom protests.

“It’s absolutely necessary. I’ve been on a cot for the last two months. I’m sleeping at the Caraway and you’re coming with me.” Our drinks arrive. I lift my martini glass. “To Darin Sinclair. He loved martinis; he loved me. No accounting for taste.” I down half the martini in one gulp. Managing to swallow it instead of spitting out the foul drink, I gasp for air. Mom and Liam watch me, mint.

“Are you going to be all right?” Mom asks.

I stare at the olive in my glass. “Eventually, I suppose.”

“Well, then, since we’re celebrating your freedom, I’d like to make an announcement.”

I look at Mom expectantly.

“Simon and I are getting married.”

“Dark orange, Mom.” We hug.

“Congratulations, Mrs. Buchanan,” Liam adds.

“When did this happen?” I ask.

“Right before you called me from... you know.”

“I’ve ruined things again. You just got engaged, then you leave your fiancé to take care of me for weeks on end. I’m sorry, Mom.”

“You always come first in my life, Lila. No one’s more important to me than you.”

“Well, you need to get back to Simon. Stat. You’re getting on a plane first thing tomorrow morning. You’ve wasted enough time on me. Gold.”

“If you’re okay, then I think I should be getting home.”

“Definitely. My apologies to Simon. Be sure to tell him. And you, master scientist? What’s your plan?”

“Fluid.”

“Maybe I can show you around my town tomorrow. Hey, I just thought of something. Where’s all my stuff?”

“What stuff?”

“The stuff from the Piazza.”

“Maybe they stored it.”

“For a fee, most likely,” I murmur.

“I’ll help you track it down,” Liam offers.



I put Mom on a morning flight home, then Liam and I trek over to the Piazza to ask about my stuff. “It was held for thirty days. No one picked it up, so it was sold to a pawn shop.”

“Are you shitting me? You sold all my things to a pawn shop. Which one?”

“Gordy’s, on Second Street.”

“Thanks for nothing.”

We trek over to Gordy's, an over-stuffed mad-sale-looking store, that seems to do lots of buying but not much selling. "I'm looking for a jewelry box."

"I've got a few right over here. Whaddaya like? Wood? Painted? Gold leaf?" Gordy is so drowning in clutter, he doesn't even look at me long enough to be freaked out by my colorlessness.

I spy my box at the bottom of a stack of other boxes. "How much is that one?"

"Oh, that one's nice. Velvet lined inside, not felt. Monogamy inlay, you see?"

"I think you mean, mahogany," Liam suggests.

"Yeah. That's right. Fifty-five."

I pay for the box and open it. "Where are the earrings and the necklace?"

"Was empty when I got it," Gordy insists.

"Stinking thieves at the Piazza. Thank goodness I was wearing the bracelet when they arrested me. At least the police give things back to you." I hold my wrist up to show Liam.

"That's all you wanted to get back? Maybe more of your stuff is in there."

"This is all that matters. These two."

"Okay. Where to next?" Liam asks.

"Wanna see my camping van?"

"Sure."

"Then we have to go to the mall and buy some clothes. You want some clothes? My treat."

"I have enough clothes. Thanks. Unless you're saying my clothes suck."

"That suit was pretty nice. How'd you come to own a suit?"

"Graduation. MIT. You have to dress up for that there."

"Tell me about MIT."

Liam and I spend the whole day catching up. I show him my van and my favorite barbeque, the fountains and the laser show, everything that has become ho-hum to me but's new and glitzy to him. Well, my van's not glitzy. I never did go back to get the stars added to the paint job. I should do that...

He tells me about elite college life, dorms, apartments, roommates, and all the studying. Back at the Caraway Bay, he asks to see how I play poker. For his entertainment, I turn one hundred into three and cash out. “That was brilliant, Lila. Now don’t forget to pay your taxes,” he teases, gold as when we were kids.

“Still seems unfair. If you win a pie in a raffle, are you supposed to cut out a piece and give it to the government?” As I look at him, the lights of the slots flash artificial colors on his face. “Let’s go somewhere quieter. I can only take this noise for so long.”

“Lead the way.”

I lead him to my room. I kick off my shoes and turn on the TV. Lounging on a stack of pillows, I invite Liam to relax and kick back. Turquoise, he gets on my bed next to me. “Need more pillows?” I ask.

“No. I’m fine.”

I flip through the channels until something catches my eye: Thomas making his speech in front of the courthouse. A field reporter talks about it and proceeds to interview people from the crowd. “Hey, that’s Gina.”

“You know her?”

“Yeah, she’s a poker dealer at... it’s been a while. Colosseum, I think.”

“Lila’s always been a decent person. I mean, once I got over the shock of seeing her, I found her to be nice. Good tips. Never took more than a hundred, more or less, off any one guy.”

The face on the screen changes to a familiar-looking man. “Lila saved my life.”

“What?”

“Turn it up.”

“She saw I couldn’t afford to lose anymore. She physically dragged me out of my chair and listened to my problems, then told me to go home. I’ll never forget it. She said, ‘Use your gambling time to get a second job. Don’t lose your family.’ I’ll never forget the way she said, ‘If I had a

normal life like you, I wouldn't waste it in a casino.' Wherever you are, Lila, thanks. You saved my marriage."

"Son of a gun," I mumble. One more face shows up. "Oh my god. Milo."

"Lila's a person with real, deep feelings. We all hurt her by judging, staring, or avoiding staring, or scooting away at the card table, or taking advantage of her innocence and desire to be loved. I'm so glad she was acquitted. I wish her the best."

"As you can see," the reporter sums up, "judging Lila Buchanan by her colors – or lack thereof – leads to our loss, not hers. I'm Amy Jorgen reporting from outside the county courthouse."

"How do you like that?" Liam asks.

"Unbelievable. You think it'll last? All the good will?"

"Honestly, no."

"Me neither." I continue to click through the channels. "Oh, Liam. Remember this movie?"

"Sure. Terrible."

"Right? Can we watch it?" I glance at Liam to see if he objects. He's staring at me, looking light purple, though it's tough to tell by the light of the TV. I mute it and slide down so I can rest my head on my pillow pile. "What?"

He reclines into a casual posture on his side, his head resting on his upturned hand. "Lila, I've wanted to tell you something."

"Okay."

"It's about high school."

"Wow. Dark ages. What about high school?"

"Do you remember that day I said you were... I'm so dark turquoise... I said you were the only DY left?"

"Yeah."

"Later you said you were orange for my good fortune – getting the glasses."

"Uh huh."

"That cut me, Lila. It cut me deep."

"Um... I think you got that wrong, Liam. You cut me that day. Your rejection hurt. I still wanted to be friends."

“Wait. I didn’t explain that right. You didn’t... I was wounded by my realization that I was an asshole, and you were so generous with your friendship. I punished myself, Lila. But then I decided something. I decided I was going to make ‘hue lenses’ for you. Well, you know what I mean: hue emitters.”

“When did you decide that?”

“It was a few weeks later that I came up with the idea. It was perfect – in my mind. I would figure it out and make it and give it to you so we could be friends again.”

“Liam...”

“I just had to make it up to you. I had to get your forgiveness so you’d be my friend.”

“All you had to do was ask. You didn’t need a peace offering.”

“I was a stupid teenager. I didn’t know anything about girls. Anyway, I took all the science classes that were offered at the school. I realized I wasn’t going to find the solution in high school, so I set my sights on getting into a great tech school. And I did. I tapped into every resource I had there: professors, research papers, everything.”

“When did you finish it?” I ask softly.

“Couple months ago. Bachelor’s: check. Master’s: check. Find Lila: roadblock. You don’t have a presence on social media.”

“You didn’t ask my mom?”

“I called your mom’s house, but no one answered – for days.”

“Oh, right. She was here, ‘cause I was in jail.”

“Yeah. But the story, Lila, it went national.”

“You’re kidding me.”

“It’s true. ‘Emotionless woman kills famous magician.’ It was headline news, even where I live.”

“Darin wasn’t that famous, was he?”

“Pretty famous. He had specials on TV. You can access them online.”

“I didn’t know. I thought he was just a local big shot.”

“Well, I took buses across the country to get here. Then they wouldn’t let me into the courtroom.”

“Why didn’t you just tell them we were old friends?”

“I did. They didn’t believe me.”

“But, you’re colorful.”

“No one believed you had any friends. Your first lawyer kinda sucked. She wouldn’t listen to one word from me. Finally, when you got the new lawyer, I was able to convince his associate to give him a note.”

“All that happening behind my back, and Mailyn never told me any of this.”

“Getting Thomas assigned to your case saved you.”

“You saved me.”

Liam shrugs noncommittally. “I helped, but... Lila, I’m so sorry for high school. Please forgive me.”

“I can’t believe you carried guilt around all these years. I didn’t hate you, and I wasn’t mad at you. I knew you belonged with the science nerds, like I belonged with the soccer girls. I did miss you, though.”

“I missed you, too. Especially at MIT when I didn’t even know where you were. At least in high school I could see you ‘round campus. I saw that you were orange without me.”

I don’t tell Liam I wasn’t all that orange in high school. I don’t tell him that navigating school without him was teal and hard. I don’t tell him that when we said good-bye at graduation, I wished he would kiss me. Nor do I tell him that for months – okay, years – afterward, I thought about him and wished to have another chance.

I don’t tell him any of these things because even though he devoted his school years to solving my colorlessness, he did it out of guilt. Guilt and pity. “Liam, if what you want is forgiveness, then rest assured: you’re forgiven. No hard feelings. I’m grateful you made those beads for me. It’s a thoughtful and generous gift. I’ll hold on to them in case I ever get arrested again. ... Gold.”

He’s blue. “Oh. Yeah, right.” He pulls them out of his pocket and gives them to me.

“Y’see? I needed that jewelry box.”

“Yeah. You sure do.”

“But think of how famous you’ll be if you get a patent for the proficient moats –”

Liam shows light gold for a moment. “Proiciente motus.”

“Yeah, that’s what I said.” I smile. He puts his hand on my cheek. “I’m lilac that you’re here, Liam.”

His thumb caresses my cheek while his warm palm cradles my face. “Lila...”

I wait for the rest. “What?”

“It’s great to catch up.”

The room falls dark when I turn off the TV. I scoot over next to Liam and put an arm around his waist and my head by his arm. He lays his head down next to mine and reaches an arm around me. “Good night, Liam.”

“Good night...” he whispers very quietly, “...Lilove.”

Chapter 25

Four weeks after the end of the trial, Liam is still with me. We stay in one room that has two queen size beds, because it's cheaper than two rooms. We don't do too much. We talk. We watch TV. We play cards. We go for walks on the strip. We bought a big puzzle and work on it when we have nothing else to do. He works on his computer while I play videos on mine.

Last week I found Darin's TV special from years ago online. I've watched it a dozen times, as if I'd not seen his show enough already. One of those times, I screenshot a paused picture of him that looks the most like I remember him on stage the time we connected emotionally. That was the day he gave me the jewelry box after the show. I stare at that screenshot a lot.

Liam catches me watching the show yet again. "Lila."

I pull the ear bud out. "What?" I'm pretty sure he's going to tell me it's not healthy to cling to Darin this way. But what am I supposed to do? Forget about him? I couldn't keep him alive in real life, but I can keep him alive in my memory.

"Um, in the morning, would you like to take a drive? Get out of town for the day?"

"Can't. I have to go to the lawyer's office in the morning to do paperwork."

"Lawyer?"

"Darin's lawyer. He called me. The inheritance. All his investments have to be put in my name."

“Oh. Maybe in the afternoon? Or the next day?”

“Maybe.”

“Can I... do anything for you?”

“I’m fine.” I recline on my bed with four pillows stuffed behind my back.

“Can I sit with you?” Liam asks. I scoot over to make room for him. He slides in next to me and looks at my computer. “Are there any videos of the show when you were in it?”

“I wish. You would be amazed. The man took my colors away every night. ‘Course, he *gave* me colors every night first.”

“I wish I could’ve seen you on stage.”

“I didn’t do anything. Just stood there looking nervous.”

“I wish I could’ve seen you orange.”

I look at Liam. I can’t remember the last time I was truly orange. Certainly not the last time Liam would’ve seen me orange. “I’m sorry.”

“No, Lila. Don’t.”

“What?”

“Don’t tell me you’re sorry. You have nothing to be sorry for.”

My eyes are filling up again. *Shit. When will that stop?* “I didn’t save him, Liam. I didn’t see it coming. I wasn’t enough for him.”

“You were everything you could’ve been for him. You’re enough, Lila.” He wraps his arms around me, hugging me as we recline on the bed. “You’re enough.”

I set the laptop aside and turn toward him, putting my arm around his middle. He rubs my back, whispering, “You’re enough,” kissing the top of my head.

Being with Liam is so comfortable. Comforting, too. I don’t know what I would do if he wasn’t here. I need him. I need him the way Darin needed me when he asked me to move in with him. “*You’re my best friend. I just need you,*” he’d said.

“Liam, you’re my best friend. I just need you.”

He hugs me tighter and puts another kiss on my head.
“I’m here for you.”

I curl my leg around his two, trapping him next to me. After a few moments like that, I lift my face toward his, craning my neck to get close to his lips. I push my body against his. “No, Lila.”

“No, what?”

“Don’t tempt me. I can’t use you like that. Not like that. And you’d regret it in the morning.”

“One regret more or less...”

“I don’t want to be your regret.”



I don’t remember falling asleep, but when I wake up, Liam’s in his own bed. I’m still in my clothes, covered with a blanket. What time is it?

Eight o’clock. I have one hour to get showered and over to the lawyer’s office. My stomach growls. Liam and I never ate dinner last night, so I order a breakfast sandwich, then head into the shower. As the water pours over me, I think about what Liam said the night before. He didn’t want to be my regret. What does he want to be? Why is he still with me after four weeks of me pining for Darin? Is he really that good a friend?

I know he’s basically on summer break, but he could be applying for jobs or grad school, or anything more productive than hanging around with dark blue Lila.

I put Liam out of my mind and focus on getting ready for my meeting with the lawyer. Wearing the most business-like clothes I own – unripped jeans and a button up blouse – I come out of the dressing area smoothing my hair. Liam wakes up. “Where...?”

“Lawyer’s. Remember?”

“Right.” He raises a hand to say good-bye, his eyes still closed. I smile at him. He’s so cute when he’s all ruffled in the morning.

My breakfast arrives as I’m heading out the door. “Oh, thanks. I’ll take it on the road,” I say to the uniformed server. “Add a tip to the bill, okay?”



I never knew there could be so many papers to sign requiring a notary – which I’ve learned what that is. But after an hour, it’s done. What was his is now mine. I would still trade it in to have Darin be alive.

It’s a weird feeling to be suddenly rich. I don’t need it. I have a simple life, simple wants. Actually, right now, I don’t want anything. Anything money can buy, that is. I ponder what to do next.

Not in life. Just what to do next today because I’m feeling teal having Darin’s money instead of Darin. I don’t want to go back to the Caraway yet. Poker? No. Drive out of town, like Liam suggested? Alone maybe?

Then it strikes me like lightning: Monique’s tattoo place. It just feels like the right thing to do. I know what I want in my tattoo, and I know where I want to place it.

Monique remembers me. Who doesn’t remember a colorless person when they meet one? “You ready for a tatt?” she asks. I nod. “Got a design in mind?”

“Sort of. I know what I want, but you need to make it artistic.”

“Can do.”

“I want you to make two letters, fancy, and put it on my wrist in a way that’ll compliment this bracelet.”

“That’s new. Huh.” She holds my arm in her hand and moves the bracelet around on my wrist. “You want it to look like a charm?”

“Yeah. Something like that.”

“What are the letters?”

“DS.”

“Why don’t you just get a custom charm for the bracelet?”

I hadn’t thought of that. But that’s not good enough. A charm could fall off, or get stolen, or tarnish. DS has to be permanent. “Can’t lose a tattoo,” I tell her.

“Let me sketch something up. You have time to wait?”

“I have nowhere to be today.” I watch Monique as she starts with a curly, script D and S and connects them with scrolls and swirls.

“How do you like that?”

“It’s nice, but...”

“Don’t hold back. If it’s not perfect, we keep working on it.”

“I can hardly find the D and S in all those squiggles.”

“Gotcha. More prominent letters, right?”

“Yeah, but not like bold Times Roman, you know?”

“Got it.” She starts over with a simpler D S. “You want hearts connecting them?”

“No. Hearts are so... high school. I like the swirls and stuff you had before. I want it to be classy.”

Monique works on the design for another ten minutes, then presents it to me. Perfect. “Have you thought about colors?”

“Can you make the letters dark purple and the swirls... a mix of the basic colors?”

“Hmmm. Each line a different color, or an ombre effect over the whole pattern?”

“The first way.”

“Let me sketch it up with colors.”

Her colored pencils feather over the curls and swirls in different colors, the lines weaving in and out of the letters,

tying them together in a beautiful, colorful lattice. “That’s perfect. Can we get started?”

“Don’t you want to know what this will cost?”

“Oh, I guess so.”

She taps her calculator. “With all the colors, it’s gonna be eight hundred.”

“Deal.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, then. Let’s get you comfortable.”

Monique works on my wrist tattoo for an hour before talking to me again. “DS. Is that for Darin Sinclaire?”

“Yes.”

“I saw the news coverage of the trial. I’m sorry for your loss.”

“Thanks.”

“Are you... doing okay? Getting back on your feet?”

“Yeah. It’s weird, though, how you can have the same life you had before you met someone, but now it’s so empty. Why can’t I feel like I did before I knew him?”

“Maybe you didn’t get closure. I mean, they didn’t let you go to the funeral, did they?”

“No.”

“Maybe you need to say good-bye.”

“I don’t want to forget him.”

“Not forget him. Let him go.”

“How do I do that?” I ask.

“I don’t know. Maybe you should go to his grave and talk to him.”

“But... he’s gone. He can’t hear me.”

“Maybe. Maybe not. But it’s not for him; it’s for you. Closure.”

Monique’s idea tumbles around in my head for the second hour of the pain-fest on my wrist. Unaware of the time going by, I’m startled when she says, “Okay. I think that does it.” I snap back to the here and now and look at my tattoo: beautiful, colorful. I love it. I give Monique an even thousand and leave with a small ice pack on my wrist.

Back at the hotel, Liam's working on his laptop at the small desk. He looks up when I come in. "Where you been?"

"Around."

"You hurt your wrist? Why do you have ice strapped around it?"

"Yeah, it hurts."

"Should we go to the doctor's?"

"No, it'll be fine. No worries." I wander to the kitchenette and open the cupboards. "You want lunch?"

"I had something around noon."

The clock on the microwave says 2:15. Already? I give up on the idea of lunch and sit down on the hotel's idea of an easy chair.

"Can I do anything for you?" Liam asks, like he does almost every day.

"Since you have your computer open, could you look up where Darin is buried?"

A little burgundy, Liam runs the search for me. "Meadow Hills Cemetery," he announces.

"Meadow? In the desert?"

"It's not around here. It's... six hundred miles north-east of here, in Kensington. Maybe that's his hometown."

"Maybe you should get back to your own life, Liam. I've derailed you long enough."

Liam's colors react weirdly: part pink and part blue. "I *want* to be here for you. I'm not tied down anywhere. I'm between college and a job. I'm in no hurry. Unless... you want me to go."

"No, I've loved having you here. But I'm checking out tomorrow. I'm going to Darin's grave to get closure."

"Oh."

"Like before, sleeping in my van."

"Do you... want company?"

"It's not a four-star hotel, Liam. It's a mattress in the back of a van."

"I know."

"You'd really come with me?"

“Yeah. I love being with you.” He instantly turns turquoise.

I look down. I find it hard to look at someone who’s turquoise. “Okay, then. Pack up tonight. We head out first thing tomorrow.”

Chapter 26

I put Liam in charge of mapping a course. We drive for four hours before stopping for gas and food. “Two-twenty down, three hundred, eighty to go.”

“That’s a good start,” I say. “Maybe another one-fifty today, then we can stop for the night. That all right?”

“Whatever you want, Lila. This is your trip. I’m just tagging along.”

I wonder why Liam is tagging along. He was in town for five weeks and hanging around with me for over four of them. Surely, he has plans that don’t include following me as I bounce around.

Don’t get me wrong. I love having Liam with me. It’s like we’re back in school, before all the high school crap, when we could talk about anything. Except we’re no longer awkward pre-teens. He’s taller than me and really good-looking. And he’s smart. Well-educated.

But he’s not orange. Not as much as I would hope for him. He’s mostly lavender, but there’s a stress he’s battling – hints of dark yellow sometimes come through – and I don’t know how to help him. He tries to hide it but, having recently failed Darin when he was over-stressed to the breaking point, I’m keenly sensitive to Liam’s uptightitude.



Day two of the graveyard-or-bust road trip started early this morning. We've found Kensington. And we've found the Meadow Hills Cemetery. It has a big gate across the road leading into it, but the gate's open, so in we go.

It's weird. I've known about cemeteries all my life, but I didn't really know anything about them. I thought they were small, fenced gardens beside churches with dozens of tombstones sticking up out of the ground. But this one is a sprawling landscape of manicured grass. There are thousands of people buried here and we can't just wander around until we find the gravesite we're looking for.

There are sections. There's one for veterans. The section for cremated people is a collection of little lockers in walls. Each religion has their own section, and the newer the grave, the farther away from the central chapel it is.

In the office they tell us that Darin's buried in the Western Glen which is so far from the chapel that we have to drive out there. Following the signage through the cemetery, passing fields of grass-covered graves marked by flat metal identification plates, we make our way to the Western Glen. We never would've known there were bodies buried in the fields if not for the bouquets of flowers sprouting up here and there at sites recently visited by loved ones.

Darin, however, is in a section full of elaborately carved headstones, marble monuments with gold lettering, and family crypts, all surrounded by an ornate shoulder-height fence. Liam and I park the van and get out. I'm stuck for a minute, looking at the fenced-in collection of headstones. The directory people gave us a map of this section, but when we finally walk through the gate, it isn't hard to spot the light green baby grass growing over the freshly turned soil.

I slow as we approach, feeling like the closer I get, the more dead Darin becomes. His headstone gleams in stark

contrast to older stone markers that have taken a beating over decades of harsh weather.

Today is not harsh, though. It's calm and quiet, save the few birds that twitter in the trees outside the fence. Adding to the peace, no one else is visiting the Western Glen right now.

The etching of his name is clear and crisp on his headstone: Darin James Sinclair. "I didn't know his middle name was James," I tell Liam, whispering because the serene spot necessitates reverence.

Liam stands at the foot of the grave while I walk along the side, not wanting to step on top of Darin. I reach out and touch the white stone, then turn my arm over and let the cool, smooth surface soothe the scabbing site of my tattoo. It gives some relief to the pain in my skin, though my heart feels heavier than before. Given the choice, I'd take the burning ache on my wrist any day of the week.

Kneeling next to the headstone, I speak to Darin out loud, not minding if Liam hears me. "I forgot to bring flowers. Sorry, D. That was stupid of me. I wasn't thinking about that. I was only thinking about finding you. Super blue right now, you know?" Tears start to fall out of my eyes. "Guess what. I have a new way to show emotion. My eyes water and overflow when I'm blue. Like right now. I wonder why I never did that before. I guess it takes extraordinary blues to turn it on. Oh, but get this. Liam – he's right here – went to college and figured out how to give me colors. It's ingenious. Better than your illusion, even, 'cause it's not fake.

"I'm talking like you can hear me. I hope you can hear me, somehow. I miss your show, Darin. I miss cooking with you. I miss strolling the strip together early in the morning when no one else is up and it's not too hot yet.

"I wish you didn't go. I really miss you. There are lots more places we could've gone camping... or whatever. If I knew you had all that money, we could've bought a real camper and explored all kinds of beautiful places. But I understand. I understand the Piazza was coming after you. I know losing your SOH hand was huge. I know you felt guilty about the crew. I know you didn't always believe in yourself.

But I wish you had believed in us. Then my eyes wouldn't be leaking right now.

"I guess it waters the grass.

"I can't give you anything else, so I give you the tears from my eyes to be in the ground with you. And you're always with me." I hold my wrist out in front of me like he can see it. "It'll look better when it heals." I run my hand over the grass that grows on his gravesite.

"I don't think I'll be coming back here anymore, Darin. I came to say good-bye. You know how I feel about you." I look up at Liam, still standing like a sentry at the foot of the grave. He is all blues, just like me.

I have one more thing to tell Darin. "I remember what you wrote in your letter. Because you want it, I'll try. Be orange, okay? Like the last day we were together."

I stand up and walk away, not looking back. Liam catches up and puts his arm around my shoulders as we walk back to the van.



We stayed in an RV park last night. It should've felt familiar and comfortable, but this morning families and seniors are here in their gigantic RVs living life and having fun. Liam and I don't really fit in. So, we start driving eastward. There's supposed to be a really nice state park about two hours away. With nothing better planned, we decide to check it out.

Liam's been kind-of quiet since Meadow Hills. I guess I have, too. Without a lot of chatter, we settle into our camp site at the state park, build a fire, and sit together staring at the dancing flames. The sun's gone down. Other groups sit around their own campfires, drinking beer or cooking hot dogs on sticks.

“You’re pretty good at building a fire,” Liam says.

“Yeah. I was a great boy scout.”

“I knew you back then, remember?”

“Oh yeah.”

“Really, how’d you learn to do that?” he asks.

“Darin taught me. He *was* a boy scout way back when. Actually, that’s how he got into magic. He did a merit badge, or whatever it’s called, and really liked it. Kept learning and practicing.” I toss a few small sticks onto the fire for no reason; it’s burning fine. “And he did lots of camping with the boy scouts. We went camping a couple of times after he lost his job.”

“Yeah. You mentioned that.”

“I did?”

“At the grave.”

“Oh.”

We fall back into silence. A cold breeze gives me a shudder. I scoot closer to the fire. “You cold? Want my jacket?” Liam offers.

“No, thanks.” He scoots closer to me. I nestle up next to him. “This is nice.”

“Yeah.”

A loud chorus of voices rises up and dies down fifty yards away. “Guess they’re having fun,” I say.

“Yeah.”

“Liam, what do you want to do next?”

“There are some hiking trails we could check out in the morning, or we can get back on the road and see what there is.”

“I mean, next in life. We’re heading toward MIT.”

“Serpentine.”

I smile. “Yeah. You gonna get a job, or a PhD, or what?”

“I’m not sure. My only thought all through school was finishing the proficient moats.”

I elbow him for making fun of my sorely lacking knowledge of Latin. “I didn’t have a plan for my life,” I admit. “You know? I was wondering one day if I’d still be playing

poker on the strip when I'm forty. But I don't think I want to go back there."

"What's next, then?"

"I asked you first."

"Did... you and Darin have any plans?"

"I was trying to be open. Flexible. I was just trying to help him, sort of, cope. What about you? You got a girlfriend and... plans?"

"No. No girlfriend. No plans."

"That's good."

"It is?"

"Heck yeah. She'd be pissed if you're here with me instead of there with her."

Liam's arm finds its way around my back. "No one's waiting for me."

I look at Liam's face, lit by the fire. He stares back at me. "Bet you had a lot of girls trying to get your attention. You're a catch, Liam Hansen."

Several long moments pass before he says, quietly, "The fire gives you colors, Lila."

"Does it color me orange?"

"Looks like it. Are you? Orange?"

"More... lavender, I think. I like being with you again. It's comfortable. But I don't think I'm orange yet. Still hurts when I think about..."

He squeezes me with the arm around my back. "I wish I could, I don't know, do something to help."

"You are, Liam. I'd be miserable without you here." He stares at me with the same look on his face he had after graduation. Our faces are just inches apart. I look into his eyes, suddenly wishing he wanted me, but he turns back to the fire and I bury my disappointment.

Guilt, though, sticks around. "I, uh, was taking a class at the college. But I didn't finish it because I got arrested. I think I should get myself educated."

"Always a good plan."

"I'd never get into a school like yours, though."

"There are lots of good colleges all over the place."

“Which brings me back to my original question: what’s your next move? PhD, *Doctor Hansen*?”

“I haven’t... it depends... I don’t know. Can I leech off you a while longer while I think about it?”

I smile. “Course.” We focus on the fire again. Then a question pops into my mind out of nowhere. “Liam, I’m curious. What did you think when you first put on those special glasses?”

He blows out a breath. “It was... surprising. Confusing. Overwhelming.”

“You weren’t instantly orange?”

“I didn’t understand what I was seeing. People talked about colors. I knew which words went with which emotions – thanks to you – but I didn’t know what colors looked like, you know?”

“So, everyone looked weird.”

“Yes, exactly. It was meaningless. I wasn’t any better off than before.”

“Didn’t your parents help you learn?”

“My parents are great. I love them, but they worked, like, all the time. They gave me a baby book of colors, but that’s not the same as the way people look, you know?”

I nod my understanding.

“Plus, it was a freakin’ baby book. How humiliating is that? I really wished you were there. I knew if I had you there, I’d learn it a lot faster and easier.”

“Why didn’t you call me? We could’ve figured out a way to get to each other’s houses. Oh, shit. That was right after freshman year. You probably hated me.”

“What? I never hated you. I was burgundy as hell that you managed to ditch the DY baggage with your soccer friends. And... teal. I was so damn teal without you, and when I couldn’t get the hang of colors that summer, I got mad that it was so hard. When I saw you at school, it all sort-of boiled over. I took out all my frustrations on you and said the worst thing I could’ve: that you were the only DY.” His head falls forward in shame.

“That’s in the past. Let’s not go back there.”

“But if I had been more gracious...”

“High school: I’m glad it’s over. I much prefer what we have now.” *Shit, did I just imply we have something going on?* He’s looking at me questioningly. Obviously, he doesn’t think anything is going on. “I mean... friends again. A little older, a little wiser.”

“Oh. Yeah.”

Chapter 27

Day ten of the road trip, we took a detour and went north to see snow. Well, that required a stop at a thrift store for a warm jacket and boots since all I have is desert clothes. Liam told me there's lots of snow at MIT, so he drove since he knows how. Oh yeah, we had to buy chains, too, for the tires.

One thing I really like about snow is that we have to bundle up from head to foot. With all my skin covered, hardly anyone notices I'm colorless. One thing I really don't like about snow is that we have to bundle up from head to foot. What a pain.

We went to a rental shop today to try cross-country skiing. Liam says he's done it a few times before, so he's trying to teach me.

"It's sort of like running but you slide your feet forward."

"I feel like a dork. Hey, is there a dog around? A big dog? I'll walk the dog."

"You don't get a dog to pull you along," Liam chides, light gold. "C'mon. Try it."

I'll try it. I follow him out on the trail. It's pretty flat, but we're both in terrible shape, just driving and eating fast food, so there's lots of huffing and puffing on the trail. We've gone miles and miles on those skis. Miles, I say. The app on Liam's phone, however, says we went eight tenths of a mile. "Is that all?" I lean forward, resting on my poles.

“What happened to you, soccer star?”

“Went to jail, brainiac.”

He looks at me, light gold. “Can’t use that excuse anymore. You’ve been out for six weeks.”

“Well, you haven’t been exercising either.”

“Guess we should’ve taken advantage of the hotel gym while we were there.”

I smile. “Yeah. Okay, decision: we only stay in motels with gyms from now on and we hit the gym at least four times a week.”

“Unless we’ve already killed ourselves doing something like this.” He turns dark, dark turquoise. “Oh, god. Lila, I’m sorry. I wasn’t thinking. I’m such an idiot. *Shit!*”

“It’s okay.” I want to alleviate Liam’s guilt, but the off-hand comment had the effect he feared.

He uses his pole to unbind his boots from the skis and comes to stand in front of me. “I’m sorry.” He puts out his arms as a consolation offer. I accept, hugging him with my poles dangling from my wrists behind him.

“How long does it take to stop hurting?”

“I don’t know, Lila. I’m so sorry. I never want to hurt you.”

“I know. Don’t feel bad. It was an innocent comment.” He squeezes me tighter. “Liam, can we go back. I don’t really like this skiing stuff.”

“Of course. Want to walk? I’ll carry the skis,” he offers.

“Sounds good.” He helps me get the skis off my boots and picks up all four. I carry the four poles and we start our hike back down the trail. “This takes too much equipment. In soccer all you need is a ball.”

“You have a ball?”

“Nope. Gonna have to get one.” I smile at Liam so he’ll stop feeling so dark turquoise about the suicide slip. “The van’s getting pretty full of our junk.”

“Thanks for shelling out for the motels...”

“You bet. I’m over the RV parks and sleeping in the van. Especially in this cold.”

“Want to go more south?” Liam asks.

“I don’t care.”



A few days later, I call my mom to say hi, and it’s a good thing I do. I’d bought a new phone after the trial and had to get a new number – different carrier or some such shit – and I’d forgotten to give her my number. I haven’t really been “all there” lately, common sense-wise. So, I’m talking to Mom, and she tells me her wedding is in two weeks.

“Liam, would you mind if we dash back home? I really want to be there for my mom.”

“Of course not.”

“But that takes us the opposite way from MIT.”

“When are you going to understand that I’m in no hurry to get back there? I want to be with you, Lila. I mean, be here for you.”

My heart felt a lightness I hardly recognized when he said he wanted to be with me. Then it fell like a brick when he corrected himself. I wonder if he’ll ever feel anything for me more than buddyship.

I promised Darin I’d try to do what he wanted me to do, and I had started wishing the “person my own age who could be everything I deserve” might be Liam. But like that almost-kiss on graduation day, we seem to be in a perpetual almost-relationship. He doesn’t want to leave me, but he doesn’t want to love me either.

It’s a stupid wish; I don’t deserve Liam anyway. He deserves to be with a Normal. But I have to set my own shit aside. For the next two weeks I’m going to put my focus on my mom and her well-deserved happiness.



We're taking the most direct route back home, but still have to stop for the night half-way. We've driven most of the day and have covered almost five hundred miles. Having gone enough south to get out of the snow country, I gladly shed the heavy coat and snow boots at the back bumper of my van. "Can you put these in my suitcase? It's over there by the wheel well." Liam looks around the back of the van, finding my old suitcase. When he yanks it out of its spot, the handle comes off.

"Oh, no. Sorry, Lila. I broke your suitcase."

"No big deal. It'll still hold my boots, right?"

"Yeah, hand 'em over." Sitting on the mattress, he opens the case and finds my artist's sketch book inside. "What's this?" he asks as he flips the cover open.

"Oh, I used to draw when I was bored, when I didn't have wi-fi. That's a Koshona totem pole."

"Cool." He flips the page.

"That's Grandfather Wohali, the chief's father. I guess he used to be the chief."

"Of the Koshona?"

"Yep. And that's Mount Kingsley. And that's... what was it called? Some lake I saw in my travels."

"Says Lake Heron here in the corner."

"That's right."

"Good thing you wrote what all these things are since your memory sucks." He looks up at me, light gold.

"Never claimed to be smart..."

"You're smart," Liam says as he flips another page. "I know this place. It's... Walter's Mill. Yep," he says, pointing to the note in the corner.

"You've been there?"

"Family trip one summer." He flips more pages. "These are really good, Lila. Where'd you learn to draw so well?"

“Art I in high school.”

“One class? That’s all?”

“Yep.” I look over his shoulder at my work. “Not bad.”

“No, they’re really good.” He flips a page and finds the portrait I did in high school stuck between two blank pages in the sketch book.

He stiffens; I scramble. “That was... an assignment... for class,” I bumble. “Had to draw someone at school.”

“You drew me?”

“Yep.” How else to answer the obvious question but with the obvious answer? “I guess I put it in there back when... I bought the sketch... book.” Turquoise. I don’t know how else to downplay the facts that I had drawn him and saved the portrait for all these years. He touches the lower corner where I had written his name with a little heart dotting the i. Turquoise. Turquoise. “Well, now you know my secret.”

He looks up at me.

“I’m a closet artist.” I take the sketch book away from him, closing the pages carefully over the portrait. “Can you, um, put my boots and coat in that suitcase for me?”

“Sure.” We get back to work straightening up the van, enduring awkward silence. I hate awkwardness with Liam. Why can’t we talk to each other anymore – I mean, about important stuff?

Midnight. In our motel room, we’re sharing a standard room with two twin beds, as usual. There was an uncomfortable lack of chatting tonight. I’m dying to know what he’s thinking, but I’m still so turquoise about him finding that drawing, I just can’t ask.

He’s over there sleeping, his special glasses on the nightstand between our beds. I’m obviously not sleeping. My mind won’t turn off. We’ve been sharing motel rooms and almost every hour of every day for weeks – no, months now – and not once has he tried to make a move on me. Either he’s a perfect gentleman, or he just isn’t into me that way. And if he isn’t into me that way, what must he think of me after seeing that drawing? Why’d I have to dot the i with a ridiculous little heart?



Breakfast in the coffee shop next to the motel is... breakfast in a coffee shop. We eat our eggs and ham, reading news on our separate phones. The thoughts that kept me awake last night, the wishes that Liam and I could be more than friends, bother me this morning. Darin just died. Didn't I just testify in court that I loved him? What kind of deviant am I? Truly, I'm a DY.

My mind and my eyes wander out the window to the parking lot. A family with two small kids load into their minivan but don't drive away. What chaos must be going on in that minivan that they can't even get going on their trip?

Kids.

I can't imagine it – being a parent. Me: a parent. What if I have kids and they're also colorless? How can I inflict this life on someone else? And what if they're not colorless? I remember being a teenager, embarrassed about my mom showing up, even though I loved her more than anything. How would my normal kids react to their friends seeing me? I'd have to skip all the soccer games, or musicals, or whatever they were in to. I'm blue, thinking about either scenario.

I stare, unfocussed, at that minivan in the parking lot. The dad gets out and opens the hood. *Shit*. I got stuck by myself once. With a family in tow? Nightmare. He stands in front of the engine, his cell phone to his ear.

I get up and walk outside. "Hey, is your battery dead? Need a jump?"

He double-takes on me, then shakes his head. "The, uh, lights still work. I don't know what's wrong with it. I'm calling for a tow." His hand runs through his hair. The mom rolls down her window. "What's wrong, John?"

He's talking on his phone, so I say, "He doesn't know." She stares at me, wondering why I'm standing here – or because I'm colorless. "I offered him a jump start, but he says it's not the battery."

Liam joins me outside. "What's going on?"

"Their car won't start." We can hear the kids starting to complain in the back seat.

"It's hot in here," they whine. The mom gets out and slides the back door open, then goes to the other side and opens the opposite door. The kids stop complaining – for the moment. The mom returns to where I'm standing.

"I can't imagine what's wrong," she mutters. "He took it in for a tune up before the trip."

"Where are you going?" I ask.

"Home, from vacation at Lake Mackey."

"Oh, I've been there. Nice place," Liam chats. "Camping?"

She sighs. "Here's my question: why do people leave home, drive two hundred miles, and do everything you have to do at home – only harder and in the dirt? That's a vacation?"

Liam turns light gold. "It's for the kids, I guess. Visit nature."

"Yeah. The only kind of vacation we can afford, at this point. Didn't count on a car repair." She sighs again. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't complain. I'm just tired. This is just the last straw, you know?"

Liam puts a hand on my shoulder, worried, I guess, that the "last straw" comment might have affected me. Her husband comes walking around the car. "Tow truck's on the way. Thanks for checking."

I look at Liam. "We better go back in and pay the check."

"Already done."

"Oh. Thanks. But I'm going to order a milkshake for the road. You mind?"

"Nope." We head back into the coffee shop and wait for the shake. I still watch that family through the window. Four

of them living in an apartment, driving an old minivan, ending their humble vacation with a break-down. Stranded.

A warm feeling comes over me as I remember stepping out of Ric's studio apartment and finding a bag of groceries. "Liam, I'll be right back." Across the street I find an ATM. I can only take out two hundred dollars at a time, so I have to keep starting new transactions. Once I collect six hundred dollars, I dash back to the restaurant parking lot. The parents, dark yellow, are discussing their options as they wait for the tow. "Excuse me." They look up as I approach. "I don't know what this repair is going to cost, but I hope this will help." I hold out the stack of fifties that came out of the ATM.

They look at the money, then at me. "We... couldn't. That's an awful lot of money..."

"I've got more. It's okay."

They still won't take the cash. I drop my outstretched arm.

Liam comes out with my milkshake. "Here ya go, Lila." The couple look at Liam, then back at me.

"Lila? You're the... achroma... with the magician..."

I drop my gaze. I've been recognized here and there over the past month of road-tripping. Liam, my rock, stands behind me, putting his arms around my shoulders protectively, as if shielding my heart. I melt into his body at my back, gaining comfort and courage.

"Look, a few years ago, when I was almost out of money, someone showed me great kindness and generosity. Didn't want anything in return." I lift my hand again, urging them to take the money. Finally – the dad turquoise, the mom lilac – they take the cash.

"You don't even know us. This is so generous... How do we thank you?"

"I don't want anything. I don't need anything. Just... pay it forward." Liam drops a kiss on my head and squeezes me. "I hope things go better for you."

"Thank you," they say as we turn toward our own van.

“I think there are some stories about your travels you haven’t told me,” Liam comments. “That was really nice, Lila.”

“I can be nice.”

“You’re always nice. I just meant that was above and beyond.”

“Not really.” We stop outside the driver’s door and face each other.

“Lila, lots of people can’t bring themselves to be pleasant, much less generous. You’re very special.”

“Same with you.”

He shakes his head.

“Are you kidding? How many years did you spend working on that techno necklace? For one person. It’s not like you’ll be able to sell a lot of them and make your fortune.”

“I had a good reason to work on that,” Liam says softly. “A selfish reason.”

Assuaging his guilt. “Be that as it may, I think you’re special. I haven’t forgotten how you stood up for me in school.”

He shifts to light yellow. “I was an asshole in school. I never handled people’s rudeness the way you did. I really admire you.”

“Stop it.”

“I won’t stop it. I don’t know if Darin ever told you, but you are a first-class, platinum-level, grade-A, good person. And if he didn’t tell you, then... then... he didn’t deserve you.” My eyes tear up for the first time in weeks. “Crap, I’m sorry,” Liam apologizes. “I just can’t say the right thing for you.” He gathers me into his arms and hugs me. “Please, Lila...”

“I’m sorry. I don’t want to be like this. I’m trying to be cheerful. I trying to move on.”

“You’re doing great. It’s my stupid foot I keep putting in my stupid mouth... Just so I don’t repeat my mistake, what did I say that hurt so much?”

I reach into my pocket to grab my phone, then pull the case off it. Folded inside is Darin’s last note. I hand it to Liam.

He reads the first line, then hands it back to me. “This is private.”

“The whole justice system has read it. It’s hardly private anymore. I want you to see it.”

“Sure?” When I nod, he takes it back and reads through it carefully, thoughtfully, light purple. “He... didn’t think he deserved you.”

“I don’t understand that. I’m nothing special. Why did he think he wasn’t worthy? What the hell kind of thinking is that? If someone loves you, then you’re worthy of that love, right? It was me, Liam. I wasn’t good enough to save him. *I’m* the one who wasn’t worthy. It was my fault.”

“No. *No*. Lila, you’re wrong.” Liam’s encircled me again, talking into my hair. “He didn’t leave you because you failed or weren’t good enough. He wanted to set you free because he loved you so much. He saw himself as broken. That’s how depression works. He saw everything through a blue lens. It was overwhelming. His life hurt, except for your part in it, and he wanted your life to be your own.”

I sob into Liam’s shoulder. “How do you know?”

“I’ve been there, Lila. I’ve been there, feeling there’s no hope, no way back to a happiness I once had. If it had been me, I would’ve wanted to set you free, too.”

“Set me free... I feel trapped in a dark turquoise guilt chamber.”

“Lila, look at me.” He forces space between us and puts his hands on my face. “Look at me.” Against my sense of self-loathing, I meet his eyes. “Do you think Darin wanted you to feel guilty? Did he blame you for anything?”

“N-no.”

“What are the last words of his letter?”

“Be orange.”

“Exactly. In his mind, you were a first-class, platinum-level, grade-A, good person and he loved you. He doesn’t want you to feel dark turquoise or teal or blue or red. He wants you to feel orange. Because he loved you. Because you’re worthy of his love. And he was worthy of your love. It’s been hard for me to understand what you two had, but I’m

one hundred percent sure you were both worthy. You don't have to like his decision to leave, but you have to accept it. And honor his last wish: be orange."

"How?"

"Oh, Lila," he places a tender kiss my forehead, "Darin gave you permission. Give yourself permission to be orange. Give yourself permission, and it'll come."

I nod, my face still in Liam's hands. I understand that it's all right to feel attraction to Liam. It's okay to think about him, feel something for him, hope that he might come to love me, too. It doesn't erase what Darin and I had. It adds to it. "Liam..."

"Hm?"

"I'll try."

He turns my face slightly to the side and kisses my cheek, holding his warm lips against my face for several long, glorious seconds. Then he looks into my eyes again. "Let's get you home. Want me to drive?"

I nod. "I have this melted milk shake to deal with." I sniff. "Light gold."

Chapter 28

We made it home ten days before the wedding and I've been non-stop busy ever since. Liam's visiting his parents while I stay in my old bedroom in Mom's house. Every day there's something to do: buy a dress, get matching shoes, get my hair cut properly. I have to be presentable – I'm Mom's maid of honor.

Then there are the projects: little take-aways for the wedding guests, gift bags for the out-of-town relatives, addressing envelopes for the thank-you cards Mom will have to write when she opens all the presents that have been arriving day by day. She seems light yellow about all the gifts. "I don't need anything. What are people buying for us? They should save their money."

That's Mom. Ms. Frugal. Ms. Practical. Ms. Not-me-let's-talk-about-you. Ms. We're-not-taking-a-honeymoon-trip-it's-fine. Well, that gave me the perfect idea for a present for them. I know my mom has always wanted to take a cruise, so I booked two tickets for the honeymoon suite. I checked with Simon to make sure the dates were okay. He's dark orange about the gift and is certain Mom will be super-dark orange about it, too. We're saving it for a surprise.

I am all oranges to help Mom in any way I can. If she foregoes something for the wedding because of cost, I pick it up. We've upgraded the champagne. We've added

centerpieces for the tables. We've made an appointment for hair *and* make-up *and* nails to be done the morning of the wedding. Mom loves the upgrades and is actually accepting my offers – since I'm loaded, I guess.

I buy one more thing for her: a pearl necklace that compliments her wedding dress beautifully. I give it to her as she's checking herself in the full-length mirror twenty minutes before the wedding. "Mom, I have something for you. Close your eyes."

"Lila, what is this?"

"Mom, please?" She obliges me and I slip the pearls around her neck and close the clasp. "Okay, open your eyes."

Gasp. Mint. Hand to her heart. Everything I expected in her reaction. "Lila, are these *real* pearls?"

"Of course. I wouldn't give you fake pearls. I hope this makes up for many missed birthdays and general negligence on the part of your wayward daughter."

"It's too expen—"

"Stop. I have plenty to share with the best mom in the world. I'm sorry I haven't been an easy child to raise, but I want you to know that I understand and appreciate what you went through with me. You're a very special person who deserves real pearls and a husband who adores her. So, let's get you down that aisle and hitched, huh?"



Quick recap: The wedding was spectacular. Mom was beautiful; Simon, handsome; both, sunny orange. The champagne was delightful. The food was delicious. My date was charming. Seriously: beguiling, enchanting, and cute.

Liam was my date, of course. We drank; we danced; we partied until the newlywed couple departed. The guests left soon after and the DJ packed up.

While busboys clean around us, Liam and I sit, drained, finishing one last glass of champagne. It's my fourth. Fifth? I'm not sure. I'm a little, kind-of, pretty tipsy. I reminisce about a dance we shared an hour ago. We were sitting at Mom and Simon's table, with Simon's sons and their wives. Once everyone had a few drinks in them, no one cared anymore that I was colorless. Mike, Simon's oldest, asked me from across the table, "Lila, would you like to dance?"

I glanced at his wife, a bit of a pudgy woman after giving birth to two children for the oaf. She started to show burgundy when she looked at him, but he ignored her. Stupid, drunk jerk. I wasn't drunk enough to get in the middle of that hornet's nest, so I hemmed and hawed, trying to think of the right way to shoot him down.

"I'm sorry, Mike," Liam said. "I'm terribly jealous if Lila dances with anyone but me. In fact," he stood, "Lila?" I took his proffered hand and stood, giving no attention to Mike. We went to the dance floor as a slow song played. He put one hand on the back of my waist and held my hand with his other.

"Thanks for the save, but I don't really know how to dance."

"Put that arm around my shoulder," he advise, bringing our bodies closer together, "and just go along with me." He started to sway, slowly turning us in a circle and moving about the dance floor.

"Where did you learn to dance?" I ask.

"I don't really know much. I picked up this little bit at Junior Prom."

"You went to prom? Who with?"

"Evelyn Bush. Our parents belonged to the same... social club. Her parents told my parents she wished I would ask her to prom, so my parents pressured me to take her."

"You have fun?"

"It was all right. I'm having more fun now."

"How do you like that Mike character? Simon's so polite. How'd his son become so rude?"

"Alcohol. I saw it at school. People change when they get drunk."

“I hope you’ll forgive me getting a little drunk tonight. I’m so orange for my mom, I just want to celebrate.”

Liam pulled me even closer. “I’ll hold you up, y’boozer.”

“Light gold.” And dark orange, but I didn’t tell him that. “Who’d you take to Senior Prom?”

“Didn’t go.”

“Why not?”

He tucked his head next to mine and spoke into my ear. “Couldn’t ever get up the nerve to ask the girl I wanted to ask.”

“That’s hard to believe. I saw lots of girls flirting with you. Anyone you asked would’ve said yes.”

He pulled his head back and looked at my face. “You think so?”

“Well, I was never asked to a prom, but if someone like you had asked me, I would’ve said yes.” We swayed a few times, eyes locked together. He leaned in slowly. I closed my eyes, heart racing, ready for the kiss I longed for.”

“Ladies and gentlemen,” the DJ said loudly over the microphone. “If you’ll all turn your attention to the bride and groom, they will now cut the cake.”

I opened my eyes. Liam backed away, letting go of my waist and turning obediently toward the cake table. He joined in the applause. After the cake, I had maid-of-honor duties to perform. We didn’t have a quiet moment again until now as we sit here in the middle of the clean-up crew’s bustle, finishing the last glass of bubbly.

A waiter approaches with a case of champagne. “Oh, I can’t drink all that tonight,” I say, feeling cleverly amusing.

The waiter sets it on the table. “Half case. That’s all that’s left. It belongs to the bridal couple.”

“Oh. Okay. I’ll take it home for them. Thanks. Hey, you guys did a great job tonight. Out...standing service.” I search my dress for pockets, looking for a few ten-dollar chips to give the waiter. Dumb dress doesn’t have any pockets. “Sorry, I can’t find my chips...”

“Chips, ma’am?”

“Yeah, my poker chips. Liam, you have any chips on you? This guy needs a tip.”

“Sorry, Lila. It’s not a casino. No chips here.”

“Ma’am, we’ve already been given a gratuity by the couple.”

“Ooooooh. Good. Good...”

“I’ll call for a ride,” Liam offers.

When the car arrives, we slouch in the back seat, tired at the end of a long day. The driver stops at Mom’s house first. “I’m house-sitting while they’re gone, so I’ll be here for a while,” I tell Liam.

“Call me tomorrow if you want to do something.”

I pick up my phone and hold it in the vicinity of my ear. “Hi, Liam. Let’s do something.”

Light gold, Liam opens his door and gets out. He walks around the car and opens my door for me.

“You’re such a gentleman,” I tell him, taking his hand and stumbling out of the car.

“Go on,” he tells the driver, pulling the half-case of champagne out of the car. “I gotta make sure she’s all right.”

“Rock on.” And... he’s gone.

“What did he mean?” I ask.

“I dunno. Come on. You need to get in bed and sleep this off,” Liam says.

“Yeah, I need sleep. Where’s my bed?”

“In the house.”

“No, it’s in the van.”

“This way party girl.” Liam pulls me toward the house.

“I guess I can stay in there.” I find my bedroom, which is much harder to do than it should be.

Liam kneels down and takes my shoes off. “Can you get out of that dress on your own?”

“It just falls off. See?” I stand and slip my arms out of the off-the-shoulder sleeves and the dress crumples to the floor around my feet. He’s suddenly turquoise. “What? You never saw a girl before?”

He grabs the blanket off my bed and wraps it around me. “Lie down, Lila.”

“Well, which is it? Lie-down or Li-la?”
“Both.”
“Where are you going to sleep?”
“On the couch.”
“No, we can share. Come on.”
“It’s not big enough.”
“We shared in the van.”
“That one’s bigger.”
“Then we should sleep in the van.”
“It’s warmer in the house. Go to sleep, Lila. I’ll see you in the morning.”



When morning comes, it’s afternoon. I think I slept through the hangover I deserved. Liam made a pot of coffee at some point, so I help myself. But I can’t find Liam. After a shower I revert back to casual Lila. No heels. No dress. No style.

Liam walks in the front door. “Where you been?” I ask.

“Went to my parents’ to get clean clothes. Hope it’s okay I borrowed your van.”

“Hey, what’s mine is yours. Help yourself.”

“You sleep all right?” Liam asks as he sits down next to me on the sofa.

“Yeah. Woke up about... half hour ago. Did I, um, flash you last night?”

Liam turns turquoise again. “Yeah.”

“Sorry. I don’t know why I did that. Totally out of character.”

“Alcohol will do that.”

“But yesterday was fun,” I say.

“Yeah, it was. It was good to see you orange again.”

“When are you going to be orange again, Liam?”

“What?”

“You’ve been brooding for weeks. What’s going on?”

“Nothing.”

“I call bullshit. Come on. You can talk to me. It’s me, Liam.”

“I... don’t think I can.”

“Are you worried about something?”

“No. Nevermind. I’m okay.”

I back off. I hate it when people badger me to talk about something I don’t want to talk about. “Hey, I know what we should do today.”

“What?”

“Go see Grandfather Wohali.”

“Who’s that?”

“You know, the one from my sketch book. He’s a great old guy who used to play at my poker table in the Koshona casino.”

“Your table? You had your own table?”

“I was a dealer. First job after high school.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“I’m full of mysteries, Mr. Hansen.”

Liam’s light gold. “I’m finding out. What else don’t I know about you, Miss Lila?”

“Well, I’m a terrible housekeeper. That’s why I like to live in hotels.”

Liam nods, his light gold deepening.

“And I’m a terrible party-thrower, though I figured out what I did wrong that time.” I glance at my tattoo, remembering that night with Darin.

“What’d you do wrong?”

“I didn’t think of just getting room service. I tried to do it all myself with a lousy microwave and hot dog napkins and... well, it was a disaster.” I smile at Liam. “Bet you went to a lot of parties at college. That’s what college is all about, isn’t it?”

“That’s what I heard, too. But unless you’re in a fraternity, you don’t get invited to a lot of parties.”

“You didn’t join?”

“I tended to be in the nerd camp.”

“Tell me more. You don’t talk much about what you did there for fun.”

“Not much to tell. Took hard classes. Worked a lot.”

“Girlfriends?”

“Not really.”

“Seriously? Why not?”

“No one ever lived up to...”

“To what? You have some kind of impossibly perfect woman in mind? Barbie figure, Charla face?”

“What’s Charla face?”

“Charla. From high school. I thought you were into her.”

“Oh, Charla. Yeah, I remember her.”

“Light gold. She was into you,” I tell him.

“She was? Maybe...”

“You are so dense, Liam.”

He looks pink for a moment, then returns to light orange.
“There was one girl I liked a lot.”

“But you were too afraid to ask her out, right? Liam, you should have more confidence in yourself. You’re a great guy. And you’re good looking and smart and fun and sensit—”

Liam turns light yellow. I don’t know what confuses him, but I’m glad he can’t see my color. If he saw the purple I felt just then, I’d be so turquoise. I change the subject. “So, how about some poker at the Koshona casino? It’s only fifty miles from here.”

Liam agrees. “Sounds good to me.”



“And that’s the RV I lived in while I worked here,” I say, pointing out the window as we drive down the street where I used to live. I pull into the casino parking lot. “And this is where I worked.” We park and head for the front door of the casino.

When we walk in, I just stand there, looking around at how small it is, smaller than I remember. I don't recognize anyone until I see Bart, the floor manager.

"Lila." He beams orange. "How are you?"

"Hi, Bart. I'm fine. This is my friend, Liam." The two men exchange greetings. "How are things around here?"

"Same old same old. Where've you been these past couple years?"

"You don't watch the news, do you?"

"Not really. Why?"

"Forget it. Hey, has Grandfather Wohali been around? I wanted to introduce him to Liam."

"I'm sorry, Lila. Grandfather died last year."

"Oh. I'm blue... but I guess he's not anymore, huh?"

"He's at peace with Grandmother now."

"He's at peace..." Darin's dark blues and dark yellows enter my thoughts. He, too, is now at peace. The thought of Grandfather Wohali and Darin being free of their blues makes me orange. I look at Liam. He's light sage. "What are you so deep in thought about, Liam?"

"Just... him finding peace doesn't help those left behind find peace, does it?"

"Maybe not a first. But, yeah, it can." We stare at each other, knowing we're talking about Darin, not Grandfather Wohali. I turn back to Bart. "Nice seeing you again. I think I'm gonna hit the poker table if that's okay."

"Of course. Good luck." Bart goes back to business.

I check back with Liam; he's still light sage. "Are you finding your peace, Lila?"

I stare into his caring eyes, and slowly nod. "I think I am."

Chapter 29

I play a little poker for some spending money. Liam sits out, opting to watch instead of play. I said he was smart, didn't I? As we cash in my chips, he says, "Well, your poker skills make up for your lousy housekeeping skills."

"Hey."

"You said it, not me," he ribs, gold.

"Light gold. You're right. I was right."

"Did you have fun?"

"Playing poker? Not really. It's more like a job for me. Hey, I want to go somewhere classy for dinner. What do you say?"

"Are you asking me out on a date?"

I ponder that. We've been having meals together for the past couple of months. None of those dinners out were "dates." But this feels different. "Yeah. I am."

Orange, he says, "I'd love to go on a date with you."

My heart leaps a tiny bit. "Well, let's get our classy clothes on and go out."

"I know just the place. I'll make the reservation."



He drops me off at home and takes the van to get his suit from the cleaners while I put on the dress I wore to the wedding. I hear Liam come back while I'm still in my room, dithering over which earrings to wear. "Lila, you ready?" he calls.

"Coming." One step into the living room, I find him standing there, wearing his graduation suit, the one he wore when he reappeared in my life in the courtroom. I look at him, all dashing as he is. "What?" he says, looking down at his suit for a stain or something.

"You look great. You make my heart go pitter-pat. Gold."

Purple flows over him. "And you look beautiful." He pulls his hand out from behind his back and hands me a bouquet of flowers.

"Oh, wow. No one's ever brought me flowers before," I say, taking them. "I suppose I should find a vase. Um, where would Mom keep vases?"

"No idea," he says quietly, gazing at me. I don't tell him, but I'm not gold anymore. I'm purple, just like him. I smile because I know he thinks that makes me prettier. I want to be pretty for him. It feels good to feel purple and orange with no blue or turquoise or teal in the background. "Shall we?" He motions toward the door.

Liam drives us out to the country club which I have never seen before. Right here in my hometown, and I've never even driven past it. "Orange, Liam. Have you been here before?"

"No, but they allow people to come in for dinner if they're *properly attired*," he says with a snobbish accent.

"Are we proper enough?"

"We're the best-freakin'-looking couple they've ever seen." He's strong sage.

"You have too been here before."

He pulls up to the valet and gets out, hastening around to my door and opening it for me. While we walk past the valet, he hands Liam a tag, saying, "Have a good evening, Mr. Hansen."

“I knew it. Your parents are members, aren’t they?”

“Maybe.”

“Your parents are loaded.”

“No.”

“Liar.”

“I’m not lying. You know my dad’s a surgeon, right?”

“Yeah. I figured you were sort-of rich to go to MIT.”

“They’re well enough off. Half the time my dad was doing Doctors Without Borders work.”

“Wow, that’s impressive. Well, if they’re not filthy rich, how’d they get into the country club?”

“He did a heart bypass for a member who *is* filthy rich – saved his life – so that guy paid my dad’s dues here. It’s all a big waste of money, if you ask me, but it’s the nicest place ‘round here, and you said you wanted classy.”

“This is super classy. Thanks, Liam.”

“Thanks for asking me out.”

I hold his arm like they do in the movies when they’re at a fancy place. At the hostess podium a woman greets Liam by name. “Mr. Hansen, how are you this evening? Do you have a reservation?”

“Yes. Seven-thirty.”

She looks at her book. “Yes, here it is.” Then she looks up at me and nearly gasps. Liam turns light red. She spots his red and apologizes for upsetting him. “I’m sorry, Mr. Hansen. I didn’t mean to... I was just surprised...”

“Why are you talking to me? It’s my date you’ve insulted.”

Her mouth hangs open as she looks at him, then me, then him, then me, then—

“Can we just have a table?” I ask.

“Uh... let me just check on... make sure it’s ready...” She hurries away.

“I hope we get a seat by the window,” I say nonchalantly.

“We can go somewhere else if you want.”

“Why?”

“Because these snobs are the most self-absorbed, tactless, judgmental pricks,” he huffs.

“Liam, this is my life. This is how it always goes. I thought you could handle it.”

He looks at me pointedly. “What are you saying? I’m not man enough to ‘handle it’?”

“I’m not saying that.”

“Because I’ve been handling it for the last few months, Lila. I’m not ashamed to be seen with you. I’m not ashamed to lo—” He cuts himself off.

I tilt my head. “To what? To look like a loser hanging around with the DY?”

Pink, Liam stares at me. “How can you say that?”

The hostess returns with a man in a dark suit. I break the staring contest with Liam and look at the man. He eyes me with suspicion.

“What do you know?” I grumble. “Rich pricks are no different than hick pricks. What the hell are you staring at?”

“I’m sorry, ma’am, but your... language is unbecoming this club. I must ask you to leave.”

“And what was going to be your excuse before you heard my unbecoming language?”

“I... I...”

“Who are you to judge someone by their birth defect?” Liam interrupts. “Wasn’t it your own son who was born with a cleft lip? Didn’t my father reconstruct his mouth, pro bono? I knew Jerry in first grade. He looked normal, thanks to my father. He had friends and playmates because his birth defect could be fixed. How dare you look upon someone who still lives with her birth defect and judge her by that?”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Hansen. Of course, you’re absolutely ri—”

“Stop apologizing to me,” Liam blusters, dark red. “Apologize to Lila, dammit.”

I look at the floor, angry with Liam for making a scene on my behalf. But why am I red? We’ve stood up for each other many times, like the time in high school when I yelled at those mean girls who were mocking Liam by pretending to like him...

I close my eyes and feel myself slump as I suddenly realize why he was so mad at me that day. He didn't want me fighting his battles for him. Sure, we looked out for each other, but I had gone too far that day, making a big scene that embarrassed him more than the teasing did. "Liam, can I talk to you?" I ask quietly.

"Huh?"

"Over there." I point to a sofa in the large foyer.

Reluctantly, he walks with me to the sofa, and we sit. "Liam, I'm sorry for what I did freshman year, with those two girls at lunch."

"What?"

"I yelled at those girls because they were tricking you. You got mad at me. I didn't understand why you were mad at me and not them, but I think I do now."

"What are you talking about?"

"Liam, you embarrassed me by yelling at that asshole."

"But he was trying to eject you from the *sacred country club*."

"Don't I get to choose how to deal with people who are mean to me?"

"I was just trying to protect..."

"I don't need protection." I put my hand on his hand. "Sage."

He stares at me, light yellow as he tries to understand what I'm saying. Slowly, he shifts over to blue. "I wanted to fix your life for you. I wanted to give you something that would make everything better. I wanted people to treat you like a normal person."

"I only care about *you* treating me like a normal person."

He pleads with his eyes. "I do."

"Almost. There's one thing Darin did better than you. He treated me normally."

"I treat you normally. Ever since we were kids."

"You did when we were kids. Not since you got the glasses."

"I don't think you're a DY, Lila. When I said that, I was a stupid teenager."

“I think you do think of me as a DY,” I say gently.

“How can you say that?”

“Because you just told me you wanted to fix my life for me. Only DYs need to be fixed.” His blue deepens. “You wanted to make everything better and make people treat me like a Normal. But you can’t fix that. You can’t make people nice. I could wear those beads every day and people would still treat me the same.” Liam drops his head. “I’m so lilac, Liam, that you made them for me. You saved me at the trial. But I don’t think you can save me from the mean old world. And you have to live with that if you’re gonna hang around with me.”

He takes my hand and stares at the DS tattoo on my wrist. The silver bracelet lays across it crookedly. “Lila,” he starts, then stalls. After a deep breath, “Um, Lila, do you know why I made those beads for you?”

“You felt guilty that your disability got fixed and mine didn’t.”

He shakes his head, still looking at my wrist.

“Then... why?”

“Because I love you, Lila. I’ve always loved you. Since middle school when we made up those face signals – the smile, the wink – I felt a connection with you that never went away.” Liam caresses the tattoo. “But you love Darin. I know you’ll always love him, no matter how much I wish you’d love me.”

I think my heart rate just doubled. “Liam... I did love Darin; it’s true. And I miss him. You told me to give myself permission to be orange. Being with you makes me orange.” I put my hand under his chin and lift it up, forcing him to look at me. “After graduation, I wanted to kiss you that day because...”

“Because?”

“Because I loved you. Mint... I never admitted that to myself until now. I loved you in high school, but you were out of my league.”

He shakes his head, drilling his gaze into mine. “I’ve tried to be your friend these last months, to support you

through your grief, but I can't stuff it down anymore. I love you, Lila. Can you ever love me again?"

"Liam, I am so dark purple in love with you." He springs forward, smothering my lips with his.

Dark orange excitement.

Dark green certainty.

Dark purple love.

When his lips leave mine, he leaves me breathless. I open my eyes to see Liam is dark purple. I smile at him and say, "Only two color weirdos could have as many misunderstandings as we do. Are you sure you wouldn't prefer someone easier to interpret?"

"I admit, I'd like to see those beads turn dark purple on you right now."

"You can't just trust me?"

He shrugs playfully. "Just wanted to save you the trouble of having to tell me..."

I open the little clutch I carry – because the evening dress has no damn pockets – and pull out the beads Liam made for me. He takes them from my hand and gently leans forward to fasten them around my neck. As soon as they lay across my sternum, they turn dark purple. "Good thing I brought them with me."

Liam takes my face in his hands and kisses me slowly, gently. His hands snake around to the back of my neck, as he tilts his head opposite mine, deepening the kiss. I'm lost in the cascade of emotions that spill out from the depths of my heart. I can feel Liam's love through the kiss we share: an endless, bottomless, fount—.

A throat clears loudly nearby. "Such – ahem – public displays of affection are not appropriate for the lobby of this establishment," Mr. McSnootface murmurs from a few feet away.

Liam backs away, not letting go of me, and I find my hands gripping the lapels of his suit jacket. His eyes still locked on mine, he says, "You wanted to go somewhere classy. How about Ritza Pizza?"

The beads turn light gold. "It's right in the name."

Chapter 30

We didn't go to Ritza Pizza. We didn't go to dinner at all. We went to Mom's house and got into comfortable clothes, brought a stack of blankets to the living room, turned on the gas fireplace, and sat close together, eating strawberries and cheese. "This is classy."

"Want something to drink?" Liam asks. "Where's that half case of champagne leftover from the wedding?"

"I think it's in the kitchen, but I don't need champagne. That's for special occasions."

"Our first date isn't a special enough occasion?" His light gold tells me he isn't insulted.

"If you want. But I might eat all the strawberries while you're trying to figure out how to open a champagne bottle."

"I'll take my chances." Liam springs to the kitchen. He's gone for a while. I prep some teasers to hurl at him when he comes back empty-handed. But he surprises me. He comes back with two flutes of champagne. "Here you go."

"Well done, Liam. All my ammunition is now wasted. Gold."

"I see."

I looked down at my chest and see the beads are gold. "Just habit."

"I know." He settles down next to me. We recline on the sofa cushions piled up on the floor. "I could live like this..."

“Have you decided to look for a job then? Or do you want the Doctor title to match your dad’s?”

“Definitely Doctor. Dad will say a PhD is not the same...”

“Big deal. You get the PhD and those snobs at the country club will have to call you Doctor Hansen, too.”

“Yeah, and they’ll have to call you Mrs. Hansen.”

I choke on the sip of champagne going down my throat. “What?”

“Doctor and Mrs. Hansen. Do you like it?” He’s dark purple, holding me with steady eyes. My mint starts to give way to dark purple.

“Yes, I like it a lot. Can you, you know, ask me outright, so I’m sure what’s going on here?”

Liam sets his champagne glass on the coffee table. He takes mine and sets it down, too. Then he reaches into his shirt pocket and pulls out a twisted wire – the champagne cork’s wire which he’s worked into a braided-looking ring. “I’m sorry I don’t have a real ring for you, but I hope you’ll accept this as a place holder until we can go out and buy one.”

I smile at Liam, feeling dark orange. I nod eagerly.

“Lila, I love you more than anything in the world. I want to spend my life with you. I can’t even imagine my life without you. Will you marry me?”

I smile so widely, I think my face is going to break. “Yes. Dark green yes.”

He puts the braided wire on my finger, then holds my hand, looking at the tattoo. “Are you sure you’re ready?”

“I lost you once. I don’t want to lose you again. I love you, Liam. With a little heart on the i.”

Liam’s hand caresses up my arm to my neck. He pulls me close and kisses me like he wants me desperately.

“Lila,” he whispers, “I’ve dreamed of you for so long.”

“Don’t wait another second.”

A thrilled shudder runs through his body, causing mine to tremble. He reaches his arm around me, lowers me to the floor, following me down with fire in his eyes.

I know it's a reflection of the fire in the hearth, but still,
it suits the moment perfectly.

Epilogue

Liam and I were married three months later. He applied to several university doctoral programs and was accepted at a few but would only choose a school that also accepted me as an undergrad.

We sold my trusty old van and bought a two-seater convertible, then drove to the desert for a short errand. I went to see Monique about another tattoo. In a design that compliments the DS on my wrist, she drew a cursive L that connects to a second cursive L like a single, fancy, flowing ribbon on my other wrist.

Not to be out-pained, Liam got a manly version of the double Ls tattooed on his upper arm. Thus marked as belonging together, we drove across the country to Stafford University where Liam is a doctoral student, and I am a freshman Art major.

Yep, here we are, back in school together, lavender and orange with dark purple icing on top.

The End

Thank you for reading *Color Me Orange*.

For more books by this author, please go to

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Color Reference Guide

Basic Human Emotion Color Palette ²			
Color	Light	Medium	Dark
Blue	Bored	Sad	Depressed
Teal	Solitary	Lonely	Abandoned
Turquoise	Nervous	Embarrassed	Guilty
Pink	Offended	Hurt	Distressed
Red	Critical	Mad	Hostile
Burgundy	Envious	Jealous	Bitter
Yellow	Confused	Scared	Stressed
Orange	Cheerful	Happy	Excited
Gold	Amused	Playful	Eager
Green	Valuable	Proud	Strong
Mint	Startled	Surprised	Astonished
Sage	Contemplative	Confident	Assertive
Lilac	Obligated	Grateful	Indebted
Lavender	Calm	Relaxed	Tranquil
Purple	Thoughtful	Loving	In love

² Based on the work of Patton, et al