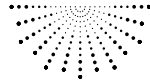


PROLOGUE



BRIGHTON, MASSACHUSETTS

Ozzy kicked a stone on the gravel road. He was so mad he wanted to kick it at somebody, anybody.

The principal of Brighton High School had to cancel their meeting because a mother needed to speak to him immediately.

Ozzy worked as a correspondent for a local paper, writing a monthly column for thirty-five dollars a pop, while collecting unemployment. It had been six months with no potential job prospects.

He threw his notebook, pen, and recorder in the passenger seat of his dilapidated car, cursing to himself but yearning to hurl them at the world so everyone would hear his frustrations.

Upon slamming the car door, he heard a ball dribbling. Then the sound of young guys talking and laughing. High school boys had gathered to play basketball.

Ozzy glanced over at them, turned away, and then did a double take. One of the boys caught his eye.

He had written the celebrity column for the *Boston Herald* for a few months before getting fired for embellishing a story. Ozzy fumed just thinking about it. How else was he supposed to get promoted if he wrote the same tired articles: this celebrity bought this house, that celebrity was engaged, another one signed on for this movie? His editor told him he wanted more heavyweight articles if Ozzy expected to move up, but he couldn't sniff out any meatier news. So he exaggerated a little. He was desperate.

Ozzy walked over and approached the fence surrounding the court. Putting his hands in his pockets, he tried to look like he was casually observing. That one boy had an uncanny resemblance to a famous actor. A teenage version with his blue eyes and tall, lanky build. If there was one thing Ozzy had spent time studying, it was the celebrities.

Another man came over to the fence to watch. Ozzy nodded to him, and in the most offhand manner, he pointed to the boy and said, "That kid looks so familiar. He must be my friend's son. I've got a son his age. He's going to this school in the fall, and I'd like to introduce them if that's who I think he is."

"That's Tim Goldberg. Nice kid," the man said to him. "Do you live here in Brighton, or are you moving in?"

"Oh, we're moving in. In fact, I'm going to call this friend tonight and arrange an introduction. My James would feel better if he already knew someone at the school," Ozzy lied.

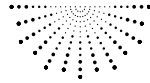
"Yeah. My son's graduating this spring. I've got nothing but good things to say about this school," the man added. "The teachers and programs helped my son tremendously. He's got to decide which college he wants to attend." He pointed to the school building. "This school did him a lot of good."

"Yeah, you don't say? Well, hopefully James will have that

experience too,” Ozzy said, shaking the man’s hand before leaving.

Ozzy glanced back as he made his way to his car. If that kid was the son of the Hollywood actor, coming to this high school today would change his life for the better.

CHAPTER ONE



HOLLYWOOD HILLS

It was 8:00 a.m. when Ryan woke up and reached for his blue silk robe. Momentarily startled by the sound of a light snore, he turned and surveyed the gorgeous brunette sleeping in his bed. He had forgotten she was still there.

He had invited her to his sprawling Hollywood Hills estate after the party at the Point, the swankiest club in the entire city of Los Angeles. She barely looked twenty and had the makings of a supermodel – tall and leggy. The faint smell of the musk she wore permeated the sheets. Musk was his favorite scent – his first love always wore it. The woman lay flat on her back, her hands resting on her chest. Her mouth curled into a smile even while asleep. He noticed her makeup was still intact, and her hair appeared neat and combed even after a night of continuous lovemaking. Dead drunk last night, Ryan couldn't recall what her hair felt like. He fought the urge to touch it and find out if it was stiff from hair spray or gel.

After drinking and socializing until four in the morning

with little sleep, he needed time to himself. He intended to get her name and phone number. Forgetting he was in a relationship with Megan, Ryan thought about taking her out on his new sailboat for an entire day, chatting about her life and goals to get a feel whether this would be a long-term relationship or if she was only using him for media attention to advance her own career. Yes, a day-long trip was always his testing ground for a new relationship.

As Ryan stepped into the shower, he welcomed the quiet and isolation that allowed him to think. As he grabbed the shampoo to massage his scalp, his thoughts drifted to the two movie offers he was seriously considering. His fingertips gently rubbing his scalp allowed him to go into a meditative state to focus on each offer both more objectively and instinctually. One was the lead role in a Frank Sinatra biopic, working with a seasoned director; the other was an indie production, playing a southern slave owner helping finance the Civil War. Which had a better plot? Which would potentially generate more sales and advance his standing in Hollywood? Was either one Oscar material? He personally preferred the edgier, more challenging roles, and his body pulsed with excitement whenever he thought about winning an Academy Award, thereby cementing his reputation as a serious actor.

After a while, Ryan's thoughts shifted back to last night. His head still felt the buzz of the crowd at the Point. There he had met tons of hot women, and the champagne was the finest he ever tasted. He was so distracted he kept forgetting to ask the name of it.

Ryan never knew what he did to deserve such a lucky life. He never took time to contemplate it but simply enjoyed it. His acting career began when he was spotted by a talent agent while playing basketball with his buddies the summer before his sophomore year of high school. The man

gave him the creeps the way he studied him, staring right at him as he moved around the court. During a water break, he was about to ask his friends how to get rid of this guy when the man came over and introduced himself as a talent scout. He gave Ryan his card, and his parents checked him out to make sure he was legitimate before calling. Since then, Ryan had taken one role after another, starting out with bit parts on television before landing small parts in movies. Most of the projects were successful and, in nearly all of them, his work received excellent reviews. He was now considered one of Hollywood's best and brightest, and he heard critics praising his latest role as a man who rescues runaways from a human trafficking ring, calling it "Oscar worthy." If he won, this would be his first Academy Award. But it was only October, and other actors had given stellar performances that could eclipse his before the February awards ceremony.

Ryan put a towel around his waist and used another to dry his hair as he sauntered back into his bedroom. The brunette moved slightly, and her eyelids flickered. His eyes hungry with desire, Ryan sat at the edge of the bed as she stretched her arms. When she opened her eyes, she stared around, seemingly struggling to orient herself to where she was. But once she caught sight of him, she relaxed and smiled. Overtaken by her big, beautiful eyes and sensual lips, Ryan inched himself closer beside her and prepared to taste her with his kisses.

"Morn', handsome," she said as she reached out to kiss his lips.

Their lips locked in what should have been a glorious reuniting of their bodies the morning after. Instead, their fairy-tale encounter evaporated. Her stale morning breath repulsed him.

"Mornin'," he mumbled, turning his head away as fast as

he could so she wouldn't see how her breath offended him. "Gotta get dressed and get going."

Glancing back at her, he saw she was observing him with her mouth turned downward in a frown.

"I didn't want to wake you," he said soothingly, attempting to grin in an effort to hide his disappointment. "How did you sleep?"

"Wonderfully." She smiled widely as she wrapped her hands under her head.

Ryan couldn't help noticing the nicotine stains on her teeth.

The woman scrutinized him for a moment and then sat up on her elbow in a sexy pose that would normally turn him on. But Ryan looked away and got up to open his walk-in closet. While choosing a pair of jeans and a white T-shirt, he dug into the recesses of his mind, trying to remember the woman's name. Turning around to study her again, he noticed the blood-red polish on her fingernails was chipped. Biting nails was a habit he found most unbecoming.

When he remained silent, she spoke. "I'm thinking of auditioning for the Gem Modeling Agency. You know, the man you were talking to last night signs models there?" She pushed back a strand of hair and gently tucked it behind her ear. "He said he's looking for models." She gazed steadily at him with a sexy smile. "So what do you think? Will you put in a good word for me?"

Ryan hung his head to hide his disappointment. *Either they want a commitment or they use you to get ahead*, he thought. *Another one using me to further her own career. Couldn't she be a little more subtle than that?*

But he lifted his head and faced her again. "Sure thing," he told her, and then ducked into his enormous closet to change.

"When can I see you again?"

“Ah, wait a sec,” he called from inside the closed closet, pretending not to hear.

Instead of admiring her beauty, now he couldn’t wait to get rid of her.

I’ll just tell her I have a very important appointment first thing this morning, and I gotta leave right away. I’ll take down her name and number and pretend I’ll refer her to that modeling agency. What was her name anyway? Was it Becky or Angie or something?

He decided to refer to her as merely BB. Bad breath.

Ryan walked out of his closet ready to put the finishing touches on his appearance.

She was sitting up in the bed when he walked out of the closet. She must have been rubbing her eyes as she waited for him to come out because her mascara had gotten smudged, and the dark lines underneath her eyes reminded him of a football player. Her hair was no longer perfectly coiffed but rather sticking out near both her ears. “I’m going to take a quick shower,” she announced as she sprang up out of the bed.

“Oh actually, I’ve gotta leave now for a meeting.” He grabbed his Rolex from the nightstand. “The cleaning people are coming, and the whole place has to be vacant. Sorry, but I’ve gotta rush you out.”

Ryan spoke softly and gently, but even he couldn’t muster up a genuine appearance of regret.

BB’s eyes narrowed. “Is there time for me to use the restroom at least?”

“Sure,” he said, turning away to hide his discomfort.

He looked down in shame as BB slammed the bathroom door. He winced, hoping she hadn’t damaged the hinges. Ryan reached for his phone and quickly called an Uber driver friend of his to discreetly pick her up outside the security gate of his home. This friend had done it many times

before and knew how to keep things under wraps from the media, for which Ryan paid him handsomely.

In two minutes, she opened the door and marched out of the bathroom wearing the little black dress with spaghetti straps that she had on last night. She brushed past him to the front door without glancing his way. He could almost see her nostrils flaring as she stood by the door with her arms folded, waiting for him to escort her out. Fortunately, his friend had already texted him that he was on his way.

"I paid for an Uber to bring you home, or any place you want to go." Ryan smiled widely, hoping she would be touched by his generosity.

She grunted.

He opened the door, and she stomped to the gate, neither saying good-bye nor turning back. Ryan gave a signal to the security guard as she departed. His friend pulled up in his car.

He shrugged. *At least I didn't have to bother getting her name and number,* he thought. *Whatever her name is.*

Ryan headed for his Maserati. He knew he was very lucky to have plenty of money at his disposal for these occasional trysts. Sighing, he felt justified in his actions because the two serious relationships in his life had both ended badly. The first, which he considered the love of his life, ended abruptly and he never found out why. Kim was the second relationship. It was so promising until he found out she was using him to advance her career. She turned vengeful when she realized he didn't have the clout back then to help her. At a red light, Ryan bowed his head, remembering how she had lied to directors, claiming they were engaged and that he wanted them to star in a movie together. This was after he won acclaim as a supporting actor in a major movie and was even nominated for an Oscar. By the time he broke up with

her, she actually tried to blackmail him by threatening to write a tell-all about their relationship.

Fortunately, Ryan wasn't a big enough star at the time to entice any publisher. Kim eventually moved on.

The blasting horn behind him alerted Ryan the light had turned green. He stepped on the gas. *Oh, well*, he thought. *I have to be content with occasional dates like BB. And Megan, of course.*

Megan was his semisteady girlfriend, though he had explained to her that he couldn't commit to an exclusive relationship. It was not in him. He convinced himself that she would understand that he would sleep with other women from time to time. Past girlfriends were shocked when they found out he had strayed, and Ryan couldn't understand why – he thought he made his intentions clear that he could never commit.

He shook his head, wondering what was wrong with them.

Hopefully, Megan gets it. She's a smart girl, he reasoned.