

## *Lila Blue*

by Annie Katz

At dawn on the day I turned twelve, my mother kissed me on the forehead, shed a few tears, and shoved me up the steps onto a Greyhound bus heading north. I didn't know where I would end up or where I truly wanted to be, but I was certain I did not want to be riding that bus away from Sacramento and the only life I'd ever known.

Janice, my mother, was sending me to stay with someone I'd never met. Her name was Lila Blue, and she was my father's mother. I knew almost nothing about my father and even less about his family. I should have asked lots of questions and made someone give me straight answers. If I had, maybe I wouldn't have spent my twelfth birthday making myself miserable. How was I to know my real true life would begin in Rainbow Village, Oregon?

"Lila cuts hair," my mom said before she pushed me onto the bus. "Here's her shop." She handed me a white business card, which I stuffed in my jeans pocket along with the wad of birthday money she gave me at the same time. "She'll pick you up," she said.

The bus trip was long, boring, and punctuated with soggy sandwiches, stinky toilets, crying kids, crumpled old men, and exhausted women. The best part was I was lucky enough to get the front seat behind the steps, so I could see the road and not feel packed in a crate like the people behind me. The worst part was all that time to think.

The first hour I imagined wonderful ways to get back at my mom for sending me away, like having the bus plunge off a cliff and me dying while saving a child's life. My vengeful fantasies were interrupted at the stop in Willows when a man with whiskey breath pushed my backpack onto the floor to sit next to me. I was trying to decide what to do when the bus driver made the guy move.

"Sorry, Miss Teledin," the driver said, and he smiled at me.

"Thanks," I said, returning his smile. He nodded my way and went back about his job.

I looked at the bus driver for the first time. I'd been so obsessed with my pity party I hadn't seen anything outside my own head. The bus driver had a gentle voice that didn't fit his body, which was bulky and solid. He looked like a retired football player who'd kept in shape. No wonder the guy moved without a fuss.

The driver probably felt sorry for me, a kid sitting alone on his bus. I wasn't actually alone, because kids under fifteen couldn't travel by themselves, and besides my mother would never have let me go anywhere alone. Technically I was being looked after by my mom's work friend Jane, who was traveling to Tillamook to visit her sister for two weeks. Jane had partied all night and boarded the bus with me at six in the morning looking ghastly. As soon as we got on the road, she left me alone in the front seat to go search for a seat in the back where she could sleep it off.

Before the trip was over, Jane turned out to be as much trouble as many of my other babysitters had been. I had to make sure she was alive and fed and watered and alert enough to survive without me when I got off the bus.

Lila says angels are always looking out for us, so the bus driver was probably an angel, and that's why he let me leave my pack on the seat and kept an eye on who sat beside me. And come to think of it, I must have been Jane's angel.

Angels were not on my mind though as I watched the bus driver and wondered what it would be like to be in command of such a huge vehicle. My mom wouldn't let me touch her car steering wheel. Some kids my age brag about driving, and one Mexican kid in my class said he drove all the time on his farm down there. He was about half my size and barely spoke English, so I don't see how he could drive a truck.

The bus was climbing into the mountains, still a long way from the Oregon border. I had no idea there was so much California north of Sacramento. I stopped fantasizing about my messy, guilt producing death and stared out the window for a few hundred miles. The Golden State was gold and yellow and beige and orange and manila and tan and brown, all topped with dusty blue skies.

My mom didn't always hate me. I had good memories. Like the time she took me to a horse barn. I was in kindergarten, and she was dating a Marlborough man, one of the models who posed for cigarette ads. He didn't seem that handsome to me, but my mom loved the idea of dating a model. At least he didn't smoke. Janice had some limits. Smoke was one of the things she didn't like about tending bar. She put up with smoke at work, but she wouldn't have a smoker in her house or car. So the model didn't smoke, which I imagine is not the norm for Marlborough men. He did have a horse, though, which is probably not the norm for Marlborough men either, and the idea of a horse enthralled me.

My mom's pattern with men was like this. Each boyfriend lasted six months. For the first three months she was so crazy about the guy, she would hide me away with babysitters or leave me with her mother, if she and Grandma Betty were on speaking terms. The second three months she would wedge me between her and her boyfriend to help them break up.

Once when I was seven and another time when I turned ten, there was no boyfriend. Both times my mom had sworn off men for good, and she lavished so much attention on me I had nightmares about drowning in chocolate milk. "For good" ended up being six months each time. Maybe it was a hormone thing.

So this must have been toward the end of the Marlborough man, and my mom and I were at the horse barn with him. We were in a matching clothes phase. We both had on kelly green cowboy boots. Mine pinched my toes. When I complained about them, she said, "Get used to it, Sandy. Beauty hurts."

I was excited to see real horses and scared too, because, well, if you've ever been five years old standing in straw up to your shins in a stall with a shiny black horse whose front leg is taller than you are, you know why I was scared. Horses look small on TV.

The model boyfriend had given me a carrot to offer the horse as a present, and before I was ready, the horse's big head came down at me and his enormous whiskery mouth closed over the carrot and yanked it out of my hand. Terrified, I ran behind my mother and bawled my head off. Well, they both got a big kick out of watching little Sandy cry so hard over nothing.

Now why am I telling this story? Oh yea, good memories. Okay, I'm getting to that part.

While I was crying myself into a fit of hiccups, the model said, "Babe, I need to make a phone call," and he disappeared.

My mom picked me up and took me outside to a huge tree beside a pasture. She sat me on the top rail of the fence, wiped my face with perfumed tissues from her pocket, and kissed me. "I'm sorry, Sandy," she said. "I forgot how big horses are when you're little. Don't worry. Horses don't want to hurt anyone, especially sweet little girls like us."

She pointed to some horses at the other end of the pasture. They were standing still eating grass, and when she pointed to them, they raised their heads and looked at us. "See," she said. "They like us. They're nice."

"Come on," she said. "I have an idea." She picked me up, and I wrapped my arms and legs around her and burrowed my nose into the hair behind her ear. She smelled sweet and beautiful, and I felt safe all wrapped around her.

She took me back inside to the horse and petted its neck. "You know what?" she said. "This horse really likes little hands like yours to touch him on this soft part." She took my hand and gently placed it on the horse's warm smooth neck. "See, Sandy, this horse is nice." She held me close, cradling me in her fragrant warmth. I believed her and I wasn't afraid.

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Janice put me on the bus in between boyfriends. The last one was over, and I could tell by the way she dressed and touched up her nails every day that she had met the next one. I was so tired of her endless parade of lovers I planned to avoid boys forever. The whole notion of men was too predictable and tiresome.

School was out, and I was facing a summer of being too young to get a job and too big to hang around the neighborhood swimming pool. My best friend Shelly spent summers with her

grandparents at a lake in Wisconsin, where she and a gaggle of cousins splashed their way through the vacation. So I resigned myself to an endless boring summer.

The day before my birthday, my mom said, "Cassandra, I'll help you clean your room."

"What?" First of all, she only called me Cassandra when she was introducing me to someone important, and second of all, my room was always tidy.

"Come on," she said, marching into my bedroom before I could stop her.

I followed her, meaning to get all huffy about her insinuating my room needed cleaning, but when I saw a giant suitcase open on my bed, I was speechless.

"Now before you get excited," she said, "it's probably just for the summer, until I straighten some things out here."

"You said you'd never let anyone take me away again." I pushed the suitcase off onto the floor and slumped down beside it.

"This is not the same." She tried to pull me up, but I pushed her hands away.

"You promised."

She sighed and took off her spike heels so she could sit on the floor across from me. "Just listen, okay? You're going to stay with your grandmother in Oregon for the summer. I need the space and she wants to get to know you."

"Grandma and Hugh are on a cruise to Mexico."

"Not that grandma, your other one, your dad's mom."

"What? All of a sudden you invent a new grandma?" I wrestled the big suitcase in between us and pushed, so she had to scoot back against my bedroom wall. "It's another foster home, isn't it?"

"It is not a foster home. It's your real flesh and blood grandma, Lila Blue, your father's mother."

"I have a grandma you never told me about? How could you?"

She pushed the suitcase back into my shins, jumped up and stormed out of my room, carrying one shoe in each hand, like weapons. I knew she'd be back when she had a rebuttal prepared, and sure enough, it only took a few minutes.

"Ever since those child protection people took you away from me, I've busted my butt making sure you were never left alone for one second. You think it's been easy taking care of you all these years with no help? I could have bought a Mercedes with all the money I spent on sitters."

"Mom, don't send me away. I'm twelve now, not four. No one's going to call the police if you leave me alone a few hours or even all night. I don't mind, really. Let me stay. Please."

"I can't, Baby. Don't you see? You're growing up. I can't protect you. I know I'm not the best mom, but I try. I want you to be safe."

"I am safe. I lock the doors. Aunt Lacey is two blocks away. I could run there in one minute. Let me stay."

"No, Cassandra. It's all arranged. You're going tomorrow, like it or not."

"Tomorrow's my birthday!"

"I know, but that's when Jane's going, and she's taking you."

"Jane?"

"You know Jane, my friend from work. It's all arranged."

"No. I won't go. I'm staying here where I belong. Don't send me off to some stranger."

"Lila Blue is not a stranger. She's a friend. She sends us money. Every Christmas and every birthday and whenever I'm in a bind."

"Lila Blue is my grandmother?" A slide show went off in my head, year after year of Christmas letters featuring Lila Blue and her grandkids and her pets and her adventures at the beach. The world she described was unimaginable. I had always wondered why she signed them, "Love and blessings to my beautiful California Girls."

When I had asked my mom about it one time, she'd said, "Oh, we met Lila Blue when you were two years old, and she thought you were the cutest thing alive."

I glared at my mother and imagined daggers streaming out of my eyes into her heart.

"She's a nice person. You'll like her."

"How could you?" I started crying from anger and frustration and fear all mixed together. I pounded on the suitcase between us.

"Sandy, please don't do this to me. I couldn't tell you. You were too young. I didn't want to complicate things."

"So every time we had a shopping party, it was her money? You lied to me my whole life?"

"I can't tell you everything."

"Some basic facts would be nice, Mother."

"I want to change, Sandy. That's why I need some privacy now. I need your help."

"A new boyfriend." I climbed up on my bed and buried my head under the pillow and screamed into my mattress.

She sat beside me and put her hand on my shoulder. I scrunched to the edge of the bed away from her. "A friend. Not a boyfriend. His name is Roger."

"You dumped Roger three years ago!"

"Not that Roger. A different one."

I screamed into the bed again.

"He's good for me, Sandy. He's older, he wants to help me get a better job and stop drinking. He stopped two years ago."

She'd never talked about stopping drinking before. "You'll stop drinking? Even wine?" She went nuts over fancy wines, the more expensive the better. She memorized labels and cared more about wine pedigrees than she did about my report cards.

"Everything," she said. "For good. One day at a time."

"How is sending me away going to make you stop drinking?"

"Roger says when you change a habit, it helps to break up your routine."

"I'm your daughter, not your routine."

"Listen. Lila and I decided this together. She wants you, Sandy. She's your grandma, and she's been very good to us. Please try it for two weeks? If you don't like it, I promise you can come back on the bus with Jane in two weeks."

"You're putting me on a bus?"

"You have to help me here, Baby. I need to change, and this is my chance. Please try? For me?"

What choice did I have? What choices do kids ever have?

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I stared out the bus window at Lake Shasta in the afternoon light. Imagine forty giants kneeling in a circle gouging a deep sloppy hole in red dirt and then filling it partway with muddy water. That's Lake Shasta for you. Not pretty.

This was not how I planned to spend my twelfth birthday. Not that I had planned anything, but I certainly never imagined being banished to the wilderness all by myself. I felt like Hansel and Gretel, only worse. At least they had each other. I wished I could talk to Shelly. She always made me laugh.

Then I remembered Shelly's gift, the only real birthday present I'd received this year. I took it out of my backpack, where I had kept its gold wrapping paper safe by folding my sweatshirt carefully around it. While I unwrapped my gift, the gold paper crinkled enough to attract the attention of the driver, who glanced at me and smiled when he saw what I was doing. Everybody loves presents.

The gift turned out to be some kind of book, covered in green brocaded satin, luxuriously soft. Inside was a blank journal with creamy heavy paper. The book was just the sort of elegant gift Shelly always chose for me. There was no card, but she'd inscribed it on the first page, *Happy Birthday, Sandy. Write all the most delicious words of the summer in here. All my love, Shelly.*

I laughed. She knew me so well. Having a friend like Shelly made everything easier. She could make me laugh long distance. I dug a pen out of the front pocket of my backpack and wrote underneath her inscription. *I love you, Shelly. Thank you for the perfect birthday present. PS I'm sitting on a Greyhound bus on my way to Oregon. Help!* Then I closed the lovely book, wrapped the gold paper around it again, and found a safe spot for it in an inside compartment of my backpack.

While paying for a ham sandwich during the lunch stop, I found the card to Lila's shop in my jeans' pocket. Back on the bus, I used it for a bookmark in the dictionary I carried with me at all times.

The dictionary has always been my favorite book. In my suitcase I carried a hardcover college edition. In my backpack I had a pocket edition nearly as thick as it was wide. I'd put clear tape all over the cover to reinforce it, but the poor thing was frazzled from constant use.

Ever since Grandma Betty gave me a picture dictionary when I was four, I've loved words. I never worry about being bored if I have a dictionary. I guess I'm addicted to it the way some people are to crossword puzzles or to those tiny breath mints. I open it anywhere and study the first word my eyes land on. I flit around from page to page tasting words, the way bees visit blossoms on apple trees. Some words are sweet, like *memorabilia* and *willowware*, and I say them over and over in my head or out loud if I'm alone. Others are bitter or salty. Or sour, like *propitiate*. Or sharp, like *cataract*. I feast on words. That's what Shelly meant by *delicious words of the summer*.

The dictionary is guaranteed to calm me down and help me get through hard times, and there had been more hard times than ever lately.

Janice wasn't doing so well. She hadn't smiled in weeks. She'd stopped going out with her girlfriends, and her last boyfriend had gotten mean to her and too interested in me. Three babysitters in a row quit because my mother came home so late, and she'd run out of ideas for where to get new sitters. I told her I was old enough to look out for myself, but she felt too guilty to leave me alone.

The last two sitters had been useless. They should have paid *me* for doing their homework. How do some girls get to be seventeen without developing brains?

I was worried about my mother, and I was worried about me. She was all I had, and she was in trouble.

Grandma Betty couldn't help us that much, because she had two other daughters with all their kids who used her house for a motel. Her fourth husband, Hugh, was tolerant, but he limited houseguests to one batch at a time, and Janice's sisters always seemed needier than we did.

So I guess I should have seen this coming, but you don't know how bad something is when you are smack in the middle of it. Like a bad smell that you've been breathing in day and night. You don't know how horrid it is until you've been in fresh air long enough to regain your senses. Then you walk back in and, whoa, this place really stinks.

Somewhere around the Oregon border, after all that scenery and all those passengers embarking and debarking, I thought, "Whoa, my life really stinks."

I spent a few miles wallowing in that realization, and then I became curious about what was coming up next.

I studied the white business card that was the ticket to my future. On it was a tiny picture of my newly discovered grandmother. Lila looked old. Her white hair was braided on her head like a crown and it had red flowers stuck in it. My grandma Betty died her hair black, the way my mother did, so I was not used to white-haired relatives. I wondered how many other ways Lila would surprise me.

Her card had raised blue lettering that said, *Carefree styles for the whole family at Lila Blue's Family Barbershop, Highway 101, Rainbow Village, Oregon.*

"She will pick you up" were my mother's parting words. I sure hoped Janice had remembered to tell Lila I was coming.

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The rain started at the Oregon border and didn't show any signs of letting up. The whole world turned gray and black. In some places the rain was so heavy the bus's giant windshield wipers could not keep up with it. I strained to help the driver see until I gave myself a headache and had to close my eyes and try to rest. I snuggled in the hooded sweatshirt from my backpack, leaned against the cold bus window, and listened to the tires splash rooster tails of water over everything in our path.

Jane and I had to change buses in Corvallis to get to the coast highway. She was still in horrid condition when I woke her up and gathered her belongings for the transfer. If my mother considered Jane a reliable person, she was delusional.

After I'd ridden a full twelve hours, I finally limped off the bus at the Rainbow Village stop, which turned out to be the village post office, which was closed. By then the clouds had rained themselves out, so even though I was tired and crumpled, at least I wasn't sopping wet when Lila found me.

She looked exactly like the little picture on her card, red flowers tucked in her white braided crown and all. In fact, she looked like Santa's grandma, not mine.

Grandma Betty was an older version of Janice, only with better tastes in shoes and men. Lila Blue was something new. She wore red shoes and socks, a baggy red sweater, and a long black denim skirt.

"Cassandra," she cried, circling me in a hug that smelled of carnations and fresh ocean air. "And so beautiful," she said, holding me away from her to study my face. "Simply beautiful. I'm so happy you are here. So grateful."

She hugged me again, and for some reason, tears ran down my face and dripped on her sweater. I wasn't crying. The tears must have been from exhaustion.

"I'm all muggy and smelly," I said, pushing away from her. My mom hadn't hugged me since I'd started getting breasts. It felt weird to have someone touch me.

Lila pulled my grimy hands up to her face and kissed the tops of them. "Well that's so easily remedied," she said. "You're here now. That's what matters."

She dropped my hands and marched over to get my bag. The suitcase had tiny wheels on the bottom, but when we tried to pull it along the wet sidewalk, it kept falling over. Finally Lila lifted it and marched along to her little red Honda car. She was strong for an old lady.

At least her house wasn't red. It was made out of big, smooth gray rocks, and it perched at the top of a hill overlooking the ocean. When we walked into the kitchen from the garage, my mouth dropped open.

A huge picture window, practically the whole wall was glass, looked over the cliff to white sand, waves breaking on a rift of black rock, and gray ocean out as far as I could see. A high blanket of clouds covered the sky but didn't obscure the bright horizon, where the ocean made a crisp, dark line miles away on the edge of the world.

I had never imaged a house could have that kind of view. It made me dizzy, and I grabbed the back of a padded wooden chair tucked in under the kitchen table.

"Sorry," Lila said. "The floor slopes downhill in the kitchen, so everyone feels woozy at first."

I nodded, gulped, and looked around slowly, trying to keep the world from spinning. When I stood still, my body remembered the motion of the bus, which didn't help. While I clung to the back of the chair, Lila lugged my suitcase and backpack into the living room.

"You have a choice of rooms," she said when she returned. "We can fix you up in my sewing room or you can have the middle bunk in the Crow's Nest upstairs." She seemed so happy and relaxed that I took a deep breath.

"Take your time," she said, prying my hands off the back of the chair and pulling it out for me to sit down. I sat and closed my eyes to stop the sensation of being on a ship bobbing in the sea. I don't know what I expected, but this wasn't it.

I opened my eyes enough to peek through the archway into the living room. I could tell by all the light it had a huge ocean-view window too. Beyond the back of the couch, which sat in the middle of the room, I saw a piano and a small desk with a curtained window above it. I was curious about the rest of the house, but too weary and wobbly to investigate.

My mother's idea of home decorating was white leather sofas, glass tables, and pink satin pillows. I didn't mind that, really, although I would never choose it for myself. The part that bothered me was she liked to top it all off with some grinning boyfriend whose only chore was to flatter her. She was a bartender, so what did I expect. When I suggested she might like to try working in a bank or maybe a dress shop, she said the tips were good at the club and she liked the hours. Right.

I was glad there wasn't the slightest whiff of leather in Lila's house so far. It smelled of salty sea air, vanilla, and something fruity and sweet.

With my eyes closed, I stayed still, breathing. The roar of the ocean, a constant crash swoosh crash swoosh, was punctuated by seagulls crying. I clung to the table, feeling adrift.

"You poor thing," Lila said, sitting down beside me. "Here, drink this. Peppermint tea and honey, to calm the Nellies." She guided my hands around a heavy mug of fragrant tea, and the smell of it did help. After a while I was able sip the tea, breathe normally, and open my eyes all the way. Then I felt incredibly tired.

"Which first," she said, "shower, sleep, or supper?" Then she laughed at herself and said, "My, that was sibilant, yes?"

"The sss sounds," I said, nodding, "Yes."

"Ooh, another word person in the family. Excellent!" She clapped her hands and bounced up and down like a child.

"Shower," I said.

"Perfect," she said, and she brought me a big shopping bag full of wrapped birthday presents. Even though I was tired, it was fun to open the gifts, which were wrapped in layers of white tissue paper and bright red ribbons. The first gift was a soft, beautiful white flannel nightgown with ruffles on it. Next was a fluffy long blue robe that felt warm and luxurious. And the last package was a pair of fuzzy blue slippers to match the robe. These gifts were so pretty I felt ashamed of my big pity party on the bus earlier.

Lila remembered my birthday. And she went out of her way to make it special. I thanked her, and she carried the presents to the bathroom to get out towels for me. I followed her, and she showed me where everything was and told me to take my time.

Before I stepped in the shower, I tried on the slippers to see if they fit. They fit perfectly, which was truly amazing because I had already passed through the Big Foot stage of puberty.

First came the long arms and legs, then sore little breasts, then zits and shiny skin and stinky armpits, then little curly hairs popping out overnight in strange places, then big feet. All my body parts seemed to have agendas of their own. I was completely at their mercy.

I even had my period, once, kind of, enough to be yucky. When I had shown my mom my underpants, she'd said, "Great! My daughter has the curse at eleven." She'd wadded up my underwear and thrown them in the trash. "Don't I have enough trouble taking care of you without worrying about this too?"

She'd pushed me in the bathroom and handed me a box of sanitary napkins and a box of tampons. "Read the directions," she'd said. "You'll live." Then she'd closed the door on me.

The nurse at school had called menstruation "our monthly visitor."

I had memorized the textbook diagram of the vulva and vagina and uterus and ovaries and fallopian tubes, but all that knowledge did nothing to ease my loneliness as I sat on the toilet and read all the directions on the blue and white boxes of sanitary products.

When I emerged from that bathroom, I knew what it meant to be unclean.

Now, less than a month later, I was six hundred miles away from home in the bathroom of a grandma I never knew I had. The sturdy grab bar in Lila's tub helped me survive my first shower in Oregon. Every time I was in danger of passing out from exhaustion and fragrant steam, I clutched it, closed my eyes, and took three deep breaths.

After I was clean through and through, I dried with lavender scented towels, and I pulled the soft warm gown over my head and the soft warm slippers onto my feet. When I came out of the bathroom, Lila took my hand and led me to the little sewing room across from her bedroom.

"Sleep here tonight," she said. "Tomorrow you can explore upstairs. I'll leave lights on in the bathroom and kitchen. If you need something in the night, wake me up."

I let her tuck me in bed like a baby. "Sweet dreams, Cassandra," she said.

"Sandy," I said, and she smiled. My eyes fell shut, and even though it was still light outside, I plunged into deep, warm sleep.

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Sometime in the night, I awoke to Lila's voice in a whispered conversation with someone in her bedroom. First I thought she was calling my mom or maybe she had a grinning boyfriend of her own tucked away in there, but neither of those scenarios fit what I was hearing.

I got up to use the bathroom, and as I passed by her open bedroom door trying not to snoop, two tall white cats came out and brushed by me on their way to the kitchen. They barely

glanced at me. Maybe they weren't cats at all, because cats are supposed to be scared or curious, aren't they? Whatever they were, they weren't a grinning boyfriend, so that was a relief.

When I shuffled into the kitchen early the next morning, Lila was sitting at the table writing in a journal and drinking coffee. The whole kitchen still slanted toward the sea. The horizon was pink over a silvery ocean, and seagulls were gliding by the window silently, all headed south, like early morning commuters on the California freeways.

"What would you like for breakfast?" Lila got up and pulled me over to the bank of cupboards and countertops near the sink. She gave me a tour of the kitchen. She had all the normal foods, like cereal and crackers and bread and peanut butter and jam, plus she had lots of stuff I'd never seen before, like a whole pineapple in the huge bowl filled with fresh fruit. My mom's idea of fruit was canned fruit cocktail on sale, the diet kind.

The pineapple looked dangerous.

"My mom lets me drink coffee," I said, because the coffee smelled really good, and it was true that once in a while my mom let me taste her coffee.

"Okay, sweetie," Lila said. "Help yourself. The sugar's in the bowl by the breadbox and there's milk in the fridge if you like to dress it up."

I helped myself before she had time to remember I was barely twelve years old. The coffee, dressed up with lots of sugar and milk, looked okay and smelled okay, so I drank some, and it tasted good.

When I returned to the table, Lila nodded her approval. "Your daddy sniffed everything before he tasted it, too. You inherited that from him."

My father. There it was. I was hoping that subject wouldn't come up until I was good and ready for it. I'd spent years trying to remember one tiny thing about him, but I couldn't. Then I pretended I never had a dad, which I mostly didn't because my mom said he was dead, but how could I believe her?

Now here I was sitting with my father's mother.

I put the coffee cup carefully on the table and stared at the waves crashing on the ridge of black rocks that poked out of the ocean below the house.

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The possible facts. It had taken my whole life to drag these tidbits out of my mom, usually when she was drunk or too tired to remember she hated my dad and hated me by association.

My mom and dad were married in Reno, Nevada, in January of 1973. It was raining, and my mom's pink linen suit was crumpled by the time it was their turn at the wedding chapel.

There were no pictures, no flowers, no presents. Their honeymoon was one night at a casino hotel, where they lost money playing black jack all night. I was born June fifteenth of the same year. There's some math for you.

My dad's name was David and he was tall, dark and handsome, probably not unlike the Marlborough man. David had green eyes like mine and curly hair like mine, only his hair was brown and mine was orange. Grandma Betty called mine strawberry blonde, but I'd never seen orange strawberries. Mom and Grandma Betty had nagged me about my hair for so long that I refused to let anyone touch it. No one could mistake *me* for a model. Don't they know how insulting it is to say, "Sandy, you'd be so pretty if...?"

When Mom found out their marriage wasn't legal, she tore up everything related to him, including the invalid wedding license and my real birth certificate. She had to write for a copy of my birth certificate to register me in school, but she scratched out the father's name and threw a tizzy fit in the school office when they asked her about it. The clerks let it go. They recognized a difficult mother when they saw one.

So, no photos, no memories, no cute teddy bears from Dad, not one word.

The smell of frying bacon pulled me off Memory Lane.

"How about scrambled eggs?" asked Lila.

When I looked at her helplessly, she said, "And toast and jam. That should be a good start for your first day at the beach."

Even in my shell-shocked condition, I noticed that breakfast included the best scrambled eggs I'd ever eaten.

"Fertilized brown eggs from Wilson's farm," Lila said. "Best tasting eggs in the county."

Something about the way she said it made me think she'd tried eggs from every chicken for miles around. Maybe she had, or maybe her voice rang with authority no matter what she was saying.

Lila pointed to my giant suitcase parked against the back of the living room sofa that faced out to sea. "Get on some warm clothes and beach shoes," she said. "Unless you want to go barefoot, like me. Barefoot is the best way to venture forth into a new life."

I opted for running shoes.

The stairway in front of the house was a sturdy wooden one, wide enough for one person, with strong handrails on both sides. Twenty-one steps. Lila counted them out loud when she led me down that morning. "Just twenty-one steps to the magnificent Oregon coastline."

Magnificent is a word that must have been invented with Lila's beach in mind. We walked north along the tide line on the wide empty expanse of white sand toward a dark cliff covered in pine trees. The trees must have been ancient, because they looked tall and we were a mile away.