

Chapter 1

Of Mormons and Aliens

Roswell New Mexico, 2011

“Leave the aliens behind, go to Zion, marry yourself a good Mormon girl, and have *lots* of babies.”

This was the advice my vainglorious mother gave me from the time I could even write out the word ‘aliens’ on paper.

“And if she’s a pretty Mormon girl, even better, because I want cute grandbabies.”

My mother was high-flown in her lofty goals for me, her oldest child. But I wasn’t about to disagree. She was the Relief Society President of our tiny Mormon ward and a veritable hurricane of a personality. She was pure caffeine carefully bottled within a five-foot-nothing frame, and accented by short, spiky dark hair that resembled an aloe-vera house plant.

Nobody ever questioned mother’s advice.

In fact, the sisters in the ward often found their way to our doorstep like little lost sheep, where they would be welcomed by her sage advice and exchange friendly gossip—all while indulging in her homemade bread and canned apricot marmalade or a slice of decadent Celestial cake. (This kind of rankled me to be honest, because it usually meant less for me.)

I suppose my mother’s advice kind of makes sense seems as how we were one of the only Mormon families living in Roswell, New Mexico. Utah was the mother-ship, our holy Mecca, our Zion, and Roswell was slim-pickings indeed when it came to Mormon girls. Blanche Pratt, for starters, had a nose that was off-center and she was obsessed with Anime. It used to frighten me how many times she’d sit in Sunday school all growing up and sketch pictures of curvaceous girls with buggy eyes who carried around bloody chainsaws or jagged scissors.

The only other Mormon girl my age who I could actually stand was my cousin Lizzy. And although I had wanted to marry her at the age of three, thank goodness that wasn’t a religious belief in Mormonism. Otherwise Mother would already have us lined up at the altar.

No, I had about as much luck in finding a decent Mormon girl in Roswell to marry as we did in having another UFO crash down in town. And none but a faithful Mormon girl would do in the eyes of my zealot mother—no Catholic, no Presbyterian, no Jewish, and certainly no new-age hippy girl as my mother called them—the kind of girls who don’t believe in using microwaves, smoked weed, and thought reincarnation was legit and all that jazz.

Now if they were to hearken to the call of Joseph Smith and convert to Mormonism, well that was a different story.

Yup, those were my dismal options in life.

Now of course I'd given the whole "Zion" thing a good go—I'd actually just spent the last two college years in Utah. But I had recently returned back home to Roswell without a college degree, with barely a penny to my name, and *wifeless*. This had been much to my mother's chagrin.

Utah certainly hadn't worked out for me, but I was ready for a change, a fresh start, which is how I found myself on a Wednesday morning in late July at the Roswell International Air Center.

"Attention all passengers, please have your passports or ID's and your boarding pass ready for inspection." The announcement jugged my senses, and gathering my luggage, I moved to stand in the security line. My aunt had just dropped me off and I was now nervously waiting to board a plane to New York City.

My whole life I'd never been further east than Mount Rushmore, and I was wondering if I was savvy enough to survive a place like the Big Apple. Lizzy had recently moved there with her boyfriend who had received a job working for Facebook in Manhattan, and she had invited me to come stay with her and Stefan. And her boyfriend's name was legit Stefan. Not Steve, or Steven, like any other normal person, but Stefan. He even pronounced it *Steh-fawn* so that it sounded really cool and different. Like he was some European vampire.

No one blamed Lizzy one ounce for falling in love. No-one except for my mother, that is. She had pursed her lips and immediately rung up her sister-in-law in a huff when she found out Lizzy had run off with a non-Mormon boyfriend.

When Lizzy had first left for New York, I was sad to see her go and was just a little envious of the fact that she was moving to a city where it's socially acceptable to walk around wearing your bathrobe. (Actually, I'm not sure if that's true, but it seems like it would be okay and I kinda like the idea of it.) Truth be told though, I was mostly jealous that she had escaped Roswell since I'd managed to crash-land back in town with flying colors.

One year apart in age, Lizzy and I have always gotten along well. From the time I was young I felt safe around her. Lizzy didn't kick soccer balls in my face or pin me down, dangling loogies over me the way boys in my neighborhood did. That is, unless I called her "Lisianthus," her real birth name, after the flower. She hated the name and would never hesitate to kick you in the nuts if you called her by it. So she had always been Lizzy to me. Yes, her company was definitely preferable to wrestling with boys, hunting down aliens with bb guns, and who knows what other ghastly things young boys are prone to do.

Another thing I loved about her? She owned an unnaturally large collection of My Little Ponies, which I particularly enjoyed. Playing with ponies seemed a much safer option than watching my brother burn the legs off of grasshoppers on the electric fence in the field near our home.

And as we grew older, the days of 'Pouf and Purdy Parlor' faded and turned into a shared appreciation for anything nerdy and non-athletic. Lizzy was a brilliant student and scientist. She was the elegantly-dressed chemistry tutor who spoke in long, flowery sentences using proper grammar. I, on the other hand, had toted around fantasy books all growing up, reading fiction on the school bus and wearing Lord of the Ring type graphic tee-shirts that were usually on the hideous side and probably suited me the way a crocheted sweater would suit a bull dog.

Now, as young adults, Lizzy and I were still thick as thieves. She was still obsessed with fashion and molecules, and I still carried a book everywhere I went and couldn't be bothered with trivial things like

matching my belt to my shoes. It just didn't seem like it'd do any good, really. I was a tragically skinny case, so why bother with Versace when it'd just fit me like a circus tent anyway? From the way the excess fabric of sweaters hung from my arms, you'd think I'd been a starving orphan growing up. I was on the tallish side as well, yet my complete lack of athletic coordination made me absolutely worthless on a basketball court. I blamed my pigeon-toed feet for that one.

Lizzy assured me that I was okay though, despite the fact that I had zero regard for style and was a walking accident-waiting-to-happen with thin arms and twiggy legs for days. In fact, she claimed I'd become one of the handsomest men in Roswell one day. And before she passed, my gammy used to call me her "pretty little English boy." Although I felt terribly self-conscious each time she did. I didn't like being called "pretty."

Gammy always said I stole my looks from our West Yorkshire ancestors. I had the family's trademark, smooth, pale-moon skin and had inherited my dad's slender face, upturned Celestial nose, and unruly, dark hair. It was a galaxy of wavy curls the color of midnight. My eyes though, were my mother's. They shifted between shades of vivid green and lightened to lucent shades of gold, depending on the weather, the clothes I wore, or even my mood.

They were fickle and intense. Just like my mother.

As I slowly made my way forward in the security line, I found myself feeling more and more anxious for my upcoming trip. Whenever I feel like I am out of my comfort-zone I often people-watch. There is something concrete about watching ordinary strangers doing ordinary things. It calms my nerves, bringing my emotions back at bay. So, I began watching the people ahead of me as they filed awkwardly through the metal detectors. I soon found it interesting to see how many articles of clothing were being stripped.

The lucky individuals who played the right cards came through fully clothed. Others weren't so lucky. One woman in a skimpy tank top and skirt was trying to modestly cover herself again with her metallic buttoned up jacket, while simultaneously replacing her high heel shoes and bracelets. She lost her balance, bumping into a balding man in a floral shirt who was fastening his belt back on to his sagging khaki pants. The woman apologized, her face a mask of embarrassment. Next to her, another barefooted man was hurriedly clipping his suspenders back on under his suit jacket while a young woman in a blue summer dress snuck covert glances his way out of the corner of her eye as she replaced her gold watch and hoop earrings.

The strip poker scene made me think of my Dad. It was he who had taught Lizzy and me how to play poker (the non-strip version). Lizzy's father and my dad were brothers, and they owned a local diner together—The Alien Egg-Duction—and it was my personal sanctuary. Sometimes I'd help out bussing the tables, but most of the time I would curl up with a good book in my dad's personal office, or else I'd watch television on the little portable TV that sat propped up on a pile of dusty *National Geographic*s in the corner. The times we played poker though were always my favorite.

Every Saturday night for as long as I could remember, my dad and Lizzy and I would hunker down in his back office to watch episodes of "The X-Files" (Dad loved that paranormal-alien crap) and play a few rounds of poker. He never let us gamble using real money, of course, but we used Starbursts, Skittles, and Swedish Fish. And mother never knew about our games. It was our secret.

My dad was quite different from my mother and her “standards.” He had a fine mustache the color of dark ash that he carefully trimmed twice a week with a miniature pair of scissors and he always wore a dress shirt and tie to the cafe. One might mistake him for being intimidating. But I knew better. He had a weakness for helping the underdog and had a boyish laugh that usually turned heads. He was definitely a lot more relaxed to be around, and although I knew my mother meant well, I often escaped her nagging to spend more time with my dad.

My mother openly hated the aliens and secretly hated the diner. So I was always safe there.

Once I made it safely through security (luckily, I played a decent hand and only had to take off my shoes and remove my backpack), I left the strip poker behind and wandered aimlessly for a while until I found the right gate. Relieved, I found an empty seat and sat my fanny down in a hard, uncomfortable plastic chair bolted into the floor. Turning my attention to my immediate surroundings, I noticed a young woman sitting two seats away from me. I guessed her to be in her early twenties. She had vintage cat eye glasses and was wearing a sea-green shirt that read, “Cupcakes, Vodka, and Hakuna Matata.”

Overall, she seemed nice enough. Feeling like making a new friend as I waited for boarding, I decided to try and make light, easy conversation. “Excuse me, do you know if this is the flight to JFK in New York?” I asked lamely as I leaned slightly across the empty chair toward her, because I suddenly realized I had nothing else to say, really.

“Yup,” she answered simply. Her cell phone then rang, putting an end to what I was hoping would be a sociable conversation.

The girl greeted her caller in a cheerful voice. Ten seconds later she exploded.

“Mom he is *not* bipolar!” she practically shouted into the phone. “Listen, we’ll talk about this when I get back to New Jersey okaay...” There was a pause in which time the girl dramatically rolled her eyes. “Oh my gosh, he is *not* bipolar!” She then kept repeating the same sentence over and over again, becoming more and more hysterical and upset each time.

Honestly, I would have been fine if she’d chattered my ear off while we waited for our plane. She could have even shown me appalling photos of her cats, Shakespurr and Lord Flufferton. But this was so much better. I looked around to see if anyone else was listening in. One elderly woman with a head full of curls and a young boy with freckles floating on his face like dots of fish food seemed to be enjoying the conversation as well. I glanced at the old woman and she smiled and shrugged her shoulders.

“Mom. Oh my, Mom listen to me, that was like one time—” the girl continued. “He is *too* a good boyfriend!” Long pause, then— “Okay, so just because he proposed then disappeared for like two months—” short pause— “that does *not* make him bipolar!”

As Bipolar Girl carried on ranting, I pondered to myself. Truth be told, I was feeling a little bipolar myself at the moment. I really wasn’t sure *why* I was boarding a plane to Manhattan. There was the obvious reason—to visit my cousin. Deep down inside though, I knew there was another reason for my spur-of-the-moment vacay. Yet I felt unsure. It’s as if my emotions had been emptied into a blender and were swirling around at high speed.

Maybe it was foolish to think I would find answers in Manhattan...

Finally, Bipolar Girl hung up with her mother as we began to board the plane. Shrugging off my discomfort, I followed her through the ticket gate.

When we entered the airplane, I said farewell to Bipolar Girl. She looked at me like I was something smelly on the bottom of her shoe as she retreated to the back of the plane. I was closer to the front, and as I located my seat, I found that I was to be sitting in the middle of two gentlemen, both dressed in business attire. I imagined they were going to big meetings in New York City, and I felt just a little bit important as I was to be accompanying them.

As we flew, I noticed that the man in the window seat never did look out the window. Not even during takeoff when you can see the wide, rose-colored desert, the snowcapped peaks in the distance, and the blue-green cenotes that made up the Bottomless Lakes near Roswell. The light threw its reflection back at me from the surface of the Bottomless Lakes in glimmers, like the Heavens had dropped a handful of coins into the water. I was reminded of how I had always pretended growing up that it was really the ocean. I've never been to the ocean before. It seemed more romantic that way, and to me, flying over my ocean was like falling in love. The man by the window didn't seem to understand how privileged he was.

I had desperately wanted a window seat, but didn't have any extra money to choose where I sat. Feeling that this man didn't deserve his seat, I looked past his pin-striped shirt indignantly to gawk at the clouds out the window. I think he felt a little uncomfortable, but I was so fascinated by the thought of leaving New Mexico, I couldn't help but look. Out of courtesy though, I tried not to lean too much when gazing or breathe too loudly because let's face it, that's just plain creepy. I even smiled once and asked him what refreshment he would like when the flight attendant came by. He ordered ginger ale and since it sounded rather high-class, I ordered one as well. I will admit that as soon as he pulled out his Mac book, I might have read his emails out of the corner of my eye. They were mostly boring messages about financial stuff I didn't understand. I was hoping for emails of scandalous love confessions or secret embezzlement crimes. It was a long six-hour flight—gotta pass the time doin' something.

As the plane finally dipped below cloud cover towards the end of our long flight, and as I caught sight of the land below, I held my breath. The sunlight was dazzling off the harbor of a *real* ocean and as the plane tilted downwards, I could see movement as cars drove in straight lines and pointed buildings lined up in perfect squares. If life had a theme song for pivotal moments, I felt now would be the perfect time for my own personal anthem to play. I gazed past Mister Ungrateful and saw my mirror image looking back at me from the small window, a look of nervous anticipation on my face.

I, a small-town Mormon-boy from alien-central New Mexico, was just arriving to the civilized and mysterious East.

"Poplewells come from strong stock," my mother always told me.

Mother had a scrapbook of old black and white photos and journals of my dad's Mormon ancestors. Growing up, she used to gather my siblings and me in the kitchen to tell us about our heritage, while teaching us how to can tomatoes or make applesauce.

"Our pioneer ancestors trekked across the plains in handcarts during the dead of winter to escape religious persecution," she told me while I cranked the old Victorio food mill and pink applesauce snaked through the strainer into a large metal bowl.

“When the mobs forced our ancestors from their homes in Nauvoo, your great, great, great, great grandmother, Mary Elizabeth, held her head high and swept her kitchen floor one last time before she left. And when her husband froze to death in a blizzard while coming across the plains, she was left alone with three young children to feed and a handcart to pull to Zion, but she never gave up. And when she thought she could walk no further, she felt the Angels of Heaven helping to push her handcart through the snow.”

I had stopped cranking at this point, a look of awe on my sweaty face. “Dash, please keep turning.” I swiped aside the rebellious curls of hair plastered to my head like oxford commas in a sentence and began to slowly crank away again as my mother continued.

“She was a strong woman who showed dignity and courage in the face of terrible trials and tribulations. Plus, she kept a spotless kitchen,” she added as an afterthought as she looked around at her own immaculate kitchen. “And we must do the same. We patiently endure any trials God sends our way and we keep our heads held high. Because that is what Popplewells do.”

Keep your head held high.

This is what I told myself twenty minutes later as I collected my luggage from the baggage claim at the JFK airport. I was a competent, knowledgeable 25-year old after all. If my great, great, great, great grandmother could sweep her kitchen floor in the face of an angry mob, I could certainly survive in a big city all by myself. And I could manage it without looking like an idiot. I nervously fingered the hem at the bottom of an old but very soft, faded shirt, sticking my finger through a tiny hole and hoping I wouldn't make a fool of myself.

I did *not* want to be one of those mucky tourists from the postcards that wear I♥NY tee shirts while sporting visors and fanny packs and taking a zillion photos. In my mind, it seemed that if I wanted anyone to take me seriously in Manhattan, I would need to be more cool than that. If I tried, I could probably even fool people into believing that I actually lived here. With that resolve I squared my shoulders, held my head up high, and began wheeling my luggage to the exit, banging it loudly into a corner of a column on my way out.

Hopefully no one saw that.

As I stepped outside, I nearly had an immediate panic attack. The sensation I was feeling can be compared to what it probably would have felt like if my arch nemesis from middle school had succeeded in setting my hair on fire with the Bunsen burner in chemistry lab. The humidity was like a giant invisible hand smothering me with a hot, wet towel. I couldn't believe how heavy the air was!

I walked to the curb outside the terminal, trying to re-learn how to breathe, and mentally preparing myself to wave my arm and start yelling “TAXI!” like they do in all the movies, when I noticed that there was already a bunch of people waiting in a very organized line for taxis. I felt relieved that I hadn't made a complete fool of myself, and waited behind a family about to start their vacation in the Big Apple (I had eavesdropped on their conversation of course). A few minutes later, a man with a bushy mustache and a prayer cap on his head pulled over and helped me load my luggage into the trunk of his cab.

I slid into the backseat and pulled out the address my cousin Lizzy had given me. Clearing my throat, I said in my most sophisticated voice, “I need to go to Lower East Manhattan to 179 Rivington,

please. The cross streets are Clinton or you can take Attorney.” Mustache Man nodded his head in approval. I hesitated a moment, then asked, “So, um, do I pay you now?”

I’d never ridden in a cab before, so I wasn’t entirely sure of cab riding etiquette.

He raised his eyebrows at me. “No... you pay at the end of your ride.”

“Oh right...”

Once we were out of the confines of the airport, Mustache Man began to speed up. I was alarmed to realize how fast we were soon swerving in and out of traffic along the highway. Even though I was wearing my seat belt, I could feel myself being jolted back and forth, causing me to feel like a tray of green Jell-O in the hands of an elderly woman.

At one point, Mustache Man drove up too fast behind a Subaru and pushed on the brakes hard. I slammed into my seatbelt at the same time that he lay on the horn, cursing the driver in front of him as well as the driver’s mother, shocking me completely.

“For the love of Allah” he muttered to himself after his tirade of four-letter words.

Were Muslims allowed to swear?

I didn’t even know they could have mustaches come to think of it. Shows how little I knew. Figuring that this must be normal cab driving behavior in the big NYC, I continued to sit tense and alert, constantly watching the cars we would narrowly cut off. I mentally conjured a picture of the breakfast menu from our diner and began listing off the entrees in order to try and distract and relax myself.

Flying Sausage Breakfast, \$8.99. Close Encounters of the Food Kind with a side of Heavenly Hash Browns, \$10.25...

As we neared the city, the speed limit dropped and traffic picked up. I was relieved when Mustache Man began to drive at a safer, less terrifying pace. While he continued driving, I gazed happily out of the window expecting to see, oh I dunno, maybe the Statue of Liberty nestled among the Cornflower blue sky and kites rising from Central Park. Nope. Smog, and lots of it. Finding the view to be a bit hazy at the moment, I turned to the driver instead.

“So, do you enjoy driving cabs?”

He kind of grunted and I think I heard “sure kid,” but I wasn’t certain.

“Well I’m so thrilled to be here!” I said perhaps a bit overenthusiastically. “I’m visiting from New Mexico.”

I glanced in the rearview mirror and saw the look of annoyance on Mustache Man’s face. A moment later he pulled out the earphones to his iPod, ignoring me completely. I bit my bottom lip and took to looking out the window again.

A few minutes later I was feeling ridiculously hot and was fanning myself. It was then that I noticed that the air conditioner wasn’t on. It had to have been at least 95 degrees, plus the humidity, and the man didn’t have AC on. Figuring that he must be trying to sweat off some pounds, I braced myself to speak to the man again.

“Hey excuse me? Um sir? Hello?” He finally pulled out one earphone. “Hi. Can I get some air conditioning back here? It’s roasting.”

Without a word he flipped on the AC to the lowest setting and replaced his earphones. Realizing that I wouldn’t get more air than this, I shrugged my shoulders and began snapping pictures with my cell phone out the window of the rows of buildings and the shoppers bustling about.

As we drove on and as the smog began to clear, I caught my first glimpse of the skyline. I began to feel a growing excitement that seemed to start somewhere down around my belly and grew on upwards, filling me with a desire to start jumping up and down in excitement while yelling “I’m in New York City baby!”

A few minutes later we turned off the main roads and began meandering down some crowded, smaller streets. As I looked out the window all I could see were very old high-rise buildings crammed in-between numerous pawn shops, cafes, and tattoo parlors. It seemed like I was in an older part of the city. Not like the area we had previously driven through. The cab suddenly pulled over next to a giant wall glossed over with graffiti.

“Here you are,” Mustache Man said as he turned around to look at me. My feeling of excitement suddenly vanished.

“Oh, um... are you sure this is the right place, because this doesn’t seem much like a residential neighbor—”

“—Kid, we’re on the corner of Rivington and Clinton. 179 should just be down the street a ways.”

He hopped out and unlocked his trunk. As I struggled with the credit card reader a screen popped up with the amount due of \$45.70 and asking if I would like to tip 10, 20 or 30 dollars. My jaw dropped open as I mouthed the amount.

You have got to be kidding me!

I had figured the cab ride would be 10 bucks at *most*. I had never imagined a cab ride would cost so much. Shaking my head in disgust, I selected the 10-dollar tip, grabbed my receipt, then pushed my door open.

I instantly felt dismayed the moment I saw my luggage sitting next to a large puddle of dirty water, an impatient cab driver at its side. “So, uh, you said 179 was that way?” I asked as nonchalant as possible as I pointed down a street that looked like it had just visited the Sturgis Bike Rally.

“Yup.” He gave me an amused look, then without another word, Mustache Man hopped in and drove off, leaving me standing next to the giant puddle on a corner of two streets.

Feeling my confidence seeping out of me like the sweat now running down my face in rivulets, I awkwardly pulled my luggage off the street and up onto the sidewalk. Scaffolding structures ran the length of the sidewalk and several doorways had tarps hung around them. There was a garbage can overflowing with trash and across the street a neon sign of a giant palm read, *Madame Aurelia~ Gifted Seer and Soul Mate Specialist*. I looked further down the street and noticed that one of the buildings had giant orange mushrooms painted all across the front, growing around the door and sprouting up around the second story windows.

It was like being in a nightmare version of *Alice and Wonderland*.

Trying not to panic, I pulled my cell phone out and frantically dialed my cousin's number. As I sat waiting in anticipation for her to answer, I noticed two large men, both covered in tattoos and wearing white tank tops and pants that hung off their thighs, across the street watching me. They were sitting on a staircase, smoking, and I straightened up, throwing my chest out a little as I nodded my head in greeting. They simply continued to stare me down, their muscles bulging. I swallowed nervously, my chest immediately deflating. Finally, Lizzy answered.

"Lizzy! Oh I'm so so *glad* you answered, I think I'm lost! I was about to pull out my GPS and—"

"—What? Where are you Dash?"

"I dunno, the street sign says Rivington, and there's a strange building with mushrooms on it and I'm pretty sure I'm in the wrong—"

"—Oh no, you're just outside! I'll be down in a second." The line went dead and I stared at the screen incredulously.

How on Earth was I in the right place?!

Wondering what I had gotten myself into, I nervously paced around holding tight to my luggage. It seemed that in all the movies, people always get mugged or killed in broad daylight in New York, and I was sure hoping the same wasn't about to happen to me.

Why did I think that coming here would help me find answers? I'm not sure I want a New York City adventure anymore...

I didn't want to admit it, but as I looked down at an old, worn newspaper lying flattened in the damp gutter collecting grime, I was reminded of the current state of my life.

Only a month ago, I had been lying on a mattress in a similar defeated and flattened manner back in my apartment in Salt Lake City.

The air had slowly leaked out of my air mattress. My butt was touching the floor, my back slightly elevated. This was a regular occurrence and every day for two years I had pumped air into that pathetic old mattress. I could barely afford my rent, let alone buy myself a new mattress, and I definitely didn't want to ask anyone for help. Seriously, who wants to admit to their mother that maybe they aren't ready to adult yet?

My parents had offered to help more than once, but I was stubborn. I guess I should consider myself lucky that I had found the air mattress in the closet across the hall when I had moved in. Whatever Good Samaritan had rented the room before me must have left it behind.

I shifted my position, rising up on my elbow and looked at the wall. Apart from a rather battered, single oil painting of a ship at sea that had been a dumpster-dive find, and a small framed photo of my dad and me wearing green alien-eye sunglasses and antennas and making peace signs outside of the diner, my walls were plain, making the room look pretty bare and bleak. I didn't own many nice things;

any money I made had gone to tuition, gas, and groceries. A few belongings were scattered on the floor, and my clothes hung limply in the closet as if they had no will left to live.

Sighing, I lay back down, staring at the ceiling now. “Heavenly Father... I’m not sure I know where to even start,” I whispered to the night. “I guess I should say that I’m thankful for my blessings.”

I could hear the loneliness in my voice. “Are you even there?” Silence. “Right now I have a lot of bad things going on.” I moved my position again and heard a crinkle. I lifted up again and pulled the paper from under my back. It was a letter from the University of Utah. After reading the first few lines again I dropped the letter in my lap.

I was a failure, plain and simple. And now I was going to have to head back to Roswell in shame. Closing my eyes tightly, I felt all my emotions swirling inside me like a vacuum chamber.

Grabbing my comforter, I lay back down and curled myself in a ball under its warmth, pretending they were arms wrapped tight around me. “God, please don’t leave me by myself...”

I looked up from the soiled newspaper lying in the gutter, wanting to forget that memory. A moment later a door opened up near the two men who were smoking. Her light blonde hair in a loose bun and wearing yellow Capri’s and a lacey, white blouse, my fair-skinned cousin bounded down the steps past the two men and strolled across the street to where I was. She had a huge smile on her face, and I had never been so relieved to see someone.

“Lizzy!” We embraced, laughing.

“Welcome to Manhattan my favorite cousin in the whole world! I have missed you!” she said as she pulled away. “Let’s get your stuff inside.”

“This is where you live?” I asked as I handed over the smaller suitcase to her.

“Yeah, it’s a little different I know, but I love it! And you’re absolutely going to enjoy my place—it’s so charming, Dash, and the decorations are lovely.”

She continued to chatter merrily as we passed the two men. I made eye contact with one and he smirked at me. I quickly looked away and at that moment I realized that I was a tourist through and through. Screw the whole competence thing, I thought to myself as I banged my suitcase on the edge of the door as we walked inside.

I guess I would have to let Lizzy be my tour guide. If I couldn’t even manage my own life, there was no way I could survive this city alone. We climbed a stairwell, passing a cat that hissed at me, and approached a faded white door at the end of a hallway. Lizzy unlocked her place with a flourish and I stepped inside.

Sunshine poured in through two large bay windows, illuminating a living room filled with numerous bookshelves, a large wrap-around-couch, a perfectly squashy-looking lounge chair, and two coffee tables. As I set my luggage down, I noticed a statue of a pig with wings sitting next to a very old and antique typewriter on one shelf. There was an Asian cat figurine on the windowsill that was waving its arm back and forth lazily. Plants tumbled out of every corner and books took up a considerable amount of real-

estate on the coffee tables. On the lounge chair was a ball of red yarn and set of knitting needles. As I basked in the cheerful and bright apartment, I felt safe for the first time since arriving in New York.

It looked like my New York City adventure was about to start.