

HOTELIN'

Free orange juice and donuts is a sign that our luck is turning around. At least that's what Mama thinks our first morning at the Sleepy Time Motel.

"Look, girls, breakfast!"

I roll over, almost squishing Jazzy in the cramped twin bed we share. My younger sister whimpers but remains asleep. I sit up, careful not to shift the bed too much, and blink at Mama. The shades are drawn closed but the sun is battling to come inside. She stands in a sliver of sunlight which illuminates her pale skinny arm holding a flimsy paper plate piled high with donuts. Her other hand skillfully grips three Styrofoam cups.

"Where'd you get that from?"

Mama sets the plate down on the table in front of the TV. She hands me one of the cups. "The lobby."

I peer in the cup. Orange juice. I sip it cautiously. It tastes like heaven. Much better than the Sunny Delight Mama would sometimes buy.

Mama sets the other cup down on the nightstand. She sits on the twin bed opposite us and slurps her juice. “I’ve got a good feeling about this, Mia.” She jiggles her leg up and down, what she always does when she’s feeling good. Like soon, real soon, we’ll get the government check she’s been waiting for and find a home. A for-real home with our own furniture, something I haven’t had in over eight years, since I was seven. ‘Course we’d have to buy furniture but Mama’s real good at finding bargains at garage sales and flea markets. People throw out stuff too, leave it at the curb.

I stand up and shuffle over to the donuts. I slept horribly as I always do when we move to a new place. The strange noises, the weird smells, the lumpy mattress. It’s the same at every motel, but different. Instead of mold, you smell bleach. Instead of the mattress being too soft in the middle, it’s got poky springs that stick in your back. Instead of TVs blaring through the thin walls, you got couples fighting.

Same but different.

I pick up a plain glazed and bite into it. The sugary sweetness practically seals my mouth shut. I almost gag.

“I’m telling you. It’s a sign.”

I choke down the gummy ball of sugar dough. “What’s a sign?” I hate to ruin her little party or sugar high or whatever she’s feeling, but I’ve heard it before. Our last place, a few blocks from Disneyland, had a real live plant in it, right there on the nightstand. Not one of those cheap plastic ones. Mama calls it a peace lily. She took *that* as a sign that her check would come in and we’d be living in our own place. Her optimism lasted about six weeks until the manager kicked us out. He was real sorry about it too—yeah, right—but corporate had a strict new policy about the homeless living there. Like a lot of motels lately.

Mama didn't take kindly to that. "We're not homeless, you asshole. We're in between places right now. That's all."

The guy didn't care what we called it, we still had to leave. And now here we were at the Sleepy Time Motel in Westminster, near Little Saigon. Mama even took that stupid plant with her. Like it brought us so much luck at the last place. But she refuses to part with it.

"It's just a donut," I say. "It's not a sign."

Jazzy stirs but remains asleep. I envy that about her. She can sleep through anything.

"Be positive, Mia." Mama stands up, glances down at her uniform. Powdered sugar dots her black pants. She brushes it off and straightens her white button-down shirt.

Mama works at a small coffee shop over in Garden Grove during the day. Sometimes she'll bring home day-old muffins or croissants. The owner still makes her pay for them too. He's a real dick about stuff like that, even if they're going to be thrown out. It pisses me off but Mama hushes me. Says it's just how things are.

"Gotta catch my bus, honey." She goes into the bathroom with her empty cup. I hear running water. She comes back out and waters the peace lily she'd placed near the TV. "Make sure you and Jazzy don't wander around too far, OK? Stay close to the motel."

I nod but know it's pretty much impossible with an eight-year-old. There's only so long you can play hide and seek in the parking lot of a motel or I Spy. A couple motels ago, the one in Brea, we got busted for truancy. Mama never forgave us for that because social services came around, insisting we had to go to school, especially Jazzy. Mama insisted we were "leaving any day" so why bother enrolling in school? The social worker didn't see it that way.

So I ended up at Brea High and Jazzy at Brookview Elementary. We lasted two weeks and it was the most miserable two weeks ever, except for the free lunch the school provided.

Everyone stared at me and whispered. I knew my clothes didn't fit right and were all faded. That's what happened when you shopped at Goodwill or washed the same shirt over and over. I was behind in every subject so they held me back a grade. Instead of enrolling as a sophomore, I was a pathetic fifteen-year-old freshman. Mama had been homeschooling us but with her being gone all the time and me watching over Jazzy, I stopped caring. She stopped trying to quiz me.

When we moved away, I'd never been more relieved. Except for last year when we lived with Keith. He was Mama's boyfriend and a real psycho. He questioned everything she did and was convinced she was cheating on him when she wasn't. Called her "slutty Chink whore" and we were her slutty half-breeds. When it got real bad one day and I was terrified he'd kill Mama, she finally had it and snuck us out of there in the middle of the night. Been living in motels ever since. Keith didn't even bother to look for us. Mama promised to find us an apartment but even with two jobs, no way could she afford first and last month's rent *and* a security deposit.

At first, I was worried Daddy wouldn't be able to find us, we were moving around so much, but the glare on Mama's face told me it was a dumb thing to worry about. I can't even remember what he looked like anymore. Mama had torn up all his pictures, calling him a cheating bastard, when he drove off in his big rig one day and never returned. She gave birth to Jazzy two months later. He's never even seen her.

By the time Jazzy wakes up and shovels down three donuts, I'm itching to get out of the dingy room. But I know we can't wander around.

I give Jazzy a book to read. The walls, big surprise, are paper thin. Babies shriek, people yell, and music blares. I hear a booming voice a few times, telling people to shut the hell up and surprisingly, they do.

I try turning on the air conditioning, it feels like we're suffocating in here, but the window unit doesn't work. I'm too afraid to complain to the front desk. I don't want anyone remembering us in case we have to sneak out in the middle of the night. Mama made us do it once, back at the Royal Highness Inn. She never told me why. I felt bad and couldn't believe people do it all the time. Run up a big bill and move to the next place without paying. Hotelin' they call it.

"I'm bored, Mia." Jazzy gives me her pout that's half adorable, half annoying.

"Finish your book."

"I did already. Twice."

I look around the room. "I spy with my little eye, something that rhymes with..." I glance at the cheap clock radio in between the beds. It's almost one. Mama will be home by five to bring us dinner, either stale pastries or fast food, and then take the bus again for her second job, cleaning offices in some big medical building near Disneyland. "...sock."

"I don't wanna play, Mia. I wanna walk around."

I sigh. "Alright." I stand up.

"Yippee!" Jazzy leaps up and grabs her oversized plastic white sunglasses. The ones she found in a CVS parking lot. She puts them on and strikes a pose in her tank top with a tiger on it and her pink shorts. She has powder sugar all over her face. I wipe at her chin with a wet washcloth.

"Let's go, Miss Thang." I grab her hand and we stumble out into the blazing sunlight. We survey our surroundings: the L-shaped motel with pink paint and turquoise trim, asphalt parking lot with a few beat-up cars, and a McDonald's across the street. Our room sits at the end of the L,

the short part. A few toys are scattered along the walkway. A couple rooms have lawn chairs by the doors with cigarette butts littered underneath.

The door two rooms down from us, room 144, opens and a tall lean black man emerges. He's either Mama's age or like, eighty, I can't tell. He lights a cigarette and eyeballs us.

"Shouldn't you be in school?" He has one of those deep voices that makes you stand straight and pay attention. It's the booming voice I've been hearing all morning.

"You won't tell on us, will you?" Jazzy asks. I put a hand on her shoulder to shut her up.

The man makes a noise, kind of like a snort, and settles into one of the lawn chairs, his knobby knees poking up through the holes in his jeans. He makes the chair look miniature. "Your secret's safe with me." He sucks on his cigarette. "You hungry? You might be able to score some donuts." He nods his head in the direction of the lobby which is at the long end of the L, across the parking lot. A big sign towers over that reads "Whoomp There It Is! All New King Size Beds!" I wonder why our room doesn't have any.

Jazzy looks like she's ready to run over and grab more donuts, but I stop her. "We had some, thanks." The reminder of the sugary blob from earlier makes my stomach churn. I can see inside his room. Clothes are stacked in neat piles and there are packages of ramen noodles and soup cans lined up along a shelf. A small microwave sits on top of a mini fridge.

A door opens further down and a heavy white woman comes outside wearing a shapeless dress with big orange and pink flowers on it. She holds a thick blanket and shakes it out, like she's cleaning. I hear canned laughter from her TV. She glances in our direction. "Morning, Spice." The smell of hot dogs wafts in our direction. She stares at us curiously.

He turns his head to her. "Whoo-hee. I can smell those wieners from here, Cat."

"You want some? I can cook up some more for you."

He grins. "No thanks. Still recovering from that last batch." He winks at me. I smile.

She looks at us. "Girls?"

"I'm vegetarian," Jazzy says. I raise my eyebrows at her.

Spice thinks that's the funniest thing in the world. His whole body shakes and he stomps his feet as he laughs. Jazzy giggles along with him.

I tug at her. "C'mon." I glance at Cat as we hurry past, hoping she doesn't think we're rude. She stares at us as if we're aliens.

"Vegetarian? Why in the devil would a little girl be vegetarian?" she asks, sweat trickling down her plump face.

I hear Spice say something like "leave those girls be." We round the corner of the motel and find a Dumpster underneath some trees. Cardboard boxes are scattered around. We used to play House when Jazzy was a toddler. I'd build walls with boxes and we'd sit inside them, pretending it was our real home. Sometimes we'd find stacks of unused carpeting and that'd be the "nice" dining room when we had guests over.

After establishing that the Sleepy Time has no pool and no park, me and Jazzy agree this neighborhood sucks. Nothing nearby but a busy street, bus stops, and fast food joints.

"I'm hungry, Mia."

I knew that'd be coming soon. My own stomach growls. I squeeze her hand. "I know."

We hustle across the street, crossing busy Garden Grove Boulevard, to the McDonald's. I learned after a while that if we stand outside long enough, people feel sorry for us and hand us money. I guess we look that pathetic. I hate to do it though 'cuz it makes me feel like we're giving up. Like we're really homeless people.

Mama doesn't mind free stuff as long as it's for everyone. Like the donuts. Handouts are a whole different thing. She refuses to accept them.

On the other hand, Jazzy has no problem taking stuff from people. Maybe it's because Mama and I spoil her any chance we can. She's used to people doing things for her. And everybody's happy to do it.

Like right now, she stands by the McDonald's entrance with her silly sunglasses and tiger tank top, and I swear every person that walks by her either waves or says hello. I bet if she asks, she'll get a Happy Meal out of somebody.

I grab her hand. "C'mon." We walk around back to an overflowing trash can. Sometimes people discard barely-eaten Quarter Pounders or a handful of fries. It grossed me out at first but after a while, not much grosses me out anymore.

No luck. Just balled-up wrappers with bits of cheese stuck to them. A couple morsels of an Egg McMuffin.

"Mama will be home soon anyway," I tell Jazzy. She nods, clearly disappointed. I feel a twinge of guilt for not feeding her, but in a few hours, we'll get something. Probably day-old croissants but still.

Spice is still in his lawn chair, smoking a cigarette. He nods when he spots us dragging our feet back to our room. Sweat trickles down the inside of my arms and again, I wish for a pool.

"Hey there, ladies. Hard day at work?"

Jazzy giggles. "We don't work, silly."

Spice laughs in that infectious way of his. I'm glad he's nearby. Much better than the usual drug addicts or creeps we're stuck with as neighbors.

I tug Jazz's hand to head to our room when Spice calls out to us.

"Some lady was looking for you girls."

I turn around. Mama must have come home early. Maybe she's in our room with food.

"Was she Chinese? Wearing black pants and a white shirt?"

He shakes his head. "Nah. This woman was white. Blonde hair. Real skinny. All business. Seemed real interested in finding you."

Something in my chest tightens. Knots up until I think I'm going to choke. I take a deep breath to calm down. She sounds like the social worker from before. Like all the social workers really. Wearing cheap suits and firing a million questions at us like we're disrupting *their* lives. Why don't they just leave us alone? Mama's doing the best she can.

"What'd you tell her?" I grip Jazz's hand. It's hot and sticky.

"That I ain't seen you." He looks at me. "But I got the feeling she'll be back."

I swallow. My mouth feels dry and cottony.

His eyes never leave mine and I feel like he can see inside my head. Can read my terror. Because if they find out Mama hasn't enrolled us in school again, they'll take me and Jazzy away. I hear horror stories about foster care. I may never see Mama or Jazzy again.

"Thanks," I manage to say.

We have to leave. As soon as Mama comes home. I hustle Jazzy to our room and start throwing our stuff in bags. I order my sister to do the same. She grumbles until I tell her that if she doesn't help me, we're leaving her here. That shuts her up. Luckily since we'd just arrived yesterday, most of our stuff is still packed.

By the time it's six and there's no sign of Mama, I know something is horribly wrong. Did the social worker find Mama first? Did they arrest her? I have no idea if that's how things

work. Or maybe the cops got her for skipping out on the bill at the Royal Highness. Were there video cameras?

“Mia, stop it,” Jazzy whines.

I realize I've been pacing the room like a maniac. I sit on the bed. Jazzy flips channels on the television, glancing at me with her eyebrows furrowed together. I don't think she understands how bad the situation is, but she can tell I'm freaked out. I smile.

“It'll be alright, Jazzy.”

Finally after seven, the motel room phone rings. *Beep, beep.* At first, I fear it's some kind of fire alarm. Then I notice the flashing red light on the phone by the bed. I pick it up.

“Hello?”

“Mia?”

“Mama, where are you?” Relief floods through me but is immediately replaced with frantic urgency. “We gotta—”

“I'm here at work, honey. At the medical office.”

“What?”

She sighs. “There was some kind of bus breakdown and we had to get off. Walk over to catch another one. By the time that one came, I had to go straight to the medical office. I'm sorry, Mia.”

“Listen, we have to get out of here.”

But she keeps going. “I got you some bagels, OK? I'll be home real soon. Just sit tight.”

“Mama, the social worker was here we have to leave now.” I say it real fast before she can hang up.

“What? When?”

“Earlier today. While we were...” I’m about to say wandering around but remember that’s exactly what we’re supposed to not be doing.

“What’d they say? You didn’t go exploring, did you? I told you not to wander around, Mia.” She sounds exhausted. I feel bad for putting her through this right now but dammit, she needs to listen.

“Look, a woman came and talked to Spice. Asking about us. And he told her...”

“Who?”

I sigh. “Spice. The man two doors down.”

“I don’t want you talking to some man, Mia. I—”

“Listen!” I hiss. “She asked about us and Spice said we weren’t here but I know she’s going to come back and take us away so we have to leave right now.” My voice rises to a wail.

“Mia, stop. Take a breath. There’s no way a social worker’s coming in the middle of the night to get you, OK? They’re not on call twenty-four seven.”

“But...” I’m about to argue, then realize she’s probably right.

“She’ll probably come back tomorrow. And when she does, we’ll be gone already, OK? We’ll leave first thing in the morning. But right now, get some rest. I’ll be home real soon.”

I nod even though she can’t see me.

“Pack our stuff up so we can go first thing, OK? Can you do that for me?”

“Yes, Mama.” I don’t bother saying I’ve already done that.

“Good. Love you, honey.”

“Love you, Mama,” I mumble. I hang up and brush the tears away. I didn’t even realize I was crying.

Jazzy stares at me, her brown eyes big. “Where’s Mama?” She looks like she’s about to burst into tears. “I’m hungry.”

I smile, try to act like nothing’s wrong. “I know, Jazz. But we have to wait until she comes home tonight, OK?”

“Maybe we can ask Cat for some wieners,” she says.

“You’re vegetarian, remember?”

“I am not.”

I snort but get off the bed to peek out the window. If she happens to be outside, then maybe I’ll bring Jazz over. Or maybe Spice will be there. Just seeing him makes me feel better.

But neither Spice nor Cat are around. The street lamps dotting the lot flicker on and off, giving the parking lot a haunted house vibe. The only people I see are getting out of the back seat of a nearby long white car. It sits on the other side of the parking lot, tucked away in the shadows of a tree. Looks like one of those old vintage Caddies. At one point, the bright flash of a cell phone screen from the driver’s seat reveals the phone’s owner, a Hispanic dude with a shaved head. A beefy arm pokes out from the rolled down window. Two other people stroll over and climb in the back seat.

I turn to Jazzy. “We better stay inside, OK?” Those people going in and out of the Caddy remind me of a sketchy motel in San Bernardino a few months ago where the same thing happened. Only it was the room next door to us instead of a car. I knew it was a drug den and I figure the Caddy is the same thing.

Jazzy whimpers but says nothing. I set our bags near the door so all we’ll have to do in the morning is grab them and go. I crawl into bed with her and hug her close to me. We watch TV until I hear her soft, steady breaths. Good, she’s asleep.

Laughter, shouting, and loud hip hop music pour out of that car all night long. I can't sleep, although no way would I have been able to anyway. I constantly glance at the clock while changing channels on the TV. I want to peek outside but don't want to disturb Jazzy who's nestled in my arms.

Finally when the digital clock reads 12:03, I hear rustling at our door. Mama's home, thank god. The door opens but instead of walking in with her usual smile, she stands in the doorway in her black cardigan with a weird look on her face.

"Mama?" I sit up straight. Jazzy stirs in my arms but remains asleep.

"We have to leave right now, honey. Wake Jazz up." Her voice is high-pitched and strained.

"But I thought you said—"

She stumbles inside the room and right behind her is Keith. I didn't think I'd ever see that asshole again. He looks the same, only meaner. Stringy long hair, ropy arms covered in faded tattoos.

"Evenin', girls." He grins and it makes me shudder. He shuts the door behind him.

"Listen to your mama. You're coming with me. Hurry up. Don't want to miss the little reunion I got planned for us."

"We're not going anywhere with you," I say.

"Mia, don't." Mama looks terrified and that's when I spot the gun he shoves into her back. Holy crap.

He must have seen the look on my face because his smile widens. He practically does a little dance, he's so thrilled to see me scared. "That's right. You don't leave with me right now, princess, your mama's insides will be splattered all over this ugly motel room."

Jazzy, by this time, is waking up. I bend my head down and whisper, "We have to go, Jazz, OK? Be a good girl."

"Mama?" She notices Keith and her eyes bug out. "What's going on, Mama?" Her voice rises with each word.

"Tell her to shut up or I'm using this." Keith shoves the gun into Mama's back and she flinches.

"Jazzy, be real quiet now, you hear? We gotta go."

Thankfully, my sister understands and says nothing more. We quickly get out of bed. I try to grab our bags but Keith kicks it away with a dirty tennis shoe.

"Leave it."

He steps further in the room, jerking Mama with him. "Go on. Open the door. We're right behind you. No running or yelling or your Mama's dead, you got that?"

A low moan escapes from Jazzy, and I put my arm around her. We stumble outside, Keith and Mama right behind us. I stop and look around, praying for someone to see us. Spice, Cat, anybody.

"Go on." A kick from behind, sends me flying forward but I right myself. Jazzy clutches my waist.

The motel is eerily quiet. The lawn chairs empty. My heart sinks. Even the stupid Caddy is gone. Nobody will notice us or remember us. We'll just vanish in the night. Because one thing I know is that Keith is going to kill us. A guy like him doesn't take kindly to women leaving in the middle of the night. He does the leaving, not the other way around.

I can feel Jazzy shivering next to me and pull her close. Her skin is like ice. She still has on just her tiger tank top and shorts. Bastard doesn't even let us grab our hoodies. Even though it's early September, nights are still chilly.

"Go to that car."

At first, I see nothing but then I make out a black sedan hidden in the shadows of a burned out streetlight about ten feet away. I want to run, scream, do something, but my feet lead me right to the car.

"Get in the back seat. It's unlocked."

I open the door and poke my head inside.

"Get in."

I let Jazzy climb in first and scoot in after her. It's dark in the sedan and stinks of weed and beer. Someone sits in the driver's seat. Their face is turned away from me but I can tell it's a woman with blonde hair. I stiffen. The blonde woman from earlier.

The back door opens on the other side and Mama is shoved in next to Jazzy. The door slams shut behind her. Immediately she reaches out for us. We hold each other tight.

"It's OK," she murmurs. "You're my strong girls."

Jazzy is sniffing and I can feel her wet tears or maybe it's snot on my arm.

The car shifts with the weight of Keith as he climbs in the front passenger seat. He turns around, his narrow face obscured in the shadows. The gun's still trained on Mama. "I knew I'd find you eventually. That old black man said he ain't seen you but Trina here could smell a lie a mile away. Ain't that right, baby?"

I glance at the blonde woman. She doesn't move or say anything.

"Hey, ain't that right, baby?" Keith nudges her.

The woman pitches forward. Her head hits the steering wheel which emits a loud *hooooooooooooooooonk!* I see something poking out of the side of her neck. It's a skinny knife, like something you'd carve a turkey with. Dark liquid oozes down her pale neck. I think I'm going to be sick.

Keith shouts something but I can't tell what because Jazzy unleashes an ear-splitting scream. I reach for the door, desperate to get out. I hear Mama yelling "go, go, go" but I'm having trouble finding the door handle.

The front passenger door flies open and Keith disappears. Now it's Mama's turn to scream. I look over and recognize the Hispanic dude from the Caddy. He's much bigger than I thought—like weightlifter big—and he's holding a huge gun in one hand and the back of Keith's shirt with the other, jerking him away from the car. Another Hispanic dude runs up and punches Keith in the face. Mama screams at me.

"Go, go, go." She scoots down the leather seats toward me and reaches over Jazzy for the door handle that I'm still struggling with. The door flings open and I practically somersault out onto the asphalt, Jazzy right behind me. Strong arms lift me so that I'm standing. It's Spice. I've never been so happy to see anyone in my life.

"Here. Got you a cab."

I'm confused and then realize he's trying to hand me our bags. I take Jazzy's backpack and sling Mama's duffel bag over my shoulder. Mama grabs the rest. The cab idles at the curb.

I look up at Spice. He's nodding at someone behind us. I turn around. The huge Hispanic dude returns the nod while his buddy pummels on Keith. Spice turns back to me. "The driver'll take you anywhere you wanna go. Just get on out of here."

I don't need to be told twice. I grab Jazzy's hand and Mama grabs my other one. We scurry over to the waiting cab, our bags jostling and jiggling. I open the door and guide Jazzy in. I throw in our bags, then motion for Mama. She disappears inside the cab.

I glance behind me. The Caddy has pulled around now so it's side by side with the sedan. The Hispanic dude is shoving a now-limp Keith into the Caddy's trunk.

Spice is already walking back toward the motel, his long shadow stretching across the parking lot. I want to shout thank you, something. He saved our lives.

As if he hears me, he turns around. He gestures at me with his hand. Like he's shooin' a cat away. *Go on now.*

I nod to him before climbing inside the cab, slamming the door behind me. Mama is already telling the driver to take us west. Toward the ocean.

"I spy with my little eye..." I lean forward so I can see Jazzy. She looks over at me, her eyes shiny with tears.

Mama bends over, fusses with something on the floor by our feet.

"Careful," she says. "Don't kick it."

I look down to see that dumb plant. The peace lily. Spice somehow knew how much it meant to Mama. I can't help but smile. I reach for her hand, and she squeezes it. *It's a sign*, I know she's thinking.

This time I believe her.

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