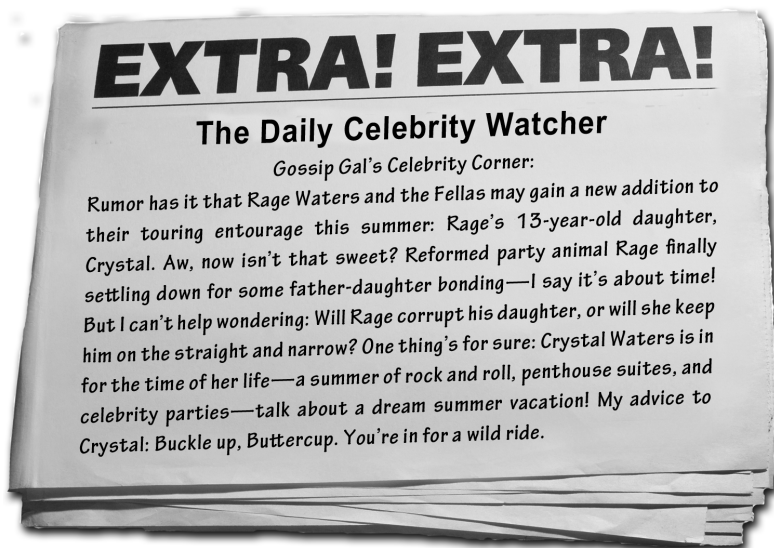
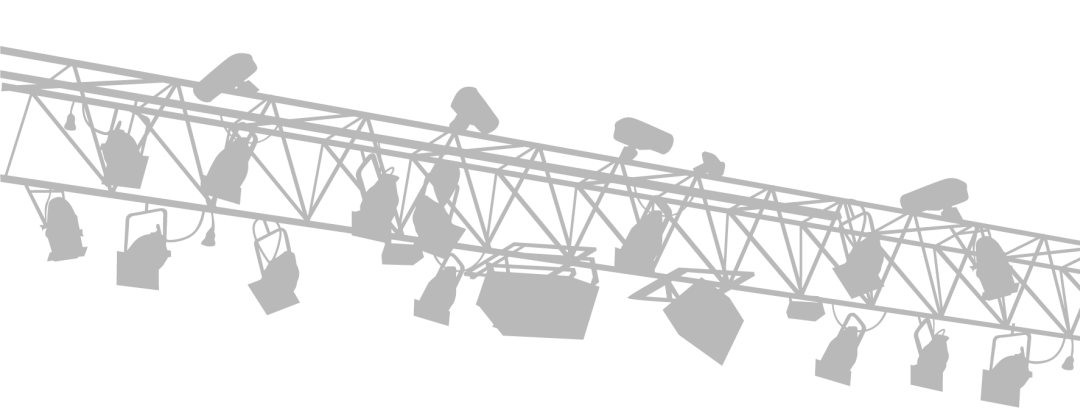


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Trembling fingers ripped a page from a magazine. Dark eyes scanned it again, disbelieving.



A thick-fingered hand wadded up the news article, squeezed it into a crinkly ball, and aimed toward the trash can. Wait. The hand paused, then touched the paper to the end of a smoldering cigarette until smoke snaked toward the ceiling. In a sudden burst, the paper ball glowed with angry flame. At the last possible moment, in a rush of fear and adrenaline, the hand dropped the fireball onto the carpet, then grabbed a glass of fresh-squeezed orange juice and sloshed it onto the small blaze. It died with a sizzle. The stench of burned carpet—not unlike the stink of burning hair—mingled with sour citrus. The hand still trembled.



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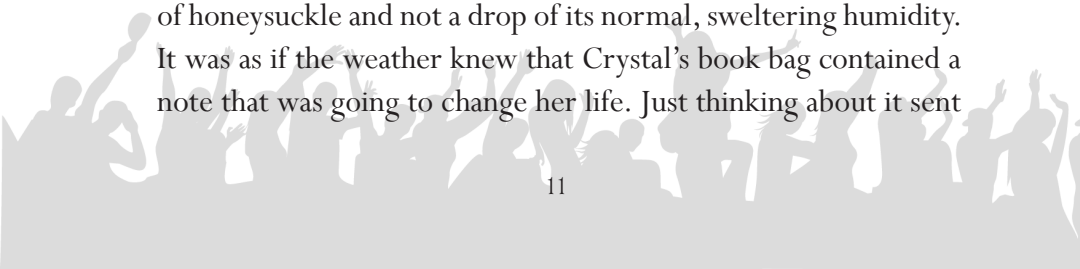
## *The Best Day*

*Five days earlier...*

It should have been the best day. Crystal Waters floated home from the bus stop, and with each step her heart grew lighter and her smile bigger. She knew she probably looked like an idiot, grinning and swinging a near-empty book bag around—but for once, she didn’t care how she looked. She twirled in a circle, then kept walking, just managing to stop herself from skipping.

The Parker twins sprinted past her, dumped their backpacks in their front yard and jumped onto their bicycles, tearing down the street, shouting, “Freedom!” at the top of their lungs. It was all Crystal could do to keep from screaming right along with them.

The North Carolina weather seemed to celebrate with her—bright blue sky without a single cloud, air tinged with a hint of honeysuckle and not a drop of its normal, sweltering humidity. It was as if the weather knew that Crystal’s book bag contained a note that was going to change her life. Just thinking about it sent



a tingle crawling up her spine. She shivered. The Barrett Buzz, Alexis called it—and what a buzz it was.

Casting a quick glance around to make sure no neighbors were watching, she plopped down onto the sun-warmed sidewalk and yanked her yearbook out of her green book bag.

There it was, on the inside front cover, in the most adorable, masculine scrawl she'd ever seen:

*Crys, Stay sweet and don't change.  
See ya at the pool. Barrett. Oh, P.S., K.I.T.*

Barrett Branson had given her a nickname, Crys. Never mind the fact that Crystal didn't like being called Crys—everyone knew guys didn't give you a nickname unless they really liked you. And sure, everyone wrote "stay sweet and don't change" in yearbooks, but—did he really think she was sweet? She could swear the apostrophe in "don't" looked a little like a heart. And "K.I.T.," as in, "Keep In Touch"? No one—certainly no boy—would write that unless he meant it, right? Alexis would know. She had to call Alexis.

When Crystal reached her small brick home, she almost kissed it. Instead, she threw open the red front door and slung her backpack onto the floor, turning her startled cat Missy into an orange streak, yowling up the stairs. Crystal spread her arms wide and then squeezed herself in an enormous hug.

"Hello, house! I'm home for the summer! Hello, Missy," she called to the cat, who peered grumpily down at her from the top stair. "Sorry I scared you. But it's not every day I get to graduate from the seventh grade!"

She bent over to pick up her bag and carry it up to her room, but caught herself. Straightening up, she gave the bag a decisive kick and left it on the floor. Flushing with the victory of squelching her inner clean freak, Crystal headed toward the kitchen in the back of the house.

“Come on, Missy, let’s get a snack.” She paused at the foot of the stairs to wait for the cat, who was quite familiar with the word *snack*.

The long-haired orange tabby looked away and licked her paw. Crystal put her hands on her hips with a sigh. “Come on, Missy, I said I was sorry. But I know you want a snack, don’t you? Maybe even some tuna?”

Missy licked her other paw, wiped her face, stretched long and slow, then ambled down the stairs, pausing every two or three steps to preen.

“I thought so.” Crystal smiled and turned toward the kitchen.

She screamed.

Someone was standing in the hallway.

An orange flash streaked by as Missy shot back up the stairs.

A second voice shrieked, then burst out laughing.

“Crystal!” The woman could barely talk between fits of laughter. “It’s just me, Honey! You can stop screaming now.”

Crystal clutched her heart as she stared at her mother, who was now doubled over, shaking with laughter. “Melanie Ann Smalls! *Mother!*” Crystal’s loud hiccup echoed in the tiny hallway. “What are you doing here? You aren’t supposed to be home ’til eight.”

“I know, I know. I got off early.”

Crystal tried to catch her breath and calm her pounding heart. “Gosh—*hic*—Mom, you scared me to death. And now look what you’ve done. I’ll have these hiccups for hours!”

Crystal’s mother raised her eyebrows and flashed her too-big, “I’m-sorry-but-I-know-you’ll-forgive-me-if-I’m-really-nice” smile. Crystal could never stay angry with her mother when she made that face. She felt the corners of her mouth begin to curl upwards.

“Crystal, I am sorry, I really didn’t mean to sneak up on you. But if I were a burglar, I think you would have scared me away with that scream.”

“Yeah, well—all a part of my anti-burglar tactics, you know.”

“So congratulations on finishing the seventh grade!” Melanie gave Crystal a squeeze. “Want a snack? I stopped and got a banana split for you—extra whipped cream and everything.” Melanie reached for her daughter’s hand to pull her toward the kitchen.

Swallowing a hiccup, Crystal narrowed her eyes and pulled her hand away. “What’s going on? You have bad news, don’t you? First you’re home early, now the ice cream... Come on, Mom, something’s up.”

Her mother’s hazel eyes widened in forced innocence. “What are you talking about? Can’t I bring my daughter ice cream on her last day of school?”

Crystal crossed her arms and did not blink until her mom squirmed and looked down.

“Mom, don’t even try to lie to me, you know you’re horrible at it. You’re doing the wide-eyed thing. Something’s up.”

Her mom sighed and shook her head, her curly brown hair swishing from side to side. “You’re right. I do have... *news*... but it’s not necessarily *bad* news. And I wasn’t lying, by the way, just waiting for the right time. Come on, eat your ice cream and I’ll tell you all about it.”

Crystal plopped down at their narrow kitchen table, which was always set for two, but could fit four if they had company. She ate a heaping spoonful of chocolate ice cream, closing her eyes in a brief moment of delight. The first bite was always the best—if she concentrated, she could feel the cold slip all the way down her throat and into her stomach. “Mmm... you always did know

the way to my heart, Mom. So what is it? You have to work extra shifts again this summer? 'Cause that's no big deal, I can just hang out with Alexis. We were planning this big summer self-makeover plan anyway—Pilates videos, a Jane Austen reading extravaganza, daily tanning sessions at her pool, the whole deal.” She left out the part about Barrett being a lifeguard at Alexis’s neighborhood pool. “And I was already planning to come to Arbor Way with you in the afternoons, 'cause I’ve got lots of work to do with the music therapy program, and then there’s the wheelchair derby to organize. Plus, Mrs. Sorenson always needs my help weeding her window box.”

“Well, I guess extra shifts are part of it.” Her mother sat down and shoved a dripping spoonful of ice cream into her mouth.

“*Part of it? Part of what?*” Crystal put her spoon down as a hiccup swelled in her throat. “What’s the other part?”

“Well, really this is good news.” Melanie smiled too brightly and sucked in a deep breath. “You know I’ve been stuck as assistant manager at Arbor Way for—what, like five years now?”

“Yeah, so?” Crystal spoke slowly, her brain racing as she tried to guess where this was going. She felt her best-day glow slipping away, drifting out the back screen door to join the Parker twins in their carefree celebration.

“Right. So anyway, of course I adore all the residents there, and I know they’ve all become like your adoptive grandparents and everything, but—well, you know how much I want to be in charge somewhere, to have the chance to implement my own programs. So here’s the thing: You might have heard me mention that new assisted-living home that’s opening across town, Magnolia Manor. It’s just like Arbor Way—all the people who live there are retired, but they’re still independent and have lots of energy.

Anyway, they need a manager when they open in September—and they offered me the job!”

Crystal squealed, jumped out of her chair and threw her arms around her mother, flinging ice cream onto the wall with her spoon. Relief and joy gave her a dizzying head rush. “Mom! Oh, my gosh! I can’t believe it. This is great! You’ve worked so hard for this, I can’t believe you finally got it! I can already see the front page of the Milledge Chronicle: ‘Ms. Melanie Smalls Takes Charge at Magnolia Manor: Old people everywhere rejoice. Two grandmothers beat each other with canes, fighting for the last available room.’” Giggling at her own cleverness, she punched her mom on the arm. “What were you acting so nervous for? This isn’t bad news at all... is it?”

She stepped back to study her mom’s expression. Melanie was smiling, but chewing her lip at the same time.

“What?” Crystal backed away and sat down. “Mom—what?”

“Well, you see... before I start this job in the fall, the owners want me to get some more management training at a big place in Texas for the summer. They have a sister facility there, and they want me to assist the manager there and learn their system before I take over here.”

“Texas?” Crystal’s mind had suddenly gone blank. *What’s Texas? Where’s Texas?* “We’re moving to Texas?”

Melanie took a deep breath. “Not ‘we,’ Honey. Just me.” Crystal blinked. She didn’t even feel her mouth flop open.

Her mother started talking fast, too fast. “They have a strict no-kid policy there, so I have to go alone. I begged them to reconsider, to let you come, I told them you were practically a little old lady yourself”—she gave an awkward chuckle—“but... oh, Sweetie, it would just be for the summer.”

Crystal’s thoughts came slowly. She felt like she was in a nightmare, trying to run with her feet glued to the floor. “But

what—I mean where? Who...?”

Melanie reached across the table to hold her daughter’s limp hand, which lay next to the bowl of melting ice cream. Crystal noticed that the banana split was becoming banana soup. Somehow that struck her as amusing, and she wanted to laugh.

Her mother’s voice sounded as if it were far away. “I think I have a great idea for your summer. What if—and this is totally up to you, of course—but what if you stayed with your dad for the summer?”

Crystal stared at her mom for a few seconds, cheeks blazing, hot tears welling in her eyes. “Ha, ha, Mom.” Her laugh was hollow. “You’ve got to be kidding. This is a joke, right? Because I cannot spend an entire summer with him. I’d go crazy after three days!”

Melanie pulled her hand back. “Come on, Honey, I know he’s not always the most”—she hesitated, searching—“mature person in the world, but you guys do have fun together!”

Crystal snorted. “Mature? Mom, he’s like a big kid. I’m more mature than he is, and I’m thirteen years old!”

“Crystal, watch how you talk about your father!” Melanie’s tone was sharp.

Shame burned Crystal’s cheeks and forehead. “Mom, I’m sorry, I just—”

“Listen to me, and quit interrupting. Just hear me out for a minute.” Melanie waved a wayward curl out of her eyes. “The band has already started its U.S. summer tour, and they’ve got stops all the way across the country. You’d be traveling to New York and Boston and Ohio and Vermont and, and Kentucky, and—”

“Kentucky? Who wants to go to Kentucky?”

“Let me finish, will you? Good grief! So you’ll get to travel with the band. Some of the other musicians might bring their families along—I think Stoner even has a fourteen-year-old son.”



Crystal rolled her eyes, but Melanie didn't seem to notice. "I think it would be a really cool experience for you, Honey. You'd see the whole country, stay in fancy hotels, go sightseeing, and come on—who wouldn't want the opportunity to travel with Rage Waters and the Fellas? But more than all that, you'd get some real time with your father. It's high time the two of you spent more than just a long weekend together. This could be such a special, bonding time for the two of you. Besides, your dad is all excited about it; he really wants you to come."

"So *you* say." Crystal's carefully packaged hurt—balled up and sealed in a secret corner of her mind, tucked away so deep she could almost forget about it—found a weak spot in her armor and leaked out, leaving a bitter aftertaste in her mouth.

"No, really, Honey. He got all choked up when I asked him about it. He's already making all kinds of plans. He's mapping out the sightseeing you'll do together, he even ordered your favorite foods for the touring menu."

Crystal felt something warm spread inside her. A reluctant smile tugged at her lips. "He remembers my favorite foods?"

Melanie smiled. "Sure, your father may be... spacey... but somehow he always notices the details. He remembered that you love Oreo ice cream and chocolate anything and popcorn and steak and mashed potatoes and Twizzlers."

"What about black-eyed peas and Cocoa Puffs and strawberries?"

"I'll remind him."

Crystal twirled her hair around her index finger, feeling herself soften just a little. A hiccup bubbled in her throat, and she swallowed it, grimacing.

"Before you say anything else, just let me tell you one more thing, and this is the coolest part: Your dad offered to fly Alexis out to join you for two weeks."

Crystal dropped her hair. “No. *Hic*. Way. You’re totally kidding.”

“Yes. Way. I’m totally serious—assuming, of course, that her parents say it’s okay.”

“Oh my gosh. Alexis would just die. She worships the Fellas, even though she acts like she doesn’t when she’s around me.”

Melanie grabbed her daughter’s hands and put her in an eye-lock. Crystal squirmed, but didn’t dare look away. “Honey, listen, now that I’ve explained it all to you, you really don’t have to do this. If it would just make you miserable, it’s not worth it. I’ll say no to the Texas thing. I love my job at Arbor Way, so I don’t have to be a manager to be happy. I’m serious, Sweetie. You know you come first. I just thought—I thought maybe this could be a great thing for both of us. Once you get over the initial shock, maybe you’ll actually get excited about spending time with your dad—it could be really fun. Maybe this was meant to be, you know, like *Destiny*?” Melanie’s eyes glazed over as she whispered the word *destiny*, as if the word itself held some sort of magic. Crystal grunted. Her mother could be such a hippie cheeseball.

Shaking the beginnings of a smile from her face, Crystal reminded herself that she was supposed to be furious with her mother, that her mother deserved to be punished for ruining her life, her summer plans, and her hopes of ever hearing Barrett Branson pronounce her name out loud, much less proclaim his undying love for her. She opened her mouth to say this, when Melanie’s cell phone began to warble some ancient flower child song about hammering in the morning.

“It’s your father.” Melanie held up a finger to silence Crystal. “Hi, Wayne—sorry, yes, I know your name is *Rage* now”—Melanie rolled her eyes for Crystal’s benefit—“yes, I’m just talking to her about it now... She’s, uh, excited, sure.” Her voice fell flat.

Crystal cocked an eyebrow at the outright lie.

“Yeah, we haven’t quite gotten that far, but—mmhmm, I have to be in Texas by next Thursday, so she would probably fly out next Tuesday or Wednesday, although Crystal and I haven’t—”

Crystal squeaked. *Next week?* She was leaving *next week?*

Melanie put a finger over her lips to shush Crystal.

“Wait, say that again?” Melanie turned her back on Crystal, as if to muffle her words. Crystal could see her mother’s spine stiffen as she listened. She spoke in a tense almost-whisper. “A stalker? What—what does that mean?” Her voice began to squeak. “Psycho what?”

Crystal jumped to her feet, her heart beginning to thump. “What? What are you guys talking about? MOM, what’s he saying?”

“Crystal, shhh! I’m trying to hear!”

“Mom, come on, don’t sit here and talk about my life like I’m some little kid—”

Melanie blinked at her, looking dazed.

Crystal reached for the phone, pried it gently from her mother’s hand and punched the speaker button.

“Hello? Melanie?” Rage’s warm baritone crackled over the phone line.

“Uh, hey, Dad, it’s me, Crystal. We’re both here. What’s going on?”

Rage sighed into the phone. “It’s nothing—well, not nothing, exactly, but Derrick—you remember Derrick, my head of security? Well, he insisted I warn your mother that I’ve been getting some weird mail from a rather obsessive fan. I call her Psycho Girl.” Crystal thought she heard a smile in her father’s voice, but then urgency propelled his words faster. “I swear she’s harmless—it’s really just some crazy letters is all—but Derrick said I have to tell you about it, Mel, before you decide for sure if Crystal can come.”

Melanie chewed her lip. "What—I mean, how serious is this? Are you in any danger?"

Rage snorted a laugh. "I don't think so, but you know Derrick—always paranoid. Like I said, it's just a bunch of letters—I've been getting weird fan mail from women for years." Crystal thought she detected a note of pride in her father's voice, and she stifled a groan. "This chick is just a little more, uh, persistent than most—but if anything, this is probably the safest summer ever for Crystal to come, since now we're taking all these new safety precautions."

Two creases appeared between Melanie's eyes, and she pinched them with her fingers. She opened her mouth, but Rage kept talking, his tone warming, wheedling. Charm seeped across the phone line. "Come on, Melanie, I've been begging you for years, and now that I've finally convinced you... please, trust me, I promise we'll take good care of her. I'm just aiming for full disclosure here, trying to show you how responsible a father I can be, but please don't change your mind. Please let Crystal come."

The phone sagged in Crystal's limp hand. A buzzing filled her ears. *I've been begging you for years... begging you for years...* All these years, her father had wanted her to spend time with him, wanted her to travel with him, wanted *her*... She stared at her mother with new eyes. A dozen worries flashed across her mind at once—who would pay the bills, who would keep Missy, would Barrett forget her?—but in a surge of reckless determination, she batted them aside.

Crystal jerked the phone up to her mouth. "I'm coming."

"What was that?" Both her parents spoke at once. Melanie was blinking at Crystal in surprise.

"I said I'm coming." Crystal's voice sounded stronger, even to her own ears, than it had ever sounded before. Older.

"Really?" Rage's voice sounded light with relief. "Mel? Is that okay?"

Sighing, Melanie gave a slow nod. "If you swear..."

"On my boots and my guitar. I'll keep my only daughter safe."

Crystal's grin wrestled with the instinctive shyness she felt around her father. The grin won. She smiled at the phone, glad Rage couldn't see.

"Our only daughter, and you'd better, or I'll stalk you and kill you myself." Melanie's mouth twitched, and Crystal's eyes narrowed. Were her parents *flirting* with each other? On *speaker phone*? What was the world coming to?

"Well—hot dog!" Rage said, and Crystal laughed. "Crystal, Honey, I'm gonna show you the best summer any girl's ever had. I'm talking concerts and hotels and all-night room service, all the junk food you can eat, and shopping sprees and—"

"Rage." Melanie's tone held a warning.

"And early bedtimes every night, and lots of summer reading," Rage said with exaggerated meekness.

"Whoop-de-doo, you really know how to throw a party," said Crystal, giddy and giggling in spite of herself.

As Melanie took over the phone and talk turned to flight arrangements, Crystal walked to the table on tingling legs. The kitchen seemed to spin around her. Her world had tilted on its axis, and she doubted it would ever turn the same way again. Her father wanted her.

Grabbing her ice cream bowl, she walked toward the sink, hearing the thrum of her own heart as it swelled and surged, expanded in her chest and opened to the world. Dumping her melted ice cream into the sink, she watched it ooze down the drain.