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MICHELLE BUCKMAN

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Sample from *My Beautiful Disaster* / ISBN 1600060383

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In loving memory of my parents

## Chapter One

MY NAME IS Dixie.

I'm not gorgeous or anything, but I started hanging out with the hottest girls in school my sophomore year, so I reached the status of being popular by default. Or at least I *was* popular. That rank has changed.

Some people say I've made a mess of my life. I don't know. Maybe my stepsister Maggie's description is more accurate. She's a huge Kelly Clarkson fan, so it didn't surprise me when Maggie dragged up some of her lyrics to describe me. She says my life is a "beautiful disaster." You be the judge.

Maggie and I were friends long before we became stepsisters. We met on the first day of kindergarten. Maggie's skinny body was topped with a mop of bright red Irish curls, and I was round with baby fat and strung with two straight blonde braids. We sat at the same little table and drank juice and ate cookies together, stuck our hands in Play-Doh, and fought over the dinosaur puzzle. After that no one could separate us. We took every class together. We shared ChapStick, hairbrushes, and one bout of lice in elementary school. We bought our first bras together when we were twelve. We tried out for cheerleading together even though

we knew we wouldn't make the squad. We walked for March of Dimes and ran track together in ninth grade. We finished each other's sentences and each other's sandwiches. We slept at each other's houses, talked all night, and cried on each other's shoulders many a time. We did everything together.

Then we became sisters. My mother married Maggie's father.

You would think that would have made us closer. I mean, we were already closer than sisters, but something happened when we moved in under the same roof and had to share a bedroom. Or maybe it was already happening before then, and living together made us face it straight on.

You see, Maggie and I weren't exactly popular at school in our early years. In fact we were pretty much invisible. We blended into the walls and floors. Nobody took any notice of us. No one invited us to parties or commented on our clothes or asked what we thought of the latest Reese Witherspoon movie. We weren't as bad as the losers or the nerdy kids who kept their noses in their laptops all the time; we just weren't important to anyone. All that changed when Maggie got on the news one day. I would tell you more about that, but that's her story, and this is mine.

What matters is that suddenly everyone noticed us. We had boyfriends and invitations to parties and everything. The weird thing is that after years of yearning to be popular, Maggie rejected it all. She became *known*, recognized, but remained more or less a loner. I'd had enough of that life. I embraced my new visibility and left her behind.

By the middle of tenth grade, I was hanging out with Heather and Tammy, two cheerleaders who held the school in the palms of their hands. Maggie and I still hung out in classes, since Heather and Tammy weren't in any honors courses, but after school we

went our separate ways—she to study with Webb, a boy from our neighborhood, while I met up with Heather and Tammy and hit the mall or went to their houses or to the pizza parlor or whatever. Despite that, Maggie and I were still okay with each other. We were still friends, just with differing interests. Maggie barely noticed anyway since she was so hung up on Webb. I think she was glad I had someone else to hang out with. So things were fine between us at that point. And it wasn't the idea of our parents getting married that threw a kink in things because it was pretty much our doing. Maggie's daddy was dating a lady Maggie couldn't stand, so we introduced my mama to him as a decoy. Well, I should say *re-introduced*. From stories Mama had told us, we knew that they had been in high school together and that they dated at least once back then, but how Mama ended up marrying my daddy, Richard Chambers, and Maggie's dad ended up marrying Mallory had some undercurrents that Mama wouldn't share with me or Maggie.

Anyway, whatever happened between our parents in high school was rekindled when Maggie and I got the two of them together. That was back when we were in tenth grade. During the summer between eleventh and twelfth grade, they got married and we became sisters. Which brings me to our senior year. By January, Maggie was sick of sharing a bedroom with me, and Heather and Tammy and I got Asby Jones, popular juvenile delinquent, to make us fake IDs so we could go to a bar to hear a new group called Blind Reality that Heather kept raving about. That is where my beautiful disaster began.

## Chapter Two

MY HOMETOWN WAS about the size of a city mall. I couldn't go anywhere without someone knowing me and seeing what I was up to, but luckily the bar was in Columbia, which meant no one would recognize us there, or look at our fake IDs and know our mamas and our aunts and our grandmas, or call up Sheriff Tate to come drag us home.

I hadn't ever done anything like that before—sneaking into a bar—and my heart was in my throat all the way there because I knew it was wrong. I wasn't an angel, but I'd never before done anything illegal, other than drinking underage at parties. That didn't seem as scary as trying to get into the bar with a fake ID. There was a sense of excitement and adventure that carried me along and made me ignore my usual sense of ethics. No one from my church would be there, I knew that for sure, so it wasn't likely to get back to Reverend John that the teen leader of his youth group was out on the town with friends.

I had some major pangs of guilt when Heather first suggested the excursion, but Heather . . . well, I tended to do whatever she suggested for fear of being shunned if I didn't, because she absolutely *made* my social life, and I wouldn't be anyone if I weren't

hanging with her. Besides, it's not like we were going there to drink. She just wanted us to hear the band. What harm could come of that?

After all our worries, the guy at the door barely even glanced at our IDs, and we entered the bar without incident; but it immediately struck me as foreign territory, a place I didn't belong.

The first thing that surprised me was that it wasn't full of smoke the way bars are always portrayed in movies—crowds of people lounging at tables and leaning on the bar in a haze of cigarette smoke. This place had gone politically correct and confined the smokers to a separate area to the far left of the entrance, as well as an outside lounge beyond, which consisted of a small square of cement surrounded by a ten-foot fence and half a dozen metal tables. That was fine with me because I had no intention of smoking. There were some dumb teenage antics I went along with, but smoking wasn't one of them. I watched my father die of lung cancer when I was thirteen, and it wasn't a pretty sight. He couldn't talk. He could barely swallow. I had to help him steer his walker into the bathroom, sit him in a chair in the shower, and bathe him—me a little girl and him a grown man—as his body wasted away and the life in his eyes died under the strain of pain that handfuls of pills didn't mask. So I told Heather and Tammy straight off that it was no deal smoking around me. I wasn't an idiot.

The lack of smoke didn't diminish the partylike atmosphere. The lights were dimmed to twilight level, just enough to make me squint, as if it would bring things into better focus. Special lights embedded into the ceiling cast a soft glow across the bell-shaped glasses hanging from wooden racks above the mahogany bar, and glistened on the brass rod running around the edge of the

counter. The bartender, a hunky guy, considering he was probably in his thirties, was busy pulling bottles from the rack lining the mirrored wall, his hands moving with practiced confidence as he mixed three different drinks. He swung around to place them in front of two middle-aged businessmen dressed in khakis and white button-downs, and their female companion, a lady who had obviously never studied the art of adjusting her wardrobe from work to eveningwear. She still had on her tailored coat, and her hair was pulled into a severe ponytail that emphasized her flat face and pointed nose. She definitely needed to let her hair down, take off the coat, and add a scarf or something to soften the neckline of her blouse . . . things I'd learned from Heather and Tammy over the previous couple of years.

All but one of the barstools were occupied, men and women lined up munching on peanuts, sipping drinks, and making small talk, with their disjointed reflections peering back at them from between the liquor bottles. The rest of the bar wasn't elbow-to-elbow crowded, but most of the wooden tables seated at least a couple of people, sometimes more, their heads bent in concentration to hear each other over the general din of conversation.

Tammy poked me as we entered to let me know the two guys near the door were eyeing the three of us. The closest one was blond with a huge fuzzy mustache that looked like some freaky mammoth caterpillar had taken up residence on his face. The other was better looking, the clean-cut type that looked like he had money, but way too old in my opinion. Tammy liked older guys, though, so she was probably thrilled. She had never actually dated a grown man, but that was her goal. She thought high school guys were pathetic. Both men had their eyes glued to us, maybe out of boredom and lack of anything to talk about, or maybe they were calculating our ages and

had a thing for high school girls. Heather was worth a look, that's for sure. She stood five-ten even when she was barefoot, with legs to die for. And that night, even though it was only about forty degrees outside, she had on this miniskirt that showed them off to the max, with spiky heels that raised her to about six-two. (I would love to have seen Maggie try to walk in those heels. She would have fallen flat on her face.) Heather had flat-ironed her hair and sprayed it with sheen so that it shone like spun silk and swished across her shoulders when she turned her head. Tammy, with a darker and more classic look, wore a conservative top, hoping it made her look older, not promiscuous . . . but she had on tight jeans that didn't leave a whole lot to the imagination. Being shorter than either of them, and rounder, but not fat, I wore a matching pants and shirt outfit that emphasized my waist and my curves. It made me look older than usual. Nothing on the level of Tammy and Heather, though. So if guys were looking at us, I doubted their sights were set on me.

I followed the other girls through the crowd to an empty table, totally aware of every step I took as the heels of my boots clicked against the ancient hardwood floor. My hips brushed against the arms of unsuspecting men huddled over their beers; if they looked up, they'd catch the sparkle in my eye—I was out at a bar with a fake ID and a night of fun ahead of me.

Heather wanted to sit right up front so she could see the singer, Ariana—some girl she'd met at a modeling competition. Apparently Ariana had asked Heather to come listen to them play. She just wanted to be able to say she knew the singer, like that would be some thrill, considering no one in the world had ever heard of this dorky group. I figured they wouldn't be all that good.

The band was setting up. Heather slid into a seat and pointed at the black-haired beauty setting out microphones. "That's her.

That's Ariana," she said, and went into the long tale of how they'd met. Heather was known for telling elaborate stories when she had an audience, like in the middle of class with everyone watching. She was one of the few kids who could get away with it; the teachers loved her.

As she talked, I watched Ariana. I had to admit that she looked like a model. She had high cheekbones and flawless skin the color of the caramels I used to get in my trick-or-treat bag every Halloween when I was kid. She moved like a cat, her hips swaying to the movement of her long, slim legs. Instinctively, I knew it was her beauty that attracted Heather. She liked being around beautiful people. Tammy didn't. She didn't like to be outshone. She popped up out of her seat. "I'm going to get a drink."

"Sure, just draw attention to us again, like getting in the door wasn't enough of a risk," Heather hissed with uncharacteristic seriousness; she usually played the ditz, using sappy stories and her beauty to get what she wanted. "Sit down," she said.

Tammy blinked at her tone but remained standing. "Isn't that the point of coming to a bar?"

"No. It's to hear the band."

Tammy rolled her eyes. "I can at least get a Coke." She flounced off, a peacock needing to preen her feathers.

Heather jabbered away about how cool Ariana's silky black outfit was, while I watched the band set up. I'd never seen such a thing before, even though my stepbrother, Tony, played guitar. He seemed to confine his playing to his bedroom and had never played in a band that I could remember. I wondered if he would have enjoyed being there onstage and whether or not he knew how to set up amps and such. I'd known him as long as I'd known Maggie, and yet I suddenly realized I didn't know much about

him at all. I wished Maggie were there so I could ask her why he wasn't in a band.

I shook the thought away with a smile. Maybe a part of me missed hanging out with Maggie more than I cared to admit. She always had such deep interest in other people.

The drummer, a clean-cut guy with an easy smile and quick movements, appeared intent on his task. All the drums had to be set up just so, along with a huge set of cymbals. He moved so quickly I imagined him as a kid, like some of the guys in elementary school who couldn't sit still; he had probably banged pots and pans on the kitchen floor as a toddler, always moving, always making noise and driving his mother nuts.

Another guy, tall and lanky like a giraffe, messed with a sax, putting the mouthpiece on and trying a few notes. On the far side, a square fat girl sat at an electric keyboard and stared at the crowd with disinterest.

There were two guitar players. One, "Don" I heard him called, was leaning against the wall plucking at metal strings. His face was so plagued with pimples it made my face hurt to look at him.

The other guitar player had his back to me most of the time as he moved from place to place checking wires, flipping switches, arranging speakers and amps. He moved offstage and returned with a white electric guitar, his hair flopping over his face as he looked down to plug in the cord and check the connection and volume. When he finally turned around, my heart stopped. He was the best-looking guy I'd ever seen: tall, lean, muscular. His face was rectangular, with a chin that jutted out firm and square, and hair that hung loose around his face—not to his shoulders, but definitely long. I imagined attending the prom with him as

my date; I would be the envy of every girl in school. I felt like the life was sucked out of me, then filled back up with some new glow and purpose attached—I had to get a date with him.

Unfortunately, he didn't even see me.

After tuning up a few minutes, the group didn't waste any time getting the show started. The guitarist, the good-looking one, stepped up to the microphone and welcomed the crowd. His voice was rich and deep, and when he started singing, it resonated with a huskiness that made me think of a mysterious character in a movie, a secret agent who hissed out plans in dark alleys. It sent a chill up my spine.

The longer I sat listening to him, the more enthralled I became. At one point I pulled my attention away from him long enough to scan the crowd and saw he had a connection with his audience. Only a few people were talking, but even though most were watching and listening, mesmerized, I was sure no one felt as drawn to his presence as I did.

When the band took a break, Heather and Tammy rushed up the side steps onto the stage to speak to Ariana. Tammy flashed her eyes at my singer. After all, he wasn't a high school student; I guessed he was probably twenty-one. But even so, I knew Tammy wouldn't be after him with any serious intent. She wanted a businessman, firmly established, with money to burn. Heather smiled that coy smile that almost puts a price tag on her body, even though she'd never dated any guy long enough to get that close. (Three dates. Both of them said that was their limit, then on to the next guy, just passing time till *real life* delivered what they wanted.) Me, I stayed in my seat watching him. Two other girls walked up to the edge of the stage and flirted outrageously. He took it all in stride, used to the attention, taking it as his due.

I knew if I wanted him to notice me, I had to bide my time and wait for the right opportunity.

He looked toward the bar, anticipating a drink, but remained where he was, careful not to offend his growing fan base. His eyes flickered over me, just a slight pause in surveying the room. I smiled ever so slightly, but he didn't really see me, and I stayed in my seat and looked away. I was content to let the tension build for a while. I intended to see him again when the competition wasn't around and he had time to really look my way. I didn't stand a chance if I was lodged between Heather and Tammy.

Onstage, Ariana was making introductions.

"Vince," Heather said, her eyelashes fluttering like a spring butterfly, "you are fantastic."

*Vince.* His name was Vince.