

A CRACK IN THE VINYL

by
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Sunny often imagined her dead father sat beside her. Sometimes, she could smell his woody aftershave. Her mother? Well, Sunny had killed the woman just by being born.

She rested her head against the car window again and ignored the vibration that had already caused a bruise above her right eyebrow. With indifference, she watched saguaro cacti slip by, crooked arms reaching for the azure dome above. Various cacti, desert shrubs and drought-tolerant trees made up much of the landscape. For a moment, they gave way to a gas station, missing pumps and boarded up windows telling travelers not to stop.

As a tear fled down Sunny's cheek and fell onto the cracked and faded vinyl next to the door lock, the social worker—Sunny had forgotten her name—said something.

She didn't feel like talking. Instead, she rolled down the window to let the hot September wind whip her short hair about her cheeks. The opulent sky accentuated the few desert flowers that dared bloom from the parched ground. Sunny's desert. The place where she'd been born and would probably die. The place where she had killed her mother. Where her father now rested under the dirt.

As she leaned back into the hard seat, a familiar sound caught her ears. She squinted when a glint hit her eyes, like a flickering holiday bulb. A prop plane flew into view as a glimmering speck over the mountain in the distance. She smiled, remembering the times her father took her up in his vintage plane, the one she'd named Big Blue because it let her touch the sky.

"Reach for the clouds, my Sunny girl," her father had always told her, and they would laugh as she plunged her arms upward.

For a moment, she thought she heard her father's laughter. Just for a moment, then it was gone. "I miss you, Daddy." Somehow, she hoped he would hear.

She squinted against the brilliant sun as she watched the plane fly out of sight. She never bothered to wear sunglasses anymore, didn't see the need now. No one cared whether she went blind from the sun. No one was left.

They stopped at an intersection, bringing her mind back to the social worker's car that smelled of old vinyl and desperation. With no other cars on the desolate road, they turned right and drove a while longer. Eventually, they passed the bent and rusted sign welcoming them to Hedgehog, Arizona, population two-thousand-thirty-six. Soon to be two-thousand-thirty-seven. Halfway between Tucson and no place.

Sunny sniffed hard to keep her nose from running. She'd flown here with her father several times for festivals, but nothing about this place seemed festive now.

The small shops, restaurants and single gas station crept by, frequented mostly by travelers who came to purchase prickly pear jams, handmade crafts and other Arizona gifts. Several people wandered in and out of various doors. Some carried bags, some walked empty-handed. At the center of town, which consisted of a three-way stoplight

along Main Street, the car continued straight.

Sunny spotted a figure in a shop doorway, a man dressed in jeans and a button-up shirt. Tinted goggles sat atop his vintage leather cap and earflaps dangled as he moved. He smiled.

“Stop!” She banged a frantic hand on the door. “Stop! Pull over!” The car lurched to a halt and she reached for her seatbelt buckle.

“What is it?” the social worker said.

“It’s my—” The car door stood open and Sunny had one foot on the worn curb.

From the sidewalk, an elderly woman glanced over at the car then went on her way, wire cart squeaking as she pulled it along behind her. When Sunny looked at the shop again, the man was gone, the man who looked like her father. A weathered “For Lease” sign hung in the shop window. She rubbed at tired eyes and let out a sigh.

“What is it, Sunny? You wanna buy something?”

She stared at the empty porch. “No.” She drew herself inside, shut the door and slumped against the seat, letting her head bounce against the hard vinyl. “He’s not here.”

“What? Who?”

“Nothing. Just—just go.”

The woman eyed her a moment before putting the car in gear.

They traveled until the old downtown receded behind them. Her father’s aftershave hung in the air around her now, faint and woodsy, and anticipation grew as they got closer to her new home. Sunny kept her eyes on the sky.

After what seemed an eternity, they turned onto the dirt road that led to a beige stucco house with red tiles on the roof. The same colors as Sunny’s old house.

Rock and dirt clattered against metal as the car bumped down the road. The house crept toward them until they stopped near the carport. In the unkempt yard, palo verde trees twisted in angular patterns toward the sky, showing off green bark riddled with thorns. Saguaros grew interspersed between brittlebush and fuzzy cholla. Birds chattered from the trees and saguaro holes. They sounded happy. Sunny unbuckled her seatbelt, anxious to get out. Someone opened the car door.

“Hi, honey.” A woman smiled. Sunny’s foster mother. “I’m Pat.”

“Hi.” She glanced at the woman’s red-rimmed eyes, unnaturally large behind thick glasses, and stepped out. She allowed Pat to hug her. The graying woman smelled of pepper and cinnamon that almost drowned out her father’s aftershave. Almost.

“I kept lunch for you, in case you’re hungry.”

“Thank you.” But she wasn’t hungry. She studied the sky again. Several clouds drifted overhead and she longed to touch them.

The social worker unloaded Sunny’s belongings from the trunk. Her foster mother asked her another question but she ignored it, and the women began to talk. Their voices faded, replaced by purring propellers. Sunny’s heart flip-flopped against her ribs.

She spotted a deck on the side of the house and made her way across the yard, careful not to step on cholla barbs. The planks of the weathered deck creaked with her weight. An old glider sat nearby and she stretched out on it. The prop engine grew louder, tuning out the chattering birds.

“Big Blue.” As she reached for the clouds, her father’s laughter touched her ears.

The woody scent of his aftershave filled her nostrils. Sunny took in a deep breath and smiled.

He had come back to her.

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