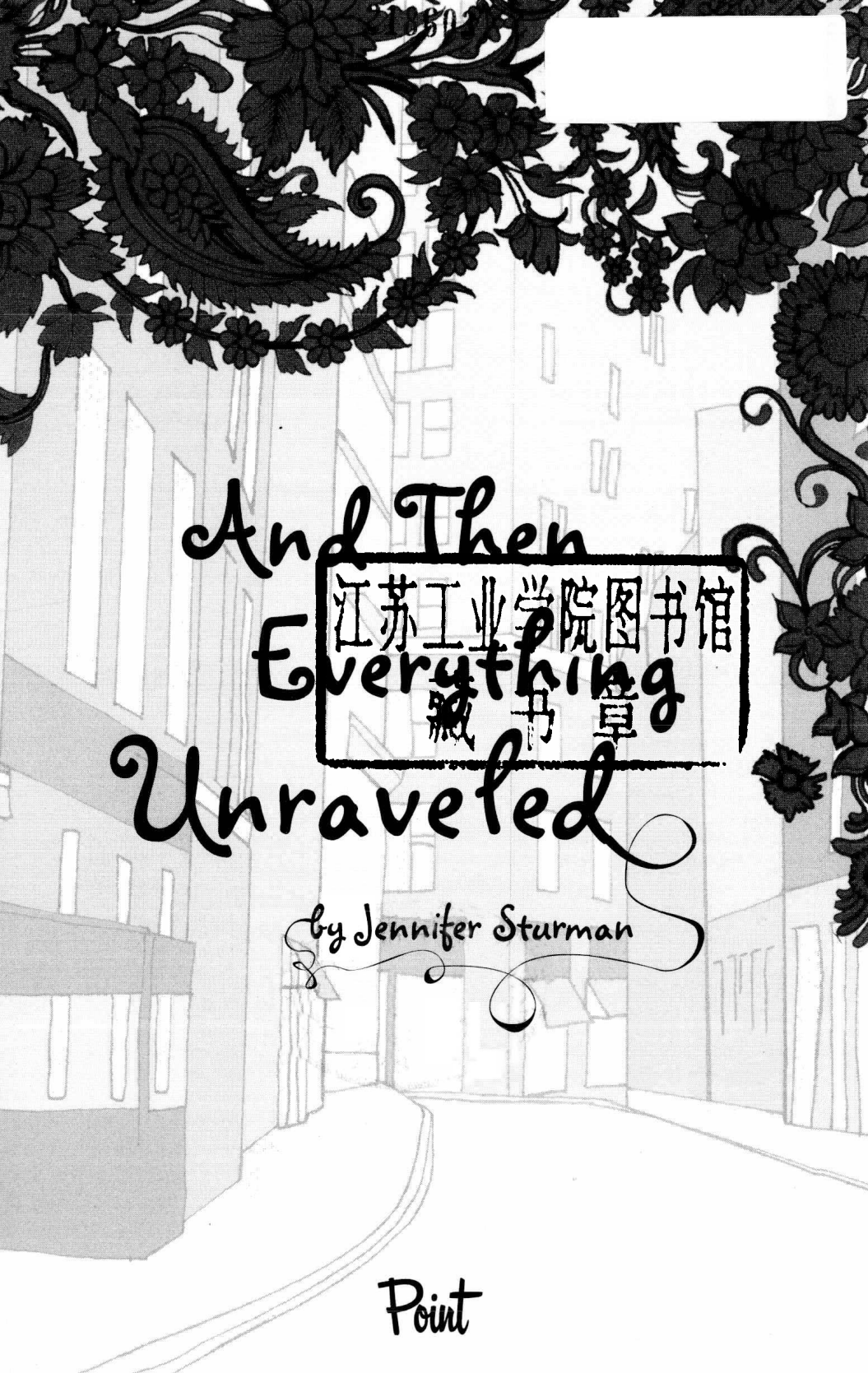
The book cover features a stylized illustration of a city street. In the foreground, a yellow taxi cab is partially visible on the left, with the license plate '4-102' and the word 'TAXI' below it. A woman with long dark hair, wearing a purple long-sleeved shirt and blue jeans, is walking away from the viewer down the sidewalk. The background shows tall city buildings under a light blue sky with soft clouds. The entire scene is framed by ornate, colorful floral and vine borders in red, purple, and green. The title 'And Then Everything Unraveled' is written in a large, red, cursive font across the top. Below the title, the author's name 'by Jennifer Sturman' is written in a smaller, red, cursive font.

And Then Everything Unraveled

by Jennifer Sturman



And Then
Everything
Unraveled

江苏工业学院图书馆
藏书章

by Jennifer Sturman

Point

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Sturman, Jennifer.

And then everything unraveled / Jennifer Sturman. — 1st ed.

p. cm.

Summary: Delia's mother is declared dead when her ship disappears on the way to Antarctica, but when Delia arrives in New York to live with an aunt she has never met, she begins trying to figure out what really happened to her mother.

ISBN-13: 978-0-545-08722-3 (alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 0-545-08722-8 (alk. paper)

[I. Missing persons—Fiction. 2. Aunts—Fiction. 3. High schools—Fiction. 4. Schools—Fiction. 5. New York (N.Y.)—Fiction. 6. Mystery and detective stories.] I. Title.

PZ7.S94I25An 2009

[Fic]—dc22

2008046958

12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 9 10 11 12 13 14/0

Printed in the U.S.A.

First edition, July 2009

Book design by Elizabeth B. Parisi

And Then
Everything
Unraveled



ALSO BY JENNIFER STURMAN

The Pact

The Jinx

The Key

The Hunt

This book is dedicated to Michele Jaffe.



Acknowledgments

Thanks to: Aimee Friedman, Abigail McAden, and the wonderful team at Scholastic; Laura Langlie, my fabulous, non-jinxing agent (though I might've just jinxed that); Michele Jaffe, without whom nobody would know what to wear; Manuel Urrutia, expert on all things Colombian; and various Sturmans, large and small.

And Then
Everything
Unraveled





One

It's hard to believe, but this whole thing didn't even start until a couple of weeks ago, when my mother left for Antarctica with one of her environmental groups. They were on their way to document the damage to polar ice shelves from global warming, just in case there's still anyone out there who doesn't think it's a problem.

Of course, I didn't know then that my life was about to change forever. Everything seemed completely normal. T.K. — my mother's full name is Temperance Kittredge Truesdale, but for obvious reasons she prefers to go by T.K. — anyhow, she travels a lot, so I was used to her being away. In fact, I was sort of glad about this trip, because it meant I could spend the last days of summer at the beach, guilt-free.

I have a semisecret surfing habit, something neither my mother nor my friends know much about — T.K. because she doesn't believe surfing is a “high-return use of scarce time” and my friends because everyone thinks business plans are cooler than slacker sports in Silicon Valley, where it seems like nearly all of the parents and most of the kids have started their own Internet companies.

Google and Microsoft are already fighting over a widget my best friend, Erin, came up with for mobile messaging, and my other friend Justin sits in on engineering classes at Stanford — for fun, not because anyone makes him. Meanwhile, I do a lot of pretending to understand what they're talking about.

I'm pretty sure they're just as mystified about how I spend my spare time, not that we really discuss it. But my dad was the one who taught me how to surf, and even now there's something about hitting a wave just right that makes me feel like he's still around, and like things make sense in a way they never do on dry land.

All of which is a long way of explaining why I spent the whole afternoon at Ross's Cove that Monday, making the most of nobody paying any attention to what I was up to. I probably stayed out later than I should have, but I had no idea that everything had already begun to unravel.

The big black BMW parked in front of our house was the first clue that something wasn't right. Even without the TJW-4 vanity plate I would've recognized the car. Only Thaddeus J. Wilcox IV would drive something that flashy in our neighborhood, where it's practically illegal to own anything but a hybrid.

Thad's the guy who manages the day-to-day operations of my mother's company. He comes by the house sometimes, but it's always to see T.K. — his being there when she was away was

sort of strange. Still, when I saw his car, I just figured he was dropping off some paperwork for when she got back, and mostly I was hoping he'd be gone before I got inside. While Thad's supposed to be a total genius at business, he's not exactly the most gifted conversationalist.

So I was taking as long as I possibly could to hang up my wet suit on the porch when I heard Nora calling my name from the kitchen. Nora's our housekeeper, and she stays overnight when my mother's out of town, which means a lot of TV and junk food since those are two of our shared interests. She also likes to ask about my love life, but that's a pretty short conversation since I don't have one.

I went in through the back door, and Thad was still there, waiting for me in the kitchen with Nora and fiddling with his BlackBerry, which I think must be surgically attached since I've never seen him without it. They sat me down at the kitchen table, and Nora poured me a glass of milk, which she knows perfectly well I hate.

I was so busy protesting about the milk that I didn't even notice the weird look on Nora's face until after she'd taken a deep breath and said, "Delia, honey, we have something important to tell you."

Then Thad cleared his throat and explained about the SOS signal my mother's ship had sent out, and how none of the ships or planes that came to the rescue found a trace either of her ship or any survivors.

“Oh,” I said.

“Do you understand what Thad is saying?” Nora asked. Her forehead crinkled, and she automatically reached up a hand to smooth it. Nora’s a grandmother, but she’s very proud of not looking like it, and also of looking that way naturally. One of our other shared interests is checking out pictures of face-lifts gone horribly wrong on [AwfulPlasticSurgery.com](#). “Sweetie, if the ship went down, and they didn’t find any survivors, it means your mom is d —”

“Uh-huh,” I said.

They were probably expecting a more over-the-top response. And I have to admit, for a split second I did feel like somebody had vacuumed out my insides.

But almost instantly that feeling gave way to a bizarre sort of calm. When I reached for the emotion that was usually right there, waiting to be tapped, I came up empty.

Because I just couldn’t believe my mother was dead.

I still can’t. I mean, everyone else is using the past tense when they talk about her, but it’s all a huge mistake. It has to be. I don’t know what happened exactly, but T.K. will explain everything when she returns.

And I’m sure she will return. This is a woman whose favorite appliance is a label maker — she’s way too organized to die by just disappearing like that, and she’s much too determined to let a little thing like being stranded in the Antarctic do her in.

Especially when she’s the only parent I have left.



My dad, Ashok Navare, and T.K. met in the computer lab at Stanford. I suspect I was conceived there, too, but that's one of those things I'm happier not knowing about. They were in the same graduate program, and together they came up with a way to speed up e-mail traffic on the Internet. This sounds like an easy fix, but whenever people send e-mail, the company my parents started makes money. Only a fraction of a penny each time, but since it happens billions of times a day, it adds up.

T.K. was really into building the business, but my dad cashed out to pursue his true passion, which was, embarrassingly, the type of extreme sports they show on ESPN2. Some fathers play golf, and the ones who're trying extra hard to seem young might do yoga. Ash was the only one jumping out of planes with a surfboard strapped to his feet. He liked defying expectations, and people tend not to expect Indian software engineers to be into that sort of thing.

The irony was that he died doing something as ordinary as grocery shopping. He was coming out of the Whole Foods in Palo Alto when a car swerved to avoid a runaway cart and hit him instead. That was three years ago, and I'd thought I was finally okay with it, but hearing about T.K.'s disappearance made me miss him all over again.

So, I was already down to one parent, and I knew T.K. would never just desert me, and definitely not in such a haphazard manner. And it wasn't like there was even any proof that she was actually dead — I didn't get the science gene, but I'm still

enough of my parents' daughter to know how important empirical data is, and in this particular situation there wasn't the tiniest shred of it.

But nobody seemed to agree with me on that point — not Nora, and not even Erin and Justin, though they were a lot nicer about it than people like Thad. And nobody paid the slightest attention to any of my ideas about search-and-rescue missions, either. A person can't be declared officially dead until she's been missing for seven years, but the general consensus of everyone who was old enough to have a say — as in, not me — was that my mother's gone forever. Thad and the lawyers hardly waited seven seconds to dig up T.K.'s will.

Knowing my mother, I wasn't surprised that she had a will or that she'd filed copies in all of the appropriate places, including in a folder labeled WILL in the cabinet in her home office, right behind the folder labeled WETLANDS PRESERVATION and right in front of the one labeled WIND FARM — SOLANO COUNTY. But I was still surprised by what it said.

Her plans for her money were completely predictable. I knew she had a lot and I knew exactly what she'd do with it. Sure enough, a sensibly sized chunk goes to me — enough to cover the basics, but not enough for Paris Hilton to start worrying about the competition. The remainder's supposed to go to organizations supporting “socially liberal but fiscally conservative causes.”



Her plans for her company, TrueTech, were predictable, too, since it's been entrusted to Thad's care. There was also some ominous language about Thad training me to take over one day, and he seemed pretty worked up about it, but he's always worked up about something. Since I've barely finished the tenth grade, and since I have plenty of other things to worry about, it seems as if this is a request we can safely ignore for now.

No, the stuff about the money and the company was fine. It was the final paragraph that floored me. Here's what it said:

In the event of my death prior to my daughter, Cordelia Navare Truesdale, reaching maturity, I appoint my sister Charity Dennis Truesdale of 15 Laight Street, Manhattan, to act as her legal guardian.

However, while Charity will have sole custody of Cordelia, I appoint my other sister, Patience Truesdale-Babbitt of 888 Park Avenue, Manhattan, to act as her trustee, with full discretion over all financial and academic decisions.

This would have been fine, too. I know orphans are supposed to go live with their relatives, and even if my parents had ever been married, what family my dad had is in India — it wasn't like I expected anyone to send me to an entirely different country.

There was just one small problem: I'd never even met my

mother's sisters. Or anyone else in her family, for that matter. All I really knew was that T.K. hadn't spoken to her parents since before I was born.

The rift started when she decided to go to Stanford. Truesdales had been attending Princeton for generations, so this was a big deal. Then things got worse when she decided to have me on her own. Apparently, voluntary single motherhood wasn't done, at least not in her parents' social circles, but T.K. considers marriage to be an "archaic manifestation of patriarchal oppression" and says life is too short to waste on "antiquated convention and East Coast snobbery."

She'd explained this back when I was in the second grade and wondering why I didn't have a lot of relatives giving me presents on my birthday or coming to watch my soccer games. But when she'd told me about her family, all she'd really said about my aunts was that the three of them didn't have much in common besides being the victims of their parents' unfortunate taste in names.

And, as if finding out that my mother had recklessly handed my future over to two complete strangers wasn't enough of a shock, then came the real kicker. T.K. saw fit to add the following little coda, right before the signatures and dates and notary's seal:

*To be clear, I make these arrangements only as a last resort.
For Cordelia's sake, I hope they never become necessary.*

These aren't exactly the sort of words in which an orphan can take comfort, even an orphan who's only temporarily an orphan. But they also didn't stop Thad from calling up my aunts and turning my entire life upside down.

After several hurried conversations among the adults on each coast and a lot of me fruitlessly pointing out how ridiculous it was to write T.K. off so soon, Nora packed my things into boxes to be shipped to my aunt Charity's, and Thad arranged for my plane ticket. It was all done so quickly that I barely had time to process what was happening, though I did manage to sneak in a final afternoon at Ross's Cove before saying good-bye to Erin and Justin.

It was the first Sunday in September, right before Labor Day and the start of the school year, when Thad drove me to the airport in San Francisco. Being Thad, he insisted on getting there ridiculously early and then walking me all the way to the security checkpoint. If they'd let him, he probably would've followed me onto the plane to make sure I buckled my seat belt properly, but fortunately he didn't have a boarding pass and I was considered old enough to travel by myself, even if I didn't have any say over where I was going.

Six hours later, I landed in New York.

