



plan b

jenny o'connell

*He was never
part of the plan.*

plan

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For my daughter,
because she's my most
favorite girl ever.

acknowledgments

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prologue

I knew it was too good to be true. Only nine months. Forty weeks. Two hundred eighty-four days. If I wasn't so busy getting ready for the first day of my senior year, and I'd remembered to buy the calculator required for my AP calculus class, I could have had it down to the exact hour. The day I graduate from high school. Then a summer traveling around Europe with Taylor, where hopefully five years of conjugating French verbs would finally pay off.

Anyway, I had life all figured out. In one short, hopefully relatively painless year, I'd be on my way out East to college, where I'd join Patrick and things would be exactly like they were last year when I was a junior and Patrick was a senior. Only better. Because we'd be away from home and on our own (in a manner of speaking, of course, considering our parents would be footing the entire bill for our college experience and the road trips Taylor and I were already planning to Boston).

That was the plan, anyway. But then came the phone call. I was waiting to hear from Patrick, the cordless phone sitting silently beside me on my bed so my parents wouldn't get to it first. But

when I picked up the phone it wasn't my college-bound boyfriend calling to tell me he couldn't wait for me to visit. It was a woman asking for my father in a voice that was so polite, so practiced, I thought she had to be a telemarketer trying to get him to switch our long-distance telephone service or, at the very least, renew his subscription to the *Chicago Tribune*.

If I'd known then what I know now, I might have just told her she had the wrong number, replaced the receiver quietly on its cradle, and unplugged all the phones in our house. Maybe even called the phone company and asked to disconnect our number all together. But I didn't. I brought the phone over to my dad, who was in his study reading a book while my mom worked on the laptop at his desk. And that's when everything changed. In that single moment when my dad said hello and I watched his face transform from a look of practiced calm to a look of petrified shock, I realized that life as we knew it was about to change.

And that's when my carefully laid plan went out the window.

chapter one

“Has Patrick called you yet?” Taylor asked me for what seemed like the tenth time today.

“He just left on Wednesday,” I reminded her, flipping through my *Let's Go Europe*. “Besides, he's only had a day to settle in and meet his new roommate. I'm sure there are tons of things incoming freshman have to take care of,” I added, not sure whether I was trying to answer Taylor or convince myself.

Taylor shrugged and sat up, swinging her legs around until she was sitting Indian style on the sunken cushion of the armchair we'd staked out in the language section of Barnes & Noble. The girl had become amazingly limber since she read about Madonna's addiction to Bikram yoga and decided to replicate the same conditions in her bedroom with a space heater, an electric blanket, and a DVD she bought off some swami's website. “Still, I would have thought you'd hear from him by now. He has a cellphone, you know.”

“He'll call,” I assured her, repeating the silent mantra I'd been reciting to myself for the past two days.

“Aren't you afraid of cheating?” Taylor asked, not even looking

up from the book in her lap as she traced a map of Germany with her finger.

I shook my head and dismissed her absurd suggestion. “No way. I’d never cheat on Patrick.”

This time she looked up. “I meant, aren’t you afraid of him cheating on you?”

“Nope.” I touched the small gold heart charm hanging around my neck, a birthday present from Patrick. I rubbed it for good luck and then discreetly checked my fingers to see if the gold came off. He’d said it was fourteen carat, but you never knew.

Taylor wasn’t as convinced. She wasn’t exactly Patrick’s biggest fan and I knew she was glad to finally be rid of him. “I don’t know. Last year when Courtney Maxwell and Brian Bonham left for college he cheated on her in less than two weeks with some girl who had a barbell through her tongue.”

“Brian Bonham was a prick.”

Taylor frowned at me as if to say, aren’t they all?

“Can we please not talk about this now?” I asked.

“Sure. I didn’t mean to imply that Pat—I mean Patrick—will cheat on you.” She shrugged. “Just that, well, you know.”

Yeah, I knew. The look on Taylor’s face was the same look everyone gave me when I told them Patrick and I were going to still date after he left for Yale. A look that said, who are you kidding?

“*Ich brauche ein Abführmittel.*” Taylor slowly mouthed, trying out a line from the book in her lap. “That means, ‘I need a laxative.’”

“Let’s hope we won’t need that one,” I noted and traded my *Let’s Go Europe* for her *Lonely Planet Europe Phrasebook*. Even though it was barely Labor Day, Taylor and I were already planning next summer’s vacation. We were also trying to convince our parents that two eighteen-year-old girls would be fine trekking

across Europe by themselves, which was proving more difficult than last summer's task, when we persuaded them to let us go camping for the weekend at Starved Rock State Park. Apparently having their daughters pitch a tent amidst 2,630 acres of thick forest was preferable to setting them loose in a foreign country.

But focusing on next summer made the next nine months seem bearable and gave me an added incentive to kiss up to Madame Rodriguez in French class. At least I had something to think about besides the fact that Patrick was 874 miles away in Connecticut, moving into a new dorm room, on a new campus, meeting new people. He was probably waiting in line as we spoke, getting his ID photo taken or having his phone and computer hooked up so he could e-mail his girlfriend back home to tell her how much he missed her.

Still, when Taylor kept quizzing me about what Patrick was doing every hour of the day, it just reminded me that whatever he was doing, he was doing it without me.

"We *are* going to Germany, right?" Taylor asked.

"That's the plan."

"*Ech will eine heue Frisur.*"

"Let me guess: 'I've got the runs?'"

"I want a new hairdo," she translated. "Maybe dark brown or black."

"Your mother will kill you." Taylor's mother, with a little help from L'Oreal, went to great lengths to achieve the golden auburn tone Taylor was able to achieve naturally. After all, as she always reminded us, she was worth it.

"But I want *etwas exotisches*," she told me, sounding like there was peanut butter stuck to the roof of her mouth. "Something exotic. Look." Taylor riffled around in her backpack, pulled out the latest *People* magazine, and flipped to the Star Tracks page. It

showed celebrities caught in everyday moments just like the rest of us—climbing into their Ferraris, sunbathing on the deck of their yacht in Cannes, eating lunch at the Ivy. “Everyone’s doing it—Reese, Renée, even Nicole,” Taylor clarified, as if that should explain the sudden interest in going from her natural tawny red to inky black. And it did.

Taylor is obsessed with anything to do with celebrities. She can tell you who’s dating who, which stars are teetering on career suicide, and what former “it” girl is in rehab.

“See there.” She pointed to a photo of two stars from *Wild Dunes*, her favorite show. “Reed Vaughn is shopping for groceries with Rebecca Stewart, and what color is her hair?”

“It’s the color of the filter in my parents’ espresso machine—dingy brown. Besides, the photo is obviously just a publicity stunt.”

“Why?” Taylor asked, concerned. She never doubted the voracity of the information she read in *People*. It would be like questioning the Bible—the world as she knew it would cease to make sense.

Taylor received a subscription to *People* for her ninth birthday and has saved every issue that’s arrived in her mailbox every Friday for the past eight years. That means she’s saved over four hundred issues of *People*, and her mom finally had to take her to The Container Store and buy plastic shelving units to hold her growing library. Taylor even gets *Us Weekly*, *Entertainment Weekly*, and *Teen People* now, but she claims she’s a purist; that even though those magazines are fine imitations, it’s *People* she wants to write for when she graduates from college.

That’s why I don’t think anyone was surprised when Taylor suggested that our school paper, the *Cabot Chronicle*, include an entertainment section. Of course, she also volunteered to be the

section's first reporter and editor. Taylor covers the school-sanctioned entertainment at Cabot, like last year's half-assed production of *Les Miserables*, a title that described both the performance and what it was like to sit in the audience. She also provides running commentary on how Hollywood's trends find their way into the halls of our esteemed school.

I took the magazine away from Taylor and inspected her evidence. "We're supposed to believe they're shopping for farm-fresh produce? Rebecca looks like she hasn't eaten in months and I thought Reed was in rehab."

It barely took Taylor a second to scan her mental encyclopedia of entertainment facts. "He was at Casa Hope in Malibu because he blacked out and drove his car into a Starbucks on his way home from a cast party for the new season of *Wild Dunes*."

What was I going to do, disagree with her? The girl knew the comings and goings of Reed Vaughn better than Reed Vaughn. His alcohol-induced blackouts were probably more distressing for Taylor than they were for him—after all, if Reed couldn't remember what he did, how was she supposed to read about them?

If I didn't put a stop to the conversation now, Taylor would have me running down the list of famous alcoholics and drug addicts who attended Casa Hope—some more than once, which I didn't think was a resounding endorsement, considering the place was supposed to cure people. But I wasn't about to get into it with Taylor, who was surely in need of her own 12-step program to treat her addiction to *Access Hollywood*.

"Hey, it says in *Let's Go* that we should take a good self-defense class so we can react to unwelcome advances." Taylor held up the guide and pointed to a photograph of a girl giving some guy a swift kick in the balls.

"I don't think I'll bring that up to my parents. As it is, unless we

get them to change their minds, the only thing Greek we'll be seeing next summer is the gyro stand at North Avenue Beach."

"Tell me about it." Taylor slumped down in her chair and closed her *Let's Go* in defeat. "I can't believe your mom and dad aren't into the idea. I was counting on them convincing my parents to let us go."

I shrugged. What was I going to do? My parents were consistently inconsistent. They liked to think they're quirky theater people, chalking up their eccentricities to the fact that they're *in the arts*. But my mom hasn't designed a set since she became an interior decorator and traded in curtain calls for plantation shutters, and the only thing dramatic about my dad's job as artistic director for the Bookman Theater were the hissy fits he had to deal with from aspiring actresses who thought they deserved more attention.

Granted, they were more tolerant than the other parents at Cabot, but it wasn't like I gave them a whole lot to get uptight about. Even if my mother did have a tendency to rearrange the furniture on a weekly basis and my father can manage a cast of thirty performers yet can't manage to keep his beloved sheep dog from crapping on my mother's shantung silk curtains, at least I had my act together. While other kids were sneaking out at night and hiding pot in their underwear drawers, I didn't have much to rebel against. My parents took a perfectly pragmatic approach to child rearing.

Teen pregnancy—it's called the pill. Use it.

Clothes—my mom once wore a see-through gauzy thing to an opening-night performance and gave the audience more of a show than the actors on stage. We have the picture in our family photo album to prove it, so who was she to complain?

A curfew—only for parents who didn't trust their kids. ("We trust you, Vanessa, until you give us a reason not to," they always told me.)

And I always got the feeling that if they caught me smoking dope, they'd just give each other a knowing look, one that said, been there, done that.

So what was I going to rebel against? The fact that they made me volunteer to hand out programs at matinees?

No, my parents weren't concerned with the classic things most parents worry about, but coming to terms with the idea that their only child was about to leave the nest, that freaked them out. That's why I think they're so set against our trip to Europe. No matter how many articles I strategically place on the kitchen counter, articles that proclaim the numerous benefits of multicultural experiences, they haven't budged: "If you want a multicultural experience, we can take you to the Latin American film festival next summer." They just didn't get it.

"Maybe if we got jobs this year and earned enough to stay in hotels instead of hostels," Taylor suggested halfheartedly. Neither of us wanted to get a job.

I hated that word—"hostel", not "job." A job I could deal with, just not while I was dealing with my senior year of high school. But the word "hostel" sounded too much like "hostile," like we'd be sleeping in our dumpy cots and wake up with some knife-wielding psycho hovering over us with a deranged look in his eye. Why couldn't they call them something nicer—like "cozies." Think of how many parents would sleep better at night knowing their kids were staying at a cozy?

"I think the cultural angle is still our best bet," I told her. "We need to play up the benefits of living among natives, so to speak."

"Shit, we should have thought of this last year. We could have used the whole college application thing as an excuse—no college wants an applicant who writes her essay about a summer job at the Shoe Carousel. They want someone who learned how to make

voodoo dolls at the knee of some African medicine man while attempting to discover an alternative energy source and restore peace to the Middle East.”

College applications. “Let’s not go there. We have five days before school starts. Can’t we just think about sitting at some sidewalk café in Paris eating warm, flaky croissants while we sip cappuccino?”

“This is depressing, we’re probably never going to convince them to let us go.” Taylor started collecting the stack of entertainment magazines splayed out on the coffee table. “I’m heading over to the magazine racks to return these.”

She took off and left me with the task of returning six travel books and one map of the London Underground back to the bookshelves.

After I’d put back the books, and spent a few minutes organizing several others that were also out of place, I found Taylor basking in the glossy glow of *Premier*, *Wow*, *InTouch*, and *Star*. Back when it was a tabloid that shoppers would flip through while waiting in line at the checkout, Taylor snubbed *Star*. But now that it was a glossy magazine placed on the rack right next to her revered *People*, it had become fair game.

“Aren’t you going to buy one?” I asked, as she returned the magazines to their displays.

“No. There’s a new Reed Vaughn calendar I was thinking of buying instead.” In Taylor’s mind, twelve months of Reed Vaughn trumped four Hollywood weeklies.

Unfortunately for Taylor, when we found the calendar section, Reed Vaughn wasn’t in sight.

“Excuse me,” she asked the salesperson as she paid for the *Lonely Planet Europe Phrasebook* and *Europe by Rail*. “Do you have the new Reed Vaughn calendar?”

The salesperson shook his head. “Nope. All sold out. We should be getting more next week.”

“Can I get put on a waiting list or something?” she asked.

“Waiting list? It’s a calendar,” he pointed out, making the idea of a waiting list for a calendar sound as ridiculous as if she’d asked to make a reservation at KFC.

I knew Taylor wouldn’t let his comment slide. Running out of this season’s best-selling calendar, that she could understand. But letting some salesperson live with the misbelief that twelve color photos of Reed Vaughn sweating it up in front of a camera didn’t deserve a waiting list? That was an egregious error she felt compelled to correct.

“It’s not just a calendar. It’s a Reed Vaughn calendar,” she explained, calmly. “Now, do I have to ask for your manager or will you please put me on a list to be called when you get more calendars in?”

What was the cashier going to say? He took her number, even though I was sure he’d toss it in the trash the moment we walked out the door.

I stepped forward to pay for my *Let’s Go*.

“You want to go see a movie tonight?” Taylor offered while I waited for my change. “There aren’t many days left before school starts, we may as well take advantage of it.”

“Can’t. My parents are taking me to some opening night at a gallery their friend owns. A new show called ‘The Human Canvas.’”

“What’s that mean? Does the artist paint with his toes or something?”

I shrugged. “Who knows. All I know is that they think this guy is the next Picasso.”

“I thought they said that organic sculptor was supposed to be the next Picasso.”

“No, he was going to be the next Calder, but it doesn’t matter anymore. His stuff was crap.”

“That bad, huh?”

“No, I meant it was crap—literally. Turned out the guy was carving dried cow manure.”

Taylor laughed and grabbed the bag with my *Let's Go*. “That’s a good one.”

I took my change and followed her out of the store. “My mom didn’t think so. She convinced one of her clients to buy a piece. I guess they should have known something was wrong when he named all his pieces *Sculpture Number Two*.”

“Maybe the next Picasso will be better,” Taylor offered hopefully.

“Maybe,” I told her, but, given my parents’ track record, I wasn’t very optimistic.