



What if your teenager's fantasy
was your reality?

the idea *of* you

robinne lee

“Captures what fame looks like, and how it affects us all...
a fun, juicy love story!” —ELIZABETH BANKS

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For Eric,
who has loved me best

acknowledgments

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All the love,
Robinne

las vegas

I suppose I could blame it all on Daniel.

Two days before my planned getaway to Ojai, he showed up at the house in a tux with our daughter, Isabelle, in tow. He'd left the car running in the driveway.

"I can't do the Vegas trip," he said, thrusting a manila envelope in my hand. "I'm still working on the Fox deal and it's not going to close anytime soon."

I must have looked at him in disbelief because he followed that up with:

"I'm sorry. I know I promised the girls, but I can't. You take them. Or I'll eat the tickets. Whatever."

An unopened package of Da Vinci Maestro Kolinsky brushes was lying on the entry table, alongside a set of thirty-six Holbein watercolors. I'd spent a fortune at Blick stocking up on materials for my artist retreat. They were, like the trip to Ojai, my gift to myself. Forty-eight hours of art and sleep and wine. And now my ex-husband was standing in my living room in formal black tie and telling me there'd been a change of plans.

"Does she know?" I asked. Isabelle, having retreated immediately to her room—no doubt to get on her phone—had missed the entire exchange.

He shook his head. "I haven't had time to tell her. I thought I'd wait and see if you could take them first."

"That's convenient."

"Don't start, okay?" He turned toward the door. "If you can't do it, have her call me, and I'll make it up the next time the group's in town."

It was so like him to have a Band-Aid for everything. To walk away from commitments guilt-free. Would that I had acquired that gene.

Isabelle and her two girlfriends had been counting down the days to see the band August Moon, a quintet of handsome lads from Britain who sang pleasant pop songs and drove tween girls mad. Daniel had "won" the tickets

at the school silent auction. Paid some formidable amount to fly four to Vegas, stay at the Mandalay Bay, and attend the concert and a meet-and-greet with the band. Canceling now would not go over well.

“I have plans,” I said, following him out into the driveway.

He slipped around the back of the BMW and withdrew a cumbersome bag from the trunk. Isabelle’s fencing equipment. “I assumed you would. I’m sorry, Sol.”

He was quiet for a moment, drinking me in: sneakers, leggings, still damp from a five-mile run. And then: “You cut your hair.”

I nodded, my hands rising to my neck, self-conscious. It barely reached my shoulders now. My act of defiance. “It was time for a change.”

He smiled faintly. “You’re never not beautiful, are you?”

Just then the tinted window on the passenger side rolled down and a sylphlike creature leaned out and waved. Eva. My replacement.

She was wearing an emerald-green gown. Her long, honey-colored hair twisted into a chignon. There were diamonds dangling from both ears. It wasn’t enough that she was some youngish, stunning, half-Dutch, half-Chinese star associate at the firm, but that she was now sitting in Daniel’s 7 Series in my driveway looking every bit the princess while I was dripping sweat—now, *that* stung.

“Fine. I’ll take them.”

“Thank you,” he said, handing over the bag. “You’re the best.”

“That’s what all the boys say.”

He paused then, screwing up his aristocratic nose. I anticipated a response, but none was forthcoming. Instead he smiled blandly, leaning in to do the awkward divorcé cheek kiss. He was wearing cologne, which he’d never done in all his years with me.

I watched him make his way over to the driver’s side. “Where are you going? All dolled up...”

“Fund-raiser,” he said, getting into the car. “Katzenberg’s.” And with that, he pulled away. Leaving me holding the baggage.

* * *

I was not a fan of Vegas: loud, fat, dirty. The underbelly of America convened in one garish skid mark in the desert. I’d visited once, years before, to attend a bachelorette party that I was still trying to forget. The smell of strip clubs and drugstore perfume and vomit. Those things linger. But this

was not my adventure. This time I was just along for the ride. Isabelle and her friends had made that clear.

They spent that afternoon running circles around the resort on a quest to find their idols, while I followed dutifully. I had become accustomed to this: my passionate daughter trying any- and everything, setting her mind and forging her way. Isabelle and her American can-do spirit. There was trapeze school and figure skating, musical theater, fencing ... She was fearless, and I loved that about her, envied it even. I liked that she took risks, that she did not wait for permission, that she followed her heart. Isabelle was okay with living outside the lines.

I was hoping to convince the girls to visit the Contemporary Arts Center. It would have been nice to squeeze some real culture into the weekend. To imprint something worthwhile upon their impressionable minds. I'd spent countless hours trailing my mother through the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston as a child. Following the click of her Vivier heels, the scent of the custom-made fragrance she bought every summer in Grasse. How knowledgeable she was to me then, how womanly. I knew the halls of that museum as well as I knew my third-grade classroom. But Isabelle and her cohorts had balked at the idea.

"Mom, you know at any other time I would say yes. But this trip is different. Please?" she'd implored.

They'd come to Vegas for one reason only, and nothing would thwart their mission. "Our lives begin tonight," Georgia, with the silky brown skin, had proclaimed on the flight in. Rose, the redhead, agreed, and the three quickly adopted it as their mantra. No expectation too high. They had their whole lives ahead of them. They were twelve.

* * *

The meet-and-greet was at six o'clock. I don't know what I was expecting exactly, something slightly elegant, civilized, but no. They crammed us into a fluorescent-lit holding room in the bowels of the arena. Fifty-odd worshippers in various stages of puberty: girls in braces, girls in wheelchairs, girls in heat. Wide-eyed and smitten and on the verge of combustion. It was at once beautiful and desperate. And it pained me to realize that Isabelle was now part of this tribe. This motley crew searching for happiness in five boys from Britain whom they did not know, could never know, and who would never return the adulation.

Several parents were scattered throughout. A select swath of Middle America: jeans, T-shirts, practical shoes. Faces pink from a brutal introduction to the Vegas sun. It dawned on me that I would be lumped in with these people. “Augies,” as the media had dubbed the fandom. Or, worse yet, an “Augie Mom.”

The girls were beginning to fidget when a side door opened and a hulking bald man with a neckful of laminated passes entered. “Who here is ready to meet the band?!”

Shrieks pierced the air, and I suddenly remembered that I’d forgotten my earplugs in the hotel room. Lulit, my business partner and confidante in all things worth confiding, had mentioned it yesterday at the gallery, told me I’d be crazy to step into a stadium of Augies without a pair. Apparently, she’d once attended a concert with her niece. “The boys are adorable, but my God, the fans are loud.”

Beside me Isabelle’s entire body had begun to shake.

“Excited?” I squeezed her shoulders.

“Cold.” She shrugged it off. Ever the aloof one.

“The guys are going to be five more minutes,” the hulking man continued. “They’ll stay for about twenty. I need you all to form a line up here to the left. You’ll each get your turn for a quick hello and a photo with the group. No selfies. Our photographer will take the pics, and you’ll be able to download them later online. We’ll provide you with the link. You all get that?”

It seemed so impersonal. Certainly there were better ways Daniel could have spent his money. I was thinking, as they steered us into line, that I was overdressed in Alaïa sandals and out of place. That I was pulled together and polished and that once again, for better or worse, I stuck out. This, my father’s mother had explained to me on numerous occasions, was my birthright: “You are French, at your core. *Il ne faut pas l’oublier.*” There was no forgetting it: my Frenchness. And so I resisted being grouped in with these women, but at the same time I was keenly aware of their selflessness, their patience. The things we did for our children. What kind of mother would I be to begrudge Isabelle this moment?

And then they entered. The five of them. There was a groundswell and audible swooning, and Rose let out a little yelp like a puppy that had her tail stepped on. Georgia threw her a look that said, *Get it together, sister*, and indeed Rose did.

They were young—that was my first thought. They had dewy, fresh skin, as if they'd been raised on an organic farm. They were taller than I'd expected, lean. Like the swim team at Brown. Only prettier.

“Now, who is who?” I asked, and Isabelle shushed me. Right.

We migrated to where the boys were positioned before a banner with the August Moon logo: big yellow letters across a gray backdrop. They seemed happy, giddy even, to be mingling with their fans. A mutual love affair. The way they hammed it up for the camera and put the awkward adolescents at ease, the way they flirted with their older fans—sly, but not crossing the line—the way they engaged the tweens and charmed the mothers. It was an art. They'd nailed it.

When we were next in line, Isabelle leaned into me. “Left to right: Rory, Oliver, Simon, Liam, and Hayes.”

“Got it.”

“Don't say anything embarrassing, okay?”

I promised her I wouldn't.

And then it was our turn.

“Well, hullo, lasses!” Simon bellowed, eyes wide, arms outstretched. He had an impressive wingspan. Isabelle had mentioned on the plane that he'd rowed crew in boarding school. “Step right up, don't be shy!”

The girls did not need a second prompt. Georgia lunged into Simon's arms, and Rose sidled up next to Liam, the baby of the bunch, he with the green eyes and freckles. Only Isabelle hesitated, her eyes darting back and forth. Eenie, meenie, miny ... Quite the candy store.

“Having a hard time deciding?” The tall one on the far end spoke. “Come, come stand near me. I don't bite, I promise. Now, Rory, Rory might bite, and Ollie's unpredictable, so...” He smiled this dazzling smile. Wide mouth, full lips, perfect teeth, dimples. Hayes.

Isabelle smiled and made her way in his direction.

“Ha! I win! I win ... What's your name, love?”

“Isabelle.”

“I win Isabelle!” He flung his arm over her narrow shoulders, protective-like, and then glanced over to me. “And you must be the big sister?”

Isabelle laughed, covering her mouth. Her features delicate, like a little bird. “That's my mom.”

“Your mum?” Hayes raised an eyebrow, holding my gaze. “Really? All right then. *Isabelle's* mum. Do you want to join us for the picture?”

“No, I’m fine. Thanks.”

“You sure? Promise to make it worth your while.”

I laughed at that. “I’d like to see you do that.”

“I’d like to *show* you.” He smiled, bold. “Come on. You’ll want something to commemorate our wild night in Vegas.”

“Well, when you make it so appealing...”

* * *

The first photo I have of myself with Hayes is of the nine of us, in the basement of the Mandalay Bay. He has one arm draped around me and the other around Isabelle. I’d ordered two copies. In time Isabelle would destroy hers.

* * *

“I’m impressed you flew out here just for us.” The guys were in full conversation with my brood, making the most of our ninety seconds. Liam was asking Rose about our trek to Sin City, and Simon was touching Georgia’s hair.

“I love these curls.”

“Do you?” Georgia gave as good as she got. She’d benefitted from an older sister.

“That’s quite an indulgence, flying in for the day.” Hayes was engaging Isabelle, leaning on her shoulder like a big brother. Like he’d known her all her life. I knew inside she was dying.

“Two days,” she clarified.

“It was a gift from her father,” I volunteered.

“‘Her father’?” He looked over to me. There was that raised eyebrow again. “Not *your husband*?”

“He *was* my husband. Now he’s just her father.”

“Well...” He paused. “That’s serendipitous, isn’t it?”

I laughed. “What does that mean?”

“I don’t know. You tell me.”

There was something about him in that moment. His ease. His accent. His cocksure smile. Disarming.

“Next!” Our time was up.

* * *

He humored us again at the end of the meet-and-greet. When everyone had taken their requisite photos and the group was signing autographs, we filtered over to him amidst a sea of moving bodies. Fish swimming upstream. All around us there was collective squealing and swaying and “Hayes, can I touch your hair?” But my group was holding it together. It might have been that jaded L.A. thing: that they were used to seeing the likes of the Beckham boys at the local park, or “Spider-Man” in the carpool lane at drop-off. It took a bit more to faze them. They were, despite all their exuberant canvassing of the resort that afternoon, surprisingly poised.

“I’m really loving the *Petty Desires* album. It’s deep on so many levels,” Georgia gushed.

“Yes,” Rose chimed in. “Such clever lyrics. I love ‘Seven Minutes.’”

“You like it, do you?” He glanced up from where he was signing a T-shirt.

“It’s like ... you’ve really tapped into our generation. You speak for all of us.” Isabelle flipped her hair, an attempt at flirting, but the awkward pursed-lipped smile belied her youth. There were braces under there. Oh, sweet girl, in time ...

She had my face. Large almond-shaped eyes, pouty French lips, a fair olive complexion. Her hair thick, brown, almost black.

I watched Hayes take the girls in. His eyes moving from one to another, amused. I imagined he was used to this. Finally, he landed on me.

“Where are you ladies sitting?”

The girls rattled off our seat numbers.

“Come backstage after the show. I’m going to have someone come and get you on the floor. Don’t leave.” He looked to me then. Piercing blue-green eyes and a mass of dark curls. He couldn’t have been more than nineteen.

“All right?”

I nodded. “All right.”

* * *

There was something mind-bending about emerging from an intimate conversation with a member of the biggest boy band of the last decade and being thrust into an arena with twelve thousand of his shrieking fans. There was a shift of equilibrium, a disconnect. For a moment I lost sense of where I was, how I’d gotten there, what my role was supposed to be. The girls were buzzing with excitement and rushing to find our floor seats, and I was spiraling. I was not prepared for the onslaught: the roar, the pitch, the energy

level of so many adolescent girls at the peak of arousal. That this, all of this, could be for the boys we'd just left in the basement seemed inconceivable. They were bewitching, yes, but still flesh and blood.

The screamfest started before the guys hit the stage and continued without pause for the next two and a half hours. Lulit had been right. It was at a decibel level that was near impossible to get used to. Particularly for a woman pushing forty.

The year I turned sixteen, I saw the New Kids on the Block at Foxboro Stadium during their Magic Summer Tour. A handful of us went for Alison Aserkoff's birthday. Her father had finagled floor seats and backstage passes. It was loud and unwieldy and not typically my thing. Boy bands were not part of the prep school culture. We grew up listening to the Stones, U2, Bob Marley. Music that never got old. So five working-class boys from Dorchester, Mass., should theoretically not have had any appeal.

But there was something there. The rush, the hormones, the heat from the stage. The idea that they were longed for and lusted after by so many made them exponentially more appealing. And for a brief moment I thought I could let myself go, in the madness. But then I realized how indelicate that would seem, how unbecoming. And I remembered who I was supposed to be, at my core. And whatever wanton adulation might have occurred I stopped before it could take root. Well before the encore at the New Kids concert.

A near quarter-century later, it was threatening to play out again.

Despite the noise and the hormones coursing through the Mandalay Bay, the band put on a great show—although whether a group could truly call themselves a band if they didn't play instruments was unknown to me. Rory stroked the guitar for a handful of songs, and Oliver sat down before the piano once or twice, but other than that, the only instrumentation came from the accompanying backup band. Mostly the guys sang and jumped about onstage like young virile pogo sticks. There was lots of roughhousing and clowning around and very little choreography, but the fans did not seem to mind.

"I love them! I love them! I love them!" Georgia proclaimed after a rousing rendition of "Fizzy Smile," the titular track from the band's first album. There were tears streaming down her doll-like face, and her curls had begun to frizz in the humidity. "They touch my *soul*."

Rose was clearly in agreement, shrieking every time Liam walked the extended platform that brought him within feet of us. Isabelle was in her own

trance, singing and swaying deeply with the music. They were a happy bunch. And in that moment, I forgave Daniel for welshing as he often did, because his flounder had gifted me the opportunity to witness the girls' rapture. One could not put a price on that.

Like clockwork, a burly black man wearing credentials arrived at our section just as the band exited the stage after the final encore. Hayes had kept his promise.

"Is one of you Isabelle?"

I barely made out what he was saying through the incessant hum in my ears, the sense of conversing underwater. But we followed him to the gate, where he presented each of us with wristbands and all-access lanyards.

No words were spoken on the long walk backstage. I suspected the girls did not want to ruin the moment, to be woken from the dream. Their expressions were expectant, serious. They could barely look at one another for the excitement. *Our lives begin tonight.*

I got the impression that the security guard was used to this, plucking young girls from the audience to hand-deliver to the band. For a moment I feared what we might be getting ourselves into. Where was he taking us exactly? And at what point might I be liable for child endangerment? Because certainly handing over a trio of twelve-year-olds for consumption would constitute some sort of misdemeanor, if not felony. No, I would not let them out of my sight. This was Vegas, after all.

But as we entered the after-party it became apparent that my worries were unnecessary. Girls for consumption seemed few and far between: a couple of unrecognizable models, the Dane from the *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue, a reality star, and an actress from the new Netflix series. Other than that, it appeared to be family and close friends: a bunch of Brits and industry types and a handful of well-behaved, lucky young fans. It felt decidedly safe.

Eventually the band emerged, freshly showered, hair damp and void of product. There was applause and whistles and the pop-popping of champagne. And I had to wonder if this happened every night. This sort of self-congratulatory celebration. Isabelle and her friends wasted no time flocking to Simon and Liam at the party's core. Composure regained, they were once again on a mission. I wasn't certain what that mission was exactly: "Make said member of August Moon fall in love with me" sounded about right, and yet surely they must have realized that was highly unlikely. As it was, Rory was chatting up the swimsuit model in a corner. Beanie pulled low

on his brow, hands jammed deep into his pockets, forcing the waist of his black jeans lower than their already ridiculous latitude. The incline of his head and his body language conveyed all: he had claimed her.

Oliver was deep in conversation with what I took to be a record exec—some guy in a gray shiny suit who might or might not have been hitting on him. He was the most elegant of the group. Willowy and thoughtful with hazel eyes and golden hair. The type I would have fallen in love with in college only to discover he was gay. Or far too profound to be interested in an art history major. Either way, he would have broken my heart.

And then there was Hayes. Holding court like Simon and Liam, but in a manner that seemed more deliberate, intense. From my vantage point on the far side of the room, where a writer from *Vanity Fair* was chatting me up, I could see Simon goofing off and Liam being young, both captivating their fans. But Hayes was harder to read. Hayes's attention appeared sincere. Even from a distance, his conversation with his sycophants seemed earnest.

It wasn't until thirty minutes or so later, when I'd almost polished off a glass of Perrier-Jouët and extricated myself from the writer, that Hayes approached me in the corner.

"Well, hello, Isabelle's mum..."

"It's Solène."

"So-lène..." He took his time with it. "Like, 'So, lend me some money and I'll pay you back?'"

I laughed. "Exactly."

"So-lène," he repeated. "I like that. It's French? Are you French?"

"My parents are. Very."

"So-lène." He nodded. "I'm Hayes."

"I know who you are."

"Yes. Fancy that." He smiled this half smile, the left side of his mouth turning up at the corner, putting precious dimples into relief. His mouth was too big for his face—wide and unapologetic. But he had dimples, and what might have been arrogance came across as endearing. "Are you enjoying yourself?"

"I am, thank you."

"Good." He stood there, grinning, arms folded across his broad chest. He was doing that thing that tall guys sometimes do, copping a very wide stance to bring him closer to my eye level. "Did you like the show?"

"It was ... entertaining."

His smile widened. “You didn’t like it.”

“It was surprisingly loud,” I laughed.

“No one warned you? I’m sorry, Solène.”

There was something about the way he kept saying my name: raspy voice, unwavering gaze, the roll of his tongue. It felt ... intimate.

“I was warned, just not enough, clearly. Your fans are—”

“Excitable.”

“That’s one way of putting it.”

He laughed, tossing back his head. He had a beautiful jawline. “They’re a wild bunch. Next time we’ll get you headphones.”

“Next time?”

“There’s always a next time.” He said it with a straight face, but there was something there that gave me pause.

“How old are you, Hayes?”

“Twenty.”

“Twenty,” I repeated, and then downed the rest of my champagne. One gulp. Well, at least that was better than nineteen.

“Twenty.” He bit down on his bottom lip and smiled.

Right then would have been a good time to excuse myself. Collect the girls and call it a night. But I could see the expressions on their faces from across the room. Simon was patting Georgia’s hair again, and Liam was showing off his breakdancing moves, and the euphoria was palpable. We’d been there less than an hour. Pulling them now would be cruel.

“You’re thinking about leaving, aren’t you?” Hayes’s voice drew me back in. “Please don’t. I’m going to get you another drink.”

“No, I’m good, thank you.”

“Rubbish. It’s Vegas.” He winked before taking the empty flute from my hand and heading over to the makeshift bar.

There hadn’t been many since Daniel: a series of dates with one of the dads from Isabelle’s fencing team and a two-month dalliance with the TV writer from my spin class. Neither had been consummated. Once they’d threatened to go beyond casual flirtation, I’d closed up. I’d shut down. And while three years of accidental celibacy had been oftentimes miserable, I was not going to jump into bed with a rock star barely half my age because he’d winked at me at an after-party. I was not going to be a cliché.

Before I could fully plot my exit, Hayes returned with another glass of bubbly and a bottle of water for himself. His hair had dried into an enviable

mop of silken curls. There were blogs dedicated to Hayes's hair—this I would learn later—but there in the belly of the Mandalay Bay, I resisted the urge to touch it.

“So, Solène, what is it that you do when you're not attending August Moon concerts?”

“You are amusing, Hayes Campbell.”

“Ha. You know my last name...”

“Yes, because I live with a twelve-year-old girl.”

“But not your ex-husband?”

“Not my ex-husband, no,” I laughed. “I could be your mother, you know.”

“But you're not.”

“But I could be.”

“*But you're not.*” He held my gaze, smiling his half smile.

I felt it then, that little flip-flop in the pit of my stomach that told me that whatever this twenty-year-old was doing, it was working.

“Are you going to give me that glass? Or did you just bring it over here to tease me?”

“To tease you,” he laughed, and took a sip of my champagne before handing it over. “Cheers.”

I stood there, staring at him, not drinking. Enjoying it. “You're bad...”

“Sometimes...”

“Does that work for you?”

He laughed then. “Mostly. Is it not working now?”

I smiled, shaking my head. “Not as well as you think it is.”

“Ow, that hurts.” His eyes darted across the room then, searching. “Oliver!”

Oliver looked up in our direction. He was still being cornered by the guy in the shiny suit and seemed eager to have an out. I watched as he excused himself and made his way over to us.

“Ol, this is Solène.”

“Hi, Solène.” He smiled, charming.

The two of them stood peering down at me, equally tall, equally confident. And for a moment I wished I hadn't worn flats, because even at five foot seven, among these boys I felt small.

“Tell me, Ol, could Solène be my mother?”

Oliver raised an eyebrow, and then took an extended moment to look me over. “Most definitely not.” He turned to face Hayes. “And your mother is a

very beautiful woman..."

"My mother *is* a beautiful woman."

"But she doesn't look like this."

"No, she doesn't." Hayes smiled.

Oliver's eyes were arresting. "What are *you* doing slumming in Vegas?"

I took a sip of champagne then. Game on. "I got roped into attending an August Moon concert. You?"

They were both quiet for a second. Hayes laughed first. "And a brilliant wit, to boot. Ol, you can go."

"You just invited me to the party, mate."

"Well, now you're being uninvited."

"Hayes Campbell. Doesn't play well with others," Oliver said, deadpan.

"I just saved you from the wanker in the bad suit. You owe me."

Oliver shook his head before extending a graceful hand. "Solène, 'twas a pleasure, albeit brief."

Albeit brief? Who were these guys? This rakish quintet. Clearly Isabelle and the other umpteen million girls around the world were on to something.

"Doesn't play well'?" I asked once Oliver had departed.

"I play very well. I just don't share."

I smiled up at him, taken. His face, like art. His mouth, distracting. And that which crossed my mind was not all pure.

"So," he said, "tell me about you."

"What do you want to know?"

"What are you willing to share with me?"

I laughed at that. Hayes Campbell, twenty, and making me sweat. "As little as possible."

He smiled his half smile. "I'm listening..."

"So you are." I took a sip from my glass. "Where to start ... I live in L.A."

"Are you from there?"

"No. The East Coast. Boston. But I've been there for a while now, so ... it's home, I guess. I own an art gallery, with my girlfriend Lulit."

"Girlfriend?" He raised an eyebrow.

"Not that kind of girlfriend."

He smiled, shrugging. "Not that I was judging..."

"Just that you were fantasizing?"

He laughed, loud. "Did we just meet?"

"Do you want to know more or not?"