



Betrayed on the Beach Bus

Summer was a disaster. I'm talking epic failure. And it's all Melody's fault. Which is ironic because she's supposed to be my best friend and this was supposed to be the best summer of our lives.

We both turned twelve in June, which meant we were finally old enough to take the bus to Crescent Moon Bay on our own. Crescent Moon Bay, in case you didn't know, is the most spectacular beach in Malibu.

Melody and I had a gazillion plans, none of which involved her stealing my future boyfriend or me getting stuck taking my four-year-old stepbrothers to the beach, solo. Yet here we are. It's the last day of summer and Kevin's got his arm around Melody. And me? I'm holding hands with Ryan and Reese, the three of us

sticky and smelling like chunky peanut butter and blueberry jam.

The beach bus leaves every hour, so it's simply bad luck that we happen to be on the same one. It's even worse luck that Melody and Kevin got on first and chose the third row, so the boys and I have no choice but to walk past them.

At least they're completely wrapped up in each other. That means they might not notice me, although I am hard to miss. I am an albatross, except not as graceful, weighed down not only by my stepbrothers but also by the largest tote bag in the universe. I'm carrying lunches, towels, sunscreen, and too many toys: soccer balls, baseballs, buckets and shovels, big plastic trucks, and a gigantic stuffed turtle in sunglasses that the boys insisted they could not survive without.

We've only just gotten on and Ryan is already asking if we're almost there.

"The bus isn't even moving yet," I whisper.

"When's it going to go?" asks Reese.

"Once everyone is sitting down." We're about to pass Melody and Kevin. I'm sure they can hear us and I wish Reese would keep his voice down.

"I have a rock in my shoe," Ryan announces.

"The sunglasses are falling off Turtle," Reese says, even louder.

It's like they're trying to humiliate me.

"Can we please keep moving?" I hurry them forward, almost in tears at the injustice of everything. Melody is the one who promised to take Ryan and Reese to the beach in the first place. Of course, that was before I spied her and Kevin kissing in her hot tub last Saturday night.

But I don't want to dwell on that, because as furious and as mortified as I am, deep down I can't help but wish that she were hanging out with us. Things are always easier when Melody is around. She has this sweet and gentle way about her. Plus, Ryan and Reese actually listen to her. My mom says it's because she's not their step-sister and they don't get to see her as often. But I know the truth. My stepbrothers listen to Melody because even though they are only four, they are still boys and all boys like Melody better.

The two of us represent the universal rule of opposites. Melody is a boy magnet. I'm more like boy repellent.

We are almost past the ecstatic couple, practically in the clear, when Ryan spots Melody and shouts her name at the top of his lungs. "*Melo!*"

Melo is our nickname for Melody. It stands for both *mellow* because she is by nature, and also *marshmallow* because she loves them so much. Whenever we make

s'mores in her fire pit, she roasts herself at least three extra marshmallows.

Kevin and Melody look over at us, surprised expressions on their faces.

Ryan drops my hand and climbs onto their seat even though there's hardly any room. Melody inches closer to Kevin to make space, so now their legs are actually touching.

"Hi, guys," says Melody, brightening at the sight of my stepbrothers. She tousles Ryan's hair, smiles at Reese, and does not raise her gaze to acknowledge me.

Kevin ignores me, too, and it hurts. "Hey, little dudes," he says sweetly, as he leans over Melody and offers up his hand. "Who wants to give me five?"

Ryan and Reese fight over who gets to slap Kevin's hand first.

Meanwhile, I sniff back tears, grateful that my eyes are hidden behind gigantic sunglasses, the frames of which are heart shaped and red with sparkles. Yes, my shades are hideous and out of style by several decades but I am wearing them ironically. That's what I intended, anyway. At the moment I have the feeling that they simply look ridiculous. At least they're hiding my watery eyes. I stand up straighter, shove the stuffed turtle farther into my bag, and try to maintain some dignity.

"Can we sit with you, Melody?" Reese asks in his

sweetest, most pleading little voice. There's clearly no room, and when he tries to join them, Ryan shoves him off the seat, wanting Melody all to himself.

My former best friend smiles and tells him gently, "I wish there was more room. I'll sit with you next time. Okay?"

"Promise?" asks Reese.

"I promise," Melody says solemnly, holding up her right hand like the dutiful Girl Scout she used to be.

"Come on, let's go," I say, taking Ryan's elbow and pulling him off their seat.

He looks up at me and asks, "Are you crying?"

"Be quiet!" I hiss, pushing both boys down the aisle. My tremendous bag is knocking into strangers left and right—I hear some grunts, a couple of ouches—but I don't even look back or apologize, I'm in such a hurry.

"I want to sit near Melo," Ryan whines.

"We can't!" I say, feeling like the meanest big sister in the world.

The three of us squish into a seat twelve rows back. We are out of earshot of Kevin and Melody but close enough for me to admire Kevin's perfect head.

He's wearing a faded red baseball cap. He is golden in every sense of the word—his tan, his shaggy hair, his long, lean limbs, and his whole entire aura. I am swooning

and telling myself to stop, but this only makes me swoon harder. Gah!

At least he and Melody aren't all over each other anymore. She's now reading a book. Kevin is staring straight ahead, probably doing something cool like meditating or visualizing himself on a surfboard or planning some romantic date with Melo or silently reciting obscure poetry. Maybe he's doing all of this simultaneously.

I don't know what her problem is. If I were Melody I would not be reading some boring book. I would be paying attention to the perfect specimen of a guy right next to me.

When I notice her yawn I almost lose it. This is so unfair I want to scream! Melody and I agreed that Kevin was mine. We worked it out months ago because Melody does not like Kevin as much as I do. She can't! And even if she did, I saw him first. Plus, how much luck and happiness does one girl deserve? Melody already has everything: perfect parents who are still married and actually get along and a ginormous house with her own hot tub and pool with a slide.

Oh, and let's not forget her looks. Melody is gorgeous. She's got curly blond hair that's silky smooth, with no hint of frizz. Her eyes are blue green like the Caribbean Sea, not that I have ever been to the Caribbean to know this. My knowledge comes from Ryan and Reese's jumbo box of crayons.

Melody knows the Caribbean because she goes on vacation with her grandmother there every single year. She's been everywhere: Turks and Caicos, Saint John's, Saint Thomas, Saint Bart's, and Barbados.

Wait. Is Barbados a part of the Caribbean? I suspect not, but I don't know for sure. Of course, it doesn't matter if I know or not. It's not like I'll ever get there.

The only place I travel to is Seattle because that's where my dad moved after my parents got divorced four years ago.

Let me tell you about Seattle: the mountains are green and spectacular looking, but it's impossible to enjoy them because it's always cold and gloomy and raining. Also, my dad is married to a taxidermist. So, yeah, my stepmom stuffs dead animals—for a living. She takes her work home with her, too. Their house is filled with all sorts of creatures, from tiny white mice to tremendous moose, and everything in between.

And did I mention I'm a vegetarian?

I'm a vegetarian, so being surrounded by dead animals—most of them hunted for sport and then stuffed for bragging rights—does not exactly sit well with me. That's why I don't visit very often. Only on the court-mandated every other Christmas, Thanksgiving, and Spring Break.

I spend most of my time in Braymar in a tiny, loud, supercrowded house with my mom and her new husband,

Jeff, and his kids, Ryan and Reese. The three of them moved in with us last year.

Jeff is a nice guy and I love his kids, too. It's the story of Jeff and my mom that gets to me. They were each other's first crushes and went out together for all of sixth grade until Jeff and his family moved to England. That means their love for each other at eleven was so pure and true that it lasted for years, through the trials and tribulations of life and moves to different continents, and marriage and kids with other people, until they finally got their happy ending.

That's what everyone always says. People love their story. And it's fine and wonderful and romantic for them, but it sure puts a gazillion tons of pressure on me. Because guess what? I am already twelve and I've never even had a boyfriend. Ever.

I've had plenty of crushes but as far as I know, none of those crushes have been returned. It's completely one-sided. I'm one hundred percent uncrushable. I promised myself that would change this summer. Things were supposed to come together for me after I graduated from sixth grade back in June. Summer stretched before me and I was finally ready to live life like a regular kid—break curfew, sneak out of the house, go to raging parties, and meet cute boys. Except none of that actually happened and middle school starts tomorrow. I failed. Big time. And now it's too late.

I will never have a sixth-grade boyfriend to break up with and then reunite with years later. I'll probably spend all of middle school alone. I won't even bother going to the dances. Why even show up when I'll have to stand around by myself? No one will ask me to dance, except maybe one of the chaperones out of pity. I'll become known as the loner sad sack and my rotten reputation will carry on into high school.

I will not go to homecoming.

I will not go to prom.

I will grow old and shriveled solo—bitter about my youth.

I might as well give up now and tell my mom I want to be homeschooled. Not that my mother even has time to homeschool me. She's too busy with work and with helping the twins adjust to our "blended family." But why am I complaining about that? It's not like I even want to spend more time with my mom at the moment.

I am so distraught I am not making sense, but at least we're almost at the beach. I've taken this route a million times and I know every turn on this winding, canyon road.

When Melody and I were in second grade, our moms took us to Crescent Moon Bay nearly every day of the summer. Back then, life was good and simple and fun. Melody and I were besties and we cared more about boogie boarding than boys.

The two of us always played the wishing game when we got to the Crescent Moon Tunnel, which marks the halfway point between our town and the beach. The tunnel is long and dark and dramatic, carved out of a gigantic mountain in the middle of the road. As soon as you clear it, you can see the ocean.

Transitioning from sleepy suburban town to spectacular Malibu beach within less than a minute is magical enough for me, but Melody always swore our wishes would come true if we followed the rules. “Hold your breath and keep your eyes shut tight and wish with all of your might,” she’d remind me.

Back then I believed her and tried every single time.

That first summer, I kept wishing my parents would stop screaming at each other. Instead they got divorced. The second summer I wished for a pony for Christmas. When December rolled around, I got knitting lessons. Yes, knitting lessons. My mom thought they’d be a fun bonding experience for the two of us. She even phrased it like that: *We’ll learn together and it’ll be a fun bonding experience.* As if she were reading some self-help book on how to relate to your preteen daughter, one that was written a hundred years ago.

Long story short: the only thing we bonded over was how truly terrible the knitting lessons were.

I stopped making wishes after that, but today I close

my eyes. This is Labor Day, the last official day of summer. Tomorrow, I start seventh grade. Middle school! This is probably the last time I'll ever take the beach bus, and what have I got to lose?

I have no boyfriend and no best friend and no prospects for either.

I am squished between my stepbrothers.

Ryan is picking his nose but I don't have the energy to fight him on it. Reese is kicking the seat of the lady in front of us and I can tell that she is about to turn around and yell and then I'll have to deal with that, too. But at the moment, I am free.

I'm still wearing my sunglasses, so no one will ever guess what I'm doing. Plus, I know what I want. It comes to me fast, as if the idea were hardwired into my brain. And who am I kidding—it so totally is. My heart's desire is sad and silly, but painfully true.

I wish I could start this summer over, as Melody. I mumble the words under my breath because wishes only work if you say them out loud.

I hear Ryan ask "What?" and I see, out of the corner of my eye, that Reese is staring up at me with curiosity.

I ignore the boys, take a gulp of air, and hold my breath.

The bus races forward.

Even with my eyes squeezed tight I can tell we're in

the tunnel because everything is cool and dark. I feel the hairs on my arms stand up. Goose bumps form on my flesh and I shiver. I shut my eyes tighter and I wish with every fiber of my being that I were Melody.

Suddenly, strangely, I feel a strong tingling sensation, like I have pins and needles in my whole entire body. Then something shifts inside of me. At first, I think it's my soul. But that can't be. Souls do not shift and anyway, mine has been crushed.

Maybe I'm about to lose that egg-and-cheese sandwich I wolfed down before we got to the bus. I've never been carsick before, but it would be just my luck and totally fitting for me to barf on the beach bus in front of Kevin.

True, we are sitting behind Kevin, but surely the smell would waft up. He'd probably turn around before I had a chance to wipe my face and—ugh—I can picture his look of horror.

Except then the shifting tingling sensation fades into oblivion. Now everything is back to normal, my stomach included.

The sun shines in through the windows, warming my limbs. We are out of the tunnel and I feel fine.

I open my eyes and see blue. This calms me. Life is pretty sucky—yes, Melody may have betrayed me and I officially have no chance with Kevin—but I'll always have

Crescent Moon Bay. I can already hear the waves crashing on the beach, smell the salty fresh air.

Then I realize something strange. I'm no longer sitting in the back of the bus. I'm more toward the middle. Also? Ryan and Reese have disappeared. Where'd they go? Did I lose my stepbrothers? If I lost my stepbrothers, I'll be so busted.

I look but don't see them anywhere. I'm not alone, though. Someone else is next to me, and she's about my size.

I squint and then gasp because I'm staring in the mirror. Except that's impossible. There is no mirror on this seat.

Still, I am looking at a replica of myself and it's not two-dimensional. I am looking at myself in the flesh because I am out of my own body.

"What's going on?" I ask myself. I mean the "me" who looks like me—the me, as in Katie, with the same long dark hair and green eyes and pale, freckly thighs sticking out of my cutoff shorts. The same shorts that I wore on the first day of summer and lost that very same day. My favorite shorts that I figured I'd never see again.

Now they turn up? Cool!

Except wait. How could I be wearing them at this moment, when they're not what I put on this morning?

And how could I not be myself?

Unless . . .

No, wishes don't come true. Especially not mine.

Yet this whole situation seems eerily similar to my real first day of summer.

"Katie, is that you?" the girl who looks like me asks. Her voice sounds exactly like my voice. The voice is mine and it's actually coming out of a mouth that is mine except it's not because I am not myself. I am no longer Katie.

I run my hands through my long and wild blond curls. I look down at the white cotton cardigan draped over the pink-and-white polka-dot sundress that flounces at the bottom. It's the outfit Melody wore on the first day of summer, the dress that only she can pull off.

And that's when I realize this insanely crazy impossible thing: my wish came true.

I am starting the summer over.

We are back to day one.

Except this time I'm Melody.