

Burn's World

A Love Triangle (A new adult and contemporary romance novel)
(Part 1)

By

Eve Rabi

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Smashwords Edition

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*This book is dedicated to all the Burns of the world, who were made to feel like they didn't belong.*

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## Chapter One

My name is Burn and I've never been a size eight.

I'm almost seventeen, I like ~~cigarettes~~, Rocky Road ice cream, Friday afternoons, ~~vodka and orange juice~~, my iPhone and I crave heartache, heartbreak, love sickness and all the stuff that goes with falling in love and being in love, because... it's so goddamn romantic!

Bella and Edward – now that's the love I dream of. Simply can't wait for the day I get to experience *that* kind of love and all that comes with it.

I suck at math, I diet every single Monday morning to Wednesday lunch time, I spend most Saturday nights dateless and catching up with laundry or shaving my legs just in case I get asked out, and, I don't like Beyoncé.

Why? Because she is so beautiful and perfect and I'm not. Am I jealous of her?

Duh!

She's friggin' perfect. I mean, ever seen her drunk like a skunk, or should I say, drunk like Mariah at an awards evening? Nooo.

Ever heard of her having a public war of words with Kelly Osborne like Christina did?

Of course not!

Ever seen her showing her vijajay like Brittany Bitch? No.

Ever seen her steal someone's husband like Angelina did? Hell no.

'Great' is the word. I mean, she's a great singer, she looks great, she has a great husband, she has great parents, she has a great sister, she's got great friends, she has a great career, she's got a great clothing line, she's got a great ass and she's got great self-esteem. How do I know that she has great self-esteem?

'Cause she lets Jay-Z work with Rihanna and Alicia Keys. Puhleese! If Jay-Z was my husband, I'd only allow him to work with Joan Collins, Betty White and Ellen Degeneres. Maybe Rosie O' Donnell as well.

But wait, there's more – she has an adorable baby girl called Blue Ivy Carter.

Carter? Like President Carter? Trust her to pick a husband with the surname of a president.

And, unlike Posh, she got her baby girl with her first try!

She's not real, I tell you. I think she's the second most amazing Disney cartoon ever created. (The first is Joan Rivers and the third is Nene.)

Anyho, nuff about me and my jealous rants about Ms. Beyoncé Knowles Perfect Carter. Allow me to introduce you to the many facets of my average, if not boring life.

First there's my fucked up school. (I believe that school is only there because juvenile halls are overcrowded.)

Sorry, I digress. Walk with me and you'll see what I mean.

Keep up now!

\*\*\*\*\*

"So Fung Chin, how often do you shave?" Bud McGraw asks.

Fung Chin is our Chinese exchange student and Bud only talks to him when he wants to make fun of him, so all our ears are pricked knowing that a joke is on its way.

"Eh," Fung Chin looks to the left of the ceiling, drums on his desk with his fingers, looks to the right of the ceiling and says, "Maybe, I shave three day...?" He nods several times. "Three day, yes! I shave three day."

"Reeeally? Every three days, Fungus?" Bud nods almost pleasantly. "And your face?"

Laughter all around the classroom.

Embarrassment and confusion flits across Fung Chin's face.

Satisfied that he was able to entertain our class at Fung Chin's expense, Bud McGraw zeros in on Harjoon Singh. "Hey Apoo!"

Harjoon visibly tenses as all eyes rest on him.

I spin around in my chair to glare at Bud. "Leave them alone, dickhead."

His blue eyes widen. "Why Burnt, that's really offensive language you're using, Burnt."

"It's Burn, you moron."

"Fuck me! I got your name wrong?" Bud lifts up his finger. "Question everyone ...?"

The class falls silent and brace themselves for Bud's next joke.

"Why is Burn's skin so brown? Answer: Because when Burn was born, they put her into a microwave instead of an incubator!"

The room shakes with laughter.

"Very funny," I say. "Where's your white hoodie, KKK asswipe?"

He high-fives his cousins, Nick McGraw and Bobby Rivers seated next to him.

"You guys need to grow up," I mutter.

"Okay, whatever you say, Banjo Lips!"

Screams of laughter all around as everyone cranes their neck to look at my lips.

I give him the finger.

Nick McGraw and Bobby Rivers aren't offensive with their jokes; they're funny and even entertaining. But they laugh at Bud's offensive jokes, which make me mad at them.

Bud is probably the cutest guy in school. Tall, blue-eyed and ripped. Pity he's such an asshole. It masks his good looks. His cousins Nick and Bobby are also eye-candy and girls go gaga over them.

We are interrupted by the arrival of our substitute teacher.

"Settle down now," he drones. "You can call me Ardie, or you can call me Mr Burbak, if you like." He smiles as he links and unlinks his fingers. "I'm not fussy and I, more than anyone else, would like to ensure a pleasant, but relaxed classroom environment."

He's fiftyish, stocky, lots of salt and pepper, curly hair. He wears a hound's-tooth jacket with leather patch elbows, which I'm guessing, fell out of Noah's ark. His pants are equally outdated – beige corduroy and high-waisted.

He has sideburns — like that Elvis dude my Aunt Carlene likes.

"I'm Armenian," Mr Burbak explains. "Like Kim Kardashian. "Though, I might add, we Armenians generally stay married for a lot longer," he chuckles.

"Now, starting from the back, I would like you to tell me your names." He points at Nick McGraw.

"Coombs," Nick says without hesitation. "Sean Coombs. My friends call me 'Diddy'."

"Nice to meet you, Mr Coombs."

We all start to giggle.

Mr Burbak looks at Bud-the-jerk McGraw.

"Tatum, Channing, Sir," Bud says with a straight face.

Mr Burbak nods and looks at Kate Spelling, who is Nick McGraw's blue-eyed, blonde-haired girlfriend.

"Nicky Minaj," Kate says.

By now we're all fighting to contain our laughter.

Celebrity names fly around us. "Kelly Rowland."

"T-Pain."

"Carey, Mariah."

"Hemsworth, Liam."

"Pattinson, Robert."

“Poo, Nannie.”

“You guys have some pretty unusual and somewhat original names,” Mr Burbak says, as his eyes move to me.

Although I’m tempted to say Fergilicious, I feel bad for Mr Burbak, so I say my real name, “Burn, Burn Ballantyne.”

Mr Burbak peers at me. “Come now, young lady. That can’t be your real name.” With a smile, he wags his index finger at me. “Good one though. Now, let’s have your *real* name.”

Okay, he asked for it. “Ritchie, Nicole,” I say.

“That’s better,” Mr Burbak says. “Moving on . . .”

What can I say? (I warned you about the juvenile halls being overcrowded.)

Welcome to Emhart County High in the good ol’ US of A.

When the bell goes, there is a stampede out of the classroom.

Kate Spelling (who has the confidence of Paris Hilton) and her friends saunter up to me. “Burn,” Kate purrs, as she plays with her silken hair, “I just want you to know that we thought it was highly inappropriate for Bud to call you . . .” She puts a hand to her mouth to suppress a chuckle, “Ban . . . Banjo Lips.”

Her friends fall around laughing.

“Kate, why don’t you and your skank-ass friends here go fuck yourselves?” I say as I push past them.

“Banjo Lips!” one of them coughs. Another burst of laughter follows.

As I walk, I catch sight of my reflection in a window. The word that comes to mind when describing my almost-seventeen-year-old self . . . average.

Slightly rounded figure, average boobs, caramel-colored skin, hazel eyes, full lips, long spiral curls that have a tendency to halo my face. No banjo lips.

I’m wearing black, skinny jeans, a hooded black and white Tee, black ankle boots which are scuffed around the sides and hooped silver earrings. I do love fashion but I’m not obsessed with it.

I’m not fugly enough to win an extreme makeover, I don’t turn heads when I enter a room and I probably won’t win *America’s Next Top Model* anytime soon. When I need to, I can clean up pretty good though.

“Yo, yo, yo, yo, Nigga!” Harjoon Singh says as he swaggers up to me. “One of these days I’m gonna bust a cap in that nigga’s ass!” He holds up his thumb and forefinger and points in Bud’s direction.

I roll my eyes at Harjoon’s words. He’s half Bud’s height, wears a ton of wet-look hair gel, some of which has seeped down his face and has added to his already glistening forehead. So, Bud, ever so quick on the draw says, “Hey look, you’ve got cum on your face.”

Harjoon wears a beige and red hoodie, a pair of colorful, long shorts and you can bet there is a comb in one of his pockets ’cause he’s always combing his hair.

“Yep, he’s an a-hole alright,” I say.

“Us niggas must stick togetha,” Harjoon says and knocks his chest with the side of his fist.

Time to jog his memory. “Harjoon, *I’m* black, you’re Hindu.”

“Sikh!” he corrects, his index finger stabbing at the air in front of him. “Sikh! Don’t ever confuse me with Hindus! There is a big difference. Big difference between Hindus and Sikhs. Big difference.”

“Okaaaay! Calm the fuck down, man.” Everybody calls him a Hindu. When they’re not calling him Apoo.

“And . . .” He drops his voice and flashes me his version of a sexy smile, “it’s HarLo, baby. Don’t forget that.” He wriggles his eyebrows at me.

“Got it, Har. . . Lo.”

Jennifer and her JLo. Look what she’s done.

Fung Chin runs up to us holding two blue iced cupcakes. Fung Chin has really embraced our culture and his English is improving rapidly.

Even his dress has changed since he's been in the US. Gone are the colorful Kimono-styled shirts and Chinese straw hats you seen on people in ...I dunno – rice fields? Maybe it has something to do with Bud calling him 'Crouching Meerkat, Hidden Dragonfly.'

Today he wears blue shorts, a T-Shirt with Justin Beiber on it and a Justin Beiber bandana on his head. His purple, black and white Reeboks are current with their bright orange laces. Cheerful much.

I do believe Harjoon took him shopping for some spiffy threads. Spiffy? Strike that.

Fung's taste in music is varied – he's also a huge fan of Kanye West, sings his songs and got his swagger, so we lovingly call him Kanye East. (Lovingly, I said.)

"Nigga, what the hell took you so long?" Harjoon asks, snatching a cupcake out of Fung Chin's hands.

Fung explains: "Nigga, I go coffeeteria to buy cupcake, fucking. Queue very long, fucking. Coffeeteria lady with fat arms say no change for fitty dollar, fucking. I ask everyone for change for fitty dollar, fucking. I get change, fucking. I go back to coffeeteria, I buy cupcake, fucking."

Good ol' Fung Chin. As I said, his English is improving. Progress may be slow, but we're getting there. Now, if only we can get him to wear his backpack on just one shoulder.

Harjoon, as can be expected, is borderline brilliant and he does my math homework for me. In return, a couple of times a month, I'm to wear hooker-red lipstick, totter out of the school grounds with him to a car full of his cousins, touch his face and say, "Are you gonna call me, HarLo?"

See, one of his cousins is Sunita, a sourpuss with a nose ring, who he has a major crush on. So, I'm to make her jealous and get her to run into Harjoon's arms. So far it hasn't worked – Sunita won't even look at him. But Harjoon's sole ambition in life is to mate with Sunita, so I persist.

He's sweet and a genuine guy when he's not trying to be hood. Harjoon, that is. Eh, sorry, make that *HarLo*. But as you can see, he provides ample fodder for jokes and Bud-the-moron zeros in on that.

Bud and his crew pick on *everyone*. Live for it, actually. They're anti blacks, anti-Jews, anti-Mexican, anti-Indian, anti-French, anti-Italian, anti-Persian, anti-teachers, anti-students, anti-everyone, I think. They have their own clique of blues and greens. Eyes, that is.

Our school is divided like that – scoffing whites on the one side, angry blacks on the other and then there's the Mixicans who are all over the place.

I'm a 'Mixican' which means I'm mixed. White mother, black father. Like Halle Berry and Mariah Carey, without the gazillion dollars and the adoring fans. I'm not white enough to belong to the Scoffing Whites and not black enough to belong to the Angry Blacks. So, I do what most mixed-race kids do, seek out other Mixicans.

Similar to prison, but with fewer tattoos.

Anyway, Nick McGraw's father is Robert McGraw – an outspoken, but well-known politician.

Rumor has it that his great-granddaddy was a Ku Klux Klan founder. You'll recognize his father's convertible – it has a 'Honk if you're KKK' bumper sticker on it. Okay, so I exaggerate – he doesn't have one at the moment, but if he did, it would be along those lines.

Nick's not as obnoxious as Bud and on his own, he can be okay. But, put them together and you have mayhem.

Nick is tall, blue-eyed with sandy-blond hair. He plays football and is dating Kate Spelling, who we met earlier. The sweetest looking bitch you'll ever find. But a purebred bitch, make no mistake about that.

Kate is a Facebook addict. She's a serial poster of pictures that show her having a blast. Every little thing that she does is Facebooked. Her aim is for us all to look at her life and envy the fuck out of her. Sometimes, we do.

She adds *everyone* on Facebook. Friends of friends – she just randomly collects ‘friends’ and ‘likes’ like seashells. Guess it’s not too hard to collect likes and friends when you post pics of yourself with your tits hanging out.

We suspect that Guinness Book of Records is probably going to show up at our school one of these days and declare her *The Facebooker with the Most Number of Friends in the World*. If they give her a sash, Kate would wear it every day, I’m sure. Even on Sundays.

Back to Bud and his crew – they may be offensive smart-mouths, but I gotta admit, they keep us entertained, and isn’t that what every student wants – to be entertained while at school?

Again, welcome to Emhart County High.

## Chapter Two

I visit my school library during my lunch time and Google, *why am I hearing voices in my head?*  
My screen fills up with *Schizophrenia, Schizophrenia explained and Managing Schizophrenia.*

“Assignment or lyrics to a song?”

I glance behind me at the owner of the voice. It’s *nosey* Miss Assinburger, one of the librarians. (I kid you not; that is her surname. Contrary to what you may think, she wasn’t named by Bud McGraw.) She cranes her neck to look over my shoulder.

“Eh, lyrics,” I lie.

“Ah.”

*The rubbish these youngsters listen to these days! No wonder they’re so stupid.*

That’s her thoughts, not mine. See, that’s why I’m here right now. I can hear people’s thoughts. Randomly. As you can imagine, it’s freaking me out like crazy.

“I love that song,” she says.

I turn around to look at her. “Which song, Miss ...?” Forget it – I ain’t saying her name unless it’s a matter of life and death.

“The one with the... you know – schizophreniaaaaa.”

“Ah... yeah, yeah, me too.” There’s no fucking song on schizophrenia or schizophreniaaaa.

With a smile, she backs away.

After scanning a few pages in front of me, I realize I don’t have schizophrenia. I click out of the screen and leave the library, still disturbed over the voices in my head. I have to work out who they belong to. That can be annoying, disruptive and depressing at times.

*JLO. Nah, Katy Perry. Nah, JLO. Nah, Matt’s mom – that’s who I’ll jerk off to. Yeah, Matt’s mom. She’s hot. A MILF. But hang on, what about Matt’s gran? She’s a GILF. Yeeeahhh!*

See what I mean? That kind of voices, those American Pie thoughts – random shit - drives me mental.

Recently, it made me look like a nut job. Allow me to explain.

Angel and I were walking along the street when this dude, fortyish, potbelly, tattered windbreaker and dirty-blonde hair under a striped beanie, looked leeringly at us. *Man, I would love to do both of you at the same time.*

Say what you like to me, do what you want to me, but do not, under any circumstance, interfere with Angel, my eight-year-old sister.

“You dirty old man!” I yelled. “Fucking pedophile!”

He looked at me, panic in his eyes, eyebrows high up into his beanie. “What the ...?” Then realizing he hadn’t actually *uttered* those words, his eyebrows slowly dropped. “I ain’t never said nothin’...”

“Dirty fucking ...”

“Bitch, you got Tourette or something?”

I glared at him. “Just fuck off, okay?!”

His eyes darted around nervously, before he hurried away with his head bowed.

Angel touched my arm, her eyes the size of saucers. *Burn, he never said anything, so ...?*

I looked at her, confused. She wasn’t talking, but I could hear her thoughts and she was right – he hadn’t uttered the words.

I put my fingers to my temples. What is going on with me, I wondered? Am I going mental? Maybe I need more sleep.

*Burn, you’re angry all the time.*



I looked at Angel and attempted a smile. “I just need sleep, then I won’t be so ...so *snappy*,” I said, in what I hoped was a reassuring voice.

Anyway, the next time I encountered my gift was in math class. Mr Soames asked me for an answer to a math question. Okay, I was in trouble for various reasons. In no particular order:

I hated math like I hated a cold sore on my lip and I barely managed to pass it.

I wasn’t paying attention; I was thinking about Rocky Road ice cream with cream and nuts sprinkled on top. Or maybe chocolate sprinkles. Or maybe chocolate sauce. Or maybe all of the above at the same time. Yum!

As usual, I had no clue what the answer was.

I was in hot water with Mr Soames already, as I had skipped two math classes and faced a week of detention.

Come to think of it, that was the *exact* order of reasons.

“Burn?”

I stared at Mr Soames.

52. 52. 52. 52.

“Five fifty two?”

He frowned. “*Five* fifty...”

52. 52. 52. 52.

No wait, hang on, I thought. Concentrate. “F... fifty-two?” I finally said in an unsure voice.

His frown disappeared. “That a question or an answer, Burn?”

Answer.

“Um ... an ... swer.”

“Very good, Burn,” Mr Soames said, sounding impressed, but looking perplexed.

I mean, me giving a correct answer in math? It was as often as Christmas.

Whew!

Okay, maybe it was pure coincidence that I could read his mind, I thought. That, and the pedophile incident. An *unusual* coincidence. Had to be. I mean it’s 2011 – who reads minds in this day and age?

The next day I stood in line at the supermarket eating rocky-road ice cream and waiting to pay for bread and milk. An old woman around seventy stood in front of me. I watched her hand the teller a fifty dollar note. The teller, a bubbly woman around forty, with curly blonde hair and bright orange lipstick, smiled and said, “Here’s your change – thirty-nine dollars and fifteen cents. Have a lovely day.” So charming, so sweet. Not.

*Five dollars short, but I’ll distract you with my dazzling smile and by the time you discover it, it will be too late.*

“Excuse me!” I heard myself say.

The old lady looked up at me, change still in hand. *Oh no! I’m being robbed again! Damn teenagers – nothing but trouble! Lock them all up, I say.* “Yes dear?” she asked in a taste-like-sugar-but-it-isn’t-sugar voice.

“Eh, ma’am...” Did this old bat just think that I was gonna rob her? What a bitch. “Eh, you should check your change.”

“What?” The old bat looked at the money in her hands, then at me again.

From the corner of my eye, I noticed the teller stiffen and glare at me. *You shut your mouth, you little nincompoop! You little ...*

“Always a good idea, ma’am,” I said to the grey-haired bat. “Just be cautious, that’s all.”

She frowned, then examined her change. *Oh well, maybe she’s not a robber after all. Let me check*

...

Please let the change be wrong or I will look like a fucking nut job, I prayed.

The old lady looked at me, surprise all over her face. *Well, what do you know – a teenager who can both count and pay attention? Will wonders never cease?* “Young lady, you are right.” *Bet she’ll want a frigging reward now.*

“Five dollars short?”

She nodded. *“Five dollars short, yes.”*

I exhaled.

With glee, I watched the teller mutter apologies as she opened her cash register and righted her wrong. *Five dollars. Five dollars, that’s all it is! Here, take your stupid five dollars.*

When it was my turn to pay, after serving me, the teller smiled (the kind an executioner would give you just before he threw the switch or kicked the chair from under you) and pointed to the sign above the entrance to the supermarket—the one that said that they have a right to search all bags larger than a purse.

*I’ll teach you to butt into other people’s business, you black shithead.*

She thoroughly inspected my school bag and then, unable to nab me for anything, slapped my change on the counter and looked at me with orange lips pressed together. *Now get the hell out of here. Go on, scoot!*

I whistled as I walked out the store – she had no idea that I hadn’t paid for the rocky road ice cream.

But I was experiencing mixed feelings – I was freaking out and at the same time, I was experiencing a deep thrill.

As I sat at the bus stop, I tried to put things in perspective. That’s three experiences only. All could be coincidental. What would it take to convince me?

My answer: One more. One more experience would convince me that I could hear people’s thoughts.

I listened out, braced myself for that all-important experience. Nothing. Not one single voice, not a single thought. Zilch! Imagine that?

After a week of nothing, I was convinced that the weed I had smoked two weeks ago had fucked up my grey matter. Don’t know what shit they put into it, but man, did I have to stop.

So, that’s why I’m at the library, on the internet to see if there is something wrong with me. The last thing I need right now is to be sent to some nut house because I have multiple personalities or something.

My research tell me that I’m not schizo.

I should be happy that I’m not, but, what if it’s something more sinister?

### Chapter Three

I wake up with a start. It's the middle of the night and there's a man in my bedroom. I blink rapidly. No, I'm not dreaming – a man I've never seen before is in my room. Shit!

Slowly, my eyes snake over to Angel. She's still asleep next to me. *Okay, keep calm, keep calm, pretend you're still asleep and you can jump this motherfucker.* I force my breath to slow down.

Suddenly, I jump up, grab the baseball bat next to my bed and swing wildly. Piñata first, questions later.

Wham! Rib cage first. He doubles up in pain.

Bam! I whack him on the head. He goes down like a bean bag.

I stand, legs apart, bat above my shoulder, breathing rapidly, ready to swing again. This time, I'm going for gold - right for his nuts.

With my eyes trained on him, I reach for my iPhone to call 911. Damn phone is password protected. I key in my password and just as I'm about to dial the cops, the dude slowly rises to his feet.

You gotta be kidding! Those blows should have at least cracked a couple of ribs and bruised his pancreas, whatever that is and wherever that is. Damn! I should have went for the nuts first.

He smiles at me like he's from one of those silvery, slippery characters from a Schwarzenegger movie or something.

Time to wipe that smile off his mug. Round two. I raise my bat again.

Wait!" he says.

"Get the fuck out of my room, asshole! Now!"

"Relax, Burn, relax."

Okay, so he knows my name. Ninety percent of women are raped by someone they know. Shit!

"Put down the bat, Burn. You can't hurt me."

In my most intimidating voice, I say, "Wanna bet, *bitch?*"

He rolls his eyes then gives a long sigh. "Seriously," he mutters, "the people they give the gift to these days ..."

"What do you want?"

"I don't want anything. You need to put the bat down and ..."

"Like I will. It's the middle of the night and you're in my room. I don't know you, motherfucker." He'd better not rush me 'cause if he does, I'm in trouble.

"Relax. I'm not gonna rush you."

I never said that out loud. How did he know what I was thinking?

"I can hear your thoughts, Burn," he says. "Like you hear other people's thoughts."

I blink rapidly and shake my head. This is all so weird. How the hell...?

"Yes, it is weird but it's true, and your sister, even if she wakes up, she won't see me. So you can relax."

My eyes sweep over him in the dimly lit room. He's fortyish, with dark wavy hair and bright, grey eyes. He wears a light blue Tee and jeans. Not a bad looking dude.

"Thank you," he says.

Okay, he's doing it again - reading my mind.

"I come in peace."

"You come in peace? What are you – a fucking Red-Indian? You don't look it, white boy."

He smiles and takes a step towards me. "You're a funny one. Let's talk about your gift."

"Gift? What the fuck you talking 'bout?" I lower my bat an inch. I mean, if he's going to give me a present, that will change things.

"You have a gift, Burn – you hear people's thoughts and ..."

That's a gift? I raise my bat again.

"...that's a gift."

"You come to talk to me about a 'gift' in the middle of the night? You on drugs or something?"

"Drugs ... mmm." He strokes his chin and appears thoughtful. "Talking about drugs, Burn – you did marijuana the other night with your friends."

Who uses the word *marijuana* these days? Except the cops when they appear on TV bragging about how they busted a crop grower.

"You a cop?"

"What?"

"You wearing a wire? Do I need to watch my words?"

"No, Burn, I'm not a cop and no, I am not wearing ...why would I use a wire?"

I shrug. "Look, most teenagers do it. It wasn't like I was packaging it and selling the shit. I just smoke to chill. Big deal. I have stresses, I have issues. I'm seventeen – well, almost, and I live in *this* house. Take a look around you, man. You blame me?"

He shakes his head from side-to-side. "Not when you have a gift, Burn. You can't do that."

"Man, you keep talking about a *gift*. My birthday was in ..."

"Burn, listen to me - you hear people's thoughts, you hear their whispers. That is a gift. It is something sacred."

"That's a *gift*? You call that a *gift*? My head buzzes randomly like static with people's thoughts - crazy stuff at times and you call that a *gift*?"

He nods.

I roll my eyes. "I don't understand –who sent you? ET?"

He smiles. "No. Burn, you are supposed to use your gift for good. Now when you disrespect it - smoke cannabis, smoke cigarettes and consume alcohol, you are compromising the gift. That cannot happen."

"But I'm a kid. Kids do stuff like that."

"You're almost seventeen, Burn. Not a kid anymore."

"Mff. Look, I appreciate all this gift and all, but I really don't want it. Take it back and ..."

"You don't have a choice."

"But ... but ... but, I should have a choice. All kids should have a choice."

He falls silent. I sit on the bed, a bit spooked with this midnight visitor asking me to live life like a monk, eh, nun.

I fold my arms and squint at him. "How do you know all this stuff about me?"

He shrugs. "I just know. I know a lot."

"Oh yeah? Tell me 'bout it. About me?"

"Well," he scratches his nose, "I know that your parents died in a car crash, and that you and your younger sister live with your aunt ..."

"Huh huh, huh huh ..."

"I know you have anger issues ..."

"WHAAAT?!" I glare at him.

He shrinks back, his eyes wide.

"Kidding."

He gives a small smile. "Black father, white mother..."

"Huh huh ..."

"... and I know that since you were little, you've heard people's thoughts and at times you were scared."

I fall silent and bite my lower lip.

"I'll be shadowing you to help you out."

"Shadowing me? I don't ..."

“A gift is given to someone with a pure heart, Burn. In this world of obstacles, you may need a mentor, a guide at times. That’s what I’ll be to you.”

I cock my head and look at him. “Are you like, dead?”

“I am ... I am in a different realm.”

It’s 3:30 AM and he’s using words like ‘realm’?

“Allow me to explain: you and I can see each other, but others, they can’t hear or see me and I’m not alive, but I’m not dead either.”

“Oh greeeeat. I have an imaginary friend.”

He gives several small shrugs. “You could look at it that way.”

“Awesome. Problem is, you’re supposed to lose the imaginary friends when you reach double digits, right?”

“Look, Burn, whenever you need me, I will be there.” Sounds like the words to a Celine Dion song.

“Yeah? So, like what - you gonna give me an Ouija board so I can locate you?”

He shakes his head.

“A walkie-talkie? A flare gun?”

He rolls his eyes. “Whenever you need help, just call and I will be there.”

I crane my neck to look out the window. “You got a magic carpet, a Batmobile ...?”

He shakes his head. “I have to go now and you have to continue sleeping, so be good and call me, okay?”

“Can I tell my friends about my *awesome* gift? You know, the one that doesn’t allow you to be a youngster, a kid anymore?”

“No. Nobody is to know until you turn twenty-one.”

“Why?”

“It’s the way it is. Protects you – prevents people who know about your gift from exploiting you.”

“Aww! That sucks. I would love to tell my friends about it. They’d think I was sooo cool.”

“This gift is not about being cool. Now, I have to be go ...”

“Wait! I’m kinda confused about ...”

“Look, don’t worry about things,” he says in a reassuring voice. “One step at a time. No need for information overload.”

“Oh, okay, imaginary friend.”

“Call me Hawk.”

“Cause you fly?”

“Because, that is what my parents named me. With a smile, he vanishes.

Hey, maybe I can win at poker? Gambling? Lottery? I mean how cool is this gift? Wow! I’m gonna be so freakin’ rich I’m gonna buy Angel and me everything – all the shit I never had. I’m gonna even buy me a ...a cloud. Because I can.

Wonder if he left a PDF or an instruction manual for this gift?

I can’t wait for tomorrow when I can use my gift to make us some real money. I fall asleep with a smile on my face.

When I wake up the next morning, there is no sign that I had a visitor during the night. I look to the side. My baseball bat is in its usual place. It was all a dream.

I turn to face the wall and draw the sheet up to my chin. Ah well, maybe I have to forget about winning at poker, but at least I can drink and smoke without worrying about compromising shit.

## Chapter Four

I wake up to yelling.

“Where the fucks my bandage skirt?”

“I didn’t take your bandage skirt, bitch!”

“Well, it’s missing and that means someone has borrowed it and ...”

That’s my two adorable cousins, Lanie and Daisy.

“... if you didn’t take it, then where the fuck is it?”

“How the fuck must I know? I got my own, bitch.”

“Why don’t you girls shut the fuck up?” That’s my adorable aunt Carlene, mother of Lanie and Daisy. She had her first child when she was just sixteen and her second when she was seventeen.

Welcome to my crib. Stay close and watch. As they say in Springer: “It gets reeeeeeeal innertaining.”

“It’s too early for all this shit!” Aunt Carlene says.

I look at my iPhone – 11 AM. That means she’s hungover.

Carlene’s my late mother’s younger sister who took Angel and me in when my parents died, because she had a big heart.

Strike that – it has nothing to do with the size of her ticker. It was solely due to the fact that she’d receive two thousand dollars every month from the trust fund my parents set up for Angel and me.

Angel and I see not a cent of that money. Not even pocket-money, so I have a part time job. (I never complain, as I dare not risk Angel and I being separated.)

Carlene is always on the Posh Spice diet – all the water you can drink and still lose weight. Eight glasses or more. Carlene, being as inventive as she is, varies her diet a little – she substitutes the water with vodka, but hey, it still works. Eight glasses of Vodka a day and my aunt is thinner than me. Drunk as a fucking bar room fly and broke-ass as anything, but still, most important, she’s a size six.

Carlene really enjoys her part time job as a waitress at a truck stop and the constant stream of dates it brings her.

With her bottle-blonde hair, micro-minis that are plain skanky, especially when worn by a mother of teenage girls, and her scarlet lipstick that stays glued to her collagen-plumped lips, she is able to secure a fair amount of losers. Eh, boyfriends.

She likes whisky, menthol Marlboro, sleeping pills and eighteen-year-old boys. She oozes charm, is touchy-feely and calls everyone ‘Hon’. Getting the guys might be easy, but keeping them after day three is a challenge.

When she loses them, you want to run for cover because she becomes mean as a Nevada rattlesnake.

Now, don’t get me wrong – she’s not the wicked stepmother from Cinderella or anything. She just doesn’t care about ... *anything* or anyone. Not even when it comes to her own daughters. Lacks maternal instinct and should never have had children. Very different from my mom.

“Burn dear, will you be a honey and do the dishes? Sweetheart? Steven’s coming to visit later on.”

Three terms of endearment in one sentence. Gotta hand it to Aunt Carlene – she lays it on thick when she wants something out of me.

She’s sleepy and hung-over right now – want me to wake her up? Really piss her off? Watch this.

“Okay, Aunt Carlene.” An innocent remark? That’s what you think. Wait for it ...

“Carlene! Not AUNT Carlene!” That’s her yelling. “Just plain Carlene! How many times must I tell you that, Burn?”

See? Not a single term of endearment now from my darling, guardian aunt.

Like all families, Carlene has rules which we have to obey. A list of ‘nevers’ and they are in no particular order: (Actually, they are in this precise order.)

Never call her ‘Aunt Carlene’ (as previously demonstrated), just Carlene.

Never let her daughters call her Mom, Mommy, Mother etc. (Mommie Dearest is okay, providing it’s under your breath.)

Never tell anyone we’re related. Ever. Tell them she adopted us. She does not want anyone to know her sister married a black man and contaminated her blood line. ‘Sides, adopting a black kid is so fashionable these days. Ask Branjelina and Sandra Bullock and Charlize.

Never wake her up before noon, unless a man with a six-pack comes calling (abs or beer, she’s not fussy about the six-pack) for her, or for any of us at home. (Again, she’s not fussy who he calls for.)

Never ask her to shop for groceries, food, medications, etc.

Never expect her to cook, clean, wash up, etc.

Never ask her for money for essentials, like food etc.

End of the list of ‘Nevers’.

I roll out of bed, put on my Ugg boots and stagger to the refrigerator. I look inside and wriggle my nose as I take stock – beer, wine, gin, Vodka, flat soda, gel eye-masks, line-reducing eye cream, tons of ice, bottles of water, low fat milk, ketchup. That’s it.

Gotta find another way to feed Angel.

I scan the kitchen. Sinks full of dirty dishes, empty pizza boxes scattered around, empty beer bottles, cigarette butts, dirty wine glasses, a snaking ant trail to a can of half-drunk Pepsi.

I haven’t cleaned the place in three days, so it’s now a three hour job. I walk back to my room to get my headphones. Yeah, that’s right, I don’t clean, it doesn’t get clean.

I find some instant noodles in the back of a cupboard for Angel, heat them up and leave them to cool on the table. While I’m waiting for them to cool, I try to tidy up the kitchen.

“This place stinks!” says Daisy. She’s also seventeen, like me. “Oooh, can I have these noodles?”

“No, they’re for Angel.”

Her lips turn downward. Unlike me, Daisy’s blond, thin, blue-eyed and popular with boys, gets invited to all the parties and doesn’t eat. So she’s always miserable. When she does eat, it’s followed by a quick trip to the bathroom.

“Then clean it up!” Carlene shouts.

“I’ll be damned if I spend my Saturday cleaning up. I have a social life, unlike some people.”

*Mother!*

Some people, as in me.

“Then, shut your pie-hole!” Carlene says. Someone’s in need of double-strength Tylenol for that hangover.

“You shut your mouth,” Daisy flings back.

I never dared speak to my mother like that.

“Get a dishwasher!” Daisy mutters.

Lanie walks in and shudders at the sight of the kitchen. *We have one – Burn!* Lanie laughs and slaps my butt. *Here’s the help.*

“Get lost, Lanie!” I say.

“What? What? What did I say?” Lanie asks. She looks at the noodles. “Oooh, can I have these?”

“No! They’re for Angel.”

“Mff.” *Angel gets everything.*

Lanie is Daisy’s older sister. She’s nineteen and a ‘gimme’ child. Gimme this, gimme that, gimme gimme gimme. All the time. All thanks to good ol’ Carlene for raising her daughters the way she does.

Carlene has one more daughter, Katie-Anne. Three-year-old Katie-Anne lives with her father, a twenty-something druggie nicknamed Panda, as he is famous for his black eyes – giving them. His own eyes are green.

“Carlene!” Lanie yells.

“What, Lanie?”

“Do you know where my bandage skirt is?” Lanie has such an obsession with bandage skirts and bandage dresses.

Oh, I forgot to mention – we’re all around the same size and it causes a problem, as we’re always pinching each other’s clothes. Nobody steals mine, mainly because I don’t have much to steal. And also because of one other problem – I’m eh, bigger than them. (My name is Burn and I’ve never been a size eight. Remember my confession?)

It’s a while before Carlene answers. “Yeah. It’s in the wash!” she yells.

“What the hell!” Lanie explodes. “I told you never to wear my stuff.”

“Aw shut up! It’s just a skirt!”

“I’m supposed to wear it this morning, now I can’t! And you took my goddamn hair-straightener too, Mommy Dearest!”

“Don’t call me that, you little witch!”

“See?” Daisy says. “And you blamed me?!”

“Aw shut up!” Lanie says and storms off.

Another day in a place I call home.

I take the noodles to Angel, then return to the kitchen where I stuff my headphones into my ears and crank up Pink to drown out their arguing.

When they continue shouting and Pink’s not enough, I bring in heavy-duty help – I switch to Eminem. Since he’s always pissed with someone and *something*, he can scream anyone down. Drown the motherfuckers. Sometimes, in the mornings, when I have trouble getting a move on to school, I listen to Eminem and it’s like having a cold shower. I’m awake immediately and I’m dressed before his song ends.



## Chapter Five

I'm pretty together when it comes to the opposite sex. I pride myself on not being one of those gals who goes nuts about guys. So it came as a surprise when I went gaga over Brody McGraw.

Okay, so he was beautiful. Taller than all the teachers, ripped abs, sculptured chest, disheveled, sandy hair, bright-blue peepers. With those powerful thighs, he was of course, a track athlete. Most beautiful was his smile.

But when I learned that he was the brother of Nick McGraw, and cousin to Bud-the-dickhead McGraw, my hopes and dreams of us meeting, him ditching his girlfriend for me, him falling head-over-heels in love with me, us getting hitched and raising children together, Titanic.

He's probably as obnoxious and annoying as Bud, I thought. Probably also drives a truck with a bumper sticker that reads, *Honk if you KKK*.

Brody and Nick McGraw recently joined our school. They were in a private school before this. Not exactly sure why they enrolled at our school. Heard something about his father wanting his kids to be schooled with his supporters. You know – live among the people, to win over the people.

A ploy or something. If it means that I get to see his beautiful mug every day, then I'd say it's a mighty fine ploy.

He's currently dating Alicia Cooper, a cheerleader (who else?) with a small waist and a pea-size brain. She's eighteen, with long blonde hair, blue eyes. Every guy wants to date her and every girl wants to be her. Including myself. (Be her, not date her. Let's get that out of the way, okay?)

The bad thing about her – she's nice. No really, she's a cheerleader, good looking, popular, and she's *nice*. Go figure; I'm still trying to. She smiles at me and she's pleasant to everyone around her.

Anyway, the object of my perving looks right through me, so I guess I need to lower my standards.

"So, have you decided?" That voice belongs to the pretty pixie called Tina. (Bud calls her Tuna. Don't let her hear you call her that. She'll kick your ass.) She's one of my best friends.

Tina is Mixican too. Her father is white and her mother is from the Seychelles - a mix, French/Indian with green eyes and dark brown skin, all of which Tina has inherited. Her skin is lighter though, but she doesn't need bronzer.

Tina gets underestimated a lot because she is tiny and sweet. Appears *sweet*. But ... she has a talent and is wonderful at it. She's a serial shoplifter.

She's so good, she actually gives lessons to others. Got a special occasion like, Prom night? Talk to Tina before you go shopping.

Hot date and low budget? Talk to Tina first. She's got a great heart and will happily share anything she owns with you. Maybe it's because she gets it for free anyway. You know the saying: easy-come-easy-go?

But she's sweet with olive skin, long, spiral curls and a warm smile.

"On what?" I ask.

Her eyes follow mine to Brody McGraw. "Guess you can perve."

"Guess I can. He's so beautiful." My sigh is wistful. "How can one guy be so good looking? There ought to be a law against that."

She places herself in front of me with a forget-about-it-he's-never-gonna-fall-for-someone-like-you look, and blocks out my view of my crush. "Let's talk about a more pressing issue – your birthday. What d'ya wanna do?"

"I wanna go to *Danes*," I say. "I wanna do the Diiiiirty like Christina Aguilera, get real nassssty." I put my fists to my chest and shake my booty.

"You're not eighteen yet. *Danes* won't allow you in. Next!"

"Fake IDs," Laura says. "It's about time we got them."

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