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Susanna See Stars

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ONE

I am the luckiest girl in the world. What are the odds of *me*, celebrity junkie Susanna Barringer, native New Yorker, state school sophomore, more of a Roseanne than a Reese, landing a coveted summer gig at *Scene* magazine? It's got to be a gazillion to one. At *least*. But, here I am. Day One of the beginning of my life. My *real* life. Not the preamble of school and homework and obsessing over the zit on my chin that erupts each month like Mount Vesuvius.

'Aliens walk among us.' A bum in filthy brown clothes circles me as I wait for the cross-town bus. 'It could be me,' he says. 'It could be you.'

I flash him a thumbs-up and try not to breathe. His smell is so beyond BO there has to be a whole new name for it. Maybe some alien name like *Xoestryuuil* that only aliens understand. I mean, this guy reeks so bad he'd be jettisoned back to Earth if an alien abducted him. There aren't windows in a spaceship, are there? How could they *ever* air it out?

'The moon is in the seventh house. And Jupiter aligns with Mars,' he says.

Where have I heard that sentence before?

'Let peace guide the planet!' His Reekness yells to no one in particular. Frankly, his breath could use an Altoid, or a hundred. I consider tossing him my tin when I suddenly remember: that's a *song*. My parents sing it all the time. *And love will steer the stars*. It's from some ancient musical about hair. Even though my parents are too young to have been *true* hippies, they like to view themselves as former flower children. Which is laughable because Dad works in a forensics lab and Mom is the payroll manager for Bloomingdale's.

'Wake up, people! This is New York City! Crop circles are a crock! Aliens are *here*, on the streets. Look around!'

Glancing to my left, I see three upper east side divas with cheek implants and puffy, over-collagened lips and I think, well, *maybe*. Then I squint down the street and wonder when on Earth the bus is going to come.

It's eight-thirty on Monday morning and Manhattan is full of glum faces – and, of course, enough nut-jobs to make city life interesting. It's already so hot, my feet sink into the asphalt. My scalp is sweaty. The gutter smells like rotting oranges. Still, I can't stop smiling – even next to the guy who hasn't showered since the age of Aquarius. Unable to resist, I say it out loud: 'Intern at *Scene* magazine. You know, the *People* magazine clone?' I feel the words roll over my tongue. They taste incredibly sweet. I'll work directly for the editor-in-chief, Nell Wickham, who is considered a publishing genius.

I can picture it now: I'll have a pencil behind my ear, take notes in an editorial meeting, run off to get a scoop on Angelina, Jude, Paris or Johnny. A *teen* scoop. I'll ferret out the info kids want to know. Like, who told Lindsay Lohan she needed to lose weight? Or, do stars run to their dressing rooms to brush their teeth before a big love scene? If they don't, who has the worst breath in Hollywood?

Yeah, I know I'll be an assistant and have to do grunt work like all assistants do. Still, I wonder, how soon will they issue me my own business cards?

'Their eyes,' Mr Stinkbomb warns me on the street. 'That's how you can tell they are aliens. Huge pupils.'

I lower my lids and look the other way. You can never be too careful in New York. I have no idea if my pupils are large or small.

Finally, the bus arrives and I escape the stink and the steam, stepping into a deliciously cool blast of air-conditioning. As I make my way to an open seat, I inhale some woman's perfume and think: Ah! The sweet smell of success!

Nobody can believe I scored such an awesome summer job. Not my parents, nor my best friend, Amelia. The only other job I've ever had was babysitting my brothers and walking my neighbour's dog once when she broke her leg.

The way it all came about was pure destiny.

I couldn't sleep. It was the middle of the night, in my

freshman year. I was at that 'questioning phase' every kid hits eventually. I was like, when will I *ever* use algebra? Why am I killing myself to learn all this useless information? My dad is a *scientist* and even he doesn't use algebra. I was searching for the deeper meaning of homework and coming up empty.

I was desperate for answers. So I turned on the TV.

'You have the power to do exactly what you want with your life.'

A guy with a humungous head spoke to me from a cable infomercial. He had a microphone strapped to his ear. His teeth were so white, they lit up my dark bedroom.

'It's a matter of listening to your *soul* and letting the universe guide you,' he said.

'Yeah,' I said out loud. 'What universe cares about algebra?'

I got real quiet and listened to my soul.

At first, it was hard hearing my soul with the TV on. Plus, my biology teacher's voice kept intruding in my head, telling me to memorise the difference between meiosis and mitosis so I could ace tomorrow's quiz. (Another waste of time! Like my cells will stop dividing if I flunk my test!) But when I muted both sounds, something awesome happened. I swear I heard a squeaky voice – oddly high-pitched for an entire *universe* – tell me I was destined to dish celebrity dirt. No lie! I know it's shallow for someone's *destiny* to be a gossip, but who says the universe is always deep? Who am I to question cosmic orders?

The down-and-dirty truth is, I've always been overly-

fascinated with showbiz. I say 'overly' because I *do* recognise that most kids with my Grade Point Average (three point six and rising) know more about cell division than, say, the fact that Cameron Diaz spends an obscene amount of air minutes talking with her buddies on her cell phone. I realise that my best friend Amelia thinks I'm crazy because I have a recurring dream that I live in *Smallville* with Tom Welling. When I wake up – in that delicious moment between 'asleep' and 'awake' – I swear I can hear Superman snoring next to me.

My parents are horrified. Dad's idea of light reading is *Scientific American.*

'You realise you may be compromising the nerve fibres in your corpus callosum,' he said one time when he saw me watching *Entertainment Tonight.*

'Huh?'

'My point exactly!'

Mom once asked me, 'How could anyone still care why Gwyneth named her daughter Apple?' after seeing a headline in the check-out line at D'Agostino's.

'For the same reason we're still agog that Jermaine Jackson named his son Jermajesty, Demi named her daughter Rumer, and Toni Braxton thinks her son is a pair of jeans by naming him Denim,' I said, indignant.

I still remember the appalled expression on my mom's face. It's the same look she gave me when she found an issue of *Star* magazine hidden under my mattress. Most parents would be that upset if they found a bag of weed.

If I channel Dr Phil, I'd have to say that's one reason why I'm addicted to celebrity dirt. Forbidden fruit, you know? My parents never allowed me to watch network TV when I was a kid, or read anything that wasn't 'mind-expanding'. (I didn't have my own TV until I was in middle school!)

Another reason is probably deeper – more Freudian than afternoon *insta-shrink*. I was an only child for a very long time. My three brothers – Evan, Henry and Sam – were born when I was fourteen. (Can you believe my parents dethroned me with *triplets*?!) Before The Trips were born, when I wasn't hanging out with my best friend, Mel, I spent a lot of time alone. Celebs were probably my version of imaginary friends. Friends who looked perfect and had problems that were solved in twenty-two minutes or less. Friends I probably wanted to be, seeing as how I was chubby and curly-haired and felt as though I'd never feel even slightly normal.

My baby brothers are *soooo* cute and I love them *soooo* much. But, let's get real. When you're navigating adolescence, one baby around the apartment is hard enough. Three? Well, you've never seen so many bodily secretions in your life. It's all my parents can do to keep the baby-wipes in motion. They stopped having time for me the moment my brothers' diapers stopped being soiled with baby poo and started loading up with *poop*.

Now, at the mature age of fifteen, I'm working on cultivating inner peace. In spite of the fact that I live in a madhouse. I'm striving to wipe my brothers' snot with a

Zen-like reverence for nature. I'm learning to *embrace* my flaws. Each morning, I tell my thighs that it's okay to touch at the top. I greet frizzy-hair days with a hardy, 'Hey there!' And that 'being normal' thing, well, it doesn't take a forensic scientist to tell me it's not in my DNA. Might as well let it go.

None of this works very well. But, I'm quite sure Dr Phil would say it's worth the effort to keep trying. Especially now that I'm a role model for my brothers. Only, he'd say it in some down-home way that would make everyone chuckle.

When I awoke the morning after my soul-listening, I had the *Frankenguru's* advice in my brain. Right after my biology quiz (I got a B plus, instead of an A, because I forgot to include the step when the reproductive cells, gametes, are produced!), I decided to embrace my superficiality too, and follow my universal bliss. I composed a letter, typed it into the school library computer, printed it out, and sent a copy to every celebrity magazine in New York.

'Dear blah, blah . . . my name is Susanna Barringer, blah, blah . . . I'd like to be a summer intern at your magazine, blah, blah, blah . . .'

Then, I waited. I was so sure the universe would take care of everything, I actually carried my cell with me into the bathroom so I wouldn't miss the call. After a week passed, I obsessively checked my email. After two weeks, I raced for the mail each day after school. After a month of stone-cold

silence, I stopped watching stupid infomercials by guys who can't fit their fat head into a hat.

That's roughly the time I starred in my own reality show and realised I might be dreaming the impossible dream. The trip from my neighbourhood in the meat-packing district to the Midtown offices of New York Publishing was a bus or subway ride, but light years from possibility. What made me think I could snag an internship when I'm still in high school? At a national magazine, no less! Had my soul really been telling me to *shovel* dirt instead of *dish* it?

Clearly, I had a few (thousand!) obstacles in my path. Which, honestly, only firmed up my resolve. Hey, I'm a native New Yorker. Giving up isn't in my pedigree. Negative odds are so *negative,* you know? Why let them bring you down? The way I figured it, my only chance at success was to stand out, be different, dare to think outside the box. Which, oddly enough, spawned the idea that got me the gig at *Scene* magazine.

Like I said, it was pure *destiny.*

TWO

Summer vacation was only three weeks away. My letters were all a washout. The rich kids in my school were planning to bake on the beaches near their family vacation homes in the Hamptons or at the New Jersey shore. The rest of us – me, included – were trying to avoid baking on the streets of New York. Or worse, getting a daily grease facial over the fry pit at McDonald's.

If my latest idea – fifty per cent inspiration, fifty per cent desperation – didn't work, I would be toast.

Here's what I did: after school one afternoon, I took the downtown bus to Chinatown. Snaking through the tourist mobs on Canal Street, I found a little shop that sold little stuff, and I bought a tiny lockbox complete with mini lock and key. Then, I hopped back on the bus and returned home. Inspired by my fabulous find, I printed out a note to the head of my favourite magazine – Nell Wickham, *Scene*'s editor-in-chief. Folding the note into a small square, I tucked it neatly inside the box. The first line read: *I hear magazine jobs are tough to break into.*

Amelia informed me that the grammar was all wrong.

'You can't end a sentence with a preposition,' she said.

I *knew* that. But, what am I going to write? *I hear magazine jobs are tough into which to break?*

I don't think so.

So, I went with my gut. I left the bad grammar in and included a funny section about how I'd been born with a silver tape recorder in my mouth, how I was destined to interview celebrities. I confessed to dreaming of standing on red carpets shouting, 'Who are you wearing?!' I speculated that Joan Rivers was probably my *real* mom, and Melissa and I were switched at birth. Then I locked the letter inside the box. Using my babysitting money, I Fed Ex'd the lockbox to *Scene* magazine. The next day, I messengered the key.

You have the power to unlock my potential, I wrote, on a long, white ribbon I tied to the key. *If you give me a summer job, Ms Wickham, I'll give you a girl who will do anything to get a great story.*

Amelia thought the 'anything' line was too much. 'Would you hide in a celebrity's garbage can?' she asked.

'Maybe,' I said.

She added, 'If there was dog poop in it?'

I rolled my eyes and told her she was missing the point. 'It's about getting attention,' I said. 'Nell Wickham isn't going to hire me if I just ask her nicely.'

Less than a week after I sent the lockbox and key, Nell Wickham's executive assistant completely blew me away by calling to set up an interview. I couldn't wait to hang up the

phone so I could whoop like a maniac. I mean, what are the odds? Incredibly, I was on my way. Thank you, universe! Late-night cable! Move over, Joan and Melissa.

Mom let me use her employee discount to buy an interview outfit at Bloomingdale's. It took all day Saturday to select the perfect look: a cotton floral shift and lime-green Kate Spadeish handbag. I completed the outfit with my favourite pink patent-leather knock-off JP Tod loafers. I even rubbed fake-tanning cream on my white legs.

Monday moved as slowly as ketchup that you just *know* is never going to pour out. I could hear the seconds clicking off in my head all day at school. My interview was scheduled for four o'clock. To keep my outfit fresh, I brought it to school in a garment bag. No way would I have enough time to race home and change. Not when I had to make it to Midtown in forty-five minutes. So, I carried everything with me all day. The moment the final bell rang, I dashed into the bathroom and peeled off my sweaty clothes. Amelia guarded the door.

'Did you remember deodorant?' she asked.

'Yes.'

'Toothpaste?'

'Yes.'

'Talc?'

'Talc?'

'You know, to soak up sweat in nooks and crannies.'

I rolled my eyes. 'Could you please zip me up?'

While Mel zipped the back of my dress, I brushed my teeth, splashed cold water on my face, blotted with a paper towel, and applied a thin layer of the tinted moisturiser I bought at Duane Reade drug store. I swiped my lips in gloss, my cheeks in blush, my lids in shadow, my lashes in mascara. I brushed my hair and twisted it in a messy knot, held firm with a pink claw clip. Completing the look, I slid my bare feet into my loafers and dangled my new green handbag on my forearm.

'Fabulous!' I said to my reflection in the bathroom mirror.

Mel hugged me and said, 'You look like a spring garden!'

By the time I rose up from the subway in Midtown, I looked like a wilted spring salad. I wished I *had* sprinkled talc on all my nooks and crannies. While the individual subway cars are air-conditioned (most of the time), the platform is always a sauna. And the street is one big steam room. Still, it was thrilling to be walking into my destiny. Even though I could feel my bare feet squishing around inside my fake-leather loafers.

Midtown Manhattan is Publishing Central. You can almost smell freshly-printed pages on the streets. Everyone walks fast with a cell pressed to their ears. They emit an aura of mega-money deals. Unless they're wearing the 'New York Tourist' uniform: oversized T-shirt tucked into undersized high-waisted shorts; thick leather sandals with socks. In that case, you have to power-walk around them. Which is just

what I did when I saw the polished brass revolving doors ahead, leading into the lobby of *Scene* magazine.

'I have an appointment with Nell Wickham,' I said to the guard, blowing sweaty fringe off my forehead.

The ground-floor lobby of *Scene* magazine was panelled in rich, dark wood. The floor was forest-green granite. Mercifully, it was super air-conditioned.

'ID, please,' the uniformed guard said.

After I produced my school identification, he called someone, said my name, then hung up.

'Seventeenth floor,' he said.

My heart fluttered. I was truly on my way up.