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Written by Alyson Noel

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UNRIVALLED

A BEAUTIFUL IDOLS NOVEL

ALYSON NOËL

UNRIVALLED

A BEAUTIFUL IDOLS NOVEL

This novel is entirely a work of fiction. The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or localities is entirely coincidental.

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For Jackie and Michelle,
my BFFs for too many decades to count!

All that glitters is not gold.

—WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

PROLOGUE

LOST STARS

Despite the crush of tourists storming the sidewalks year after year, Hollywood Boulevard is a place best viewed behind a pair of polarized lenses and lowered expectations.

From the string of sagging buildings in various stages of decay, the tacky souvenir shops hawking plastic statues of Marilyn in her windblown white dress, and the seemingly endless parade of addicts, runaways, and glamour-deprived transients, it doesn't take long before the sunburned, white-sneaker-wearing masses realize the LA they're searching for does not exist there.

In a city that feeds off youth and beauty, Hollywood Boulevard more closely resembles a former screen siren who's seen better days. The incessant sunshine is a harsh

and brutal companion, intent on magnifying every wrinkle, every age spot.

Yet for those who know where to look (and those fortunate enough to boast a spot on the guest list), it also serves as an oasis of the city's hottest nightclubs—a sort of hedonistic haven for the young, fabulous, and rich.

For Madison Brooks, the boulevard was everything she'd dreamed it would be. Maybe it didn't look anything like the snow globe she'd had as a kid, the one that showered small squares of golden glitter over a miniature version of the Hollywood sign, but she never expected it would. Unlike those clueless tourists expecting to see their favorite celebrities hanging by their Walk of Fame stars, handing out autographs and hugs to all who passed by, Madison knew exactly what she'd find.

She did her due diligence.

Left nothing to chance.

After all, when planning an invasion, it's best to familiarize yourself with the lay of the land.

And now, only a few short years after exiting that grimy bus station in downtown LA, her face was on the cover of nearly every magazine, every billboard. The town was officially hers.

While the journey was far more arduous than she'd ever let on, Madison managed to surpass everyone's expectations but her own. Most merely hoped she'd survive. Not

a single person from her former life expected her to rocket straight to the top. Ultimately becoming so known, so lauded, so connected, she'd command full, no-questions-asked access to one of LA's hottest nightclubs long after it had closed for the night.

In a rare moment of privacy, Madison strode toward the edge of the vacant Night for Night terrace. The heels of her Gucci stilettos sliding gracefully against the smooth stone floor, she pressed a hand to her heart and bowed toward the skyline, imagining those flickering lights as an audience of millions—cell phones and lighters raised in her honor.

The moment reminded her of a similar game she'd played as a kid. Back when she staged elaborate performances for a crowd of grubby stuffed animals with matted hair and missing limbs. Their dull, unblinking button eyes fixed on the sight of Madison dancing and singing before them. Those tireless rehearsals prepping her for the day those secondhand toys would be replaced by real, live screaming fans. She never once doubted her dream would become a reality.

Madison hadn't become Hollywood's hottest young celebrity by hoping, wishing, or depending on others. Discipline, control, and steely determination steered her ascent. Although the media loved to portray her as a frivolous party girl (albeit one with serious acting chops), beneath the salacious headlines was a young and powerful girl who'd seized

control of her destiny and made it her bitch.

Not that she'd ever admit to such a thing. Better to let them think she was a princess whose life flowed effortlessly. The lie provided a shield that kept them from learning the truth. Those who dared scratch beneath the surface never got very far. The road to Madison's past was jammed with so many roadblocks even the most determined journalist eventually yielded defeat by writing about her unparalleled beauty—her hair the color of warming chestnuts on a crisp fall day (according to the guy who'd recently interviewed her for *Vanity Fair*). He also described her violet eyes as shadowed by a lushly dark nimbus of lashes used to alternately reveal and conceal. And wasn't there a mention of her skin being pearlescent or incandescent or some other descriptor that translates to radiant?

Funny how he began the interview as just another jaded journalist sure he could break her. Convinced that their vast age difference—she being eighteen, he hovering way past forty (ancient in comparison)—along with his superior IQ (his assumption, not hers)—meant he could trick her into revealing something regrettable that would send her career into a tailspin, only to walk away from their meeting entirely frustrated, if not a little infatuated. Same as all the others who'd gone before—each of them grudgingly admitting there was something different about Madison Brooks. She wasn't your average starlet.

She leaned deeper into the night, swept her fingers across her lips, and arced her arm wide, releasing a string of kisses to her imaginary fans flickering and gleaming below. So captured by the sheer unbridled giddiness of all she'd accomplished, she lifted her chin in triumph and released a shout so thunderous it blotted out the incessant soundtrack of traffic and sirens below.

It felt good to let go.

To allow herself, for one brief instant, to be as wild and untamed as she'd been as a kid.

"I did it!" she whispered to herself, the imaginary fans glimmering in the distance, but mostly to those who'd doubted her, even tried to thwart her.

The second time, she allowed the startling twang she'd long since abandoned to slip to the surface, amazed at how easy it was to summon that voice—another remnant of a past she could never fully escape. Considering the reckless way she'd behaved earlier, she wondered if she really wanted to.

The memory of the boy she'd kissed was still fresh on her lips. For the first time in a long time, she'd allowed herself to relax enough to let down her guard and be seen for the girl she really was.

Still, she couldn't help wondering if she'd made a mistake.

The thought alone was sobering enough, but a quick

glance at her diamond-encrusted Piaget gave her real reason to worry.

The person she was meeting should've been there already, and his lateness, along with the silence of the closed and empty club, was starting to feel far more eerie than liberating. Despite the warmth of the California summer night, she pulled her cashmere scarf tighter around her. If there was one thing that made Madison shiver, it was uncertainty. Maintaining control was as necessary as breathing. And yet there she was, second-guessing the message he'd sent.

If the news was good like he'd claimed, she'd put the nuisance behind her and never look back.

If not . . . well, she had a plan for that too.

She just hoped it wouldn't come to that. She hated when things got messy.

Curling her delicate fingers around the slim glass partition, the only thing separating her from a forty-foot fall, she lifted her gaze to the sky, trying to locate a single star that wasn't actually an airplane, but there's only one kind of star in LA.

While she usually fought to avoid all thoughts of the past, on that night, for that one brief moment, Madison allowed herself to drift back to a place where real stars were abundant.

Back to a place that had better stay buried.

A breeze curled past her cheek, delivering the sound of light footsteps and a strangely familiar scent she couldn't quite place. Still, she waited a beat before turning, stealing the moment to wish on a shooting star she'd mistaken for a jet, crossing her fingers as it blazed a wide and glittery arc across a black velvet sky.

It would all be okay.

There was no need to worry.

She turned, ready to face it, whatever *it* was. She was telling herself she could handle it either way—when a cool, sure hand slipped over her mouth and Madison Brooks disappeared.

ONE MONTH EARLIER

ONE

HYPOCRITICAL KISS

Layla Harrison could not stop fidgeting. First she sank down low in her beach chair, burying her feet deep into the sand, then she wiggled upright again until the canvas bit into her shoulders, before finally giving up and squinting toward the ocean where her boyfriend, Mateo, waited for the next decent wave. A tedious pursuit that never failed to supply him with an endless stream of happiness she could not understand.

As much as she loved him, and she did (hell, he was so cute and sexy and sweet, she'd be crazy not to), after spending the last three hours dodging the sun under her giant umbrella while struggling to write a decent piece that contained the right dose of humor and snark, she wished Mateo would call it a day and start the long paddle in.

Clearly he had no clue how crazy uncomfortable it was to sit for hours on end in the rickety, ancient beach chair he'd loaned her, and how could he? It wasn't like he ever used it. He was always out on his board, looking Zen and gorgeous and completely at peace, while Layla did all that she could to blot out the splendors of Malibu. The giant umbrella she hid under was just the beginning.

Beneath the bulky hoodie and the extra towel she'd placed over her knees, she wore a thick layer of sunblock, and of course she'd never venture outside without her oversize sunglasses and the crumpled straw fedora Mateo had brought back from a recent surf trip to Costa Rica.

For Mateo, Layla's ritual of blocking and shielding was futile at best. *You can't master the environment,* he'd say. *You have to respect it, honor it, play by its rules. It's madness to think you're in charge—nature always gets the last word.*

Easy to say when your skin is immune to sunburns and you were practically raised on a surfboard.

She returned to her laptop and frowned. Writing a cheesy celebrity gossip blog was a long way from the *New York Times* byline she dreamed of, but she had to start somewhere.

Arrested Development

No, I'm not referring to the too-smart-for-network-what-were-they-thinking cult comedy (insert I'm-

> surrounded-by-idiots sigh), I'm talking about actual *arrested development*, people. The kind you can read about in your Psych 101 books (for those of you who actually read anything other than gossip blogs and Twitter feeds). The kind yours truly witnessed last night at Le Château, when three of Hollywood's youngest and hottest, but certainly not brightest, decided olives were for more than just aimlessly lolling at the bottom of a martini glass—

"You still at it?" Mateo stood before her, board tucked under his shoulder, feet sinking into the sand.

"Just doing some last-minute edits," she mumbled, watching as he dropped his board on the towel, swiped a hand through his sun- and salt-water-streaked hair, and unzipped his wet suit. He peeled it so far down his torso Layla couldn't help but gulp at the absolute speech-defying wonder of seeing her beautiful boyfriend bared and glistening before her.

In a town teeming with oversize egos, a surplus of vanity, and a cult of body-obsessed green juice devotees, Mateo's obliviousness to his natural good looks was so rare, most of the time Layla couldn't imagine what he saw in such a pale and cynical slip of a girl like herself.

"Can I help?" He reached for her water bottle, looking as though he'd like nothing more than to read her take on three martini-fueled A-list celebrities reenacting their

former high school cafeteria hijinks by chucking olives at everyone around them.

Typical Mateo. He'd been like that from the first night she'd met him, just a little over two years ago, on her sixteenth birthday. Both of them had been amazed to discover they were born just a year and ten days apart, and yet their birthdays still managed to make them different (and mostly opposing) astrological signs.

Mateo was a Sagittarius, which made him a free-spirited dreamer.

Layla was a Capricorn, which made her ambitious and a wee bit controlling—if you believed in those things, which of course Layla didn't. It was just some weird coincidence that in their case was true.

She handed over the laptop and sank deeper into her seat. Hearing Mateo read her work aloud was her own personal version of crack.

It was good for her process. Helped her edit and hone. But Layla had enough self-awareness to know that when it came to her writing, she was the world's biggest praise slut, and Mateo usually found something nice to say, no matter how lame the content.

Water bottle dangling from one hand and Layla's MacBook Air perched on the other, Mateo started to read. When he reached the end, he looked at her and said, "Is this for real?"

"I kept an olive as a souvenir."

He narrowed his gaze as though trying to picture the celebrity food fight. "You get a picture?" He returned the laptop.

Layla shook her head, paused to make one small adjustment, then hit Save instead of the usual Send. "The Château is serious about their photo ban."

Mateo shook his head and drained the water bottle in one steady stream as Layla continued to ogle him, feeling more than a little perverted for reducing her boyfriend to a sweet piece of eye candy. "You going to send that?" he asked. "Seems ready."

She sank the laptop into her bag. "You know how I've been talking about starting my own blog, Beautiful Idols?" Her tentative gaze met his. "I'm thinking this might be the perfect launch piece."

He shifted his stance, played with the bottle cap. "Layla, it's a good bit." He spoke as though he was handpicking each word. "It's funny, and on point, but . . ." He shrugged, letting the silence say what he wouldn't: it was hardly the caliber of work she was capable of.

"I know what you're thinking." She rushed to her own defense. "But none of the crap I write about qualifies as world-changing news, and I'm sick of working for crumbs. If I want to go it alone, I'll have to start somewhere. And while the blog might take a while to really catch on, once it

does, I can make a ton of money on the ad revenue alone. Besides, I've saved more than enough to hold me between now and then."

That last part was a hasty addition that might or might not be true. But it sounded good, and it seemed to convince Mateo, since his first response was to pull her out of her chair and into his arms.

"And what exactly will you do with all that ad revenue?"

She ran a finger over his chest, stalling for time. Her dream of going to journalism school in New York was something she hadn't yet shared, and to do so now would bring an awkward moment she'd rather avoid.

"Well, I figured the bulk of it would go toward the burrito fund."

He grinned, circled his arms at her waist. "The recipe for a happy life—you, decent surf, and a healthy burrito fund." He touched his lips to the tip of her nose. "Speaking of—when are you gonna let me teach you to surf?"

"Probably never." She allowed her body to melt against his, burying her face in the crook of his neck, where she inhaled a heady base scent of ocean, sun, and deeply rooted contentment—complemented by a top note of honor, sincerity, and a life lived in balance. It was everything Layla wished she could be, but knew she would never achieve, encompassed in one single breath.

Yet despite their enormous differences, Mateo accepted

her as she was. Never trying to change her or make her see things his way.

She wished she could say the same.

When he tipped a finger under her chin and lowered his lips to meet hers, Layla responded like a girl who'd spent the last three hours waiting for exactly that (she had). At first the kiss was gentle, playful, Mateo's tongue gliding with hers. Until Layla ground her hips against his, returning his embrace with a passion that saw him groaning her name.

"Layla . . . *jeez* . . ." The words were a blur on his lips. "What do you say we find a place to continue this?"

She curled her leg around his, pulling him closer, as close as her denim cutoffs and his wet suit allowed. Aware of nothing more than the heat spiraling throughout the length of her body as his hands slipped under her hoodie. So drunk with his touch she'd gladly drag him down to the warm golden sand and straddle him there. Luckily, Mateo had sense enough to pull away before she got them arrested.

"If we hurry, we can have the house to ourselves." His grin was loose. His eyes heavy and glazed.

"No, thanks." Layla pushed him away, quickly losing the mood. "That last time Valentina nearly walked in, the panic I experienced shortened my life by a decade. I can't risk that again."

"So you live to one forty instead of one fifty." He

shrugged, tried to pull her back to him, but Layla stayed put. "I like to think that it's worth it."

"Easy for you to say, Mr. Zen Master." It was one of her many nicknames for him. "Let's go to my place. It's free of little sisters, and even if my dad's in the studio, it's not like he'll bother us. He's really into his newest series of paintings, not that I've seen them. I'm just glad he's working. It's been forever since he last sold a piece."

Mateo cringed. Obviously he still wanted to be with her, but all it took was the mention of her dad for his own enthusiasm to wane.

"I can't get used to that." He busied himself with packing their stuff, pulling the umbrella apart, and sliding it into its bag. "It's too weird."

"Only for you. Don't forget Dad's a self-described open-minded bohemian who believes in free expression. And more important, he trusts me. And he likes you. Thinks you're a calming influence."

She cracked a smile. It was undeniably true. Then, tossing her bag over her shoulder, she headed for Mateo's black Jeep, where she plucked a flyer from under his wiper blades and read: *Promote with Ira Redman's Unrivaled Nightlife Company this summer for a chance to win an unbelievable cash prize.*

Her interest was instantly piqued.

She'd had her sights on journalism school in New

York since her junior year of high school, and while she was thrilled to have been accepted, there was no chance of attending when the staggering tuition, not to mention the high cost of city living, was like a brick wall blocking her way. And with her dad's current financial slump lasting longer than usual, asking him for help was out of the question.

While her mom could easily provide whatever amount Layla might need (correction: her mom's wealthy *husband* could provide; Layla's mom was just another Santa Monica zombie shuffling between Soul Cycle and Drybar), the fact was Layla and her mom hadn't spoken for years, and Layla had no plans to start.

As for Mateo—his job as a surf butler at some of the pricier beachfront hotels didn't pay much (not that Layla would accept his help if it did). Not to mention she'd yet to fill him in on that particular goal—mostly because he'd insist on joining her, and as nice as it would be to have him around, he'd only end up distracting her. Mateo didn't share her ambition, and sweet as he was, Layla refused to be yet another female who let a cute boy keep her from achieving her dreams.

She scanned the flyer again—a job like that could be just what she needed. The exposure to the Hollywood club scene would give her way better material, and who knew where it could lead?

Mateo leaned past her shoulder and tugged the flyer from her hands. "Tell me you're not interested in this." He swung around to better see her, his brown eyes narrowed as Layla bit her lip in response, unwilling to admit it was the most exciting thing to happen all day (other than that kiss on the beach). "Babe, trust me, you don't want to get involved in this." His voice was stern in a way she rarely heard. "The club scene is sketchy at best. You remember what happened to Carlos."

She dropped her gaze to her sand-covered feet. She was overcome with shame at having forgotten about Mateo's older brother, who'd OD'd right outside a club on Sunset Boulevard, not unlike River Phoenix collapsing in front of the Viper Room, except for the fact that nobody built a shrine in his honor. Aside from his immediate family, no one had even stopped to mourn. By the time Carlos died, he was so far gone the only friends he had left were drug dealers—none of whom bothered to go to his funeral. It was the greatest tragedy of Mateo's life. As a kid, he'd totally idolized his brother.

But what if this was the perfect way to honor Carlos—maybe even vindicate him?

She reached for Mateo, her fingers grazing his arm before falling back to her side. "What happened to Carlos was the worst kind of tragedy, because it could've been avoided," she said. "But maybe the best way to draw attention to

Carlos and other kids like him is to expose what really goes on in that world. A gig like this would allow me to do that."

Mateo frowned. She was going to have to try harder than that.

She stared at the flyer still clutched in his hands, knowing in her gut she was right. Mateo's resistance only made her more determined. "I hate our celebrity-worshipping culture as much as you do. And I totally agree the whole club scene is one major sleaze fest. But wouldn't you rather I do something to shine a light on all that? Doesn't that beat sitting around and complaining?"

While he didn't necessarily agree, he wasn't arguing either. A small victory she was happy to claim.

"I have no illusions I'll win the competition. Hell, I don't even care about that. But if I can just get in on the game, I'll have all the necessary ammo to reveal that world for the fraud that it is. If I can get just one kid to stop hero-worshipping those shallow, needy, undeserving assholes—if I can convince just one teen that the club scene is seedy, dangerous, and better avoided—then my job will be done."

Mateo gazed at the ocean, studying the horizon for a long while. Something about seeing him in profile, shadowed by the fading rays of the sun, softened her heart. He loved her. He only wanted what was best for her, including keeping her far from the world that had claimed his

brother. But as much as she loved him, she would not let him win.

He lingered on the postcard-perfect view of the sun dipping toward the ocean before turning to face her. "I can't stand the thought of you getting mixed up in all that." He clenched his fist, causing the flyer to crumple loudly. "That whole world's a lie, and Ira has a well-earned reputation as the worst kind of scumbag who doesn't give a shit about the kids who've made him rich. He only cares about himself. They dumped Carlos outside and let him die on the street so they wouldn't have to call the ambulance and shut down the club for the night. Though you can bet they didn't hesitate to benefit from the scandal."

"But that wasn't Ira's club."

"It's all the same. Carlos was a smart kid, and look what happened to him. I can't let that to happen to you."

"I'm not Carlos." The instant she said it, she was filled with regret. She'd do anything to pull the words back from the ether and swallow them whole.

"Meaning?"

She paused, not entirely sure how to explain without offending him further. "I'm going in with a purpose, a goal—"

"There are other, better ways to do that."

"Name one." She tilted her chin, hoping to convey with a look that she loved him but they'd reached a dead end.

Mateo tossed the flyer into the nearest can and propped the passenger door open as though that was the end of it.

But it wasn't.

Not even close.

She'd already memorized the website and phone number.

She inched closer. She hated when they argued, and besides, there was really no point. She'd already made her decision. The less he knew about it going forward, the better.

Knowing exactly how to distract him, she ran her hands up the length of his thigh. Refusing to stop until his lids dropped, his breath deepened, and he'd forgotten she was ever interested in promoting Ira Redman's clubs.