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STARRY EYES

Written by Jenn Bennett

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STARRY EYES

Jenn Bennett



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Spontaneity is overrated. Movies and television shows would like us to believe that life is better for partygoers who dare to jump into pools with their clothes on. But behind the scenes, it's all carefully scripted. The water is the right temperature. Lighting and angles are carefully considered. Dialogue is memorized. And that's why it looks so appealing—because someone carefully planned it all. Once you realize this, life gets a whole lot simpler. Mine did.

I am a hard-core planner, and I don't care who knows it.

I believe in schedules, routines, *washi*-tape-covered calendars, bulleted lists in graph-paper journals, and best-laid plans. The kind of plans that don't go awry, because they're made with careful consideration of all possibilities and outcomes. No winging it, no playing things by ear. That's how disasters happen.

But not for me. I make blueprints for my life and stick to them. Take, for instance, summer break. School starts back in three weeks, and before I turn eighteen and embark on my senior

year, this is my blueprint for the rest of the summer:

Plan one: Two mornings each week, work at my parents' business, Everhart Wellness Clinic. I fill in at the front desk for their normal receptionist, who's taking a summer course at UC Cal in Berkeley. My mom's an acupuncturist and my father is a massage therapist, and they own the clinic together. This means that instead of flipping burgers and being yelled at by random strangers outside a drive-through window, I get to work in a Zen-like reception area, where I can keep everything perfectly organized and know exactly which clients are scheduled to walk through the door. No surprises, no drama. Predictable, just the way I like it.

Plan two: Take photos of the upcoming Perseid meteor shower with my astronomy club. Astronomy is my holy grail. Stars, planets, moons, and all things space. Future NASA astrophysicist, right here.

Plan three: Avoid any and all contact with our neighbors, the Mackenzie family.

These three things all seemed perfectly possible until five minutes ago. Now my summer plans are standing on shaky ground, because my mom is trying to talk me into going camping.

Camping. Me.

Look, I know nothing about the Great Outdoors. I'm not even sure I like being outside. Seems to me, society has progressed far enough that we should be able to avoid things like fresh air and sunlight. If I want to see wild animals, I'll watch a documentary on TV.

Mom knows this. But right now she's trying *really* hard to sell me on some sort of Henry David Thoreau nature-is-good idealism while I'm sitting behind our wellness clinic's front desk. And sure, she's always preaching about the benefits of natural health and vegetarianism, but now she's waxing poetic about the majestic beauty of the great state of California, and what a "singular opportunity" it would be for me to experience the wilderness before school starts.

"Be honest. Can you really picture me camping?" I ask her, tucking dark corkscrew curls behind my ears.

"Not camping, Zorie," she says. "Mrs. Reid is inviting you to go *glamping*." Dressed in gray tunic scrubs embroidered with the clinic's logo, she leans across the front desk and talks in an excited, hushed voice about the wealthy client who's currently relaxing on an acupuncture table in the back rooms, enjoying the dated yet healing sounds of Enya, patron saint of alternative health clinics around the world.

"Glamping," I repeat, skeptical.

"Mrs. Reid says they have reservations for these luxury tents in the High Sierras, somewhere between Yosemite and King's Forest National Park," Mom explains. "Glamorous camping. Get it? Glamping."

"You keep saying that, but I still don't know what it means," I tell her. "How can a tent be luxurious? Aren't you sleeping on rocks?"

Mom leans closer to explain. "Mrs. Reid and her husband got a last-minute invitation to a colleague's chalet in Switzerland, so

they have to cancel their camping trip. They have a reservation for a fancy tent. This glamping compound—"

"This isn't some weird hippie cult, is it?"

Mom groans dramatically. "Listen. They have a chef who prepares gourmet meals, an outdoor fire pit, hot showers—the works."

"Hot showers," I say with no small amount of sarcasm. "Thrill me, baby."

She ignores this. "The point is, you aren't actually roughing it, but you feel like it. The compound is so popular that they do a lottery for the tents a year in advance. Everything's already paid for, meals and lodging. Mrs. Reid said it would be shame to let it go to waste, which is why they are letting Reagan take some of her friends there for the week—a last-hurrah trip with the girls before senior year starts."

Mrs. Reid is the mother of Reagan Reid, star athlete, queen bee of my class, and my kind of, sort of friend. Actually, Reagan and I used to be good friends when we were younger. Then her parents came into money, and she started hanging out with other people. Plus, she was training constantly for the Olympics. Before I knew it, we just . . . grew apart.

Until last fall, when we started talking again during lunchtime at school.

"Would be good for you to spend some time outside," Mom says, fiddling with her dark hair as she continues to persuade me to go on this crazy camping trip.

"The Perseid meteor shower is happening next week," I remind her.

She knows I am a strict planner. Unexpected twists and surprises throw me off my game, and everything about this camping—sorry, *glamping*—trip is making me very, *very* anxious.

Mom makes a thoughtful noise. "You could bring your telescope to the glamping compound. Stars at night, hiking trails in the day."

Hiking sounds like something Reagan could be into. She has rock-hard thighs and washboard abs. I practically get winded walking two blocks to the coffee shop, a fact of which I'd like to remind Mom, but she switches gears and plays the guilt card.

"Mrs. Reid says Reagan's been having a really tough time this summer," she says. "She's worried about her. I think she's hoping this trip will help cheer her up after what happened at the trials in June."

Reagan fell (I'm talking *splat*, face-plant) and didn't place in the Olympic track trials. It was her big shot for moving forward. She basically has no chance at the next summer Olympics and will have to wait four more years. Her family was heartbroken. Even so, it surprises me to hear that her mother is worried about her.

Another thought crosses my mind. "Did Mrs. Reid ask me to go on this trip, or did you hustle her into inviting me?"

A sheepish smile lifts my mom's lips. "A little from column A, little from column B."

I quietly drop my head against the front desk.

"Come on," she says, shaking my shoulder slowly until I lift my

head again. "She was surprised Reagan hadn't asked you already, so clearly they've discussed you coming along. And maybe you and Reagan both need this. She's struggling to get her mojo back. And you're always saying you feel like an outsider in her pack of friends, so here's your chance to spend some time with them out of school. You should be falling down at my feet," Mom teases. "How about a little, *Thank you, coolest mom ever, for schmoozing me into the event of the summer. You're my hero, Joy Everhart*?" She clasps her hands to her heart dramatically.

"You're so weird," I mumble, pretending to be apathetic.

She grins. "Aren't you lucky I am?"

Actually, yes. I know that she genuinely wants me to be happy and would do just about anything for me. Joy is actually my stepmom. My birth mother died unexpectedly of an aneurysm when I was eight, back when we lived across the Bay in San Francisco. Then my dad suddenly decided he wanted to be a massage therapist and spent all the life insurance money on getting licensed. He's impulsive like that. Anyway, he met Joy at an alternative medicine convention. They got hitched a few months later, and we all moved here to Melita Hills, where they rented out space for this clinic and an apartment next door.

Sure, at the ripe age of thirty-eight, Joy is several years younger than my father, and because she's Korean-American, I've had to deal with genius observations from bigoted people, pointing out the obvious: that she's not my real mom. As if I weren't aware that she's Asian and I'm so Western and pale, I'm rocking an actual vita-

min D deficiency. To be honest, in my mind, Joy *is* my mom now. My memories of Life Before Joy are slippery. Over the years, I've grown far closer to her than I am to my dad. She's supportive and encouraging. I just wish she were a touch less granola and chipper.

But this time, as much as I hate to admit it, her enthusiasm about the glamping trip might be warranted. Spending quality time outside of school with Reagan's inner circle would definitely strengthen my social standing, which always feels as if it's in danger of collapsing when I'm hanging around people who have more money or popularity. I'd like to feel more comfortable around them. Around Reagan, too. I just wish she'd asked me to go camping herself, instead of her mother.

The clinic's front door swings open and my father breezes into the waiting room, freshly shaved and dark hair neatly slicked back. "Zorie, did Mr. Wiley call?"

"He canceled today's massage appointment," I inform him. "But he rescheduled for a half session on Thursday."

A half session is half an hour, and half an hour equals half the money, but my father quickly masks his disappointment. You could tell him his best friend just died, and he'd pivot toward a meet-up at the racquetball club without breaking a sweat. Diamond Dan, people call him. All sparkle and glitz.

"Did Mr. Wiley say why he couldn't make it?" he asks.

"An emergency at one of his restaurants," I report. "A TV chef is stopping by to film a segment."

Mr. Wiley is one my dad's best clients. Like most of the

people who come here, he has money burning a hole in his wallet and can afford above-average prices for massage or acupuncture. Our wellness clinic is the best in Melita Hills, and my mom has even been written up in the *San Francisco Chronicle* as one of the Bay Area's top acupuncturists—"well worth a trip across the Bay Bridge." My parents charge clients accordingly.

It's just that the number of those clients has been slowly but surely dwindling over the last year. The primary cause of that dwindling, and the object of my dad's anger, is the business that set up shop in the adjoining space. To our shared mortification, we are now located next to a store that sells adult toys.

Yep, *those* kind of toys.

Kind of hard to ignore the giant vaginal-shaped sign out front. Our well-heeled customers sure haven't. Classy people usually don't want to park in front of a sex shop when they are heading to a massage therapy appointment. My parents found this out pretty quickly when longtime clients started canceling their weekly sessions. Those who haven't fled our desirable location near all the upscale boutique shops on Mission Street are too important to lose, as Dad reminds me every chance he gets.

And that's why I know he's upset by Mr. Wiley's cancellation—it was his only appointment today—but when he leaves the reception area and heads to his office so that he can stew about it in private, Mom remains calm.

"So," she says. "Should I tell Mrs. Reid you'll go glamping with Reagan?"

Like I'm going to give her a definitive answer on the spot without considering all the factors. At the same time, I hate to be the wet blanket on her sunny enthusiasm.

"Don't be cautious. Be careful," she reminds me. Cautious people are afraid of the unknown and avoid it. Careful people plan so that they're more confident when they face the unknown. She tells me this every time I'm resistant to a change in plans. "We'll research everything together."

"I'll consider it," I tell her diplomatically. "I guess you can tell Mrs. Reid that I'll text Reagan for the details and make up my mind later. But you did well, Dr. Pokenstein."

Her smile is victorious. "Speaking of, I better get back to her and take out the needles before she falls asleep on the slab. Oh, I almost forgot. Did FedEx come?"

"Nope. Just the regular mail."

She frowns. "I got an email notification that a package was delivered."

Crap on toast. I know what this means. We have a problem with misdelivered mail. Our mail carrier is constantly delivering our packages to the sex shop next door. And the sex shop next door is directly connected with item number three in my blueprint for a perfect summer: avoid any and all contact with the Mackenzies.

My mom sticks out her lower lip and makes her eyes big. "Pretty please," she pleads sweetly. "Can you run next door and ask them if they got my delivery?"

I groan.

"I would do it, but, you know. I've got Mrs. Reid full of needles," she argues, tugging her thumb toward the back rooms. "I'm balancing her life force, not torturing the woman. Can't leave her back there forever."

"Can't you go get it on your lunch break?" I've already made the trek into dildo land once this week, and that's my limit.

"I leave in an hour to meet your grandmother for lunch, remember?"

Right. Her mother, she means. Grandma Esther loathes tardiness, a sentiment I fully support. But that still doesn't change the fact that I'd rather have a tooth pulled than walk next door. "What's so important in this package anyway?"

"That's the thing," Mom says, winding her long, straight hair into a tight knot at the crown of her head. "The notification was sent by someone else. 'Catherine Beatty.' I don't know anyone by that name, and I haven't ordered anything. But the notification came to my work email, and our address is listed."

"A mystery package."

Her eyes twinkle. "Surprises are fun."

"Unless someone sent you a package full of spiders or a severed hand. Maybe you jabbed someone a little too hard."

"Or maybe I jabbed someone just right, and they are sending me chocolate." She steals a pen from the desk and stabs it into her hair to secure her new knot. "Please, Zorie. While your father is occupied."

She says this last bit in a hushed voice. My dad would throw a fit if he saw me next door.

"Fine. I'll go," I say, but I'm not happy.

Summer plans, how I knew and loved you.

Sticking a handmade AWAY FROM THE DESK. BE BACK IN A JIFF! sign on the counter, I drag myself through the front door into bright morning sunshine and brace for doom.