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Sunday at the Beach

Susan ignored the pings from her phone. She didn't need to see any more photos of apartments in Michigan. Joel had been texting for a week, enticing her to leave New York and join him in Ann Arbor, where he was about to start grad school.

She sat at the kitchen table and stared at the glossy packet, a hand-out from the previous day's orientation for new employees. Rejected for marketing positions by a fashion house and a book publisher, Susan contemplated her best job offer in New York—dreary office work with an insurance company. The greeting printed in a bold cursive font across the folder's cover, "Welcome to the Pinnacle Team," taunted her. An escape to the Midwest could be either an opportunity or a surrender.

She pushed the folder aside to clear a space to prepare a breakfast smoothie. The apartment buzzer interrupted her as she poured blueberries into a measuring cup. It was not yet ten o'clock. Her roommate, Trish, was still asleep. Growing up on her family's farm in Minnesota, Susan would wake by five most mornings to help her father and older brother with the cows or prepare breakfast with her mother. In New York, most of her friends did not stir until after noon.

She pressed the intercom button; Alec asked to be buzzed in. Susan knew him from their Branding Strategies class, which Alec audited to get ideas for promoting his band. She unlocked the door and stepped into the hallway as Alec reached the third-floor landing. "Trish is still sleeping; we have to be quiet," she said.

Alec followed Susan into the apartment. He wore black leather pants and a purple tee with a stenciled likeness of Bob Marley on the front. The morning light exposed early specks of gray in his thick black hair.

"I won't stay long. I wanted to tell you in person. We got a recording date for the band. A guy from one of the record companies heard us at the club last weekend and set up a session," he said.

Susan threw her arms around Alec. "That's fantastic! I knew this would happen for you."

"There's something else. We're doing 'Sunday at the Beach.'" It would sound better with backup singers. I was thinking you and Trish could do it."

Susan stutter-stepped back. "Are you serious? We've never done anything like that," she said.

Alec rested a hand on Susan's shoulder. "Hey, I heard you and Trish harmonizing on that Brandi Carlile song at the bar last week. It's just a few lines:

Sunday at the beach

Sunday at the beach

With you."

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Trish shuffled out of her bedroom and cinched her robe. "Hey, Alec. A little early for you."

"Yeah, I was telling Susan about our recording session," he said.

Susan poured the blueberries and some soy milk into the blender. "He wants us to sing backup on 'Sunday at the Beach.'"

"What about that woman who was singing with you? What was her name, Gina?" Trish asked.

"Nina. She took off with her boyfriend to work on a goat farm in Vermont," Alec said.

Susan's phone pinged again. Joel had sent a photo of a row of tennis courts he took from an apartment with the caption, *View fr bedrm. Only \$1200 / mo w/ breakfast nook!* Susan wrinkled her nose and set the phone to DND.

"Okay Alec, I'm in. What about it, Trish?"

"Sure, why the hell not." Trish covered her mouth and yawned. "I've got to take a shower."

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Susan and Trish set out for the recording studio from their West Village apartment after getting high on weed. The studio occupied a corner of a repurposed warehouse in the Meatpacking District. They pushed open a heavy steel door to enter the dark, dank building. Foam acoustic panels had been installed on the walls, and baffles hung from the overhead beams. The control board sat outside a clear plexiglass partition with a sliding panel for access to the performance area. The place had an acrid smell of smoke and sweat.

Alec nodded when Susan and Trish approached the band platform as his fingers worked the guitar. He and his band were warming up with riffs and outtakes from their repertoire. Alec had told Susan that growing up, he listened to his father's blues and jazz albums—Muddy, Miles, and Coltrane. But he knew pop fluff like "Sunday at the Beach" sold.

The warehouse door creaked open, and Susan glanced toward the shaft of daylight. A tall, broad-shouldered guy with dark hair, frizzed by August humidity, entered. He took long deliberate steps, as if he were prodding a crowd to part, but there was no crowd.

Alec motioned for the band to stop playing. He stepped from the stage and threw his arms around the visitor. "Hey, Lenny. Glad you're here," he said. Alec turned toward Susan and Trish. "Lenny's a filmmaker. He's going to shoot the video."

"When we were in high school, I filmed Alec and his first group at a street fair in our old neighborhood. They were shit then. The crowd was there to see a hip-hop act and began throwing beer cans at them," Lenny said.

Alec crumpled a piece of paper from a small table on the side of the stage and banked it off Lenny's head. Lenny approached the two women and made contact with Susan's smokey blue eyes. If she didn't know he

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made movies, Susan would have taken him for a construction worker.

"So, you're the backups," he said.

Trish reached into her handbag for a bag of gumdrops, which she fancied when high. "Are we in the video too?" she asked.

"Sure, I need more to work with than this sorry bunch," Lenny said as he flicked his thumb toward the band.

"When are we shooting?" Susan asked.

"This Sunday, out on Long Island. I've got a van. I'll swing by and get you," Lenny said.

Alec returned to the stage and picked up his guitar. "We'd better start. We only have an hour of studio time," he said.

Susan and Trish slid past the bass guitarist, keyboard player, and drummer on the tiny stage and huddled around a mic on the left edge of the platform. The band ran through the song once so Susan and Trish knew when to come in. The sound engineer cued the group to begin. Trish was flat on the first couple of takes, and Susan was off the beat for the hand claps on the chorus. But they hit the notes and found their timing by take six. The engineer flashed a thumbs-up to Alec, and after listening to the playback, he and the band agreed to call it a session.

As the band packed their equipment to leave, Lenny walked up to Susan. "I'm going to Maine next week to shoot a film I'm working on. You'd be perfect for one of the parts."

"Yeah, I'm leaving for Michigan. My boyfriend's starting grad school, and I'm heading out there to join him," Susan said.

"Aw, hell. Tell him he can wait. What's in Michigan? Football and beer? This'll be a lot more fun. You'll be in the movies. You're like a Warhol girl!" he said.

Susan turned to Trish and they both laughed. "How many women have already turned you down?" Trish asked.

Lenny smiled and turned toward the door. "Think about it. And remember to bring floppy hats for the beach. I'll be by at nine," he said.

Susan turned to Trish, who tossed a cherry gumdrop into Susan's open mouth.

Susan was putting on sunscreen when Lenny arrived on Sunday. She let him in, and they made their way to the kitchen. He wore a Panama hat in a way that didn't embarrass him. Susan tried to picture Joel wearing one, but she shook her head. She decided Lenny would look good with a mustache. If she felt flirty at the beach, she'd tell him so.

"Where's Trish?" he asked.

"She spent the night with her friend, Luka. He's driving her there."

Susan picked up the pinging phone from the kitchen table and stared at the screen.

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"Ah, another text from football and beer?" Lenny asked.

"Joel's not into that. He's there for clinical psychology. His father's some big-time psychiatrist in Chicago. Joel's working a different wing of the business," she said.

"Alec told me he met you in a business class. How did you wind up with a psych major?"

"I saw this notice posted on a bulletin board looking for students for a research study, something about introverts and extroverts. They were paying a small stipend, so I figured why not. I go to the info session, and this burly guy with a red Paul Bunyan beard is there. That was Joel, leading the study for his professor. After the project was over, he texts me and we start going out. By the end of the semester, I was spending most nights at his place."

Lenny laughed and nudged his hat higher on his forehead. "We'd better go. The traffic's going to suck."

Susan grabbed her tote bag and pulled out a tan floppy beach hat. "Will this do?" she asked.

"Perfect. We're all set."

They walked to Lenny's van, which he had parked in a loading zone. He yanked a ticket from the windshield and muttered a profanity. "I'll just add it to Alec's tab," he said.

Lenny squirmed in his seat, tweaked the mirrors, and fiddled with the radio as the van crept through Manhattan. Once they cleared the bridge, the traffic thinned and Lenny relaxed into the ride. Susan reclined in her seat and rested her feet on the top of the dashboard.

"Alec told me you make porn films," she said.

Lenny smiled. "Ah, that video I brought to his party last week."

"Like the one in Maine you want me to do?"

"No, that's different. I do other stuff too."

"So, what's it about?" Susan asked.

"The porn film?"

"No, Maine."

Lenny took his eyes off the highway to look at Susan. "It's more of a thriller. A couple rents a place on the coast for a weekend getaway. Weird shit starts happening. They think it's her psycho ex-boyfriend, but it's the guy who rented them the place. Turns out he's a Norman Bates type." A car horn blared, and Lenny jerked the van back into its lane.

"So, sex and gore," Susan said.

"Something like Jordan Peele meets Tarantino. Don't worry. It's my cousin's house. I'm working her and her husband into it too."

"Ooh, I'm feeling better already."

Susan pulled her phone out of her shorts pocket. She scrolled to a mes-

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sage and held it close to Lenny. "It's from my brother, Ben. We have a new calf!"

"Where the hell is that?"

"My family's dairy farm...in Minnesota. When I was a kid, my dad would let me bottle feed them."

Lenny nodded. "Yeah, I figured you weren't from New York. How did you wind up here?"

"I wanted something more than milk and manure. You and Alec didn't stay in Brooklyn. We're all chasing something," she said.

Lenny turned to her. "Or someone."

Alec and his band were waiting when Susan and Lenny arrived at the beach parking lot. As they unloaded the equipment from Lenny's van, Trish and Luka pulled up. The group set out to find a stretch of beach away from the Sunday crowd to set up. Luka helped by positioning reflectors and retrieving filters from the equipment case. Lenny had scripted three minutes and twelve seconds of foolishness for the "Sunday at the Beach" video. He wanted Susan and Trish to tumble from the top of a dune but dropped the idea when he saw a sign warning of a five hundred dollar fine for trespassing on the berms.

After they had completed a few takes, the beach patrol pulled up. A barrel-chested man wearing sunglasses and a scowl got out of the vehicle. "Hey, you with the camera, what's going on here?" he shouted.

Susan broke from the rest of the group to join Lenny as he approached the officer, R. J. Ludlow, according to his ID tag. "We're shooting a music video," Lenny said.

"Music video. You have a permit?"

"Ah, no. We came out here to have some fun. I'm just filming it."

Susan edged closer to Lenny and the officer. "It's for our song, 'Sunday at the Beach.' We need a video to post, to get the word out," she said.

Ludlow scratched the back of his neck and drew in a raspy breath. Susan figured him for a two-pack-a-day guy. "See, this is a state park. You need a permit for any commercial activity," he said.

"Oh, I see," Lenny said.

"You see. Listen, I could write you up, but if you get your asses out of here, I'll let it go."

"Yeah, okay," Lenny said.

When Susan and Lenny returned to the group, Alec and his bandmates were chasing and splashing each other in the water. Trish and Luka had swum out to catch a breaker. Lenny waved his arms to get everyone's attention.

"That's it. We gotta get out of here. Prick said we need a permit."

Alec stepped out of the surf onto the wet sand. "Man, we have to do

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this again?" he asked.

"Nah, I think I got enough in those takes to put something together," Lenny said.

Susan joined Trish and Luka as they walked to the parking lot.

"Well, that was a big waste. Luka knows a place on East Twelfth still serving brunch. I'm starved," Trish said.

"Yeah, I'll be with you in a minute. Let me catch Lenny before he leaves," Susan said.

Susan walked up to Lenny as he was packing up his gear. "So, when are you leaving for Maine?" she asked.

"Tuesday, you in?" he said.

Susan brushed strands of hair away from her eyes. "Yeah, I'm in...but I'm not taking my clothes off."

Lenny grinned and shook his head. "Right. You're still a farm girl."

"And Trish is coming with us."

Lenny tossed his hat into the back of the van. "Sure, maybe I can work her into the story."

Susan settled into the back seat of Luka's car. Drained by the heat, she was happy he had set the a/c to max. Trish gathered her hair into a knot and turned around to face Susan. "Did you talk to him about Maine?" Trish asked.

"Yeah, he's leaving on Tuesday."

"What about Maine?" Luka asked.

Trish pulled a water bottle from her tote. "Lenny's filming a movie and asked Susan to be in it. I'm going with her. I need a vacation before classes start."

"What do you know about this guy?" Luka asked.

"Alec says he's okay. They grew up together in Brooklyn," Susan said through a yawn. "Wake me when we get to the restaurant."

She tried to sleep but kept thinking about Joel's last text: *Had dinner at a fantastic Greek place last night w/ dad. Says he and mom can't wait to meet you. Will visit us when we're settled in. Booked your flight yet?*

Joel reminded her of many of the boys she grew up with in Minnesota, guys who navigated life with an instruction manual, which they dutifully followed. Why become a name on someone's checklist? She took out her phone and texted Joel her reply: *Won't be coming. Off to Maine to become a porn star.*

Susan found the thrum of the traffic comforting. On summer trips to Lake of the Woods with her family, her mother tried to head off bickering between her and her brother by asking them to invent stories about the motorists along the way. She and Ben imagined the destinations and plans of the young families in minivans, workers in pickups, and elderly couples in behemoth sedans they passed on the highway. As she rode back to the

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city with Trish and Luka, Susan closed her eyes and created her own narrative, after Joel and beyond Lenny's frivolous movie. With each whoosh of a passing car, she filled in another possibility piece by piece.