

SWEET VALLEY CONFIDENTIAL

Francine Pascal

Excerpt

CHAPTER ONE

New York

Elizabeth had turned the key in the Fox lock, releasing a heavy metal bar that scraped across the inside of the front door with an impressive prison-gate sound, and was about to attack the Segal lock when the phone in the apartment started to ring. By the time she had opened the second lock and was sliding the key into the last one—this was New York, after all—the phone was on its fourth ring.

At almost midnight, it had to be the West Coast calling.

She could still grab it in time, but Elizabeth didn't hurry. Slow, with purpose. Slow, giving the internal anger and hurt time to shoot from zero to a hundred. It needed only seconds, like the start-up speed of a Maserati. Except it was never at zero. Not anymore. Hadn't been for the last eight months. And she couldn't imagine a time when it would ever be there again.

As always, the hurt overpowered the anger, and what welled up into her throat came with tears that choked her.

"You going to get that?" David Stephenson, the young man standing next to her, asked as he stretched his arm over her head to hold the door open. David was six-three and at her five-seven it was way over her head.

"That's okay," she managed, quickly ducking her face away from him, stealing a sliver of extra time as she put the doggie-bagged pork chop she was carrying carefully and more precisely than necessary down on the hall table. It gave her enough time to catch her breath and let the tears slide back down her throat.

And with that momentary respite came an irresistible, nasty need to satisfy the anger physically. All she had was her purse. It would do. She flung it as hard as she could into the hall chair and watched as the Prada knockoff hit the upholstered back, bounced off, and came to rest on the edge of the chair. A little dumb, but it was a surprisingly good release.

Like that embarrassing time a month ago on Broadway, when the fury escaped her mind into her mouth and she said, out loud, really loudly, "I hate you!" People turned, shocked and then interested; she quickly put her hand to her ear as if she were on a cell phone, and it became ordinary and they lost interest.

David had already walked into the living room, missing all the action behind him. “You have a landline? And an answering machine?”

“My mother. A going-away gift. She said it made her feel that I was safer. How, I don’t know. I think it made *her* feel safer.”

Elizabeth could hear own calm message playing in the background: “Please leave your name and number, and I’ll return your call as soon as possible. Thank you.”

“I’m just going to throw this in the fridge,” she said, scooping up the doggie bag, back in control. “Would you like a glass of wine?”

By now she was halfway through the narrow, sparsely furnished living room, heading into the safety of the very small jerry-built kitchen, with its squeezed-in mini refrigerator, two-burner stove, tiny oven, and an outsized, badly chipped, probably prewar like the rest of the building, porcelain sink deep enough to wash babies as well as dishes.

“Sure. Okay. With a couple of ice cubes, please.”

“Lizzie. Pick up.” The woman’s voice on the machine was plaintive. “Please. I really need to talk to you.”

Of course, Elizabeth could hear it from the kitchen. Could she ever miss that voice? Now so sweet, so seductive, pleading softly, spreading out the vowels, almost songlike. Liz...zie...

That voice, so heavy with love. Love me, it said, forgive me, so I can put you out of the way and get back to my own life.

“I forgot to fill the ice tray, but the wine’s really cold.”

Elizabeth’s voice was so calm David thought maybe she hadn’t heard the message.

“It sounds important. Don’t you want to get it?”

Now Elizabeth was back in the room carrying two glasses of chilled white wine. David was sitting on the small low couch, so low his knees almost obscured his face.

She answered him completely composed, as if she were reciting dialogue in a play. “Actually, no.”

It had everything but the English accent.

David’s cheeks creased in a slightly embarrassed smile that pulled in his breath with a little hiss; he was politely uncomfortable, knowing he had stumbled into something too personal. “Sorry.”

“That’s okay. Forget it.” She brushed it off, but there was no way to hide her flushed face.

“I have to tell you. It’s really weird,” he said.

“Because I didn’t take the call?”

“No, because the voice...it sounded just like you.”

No wonder. How many times over the years had she herself been fooled by a recording? For just a flash she would think, Was that me? Or worse, when she had to pick herself out of a family picture. How pathetic is it not to recognize yourself?

Elizabeth handed David his wine without comment, put hers down on the low table next to her least favorite chair, comfortable but covered in a scratchy plaid fabric.

Normally, she never sat there, but the choice was either next to David on the loveseat, which would surely be more intimate than she felt right now, or the scratchy chair. She wasn’t in the scratchy chair two seconds before she bobbed up and reached for the stereo which, because the room was so small, was within arm’s distance.

“You like Beyoncé?”

“Really,” he said. “I mean, you could have fooled me. It was identical.” He wasn’t going to let it go so easily.

Instead of the scratchy chair, Elizabeth sat back down next to David on the loveseat, making the only move that could detour the direction of the conversation. A direction she seriously didn’t want. Certainly not with this semistranger, a guy she’d barely spoken to before tonight. Her boss.

It worked. He turned to her, delighted, a little surprised at the possible gift he was not expecting, all thoughts of the telephone message wiped out of his head.

They worked together at the online magazine *Show Survey: Off Broadway in New York*, a weekly struggling along with only a smattering of sponsors and even fewer paid advertisements. It was put out by a passionate staff of three dedicated theater lovers and the newcomer, Elizabeth Wakefield. The printed copy which they left at hotels was not much better than a throwaway, but Elizabeth was grateful to be part of the venture. Not having much experience in theater, she’d lucked into the job eight months ago after two frantic days in New York, one of which, the worst, was her twenty-seventh birthday. She celebrated alone, then lied to her parents that she’d spent the day with a couple of old friends from Sweet Valley who had moved to New York. Her mother asked who they were, but when Elizabeth sidestepped the question, she very kindly and wisely didn’t pursue it. In fact, her parents had been very gentle and understanding. Never asking the wrong questions. Even the two times they came to see her in New York they only talked about her work.

Actually, it was David who had hired her. He and his partner, Don Barren, both in their early thirties, both trained accountants who hated the confinement of numbers, both theater enthusiasts, had self-financed *Show Survey* about two years ago as a kind of Zagat ratings guide for Off Broadway. No critics, just audiences. Elizabeth was hired to interview people coming out of the theater and write up paragraph descriptions of shows, just as Zagat did for restaurants.

There wasn't enough staff money for Elizabeth to see all the shows, so they had arranged to buy tickets the day of the show at the tickets booth on Forty-seventh Street, and only the cheapest ones at that, and only for shows without an intermission. If there was an intermission, Elizabeth would sneak in free for the second act. Though she worried in the beginning, she never once got caught. She had a story ready about how her brother was in the cast and had told her just to use his name. Of course, she always found an ensemble name in advance for her "brother." So far, she hadn't had to use it.

All printed copies of *Show Survey* were free, given away at hotels and restaurants, but it was beginning to catch on, and they had picked up a few more online sponsors. Recently they had added interviews with everyone involved in the theater—actors, writers, producers, directors, even ushers. Just this week David had given Elizabeth her first interview assignment: a playwright named Will Connolly.

Tonight wasn't a real date with David. It was more like, Hey, you eat yet? No? How about we grab a bite at McMullen's? Hence, the leftover pork chop. It was okay, but somehow Elizabeth had gotten stuck with the tip. David was attractive enough—tall with a very good body, every muscle well worked out at least five times a week at a local gym—but the tip thing was a turnoff.

Additionally, sleeping with the boss was a famously bad idea. In her four years at the *Sweet Valley News*, Elizabeth had never done it. Well, of course, Todd was in her life then.

Still, David did have a great body, and maybe the tip thing was accidental. Right from the start Elizabeth could tell he was attracted to her. It had probably helped in the hiring, though she had decent credentials, but a little gratitude wouldn't hurt. He was, after all, a nice guy.

A nice guy she didn't feel like sleeping with.

On the other hand, in the eight months she had been in New York she hadn't slept with anyone but Russ Klein, a friend of the rental agent for the building. With Elizabeth's permission, the agent had given Russ her e-mail address. They e-mailed back and forth for a couple of days, and he seemed like a nice guy. Like Elizabeth, he was new to New York; he had come four months earlier for a job as a trader on Wall Street. Coffee turned into a three-week miniaffair spread out over two months. Definitely rebound stuff. She cried after every orgasm. How embarrassing, but he pretended not to notice. Russ was not a man to complicate a good thing with feelings.

Elizabeth had thought maybe they'd stay friends after—not that they had such a great connection—but she was in the market for new friends, people with no association to Sweet

Valley. Whenever anyone asked where she came from, she said California. They immediately thought L.A., and she didn't disabuse them.

But it didn't happen, the friendship with Russ. His sister was in the middle of a divorce, and though Elizabeth thought she was good at hiding her own problems, he sensed another sad story and got out of the way.

She could feel David staring at her while she feigned deep involvement with her wineglass. Eventually, she would have to turn toward him. That would be the moment. The turn would be a Yes, let's have sex, or a No way.

Beyoncé was having her heart broken in soft sounds.

I don't wanna play the brokenhearted girl

A little more of this and she would cry *before* the orgasm.

"That was my sister. I mean, on the phone." At the moment it seemed the lesser of two evils. Elizabeth stood, reached out, hit the next button, and Justin Timberlake was in love.

Because I can see us holding hands...

She had to remember to change the CDs.

"We had a little something, nothing important. You know, sisters..."

Now she was standing, safe, physically having made the decision not to have sex with him. "I'm doing the Will Connolly interview Thursday; how long do you want the piece?"

David hesitated for a moment, adjusting to the loss, then spoke. "Seven hundred fifty words should be enough. Don't go more than a thousand." He finished his wine.

"Another glass?"

"No, that's okay. I'm running early tomorrow morning."

Pushing himself off the low couch was like doing a bench press, but he did it flawlessly.

There were a few awkward seconds when Elizabeth opened the door, but they pulled it together, and by the time David said, "See you tomorrow," and patted her head, they were back to business.

Elizabeth leaned against the closed door. A faint hint of regret was wiped out by relief.

“Stupid!” she said to the stereo as she clicked Timberlake off, walked to the kitchen, and refilled her wineglass.

Almost one in the morning. But really only 10:00 P.M. She always did that—went back to real time. Eight months and she was still taking off those damn three hours. Would she ever truly be free of Sweet Valley?

That was minor compared to being free of being a twin. How to explain something as natural and unlearned as seeing or feeling when you’ve never known anything different? It was always that way with a matching half: you only knew it by its absence.

She remembered a poem they had found when they were about ten called “The Twins.”

In form and feature, face and limb,

I grew so like my brother,

That folks got taking me for him,

And us for one another.

They both loved that poem, especially the ending:

When I died, they came and buried brother Jim.

Would anyone else ever delight in that silly poem?

Like the twins of that poem, Elizabeth and Jessica Wakefield appeared interchangeable, if you considered only their faces.

And what faces they were.

Gorgeous. Absolutely amazing. The kind you couldn’t stop looking at. Their eyes were shades of aqua that danced in the light like shards of precious stones, oval and fringed with thick, light brown lashes long enough to cast a shadow on their cheeks. Their silky blond hair, the cascading kind, fell just below their shoulders. And to complete the perfection, their rosy lips looked as if they were penciled on. There wasn’t a thing wrong with their figures, either. It was as if billions of possibilities all fell together perfectly.

Twice.

Elizabeth finished the last of the wine in her glass, undressed and slipped into her oversized SV T-shirt, and curled up on the couch.

The outside noises of a New York apartment in Midtown Manhattan were a constant: garbage trucks, standing buses spewing the sounds of endless pollution, an occasional police siren, a vagrant nut screaming obscenities, and now and then Con Edison digging. But in the last eight months it had become white noise for Elizabeth Wakefield, barely registering as more than background, never disturbing the silence of the apartment enough to keep her from feeling alone.

Especially tonight.

Bereft and abandoned, Elizabeth was overwhelmed with feelings of loss, with the ache that had been chewing at her insides day in and day out. The betrayal. Without trying, she'd become the lyrics to every sad love song.

That he didn't love her anymore should have been the most important part, but it paled next to his deceit and betrayal. Elizabeth winced when she thought how blind she'd been, what a fool she must have looked like all that time.

And all that time may have been years.

When the light finally came, she'd followed her first instinct and fled. And now here she was, self-exiled, stranded alone in strange territory.

Everything about New York was unfamiliar. To begin with, the apartment was old. Growing up in Sweet Valley, nothing was old. Old was more than thirty years. And nothing seemed to have more than a couple of coats of paint. Not enough so that you could see it. Here, the old paint, maybe eighty years' worth, was so thick it looked like plaster, but bumpier and more uneven. No sharp corners anywhere. And no matter how much she cleaned, the dirt seemed painted in. Nothing had that bright, crisp feeling of home and what used to be.

She didn't even have any real friends. Sure, she'd gotten to know some people, even a woman in her building, but there was no one she trusted. Good. About time she learned not to trust.

It was still early enough to call her best friend, the only friend she still had from Sweet Valley, Bruce Patman. It still made her smile when she thought of that impossibly arrogant and conceited boy of high school. Actually, she could hardly remember him that way anymore.

She could call. It wasn't even eleven there. Not that she hadn't called him a lot later than that. In fact, there were a few three-in-the-morning beauties when she first arrived in New York—whiny and complaining—she was almost too embarrassed to remember them.

She could call him now. But she wasn't going to. Not when she was feeling so low. He took it too seriously, like a good friend would, and she just didn't want to upset him. Bruce Patman upset by someone else's trouble? That almost made her smile.

But she didn't call and she didn't smile.

The room was still. And silent. Until she hit the replay button on the answering machine.

“Lizzie. Pick up. Please. I really need to talk to you.”

Never!

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THIS IS A WORK OF FICTION. ALL OF THE CHARACTERS, ORGANIZATIONS, AND EVENTS PORTRAYED IN THIS STORY ARE EITHER PRODUCTS OF THE AUTHOR’S IMAGINATION OR ARE USED FICTITIOUSLY.

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