

“Oh hurray, buzzy, buzzy, buzzy,” sang a loud tinkling voice.

The inane song reached, like a long-handled hook, into Delilah’s enjoyable dream and yanked her from the blessed retreat of sleep.

“What the . . . ?” Delilah muttered as she sat up in the middle of her rumpled flannel sheets, blinking at the sun punching through gaps in her louvered blinds.

“You make me feel so perky,” the singer continued.

Delilah threw her pillow at the inadequate wall that separated her apartment from the one next door. The pillow made a satisfying *thump* when it hit a framed poster depicting a serene beachy scene. Delilah looked at the poster with longing; it represented the view she wished she had.

But Delilah didn’t have an ocean view. She had a view of dumpsters and the filthy backside of the twenty-four-hour diner where she worked. She didn’t have serenity, either.

She had her annoying neighbor, Mary, who continued to sing at the top of her lungs: “Thank you, thank you, thank you for starting my day.”

“Who sings about alarm clocks?” Delilah snapped, groaning and rubbing her eyes. It was bad enough having a singing neighbor; it was a thousand times worse that the singing neighbor made up her own stupid songs and always started her day with one about an alarm clock. Weren’t alarm clocks bad enough on their own?

Speaking of which. Delilah looked at her clock. “What?” She catapulted from her bed.

Grabbing the little battery-powered digital clock, Delilah glared at its face, which read 6:25 a.m.

“What good are you?” Delilah demanded, tossing the clock onto her bright blue comforter.

Delilah had a pathological hatred of alarm clocks. It was a vestige of the ten months she spent in her last foster

home nearly five years before, but life in the real world required the use of them, something Delilah was still learning to deal with. Though now she'd discovered something she hated worse than alarm clocks: *alarm clocks that didn't work.*

Delilah's phone rang. When she picked it up, she didn't wait for the caller to speak. Talking over the sound of clattering plates and a hum of voices, she said, "I know, Nate. I overslept. I can be there in thirty minutes."

"I already called in Rianne to cover. You can take her two o'clock shift."

Delilah sighed. She hated that shift. It was the really busy one.

Actually, she hated all the shifts. She hated shifts, period.

As a shift manager at the diner, she was expected to work whichever shift best fit the overall schedule. So her "days" varied from six to two, two to ten, and ten to six. Her body clock was so messed up that she was practically sleeping while she was awake and awake while she was sleeping. She lived in a state of perpetual exhaustion. Her mind was always murky, like fog had rolled in through her ears. Not only did the fog dampen her ability to think clearly, it also made it difficult for her brain to interface with her senses. It seemed as though her vision, hearing, and taste buds were always a little off.

"Delilah? Can I count on you to be here at two?" Nate barked in Delilah's ear.

“Yeah. Yes. I’ll be there.”

Nate made a growling sound and hung up.

“I love you, too,” Delilah said into the phone before she set it down.

Delilah looked at her queen-size bed. The thick mattress and her special memory foam pillow beckoned like a languid lover, inviting her back to bed. Delilah so wanted to give in. She loved sleep. She loved just being in her bed. It was like a cocoon—an adult version of the blanket forts she liked to build when she was little. She would spend all day in her bed if she could. She wished she could find one of those stay-at-home jobs that let her work in bed in her pajamas. It wouldn’t be ideal for her employer, because she’d rather just lounge about and sleep, but it would be better for her health. She could set her own shifts if she worked for herself.

But all her searching for such a job had found nothing but work-at-home scams. The only place that would hire her after she and Richard split up was the diner. All because she had a juvie record and had dropped out of high school for reasons she barely remembered anymore. Life sucked.

Delilah looked at her useless alarm clock. No. She couldn’t risk it. She had to stay awake.

But how?

Next door, Mary was on at least a third repeat of her stupid wake-up song. Delilah knew it would do no good to bang on the wall or go next door to ask Mary to keep it

down. Mary wasn't cooking with all her burners. Delilah wasn't sure what was wrong with the woman; she just knew that her previous complaints had disappeared into the void that seemed to make up the mind hidden under Mary's thick gray hair.

Delilah didn't want to stay in her apartment and listen to Mary. She might as well do something useful.

Shuffling into her tiny pink-tiled bathroom, Delilah brushed her teeth and dressed in gray sweats and a red T-shirt. She figured she might as well go for a jog. It had been at least three days since she'd gotten exercise. Maybe that had something to do with the fog in her head.

Nah. She knew that wasn't true. She'd tried exercise as a solution to her constant exhaustion. It didn't seem to matter how much she worked out. Her body just didn't like bouncing from one schedule to another like a hummingbird flitting about.

"It's just because it's winter," Delilah's best friend, Harper, said. "When spring comes, you'll wake up, just like the flowers."

Delilah had doubted that, and rightfully so. Spring was here. Everything was blooming . . . except Delilah's energy levels.

But whether it would help her head or not, Delilah put on her running shoes and tucked her keys, phone, some money, driver's license, and a credit card into her running pouch, which she then hung around her neck.

Leaving her little noisy apartment—Mary was still singing—Delilah stepped out into a carpeted hallway that smelled like bacon, coffee, and glue. What was with the glue?

Delilah snorted as she trotted down three flights of narrow, uneven steps. The super was probably fixing the wall or something. She wasn't exactly living in an upscale place.

Two sullen, slouchy teens ambled through the building's lobby as Delilah reached it. They eyed her. She ignored them, stepping through the scratched gray metal door just in time to watch the sun duck behind a fluffy white cloud.

It was one of those bright, breezy spring days that Harper loved and Delilah hated. Maybe if she lived on the coast or in a forest, she could appreciate the happy sun and the sprightly air currents. Surrounded by nature and maybe some blossoming flowers, such a day would feel right. But here?

Here in this urban conglomeration of strip malls, machine shops, car dealerships, vacant lots, and low-income housing, *bright and breezy* wasn't pleasant; it was jarring. A tiara would look more suitable on a pig.

Trying to ignore smells of rotting lettuce, exhaust, and rancid frying oil, Delilah propped her foot on the side of the empty flower planter in front of her gray-walled boxy building. Maybe it would feel more like spring if the planters were growing flowers instead of rocks. Delilah stretched, then shook her head at her negativity.

"You know better," she scolded herself.

Setting off at a medium-paced jog, Delilah pointed herself north, which would take her through the nearest housing area, where she could run past houses and trees instead of struggling businesses and cars.

She needed to get out of this dark spiral she was in. She'd had enough therapy when she was in her teens to know that she had an "obsessive personality"; once she latched onto a perspective, there was no unlatching her. Right now, she was stuck on the idea that her life sucked. It was going to continue to suck if she didn't pick a new idea.

As her feet met the uneven sidewalk, Delilah tried to clear the fog from her brain by thinking happy thoughts. "Every day, I'm getting better and better," she chanted. After ten rounds or so of this affirmation, she was starting to feel snarly. So she traded affirmations for an image of the life she wanted to be living. That made her think of the life she *had* been living with Richard, which just dropped her further into the negativity pit.

When Richard decided he wanted to replace his dark-haired, dark-eyed Mrs. with a blonde, blue-eyed wife, Delilah didn't have many options. She'd signed a prenuptial agreement before marrying Richard. She had nothing going into the marriage, and she got nothing in the divorce. Well, not *nothing*. She received enough of a settlement to get her an apartment, some secondhand furniture,

and her fifteen-year-old tan compact sedan. She got these after she found the one place that was willing to hire her and train her. Given her stunning résumé of “completed half of twelfth grade,” “babysat,” and “worked in a fast-food restaurant,” she was lucky to get what she got. And, awful hours aside, the job had been good to her. Nate had sent her to management training, and she had climbed the ladder from server to shift manager in just a few months. At twenty-three, she was the youngest shift manager in the restaurant.

“See?” Delilah panted. “Things are looking up.”

She clung to that tenuously positive thought as she jogged through the ratty old neighborhood that backed onto an industrial park. The neighborhood was too run-down to be called pretty, but it was filled with beautiful old maple trees and tall sinewy poplars that swayed in the gentle wind coming up the street. All the trees were filled with light-green new growth. The tender leaves encouraged more hopeful thoughts, if only for a minute or two.

She wondered if the people who lived in the area ever let the trees inspire them. Looking around, she doubted it. A few listless kids were waiting for the yellow school buses that belched diesel fumes as they came chugging up behind Delilah. An old guy with a shiny bald head mowed a yard full of weeds, and a woman whose attitude appeared to be worse than Delilah’s stood on her front porch glaring into a coffee mug.