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THERE'S AN OLD saying about stories, and how there are always three versions of them: *yours*, *mine*, and *the truth*. The guy who first said it worked in the film business, but it holds true for journalism too.

We're not really supposed to take sides. We're supposed to deal in facts. Facts add up to truth.

Fact: Robert Evans—producer, studio exec, and actor, who coined that catchy mantra about the truth—was married seven times.

Fact: I, Alice Scott—staff writer for *The Scratch*, aspiring biographer, not much else—am not even officially the girlfriend of the man I've been dating for seven months.

Fact: At five feet and nine inches tall, Robert Evans was the exact same height as I am.

Fact: My entire life is quite possibly about to change, and instead of sprinting up the walkway to the quaint picket fence separating me from a lifelong dream, I'm sitting in my rental car, blasting air-conditioning and reading the IMDb page of a man whose name I'd

never heard three minutes ago, because his quote about stories popped into my head and also because I'm stalling.

I'm more excited than nervous, but there are still a *great* deal of nerves vibrating through me. With one last deep breath, I turn off the car and pop the door open.

Immediately the dense midday heat of a Georgia summer hits me from all sides, a familiar and deeply loved sensation that's only improved by the salty sea breeze sweeping in off the water surrounding Little Crescent Island.

I double-check that I have my notebook, voice recorder, and pens, then bump the door shut and stoop to check my rapidly dampening bangs in the side mirror.

I try to school my grin into an expression of neutrality. It's important that I play this cool.

Fact: I have never played it cool in my life.

I open the gate, my sandals slapping the stone walkway as I follow its curve around a wall of foliage: black needlerush and cabbage palm, prickly pear and glasswort, and—my favorite—live oak.

Eleven years in Los Angeles, but every time I see a Georgian live oak, I still think, *Home*.

A charming turquoise house on wooden stilts comes into view, and I climb a handful of worn wooden steps to reach its hot-pink front door, every inch of which has been hand-painted with white swirls.

I'm rewarded with a suitably eccentric doorbell. I mean, it looks like a normal doorbell, but when I hit it, it sounds like wind blowing through chimes.

I'm still mid-preparatory breath when the door swings open and a short, gray-haired woman in a faded flannel shirt and jeans scowls out at me.

"Hi!" I stick my hand out. "I'm Alice. Scott."

She stares back, her eyes pale blue and hair cropped short.

“With *The Scratch*?” I add, in case that jogs anything.

She doesn’t even blink.

“I mean, not *with The Scratch*. I’m on staff there, but I’m here about the book?”

Her expression remains placid. For a second, I’m forced to contemplate the possibility that all of this has been an elaborate ruse, perhaps orchestrated by this woman’s middle-aged son, from his computer in her basement, where he spends his days shooting off emails and phone calls to gullible writers like me, pitching his voice upward and adding a light shake to pass himself off as a woman in her eighties.

It wouldn’t even be the first time.

I clear my throat and refresh my smile. “I’m sorry. Are you Margaret?”

She doesn’t *look* like her, but then again, the last pictures I’ve seen of the woman I’m supposed to be meeting are easily three decades old. So for all I know, this *could* be the once-glamorous, nearly legendary (at least to a certain subset of people, including me) Margaret Grace Ives.

*The Tabloid Princess*. Known as such both because she was the heiress to the Ives media empire *and* because of those years when her own celebrity status earned her near-constant attention from the paparazzi and gossip columnists.

The woman barks out a loud, genuine laugh and widens the door. “I’m Jodi,” she says with the faint hint of an indeterminate accent—German, maybe. “Come on in.”

I step into the cool foyer, the smell of lemon and mint in the air. Jodi doesn’t pause or even slow for me, just marches straight into the house, leaving me to pull the door shut and bound after her.

"This place is beautiful," I chirp.

"It's hotter than hell, and Dracula has nothing on the mosquitoes," she says.

I spare a thought for Robert Evans: *Yours, mine, and the truth.*

At the end of one narrow hallway, she turns down another, the house an airy, bright labyrinth of whitewashed beadboard and sea-glass-colored accents ending in a spacious sitting room whose walls are seventy percent window.

"You wait here, and I'll go grab *madame* for you," Jodi says, with a detectable edge of amusement in her voice. She unlocks one of the glass back doors and steps into the yard, a vaster and wilder garden than the front, with a small swimming pool set off to one side.

I take the opportunity to make a slow lap around the room, still buzzing *and* smiling big enough that my jaw has started to ache. I set my things down on the low rattan coffee table and cross my arms to keep myself from touching anything as I wander. Art crowds every inch of the walls, and plants hang in clusters in front of the windows, still more in clay pots on the floor. A thatched fan twirls lazily overhead, and books—most of them about gardening and horticulture—sit in messy stacks and face down with cracked spines, covering every antique-wooden surface available.

It's beautiful. I'm already mentally drafting how I'd describe it. The only problem is, I'm still not convinced I'll have a *reason* to describe it.

Because so far there's nothing to indicate this is Margaret Ives's house. No photos of her illustrious family. No copies, old or new, of any of their dozens of magazines or newspapers. No framed illustrations of the opulent "House of Ives" where she'd been raised on the California coast, and none of her late husband's Grammys on the mantel either. Nothing concrete to link her to the now-collapsed media juggernaut, *or* the joys and tragedies the Ives family's competing

publications had so loved to catalog back when Margaret was still on top of the world.

The door swings open again, and I spin to face Jodi, working myself up to demand answers about who exactly invited me to do eleven hours of air travel plus forty-five minutes in a rented Kia Rio for this meeting.

But then I see the woman standing just inside.

She's shrunk a few inches, gained some weight—much of it muscle, I'd guess—and her once jet-black hair is now a mix of mousy brown and silver.

She's been scrubbed clear of any glamour, or air of money and power, but that sly sparkle in her blue eyes is exactly the same as in every photograph I've seen of her, the elusive, unnamable *something* that had turned her from *heiress to a newspaper fortune to princess of the cover page*.

"Well, hello there." The warmth in Margaret's voice surprises me, just like it did during our few brief phone calls in the weeks leading up to this trip. "You must be Alice."

She shucks off her gardening gloves and tosses them across the arm of the nearest white rattan chair as she strides barefoot toward me, dusting her hands off on her caftan before stretching one out to shake mine.

"You're her," I say. Every eloquent or even *serviceable* sentence I've ever put together has been typed out slowly, over time. The ones that come directly from my mouth usually sound more like this.

She laughs. "I was under the impression that was the point."

She gives my hand a little squeeze, then drops it and gestures for me to sit.

"No, it is." I lower myself to the couch. She takes the chair opposite me. "I was just trying not to get my hopes up! It didn't work. Never does. But I keep trying."

“Really?” She sounds amused. “I tend to have the opposite problem. Can’t help but expect the worst from people.” She flashes a smile. It’s both dazzling and sad. Sazzling.

That, for example, would not make it to a typed-and-edited sentence. But the point is, I can see it hidden back beneath those sparkly irises of hers somewhere: the truth. The one we’ve never heard before.

What it was like to be born into a world of silver spoons and golden platters, of actors drunkenly swimming fully clothed through your indoor pool and politicians making handshake agreements across your antique dinner table.

How it felt to fall in love with rock ‘n’ roll royalty, and for him to love you back, wildly.

And, of course, about the *other* things. The scandal, the cult, the trial, the accident.

And finally, twenty years ago, Margaret’s disappearance.

*What* happened, but also *why*.

And why now, after all this time, she’s open to finally telling the story.

Behind Margaret, the door squeals open and Jodi reenters the house, toting a bucket of lemons. “Thank you, Jodi,” Margaret calls, without turning around.

Jodi grunts. I could not *begin* to guess whether the two women are friends, romantic partners, an employer and employee, or mortal enemies who happen to be roommates.

Margaret crosses one leg over the other. “Cute nails,” she says, jutting her chin toward my hands in my lap.

The moment of connection makes me near giddy. “They’re press-ons.” I lean forward so she can get a better look at the little strawberry-printed designs.

“I’d bet you’re the kind of person,” she says, “who tries to find beauty in everything.”

"Don't you?" I ask, intrigued by the soft, sad smile that feathers across her lips.

She gives a half-realized shrug that reads less like *I don't know* and more like *I don't like that question*.

Then, like the Ives she is, she neatly reroutes the dialogue: "So how exactly would this work? *If* I agreed to do it."

I don't let the *if* discourage me. I know she isn't one hundred percent in just yet, and I don't blame her. "However you want it to," I promise.

She arches one brow. "What if I want it to work how it would usually work?"

"Well," I say, "I haven't done anything exactly like this before. Usually I'm doing features and profiles. I spend a couple days, or weeks, with a person. And I write about my observations, crack some jokes. It's an 'outsider looking in' perspective. This would be different.

"It'd be about getting *your* experience onto the page. 'Insider looking out.' That would take a lot longer, months probably, just for the first round of research to be able to write a draft and figure out where my holes are. I'd rent a place nearby, and we'd have a schedule, times for sit-down interviews, but also time for me to just shadow you."

"Shadow me," she repeats thoughtfully.

"Follow you around in your normal life," I clarify. "See what you grow in your garden, who you spend your time with. Hang out with you and Jodi, and any other friends you've got in town."

Margaret's chin juts forward, her eyes closing on her own quick, blunt laugh. "Do me a favor and say that again when she gets back in here."

Mere seconds later, Jodi comes streaming into the room, carrying two glasses of lemonade. She plops them both down on the coffee table.

"Thanks, Jodi," I say, determined to win her over.

She marches back out the way she came in.

"I'd die without you," Margaret calls teasingly after her.

"Don't I know it," Jodi shouts, before disappearing through the doorway.

I take a tiny sip of the lemonade, which turns into a long gulp, because it's amazing, fresh and crisp with torn mint leaves swirling around along with the ice cubes.

I set the glass down and force myself to get back to business. "Look, there are a lot more experienced writers you could pair up with. There are hundreds of people who would push me in front of a bus to get this job, and honestly, I'd understand it if they did."

"Troubling," Margaret says.

"My point is, if you're ready to tell your story, you deserve to have it told exactly how you want it to be. It needs to be yours, no one else's. And that only works if you're doing this with someone you completely trust. But I can promise you, if you end up wanting to write this book together, *your voice* will be front and center. That's my top priority. Making sure it's your story."

Her smile fades, her face sobering. The crinkles at the corners of her eyes and the folds at the edges of her mouth deepen, proof of an entire life lived, not just those first thirty-three years she spent in the public eye, but the thirty she spent as a recluse after that, and the twenty since she vanished.

"What if," she says slowly, "that's not what I want?"

I shake my head. "I'm not sure I'm following."

"What if I don't want it to be my version of the story?" she asks. "What if I want the whole awful truth? What if I'm done living with my version of events, where I'm always the hero, and I want to sit down and see things in black and white for once?"

Her question catches me off guard. If anything, I'm used to having to reassure my subjects that I'm not there to twist everything

they say into a brutal takedown piece. That I *want* to see the full picture, right down to their humanity.

Margaret's brow arches at my hesitancy. "That a problem?"

I scoot to the edge of the couch. "It's how you want it told," I repeat. "If that's what you want, that's what we do."

She considers for a long moment. "One more question."

"Anything." She could ask for my most embarrassing sex story, and I'd trot it out right now. I need her to understand she's safe with me.

Her gray eyebrow arches wickedly again. "Are you always this perky?"

I let out a breath. This is too lengthy and important a job to kick things off with a lie.

"Yes," I say. "Yes, I am."

Her chortle is interrupted by a sound like wind blowing through glass chimes. Margaret glances at the driftwood clock on the Grammy-free mantel.

"That'll be my two o'clock." She sweeps onto her feet. "You've given me a lot to think about, Alice Scott."

I bounce up onto mine too, grabbing my unused notebook and recorder. "Either way," I say, "thank you. Seriously."

"For *what*?" she says, sounding genuinely baffled as she leads me back through the maze of hallways.

"For today," I say. "For giving me a chance." For the fact that I *finally* have something work related to tell my mom that won't make her eyes glaze over with disinterest.

"It's just a chance," Margaret reminds me as we reach the front door. "Don't thank me for that. Everyone deserves that much. And I've still got a couple other branches to shake, see what falls out."

"I completely understand, but—" My words drop off as she swings the bright pink door open, and I realize how wrong I was.

I did not completely understand.

Margaret's two o'clock is standing on the top step in slate-colored chinos and a white T-shirt.

It's not the outfit that makes my heart sink and all the blood drain from my face—though the idea of wearing long pants in weather like this certainly does give me pause.

It's the hulking, dark-eyed, hawk-nosed man wearing it.

Hayden Anderson.

Four years ago, you might've said *Hayden Anderson the music journalist*, and that would've been a fair summation. But if he were *still* just a music journalist, I wouldn't know his name, let alone what he looked like. I have a decent memory, but I don't make a habit of memorizing *Rolling Stone* bylines.

However.

He's no longer just *Hayden Anderson the music journalist*.

Now, he's *Hayden Anderson the Pulitzer Prize-winning biographer*. The one who wrote that doorstep-length gut punch about the Americana singer with dementia.

Now he's the Hayden Anderson that Margaret just referred to as another branch to shake. A more successful, more well-known, more *more* branch.

His dark eyes cut from me (expression blank, he doesn't recognize me; why would he? I am an unimpressive branch) to Margaret (in whom he is only marginally less disinterested) as his low rumble of a voice says, "Am I early?"

"You're exactly on time," Margaret says warmly. "Alice was just going."

I would describe the expression on Hayden's face as a distinct mien of *who the hell is Alice*, like he's already forgotten there's another person standing immediately in front of him, or possibly didn't actually register me the first time our eyes met.

"Hi!" I recover enough grip on my organs for my heart to be pumping blood again, my lungs to be pulling in oxygen, and my hand to be reaching out to shake his.

He lifts his slowly, as if he'd like some more information before he agrees to physical contact.

"I was just leaving," I promise, and that seems to do the trick. Finally, his very large, very warm, very dry hand folds around mine, dips once, and drops back to his side.

"Thanks again," I tell Margaret over my shoulder as I hurry out onto the sidewalk.

"I'll be in touch," she tells me, and I force a smile, like my heart isn't a little bit breaking and I'm *not* on the verge of tears over the dream job I'm ninety-nine percent sure I've just missed out on.