

## A RISING STAR

She danced in front of abandoned store windows and stared at herself in restroom mirrors. She was aware of lingering glances from boys at school and she reveled in a new sense of herself. Her dewy skin glowed, and her large exotic eyes flashed flirtatious glances back at the boys, as she walked to her classes.

At fourteen, Sasha was alive with energy and possibilities. Her body was full of rhythm, and a definitive urgency coursing throughout her body. It was hard for her to stay still.

Sasha dreamed of the bright future her beauty would bring her. She wanted to be a model and a designer. The year before, she won an art contest for the school's most innovative fabric design. Sasha imagined herself in Paris showing off her new line of designer clothes with expensive price tags. Her dreams filled her days and evenings with hopes that had previously eluded her.

The phone rang and Sasha twirled in pirouettes to answer it. Her shoulder length curls twisted and turned with her bright cascading movements.

"Hi Mom, I knew it was you. What, I can't hear you. Where are you? There's so much noise in the background. Who are all those people anyway? What? You're not coming home again? Why not? I thought you were bringing dinner. There's nothing to eat here. Great mom, that's a bogus excuse and you know it. Forget it! I never know when I can believe you. What kind of mother are you anyway? Screw you too! Don't come home, I don't need you!"

Sasha slammed the phone down with a violent vengeance. She felt like she was splintering inside. Her mother had not been home for three days.

By the end of the following two weeks, the phone was shut off. Sasha kept to her regular schedule. She went to school but it was hard to concentrate. She thought about her mother and wondered where she was. Who could she turn to? Lunch time was excruciating. She had no lunch money. Her mother had not signed her up for free lunches, and no one seemed to notice her solitary pain. Dinners consisted of free potato chips and popcorn she snuck from hotel lobbies.

In the evenings Sasha listened for her mother. Every sound of footsteps or doors opening made her pulse quicken. She cried herself to sleep when she realized she would wake up to another day without her mother. The studio apartment was dismal and depressing to her. Everything dimmed in the grayness enveloping her.

Sasha came home one afternoon and found a large box with canned soups, beans, and peanut butter in it. There was also a loaf of bread, but rats had already chewed into it. Sasha opened the bread and slathered peanut butter onto two slices, gulping them down as she inspected her gift box. Beneath the cans was a note from her mother:

"Dear Sasha,

I have found a new job. I will be living with other people for awhile. Please keep going to school and do your best. I will bring you more food next week. I love you, Mom."

Sasha's rage overcame her. She threw cans at the walls. She broke a lamp. She broke another one. There were shards of glass everywhere. Sasha screamed. Her entire body shuddered. She picked up a piece of glass and tore open her skin. The sight of

## A RISING STAR

herself bleeding made her feel better. She slashed more cuts into herself and stared to laugh uncontrollably.

When the next week arrived, there was a light knock on Sasha's door early one evening. The fading sun was lighting the studio with golden hues, and Sasha jumped up in anticipation. When Sasha answered the door, she hoped there would be another food box. Instead, there was a well dressed man in a suit wearing lots of jewelry. He was thirtyish with dark hair slicked back, and dimples framing his big toothy smile.

Sasha felt afraid. The man spoke in a gentle voice.

"Your mother sent me to get you."

"My mother? Why didn't she come herself?" Sasha held the door half open and looked at the stranger with a sideways glance.

"Your mother's job is across the city. She is going to meet us downtown. In fact, she's coming to dinner with us."

"Dinner? My mother said she was going to send me food."

"Well, she sent me instead. I'm taking you and your mother out to eat. You can order anything you want. Do you like steak? How about cheesecake?"

The man leaned towards Sasha in a concerned manner. His kindness and smile were disarming. She became desperately aware that she was tired of being alone and afraid.

"How do I know you know my mother?" Sasha asked as she clung to the door.

"Ha, that's easy! I know your mother's middle name is Janet and I know she has a big birthmark at the base of her spine. I know her favorite food is Italian and I know she loves you very much. She told me to tell you this: "FanaBanana."

Sasha winced when the man uttered the phrase. It was a secret code her and her mother used when they wanted to talk privately. Sasha let out a sigh.

"So," the stranger said as he played with his handcuffs, "your mother is waiting for you. You do want to see her, don't you?"

Sasha quietly followed the man outside. Her rising excitement numbed her hungry stomach and quelled her loneliness as she stepped into the hallway. When she passed the fading walls and stained walkways of her apartment complex, she felt renewed. She was excited about seeing her mother again. She walked with a springy step towards the man's BMW. She could not wait to feel her mother's hugs and kisses, and hear her mother tell her she would come home again.

The following year, when tenth grade roll call was taken, Sasha was not present. She did not leave a forwarding address. Only her dreams remained behind.