



My Best Friend Prince Charming

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Category: Romance, Billionaire Romance

Description: They were best friends. He's always wanted more. Will his newfound fame destroy them?

Shannon:

Ryker and I have been best friends since third grade. We were the poor kids in the school, but that didn't matter. We always had each other. And we had big plans to get scholarships and make something out of our lives. But now he's been discovered by a big time Hollywood film director who wants to cast him as Prince Charming in an upcoming production of Cinderella. Our college plans have been flushed down the toilet overnight, and now Ryker's become famous with a ridiculous amount of money coming his way. Thanks to the paparazzi, girls are swarming him both in person and online. And Ryker seems to love every minute of it. It's so annoying. I feel like I'm losing my best friend in the worst way possible, and I'm starting to wonder if maybe I've been lying to myself about my feelings for Ryker for a long time.

Ryker:

I've secretly had feelings for my best friend Shannon for years, but she's solidly kept me in the friend zone.

When a famous Hollywood director sees me as the lead in his niece's high school play, he casts me on the spot as Prince Charming in his upcoming Cinderella film. I'm in shock and on top of the world as my biggest, wildest dreams are coming true. I'm finally leaving behind my old life of poverty and moving up in the world. But now Shannon's acting super weird and withdrawn. I don't understand why she can't just be happy for me. I wish she could see that I don't care about the fangirls. Shannon's the only girl I've ever wanted, and nothing, not even fortune and fame will change that.

But I'm afraid that all this luck may prove to be unlucky after all. Because if I lose Shannon, will it really have been worth it?

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Ryker

I bowed to the cheering audience and followed my fellow cast members off the stage.

“Boom!” my friend Liam whooped when we got backstage and out of earshot of the crowd. “No more musical for the year. I think I’m going to sleep for a week.”

“Come on,” I said. “We still have to greet the audience outside the auditorium.”

When we got to the hall outside the auditorium, I took my place next to Camille, who had been cast as Cinderella.

“Can you believe this is over?” she asked.

I shook my head. I wouldn’t even know what to do with myself after all the hours spent memorizing lines and rehearsing.

“Ah! The prince,” a man with graying hair and aviator sunglasses perched on his head approached me with a wide grin.

Camille’s face lit up. “Uncle Stephen!” She jumped between us before he could finish speaking to me and wrapped her arms around him in a gigantic hug.

“How’s my favorite niece?” he asked her.

“I’m so glad you came,” she said to him.

“You know I wouldn’t miss your performance. Especially since I’m in town anyway.”

He reached out and shook my hand. “It’s, ah, Ryker, right?” he asked, glancing at my name on the playbill. “That was an impressive performance.”

“Thank you, sir,” I said.

“I’ve been looking for someone like you for a while, actually.”

“Someone like me?” I echoed. Well, that was cryptic.

“Would you be interested in auditioning for me next week?”

“Auditioning?” I asked.

“I may have a job for you. It’s, ah, paid work. Do you have any film experience?”

“No, sir,” I said, my heart drumming in my chest. Film? Who was this guy?

“Have my niece give me your information. I have to get going. I’ll reach out to you later this week with a time and place to meet up. It was nice meeting you.”

And just like that, the guy disappeared into the crowd.

I turned to Camille. “What was that all about?”

“Do you have any idea who my uncle is?”

“No. He seemed pretty cool, though.”

“You’ve never heard of a Stephen Christopher film?”

“Nope.”

“He’s a big-time Hollywood director. He’s worked on lots of blockbuster movies. I can’t say for sure, but I think he may have just picked you out for his upcoming Cinderella movie. He’s been looking for a Prince Charming for months. The audition is basically a formality.”

I stared at Camille in shock. There was no way the audition was a formality. He couldn’t tell how talented I was in front of a camera based on my stage performance. “What’s he doing in Sweet Mountain?”

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“He’s my mom’s brother, and he’s driving through on his way to the beach. He wanted to see my performance in Cinderella since it’s on the way. He’ll be back next week for my mom’s birthday. If you accept this role, you would basically become rich and famous overnight.”

My head began to spin. I couldn’t begin to imagine that I’d be able to land a role like that. “Why would he want me?”

“You’re a lot better than you realize. And you fit the vision he’s had for a while, I guess,” Camille said with a shrug.

Then Shannon came up to me with her long, dark-blond hair tucked behind her ears. She had on a t-shirt with Aiko on it, a character from Katana Warrior, our favorite anime show. We were even writing a Katana Warrior fan fiction together.

“Hey, you,” I said.

“You were awesome, Ryker,” she said. “Like, seriously.”

My heart lifted. Shannon’s opinion mattered most of all. I met her when her family moved in next door when we were in the third grade, and we’d been inseparable ever since.

“Where are we going to celebrate?” she asked.

“I didn’t know that was a thing.”

“It is now. I just got paid tonight.” Shannon worked after school and on the weekends at Toppings, an ice cream shop in town.

“You know I’m not going to let you pay for your food, right?” I said.

Shannon rolled her eyes. “Ok, fine. Burgers and shakes at Skippy’s?”

“Oh sure, just pick out a place where we eat free anyway, so I won’t be able to pay for your meal,” I said. My aunt owned Skippy’s, the local diner, so we never had to pay for anything when we ate there. My grandpa started the place when my dad and aunt were kids, and now she owned it. When my dad lost his job at the lumber mill, he was desperate, and my aunt hired him to take over the newly opened manager position at Skippy’s. It didn’t pay as well as the lumber mill, and Dad had to work much longer hours, but since I waited tables at Skippy’s, I got to see him more than I would have otherwise.

I hated letting Shannon pay for anything. She probably would have fought me on it, but she worked herself to the bone, trying to help her mom make ends meet. I didn’t like to see Shannon suffering financially. But that had been the harsh reality of both our lives for as long as either of us could remember.

We lived on the “wrong side of the tracks,” according to Mom, who ran off when I was ten. To me, it meant that my future was severely limited. I had to miss out on a lot of opportunities that other kids had, like after-school programs and sports that cost extra money. There was never money for stuff like that. We were lucky to get a new pair of shoes for the school year.

Before Mom left, she spent a lot of time sitting on the couch watching reruns. She got really bad postpartum depression when my younger sister was born, and she never seemed to get over it. One day, eight years ago, she just snapped and left in the middle of the night. We never saw her again.

That pretty much left me to raise my little brother and sister. It wasn't too bad. I loved those kids, but it didn't leave me much time for working a paying job. We didn't see my dad much. He spent a lot of time working. And when he did come home, he spent a lot of time on his phone trying to unwind. It was like he'd checked out.

I gathered my stuff backstage and then met Shannon out front. "Want to take my car?" I asked. My aunt Kristen had given me her old car when I turned sixteen. The 1998 Nissan Sentra wasn't pretty to look at, but it ran and didn't guzzle too much gas.

"Sure," Shannon said. She shouldered her bag and followed me across the parking lot.

We could have invited other friends, like Camille and a few of the other cast members, but Shannon and I usually liked to hang out alone. We were the nerdy, Katana Warrior-obsessed members of the senior class at Sweet Mountain High.

Shannon and I had been writing our fan fiction together since freshman year, and we were still going strong. When we hung out, we usually discussed complicated plot points that none of our other friends would understand. That meant that I got Shannon all to myself most days. And I wouldn't have it any other way.

Shannon didn't know how deep my feelings actually went. The truth was, I'd been in love with her for a long time. I wasn't sure when it started exactly—it kind of snuck up on me. I'd always thought she was pretty, even in third grade, when girls were supposed to be gross. But Shannon had this gorgeous honey-blond hair that fell around her shoulders in waves that were so soft they always begged to be touched. And her eyes? They were a piercing blue the color of the ocean in the tropics.

The problem was, Shannon didn't feel the same about me. She'd been dating Austin on and off again for the past two years. He was bad news, and no matter how hard I

tried to warn Shannon about him, she never seemed to see what I was talking about. Every time he mistreated her, she always made excuses for him. It was infuriating, but there was nothing I could do about it. So I stayed by her side as much as I could to protect her from him and offered her my shoulder to cry on. He never hit her or anything, but sometimes I worried he might, from the stories she told me. Sometimes he flew into an angry rage and yelled at her, but most of the time, he just gave her insults veiled as compliments.

It was disgusting how often she cried over that idiot guy. He was my number one nemesis. All I could hope was that one day Shannon would see the light and understand who was actually loyal to her. In the meantime, I didn't mind comforting her too much.

Shannon and I discussed some of the research we'd recently done for our fanfic while we drove the short trip to Skippy's. I pulled into the parking lot behind the diner, and we laughed about the irony of our latest chapter. In that moment, everything was perfect. It was almost like I'd forgotten that Shannon had a jerkface boyfriend and that I'd just been offered an audition for a big Hollywood movie.

"Hey, you two," Aunt Kristen beamed at us as we walked into the diner. "Booth seven's open," she said, pointing to the corner booth, our favorite spot.

"Burgers and shakes?" she asked once we were settled in the booth.

"And some onion rings," I said.

She shouted our order to Joey back in the kitchen and turned back to us. "How was the musical?"

"You'll never believe what happened," I said. I told them about the big-time film director who wanted me to audition for him.

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“That’s huge, Ryker! If you get this role, it could completely change your life,” Aunt Kristen said.

Shannon sat quietly, twisting her ring around her finger. It had been her grandmother’s, and Shannon always twisted it around when something was bothering her.

I shrugged. “I’m not sure I’m going.”

“What?” Aunt Kristen said. “Why would you pass up an opportunity like that?” She knew how much I loved acting, so I understood her surprise at me not wanting to audition. It wasn’t that I didn’t want the part. I’d always dreamed of making it big one day. But that was just a far-off fantasy. Like something one of my fan fiction characters would dream about doing. But that wasn’t reality. Shannon and I used to have big dreams. I was going to be an actor, and she was going to be an author. But we weren’t kids anymore. We were both staring down adulthood. We’d each seen how hard life could be without a stable career. That was why college was so important. It was reliable and practical.

“We already have our future all planned out,” I told her.

“Ryker,” Aunt Kristen shook her head. “Sometimes life takes an unexpected turn with better results at the destination. You can’t give up on something amazing just because you’re too attached to the outcome you had in mind.”

I brushed off her advice. “Shannon just heard back from the University of North Carolina. They’re offering her a full-ride scholarship.” They’d just offered me a full

ride as well, and it meant that we'd both be able to go to school together. It was huge news. I knew Shannon had experienced a lot of anxiety about leaving Sweet Mountain and going off to a new school alone. Sometimes I didn't understand the inner workings of her mind. She always talked about how she wanted to get away from Sweet Mountain so she could see the rest of the world, but she didn't want to be alone when she left.

She had been really excited for us to go to school together. I didn't want to mess that up. Her top school was UCLA, but since UNC offered her the scholarship, that was where she'd decided to attend. It was her second choice, but it wasn't like she had a rich daddy to pay the out-of-state tuition. Her dad couldn't even pay child support. Couldn't . . . or wouldn't.

"Maybe it doesn't matter. I probably won't get the role anyway. Just because the director liked my stage performance doesn't mean he'll like me in front of a camera. It's a totally different acting style. No one sees my face up close while I'm on stage."

"You should at least go for the experience of auditioning in front of someone that famous," Aunt Kristen said. "And I've seen you on camera. Remember all those silly videos you used to make back in middle school? You were actually really good."

I shrugged. "I guess."

"This is your ticket out of here. You can see what's beyond Sweet Mountain."

Everything I wanted in life was right here in this little town. And she was sitting right across from me. If I couldn't be with her romantically, at least I could be in her life every day as her best friend. I would take whatever I could get.

Our food came, and we sat eating, discussing more of our fan fiction. I loved watching Shannon's face as she talked about her story ideas. She was so passionate

about her writing. She came alive whenever she talked about it. I wanted to see her this happy every day. If I could bring her this kind of joy, then I knew I was living my life the right way.

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Shannon

“We’re having mac and cheese again tonight,” I told my sixteen-year-old sister, Maddie.

“Oh joy,” she said, rolling her eyes.

“Hey, if you don’t like it, you can make dinner,” I said, pointing at her with a wooden spoon.

Maddie had her nose buried in a library book—one of those werewolf love stories. It was her fourth one this week. I had no idea how she had time for all that reading and her homework too. I’d spent every moment since coming home from school working on my assignments. I’d only taken a break to make some dinner. As soon as I finished eating, I’d be right back in my room, knocking out the rest of my assignments.

Mom worked evenings this week, so it fell to me to make dinner. Maddie was perfectly capable of doing it, but if I left it to her, I’d end up with a peanut butter and jelly sandwich because she wouldn’t remember to cook anything until nine p.m. So I usually did the cooking when Mom was working.

We rarely saw our dad anymore. He cheated on Mom when I was in third grade. That was when we moved into this house. We’d struggled to make ends meet. It was tough, but with my money from Toppings, the ice cream parlor in town, we were able to make it.

I met Ryker when we moved into the 1950s home we lived in now. He'd been playing outside, building a fort in his backyard next to the mature oak tree that shaded his backyard. I asked him if I could help, and the rest was history. We ended up turning the fort into our clubhouse. We had official meetings and everything.

Then his mom left when we were ten, and we grew even closer. I understood what it was like to have divorced parents. I used to joke that our parents should get together, but Ryker didn't seem to like that, so I dropped it.

After dinner, I went to my room. I tackled the rest of my homework and then checked on the fan fiction. After writing for about ten minutes, I had a brilliant idea pop into my head for what I could do for Ryker's birthday. It was coming up in just a few days. I pulled out my sketch pad and began the outline of the original character Ryker had created for the fan fiction. For the next hour, I focused on the drawing, putting meticulous detail and emotion into the character's face.

A knock sounded on my bedroom door. Before I could answer, it opened a crack, and Austin looked in.

"What's the point of knocking if you're just going to barge in anyway?" I asked, tucking the drawing under a stack of papers on my desk.

"Hey, you," he said, smiling because he knew he could get away with anything when it came to me. I was putty in his hands.

"I could have been naked," I said.

"And your point is?" he said, coming up to me and burying his face into my hair.

I twisted around in my desk chair and smacked him. "That's not funny." I frowned. Austin knew I wasn't interested in taking our relationship that far.

That didn't stop him from constantly bringing it up. It was like he thought if he joked about it enough, I'd just wake up one morning and decide I wanted to push my boundaries too far with him.

"You're not even supposed to be over here when my mom's not home."

He kissed my ear, wrapping his arms around my shoulders. "I thought she was supposed to be home soon."

I wriggled out of his embrace and pushed up from my desk.

He slid into my desk chair. "What are you writing?" He studied the screen. "Is this that Katana Warrior fan fiction you're writing with Ryker? I thought you guys had moved on to your own ideas instead of stealing someone else's story world."

Austin's words stabbed into my heart like a dagger. I snapped my laptop shut. "It's private." I never let Austin read my stuff. Not since he made fun of it when I shared it with him once. He said he was just joking around and that I couldn't take a joke, but mocking my writing was taking it too far. I'd wanted to be a published author for as long as I could remember. But Austin never seemed to see it as an achievable goal. His words had hurt because I was too scared to branch out on my own with an original story, and he seemed to think writing was just some dumb waste of my time.

"What do you want, Austin?" I really just wanted to get back to my story. Ryker and I were at the good part.

He stood up and turned around to face me. He took a hand and tucked my hair over my shoulder and caressed my cheek. "You're my girlfriend. I came to see you. Is that too much to ask?"

I blew out a puff of air. My mom would probably scold me if she saw the way I was

treating Austin. “I’m sorry, I know I’m being rude. I was just caught up in my story.”

Austin wrapped his arms around my waist and pulled me close to him. I let him kiss me, but my heart wasn’t in it. I kept thinking about the big plot twist I’d been planning with Ryker over burgers and shakes last night.

My door exploded open. “I know how to fix the plot hole! We just need to have our characters kiss before they talk it out.” I turned away from Austin to see Ryker standing in my doorway.

I grinned. “That’s genius. Why didn’t I think of that?”

Surprise crossed Ryker’s features when he saw Austin standing close to me with his arms still around my waist. “Am I interrupting something?” Ryker asked.

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“Not at all,” I said, stepping away from Austin. “Have you heard anything else about your audition?” I asked. Ryker was pretty much perfect for the part. I’d never really stopped to think about it, but with his longish, curly blond hair and bright blue eyes, he really did look like he could be Prince Charming. He was a highly attractive guy beneath all the nerdiness. I always thought of him as just a friend, but I wasn’t blind. I knew a hot guy when I saw one. It wasn’t surprising that Ryker was handpicked by a Hollywood director.

He had a pretty killer British accent, too. We used to make silly videos when we were younger, and he went crazy with different accents. I always thought we were just kids messing around, but now I realized that it could end up paying off big for Ryker.

The problem was, I didn’t know what I’d do without him. I really had to figure out how to be a better, more supportive friend, but I was seriously struggling with my feelings. I felt like I had a big battle inside me. One side fought to support Ryker, and the other side fought to be more selfish and keep him all to myself. I wasn’t exactly thrilled about the idea of going to college without him after we were so excited about going together.

Austin scowled. “You get after me for barging in, but when Ryker does the same thing, you don’t care?”

“Ryker’s different,” I said.

Ryker acted like he hadn’t heard Austin complaining. “I got an email with some instructions and a date and time.”

“Are you going?” I asked.

Austin folded his arms and shifted his weight to his other foot like he was already bored with the conversation. He probably wanted Ryker to leave so he could get back to making out.

“Yep. It’s next Saturday. I’ve already picked out some lines to audition with.”

“Let me know if you need help running through your lines.” I’d helped Ryker run lines for his musical. We’d had a lot of late nights with popcorn and Twizzlers and a lot of ridiculous nonsense. My mom was pretty strict with my curfew with Austin, but she didn’t mind letting Ryker stay over a little later. Our families were so close he was practically a son to her.

Maddie pushed open my bedroom door and climbed onto my bed, helping herself to the package of gummy bears on my nightstand.

“How is it that you’re the nerdiest girl at school, and you have two guys in your bedroom? And here I am over here, completely single, and not half as nerdy as you.”

My cheeks heated up. Maddie loved embarrassing me as much as possible. “Can I help you with something, Maddie?”

“I’m bored. I came in here to be entertained.”

“Don’t you have another werewolf book to read?”

“I just finished the series. I have to let the story marinate for a while before I can start a new book.”

“Well, you might want to go watch Netflix or something. We aren’t all that

interesting.”

Maddie popped another gummy bear in her mouth and looked between the two guys standing awkwardly in my bedroom. “Looks pretty interesting to me.”

I wasn’t in the mood to be the butt of her joke. Plus, it wasn’t like there was anything going on between Ryker and me. The idea was laughable. Everyone knew we were just friends. I’d been dating Austin forever anyway. Maddie just loved a good love triangle and had an overactive imagination. There wasn’t a love triangle here—only the one she’d conjured up. It was definitely fictional.

“So,” Maddie said with a naughty little-sister smile. “Do you want to turn this love triangle into a square?” She patted the spot on the bed next to her. “Ryker, come sit next to me. I’m not in a complicated relationship.”

Ryker tugged on the collar of his shirt like it was choking him. “I was just leaving, actually.”

“Oh, come on. I don’t bite. Well, not very hard anyway.”

“Your sister’s crazy, Shannon,” he said, glancing over his shoulder at me as he made a beeline for the door.

“I am well aware of that,” I called out to him as he went down the hall. “I have to live with her every day.”

* * *

I walked down the hall at school with Austin, our fingers entwined. He waved to a bunch of the baseball team and fist-bumped Jimmy Alston.

Austin and I were that couple that no one seemed to understand. We were nothing alike, but opposites attracted, right? I was the shy nerdy girl of the school, and Austin had to talk to every person he passed in the hallway. I just wanted to read manga, draw, and write my fan fiction. Austin cared about sports and friends more than grades. I was uncoordinated and obsessed with getting straight A's. I had to. If I hadn't worked my tail off, I wouldn't have gotten the scholarship to UNC.

Logan Cartwright and Bella Davenport stood together at her locker, and she popped a grape in his mouth. They were so adorable. Austin and I weren't like that. We weren't really the romantic type. But we'd been a staple of Sweet Mountain High. That iconic couple of nerd and popular guy. I didn't even know how or why we'd gotten together. It had just kind of happened.

We were assigned as partners in biology freshman year when we were dissecting frogs. He took his tweezers and poked at the frog. He asked me what he was poking at, and I told him it was the frog's heart. He said he wondered if the frog had ever had his heart broken. I thought he was a weirdo in an adorable sort of way. At the end of the class period, he asked me out. Now we were close to graduation, and we'd lasted all four years.

Sure, we'd had our ups and downs like any couple, but we'd stood the test of time. Unlike my parents. Sometimes I wished they'd tried harder to work through their problems. Yeah, my dad cheated, but I wished my mom had found it in her heart to forgive him. But she just gave up. I refused to let that happen to Austin and me. No matter how hard it got. That was why I was still with him now.

Austin had plans to go to UNC with Ryker and me. I hoped to get into advertising and graphic design. I had an aunt who made good money and worked for several big name brands. She'd ended up traveling the world because of her career and could work from home if she felt like it. It was a win-win situation. I'd get to pursue art and make money while getting to see something other than Sweet Mountain. It wasn't

that I had anything against our little town; it was a darling place to live. But it was all I'd been able to see. My parents never took me on vacation, and my dad hadn't once asked me to come see him at his home in California with his new wife. He'd pretty much moved on from us like we'd never existed.

Although I'd faithfully stayed by Austin's side for the past four years, with a few hiccups here and there, we didn't really hang out much outside of school. He tried to, but I usually ended up daydreaming about all the nerdy stuff I wanted to discuss with Ryker. All Austin wanted to do was kiss. I honestly didn't see the appeal. Kissing was okay, but I got bored with it.

I could sit and talk to Ryker for hours on end, though, and we did on a regular basis. There was always so much to talk about. We never got bored. And Ryker was really good about responding to my texts. He always answered right away and usually said something to make me laugh. Sometimes Austin took an entire day to respond. It drove me nuts. How could anyone hold a conversation like that?

My relationship with Austin wasn't perfect, but whose relationship was, anyway? Every couple had their struggles. We just had to work through them.

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Ryker

I walked into the auditorium at Sweet Mountain High that Saturday afternoon. I smoothed down my white button-down shirt. I'd never been so nervous for an audition. I kept telling myself that it didn't matter if I got the part because I wasn't sure I was going to accept it anyway, but I still wanted to make a good impression. This was Stephen Christopher, after all.

His name hadn't meant anything to me when I first heard it from Camille after the musical. But I went and did some digging around on the internet when I picked my audition piece. To say he was intimidating was a massive understatement. This guy was uber-famous. I'd seen almost every single one of his movies and loved them. I just hadn't paid attention to who the director was.

He sat behind a folding table set up on the first row of the auditorium seating. A camera was set up on a tripod and pointed at the stage. I had a feeling I was the only one auditioning for him in Sweet Mountain. Which meant he went through the trouble of setting this all up just for me. Maybe it really was just a formality. For some reason, that didn't make me feel any better.

I was still terrified.

Stephen Christopher turned around and smiled at me when I came close enough for him to hear me coming into the room.

“Ryker! Glad to see you made it.”

“Do you want me up on the stage?” I asked.

“No. Why don’t you just stand right here in front of the stage for me?” He pointed to a spot a few feet in front of him.

“Do you have a headshot and resume for me?” he asked.

“No, sir,” I said. “I didn’t realize I was supposed to have one.” I felt my cheeks growing hot. Was that going to ruin my chance of landing the role? I should have researched this stuff better. I didn’t even know a photographer who did headshots.

“Don’t worry about it. I should have put it in the email for you. We’re just glad you were able to make it today.”

I set my backpack down on one of the seats in the row behind him. Mr. Christopher made it sound like I was doing him a favor by just showing up. I headed to the spot in front of the camera and launched into the audition.

When I’d gone through my lines, he scribbled on his notepad. Then he looked up, smiled at me, and said, “Very good. Well, it looks like we’re done here, Ryker. I’ll have someone reach out to you within the next few days.”

“Thank you for the opportunity, Mr. Christopher.”

“It’s been my honor, Ryker.”

I left the school and drove home. I parked on the street and walked into the house. My little brother, Parker, and my sister, Ava, were sitting on the couch watching Netflix and eating a bag of potato chips. Ava was thirteen, and Parker was ten. They

were both pretty young when Mom left. Parker couldn't even remember when she lived with us. It seemed like a lifetime ago when I thought about it now. Now that they were older, they could look after themselves, but I spent a lot of time taking care of them.

"Where's Dad?" I asked.

"He went to the grocery store," Ava said, shoving a chip into her mouth.

"I'm surprised we have any chips left with you two smashing through all the food around here," I said, swiping the bag away from them. "Make sure you're not just filling up on snacks and eat actual meals. I have to get some homework done before I have to go in to work tonight." I shoved a handful of chips into my mouth and dusted off my greasy hands before handing the bag of chips back to Ava. I turned to go down the hall to my room.

"Wait," Ava said. "You forgot to tell us how your audition went."

"It went all right, I guess." I shrugged. "Mr. Christopher said I should be hearing back from them in a few days, so we'll see. It's hard to know what people are thinking during auditions."

I went back into my room and studied for my economics test. About an hour into my studying, my phone rang.

"Ryker? This is Allie with Big Films Casting Company."

"Hey," I said.

"I'm calling to congratulate you. Mr. Christopher has decided to cast you as the prince in his upcoming Cinderella film."

I almost dropped my phone in shock. “I’m sorry. What?” Was I hallucinating?

“You got the role! You’ll get an official email within the next hour, but I wanted to call and let you know personally. All you need to do is respond to the email and let us know if you’ve decided to accept the role. Once you accept, you’ll need to sign some paperwork, including a contract. Do you have a talent agent?”

“No.” It had never crossed my mind that I would ever need an agent. I’d always wanted to get into film acting, but I hadn’t taken it that seriously.

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“Between you and me, I recommend you find an agent to help you navigate the contract. Those contracts can be a bit complicated.”

“Thanks for the tip.”

“Sure thing,” she said cheerfully. “Hopefully we’ll be seeing a lot more of you in the near future. We’ve been looking for someone just like you for a long time now. We were getting a little bit desperate. Filming begins on the first of June.”

That was a week after graduation. This was all so hard for me to wrap my head around. We ended the call, and I checked the clock. I had work in ten minutes, and I still hadn’t changed into my uniform.

I hurried and put on my navy polo shirt and black apron and said goodbye to my brother and sister on the couch. I was about to leave, but I hesitated by the door, looking back at Ava and Parker.

“I just heard back from the casting company,” I said.

“Already?” Ava said, pausing her show. “I thought they were going to reach out to you in a few days.”

“I guess they changed their minds,” I told her.

“Well, did you get the part?” she asked.

“Yup.”

“No way! You’re going to be totally famous, Ryker!” She jumped up and threw her arms around my neck. “Does this mean we all get to move to Hollywood? I’ve always dreamed of living there.”

“Dude!” Parker said. “That’s awesome!”

Dad came into the room from the kitchen. “Did I just hear you say you got the part?”

“Yeah.”

He crossed the room, and Ava stepped aside from our embrace. He enveloped me in a bear hug. “I can’t tell you how proud I am of you. I know you’re going to do an incredible job. Just don’t forget about us little people when you’re rich and famous.”

“Hang on, guys. I don’t even know if I’m going to accept the role or not. I haven’t decided.”

“How is that even a decision?” Parker asked. “Someone wants to make you rich and famous. There’s only one answer.”

If only it was that simple. “I have to go to work, guys. I’ll let you know as soon as I make a decision.”

As I drove to work, I thought through the implications of accepting the role. Would I lose my scholarship to UNC and postpone my education for the start of a promising film career? It would mean a complete upheaval of my life, something I wasn’t planning and hadn’t foreseen at all. I never thought I’d actually get this role. It seemed too easy. I hadn’t gone to years of film classes or thousands of auditions. This was my first film audition. I didn’t even know I was supposed to bring a resume and headshot.

How could I go to Hollywood and pursue this unexpected career? It would probably mean I'd have to give up my relationship with Shannon, and I wasn't sure that was something I was willing to sacrifice. How could I abandon her at that school? And especially with Austin lurking around. It was bad enough she was with him in high school. Would he get to be with her in college, too?

If she didn't want me, she could at least pick a guy who treated her better. But I didn't think Shannon knew anything different. Austin was the only guy she'd ever dated, and it wasn't like her dad was a shining example of manhood either. From what I gathered, he'd been emotionally abusive to Shannon and Maddie and their mom. His behavior had only shown Shannon that it was acceptable to treat a woman like garbage.

I pulled into the parking lot behind Skippy's and climbed out of the car, locking the door behind me. I went inside and greeted my aunt Kristen. She stood behind the bar, wiping it with a rag. The diner wasn't very busy tonight. A few of the regulars sat in their favorite booths, and a couple with a baby in a high chair sat back in the corner where Shannon and I usually sat. I checked the board to see where my section was for the night. I opened the folder from my apron pocket, where I kept my notepad and tips and receipts. I ripped a few scribbled-on pages from my notepad and tossed them in the garbage can behind the counter.

Usually, Skippy's was my happy place, but today, not even the smell of burgers sizzling could cheer me up. I normally told Aunt Kristen everything. She was the only person I'd confided in about my true feelings for Shannon. She was like a mom to me. I'd been just a kid, but I still remembered telling her about how I'd been crushing on Shannon secretly.

"Are you okay?" Aunt Kristen asked, following me back through the kitchen to the break room area. "You seem a little off today."

I considered whether or not to tell her about the results of my audition. I already knew she would try to talk me into accepting the role. I just wasn't sure I wanted to do that.

"I'm okay," I said.

She studied me, tapping a pencil against her lips with narrowed eyes. "How did your audition go? That was today, right?"

I blew out a puff of air. I might as well tell her. My entire family already knew anyway. "I got the part."

She dropped the pencil. "I think I'm in shock right now. Are you serious?"

"Yeah."

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She bent down and picked up her dropped pencil. “Why do you look so upset about it?”

“Because it doesn’t feel right,” I admitted.

“Excuse me? How could something like that not feel right? You just had a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity open up for you. They’re serving it to you on a gold platter, and it doesn’t feel right?”

I shrugged. I didn’t know how to explain it. “I’m really just worried about leaving Shannon behind. I promised her that we’d go to UNC together. I don’t want to miss out on that.”

“Have you told Shannon that you got the part yet?”

“Not yet. I know she’d put on a brave face for me and encourage me to go for it. She always puts her own feelings aside for others. But this time, I want to put Shannon first.”

“I don’t think this is about putting on a brave face. If you don’t accept this role, you’re going to regret it for the rest of your life. Being noble doesn’t help you or anyone else in this situation. Do you know how mad Shannon would be at you if she ever found out that you got the role and didn’t accept it?”

“It would be a complete uprooting of my life.” Meaning, it would uproot my life with Shannon.

“Ryker, you’re eighteen. You’re supposed to uproot your life right now. Either way, you’re uprooting your life, whether you choose UNC or the film role.”

“I guess that’s true.”

For the first time, I allowed myself to envision what it would be like to accept the role. It would change more for me than just moving out of the state and uprooting my life temporarily. It would mean that I wouldn’t be able to go anywhere without being recognized. Paparazzi might even begin to follow me around. My mind began swirling, and I couldn’t let myself think beyond that.

“Think about how much this could help your family financially. Your dad isn’t exactly rolling in the cash.”

Annie, one of the other servers, came around the corner. “Ryker, you just got a table with four people.”

I shoved my folder back into the pocket of my apron and followed Annie back out to the front of the restaurant. I hadn’t thought about how much I could help my family with the money I could earn from this movie, not to mention the subsequent movies I’d be more likely to be cast in after finishing the film. I basically had an entire film career now because of this one opportunity. Even if I sucked. I knew plenty of actors who were terrible and still got cast in lots of movies.

All of that meant I’d be able to buy my family a bigger house, and Ava and Parker could go to whatever college they wanted. I was lucky enough to have made good enough grades for a scholarship. Parker and Ava weren’t so blessed. They both struggled with learning disabilities and needed constant help with their homework. If I had an endless supply of money, I could afford to hire tutors for them to help with schoolwork and therapists to help them deal with the trauma we all had from Mom leaving.

This was bigger than just me and Shannon. It was an opportunity for my entire family to thrive.

I went out to my section and greeted the family sitting at one of my tables. I took their drink order and went to the back and filled four glasses with ice and the various beverages they'd requested.

Aunt Kristen barked some orders to Stan, the guy flipping burgers. She saw me staring at her as she passed me with an armload of dirty dishes, and she pressed her lips together thoughtfully as she dumped the dishes next to the dishwasher.

"I'm going to do it," I said.

A smile slowly stretched across her face. "That's my boy." She threw her arms around me, and I almost spilled the glass of Diet Coke I was setting on a tray.

Now I had to figure out how to break the news to Shannon. I'd be leaving after graduation, and that could mean I would never see her again.

4

Shannon

The bell rang as I slid into my seat in AP Calculus. Mr. Klaton finished writing some equations on the board and turned around to greet the class. I flipped open my notebook to a fresh page and clicked out a tiny length of lead on my mechanical pencil. The sound of the pencil scraping across the page relaxed me as I soaked up the new information. Frantic whispers distracted me from my train of thought, and I glanced over to my right to see the school newspaper editor, Lindsey Beck, talking to the girl in front of her. I caught the tail end of her conversation, and my pencil stilled on my paper.

“No, it’s true. I heard from Camille this morning that Ryker got cast in the Cinderella movie.”

“What, like as an extra?”

“No.” Lindsey leaned toward the other girl, and her platinum blonde hair fell forward, covering her face. Even though I couldn’t see her face, I still heard her words, loud and clear. “Get this. He’s the prince.”

“No way.”

“Camille’s uncle is the movie director. Look up Stephen Christopher online if you don’t believe me. Facts are facts,” Lindsey said, sitting back, crossing her arms. “Not that you need to take my word for it. It’ll be all over the internet any day now.

Camille said he accepted the role yesterday.”

Mr. Klaton stopped talking, and I realized he was staring at the whispering girls. “Is there something you’d like to share with the rest of the class, ladies?”

“No, sir,” Lindsey said.

I felt tears welling up in the corners of my eyes, and I shot up from my desk before they spilled down my cheeks. I left my books and my bag where they sat. “Can I go to the bathroom?”

Mr. Klaton handed me a hall pass and jumped back into the lesson.

I felt like I was drowning, and I couldn’t explain why. Shouldn’t I be happy for Ryker? His news was overwhelming and incredible. I frowned as I walked down the empty hall past rows of lockers and posters announcing prom. I pushed open the door to the girls’ bathroom and slipped inside. I locked myself in a stall and took a few deep breaths.

When had Ryker found out? And why hadn’t he told me? I’d had to find out from idle gossip in math class. That meant Ryker had been keeping it from me. I’d texted him Saturday night, asking him how his audition had gone, and he’d been pretty vague in his response. Did he already know then and had consciously decided to keep it from me? Why would he do that? Lindsey had said that he’d accepted the role on Sunday. A day after his audition. Did he accept as soon as they offered the role to him, or had it taken him a while to decide? It hurt my heart that he hadn’t reached out for me to help him decide.

Ryker would be flying out to California. Probably as soon as we graduated. He had such a bright future.

The bathroom door opened, and I heard hushed voices.

“Shhh. Come on. Follow me.” A soft moan was emitted from the girl who was talking, and I covered a gasp when a male voice responded.

“I can’t tell you how long I’ve wanted to kiss you, Tabby.”

I'd recognize that voice anywhere. I stayed inside my stall, frozen in shock at what I was witnessing. The sounds of lips connecting sounded from the back corner of the bathroom, and I could tell the couple was moving into the handicapped stall. Tabby giggled, and the stall door bounced on its hinge.

Rage fumed inside me. I'd had a bad enough morning as it was, and my patience had completely run dry. Tabby Lewis was a member of the group called the MGs, short for Mean Girls, at Sweet Mountain High. She'd rightfully earned her placement in the group. And I had been the recipient of her pointless wrath more than once. Tabby wasn't fond of my nerdy tastes and had been extremely vocal about it over the years.

I opened the door to my stall and then swung open the unlocked door of the handicapped stall.

“Austin!” I had to fight to keep from letting my voice get too shrill. He stood with his hand buried in Tabby's jet-black hair, and complete shock registered on his face at being caught. “What are you doing?”

His jaw went slack as he realized there was no way he could talk himself out of this situation.

I was such an idiot. I'd ignored all the red flags with Austin. I should have known better than to trust him long ago. “You couldn't get what you wanted from me, so you go behind my back with someone else? Well, excuse me for standing up for my

boundaries. If you'd been worth keeping around, you would have respected that."

"Oh, no. A lovers' quarrel." Tabby smirked. "Don't let me come between you." She slipped out of Austin's embrace.

I glared at her as she left the bathroom and then turned my attention back to Austin. "I should have seen it coming because I knew you were a lying jerk. But Tabby? Really? She's horrible, Austin."

Austin shrugged. He didn't have a shred of remorse on his face. He only looked a little uncomfortable at getting caught.

"You don't care, do you? I'm such an idiot." I groaned at my own stupidity. I should never have trusted Austin. But I'd wanted to prove to myself that I could stay in a relationship—that I was better than my dad, who gave up when it got tough. But this was too much. "We're through, Austin."

Before he could respond, I turned on my heel and left the bathroom. As I walked the hall back to math class, I breathed out the rest of my emotions and put on a mask of control. I needed to get back to learning if I wanted to keep my scholarship to UNC. I didn't have the luxury of being sad when my grades were on the line. I slipped back into my seat and fought to keep my focus on the lesson for the rest of the class period.

When lunch rolled around, I met up with Ryker at our usual table.

“Hey, Ryker.”

“What’s up, Shannon?”

“I heard Lindsey Beck saying you got cast in the Cinderella movie.”

He looked at me with shame written heavily on his features. “Shannon, I—”

“It’s okay,” I insisted.

“Shannon, I’m so sorry.” He reached out and touched my arm.

“You have nothing to apologize for. You were following your dream. I think it’s incredible, and I want all the good things for you. I just wish you’d told me.”

“I didn’t know how to tell you,” he said quietly. “I’m sorry that I waited. I thought I had more time before word started spreading. How did Lindsey find out anyway?”

“Camille told her. I’m guessing you talked about it with her?”

“No. I’ve only told family members. But her uncle must have told her.”

My shoulders relaxed. I hadn’t thought of that. Of course, her uncle would have told her that her schoolmate was cast. Knowing that Ryker hadn’t been going around school, sharing his good news with random people before telling me made me feel better.

I stabbed a fork into my chicken parmesan and twisted some pasta around before shoving it into my mouth.

“Why is Austin sitting with the MGs today?” Ryker asked, his eyes across the lunchroom. Austin usually sat with us.

I chewed and swallowed my food before answering. “We broke up after I caught him making out with Tabby Lewis in the girls’ bathroom this morning.”

Ryker’s eyebrows shot up. “Are you okay?” he asked gently.

I shook my head.

Ryker got up and circled around the table to the side where I sat. He slid an arm around my shoulders. “I’m sorry, Shannon. I know you really wanted it to work out with Austin.”

I nuzzled into Ryker’s warm embrace. He smelled incredibly good, and I felt safe next to him. It had been a long time since Ryker had hugged me. He’d gotten pretty buff since the last time we’d hugged—his weight training class had certainly paid off. I had to admit, it was a nice surprise. When was the last time I’d seen Ryker with his shirt off? I couldn't remember.

I had a sudden urge to invite him to go swimming. I stifled a giggle.

Where had that thought come from? I was officially losing my mind.

5

Ryker

Shannon snuggled into me as I held her. I sat in shock. I hadn't expected her to respond this way. I told myself that she was just having a rough day and needed some comfort, but I couldn't help but hope that it meant she was interested in me as more than just a friend.

As sad as she was that Austin had betrayed her trust, I couldn't help but feel triumphant. I'd been waiting a very long time for Shannon to see Austin for who he really was, finally. I'd overheard him bragging about his newest conquest more than once in the locker room. Tabby was far from being the first girl he'd pursued while he'd been dating Shannon.

It took all I had to keep from beating in his face most days. And I wasn't sure Shannon would even have believed me if I'd told her the truth. Austin was an expert at putting on the nice-guy face. He was always high-fiving guys in the hall, taking time to talk to the shy kids.

From the edge of my vision, I felt eyes on me. I turned to see a couple of freshman girls staring in my direction, whispering to each other. One of them nudged the other, and they giggled. They came up to our table and put a piece of paper and a pen in front of me.

"Hey, Prince Charming," one of the girls said. "Can I get your autograph?"

“Um, sure.” I unwound my arm from around Shannon and picked up the pen and signed my name. This was so weird. It felt like I’d just stepped into the Twilight Zone.

“Me, too,” the second girl said, producing her own paper and pen. I signed her paper and handed it back to her. They left, giggling and waving their newly autographed papers to a table packed with freshman girls.

“Well, that was interesting,” Shannon said, grinning at me. “And so it begins.”

“I’m not sure how I feel about it, honestly,” I admitted. “I mean, what if I’m really bad at this?”

“You’re going to do great. You’re a natural on stage, obviously, or Mr. Christopher wouldn’t have asked you to audition. Do you think he doesn’t know what he’s doing? He’s been making movies for a long time.”

“I guess that’s a good way to look at it.”

For the rest of the lunch period, a steady stream of freshman girls appeared at our table.

After getting my autograph, a bubbly girl with bright red hair pulled back in a ponytail said, “We just want to make sure we get your autograph before you leave for Hollywood and become uber-famous. We may never get another opportunity to see you without bodyguards surrounding you.”

I laughed. Bodyguards? I couldn’t imagine that this Cinderella movie would go so well that I’d end up needing bodyguards.

“You just have to make sure you don’t forget us.”

“Of course. I’m sorry . . .” I paused, my cheeks burning. “This is really embarrassing,” I said, “what was your name again?”

“Oh, it’s okay. You don’t have to feel embarrassed,” she gushed, laying her hand on my arm. “I’m Kenzie.” She pointed to the shy-looking girl next to her. “This is Sara.”

“Well, I promise I won’t forget you,” I said. “And I’m not sure how famous I’ll be. They may kick me out after the first week on set.”

“Aw, I’m sure they won’t do that! I saw you in our Cinderella musical here at the school,” Kenzie said. “You were incredible.”

“Well, I appreciate that. Maybe there’s actually hope for me after all.”

Kenzie and Sara burst out into infectious giggles like I was the most hilarious person they’d ever met.

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught a glimpse of Shannon’s face. I wasn’t sure how she was going to handle all this attention the girls were giving me. But she was smiling without a trace of jealousy. Was it so bad that I wished she’d at least look a little jealous? Because that would have meant that she was attracted to me and wanted me to focus my attention on her. Or that she would have felt threatened by these girls. I thought that maybe she’d felt something when she snuggled into me just now, but maybe I’d imagined things. I’d sure enjoyed having her that close to me. She smelled like vanilla and heaven.

“This may be a dumb question since you probably already have this all figured out, but do you have a talent agent yet?” Kenzie asked.

“Not a dumb question at all,” I said. “I do not have a talent agent, actually. I’m looking for one, but I don’t really know where to start. I figured I was just going to

email Mr. Christopher and ask him if he could recommend one.”

“My uncle George is a really good talent agent. He lives in Hollywood, right in the middle of everything. If you want, I can give you his information.”

“Totally,” I said. “Let me see your paper.” I scribbled my email address on the bottom of the paper I had autographed. “Shoot me an email with his info, and I’ll look him up online to see if he’ll be a good fit for me.”

Kenzie’s face brightened like I’d just handed her a trophy. “Sure, I can do that!” She took the paper back from me. A group of four girls crowded in behind her, and she backed away to let them step forward.

For the next couple of hours, girls—and even some guys—swarmed me, asking for autographs. It was like some of the people had seen their friends getting autographs, and they wanted to join in on the fun or make sure they weren’t missing out.

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When I got to study hall in the library, I sat at the table where Shannon was already sitting with her books spread out in front of her.

“Hey,” I said, scooting my chair up closer to the table. “It was really fun at first to have so many people asking for my autograph, but I’m starting to get overwhelmed by it.”

“I know I wouldn’t like it,” Shannon said. “There’s a reason I’m always hiding behind my books.”

“Hey, that’s not a bad thing. I really like that about you.”

“I never said it was a bad thing,” Shannon said. “But I can see how some people might think it’s bad to hide from the crowd. There’s just way too much drama out there. I’m not interested in getting involved in all that mess.”

“I get that. But it looks like my privacy is a thing of the past.”

“It doesn’t necessarily have to be that way,” Shannon said. “Maybe you just need to figure out a way to set up boundaries so people learn to respect your privacy.”

I laughed. “Maybe I’ll need to hire that bodyguard sooner than I think. Like tomorrow.”

As we completed our homework, we stopped to chat every few moments. Our conversation drifted easily into the world of mangas, K-Pop, and eventually, our Katana Warrior fan fiction. I never got tired of talking to Shannon about our writing.

We made a great team and loved bouncing ideas off each other. Shannon was really good at adding in the grammar and story structure, and I provided the comic relief. I also came up with colorful descriptions of the settings and what the characters looked like and how they acted.

“I can’t believe that Austin cheated on me,” Shannon said, changing the subject. “I mean, the guy knew that my dad cheated on my mom. He knows how much it bothers me. I hate my stepmom, and I barely even know her. I don’t want to get to know her.”

I hesitated. I wasn’t sure how much to tell Shannon about what I’d seen from Austin when she wasn’t around. Would it shatter her to know that Austin had been cheating on her all along? And would she be mad at me for withholding that information from her?

“I’m such an idiot. Why did I even want him, Ryker?”

Uh. I didn’t know how to answer her because I had no idea. The guy was toxic, and I could see it from a mile away. But it wasn’t like that for Shannon. She thought she deserved a guy like that. She let him treat her like garbage because it’s what she’d known from her own parents. She’d watched her dad treating her mom like that for the first part of her childhood. I didn’t say any of that, though, because Shannon was hurting enough.

“I don’t know, Shannon. I guess you just liked him. And he made you feel good when you were with him.” My answer was generic enough.

Shannon shook her head. “That’s the thing, though. I didn’t feel good when I was with him. I felt angry and irritated all the time.” She buried her face in her hands. “None of this makes any sense.”

“Does it have to make sense right now?”

A crowd of girls came into the library. They moved like a swarm of hornets to our table. “Ryker! Can we get your autograph?”

I glanced back at Shannon. She gave me an encouraging smile. “Sure.” I signed autographs until I lost count. I was sure the school librarian, Mr. Nelson, was about to kick them out, but he just sat behind the library counter and allowed it. The bell rang, and I didn’t get a chance to finish my conversation with Shannon. I filled my backpack with my books and slipped it over my shoulders. Two sophomore girls linked arms with me on either side and escorted me out of the room with a group of more girls following behind. I glanced back at Shannon. She was still smiling, but this time it looked forced. My stomach sank. How much damage would my new fame do to my relationship with Shannon? And after it was all over, if it ever actually ended, would I even have a relationship with her?

6

Shannon

I watched Ryker leave the library with a big group of girls, and I packed up my books. I just needed to head to my next class, and then this long, horrible day would be over. I slung my backpack over one shoulder and hurried to my English class. I wanted to be happy for Ryker, but it was starting to get on my nerves that all those girls kept interrupting our conversations. Hopefully, the excitement would die down soon, and we'd be able to get back to our lives. Back to normal.

But Ryker was changing, and our lives would never be the same again. He was going to sign a contract soon, and then it would be set in stone. He had to start filming by the first of June. And then his face would be internationally known. There was no such thing as a Stephen Christopher movie that didn't do well. I suspected that this Cinderella movie would be better than most.

I should have been happy for Ryker, and I was, but today I'd lost my boyfriend. I was having a hard time, and all these changes were weird. All the girls swarming. I mean, I got it—Ryker was hot. I knew that. It was plain to see. And after snuggling up with him at lunch today, I could feel it through his shirt too. He would make a perfect Prince Charming. He was every high school girl's dream guy. Witty, charming, hot, sweet, thoughtful . . .

Of course, they were going to swarm him. I was surprised they hadn't done it before. But I'd had Ryker all to myself back then. Maybe they stayed away from him because I was always there.

Which was ridiculous. I was with Austin.

But now that I wasn't, they wanted Ryker. It was ironic, but wasn't life like that anyway?

I slid into my desk in the front row of my English class. The bell rang, and Mrs. Drake pulled out a sheet of paper.

"Before we get started today, I have an opportunity a few of you may be interested in. Tufted Pen Publishing is holding a writing contest for high school seniors. Their goal is to get students writing, and to increase literacy. The requirement is to submit a full-length novel by the middle of May. They are offering a publishing contract and ten thousand dollars to one lucky winner. See me after class if you're interested, and I'll give you more information."

Immediately my ears perked up at the opportunity Mrs. Drake mentioned, but then I remembered Austin and how critical he'd been of my writing. There was no way I'd be able to knock out a novel between now and the middle of May. That was in two months. The only reason I wrote so much of the fan fiction was because I had Ryker to help me. I probably wouldn't get anything written without him. And it wasn't like I could ask him to co-author something with me. The contest was for one lucky winner, and Ryker was probably going to be too busy with his new acting job anyway.

When the bell rang, I shouldered my backpack and headed to leave the classroom, but Mrs. Drake stopped me. "Shannon, have you considered the publishing opportunity I mentioned at the start of class?"

"I thought about it a little, but I don't think it would be worth my time."

"You're an excellent writer, regardless of winning, writing a novel would most definitely be worth your time. Think of how much you would learn."

“I appreciate that. I really do, but I don’t see how it would work. I have too much going on with school and work to fit in a novel between now and mid-May.”

“I understand. If you change your mind, let me know. I’d be happy to help you in any way I can.”

“Thanks, Mrs. Drake,” I said.

* * *

For the next few days, Ryker grew more distant. He found an agent and negotiated terms of payment, whatever that meant. He didn’t share the nitty-gritty details of his contract with me. In fact, whenever I tried to bring up his new film career, he changed the subject. Did he think I couldn’t handle it or something? I felt annoyed that he didn’t trust me enough to share the details of his new life. He was turning into a different person. And it was getting worse every day. His agent moved quickly with him—they had to. Their time was running out.

The publishing house’s writing contest kept coming up in my mind, but every time I thought about it, I pushed the idea away. I had my writing project with Ryker to worry about anyway. Only he hadn’t written for a while, and I was waiting for him to finish his chapter so I could start on mine. I didn’t know what direction I needed to take the story, and Ryker was too busy with his agent to write his chapter, let alone talk about it with me. So instead of writing, I sketched. But I missed writing.

Ryker’s birthday arrived a week after he’d auditioned. I’d been working countless hours on the artwork of his fan fiction original character for his birthday. I’d scrapped about five different versions of it before finally deciding I had a version I liked enough to give to him as a gift. I drew his character standing in a bamboo forest. Dark blue hair fell across his face, obscuring half his fierce expression. He held his katana in a defensive position across his torso.

When I wasn't at school or working at Toppings, dishing out ice cream, I'd had more time on my hands than I'd realized when I turned down Mrs. Drake's suggestion of entering the writing contest. Whenever I tried to go over to Ryker's house to hang out, he was on his computer, video chatting with his agent or Mr. Christopher. He even did a set of virtual interviews with some media companies covering the news of him getting cast. Normally, they would have had him do some appearances in person in Hollywood before filming began, but his dad insisted that Ryker be able to finish his senior year in the most normal way possible.

I woke up the morning of his birthday, determined to finish Ryker's picture. I sketched all morning and then took a break to work a few hours at Toppings. After work, I came home and quickly put the finishing touches on the picture. I'd run out of time. If I wanted Ryker to get it on his birthday or anytime soon, I had to stop being such a perfectionist.

I stepped back and studied it. A smile crept across my face. It was most definitely my best work yet. Ryker was going to be blown away. I couldn't wait to show it to him. I lifted a framed picture of the ocean from my wall and took the back of the frame off. I swapped the picture for the sketch I'd drawn for Ryker. I wrapped it up in tissue paper and stuck it in a box, then wrapped the box with a roll of birthday wrapping paper I found in the hall closet.

I pushed open the front door, the gift tucked under my arm. I crossed the grassy area between our houses and knocked on Ryker's door. His sister Ava opened it.

"Hey! Is Ryker home? I have something for his birthday."

"Yep, come on in." She opened the door wider to let me pass her into the front hall.

"He's in his room."

She went into the living room and settled on the couch, and I walked down the hall

that led to the bedrooms. I knocked on the door to the room Ryker shared with Parker.

“Come in,” he called through the door.

I pushed open the door and saw him sitting at his desk, his laptop in front of him with a video chat open. He wore headphones and kept his eyes glued to the screen. He waved me over without even looking at me. He laughed hard, holding his hands over his belly as he leaned back in his chair.

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I closed the door behind me and shrunk against it like it would protect me somehow. I should have known that Ryker would be busy again. It had been like this since Monday when I found out that he'd been cast in the movie. I'd barely had a conversation with him since study hall Monday afternoon.

I'd never felt so alone. I didn't have girls I hung out with. Austin had moved on with Tabby and hadn't looked back once. He seemed to be on top of the world with her. They'd gotten in trouble for kissing in the halls twice in one week. The entire thing turned my stomach. I was glad high school was almost over. It really was too bad that Austin was going to UNC. It meant I'd have to see him still. But the campus was a big place. It wouldn't be too hard to avoid him.

I stood with my back to the door for a few minutes. I thought about leaving and taking the picture with me. I felt so stupid. Austin had moved on from me. And now it looked like Ryker had moved on as well. Why did I always care about people who ended up leaving me? First, my dad, then Austin, and now Ryker.

Ryker ended the call and turned to look at me. "Shannon? I didn't know that was you." He stood up. "Oh, man. I'm really sorry. That was so rude of me." He looked at me. My eyes watered. I couldn't hold back the tears threatening to spill down my cheeks. So I let them fall.

Ryker's eyes softened with concern. "Are you okay?" He reached up and wiped a tear from my face.

I shook my head. "I feel so alone, Ryker. I know I shouldn't feel this way. I'm a selfish person. I want to support you and be happy for you, but I don't know how."

“What are you talking about?” he asked. “Shannon, you don’t have to do anything. Just be you. You’re allowed to feel sad. You’re allowed to feel alone. You’re dealing with what Austin did to you. I’m sorry, I haven’t been there for you better. I wish I could, but I need to do this for my family. Look at this place. The roof needs to be replaced. The foundation is infested with termites. It’s been that way for years. But we haven’t had the money to fix it. Ava and Parker are struggling in school, but my dad and I are too busy working to sit and help them, and there’s no money to hire a tutor for them.”

I hadn’t thought about any of that. I just kept seeing Ryker basking in his fame. But the new knowledge didn’t help me feel any less alone. How was I supposed to face college away from my mom and Maddie without him? It was weird that I was even having these feelings. For so long, I only thought about leaving Sweet Mountain and making something of myself in the world, but I’d always thought I’d have Ryker by my side the entire time. He’d always been there, since we were kids, anyway. I hadn’t thought about a life without him and what that might look like. And imagining it wasn’t pretty. I didn’t want to even let my mind go there.

“What do you have behind your back?” Ryker reached around and took the box with the brightly colored birthday wrapping paper. “Is this for me?”

I nodded, the lump in my throat still keeping me from speaking.

He took my hand and led me to sit on the end of his bed. He tore open the paper and set it behind us. He lifted off the lid of the box and pulled out the rectangle wrapped in tissue paper. He pulled back a fold of the tissue paper, and his breath caught audibly.

“Did you draw this?” He ran his fingers across the glass of the frame.

“Yeah.”

He looked in my eyes and said, “I love it, Shannon. This is the most thoughtful gift you could have ever given me. He looks exactly how I pictured him in my head. You even got his eyes the right color.”

I stared back into Ryker’s blue eyes, and something fluttered in my belly. They were the same eyes I’d used in the drawing. I pressed my lips together and looked away. I couldn’t feel this way about Ryker. That was just weird. I hopped up.

A flash of black outside the window caught my attention.

“Um, Ryker?” I asked. “Were you expecting a limo to take you somewhere tonight?” I thought he had to work.

“Oh, yeah.” He looked down at his watch. “How did it get so late already? I have to get ready to go.”

A tiny girl with black hair twisted in a perfect princess bun atop her head climbed from the limo. A necklace sparkled at her throat in the bright rays of the sunset. A gasp caught in my throat. “Is that Gabi Richardson?” I’d spent my childhood watching her grow up in one movie or another.

Ryker stood at his closet, frantically rummaging through it. He yanked out a starched shirt and polished brown leather shoes from his closet floor. Everything still had tags on it.

“Did you go shopping?” It wasn’t like him to keep me out of the loop on his life. Was he starting to hide things from me? And if so, why?

“Yeah,” he pulled his shirt off, revealing a chiseled set of abs. I gawked. Wow! Who knew Ryker looked that good?

“Um, Ryker?” I asked, averting my eyes, my cheeks heating up. “Do you want me to step out of the room?”

“Oh. Yeah.” Ryker looked down at his bare chest. “Sorry about that.”

I went into the living room and hung out on the couch with Ava. Then I noticed what she was watching. She had on a Gabi Richardson movie, one of the films Stephen Christopher had directed.

The doorbell rang.

“Should I get that?” I asked.

Ava paused the movie, the screen frozen right on a clear shot of Gabi’s face. This was all getting so weird. “Why are there famous people on your doorstep?” I mean, I knew it was coming, but I didn’t think they’d show up so soon.

“They’re taking Ryker out for his birthday. Get this. He’s going to Charter,” Ava gushed.

Charter was the nicest restaurant in town. I’d never set foot inside it. It had never crossed my mind that Ryker would be going to a place like that, let alone in a limo. I didn’t know much about designer clothes, but I could tell that the new clothes Ryker had in his closet hadn’t come from Walmart. Probably not even the local mall. His shirt probably cost as much as my entire month’s paycheck from Toppings.

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Honestly, it hurt that Ryker had made plans with Gabi and Mr. Christopher instead of hanging out with me. He'd told me when his schedule came out that he had to work on his birthday. Maybe I just needed to get used to the fact that Ryker was moving on to a better life that didn't include me.

Ava answered the door and invited Stephen Christopher and Gabi inside just as Ryker came down the hallway.

He greeted them like he'd already been working with them for years. How was he not intimidated? Gabi was so brilliantly beautiful that I was left speechless. Her makeup was flawless. But someone like Gabi could afford the best skincare. I was lucky if I had enough money set aside for the cheapest drugstore foundation. And most of the time, I skipped makeup altogether.

"This is Shannon," Ryker said, turning to me. "She's my best friend. We've lived next door to each other since third grade."

"It's great to meet you, Shannon," Gabi said graciously, a sweet smile spreading across her face, revealing perfect white teeth.

Mr. Christopher shook my hand. "Thanks for letting us have Ryker for a while."

"This is my sister Ava. She's thirteen."

"Nice to meet you, Ava," Mr. Christopher said.

"If you decide you need anyone else in one of your movies, I'm your girl," Ava said,

a pair of dimples appearing as she smiled.

Mr. Christopher laughed. "I'll keep that in mind."

"I'd introduce you to my dad and my brother, but my dad is working, and my brother is at a friend's house helping them move. They both really want to meet you, though."

"I'm sure we'll get another chance," Gabi said.

"Well," Ryker said. "Should we head out?"

"Absolutely," Mr. Christopher said.

They waved goodbye to Ava and me and exited through the front door. I went into the kitchen for a glass of water and spotted Ryker helping Gabi into the limo before climbing in himself. A flood of bitter emotions threatened to encompass me, but I pushed them all down and embraced the emptiness instead.

That was when it hit me. Maybe I did have something to write about on my own. What if I wrote a story about a girl with a best guy friend who gets sucked into a Hollywood career? That was a story worth writing about. I'd change around some of the facts, so it didn't resemble reality too closely, but it would be a good way to process what I was feeling. Because right now, I was wallowing, and that was never a good thing.

I went home and opened my laptop to a blank document and began typing. It looked like I had a story for Mrs. Drake, after all.

7

Ryker

The limo pulled up to the front entrance of Charter, and the driver got out to open our door. The sidewalk was lined with people with cameras. Paparazzi. How had they found out we were going to be here tonight?

Lights flashed in my eyes, momentarily blinding me. I climbed from the limo first, smiling and waving. Gabi followed next, taking my hand.

“Hey, guys!”

“Happy Birthday, Ryker!” someone called.

A woman with blonde hair hairsprayed into a helmet shoved a microphone in my face. “How does it feel to know you’re going to be one of the most desired men in Hollywood?”

“I don’t know about that.” I chuckled. “I think I just need to worry about getting there first.”

“Gabi! How do you feel about being onscreen with Ryker?”

“I’m sure Ryker will be fantastic. I took a look at his audition video, and he’s amazing in front of the camera.”

She'd seen my audition video? That was so embarrassing. Gabi wasn't what I'd expected at all. I thought she'd be a spoiled, pampered princess. But she actually seemed down to earth and cool. She and I had video chatted a few times. She'd begged Mr. Christopher to fly out with her to have dinner with me on my birthday. She insisted she needed to see where I grew up to really understand who I was. She said it was integral to her process of getting into character and building onscreen chemistry with me. She was privately tutored instead of going to a normal high school, so she could hop on a plane anytime she felt like it and just keep her tutoring sessions to long-distance video chat.

Mr. Christopher leaned into the microphone. "That will be all for tonight. Thank you."

We walked into the building together, where security personnel guarded the doors to keep out the riffraff. I'd never even been inside Charter, and now I had guards to protect me.

Soft lighting hung low over tables scattered around the room. A hostess greeted us and led us to a table in the corner.

"How did they know we were going to be here tonight?" I asked Gabi when we'd settled at the table and had given our orders.

"Who knows? It probably has to do with the fact that Stephen announced your role in the film yesterday. They probably sent people to Sweet Mountain right away. It's not a stretch to guess that you'd go to the nicest place in town for your birthday. Especially since I came to visit. They follow me everywhere. It can be annoying, but you get used to it eventually. I usually just smile and wave."

"You have a really good attitude about it. Don't most celebrities hate the paparazzi?"

“I don’t have a bunch of dirty secrets to hide.”

“Gabi hasn’t had to work very hard to keep up her squeaky-clean image. It comes naturally to her,” Mr. Christopher said. “It’s one of the reasons I cast her as our Cinderella. She already has the perfect image for it. So many people are easily corrupted by this industry, but if you focus on working hard and staying out of trouble, you’ll see that the paparazzi won’t bother you too much. They’ll have much bigger, juicier stories to pursue.”

“You’re so sweet, Stephen. Thank you,” Gabi said.

“What’s it been like not going to regular school?” I asked Gabi.

“It can get pretty boring and lonely.”

“Do you ever wish you could go to a normal public high school?” I asked.

“Well, all I know is what I’ve seen on TV and movies, but yeah. I definitely feel sad that I’ve missed out on all the fun stuff like football games and prom. You’re lucky to have a good friend like Shannon. For all the fame I seem to have, I’ve actually led a pretty isolated life. It’s hard to find people who understand what my life is like.”

“That’s what I’m worried about,” I admitted.

“What do you mean?” Mr. Christopher asked.

“I guess I mean, I’m worried that I’ll lose my identity now that I’m going to be so well known.”

Mr. Christopher nodded thoughtfully.

“Are you worried about losing your friends?” Gabi asked.

“The only friend who really matters is Shannon.”

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“What’s the deal with you guys anyway?”

“What do you mean?” I asked, taking a sip of my water.

“Why aren’t you dating her?” Gabi unfolded the linen napkin wrapped around her silverware and spread it across her lap.

I choked on my water, letting out a cough.

Mr. Christopher laughed. “It’s that bad, huh?”

“You want to know the honest truth?” I didn’t care if Mr. Christopher knew how I felt, but I had no idea why I was admitting this to Gabi. Maybe it was because I knew we had to perform onscreen together as a romantic couple in love, and I wanted her to understand where my heart stood.

Her eyes sparkled, and she nodded. She reminded me of a little girl getting ready to hear about a good fairy-tale romance. She was about to be sorely disappointed. Our romance was clearly one-sided.

“I’ve been in love with Shannon for a very long time.”

She clapped her hands. “I knew it!” she squealed. “I could tell when you introduced her to me.”

“Why didn’t you introduce her to us as your girlfriend then?” Mr. Christopher asked.

“Because she doesn’t know how I actually feel.”

“Ouch,” Mr. Christopher said.

“Yeah,” I said.

“You need to tell her the truth,” Gabi said, leaning back in her chair with her arms crossed.

“Believe me, that wouldn’t go over well.”

“That’s just your fear talking,” Gabi said. “You’re brave enough to get up on a stage and perform. And now you’re putting your privacy on the line with a film career. Most people would be way too terrified to do that. It’s just a simple conversation.”

“A simple conversation? It could ruin my relationship with my best friend in the entire world. I’d rather at least have her as a best friend than lose her altogether.”

“Or you could be dating her,” Mr. Christopher said. “It’s a risk, but the best things in life usually require a leap of faith.”

He was right. But was I ready to take action?

“You have to talk to her,” Gabi pleaded. “You’re about to go off to California. What if you leave, and you never get the chance to tell her the truth? You could end up regretting that for the rest of your life. You never know, Shannon might like you back.”

“Until recently, she had a boyfriend, but she caught him kissing another girl at school last Monday. So she broke it off with him.”

“Now’s the perfect time to make your move then,” Mr. Christopher said.

I thought back to Monday when I hugged her in the lunchroom, and I’d sensed that she might actually be interested in me. Maybe I had a better chance with Shannon than I thought.

* * *

Over the next week, a steady stream of packages arrived at my house. My agent, George, recommended that I start stocking up on a new wardrobe since I’d be in the public eye so heavily. I guess he wasn’t really thrilled with my ratty, stained t-shirt collection. He helped me order a bunch of stuff from stores I’d never even heard of. He insisted it would help my image.

I didn’t even want to know how much George had spent, but, thanks to the huge advance George had negotiated for me, my bank account was so huge now, I wasn’t sure it even mattered at this point. George insisted that it was an investment in my future career and could be written off as a business expense on my taxes, whatever that meant.

I didn’t wear them at first. I was happy in my old clothes. I stacked up the boxes in the corner of my room, but then when I went to school one morning, my house was swarmed by paparazzi.

Before noon, my picture was viral on Twitter with loads of comments on how I was dressed.

My phone blew up with texts from George, asking me if I’d gotten the new clothes he’d helped me order. I went home that afternoon and began opening the stack of boxes.

Shannon came into my room as I ripped open my third box.

“What’s all this?” she asked.

“Clothes my agent wants me to start wearing.”

She walked over to my bed and picked up a pair of ripped-up jeans. “How is this that much different from what you’re already wearing?”

“It doesn’t have grass stains on it?”

“You paid five hundred dollars for this?” Shannon squeaked.

“Oh, did I? I’m trying not to look at the price tags. George ordered them all for me.”

“You don’t even like skinny jeans.”

“I guess I do now.”

She put the jeans back on the bed. “This isn’t you, Ryker.”

“George said, it’s important to get my image right for the fans. It’s part of getting future film work. I’m just thinking of it as a work uniform. When I’m chilling out at home, I can wear whatever I want.”

“You’re really planning to make this an entire career, aren’t you?”

“You have your paycheck from Toppings that you can use to help out your mom. This is what I have, and it’s a lot better pay than what I was making working part-

time at Skippy's. I have to help take care of my family, somehow."

"I get that," Shannon said. "I guess I'm just trying to absorb all of this. I didn't see it coming, you know?"

"None of us saw it coming. But it's here, and it's a better opportunity than most people can ever imagine."

Shannon looked up at me, her bright blue eyes studying me like she was still trying to process all the changes at once.

Oh, how I wanted to kiss her. The pull to take her in my arms and taste her lips was hard to ignore. I'd been thinking a lot about my conversation with Gabi and Mr. Christopher at Charter. I wanted to tell Shannon how I felt, but I still hadn't gathered the courage to do so. I wanted to get a better gauge of her reaction to me.

On impulse, I reached up and tucked a wavy blonde strand of hair behind her ear. She froze, keeping her eyes on me. I dropped my hand, letting it trace down her arm. I felt goosebumps rising up on her skin, and I lifted my hand away.

She looked away, her hair shading her reddening cheeks. "I should get back home," she whispered.

"Why?" I asked.

"I'm writing a book," she said.

"What?" I pulled away. "Like, on your own?"

"Yes. For this contest Mrs. Drake told us about in English class. I went to her today and told her I'd decided to enter." Her blue eyes were serious.

“That’s incredible, Shannon.” I could kiss her all over again. I was so proud of her.
“What’s it about?”

She blushed. “I’m not ready to share it with you yet, but maybe one day.”

“I understand.” I turned back to the next box and sliced it open. It hurt that Shannon didn’t want to share her new book with me. We’d always shared our stories together. Did this mean she didn’t want to write the fan fiction with me anymore?

“I just . . .” Shannon had her hand on her opposite arm over the spot where I’d felt her goosebumps. “I just wanted to stop by to see how you were. It feels like we hardly talk anymore.”

“Hey, I’m just next door. You know where to find me.”

“For now,” she said.

“Yeah. For now.” And then I was moving to the other side of the country. Right when it seemed like something might actually happen between Shannon and me. Sometimes the universe really was cruel.

Shannon

I left Ryker's house, my head swirling with confusion. What was happening between us? Ryker was changing, and quickly. First, all his new clothes, which would probably end up looking incredible on him, and now, the way he'd been touching me lately. I couldn't say I didn't like it—because I did like it. A little too much, and that was what scared me. I wasn't sure I was ready to face what it might mean for Ryker and me. I was comfortable with the way our relationship had been. It was safe and predictable. Routine. But this? We were entering uncharted territory, and I didn't know how to navigate this terrain.

When I saw Ryker coming home from Charter, Gabi had gotten out of the limo to say goodbye to him, and she'd ended up hugging him so naturally, I'd thought Ryker was interested in her. I mean, regardless of the hug, what guy wouldn't be?

She was a drop-dead gorgeous uber-famous movie star. The kind of girl every guy dreamed about. Poised, gracious, and well-spoken. She didn't even come off as fake. She seemed genuine and down to earth. How was that even possible? Would I be that nice if I had that much attention and money? Gabi didn't have to worry about barely scraping by financially. If Ryker's new spending habits were any indication, she could spend the entire day at the mall and not even come close to making a dent in her bank account. I had no idea what that must be like. I'd spent so much time ensuring I had every last penny accounted for. I had to, or we wouldn't have been able to survive. Most girls my age spent their money on new clothes or the newest shade of lipstick. I saved up every penny to help my mom put food on the table.

I pulled open the screen over my front door and then the door itself. Mom still wasn't home. Maddie was sitting at the table, painting her nails.

"What's up, Shannon?" she asked.

"Nothing."

"You just come from hottie's house?"

I made a face. "Don't call him that."

"Why not?"

"Because it's weird."

"That's what half the school is calling him. And now there's a rumor going around that you're dating him since Austin is sucking face with Tabby Lewis. I have to say, you really dodged a bullet on that one. Ryker is a way better catch, and I thought that before he got rich and famous."

"There's a rumor going around that I'm dating Ryker?"

"Oh yeah. People are shipping you big time. Just give it a few days, you'll have a hashtag trending."

"I don't even know what any of that means."

"You don't know what a hashtag is?"

I rolled my eyes. "I know what that is. Just not the rest of that gibberish."

“You’re the biggest nerd in the school, and you write fan fiction. How do you not know about shipping and trending hashtags?”

“Because I write my fan fiction. I don’t hang out on social media. It’s not my thing.”

“It’s only a matter of time, and you’ll be hanging out on there, whether you like it or not,” Maddie said.

“What are you talking about?” I asked.

“Haven’t you noticed the crowds of creepsters outside our house with the cameras, or are you really that disconnected from reality?”

I scowled. “Of course, I’ve seen them. I just don’t know what they have to do with me.”

“Duh, you’re always with Ryker. If half the school is shipping you two, then it’s only a matter of time before your face is plastered all across the internet with him.”

“You mean the paparazzi is going to start writing articles about me and speculating that I’m dating Ryker?”

“Obviously.”

I opened my mouth to speak but shut it again. I hadn’t thought of that. “But I’m not dating him. We just have to let them know that.”

“Yeah, like that will work. Those people are vultures, looking for whatever piece of juicy gossip they think will get the most attention. Everyone loves a best-friends-to-lovers story, especially when the lovers are next-door neighbors who grew up together. And they’ll be more than happy to create that story for the masses.”

“You mean they won’t believe me.”

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“Um, I don’t even believe you. I knew you were crushing on Ryker before all this movie stuff went down.”

“Except I wasn’t. I was dating Austin, remember?”

Maddie busted out laughing. “Oh yeah, I remember. You always spent all your time with Ryker and practically ignored Austin.”

“That’s just because we’re writing a fan fiction together. As friends.”

“Is that what you still are?”

I hesitated. “Yes.”

“Hm. That sounded convincing.”

“You’re so snarky. You don’t know what you’re talking about.” I pushed past her to get an apple from the fruit basket on the table. “You should have seen him with Gabi. That’s who the media will beshippingor whatever you call it.”

“You’re jealous!” Maddie started laughing so hard she almost fell off her stool.

“Calm down. You’re going to get nail polish everywhere, and then I’m going to have to clean it up. Because you’re not exactly known for cleaning up your messes around here.”

“You’re cranky. You just need to chill out, Shannon.”

I rubbed my forehead. Maybe I did. I didn't know what had gotten into me lately. Everything was changing so fast I could hardly keep up with it.

The problem was, I was jealous. Ryker was going off to California to go see the world. UCLA had been my dream school, and although I'd been accepted, I couldn't begin to afford the out-of-state tuition. UNC was in a bigger city than Sweet Mountain, but it wasn't as much of a change as UCLA would be. I'd be in the state with basically the same culture. More or less. UCLA would have been like another planet compared to Sweet Mountain. And I could have gone to the beach on the weekends, and the weather would be amazing year-round.

I'd convinced myself that UNC would be just as good as UCLA because Ryker would be there with me. But now that was a thing of the past. And heading to UNC by myself didn't sound nearly as appealing. I felt awful for feeling jealous of Ryker. It officially made me a terrible friend.

I trudged back to my room and opened my computer. I needed to write to get all these feelings out, or I would go mad.

* * *

Ryker and I drove to school the next morning. It wasn't unusual for us to ride to school together from time to time. But today we traveled with a trail of paparazzi in cars behind us. When I suggested I ride with him earlier that morning, he tried to warn me that we'd be bombarded with the media, but I didn't realize how bad it would actually be.

"Do you think the media is going to try to say there's some romance in the air with you and Gabi?" I asked.

"I would be surprised if they didn't," Ryker said in a matter-of-fact voice.

“I guess that makes sense. You’re about to film a pretty romantic movie with her. Everyone will want to think it’s real.”

“It’s just the nature of the beast. I don’t pay too much attention to all that nonsense. If there’s a problem with the media, my agent will let me know what to do. That’s his job.”

“Do you think she’s pretty?”

“Of course, she’s Gabi Richardson. Everyone thinks she’s pretty. Any girl cast as Cinderella in a big movie is required to look pretty,” he said in a businesslike voice. Just like any guy cast as Prince Charming was required to look hot. But I wasn’t about to admit that to Ryker.

The truth was, he was incredible looking, and I was beginning to see it more and more every day. How had I gone this long without seeing that? I guessed it wasn’t that I didn’t see it, I just didn’t do anything about it. I wasn’t sure that was always going to be the case between us. I’d felt something strong with Ryker in his room the other day, and I was having a hard time forgetting about it.

“Don’t you think it’s weird that you’re going to have to kiss her and stuff?”

“I kissed Camille. It’s just part of being an actor. Sometimes you have to kiss people. Does it bother you?”

“Me? Why should I care? You can kiss whoever you want. I was just curious.”

“Were you trying to ask if I’m crushing on Gabi?”

“No. I know you’re not crushing on Gabi,” I said quickly.

“You’re allowed to know how I feel about Gabi. You’re my best friend.”

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“I don’t mean to pry, I swear.”

“Just because I objectively find someone attractive doesn’t mean I’m crushing on that person or that I want to pursue a romantic relationship with the person.”

“You’re allowed to like whoever you want.”

Ryker laughed. “I realize that. It’s good to know I have your permission.”

“I don’t mean it like that. I just . . . Ugh. Nevermind.” My cheeks heated. This conversation was getting more awkward by the second.

“But in case you were wondering, there is someone I like.”

My heart stopped beating for half a second, and my stomach jumped into my ribcage. Did I want to know who it was? Ryker never mentioned his crushes to me. He was pretty tight-lipped about it.

“Does she know you like her?”

“I don’t know.”

“Do you think she likes you back?”

Ryker’s smile faded, and his face grew pensive. “I’m not sure.”

“I bet she does. Maddie says the entire school calls you ‘the hottie’ now.”

Ryker laughed. “How have I been completely oblivious to that?”

“I don’t know, maybe because you’re too busy trying to graduate while preparing to move to California to start a successful film career.”

“Yeah. That probably has something to do with it.”

We pulled into the school parking lot. The only open spot was near the back of the lot, and we had to walk a ways to get into the building. We got stopped by the paparazzi three separate times as they tried to ask us questions. By the time we got inside, the bell was ringing. Great. Another tardy. Why did this always happen when I rode with Ryker?

We turned a corner and saw Austin and Tabby walking down the hall hand in hand. She was holding a white ceramic vase with a dozen red roses. Prom? was painted on the vase in red letters.

Austin was supposed to take me to prom. I knew it wasn’t going to happen, but it still hurt to get rejected. Seeing that vase of roses gave me a tiny glimpse of what my mom went through with my dad and his new wife.

“Are you okay?” Ryker asked after Austin and Tabby were out of earshot.

I turned to him and gave him a brave smile. “Yeah. I’m fine. I’m better off without him.”

“Yeah. You are. You deserve to be with a guy who will always respect you. Austin was the complete opposite of that.”

“He sure tried to put on a nice-guy face, though.”

“It wasn’t hard to see through it. For me, anyway. But I was around you guys a lot. I can see how maybe someone would have thought he was a great guy from a distance. He has all the right words. The problem is, he doesn’t mean most of what he says.”

“Well, I’d better get to class. This is my third tardy this semester.”

“Oh, no. Your third tardy? How devastating.”

“Are you making fun of me, Ryker? Oh yeah, I forgot. You’re the guy who probably has three tardies a week. It’s a wonder they haven’t kicked you out by now.”

“They don’t kick you out. They just send a letter to your parents or something. I wouldn’t know. Despite what you may think, I don’t actually get that many tardies. And in my defense, it’s not my fault that there was a crowd of money-hungry reporters outside the school.”

“Kind of reminds me of Lindsey Beck,” I said when we got to my locker. I twisted the dial and swung open the door, exchanging some books. “Do you think she’ll ever become a member of the paparazzi? I mean, she already has experience as a reporter for the school newspaper.”

“You really don’t like her, do you?”

“She’s the reason I found out you had decided to accept the role in the movie.”

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“Yeah, I remember. You know why I didn’t tell you right away?”

“Why?”

“Because I felt guilty. I didn’t want to upset you. I knew it meant that you’d have to go to UNC on your own.”

“Oh, Ryker. You shouldn’t feel guilty about that. You have your family and your own future to think about.”

“I just thought you should know. I wasn’t trying to hide things from you. I just didn’t know how to break the news to you in a way that wouldn’t hurt you.”

I smiled sadly. “I don’t think there was any way you could have accomplished that.”

Concern clouded Ryker’s eyes. “Are you saying you’re hurt by the fact that I accepted the role?”

I slammed my locker shut. “I don’t want to admit it, but yes. But only for the most selfish reasons. I was looking forward to hanging out with you at UNC.”

“I know. I was looking forward to it too. We had it all planned out. When we found out you got the scholarship too, it felt like everything had fallen into place. I wasn’t even going to consider going to the audition.”

“I remember. But life doesn’t always go as planned. Sometimes it has better things in mind for us,” I said. “I want you to know that I’m glad you got the part. You get to go

off to beautiful California and the constant sunshine. Think about how often you'll get to go to the beach and meet amazing people."

"I just wish you could come with me," Ryker said, surprising me.

My heart leaped into my throat. I could feel heat creeping across my cheeks. Why was I blushing? "You do?" I'd thought he was ready to move on from me to more glamorous friends like Gabi.

"Of course, I do. You're my favorite person in the entire world."

I noticed that he hadn't called me his best friend as usual. Did that mean he viewed me as something more?

9

Ryker

I walked across the football field, and I spotted Shannon sitting on the bleachers. She had a textbook spread on the seat next to her and a notebook in her lap. The sun was out, and it was a beautiful, warm day. Shannon had taken her cardigan off and sat in just a tank top with an anime character on it, tanning her shoulders. She looked beautiful.

Had she been blushing earlier this morning when we were heading to class, and I told her I'd wanted her to go to California with me?

As I approached, Shannon looked deep in thought. I knew her better than anyone, and I could tell something was on her mind. She always took off her ring and played with it when she was in deep concentration.

Several girls had already asked me to prom. The same girls who hadn't given me the time of day before I was cast in the Cinderella movie were now flocking to go out with "the famous Ryker," or "the hottie," if you asked Maddie. I rolled my eyes.

Freshman year, before Shannon started dating the loser, I'd considered asking Shannon to homecoming. Now that she wasn't dating Austin anymore, she would need a date to prom. I couldn't leave her dateless on one of the biggest nights of a high school girl's year. Should I ask her to prom? Did I have a chance?

Large droplets of sweat formed on my brow. I could do this. I decided to run up the

bleachers so I would have an excuse for the sweat. When I reached her spot, I sat down next to her.

“What are you thinking about?” I asked Shannon, who was still playing with her ring.

“I’m thinking about our conversation before school,” she said with a half-smile.

“What, um, what about it?” I asked, stumbling over my words. I felt like such an idiot. I’d never been so nervous around Shannon before. But then again, I hadn’t ever asked her to prom either.

“I’m scared, Ryker.”

“What’s scaring you?”

“I don’t want to lose you.”

I took her hands in mine. “You’re not going to lose me. I promise.”

“I don’t know how to go forward,” Shannon said.

“You just take one step at a time. I’ll be here with you as much as I can. And even if I’m on the other side of the country, you’ll have me just one video call away,” I said.

“I told you that you’re the most important person in my life.”

“Not Gabi?”

“Not Gabi. I barely know her. She’s a nice person, and I’m glad to be working with her, but I’ve cared about you for years.” I was getting dangerously close to admitting my true feelings, and I wasn’t so sure how Shannon would react. I could at least start by taking one step forward.

Shannon fidgeted with her ring, spinning it around and around in slow circles between her fingers.

“Shannon?”

“Yeah?” She looked up from her ring.

“Do you want to go to prom with me?”

“What?” Her eyes widened, and the ring fumbled from her grasp. “Oh, shoot.” She reached for it, but it bounced from her fingers against the side of the benches, before dropping to the depths below the bleachers. “No, no, no!” Shannon panicked, scrambling to her feet. “That was my grandmother’s ring.” She jogged down the steps and I got up to follow her.

My face felt like it was on fire. Way to make it awkward, dude.

When we got to the bottom, Shannon circled to the back of the bleachers and crouched in the dirt, searching frantically. I kneeled in the dust next to her. I spotted the ring blinking in the sunlight filtering through the slats in the bleachers above us. Shannon must have seen it at the exact moment that I did because we reached out for it together, our hands brushing against each other. Her hand was incredibly warm and soft. Electricity zapped up my arm and straight to my heart.

I didn’t want to hold back any longer. Shannon’s eyes met mine. We sat inches apart, the air charged between us. Before I could talk myself out of it, I leaned in and kissed her. At first, she froze in shock against me, but then she melted into me, kissing me back slowly, gradually intensifying the kiss. Her lips were incredibly soft and warm, and they tasted like sunshine and peaches, and everything good in the world. I breathed in her sweet smell and sighed against her mouth. “So does this mean you’ll go to prom with me?”

“Yes,” she breathed as I kissed the edge of her mouth.

“Good.” I kissed her once more. “I was hoping you’d say that.”

“You’re really good at this,” she said against my mouth.

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I teased her lips between mine, and she let out a soft moan. I deepened the kiss, savoring the moment as one of the best in my life. How long had I waited to kiss Shannon? Wondered what it would be like? I'd never imagined it would be this amazing, and I never wanted it to end.

But then it did. Shannon pulled away from me. I looked into her blue eyes and caught the unmistakable fear she held there. She curled her fingers around the ring and looked down, her blonde hair falling around her face like a protective curtain. "I'm not sure that was such a good idea," she said. She crept from beneath the bleachers and stood, brushing the dust from her hands, shaking the dirt from her ring. She headed back to the bleachers where her books were still resting.

"Shannon, wait."

She didn't stop. I followed her back to her seat. She was shoving her books and notebooks back into her backpack. "I have to go. Please don't follow me."

I sunk onto the warm metal beneath me as she shouldered her backpack. She dashed down the bleachers and disappeared around the corner.

My hope plummeted as I watched her leave. Had I just ruined my relationship with my best friend? I could still feel her kiss lingering on my lips. Everything had seemed to be so perfect. She'd even agreed to go to prom with me. What had I done wrong? And did her hasty departure mean she was withdrawing her agreement to go with me? Was she just caught up in the moment?

At this point, only time could tell.

10

Shannon

I made my way through the parking lot for my car before I realized I had driven to school with Ryker. Which meant he'd have to drive me home. Everything was getting so awkward. I wanted to be mad at Ryker for messing everything up. We were fine before. It was hard that he was leaving to go to California, but we'd still at least have the chance to talk every day when he was done filming.

Now? Everything would be strained and weird between us. Because how could we get over that kiss? That kiss had been life-changing. I didn't even know a kiss could be that electrifying. I could feel my heart calling out to his, and that was what terrified me the most. It wasn't safe for us to feel this way, especially me, because he was about to leave and be surrounded by even more girls. California girls. Celebrity girls. How could I ever compete with that? I wasn't going to kid myself into thinking that Ryker would choose me over them.

Ryker was the best thing in my life, and I was worried I was about to lose him. I couldn't let my feelings travel down the road they wanted to go. It would only end in heartbreak. Just like my mom. I had to figure out a way to keep everything as normal as possible between us. Maybe we could just pretend the kiss had never happened.

"Shannon."

I spun around to see Ryker approaching me in the nearly empty parking lot. Why did he have to look so good? My body begged me to kiss him again, but I suppressed the

feeling.

“I know you said you didn’t want me to follow you, but you’re standing right by my car, and I need to get home. You’re welcome to ride with me—if you’re okay with that.”

His eyes . . . I couldn’t stand to see the pain there. Guilt stabbed my heart. I’d hurt Ryker by running away after our kiss. Did that mean he felt as strongly about it as I had?

“Yeah,” I said, trying to keep my voice sounding as normal as possible. “A ride home would be nice. Thanks.”

I climbed into the passenger side of Ryker’s car. But the entire car smelled like him, and he was so close. My senses were whirling out of control.

“Look,” Ryker said, cranking the engine. He bit his bottom lip nervously, and my breath caught. What was wrong with me? “About that kiss . . .”

Before I could stop myself, I leaned toward him and slipped my hand around the back of his neck. I pulled him toward me. His warm lips met mine, and I ran my finger over the stubble on his jaw. We stayed like that for a few minutes, making out, and I didn’t care who walked by and saw. I needed him. I needed this. My heart exploded in my chest, and I wanted to pull my body even closer to Ryker.

I forced my eyes open and pushed away from him. What was I doing? I couldn’t kiss Ryker like this. I had to put a stop to our nonsense, and right away. It was one thing to write about it in my book, where my characters were growing increasingly closer, but this was real life. And real life had consequences. I wasn’t going to be the first girl on a long list of hearts that Ryker decided to break over the coming years. I had to remember who he was now. A celebrity. And celebrities didn’t have real romances

with the girl next door.

I pulled the seatbelt across my body and snapped it into place. “Can we just pretend that never happened?”

Ryker looked straight ahead with his hands on the steering wheel in front of him, his face grim. “Shannon.”

I shook my head. “I just can’t talk about it right now. Is that okay?”

Ryker blew out a frustrated breath. “I guess so.”

“Let’s just go home.”

We took the drive home with an awkward silence hanging between us. When we pulled up the driveway, I turned to Ryker. “I’m sorry I’m being like this. I have a lot in my head I’m working through right now. Please just be patient with me. In the meantime, I still want us to be friends. Please. I don’t know what I’d do without keeping you as my best friend.”

Ryker’s white-knuckle grip on the steering wheel loosened. “I don’t want to lose you as a friend either. I told you, you’re my favorite person.”

“But you meant as more than just friends?” I regretted the words as they left my mouth. I’d told Ryker I didn’t want to talk about what had happened between us and that I just wanted to pretend it hadn’t happened, and here I was reopening the uncomfortable conversation.

I stepped outside the car and looked up into the branches of the big tree that shaded my entire front yard. That tree had always comforted me. Right after my dad had left, and we’d just moved into the house, I used to spread out on the grass beneath the tree

and look up through the branches. The leaves were so thick in the summer it was hard to see the sky through the greenery. I always liked that for some reason.

Just looking up through the branches now relaxed me, and I took a moment to breathe. I stepped away from the car. I didn't know what the future held for Ryker and me. But that was okay, wasn't it? I didn't have to have all the answers today or even tomorrow.

"Shannon," Ryker said.

I realized he'd never answered my question of if he meant he saw me as more than just a friend.

"I would never just kiss you for fun. I hope you know that. I'm not that kind of guy."

"You mean, you're not like Austin."

"No, I'm not like him."

And that meant he didn't casually kiss some MG in the girls' bathroom when he had a different girlfriend. Ryker meant it when he kissed someone. At least off camera and off the stage. He'd already confirmed that those kinds of kisses were meaningless to him.

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That meant that he'd wanted to kiss me. The thought sent a thrill through me that I couldn't ignore. Even with the ability to choose any girl he wanted inside or outside of the school, he chose me. And he knew me better than anyone. He'd seen me when our families had gone backpacking on the Appalachian Trail, and I hadn't bathed for a week. He knew every side of me that could be considered a major turnoff to a guy, and he still looked at me in a romantic light.

I had no idea how that could be possible. I suddenly felt incredibly exposed. How long had Ryker seen me this way?

He came around the car and stood in front of me. "I have to go to work. Can I come by and see you when I get home?"

I stared up into his blue eyes and swallowed before nodding. He was standing really close, and I could feel the pull to bury my hands in his already mussed hair and touch his incredibly soft curls. I almost reached up to touch his face, but I curled my fingers into a fist instead. I took a step back.

"I'll see you tonight then."

"Okay," I whispered, my eyes still on his ocean-blue ones. I turned and went back into my house. Maddie was nowhere to be found. She must have gone over to a friend's house. I took my backpack up to my room and slung it onto the foot of my bed. I grabbed a purple fuzzy throw pillow and hugged it to my chest. I twisted the ring around my finger. Grandma's ring sure had gotten me in a lot of trouble today. I wondered if she was watching me from the other side. What was she thinking about all of this? All I knew was she would want me to be happy.

I took a deep breath to help clear my head. I fell back onto my bed and stared at the glow-in-the-dark stars I'd stuck to my ceiling when I was ten. Did kissing Ryker make me happy? A grin spread across my face. I couldn't think of a time I'd felt giddier. If that was true, then why was I fighting it so hard?

I knew the answer right away. Because I was terrified of getting my heart broken. But Ryker wasn't Dad, and he wasn't Austin.

He was Ryker.

I had always trusted him to be my best friend. Who was to say I couldn't trust him with my heart?

I sat for a minute and followed the logic I'd been feeding to myself all afternoon. I hadn't been making any sense at all. I knew Ryker. He was the best guy I knew. Didn't he deserve my trust? He never said we had to jump into anything too serious too fast. Maybe we could just take our relationship one day at a time. Maybe today we were best friends who tried kissing and discovered that it was really nice.

What was the harm in trying it out again? I twisted the ring around my finger and relived the kiss in my mind. I bit my bottom lip, remembering how Ryker had taken my lips between his. That hadn't been so bad, had it? A grin stretched across my face. Um, actually, it had been amazing. I hadn't even realized kissing could be that great. I usually got bored when Austin had kissed me. I couldn't imagine ever getting bored when Ryker was kissing me. That would be impossible.

I spent the rest of the evening working on my homework, but I was having a terrible time focusing. My mind kept drifting off to remember Ryker's kiss. And then I'd keep wondering when we were going to try kissing again. That's when I felt the giddiness all over again. After two hours of struggling to focus on my homework, I'd only gotten through one page of my math problems, and I usually finished math and a

couple of other subjects by this point. I'd never had this problem when I was with Austin. Ryker had turned me into a hot mess. And I wasn't sure I minded.

I finally decided to try getting some dinner to get my mind back on something normal and routine. Not that it did much good. I still kept daydreaming as I heated up some leftover soup on the stove.

When I returned to my homework, my focus was a little better thanks to my full tummy of food. But I was still all over the place with my thoughts. Every now and then, fear would try to creep back in, but I kept pushing it down to the deep part of me that I didn't want to acknowledge.

Around ten, Ryker knocked on my bedroom window. I hopped up from my desk and pushed up the glass. He'd been climbing in my window since we were kids, but this was the first time it had seemed rebellious. But my mom was so used to us being only friends she wouldn't even care if she saw Ryker in my room late at night.

"Hey," I said after he'd climbed inside. "Do you want to come sit down?"

"Sure."

"How was work?" I asked after we'd gotten settled side by side on my bed.

"Honestly? It felt like the longest night ever. Time was dragging," Ryker said.

That sounded familiar, but I didn't share that information with Ryker. He didn't need to know how badly I'd wanted to reunite with him. I still wasn't entirely sure how he felt about our kiss.

"Why are you still working there when you have a bazillion dollars in your bank account?"

Ryker shrugged. “Familiarity. And I didn’t want to leave my aunt high and dry. She still needs me to train my replacement.”

“You’re a good guy, Ryker.”

“I’m just doing what anyone would.”

I took his hand in mine, and he looked over at me with surprise in his eyes. “I’m ready to talk about that kiss now.”

He rotated his body so he was facing me on the bed. “You are?”

I nodded. The words were beginning to get stuck in my throat again.

“What was up with you earlier?”

“Which time?”

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“When you took off after we kissed.”

I stared down at my lap. “I was scared.”

Ryker lifted my chin with his finger, and I looked into his blue eyes. “You can talk to me. Your thoughts are safe here. What were you scared of?”

I looked back at him, and I felt vulnerable. “I don’t want to care too much.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t want to care too much about you, Ryker. Not like this.”

“You mean, romantically?”

I nodded.

“That’s not a bad thing.”

“It is if you’re used to protecting your heart.”

“Is that why you stayed with Austin so long? Because your heart wasn’t into the relationship?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t given it a lot of thought. I think that was probably on purpose, though. I didn’t want to see the truth because it would mean I was in a relationship that was a sham. It seemed a lot easier to keep pretending that I was with

the awesome guy everyone seemed to think he was.”

“Are you worried that I’m going to forget about you when I get to California?”

How was he so in touch with my emotions?

“I’m terrified. You’re going to be so busy with your filming and then all the promotional stuff like awards ceremonies and photoshoots. I don’t want to invest in something with you, whatever it may end up being between us, if it means that you’re only going to get tired of me when you get to California.”

“I don’t care how glamorous California ends up being. I will never get tired of you.”

My heart filled with warmth as he cupped my face with his hands and leaned in to kiss me. I reached up and ran my fingers through his soft curls as he tasted and explored my mouth. I sighed in happiness and pulled him closer to me.

We kissed until Ryker pulled back. “As nice as this is, I think we need to be done for the night.”

“I didn’t know you could kiss like that,” I said, snuggling into him. “Ryker?” I asked. “What are we going to do when you leave?”

“I don’t know. We just have to take this one day at a time.”

I nodded. I just wasn’t sure how well my heart would survive.

11

Ryker

The next Saturday, I knocked on Shannon's bedroom door to wake her.

"Are you decent in there?" I asked.

"Come in," she mumbled.

I pushed open the door. Shannon was sprawled across her bed, face down with her legs tangled in her blankets.

"Good morning, sleepyhead," I said. "I brought you coffee."

She didn't move. Her messy blonde hair had tumbled across her face.

"You know, you have a little river of drool puddling on your pillow."

Shannon bolted up in bed, her hair sticking out in ten different directions. "What?" She wiped at the corner of her mouth. "That's really gross. I can't believe you just saw that."

"That's nothing. I've seen much worse from you. Remember? We've been friends for a really long time."

"That's really embarrassing." Shannon wiped at her crazy hair, not that it did much

good. “Where’s this coffee you were talking about?” She squinted straight ahead.

“Did I keep you up too late last night?” I asked, putting the cup into her hand.

She took a sip and moaned. “That’s really good. Where did you get this?”

“Starbucks.”

“I thought we couldn’t afford coffee from there,” she said, waking up a little bit more, staring at the cup like she had to see it to believe it. We usually just got coffee from a fast food place or the gas station.

“Um.”

“Oh, yeah. You’re rich now. That’s a thing.” She took another sip of coffee and sighed. “I really love you right now.” Her mouth formed an O shape like she’d just realized what she’d said. “I mean, you know, like a friendship kind of love, and stuff.”

“Hey,” I said. “I get it. We’re just taking this one day at a time. Now, drink up. You’re going to need the energy. We’re going on an adventure today,” I said with a grin.

“What kind of an adventure?” Shannon asked, sipping the cup.

“The kind where you wear hiking gear with a swimsuit underneath.”

Her eyes finally opened to a normal width. “Are we going to the falls?”

“You guessed it.”

“We haven’t been there in forever!”

“Not since last year. And it’s supposed to be eighty-five degrees today.” The falls were a favorite hangout spot for the kids of Sweet Mountain High.

“Well, thanks for the help getting up this morning. Even if it does still feel like the middle of the night.”

“Um, Shannon, it’s ten o’clock in the morning.”

“It is?”

I walked over to her blackout curtains. Shannon loved to sleep in the darkest environment possible. I pulled the drapes apart, allowing golden sunlight to stream into the room. Shannon squinted against the brightness.

I chuckled at her reaction. “You really are so adorable first thing in the morning.”

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Shannon sniffed her pits and made a face. “You wouldn’t say that if you could smell me.”

“I’m sure you smell amazing.”

“Psh. Yeah, right. You’re living in a fantasy world.” Shannon got up and went to her dresser, gathering a tank top, shorts, and an electric pink bikini I remembered very well from last summer.

Yep. It was going to be a good day.

“I’m headed to the shower. Go grab a bowl of cereal or something,” Shannon said.

I went to the kitchen and scrounged around until I found an orange and a package of strawberry PopTarts. I ripped open the package and dropped them in the toaster so they could warm up while I peeled the orange.

By the time I’d dusted off the final crumbs of the PopTarts, Shannon emerged from the bathroom. She had on the black tank top. I could see the straps of her pink bikini tied behind her neck. Her ripped cutoff shorts showed miles of legs. I swallowed. I couldn’t believe I’d been lucky enough to be kissing this girl.

“Ready to go?” I asked, tossing my wrapper and orange peel into the garbage.

“Yep. I just have to grab my bag.” Shannon disappeared into her room and came out with a drawstring bag. “I wanted to make sure I had my towel. Remember when I forgot my towel last year?”

“Yeah. But I gave you mine, so it worked out.”

“Except you had to dry off with it after I’d already gotten it cold and wet.”

I smiled. “I didn’t mind.”

She blushed. “You’re a weirdo. Let’s go.”

* * *

“Just jump in the water,” I said. “Quit being a wimp, or I’ll push you in.”

Shannon stood in front of me in her tank top and shorts, studying the water from the boulder where we stood. The waterfall crashed majestically before us.

“Okay. I can do this. I do it every year.” She unzipped her ripped denim shorts and kicked them off, revealing even more of her beautiful legs. She peeled off her tank top, and, holy macaroni, I couldn’t take my eyes off her.

She swung her arms back and forth like she was planning to make a running jump for it.

“Actually,” she looked at me with a sheepish expression on her face. “I think I might need you to push me in. I don’t think I can do it on my own.”

“Well, in that case,” I said, shoving my hands against her bare back. She practically burned the skin off my hands with how amazing she felt. She went flying off the ledge, a screech emitting from her lungs before splashing into the water below. Her head bobbed above the surface, and she pushed her wet hair back from her face. She disappeared below the surface again, reappearing with her head tipped back so her hair was washed back from her face this time. She rotated in the water so she could

see me still up on the boulder.

“Now who’s the wimp?”

A wide smile spread across my face. I peeled off my shirt and smiled bigger when I noticed Shannon’s reaction to seeing my bare torso. In that one moment, all the time I’d spent lifting weights for the past two years had been completely worth it. I hadn’t really seen results from my time in the gym the first year, but over the last twelve months, I’d seemed to really begin to fill out. I had a feeling that would only increase over the next few years. Mr. Christopher probably wouldn’t have been very happy with my breakfast choice this morning. But I figured I’d better enjoy my last few weeks of freedom while I could.

I leaped from the rock, the cold mountain water engulfing me. I kicked my way up to the surface and threw my fists into the air with a whoop after emerging.

Shannon threw her head back and laughed. She swam over to me, and as she came close, I could see a sudden shyness come over her. She placed her hands on my chest under the water and ran them down my abs. I shivered under her feather-light touch. The way she moved her hands over my body made it seem like she was afraid to feel me. We stayed like that for a moment, kicking in the water to stay afloat. She reached her hands around my neck and pulled herself to me, close enough for our foreheads and noses to touch. Little rivers of water ran down her face from her hairline. Unable to stand a moment longer without her lips on me, I took her mouth in mine and kissed her tenderly, slowly intensifying the heat until she was moaning against my mouth and twisting her fingers up in my hair.

We pulled apart and swam to the smaller boulders that bordered the water. We climbed out, and Shannon took my hand, tugging me toward the falls. Every year we went to the falls since we were little, we had a tradition of standing under the water together. I followed Shannon over the slippery rocks to the moss-and-algae-covered

spot where the water pounded on the flat rock below.

“Ready?” she yelled over the powerful pounding of the water.

I threw our joined hands into the air and whooped. She joined in our war cry and led me into the water. I gasped at the weight of the water as it beat down on my head and shoulders. Even though I’d done this every year, I always forgot just how intense it really was.

We stepped out of the water, laughing, and I pulled Shannon into a tight embrace, her body slippery against mine. She wrapped her arms around my neck, and I kissed her soundly. A moment later, we pulled apart smiling.

Something flashed in the corner of my vision, and I turned to see a shape crouched in the bushes.

“Shannon,” I said in her ear. “You should get your shorts on.”

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“What?” she yelled over the din of the crashing water.

I tugged her away from the waterfall, doing my best to keep her shielded from the person hiding in the underbrush. I cursed under my breath. It was only a matter of time before they found us together. I should have known they’d follow us here.

I pulled Shannon to our stuff and scooped it all up in one armful. “What’s going on, Ryker?” she asked, her brow furrowed in confusion.

Another flash went off in the bushes, and this time Shannon saw it as well.

“Paparazzi,” she said.

“Yep. Time to go.” I pulled her towel from her bag and threw it toward her. She wrapped it around her midsection and followed me down the path that led back to the car. We climbed in my car, still dripping. I was sure it was too late. They would have most definitely gotten some pretty clear shots of Shannon kissing me in our very intimate embrace next to the falls.

By the time we got back to our house, my phone was already ringing. “Ryker.” George’s voice didn’t sound very happy over the phone. “Don’t panic, but there’s a swimsuit picture circulating around the internet of you in a passionate embrace in front of a waterfall.”

“The movie hasn’t even started filming yet. Why do they care so much?”

“Somehow, you caught fire on the internet. I can’t explain why people obsess over

certain actors, but they seem very drawn to pictures of you. And this picture is the worst of them all. Who is the girl with you?"

"She's my girlfriend, Shannon."

"Girlfriend? I thought you said you weren't dating anyone."

"Um. It's . . . new." I glanced over at Shannon, but she was looking out her window, and all I could see was the back of her dripping-wet head.

"Well, you may want to practice a bit more discretion, unless Shannon doesn't mind having swimsuit pictures of herself going viral."

I groaned. The amazing Saturday I'd had planned with Shannon had taken a definite turn for the worse.

I ended the call with George and turned to Shannon as I pulled up in my driveway. "What was that all about?"

I hesitated. I wished there was a way I could avoid telling Shannon that her privacy had been violated so badly, but considering the fact that she already saw the photographers herself, it was a little late for that. "That was George. He saw our picture on the internet."

"Like, from just now?" Shannon asked with wide eyes, looking down at her body in her swimsuit. "I should have skipped that slice of cherry pie after you went home late last night."

"You're absolutely ridiculous."

"No. I'm not. I'm being serious."

“You mean, you’re not upset that there’s a picture of you in a bikini, kissing me, that’s going viral on the internet right now?”

“I’m not thrilled about it,” she admitted. “But what’s the point of freaking out? It’s not like there’s anything we can do about it now.”

I said goodbye to Shannon and went into the house to get ready to go to work at Skippy’s. When I came out of my room, Ava turned to me from where she sat on the couch doing homework with Dad’s old laptop.

“So, you and Shannon, huh?”

“How do you know about that?”

“I just got a text from three of my friends, telling me about it, and I just saw the picture for myself.” She turned her laptop toward me, and a picture of me holding Shannon close to me while we kissed in our swimsuits filled the screen. I could see the edge of the waterfall on the far left of the image. I just hoped that Shannon wasn’t lying when she acted like it wasn’t that big of a deal. She was always trying to put on a brave face. Just yesterday she wasn’t sure she wanted to date me. I wasn’t even sure she was okay with people knowing we liked each other romantically, and now the entire world knew, including the thousands of crazy fangirls who’d already proposed marriage to me online.

Somehow, they thought if I said yes, they’d automatically turn into princesses just because I’d been cast as Prince Charming. I just didn’t want them targeting Shannon. As long as she stayed off of social media, she’d most likely be fine. Thank goodness Shannon hated social media and considered it a waste of her time. But the same couldn’t be said of the entire student body of Sweet Mountain High.

* * *

“You need to be careful with that girl,” my aunt Kristen said to me as I mopped the floor after helping her close the diner for the night. I’d just told her what had happened with the paparazzi and Shannon’s rapid trip into the media’s spotlight.

“Believe me, I know,” I said. “I love that girl. I don’t want anything to happen to her.”

“Her mom told me how fragile her dad’s abandonment left her. She became withdrawn and distrustful. I guarantee she never would have dated Austin if she’d had a supportive, loving father in the home.”

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“The problem is, time is running out,” I said. “I just want to savor every last minute. I can feel the seconds ticking down like I’m on a march to my doom.”

“Don’t think about how much time you have with her. Just enjoy today. You don’t know what the future holds. And don’t worry so much about what other people think. The only person who matters is Shannon. All you can do for her is show her all the love and respect she deserves. The rest is out of your hands.”

“Sometimes, I question my decision to be in the film. I knew it would be a big change, but I didn’t think it would be this extreme. And I’d hoped to keep Shannon out of the public eye. Because of my decision, she may be targeted.”

“Remember, Shannon sat here right after you met Mr. Christopher and told you to go to that audition. She’s a big girl. She can make decisions for herself.”

“But you said I need to be careful with her.”

“I meant, be careful with her heart. She’s been in love with you for a lot longer than you realize.”

I studied my aunt as I absorbed this new information. Shannon was in love with me? And had been for a long time? “How do you know?” I asked.

“I’ve watched Shannon coming into this diner with you since the two of you were eight. I’m an observant woman. I could just tell. But I knew she wouldn’t admit it to herself or to anyone else, so I kept my observations to myself.”

“I only wish I’d know this a long time ago. I would have asked her to homecoming or something.”

“She was always with Austin, remember?”

“And now that he’s out of the picture, she’s able to examine her own heart,” I mused.

“It seems that way. And when you asked her to prom and kissed her, she couldn’t deny her feelings anymore.”

“And then everything changed.”

Aunt Kristen smiled. “I’ve waited a long time to watch you two be this happy.”

I only hoped it could last.

12

Shannon

I reached into the large bin of rocky road ice cream and dug out two scoops for the older woman standing in front of me. I piled on the toppings of peanuts and chocolate chips that she'd requested. "Will that be all?" I asked. When she nodded, I took her bowl to the register and rang up her order.

"Shannon, come here," Megan, one of the managers at Toppings, called me back to the kitchen, where customers couldn't overhear our conversation.

She was holding her phone up for me to see. "Have you seen this?" Her screen displayed the picture of me at the falls with Ryker earlier that day that George had been talking about.

"I heard about it, but this is my first time seeing it." A blush crept across my cheeks. I never thought my boss would be the one to actually show me the picture. How embarrassing. "Am I in trouble? I promise I didn't know they were going to take a picture of me. I just wanted to go to the falls and have a fun day with Ryker."

"Of course, you're not in trouble. But I am worried about you, and I want to make sure you're okay."

Was I okay? I didn't actually know. I thought I was, but maybe I was still too in shock to know any difference.

“Shannon?”

I must have been zoning out. I looked at Megan and smiled. “I’m doing just fine. The paparazzi are annoying, but I stay off of social media anyway, so it’s not that big of a deal.”

I went back to the front and took a few more orders. When the store emptied, closer to the end of the night, my coworker Jessica pulled her phone out and scrolled through with a bored expression on her face. I got the broom and started sweeping behind the counter where we’d spilled a bunch of chocolate chips and gummy bears.

“Shannon, is this really you?” Jessica said, turning her phone screen to me. The picture of Ryker and me lit up her display.

I groaned inwardly. Was this my new reality?

“Well, that look on your face answers that question.” She zoomed in on the picture by sliding her fingers apart on her phone screen. “That’s a cute swimsuit. Where’d you get it?”

“Ugh. I don’t want to talk about it.”

“So, are you and Ryker an item now?”

“I don’t even know myself. How could I tell you?”

“How do you not know? You look like you’re together here.”

I winced at the kissing picture. I didn’t think I’d mind the lack of privacy, but now I was starting to question the sanity of that assessment. I had no idea what I was talking about.

“This picture is on pretty much every social media platform.”

“Are there any others?”

“Not that I can see. I guess they thought this one was plenty of evidence to tell the story they wanted to tell.”

“And what story is that?” I asked.

“That Ryker’s taken,” Jessica said matter-of-factly. “You’ve broken the hearts of thousands of girls across the internet.”

“That’s just weird,” I said, feeling strangely defensive. “They don’t even know Ryker. How can their hearts be broken?” I was the one with the heart on the line. They didn’t get to take that from me by cheapening my pain.

Maybe it was a mistake to start dating Ryker, if that was what we were doing. Ryker had called me his girlfriend to George. But he hadn’t officially asked me if I wanted to take our relationship to that level of commitment.

Was I an idiot to let myself think Ryker wanted me and only me? What chance did I stand with him spending tons of time with Gabi, a gorgeous movie star, kissing her on camera? Gabi probably had an entire team of makeup artists dedicated to making her look perfect.

Dad had cheated on Mom, and Austin had cheated on me with Tabby. My trust levels with the guys in my life were so low it was scary. How was I supposed to trust any guy after all that? I knew Ryker had spent the last ten years being loyal to me. Out of everyone I knew, I should trust him the most. But now everything was changing for him. He hadn’t spent the last ten years surrounded by celebrities who were interested in him. Was it possible that fame could change Ryker enough to betray me like

Austin had?

How could I ever know for sure? Maybe I needed to end the nonsense between us before it went too far, and I let my heart be more vulnerable than it already was.

* * *

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I knocked on Ryker's window later that night. I'd seen his car in the driveway, so I could tell he was already home from Skippy's. I had to tell him it was over. What we were doing was reckless and stupid. We just needed to move on in our separate directions.

Ryker came to the window and pushed it up.

"Hey there, beautiful."

Ryker had never called me that before. I could get used to it. Too bad that would never happen. I just couldn't allow it.

He reached out and helped me climb inside. "Is Parker in here?" I asked. I probably should have checked on that before I just climbed in and got Ryker in trouble. Now that we had a picture of us kissing plastered across the internet, I had a feeling Ryker's dad wouldn't be nearly as relaxed about us being in each other's bedrooms with the door closed. There was no way we could claim we were just friends after that disaster. Unless we broke up and went public with it. Which was what I was planning to tell Ryker.

"Parker's sleeping over at a friend's house tonight."

"Oh," I said.

"Is everything okay?" Ryker said, running his hands down my arms.

"I don't know." I looked away from his searching gaze. "I saw the picture at work

today.”

“I was afraid of something like that happening. I hoped you wouldn’t see it since you aren’t on social media, but people are stupid and love sensational stuff. But don’t worry. We’ll get through this together. You have me in your corner every step of the way.”

I needed to stay strong. I had my reasons for wanting to back out of this relationship, and I couldn’t let Ryker’s charming self distract me from my plan.

“But what about when you go to California, and you forget about me? I don’t think I could handle that. This hasn’t been something casual for me. That’s why I’m over here. I need to let you know that we can’t continue whatever this is between us.”

“Shannon.” He lifted my chin so that my eyes looked into his. “I can’t tell you what you should or shouldn’t do, but I can promise you that I have eyes for you and only you. It’s been this way for me for a very long time. Haven’t you noticed that I’ve never had a girlfriend before?”

“Yeah, but I just thought that was because you focused too much on school.”

“I did focus on school a lot, but the real reason is that I was actually focused on you. I couldn’t even look at another girl when you were in my life.”

“But I just kept you in the friend zone the entire time.”

“And as much as I didn’t like that, I still couldn’t look at another girl.”

“You didn’t like being stuck in the friend zone?”

“Of course not. What kind of question is that?”

“I just didn’t realize you felt that way about me the entire time. I might have brought you out of the friend zone if I’d known. I know I wouldn’t have still dated Austin for very long. That guy would have been in the dump zone.”

Ryker took my hands in his and placed a gentle kiss on my hand. “Can you reconsider breaking this off between us?”

I hadn’t realized that Ryker might be scared to lose me. I just kept focusing on the celebrity fangirls swarming him. I didn’t want to hurt Ryker. Like ever. And if I broke off our budding relationship tonight, I would break Ryker’s heart. And I couldn’t have that. I would let my own heart break into a million pieces before I knowingly hurt Ryker.

Ryker pulled me into his arms, and we stood in the middle of his room with my head on his shoulder. I fit right into his embrace like two matching jigsaw puzzle pieces.

I wouldn’t be breaking the relationship off with Ryker tonight, but as I climbed out of his window and crossed our lawns, I hoped he knew what he was talking about, or we would both end up miserable with shattered hearts.

13

Ryker

Sunday afternoon, I knocked on Shannon's front door with a white box under my arm. Her mom answered the door.

"Is Shannon home?" I asked.

"Yep. You know you don't have to knock. You practically live here anyway," Mrs. Cooper said.

I followed her inside.

"What's in the box?" Maddie said when I walked into the living room. She had her feet crossed at the ankles with her feet up on the coffee table.

"It's a surprise for Shannon."

Maddie's face lit up. "Ooh! Can I see?"

"If Shannon wants to let you watch her open it, then I don't mind you seeing it."

"Shannon!" Maddie yelled. "Your man's here with a present for you."

Shannon's bedroom door opened. "Ryker?" She had her hair up in a messy bun on top of her head, and a sweatshirt that had fallen off one shoulder. She came up to me

and hugged me. She looked like she'd just been napping. She'd gone through a lot lately. It was no wonder she was exhausted. "You got me a present?" She eyed the large, white rectangular box curiously.

"Open it," I said.

She lifted the lid to reveal a royal blue cocktail dress. She gasped, taking it from the box and holding it up to inspect the dress fully. "Ryker, this is beautiful. Thank you." She hugged me and buried her face into my chest. "How did you know how to get my size right?"

"I came over when you weren't home and swiped the red dress you wore to homecoming and took it to the dress shop on Main Street. They helped me find this dress for you."

"It's stunning. But what's the occasion? This dress is too short for prom."

"Oh, there's a gift card at the bottom of the box for prom. That way, you can pick the dress out yourself. I know it's a big deal for girls to go dress shopping together."

"I don't know what to say," Shannon said, wiping away a tear. "I didn't know how I was going to afford a dress for prom. How can I ever thank you enough?"

"All you need to do is agree to go with me to dinner tonight. That's what the blue dress is for."

"This dress is for dinner? It's pretty fancy. Where are we going?"

"I got us reservations at Charter."

"Charter?" Shannon squeaked.

I took her hands in mine. “You’ve been through a lot with the paparazzi, and that was because of me. I want to show you that dating a movie star isn’t all bad. There are perks too.”

“You’re incredible,” Shannon said.

“We have reservations at seven. Does that give you enough time to get ready?”

“More than enough time. I’m not a high maintenance kind of girl.”

“Perfect. I’ll be back to get you at six forty-five.”

Shannon planted a kiss on my lips. “I’m heading to the shower.”

“That was a really thoughtful thing to do,” Mrs. Cooper said after Shannon had disappeared into the bathroom. “She’s had a hard time with all this mess with the paparazzi. I can’t even imagine how tough it would be to have my privacy violated like that, and I’m forty. She’s only eighteen and is dealing with it like a champ.”

“I know she hides most of what bothers her. So if you can tell she’s having a hard time, it’s probably much worse than what you see,” I said.

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“Shannon’s always been like that,” Mrs. Cooper said.

“I wish she didn’t have to feel like putting on a brave face. It makes it much harder to know when to help her. She just wants to carry all her burdens on her own.”

“You’ve been the best thing to ever happen to Shannon. I don’t know what she’d do without you.”

“I hope we never find out. I plan on being there for her even if I have to be on the other side of the country.”

If only there was a way to bring Shannon with me to California.

* * *

On Monday, the school was buzzing with the news that Shannon and I were an item. For the most part, the girls with the autographs had backed off. Most of them already had their autographs at this point anyway. Some of the more hopeful, persistent girls didn’t seem to care whether Shannon was my girlfriend or not. The fact that they thought they could convince me to choose them over Shannon was laughable.

Last night she’d looked like a dream come true in the dress I’d bought for her. It hugged her in all the right places and showed off enough skin to be tantalizing, but covered enough to still be classy. She’d paired it with tan heels that made her long legs look even longer. It had truly been a magical night. I felt like the prince and the fairy godmother all rolled into one for Shannon.

When school let out for the day, I pushed open the front doors to the school to head out to my car. Today I'd parked near the front. Tabby was sitting on one of the stone benches that sat in front of the school.

"Ryker! I've been looking for you," she said, scrambling to her feet, smoothing down her already smooth, jet-black hair.

"What's up, Tabby?"

"I had kind of a weird question, and I was wondering if you could help me answer it. It's part of a social experiment I'm conducting."

"Sure. I mean, I'll do my best. What's your question?"

"Am I a good kisser?"

I blinked at her in confusion. "I wouldn't know the answer to that question, Tabby. I don't know why you think I would."

In a flash, before I could react, Tabby's candy-apple red lips were on mine. She reached up and around my neck, keeping me pinned to her face as she went in again. I didn't know what to do. I didn't want to pry her off of me physically, but I was beginning to contemplate it.

"Ryker!" Shannon's voice startled me, and Tabby finally pulled her mouth away. I twisted to see the shock and horror etched on Shannon's face. She dashed back into the school, disappearing from sight.

"Shannon." I tried to follow her, but Tabby still had a tight grip around my neck, almost like a headlock. "Let go of me, Tabby."

She dropped her hands and said, “What’s your issue? I’m just having some fun.”

I pushed past her and headed into the building to find which way Shannon had gone. Instead, I slammed right into Austin.

He looked furious. “Why were you kissing my girlfriend just now?”

“How should I know? She’s nuts. She just grabbed my face and kissed me.”

Austin scoffed. “Did you just make that up? That’s not even a believable lie. You’re lucky Mr. Klaton wasn’t here to see your little public display of affection. He’s been handing out detentions all year to people kissing on campus.”

I didn’t have time for Austin and his delusional self-righteous monologues. “Which way did Shannon go?” I asked instead of trying to defend myself again.

“How should I know?” Austin said. “It’s not my job to keep track of her.”

He wasn’t helping anything. I dashed down the hall but couldn’t see Shannon anywhere. I blew out a frustrated sigh. Maybe she just drove home. I decided to check the back parking lot and pushed open the crash bar on the double doors at the end of a long hallway lined with lockers. I stepped outside and took a sharp left to head to the area where Shannon had parked this morning.

I spotted Tabby again, crouched in the bushes. She had her hand between two bushes like she was looking for something. She brought her hand back, and it was full of a wad of rolled-up cash. My heart pounded. What was Tabby up to? I started jogging in her direction, but she turned and disappeared between two cars. Then a short, squat man with a camera around his neck stepped from the bushes.

“Hey!” I called to him. Had he paid Tabby to kiss me so he could get a picture of it

for the tabloids? “You there!”

The man looked in my direction and took off running at full speed. I was a fast runner, but not fast enough. A black sedan pulled up, and he climbed inside before I could ask him any questions.

I found Shannon sitting in her car, her eyes puffy and red from crying. I knocked on her window, and she rolled it down. “What do you want, Ryker?”

“Can I get in?”

She narrowed her eyes at me like I was poisoned but then nodded.

I rounded the car to the passenger side and climbed inside. “You saw what Tabby did to me, didn’t you?”

“Why, Ryker? Tabby? Really? She’s horrible.” Tears streamed down her cheeks, and she dabbed at them with a tissue that looked like it had been through a war zone.

“I can explain.”

“I’m sure you have some sort of fancy explanation. And then I’ll believe you and fall for it all over again.”

“I don’t have a fancy explanation. It’s a lame one. Because what happened was very stupid and lame.”

“Well, we can both agree with that.”

I explained the situation to her, ending with what I saw in the bushes with the paparazzi guy.

“That is the most ridiculous story I’ve ever heard. You expect me to believe that?”

“Have I ever lied to you before?”

“Well, there was that one time when it was my birthday, and you didn’t tell me my house was full of about fifty people. And you know I don’t like crowds.”

“That doesn’t count.”

“Then . . . no.”

“Tabby did it for the money. And, by the looks of it, she was handsomely paid for her efforts. They couldn’t even get her to do it for free.”

“Why would the media go through all that trouble of getting a picture of someone else kissing you?” Shannon asked.

“Because then it looks more scandalous. I guess the fact that you’re my next-door neighbor and someone I’ve been best friends with for the past ten years was too stable and boring for them.”

“So they’re trying to make it look like you’re cheating on me. Or maybe you’re this guy who jumps from woman to woman.”

“Or both,” I said, thinking of Austin boasting about jumping from girl to girl while he was still dating Shannon.

“Look,” Shannon said, pointing out her window.

Across the parking lot, we spotted Tabby arguing with Austin. He was waving his arms around to make his points. I was really glad we had the windows rolled up, so we weren’t able to hear what they were saying. It didn’t look like it sounded pleasant. Maybe all of Austin’s mistreatment of women was coming back to finally catch up with him.

“Did he see her kissing you?” she asked.

“Yeah. I told him the truth, but he didn’t believe me.”

“Of course not. Because cheaters expect everyone else to be cheaters like them.”

“And liars, too,” I said.

“Part of me actually feels kind of sorry for him,” Shannon admitted.

“Why?” I scowled. I didn’t feel one ounce of pity for the guy. He’d had it coming to him for a long time.

“Because I know what it feels like to be cheated on. You feel so worthless and rejected.”

“Is that how you felt just now when I found you crying in the car?” I asked.

She nodded, fresh tears springing in her eyes.

“Oh, come here, Shannon. You are anything but worthless and rejected. You are priceless and so very wanted.”

“Thank you, Ryker,” she whispered.

I was such a fool to ever think I would be able to protect Shannon from the paparazzi. It seemed that the harder I tried to keep her safe, the harder they tried to destroy everything I’d ever wanted with Shannon.

14

Shannon

“I have a surprise for you,” Ryker told me Thursday night. He showed up at Toppings right as I was helping to close up the shop for the night. So far we’d been checking the news for the story about the cheating, but strangely we hadn’t seen anything about it.

“What’s the surprise?” I asked.

“I just got off the phone with Mr. Christopher. He feels terrible about how targeted you’ve been by the paparazzi. Especially since he was the one who encouraged me to tell you how I felt about you.”

“He was?” I would have to thank the guy someday. If I ever got the chance to meet him again.

“So he decided to fly the two of us out to California. There’s a charity ball he wants me to attend with him and Gabi. He’s arranged for a hotel suite for us and everything.”

“That sounds nice,” I said. “I’ll just have to make sure my mom’s okay with that.”

“I already asked her, and she said yes.”

I gaped at him. “When do we leave?”

“That’s the thing. You’re going to need to find someone to cover your shifts here at Toppings. We leave tomorrow after school.”

“I can cover her shifts,” Jessica piped up. I hadn’t even realized she’d been eavesdropping. “I’m trying to pick up some extra cash anyway.”

“Well, there you go,” I said.

“I can’t believe I finally get to go to California,” I said.

“I knew you really wanted to go, and I may or may not have mentioned it to Mr. Christopher,” I said with a wink.

I stood on tiptoe and planted a kiss on Ryker’s lips. “You really are an incredible boyfriend.”

“Oh, so I’ve finally earned the boyfriend status?”

“Duh. You’ve had that status for a while now.”

“Glad to have that explained to me.”

“Cut the snark,” I said, elbowing Ryker.

I hurried home and threw together a weekend getaway bag. I’d never been on a weekend getaway on a plane before. We’d only ever driven to nearby campgrounds over the years. Once in a while, we would camp at the beach near the North Carolina coast. But this trip was an entirely new experience. I was giddy, and my expectations were sky-high.

When I opened my closet to find a dress for the charity event, I was a little stumped.

My dress from junior prom had a tear in the hem from when I'd stepped on it in my heels and ripped it. There was no way I could show up to a Hollywood red carpet event in a torn dress. Especially with the vultures swarming, nitpicking everything I did. A month ago, I would have told someone that I didn't care anything about what someone thought about my appearance. All I cared about was writing my fan fiction with Ryker. But now I realized how important appearances were for Ryker's career. And now, as his girlfriend, I was a big part of his image.

I texted Ryker and asked him if he thought the blue dress would work for the charity ball. He responded with a cryptic text about how I didn't need to worry about my dress because it was already taken care of.

* * *

My mom and Ryker's dad checked us out of school early so we could make it to the airport in Charlotte in time for our flight. When we got onto our flight, we were guided to seats in the front of the plane.

"Mr. Christopher said he spared no expense for this trip. He even got us first-class seats."

"This is unreal," I said when the flight attendant brought me a drink.

Ryker smiled. "Just wait. This is only the beginning."

I settled in next to Ryker and burrowed against his shoulder. I didn't wake until we landed in Los Angeles. I looked out the window and stared at California. I couldn't believe I was finally there after so many years of dreaming about what it would be like.

After we got our bags, we were picked up by a limo Mr. Christopher had sent over

for us. I'd never been inside a limo before. I snuggled next to Ryker in the back, gawking out the window as we drove through the streets lined with palm trees. The limo driver pulled up to a gorgeous hotel surrounded by tropical potted plants. My head spun at the opulence of everything around me. It seemed backwards that we were in Hollywood, the land of the paparazzi, and we hadn't encountered a single member of that group. Sweet Mountain was such a tiny place compared to LA. With it so flooded with the media, it was almost impossible to catch a moment's breath without them documenting it.

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We got the key cards to our room and took the elevator up to the ninth floor. As we climbed the floors, Ryker leaned over and kissed me. When we got to our room, I was blown away by how gorgeous it was. The large living room had a view of the city below, thanks to an entire wall of windows. Both sides of the room had a door that led to a private bedroom.

“Your mom only agreed to let you go on the trip if we had a hotel room with separate bedrooms. Either that or two different hotel rooms.”

I laughed. That sounded like Mom. She did realize that we were in a different state and could do whatever we wanted, didn’t she? Not that I was planning on doing anything sketchy. “Which room do you want?” I asked, wandering into the room to the left.

“I think this room is yours,” Ryker called from the bedroom to the right of the living room.

“What makes you say that?” I asked, wandering into the room. A white box sat on the bed. It reminded me of the box my blue dress had been in.

“Is this what you meant by saying my dress situation was taken care of?” I asked as I opened the box.

“Yep.”

Champagne satin sat nestled among the tissue paper. I took it out and held it up by the spaghetti straps. The dress was simple but elegant. It draped along the neckline and

fell to the ground, and a slit ran up one side of the dress.

“This is stunning.” It looked like it would hug my body. I held it up to myself and turned to look at my reflection in the full-length mirror. “It looks good with my skin tone.” I’d never touched such an expensive-looking dress, let alone worn one, and now this dress was mine. How could I ever hope to deserve any of this? I could never pay them back.

* * *

We spent all morning Saturday as tourists, exploring Hollywood. That afternoon Ryker had an appointment with a reporter or someone who wanted to interview him. The limo driver dropped him off, and then he took me to a salon that was recommended by Mr. Christopher. The stylist I was seeing had several clients who were celebrities. I got my hair and makeup done, and the limo arrived with Ryker to take us back to the hotel so I could put on the dress, and Ryker could change into his tux.

I slipped into my dress, my curls cascading down my back. I looked at my reflection in the full-length mirror in my gigantic gilded bathroom. I hardly recognized myself. My skin and hair looked perfectly sculpted, my lips red and sultry in contrast to the champagne satin. The dress was a perfect fit. What had happened to the girl who lived in anime t-shirts and sweatpants? After one final glance in the mirror, I stepped out of the bathroom.

Ryker emerged from his room and stopped in his tracks when he saw me. “Whoa. You look . . . flawless.”

I smiled shyly. “Thanks. You don’t look so bad yourself.” It was true. Ryker looked mouth-wateringly good in his tux.

He gave me his arm, and we headed from our rooms to the elevator. Outside the lobby, a limo waited for us at the valet stand. We climbed inside.

“This is all so surreal,” I said, looking out the window at the darkening city.

“I know what you mean. Who would have thought that we’d be here? We were the kids who were too poor to even go to Starbucks.”

“I can’t even think about how much this dress cost,” I said.

“Mr. Christopher insisted on getting it for you.”

“I’m just afraid I’m going to spill a drink on it or something.”

“You won’t,” Ryker said.

The limo pulled up behind a line of cars and limos, letting passengers out at the red carpet. I could see up ahead a crowd of roped-off reporters lining either side of the red walkway. Nervous jitters fluttered in my belly. I’d only tried to get away from the paparazzi, and now we were walking knowingly into the biggest crowd of them yet.

Ryker took my hand and squeezed. “You’re going to be just fine. You don’t have to talk to any of them. Just smile and wave.”

The air suddenly felt scarce in the limo. I fanned my face with my hands to get some airflow without rolling down a window. Before I was ready, the limo pulled up.

“Ready?” Ryker asked.

“It’s now or never, right?”

He opened the door and stepped out first. Immediately, the crowd of reporters went insane. I could see Ryker waving from where I still sat in the limo, and I could imagine the smile he was giving them all. The guy sure knew how to lay on the charm.

He turned around and grabbed my hand, helping me out of the limo. Just smile. Don't think about what they're doing. I stretched a smile across my face and tried to keep from squinting in the blinding flashes that never seemed to stop.

"Ryker White? Is that you?" A busty blonde with a plunging neckline wrapped her arm around his, sidling right up next to him. "We have been dying to meet you."

A fiery redhead wedged herself between Ryker and me. Why hadn't I reached back out to take his arm after I got out of the limo? I didn't realize I'd have to stake my claim on my man. I could feel my smile beginning to strain.

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“You haven’t even started filming yet, and you’re already on fire.” The redhead caressed his bicep as she smiled flirtatiously at him. “Are you busy after this?”

“Why are you asking?” Ryker said.

“Because you look like you could use some fun,” the blonde said.

“I appreciate the offer, but I’m already taken tonight.”

“Maybe another time,” the redhead purred.

“Probably not. I’m with Shannon, actually.” He stepped away from the girls and offered me his arm. I took it gratefully.

“Oh.” She sneered her nose down at me. “Lovely to meet you.” She offered me a limp hand to shake. I took her hand and gave it a little shake.

I shuddered at her icy glare despite the warm evening.

“Ryker! Who is this mysterious woman with you tonight?” A female reporter called out to us.

Ryker stepped over to her, guiding me along with him. Panic flew through me. What was he doing? Wasn’t the goal to avoid the paparazzi as much as possible and just get inside where it was safe? But after meeting those two airbrushed, catty women, I realized there wasn’t anywhere safe at this event.

Before Ryker could get close enough to answer the reporter's question, another reporter shouted out, "Ryker? Does your date know how many girls you've been seen with lately?" What other girls? Who was he talking about? I knew about Tabby, but who were the other girls? Ryker had been faithful to me, right? I wouldn't have been able to handle it if he hadn't. I didn't think I could ever forgive him.

The man held up a printed-out picture of Ryker kissing Tabby. She had her arms around his neck possessively. I'd seen him kissing her from a distance, but this picture was zoomed in.

I choked back bile. I was reliving the nightmare all over again. Cameras flashed all around us. With each flash, I kept seeing Tabby kissing first Austin and then Ryker. Alternating, over and over. I started to feel dizzy, the world tilting on its axis. My knees went weak, and I began to collapse.

Ryker steadied me. And then everything went black.

* * *

"I ruined the night for you," I told Ryker later that night from our suite. I'd changed into a pair of sweats and a baggy t-shirt. A carton of Chinese takeout sat on the table between us.

"You passed out. There was no way I was making you go inside and face a bunch of strangers."

"I feel so guilty. Mr. Christopher paid all this money for us to go to this event. And we didn't even make it inside."

I'd only passed out for five minutes, but Ryker insisted that we needed to go back to the hotel when I came to. I'd woken up to a cluster of paramedics attending to me.

“None of this was your fault. I should have known that it would be too much for you after everything that’s happened in Sweet Mountain with the media.”

“I should have told you I needed to work this weekend. Then you could have made your appearance with Gabi, and everything would have been perfect.” And I could have stayed back home at the boring life I was used to living. I was crazy to think that I needed to run off after high school to go on some grand adventure to see the world outside Sweet Mountain. I had no idea what I’d been wishing for.

“I’m so sorry about those reporters. I should have known better.”

“It’s not your fault. I just don’t know how to react to these vultures.”

“I would tell you that you never have to deal with them again, but I’m afraid I don’t want to tell you that.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

Ryker’s blue eyes pierced into mine. “I’m in love with you, Shannon.”

I sat up and stared at him. “You’re in love with me?”

He stared back at me in shock like he couldn’t believe he’d just blurted out a secret. Finally, he nodded, taking my hands. “The truth is, I’ve known I was in love with you for a very long time.”

“Define a long time,” I said. “A few weeks? Months?”

“More like years.”

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All that time. Writing the fan fiction together. Hanging out in the clubhouse in Ryker's backyard. My mind was officially blown. I'd known he'd recently developed feelings for me, and that he'd been crushing on me for a while. He'd admitted that much already. But this was something else entirely.

And I didn't know how to process this new information. He was staring at me expectantly. Oh, shoot. Did he expect me to tell him I loved him back? I definitely wasn't ready for that. But I didn't want to hurt Ryker either. "I don't know what to say," I admitted. "I'm pretty shocked."

"You don't have to say anything." Ryker kissed me on the forehead. "I'm not here to pressure you to say anything you're not ready to say."

Relief washed over me. Ryker hopped up from his dining chair. "I'm going to get another root beer." We'd ordered up the glass bottles of root beer that Ryker loved.

A text message dinged on Ryker's phone and flashed up on his screen.

George:For now, lay low with your relationship with Shannon.

My breath caught. What had Ryker told him about our disastrous night that would make George say something like that? My head began spinning with the endless possibilities of how I could have failed Ryker. But before I could travel too far down that toxic rabbit hole, another text flashed up on his screen.

George:She's not good for your image. It's better if you're seen as single.

I wasn't good for his image? Was it my fault that I'd fainted? Or that the paparazzi were so vicious? And now I was ruining his future just by existing.

Ryker came back with his root beer, taking a long swig from the bottle before setting it down on the glass tabletop with a clink.

"This really isn't going to work between us, is it?" I asked.

"What are you talking about?" Ryker's brow furrowed in confusion.

"I'm breaking up with you."

"What?" Ryker stood up and turned to me. "Did I do something wrong?"

"No. It's not you at all."

"Is it because I told you I've been in love with you for years? I knew I shouldn't have told you that. I just made everything weird between us."

"It's not that, Ryker. I'm just not good for you. I see that now."

"Where is this coming from?" His eyes were frantic.

"Our lives are too different. We used to make sense, but nothing about this makes sense now."

"Everything about this makes sense to me. Do you know what doesn't make sense? Living in this world without you in the center of it."

There was no way I could get Ryker to understand what I was trying to say. So I told him, "That's my final decision. You told me you're not here to pressure me. So

please respect that.” Even if we did find a way to lay low, George would want Ryker to look single to all his fans. Because as long as he was available, they could dream that they had a chance with him. And that meant he would be swarmed with more girls than ever. And I would have to stand by and do nothing about it.

And I knew my heart couldn’t handle that, because it was already too invested. Because I was in love with him too. The last thought hit me like a jolt of lightning.

I was in love with Ryker. That meant I had to take extra care to protect my heart now. And I couldn’t let him know how I felt. Because then he’d try to talk me out of leaving, and I couldn’t let that happen. It was too risky. I’d been hurt by Austin cheating. I’d been hurt by Dad leaving. I couldn’t handle losing Ryker too.

But it was too late for that, wasn’t it? I was going to lose him either way.

He was going to be swarmed by girls. George himself said it was best for his career to appear single, and if Ryker knew I was in love with him, he would want to be with me. I couldn’t let him destroy his career like that.

I had to leave. For myself and for Ryker.

I just had to get through the rest of this trip. I would throw myself into my writing if I had to. I was getting close to finishing, and my story was coming along better than I’d hoped. Ryker had his dream and I had mine. We just needed to focus on that and go our separate ways.

It was the best decision for everyone involved.

15

Ryker

The rest of the California trip was pure torture. I should never have told Shannon how deep my feelings had gone. I should have known that she didn't feel the same way about me. But I was a hopeless romantic and a fool.

Shannon spent the rest of the trip acting strange and distant. She kept herself glued to her laptop, working on her mysterious book, and barely spoke more than two sentences back to back.

When I saw her at school the Wednesday before prom, she was holding hands with Austin. That was the lowest blow of all. It was one thing for our relationship to be over, but she knew how bad Austin was. What was she thinking? I was furious.

Austin seemed to think it was hilarious. He'd stolen a girl from the brand-new celebrity. He was on top of the world and determined to shove it in my face as much as possible. It didn't matter how much money I earned or how many films I appeared in; I couldn't be happy knowing Shannon was being mistreated by that jerk.

What I didn't understand was why she would ever want to be treated so badly. It just didn't make sense.

I was going through the lunch line when I heard a voice behind me. "Looks like even fortune and fame wasn't enough to convince Shannon to stay with you. Because you're a loser deep down and always have been. Fancy new clothes and a bunch of

followers on social media doesn't change that."

I whirled around and faced Austin man to man. I curled my hand into a fist to keep from pounding the guy's face. "You're scum deep down and always have been. It's only a matter of time before Shannon sees through you. What kind of lies did you tell her? That you've finally seen the light? That this time you'll have eyes only for her?"

Austin sneered at me but didn't say anything.

"What? You have no response to that? Because it's all true, or because you're too much of a coward to talk to me when we're face to face? The only reason Shannon is with you right now is because you're familiar, and she's been through a lot." And she was probably self-sabotaging. But I wasn't going to tell him that. It was none of his business. I'd tell her that myself, but she probably wouldn't listen to me.

She deserved so much better, and I planned to tell her that. I found her getting into her car after school.

"Why are you with Austin?"

"Well, hello to you too." She gave me a sour look.

"Please don't get snarky with me. I'm not the bad guy here."

Shannon let out a loud, tired sigh. "I know, Ryker."

"How did this even happen?"

"Does it matter?" She turned to look at me with a stormy look on her face. "You think I deserve better? You're right. Austin isn't the best. But he's here. And you're going to be swarmed by a bunch of girls. At least I know he's with me and just me. I

will never be able to have that with you.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I saw your text messages. George said you needed to look single to the world so girls could dream about having a chance with you.”

“Well, you obviously didn’t see my response.”

“It doesn’t matter now. I’m not going to be responsible for holding you back from your career. You’re about to leave anyway to live a life of fame and fortune, and I’ll be at UNC. We’re heading down two separate paths, and eventually, we’ll be so different, we won’t be able to relate to each other at all. It’s already started. That’s why I’m putting a stop to it before it goes too far. Before either of us gets too hurt. That’s why I’ve decided to go to prom with Austin, because I need to get back to my old life and familiarity. Austin isn’t the greatest, but at least I know what to expect. And we’re both going to UNC. It just makes sense.”

No. Nothing about her reasoning made sense. She’d changed too much to go back to her old life. It was only a matter of time before she’d realize that.

“And I think I need to take a step back from everything for a while. Let the dust settle.”

That, I could respect. If Shannon needed time, then she would get it. And I’d be waiting for her when she was ready to return to me.

I said goodbye to her and got in my car. I picked up my phone. “Gabi? How would you feel about experiencing a normal teenage rite of passage? I need a date to prom.”

“Ryker?” her cheerful voice came across the line. “Are you asking me to go to prom

with you?”

“That’s basically the gist of it.”

“What about Shannon? I thought you were dating her.”

“Shannon broke up with me. She got back together with her old boyfriend, and she’s going to prom with him now.”

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“Don’t you think it will make her jealous to see you going with me?” Gabi asked.

“Not if I explain why I want to take you.”

“And why is that?” Gabi asked.

“You told me you want to have a normal teen experience since you didn’t get to go to a regular high school. And prom is the perfect opportunity to do that. I’m dateless, and honestly, I need a friend right now.”

“What happened between you and Shannon anyway? You guys seemed so perfect together.”

“I think my new celebrity status has been too hard on her.”

“Ryker, I’m so sorry. I’d love to go, but I don’t want to cause any problems with you and Shannon.”

“I don’t want to cause problems with her either, but I know this is the right thing to do.”

“Why is that?”

“I want to go the distance with Shannon. I have unfinished business with her, and I think bringing you to prom will help us with that.”

“I’m not following you.”

“I just want to be happy with Shannon.”

“I understand that, but how will you taking me to prom help you get back together with her?”

“I think when she sees us together, she’ll realize that she could be missing out on something great. You and I know that nothing is going on between us, but Shannon doesn’t know that, even though I’ve told her over and over. I just think she needs a wake-up call. Maybe this is the only way to get her to listen.” It was risky and drastic, but I couldn’t think of another way to get through to Shannon. “She might get upset at first, but she’ll understand once we explain everything.”

“I hope you and Shannon figure things out. I would give you relationship advice if I could, but I’ve never had much luck with it myself. It’s not an easy thing for normal people, but in this industry, it’s a whole different level of hard.”

“Can you get out here fast? It’s on Friday.”

“Of course, I can! Thank you so much for inviting me, Ryker. I can’t tell you how much this means to me. I didn’t think I’d ever get a chance to go to prom. You probably think that’s weird, but I don’t actually have that many friends. And the ones I do have are all actors like me who live on the road most of the time. It can be a pretty lonely existence.”

I’d already seen that to be true myself. I just hoped it was still possible for Shannon and me. We’d been by each other’s side for the last ten year as we’d grieved for our wayward parents. We just needed to realize that we had the strength to get through this as well.

16

Shannon

“You look beautiful in that dress,” Austin said, pulling me in for a kiss. I turned my head at the last minute, and his lips landed on my cheek instead.

The dress he was referring to was the prom dress I’d bought with the gift card Ryker had given me. I wore an aqua dress with tiny white leaves stitched into the bodice that trailed down into the full tulle skirt. It was everything I’d ever dreamed a prom dress could be. It was just too bad I was with the wrong guy.

When Austin found me crying in the park after my trip to California, he’d acted so supportive and kind that I’d wondered if maybe I’d been wrong about him all along. That was in a moment of weakness. I saw that now. Austin hadn’t changed at all. He was the same guy he’d always been.

He hadn’t even bothered to pick me up for prom. He suggested that we just meet there. So we were standing in the parking lot in our nice clothes—no nice pictures where my mom fussed over us. I told myself it was okay because we’d get the professional pictures done inside, but I was definitely irritated. And this voice in the back of my mind kept telling me that Ryker would have never treated me like this. But I wasn’t willing to listen to that voice.

Listening to that voice was dangerous. Because it would mean he was right that Austin wasn’t good for me, and that I deserved better. I couldn’t admit that right now. Too much was at stake. And I needed the safety of normalcy right now. A simple guy

and girl going to prom after dating all through high school. So I allowed Austin to take my hand as we walked into the building.

I'd expected prom to be this magical night. Every girl looked forward to her chance to go to prom. She curled her hair and put on a dress that made her feel like Cinderella heading to the ball. But nothing about this night felt magical. The music seemed a little too loud, and the colors a bit too dull.

No one came up to us to greet us as we entered the room. All around us were couples, busy being happy together. Harper and Luke slow danced in the middle of the room, looking completely in love. Bella and Logan stood at the refreshment table, getting food together. Kate and Miller were getting their picture taken by the professional photographer. Everywhere I looked, people were laughing and having fun.

Should I want to join in on their fun? That was the thing. I didn't want to. I wanted to go home and put on my sweats and climb into my bed with the covers pulled over my head. I would have rather spent the night writing my fan fiction. With Ryker. That was really what my sour attitude came down to tonight. I missed him. He was my best friend. Even the colors weren't as bright without him in my life. But it couldn't be helped.

I stopped myself. Why couldn't it be helped? I couldn't even remember what convoluted argument I'd fed myself to make me want to be in this situation. Spending the best night of high school with the wrong guy. I couldn't think of an argument that made this moment worth it. This wasted opportunity. I had to make it right with Ryker. I was officially the biggest idiot alive.

A ripple of excitement moved through the room, and I turned to see what the commotion was about. The room was too crowded to see what everyone was so worked up about.

“Is that actually her?” Dale Odom asked his girlfriend, Lindsey Beck. I couldn’t hear Lindsey’s response, but out of curiosity, I pushed through the crowd to investigate. Surrounded by security personnel and looking like a power couple, Ryker and Gabi stood in the middle of the crowd with a halo of empty floor surrounding them thanks to the burly men in suits keeping the school from mobbing poor Gabi.

“Gabi’s here to enjoy the prom. She’s not signing any autographs tonight,” Ryker announced to the mob.

“Is he dating her now?” Austin said, coming up beside me.

“I don’t know.” I’d worried in the beginning that Ryker had been interested in Gabi, but he put those fears to rest right away. As far as I knew, they were still just friends. But they looked so natural together I began to question what I’d been assuming all along. Had I ruined everything? I’d had my chance with Ryker, and now I might have lost it forever. Gabi was charming and sweet and a famous actress. Like I’d said from the beginning, I would never be able to compete with that. And now my worst fear looked like it very well might be coming true. But I’d chosen this road. And now I had to deal with the consequences. I had Austin. I might as well make the best of the relationship I’d worked hard to build for the past four years.

“They sure look like they’re together now,” Austin said.

“Yeah,” I admitted. “They do.”

“Well, he sure moved on fast,” Austin said. “I guess it wasn’t that serious between you two, after all. Not that it matters now. Because you have me.” He took my hand and kissed my fingertips. It would have been a sweet, romantic gesture from the right guy, but when Austin did it, it just gave me the creeps.

Ryker and Gabi moved to the middle of the room. He spun her around, her sparkling

white gown fanning out around her. They really did look like Cinderella and Prince Charming at the ball. The scene was something straight from a Disney movie.

I thought I would be sick. I had to get away from the dance floor.

I migrated over to the refreshment table. I had to weave around several couples to get there. I got a glass of lemon water and sipped on it, taking deep breaths. Slowly, the ill feeling in my tummy subsided, and I felt my shoulders relaxing a bit. I leaned against the wall next to a decorative tree strung with twinkle lights. How was I supposed to survive much more of this night? At least the crowd was so thick I couldn't see Ryker and Gabi anymore. I felt safer hiding behind this tree. I knew I was being a coward, but I needed this moment to escape.

"You clean up well," Austin said.

I was tempted to crane my neck to see who he was talking to. Why was he flirting with someone when he'd promised that he only had eyes for me this time? And why had I been stupid enough to believe him?

"You don't look so bad yourself," a female voice said. This time I did crane my neck and spotted Austin smiling at Tabby like she was the most beautiful woman alive. She put a hand on the lapel of his suit jacket and ran it down his chest, caressing him. The chemistry between them was undeniable. Who was I to deny them that? By all means, they could have each other. Because I was done being their source of entertainment.

"Shannon, are you okay?"

I turned to see Ryker standing before me in his tux, and yummy didn't even begin to describe how good he looked. My heart jumped in my chest at his nearness and begged me to allow myself to be with him. But my heart didn't have a brain. Ryker

looked like he was very much with another girl tonight.

“What are you doing against the wall by yourself?”

Even after the terrible way I’d treated him, he still cared about me? Tears sprung to my eyes. I hardly deserved any kindness Ryker had to offer.

Tabby let loose a shrill laugh, and I looked over to see her still touching Austin. This time she was standing much closer to him, and he had his hand around her waist.

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Ryker must have seen the direction where I was looking because he stepped forward to confront Austin and Tabby. “Are you guys serious right now? Can you be any more disrespectful to Shannon? Austin, you were supposed to be her date tonight. You have never appreciated how amazing Shannon is. You had an incredible girl who wanted to be with you, and all you ever did was take advantage of her and treat her like dirt.”

“I only treated her the way she wanted to be treated.”

“What does that even mean?” Ryker asked, fury lacing his words. “No one, and I mean no one, wants to be mistreated. There’s never an excuse to be disrespectful to another person. And especially not someone you’re dating. That’s the person you’re supposed to respect the very most.”

“Whatever, man. Save it for the movie camera. We’re living in reality over here.”

Ryker was wasting his breath trying to explain decent human behavior to Austin. But regardless, Austin still needed to know he couldn’t walk all over me anymore. I was beyond done with the way he was treating me.

I stepped in front of Austin and Tabby and looked both of them square in the eye. First Austin and then Tabby. “I’m through with you both. Don’t talk to me again. Austin, when we’re at UNC, and you see me on campus, I hope you act like you don’t even know me. Because I don’t want to know you. I don’t hate you. In fact, I hope your life is full and happy. I only wish the best for you. But I’m done being used by you, and I’m not going to let you hurt me ever again.”

I spun on my heel and stalked away from them.

“Are you okay?” Ryker was by my side again.

“Where’s Gabi?” I asked, avoiding his question. The truth was, I wasn’t sure if I was okay. I was pretty shaken up and confused by what had just happened.

“She insisted that I let her sign some autographs. I think she really just wanted me to come talk to you.”

“To me?” I squeaked. “Why would Gabi want that? She’s your date.”

“Gabi and I aren’t together. You know that, right?”

“Nooo . . .” The word stretched out slowly from my mouth.

“When we went to Charter, she told me that she’d always dreamed of having a normal high school experience. When you told me you were going to prom with Austin, I decided to offer her your ticket. I figured she’d love to experience prom. I want to get to know her since we’re filming the movie as soon as graduation is over.”

“So you’re not together with her.”

“No. Not at all. Gabi and I are just friends. And we’re new friends. Hardly more than acquaintances.”

I took a minute to absorb this new information. It settled on me like a warm blanket, and I felt the truth of it. I just wasn’t sure what I was going to do with it.

“I can tell that you need some space to figure your feelings out. I can respect that. So I’m taking a step back, Shannon. When you’re ready, if you ever decide that you are,

I'll be waiting for you."

Because he loved me. And that's what people did when they loved someone. They put that person's needs before their own. Wasn't that what I wanted to do for Ryker when I decided to break off our relationship?

Because I loved him. I realized that now. I'd wanted to put my own feelings to the side so he could have the career he deserved. The truth was, I was better off with Ryker. But he wasn't better off with me. I was a mess. And that would only be distracting to him and his future.

* * *

Ryker and Gabihung out with me for the rest of the evening. They were both so sweet and kind to me. Gabi was genuinely worried and listened as I told her what kind of boyfriend Austin had been. When I heard how invested she was in me getting together with Ryker, I realized she'd never intended to take him. She apologized if it had ever seemed that way. She even let Ryker walk me to my car so I wouldn't have to go out in the dark alone.

For the next few weeks, Ryker and I didn't really talk. I finished my novel, and Mrs. Drake and a few of the other girls from my English class who wrote for fun, read through it, giving me feedback. I went through and worked long hours, fixing what they had suggested to make the story stronger. Beyond that, I went back to my old life of going to school, going to Toppings to work, and doing what was left of my homework for the rest of the semester. I felt happier than I had in a long time. Writing had filled a huge void in my life. But it wasn't the same without Ryker.

Mid-May arrived, and I finally turned in my completed manuscript to Mrs. Drake. The next morning, she stopped me after English class.

“I stayed up late reading the finished version of your manuscript. It’s very good. You’ve completely nailed it with this story. You have a strong chance of winning the competition—I hope you know that. But I want to talk to you about something, and I hope I’m not intruding by bringing this up. I know you got the inspiration for your book from your relationship with Ryker, but I have to admit, I’ve noticed that you never sit with him at lunch anymore. Did something happen between the two of you? I normally wouldn’t ask, but your book characters have their happily ever after, and I feel like you deserve one too.”

“My characters get together in the end, but let’s face it; that’s not how real life works. Real life is when people leave each other and get hurt. Hearts are left smashed. I’m trying to keep that from happening to me. And if I don’t give my heart to anyone, I don’t have to worry about it getting broken.”

“But then you don’t get the kind of happiness you deserve either. Sometimes you have to take a risk to get the biggest reward.”

I’d heard the same thing before. Maybe it was worth thinking about. I just wasn’t sure I was ready to do that.

* * *

Late one night just over a week later, after I got home from Toppings, I sat at the kitchen table, across from my mom, sipping on a cup of hot chocolate. It was rare for us to talk, just the two of us.

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“I hope you know how proud I am of you for finishing that book. I have to admit that when you told me you were planning to write a book in two months, I thought you were taking on too much, especially right at the end of your senior year. But you’ve far surpassed my expectations. I couldn’t be more impressed. But I’m still concerned about you. Despite how happy you’ve been to finish your first book, you seem sad at times,” Mom said. “What’s been going on with you?”

I shrugged, looking down into my cup.

“Does it have something to do with the reason Ryker never comes over anymore?”

“He and I aren’t really friends. We had a little bit of a falling out.” It wasn’t exactly the truth, but I wasn’t sure I wanted my mom to know what had actually happened. It was easier to paint a picture of a big breakup. But the truth was, I couldn’t explain why we weren’t together. Every time I tried to understand it, my brain didn’t want to acknowledge the thought. I usually ended up distracting myself by picking up my phone or working on my fan fiction.

“Why don’t you start from the beginning?”

I took a deep breath. It was a struggle to open up at first, but before I realized it, I was pouring out my heart to my mom about Ryker and had filled her in on everything that had happened between us. It had been a long time since I’d had a good heart-to-heart talk with my mom, and it felt great. I’d been holding everything inside.

“I think I’m scared Ryker will end up leaving me just like Austin did. Just like Dad left you.”

“Austin and Ryker are two very different people. Ryker is one of the good ones.”

“I know he is.”

“Then what’s stopping you from being with him?”

“That’s what I can’t figure out.”

Mom sighed. “When your dad left, I tried to protect you as much as I could from what I was going through, but now I see that maybe I should have opened up a little bit more with you. Because I stayed quiet, you ended up in a relationship with a guy who treated you like your dad treated me. But when you get a divorce, everyone tells you to never badmouth the other parent because it’s hard on the kids. I thought that meant I couldn’t talk about what happened at all. I didn’t know how to talk about the level of abuse he put me through without shedding a bad light on him. But now I’m wondering if that was a mistake. I wanted you to grow up carefree and fun.”

“But I was in the situation, too,” I argued. “I saw the way Dad treated you. I heard him tell you he’d been with another woman. You didn’t have to badmouth him. I saw it all on my own.”

Shock registered across Mom’s face. “You heard him telling me he’d cheated?”

“Yeah. I’ve known the entire time. I know Dad’s a scumbag. But I thought that maybe you guys should have worked harder. I blamed you for a long time because I thought that if you’d just tried harder that he wouldn’t have picked another woman, and then he wouldn’t have left.”

“You blamed me?” Mom’s face went white.

“I did. I decided that I was going to try my best to work things out with Austin.

That's why I stayed with him for so long. I wanted to do what I thought you weren't doing right. I wanted to prove that I had what it took to keep a relationship together."

"And what did you learn?" Mom asked.

I laughed bitterly. "I learned that there was nothing I could do to change Austin. No matter how sweet I was to him, he would still mistreat me. After a while, I started to hate him. But I stayed with him anyway because I kept holding onto that hope that I'd figure out what it took to fix the relationship. But it never happened."

"And when he cheated on you with Tabby, you decided you'd had enough."

I nodded. "Exactly."

"And then Ryker came along, and you recognized what you were missing."

"Well, Ryker was there the entire time. I just didn't understand how he was getting me through it all. But when he started getting all the attention from the girls, and I saw I was going to lose him, I kind of woke up. And eventually, I realized I've been in love with him the entire time."

"Why aren't you with him now?" Mom asked.

"I don't know," I said. "I can't make sense of it."

"You know what I think?" she asked.

"What?"

"I think you don't believe you deserve a guy as good as Ryker, so you're self-sabotaging. You had Austin's behavior modeled to you by your father. I'm not going

to dig too deep into what happened because he still is your father, and I want to respect your relationship with him, but from an objective perspective, I can still see that he had a big impact on you and your self-worth.”

“So, I think I deserve someone like Dad who thinks it’s okay to cheat on a woman.”

“You said it, not me,” Mom said with a smile. I could see a dam of emotions built up behind her eyes. How much had Mom been keeping from me about what she’d gone through? I was just glad Mom had been able to go to a therapist and talk it out.

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“Mom, I’d like to go to therapy over what happened with Dad. I think I’m ready to start healing.”

She reached out across the table and took my hand in hers. “That is definitely something we can do. I’ll see if my therapist has any openings this next week. How does that sound?”

“Honestly? It sounds scary. I’m not sure it will be easy to talk about everything I’ve been keeping bottled up all these years.”

“You just have to take it one day at a time. In the meantime, you need to make it right with Ryker. I know you’ve been in love with him the entire time.”

“You did? How?”

She quirked an eyebrow. “I’m your mother. I know you better than anyone. I knew you’d recognize what you felt for him when the time was right.”

Maddie came into the room. “Shannon, I overheard you talking to Mom just now. There’s something you need to see.”

She slipped into the chair next to me and showed me a video she had pulled up on her phone. Ryker was sitting on a couch, talking to what looked like a talk-show host. He was wearing the same shirt he’d been wearing when we were in California. Maybe he was being interviewed while I was getting my hair done for the charity ball. He had mentioned that he had an appointment set up for him that day.

The man in the video wanted to know who the girl in the waterfall picture was. So Ryker told him our story from the beginning. He let them know that we were the poor kids at school who had been best friends since elementary school. We were next-door neighbors with single parents. He told him that we had recently begun dating and that we were happy together.

“This video changed Ryker’s entire image with the public,” Maddie said.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

She rolled her eyes. “Maybe if you bothered to open a web browser once in a while, you’d know what people are saying about you online.”

I narrowed my eyes. “I open web browsers,” I said defensively.

“Clearly not to the sites that matter,” Maddie said.

“What are they saying about her now?” Mom asked.

“Everyone sees her as a modern-day Cinderella.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Now that they know Ryker hasn’t been jumping from girl to girl, the response online has completely shifted. Ryker has this new role and the money that goes along with it, and they see him as an actual Prince Charming in love with his best friend and next-door neighbor. His fans are eating it up. Because who doesn’t love a real-life Cinderella story?”

My mind reeled. Maybe Maddie was right. I did need to open a web browser more often. This new information changed everything.

“I think you know what you need to do now,” Mom said.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“You need to go after Ryker before you lose the best thing in your life.”

I sat back in my chair, my mind racing. She was right. I knew exactly what I needed to do.

The next morning, I got up to go to the last day of school. While I was brushing my teeth, an email came through on my phone. I swiped at the screen and saw who it was from—Tufted Pen Publishing submissions. My heart dropped to my feet, and I frantically opened the email. I scanned through the attached letter and spat my toothpaste in the sink, screeching.

Maddie rushed into the bathroom. “What’s the matter with you?”

“I won!” I whooped. “I won the contest!”

“You did? No way!” She grabbed my phone. “Let me see that.”

Mom came from her room. “Did you just say you won the writing contest?”

“Yep.” I couldn’t believe it. Nothing this good ever happened to me. My heart was bursting with joy. How could such an amazing thing be true? “Now I can give you guys the money so you won’t be so tight financially when I’m gone to college.”

“No, Shannon. I can’t take your money. Don’t even think about giving us your prize money,” Mom said.

“But I’m leaving you high and dry after I leave.”

“Actually, you aren’t,” Mom said. “My boss just gave me a raise. We’ll be just fine.”

“And I’ll be out of here in two years anyway, Shannon. That’s your money,” Maddie said.

My eyes welled up with tears. I couldn’t believe how lucky I was. Not only did I have a chance to become a published author, but I had a loving mom and sister too.

All I needed now was to make things right with Ryker.

17

Ryker

I stepped from my car into the school parking lot and wiped the sweat from my brow. The last day of my senior year was a scorcher. I'd already finished all my final exams, but I still needed to pick up my cap and gown. That and my yearbook. It was a big deal to get your senior yearbook signed. I'd watched the other seniors passing their yearbooks around every other year. It was a way to say goodbye. The last time to see each other. Sometimes maybe ever. Many of us would end up going off to college. Some would stick around, and some would come back to Sweet Mountain years later to settle down with our families. It was strange to think about what the future held for all of us. I'd always thought that my future included Shannon, but now I wasn't so sure.

I walked through the halls of the school, mentally saying my goodbyes to the building. I'd spent the last four years of my life here. It was strange to think I wouldn't have a reason to come back on Monday. I'd be graduated and flying out to California by then.

Mia and Jimmy sat side by side on the floor against the lockers. Their yearbooks were open on their laps, and they looked over them together, pointing out the parts that caught their attention.

I scanned the crowded halls, looking for Shannon. I had something important to tell her. I'd been sure to give her as much space as possible to let her have time to sort out her feelings. But I'd thought about her every day. And now I had some news that

would change everything.

Mrs. Gentry, our principal, and her husband, who happened to be the vice-principal, sat behind a folding table outside the front office, handing out graduation caps and gowns. Bella and Logan stood at the table, gazing into each other's eyes. Mr. Gentry cleared his throat, and Bella jumped. "Oh, sorry!" she said, blushing, before taking her cap and gown from him. I got in line behind them and then took my cap and gown. I tucked the bundle into my backpack and searched the hall for Shannon again.

I turned the corner, looking into one of the classrooms where I knew Shannon had classes. Maybe she was still taking one of her final exams.

Down the hall, I spotted Mara and Taggish standing by her open locker. She put on her graduation cap and checked out her reflection in her locker mirror. He reached up and batted at the tassel, causing the strands to fly into her face so she couldn't see. She swatted his hand away, but he just laughed.

I pulled out my phone and sent Shannon a text.

Me:Are you at the school right now?

Harper stood at her locker, cleaning out the contents into her backpack. Her boyfriend Luke said something to her with a smile, and she punched him in the gut.

"I thought we were past this!" he exclaimed.

She laughed and said something under her breath to him that I couldn't hear. His eyes widened, and then he laughed with her.

I checked another classroom and then headed toward the lunchroom. Outside the lunchroom, a table was set up where Mr. Nelson and a couple of the juniors were

selling yearbooks.

Kate stood in line to pick up her yearbook, and Miller was behind her. He had his arms around her waist as she leaned against him. I got in line, and my phone buzzed.

Shannon: Yes. I was just meeting with Mrs. Drake. Are you here? I need to talk to you.

My heart rate picked up at the last line of her text. She needed to talk to me. My mind jumped from possibility to possibility of what she might have to say. Most of all, I just wanted her to tell me that she wanted to be by my side as much as possible.

Me: I'm in line to get my yearbook. Over by the lunchroom. Have you gotten yours already?

Shannon: Not yet. I'll be right there.

Shannon appeared around the corner just as I got my yearbook. I bought a second one and handed it to her. "I got one for each of us to save you the trouble of going through the line."

"Oh, thanks. Do you want me to pay you back?"

I frowned. "Of course not."

"Okay. I wasn't sure."

We walked for a bit in silence.

"What happened with Mrs. Drake?"

Shannon's smile brightened. "You'll never believe what happened. I won the

contest.”

“Wow! That’s great. Congratulations.” I stopped and hugged her. She felt so amazing against me. I’d missed holding her so much. “Does this mean you’re going to be a published author now?”

“I guess you could say so!” she said brightly.

“And you’ll have the money too?”

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“Yes. I was planning to give it to my family to help them out after I go to college, but my mom won’t accept it. She said she got a raise from her boss and insists she’s going to be fine without my help. So I guess I’m going to use it for living expenses so I won’t have to take out any student loans to pay rent. My scholarship only goes so far.”

“That’s incredible.” For a moment, it felt like old times between us, and my heart sped up. I had hope that this day was going to go better than I’d thought. So I took a chance and said what was on my mind. “I don’t want to put distance between us. I hope you know the only reason it seems like I am is out of respect for your wishes.”

“That’s actually what I wanted to talk to you about.” She stopped outside the auditorium doors. “Do you want to talk in here for a minute?”

“Sure.” My pulse picked up again. I had no idea what she was going to say. I didn’t want to get my hopes up. I followed her inside the auditorium.

A few lights shone on the stage, but the room was empty. We climbed the stairs on the side of the stage and settled at center stage. We sat with our legs stretched out in front of us. I looked out into the empty sea of seats. I hadn’t been in here since my film audition. I’d spent the last four years in various musicals or plays, and now, I had a promising acting career ahead of me. I hadn’t really stopped to think about what that meant for me and my life. I’d been so focused on everyone else the entire time. My family’s needs. Shannon’s needs. Never my own or what I wanted.

Being here on this stage brought back so many good memories. It was my happy place. Then it hit me. I hadn’t given myself permission to feel excited about being in

the film. Because the entire time I'd been too worried about what Shannon was thinking and feeling. But the last few weeks of giving her distance had left me with plenty of time to think about what I wanted. I'd spent my time speaking with my agent and focusing on my own preparations for moving to California. And now I realized that a film career really would make me deeply happy. It was what everyone had been telling me all along, but I just now saw it for myself.

"Ryker," Shannon said, her voice breaking through the peaceful silence that hung over the room. "I'm so sorry for the way I've been treating you. Last night Maddie showed me the video of the interview you did when we were in California, and I was getting my hair done. I had no idea the response had changed like that. I'm not sure what it means for us, but I wanted to let you know I reacted badly. I know I hurt you, and I feel terrible."

"Thank you, Shannon. That means a lot to me."

"You're welcome."

"You said you don't know what the video and the positive online response means for us. It means that my agent is backing off now. He'd already started backing down when he heard how my interview had gone. But you hadn't read that part of my texts." She'd just made an assumption and jumped into the drastic decision to break up with me.

"I realized something else last night."

"What was that?" I asked.

"It was something my mom pointed out to me. I tend to self-sabotage."

"What gives you that idea?" Wasn't that what I'd just realized about myself? I was

self-sabotaging by not even wanting to audition at first.

She scooted closer to me, staring up into my eyes with her crystal blue ones. “Because I chose Austin instead of you.”

My breath caught in my throat. She was only inches from me, and she smelled amazing. Like Shannon. Sweet like honey and vanilla. “Which time?”

“Every time.” Now her lips were only centimeters from me.

“Really?” I murmured. But I didn’t get to say anything else because her lips were on mine. Fireworks exploded in my head in a burst of color and joy. My heart swelled, full and happy. I reached over and pulled her closer to me, my fingers getting lost in her incredibly soft hair.

She pulled away, looking deep into my eyes. “I’m so sorry, Ryker. I’m a really stupid person. The past few weeks away from you have been pure torture. I’m in love with you, and I don’t know how I could ever be away from you again.”

“You’re in love with me?”

She nodded, a smile beginning to grow on her face. “I have been all along. But because I was self-sabotaging, I kept choosing Austin. I didn’t think I deserved a good guy like you. But the time we spent together changed me, just like you said. And you’re right. I can never be with a guy who treats me like that. I realize now that I’ve been struggling with the way my dad treated my mom and the fact that he left us and started a new family. I told my mom I’m ready to start my path to healing. I’m starting therapy next week.”

“I’m so proud of you, Shannon.” I kissed her again. “I can’t even express how much I love you.”

“I think you just did. But you can do it some more if you want. I won’t complain.”

“Deal.”

“Do you know what my book was about?” Shannon said.

“What?”

“It was the story of us. A guy and a girl are best friends, and he becomes a famous actor. I changed a few things like their names, of course, and they weren’t as poor as we were, and she doesn’t act as jealous as I did.”

“You weren’t that jealous. You’re too hard on yourself.”

“Okay.” She nudged me, grinning. “Maybe you’re right.”

“Of course, I am. I’m always right.”

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She rolled her eyes. “Sure. Whatever you say, Ryker,” she said in her most sarcastic voice. “Anyway, I wasn’t finished.”

“Go on,” I said.

“By the end of the story, the two best friends realized they were in love, and they lived happily ever after.”

“Just like our characters in the fan fiction,” I said.

“That’s right. I hadn’t thought of that,” Shannon said.

“I did. I think it was a sign that we both had deep feelings for each other the entire time. It was coming out in our writing, and we didn’t even realize it.”

“That’s actually what I was about to tell you. As I wrote my story, I began to recognize my feelings for you.”

“That’s incredible,” I said. “I’m so glad you decided to write it.”

“Do you know why I did?”

“Why?” I asked.

“Because you stopped writing on the fan fiction. I got bored, and so I took Mrs. Drake up on her challenge.”

“One day, we’ll finish our fan fiction,” I promised.

“Sounds like a plan. Maybe once you’re done filming, and you’re not so busy. I’ll probably be in college by then.”

I smiled and kissed her again. “There’s actually something I need to tell you about college.”

She sat back and looked at me. “What is it?”

“I have a way for you to go to UCLA.”

She tilted her head, a confused look on her face. “What do you mean?” A small light of hope lit in her eyes.

“You’re being offered a scholarship.” I pulled a letter from my backpack and handed it to her. “It’s already been opened because I opened it.”

“It’s addressed to you.”

“You’ll see why in a minute.”

“I’ve been awarded the White Foundation Scholarship. Why are you getting a letter for my scholarship?”

“Your letter is still coming in the mail. This one is just to inform me that your scholarship has gone through. You couldn’t get your own scholarship from UCLA, so I created a way for you to get one.”

Realization dawned on her face. “White . . . as in Ryker White.”

“I knew you wouldn’t allow me to just pay for your tuition, so I created this and told them to reconsider your scholarship application. And in the future, I’m going to help other people who are struggling financially to have a better opportunity to go to school.”

“Ryker,” Shannon said. “I’m speechless. I honestly don’t know how to thank you for this.”

“You can thank me by coming out to California and accepting my scholarship.”

“Of course, I’ll accept it. I just can’t believe you were able to get all this done so fast.”

“I started the process pretty much as soon as the advance hit my bank account.”

“Yeah. But still. You would think this stuff would take forever.”

“Not really. But that may have something to do with all the news coverage over my new role.”

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“You mean they sped up the process for you because you’re famous now?”

“I’m not saying it. But it’s a possibility. And why question it? I’m just grateful.”

“I can’t believe you did this for me, even when you knew I already had a scholarship for UNC. I’m sure you could have found a thousand other ways to spend that amount of money.”

“What good is my money if I can’t be near you?”

“How did I get so lucky to be with a guy like you?” She entwined her fingers with mine.

“I think I’m the lucky one.”

“So we’re going to California,” I said.

“And we’re starting a new life. A new adventure,” Shannon said, her voice full of hope. It was all she’d ever wanted. To go on an adventure. To see something new.

I looked at her, my heart bursting with love. “Who says dreams don’t come true?”

The End

* * *