



# The Perfect Hit

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**Category:** Romance

**Description:** He's got a crush, but can he make it out of the friend zone?

Colt Buttars knows nothing about theater, until Hazel enters his life. He's liked her for months but isn't sure how to tell her. Then the opportunity to try out something new, something besides sports, gives him the push to get out of his comfort zone, and hopefully, impress Hazel. The only problem is keeping that a secret long enough to figure out a plan. The theater teacher asked Hazel Miller to write the spring play and it's got her all sorts of nervous. But having Colt there helps, at least until he's been asked to a dance by one of Hazel's theater friends. Only then does she start to realize her feelings for him. But will she be too late?

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Colt

Baseball was life.

At least that's how it felt right now. The smells of the grass and dirt, along with the crack of the bat and the snap of the ball as it hit the glove, were all like the soundtrack to my life. It meant I had the chance to hang out with some of my best friends since they all played.

Well, except for Hazel. She was the opposite of athletic, but her flair for the stage could probably rival my happiness over how the Elite Baseball Camp had gone.

I threw my bat bag and duffle bag in the storage area underneath the bus. It had been a whirlwind few days, but the time spent at the camp two hours north of Pecan Flatts, Texas, had been awesome. Two days of intense instruction, and I'd learned a lot from the camp directors. Being there with several of my teammates was an added bonus. Our goal was to win the state championship this year, and with the kind of chemistry we'd had just in the past couple of days, my hopes were high.

One of the best things about the camp was being able to study the other top baseball players in our region, allowing me to gain new insight and skills that way. I'd grown up thinking there was only one way to do everything, but from all I'd learned in the past year about life, there was no right way.

Nate getting together with Brynn was something I hadn't seen coming. And the rest

of the guys dating their girlfriends? It just showed how much a person could change. But it wasn't that easy for me and relationships. I had been crushing on Hazel since she moved into town from Buffalo, New York, last summer.

The hardest part was I'd been too chicken to say anything to her, hoping to not mess up the fun relationship we had with awkwardness, and I was pretty sure she still didn't know I liked her. Which was good and bad.

"Great job, Butters," one of the coaches said as I got onto the bus. "Just keep up those drills and you'll be launching the ball."

I nodded and smiled. "I hope so."

My swing just wasn't working. No matter what I did, it seemed like I just couldn't connect to the ball like I had last season. I'd tried to keep myself happy about how well I'd done in the fielding aspect, but that still didn't help. In baseball, there was only one designated hitter, and that was usually so the pitcher didn't have to hit. If I couldn't get my swing going, it wouldn't matter how well I played in the field.

As much as I loved being at a place where we just ate, played, and slept baseball, I was ready to get back home. My three brothers gave me a hard time about all the things, but they were some pretty awesome friends when the hard stuff hit. And I wanted to see Hazel, but keeping that to myself was the easiest. Nobody needed to know right now.

I grabbed a seat next to Nate and Logan. Jake, Dax, and Ben were all in the rows behind us.

"Are you ready for the two-hour ride home?" Nate asked, sliding down into his seat.

Logan nodded. "My phone's all charged up. I have to enjoy this time without

chores.”

I laughed, agreeing with that. My parents thought Saturdays were for yard work and chores when we weren’t playing sports, and since I was away the day before, I’d probably be doing them when I got home. Logan lived in the outskirts of Pecan Flatts on a large working ranch, and I could only imagine how much work went into taking care of it. He had a lot of quirks, but he was a great player and came with a lot of humor.

“Do you even get cell service out on your ranch?” I asked, giving him a little slug in the shoulder.

“Of course we do,” Logan said, frowning. “I live, like, three miles from you, Colt. You just wish you had as much land as we do.”

I shook my head, knowing what acres of land equaled in the Buttars family. Any spare moment we got, we were outside working on some part of the yard or fixing up a remodel of our house. I didn’t need the work to be exponential.

My dad had always taught us that hard work had to be learned and there was always something to do to keep us out of trouble. I could understand that. When my brothers and I got bored, that usually translated into fist fights or a bet to do something outrageous.

“I’m good,” I said. “I’ve got enough on my plate at home.”

“So what should we do?” Logan asked.

Nate fluffed his pillow and leaned it back against the glass. “We’re going to take a nap.”

The idea sounded awesome, but as I closed my eyes, my brain decided to speed up, shooting random scenarios through my mind to keep me alert.

We were heading home on a Sunday, a week before Valentine's Day. When I'd left, my dad had been welding several pieces of metal together, but I hadn't asked what it was for. Possibly another iron flower for my mother's garden. He worked in one of the factories close by, and it seemed like we had more metal structures in our yard than the whole rest of the neighborhood combined.

"Can't sleep either, huh?" Logan said, peeking through the two seats. I turned to look at him in the row behind me, shaking my head.

After a yawn, I said, "You had some sweet plays this weekend in the outfield. Do you think this will be our year?" I kept my voice low, knowing there were kids from other teams on the bus and I didn't want to start a fight.

Our team had tried to take the state title for the past several years, and we just kept coming up short. Last year was closer at fifth, but number one was the goal.

"If we don't do it now, I don't know if we'll be able to next year," Logan said. It was the first serious answer I'd gotten from him since we'd headed out for the camp.

## Page 2

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I nodded, thinking about that. Nate and I were juniors, and Logan was a sophomore. John Miller, Kyle Sharp, and Will Johnson were all the good freshmen who'd be playing with us this year. Sure, we'd have one more chance, but then we'd be without Jake, Dax, and Ben, who were the core of our team.

"How are things going with you and Hazel?" Logan asked with a sly grin.

Hazel. The one girl I could say my insides went gooey for.

My only problem: I was stuck in the friend zone.

She was into drama and theater, something foreign to a kid who'd grown up around explosions and crazy jumps, but she made it look like a lot of fun. Secretly, I wanted to try it out, just to see what it was like. The biggest part of why I hadn't acted on it was because the play would be during baseball season, and I didn't want to jeopardize my time when we were coming together as a team to accomplish our goals.

"We're just friends," I said, closing my eyes. I didn't want to talk about it with any of the guys. Between the baseball team and my brothers, they already gave me plenty of crap for liking a girl who wasn't sporty. Why they didn't tease Dax, since his girlfriend, Kate, was into dance, I wasn't sure. Then again, he hadn't said too much to me about it.

Hazel was the definition of a theater diva without the level-X drama. She'd even put in a Broadway song as my ringtone, and I probably couldn't remember which show it was from. She was the happiest, bubbliest, most adventurous girl I'd ever met, all

very different from living in a house of brothers. Even though I'd tried to avoid liking her, my attraction grew every time we were together.

"I think you two would be good together," Logan said.

I cracked open one of my eyes to see if he would give me his signature grin that signaled he was teasing, but for a second time, he surprised me with a serious expression.

"What about you? Any girl caught your eye?" As I thought about the other guys on the team, most of the ones I hung out with now had girlfriends. Jake and Penny had been dating since last spring, Ben and Serena got together after her ankle injury last summer, and Dax and Kate started hanging out in the fall.

The newest couple in our friend group was Nate and Brynn, and in a surprising turn of events, their relationship was even stronger since they'd already been through a lot of trauma together. Finding out my guy best friend was a childhood genius, which he'd been hiding from all of us, and Brynn's mother walking out on them over New Year's had been a lot for both of them. But it had been several weeks, and it seemed like things were working well.

Logan shook his head. "No, there are a lot of fun girls, but I can't really date yet."

"What do you mean you can't date yet?" I said, shifting to a sitting position.

"My parents have this weird rule where we can't technically date until we're sixteen. I think it's my mom's way to survive raising three boys and three girls."

I laughed, thinking about my mother. She'd had four boys, and while sometimes she bemoaned the fact that she didn't have any girls, she did a good job with the rules and regulations in our home while still giving us room to grow.

“Okay, so when do you turn sixteen?” I should have probably known this already, but I wasn't all that great with dates and numbers.

“June 10th. It feels like forever. I've been driving the tractor since I was, like, five, and my dad would love to send me to school in our truck.”

I nodded. “There is definitely a lot of freedom once you can drive. Who do you want to take on your first date?”

“I'll have to think about that one,” Logan said, grinning.

“Well, maybe Hazel has a friend you can date. Then we could hang out in a group.” It was different having Nate so busy with Brynn lately, and I knew he'd been bugged that I hung out with Hazel a lot more when he was single, but the tables had turned. I guess the fact that I was on the other side now made me realize how much he'd been missing things.

Logan nodded. “I'd be up for that. Right now, it's time to crush baseball season, and then we can get to the dating part. It might help to have a title to talk about too.”

I shook my head. “Logan, even when we take it, don't go telling the world about it. IF they ask, you can tell them, but you don't want to be an arrogant jerk who only talks about himself.” Just one more thing I'd learned from Hazel. She'd been the star of the fall musical, surprising the kids who thought they'd waited long enough for their turn to be cast in the leading roles. But through all of it, she'd stayed surprisingly humble, not trying to boast about it at every chance.

“You're probably right.” He leaned closer and whispered, “That kid from Groveton, the first baseman? That was all he did for most of the camp.”

I glanced around the bus, pinpointing where the guy sat several rows ahead of us.



“Yeah, just be chill. Girls like it when guys aren’t arrogant.”

Except for Hazel. It seemed like no matter how much I did to support her, it didn’t faze her. But I had a feeling there was something she held back from her time in New York that she hadn’t talked to me about, even after several months.

The bus was silent for a while, and I dozed off here and there, waking up every time the bus hit a rough spot in the road.

With my phone lacking charge, I pulled out the small medallion I kept on a chain around my neck. The round metal piece was from my grandfather, and it was one of my most prized possessions. He’d given it to me a couple years ago, saying it meant valor and honor. I loved having fun, but this seemed to keep any crazy ideas in check.

An intercom sounded, and the coach from camp spoke.

“Okay, men,” he said, “we’re about thirty minutes out from Pecan Flatts. Make sure you call home if you need a ride. I prefer not to sit at the bus stop all night.”

He laughed, and a few of us returned it. This guy reminded me a lot of our high school coach, Coach Maddox, who seemed to never leave Rosemont High.

## Page 3

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Glancing down at my ancient phone, I wished I'd remembered the charger while hurrying out Friday morning. I'd turned it off Friday night with a bar of charge left, knowing I'd need it to get picked up when we got home. My mom's car had died, and they needed my truck to shuttle my other brothers around while I was gone.

Not that many people would've contacted me since all my baseball friends were with me, but it would've been fun to text Hazel back and forth at night. It wouldn't have changed our relationship, but a guy could hope.

Nate shifted in his seat to my left, and I glanced over to find the look on his face neutral. He was staring at his phone like it was a lifeline. I wasn't sure what that meant, but I hoped everything was okay.

"Good news or bad news?" I asked.

"It's good," Nate said, breathing out a sigh of relief. "Brynn said she's been hanging out with Hazel this weekend. And that she's sick of show tunes."

The mention of Hazel made me laugh. She and Brynn were cousins, and even though they were nearly black and white as far as the differences of their personalities, they had a lot of fun together.

My phone, a hand-me-down flip phone, finally turned on. The only problem was, I had to wait for the messages to upload to it.

A few seconds later, a text sound buzzed and then several in a row, and as I glanced down, I couldn't help but smile. Most of the fifty-four text messages were from

Hazel, probably giving me a play-by-play of her day, or even her worries over the play the theater teacher had assigned her to write after Christmas break. We'd spent a lot of time together while she tweaked the original story from her English class into a stage play, me usually there for emotional support as she freaked out every few minutes, but she'd turned in the final draft to Mrs. Sanderson at the beginning of last week.

A text from my mom caught my eye. I hope you had fun. Call me as soon as you get this.

My mom wasn't usually so cryptic. The fact that she hadn't said anything more made my nerves and brain go haywire. Had something happened to my family? My brothers had broken arms and legs before, but that didn't usually signal a text message like that.

I dialed her number, tapping my leg with my hand as a way to distract myself somewhat.

"Hey, Colt," my Dad's voice said over the line, his voice deeper than usual. "You on your way home?"

"I'm less than thirty minutes out. What's wrong? Is everything okay?"

"Hmmm, have Nate bring you over to the hospital. Grandpa Ken fell this morning, and we just got him here. The doctors should be coming in any minute with the results from his X-rays."

"Is he okay?" I knew enough to know that when an older person fell, it was usually not a good thing because they didn't heal as well. I turned toward the window and tried to muffle my voice, not wanting any extra commentary or questions from the guys after I got off the phone call.

“They haven't said much, but your mom has been there every step of the way,” my dad said, his voice hitching on the last word. My mom had given up her studies to become a nurse when my oldest brother, Sterling, was born. She'd always mentioned how she wanted to go back and finish, and she was finally taking the plunge at the beginning of the next school year, twelve years after my youngest brother was born. “They just said they're running some tests and will see with time what will happen.”

I blew out a long breath, hoping everything would turn out all right. Grandpa Ken understood way more than we all gave him credit for, and he was the one I turned to when I was having a hard time. He had a joke for everything, and a lot of great stories. I could sit for hours and listen to his voice weaving tales and explaining everything about the wars he'd had to take part in.

As if knowing my worries were skyrocketing, my dad said, “He'll be okay, son. It's probably just a break, and then he'll need a few weeks of physical therapy. How was the camp?”

“Good, really good,” I said, trying to make my voice sound upbeat.

Shuffling muffled the line on the other end, and then a voice I couldn't hear clearly spoke. “The doctor is here, Colt. I'll see you in a little bit.”

My dad said goodbye before he hung up, and I sat staring at my phone, the logo of the phone company coming up as the battery died. Of all times to die, at least I knew where my family was.

The downside was that if they found out anything major, they'd have to wait until I got there to tell me. I just hoped they didn't find something more severe, like internal bleeding or cancer.

Hazel

Sleepovers were fun and all, but there was something about needing my own bed at the end of it mixed with the exhaustion from staying up all hours that made me ready to head home. Then again, this had been an extended sleepover, and I was all caught up on the sports movies I'd never seen. I pictured the lineup of musicals and plays displayed on my shelf at home. I'd have to turn one on once I got home.

I finished picking up all my stuff from all over Brynn's house. With her mother gone and her brother and boyfriend at baseball camp, I knew she needed someone to lean on. It had actually been the best way to spend the last couple of days, allowing me to decompress after the edits to the play I'd had to fix most of yesterday.

"Let's go do something," Brynn said, coming out of her bathroom in something other than sweats. The girl could rock the casual-athlete look, but when she got dressed up, she could pass for a model. It was the Miller genes. I was a Miller too, but the tall genetics passed me up completely.

"That sounds great. I need to grab a few things from the store for Colt." He was coming home today, and I was still missing some of the things to put in a little bag I'd planned to give him.

With a shake of her head, I already knew what my cousin was going to say. "He's been gone for two and a half days and you're giving him a present? Should I be giving Nate a gift? Or are you planning to ask Colt to be your girlfriend by showering him with gifts?"

I focused on folding my clothes, even though I was just going to throw them into the laundry basket once I got home. "No, we're friends, and you know I love giving gifts. I'm pretty sure if I took one of those love-language tests, it would confirm it. And isn't it awesome to come back and find something fun?"

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“It is. I’m just surprised you two aren’t dating with the way you’ve been talking about him all weekend.”

Biting my lower lip, I mentally went through our conversations. At least I could skim through them quickly.

“I haven’t been talking about him all night,” I said, turning around and sitting on Brynn’s bed. “We’ve talked about a lot of things in this cousin-bonding time. I’m just used to talking to him a lot, and it was weird that he wasn’t here for several days.”

Brynn gave me a no-nonsense look. “Are you sure you don’t have feelings for him? I mean, the kid would bend over backward for you.”

A pang of guilt hit me. She was probably right. Colt was one of the best friends a girl could ask for, usually doing the crazy things I asked him to do, although somewhat reluctant. We were an odd pairing of friends, a Broadway fanatic and a baseball star, but somehow our chemistry just worked.

“We’re just friends. Just because he’s nice doesn’t mean he likes me. And I still have too many flashbacks of Seth.” My ex-boyfriend from Buffalo. He pretty much ruined the idea of a relationship for me a few weeks before my father announced we were moving back to Texas.

Brynn frowned like she wanted to say something else but didn’t. “That guy turned out to be a jerk, but not all guys are like that, Haze. You were the one giving me a hard time about not having a boyfriend just a few weeks ago. Maybe it’s your turn to focus on finding your own future boyfriend.” She ended it with an eyebrow wiggle and a

deep laugh. I wasn't sure how long it would take her to get back to the Brynn I knew, but this was a good start.

I shook my head, flashes of the train wreck that had been my last breakup causing me to shiver. "I think I'll wait a bit longer." When she gave me a look like she was about to get mad at me for it, I said, "It wasn't fun, Brynn. I mean, he basically turned me inside out with how cruel he was when we broke up."

"Okay, but has Colt been like that? No," she said, not waiting for me to answer. "And there have been other good guys at school."

"There isn't really anyone I'm pining after," I said, knowing she wouldn't take the bait of the excuse that I didn't think anyone was attractive. Because to be honest, Colt was definitely cute, but I couldn't go back and set myself up for heartbreak again. And our relationship was nearly perfect the way it was. "There are a few cute guys in some of my classes but none who would tolerate my obsession with show tunes."

"What about Scott Daniels?" Brynn laughed, and I gave a semi-fake laugh in return. I wasn't sure anyone could put up with my enthusiasm for all things musical and on-stage, because Seth hadn't been able to, and I'd liked him since the third grade.

I shook my head. "Yeah, he might have the looks, but the guy is a tool, to put it lightly. Rehearsing with him during Beauty and the Beast was rough. He kept saying I was too pitchy, when in reality, it was him who was off."

We headed out to my car, an older but sturdy model that had survived several slight taps of the bumper to people in front of me. I wasn't the best driver in the world, but I was trying to fix that.

"Have you heard from Nate yet?" I asked, turning into the store parking lot a couple blocks away.

It was kind of nice to be done talking about my dating life and focusing on Brynn's. I might have had an ulterior motive as I hadn't heard from Colt since they'd left. He'd said something about forgetting his charger, which was killing me. I had so much to update him on over the past few days. This was the longest we'd been apart since we started hanging out last fall, and I'd realized just how much we talked throughout the day.

Brynn shook her head, glancing down at the phone in her lap. "Not yet. But they're supposed to be home today, so I would guess any time." She gave me a small smile. She hadn't mentioned it too much, but she was excited for Nate to come home. There were still fears that he would disappear just like her mother had, but from everything I'd seen from him over the past couple of months, I'd say he was in love with her and wasn't going anywhere for too long.

I dragged her inside the store and grabbed a few things to complete my small bag of goodies. The gift probably would've been better for when they left so he could take it on the bus ride, but I'd been too preoccupied with the play stuff to think about it.

"He likes grape soda?" Brynn pointed to the six-pack of cans I'd just picked up.

"Yeah, it's different, but he's a fan. He also likes black licorice." We both cringed at that idea and laughed.

"Black licorice should be banned or something. It's so gross." Brynn gave a fake shudder, and I laughed again.

We walked down the aisle and grabbed a few more things, the mostly normal kind of snacks, in my opinion anyway.

Once we'd finished checking out, we headed back to my car.



“Haze,” Brynn said, shutting her door once she’d gotten inside. “Thank you so much for helping me out the past couple of months. I know it’s not over yet, but I feel a lot better than I did at New Year’s.”

I gave her a sad smile and nodded. “Anytime, Brynnie. Us Millers have to stick together, even when things are hard.” She’d definitely been there to help me get settled back into Pecan Flatts. Moving was never easy for me as I got attached to people so easily, but she’d helped introduce me to several people in the neighborhood and at school.

As we headed out of the parking lot, her phone dinged, and from her wide grin, I could tell it was from Nate.

“He said they should be back in Pecan Flatts in about ten minutes.” She stopped talking, her fingers flying over the screen.

“Do you want me to turn around? I can drop you off at home so you can see him.”

Brynn turned to look at me, worry crossing her face. “Do you mind?”

I was happier than I’d been in a few days now that my best friend was finally close enough to talk to face to face. My phone was sitting in the console, and I glanced down every few seconds, hoping it would buzz and ding, telling me Colt was happy to see me too. Maybe he really had run out of battery.

“Of course not. I wouldn’t want to keep you two lovebirds from seeing each other. That could be dangerous for my health.” I chuckled, and Brynn shook her head, her shoulders moving with her laughter.

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The closer we got to Brynn's house, the more worried I got. What was happening here? Why hadn't Colt contacted me? Then again, I doubted he'd use Nate's phone just to text and call me.

As my thoughts escalated, Brynn's words from earlier entered my mind about how we weren't dating. I wasn't his girlfriend, so why would I be the first person he'd contact? That realization hit deeper than I wanted it to. I leaned on him for a lot, and I hated to think that anything could change between us. Sure, I had other friends at school, but somehow Colt balanced me out.

We pulled into Brynn's driveway, and I put the car in park.

"Haze, just remember how awesome you are. There is someone out there for you, someone who will love every part of you. Don't change." She reached over and squeezed my hand, giving me a jolt of emotion and springing tears to my eyes. "Do you think you'll get the script back tomorrow from Mrs. Sanderson?"

I nodded, trying to clear my throat of emotion. "I hope so, and I hope it's good. I mean, I've never written something that will be performed before, and I can't believe it's finished. We start auditions next week."

Disbelief at a finished product was the truth. When Mrs. Sanderson asked me to write the play from a story I'd written for English, I was floored. I mean, I was usually the lead of the play or musical, and writing this play had pushed me past anything I'd imagined I could do. But only part of it was done. There were still auditions and then the execution of the play, meaning my stomach would be in knots for weeks to come.

The passenger door opened, and a familiar face leaned over. “Is this a girls-only meeting?”

“You’re back!” Brynn said, jumping out of her seat.

Nate wrapped his arms around her waist, and they kissed, him lifting her so her feet were in the air.

My inner romantic swooned as it usually did, but there was a slice of envy running through me. I’d never been envious of my cousin before, but the fact that someone could look at a girl like that, like she was the only person in the world, made me wish I had the same thing.

Then my inner defense wall slammed down on that thought, crushing it to pieces. Getting attached to a boy in a relationship was just setting myself up for heartbreak. I didn’t need to be doing that right now. We were almost at the end of our junior year, and the spring musical would be taking over my life.

My entire spring would be booked up with rehearsals and memorizing lines. It was best to avoid anything that might distract me from that. At least, that’s what I’d tell myself.

3

Colt

Nate had dropped me off at the hospital, and it was a relief to see my grandfather in good spirits. Well, that might have been helped by the pain medication they’d given him, but I was still happy to see him cracking jokes.

The diagnosis was that he would need a few days in the hospital after the surgery on

his hip, and then he'd need to stay in an assisted-living facility to get through therapy. He hadn't been excited about that idea, but my mom pacified him by saying we'd work out the details when it got closer to leaving.

As usual, once we made it back home, my dad sent me out to get my chores done. My three brothers had already mowed the lawn and trimmed the hedges the day before. That meant I had to weed the garden. With one look, I knew Wyatt, my youngest brother, hadn't done the weeding throughout the week, even though it had been on his chores list. At least gardening in the evening wasn't as hot as during the day. The sun hadn't completely set, giving me enough light to see.

"Hey, stranger," Hazel said as she walked around to the backyard.

"What are you up to?" I asked, grinning up at Hazel.

I stood, glancing down at my dirt-covered hands, and decided against reaching for a hug. She wore a pair of longer cutoff jean shorts and a bright blue t-shirt. It was the most casual I'd ever seen her, but it highlighted the color of her eyes.

I hadn't realized how much I'd missed her until I saw her there, the light hitting her skin just right and making her look like she was beaming.

"I'm really sorry I didn't call you when I got back. My phone's inside charging finally." Why did I feel so awkward around her now? I'd had the same feelings for months. I didn't need to change the status quo after a few days away from her.

"I'm just really excited you're home," she said, laughing. "It felt like you were gone forever."

It was my turn to laugh. "What are you talking about? I missed one day of school and was gone throughout the weekend."

“I know, but radio silence wasn’t fun. Does it bug you when I talk a lot?”

I stopped pulling at the weeds and turned to look at her. “What do you mean?” The insecurity in her voice shocked me.

“I mean, do you get annoyed when I talk a lot?” Her eyes reminded me of a doe with the way she stared at me, as if studying my reaction for an answer.

I shook my head. “No, it’s kind of nice, actually. What’s with the question? Did someone say something to you?”

Hazel folded her arms over her chest and tightened, her gaze drifting to the tree at the corner of our yard. “No, I was just thinking about it. How was your camp?”

“It was good for the most part. My fielding skills were on point, but I struggled to hit anything.” I ran a hand through my hair, reliving the embarrassment I’d felt yesterday when I’d struck out. “I didn’t impress any college scouts who were there yesterday.”

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Hazel looked thoughtful. “Do you want to play baseball in college?” It was strange, all the questions she’d directed at me, but I was grateful she cared enough to ask.

I shrugged, kneeling back down to tug at another stubborn weed. The section I was working on hadn't gotten as much water that day, and the soil was still tough. It gave me a moment to think about my answer.

“I haven't really thought about it, to be honest. Jake and the other guys are talking about it nonstop, hoping to get scholarships. But even if I wanted to, no scout would’ve picked me based on my performance the past couple of days. I mean, I love playing baseball right now, but will it be more like a job when I get to college?” That fleeting feeling of baseball being everything from just a few hours earlier didn’t fit as well as it had then.

Hazel gave a slow nod. “I hadn't thought of it like that. I would love to attend a school that focuses on music and theater. I just hope I won't get sick of it either.”

I shook my head, laughing at her. “Are you serious? If you were to get sick of it, you probably would've done so by now. The way you listen to show tunes, sometimes I feel like you’re preparing for your own Broadway show.”

“That's the dream,” Hazel said with a breathy sigh.

“You'll get there,” I said, confident she would.

Hazel was one of the most tenacious people I'd ever met in my life. Ever since she'd moved from Buffalo, I worried she'd want to move right back. Pecan Flatts was not

close to New York City at all, and Buffalo was still a few hours' drive from the big city. There wasn't too much to foster a young theater student here in our small town. At least Mrs. Sanderson had enough knowledge about the theater for Hazel to keep learning.

"When are your auditions?" I asked, grabbing the last couple of weeds and standing back up. It turned out to be a medium-size pile, and I gathered it and walked over to the garbage can at the side of the house.

"We start auditions Wednesday," Hazel said, walking up behind me. She brought the small shovel and a few weeds I must've forgotten and dumped the weeds into the trash can.

"Wednesday? That's when baseball tryouts are." Even though I knew it would be hard, part of me wondered what it would be like to take part in Hazel's play. She'd worked so hard on it, and I knew the overall storyline.

"Yay for that. It'll be just fine and you'll figure out how to swing." She blushed and laughed. "I sound like a girl who knows nothing about sports."

I grinned. "It's probably how I sound when I try to talk to you about your plays and theater stuff."

"You've definitely come a long way since I moved here," she said, her smile causing my stomach to flip with the excitement of it. "Mrs. Sanderson gave my script back on Friday. It was supposed to be the final, but she still had so many red marks all over it. It was probably good you were gone yesterday because I actually got all the edits done."

I laughed. "Are you saying you missed me?" I tried to make my tone light, but I was more curious than I should've been. Maybe because all my friends now had

girlfriends and spending the weekend with them talking about the girls made me more anxious about her answer.

“Of course I missed you,” Hazel said, grinning. “You’re the only guy who lets me talk about everything and anything. And you give pretty good insight. There’s no way I could’ve finished that play without you.”

I straightened my back and shoulders, striking a pose to give her a laugh. “I’ll take it,” I said. “What are you doing right now?”

“Well, I’m talking to you, obviously,” she said, rolling her eyes.

“Why don’t we go get a milkshake or something? We can celebrate the start of the baseball season and you getting your script ready in time for auditions.”

“Sounds perfect. But I’m buying,” Hazel said, “to thank you for all your help with it.”

I shook my head, frowning. “No way. I’m the one who suggested it, so I’ll pay. Let me just go wash off my hands and grab my keys.”

We walked into the kitchen where my mom was busy canning something. I couldn’t quite figure out what it was, just that it was bright red.

“Hello, Mrs. Buttars,” Hazel said.

“Hi, Hazel.” My mom smiled. “And remember to call me Shirley. I’ve missed you here the past couple of days. You should’ve come over and talked while Colt was at camp. I can always use another girl around this place.”

I turned my head while my hands were still under the water to look at Hazel, and her eyes grew big while her expression turned pleased.



“I’ll have to do that next time.”

“Now, now,” I said, wiping my hands off on a towel. “Are you trying to steal my best friend, Mom?”

The other two laughed, and I chuckled along with them.

Grabbing my keys from the hanger next to the door, I took a few steps toward my mom and gave her a peck on the cheek. “We’re going to get milkshakes to celebrate Hazel finishing her script. I’ll be back in a while.”

“Okay. Maybe grab you something else while you’re there. I’m going to head back to the hospital to check on Grandpa, so I probably won’t be around to make dinner.”

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I nodded. “Sounds good.”

Hazel hopped into the truck, and I shut her door before running around to the driver’s side.

“What happened to your grandpa?” Hazel asked, a line etched into her forehead.

“He fell this morning. The doctor said he’ll need surgery and then a few weeks of therapy to get back to normal.” Saying it like that made the process seem so simple, but I figured the whole idea of being away from his home for an extended period of time would be painful for him. My grandma had passed a few years before, and he’d been struggling with the idea of selling and moving into a smaller home since all her memories were there.

Hazel’s hand rested on my forearm, sending sparks of excitement zipping through my body. “I’m so sorry. I’ll be honest, I was a little sad when I didn’t hear from you when you got back from camp. But you were probably at the hospital. Where you totally should’ve been.”

I nodded. “Nate dropped me off there once we got back to town. And my phone died right after I got off the phone with my dad about heading to the hospital. I would’ve called if I’d had the battery power.”

Was I being too eager? Too transparent about my feelings for her? I tried to sound like a best friend, but my tone might have edged into flirting.

Embarrassment flooded my cheeks at that realization, the heat radiating off of them a

signal that I was probably turning as red as whatever my mom had been canning. Then again, that happened a lot. Working out, being in the sun too long, and being embarrassed all brought about the same tomato shade of redness.

“Well, I sent you, like, a thousand text messages.”

I laughed, knowing it was really in the fifties. “I have to say it was nice to be missed.”

“Oh, I completely forgot to bring over your present. I had it all put together in a bag but forgot it. I’ll have to give it to you when we get back.”

I raised an eyebrow. “You got me a present?” My heart was jumping up and down while my brain was doing its best to keep my face from revealing heart eyes like in the cartoons.

She shrugged like it was no big deal, even though not too many people gave me gifts just for existing. “It’s been a while since I’ve gotten you anything, and I like getting people gifts. I feel like it creates excitement.”

“It definitely does that. What’s in it?” I asked, leaning over and trying to coax the answer out of her with a smile.

She tipped her chin up and crossed her arms over her chest. “My lips are sealed.” After another few seconds of silence, she asked, “Where do you want to go?”

“How about Lou’s diner? They have good milkshakes there.”

She nodded, and I turned the truck in that direction.

We pulled into the parking lot a few minutes later, and I took a quick glance over at

her, admiring the loose curls of her hair over her shoulder and the bright red of her lips. It reminded me of when I'd gone to see her performance in *Beauty and the Beast*.

"So, are you auditioning for anything in the play?" I asked as we walked toward the front door. Her hand swung back, brushing mine, and I flexed, trying to keep from taking her hand in mine.

Friends. I'm her friend.

Hazel shook her head, looking more distraught about the play than I thought she would.

"No," she said. "Mrs. Sanderson wants me to learn how to direct. She thinks that will help me get into a good college. As much as I love to perform, I'm both terrified and kind of excited about this new skill I'm learning."

"Who do you think will be the leads, then?" Not that I knew much about who was really good for which part, but I liked watching her face light up when she talked about things like this.

"Ellie was my understudy for Belle," she said, waiting for me to open the door. "And I think she's got a pretty good shot at being the lead this time. And then Scott Daniels will probably be the male lead."

My insides twisted at the mention of Scott Daniels. He was what my brothers would call a "wannabe future celebrity."

He didn't have the build for athletics, but there were a lot of girls at the school who seemed to think his face should be on the cover of one of the fashion magazines. I honestly couldn't remember the names of any because we never had any at our house. Even Hazel's voice had gotten a little breathy as she'd said his name. How could I

compete with a guy like that?

We stood next to the podium at the front of the diner, and Penny walked over with a big smile.

“Hi, guys. Just the two of you?” she said, grabbing two menus.

We both nodded, and she said, “Sweet. Come follow me.” She took a few steps and said, “It’s good to know you’re back, Colt. Jake didn’t know what time you’d get in, and we’ve been busy here tonight so I haven’t had a chance to check my phone to see if he called.”

“Yeah, we got back a couple hours ago. Jake did well at the camp. I think he might be getting a few offers for scholarships.”

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The way her face lit up made me smile even wider. Since she played softball, she understood all the pressures of playing well for the scouting college coaches.

I was happy for Jake, especially since he was worried he wouldn't go anywhere with him already in his senior season. He deserved the chance to prove he was a next-level athlete.

As we were about to sit down, Hazel veered to the right, and I groaned as I realized who was sitting in the booth next to ours.

Scott Daniels.

Penny glanced between me and Hazel then over to Scott before setting the menus on the table. "I'm going to leave this here for you. I'll be back in a few minutes."

I nodded and slid into the booth, wishing we could rewind about thirty seconds and ask Penny to seat us in a different section.

"Scott, what are you doing here? Colt and I were just talking about you." Hazel's voice was friendly, but did it show that she had a crush on him? We'd talked about him plenty over the course of our friendship, but for some reason I was feeling territorial tonight. Scott Daniels had a lot of qualities I didn't have. One was height, and the other was teeth that didn't need to undergo three years of braces. At least I was done with that part of my life. Braces were the worst.

"I hope it was all good things," Scott said, standing up and wrapping Hazel in a hug. He used that dramatic deep voice he had, and while I usually wasn't a fighter, aside

from wrestling matches with my brothers at home, I wanted to punch the guy in the face.

“Of course,” Hazel said, laughing.

Scott took a step back and gave her a once-over. “And how is our fearless scriptwriter today?” he asked with a lopsided grin.

My hand formed a fist, and I had to focus on the menu to keep my irritation under control.

“We’re doing good,” Hazel said, motioning toward me. “We were just talking about who we think the leads of the spring play will be. I’m guessing it’s you.”

Scott leaned in and whispered, sending fury coursing through me. “Isn’t that against the rules? You’re the director. You’re not supposed to have favorites.”

Hazel looked like she’d been slapped in the face, the bright smile fading and a few spots of red appearing on her face. She gave a hesitant smile. “That’s probably true. I’m new at this whole thing.”

“Do you think you’ll be able to handle this? I mean, directing the Rosemont High play. That’s a pretty big deal.” I caught him waving two fingers around in a small circle and wished I could break them. I needed to go hit a bucket of balls off the tee to get this frustration out of my system. Maybe that would get me out of my hitting slump at the same time.

Hazel’s slight smile dropped, and she looked at him as though she’d just learned the Easter Bunny wasn’t real.

“She’s got this,” I said, standing up next to her. “And you might want to change your

attitude, or she just might find a reason not to cast you as the lead.”

“I doubt she’d be able to find anyone better. We’re just finishing up, but I’ll see you tomorrow,” Scott said, his tone frosty. He was out with some kids I didn’t recognize, and they stood and walked out of the diner with smiles. What a punk!

I didn’t want to ruin anything for Hazel, but giving the kid a black eye would certainly make me feel better.

4

Hazel

I waved to Scott as he left and then took my seat in the booth across from Colt.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, noticing his face was pulled into a deep frown.

“What’s wrong? That guy is what’s wrong. I can’t believe he talked to you like that,” Colt said, his hands flying all over as he spoke.

With a quick intake of breath, I stared at Colt. He had always been the easy-going type and had gone along with my shenanigans more than once, but anger wasn’t something I’d seen often from him.

“It happens sometimes. He wasn’t like that in the fall musical, though.” I hadn’t realized it until Colt brought it to my attention, but it was strange for Scott to do that.

Colt shook his head. “It shouldn’t happen at all. Mrs. Sanderson picked you to write and direct the spring play. She trusts you, knows you can do it. If he’s bugged about that, he can talk to her.”



“What are you getting to eat?” I asked, hoping to break the tension. Colt was usually so upbeat and full of energy. To see him annoyed and somewhat deflated was odd. I’d already gotten over Scott’s comments, knowing that his opinion wasn’t something I had to side with.

“I’ll probably go for the strawberry shake, and maybe an order of fries,” he said, placing his menu on the table. “I’ve lost most of my appetite,” he added under his breath.

“I think I’ll go with the brownie sundae.” I grinned. It was the same thing I ordered every time, but I’d rather get something I liked than waste money on something I didn’t.

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When Colt continued to frown at his menu, I asked, “What's wrong? I don't think I've ever seen you get this mad before.”

“Scott Daniels just drives me crazy,” he said, shaking his head.

I laughed out loud and then had to cover my mouth with my hands. “I'm sorry,” I said when I'd gained a little more control of myself. “He can be an arrogant jerk, but he has his moments of being a decent human being. Why are you so irritated with him now?”

“He thinks he's the greatest of all time,” Colt said, fingering the edge of the menu.

He wouldn't look up at me, and a mixture of irritation and curiosity hit me.

“He had no right to talk to you that way. Besides, it bugs me how every girl in the school tends to fawn all over him,” he said, finally lifting his head to look at me with hooded eyes.

“Really? Are you worried none of the girls look your way?” I asked, trying to keep my smile under wraps. “Because I'm pretty sure Marcy Johnson would go out with you in a heartbeat.”

That thought would usually make me smile, as I loved seeing my friends get together with people they liked, but picturing the two of them together did something to jar my brain, and a bit of jealousy peeked through. It seemed like the comment hadn't sat well for him either.

He frowned. "I'm not sure who she is. And it's not like I'm trying to date the world. I just don't like arrogant people."

I tipped my head back and laughed, one of the deep, hearty laughs.

"What's so funny?" Colt asked, leaning forward to take a sip of water.

"You don't like arrogant people? Nate is, like, the definition of arrogant, until you get to know him."

Colt thought about that for a few seconds and then gave me a partial smile. "Yeah, you're right about that."

He relaxed a bit, and at that moment, I wished I had a story narrator for my life like in some of the plays to help me read his thoughts. The idea that he would be envious of Scott Daniels made me laugh internally. The two were completely different, and it would be really hard to compare them.

Where Scott was tall and lanky, Colt was average size and built. Scott had brown eyes, but Colt's were a mix of blue and green, one color appearing more depending on what color shirt he wore. Colt's sandy-brown hair was longer now, but he usually kept it neatly trimmed. Then again, knowing his mom, she was probably the reason for his clean-cut appearance most of the time. My eyes flicked down to his arms, and I noticed how strong they looked now. Not that he'd ever been super skinny, but he was starting to fill out.

Wait a minute, why was I checking him out? Colt was my best friend and the best guy I'd known since I'd moved here from Buffalo. We'd had so many adventures, and it seemed like the betrayal I'd gone through with my ex-boyfriend was slowly starting to heal.

But there was always a difference between friendship and being in a relationship. Ever since I'd broken up with Seth, it seemed like being friends was the safest option.

"What are you thinking about?" Colt asked.

I shook my head, returning to the present. "Just that I'm grateful for you, and for our friendship." Telling Colt about my ex-boyfriend had been something on my to-do list, but part of me worried that it would push Colt away. That if he realized the same things Seth had, he'd go running for the fields and leave me to fend for myself. Which I was not equipped to do just yet.

But the word friendship suddenly tasted bitter as I said it, and I knew maybe spending so much time on this play had done a number on my feelings. The play was about teens conquering a lot of obstacles to be together. Now that I was looking at my bestie through a new lens, I realized there were little things throughout the script that were kind of like Colt and me.

Colt gave me a thin-lipped smile, and it seemed like there was a strange wall between us suddenly.

"I hope you know I'm being serious," I said, reaching over and touching the back of his hand with my palm. "I went through a lot of crap a few months before coming here, and as much as I love New York City, it was nice to have a fresh start from Buffalo."

Colt perked up and leaned forward. "What did you go through?"

I bit down on my bottom lip for a few seconds, debating whether or not I should or was ready to talk about this.

"I mean," Colt continued when I hadn't said anything, "you don't have to tell me if

you don't want to. To be honest, I've always worried that you are going to up and leave back to New York one day.”

Laughing, I said, “There isn't much left in Buffalo for me. My ex-boyfriend kinda ruined it.”

Colt nodded. “I didn’t know you had an ex there.” He looked like he wanted to ask more but didn't want to pry. Just another reason being around him kept me grounded. I knew he wouldn’t force me to share anything I didn’t want to, even though those instances were few and far between.

“I didn't want to talk about him because he really hurt me. He didn't support the things I loved, even though I was at every one of his basketball games.” There. That was at least something. Vague enough that Colt wouldn’t know exactly what Seth had critiqued during our breakup.

I thought back on those times. I'd been in several productions throughout the years my family had lived there. In the year we dated, he'd shown up for one choir concert and left after about ten minutes.

“I can understand that,” Colt said. “It's hard not to want someone to reciprocate your feelings.” Why did it sound like he struggled to say that?

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“Yeah,” I said. There was so much more to it than that, but thinking about it made the tears surface, and I was determined to push Seth out of my mind.

Our ice cream came, along with Colt’s fries. I savored the combination of the chocolate brownie, fudge sauce, and vanilla ice cream while sneaking a fry every once in a while.

After reliving some of my past, I just hoped I'd be able to sleep that night.

5

Colt

Once I dropped Hazel off at her house just down the block from mine, I sat in my truck for several minutes before going inside. Her revelation about an ex-boyfriend was new. She'd never mentioned anything about him, and as I thought through several of our conversations, she'd never expressed the desire to go back to the town where she'd lived before. That was all something I'd made up out of fear, I guess.

She'd love to live in New York City, but I knew I needed to keep supporting her in her interests to hopefully win her over at some point.

Maybe that was the reason I'd gotten so mad at Scott Daniels. How could he be so rude when Hazel had worried and stressed about the play for several weeks now?

Then again, I'd been there when she was writing it, seeing everything first hand. It was easy to think things came easily when Hazel was so good at hiding what she

didn't want seen. Like an ex-boyfriend.

I walked inside, grateful for the smell of dinner. We were having something with onions and garlic, and I was okay with that.

"I thought you weren't making dinner," I said, sneaking a slice of French bread from the cutting board. I hadn't ordered anything else aside from the shake and fries, but now I was ready for real food.

"I called the hospital, and Grandpa was asleep, so I stayed home. How was the ice cream?" My mom stood next to the stove and stirred something in a large pot.

"It was good. I think she's nervous about the play." I paused for a moment and leaned against the cabinets. "She told me she had an ex-boyfriend in Buffalo."

My mom stopped stirring and looked over at me. "That's new. How do you feel about that?"

I shrugged, trying to play it off like I didn't care. We'd been friends for this long, and she'd just now told me about it. From the look on her face, I guessed it had called up some bad memories. But what would this guy have done to hurt her? I hadn't noticed the signs of her being depressed or anything, but I didn't know her back then.

"It was just something I hadn't heard from her before. I mean, she's basically told me about her entire life since she can remember, around the age of three. Why would she not have talked about this before?"

"It's always good when people decide to open up more," she said, going back to stirring. "Maybe those memories are harder to talk about than others. I mean, breaking up isn't always amicable."

I nodded, popping the last bite of bread into my mouth.

“You might as well go get your homework done. Dinner will be ready in less than an hour, and you’re on dish duty.”

I gasped and frowned. “What do you mean? I just had to weed a bunch in the garden.”

She pointed to the chore chart, the one I was ashamed we still used after all these years. But in my mom’s defense, it kept her from having to break up a fight daily.

I’d achieved reading the English homework before we were all called downstairs to eat.

“It’s good to have you back, Colt,” my dad said from the end of the table.

“It’s a miracle you’re not working, Dad,” Sterling, my older brother quipped.

My dad leaned over and slugged Sterling on the shoulder. He shook his head and gave a slight smile. “I’m just here to keep you in check, son.”

Nash and Wyatt helped bring a few plates and pots over to the table, my mother trailing behind. Once the food was divided up, we ate in silence for a bit.

“What’s new with everyone?” my dad asked, cutting a piece of chicken parmesan.

“School, work, football,” Sterling said, sticking a large forkful of penne into his mouth.

“Soccer for me,” Wyatt said.



“Baseball,” Nash and I said at the same time.

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A fork clanked against the plate, and I looked up to see my father's fingers intertwined. "How are grades coming?" He raised his eyebrows at all of us, and I watched as Nash looked away groaning.

My father was the biggest sports fanatic there was, and nothing gave him more pride than to watch us play the game we loved. But he and my mother had instituted a rule when Sterling was old enough to start playing more competitively. In order to play sports, we had to have above a 3.5 GPA. I understood why he had the rule, since he wanted us to do something else besides getting stuck in a factory for the rest of our lives, but it was difficult sometimes to keep juggling all the balls in the air.

"Mine are good. I might need to do some extra credit in art, but everything else should be fine." I took a bite of the asparagus, trying not to think about how weird the texture was.

"You could always ask your drama girlfriend," Wyatt said, stabbing a piece of chicken. "I'm sure she'd cast you in her play to get that extra credit."

My brothers all laughed, and I scowled at my youngest brother. "Leave it alone, Wyatt."

"What? Do you want to be a performer?" Sterling asked, staring at me.

"No," I said, trying to be convincing. "But I can have friends with different interests."

"Let's change the subject," my mother said, her tone firm.

Sterling rolled his eyes. "I don't even know why she's so obsessed with Broadway anyway. It's such sissy stuff."

Of course Nash and Wyatt agreed, and I froze as they turned to look at me.

"It's not the worst thing in the world," I said, trying to keep a neutral stance. We'd always been a sports family, and anything remotely girly was seen as a bad thing. But I'd learned a lot from Hazel over the past six months, and there were a lot of catchy songs she'd introduced me to. For some of those guys to sing as well as they did, it was evidence that it wasn't only for girls.

"Do you really like her?" Nash asked, grabbing a piece of bread and the tub of butter. Leave it to him to cut straight to the heart of things.

"She's my friend," I said, electing to leave out best. Nate and I were still good friends, but I didn't need anyone interfering in my relationship with Hazel, especially not from my brothers right now.

"Yeah, but you spend a lot of time with her," Wyatt said. He was only twelve, but at the rate he was growing, he would probably surpass me in the next few months.

"Yeah," I said, my defenses rising. "You spend a lot of time with Joey. It's the same thing."

Sterling's hand landed on my shoulder, and he ducked his head a little bit as if to get directly on eye level. "That's not the same thing. Wyatt and Joey have the same interests. Hazel doesn't even know how to catch a ball."

I swallowed, remembering our Thanksgiving football game. I'd invited her over, excited to have her share in one of our family traditions, and it didn't go quite as I'd pictured it. She hadn't exactly come over dressed to play a sport, meaning she was

trying to run in knee-high boots. And then, Sterling, as the defender, had taken the opportunity to hit away any ball thrown to her before she had a chance to catch it.

I held up my hands. "It's not like we're in a relationship. We're friends," I said. Those last two words sliced through my chest, and I wished there was some way to change that. Visions of her hanging onto the arm of some faceless dude in what I pictured Buffalo to look like, coupled with the asparagus I was still trying to choke down, made me want to throw up.

"Whatever," Sterling said. "I'll bet she'll get you roped into starring in her plays next."

There was a moment of silence before all of us started laughing at that. It was nice to cut through some of the tension and relax a little bit.

"I'll take that bet. I'll give you a hundred dollars at the end of the school year if that ever happens. You'll owe me if I don't," I said. Baseball was my sport, and even if I thought being part of the play would be fun, there was no way to juggle both, meaning I'd easily win. And I struggled to memorize all the facts for my history class. Remembering lines for a performance in front of a crowd wasn't something in my wheelhouse.

"A hundred is on the table, then," Sterling said, nodding.

We shook on it, and I was confident I'd get a chunk of Sterling's college allowance when school ended.

"If that's what he wants to do, then he should go for it," my mom said, clearing her plate. "Don't let them deter you from something you might actually like, Colt. There's more to life than just sports."

“I don't think we'll have to worry about that, Mom. The play is during baseball, and this is the year we have to focus to make it to state. I've got my eye on the prize.” I tried to smile around another bite of the asparagus, but the end piece got stuck, activating my gag reflex.

“You’ve got your eye on something besides the state championship,” Sterling said, chuckling.

Once I swallowed the offending vegetable, I frowned and shook my head. “Why don’t you just go back to college?”

Sterling grinned. “I am, in about two hours.”

We cleared the dishes, and I started washing them, wishing our dishwasher was fixed so I didn’t have to do it all by hand. But the good thing about this chore was that it gave me the chance to think through everything going on in my life.

Baseball was up there, but Hazel was the one who took up most of my thoughts. Should I make a move and ask her on a date? Or would I ruin our friendship forever?

6

Colt

“What are you up to?” Nate asked, hitting me on the back when I got to the lunchroom the day of tryouts. There weren’t many days where we ate lunch at school, but the turkey with mashed potatoes and gravy was a hit among the baseball team.

“Just trying to keep my grades from tanking,” I said.

I’d struggled with one of the newer math concepts and had stayed after a few minutes for the teacher to explain it to me. Not that I would admit all that in front of the guys. We all had our things we’d had to conquer over the past year, and I didn’t want math to get in the way of playing baseball.

I preferred preparation now rather than sitting on the bench during games or, worse, living at the library until I brought it back up.

Sterling had been the one to test that, always having to go in and ask his teachers for extra credit and mercy for turning in late assignments. Nash and Wyatt hadn’t gotten into too much trouble yet, but it was a daily conscious thing for me, always making sure I was caught up or ahead of the upcoming schoolwork just so I could keep my grades higher.

But I’d figured out that if I could just keep on top of what the topic was right then, instead of procrastinating, I could usually get through things pretty easily. I was no genius like Nate, but I didn’t have to be. A little studying and not putting off my

homework made all the difference.

“What do you mean?” Logan asked.

Nate leaned in. “Colt’s dad won’t let him play unless he keeps his grades up.”

Logan looked perplexed. “Your dad? The one who yells and cheers really loud at the games?”

I nodded, feeling a mixture of pride and humiliation at that. With all the overtime, he’d missed a bunch of our fall ball games, but when he could make it, he was probably the biggest Rosemont Royal fan out there.

“Great, I’m sitting between a genius and another kid who does his homework.” Logan dipped his roll in the gravy, taking a big bite.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I asked, pulling the plastic silverware out of the package, my eyebrow raised as I waited for his answer.

Logan shrugged. “Just that school is kind of lame. I’m not going to need calculus or trigonometry when I graduate.”

I may not have been convinced of it either, but it didn’t hurt to learn it now, just in case. “Are you planning on farming for the rest of your life?”

“No,” Logan said, shaking his head from side to side slowly. “But that’s not the worst thing a guy can do.”

“Then what can it hurt? You might as well suffer through it now and be done.”

Nate nodded. “If you’re having trouble in those subjects, I can help. They aren’t that

tough when you figure out the secrets.”

I smiled at Nate, liking the new change in him. A few weeks ago, none of us even knew about his past, but finding out he was a child genius hadn’t changed our opinions of him. Now that he was more open about it all, I could see a different kind of satisfaction.

“How’s Hazel’s play going?” Nate asked, stuffing a scoop of mashed potatoes in his mouth after.

“She said auditions start today.”

“What if she asks you to star in it?” Nate’s eyes focused on my expression, and I probably resembled a fish out of water with all the air I was drinking in.

The question was different from my brothers’ teasing on Sunday. They’d suggested I’d join just because I wanted to, but Nate had phrased it as Hazel asking. That put a different spin on it.

I shook my head. “There’s no way she’s going to ask me to be in the play. She knows how important this year is for our team.”

“But what if she said she’d go out with you if you were in it?” Logan pointed his plastic spoon in my direction, as if trying to emphasize it more.

That question caused me to pause at the worst time ever, because the rest of the table had stopped talking about whatever and turned to look at me.

“I don’t know. I guess it would depend on the timing.” I turned my baseball cap around so the bill was down my back, feeling my palms start to sweat with this kind of attention.



“You’re actually thinking about it?” Dax asked, lifting his cup to take a drink.

I blinked several times, wishing this was some strange dream I would wake up from. A white lie formed. “I hadn’t really thought about it until Logan said something. Guys, I know I’m not a huge impact player on the team, but I want to be there for our wins.”

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Jake snorted. “Not a huge impact player. No one can field those straight shots off the Groveton guys like you can, Colt. And your hitting will come. You’ll be going for the fences for sure.”

I tried to laugh that off, but to hear it from one of the captains was a huge deal for me. I’d always been average height, nothing shocking like some of the others on the team, and to hear that they needed me was kind of a boost.

“Thanks, guys. We’re taking state this year.” I raised my chocolate milk carton as if we were toasting the idea.

Thankfully, they all cheered and started talking about something else, leaving me to think about the play and Logan’s question. What would I do if Hazel told me she’d date me? Would I be in the play?

I laughed at that. My acting skills were worse than zero. I’d learned not to lie to my mother early on since she could read it all over my face. To be honest, I was surprised the guys bought the small lie I’d told them. But I didn’t need them to worry when things were so intense this year.

The idea of me in a production not sports-related was laughable, and my brothers would never let me live it down. My curiosity made me want to be in a production with Hazel, but that could wait until next fall with whatever Mrs. Sanderson decided to produce.

But would it be worth it to join in now if I could call Hazel my girlfriend?

Hazel

It felt like I'd gone for a long run with all the nerves I'd gone through during school. It was time to cast the characters I'd become attached to, and I wasn't sure how well that would work out. I might have made a list of the people I thought would work for several parts, not sure who all would show up.

"Okay, Hazel. Now is the time to see who will embody your characters the most. Are you ready for that?" Mrs. Sanderson beamed at me as though this was her favorite thing ever.

I swallowed big and then nodded. "I think I'll survive, right?"

"You're turning green, Hazel. Don't worry, dear. I remember being just as nervous as you the first time I had to direct." She took in a deep breath, using her hands to signal that I should do the same. "Now, breathe out. There you go. Whenever you feel overwhelmed, just take a few breaths and take it a minute at a time. That's how I get through anything I struggle with."

We took our places a couple of rows back from the stage in the large auditorium and waited as the students got ready for their auditions. It was such a strange change from where I usually was. I breathed deeply, feeling a little less tense with every breath out.

In the past, when auditions came for any musical or play, I was singing and rehearsing for days, learning the melodies and harmonies, wanting to know everything inside and out. This time, it felt like I'd done that anyway since I'd written the whole thing. And this one turned out to be a play instead of a musical, because no matter how I tried to come up with some catchy songs for it, it just didn't feel right

every time.

“Welcome to the auditions for the spring production of *Better Together*,” Mrs. Sanderson said. “If you’d all clap for our own playwright, Hazel Miller.”

My cheeks had to be the color of tomatoes after that introduction. It was like this writing thing had changed me into a different person. I usually welcomed the applause, but right now, I guess I was nervous that the whole thing could flop, even though Mrs. Sanderson approved of the script.

She continued. “We’ll start with the smaller roles and then go for the bigger ones last. There is a part for everyone here, so even if you don’t get the part you really wanted or tried out for, you’ll still be part of the magic.”

I loved the way she said that, the way she encouraged all of us with hope and excitement. There had been directors in my past who weren’t so supportive. Ex-boyfriends as well.

The auditions started out a little rough, with several of the students flubbing their lines as they practiced together. My range of emotions was so up and down that I could’ve sworn I’d just been flying and then hit turbulence.

I leaned over to Mrs. Sanderson in between two auditions and whispered, “Is this how you feel every time? Like, are we going to be able to make a production out of this?”

Mrs. Sanderson laughed. “Oh, honey, that happens to me every six months. But with the right motivation, some good instruction, and keeping the fun around, it’s very possible.” She turned to the stage, encouraging the next few students onto the stage to begin.

I pulled out a pen and wrote down that advice. It seemed like something I’d need to

consult later on.

The power flickered and turned back on, the surprise of it causing shrieks and screams from several students. It flickered again and then went out completely.

“What happened?” someone on stage asked.

We waited a few moments, hoping it would come back on, but it didn’t.

“Okay, everyone, please file out into the hallway. No running. We don’t need to call the ambulance to the school when the electricians will have to come anyway.”

Mrs. Sanderson’s sense of humor was funny, but she did have a point.

The rest of the school was dark as well, and the windows only let in a little light. The dark clouds signaled a big storm.

“We’ll have to postpone auditions today,” Mrs. Sanderson said to the crowd of students. “Be prepared for auditions to continue tomorrow when the power is back on.”

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The students filed out, and the director turned to me. “I know it’s hard to cut right in the middle, but we’ll get this cast ready by the end of the week and get rehearsals going. I’ve got mid-April blocked off for the performances, so that will give us plenty of time to polish the cast.”

I blew out a breath, grateful for that insight. I’d been panicking about a lot of things over the past month, and looking back, I couldn’t believe I’d been able to accomplish all this in such a short time. But as Mrs. Sanderson pointed out, I’d already done most of the hard work, the base of the story, last semester in English. And I wouldn’t have survived without the constant reassurance from Colt.

“Thank you, Mrs. Sanderson. It will be nice to picture the leads.”

She nodded. “Yes, the people taking over your beloved roles is a big deal. Although I didn’t see anyone up on stage who was quite there yet. Who knows? Maybe we’ll get someone tomorrow who decides to give it a chance.”

We both looked at each other and laughed. Everyone who’d been there this afternoon had been a part of the fall musical. The chances of anyone outside the drama club showing up were pretty slim.

I just hoped we’d be able to find the right people to make my first play unforgettable. And that I’d know what to tell them to make it a success.

I glanced out at the players as we got ready for the first day of tryouts. I loved baseball, but I was starting to feel the pressure. It was only day one, and I knew there was a lot more coming up. And glancing up at the darkening sky, I hoped it wouldn't downpour on us.

The kid next to me who pulled out his cleats and glove from his bag looked unfamiliar. He didn't have the doe-eyed look of a freshman, either excited to finally be in high school or thinking he was going to rule the school and show all the seniors a little something, so he must've just moved in.

"Hey," I said, "I'm Colt. Are you new here?"

The kid turned to me, standing at his full height, which was at least three inches taller than me. "Yeah, I'm Adam Taylor. I just moved here last week from California."

"Sweet, welcome to Rosemont baseball. What position do you play?"

"I was a third baseman in California, but I've been known to play just about anywhere on the field."

When he said he played third base, I had a slight gut check. That had been my position for the past four years on our competition team and in high school. I glanced up at him, knowing that if I was going to keep the starting spot at third base, I'd have to work through the competition with him.

"What brings you here from California?" I asked, pulling the strings on my cleats to tie them tighter.

"My dad just got transferred here for a job."

"And? What do you think of the place so far?" I grabbed my glove and the ball inside

it and began tossing the ball into the palm of it as I waited for his answer.

“Well, there's a lot of flat land. We lived by the beach back in California, so I miss surfing and all that.”

“Are you serious?” I asked. “That sounds epic. You were probably devastated when your dad said you were moving, huh?”

“For sure,” Adam said, readjusting his baseball cap.

“Okay, team. It's time to get going,” Coach Maddox said. “Let's do some warm-ups. Four laps around the field, and then get some good stretching in. We're going to be running today, boys.”

I groaned and turned to see Nate looking like that was the last thing he wanted to do. We got in a pack, and I was surrounded by Jake, Dax, Ben, and Nate, grateful I had to go through all this with them. We'd run a lot at the camp last weekend, but I wasn't sure I was up for a marathon today.

After the first lap, I noticed a few of the kids up front, and Adam was one of them.

“Great,” I said, mostly joking. “New kid's going to show me up.”

“What are you talking about?” Nate asked, frowning at me.

“That one tall, lanky kid up there just moved from California. And guess what position he plays?” I gave a fake grin, and Nate chuckled.

“Let me guess. Third base.”

I pointed my finger at him. “Bingo!”



“I overheard him talking to someone else, and he said he plays first base too,” Ben said.

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“We'll just see what Coach Maddox says when it's game time,” Jake said, filling in his typical captain's role of being the neutral party.

We got into groups after all the warm-ups and stretching were done, the infielders with Coach Maddox and the outfielders with Coach Davidson. We started off with a bunch of grounders, and of course, who did I end up behind? Adam Taylor. I had a feeling I was going to be sick of this kid by the time tryouts ended.

We each had to take two balls at a time, one of them to the side to show our range of motion and getting to the ball, and the other was usually right at us but a fast and hard shot. I was prepared for both and felt pretty good about it. But the next time through, I fumbled the straight shot right at me.

“Buttars,” Coach Maddox said, leaning on the bat as he stared at me. “I don't think I've ever seen you miss one of those. Get focused. This is our year.”

I nodded, pounding my fist in the palm of my glove and setting up for another rocket shot right at me. This time I fielded it just like I always did.

After going through several rotations of drills to test our abilities, I glanced around, not sure what was off about the whole thing. This didn't feel like it had in the past couple of years of tryouts. It was as if the pressure had intensified after last year's fifth-place finish in the state tournament.

My stomach was all tied up in knots as we got up to take some pitches off Coach Davidson, the pressure already getting to me. I focused on the few swings and tips I'd learned while I was at that camp, but I barely touched the ball, fouling the few times I

even made contact.

My swing wasn't working, and I didn't know how to fix it.

9

Hazel

Nearly twenty-four hours later, my stomach was still tied in knots. I'd talked to Colt about his tryouts late last night, and he was more than excited about their chances for this year's team. He kept saying how they'd been at the camp with a bunch of the star baseball players in the area and that he and his team now knew their secrets and weaknesses. He'd also talked about his hitting difficulties, and I wished there was something I could do for him. Theater was my jam, and I didn't know enough to help with the baseball aspect.

I'd tried to be upbeat and not a Debbie Downer, but all I could think about was figuring out who my leads would be. Sure, we hadn't gotten to that point in the auditions the day before, but I guess I was hoping for some fresh face to come in off the street saying he or she was a professional actor, giving my characters the treatment they deserved.

I'd pretty much hidden out in Mrs. Sanderson's classroom since first period, going over the script again in the hopes that I would find any errors. She said she'd give me a note for my other teachers this one time, and I appreciated it more than she knew.

I tried to hold back the small lunch I'd been able to eat as I resumed my seat in the second row of the auditorium. There were so many students milling about, and I just hoped I'd know who to cast where. Leads were important, but after another go-through of the script, I realized just how much I loved the secondary characters. I glanced down, seeing that my fingers had twisted the front of my shirt into a knot.

I needed to get it together.

Ellie walked to the middle of the stage and started reading lines for the main female character. She messed up one spot, but the rest of it seemed to be really spot-on.

Once she was done, I leaned over and said, “She did a great job at that.”

Mrs. Sanderson nodded. “Probably as close to perfect as we’ll get for the role.”

Marcy Johnson went up after, and while she wasn’t as polished as Ellie, she did a great job too. People were clicking into the roles within my brain, and breathing came much easier now that I had more faith in the people auditioning.

Several other students went, and it was simpler to place them in the smaller roles. But as the characters performed, there still wasn’t anyone perfect for the male lead. Was Scott Daniels not even showing up? Is that what he meant when he said I shouldn’t guess who would be cast when we saw him at the diner Sunday?

I glanced at my watch. 5:30 pm. We’d been there for what seemed like days, but it had only been a couple of hours.

“Apologies, ladies,” Scott said, strolling onto the stage. “I got delayed by a few things.” He looked at me and winked, but instead of it being cute, it seemed more of a show.

He performed several lines, and unlike most of the group, he did it from memory. That was impressive in and of itself since the final script had just been finished last weekend. Mrs. Sanderson said she’d given out copies of what we’d had before to anyone who wanted them.

I blew out a long breath, grateful that was done. We had at least one person for every

role, but no backup for Scott.

One of the backstage hands walked onto the stage. “I think that’s our last audition.”

I glanced at the group sitting in the rows behind us and had a feeling that things wouldn’t be a total disaster.

Marcy sat next to me, and I grinned at her. “You did such a great job.”

She rolled her eyes. “Except for messing up in the middle.”

I patted her leg. “Well, considering how much time you had to prepare, I’d say that’s a win.”

“Wait,” a voice from the back called. “I’m ready to audition.”

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Colt appeared on stage, wearing his dirty baseball uniform and cleats. “Is it too late?” He didn’t seem to notice when I cringed at the metal cleats clicking on the stage.

I stared up at him, trying to decide if I was daydreaming that my best friend would come and be part of the play I’d written or if he was just a mirage. I smiled at his words and wondered what could have spurred him to come audition for a part. Was it because he wanted to help me after the confrontation with Scott at the diner? Or because he really wanted to take part in it?

Marcy grabbed my forearm and squeezed tightly. “Colt being part of this production? Can my day get any better?”

A ripple of irritation settled through me as I pictured her and Colt together. They would probably be cute as a couple, but things were going well in our friend relationship right now. And to see him willing to do something so out of his comfort zone for me made him that much more appealing.

As much as I didn’t want to have feelings for my best friend, those feelings took on a territorial vibe.

We sat back down, and I watched as Colt glanced out at the group, a slight panic crossing his expression. He was probably second-guessing himself, but I smiled, hoping he’d know that no matter what happened, I was excited he was there.

“Go ahead, Mr. Buttars,” Mrs. Sanderson said, smiling.

I leaned over to her and whispered, “How do you know him?” He’d never been part

of the drama club and most likely didn't have any classes with her as a teacher.

"I try to keep up with the baseball team here. My stepson is Coach Maddox," she said, grinning. That was something I didn't know.

I turned back to the stage, half hoping he'd do really well and the other half hoping he wouldn't screw up and be embarrassed.

Someone handed him a script, and he glanced down at it, his lips moving silently as he read through some of the lines.

When he finally looked up in my direction, he asked, "Can I just be a background character? I'm fine with not having a speaking part."

What should I say in that situation? My lack of experience was showing, and I dug around in my brain a bit, hoping some little thread of an explanation would come out.

"Go ahead and read some of it for us. Even though we need those secondary characters, it makes it easier to place you, knowing how you sound." Thank you, Mrs. Sanderson.

I opened my notebook to write that down. Mrs. Sanderson kept spilling wisdom of the theater, and if I was going to direct again after this, I'd need to remember all this stuff.

Colt swallowed hard and glanced back down at the script, reading the secondary character. "'What are you talking about?'" he read. "'Don't you know how much I've wanted this moment since forever?'" He paused, and Mrs. Sanderson nudged me.

I glanced down at the script, seeing the female secondary character's part that corresponded to his lines. The use of the different lines was refreshing after the same

ones for each audition. ““Wanted what in forever?”” I said.

““To tell you that I like you. That I’ve liked you since the first day you moved in and said hello to me across the fence.””

My chest constricted as I realized just how good Colt was at this. And how close to home all this was hitting. ““But we’re friends, Trey. We’ve always been friends.””

He glanced down at the next words and then gave a slight shake of his head as if that was all he wanted to do.

I skipped to the next line, which read, But I want more.

“Thank you for that, Mr. Buttars. We appreciate your trying out for the part.” She let her gaze turn to me. “Now is when you’ll tell them we’ll have parts posted by a certain time.”

I nodded and stood. “Thank you, everyone, for coming. We’ll be making the final assignments and posting them by tomorrow morning. We hope to get started right away on rehearsals because there’s only so much time before performance week. Get excited for our spring play!”

The students clapped, and everyone started cleaning up the stage as the bright lights turned off.

“How about we talk over the parts in my office?”

I nodded, scanning the stage and then the hall for Colt. There was so much to talk to him about, but it was like he’d just disappeared after we finished.

Once we were settled in, Mrs. Sanderson smiled at me. “Do you have someone you



think will be good for the female lead?”

I nodded, thinking back to Marcy’s audition. “I think Ellie is perfect for it. Marcy would be a great understudy. Do we assign her a secondary part? She was kind of a surprise.”

Marcy had been one of the background characters in *Beauty and the Beast* the fall, and she’d come out of her shell a bit for this audition.

“That’s a great idea. She did impress me with her audition.”

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I wrote down the names next to their parts in the play. Then my pen hovered next to the male lead, and I wondered if I should put Colt's name there. Sure, he didn't have the finesse Scott had demonstrated, but the play was about teenagers, and he'd been the most real.

"Who should take the male part?" Mrs. Sanderson asked.

Still second-guessing my instincts, I glanced up at her. "Who do you think?"

"I know it's unorthodox, but Colt did seem to be able to do it well. Your other option is Scott Daniels. He has the skills and experience to pull it off."

I thought back to Scott's audition. He'd done a great job as the Beast, but pretending to be a high school student seemed like it hadn't worked out quite as well for him. I chuckled at the irony in that thought.

"Do you think Colt could do it? I mean, he's never been on stage before." Was I more worried about him messing up? Or that he'd ruin the production?

I thought over the role of the lead, trying to picture both guys in the position. Scott had the acting prowess, but I kept going back to Colt, knowing he'd kind of been my inspiration for the role.

"Well, if I know anything about Colt, it's that he came here for a reason, despite having his second day of baseball tryouts. But I'm not one to judge on priorities." She sat back, tossing her gray braid behind her shoulder.

I'd almost forgotten about tryouts for baseball and knew that even though Colt came to auditions, he was probably still trying to make it to practices and games there.

"Should I cast him as the understudy for Kurt? Then he would be able to do both, right?" As much as I'd have loved for Colt to embody my mental picture of Kurt, I didn't want to take away his chance at taking state. Maybe I needed to have a conversation with him about why he'd decided to try out.

Mrs. Sanderson nodded. "That would be a good idea. And then if anything happens, he'll be ready to take over the part. We'll just have him work closely with Scott."

I gave her a small smile. "We'll see how that goes over. Colt isn't a big fan of Scott."

Shaking her head, Mrs. Sanderson said, "That's showbiz."

We both laughed at that.

I leaned over and wrote down Scott's name next to the male lead and then put Colt as the best friend/understudy.

I thought I'd feel better about all this once we'd cast the characters, but instead, my anxiety had kicked up a notch. Directing was the next step, and I didn't want to mess anything up.

10

Colt

I wasn't sure what I'd been thinking. Trying out for the school play in the middle of baseball tryouts? Maybe it was just the worry that Scott Daniels would try to demean Hazel again that got me like a crazy person. But I'd been kind of curious about stuff

like musicals and plays ever since I met Hazel. She always talked about it like it was the greatest feeling in the world, and I wanted to be able to experience it at least once.

It had been tricky, though, trying to get out of the second day of tryouts at just the right time. Usually, we couldn't leave for a bathroom break, but I'd told Coach Maddox that I needed to go and bad. But I wasn't feeling well since I was battling the decision and it had twisted my stomach to the point that it was uncomfortable.

Did anxiety count as not feeling well? Because everything inside me wanted to do this play, but I was extra anxious that my teammates and my brothers would find out. I guess they would know by the time the performance happened, but that was a few months away, and I'd find a way to explain it by then. And I'd have to earn a hundred bucks to pay the bet to Sterling. That didn't last long.

"What happened to you, man?" Dax asked, grabbing a drink from the water bottles in the dugout.

"Just something I ate, I think," I said, wiping my mouth.

"Well, at least you didn't miss conditioning," Nate said, slapping me on the back.

I nodded, internally groaning at that. But then again, it might be a good thing. I'd have a way to work out some of my fears while focusing on keeping my lunch down.

We endured fifteen minutes of relay sprints, and in a weird way, I felt better. But as soon as we stopped, I remembered what I'd just done, the nerves I'd felt on the stage and the way I'd looked at the next line in the script and knew I couldn't say it, not in front of Hazel at least.

Now I had to worry about which part I might get. I could be one of the teammates, or even one of the random characters in the background. But would I be able to make it

work with baseball going on at the same time? I'd already made a commitment to the team, and I wanted to be here, but I also wanted to try out something new, something that would challenge me even more.

“Good tryout today, guys,” Coach Maddox said. “Make sure to check back tomorrow morning. I'll have the list posted outside the locker room. For those of you who don't make it, just keep working at it, and try out again next year. For those of you who do make it, practice starts at three thirty tomorrow afternoon until about six. Come to practice focused, because this year we are taking down Groveton.”

Everyone cheered as we packed up our bags. We walked toward the school, but before I walked all the way, I realized the chances were high that some of the drama people were still in the building. I didn't need them commenting on anything in front of my friends, least of all my performance on stage.

“Where are you going?” Nate asked as I turned around in the direction of the parking lot.

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“I think I’m going to head home. I’ve got a lot going on. And I haven’t gone to see my grandpa in a bit. Homework will dominate the rest of my night too.”

He cringed. “Okay, man, but don't complain to me if your truck starts to stink from your BO.”

I laughed and hurried out to my truck, throwing my bat bag in the back and starting it up. When I pulled into my driveway, I saw a text message from Hazel and was curious what she had to say. She’d looked completely shocked when I walked onto the stage, and to be honest, it was a little crazy to be there myself. But that feeling was kind of fun. Everything had focused on me for those few seconds, and it almost reached the high I got from baseball.

Hey, where'd you go after the audition?

I had to run back to tryouts.

I was grateful Hazel was the one person I could be completely honest with—well, aside from telling her I liked her as more than a friend.

Gotcha.

Did you get everything figured out?

Several seconds ticked by, and I finally got out of the truck, ready to get some food after all the energy I’d used up physically and emotionally today.

I grabbed my stuff, realizing I'd left my backpack in the locker room. It would be easy to just leave it there and pick it up tomorrow, but I had homework, and if I was going to juggle a double life in baseball and theater, I needed to stay on top of school work.

After a few tries, my truck started back up, and I retraced the route I'd just driven from school. Avoiding the locker room, I went around to the main part of the school, hoping most of the guys had gone by now.

I opened the door and glanced in, finding that just about all the guys were still there. Nate would know something was up if I went in now.

Pacing in front of the door, I glanced around, trying to figure out what to do.

“What did you think you were doing? Trying out for the play?” Scott’s voice called to me in a low growl from down the hall. “Isn’t that against some code you athletes have?”

“Scared, Daniels?” I didn’t know why I suddenly had a shot of confidence, maybe because I wanted to knock this guy down a few pegs.

“Not at all. I’ll be the lead, and you’ll be one of the background characters. Then again, if I were directing, I’d send you to be part of the stage crew.”

I shrugged, keeping my balled fists to my side. “We’ll just have to see what happens tomorrow, won’t we?”

Scott walked closer, stopping only a foot or two away. “If you get a part, it will only be because you’re best friends with Hazel.”

Shaking my head, I grinned at him. “I didn’t do that bad, Scott. You sound a bit

nervous you might lose your starting spot.”

“It’s called the lead role,” he spat out.

“Same thing. Get used to this, Scott. I have a feeling we might be working closely for the next several weeks.” Okay, I wasn’t sure about that, but I knew I was getting under his skin and couldn’t resist.

He turned on his heel and stalked off. That was satisfying, but I also hoped I could avoid him as much as possible in the coming weeks.

11

Hazel

Did you get everything figured out?

I stared at Colt’s text for a while. I still felt unsettled about something, but as I looked down at the list of characters, I couldn’t pinpoint what was giving me anxiety.

It would be easy to have a conversation about this over text message, but I wanted to see his face, to know for sure that he was serious about the play. Not that Colt would do anything to sabotage me, but I wasn’t used to seeing him on the stage. And juggling both baseball and the play would be interesting.

I pictured Ellie and Scott as the leads and wondered if that was some of the irritation I was feeling. Was I bummed that my name wasn’t there as the star of the show? I’d been so used to being in the spotlight that directing was outside of my comfort zone. That would’ve been the opposite for so many people, and I had to remember I was developing skills in other areas. Other skills that could help me get into the college of my choice as I pursued theater for a degree.



I laid my head down on my crossed arms, relaxing against the kitchen table.

“Hazel,” my mom said, coming into the kitchen. “What’s wrong? How did auditions go?”

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I took in a deep breath, calling up all the energy I wasn't feeling at the moment to sit up. "Well, at least it wasn't interrupted by a power surge this time." I turned, blinking a few times when I saw her with a couple bags of takeout food. My mother prided herself on cooking just about every meal at home, and to see this was quite the surprise.

"That's definitely a bonus. How are you feeling about the cast?"

If I didn't know better, I would say my mother had the gift of telepathy, because she always knew what I was thinking before I said anything. Maybe I needed to be a better actress at home when I wanted more time to think things through.

I shook my head. "I don't know, Mom. It's like it's not quite right yet, but I don't know who to move and to where. They all look like they should be great for their parts right now."

She took a seat next to me, giving me a small smile. "How are you feeling about not having your name on the paper?"

Emotion welled up in my throat. "It's different. I'm trying to figure out if that's why I'm feeling off."

"It's definitely something new, but I think it's a great opportunity for you to grow."

I nodded, knowing I would grow in this new role, but at the moment, I wanted the familiar, not the unknown. "Colt auditioned."

My mom sat back with wide eyes. “Really? That’s a surprise. What part did you give him?”

“Well, it was actually really hard to decide. I couldn’t believe how good he was up there. But with baseball, I’m not sure he’d be able to commit to extra practices for the lead. So I put him as the understudy.”

She scrunched her eyebrows together. “But doesn’t the understudy have to be there as much as the lead?”

“Yeah, but I guess we could be more flexible with him. I mean, this is the first friend I’ve had who’s been interested in something like this. I guess I just really want him to continue.”

“I’m glad he wants to do it, Hazel, but you have to remember you can’t cater to one person when the rest of the group is working hard too.”

I nodded. “Yeah, I know. I’ll just have to jump that hurdle when we get to it.”

“Mrs. Sanderson will help you out, right?”

“Yeah, she’s been doing a great job teaching me but letting me take the lead. It’s just hard to manage that many people. Like, overwhelming hard.”

My mom wrapped her arms around me and pulled me into a hug at her side. “I know, dear. But those really hard times are what shape us. I hate to break it to you, but high school is bliss compared to adult hard. Just take things one day at a time, and you’ll pull this off. You’re amazing, and you have so many great talents. Use those and refine the things you need to work on.”

“Thanks, Mom,” I said, choking back tears. This was already harder than I thought it

would be, but it was nice to have a safety net of my family and Colt behind me.

With their support, I could do anything. At least, I hoped.

12

Colt

“Your grandfather is moving in,” my dad said as I walked into the house after coming back from school the second time. The adrenaline from talking to Scott had mostly subsided.

“Really? That’s cool. Where is he going to stay?”

“He’ll be in the back guesthouse.” He gave me a quick smile, and I stopped where I was, turning to face him.

With my eyebrows raised, I said, “You’re going to put your dad in a junk heap?”

My dad definitely did all he could to take care of his father, and the idea of my grandfather finishing up therapy and living with us wasn’t unusual, but having him stay where there were at least ten years of boxes and junk stored wasn’t something I ever thought he’d say.

He chuckled a bit. “Nope. That’s our weekend project. What time do you have practice?”

I shook my head. “No practice on Saturdays this year, which is kind of a relief.” Then again, I thought about what I’d be dealing with in the guesthouse and wanted to ask Coach if he’d reconsider.

“Good. Sterling said he can’t make it because of spring football practice, but you, Nash, and Wyatt, along with your mom and me, should be just fine.”

Breathing in deeply, I nodded. There was no use whining about it. I needed to get the rest of my homework done before then because a project of that size was bound to take all day.

## Page 20

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I trudged up to my room, exhausted from the long day of tryouts. At least I wouldn't have to think about cleaning out the shed until the weekend.

I jumped in the shower and then threw on some athletic shorts and a t-shirt before trying to get through the large reading assignment from English. It was like Mr. Kendall was trying to torture me with all the reading we had to do for the class. At least we hadn't had too many essays and papers throughout the year.

A knock sounded on my door, and I said, "Come in."

"That's brave of you, knowing who your brothers are," a feminine voice said.

I turned to see Hazel grinning at me and sat up on my bed. With a quick glance around the room, I darted off the bed, grabbing the clothes I'd worn to practice, along with the underwear sitting on the floor next to the hamper, and threw them into it. My mom would be proud if she saw that after all her complaining about her boys never cleaning up. All she had to do was let a cute girl into the house.

"Well, I try to think they'll be easier on me if I'm not a total jerk." I walked back over and sat on the edge of the bed. "What brings you here?"

All I could think about was her face as she'd stared up at me on stage earlier. She'd been shocked but happy while I performed the lines that should be foreign but that we'd worked on for several weeks together.

"Oh, ya know, just thought I'd swing by and see how my bestie was doing," she said, smiling but her eyes looking at me as if with x-ray vision. She took a seat next to me

on the bed, and I had to wipe my hands off on my shorts, knowing what question was coming.

“Doing okay. We ran a lot at tryouts today. I hit the ball pretty far too, finally. Coach Maddox was impressed.” Okay, I was babbling, and I couldn’t look her in the eyes. What was my deal? She was my best friend, the one I told just about everything to. Everything but the fact that I had a huge crush on her.

She nodded a bit, her eyes narrowing as if waiting for me to confess. “So, it was a surprise to see you on stage earlier. What made you decide to try out?”

A range of emotions went through me. Maybe it was the pressure of taking state that had gotten me all wound up, but as crazy as it had been, I was still glad I’d auditioned. It was like I’d tried some new food from another part of the world and actually liked it, even after a lot of people had told me I wouldn’t.

“I don’t know,” I said, stalling for a good enough answer. If I said it was because I liked her, she’d probably scramble out of the room and avoid me forever. “I guess I just thought it would be fun to see what it was like. I mean, we worked on the script for weeks. Sorry, you worked on it for weeks while I tried to support you as much as possible.”

She shook a hand in front of me. “No, no, you definitely deserve credit for helping me piece that thing together.”

“Well, if I was that bad of an actor, you don’t have to cast me in anything. I mean, it was on a whim, and I already have a lot going with school and baseball.”

Hazel’s hand rested on my bicep, just below where the sleeve of my t-shirt ended. Her fingers against my skin caused a ripple effect, and I had to consciously keep from jerking my body away, worried she’d let go.

“What are you talking about? You did a great job. I mean, I had no idea you could even act.”

I froze, trying to read her face for any signs of joking. “Funny, Hazel. You can tell me the truth.”

Her eyes went wide. “I am telling you the truth, spaz. You did a great job up there. I was kind of sad when you stopped.”

The words from the script ran through my head, and I wondered if she meant she’d wanted me to say it in real life.

I stood, picking up a sock I’d missed and throwing it into the hamper. “Did you get your cast all set, then?”

Why was I so nervous about what she was going to say next? There was no way I had the acting skills to be one of the main parts, and memorizing all that would be rough.

Hazel nodded. “I think so. You’re going to be Trey, Kurt’s best friend.”

I fell back a step, trying to comprehend that. “You’re making me the best friend of the main lead? Are you crazy?”

Hazel laughed. “Probably. But you did a great job up there.” Her gaze darted around the room, but her mouth opened and shut a few times, looking like she wanted to say something but couldn’t find the words for it. That was unlike Hazel. She always knew exactly what to say and when to say it. I secretly called it the talent of the diva.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Mrs. Sanderson and I discussed having you be the understudy for the lead role.” It



wasn't phrased as a question, and I tilted my head, waiting for her to finish. "Would you be up for that?"

"Who's the lead?"

"Scott Daniels."

I tried to keep my face neutral, but it was a lot harder knowing I'd have to be near him every day. "So I'd have to work alongside him on this? Are you trying to kill me, Hazel?" I added a dry laugh in there, wondering if she'd pick up on that.

"I know he can be a tool, but he's got experience, and I think you'll learn a lot from him. You might just have to look for those bits of wisdom, though."

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We both chuckled at that. With Scott's arrogance, I would probably have to dig way deep to learn anything.

I thought it over. Having a more prominent part would take up a lot more time than I'd be able to give. With baseball in full swing now, I needed to stay focused. Although being up on stage would be fun. That was why I followed the urge to audition in the first place, right?

I shook my head, glancing down at my hands. "I probably shouldn't have even shown up, Hazel. All I was thinking about was supporting you, and you were nervous after yesterday, not knowing who would be in which part. To be honest, I don't have a ton of time to be there. And I'm sure it would conflict with baseball."

I looked up at her and saw she was smiling. "Well, I talked to my mom about it earlier, and she said something that resonated with me. So I might've called to convince Mrs. Sanderson that it would be better to let the students go home and get things done before rehearsals. We wouldn't be starting until around six and going until eight on most nights, at least until we get to the final couple weeks."

Practice usually ended around five thirty but sometimes stretched until six. It would give me a chance to shower and avoid the guys so they wouldn't know what I was doing. That would make for some long nights, but it was only for a few weeks.

"You did that for me?"

Hazel glanced away, trying to hide a smile. "I guess I was really excited to have my best friend participating in the play. I tried to find a way to help it happen."

I grinned wide enough that my cheeks hurt. It wasn't a declaration of a crush, but it meant I'd get more time with her and would be able to try out something new.

"Well, then. I'm in, as long as we can keep this all a secret. I don't need my family or my team knowing, you know? There's enough pressure for winning state that I don't want them to think I'm not focused."

She pinched her pointer finger and thumb together and pulled them across her lips. "They won't hear it from me."

I did a little dance, trying to shake out all the strange excitement and nerves I was feeling.

Could I really pull off playing baseball and being in the spring play? I guess I'd find out soon enough. The best part was I'd get to see Hazel that much more and in her element. I just needed to up my game so I didn't embarrass her.

13

Hazel

Something was seriously wrong with me. I mean, touching Colt's bicep had set my fingers on fire, and I couldn't get the feeling of excitement to leave while I was with him.

Even on the walk home and as I got ready for bed, I couldn't process the fact that a guy would actually do something so far out of his comfort zone as to audition for the play. Seth never would've done something like that. It was just another bonus point for having such a great guy friend like Colt.

Although my growing attraction to him was a bit unnerving.

On the one hand, it would be fun to have him around more, practicing in the play and just being there. But would I like him more and then have everything get ruined?

I couldn't lose him. I'd had a rough time the last few weeks at my previous school the year before, and I didn't want to repeat that in any way.

And now we were here, in the auditorium, students milling about as they waited for us to start the first rehearsal.

Mrs. Sanderson gave me a slight nudge, and I finally cleared my throat, trying to channel the vibes she'd given in our last production. Warm, encouraging, patient.

"Welcome, everyone, we're so glad you made it. Thank you again for your auditions. We couldn't make this production work without you, and I'm grateful for the chance we have to work together over the next couple of months."

I had everyone grab a chair, and we sat in a large circle. Mrs. Sanderson had asked one of her teacher assistants to make copies of the script for everyone, and while we hadn't done this for *Beauty and the Beast*, I wanted to have everyone read through it in the hopes that we'd come up with some ideas I hadn't thought of as far as executing each scene.

"We're not going to pair off and go over our parts?" Scott asked, leaning back in his chair as he accepted the packet of papers from me.

I shook my head. "With the script being so new, I'd love to go over it together and get a sense of your ideas. You might think of something that could make this play shine better than I originally thought. This is going to be a team effort."

"I doubt Mrs. Sanderson would make us do that," Scott mumbled.

Words didn't come like I needed them to, and I was gaping at Scott.

“Actually, a first read-through is a great idea,” Mrs. Sanderson said from her chair in the corner. “Hazel is directing this, and while she'll have some guidance from me, she's the one to listen to.”

Footsteps raced across the stage, and Colt slipped into an empty chair just in time to accept a script from me. “You're late,” I whispered.

“I know, sorry. Coach Maddox made us do extra-long conditioning, and I needed a shower.”

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I inadvertently got a whiff of his body wash and had to mentally pull myself away, the fresh scent making me want to cuddle up to him.

I finished passing out the scripts and sat in my seat next to Mrs. Sanderson. After a quick sweep of my gaze over the students, I smiled and said, “I know a lot of us have been in theater for a while, or we performed in the one in the fall, but why don’t we do a little get-to-know-you game.”

“We only have eight weeks until the performance,” Ellie, the female lead, said. “Are you sure you want to waste time with games like this?”

My brain went blank again, and I could only blink at her.

“I think it’s a great idea,” Colt said. “I don’t know much about you all, so at least I’ll get a sense of how we are together.”

“Why don’t you just stay on the court?” Scott said, focusing on the script.

“It’s a field, Scott,” Colt said, leaning back in his chair. “And you might find that I have a few other talents than just on the baseball diamond.”

I swallowed hard and gave Colt a smile. How was he so at ease sitting here? I figured he’d be feeling out of his comfort zone a lot like I was. Man, directing was a lot harder than I thought it would be.

“Okay, start thinking of what you’ll say. I’ll start. I’m Hazel Miller, and I’ve lived in five different states.” Not something totally out of the ordinary, but it was the best I

could come up with in such a short amount of time.

“I’m Mrs. Sanderson, and I’ve been working on plays and musicals since I was in high school. I know, I’m old to you all, but something about opening a fresh script brings back all those memories of a new adventure we’re embarking on.”

We continued around the circle, and Scott and Ellie even participated, although theirs seemed a bit more show-offy than most, but I should’ve suspected that would happen.

Marcy said, “I love the smell after rain.” She looked over at Colt like she was waiting for his reaction. Was she trying to impress him?

I knew she’d been excited about him trying out, but I was surprised to find my theater friend had a crush on Colt. Maybe it was because she was the first to mention him, or that I’d never heard girls talking about him like they did some of his friends, but irritation flared, and I wanted to sit between them.

Colt gave her a short smile. “I know it’s a shock for all of you, but I’ve never been in a play or a musical before. I haven’t even participated in choir.”

“Great,” Scott said under his breath. “Are you expecting me to teach him everything there is to know about theater in eight weeks?”

There was a long pause, and again I couldn’t think of anything to say.

I glanced down at the script and then tapped it. “Let’s get going on the read-through of this. If anyone has thoughts while we read, please let me know. I’d like any notes to help me block out the scenes before we start rehearsing.”

I overheard Colt lean over and ask Marcy what blocking was. Maybe we were in over our head with all this.

A brutal hour and a half later, as we packed up to go at the end of the night, Mrs. Sanderson stopped me. “I’m so proud of you. It’s hard when you have your first directing position, but you did a great job of keeping the momentum going, even with Scott’s comments. Now we just need to keep them there to work in harmony.”

I nodded. “Yeah, what do I do with Scott, though? I mean, if he’s going to be like this for the entire time, I don’t know if I’ll survive it.”

She gave me a warm smile and pulled me in for a hug. “Oh, Hazel. This is another part of theater. The drama behind the scenes. I know you haven’t had much to deal with, having been the lead in most of your experience, but learning how to communicate is a skill you can use across every aspect of your life. Managing people needs communication more than you might think. You just need to stand up for yourself and know how much time you put into writing this thing. This script is one of the best I’ve ever had the privilege of working on at the school level, and I think it’s going to be a hit.”

I nodded. “Thank you, Mrs. Sanderson. I’ll work on that. Was there anything else you thought we needed?”

She tapped her chin for a few seconds and then shook her head. “I think we’re doing well for now. We’ll dive into the bigger details when we get to set design and costumes. Go home, relax, and come back fresh tomorrow.”

I walked out the door and saw Colt leaning against the wall, chatting for a minute with Marcy. A pang of jealousy hit me, and I had to shake it off. She and Colt were going to be working together a lot, and I hadn’t realized that until tonight. Marcy was practically dancing with excitement, and I had to contain my frustration. But as much as I wanted to, I couldn’t just coddle Colt throughout the entire production.

“Are you ready?” he asked, glancing over at me with a big grin.



I nodded and glanced at Marcy. “Great job today. Thanks for the part about emphasizing the dark moment.”

She nodded. “No problem. I’ll see you both tomorrow. Have a good night.” She batted her eyes at Colt a few times and then turned to leave.

Breathe in, breathe out. At least that helped a little with my irritation.

“How do you think it went?” Colt asked, taking the small stack of notebooks and papers from me as we walked down the hallway.

I shrugged. “Good, I guess. It’s weird being on this side of things. I know; I’ve said that a lot already, but it’s true. There is so much pressure, but it’s different from being the lead. I can’t really describe it better than that.”

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“I get it,” Colt said, nodding. “For me, it’s like there’s pressure, but it’s not to the point where all my insides are locking down.”

He walked me over to my car and opened the door for me. “You’ve got this, director diva. Just let me know how I can help.”

I smiled. “Yeah, I always do.”

He smiled back and shut the door, taking a few steps backward as I started up my car. I put it into drive and drove out of the parking lot, processing everything that had gone on today.

Why had I gotten so annoyed when I saw Marcy and Colt together? And what was I going to do with Scott’s attitude?

14

Colt

It felt like the week had sped by with all that was on my plate. I was juggling baseball, the play, and school. To be honest, I wasn’t doing too bad of a job at it. I mean, I still struggled with math and had to put extra time into it, but overall, I was feeling pretty good about things.

Memorizing the lines was kind of a struggle, but I figured I needed to just keep working on it to remember. It did help that I’d gone through a lot of the storyline while Hazel wrote it over the past several months.

Although I would've liked to do something with Hazel for Valentine's day the weekend before, she'd been babysitting for the couple next door for what seemed like forever. I'd gotten her a bag of chocolate-covered cinnamon bears, one of her favorite treats. She gave me a shirt that said, Theater: it's a stage I'm going through.

I'd laughed hard at it but had made sure to stick it in the bottom of my shirt drawer so my brothers didn't see it.

We'd made it to Friday, and I was rehearsing with Marcy, trying to get one of the lines I'd thought I'd already memorized.

"You're fine," Marcy said after the fifth time I flubbed the words. "It takes time to get it all down."

I chuckled and shook my head. "Fielding grounders is definitely easier than this."

Marcy laughed. "There are a lot of things easier than memorizing fifty lines. This is the most I've ever had in a play."

I watched as the insecurity passed over her expression, and I said, "Well, I think you're doing a pretty great job."

She blew out a breath. "Do you think?"

"Yeah, I mean, you remember a lot more than I do."

We laughed together, and she said, "Yeah, but is it bad I'm hoping nothing bad happens to Ellie? I mean, this is way cool and all, me being her understudy, but that's so much pressure. I would probably stand up there and be an icicle, frozen in place."

I nodded, understanding what she meant by that. "Well, I'm in the same boat. Scott

better not get sick or anything. I would hate to ruin Hazel's play." I turned, searching for her. It was kind of fun to watch her work. She was really encouraging, but I could see the underlying layer of panic ready to step in if anything happened. She'd assured me she was okay, but I needed to keep an eye on her.

"What position do you play in baseball?" Marcy asked, her voice soft.

"I, uh, I play third base." I watched her reaction, waiting to see if she understood what that meant. Hazel, for all I'd tried to teach her over the past several months, still looked at me like I was speaking in a foreign language when I talked to her about the results of a game and how I played.

Marcy smiled. "Gotcha. One of my younger brothers plays second base. Not for the high school of course. He's only in eighth grade."

"He should try out next year. We'll have a few spots to fill once the seniors graduate." That made my stomach clench, and a slight worry about why I was here instead of in my backyard working on my swing grabbed ahold of me. I wouldn't have the seniors to lean on, and the true weight of what this year meant in terms of how far we'd get was pressing down on me.

"He plans to. He pretty much eats, sleeps, and lives for baseball." She paused and glanced in the direction of Hazel. "Kind of like she does with acting."

I nodded. "We're good friends, and I want her to do well. She's worked so hard at this play, writing it and getting worried over directing it, that I'm hoping it goes well for her, you know?"

Marcy's eyes squinted like she was trying to decide if she believed me or not. "Yeah, she totally deserves to have that support."

“Has she said anything to you about her past boyfriend?” I asked, curious. The two of them had been friends before I’d started hanging out with Hazel, and I wondered if Marcy knew more about that situation than Hazel had confessed to me.

Marcy gave me a tight smile. “The only thing she said was that her boyfriend was unsupportive. And then he broke up with her because she spent too much time at her activities instead of being there to cheer him on all the time.”

With a quick nod, I smiled. “Thanks for that. She doesn’t talk much about him, and I was just curious.”

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“At the beginning of the year, she said it would be hard for her to be in a relationship again and that she might wait until college, but that was several months ago.”

My stomach sank. Great, I liked a girl who was emotionally unavailable for the next several years.

“How’s it going over here?” Hazel asked, walking up next to us.

I glanced down at the script again and said, “It’s, uh, good. I’m just trying to remember this line.”

I pointed to it on the paper, and she leaned over my shoulder, reading it. “Ah, yes. The part when Trey doesn’t think he has a chance. You’ve got this, Colt. You’ve been my cheerleader for the past six months. Just try to channel that, and you’ll be just fine.” She turned to Marcy. “How are the lines coming for you?”

“I think I’ll have them soon.” She grinned at Hazel, and I was surprised by the look of relief on Hazel’s face. She was really worried about this whole situation.

“Okay, keep up the good work. We’ll start blocking at the next rehearsal.” She drifted to the next group, and I might have let my eyes linger on her a bit longer.

Could I get her past the betrayal she had from her ex-boyfriend? It was worth a try.

I'd always questioned whether zombies were real, but I'd begun to feel like one ever since auditions ended. Sleeping only came in spurts, and when it did, nightmares of my actors not showing up for the performance or forgetting all their lines plagued me. Maybe it was because I was usually the one performing the lines, in control of the situation, that handing it over to the others made it more difficult.

I wasn't sure how I'd survived up until that point, and we'd only had two practices other than the audition days. I was at the point where I was working on this play in my head practically twenty-four-seven, and I knew I still had a long way to go. How did directors focus on anything else?

Well, I had watched as Colt and Marcy interacted, and that familiar pang of jealousy crept in again. But I couldn't worry about him right now. I needed to focus on how I would set up all the characters as they came and went on stage.

It was Saturday morning, and as much as I thought about blocking the characters, trying to figure out how each would end up in each scene, I needed a break.

"How's it going, Hazel?" my mom asked, chopping up an apple.

"It's going," I said, sitting at the table and putting my head down. "I think I made a mistake in taking on this play."

Another chop. "Why do you say that?"

"Because it's like I can't get it out of my mind. I'm constantly thinking about it, and it's hard to concentrate on my other classes."

"It will all work out. You've been like this for every play you've starred in. The beginning is always the hardest, but as you keep going, you end up getting into the groove of things. Just make sure you don't let go of all your homework. I don't want

to see you in summer school.”

I turned, my eyes wide at the idea of no summer break, and saw she was grinning.

“Thanks, Mom.” I stood and took a bite of one of the apples. “I’m going to go for a walk, I think. Try to keep things moving.”

“How’s Brynn doing?” my mom asked as I put my shoes on by the door.

I nodded. “Good. Really good, actually. I saw her in the halls yesterday, and she said she’s got a job starting this week. And Nate, as much as I was annoyed with him in the beginning, is a pretty good guy. He takes care of her, and she’s happier. I just wish her mom would give her a call or something.”

My mom gave me a sad smile. “Yeah, I can’t imagine not hearing from you or not wanting to know what was going on in your life. Your dad and I are going on a date later tonight. Will you be around to hang out with your sisters?”

I nodded. “Yeah, I can do that.”

My sisters were seven and eight, miracle babies my parents didn’t think they could have after complications with her first pregnancy. It wasn’t always easy to bond with them since we were so far apart, but we had a lot of fun moments together.

I waved goodbye and walked out the door, just letting my thoughts wander as I headed down the road. So many thoughts about the play, about Marcy and Colt, and about Scott flooded my mind.

Before I knew it, I was standing in front of Colt’s house.

“Hey, Hazel,” Mrs. Buttars said. “Colt is around back.”



I smiled at her. “Thank you.”

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I walked around the side of the house and saw boxes and the Buttars boys all doing something around them.

“What’s going on?” I asked, stopping next to a tower of boxes.

“Our grandpa is moving in,” Nash said, lifting a box and taking it underneath the small deck at the side of the house.

I smiled at that. Colt’s grandpa was a fun guy, and even though I’d only met him twice, it was fun to think he’d be there.

“Hey, Hazel,” Colt said, dropping a couple boxes he’d just pulled out from the garage-turned-guesthouse. He sported a shirt with the sleeves ripped off, and with the flex of his arms to move the boxes, I might have been distracted for several seconds.

“Hey. Your grandpa is moving in, huh? That will be fun.” Why was I struggling to talk?

We’d joked about the guesthouse for a while, that the people who’d owned it before loved to live in the past because the few times I’d peeked in through the window, I saw brown flowered wallpaper. Our homes had only been built about twenty years ago, which didn’t fit the time period of the interior décor of the guesthouse.

Colt smiled and wiped at his brow with the hem of his t-shirt, drawing my gaze to his stomach. I shouldn’t have been looking there, but, wow, I wasn’t used to seeing this side of him.

“Yeah, it will be an adventure.” He walked over and gulped from a sports drink.

“Is he going to live here permanently?” It was kind of prying, but I was curious and trying to keep my brain from drifting back to how hot Colt was looking right now.

He shrugged. “I’m not sure right now. He’s got a bunch of therapy for his hip, and my mom thinks it’s best that he be here instead of his own house by himself. She’s got the training to know what to do, and we’ve got this usable place.” He laughed as he pointed to the guesthouse.

“Is there a kitchen in it?” I asked, wandering over to the window. There had always been so much stuff in there that it was amazing to see it without all the boxes blocking the way. There were still dozens of boxes and odds and ends, but it was easier to see now.

“I think it’s just a kitchenette. But we’ll make all his food anyway. He can’t really get up and down yet.”

I turned back to him. “What can I help with?”

Colt looked like he didn’t believe me. I was in jean shorts and a nicer blouse, but it wasn’t like I couldn’t help move some things, or even sweep and clean. “Are you sure you want to help? I mean, this is ten years of my family’s junk.”

“It’ll give me something to think about other than the play.” I tried to keep the nerves out of my voice.

Colt walked over and put his arm around my shoulders, tucking me to his side. When I turned, my breath hitched as he looked me straight in the eyes. The whole thing sent a shiver along my spine, and I watched as a smile formed.

“Are you cold?” he asked.

I laughed and shook my head. How could I explain that away?

“Well, what’s bugging you? Talk to me.”

That was the great thing about Colt. He was always ready and willing to listen to anything I had to say. I hadn’t always had friends who were up for that.

I blew out a breath. “Just trying to figure out all the ins and outs of directing. It’s a lot harder than I thought. If I would’ve known sooner, I wouldn’t have mentally criticized the directors in my past.”

We walked into the small room, and I saw a broom in the corner. I picked it up and went to the far corner, sweeping at the thick layer of dust that had formed in between the boxes. There were still distinct lines where some of the stacks had been, as well as several cobwebs. I just had to breathe to make sure I didn’t freak out. Spiders and I didn’t go well together.

“I think that’s true for just about anything. We think we know a lot until we’re thrown into the reverse role.” He bent over and picked up a few more boxes. “Just know, I may not have a lot of experience, but I think you’re doing a pretty great job at all of it.”

He walked out of the room, and I bit my upper lip, doing my best to think of something other than the amazing guy I called best friend.

I just had to keep my emotions in check and use my acting skills so he wouldn’t know I was starting to like him. I didn’t need a repeat of Seth, even with the differences in character.

## Colt

It was fun having Hazel over to help with the cleanup. Wyatt and Nash, even though they talked about her like she was a weirdo when she wasn't around because of her love of drama and acting, were really nice to her once she was there. That was one thing I was grateful for, because I didn't want her to stop coming around.

"It's looking good in here, kids," my dad said, returning from the plumbing store. He'd found a leak in the faucet when he'd turned on the water and had gone to get the supplies to fix it. Of course, that was over two hours ago, and he'd come back with only a small bag.

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I just shook my head and laughed inside, knowing he was probably doing everything he could to make sure us kids had the time to work on the shed, allowing him to resume the supervisor role once he got back.

We'd pulled out all the boxes and even the random pair of skis we'd been given a few years ago and never used, as well as all the random car parts my father had collected. He was determined to finish an old truck we had sitting in our driveway, but with all the overtime he'd had to work, it seemed like we'd never get it finished.

My mom came out and opened one of the boxes. "Okay, I guess it's time we start dejunking." She scrunched up her face like she'd just opened Sterling's football bag and sighed.

I laughed, and so did Hazel right next to me. We'd survived cleaning up for the most part, but the place still needed a deep clean inside. And my mom was right that we needed to get rid of some things, as we didn't have any room in the basement to store anything else.

Mom pulled out several old toys and turned to us with tears in her eyes. "I feel like you were just playing with these toys. You all need to stop growing up."

"Mom, I think we can get rid of those," Wyatt said, lounging in one of the chairs with a bottle of water. As much as my brothers had struggled with certain things, we'd all learned how to work hard, and I was grateful for that. It would've taken a lot longer to get the junk out of the guesthouse without their help.

Hazel looked tired, but every time I glanced at her, she was smiling. "What are you

thinking about?" I asked, walking over and standing next to her.

"Just that moving here was one of the best things to happen to me."

I chuckled. "Yeah, this is just what you want to be doing on a Saturday. Cleaning out the Buttars's junk."

She shrugged, leaning over and nudging me with her elbow. "That's not all bad. My mom has everything so organized that I don't have anything to distract me. This was just what I needed."

"Well, I'm glad you came over. Do you want to go for a walk?" Where was I coming up with this? Most of me just wanted to have a private conversation away from the prying ears of my brothers.

"Sure."

We took our water bottles and strolled down the street, passing her house and continuing to walk in silence. I needed to tell her I liked her at some point, but was now the right time? Or would there ever be a right time?

She seemed preoccupied with her thoughts, and I wondered if I should just wait to confess everything to her until the play was over.

"Are you all right?" I asked, finally.

She looked over at me like she'd almost forgotten I was there.

"Yeah. Just trying to go over all the places people have to be in each scene. It's kind of like a game of chess, but I only know the rules for checkers."

I laughed at the look of confusion on her face. “You’re doing well. I’m sure Mrs. Sanderson would be willing to help you with anything you need. You just need to ask.”

“You’re right. I’m the worst at asking for help, except from you,” she said, grinning at me. “I guess I just worry that someone will drop the ball if I don’t take control of all the things.”

“I don’t know a lot about the play, but I know everyone is willing to make this great. So make sure to be open. You’re going to be awesome.”

Hazel hooked her arm through mine and leaned her head on my shoulder, pulling us to a slower pace as we walked. With the glow of the sun behind a few of the trees, everything seemed brighter. The perfect evening.

We slowed down even more until we stopped, and I couldn’t pull my eyes away from her head resting on my shoulder.

A surge of anxiety and a push to tell her how I felt caused me to turn fully toward her. “Hazel, I—”

Her phone rang in her pocket, and she pulled it out, noticing the time. “Oh! I have to watch the girls. Thank you so much for giving me a distraction today.”

I tried not to frown at the lost opportunity to tell her how I felt and nodded. “What are best friends for?”

Way to cement my place in the friend zone.



Colt

Sunday was spent making sure I'd caught up on homework completely. Yeah, it might sound like a nerdy move, but I'd even started a few assignments from the syllabus early in the hopes that I could save myself some time later.

The week was packed with practices and our first game, and as each event came and went, it was a huge relief to check off the list. I had to laugh at the thought of the pressure I'd felt from the first day of tryouts. That was nothing compared to the amount of time it took to think everything through and make sure I didn't spill any hints about me being in the play to the wrong people.

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I just needed to keep things under wraps in all areas of my life. I couldn't believe how close I'd come to telling Hazel I liked her. Looking back, it was like waiting for a bomb to explode. Maybe I just needed to get over her, to remember we were just friends and that we had a good thing going right now. Why mess with it?

The team was warming up for our first game that Wednesday, an away game, and I was ready for whatever came toward me at third base. Although I'd been slightly distracted the past week, this was the start of the awesomeness that would lead us to a championship. I had to be on my game because it was going to take every person possible to make it.

I got a couple hits my way and made the plays, feeling pretty good about it all. But my batting was off. I hit a little grounder to the first baseman, who tagged his bag and then tried to get Dax out running to third. The second time up, I hit a high pop fly to the catcher, one of the worst feelings ever.

The person who surprised me was Adam Taylor. The kid hustled from the moment he stepped onto the field until he was off it. Coach Maddox had put him in the batting order to hit for Ben, who'd started on the mound this game.

Watching him hit was like watching an instructional video about what to do. He was selective with his pitches, and when the right one came along, he was able to position it into the gaps in the outfield, allowing us to score several runs.

"The kid's a machine," Jake said, putting his helmet away after scoring on Adam's drive to left-center.

I nodded, trying not to get down about my own skills. There were several moments of irritation, but I had to keep remembering we were in this for the long haul, and getting petty about that kind of stuff in the first few games would only make it difficult to go the distance.

We made it to the sixth inning, and I was up to bat once again. The pitcher took his stance, and I made a quick run-through of everything I'd learned at the camp and over the past couple of weeks.

The ball came in, and I saw it curving. Instead of swinging, I let it go by.

“Strike!” the umpire called.

The next pitch came in, slower than the pitch before, and I swung way harder than I should've, spinning on my heel and feeling like an idiot as the ball snapped into the catcher's glove.

Stepping out of the box, I glanced out at the grass in the outfield. I needed something to calm me down at this point. I placed one foot in the box and then set the back one, swinging the bat low a few times as I waited for the pitcher to get set.

This time, the ball came straight down the middle, and all I had to do was connect. The ball hit the bat, flying out in between left and center field.

Taking off, I pushed hard, rounding first and heading into second. Right as I went to touch second base, my foot caught the edge of the bag, rolling my ankle over. A shot of pain drifted up from my foot to my calf, and I bit my bottom lip, hoping to keep the pain inside. I made sure my good foot was still on the bag and held the other in my hands.

Once the ball was called dead, I heard Coach Maddox making his way out there.

“What happened, Buttars?” He knelt down, pulling back one of my hands.

“I just hit the bag wrong and twisted my ankle.” I knew he was trying to be chill about it, but a moment of panic crossed his face.

“Can you stand?” he asked. He held out his hand and pulled me up. I tried to put a little weight on the foot, but I knew it was going to be difficult to play on for the rest of the game.

Without saying anything, he turned to the field umpire. “We’re going to need to sub. Number fourteen for six.” He called to the bench, and Kyle Sharp, one of the fast freshmen grabbed a helmet and headed out to us.

Coach wrapped his arm around me, allowing me to lean on him for help. “You’ll be out the rest of the game, but at least we’re up by a lot and only have an inning and a half left.”

I nodded, trying to keep my face neutral even though I had to grimace every few steps.

“You didn’t hear it pop at all, right?” he asked as we got to the dugout. He let me sit on the bench as he squatted down to check out my ankle.

“No. It just twisted and then pain hit.”

A trainer from the other team showed up, feeling the area and testing things with a few twists. “It’s a sprain. Let me get you a bag of ice and keep it elevated.”

I nodded, wishing I could somehow go back a couple of minutes and do things differently. If only I’d concentrated on the bag in front of me instead of trying to see if I could go farther.

The next batter struck out, and I watched Coach Maddox make adjustments to the field as my teammates grabbed their gloves and headed out to play defense. He did some switching, but Adam Taylor ended up at third base. Fear hit me that I might have just lost my spot.

Should I secretly wish him to struggle and miss a ball to make myself feel better?

I shook my head. I needed to be grateful we had another option, at least for the short time I wouldn't be able to play.

The first pitch was a rocket to Adam, and he fielded it like it was a cloud, firing it over to John Miller, Brynn's brother, who'd had to come in from the outfield in the whole shift.

With his height, John was able to field the throw a few feet off from the base and come back. At least the play wasn't perfect.

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Once the game was over and we'd shaken hands with the other team, I struggled to get my cleat off. The ice had helped to keep the swelling down, and I'd just have to be careful walking on it.

"Buttars," Coach Maddox said after the team discussion, "make sure you see the trainer tomorrow morning. I need you to get that ankle taken care of so you're back in the game as soon as possible."

I nodded, waiting until he walked back to the bus before I started hobbling along.

"How's it feeling?" Ben asked, grabbing my bag from me and carrying it on his free arm.

"There's just a lot of pain." It was all I could say at that point. I was focusing on not aggravating it as we walked back to the bus.

"Hopefully all you need is some ice and tape," Dax said, walking up on the other side. He leaned over a bit, and I put my hand on his shoulder, using him as my tall crutch to make it to the bus.

Logan walked in front, taking backward steps. "That looked like it hurt, man. And you did it all without screaming. I'm no good with pain."

We all laughed at that. "What do you mean?" Jake said, walking on the other side of Ben. "You live on a farm."

"What does that have to do with my inability to handle pain?"

At this point, I was struggling to walk because I was laughing so much. When I finally settled down, I looked up at him. “You have animals and equipment that can cause pain daily.”

Logan shrugged. “True, but I stay away from those. The worst part about living on a ranch is the smell and the mud. Other than that, I’m good.”

We finally made it back to the bus, and I had a feeling of gratitude fill me. These were some of the best friends a guy could ask for, and I was happy to have them on my side, even with a dumb injury like this. At least their fun banter caused me to forget about the pain for a bit.

By the time I got settled on the bus, my ankle was swollen and hurt a bit more than before. Coach Davidson dug around in his bag and found some ibuprofen, which I took, hoping it would negate some of the swelling and make it so I could at least walk.

Ben checked a few movements and agreed that it was only a sprain and shouldn’t be anything worse than that. “Stay off it for a few days. You still might want to go get it checked out, though. I mean, I may work in a physical therapy clinic, but I’m still not licensed.” He laughed at that, and I slugged him in the shoulder.

“Well, I like your diagnosis, so I might just go with it.”

I hobbled in the direction of the truck. How I was going to drive it with my right foot injured was going to be an adventure.

“Do you think you’ll be okay by tomorrow, Butters?” Nate asked. It was rare for him to call me by my last name, and I was curious why he’d done so all of a sudden.

“I hope so. We’ll have to see.”

“Yeah, I hope you can. I don’t want anyone to take your place. I always know I have a wall over at third base,” Ben said.

I nodded, trying not to get emotional. It was the first time I’d ever really gotten compliments from these guys. I’d always thought I was too short or not strong enough to do the things I was starting to do, and it felt good. Not my ankle, of course.

“Do you want me to drive you home?” Nate asked, gesturing to his Hummer. “We can always get your truck tomorrow.”

I shook my head, not wanting them to dote on me. “I’ll be fine, guys. I’m going to go home and put my leg up or whatever and sleep it off. If all goes well, I’ll be back at it tomorrow.”

It took a moment for them to agree, and they said goodbye, walking in the directions of their vehicles.

I got into my truck and slumped against the seat. All that running around was exhausting, but at least I didn’t have play practice tonight. That was one of the good things about this, that even though I was busy with so many things, the long nights weren’t every night like I thought they’d be. Although Marcy and Hazel had warned me that things would start to pick up next week and continue to the night of the production.

A knock on my window caused me to jump, and I saw Hazel smiling at me. She opened the passenger side door and slid in. “What are you up to in here?”

I rested my head back against the glass behind me. “I’m trying to remember that life isn’t always this crazy.”

“Did you just get back from the game?”



I nodded, turning slightly so I could see her expression. “Yeah, the guys all just left. I was trying to figure out how to drive with my left foot.” At least I didn’t drive a stick shift, or that’s what my dad would probably say once I got home.

“What happened to you? Are you okay?” Hazel leaned over the seat and reached down to look at my ankle. It was covered by a bag of water since all the ice had melted.

Waving it off, I said, “I’m fine. I mean, I’ve got a bit of pain still, but the ibuprofen is working. I should be back to normal tomorrow.” That was the hope.

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Without saying anything, she got back out of the truck, and I was more confused about where she would go without saying goodbye.

She opened the driver's side door and said, "Scoot over."

"What do you mean?"

She rolled her eyes. "Scoot over. I'll drive you home."

"What about your car?" I asked, still not budging.

"It'll be fine here. I've got it all locked up, and no one is going to steal that thing. Not when there are BMWs and Teslas all over the parking lot."

I laughed as she used both hands to push me, making me fall over headfirst onto the seat. I finally scooted over, having a hard time getting my foot around the hump in the middle.

"What are you doing here so late?" I asked her as she put the truck into reverse.

The clock on the dash said 7 pm, and I knew she wasn't having play practice. At least, I hoped I hadn't missed it. Now that I'd committed to both things, I wanted to see them through, but it was getting tricky to juggle it all.

She gave me a sheepish grin. "So, I've been walking all over the stage, trying to get the blocking for the third and fourth scenes down. I hate wasting everyone's time when I'm trying to do it during rehearsals, so I figured I'd spend some time doing it

tonight. Hopefully, it will make for a more productive practice tomorrow and we can go over the scene more than once in a night.”

After taking a right onto the road outside the school, she glanced over at me. “I’m guessing the game didn’t go so well, huh?”

I thought about that for a moment. Even in reflection, I went through so many emotions as I thought about my hit and then getting injured. And then seeing Adam in my spot sent my irritation spiking.

With a quick shrug, I said, “No, it wasn’t bad. We actually killed them. But I got a little more aggressive than usual, mostly because I got a decent hit. I made it to second base, where I rolled my ankle. Ben said nothing is torn, but I need to rest tonight and probably tomorrow.”

I didn’t want to let anyone down, least of all Hazel.

“That’s okay. We’ll just put a chair out for you to sit in while we rehearse. I mean, if that’s what you want to do.” She bit her bottom lip, looking nervous about something.

“What do you mean? I want to be in the play.” I didn’t want to be angry at her for the question, but it made me wonder if she didn’t want me there at all.

She glanced over at me for a few seconds and then asked, “You didn’t just join because of me? Because I’ve been paranoid about everything?”

“No, well, maybe it started out that way, but I really like this. It’s something different, and I don’t have people breathing down my neck about it. There’s so much pressure with baseball this year, and I just needed something that wasn’t being forced on me, you know?”

She sat back, a curious expression beaming back at me. “But you love baseball. That’s been your life for, like, ever.”

I thought about her words and realized they were true. “Yes, because that was what I knew. But stepping out of my comfort zone has been a lot of fun. I mean, I’m still not the best one on the stage, but I like the challenge.”

“Don’t you find baseball a challenge anymore?” She adjusted her hands on the wheel and turned to look at me for a split second before glancing back out at the road.

I chuckled. “Wow, you’re hitting all the deep questions today.”

She laughed too. “Sorry, it’s just interesting to hear you talk about this, like baseball is just another part of you instead of your whole life.”

Moments of silence filled the cab as we continued to drive down the road, getting closer to our neighborhood.

“Is that a bad thing?” I said just above a whisper.

Her slight hesitation caused me to panic. “No, I don’t think so. It’s just different. I guess you might feel the same if I suddenly decided to join the softball team.” She stopped a second and then said, “Full disclosure, that’s not happening. You saw me at your family’s Turkey Bowl game. I’d be lucky not to break my nose or something every time.”

We both laughed about that, long and hard. When I settled down, I said, “I just hope you know I’m here for you, no matter what changes happen.”

She gave me a thin-lipped smile and nodded. “Right back atcha. Now let’s get you inside and fix your ankle.”

The smile and the care she took while getting me out of the truck only made me want to kiss her. I just hoped that one day soon she'd feel the same about me.

Hazel

Seeing Colt injured was a strange experience for me. He'd been my rock, my person to lean on and my safe place to land for the past several months, and I realized how imbalanced that was. I hadn't done much to contribute to his goals and talents, and it was a strange feeling as I thought about my situation with Seth. I'd gone to everything, helped with everything, and then he'd dumped me. Is that why Colt seemed to be getting closer to Marcy? Because I wasn't helping or supporting him in any way?

I was going to have to change that.

We got him into the house and onto the family room couch.

"Where does your mom keep the baggies? Like for food and stuff?" I called from the kitchen. I was so used to my mother's over-the-top organization, with labels and everything, that I wasn't sure where to look in someone else's house.

"Try the pantry. I think she has one of those basket things hanging on the door."

Bingo. It was a surprise that he even knew that much. My father would've been clueless even with the labels.

I opened the freezer and took out a blue ice cube tray, twisting the sides to loosen them. I dumped them into the bag and zipped it up, carrying it out to him.

"What else can I get you?" I asked.

“I think I’m good. You can hang out and watch a show or something if you want.” It was late on a school night, but something to relax my brain from the constant worry about the play would definitely help.

I nodded, sitting next to him. He smelled like a boy, sweat and dirt, but I wasn’t overly turned off by it. In fact, I was surprised to get a whiff of the fresh deodorant he wore. “How does Ben know if your ankle is sprained or not?”

Colt turned to look at me, our faces only a few inches apart. “Um, he, uh, well, he works in a physical therapy office. His girlfriend, Serena, sustained a sprain worse than mine, and that’s kind of how they started hanging out together.”

I turned to the TV, feeling self-conscious so close to him. I mean, I was usually so on top of my clothes and my hair, making sure I looked put together all the time. But this afternoon, I’d thrown on a pair of more fashionable sweat pants and put my hair into a ponytail before heading back to the school to block out the scenes, preferring some comfort since I was still trying to figure out all the things about this play.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen you wear your hair up like that.” Colt’s voice caused me to turn, a slight panic pressing down on my chest.

“Is that a bad thing?” I said, giving a half-smile as I realized I sounded like him in the truck.

He shook his head. “No, I think it looks good on you. You always look good.”

I might have beamed a bit too much at that and had to turn away so he wouldn’t notice how embarrassed I was. I mean, the compliment was amazing, but my growing crush for my best friend was now to the unnerving part. Successful relationships were few and far between, and if things didn’t work out, I’d lose him forever. I wouldn’t survive the rest of the year without him.

His phone buzzed on the coffee table, and I leaned forward and picked it up for him, reading Marcy Johnson as the sender of the text.

I handed it to him, my emotions going from panicked to frustrated in seconds. It wasn't like they'd spent that much time together to be at the level of casual texting one another, but again, I had to remind myself he was free to date whomever he wanted.

I leaned back, trying to glance at the text from the corner of my eye. Sure, I was trying to push away these feelings of jealousy, but my friend from drama was texting my best friend and new crush, which threw me for a loop.

Hey! I heard about your injury from one of the guys. Are you okay?

I tried to breathe shallowly so he wouldn't know I was trying to read their conversation. We'd never kept secrets from each other, well, except for me not talking about Seth in any capacity, but I wasn't sure with all the new stuff going on in our friend relationship if that would change our dynamic.

I'm good. Just home resting. Hazel is taking care of me.

When he put his phone down, I pretended to be watching whatever sports competition show about ninjas he'd turned on.

"Where's your family?" I asked, trying to get my mind into balance. He was talking to Marcy, but he'd mentioned I was with him. Was that a good thing or a bad thing? It had been a while since I'd been in the dating realm, worried about what a guy was thinking or overanalyzing everything he said or did, and while I wasn't quite to the point of taking the plunge again, I was probably giving off the jealous vibe.

"I think they had something tonight. Oh, Wyatt had a game up in Groveton, and Nash



had a soccer game down south. They had to divide and conquer, so they weren't at my game."

I turned and gave him a knowing look. "Did you tell your mom you got hurt? Or your dad?"

His eyes opened wide, and he said, "Um, nope. I should probably do that."

Another text came in before he was able to call his parents, and I saw Marcy's name again.

Awesome. Let me know if I can do anything for you and see you at practice tomorrow night.

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She was good. Leaving breadcrumbs to show she was looking out for him and then dismissing the conversation for tomorrow. I'd have to keep watching out for her. Not that I wanted to hurt her or anything. She was one of the sweetest people I knew from drama, where, back at my high school in Buffalo, things could be cutthroat to get the right position or part in the production.

I had so much on my plate that I didn't have time to start worrying about Colt dating someone. I just hoped that no matter who he liked, we'd still have moments like this together.

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Colt

Ben's assessment of my ankle was correct, and I was back at practice after an extra day of rest. The small training room at our school wasn't super decked out with all the fancy gadgets, but the trainer had taped my ankle before practice, allowing me to move with freedom, and I didn't worry about reinjuring it.

It had been nice to have Hazel around for that first night, but she seemed stiff, like something was off, and I couldn't pinpoint what it was. With Marcy texting me over and over, I was just ready for bed. I'd turned the phone to silent at one point, not wanting to hear the buzz with every conversation, even when she kept "forgetting she had to ask" about one thing or another. I just hoped Hazel hadn't seen the texts. They were all innocent, but it would only hurt my future chances with her.

My parents got home around nine that evening, and after telling him what happened,

my dad accidentally slapped my foot, sending sharp jabs of pain up into my calf.

But now I was back at practice, feeling the rising panic that it was going to go over and I'd be late to play rehearsal.

"Let's put you into groups and get into a rotation. We're going to imitate something the softball team does; just don't tell anyone we're doing it," Coach Maddox said, a slight smile on his face. He pointed right at Jake, who raised his hands in the air.

"No problem, Coach. Penny doesn't need to know." The rest of us chuckled at the look of feigned panic on his face.

"As much as baseball is a great sport, I think having you all work instead of spending the entire practice shagging balls might help us get that edge when it comes to the end of the season. We'll still have a ball shagging station, but then we'll have you working on other aspects of hitting while the group up for the bullpen is going. Might as well go for quantity if possible."

After we all got paired up, I was in the group with Logan, John Miller, and Adam Taylor. I was right when I'd figured I couldn't get away from the guy.

We were sent out to the section to hit off the tee. Logan and John paired up on the first tee pretty quickly, leaving me with Adam.

I put a ball on the tee, allowing him to go first. It was kind of awkward for the first few minutes, as Logan and John were chatting in between hits.

I wracked my brain for some kind of topic I could ask Adam about. But I felt like we'd covered a lot the first time we'd spoken, and the competitive side of me wanted to keep him at arm's length, worried he'd somehow swoop in and take my spot.

“Have you lived here for a long time?” Adam finally asked. He swung, his form nearly perfect, and the ball was a line drive off the tee and into the fence at the other end.

“Um, yeah,” I said, surprised he was making conversation. “I grew up on the other side of town. We moved to the house I’m in now about ten years ago. So I guess I was only at the other house until I was seven.”

“That would be nice. I’ve moved twelve times in my life.”

My mouth dropped open. “Twelve times? How is that even possible? Do you just keep your stuff packed?”

He shook his head and laughed. “No, but my mother has threatened to a few times. My dad does a lot of consulting work, and he’s changed agencies a few times.”

That blew my mind. Maybe it was because I was so used to living in the same place, but that was a lot of moving, and a lot of getting to know people. From his first question to kind of break the ice, he must be good at that part.

“So do you have to move again? How does that all work?”

He shook his head. “My mom made him promise I could stay until I graduated at least.”

“What about siblings?”

He shook his head. “I don’t have any. When I was born, I guess it was pretty complicated and my mother almost died. So they decided to be happy with just me.”

I laughed. “I have three brothers, and to me the sound of being the only child is like

the crack of a bat hitting a homer out of the park.”

Adam nodded. “Yeah, it has its perks. But there are a lot of lonely days when it would’ve been nice to have someone else around. Especially every time we had to move. Then I would’ve had at least one or two friends with me all the time.”

I chewed on that for the last two balls and then picked up the bat, getting ready. How would that have been? Yeah, my brothers were good at constantly fighting, but at least we had some moments where we all got along.

I took a few cuts, loosening my arms, and stepped up to the plate. It felt good to swing the bat again, even though it had only been two days. Focusing on the ball, I drove the white cowhide down to the end of the batting cage.

“You’ve got a great swing,” Adam said, adding the ball to the tee.

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Straightening up a bit, I said, “Thanks.”

“Do you mind if I give you a suggestion?” And just like that, the little ego I’d puffed up popped like a balloon.

“Sure, why not?” I spread my arms out at my sides and handed him the bat.

“Go ahead and get into your stance.” I did as he asked, and he stepped closer. “I noticed in the game the other day that you go a little early for the ball and end up spreading out your legs too far. Those are the ones where you don’t have as much power. The one you drove into the outfield, you stayed compact with your legs and used everything to push the ball forward.”

I thought about it, recalling the experience with the double before I twisted my ankle. Focusing on that, I hit the ball off the tee. The power drove from my legs, and not just from launching it with my arms.

“Wow, how’d you learn that?”

“Like I said, I’m an only child, and there are only so many camps and YouTube videos a kid can watch before he internalizes everything.”

I swung again, focusing on using my legs, and had the same results. “That’s crazy, man. I just went to a camp before tryouts, and that wasn’t anything they were telling me.”

Adam nodded. “Yeah, baby steps. Sometimes it’s nice to fix one thing and then move

on to the next.”

“So what do you think so far?” I said, getting in my stance for the last ball.

“About the team? There are some good vibes here. A lot of good chemistry. Not like my last high school but the one before it, the team was chill and decent.”

“What do you want to do after high school? Are you hoping to play college ball?” The question reminded me of Hazel’s short interrogation, and I wondered what he’d say.

Adam nodded. “Yeah, I’d love it. I’d love to get to the majors, even.”

I nodded, trying to picture myself playing professional baseball, but nothing came up. Even thinking about playing in college wasn’t a clear picture. “That’s a sweet goal. I’m just hoping to get through high school ball and see what happens.”

Adam grinned. “I love the game and analyzing everything about it. There is so much cool stuff we don’t even realize. Even if I didn’t make it as a player, I’d love to be a scout. That would be my dream job. It would be hard to sit behind a desk all day.”

We walked down to the end of the batting cage and picked up the balls, throwing them into the bucket and carrying it back to the tee. A whistle blew, meaning we were supposed to switch groups out to the outfield.

We were spread out farther, unable to talk like before, but I thought about Adam’s dream. I didn’t have one that big and hadn’t even thought that far out yet. I guess part of my thought process was that my dad wanted me to get good grades so I could do something more than a factory worker. But I always imagined I’d figure it out by the time I graduated.

How hard would it be to get seen if I was being moved around the country all the time? After blowing my chance at wowing the college coaches at the camp, I'd kind of shelved the idea of worrying about getting a scholarship. Taking a state championship could help Adam and me get seen, giving me a second chance. We just had to make it there first.

20

Hazel

The play was coming along easier than I originally thought. It helped that Mrs. Sanderson kept bestowing her many years of wisdom on me, and I was forever grateful. Tonight was a practice for the leads and secondary characters, and I'd hoped to get everything blocked and ready before they showed up.

I heard voices coming down the hall and looked up to see Ellie and Marcy walking through the door.

"Hey, Hazel," Marcy said, waving the hand holding her script. It was bent in several places, and I could see a pink highlighter on a few pages.

"Hey, girls. I'm just trying to get this figured out before everyone arrives."

Ellie slumped down on the edge of the stage. "It shouldn't be that hard, right? I mean, you wrote the script. You should know where you want all the characters." She turned and looked up to where I was standing just a foot or so away, mumbling to myself about who would be there and when.

I gritted my teeth, trying to figure out what to do in that instance. A year ago, no, even six months ago, I would've thought the same thing. But now I understood that it was more than just placing the lead characters, but also figuring out how each person



came on and off the stage throughout a scene. I was dealing with up to twenty cast members I had to help, and it was all a little overwhelming.

“You’re doing a really great job, Hazel,” Marcy said with a smile. “I was a bit skeptical when I heard you’d written the play, but after seeing all you’ve gone through to make it happen, I’m just glad it wasn’t me Mrs. Sanderson asked.”

I gave her a quick smile, returning to the process I’d already mapped out for some of the characters. It was good to know how little support I had and how hard I had to work to win it back.

Scott walked in, along with a few of the other background characters who were supposed to be there, and I kept glancing toward the doors, waiting for Colt to arrive. Today was only a practice for baseball, and they hadn’t gone over with one of those yet.

“Are we ready to start?” Mrs. Sanderson asked, walking into the auditorium.

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“My understudy hasn’t made it yet,” Scott said, his tone dry. Now that I’d gotten to know him even better, it made me wonder what all the other girls in school who fawned over him thought. He had enough charm to sway people, but he wasn’t the most patient person in the world. And his compliments were more like veiled attempts to criticize.

“We’ll give him a few more minutes,” Mrs. Sanderson said, walking over to me. “How’s it going over here?”

“It’s going,” I said, pausing to make another note on the long list I already had.

Mrs. Sanderson nodded. “This is where I make sure the students have about twenty-five percent of their lines memorized. We only have six weeks left, and we’ll need to up the rehearsal count per week to three or four starting next week. We also need to give more insight to the set design crew. I saw one piece of set sketched out, but it will be good for you to talk to them about your overall vision.”

I breathed out, nodding. That was a lot of time for practices, but once we got out the initial kinks, I hoped we’d be able to smooth out the rest and make it work. As far as the set design, I hadn’t even gotten that far in my thought process.

The door opened, and Colt ran in looking like he’d been sweating and was covered in red dirt again. “Sorry, I’m here. We got out late, so I didn’t get a chance to take a shower.”

“You can stay over in the corner, then, so we don’t have to smell you,” Scott said, pointing to the section farthest away from the stage.

I glared at Scott, not wanting to tick him off enough that the practice didn't go well but also not wanting him to think it was okay to talk to a fellow cast member like that. It was all about communication, like Mrs. Sanderson had advised.

Colt laughed and ran up on stage. "Haha, good one, Scott. At least I'm here and ready to go. I need to learn from the master, right?" He turned and winked at me before taking a seat on one of the chairs.

It was nice to see him up and around, not hobbling like he had been just a couple of days ago. And with his baseball hat turned backward, the small pieces of light brown hair showing through, he was hot.

Shaking my head, I knew I had a lot to go over, and I didn't want to keep the cast there all hours of the night. We all needed rest, and maximizing time was something I was all for.

"Okay, let's start in our pairs. Ellie and Scott, you're going to be center stage for most of this scene, maybe a little stomping back and forth as it goes on, but here for the most part. Colt and Marcy, you'll both be back here in the corner, working on dishes at the diner." I pointed in the direction they needed to be. A few minutes later, I finished blocking the seven other people there and told them to go ahead and rehearse in their groups, and then we'd all come together and finish it out.

I stared at Marcy for a few minutes, as if hoping to see any note that Colt wasn't into her, but in no time, I was stuck with one of the background girls, Tanna, who had a question about everything and anything all the time.

I'd have to check out the situation later, in the hopes that I wasn't losing my best friend.

Colt

To be honest, I didn't want to practice with Marcy that evening. She was a cool girl, but I was getting the vibe that she liked me. How was I supposed to tell her that I had a huge crush on someone else?

We stood together, and I wondered if maybe it was a good thing I hadn't showered. Maybe I'd push her away with the body odor smell, because after the fifteen-minute cardio drill we'd done at the end of practice, and in the hot Texas sun, I did not smell like roses.

"Okay, should we start from the beginning?" I asked, hoping to get this paired-off section done as soon as possible. I glanced around, searching for Hazel, but found her helping out the one girl who usually complained or didn't understand most things. And there Hazel was, being as patient as ever with her. I needed to get a grip and focus on the play, not ogle my best friend for extended amounts of time.

"Yeah, the beginning works. Okay, so I think we'll be standing here as the scene opens, and then we'll be chatting." Marcy paused, looking at me intensely. "Can I ask you a question?"

I gave a half-hearted smile, not sure what to expect with her. "Sure. I mean, I probably won't know the answer if it has to do with all this stuff."

Marcy laughed. "Don't worry; we don't have much to rehearse in this scene."

My brain took off at that phrase, and I wondered where she was going with this.

"Are you and Hazel together, like a couple?"

I definitely wasn't expecting that. "No. You're her friend. You know how she is about

her past,” was all I could think to say.

She rolled her eyes and gave a short laugh. “We’ve barely hung out since Christmas, and you guys are always together. I just thought I’d ask.”

I closed my eyes, not wanting to have this conversation now, there, where Hazel could hear everything. I had to mentally prepare for telling her everything, and I wasn’t in that mental space just yet. Having her find out in the middle of the play would only embarrass us both.

We got back to rehearsing, and I couldn’t shake the feeling that Marcy had an underlying reason to ask me that. Was she trying to set something up between her and me? Or was she hoping to ask me on a date?

We practiced through the next few scenes, and I was grateful I only had a few lines here and there. I messed up one of them, but the others I didn’t have a hard time reciting. Maybe there was hope for me yet.

Hazel worked to get the rest of the group engaged, but it seemed as if the two leads were planning a sort of mutiny to not listen to her. Once, I stepped forward to react but got a death-glare stare from Mrs. Sanderson.

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At the end of rehearsal, I was cleaning up a few things by the drama instructor and whispered, “Why don’t you want me to defend her?”

She gave me a small smile and clasped her hands in front of her. “Mr. Buttars, how often do you step in and defend her?”

I frowned, wondering what that had to do with anything. I was her best friend and the guy who liked her. What was wrong with helping?

I shrugged. “Not very often. She does pretty well by herself.”

Her smile grew only in millimeters, and she said, “She does well when she’s comfortable. But theater isn’t that way forever. I know how much she wants to go on and study about theater and music. I’m hoping to help her see what she needs to do to get there.”

I paused, my mouth open to say something, but my mind went completely blank. “How can you tell all that?” I grinned, surprised at the depth of analysis I hadn’t even considered. Then again, this world was out of my element, and I still had a lot to learn.

Shaking her head, she laughed. “I’m just a teacher who’s been around the block a few times. Hazel is a special girl, and I know how much she means to you. Just let her fight her own battles for a while, all right?”

It took a few seconds of thought, but I finally nodded. “I’ll do my best.”

“Now, you best be getting home. You probably have homework or something to take care of. Wouldn’t want you missing your next game.” She winked at me, and I wondered if she knew something I didn’t.

With a nod, I walked over to Hazel, and we headed home.

What a strange situation, but if it was going to help Hazel, I had to at least try to back off and let her stand up for herself.

22

Hazel

“Hazel! Hazel!” I could hear Winnie’s voice calling to me through the door to the bathroom. I’d come home right after rehearsal and gone right into a bubble bath, needing a few moments of peace and quiet after the constant barrage of questions and opinions at rehearsal.

And I might have had a hard time getting the idea of Marcy grinning at Colt out of my mind. They’d been laughing by the end of the rehearsal about something I didn’t understand, and as much as I tried not to care what was going on with others, I didn’t want to lose my best friend just because he was trying to take an interest in what I liked.

It had been hard to keep talking on the way home, mostly because of that situation and the one with Scott and Ellie. What was their deal? I’d never seen them act like that for Mrs. Sanderson. Even though I was outgoing when it came to drama and theater, confrontation was something I stayed far away from.

“What?” I called out, hoping my sister would just leave me alone for a few more minutes. My fingers were pruned and the water was near freezing, but I wasn’t up for

moving just yet.

“Mom has something for you.”

Dragging myself out of the water, I towel-dried and got dressed in some fluffy pajamas and a comfy t-shirt. Once downstairs, I walked over to see a package on the table. The address said Buffalo, but I couldn’t remember whose address it was listed in the top right corner.

A moment of panic hit me as I hoped it wasn't some bad joke from Seth.

I pulled on the tab on the back of the envelope, opening it to see the contents inside. There were streamers, confetti poppers, and a party hat. I smiled at all of it and saw the paper near the bottom of the envelope. Once I opened it, I relaxed fully, seeing it was from a friend.

Hey girl!

I just wanted to send some celebratory materials for your play. You’re doing awesome and congrats.

We all miss you here. Hope you’re having fun and good luck with the production!

Lina

“Oh, did Winnie tell you about the package?” my mom asked, walking into the kitchen.

I nodded and handed her the note. “Lina sent this.”

My mom quickly read the note and then glanced inside the envelope. “That’s a fun



idea. Just make sure when you're popping those that you don't do it inside my house."

I rolled my eyes. "Yes, Mom. I think I'll save them for performance week."

"How did she know about it?"

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“I’m not sure,” I said, trying to think about when I’d talked to her last. We’d been close friends when I lived in Buffalo, and we still texted each other from time to time, but it was harder and harder to have much in common since I lived so far away.

“Well, it looks like you’ve got support for this play even when they live thousands of miles away.”

I smiled, happy that I wasn’t completely forgotten by my friends back in New York. It had been hard the few weeks at the end of school, and most of my friends had sided with Seth. They’d known how much I hurt every time he said he was coming to something and didn’t show up, yet he was able to sway them to his side. At least Lina was still loyal. Not that I should let it matter much since this was my life now.

I hadn’t unfolded all of it and found this at the bottom:

P.S. Seth is dating Darcy Cutler now. They’re a mess.

Darcy Cutler was another girl from our drama department, and I wondered what the deal with Seth was. Did he just like girls who loved theater? The only problem with him liking her was that it made me wonder if it was just me he’d stopped liking. Or had he moved on with her before we broke up? I figured I would’ve heard something if that were the case.

At least I wasn’t there reliving things every day.

All these thoughts caused me to remember Colt and Marcy laughing on stage. What was it that I wanted? Did I want to just be a best friend for the rest of my life?

Insecurity tugged at me. I could make it through the play for a few more weeks. I just hoped everything that kept me stable here in Pecan Flatts wouldn't be gone by the time it was done.

23

Colt

It was Grandpa-moving-in day, and we still had a lot to get done before he came home. We'd spent almost four weeks cleaning and remodeling the place. I'd gotten up before school to help with the last bits of cleaning, and then my parents were going to get all the supplies they needed for him to stay there. My dad had even taken the day off, which I think my mother was grateful for. She was used to holding down the fort and keeping everything spinning in our family, but something as big as this was fraying her patience.

I glanced at the calendar on my phone, surprised to find that we'd been working on rehearsals for the play for five weeks. Things had still been going well, and I'd managed to keep my double life a secret for this long, but Hazel had seemed a bit off since Mrs. Sanderson had told me to let her fight for herself. Was she bugged at me for that?

She was usually so upfront about her feelings when it came to me, and to keep this to herself wasn't like her. I needed to confront her about it; there just hadn't been a great time to do so.

I made it through the first few classes of the day and headed down the hall to the commons area. I wasn't sure if I was in the mood to go out for lunch, but I figured I'd let the other guys decide. Just trying to get from practice to practice was difficult enough, and I didn't want to waste brain power on something like that right now.

Once I turned the corner, I saw a ginormous white sign spread across the upstairs balcony and visible into the commons.

Colt Buttars, pizza will you go to the spring dance with me?

It looked like someone had tried to draw a pizza on both sides of the words.

My stomach dropped, and I stood there gaping like a fish. Tanna, the needy girl from the play, walked up with a large pizza and handed it to me, causing me to give a sort of fake smile.

“You’re asking me to the dance?” I asked, not sure if I’d ever talked to her before now. She usually skulked in the background, but she’d done a pretty good job with the scenery so far. I doubted she was the one to draw on the poster.

Tanna’s eyebrows rose. “Not a chance.”

I waited for her to say more, but she turned and walked away, leaving me confused.

I scanned the upper balcony, looking for some sign of who was asking me out. For a few seconds, I wondered if Hazel was doing it, using someone in the cast to bring me the pizza. But as I studied the lettering on the poster, I knew it couldn’t be Hazel. There were no hearts over the I’s. I’d gotten excited for nothing, and apparently, I was bordering on crazy with recognizing this wasn’t her handwriting.

People stared and several of them whispered something about me, but I was still trying to figure out who’d asked me. I sat on one of the benches, opening the pizza box.

“What did you bring me?” Jake asked, sliding up next to me and grabbing a slice.

I motioned toward the sign hanging from the balcony. “Not me.” It was then that I noticed the note written on the lid of the box. Marcy Johnson.

Well, the options could’ve been worse, but how was I going to tell her I wasn’t into her?

Jake stopped mid-bite as he read the sign and glanced back at me. “Are you going to say yes?”

I looked back at the sign, an inner debate taking place. “You know my mother will force me to.”

Ben walked up in front of me with Dax at his side. “Your mom forces you to go to dances?”

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“Yeah,” Nate said, slapping the top of my shoulders as he approached from behind. He took a seat next to me and said, “She didn’t get asked to many dances, and one time she asked and the guy was a total jerk.”

I nodded. “She thinks it’s her mission to save the emotions of high school girls since she didn’t have any daughters. If a Buttars boy gets asked, they go.”

“Well, I mean, you haven’t gone to any dances without Hazel since the two of you started hanging out. Didn’t you go to Harvest with her?”

I shook my head. We’d started hanging out a week or two before that dance, but I’d already been asked by another girl in one of my classes for that night.

“Maybe it’s time to move on and just enjoy high school,” I said, the words burning my tongue. I didn’t mean them to be so callous, but this might be a good way to see if Hazel cared about me in the way I did for her.

“That’s bold of you, man.” Nate said it while slapping me on the back.

I frowned at him. “Come on. I’m not that obvious, am I?”

Jake gave me a wide grin. “Colt, you’ve had puppy-dog eyes for her for months.”

“Then why doesn’t she know?” I said it louder than I thought and had to lower my voice. “Like, how can she not tell I like her?”

With a quick shrug, Jake said, “Maybe she’s trying not to notice. Maybe she doesn’t

want to mess up things like you haven't wanted to by making a move."

I nodded, realizing he probably had a point.

Logan walked over and started hitting the guys. "What's going on? Oh, pizza. Sweet! This isn't going to fill us all up, man."

"He got it from being asked to the spring dance," Ben said dryly.

"Did Hazel finally come around?" Logan asked, pushing Nate over to sit next to me.

Friends. They were always there for me, even if it meant calling me out on my love life, or lack thereof. I shook my head. "Marcy Johnson asked me."

"Who's Marcy Johnson?" Dax asked, slipping a slice of pizza from the box.

"She's in the—I mean, she's good friends with Hazel." Great, in that perspective, was I ruining things?

I'd heard about girls who didn't date guys their friends had dated, but a dance against my will? I hoped Hazel wouldn't get too picky if she ever saw me as more than a friend.

I was all over the place emotionally, but I had to make sure Hazel was okay and that I didn't do anything extra dumb to push her away.

"It might not be the best to go out with one of her friends, man," Ben said, giving me a sympathetic smile.

"What do I do, then? My mom will make me go with her. And dances don't count as real dates, right?" I was grasping at straws, hoping to find some strange loophole that

wouldn't keep me from dating Hazel in the future.

"Good luck with that," Nate said. "Let's hope Hazel won't be upset. I mean, you keep saying you're just friends." He shrugged. "I need more food. A couple pieces of that pizza will just be a snack."

Leave it to my friend to help only after a full belly.

24

Hazel

I'd come out of my third-period class only to see a giant poster hung up asking Colt to the dance.

Tears jumped to my eyes, and I ran for the girls' bathroom, not sure where else to go. I curled up in the extra-large stall, wishing I could figure out what was wrong with me. How did I go from being best friends with someone to full-on crushing on him?

With all the play stuff, I hadn't even realized there was a dance coming up.

All the emotions flooded me, and I cried even harder, knowing I just needed to keep going, to put on a brave face like I was acting in a normal production. But this was my regular life. This wasn't just a part I could put on and take off when I wanted to, and I think that was the hardest part of the situation.

After several minutes of emotional overhaul, I stood, dried my tears, and made sure I looked presentable before walking back into the hallway.



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My fourth-period class was with Mrs. Sanderson, and I knew she'd have a way to help soothe my wounded soul. If I went before class, maybe she'd find a way to talk me out of the anxious feelings about where my life was heading.

Several deep breaths got me through fourth period. When I'd gone to talk to the drama director, she'd been trying to help another student figure out what to do for a final project, and as patient as she was, Mrs. Sanderson looked like she was at the end of her rope. At least there was no play practice that night.

Colt had a game that afternoon at home, and as much as I thought about all that I still had left to do to get ready for the next rehearsal, I figured it might be a good idea to go watch one of his games. He'd come to everything of mine since we'd been friends, but I hadn't taken the time to support him. It was me and Seth, only in reverse, and I wasn't going to let that happen any longer.

Wasn't that what I ultimately wanted? Someone who would support me, even with my weird quirks? I thought of the time I asked Colt to be the Beast character so I could practice last fall. We'd only known each other a handful of weeks, but he'd stood there and done his best. I should've seen his talent for theater earlier.

I packed up my things and headed for the baseball field, not sure what I was doing. My baseball knowledge was limited to whatever Colt had told me, and I just hoped I'd be able to understand some of what happened.

As I climbed into the stands, I breathed a sigh of relief that Brynn, my cousin, and her other friends were there. They would at least be able to explain some of the calls to me.

“Hey, Haze,” Brynn said, scooting over a bit to give me room to sit. “What brings you here?”

“Hello,” I said, nodding to the other girls. “I, uh, figured I should be a good, um, friend and support Colt.” That was painful to my ears.

“Serena, Penny, Kate, this is my cousin Hazel. Hazel—Serena, Penny, and Kate.” She pointed to each one individually, helping me know who was who.

“It’s nice to see you all again. Who are they playing today?” I asked, trying to act like I knew what was going on.

“Groveton.” Penny’s voice sounded ominous, and I tried to pretend I knew what that meant.

Brynn leaned over and said, “They’re a big rival of Rosemont. So this is a pretty big game.”

I grinned, glad that I’d decided to come to this game.

The guys warmed up on the field, running and catching. Colt was closer to us, and I watched as he fielded the ball so easily. I’d never really seen him in action, and he was really good.

The game began a few minutes later, and Colt ran out next to one of the bases. “So what position does Colt play?” I asked.

“Third base,” Penny said, next to Brynn. She was staring out at the field, and I was a bit intimidated by it all.

The pitcher threw the first pitch, and Serena went crazy when he got the first

strikeout. “Atta boy, Ben. Take them down one at a time.”

Brynn leaned over and laughed. “Serena is dating Ben. Penny is dating the shortstop, Jake,” she said, pointing just past Colt to a guy standing on some of the dirt. “And then Kate is dating Dax, the catcher.”

I laughed. “Wow, nothing like dating friends.”

Brynn gave me a weak smile. “It’s actually really fun. We are all at the same events for the guys.”

“Do you come to every game?” I asked, curious what it was like to actually date a baseball player. As I thought about it, I hadn’t been to any of Colt’s games, not even in the fall. I’d been such an avid supporter of Seth and his basketball up until he dumped me that I wondered if I’d avoided them subconsciously because I didn’t want to ruin Colt’s relationship with me. But now, looking back, that was one of the lamest excuses for it all.

Brynn nodded. “Now that basketball is done, I can. Nate came to as many games as possible for me. It’s fun cheering them on.”

The game progressed rather slowly. I had to keep telling myself that it was okay for the runner on first to be off the base a few steps. I was completely over the pitcher trying to get him out, though.

“Is this game always so slow?” I asked, hoping I wouldn’t annoy anyone.

All four girls turned and said, “Yes.”

Penny grinned. “As much as I love this sport, it has its moments where it’s hard to keep watching. I mean, I play softball, and that goes by so much faster.”

I laughed. “Okay, at least this nonathletic girl isn’t totally off.”

Colt walked up to bat, and I clapped and cheered, excited to see him bat. For a second, I thought he saw me and gave a big smile, before his expression turned neutral again as he stepped up to the white thing. Home plate, I think it was called.

The pitcher threw the first pitch, and Colt watched it go into the glove. The umpire didn’t say anything, so I assumed it was a ball.

He swung on the next pitch and connected with the ball, sending it down the white line on the one side. Everyone stood, and then there was an audible sigh as everyone sat back down.

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I turned to Brynn and whispered, “What happened?”

She pointed to the line. “If the ball is on this side of the line, it’s in. If it’s on the other side, it’s foul and he has to come back and hit again.”

Okay, I could understand that.

I clasped my hands together, hoping for a good outcome. We had one runner out on the bases, and from something Penny said, we might be able to score if Colt got a good hit.

The next pitch came in, and he swung, nearly twisting himself around with the effort. The ball snapped in the catcher's glove, and the umpire did the hand motion he had done for all the other strikes on other batters.

“Keep your eye on the ball,” Penny called.

“Yeah, do what Penny said,” I yelled. I was probably the worst sports fan ever, but I knew what it was like to not have anyone in your corner, or the people you cared most about. Hopefully, he knew I was cheering for him.

The next pitch he hit, but instead of going between the white lines, it ended up going behind and over the net.

“Foul ball,” the umpire called.

“I thought they only get three strikes,” I said, my voice a little louder this time as Colt

jogged back to pick up the bat. “Why isn't he out?” Not that I was hoping for that, but I guess I needed some kind of rulebook for this game so I could actually understand it.

“When they have two strikes, if they foul it off,” Brynn said, keeping her voice low, “they can go until they either hit the ball, strike out, or walk.”

That seemed like a lot of options.

The next pitch came in, and Colt swung, the ball missing the bat by a few inches.

His head dropped, and he looked like he was struggling with something.

The team ran out and took the field, Colt grabbing his glove and hustling out to his spot on the corner of the dirt. I could see the disappointment in his shoulders, slumped over like he'd just lost the championship in this one game.

“You've got this, Colt,” I yelled. “Don't even worry about it.”

Colt turned and looked at me, straightening up again.

Ben threw several pitches before the batter hit the ball, sending it right for Colt. He fumbled it a bit, but from the crazy sound the umpire guy behind first made, it looked like he still threw the runner out.

“That's one of Groveton's best hitters,” Brynn said, clapping loudly. “The fact that Colt fielded it well is a good sign.”

I nodded, slowly understanding what she'd been trying to tell me. Colt just took away a scoring opportunity from the other team.

The game came down to the wire, and it took a last-minute long hit to the outfield by a new kid Penny said was named Adam Taylor for us to pull off the win.

It had been fun hanging out with the girls, and I'd learned a lot about the game. Maybe I could use a few phrases I'd learned to show Colt I was trying to understand the game he loved.

We waited for the stands to clear before leaving. Penny pointed to where the team had gone and said, "They have a little post-game chat after every game. Most of the time, just a quick recap of what worked and what didn't."

I nodded, trying to find Colt in the group. Once the team headed back toward us, I could see him lagging behind like he was still beating himself up over the batting attempt.

The girls all found their boyfriends, and seeing them all together, especially Brynn, made half of me swoon while the other half felt more alone than I had in months.

"Hey, what are you doing here?" Colt asked with a big grin.

I glanced up and saw he was talking to me.

He turned to see where I'd been looking and said, a little louder than usual, "Oh, should we hug to join the group?"

Before I said anything, he pulled me into his arms. That same smell of dirt and body odor wafted to my nose like it had the night I'd helped him inside after he'd hurt his ankle. Was it weird that I actually kind of liked it?

He took a step back, and I realized I wasn't ready for him to let go. Being in his arms helped me with the insecurities roaring through me. Was he not into Marcy like I

thought?



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There had been nothing I could really change when it came to my relationship with Seth. There were so many things I'd done over the top, getting him gifts for the littlest events and being at every one of his basketball games, even the off-season ones.

But had I already lost my chance with Colt? I mean, this was the first time I'd gone to something he loved, and now he'd been asked to a dance by a girl I thought was my good friend.

But who was I to stop her from asking him? I mean, there were no official titles between us, and I wondered if Colt would even want that.

I remembered last semester, before the holidays, Brynn had mentioned that Colt seemed to have a crush on me, but he'd never said anything about it. I'd heard of people having a crush on someone until they'd gotten to know the person better. Did he not have a crush on me anymore because he knew so much about me?

"Hey, girl. Where are you right now?" Colt still had his hands on my sides, staring down at me as though I was the only girl in the world. Or was that just my brain overthinking things, hoping it was true?

"Sorry, I just got lost in some thoughts. You did great, though. I can't believe you know how to stop a ball that comes flying at you like that. Very impressive."

Colt grinned and laughed. "Are you talking about the one I almost messed up completely? Yeah, I've been struggling today. My hitting was the worst."

“You’ll get it. You just need to keep on going.” It was a lame phrase, but I’d run out of terminology that applied in this situation.

A taller kid I recognized as the new player came and slapped Colt on the back. “Good job today.”

“Thanks, Adam. Way to save the game with that hit.”

The guy grinned and walked away.

“What position does he play?” I asked, pointing after him.

Colt blew out a breath. “Third base and sometimes first base. He took over for me when I rolled my ankle.” He picked up his bat bag and started walking toward the school.

“Why do you sound like that’s a bad thing?”

He shook his head and glanced around us. There was no one even close, and he leaned in closer, causing my breath to hitch somewhat.

“I’ve got this pressure coming from Coach Maddox now, like if I don’t perform, I’m out. I’ve been starting since the middle of my freshman year. I don’t want to give it up to a new guy.”

He stopped speaking for several seconds and then continued. “I mean, I get it. We want to win state, and this kid is focused, always practicing and giving out tips. He even helped me with a few hitting tricks, which I obviously didn’t put into practice today.”

“So what’s the problem?”

“Should he have the spot because he wants it so bad? I mean, I love baseball and sports, but I just don’t see myself playing in college.”

That was something I hadn’t considered before. In a way, it kind of felt like that with me and the play since I was directing when I could’ve been the lead. But just thinking about trying to direct and memorize all the lines was more than I could handle.

“I guess it depends on what you want to do. I mean, you’ve got another season of high school baseball. Does he have to play third base?” I asked, trying to be helpful.

“I don’t know.”

With a shrug, I said, “Then you give it your best and see what the coach says. Not that we’re that old yet, but would you look back on your time playing for Rosemont High and be disappointed that you didn’t give it everything you’ve got?”

He nodded, looking like the answer to that question hadn’t crossed his mind.

“Should we head home?” he finally said, getting to the truck in the parking lot.

“Don’t you have to go shower or something?” I said, pointing toward the school.

“Are you trying to tell me I smell?” he said with a half-smile.

I shook my head, trying to hold back a grin. “Of course not. I just figured that’s what you all do all the time.”

“I think I’ll just shower at home. I’m starving and don’t want to wait for the cold water in the shower here.”

We stood next to my car, and I said, “Well, I’ll chat with you later, then. Are you

ready for the bigger rehearsal tomorrow?”

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He grinned. “The question is, are you ready for it?”

I feigned a cry. “I don’t know. I mean, it still feels all disjointed, and at this point, we should be getting it down. I mean, we only have three more weeks until the performance.”

His eyes went wide. “What do you mean? Is it really in three weeks?”

“Uh, yeah,” I said, watching as he pulled his phone out of his pocket and started swiping at something.

“We have the away game against San Marcos that Thursday night.”

I raised an eyebrow. “And?”

“That’s an hour away, plus the time it takes to get all the warmups done. How am I going to work that out?” His lips tightened into a thin line, and the muscle along his jaw tensed.

Anxiety pooled into my stomach, and I shook my head. “I don’t know, but I need you there. If you can’t make it, we’ll need to assign an understudy, like, yesterday.”

Raising his hands, he nodded. “I’ll figure something out.”

“You better. I don’t know if I want to do this without you. With all the time you helped me write this, there are so many lines that make me think of you.”

Whoa, that was more than I'd meant to share. I had to keep remembering that I was on a dating fast for the next decade and he was already going on a date with Marcy. I'd been too chicken to ask him about the poster yet.

"Well, you did a fantastic job writing it while I sat next to you eating Cheetos."

I chuckled. "Yeah, I still have some orange-coated notes to prove that."

I got into my car, and he shut the door behind me, waving. But before I drove off, I rolled the window down, needing to know the answer to my question now that I had the guts to ask.

"I saw you got asked to the dance." My voice was warbly even though I was trying to keep things casual.

Colt leaned down on the windowsill, his face inches from mine. "Yeah, Marcy asked me."

Why wasn't he just spilling all the details? Was I going to have to drag it from him?  
"And?"

"And what?"

"Are you going with her?"

He nodded and glanced away. "She's the only one who asked." His voice was low with a sad tone to it. When his eyes turned back, they locked onto mine, and something zipped through me, like he was asking me to do something. "It's kind of a Buttars rule. We go when we get asked. Are you, uh, planning on going to it?"

"No, I'll just be prepping for the play, as always." That sounded like I had no life at

all.

He nodded, and I tried to smile, the tears building up. Even blinking was making it hard to keep at bay. “I’ve got to go. I’ll chat later.”

My chest hurt as I drove away, making it difficult to breathe. What was this feeling?

25

Hazel

It was the weekend, more than a week after Colt was asked to the dance, and I’d permitted myself to take a mental break from the play. It had been nonstop since I’d been assigned to write it, and I just needed some downtime.

Rehearsals had been going well for the most part, but there was still a long way to go before everything was polished. And things between me and Colt had been awkward, mostly because I kept picturing him crushing on Marcy, turning my stomach into a twisted pretzel.

Colt had baseball practice, an unofficial one that meant the guys were heading to the local batting cages and spending a few hours to get their skills ready for the last few games of the regular season.

Things had been kind of off for us lately. It was probably my fault, my self-preservation kicking in. But I didn’t need to lose my best friend over my issues.

“Hey, girl,” Brynn said, bouncing up and down on my bed. “What are you up to?”

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I turned around, my mascara brush hovering an inch in front of my eyes. “What do you mean? I’m trying to get ready here.”

“Ready for what?”

I turned, rolling my eyes as my beautiful cousin had donned basketball shorts that went almost to her ankles and a t-shirt that was a little more formfitting. Even in casual clothes, she could probably rock the runway, with the right eye makeup of course.

“For the day. What brings you to the other Miller home?”

“I figured I should come and help you ask someone to the dance.” Brynn grinned at me, and I knew that mischievous look. It was the one I’d given her just a few months ago when I was trying to set her up with guys.

“Um, no. I don’t date. At least, not anymore.”

“What are you talking about? You’d be a popular choice of date if you let people in.”

I shook my head. “Brynn, you know better than anyone what it’s like when you’ve been betrayed. I just, I can’t do that yet.”

“I didn’t think I could either,” she said, giving me a no-nonsense look. “And here I am, in a happy relationship because I got a little nudge from you.”

I laughed, not believing her. “Please. I just embarrassed you the night all the guys



came to the old-man basketball game. You did the rest yourself.”

She stood, walking toward my bedroom door. “Yeah, well, here’s my chance to embarrass you. We’re asking someone to the dance.” She grabbed a bag from the hallway.

I blinked a few times. “You mean the one coming up on Saturday? As in, less than a week from now?”

Brynn nodded slowly as if waiting for me to get something I wasn’t picking up.

“You’re crazy. With all the stuff we have left to get ready for the play, I don’t have time to go on a date, let alone plan one.”

“That’s not a problem,” she said, waving her hand in the air. “You’ll just go in our group. We’ve already got things planned out, and it will be so fun. Come on, Haze. Now’s the time to have fun. Forget what that loser Seth said or did so long ago. You’re stronger for it.”

I was grateful for the praise, but I didn’t feel any stronger. In fact, it was like I was stuck in some weird kind of limbo.

“Colt has already been asked by someone. I don’t know who else to ask.”

She smiled that smile again, and I knew something was up. “How about you take that new kid? Adam Taylor.”

I gave her a short sarcastic laugh and stopped when I realized she was serious. “I’m not asking out a guy I barely know.”

“Why not? You could use it as practice. It doesn’t have to be a long-term thing

because it's a dance."

"Some people start off at a dance and end up a couple," I said, reflecting on my past relationship. I'd asked Seth to a dance, and that's how we got started. My stomach tightened, thinking that could happen with Colt and Marcy.

"Not everyone, Haze. It will be a good jumping-off point into getting back in the game."

I closed my eyes and fell back onto the bed, not wanting to go further with that line of thinking. But I couldn't come out and say I was starting to crush on Colt either. Not when Marcy was interested in him. Ugh, what a mess.

"What if I'm never ready?"

Brynn reached over and pulled me into a hug. "How about we go for this one dance date? Then you can go back to being a non-dating girl if things don't work out. But the best part about this is he's a baseball player, so he'll fit in with the guys, and I'll be there to help you if you need anything."

"Do I need a dress?" I asked. I still couldn't remember which dances were formal and which weren't in Pecan Flatts.

Brynn shook her head. "Nope. This is a couples costume dance, and I knew that would be easy for you."

I grinned, just thinking of the couple's costume possibilities. But then I remembered I wasn't going with Colt and my enthusiasm wavered. "Wait, wasn't Harvest costumes?"

Brynn shrugged. "Yeah, but the senior committee decided to do them again instead of

matching t-shirts. You can blame Kate for that.”

“I know nothing about this guy. What if he doesn’t want to dress up?”

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“Then make up something for the two of you. It’s not hard to even make a joke costume if need be.” She lifted the bag onto the bed. “Now stop making excuses, and let’s get to this.”

I swallowed hard, not sure this was going to go over all that well. For me or Adam.

26

Colt

It was taking a while for me to answer Marcy back—a week and a half and counting—but with all the crazy going on in my life, I hadn’t had a moment to breathe, let alone come up with some lame answer. I mean, what happened to giving a simple yes or no answer?

My mom had talked to me about the date, and she’d nagged me for the past two days about whether or not I’d given my answer. I could tell even she was torn on what to do since she was a fan of Hazel.

“Maybe she’ll actually like you if you go out with someone else,” Wyatt had chirped when he’d overheard most of the conversation we were having in the kitchen.

“I’m going to leave this one up to you,” my mom had said, surprising me and my brother. “As much as I want you to not crush the dreams of anyone, I also don’t want you to mess things up with Hazel.”

“But is she willing to go to a dance or even date?” Wyatt said, leaning back in his

chair like he was the voice of reason.

Hazel and I had gone to the informal dances in a group, but she hadn't asked anyone to go to the few we'd had this year.

Now I was trying to decide what to do. Should I say yes to Marcy and hope Hazel would realize she liked me? Or say no and keep hoping something else would spark our relationship and get us out of the friend zone?

A text message sounded from my phone as I walked into my first-period class, and I froze a few seconds before jumping into action and turning off the ringer. I opened up the text and saw it was from Nate.

There was a picture I must've missed by heading to class so early, and it was hard to make out in the small version. I clicked to open it, my phone still making it pixelated. But the gist was there. Hazel was standing next to Adam Taylor with a large sign that said, "Adam, Spring Dance?" and an Easter basket hung from the other hand.

What happened to her not dating anyone? And what made her want to date the new kid?

I couldn't focus on anything else the rest of the day, and when lunch came, I didn't wait for any of the guys.

"Where are you going?" Nate called after me.

I turned, seeing him run my way. "I just need some space."

The classrooms and hallways all felt too constricting after my world had fallen out from under me. I shook my head. I knew I had to watch out for Adam taking third base from me, but stealing the attention of my crush? I didn't blame him; I just hoped

I wouldn't see him for a while, until I calmed down at least.

Nate stopped in front of me. "What's wrong? Is this about the picture earlier?"

I ground my teeth together and nodded. Something was stuck in my throat, making it hard to speak.

"I thought you'd be happy."

My lungs squeezed as I tried to come up with his reasoning for those words. "What are you talking about?"

"Brynn had her ask out Adam this morning before school in the hopes that Hazel would see you with Marcy at the dance and realize she likes you."

I scoffed, frowning so hard my forehead started to hurt. "That's a great way to get someone to return feelings. 'Hey, let me set you up on a date with someone else you could potentially fall in love with in the hopes that you'll finally like me.' Yeah, I don't see this as a win."

Nate rested his hand on my shoulder and gave me a small smile. "Just relax, Colt. I didn't realize your feelings ran that deep. And I probably should've warned you about it."

"As my best friend, that would've been a good idea." I couldn't temper the anger simmering inside me. Even though this was done to supposedly benefit me, all I could think about was Hazel wanting to be with Adam.

Ugh, why did girls have to be so confusing?

"So how do I answer Marcy?"

Nate had a surprisingly good way to answer her, and it didn't take much more than a trip to the grocery store and a couple of dollars. That was my kind of answer.

We made it through our home game, and after a quick shower, I headed for the theater for rehearsal. Marcy was sitting on the edge of the stage, flipping through the script. It reminded me that I still had a lot to memorize.

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Holding out a bag of Almond Joy candy bars in one hand, I waited until she took it before handing her a note that said, It would be a 'Joy' to go to the spring dance with you.

She looked down at it and then back up at me, confused. Had I spelled something wrong? "This is it?"

I might have panicked for a few seconds and then nodded. "I'm sorry it took so long, but I finally answered you," I said, glancing around the theater.

"I know it's an answer, but you're supposed to make a big deal about it. I mean, I asked you in front of the school." Marcy had started using her hands, emphasizing each word and causing me to back up a step.

Frowning, I said, "I didn't know there was a manual on how to answer someone." The words sounded more like a hiss as I was trying to keep anyone else from overhearing our conversation.

She looked disappointed, and I had to shrug it off, knowing I could only do so much with what I had to work with.

"Okay," she said, dropping the bag of candy on top of her backpack.

I could tell something was off and wondered what to do about it. I didn't need to deal with another girl's emotions. Hazel had already been all over the place as it was.

Luckily, play practice began, and I breathed out a sigh that our game had finished



early enough to get there.

Hazel walked into the auditorium like nothing out of the ordinary had happened, and that she hadn't just stepped all over my heart. Inside, I was both furious and falling apart. Of course, the girl I liked wouldn't like me back. But dating the new kid from California? That was more cliché than anything I'd been doing in trying to break boundaries.

We began working through each scene, and I tried to hold in my irritation. Marcy finally pushed me offstage when the others weren't looking and asked, "What's the problem?"

"I'm just having an off—"

"Are you two okay back here?" Hazel asked, her arms crossed over her chest.

Marcy leaned in, pressing her palm against my chest, and turned to glance at Hazel with a grin. "Of course. We're just trying to get into character."

My eyes went wide, and I saw that this might look a little more flirty than it was meant to be.

With her lips pinched, Hazel's gaze darted between me and Marcy, a quick look of hurt flashing across her face. "Well, let's get back to practice, then. We don't have much time until the final performance."

Once Hazel turned her back, I whirled around to face Marcy. "What was that?" I asked.

"What do you mean?" Marcy asked, her eyes wider than the white lights above us.

“We’re going to the dance together, but that doesn’t mean we’re together.” I took a moment and breathed, knowing I needed to be a little more understanding when I continued. “I’m sorry, Marcy. I appreciate you helping me with my lines and guiding me through this process. And I’m excited about the dance, but I just wanted you to know that I like someone, and I don’t want to hurt you when I can’t return your feelings.”

Her jaw moved back and forth, and then a tear rolled down her cheek. “Okay, I appreciate your honesty. I just thought you were a lot different.”

I frowned, trying to understand where she’d gotten that impression. I’d only started talking to her a few weeks ago during the play, and she was acting as though she’d known me forever.

“A lot different than what?” I ventured.

“Than the rest of the guys at the school. You’re always doing nice things for the other girls and for Hazel. You open doors and help carry books...” She let her words trail off, and her eyes got wide again. “You like Hazel.”

“We’re just friends.”

Famous last words. I just hoped she didn’t do anything to permanently damage my relationship with my best friend.

27

Hazel

I swallowed and opened my eyes to see what configuration Brynn had come up with this time. Between my schedule and Adam’s, we barely had time to figure out a

costume, and I'd assigned it to Brynn since she'd gotten me into this mess in the first place. The idea of going to a dance made my brain short-circuit, and I was tempted to call Adam and tell him I was sick.

Brynn attached what looked to be a paper towel tube to my head, although she'd put some white paper around it with red lines down the sides.

"Why do I have a partial straw on my head?" I asked, laughing at the thought.

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“Oh, I probably should’ve had you put your shirt on first, but I didn’t want to give it away.” She walked over and pulled a shirt out from her bag. On the front of it, she’d stenciled the logo from Lou’s diner.

“Am I a shake?” I said, actually really excited about it. Although, that made me think more about Colt than I should’ve, and another wave of I-don’t-want-to-do-this hit me. Why did Marcy have to ask him? I would’ve much rather gone with him. But then again, would I have asked him? Probably not. I didn’t have time as it was with the play in a week, but maybe a night out would help me relax.

Brynn nodded. “I dropped off the one for Adam to his house yesterday but wanted to give you the full surprise today.”

I crinkled my nose and looked at her through the mirror. “Isn’t it weird that I’m the one who’s supposed to be going on the date and you dropped off the costume?”

Brynn shook her head. “No, it’ll be fine. Adam seems like a chill guy anyway.”

“Chill enough to know that there’s no future for this?”

“Haze, most guys understand that.”

Did Colt understand that? He’d seemed pretty cozy with Marcy backstage the other day, and it had been hard to talk to him like normal the past week. I wanted to blame it on lack of time, but it seemed like things were escalating in his and Marcy’s friendship—or whatever it was—and I was panicking that I’d be left in the dust.

“Okay, let’s get this show on the road.”

Brynn drove to pick up Nate, and then we had to navigate to find Adam’s address.

When we got there, I hesitated for several moments, not sure I was ready for this. The last date I’d gone on flashed before my eyes. I’d gone out with Seth to see a movie I’d been dying to see. Once it was over, he’d stormed out and basically told me we were done, that he couldn’t handle how into music and theater I was and why couldn’t I just hang out and be at his beck and call.

“You’re going to be fine,” Brynn said, turning to look at me from the front seat. “Just go up and knock. He should be ready.”

Once the front door opened, Adam stood there in comfy shorts and a hoodie. He was a cute guy, but there was no stomach-flipping or increased heart rate. “Hey.”

“Hey,” I said, panicking that he wasn’t actually ready to go. “Did you remember that tonight is the dance? I mean, um, we’re heading to dinner in a few minutes. Brynn said she dropped off your shirt and little, um, straw piece yesterday.”

“Oh, uh, yeah. Sorry, I forgot.” He frowned. “Um, I’ll go change really fast.”

Forgot? Really? I’d asked a few days ago, and then he’d answered me yesterday. How did he forget between then and now?

“Okay, I’ll be out in the car.”

I walked back to the car and closed my eyes, sliding into the backseat so I wouldn’t see the pity on Brynn’s face.

“What happened?” Nate asked. Of course, he would have to get right to the heart of

things.

I tilted my head to the side, adding some sarcasm to my tone, and said, “Apparently he forgot that the dance was tonight. At least the costumes don’t take too long to put on.”

“That’s strange. It seems like Adam is so put together and on top of things usually, at baseball anyway. Then again, I don’t have any classes with him at school.” Nate folded his arms over the pool noodles that had been cut to look like French fries.

The door opened behind Nate, and Adam slipped in. The two of them greeted each other through the usual manly fist bump, and I was just grateful it wasn’t me, myself, and I alone with him right now.

“Hi, Adam. I’m Brynn,” my cousin said.

He nodded, his eyebrows raised. “Yeah, we met yesterday.”

“Right, yes we did,” Brynn said, laughing. She put her car into drive, and we headed in the direction of dinner, which was another part of the plan I’d forgotten to ask about.

It took several moments for me to gain the courage to even look at Adam, and then I had to laugh at the look of him with the straw piece sticking out from his forehead. “So what brought you here from California?”

“My dad’s job.”

I waited for more, but that was all he was giving me.

I nodded. “That’s cool. I just moved from Buffalo last summer. Are you liking it

here?”

“Yeah,” he said. “There’s not a ton to do, and I miss the ocean. But it has its perks. My dad isn’t gone quite as much.”

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There would always be things to miss from Buffalo, but I think Seth overshadowed most of those.

We made it to dinner at Serena's house, and I was impressed by her and Ben working side by side in the kitchen, laughing and talking about something. Was that what Colt was doing right then with Marcy?

Ugh, I needed to get over it and not worry about him. It wasn't like a dance could change a whole lot, or could it?

Dinner went well, and Adam and I made small talk here and there, mostly listening to the conversations of the other couples. Yeah, not awkward my foot, Brynn. The other couples were cozy and cuddly, and I just hoped to make it through the dance without falling apart.

Arriving at the dance, my heart raced a bit, knowing I would have to dance with Adam and that the person I really wanted to be in front of was Colt. Why hadn't this revelation come to me a couple of weeks ago?

We walked into the gym where everything had been set up to look like a beach. Decorations of palm trees and tons of balloons were hung up all over. On the table were little pineapple and watermelon decorations, and they were so cute. At least that was keeping me from thinking about the few dances I'd gone to with Seth. I didn't need those memories to surface now.

The group got onto the middle of the floor and danced to a faster song, one of the popular ones by ColdStar. It was a group Colt had introduced me to and was about



the only one I knew of outside of Broadway show tunes.

Poor kid.

Why would he like me when I tortured him with things that no other guy listened to?  
No wonder Seth broke up with me.

A slow song came on, and my gaze darted everywhere but at my date.

“Do you want to dance?” he finally said, holding out his hand.

“Uh, sure,” I said, holding on to his biceps loosely since he was too tall for me to put my arms around his neck. We swayed back and forth, my stomach all tied up in knots.

“You look like you’re worried about something.”

I glanced up and saw Adam looking down at me. “Yeah, I’ve got a lot going on. I’m directing the school play, and, yeah, it’s been taking up all my brain power lately.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Are you sure that’s the only thing? I mean, you keep glancing over at the doors every few seconds. Are you waiting on someone?”

Man, this guy was observant. “I have a best friend and wanted to make sure I said hey when he gets here.”

Adam nodded and gave me a small smile. “That’s cool. I’ve never been in one place long enough to have a best friend.”

That thought hit me, and I tried to keep the wave of tears back. “Well, hopefully, you won’t have to move this time and can get to know some of us. We’re not all crazy.”

We both laughed at that, and even though things were easing up in my stomach, I was still relieved when the song changed to a faster, upbeat tempo again.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Marcy walking in dressed like a tropical bird. I turned to see fully, and Colt walked in dressed as a palm tree. Well, that was a first. I didn't know if I was going to cry or laugh at what he was wearing, and that he wasn't there with me, being his milkshake to my brownie sundae.

Breathe in, breathe out.

He must've spotted me because he waved, but I couldn't read the expression on his face. I thought I'd figured out all his expressions in the months since we'd become best friends.

And what did I do? I glanced away and pretended like I hadn't seen him.

Adam brought us drinks from the table, and we sipped at them a few times before he said, "So, about your best friend. Do you have feelings for him?"

I glanced up at him in shock. What was I supposed to say to this guy?

"He's a good guy. I just messed up." Yeah, by taking him for granted.

Adam shrugged. "Take it from me. There's always time to fix things, unless you're moving the next day."

A slow song turned on, and I absentmindedly took my place next to Adam while watching as Marcy sidled up next to Colt. It should've been me who was dancing with him.

I had to use my acting experience for this one. The focus was to cover up the hurt and

not show Colt how much I wanted to be with him and tear him away from Marcy.

I glanced up at Adam, trying to think of something we could talk about and hopefully make this less awkward for him.

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Nothing. My brain was blank, except for tracking Colt's movements. I was hopeless. And far too late.

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Colt

Ididn't think I'd ever be a palm tree, but there I was, at a dance with the girl I didn't want to be with and constantly having to brush the fake palm leaves Marcy must have designed out of my face.

I'd seen Hazel and Adam when we walked in, and I tried to wave, but she'd looked away. Now she was over there grinning up at him as if he was the coolest kid in the school. I mean, after all he'd done to help me, he was pretty cool. I just hated to see her look at him the way I wished she would look at me.

The slow song ended, and I tried to steer Marcy closer to my group of friends. That had been another hurdle for tonight's dance. I was used to at least going with one of my baseball friends to these events, but I'd been stuck in a group with a bunch of the theater people. At least I'd gotten to know them a lot better over the past several weeks, but having to be around Scott Daniels for something other than practice was torture.

"Where are you going?" Marcy asked, giving me a small frown.

"I just wanted to say hi to a few of my friends." I waved for her to follow, and she finally did, her bird tail flapping as she walked.

I made it to the group and grinned. “Hey! You all look pretty good.” There were variations of couple’s costumes, and I had to laugh that Nate and Brynn were a hamburger and French fries. Nate just rolled his eyes.

“What’s it like being a palm tree?” he asked, slapping me in the chest.

I gave him a fake smile. “Awesome,” I said, trying to convey my true feelings with my eyes since Marcy was standing right next to us.

Hazel had her back to me, sipping a drink and talking to Adam. What was the problem? She usually ran over and hugged me every time she saw me.

The next dance started, and Marcy pulled me into a dancing stance, her arms wrapped loosely around my neck since that’s where the palm leaves connected.

“Thanks for coming with me,” she said, her smile hesitant.

I nodded. “Thanks for the invite.”

There were several seconds of awkward silence, when I saw someone making a beeline for the door out of the corner of my eye. Turning, I saw Hazel practically running.

I took a step back and gave Marcy what I hoped looked like an apologetic smile. “I’ll be right back, okay?”

Marcy frowned, her eyes searching my face for something. “Okay. Uh, yeah.”

I ran out the door, searching the hallways for Hazel. I finally found her crouched down in the space between a wall and the entrance to one of the classrooms. Her shoulders were shaking, meaning she was in full meltdown mode.

Squatting down, I reached over and touched her shoulder. “Hazel, what’s wrong? Are you okay? Did Adam do something to upset you?”

It took a few seconds, but she finally glanced up at me, her tear-streaked face nearly breaking my heart. I went to lean in and pull her into my arms, wanting to take away all the pain she was feeling, but instead of letting me, she put her hands out.

“Don’t,” she said, her body shaking with a sob. “Just don’t.”

I stood and frowned, not understanding what could’ve happened. We’d never had a big argument, and this was something I hadn’t expected, least of all at a dance after she’d asked Adam out.

She stood, tilting her head back and looking like she was getting ready to perform on stage. “I thought it would be amazing having you in the play. You’d be able to experience all I do every time I step into those lights. And yet, it seems like we’re further apart than ever.”

She took a few steps to the side, trying to pass me, but I grabbed her arm, trying to be gentle so I wouldn’t hurt her.

“What are you talking about? I’m here.”

She shook her head. “I can’t do this right now. I just can’t.” She ran down the hall, and I was too shocked to even move. This must’ve been what Nate was warning me about earlier. But we’d always been so open with each other. Why couldn’t she just talk to me?

It was then that I noticed several of my baseball teammates standing in the hallway, definitely in hearing range.

“What happened?” I asked, hoping they would have an answer for me.

Brynn stepped forward, giving me a sympathetic smile. “You went on a date with someone else.”

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I frowned. “I didn’t think she cared. I only said yes after she’d already asked Adam.”

“I’m not sure what’s going on here, but did I just hear you’re in the play?” Nate asked, his eyes narrowed in my direction.

Oh crap. That was the one thing I didn’t want them to know. Not yet.

29

Hazel

I knew I’d have to apologize to Adam and the others for running out, but I couldn’t stand to be there one more minute. It was like I was watching a real-life version of Seth and Darcy as I watched Colt and Marcy dance.

I’d lost him.

I’d completely lost him by not allowing him in all the way. What hurt even worse was that I liked him more than I’d ever liked Seth, and I’d completely screwed this up, thanks to my insecurities.

Instead of waiting outside for Brynn to take me home, I sent her a text telling her I was going to walk home.

“Hey,” I heard behind me, and I paused, turning to see who it was. Had Colt come after me?



Adam. Why was he following me?

“Are you all right? Did I hurt you in any way?” he asked, turning me enough that he could look into my face. “I mean, I’m sorry I wasn’t ready when you got to my door. I just, well, I have a complicated relationship with someone else, someone who lives in another state, and I debated whether or not I should come because of that.”

I sniffed, trying to give off the impression that it was no big deal. But back there, I’d been a real diva, not the chill kind who could go with the flow in her life.

“I can understand that. No, it wasn’t you.”

“Colt?”

I nodded, unable to speak as a fresh wave of emotions took over. I paused for several seconds and said, “Yeah. I think I like him.” Saying the words out loud was like a revelation, and I was finally leaning into it.

Adam smiled. “So why did you run out crying?”

“Because I screwed up everything. I didn’t realize I liked him until recently, and I just outed the fact that he’s been practicing to act in the spring play with his teammates listening at the door to the gym, which he specifically told me not to do. What a great best friend I am.” I wiped the side of my hand under my nose, trying to keep my emotions under control. That was all I needed, the new guy and my date to think I was crazy.

“What’s the big deal about the play? Why can’t he do both?”

I pictured Colt’s brothers, Sterling out front, along with their dad. “I think he’s worried about what his family will say. He has a lot of brothers, and they’re very into

masculine things. They've given him a hard time about hanging out with me in the first place, so I get where his worries come in. And he doesn't want to let the baseball team down. He's been focused on helping the team take state since their loss last year. At least, that's what I gathered."

"There's nothing wrong in taking part where you want. I mean, it's been a juggling act, but if he's been able to do it this long, he might as well keep going." Adam had his hands tucked into his pants pockets, and he looked so nonchalant about the whole thing. If only everyone in my life could feel the same about my participation in the play.

I nodded, wondering if that's what Colt would actually do. He'd worked so hard and was memorizing a lot more than I thought he would. But would he even want to show up now that I'd outed him in front of his teammates?

I hoped I hadn't done irreparable damage to our relationship. But then again, did I want things to stay the same? Or was I ready for us to move forward, forgetting my feelings for him and focusing back on being man-vegan?

Because seeing him with Marcy was doing a lot to my tender heart at the moment.

30

Colt

I asked the girls to go back into the dance, as this was something I needed to confess to the guys.

"I auditioned for the spring play and made it. I was cast as the best friend of the lead, and I'm also his understudy." My gaze swept over the faces of the guys I'd played baseball with for years, my chest squeezing as I waited for their reactions.

“What about the season? What about state? Is that not on your radar?” Dax asked, his voice low but his tone having an edge to it.

My knees nearly buckled as sadness washed over me. Had I let down my team because I’d chosen something I wanted to try out?

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“Of course it’s on my radar. I’ve been focused on it since we lost in the last inning last year, or since we started playing together years ago. But this is something I’ve wanted to try out for a while. It’s a whole other sort of adrenaline.”

Several of the guys nodded, looking disappointed as they made their way back into the dance.

“You couldn’t tell me?” Nate asked, looking like I’d just smashed into his Hummer.

I raised an eyebrow. “You couldn’t tell me about your childhood genius status. I knew what you’d say, that I was crazy for even thinking about doing the play.”

Even more down, Nate shook his head. “No, man. I know what it’s like to have a secret and not have others to lean on. I would’ve understood. Especially after all I’ve gone through, I thought you could trust me.”

“Nate, come on. I’m sorry, man. I just know how much this state championship means to everyone.”

He gave me a small smile. “Not more than friendship, man.”

I watched as he disappeared into the gym, doing everything I could to keep from breaking down. My world was crumbling because I’d been too worried to tell the people closest to me about my plans.

I had a few more people to talk to about this, but I was done going through it all in secret.

Colt

Inside I was dying. I'd tried to survive the rest of the dance with Marcy, doing my best to play along and still make it fun for her.

After all this time, I'd messed things up, even with my careful juggling of all the things I had going on. I shouldn't have said yes to Marcy, but jealousy had blanketed the true consequences for me.

Marcy dropped me off, and I walked into the house, pulling off the palm leaf necklace.

"How was it?" my mom asked from the couch. She was sitting next to my dad, who'd dozed off watching some late-night game show.

"Awful." It was like every part of my body hurt with all the things I was still trying to process.

She sat up and turned to me. "What do you mean, 'awful'? What happened?"

I swallowed hard, feeling the emotions rise in me. I had to be strong, had to show that I was a man, even though I wanted to finish out the play. But a week was going to be difficult if I couldn't talk to my best friend. Coach Maddox was next on my list of people to talk to.

The shift of my mother had caused my dad to wake up, and he kept blinking, trying to focus on what was going on.

"Mom, Dad, on the second day of baseball tryouts, I auditioned to be part of the

spring play.”

“Really?” both of my parents said, each with different reactions.

“Why?” my dad said, his voice thick from sleep. “Did Hazel push you to do it?”

I shook my head, trying to smile. “I wanted to do it. It was something I wanted to try, and I’ve been working to balance school, baseball, and the play for the past seven weeks.”

“That’s impressive, Colt. What’s your part in the play?” My mother, ever the encourager.

I explained my part and glanced over at my father, seeing his face with a mixture of emotions.

“Have you devoted enough time to baseball? It was your first priority, right?” My father’s questions cut me deep, and I thought about all the times I’d struggled to hit in the past few weeks.

I bowed my head, trying to stay strong. “I’ve done my best at both.”

My dad shook his head. “We’re Buttars men. We don’t have time for things like that.”

My mother slapped him on the chest with the back of her hand. “Tom, that’s not true. Guys can be in plays and play sports. There’s no rule book that says you have to stick with one.”

“Colt’s in the spring play?” Nash said from the stairs.

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This night just continued to get worse.

“I don’t want to talk about it anymore.” I turned, and instead of heading up to my room, I walked outside, deciding to head to the guesthouse. I’d almost forgotten my grandpa was in there, and when I opened the door, I was surprised to see he was awake.

“Coltie boy, how are you doing this evening?”

I nodded and sat in a chair next to his bed. “I’m all right. What are you doing up this late?”

He smiled. “Well, it looks like you could use a little lotion for your skin. What are you wearing?”

I glanced down. The brown paper stuck to the brown sweats Marcy had coaxed me to wear as part of the costume. I chuckled. “It’s part of a palm tree costume. I went to a school dance tonight.”

He nodded. “Well, that’s probably the funniest thing I’ve ever seen you wear, son.” He leaned back in the hospital bed my parents had set up for him. It was easier to get him in and out of it with his hip the way it was.

“I was missing your grandmother something awful, so I figured I’d turn on one of her favorite TV shows.” He pressed a button, pausing the show. “How come you look like you lost the World Series if you just went to a dance. Don’t those usually make you happy?”

I chuckled a minute and turned to him. “Grandpa, did you ever do anything that people said you were crazy for doing?”

He smiled and laughed. “Yeah, way too many times. What kind of crazy are you talking about?”

“I auditioned for the school play.”

“Ah, the spotlights and the adrenaline as you get ready to deliver your part onstage. It’s the best feeling in the world.”

I blinked several times. “Wait, you were in a play?”

He reached out and slapped my shoulder. “Not just one, but many, Coltie boy.”

“Are you sure you’re not my mom’s dad?” I laughed, and so did he.

“Oh, son, your dad ran around with the sports crowd his whole life. He’s never known anything different. And he’s not one to change on the spot, if you haven’t noticed.”

“It’s not hard to notice that. So how did you do that and sports?”

My grandfather smiled, adjusting the blanket over his lap as he leaned a little closer to me. “Things were a bit easier to manage back then. Sports didn’t go year-round like they do now. But I’m proud of you, boy. When is the performance?”

“In a week. I still don’t have my lines down, and my team and my family are disappointed, saying I’ve stretched myself too thin.” They hadn’t said it in those words exactly, but I knew that’s what my dad was thinking. He was all about the philosophy of finding what you’re good at and sticking with it.



“Well, there’s no time like the present. I’ve got nothing but therapy to do tomorrow. Why don’t you bring out the script, and we’ll work on it?”

I grinned, feeling the best I had since I’d confronted Hazel in the hall. The urge to go over and talk to her was strong, but she’d already rejected me. I didn’t want to cause her more pain over all this, especially since I’d gone on a date with her friend. If only there was a way to go back in time and change it all.

“Sounds like a plan, Grandpa.”

No matter how much Hazel might hate me right now, I wasn’t going to give up and let her down. I’d have to work things out with Coach Maddox about the game a week from Thursday. I just hoped I could gain my teammates’ trust again, especially Nate’s.

32

Hazel

The next week and a half passed in a blur. I’d avoided Marcy and Colt as much as possible, only giving them simple commands when I saw them at rehearsals. Colt had tried to talk to me a few times, but I didn’t need a Band-Aid to cover the gaping hole in my heart. How things had gotten worse than my breakup with Seth, I’d never know.

But I was here, a mostly functioning girl trying to direct the play. We had one last practice to get everything polished, and then the final performances would take place. I’d gone home after the dance and was grateful to Adam for the conversation we’d had.

I needed to communicate things better, just like Mrs. Sanderson had been trying to

teach me, but even picturing a talk with Colt had turned into a jumbled mess I didn't think I could come back from. I'd pushed him away, and I'd never wished more for some magic to go back in time and change it.

I'd become numb to a lot of things, not feeling the rush I usually got from rehearsing and performing. But now it was Wednesday, the week of the play.

I made it to the afternoon and found myself walking through the back of the stage and checking on all the props and scenery. It was both exhilarating and terrifying to think that we'd be performing something I'd written in just twenty-four hours.

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The cast started to filter into the auditorium, dressed in their costumes and ready to go for the final dress rehearsal. With every opening of the door, I kept hoping Colt would walk through it so I could at least tell him I was sorry. I owed him that for turning away from him every time he wanted to talk. I hadn't seen him in his usual hangout places all day.

"Should we get started?" Mrs. Sanderson asked, taking her seat in the second row of the auditorium.

"I think Colt is missing," Scott said, triumph in his voice. "I knew he wouldn't make it to the final performance. It's a good thing I'm here."

Standing, I walked over and glared up at him, wishing I had another couple inches to add intimidation to the fact that I was fuming.

"He is part of this cast, and I don't care what your personal feelings are. We put this cast together in the best way we knew how with the talent we had to work with. To be honest, Scott, I debated whether or not to put Colt in as the lead because of how genuine he would be in the role." I paused a moment, watching as disbelief flickered in his eyes. "Would you like to continue with us through the performance? Because we'll manage even if you're not here."

Taking a step back, Scott's eyes dropped, and he nodded. "I'll stay."

"Good." I glanced around at the rest of the cast, letting out a deep breath. "This is our final run-through. No matter what happens tomorrow night, you've done an exceptional job of bringing this script to life, better than I thought it could be. Let's

give it our all and go from there.”

I resumed my seat next to Mrs. Sanderson, and she tapped me on the leg. “I don’t know if I’ve ever been so proud as I have at this moment.”

I frowned, trying to figure out what she was talking about. “You mean my outburst?”

She nodded. “Hazel, you have a fire in you that shouldn’t just be used on the stage. You’re a leader; you just need to remember to communicate what needs to be done.”

I tried to understand what she meant by that but had to refocus on the cast.

“Have you seen Colt?” I asked in a last-ditch effort to curb my inner turmoil about him not being here.

Mrs. Sanderson smiled. “He told me he wouldn’t make the rehearsal today because he had a few things he had to take care of.”

I panicked and turned to face her completely. “Is he quitting the play?”

She shook her head. “No, I think he’s trying to get everything lined up for it to work out this weekend. He was in my classroom practicing lines for most of the day, so I wouldn’t worry about him too much.”

So that’s why I hadn’t seen him in between classes or at lunch. I was partially relieved that he wasn’t completely ditching out on the play, but I hoped he wasn’t also using it as an excuse to avoid me until the performance took place.

I'd wiped my hands on my pants nearly five times as I waited for practice to begin. I'd been sitting out in the hot Texas sun, going through every scenario possible.

When Coach Maddox walked up, I stood, hoping I could say everything I wanted to say. I'd meant to tell him sooner, but he'd gone in for an emergency surgery to remove his appendix that had burst, causing him to be in the hospital longer than normal.

"Hey, Coach," I said, hitting one fist into my palm. "Can I talk to you for a minute?"

He sat down gingerly on a bucket of balls and turned to me. "What's up, Butters?"

I breathed out quickly, hoping I'd be able to do this without stumbling over my words. "Well, I joined the play back during the first of the season, and I probably should've told you about it then."

Coach Maddox gave me a half-smile and nodded. "Yeah, I've been waiting to see how long it would take you to tell me. I just couldn't believe you made it to the performances before talking to me about it."

"W-what? How'd you know?"

"It helps when your stepmom is the drama director." Coach Maddox grinned as the realization hit my face.

"Your stepmom is Mrs. Sanderson? Why the different last names?"

He shrugged. "I think it was easier to keep Sanderson as her professional name when they got married. She uses Maddox for everything else."

All of that finally sank in, and I tried to smile. "I want to be here for the team; I want

to help take the team to the state championship. But I also want to do this.”

The anxiety of the unknown ate at my stomach, wrapping everything up in knots.  
What would he say to that?

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He nodded as if he'd just considered all my words, and I hoped that was a good thing. "I get that. I don't think a full life is lived if we're so stuck on one thing. Then again, I should take some of my own advice and do something other than baseball."

We chuckled together for a few seconds.

"My biggest concern is that we have a game on Thursday, and that's one of the nights of the performance."

"Okay, so what's your plan?"

I hesitated, waiting for him to elaborate. When he didn't, I said, "What do you mean?" I guess I'd been expecting him to say yes or no and that I wouldn't have to make a set decision.

"What's your plan for that night? Are you playing baseball or acting in the play?"

I shrugged, not knowing what to do about it. "I guess I was hoping you'd tell me what to do."

Coach Maddox took a few steps forward, clapping his hands onto my shoulders, and shook his head. "I can't tell you what to do with your life, but I'm here to coach you through it. Not just in baseball, but the little life lessons as well."

"The game is an hour away. Is it possible for me to play in the varsity game and then leave before junior varsity?" I calculated times, knowing it would still cut things close.

“That’s something you’ll need to ask your teammates. It’s all part of the journey, and I can’t decide for them either.”

I nodded, understanding what he meant. “Can I have a minute to talk to the team before we start practice?”

“Of course, Colt. I was skeptical about this at first, but from all the strength you’re showing, I think it’s a commendable thing to go after what you want.”

I didn’t feel strong at all right then. My knees threatened to buckle, and I was sure I would throw up before I got all the words out. “Thank you, sir. I appreciate it.”

Minutes ticked by, and I’d been ready with cleats on and glove in hand since our conversation ended. The team trickled in, and it was difficult to watch as my friends looked away from me. I hadn’t trusted them with the information, and I hated this feeling of distance between us.

Once they’d all dressed and gotten ready, Coach Maddox gathered the guys into a group on the grass.

“Before we get started with this practice, Buttars wanted to say something to everyone.” He turned to me and said, “Go ahead, Colt.”

I stood, feeling as though I’d just gone down the big section of a rollercoaster and was about to lose whatever was still left in my stomach from breakfast.

“Hey, guys. So, you might’ve heard that I auditioned for the play back at the beginning of the season.” My voice shook a bit, and I had to focus on the fence behind their heads, knowing that making eye contact with anyone right now would make it so I couldn’t continue. “I’m sorry I wasn’t upfront about it. To be honest, my family is against stuff like that, except my mom. I mean, not exactly against it, but



it's one of those things that doesn't help build manly character, or so my dad says."

I was rambling. I took a breath, trying to regroup my thoughts. "I hid it because I know what winning the state tournament would mean for all of us. I didn't want you all to think I wasn't focused on the goal. I am, but I also want to finish out this performance."

A few of the guys shifted, staring at their cleats or the grass like I was making them uncomfortable. If they only knew that my limbs were pretty much frozen in place from the fear and anxiety that went into admitting all this.

"Our first play performance is tomorrow night, and I know we have a game and it's an hour away. Coach Maddox wanted me to ask you all if it's okay to leave after varsity and perform in that. It sounds crazy when I say it like that, as if you're my parents," I said, chuckling.

A bunch of the others followed suit, and I relaxed a fraction, a sliver of hope blooming that I might be able to get through this tough discussion. "Can I leave a bit early to make it back in time? Or do you want Adam to take my place?"

There was a long moment of silence before the guys started talking to their neighbors. I took a few steps back, not wanting to overhear anything that might make me feel worse about this.

The talking stopped, and Jake stood and walked over, hitting me on the back.

"The team has spoken. We appreciate the apology and the question. There's no way we can make it to the state tourney without you, man. But we're playing San Marcos tomorrow, and to be honest, you should just miss the game."

I frowned. Was this a good thing or a bad thing? I was more confused than ever.

“We’re going to win tomorrow no matter what. And if you have a performance to get ready for, you might as well stay here so you’re not late.”

I glanced at him and tried to figure out if he was serious. “You mean miss the game entirely?”

Jake glanced to Coach Maddox for confirmation and then said, “Yeah. Do this. We have three other games before the playoffs begin. Be there for your cast and then refocus and be here for us when it’s over.”

I had to move my jaw a few times, kicking back the tears that threatened to surface. The fact that they could be so chill about this made me more relieved than I’d even imagined.

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“Thanks, guys. I appreciate it.” The words were barely choked out, and as I turned away to keep from crying in front of them, a mass hit me, arms wrapping around me as the group came closer.

“We’re a family, and we’ve got to support each other.”

“Okay, let’s get going on practice, men,” Coach said. “We’ve still got a lot to cover tonight.”

“Nate,” I said before he took off. “I’m sorry, man. I messed up, and I realize that. Do you think you can forgive me?”

He reached forward and pulled me into a back-slapping hug. “Colt, I get why you hid it. But I’ll be there on the front row Friday. I need to cheer you on.” He grinned and took a step back.

“Thanks, man. That means a lot.”

We started our warmup jog, and I felt lighter than I had in weeks.

Now I just needed to figure out what I could do to resume my friendship with Hazel. It might kill me to do so, but this long without speaking to her was killing me. It was better to have her in my life in any capacity than it would be not to have her at all.

Colt not coming to the rehearsal made me worry more about the play than I had before. Maybe it was because I was so used to his upbeat personality buoying me up in the difficult moments and not having him there was messing with my brain.

But at least I'd made progress at expressing my feelings with Scott the night before. Now I just needed to survive through this day and hope that the play would go off without a hitch.

"Are you going to be okay?" Marcy asked me at lunch. I should've been mad at her for asking Colt to the dance, but she was all I had right now, except for Brynn. Marcy understood the ins and outs, the highs and lows of being in theater, helping some of my irritation to die down as I needed that lifeline.

"Yeah, I just wish Colt had been there last night," I said, shifting my food around my plate with my fork.

Marcy raised an eyebrow and laughed. "Girl, you're already bugged that we went on a date. I figured you had a crush on him the day of the dance. He's an awesome guy, but he likes you. At least I don't have to kiss him in the play. How are you going to handle fixing your relationship?"

Kissing. Why did I want to kiss him now? Maybe because I knew how much he'd really done for me and I'd flipped out when I realized I liked him.

Kissing was such an intimate thing that I'd sort of dished that training off to Mrs. Sanderson, not wanting to watch Scott and Ellie work on that aspect of the play.

"I'm going to get through this production and figure out how to make it up to him."

"Are you sure you can make it that long?"

I shook my head, not sure of anything at the moment. But an idea was forming, and I hoped it played out how I wanted it to. There were only a couple of hours until the performance, and I needed to make sure this worked.

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The lights dimmed, and I felt like all we'd done was run around making sure we had all the costumes on and all the props in place for the play. I'd seen Colt from afar and felt those butterfly shivers, different than the scared butterflies I usually got when I was about ready to go on stage. I had a plan, and tonight was the best time to enforce it.

The first few scenes went off without a hitch, and then a small trip in the middle of the fourth scene had me worried things weren't going to continue on that path. But Tanna got back up and made it look like she'd fallen on purpose. Yay for acting skills when the lights were on.

Scott and Ellie did a good job of the push and pull of a relationship, while Colt and Marcy, along with the rest of the cast, only added to that with their lines and actions.

Colt did an amazing job, and I could tell that although he was nervous, he'd gone through his lines without a mistake or a forgotten phrase, and I wanted to hug him and praise him for that. I knew what a big deal it was for him and couldn't have been happier.

Then it was time, the end of the play when things were wrapping up. Scott and Ellie had their few moments to kiss, and then it was time for Marcy and Colt to go on stage.

As planned, Marcy stood offstage, and I was now wearing her costume. I took a deep breath and walked out there, trying to enjoy every moment of confusion and hope on

Colt's face.

His eyes widened as if trying to ask what I was doing out there. He took a deep breath and began.

“Don't you know how much I've wanted this moment, since forever?”

“Wanted what in forever?” I said, biting my bottom lip so I felt like I had some sort of control over this exciting and scary moment. And then with his next words, it was like the audience melted away.

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“To tell you that I like you. That I’ve liked you since the first day you moved in and said hello to me across the fence.”

My chest constricted, just as it had the first time he’d said those words. I remembered our first meeting, when he walked by as we were moving in and I said hi.

“But we’re friends, Trey. We’ve always been friends.”

With more emotion than I’d seen on his face, he opened his mouth to speak, but instead of letting him, I pressed my finger to his lips.

In a breathy voice, I took his line and said, “But I want more.”

He studied my expression, and it was hard to figure out what he was feeling. In a moment, he swept me into his arms and pressed his lips to mine. Every inch of me felt the kiss, the nerves in my lips on fire.

The sounds of the stage fell away. What had taken me so long to figure out how I felt about Colt? Because that kiss topped any kiss I’d ever seen or experienced.

We broke apart, our foreheads touching as we gulped in the air.

As if remembering it wasn’t just the two of us, Colt slid his hand down my arm and slipped it into my palm. “Well, it took you long enough!”

The crowd laughed at that, and we ran off the stage and into the dimness of the side.

“What were you doing out there?” he asked, holding both of my hands as he studied my face once again.

“Colt, I’m so sorry for the argument at the dance, for the problems I caused and for just being a mess.”

He pulled me to him, hugging me tightly and making me feel safe once again. “Did you mean what you said on stage, though?”

I couldn’t see his face, but I could tell he was trying to be calm about things. “Every word.”

He pulled back and kissed me again, a short, feathery kiss. “This is like a dream.” Then after a moment, he asked, “Do you really have feelings for me?”

I gave him a small smile with a quick nod. “It was gradual, but I might’ve needed a little push into it since my past is so crazy and all.”

Colt leaned his forehead against mine again and whispered, “I guess the question is, Hazel Miller, will you be my girlfriend?” His lips quirked up, and he looked hopeful.

“Absolutely.”

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Colt

The night could not have gone any better than this. The baseball team slaughtered San Marcos, and Hazel was finally my girlfriend.

What a loop that had thrown me for, to see her come on stage when I’d been



expecting Marcy. But the unexpected kiss was worth every moment of pain I'd gone through over the past few days.

The play wrapped up, and we were sent out to mingle with the families who'd shown up.

A bunch of the other cast members had lots of people talking to them, and I hadn't thought far enough ahead to tell my family when the performances were.

Then I saw a wheelchair with a familiar white head of hair and a brilliant smile, and the night was complete.

"Grandpa, how did you get here?" I said, leaning over to give him a quick hug.

I stood, staring at my father and mother, trying to decide what they thought.

"Hazel called us and said she had some tickets for opening night," my mom said, getting a little teary-eyed. "You did such a fantastic job, honey. I'm so proud."

"Thanks, Mom," I mumbled and stared back at my father. His expression was stoic, something I expected with bad grades, not a play performance.

My mom stepped back, and to my surprise, my father stepped around the wheelchair and pulled me in for a hug, something I'd only had a handful of times in my life. With a few rough pats on the back, he said, "Well done, son. You made me proud."

“Really?”

He stepped back and nodded. “Of course. You did something completely out of your comfort zone, even against opposition. I might have to come to a few more of these plays. Your mother is giddy with excitement that we’re here.”

I laughed at that. Who would’ve thought my old man would change so much in just a few days?

“You still owe me a hundred bucks,” I heard someone say and turned to see Wyatt and Nash standing next to Sterling.

“What are you doing here?” I asked, surprised that my older brother would come home from college for something like this.

“To be honest, I came here hoping you’d make a fool out of yourself. Then I wanted to make sure you knew you lost the bet. But you actually did a really great job. I take back all the things I said before about theater. There is something fun about it.”

We hugged, and I had to laugh, knowing this was probably more hugging than my family had done in an entire lifetime.

“Thanks for coming, everyone. It means a lot. Here’s to the first performance and definitely not the last.”

About the Author

By day, Britney M. Mills is the wife to a builder and mom to five, but by night, she turns into an author, writing YA & contemporary romance stories.

A book lover, former college athlete, and Jane Austen fan, she crafts stories with the idea that anyone can find love.

When she's not writing, she spends time playing games with her kids, or shuttling them to and from their activities, watching Sanditon and Murdock Mysteries, or dreaming of future characters while she folds a mountain of laundry.

Subscribe to Britney's newsletter for updates, behind-the-scenes and a free book to dive into today!

Epilogue

Colt

The next few weeks were a blur, but the play had gone over well, and Hazel and I were just excited to be done with it for a bit. I had to catch up on a few assignments I'd put off the last couple of weeks of practices, but that wasn't hard now that I only had baseball practice.

As far as the baseball state tournament, we made it to the championship game. After playing our hearts out and doing everything we could to win the game, we lost in the last inning. It was a heartbreaker, as we'd had two runners on and Adam at bat. He'd sent the ball sailing toward the outfield fence, but the left fielder jumped and made an amazing grab.

It was hard to see the seniors down, but to know we'd put our all out there helped soothe that a bit.

Hazel had been to every minute of the rest of the season and to all the games we had

during summer ball. I'd never realized that having my own personal cheerleader would be such a boost. She even helped me work through my hitting slump, mostly putting balls on a tee so I could get all the kinks out of my swing.

And now, here I was, having makeup applied as we got ready for the fall play. We were doing a modern-day adaptation of Romeo & Juliet, only this time the main characters lived. And who wrote it?

Hazel, of course.

"Are you ready to go out, my Romeo?" she asked, grinning at me.

"As long as I'm with you, I'm ready for anything."