



The Wrong Prom Date

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Category: Romance

Description: Can a fake relationship land her the prom date of her dreams?

Hayley Lawson had no chance of getting a date to prom. Thanks to a rumor gone wrong, the boys at school were all convinced she was only interested in dating college guys. She certainly wasn't holding her breath waiting for someone to ask her to the big dance.

But, when her long-time crush returns to town, Hayley's hopes of landing her dream date suddenly reignite. Owen Beck was everything she ever wanted in a guy, but after years of waiting, she couldn't rely on fate alone to bring them together. If she wanted to go to prom with him, she was going to have to put her heart on the line and ask him herself. Her promposal doesn't exactly go to plan though, and when Owen's twin swoops in to 'save' her, she ends up in the arms of the wrong brother.

She might still have a chance with Owen though. Ethan knows his brother better than anyone, and he seems to think a bit of good old fashioned jealousy might just get Owen to ask Hayley to the prom himself.

A few weeks faking a relationship shouldn't be too hard. After all, Ethan is nothing compared to Owen. Right?

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1

Teagan

My fingers tapped restlessly against my desk as I waited for the bell to ring. Today was the day I'd been waiting for all year, but it was like time had gone into slow motion ever since I'd arrived at school that morning. The cast list for the school play was being posted at the end of the day, and I couldn't have been more nervous.

I glanced up at the clock yet again, and I swore the minute hand had stalled. This English lesson was going on forever, and I still had lunch and a couple of other classes to get through before I'd find out if I'd gotten the lead. Why was it that lessons always went so much slower when you wanted to get them over and done with?

Mr. Randall was slowly walking down the aisle as he handed back our latest assignments. As he passed me mine, he gave me a disappointed look, and when I saw the grade, I instantly knew why. I let out a sigh as I placed the assignment down on the table and sunk low in my chair.

My English teacher was out to get me.

It didn't seem to matter how hard I worked on the essays I submitted; they always came back with a big red D circled at the top of the page. Today was no exception, but for once, I'd been expecting the result. The auditions for our play had been the same day the assignment was due, so obviously, I'd had other priorities. Mr. Randall was lucky I'd submitted the work at all.

“Teagan, how did you do?” Evan whispered.

He was sitting at his usual desk behind me, and I plastered on a fake smile as I turned to him. “I did okay,” I replied, brushing off his question before he could dig any deeper. “How about you?”

“I got a B, baby.” He flashed his paper in my direction, showing me his grade.

“That’s amazing, Evan.”

He grinned. “I know, right? It looks like I might not fail English this year after all.”

At least that made one of us.

The bell finally rang and I shoved my assignment in my notebook, glad I would never have to look at it again. I used to be quite good at English, but lately I never had the time to put any effort into the subject. I started toward the door, but Mr. Randall stopped me before I could make it out of the room.

“A moment, Miss York?” he said.

I paused by his desk, my eyes nervously flicking in Evan’s direction.

“I’ll meet you outside,” he said, and I nodded. Mr. Randall had that look in his eyes that told me he was preparing to give me a lecture, and I really didn’t want Evan to be there for it. It was bad enough I would have to hear it.

The other students continued to file out of the room, and Mr. Randall waited until the classroom was clear before he started to speak. “This has to be your worst work to date, Teagan.”

I tried to keep a passive face, but my shoulders couldn't help but slump. "I know it's not my best," I admitted. "But the assignment was due the same day as auditions for the play. I didn't have a chance to focus on it."

He let out a long breath and shook his head. "You had two weeks to work on it, and auditions are not a good enough excuse. For a student who excels at drama, an analysis of *Romeo and Juliet* should be right up your alley."

My heart dropped at his words. *Romeo and Juliet* was one of my favorite plays, and I knew he was right. I should have kicked ass at this assignment, and I felt certain I would have done better if I'd had enough time to work on it. But Mr. Randall clearly didn't understand that free time wasn't exactly on my side, and I'd spent every moment of it during the last two weeks preparing for my audition.

"Your assignments in this class are always rushed," he went on. "But, I've seen evidence in all of them that you are capable of a deeper level of critical thinking. Unfortunately, it's never consistent. You don't check your work, and a lot of your essays are missing a conclusion. Sometimes, I suspect you don't even read the required texts."

I was pretty sure most of the kids in class watched the movies instead of reading the books, but I could hardly use that to justify my own crappy grades. I kept my face blank and glanced at the clock. We were five minutes into lunch now, and I wondered how much longer this lecture would go on. Given how disappointed Mr. Randall was, I was guessing it could take a while.

"If you don't get an A on your next assignment, you're going to fail my class," he said.

"What?" The blood drained from my face, and I couldn't stop my crafted look of indifference from dropping. I knew I was falling behind in English, but I couldn't

believe it had gotten so bad that I was now failing.

He nodded, far too seriously for my liking. “You’ve been getting D’s all semester, and you need to raise your grade dramatically.”

“But there’s no way I’ll ever get that kind of grade,” I said. “And rehearsals are going to start later this week. I’m going to have even less time for homework.”

“If you have time for drama rehearsals, you have time to complete your next assignment to a high standard.”

It was such a teacher’s response. He clearly didn’t understand how important the school play was to me or how little I cared about English in comparison. It’s not like I was going to become a poet once I left school.

“Okay, I’ll do better with the next assignment,” I said, in an attempt to bring the conversation to an end. I had no doubt I’d probably fail again, but there was little point in trying to convince Mr. Randall of that. “Can I go now?”

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Mr. Randall nodded, and I didn't hesitate as I swiftly turned to leave the room. I couldn't get out of there quick enough.

"What's with the sour face?" Evan asked as I whipped past him. He was standing by the doorway, but I was in such a bad mood that I'd completely forgotten he was waiting for me.

I quickly schooled my features, shoving down the irritation that was prickling against my skin. "Mr. Randall wanted to talk about the assignment. It's no big deal."

Evan's brow creased as he looked at me. "No big deal? You sure about that?"

I hated lying to my best friend, but I'd learned pretty early in life that no one ever really wanted to hear about your problems, and a listening ear never seemed to solve them either. If anything, it only offloaded your worries onto someone else's shoulders. My shoulders were strong enough to carry all my problems on my own and I'd never want to burden my friends with them.

I gave him a sweet smile. "Of course, I'm sure. I probably just looked a bit sour because I can't stop thinking about the cast list."

Evan laughed. "You don't need to worry. Everyone knows you're going to get the part of Belle."

Our play this year was a reimagining of *Beauty and the Beast* in a modern-day setting. I'd practically devoured the script before my audition and was surprised by how dark and gritty it was. I was actually looking forward to this play and was desperate to get

the lead. I'd been cast as the main part in some of our school plays in the past, but that wasn't a guarantee I would get the role I wanted now.

This year, the stakes seemed so much higher too. Miss Appleby had worked as a talent scout before she became a teacher. She'd hinted that she might be able to get one of her old colleagues who still worked in the industry to come watch the production. I wanted to be an actress more than anything, so it was vital I got the part.

"Well, I'm sure you're going to be Beast," I said. Evan's audition had been great. He wasn't nearly as obsessed with acting as I was, but he had a flair for being dramatic and naturally shone whenever he was on stage.

"I think Miss Appleby might worry I'm too beautiful for the part," he said, making me laugh. "What? That woman is in love with me, I swear."

I shook my head, refusing to encourage him. The boy was far too charming for his own good and already had half the staff in school eating out of the palm of his hand.

"It's your own fault," I said. "You're always complimenting her and flashing her that smile of yours."

"What smile?" he said, giving me an example of the exact smile I was talking about. He totally knew it too. He'd refined the look when we were still in kindergarten and had been getting his way with it ever since.

"Don't you use that thing on me," I said.

He slung an arm around my shoulder and drew me close. "Wouldn't dream of it, Teags. I already know you're immune to my charms."

I laughed and shoved his arm off me. "You know that's not true." I was probably the

biggest sucker in school for Evan's smile.

"Yes, it really is your greatest weakness," he agreed.

We walked into the cafeteria and grabbed trays of food before heading to our table. Since we were late to lunch, our friends were already halfway through eating their meals. I wasn't all that hungry though. Mr. Randall's lecture had been brutal enough to put me off my food and I was growing more nervous about the cast list as the day wore on.

I took the free seat next to Madi, while Evan sat across the table at Hayley's side. I was surprised to find Madi's boyfriend was sitting with us today. The two of them had been pretty inseparable since they'd started dating, but Cole usually ate lunch with the other football players. They'd gotten together because of a Bachelor-style contest our school had hosted called True Love. It had been almost a month since the contest ended, but it felt like they'd been together forever.

"What's up, Cadi?" Evan asked as he lowered himself into his seat.

Cole grinned widely at Evan's use of their couple name while Madi blanched. "Please stop calling us that," she said.

Evan chuckled. "But it's so adorable."

"No, it's not." She scrunched up her nose, but Cole wrapped one of his huge arms around her and started to nuzzle her ear. "It's not so bad, Mads," he said.

Hayley started to gag. "Dude, no PDA at lunch. I'm trying to eat here."

Cole laughed and eased back in his seat. He was one of those people who never seemed to have a care in the world, and it wasn't hard to see why he was one of the

most popular kids in school. It was also pretty clear why Madi insisted he sit with his own friends. He couldn't seem to keep his hands off her.

"And that is why it's time for you to go back to your own table," Madi told him.

"But it's all the way over there," Cole complained as he nodded toward a table in the distance. Like always, it was the loudest table in the room, crowded with football players and cheerleaders. "And I'll miss you."

He gave her big puppy dog eyes, but Madi wasn't swayed. "Up!" she said. "Or everyone at the table will mutiny, and you'll be forced to leave."

Cole gave us all a cautious look, like he seriously thought we might consider an attempt at physically removing him. The guy was huge though, and while Evan might have been tall and reasonably built, he was definitely no match for Cole.

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He finally let out a breath. “Fine, fine, I’m leaving. But you’ll be making this up to me later.”

Madi’s cheeks warmed at his comment, and he winked at her before leaving the table.

Evan let out a sigh. “You guys are too much,” he said, as he watched Cole walk away.

“Hence why he needs to sit with his own friends at lunch,” Madi replied. “I don’t want to bethatcouple.”

“What couple?” I asked.

“You know, those people who are all over each other in public and grossing everyone out.”

“I think it’s a bit late for that,” Hayley muttered.

Madi groaned. “Please don’t say that!”

“Well, you were both kind of all over the internet with theTrue Lovecontest,” she said.

I could see Madi was trying but failing not to cringe. She hated all the attention she’d received from the contest, but it had worked out for her in the end as she’d gotten the guy. I’d been one of the top three contestants with her, but even though Cole was a great guy, I didn’t have any chemistry with him. The contest had just been a means to

an end for me. It allowed me to get in front of the camera, and I'd garnered quite a large social media following because of it. I was desperate to get out of this town one day, and I'd use any means possible to do it.

"Let's talk about something else," I said, earning myself a grateful smile from Madi.

"Like the cast list?" Evan suggested.

"Anything but that." My friends were meant to be distracting me from the list, not putting it at the forefront of my mind. "Talking about the list won't make Miss Appleby post it any sooner."

"Haven't you guys heard?" The voice came from behind me, and I turned to find that Todd, who was also in our drama class, had walked up to our table. His chest was puffed out, and he had a confident look in his eyes as he took a step forward and leaned casually against our table.

"Heard what?" I asked.

"Only that Miss Appleby might be posting the cast list early today."

My heart felt like it did a backflip in my chest.

"Don't listen to him, he doesn't know anything," Evan snapped. He and Todd had a bitter rivalry, so I wasn't exactly surprised by his response.

"Be nice," I shot back at Evan, before focusing on Todd once more. "Where did you hear that?"

"I work as an office aide, and I heard her talking about it with Principal Green. She sounded really excited and was saying she didn't want to wait until after school to

post it. She kept going on about how this was going to be the best play we've ever done and she couldn't wait to make the announcement."

"An unlikely story," Evan replied. "You're usually far too busy checking yourself out in the mirror to have time to work as an office aide..."

"I'm the one always checking myself out in the mirror?"

I ignored the two of them as I looked toward the doors leading from the cafeteria. "You don't think she's put it up already, do you?"

"Nah, she said she'd send everyone an email once it was up," Todd replied. "Not that I need to see a list to know I'll be landing the lead." He shrugged, like it was a sure thing, before he turned and walked away.

"Keep dreaming," Evan shouted after him though I wasn't sure Todd heard. Evan shook his head and angrily bit down on one of his fries as he glared after Todd's retreating figure. "I didn't think I could hate that guy more. Apparently, I was wrong."

Hayley laughed. "You can't let him get to you. It's Todd."

"Do you have an arch nemesis, Hayley?" He pointed his half-eaten fry at her.

"Well, no..."

"Then, you just don't know what it's like."

I wasn't sure how either of them could be focused on Evan's rivalry with Todd when there were far more important issues at hand. I took my phone out of my pocket to check if we'd received the email yet. The device was clunky and old and took forever

to open from the locked screen. Most kids at school had the latest iPhones, but mine was a hand-me-down from when Evan had upgraded his last year. When I finally got my mailing app open, my inbox was sadly empty.

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I let out a long breath as I looked up at the others. “Well, there’s no email from her so far. God, this is torture.”

“For you maybe,” Hayley grumbled. “I’ll probably end up a tree again.”

“You’re not going to be a tree again. You haven’t been a tree since we were in kindergarten,” Madi reminded her.

“No,” Hayley agreed. “But I’ve been a bush, a chimney sweep, a dead woman, and last year, I played a baby in a pram. Hell, I even played Toto when we did the Wizard of Oz two years ago.”

Evan started laughing. “You were the best dog I’ve ever seen.”

Hayley lifted an eyebrow at him.

“What?” he said. “You got a standing ovation at the end. Everyone loved you.”

“That’s true,” Hayley admitted, a sly smile forming on her lips. She might have always landed the dud parts, but she somehow always managed to steal the show with them. I was surprised Miss Appleby hadn’t realized this and started giving her better roles.

“At least I don’t have to worry about casting,” Madi said. She’d done a lot of backstage work in our previous plays, and Miss Appleby had her running the stage management this year. “I don’t know how you guys don’t get sick performing in front of all those people.”

Evan rolled his eyes at her. “This coming from the girl who made out with her hot boyfriend in front of the entire school. Not to mention the one million people who watched the finale of the contest on YouTube.”

“Evan!” Madi groaned. “I thought we agreed to stop talking about this.”

“I agreed to no such thing.”

She slowly shook her head at him. “You know how embarrassed I am by the whole contest. I literally can’t sleep at night sometimes because I’m so mortified.”

“It was worth it though, right?” I said.

Madi started to smile, her gaze darting in Cole’s direction. He was watching our table from across the room, and he grinned at her as he caught her eye. “Yeah, it totally was,” she agreed.

My phone vibrated in my pocket, and my palms grew sweaty as I pulled it out. It could be just a text message or a notification from Instagram or Snapchat. Knowing it probably wasn’t the email I was desperate to receive didn’t stop my heart from racing though. As I focused on the screen, I saw a new email was waiting for me, and my stomach twisted with nerves.

My eyes went straight to the subject line, and my galloping heart seemed to freeze. “Guys, Miss Appleby just emailed us. The cast list is up on the drama room door.”

At once, everyone jumped from the table and ran from the room. A few people in the cafeteria laughed as they saw us scrambling for the door. It was probably quite the spectacle, but I didn’t really care if I looked stupid right now. Not when our parts had finally been posted.

We raced down the corridor, screeching to a stop when we reached the drama room. We all gathered around the piece of paper pinned to the door; my heart still raced with a combination of nerves and exhaustion from sprinting through the hallway. My name was the first one on the list, and I couldn't stop a huge smile from lighting up my face when I saw it.

I got Belle.

My whole body pulsed with excitement as I read my name next to the role I'd auditioned for. It took everything in me not to squeal out in celebration. My friends still needed to find their parts, and I wouldn't be celebrating unless they were all happy too. I turned to see the other's reactions, but they were all still reading through the list.

"I got Plumette," Hayley said. She clapped her hands and grinned at the rest of us. "I was worried I was going to be the footstall with no lines."

Madi gave Hayley a high-five. "I told you you'd get the part."

"Yeah, I'm pretty sure I was born to play a flirty French maid."

The rest of us chuckled, but my heart seemed to clench when I saw Evan's shoulders slouch.

"Gaston," he said, giving a defeated exhale of breath.

"What?" That couldn't be right. My gaze darted back down the list. Evan had delivered an amazing audition, far better than Todd, who was his closest rival. Todd had been given the part of Lumière though.

I searched the cast list until my eyes fixed on the name next to Beast. "Who is Liam

Black?” My voice was filled with accusation.

“Only the hottest movie star ever,” Hayley replied.

“I know who that Liam Black is, but I’m not talking about him. I’m talking about the Liam Black who’s been cast as Beast in our play.”

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The others all checked the list again, similar looks of confusion gracing their faces.

“Do we have a new kid?” Madi asked.

“Or has Todd finally got so pretentious he’s taken a stage name?” Evan suggested.

I shook my head though. “Todd’s playing Lumière...”

“So, it must be a new kid then...”

“But he didn’t even audition.”

Evan crossed his arms over his chest, his eyes narrowed in suspicion. “I still think it could be Todd, and even if it’s not, I’m spreading that rumor,” he said, making us chuckle.

“Well, whoever it is, I guess we’ll be finding out in drama tomorrow,” Hayley said.

The bell rang, abruptly signaling the end of lunch, and our group slowly started to disperse as everyone headed to class. I couldn’t stop myself from glancing at the cast list one last time though.

Who the hell was Liam Black?

2

Liam

This had to be one of the stupidest things I'd ever done. And I'd done plenty of stupid shit over the years.

"You sure about this?" Zeke asked.

We were sitting in my black Escalade staring out through the dark tinted windows at the streams of kids heading toward the school in front of us. It had been several years since Zeke finished high school, but he wasn't all that much older than me and was one of the few people I trusted. My assistant normally kept a cool head, but right now, there was a note of concern in his voice, and his eyes seemed to mirror my own hesitation. Zeke always seemed to get me, and if he was worried, I knew I was right to be terrified.

When I didn't respond, he kept talking. "I mean, I get that you've signed the contract and everything, but surely, there's a way around this? High school sucks."

I was going to have to take his word for it seeing as I'd never been to a regular high school before. It was probably why I'd frozen now and couldn't bring myself to step out of the car. I was completely transfixed by the sea of students all converging on the school. There were so many of them. And they'd all know exactly who I was. This wasn't going to be a normal school experience. It never could be.

Unfortunately, I didn't have a choice when it came to attending Lincoln High. The director for my next movie was somewhat unconventional, and my attendance at this school was written into the contract. If I wanted the role, I had to go through with this. To be honest, I would have done just about anything to work with Josh Winkler.

Under the Bleachers was a dark teenage drama that focused on the mystery of a student murder in a high school. Since I'd been homeschooled most of my life, Josh thought it would be a great idea to send me to a real high school for a semester. I was supposed to pretend that I was using it as an opportunity to prepare for my role. That

was a lie though. This was about PR, plain and simple.

It's not like the school wasn't getting a good deal out of it though. From what I understood, the studio had donated a decent amount of money to get me in. The choice of school wasn't exactly random either. Lincoln High was handpicked after they gained a whole heap of publicity for some bachelor-type charity contest they held that went viral a month ago. I guessed the studio was hoping it would only help with the buzz.

"I don't really have a choice. I'm committed now," I finally said. I needed to say it aloud as much to reassure myself as to reassure Zeke. I was nervous about facing such large crowds of people alone. I'd been mobbed on more than one occasion, but it never got too bad as my security team was always there to step in. I couldn't exactly have them join me for math class though. They'd be on the school grounds, sure, but I'd look ridiculous if they trailed me throughout the day.

"Have you at least thought about how you want to play this?" Zeke asked, before nodding out the window. "They all think you're some drunken bad boy."

"And?"

"And do you think that's going to fly here?"

I shrugged. I barely ever touched alcohol, let alone got drunk. It was part of the persona we'd built for me this last year though. Apparently, it was the quickest way we could change the child-star image that had been holding me back. Girls supposedly loved a bad boy, and my growing public infamy had been a massive part of landing me the role I was preparing for. I couldn't afford to let that image drop now. Not when I was finally getting somewhere.

"I guess we're about to find out," I replied.

Zeke blew out a long breath as he eyed the school. “This isn’t going to end well.”

“Maybe not,” I agreed. “But it’s the price I have to pay to star in this movie.”

Zeke slowly shook his head like he thought I was mad. He was probably right. Attending this school was crazy.

A bell rang out across the open parking lot, and it seemed to reverberate in my stomach. I couldn’t postpone this any longer. “I guess that’s me,” I said.

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“Well, the bell sure isn’t for me.”

I shot my assistant a scowl, but he simply grinned and proceeded to pass over a piece of paper. “Here’s your class schedule.”

I glanced down at the schedule without really seeing what was written on it. I’d been homeschooled with some of the best teachers in the country. Whatever subjects Zeke had selected for me, I had no doubt I could ace them.

“The faculty all know to expect you today,” Zeke continued. “If you have any problems, Boss will be out here all day.” He nodded at the other black Escalade parked next to mine. I couldn’t see my bodyguard through the dark tinted windows, but I knew he’d be sitting in the driver’s seat, vigilant as always. It was going to be weird without him shadowing my every footstep, but the school had assured us that no press would come onto the grounds. I’d believe that when I saw it, but I was willing to give independence a crack for a day. If there were problems, we could always reassess tomorrow.

“I’ll be back at the house,” Zeke said. “But just call me if you need anything.”

He was beginning to sound like a worried mom. Not my mom, of course. She was one of the reasons I was in this mess. She hadn’t even consulted me about the decision to send me to high school. And while she might have given birth to me, I was fairly certain she only thought of herself as my manager. The woman was as heartless as they came and didn’t have a maternal bone in her body. I suspected the only reason she had kids was so she could profit off them. She was currently in New York traipsing my five-year-old sister, Zoe, all over town, trying to launch her

modeling career.

As the last few kids disappeared through the front doors of the school, I pushed the car door open and jumped out of the vehicle.

“Any last words of advice?” I asked, looking back at Zeke.

He smirked in response. “Try not to piss off too many jocks,” he said. “They punch a whole lot harder than anyone in your movies, and we wouldn’t want to mess up your pretty face.”

I put my middle finger up at him, making him laugh, before I shut the door and started toward the school. Since the bell had rung, the parking lot was empty. I was normally a stickler for punctuality, but I’d been far too terrified to brave the masses and enter the school on time.

Without all the kids running about, I started to notice the school buildings. They were dull redbrick eyesores that looked more like a prison compound than a place that housed children. Did all schools look like this, or was I just unlucky?

I was barely through the front door when I encountered my first student. He was standing just inside the entrance, and I suspected he’d been waiting for me because his eyes lit with recognition. He was wearing dress slacks and a button-down shirt that made me wonder if I were underdressed. None of the other kids I’d seen in the parking lot seemed as polished as him though, so I suspected it was just the way this guy rolled. Besides, I was Liam Black, so there was no way anyone would think the designer jeans, T-shirt, and leather jacket I was wearing weren’t dressy enough. It was more likely everyone else would reconsider what they had on.

“Liam, we’ve been expecting you,” the guy said, holding out his hand in greeting. “Welcome to Lincoln High.”

I stood still, ignoring his offered hand as I continued to study him. He must have been about my age, and he seemed pleasant enough. His smile was a little too forced to be genuine, but people often struggled to be themselves around me. At least he wasn't squealing. Man, I hated it when they squealed.

"I'm Angus Fable," the guy continued, not seeming at all bothered that I hadn't shaken his hand. "Student body president." He lifted his chin a little as he announced himself, so I guessed his title meant something important around here.

"I'm going to show you around and help you find your classes today."

I really didn't want a tour guide, so I flashed him the sheet of paper I had with my schedule on it. "No need, I'm all sorted." I went to walk past him, but Angus fell quickly into step beside me. Apparently, he wasn't so easily put off.

"It's no problem at all if that's what you're worried about," Angus said. "There's an assembly in the gym to start the day, so I'll take you there first."

I blew out a long breath, quickly realizing that resisting this guy would be futile. I'd met my fair share of people who didn't take no for an answer, and sometimes, it was simply easier not to fight it. I waved him ahead of me. "Well, then, lead the way."

Angus grinned broadly, and he started to walk slightly ahead of me. It was the first genuine expression I'd seen on his face since I'd met him. Clearly, he got off on other people's deference, which would explain why he was so quick to point out that he was president of the students at Lincoln High.

"So, the camera crew got here earlier to set up for the announcement," Angus said. "None of the other students are aware you're joining us for the semester, but they're all going to be so excited."

My face paled at his comment. “None of them know I’m coming?”

“Nope.” Angus shook his head. “It’s going to be a surprise.”

The news was enough to make me want to turn around and leave. I should have known the studio would want to capture my arrival on film, and I wasn’t sure I could deal with the hysteria that such an announcement would create. The fact there would be cameras filming every second of it didn’t make me feel much better.

My mother had to have known this was happening, and it wasn’t the first time she’d left me in the dark. I hated surprises, and I despised being made a fuss of. She knew that, but like always she’d decided that keeping me ignorant was the best way forward. It was just another way she liked to control me.

“So, what do you think?” I glanced at Angus, who was watching me expectantly. Apparently, I’d just missed whatever he’d been saying.

“Think about what?”

“About introducing me to some of your colleagues in the industry,” he replied. His eyes were bright with anticipation, and it wasn’t the first time I’d seen that look before. We’d barely exchanged three sentences, and the guy wanted something from me. Typical.

“Yeah, whatever you want, man,” I replied, earning myself a broad grin. Angus was practically salivating. There was no way I’d be introducing him to anyone though. I was happy to help people out when I could but not when they clearly just wanted to use me.

Angus paused as we reached a set of double doors. One of the doors was wedged open slightly, and I tilted my head to look through the gap. I could see a brightly lit

basketball court and a mass of students sitting on the bleachers. My mouth went dry, and I swallowed as I quickly took a step back from the door, making sure I was well out of view.

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There were so many people in the gym, and I didn't have my entourage of bodyguards with me like I usually would for such a public appearance. A part of me had hoped this whole experience would be relatively normal. Sure, kids would get excited to see me at first, but maybe, they'd get over it quickly. Seeing such a big crowd of students gave me flashbacks of every mob of fans who had ever surrounded me though. Nothing about this experience was going to be normal, and I'd been stupid to think otherwise.

Angus stepped into the doorway and waited there like he was expecting some kind of signal. I could hear a woman speaking into a microphone from within the gym, but I was so distracted by my increasing anxiety that I didn't hear a word she said.

"Liam, there you are." I turned to find Gabby, one of the studio's PR girls, walking toward me. Her white-blonde hair was slicked back, and she looked a little like business Barbie in the suit she was wearing. I'd only met her a handful of times, as Mom usually dealt with this kind of stuff. "I've been calling you all morning," she said, as she stopped at my side.

"Oh, sorry about that, I left my work phone at the house." I figured it wouldn't be needed at school, but it seemed I was wrong. "I didn't know you were going to be here."

She lifted a slim eyebrow at me. "Of course, I'm here. I've got to make sure the announcement goes to plan. Did you read the script I sent through to you yesterday?"

"Script?"

Her blue eyes narrowed with concern. “What you’re expected to say when you’re announced to the school...”

“I never received it.” This day was turning from bad to worse. She must have sent it through to my mother, who was apparently too busy to tell me about it.

Gabby sighed and thrust a piece of paper toward me. “You have about two minutes until you’re announced,” she said before she went to stand in the doorway next to Angus.

My gaze immediately dipped to the page. Memorizing lines was my biggest weakness when it came to acting, and two minutes was barely enough time to read the paragraph let alone commit it to memory. I skimmed the words to get the general gist of what she wanted, so hopefully, that would be enough.

“Okay, they’re going to make the announcement now,” Gabby said, glancing over her shoulder at me. “You ready for this?”

“Sure, wish me luck.” In truth, I was far from ready, but I didn’t really have a choice. I tucked the piece of paper into the pocket of my pants and started toward the gym.

3

Teagan

Today’s school assembly had to be one of the most boring I’d ever attended. The principal had spent the last five minutes talking about the poor performance on our latest fire drill, and she had such a monotonous voice that I was pretty certain she had put half the students to sleep. All the kids surrounding me had a glazed look in their eyes and there was no way any of them was listening to a word of what Principal Green was saying.

I was too busy searching the crowd for our new student to care though. Ever since I'd seen the cast list yesterday, I'd been asking around to see if anyone had met the mysterious new kid, Liam. No one knew who I was talking about though. I'd even tried to find Miss Appleby before school this morning, but she wasn't in her office. I was desperate to grill her about who Liam Black was and why she'd cast him as Beast. It seemed I'd have to wait until drama later today though.

I stifled a yawn as I tried to focus on Principal Green again. I hadn't slept well last night. I'd been too distracted worrying about whether the new addition to our drama class could handle the part of Beast. The principal's droning tone really wasn't helping me stay awake though. Was she really still talking about fire drills? Evan elbowed me in the side as my head started to droop. My eyes snapped open, and he laughed quietly under his breath as I looked up.

"It's not nap time, Teags," he whispered to me.

"Pretty sure it is," I replied, nodding at the other students. Some of them were legitimately dozing off now, and I didn't blame them. "I could have had three coffees this morning, and I'd still be falling asleep. This is so boring."

"It's assembly. It's not meant to be exciting," Evan replied.

"I know, but can you really say it would be this boring if you were up there giving the same talk?"

"No, you're right. I'd be way more interesting," Evan agreed. "But mostly because I'd use visual aids to emphasize my points."

"What, like live flames?"

"I was thinking more like hot firefighters," he replied.

I snorted out a laugh that was far too loud and attempted to cover it with a cough as several kids looked in my direction. As soon as they looked away, I shot Evan a scowl. “You’re not supposed to make me laugh,” I hissed.

He gave me an innocent look and shrugged. “I can’t help that I’m hilarious.”

“Sure, you can.”

Hayley nudged me from my other side. “Why is Evan talking about hot firefighters?” she whispered.

“He thinks they’d make this fire drill speech more impactful.”

She nodded appreciatively in response. “He has a point. Remind the students that you’re not just running from something buttosomething when there’s a fire.”

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Evan grinned and leaned over me to give Hayley a high-five. I shook my head at the two of them. There was really no hope for either one of them.

“On to the next order of business,” Principal Green said, raising her voice and shooting a deliberate look in our direction. Hayley and Evan both shrunk under her stare, and I wasn’t surprised. Their high-five hadn’t exactly been subtle.

“We have some exciting news to share with you today,” the principal continued. “For the rest of this semester, Lincoln High will be hosting a special guest student.”

The students around me seemed to wake up at her announcement, and whispers filled the gym as people tried to guess what she meant. Was it an exchange student? If so, why make such a fuss over them? I glanced between Hayley and Evan who both looked equally as confused.

“They will be attending classes with you all, and it’s important they be treated just like any other student at Lincoln High.”

Such a dramatic announcement didn’t seem like the way any old student would be introduced. The kids in the bleachers were whispering even louder now, and everyone was starting to crane their necks and scan the gym to see where the mystery student might appear from.

“Please remember to treat our guest with courtesy and respect.” Principal Green was really on a roll now. Her voice was filled with an enthusiasm that had been sorely lacking earlier, and she had to keep speaking louder to be heard over the murmurs of curiosity that were gaining momentum throughout the room. Who the hell was this

person?

“So, with that in mind, I’d like to introduce Lincoln High’s newest addition...” She waved toward the gym doors, and in stepped the new student. He didn’t look like any of the students sitting around me though. He was tall and muscular with messy dark hair that looked like he’d been running his hands through it just before entering the room. He was wearing reflective sunglasses, but he slowly removed them to reveal the most intense green eyes I’d ever seen. A gasp caught in my throat as I recognized him. It was Liam Black. The Liam Black.

I wasn’t the only one who seemed to realize that Hollywood’s most notorious bad boy had entered the room, and within moments of his appearance, the students around me went wild. Chaos erupted as a series of high-pitched screams echoed through the gym. Some kids were jumping up on their seats and yelling out his name; others had taken their phones out and were videoing the whole thing.

I felt frozen to the spot as I watched him walk across the room though. He was wearing a dark T-shirt that stretched suggestively over his pecs, and expensive jeans that hugged his thighs. He had a leather jacket slung over his shoulder like he didn’t have a care in the world, and his lips lifted in an amused smirk as he surveyed the room of screaming fans.

There were plenty of good-looking guys at Lincoln High, but there was something about Liam’s presence that was powerful and magnetic. It felt like a king had entered the room, and I had to remind myself that he was just a guy. A really, really hot guy.

Evan had grabbed hold of my arm and was squeezing it so tightly I was starting to lose all feeling in my hand.

“Do you know who that is?” he hissed, finally drawing his gaze away from the Hollywood star who had just entered our midst. Evan was really struggling to

maintain his cool. Then again, he'd been obsessed with Liam for as long as I could remember.

"No, Evan, I've got no idea," I said, my voice thick with sarcasm.

"It's Liam Black," he said, as though the entire room wasn't already chanting his name. As I watched my best friend, it felt a little like observing a kettle that was about to hit boiling point, and I kept waiting to see if steam would suddenly erupt from the top of Evan's head. I figured we'd reached that point when he and Hayley started jumping up and down in a flurry of excitement.

"Can you believe he's at our school? Like, right here. In our presence," Hayley squealed. "My sister is going to die of jealousy when she hears about this."

"Your sister is going to die? I'm dying and I'm here," Evan replied. He stood up on his tiptoes to get a better look at Liam. With all the commotion in the bleachers, it was almost impossible to see him now. It felt like the school was about to riot.

"Why do you think he's come to Lincoln?" I asked.

"You're focusing on the wrong thing there, Teags," Evan replied, still trying to catch a glimpse of Liam. "The more important question is: do you think I'll be able to get his autograph?"

"Not sure I like your chances." He was going to have to battle through at least a hundred other kids if he wanted an autograph right now.

"Everyone, please be seated," Principal Green yelled into the microphone.

No one paid her any attention though. They were all too busy trying to get Liam's attention. It wasn't until Coach Barnett took control of the microphone and shouted

for quiet that the student body began to fall back into their seats. He was probably the only teacher who could strike fear into the heart of every student in the gym, and he stood on the stage scowling at us all until he was content everyone had settled. Most kids were probably worried he'd make them run laps in PE if they didn't comply, and knowing Coach Barnett, he probably would.

Now that my vision wasn't blocked by the bobbing heads of excited teens, I could see Liam standing next to the principal. He seemed so calm as he surveyed the masses before him, and I had no idea how he remained so relaxed despite the display he just witnessed. It was like he'd been locked in a cage of rabid monkeys and he wasn't the least bit concerned that there was a desperate look in their eyes and froth coming from their mouths. He probably dealt with that kind of thing every day though.

Principal Green murmured her thanks to the coach before taking the microphone off him. She didn't seem nearly as composed as Liam, and her eyes were a little wild after the commotion surrounding the Hollywood star's arrival. I bet she was wondering why she'd agreed to all this in the first place.

"Liam would like to say a few words," the principal said.

"Thank you, Principal Green." He took the microphone from her and started smiling at the audience. I heard several girls sigh at the sight, and I could understand why. His smile softened his chiseled features, making him look even more beautiful, if that were possible.

"This can't be real," I muttered.

"Oh, it's real," Evan replied. "Do you need me to pinch you?"

"I don't need—" Evan didn't wait for my response and tried to pinch my arm. I swatted his hand away before he managed to get hold of any skin. "Don't pinch me. I

know I'm awake."

"I don't. Pinch me instead," Hayley said to him.

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Evan grinned widely as he went for Hayley. I shook my head at the two of them and focused on Liam as he started to speak.

“Hi, everyone,” he said. His voice was smooth and deep, and it was surprisingly familiar. I guess it was because I’d heard him on TV so much over the years.

“Thank you for such an enthusiastic welcome.” He chuckled. “As your principal explained, I’m going to be attending Lincoln High this semester. I’ll be using my time here to prepare for my role in my new movie *Under the Bleachers*, and I wanted to thank you for sharing your school with me and let you know how privileged I feel to be joining you here.

“I’m not sure I’ll be the best student,” he said, earning some laughs from the audience as he glanced nervously at Principal Green. “But please be patient as this is all new to me. Thanks in advance for putting up with me, and I can’t wait to see you all in the corridors.”

The room erupted in a cheer as he handed the microphone back to the principal and began to wave at the room. This was all so surreal, and I had no idea how to feel about it. Most of the students were ecstatic, but none of this felt authentic to me. If anything, it seemed like we’d just joined the circus. There were cameras set up around the room, and they’d all been focused on Liam during his speech. Even now, I could see a woman in a suit giving Liam a thumbs-up, and I couldn’t help but wonder whether Liam had even given us the real reason why he was here or if he’d just been told what to say.

“This is so weird,” Hayley said, as we watched Liam walking toward the exit. “Like,

is this really our life right now?"

"I know," Evan agreed. "Who would have thought when we woke up this morning that we'd be going to school with a celebrity?"

"Not me," I replied. "And certainly not one with Liam's reputation."

"He's not so bad," Hayley said.

Evan gave a laugh. "I guess it depends on your definition of bad. He was photographed being removed by security from the Bellagio fountain in Las Vegas just last weekend."

Hayley shrugged. "Maybe he thought it was the pool?"

"It was midway through the fountain show," Evan replied. "Plus, everyone knows he likes to party. He looked pretty drunk in the pictures."

"The girls he was with didn't exactly look sober either," I added. I'd seen the pictures too and hadn't been at all surprised because everyone knew Liam Black wasn't a good guy. He partied too hard, drank too much, and broke girls' hearts. I had no idea what he was really doing in our school, but he definitely didn't belong here.

Now that Liam had left the gym, the crowd of students started to move down the bleachers and make their way to their first class. We were sitting toward the back of the stands and had to wait for everyone else to leave.

"So, I guess I was right," Hayley said, as we finally started to move.

"Right about what?" I asked, glancing over my shoulder to look at her.

“TheLiam Black really is the lead in our play.”

My stomach dropped at her words, and my eyes widened with concern. Hayley was right. Liam Black was going to be my costar in the school play. His name had been written next to the role of Beast, and we’d all just assumed he was some kid with the same name as the famous actor.

Hayley sounded so excited at the prospect, but I didn’t share her enthusiasm. I probably should have been elated at the news, but I was too busy freaking out. So much of my future was resting on my performance in this play and being noticed by the talent scout Miss Appleby had invited to watch it. But how would I ever be noticed when all eyes would be drawn to the Hollywood actor on the stage?

There was no way I could compete with Liam Black, and this play I’d been pinning all my hopes and dreams on was going to be a disaster.

4

Liam

“Here we are,” Angus said, waving at a bland white door. His voice was chipper, like we hadn’t just spent the last twenty minutes being overwhelmed by excited fans. I guess I’d been the only one getting mauled though. The people at this high school didn’t seem to have any boundaries, and I was really beginning to miss Boss about now.

The assembly had been a lot to handle, but it was nothing compared with the school corridors right after. Everyone seemed to want to touch me. The guys wanted to shake my hand, the girls wanted hugs, and almost everyone wanted selfies. Kids squealed when they saw me or hyperventilated with excitement. It wasn’t so bad in small doses, but when large groups pressed in on you, demanding your attention, it

could become overwhelming.

I was used to dealing with fans, but it had never felt so real. It was like I'd spent my life in an aquarium. I could see the sharks swimming in the water, but there was a nice thick barrier of glass dividing us so I had no chance of getting hurt. The walls were gone though now. I'd been dropped into the middle of the open ocean like a piece of live bait in shark-infested waters, and the students here were going to eat me alive.

"I'll be back when the bell rings to show you to your next class," Angus continued. "I can also take you to your locker then. We would have gone there first, but we're late to class after all the stops we had to make." There was an accusing look in his eyes, like I'd asked for all those intrusions into my personal space.

I didn't mind that Angus was annoyed with me though. In fact, I was surprisingly grateful he had decided to keep playing tour guide. He knew the quickest route to get to class, which was important when I was trying to avoid getting noticed. He was also like walking girl repellent and had done a great job of interrupting fans when they'd been pawing me and telling them we had to get to class.

"I'll see you soon," Angus finished before turning and heading off down the corridor. He was probably late for his own class, but he didn't rush as he walked away.

I focused on the door to the classroom, but I was hesitant to open it. The day had barely started, and it had already been a stimulation overload. I wasn't sure if I could deal with more screaming fans, and I half-expected to be mobbed when I stepped into class. I liked to believe the teachers would stop that from happening, but it was often older fans who stood at the front of the lines when I did signings. Perhaps the teacher would be leading the charge against me?

Zeke really hadn't been kidding when he'd said high school sucked. I'd barely been

here an hour, and I was already desperate to bail. I took a deep breath in and reminded myself why I was doing this. I needed the role in this movie so I could prove to the world I wasn't a kid anymore. It was an opportunity to show I could hold my own as the male lead in a serious role. It was my chance to shed my child-star image once and for all and begin my acting career for real. But, I couldn't do any of that until I did my time at this high school.

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So, I took hold of the handle and opened the door, not giving myself a chance to chicken out. As I walked into the room, my features only portrayed indifference, and no one could have guessed there was a buzz of nerves flickering in my chest.

Every head in the room snapped up, and twenty pairs of eyes looked in my direction. A flurry of gasps and whispers quickly followed.

I didn't focus on the way my name seemed to echo around the room and instead kept my eyes trained on the small woman who was sat in front of the whiteboard. Her hair was a mess and her lipstick a little uneven, but she had a sweet smile as she stood up to greet me.

"You must be Liam," she said. "I'm Mrs. Jameson, your history teacher."

I nodded along, not really sure what I was supposed to say. The apprehension that had been building all morning was still thrumming through my veins. I was on high alert and could feel the eyes of the twenty or so students staring holes into the back of my skull.

"Why don't you take a seat..." She gestured at a free chair toward the back of the room.

A little of the tightness in my chest eased at the sight. The other kids could hardly ogle me if I sat behind them. I quickly headed for the free seat, their whispers trailing behind me.

I was somewhat used to being talked about and watched, but normally it was at a

distance, and it was far more comforting when there was a wall of muscle shielding me.

I sat in the chair and relaxed back into it like my heart wasn't racing and I wasn't half-terrified of the kids surrounding me. The fact I was sitting at the back of the classroom didn't stop the students' heads from turning.

"Back to your assigned reading, class," Mrs. Jameson said. "Tanner, it appears our new student is without a textbook. Will you please share yours?"

"Sure thing Mrs. J." The huge guy in the seat next to me slid his textbook across the table so it was between the two of us. I worked out every day of my life, but this guy easily put my muscles to shame. He was massive.

"Hey, man, I'm Tanner," he said.

"Liam," I replied.

The corner of his mouth immediately lifted in a smirk. "No shit."

I grinned down at the textbook in front of me. I already liked this guy. The class appeared to be studying King Henry VIII, so I didn't pay too much attention to what was written. I'd submitted essays on him before and was more curious about the classroom I was in.

Now that the initial excitement of my arrival seemed to have died down, the students were all focused on their books. I still caught a few inquisitive glances from some of the girls, but their attention was far less intimidating when there were desks dividing us and they weren't all looking at once. I was also feeling much better now that I'd had a few minutes to breathe.

I couldn't let myself freak out like I had before. It might have been overwhelming to deal with so many fans at once, but I had a reputation I needed to maintain here. I was meant to be keeping up my bad boy façade while at Lincoln, so the next time one of the girls looked my way, I winked at her, making her smile.

Tanner snorted, having caught the interaction.

"What?" I muttered to him.

He slowly shook his head, still smirking at me. "Just be careful who you flirt with here. Some of these girls have a few screws loose and might go all Fatal Attraction on you."

I lifted an eyebrow at him. "And you think she's one of them?" I nodded at the blonde who now had her back to me.

"Dude, Laurie probably watched Glenn Close in that movie and took notes. Just a friendly warning."

I huffed out a breath and frowned. A little harmless flirting with fans was practically half my job, but I hadn't thought about the fact that these people weren't just fans. They were people I'd be stuck with every day. I was going to have to be more careful.

"Thanks," I said, nodding my appreciation. "This is all a little new to me."

Tanner grinned. "Ah, you'll get the hang of it pretty quickly," he said. "You seemed to have everything under control during the assembly."

"Maybe, but the corridor after was another story. Some of the girls here don't understand boundaries."

Tanner nodded solemnly. “Yeah, the girls here get a little excited when there’s fresh meat, and you’re like a juicy cut of sirloin steak in their eyes. I’d feel sorry for you if you weren’t a famous millionaire who dated supermodels.”

I chuckled under my breath. Yeah, Tanner seemed like a cool guy. He didn’t sugarcoat things and said what he thought. It was refreshing because I was used to dealing with people who glazed everything in a thick layer of bullshit. That was Hollywood though.

I tried to focus on the textbook, but Laurie kept looking over her shoulder at me and smiling. Each time her lips lifted, my stomach clenched in a small quiver of fear. I really didn’t need any extra craziness in my life right now, and definitely not in the form of a pretty girl. When she sent me her next flirtatious look, I ignored it and looked away.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw her smile drop, and her brow furrowed as she quickly turned to the front of the class again. Mission accomplished. For now, at least. Tanner grinned at my side. “Nicely done. Maybe I should take up acting? I could totally be the next Rambo.”

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He certainly had the bulk for it, but acting wasn't just about pulling a convincing face every now and again, and the film industry wasn't as glamorous as outsiders believed. One look at Tanner and I could tell he wouldn't put up with half the crap I had to deal with on a daily basis to get where I wanted to be.

"I don't think your bullshit tolerance is high enough for the film industry," I said.

Tanner chuckled. "Man, you got me pegged in one hit."

"What can I say? I'm observant."

He chuckled again before focusing on his work. I was somewhat jealous as I watched him. I was never given a choice when it came to acting. I'd grown to love it over the years, but I had to wonder if I would have ended up in the industry if I'd had a normal childhood.

When the bell for the next class rang, I waited for most of the students to head out before I followed. Tanner waited with me and grinned when I hesitated by the door.

"Scared of the school corridor?" he asked.

"Terrified," I replied, making him laugh. For some reason, I already trusted him. He seemed easygoing and laid-back. Not all strung up and starstruck like most people I came across. They were always too scared to call me out on my crap and felt the need to placate me constantly. I liked that this guy didn't seem to give a shit about who I was.

“You probably should be,” he agreed.

“Well, it was bad enough before this class, but now, you’ve told me the girls here are all crazy.”

He laughed and shrugged. “Maybe I like a little crazy.”

I shook my head at Tanner as my favorite tour guide appeared in the doorway.

“Liam, there you are,” Angus said, admonishing me like I was a dog that had gotten lost. “We both have a free period now, so I can show you where your locker is and give you a tour around the grounds. Then, after that, I believe you have drama class.”

This guy was worse than my mom, but he had also been my savior earlier, so I didn’t know whether to love him or loathe him. For now, I’d have to settle on tolerating him.

“Wish me luck,” I said to Tanner in farewell.

“Good luck,” he said. “You’re going to need it.”

5

Teagan

I was a bundle of nerves as I made my way toward the drama room. I’d been consumed with thoughts of Liam’s involvement in our play ever since he’d been announced in this morning’s assembly. And the more I thought about it the more I came to despise the idea.

I mean, I understood that he was a professional actor and could handle the part of

Beast. But, I couldn't displace the feeling that some injustice had occurred. He'd stolen the part from Evan and his presence in the play would draw attention away from everyone else.

I also had to wonder how seriously he would take our school play. The guy was only here until the end of the semester; surely, he'd prefer to take classes that didn't require the intense commitment of drama.

"Miss Appleby, I think you've made a mistake," I said, as I entered the drama room. I'd ducked out of math early so I could talk with her before class started. Thankfully, she was alone.

"A mistake?" she said, peering up at me from where she sat on the edge of the stage. She had a pile of scripts beside her, and she was busy writing each of our names across the top of them. The stage in the drama room wasn't as big as the one in the school auditorium, but we'd move in there for rehearsals once we started blocking out each scene.

"Yes, with the casting for our play." I folded my arms over my chest as I stared her down. I didn't get heated over much, but when it came to our drama productions, I couldn't let something like this slide. Especially not with the promise of a talent scout attending the performance.

"You're not happy with Belle?" She frowned at me with confusion swirling in her grey eyes. She was one of the quirkier teachers in our school, but probably the teacher I got along with the best. Her years working with real actors gave her so many brilliant insights into the art and the industry, and I loved how she managed to bring the best out of me in every performance. I couldn't help but feel like she'd made a terrible mistake for once though.

"It's not about me," I said. "It's about Beast. Evan was amazing in his audition and

he deserved the role.”

“Oh.” The small dent in her forehead grew more pronounced as she stared at me.

“Did you miss the assembly this morning?”

“I didn’t miss the assembly, and I know who you’ve cast. I don’t think Liam Black is right for the part.”

Miss Appleby slowly shook her head. “I have to admit I’m surprised, Teagan. I would have thought you’d be thrilled to work with an actor who has so many years of experience.”

I hated the disappointment in her eyes, but I knew I couldn’t back down so easily. “Under normal circumstances I would love the opportunity. But, this play is important, and I’m worried he won’t take it seriously,” I admitted. “You know his reputation. What if he doesn’t show up to rehearsals? Or refuses to learn his lines? What if he decides being in high school isn’t all its cracked up to be and he leaves before opening night?”

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My words were tumbling over each other as I rushed to get them out, but these were all valid concerns. Liam Black may have had an IMDb page, but what did we really know about the guy?

Miss Appleby waited patiently until I finished my rant before giving me a reassuring smile. “Why don’t you give him a chance? He might surprise you.”

I had serious doubts about that. I’d seen more than enough tabloids to know that Liam Black was bad news. He had a different girl on his arm every week, and photographs of him stumbling out of nightclubs surfaced on an almost constant rotation. At seventeen, he had already had problems with alcohol and drugs. What he needed was a stint in rehab, not a part in our school play.

Miss Appleby had never let me down before though, so I knew I should at least try to listen to her now. I’d do as she asked and give him one chance, but that was it.

I let out a long breath and nodded. “Okay, you’re right. I’ll give him a chance.”

The door behind me opened. “Is this the drama room?” I froze to the spot as I recognized Liam’s deep voice. It sent shivers down the back of my neck, and I was again struck by the familiarity of it. He was a complete stranger, but somehow, he also felt like someone I’d known my whole life.

Miss Appleby jumped up, a beaming smile covering her face as she waved him in. “Liam, come in,” she said. “Yes, you’re in the right room. I’m Miss Appleby, your drama teacher.”

I didn't turn to face him. For some reason, my body just refused to move. I had been indignant about him only moments ago, but now that I actually had to meet him, I was filled with nerves. How was I supposed to act around someone so famous?

I listened as he approached until he came to a stop at my side. He was standing so close I could smell the musky scent of his cologne, and as I glanced at him out of the corner of my eye, I had to dig my nails into my hands to stop myself from reacting. Liam was huge. He was at least a foot taller than me, and his muscles looked like they'd been carved from stone.

I might have likened his aura to that of a king when I'd seen him enter the assembly earlier, but seeing his perfect face from this close made me realize the brutal truth. Liam Black wasn't a king. He was a god.

"Nice to meet you, Miss Appleby," Liam said, taking her hand in his to shake it.

I think Miss Appleby was also feeling the effects of Liam's godlike powers because she started to blush bright red. "You've joined us at a good time, Liam," she giggled as he released her hand. "Rehearsals start for our stage version of *Beauty and the Beast* this week, and you've been cast in one of the lead roles, *Beast*."

Liam's calm and cool expression revealed none of his thoughts about the news.

"This is your costar, Teagan." Miss Appleby gestured toward me. "She's playing Belle."

Liam folded his arms across his chest and lifted one eyebrow as he glanced at me for the first time. "Costar, huh?" His voice betrayed enough of his disapproval that I very much got the picture he wasn't interested in being co-anything with me.

I bristled at his words. The guy was so conceited, and I desperately wanted to put him

in his place. Miss Appleby shot me a look though, her eyes speaking what her words could not. I'd told her I'd give him a chance. Apparently, one minute of interacting with him wasn't chance enough.

I let out a sigh. "It's nice to meet you. I look forward to working together." There, I'd been totally pleasant and chance giving.

The corner of his lips lifted just a fraction. If I hadn't been watching them, I might not have caught it. He clearly found something about my words amusing, but I wasn't sure why. All I knew was that I didn't want to amuse Liam Black. I didn't want to do anything with him—and that included acting together in our play.

I suddenly realized I was focused on his lips, and I quickly lifted my gaze toward his eyes. But looking into his eyes was a mistake. His expression may have seemed bored and aloof at a glance, but his eyes were different. They were the color of a tropical forest in the depths of a storm, and they almost seemed to glow brighter as I looked at him. They were charged with an intensity that the rest of his expression seemed to hide.

His eyes entranced me and were almost impossible to look away from. It felt like I was getting a rare glimpse into the soul of the smug guy before me, but as I searched his eyes, I couldn't see his arrogance at all. He was looking intently at me too, and I wondered if he could tell that I was hiding just as much behind my forced smile as he appeared to be with his air of disregard.

The bell rang, waking me from the spell he'd held me under, and I quickly looked away. My heart was racing, and I felt a little breathless. One intense look from him and my heart was aflutter. It was mortifying.

"Can I start looking over the script, Miss Appleby?" I asked. My voice was light and barely louder than a whisper. With a few words, Liam had crippled me, and with one

look, he'd left me feeling completely exposed. I'd been prepared to meet the bad boy of Hollywood, but I hadn't expected that he would get to me so much.

Miss Appleby smiled and passed over my copy of the script before I quickly retreated from the stage to go sit in one of the chairs facing it. Liam also took a script and went to sit in one of the chairs at the far back of the room. I was glad he hadn't chosen to sit close to me. I'd already held my tongue around him once today, and I wasn't sure I could do it again.

Students slowly began to file into the room, and I felt some of my equilibrium return as the drama room filled with chatter. Evan was one of the first ones to arrive, and he immediately came to sit next to me, flinging an arm across the back of my chair.

"You snuck out of math early," he said with a disapproving tut. "Do I even want to know why?"

"It's math. Do I need a reason?"

He started to respond, but as he did he finally noticed Liam sitting at the back of the room and his eyes widened. "Hello, reason."

I poked him in the stomach, drawing his attention back to me. "He's not the reason," I hissed. "Well, he is, but not for the reason you might think."

"And what might I think?" Evan asked, whispering like we were conspirators.

"Probably something insidious."

“Nice word, Teags.” Evan lifted a hand for a fist bump.

I ignored the offered hand. “I’m being serious here. I wanted to talk to Miss Appleby because I feel like you were robbed of the part.”

“Uh, Liam Black can rob me any day he wants.”

I rolled my eyes. “Of course, you’d say that,” I muttered.

He glanced at Liam over his shoulder once more with a dreamy look in his eyes. When I followed his gaze, I could kind of see the appeal. Liam was completely focused on his script. His expression was far gentler than it had been earlier, and he looked kind of innocent as he chewed on a thumbnail while he read.

“I think this might be the best day of my life,” Evan said.

It definitely wasn’t mine. Liam might have been captivating, but I really didn’t know what to make of him. He’d made it clear he didn’t think I was worthy of acting opposite him, and I had a host of other valid concerns about how this would play out.

As more students entered the room, my worry only grew worse. Everyone was watching Liam with stars in their eyes. Girls were whispering to each other and giggling, and guys were looking at him as if they were wondering how to approach him and become his new best friend. How was anyone in this room going to act in our play if they all kept going gooey-eyed whenever Liam was around? This was a nightmare.

Hayley and Madi entered the room and came to sit on the other side of me. “Did you guys see who’s sitting in the back row?” Hayley hissed excitedly in greeting.

“Yeah, we saw,” I said. “And I’m worried Evan’s going to get their names tattooed on his chest if he sticks around much longer.”

Evan slapped a hand against my arm. “I am not.”

“Dude, you totally are,” Hayley said with a snigger. “You look just like that emoji with the love hearts in its eyes right now.”

“I can’t help that he’s even hotter in real life. You guys think he’s hotter in real life, right?”

“He is,” Hayley agreed.

“He looks lonely,” Madi said. “Do you think we should see if he wants to sit with us?”

“No,” I said, as Evan and Hayley both replied, “Yes,” at the same time.

Madi looked like she was going to get up to go invite him over, but thankfully, she didn’t get a chance as Miss Appleby cleared her throat, drawing the attention of the room. She was smiling broadly, and I knew it was because she was excited about our new classmate. She and everyone but me it seemed.

“As you can see, we have none other than the very talented Liam Black joining us this semester,” she said. “I hope you will all make him feel welcome.”

Some people started clapping, but I refused to join in. Were we clapping his very existence now? If he were any other new kid, there was no way the class would be

giving him a round of applause.

“We’ll be starting rehearsals this week, and today, we’ll begin by doing a read-through of the script,” Miss Appleby continued. “Now, if you all want to drag your chairs into a circle, we’ll get started.”

Chairs scraped against the floor as people started to follow her instructions. I quickly moved into position, keeping myself between Evan and Hayley. The others in class weren’t hurrying, and it was quite comical to watch as several of the girls waited to see where Liam was going to put his chair so they could swoop in next to him.

He finally settled his chair in a position across the circle from me. It looked like there was going to be a battle to the death as two girls tried to fight for the free position next to him.

I snorted at the spectacle and Liam’s eyes snapped up to meet mine. Their color was so bright and luminous, but I quickly looked away before I could see what he was thinking through his expressive gaze. I didn’t need to know what Liam thought of my laugh.

We started reading the script from the top, and I quickly immersed myself in the experience. As the lead in the play, I had most of the lines, so I found there was little time to worry about Liam while I was reading them. Everything seemed to be going fine, but, as we read, I began to realize that Liam wasn’t putting in any effort.

I knew it was just a read-through, but whenever I glanced at Liam he was slumped in his chair, his eyes barely focused on the script. He missed half his lines because he wasn’t paying attention, and when he did read them, his buttery voice sounded bored. It was clear he wasn’t interested, and he was only confirming my worst fears. I knew this was just some random school play to him, and we weren’t a blockbuster movie or some cult-indie flick. But did he really have to show so much visible disdain toward

it?

My voice grew tense as we continued reading, and I couldn't even look at him when we were exchanging lines. By the time the bell rang, signaling the end of class, I was ready to throw my script at the guy.

He stood up immediately at the sound of the bell and sauntered out of the room, like he hadn't just decimated his role in the play. I wasn't going to let him get away with it through. I jumped up, a fire burning inside me that I hadn't felt in a long time.

"Teags..." Evan said, his voice filled with concern. "Why do you look like you're about to lose your shit?"

"Because I am," I growled. "I'll see you at lunch, Evan. There's a wannabe actor in the corridor who needs a piece of my mind."

Liam

I couldn't get out of the classroom quick enough. What the hell had Zeke been thinking signing me up for some school play? He knew I struggled with learning large chunks of dialogue. I could manage committing lines to memory for a few scenes before a camera, but a whole play? That was damn near impossible.

I'd been in a foul mood the entire lesson, and it was all I could do not to storm from the room the moment the teacher announced I had one of the lead parts. I didn't sign up for this, and there was no way I was making a fool of myself for some high school play. What would people say if they found out the truth about my crappy memory recall? I'd probably be the laughingstock of the film industry and would be lucky if I ever landed a job again.

God, I'd been a complete wreck in the classroom. Acting had always felt as natural as breathing, but thinking about performing in front of an audience had completely frozen me up. I couldn't stop picturing myself standing under the bright stage lights and forgetting my lines before an auditorium of people. It was only a read-through, but I couldn't help but freak out. The other students in there must have thought I was completely crazy.

I was so riled up I barely noticed the stares I was receiving as I stormed down the corridor. I must have looked pretty unapproachable because no one was asking me for selfies or autographs this time.

My annoyance had consumed me so much that I almost didn't notice as a girl stopped in front of me, forcing me to come to a halt.

“Excuse me.” I tried to walk past her, but she moved to bar my way. I focused on her face and was surprised to find it was the blonde girl from drama class.

I spent time around a lot of beautiful people every day, but this girl put half the models and actresses I knew to shame. Her skin was pale but radiant, and she had huge green eyes that seemed to suck me in. She’d been introduced to me as my costar, but if I had my way, there was no chance of that happening.

The girl’s eyes narrowed in a scowl as she stood her ground and jabbed a finger into my chest. “Who the hell do you think you are?” Her voice quaked with anger, which was an emotion I wasn’t used to dealing with when it came to fans.

I immediately tried to defuse the situation and gave her a smile. “I’m Liam Black, beautiful.”

I regretted the words almost the moment they left my lips. They didn’t come out how I intended, and even to my own ears, I sounded like a pretentious jerk. I wasn’t good with girls—at least, not real girls like the one before me. And that line was a prime example of how bad I was at talking to them. It was exactly the kind of crap I was expected to say as Liam the playboy of Hollywood though. An act I was supposed to be keeping up in this school.

“I know who you are,” she growled. “That’s not what I mean.”

She clearly wasn’t a fan of mine. I wasn’t sure what I’d done to incite her anger though, and I didn’t really want to stick around to find out either.

“Well, since we’ve both established who I am, I don’t see the problem.” I tried to move past her once more, but she was determined to keep my attention and stepped in front of me again.

“Let me elaborate for you,” the girl said. “Your reading of Beast back there was pathetic. We take our performances at Lincoln High seriously, and I won’t let you ruin our play.”

A genuine laugh escaped me. “You think I’m going to ruin your play? I’m going to be what makes it.” I wanted to slap a hand against my forehead as the words slipped from my mouth. Had I really just said that aloud? I mean, it was probably true, but I sounded like a complete tool. I wasn’t even planning on continuing with the play, and the rehearsal had only cemented the decision in my mind.

“Good luck convincing anyone of that,” she growled. “I’ve seen slugs portray more emotion than you just displayed.”

“Slugs? Really?” I couldn’t stop a grin from forming on my lips. She was kind of like an angry lion cub. She was trying to roar at me, but instead, it was coming out as an adorable growl.

I might not have given the read-through much effort, but I wasn’t sure why she cared so much. It was just a read-through, after all. It’s not like it mattered.

“I don’t know why you’re so concerned,” I told her. “It’s just a school play.”

“Just a school play?” She looked at me like I’d just slapped her across the face. “Just a school play?”

“Yes...”

“This is not just some school play.” I had officially awoken the kraken. “Did you even audition for the role?”

“Well, it is a school play, and I think I’ve more than proven I’m capable of handling

the role,” I fired back.

“That’s not what I asked...”

“I don’t really care what you asked,” I replied. This girl was bringing out the absolute worst in me. I couldn’t seem to say anything right around her, and I needed to leave before some of the students near us decided to get out their phones and start filming our argument. I didn’t need any viral videos of me being a jerk making the rounds.

“As fun as this little interrogation has been, I’m going to go now.” I placed my hands firmly around her arms and shifted her so she was standing to the side. She felt so small within my grip, and she moved easily as I guided her out of the way. Her eyes were wide from the contact, and I seemed to have surprised her enough to shut her up for a moment. She was really stunning when she wasn’t spitting fire in my direction.

“Catch you around, spitfire,” I said.

Anger flared in her eyes at the name, and I made a quick exit before she could resume her verbal attacks. I should have been outraged by the fact she’d verbally attacked me in the corridor, but I found myself grinning as I walked away. I was always surrounded by girls who pandered to me and told me exactly what they thought I wanted to hear. None of them ever spoke their mind, but I actually found I liked it. It was a shame she’d probably never want to speak to me again.

“Liam, there you are,” Angus said. He was puffing as he caught up with me.

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“Ah, Mr. President,” I replied. “I worried I’d lost you.” Worried; hoped—same thing really.

Angus pulled his shoulders back, puffing his chest out even further than usual. “Well, I’m here now.”

“I can see that.”

“We have lunch in the cafeteria,” Angus continued. “You can come sit with me.”

I think I’d rather go back for another round with the kraken. “Actually, I’ve got to make a call. If you just give me the directions to the cafeteria, I can find my own way there.”

Angus faltered in his steps. “I can stay with you while you make your call.”

I lifted an eyebrow. The guy was like a dog with a bone, and I was getting a bit fed up of being chewed on. “It’s a call with the director of my next movie. A private call.”

“Oh.” His shoulders sank. “Well, the cafeteria is down this corridor and through the large double doors on the left. Come find me.”

I let out a breath as Angus disappeared before I ducked into the men’s bathroom that was nearby. Thankfully, it was empty. I quickly pulled out my phone. Zeke answered on the first ring.

“Need me to come rescue you?” he asked.

“How did you know?” I sighed.

“It’s high school,” he replied, as though it was obvious. “So, am I coming to get you?”

A small, pathetic part of me wanted to say yes, but I hadn’t even finished the first day, and there was no way I could give in so easily. “Nah, I’m not ready to throw in the towel just yet. I do have a favor to ask you though.”

“Yes...”

“The drama class I’m in. I need you to get me out of it.”

Zeke laughed like he thought I was joking. When I didn’t join in with him, he went quiet. “You’re not kidding, are you?”

“No. They’re doing some play and have cast me as the lead, but I want no part in it.”

Zeke hesitated on the other end of the line. “I’ll have to check with the studio first,” he said. “They selected your subjects.”

“I don’t care what they picked. I need you to get me out of it. You know I don’t have much stage experience.”

“Okay, okay. I’ll do my best,” Zeke said. “How’s school beside that?”

“Well, the kids here are intense and don’t seem to get personal boundaries.”

“Too many girls throwing themselves at you?” I swear I could hear him smiling on the other end of the phone.

“You’d think it would be a good thing,” I grumbled, drawing another laugh out of

him. I sometimes got the feeling that Zeke rather enjoyed watching me put up with this kind of stuff.

“Shouldn’t you be in class?” he asked.

“It’s lunch right now.”

“And you’re on the phone with me instead of eating? You must be overwhelmed.”

I smiled at his joke. I was known for my healthy appetite. I spent hours in the gym every day though, so it was to be expected. My stomach rumbled in complaint as if it suddenly realized it was being neglected.

“You’re right, I better go eat. You call the studio and get me out of this play.”

“I’m on it, have fun,” Zeke said before hanging up.

I took a moment before lowering my phone and putting it back in my pocket. It was time to face the masses once more.

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It wasn't until I entered the cafeteria that I realized exactly how terrifying that notion was. Until now, I'd only had encounters with small gatherings of other students. I'd passed them in the hall and sat in small groups of them in classrooms. But the cafeteria was a whole new level of frightening, and the moment I walked into the room, every head seemed to turn to me.

"It's Liam!" the girls at the table closest to me squealed.

I blanched and looked around for an escape. The girls were already jumping up from their table, and I knew I only had seconds before I was surrounded. Normally, I had bodyguards when I was out in public, and they were more than capable of dealing with crowding fans. I wasn't used to handling them on my own. One or two were fine, but a dozen or more was another thing altogether.

Just as the girls were about to reach me, a large figure appeared at my side. "You're about to get mauled, you know that, right?"

I let out a breath of relief as I recognized Tanner. "Occupational hazard," I said, making him laugh.

The girls closed in but hung back slightly as they glanced at Tanner. It looked like they were ready and willing to accost me when I was alone, but slightly less inclined when I had backup.

"Hey, Liam," the girl who stood slightly out front of the others said to me as she fluttered her eyelashes in a flirtatious way. There was always one that was bolder than the rest of the pack. "Will you take a photo with me?"

“Amber, Amber, Amber,” Tanner said with a slow shake of his head. “Are you really going to bother him for a photo at lunch?”

“Well, yeah,” she said, beginning to blush. “What’s it to you, Tanner?”

She folded her arms over her chest and glared at him. I, on the other hand, thought I’d found a new hero.

Tanner tutted. “If you leave this conversation learning only one thing, it’s that you should never interrupt a guy when he’s on a mission to get food. Come on, Liam, let’s get you in the lunch line before you waste away before our eyes.”

I quickly followed after him, more than happy to have an excuse to leave. As we walked across the room, I found it interesting that everyone we passed greeted Tanner with a smile. People genuinely seemed happy to see him, and given what I knew about the guy in the short time since I’d met him, I could see why. He had an easy, honest air about him that made him hard not to like.

“And I thought I had it bad,” Tanner said, glancing over his shoulder at me as we fell into line for food.

I lifted an eyebrow at him, confused at what he was implying.

“I’m joking,” he explained, when he saw my expression. “The girls back there. Is it always like that?”

“Oh, right.” I shook my head. “I don’t spend a lot of time in public, so not normally.”

“Still, pretty crazy,” he said. “I can see why you’re afraid of the corridors.”

I scuffed my shoe across the ground as I shrugged. My life was far from normal, and

being in this school only seemed to be highlighting that fact for me. I was actually jealous as I looked around the room at the students. They all seemed so carefree as they laughed with their friends. I'd spent my entire life in the spotlight, and I wondered what it would be like to be in the shadows for a while. To be invisible.

"So, the food here's not all that great," Tanner said, drawing my attention once more. "I recommend avoiding the mystery meat dish and selecting one of the options that actually looks like what it's supposed to be."

I saw him pointing at a strange brown sludge, and I assumed that was the mystery meat he was talking about. I decided to follow Tanner's advice. Pizza wasn't exactly allowed in my strict diet, and I was sure my trainer would punish me for it later, but I was starving, so it would have to do.

Tanner took me over to a table and introduced me to everyone sitting there. I didn't remember any of their names, except for a guy named Cole, but only because Tanner gripped his shoulder and announced him as his best friend. Cole rolled his eyes at his friend but held out his hand to shake mine.

"So, you made it halfway through the day," he said in greeting.

"Looks like it," I replied, returning his easy grin as I released his hand. "Not sure I'm still in one piece though."

Tanner and Cole both laughed. "It should get easier once the initial excitement dies down a little," Cole said.

I hoped he was right, but even if he was, who knew how long that might take.

"So, why Lincoln High?" Tanner asked.

“I think there must have been a fan of your True Love contest in the studio,” I replied.
“They were the ones who made the decision.”

Tanner laughed and nudged Cole in the side. “Dude, even people in Hollywood watched you make an idiot out of yourself.”

“You were in the contest?” I asked him.

Cole nodded. “I guess so. I’m pretty happy with how it all turned out though. I got the girl, didn’t I?” His gaze seemed to drift across the room as he spoke, and a subtle smile lifted his lips as he stared at a brunette who was sitting at another table chatting with her friends. She seemed to sense him watching her and looked over. The moment their eyes collided, his smile widened into a grin, and he winked, making her blush.

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Tanner rolled his eyes at the interaction before focusing on me. “Well, whatever the reason for you being here, Liam, we’re glad to have you.”

“And the rest of this semester doesn’t seem nearly long enough. Are you sure you can’t stay longer?” I looked across the table as a soft, sultry voice drifted toward me. It was the girl I’d winked at earlier today who had spoken. She was the one Tanner had warned me about and was leaning across the table, pressing her chest up so as much cleavage as possible was visible.

“No, I can’t stay,” I replied. “I’ve got to start on my next movie.”

She pouted in response. “Well, I’m really looking forward to getting to know you in the short time we have together, Liam.” The way she purred my name made me want to run away—hard and fast and never look back.

I swiveled in my chair to focus on the two guys at my side. Hopefully, if I didn’t look in the girl’s direction, she would back off a bit.

Tanner chuckled as he watched. “Calm down, Laurie, I think you’re scaring him.”

I didn’t look to see her response, because Tanner was right. I was scared, and I had no idea how to deal with someone so forward. Most of the interactions I had with girls were fake, so I wasn’t used to it. I was either acting with them on set or posing with them in front of the paparazzi outside nightclubs. The whole point of those excursions was to help develop my image, and the relationships were as fleeting as the public interest in the tabloid stories they created. When you considered the fact that my manager was also my mom, and she was the one who organized those outings, it

became really unromantic—and a little disturbing.

I'd never even had a girlfriend. Not that I'd ever admit that embarrassing truth aloud. I could only imagine the stories that would run if the tabloids ever found out what a fraud I really was. I needed to get myself together fast if I wanted to stop that from happening. My PR team would want me to be all over girls like Laurie. Instead, even these guys I barely knew could see I was uncomfortable.

I huffed out a long breath. "It's been a long day."

"Bet you can't wait to do it all again tomorrow," Cole said.

Not even close. I was dreading it.

7

Teagan

"Mom, I'm home," I called into the house as I closed the front door behind me. She didn't answer, but I wasn't exactly surprised. It had been a long time since she'd welcomed me home after school.

I traipsed through the house, ditching my bag down on the kitchen counter as I went to get myself a snack from the fridge. The moment I opened the door though, my heart plummeted. The shelves were empty again.

"You've got to be kidding me," I grumbled as I slammed the fridge door shut and fished out the jar of peanut butter I kept hidden under the kitchen sink. I dipped my finger into the jar and licked the peanut butter off it a few times before putting the jar away. Even my emergency food wasn't cutting it today.

“Mom!” I yelled out.

Again, I received no response. I knew she was home because her car was in the drive, and I was guessing she was in her bedroom. Taking the stairs two at a time, I stormed up to her room. Surprise, surprise, she was passed out on the bed. I yanked the blinds open, dousing the darkened room in sunshine.

She groaned and threw a pillow over her head. “Teagan, will you cut that out?”

“There’s no food in the house again.” I folded my arms across my chest as I glared down at her.

“But I just did the shopping,” Mom grumbled.

“That was over a week ago,” I replied. “Funny thing about food. It doesn’t last forever, and you’re supposed to go buy some more once the groceries run out.”

She groaned and finally pushed the pillow off her face so she could look at me. My mom had always been beautiful, and when I was younger, people often joked that I could be her mini-me. We didn’t look quite so similar anymore, and even her beauty couldn’t mask the heavy bags under her eyes, her constantly reddened cheeks, and the pallid tone of her skin.

My dad leaving two years back had been the catalyst for my mom’s downward spiral, but he wasn’t entirely to blame. Mom had been dealing with her own demons for years. Now that my father was gone, she no longer felt the need to keep them caged.

I sometimes wondered if I should have left with Dad. It would have meant moving out of state and living with his bitchy new girlfriend, but that didn’t seem like the worst option on days like today. Life would have been miserable without my friends, but at least there would be food in the house.

“Take the credit card to get some things,” Mom said. “And close the blinds again on your way out.”

I huffed out a breath and searched through my mom’s bag for her wallet. I took the credit card before leaving the room without shutting the blinds. A little sunshine would do her some good. Maybe next time she went out she would remember this and reconsider drinking so much. Not that I thought that would ever happen.

“I can’t wait to get out of here,” I muttered as I headed back to the front door.

Our house had once been the kind of stylish place you saw in décor magazines. Everything had been white and pristine, with designer furnishings and high-end appliances throughout. It didn’t look like that anymore.

The front garden was overgrown, and the pool out back was green and half-empty of water. Mom had been selling off our nicest things over the years, so the house now looked sparse, like we’d only just moved in. Every room used to look like an art gallery, but the walls were now sadly bare.

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There was only one painting left out of what used to be an extensive collection, and it hung in the foyer entrance. My dad had commissioned the painting on the day I was born. It had been the middle of one of the coldest winters we'd ever seen, and the painting depicted a girl in a red coat in the depths of a snow-covered forest. He often smiled and said I was the girl in the picture. At least, he used to say that back when he lived with us. That was probably why the painting felt so special to me. It was my one remaining connection to a happier time in my life. I wasn't sure what I would do if it disappeared along with the others, but it was probably only a matter of time.

I think Mom figured it was easier to sell her things than to get a job, but I was beginning to wonder how much longer that would last. The child support checks Dad sent her every month barely lasted two weeks, and it wasn't because he was being stingy. Mom just refused to settle for cheap vodka.

I was still riling with anger by the time I reached the shops. Admittedly, the local grocery store was only a short walk down the street, but I'd hoped getting out of the house would help. I calmed somewhat as I walked through the front doors and was greeted by Mrs. Maisey.

"Teagan, my dear, how are you?" the old woman said in greeting. Mrs. Maisey had owned and run the store with her husband for as long as I could remember. The prices were slightly higher than the chain supermarket in town, but even though we were struggling for cash, I refused to spend my money elsewhere.

"I'm fine thanks, Mrs. Maisey," I replied, giving her a warm smile. Something must have been seriously off with my acting skills because she frowned in response.

“What’s wrong?”

I grimaced at the question. I was always so good at pretending things were fine when they most certainly weren’t. But this week, I’d been all over the place. I still couldn’t believe I’d yelled at Liam Black at school today. One of my most important rules in life was to keep my worries suppressed. I’d not only broken that rule—I’d completely shattered it.

“Just having a tough day, I guess.”

“Problems at home?” she prompted.

My gaze flicked to my hands as I considered how to answer. Mrs. Maisey was one of the few people in town who knew about my mom’s problems with alcohol. It was a little hard to cover up when Mom always stumbled into her store either half-drunk or hungover. Funnily enough, Mom wasn’t my biggest problem for once.

“Actually, it’s just stuff with school,” I said. “I’m not doing so well with one of my subjects, and we’re starting rehearsals for the school play. I’m a little overwhelmed, I guess.”

Mrs. Maisey gave me a bright smile. “Well, you’re one of the most dedicated kids I know. If anyone can handle the extra workload, it’s you.”

I wanted to believe she was right, but I just couldn’t seem to manage it. I pasted another smile on my face and nodded. This time, the smile seemed to do the trick, and Mrs. Maisey relaxed.

“I’ll leave you to your shopping,” she said.

I couldn’t escape her quickly enough. I didn’t like opening up to people, but Mrs.

Maisey always seemed to see past my fake smiles and false words. It was like some kind of superpower, and she always seemed to know when things weren't going well for me.

I grabbed a basket and started moving up and down the grocery aisles. I wasn't planning on buying much, just enough food to get us through the next couple of days. Mom rarely let me borrow her car, so unless I could carry what I bought with me, it was staying in the store.

I was in my own little world as I wandered along the canned goods aisle. The soft sound of music played from the radio by the checkout, and I hummed along to the old Coldplay song that filled the air. I felt quiet though as I heard two people talking in hushed voices in the next aisle. Sometimes, when people tried to talk in quiet voices it only made their words clearer, and this seemed to be the case right now.

"I can't believe you've dragged me to this place," a guy hissed.

"Well, it's the only place in town that stocks those protein bars you like, so I didn't have much choice," another guy responded. "Besides, it's close to the house. If it offends you so much, you could have stayed in the car."

The first guy snorted under his breath. "You know I hate being cooped up," he said. "And it's not like there's anyone in here. This place is dead."

I kept wandering down the aisle, and the voices moved out of earshot. I was reaching for a packet of pasta when the two guys turned around the corner and started walking toward me. I fumbled the pasta in my hand and dropped it on the floor when I saw the face behind one of the voices.

"What the hell are you doing here?" I growled as Liam Black walked toward me.

His eyebrows shot up with recognition, and the guy at his side started to smirk as he looked between us. The guy couldn't have been much older than we were and was very good-looking. He might not have had Liam's bulk, but he made up for that in height. He practically towered over me.

"Friend of yours?" the guy asked Liam.

I didn't really want to see his reaction, so I ducked down to grab the pasta I'd dropped on the floor. Thankfully, the bag hadn't split from the fall.

"She's just some girl from the high school, I guess," Liam explained as I placed the pasta in my basket.

I scowled at the way he dismissed me so easily. How he talked about me like I wasn't even there. This guy really thought the world revolved around him. I knew Liam recognized me. I'd seen it in his eyes when he'd rounded the corner and found me standing in the aisle.

"And does the girl have a name?" his friend asked, coming toward me. He sounded pleasant, and I got the impression he wasn't nearly as terrible as Liam. In that moment, I decided to show Liam just how unforgettable I really was.

"Teagan," I said, slowly peering up at him. I'd pasted on my smile once more, and the guy's eyes widened a little as he took it in. I was giving him what I'd dubbed my "mega watt smile." I'd practiced a million different expressions in the mirror over the years, but this was the one that made people pay attention to me. The smile exuded warmth, and my eyes sparkled with humor. It was the one I reserved for special occasions, and I knew it transformed my face. Even Liam seemed a little startled by it. Not that I was really focusing on him though.

"What was your name?" I prompted the guy, when the two of them had been staring

at me in silence for a few seconds longer than was polite.

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“Zeke,” he replied. “I’m Liam’s assistant.”

“You poor thing,” I said, making him laugh.

“It’s not so bad,” Zeke replied, giving Liam a nudge. Liam was too busy staring at me to notice though. It was like he’d only just seen me for the first time, and I had to try really hard not to roll my eyes at him. Heknewwho I was. We’d been introduced in drama today, read lines together for over an hour, and I’d yelled at him in the corridor.

“Well, it was nice to meet you, Zeke,” I said. “I guess I’ll see you around.”

I walked away before Liam could open his mouth and start being an ass again. I’m not sure he was even trying to be rude when he talked; he just naturally had an obnoxious personality. It was lucky he was famous because I doubted he’d have any friends if he weren’t.

Once the two boys were out of sight, I rushed toward the cash register. I had no idea if I’d picked up everything I needed, but I didn’t want to risk bumping into that arrogant Hollywood idiot again. I had far more important things to do with my time than hang around and be insulted by Liam. For one thing, I needed to get home and start learning my lines.

“Who were those young men you were talking to?” Mrs. Maisie asked, as I placed my groceries in front of her.

I glanced over my shoulder and found Liam at the end of the aisle, watching me. It

was almost like he was waiting to hear my response, and I already had the perfect reply. I tried not to smirk as I turned to face Mrs. Maisey once more.

“Just some guy from school and his friend, I guess.”

8

Liam

“I see you’re already dazzling your peers with your vibrant personality,” Zeke murmured as I watched Teagan pay for her groceries.

I drew a hand down my face and huffed out a breath as I turned to him. “Gee, thanks.”

He laughed and shook his head at me. “Dude, that girl has you all kinds of irritated.”

“She doesn’t have me irritated.” But even as I said it, he gave me a knowing look, and I could tell he was right. I was a prickling ball of frustration right now.

“Uh, yeah, she does. I can see how twisted your panties are from here, and you’re taking it out on poor old me. Even Teagan felt sorry for me.”

“Please don’t mention her name.”

Zeke’s lips formed a wide grin. “You like her, don’t you?”

“I don’t even know her.”

Zeke shrugged. “Doesn’t mean she doesn’t intrigue you.”

My expression shut down at his suggestion. If I continued to object, he would only take it the wrong way, and I decided the best course of action was to say nothing on the subject at all.

“Did you find those protein bars?” I asked instead.

“Got them right here,” he said, waving them in front of my face. “Do you think we should offer one to Teagan?”

Apparently, Zeke wasn't so easily put off the girl. I guess it was the first time he'd ever really seen me react this way before. Normally, I treated girls with indifference, and he'd never seen me act negatively toward one before. I wondered if he'd also noticed how I lost the ability to speak when she smiled at us. Her smile had been like a punch to the gut for me, and it had taken a few seconds for me to get control of my expression. Teagan was flawlessly beautiful, but when she smiled, she looked like some kind of angel. I still couldn't get the image out of my mind.

“She's certainly a looker,” Zeke continued, as we watched her walk out the door with her bags.

I shrugged. “I guess, if you're into that sort of thing.”

Zeke snorted. “Yeah, because who would be into a girl who looks like she belongs on the cover of Vogue?”

“Beats me,” I replied before heading toward the checkout. The sooner we got out of the store, the better. I didn't like how Zeke had fixated on Teagan and the way I'd acted around her. I was hoping that some fresh air and a change of scenery might help get her off my assistant's mind.

“You two are new around here,” the lady behind the register said, as she scanned our

protein bars. Her hair was white as snow, and she had these piercing blue eyes that made me feel like I'd just walked through a scanner at the airport. With one look, she seemed to be able to tell that I was carrying far too much baggage and, yes, it was chock full of undesirable items.

“Yes, ma’am, we are,” I agreed.

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She smiled warmly at me in response. “Teagan says you’re at school with her.”

I nodded as I passed the cash over to pay. “I started today. Zeke here graduated a few years back, though.”

She put the money through the register before handing me the change. “Well, it’s lovely to have a couple of new faces in the neighborhood,” she said. “I look forward to seeing you both here again soon.”

“You will,” Zeke replied before we turned and left the store.

“I think that lady might just be the cutest thing I’ve ever seen,” he said, as he walked round to the driver’s side door of the shiny black Escalade.

“I don’t know. I swear she could see all my deepest, darkest secrets with just one look.”

Zeke rolled his eyes at me. “You don’t really have any deep, dark secrets.”

“Well, I stole a trident from the set of Ocean Deep when I was ten, and I swear she knew about it.”

Zeke laughed. “That trident you keep in your bedroom back home?”

“That’s the one. Though I guess it’s not such a secret anymore.”

“Not now that me and the old lady know all about it,” Zeke agreed.

We climbed into the car and started the short drive back to the house I was renting. It was a nice enough place, but it wasn't nearly as flashy as my penthouse back in L.A. It was the only house we could find in the area with half-decent security though.

We were halfway down the street when I noticed a familiar blonde walking up ahead. I could see she was straining to carry the bags she was holding, and a small wave of concern shot through me. She clearly needed help, but I highly doubted she wanted it from me. Everything about me seemed to set her off, and I knew I should be keeping as far away from the little spitfire as possible.

My mouth seemed to have other ideas though, and I told Zeke to slow the car down before my brain had a chance to intervene. Zeke threw me a knowing smile, that I decidedly ignored, and I wound down my window as he pulled up along side Teagan.

"Do you need a lift home?" I asked her.

She jumped as she turned to look at me. The startled expression on her face was immediately replaced with a frown. "No, I'm good." She kept on walking without another look back.

I huffed out a breath before jumping out of the car to go after her. Teagan might not want my help, but I couldn't just drive off and leave her. Apparently, I was a glutton for punishment.

"You know, stalking is illegal, right?" she said, hearing me come up beside her.

"I'm not stalking, I'm helping," I said, taking a hold of the nearest bags she was struggling to carry. She slowly released them to me, and I could easily see the distrust in her eyes. "I think this is where you say thank you."

Her frown only deepened at my comment. "My house isn't far from here. You really

don't need to help."

"It's a bit late for that now, isn't it?"

She gave a defeated sigh before continuing down the street. I quickly caught up with her, and we walked side by side. Neither of us spoke, but she kept sneaking glances at me. Each time I met her gaze, she quickly looked away and bit down on her lower lip as if she were embarrassed at being caught.

"Why are you helping me?" she asked, breaking the silence. Her curiosity must have finally outweighed her animosity.

"I'm carrying your groceries. It's really not that big a deal."

"But you're not really the kind of person I imagine doing something like this. Don't Hollywood movie stars have people to carry their groceries for them?"

"Wow, you really hate me, don't you?"

She didn't respond. Instead, her expression grew puzzled like she wasn't sure what she felt. Her face seemed to betray her every thought, and she was actually an incredible person to watch. I could study her expressions for days and not grow tired of them.

"I don't hate you," she begrudgingly admitted. "But I don't particularly like you either."

I scoffed out a laugh. "Wow, you're pretty ruthless, aren't you?"

"More concerned by the impact you're going to have on our drama production."

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“Not this again,” I groaned. “I’m not going to ruin the play.” I wasn’t even planning on being in it.

“Right, I remember, you’re going to make it.” She let out a sharp breath. “Do you even want to be in the play?”

For a moment, I wondered if she’d read my thoughts. I was very good at masking them, but I hadn’t really been concentrating on protecting them from this girl. I didn’t answer her question quickly enough, so she continued on.

“You know, other people actually auditioned for the role you were simply handed,” she continued. “And it’s pretty clear you don’t give a damn, so why even bother continuing with the play?”

“Who says I don’t give a damn?”

She stopped in her tracks and glared at me. “Your whole personality says it. Everything from the way you dress to your lackluster performance in class says that you could not give a shit about this school and most certainly this play. You might be able to fool a camera with your good looks, but on the stage, you need courage, talent, and dedication. From what I’ve seen, those are a few areas you’re lacking.”

I blinked several times as I tried to process the grilling I’d just received. I don’t think I’d ever been given such brutal criticism to my face before. How could she judge me so harshly after just one class together? My laid-back, dismissive attitude was generally an act, but I still felt hurt by what she’d said.

She barely had time to draw in a breath before she continued. “And this is my house.” She stole the bags back from my hands and left me standing, gap-mouthed, on the street.

Who the hell was this girl? A part of me wanted to find out, but another part of me told me to stay clear. She was stubborn and frustrating—nothing like the girls I had expected to meet in high school.

“Why do you look like you just got slapped in the face?” Zeke asked, as he pulled up the car beside me. I’d been so focused on Teagan that I hadn’t noticed him trailing us as we walked.

“Because that’s pretty much what just happened.” Physical violence may not have been involved, but I’d certainly received a verbal lashing from Teagan.

I shook my head as I stared after her. She didn’t look back and quickly disappeared into her house. The home was large but in total disrepair. The front garden looked somewhat like a jungle and stood out amongst all the other houses on the street that had perfectly manicured hedges and flowerbeds.

“Why was she so angry with you anyway?” Zeke asked as I got back in the car.

I frowned and focused on doing up my seat belt as I considered his question. It was clear Teagan only thought the worst of me. She thought I was lazy. She thought I didn’t have what it took to perform on stage in a high school play. I’d been on TV and in Hollywood my whole life, but perhaps, she was right.

“It doesn’t matter,” I replied. “Did you manage to get me out of doing the drama play?”

“Ah, sorry, man.” Zeke shook his head. “I couldn’t swing it, I’m afraid. The studio

said your subjects can't be changed."

"Right." I expected my gut to drop as I heard the news there was no way out of it for me, but instead, I felt encouraged. Perhaps, it was a blessing in disguise that I'd have to go through with the play. I might have been worried about learning all of those lines, but I'd never been afraid of pushing my boundaries before. I'd worked hard to get where I was today, and I was about to star in my biggest movie to date. I couldn't let my fear of failure hold me back, especially when it came to a high school production. If anything, I needed to use it to make me better.

Teagan may have had her doubts about me, and I had a few of my own. But perhaps, this was my chance to prove both of us wrong.

9

Teagan

"Did you see the paparazzi in front of school this morning?" Evan asked as he met me at my locker.

I nodded as I grabbed out my books. "I guess word is out that Liam Black is here."

Like it wasn't bad enough that everyone in school was obsessed with him, now we had to contend with paparazzi on the street. It felt like the guy was invading every facet of my world, and he'd only been here one day.

It wouldn't be so bad if he were even slightly likable. His whole attitude just rubbed me up the wrong way though. He acted like he was above us all and seemed to take joy in provoking me. I had no idea why he helped me home with my groceries last night. But, I was half-convinced it was part of some twisted joke that I failed to see the punch line for. Either that or his assistant had told him to start acting like a decent

human being. Zeke had witnessed firsthand how Liam had been a jerk toward me at the grocery store and had been the one driving the car, so I was presuming it was the latter.

“I guess so,” Evan agreed. “At least they can’t come onto school property.”

“Yeah, well, they hardly need to when every kid here has a phone pointed at his face.” I’d lost count of the number of times I’d seen Liam appear in Snapchats and Instagram posts yesterday. He was everywhere, and everyone was trying to be his best friend.

Evan scrunched his lips up, his eyes growing thoughtful as we started walking to class together. “It must be hard for him to have so much attention on him all the time.”

“Please don’t tell me you feel sorry for him.”

Evan tilted his head as he looked at me. “You really don’t like him, do you?”

“I don’t like or dislike him,” I said. “I just don’t want him to ruin our play.” I thought it was a very diplomatic response.

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“Well, I think he got that message when you yelled at him about it.”

Evan didn't know the half of it. I hadn't told him about bumping into Liam at the grocery store last night, and I most definitely hadn't divulged the fact that he'd helped me carry my groceries home and I'd yelled at him once again. His arrival had really messed with my head, and I needed to get past it. I was normally so calm and controlled, and I didn't want to turn into a crazy lady because of some guy.

I shrugged. “He needed to know this isn't just some stupid play.”

“I'm sure he doesn't think that.”

I scoffed. Evan was dreaming if he believed Liam was even slightly interested in our play.

“And just think of the positives he'll bring to the performance,” Evan continued. “So many more people will come to watch the production because he's in it. And who knows, maybe the play will garner some real media attention. Teagan, this could be your shot.”

His words made my stomach sink. Evan knew I was desperate to get out of this town and be an actress one day. I should be taking every chance I could get to make connections with someone as famous as Liam Black. With his star power, I might be able to get the attention I needed to kick-start my acting career.

Something about the idea felt icky to me though. I didn't want to use anyone as a stepping-stone to my dreams, and even if Liam could help me out, I highly doubted

he would be bothered. There were other ways of achieving what I wanted without Liam's help, and the scout Miss Appleby had asked to our play was one of them.

"You do still want to act in movies someday, don't you, Teags?" he prompted when I hadn't responded.

I gave him a tight smile. "Of course, I do. I'm just very aware that all that added attention won't be very helpful if our play is a flop, and I'm especially nervous about that after Liam's lifeless performance yesterday."

"It was just a read-through," Evan replied. "I'm sure he'll be brilliant once he gets onstage."

"Perhaps." I shrugged. "But I'm going to keep being nervous until I've seen him taking it seriously."

"Well, I think you're worrying too much."

"I guess time will tell."

We had drama class first up, and as we walked into the room, the two of us fell silent. Liam was already there, speaking with Miss Appleby, and my stomach dropped at the sight. He had a script open in his hands, and even from here, I could see huge red marks all over the pages.

As if he sensed me enter the room, Liam glanced in my direction. As soon as our eyes collided, a smirk lifted at the corner of his lips. He looked so damn smug for some reason, but I kept my face impassive. I was done letting this guy get a rise out of me.

I turned my attention back to Evan and smiled broadly, like we hadn't just spent the last five minutes talking about how worried I was. "Have you started memorizing

your lines yet?" I asked.

Evan chuckled and shook his head. "I think we're still a few weeks off putting our scripts down, Teags."

"Yeah, but the sooner everything's memorized, the better, right?"

A knowing smile formed on his lips. "How much have you already memorized?"

"I don't know, a few scenes."

"Teags..."

"Okay, maybe more than a few scenes," I admitted. "But I have a really good memory for lines."

"You do," he agreed. "I bet Hayley twenty bucks you'd have the whole play memorized by the end of next week. I hope you're not going to let me down."

"You did not bet on me!" I exclaimed.

"What? I could really use the money."

I shook my head at him. "You're impossible."

"I know," he agreed.

We sat at the back of the class, and I tried not to look in Liam's direction. My gaze felt magnetized to him though, and I struggled every few moments as my eyes started to naturally drift toward him. I was desperate to know what he and Miss Appleby had been doing with the script, but I refused to give him the satisfaction of going up and

asking.

At least I didn't have to wait long to find out. As soon as class started, Miss Appleby began by telling us all about Liam's great ideas for the play.

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I immediately lifted my hand in the air as she started to explain. “What do you mean he wants to change some lines in the script?”

“It’s just a few minor changes, Teagan, and I think when you see them you’ll agree they make the dialogue between your two characters so much stronger.”

I could barely keep my composure. Yesterday, Liam didn’t care enough about the play to even pay attention during the read-through. Now, he wanted to improve the script?

“Madi will also be handing out a revised rehearsal schedule, as we’ve had to incorporate Liam’s availability into it.”

I raised my hand again as I struggled to contain my anger.

“Yes, Teagan?”

“So, our rehearsals revolve around him too now?” My voice was filled with disbelief. I’d already written the rehearsal dates into my diary and had gotten time off from babysitting to make sure they never clashed.

Miss Appleby glanced nervously around the room, like she was worried my question was going to start some sort of rehearsal schedule revolt. No one else but me seemed bothered though.

“If there are any problems with the changes, I’m sure we can come to a solution that everyone is happy with,” Miss Appleby said.

I sat back in my chair and folded my arms across my chest. I couldn't work Liam out. One minute, he was dismissing our play as a waste of time, and now, he was suddenly taking an active role in the production? I wanted him to be committed, but I didn't want him to take over.

The teacher kept talking, but I barely heard a word she said. I was too busy stewing with anger, and it was really hard to rein it in when Liam was sitting across the room with a growing look of smugness on his face. His eyes met mine in challenge, making every cell in my body quiver in agitation. He was enjoying the fact he was getting to me. I didn't want to give him such satisfaction, but I was struggling to keep a cool head.

I was always so composed at school, but ever since Liam had entered my life, I'd slowly been losing the firm grasp over my emotions. He put everything I cared about at risk. How could I idly sit by and watch him flush my future down the toilet?

My mood only grew worse as we continued our read-through of the script. Liam spoke his lines in the same bored tone he'd used yesterday. It felt like he was doing it on purpose, and I kept catching him stifling a smile whenever he looked my way. My fingers itched to slap the superior look off his face, and I swear he could read my mind because his eyes dipped to my hands as I clenched them both into fists.

When class ended, I waited for the room to empty before approaching Miss Appleby. Her pleasant expression dimmed a little when she saw the worry in my eyes.

She let out a sigh. "I know you're not happy with this situation, Teagan."

"Miss Appleby, surely you can see he doesn't even care? He wasn't even trying in the read-through today, and he was even worse yesterday. Are we really going to cave to his every whim?"

Her forehead creased, and I could see evidence of the internal struggle she was experiencing in her eyes. “I understand your concerns, but Liam is going to do wonders for the drama department, and I think you’ll be surprised by him. He went to a lot of effort to make suggestions for how we could improve the script, and he seems far more enthusiastic than he lets on. You said you would give him a chance, and I don’t think one read-through of the script counts.”

It was clear that his poor performance today didn’t have Miss Appleby concerned, so perhaps, I was overreacting. I twisted my hands nervously as I sighed and nodded. “I guess we can see how he goes when we start blocking out the scenes.”

She beamed up at me and nodded enthusiastically in response. “Yes, once we get you both up onstage, everything will fall into place, you’ll see.”

“If you think so.” I moved to leave, but Miss Appleby stopped me before I reached the door.

“The play is going to be brilliant, Teagan. Promise me you won’t lose faith in it before we’ve even started,” she said.

I gave her a small smile. “I won’t,” I agreed.

The promise flew from my mind the moment I left the room though. Liam stood just outside the classroom and was surrounded by a flock of adoring girls who all stood in my way. They were fawning all over him and pushing their textbooks in his face as they asked for autographs. Liam barely looked interested as he signed his name across the covers, but that didn’t seem to matter. It was like the girls were all under some magic spell, and they were completely oblivious to the fact that they were besotted with someone who clearly didn’t give a crap about them in return.

“Ugh,” I grumbled as I pushed my way past the group. After my talk with Miss

Appleby, I was running late for my next class. Unfortunately, it was English, and I really didn't need to make Mr. Randall's impression of me worse than it already was.

I rushed into class, prepared for the embarrassment of arriving late and having to apologize, but the classroom was empty of students. Only Mr. Randall was in the room, and he peered up at me from behind his desk as I entered.

"The two of you are late," he said.

"Two of us?" I glanced over my shoulder and found Liam had just entered the room behind me. My expression turned to stone as I looked at him. I was surprised he'd even bothered leaving all the doting girls to come to class.

"The rest of the class has already left to start on the assignment," Mr. Randall continued. "But it doesn't matter, since there's two of you here, it makes things easy for me."

My stomach tensed as I focused on the teacher once more. Something about what he'd said gave me a bad feeling. Why would the two of us being late make it easy for him?

"The class is starting the biography assignment we talked about yesterday," he explained. "Since there's two of you left, that means you can be partners."

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The uneasy feeling in my stomach magnified at Mr. Randall's words. "You want me to partner with Liam?" I asked. Not only did I want to avoid spending any more time with Liam than was necessary, but I had to do well on this assignment, and I needed a partner I could work with, not someone who would probably avoid the work at all costs.

"Yes," Mr. Randall said. "Now, as I explained yesterday, you will each be required to write a section of a biography on your partner. I'll leave it up to you to decide what section of their life you would like to focus on. You have today's lesson to start planning your assignments."

My face felt drained of blood, and I was really struggling not to argue with the teacher. I hadn't been worried about this assignment when he'd explained it yesterday because I'd assumed I'd be partnered with Evan. The thought of divulging parts of my life to Liam made me sick to my stomach. I didn't want to write about his life either. This project was going to be a nightmare.

Mr. Randall passed us both a sheet with the assignment on it. "Feel free to go to the library or find a spot outside the classroom to discuss your plan." His voice sounded so final, like he knew I wanted nothing more than to argue with him about this.

"I guess we better get started," Liam said.

I slowly turned to face him, and from the expression on his face, I could see he was just as unhappy about the pairing as I was. All I could hope was that he wasn't about to make me fail.

Liam

This assignment had to be some kind of joke. Did the teacher really expect me to tell a girl who hated me all about my life for a school project? I never revealed anything personal to journalists, and I wasn't inclined to change my stance on my private life now. I had no idea how I could avoid this though. Zeke hadn't had any luck getting me out of the drama production, so I didn't like my chances on being excused from English.

It wouldn't be so bad if these grades didn't matter, but since they counted toward my GPA, I couldn't allow them to slide. I was really missing my regular tutors right now. They never would have given me with this kind of assignment. Partner work wasn't an option when I was their only student.

I followed Teagan from the classroom, and she made a beeline for the large double doors that led outside. She pushed them open with a surprising amount of force, and we emerged onto large grass area that stretched between the building and the sporting fields. It seemed like she was on a mission as she stormed away from the building. Her hair whipped around in the breeze, and she held her books tightly to her chest as she walked purposefully toward a table that sat under the shade of a large tree. She came to a stop when she reached it and slid onto the bench, allowing her books to drop from her hands and slap onto the wooden tabletop. She hadn't looked at me once since we'd left the classroom, and her hard movements easily betrayed every bit of her frustration.

I wasn't surprised by how she was acting. Every time we encountered one another, I somehow seemed to anger her. It might have been somewhat deserved today though. I'd purposely given a poor performance in drama, after all.

The way she'd spoken to me on the street the day before had really gotten under my skin. I'd gone home and read through the whole script and genuinely spotted a few ways to tweak it and make it more engaging. I'd actually intended to make an effort during the read-through as well today, but I changed my mind after seeing the way Teagan had fumed at the script changes and schedule requests I'd made. I thought she wanted me to show some commitment to the play, but clearly, I couldn't win with this girl. It might have been a bit petty and juvenile, and definitely wasn't my proudest moment, but I got a whole lot of satisfaction from doing a bad job at reading lines and seeing it get to her so much. It was really bad luck that I was now her partner in English and had to deal with the fallout. I would have much preferred to simply avoid her until our next rehearsal.

She finally glanced up at me when I hesitated at the edge of the table, not certain I wanted to sit anywhere near her.

"I don't want to be your partner either," she said. "But will you please sit down so we can get this over and done with?"

I was more concerned with the project itself rather than the fact she was my partner. Though I wasn't crazy about that part either. I blew out a breath and sat across from her. There was no getting out of this, so I might as well get it finished and be done with it as quickly as possible.

"So, a biography, huh?" I said.

She started frowning as she nodded. "We'll probably have to get together after school so we can interview each other."

I blanched as she mentioned the interview. I hated interviews more than anything. I was much better at withholding information than divulging it. I'd committed myself to experiencing school life though, and this was a part of it.

“Do you know what period of my life you want to focus on so I can prepare for your questions?” she continued.

“Oh.” I glanced down at the worksheet and picked the first option listed. “Birth, early childhood, and family,” I said.

She shook her head. “No, that doesn’t work for me.”

“I don’t think you get to decide what works for you,” I replied.

“Well, if you want me to answer any of your questions, you’ll focus on something else.” Her face was like stone and completely devoid of expression. It was clear this was something she didn’t want to talk about so I decided to give in and pick a different topic.

“Fine. I’ll ask you about career plans and hopes for the future.” It seemed like a safe enough option.

She nodded. “And I’ll focus on your successes and failures.”

“Not sure you’ll find too many failures.” I gave her a half-smile, but she didn’t laugh at my joke. From what I knew about Teagan, she probably thought I was being conceited.

“Whatever,” she grumbled. “So, we’ll work on our questions tonight and get together tomorrow to interview each other. Does that work for you?”

“Fine by me. I can come to your place after school.”

Her body seemed to freeze up at my suggestion. “You can’t come to my house.”

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“Why not?”

“My mom’s remodeling, and it’s a disaster zone right now.”

“I don’t care about that,” I said.

“Well, I do. You’re not coming to my house.”

I huffed out a breath. “Fine, you can come to mine.”

“Fine.” She quickly gathered up her books and left before I got the chance to ask her if she needed directions.

“The bell hasn’t even rung yet,” I called after her. But she didn’t respond as she continued walking back toward the school’s large brick buildings. Apparently, that was all the time she was willing to give our planning session.

* * *

The following afternoon, I waited by the school entrance for Teagan to come out. She’d avoided me since yesterday, and it was near impossible to catch her in the school corridors when fans were constantly stopping me to talk. It was frustrating that we hadn’t had any classes together. All I wanted was to arrange the details for our school project, but that was impossible when Teagan wouldn’t have anything to do with me.

As school students began to trickle out the front entrance, I started to draw a crowd.

Standing alone out here seemed like some kind of open invitation for them, and before I knew it, I was completely surrounded by fans, all trying to grab my attention. I smiled politely at those closest to me and exchanged a few words at first, but it was hard to maintain a conversation when the crowd grew larger and people started pressing in.

Phones were all pointed in my direction, and my eyes twitched at the constant flashes going off. These kids were almost as bad as paparazzi and had no shame in taking reels of pictures of me without asking if it was okay.

Situations like this made me feel like I was more of an object than an actual person, and I hated it. I wanted nothing more than to get away from all these people, but I stood my ground, hoping Teagan wouldn't take much longer.

"Come on, kids, move along. You're blocking the school entrance, and Liam will be back tomorrow." Boss's voice drifted over the crowd, and I let out a relieved breath as I caught sight of him making his way toward me. My bodyguard was at least a head higher than even the tallest kids and twice as wide. The crowd around me didn't seem to think twice before moving out of his way.

"Keep it moving. Go on now." He waved the kids away from me, and most of them were all too willing to follow his directions. I wouldn't go against his orders either. Boss was ex-military and looked damn scary when he was on a mission.

As he came to stand at my side, a wave of gratitude rushed through me. The crowd was no longer pressing in tightly around me, and people seemed to think twice about approaching me when he was standing in my shadow. I gave him a relieved smile.

"Thanks," I murmured.

"No problem," he replied. He was probably wondering why I'd decided to wait out in

the open like this, but thankfully, he didn't question me. Boss was good like that. With him by my side, kids were maintaining a safe distance away. It didn't stop several of them from keeping their cameras focused on my face though. It also made no difference to a group of fearless girls who came up and started flirting with me. My focus wasn't on the girls though, and I barely said two words to them as I continued to try and find Teagan amongst the crowd.

I began to wonder if I'd missed her when she finally walked out through the large double doors of the school. She rolled her eyes as she caught sight of the crowd surrounding me and wove her way around it as she made her way toward the parking lot.

I pressed forward, rushing after her, not bothering to say goodbye to the girls who had been chattering at my side. It was pretty clear they'd only stood with me to get a couple of photos. Not one of them had tried to actually talk with me, other than to say meaningless platitudes.

I weaved my way through the remaining groups of kids who had lingered to take my picture, but they all seemed to lose interest now they could see I was leaving. Once I was clear of them, I jogged to catch up with Teagan.

"Going somewhere?" I asked, as I fell into step with her.

"Yes, we have our project to do now." She didn't look at me as she walked.

"I know and I was waiting for you."

She scoffed.

"What?"

She didn't look like she was going to respond, but it seemed she couldn't resist.
“Waiting for me, or trying to score a date?”

“I wasn't trying to get a date with those girls,” I replied. “They approached me.”

“You didn't seem to be complaining.”

I frowned as I looked at her. “Are you jealous?”

This brought a genuine laugh out of her. “You think I'm jealous?” She continued laughing to herself as she shook her head, and I very much got the picture that she wasn't the least bit interested in me.

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“Okay, okay, not jealous,” I grumbled, when she’d been laughing far longer than was necessary.

“Definitely not jealous.” Finally, she looked in my direction. “Is your head really so big that you just assume every girl wants you?”

“It was a natural question given your annoyance,” I defended.

“I didn’t realize annoyance equaled desire. If that’s the case, then given how much you annoy me, I must be head over heels in love with you.”

I groaned and ran a hand through my hair. “I don’t think you’re in love with me.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure.”

“Well, lucky we figured that out. I was worried you’d stolen my heart there for a moment.”

I groaned again. “Please stop.”

A small smile curved the corner of her lip. “So, where do you live?” I guess she’d decided to take mercy on me and give me a reprieve from her mocking.

“Not far from here. Do you need a ride?” I didn’t want to utter my address aloud when there were still students hanging around.

“Evan’s going to drive me. What’s your address?”

I touched her arm, pulling her to a stop. “Don’t be silly, I can drive you and drop you home. You don’t need Evan to give you a lift.”

“The man has a point,” Evan said, coming up behind us.

I smiled gratefully at the guy. The two of us hadn’t really talked, but I’d heard him cracking jokes to some of the girls during drama, and he always seemed to be hanging around with Teagan. He slung an arm over Teagan’s shoulder in such a familiar way I began to wonder if perhaps there was more to their friendship than I’d first assumed.

“Are you guys together?” I asked.

The two of them scrunched up their faces in identical depictions of disgust before they burst out laughing. I felt like I was missing something, and as they continued, I began to feel stupid. It seemed like a fair enough question, and I didn’t get why they found it so hilarious.

“No, we’re not together,” Teagan finally said.

I wasn’t sure why, but her revelation seemed to relieve a little of the tension I felt in my chest.

“Yeah, Teags isn’t really my type,” Evan said with a grin. “Why, do you think she might be yours?”

I didn’t even know where to begin to answer that question. It was far too risky, and I was certain Teagan would end up offended whatever I said, so I decided to ignore it.

“So, it’s fine if I drive you, Teagan?”

“Of course, it is,” Evan replied for her. “Isn’t it, Teags?”

She sent a scowl in his direction but finally let out a breath and nodded. “Yeah, I guess it’s fine.” She appeared unsure as she said goodbye to Evan and started to follow me to my car. Most girls at the school would have been jumping at the opportunity to come to my house, but it seemed like Teagan’s worst nightmare.

“Your car’s real subtle,” she said, when we reached my Escalade. One of her eyebrows lifted as she checked it out.

“The black-tinted windows are a necessary precaution,” I replied.

She glanced over her shoulder and twisted a long strand of her blonde hair around one finger as she scanned the rest of the parking lot. People were watching us and there were still a few phones pointed our way. The attention didn’t seem to bother her, but as she glanced in my direction, I wondered if she was worried about being seen with me.

“They’ll all be gossiping about this tomorrow,” she said.

“You scared of a little gossip?” I asked.

She shrugged. “It depends.”

“On...”

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“On how damaging it is,” she replied.

I knew better than anyone how damaging or beneficial a little gossip could be, so I nodded. “Well, we better get out of here then. Give them less material to work with.”

“I guess,” she agreed. “Although knowing the kids here, it’s probably too late.”

We didn’t talk as I drove Teagan back to the house I was renting while I was in town, and she kept her gaze focused out the passenger window the entire journey. It wasn’t exactly surprising that she didn’t want to interact with me. She’d made her feelings about me more than clear in the few interactions we’d had. She was far from my biggest fan.

“Zeke, I’m home,” I called out, as I led Teagan into the foyer of the house.

She glanced around the room but didn’t really react as she took in the sizable entrance. The house was ostentatious and screamed of wealth, but that didn’t seem to bother her. I was actually surprised by how unaffected she was and had to wonder if it was because she was simply unimpressed by it or if she was just good at covering her emotions.

“Hi, honey, how was school?” Zeke called back. It sounded like he was in the kitchen, so I signaled for Teagan to follow me there.

Zeke was sitting and working at the breakfast bar. He had his laptop open, and there was a large pile of scripts at his side. His eyes were downcast on his phone as I entered the room, but his eyebrows lifted with surprise when he looked up and found

I wasn't alone.

"Teagan, hi," he said in greeting. "I didn't know you were coming over."

"We have a project to work on together," I quickly explained.

"Oh, really?" Zeke was grinning like he was thoroughly enjoying my awkwardness and his voice was filled with connotations.

"Yep," I replied. "We'll go work on it in the living room. Do you have any messages for me?"

Zeke's face immediately sobered. "None you want to hear. Your mother called."

I tried to keep my expression neutral at the news. She rarely checked in with me unless I'd messed up. I didn't think I'd done anything to warrant a call, but whatever her reason for ringing, I knew it couldn't be good.

"She hasn't heard from you in days and wants you to call her back as soon as possible," he continued.

That definitely meant bad news, but I wasn't about to reveal so much in front of Teagan. "I'll call her back when we're finished with our schoolwork," I replied. "Come on, Teagan."

She quietly followed me to the living room. We'd rented the house fully furnished, and it wasn't exactly to my taste. Everything in it was far too extravagant and pretentious for my liking, and there was nothing comfortable or inviting about it. The sofas were covered in an elaborate woven material, and paintings surrounded by heavy golden frames dotted every wall. The place was probably costing me an arm and a leg, but I didn't really care about the money. I just wished it felt more like

home.

“Your mom isn’t staying here with you?” Teagan asked, as we sat down. I didn’t miss that she made a point of sitting on the couch across from me rather than at my side.

“No, she’s in New York with my sister,” I replied.

She pulled her books out of the backpack she’d slung on the floor and tapped a pen against her lip as she focused on me. “And you’re allowed to just live here with no parents around?”

I shrugged. “It’s been a while since I’ve had a parent watching over me.”

Teagan frowned at the comment, as though it troubled her. “But you’re only seventeen.”

“And I’ve been treated like an adult since I was eight,” I replied. “It’s no big deal.”

Her lips creased and scrunched to the side as she considered my response. “I think it’s a bigger deal than you’re making out,” she said. “Everyone wants to have a parent to look after them.”

I scoffed. “Not my mom.”

“And your dad?”

Again, I shrugged. “He’s not in the picture. Shouldn’t we be getting started on the assignment?”

“Right,” she replied. But from the way she kept watching me, I could see she was

repeating our conversation over again in her mind.

I let out a long breath when she hadn't said a word and I could see that she wasn't going to move past it. "Look, not all parents are perfect," I said. "And some kids are better off without their toxic influence in their life."

"So, your mom is toxic?"

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“It’s more that she’s not really a mom. She’s more concerned with making my next movie deal than what I’m eating for dinner. I suppose you wouldn’t understand though. You probably have the perfect family.”

She frowned at my comment. “You’re right, we should probably start on the assignment.”

Her diversion had me curious though. “You don’t have the perfect family?” I asked.

“My family is fine,” she said. But her eyes were wide, and there was a hint of fear in them, like she worried I’d uncover some horrible truth.

“You’re lying,” I said.

“I’m not lying,” she ground out. “Now, what do you consider your greatest success in life?”

She was trying to get into the assignment, but I wasn’t ready to let this go. Teagan always acted so perfect at school. Her hair was always flawless, and she constantly wore that easy smile. I hadn’t failed to notice how she walked around the school like she didn’t have a problem in the world. Except when she was around me, that was. I had always been good at reading people, and I was beginning to suspect that her manner was just an act and it bothered me. What was she covering up and why?

“Liam?” she prompted when I hadn’t answered her question.

“Well, my greatest success would have to be landing the role of Beast in the Lincoln

High drama production, obviously,” I replied, my voice thick with sarcasm. I was too busy thinking about what she could be hiding to temper it in.

“Teagan, why won’t you talk about your family?” I asked, my voice more sincere this time. I’d experienced firsthand what it meant to have a crappy parent, and something about her reaction made me feel like maybe this was something we shared. I’d come to terms with the fact my mother was selfish a long time ago, but the fear I’d seen in Teagan’s eyes made me wonder if perhaps she was still struggling with whatever she was dealing with. I shouldn’t care, and this wasn’t my problem, but I couldn’t seem to let it drop.

Her eyes narrowed in a scowl. “Why do you have to be such a jerk?”

“I’m a jerk because I asked about your family?”

“No, you’re a jerk because you’re making fun of our play. You know, it actually means something to the rest of us. Getting the main role in it is one of my greatest achievements.”

I swallowed down my next words, a flicker of guilt swirling in the pit of my stomach. “I wasn’t trying to be mean,” I said.

“No?” she replied. “You could have fooled me.” She began to pack her books up and shoved a piece of paper down on the coffee table between us. “You know what, here are my questions. Write out your answers, and give them back to me when you’re done. I don’t want to do this stupid interview anymore.”

“But what about my questions?”

“Do you even care what grade you get on this assignment?”

“Of course, I care.” I had a perfect A-grade average with my tutors, and I wasn’t going to let that slip now just because I was forced to go to a real high school. This might have been a PR stunt, but the assignments I turned in still mattered.

She shook her head like she didn’t believe me. “Well, for someone who supposedly cares, you do an awesome job at acting like you don’t. Just make up whatever you want about me for the assignment and I’ll do the same.”

With that, she turned and stalked out of the house, slamming the front door behind her as she left. This girl was going to drive me insane. Why did she have to be so difficult? I wanted to go after her and at least drive her home, but I doubted she’d get in the car with me.

“Study group over so soon?” Zeke asked, failing to keep the smile from his lips as he popped his head into the living room.

“Yes, it’s over,” I replied. “Would you mind going after Teagan and giving her a lift home?”

Zeke looked in the direction she’d just stormed off in. “What happened?”

“I pissed her off,” I explained, making his smile larger.

“Of course, you did.”

I hated how it didn’t surprise him that I’d managed to anger her. That he actually found it amusing that we’d gotten into another argument.

“So, will you go after her?” I asked.

“Yeah, yeah, I’ll go,” Zeke said. “What did you do to piss her off?”

“I was just my usual charming self,” I replied.

Zeke shook his head at me. “You really need to work on that.”

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Didn't I know it. I was beginning to wonder if I had more in common with Beast than I first suspected.

"Don't forget to call your mother back," Zeke yelled over his shoulder as he went to go after Teagan.

"Wouldn't dream of it," I replied before slowly traipsing up to my room. Calling my mother wasn't an option right now though. Talking with her was hard enough when I was in a good mood, and it was near impossible when I was in a terrible one.

I was still clasping the questions Teagan had left for me, and I started to read over them. My eyes snagged on a question toward the top of the page, and my hands clenched around the paper. She actually had the nerve to ask whether I considered it a failure that my reputation had taken such a dive over the last year. And as I kept reading through the questions, I could see they didn't get much kinder. She really did seem to hate me and this sheet of paper was proof of that.

I stood there staring at the page for far longer than was necessary before I scrunched the paper up and threw it over my shoulder. Teagan could fail this assignment for all I cared, because there was no way I was answering any of her questions.

11

Teagan

Several days had passed since I stormed out of Liam's house, and I was still mad with him. He'd been intrusive and rude, and the way he'd so flippantly made fun of

landing the role of Beast in our play had cut deeply. Even the weekend hadn't managed to calm me down, and when Monday rolled around, I was dreading seeing him in drama.

"You look tired, Teags," Evan said, as we walked to drama together. Miss Appleby had sent an email over the weekend reminding us we'd be starting rehearsals in the auditorium today, so we were headed to the other side of school rather than the drama room.

"I didn't sleep well over the weekend," I admitted. I'd worked some pretty long hours babysitting on Saturday, and then Mom had been gone all Sunday. She hadn't come home until the early hours of this morning and was a drunken mess when she got back. It took me hours to calm down enough to fall asleep.

"Working too hard again?" he asked.

"Probably," I admitted.

I didn't tell him it was mostly because of my mom. He still had no idea about her drinking problem, and I really didn't want to worry him. Evan was so positive and fun that I sometimes forgot my issues at home even existed when I was around him. It might be selfish of me, but I didn't want to lose those moments and have them replaced by sad talks of my home life and problems that couldn't be fixed.

We walked into the auditorium, and most of the class were sitting in the first few rows of the audience, while Miss Appleby stood by the edge of the stage. She was waiting for everyone to arrive, and so far, it looked like only half the class was here. I wouldn't be surprised if it was because people had forgotten drama was in the auditorium today.

I followed Evan into one of the rows, and as we sat down, Todd turned around in his

seat to glare at him. “Geez, Anderson, go a little overboard with the cologne today? I can smell you a mile off.”

“Better than the pungent reek of desperation that you give off,” Evan fired right back.

Todd scoffed before turning around in his chair to face the stage again. Evan leaned in close to me. “Evan–1, Todd–0,” he whispered, making me laugh.

I couldn’t remember the exact moment the pair became rivals, but I was pretty sure it had been going since kindergarten. Todd had never been anything but nice to me, but for some reason, he and Evan couldn’t stand each other. It only seemed to intensify in drama, but I think it was because they always went for the same parts.

“You’re still keeping score with him?”

“Always.”

I shook my head. “You’re a pretty biased umpire, you know.”

“Well, I definitely won that round.”

“True,” I smiled, “and you do smell pretty amazing.”

“Thanks.” He leaned in close again to whisper in my ear. “Though I may have accidentally sprayed myself a few too many times with the bottle this morning.”

“So, Todd was righ—”

Evan clamped a hand over my mouth. “Shhh! Not so loud, Teags.”

I couldn’t stop a laugh from escaping as I took in the panic in his eyes. “You take this

far too seriously,” I said, once he lowered his hand.

“This is war. I don’t see any other way to take it.”

Miss Appleby clapped her hands together, quieting the many conversations in the room. “Okay, class, let’s get started. Today, we’re going to block the play out starting from scene one. Initially, I want you all to go with your gut and perform what feels natural for your character. That will give us a starting point, and we can discuss what works and what doesn’t and refine from there. Can I get everyone up onstage who’s needed in the opening scene?”

A few students stood up and headed to the stage. Evan and I weren’t required for the first scene, so we remained seated in the audience. The play opened with Beast becoming cursed by the haggard enchantress. I looked around though as I realized our Beast was nowhere to be seen.

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“Where’s Liam?” I hissed to Evan.

He started looking around too. “Huh, he doesn’t seem to be here.”

“Clearly. But where do you think he is? You don’t think he’s bailed on the play, do you?”

Evan laughed. “No need to sound so hopeful, I’m sure he’s just running late to class.”

Miss Appleby seemed to have noticed Liam was missing too and let out a sigh. “We can’t rehearse the first scene without Liam. We’ll have to start with the second scene.”

The kids who were already onstage let out groans as they headed back toward their seats while Evan and I went to take their places. It was only day one of rehearsals, but I wasn’t at all surprised Liam was already letting the team down. If this wasn’t evidence of how little he cared for our play, then I wasn’t sure what was.

I pushed him from my mind as we started rehearsing my first scene though. I loved that Miss Appleby gave us the freedom to do what felt natural to begin with and springboard from there. Blocking was always a slightly awkward stage of rehearsals, mostly because people were still hindered by the script in their hands. I’d memorized my lines on the weekend though, so it was nice not to feel the burden of having to check my script.

As we worked through the scene, I also realized that, as brilliant as Evan had been at auditioning for Beast, he was an absolute natural at playing Gaston. It was like the

role had been written for him, and I was blown away by the performance he was giving even though it was only the first rehearsal.

Liam finally rocked up when we were already halfway through the lesson. He went straight to Miss Appleby, and whatever he said to her earned him an indulgent smile and a nod. He smiled in return before taking a seat toward the back of the audience.

I watched the whole interaction in shock. The guy was untouchable. Any one of us would have at least received a look of disappointment from our teacher for arriving so late and disrupting the class, but not Liam. All he got was a warm and understanding smile.

I had to wonder what he'd said to explain his absence. Madi was standing right next to Miss Appleby, and I lifted a questioning eyebrow at her. She caught the look and simply shrugged, which wasn't an answer at all.

I had to wait until class was over before I could talk to her. I didn't know what Liam had said to Miss Appleby, but we hadn't gone back to do the first scene despite the fact our Hollywood star had finally arrived. Maybe it was because we'd be on a roll after finishing the second scene. Either way, Liam didn't get up onstage once during class though I had barely left it.

"Why was Liam so late today?" I asked Madi, as we headed out of the auditorium. I should have been on a high from a successful first rehearsal, but instead, I was plagued by Liam's late arrival.

"He didn't get the email about the venue change," Madi said. "And when he got to the drama room and realized no one was coming, he had no idea where the school auditorium was."

My brow creased. I'd assumed the worst of the guy and didn't like that he'd proved

me wrong. “I guess that’s a reasonable enough explanation.”

Madi laughed. “Were you expecting something unreasonable?”

“Knowing Liam? Yes.”

Madi shook her head at me. “I think you need to give the guy a chance.”

Why did people keep saying that to me?

“Anyway, I’ve got math now so I’ll see you at lunch.” Madi gave me a wave before disappearing down the corridor. I stared after her, questioning myself for a moment.

Was I being too hard on Liam? Or was I the only one who saw him for who he truly was?

* * *

Liam wasn’t late for our next rehearsal. He actually arrived early and was already sitting in the audience waiting when the bell rang for class to begin. Not even Miss Appleby was in the auditorium, and I quickly found a seat as far away from him as possible.

We still hadn’t talked since our failed interview last week, but I knew we’d have to speak today. We were rehearsing our first scene together, and I was surprised to find I was nervous.

The other students slowly drifted into the room, most of them trying to score a seat as close to Liam as possible. None of them seem to care that he’d completely disrupted our last rehearsal, and they all acted like nothing had happened. They were too busy trying to become Liam’s new best friend, it seemed.

Once everyone had arrived, Miss Appleby clapped her hands together, calling the class to order. The room hushed as we all focused on her, and she got Madi to call the cast members needed for the scene up to the stage. I was the only one who walked up there without a script, and I frowned when I saw the booklet in Liam's hands. He was paid to be an actor. How did he not have the script memorized already?

"Don't you know your lines yet?" I asked him, as I came to stand at his side and wait for my entrance onstage.

He folded his arms over his chest and glanced around the room. "No one else is off script yet."

"Yeah, but you're Liam Black. I would have thought memorizing a few lines for a school play would be easy."

"It's not just a few lines," he growled in response. "I'm the star of the play, so I'd say it's more than a few."

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He sounded defensive about the lines, and I wondered if he was trying to cover up his embarrassment about not having learned them already, but I quickly pushed that from my mind.

“You’re the star of the play? What am I then?”

“My leading lady, of course.”

The way he said it sounded so backward, like I was only there to support him. Like I wasn’t every bit as important to the play as he was. I probably shouldn’t have been surprised that he believed he was the star of the show, but a part of me had begun to wonder if maybe there was more to Liam Black than met the eye. I guess I was wrong.

“You really are full of yourself, aren’t you?” I said.

“No, you just take everything I say the wrong way.”

“How was I supposed to take the fact that you think you’ve got the only important role in the show?”

He started to respond, but I heard my cue and walked onstage before he could get a word out. I was somewhat glad I’d had the last word, but when Liam entered the scene, it seemed he’d also brought his annoyance with him. As soon as he stepped onstage, he was seething with anger. His whole persona encompassed it, so when I looked at him, I truly saw the beast he was portraying.

He was either a really good actor or I'd majorly pissed him off. Since I hadn't seen him even try to act since arriving at school, I had to believe it was the latter. The tension on the stage was palpable, and he roared his words, giving them every bit of spite and cruelty they deserved.

His actions were stilted because he was still using the script, but he did every word justice, and I felt my own acting skills rising to the high bar he was setting. I became lost in the fight our characters had onstage, and when the scene finally ended, Miss Appleby gave us a standing ovation.

"Marvelous, simply marvelous," she said.

I blinked as reality hit me once more, and I remembered the class of students who were all watching. I'd been so absorbed in the performance that for a moment I'd been staring into the eyes of Beast rather than the boy before me and the class had disappeared.

Liam's anger with me was just as real as his character's though, and he barely batted an eyelid at the teacher's praise before he stalked offstage to return to his seat in the audience. I slowly followed after him. Telling Liam he was full of himself had seemed to strike a nerve. I guess it was a little harsh, but it seemed justified when he'd been acting so stuck up.

Miss Appleby touched my arm as I returned to my seat. "You can learn a lot from him," she murmured.

I simply grunted in response, not wanting to heed her advice. I didn't want to learn anything from Liam, but I had to begrudgingly admit he'd just given one hell of a performance.

"That was insane," Evan murmured, as I sat next to him. "I knew Liam was good, but

he was incredible up there.”

I glanced in Liam’s direction. He was sitting rigidly in his seat, probably still stewing over our argument. “What can I say, I really bring the beast out in him,” I replied.

I could hear the smile in Evan’s voice as he replied. “You certainly do.”

12

Teagan

“I hear Liam is throwing a party on Saturday.” I clumsily dropped my tray of food on our lunch table as my eyes darted up to look at Hayley. She was grinning from ear to ear as she spread her exciting news amongst our friends. I didn’t want to seem interested in anything to do with Liam though, so I quickly looked away.

Between angering him in drama rehearsals and our dismal attempt at being partners in English, it was safe to say neither of us could stand each other. It didn’t help that the information I’d gathered on him for my biography assignment had given me even more reason to dislike him.

He might not have answered my interview questions, but thanks to Google, I had a better picture of who the real Liam Black was. And it wasn’t pretty. From dating and dumping Victoria’s Secret models like they meant nothing to hospital stays for alcohol poisoning, everything I’d read about him had only soured my opinion of the guy.

Just a few years ago, he’d been this sweet Disney kid, but now he was a notorious party animal with an asshole attitude to match. So many websites went on and on about how sexy he’d become. I wasn’t sure how anyone could be considered sexy when they had such a bad personality though.

“Of course, he’s having a party,” Evan replied. “The guy lives for that stuff.”

I found myself glancing in Liam’s direction. He was sitting between Cole and Tanner, laughing at something Tanner had said. He looked so at home eating his lunch with the jocks of our school. Their table was where the pretty, popular people all congregated every day, so I guess he fit right in.

“Cole told me he’s actually pretty cool,” Madi said. “And I had a chat with him during drama the other day, and he seems really sweet.”

I had to stop myself from rolling my eyes. Liam Black wasn’t sweet. He was full of himself and probably only being nice to Madi because she was gorgeous. It was also hard to trust Madi’s opinion when she always saw the best in people.

“Well, obviously, he’s cool,” Hayley replied. “He’s a movie star.”

“She has a point,” Evan agreed.

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I kept my face blank, not wanting to comment on anything to do with the guy who'd started to become the bane of my existence. Everyone at school worshiped him despite the fact they barely knew him. I was very much in the minority when it came to my opinions of Liam Black.

"So, are we going to go?" Evan asked.

"Duh," was Hayley's immediate reply.

"Yeah, I'm in," said Madi. "I'll have to change my shift at work, but I'm sure someone will swap with me."

All heads then turned in my direction as they waited for my response. "It sounds great," I said, pasting a smile on my face. It didn't sound great at all. But this was the first Saturday I wasn't booked for a babysitting job in weeks and I wanted to hang out with my friends.

"We should all get ready together," Hayley said.

"How about your place, Teags?" Evan asked.

"It's a no-go zone this weekend," I quickly replied. Mom was going through a bad phase at the moment, and I didn't want to risk them seeing her. "Mom's painting the house this week and the whole place stinks." I gave an eye roll to emphasize how irritated I was.

"Bummer," Hayley said, easily buying the lie. Once upon a time, my mom had been

the type of parent to repaint the house on a whim. Not so much anymore. “Well, we can get ready at mine,” she continued. “Though I can’t promise Kitty won’t be a nightmare.”

“Aw, don’t say that. Your sister’s cute,” Madi said.

“She’s the devil in a tween body, and if you believe otherwise, you’ve clearly been brainwashed,” Hayley replied.

Evan chuckled. “I’m sure she’s not that bad, Hayley.”

“Well, you’ll see for yourself on Saturday.” She seemed pretty certain we’d all come to the same conclusion as her. “But, who cares about Kitty. We should be focusing on the more important issue at hand: what do you wear to a Hollywood actor’s party?”

“Something hot,” Evan replied. “Somethingveryhot.”

* * *

The party had felt like forever away, but Saturday night rolled around all too quickly, and before I knew it, I was sitting in Evan’s car, speeding toward Hayley’s house. Evan was stuck driving his grandma’s old Ford station wagon everywhere, but he handled it like it was a Maserati.

“Do you think any celebrities will be there tonight?” he asked, as he took a corner so fast I wondered how we hadn’t rolled.

“Doubtful,” I replied.

Evan pouted in my direction, so I gave him another piece of information that I thought might cheer him up. “But Liam has a super-hot assistant who I’m sure will be

there.”

“How hot are you talking?” Evan asked.

“Almost as hot as Liam,” I replied. “He’s tall too.”

“Does this god have a name?”

I laughed. “I think he said his name was Zeke.”

“Zeke is a hot guy name,” Evan agreed. “How do you even know this?”

“He was at Liam’s house when I went over there to work on our English project.”

“Why am I only just hearing about this now?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. I guess I forgot about him.”

Evan shook his head at me. “What is the number one rule of our friendship?”

“To always report hot guy sightings,” I repeated back to him. We’d come up with the rule years ago though, so how was I supposed to remember it was still enforced?

“I can’t believe you broke our sacred pact, Teags. I’m very disappointed in you.” He shook his head at me again. “But,” he continued, “I’m willing to forgive you because I might have started seeing someone.”

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“You have?” I turned to find a nervous smile on his lips. Evan was a serial dater and always said he didn’t want to be tied down in high school. The fact he was seeing someone was major news. “How am I just hearing about this now?”

He shrugged. “I’m still seeing where it’s going.”

“Do I know the guy?”

“Probably not. He goes to Westbrook,” Evan replied.

“Please tell me he’s not a jerk.” Westbrook was our school’s biggest football rival, and it might have just been those Friday night lights, but the kids were always scary aggressive at the games.

Evan laughed. “Not all kids at Westbrook are jerks. Noah’s one of the good ones.”

“Do I get to meet him?”

Evan shrugged. “We’re keeping it to ourselves for now and seeing how it goes.”

I frowned at his comment. Evan wasn’t exactly the kind of guy who kept things to himself. He was all about embracing life and living it to the fullest, so it seemed strange he’d want to keep this quiet. I didn’t get a chance to question him further though as we screeched to a halt outside Hayley’s house.

Evan sprung out of the car with added excitement. “Do you think what I’m wearing works for a Hollywood party?” he asked me, as we walked to the front door.

He was dressed in jeans and a fitted Henley that hugged his muscles closely. His hair was messily gelled, and he looked just as good as he always did. “It’s perfect,” I said, giving him the honest truth. He always seemed to look effortlessly amazing.

“You don’t look so bad yourself, Teags.”

I gave him a warm smile and pressed my hands down over my outfit. I’d fretted about what to wear all afternoon. I didn’t want to dress up too much and make Liam think I was trying too hard, but I also didn’t want to look too plain either. I’d settled on a patterned skirt that hugged my hips tightly and brushed just above my knees and a tank that left a slither of midriff showing.

My heels might have been a little dressy, but they were the only shoes I could find that went with the outfit. They were my mom’s, but I didn’t think she’d miss them. She was so out of it these days I doubted she even remembered what was in her wardrobe.

Hayley opened the front door as we approached and grinned broadly when she saw us. “Hello, party people!” she said in greeting. She was wearing a dress far more scanty than my own outfit and had a face full of makeup on. Her dark hair was in thick curls that I envied. My curler hadn’t wanted to play ball this afternoon, so I’d had to settle for straightening my platinum-blond locks for tonight.

“Come on, Madi’s upstairs,” Hayley said, leading us inside.

I followed her up the stairs and into Hayley’s bedroom. The room looked like a bomb had hit it, and a million different dresses were scattered across the bed and floor.

Hayley laughed when she saw my eyes widen at the mess. “Sorry about the wardrobe explosion, guys. I couldn’t decide what to wear.”

Madi, who was standing in the middle of all the untidiness, laughed and shook her head. “Hayley don’t lie, your room is always like this.”

“Well, maybe just a little bit,” Hayley admitted. “I like to believe there’s order to my chaos though. If my room were clean, I’d have no idea where anything was.”

“Sure, that’s the reason you keep it messy,” Madi said with a grin.

Hayley scrunched her nose up and poked her tongue out at Madi before letting out a small laugh. “Anyway, you guys don’t need to hover by the door please, make yourselves at home in my bomb site.”

I entered the room and went to sit on Hayley’s bed while Evan sat at the desk by the window. The party didn’t start for another half hour, so we had plenty of time before we needed to leave.

“Have you guys been getting ready for long?” I asked.

“Just a few hours,” Hayley replied, heading over to her dressing table.

“A few hours?” Evan struggled not to sound shocked.

Hayley gave a shrug. “Yeah, we shouldn’t be much longer. It will go much quicker if Madi will just stop complaining and change.”

Madi let out a long sigh. “Hayley’s been trying to convince me to wear something different all afternoon, but what do you guys think?”

She was wearing jeans and a cute top, which was pretty much the same thing she wore to every party. Hayley was always trying to get her to wear more revealing clothes, but Madi didn’t need to dress up or put on loads of makeup. She was

stunning without all the other fuss, and I nodded enthusiastically as I took in her outfit.

“You look great,” I said. “I wouldn’t change a thing.”

“I’m not underdressed?”

“You’re always underdressed,” Hayley piped up from her spot in front of the mirror where she was carefully applying some lipstick.

Madi chuckled. “And that is exactly why I need more opinions... Hayley’s biased.”

“I’m not biased,” Hayley replied before she paused and seemed to think about it.

“Okay, so I’m biased, but only when it comes to your wardrobe.”

“Well, I don’t think Cole will be disappointed if that’s what you’re worried about,” Evan said.

“That’s exactly what she’s worried about,” Hayley replied with a grin.

“So, problem solved then,” Madi said. “I’m fine.”

“You sure are...” Evan’s voice drifted off as his eyes caught on something outside Hayley’s window. “Ah, Hayley, why didn’t you ever tell me your room looks directly into Ethan Beck’s bedroom?” he asked. He leaned forward on the desk to get a better look. Ethan was in our year at school, but all I knew about the guy was the fact he was in a band. He was pretty good-looking, but unlike most of the guys at our school, he didn’t try to flaunt it.

“Probably because I don’t ever think about it,” Hayley replied in a bored tone.

“Not even when he’s walking around in only a towel?” Evan asked. “Man, who knew

he was hiding such ripped abs under all those band T-shirts.”

I immediately darted up and pulled the blinds shut. “Don’t be a creeper,” I said before smacking Evan across the back of the head.

“Hey!” he grumbled, rubbing his head as he sat back in his chair. “It’s not creeping if it was an accident.”

“It’s totally still creeping,” Madi replied with a roll of her eyes and a smile.

“Seriously, Hayles, you have direct access to some easy-viewing man candy from your bedroom. How have we never heard about this?” Evan asked, ignoring Madi’s reply.

She simply shrugged. “I never really noticed. Besides, Ethan Beck is not my type.”

She sounded so adamant that I wondered if perhaps there was more to it than she was letting on.

“Anyway,” she said, drawing the word out like she was searching for a change in topic.

“Where’s your sister tonight?” I asked, coming to her aid.

Hayley gave me a relieved smile. “I told my parents I was having you guys over before Liam’s party, so Mom and Dad took her out to dinner,” she said. “I think Mom knew Kitty would lose her shit if she heard us all talking about the movie star party we’re going to tonight. She’d want to come too, and there was no way that was happening, so we all decided it was best she never knew we were going. You all dodged a bullet tonight, my friends.”

“But I was so looking forward to meeting her,” Evan said, making us all laugh.

I went back to sit on the bed amongst Hayley’s piles of clothes. “I’m surprised Liam’s even having a party tonight,” I said.

“Why?” Madi asked.

“I don’t know, I assumed he wouldn’t want people to know where he lived.”

“Yeah, I guess if you’re a movie star it’s probably a bad idea to have all those crazy fans knowing where you sleep at night,” Hayley agreed.

“Hayles, youareone of those crazy fans,” Evan said.

She scowled and threw her lipstick at his head, but Evan caught it before it hit him and grinned.

“Like you can talk,” she said in reply.

Evan lifted his hands in surrender and laughed. “I never said I wasn’t one of those crazy fans.”

It seemed like only Madi and I had our heads screwed on straight when it came to Liam. She treated him just like he was anyone else, unlike Hayley and Evan who were still struggling to focus when Liam was in class.

“So how does everyone know where to go tonight?” I asked.

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Madi handed me a piece of thick card that looked like the party invitation. It was far more striking than any high school invite I'd seen before. The entire thing had been written in graffiti print, and it was bright and edgy. It had clearly been done professionally, rather than printed out in the school library. My eyes rested on the address and I frowned. Liam wasn't hosting the party at his house. At least, he wasn't hosting it at the house he'd taken me to the other day. This place was on the other side of town, and I had to wonder if it were some kind of decoy.

I gave Madi a smile and handed the invite back without saying a word about the address. I didn't want to disappoint my friends who all thought they were going to Liam Black's house. Who knew though. Perhaps, I'd been taken to a decoy house the other day? I didn't really believe he'd go to so much effort to trick me though.

It didn't take much longer for Hayley to finish with her makeup, and when she announced she was ready, she turned to the rest of us. "Do you guys want to head to the party now?"

"It doesn't start for another fifteen minutes," Evan said.

"Yeah, but it will take us that long to get there, and I really don't care about being fashionably late. Not when we're going to Liam Black's house."

"Fair enough," Evan replied. "I'm happy to go if everyone else is."

I knew I was the only person in the room who wasn't eager to get to the party, so I kept my mouth shut while the others all agreed, and within minutes, we were piling into Evan's car to head across town.

It should have taken us fifteen minutes to reach Liam's party, but, in his excitement, Evan got us there in ten. We were slightly early, but that didn't seem to matter. It appeared that everyone else from school had the same idea and was arriving at the party on time. Music blared from inside a large house, and students from school were streaming inside.

"This is insane," Madi said, as we got out of the car.

I nodded in agreement. It was no surprise that Liam would throw a raging party. The police would probably rock up before too long, so I knew we'd have to make the most of it before it got broken up.

"You guys ready?" Hayley asked, grinning from ear to ear.

"Ready as ever," I replied. Though as I followed Hayley toward the thrumming house, I had a bad feeling it was going to turn into one messy night.

13

Liam

The party was my mother's bright idea. Apparently, my time at Lincoln High hadn't garnered enough media attention, so this was her solution. She'd hired a house and an event planner and invited the entire school. My only job was to act the part of party-boy host and make sure I was photographed in the middle of the out-of-control party she'd thrown. There were enough kids in the house with phones that I was sure pictures had already been spread all over social media, and it wouldn't take much longer for those pictures to be picked up by the tabloids.

I really didn't like the bad boy image my mother had created for me, and I wasn't enthusiastic about her plan for the night. I'd already spent the past year attending

more parties than I could count, and I was tired of it all. This one had only just started, and I already wanted to bail.

It was one thing when Mother had me traipsing all over L.A. and going to nightclubs with strange girls, but I was supposed to see these people every day at school. I didn't want to play this part around them. I didn't want the people at Lincoln High to only see me as some party obsessed film star. I'd only been there for two weeks, but a little of my glamour had started to wear off and I was hoping people would start to see the real me. The kids here were normal, and I wanted to find my place in that reality.

"Cool house, Liam," Laurie said as she strode into the kitchen. I'd been hiding out in here because it was a little quieter, but apparently, my solitude had now ended. "And great party." She waved toward the rest of the house. It had only been going for an hour, and already the place was packed with people. At least my mother had the sense to hire somewhere other than where I lived.

"Thanks," I replied.

Laurie stepped toward me, trapping me against the kitchen bench. The thick scent of her perfume and hairspray filled the air, and I had to stop myself from scrunching up my nose in distaste. It smelt like she'd bathed in a bottle of whatever floral scent she was wearing and it wasn't at all subtle.

"You know, I'm surprised you haven't asked me out yet," she said, slowly trailing a finger across my chest.

I captured her finger in one hand to stop her. The girl was hot, but Tanner had already warned me that she was also crazy. And my life was already crazy enough without adding an unhinged girlfriend to the mix.

“I don’t date high school students,” I said, trying to let her down as easily as possible.

“Well, we don’t have to date,” she immediately replied, not even slightly put off by my response. Her voice was filled with suggestions that I wanted nothing to do with.

“I don’t not date them either,” I said, my voice becoming slightly harder. I really hoped she’d get the hint because I didn’t want to be blatantly rude.

She pouted, but then shrugged and stepped back from me. “Well, if you change your mind...” She left the words hanging as she turned and walked from the room, taking her perfumed scent with her.

I sagged against the bench, and the sound of chuckling reached my ears.

“You have absolutely no game,” Zeke said, walking across the kitchen toward me. Apparently, he’d seen the whole thing.

“Well, she’s not my type.” I frowned.

“Why not?”

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I huffed out a breath and rubbed my eyes tiredly. Between doing homework, attending school every day, and keeping up with my normal exercise regime, I was exhausted. My trainer had tortured me for hours this afternoon, and I wanted nothing more than to head to bed early tonight.

“I’m not interested in dating someone who only wants to be seen with me because I’m famous,” I replied.

Zeke laughed again. “I’m not sure girls like that exist. You’re looking for a unicorn.”

“There must be girls out there who aren’t interested in who I am,” I grumbled.

But Zeke was shaking his head at me as he patted me on the shoulder. “Yeah, maybe, one or two of those rare creatures exist. But, in the meanwhile, perhaps you should relax and remember there are plenty of perfectly normal and very gorgeous girls here tonight. I don’t want you to end up old and all alone.”

My gaze drifted from Zeke as I noticed Teagan entering the kitchen. She was laughing with a girl I recognized from drama, Hayley, I think, but the moment she laid eyes on me, Teagan’s smile turned to a frown. The last time we’d spoken had been in drama, and she’d reiterated yet again just how little she thought of me. She had a way of getting under my skin, and I’d probably let her words get the better of me at the time. It was frustrating though because I never seemed be able to say the right thing to her.

Zeke turned to see what I was looking at and started to grin. “Oh, look, aunicorn.” He chuckled. “Hey, unicorn, over here.” He waved Teagan over, and I felt like I

might die of embarrassment. I was going to kill Zeke for this later.

Teagan's bright green eyes clouded with confusion as she looked at my assistant. He kept grinning and beckoning her toward us though. Her eyes darted to me as she hesitated. It was quite clear I was the reason she didn't want to come over, and I was guessing she was still pissed after our argument the other day. I wasn't sure why she felt so hard done by. She hadn't exactly been pulling her verbal punches.

She was so reactive when it came to me, and I wished she would just give me a chance. Our performance had been electric when we'd acted out the scene together onstage right after butting heads in the wings. I'd never felt chemistry like it before. If Teagan could only see that I wasn't the villain she thought I was, then I felt like maybe we could get along.

For a moment it looked like Teagan might turn and leave the room, but her friend grabbed her by the arm and dragged her toward us.

Teagan hung back slightly as Hayley came to stand with us. She had her arms crossed over her chest and seemed determined to look anywhere but in my direction. If she hadn't already made her thoughts about me clear enough with words, her body language sure left no doubt about how much she despised me.

"Hey, Liam and Liam's friend," Hayley said, a wide smile on her face. "What was that about a unicorn?"

"Well..." Zeke began, but I interrupted before he could completely throw me under the bus.

"It's nothing," I quickly said. "Just Zeke messing around. Weren't you just saying you needed to get some more ice, Zeke?"

“Oh, yeah,” Zeke agreed. “How could I forget? I’ll leave you guys to it.” He turned to me and winked before excusing himself from the group.

I watched him leave with mixed feelings. He was great at shielding me from unwanted attention, but he also enjoyed embarrassing me far too much. I didn’t even want to guess at how he’d been going to explain the unicorn comment.

I tucked my hands into my pockets, feeling slightly awkward as I stood with the two girls. Hayley was the only one of us who didn’t seem uncomfortable, and she pulled Teagan forward so she wasn’t hiding behind her anymore.

“Teags, don’t be shy,” Hayley murmured to her.

“Yeah, Teags, no need to be shy,” I agreed.

Teagan’s eyes finally lifted to meet mine, defiance shining brilliantly out of them. I knew perfectly well she wasn’t standing back because she was nervous around me. It sure was fun messing with her though.

“I’m not shy,” she replied. “I was just looking for drinks. We heard there were drinks in here.” The words came out in a rush, like she needed to explain her presence to me. It was quite cute to watch and I had to smother a laugh.

“So, you’re only in here for drinks? You didn’t want to come say hello to me?”

She gave me a brilliant smile in response, completely transforming her face. If I didn’t know how she felt about me, or if I hadn’t seen this exact smile before, I might have been half-convinced it was real. “Hello, Liam. Thank you so much for having us here. This is an amazing party.”

I chuckled under my breath. The girl really was a good actor, I had to give her that. I

gave her an equally brilliant smile in return. “I’m so glad you could make it. I heard you were thirsty. Can I offer you both a drink?”

She rolled her eyes at my playacting, but something about her smile changed like it amused her.

“What have you got?” Hayley asked.

“Beer, wine, champagne, some crazy concoction Tanner brought over that he called jungle juice...”

“Just water would be great,” Teagan interrupted.

Apparently, her friend wasn’t impressed though. “Teags,” she hissed.

“Hayley,” Teagan replied through her teeth.

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I was trying not to smile as I turned to the fridge and took out two bottles of water for the girls.

“So, are you both enjoying the party?” I asked, as I turned back and passed them each a bottle.

Teagan took the bottle but didn’t move to open it. She simply crossed her arms over her chest like she didn’t want to respond. Hayley was more than happy to start gushing though.

“This has to be the best party I’ve ever been to,” she said. “I mean, you have actual waiters handing out food, and you’ve got the biggest pool I’ve ever seen out back. People will definitely be in it before long.”

“Is this the best party you’ve ever been to, Teagan?” I asked.

Her lips formed a hard line, and I could tell that complimenting my party for real was the last thing she wanted.

“Teags, he asked you a question,” Hayley said. Her eyes were bugging out of her head like she couldn’t believe Teagan would be so rude. I realized I hadn’t seen Teagan ever put a foot out of line in front of other people before, so it probably made sense that her friend would be shocked.

“It’s a great party,” Teagan finally said though it looked like she was lying through her teeth. “We should probably get back to the others.” She didn’t wait for Hayley as she turned and walked from the room. She couldn’t get out of the kitchen quickly

enough, and Hayley was frowning as she watched her go.

“Why is Teagan mad at you? What did you do?” Hayley asked, focusing her laser eyes on me. I got the distinct impression that she assumed I had done something very wrong.

“She’s not mad.” I scoffed. “I didn’t do anything.”

“No, I’m pretty sure she is. Teagan is one of the nicest people at Lincoln. I’ve never seen her be mean to a spider, let alone a person. Seriously, what did you do?”

“I literally have no idea,” I replied. Except that was a lie. The school play clearly meant everything to Teagan, and she still wasn’t convinced I was taking it seriously. It was why we’d gotten off on the wrong foot to begin with and was probably the reason why we were still at odds now. It also didn’t help that she wasn’t afraid to call me on my bullshit, and there was something I quite enjoyed about ruffling Little Miss Perfect’s feathers.

“Well, you’ve clearly done something wrong, so you should probably make it right ASAP.” Hayley let out a long breath as she shook her head at me. “Anyway, thanks for the water and the party.” She strode off without another word and left me standing there, stunned.

People never told me I’d messed up to my face. Unless, of course, I was speaking with my mother. It was a strange feeling to be scolded, and I found myself unsettled by it. I didn’t want Teagan to hate me. In fact, she was the first girl I’d come across at Lincoln who wasn’t totally blinded by my fame when she looked at me. She’d seen past the Hollywood glamour from day one and didn’t like what she saw.

I pushed a hand through my hair, scowling at the door as these uncomfortable thoughts ran through my brain. I’d been acting like a self-entitled dick around

Teagan, so I didn't blame her for the way she felt about me. If Teagan was going to hate me though, she at least needed to know the real me before she made up her mind.

"Dude, you need to have some of the jungle juice," Tanner said, as he entered the kitchen and caught me scowling.

I immediately calmed my expression. "I do?"

He laughed. "You look way too sober for this party."

He was probably right. My mother would certainly disapprove. She didn't expect me to drink, but I was sure to get criticized if I didn't at least look a little tipsy.

"I guess I better have a drink then," I said.

Tanner grinned before he proceeded to ladle the jungle juice out of the punch bowl on the kitchen counter and poured it into a red plastic cup. The liquid was almost the same color as the bright red plastic, and it looked completely unappealing.

I took a sip when he passed it to me and grimaced. "Just how much sugar is in this?"

"Just enough so you can't taste the copious amounts of alcohol," Tanner replied.

"My trainer is going to kill me," I said.

Tanner chuckled. "Yeah, I don't think Coach will be too pleased with me either. Maybe it can be our little secret?"

I laughed. "I'm down with that."

I took another sip of the drink and shuddered as it went down. My diet had almost no sugar in it, so I couldn't handle anything this sweet. I didn't want to be rude though, so I knocked back the rest of the drink quickly.

“Another?” Tanner asked.

I quickly shook my head. “No, I think I'll stick to beer.”

“Probably a wise decision.”

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Together, we walked out into the living room. The planner had hired a DJ, and the dark room was flashing as strobe lights streaked across the walls and floor. People were squished together as they danced to the beat of the music. It seemed like they were having fun, but I could think of nothing worse than getting caught up in the crowd.

“I think I might head outside,” I called to Tanner over the music.

“I’ll join you,” he yelled back to me.

The two of us walked out back to find that the yard was almost as bad as the house. There were so many people at the party now. Guests were scattered all over the lawn and several had jumped into the pool fully clothed. The party was quickly growing out of hand, but I guess that’s what my mother wanted. The bigger the party, the bigger the story.

Tanner made his way toward some of the guys who normally sat with us at lunch, but I didn’t make it that far as I was flocked by a group of younger girls. They were all talking over one another, and it was impossible to make out what any of them were saying. They kept touching me and taking selfies of themselves at my side. They were completely invading my personal space, but I smiled in all their photos and slung my arm around some of their shoulders as their camera flashes went off. My mother wanted me to look like I was hosting the party of the year, so I needed to pose for at least a few of their photos.

When I’d taken more than enough pictures, I tried to move past them and follow after Tanner. “Catch you later; thanks for coming,” I said, as I attempted to pass. The

moment I escaped the first group of girls though, another group descended on me, and I was trapped once more. I didn't recognize any of the people who kept coming up to me, and I was sure many of them didn't even go to Lincoln High.

I felt serious regret for agreeing to this party in the first place as I slowly made my way across the lawn. At school, there was at least some note of decorum to the masses of students. Teachers quieted classes down if they got too excited that I was there, and by this point, most kids had gotten the photo they wanted, and I was being stopped less between classes.

I'd just managed to free myself from another group when someone grabbed hold of my arm. I turned and let out a breath of relief as I found Zeke at my side. I thought he'd come to rescue me, but the feeling of relief was all too short, because the moment I caught his gaze, I knew something was up.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"People keep on streaming into the house," he said. "It's not just kids from Lincoln High anymore. Word seems to have spread, and there's a real crowd forming out front."

I swallowed and glanced nervously around the backyard. It wasn't overcrowded yet, but if people kept arriving, things were going to quickly get out of control.

"I don't think you're safe out here," Zeke continued.

"I'm fine."

Zeke scoffed, calling my bluff. "You've spent the last twenty minutes being mobbed."

He wasn't completely wrong about that. But it wasn't like I hadn't dealt with fans before.

"It's only going to get worse," Zeke continued. "I think we're going to have to shut down the party."

"But how?" I didn't have nearly enough personal security to kick everyone out. And it's not like I could simply ask them to leave.

"We might have to call the cops..."

I shook my head at his suggestion. "No. I know my mother wants me to do something newsworthy, but if word gets out that a party I threw was broken up by the police, it might be more negative publicity than even we can handle."

"Well..." Zeke shrugged. "It might be our only option."

I shook my head once more. "I don't want any photos of me near police."

"Fine. We'll get you out of here first, and then I'll make the call. Does that work for you?"

I glanced nervously around the yard once more. I didn't want to get these kids in trouble, and guilt curdled in my stomach at the idea of calling the cops on them. If the crowd got too large though, they would all be in danger. This party seemed to be taking on a life of its own, and I didn't want anyone to get hurt. Plus, if we made a big deal about me leaving the party, perhaps, people would head home of their own accord and we wouldn't have to call the cops.

I slowly started to nod. "Let's get out of here," I agreed. "And if me leaving doesn't calm the party down at all, you can call the cops."

Zeke blew out a breath, like he'd been worried I wouldn't agree with him. "Okay, good."

As he turned to lead me back through the crowd, I noticed he'd brought Boss with him. Boss tended to keep himself in the background when he was on duty, and I rarely even noticed he was there, which was impressive, considering his size. Right now though, I was beginning to feel really grateful he had made his presence known. Boss might not say a whole heap, but he was a formidable-looking guy. He didn't even need to push his way through crowds. They always just seemed to part for him.

"You okay?" Boss asked as I focused on him. "You told me to keep back, but I was getting concerned."

"I'm fine."

"Liam's agreed to get out of here," Zeke added.

Boss grunted his approval. "About time," he said before he started clearing a path for me through the crowded backyard. Boss certainly made getting back to the house easier than getting out of it had been. No one dared to stop me when he gave anyone who looked my way one of his murderous glares.

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“What about your mother’s plans?” Zeke murmured to me as the two of us followed after the huge bodyguard. “Do you think you’ve done enough to keep her happy?”

I shrugged. “The party’s huge, which is what she wanted, and I’ve already had my picture taken a million times tonight. She can figure something else out if she’s not satisfied.” Her happiness was the least of my worries right now. I liked to think she’d be glad I was getting out of the party so I would be safe, but because I hadn’t been photographed doing anything outrageous, it was more likely she’d be disappointed.

As we entered the house, a whole slew of new faces greeted us, many of them shouting my name in excitement.

“Liam! Great party,” one guy called.

“Liam, can I get your autograph?” yelled a girl.

“Liam, over here!”

“Liam, can I get a picture?”

The requests were endless, and I wanted nothing more than to disappear. It was impossible to completely vanish though because the house was crammed with people and there was no escaping them. It had grown so congested that even Boss was struggling to clear a path. People were pressed in so tight that there was nowhere to move, and I was struggling to keep close to Boss as he attempted to push through the crowd. It was hot and suffocating amidst all these people, and I desperately wished I’d thought to bring a baseball cap as everyone I passed recognized me instantly and

tried to grab my attention.

I was almost to the front door when the music screeched to a stop and a shout rang out through the room. I turned as a group of people fell back against me, pushing me up against the wall. For once, the crowd wasn't swarming me though; they were trying to get away from a fight that had broken out near the DJ booth. His equipment was lying broken on the floor, and a group of guys were throwing punches at each other as the people around them scrambled to get away.

I wanted to get away too, but I noticed Teagan standing pressed against the far wall. The fight was right in front of her, and there was no avenue for her escape. My stomach dropped as I saw the fear in her wide eyes, and I instinctively started moving toward her, my heart racing with a surprising amount of concern.

People yelled my name as I pushed through the crowd, but I ignored them as I used my body weight to carve a path toward the fight. Those who weren't trying to get away from the scrap had formed a circle around the brawling guys and were cheering them on. I didn't recognize anyone in the circle, but then again, I was barely focused on them as I made a beeline for Teagan.

Her face had gone pale, and she had shrunk in on herself as she kept looking for a way to get herself to safety. None of her friends were anywhere to be seen, and I had to wonder why she was there alone. When I finally reached the fight, I didn't bother trying to walk around it. Instead, I barged my way right through the brawl to get to Teagan.

The guys were all so fixated on each other that they barely noticed me pass by them, and Teagan's eyes widened at my arrival. For once, there wasn't the usual irritation in her gaze as she looked at me. Instead, she looked worried. "What are you doing?" she yelled at me.

“What does it look like I’m doing? I’m getting you away from these idiots!”

I didn’t wait for her response as I tucked her under my arm and started back across the room. Somehow, I’d managed to avoid the fight on my way to Teagan, but as I returned, one of the guys zeroed his focus on me.

“Whatchu lookin’ at?” the guy slurred before he staggered in my direction and threw his fist toward my face.

I stepped in front of Teagan, pushing her behind me as I raised an arm to block the punch. The guy’s attack was sloppy and lacked any impact. I suspected it had something to do with how drunk he was. He was barely able to keep to his feet, and his eyes were glazed with alcohol.

I easily deflected his punch, and his own momentum sent him stumbling to the ground. “Don’t even try it,” I growled before I wrapped my arm around Teagan once more and led her from the room.

I had no idea where Boss and Zeke had disappeared to, and I hoped they’d be outside waiting for me. Normally, I could pick Boss out of a crowd a mile away, but given the chaos in the room, it was hard to see anyone—even my bodyguard.

The pandemonium only grew worse as we neared the front door. People were constantly streaming in through the entrance, making it almost impossible for us to leave. It didn’t help when a large group of girls recognized me and started screaming my name and pressing in on us as they scrambled to get closer to me.

Teagan looked terrified, and I felt a wave of guilt for leading her into this mess. She would have probably been safer standing on the edge of the fight ,because if these fans didn’t calm down, we were going to be trampled.

“We need to get out of here,” I said, frantically looking for some way through the crowd. It was worse than a mosh pit at a concert though. There was no going backward, and it was too hard to move forward, so we were wedged in the middle of the mayhem with no escape.

“Where’s your security?” Teagan asked.

“I lost them.” I pulled Teagan in closer to me as a wave of people surged in through the front door, jostling us as they rushed into the house. If I hadn’t been holding Teagan so tightly, I had no doubt she would have been swept from her feet. “Are you okay?” I asked, as I steadied her.

She nodded, but I couldn’t help but feel angry with myself. Teagan had nearly been hurt for the second time tonight, and it was my fault for hosting this stupid party to begin with. “This is getting dangerous. We need to clear everyone out of here.”

Teagan stared into my eyes for several long moments, her forehead creased with concern. Suddenly, her gaze lit up, and a small smile curved the corner of her lips. She turned from me and didn’t hesitate as she started shouting at the top of her lungs. “Cops! The cops are here!”

The girls closest to us started frowning. “What? There’s no cops,” one of them said. But the rest of the room responded to Teagan’s warning immediately. People started to scream, and the whole crowd started running to the nearest exit. Complete mayhem had broken out as people charged for the front door. It was like getting caught up in a stampede, and I grabbed hold of Teagan’s hand as we raced along with them. No one seemed to care that Liam Black was running at their side. Not with the threat of cops in the vicinity.

The cool night air hit me as we left the house, but there was no relief in the front yard. It was just as chaotic as the house had been. For a moment, I worried we’d have

problems getting to the street, but as soon as the huge group of people gathered outside saw everyone streaming from the house, they quickly understood what was happening and started to follow suit.

There was a mad rush as people sprinted for the road and it was a miracle Teagan and I weren't trampled in the panic. We followed along with the crowd, and when we reached the street, we didn't stop running. We kept on going, turning down street after street until we reached a road that was empty of people. The sounds of the party had lowered to a muted noise in the distance, and it felt like we were finally safe.

Teagan was puffing heavily from our run, but I'd barely broken a sweat despite the distance we'd covered. It was probably a sign I worked out far too much.

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Teagan stared at me for several moments before she suddenly started laughing. I frowned when she kept on going.

“What?” I said, which only made her laugh harder. “What is it?” She sounded kind of hysterical, and I was guessing it was because she was freaking out. My heart was racing with adrenaline, so I had to imagine hers was too. We were lucky to have gotten out of the party without getting hurt.

“I just had to use the cops as a threat to get rabid girls away from you.”

My frown grew deeper. “That’s not funny.”

“Sure, it is,” she said, though she’d finally stopped laughing and was now taking in deep breaths as if the whole experience was just starting to hit her.

“It was a good idea though,” I admitted. “Thank you for getting us out of there. If you hadn’t done that, we might have been overwhelmed by people.”

Her cheeks seemed to warm at my thanks, and she started to twist a strand of her long blonde hair around one finger. “It was nothing, and you rescued me first from that fight, so I’m pretty sure I’m the one who should be thanking you,” she said, struggling to meet my eyes.

It had probably nearly killed her to admit that, but I felt a wave of happiness at her gratitude. The feeling swelled in my chest in an intoxicating way that I couldn’t quite understand. Why did this girl’s thanks mean so much to me?

“I guess that makes us even,” I said.

“I guess so.” She finally lifted her gaze to meet mine. There was curiosity in her eyes, and I sensed she was a little nervous. She was probably still processing our escape from the party though. She’d never exactly been nervous around me before.

“Is that really what it’s like to be you?” she asked. “All those people at the party trying to get to you, I mean.”

I shrugged. “Sometimes, but normally it’s not nearly so bad. Usually I have a whole team of security when I’m in situations with big crowds.”

“Where were they tonight?”

“I didn’t realize so many people would come,” I replied. “Boss wanted to have more security on me, but my mother was more interested in making sure I experienced a real high school party. I guess she figured it would be hard to do that through a wall of muscle.”

“Well, that was stupid,” Teagan said, with a shake of her head. “Shouldn’t your mom be more concerned about your safety?”

“Yes, well, she’s not exactly going to be winning a prize for mother of the year anytime soon.” I slowly blew out a breath and fished my phone out of my pocket. I had countless messages and missed calls from Zeke and Boss. I fired off a text to Zeke, telling him where I was and asking him to come pick us up, before I focused on Teagan again. “I’ve just organized a ride for us.”

“Thanks.” Teagan gave me a relieved smile and peered down at her own phone as it lit up with several text messages.

“Is that your friends?” I asked, feeling a hint of worry for the drama kids she normally hung out with. I’d spoken to a few of them during classes and had seen several of them at the party tonight. I knew Teagan would be concerned about leaving them behind.

She nodded as she read the string of text messages. “They’re all okay,” she said, letting out a long breath. “It sounds like they went out the back of the house when all the craziness started, and they’ve managed to get back to Evan’s car.”

“Good.” I was surprised to find I actually felt comforted by the news. I guessed the drama kids were growing on me.

Zeke’s eyes were filled with concern and relief when he finally arrived to pick us both up. Boss was in the car with him, and he looked just as unhappy about how the night had escalated.

“You seriously had me worried there, kiddo,” Zeke said, as Teagan and I got in the back of the vehicle.

“Don’t worry,Dad, I’m fine,” I replied, making him chuckle. His voice was strained though, and I knew how concerned he’d been. Despite my fame, it wasn’t every day we found ourselves at the center of such a big crowd. Walking a red carpet or leaving a nightclub was one thing, but inviting all the screaming fans into your house for a party was something else entirely. I wasn’t in any hurry to do it again. My mother was crazy for thinking it was a good idea.

When we pulled up at Teagan’s house, I expected her to race from the car without a backward glance. But, as she got out of the car, she hesitated and turned to me.

“Thanks again for looking out for me tonight,” she said. She didn’t meet my eyes as she said it, and she didn’t wait for my reply as she swiftly shut the door. She hurried

down the darkened pathway toward her house like she was worried I'd come after her so I could respond. I didn't stop watching her until she was through her front door and out of sight.

"I think she might be softening on you," Zeke commented from the front seat.

My heart warmed, and a flicker of hope flared within me. Teagan might have a knack for driving me crazy, but I couldn't deny that whenever she was near me, my heart beat a little faster and I struggled to notice anyone else in the room. Seeing her so vulnerable tonight had brought out a protective streak in me I didn't know I possessed, and now that it had come to life, I couldn't seem to switch it off.

There was so much more to the girl who had yelled at me in the corridor on my first day of school and she wasn't at all like I first assumed. It felt as though I was slowly peeling back the defensive layers she shielded herself with, and the more I got to know her, the more I wanted to know. Teagan was good at getting under my skin. The problem was: I was starting to like it.

14

Teagan

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I was surprisingly nervous as I walked into school on Monday morning. It wasn't any of my classes that had my stomach tied up in knots though; it was the thought of seeing a certain Hollywood actor who had come to my rescue on the weekend.

I was never the damsel in distress and yet that was exactly how I'd acted on Saturday night. I'd completely frozen up when I'd gotten caught up in the brawl at Liam's party. Fear had rendered my limbs useless and if it weren't for Liam I could have gotten really hurt. He'd put himself in danger to help me and I didn't know how to feel about it.

His actions had made me wonder if I'd been wrong about him. Was he simply the self-centered movie star I'd been introduced to or was there more to Liam Black than was obvious at first glance? I kept trying not to think about it or care about the answer, but I couldn't seem to push thoughts of Liam from my mind.

I kept recalling how safe I'd felt in his arms when he'd rescued me from the fight. Plus, I really needed to stop remembering how my hand had tingled while he'd held onto it and how he hadn't let go until we were safely away from the chaotic crowd that had swarmed the house. I kept trying to remind myself that Liam was a jerk, but I'd seen glimpses of a guy who actually cared on the weekend and I was left feeling confused.

I didn't want to have conflicted feelings when it came to Liam. I didn't want to be intrigued by the softer side of him I'd now seen, and I definitely didn't want the warm feeling that swelled inside of me when I thought of him. It was so much easier when I was constantly focused on disliking the guy, and I wanted nothing more than to recapture that feeling once more. I thought it wouldn't be too difficult to do, but

the moment I walked into our drama class, I wasn't sure if it would be such a simple task.

He caught my eye as I entered the auditorium and didn't look away as I made my way down the aisle to find a seat. I wasn't sure why he was staring at me in such a way, but he must have sensed my discomfort because his lips pulled into a smile like he thought it was funny. His smile was full of mischief and made his eyes twinkle in a dangerously handsome way. It was the kind of smile that made it all too easy to forget that the guy behind it was trouble and I quickly glanced away before I could do something stupid like smile in return. I wasn't supposed to be sharing smiles with Liam Black.

"Why does our resident superstar look so happy to see you?" Evan asked. He was walking next to me and had apparently seen my interaction with Liam.

I shrugged. "I don't think he's happy because of me. He smiles at all the girls like that."

"You sure about that?" Evan certainly didn't look convinced. "I haven't seen him smile at any girls like that."

My cheeks warmed as I shrugged again. What was I supposed to say in response to that? I definitely didn't know why he was smiling at me. He was probably planning his next means for tormenting me. I knew in my heart that wasn't the truth though. We found a couple of free seats, and thankfully, Evan didn't press me for an answer as we sat down.

"Did you see the photos of his party all over the Internet?" Evan asked instead.

I nodded. "I saw one article on Sunday morning, but it wasn't even close to the truth. They made it look like Liam started that fight, and there was speculation that the cops

came and arrested him. The cops weren't even there."

"Yes, well, you would know what happened with Liam seeing as our dashing prince rescued you from those hideous, brawling ogres and whisked you away to safety on his white horse."

"He didn't whisk me away on a horse," I grumbled. I really wished I hadn't told Evan about how I got home on Saturday night. He was never going to let me hear the end of it.

"Sorry, I meant shiny, black Escalade."

I rolled my eyes. "Well, I would have much preferred it if a beat-up old Ford had come to my rescue."

Evan's face dropped a little. "I'm sorry we got separated and I wasn't there to help you."

I smiled and nudged my shoulder into his. "I know you are, and, to be honest, I'm just glad you were out the back and got out safely. I'm much happier with the thought of our arrogant star putting his handsome face on the line."

"Did you just admit that Liam is handsome?" Evan gasped. "I never thought I'd see the day."

I groaned. Of course, that's what Evan took out of our conversation.

Thankfully, he couldn't continue winding me up because Madi called for everyone's attention and began to read out the cast who were needed up on stage. I wasn't required for the scene, but Liam was, and I couldn't seem to draw my eyes away from him as he made his way up onstage and started to perform.

He was still clutching his script like it was a safety blanket, but he didn't look at it once as he read his lines aloud. He seemed to be putting so much effort into the role, and I was blown away by his acting skills once again as he stalked across the stage toward Todd and growled out his lines. When the scene ended, the class started clapping, and I was surprised to find I joined in with them.

I wasn't supposed to be impressed by Liam.

I was supposed to be focused on all the reasons why I disliked him.

It was all really hard to do when he kept surprising me though.

* * *

Mr. Randall had asked me to meet him in his classroom after school. He'd suggested I submit an early draft of our biography assignment for him to review, and I'd taken him up on it because of how important the assignment was. I had a bad feeling I was about to be told I wasn't living up to my potential yet again.

My suspicions were confirmed when I walked into his classroom and saw the disappointed look in his eyes. I let out a hard exhale as I came to stand at his desk. "My assignment's terrible, isn't it?"

"Not terrible," he replied, though I could tell from his tone of voice that it wasn't great either. "Why don't you take a seat, Teagan?"

I eased myself into the chair across from him and clasped my hands tightly on my lap. This meeting meant I wouldn't be getting a ride home from school with Evan today and I'd have to walk. I had a babysitting job later tonight, so I really couldn't take too long with Mr. Randall or I'd be late.

“So...” I prompted.

“So, it needs some work,” he replied. “Your writing is clean, but it’s the content I’m concerned about. You’ve written down facts like you would a grocery list. There’s no heart to your story and no thread binding the facts together. I want you to dig deeper and give the reader of your biography a reason to want to keep reading it.”

It was a little hard to dig deeper when Liam hadn’t answered my questions. “I’m finding it difficult to get more information out of my assignment partner,” I said. It was the understatement of the century considering how much of a disaster our interview had been, but something stopped me from ratting Liam out completely.

Mr. Randall let out a tired breath. “Part of this assignment is about learning to work with others and uncovering their story. You need to consider what questions will be most effective in drawing out the answers you want. Why don’t you try questioning Liam again with this in mind?”

I withheld a groan that had worked its way up my throat. I was trying to distance myself from Liam, not get to know him better. I didn’t want to uncover his story, but it was clear my assignment wasn’t going to get me the grade I needed unless I made some improvements. I’d have to work harder on it, that much was obvious, but it didn’t mean I had to interview Liam again. I was just going to need to get more creative.

I started nodding, hoping it would get me out of the classroom quicker. “I’ll think about what you’ve said and do my best to make it better.”

Mr. Randall passed the paper back to me and smiled. He'd gone to a lot of effort making notes all over the page. The notes only made me sad though. They were a reminder of how much I was failing in his class, and it felt like I was letting myself down.

"I'll see you tomorrow, Teagan. Have a good night."

"Thanks, Mr. Randall. You too," I said, as I dashed toward the door.

My night was going to be filled with the cries of Mrs. Jensen's baby, so I doubted it would come anywhere close to being good.

* * *

"You're late," Mom slurred at me from the top of the stairs when I finally made it through the front door just before midnight. She was in her pajamas, clutching an expensive bottle of red wine, and there was makeup streaked under her eyes. I didn't want to know what she'd been doing tonight. It's not like she cared where I'd been.

Thanks to my meeting with Mr. Randall, I hadn't had time to go home between school and babysitting. It was the middle of the night, and I doubted Mom had even realized I wasn't home until now.

"Well, I'm home now," I grumbled as I dumped my bag by the door and started toward the kitchen. Mom didn't come after me, and I was almost glad she didn't feel the need to question me about my evening. I wasn't sure I could handle dealing with her right now. I was exhausted and starving. The Jensens always told me to help myself to anything in their fridge, but there hadn't been a chance to eat because baby Sarah had cried all night long.

Not one bit of my homework was finished, and I was too tired to try and slog through

it now. As I opened the fridge, my heart plummeted. Mom must have been really hungover today because the food I'd left in there this morning was all gone and the fridge was empty again.

Tears pricked the corners of my eyes as my stomach started to moan in complaint. I closed the fridge and leaned my head against it as tears began to silently stream down my face. Where the hell had my mother disappeared to, and why was I stuck with this stranger in her place?

Before Dad left us, Mom had taken pride in caring for our family. The fridge was always fully stocked, and she would have noticed that I hadn't come home from school. She would have known that I was babysitting tonight and would have offered to drive me there and pick me up. That life no longer felt real to me though. It felt like some dream that had happened to someone else, and it was never coming back.

I scrubbed the tears from under my eyes and tried to tell myself that I was stronger than this. I might not be able to control my life today, but my future would be different. It would be happy and bright. I'd leave this dim life behind forever and hopefully one day this would all seem like a dream too.

15

Liam

"I'm never going to be able to learn these stupid lines," I groaned to Zeke. The words were almost blurring on the page I'd read them so many times. I knocked back the last dregs of my protein shake. It was the same flavor I had for breakfast every day and I'd just completed a grueling workout with my trainer, same as always.

I was used to the routine, but I sometimes wished there was a little more variety in my life. I could have done with a little more free time too. With school and

homework now taking up so much of my day, it felt like I had no time for anything else including learning my lines. I'd never had so many to memorize all at once, and I didn't usually have to retain them for long periods of time.

I was jealous of Teagan for having the entire script committed to memory already and worried she made me look bad in comparison. I had to admit, I was impressed by her commitment though, and her skills onstage had floored me in rehearsals. She was a very talented actress, and her gift was wasted in a high school play.

"You'll learn the lines," Zeke said. "You've already got almost half of them down."

I placed my script down as I looked at my assistant. "Yeah, but as soon as I learn the second half, the first half will fly out of my brain. It's a scientific problem, I swear."

Zeke chuckled. "Well, if you say it's a scientific problem, then it must be true..."

"I pay you far too much to take this crap," I grumbled.

"Probably," Zeke agreed. "And, speaking of crap, your mother called this morning."

I groaned. "Please don't drop the M-word before I've had my morning coffee."

"She's been leaving messages for you to call her back," he continued, completely ignoring me. "You know she doesn't like to be kept waiting, and you've been dodging her calls ever since the party last weekend. It's nearly been a week."

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I'd leave it much longer than that if I could. It was Friday though, so it was probably time I called her, or she might show up in person. "I've been busy."

"Yeah, I know," Zeke replied. "But try telling Cruella that..."

I blanched and felt a wave of guilt that Zeke was stuck playing mediator between my mother and me. He was paid pretty well as my assistant, but I wasn't sure there was a wage in this world that could adequately cover that kind of job.

"So, do you know what she wanted?"

"Just to debrief about the party. She was really happy with your performance on Saturday night. According to her, all anyone is talking about is how perfect you are for your bad boy role in *Under the Bleachers*, and it's really hyping up the movie. It looks like the time you're doing at Lincoln is really paying off."

"Well, that's just great." I was growing really tired of the act my mother expected me to put on. I was also starting to worry that if things kept escalating it might affect my career in a negative way. What if one of the kids at my party had been injured on Saturday night? I doubted that even my mother's PR machine could have spun that in my favor. I was sick of fostering a bad reputation. It might have landed me the part in this movie, but what happened next? Would other producers want to hire an actor who'd been photographed in the midst of a fight with school kids?

"Do you think she paid those guys to start the fight?" I asked, focusing on Zeke once more.

He shrugged. “Wouldn’t put it past her. Your mother’s crafty.”

“Which is just a nice way of saying she’s evil.”

“Pretty much,” he agreed. “How’s that English assignment of yours coming along?”

“Way to change the subject.”

“Way to ignore the question.”

I huffed out a long breath. “I haven’t done the assignment.”

“Why not?”

“Because I have no idea what Teagan’s career plans are or what her hopes for the future are.” I’d considered asking her if she would be open to trying to do the interview again, but she’d been acting strangely around me this week. I thought that things might change between us after my party last weekend, but they definitely weren’t any better. They weren’t really anything. She only spoke to me in rehearsals when she had to, and it felt like she’d prefer to have nothing to do with me at all. I couldn’t help but feel disappointed.

“So, you haven’t done the interview?”

“Well, I would have, but Teagan’s impossible.”

Zeke started laughing, but I didn’t see the funny side.

“Teagan’s impossible?”

“Please, just let it go,” I grumbled.

“Okay, okay. But what will your English teacher think when you don’t hand in your assignment?”

“That perhaps Liam Black has better things to do with his time?”

Zeke shook his head at me. “I’m not sure that’s going to work.”

“Of course, it will. I’ll explain the situation to him and he will understand.”

“Ah, Liam, you have so much to learn.”

* * *

Zeke must have known something I didn’t because apparently the English teacher was far from understanding.

“What do you mean you aren’t doing the assignment?” he asked in a stern voice.

I was suddenly glad I’d decided to wait until the end of the lesson to tell Mr. Randall I wasn’t going to be able to complete the biography assignment. I’d met plenty of intimidating people in the film industry, but they didn’t hold a candle to the look Mr. Randall gave you when you told him something he didn’t want to hear. My palms started growing sweaty, and my throat felt like it was constricting.

“I haven’t had a chance to do it,” I continued. “And I won’t be able to complete it before it’s due on Monday.”

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“I see.” It didn’t sound like he saw at all.

“I’ve had problems getting my interview questions from my partner,” I added. I felt a twinge of guilt in my gut as I threw Teagan under the bus. The words had rushed out in a moment of panic, and I was sure I’d come to regret them later, but it was the truth. She couldn’t stand being around me, and it had been impossible to sit down with her and get her to answer a few silly questions.

“Miss York has managed to write a biography with the answers you provided,” Mr. Randall said.

“I find that unlikely seeing as I never provided any,” I muttered. She must have simply checked my IMDb page.

The teacher’s gaze narrowed further. “Are you telling me that neither of you bothered to undertake the interview?”

Crap. I’d really screwed Teagan now. It wasn’t just a bus I’d thrown her under but a semi-trailer too. “Well, we tried...”

“But?”

“But we never got to the part where either of us answered any questions.”

The teacher’s head looked like it was about to explode. His face had turned an unnatural shade of red, and I was concerned about how much oxygen was getting to his brain. It couldn’t be healthy.

His hands clenched onto fists as they rested on the table. “You and Miss York will both complete your interviews properly and submit your completed assignments on Monday when they are due.”

“But it’s the weekend.”

“Yes, and this is school. If you want to pass this subject, Mr. Black, there will be no weekend for you this week.”

“But...”

Mr. Randall interrupted before I could object again. “You will complete this assignment, or I will have to have a talk to the principal about your placement here at Lincoln.”

I swore under my breath, earning yet another reproachful look from the teacher. I couldn’t afford to be kicked out of the school. Not when it was part of my contract for *Under the Bleachers*. If I didn’t complete my time here, I might lose my role in the movie.

“Fine, I’ll get it done.”

“See that you do.”

I left the room, at a loss for words. Not only had I failed to get out of the assignment, but I’d also got Teagan in trouble too. It sounded like the teacher had already seen her work, so I was guessing she’d handed the assignment in already. It wasn’t all that surprising. The girl was Little Miss Perfect after all.

I didn’t manage to catch Teagan before school finished for the day, so I drove straight to her house. Her street wasn’t all that far from my own place, and I navigated almost

on autopilot, my mind whirring as I considered what I would say when I rocked up at her front door unannounced.

I parked my car directly in front of her house. The place was just as I recalled it: a large, rambling mansion with a garden that was growing out of control. It looked so out of place amongst the perfect houses that lined the street, and for the first time, I wondered why it was in such a state of disrepair. Surely, if you could afford a house like this, you could afford to maintain it?

I shrugged the question off as I prepared to face Teagan. She wasn't going to be thrilled about me showing up at her place without warning. She was going to be even more unhappy with me when I told her about my conversation with our English teacher. I couldn't put this off forever though. Thanks to me, we only had this weekend to get our respective assignments done.

Walking up to her front door, I felt a wave of uncertainty rush through me. The garden had looked overgrown from the street, but as I walked down the pathway, I began to see the extent of the disrepair. The grass lawn reached my knees and thick bushes of thorny vines crawled up the side of the house. If I hadn't seen Teagan walk through the front door before, I would have thought the place was abandoned.

I braced myself as I knocked on the front door, uncertain as to what I would find. I stood there for several long moments, waiting for someone to answer the door, but no one came. I knocked again, refusing to be deterred.

"Teagan, are you home?" I called out.

The door burst open, and I was met by Teagan's wide eyes. They quickly narrowed into a scowl when she saw me. "Liam?"

"Yes, that is my name."

She shook her head and glanced over her shoulder before quickly stepping outside. I tried to look past her and into the house, but the door was closed again before I could see anything.

“What are you doing here?” Her eyes were darting all over the place, and I could distinctly sense her unease.

I decided to get right to it. “The English assignment is due on Monday. We need to do our interview for real.”

She rolled her eyes, and her shoulders relaxed a little. “That’s what you want?”

“Well, yeah.”

“Just make something up about me. That’s what I did for my biography of you.”

I slowly shook my head. “I’m afraid that’s not going to work.”

“Why not?”

“Well, I may have spoken to the teacher and explained that you weren’t very forthcoming with your answers, and he insisted we did this properly.”

“You told Mr. Randall we didn’t do the interview?” Yep, there was the loathing I’d been waiting for. It was practically radiating off her skin, and it felt like I needed a shield for protection. “Why would you do that?”

“I was trying to explain why I wouldn’t be submitting my assignment,” I replied.

She flung her hands up in the air. “You completely suck. You know that, right?”

“It’s not something I’ve heard before.”

“Well, people should tell you more often. Like, every day would probably be a good idea. What were you thinking? How could you do this to me?”

“I wasn’t trying to do anything to you,” I murmured, but she didn’t seem to hear me.

“I need to do well on this assignment, and now, I’m going to have to start it from

scratch for the third time.” She continued her rant.

I rubbed the back of my neck as a slight hint of guilt flared in my chest. “Look, it won’t be all that bad. We’ll just get our answers and then quickly redo the assignment.”

“I don’t have time to just redo the assignment!”

“Well, I can help you. We can do it now...”

“No, we can’t.” She glanced down at her watch and started swearing. “I’m going to be late for my babysitting job.”

She didn’t wait for my response as she opened the front door again and grabbed her bag from inside the doorway. She slung it over her shoulder before slamming the door shut once more. Teagan took off down the pathway in a flurry of motion, and I had to jog to keep up with her as she started storming down the sidewalk.

“Where’s your babysitting job?” I asked.

“Two blocks from here.”

I took hold of her arm, gently tugging her to a stop. “I’ll drive you.”

Teagan glanced toward the car parked behind me. She must have been desperate because she sighed and started to nod without complaint. “If I could get a ride, that would really help.”

“Just tell me where to go.”

There were probably plenty of places she wanted to tell me to go, and I expected

most of them were as far away from her as possible. Thankfully though, she didn't echo those thoughts out loud as she got in the car. She secured her seat belt and sat there silently, hugging her bag tightly to her chest as I started to drive.

She didn't say anything other than to give me directions as we wound through the streets to our destination. It only took a few minutes until we arrived. The moment I pulled to a stop, Teagan was jumping out of the car and calling out her thanks. She darted around the front of the hood, and I wound down my window as she started toward a nice house.

"We still need to do this interview," I called out to her.

She slowed only slightly as she glanced over her shoulder at me. "Meet me at my house at ten tomorrow morning," she said. "And don't be late."

I gave her a small salute in agreement. "See you in the morning then."

16

Teagan

I was so tired it felt like my eyelids had been lifting weights, and they were now struggling to blink of their own volition. I'd been stuck babysitting until late last night, and by the time I'd walked home, it was nearing 2:00 A.M.

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I sat on my front porch waiting for Liam to come pick me up. There was no way I was going to wait inside and risk him coming to the front door again. He'd caught me off guard yesterday, and I wouldn't let that happen again. My house was the last place I wanted him anywhere near. I could only imagine what this place would look like to some Hollywood starlet, let alone the horror I'd endure if he met my mom.

He pulled up outside the house with two minutes to spare, and I slowly dragged my feet toward him as he got out of the car. "No need to get out. We've got to go," I called to him.

He frowned and glanced up at my house. "I thought we were studying here."

"Nope," I replied. "I've got another babysitting job, and you're coming with me." I usually didn't mind the amount of babysitting I committed to, but today, I felt too tired to be looking after a little person, let alone dealing with Liam as well. I needed the money though. I was saving for when I escaped this town someday. I was also terrified that there would come a time when Mom was going to max out her credit card and have nothing left to sell to cover the debt. My babysitting money was my insurance policy, so I continued slowly moving toward Liam rather than returning to bed like my exhausted body desperately wanted me to.

Liam folded his arms over his broad chest. "You want me to go to your babysitting job? You're kidding."

I wished that I were. "No jokes here, so back in the car with you."

He grumbled under his breath as he climbed back in the car.

“Why couldn’t we have done this at your babysitting job last night?” he asked as I joined him in the vehicle.

“It wouldn’t have worked. Baby Sarah needs constant attention.”

“And the kid today doesn’t?”

The corner of my mouth lifted as I shook my head. “Topher is a little angel. We’ll be fine to work on the assignment.”

“You realize I had to miss a session with my trainer today for this, right?”

I huffed out a breath and settled my hard gaze on Liam. “And I have to completely redo my assignment because of you. I’m sure you’ll live one day without your trainer.”

He frowned at me, as though he was genuinely worried he wouldn’t survive without his morning gym session. He also seemed slightly stunned that I hadn’t simply apologized. He must have been so used to people fawning all over him. I was one girl who certainly wouldn’t be.

“Besides, your muscles are too big anyways. They’re starting to make your head look small,” I added.

His eyes bulged at the comment, and he quickly looked down at his chest. I had to hide a smirk at his reaction. Every inch of the boy sitting across from me was pure perfection, but there was no way he needed to know I thought that. Besides, a little less training would probably be good for him. He clearly spent far too much time in the gym.

“I need to stay in shape for my next movie,” he said, narrowing his eyes as he looked

back up at me.

I gave him a tight smile. “Well, I’m sure they won’t mind if you overdo it then. Is the part you’re playing a high school student on steroids?”

“I don’t look like I’m on steroids.”

“Don’t you?” I left the question hanging, and he checked himself out again. I was having far too much fun getting under his skin. “We should probably get a move on. The Browns live on the other side of town.”

“Right.” He started the car and focused on my directions, but he kept sneaking nervous glances at his muscles. I’d probably given the guy a complex.

When we arrived at the house, I let myself in using the key under the doormat. I’d been babysitting Topher for a couple of years now, and the place practically felt like a second home to me. Topher’s mom, Nina, was a nurse and worked crazy long hours. Topher’s grandma looked after him most of the time when Nina was at work, but I came in on the weekends to give them both a break.

“Hello, Nina?” I called out as I entered the house. The place was a lot smaller than the house I’d been babysitting at last night, and Nina only paid me half as much as the Jensens for babysitting, but I’d help her out for free if she let me. Little Topher was the cutest kid alive, and I actually enjoyed hanging out with him. I also knew how hard she worked as a single mom, and I hated taking money from her. She certainly put my own mother to shame in that regard.

“Oh, Teagan, you’re a few minutes early,” Nina said, rushing down the corridor in her scrubs to meet me. She gave Liam a pleasant smile as she caught sight of him over my shoulder. There was no hint of recognition in her eyes, so I doubted she knew who he was.

“I hope it’s okay I’ve brought my English partner. We have an assignment due Monday that we really need to work on.”

Nina smiled. “Of course, that’s fine. You’re still okay to work until tonight? I know it’s a long shift, but Mom’s going to struggle to get here and relieve you today.”

“Yep, still okay,” I replied. “Don’t worry about it at all.”

She let out a breath and nodded. “You’re the best.” She grabbed her keys from the entranceway table and started for the door. “Topher’s out back drawing, and you have Mom’s number. If you need anything, call her.”

“I will,” I said with a smile.

She was out the door in the blink of an eye. That was how it always was with Nina. She almost seemed to blur when she moved as she was always trying to get a million things done at once. It was part of the reason I always tried to come a little early. I knew it made her life easier.

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“So, are you ready to meet Topher?” I turned to Liam.

He was staring after Nina though, like he couldn’t believe a whole conversation had just happened without involving him.

I tugged on his sleeve. “Come on, superstar, let’s head out back.”

Liam followed without complaint, and I all but forgot he was with me as Topher came into view. The four-year-old was sitting on his knees leaning over the coffee table as he drew on a large piece of butcher’s paper. His tongue was caught between his teeth as he focused on his masterpiece, and it took him several moments to realize he had company.

His eyes darted up, and a huge grin stretched across his face. “Teagan, you’re here!” he squealed with delight. He launched to his feet and raced over to give me a hug.

“Hey, little bug,” I replied, scuffing his hair in greeting. “I missed you this week.”

“Me too,” he said. A small frown crossed his features as he focused on the boy behind me, and a look of awe lit up his eyes. “You brought Dino to meet me?”

I laughed and looked over my shoulder at Liam. “Dino?” I asked.

“Dino and the Gang,” Liam murmured. “I didn’t know they were still running the show.” In an instant, Liam’s face transformed into a goofy grin as he crouched down to Topher’s level. “Well, hi there, pal. Yes, Teagan brought me here to meet you today.” His voice was high-pitched and enthusiastic as he turned into Dino before my

eyes. The cool Hollywood star has gone, replaced by a dorky children's TV character. I couldn't help but smile though when I saw how excited Topher was getting.

He tugged my hand as he started to jump up and down. "Is Teagan in your gang?"

"She sure is," Liam replied.

A moment later, Topher had grabbed Liam's hand and the small child was dragging him over to the coffee table. "Dino, I want to show you my picture."

I watched and laughed as a slightly overwhelmed Liam was forcibly pulled across the room by the small boy. He gave me a warm smile as he went though, all too happy to indulge Topher.

"See, that's my mommy," Topher said, pointing at his drawing. I could see he'd drawn Nina in her scrubs, and I had to stop from chuckling when I saw he'd also drawn her holding a huge syringe. Ever since he'd had a vaccination a few months back and found out the woman giving it to him was a nurse like his mom, Topher had been drawing Nina with syringes in hand.

"Wow, it looks just like her," Liam said. "You're a very good artist."

Topher's little chest puffed out with pride at Liam's praise, and he started tugging on Liam's jeans. "Do you know what else I'm good at?"

"What?"

"TheDino and the Gangdance."

I couldn't stop the smile from spreading across my face as Topher started to dance. His arms and legs were flailing all over the place, and not the least bit coordinated,

but it was impossible not to find him cute.

Liam must have thought so too because he grinned before pulling out his phone. Soon, a ridiculous whistling tune started playing from the speakers, and he started mirroring Topher's moves. A laugh burst from my chest as I watched the two of them. It was probably the most awkward dance I'd ever seen in my life, but they were both having so much fun that neither of them seemed to care.

"Don't think you're getting out of dancing that easily," Liam said, grabbing my hand and dragging me over to them.

"I don't know the moves," I protested.

"Come on, Teagan, it's easy. You just do this," Topher replied, doing a crazy wave with his arms as his feet tapped out to the side.

I laughed and started copying him. "Like this?"

Topher jumped up and down and clapped. "Yes! That's perfect!"

"You're a natural," Liam added, his eyes sparkling with humor.

I rolled my eyes at him but couldn't wipe the smile from my lips as we kept dancing around the living room. I was pretty sure that the Dino and the Gangdance simply involved dancing as crazily as possible, because that was what all of our movements descended into. It was fun and freeing though, and we were all laughing as we tried to outdo each other.

This was definitely a side of Liam I hadn't seen, and messing around with him was the most fun I'd had in a long time. Dino was silly and goofy and didn't care that he was making a complete idiot of himself. I had no idea who this guy was, but it was

not the Liam Black I'd come to know.

When the song finally ended, we all fell onto the couch in a tired heap. I was still smiling, and it felt like a weight had lifted off my shoulders. Topher was grinning from ear to ear, and he was watching Liam like he was having the best day of his life.

Unfortunately for our assignment, Topher spent the next few hours commanding Liam's attention. The kid was so incredibly excited to have one of his favorite TV characters with him that I couldn't seem to separate the two of them. It was only when he was finally put down for his afternoon nap that Dino disappeared and Liam returned in his place.

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“Thanks for doing that,” I said, as I entered the living room after leaving Topher asleep in his bed.

Liam smiled up at me. “It was no problem. You were right. Topher’s cool.”

“He is,” I agreed.

I sat on the couch at Liam’s side and let out a long breath as I gathered myself to start the interview. I needed a moment’s break though before we delved into it. Liam seemed to sense this and sat patiently at my side.

He’d been acting so different today, and it was hard to remember why he irritated me so much when he went to such an effort to entertain Topher. His usual arrogant behavior acted like a filter that veiled his good looks, leaving me completely unaffected by how attractive he was. But the sweeter side of his personality made me feel like I was seeing him for the first time and I was finding it hard not to feel a little overwhelmed by how gorgeous he was as I sat next to him. He’d focused his full attention on Topher for hours, and the way he’d made the boy giggle wasn’t something I would easily forget.

I took in some deep breaths, trying to remind myself that a few hours playing with Topher didn’t make Liam a different person. It was almost impossible to do though because I was starting to realize that I might have judged Liam all wrong. I glanced at him out of the corner of my eye, feeling a sudden onslaught of nerves. They erupted in my stomach and seemed to flutter against my ribs. I could handle Liam Black the movie star, but this Liam Black had me all tied up in knots.

I had to tamper down the urge to jump from the couch and sit on the other side of the room. I wasn't sure what I'd been thinking sitting next to him, but he felt all too close right now.

Liam caught me glancing at him and started to smile. "You think I'm a loser now, don't you?"

I returned his smile, all too relieved he hadn't guessed what I'd really been thinking about him. "It's easy to forget you're Liam Black the bad boy of Hollywood when you spend a couple of hours with dorky Dino," I replied.

Liam laughed. "I've actually kind of missed dorky Dino."

"He is much easier to get along with." I slowly shook my head as I looked at him. The boy I'd spent all morning with seemed so much more natural than the guy I'd seen spread across magazine covers. The inflection in his words might have been fake, but the goofy personality I'd seen shining through Dino seemed very real to me.

"Liam, are you really as bad as the magazines say you are?" Now that I'd seen another side to him, I just couldn't picture it. I knew he was a talented actor, but I found it difficult to believe that what I'd just witnessed was all for show.

His eyes sobered somewhat and he started to frown. "Is this a part of the interview assignment?"

"No, this is just me asking."

He sighed and looked away, as if he wasn't sure whether he wanted to answer. I didn't press him though, and I sat in silence as I waited to see what he had to say.

"The Dinos of the world don't get serious, grown-up acting jobs," he started. "And

that's how everyone saw me. I was a fun, goofy kid, and the only way forward was to behave so badly that people forgot I was ever anything else."

He glanced up at me to gauge my reaction.

"It's all a lie?" I whispered.

Liam shrugged. "It's a perception."

"Is that really so different?"

He slowly blew out a breath and stared down at the picture Topher had drawn that still lay across the coffee table. "My whole life has revolved around perceptions, so I wouldn't know."

My heart broke for him at his admission. He might have been living the life I desperately wanted, but I knew firsthand how high the cost of living a lie was. Knowing I sometimes had to wear fake smiles at school and in front of my friends didn't seem so bad compared to the lengths Liam had to go to though. The constant act he performed must be taking a toll, and I had to wonder if he was losing pieces of himself along the way.

"You want to write about my successes and failures in life for the assignment," he said. "But they aren't the movies I've been in or the parts I've missed out on. My greatest failure in life is that I'm stuck living a lie, and I'm still waiting on my greatest success. That will come when everyone sees the true me and accepts it as enough."

His face was raw and vulnerable, and I reached out to grasp his hand, giving it a small squeeze. "If the real you is anything like the guy I've spent today with, then everyone else won't be able to help but love you."

A smile started at the corner of his lips and the rest of his face seemed to light up from within. “So, you love dorky Dino, do you?”

I laughed and sat back from him, releasing his hand. “I’m not sure I’d go that far. But dorky Dino has a lot going for him.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” he said, still smiling.

He couldn’t seem to wipe the grin from his face, but then again, I couldn’t either. There was something undeniably attractive about this new side of Liam Black, and if I kept seeing more of it, I knew I was going to be in trouble.

17

Liam

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I could really get used to Teagan's smile. The real one, that was. Not that fake thing she plastered across her face like her life depended on it while at school. There was such a subtle difference between the two that you might not realize she wasn't genuinely happy unless you knew what you were looking for. It was in the way her eyes sparkled though. When she was truly happy, her green eyes twinkled like sunlight was streaming through a canopy of leaves that were fluttering in the wind.

The most astounding part of our whole morning was the fact she'd brought out a side of me that had been buried deep for so long I'd almost forgotten it existed. Once upon a time, I was the goofy guy who was always laughing with his cast mates and going out of his way to make people smile. Ever since we'd started to reform my image though, I'd become all too serious.

I liked to think I'd brought out a side of Teagan that she kept hidden too. The way she'd laughed with such freedom while we danced wasn't something I'd witnessed at school. Her face glowed with happiness, and the sound of her laugh was so carefree I knew I wouldn't forget it anytime soon.

"So, we should get on with the interview," she said, her eyes darting away to rest on her bag. She started rifling through it as she brought out a notebook. I took out my laptop at the same time, ready to get the project completed for real this time. I found I actually wanted to learn more about Teagan, and the assignment seemed insignificant compared with my own curiosity.

I opened the document of questions I'd prepared, but I barely looked at them, instead choosing to focus on Teagan. She was wearing a simple denim skirt and T-shirt today. There was hardly any makeup on her face, and her hair fell in soft waves. It

was clear she hadn't spent hours working on her appearance like most girls at the high school seemed to, but she was so naturally beautiful she didn't need to. She was all too easy to watch, and the more time I spent with her, the more I lived for the subtle expressions that always lit up her features.

"You wanted me to interview you about your career and hopes for the future," I started.

Her cheeks warmed at the words, and I found my curiosity growing. Was she embarrassed about what she wanted to do with her life?

"I did suggest that, didn't I?" she murmured.

"Yep. So, what is it you'd like to do when you finish school?"

Her gaze drifted toward me, but she didn't meet my eyes as she responded. "I want to be an actress."

My eyebrows lifted with surprise. "You want to be an actress?"

"Don't sound so shocked," she said, her prickly temper bubbling to the surface.

I quickly shook my head. "I'm not shocked." I'd seen her acting in drama class, and her skills easily matched most of the actors I'd worked with. "I guess I just didn't expect you to say that. You seem so dedicated to school I thought maybe you'd want to go to college."

She let out a sad laugh under her breath. "I seem that way, do I?"

"It's just the impression I got," I replied. "Plus, for someone so set on acting, I would have thought you'd have been all over me from day one."

She rolled her eyes. “Of course, you’d think that.”

I shrugged. “It’s only natural. Success in Hollywood isn’t what you know but whoyou know. The only reason my acting career started so young is because my uncle is a producer. Most people I meet who want to get into acting try to use me for a leg up.”

She seemed to stiffen at this, straightening her back and sitting upright in her spot on the couch. “I don’t need you to give me a leg up. I’m going to be successful because of my own talent.”

I frowned, surprised by her reaction. Girls always wanted me for something. The ones who agreed to be photographed with me at nightclubs wanted to gain more exposure and used me to increase their profiles. The girls at Lincoln all wanted photos with me to post on their Instagram or Snapchat so they could get more followers or likes. Even my own mother used me to make herself more successful.

I didn’t quite know how to respond to the girl sitting before me. From the very first day I met her she’d made it clear that she had no use for me in her world. That she was just fine without me. She was the one person with the most to gain from me though. I could so easily help her with her dreams of starring in movies, but I really respected the fact she was determined to do it on her own.

“I have no doubts you will make it because of your talent alone,” I finally responded.

Her eyes flashed with disbelief.

“You can definitely act,” I continued. “And you’re beautiful, which doesn’t hurt.”

“You think I’m beautiful?” she murmured. The way she looked into my eyes made my heart tremor. It was like her gaze reached right inside me, tied a rope around my heart and tugged it toward her. I wanted to close the distance between us. To reach

out and brush my lips against hers, but I had no idea if she'd welcome a kiss between us. Did she feel the connection between us too, or was this purely one-sided?

"You're the most beautiful girl I've ever seen," I admitted as I stared into her eyes. My cheeks warmed as I realized I'd said the words aloud. They hadn't come out all smooth and confident, like I was Liam Black, notorious Hollywood player. Instead, dorky Dino had risen to the surface and my voice had shaken with nerves. I couldn't believe I'd just said that to her.

Teagan's lips parted, and she looked like she was ready to tell me I was mistaken. The sound of something dropping on the floor upstairs pulled her attention away though.

She jumped up from the couch. "I should go check on Topher." She was out of the room before I could reply, happy to get away from the fumbling idiot sitting next to her.

I was so used to Teagan being annoyed by me that I was unsure how to act around her now I was seeing this softer side. My stomach twisted with nerves. The papers may have portrayed me as a player, but I had absolutely zero game when it came to girls in real life, and I wasn't sure how to proceed. Teagan and I had shared a moment just before, and I'd wanted to lean in and kiss her so badly. I didn't have the courage to do that though.

This was all so much easier when there was a script to follow.

Teagan came down a few minutes later but sat on a chair farther away from me. My chest deflated as I looked across the distance between us. Whatever I'd been feeling, apparently, it was one-sided.

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“Everything okay with Topher?” I asked.

She nodded, her fingers twirling a loose strand of hair around them as she focused down on her notebook. “He has a million toys on his bed, and his truck fell off.”

“He’s still asleep though?”

“Yes, that boy could sleep through anything,” she replied with an indulgent smile. The expression dropped as she focused on me though. “Should we get back to the assignment?”

“Sure.”

Our interviews were far less interesting after that. Teagan barely looked at me when she responded to my questions, and her questions to me were asked in a quick and colorless way. I almost felt like I’d crossed some kind of invisible line with her earlier, and I couldn’t understand what I’d done wrong. Why was she shutting down on me all of a sudden? Why wasn’t she opening up to me like she’d done so easily before?

When Topher woke up from his nap, Teagan declared that our interviews were over, and I got the distinct impression she meant it was time for me to leave. I would have happily stayed and hung out with her and Topher all day, but I also didn’t want to overstay my welcome.

“Please don’t go, Dino!” Topher begged as he held tightly onto my leg.

I glanced in Teagan's direction and could see her nervously watching the interaction. She looked ready to butt in, but I didn't want to make her the bad guy.

"I have to go, pal," I said, crouching down to his level. "The rest of the gang is going on an adventure, and they need my help."

His eyes grew wide with excitement. "Can I come?"

I quickly shook my head. "Gang members only for this adventure. But maybe, you could come next time."

"Really?" He was jumping up and down with excitement.

"Of course."

He barreled into my arms for a hug before quickly turning to Teagan. "I get to go on the next adventure!"

"I know," she said. "It's very exciting."

"We'll need a treasure map!" He ran toward his crayons and started drawing what I guessed was the map.

"Well, that's my cue to leave," I said, pulling my bag onto my shoulder.

Teagan gave me a tight smile and started to walk me toward the door. "Have you got everything you need?" she asked.

I nodded. I had everything I needed for the assignment though not everything I wanted from her. I felt like there were so many layers to Teagan that I could spend a lifetime trying to unravel them all.

“And you’ve got enough material from me to work with?” I asked in reply.

“I think so.”

“Give me your phone,” I said, holding out an expectant hand toward her.

She frowned down at my hand like it had turned into a poisonous snake but pulled her phone out of her pocket and passed it to me. “What do you want it for?”

“I’m putting my number in here so you can call me if you think of anything else you want to ask.”

Her eyes lifted to meet mine. “You’re giving me your phone number? Isn’t that like the first thing they teach you not to do in How to be a Superstar 101?”

I chuckled. “I must have missed that class, but I think I can trust you with it.”

I quickly called my own phone first, so I had her number too, before I passed her phone back to her. I wasn’t sure if I’d be brave enough to call her, but it made me happy to know I could.

I opened the front door to leave but paused when I saw my car parked out on the street. “I drove you here.” I faced her once more. “Are you going to get home okay when you’re done babysitting?”

Teagan nodded, a smile coming to her lips. “Yes, of course. I’ll get my mom to come get me.”

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I frowned. “Are you sure? I can come back to get you if you need.”

“I’ll be fine, Liam.”

The smile on her face was the perfect one she adorned when she walked down the school halls, but it didn’t reach her eyes, and I got the feeling she wasn’t being honest with me.

“I should get back to Topher. Thanks for today,” she said before I could question her.

“I’ll see you at school on Monday,” I said.

“Yep, first after-school rehearsals start. I hope you’re ready.”

I was still struggling to get the lines down for my part, but I refused to admit that to Teagan. I had the rest of the weekend to practice with Zeke and was going to make sure they were cemented in my memory by the time Monday came.

“I’ll be ready,” I said, giving her a wink and turning toward the car.

As I walked away, I couldn’t dismiss the feeling that Teagan was hiding something from me. She might have finally opened up to me today, but her answers had only gone skin deep. I was going to keep on trying to get to know her though, because there was something incredibly special about this girl.

Teagan

Spending the day with Liam on Saturday had been disastrous to my self-control. I'd been quite happy keeping the guy at arm's length, but just one day alone with him and I was turning into every other girl at school and developing a massive crush. I felt like such an idiot. The guy dated supermodels, and almost every teenage girl in the country was in love with him. I had no chance with him. But why did I feel like there had been a connection sparking between us?

The one positive to come from the weekend was that I'd had time to focus on my English assignment. The words had come so easily after talking with Liam, and they flooded out of me and onto the page in a seamless flow. I'd actually been proud of the work I'd done when I handed the assignment in, but I would have died if anyone other than Mr. Randall read it. I probably sounded like one of Liam's groupies the way I gushed about him. It was hard not to though once you caught a glimpse of the guy he was beneath the bad boy façade.

I just wished I knew what to do about the feelings I was developing for him. It wasn't like I could ask him on a date, and I was completely hopeless at flirting with guys. My one lone kiss had been with Slobbery Steve back in freshman year and the experience had been so bad that I hadn't considered kissing another boy since. I still had nightmares about the saliva he'd dribbled all over my face, and I pushed down a shudder as I thought of it.

It would be so much easier not to be affected by Liam if he wasn't so good-looking. His dark hair always fell in a perfect mess, like he'd just run his hand through it, and the color of his eyes were an ever-changing shade of green. One day, they reminded me of the ocean while other days they were imbued with shades of a tropical rainforest. Today, they looked like emeralds, not that I'd ever admit thinking something so embarrassing out loud.

Liam was up onstage without his script in hand, and something about the lighting really made his eyes stand out. I couldn't seem to stop looking at him, and it was lucky we weren't in the scene together or people might have noticed me staring.

"He's just as handsome in real life as he is on screen, isn't he?"

I jumped at the sound and turned to find Zoe sitting next to me in the auditorium. I'd been so distracted by Liam I hadn't heard her approach. "Zoe, what are you doing in here? Shouldn't you be in class?"

"I had a free period and thought I'd come check out the rehearsal." Her voice was calm, but there was something calculating about the way her eyes flicked toward the stage.

"Only drama students are allowed at rehearsals."

She shrugged my comment off and held up her notepad as she started to scribble something on it. Zoe was on the school paper, and she was so good at uncovering the latest news and gossip that everyone at school was certain she had secret Jedi mind powers.

"Zoe, you can't be in here," I repeated.

She pouted and shook her head at me. "Don't be such a spoilsport, Teagan. I'm just trying to get a head start on my piece for opening night of the play."

"More like another scoop on Liam." He'd been quite the feature in the paper lately, and her last article on him had been a damning exposé on teen drinking at parties and the fights that ensued. Liam had been the poster boy for her article, and it was clear she didn't have the highest opinion of him. A few days ago, I might have agreed with her.

“I’m just here for the play, I swear,” she said, her eyes wide and filled with innocence. I didn’t believe her for one second though.

“Opening night is still a couple of weeks away.”

“And I want the piece to be perfect. Don’t you want my article about your performance to be good?”

I folded my arms over my chest as I stared her down. She knew how much every element of the play meant to me including whatever critique she wrote about it. I wasn’t an idiot though. Whatever information she gathered now wouldn’t change her review if she didn’t like the performance.

“I have total faith in your talent, Zoe, and feel sure you’ll write the best piece in the world come opening night.” I stood up and motioned for her to get up with me.

She sighed and put her pen and paper away as she allowed me to walk her from the room. She paused when we reached the door though.

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“I heard you and Liam spent the day together on Saturday,” she said.

“Where did you hear that?”

She smirked. “So, it’s true?”

“I didn’t say that...”

She wasn’t listening though. “Are you guys dating?” she pushed on. “The two costars of the school play, rehearsing together in close quarters, night after night. It makes sense.”

“We’re not dating,” I confirmed, stopping her before she formed her wild theories any further. “We had an English assignment to work on together.”

“Uh-huh.”

“We’re not dating,” I repeated.

“Sure, sure.” She winked at me.

“Goodbye, Zoe,” I said, giving her a final push out the door.

I shook my head as I returned to my seat.

“What did Zoe want?” Evan asked, as he joined me in the audience. He’d just finished a scene with Liam, and he looked pretty happy with his performance. He had

every right to be. He'd held his own against the Hollywood hotshot.

"The inside scoop," I replied.

Evan chuckled. "Sounds like her. Did you spill any of your deep, dark secrets?"

I laughed uncomfortably. "I don't have any deep, dark secrets. You know that, Evan."

He glanced knowingly in Liam's direction. "I think you might, actually."

"What are you saying?"

"Just that you haven't been able to take your eyes off a certain Hollywood heartthrob all rehearsal."

"He's been in every scene. Of course, I've been watching him."

"So, you're not hiding a secret obsession with Liam Black?"

My cheeks warmed at his question. Anything I might have felt for Liam was completely one-sided, and there was no way I was admitting any feelings out loud. "I'm not hiding a secret obsession," I replied.

"If you say so," Evan said though he sounded far from convinced. "I guess it's no problem then that, since Todd is sick, we have to skip ahead a few scenes. We're rehearsing the final scene of the play next."

"What?" The word felt like it caught in my throat and I struggled to get it out. "We're not supposed to get to that scene until later in the week." I'd thought I had a few more days until I had to worry.

Evan shook his head at me. “Maybe you were a bit too busy talking with Zoe to hear Madi announce the change just now.”

“It’s not like I wanted to be talking to Zoe, she was only trying to dig up dirt.” I bit on my lip as I considered my friend. “Are you sure that’s what Madi said?”

“Yes, I’m sure,” Evan replied. “But, I thought you weren’t worried about that scene?”

“I’m not.”

“So, you’re feeling totally cool about kissing Liam onstage?”

My stomach dropped, and I really wished Evan hadn’t felt the need to spell it out like that. It was just a stage kiss and it meant nothing—at least, it shouldn’t mean anything. I started twisting my hair around my finger as I tried to remain calm. “I said it’s fine, didn’t I?”

“Teags, it’s okay to be nervous.” Evan was always such a jokester, but right now, his eyes were filled with sincerity, and he reached out to give my hand a comforting squeeze.

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I nodded. “It’s just a little kiss. How hard could it be?”

“It’ll be as easy as breathing,” he replied with a reassuring smile.

“Thanks, Evan.”

His eyes suddenly turned mischievous though. “But, you know, if it’s horrible, I’m more than happy to learn the lines for Belle and take your place. I have no problem kissing Liam, and I am the beauty in our group after all.”

I laughed and shoved his hand away. “You’re so full of yourself, Anderson.”

“Well, one of us has to be.”

I turned as I noticed someone waving to me from the end of the aisle. It was Madi. She was dressed all in black, which made it difficult to see her in the darkened auditorium.

“You’re up, Teags,” she said.

I slowly nodded and started to stand. “Wish me luck,” I said to Evan.

“I’ll do you one better and give you a breath mint,” he said, offering his tin of mints out toward me.

I laughed, knowing he was only joking, and took the mint anyway. It couldn’t hurt, right?

I started up to the stage, nerves making the blood rush from my skin. I felt suddenly cold and wasn't at all sure what my lines were supposed to be. It was like they'd disappeared straight out of my head, and no matter how hard I tried to recall them, they simply weren't there.

Some of the cast were still reading off scripts as we blocked each scene out, but I'd been off my script since we finished the first read through. This was the first time we'd be practicing the final scene, and it was the first time I'd kiss Liam. It was just a stage kiss and I had to keep reminding myself that.

"Hey," Liam said, as I joined him in the wings. Miss Appleby was still chatting with Hayley about some notes she had on the last scene, so we had a few minutes before we began.

I hadn't spoken to Liam since Saturday, and I could barely look him in the eyes. "Hey," I replied. "How'd you get on with writing up the English assignment?"

"Good," he said, flashing me his beautiful smile. "I'm guessing you had everything you needed since I didn't get a call." It almost sounded like he was disappointed I hadn't called him, but I knew I was probably just imagining things.

"Yeah, I had enough to get the assignment done." I replied.

"I'm glad. Sorry again you had to redo all the work you'd done."

I shrugged. "No, it's fine. It was a much better biography in the end anyway. It was probably a good thing I had to start over."

Miss Appleby clapped her hands together and called for us to begin the next scene. She liked us to act the scenes out in an impromptu manner for our first run through, so it was completely up to us how it went.

Liam had been shot in the last scene and was supposed to be lying on the floor. He winked at me before he walked over and took his place on the ground, his hands clutching the wound on his stomach his character was suffering from.

I took a deep breath in and counted down from three before I entered the scene. “Three, two, one...”

I stepped onto the stage and fell into character. I rushed to Liam’s side and his eyes lit up at my appearance. “Belle, you came back.” His voice was rough, and his teeth were gritted together with pain.

“Of course, I did,” I said, as I fell to my knees at his side. He hissed in a pained breath and my eyes darted to where his hands clasped tightly on his abdomen. “You’re bleeding.”

I pressed my hands over his as I stared down at the wound in horror.

“Maybe it’s better this way,” he said.

But I violently shook my head as I looked him in the eyes. “Everything will be okay. I’m going to make everything okay.” I pleaded with him with my gaze, but his eyes were drifting shut.

He lifted a hand to me and lightly touched a stray strand of hair that fell across my chest. “At least I got to see you one last time...” His hand dropped to his side, and finally, his eyes drifted shut.

I leaned over Liam’s chest and gripped his face in my hands. His skin was soft and warm, and I suddenly found it difficult to stay in character now that we were so close. My body was pressed against his, and I had to remember that everyone was watching us.

“No,” I whispered. “No!” I gently rubbed his cheek as tears welled in my eyes.
“Please don’t leave me. I love you.”

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I bent my head over his body, placing it against his chest in despair.

“Cue final petal dropping. Cue lighting and smoke,” Miss Appleby called out.

We didn’t have props yet, but this was where the beastly boy in front of me was supposed to transform into his handsome self from under the cover of wafting smoke.

I stood and stepped away, shielding my eyes from the transformation that was supposed to be happening.

“End transformation,” Miss Appleby called.

I slowly lowered my arms, blinking as I looked in Liam’s direction. He held his arms out toward me, but I shook my head with confusion.

“Belle, it’s me,” he said.

I tilted my head, taking cautious steps forward as I stared into his eyes. I lifted a hand and lightly touched his cheek, and I could have sworn Liam shivered under my touch. I was almost too scared to speak my next lines because I knew what would happen the moment they were out. We were supposed to kiss, but I was so jittery because the beautiful boy standing before me wasn’t just another actor. He was Liam Black.

It’s just a play, I reminded myself.

“It is you,” I whispered, the words barely passing my lips because I was so nervous.

He slowly brought his head down toward me before hesitating for the briefest second. I knew I had to reach up the rest of the distance to kiss him—that this kiss couldn't be one-sided. My heart raced and my stomach dropped as I placed my hands on his chest and pushed up on my toes. I lightly pressed my lips against Liam's and, in an instant, I was gone.

His lips moved gently against mine, and the lightness of the kiss made my knees go weak. I could feel it tingling all the way down in my toes. He tasted like peppermint, and as his strong arms wrapped around me, I found myself wishing he'd never let go. The kiss wasn't supposed to be real, but my heart couldn't seem to tell the difference. It had exploded the moment his lips touched mine, and my skin buzzed like I was cocooned in the purest form of magic. I was both relieved and disappointed when Liam finally pulled away. If he hadn't, I very well might have lost myself in the kiss forever.

His eyes stared intently into mine, and even though our lips no longer touched, I felt more connected to him than ever. My skin smoldered where he still held me and we breathed in and out in unison like we were one person rather than two. The kiss had left me speechless, and though there was a niggling feeling in the back of my mind, I struggled to remember why we had to stop.

Miss Appleby started clapping, and the two of us seemed to snap back to attention. I jumped out of Liam's hold and turned to the teacher. My cheeks were flaming red as I looked around the room and remembered we weren't alone.

"That was brilliant, you two," Miss Appleby said, smiling proudly at us. She continued talking as she analyzed our performance and gave us instructions for where we could improve, but I didn't hear a thing.

My ears were ringing and my heart was still fluttering because I had a serious problem: I had fallen for Liam Black.

Teagan

I somehow managed to stumble out of drama without talking to anyone and make my way to PE. After the kiss with Liam, I wasn't sure how to face my friends, let alone the boy in question. I'd pretty much run from the room once our scene was over. Liam must have thought I was so weird.

"Way to ditch us after drama today," Hayley said, as she joined me on the sports field. Evan and Madi were both at her side, and all three of them were looking at me with their eyes filled with questions. There was no way I was going to be able to avoid talking about the kiss with Liam like I'd hoped.

"Sorry I left class in a rush. I was just really excited for baseball today," I replied. It was such a lie. I'd been hopeless at fielding in our last class and I had a feeling that I'd be even worse at batting today.

"Sure, you were, Teags," Evan said, with a laugh. "It had absolutely nothing to do with what happened in drama class."

I was starting to wish we were running in PE today. At least then I might have had some chance of escaping my three friends. Instead, we were all waiting in line to bat and I was cornered.

"You just kissed Liam Black," Evan continued. "I need to hear all the juicy details."

"What juicy details?" I glanced in the teacher's direction, desperately hoping she'd call me up to bat and save me from answering. I just wasn't that lucky though as Willow's name was called instead. She looked absolutely terrified at the prospect of having one of the boys pitch a ball at her, but I'd have done anything to trade places

with her and avoid the grilling from my friends.

“Tell us what it was like, obviously,” Hayley said, sounding all too eager for my liking. I gave one last wistful look in Willow’s direction before focusing on my friends again. Three sets of curious eyes met my gaze, and I couldn’t really blame them. I’d probably be asking the same question if one of them had just kissed a Hollywood superstar.

“You don’t need juicy details, you saw the whole damn thing.”

“That kiss was hot though,” Hayley said.

“And it’s your sacred duty as my best friend to tell me what it was like,” Evan added.

“Stop, you guys. We don’t need details,” Madi interrupted, as if she sensed my apprehension. I shot her a thankful smile. At least one of my friends was a decent human being.

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Hayley waved the comment off. “You might not need details because you get hot kisses from Cole whenever you want them, but some of us need to live vicariously through others.”

“Hayley has a good point,” Evan said, nodding along with her.

“You’re dating someone,” I groaned.

“I’m absolutely certain that he’d want me to find out everything I could about kissing Liam Black,” Evan replied, like that justified his reasoning.

“You guys suck,” I grumbled.

“But does Liam?” Evan asked, wiggling his eyebrows.

I didn’t want to encourage them, but I couldn’t stop myself from laughing. “Okay, okay, it was a good kiss.”

“How good?”

I lifted an eyebrow in Hayley’s direction. I swear she had zero boundaries sometimes.

“Do you really need to hear more?”

“Yes,” she replied, a completely serious look on her face. “Now, dish.”

The crack of the ball hitting the baseball bat pulled my attention for a moment and I was surprised to see it flying toward the outfield while Willow nervously started

toward first base. I think she was just as surprised as everyone that she'd managed to connect with the ball. She wasn't particularly good at sports that involved hand-eye coordination, and even the fielding team cheered for her as she settled safely on first base.

The teacher yelled out another name, calling them up to bat. Unfortunately, it still wasn't me. I let out a long sigh as I turned to my friends once more, knowing I'd have to answer Hayley. "It was the best kiss of my life."

Evan snorted. "Wouldn't be hard. Your only other comparison is Slobbery Steve."

I thumped him on the shoulder.

"Ow!" Evan rubbed the spot and shot me a scowl. "What did I do to deserve that?"

"Exist."

He chuckled. "Okay, so best kiss of your life, continue..."

I huffed out a breath, trying to find the words to describe the kiss. The things I'd felt while Liam had held me in his arms and pressed his lips to mine didn't really equate to any kind of description I could think of, so I said the only thing that came to mind. "I know we were only supposed to be acting, but it felt like it was more than that. For a moment, it was like the entire world had stopped and I was in some kind of dream."

Evan and Hayley both shared a grin before she turned to me. "The world stopped, huh?"

I lifted my hands in the air in defeat. "I don't know! You guys wanted some deep explanation."

The two of them started laughing and I folded my arms over my chest as I scowled at them. “You guys all suck and I’m getting new friends, by the way.”

Evan draped an arm over my shoulder and pulled me in close. “You can’t replace us, we’re the best. Especially me. Hayley, I could understand...”

“Watch it, Anderson,” Hayley said.

“What? You’re high maintenance.”

“You’re worse,” she came right back at him.

“True,” he agreed with smile.

“So, do you like Liam?” Madi asked me as I slipped out of Evan’s grasp. Her question seemed to capture everyone’s attention again, and they all focused on me once more.

I glanced at the ground and shrugged. Any feelings I might be developing were hopeless because Liam would be leaving soon. There was no point in admitting I was falling for him because there was nothing I could do about it. I let out a sigh and looked up at my friends. “The two of us would never work. He’s only here a few more weeks, and then he’ll be back to his glitzy life in Hollywood.”

“So, you do like him...” Hayley prompted.

Again, I shrugged. I was barely coming to terms with my feelings and wasn’t ready to admit them to my friends. Especially not when any relationship with Liam would be over before it started.

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“Because I would be more than willing to help you with a makeover if you want to impress him,” Hayley continued.

“Teagan doesn’t need a makeover,” Madi said.

“Have you seen the girls Liam dates?” Hayley replied. “She dresses far too sweet for a guy like him.”

Madi shot her a scowl. “Or maybe, he likes Teags just the way she is.”

“Nah, Hayley’s right, and I have the perfect solution,” Evan cut in. “I think we should dress her up like Sandy inGrease. How are your vocal cords, Teags? Do you think you could handle singing ‘You’re the one that I want’?”

“I’m not dressing in leather and singing to him,” I growled.

“But all we need is a school carnival and a flying car,” Evan replied.

“You know you’re the worst, right?”

“You say that like it’s a crime,” he replied. “Are you really going to deny me the chance to gel my hair, wear some tight pants, and be a backup dancer?”

We all started laughing as Evan pouted. The scary thing was, he was being totally serious. In his mind, recreating a scene fromGreasewas the perfect way to win Liam over.

“In this case, yes. While I love your enthusiasm, I’m not making a fool out of myself to win a guy over. I’m not doing anything because it’s pointless.”

“But, if you like him, don’t you think it’s worth giving him a chance?” Madi asked. “You should at least see if there’s something between you before you give up on him.”

I twisted a stray piece of hair around one finger as I considered her question. It seemed idiotic to even humor the possibility that there could be something between Liam and I. Anything I felt for him was one-sided, and I was silly to imagine otherwise.

“I don’t think he’s interested in me,” I said.

“That kiss showed otherwise,” Evan said. “Did you see the way he was looking at you afterwards?”

I shrugged. “He’s a good actor, that’s all.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure, Teags.”

“Maybe the next time you kiss him, you’ll get a better idea of whether he likes you,” Madi suggested.

“Or perhaps, you should corner him and tell him you need some extra time to practice that scene alone?” Hayley said with a sly grin.

I shook my head. “You guys are wrong. He doesn’t like me like that.”

“Well, I think you’re the one who’s mistaken,” Evan said. “And when you realize that and need help figuring out what to do, you better come to me for help. I plan to

be featured in yourE! True Hollywood Story one day as the guy who got you two together.”

I gave a nervous laugh and shook my head at him, as I finally heard my name being called up to bat. He was just joking—I hoped.

* * *

I wasn’t prepared to face Liam again. A few hours had passed since our kiss, but I was still trying to wrap my mind around how much it had affected me. I couldn’t stop thinking about it, and my free period at the end of the day had been a complete waste of time. I was far too distracted to get any homework done.

About ten minutes before the final bell rang, I gave up trying to work and closed my books. There was no point just sitting in the library staring at the words, so I headed to the auditorium early for our after-school rehearsal. I entered the hall just as the final bell rang. I was the first person to arrive and I wasn’t sure whether to be relieved or disappointed about the fact that Liam wasn’t there yet.

I was still reeling from the kiss, but I knew I needed to act like everything was normal. The play was far too important, and I couldn’t start acting weird around Liam, or it might ruin our performance. I imagined Liam would freak out if he thought I’d actually enjoyed the kiss between us when it wasn’t supposed to be real.

The door to the auditorium opened with a bang, and I jumped with surprise as Liam strode into the room. His eyes warmed when he saw me standing in the aisle, and a small smile formed on his lips, like he was amused I’d been startled.

I swallowed and tried to ignore the way my heart hiccupped under his gaze. Why did he have to be so good-looking? I’d have no problem playing it cool around him if he looked a little more like the beast he was playing. Although, even then, I suspected

I'd still be captivated by him. It wasn't his looks that drew me in. I'd only really started to develop feelings for Liam after I'd seen the guy behind his handsome face.

I quickly turned away before he noticed how strangely I was acting and walked into the audience to find a seat. I could hear his footsteps behind me, and my heart began to race as he followed me into the aisle and came to sit at my side. I gave him a tight smile, before pulling my script out of my bag and desperately focusing down on it.

Stay cool, Teagan. Stay. Fricken. Cool.

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“I thought you already had all your lines memorized,” Liam said.

“Oh, I do,” I replied, refusing to look up at him. It was a really hard thing to do when the scent of his cologne started tempting me. Why couldn’t he smell like sweaty socks, or rotten eggs, or something equally as repulsive? Hell, I’d even settle for no scent at all right now. He needed to be less appealing, not more. It didn’t help that his scent had seemed to wrap itself around me when we’d kissed earlier, and smelling it now was only making me recall the moment more vividly.

“I think I almost have the whole script down,” he continued. “I’m not the best at memorizing such large amounts of dialogue, so I can’t tell you how many hours I’ve made Zeke run these lines with me.”

My eyes darted up to look at him in surprise, and he chuckled as he took in my expression.

“Yes, even the great Liam Black isn’t perfect,” he said.

I bit my lip as I stared at him. He might have thought such a flaw made him less than perfect, but being privy to such a small crack in his façade only made him more attractive to me. He didn’t let his weaknesses hold him back. They pushed him to work harder. I was trying to act like things between us were normal, or at least as normal as they’d ever been, but it was impossible when he opened up to me.

I wanted to tell him that I liked him better when he didn’t seem so perfect, but that would make it seem like I cared. I didn’t want to make a joke about it either though, and I felt torn about how I should respond.

The door opened as Miss Appleby entered the auditorium, and I jumped from my seat, happy for an excuse to leave the conversation. “I have to talk with Miss Appleby,” I spluttered to Liam before I grabbed my bag and hurried away.

I couldn’t seem to escape his presence quickly enough, and I was doing a terrible job at keeping calm around him. He was just being friendly, and I was either ignoring him or looking at him like he was the most beautiful thing I’d ever seen. Give me lines and tell me the part you want me to play and I can do anything, but right now, I was completely struggling to act like myself.

Outside of the scenes we were both in, I didn’t talk to Liam again at rehearsal, and I was all too relieved to get into Evan’s car when it was over. I sunk into the passenger seat, feeling exhausted. I’d put all of my energy into acting my part for the play tonight, and now, I had nothing left.

Evan seemed exhausted too, and neither of us spoke much as we drove to my place. It was only when Evan pulled up outside the front of my house that he gave me a tired smile. “I’ll see you in the morning?”

“Yeah,” I grinned back at him. “And thanks for the ride home.”

I gave him a wave before trudging into the house. It was quiet inside, and my stomach dropped as I noticed our one remaining painting was missing from the entranceway wall. My heart felt like it was slowly breaking as I looked at the blank space, and tears pricked the corners of my eyes.

I wasn’t attached to the possessions in our home, but that painting had been special to me. It was the painting Dad had commissioned the day I was born, and I couldn’t believe Mom had sold it off just like everything else in our home.

Seeing the bare spot on the wall made me turn and take a good look at the entrance

hall surrounding me. It was empty of everything, except for a pair of stilettos left strewn by the doorway.

I was so used to small things disappearing here and there that it seemed I'd become completely oblivious to how much of a shell the house we lived in really was. How had I missed the fact that we had almost nothing left? What were we going to do when Mom had drunk all of our possessions away?

I walked into the living room and found her passed out on the couch, a bottle of wine hugged tightly to her chest. Something seemed to snap inside me as I saw her lying there. I was exhausted, and I was so sick of her shutting herself off from reality. I stalked over to the couch and tugged the bottle of wine free from her arms, waking her from her sleep.

"Teagan?" she groaned. Her eyes were still hazy, and her voice was slightly slurred. Apparently, she hadn't had enough shut-eye to sleep off her latest drinking session.

"Was this bottle of wine really worth Dad's painting?" I shouted.

Mom winced at the volume of my voice but didn't seem the least bit sorry. The alcohol seemed to be numbing the heat of my anger, and I wished she were sober enough to feel it.

"That painting was mine. How could you?"

"We had bills to pay," she murmured, slowly sitting up straight.

"You and I both know that's not the case," I growled. "You clearly just wanted an expensive bottle of red tonight." I shook my head at her, pain and disbelief riling inside me. "God, you're a mess. It's a weeknight, and you're passed out drunk on the couch."

“I was just taking a little nap...”

“You’re always just taking a little nap, and I’m sick of it. You need help, Mom,” I pleaded.

“I don’t need any such thing,” she grumbled in reply. She stood and stumbled out of the room, just like she always did when I confronted her about her drinking. She hated conflict more than anything, and I knew she much preferred to live in blissful ignorance of the disaster her life had become.

I paced after her, refusing to let her off so easily. “I know Dad left, and I know it’s hard, but you’ve just completely given up on life,” I said, as I followed her. “You haven’t been a mom to me in years, and if something doesn’t change, there isn’t going to be anything left in this house for you to sell.”

My voice quaked with emotion, and my heart pounded against my ribs. I just wanted her to listen to me for once, and that desperation bled into my angry words. “You need to get help and stop drinking. I’ve done everything else around the house these last few years, but this is something I can’t do for you.”

She slowly turned to me, her eyes wide with surprise. I always tried to talk to her about her problems, but I’d never been quite so forceful. I didn’t want to be hard on her, but we were running out of options, and she needed to get her act together.

“Just leave it,” she snapped. “I don’t have a problem.” She turned and walked away.

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I watched her slowly start climbing the stairs to her room, a feeling of defeat welling up inside of me. This was a problem I didn't know how to fix. I couldn't force Mom to change because I wanted her to. She needed to want to fix it for herself, but it was clear she wanted nothing of the sort.

I went to my room, not bothering to check if there was food in the kitchen. I already felt certain that there wasn't. I lay on my mattress and stared at the ceiling for what felt like hours. I'd been so overwhelmed and hopeful about the kiss I shared with Liam today, but coming home to this harsh reality made all that positivity disappear.

Liam was a fairy tale—a fantasy just as elusive as my hopes of escaping to Hollywood one day. He'd been acting when he kissed me, and there was no way he was affected by it in the same way I had been.

He was unattainable, so I needed to push him from my mind and concentrate on the things I could control. There was a talent scout coming to our play, and that needed to be my focus right now. After Mom's performance tonight, I felt the need to get out of here more than ever.

It didn't stop me from thinking about Liam's kiss as I drifted off to sleep though. A girl could dream, after all.

20

Liam

I really needed to stop watching Teagan. Whenever she was in the same room as me,

my eyes seemed to zero in on her, and I became completely oblivious to everything around me. I couldn't seem to help it though. Ever since we'd kissed in rehearsal it was like she'd put me under some kind of spell. I'd acted out plenty of kisses before, but they all seemed to blur into insignificance in comparison. They had been neutral and completely platonic. Not one of those kisses had struck me in the heart like the one I'd shared with Teagan.

I was leaning on the back legs of my chair watching her in English when a swift kick to the legs made my chair fall backward. I threw my body weight forward and somehow managed to leap from the chair before it fell to the ground and save myself from completely crashing out. The whole class noticed my near fall though and started laughing.

"Sorry, Mr. Randall, I slipped," I quickly said as I righted my chair and sat back down. I shot Tanner a hard look, knowing he was to blame. He was sitting next to me, and his cheeky grin only confirmed my suspicions as he gave an innocuous shrug. I'd have to figure out a way to get him back later, but he was far too big for me to repay him in kind.

I faced Mr. Randall once more and saw his eyes were narrowed on me, as though he was waiting for my undivided attention. "Perhaps, if you focus a little more on my class and less on Miss York, you'll find it easier to concentrate," he said.

Chuckles drifted around the class, and my cheeks warmed as Teagan slowly turned in her chair to look at me. Her eyes were wide, and her cheeks were flushing pink. When I caught her eye, she quickly looked away, embarrassed.

My head sagged into my hands as the teacher started talking again. I couldn't believe he'd called me out like that. It was like he enjoyed humiliating me in front of the entire class. If that had been his intention, it certainly worked, because I didn't dare look in Teagan's direction again for the rest of class.

As soon as the bell rang and everyone started rising from their desks, I turned to Tanner. “I’m not sure how and I’m not sure when, but you better believe I’ll be extracting my revenge on you for your little prank.”

“Good luck with that, Hollywood,” he said, like he didn’t believe for one second I could possibly get back at him. He didn’t realize how much I observed the people around me though.

“You’re right, there’s no way I could ever uncover your greatest weaknesses,” I said, as I gathered up my books. “How’s Stacy by the way?”

Tanner swore. “How the hell do you know about Stacy?”

“I have my ways.” It was completely accidental, but Tanner didn’t need to know that. Laurie had been talking with one of her friends during class the other day, and they’d been speaking so loudly it was impossible not to hear their conversation. I now knew far too much about Tanner’s on-again, off-again relationship with a girl named Stacy. I was glad I’d followed Tanner’s advice and avoided Laurie though, because she sure did like to gossip.

Tanner looked impressed rather than annoyed. “I guess you’re more perceptive than I gave you credit for,” he said. “How about we call it a truce?”

I laughed and shook his offered hand. “Truce it is.” I really didn’t have time for anything as petty as revenge anyways.

“So, Mr. Randall was out of order for calling you out like that,” Tanner said, as we walked down the corridor to our lockers. A few people smiled at me as I passed, but the excitement surrounding my presence at the school seemed to have calmed down this week, and I wasn’t being stopped every few steps for a photo. It was a massive relief, and I hoped the rest of my time at Lincoln High would be this peaceful.

“I don’t think he likes me very much,” I said.

Tanner laughed. “I don’t think he likes anyone, so I wouldn’t take it personally.”

“I’ll try not to,” I replied.

“So, you and Teagan, hey?” he prompted, nodding his head toward where she was standing at the far end of the corridor. She was smiling brightly as she talked with a girl I didn’t recognize. She always seemed to have such an effortless ease about her, and it didn’t take a genius to see why people gravitated toward her. She was kind and sweet and always made the people around her feel good about themselves. I’d been watching her long enough now to know how special she truly was.

I glanced down at my textbooks as I considered Tanner’s question. “She’s cool,” I finally said. “But there’s nothing going on between us.”

“Really?” Tanner questioned.

“Yeah,” I repeated. “We’re just spending a bit of time together because of the play.”

I kept my voice neutral, but I felt disappointment rise up inside me as I spoke the words. If this week was anything to go by, there really was nothing between Teagan and me. It felt like she’d been avoiding me ever since we’d rehearsed the kiss, and aside from a very one-sided conversation in the auditorium the other day, we hadn’t spoken since.

“It looks to me like there’s something more than just the play between you guys,” Tanner said, his voice more serious than it usually sounded.

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I huffed out a breath and looked up at him. “It wouldn’t matter even if there was.” I sighed. “I’m only here a few more weeks, and I’ll probably never see her again.” I’d been thinking more and more about the end of the semester as my time at Lincoln High started to dwindle. Time was moving way too fast, and I wasn’t nearly ready to leave this school. I was surprised by how much I’d enjoyed my time here, and I knew I would be sad when I had to return to my regular life.

Tanner gripped my shoulder and looked into my eyes. “You’ve got to grab life by the balls, man. You should ask her out and enjoy the time you have left here. You won’t get the opportunity once you’re gone.”

Balls aside, they were surprisingly deep words coming from Tanner. I really didn’t think he had them in him. I started to smile. “Didn’t realize you were so profound, Tanner.”

He laughed. “You can call me sensei.”

“I don’t think so.” I couldn’t deny that he’d made a good point though. If I didn’t take a chance now, then I might always wonder what could have been with Teagan. I had no idea if she felt the same way about me, but that shouldn’t hold me back from at least trying.

The only problem was the strong chance that it could all blow up in my face. She might not feel anything toward me, and that would make the rest of our time doing the play together completely awkward. The last thing I wanted to do was ruin the play for Teagan, but I had to believe it was worth the risk. If I only had this small amount of time with her, surely it was better if I tried and failed than never tried at all?

Tanner had given me a lot to think about, though I couldn't spend too long mulling it all over. I needed to make a decision sooner rather than later because my time here was running out.

I didn't see Teagan again until rehearsal after school. We were getting fitted for costumes today, and somehow, the two of us ended up being the last ones in the auditorium having our costumes pinned by a couple of moms. We'd barely exchanged two words since our kiss in rehearsal, and she hadn't looked at me since Mr. Randall told the whole class I was watching her today.

I couldn't tell why she was ignoring me, but I hated her silence, and I missed her laugh. I even longed for her fiery temper and would have given anything to have her yell at me rather than suffer through this indifference. I kept glancing in her direction, but her attention remained glued to the wall and as far away from me as possible.

With every moment that passed, the distance between us seemed to stretch further. It had only been a few days since we'd been babysitting Topher together and goofing around, but that felt like a lifetime ago. So much had changed in that short time, and I knew I couldn't stand by and watch as she slipped through my fingers and beyond my grasp. I didn't want to spend my last few weeks here avoiding eye contact with her and not speaking. She'd started acting this way toward me after we kissed in rehearsal, and a small part of me hoped that maybe, just maybe, it was because she'd liked the kiss just as much as me.

It was clear that ignoring each other wasn't going to bridge the distance that seemed to have developed between us, and I didn't have time to wait around for things to go back to normal. The truth was, I didn't want them to go back to normal. If it was going to be all or nothing, then I was definitely all in.

She finished with her costume just before me and hurried from the auditorium like she couldn't get out of there fast enough. The moment I was finished, I raced after

her, hoping to catch her before she left school. I headed straight for the parking lot, and as I pushed through the doors of the front entrance, I found her slowly walking across the vast empty concrete square. My car was the only one left in the lot, so I had no idea how she intended to get home.

“Teagan, wait up,” I called, as I jogged over to her.

She turned to me, a small frown creasing her brow. “Liam, what do you want?”

I adjusted the strap of my bag as I stopped in front of her. “We got stuck here so late, I wanted to see if you need a ride home?”

“Oh.” Her face relaxed slightly. “Actually, that would be great.”

I couldn’t help but smile. She was talking to me and being able to drive her home felt like a small victory. I somehow managed to rein in my excitement as we started toward my car. I didn’t want to look too eager.

“So, the costumes are looking good,” I said, uncertain what to say now I’d gotten her alone. I couldn’t exactly come straight out and tell her I liked her. How on Earth did people ever get together in real life? Without a script to follow, this was impossible.

“Yeah, Hayley’s mom always does a great job,” she replied.

We both fell silent again, and I scrambled for something else to say. “I’m sorry if I embarrassed you in English earlier. I didn’t mean for the teacher to call you out like that.”

Teagan shrugged but didn’t meet my gaze. “It’s fine.” It was a cool evening and she pulled her jacket in close to her chest as she glanced at me. “Were you really watching me in class?”

I pushed a hand through my hair as my stomach gave a nervous flutter. “I might have been. But can you blame me? You’re much more interesting to look at than Mr. Randall.”

A small smile pulled at the corner of her lips, but she turned to focus on my car before I could truly get a look at it. “I don’t think he’d agree with you.”

“Probably not.” I grinned.

A light rain misted the air, but neither one of us felt the need to rush because of it. The two of us slowed as we reached my car, and Teagan turned to me once more. She seemed almost hesitant, and bit down on her lower lip as she considered me. “Why were you watching me?”

I scuffed my foot across the ground, suddenly feeling embarrassed under the intensity of her gaze. I felt exposed. Her eyes had this way of penetrating the layers upon layers of disguise I normally wore for the world to see.

“I wouldn’t know where to begin,” I admitted. “But, honestly, it’s kind of hard not to look at you.”

She swallowed and tilted her head as she looked at me. A hint of surprise had brightened her green eyes, and the wind caught the stray strands of hair that weren’t swept back in her ponytail. If she could see herself right now, she wouldn’t need an explanation from me. She was so raw and beautiful. Any guy would find it impossible not to be totally enamored by her.

Drawing in a deep breath and summoning all the courage I had, I closed the distance between us and lifted a hand to lightly skim my fingers across her cheek. Her skin was cold and smooth to the touch, and one little caress just didn’t seem enough.

“I can’t stop thinking about you, Teagan,” I said. My words came out in a rush, and I hoped she couldn’t tell how nervous I was. “I think you’re smart and kind and beautiful, and I can’t get that kiss out of my mind. There’s something between us. Tell me you feel the same way.”

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She frowned a little at my words. “But the kiss was just part of the play.”

I immediately shook my head. “I’ve acted out enough kisses before to know that there was nothing pretend about that kiss.”

She was silent for several seconds, and I had no idea what she was thinking. Countless emotions seemed to flicker behind her eyes, like they were battling to rise to the surface. She started to smile. It was small and slightly nervous, but seeing happiness on her face made my heart leap.

“It wasn’t pretend for me either,” she admitted.

Those simple words made my chest swell with joy, and a wide grin stretched across my face as I looked at the beautiful girl before me. Tiny droplets of rain sparkled against her hair and her wide green eyes were filled with hope as she looked back at me. I couldn’t believe that she’d felt something in our kiss too, but I was too happy to question if this was real.

She hesitantly placed her hands against my chest, and I wondered if she could feel how my heart was racing. Ever so slowly, she lifted herself up on her toes and, when her lips were just a breath away, I closed the distance between us. The kiss was sweet but fiery, just like Teagan, and from the moment we connected, I knew I never wanted it to end. My whole body tingled with warmth, and I felt a strange sense of buoyancy, like the kiss had stolen the gravity grounding my feet and I was floating several inches from the ground. .

Teagan started giggling when I lifted her up and swung her around.

“Liam, what are you doing?” she gasped, breaking the kiss as she laughed.

“I’m celebrating,” I said, as I swirled her around the empty parking lot. She was grinning widely as I placed her back on the ground, and I couldn’t stop myself from pressing another quick kiss to her lips.

Her face was bright with happiness as I pulled back, but some of the light in her eyes soon started to dim, and she suddenly looked thoughtful. “But you can’t possibly like me. You’re Liam Black.”

“Of course, I like you, Teagan. If anything, it’s the other way around. You couldn’t possibly like me because I’m Liam Black.”

She started to smile a little once more. “Hmm, that’s true,” she agreed. “I’m not sure if I could possibly be associated with the bad boy of Hollywood.”

I knew she was only joking, but I didn’t want even one small part of her to believe that I was anything like the guy the tabloids portrayed.

“You know that’s all an act,” I said. “Besides, I’m pretty sure I’m about to be the reformed bad boy of Hollywood.”

“But maybe I won’t like the reformed bad boy.”

I rolled my eyes, making her laugh. At the same time, she pushed down a shudder, and I realized how cold she was standing outside the car. “We can talk about how you’ve turned me into a new man on the drive home,” I said, opening the door for her and ushering her inside.

I had to subtly pinch myself several times as I drove Teagan home. What had just happened between us felt like a dream. So much of my life was fake, and now that I

had finally experienced something so real, it seemed far too good to be true. Teagan wasn't like any girl I'd ever met before, and I didn't feel like I deserved someone so special. It was a miracle she wanted anything to do with me, and I was already dreading being parted from her when the end of the semester came. I was going to have to make our short time together count and hope that the future would figure itself out.

It was growing dark by the time I pulled up in front of Teagan's house, and I was surprised there were no lights on inside her home. Perhaps her mom wasn't there though. We'd talked so easily during the drive, but the journey was over faster than I would have liked. I wasn't ready to let her go yet. Not when it felt like I'd just found her. Teagan seemed hesitant to leave me too as she didn't jump out of the car as soon as I pulled to a stop.

"So, there's something I've been thinking about," Teagan said.

"Was it this?" I asked, as I leaned over the console toward her. I brushed my lips against hers, and for a brief moment, we were both lost in another kiss.

Teagan pulled back far too quickly though and started laughing. "No, it wasn't that."

"Well, it should have been."

She smiled and shook her head. Her expression seemed to sober though as she considered me. "I think I might really like you, Liam," she said. "But I know you're leaving town soon."

I nodded, feeling my own heady happiness dissipate at her words. I didn't want to think about reality now, not when this was so fresh and exciting.

"I think we should keep this between the two of us for now," she continued.

“Opening night for the play is coming up, and I don’t want any distractions. If we tell people it might complicate things.”

I frowned as I considered her request. I wanted to date Teagan openly and would have shouted about our relationships from the rooftops if I could. I knew that being with me would be a lot to take on though, and the attention might be overwhelming in the lead-up to the play. I understood where she was coming from even if I wished things were different. “If that’s what you want.”

“It is.” She nodded.

I blew out a long breath and nodded. “So, we’ll keep it quiet.”

She gave me a relieved smile before glancing out the window toward her house. A flicker of sadness passed her eyes, and I got the sense she didn’t want to leave, but a moment later, she opened her car door.

“So, I’ll see you at school tomorrow?”

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“You will,” I said, as she hopped out of the car. She closed the door and gave me a small wave before starting toward the house. She got halfway there before she glanced over her shoulder and smiled at me once more. Her smile was everything to me, and I was unable to fight the bright warmth that invaded my chest as I stared after her.

I was officially infatuated with Teagan York, and I wouldn’t do a thing to change it.

21

Teagan

“Why are you practically floating through the corridors this morning?” Evan asked as we walked between classes. “I swear your feet haven’t touched the ground since you entered school today.”

“I’m not floating.” I swatted his arm to shut him up, but I somehow couldn’t keep the giddy smile from my face. Liam and I had kissed for real last night, and I hadn’t been able to stop thinking about it since. It was sweet and perfect, completely the opposite from what you’d expect of a playboy movie star.

Evan couldn’t have looked more confused though. “Did something happen after I left rehearsal last night?” He’d gone home quite early, and when he left, there had been no hint that something was brewing between Liam and me. Even I had no idea what was to come once we finished with our costume fittings.

“Liam might have given me a ride home,” I admitted.

Evan gave me a knowing smile. “He did, did he?”

I hadn’t even told him the best part, but I wanted to keep whatever was developing between Liam and I quiet for now. I knew Evan wouldn’t say a word to anyone if I told him about the kiss, but I needed to know that what Liam and I had was real before I told my best friend.

“Look, it’s not a big deal.”

“It is when you’ve got a thing for the guy and I’m fairly certain he’s into you too. I mean, Mr. Randall told him off for watching you in English yesterday, and then he drove you home—that all means something.”

I glanced away, unable to meet Evan’s gaze. I didn’t want to lie to my best friend, and I felt like he’d be able to tell I was holding something back if he looked into my eyes.

“Maybe,” I admitted. I really hated not telling Evan the whole truth.

“Definitely,” he corrected me. “Look, I know you don’t think you’re the kind of girl that can date a guy like Liam, but you need to start believing in yourself. Any guy would be damn lucky to date you. Please don’t forget that.”

I looked up into his eyes again and could see the sincerity in his gentle gaze. I wasn’t sure what I’d done to deserve such a good friend, but I was the one who was lucky.

“Thanks, Evan.”

“No thanks are necessary, Teags. I’m just telling you how it is.”

We continued on to English, and my gaze automatically went to the desk Liam usually sat at as soon as I entered the room. I’d been looking forward to seeing him

all morning, but his chair was empty, and I felt a small wave of disappointment. I got settled behind my desk and watched the door as I waited for his arrival. Students slowly trickled into the room, but Liam never came.

I snuck my phone out of my pocket and checked it several times during class, hoping to see that he'd contacted me. But, each time I looked at the screen, there were no new messages, and I wasn't sure what to think. Perhaps, Liam was sick, or maybe, something had come up? I was more worried than I would have expected though and wished I had an answer.

"Where's your boyfriend today?" Evan asked once class was over and we started drifting out of the room to go to lunch.

"He's not my boyfriend," I said. "And I've got no idea."

"I haven't seen him at school today."

"Maybe he's unwell," I suggested. He had seemed fine last night though.

"Perhaps he has special Hollywood business to attend to," Evan guessed.

I wanted to believe Liam would have said something to me last night if he'd known he wasn't going to be in school today, and an uneasy pit settled in the base of my stomach as I wondered where he could be.

"I'm sure he has a good reason."

Evan and I entered the cafeteria, and I glanced toward Liam's normal table. Despite him missing English, I still hoped he might be at school today. It seemed that was just wishful thinking though as Liam wasn't at his table or anywhere in the cafeteria. I didn't want to make assumptions about why he was absent, but a small part of me

was scared that this wasn't just one day of school he was missing—that perhaps he was gone and never coming back.

I tried to push him from my mind as I joined my friends for lunch. I wasn't the only one who had noticed his absence though, and everyone was talking about him as I placed my tray on our table.

“I bet he got bored of school and jetted off to the Maldives,” Hayley suggested as I sat down. “Either that or he went out partying last night and is too hungover for school today,”

“I doubt he's ditched school for the Maldives, and I'm sure it would be all over social media if he'd been partying,” Madi replied. “There's a bad stomach bug going around, so it's much more likely he's come down with that.”

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“Ew,” Hayley said, scrunching up her nose. “I’d much prefer to imagine him on holiday.”

“Wouldn’t we all,” Evan agreed.

The conversation had only just gotten started, but I didn’t feel like speculating on Liam right now. “What’s everyone got planned this weekend?” I asked, hoping the question would cause all talk of Liam to drop.

“I’m getting dragged to my brother’s hockey match,” Madi said, with a long sigh.

“Don’t pretend you’re not excited to watch him play, Mads. You’re almost as obsessed with hockey as he is,” Hayley said.

“It’s no fun watching from the sidelines though,” Madi replied. “And this one is stealing my boyfriend on Saturday, so I’ll be stuck with my parents all day.” She nodded in Evan’s direction.

“You’re hanging out with Cole?” I asked Evan.

He smiled and nodded. “Turns out he’s just as obsessed with *Zombie Killers* as I am, and the new game comes out on Saturday.”

“Better him than me,” I said, pushing down a shudder. Evan had tried to get me into playing the older version of the game with him a couple of years back, but I was absolutely useless at video games. Plus, zombies freaked me out, so I’d spent half the time squealing whenever one appeared on screen.

“I didn’t know you and Cole hung out,” Hayley said to Evan.

He shrugged. “I guess I’ve decided he isn’t the dumb jock stereotype after all.”

Madi rolled her eyes but smiled. I think she liked that Cole got along with her friends. None of us had ever really liked her ex-boyfriend Jake. He completely monopolized her time, treated Madi badly, and acted like we didn’t exist. Cole was a genuinely nice guy, which was definitely a change for the better.

“What about you, Hayley?” I asked. “What are you up to this weekend?”

Her face fell at the question. “Laurie has us all going to her place for a cheer bonding sleepover. I mean, don’t we bond enough at the three training sessions we have to go to every week? It’s going to be torture.”

We all nodded sympathetically. I could think of nothing worse than being dragged along to a bonding session by Laurie. I didn’t have much to do with her, but she was notorious for being mean to anyone who got in her way.

“What about you, Teagan?” Madi asked.

“Babysitting for me,” I said. It was my standard answer most weeks. I babysat almost every Saturday and spent my Sundays on homework. It was rare I had a weekend when I wasn’t working. One day, things would be different and I’d have more of a life, but until then, I needed as much cash as I could squirrel away.

As I looked around at my friends, I found myself wishing I could spend just a day in their lives. I would do anything for a family who wanted to spend time together, and it felt far too rare that I got a free afternoon to just hang out with my friends. I’d even take a torturous weekend with a bitchy cheerleader if it meant I didn’t have to worry about my mom.

“You alright, Teags?” Evan asked, having caught my small moment of self-pity as I stared into space. I quickly shook the expression off and gave him a smile.

“I’m fine.”

For once though, I could see that my best friend wasn’t convinced by my act.

* * *

Liam didn’t turn up at school for the whole day. In drama, we had to work on the scenes that didn’t include him, and it seemed like the whole school was gossiping about where he might be.

I kept checking my phone, hoping he might message me, but the screen remained disappointingly blank. I could send him a message first, of course, but I didn’t have the confidence to go through with it. We’d shared a kiss last night, but that didn’t give me the right to know where he was at all hours of the day. I didn’t want to come across as needy, but as Evan drove me home after school, I finally gave up and decided to send Liam a text.

We missed you at school today, I wrote. I waited several moments to see if he’d respond before putting my phone away in my bag so I wouldn’t go crazy watching it and waiting for his reply.

“Is something up with you?” Evan asked as he pulled the car out of the parking lot. “You were so happy at the start of the day but seemed out of sorts at lunch and in drama. Were you missing Liam?” He said the name in a singsong voice.

“Of course not,” I quickly replied. “I was just distracted and thinking about the play. You know how I get.”

Evan chuckled like he could see right through me. “If you say so.”

He dropped me off at home, and I stopped in front of the doorway, steeling myself for a moment before I entered the house. For some reason, I felt nervous. Good things just didn’t happen to me, and Liam definitely counted as something good. It felt like the universe was setting me up for a fall somehow. Like I was about to be the butt of some hilarious joke and the punch line was on the way.

I wasn’t so pessimistic at the start of the day, but since Liam failed to show up at school, I’d begun to allow some doubts to slowly creep in. I’d even started to wonder if kissing me was part of the reason Liam hadn’t come to school.

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I shook my head, knowing I was just being silly, and pushed the front door open to walk inside. I jerked to a stop in the entranceway, my blood freezing me to the spot, as I saw a set of bags by the door. My stomach sank to the floor. They were my mom's bags, and I couldn't help but jump to the conclusion that she was finally abandoning me. Was she done with me because I'd been so brutally honest with her the other night?

Footsteps echoed across the hardwood floors, and my head whipped up as my mom entered the hallway. A flicker of surprise crossed her face, and her eyes seemed to immediately dart toward the bags sitting near my feet.

"Yes, Mom, I saw the bags."

She started twisting her hands together, like she was unsure how to explain, and I wished she'd just hurry up and be honest with me.

"Are you going somewhere?" I could barely get the words out of my mouth.

Mom nodded, unable to meet my gaze. When she finally lifted her eyes, I was surprised to find they weren't bloodshot or bleary for once. She wasn't swaying on her feet either. "What you said to me the other night," she started. "About getting help. I decided that maybe you were right."

I frowned, not certain what to say, and waited for her to continue.

"I'm going to a rehab facility," she finally admitted.

I wanted to feel relieved, but instead, I only felt the weight of another burden. “We can’t afford that.”

“Actually, we can. I sold my car.”

“You sold your car?”

She nodded. Mom loved her car more than anything. It was one of her last remaining status symbols, and parting with it clearly meant she was serious.

“Your grandma is going to come stay with you while I’m gone,” she continued, her words spilling out like she couldn’t wait to be rid of them. I hadn’t seen Grandma Carol in years and could barely remember her. She lived on the other side of the country and was always traveling. Mom never talked about her, so it was easy to forget my grandma even existed sometimes.

“I don’t need a babysitter,” I replied.

Mom stood up a little taller, her shoulders squaring as she looked at me. “You’re seventeen years old, so, yes, you do. Your grandma is staying here, and that’s final.”

I nodded, for once feeling a fleeting sense of respect for my mom. “How long will you be gone?”

“Thirty days, but we’ll see how it goes.”

I swallowed as I tried to picture the next month of my life without her. I couldn’t quite visualize it though. She wouldn’t be here to see my school play, but she probably wouldn’t have turned up anyway. I kept waiting for a barrage of emotions to hit me, but instead, I just felt empty. Mom was finally getting the help she needed, and I should be happy or relieved. It was hard to feel any of that when I’d been taken

completely unawares though. My mind was still trying to play catch up, while Mom's bags were already packed.

I glanced at the bags again. "When are you leaving?"

A car honked out front, and Mom's eyes flickered toward the door. "That's my ride now," she said. She didn't immediately move to leave though, and I got the feeling she had something more to say. I wasn't sure I could handle another bomb dropped on me right now, but her eyes flicked toward the wall. As I followed her gaze, I saw the painting she'd sold had been returned and was hanging in its rightful spot.

"My painting..." I whispered. For a moment, I was so happy to see it there, but the emotion was quickly replaced by the feeling of my chest constricting. Mom was really leaving me. I wanted to feel relieved that she was finally making the right choice, but a selfish part of me was afraid of being left alone. She wasn't the best parent, but she was the only one I really had.

"I never should have sold it," Mom said. "I never should have let things get so out of hand, but I'm hoping that going away for a little while will help."

I swallowed down the thick lump in my throat as I nodded. I couldn't get any words out, and a barrage of feelings was quickly overwhelming the numbness I'd felt only moments ago. Mom had really been listening to me the other night, and the longer we stood opposite each other in the corridor, the more I struggled with seeing her leave.

The car out front honked again, and Mom looked toward the door. "I should really get going. Your grandma will arrive in the morning," she said. "I've left her number on the kitchen table. If you need anything before she gets here, you can call her."

My heart started racing as Mom moved toward her bags. This was all happening far too quickly, and unwelcome tears welled in the corners of my eyes. I wanted her to

get help more than anything, but I didn't know how to be without her.

Mom hesitated when she caught sight of my expression. "It's going to be okay," she said before gathering me up in a hug. I couldn't remember the last time Mom had hugged me, but I was surprised by how good it felt. She smelled of the perfume she used to wear when I was little, and as I breathed her in, I felt a small wave of calm wash over me.

"I can't make any promises," she murmured. "But I'm going to try and be better."

She stepped out of the hug and picked up her bags. "Just remember that I love you, sweetie." She was out the door and gone.

I wrapped my arms around my body as I watched her leave. I wasn't sure whether to laugh or cry. Mom had finally done the right thing by herself and by me, but it left me feeling very alone. I'd been strong and self-sufficient for so long, but right now, I really wished I didn't have to be.

Teagan

Grandma Carol was far stranger than I recalled. She didn't turn up at our house until Sunday morning, but when she arrived it was with a burst of energy and enthusiasm. She wore a face full of makeup, and her short, peroxide-blond hair was perfectly coiffed. Her clothes were a riot of bright colors, and the feather boa wrapped around her neck did little to calm her outfit.

"Teagan, darling, it's so good to see you," she said, blowing me air kisses as she walked through the front door. She had two large roller cases with her, and they glided along at her side as though they were extensions of her arms.

I stood back, feeling slightly overwhelmed as she wafted into the house like we were the best of friends. Carol's discerning eyes took in the empty foyer, but she didn't say a word as she continued into the house. She left a trail of her floral-scented perfume as she headed toward the guest room. I followed after her, not quite sure what else to do. The woman was practically a stranger to me.

"I am so looking forward to our time together," Grandma Carol said. "It really is a shame that Linda had to land herself in rehab for me to finally get invited here."

I pursed my lips as I considered my grandmother. She spoke as if Mom's condition were a silly inconvenience rather than the life-altering addiction that it was. Perhaps, if she'd seen what it had been like over the last few years, she would have spoken about it differently. Or maybe, this was just how my grandmother was and she liked to play down the more difficult things in life. I didn't know this woman, so I couldn't really tell.

“Thank you for coming, Grandma Carol,” I said.

She scrunched up her nose as I said her name. “Please, just call me Carol. I’m hardly old enough to be a grandma.”

I smiled politely and nodded. Carol seemed a little delusional, but I wasn’t about to call her on it. She’d been a grandma for seventeen years, though I guess it was easy for her to forget that when she never saw her granddaughter.

“So,” she said, clapping her hands. “How do you feel about a spot of shopping today?”

I frowned as I looked at her. We hadn’t spent time together in years, and the first thing she wanted to do was go shopping? I couldn’t remember the last time I’d gone shopping for anything other than groceries. There was never the money for it, and when I couldn’t buy clothes with my babysitting money, I usually borrowed from my Mom’s wardrobe. It was lucky we were the same size, or I probably would have been turning up to school in rags.

“I have homework I need to get done today,” I said.

Carol flippantly waved my comment away. “Nonsense. I want to spend time with my beautiful granddaughter. I’m sure you can put off one day of homework.”

She didn’t seem like the kind of lady who was used to being told no. I half-considered pushing the point, but the truth was, I’d finished my homework while babysitting yesterday and I’d probably just spend the day watching my phone if I weren’t distracted.

Liam still hadn’t been in contact since our kiss on Thursday night, and I was slowly going crazy. I could only assume that he regretted it, because why else would he be

going to such lengths to ignore me?

“Okay, let’s go shopping,” I said before I could question the decision.

Carol clapped with glee. “This is going to be so much fun.”

* * *

Shopping with Carol was like nothing I’d ever experienced before. She spent cash like it was a game of Monopoly and bought anything I showed even the slightest amount of interest in. I’d been saving my babysitting money for years, and in one morning, she spent almost as much as I’d accumulated over all that time. It was ridiculous, and I couldn’t help but feel bitter about it.

Mom and I had been struggling for years, so why hadn’t Carol helped us?

It wasn’t just me Carol was shopping for either. She kept picking up pieces of clothing, showing them to me and asking for my opinion. “Do you think your mother would like this?”

I always gave a noncommittal answer because it all felt too weird for me. It was like she was trying to make up for her absence by buying my love with pretty things. I didn’t care about material objects though, and I would have traded a few nice dresses for my grandmother’s support at some point over the last few years in a heartbeat. Looking after my mother wasn’t something I should have had to do on my own.

“This one would look nice on you,” Carol said, lifting a skirt from the rack to show me. We were in some boutique clothing store I’d never entered before and the price tags on all the clothes had at least one too many zeros on them. The place was like something out of a magazine, with fresh flowers on the counter and marble tables running down the center of the room. The shop assistants all looked like models in

the perfect outfits they wore, and I couldn't have felt more out of place.

"I'm not sure that's for me," I said. The skirt was nice enough, but I was growing tired of shopping and standing in the expensive store made my stomach roll.

"Nonsense, you'd look lovely."

She tried to pass me the skirt, but I pushed her hand away. "I really don't think it's something I would wear, and maybe, you would know that if you'd ever bothered to come visit us."

Her face paled, and she pulled the skirt back toward her chest as she stared at me in shock. I didn't wait for her response before I turned and strode out of the store. I hated myself for lashing out at my grandmother, but she couldn't just rock up at my front door and expect me to be ecstatic to see her. Buying me clothes I didn't need wasn't going to make up for the fact that I'd spent most of my teenage years running a household, working every babysitting job I could get, and trying to keep up with my schoolwork. I'd needed help and my grandmother should have been there.

There was a park across the road from the store and I walked over to it and sat on a bench just inside the entrance. My blood was still pulsing with adrenaline, but as I took some deep breaths in and started to calm down, it was replaced by remorse. I couldn't believe I'd snapped at my grandmother. For years, I'd been completely in control of my emotions, and I'd always managed to say the right thing.

Something had changed in me recently though. It seemed like ever since Liam had entered my life I'd been struggling to keep my feelings all bottled up. He'd placed a fracture in the delicate container I kept them in, and the fissure was only growing larger as more emotions leaked out.

"I'm sorry." I turned at the sound of Carol's voice, and she slowly approached the

bench I sat on. Her eyes were sad, and I couldn't help but feel like I'd truly hurt my grandmother. The buoyant, carefree woman I'd been shopping with all morning was nowhere to be seen. "I can be a bit intense," she said softly.

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I shook my head. “I’m the one who should apologize. I never should have snapped at you. I just found all of the shopping a bit too much. The skirt was really nice.”

Her expression softened at my comment, and she came to sit at my side. “I suppose I went a little over the top. I was just so excited to see you again. I wanted to spoil my granddaughter.”

It was almost like a light lit up in her eyes as she stared at me, and I could feel the love she felt for me in her gaze. I wasn’t sure how I’d missed it before, but as she looked at me now, I could clearly sense how much I meant to her.

I slowly shook my head. “Why now?” I asked. “Why haven’t you visited in such a long time?”

She let out a long sigh and looked into the distance. “Your mother didn’t want me around,” she admitted. “Not that I blame her,” she quickly added. “I never used to hold back my opinion, but I only ever wanted the best for her.” She shook her head like she was saddened by the fact. “I wasn’t always very good at tempering my thoughts, and over the years, the invites to visit stopped coming, and she slowly stopped answering my calls. I didn’t know things had gotten so bad.”

“So then, why did she ask you to come here now?”

Carol gave a small shrug and didn’t answer my question. But the answer seemed clear to me. Mom was finally desperate enough to ask for Carol’s help.

“I’m hoping to stick around for a while,” Carol said. “I want to fix things with Linda,

and I want to be here for her. I've had a long time to think about how things went wrong, and I'm hoping she'll give me a second chance."

I gave Carol a heartfelt smile. "I hope she'll give you another chance too." My grandmother was full on and totally over the top, but it was clear she had a big heart, and when I finally got out of this town one day, it would be a whole lot easier knowing I wasn't leaving my mom alone.

"Why don't we head home and watch some TV together?" I asked.

Carol smiled at me and nodded. "I think I'd like that."

I felt much more at peace as Carol drove us home. There was still a mountain of shopping bags in the back seat of the car, but I no longer resented them. Carol hadn't been trying to buy my love; in her own strange way, she'd been trying to show me her love. And, after our talk in the park, I think I understood her a little better.

As we pulled up to the house, I recognized the car parked in front of us. The black Escalade was kind of hard to miss on our suburban street, and I started looking around, my heart fluttering with a mixture of excitement and panic. Liam was at my house, and as much as I wanted to see him, I also dreaded the thought of him being here.

I jumped out of the car and went up to driver's side door of his car. I was about to knock on the window, but a voice called out my name from behind me. I turned to find Liam sitting on my front doorstep, a bouquet of flowers in his hands. He looked slightly nervous but started to smile widely as I approached him.

I had no idea how to act around him now that we had kissed. I didn't know where we stood with one another, and after days passing with no contact with him, I was only more confused.

“I got these for you,” he said, holding the flowers out to me.

I smiled as I took them, my stomach fluttering with happiness. It was a bunch of pink peonies that were the prettiest shade of pink. “Thanks, Liam. They’re beautiful.” I started to frown as I stared at the flowers though, and uncertainty began to rise up inside me again. The peonies were such a sweet gesture, but they didn’t make my worries disappear.

“So, what are you doing here?” I asked him. This seemed like the simplest question to start with, but what I really wanted to know was where he’d been and why he’d ignored my text.

“I’ve been out of town, and you were the first person I wanted to see when I got back,” he said. I could have sworn his cheeks were blushing at his explanation, and my heart started to warm in response. I kind of hated how easily I forgave him for being gone without explanation for days.

Carol came up the walkway behind me, her arms laden with the shopping bags from the car. I’d been in such a rush to see Liam I’d completely forgotten about them.

“Can I help you with those?” Liam asked. He didn’t wait for Carol’s response as he started to relieve her of the bags.

Carol looked between the two of us, her eyes discerning as she took in the flowers in my hands and the blush tinting Liam’s cheeks. She didn’t seem to recognize Liam, but the small smile on her lips indicated she was all too aware of how gorgeous he was.

“Carol, this is my friend Liam. Liam, this is my grandmother Carol,” I quickly explained. I hoped that my quick introduction meant Carol wouldn’t poke too hard into who Liam was and what he was doing here. I wasn’t sure how she’d react to

knowing he was a movie star.

“It’s nice to meet you, Carol,” he said.

“Likewise,” she replied with a wide smile. “Please come inside and join us for some tea.”

I knew there was little chance of Carol finding any tea in the house, and I didn’t want Liam to see beyond the front doorstep. My home was a complete embarrassment these days, but I couldn’t exactly tell him he wasn’t welcome to come in.

“I’d like that,” Liam said, following Carol inside with the bags.

“Teagan can show you where to put them,” Carol told him before gliding toward the kitchen. I directed Liam to the living room and nervously waited for the moment when he realized that my house was almost empty.

I twisted my fingers around a loose strand of hair as I watched him. He placed the bags down on the coffee table, and when he looked up again, all he seemed to see was me. His eyes didn’t flicker to the empty wall hangings or the expansive lounge room that only contained a table and a couch. His eyes bore deeply into mine and he smiled.

When he smiled like that it made me feel like I was the only girl in the world, and it wasn’t difficult to see why he was considered a heartbreaker by the media. His smile was magnetic, and it made my stomach pleasantly swirl with nerves.

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“I missed you while I was gone,” he said.

“You did?”

He nodded, his smile stretching wider as he looked at me. “Did you miss me too?”

“Maybe,” I said. “Though, perhaps, you’d know that if you checked your messages.”

A slight furrow formed in his brow. “You messaged me?”

I shrugged, trying not to show I’d been upset he hadn’t bothered to reply.

Realization dawned in his eyes. “I didn’t get it. I forgot to bring my school phone with me, and I came here as soon as I landed.”

“Oh,” I replied. I felt silly for being so worried about where he’d gone, and it was a relief to find out he hadn’t ignored my text. I wished he would have told me that he was leaving so I hadn’t fretted over him, but I wasn’t annoyed about it. We were still finding our feet in whatever this relationship was between us, and I didn’t think we were quite at the point where we needed to tell each other our every move.

“So, where did you go?” I asked.

“Back to L.A. I had a couple of meetings I couldn’t really miss. I only found out about them on Friday morning and had to get on the first flight out of here. It was all very last minute.”

“Sounds fun,” I said. I’d sounded so unenthusiastic he laughed.

“It was most definitely not fun,” he agreed. “I couldn’t wait to get back here.”

I really wished he’d stop looking at me with so much affection in his eyes. I was already struggling not to fall for the guy, and I couldn’t stop thinking about kissing him again.

“I should probably get these in some water,” I said, nodding to the flowers I still held in my hands. I started toward the kitchen, and Liam followed closely behind. As we walked, I noticed him finally realizing there was practically no furniture in the house.

“Sorry the house is in such a poor state. Mom’s refurnishing,” I quickly explained. The lie rolled so easily off my tongue, but the swell of guilt in my stomach was much harder to ignore. I hated lying to Liam. I might have only just met him, but it felt harder to cover up my sham of a life with him than it was with my friends. I’d always kept my home life a secret from them because I didn’t want them to bear my burden, but was it so wrong that I was sick of carrying the weight of my problems alone?

Liam might reject me if I told him the truth, but I didn’t want to keep parts of myself closed off from him. I’d seen firsthand what happened to relationships that weren’t honest after my parents’ marriage imploded, and I didn’t want to start whatever relationship Liam and I had with lies. As I glanced at him out of the corner of my eye, I wondered if he would still like me if he knew all my deep, dark secrets. It felt like I needed to know either way, because there was no way I could ever care for someone who rejected me because of them.

As we entered the kitchen, Carol was picking up her handbag off the bench. “There’s no tea in the cupboards,” she said. “So, I’m going to the shops.” From the way she was looking at me, I could tell she wanted to say much more. She’d obviously seen there was no food in the house, and it was killing her not to ask me about it.

Thankfully, she held her tongue around Liam.

“I’m also thinking of getting the ingredients to make my famous casserole for dinner. Would you like that?” she continued.

“That sounds amazing,” I replied. And it really did. I couldn’t remember the last time anyone had used the oven in our house. My dinners mostly consisted of meals that could be microwaved.

“Will you stay for dinner, Liam?” Carol asked.

“I would love to, but I can’t stay too late. I’ve been away and need to get home to finish up some work before school tomorrow. Maybe next time though.”

“I’ll hold you to that,” Carol said with a grin before excusing herself from the room. I stared after her, yet again wondering why I couldn’t have had my grandma in my life sooner. I know Carol felt like she’d been too hard on Mom, but Mom could be completely stubborn sometimes, so I was guessing that played a large part in their estrangement too.

“Your grandma seems nice,” Liam said, as we heard the front door click shut.

I nodded and went to get some water for the flowers. We no longer had any of the lovely vases Mom used to keep, so I had to use an empty glass instead. I wondered if Liam would notice I didn’t have a vase to use, and I worried I would have to lie again. The thought made me sick to my stomach though. I was tired of lying. I was done pretending everything was fine when it clearly wasn’t.

“You have the same green eyes as her,” he added.

“Do I?” I asked, as I turned off the tap and looked up at him.

“Yeah,” he chuckled. “Haven’t you noticed?”

I swallowed as I stared at him, the color of my grandmother’s eyes the last thing on my mind. Instead, all I could think about was being honest with the boy standing before me. My secrets felt like a big wall between us that shrouded the true me from view. If Liam couldn’t see me properly, then how could he ever really like me? I needed to tear down the barrier between us and lay myself bare. He might not like what he saw, but if I wanted to be with him, then it was a risk I needed to take.

“I hadn’t noticed...” I bit down on my lip as fear pulsed under my skin. I’d made the decision to be honest with Liam about my home and my family problems, but it was really hard to put that honesty into words. I drew in a long breath as I went to continue. “I hadn’t noticed because today’s the first time I’ve seen her in years.”

It was a small truth in the scheme of things, but it still felt so hard to say. My small admission broke a hole in the floodgate doors though, and the rest of the secrets I’d been keeping started pushing at the hole, widening it and pressuring it like they wanted the truth to spill out of me in one torrent of emotion.

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“She’s come look after me because my mom’s gone to rehab, and my dad wants nothing to do with me,” I continued. A mixture of fear and relief swirled through me as the words flowed out of my mouth. Liam would probably want nothing to do with me when he knew how damaged I was, but the release I was feeling was heady and impossible to stop. “And I lied about our house before. It’s not getting refurnished. It’s nearly empty because Mom’s been selling our things for years to fund her alcohol addiction.”

I squeezed my eyes tightly shut as I took in several sharp breaths. I’d spoken the truth for the first time in years, and I was too terrified to see Liam’s reaction. There was no way he’d want anything to do with me now he knew the truth. It was better this way though. Better now than later when him walking away would completely shatter my heart.

He took several steps toward me and lightly took my hands in his. I nervously opened my eyes and was surprised by the sympathy I found in his gaze. I didn’t want his sympathy. I didn’t need it. I’d been doing fine on my own all this time. I was too relieved he hadn’t walked away to care how he was looking at me though.

“That’s terrible,” he murmured. “You shouldn’t have had to go through any of that. Do your friends know?”

I slowly shook my head. “I didn’t want to be a burden on them.”

“Oh, Teagan,” he said, slowly wrapping me in his arms. They were warm and secure, and the hug made me feel safe in a way that I hadn’t experienced for a long time. We stood there for several long minutes, and it was only when we finally pulled apart that

I realized there were tears in my eyes.

I quickly wiped them away. “Sorry, I’m usually so much better at keeping my emotions in check.”

“You don’t have to keep them in check around me,” he replied. “And you don’t have to keep these things secret from me either. Your problems shouldn’t be yours to carry alone. I want you to be happy, and I can’t make that happen if you’re hiding things from me.”

I gave a sad laugh. “You barely know me.”

“I know enough to know that I really care about you and will do whatever I can to help you.”

I slowly shook my head. This guy just didn’t seem real to me. He was so different from what I had expected, and I felt a wave of sadness that it wouldn’t be long until I had to let him go. I just wanted to keep him forever.

I didn’t have forever though. I only had these short moments. So, I reached up on my toes and kissed him. All my pent-up emotions went into the kiss and Liam responded in kind. He wrapped me in his arms tightly, like he might never let me go, and kissed me with the kind of passion that took my breath away and stole parts of my soul.

My emotions felt so raw and intense, and I wondered if it would ever be possible to feel anything this forceful with anyone else again. If this was my one chance at feeling this way, however fleeting it might be, I was going to throw everything I had into it.

We were both breathing heavily when we finally broke apart. “If you kiss me like that onstage, I think we might give the audience more than they bargained for,” I said,

making him chuckle.

“No, these kisses are just for you and me. I don’t want to share them with anyone else.” He lifted his hands and lightly ran them down the outside of my arms, causing me to shiver. His face became serious as he stared into my eyes. “What can I do to help with your mom?”

“Nothing,” I replied, not needing to give it an ounce of thought. “I’ve got it under control.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure. Now Carol is here, I think things might finally be turning around for me.” I was surprised to find that the words actually felt true. In the few short hours I’d spent with my grandma, I was starting to feel hopeful about my future once more. She barely knew me and yet it seemed she genuinely cared about what happened to me. It was a far cry from the way my own mom had been treating me lately.

Yes, things were finally starting to look up. I probably should have known they were about to fall apart again.

23

Liam

I was reeling after spending the afternoon with Teagan. The more I got to know her, the more I realized how strong she was. She’d gone through so much on her own, and I was annoyed that I hadn’t seen past the brave front she always wore sooner.

I wanted to rescue her from the hard life she’d been living, but it was pretty clear Teagan was no damsel in distress. She was a girl intent on rescuing herself, and I

could only respect her more for that. I had no idea how she'd kept her disastrous home life to herself for such a long time. I wanted so badly to help her, but she was so self-reliant that I felt like she'd never forgive me if I used my wealth to fix the things she wanted to overcome on her own.

It would be so easy to snap my fingers and have her house furnished, her garden taken care of, and her mom's rehab bills paid for. I could hand her the acting career she wanted on a silver platter, but the fact that Teagan hadn't asked me to do any of that only made me like her more.

She had really opened up to me today, and despite how heavy some of her truths were, I couldn't help but feel like they'd brought us closer. Teagan trusted me, and I hoped I could be worthy of that trust. I'd never had a relationship before, but I was going to do everything in my power to be the kind of guy she deserved. She might not let me fix her problems, but that didn't mean I couldn't support her in them.

"Zeke, I'm back," I called out, as I entered the rental house. I'd only been gone a couple of days, but I felt a sense of homecoming. I was really starting to settle in to my life here, and it was going to be hard to leave once my time at Lincoln High was up.

"I know I said I wouldn't be long at Teagan's place, but I got..." My voice trailed off as I walked into the kitchen and caught sight of Zeke's face. There was a solemn look in his eyes that rarely made an appearance, and my blood went cold as worry started to pulse through me. Something was seriously wrong.

He opened his mouth like he wanted to explain, but he was cut off by the sound of heels tapping against the floor. I turned, and my stomach plummeted as my mother walked into the room. It had been weeks since I'd seen her, but you wouldn't have thought we'd been parted at all by the scornful look I was receiving. It was a miracle she could form any expression given the amount of Botox injected in her face. Her

lips had received a lot of work too. They'd been slowly growing larger over the years and were now so ridiculously big she reminded me somewhat of a clown.

She smoothed a hand down her Prada pantsuit as she came to stand before me. "You're supposed to be in L.A.," she said. Her words were cold and demanding. My mother never raised her voice. She didn't have to when she could strike fear into a room of grown men with her eyes alone.

"Hello, Mother. It's good to see you," I replied.

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She waved my comment away. “Oh, please, Liam. Don’t start on your pathetic pity party now. I’ve had to fly across the country to clean up your mess, and I’m not in the mood.”

“Well, you needn’t have bothered. There’s no mess for you to clean up. I have everything handled.”

Mother scoffed. “In one afternoon, you’ve offended your director, almost cost yourself the part in your next movie, and turned down a large sum of money, all so you could keep playing student at your little school.”

“So what?” It wasn’t like I needed the money, and Josh might have been disappointed I turned him down, but he didn’t run my life. He wanted to move the schedule forward for *Under the Bleachers*, and to do that he needed me to leave Lincoln early so filming could start. I only had one chance at exploring what I had with Teagan though so I’d refused him; even when he offered me an enticing lump sum to reconsider.

Mother folded her arms over her chest as she stared me down. “You didn’t go to Lincoln High to be a student,” she said. “You’d do well to remember your attendance there was simply part of fulfilling your contract and nothing more.”

Her gaze cut right through me, more sharply than any physical weapon could have. “You know, it’s lucky you aren’t the one managing your career and I’ve been able to fix things,” she continued. “If it were left to you, you’d never get work in the film industry again.”

“Mother, what did you do?” My words came out in a deep rumble filled with warning, but the woman standing before me didn’t seem to notice or care.

“I did what was necessary,” she replied, her voice as icy as her stare. “You should be thanking me for agreeing to this for you. Josh had every right to want to bring the project forward. There’s so much hype for the film after you landed in the papers for that high school party it would be crazy to let that fizzle out. I won’t let you anger the director and risk losing this role.”

I laughed darkly as I shook my head at her. It was obvious she was only worried about the money. Josh hadn’t seemed angry with me when I’d knocked his offer back. He had told me he understood. I was sure he was disappointed, but I hadn’t felt like my role in the movie was in danger.

“Well, I know I’m not at risk of losing the role, and you’re going to be the one who’s disappointed because I’ll be finishing my semester at Lincoln High.”

A smile curled at the corner of her big, fat lips. “I thought you might need some convincing.” She opened her Louis Vuitton handbag and pulled out a series of photographs before handing them to me.

My heart stuttered to a halt as I looked at the first photo. It was an image of Teagan and I kissing in the school parking lot. That moment had been so precious to me, and I thought we’d been completely alone. How the hell did she get a picture of it?

I wasn’t sure what my mother was hoping to accomplish by showing it to me. Other than proving she was watching me, there wasn’t much she could do to use it against me. I’d kissed plenty of girls before, so it wasn’t exactly controversial. It wasn’t even that obvious that Teagan was the girl, so I wasn’t concerned she’d be targeted because of it.

I shook my head. “This is supposed to force me to go through with the deal?”

Her smile widened. “Keep looking.”

I frowned and flicked to the next photo. It was from today. I was sitting on Teagan’s front doorstep with the flowers, and in the following photo, I was giving them to her. This was hardly incriminating stuff.

I glanced up at her, and she nodded for me to continue. The final photo was of a woman I didn’t recognize walking into a large brick building. The woman was about my mother’s age. She was very beautiful with long, blonde hair and bright green eyes. I wasn’t quite sure what I was looking at until I saw a sign plastered over the doorway the woman was headed toward: Begonia Treatment Center. My heart seemed to falter as I stared at the picture. I’d never met Teagan’s mom before, but I knew it must be her in the photo. The woman looked just like an older version of her daughter, and the similarity between them was uncanny.

“How do you have this?” I growled.

My mother’s face was so smug I wanted to slap her. “I’ve been keeping a close eye on you, Liam. And I know how much you like the little blonde girl. I’d hate to think how it would ruin her life if it came out that her mother was in rehab.”

I swallowed, uncertainty swirling in my gut as I looked at the picture again. Teagan and her mom would be on the front page of every tabloid in the country by tomorrow morning if Mother made the pictures public. Teagan was so incredibly private about her home life and kept it hidden even from her closest friends. I had no doubt something like this would devastate her, and I couldn’t let that happen.

I slowly lifted my gaze to glare at my mother. “How can you do this to me?”

She walked over and patted my cheek. "I'm not doing anything to you," she replied. "I'm the one who's looking out for you."

I begged to differ and wished I could see a way around this. I had no clue how to fight her though and felt thoroughly backed into a corner. She'd left me with no choice because I cared about Teagan too much to risk the photos getting out.

My mother must have seen the resignation in my eyes because she smiled and turned to walk from the room. "You're booked on the next plane home," she called over her shoulder. "Make sure you don't miss it."

I didn't respond. What could I say? I simply stood there staring after the horrible woman who'd given birth to me. It was only once the front door closed that I broke from my frozen stance and sank into a chair, running both my hands down my face.

"I'm sorry, Liam," Zeke said, slowly coming to stand at my side. "I had no idea she planned to ambush you like that."

"It's my mother; it's what she does," I replied. "Tell me you've got a brilliant plan to get me out of this?"

Zeke looked as defeated as I felt though, and he shook his head. "I wish I did, but that woman has us both hogtied. I don't think there's any way out of this other than doing what she wants."

"I really hate her," I spat. "And the worst part of all of this is that now she has those photos she can bring them out whenever she wants something from me."

Zeke paled at the thought. "We'll think of a way to get around them," he said. "But for now, I don't think you've got much choice but to go back to L.A."

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I sighed and nodded. “Teagan’s going to hate me. Her school play is more important to her than anything, and if I bail now, there won’t be enough time for them to find a replacement for me.”

Zeke shrugged. “Missing the play seems the lesser of two evils.”

I knew he was right, but I hated it all the same.

I let out a long, painful breath as I considered the girl who had completely opened up to me only hours earlier. She didn’t deserve any of this, and I knew she was never going to forgive me. “I guess I should go tell Teagan,” I said.

Zeke placed a hand against my chest to stop me though. “Your plane home is in an hour. You don’t have time.”

“You want me to just leave without explaining or saying goodbye to Teagan?”

He slowly lowered his hand. “I know it sucks, but I don’t think you can risk missing the flight. I also think you should try to keep some distance from Teagan. She’s a sweet girl and doesn’t deserve those pictures being released. One wrong move and your mother could do it. I don’t trust that woman, and she’s clearly watching your every move.”

There was sympathy in Zeke’s eyes, and I think he could see I was breaking inside. I didn’t care about a lot in this world, and so much of my life was fake, but I’d started to develop real feelings for Teagan, and it was killing me to abandon her in this way.

“Look, I don’t need to be on the flight, so I’ll go see Teagan tomorrow and talk to her for you,” Zeke suggested.

It wasn’t the solution I wanted, but I was afraid it was the best I was going to get, so I nodded. “Thanks, Zeke.”

He gave me a solemn nod in return. “We better get you to the airport.”

His words made it official. My time at Lincoln High was over, and so were my chances with Teagan.

24

Teagan

It felt like my life was finally turning a corner when I woke to the smell of waffles cooking downstairs. I was never very good at pulling myself out of bed on a Monday morning, but the scent made my eyes whip open, and all vestiges of sleep disappeared as I jumped out of bed to investigate.

I could barely keep the smile from my face as I walked into the kitchen and found Carol hovering by the cooktop. “What is this?” I asked.

She grinned as she glanced over her shoulder toward me. “Ah, you’re up. I’m making waffles. My favorite granddaughter needs a good breakfast to start the week,” she replied.

My heart warmed, and I went over and gave her a hug. Mom and I rarely showed any emotion toward each other, but Carol wrapped me in her arms and held me close like we’d been hugging the same way for years. It had barely been a day since she’d entered my life, but I was already desperately hoping that she wouldn’t disappear

again.

“You didn’t have to do this,” I said, pulling back from her.

She smiled and put the first couple of waffles on a plate. “Of course, I did. Waffles are the only way to start your week right.”

I laughed. “I won’t argue with you there.”

I was growing attached to Carol far too easily. Odds were that she’d be gone just as quickly as she arrived once Mom got home. Did that mean I shouldn’t let her into my heart though? I didn’t want to be so jaded that I distanced myself from her just in case she left me again. I’d taken a risk letting Liam in, so perhaps I needed to take a chance with my grandmother too. I had a feeling she’d worm her way into my affections permanently whether I wanted her to or not.

The doorbell rang just as I took the first bite of my waffle, and I glanced at my phone to check the time. It was far too early for visitors. Who called at this hour of the morning?

“Expecting anyone?” Carol asked.

I swallowed my food and shook my head. “Nope, but you keep cooking, and I’ll get the door.”

I zipped up my hoodie as I trailed out of the kitchen and tried to tame my hair a little before I pulled the front door open. I wasn’t sure who I expected to find there, but it certainly wasn’t Liam’s assistant.

“Zeke?” My voice was filled with surprise. “What are you doing here?”

“Hey, Teagan.” He gave me a tight smile. “Do you have a minute so I can talk to you?”

His face was grim, and although I had no idea why he was here, I did have a bad feeling about it. I glanced over my shoulder toward the kitchen before stepping onto the front porch to join him.

“Sure. What do you need to talk to me about?”

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He hesitated for a moment before he began. “It’s about Liam,” he said. “I wish I were visiting for a better reason, but I have some unfortunate news.”

“What is it?” My body was tense as I waited for him to explain.

“Liam’s had to return home to L.A. He won’t be coming back to school.”

I shook my head, failing to understand. Zeke’s words might have been clear, but they didn’t seem to sink in. “He’s not coming back?” I repeated.

“No.”

For several long seconds, I simply stared at Zeke, trying to process what he’d said. It didn’t make any sense to me though. Liam couldn’t be gone.

“He had to start filming for his next movie early and couldn’t get out of it,” Zeke continued.

“But I only saw him yesterday, and he didn’t say anything to me then.” He’d also brought me flowers and kissed me. I’d opened up to him, spilling some of my deepest secrets, and he’d made me feel like there might be something really special between us. I didn’t want to believe he was gone, but a part of me felt stupid for thinking this was going to end any other way. I should have learned by now that opening my heart only ever ended in misery.

“He didn’t know he had to go back until last night,” Zeke explained.

“And he couldn’t call me or tell me this to my face?”

“I’m sorry, Teagan. He really didn’t want to leave, but he didn’t have a choice.”

I nodded, shock still seeming to hold my emotions at bay. All I felt was cold and empty. “It wasn’t because of anything I said to him yesterday, was it?”

“No, of course not,” Zeke quickly replied. “If he could have stayed, he would have.”

If that was the truth, then why hadn’t Liam called me himself?

“I’m sorry I had to be the one to tell you about this, but trust me when I say that Liam really cares about you and he wasn’t ready to say goodbye yet.”

I nodded, not sure what I could say in response. It all came back to one simple truth: if Liam cared about me the way Zeke claimed he did, he would have found a way to tell me this himself. This felt like a brush-off, plain and simple. Maybe this was the way all actors in Hollywood broke up with people.

“Do you want me to give Liam a message from you?”

I let out a humorless laugh. “No. I have nothing to say to him.”

Zeke’s eyes filled with sadness. “Are you going to be okay?”

I didn’t really have any choice in the matter, so I shrugged. “I’ll survive.” Just like I survived everything else. I should have known that things had been too good to be true lately.

Zeke reached out and rubbed one of my arms, giving me a warm smile. “I feel sure I’ll see you again soon, Teagan,” he said, before turning to leave.

I watched him walk back to his Escalade, which was parked by the curb. It wasn't until he drove off that I sunk to the ground and allowed my emotions to flow free. Liam was really gone. I hugged my knees to my chest and tried to stop the tears that were slowly forming in my eyes. I barely knew Liam, and yet there had been this incredible chemistry between us. It had only been a few weeks, but I'd completely fallen for the guy.

It was only after I'd been crying for several minutes that I realized I wasn't just losing Liam. I was losing my costar in the school play too. There was no way anyone could replace him in time for opening night. The production, my chances of impressing the talent scout, and my dream of finally leaving this place were doomed.

* * *

I somehow managed to get myself to school on time. My hair was a mess, and I had a thick layer of makeup on to hide the fact I'd been crying, but I was there. I felt like crap and probably would have skipped the day altogether if it weren't for the play. Liam might have let me down, but this play meant everything to me, and I wouldn't let him ruin it.

I headed straight to Miss Appleby's office when I arrived at school. Her door was already open, and it only took one look at my teacher to realize she already knew the devastating news that our Beast was gone.

"You've heard about Liam," I said, my shoulders deflating as I entered the room. A small part of me had hoped that maybe I'd just dreamed about him leaving. Miss Appleby's saddened expression was the stark slap of reality I needed though. Liam was gone, and he wasn't coming back.

She nodded and gestured for me to sit in the chair across from her. "I got a call from his assistant this morning. Looks like we're going to have to find a replacement for

him.”

“But there’s no way anyone can learn all the lines or blocking for Beast in time,” I told her. Our drama class wasn’t big enough for understudies, so Liam’s unlucky replacement would have to memorize everything from scratch. Opening night was next week, and it seemed like an impossible feat.

“They’re going to have to,” she replied. “We may have lost one of our leads, but the show must go on.”

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I thought she was being a little optimistic on that front, but she told me to leave it with her. I wanted to trust that she could fix this, but I left her office feeling completely defeated. No matter what magical rabbit Miss Appleby pulled out of the hat there was no way that rabbit could give even half the performance that Liam would have.

It wasn't until the end of lunch that I found out who the unlucky replacement for Liam was. Evan hadn't been in the cafeteria all break, but I caught sight of him leaving Miss Appleby's office as I headed to class. He was as white as a sheet, and his eyes were wide with fear. It didn't take a genius to guess he'd been the one hit by a casting bombshell.

I rushed over to him, and it took him several seconds to focus on my face. There was a stunned and fearful look in his eyes that only confirmed I'd guessed correctly. "You're playing Beast, aren't you?"

He nodded, at a loss for words for the first time in his life. His eyes flicked toward Miss Appleby's door, and he pulled me down the corridor a little farther as if he didn't want her overhearing what he had to say.

"How the hell am I going to learn all of this in a week, Teags?" he hissed. His voice was slightly hysterical, and my fun-loving friend was nowhere to be seen. I'd never seen him freak out this way before, and it didn't give me much confidence that he could handle taking on the role.

"You don't have to do it if you don't want to," I tried to tell him.

Evan quickly shook his head though. “If I don’t do it, she’ll ask Todd. I can’t let him get the lead role over me. I’d never hear the end of it.”

“Evan, that’s crazy. So what if Todd gets the role instead? It’s completely reasonable if you think this will be too much for you.”

Evan scoffed. “You clearly don’t understand what it’s like to have an arch nemesis.”

“And you’ve clearly lost your mind if you think that beating Todd is a good reason to take on all this extra work. You don’t have to do this.”

He looked me deep in the eyes as he shook his head once more. “I do, Teags. This play means the world to you. I can’t let you down.”

My heart fluttered at how much he cared, but I couldn’t let him go through with this just because of me. “Evan...”

“Teags,” he replied with a smile.

“You know I’d understand if you didn’t want to do it.”

He took my hand and squeezed it. “I know, but I’ve made up my mind. Just tell me you’ll help me learn the part.”

“Of course, I will. I’ll work with you day and night for the next week if you need it. Don’t worry for one second. If you want to do this, I’m one hundred and ten percent here for you, and we’ll make the play amazing.”

“Good.” His face brightened, and I was glad to see I’d eased some of the tension that had been gripping him since he’d left Miss Appleby’s office. Unfortunately, a little optimism wasn’t going to lessen the big task ahead of us.

“I still can’t believe Liam did this to us,” I said. “I feel so betrayed.”

Evan pulled me under one arm and hugged me. “Sometimes these things just don’t work out, right? He was only ever going to be here for a short time.”

“I know. I just wish he hadn’t left us in such an impossible position with the play.”

“You said yourself it’s going to be amazing,” Evan replied. “And it will be, you’ll see.” Suddenly, he was the voice of optimism and reason, but it was a little hard to believe his words when only moments ago he’d been so worried. We had a lot of work to do in a short amount of time, and until we started rehearsing and I knew how much practice Evan needed, I wasn’t going to be reassured.

25

Teagan

The first rehearsal with Evan playing Beast wasn’t a complete disaster. It wasn’t exactly promising though either. He’d clutched his script the entire time, and I couldn’t stop comparing his performance to Liam’s. I knew it would get better once he’d memorized all of his lines, but I was worried that simply wouldn’t happen in time for our performance. The play was set to open on Wednesday night next week, so we only had a week and a half to get Evan up to speed. It wasn’t nearly long enough.

I worked with Evan every day before and after school. We even ran lines with each other between classes. He planned to be off script by rehearsal on Thursday, which would be just under a week from the opening night. I hoped that once he put his script down we could start to focus Evan’s efforts on developing his character. But, when Thursday came, I began to feel my hopes for the play’s success slipping away. Evan was doing the best that he could without his script, but he still struggled with most of

his lines and kept forgetting his entrances.

It didn't help that we'd had to replace Evan's role too, so Eli was also struggling with his performance of Gaston. I could barely watch the rehearsals when I wasn't on stage. Seeing the mess our play had become made me want to cry.

At the end of our Thursday rehearsal, Miss Appleby asked me to stay behind. I had a feeling she was going to deliver the blunt news that the play would have to be canceled. At this point, I wasn't sure if I even cared. Surely, it would be better to cancel the play than to put on a performance that would only embarrass us?

"What's up?" I asked Miss Appleby as I came to stand before her.

"I have some bad news," she said. "The talent scout I told you about isn't able to make it to our performance next week."

I waited for disappointment to flare up inside me at the sound of yet another setback, but this had been a week of bad news, and at this point I was almost glad. Given the state our play was in, I wasn't sure I wanted anyone to see it, let alone a talent scout. It was nowhere near the caliber of performance our class was capable of and even my own acting had become lackluster due to the amount of mistakes in every scene. I didn't want to blame Evan, because it really wasn't his fault we were in this mess, but it was hard to do a good job when your costar didn't know the blocking and kept forgetting their lines.

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“Can I ask why they’re not coming?”

Miss Appleby glanced down at her hands. “Well, we had some notice of Liam’s attendance at Lincoln, and his being in the play was the main reason I was able to pull the favor.”

“So, the talent scout’s not coming because Liam is gone?”

“Yes.”

I swallowed down a thick lump in my throat as I nodded. “Well, I guess it’s for the best. Our play needs a lot of work.”

Miss Appleby reached out and touched my arm. “Don’t be disappointed, Teagan. You’re the most talented student I’ve ever had the pleasure of teaching and I’ll do whatever I can to help you follow your dreams of acting.”

I gave her a warm smile. “Thanks, Miss Appleby.”

I walked from the room feeling a small sense of relief. At least there was one less person coming to watch our play fail.

“What did Appleby want?” Evan asked when I found him waiting in the corridor.

“To let me know the talent scout isn’t coming to the performance. Apparently, Liam was the draw card to get them here. Now that Liam’s gone, so is the scout.”

“Damn, that sucks. I’m sorry, Teags.”

I shrugged. “Just add it to the list of things Liam has done to let us down this week.” I let out a long breath before I continued. “I just don’t understand how he could leave us all without saying a word.”

“It’s okay to be upset,” Evan replied.

“I’m not upset, I’m annoyed,” I continued. “I swear, if I ever see him again, I’m going to slap him right across his stupidly perfect face.”

Evan chuckled. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you this irritated before. It’s cute. Kind of like a little pissed-off Chihuahua.”

“I’m not a Chihuahua,” I protested. He only laughed again in response so I scowled at my friend and stormed ahead of him to class.

He quickly caught up to me, still laughing. “Okay, okay, you’re not a Chihuahua.”

“Good,” I grumbled. Evan was right in thinking he’d never seen me so annoyed before though. I usually kept my emotions completely in check and had plenty of experience acting as though I was okay when everything was falling apart. But Liam had been chipping holes in the barrier I kept my feelings behind ever since I met him. He’d opened those floodgates wide, allowing my emotions to run free. Now I had no idea how to close them again, and I was seriously struggling to keep my cool.

“You are hurting though,” Evan said, turning more serious.

“Yeah, well, he never had the decency to even text me goodbye. He just disappeared without a word and sent his assistant to tell me he was gone.” My voice became quiet as I allowed sadness to rush through me. “I feel like I deserved more than that.”

Evan tilted his head as he looked at me. “You really liked him. Didn’t you?”

His deep hazel eyes seemed to see right through me, and I knew I couldn’t hide my true feelings anymore.

“Yeah, I really did.”

He wrapped an arm around my shoulders, pulling me close. “Well, he’s an idiot for treating you this way. He’s never going to do better than you.”

“He’s a movie star, of course, he is.”

“No, Teags, he isn’t. You’re the best person I know.”

Tears started to well in my eyes, but somehow, I managed to gain control of them before they started to fall. I tried to give Evan a smile. “I guess it’s his loss then.”

“It definitely is,” Evan agreed.

We continued on to class though English was the last place I wanted to be right now. Between our failing play, my broken heart, and my absent mom, I desperately just wanted to run and hide from it all. I wasn’t the kind of person who let my problems overwhelm me though, and I refused to be overcome by them now. I needed to keep on slogging through life, just like always, and try to move on.

When we arrived in English class, Mr. Randall announced he was going to return our biography assignments today. Since I’d done mine with Liam, it was going to be near impossible to take my mind off him this period.

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Mr. Randall started handing out the assignments but paused when he reached my desk. “I’d like to see you after class,” he said, making nerves ratchet up my spine. As if my week could get any worse. Since the teacher hadn’t returned my assignment, I knew there was clearly something wrong with it. I couldn’t afford to get another bad grade in this class.

I didn’t hear a word Mr. Randall said for the rest of the period as I waited for the inevitable doom that awaited me once class was over. Whether or not I passed English was dependent on the grade I got on the biography assignment, and I felt completely resigned to the fact I’d failed.

When the bell finally rang, I dragged my feet to the front of the classroom. Mr. Randall waited until all the other students had left the room before he started talking.

“I was surprised by the final draft you handed in,” he said, only making the dread curdling inside me intensify. His surprise didn’t sound promising. “It was a complete change from the version you had me look over.”

Again, I wasn’t feeling any more comforted by his words. I looked at the ground, unable to face him as he condemned me.

“So, I failed?” I whispered.

“No. You got an A.”

My head snapped upwards and I was greeted by Mr. Randall’s beaming smile—a phenomenon I never thought I’d witness.

“W-what?” I stuttered in disbelief.

He handed over the paper, and I stared at the big red A written across the top of the page, my mouth hanging open.

“I wanted to congratulate you myself,” Mr. Randall continued. “You wrote an insightful piece and I wanted to say that I’m proud of you for really digging deep with this assignment.”

I was in so much shock I could barely speak. “But I never get A’s in English.”

“Well, you deserve this one, and I hope this is the start of many more for you. You’re a talented writer, Teagan, when you put in the effort required.”

“Thank you, Mr. Randall.” I blushed at his compliment, completely unaccustomed to hearing anything positive from a teacher who wasn’t Miss Appleby. This just didn’t feel real.

He pursed his lips before he continued. “I was also told to return Mr. Black’s assignment to you.”

“You were?”

“Yes. Since he won’t be returning to Lincoln, he asked if you could collect it for him.”

I frowned. Mr. Randall had spoken with Liam? It seemed ridiculous that he couldn’t find the time to explain his disappearance to me but was willing to contact our English teacher. It was stranger still that he wanted me to have his assignment. I had to admit I was curious about what Liam had written though, so I took his biography of me without complaint. There was no mark across the top of the page, but the title

made my stomach dip: A biography of Teagan York.

“Thanks, Mr. Randall,” I said, quickly looking up at him and smiling. “I’ll see you in class next week.”

I left the room quickly, hoping to making it out of there before Mr. Randall remembered what a difficult student I usually was and reconsidered the good grade he’d given me. I found Evan waiting in the corridor, and he lifted an eyebrow when he saw the papers clutched in my hands.

“Everything okay?” he asked.

I grinned and showed him my front page. “Mr. Randall just wanted to congratulate me in person. I got my first A.”

Evan grinned and lifted a hand to give me a high-five. I happily slapped his palm, enjoying the first burst of positivity I’d experienced all week. The feeling evaporated all too quickly though when I remembered that I also held Liam’s assignment in my hand.

“You go on to lunch,” I said to Evan. “I just need to go to the library quickly.”

Evan smiled. “Okay, Brainiac. Glad to see you didn’t let that A go to your head or anything.”

I poked my tongue out at him and started to walk away. “I’ll see you at rehearsal after school,” I called to him.

I started in the direction of the library but had no plans of actually going there. My curiosity had been piqued, and I needed to find somewhere private where I could read Liam’s assignment. When I spotted an empty classroom, I ducked inside, closing the

door behind me. I walked toward the back of the room and took a seat by one of the windows. The lights were off, but sunlight streamed inside, warming me where I sat.

I placed Liam's paper on the table and played with a stray hair as I started to read. I could barely breathe as my eyes devoured the words on the page before me. I was surprised to find that Liam was actually a good writer. But what surprised me more was how he described me in his biography.

He hadn't known the truth about my mom when he'd written it, and yet he spoke about how strong and resilient I was. How I brought out the best in the people around me and challenged them to be better than they were the day before. He went into great detail about how talented I was on stage and how he had no doubts about my future as an actress. But what really made my heart stutter was the way he ended the biography.

Teagan York is beautiful inside and out, and I look forward to one day seeing her light up our screens the way she's lit up my heart.

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Tears pricked the corner of my eyes as I read the final sentence over and over. It certainly wasn't in keeping with the criteria of our biography assignment, but reading it made a weight lift off my shoulders that had been pressing down on me all week.

Liam had abandoned me and let our drama class down, but reading his heartfelt words made me wonder if perhaps returning to L.A. wasn't the simple decision I'd assumed it was. All week I had believed he left because he didn't care enough to stay, but everything he'd written about me suggested that wasn't the case. That perhaps Liam did care for me, after all.

I let out a sigh as I leaned back in the chair and ran a hand down my face. Reading this assignment didn't really change anything. Liam was still gone, our play was going to bomb, and it was unlikely I'd ever see him again. His words had given me a small ray of hope though. If Liam believed in me this way, then perhaps all was not lost.

26

Liam

I'd only been back in L.A. for a day, but it felt like I'd been separated from Teagan forever. Guilt weighed heavily upon my chest, making it hard to breathe, and I couldn't seem to take my mind off her. Leaving without saying goodbye was one of the hardest things I'd ever had to do, and not contacting her now was like torture.

"How did she take it?" I asked Zeke.

“About as well as can be expected.”

I pressed two fingers to my forehead to stave off the mammoth headache I could feel brewing. After a day spent in meetings, I was exhausted. The thought of Zeke returning to L.A. and telling me about his conversation with Teagan had been the one thing getting me through it all.

“Was she mad?”

“I think she was more upset,” he replied.

I swore, the thought of hurting Teagan tearing me up inside. “I should call her...”

Zeke quickly shook his head though. “We talked about this, and you need to keep your distance from Teagan. Your mother will be watching your every move right now, and we can’t risk her getting any more material to use against Teagan.”

“But it’s just a phone call.”

Zeke let out a sigh. “And what exactly do you think you’ll achieve with a phone call?”

“I could explain...”

“What? That your mother is using photos of Teagan and her mom to manipulate you?”

He was right. I couldn’t put that on Teagan. “I could at least say goodbye.”

Zeke folded his arms over his chest as he looked at me. I was surprised by the amount of sorrow in his eyes, which only proved how pathetic I must have looked.

“It’s your choice, but I’m not sure saying goodbye is going to help her,” Zeke gently explained. “She’s hurt, and it didn’t seem like she wanted to talk to you about it. You have to remember that this isn’t just about the two of you. Your disappearance will probably ruin the play she cares about too.”

“But I didn’t want to hurt her or ruin the play.”

“I know that, but you made the right choice. Those photos your mother has would destroy Teagan.”

I let out a frustrated breath. “I just wish I could explain it to her...”

“And maybe you can once you’ve done what your mother wants and this movie is over. But until then, you need to give Teagan some space and let her focus on her play. Calling her now would only confuse and upset her more.”

I wished he was wrong, but Zeke had a point. I’d screwed Teagan over by leaving and calling her now wouldn’t change that. Opening night for *Beauty and the Beast* was just over a week away, and I knew she’d be spending every ounce of her focus on helping get my replacement up to speed. Teagan wouldn’t want to hear from me unless it was to tell her I was coming back for the performance.

“You’re right,” I said. “Calling Teagan won’t help, and it’s better not to risk giving my mother any more ammunition. For all I know, she’s probably tapped my phones as well as having me followed.”

“I wouldn’t put it past her...” Zeke grumbled. “She certainly had no qualms about releasing those pictures she got from your cloud last year.”

I swallowed as I remembered the day I’d opened my laptop to find my progress pictures all over the internet. They were pictures I’d taken to keep track of my

training, and since I hadn't always been as bulky as I was right now, the before pictures were quite embarrassing. My mother had been quite happy to sell them to the tabloids though, just like all the other pictures she leaked.

At least I was aware when I was being photographed at parties or outside nightclubs with girls. But these pictures had been private, and while they weren't the worst photos in the world, it felt like a complete violation to have them splashed across the covers of every trashy magazine in the world.

It was safe to say that I no longer allowed Mother access to any of my accounts. She used everything she could to manipulate me though, and I often dreamed of what it would be like to oust her from my life entirely.

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I let out a sigh. “Perhaps I’ve been going about this the wrong way,” I said. “I’ve been so busy caving to her every demand, but maybe, what I should be doing is trying to get out from under her thumb.”

Zeke slowly started to smile. “What are you thinking?”

“Well, I’m sure I’m not the only member of my family with things they’d like to hide. I think we should do a little digging of our own.”

Zeke’s smile stretched into a wide grin. “Consider me on it.”

I grabbed Zeke’s shoulder and gave it a firm squeeze. “Thanks, I seriously don’t know what I’d do without you.”

“Tell me about it; let’s hope you never find out,” he replied with a chuckle.

I smiled in return. If I could stop my mother from managing my affairs, there was no doubt in my mind that the guy standing in front of me would be taking her place.

“You better get downstairs to the gym,” Zeke said. “Your trainer’s waiting for you.”

I let out a long breath and nodded. I actually felt like being punished right now, so a training session was exactly what I needed. I paused before walking out the door and turned back to Zeke.

“I know I shouldn’t contact Teagan, but do you think you could get in contact with her English teacher and ask him to return my part of our joint assignment to her.”

Zeke frowned. “Why would you want me to do that?”

“Because maybe she won’t hate me quite so much if she reads it.”

* * *

I had hoped that as the days passed my thoughts about leaving Teagan would subside. I’d thrown myself into preparation for *Under the Bleachers*, but even a week later after leaving her, I was still drowning in guilt. I was desperate to contact her, but I knew she was better off not hearing from me. Nothing I could say would fix things, and I wanted to give her the space she needed to focus on the play.

I was struggling with being apart from her though, and by the time the day before the play rolled around, I was regretting ever allowing myself to cave to my mother’s wishes. I was also completely distracted.

“Liam, are you okay?”

I snapped to attention and realized I’d just missed my line. Again. I focused on my *Under the Bleachers* costar Mallory, who was staring at me with concern. She was one of the most popular teen actresses in Hollywood and was well known for her talent, beauty, and dedication to her roles. She just wasn’t the actress I wanted to be standing opposite right now.

It was our second day of shooting the movie, after days of script read-throughs, and we’d been retaking the same scene for hours. It was my fault we hadn’t nailed it yet, and I knew it was because I couldn’t keep focused. My thoughts were constantly drifting to Lincoln High and the performance that would be going on there tomorrow night. The performance I wouldn’t be a part of.

“Liam?” Mallory prompted.

“I’m fine.” I gave her an empty smile before glancing at our director. Josh Winkler was in his late twenties and fairly young to be directing such a big budget film, but everyone in the industry was desperate to work with him—me included. After winning critical acclaim at the Cannes Film Festival with his debut indie flick a few years back, he’d become a hot commodity. I couldn’t afford to make a mess of what could be my one chance to work for him.

“Sorry, I missed my line,” I said to Josh.

“It’s okay, Liam,” he replied. “Let’s start the scene from the top again.”

I nodded, trying to put Teagan from my mind so I could focus on the girl in front of me. We had to do several more takes of the scene before Josh was finally happy with it and announced we were wrapped for the day.

I couldn’t wait to get off set. It had been a long day, and ever since I’d returned to L.A., I’d begun to resent the movie I’d worked so hard to be a part of. The job might have brought me to Lincoln High in the first place, but it was also the reason I had to leave the school early and, more importantly, Teagan.

I just wished there was a way I could escape for a few hours to be at Teagan’s performance tomorrow. I wanted to support her, but I was due on set all day every day for the foreseeable future. Unless I wanted to lose my part in the movie, I had to be in L.A. I also couldn’t risk leaving when my mother was still blackmailing me with photos of Teagan.

“Liam? Could I have a word?” Josh asked as I started toward my trailer. My stomach pooled with dread, and I felt certain I was about to be reprimanded. I’d tried my best to concentrate today, but my performance had been completely lacking. My heart just wasn’t in the movie at all.

I gave him a nod and came to stand before him. He glanced past me, hesitating as he waited for some of the crew to walk out of earshot, and I waited silently for him to speak.

“I could see you were struggling a bit with your focus today, so make sure you get a good night’s sleep tonight,” he said, once we were finally alone. “When you come to this set, I need you completely present.”

“Yeah, I know, and I’m sorry about that. I’ll be better tomorrow.”

Josh grinned and slapped me on the shoulder. “I know you will. You did really well in the cast read last week, and the scenes we shot yesterday were great. I’m impressed by your dedication.”

“You are?”

“I’m as surprised as you are,” he chuckled. “I wasn’t sure I wanted to work with you at first, but I’m glad you proved me wrong. You were committed to your time at the high school, giving us some great PR to work with, and you really pulled through for us by starting production early.” There was almost a sense of pride in his eyes as he looked at me. “You’ve been giving this part your all, so it’s understandable you’re tired, but take care of yourself because I want to see that kind of commitment every day.”

I was mostly relieved to hear such positive feedback, but I couldn’t help but focus on the one negative thing he’d said and I started to frown. “Why wouldn’t you want to work with me?”

“Well, it wasn’t because you didn’t have the talent,” Josh explained. “I guess with all the partying and drugs it seemed like you’d be difficult to direct. Our job is hard enough without adding unnecessary distractions into the mix.”

I swallowed down a tight knot in my throat. I guess that was yet another thing to hate my mother for. She was the one who had made me out to be a party boy, and it seemed to only be hindering my career rather than helping it.

“You know as well as I do that looks can be deceiving,” I replied.

Josh nodded, his lips forming a firm line as he looked me over. “I do, and it’s clear you’re not the guy people believe you are. A word of advice though: you’ve got the talent, so you don’t need those publicity tricks to get the jobs you want. You’ve got to

start being true to yourself.”

I’d needed to hear those words for so long, and the thought of following his advice and being myself seemed to release a tension that had been gripping hold of my body ever since my mother started trying to change my image. “You’re right,” I agreed, letting out a long breath.

“Anyway, have a good night, Black.” He tipped the peak of the worn Lakers’ cap he always wore before turning to walk away. I stood in silence, staring after him. I’d been breaking off pieces of myself to please others for as long as I could remember, and I no longer recalled what it was like to feel like my whole self. But as I thought over what the director had said, it felt as though the fractured pieces of the person I wanted to be started to realign and fall into place. I hadn’t been true to myself in a long time, and it was high time I did something about it.

I took my phone out of my pocket and called Zeke the moment I was back in my trailer. “We’re going back to Lincoln High tomorrow,” I said. “Organize the flights.”

“What about the movie?” he asked.

“Screw the movie. If they want to fire me, fine. But I can’t keep letting other people dictate my life, and I need to be there for Teagan.”

“Okay,” Zeke replied. “I’ll get you on the next flight.” I could practically hear his smile through the phone. “What about your mother? She might still release those pictures, and we haven’t found anything to use against her. For a woman who bares an awful resemblance to the devil, she has surprisingly few skeletons in her closet.”

I drew in a deep breath as I considered the problem. If I was starting afresh and being true to myself then I needed to treat my mother in the same fashion. And I had a few ideas of how I could accomplish that.

“I’m going to do what I should have had the guts to do a long time ago,” I replied. “I’m going to tell her she’s fired as my manager and that she’s going to accept it without complaint.”

“Your mother isn’t exactly an accept it without complaint kind of woman...”

“No,” I agreed. “Which is why I’ll be taking a little inspiration from my English project. If she doesn’t step down quietly, I’ll tell her about the autobiography I’m writing.” I slowly started to smile as I thought about it.

“You’re writing a book?” Zeke raised an eyebrow at me.

“I am now,” I answered. “It will be an honest tell-all about how my mother controlled me through blackmail for years and the lengths she’s gone to in order to make me famous. I think the idea of having all of her manipulative ways exposed should get her off my back.”

Zeke chuckled. “That might just work. She completely freaked out a few months back when that article ran on how rude she’d been to a waiter.”

“I was thinking the same thing.”

“I can’t imagine she’ll be happy to hear this.”

I grinned. “No, but her image is even more important to her than mine is and she’ll do just about anything to make sure I don’t tarnish her name.”

“Including leaving you alone.”

“Exactly,” I agreed, with a smile. “Now, let’s focus on what really matters.”

“That you get to see Teagan again?”

“That I get to see Teagan again.”

27

Teagan

It was opening night, and the usual buzz of excitement I felt before every performance was nowhere to be found. Instead, a dull blanket of melancholy seemed to have replaced my normal nervous anticipation. I’d worked with Evan tirelessly over the past week, but he was still struggling to remember all of his lines. It was incredible how far he’d come in such a limited amount of time, but only a miracle could have adequately prepared him for the play.

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Our dress rehearsal today had been a disaster. Eli messed up some of his scenes as Gaston and Evan made mistakes almost every time he was on stage. Even the Beast costume was too big for Evan. He was just as tall as Liam, but he didn't have his ridiculous muscles, and the costume sagged sadly on him. Like everything else with the play, there hadn't been time to fix it.

"You'll be fabulous tonight," Carol reassured me, as she drove me to school.

I smiled and nodded. She'd never seen me act before, so I knew it was an empty compliment. She sounded so certain though, like it was impossible for me to fail.

"And I'll be watching you from the audience. Oh, I'm so excited."

Her enthusiasm brought a more genuine smile out of me. I couldn't remember the last time a member of my family had been at one of my performances. I could pretty much always count on Mom to forget they were on. The closest I ever got was when Nina came to watch with Topher. She was on shift tonight though, so unfortunately, she couldn't make it.

"I'm really glad you'll get to see it too," I replied. I only wished it was going to be the performance I knew our drama class was capable of. If Evan had been given a proper chance to practice his role, we'd be unstoppable. As it was, he barely managed to stop himself from cracking up in giggles whenever we kissed. We'd survived one kiss without laughing, but it was the most awkward encounter ever, and we were both scarred for life from the experience. Ever since, he had been complaining that I kissed like a girl. "Duh," I'd responded each time, only making him laugh more.

“Here we are,” Carol announced as we pulled into the school parking lot. “Now, don’t be nervous. I already know you’re going to be the best Belle the world has ever seen.”

“I’ll try,” I replied, before jumping out of the car. It was dark out, and I pulled my jacket close to my chest to ward off the cold as I walked up the steps to the school entrance. Carol honked as she drove away, sending a small jolt of reassurance through me. It was nice to have someone around who cared enough to drop you at school before an important night.

I was the first student to arrive in the dressing room, and the others slowly started to trickle in as I began to get ready. I took my time as I did my makeup. A part of me dreaded finishing it because that meant I’d be one step closer to the start of the play. It was a horrible feeling to have right before a performance and didn’t bode well for the rest of the night.

“Teagan,” Madi’s voice called from behind me. “These came for you.” I turned and saw she was carrying a huge bunch of red roses in her arms. There must have been a hundred flowers in the beautiful bright red bouquet, and Madi’s arms seemed to be heaving under the weight of them.

“What?” I exclaimed, jumping from my seat in front of the mirror to take the flowers. “Who are they from?”

“I think we can all guess,” Hayley said, coming up to take a closer look. “They’re totally from Liam.”

“They’re not from Liam.”

“Uh, we all saw the way he looked at you during rehearsals. And unless you’ve been secretly seeing some sugar daddy, no boys at school could afford such a huge

bouquet.”

“I don’t have a sugar daddy.” My cheeks flushed and I distracted myself by picking out the small card that was tucked between the leaves. It read: Break a leg — L xx.

“See, I told you,” Hayley said, reading the card over my shoulder. “Look, he even sent you kisses.”

“This doesn’t mean I don’t still want to slap him,” I replied, carefully placing the flowers on the table. They were really beautiful, but it didn’t excuse what Liam had done. It also didn’t excuse the fact he hadn’t had the guts to call me once since he left. All I wanted was to hear his voice again and I didn’t think it was too much for me to ask for an explanation directly from him as to why he left so suddenly.

If he cared about me enough, he would have called, and a bunch of flowers and an apology from his assistant just weren’t the same. I’d experienced a whole rollercoaster of emotions since he’d been gone, and I still wasn’t certain if I was livid he’d ditched our play, pissed he’d left without a goodbye, or simply lovesick and missing his presence in my life.

“Has anyone seen Evan?” I asked, hoping to change the conversation. I had enough to worry about right now and didn’t need to add my feelings toward Liam into the mix.

“He’s getting ready in one of the classrooms,” Madi said.

“Why the hell would he do that?” I asked. “Everyone else is here.”

Madi shrugged. “I guess he wants to be a diva tonight. It’s fine though, I’ll make sure he’s backstage in time for the start of the play.”

I didn’t like the idea that Evan was alone in a classroom. I highly doubted he was

doing it because he wanted special treatment, and it was far more likely he'd separated himself from the rest of us because he was freaking out with nerves. "Maybe I should go check on him," I said.

Madi placed a hand on my arm to stop me though. "I just talked with him, and he's fine, I promise. But if you're worried, I can go check on him again. You still have to finish getting ready."

I smiled and nodded. "I'd breathe a little easier if you wouldn't mind checking on him once more. He's really overwhelmed with all those lines he's had to learn."

"No problem," Madi replied, with a smile. She didn't seem the least bit concerned, and I was impressed by how calm she remained. Given how disappointing our final rehearsal had been today, I'd have expected her to be on edge, but she seemed to be keeping a cool head as stage manager.

I made the finishing touches to my makeup, before I put my costume on and took a look in the mirror. The soft blue dress fit me perfectly, and with my hair swept back and my subtle makeup, I looked every inch the part of Belle. Now I just needed to act it convincingly.

"Gather round, everyone," Miss Appleby called as she walked into the room. She was beaming and bursting with energy as we all formed a crowd in front of her. It was as though she too had forgotten about our terrible performance from earlier today. Either that, or she was just a really good actor.

"We've got a full house tonight," she said. "So, let's give them the brilliant performance I know you're all capable of. Break a leg out there and do me proud. Now, places everybody."

My palms were sweaty as I made my way to the stage wings. I felt a sprinkling of

nerves before every performance, but right now, it was more of a deluge. My whole body shook with anxiety, and I was terrified we were going to fail. I still hadn't seen Evan yet, and I was really beginning to worry. Why hadn't he come to the dressing room for Miss Appleby's pep talk?

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I wasn't in the first scene, and the rest of the cast were all taking their place on stage when Madi pulled me aside. "Teags, where's your basket for your first scene?"

"Why are you asking me? I thought you would have it?" I hissed.

Madi swore under her breath. "You're right. I think I left it down in the dressing room." She glanced over her shoulder before focusing on me once more. "I can't leave the stage, but could you go get it? You still have time to get back here before your scene starts."

"Fine, I'll go." I didn't want to make a mad dash for the dressing room right before my opening scene, but Madi was right; I should have time. She emphasized that I needed to hurry with a wave of her hands, and I raced back to the dressing room to find the prop.

As I arrived in the dressing room, I heard a cheer erupt from the auditorium. I glanced over my shoulder wondering why the audience would be so excited. Were they just really enthusiastic about the play, or were they applauding the end of the first scene already? Either way, I really needed to hurry.

I focused on the room and had to rummage through piles of costumes and stacks of props before I finally found the basket tucked away behind an open door. It had taken me too long to find, and I cursed under my breath as I grabbed the prop and dashed back to the stage. I was barely going to make it back in time for my scene, but at least the adrenaline seemed to have replaced my nerves, and I was more focused on making my entrance on time than the fact our play was probably going to be a massive flop.

As I arrived back in the wings, the lights on stage went down, signaling the end of the first scene. I'd made it. "That's your cue," Madi said, waving to me toward the stage.

I barely had time to catch my breath before I walked past her to take my place. As I reached my mark on stage, I finally caught sight of Evan for the first time that evening. He was standing in the wings, and my expression dropped at the sight of him. He was wearing his Gaston outfit.

I tried to catch his attention, but he seemed to be deliberately avoiding eye contact with me. I officially felt like I was going to throw up. What on Earth was he doing? He was supposed to be playing Beast. No one else had learned the lines, and it wasn't as if Evan could play the two characters at once. Who had played Beast in the first scene?

I wanted to sprint offstage and confront him, but the lights on stage brightened, suddenly washing over me and warming my skin as the scene began. I pushed my worries to the back of my mind as I quickly fell into part. I'd have a chance to ask Evan what was going on between scenes.

The chance to speak to Evan never came though, as he hurried off the opposite side of the stage to me at the end of our scene. My hands clenched into fists at my sides as I tried to remain calm. My best friend was actively dodging me, and I couldn't understand why. It even felt like he had been avoiding eye contact with me during our scene together. Something wasn't right.

"Why is Evan playing the wrong part?" I hissed to Madi as I waited in the wing for my next entrance. "Who's playing Beast?"

She waved my question away as she focused on the stage. "It's fine, Teagan," she whispered, like that was all the answer I needed.

I didn't understand. Evan was the only person who had rehearsed the part. Our play was about to go from a disappointment to an all-out catastrophe if we had anyone other than Evan play Beast. Was I really the only one that cared?

The first act of the play went by in a blur, and by the time I finally had a scene with Beast, I was a mess. No one was giving me a straight answer as to what was happening with Evan, and I had a sinking suspicion it was because he'd chickened out at the last minute. Todd had been begging Miss Appleby all week to give him a shot at Beast, and he claimed he already had all the lines memorized. Evan had told me plenty of times that if he didn't perform well in the role that it would go to Todd. It seemed to be his main motivation during all our extra rehearsals. Would Miss Appleby really allow the boys to change their roles at last minute though?

I was completely rigid with nerves as I prepared to take the stage for the first scene with Beast. I was trying to mentally prepare myself to do damage control. Whoever I was about to act opposite was going to need all the help he could get, and I felt certain I was going to have to ad lib to cover their blunders and keep the play moving. I'd barely stepped foot on stage, when I froze.

Liam stood across from me. He was dressed in the Beast costume, and his face was pulled into an expression of anger, but his eyes were soft and seemed to caress me as he looked me over. Shock pulsed through me as I stared back at him. At first, I felt a wave of happiness, but it was quickly replaced by confusion and then frustration. What was he doing here?

I somehow managed to compose myself as he stalked across the stage toward me, but my hand had other ideas. Without thinking about it, I stepped forward and slapped him across the face.

The audience gasped, and my hand burned from the contact. I immediately regretted the action, but I was so confused and hurt that I hadn't been able to help myself. He'd

abandoned me without a word, and then this was how he decided to face me again? Risking the play that he knew meant so much to me by surprising me right in the middle of a scene.

I could see the shock in Liam's eyes, but he kept in character, reacting just as Beast would at being slapped. "What are you doing here?" he growled.

"I could ask you the same thing," I snapped back at him. They weren't Belle's words, and concern flickered through Liam's eyes. I was off script, and I wanted nothing more than to also be offstage. I was tempted to run, but as I glanced past Liam, I saw Madi, Hayley, and Evan watching me from the wings. They all had identical looks of shock on their faces, clearly worried that I wasn't following the script. In that moment, I knew I couldn't give into my emotions. I couldn't let my friends and the rest of the cast down.

I focused on Liam, easily falling back into character as I mirrored Belle's anger. "I'm here for my father," I demanded, delivering the correct line.

"Well, you shouldn't have come," Beast replied. All I could think was that I felt the same way about him. Liam shouldn't be here either. I pushed the thoughts to the back of my mind though as I focused on the scene.

My own anger and hurt bled into my character as we volleyed dialogue at each other. I felt the words more intensely than ever before, and it must have showed in my performance because the auditorium was deathly quiet as we kept the audience enthralled.

When our scene ended and we walked offstage together, I stood in the wings staring at Liam, still in shock. "What is wrong with you?" I asked. "Why on Earth did you think it was a good idea to surprise me onstage like that? You're lucky I managed to stay in character out there"

Liam looked like he wanted to reach out to me, but he clasped his hand tightly at his side. “I couldn’t bear the thought of letting you down tonight,” he said. “I managed to speak with Miss Appleby and Evan before the start of the show, and they agreed to let me back in the play.”

“And you thought it would be a good idea to just land that on me in the middle of the performance?”

I didn’t get his answer though because Madi called my name. “Teagan, you’re due onstage in a few lines,” she hissed at me. I wasn’t ready to go back out there yet though.

“I thought I was never going to see you again,” I said to Liam.

His eyes were tender as he stepped toward me and lightly touched my cheek. “I wasn’t given a choice. My mother blackmailed me into leaving, and I knew if I contacted you she’d do something to hurt you so she could get to me.”

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I shook my head, tears forming in my eyes. “So, what changed? Why are you here now?”

“I’m here because you are the most important person to me, and I never want to let you down again. I won’t let my mother manipulate my life or the people I care about anymore.”

“You really didn’t want to leave?” I asked.

“No.” He slowly started to smile. “I wanted to stay so badly that I’m planning on enrolling at Lincoln High when I finish my next film.”

“What?” I gasped.

He reached out and took my hands in his. “There’s this girl there that I really like, and I’ll do anything to keep her in my life.”

My heart soared at his words, and I struggled to keep the goofy grin off my face. “Really?”

“Really.” My heart fluttered as he looked into my eyes and I wanted nothing more than to feel his lips brush against mine. He slowly lowered his head and moved to kiss me, but Madi interrupted us again.

“Teagan, you’re up,” she hissed.

I jerked back from Liam and smiled. “I guess you’ll have to wait till later if you want

that kiss.”

“I won’t have to wait too long,” he reminded me as I went to walk back on stage.

I felt like a weight had lifted off my shoulders as I started the next scene. My performance felt electric as I gave everything I had. I didn’t hold back, and when I acted in scenes with Liam, it felt like we truly were the characters we portrayed. When we were onstage together, we worked as one, our chemistry flaring so brightly that it felt like a tangible thing. When our kiss came in the final scene, it felt like I might explode with happiness.

I’d missed him so much, and I could feel how much he missed me in the way he held me like he was never going to let me go. When the play ended, the crowd erupted into a cheer so loud it deafened my ears. People stood from their chairs as they clapped us, and I gripped so tightly onto Liam’s hand as we bowed that he probably lost all feeling.

As soon as we were backstage, the cast all descended on us, and we were pulled apart.

“You were great out there, Teagan,” Madi gushed. “I have no idea how you didn’t fall out of character when you met Liam onstage. I kept trying to tell everyone it was a bad idea.”

“I didn’t,” Evan said. “I thought it was brilliant.”

I hit him on the arm. “I can’t believe you were in on this and didn’t say anything to me.”

He shrugged and gave me a grin. “When Liam Black asks you to do him a favor, I’m pretty sure you don’t say no.”

I rolled my eyes at him. “You’re such a pushover,” I grumbled.

He laughed and nodded. “Guilty.”

I went round congratulating the rest of the cast. Everyone had done such an incredible job, and I couldn’t have been more proud of how we’d all come together. The room was buzzing, and it felt like we’d achieved the impossible. None of us could have imagined that we’d put on such a good performance.

“You were amazing tonight,” Hayley said.

“No, you were the amazing one. You were so funny out there,” I said. “Everyone loved your French accent.”

Hayley smiled and nodded. “I was so worried the audience wouldn’t laugh at the jokes.”

“Well, you had them in stitches.”

Her smile broadened into a grin. “I know. Now, if only I could convince the rest of you dunderheads of how funny I am in real life.”

I laughed and shook my head as Evan shouted across the room, “You keep working on that, Hayles.”

A hand gripped mine, and I turned as Liam pulled me toward him. A soft smile lit his features as he looked into my eyes. I still couldn’t believe he was here. That he’d come back for me.

“You really were incredible out there tonight,” he said.

“She certainly was.” A deep voice sounded from behind us.

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We both turned and were greeted by a stranger. The man must have been nearing thirty, but his serious gaze made him seem much older. He was wearing expensive jeans and a T-shirt, which contrasted with the beat-up old Lakers cap on his head. The man's eyes were thoughtful as he looked between the two of us, and as his stare settled on Liam, he clenched my hand a little tighter. Liam seemed to shrink under the man's gaze, and worry lines marked his face.

"Josh, what are you doing here?" he asked.

"Well, I was wondering the same thing about you," the man replied. He glanced over his shoulder at a very nervous-looking Zeke who was standing behind him. "Your assistant here turned up on set this morning to tell me you wouldn't be coming to work because you needed to perform in a school play. I wanted to see what was so important you were willing to risk your role in my movie for it."

My breath got stuck in my throat. The man was the director of Liam's latest movie, and Liam had risked getting fired to be onstage with me tonight. I kind of felt the urge to slap him again. The play was important to me, but it wasn't worth risking the movie role he wanted so badly.

"I'm sorry for disappointing you, Josh," Liam said. "But this was the reason I didn't want to start the movie early." He looked down at me and smiled as he said the words, and I knew it wasn't the play he was talking about. He focused back on Josh as he continued to speak. "You reminded me yesterday that I needed to start being true to myself, and I would have been doing the complete opposite if I hadn't come here tonight. I made a commitment to these people, and I couldn't let them down."

It was impossible to know what Josh was thinking as he continued to stare at Liam. The man was intimidating, and I had no idea how Liam had managed to stand up to him. I certainly wouldn't have had the guts to stare down a big-time Hollywood director. Josh suddenly started to chuckle though. "I did tell you that, but I didn't expect you to ditch us the very next day." He slowly shook his head. "I guess we can discuss this more back in L.A. tomorrow."

A small smile curved Liam's lips. "So, I'm not fired?"

"Not today," Josh replied. "But, I won't be so forgiving if this happens again."

Liam let out a breath. "That's fair."

Josh's eyes drifted in my direction. "You must be Teagan," he said, holding out a hand toward me.

I gave Liam a nervous glance before shaking Josh's hand. "Yes, that's me."

"It's a pleasure to meet you," he said. "Zeke was telling me all about you on the flight here. You were wonderful out there tonight."

"Thank you." I smiled politely, but my heart was racing at a million miles a minute. A Hollywood director had just complimented me, and it felt like I couldn't breathe.

"It was an impressive performance, and you had great chemistry with Liam."

Yep, I was officially suffocating.

"I actually have a minor part in our film that we're still looking to cast, and I think you would be perfect for it."

My eyes grew so wide they must have looked like they were about to pop from my head. “You-you do?” I stuttered.

He grinned broadly as he nodded. “Have your agent get in touch with me, and I’ll send across the script. It was nice meeting you, and I look forward to seeing you on set.”

“You-you too,” I said.

“And, Liam?” Josh said. “I’ll see you bright and early on set tomorrow.”

“You will,” Liam agreed.

Josh turned and walked away, leaving me in complete shock. My jaw was hanging somewhere around the floor, and my ears were ringing like I’d somehow miraculously survived an atomic bomb going off. My body was shaking, and the sounds in the room had gone quiet.

“What just happened?” I whispered, finally managing to speak.

“I think you just got a part in a Hollywood movie,” Liam replied, grinning proudly at me.

This couldn’t be happening. “But he said to get my agent to contact him. I don’t have an agent.”

Liam laughed, like he thought my concern was cute. “I think I know a guy I can put you in touch with.”

I finally turned to him, a frown furrowing my brow. “Did you organize this?”

“No, of course not.”

“Because I told you I didn’t need your help!”

Liam raised his hands in appeal. “I didn’t say a word to him and had no idea he was going to show up tonight. I promise.”

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 7:17 am

“So, he really thought I was talented?”

Liam smiled so brightly his whole face lit up. “Of course, he did.”

I started to laugh, giddy from the buzz of the play and the thought of getting to be in a movie with Liam. “This is really not how I thought my night was going to go.”

“Me neither.” Liam gave my hand a tight squeeze. “But I don’t think it gets much better than this.”

“You don’t?” I replied, a small smile lifting my lips. He seemed confused by my comment, but as I wrapped my arms around his neck and drew him close to me, he seemed to catch on.

“Maybe, there’s one thing...” he murmured. He closed the small distance between us, and as our lips touched, sparks ignited beneath my skin and my heart felt like it might explode. The kiss was raw and emotional and more powerful than all our other kisses combined. The one we’d shared onstage had been but a shadow in comparison, and I knew that I was completely, one hundred percent, falling in love with Liam Black.

People started whistling in the background, and Liam and I broke apart as we started to laugh. It was one thing to pretend to kiss onstage, but I wasn’t quite ready for making out in public.

“Get a room!” Evan called out to us, making me blush.

Liam chuckled and shook his head, refusing to break eye contact with me. “Maybe

we should get out of here...”

I grinned as he took hold of my hand. “Just lead the way.”

I couldn’t stop smiling as we walked from backstage and out into the auditorium. A few people were still milling around after the performance, and I was surprised to hear someone shouting my name rather than the name of the Hollywood star who stood next to me.

“Teagan, Teagan?” I turned and found Zoe racing toward me. She had her phone stretched out in front of her, and as she neared, I could see the voice recording app was on. “How does it feel to be the star of Lincoln High’s annual production, the up-and-coming actress in Josh Winkler’s new movie, and to be dating Liam Black?”

I had no idea how she knew so much so soon, but I just laughed as Liam and I shared a knowing look. “I’m the star of the play? I thought we were supposed to be costars?” I said to him.

Liam chuckled with me. “I think you might have stolen the spotlight tonight. So, tell your adoring public...how does it feel?”

I grinned as I turned back to Zoe. “It feels pretty damn awesome.”

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