



# We're At It Again

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**Category:** YA&Teen

**Description:** HUDSON WILDER

Is the ultimate bad boy, known for his rebellious streak and knack for finding trouble. Beneath his tough exterior, hes been harboring a secret: a deep, unspoken love for Luna, his best friend turned enemy. Despite their fiery clashes, Hudsons heart has always belonged to her.

LUNA DELGATO

Is the quintessential good girl, dedicated to her studies and always following the rules. But when her boyfriend dumps her, her orderly world shatters. Desperate for revenge, she turns to Hudson for help and proposes a fake dating pact. As they navigate their charade, old feelings begin to resurface, threatening to blur the lines between pretense and reality.

**Total Pages (Source):** 42

LUNA

I HAVE ALWAYS LOVED FALL. The warmth of scarlet and gold replaced the flamboyant colors of summer. The satisfying aroma of the earth with each breeze brought on a sense of comfort, and the sun's warmth was nothing but a subtle kiss. I gazed out my window as the ember-red leaves burned, fluttering with the wind with one last dance before reaching the ground. Tumbling fall leaves symbolized the transition from summer to a new school year: the inevitable senior year, the first and last. I had expected this day since freshman year, planning every outcome, and preparing for every epic moment. The last time to make memories with the ones I loved before we all parted for our next chapter of college—that fateful day of ambivalence.

The cheerful smiles of my parents greeted me as I entered the kitchen—a first-day tradition ever since kindergarten.

“If it isn’t miss senior.” My mother said with glee as she slid a plate before me: scrambled eggs, one pancake, and two slices of bacon. Another first-day tradition. I groaned in delight as the aromatic scents invaded my nostrils. It delighted both the eyes and the palate. My mother always had a flair for cooking.

“Are you excited?” My dad questioned before taking a generous sip of orange juice.

“I’m nervous but excited.” I said, as I cut through the pancake like butter.

“That’s normal.”

“I cannot slack off; Stanford has a no-slacker policy.”

My feeble attempt at lightheartedness did not quite reach my face, a million butterflies were swarming through my stomach.

“Stanford isn’t the only opportunity.” My dad said with furrowed brows. “There are always options.”

“It’s the only option.”

My boyfriend, Austin, and I had dreamed of attending Stanford together for as long as I could remember. An awkward game of Seven Minutes in Heaven at Sophia Henderson’s thirteenth birthday party set the foundation of our whirlwind romance, and we have been in love ever since. We had a relationship that many envied—a love at first sight, destined to be. We established plans for our future: graduating, attending Stanford, completing our doctorate, and having an early retirement with our kids and grandchildren. My parents, however, did not feel comfortable with me planning my entire future around Austin, but how was I supposed to think of a future without him when he had been a major factor in my past and present?

“I cannot believe it’s your senior year.” My mom uttered, a dazed look in her eyes. “Julie would have been so proud.”

Julie Wilder was my mom’s best friend. They met on their first day of college when they became roommates and became inseparable ever since. However, we lost Julie too soon.

“She would be so proud of Hudson.” My mom mumbled, tears highlighting her eyes.

Hudson and I were best friends. We were even born one day apart. I was born on November 24<sup>th</sup> and Hudson arrived twenty-six hours later. Our fateful friendship

ended in a brutal demise when we were twelve years old. We were inseparable, needing only each other, but in life, people are forever or temporary. Hudson Wilder was temporary. From cherished friends to bitter enemies, Hudson and I were as sorrowful as Brutus and Caesar. Despite my constant brewing hatred for Hudson, no one deserved to grow up without the ones they love, to have them taken away too soon. Death was inevitable, and so was heartbreak. Loving someone comes with the greatest cost.

“You better get going. You don’t want to be late for school.” My mother said, as her smile failed to reach her watery eyes.

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The earthy breeze whispered through my pores as I sauntered towards my car. I gazed at the sky, painted in hues of soft blue, adorned with scattered clouds that hinted at the change of weather.

“Morning, neighbor.” The exasperating voice echoed across the street.

I rolled my eyes as I spotted Hudson standing beside his deathtrap of a motorcycle with a cigarette clutched between his lips.

“You know if that motorcycle doesn’t kill you, the cigarettes will.”

“Careful, I might think you care, Snow.”

I winced at the dreaded nickname. It was a constant reminder of one of the most embarrassing moments of my childhood, and Hudson made it his sole purpose in life for me never to forget it. I got the dreaded mockery at Julie Hawks’ eighth birthday party—the theme being Disney. I dressed up as Snow White, eager to flaunt my new dress. Everything was going according to plan until I tripped over a log and fell

backward, drenching the back of my dress in wet mud. I was called poop stain for weeks until everyone forgot about it, but Hudson never did.

“Stop calling me that.” I said, but I only received a howl of laughter in return.

“Your reaction is too priceless to stop.”

I narrowed my eyes and clenched my jaw, but my attempt at looking threatening was in vain as he erupted into laughter once again. I scoffed as I thrust my car door open and slammed it with an equal amount of aggression. Hudson Wilder remained the perpetual bane of my existence.

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The hallways stretched out before me, bustling with the energy of echoes and laughter. As I walked past a group of girls, they lifted their heads and smiled in silent greeting. I responded kindly, offering them a friendly smile.

The fluorescent lights overhead cast a bright glow, illuminating the polished tiled floors. They echoed in my steady footsteps. Posters and bulletin boards lined the wall, but I ignored them. I needed to get these piles of books into my locker.

With a soft click, the locker door opened, and the familiar scent of lavender infiltrated my nostrils. I arranged the books on my shelf as I attempted to shake off the flutter of excitement in my stomach. It had been months since I’d seen Austin.

As I slid my English textbook into place, a pair of muscular arms wrapped around my waist. I gasped in surprise, my heart leaping with joy as his familiar cologne wafted around me.

“I’ve missed you.” Austin said, his voice sending shivers down my spine.

I turned around in his arms, my eyes lighting up as I gazed into his deep honey-brown orbs.

“I’ve missed you more.” I said, throwing my arms around his neck and pulling him into a tight embrace.

“If you lovebirds could pull apart for two seconds so I can hug my best friend, that would be appreciated.”

I pulled away and gazed into the fierce eyes of my best friend, Maya. We’d spend our summers together in our mundane town, but her parents decided she should spend some time with her family in South America before going to college. This was the longest we had been apart ever since kindergarten. I embraced her in a long, overdue hug.

There were subtle changes in her appearance. Her once chestnut brown hair had streaks of cherry highlights. She even had a new style to go with it, a trendy outfit that complimented her figure.

“You need to tell me everything that happened in South America.”

She nodded her head before turning to Austin.

“Nice to see you, Austin.”

I had never solved the mystery of Maya’s dislike for Austin, but I appreciated the effort she put in to be cordial.

“Maya.” He said with an equal amount of disdain. “I will see you later.”

He kissed my cheek tenderly before walking off, wanting to catch up with his friends

before class started.

“So, are you ready to rule this place?”

A sly grin tugged at the corner of her lips, hinting at the mischief brewing within. I couldn't help but soak up her enthusiasm.

“I have been ready for this day for years.”

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## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 10:24 am*

HUDSON

OH, HOW I LOVED LUNA DELGATO. We always engaged in heated exchanges during our mornings. I would upset her just by breathing. And she would retaliate with a verbal rebuttal. It's what made me get out of bed every morning. However, I'd like to believe she wasn't aware of my feelings. I'd always been gifted at masking them.

I'd been in love with her since the first grade. Our mothers had been best friends since college, which led to our inevitable friendship. I knew she was the one the moment she dug Katie Sanchez's face in a puddle of mud because she made fun of my haircut. My mom thought a week of beauty school would be enough experience to cut my hair herself. She always dabbled in things, but hairstyling was not her forte.

That day, Luna went home and snipped her ponytail off with the first pair of scissors she could find. I could hear her mother's screams from across the street. When we ran over to investigate, we found her mother enraged and red-faced, but Luna greeted us with the widest smile and an uneven haircut. It was then I knew that I'd found someone special. But I messed it up, and I may never have the chance to rectify my mistakes.

I was never one for rules. I'd always believed that rules were society's diabolical way of restricting our individuality. This view has often found me on the side of trouble, but at least I made my own choices, and I would be damned if I let anyone take that away from me.

I clutched the stick of nicotine between my fingers and inhaled the gray stench. The



intrusion in my lungs was a feeling I had become accustomed to. Many warned me of my potential deathbed if I continued with the charade, as if that would make me stop.

I glanced around the neighborhood. The silence calmed me. Some detested it and made it their sole mission to pack their bags and get out to live life in the big city. I always thought that to be cliché. Why move where there are more people to detest?

Once my cigarette was nothing but a bud, I trampled it before mounting my motorbike—mine and my dad's special summer project. The engine roared, bringing life to the dead neighborhood. I raced through the streets, attracting attention from onlookers as I maneuvered through the minimal traffic. As I stopped in my usual spot in the school parking lot, more eyes befell me. I rolled my eyes at the tasteless people I go to school with.

I strolled down the hallway and tossed my leather jacket over my shoulder. A group of freshmen parted like waves before me, casting curious glances mixed with a tint of apprehension. Once I approached my locker, I spotted a group of jocks a few feet away. Their booming laughter was obnoxious, especially considering they were laughing at something Austin Chambers said. He needed a personality to be funny. With concealed disdain, I rolled my eyes at their juvenile antics.

“You have a problem, Wilder?”

They caught me. Chambers took my indifference as a challenge and swaggered over to me. His entourage shadowed him. I met his gaze with cool indifference, smirking as I towered over him.

“I'm perfect,” I said with a mask of calm defiance. “You seem to have one, jockstrap.”

His arrogant smirk wavered.

“You think you’re better than everyone else, don’t you, Wilder?” He said, his tone salivating in aggression.

I held my ground, my gaze unwavering. Don’t take the bait.

“I don’t waste my time thinking about you.”

The air between us was static. I grinned as his face reddened with anger. His fists clenched at his sides as his friends egged him on. There was a fire in his eyes as he shoved me with force, sending me tumbling backward. My back hit the metal locker. Now, I was mad. His friends erupted into cheers; their voices echoed off the walls. I regained my balance, my muscles tensed as I prepared to punch him in the jaw. But, as I was about to retaliate, a figure stepped between us, cutting through the chaos. Luna.

“Austin, stop.” she said, her voice pleading as she placed her hands on his chest.

His expression twisted with frustration; his anger redirected towards her for intervening.

“Don’t get involved, Luna.”

I couldn’t resist getting involved in their couple’s spat.

“That’s no way to treat a lady, Chambers.”

He lunged for me, but my reflexes were quicker as I dodged his fist.

“Austin, stop it.” she demanded.

I smirked as he glared at me over her head, unable to resist provoking him further.

“Listen to your girlfriend, jockstrap .”

“ Hudson.” My name sounded like poison past her lips. “Stop it.”

I raised my hands in mock surrender as I trudged back, bypassing arguing with a dismissive smirk.

“Have a lovely day.” I said, picking up my fallen jacket.

“I won’t.” Jockstrap said with unfiltered aggression.

“I was talking to Luna.”

I winked at her in parting, the smile never leaving my face, even when I was out of sight.

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I had just made it through the doors of the History classroom when Stacy Henderson accosted me. Her blonde hair cascaded over her shoulders like a golden waterfall. She twirled a strand around her finger as she sidled up to me with a coy smile. Her eyes twinkled with mischief.

“Hey, Hudson.”

“Stacy.”

I sidestepped her, but her reflexes were quicker. She tilted her head, gazing at me from under her lashes.

“Do you have any plans this weekend?”

“Yes.”

I wasn't in the mood for her charms. Her advances were relentless. My gaze scanned the room until it landed on a lone figure in the back row. Luna. She focused her attention on a piece of paper on her desk. Her pencil flicked back and forth on it. She always loved to draw. Without hesitation, I approached her, leaving Stacy and her rambling behind. I slid into the seat beside her, flashing her a charming grin.

“What are you drawing?”

Her reaction was less than welcoming as she glanced up with a guarded expression. There was a flicker of annoyance in her eyes, conveying her displeasure with my company.

“Why are you sitting next to me?”

I placed my chin in my hands, my eyes alight with a mischievous spark.

“I believe I asked first.”

Her grip on the pencil tightened, but I was determined to break through her icy exterior.

“They're just doodles.” She said, her tone curt. “Now that you have your answer, we can stop talking.”

I was about to muster a witty remark, but Mrs. Dupont walked in. As the lesson began, the tension between us simmered beneath the surface, a silent reminder of the past that lingered like a ghost in the room.

LUNA

I ALWAYS PRIDED MYSELF ON HAVING AN IMPENETRABLE GIFT OF CONTROL. I have never been one to lose myself, having mastered the art of keeping my emotions locked away with no opportunity to escape. However, my control flew out the window the second I was in the presence of Hudson. As if he was an overloaded neutron to my scarce proton—we cause an unstable balance in nature.

Lunch couldn't come sooner. The rambunctious cafeteria buzzed with teenagers just as hungry as I was. Everyone stood in line like animals to a river.

Retrieving my lunch, I did a quick scan of the room. Maya waved from our usual table. A warm smile lit up my face as I walked over and slid into the seat beside her.

She delved into explaining what she did with her cousins in South America, and I filled her in on the boredom I endured without her. Austin, flanked by the rest of the popular crowd, interrupted our conversation. With his patented grin, he kissed my cheek before settling into the seat across from us. The rest of the football and cheerleading teams followed suit.

Despite being a cheerleader myself, I couldn't shake being out of place among the glamorous squad. Maya and I were spectators as they joked and laughed. A sense of discomfort gnawed from within.

Kyle, Austin's closest friend, pointed at a nearby table. The resident misfit table. Hudson's table. The mischievous glint in Austin's eyes was unsettling. My stomach clenched as he grabbed the apple from his tray, his aim locked on the target as if it

were a football match.

With athletic ease, the apple flew, hitting Hudson's head. The cafeteria fell silent, their eyes darting back and forth between the unfolding confrontation.

Hudson rose from his seat, his eyes blazing with fury as he stalked toward our table. My throat closed from the thickened tension in the air.

"Real mature, Chambers."

His voice was low and menacing, his fists clenched at his sides. Austin, empowered by the support of his friends, stood his ground. He jutted his chin out.

"Learn to take a joke." He retorted; his tone laced with arrogance.

The atmosphere grew more charged as the verbal confrontation escalated. And then, in a flash of movement, the confrontation turned physical. With a roar of anger, Hudson launched himself at Austin, their fists colliding in a flurry of blows as chaos erupted around them, causing tables to overturn, food to scatter, and the once bustling cafeteria to descend into pandemonium.

I pleaded for them to stop, but it was in vain. As the tension in the cafeteria reached its peak, a sense of urgency hung heavy in the air. Austin's friends waded into the fray; their arms outstretched as they attempted to pull them apart.

"Hudson, break it up." Eli, a guy I'd seen him hang out with, said.

He joined in on the commotion. With a collective effort, they hauled them apart. Grunts and curses filled the air as they fought against their friends' hold. I watched the scene unfold, sighing in relief as the chaos settled. My emotions were a turbulent whirlwind as I locked eyes with Austin.

“Luna-”

“Save it, Austin.”

With a clenched jaw and fists balled at my sides, I turned away. My steps were quick and determined as I walked past the dispersing crowd. The frustration churned inside me like a storm, and I couldn’t bear to face Austin.

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For most of the day, I maneuvered from class to class, feeling like one of those out-of-body experiences. I was aware, but my state of mind had drifted into space, far away from the present reality. I didn’t remember changing for gym, but as my mind lit up in the darkness, I found myself on the school field in my casual cheer shirt and gym shorts. My mind opened like a blossoming flower, Maya’s arms swinging, waking me from my mental hibernation.

“Finally, I was debating whether to slap you.”

My heart felt heavy, but the slight exhale lightened the burden.

“Sorry, I have just had a lot on my mind.”

“What happened with Austin? Did he get into a lot of trouble?”

I would love to know that too.

“I have no idea. We’re not speaking.”

We watched with vast interest as he dribbled a soccer ball back and forth between his friends. His attitude was carefree, as if our mild disagreement didn’t happen. Hudson

stood a few feet away with his friend. An unlit cigarette dangled from his lips.

“Wilder, where is your gym gear?” Coach Gregory’s voice boomed through the lengthy field.

“I sprained an ankle.”

Coach walked up to him and plucked the cigarette from his lips. He delivered a warning glare.

“It’s because he can barely kick a ball, coach.” Austin said with an arrogant smirk. His mindless buddies laughed at his comment. “He has no aim.”

Hudson chuckled and glanced at the soccer ball at his feet. Before I even had time to blink, he kicked the ball with brute force. It collided with the side of Austin’s head. So much for a sprained ankle.

“How’s that for aim?”

Austin lunged for him. Round . Coach stood between them with his hands on each of their chests, a disapproving look on his face.

“I had enough of your drama last year.” He spoke. “The two of you need to grow up.”

It was like watching a showdown between two male lions challenging for the alpha title . Austin was the one to break the intense eye contact and stalked back to his buddies. I debated whether to comfort him but was adamant about giving him the cold shoulder. Whispers captured my attention as a few cheerleading teammates gathered in an intimate circle, directing their gazes at Hudson before turning back to each other with girlish giggles. He seemed unaware, as he was back to discussing with his friend. I glanced at Maya as if she could clarify the situation, but she seemed



just as confused. The male ego was an unsolvable mystery.

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## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 10:24 am*

HUDSON

MY FATHER WOULD TELL ME THAT HATRED WAS A COWARDLY MAN'S BURDEN. He had always been one to choose kindness over hatred, which made me wonder how I became the exact opposite. I suffered an ongoing war with my inner demons. The anger often took control of me, as if I was not strong enough to push the emotion back, but I sometimes wondered if I bothered to fight it or if I enjoyed the consuming rage. It's better to feel anger than feel nothing at all.

As I arrived home, I made a beeline for the garage, my usual after-school hangout. My father and I often spent our time there if we were not at his shop. He was a local mechanic and owned a small auto repair store. He had a talent for engines and mechanical engineering. A talent I am proud to say he passed down to me. For as long as I can remember, we spent our weekends working on beat-up cars he would find in the scrap yards. He would bring them home and teach me everything he knew. It used to drive my mom insane every time he brought home junk, but she let it slide because she knew it made him happy and I loved it just as much. He would tell me you could always fix something broken. You just needed to put your time into it.

I entered the garage and felt at ease. This was my haven. My dad's head appeared from under the hood, his face covered in rust and oil splotches.

"I got a call from your principal." He said as he rubbed his hands with the cloth he kept tucked into his overalls. "I thought I would only get one on the second day."

"It was for a legitimate reason." I said, avoiding eye contact.

“Punching someone is a legitimate reason?”

“If you met the guy, you would understand.”

My impulsivity led me to reckless decisions, with dire consequences. My dad sighed and placed the cloth on the rickety counter.

“Look, you have been through a lot, but people will stop giving you the benefit of the doubt.”

I rolled my eyes with a groan.

“Please, not another lecture.”

“It’s not a lecture.” He said and raised his hands in the air, declaring surrender. “It’s advice.”

I leaned against the beat-up vehicle that was our latest project and rubbed my eyes until I saw stars.

“I miss her too, you know.”

My jaw clenched. I shut my eyes. One, two, three—inhale and exhale.

“I have some homework.” I replied, before hurrying inside the house.

Grief was an odd emotion. It came in the tiniest waves, so casual you barely feel it. Waves would pick up, wash over you, and bring a hurricane. It gave you time to catch your breath until it consumed you once again, returning until you were drowning in it. Grief is ruthless, but patient. It had no deadline. Each person’s stages vary, yet we all face the same fate. All outcomes were harsh. Loving someone comes

with the greatest consequence. You open your heart to the most unbearable pain. Every time you lose someone you love; you lose a part of yourself. Some claim pain fades, but I disagree. I believe you carry the pain with you forever, as it plagues your thoughts. Losing someone takes your mind on a different course. I found it tragically beautiful how one person could have such an influence on your emotional well-being.

Feeling the weight of fatigue settle over me like a heavy blanket, I trudged to my room. I kicked off my shoes and collapsed on my bed. The soft sheets and mattress offered a welcome respite from the demanding day. My eyes closed, attempting to let sleep wash over me. But, as I felt myself on the brink of sleep, my phone buzzed with a notification.

Groaning in annoyance, I reached for my phone on the nightstand. I glanced at the screen. Stacy. I debated whether to respond or ignore it, but the lure of sleep was impossible to resist. With a resigned sigh, I swiped to dismiss the notification and dropped the phone beside me.

Closing my eyes once more, I shifted further into the mattress. I placed my hands on my abdomen and focused on the rhythm of my breathing. Minutes faded into the outside world. I succumbed to sleep's embrace.

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## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 10:24 am*

LUNA

AS CHEER PRACTICE ENDED, I let out a sigh of relief. Every muscle in my body ached with exhaustion. I wiped the sweat from my brow and stretched, grateful for the chance to rest. My gaze wandered across the field, and I locked eyes with Austin. It had been a few days since we'd spoken, and our tension was thick with unresolved conflict. However, as he approached me with a sheepish smile, I felt a glimmer of hope.

"Hey," he said, his hazel eyes meeting mine with a mix of apology and longing. "I'm sorry for being a jerk."

My heart softened at his words, as my anger melted away in the face of his sincerity.

"It's okay," I replied, my voice gentle. "I forgive you."

We shared a quiet moment. The tension between us eased as we embraced. He pressed a tender kiss to my lips, a silent promise of reconciliation. But his teammates interrupted our romantic moment, calling for him to start practice. With a regretful smile, he gave me one last kiss before turning to join them.

I felt a pang of disappointment at the abrupt end to our reunion. But before I could dwell on it, a voice called out from the bleachers.

"You both look so cute together." I picked up on the condescending tone. "It's what we all aspire to have."

I rolled my eyes at the intruding peace. I could never have one moment without Hudson being there to kill the mood.

“Don’t you have anything better to do?”

I folded my arms across my chest and exhaled through my nostrils.

“I’m avoiding Stacy.”

He leaned his head back and squinted against the harsh sun rays.

“Then why don’t you go home?”

“I have detention.”

Typical. I didn’t respond, knowing it would lead to an unnecessary back-and-forth dispute between Hudson and myself. I would get riled up, allowing my impulsive anger to take control. Leaning forward in his seat, he reached into his pockets. He pulled out a pack of cigarettes and a lighter. He removed one from the box and held it between his lips before his piercing emerald eyes locked with mine.

“Want one?”

He used the side of his lips that weren’t holding the cigarette to talk, extending the nicotine pack toward me, and I wrinkled my nose. I could smell it before he even lit it.

“No, thank you.” I said. “I care about my lungs.”

“If it’s not your lungs, something else is going to kill you,” he said. “Keep dating jockstrap and you might just die of boredom.”

“I don’t find you funny.”

“I wasn’t trying to be.” He leaned forward with a satisfied grin before lighting the cigarette. He inhaled with ease. “You need to learn to relax, Snow .”

“I only get like that when I’m around you.”

My snide reply did not affect him, and he moved forward with a crooked grin as if he was having the time of his life.

“Yet you’re still here talking to me.”

I groaned, hating that he was right, but I played it stoic and squared my shoulders.

“That’s my cue to leave.”

I held my head high and distanced myself from him, but he always had to have the last word.

“It was great catching up with you, Snow. ” He called. “We should do it again sometime.”

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As the winter morning cast its pale light over the sleepy neighborhood, I stepped out of my house, pulling my coat tighter to ward off the cold. A thin layer of frost coated the ground, crunching under my boots as I made my way to the driveway. However, the roaring engine across the street shattered my peaceful morning. Hudson was revving his motorbike, the noise echoing through the quiet street like a thunderclap. I groaned, my hands flying to my temples as the noise worsened my pounding migraine.

“Hudson!” I said, my voice traveling across the street. “Can you cut that out?”

He gazed at me with a sickening grin and revved the engine louder. There was a roguish glint in his eyes.

“I can’t hear you!” he mouthed back, his lips curling into a taunting grin.

I rolled my eyes in frustration, my patience wearing thin. With an exasperated sigh, I turned away from the jerk and headed for my car. The throbbing in my head intensified with each passing second. I climbed into the driver’s seat and started the engine, eager to put some distance between myself and Hudson’s noise. I pulled out of the driveway and sped past him as if I was about to complete the last lap of a Grand Prix.

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As the school hallway buzzed with the usual hustle and bustle, I navigated through the throng of students, a stack of textbooks balanced in my arms. With each passing moment, the weight of my responsibilities pressed down on my shoulders like a heavy burden. I had a mountain of schoolwork to tackle, and deadlines loomed like dark clouds on the horizon. My mind raced with thoughts of essays, exams, and assignments, each demanding my attention.

As I reached my locker, I caught my breath, my arms straining under the weight of books. Before I could gather my thoughts, Maya appeared beside me. Her concerned expression caught my eye.

“Rough night?” she asked, her voice filled with genuine concern as she noticed the stress etched on my face.

I managed to smile, but it did little to mask the tension in my features.



“Something like that.”

“Don’t you think you’re stressing yourself out too much?” She asked. “There are other colleges.”

My stomach churned. Maya always attempted to persuade me to choose anywhere other than Stanford - other than Austin.

“We’ve spoken about this.”

She sighed. I knew she had more to say, but I appreciated her holding back.

“Fine, I’ll keep the Austin bashing to a minimum.” She said. “See you in physics.”

Mr. Morrison was yet to arrive, and I took advantage of the opportunity to gather my thoughts before diving into the theme of revenge in Hamlet. I settled into my seat and let out a contented sigh as I gazed out the window. The snow-covered landscape stretched out. Trees stood like silent sentinels, their branches heavy with a fresh blanket of snow, while the sky above was a pale canvas of muted hues. Lost in tranquility, I never noticed Hudson sitting beside me.

“Penny for your thoughts?”

Startled, I turned to face him.

“Go away.” I said, not in the mood for his company.

But he just chuckled, undeterred by my stiff demeanor. Leaning closer, he flashed me a charming smile. His emerald eyes sparkled with mischief.

“Come on, Snow.” He said. “I knew you were going to get bored with Austin

Chambers. I just never knew he was sucking the life out of you this much.”

I turned so fast that I got whiplash. He seemed smug as he leaned back with his hands behind his head. His lanky legs slouched under his desk.

“I am not in the mood for your annoying attitude today.”

He couldn’t take a hint.

“Just admit you like it.” He said. “I keep you on your toes. Something your jockstrap boyfriend never could do.”

I don’t know if it was the self-approving grin or the condescending wink, but I leaped out of my seat and tackled him.

Surprised, Hudson stumbled to the ground, his laughter mingling with my cries of outrage. The rest of the classroom turned to watch. Their eyes widened in shock as we grappled with each other.

“What is going on here?” Mr. Morrison yelled over the encouraging roars, and the cheers dissipated. Everyone stepped back to allow him space to investigate. “Ms. Delgato, I expected better of you.”

Hudson loosened his grip, and I ripped my arms away from him. I got up to create as much distance from him as possible.

“Get up Mr. Wilder.”

“I’m wounded, sir.” I rolled my eyes at his dramatics. His grin ruined his charade. He lifted himself from the ground and fixed his tattered black and white plaid shirt. He glanced at me with a glimmer in his eyes. “Nice right hook.”

I stepped forward to charge him again, but Mr. Morrison blocked the way.

“Principal’s office. Now.”

I marched out of the classroom, and my angered footsteps echoed through the hallway.

“Don’t even come near me.” I said when I heard Hudson trailing.

“But we’re going the same way.” I quickened my steps, but his black Converse appeared at my side. “I knew you still had it in you.”

“Had what? ”

“That insatiable fire.” He said. “I thought you’d gone soft.” He tucked his hands in his front pockets. “What’s jockstrap going to say about you getting sent to the principal’s office?”

I ignored him.

“The silent treatment.” He said. “I must be in your head, then.”

The heavy wooden door to the principal’s office shut behind us. I found myself seated in a row of uncomfortable chairs. My heart hammered in my chest, my palms slick with nervous sweat as I waited for the confrontation. This would be the first time I’d ever gotten into trouble.

I glanced at Hudson from the corner of my eye, taking in his relaxed posture and carefree grin. His devil-may-care attitude grated on my nerves, especially given the circumstances that landed us in this predicament.

I drummed my fingers against my thigh as I glanced around the office, taking in the sterile white walls and organized shelves. The air was heavy with anticipation.

Minutes stretched into eternity as we waited, the silence punctuated by the unabating ticking of the clock on the wall. My mind raced with a million different scenarios. Would they suspend us? Expelled? Either way, this would ruin my chances at Stanford .

Hudson nudged me with his elbow, snapping me out of my spiral of anxious thoughts.

“Relax, Snow.” He said. “It’s not a big deal.”

I groaned and rubbed my temples. He doesn’t get it.

“It might not be for you, Hudson,” I said. “But this could ruin my chances of getting into Stanford.”

His eyes widened in shock, his initial surprise giving way to anger.

“Since when was Stanford part of your plan?” He asked. “What happened to Parsons ?”

The principal’s office creaked open, interrupting our conversation. My heart leaped into my throat as I rose from my seat, my legs trembled with nerves.

“Take a seat.”

Principal Quinn didn’t waste time with formalities. Hudson slouched in his seat, but I sat alert and tense. Principal Quinn removed his glasses and rubbed his temples with closed eyes. He released a shaky exhale.

“I expected to see Mr. Wilder today, but not you, Ms. Delgato.”

“In my defense,” I said. “I feel he’s gotten more annoying over the summer.”

Hudson snickered and raised his hands in mock surrender.

“Sir, I am a victim.” He said. “She attacked me unprovoked.”

“Knowing you, Mr. Wilder, there is more to the story.” I snorted. Hudson just got schooled by the principal. “And you, Ms. Delgato, you wouldn’t want Stanford to hear about these incessant indiscretions.”

My smile fell.

“Of course not, sir.”

“I’m going to let you both off with detention.” He said, folding his arms across his chest. “This is your last chance . Do I make myself clear?”

“Crystal.” Hudson said with a careless shrug.

I nodded, relieved that this wouldn’t get back to Stanford.

“You’re both excused. Be in the detention room straight after school.”

I tossed my backpack strap over my shoulder and pushed past Hudson, resisting the urge to punch him in the jaw. Again.

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## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 10:24 am*

Hudson

I TOOK MY TIME GETTING INTO DETENTION. It's not like I would be missing much. I entered the room and spotted a few familiar juvenile delinquents . Including my closest friend, Eli. I nodded in his direction before glancing around the room to spot the outlier. With a smirk, I sat next to her, handing her the rose I plucked from the garden on the way over. I offered her my most charming grin as I placed the flower in her line of sight.

“What is that?”

“A rose.”

“I can see that. Why is it in my face?”

“It's for you,” I said. “To apologize.”

She opened her mouth, but an all too familiar voice spoke up.

“Hey, Hudson.”

I closed my eyes and braced myself. My attempts of avoidance had all been in vain.

“Hey, Stacy.”

I glanced at her before turning my attention to the desk. The rose was still in front of Luna's face. Luna, enjoying my discomfort, smirked and stood up.

“Stacy, why don’t you have my seat?” She suggested.

She grabbed her backpack, hit the rose out of my hand onto my table, and stalked off. I clenched my jaw as she sent a condescending wink across the room.

“That’s a pretty rose.” Stacy said.

“You can have it.”

I pushed out my chair and sat beside Eli, folding my arms across my chest.

“Your first rejection.” He said with a self-satisfied smile.

“Whatever.”

I glanced out the frost-kissed window, watching as the wind caressed the leaves of the maple tree. They fluttered back and forth. Some broke off and soared through the sky before landing a few feet away, joining the carpet of fall leaves. It might be ridiculous to be envious of dying leaves, but they got to escape the clutches, while I’m forced to be confined in this stuffy room with a group of people who are nothing more than my weekly detention buddies. Except for Eli.

Mr. Landry walked in with a steaming cup of coffee and a sandwich. The conversations ceased and everyone occupied themselves with something, but I was not in the mood for anything right now. I slouched in my seat and tilted my head back. I closed my eyes, hoping for some rest, but it was short-lived.

“Mr. Wilder, why do you insist on sleeping in every detention?” Mr. Landry’s voice pierced the silence.

“There isn’t much else to do,” I said. “It’s expected when we’re made to sit here for

an hour. It's not like I can bake a cake."

The few people in the room snickered but stopped as Mr. Landry delivered a menacing glare. They returned to what they were doing, and Mr. Landry returned to marking his papers. With a smug grin, I made myself comfortable and closed my eyes, wishing the hours away.

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The chilled afternoon air echoed with the rhythmic thuds of the basketball as I dribbled it back and forth on the concrete driveway. Eli stood nearby, ready to defend as we engaged in a friendly game of one-on-one. We exchanged banter and jokes between shots.

While taking a break, I became captivated by the house across the street. Luna arrived home. Her laughter rang out as she walked hand-in-hand with him. I clenched my jaw as I watched their exchange. Eli followed my gaze with a knowing smirk.

"Ah, if it isn't the object of your affection."

My cheeks flushed with embarrassment as I tore my gaze away from them.

"Shut up." I said with a smile, tossing the ball in his direction.

He caught it with ease and chuckled at my discomfort.

"We've been at this for years." He said. "Just tell her how you feel."

I sighed; my shoulders slumped with defeat.

"That's terrible advice from the guy who's dated the same girl since kindergarten."



He chuckled and raised his hands in surrender before retrieving the ball.

“Guilty.” He said. “But at least I never have to deal with this mess.”

I watched as Jockstrap pulled her into a playful embrace. A pang of longing tugged at my heart. Eli noticed my distraction and couldn’t resist poking further fun at me.

“Get your head in the game.” He said. “Unless you want me to beat you again.”

I scoffed at his inability to trash talk before running over to steal the ball from him. However, no matter how hard I tried, their romantic exchange was still lingering in the back of my mind.

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## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 10:24 am*

LUNA

AS THE MORNING LIGHT filtered through the frosted windowpanes, illuminating the classroom in a soft glow, I sat at my desk in the English classroom, my notepad opened in front of me. With delicate strokes of the pencil, I traced the contours of a flower, each line etched into the paper. Lost in my sketch, I didn't notice the figure that approached until he slid into the seat beside mine. Hudson flashed me a mischievous grin.

"You should draw a fire-breathing dragon next." He said. "That would be epic."

I tensed at the sound of his voice. My grip on my pencil tightened. Ignoring him, I focused on my drawing, hoping he would take the hint and leave, but Hudson was never skilled at social cues. His breath hit my neck as he peered over my shoulder, admiring my sketch.

"It looks amazing, Snow ." He said, his tone sincere.

I felt a flicker of pride at his compliment, but I pushed it aside. Letting your guard down around Hudson was a risky move.

"Thanks."

My lack of response didn't satisfy him. With a playful grin, he leaned closer for a glimpse of my drawing. I pulled my notepad closer to my chest to block his view.

"Don't be like that." He teased, his eyes twinkling with amusement.

I shook my head. My resolve hardened.

“Forget it, Wilder.”

Mr. Morrison interrupted our banter, entering the classroom with a stack of papers. The class settled down once he cleared his throat.

“Now that we’ve gone through everything we need to know about Hamlet. You will work in pairs for a written report on all the major themes.” He said. “Your partner will be the person sitting next to you.”

I froze and dropped my pencil, but it was inaudible over the chatter. Hudson turned to me with a face-splitting grin.

“Hey there, partner.”

There was not enough air for me to breathe to calm down. I clenched the sides of the table with inhuman anger. Hudson leaned back in his seat with a complacent grin.

“The assignment is due next Wednesday, so I would advise you to work on it immediately.” Mr. Morrison said before sitting at his desk.

“Meet me at the diner after school.”

Hudson sat up with a mischievous twinkle in his eye.

“Are you asking me on a date?”

I rolled my eyes at his arrogance.

“I am not failing this because of you, so you better be there.”

He put his hand to the side of his head in a mock salute with a phony serious look on his face.

“Sir, yes, sir.” He said before dropping his hand. “Just one more question. Do you prefer flowers or chocolate?”

“Why?” I asked with knitted brows.

“I can’t show up to our date empty-handed. My parents raised me better than that.”

The blood in my veins boiled as I punched his arm, wincing as I took most of the hit. I rubbed my knuckles. As class ended, I gathered my things, determined to get through this assignment without drama.

“Can’t wait for this afternoon.” He whispered into my ear as he strutted past me and out of the door.

As I exited the room, my heart raced with nerves. I couldn’t shake the feeling of dread that settled in my stomach at the thought of having to be near Hudson for an extended period.

Austin greeted me with a smile. He leaned against my locker as his familiar smile brought a sense of comfort. We moved in for a kiss.

“Hey babe.” He said. “A few of us are going to hang out at Ricky’s place after school. Want to join?”

My heart sank at his words, knowing I’d have to tell him about the assignment. I bit my lip, steeling myself for his reaction.

“I can’t.”

His smile faltered, replaced by a furrow of confusion.

“Why not?”

I took a deep breath, thinking it was best to rip the band-aid off.

“Hudson and I are partners on an assignment.”

Austin’s expression darkened at the mention of his name. His jaw tightened with frustration.

“How did that even happen?”

I winced at the hostility in his voice, but I didn’t appreciate the accusatory tone. It’s not like I asked for this to happen.

“Mr. Morrison assigned the partners.”

He folded his arms across his chest.

“I’m not comfortable with you being alone with him.”

I took a step back.

“Do you not trust me?”

He sighed; the frustration was clear on his face.

“I don’t trust him . It’s obvious he has a thing for you.”

My eyebrows shot up into my hairline. Once I registered his words, I shook my head

with a bemused smile.

“He has a thing to annoy me.”

He wasn't in the mood for lighthearted discussions.

“Whatever it is, I'm joining the two of you.”

I tugged the roots of my hair as he walked off, knowing that arguing with him would be pointless.

Sorry, Hudson, it seems you won't have your date after all.

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The air was thick as I sat with Austin in the diner's booth. The atmosphere hung heavy with unspoken words. Austin fiddled with the straw of his diet Coke ; his gaze fixed on the drink as if it held the answers to the universe.

I shifted in my seat, feeling the weight of his silent disapproval press down on me. He'd rather be with his friends right now, but I never forced him to come with me.

The minutes ticked on, and the silence between us grew thicker, punctuated by the occasional clink of ice against glass. I glanced at the entrance, wishing Hudson would hurry and end the suffering.

It's as if he heard my silent pleading.

He strutted into the diner with his trademark swagger and arrogant grin. In his hand was a single red rose.

He didn't.

My gaze shifted to Austin, noticing the rigid tension in his jaw and the set of his shoulders. Hudson's smile faltered as his eyes set on Austin, his eyes flickered with disappointment. But he didn't take long to regain his composure. His expression shifted to his usual confidence.

"What a lovely surprise." He said. I watched as he bit his lip to hold back his cocky grin, before extending the rose to Austin. "For you, princess."

He was attempting to provoke Austin, and I was astonished to witness Austin's stoic demeanor. He kept his gaze locked on his drink, pretending that Hudson wasn't even there. However, his cold shoulder made Hudson's smirk wider. He extended the flower to me.

"For my lovely partner."

I glanced between him and Austin, but he didn't move his arm. Sighing, I took the flower, knowing he wouldn't budge until I accepted it. He smiled, sliding his leather jacket off his shoulder and draping it behind his seat. Once comfortable, he folded his arms on the table as if he were about to conduct a business meeting.

"No offense." He said. "I'm not into threesomes."

This ticked Austin off as he slammed his palms on the table, almost knocking his glass off. Heads turned our way.

"Well, there is no way I was letting you anywhere near her alone."

Hudson snorted.

“Chill, jockstrap, we’re working on an English essay. We’re not planning on running off to Vegas to elope.” Hudson said before casting a cheeky glance my way. “Unless you want to, Snow.”

Austin launched out of his seat and towered over Hudson’s seated figure.

“I’ve had enough of your quips, Wilder.”

He peered at my boyfriend from underneath his lashes and grinned.

“You make it so easy for me,” Hudson said before looking at me. “I can’t work with such distractions and if you want that A, then I believe we need to compromise.”

I sighed, not in the mood for tedious child’s play. My eyes locked with Austin’s. It’s as if we were having a telepathic conversation.

“I’m not leaving you alone with him.”

“You don’t have to,” I said. “If you sit a few tables away, you can still see us.”

I gazed at him, hoping he would make this exchange as painless as possible. The sooner we started on this essay, the sooner we could finish it. Austin seemed to have had the same thoughts as his tense shoulders sank. He released a deep breath.

“Fine.”

He leaned down to kiss me, and a warm smile spread across my face. I returned the kiss, my heart fluttered with affection.

“There are kids in this diner.” Hudson said, interrupting our moment.



Austin ignored him and kept his focus on me.

“I’ll be just over there.” he said, motioning to the other side of the diner that was still in eye range.

I watched him walk off. A knot tightened in my chest. As he disappeared to the other side, I turned to Hudson.

“So, what’s the plan?” He asked, leaning back on the stool with his arms behind his head.

“Have you ever read Hamlet?”

“That’s the one with that Macbeth guy, right?”

He seemed pleased at his sordid attempt at humor, but I remained unimpressed. I folded my arms across my chest and raised my brow like a mother about to scold her child.

“Hudson, can you be serious for once?”

He glanced up, a playful smile on his lips.

“What’s the rush, Snow ?” He asked. “We have all night.”

My frustration grew by the minute.

“This is important, Hudson,” I said. “Please help me or I’m leaving.”

His grin widened at my plea. He studied me for a moment before leaning forward.

“I’ll help. Only because you said please,” he said. “But first, answer a question.”

I raised an eyebrow, unsure of what to expect.

“What question?”

He grinned, almost leaning over the table.

“Do you think your boyfriend is jealous?”

“Jealous of what?”

“Us.”

I blinked in surprise, taken aback by his statement.

“Why would he be?”

He chuckled, shaking his head, not answering. He leaned back in his seat, his expression turned serious. And, to my amazement, he recited a line from Hamlet.

“I loved Ophelia. Forty thousand brothers could not, with all their quantity of love, make up my sum.”

My jaw dropped in shock as I listened to Hudson recite the famous soliloquy. His eloquence surprised me. Hudson smirked at my reaction, a twinkle of amusement in his eyes. He grinned and leaned back in his seat with a sense of satisfaction.

“I’m more than just a pretty face.”

Hope rose within me as we set to work on the project. We were making progress until

Hudson's demeanor shifted. His eyes widened in alarm as he caught sight of someone entering the diner. Without a word, he ducked under the table. I watched in confusion.

"Hudson, what are you doing?"

He glanced at me from under the table, a mischievous twinkle in his eyes. Without explanation, he emerged from his hiding spot and hurried to the window beside us. He threw it open, letting a cold gust of air through. I stared at him, baffled by his behavior. His eyes danced with amusement as he turned to me.

"Stacy has been looking for me." He said. "Sorry, Snow, but it seems we'll have to finish this another time."

Before I could respond, he slipped out the window with surprising agility, disappearing into the night with a wicked grin.

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## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 10:24 am*

HUDSON

IN THE DRIVEWAY OF MY HOME, I was hard at work on my beloved motorcycle. The magnificent colors of fall painted the neighborhood with shades of gold, crimson, and amber. I sighed in relief as the crisp air cooled me down. The bracing snow had melted, giving us respite from the chill.

With my sleeves rolled up and a wrench in my hand, I leaned over the sleek machine, my brow furrowed in concentration. The sunlight filtered through the trees, casting dappled shadows across the pavement as I worked.

The soft hum of the neighborhood was a gentle backdrop to my tinkering. I could hear the distant sounds of lawnmowers and children's laughter. I would wipe the sweat from my brow or take a sip from the can of Red Bull beside me.

"Hudson, sweetie, I brought you something."

My head raised at the familiar voice. A bright grin spread on my face at the sight of Mrs. Delgato. I set down my tools, wiped my hands on the rag in my pocket, and bounded over to greet her.

"Hey, Mrs. Delgato," I said, my eyes lit up with genuine delight. "Please tell me that's your famous apple pie?"

She chuckled; her eyes twinkled with affection as she handed me the dessert.

"I was baking and realized you would never forgive me if I never baked you one."

My heart warmed with kindness at her words.

“You’re the best.”

Ever since my mom passed away, Mrs. Delgato doted on me. I appreciated it, but it always made me miss my mom more. However, her heart was always in the right place.

“Any news from colleges?”

I shifted; my gaze drifted to my tattered Vans.

“I’m still waiting to hear from a few schools.”

She studied my face for a moment.

“I know you’re going to get a lot of offers.” She said. “You’ve always been so smart. Just like your mother.”

As she continued to rant about her times at college, I couldn’t shake the unease that gnawed at me. I knew I should tell her the truth, but I couldn’t bear disappointing her - or my father, so I remained silent. Mrs. Delgato had been a second mother to me my entire life and I would deal with the consequences when they came.

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In the dimly lit classroom of the Economics class, the late morning sunlight filtered through the windows, casting long shadows across the rows of desks. The air was heavy with the smell of chalk and paper, and the inaudible murmur of conversation filled the room as students chatted amongst themselves.

In the back of the classroom, I slouched in my seat, my arms crossed over my chest as I gazed out the window. I watched as the branches of the nearby trees swayed in the breeze.

With each passing minute, anticipation and tension grew in the room. I drummed my fingers on the desk. My mind raced with a million different thoughts.

The teacher entered, and silence filled the room as everyone looked at him. With a brisk nod, he began the lesson, his voice filling the room as he outlined the day's assignment.

"Today, you will work in pairs." he said, handing out the stack of papers.

As he began assigning partners, I listened with half-hearted attention, my mind drifting. But then, my ears perked up as I heard my name called out.

"Hudson, you're with Maya."

Our eyes met, and I sensed her hesitation, even from afar. As the class dispersed to begin their work, I approached the table beside Maya. We exchanged awkward glances and hesitant smiles.

"It's been a while, St. James." I said, dropping my jacket over the seat behind me.

"There's a reason for that."

I'd forgotten she never had a filter. I respected that.

"Want to get this over with?" I asked, holding back a grin.

She shrugged.

“I guess so.”

As we worked on the project, an awkward silence settled between us. I’d never been one for uncomfortable tension.

“Do you still collect those weird dolls?” I asked, causing her to pause writing her notes.

“What?”

“Those Chucky-looking dolls you had on your shelves?”

Despite her best efforts, she couldn’t hold back a smile.

“No,” she said. “I realized they were creepy.”

I chuckled at the memory of Luna’s refusal to enter her room until the dolls faced away.

“I tried to tell you.” I shrugged. “At least you came to your senses.”

“Says the guy that would only wear blue for a year.”

I folded my arms across my chest and kicked my legs forward.

“It’s still my favorite color.”

She grinned, but it faded as fast as it appeared. As if she remembered she was supposed to despise me.

“Let’s just get back to work.”

I tilted my chin upward.

“It’s okay, St. James, you can admit it.”

She glanced at me over her shoulder.

“Admit what?”

“You forgot how entertaining I can be.”

She scoffed and turned back around, directing her attention to the paper on her table, but I saw a hint of a grin on her lips. Just like old times.

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LUNA

THE PUTRID SMELL OF NARCOTICS wafted through my nostrils, and I felt my stomach clench. No matter how often I smelled it, it seemed more repulsive. Intoxicated teenagers filled Austin's spacious living room. The hot air made breathing hard as the sweaty bodies paraded throughout the house.

I maneuvered through the herd, trying to avoid colliding with someone, and retreated to the kitchen, a perk of knowing this house like the back of my hand. I glanced around the room, avoiding the gazes of the few inhabitants, and concocted a drink in one of the cliché red cups and took a small sip, wincing at the pungent flavor. Obnoxious laughter flittered through my ear, mixed with the booming music.

Austin and his friends were standing outside the kitchen, jabbing each other, making jokes at the expense of one another. Each of them clutched a red cup in their hands as they glanced down at something on Austin's phone, which he placed back in his pocket when I approached.

"Hey, babe."

He bent to place a chaste kiss on my cheek. The sickening essence of beer overbore my nostrils. I scrunched my nose and offered them the smallest of smiles. Austin wrapped an arm around my waist as they continued their antics. I sighed in relief as I spotted Maya approaching and fled the rowdy group towards my best friend.

"Don't hate me, but I brought a friend."

Before I could question who, the figure appeared beside us.

“Hope we’re not late.” He said with a cocky grin as he glanced around the living room.

Maya bit her lip as she gazed into my harsh eyes.

“I’m going to get a drink.” Hudson said with his hands in his pockets, unbothered by my lack of conversation.

He strutted through the crowd, towering over most of the partygoers.

“Hear me out,” Maya said. “We became econ partners and I think he’s cool once you get over his arrogance. We were talking about the party during class, and I invited him along.”

I wanted to scream and curse her for inviting my worst enemy and the most annoying human being to my boyfriend’s party, the same boyfriend who despised him. However, I could never be upset with Maya. She always had the natural ability to make friends with anyone she crossed paths with, even if the friend was a deranged and arrogant jerk. But, he used to be her friend too.

“It’s fine.”

How much trouble can one person make, anyway?

I offered an encouraging grin and glanced toward Austin and his buddies. I sighed in relief, optimistic that he hadn’t seen Hudson yet and that the party was too crowded for their paths to cross.

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HUDSON

I WAS NEVER ONE FOR PARTIES OR SOCIAL GATHERINGS. The thought of surrounding myself with people I barely associated with at school was appalling. If I didn't enjoy their company at school, why would it be any different outside of it?

The rhythmic pulse of bass and the chatter of teenagers filled the spacious kitchen, where neon lights danced across the sleek countertops and polished tiles. I slipped through the doorway with purpose. With a confident stride, I entered the kitchen. My eyes swept over the room with a smirk playing on my lips. This was the haven of my enemy, and the thought brought a glint of mischief to my eyes.

I wasted no time in making myself at home. My gaze settled on the gleaming array of liquor bottles arranged on the counter, and with a deft hand, I reached for the most expensive bottle of whiskey I could find. With a satisfying pop, I unscrewed it and poured myself a generous measure, relishing knowing that my presence would upset Jockstrap .

Sipping my drink, I walked to the snack table, where bowls of chips and pretzels beckoned. I grabbed a handful of snacks, my movements lazy and unhurried as I lounged against the counter, soaking in the party's chaos.

Chambers stormed into the kitchen, interrupting my moment of relaxation, his expression dark with anger. My smirk widened as I watched his eyes pop in shock.

“Who invited you?”

I straightened up, leaning back against the counter with a casual, arrogant demeanor.

“This is a lovely home.” I said, knowing that ignoring his question would add more fuel to the fire.

I guess I’m an arsonist.

“I am not in the mood for your arrogance, Wilder.”

Unfazed by his hostility, I took another sip of whiskey, moaning in delight.

“This is scrumptious.”

His fists clenched at his sides; his jaw tightened with fury. I grinned at his face flushed red with rage, his nostrils flared as he struggled to control his temper. The frustration boiled beneath the surface, and I couldn’t resist pushing his buttons further.

“Cheers, Jockstrap .” I said with a smirk before taking another sip of my drink.

“Hudson, cut it out.” Maya said, stepping into the room with Luna trailing.

The air crackled with tension as Jockstrap glared at me, his fists clenched at his sides and his jaw set in determination. The room seemed to hold its breath as the heated exchange escalated, the noise of the party fading into the background as all eyes turned to confrontation. Luna stepped forward; her face etched with concern. She placed a gentle hand on his chest.

“He won’t cause any trouble.”

He turned to her with a look of bewilderment, his anger simmering beneath the

surface.

“Did you know he was here?” he asked, his voice laced with accusation.

She hesitated. Her gaze flickered away before she met his gaze again.

“I found out a couple of minutes ago.”

“And you didn’t think to tell me?”

She took a step back.

“I didn’t want to ruin your party.”

A glacial silence avalanched through the room as the onlookers gazed on in savage curiosity. I decided it was best to break the tense atmosphere.

“How about a game of Beer Pong ?”

I cast a mischievous glance in Maya’s direction. She mouthed a curt thank you.

“Sounds like fun.” She said.

“Why don’t we make it a double challenge?” Jockstrap asked, with a devious grin on his face.

As he set up the table, the atmosphere crackled with energy. The clang of cups and the thud of ping-pong balls echoed through the room. Luna stood by his side; her eyes filled with determination as she was eager to beat us. Beat me . I glanced at Maya as we shared a smirk, motivated to take on the challenge.

The game began. The balls bounced back and forth across the table as we traded shots. It was tame, but as the game progressed, I grew bored. While Jockstrap was distracted with his shot, I shuffled over to Luna.

“How could you find that attractive?” I asked.

As if to prove my point, he made the shot and cheered with his friends, hitting his chest and howling like a wolf.

“Leave me alone, Hudson.”

With a mischievous gleam in my eyes, I leaned close to her, my voice low as I whispered in her ear.

“Nice perfume.”

Her cheeks burned as she returned to her boyfriend’s side. She was wearing the perfume I bought for her on her eleventh birthday. She was obsessed with it, wanting to be like the cool kids. I saved for months to buy it for her. It seemed she never stopped wearing it.

Her boyfriend took a shot and failed. I bit my lip, but it didn’t stop me from taking a jab.

“All talk, right, jockstrap?” I said, grinning in sinister pleasure, as it had the desired effect.

“Don’t listen to him,” Luna said and placed a comforting hand on his arm before directing a fiery glare my way. “He can’t help being a jerk. It comes naturally to him.”

“You wound me, Snow.”

I feigned sadness, receiving a scoff. As the game neared its end, the tension reached a fever pitch. The cups dwindled on both sides of the table, victory hanging in the balance. With a final, triumphant shot, I sunk the last cup, sealing our win and sending the room into cheers.

Maya and I hugged in celebration with a victorious grin. Chamber’s face twisted with rage. He slammed his hand down on the table, his eyes blazing with fury as he glared at me.

“You cheated.” He accused, his voice booming over the cheers.

I shrugged; my smirk unwavering as I leaned back against the wall.

“You win some, you lose some.”

He wasn’t having it. He shoved the table aside, sending cups and balls clattering to the ground. Luna whispered something to him, and he retracted as if she shocked him.

“Can you stop?” He said, anger seeped through his words. “I am so sick of you always trying to fix everything.”

Her eyes brimmed with tears as she attempted to defend herself.

“Can we not do this here?”

Her hands shook as if she was trying to control her anger.

“I am so sick of you always fighting my battles for me, Luna!” He said. “I cannot

take it anymore!”

She glanced down at the ground, wiping her nose with the sleeve of her sweater before gazing up at him like a lost gazelle.

“What are you trying to say?”

“I think we should break up.”

His words were so blunt, that even I winced at the emotionless reply. As he turned to walk away, he muttered something cruel under his breath, his words sliced through the air like a knife. It rhymed with stitch. My eyes narrowed with anger as I heard the insult. My protective instincts kicked into overdrive.

“Hey, watch your mouth, Chambers,” I said, stepping forward to confront him. “You don’t talk to her like that.”

His eyes widened in surprise before anger overtook him.

“You’re getting on my nerves, Wilder.”

“Ditto.”

He lunged for me, but I dodged it before he stumbled. This was pathetic. Maya grasped Luna’s arms before approaching me.

“Please take us home.”

She had a firm grip on an emotionless Luna. I nodded before leading them out of the dense house, towards my dad’s truck. A blanket of ominous silence enveloped us as I gazed ahead at the dimly lit road. Nobody wanted to be the first to speak, nobody



wanted to be the first to address the situation that took place minutes ago. What does one even say? Sorry, your boyfriend is a jerk and you're his doorstep? Sometimes it was best to withhold the truth because nothing hurt more than hearing it.

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LUNA

I HAVE WATCHED ENDLESS SHOWS AND READ ETERNAL BOOKS, yet none prepared me for that moment. We would hear the tragic stories of heartbreak, scoffing at the antagonistic girl as she wept for the lost love and her unmendable heart. We looked down and scrutinized her until we became that girl. That's when it all made sense.

However, we need love. We want it. But not the potential heartbreak that comes with it. Everyone overlooked the conditions written in fine print. Relationships are like warranties. No eternal promises. And it seems mine and Austin's warranty has expired.

The school hallways buzzed with whispered conversations and stolen glances. My footsteps were heavy, each echoing the weight of devastation in my heart. Every glance felt like a dagger to my heart. I expected the gossip. The hushed tones and pointed stares shadowed me.

Lost in my thoughts, I moved through the hallways as my legs carried me. I rounded the corner and froze in my tracks. Austin stood amid the crowd. With his arm around Cynthia's shoulder. He whispered into her ear, and she giggled in response.

My breath caught in my throat as I watched the scene unfold. Tears welled up in my eyes, blurring my vision as I struggled to comprehend the betrayal. It hadn't even been seventy-two hours.

Unable to bear the sight any longer, I turned on my heel and fled. My footsteps

thumped through the hallways as I raced to the nearest bathroom. Pushing through the door, I collapsed against the wall, fighting back tears. My breath came in ragged gasps as I buried my face in my hands.

“Snow.”

I glanced up, but the tears blocked my vision. I blinked until they washed away. Hudson stood a few feet away with an unlit cigarette dangling from his lips.

“What are you doing in the girl’s room?” I asked, rubbing my eyes, not wanting to cry in front of him.

“I’m not.” He said. “You’re in the men’s room.”

My eyes darted around the room, taking in my surroundings with a sinking feeling in my stomach. He was right.

“You have got to be kidding me.” I said, shoving my head in my hands. “Could this day get any worse?”

“Your ex could walk in.” He said with a smile as if my heartbreak was comedic material.

“So, you heard that it’s official.”

“It’s all over social media. The public display was a dead giveaway, though.”

He reached into his back pocket and grasped his phone, scrolling through it before showing me a video. The narrow screen showed Austin and me fighting at his party.

“Five hundred likes overnight.” He said as he watched the dramatic dispute.

He slid his phone back into his pocket before lighting the cigarette. My brows furrowed with concern.

“Are you crazy?” I asked. “You could set off the smoke alarms!”

He shrugged and took a drag from his cigarette, blowing clouds of smoke into the air.

“That’s the plan.” He said, leaning against the wall. “I didn’t study for the English test.”

I scoffed at his blatant disregard for education, wincing at the oncoming migraine. It worsened as a shrill alarm pierced through the air. The sound echoed in the bathroom with a deafening intensity. My hands flew to my ears as I stared at him in disbelief.

“Whoops.” He glanced at the cigarette as if it had transformed into a snake. “Didn’t think that would work.”

I shook my head in exasperation.

“I’m getting out of here.”

A large group gathered outside as everyone murmured with theories of what could have triggered the smoke alarm. I felt some not-so-subtle gazes in my direction, and I glanced down at the ground, wishing it would swallow me.

“It’s so strange that the alarms went off for no reason.” A husky voice said into my ear.

I glanced to my side as Hudson’s lanky frame bent down at the waist to reach me.

“I heard some jackass did it.”

He laughed before leaning upright with his arms folded across his chest.

“I heard he’s a pretty decent guy.”

“Well, you can never trust rumors.” I said, earning another round of laughter.

“I’m done for the day.” He said. “Care to stop acting like Ms. Perfect and ditch with me?”

I glanced over my shoulder and scoffed.

“I would rather gouge my eyes out.”

“Guess you’ll have to torture yourself by looking at that all day.”

He pointed over my shoulder. My breath hitched as Austin and Cynthia stood a few feet away with their friends. I winced as I noticed his arms wrapped around her waist, holding her close. That’s how he held me. A million different emotions simmered in my mind: anger, sadness, and more anger. The ambivalence was giving me a migraine.

“What did you have in mind?”

I could sense his smirk.

“Nothing.” He said. “Anywhere is better than here, right?”

I had never been one to act impulsively. While looking at Austin and Cynthia, I experienced an unfamiliar feeling. The need to let go of everything and not think, because thinking led to feeling and that was the last thing I needed right now.

“Let’s go.”

I walked off without waiting for a response, but I could hear Hudson’s boots trailing behind me. I strutted through the parking lot hoping to get into my car as fast as possible, but a firm grip on my wrist stopped me.

“I thought we were taking my bike.”

“Why would you think that?”

He glanced at me with a sly grin and his eyes held a mischievous sparkle, as if he knew a juicy secret.

“This is your opportunity to do something you’ve never done before.” He said with a shrug. “Because, no offense, being safe hasn’t gotten you anywhere other than dumped.”

His brash words were like a supernatural punch to the gut. It didn’t affect me like I thought it would. I imagined myself screaming, fuming like a fire-breathing dragon. Instead, I felt nothing. Maybe I knew deep down that he was right. I’d planned my entire life around Austin, our future, given up everything to where I’d given up myself. I sacrificed for a man who wouldn’t give me a coat in Alaska, duped into this charade of love, and I had no one else to blame but myself.

“You’re right.”

His eyes widened.

“I am?”

I nodded.

“Look where playing it safe has gotten me,” I said, gesturing around the deserted parking lot. “I dedicated my entire high school career to one guy, studied my butt off to get into a college with the said guy, but here I am in a deserted parking lot with you, of all people, after you set off a smoke alarm!”

His grin widened, and a sense of triumph shined in his eyes.

“Well, let’s not waste any time.”

With a glance to ensure no one was watching, he grabbed my arm and led me to his bike. It gleamed under the midday sun, and the engine purred once he straddled it. He looked at me with a devilish grin. I eyed the machine.

“Come on, Snow. It will be fun.”

My fingers twisted in the hem of my sweater as I bit my lip.

“I don’t know.”

He chuckled and reached behind him for a helmet.

“You can wrap your arms around me.”

His grin widened as he offered me the helmet. With a hesitant sigh, I accepted it. My fingers trembled as I attempted to fasten it, but I couldn’t. He reached over and fastened it for me. I swung my leg over the bike and wrapped my arms around his waist. His body heat seeped through my clothes. Adrenaline coursed through my veins as I felt the rumble of the engine.

With a final look back, he checked I was at ease before accelerating. The burst of speed sent a thrill through my veins.

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HUDSON

THE RUMBLE OF MY BIKE ECHOED through the quiet streets as we navigated the winding roads. She clutched my waist before chuckling in delight at each twist and turn. As we pulled up outside her house, I cut the engine. She swung her leg onto the pavement and lifted the helmet to reveal a face-splitting grin.

“Thanks for the ride.” She said, handing me the helmet.

I leaned forward, a smirk playing on my lips as I admired her lively features.

“It was my pleasure, Snow.” I said. “Anytime you need a distraction, I’m your guy.”

She shifted on her feet; her cheeks flushed with embarrassment.

“It was fun.”

“I’m a fun guy.” I said, lifting myself from the bike.

Her eyes widened as I swung my leg over and stood before her, so close our shoes touched. I craned my neck down to look into her eyes.

“You need to let loose more often.” I said. “It reminds me of the old Luna.”

“The old Luna?”

I shook my head, mounted the bike, and revved the engine to bring it back to life.

“I’ll see you around, Snow.” I said, pulling away from the curb, and disappearing down the street.

?

I have attended more parties this month than in my whole high school career. The pulsing bass of the music and lights cast a hazy glow over the sea of people. Despite my usual aversion to crowds, I was drawn to the energy.

As I scanned the room, I saw Maya waving at me from the Beer Pong table. She beckoned me over. With a reluctant sigh, I weaved through the crowd until I reached her side. Her eyes sparkled with mischief as she tossed the plastic ball into my hand.

“As reigning champions, we have a reputation to protect.”

I smiled at her enthusiasm as I stood beside her. The familiar weight of the ball in my hand increased my competitiveness. I glanced at the two meat heads across the table and flicked my arm, launching the ball into one of their cups. Tension mounted with each shot as we battled it out for supremacy. They had one cup left. Maya took the last shot, sinking it in with a satisfying splash. We cheered as I threw my arm around her shoulder and pulled her to my side.

“We did it!” She said, raising her hands for a high-five.

As the celebration continued, I felt the need for fresh air. I excused myself out onto the porch and lit a cigarette. The cold air was vengeful, and I tugged my jacket tighter around my torso.

I caught sight of a figure stumbling in the distance. Squinting through the haze of smoke, I recognized the familiar figure.

Without a second thought, I rushed to her side with my cigarette dangling on the edge of my lips. I reached out to steady her. My phone rang in my back pocket, causing me to stumble in surprise. My grip on Luna slipped, causing her to tumble to the ground. With a frustrated sigh, I checked the caller ID. Dad. I debated whether to answer or to help the girl lying at my feet.

“Hey, dad,” I said. “What’s up?”

Luna groaned, but I ignored it.

“Where are you, kid?” He asked. “I just got home.”

I took in my surroundings. The house was far away, but the pounding music vibrated under my feet. I spotted two junior girls near the bushes. One was holding her friend’s hair back as she vomited. I scrunched my nose in disgust.

“I’m at a party.”

I’d never been able to lie to my father. There was a pause on the other line.

“Alright, stay safe.” He said. “Don’t come home too late.”

He ended the call. I sighed in relief and tucked my phone in my back pocket.

“Hudson, why is Luna on the ground?” Maya asked as she approached us.

“I found her like this.”

With a concerned expression, she crouched beside Luna and attempted to lift her.

“Let’s get you home.”

Luna groaned in protest. She lifted her head, displaying her smudged makeup streaking down her face.

“He doesn’t love me, Maya.” She said, her words slurred with the effects of the alcohol.

“You’ve got this handled from here, right?” I asked, not equipped to handle these kinds of emotions.

“I need your help!” Maya said in disbelief.

I rolled my eyes. With a grunt of effort, I lifted her into my arms, hoisting her over my shoulder.

“No, leave me.” Luna protested.

I shook my head with a smirk as I adjusted my grip on her. She wiggled.

“Cut it out, Snow.” I said, my forehead knotted in frustration.

I turned to Maya.

“Did you drive here?”

She shook her head.

“No, we came with a friend.” She said. “She can drive us home.”

“I’ll take you both home,” I said. “There is no way anyone here is sober enough to drive.”

It's a good thing I came in my dad's truck.

"Thank you."

We made our way out of the party and trekked down the winding street until we reached my truck. Maya opened the back door as I shoved Luna inside.

"I think I'm going to be sick." She said, placing the back of her hand on her forehead.

"You better not puke back there, Snow."

"Don't tell me what to do."

Maya climbed into the passenger seat and looked over her shoulder at her drunken mess of a friend.

"I think you should stay at my place tonight."

She received a thumbs-up in response. I kept my gaze on the road. The dim glow of the streetlights cast shadows on the deserted street. The engine's hum was the only thing to break the silence of the night. As well as Luna's sobs.

"I can't believe he dumped me in public." She said, her voice choked with emotion.

"He was a jerk, anyway. Not much worth crying over."

Maya nudged me in the ribs and delivered a warning glare.

"Way to be empathetic."

I shrugged, knowing that I would lose the battle. Instead, I focused on getting them

home and out of my way.

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*Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 10:24 am*

LUNA

I WOKE UP ENRAGED because I wasted my weekend crying over someone who stomped on my heart. I watched Pretty Little Liars and ate my weight in ice cream, only to realize that I could do better. That was the heartache talking, but it's the truth.

I marched with purpose through the hallways, my jaw set in determination and my eyes flashed with anger. The sting of betrayal was still fresh in my mind, especially when I noticed Cynthia leaning against my locker with a smug grin. My hands clenched into fists at my side as I approached.

“So, Austin and I are going on a date after school.”

My anger flared at her taunting words. I dug my nails into my palms to control the rage. Cynthia was infamous for rubbing salt on wounds.

“Good for you.”

I attempted to remain unbothered, but her smug grin crumbled my facade. My anger gave way to a tidal wave of hurt and humiliation. Without a word, I turned on my heels and stormed down the hallway.

My ambivalent thoughts were a whirlwind as I wandered the halls. Relief flooded through my veins as I turned the corner and found Maya. In a conversation with Hudson. Great.

“Luna, what's going on?” she asked, her brows furrowed with concern.

“Cynthia came up to me bragging about her date with Austin after school.” I said, my voice cracking at the end.

“That’s my cue to leave.” Hudson said, evacuating the conversation like there was a fire.

Maya led me to the nearest bathroom. She dabbed at my eyes, allowing me to gather my thoughts. I felt ridiculous crying over someone who wasn’t worth my tears, but sometimes pain snuck up on you. The betrayal and the broken promise of forever were like a gunshot to the heart, and Austin had perfect aim. Maya placed her hands on my shoulders and stared into my eyes.

“You’re hurt, and that’s okay.” She said. “But you need to accept that he was never the one. He never deserved you.” She dabbed my tear-soaked face again. “There are so many great guys out there. You’ll find an upgrade.”

I nodded my head, despite finding her words hard to believe. What hurt the most was how replaceable I was. It made me feel worthless, questioning my entire purpose. If Austin could toss me to the side, who’s saying no one else will?

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HUDSON

I SWAGGERED DOWN THE HALLWAY, exuding an air of nonchalance. My eyes scanned the passing faces as my thoughts drifted. The meat heads appeared in my path; their bulky frames blocked my way like an impenetrable wall. I sighed in annoyance as I attempted to sidestep them, but they moved to block me again. Their smirks widened into arrogant grins.

“Move.” I said, not in the mood for pleasantries.

“What’s the magic word?” Jockstrap asked from behind his army of jerks.

“Move before I punch you.” I said, tilting my head to the side with a plastic smile. “Please. ”

“I don’t feel like that was genuine,” Jockstrap said, rubbing his chin in thought. “Want to try again?”

“Perhaps you should ask me not to punch you in the face.”

His mindless buddies laughed; their bravado bolstered by their numbers. As the tension was about to escalate, a familiar voice cut through the air, drawing our attention. Luna approached, her eyes red-rimmed with tears, but her voice was steady as she addressed me.

“Hudson, not again.”

Her eyes were pleading as she avoided his gaze. She placed her hand on my arm. My eyes softened at the sight of her distress. A pang of guilt tugged at my chest. The pain on her face was enough for me to step back. However, I rammed my shoulder into Jockstrap's as I walked past, knowing he wouldn't do a thing.

I didn't stop walking until I reached the parking lot. In a dark corner, I leaned against the wall. My fingers retrieved a cigarette from my pocket, and I lit it with practiced ease. As I took a drag, my eyes wandered to the rows of cars landing on the familiar Mercedes. My mind whirled with mischief.

A devious smirk spread across my lips as an evil idea took shape in my mind. With a glance around to ensure there were no witnesses, I approached my dad's truck, popped open the toolbox in the backseat, and retrieved a set of tools.

With practiced efficiency, I removed the lug nuts from each wheel. My hands were steady despite the coursing adrenaline. As I worked, the thoughts of his dumb little face seeing this caused sinister pride to wash over me. With a triumphant smile, I stepped back to admire my work. I wasn't done.

Reaching into the back of the truck, I retrieved a can of spray paint. My fingers itched with anticipation. I defaced the expensive vehicle, my movements fueled by rage and satisfaction. The rush of adrenaline left me breathless and exhilarated. Good luck getting to your date with the Snow Queen.

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LUNA

AS THE FINAL BELL RANG, I walked through the crowded hallways towards the parking lot. I slung my backpack over my shoulder, my mind drifting to my non-existent weekend plans. Since my breakup with Austin, Maya has been my only friend in our large group.

As I reached the parking lot, my ears perked at a commotion ahead. A cluster of students gathered around something with expressions of amusement and bewilderment. My curiosity piqued, and I weaved through until I reached the front. I gasped and slapped my hand over my mouth.

Austin's car was in the center of the crowd. Its once pristine exterior was now marred by graffiti and missing wheels. My eyes widened as I took in the sight. A mixture of disbelief and satisfaction flooded through me.

"I'm going to murder him." Austin said. "He's dead."

I couldn't wipe the smirk off my face as I watched the chaos unfold around me. He stood beside his vandalized car; his face contorted in rage. The crowd's laughter drowned out his threats, as everyone became caught up in the spectacle and didn't take him seriously.

I scoped the rest of the car. The words "small package on board" were spray-painted on the front window. My eyes fell on the side mirror. A jockstrap was dangling on the mirror, moving side to side as the gentle breeze blew through it. My smirk widened into a grin. It was a dead giveaway of who the culprit was. A part of me thought I

should feel guilty for taking pleasure in Austin's misfortune, but the devil on my shoulder convinced me it was what he deserved.

With one last glance at his angered face, I turned on my heel and walked away with a spring in my step and a smile. Seeing him get his comeuppance was the sweetest revenge I could have asked. It's hard to believe that Hudson Wilder was the one to avenge me.

?

The soft glow of my desk lamp illuminated my bedroom as I sat with my attention on my homework. The room was quiet, bar the scratching of my pen against paper and the occasional rustle of pages.

A movement in the window caught my eye. I glanced up. My heart skipped a beat as I saw a figure in the reflection. With a gasp, I turned to find Hudson, leaning against my doorway, a mischievous smirk on his lips as he took a bite of a cookie.

"Your mom made cookies." He said through a mouthful.

My surprise turned to confusion.

"How did you get into my house?"

"Your mom let me in." He said, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

I shook my head, my brows furrowed in disbelief as I wondered why my mom would let him into my room, but the answer was obvious. My mother adored Hudson. I glanced back at him and noticed his attention was on something else.

Following his gaze, I spotted the dusty old camera sitting in the corner of my room, a

relic from a past that seemed like another lifetime. The one his mom bought me for Christmas when I was ten.

“You don’t take pictures anymore?” He asked, his voice tinged with curiosity.

“No.”

“You used to love it.”

I shrugged; a sudden pang of sadness gripped me.

“Things change.” I said, averting his gaze. The room fell into a heavy silence as we both absorbed the weight of my words. Unable to dwell on it any longer, I broke the silence. “What are you doing here, Hudson?”

His smirk returned as he straightened up and approached me. I tensed, knowing that smirk only meant trouble.

“I have a proposition for you.”

It sparked my interest.

“I’m all ears.”

He cleared his throat as if he was about to deliver a business presentation.

“Since you and Jockstrap called it quits, I figured we should date. Or, at least pretend to.”

My jaw dropped to the floor. Was he serious?

“What’s in it for you?”

His grin widened.

“It would help me get Stacy Henderson off my back.” He said. “She texted me four times, just as I crossed the street to your house.”

I was shell-shocked, my mind racing as I weighed his proposition.

“I don’t know.”

“Think about it, Snow.” He said. “What would annoy Chambers more than you dating the guy he hates most in this world?”

He made a valid point. I wanted revenge, and this was the perfect way to do it. After a moment of hesitation, I made my decision.

“Fine, we have a deal.”

A triumphant spread across his face.

“Should we hug it out?” He asked, with outstretched arms.

I scoffed and folded my arms across my chest.

“Don’t push it.”

He smirked, before nodding his head.

“Well, I guess I’ll see you later, girlfriend. ”

As he turned to leave, I couldn't help but feel that my life was about to take a drastic turn.

?

LUNA

STROLLING THROUGH THE SCHOOL HALLWAYS, the atmosphere crackled with whispered words and darting glances. Hudson had his arm draped around my shoulders, igniting a firestorm of gossip.

I felt a rush of insecurity as we passed clusters of students, their eyes following us like hungry predators tracking prey. As if they were dissecting our every move. Hudson seemed unfazed, his stride confident and his expression unreadable.

“You’re tense.” He said, keeping his eyes trained in front of us.

“Do you blame me?” I asked. “Everyone is staring.”

“Did you expect any other reaction?”

“No,” I said with a sigh. “I was not expecting this.”

“They’ll have something new to gossip about by the end of the week.” He said, brushing off my concerns.

As we reached my locker, I felt the weight of a hundred eyes on us. I could hear the murmurs rippling through the crowd. As I fidgeted with my lock, I glanced at Hudson beside me. His cool demeanor was infuriatingly calm.

“What are you looking at?” I asked him once I got my combination.



“Just looking.”

I turned and followed his gaze to a group of freshman boys. He glared at them with a look that had me quivering, before they bolted with their tails tucked between their legs.

“Don’t be a jerk.” I said, nudging his side with my elbow.

“Isn’t that your type?”

Ignoring his comment, I reached for my books, but there was an unmistakable sensation of someone’s gaze burning into my back. Turning my head, dread pooled in the pit of my stomach, to find Austin watching us with a mixture of surprise and an expression I couldn’t quite place. Our eyes locked, and a myriad of emotions passed between us.

“Hold my hand.” I said, turning my attention to Hudson.

“Why?”

I motioned over my shoulder. A light bulb went off above his head.

“Oh, right.” He reached to clasp his hand over mine but retracted it. “Why are your hands so cold?”

He’s so dramatic.

“Just hold it!” I said and intertwined our fingers together.

The look of shock on Austin’s face brought a sadistic sense of pride. Now you know how I felt.

“Can we get to class now?”

“Are you always going to be this annoying?”

“Are we having our first fight?” He asked with a cheeky grin.

“Let’s just go.”

I dragged him through the hallway, past Austin. Hudson winked at him as we sauntered past. I shoved him the moment we turned a corner.

“What now?” He asked, rubbing his shoulder.

“I saw the look you gave Austin.”

“So, wasn’t the whole point of this to annoy him?”

“We’re not starting a fight. I know that’s a hobby of yours.”

His nose scrunched in disgust.

“I can just tell you’re going to be a great girlfriend.” He said before we strutted into class.

?

HUDSON

I SAT ON THE SIDELINES of the cheerleading practice. I watched them practice the routines with a faint smile.

Sun broke through clouds, casting a warm glow on the field, but the brisk wind persisted. Despite the chill, I relished in the rare sunshine.

My cigarette dangled between my fingers, long forgotten as the festivities distracted me. I followed their movements, but my gaze was on a particular person. She moved with a grace that captivated me. Her enthusiasm was contagious.

“Did you know Luna hates smokers?”

Maya interrupted my moment of solitude. She plopped down beside me with a grin. I chuckled. A puff of smoke escaped my lips as I shrugged.

“Guess I have to quit.” I said, flicking the cigarette butt onto the ground, stamping it out with the heel of my boot.

“I know about your deal, by the way.” She said. “The fake dating thing.”

“Are you going to lecture me about what a bad idea it is?”

She shook her head before tilting it back to soak in the sun's rays.

“No,” she said. “You’re already an upgrade compared to the last guy.”

I had to restrain myself from laughing out loud, happy that someone else harbored a hatred for Jockstrap.

Stacy interrupted our conversation. She sidled up to us; her smile was bright as she turned her attention to me.

“Hey, Hudson.” She said, her voice tinged with flirtation.

My discomfort was palpable as I shifted in my seat. I offered her a polite but guarded smile. This dance between us was too familiar - she flirted, I deflected. My mind was racing for an excuse to escape her advances, until Luna appeared, her arms laden with her bags. I shot to my feet, relieved to escape the situation.

“Let me get that for you.” I said, moving to help her with the bags.

Her eyes met mine in confusion until she noticed Stacy standing there.

“Thanks.”

I draped an arm over her shoulder, hoping Stacy would get the hint. Her face fell, but before she could comment, Cynthia beckoned her over. We watched as she marched to the cheer captain.

“This is better than television.” Maya said.

I bit my lip with a grin.

As we made our way off the field, I couldn't help but notice Jockstrap watching us from the middle of the field with a dark scowl. His eyes bore into mine with an expression mixed with anger and jealousy. My smirk widened as I lifted my hand in a condescending wave. Luna shot me a warning glance. Her hand smacked my chest.

“Stop it, Hudson.” She said, but her laughter betrayed her attempt at seriousness.

I grinned; the adrenaline of the moment coursed through me. This was all part of the fun, getting under his skin. But it was never my main motivation. I suggested the fake dating proposal under the pretense of revenge and getting Stacy off my back. But the real reason was that I wanted to win Luna back and show her that Austin Chambers was never the guy for her. The best guy for her was in front of her all along.

?

Leaning against the row of lockers, I watched as Luna fumbled with the books inside, her expression troubled. The hallway buzzed. Banners and posters announcing the upcoming homecoming dance adorn the surrounding walls.

“What’s going through your head, Snow?” I asked, my voice low and tinged with curiosity.

She sighed, closing her locker door with unnecessary force.

“Look around, Hudson,” she replied, gesturing to the festively decorated hallway. “It’s Homecoming week.”

My eyebrows furrowed in confusion.

“So?”

A pained expression flickered across her features.

“It’s the first homecoming dance I’ll be going to without Austin.” She admitted, her voice barely above a whisper.

As if on cue, a couple nearby caught our attention. With a wide grin, the boy extended a bouquet and asked the girl to accompany him to the dance. Luna's eyes lingered on the scene before she turned away, a wistful expression crossing her features.

"That seems way too cheesy for me."

Her gaze returns to the happy couple, strolling down the hallways with interlocked hands.

"I wouldn't know." She said. "No one has ever asked me."

Confusion dawned on me.

"What do you mean?" I asked. "Did Jockstrap never ask you?"

Luna shook her head, a bitter laugh escaping her lips.

"No," she admitted, her voice tinged with sadness. "He always assumed that since we were dating, he didn't need to ask."

I fell silent for a moment, digesting her words. Hurt was clear in her eyes. She shook her head as if she'd risen from a deep sleep.

"We better get to class."

I watched her forlorn trudge to class and felt a pang of sympathy spike through my heart. My mind battled between pretending I didn't care about her homecoming aspirations, but my heart was overpowering it. I'm going to look like a fool, but it would be worth it. For Luna.

?

LUNA

THE FIELD BUZZED WITH ENERGY as the opening celebration of the homecoming game drew near. In the stands, fans sported the school's colors. Their voices rose and fell like waves crashing against a shore. The squad gathered in a tight-knit circle as Cynthia belted orders not to ruin the routine. I glanced around the stands, spotting the familiar faces of my parents. They waved and cheered my name. I smiled.

The Drumline launched into a thunderous rhythm, setting the stage for our opening routine. We synchronized our movements to the beat of the music, just like we practiced. The crowd erupted into cheers, their applause echoing throughout the stadium. As the routine ended, I felt a surge of exhilaration wash over me. The energy of the crowd was electric.

The celebrations ceased as Cynthia made her way onto the made-up stage on the field, taking her rightful place center stage behind the microphone.

"Greetings, all." She said, welcomed by applause. "I am Cynthia Piersen; cheer captain and student body president and I have a few things to discuss before getting started."

I scoffed. My thoughts shifted as I tried to drown out her annoying voice. I twirled a strand of mahogany locks around my finger. It was more interesting than anything Cynthia could say.

"Hudson!"



Cynthia's infamous banshee scream exploded through the microphone. I pressed my hands against my ear as the microphone exuded a deafening noise. With furrowed brows, I turned to find Cynthia in a tug-of-war with Hudson over the microphone. Gasps, followed by laughter, echoed in the open stadium.

"Let go!" She said, loud enough for the microphone to catch it.

"Who even voted for you?" he asked, as he attempted to yank the microphone out of her vice-like grip. "How are you so strong?"

More booming hysterics echoed through the lengthy field, and I bit my lip to hold in my laughter. I felt dizzy watching the microphone change hands back and forth until Hudson yanked it with a firm tug and took off with it.

"Luna Delgato."

My breath hitched as my name echoed. He glanced around before his eyes landed on me; his infamous smirk proudly etched on his face. Before he could say another word, Cynthia lunged onto his back. Ambivalent reactions burst through the on-watchers. Hudson tried to shake her off, but she was like a koala with a tree trunk. I covered my mouth with my hands as I burst into laughter, watching him attempt to shake the blonde off him, but his attempts were futile as she forced him down to the ground. He brought the microphone to his lips and the sound of him trying to catch his breath boomed through the speakers.

"Luna Delgato, will you go to Homecoming with me?" he asked before Cynthia snatched the microphone out of his hand.

A tumultuous uproar of applause reverberated, and I watched in horror as Principal Quinn escorted Hudson off the stage. I dropped my pom-poms before pushing through the clusters of cheerleaders and jocks to block Hudson.

“What was that for?” I asked as I dragged him away from the celebrations.

“You told me no one has ever asked you,” he said with a shrug. “I’ve never asked someone. I don’t think I will again.”

He massaged the back of his neck with a groan and winced when he touched a delicate spot.

“Why did you ask me?”

“I figured since we’re dating, it would look weird if I didn’t.”

“I wasn’t even thinking it was a possibility. I was planning a night of movies and takeout.”

“Is that still an option?” he asked, his eyes hopeful.

I bit off a smile.

“Not anymore. I would love to go to Homecoming with you.”

It wasn’t how I pictured my senior homecoming to go. I expected it to be with Austin, celebrating our final homecoming dance together.

And, if you told me I would go with Hudson Wilder, I would have died of shock.

Before Hudson responded, Principal Quinn grabbed his arm and dragged him out to the parking lot where I saw his dad standing with his arms folded across his chest, shaking his head in defeat as his delinquent son was in trouble again.

HUDSON

THE SOFT GLOW OF THE MORNING LIGHT filtered through the windows, casting a warm hue over the kitchen as I descended the stairs. My dad stood at the countertop with a steaming cup of coffee. The aroma of freshly brewed java filled the air.

“Morning, Dad.” I said, moving towards the coffee maker for a cup.

“Morning, kid.” He said, distracted by something on his laptop.

I peeked over his shoulder to find him looking at new car parts.

“Any plans for the day?”

He shook his head and turned to me.

“I might go for drinks with Kevin.” He said, referring to Luna’s father. “What about you?”

His question left me frozen in my tracks. I dragged my fingers through my hair and turned to him, hoping to hide my awkwardness behind my mug.

“I’m going out with Luna today.”

He glanced up with a mischievous twinkle in his eye. I pretended to be interested in the contents of my mug to avoid his amused expression.

“Since when are you both friends again?”

I shrugged and shifted my weight to my right foot.

“We’ve been pretending to date,” I admitted, scratching the back of my neck. “To make her ex jealous.”

His expression turned more serious; a hint of concern flickered in his eyes.

“That doesn’t seem like a good idea.” He said. “It might be fake for her, but I know it isn’t for you.”

I shook my head, adamant I could leave my emotions at bay.

“It’s just for show. No one will get hurt.”

He remained unconvinced. I could see it in his face.

“Hudson, just remember, a lot has happened between you two.”

I nodded. His words hit closer to home than I’d like to admit.

“I know, Dad. I’ll see you later.”

With that, I grabbed my jacket and headed out the door, walking across the street to Luna’s house. I walked with my hands in my pockets. I couldn’t shake the feeling that my dad’s warning might be more relevant than I wanted.

The crisp air nipped at my cheeks as I stood on their doorstep. I rapped my knuckles against the wooden door; the sound echoed through the quiet neighborhood. The door swung open, revealing Mrs. Delgato with a warm smile.

“Hudson, what a pleasant surprise.” She said, stepping aside to let me in.

I removed my beanie as I entered and ran a hand through my tousled hair. Mrs. Delgato led me into the cozy kitchen. The scent of brownies enveloped me like a warm embrace. A smell I’d longed for.

“Help yourself.” She said, gesturing towards the snacks on the counter.

“No, thank you, Mrs. Delgato. Is Luna home?”

Her eyebrows shot up in surprise.

“She’s upstairs.” She said. “Is everything okay?”

I grinned, knowing Luna would never tell her parents we were dating. There was no way I could let an opportunity like this slip through my fingers.

“She’s fine. We’re going on a date.”

Her eyes widened in shock, a hand flying to her chest.

“You and Luna?” she asked, her surprise melting into excitement. “This is unexpected but wonderful.”

I grinned, happy that her reaction was going to plan.

“It’s great, isn’t it?”

She reached her arms out to pull me into a motherly embrace.

“I knew you’d both get together.”

I suppressed a smirk, trying my best not to laugh as Luna entered. Her expression was a mix of confusion and embarrassment.

“Luna, why didn’t you tell me you and Hudson were dating?”

If she could have killed me, she would have. I choked on my laughter as she glared at me.

“I’m sorry, mom.” She said, not taking her deadly stare off me.

“She told me it’s because she couldn’t believe we’re finally together after years of her pining over me.”

I was stirring the cauldron of drama, having far too much fun. Mrs. Delgato turned to retrieve a glass from the shelf, and Luna took that as an opportunity to punch me in the arm.

“What is wrong with you?” She hissed, her cheeks flushing red.

I raised my brow.

“I’m just trying to be a wonderful boyfriend and getting to know your mom.”

“You know my mother as well as I do.” She said. “I’m going to kill you.”

“You’ve always known what to say to have me blushing.”

Luna’s mom turned around with a friendly smile, oblivious to our whispered exchange.

“Have fun, you two.”

“We will, Mom.” Luna said, her cheeks still flushed as we said our goodbyes.

As we stepped outside, the cool breeze greeted us, and I guided her across the street to where my bike was parked. The engine roared to life as I climbed on. I smirked, feeling proud as she didn’t argue. Instead, she reached for my spare helmet, strapped it, and mounted the bike. We sped off into the afternoon, ready for the adventures ahead.

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The gentle afternoon sun painted the mini golf course with warm hues, casting elongated shadows across the artificial turf. As we stepped onto the green, I couldn’t help but feel a sense of nostalgia wash over me. It had been years since we played together. However, my focus drifted to her as she admired the scene before her. Her joyful face was enthralling.

“I haven’t played in ages.”

Her words didn’t register in my mind until she turned to me.

“I heard Jockstrap was here with Cruella, so I figured we could have some fun and mess with them.”

Her eyes dimmed at the mention of them, but I would not let it affect her day. I grabbed her arm and dragged her to the first hole. She bit her lip, intimidated by the twists and obstacles. I took the lead, guiding the ball through the course with a flick.

“I forgot how much of a show-off you could be.”

She lined up her shot and hit it far away from the hole. I placed my fist in front of my mouth to hide my smile. She’s too cute.

“And I forgot how bad you were.” I said, biting my lip as she pouted.

The game progressed, and it seemed as if she’d loosened up a bit. She lined up another shot until she glanced to her left. I picked up on her tensed shoulders and followed her eyes. There was her ex, with his new flavor of the week. However, his focus wasn’t on his girlfriend, but on us. With a cocky grin, I draped my arm around Luna’s shoulders, pulling her close.

“Play along,” I whispered, my lips against her ear. “Let’s show him how it’s done.”

I noted her blushing at our proximity as goosebumps littered her arms. Despite my playful flirtation, my mind fluttered as her lavender-scented body lotion invaded my nostrils. I drew my arms around her and placed it on top of hers, holding the club.

“It looks like I’m better at something than you.” I whispered into her ear.

She scoffed.

“It’s just mini golf. It’s not like it’s going to get you anywhere.”

“It got me in this position.”

I guided her arms, positioning her for a shot.

“Is Austin still looking?”

I looked over my shoulder to find his back turned to us, talking to Cynthia. It seemed to be a heated debate as arms were flailing.

“Yes, he’s still looking.” I said, turning around and tightening my grip on her.



I may have lied, but I just wanted to hold her in my arms for a moment longer. To revel in her natural and radiant warmth. With my guidance, her ball landed in the hole with a satisfying slot. We broke apart and high-fived in celebration.

Until her beautiful smile fell. Her eyes lingered on them at the next hole. The sadness in her eyes flickered anger and jealousy inside of me. Why does she still have feelings for a jerk like him? My grip on the putter tightened, and my knuckles felt like they would crack. As the jerk leaned in to kiss Cynthia, I noticed tears pricking at the corner of Luna's eyes. My jaw clenched as a surge of anger washed over me.

In a swift, decisive motion, I lined up my shot and swung the putter with all the strength I could muster. The ball soared through the air; a perfect arc aimed straight at Jockstrap's head. There was a satisfying thud as the ball made contact. Jockstrap stumbled backward, arms flailing, before landing with a splash in the miniature lake.

There was silence until realization dawned on us, and then we laughed. The tension melted away, replaced by a sense of exhilaration.

"Did you see the look on his face?" I asked, nudging Luna.

She doubled over with laughter, clutching her stomach.

"That was awesome!" As we caught our breath, I flashed her a grin, a sense of camaraderie. "Thank you, Hudson, I needed to see that."

I grinned, delighted by her breathtaking smile. My smile widened as I glanced at Cynthia, attempting to help him out of the water before a splash followed her screech. It ignited another round of laughter as we watched her flail like a fish on land.

*Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 10:24 am*

LUNA

THE SOFT GLOW OF MY VANITY MIRROR cast a warm light over me as I stood before it. My reflection stared back at me with a mix of apprehension and melancholy. The delicate fabric of my dress flowed over my figure like a river of silk, yet my smile didn't quite reach my eyes.

I waited for this night for years, envisioning laughter and dancing, yet it felt burdened by absence. My first dance without Austin. As I adjusted my hair, my mother's voice drifted up the stairs, pulling me from my thoughts.

"Luna, Hudson is here!" She called out, a note of excitement in her tone.

With a resigned sigh, I tore my gaze from the mirror and walked downstairs. The soft sound of my heels echoed on the wooden steps. As I descended, I caught sight of Hudson waiting at the foot of the staircase, his eyes fixed on me with an intensity that made my heart skip a beat.

He stood tall and confident, a smirk playing at the corner of his lips as he took me in. I couldn't help but feel a pang of sadness as I realized he was only putting on an act, playing the part of the perfect boyfriend. Another reason the night was doomed.

As I reached the bottom of the stairs, he stepped forward, closing the distance between us in a single stride. With a charming grin, he pressed a gentle kiss to my cheek.

"Ready to face the paparazzi, Snow?" he asked, his warm breath tickling my skin as

he whispered in my ear.

My mother's voice cut through the moment, interrupting our brief exchange.

"We need pictures before you head out."

With a resigned smile, we allowed my mother to usher us into position. My parents snapped picture after picture as we posed for the camera.

The impromptu photo shoot ended, and we went outside into the cool night air. The stars twinkled overhead, casting a soft glow over the scene as we walked to his truck. He rushed to the passenger door and opened it, motioning for me to enter as if he were a gentleman.

"Are you ready for the night of your life, Ms. Delgado?" he asked with an arrogant smile.

"You seem pretty confident."

"I am." He said. "You know I'm desirable, and every girl at the dance will envy you."

I snorted before pushing him away from the door.

"No need to pretend to be a gentleman, Hudson. You can't fool me."

He moved against the door, stopping me from closing it. He placed his palms on the car roof before leaning down until his head was inside the car, dangerously close to mine. I could smell the peppermint gum.

"Maybe I've changed."

“People don’t change.”

I watched his jaw clench every time he chewed on his gum. His evergreen eyes inspected me from head to toe. The corner of his lip twitched before he pulled away, standing tall.

“This is your last chance to back out.” He said. “We could do something else.”

I shook my head, watching as he tugged on the collar of his shirt. The deep navy fabric brought out the rich tones in his eyes, enhancing his natural charisma. It added an air of sophistication to his rugged charm. He has come far from the awkward preteen I knew.

“Are you checking me out?” he asked, snapping me out of my thoughts.

My cheeks flushed, and I hoped he didn’t notice in the dim light.

“I forgot how weird-looking you are.”

He tossed his head back as his stomach shook in laughter. After the silence, he looked at me with a restrained desire to speak. The corner of his lip was raised.

“Deny it all you want, Snow, but you know I got hot.” He said, not letting me retaliate before he slammed the door shut.

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*Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 10:24 am*

### HUDSON

AS WE ENTERED THE DANCE, the room came alive with excitement. Colorful streamers twisted around the walls, and glittering fairy lights cast a soft glow over the dance floor. The air was booming with the sound of laughter and music.

But amidst all the splendor, I found my gaze drawn to the girl beside me. I watched her with awe and longing, unable to tear my gaze away. She moved through the room with a grace that defied description, her eyes wide with wonder as she took in the decorations.

I couldn't help but admire how beautiful she looked; her radiance magnified by the soft glow of the lights. Her mahogany hair cascaded down her shoulders in soft waves, framing her face like a halo, as her eyes sparkled with excitement.

I felt a tug at my heartstrings as I watched her, a deep sense of longing stirred within me. I wanted to take her hand, pull her close, and never let go. But I couldn't. My past mistakes ruined my chances. Instead, I watched her from afar as she walked off to Maya and her date. An indescribable emotion filled my gaze as I saw the happiness radiating from her. I leaned against the pillar, watching her laugh at something Maya said.

The unwelcome presence of her ex interrupted my reverie. He sidled up beside me with a scowl etched on his face. Neither of us spoke as we both watched Luna.

“What are your intentions with her?” he asked, his voice low and dangerous.

I met his gaze, my jaw set with determination.

“To treat her better than the last guy did.”

His eyes narrowed.

“Is that so? I don’t see how someone like you could ever make her happy. You have a habit of destroying everything around you.”

He’d struck a nerve, and before I could stop myself, my fist connected with his jaw with a satisfying thud. He stumbled backward; his face contorted with pain before chaos ensued.

A crowd gathered, their murmurs growing as they witnessed the unfolding drama. We exchanged blows, our fists flying as we grappled with each other in a whirlwind of anger and adrenaline.

“Stop it!” Luna said, her tone filled with anger and disappointment. “You’re both ruining everything!”

Her words were like a bucket of cold water, and my anger ebbed away, replaced by a sense of shame. I stepped back, panting, looking at the mess we made. With a heavy heart, I turned to Luna.

“Luna -”

“Save it, Hudson.” she said, her eyes brimming with tears of frustration. “I just wanted one night, and you jerks had to ruin it.”

Jockstrap stood up with blood gushing out his nose. She delivered a hateful glare in his direction before storming off.

I stepped out into the cool night air, my breath forming misty clouds as I exhaled. A sense of guilt gnawed at me like a persistent itch. I lit a cigarette, but I didn't smoke it. Glancing down at my hands, I noticed the angry red split knuckles from the fight. Ignoring the pain, I clenched my fists, my jaw tightening with frustration. I messed up. Before I could dwell too much on my thoughts, footsteps approached. I looked up to see Maya, her expression of concern and disapproval. She opened her mouth to speak, but I cut her off.

"I'm not in the mood for a lecture, Maya." I said, my tone sharper than I intended.

Her face softened, and she took a step closer.

"I know," she said. "But you need to understand how much tonight meant to her. She's been looking forward to this since freshman year. And she just realized her dreams of being Homecoming Queen are gone."

My heart sank at her words. The weight of my actions crashed down on me like a ton of bricks. I never meant to hurt her, but I let my anger get the best of me and ruined her night. Maya gave me a sympathetic look before turning to leave me with my thoughts. I watched her retreating figure, feeling a sense of emptiness settle over me.

I stood there, lost in guilt and remorse, music and laughter drifted from the gymnasium. I could hear Principal Quinn's voice through the speakers, proclaiming it was time to announce the homecoming king and queen. A spark of an idea ignited in my mind, and I knew what to do to make things right. With determination, I stubbed out my cigarette and headed back inside.

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LUNA

DESPITE THE GYMNASIUM PULSING with the rhythm of music and laughter, I felt like my night was shrouded in darkness. I sat at my table, shoulders slumped, a heaviness settling over me like a suffocating blanket. Two jerks had ruined my evening.

The announcement for homecoming king and queen echoed through the hall, I couldn't help but groan. I'd hoped to win, but the universe seemed intent on stomping on my hopes.

I tasted bitterness in my mouth as Austin and Cynthia were crowned. I watched as she walked onto the stage, waving as if she were at a pageant. She strutted to the microphone, ready to deliver her triumphant speech. I braced myself for the onslaught of jealousy and resentment.

However, before she could speak, gasps echoed in the gymnasium. A sense of déjà vu struck me as Hudson burst onto the stage. With a swift movement, he yanked the crown off her head, before bolting off the stage like a fugitive escaping the law.

My eyes widened in shock as I watched him flee, unable to process what was happening until he was beside me, grabbing my hand and urging me to run. My heart raced as I followed him through the crowd, the noise fading into the background as we reached the empty parking lot.

We stopped beside his truck, both panting for breath. Adrenaline coursed through my veins. I punched him in the arm, the force of my blow surprising even myself.



“Why did you do that?” I asked, my voice laced with confusion and frustration.

He grinned, a mischievous sparkle in his eyes, and with a tenderness that took my breath away, he placed the crown on my head.

“In my world, you’re the rightful queen.” He said, his words carrying a weight I couldn’t comprehend.

I was speechless, my heart pounding as I struggled to process what was happening.

“You’re going to get into so much trouble.”

“It was worth it.”

Goosebumps prickled my skin as he stepped closer to fix the crown, straightening it out. His eyes locked with mine, no sound other than our steady breathing.

“Perfect.”

He shrugged off his suit jacket, draping it around my shoulders. I cleared my throat and thanked him before looking down at my heels.

“Let’s get you home.”

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The hallway outside the principal’s office was eerily quiet, the air thick with tension as I waited for the news of Hudson’s fate. I fidgeted with the strap of my bag, my heart hammering as I prepared myself for the worst.

The door creaked open, and Hudson emerged, followed by Cynthia, seething with

rage.

“I want my crown back.” She said, her voice dripping with venom.

Hudson tapped his pockets as if searching for it before smirking at her.

“Sorry, Cynthia.” He said, his tone dripping with sarcasm. “I seemed to have misplaced it.”

My heart sank at his flippant attitude, knowing I had to intervene before he put his foot in it again. With a resigned sigh, I stepped forward and handed the crown to Principal Quinn. He eyed Hudson.

“If you wish to go on the senior ski trip, Mr. Wilder, I suggest you stay out of trouble.”

Hudson shrugged, unfazed by the reprimand. Principal Quinn retreated to his office. Cynthia shot us one last venomous glare before storming off in a huff.

“Do you realize how much trouble you could have gotten into?” I asked him, my voice tinged with exasperation. “Stuff like that could ruin your chances at college.”

His jaw clenched, as his eyes flashed with a sudden anger that caught me off guard.

“And what if college wasn’t part of my plan?” He snapped, his tone harsh and defensive.

I recoiled, taken aback by his outburst.

“Why wouldn’t you want to go to college?”

His expression softened, but his eyes remained guarded as if he knew the answer but couldn't reveal it.

"It's not the only thing that matters, Luna." he said, before turning on his heel and storming down the hallway, leaving me bewildered.

?

Dark clouds loomed overhead, unleashing torrents of rain upon the deserted streets as I marched home. I refused to drive home with Hudson after his horrible attitude. I'd forgotten how much of a jerk he could be. Now soaked to the bone and seething with resentment, I trudged along, oblivious to the downpour.

His truck pulled beside me, the headlights casting an eerie glow in the gloomy darkness. He stuck his head out the window, rain dripping from his hair.

"Get inside the truck, Luna."

I shook my head, my jaw clenched with stubborn defiance.

"I'd rather freeze to death."

Annoyance flashed across his features, his grip tightening on the steering wheel. I remained resolute, my resolve unyielding. He stopped the car, the engine rumbling to a halt. In one swift motion, he climbed out and scooped me over his shoulder, my protests falling on deaf ears as he deposited me into the passenger seat.

He locked the door behind me and slid into the driver's seat. The tension was suffocating. We drove in silence. The only sound was the relentless drumming of rain against the truck. After what felt like an eternity, he broke the silence.

“How long are you going to ignore me?” He asked, his eyes fixed on the road. I ignored him, but he was relentless. “I was going to apologize.”

“Good.”

“I changed my mind.”

The agitation seeped through my veins.

“Hanging around with you has reminded me of what a jerk you are.”

His hands tightened on the steering wheel, his knuckles turning white with frustration.

“I’m not him.” He snapped, his tone sharp with anger. “And I don’t want to be.”

“What does Austin have to do with this?”

He glanced at me before returning his focus to the road.

“You want me to be like him, but I’m not.”

The words hung heavy in the air, a stark reminder of our tumultuous situation. With a sigh, he glanced at me, his eyes tired and defeated.

“This fake dating thing was a bad idea.” He said. “We should end it now.”

I nodded in agreement, my resolve wavering.

“I think that’s a great idea.”

Climbing out of the truck, I slammed the door shut behind me; the sound echoed in the empty street as I stormed into my home.

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LUNA

IT WAS TOO EARLY as we found ourselves in the school parking lot. Families gathered to bid farewell to their children, embarking on a two-week trip to a ski resort. The senior trip. A place of memories and drama.

Hudson and I stood side by side as we said goodbye to our parents. We never broke the news of our breakup. It was the first time I'd seen him in three weeks. Our parents were unaware of the silent turmoil brewing between us. Avoiding each other's gaze, we exchanged forced smiles and brief conversations with our parents. Mr. Wilder placed his hand on Hudson's shoulder, his expression a mix of concern and resignation.

"Please try to behave."

"I'll try my best."

His rebellious spirit was clear, even in this tender moment. He enveloped his father in a tight hug. I hugged my parents and waved as they left with Mr. Wilder. Once they had disappeared from our view, we went our separate ways, our paths diverging like two ships passing in the night. I climbed onto the bus and settled into the seat beside Maya.

"Are you ready for the trip we've been waiting four years for?"

Despite my annoyance at seeing Hudson, her enthusiasm was contagious. We'd heard all the wild stories of what happens on these trips, and now we'd finally experience it

ourselves.

“We’re going to have the time of our lives.”

Hudson walked past us, his hands buried deep in his pockets, his eyes fixed on the ground. Without sparing a glance, he headed to the back of the bus. I looked over my shoulder, following his movements. With a swift motion, he pulled his hood over his head and leaned against the window. I didn’t stop looking until the bus lurched into motion.

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We stepped off the bus and into the warm reception area of the resort. My cheeks were rosy from the crisp mountain air. Our teachers bustled around, handing out room assignments and organizing the logistics of our stay.

“Luna, you’re with Cynthia.”

A knot formed in my stomach as I received my room key. Our eyes met across the room. Shock and disgust were on her face, and I’m certain I mirrored it. Determined not to make a scene, I dragged my luggage toward our assigned room, and Cynthia followed. The atmosphere in the room was tense as we unpacked our bags in silence, neither of us wanting to speak first. But it was Cynthia who broke the ice.

“Look, I don’t want to fight anymore.” She said, her voice surprisingly soft. “I want to enjoy this trip. Can we call a truce?”

Her words surprised me, my brows furrowed in disbelief. With a moment’s pause, I nodded, ready to leave it all behind and enjoy the best senior trip.

“I’d like that.”

She glanced at me with a small smile.

“I’ve been to this resort before, and there’s a secluded hot spa. Away from the main lodge and prying teachers.” She said. “I invited everyone tonight for a party. That’s why we’re here, after all. I’d like it if you came too.”

Despite my initial reservations, I accepted her offer. We exchanged tentative smiles as we continued unpacking. However, I was hesitant about how long this truce will last.

?

I arrived at the secluded hot spa in the woods with Maya. My heart was pounding with a mix of excitement and trepidation. As we stepped into the clearing, we saw the senior class scattered around, drinks in hand, their laughter echoing through the trees. My eyes scanned the crowd until they landed on Hudson talking with his friend Eli. Our eyes locked, time suspended. But, just as quickly, he looked away with an unreadable expression. Maya turned to me.

“Why are we here if Cynthia hates you?”

“I told you, she wanted to make peace.”

She sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose.

“I love how nice and forgiving you are, but Cynthia is the devil. She doesn’t want peace.”

Cynthia approached with her entourage before I could respond. Maya pursed her lips.

“I’m going to get a drink.”



Cynthia ignored her and kept her eyes on me.

“Hey, Luna.” She said with a friendly smile.

My eyes widened as she wrapped her arms around me for a hug.

“Hey.”

I was unsure of what to say or do. With a saccharine smile, she beckoned me closer.

“We’ve been waiting for you to dip in the hot spa.”

I’d never been a fan of water, ever since I was a little kid and almost drowned during a pool party. I scratched my arm as I debated whether to decline, but I wanted to make peace with Cynthia. Pushing all my doubts to the side, I nodded. As I followed Cynthia and her friends to the water, I felt my stomach doing backflips. We stood on the edge. As I was about to question if we should get our clothing wet, I felt a shove on my back. My worries turned to shock as my body hit the surface - the water was freezing. A chorus of laughter erupted around me as I resurfaced, my teeth chattering. My throat closed in on myself as I felt the panic overrule the cold. The memories of the pool party ran through my mind as if I were reliving it. My body gave up as my brain shut off.

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HUDSON

I WAS ON THE SIDELINES WITH ELI, nursing a cup comprising an unknown concoction. He'd convinced me to come to this party, stating that I couldn't spend the next two weeks in my room or on the slopes. Despite my disbelief, he had a knack for pushing me beyond my comfort zone.

A sudden shift in the atmosphere drew my attention. My gaze flicked over to the clearing. And there she was. The girl I couldn't stop thinking about. My heart skipped a beat, but I feigned indifference. Our eyes connected amidst the chaotic party, but I turned my attention to Eli.

"What?" I asked as I noticed him looking at me with a knowing smile.

"How long will you pretend you're not madly in love with her?"

My eyes were downcast, avoiding his all-knowing eyes.

"I'm not pretending. I'm just withholding."

"That's the same thing."

I shook my head.

"I'm not the guy a girl like Luna Delgato falls in love with."

He opened his mouth, but a commotion erupted nearby, drawing our attention. Our

heads turned as people gathered around the open water. Cynthia and her band of Barbies gathered, laughing and pointing at something in the water. I squinted to see the figure in the water, then gasped. Luna.

The memories of that summer pool party flashed through my mind. One incident that instilled a lifetime of fear in her. I shrugged off my jacket and rushed into the water without a second thought. I reached her just as she was about to sink into the darkness, my heart pounding with fear. Ignoring the icy chill, I pulled her to the surface. She gasped for breath, her eyes wide with terror and her body trembling from the cold.

Maya and Eli hurried over to help us out, and I wasted no time wrapping my jacket around her. I didn't care if I got hypothermia. With a fierce glare at Cynthia, I lifted Luna into my arms and carried her back to the resort.

Once inside her room, I lit the fireplace to warm the chilly air, leaving her in front of it to set up a shower. I returned to discover her in the same spot, gazing into the fire with an empty expression.

"You need to take a shower and get warm."

She didn't speak as she stood up, with my jacket clutched against her, and walked into the bathroom. I walked to my room, in desperate need of getting warm. The cold seeped into my bones as I walked back in a thin shirt.

I waited a while before leaving my room to check up on Luna. Opening the door, she appeared frightened, as if realizing the situation. Tears were streaming down her cheeks like a waterfall. I hesitated before wrapping her in my arms. I led her to her bed, keeping one arm around her, as I opened her bed sheets with the other.

"Get some sleep."

I guided her onto the mattress before tucking her in, even reaching for the spare blanket on Cynthia's bed. She could freeze for all I cared. After covering Luna with blankets, I left the room, until Luna's voice stopped me.

"Hudson," she said, the tiredness deep in her voice. "Will you please stay here? I can't deal with being alone with Cynthia."

I hesitated, not wanting to reel myself back into this situation, but I'd never been able to say no to Luna. The recliner looked uncomfortable, but I made my way there, hanging my jacket over it.

"No," she said. "Stay in here with me."

I did not know what she was talking about until she lifted the bedcovers. My muscles were tense as I climbed beside her. I kept my hands on my abdomen, afraid of moving a muscle. My heart almost combusted as she wrapped her arm around my torso and placed her head on my chest. I didn't breathe, afraid she'd move away. But as she nestled into my chest, I loosened up. I watched her sleeping form, admiring the delicate curve of her features and how her eyelashes fluttered against her cheeks.

I brushed a strand of hair away from her face before caressing her cheek with the pad of my thumb. I closed my eyes, relaxing in the bed's warmth. Her presence comforted me. My knuckles drew against her cheekbone as I waited for sleep to claim me.

?

The morning light seeped through the room, casting a soft glow on our entwined figures. I didn't want to wake her, enjoying having her in my arms. As she awakened, I stiffened. She jumped out of my arms. Our position hit her like a splash of cold water.

“Morning.”

“Morning.”

Tension filled the air as we stood on opposite sides, avoiding eye contact.

“I better get back to my room.”

“Sure.” she said, her cheeks flushed. I grabbed my jacket and rushed for the door, but she stopped me by calling my name. “Thank you for saving me.”

I nodded in response, attempting to remain calm.

“No problem.”

Outside the door, I collided with Maya, who was about to knock. Her eyes widened, leaving me to ponder her thoughts.

“Good morning, Hudson.”

She winked at me with a mischievous glint before slipping past me into Luna’s room. I wandered down the hallway, lost in thought until I bumped into Chambers. His imposing figure filled the space. My eyes narrowed as they met his.

“You knew she was afraid of water, and you went along with Cynthia’s plan, didn’t you?”

He stepped forward to intimidate me, but I held my ground.

“What are you going to do about it?” He asked. “Are you going to hit me again?”

He raised an eyebrow, waiting for me to strike. For a moment, my hand shook, wanting to punch him, but I shook my head.

“No,” I said. “I’m not.”

I brushed past him, bumping my shoulder against his, before disappearing into my room. I was proud of myself for not retaliating because I knew Luna wouldn’t want me to.

?

LUNA

I HAD BEEN NURSING MY EMBARRASSMENT in the shadows for days, avoiding any social interactions. After day three, Maya wasn't having it. She burst into my room and tossed the covers off me. I groaned, refusing to move, until she grabbed my ankles and yanked me off the bed.

“Get up, we're going to the party in Stacy Henderson's room.”

I groaned and clutched my head.

“Stacy Henderson hates me.”

“I'm not her biggest fan, but we need fun.”

Reluctantly, I got ready and followed her down the hallway into Stacy's room. To my surprise, there were more people than I expected. Cynthia, sitting on Austin's lap, caused me to stop in my tracks. Maya nudged me forward and handed me a drink. Amidst the chatter and laughter, we joined the circle of people playing Truth or Dare. I scanned the circle and locked eyes with Hudson. There was an unspoken tension between us.

I distracted myself with everyone playing the game, becoming anxious as the questions became more daring. It was Stacy's turn to ask a question, and I watched as her drunken eyes scanned us like a hunter with prey. My heart dropped as her gaze fell on me.

“Luna,” she said with a sadistic grin. “Truth or dare?”

I gulped, cowering as every set of eyes in the room turned to me.

“Truth.”

She took a sip of her drink, but I could see the arrogance on her face.

“Is it true Hudson is a better kisser than Austin?”

Everyone laughed, but their ears perked, desperate to know the answer.

“Grow up, Stacy.” Hudson said, leaning forward to see her.

“I asked her, not you.”

Austin, not one to miss out on taunting Hudson, leaned forward too.

“What’s the problem, Wilder?” He asked. “Scared I’m better than you?”

Hudson’s nostrils flared as he chugged his drink.

“Unlike you, I don’t like to throw my relationship in everyone’s face.”

Relationship. I appreciated him pretending, despite having called our arrangement off weeks ago. The humiliation would have killed me.

“What relationship?” Austin asked. “I’ve never seen you kiss once.”

“What we do is none of your business.”



Austin looked back and forth between us with a challenging glint in his eyes.

“Then kiss her right now.”

We hesitated, our eyes meeting in uncertainty. We’d never kissed before, and the thought of doing it in front of everyone was nerve-wracking. But I had something to prove. With a determined spark in my eyes, I stood up and approached Hudson. His eyes were so wide it looked like they were going to explode. Ignoring the gasps and whispers around us, I straddled his waist. I leaned forward until our lips brushed.

“Play along.” I whispered, before pressing my lips to his.

His hands gripped my waist, pulling me closer. I expected it to be a simple act of defiance, a response to Austin’s challenge, but it was so much more. As if the kiss unlocked a floodgate of emotions I never realized were there. There was a tenderness in the way his lips moved against mine.

When we pulled away, I felt breathless, and my mind was reeling with the intensity of what had just happened. I looked into his eyes, searching for an explanation. But all I found was a mirrored reflection of my confusion. As I climbed off his lap, emotions swirled within me. I shot a defiant glare at Austin before turning on my heel and storming out of the room.

“Luna, wait.”

Austin followed me out, his voice sharp with warning as he tried to catch up with me.

“You shouldn’t be getting involved with him.”

His comment irked me, but I remained silent, refusing to engage in his attempts to dissuade me. Every step I took away from him was a step to reclaiming my

independence. I didn't owe him any explanation after everything he did to me. It was time for me to forge my path.

?

HUDSON

DARKNESS ENVELOPED THE RESORT, and the crisp night air carried the promise of adventure. Eli and I were roaming the resort, laughter echoing in the silent expanse. As we wandered, my eyes widened in awe at the sight before me. I nudged him.

“Look there.”

He gasped as he caught sight of a majestic moose grazing nearby. Excitement surged through us at the rare opportunity.

“Let’s see if we can get it to come to us.”

I grabbed a branch laden with fresh leaves, dusting some snowflakes off it. Eli joined me as we waved it in the air, attempting to lure the moose towards us. That’s when I got a devious plan in my head.

“I have a plan.”

With a mischievous glint, I motioned Eli to follow my lead. He didn’t argue. Here we were, in the middle of the night, leading an unsuspecting moose on a daring escapade into the lodge.

We moved silently. The thrill of what we were about to do heightened our senses as we guided the moose through the deserted hallways of the lodge. With expert precision, we maneuvered it to room 101. Jockstrap’s room.

I watched like a proud father as Eli picked the lock. As we opened his door, my heart raced with anticipation. With a swift flick, I tossed the branch into the room. The moose followed as if he was in on the prank. With a triumphant grin, we slammed the door shut, trapping Chambers inside with a wild animal.

Our laughter rang out in the silent halls as we dashed away from the scene. We collapsed onto our beds with exhilarated breaths. As we drifted to sleep, the memory of our prank lingered in my mind, and I couldn't help but smile in excitement at what could transpire tomorrow.

?

I awoke to the sound of frantic screams piercing the peaceful morning air. My eyes snapped open, and I glanced at Eli, our silent communication speaking volumes as we shared a mischievous grin. We bolted out of bed and followed the chaotic noise.

Alongside the mass of our senior classmates, we rushed down the hallway toward the source of the commotion. We arrived at Chambers' room, the door wide open, revealing a scene straight out of a comedy.

Inside, I spotted Jockstrap and his friend perched precariously atop the dresser, their faces contorted with fear as they attempted to evade the unexpected intruder. I nudged Eli as I noticed Chambers sporting a sizable bruise on his forehead, a testament to his unfortunate encounter with the moose's hooves.

The sight was too comical for us to handle, and we erupted into peals of laughter, our mirth echoing in the confined space of the hallway. We whipped out our phones, eager to capture the absurdity of their predicament.

Teachers and lodge staff rushed in, their urgent voices commanding us to return to our rooms. I snapped one more picture before pocketing my phone. As I turned to

leave, I caught sight of Luna standing in the hallway, her eyes twinkling with amusement. With a wink and a sly grin, I acknowledged her before following Eli back to our room, leaving behind the morning's chaos.

?

I sat in my room, the darkness outside punctuated by the glowing moon. A soft knock on my door startled me out of my brooding thoughts. I hope Eli didn't forget his keys again.

"Maya, what are you doing here?"

She flashed me a warm smile, her eyes glinting with mischief.

"I'm going to the hot tub with Luna and was wondering if you wanted to join us?"

My initial instinct was to decline her offer. Memories of our kiss clouded my mind. The kiss was only for revenge, but it was the kiss I'd dreamed of for years.

"Sure, why not?"

She grinned, promising to meet me there in ten. It didn't take me long to get changed, and I was on my way to the hot tub with my towel tossed over my shoulder. However, I froze as I noticed Luna immersed in the warm water, her gaze fixed on the star-studded sky. She turned to me and froze.

"Where's Maya?" I asked, but she could only shrug, avoiding my gaze.

Relieved, I seized the opportunity to be alone with her. With a splash, I joined her. My arms were behind my head as I kept my gaze on her, smirking as she attempted to avoid mine.

“I know you had something to do with the moose in Austin’s room.”

I had to bite my lip to not burst into laughter. That will never not be funny.

“That was so strange. I don’t know how it happened.” I said, feigning innocence.

She seemed uncomfortable. Her guarded posture betrayed her unease. I, however, remained nonchalant, my smug grin unwavering.

“So,” I said, attempting to make conversation. “You kissed me.”

Her cheeks were flushed, and it wasn’t from the steaming water. I grinned at her attempt to seem unfazed.

“I just wanted to shut Austin up.”

I leaned my elbow on the edge of the hot tub and placed my head in my hand as I looked at her.

“I thought we broke up. ”

“He didn’t know that.”

Undeterred, I raised my brow, letting her know I didn’t believe her absurd story.

“So, the kiss meant nothing?”

“Nothing at all.” She said, but her words lacked conviction.

Wanting to mess with her, I slid closer to her until our chests were touching.

“You never answered Stacy’s question.”

Her breath hitched as I leaned my head down.

“What question?”

My arrogant grin resurfaced.

“Who is the better kisser?”

She hesitated as a multitude of emotions reflected on her face.

“I don’t even remember our kiss.”

My smirk widened as our eyes locked. She’d always been a terrible liar.

“Then I’ll have to remind you.”

I leaned in for a kiss, our lips mere inches apart, until someone interrupted our intimate moment.

“Hey, Hudson.”

We pulled away, the spell broken, as Stacy stood in the entryway with a towel clutched in her hands.

“Hey, Stacy.”

My eyes darted everywhere but in Luna’s direction. The silence was suffocating, and I needed to get out.

“I’ll see you both tomorrow.”

I left, leaving behind a trail of unresolved tension as I disappeared into the night.

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*Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 10:24 am*

LUNA

MAYA AND I NESTLED IN A CORNER BOOTH of the lodge's main room, savoring steaming cups of hot chocolate as we indulged in some much-needed girl talk.

“Did you hear Greg Hemsley kissed Harriet Palmer last night?”

The shocking news almost caused me to spit out my drink.

“Isn't he dating Hailey Keller?”

“Not anymore.”

Our conversation danced from one topic to the next, animated gestures punctuated our gossip as we dissected the school drama with fervor. Eli and Hudson interrupted our chatter.

Hudson, typically exuding an air of confident swagger, now leaned on Eli's shoulder, wincing with each step.

“What happened?” I asked, standing up.

“We were snowboarding, and he fell.”

As Eli spoke, he forgot he was holding Hudson, and moved forward, causing Hudson to fall with a thud.

“Ow.” He said, not attempting to get up.

Concern etched across my face as I sprang into action, offering help getting Hudson to his room. Once inside, we lowered him onto his bed. I perched on the edge of his bed, my heart swelling with empathy.

“Is there anything you need?”

He winced as he shifted his weight before turning his head to look at me. He flashed me a boyish grin.

“Just you.”

I squinted at his cheeky remark before punching him in the arm. He groaned and clutched his arm, wincing as if I’d broken it. So dramatic.

“If you need anything, call me.” I said, before exiting the room with Maya.

“That boy has it bad.” She said into my ear once we entered the hallway.

I shoved her.

“He’s just being Hudson.”

Our banter continued as we reached my room until my phone interrupted our conversation.

I’m bored.

Hudson. I arched an amused brow at his ridiculous behavior.

“I’ll be right back,” I said. “Hudson needs me.”

A smirk danced at the corner of Maya’s lips, but I ignored it and went to get Hudson some food before going to his room. I entered, carrying a tray with a bowl of soup and a cup of hot chocolate. Eli’s bed was empty. I set Hudson’s food down and turned to face him. He leaned against a stack of pillows.

“You need to eat something.”

I pushed the tray towards him. He smirked, his eyes twinkling with mischief.

“I love it when you’re bossy.”

I gave an exasperated eye roll, trying to suppress a smile.

“Stop deflecting and eat.”

He pouted but ate his soup. It’s the only time he’s silent. He placed his bowl on the table and fell back against the pillows.

“I’m cold.” he said, feigning a shiver.

Now he’s just looking for attention. I indulged him.

“I’ll see what I can find.”

“You could always keep me warm.”

I ignored him, and grabbed a blanket on the recliner, draping it over him.

“Isn’t that better?” I asked, a hint of amusement in my voice.

“Not really.”

As I tucked him into the blanket, he gazed at me with an unrecognizable expression. I raised an eyebrow, a blush creeping into my cheeks.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” I asked, feeling self-conscious under his gaze.

He smiled, his eyes reflecting fond memories.

“You were always good at taking care of others.”

I blushed deeper, a shy smile gracing my lips.

“That’s because I got practice patching you up when we were kids.” Our eyes locked, lost in the shared memory, before I shook myself back to reality. “I’ll check on you later. You need some rest.”

He nodded, and I wasted no time rushing out the door. There was too much nostalgia. As I left the room, my thoughts churned with confusion and frustration. I was almost to my room when I realized I’d left my phone with Hudson. Turning on my heel, I hurried back, only to find him standing upright. His injury miraculously healed.

My gasp of surprise echoed in the room as he froze, caught red-handed. I glared at him, anger flashing as I snatched my phone from the bedside table.

“Luna -”

“Save it.” I said, my voice trembling with betrayal.

He opened his mouth to respond, but I cut him off with a sharp head shake. Ignoring

his protests, I stormed out of the room. His calls for me to come back fell on deaf ears.

?

HUDSON

IN THE QUIET EXPANSE of the wintry landscape, I trudged through the snow, my breath misting in the frigid air. My heart weighed with remorse as I sought Luna. Each step felt heavier than the last.

I spotted her silhouette on a bench, a solitary figure amidst the falling snowflakes. Approaching her cautiously, I sat beside her, the frosty bench sending a shiver through my body. We sat in silence. The only noise around was the soft fall of the snowflakes.

“I’m sorry.” I said, my voice laden with regret.

She turned to me; her expression guarded yet curious.

“Why did you do it?”

I sighed, my breath forming a cloud in the cold air.

“We haven’t been on the best terms. I wanted to spend time with you.”

“So, you faked an injury?”

I bit my lip.

“Technically, I got hurt. I just exaggerated it.”

She sighed.

“You could have told me you wanted to hang out.”

I turned to her.

“How, Luna?” I asked. “It’s not like we know how to talk to each other anymore.”

“That’s not true.”

“It is. There used to be a time when we could tell each other everything.”

She placed her hands on her knees.

“That was a long time ago.”

“I know.”

Her gaze softened, thawing the frosty barrier between us.

“I miss the guy you used to be.”

My eyes met hers, searching for understanding.

“I never liked that guy.”

A gentle smile graced her lips.

“I did.” She said, her words carrying the weight of our shared history.

I sighed, turning to her with the most serious look I could muster.

“That summer, when I destroyed our -”

“Let’s not speak about that.” She said. “It’s all in the past.”

I reached my hand out.

“Truce?”

She didn’t hesitate to shake my hand with a smile.

“Truce.”

The icy barrier between us melted away, leaving a newfound understanding behind. The air seemed lighter, infused with the warmth of reconciliation.

As she walked back to the lodge, I seized the chance to throw a snowball at her. She spun around, laughter bubbling forth as she retaliated with a flurry of snowballs. I’d declared war. Our laughter rang into the stillness of the chilly night. When her back was turned, I ran towards her and pulled her down into the blanket of snow. We rolled onto our backs and watched as the snowflakes descended from the heavens. Our breaths mingled with the cold air in soft, misty puffs. The world was calm as if holding its breath. The only sound was the gentle rustle of the wind through the trees.

I turned my head to look at her, taking in the delicate curve of her profile. Her lashes cast shadows on her cheeks and the soft blush that tinted her nose and cheeks made her look ethereal. I felt a warmth in my chest as I admired her beauty. She turned to meet my eyes, a small smile playing at the corners of her lips.

“What are you looking at?” she asked, her voice a gentle whisper that floated on the crisp night air.



I smiled, a mischievous glint in my eyes.

“Just admiring the view.”

A blush crept up on her cheeks. She averted my gaze, the corners of her mouth lifted in a shy smile.

“We should head back inside before we freeze to death.”

I sighed, the sound with heavy reluctance, but I pushed myself from the snow. Offering her a hand, I helped her to her feet. As we walked back to the lodge, the warmth of our shared moment lingered between us. I glanced at her as we crossed the threshold, my heart heavy with desire to hold on to the magical moment in the snow, because once we leave here, we’ll go back to pretending.

?

Two weeks have passed since the senior trip. I perched high in the branches of an old oak tree in the woods near my home. The late afternoon sunlight filtered through the leaves, casting scattered shadows on the ground below. I wiped the sweat from my brow with the back of my hand as I surveyed my progress. The treehouse was taking shape, its wooden beams sturdy and well-placed.

“It’s looking good, kid.” My father’s voice called up from below, breaking the tranquil silence of the forest.

I glanced down, a grin spreading across my face.

“It should. It’s taken me two years.”

“Are you going to let her see it?”

My grin faded.

“I’m not sure.” I said, shifting my gaze back to the treehouse.

“Let’s not pretend she’s not the reason you’ve been doing this.” He said, a gentle encouragement in his tone. “She’d love it.”

I sighed, running a hand through my hair.

“I’ll think about it.”

He smiled up at me, with a look of understanding in his eyes.

“I wouldn’t think for too long.”

He returned to the house, leaving me to gaze back at the treehouse. I thought of what this treehouse symbolized. For some, it was a simple stack of wood, but for me and Luna, it held a lifetime of memories. Memories that I shattered but am willing to rebuild. I hammered in another nail, the rhythmic sound echoed in the woods. Showing this to Luna motivated me to finish it.

?

HUDSON

THE SCHOOL HALLWAYS WERE ALIVE with the spirit of Halloween. Strings of orange and purple lights weaved above the locker, casting an eerie glow. Cardboard ghosts and cobwebs adorned the walls, with a few scattered carved pumpkins with flickering LED candles. Sweet smelling candy corn filled the air, along with the excited chatter of students discussing their evening plans.

I shrugged off my leather jacket and slung it over my shoulder. The hallways were too hot. I'm glad I wore my gray Oasis shirt underneath. I spotted Luna by her locker, her back turned to me as she rummaged through it. With a confident stride, I approached her, leaning against the lockers beside hers.

"Hey, Snow." I greeted, my voice smooth and laid-back.

She looked up, a little startled, but recovered with a smile.

"Hey, are you going to the party tonight?"

"Of course." I said without hesitation.

She arched an eyebrow.

"That's a surprise. I always pictured you as hating Halloween, or fun."

My grin widened at her remark, and I shook my head.

“You don’t know me as well as you think.”

She tilted her head, curiosity piqued.

“Is that so?”

I leaned in closer, lowering my voice conspiratorially.

“Yes. I already have our costumes planned out.”

“You do?”

“Yep,” I said, straightening up and crossing my arms over my chest. “You’re going to love it.”

She hesitated, biting her lower lip in thought.

“As long as it doesn’t get us into any trouble.”

I winked at her, my eyes sparkling with recklessness.

“No promises, but I guarantee you’ll have a fun time.”

The bell rang, interrupting our conversation. She gathered her books, giving me a skeptical yet intrigued look.

“Fine. I’ll trust you, but it better be good.”

“I promise.”

?

After a brutal school day, I entered my dad's auto repair shop. The familiar scent of motor oil and metal filled my nostrils. Clanging tools and the hum of engines created a comforting symphony. Grease smudged my dad's face and hands as he hunched over the engine of an old Chevy .

"Hey, Dad." I said, grabbing a pair of overalls from a hook on the wall.

My dad straightened up and wiped his hands on a rag.

"Hey, Kiddo. How was school?"

"Boring." I said, slipping into the overalls and rolling up my sleeves.

I joined my dad by the car, taking the wrench before diving into the work. As we tinkered with the engine, my dad glanced at me out of the corner of his eye.

"How's Luna?"

I shrugged, not looking up from the engine, trying to play it off.

"She's a lot of work."

His eyes twinkled with amusement.

"You're not fooling anyone. She brings out the good side of you."

"What are you talking about?"

He chuckled.

"For one, I haven't had a call from your principal in a while. And two, don't think I

haven't noticed you stopped smoking."

I shook my head, feigning indifference.

"I'm just over smoking. It has nothing to do with Luna." I said. "We're just pretending. I don't care about her in that way."

He leaned against the car with a smug smile.

"You remind me so much of your mother. She never gave up on people."

A moment of silence fell between us, as the mention of my mother brought a pang of sadness. I brushed it off, focusing on the task at hand.

"Don't push her away." My dad continued. "When love is real, you fight for it."

I considered his words. A mixture of emotions swirled inside me. Luna is the love of my life, but I know she'd be better off without me. I have hurt everyone I've ever loved in their life, and I would not do that to Luna a second time.

?

LUNA

I STOOD IN FRONT OF MY MIRROR, adjusting the collar of the costume Hudson insisted I wear. With a frown, I glanced at my reflection. I hate Hudson. I thought as I gazed at the Snow White costume. The pale yellow shirt and blue bodice felt like an ill-fitting piece of my past. Memories of the past crept into my mind, making me shiver. I'm going to murder him.

"You look beautiful." My mother said, entering the room.

Her eyes sparkled with pride as she admired me. I forced a smile.

"Thanks, Mom."

A shadow fell across my doorway, and I turned to see Hudson leaning against the frame, an arrogant grin plastered on his face. He wore a matching Prince Florian costume, every bit of him charming. It deepened my unease.

"You look ridiculous."

His eyes twinkled with mischief as if he enjoyed my discomfort.

"You always know how to make me blush, Snow."

"Let's just get this over with." I said, eager to leave.

"Not without photos, Snow."

Hudson grinned as if my dismay was his greatest source of entertainment.

“Thank you, Hudson!” My mother said, before running out of my room and calling for us to meet her downstairs.

I stomped forward and punched him in his arm with as much force as possible.

“Ow!” he said, rubbing his arms.

“That’s for the ridiculous outfit and the photographic evidence of it!”

“I just want memories for the grandkids!”

My mother returned with a camera, beaming as she snapped photos of us. Hudson squeezed my waist in a spot where he knew I was ticklish. I hit his chest as he burst into laughter. My mother was loving every second. After what felt like an eternity, my mom declared she was done. Hudson extended his arm out to me.

“Are you ready?”

I took his arm and walked out to his truck. The crisp fall air did little to chase away the tension in my chest. As we drove to the dance, I stared out the window, lost in thought.

?

The gymnasium was a transformed wonderland of spooky decorations, cobwebs strewn across the ceiling, and orange and purple lights cast an eerie glow. I admired the effort put into the party.

I spotted Maya across the room as we headed for refreshments. I weaved through the



costumed crowd and embraced her.

“Well, you look like a cute couple.” She said with a grin.

I sent her a warning glare as Hudson’s smirk widened.

“Thank you, Maya, I thought so too.” He said, wrapping his arm around my waist. “If you will excuse us, I want to share a dance with my princess.”

He winked at Maya, as if they planned to annoy me together. I followed him to the middle of the dance floor, and he extended his hand to me with a playful glint in his eyes. The moment I placed my hand in his, the song slowed down.

“What are the odds a slow song plays the moment we step onto the dance floor?”

“Likely,” he said, biting off a grin. “The DJ owed me a favor, and I collected.”

I raised an eyebrow, surprised by his statement. Typical Hudson. He pulled me closer until our bodies were flushed together.

“I don’t have cooties anymore. You can be closer.” He said with a chuckle.

I hesitated for a moment before swaying with him to the melody.

“You better behave yourself tonight,” I said. “No fights.”

“Scout’s honor.” He promised, but the glimmer in his eyes made me think otherwise.

While dancing, his eyes revealed something unique. I had grown accustomed to his teasing glances, the mischief that seemed to dance in those deep, blue pools. But as we swayed under the dim lights, I noticed an unfamiliar softness, a warmth that made

my heart skip a beat.

“Why are you looking at me like that?”

“You know,” he began, his voice low. “I never thought I’d see you in a Snow White outfit again. You look even more enchanting than I remember.”

I laughed, rolling my eyes. It was playful rather than annoying this time.

“And I never knew Prince Florian could be such a flirt.”

He chuckled, twirling me under his arms.

“I have many talents, and flirting is one of them.”

As we danced, he kept up a steady stream of teasing remarks.

“You should thank me for the costume. You look stunning.”

I smirked, trying to suppress my amusement.

“For what? For making me relive an embarrassing childhood memory?”

He leaned in closer, his warm breath against my ear.

“Your beauty could make anyone forget that day.”

I blushed, the warmth spreading from my cheeks down to my chest.

“You’re impossible.” I said, unable to keep the smile off my face.

“And yet, here you are,” he said, looking into my eyes. “Dancing with me.”

We just stared at each other. The world faded into the background. His eyes softened, revealing a flicker of authenticity.

“You know,” I said, attempting to break the silence. “You’re not the bad boy you pretend to be.”

He raised an eyebrow, his lips curving into a smile.

“Well, you’re not the good girl you pretend to be.”

“Touche.”

The music shifted to a slower tune, and he drew me closer, his arms wrapped around my waist. I rested my head against his shoulder, feeling the steady beat of his heart against my cheek. The song ended, and we pulled apart; the spell broken.

“Want a drink?” He asked, leaning closer so I could hear him over the music.

“Please.”

As he headed to the refreshment table, I spotted Maya at her table. She looked at me with a smug grin. Here we go.

“You looked very cozy.”

I should have known wouldn’t waste an opportunity to dig at my relationship with Hudson.

“Maya, you know it’s all for show.”

She placed her chin in her hands, far too pleased with the situation.

“If that was acting, then you deserve an Oscar. ”

Ignoring her, I shrugged and attempted to change the subject by pointing out some outfits of people who walked past us. We were having a fun time laughing when Cynthia approached us, dressed as Cinderella. Her face had a smug look. I braced myself for the inevitable confrontation.

“Hey, Luna.” She said. “You look cute .”

“Thanks.”

She ran her hands down her dress to draw our attention to the expensive material.

“Do you like my dress?”

“No.” Maya said before I could answer.

Cynthia ignored her and turned her attention back to me. Her eyes were as cold as ice.

“Austin bought it for me. Tomorrow is our six-month anniversary.”

I wanted to tell her not to brag, but it hit me like a punch. We were dating six months ago . Anger bubbled up inside me, and before I could think, I lunged at her, unable to contain my fury. I grabbed a handful of her dress, grinning in wicked satisfaction as I heard it shred. A chaotic scuffle ensued as we tumbled onto a table laden with decorations. We tore down streamers and carved pumpkins. I didn’t care that I was causing a scene. I was hell-bent on hurting her.

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HUDSON

I APPROACHED THE REFRESHMENT TABLE when I bumped into Eli and his girlfriend, Lily. The music in the gym was loud, but it was cut off, drawing our attention. My eyes scanned the room, landing on a commotion near the center of the dance floor. I was shocked to find Luna and Cynthia fighting. My heart skipped a beat, but a part of me couldn't help but feel a thrill at seeing her unleash her anger.

I rushed towards them but didn't intervene. Instead, I stood at the edge of the crowd watching Luna fight back with a fire I hadn't seen in a while. This was the most exciting thing that's happened to me this year. I took out my phone to record a video until Jockstrap intervened. I booed him.

"What is wrong with you, Luna?" He asked.

Without hesitation, she punched him square in the face. The crowd gasped, and a murmur of shock rippled through the room. I couldn't help but smile with pride. That's my girl. And I got it all on video.

"That's for cheating on me." She said, her voice trembling with rage.

He clutched his jaw, anger flashing in his eyes as he took a menacing step closer.

"You crazy bit--"

Before he could finish, my fist connected with his jaw, sending him sprawling to the ground. The room fell silent.

“Don’t ever speak to her like that again.”

My voice was low and menacing. I grabbed Luna’s arm and pulled her out of the gym. The crowd parted to let us through.

Outside, in the cool night air, I led her to my truck. I opened the tailgate and lifted her, so she was sitting on the edge. She shivered. Without a word, I reached into the backseat for my hoodie and draped it over her shoulders.

“Thanks.” she whispered, pulling it around her.

I placed my hands on each side of her on the tailgate and looked at her with a smug grin. She narrowed her eyes to slits as if she knew I was about to tease her.

“What happened to no fighting tonight?”

“I meant you. It was my turn tonight.”

I grinned, taking in her ragged appearance. The tattered Snow White dress was covered in punch, and the strands of hair were disheveled in all directions. She still looked beautiful. I tucked a strand behind her ear and frowned, noticing the cut on her cheek.

“You’re hurt.”

“It’s nothing.” She said, dismissing it with a wave of her hand.

“It needs to be cleaned.”

I reached into the back of the truck for the first aid kit my dad insisted I always take with me. When I pulled it out, I spotted Luna attempting to jump off the tailgate from

my peripherals.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

“You are not coming near me with that.” She said. “It’s going to burn.”

“Only for a second.”

“That does not make it better.”

Ignoring her, I opened the kit and grabbed everything I needed. She pulled her head away as I reached to hold her face.

“It has to be done, Snow.” She shook her head. I’d forgotten how difficult she could be. Always the nurse, but never the patient. “Do you know Eli once broke his arm from jumping off a ceiling?”

“What?”

I chuckled at the memory.

“We were fifteen and his older brother came to visit from college. Eli worshipped the ground he walked on and wanted to be cool in front of his big brother.”

“What does his brother have to do with him falling off a roof?”

I had to hold back a smirk, as I knew I had her distracted. Her guard was down, and I took that as my chance to clean up her cut.

“His brother used to do these insane stunts and I may have dared Eli to jump off with his skateboard and into the swimming pool.”

I gripped the side of her face as I dabbed at her cut. She didn't even wince.

"Of course you did." She said, invested in my story. "Did he make the jump?"

I dabbed at her cut a few more times before pulling away with a satisfied grin.

"No," I said. "Because it never happened."

Her brows furrowed in confusion.

"What do you mean?"

I closed the first aid kit and slid it back inside the truck.

"Your cut is clean."

She lifted her hand to her cut so fast she almost slapped herself. Her eyes widened.

"You distracted me."

I folded my arms across my chest.

"It worked, didn't it?"

She feigned anger, but the glimmer in her eyes contradicted her.

"Your mom used to do that when we were kids."

My expression softened. I reached out, my fingers tracing the edge of the cut.

"It worked every time."



Our eyes met; nostalgia stretched between us. I leaned in, my gaze never leaving hers. Her eyes were void of hesitation. As our lips were about to meet, the exit door burst open.

“Luna, are you okay?” Maya asked, rushing over.

We sprang apart, both of us had reddened cheeks. Maya bit her lip once she realized what she’d interrupted.

“I’m fine.” Luna said after an awkward silence.

I cleared my throat, disappointed at what might have happened if Maya hadn’t walked out.

“Let me take you home,” I told Luna, before turning to Maya. “Do you need a ride?”

She shook her head.

“No thanks. I’ll get a ride with my date.”

I nodded before helping Luna off the tailgate and led her to the passenger side. She waved goodbye to Maya before I closed the door. I rounded the car to my side, stopping as Maya stood with a smirk and her arms folded across her chest.

“What?”

Her smirk widened.

“Nothing.” She said. “Have a good night.”

“You too.”

As we drove away, the night's events replayed in my mind. I glanced at Luna, wrapped in my hoodie, and felt a warmth spread through me. She was going to let me kiss her. Or she was too shocked to register what I was going to do? But either way, I was going to kiss her.

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The gym echoed with the rhythmic sound of cheerleaders practicing their routines. Luna stood in line, trying to ignore Cynthia's mean remarks. She's still bitter after the Halloween party.

"You call that a jump, Luna?" she asked, her voice carrying over the music. "My grandma can do better."

Luna bit her lip, focusing on the next move. I rolled my eyes at her. Almost a month ago she was grappling with the girl at the party, and now she's letting her undermine her every action.

Their coach called for a water break, and I approached Luna on the sidelines. I handed her the water bottle and she thanked me before drinking it as if she'd escaped the desert.

"You know you don't have to put up with her." I said, nodding towards Cynthia, who was flipping through a clipboard.

"I need this for college applications." Luna sighed.

"There are other things you could do for credit."

"Like what?"

I tucked my hands in my front pockets.

“You could quit cheerleading and get back into photography.”

Her eyes widened.

“I’ve been on this team since freshman year. I can’t just quit.”

“Of course you can. You’ve been miserable.” She hesitated as if my words hit closer to home than she wanted to admit. I saw doubt in her eyes and leaned in with a smirk. “Imagine Cynthia’s face when you tell her off in front of everyone.”

She looked over her shoulder at Cynthia laughing with her pretty committee. Luna turned to me with determination in her eyes.

“You’re right.”

She marched to the center of the court, and I trailed after her, not wanting to miss the action.

“Luna let’s get back to practice. You need it.” Cynthia said, causing her friends to laugh.

“No.”

Their laughter ceased at Luna’s words.

“Excuse me?”

“I quit.”

A hush fell over the gym as everyone turned to watch the unfolding drama. Cynthia's face turned red with anger. I had to bite my knuckle to keep from bursting into laughter.

"You can't just quit."

"I think I just did." She said, turning on her heel and walking away.

She didn't even look back when Cynthia let out an indignant screech. I met her with a proud smile on my face.

"I didn't think you'd do it."

"Me neither."

I helped her with her bags, deciding it was best to flee before Cynthia went psychotic.

"So, what's next, Snow?"

She shrugged.

"I don't know."

"You'll figure it out."

"Maybe." She said, as if she'd never contemplated her life before. "What about you?"

"What about me?"

"I still have no idea what your plans are."

I looked away, my expression hardening.

“Who knows? I’ll see when I get there.”

She frowned.

“Did you apply to any colleges?”

I tossed my head back with a groan.

“Can we please not discuss this again?”

She frowned.

“I just want to know why.”

My eyes flashed with annoyance, and I knew I needed to distance myself before things escalated.

“Just drop it, Luna.” I said, before disappearing around the corner.

She wouldn’t understand. No one would.

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LUNA

I SAT AT MY DESK; the glow of my laptop screen illuminated my face in the dimly lit room. The world outside enveloped me in darkness and silence, while my mind brimmed with thoughts and possibilities. I scrolled through the endless lists of colleges, my eyes scanning each name and description with anxiety and excitement.

My fingers hesitated over the keyboard as I typed the best colleges for photography into the search bar. The results populated the screen, offering me a world of opportunities. I clicked on the first link and read about programs promising to nurture my creativity. Every description depicted a future I had only dreamed of.

I clicked through several schools, downloading applications as I went. The thought of leaving my original plans behind was daunting, but pursuing something I'd once loved filled me with purpose. A feeling I had forgotten.

I leaned back in my chair, staring at the ceiling as I debated whether I was making the right move. The stress weighed on me, but beneath it all was a bubbling excitement. I shifted forward, my decision solidified in my mind. Taking a deep breath, I started filling out the applications. With each keystroke, a smile played on my lips. It was exhilarating, and I was ready to embrace my fresh path.

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I made my way to Hudson's house, my steps purposeful as I crossed the familiar path. I hadn't seen him since our last conversation, and I needed to clear the air. Reaching the garage, I saw his dad working under the hood of a car.

“Hey, Mr. Wilder.”

He straightened up, wiping his hands on a rag, and smiled at me.

“Hey, kiddo. How are you doing?”

I returned his smile, feeling a wave of comfort wash over me. Mr. Wilder had that effect on people.

“I’m good, thanks. How are you?”

“I’m great.”

I nodded my head and bit my lip.

“Is Hudson home?”

“He should be back any minute now.” He said. “You’re more than welcome to wait.”

“Thanks.” I said, leaning against the workbench.

While waiting, he focused on the car but continued talking.

“How’s school?”

“It’s okay,” I said, trying to keep my tone light. “I’ve been thinking a lot about college, and I’m conflicted about what to do.”

He set down his tools and gave me a thoughtful look.

“You’ve always been good at figuring things out,” he said. “Ever since you were a

kid. You'll find your way."

I smiled, appreciating his words more than I thought I would.

"Thanks, Mr. Wilder. That means a lot."

The sound of a truck pulling up caught our attention. Hudson stepped out, his appearance disheveled, as if he'd been doing hard labor. He looked up and his eyes widened in surprise upon seeing me.

"Hey." He greeted me, his voice a mix of curiosity and surprise.

"Hey." I said, my eyes sweeping over his tattered clothes and sweat-streaked face. "What have you been up to?"

His eyes flickered to his dad before returning to me.

"Just been working on something. Let's get inside."

I bid goodbye to Mr. Wilder and followed Hudson into the house. He headed straight for the kitchen, grabbing a glass of water and drinking it in one large gulp. I stood across from him, feeling the weight of the earlier tension between us.

"About the college thing," I said, my voice sincere. "I didn't mean to upset you."

He set the glass down and gave me a reassuring look.

"No need to apologize. I'm over it."

An awkward silence settled between us as I took in his rugged appearance. He'd left his flannel shirt unbuttoned with only a thin, sleeveless top underneath. A blush crept



up my cheeks as I realized I was staring. He smirked, catching me in the act.

“Like what you see?”

I rolled my eyes, trying to hide my embarrassment.

“Our birthdays are coming up. What do you want to do?” I asked, attempting to change the conversation.

“I plan on sleeping.”

“No, you’re not,” I said, with a determined glint in my eye. “I’m hosting a joint party for us.”

He sighed but couldn’t hide the hint of amusement in his eyes. It had been years since we had a joint party.

“Fine. I’ll be there.”

“Perfect!” I said, my face lighting up with excitement. “I’m going to plan.”

He shook his head with a small smile.

“Looking forward to it, Snow.”

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HUDSON

THE NIGHT WAS CRISP, and the stars twinkled like diamonds in the dark sky as I approached Luna's house. Laughter and music drifted into the night, contrasting my brooding mood. I hesitated at the crowd's edge, feeling out of place with unfamiliar faces.

My eyes scanned the sea of people, searching for someone I knew, but it was unlikely. Relief washed over me as I spotted Eli near the snack table. I made a beeline for him.

"Hey." He greeted me with a grin. "I've been trying to convince you to have a party for years, and all it took was one ask from Luna."

I rolled my eyes, unable to hide the smile tugging at my lips.

"I guess you weren't pretty enough."

He chuckled at my teasing before handing me a drink. We chatted for a bit, making me feel more at ease with my friend at my side. Luna and Maya appeared; their faces lit up with joy. Luna threw her arms around me in a warm hug.

"Happy birthday!"

"Happy birthday to you ." I said, with a genuine smile on my face. "Mine isn't until tomorrow."

She laughed, her eyes sparkling.

“This is a countdown to your day.”

We all stood together, chatting and laughing until a group of friends called her and Maya over. She excused herself, leaving me alone with Eli again. I watched her leave. A sense of contentment washed over me until I noticed Cynthia and Jockstrap enter.

My mood darkened. Anger surged through me as I noticed the arrogant grin plastered on his face. I strode over, my fists clenched at my sides.

“What are you doing here?” I asked, my voice low and dangerous.

Jockstrap smirked, crossing his arms.

“I’ve never missed Luna’s birthday, and I don’t plan to start now.”

“You planned on it when you broke up with her.” I said, taking a threatening step forward.

Punching his smug face was too tempting to resist. But I couldn’t ruin this for Luna. It’s her day.

“I was going to punch you,” I said. “But you’re not worth it.”

I glared at the pair before turning on my heel and stormed off, needing to cool down. Seeking respite from the noise, I stumbled upon a peaceful yard nook. It was times like these that I needed a cigarette.

After a while of brooding, I stood on the party’s fringes, my hands shoved deep into

my pockets as I leaned against a wall. I watched as Luna flitted from one group to another, her laughter ringing like a melody. Despite my creepy smile, I couldn't help but admire her radiant beauty. Until jockstrap approached.

My jaw felt like it was going to snap at how hard I clenched it as I watched their exchange. Jockstrap leaned his head closer to her to talk over the music. I felt a familiar pang of jealousy and insecurity twist in my gut. The conversation seemed too intimate. My fists clenched at my sides. I couldn't help but feel she still harbored feelings for him, even after what he'd done. Feelings she would never have for me.

Unable to bear it any longer, I turned on my heel and walked away with a heavy heart. I made it a few steps down the street when I heard her voice calling my name. I stopped but didn't turn around.

"Hudson, where are you going?" She called, sounding confused and a little breathless from running after me.

"I didn't want to ruin your moment."

She frowned, stepping closer.

"What are you talking about?"

I sighed, running a hand through my hair and tugging the roots in frustration.

"Your precious reunion with your jerk of an ex."

She stared at me in bewilderment.

"I don't understand. What does he have to do with this? We were talking."

“Do you still love him?”

“What?”

“Answer the question, Luna. Do you still love him?”

Her eyes were cast downwards, reflecting her dejected state.

“No, but he was my first love.” She said. “That’s difficult to get over.”

My eyes flashed with a mix of anger and pain.

“That’s ridiculous.”

“Excuse me.”

My shoulders slumped as I took angered steps forward.

“I’ve been a better fake boyfriend to you than he was as a real one.”

Tension hung in the air between us. They slipped past my tongue before I could stop them. She looked stunned, her mouth opening and closing as she struggled to find the right words.

“I don’t understand.”

Without thinking, I closed the distance between us, my hands cupping her cheeks as I leaned down and kissed her. It was a kiss filled with all the pent-up emotions I’d been hiding. A mix of desperation, longing, and love. I was kissing the girl I’d been in love with since we were children. The expectations exceeded my dreams. But she never kissed me back.

I pulled away, both of us panting. The shock and confusion on her face mirrored my feelings. I took a step back, my heart hammering against my chest.

“I’m sorry.” I said, turning and running towards my house before she could say anything.

I refrained from glancing back, dreading her expression. The bitter air was cold against my skin, but it did nothing to numb my turmoil. I messed everything up.

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LUNA

THREE WEEKS. Three weeks since I'd spoken to Hudson. Three weeks since he kissed me. I'd never been more confused. Not because he kissed me, but because of how his kiss made me feel.

I sat cross-legged on my bed, a frustrated sigh escaping my lips as I'd been venting to Maya for the past hour.

"I don't get why he's acting like this." I said, running a hand through my hair.

She sprawled out on a beanbag chair, looking at me with sympathy.

"Maybe he's embarrassed because you rejected him."

I shook my head.

"I didn't reject him. I was too shocked to kiss back."

Maya's eyes widened as she almost launched out of her seat.

"Are you saying you would have kissed him back?"

My cheeks reddened as I sat up straighter.

"I think I would have. My feelings for him were unclear until he kissed me."

She squealed in delight before tackling me onto the bed.

“This is amazing!” She exclaimed. “You like Hudson Wilder.”

I would have laughed if someone had said that months ago. I buried my face in my hands as my cheeks burned more.

“Why do I feel this way?” I asked. “Hudson doesn’t do relationships.”

She waved her hand dismissively.

“It’s obvious he’s been pining over you for years.” She said. “You failed to realize it because you were caught up in Austin.”

I bit my lip, hope blossoming in my chest.

“Should I talk to him about it?”

“Absolutely,” she said. “You need to tell him how you feel.”

I hesitated, my heart racing.

“I don’t know. What if he doesn’t feel the same way?”

She offered me an encouraging smile.

“He does. Trust me. Take the chance.”

Taking a deep breath, I nodded.

“Okay,” I said, a small smile forming on my lips. “I’ll do it. I’ll tell him how I feel.”



Maya clapped her hands together.

“That’s the spirit! Now go get your guy!”

As we continued to chat and plan, I felt a newfound determination building within me. It wouldn’t be easy, but I was ready to take the risk.

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My heartbeat echoed in my eardrums as I hovered outside the doorway of Hudson’s room. Gathering my courage, I knocked.

“Come in.” His voice called from inside.

I pushed the door open and found him lying on his bed with his hands behind his head, staring at his ceiling. As soon as he saw me, he shot upright.

“Your dad let me in.” I said, breaking the awkward silence that hung between us.

He nodded. Tension mounted in the room, with neither of us knowing how to proceed. I bit my lip before speaking.

“Do you trust me?”

“Yes.” He replied without hesitation, though his eyes were still apprehensive.

“I want to take you somewhere.” I said, my voice firm yet gentle.

He nodded and followed me out to my car without question. The drive was excruciating, as neither of us knew how to break the tension. We ventured into the darkened park.

The night was serene as we exited the vehicle, our breath visible in the crisp winter air. I grabbed a shovel from my trunk. Hudson raised an eyebrow.

“Are you going to kill me?” he asked, lightening the mood.

I delivered a playful glare.

“I’ve thought about it many times.”

He laughed, the sound easing some of the tension as we ventured further into the park. We stopped until we reached a small oak tree. His eyes sparkled with recognition.

“I forgot about this place.” He said, a hint of nostalgia in his voice.

“Me too,” I admitted. “Until I remembered that today is ten years.”

“Do you think it’s still there?”

“Only one way to find out.”

He took the shovel from me and dug with deliberate and precise movements. It took a few digs until the shovel hit something solid. He continued digging around it until he earthed a small, weathered treasure box. We knelt beside it, our breaths misting in the cool night air. We opened it.

Inside were relics of our childhood: small toys, trinkets, and notes that brought back a flood of memories. Our eight-year-old selves agreed to write letters for us to uncover in the future. We thought we were so clever coming up with it.

I reached inside, pulling out a small, faded photograph of the two of us, grinning ear

to ear, covered in mud. The Snow White dress.

“Ah, the day your nickname was born.” He said, looking at it over my shoulder.

“Everyone forgot about it, but you.”

He chuckled, taking the photo from me.

“It’s because you made it so easy for me to annoy you.”

He gave it back to me before rummaging in the box again. I admired the photograph, shocked at how much had changed between us. But it was easy to fall back into nostalgia with Hudson. As if we never parted ways. Next, he pulled out my stuffed bear. I gasped as I yanked it out of his hand and held it to my chest.

“Did you put Nugget in here?” I asked in disbelief. “I spent so long looking for him.”

He shrugged.

“Sorry.” He said without an ounce of sincerity. “I was mad at you the day before and wanted revenge.”

I punched his arm.

“I couldn’t sleep for a month without him, you jerk.”

He chuckled before continuing to sort through the contents, each memory filling the frosty night with warmth. There were friendship bracelets and a small dried-up flower his mom had given me one spring. We sifted through the box, our laughter echoed through the quiet park. Snowflakes fell around us, but the memories distracted us from the cold.

He stopped and reached for a letter with his name on it. Curiosity piqued; he opened it. My breath halted when I recognized the familiar handwriting. His mother. I watched as he skimmed through his letter with tears welling up in his eyes. His expression turned from confusion to pain.

“Hudson, what’s wrong?”

He didn’t answer. Instead, he stuffed the letter into his pocket and stood up. Without another word, he kicked the tree trunk beside him before running off. I called for him to return, but his footsteps faded into the night. I lost my opportunity to tell him how I felt.

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My heart was pounding as I approached Hudson’s house. The winter night air was cold against my skin as I rubbed my hands together to generate some warmth. After a moment’s hesitation, I knocked. His dad answered, not surprised to see me.

“Maybe you can get him to talk.”

Making my way down the hallway, I saw his door partially open. I pushed it and found him face down on his bed, his shoulders shaking with sobs. The sight broke my heart. I attempted to be quiet, but one floorboard creaked under my weight. He turned his head and groaned.

“What do you want, Luna?”

I winced; never having thought I’d miss him calling me Snow.

“I wanted to check up on you.” I said, closing the door behind me.

“You can leave now.” He snapped. “I didn’t ask you to be here.”

I could hear the pain behind the words. It’s something he always did when he was upset. He tried pushing away the people wanting to help him.

“The last time I saw you like this, I left you,” I said. “I’m not doing it again.”

He scoffed before looking at me, his eyes red and filled with anguish.

“I don’t believe you. Everyone in my life seems to be a liar.”

“What are you talking about?”

He motioned to the letter at the end of the bed. The one he took from the memory box.

“Read it.”

My hands trembled as I picked it up. I unfolded it and saw the familiar handwriting.

My dearest Hudson,

When you mentioned the time capsule with Luna, I discreetly added this note. This letter will be a decade old when you open it, but my love for you is timeless.

I wish I could be there to watch you grow up, to see you graduate, and witness you becoming the incredible man I knew you would be. You have an outstanding role model in your father, and I have no doubts he will raise you to be the perfect gentleman. I know you must be upset reading this, figuring out I’d lied about my cancer timeline, but please know we never told you for a reason. You deserved a few carefree years without worrying.

I'm sorry I'm not there with you but know I am forever in your heart. You will forever be my precious boy.

Love you for eternity, Mom x

Tears filled my eyes as I understood the depth of his pain. His mom was diagnosed when we were eleven, or so we were told. And now he'd learned she was ill much longer than he'd been aware.

"Please, just leave."

He broke down again, his sobs wracking his body. Refusing to leave him alone, I climbed onto the bed and wrapped my arms around him from behind.

"I'm not leaving."

He resisted, but my warmth and unwavering presence must have put him at ease. I held him tight as he continued to cry. His sobs eventually faded, replaced by exhaustion. His breathing evened out, and his eyes fluttered into a restless sleep. I stayed holding him, my eyes burdened by the day's stresses. But I would not let him go, as I was determined to prove I was here to stay.

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LUNA

CHRISTMAS IS A WEEK AWAY and Gina Cushaw was hosting her annual party at her house. She was one of the few girls on the cheer squad I could endure and didn't shun me after I'd quit.

The backyard, strung with fairy lights, offered a more relaxed atmosphere. The soft glow of the lights cast a warm, inviting ambiance over the party, contrasting with the more frenetic energy inside the house. Gina went all out this year.

I stood with Maya at the refreshment table, laughing as we refilled our cups. She was complaining about having to see her sister again. Her sister was always an overachiever, and Maya never felt like she could compete.

"What happened to telling Hudson how you felt?" she asked, a mischievous glint in her eyes.

I blushed, glancing around the area for any eavesdroppers before leaning closer.

"The timing has been wrong."

She rolled her eyes.

"Then make it right."

There was no point arguing because she was right. My attraction to him defied all logic and reason. Every time I saw him, it was as if the world tilted on its axis, and he

became the irresistible center of gravity.

Our conversation ranged freely until I noticed something in the patio corner that drew my attention. I saw Stacy sidling up to Hudson, her hand touching his arm as she leaned down to whisper something in his ear. A pang of jealousy shot through me, and I found it difficult to focus on my conversation with Maya. From my peripherals, I watched as her flirting became more blatant. My stomach twisted in knots to the point I couldn't stand it any longer. With a determined stride, I waltzed up to them.

"Hey Stacy, do you mind if I steal Hudson for a second?" I asked, forcing a polite smile.

She frowned, displeased, but she nodded and walked away. Hudson folded his arms across his chest, a smug expression on his face.

"You're cute when you're jealous."

I rolled my eyes, hoping to hide my embarrassment.

"I'm not jealous."

"Sure thing, Snow." He said, his smirk widening. "I guess I'll continue my conversation with Stacy."

Before I could think, I leaned in and kissed him. It was impulsive, driven by a mix of jealousy and the need to prove a point. He stiffened at first but kissed back, his hands finding their way to my waist. My face was scorching as we pulled away. I couldn't meet his eyes, but the smug grin on his face told me everything I needed to know.

"I knew you were jealous." He said. "Don't worry, Snow, you're my only girl."



I couldn't stop the fluttering in my chest. His face softened with an unguarded tenderness, his eyes tracing my every feature with a gentle reverence as if committing the detail to memory. There was a quiet intensity in his gaze, and a small, involuntary smile tugged at the corners of his lips.

"What are you looking at?"

"You kissed me." He said, the smugness radiating from his voice.

"I was trying to prove a point." I said, trying to regain my composure.

"If you say so." He said, leaning closer. His warm breath tickled my cheeks. My breath hitched as our lips were about to brush, but he pulled away at the last second. "If that's the case," He whispered. "I won't kiss you until you ask me to."

He excused himself to get a drink, leaving me stunned and my heart racing. Frustration and longing bubbled inside me as I watched him walk away. The party continued around me, but all I could think about was the kiss that had turned my world upside down.

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HUDSON

I NEVER THOUGHT I would ever spend Christmas with the Delgato family again. The last Christmas I spent with them was when my mother was alive. Yet, here I am, in their kitchen, helping Luna bake cookies. I admired how cute she looked. Her brows furrowed in concentration as she read the recipe, ensuring everything was perfect. My intrusive thoughts took over my body, and I reached for a handful of flour. With a flick of my wrist, I tossed it at her. She squealed in surprise, flour dusting her hair and shoulders.

“Why, Hudson?” she asked, half-laughing, half-indignant.

“It was funny.”

Unable to contain her smile, she retaliated, tossing a handful back at me. I laughed and charged towards her, wrapping my arms around her waist. As we playfully struggled, I glanced up and dragged her towards the doorway. I feigned surprise at the sight of mistletoe hanging above the doorway.

“Well, would you look at that.” I said, with exaggerated innocence. “Mistletoe.”

She raised an eyebrow, seeing through my act.

“I’m not kissing you.” She said, however, her eyes sparkled with amusement.

I shrugged and loosened my grip around her.

“Fair enough. I promised I wouldn’t kiss you until you started it.”

With that, I moved to step away. Before I could get far, she grabbed my arm and pulled me back, her lips meeting mine in a swift, tender kiss.

“It’s a rule to kiss under the mistletoe.” She whispered against my lips, her voice soft and teasing. “And you know I hate breaking the rules.”

Laughter rumbled in my chest, and I leaned down to kiss her again, deeper this time. The world melted away until the sound of a throat clearing broke us apart. We turned to see her mother standing in the doorway; her face radiating happiness, tinged with the satisfaction of a long-awaited moment. Embarrassment flushed our cheeks.

“I’ll, uh, go find my dad.” I said, stepping away and bolting out of the room.

I had no intention of finding my father. I’d been avoiding him ever since I’d found my mother’s letter. We’d always had an honest relationship, at least I thought we did.

I wandered outside to the snow-covered patio, the cold air nipping at my skin. My mind churned as I gazed into their backyard, ignoring the cold seeping through my jacket. The festive cheers around me contrasted with the turmoil in my heart. As I stood in the stillness, watching the snowflakes fall, I couldn’t help but think of Luna. Of how much she’d changed my world for the better since she’d returned to my life. It’s as if she had woken me up from dormancy.

The quiet crunch of footsteps drew my attention, and I turned to see my father hovering in the doorway. Tension coiled in my muscles. He looked at me with a mix of concern and determination.

“Why have you been avoiding me?” My jaw clenched as I remained silent. He stepped closer until he was beside me. “Talk to me, kid.”

“Why did you and Mom lie to me?” I asked, annoyance flaring up inside me.

His shoulders slumped as realization dawned on him.

“So, you opened the box.”

I nodded, anger and hurt flashing in my eyes.

“You both let me believe everything was fine. Why would you do that?”

His face softened with sorrow and regret. He pinched the bridge of his nose, as if trying to hold back from breaking down.

“Your mother asked to keep it a secret. She didn’t want you to worry or feel you could fix it, but we didn’t want to keep it from you forever.” We stood in silence, the weight of the past pressing heavily between us. My dad sighed before speaking, his voice thick with emotion. “Your mother would be so proud of the man you’ve become. And I know nothing would have made her happier than you rekindling with Luna.”

My eyes filled with tears as I fought to hold them back. Nothing would have broken my mother’s heart more than my estrangement with Luna. I reached out and embraced my dad, our shared grief and love expressed without words. We cried on each other’s shoulders, finding solace in each other. After a while, we pulled away, and my dad looked at me with a proud smile.

“You have become an amazing young man, and I couldn’t be prouder.”

I smiled through my tears, a rare, genuine smile.

“Thanks, Dad. It’s because I had an excellent influence growing up.”

A soft voice interrupted us.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to interrupt.” Luna stood at the door, hovering with an apologetic smile. “It’s time to eat.”

My dad nodded, giving me one last squeeze on the shoulder before heading inside, leaving us alone. Luna stepped closer.

“Are you okay?”

I smiled at her, feeling a weight lift from my shoulders.

“I’m perfect.” I said, wrapping my arm around her shoulder and leading her inside.

The warmth of the house and the smell of Christmas dinner greeted us, but more than anything, it was the comfort of knowing I wasn’t alone that made everything feel right.

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The night had settled over the neighborhood, as the glow of Christmas lights reflected off the thin layer of snow that blanketed the ground. I noticed Luna standing alone on her front porch; her gaze lost in the tranquility. Grabbing a blanket, I joined her outside, wrapping it around her shoulders.

“Thanks.” she said, her eyes fixed on the peaceful street.

We stood in silence, the cold air crisp around us, but the warmth of our closeness created a blanket of comfort. She opened her mouth as if to say something, but stopped, hesitation clear in her posture. Sensing her unease, I sidled up to her, so close our shoulders brushed with each breath.

“Is there something wrong?”

She took a deep breath, as if gathering courage.

“What are we?” My stomach fluttered with a mixture of nervousness and excitement. I’d always dreamed of having this conversation with her.

“What do you mean?” I asked, trying to play it cool.

She shook her head, looking away.

“Never mind, forget I mentioned it.”

I gripped her arm, turning her to face me.

“Talk to me.”

She looked into my earnest eyes, as vulnerability shone in hers.

“I have no idea when our fake dating agreement became real to me. And I’ve been so afraid of admitting it, but I needed to know if it was all just an act to you.”

A slow smile spread across my face. I had to pinch myself to see if I was dreaming.

“I thought I’d made it obvious.”

“Made what obvious?” She asked, tilting her head to the side.

“That I’d always been yours.”

She grinned, a light blush coloring her cheeks.

“So, I guess that means we’re dating. For real. ”

“I guess it does.”

She folded her arms across her chest with a teasing grin.

“Have you ever been someone’s boyfriend before?”

I smirked, shaking my head.

“No, but I’m already better than your previous one.”

She giggled, the sound light and joyous.

“You are.”

My heart almost plummeted into my stomach as she placed her hands on the back of my neck, drawing me into a kiss. It was otherworldly, sealing the promise of our newfound relationship. However, she pulled away too early for my liking. She reached into her pocket and handed me a small box.

“I got you something.”

I couldn’t help but admire her eyes shining with anticipation. Raising my brows, I opened the box to find an Oasis lighter. I chuckled, looking at her with a mixture of amusement and affection. She remembered they’re my favorite band.

“I noticed you stopped smoking, but I thought you’d like it, anyway.”

“I love it.”

With a wide grin, I reached into my pocket and pulled out a small jewelry box. She opened it and gasped in disbelief. My mother's sun and moon necklace.

"I can't accept this." She said, looking up at me with wide eyes.

"My mom would have wanted you to have it."

She hesitated, brushing her finger along the silver, before turning and lifting her hair, exposing the back of her neck.

"Help me put it on?"

I clipped the necklace on, my fingers brushing against her skin, sending shivers down her spine. She turned back around as we admired how it looked on her.

"It's perfect on you."

My mom gave it to me when I was nine. She told me it symbolized true love. I gagged telling her girls had cooties and I would never dream of it, but reflecting on it, I knew she wanted to leave something of hers behind. She knew she wouldn't have much time with me and wanted to cherish the moment. She told me it wouldn't be too difficult for me to find the beholder of my heart, and that she was closer than I thought. She'd been referring to Luna the entire time.

Luna gazed at me in happiness, before reaching onto her tiptoes for another kiss. This one was deeper, more passionate. The bracing air seemed to disappear, replaced by the warmth of our shared love and the promise of the future.

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LUNA

IT WAS A TYPICAL SATURDAY AFTERNOON. I found myself in Hudson's garage, the air thick with motor oil and the faintest hint of his cologne. He was teaching me how to fix the engine of an old car, and I couldn't help but admire how adorable he looked doing it. Enthusiasm was clear in his voice as he explained the intricacies of the machinery. His presence was close, his arms wrapped around me to show what was important. I could feel his body heat through the thin material of his beloved Oasis shirt.

I tried to focus on his explanations, but my attention kept drifting to the tattoos that adorned his arms and how his breath tickled my neck. My heart raced, and I found myself lost in the moment, my mind far from the engine in front of me.

"Got it?" he asked, giving me a gentle shake. "What were you thinking about?"

My cheeks flushed a deep red.

"Sorry, something distracted me."

He chuckled.

"I could tell." He said, leaning down to capture my lips in a kiss.

The kiss was soft and steady yet filled with an unspoken promise. My heart was still racing when we pulled away.

“Valentine’s Day is coming up.” I said, searching his face for a reaction. I felt him stiffen as his hold on me tightened. His eyes darted around the garage, avoiding my gaze. “Are you okay?”

He pulled away and ran his fingers through his hair.

“I forgot to do something. I’ll see you later.”

He leaned down to kiss my cheek, but the gesture felt rushed and distracted. Before I could question him, he was halfway out of the garage towards his bike, leaving me confused.

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I was sitting in my room with Maya, discussing the events in Hudson’s garage a few days prior.

“So, he ran out of his garage?” she asked, leaning against my stacked pillows.

“He couldn’t get out of there fast enough. One mention of Valentine’s Day was like the plague.”

My mom knocked on my door with the widest smile I have ever seen on her face. She held up an envelope with a familiar emblem on it. I gasped, recognizing it as a letter from my dream college. The one I never thought I’d have ever applied to. My heart raced as my mom handed it to me. I felt a mixture of nerves and anticipation, my hands trembling. Maya and my mother urged me to open it, their faces full of encouragement. I tore it open and pulled out the letter. My eyes scanned the words before I squealed in delight.

“I got in!” I exclaimed; my voice filled with joy.

My father, who had been nearby, rushed into the room at the sound of my excitement.

“What’s going on?” he asked, looking around at our beaming faces.

“I got into college, Dad!” I said, waving the acceptance letter in the air.

My parents and Maya took turns embracing me, their congratulations filling the room. We shared a special moment, their pride and happiness palpable. I felt a warmth spread through my chest, knowing how much this meant to all of them.

“I need to share this with Hudson.”

My excitement was still bubbling over. I grabbed my coat and walked out with Maya, who hugged me one last time before we parted ways. I hurried across the street to Hudson’s house, my heart still pounding. His dad was outside, working on a car in the driveway.

“I got into college, Mr. Wilder!” I called out as I dangled the letter in front of me.

He looked up and smiled.

“I knew you could do it,” he said, giving me a proud nod. “Congratulations.”

I thanked him and made my way upstairs to Hudson’s room. I knocked on his door and noticed it was slightly open. Pushing it open further, I found him sitting at his desk, hiding a piece of paper as he saw me.

“What’s that?” I asked, my curiosity piqued.

“Nothing important,” he replied, standing up and walking towards me.

I decided not to press the issue, my excitement took over.

“I got accepted.”

He glanced down at the acceptance letter in my hand. A wide smile spread across his face as he pulled me into a tight embrace.

“I’m so happy for you, Snow.” He said, his voice full of genuine pride. He leaned down and kissed me, our joy mingling in that sweet moment. “I knew you could do it.”

He took the letter from my hands and looked at it, his smile growing even wider when he saw it was from my dream school.

“You’re amazing,” he said, gazing at me. “I’m so proud of you.”

We sat on the edge of his bed, my acceptance letter still clutched in my hand, while he sat beside me, our fingers intertwined. The warm moment enveloped us, and our laughter filled the room. He reached out and tucked a strand of my hair behind my ear, his fingers brushing against my skin. His eyes softened with adoration as he gazed at me, taking in every detail of my happiness. My heart fluttered under his tender gaze. His expression shifted to something more serious.

“I need to apologize.”

“For what?”

“For running off when you mentioned Valentine’s Day.” He said. “I’ve always hated it, but I know you love it.”

I looked at him, concern mingling with curiosity.

“Since when did you hate Valentine’s Day?”

He took a deep breath, his eyes searching mine.

“Since I lost you.”

My heart melted at his words. How am I supposed to respond to something as heartwarming as that?

“Well, you have me back and I’m not going anywhere.”

He moved closer to me with a determined look in his eyes. He gripped my hands in his.

“So, does that mean you’ll be my Valentine?”

My face lit up with pure joy, my happiness radiating from within.

“Always.”

In a burst of emotion, I leaned forward and kissed him, pouring all my happiness and love into that moment. He wrapped his arms around me, holding me close. As we pulled away, our foreheads rested against each other with a smile, our breaths mingling in the small space between us.

“This is going to be the best Valentine’s Day ever.”

He nodded, a grin spreading across his face.

“I promise I’ll make it perfect.” He said, placing his hands on my waist. “You deserve only the best.”

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I sat on Hudson's bed. Our conversation about our weekend plans still lingered in the air. We'd spent the entire morning cuddling, wrapped up in each other's warmth, when his dad's voice called from downstairs, asking Hudson to help him with something. Hudson kissed me on the head before untangling himself from me and heading downstairs.

Left alone in his room, I wandered around, my eyes catching glimpses of his childhood photographs scattered on the walls and shelves. My eyes fell on a picture of his mother, like the one in our home. Her radiant smile was always gentle and warm. My eyes fell on a picture of us when we were seven at the carnival. I picked it up and a piece of paper slipped out from behind the frame and fluttered to the floor.

Curious, I picked it up and unfolded it, my heart stopping when I realized it was a college acceptance letter. He said he wasn't interested in college. My mind raced with a million questions and emotions as reality sank in. Why would he keep this a secret?

The door creaked open, and Hudson walked in. He froze when he saw me holding the letter. His expression shifted from confusion to apprehension.

"Why did you never tell me this?"

He shrugged, trying to play it off.

"It wasn't important. It's not like I was planning to go."

Anger flared within me.

"You cannot pass up an opportunity like this, Hudson. This is an enormous deal."

I could see the annoyance on his face, but I doubt it could match mine.

“It’s not like I can go, Luna. So, it doesn’t matter.”

“Why not?” I asked, my frustration growing.

He ran his fingers through his hair and gripped his roots so hard. In a burst of anger, he shouted.

“Because. I can’t leave my father alone! I can’t stand the idea of him being in this empty house while I’m having the time of my life at college!”

The room fell silent, the weight of his confession hanging in the air. Our heads turned at the sound of the door creaking. His father stood in the doorway, having heard every word. Hudson’s eyes widened in realization before he bolted past his father. His footsteps echoed through the house as he rushed out the door. I stood frozen, my mind reeling from the revelation. His dad stopped me when I moved to follow him.

“Let him be.” his dad said. “He needs the space right now. I’ll talk to him.”

I nodded, tears welling in my eyes. As his dad left the room, I felt the weight of the situation pressing down on me. Hudson had been grieving since his mother’s death, but I never understood the extent of it until now.

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HUDSON

THE SNOW CRUNCHED BENEATH MY FEET as I weaved through the rows of graves, each step heavier than the last. I reached my mother's grave, a simple, elegant headstone etched with her name. My fingers traced the letters as I lowered myself to the ground beside it, ignoring the chill seeping through my clothes. I tucked my knees into my chest and wrapped my arms around them as I talked to her.

"I miss you so much." My voice broke. "I'm so lost without you."

Tears streamed down my cheeks, but I didn't bother to wipe them away.

"I miss you, but I'm so angry with you. You left me with so many unanswered questions."

My sobs became more intense.

"Everyone expects me to move on with my life, but how can I do that? How am I supposed to get over watching my mother die in my arms?"

My thoughts drift to the most painful memory of my life. I remember the hospital room where she lay, her body frail and weakened by her relentless battle. The beeping of the machines, the sterile smell, and the dim, flickering lights made the atmosphere somber. I sat beside her, clutching her hand, my childish heart unable to grasp the gravity of the situation, but I knew it was the last time I would see my mother. The memory of that day has haunted me ever since. She would never watch me graduate or witness my relationship with Luna. She'd miss it all.



“I got into college, yours and Dad’s alma mater. But I can’t leave Dad. He’s all I have left.”

The admission felt like a knife in my chest, and I cried into my arms, my heart shattering all over again. I cried for hours until I sensed a presence beside me. My father stood with a forlorn expression as he gazed at my mother’s grave. We sat in silence for a moment, the weight of our shared grief palpable, until my father spoke.

“Hudson, we’ve always been honest with each other.” He said. “Ever since your mother’s death, you’ve been looking for every excuse not to move forward with your life.” I looked down at my snow-covered boots. My dad was not done. “I refuse to be the reason you hold yourself back. Your mother would never have wanted that for you.”

My tears continued to flow.

“I can’t leave you, Dad.”

He kneeled, placing a comforting hand on my shoulder.

“I’ll be okay, kiddo. I do have friends.”

My head dropped as I brushed my hand down my face.

“You might be, but I won’t.”

He placed both hands on my shoulders and forced me to look at him.

“You can always visit during the holidays. Nothing would make me happier than watching you follow your dream.”

We stood up. I looked at him with a mix of sadness and love.

“I fear losing time with you.”

Tears glistened in his eyes as he pulled me into a tight embrace.

“We’re going to have a lot of time together, kid.” He said. “I promise you.”

We held each other, crying on each other’s shoulders, finding solace in our shared pain and love. Our shared bond warmed the winter air wrapped around us. Moving forward didn’t mean letting go.

*Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 10:24 am*

LUNA

I SAT IN MY ROOM, feeling sad and frustrated. Today was Valentine's Day. Hudson's absence had dampened my eagerly awaited day. I lay on my bed, staring at the ceiling, feeling my stomach churn back and forth.

A knock on the door interrupted my thoughts. Maya entered her expression one of concern and curiosity.

"Have you been in bed all day?" she asked, sitting down on the edge.

I sighed, hugging my pillow to my chest.

"Today is the worst Valentine's Day ever."

She frowned, but there was a glimpse of a mischievous smile.

"Don't be so dramatic." she said, before handing me an envelope. "I feel like the day is about to get better."

I sat up and took the letter, recognizing the familiar handwriting. My curiosity piqued. My heart skipped a beat as Maya exited the room with a wink. With trembling fingers, I opened it.

To, Snow:

Every time we've established something in our relationship, I sabotage it. I've often

left without explaining, but I won't anymore.

I've missed many years with you and refuse to miss more. I ruined something sacred to us, but I'll make it right. Meet me where our treehouse used to be. I'll be waiting.

P.S. I'm not worthy of being your Valentine, but I'm honored you chose me despite it.

Love,

Your Hudson.

A wide smile spread across my face as I finished reading the letter. The thought of seeing him again and revisiting a place filled with cherished memories brought me joy. Until I remembered the tragedy that followed that day. However, I was determined to move on. Keeping that in mind, I quickly got out of bed and changed into warm attire. I grabbed my coat and rushed out of my room, my heart racing.

I arrived in the forest behind Hudson's house. The late morning sun filtered through the trees, casting a soft glow on the path as I made my way toward our meeting spot. I breathed in the crisp, cool air, feeling my stomach bubbling.

Hudson was a few feet away, standing tall in his favorite Oasis shirt and leather jacket. His eyes lit up when he saw me. A loving smile spread across his face. I couldn't help but smile back, my pace quickening until I reached him. We embraced, holding each other as if we feared the other would disappear. He withdrew, gazing at me with regret and hope.

"I'm so sorry for everything -" he began, but I placed a finger on his lips, silencing him.

“You have nothing to apologize for.” I said, my eyes softening with understanding.

His body relaxed. He placed a tender kiss on my forehead, grateful for my forgiveness. I pulled back, looking up at him with curiosity in my eyes.

“Why did you want to meet here?”

He got shy. His gaze dropped for a moment before meeting my eyes again.

“Do you remember the day I destroyed our treehouse?” he asked, his voice tinged with regret.

My mind flashed back to that painful memory, a few weeks after his mother’s death. I could remember the anger and sorrow in his eyes as he unexpectedly broke down and destroyed our beloved treehouse. His angered words still haunted me. It was the day he told me he wanted nothing to do with me.

“I remember.”

He took a deep breath and cupped my face in his hands. His green eyes darkened with regret.

“I never apologized for that day. There is no excuse for what I did.” He took a deep breath, his expression filled with regret. “I’m so sorry for what I did. I was so lost and angry after losing my mom and I was terrified of losing you too, so I pushed you away before you could leave me.”

My heart ached as I listened to his confession. I placed my hands on his biceps.

“I would have never left you.”

He looked into my eyes, his own softened with sincerity.

“I know that, but I felt like I never deserved you. So, I sabotaged us before I could get hurt again.”

All the resentment I’d harbored over the years melted away at his words. I’d always wanted an explanation for his abrupt behavior. There were so many doubts about that day, but I’d gotten the closure I needed.

“I forgive you,” I said. “And I appreciate your apology.”

He seemed relieved; a weight lifted from his shoulders. He cupped my cheeks in his hands with a childlike grin.

“Close your eyes.” He said, a hint of excitement in his voice.

I hesitated but trusted that he wouldn’t murder me in the middle of the woods. I closed my eyes and took his hand as he led me down a path. After a few moments, he told me to open my eyes. When I did, I gasped, tears welling as I saw an updated version of our childhood haven.

“Our treehouse.”

“I figured I should rebuild what I broke.” He said. “It’s not the same as before, but it will suffice.”

“It’s perfect.” My hand covered my mouth as I struggled to find the words. “I can’t believe you rebuilt our treehouse. How long did it take?”

He kicked a pebble at his feet before gazing at me with a sheepish grin.

“Two years, eight months, and twenty-four days.”

My knees buckled at his words. I turned to him, amazed by his dedication.

“Why?”

He shrugged and pressed his lips together. His cheeks had a coating of red.

“Because I’ve always loved you, and building that treehouse gave me hope I’d get you back.”

It felt like my jaw was going to dislodge.

“You always loved me?”

He nodded, rubbing the back of his neck.

“I never felt good enough to tell you. I first had to become the man you deserved.”

Tears streamed down my face as I stood closer, my heart overflowing with emotion. Warmth spread in my chest, slow at first, then rushed, stealing my breath. I loved how his eyes crinkled when he smiled. How his voice softened every time he spoke to me. His presence felt like home. As if I’d completed a puzzle I never knew I was trying to solve.

“I love you too.”

The depth of his eyes equaled that of *The Great Gatsby*’s lighthouse. The answer was in front of me all along.

“You do?”

I nodded, my heart bursting with happiness.

“I love you, Hudson Wilder.”

He leaned down and kissed me, pouring all his love and passion into the kiss. When we pulled apart, he gazed at me with adoration. It made my heart backflip.

“You’ve stolen my heart, Luna Delgato. It’s yours forever, and I never plan to collect.”

I bit my lip, a smile spreading across my face. Hudson showed me what love truly is. Love isn’t definitive. We see it differently. Feel it differently. Express it differently. But when we have our version of love, we’ll know it. Hudson was the love I longed for.

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HUDSON

THE DAY HASN'T EVEN STARTED and I'm already sick of everything. I was lounging in the hallway, leaning against my lockers, minding my business. My thoughts drifted, a rare moment of peace in the bustling school. Until Cynthia strode towards me with a smug expression. She stuck a brightly colored poster on the wall beside me. I watched as she took a step back to admire her handiwork, before giving me a sidelong glance. Curious, I glanced at the poster and saw her campaign for prom queen, her narcissistic face plastered across it.

"No one's going to vote for you."

She placed her hands on her hips with a sneer.

"It's not like there's anyone else to vote for. I'm the only option, and everyone knows it."

She turned and sashayed down the hallway, confident in her inevitable victory. Once she's out of sight, I yank the poster off the wall and crumple it in my hand. I tossed it in the trash with a satisfying flick. Eli approached, a grin spreading across his face.

"I saw that." He said, nodding towards the trash can.

I shrugged, feigning innocence.

"What are you talking about?"

He smirked and shrugged his backpack off his shoulder before opening it and revealing a stash of crumpled-up posters.

“Looks like we had the same idea.”

We laughed, reveling in the moment of rebellion. After discarding the evidence, he turned to me with a knowing look.

“When are you asking Luna to prom?”

I leaned back, one foot crossed over the other with a thoughtful expression.

“Soon. I have an idea. I need to make it perfect.”

He raised an eyebrow, a hint of concern in his eyes.

“Don’t take too long. She might think you’re trying to get out of it.”

I sighed, running a hand through my hair, as it had almost grown over my eyes. I needed a trim.

“She already thinks that.”

He clapped me on the back.

“This better be good.”

“It will. Luna deserves the best.”

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It was late at night, nearing midnight, as I waited under the treehouse, my breath visible in the crisp air. A trail of twinkling lights led from the edge of the woods to the treehouse, casting a magical glow through the trees. I adjusted the collar of my leather jacket, surveying the area to ensure everything was perfect.

As I waited, the sound of footsteps reached my ears. I looked up to see Luna approaching. Her eyes widened as she took in the enchanting scene, her face illuminated by the lights. She looked ethereal, happiness radiating from her smile. Our eyes locked, and my heart swelled with adoration.

“What’s going on?” She asked, her voice filled with wonder.

I smirked, holding out my hand.

“Follow me.”

She took my hand, showcasing her full trust in me. I helped her up the ladder into the treehouse. She gasped as she stepped inside, her eyes wide with amazement. Fairy lights adorned the interior, casting a golden glow over the cozy space. A beautifully arranged picnic awaited us, with her favorite treats. I guided her to the edge.

“Look down.”

She peered out of the treehouse, her eyes almost burst from how wide they became. Spelled out in candles, the word PROM? shone in the night. Tears of happiness brimmed in her eyes as she turned to face me.

“I thought you hated prom?”

I shrugged; a soft smile played on my lips.

“I do, but I love a girl who loves prom.”

Her smile widened as she wrapped her arms around my neck, pulling me into a kiss. We savored the moment, our hearts beating in sync. After a moment, I pulled back, my arms still wrapped around her.

“So, yes?” I asked, my eyes twinkling with hope.

“I would love nothing more.” She said, before we kissed to seal the promise.

We pulled away, and I led her to the picnic. Her eyes shined with appreciation.

“This is unbelievable.”

I scratched the back of my neck, feeling nervous.

“Your mom helped.”

She laughed; her heart full.

“It’s perfect. Thank you.”

We sat down, enjoying the spread. The night felt magical; the atmosphere was filled with warmth and love. It created the perfect moment, but I noticed a sudden shift in her mood. Concern clouded her eyes as she stared in front of her, lost in thought. I brushed my knuckles against her cheek.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, my voice filled with concern.

She took a deep inhale, her caramel eyes meeting mine.

“I can’t help but worry about us, and when I leave for college.”

I scooted closer to her on the ground, hoping my presence would comfort her.

“Long distance won’t change how I feel about you.”

Her worry doesn’t dissipate completely. She bit her lip and dropped her head.

“What happens if you find someone else?”

I laughed at her words, cupping her face in my hands and looking into her eyes with unwavering confidence.

“You’re my past, present, and future, Luna Delgato. Nothing, or no one, will ever change that.”

To solidify my reassurance, I pulled her into a tender kiss. When we pulled away, her lips raised into a teasing smirk.

“Are you going to be jealous of all the college guys that are going to be around me?”

Her eyes held a mischievous glint. My lips raised as arrogance washed over me.

“Not at all,” I said, twirling a strand of her hair around my finger. “I know how to fight.”

She giggled, the sound infectious, before pulling me into another kiss. The worries of the future faded, replaced by the certainty of our love and shared bond. We eventually pulled apart, our foreheads resting together as we basked in closeness.

“I love you.”

“I love you too, Snow.” I said, my voice filled with conviction. “We’ll make this work, no matter what.”

With that promise, we continued our picnic. The future held many uncertainties, but we knew we could face them together.

?

I inhaled as I crossed the street to Luna’s house. When I rang the doorbell, her mother answered.

“Hey, Hudson.”

“Hey, Mrs. Delgato. Is Luna home?”

She shook her head.

“She went out with Maya.”

I nodded and thanked her, ready to leave, until she stopped me.

“Wait,” she said, a hint of emotion in her voice. “I have something I need to give you.”

Curious, I stepped inside and sat down in the living room, waiting for her to return from somewhere. She returned with a small box, her eyes glistening with unshed tears. She handed it to me. I looked at her in confusion.

“Your mother wanted you to have this as a graduation present.” She said. “When she got sick, she asked me to give it to you.”

I opened the box, swallowing down the lump in my throat. Inside, I found a note from my mother.

I'm sorry I'm not there to see you graduate, but I am so proud of you. Forever in your heart x.

My eyes welled up with tears as I read her heartfelt words. I glanced inside and saw the old locket she never took off. Inside was a picture of the three of us during a vacation at the beach when I was five. Overcome with emotion, I sobbed, clutching the locket to my chest. Mrs. Delgato moved closer and placed her arm around my shoulder, her tears falling in shared grief.

"I miss her every day." She whispered, her voice thick with emotion. "She would be so proud of you."

I looked at the locket with her engraved initials. Its significance weighed in my hands. With trembling fingers, I placed it around my neck, feeling an immediate sense of closeness to her. The tears kept flowing, but I felt a sense of peace mixed with them. Despite it all, my mother would be with me for more than my graduation.

LUNA

THE MORNING OF PROM APPROACHED with a gentle embrace. The first touches of sunlight warmed the crisp air. Birds sang their cheerful melodies, filling the air with a harmonious symphony. Soft hues of pink and orange painted the sky, gradually giving way to a tranquil blue. I breathed in the scent of blooming flowers and fresh grass as I stepped out of my home.

“Where are you headed?”

Hudson stood in his driveway, exuding a rugged charm that was hard to ignore. His overalls hung around his waist, revealing a tight, grease-stained shirt that clung to his toned torso. The fabric stretched across his chest and shoulders. Just below the right sleeve, the edge of his tattoo peeked out. Stray locks of hair fell over his forehead, tousled from wiping away sweat. He had a few grease smudges on his face, contrasting with his striking eyes that held a mischievous twinkle. He leaned down to kiss me the moment I reached him.

“Where are you going?” he asked again, his eyes filled with curiosity.

It was my turn for mischief.

“I’m going to get ready for prom with Maya. Need to impress my date.”

Playing along, he folded his arms with a wide grin.

“Your date is a lucky guy. I’m jealous.”



“You should be.” We laughed together before I turned serious, placing the palms of my hands on his chest. “Promise me you won’t get into any trouble tonight.”

His grin was unsettling.

“I should tell you that.”

I rolled my eyes but couldn’t help but smile. Typical Hudson. Leaning up, I gave him a chaste peck.

“I’ll see you tonight.”

I could feel his eyes on me as I turned to walk back to my car, anticipation burning in my veins.

?

I stood in my room, fixing my hair for the hundredth time in front of my mirror. I perfectly placed each curl and smoothed every strand into submission, wanting to look flawless. My mother’s voice echoed from downstairs, announcing Hudson. Taking a deep breath, I gave myself a final, approving glance before turning to leave.

As I descended the staircase, my eyes fell on Hudson. He stood at the bottom, looking incredibly handsome in his sleek black suit. It fit him like a glove, accentuating his broad shoulders and lean frame. It was rare to see him not in flannel and his Oasis shirt. His hair was slicked back, and his smile held a confident, boyish charm. My heart fluttered as his eyes lit up when I came closer. He extended his hand to help me down the last few steps. Even with heels, he towered over me. Leaning down, he kissed my cheek to whisper in my ear.

“You’re so gorgeous, Snow.”

A blush crept up on my cheeks. I reached over to straighten his tie, a gesture that felt intimate and natural. Of course, my mother had to take a picture.

“You look so handsome.”

My mom was capturing every moment on camera. We posed for pictures, our hands intertwined, before he gently guided me outside with his hand on my back. The night air was refreshing with the promise of a memorable evening.

Stepping off the porch, I saw an old-fashioned Bentley parked in the driveway. My breath hitched in my throat, and I turned to him.

“How did you manage this?”

He grinned, a look of pride and satisfaction on his face.

“An old friend of my dad’s offered it for the night if I could get it running.” He said.

“So, I spent the last few weeks working on it.”

I felt a rush of emotions, my heart swelling with gratitude and love. His effort made this night truly special for me.

“You built me a car, just to take me to prom?”

With a shrug, he acted as if it were customary for guys on dates.

“I remember your prom planner from when we were kids. Driving a Bentley to prom was number ten on the list.”

Tears of happiness welled up in my eyes. I couldn’t believe he remembered something from so long ago. He reached into the backseat and pulled out a small box,

opening it to reveal a delicate pale pink rose corsage. That was number two on my list. My hand shook as he placed the corsage on my wrist and fastened it.

Overwhelmed, I threw my arms around his neck, pulling him into a loving, heartfelt kiss. He responded with equal passion, his arms circling my waist, holding me close. When we pulled away, I looked into his love-filled eyes.

“I can’t believe you remembered all of this.”

He smiled, his eyes reflecting the love I felt for him.

“I remember everything you ever told me.” he said, gesturing to the car. “The night is just getting started.”

With one last look at the beautifully restored vehicle, I slipped my hands into his, feeling an overwhelming sense of happiness and contentment. We climbed into the car, ready to make the most of our night, knowing it would be one we’d remember forever.

?

The gymnasium had undergone a magical metamorphosis, transforming into a celestial wonderland. An ethereal ambiance enveloped us as we entered through the wide double doors. A glossy, midnight-blue floor covered the gymnasium, reflecting the twinkling lights above as if we were dancing under a starlit sky. The acoustics of the gymnasium allowed the melody to fill every corner, bouncing off the decorated walls and ceilings, creating an immersive, auditory experience.

Hudson stood behind me, his arms wrapped around my waist. I leaned back into his muscular chest, feeling the steady rhythm of his heartbeat against my back. Together, we swayed in time with the music, lost in our little world. His warm embrace made

my stomach flutter. He leaned down, his breath warm against my ear.

“I’ll be right back.” He whispered, his voice a soft promise that sent shivers down my spine.

He placed a tender kiss on my temple. His lips lingered longer than necessary as if he didn’t want to leave but had to. I felt the gentle pressure of his lips before he pulled away, leaving a tingling sensation in his wake. Confusion flickered across my face as I watched him walk off. His confident stride carried him through the crowd, and I couldn’t help but feel a pang of curiosity mixed with worry. What is he up to? Maya appeared before I could dwell on it.

“You look gorgeous.” she said, pulling me into a warm embrace.

“So do you!”

We stood amid the action, twirling to show off our dresses, basking in the night's glow. Maya scoped the area.

“Where did Hudson go?”

I shrugged.

“I’m not sure. Hopefully, he isn’t getting himself into any trouble.”

She chuckled.

“This is Hudson we’re talking about. I’m surprised the room isn’t on fire yet.”

Sharing a laugh, we discussed our dresses, dates, and the magic of the evening. As we were losing ourselves in the conversation, Hudson appeared, a troublesome smile on

his lips.

“What did you do?” I asked, narrowing my eyes.

“Nothing worthy of jail time.” He replied with a wink. He held out his hand to me just as a slow song played. “Dance with me?”

I took his hand, feeling the warmth and reassurance of his touch. He turned to Maya.

“You better save me a dance later.”

With that, he led me to the dance floor. We swayed together, the world fading into the background. His eyes locked with mine.

“So, do you think you’ll be prom queen?”

“Doubtful,” I said. “Honestly, I don’t care.”

He raised his eyebrow.

“Is that so?”

“It is,” I said. “A guy made me realize I don’t need something like a crown to be deemed worthy.”

His smile almost split his face in half.

“He sounds like a guy that knows what he’s talking about.”

“Sometimes,” I said with a grin. “Mostly, he’s annoying.”

He chuckled before drawing me closer. I rested my head on his chest, feeling the steady beat of his heart. I couldn't help but smile when I felt his lips pressed against my head, lingering. However, Principal Quinn interrupted our moment as he took the stage, his voice echoing through the gymnasium.

“Good evening, everyone. It's time to announce the prom king and queen!”

Everyone turned their attention to the stage. My heart skipped a beat, knowing I'd have to watch Cynthia's ego grow even larger.

“I would like to start with announcing the prom king.” He tore the seal and read the name. “Austin Jockstrap Chambers.” He said, doing a double-take once he realized what he read.

Laughter erupted from the crowd; Hudson included. Austin walked up with a frown; the crown placed on his head. I gave Hudson a look, but he remained too distracted by his laughter. Principal Quinn waited for the laughter to die down before announcing the prom queen.

“And this year's prom queen is... Luna Delgato!”

Shock washed over me. The applause was like a background noise as I turned to Hudson.

“What did you do?”

He smiled, eyes twinkling with pride.

“Giving you what you deserve.”

From the crowd, Cynthia threw a fit. Her banshee screams drowned out the cheers.

Face flushed with anger, she stormed through the crowd and left the gym. Hudson nudged me forward.

“Go get your crown.”

Troubled with nerves, I made my way to the stage. Principal Quinn placed the crown on my head, and applause filled the room. I was too shocked to register anything. As I looked out over the crowd, my eyes found Hudson’s. He was beaming, his love and pride clear in every fiber of his being. It felt like a dream, each moment more unreal, but having Hudson back made me feel luckier.

Principal Quinn announced it was time for me to have a dance with the prom king. Hudson’s expression darkened. As I descended the stage, Hudson held out his hand. He had a confident smirk playing on his lips.

“Rules are meant to be broken.”

I grinned and took his hand. Amidst the onlookers, he took me to the dance floor, unconcerned about their presence. He held me close as we danced.

“What did you do?” I asked, my voice filled with curiosity.

He grinned, his eyes twinkling with mischief.

“I saw Cynthia stuffing the ballot box, so I switched it out for another one.”

“Why?”

He chuckled; eyes filled with sincerity.

“You’ve always been a queen in my eyes.” He said. “And it was number one on the

list.”

My eyes filled with tears of happiness. Overwhelmed by emotion, I leaned up and kissed him. The rest of the onlookers joined us on the dance floor, but we remained focused on each other.

“Everything has become so different in such a short time, something I never expected.”

He smiled down at me.

“I hope a good different.”

I nodded, my eyes shining.

“My life could not get any better.”

I could tell my words touched him.

“For years, I dreamed of being with you. I just never imagined it would happen.” He said. “Who would have known, right?”

With a tender smile, I brushed a stray hair away from his forehead before cupping his cheek.

“Your mom knew.”

He chuckled, a fond smile spreading across his face.

“She had a habit of being right.”



He leaned down for another kiss. Happiness and love swelled within me. Our peers surrounded us, but it felt like we were alone. Everything with Hudson felt perfect.

HUDSON

THE AIR HAD A HINT OF CRISPINESS as summer gave way to fall. Leaves were turning, painting the trees with strokes of gold and red. Luna and I stood beside my dad's truck, loading it with her belongings for the trip to college. My heart was heavy knowing we would soon be apart after years together. Even during our estrangement, she was always there. Her parents chatted with my dad on the lawn, sharing stories and laughter, their voices a comforting background hum. I placed the last of her boxes in the trunk and turned to her, leaning against the side of the truck. I pulled a shirt from my back pocket.

"I want you to have this."

She gazed up at me, her eyes wide.

"This is your Oasis shirt."

I nervously scratched the back of my neck, my eyes flickering to the sky before falling to hers.

"I want you to keep it, so you can think of me when you're away."

She looked at the shirt, running her fingers over the worn fabric, a myriad of memories attached.

"You love this shirt more than anything."

Caressing her cheek with my thumb, I gazed at her lovingly.

“I found something else I love even more.”

A smile spread on her lips as she got on her tiptoes for a kiss.

“Thank you, Hudson.” She whispered, full of emotion as she clutched the fabric to her chest. “I can’t believe you’re going to college.”

“Me neither.” I said with a deep chuckle. “I might even join a fraternity.”

She laughed, shaking her head.

“I can’t picture you in a fraternity.”

With a smirk, I moved closer, enclosing her between myself and the truck. Placing my hands above her head, I leaned down until our lips almost touched.

“Do you know what’s the positive of us going to different colleges?”

“What?” she asked, her voice filled with curiosity and affection.

“The next time we see each other, we’re going to fall in love all over again.”

She rolled her eyes but couldn’t hide her smile. Her hands slipped behind my head, pulling me closer for a kiss. Her father interrupted our moment.

“Keep the PDA to a minimum, please.”

We blushed, pulling apart with shy smiles. She went to say goodbye to her parents, sharing tight hugs. I walked over to my father, who had tears in his eyes.

“I’m so proud of you, kid.”

I fought back my tears as I hugged him.

“I’ll try not to cause too much trouble.”

He laughed, clapping me on the back.

“Please wait at least a week before I get a call from the Dean.” With one last pat on the back, he stepped back, his eyes glistening with pride and love. “Your mother would be so proud.”

I hugged Luna’s parents, thanking them for everything, before turning to her with a smirk.

“Ready for a road trip?” I asked, opening the passenger door for her.

She hugged my father, waving goodbye before getting into the truck. I slid behind the wheel, looking at her with a wide grin.

“Are you ready, Snow?”

“Of course.” She replied, her voice filled with determination.

I started the truck, the engine roaring to life, and drove down our quaint neighborhood, leaving behind a summer of memories and heading towards a fall filled with fresh adventures.