Ruthless rivalry, sizzling scandal, and a love triangle that might tear the team apart...

CREW GIRL



A NETFLIX SERIES

SHEILA McCLURE


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TEAGAN

Teagan Tao had heard that there were nine circles of hell. Five days stuck in a car with her mom on an enforced cross-country road trip was definitely one of them.

Ella Tao-Emerson. Former small-town beauty queen, cockeyed optimist, low-key delulu.

“Teags!” her mom squealed out of nowhere.

Drop the low key. She was straight-up delulu.

“Teagan, look!” Ella pointed at the hundredth Friendly’s they’d passed since they’d hit the East Coast.

Its bright red signage popped cheerily against the white clapboard exterior exuding a “families welcome” vibe. A vibe that excluded them as they weren’t exactly a family anymore. Not since her dad had gone AWOL six months ago when the FBI showed up at Teagan’s regatta. He had disappeared before she’d crossed the finish line. A first. Sent her mom a pathetic text saying “sorry” after he’d hit the road.

You’d think six months was long enough to get used to the fact her dad was a wanted felon, but nope! Not so much.

She could feel her mom’s eyes on her—anxiously hopeful Teagan would join her in this celebratory sighting of a chain restaurant—so she tried to make one of those bright *oooh*, *cool* sounds, but an unexpected scratchy sting of tears morphed it into a lackluster *hmmph*.

What the hell? Teagan wasn’t a crier. Whenever she got upset after a training session or a bad race, her dad always cited one of his The Way of Tao philosophies: There’s no reason to despair. All problems have a solution—you just need to face it head on to see the way forward.

Not all of them legal, apparently. Or worth facing head on given the fact

he’d vanished. According to the search warrant (a freaking search warrant!), David Tao—California’s premier boutique hotel visionary, doting husband (gross), best dad/coach/parent ever—had been quietly defrauding his investors of millions and was currently on the run. Not exactly the behavior of a hero. Not even in a Deadpool kind of way.

How was she supposed to come to terms with that? Was she as delusional as her mom? Her dad was the reason she rowed. Why colleges like Stanford, his alma mater, were keeping their eye on her. It was hard not to despair.

“Earth to Teagan.” Her mom’s hand waved in front of her face. “Did you see the Friendly’s?”

“What? Yes. Why?” Teagan snapped. “Have you been manifesting Fluffernutter Sundae energy?”

Her mom gave an overly jolly hoot of laughter. The kind that masked the hurt she felt when Teagan’s Toxic Teen Tone hit too sharp. “I see someone’s been Googling the menu,” she teased. Warily. “Would you like to get sundaes? We went there with your grandmother last time we were here.”

“What? When I was four?”

“Who stops liking sprinkles?”

“Who starts liking sprinkles?” Teagan knew she was being a brat. She tipped back her head and gave a silent wail of despair. God, she missed being on the water.

“There was a Starbucks about twenty minutes back.” Her mom gave her a desperate-to-please smile.

As easy as it was, punishing her mom because of what her dad did wasn’t fair. “How about we have DIY sundaes after I win my first regatta?”

“Deal.”

They both might be waiting longer than either of them liked to make good on it. Despite some forensic internet searches, she’d yet to find clear evidence of a rowing team on Easton Prep’s website.

Teagan’s mom had grown up in Eagle’s Cove and had always dreamed of going to Easton Prep, the school in the “castle.” Thanks to the education trust her dad had set up—one of the few things the FBI hadn’t confiscated—Teagan would be making her mom’s dream come true. At a price. It had meant leaving California so they could live in the house her mom had inherited from her parents (so, free). Ella had eBayed and Vinted pretty

much everything that hadn’t been carted away in evidence vans, and even then, Teagan had overheard her telling a gas station cashier that it was barely enough to cover the motels and gas to get to Massachusetts.

“Mom.” They both heard the panic in her voice. “Easton Prep does have a girls’ rowing team, right?”

“I’m sure it does,” her mom said through a forced laugh. “It’s beside a lake.”

“That means they have geese, but not necessarily a rowing team.” She wiggled her phone between them. “I can’t find them on any of the top-ten rankings.”

“I guess we’ll find out soon enough.” Ella pointed at a sign listing the exit to Eagle’s Cove. “I’m getting some good vibes, Teagy-T.” She gave Teagan’s head a stroke, like she was a cat. “All the feely feels.”

Teagan returned her mom’s hand to the steering wheel. “Eyes on the road, please, Mother.”

“Hey, Teags. Despite what you think, I can do two things at once. Drive and be happy that we’re in the friendliest state in the West.”

“East,” they both autocorrected as Ella drifted into the next lane. A bunch of people honked at them as the SUV lurched back into the right lane.

An increasingly familiar silence filled the car. The kind that’s so loud you itch to play pop music at full volume to drown out your thoughts. Thoughts like, *How am I going to survive life without my dad?*

She missed him so much it literally hurt. True. She also wanted to tie him to a chair and demand honest answers to a thousand questions before handing him over to the Feds to face the music if he had really done everything they said he had.

Teagan pulled at her seat belt and hoicked herself around so she was facing her mom.

“Why aren’t you more pissed off, Mom? I thought you hated Eagle’s Cove. It’s not like you’re going to get aura points for pretending everything’s perfect.”

They both winced. It was fair to say heart-to-hearts weren’t really their thing.

Her mom took a minute to answer. “I think if you look for positive things, you’re more likely to see them.” She flicked on the turn signal,

letting her gaze skid across Teagan's face before glancing back at traffic in the exit lane, muttering "Masshole" at a tricked-out pickup truck that wouldn't let her in.

Masshole. Good one. She'd have to remember that. Easier to pronounce than Massachusettsan.

Once they'd taken the exit, her mom's perky smile reappeared. "Ready to be surprised?"

"What?" A bolt of adrenaline shot through her. "Is Dad here? Is he hiding at the house?"

Her mom's smile vanished. Of course he wasn't.

Why did she keep putting her foot in it? She should've said yes when her mom suggested they go to the Mustard Museum. It would've been torture, but there might've been hot dogs, and it would've been a less painful way to acknowledge that Teagan knew none of this was her mom's fault. Both of their worlds had revolved around David Tao. And he'd disappeared from both of their lives. Teagan didn't know how many imaginary scenarios she'd put him in since that day. Abducted by aliens? Living rough in Yosemite? Or, and this one sucked the most, was he living large on a private island with a secret family who loved him every bit as much as they did?

Not knowing was what hurt the most.

They were on a two-lane road winding through a thick woodland now, the trees showing a few hints that it would be fall soon. Even though the speed limit was sixty, the speedometer was barely hitting forty-five. Was Ella enjoying the view or delaying the inevitable?

Teagan rolled down her window. The car smelled like drive-through food and burnt sage. She discreetly gave her pits a sniff. And maybe a little bit of her. She'd been wearing her favorite sweats since they'd left California. She stuck her face into the wind like a dog, willing the sun on her face and the briny tang of the sea to clear her brain.

She would die if there wasn't a rowing team.

Not knowing where her dad was, or if he'd done all those things was bad enough. But rowing? It was her lifeblood. The one thing she'd need to keep her head above water. Literally and figuratively.

She sat back with a huff and stuck her arm out the window, cupping her hand so she could catch the wind the way her oars caught the water. Catch,

drive it forward, tilt the palm, release. Catch, drive, finish, recover. Catch, drive, finish, recover. The familiar cadence was a reminder that she knew how to focus. How to push through pain. Physical pain anyway. But this? Emotional Armageddon when the one parent sitting next to you wasn't the one you relied on in a crisis?

For as long as she could remember, Teagan's philosophy had been The Way of Tao. Her father's moral and ethical guide to life. Sure, he'd made it up, so he'd set the parameters. But she'd bought it. Just like she'd believed their lives were pretty perfect right up until FBI agents marched through their house taking just about everything. They'd left her medals. Whoop-de-doo!

Maybe in a different universe her mom was right. If she looked at it as a new beginning rather than the end of everything, nothing but possibility lay ahead.

"Are there any people here?" Teagan asked. "Or is it just trees?"

"Oh, there aren't just people," Ella said, clearly delighted at this new chance to sprinkle fairy dust on their situation. "There is also," she drew out the words as they rounded a corner, then triumphantly announced, "a fudge shop!"

"You don't like fudge."

"No one actually *likes* fudge," Ella allowed. "But I like that it exists. And there's the Crab Shack." She slowed as they drove past the hand-painted, sun-faded green and white clapboard restaurant. Jim's Crab Shack. "I used to work there." Her eyes developed a sudden gloss. "They have the best crab cakes."

Something told Teagan her mom wasn't fighting tears of culinary rapture. There was something more. Yet another secret her parents had kept from her? She knew she should say something nice but what came out instead was a deadpan, "Mother. That is a heinous understanding of what 'cake' is."

"Don't call me Mother," Ella play-pouted. "It makes me feel old."

"You are old," Teagan teased back.

Her mom turned on to yet another tree-lined street, this one standing out from the others with its dappling of pastel-colored Victorian houses. Her heart skipped a beat. Maybe living at her grandparents' house wouldn't be all bad.

She was about to say, “At least we’re not living in that one,” as they approached a dilapidated house when her mother pulled the car into the driveway.

It might’ve been nice. Twenty-five years ago. Or a hundred. She’d been too young to remember the last time they were here. But right now, it was giving serious haunted house vibes.

Her mom put the car into park, gave Teagan a here-goes-nothing shrug and grin as she unclipped her seat belt. “Welcome home, sweetie!”

“Thanks, Mom.” They had just reached the ninth circle of hell.

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CAM

“You stay here, Dad,” Cam insisted. “I’ll get the tires.” He pushed himself up and out of the mechanic’s well. “He’ll never know the difference.”

Cam’s dad, Oren Dillinger, wasn’t so sure. Taking off his cap and giving his chestnut-brown mop of hair Cam had inherited a scrub was the giveaway. “He was pretty insistent that he wanted me to pick them up.”

Before his dad could say the customer was always right, Cam jumped in. “The fact you’re able to fix that idiot’s car in two days is a miracle in and of itself. Any other town on the coast and he’d be stuck in a rental for weeks. It’s not your fault he was stupid enough to try bunny-hopping speed bumps in a sports car.”

Cam’s dad gave him a sharp look. It matched his tone. “They’re customers, son. Not idiots.”

“I know. Their mistakes keep us in steak.” It was a refrain his dad had been saying since he was a kid. Cam never pointed out the obvious: The Dillinger family dinner table wasn’t exactly groaning under a platter of grilled tomahawks every night. But he got it. Dissing a rich person with an income that sounded like a once-in-a-lifetime lottery win for making a mistake was no better than a rich person belittling a mechanic for having grease under their nails after fixing a car. They were all human. He sure as hell wasn’t perfect.

Either way, when this guy paid his bill, they could pay theirs.

He shrugged off his coveralls, remembered he was wearing his ankle-high steel toes when they were halfway down, debated taking them off, ruled it out, tied the arms around his hips. It wasn’t like he was going to run into someone from school. Everyone was away for the last few days of break and his social life was as nonexistent as the dodo bird. Between the

shop, training, and finishing the books on his summer reading list, the only other thing he had time for was sleep.

He drained his water bottle, refilled it at the water cooler, then popped it in the fridge alongside the energy drinks he was going to bring to the lake. If, that is, he got to the lake. He wasn't allowed to take boats out after eight and if he was going to get a two-hour rowing session in, he needed to get his butt in gear.

"Dad." Cam held up a can of ginger ale, his favorite. "Want one?"

"Only if you don't throw it like you did the last time."

They shared a laugh. Working with his dad full-time had been great. Not that he'd thought it would be bad or anything. It was more that he'd wanted his dad to know he could handle the responsibility, and over the summer had proved it.

He walked over to the pit, squatted down, and handed the soda to him with a flourish, like he was presenting a fine wine.

"Thank you, son." Oren took the drink and popped the top, draining most of it in one. "Right," he said, after finishing the rest. "Better get back to it."

After squishing the can, he shot it at the recycling can, which had a basketball hoop over it. He missed.

"Should've put the pit closer," they said in tandem.

A running family joke.

The pit, which let the mechanics walk underneath cars safely, was the one upgrade Cam's mom had made nonnegotiable when she and Oren had started talking about getting married. "I don't want to come in one day and find you flat as a pancake." She'd even insisted he use the money he'd been saving for her engagement ring.

"The only thing of value to me is you two," she said whenever Dad tried to put a bit aside to get her one instead of paying a bill. "Besides," she would say, "do you really think a diamond is going to make our lives better?"

"Not in the slightest," Oren had said once, giving her an innocent smile. "There's only one thing that could make my life better."

"What?" Cam's mom had demanded.

"We should've moved the pit closer to the recycling can. I keep getting rim shots."

It had taken her a beat to figure out he was kidding, but when she had, it was like always. They'd laughed themselves silly and he'd pulled her onto his lap, which even young Cam knew was his cue to get the hell out of there. It was cool his parents were still madly in love, but he had no interest in watching them mash on each other. Gross.

He scooped up his dad's can and slam-dunked it on his way to the office, where he punched the code into the office phone that forwarded calls to his cell. The fewer distractions his dad had the better. "You got Walt's keys, Dad?" The shop truck was called Walt after the guy who gave it to them ages ago when he'd switched to a mobility scooter.

"On the board."

The peg board was under the wall-mounted Rube Goldberg clock Cam had made from old car parts in his engineering class last year. His dad had thought it was genius. Cam only saw the things he'd do better if he did it again, but still, it did what it was supposed to. Tell the time.

His dad was always bragging about it to any customer stupid enough to mention it. "Cam'll be the first Dillinger going to college," he'd tell them. Mortifying. But also kind of cool. If it happened. "I'll be back in half an hour, Dad. Okay? Forty minutes, tops."

Oren looked at the clock and frowned. "It's four o'clock. I thought you were going down to the lake."

He started unwrapping the oil-stained blister tape on his right hand. He probably wouldn't make it. Lying about it wouldn't work. Especially if there was eye contact. "Lake'll be there after I get the tires."

He could feel his dad hard-staring him. He ripped off the rest of the tape and dumped it in the trash. "I'm not going to compromise my scholarship, okay?"

"I'll fire you on the spot if you do," Oren threatened. In a loving kind of way, but Cam knew he meant it. There was a real chance Cam could go to college, and he knew his dad would happily sell a kidney to get him there.

"I'll go when I get back," he called over his shoulder. If there was time. Once he'd fired up Walt's engine and put him in gear, he began a slow reverse out of the shop forecourt, making sure to look right, left, then right again—BAM!

What the hell?

He slammed on the brakes, heart thumping like a jackhammer, doubling

in pace when he caught a flash of something airborne in the rearview mirror that landed in the truck bed with a thunk. Whatever it was, it could swear.

Shitshitshitshitshitshit.

He tore off his seat belt and flew out of the vintage truck so fast a life behind bars didn't have time to flash before his eyes.

The UFO was a teenage girl around his age. Living. Breathing. No fountains of blood. Phew. He wouldn't be spending the rest of his life in prison for involuntary manslaughter. Thank god he'd put a pile of tarps on the toolboxes this morning. Which made him wonder if future him had known a hot teenage girl was going to endo into the truck.

"Hey!" She scrabbled to her knees without screaming in agony, which boded well.

"You need to watch where you're going," she sniped.

He had been.

Her fingers were shaking as she unclipped her helmet. Nerves. Adrenaline. Totally normal. If he'd done an up-and-over into a pickup truck, his would be, too. It wasn't like he was calm either.

She had pretty brown eyes. *Really* dark brown. And they were currently trained on him, like she was trying to bore a hole in him.

"You're not going to ask if I'm okay?"

He took a beat before answering. She was scared. So was he, if fear meant thinking she looked like the kind of girl he'd ask out for tacos if they'd met another way.

Errr… Earth to Cam. Tires? The Lake? "You look okay to me."

Her eyes widened.

"Uninjured," he clarified as he crouched down to grab her bike.

"Do people drive with their eyes closed around here?"

Ah. She was a tourist. Which meant she'd be gone soon. No taco dates for him. He stood, leaving his "customer is always right" filter on the ground.

"You hit *me*," he began, and definitely would've kept on going if he hadn't been caught short watching her negotiate the uneven terrain in the truck bed. Even though her cargo pants, T-shirt, and jean jacket were baggy, core strength and strong legs were the only way to explain why it looked like she was walking on water instead of navigating a seabed of mismatched toolboxes. Surfer, maybe? Something that required balance

anyway.

She saw him watching and shot him a look like she was still waiting for him to beg for forgiveness.

No way. He wasn't going to apologize for something that wasn't his fault, but as an olive branch, he picked up her bike and slid it lengthways across the truck bed to make sure it was still rideable.

"What are you doing?"

"Stealing it," he deadpanned.

She snorted.

At least she had a sense of humor.

Though obviously functional, the bike was not from this decade. Maybe even this century. And not in a retro way. Whoever this girl was, she wasn't a washashore—one of the rich folks who tripled Eagle's Cove's population over the summer.

"Tick tock. Still waiting for that apology," she said.

Talked like one, though.

"You were riding on the sidewalk." He checked to see if any lightbulbs went on. In Massachusetts, riding a bike on the sidewalk was illegal in business districts. Even if it was a stretch to call Eagle's Cove's main drag —a mishmash of overpriced boutiques, cafes, and discount stores selling beach supplies—a business district.

No lightbulbs so, to be helpful, and because sparring with this girl was strangely fun, he added, "On a blind turn."

She looked away, meaning, she got it now. She hit *him*.

He pulled the bike off the truck and flipped it upside down to rest on its handlebars. "Your chain's slipped." He glanced back. "You know how to fix it?"

She gave an exasperated sigh that said, *No, idiot, I do not.*

The chain and gear-change mechanism were begging for some WD40. He reached into the truck to grab his toolbox only to nearly crack heads with her. She fell back on the tarps and gave a frustrated growl. "You really are trying to kill me, aren't you," she grumbled when he held out a hand to pull her back up.

She begrudgingly accepted the offer, but when her hand touched his, her eyes shot to his face. So she'd felt it, too. The energy shift from combat mode to… you're not as bad as I first thought. Her cheeks turned a cute

shade of crimson when he got his hand back.

He stood aside, so she could scooch off the back of the truck. She didn't move. Like she found it enjoyable being a few feet above him. "I need to get under the tarp."

She cocked an eyebrow. "Is that where you store the bodies of your other hit-and-run victims?"

"Busted," he said, then, because time really was against him, tipped his head toward her bike. "I need to get the toolbox you're standing on so I can fix your bike." It was an easy fix, popping a chain back onto a derailleur. A squirt of oil would have to serve as the apology she wanted to squeeze out of him.

She jumped off the lip of the truck, and though she'd only given him a passing glance as she did it, he saw a chink in her armor. Something that suggested she knew she was being scratchy but was actually mad about something else. Maybe somewhere beneath her tough-girl 'tude was someone who needed a friend. He got it. But she was a tourist, and he had places to go, things to do.

He rummaged around in the toolbox picking out what he needed to check the cable tension and tighten the limit screws if necessary.

"Do you work here?"

He pointed at the logo on the side of the truck. "What gave it away?"

She didn't rise to the bait. "So, you're clearly a local."

He didn't answer. Yes. Clearly.

"What do people actually do here?"

Work. Enjoy a little free time. Dream about leaving. "We have clambakes. Tubing. Fudge. If that's your thing." He glanced up at her in time to see her pulling a face. Not a fudge person. He waved her over. "See the drive train?" He gave it a spray of oil, rubbed it in with a cloth, then did it again, wiping it clean this time. Cleanish. "You've got to clean it or the chain'll keep slipping."

She squatted down beside him to watch while he slipped it back into place. She smelled good—like honeysuckle and oranges and sunshine. He was going to plead the Fifth if anyone accused him of checking parts of the bike that were perfectly fine. When some of her hair slipped over his shoulder and brushed his arm, his body told him all about it.

He tossed the Allen keys and oil into the toolbox, flipped the lid shut,

and stood. “That should do it.”

To his surprise, she smiled. “You didn’t have to do that. Thanks.” She gave him one of those waist-height waves people did when they weren’t sure if they should shake hands. “I’m Teagan. I just moved here.”

His heart did this weird lifting thing. Like it was happy or something. Before he could think of a good response, like his name, he saw his dad climbing out of the pit. He needed to get out of here. “I gotta go,” he said, lifting the toolbox into the back of the truck. As he climbed into the driver’s seat, he called over his shoulder, “Learn to fix your bike. Next time you hit someone, you can fix it yourself.”

She snorted, made a point of giving him a wide berth as he reversed the truck out of the lot and onto the street.

Pulling away, he glanced in the rearview mirror. For a safety check. There she was, cupping her hands to her mouth and shouting, “You hit me!”

He laughed. For real this time.

If there was a universe in which he had time to date? He’d find out where she lived and leave a box of fudge on her porch.

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JOSH

Josh Regis didn’t take his status as top dog at Easton Prep lightly. Never had. Never would. Mostly because it rocked being him.

Especially now he was back with his crew.

Eight by land. Eight by sea.

Lake and river, actually. And if you didn’t factor in Liam, the cox.

Details.

He was a big-picture kind of guy and a natural-born leader.

He hadn’t needed to know everyone’s names or run a Reign of Terror to get here either. Not with his pedigree. He was a sixth-generation Regis gracing the halls of the East Coast’s most exclusive prep school. His crew were some of the wealthiest teenagers in the USA. If you didn’t count Cam. They razzed him about being a scholarship kid, but everyone knew bank balances didn’t matter when you were in the boat. Earning your seat did.

Meaning, the Josh Regis style of leadership was more… benevolent. He’d finished his stuff-a-kid’s-head-down-the-toilet phase years ago. The rest of the crew, too. Apart from Quaid. He’d given a guy a swirly last year, but he’d had his reasons. And he’d filled the tank with Evian beforehand. Quaid was thoughtful like that. And he gave great piggybacks. Which is why the team was always there to back him up.

That was how the Easton Eagles’ rowing team rolled.

Sometimes, though? A leader needed to knock some heads together. Remind them of the mission. Winning. After this morning’s inaugural practice session? Six of the guys needed to demand refunds from their training camps or admit they hadn’t gone.

Cam had probably spent the summer brooding under the hoods of cars he could only dream of driving, let alone owning. How that townie had

come back looking so ripped was a mystery. He rowed in whatever seat Coach put him. Apart from Josh's. No one who glowered that much could sit in stroke seat. Actually, no one apart from Josh could sit in stroke seat. It would stay his until the day he threw off his graduation cap to make some waves at the college of his choice. Or at least that was the plan.

The Easton Eagles had fallen off the map of crews to watch. Making it Josh's responsibility to put it back on recruiters' radar. That meant going Chad Alpha on the team. It was time to make some waves. His future depended on it. Meaning, theirs did, too.

They didn't need to know why. Or what happened in Baltimore. They just needed to win.

"Right, boys." Shower time was as good a time as any to dole out the tough love. "We need to wash off today's disaster and start fresh." He grabbed the bar of soap his girlfriend, Britney, had given him last night with instructions to use it after practice because she didn't like it when he smelled like "wet lake."

Wet lake? What other kind was there?

Whatever. It kept her happy and as it was the first day of the fall term, he knew she was as busy as he was, setting the stage for them to continue their reign as King and Queen of Easton Prep.

The bar wouldn't lather. Yet another thing that wasn't performing the way he wanted it to. He threw it into the next stall. "Catch, Crabby!"

Crabcatcher—the pipsqueak at the back of the boat—caught it, lost it, caught it again, then somehow sent it flying into the trash can. Everybody cheered. All of which set the stage for Josh to towel off and jump up on one of the cedar benches with the grace of a tiger.

And then he let rip, detailing where they'd gone wrong, how to turn it around next practice, and what would happen if they didn't.

Half an hour later, he and Ryder, the team's number two rower, led the pack up to the school's main quad. As Noah, the team's brainiac, started talking about all the books they were meant to have read over the summer, Josh caught up with his cousin.

"How was Baltimore?" asked Ryder.

"Intense." Josh wasn't going to give anything away. "Princeton?"

"Same. Their team is full of giants."

Any college team worth joining was.

“We’re still growing. We’ll be the same when we get there. But better.”

Fist bumps.

Ryder had wanted to go to Johns Hopkins with Josh, but he’d nixed it, framing it in a way that made it look like he only had his cousin’s best interests at heart versus what it really was—pushing him away. It was always a delicate balance with Ryder because a) they needed him on the crew if they stood any chance of winning, b) he was a loyal right-hand man, and c) they were related. Unfortunately for Ryder, his mom was the poster girl for the black sheep side of the family. The side Josh’s dad not-so-secretly called “The Egregiouses.”

“Hold up.” Josh stopped Ryder with a hand on his chest. “Girlfriends. Twelve o’clock.”

The rest of the team formed a semicircle behind them.

“What are we looking at?” Bronson, aka Baloo, looped his mammoth arms around their shoulders. He was the team’s powerhouse, chief of the boat’s “engine room,” and its cheerleader and heart-on-his-sleeve peacekeeper, too. He was always saying “Don’t fight, guys, please” whenever the team got into one (which they did on a daily).

“Britney. Amber. Determining the new year’s world order.”

“Ohhhh…” Baloo knew the drill. Josh’s girlfriend was his twin sister. “Britney’s doing her Queen Bee thing with the newbies?”

That she was.

“Anyone running for the hills?” asked Perry, not bothering to look up from his phone, which was in selfie mode, as per usual, tweaking his platinum-blond hair into a state of perfection before hitting the quad. Job done, he extended his phone. “Team photo! Strike a pose.” Perry did, no one else. Also, as per. Perry examined the picture and gave it a satisfied grin. “No wonder I have the most followers of anyone on the team.”

Josh watched his girlfriend in action. She and Amber were sidling up to someone he hadn’t seen before. A girl around their age with blonde highlights. Judging by her lack of fear when Brit approached, she had no clue that this exchange would pretty much establish her social status at Easton. In, out, or, like Juliet Morny, an outlier. Kind of like Cam, but a billion times richer. Juliet lived her life so far outside the proverbial box that she and Brit had an unspoken “let’s not go there” deal.

Queen Bee was about to sting.

“Want to get front-row seats?” asked Ryder.

Josh grabbed his arm, held him back. “You play Amber. I’ll do Brit.”

Ryder put on his version of an English accent, nothing at all like his girlfriend’s, but it did the trick. “Hi there, New Girl. Are you lost?”

Josh put on Britney’s chirpy voice. “We’ll help you, New Girl.” She wouldn’t unless, by some freak turn of events, she proved useful. “I’m Britney Garner, student council president. Garner like the senator.”

New Girl didn’t go into raptures. Mistake number one.

“Anybody know her name?” Josh asked.

“Teagan.”

Josh caught his double take short. How the hell did Cam Dillinger know New Girl? It didn’t sit well, Cam having an edge on Easton intel. That was his domain.

Ryder, oblivious, was being Amber again, rabbiting on about how she was chair of the dance committee when Josh’s phone rang.

Perry.

What the—? Ah. Genius. He put the call on speaker. Perry had sidled up to the girls, his back to them, and, future spy-in-training that he was, called the guys so they could tune in to the actual conversation.

“You’re probably super intimidated by the school’s whole vibe,” Britney said in a warm, friendly tone Josh knew well. “You’ll get used to it. Everyone’s pretty chill.”

If your idea of chill was *Lord of the Flies* Extreme Edition.

New Girl—Teagan, apparently—looked relieved. “Nice to know it’s not just yacht bros and pretentious horse girls.”

A couple of the guys blew low whistles.

“New Girl’s got balls,” Baloo said, impressed. Even when it came to his sister, Baloo was like Switzerland. He didn’t take sides. Stuck to doling out bear hugs as and when. Hence the nickname.

“Hmm.” Britney’s smile dropped temperature. “I’m captain of the equestrian team.”

“Which is very impressive,” Teagan backpedaled.

She’d learn soon enough that there was no backpedaling with Brit. Once there was an X on your back? You never got rid of it.

A helicopter flew over, drowning out the conversation. Students arriving from Boston or New York.

When he looked back, The Britney & Amber Show had a new cast member: Juliet Morny.

“Hello there, New Girl. I’m Juliet, your school-appointed first-day buddy. Come with me.” She hooked her arm in Teagan’s and steered her away, throwing a look at Perry that said she was on to him. All of them.

“Uh oh.” Crabcatcher covered his eyes. “Liam.”

“I thought we’d left him in the boathouse counting his crypto cash,” Quaid said.

Not when there was a new girl to impress. As gifted as Liam was at raking in digital coinage, a blindfolded penguin would’ve made a better cox. But he was their guy and what he lacked in talent he made up for in confidence. A confidence that had flourished when Easton went co-ed a couple of years ago. A mind-bender considering his arsenal of cringe-tastic lines he used to impress the “lay-deeez.”

Liam fake-bumped into Juliet. “Hey, Juliet? How ’bout you hook me up with the fresh meat?” Liam strutted past in a way that suggested he thought she might enjoy the one-man parade.

Juliet looked disgusted. So did New Girl.

You had to hand it to the guy. Knock backs only fueled his ego. Liam spotted the team and headed over, hitting on two more girls along the way. He arrived alone.

The guys split into small packs once they figured out who was going to which class first, but Josh lingered, watching Teagan and Juliet climb the broad stone steps leading up to the main building.

When they reached the top, Teagan turned back and looked directly at him, like she’d known all along that he’d been watching. Not in a creepy way. More… intrigued. The same way she looked intrigued by him.

Britney would’ve made it clear Josh wasn’t available, so whatever it was that had the two of them shooting question marks at each other was hitting somewhere different. A mystery worth exploring.

Bells rang. Students scattered. The quad emptied.

Josh headed to the dining hall. He’d texted chef and was looking forward to sitting down to one of his caviar omelets with a double side of spinach and hash browns. Protein, bruh. Couldn’t beat it.

Fortified, he headed upstairs to grace AP English with his presence.

“Mr. Regis.” Mr. Wu’s voice was tight. “How good of you to join us.”

Yeah. Obvs. Choosing a seat was tactical maneuver number one when you were a disrupter like him.

Wu gave one of his world-weary sighs. “In case you didn’t realize, Mr. Regis, class starts at the bell.”

“Sorry, Mr. Wu.” He wasn’t. The kids ran this school, not the other way around. Hadn’t he learned that yet? “I would have been on time, except”—he waited a beat; he knew his audience—“I didn’t want to be.”

Cackles filled the room. Power play complete, time for phase two. Operation New Girl.

She was parked in the back next to Juliet. As they watched him approach, Juliet whispered in her ear like she was doing a wildlife documentary commentary.

The Alpha Male of the pride enters the room… a hush… as the king of this jungle…

Josh met Ryder’s high five, ignoring the seat beside him in favor of sliding onto New Girl’s bench, pretending he had no idea they weren’t meant for three. She shot him a pissed off look when he budged her over.

Baloo was right. New Girl took no guff.

“*Mr.* Regis,” Wu said through gritted teeth. “As you’re late, you can do us the courtesy of reading the first stanza.”

Oops. “My bad. I didn’t bring the book.”

He looked at Teagan, and held eye contact until she pushed her book over. “Thanks.” He rearranged himself to face her, then gave Byron the Regis Treatment. “She walks in beauty, like the night/of cloudless climes and starry skies…”

He glanced up, even though he knew her eyes were glued to him, trying to figure how on earth an athlete like himself could make a two-hundred-year-old poem sound so relevant, so personal. People always forgot athletes needed a good grade average to get into the Ivies.

“… and all that’s best of dark and bright/meet in her aspect and her eyes.”

He let the book drop, no mic.

“What do you think it means, Mr. Regis?” Wu asked wearily.

Eyes still on Teagan, Josh said, “I think Byron was trying to smash.”

Teagan shot him the same look she’d thrown at Liam, then looked away.

“Mr. Regis,” Wu chided. “If you put as much effort into your English

class as your rowing, you'd actually get somewhere."

Teagan's head whipped around, eyes shining up at him like he was a Greek god. "You're on the rowing team?"

Aha. So she was a boat bunny, was she?

He nodded, all casual. Refused to throw a bone.

She turned back around to Juliet. "Can you show me the boathouse later?"

He smiled to himself. Made a mental note to tell the team they were about to get an audience…

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TEAGAN

Things had gone from bad to worse to shit.

Goose shit, if you want specifics. Hundreds of rancid globs of it that would take ages to clean off the dock and, more to the point, was giving her *waaaay* too much thinking time. And she really didn't want to think about how the last few days had landed her *here*.

"Hey, dock wench!"

Shudder.

Liam, the lecherous crypto boy Juliet had warned her about, swanned up all kitted out in rowing gear that he wrongly thought made him a prospect. "You missed a spot."

Flirting 101 tip: Kicking someone when they're down? Bad call.

She ignored him, Coach Hayden, his assistant coach, and the parade of rowers strutting down to the dock.

Liam leaned in, undeterred. "A little birdie told me you were into crew."

This was not a state secret.

The whole of Easton Prep knew she was into rowing thanks to an announcement earlier today calling her to Principal Cabrera's office. If she'd thought news spread fast in her old high school, she'd been wrong. Dial-up versus fiber optics. She'd been too terrified she was going to be expelled to think about the fallout at the time, but Coach Hayden had nailed it. She wished she'd been expelled instead.

She shoved the massive broom away from Liam only for him to follow.

"Hey, dock girl. Why don't I take you out tonight and you can practice your stroke?"

She pulled a sad clown face. "Aww. I can't. I have plans to profusely vomit at that idea."

Was it only yesterday she'd discovered the lakeside boathouse and thought she'd found paradise? Paradise lost, more like. A terrifying thought occurred. Had allowing herself to think things might work out here after all meant she was turning into her mom?

Ella had looked upset when Teagan had told her there wasn't a girls' rowing team. And then ruined it by suggesting trying another sport…

Ummm? Sure, Mom. She'd just forget about the ten years of training, races, blood, sweat, and tears she'd poured into her dream of rowing for Stanford and give something else a whirl. Ping-pong, maybe. Or roller derby. Better vibe for blowing off steam.

That's what had made her sneak down here at dawn. When she'd seen the roll-down door someone hadn't shut properly, it was like the universe was begging her to get a boat, return to her happy place. Remember the girl she used to be.

Catch, drive, finish, recover.

Catch, drive, finish, recover.

Working with the water, finding her pace, pushing it farther and harder until she was nothing but motion and muscle memory.

But of course the boat shed had CCTV.

It was on Teagan's shoulders that she'd been stupid enough to believe Easton Prep's brochure: "We go out of our way to lavish our students with every imaginable resource as we shepherd them toward their higher education."

If you were a guy, maybe. Or your parents donated the resource.

When Juliet had shown her around yesterday, every building, lab, and lecture hall bore plaques bearing the names of illustrious alumni signposting their legacies. And/or their hopes and dreams for their children.

The Senator Deedee Garner Debate Hall.

The Darling Media Center.

Liam the Letch's parents funded the Colman Economics Building.

And on it went. When Teagan had jokingly asked Juliet if she felt left out, not having a building with her name on it, they'd rounded a corner and Juliet fanned out her hands. "Ta da! Behold the Morny Fashion and Design Hub." The entire building, shaped like a Birkin handbag, was covered in crystals. Real ones. Juliet wasn't smug about it, though. If anything, she looked kind of sad.

“I designed it as a joke when my parents asked me what I wanted for my fifteenth birthday. At first, I thought they’d say no, but they were into it. Flew over these specialist crystal putter-on-er people from Eastern Europe. Had them working around the clock so the ribbon-cutting ceremony would happen on my birthday.”

“Sounds like they really love you,” Teagan said.

“Yeah,” Juliet said. “Totes.” She’d put on a smile that didn’t make it to her eyes and continued the tour. Since Juliet had been one of the First Day of School’s two highlights, Teagan hadn’t pressed.

The second highlight, to Teagan’s surprise, had been feeling a weird flutter of joy—relief?—when she’d spotted none other than Cam Dillinger climbing up the steps of the main school building.

Someone she knew! Well, someone she’d run into. Literally. Something he evidently wasn’t holding against her if the wave and smile he’d shot across the quad later that afternoon was anything to go by.

There had been one other moment of note. The one when Josh Regis had cozied up to her in English and read that poem with his blue eyes trained on hers, warm and fiery, like he’d written it himself.

If blond, blue-eyed Skarsgård lookalikes who made a convincing argument for the return of ’80s preppy fashion were her thing, she would’ve drunk the Kool-Aid there and then. But it wasn’t. Sorry, Josh Regis. He’d have to annoy someone else with his God’s Gift to Women act.

She’d been so stupidly elated when she’d heard there was a rowing team, she’d practically skipped to the boathouse. It was amazing. A sprawling cedar and glass haven for rowers.

A shed packed with top-of-the-range boats. The latest rowing machines (or ergs, as they were known). Everything a girl could want.

If, that is, Easton had a female rowing team. They did not. Not enough interest, apparently. A not very sympathetic assistant coach said there was a community club two towns down the road she could join for five grand.

Yeah, right. If she started prying crystals off Juliet’s fashion center, maybe.

“There’s a party down at the harbor tonight,” said Liam. “Town throws it every year,” he added, not getting the hint. “It’s for girls who’re up for a little fun. Do you like having fun, dock wench?” He rotated his hips in a way that was possibly a dance move, but actually made throwing up a very

real possibility.

"Hey, Liam," called a voice behind her. "Why don't you try your moves on someone who cares?"

Teagan turned around, squinted against the sun, not entirely sure why the hottie in rowing gear sounded like Cam until she realized it *was* Cam.

Interesting.

Mechanic. Townie. Student at Easton Prep. And a rower.

Well, well, well. Wasn't he the dark horse of Eagle's Cove?

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CAM

Cam had seen Liam hit on enough girls to know he was a crime against common decency. There was a chance Teagan might take the interruption as a cockblock—Liam would—but it was an act of public service.

Liam, no surprise, wasn't happy. "Don't talk to me, 'FAID.'"

Perry, who was sauntering past, laughed and gave Liam a high five. Cam was used to it. His so-called teammates congratulating one another whenever someone got a dig in. To be fair, everyone took digs at everyone else, too. They were egalitarian in that way. Not so much in others.

"You okay?" he asked Teagan.

She shrugged like, *Whatever*. "What's a 'FAID'?"

"Financial aid. I'm a scholarship kid." He tipped his head toward the rest of the crew who were gathering at the eight-seater they were taking out for time trials. "They love to remind me of it."

She scrunched up her face. "That's not okay."

He shrugged. He was getting a good education and a shot at making some of his dreams come true. He could take the ribbing. "It is what it is."

Coach Hayden gave the megaphone a quick blast that meant butts on seats, hands on oars. And, in Cam's case, hitting the conditions of his scholarship. "Gotta go. You sure you're cool?"

She gave a pile of goose poop a shove with her broom and shot him a grin. "Never better."

Suffice to say, the Easton Eagles hadn't soared to new heights.

It was the first set of time trials they'd done since last year and it showed.

No teamwork. No dream work.

Even from out here on the lake, Cam could tell Coach Hayden was about to blow a gasket. A few disastrous runs in, he barely needed his megaphone. Beside him, his periodic assistant coach, Lana, was keeping time even though it was obvious forward motion wasn't their forte today.

Normally, Cam just kept his head down, oars in motion, trying to match whatever pace Josh was setting.

It was like trying to keep time with an octopus. Eight oars rowing to the beats of eight different drummers. Or, in Crabcatcher's case, one oar, two different beats.

The crew had numbered positions that ran in reverse from the front where Liam, their coxswain or "cox," was perched. Eight was the first position, Crabby at the back was in the one seat. Counterintuitive, but there you were.

It was Liam's job to steer, keep them safe, and strategize. He was supposed to call the pace, synchronize the rowers, and turn their collective strengths into forward motion, all the while motivating them to do better. Multitasking was not his forte.

Josh, in the "eight seat"—aka "stroke"—ignored Liam, as usual, and set whatever pace he deemed appropriate.

The stroke was meant to be the team's best rower. A combo of consistency, technical excellence, tactical skills, and confidence. Josh had a lot of confidence.

Cam checked the thought. Josh was fine. Good, even. But the team had never been mixed up, had a chance to try out other seats. Coach probably didn't have a choice seeing as Josh's dad was one of Easton's famed legacy rowers who, if rumor had it, regularly made it clear to Principal Cabrera where his money would or would not be going if his son wasn't sitting at the front of the boat.

After him was Ryder. Josh's cousin. The second-best rower. Again, Cam had thoughts, but kept life easier for himself by staying quiet.

Then Cam. The rowers behind him were the boat's powerhouses. Baloo, Quaid, and Perry. Behind them? The bow pair—the technique guys. Noah and Crabcatcher.

Catching crabs was a rowing term and pretty much the worst thing you could do on the water. It happened when a rower miscalculated the stroke and their oar got stuck in the water. It disrupted the flow of the boat and

usually sent your oar flying, meaning game over. No matter how hard he tried (and he *did* try) Crabby caught a few every practice.

Coach had clearly had enough of watching them kill run after run, so called them in to get some energy drinks and have a “talk.”

Everyone was in a bad mood as they jogged up to the boathouse and were taking it out on each other. Liam laying into Crabby, Josh laying into Liam, Quaid telling him to stuff it, Ryder and Noah getting into it about electrolytes, and Baloo trying to make peace. The usual.

Cam was too embarrassed to check what Teagan made of them. Apparently, according to the gossipmongers, she’d been a hotshot single sculler back in LA.

If she wasn’t laughing her ass off, she was probably booking a one-way ticket West. So much for having a fellow townie here at Easton. If you didn’t count Coach. He couldn’t even say it had been good while it lasted. It, whatever “it” was, hadn’t even had a chance to begin.

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TEAGAN

After earwigging on Coach Hayden and his assistant coach, Lana, discussing how to reconfigure the team so it wasn't a laughingstock, Teagan couldn't stop herself. She had to say something.

"Dropping Ryder down a seat won't do anything," she announced. "He's not your problem."

Coach Hayden looked at her like she'd been speaking Martian. "Excuse me?"

Teagan hadn't rowed on an eight, but her dad had. She'd watched enough races with him to know how to create the best dynamics to win. If winning was their goal, because it sure hadn't looked like it from what she'd seen.

The coaches were still staring at her, and it wasn't like she had anything to lose, so she continued. "Demoting Ryder wouldn't be fair. He isn't rowing well because he's trying to match Josh. Josh is the one who isn't pulling enough. You should swap him."

Coach and Lana shared an *Aww, isn't she adorable?* look.

No. She just knew a lot about rowing.

Lana raised her eyebrow. "Okay, then. Who would you put on the throne?"

Cleaning goose shit off the dock was worse than not rowing at all, so Teagan figured she might as well be honest. If they banished her from the lake, at least she wouldn't have to endure the torture of watching the Easton Eagles sink their chances of soaring.

"Cam's got the best technique *and* he's working the hardest," she said. "But the team doesn't seem to like him, so you should put the big guy in six in the bow."

“Bronson?” Coach asked at the same time Lana said, “Baloo?”

She shrugged. “He’s got the brawn, and the team obviously loves him. Which is important, because no one’s listening to the cox.”

Coach Hayden rocked back on his heels, impressed. “Astute.” He turned to Lana. “Think we should switch Josh?”

Lana snorted. “I’d like to keep my job, thank you.”

Coach gave her a suit-yourself shrug. “I don’t think I’ll have one to worry about soon if we don’t start winning.”

Interesting. Josh clearly had more control over more things at Easton than the other students. She’d made some other observations she could’ve shared, but the guys were jogging back down.

She dragged her broom to the side and listened in as Coach gathered them around. “Last set of the day. We’re going to change it up. Baloo, you’re in eight.”

Baloo looked around the group in disbelief. “Holy shit.”

“What the hell?” Josh shouted.

Coach ignored him. “Ryder, you keep seven. Cam’s in six.” He rattled off the rest of the seats, then, to Josh, said, “You’re in bow.”

Shell-shocked didn’t come close to describing their reaction. But Teagan was *buzzing*.

“Coach, you can’t be serious.” Josh laughed. “Bow is Crabby’s seat.”

Meaning, he thought it was beneath him.

“Not for this run it isn’t.” Before Josh could launch into him again, Coach Hayden made a cool-your-jets gesture. “We’re just trying something out.”

The guys, pumped, started climbing into the boat in their new positions. Except, of course, for Josh. “You can’t do this.”

Coach made a face that said he could and would. “Get in the boat.”

Teagan gave up on the goose poop. She had to see this.

Fuming, Josh climbed into the boat, barely helping as the crew rowed into starting position.

Coach sounded the starter horn.

Teagan had never thought watching a run could match the adrenaline rush she felt rowing, but she was invested.

Baloo, as predicted, was a machine. The rest of the guys were pushing to keep up. The run wasn’t perfect, far from it, but they were rowing a lot

better than they had been.

When they passed the finish line, Coach Hayden gave his stopwatch a satisfied click. “They shaved off eight seconds.” He gave Teagan a nod.

It wasn’t a huge endorsement, let alone what she really wanted—free access to the boathouse—but it felt strangely good. Like being part of the team.

“Coach!” Josh flew out of the boat as soon as they returned to the dock and stormed toward them.

Lana took a step back. “I’m out.”

Leaving seemed a wise course of action.

Teagan was shouldering her backpack in the boathouse’s Great Room, about to make her escape, when Josh burst in, still furious. “Hey! What’s your problem?”

She played innocent. “Me?”

“I saw you talking to Coach. I’ve been in stroke seat since I’ve been at this school. Now I’m down to bow?”

All the pent-up frustration and anger that had been brewing in her since her dad had disappeared roared up out of nowhere. “Maybe you’re not the best rower,” she shot back. “Maybe you’re not pulling your weight. Maybe you should keep your head in the boat instead of up your ass.”

He closed the space between them, the way guys did when they were gunning for a fight. He was so close she could smell his expensive cologne and minty breath. “Who the hell do you think you are?”

“Who the hell are *you*?” she spat back, which was a stupid thing to say, because they both knew the answer to that.

So what if he sat in a different seat for a run? He was in a boat! Didn’t he see it? He had what she wanted and he didn’t even appreciate it.

He took a deliberate step back. “I’m Josh Regis. Watch yourself.”

He wanted her to watch? She’d watch. She watched as he turned on his heel, strode toward an enormous cedar beam where he shot finger pistols at its shiny new plaque. It read:

REGIS BOATHOUSE

Oops.

She got a flat on her bike ride home. In the middle of nowhere. Any remaining tendrils of triumph she'd felt after Coach had tried out her suggestions were long gone.

A truck pulled up beside her.

Cam.

Of course it was. Like she needed reminding that the whole team had seen Josh put her in her place.

He rolled down his window. Stared at her bike. "Tire's toast," he said. "You won't be able to fix that."

"Thanks. Good to know."

He rolled his eyes, got out of the truck, put her bike in the back. "Get in."

After riding in silence for a while, Cam broke it. "I saw Josh ream you out earlier. Or, from another perspective"—he shot her a quick smile—"you reaming him out."

Sometimes having no filter was a bad thing. "Not my smartest move."

He shrugged. "Easton Prep's a hard crowd." He glanced across to make sure she was listening. "It was fun. Mixing things up."

Yeah. She'd thought so. Not as fun as rowing, but…

She pointed out her house and Cam eased the truck into the drive.

"Everyone's going to the Dock Party tonight," Cam said as she unbuckled her seat belt.

Yeah, no. Partying anywhere near Liam or, god forbid, Josh, was not going to happen. She'd be better off breaking into the boathouse again and getting expelled. "I heard."

"You should go. Seriously."

"I'll think about it." She got her backpack and helmet from the footwell and opened the door.

"I have an extra wristband," Cam said, all nonchalant, like he didn't care one way or another if she showed up, then he took her phone out of her backpack's side pocket, held it up to her face to unlock it, and started tapping. "Text me if you want it."

Hmm. Maybe not so nonchalant after all. Did he… *like* her?

"Go on, git." Cam shooed her out of the cab. "I've got things to do."

She snorted. Boys were so annoying. Cute. Some of them. But mostly annoying. Even when they put their numbers in your phone and pretended

they didn’t care if you met them at a party. Which, weirdly, made her want to go.

Her mom offered to drive her because she had gone out and gotten herself a new job starting with a shift in the evening. Well. An old job. The one she’d done a million years ago at The Crab Shack when she’d lived here. A night at home licking her wounds sounded better, so she declined. But once she was on her own, it wasn’t better.

So she did what every girl in a similar quandary did in her position. Phoned a friend. Her only friend. But still.

Juliet promptly invited herself over, said she’d drive Teagan to the party, then dove into her closet to pick a suitable outfit. “Cam might be a FAID,” Juliet said, giving yet another dress the side-eye. “But he deserves better than this.”

Juliet was insanely rich but, weirdly, not at all snobby. She didn’t say a word about the house, which was definitely more shabby than chic despite her mom’s best efforts.

“How about this one?” Juliet asked, holding up a tiny form-fitting dress Teagan never would have picked for a date she wanted to go on let alone a meh invitation to use Cam’s extra wristband.

Before Teagan could say absolutely not, Juliet’s phone announced, “You have a message.”

“Play,” Juliet instructed.

“*Hey, guuurl…*” purred the instantly recognizable voice of Kesha. “Just calling to say hi.”

“Is that…” gasped Teagan.

Juliet gave her a pat on the cheek. “No. Well. It is, but—” She huffed out a sigh. “When my parents have bad news, they send it by celebrity video messenger. They think it softens the blow.”

“*I heard from your mom that it’s your birthday—*” said the message.

Teagan shot her a look. Why hadn’t she said? Juliet rolled her eyes, pointed at the phone.

“*Just wanted to reach out and wish you a happy birthday. Now, listen. She’s not going to be able to visit like she said, but she promises—*”

Juliet ended the video.

“Harsh,” Teagan said, then, “Happy birthday?” She took the teeny dress Juliet was holding out to her. It was the least she could do.

Juliet gave her a breezy, doesn't-matter smile. "They love that I'm at boarding school thirty-five hundred miles away. I'm easier to forget that way. But enough melodrama. Hair. You have lots of it. It must be dealt with."

Juliet dispatched her to find a curling iron. It wasn't anywhere obvious, so she went to her mom's bedroom where she'd stashed a load of boxes in her closet. She took a couple out, then froze. What was her dad's sports duffel doing here?

She sat down and warily pulled it close, taking a deep breath before opening it. There were a couple of his shirts. Weird. Maybe her mom was secretly smelling them at night like people did in the movies after someone had died. In a way, he kind of had. He wasn't the man she thought he was a year ago. The rest of the stuff was a mishmash. Mementos from holidays, a couple of baseball caps, one of her trophies that he used to keep in his office. An engraved watch. Unfortunately, it couldn't turn back time and make things better again.

She zipped up the duffel, put it back in the closet, and broke the bad news to Juliet. No curling iron. They'd need a plan B. One that would get her to the party and into her new life so she could forget about the old one as soon as possible. She stomped out just as Juliet came out of the bathroom, beaming. "Look what I found!"

The curling iron. Right where it was supposed to be.

Juliet drove them to the port in her bright orange sports car. As they climbed out, Cam emerged from the crowd and jogged over. "Hey! Glad you made it."

"Go on." Juliet nudged her forward. "I'll catch you later."

"Aren't you coming?"

"Nope. Not my scene. I'll be back. Text if you don't want me to. Laters."

"Here's your wristband." Cam handed it to Teagan, then turned to go.

What the—

He *had* invited her, right?

Yes, idiot. But not as his date.

Awesome. Could this day suck any more than it already did?

"Cool. Cool, cool." So cool. "Love going to a party by myself when I don't know anyone."

Cam looked over at the massive waterside marquee where a DJ was playing to a large crowd, then back at her. She must've looked like the last dog at the pound because he tipped his head for her to follow him. "C'mon. Let's get you a drink."

He did one better than that. He agreed to play beer pong with her. Beer pong with Teagan rules. Get one in, the other person drinks *or* answers a question.

"Are you sure?" Cam asked when she'd explained how it worked. "I'm a beer pong shark." He threw the first ball. "I heard you row. Any good?"

"Southwest Junior Champion. I have my eye set on Stanford."

He brightened. "Stanford? One of their scouts gave me his card at the regatta last year."

Way too easily she pictured them both in Stanford's colors: cardinal and white, hand-in-hand, triumphantly lifting their respective trophies in the air.

"I'm hoping for U-Dub."

"The University of Washington?"

"Yeah." He threw a Ping-Pong. Nailed it. "Why'd you pick Stanford?"

"My dad rowed for them. I always thought I'd go there, too." She'd thought a lot of things. "But then we moved here."

Another Ping-Pong ball plopped into a beer cup. "Why?"

Teagan hesitated… She didn't want Cam to judge her because of the bad things her father had done. She liked him—and wanted him to like her. Maybe once she got to know Cam better she could trust him with the truth. But for now it was safer to make something up. "Umm… my dad. Yeah, he passed away. We needed a change." She swiftly threw a Ping-Pong ball, and mercifully, it plopped into a cup. "What about you? Why the U-Dub?"

"They're a division-one crew team, which would put me on an Olympic track. They've also got a really great engineering program."

Teagan threw another ball. Crushed it. "You want to be an Olympian *and* an engineer?" Impressive.

Cam ducked his head, shot her a shy smile. "I'd be the first one in my family to go to college." He shot a panicked look around them to see if anyone heard. "Don't tell anyone."

She wouldn't. She knew better than anyone the dread of being found out. His secret was safe with her.

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JOSH

As pathetic as the Eagle's Cove Dock Party was, it was something to do. Not to mention an opportunity to arrive in style. By boat. A sleek, five-star luxury vessel the locals were free to look at, but not touch.

God, he was in a bad mood. New Girl might have balls, but she didn't have brains. Not with a move like that. She'd soon learn that you *never* cross a Regis. Britney had been *pissed* when she'd heard about it. Baloo had been strangely silent, but for the most part the guys agreed Teagan was out of order.

The whole team had come with him apart from Cam, who said he'd make his own way, as if they already didn't get that he was a lone wolf, didn't travel with the pack. Either he really did put in the hours at his dad's shop, or he was in a secret cult. Or didn't like them. Nah. Everybody wanted face time with Josh. Whatever. He could go in the bad books with New Girl.

He held out his hand to Britney, who wouldn't make it down the stairs let alone the dock in her stilettos. Baloo bashed past, pounding down the dock like the Incredible Hulk cheerily bellowing, "Camembert! Boat-rocker!"

And now he was giving Teagan Tao a bear hug?

Traitor.

She was public enemy number one.

"Because of you, I got upgraded," Baloo bellowed, volume turned to eleven.

"I didn't change the seats," she protested, laughing as he swung her around.

"Maybe not, but you spoke truth to power."

Baloo knew Josh was right behind him, right?

“Don’t think that’s what that means,” Teagan said to Baloo, smile turning wary when she spotted him.

Baloo tried to drag her into their group, pouring out tequila shots, but she wisely refused.

When Baloo got to him, Josh gave him a meaningful look. “Not really into tequila right now.”

“What? Because we have practice tomorrow?”

“No.” He waited for the light to dawn. It did.

Baloo looked crestfallen. “Hey, c’mon, man. Don’t be sore. The boat was faster with me. Fair and square.”

“It’s fine,” Josh said. It wasn’t anything close to fine. Josh was the team stroke. End of.

Baloo looked him in the eye. “C’mon, man, get in my face and tell me you’re mad at me.”

Everyone was watching. Josh glared at Baloo.

“Yup,” Baloo said, all serious, like he was a doctor diagnosing him. “You’re mad.”

He stepped closer to Josh, his huge form towering over him menacingly.

“Well, there’s only one way to end this…” said Baloo. He grinned. “BEAR HUG!”

Everyone was circled around them so there was no escape. Baloo scooped him up and spun him around until Josh started laughing. “Enough!”

Baloo dropped him to the ground.

Britney hooked her arm into Josh’s and whispered, “Let’s dance. I’ve got Amber doing a little fact gathering to see if we can remind our newest Eastonian how things work here.”

“Stay out of it, yeah?” Crew was his thing. He didn’t need his girlfriend fighting his battles. He spotted Teagan talking with Cam and some other townies nearby.

What’s your deal, New Girl? he thought. *What makes you think you can stick your fingers into pies you have no business touching?*

Britney grabbed his chin, turned his face to hers.

“Why are you staring at the new girl?”

He shook her off. “I’m not.” He was. He needed to understand why

she’d said what she had and what made her think she was right.

Brit gave a huff of irritation. Before she could launch into one, he held up a hand. “Look. I’m not… It’s not you. I just need some space.”

Britney stormed off. He saw her go over to Amber. Their heads were together as they whispered, looking at something on Amber’s phone. No doubt planning a takedown.

Maybe he did feel like having some tequila…

Too many shots later, Josh and everyone protested when the music stopped. Britney wrestled the microphone away from the DJ.

Shit.

Britney in a bad mood was as full-on as one of her brother’s bear hugs. Not in a good way. Josh had looked at another girl. So what? It wasn’t because he liked her. It was because she’d hit a nerve and he wasn’t exactly going to admit that, was he?

“Attention, everyone. Attention,” said Britney into the mic. “This is a public service announcement. I just wanted everyone to be aware that there is a thief in our midst.”

Okay. Not exactly what he’d been expecting.

A screen flickered to life behind her. A news anchor was talking about some nationwide hunt the FBI was doing.

He leaned in. What was she up to? Britney wasn’t a public service kind of girl.

“David Tao,” the newscaster said, “the owner of a boutique chain of hotels in California, allegedly defrauded his investment group of millions.” An image of the fugitive, with his wife and daughter, flashed onto the screen.

Teagan.

Teagan Tao was the daughter of one of America’s most wanted fugitives.

Josh took it all back. Brit was a genius. He’d dance with her for the rest of the night if she wanted.

The newscaster continued, “The fund was believed to have been embezzled to pay for Tao and his family’s lavish lifestyle. To date, authorities have been unable to locate him.”

Britney tapped the mic, her smile triumphant. “Where’s your dad, Teagan? Where’s the money?”

Everyone was staring at the new girl, backing away like she had a

contagious disease. She might as well have. Living large at someone else's expense did not go down well with the locals. For people like him? They all lived large at someone else's expense. But they hadn't been caught.

Teagan froze like a deer in headlights. Then, looking horrified, she fled the scene, stealing a bottle of vodka from the bar on the way out.

Like father, like daughter, apparently.

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TEAGAN

Downing as much vodka as she could in one go had not been Teagan's wisest decision. It was a few notches down from telling Cam her dad was dead, though.

Was there even a world in which she could go back to Easton?

"What happened to you?"

Teagan swirled around. Juliet was smiling sweetly at her. Too sweetly. Her dad hadn't defrauded her parents, too, had he?

"What have you been up to?"

Juliet grinned. "I figured out how to convince my mom to visit. But first, tell me what's going on."

"Ohhhh…" Teagan lurched a little, grabbed on to Juliet for balance. "I got publicly executed."

Juliet propped her up against a nearby car and walked over to hers.

Teagan squinted, trying to figure out what she was doing.

"Tell me about it when I'm back at school," Juliet said over her shoulder.

After a hiccup she could taste—gross—Teagan asked, "Aren't you going tomorrow?"

"No," Juliet said casually. "I gotta get my car fixed."

It still looked very orange. Very expensive. "What's wrong with your car?"

Juliet moved Teagan a bit farther away from it, struck a match, then threw it at her car. Instant fireball.

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING?"

Juliet gave her a sweet smile. "You should probably get going."

Teagan had never in her life 911'ed her mother. But the cumulation of

today's events demanded it. Her mom showed up two minutes later in her Crab Shack uniform, guided Teagan into the car, and wisely didn't ask any questions on the ride home. But when Teagan fell out of the car in the driveway and pretty much had to crawl onto the porch, she figured she owed her mother an explanation.

"I'm sorry, Mom. I messed up."

"Yeah," her mom said, then sat down beside her. "I'm glad you did."

Teagan would've done a double take if she hadn't felt so awful. "What?"

"It means you're talking to me."

"You never want to talk."

"Of course I do," her mom said, then pulled a bottle of water out of her bag, uncapped it, and handed it to Teagan.

"Not about Dad. Not about how he wrecked our lives."

"He didn't wreck our lives!"

"See!" Teagan felt the warmth from the vodka start to leave her system. "You can't talk about anything real. I found his duffel bag earlier. Hidden in your closet."

"What were you—"

"I was looking for the curling iron and instead I found Dad's duffel bag. Why'd you hide it? Why'd you even bring it? And don't sugarcoat the truth. If you know it."

Her mom, to her shock, blazed back. "You want to know the truth? I hate Eagle's Cove. When I left twenty years ago, I promised myself I'd never come back. But here I am. And not by choice. Because of your dad. Everyone here thinks I'm sad about it, but I'm not sad. I'm furious."

Gosh. Teagan hadn't seen that coming. It was strangely reassuring watching her mom have a meltdown. "Oh."

Her mom looked up at the ceiling and laughed. "You know? As mad as I get, I remind myself, he's your father." She shook her head. "It's been six months and I *still* can't believe he did this to us."

"But he did."

Her mom shifted around to face her. "I don't know why I kept his bag. Maybe I thought it would have some answers. But at this point? I don't know if I should keep it or burn it."

She ran her fingers through Teagan's hair and for the first time in forever, Teagan didn't want to pull away.

“I’m so angry at him, Mom.” Teagan tipped her head on her shoulder. “But I really miss him, too.”

Her mom’s arm dropped from her hair to her waist and gave her a squeeze. “Me too, Teags. Me too. That Asshole.”

Teagan laughed even though moving made the world spin. It was nice, sitting with her mom like this. Talking openly and honestly. Maybe this whole disaster was the thing that would finally bring them closer together.

“Mom?”

“Yes, sweetie?”

“I think I need you to hold my hair in the bathroom.”

Mouth breathing was the only way Teagan was going to get through another morning of sweeping goose poop. That, and dark sunglasses. Saved her from squinting against the too-bright day and dodging eye contact after Britney had destroyed her reputation. Check that. She hadn’t had a reputation to destroy, and now she had one. Embezzlement Barbie. Bankrupt Barbie. Boot-Her-Out Barbie. And the list went on.

Coach Hayden had come down a few minutes ago and even though it was fifteen minutes after practice was meant to have started, there wasn’t a sign of any of the rowers.

“You sure you don’t want to scrap the boys’ team and try to round up some girls instead?” Teagan chanced.

“Ha! Nice try. I’m sorry to say, kid, Easton won’t make a big push for a girls’ team until the boys start winning again.”

“They’re not going to win with hangovers.” Teagan nodded at the clubhouse where the boys, all in various states of disarray, were finally beginning to emerge.

Grumbling about the Dock Party, Coach met the guys halfway and barked out a command to give him a lap before they got on the boat.

Liam stumbled a few steps, then bent double to retch. “Just give me a minute, Coach.”

“You’re the cox. That means you’re meant to be leading the team—”

“I said give me a minute!”

Teagan, who really should’ve been keeping her head as low as possible after last night’s disaster, couldn’t help herself. “No wonder you’re losing.”

Liam turned his head, sunglasses slipping down his nose. “Ex-cuse me?”

“You’re wasting precious practice time being hungover. Do you know how many people would kill to get in that boat? I know I would.”

Liam started laughing. “Cute. But—”

Coach cut him off. “I think she’s onto something. Teagan? You want in the boat? There’s a position up for grabs.” He looked between the two of them, then said, “Cox.”

“What the—”

Coach held his hand up. “Liam? Teagan. You’re going to race for the position.”

The next thing she knew, Teagan was standing next to Liam in front of the team, all of whom looked as bewildered as she did. Or, more accurately, terrified.

She was a solo rower. Not a cox. And what happened once she beat Liam? Because she would totally beat him.

There was that little, teeny problem about the whole team finding out her dad was a wanted criminal last night. And Josh hating her for mixing up the seats yesterday. And telling Cam her father was dead. But apart from that, she had this.

“Right.” Coach rubbed his hands together. He looked like he couldn’t quite believe he was doing this either. “Two boats, four rowers, one kilometer.”

“I’m not doing it,” Liam said.

Coach wasn’t having it. “The losing team has to clean the docks for a month. Pick your team, Teagan.”

“Me?” Hard no. They all hated her.

“C’mon.” Coach gave her a gentle nudge. “You can do this.”

She could. Yes. She could and she would. “Umm… Cam, Baloo, Josh __”

“I’m not rowing for her,” Josh huffed.

A few of the guys laughed.

“Josh,” Coach warned. “She called your name.”

“She can have Ryder,” Josh shot back.

Ryder was good. Teagan shrugged. “Sure.”

Teagan clocked Josh giving his cousin a look warning him to do everything he could to lose. We'll see about that…

Liam jumped in. "Josh, Quaid, Perry. And Noah. She can have Crabcatcher."

"Great," Teagan shot back. "Perfect." Her entire body was shaking. This was about as far from perfect as it got.

While the guys grumbled and climbed into the boats, Coach came up to her. "You okay?"

"No. They're not going to row for me."

"You're not like any coxie they've had before. You see things they don't."

"I don't know how to cox," she wailed. "I'm a rower."

"Then you know what it's like to be in their shoes. You can empathize. Use it. Get in their heads." He let it sink in. "This is your chance to get in the boat. Do you want it?"

She did. "Yes."

"Then prove it."

Next thing she knew she was in the front of the boat with four pairs of eyes glaring at her. It was either sink or swim time. "Okay, guys, I know you don't want to be on my team, but I'm the one standing between you and a month's worth of goose shit." She took a breath. "Right. The first two fifty? We let them set the pace. Josh will burn them out quick. He has too much to prove. When they lag? We'll make our move."

No one said anything. She focused her gaze on Ryder. "I know you only agreed to row for me to throw the race."

He pretended to be offended. Good thing he wasn't an acting major.

"Consider this, Ryder. You do Josh's bidding? You'll spend the rest of your life as his sidekick."

"Bullshit." His eyes flared. She'd hit the nerve she knew would hurt the most. Out here anyway.

Too soon the boats were at the starting line, and Coach was sounding the horn.

As predicted, Liam's team shot off ahead of them.

She could see Ryder itching to push harder. "Stroke pair, hold back."

Liam was screaming a nonstop stream of commands to his team.

"Okay, guys," she said when, as predicted, Liam's boat began to lose

power. “Now! Let’s take it to them.” To her delight, the guys ramped up the force, pushing the boat forward so that they were neck and neck. But neck and neck wasn’t good enough.

“Ryder!” she shouted. “Are you really going to let him win?”

He flicked a glance over at his cousin’s boat, then started to pull hard. Just like she knew he could.

“That’s right, Ryder! You’ve got this! Everyone! Push! Push!”

They did—and their boat crossed the finish line first. They’d *won*!

“You did it! You won! You guys won!”

For a moment, no one said anything. Teagan couldn’t breathe. What was going on? They’d won.

And then the boat erupted into cheers. Even Cam was smiling.

Whooping with joy, Baloo reached out his hand and shook hers. “Well done, Crew Girl.”

Teagan rode home on a wave of euphoria. Couldn’t wait to tell her mom the news. She was the Easton Eagles’ new cox! She burst through the front door, but no one answered when she called out.

A stack of mail sat on the kitchen counter. She sifted through it, stopping when she saw a letter from Easton Prep. She opened it even though it was addressed to her mom.

It took a minute for the red letters to take form. And when they did, every ounce of joy she’d felt evaporated.

TUITION PAYMENT DECLINED

As if she needed reminding who had landed them in this nightmare, her father’s voice came to her. *Never get overconfident, Teags. One bad catch can end a run.*

Thanks, Dad. I’ll try to remember that.

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TEAGAN

A few days later, after practice, Teagan pressed her ear to the door of the guys' shower room, listening. Her crew were arguing about who deserved to be in stroke seat. Perry had put just himself forward. Apparently, he was stressing about impressing his dad. No one voted for him.

She needed to be part of the conversation. No way was she sitting out a Josh Regis–led vote to put Josh Regis back in the stroke seat. That was it—she was going in!

"WHOA!" she shrieked as eight shades of naked were burned into her retinas forever. A few in a good way. Not that she'd admit it. The rest? The less said, the better.

As she covered her eyes, and the guys covered… other parts, Ryder voted for himself and got a show of support from Noah. Cam, to her surprise, didn't get any. He, of all the rowers, deserved the team's support.

"Who's with me?" demanded Josh.

Teagan peeked through her fingers to check the show of hands. Everyone bar Cam, Noah, and Ryder raised their hand.

Lemmings.

Josh strutted about like it was a done deal.

"It doesn't matter what you want," warned Ryder. "Coach Hayden made the final calls—not us."

Josh patted him on the cheek. "You keep telling yourself that, cuz."

Ryder's punch might've landed if Baloo hadn't picked him up and put him on the other side of the room. Teagan thought it was good to see Ryder standing up for himself. He'd gone for it even though he knew the odds were stacked against him. And, more to the point, put a target on his back.

This was Josh Regis—the type of guy who made it his mission to

destroy you if you didn’t do his bidding. Like stealing your cox box, for example.

She found it in the end. In her locker. Even though the team was doing a pretty good job of letting her know they hated her, whoever had stolen it had been kind enough not to add it to the list of bills her mom couldn’t pay. Now that the FBI had frozen her education trust—the reason behind the unpaid school fees—it wasn’t like her mom could afford to buy a new one.

There was no girls’ shower room in the boathouse—just a broom closet—so she decided to head home for a shower. Maybe she could find some coxswain training videos online, and pray her mom wanted to skip the fancy parents’ cocktail party the school was hosting tonight.

She was halfway to the bike rack when she heard footsteps crunching on the path behind. Turning, she saw Cam, looking like he was still fueled by that post-workout afterglow. The kind that made you feel all buzzy and alive. Not that it mattered. It was just an observation.

“Hey.”

“Hey.” She blushed. Like an idiot. Just because he’d talked to her didn’t mean he’d forgiven her. Cam was always polite. And there was only one path from the boathouse up to the school.

When he didn’t say anything else, she blurted, “I’m really sorry I lied about my dad being dead.”

He pulled a face that made it clear it hadn’t been one of her shining moments. His eyes painted a starker picture. “He put you in a tough position.”

As nice as it was for him to give her an excuse, he wasn’t letting her off the hook. Not fully. Fix it, Teagan. *Fix it* fix it. “That’s nice of you to say, but it’s not a good enough excuse. Seriously. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have lied. No one here knew and all my friends at home have ghosted me and…” And she really, really hadn’t wanted him to judge her the way they had. “I guess I panicked,” she said feebly.

The ball was in his court now.

He tipped his head back and forth like he was weighing up the scales of justice. “Don’t worry about it.”

Not exactly a peace accord. More like a ceasefire. “Thanks. That just leaves me to worry about you and the rest of the team hating me for being the world’s worst cox.”

He stopped walking and looked at her, perplexed. “I don’t hate you.”

He didn’t seem to like her much either. Or trust her. She’d have to earn that back.

She glanced over her shoulder, annoyed to see the rest of the team making their way up from the boathouse. Cam had given her a pass. Not a full one. But it would have to do.

“Thanks,” she said sincerely. “That means a lot.”

Cam clocked the crew, too, and began walking again. She jogged a couple of steps to catch up to his long-legged strides and tried to hit a lighter note to address the other proverbial elephant lumbering between them. “I guess I have to take it on the chin that you think I’m the world’s worst cox.”

His lips twitched against a smile. “You were pretty shit out there.”

Yeah. She had been. “The guys didn’t pull punches.”

“No, but they’re stressed. Parents’ weekend does that. Turns even the most put-together kids into eight-year-olds desperate to please Mommy and/or Daddy. It’s a high-pressure show-and-tell. Like you said, change isn’t easy.” His expression softened. “And like you *also* said, it can be good. Tough love advice?”

“Lay it on me.”

“You’re going to have to change with us if you want to prove it.”

He wasn’t wrong. The only person she’d ever really competed with was herself. Sure, there were other competitors to beat, but she didn’t have any control over them. Being cox meant understanding she wasn’t just part of the team, she was the one they looked to for guidance.

They stepped off the path into a small glade of oaks as a clutch of students led their parents down to the boathouse.

“Is your dad here?” she asked.

Cam shook his head. “He’s at the shop. Apparently, some girl set her car on fire. Crazy.”

Yes indeed. It had been. “Hey, since we’re officially teammates, would you mind giving me some insight into what makes the guys tick? If I’m going to do this, I want to do it right.”

Cam glanced down the path, gauging how far the rest of the guys were behind them, then took her hand and pulled her behind a huge oak tree, presumably so the rest of the team wouldn’t see or hear them. It wasn’t a

romantic gesture, but when his hand left hers, she missed it.

Cam started with Josh.

“Yup. The boy who would be king,” she said.

“Rumor has it that his grandfather is the one who really runs the show and that Josh’s dad will do anything to make sure the business is passed down to his side of the family.”

“Meaning… shafting Ryder’s side?”

“Pretty much.” Cam ran through a few more of the guys. “Baloo,” he said, his tone softening. “He’s kind of an outlier.”

“In what way?”

“He’s nice.” They both laughed. “No, but seriously,” Cam said. “He really is a genuinely nice guy, especially considering how much pressure his mom puts on him and Britney to be perfect. Britney obviously nails the socials, but their mom is always calling Baloo up whenever he posts something she thinks ‘won’t reflect well on the campaign trail.’”

“The Evil Queen is Baloo’s sister?”

Cam laughed. “Is that what you call Britney?”

“She did publicly humiliate me.”

“Fair. And accurate. Apparently, their mom used two different surrogates at the same time. Designer twins.”

Teagan checked his face to make sure he wasn’t joking. Nope. Not a joke. This place was so weird. She peeked out to watch the approaching team just as Baloo split off from the crew to pick a few brightly colored flowers from one of the beds lining the path. He tucked one of them behind his ear, then started plucking the petals off the other, one after the other. When he got to the last one, he smiled.

“Looks like someone loves him,” Teagan said.

“Shame he has to be so secret about it.”

“Why would he have to—” she started, but Cam cut her off.

“We don’t know—he’s usually pretty upfront about the guys he’s chasing after.”

“So what? You think it’s someone the team won’t like?”

Cam shrugged. “Maybe. Or maybe he just really cares about them. Their mom’s pretty controlling about the family’s public image. Every photo Brit’s ever taken looks like a professional photo shoot. But Baloo’s more genuine—and sensitive. And I don’t think he’s ever dated someone in real

life, so for him to be publicly *with* someone? That would be big."

That sucked for Baloo. "And here I was thinking I had it hard wearing the Embezzlement Barbie cone of shame."

Cam guffawed. A big, friendly laugh she hadn't heard before. It was nice.

"I hadn't heard that one." He put on a fake-serious face and began sizing her up through an imaginary camera lens, like he was seeing if the moniker fit. "No," he concluded. "Crew Girl's a better name for you. If…" he qualified, "you get your act together at the front of the boat." He shifted around so they were side by side and pointed to the right. "What's this?"

"Starboard," she said, standing at attention like she was being tested by a drill sergeant.

"And this one?"

His arm brushed against hers as he pointed to the left. A spray of fireworks shot through her. The same thing must've happened to Cam because all of a sudden they were staring into each other's eyes, the noise and chaos around them fading away.

"Port?" she whispered.

"Cam-bucha! Tea Party!" Baloo came bounding over. "Are you playing hide and seek? Who's it?"

Apparently, they weren't quite as invisible as they thought.

A life lesson, Teagan thought, as she excused herself and scurried off to get her bike. No one was invisible at Easton Prep. And with all of the students' parents here? They weren't just on show. They were under the microscope.

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CAM

So, this was what invisibility felt like.

Cam’s stomach gave a loud protest as yet another tray of canapés he couldn’t entirely identify swept past him. The server, a guy he’d gone to middle school with, hadn’t even paused as he’d passed. Should’ve had a burger in town before he’d come back.

His mom and dad had come his freshman year, back when none of them had realized the free champagne and fancy finger foods weren’t worth the price of watching the school parade Cam around like he was a seabird they’d rescued from an oil slick, scrubbed up and given a “real shot at succeeding in life.” His parents had wisely opted out since then. Cam was still waiting to find out why Coach Hayden had insisted he come along tonight. So far, the coach had spent the whole evening being yanked to the side by Josh’s dad, Ryder’s dad, Perry’s dad, Baloo’s mom. They were all probably trying to convince Coach to make their son stroke.

The server was heading back in Cam’s direction but avoiding eye contact. He didn’t push it, even though he could’ve eaten the whole tray. Cam was a townie, but also an Eastonian. Which made him kind of like that guy who lived in an airport for twenty years because his country had a coup during his flight—his passport didn’t work anywhere. Like that dude, Cam didn’t fully belong either place now. An outsider at home, and at school.

To him, Easton Prep was a means to an end. But if he didn’t get into the University of Washington?

Don’t go there, Cam. Eyes on the prize and all that. Teagan had seemed pretty fired up when she’d left. He had a feeling she would put in the work to get better. He liked that about her. He liked other things about her, too, but thinking about those didn’t exactly help his focus. She was right: They

all needed to change. He worked hard but knew he could push himself harder. Josh had made it clear he'd do everything in his power to get back in stroke seat.

If a miracle happened and Coach put Cam there instead? Maybe they'd start winning competitions, give other, top-ranking teams a run for their money.

And maybe pigs would fly.

"Hey, townie."

He started, surprised to find Juliet in front of him with a plate full of sliders.

"Wagyu and boar, I think," she said, handing him the plate. "I saw you drooling from across the room. Hope you're cool with truffled mayonnaise."

He was grateful, but this was weird. She never normally spoke to him. Juliet leaned against the wall next to him. "So," she said, after he'd scoffed three sliders. "What's your plan?"

"What do you mean?"

"We're the only ones here without parents, so I presume you're here because you have a plan, too. That, or you like being paraded around as proof this pack of wolves has a moral compass."

"What's your plan?" he asked through a mouthful of burger.

"Seeing as setting my car on fire didn't manage to lure in the two people who are responsible for my existence." She shot him a grin. "I have been put under house arrest to pay for my sins. I'm 'garnering support' for the parents' association."

He snorted. She was funny.

"How's that going?"

"As horribly as you'd expect. Oooh—" Juliet winced as she gazed across the room. "That looked painful."

"What?"

"Teagan and her mom just got seriously cold-shouldered."

Cam looked to where she was pointing. Teagan, who looked great in a flowery dress, was with a tall, dark-haired woman he guessed was her mom. "Do you think—" he began.

"That Britney made sure everyone here knows Teagan and Ella are The Untouchables? Oh yeah. No doubt."

“Harsh.” It wasn’t Teagan’s fault her dad was on the FBI’s most wanted list.

They tracked Teagan as she tried and failed to stop her mom from approaching another group of women, a glass of champagne in her hand. It was the live version of car crash television. He and Juliet made strangled sounds of commiseration when the women blanked Ella before she could even say hello.

“At least they’re trying,” Juliet said, shooting him a meaningful look. “They’re broke and social outcasts and yet they got all gussied up and came anyway.”

Was that a dig at his parents? “My dad’s a little busy fixing some rich girl’s plea for attention.”

Juliet went wide-eyed.

“Sorry. That was a shit thing to say—”

“No. It was an accurate thing to say.” She looked impressed, rather than insulted. “But I meant you, not your parents, moron.”

“Me?”

She rolled her eyes. “Just because you’re here on financial aid doesn’t make you less than.”

“Oh!” He thunked his forehead. “So that’s why they keep rolling out the red carpet for me everywhere I go.”

“If they did? You’d probably step to the side to make way for King Josh and his court.”

Juliet didn’t mince words. He knew whose side he wanted to be on if she ever got in a fight. “Look,” she said, grabbing an entire tray of macarons from a server and handing it to Cam. “From everything Teagan’s said—”

His attention level shot up a few notches. Teagan had talked about him to Juliet?

“Yes, lover boy, you’re on her radar.”

Did nothing escape her attention?

“She’s frustrated for you, that you don’t push for yourself more on the team. Ryder’s poking his teeny-tiny head above the parapet. You should talk to Coach Hayden—make a case for yourself.”

Cam wasn’t entirely sure if she was goading him into the colosseum to amuse herself when he was inevitably slaughtered or if she was genuinely telling him it was time to put on his big boy pants.

“I just might do that,” he said, with more confidence than he was feeling.

“Good.” She gave him a shove. “Go find him now. I just saw him duck into the library.”

He turned back and gave her a nod of thanks. “Remind me to call you next time I need a tough love talk.”

“Will do, pleb. Will do.”

He hesitated. “Do you want to meet up later? Debrief?”

She curled her lip. “God, no.” She took on a lofty air. “I’m off to spread my largesse elsewhere. Something tells me Teagan’s mother could do with a little insider information.”

Five minutes later, Cam walked out of the library, stunned. Coach was giving him the stroke seat. Juliet had been right. Sticking his neck out had been worth it. No guillotine in sight. He headed home to help his dad. Juliet’s car would look brand-new when she got it back. He’d put the final polish on himself.

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TEAGAN

There were only so many breathing techniques a girl could use to calm herself down when she was about to cox a make-or-break race—the alumni versus the students.

It should've been a ragtag crew of old weaklings against a perfectly synchronized herd of stallions, but from where she was sitting? The tables were flipped.

Cam was sulking for… reasons. He refused to say. Baloo couldn't pick a mood. Perry was distracted by his phone. Ryder was trying to bore holes into the back of Josh's head. Josh, back in stroke seat, was smug as ever, but edgy. Pumped to beat his dad. Poor ol' Crabcatcher was even more nervous than usual.

Teagan got it. All the nerves.

The alums, their opponents, were Olympians and world record holders. Champions chomping at the bit to show the whippersnappers they still had it.

By the looks of it, they did.

Josh's dad, surprise, surprise, was leading the group of eight down from the boathouse in a series of precise moves that reminded her of the military parades countries with evil dictators put on as a show of might.

Whatever.

Teagan adjusted the volume on her cox box and gave her crew a smile just as the alum team did a picture-perfect standing shove off from the dock.

"We're screwed, aren't we?" Quaid asked.

No one wanted to hear the obvious answer to that one. "Josh… I was thinking, we start with a spring, drop down, then back up for the last five hundred meters."

She braced herself for the pushback, surprised not to get any.

“Good plan.” His blue eyes met hers. He wanted to win this. Together.

She ripped her eyes away and repeated the plan to the rest of the team who all gave her nods or “aye ayes” of acknowledgment. Apart from Cam. He’d been glowering all morning. So long as he rowed in sync with everyone else, she would leave him alone.

The horn sounded for them to get in place at the starting line.

Oars were at the ready. Muscles were tensed in advance of the starter horn. Eight pairs of eyes were trained on Teagan.

Right. She could do this. She’d won this cox seat fair and square. They would beat the alumni, too.

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JOSH

It had been an absolute slaughter. Josh's dad was crowing about his victory like he'd just won Olympic gold.

We're *kids*, Dad.

And Josh was a Regis. And Regises won. At everything.

So here he was wearing a stupid-ass apron at the winner's clambake.

"Losers serve the winners," his dad announced.

Thanks for pointing out the obvious, Father.

Richard Regis strutted up to the catering table Josh was standing behind and held out his plate. Josh dropped a tong full of salad onto his plate. Some of it landed. Some of it didn't. Who cared, when all Josh would be eating for the foreseeable future was crow.

"Aww, babe." Britney appeared in front of him, lowering her plate so he could see her boobs better. "You'll get 'em next time."

He pinched a cherry tomato between his tongs and put it on her plate. That was pretty much all he had left to give today.

Britney refused the potato salad Teagan was glopping onto plates next to him and flounced off to find her mom.

"Maybe next time you'll listen to me," he hissed at Teagan once Brit was gone.

"Or maybe you could've stuck with the plan and not rushed the slide," she spat back.

"She's not wrong," Ryder piled in. His cousin had been itching for a fight all day. "Your catches were shit, Josh."

Josh's vision blurred and when it cleared, it was like everything had gone all slow-motion and hyper-pixelated. Like he'd been dropped into a virtual reality version of his life, where everything looked almost the same

but everyone's roles had changed. A version where Ryder thought it was okay to talk to him like that. Publicly call him out. Question his judgment. "Ex*cuse* me?"

Ryder gave Josh a look so full of disgust you could almost smell it.

They'd had fights over the years. That's the way it was when one kid was always going to be superior to the other one. But revulsion? How fucking dare he?

Furious, Josh turned his anger on Teagan and blasted her with words. "You're shit at coxing and you know it. Do the right thing and put us out of our misery. Quit."

Cam, shoved between them, chest puffed out, inflated by his Robin Hood complex no doubt. "Leave it, Josh. It was a bad race. No need to cry about it."

He wasn't crying! He was steaming. A volcano about to blow.

"This isn't a fight you want to jump into, Cam."

Like Cam had even the slightest clue what he was talking about. None of them did. Not Ryder. Not Teagan. Not Coach. Not even his parents.

There had been so much more at stake with this race than having to wear a stupid apron with Loser printed on it. The stakes were life or death. Literally. He'd poured every ounce of power he had into that race and it still hadn't been enough. News that would go straight to his grandfather, the head of the Regis clan. Josh had failed to prove he was powerful. Not strong enough to take the helm of Regis Airlines when his grandfather decided to retire. Lacking the level of command needed to override Teagan's pathetic strategy.

He had to get out of there before his brain exploded. Or worse, his heart. He yanked off the apron, threw it at Ryder, and jogged down the beach in a way that made it clear he was leaving that pack of losers behind by choice, not running away.

He needed time alone to think. To process. To figure out his next move.

He didn't know how long he'd been sitting on a big boulder staring out at the lake, willing it to tell him what to do, when a hand clapped down on his shoulder.

Luckily, even when the chips were down, Josh still had the reactions of a ninja. The fist he'd formed relaxed when he realized it was his dad.

"Pull me up?"

It was probably another test. The kind where, when their hands were clasped, Richard pulled his son down onto the beach and did a victory dance on top of him. But instead, his dad took his hand and used Josh as ballast as he pulled himself up onto the boulder.

They sat side by side. Josh waited for whatever was coming his way.

“Good race, son.”

Josh huffed a laugh. “Yeah, right.”

“You know,” his dad said, looking out to the lake instead of at Josh. “I lost my first alumni race. To your grandfather.”

Who else would he have lost it to? Didn’t change anything. Josh had fallen to the bottom of a mountain he’d stupidly thought he was about to summit.

“That anger you feel?”

His dad was talking in a way that reminded Josh of the wise grandpa characters who teach valuable lessons in cheesy movies.

“That fire that’s fueling you right now?” His dad thumped his own chest, correctly assuming doing the same thing to Josh’s wouldn’t end well. “*That’s* the fuel you use to win.”

No comment. Josh stared straight ahead.

“My second race?” His dad’s voice shifted tone from inspirational to “spoiler alert.” “I beat him by a boat length. You’ll get us next year, son. I’m sure of it.” Josh didn’t look, but he was pretty sure his dad was giving him an encouraging smile. He was positive when his dad slung his arm around Josh’s shoulders. Weirdest feeling ever. The hand on his shoulder tightened its grip. “I expect nothing less.”

Ryder was the one who threw the first punch.

To be fair, Josh had all but begged him to throw it.

When in doubt? Insult a guy’s mom. It works a treat.

Ryder had spotted Josh coming back from his inspiring father–son talk and, sensing it hadn’t gone well, asked him to join him for a swim to cool down.

Josh had said something about it being too tempting an opportunity to drown a traitor, and Ryder, instead of punching him, had been nice. Asked him if he was okay because he knew Josh’s dad could be a dick sometimes.

The international rule of families goes like this: An immediate family member can say whatever they want about each other. Cousins outward? Against the code. So Josh had gone for the jugular. In truth, he didn't know Ryder's mom well enough to know if she was a grasping, status-hungry leech, but it had been enough to make Ryder launch a fist.

It quickly devolved into a WWF-style assault. Punching. Kicking. Flipping each other this way and that. He was vaguely aware of Britney screaming for someone to stop them, but this crowd was more likely to live stream the fight.

Somehow, he managed to pin Ryder to the ground. His eyes looking up at him all wide and scared, bugging out of his stupid red face. Josh cocked his arm, pumped up with the anger his dad had told him to use to win. He'd win this at least. This stupid, long-overdue fight. He cocked his arm, stared at his cousin's face. Time to establish his dominance over Ryder once and for all—

"Oh shit!"

Out of nowhere, a cascade of ice rained down on him and Ryder.

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TEAGAN

She’d had to wash her hair three times to get the stench of algae out of her hair, but the look on Josh’s face when she’d thrown the bucket of ice on him had been worth it. It was just a shame he’d immediately filled it with lake water to throw back at her.

Boys were idiots.

Coach hadn’t just shouted at Josh and Ryder, though. He’d yelled at all three of them. Sent them home saying he didn’t want to see them again until they had the grace to act like athletes instead of children. Errr, hello! She had been. Not to mention the only one brave enough to intervene. She’d been steaming. To the point she’d seriously considered quitting the team and staying home instead of participating in the child endangerment “challenge” the school was disguising as an opportunity to “exceed their limits.”

The Iron Crucible?

Where did they come up with that?

She’d said as much to Cam. He’d gone quiet, those brown eyes of his looking into hers without giving anything away. “Too bad,” he’d said. “You’re miles better than our last cox.”

Her resolve turned to mush.

Her mom had sealed the deal. After taking Juliet’s advice, she’d turned the parents’ night reception around. Dazzling the other moms with the juicy details about the dire straits Dad had left them in. One was so impressed she’d hired Ella to be the party planner for their son’s birthday. The fee? More than enough to pay Teagan’s tuition.

So here she was at the starting line of the Iron Crucible, listening with increasing horror as Principal Cabrera consigned her student body to certain

death.

“The course is comprised of seven obstacles, each separated by a two-mile run. You must use your digital wristband at each obstacle to mark your progress.”

Teagan gave hers a pat. “It’s just you and me out there, little buddy.” Thank god the Crucible didn’t have anything to do with rowing. She needed a break from all that drama.

“At the end of the course lies the Easton Bell, crafted by our forefathers at the Whitechapel Bell Foundry. Those of you who paid attention in history class will know this was the same foundry that gave birth to the Liberty Bell. It can only be rung by those who finish.” She gave the participants a look Teagan presumed was supposed to be inspirational. “It has been silent for six years,” Cabrera continued. “Who among you will test the limits of your physical stamina and harness that anguish into a will to succeed? Who among you will ring that bell?”

Principal Cabrera had clearly been expecting cheers, but her words were met with deathly silence. Some students had already slunk away.

Juliet, who had appointed herself Teagan’s personal cheerleader, was there at the starting line. “Good luck,” she said. “I’ll see you at the end.”

“Yeah,” Teagan laughed. “Or look for the vultures circling over my dead body.”

The participants were gathering into groups. Teagan drifted over to the rowing crew, who were gathering around Coach Hayden. Coach was smiling, unlike yesterday, but there was a mischievous glint in his eye.

“Good morning, team. I hope we’ve put yesterday’s shenanigans behind us?” They clearly hadn’t. Josh and Ryder were standing far away from each other, exuding hate vibes, refusing to mix, like oil and water. The rest of the team formed a loose shield between them.

“I’ve come up with a way to resolve the stroke seat issue once and for all,” Coach announced.

This got everyone’s attention.

“Whoever gets the farthest… and the best time… wins the seat.”

Cam caught Teagan’s eye, clearly intrigued by what they were hearing.

Coach was serious. “No cheating. No fighting. This is you proving to me that you deserve that seat.”

Behind her, Crabcatcher squeaked, “I don’t want the seat. Does that

mean I don’t have to do the Iron Crucible?”

It did not.

Teagan didn’t want stroke seat, but she had something to prove today, too. That she deserved her place on the team, and that she was strong enough to lead them. So, screw it, she was going all out. Her life had been pure chaos since her dad had left, and this would be the perfect way to rechannel the focus and drive that had caught the Stanford scout’s eye. She had always liked a challenge. Bring it on.

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CAM

Counting was good.

Counting helped.

What could he count?

Dropouts.

That would work.

One.

Two.

Five.

Mud.

Sweat.

Fear.

He could do this.

He could do this.

It was cool that Josh and Ryder were ahead of him.

For now.

Baloo.

Quaid.

Someone else covered in mud.

He had this.

In the bag.

The big, bell-shaped bag.

Even though it didn’t look like it. He totally had this.

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JOSH

One… more… wristband… to… go…

Obstacle.

He meant obstacle.

Two if you counted Ryder.

Hadn’t he run out of sweat yet?

Josh had.

The top part of his body decided it had had enough.

Was he tilting forward?

Was he going to face-plant?

His hands caught his knees.

Half of him was still standing.

That was a win, right?

He looked to the side. Ryder was having the same issue.

Did two halves make a whole?

Probably not. If there was a hole deep enough, Ryder would’ve shoved him in it.

He looked up, hoping that the next obstacle was a massage table. Or a hot tub. Or anything that involved not moving.

It was not.

A cargo net.

Spider-Man would have been very disappointed in them if he’d seen their performance. But still, they both made it to the top.

Behind them, the thud thud of footsteps.

Cam.

He looked at Ryder.

Ryder looked at him.

They weren’t oil and water anymore.
They were blood.
And everyone knew what that meant.

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TEAGAN

Was this a mirage?

It had to be.

Cam had his shirt off.

All hot and sweaty and—sweary.

She tapped her wristband against the check-in point.

It bleeped. So did Cam when he saw her staring at him like he was a triple scoop of fudge ripple ice cream.

Ha! Maybe she did like fudge after all.

“Look,” he said.

She already *was* looking, thank you very much. And she liked what she saw.

“Someone pulled the cargo net up,” he said, pointing.

She looked up. No wonder Cam had been swearing.

Someone had doubled the net up and over, making sure nobody else could go over it.

Josh? Ryder? Both of them?

Cam jumped up, arm stretching as high as he could reach.

No dice.

She was shorter than Cam, which meant she wasn’t going to fare any better. She stared at Cam’s strong, muscled shoulders that were disappearing beneath his T-shirt.

Sad Teagan. No more eye candy.

Candy.

Her kingdom for some candy!

She didn’t have a kingdom to give.

What she wouldn’t give for a handful of candy right now. *Wait, what?*

Focus, brain!

His shirt back on, Cam stared up at the net, then back at her.

He was extra intense right now.

Why was he looking at her like that?

Was she naked?

Maybe her clothes had fallen off in the mud pit.

She checked.

No. Not naked. Just dehydrated. And short. Not wildly short. Just shorter than Cam.

If you added them together they'd be tall.

That was it! Cam needed to win this competition. And she was going to help him do it.

"What if I climbed on your shoulders? I could reach the net and pull it down."

She saw the hope return to his eyes in a blaze of determination.

He deserved to win. Deserved the stroke seat. If her idea worked, it might repair the trust she'd broken between them. So she'd use every last ounce of energy she had to do it.

Cam crouched down, patted his shoulders.

She climbed on, praying her sweaty thighs around his neck wouldn't scar him for life. After a couple of wobbly tries, she managed to find her balance. She could do this. Then run two more miles to the next one.

She channeled the version of herself who had won race after race, even though her body had been screaming at her in protest. This wasn't for her. This was for Cam. For the rowing team. They deserved better than Josh Regis.

"Got it!" she cried, pulling the net down.

Then they both managed to climb up and over it without dying and grinned at each other before they faced the next run. "C'mon," she said. "Let's go dethrone the king and his jester."

As great a plan as that had been, Teagan's body disagreed and decided to cramp a mile in.

The kind that felt like King Kong was giving your waist a squeeze to see what happened. "You go on," she said to Cam. She'd have to breathe this

baby out. Or maybe lie down and see how long it took for the vultures to arrive.

Cam looked down the track, anxiety replacing the determination she'd seen earlier.

"That bell is pretty big," she reminded him. "We'd hear it." Meaning Josh and Ryder weren't there yet. There was still a chance he could win this. "Go."

She forced herself to stay upright until he was out of sight.

Only then did she let her body acknowledge the pain she'd been trying to ignore.

She bent double and closed her eyes as she hit the ground. She'd almost made it. Almost.

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JOSH

Josh looked at Ryder. Were they hallucinating? Ryder was throwing him the same WTF look. “How did you get here?”

Cam pointed at his feet, too tired to talk.

“Didn’t we—” Ryder asked Josh.

“We did.” He knew he and his cousin probably looked like idiots right now. At least they’d shifted from enemy to frenemy zone. For now anyway. Now that they had a shared goal.

Beat Cam Dillinger.

There was no way Cam could’ve reached the net on his own. And yet here he was. Just like them. At the final obstacle.

“Guys,” Cam panted.

“What?” Josh wondered how much energy he’d burned saying that. Too much, probably. Given the mountain they had yet to climb. Every single part of his body was screaming at him to stop. Too bad, body. The stakes were too high not to press on. He would. In a minute. Sitting down had probably been a mistake.

Cam coaxed one arm into lifting up the one that had a water bottle in it.

Skillz.

“Guys.” He collapsed next to them, leaning back against the wall, closed his eyes against the sun. “Is this thing the last obstacle?”

Ryder grunted. He’d used up all of his words apparently.

Josh affirmed it with another grunt.

Cam grunted his thanks.

So that’s where they were.

Three guys.

Three meters to climb.

Two ropes to climb it.
One stroke seat up for grabs.
No energy left to grab it.

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TEAGAN

Teagan’s brain had developed a new skill. Time travel.

As clear as a bell she could see her dad and the girl she’d been before he left. Pushing herself as hard as she could on the erg, trying to hit whatever milestone the two of them had set.

“Sorry, Dad. It hurts too much. I have to stop.”

“You’ve got this, kiddo. I know you can do it.”

This wasn’t the first time she’d hit a wall. Wanted to give up. But Dad always seemed to know what she was capable of before she was. Believed in her more than she believed in herself.

“I know, kid. It’s the pain talking. Your brain is programmed to protect you from pain. But you know from experience, you’re in charge of what you believe. And when you believe something hard enough, your brain starts to believe it, too.”

Her brain believed her dad was a jerk. Had left them like a coward. Left them knowing how much they relied on him.

Her mom’s smile came to her. Bursting with pride and excitement, it hadn’t left her face since she’d gotten the party planning gig that meant she’d be able to pay for Teagan’s tuition. Her mom had succeeded. And done it all on her own.

The last person in the world Teagan had imagined inspiring her was her mom. But Ella Tao-Emerson was scoring aura points left, right, and center these days. Manifesting a way to survive this new, haphazard life they’d found themselves in. Her mom was a lot stronger than Teagan gave her credit for. And also? Her mom was here. The one waiting to cheer for her at the finish line. Maybe channeling her mother was how she’d finish this.

She was a mile away from the final hurdle. What was that, a thousand

steps?

It felt impossible.

She took one step forward, just to see if she could.

She could.

She'd convinced one out of eight rowers she was a good cox.

Did she have it in her to convince the other seven?

Nine hundred ninety-nine steps later…

Teagan hadn't thought she would succumb to *actual* death doing the Iron Crucible, but she hadn't willed her body to run/walk/lurch all this way only to find out there was a literal wall to climb.

It wasn't even a normal wall.

It was a towering brick wall with two ropes hanging from the top. Presumably to hang on to as she scampered up like some kind of human squirrel.

On the plus side, at the base of the wall were three stepping stools. One shaped like Josh Regis. One shaped like Ryder Regis. And one shaped like Cam.

He was the only one smiling at her.

"Holy shit!" Cam grinned at her. "You made it."

"How the hell did she get here?" Ryder asked.

She pointed at her feet. Cam snorted.

Josh just glared.

Asshole.

She caught the burst of anger and channeled it. She'd made it here to prove to herself she had what it took to cox the rowing team and, as importantly, to win the team's respect. Because, yeah. She was going to find her inner squirrel and climb this freaking wall.

It was going to be hard.

So was rowing. It made your body ache the way hers ached now. It demanded commitment. Daily training. Hitting the water no matter the weather. Rolling out of bed when your friends were sleeping off a binge watch.

It was the best thing in the world. And she didn't want to live in a world without it.

She walked up to the wall, gave it a pat (her mom probably would've hugged it), wrapped her hands around one of the ropes, took a deep breath in, and began to climb. One hand after the other, one step at a time, she climbed that wall, then slid down the other side. Gasping for breath, she stumbled the final handful of steps to the finish line where the astonished crowd waited. And she rang the Easton Bell.

She could hear her mom's cheers above everyone else's.

The bell sounded again and Teagan turned to see Ryder.

Wow. Good for him.

Cam was right behind him. He gave the bell a clang, then searched the crowd until he found her. The hit of connection was better than sunshine. The next thing she knew she was in his arms and he was spinning her around and around, not caring at all that he'd come second to Ryder. He looked at her like he'd won, and she was the trophy. One to be proud of. One to—

The bell clanged again.

Josh.

Cam put her down.

Josh gave Ryder and Cam the guy chin-lift, acknowledging a job well done. When his eyes landed on her, he winced, like seeing her there, being cheered by the crowd, gave him actual, physical pain. There was a blankness to his expression she couldn't interpret. Britney ran up to him with a wicker basket full of energy drinks, but Josh's eyes stayed glued to Teagan's, like he was trying to burn a message into her. Too bad she didn't speak Regis.

Her mom bounced up to her, waving a pair of pom-poms. "I knew you could do it, Teags." She pulled her in for a tight hug and whispered, "I know this is normally Dad's job, but I've always been just as proud." She pulled back, emotion glassing up her eyes. "I am so, so proud to be your mother, Teagan Tao."

Before she could get her brain to work, Coach Hayden appeared beside them. "Good work, Teagan. Impressive. You really proved yourself today." He nodded toward the lake, where the team was throwing Ryder and Cam in. Josh had probably been whisked away by Britney in a helicopter. "You figured out what motivates them."

"Daddy issues and spite?" Teagan quipped.

“Grit,” Coach said. “You coming to the school barbecue?”

She grinned up at Ella, who still hadn’t entirely released Teagan from their hug. “Nah. I think I’m going to hang with my mom.”

“Okay. Rest up. See you at practice. Good to catch up with you, El.”

“You too, Matt.” Her mom gave a weird fluttery giggle. “So good catching up.”

Okay, what was up with her mom and Coach? “Did you guys know each other when you lived here?”

Another giggle. “Yes. We grew up together.”

Oh, please no. “Were you more than friends?”

“No,” her mom said in a way that sounded true, but also wistful. “No. Hey, let’s get you home and into a bath. I’ve got these amazing Epsom salts with tea tree oil and lavender.”

Teagan was considering sliding down the banister to get downstairs when she heard her mom humming. This was new. Well, since they’d moved to Eagle’s Cove anyway.

She went down the normal way, her thigh muscles aching, and found her mom pinning pictures to a huge corkboard.

“What’s this?”

“My mood board for the birthday party I’m throwing. I still can’t believe I’m an event planner.”

Teagan couldn’t really either, but nor had she thought she’d be the first one ringing the bell at the Iron Crucible. She took in the pictures her mom had pinned. “Impressive. Are you sure you’ve got this?”

Ella gave her a surprised look. “I’ve thrown loads of parties for your father. And at the hotels. I’m pretty sure I can handle a teenage athlete’s birthday.”

True. She had thrown a lot of parties but never in an official role. Teagan had always taken it for granted. It was cool seeing her mom getting paid for something she loved doing.

The doorbell rang.

Teagan, in her jammies, froze.

“It’s my client.” Ella went into a panic, smoothing her dress and checking her hair in the hall mirror. She went to the door and threw Teagan

a pleading look before she opened it. “Please, pretend you respect me?”

“I’m all good karma today, Mom.”

Her mom opened the door. A woman was standing there and next to her, of all the people in all of Eagle’s Cove, was Josh Regis.

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JOSH

Watching Teagan squirm in discomfort was much more fun than he'd thought it would be.

His mom was in the next room wittering away about his birthday party to Ella, Teagan's mom—aka the party planner.

He settled back into the couch and spread his arms wide. She squished herself as far from him as possible, waiting for the inevitable.

He took his time, smiling amicably as he waited for the perfect verbal missile to come to him. The Regis gene pool, as ever, delivered. "I'm digging the funeral parlor vibes."

"It was my grandparents' house," Teagan said through gritted teeth.

He smiled the smile of a man who knew he had a large arsenal at his disposal. "Do they haunt the place? Or is it just the curtains?"

"Josh?" Ella called, sticking her head around the corner. "What kind of cake were you thinking?"

He shot her his best charm school smile. "Anything but cupcakes, please."

"Smart man." She beamed at him.

He beamed back. She was lapping it up. His choirboy act. He was great with moms. He was great with everyone. Nervous as hell about meeting his grandfather later, but ever since his lips had touched that first silver spoon, he'd been primed for it. The moment when his grandfather openly acknowledged what the entire Regis family knew. Josh was heir to the throne. For now, he was enjoying sharpening his verbal knives on Coxie. "Your mom likes me."

"She also likes Phil Collins and pastels," Teagan said in an equally sugary-sweet voice. "It's a low bar."

Josh's phone pinged. He glanced at the message.

"Britney?" Teagan sing-songed.

"Crew stuff."

She grabbed her phone and checked it. "I didn't get one."

He waited for the penny to drop.

And… ping! Her eyes blazed with indignation. He hadn't noticed the little gold flecks in them before.

"There's another group text for the crew?"

"*You're* the other group text, Coxie." He laughed the laugh of a victor. "Took you long enough to figure it out."

Her hands flexed like a cat preparing her claws for battle. He already had a split lip thanks to Ryder. He was carrying it off with panache, obvs. But having his eyes scratched out lacked appeal. Heaven, as ever, intervened.

"Josh, honey." His mom and Ella came into the room. He stood up, because that's what polite young men did when women came into the room. "I was just asking Ella about the dinner with your grandfather."

"I'm sure you'll love it," Ella said. "I've booked a restaurant run by a friend of mine who was just awarded her first Michelin star."

"It sounds amazing, Ms. Emerson. And may I say"—he shot a glance at Teagan before delivering his next line—"you have a beautiful home."

As the door closed behind him and his mom, he heard Ella sigh, "What a well-mannered young man."

As he climbed into the Range Rover he heard Teagan's scream.

Josh Regis shoots? He scores. As ever. He was feeling it now. Pumped, primed, and ready for their next stop: Regis Airlines HQ.

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TEAGAN

Three Weeks Later

Teagan pinned the final sheet of today's crew session to the board.

Coach Hayden gave it a scan. "New warm-up for today?"

"Yeah." These past few weeks, she had poured herself into her new role. Things had improved between her and the crew, but they were far from perfect. Being relegated to a separate group chat from the rest of the crew, for example. Whatever. She was their cox, they mostly listened to her now, and, one way or another, she'd get them in shape for the regatta against Westvale—Easton's number one rival. "I thought we'd do some pick drills on the ergs. It's always good to go back to the basics, right? Break down the strokes. Finesse sequences, rhythm. We need to fine-tune our timing issues."

Coach nodded approvingly. "How's Ryder been holding up in stroke position?"

"Good," she said honestly. "But he knows it. I'm keeping an eye on him."

Hayden gave her shoulder a clap. "You've already made good progress with them these past few weeks. Keep it going and you just might whip them into shape for our first competition."

Teagan grinned. She'd been working her butt off. Coach Hayden wasn't exactly singing her praises, but reading between the lines? She was acing it.

"One thing," Coach said, stopping on his way out and turning back. "Where are they?"

Teagan's eyes shot to the clock. It was fifteen minutes after practice was meant to start. Her stomach sank as she looked back at Coach Hayden and

realized he'd known this all along.

She silent-screamed at the ceiling. She'd been doing that a lot since she'd started at Easton. She'd hoped winning the Iron Crucible would be enough to get the guys to consider her part of the team. She'd obviously been deluding herself.

Maybe she was more like her mom than she'd thought.

They found them twenty minutes later.

In detention.

"I'm sorry, Coach. Like, bottom of my heart sorry." Quaid, the reason the Easton Eagles were confined to the library, hung his head like a forlorn, overgrown hound dog puppy. "I know I was wrong, and I swear I won't do it again."

As miserable as he looked, Quaid's apology sounded memorized. As if he'd said those exact same words, in the exact same order, a million times before.

No surprise, really. The oversized goofball was not only one of the team's powerhouses, he was also their resident prankster. It was like he couldn't help it. He saw an opportunity? He took it. Teagan had no doubt he'd be saying the same words again. And again. And again.

Which sucked. He always gave a hundred percent at practice and was almost as strong as Baloo. In other words, they needed him on the team.

"You're running out of lives, Quaid," Coach warned. "I pled your case, but Principal Cabrera, understandably, isn't having it. You have one more life. You waste it on doing something as stupid as turning Ethan's car into a loaded fries container again? You're out."

Quaid's head shot up. "What? Expelled?"

"Yes."

All of them felt the shock waves of the response. Answers didn't get blunter than that.

"What possessed you to prank Principal Cabrera's grandson?" Coach asked.

A couple of the guys sniggered.

Bad idea. Coach reeled on them. "You think it's funny? Sitting in here writing apology essays when you're meant to be on the water getting ready

for a regatta? A regatta I can tell you right now you won't win."

From that angle? No. They did not think it was funny.

Coach wasn't done with them, though. "Teagan, here, has been working her butt off."

Crap. She didn't need the crew thinking she was Coach's pet. She inched herself behind him as his tirade continued.

"She had a fantastic set of drills all lined up for today and you let her down. Let yourselves down. I never thought I'd have to remind you that a team shows up for one another."

Quaid started to protest, but Teagan poked her head out and ran a finger along her neck. Not worth it.

"It's like you don't care," Coach Hayden continued. "I know you're capable of winning, but I'm beginning to wonder if you're more interested in destroying things than building something together."

Josh and Ryder exchanged looks. They knew a callout when they heard one.

"Not one of you has shown me your best today. Apart from Teagan, who, for one, bothered to show up."

A smattering of feeble protests filled the room, dying out when Coach's anger shifted to disappointment. Which was much, much worse.

"I pull every string I can for you boys. But between actively courting expulsion, fist fights, and bullying—"

"I wasn't bullying—" Quaid started.

"Write your essays," Coach said, then left the room.

"I wasn't bullying," Quaid said again, once the door had clicked shut.

Teagan had no idea if it was true, but the one thing she did know? It was down to her to keep him on the straight and narrow from here on out. Yet another Mission Impossible to add to her list.

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CAM

Anyone who walked into the library would not think this was a group of guys who'd just had their asses handed to them. They were chatting as they wrote their essays.

Baloo was getting Perry's advice on how to take an Alpha selfie that didn't scream toxic masculinity.

Ryder was assuring Crabcatcher that, with him in the eight seat, they'd still crush Westvale.

Noah was explaining to Quaid what contrition meant.

Josh made a sound like a trumpet heralding great news. "Here's how we're celebrating my birthday," he announced.

Maybe it was Josh's way of trying to cheer everyone up after Coach's tirade. Or, more realistically, maybe the idea that everything wasn't revolving around him was too much to handle.

Teagan, who'd sat next to Cam, rolled her eyes and whispered, "It's like he thinks his birthday is a national holiday."

Pretty much.

"First up," Josh said, "I'll be hosting the obligatory family dinner party for Grandad."

Ryder, who always got twitchy when talk circled around the Regis power players, mimed kissing a ring. "Thanks for the life of luxury, Grandad."

Josh ignored him. "Then it's time for the real party. The one you're invited to. I call it the 'Young, Rich, and Depraved' weekend."

The boys leaned in. Josh jumped on a low table, loving the limelight. His temporary stage was probably an antique, but when your family owned an airline, what were a few scuff marks on an irreplaceable plank of wood

from the eighteenth century? “We’ll start with Formula One go-kart racing.”

“Sick.” Ryder snapped his fingers.

“Then MMA lessons and a cage match.”

“Baller!” Perry shouted. Hilarious considering Perry freaked out if so much as a solitary hair on his head moved out of place. He probably saw it as a way to increase his followers.

“And finally,” Josh said, cuing a human drumroll from Baloo, “a private jet to Atlanta because… we’ve got backstage passes to see Kendrick!”

Everyone lost their shit. Even Cam. Because, well, backstage passes to Kendrick and a private jet? That wasn’t an invitation he’d get twice.

Teagan shot him a look of disbelief. “You’re going? You guys aren’t even friends.”

True. “It’s a team thing.”

“Right,” Teagan said, all sarcastic. “Is that why all of you were Quaid’s henchmen today? I didn’t think dumping loaded fries ingredients into someone’s car was your kind of thing.”

It wasn’t, but… he’d had to. “Look,” he started, figuring out the best way to explain the complex machinations of showing up for someone you’d probably never be friends with in real life. “Quaid’s a doofus, but we’re teammates. He asked for our help. He had his reasons. It would’ve been a dick move to say no.”

“Even though you knew it was wrong?”

She really didn’t get it. “Have you ever been on a team before?”

She scoffed. “Yes. Swimming, tennis, track—”

“Those are solo sports.”

“What’s your point?” she snapped.

He shrugged. He got it now. Why she didn’t understand. “I’m thinking someone’s only-child syndrome means she never learned how to play nicely with others.”

“That’s not—” She glared at him, huffing like a baby dragon trying to snort her first squirt of fire. He grinned.

She stomped off, like an only child who’d never learned how to play nicely with others.

He wished he knew how to help. He’d seen how much work she’d put into becoming a better cox. The guys had, too. But there was still a line

between them she hadn’t figured out how to cross. It was probably one of those lessons you needed to figure out yourself. The hard way. Like he had. The less time spent with Josh Regis the better as far as he was concerned. But a backstage pass to Kendrick? It definitely took the edge off.

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JOSH

Britney’s surprise lunch from Nobu—one of his favorite Michelin restaurants that she’d had choppered up to Easton—was going cold. His girlfriend quickly assessed the situation.

“What happened, babe? Didn’t the meeting with your grandfather go well?”

She, like him, had thought it was a given that he’d swan into his grandfather’s office—a boundary the junior Regis males weren’t allowed to cross until Viktor Regis, his grandfather, deemed them ready for The Succession Talk—and come out with his future assured.

He shook his head. Total disaster. “Regis drama at its finest.”

Brit dipped her head and smiled up at him, in a way that was clearly calculated to be submissive and supportive at the same time. “Drama is what our families are all about. Baloo made me spend about three hours going through his selfies trying to pick one for some guy he’s flirting with online.”

“I think this is a bit bigger than Baloo’s dating woes.”

Britney, who sometimes knew him better than he knew himself, waited patiently for him to spill the tea.

Might as well rip the Band-Aid off. Brit was one of the most manipulative, Machiavellian power players he knew. It was what had first attracted him to her. Maybe she’d have some genius idea for destroying Ryder. “I think I just got demoted. I’m supposed to do this internship over the summer, early training for when I take over the family business.”

She nodded, poker face on, encouraged him to continue.

“Only, instead of giving *me* the internship, Grandad gave it to Ryder.”

Britney, who really would make a great politician, didn’t blink. “I guess

you'll have to get it back."

Yeah, right. When Ryder and his mom had waltzed into Grandad's office at the very moment Josh had thought *he* was going to be anointed? The huge, self-satisfied grin on Ryder's face had made him look like a comic-book villain. Like he'd taken an elixir that could double his powers of evil.

Josh had been blindsided. Ryder's mom, his dad's half-sister, was the product of one of his grandfather's affairs. Illegitimate children weren't supposed to count when it came to things like running the family business. Up until a few weeks ago, Ryder had pretty much stayed in his lane. But now, getting that internship back would be about as easy as pulling a sword from a stone.

Brit took his hand and looked into his eyes, her face a picture of adoration. "Your grandfather's obviously made a mistake. You know him, Josh. You know somewhere inside that big brain of yours how to show him who the real future CEO of Regis Airlines is."

There was one way. "I have to get stroke seat back." Apparently, that was the reason he'd picked Ryder over Josh. Rowing was a big deal in their family. But Josh had always thought—hoped?—it wouldn't be the only way he could prove to his grandad he had what it took to lead a company. "Getting stroke is going to take time."

"So," Britney said, gently encouraging him to clear the wood from the trees. "You have to find something now. What other card in that big stack of yours could you play?"

Inspiration struck. He pulled Brit in for a kiss. If she didn't become a senator like her mom, she could become a motivational speaker. "He's coming to my birthday. I could invite the board, dazzle them with my visions for the future. Then Grandad would see I'm a better leader than Ryder and have no choice but to give me the internship."

"Not if that birthday party of yours has a 'Young, Rich, and Depraved' theme."

"No." His mind was racing through options. "Course not." And then he came up with yet another genius idea.

"We've just picked the perfect cake for your party," Ella beamed, throwing a glance at Teagan for a show of support.

She didn’t get it. Didn’t matter. Everything Ella had planned needed to be scrapped.

Once he’d laid out his vision—a new theme, The Illustrious History of Regis Airlines, triple the guest list, including the board and Easton’s rowing committee—he was pretty sure he’d lost a few points on the Polite Young Man front.

Didn’t matter. Polite young men didn’t run companies. Weren’t sitting in stroke seat on their rowing team.

His mom, a pragmatist, clocked the panic in Ella’s eyes, doubled her budget and her fee.

Money was such a sweet-talker.

Teagan dropped her head into her hands. Despairing.

Well, dry those tears, Coxie. Josh Regis was doubling down. Once the Rowing Committee and board of Regis Airlines fell under his spell at the birthday shindig, he’d be back in the stroke seat, rowing himself and the rest of the guys to victory. A champion with an internship that would fast-track him to the top. Just like his dad. Ryder would have to make do with the same job his mom had when she’d weaseled her way into Viktor Regis’s life. The mail room.

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TEAGAN

Teagan had to admit her mom had nailed Josh's seemingly impossible list of demands. Despite only having six days to plan it, the aviation museum she'd hired for Josh's birthday blowout looked amazing. Fairy lights were strung among the planes, and the staff, as and when they got here, would be dressed like her mom. In surprisingly cute vintage flight attendant uniforms for the women and pilot uniforms for the guys.

The bossa nova band she'd hired to complete the 1960s theme was warming up in the corner. It was like the world's coolest first-class lounge.

"This really is spectacular, Mom," Teagan said.

Her mom, who was racing around the place, ticking things off her checklist, screeched to a halt. "Wait a minute," she said, looking confused. "Was that a compliment?"

Teagan snorted. She and her mom had been getting on a lot better, but they hadn't reached the combing each other's hair and braiding it level. "Don't push it, Mother."

Her mom gave her a warning look, which turned into a bright smile. "Well, hello there, birthday boy. Welcome to your party!"

Imogen, Josh's mom, was openly thrilled. "I love bossa nova. And don't you look wonderful in that cute little stewardess dress."

Ella flushed at the praise, then stepped back and threw her hands out in presentation mode. "Let me welcome you to Regis Airlines' Golden Age of Flight. Your flight attendants are looking forward to serving you the finest hors d'oeuvres from their carts. And at the bar, you'll find the evening's signature cocktail: the Paper Plane."

"This is off the charts, Ms. Emerson," Josh said. Sincerely. For once. "It's even better than I imagined. Thank you so much for pulling this

together.”

Teagan was glad he looked happy. Her mom would be crushed if things had gone another way. “A lovely party for a lovely young man.” She gave Teagan a pointed look.

No, Mother. She was not going there.

Josh, annoyingly, caught the exchange and smirked at her. She’d never realized quite how much someone could love themselves until she’d met Josh Regis. “If you’ll excuse me,” she said, throwing Josh her most withering look, “I’m going to see if the crew are here.” She was on Quaid duty. Principal Cabrera was on the invite list, so someone had to make sure he was on his best behavior.

“I’ve got to find Britney.”

Great. They both had places to go and things to do. So why were they both still standing here? He put on an innocent smile. One that still looked smug seeing as it was attached to the rest of his face. “Coxie,” he drawled, “did you know that I’m a lovely young man?”

She gave him an adoring smile. “So was Ted Bundy.”

His blue eyes glinted, as delighted as she was to be on familiar ground. Taking each other down a notch. “Why are you here? I don’t remember inviting you.”

“Your mom did,” she parried. “She needed someone charming at the party.” She pointed at a plane at the far end of the hangar. “I think I just saw Britney. Don’t want to keep your Queen Bee waiting, do you? I hear they sting.”

Josh gave her a weird look. Had she just sounded jealous? No. Not a chance. If she was going to set her sights on anyone at Easton, it would be someone more like Cam. Not that she would actually consider dating anyone on her crew team. There was something kind of gross her dad used to say about not dipping your oar into your own boat.

She looked around for Juliet, her unofficial plus-one. Juliet had taken to spending her free time over at Teagan’s. Said the “mom vibes” helped her study. Which was both hilarious (because Ella never remembered to remind Teagan to do her homework) and heartbreaking (because if setting fire to an insanely expensive car didn’t grab your parents’ attention, what would?).

She found her behind one of the bars. “Are you sure you wouldn’t rather have a fishbowl for that?” Teagan asked after Juliet decanted half a bottle of

red into an enormous goblet.

“Hey.” Juliet gave the wine a swirl, wafted the scent of the wine toward her, and sighed happily. “I love a fruity bouquet. What?” She feigned being affronted when Teagan laughed. “My nanny trained as a sommelier. I have a very sophisticated palate.”

“Impressive.” Ella stopped an empty trolley in front of them. “And illegal.”

“My parents are socialites,” Juliet protested. “I could write a PhD on parties. This one would be in it as an example of how a party goes wrong when there aren’t any servers.”

Teagan saw the panic in her mom’s eyes. “They are coming, right?”

Ella checked over her shoulder to make sure no one was listening. “They’re on their way from the other venue.” Her face crumpled, as if admitting the mistake gave the tears she’d been keeping at bay permission to rise. “When Josh changed the party plans, I was so busy sorting everything out, I forgot to send them the new address. I’ve done it now, but —” They all looked toward the vast entryway into the hangar. Guests were flooding in now.

The bars were beginning to look like free-for-alls at a frat party.

Juliet cackled. “I once went to a Versace after-party with lots of glasses and no booze. It took about fifteen minutes before the models turned the champagne flutes into shivs.”

Teagan gave her a “not helpful” stare. When she turned back to her mom, she started to back away. She knew that look. The one that said, *I’ve had an idea*. “No, Mom. No way.”

“What?” Her mom played innocent. “It’ll be fun. You’d look cute in one of these uniforms.” Cute or not, Teagan knew she would do it. If her mom didn’t get paid, Teagan would have to withdraw from school. But even if the two of them flew around the hangar throwing vol-au-vents at people, there was no way they could keep all the guests happy. A fact Ella had already faced.

“Juliet,” Ella purred, putting on a warm-cookies-and-milk smile. “How’d you like to do some research for that PhD of yours?”

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CAM

When Baloo flicked his phone screen to about the hundredth photo he'd asked the guys' opinion about—a shirtless one—Cam bowed out. Picking a photo to send to someone you liked online but hadn't met yet should not be this hard.

Like Cam could talk. He never knew when a girl was flirting with him unless she felt the only way forward was to spell it out, by which point she was ready to move on.

Baloo made him look at the selfie again. "Is it too much bulge? Or not enough?"

"Sorry, man. I don't want to vote on the nude ones. I've seen enough of that in the showers."

"I'm not nude." Baloo pushed the phone at him again. "It's *implied* nudity."

Cam shook his head. Nope.

"C'mon, Cam-o-flage," Baloo pleaded. "Help a crewman out."

He had been. They all had. But nothing anyone had said had given him the confidence to press send.

"We've all voted, man," Quaid reminded him. "I liked the muscle shot. You look jacked."

"I like the one that looks like a Goya," Noah said. The guys exchanged confused looks. "Goya? The artist? Honestly. It's like none of you have been to a museum."

Baloo's normally cheery face looked anguished. This was really tying him in knots. Cam had to put him out of his misery.

"Give it here." He held out his hand for the phone, flicked between the top three choices, then gave it back to him. "The muscles one. Quaid called

it.”

Baloo beamed his thanks, then gave a whoop.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Teagan squeezing her way through a group of gray-haired suited dudes who Ryder had told them were on the board of Regis Airlines.

She looked good. He’d only seen her in workout clothes or school clothes. She was always pretty, but the flight attendant’s outfit she was rockin’ stirred something in him that it would probably be wise to squelch.

“Food!” Baloo shouted when he realized Teagan was steering a trolley full of party food toward them. The team fell on it so fast, she stumbled backward.

“Hey.” He steadied her. “I didn’t realize you were working the party.”

“Yeah,” she frowned, eyes trained on the guys as they stuffed fancy finger foods into their mouths. “I didn’t either.”

She clearly didn’t want to talk about it. He knew better than to press.

“Has Quaid been behaving himself?” she asked. “He’s gone almost a whole week without an incident.”

“So far so— Oh shit.”

She followed his gaze and groaned. “Seriously? Cabrera brought Ethan as her plus-one?” She looked around, panicked. “Quick. We’ve got to get Quaid somewhere safe so he doesn’t see him.”

She was right. Quaid would flip if he knew Ethan was here. “Hey, guys!” She clapped her hands. “Why don’t you go look at some of the planes?”

They looked up from the party food, confused. “Why?”

“Because… because… they’re old.”

“Yeah, like the rest of Josh’s invite list.” Perry cackled at his own joke.

“It’s definitely less young and depraved than Josh said it would be,” Crabcatcher said, yelping when Teagan ran over his foot.

“I don’t know,” Noah mused. “Sometimes all you need is a dry rosé and good conversation.”

“Yeah,” Quaid guffawed. “If you’re a Real Housewife.”

“Guys!” Teagan shouted, desperate now. “Go look at the old planes!”

“Why?” Ryder asked. They were clearly happy where they were.

“Because I’m the cox and I said so!”

Cam winced. She’d been getting so close to winning the team’s full

support and in the blink of an eye, poof!—off it flew.

Teagan tried again. “I know. I’m sorry. Can I take it back?” She looked around the group. They all avoided eye contact until she hit Cam’s arm. “Too late. It’s out there.”

The rest of the team went back to talking—and eating. “Did you have to leave me hanging like that?” Teagan whispered.

“If by hanging you meant trying to force Quaid to look at a plane he had zero interest in seeing, yes. I was going to leave you hanging.”

“I was doing it for the team.”

“Yeah, but you didn’t go about it the right way.”

“What’s the right way? Tell me,” she commanded, after another look over her shoulder at Cabrera.

“Not that way,” Cam said drily. “Barking orders.”

“I am *try*-ing to *help*!”

“They don’t know that, though, do they? They think you’re just telling them what to do.”

She opened her mouth to protest, then shook her head, defeated. He was right and she knew it. “Look, I know the things we do don’t always make sense, but teams are kind of like brotherhoods. Family,” he corrected, because, in that outfit anyway, the guys would never see Teagan Tao as a bro. “We don’t necessarily all like each other, but we look out for each other the same way you’re looking out for your mom—who I’m guessing is the reason you’re wearing this uniform even though it feels humiliating.”

She laughed. “How’d you guess?”

He shrugged. “That’s what family does. They have one another’s backs even though most of the time you want to strangle each other.” He didn’t want to strangle his parents, but thought it best to leave that part out. “Look,” he said, when it was clear Cabrera and Ethan were going to start circulating soon. “The guys will listen to you if they know you have their backs.”

Teagan nodded, like he’d just given her a complicated calculus problem. “How about we ditch them and start our own team.”

Was this… was this Teagan flirting?

“It’d be a lot less drama,” she said, fired up now. “We’d be great. I’d compromise, get in sync with your rhythm, and lead us to victory.”

No. Not flirting. Just reducing the number of people she’d have to fight

for supremacy.

“Hey!” Crabcatcher yelped. “He just took my last blini!”

They all turned to see who had done it.

Oh shit.

Ethan Cabrera.

Like it was a tennis match, the team’s heads all turned to Quaid.

This was serious. Quaid could not go caveman on Ethan. Not here. Not in front of all of these people. Everyone on the team would probably get expelled, meaning no more crew, no University of Washington, no Olympic medals, no engineering degree. No future.

He was regretting not at least attempting to lure Quaid into one of the planes. He probably would’ve liked playing pretend pilot. For about two seconds.

Time froze as Quaid silently calculated his options. Then, to their collective shock, he took off in the opposite direction. Which kind of seemed worse. Scarier. Like he’d known Ethan was going to show up, and had a plan.

No one was brave enough to follow. No one, that is, apart from Teagan. As Cam watched her disappear into the crowd, he realized something. She had as much to lose as he did if they got expelled. Crew. College. Her mom would probably get fired if whatever it was Quaid was up to was as bad as he imagined it would be. “Guys”—he tipped his head in the direction Quaid and Teagan had gone—“we probably better check on them. For the team.” He set off, not bothering to look back to see if they were behind him. His gut already knew what the answer was.

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TEAGAN

Quaid was built like the Incredible Hulk. A big lumbering dude with the grace of a drunk elephant. But when he wanted to escape capture? He was like a jungle cat. A gazelle. Who knew?

When she finally caught up to him, holed up in a break room near the kitchens, she bent over, hands on knees, panting to catch her breath. She'd long since kicked off her heels and was pretty sure the cute little air hostess cap her mom had pinned onto her head was about to fall off. But she'd found him. Not that she had the slightest clue what to do with him.

"Hey," he said, shooting her a wary glance.

She held up a finger. She'd be a minute.

He shrugged. He didn't care what she said. Wasn't going to stop whatever plan he was putting into motion.

He pulled a bottle out of his pocket and poured a bunch of gelcaps onto the table.

He didn't look up when she examined the bottle. He was too busy shoving them into a piece of cake.

"Laxatives? Where did you even get these?"

"We're in a room full of old people."

He pressed another pill into the slice of cake.

She sunk into a chair across from him. Cam was right. As ever. She'd thought finishing the Iron Crucible had secured the respect of the team. But respect, it turned out, only took you so far.

"Quaid," she started. "You know doing this is going to get you expelled."

He dropped his head, put on his hangdog expression. "I'm sorry. I was wrong. I won't do it again."

She laughed. They locked eyes, each as surprised as the other at her reaction. She pointed at the cake. “What are you doing?”

“Spiking it with laxatives.”

“Yeah, I got that part. I meant, why are you doing it?”

He looked at her, surprised she didn’t already know. “You have to stop them. Before it’s too late.”

“Them?” She thought it was Ethan he was gunning for.

He sat back in his chair, thought a minute, then started talking. “The first prep school I went to was Laurelwood. It was nice. Then a dick like Ethan showed up. A shove here. Some stolen lunch money there. A kid stuffed in a locker overnight.”

His expression told her who the victim of the last prank was.

“No one did anything because it was just one jerk. But when someone else sees that idiot getting away with being a bully, they think they might try it, too. Next thing you know? Everyone’s a bully.”

“So Ethan’s a bully.”

“Yup. He’s been shaking down one of the freshmen on the junior rowing team. Making him buy him loaded fries every day. Supersized.”

Which was why they’d poured loaded fries ingredients into Ethan’s car.

Now that she had the final piece of the puzzle, Teagan understood why the guys had all helped him, knowing if they got caught, they’d all end up in detention, or worse.

Quaid was looking out for the little guy. Kids who weren’t strong enough or connected enough to take on whoever was making their life miserable. “I respect that.” She did. “But… you know you’re on your last strike. Cabrera’s going to kick you off the team. Out of school. Is that what you want?”

“What other choice do I have?”

“Quaid,” she said, resolved to keep him out of trouble. “You cannot afford to do this.”

He looked down at the cake, then back at her. “I know.”

“But I can.”

The rest of the team found her and Quaid at the top of a flight of portable stairs attached to one of the planes.

They didn’t hide their surprise at seeing the pair of them giggling together as they watched Ethan Cabrera eating his cake as he flirted with a girl around the same age.

“Shhh,” Quaid instructed, nodding in Ethan’s direction. “Wait for it… wait for it…”

Teagan didn’t realize she’d been holding her breath until, at long last, Ethan went ramrod straight, started looking around in a panic, then bolted for the restrooms. Quaid whooped and gave her a high five. “Nice one, Coxie. You got him good.”

They explained what they’d done on the way to the restrooms. They weren’t done just yet.

Quaid opened the main door to the men’s room. Groans were coming from the closest stall.

“That was for the freshman, Cabrera,” Quaid declared triumphantly.

“Quaid!” Ethan squawked. “When my grandmother finds out what you did, it’s *over*!”

“He didn’t do it,” Teagan announced, possibly a bit too gleefully. Bullying was wrong. No matter who you were related to.

“It doesn’t matter,” Ethan sniped. “I’ll have you both suspended.”

Quaid threw her a panicked look. She grinned at him. She had this base covered, too. She pulled the roll of toilet paper she’d taken from the stall out from behind her back. Behind her, the rest of the team hooted with laughter. “That’s a pretty big threat for someone who doesn’t have any TP.”

Ethan’s desperate scrabble at an empty toilet paper roll echoed against the tile walls.

“If you want to get out of here with your dignity, you need to promise not to tell your grandmother. And you’re going to swear you’ll leave the freshmen alone. Deal?”

There was silence for a minute, as if he was actually considering saying no. Then his stomach made some noises Teagan had never heard come out of a human before.

“Deal,” he groaned, clearly desperate now.

Teagan presented Quaid with the roll of toilet paper. “You can do the honors.”

Quaid rolled it across the floor as Ethan’s hand shot out of the bottom of the stall, desperately clawing at the toilet paper.

Once they'd gotten a safe distance from the restrooms, there were high fives all round.

"I'm telling you," Quaid said to the boys, "Teagan went full beast mode."

Half the crew started making primitive noises. The other half dissolved into laughter.

Cam nudged Teagan with his elbow and gave her a private, congratulatory smile. "Look who went and did what none of us could do."

"What?"

"Become the Quaid whisperer."

"I had some good advice from a friend," she said.

"Oh," he said, pretending not to know she was talking about him.

"Apparently my only-child syndrome wasn't helping me play well with others."

"Well." Cam gave one of those slow, sexy, broad-shouldered shrugs of his. "It's one thing to receive good advice, and another to act on it."

She wasn't used to him looking at her like this. All warm and soft, like she was a girl he just might have taken a shine to versus the bossy know-it-all who shouted instructions at him from the front of the boat. It would've felt embarrassing if it hadn't felt so nice. She would've stared into his eyes a lot longer if her phone hadn't pinged. Probably her mom. She read the text. "Hey!" She beamed up at him. "I've been added to the crew's group chat."

He scraped his tooth along his lower lip and tipped his head a bit, as if adjusting his angle on her. "Congratulations, Coxie. You're a fully fledged team member now."

She wished they weren't surrounded by so many people. It'd be nice to hang out just the two of them. Maybe pick up on their beer pong Q&A. He was looking at her like he might like it, too. She'd had one win today; maybe the universe would give her a second one? "I should probably get out of this uniform," she said, looking down at it, then back up at him. "What are you doing after the party?"

He shrugged. "I don't think the guys are doing anything, so I'll probably head home."

Ah. She might have become the Quaid whisperer, but she definitely didn't know how to read Cam Dillinger. "Cool." She looked around for

Juliet, who she had totally abandoned. “Me too. Right. Like I said, I better get out of this uniform.”

When she chanced a glance back at the guys, she could see Baloo slapping Cam’s forehead. Probably for picking the wrong photo to send his cyber crush.

She gave her own forehead a slap. She needed to stop worrying about whether Cam liked her and focus on the real win: becoming part of the team.

Uniform off, Teagan skirted the outside of the air hangar, successfully dodging the team, past her mom, who, weirdly, was clinking margarita glasses with Coach Hayden, past Juliet, who was chatting up the girl Ethan had abandoned, until finally she made her escape out a side door.

What was it with this place? Every time she thought she’d figured it out, she got it wrong. Spectacularly, humiliatingly wrong. Back home, there was a tub of ice cream in the freezer with her name on it and nothing could get in her— She froze. Why was Josh Regis standing in front of a super car downing prescription pills like they were candy?

“Are those medicinal or recreational?”

He stared at her, horrified, like she’d caught him trying to steal one of the airplanes lined up alongside the runway. For a nanosecond she thought he might actually be vulnerable. But the innate Regis family arrogance won out. He stuffed the pills into his pocket and gave her a haughty look. “It’s my party. I’ll get high if I want to.”

“Love the self-sabotage.” Her voice had come out too sharp. Why did she take it out on other people when she’d been the one making an idiot of herself? Then again, this was Josh Regis. His skin wasn’t thick. It was Teflon.

“You’re such a buzzkill,” he snarled.

“And you’re a brat,” she snapped.

“Where’s your uniform?” he sneered. “If you leave early, you won’t get paid. And having seen your house, you need every penny you can get.”

Oh, wow. You pressed the wrong button, Josh Regis.

She didn’t care how rich or powerful he thought he was. How many strings he could pull. No one, and she meant no one, talked to her like she

was less than. *Especially* when their entire life was handed to them on a silver platter like his was. “Screw you, Josh. You might have your big fancy party and your shiny new car, but the one thing you don’t have? Class. Not an ounce of it.”

Josh barked with laughter, like she was a pathetic kid throwing a pointless tantrum. “If you like the car so much, you can valet it.” He threw the keys to her.

She caught them, didn’t bother looking back before climbing into the driver’s seat, firing up the engine, and hitting the gas pedal. Hard.

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JOSH

It wasn’t often that Josh wished being an asshole didn’t come quite so easily.

This was one of them.

He hadn’t expected Teagan to race off in his car, but after the things he’d said? He didn’t blame her. How on earth she rode this ancient bicycle to school every day was beyond him. Fired up from their argument, he made it to school in record time. His car was parked across three spots in the lot. She wasn’t in it. No surprise there. He rode down to the lake. As he’d thought, there she was, out on the water in a single.

It was windy. Too windy. No matter how angry she was, Teagan Tao wasn’t stupid when it came to rowing. She was trying to turn her shell around when an idiot in a speedboat roared past her, pushing a wake into her.

Her boat flipped over, dragging Teagan under the water. He waited a beat for her to surface. And another.

Oh shit. She should’ve come up by now. He tore off his shoes and dove into the lake, pounding out strokes like his life depended on it. Hers did. And he was the reason she was out there in the first place.

She didn’t come to until he was carrying her along the dock to the shore. She blinked her eyes and looked at him, confused. Neither of them said anything until he set her down on a picnic table and returned with a pair of blankets he’d found in the boathouse.

“How’d you know I was here?”

“Your entire personality is rowing. It wasn’t hard.” She smiled, then winced in pain, touching the back of her head gingerly. He took a look. “It’s

not bleeding, but there's a pretty bad bump—" He went to touch it, but she pulled away.

"Don't do that."

"What?"

"I'm fine. I don't need you to—"

"Make sure you don't die?" he finished for her.

She scowled at him.

He laughed. "You'd seriously rather drown than be saved by me?"

"I'm still deciding," she said haughtily, then gave him a sheepish look. "Yeah, no. This is pretty humiliating. I'm going to go back in. Finish it off."

Josh pulled her back onto the picnic table, then held up his fingers like he was in the Boy Scouts. "I swear on Phil Collins's life, I will not let you drown." He shook his head. "Why are you making this a big deal?"

"Oh, I don't know. Could it be because you've been awful to me since the minute we met?"

True, but it wasn't like she'd run off crying. "You give as good as you get."

Teagan made a shooing motion, teasing him now. "Yeah, I think it's time for you to get back to your party."

"That train wreck?"

She looked at him, surprised. "It looked like everyone was having a good time."

"Oh, they were. Except the one person it was for."

"You?" Teagan poked him in the side, then looked at his face and saw she'd gotten that wrong. "Your grandfather?"

He nodded.

"Honestly? Your family seem a little…"

"Batshit insane? Yeah, I know. People think a family business is a family that runs a business, but really? It's the other way around."

He could feel her eyes on him, didn't want to risk what she'd see if she saw his. How could his grandfather have said those hurtful things? Told him he admired his ambition in one breath, then basically told him he was nothing more than a Viktor Regis wannabe in the next. If Josh hadn't been hunting for him, his grandfather would have left the party without so much as a goodbye.

When he looked across to Teagan, her smile wasn't forced anymore. It

was sympathetic, without a trace of pity for the poor little rich boy. “Well,” she started brightly. “Maybe you’ll get lucky and your entire life will blow up. It worked for me!”

It was kind of going that way already.

“Hey.” She nudged him. “I was joking.”

“I know.” He climbed off the table, removed the blanket from his shoulders, and put it on the bench. “I better get back.” He’d left Britney on “Keep Everyone Happy” duty back at the party. She’d probably be wondering where he was. Britney had all sorts of merits. Patience was not one of them.

“Thanks for getting me out of the water,” Teagan said.

He gave her a nod of thanks. That was pretty much all he had left in him. The rest of him was already turning to lead at the thought of going back to that stupid air hangar and pretending he had any pride left.

“You know,” Teagan called after him, “I know some guys who were promised a night of young, rich depravity. Now, I can’t supply a private jet or anything, but I do have the next best thing…”

Quaid and the guys were murdering yet another power ballad in the boathouse. Josh was loving every off-key minute of it.

Teagan pulled his disaster of a birthday out of a black hole and turned it into an aurora borealis. With the help of a colored disco ball, sure. But honestly? Pizza, a karaoke machine, and the crew dancing and singing and acting like idiots without a single worry anything they did here would come back to bite them in the butt? Perfection.

Perry had anointed himself team photographer and was taking pictures of everyone. Baloo sent one to the guy he was crushing on. Spoiler alert—the guy thought he was gorgeous.

There would be some regrets in the morning. But it wasn’t morning yet, so who cared?

Josh felt light, free, like all of the energy he was used to pouring into playing House of Regis had been gifted back to him. Being the heir apparent was like being born into a game of chess without a rulebook. He’d thought he was destined to be a king. Only, as he’d found out from his grandfather today, he was like everyone else: a pawn. Maybe because he

was sick of it, too, Ryder had stashed his daggers. Or maybe he was biding his time, waiting to check Josh.

Didn't matter. Not tonight anyway.

One song ended and another began. Oh, hell yeah! He loved this one. It was time to call in that duet Teagan had promised him. "Coxie!" he shouted across to where Teagan was talking to Cam. "Coxie!" He held out the other karaoke mic. "I need you."

She cocked her ear, listened for a second, then lit up, just as he had when he'd clocked the song. She danced over, already singing the lyrics. The rest of the guys joined them during the chorus apart from Cam, who, for whatever reason, was doing his lone wolf thing. But that was cool. The Easton Eagles were a team! He hoped every single one of them felt like he did right now. Supported. Safe in the knowledge that no matter what he did —short of murder or stealing candy from babies, obviously—they'd have his back, no matter how big an ass he made of himself.

Life could trip you up, as he'd found out today. Thought he had it nailed. Hadn't. Face-planted in front of his grandfather, only for the one team member he least expected to pick him back up again. He'd had to save Teagan's life first, but he wouldn't rub in that little nugget. Especially after she'd put all this together. The perfect birthday party. He and Teagan were front and center now, making dogs howl across the county with their high notes. But no one called them out for it. Made them feel any shame. This team accepted each other as they were—warts and all.

Not that he had warts. Gross.

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TEAGAN

A night of karaoke and carbs might not be on the Olympic rowing team's training program, but from the effort the guys had been putting into training since then? Maybe it should be.

Either way, Teagan was making the most of the team's renewed energies by putting the guys through the paces on the ergs. Watching them row on the machines allowed her to fine-tune what they were or weren't doing right to hit the goal she'd set them: locking in.

Locking in wasn't strapping your feet to the slides. It was about getting to that sweet spot where your body didn't need to rely on your brain. Where instinct and muscle memory worked in harmony to create a consistent and efficient stroke.

She strapped in for the final run. It was important the guys knew she'd never make them do something she didn't demand of herself. A great idea until she'd remembered she needed to cheerlead throughout. Her lungs were burning.

"You've got this, guys. We are pure synchronicity!" It was exhilarating. Rowing with them, moving as one. Backs straight, shoulders solid, legs bending in one fluid move, sliding forward for the catch. Going long again as they pressed out a drive. Nine sets of arms and legs hitting the target pace and stroke rate; heart rates high but steady.

They were in the final push now. Crabcatcher, next to her, was beginning to struggle. He had a smile on his face, though. A change from his normal terrified or panicked expression when rowing. That alone felt like a win.

She didn't want to jinx things, but she'd felt a change in her, too. Regular hits of the feels. The good kind that meant she'd maybe, hopefully,

pretty-please-because-it-had-been-so-hard gotten her life back on track. Not the track she'd thought she'd be on, true. Single sculling herself into Stanford. But coxing was teaching her new things about rowing and herself. Like playing well with others. She smiled at Cam, who just about managed to smile back. She had no idea what was or wasn't going on between them, but maybe one day they'd figure it out. Or not. Nothing happened like she thought it would with these guys.

Like Josh Regis, of all people, saving her life. The talk they'd had after had helped her understand why he behaved the way he did. Not that she was team Regis or anything. Turned out Josh's dad had fired her mom, for absolutely no reason, right in the middle of that amazing party. Maybe the family took turns being assholes. Her mom was doing her best to shake it off, so she needed to as well.

"This weekend's regatta is a head race," she said, trying to distract the team from the pain she could see leeching into their concentrated expressions. "A time trial. That's why this session is a long one. Totally different head space to sprints. It's gonna be six kilometers of focus and drive." The Head of the Laurence, their first regatta of the season where they'd face their longtime rivals, Westvale, had the team pumped. "How we perform in this competition will set the barometer for the rest of the season. If we do well? The Easton Eagles stand every chance of lifting up the Haverford Cup this spring. So c'mon! Keep your focus. Burn this rhythm into your muscle memory. You're going to need it. Sixty more seconds, guys. Keep it up!"

Coach Hayden came into the training room and took in the scene as the final, most difficult, seconds of the session ticked away. When the clock hit zero, Crabcatcher launched himself at a garbage can and upchucked.

Teagan looked at Coach and shrugged. He'd asked her to put the team through their paces. Hadn't said how. "No pain, no gain. Right?"

While the guys hit the showers, Teagan and Coach Hayden went over the erg scores she'd put on the leaderboard.

He kept his expression neutral, as usual, finally giving a nod. A nod from Coach was like someone else jumping up and down screaming *Woohoo! Amazing!* Someone like her mom. Which reminded her of the

smile Coach had on his face when he'd been with her mom at the party the other day. It was totally different to the ones the team got. She was beginning to wonder if there was something going on there.

Coach tapped the board, pulling her attention back to the scores. "You did well today, too. A new PB?"

"Thanks." She smiled. "Gotta keep up with the boys."

Hayden appraised her for a moment like he was trying to figure out if there was something she wasn't saying, then moved over to where she'd taped up the map of the course they'd be rowing against Westvale. There'd be other teams, too, but Westvale was the team the Easton Eagles wanted to beat.

"We might have a fighting chance at the top five if the team keeps this up," Coach said. "The pressure's on you, too. This is a coxswains' race. Lots of twists and turns on the course."

"That I'll be navigating backward. I know," she said. "It's all good, Coach. I've been practicing on *Mario Kart*."

He snorted.

"But seriously, don't worry," she assured him. "I'll be ready."

He gave her shoulder one of those pats that said he wasn't worried. Not much anyway. "If you can get these boys to work out to Ariana Grande, I'm going to bet you can lead them to—"

"Victory?" she supplied.

"To a place that isn't last," he said. "You've got the team acting as a unit. That alone is a victory, Teagan. The Easton Eagles haven't brought home a trophy in a long time. I can tell you right now, they won't be bringing one home this weekend either. But you keep this up? Working with the boys' strengths instead of against them? We could get back into the top five. Which would be a win," he said, his eyes cautioning her not to contradict him.

She was smart enough to wait until he'd left the room to say, "Good pep talk, Coach."

"You talking to yourself now?"

She turned around and grinned at a freshly showered Cam. His dark hair was still glossy wet, a little curlier than when it was dry. Skin a bit glowier. Eyes a bit brighter.

"Yeah," she said. "Just pumping myself up for the regatta."

“Ha. Whatever works.”

They stood there looking at each other like neither one of them knew how they’d gotten there. He blinked first. She really needed to stop ogling him like a lovestruck Pixar character. Not that she was lovestruck. Luststruck? Was that a thing?

“Teagan…” Cam shifted his feet, put his hands on his hips, and tilted his head to the side—oh my god. Was he nervous? Was he going to ask her out? “What are you doing the week after the regatta?”

Nothing. As per. Even if she was, she’d wipe her calendar clean if he wanted to hang. She reminded herself of the epic humiliation she’d felt when she’d tried to ask him out after Josh’s birthday party resulting in a near-death experience. Probably wise to play this one a bit cool. “Other than practice? Nothing.”

“Coxie!” Josh shouted, crossing the room toward them.

Seriously? What was it with Josh Regis and bad timing? Apart from the whole saving-her-life thing, he was the thorn that refused to leave her side. “Here’s your charger. Thanks for letting me borrow it.”

“No problem.” They high-fived. Cam’s smile had disappeared. And his nerves. Teagan, as ever, was none the wiser. Had he been trying to ask her out or what?

Instead of leaving like a normal person, Josh lingered, trying to suss out what she and Cam had been talking about. “Teags, want me to stay and help clean up?”

Cam tipped his head at the main door. “Pretty sure I saw your girlfriend outside.”

Josh gave his jaw a rub, like Cam had just landed one. Then he took a step back, shifted his gaze to Teagan. “I’ll catch up with you later, yeah?”

“Sure.” She gave him a wave, then turned back to Cam. “So, we were talking about the week after the regatta?”

Cam was staring at the doorway Josh had just left, a crease between his eyebrows. “What’s up with Josh? He’s getting friendly.”

She laughed even though he hadn’t meant it to be funny. “Don’t say friendly like it’s a bad thing,” she chided gently. “He’s being nice.”

Cam made a noise like, *Yeah, right*.

She got it. Josh and Cam might be teammates, but outside the boat they would probably never see eye to eye. But Cam didn’t know the things

Teagan did. That the mighty Josh Regis was every bit as vulnerable as the rest of them. Not that it was her place to share. “He’s really not that bad, Cam.”

Cam’s eyes went wide. “Are we talking about the same guy?”

“You could try giving him a chance,” she shot back.

“Is there something going on with you two?”

What was he even talking about? Is this why Cam had wanted to talk next week? To try to squeeze some information about Josh from her? She’d stupidly thought all the team drama was behind them after Josh’s birthday. “Sounds to me like you’re more interested in Josh than you are in me, so why don’t you find out what he’s doing next week instead?”

She left before he had a chance to reply. Boys. Couldn’t live with ’em. Couldn’t row without ’em.

“Wow.” Juliet’s eyes glittered with excitement as the rowing team gathered around a huge boiling pot of water. “It’s like encountering an entirely foreign culture.”

Teagan laughed, grateful to have another girl at the boathouse. After “working” as a server for Teagan’s mom, Juliet started showing up more, gleefully discovering “the proletariat lifestyle,” as she liked to call it. Life without servants, basically. Her face had been pure astonishment when she’d seen the balls of dough Teagan’s mom had rolled flat into cookies. “This is how it works?” she’d marveled. “Who knew?”

Baloo and Quaid began distributing dry pasta to everyone on the team.

“Here,” said Baloo, handing some to Noah, who was reading despite the fact there was music blaring and people partying around him.

When Teagan and Juliet were handed theirs, Juliet held it away from her, like it might suddenly turn into a handful of snakes. “Why am I being assaulted with linguine?”

“Spaghetti. It’s crew tradition. A group carb-loading party before the regatta,” replied Teagan. It was new to her, too, all of it. Well, most of it. She’d obviously been to regattas before, but she’d carb-loaded with her dad, who would spend the entire meal talking tactics and technique. That was her job now. Which was kind of freaky.

“Easton Eagles!” Baloo called out. “Spaghetti at the ready!”

Everyone held up their spaghetti, one hand at either end.

“Three,” Baloo bellowed, the rest of the team joining him. “Two! One!”

“FREE SPEED!” everyone shouted, then broke their spaghetti in half, lining up to drop it into the boiling pot, apart from Juliet, who was still staring at it like it was an alien life-form.

“Free speed is rowing speak for an extra boost of energy,” Teagan translated.

Juliet gave her the side-eye, then grinned. “Why not do a sacrifice instead? Perry’s outfit would be perfect.”

Teagan laughed. Juliet and Perry seemed to like playfully insulting each other as much as she and Josh did.

Juliet thrust her spaghetti at Crabcatcher before he could get to the pot.

“Seriously? Thanks. I need all the extra speed I can get!”

“Hey,” Teagan assured him. “You’ve got this.”

He shook his head. “I barfed at practice.”

“Only once.”

They threw their pasta into the pot.

“I keep having this nightmare,” Crabcatcher said in a low voice. “One where my arms give out during the race.” The panicked look Teagan was familiar with took over his face. “Maybe you could just steer the boat into a bridge.”

“Why would I do that?”

“So I won’t be the reason we lose.”

“Hey.” Teagan gave his shoulder a squeeze. “You are not going to fail. You’ve been working so hard. Throwing up after an intense workout is normal. It’s proof you literally gave it your all.” An idea struck. “I was going to jog part of the course before the race. Want to come? Seeing it in real life rather than on a map really helps. Plus,” she added with an encouraging smile, “it’s extra cardio!”

He gave her a shy grin. “Yeah. Sounds good.”

“Who said extra cardio?” Baloo asked in a booming voice. “No need for these babies.” He flexed his arms, giving his biceps a kiss each.

“Of course not,” Noah said, having finally put his book down to join them. “Extra cardio is for the rest of us mortals.”

“Yeah,” Perry quipped, playing along. “You just show up, row, and go home. Don’t even have to think about it.”

“I got the brawn, Britney got the brains,” Baloo shot back.

Teagan’s heart squeezed tight. Poor Baloo. He had played the part—the strong man—but she’d seen his smile falter when Perry had made his barb. Baloo might look like an impenetrable fortress of strength, but he was all gooey on the inside. Before she could have a quiet, supportive word with him, Ryder jumped up onto a chair. “Listen up, Eagles! Your stroke is talking.”

Josh, behind him, tensed his jaw.

Ryder unfurled a Westvale T-shirt that would’ve drawn boos from the crowd if he hadn’t used tape to change it to West-fail. “This is the year we knock West-fail off the podium!” He crowed like a general rallying his troops. Or, judging by Josh’s pained expression, a Regis who had been given a promotion in the family business.

Ryder’s girlfriend, Amber, was there, alongside Britney. The pair of them joined in as Ryder started singing the team song, encouraging everyone to sing along.

“Easton, Easton… our home on high.
Lifting, soaring to the sky!
Spread our wings with talons bright,
Enemies running from the sight.
O! Mighty Eagle, King of Birds…
Watch your butt cos you’ve been served!”

Juliet sidled up to Teagan. “With poetry like that…”

“I know,” she sighed. “We’re still a work in progress.”

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JOSH

Hunting down Brit was as good an excuse as any to get out of the room for a while. He knew Ryder wasn't actively trying to rub his face in it. Or maybe he was. Josh had lorded it over Ryder for long enough. Like someone very wise once said, "Payback's a bitch."

He wandered around for a bit, then heard Britney's voice in the kitchen. She wasn't shouting or anything, but he knew before he got there she and Baloo were having a fight. Those two bickered all the time, but whatever this one was about looked serious.

"Hey." He gave the doorframe of the kitchen a knock.

The pair of them whipped around so fast Baloo accidentally sent a plate of spaghetti flying. A huge blob of sauce landed on Brit's dress.

"Bronson!" she screeched, pushing him away when he tried to rub it off with his sleeve. Britney prided herself on her immaculate appearance, so this was Defcon Level One. "What the—"

"I'm sorry, okay!" Baloo shouted, his shoulder bashing into Josh as he passed. "I'm sorry about everything."

Josh knew better than to follow him. Not with Britney glaring at him like the stain on her dress was his fault. Pretty much everything had been his fault since he'd accidentally abandoned her at his birthday party. The first one. It hadn't helped that Perry had live streamed him and Teagan doing karaoke at the second party.

"Is your dress going to be okay?"

She threw the sponge she'd been trying to dab the sauce away with in the sink. "It's going to be a replacement situation." She beamed a familiar smile at him—cheery, and laced with poison. "You know dresses. They're kind of like boyfriends."

“I knew you were still mad about that.”

She arched an eyebrow at him, clearly surprised he had the gall to think she wouldn’t be.

He’d screwed up before with Brit. He’d do it again. But she was right, he owed her an apology. “I’m sorry I ditched you. The after-party wasn’t planned, it just kind of spontaneously happened.”

“Oh, I see.” She tipped her head to the side, nodding like one of those bobblehead things people put on their dashboards. “The whole crew just ‘spontaneously’ showed up at the boathouse. Every one of them. Even Teagan, who, if I’m not mistaken, should have been serving hors d’oeuvres alongside her mother at your real birthday party. Maybe she’s why your dad fired her mom right there and then.”

Josh took a beat. That was a lot to register. He didn’t know his dad had done that. Teagan hadn’t said a word about it, and things had been good between them ever since he’d heroically saved her life, then bared his soul to her. Not really A-plus boyfriend behavior, though. When you looked at it through Britney’s lens. But she didn’t know the whole picture. No one did. Not even Teagan.

“I’m sorry. Truly. You have every right to be mad. But that whole party-at-the-boathouse thing was genuinely not planned.”

He could practically see the wheels turning in Britney’s head as she stared at him, weighing up the pros and cons of accepting his apology. “What’s going on with you?”

It was a good question. A couple of months ago he thought he knew everything. Past, present, future. It gave him plenty of free time to mess with other people. It had not been time well spent. “I don’t know,” he admitted truthfully. “Sometimes I wonder…” He looked up at her. “I wonder what would happen if my life just blew up.”

Britney clucked her tongue, as if the idea was too ridiculous to entertain. “Your life isn’t going to blow up.”

It could. It might. “What if it did? Would it be so bad to clear the slate, figure out something new? Forge my own path instead of following the Regis one?”

Britney looked at him like he’d grown another head, then flicked the switch in her brain that turned on her campaign manager mode. “There’s no need to forge your own path, babe.” She ran her hand down his arm,

threaded her fingers through his. “Don’t let your grandfather’s curveballs get to you. It might feel like you’re in competition with Ryder, but there isn’t one.” She kissed his cheek and gave him a perky smile. The one that said she’d decided what her future looked like and it wasn’t up to Josh to mess it up. “You’ve been my boyfriend for over two years when I could have my pick of the crop. Do you know why I picked you?”

Because he was hot and rich?

She booped his nose. “Because I pick winners.”

He managed to keep the smile on his face, but he heard what she was really saying. If he hadn’t been the crown prince of the Regis family, she wouldn’t have been interested. It wasn’t *him* she’d fallen for, it was all the trappings that came with him.

Amber came rushing in babbling about how hilarious Ryder was for turning Westvale into West-fail.

Josh needed to get out of there. He squeezed Brit’s hand, then untangled his fingers from hers. “I’m going to go get you a drink, okay, babe?”

He’d already lost her attention. If he’d ever had it in the first place.

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TEAGAN

Teagan wheeled her overnight bag into the hotel reception, waiting until Britney had finished giving Baloo instructions about how and where she wanted her massive pile of luggage to be placed in their suite.

They were only going to be there for two nights, but from what little she knew about Britney, she was a girl who didn't leave anything to chance. Sun, snow, wind, rain? She'd probably packed to cover all bases.

Britney caught Teagan's eye and gave her a conspiratorial wink. "I'm just going to check out the spa. Make sure everything's set for our girls' night."

"Great!" Hopefully she'd sounded enthusiastic instead of scared. She waved her off, then headed over to the check-in line where her mom was.

"Everything okay, Teags?"

She was still puzzling over why Britney had invited her to spend a girls' night together—just the two of them—the night before the regatta. Her first instinct had been to say no and run for the hills. She valued her life. Up until she offered the invitation, Britney hadn't been shy about sharing her feelings about Teagan. She didn't like her.

But, Teagan had allowed, maybe, like Josh, there were things she didn't know about Britney. A side to her she didn't like to show in public. Surely some of her brother's kindness had rubbed off on her. She tried to imagine Britney giving someone one of Baloo's reassuring bear hugs. Gave up.

She nodded at the desk. "All good, Mom. We're up."

They stepped up to the clerk. When Ella handed him her credit card, Teagan crossed her fingers, hoping it would work.

The clerk smiled. "Happy anniversary, Mrs. Tao! I see you and your husband are platinum-level guests, which"—he paused for effect—"makes

you eligible for a free upgrade!”

Teagan’s stomach lurched as she shot her mom a horrified look. “Mom. I’m so sorry. I totally forgot it was today.”

“It’s fine. I did, too.” Questionable. Her mom turned to the clerk, flustered. “Thank you for the offer—”

Teagan sensed a polite refusal on the horizon and cut in, “Sounds great. Thanks. What a treat!”

Her mom shot her a look. “What are you—”

“A fancy room is the least of what Dad owes us,” Teagan said in a low voice. “Hey, Mom. Fun idea. I’m hanging out with Britney tonight, but why don’t we get room service tomorrow? It won’t be an anniversary dinner, but it could be a super-chill you-and-me hang night.”

Her mom gave her a wary look. The kind that said, *I’m not up for a pity party*.

“It’d be fun. We could order whatever we wanted.”

“Well.” Her mom was clearly warming to the idea. “If we do that, I could order steak.”

“And I’ll order cake!”

Her mom pulled her close with a one-armed hug and gave her head a kiss. “Steak and cake it is.”

When her mom started humming as they set off for the elevators, Teagan breathed a sigh of relief. Every hurdle they’d overcome since Dad left was a step in the right direction. That’s what he’d left them to do. Put one foot in front of the other, getting further away from the life they’d once shared together.

After the team dinner, which ended with a stern lecture from Coach to get a good night’s sleep and save any shenanigans for later, her mom said she was going to go for a walk in preparation for all of the cake they’d be eating tomorrow. Teagan dropped her things off in the room and went into the bathroom to make sure she was vaguely acceptable-looking before she went up to Britney’s suite. She stared at herself for a while wondering if it would help her figure out where she stood with Cam, who had been weird with her ever since she’d thought he was going to ask her out but didn’t. Then she tried out a technique her dad had suggested, positive affirmations, but just

felt like an idiot. It was time to put on her big-girl boots and head to Britney's suite. She scribbled a nice note to her mom just in case she came back in a body bag.

The elevator wasn't anywhere near her room and Britney was only one floor away, so she took the stairs.

"Hey!"

She looked up. Josh. In running clothes. "Hey, why are you jogging in the stairwell?"

"Getting some extra conditioning in. Every minute counts if I want to get back to stroke. Where are you headed?"

"I," she said with a jaunty smile, "have a date!"

"Oh." He stopped jogging in place. "Hunh."

He looked annoyed. What was his problem? He had a girlfriend. Was there some law she didn't know about forbidding the team's cox to date? She debated spinning this out, decided against it. Everyone's nerves were on edge because of the race tomorrow. The sooner she got to Britney's the sooner she could get back to her room and snuggle up in the mountain of pillows on their mahoooosive bed. "I've got a date with your girlfriend."

Josh did a double take. "Really? That's… ummm… weird."

"Is it weird?" It felt weird.

"Well." Josh drew the word out. "It's not like you two like each other. And aren't things a little different with…" He pointed at her, then at himself.

Wait a minute. Had she missed something? Was this what Cam had seen? That things between her and Josh weren't just friendly, they were *friendly*.

He had a girlfriend. And also? No.

She shrugged like she didn't get it. "Is something different?"

He stared at her, then shook his head. "Of course not. Have a good time."

He set off down the stairs without looking back.

Okay. Whatever.

She'd just about convinced herself she'd gotten the whole thing wrong, again—because *boys*—right up until Britney opened the door with a beatific smile and ushered her into the suite. It didn't feel right. Could she hear ominous minor chords sounding her imminent doom?

Maybe there *was* something different. And Britney had been the first to notice.

She was about to make a break for it, say something about her period—that usually worked—when Britney cupped her hand to her ear. “Don’t you just love a Tibetan sound bath?”

Maybe? If she’d ever heard one before.

“Excuse Bronson’s mess,” Britney said, waving at Baloo’s unisuit and luggage that were sprawled in a corner. “I’m sure you already know he’s a slob. He’s out doing his private ‘pre-game ritual.’” She directed Teagan toward a pair of sofas flanking a huge coffee table covered in manicure supplies, face masks, and a charcuterie board that would probably get polished off by Baloo when he got back from whatever it was he was doing. “Foot bath?”

“Sure.” She sat down in front of one of the two foot baths bubbling away, sending wafts of lavender into the room. She took off her shoes and slipped her feet in. It felt really good. She and her mom used to get pedicures together back in the day, when they were a perfect family of three.

“Soooo…” Britney said once she was settled on the sofa across from Teagan. “Girl talk. I see that you’ve been cozying up with the team.”

“Umm…”

“Are there any sparks flying?” She held up her hand. “Don’t even try to tell me you spend all that time with eight hotties and haven’t wanted to slip into the shower with one of them.”

Been there, done that. Probably best not to mention it. “We mostly talk about rowing.”

“What do you think about Quaid?”

“Quaid? He’s like a little brother. A *big* little brother,” she amended.

“Noah?”

“He’s like an older brother.”

Britney made a throat-clearing noise, like she was trying really, really hard not to get irritated. “How about Cam? He’s cute. Don’t tell me you wouldn’t drink that eight-pack?”

“Cam is very… drinkable?”

Britney still didn’t look satisfied. “Have you ever thought about Josh?”

Yeah. She should’ve made a run for it. Another one of her dad’s sayings came to her: Questions aren’t stupid. Not asking them is.

Teagan swallowed the lump in her throat. “Britney, why am I *really* here?”

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CAM

“So…” Madison asked. “Who is she?”

“Who is who?” Cam played dumb even though he knew exactly what Madison, Coach’s daughter, was talking about. And that she would find a way to squeeze an answer out of him. He and Madison had pretty much grown up together. She went to the local high school even though she was smarter than half the kids at Easton. Madison was one of the few townies who’d never treated him any differently after he’d bagged the rowing scholarship. Even without an Easton education, Madison would get into whatever college she wanted. With a scholarship. She was that smart.

He closed the back of his truck and shouldered his duffel bag. He’d had to work at the shop so had arrived just in time for the team dinner.

“The girl you’re crushing on?”

“I’m not—”

She started laughing. “So the pretty blonde cox you keep staring at isn’t someone you want to go out with?”

Sometimes hanging out with Madison was like talking to a living, breathing lie detector. “Just because she’s female doesn’t mean I’m crushing on her.” There were all sorts of other reasons he was. She was driven. An awesome rower. Took advice when she needed to. Eventually. Made him a little bit crazy sometimes. He wondered if she liked tacos.

“Okay,” Madison said, like she was going to let it go. She wouldn’t.

They headed toward the hotel lobby, steering clear of a bunch of Westvale guys coming out of the hotel’s courtyard.

“You know,” Madison said far too casually. “I may not go to your prep school, but I have known you forever. And that face means you’re crushing. You should ask her out.”

“I did.”

“Really? Did she say yes?”

“No.” Not his finest moment. “She said, ‘I think you’re more interested in Josh than me.’” He left out the rest. Too embarrassing.

“I’m going out on a limb here… but… I’m calling it. You did it wrong.”

“Tell me something I don’t know.” He held the lobby door open for her, relieved there wasn’t anyone around to overhear them.

They headed toward check-in. There were a few people in front of him, parents of rowers probably.

“Walk me through the crime scene,” Madison said.

He might as well. She was a girl. Maybe she’d enlighten him as to what he’d done wrong. “I went over to her after practice, and was about to ask her out, when Josh interrupted. He was being his usual Josh self…”

She shook her head. “Stop. There’s already too much Josh in this story. What happened next?”

He grimaced. “I don’t know. There was a vibe. So when he left, I asked her if something was going on between them.”

“You didn’t.”

“I did.”

“And maybe you shouldn’t have? Girls are allowed to talk to boys. Especially when they’re coxing their rowing team.”

She had a point. “I probably shouldn’t have asked that, should I?”

“You think? You need to apologize. The sooner the better.”

“About the Josh thing?” Or everything? He was feeling confused. Asking someone out should not be this complicated.

Madison grabbed her hair and pretended to pull it out. “Do not mention Josh!”

He was beginning to see why Teagan had stormed out on him.

Madison had done him a solid. While he’d checked in, she’d gone up to the room she was sharing with her dad and snuck a peek at Coach Hayden’s list with everybody’s room number. He stood outside Teagan’s door for about three solid minutes repeating, “Do not mention Josh, do not mention Josh,” which would probably make him do exactly that, but Madison was right. Moping wasn’t the energy he wanted to bring to the race tomorrow. He

needed to ask Teagan out—for real this time. If she said no? He'd move on. If she said yes…?

Knock on the freaking door, Cam.

He knocked on the door.

Waited.

Waited some more.

Checked his watch.

Waited a little bit more.

She obviously wasn't in.

He went to his room and turned on the TV to take his mind off things… just in time to see a commercial for Regis Airlines.

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TEAGAN

Britney almost seemed relieved not to have to pretend anymore. “Cards on the table? I want you gone.”

“Cards on the table?” Teagan wasn’t going to blink. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“Sure about that?” Britney asked, her voice as tart as a Sour Patch Kid. “I was looking at your socials. You were the Southwest Junior Champ in single sculls. You must miss rowing.”

“Yeah, I do.” Didn’t take a brain surgeon to figure that out. “So?”

Britney fluffed the pillow behind her and leaned back. “Did you know that the best school for girls’ crew is Gravenhurst Academy? No need to answer. I know you do, because you follow them.”

“I also follow Taylor Swift. Doesn’t mean I want to go to band camp.”

Britney smirked. She knew she had gotten Teagan’s interest.

Teagan shrugged. “So what if I follow Gravenhurst?”

“What if you could go there?”

Her feet answered for her. Performed a happy dance that sent water sloshing onto the carpet.

“Don’t worry about that. I’ll get someone to clean it later. Anyway, my mom went to Gravenhurst. As an equestrian.” Britney let the comment land. “She’s friends with the head of the school. I can make a call right now and get you a tryout tomorrow morning. You know they’re here, right?”

Yes. Obviously. She followed them on Insta. They were the best girls’ rowing team on the East Coast.

“If you want me to call…” Britney gave a little “up to you” shrug.

Of course she wanted her to. “But… if I got in, I’d have to leave the guys.”

“Yeah, that’s kind of the point, Teagan. But you’d get to row again. It’s win–win, babe. If this works, you get what you want. And I get what I want.” She held up her phone. “Do I make the call or not?”

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JOSH

The run hadn’t cleared his mind the way he hoped it would, but it was late. One more set of stairs and he called it. Time for bed.

He headed to his suite, debating a stop at Britney’s room when Teagan stepped out of it looking… weird.

“How was girls’ night?” he asked in a low voice. If Brit heard them talking, she’d come flying out to investigate.

“Total blast,” she said.

It clearly hadn’t been, but she was pretending so he would, too. “Did you comb each other’s hair and talk about boys?”

“Yeah. Except for the hair part.” Teagan dropped her sarcastic tone, shot a look at Britney’s door, and dropped her voice low. “She thinks there’s something up with you and me and wants me as far away from you as possible. I told her that was ridiculous.”

Josh shook his head. She didn’t think it was ridiculous and they both knew it. “Is it?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Teagan.” He’d had enough. “What are we doing here? Are you telling me you don’t think about the night at the docks?”

He watched her face soften as she relived the memory, felt that same lightning bolt of connection when her eyes shot to his.

“Shit,” Teagan said, panic setting in. “This is a problem.”

“You’re telling me. I have a girlfriend!”

She shushed him, beckoning to him to move farther down the hall. “I maybe have something with Cam.”

“You do?” He’d suspected. Known, really. Hadn’t liked it.

“These are not good feelings to have,” Teagan said, pointing between

the two of them.

“Well deduced, Sherlock.”

Teagan’s phone pinged. She read it and freaked. “It’s her!”

“Well, don’t answer it.” Figuring out how to handle this crisis was the priority here. “I don’t want to do anything behind Britney’s back.”

“Neither do I. That girl is terrifying!”

Right. Cool. Okay. They could do this. What had happened at the lake was a freak occurrence. Two people having a crisis, overcoming the odds together. It didn’t mean they needed to blow up their lives and go all Romeo and Juliet on each other. Too much was at stake. He put his hand out. “Just friends?”

She shook it. “Friends.”

She pulled her hand away before the current humming between them had a chance to turn into anything else.

A smart move. Romeo and Juliet hadn’t ended well. For either of them.

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TEAGAN

Teagan peeked out at her mom, still asleep in bed, then closed the bathroom door to play Britney's voice memo again.

"Hey, girl. Got your tryout. Meet Gravenhurst at the erg room at six-thirty. I know you'll smash it. And remember? A deal's a deal. Buh-bye!"

She looked down at the workout clothes she'd put on instead of the team uniform that was hanging in the closet.

Her mom was sitting up to have a stretch when Teagan came out of the bathroom. "Morning, sweetie. Hey, why the frown?"

"I was invited to erg with Gravenhurst."

"Who are…?"

"Private school with the East Coast's best rowing program."

Her mom didn't understand. "That sounds like a good way to burn nervous energy before the regatta."

"Mom. It's a tryout."

"Oh? Gosh." She gave Teagan a funny look. "So why aren't you running around like a lunatic telling everyone?"

Because it was complicated. A lot more than she'd thought it would be when she'd told Britney to make the call. "I don't want the guys to find out. They'd be hurt if they knew I was thinking of leaving them."

"It's only a tryout." Her mom batted the concern away. "You could bomb!"

Teagan stared at her. It wasn't only a "tryout." It was her entire future at stake. "You seriously need to work on your pep talks, Mom."

"Break an oar?"

As if her stress levels needed another shot of adrenaline, she spotted Cam

with the coach's daughter, Madison. Who shoved him toward her. Weird.

"Hey," Cam said, all casual like he hadn't just been pushed. "Morning. Where are you headed?"

She really didn't want to lie to him again. Should she tell him? No. Definitely no. It wouldn't be fair to upset one of her crew before the regatta. "Meeting my mom."

"Cool," he said. "Cool, cool." He shot a look over his shoulder at Madison, who gave him a double thumbs-up. "Ummm… I went by your room yesterday, but you weren't in. I, erm, I wanted to apologize. About the Josh thing. No!" He held his hands up. "I'm not going to talk about Josh. No more Josh. He's not what I wanted to talk to you about."

She glanced at her phone. She really needed to get going. "Okay."

"I was wondering if… would you want to hang out with me sometime?"

Yes! Yes, she did. "I'd love to." But she also needed to hotfoot it to the erg room.

"Awesome! There's a new Mexican food truck in town."

"Tacos are my love language."

Were they? He looked pleased, so yeah. Why not? Who didn't love a little spice?

Behind him, she spotted Gravenhurst's head coach go into the erg room looking like she hadn't cracked a smile in a decade. She needed to go. "Super. Glad we sorted that out. Talk later?"

"Sure."

He looked confused. So was she. In about an hour's time, she'd explain. Maybe. "Awesome. Buh-bye!" She jogged off. *Buh-bye?* Since when did she say that?

Since the moment she'd accepted a favor from Britney Garner.

Gravenhurst's head coach was even scarier up close.

"Thank you so much for inviting me," Teagan blathered after a way too long introduction. Why had she said her middle name? "I really appreciate it."

"It wasn't my invitation," the coach said. "I was asked to as a favor for the principal."

Ohhhh. Duh. She looked about as happy to have Teagan here as Coach

Hayden had looked when he'd put Josh back in stroke seat for the alumni race. Never mind. She could do with burning off some of these nerves.

"Well, thanks anyway."

The coach showed her to an erg with the enthusiasm of a prison guard escorting a new inmate to their cell. "You won gold last year in the single, but now you're coxing an eight?"

"Yes." She knew it looked bad, like Teagan wasn't focused on rowing, but launching into the entire story was too complicated. "But I keep my erg training up. The single is my passion." That was why she was here, right?

"My girls train hard. The group you'd sit in if you'd stayed in singles hit seven-forty. Sometimes faster."

"Great." Teagan had been training with guys. Big, muscly guys. "Me too."

The coach nodded at the erg. She'd wait to see the proof.

While the rest of the team strapped in, Teagan took a breath and found her way into the zone. She closed her eyes. It was just her and the erg. Every muscle in her body twitching like a racehorse waiting for the starting gun.

"Sit ready!"

The second the call came to row… she was back in her happy place. Rowing had never been a duty. It brought her genuine joy. Back straight, shoulders strong, legs locking into a rhythm she knew they'd never forget. She didn't need to beg her body to push harder, dig deeper. It knew what to do. Didn't care how much sweat poured down her face. How much her thighs burned.

When the coach called time, she pulled her forearm across her forehead, her eyes stinging with sweat.

The coach held up the stopwatch, her rock-hard expression gone. "Seven thirty-two."

Teagan grimaced. "Shoot. My PB's seven twenty-eight."

Murmurs of disbelief filled the room.

"Everybody back to their erg," Coach instructed. "You," she said to Teagan, "are done for the day."

What did that mean? Had she done enough? Been a show-off? Ticked a box on the coach's To-Do list?

When the room filled with the whirr of cables extending, coiling back

in, Coach signaled to Teagan to follow her to the door.

“I think you should come train with us again next week. We have a slot in our program. You might be a good fit.”

She managed to resist punching the air. She’d nailed it! “That would be amazing. Umm, if I transferred to Gravenhurst, would I still be able to cox for Easton?”

“No. Gravenhurst rowers are required to stay focused in their streams. It’s one or the other. Is that a problem?”

“Nope.”

“Good.” The coach gave her clipboard a couple of raps with her knuckles. “I’ll catch up with you later.”

Teagan jogged up to the regatta course to meet Crabcatcher, who was stretching his quads.

“Hey,” she said, panting. “Sorry I’m late for our run.”

“You look like you’ve already worked out.”

Busted. But the trickles of sweat running down her neck? That was from her guilty conscience. “Nah. Just the jog up. C’mon. You ready?”

As they ran, Teagan wittered like a zealous tour guide to stop herself from overthinking her own situation. Crabcatcher was too busy trying to memorize the course to notice.

When they got back to the starting point, he looked winded but not spent.

“Teagan!”

Oh no. No, no. Anytime, any other place, but not here.

Gravenhurst’s coach jogged over to them. “After your performance in the erg room this morning, I spoke to the head of the school. Gravenhurst would like to offer you a place. I know it’s mid-semester, but we can transfer you now. Get you training with us right away.”

She’d done it. She’d won a place in the top rowing program on the East Coast.

“Thank you.”

“You’re transferring to Gravenhurst Academy?” said Crabcatcher. The hurt in his voice lanced straight through her.

The guilt she’d been keeping dammed up flooded into her system.

“Crabby… I can explain.”

Two minutes ago, she would’ve thought jumping boats to cox for Westvale would’ve been the ultimate betrayal, but somehow this felt worse. Choosing herself over the team. An oddball group of guys who had put her through her paces, but had finally, at long last, woven her into the fabric of their team.

“Were you even going to tell us?” Crabcatcher took a step back from her, like she’d turned into kryptonite.

“Crabby,” she appealed. “You know me. I’m a rower first. I never planned to be a coxie—”

“You fought Liam for it. Made us believe we’d be better off with you. Made me believe it. I was on your team, remember?” His voice crackled with hurt. “Why do that if you didn’t want to cox?”

“Because it was the only thing I could do at Easton.” Didn’t he see that?

He wasn’t buying it. “You never gave a crap about us. Never cared about the team. The only person you care about is you.”

“That’s not true, Crabby.” It wasn’t. It really, really wasn’t. But all the things she wanted to say to him to fix this—about how becoming part of the team had been one of the hardest, most frustrating, and, ultimately, very best things that had ever happened to her—stayed lodged in her throat.

He looked over at the sound of new arrivals. It was the team.

She gave him a pleading look. If they heard about this before the race…

“I won’t tell them, if that’s what you’re worried about. I don’t want to screw with their emotions before the race. Unlike you, I care about them.”

“Crabby, I care about you. All of you.” She desperately needed him to see this. “Rowing for Gravenhurst isn’t personal.”

“Then why work so hard to bring us together only to abandon ship?”

It was a good question.

“You guys have Liam,” she said. It was a lame response. They both knew it.

“It doesn’t work like that, Teagan. We might be an eight, but we’re a *team* of nine.”

She knew in her heart he was right. And yet being a cox had never been her dream.

“We’ve changed because of you, Teagan.” His anger was seeping away now, turning into sadness. Like her going to Gravenhurst was a done deal.

“Everyone’s rowing better. Even you. Remember? You got your personal best rowing with *us*.”

She had. A PB she hadn’t been able to replicate today when she’d been rowing for herself.

“I know,” she said. “And I’m grateful for it.” For a thousand other things, too. She’d been made to stretch new muscles. Physical and emotional. Learn new skills. Like playing well with others. Having someone’s back because you knew they’d have yours.

She didn’t have to put herself in Crabby’s shoes to see what he did. They’d believed she would fight for them just as they would fight for her.

“You used us to get what you wanted,” Crabby said.

“I wanted to row for Easton,” she reminded him. “But they don’t have a girls’ team.”

“Why not?”

“Not enough interest. Said they’d only consider it if the boys started winning.”

Crabcatcher’s eyes shot to hers. “We’re at a regatta, aren’t we?”

“Yeah…”

They grinned at each other. She understood what he was saying.

“Maybe we should see what happens if we win the race.”

“Yeah,” she said. The choice she thought she’d already made was no longer clear-cut. “Maybe we should.”

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TEAGAN

“Remember, guys,” Teagan said once the team had rowed into the starting lineup, directly behind Westvale. Like they needed reminding the Easton Eagles were the underdogs. She’d figure out a way to make it inspirational.

“Baloo,” she teased, “you’re going to tip the boat if you keep checking out the competition. All of you. Eyes on me. They don’t exist, okay? None of them do. We’ve got staggered starts, remember? The only boat we’re concerned about is ours. It’s just you, me, and six thousand meters. We’ll fly through it.”

“Like an eagle?” Crabcatcher asked.

“Exactly. We’ll keep the turns tight, to save your legs for the final sprint at the finish line.”

Ryder tipped his reflective sunglasses down his nose. “You look nervous, Coxie.”

He didn’t know the half of it.

“It’s a big one for me,” she said.

“Not just you,” said Ryder. “There are scouts onshore. Ones I want to impress. You got this?”

The horn sounded for Westvale to take their place at the starting line, then again to mark the start of their race. It was Easton’s turn next.

“Looks like we’re about to find out.”

“Aaaaand row!”

The second the starter horn sounded, Teagan felt a switch flick inside her. Like her body knew this was what she’d been training for. Why she’d pushed herself so hard at the Iron Crucible and at every practice since. The team was feeling it, too. That magic charge of grit and determination trained

into this one race. Win or lose. They'd walk away with their heads held high.

"That's it, guys! Strong start. Burn those nerves! Then we'll lock it in at twenty-eight, all right?"

Twenty-eight solid strokes per minute. It was at the high end of the push pace, but she knew they had it in them. They'd have to shift down for turns, negotiate a bridge, and, as importantly, hold on to a reserve of energy for the final, critical sprint that would send their boat soaring across the finish line.

The team was pure focus. Rowing hard. United. Their oars hitting the water as one, propelling them forward with a synchronicity of movement that felt electric. She felt the charge, channeled it into control. Anything beyond a light touch on the rudder would spell disaster. Letting the team down today was out of the question. What happened once they crossed the finish line was out of her control. But this wasn't.

Four kilometers in they'd aced the turns, nailed the straight runs. Now they were coming up to the bridge. It was a narrow one. Gauging the speed and angle at which they approached was her job. One bad call and it would be game over.

"Port. Pressure! That's right, guys. Ryder, set us up for the bridge pace. Stay clean. Long." He gave her a nod. He had this.

"Shit!" Teagan had slightly oversteered. The boat veered in response. They were heading straight for the bridge.

"Coxie!" Ryder shouted.

"Too much. My bad. Starboard!"

The command fell to Cam to execute. He dug in, pulled the boat straight.

"Good job, Cam. All of you. Great work, guys. We've got the line now. Don't change a thing for three—twooo—ooooooooone." And they were through.

"Awesome job. Push away!" She was beaming. Two months ago—two weeks ago even—this would've ended in disaster. "Lock it back in at twenty-eight."

They were back in clear water.

"Guys. Westvale's just ahead. We can close the gap. Are you with me? Should we bury them?"

Grunts of approval were all the answer she needed. She scanned the crew, double-checking everyone was up for it.

She clocked one determined face after another until she hit Crabcatcher's. He was struggling. If he cracked now, she knew he wouldn't survive the fallout. Not the crew's. They'd be disappointed, but they wouldn't make him pay. It was the punishment he'd heap on himself she was worried about.

This was one of those moments her dad had trained her for. When your body had decided it had given everything it had to give and you had to convince yourself to override it. Find a way to push through and past the pain.

"You've got this, guys," she assured them. "*We've* got this. I never wanted to be on a team until I was on your team. And that's saying something seeing as I've seen you all naked."

They were concentrating too hard to laugh, but she could see what she was really trying to tell them take hold. She was saying she cared. That she believed in them. Individually and as a unit. "Who're you pulling for?" she called out. "For the engine room that never quits! Tried and true, our Baloo!"

She won a smile, a feat given the levels of energy he was pouring into each meter they were putting behind them to push past Westvale. "That's right, boys. We're rowing for Ryder the driver! For Cam, the best starboard man! For Josh, even though he's posh! For Quaid, all power with his blade! For Noah! Ummm… what rhymes with Noah? Book smarts and kinda looks like Jason Momoa?" They were getting so close now. So close. "We're rowing for Perry's panache. And for the heart and soul of this team… Crabcatcher! Chris. We are rowing for Chris."

Crabby's face lit up when she used his real name, as if she'd just plugged him in. His oar moved in sync with the rest of the team's. This was for him, really. If they hadn't met for that run? Her head might not've been where it belonged. Right here. With the Easton Eagles.

"BRING IT IN!" she shouted, exhilarated as the rowers pushed the boat to the top of their sprint speed. The finish line wasn't far off. She could see it now. She could also see Westvale rowing as if their lives depended on it. Spurred, no doubt, by their approach.

Westvale crossed first. Easton right behind them.

Staggered starts meant no one knew who had won, but right now? Teagan felt like a winner.

They would've celebrated if they'd had any energy left. But it was pretty much all the guys could do to get the boat up and out of the water and onto the rack.

They had collapsed on a patch of grass by the river, draining bottles of electrolyte drinks as they watched the rest of the teams cross the line.

Once everyone's times had been logged, the regatta's website would be updated with finishing times: first to last.

Coach fished Teagan's phone out of the wet bag. He'd had his game face on as they finished, keeping it neutral as he helped them stow the oars and secure the boat before heading up to the judge's station with the other coaches. But Teagan could tell he was proud of them. There was some swagger in his stride.

Teagan finished her drink, then refreshed the website for the thousandth time. She blinked a few times to make sure she was reading the results right. "Oh my god."

"What?" Ryder sat bolt upright. "What's wrong?"

She shook her head. "We won, guys. We WON!"

There was a moment of stunned silence, then a deafening roar of whoops. They'd done it. They'd actually done it.

Crabcatcher covered his head, dodging back slaps and shoulder punches to get to her. "Well done, Coxie."

"You too, Crabby. I knew you could do it."

"I knew you could, too."

He grinned at her, then put his fingers in his mouth and whistled an ear-piercing noise that brought the team to attention. "Guys? There's one rowing tradition Teagan might not know about."

She looked around as they started to laugh and circle around her.

"Yup," Baloo beamed. "Someone's definitely looking a little too dry."

There was no way she could escape. And honestly? As they swung her by her hands and feet and threw her into the river, there was no place she'd rather be and no one she'd rather be with.

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JOSH

He smelled awful. All of them did. Even though they'd all jumped into the river after throwing Teagan in, his skin was screaming at him to find a shower and some body wash.

Baloo clearly didn't hear the same call. As they approached the hotel, he invited everyone to his and Britney's suite to party. All the engine room guys were on board. Crabby and Teagan were in, too.

Brit and Teagan in the same room was going to be… interesting.

His phone rang. He looked down, angling the screen away from Britney's prying eyes when he saw who it was.

He tipped his head toward the lobby. "You go ahead. It's Dad."

His girlfriend went on ahead so he could take the call.

But it wasn't his dad.

"Hello?"

Dr. Monroe gave a little laugh. "You're a hard man to get hold of, Mr. Regis."

Yeah. That's what happened when you found out your heart could kill you and you wanted to pretend it wouldn't.

"Sorry, Dr. Monroe. I've been busy."

"You haven't scheduled the follow-up test I recommended this summer. Why is that?"

How much time did the guy have? He was a cardiologist not a shrink, so Josh said, "I've been feeling good. The beta blockers you prescribed are working."

"Those were only a temporary solution, Josh. Hypertrophic cardiomyopathy is a serious condition."

"I'm aware." Aware his heart was faulty. Aware it could kill him. He'd

been diagnosed this summer while at a training camp in Baltimore, but he still hadn't told his family. The Regis family didn't respect weaklings; they valued winners. His illness had cost him the stroke seat, which was in turn why his grandfather had chosen to shine his light on Ryder instead of him.

If Josh didn't push himself harder, his dad's wrath would rain down on him harder than any storm. But pushing himself harder could kill him in the blink of an eye. So yeah, he knew the situation was serious.

"We need to monitor your heart to ensure the left ventricle wall hasn't thickened any farther. If it does—"

"I feel fine, Dr. Monroe. Really." He'd had the odd twitch. If twitch meant breathtaking pain radiating from his heart through to the rest of his body.

"Josh." Dr. Monroe's voice had a note of warning in it now. "As you know, this state allows us to treat minors on their own, but if you don't take your treatment seriously, I have a duty to involve your parents."

"No! No. It's fine. I'm fine. I'll reschedule the test. Honestly. I'll do it right now."

He didn't. He took a shower, put on some clean clothes, forced himself to go to Baloo's suite with his party face on. Gave high fives to the dudes, tried not to look like his life was on fire.

Teagan spotted him over the rim of the trophy the guys were forcing her to drink out of. She carried it over and held out the mystery mix of alcohol to him. "Josh Regis? I believe it's your turn for a sip from the winner's cup?"

Life was short and then you died, right? And his stood a good chance of being shorter than most. He cupped his hands around Teagan's, the hit of connection as strong as it was the first time they'd touched. He knew exactly what he wanted.

"I don't want to be just friends."

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TEAGAN

Voicemail. Great.

Where the hell are you, Josh? He was late for practice.

His recorded voice started telling her she could leave him a message.

She didn’t want to leave him a message. She wanted him to be sitting on an erg like the rest of the guys. That. And to untangle the confusion bomb that had splattered her brain all over the place ever since he’d told her he wanted to be more than friends.

“… please leave your message after the beep.”

How to approach the deeply awkward situation he’d put her in?

To say Britney hadn’t taken well the news that Teagan had decided to turn down the Gravenhurst offer and stay on the Easton rowing team would be putting it mildly. She’d stared daggers at her, then told Teagan that she would regret her decision. Going to school was a daily act of bravery. Doubly so if she knew Josh had reneged on the friend-zone deal they’d struck.

Beeeeeeeep.

“Hey, Josh. Teagan here. So yeah. You said you didn’t want to be just friends. That’s going to need an explanation.”

This was a mistake. Bringing it up. Maybe he was playing hooky because, like her, it’d be easy to pretend it never happened. Too late now!

“I don’t even know why I’m calling you. Talk later. Bye.”

Right! Back to being a drill sergeant.

The guys had come into practice pumped. Insisted they weren’t going to rest on their laurels after winning the Head of the Laurence Trophy. If Ryder was right, that college scouts had been lurking around the regatta, the only thing for it was to up their game.

She pocketed her phone and went back to her position in front of the seven of them who had bothered to show up. They were halfway through the session and pure focus. All eyes trained on her, waiting for the next call.

"Teagan saaaaaays… pull!"

Seven ergs flew into action.

This was fun. Playing her own version of Simon Says on the ergs. Hard for them, and rewarding for her. To see them training so hard. She'd made the right call, sticking with the team. Coxing might not have been the future she'd imagined, but hadn't her dad always told her that no amount of planning stopped life from throwing in a few curveballs? He'd nailed that one. Still not so much as a postcard from him. At least her mom wasn't totally abandoned here. She and Coach went way back. And also, apparently, Senator Garner. Just this morning, Mom had casually mentioned that she knew Brit and Baloo's mom from the pageant circuit, back in the day. She was going to ask her for help getting permission to make much-needed improvements to their house's plumbing system. Yeah, good luck with that, Mom…

"Teagan saaaaays… freeze!"

Seven ergs fell motionless. Their riders poised for action, waiting for the next call.

"Where's Josh?" demanded Ryder.

"Dunno." She didn't want to talk about it. "Haven't heard from him."

"So, what?" Ryder pressed, clearly as annoyed with Josh's absence as she was. "Practice is optional now?"

"Row!"

Quaid set his erg in motion. Everyone else stayed frozen.

"She didn't say 'Teagan Says,' Quaid."

"Crap!" He gave himself a slap on the forehead.

"Teagan saaays… pull!"

They did. Sweet. Nothing like having her team respect her authority. She waited a few seconds.

"Teagan saaaays… give me a 'yes, ma'am'!"

"Yes, ma'am!" they shouted as one, then all fell about laughing.

Cam was the last one up to the leaderboard to chalk up his score. He shot

Teagan a quick look before writing his time.

Ryder scowled.

“Better watch out,” Cam teased Ryder, who was watching everyone else record their scores. “I’m coming for stroke, Ryder.”

Ryder, who lacked a sense of humor, didn’t appreciate the playful taunt. “Give your best shot, man. You might be fastest but it’ll never happen. No one’s going to follow a FAID over a Regis.”

Teagan shook her head. Someone had a bit of a Napoleon complex. Without the short part.

“I wouldn’t be so sure of that,” retorted Cam.

“No chance.” Ryder strutted off to the shower room.

“Hey,” she said, once she and Cam were alone. “I have been promised tacos and I’ve come to collect.” She grinned up at him and realized he wasn’t quite as immune to Ryder’s taunts as she’d thought. “You okay?”

He shook it off, shot her a smile. “All good. More importantly, I hope you’re ready for tacos that will change your life.”

“I’m from SoCal,” she deadpanned. “I highly doubt that.”

While Cam was in the shower, a box was delivered to the boathouse. Baloo read the card. “Hey, Ryder! Someone left a box for you.”

The guys gathered around as Ryder lifted the lid of the elaborately decorated gift box and pulled out a big heart-shaped ornament covered in fake gemstones.

Teagan reminded herself where she was and who she was with. They were probably real.

There was a note attached to the heart “written” in cut-out magazine letters.

“You have stolen my heart. Will you go to the Fall Formal with me? From Amber,” said Ryder, reading the note aloud.

Quaid and Crabcatcher oooh’ed and aaah’ed.

Noah looked confused. “So she’s *giving* him a heart but telling him he *stole* it—which is it? And why does it look like a ransom note? Does she want money for it?”

“Love’s confusing, bro,” Quaid told Noah.

“It’s not about perfect grammar, Noah,” Baloo jumped in. “Don’t ruin the magic of this prom-posal by trying to find subjunctive clauses or whatever.”

Quaid looked perplexed. “Is it really a prom-posal when it’s the Fall Formal? Is it more like a ‘form-posal’?”

“That’s not any better,” Noah said.

Teagan saw the shower room door open and waved Cam over. This was better than reality TV.

Teagan had never really been a school dance kind of girl. “Isn’t this all a little over the top?”

Baloo shot her a woeful look. “Why do you hate joy?”

Ryder clearly didn’t care because he stood up, popped the heart back into the box with a satisfied grin. “Happy days, boys. That’s my date to the Formal sorted. I’ll organize a table. Who wants to join Amber and me?”

Everyone put their hands up apart from Teagan and Cam.

This wasn’t awkward at all. Tacos! They were going to enjoy tacos. Much better than a Formal.

“Baloo?” Ryder asked. “Two seats? I presume you want to bring your boyfriend.” Baloo gave him a weird look. “The guy you met on socials?”

Baloo shook his head, dropped his gaze. “Didn’t work out. One seat’ll be fine.”

Teagan could totally be wrong, of course, but she wasn’t so sure Baloo was nursing a broken heart. The Baloo she knew would’ve let big fat tears fall down his cheeks, waiting for someone to hunt down some ice cream to help drown his sorrows. But whether he’d been dumped or was having a secret romance with the Prince of Norway, he clearly didn’t want to talk about it. She got that. Big time. There were two boy-shaped problems in her life and—

One of them had just marched into the boathouse.

Josh returned his teammates’ confused expressions with one of his imperious smiles and dropped his duffel bag next to an erg. “Aww, sweet. You guys didn’t have to roll out the red carpet.”

Ryder shoved the lid on the box and put his coat on it, hackles up. “Rolling up at the end of practice. That’s a choice.”

“Dentist appointment,” Josh shot back in the same combative tone. “I cleared it with Coach.”

“I call bullshit. Which scout were you with? Princeton? Harvard?”

Josh’s eyebrows went up but his voice stayed even. “Dartmouth.” He put out his hand when Ryder took a step forward. “Take a chill pill, cuz. Like I

said, I was at the dentist."

Ryder clearly didn't believe him, but thankfully decided against pounding the truth out of Josh. He stormed out, the guys following behind him.

"I'll catch up with you outside," Teagan said to Cam, flicking a thumb at Josh, who was strapping his feet into an erg.

She walked over to him, arms crossed, waiting for her explanation.

"Okay," he said when it was clear she wasn't going to move. "Let's talk."

"Yeah." She nodded as if they were about to have an earnest discussion about calculating wind factor into scull speed. "You want to explain your sudden pivot from being friends?"

Josh's smile flickered. "I thought that part was pretty clear."

"And I thought we were going to let this go."

"What if I don't want to?"

"What if you just made yourself do it anyway, Josh?"

"If I didn't have a girlfriend, would that change things for you?"

"What? No! Why?"

Another crack appeared in the perfect veneer that was Josh Regis's life. "… I don't know if I'm supposed to be with Britney."

Now, *that* was absurd. "C'mon. You're perfect for each other." She popped on a cheeky grin. "You're both the worst people I know."

She got an eye roll. Fair. A slump of his straight-as-an-arrow shoulder line followed. Was he… serious?

"I don't even know what's real in my life anymore."

His blue eyes were a wash of confusion. This was not the Josh Regis she knew and loved to hate. "Hey." She squatted down so she didn't feel like she was lording it over him anymore. "What's going on with you?"

"I…" He shook his head, decided against whatever it was he was about to say. "It's nothing. I'm fine."

She pushed herself back up. Why did she even bother? "Whatever's happening in your life? Don't use me as an excuse to run away from it. I'm not an option." She made sure he got that. "If you want to break up with Britney? Don't do it because of me. Do it for yourself. It's your life, Josh."

He huffed out a mirthless laugh. "Yeah. Right."

"Hey!" This really wasn't like him. "You have so much going for you,

Josh. Before you throw it all away? Take a look at what you're really willing to lose."

She turned and left. She really needed a taco.

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JOSH

Josh pressed out a fast two kilometers. A test.

He set the bar higher for the next round, felt the familiar twist of pain grip his chest, and stopped.

What was he trying to prove anyway? That he could drop dead like all the other promising young athletes whose careers had ended on a stretcher with a sheet over their head?

Whoever had given hypertrophic cardiomyopathy the nickname “Athlete’s Heart” had been a sick bastard. Because the condition threatened real athletes with sudden death.

He dropped his head into his hands.

What was he even doing with Teagan?

Yeah, he liked her. Thought she was smart, funny, a coxie with moxie. But he wasn’t a cheat. He and Britney had been together for over two years now. He owed it to himself and, as importantly, to Brit, to look at things through a clearer lens. He couldn’t just run off with someone because he was freaked out. Too afraid to admit to his family he could never meet the bar he’d been set. There wasn’t a cure for his disease. There was medicine. A device they could implant in you. A procedure to make it better for a while. He could have a life. Just not the one he was expected to live.

He hadn’t been at the dentist. He’d been at the hospital, getting another heart scan. When Ryder had started on him, he’d wanted to shout: *Do you think I didn’t want to be here instead? Pushing myself as hard as I can?* But his doctor had been clear. Pushing himself the way he had been? Off the cards.

And that was a problem.

“Josh! Over here.” Britney waved him over to the picnic table the next day. Josh’s girlfriend didn’t do things by halves. She wanted a romantic picnic lunch at a vineyard? She made it happen. There were linen napkins, crystal glasses, entire roast chickens, and enough side dishes to feed the entire team. Twice. “Hey, babe.” She gave him a peck on the cheek.

“Hey. Wow. Looks amazing. And at a vineyard no less.” He hadn’t even realized there were vineyards in Massachusetts.

“Yes,” Britney said pointedly. “That’s right. I have a surprise for you.”

He played along. She loved surprising him. “Should I be worried?”

“Only if you don’t want to relive our first date.”

Her eyes darted back and forth between him and the spread as if there was something obvious he was missing. There were a lot of desserts?

“That perfect chalet in Rhone Valley?” she prompted before his silence became embarrassing. “I had all our faves flown in. Macarons from La Bisetts. Eclairs from La Lyonnaise. A canelé—”

“From Sabine’s?” Please let it be Sabine’s…

She clasped her hands together and sighed. “I knew you’d remember. Have a seat.”

“Of course I remember.” Mostly anyway. “But why the trip down memory lane?”

She laughed, like he’d been joking. “You’re proposing to me, silly?”

“What?” It would suit her political ambitions to be a child bride.

She gave him a tender look. “I know you’ve had a lot going on, your family, Ryder… I thought I’d plan your prom-posal for you. Especially since there’s going to be a photo shoot…”

It shouldn’t have been a surprise, given how perfect everything looked, when a photographer stepped out from behind a nearby hedge and started taking some candids.

“You’ve always loved *Bespoke Magazine*, so I thought, who better to feature us in a spread?”

He had to admit, that was pretty cool. “How’d you swing that?”

“Well…” She beamed up at him. “Surprise! We got voted Queen and King of the Fall Formal!”

“Really? Again?” Weirdly, he hadn’t been thinking about any of that kind of stuff lately. Which, considering the context, was not much of a surprise. But it was nice to see Brit so happy. Especially after organizing all

of this. “Congrats, babe.” He pulled in for a hug, heard the photographer’s shutter whirring away. He pulled back from the hug so as not to mess up her dress, but kept his hands on her hips. He was well trained enough to know that photographers loved that kind of stuff.

“When I found out we’d won, I pitched the magazine an article about our royal dance.”

He took another look at the picnic. It must’ve taken a lot of time, organizing all of this. And behind his back, while he’d been doing… other things behind hers.

Teagan was right. Brit and he were such a good match. She thought of everything. He spied a bottle of uncorked champagne on ice and poured her a glass.

“To us,” she said, touching her glass to his. “For being such a great team. I provide the publicity and political power. You provide the pedigree and charisma… not to mention the abs.”

Josh let himself get swept into the fairy-tale picture she’d just painted. It wasn’t all pretend. They hadn’t been crowned prom King and Queen for nothing. She did her part, he did his, but all of this? The food from France, the photo shoot in one of his favorite magazines? She didn’t see limits. She only saw possibility. That was what had attracted him to her in the first place. Britney would become a senator one day, no doubt. Then maybe president. The White House would never look the same if she got her hands on it.

She leaned in for a kiss. He met her for it as he had a thousand times before, thinking, *Why mess with what works?*

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TEAGAN

A picnic blanket in the back of a classic pickup called Walt. A picturesque pond. Tacos. What more could a girl ask for?

Cam took a swig of his horchata and eyed the empty taco wrappers between them. “Sooo… What do you think?”

“A solid B-plus,” she pronounced, cackling when he grabbed his heart like she’d just stabbed him.

“B-plus?”

“It’s a great grade,” she protested. “Way above average for East Coast Mexican food. Sorry, bud. I’m from LA. I have loyalties.” She flashed him the Westside hand sign.

He snorted. “I’m not cool enough to know if there’s one for the East Coast.”

“You and me both,” she laughed. She twisted the lid of her strawberry soda and yelped. Shouldn’t have done that.

“You okay?”

“Yeah.” She shook her hand, hoping it would ease the pain. “Snagged a blister from my last erg session.”

He winced, then showed her his hands.

“Wow. Those babies have seen some action.” She pointed at the one fresh blister standing out from his rough, calloused hands. “That one is not messing around. I need to sort mine out, but I can’t lance it using my left hand. The plight of the right-handed rower.” She stuck out her lower lip in a playful pout.

“You’re like me. You know you shouldn’t pop it because—”

“Infections,” they said in unison.

“But I can’t row with them.” He took her hand in his and inspected it. It

felt nice. Him holding her hand. Playing team medic. His hands felt capable, strong. Like part of Cam's life story was embedded in them.

"I can take care of it for you if you want?"

"Really?"

"Absolutely. Would you be so kind as to come into the first aid room?" He pointed at the cab of his truck. Goofball. Cute. But a goofball.

Tacos in the truck had been a good call.

They stuffed the stray chili packets and napkins into the taco bag, finished their drinks, then got in the cab. Cam pulled a first aid kit out of the footwell behind him.

Once Cam had sterilized a needle, she held her hand by the wrist, braced for the pain. "Not quite how I expected this date to go down, but…"

Cam took her hand, flicked his eyes up to hers. He had really long eyelashes. Inky enough to give his brown eyes a bit of a smolder. And they were staring at her disgusting blister again. "Ready?"

"Yeah. Do it."

The sharp stab of a needle she was used to receiving when her mom did it didn't come. In. Out. Job done. To be fair, her mom hated needles. And gross stuff. She took a look at Cam's handiwork. "Wow. You've clearly done this before."

"Yup." He gently pressed a tissue onto the lanced blister. They watched as a bunch of disgusting goo soaked through it.

"This is soooo attractive."

Cam shrugged, unbothered. "It's the life of a rower."

She leaned back in the seat, watching him as he tidied up the first aid kit. "My mom always asks why I'm obsessed with crew. Why I put myself through all of this. I never know how to explain it. It's not an obsession… It's just… who I am."

He nodded, like he got it, and held up a Band-Aid. She gave the blister a final wipe with the tissue so he could put it on.

He gently smoothed the edges of the bandage. "Same. Out on the water is where I feel most… like me." He sat back, half turned to her like she was to him. "I know it sounds crazy, but when I watch the Olympics, I think, I can do that. That's where I'm supposed to be, even if I'm just some guy from Eagle's Cove. I just need people to believe in me."

She did. The guys, too. Why couldn't he see what she did? That they

razzed him because they admired him. Cam was talented. If the Regises weren't dominating their boat, he could easily row stroke, or any other position he wanted. He was that good. But teenage guys weren't exactly known for acknowledging another guy's merits. Especially when they were consumed with convincing the world they had something worth believing in, too. "They do, Cam. People believe in you."

He didn't take the compliment. "Not really. No one sees me in stroke." He chewed his lip, lost in thought, shook it off. "You managed to get the team onside. Won their respect, got them to listen to you." He laughed. "You even got a 'yes, ma'am'!"

"Is that what you want?" she teased. "A 'yes, ma'am'?"

"Who doesn't want a 'yes, ma'am'?"

She pulled a face at him. Like she'd said. Goofball. "They don't follow your lead because they don't really know who you are. You always have your guard up. You're a mystery to them, so they slap the 'FAID' label on you because that's all they know. And to make themselves feel better about themselves."

"Right." He wasn't so sure.

"You need to let them in. Hang out with them. And pranking people with Quaid doesn't count. Show them the *real* Cam." She thought a minute. "You could go to the Fall Formal?"

His eyes sparked bright. "Is that a proposal?"

"What? You couldn't tell by the romantic taco takeout with a side of blisters?"

He laughed, the gentle one that gave her butterflies. "It's perfect."

So was this. Sitting here with him in his truck, talking openly and honestly. Until it turned awkward.

"I'd need a suit. Where am I going to get a suit?"

Now, this she could handle. "Well… I do know a guy…"

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CAM

Perry made Teagan and Cam sit on the sofa in his dorm room, then rolled out a massive rack of clothes, presenting it to them like he was their personal shopper at a high-end department store rather than two teammates begging a favor. Nice touch. He was proud of himself for asking Perry for help. Their most fashionable teammate had pretended not to be excited they'd be joining them at the Fall Formal crew table, but Cam knew he'd scored some points.

"Sooo…" Perry pored through the rack, exploring the options. "What are we feeling? Pedro Pascal at the Met Gala? Paul Mescal on the red carpet? Bad Bunny big swing?" He framed Cam between his hands and examined him. "What's the vibe? What's resonating?" He didn't wait for an answer. Plunging back into the clothes rail, he held up two incredibly loud suits.

Teagan laughed as she saw the look of horror on Cam's face.

"Nope!" He headed for the door. "Not me. I'm out."

"Wait." Teagan dragged him back to the rack. "Perry? This isn't you we're dressing. Dial it back a bit?"

"Sorry, it was just too exciting to finally get rid of the chinos." He gave himself a "do-over" shake. "Right, Cam. A suit makes a man. Why don't you tell me what style you're imagining? What are we feeling?"

"Umm. That it pretty much fits and is clean?"

Perry tucked his hand under his chin, considering the brief. "Hmmm. Comfortable. Not showy, but proud. With a hint of a rebellious streak…" He turned back to the rack and presented a beautiful deep blue, classically cut velvet suit. "*Here* we are."

Cam didn't say anything. He didn't have to. Perry had nailed it. He went

up for a closer look. “How did you *do* that?”

Perry held out the suit to him. “Call it a gift. Suit up, Cam. The crew may row like no one’s watching, but we dress like Anna Wintour is.”

After hanging up the garment bag Perry had lovingly zipped his suit into, Cam grabbed a set of coveralls from the stash he kept in the garage office.

“Hey, Dad.”

His dad held up his finger, pointed at the phone.

Cam pulled off his school shoes and started changing, mulling over the Formal and the handful of things he needed to do before Friday. He had the threads. Transportation, though? His Cinderella needed a carriage. His beat-up truck was a far cry from the limos and sports cars everyone else would be arriving in.

“I know,” his dad said to whoever he was talking to. “We’re a few months late and I’m sorry about that. As you know, it’s the slow season. I just need a few extra weeks.”

Shit. The shop had done pretty well this summer, but no matter how many late nights his dad and the other mechanics worked, sometimes it didn’t matter. It sounded like this was one of those times.

“Right. Thanks,” his dad said. “As soon as I can. I promise.” He hung up the phone.

“Everything okay, Dad?” Why did people ask that when they knew it wasn’t? To soften the blow?

“Oh.” His dad shook his head, moved a few papers around on the desk. Hiding whatever bill he was late on, probably. “Don’t worry about that. But… don’t grow. We can’t afford a new school uniform. The old one still good?”

“Yup. It’s fine.”

“Also,” his dad scrubbed his hair, depositing a streak of grease in it, “are you okay to pitch in on the evening shifts this week?”

“Of course. All except Friday.” He pointed at the garment bag. “Believe it or not, I’m taking someone to the Fall Formal.” He grinned at his dad. It had taken him months to ask Teagan out. He was pretty sure it wasn’t his insider knowledge about taco trucks that had spurred her to ask him to the dance, but even if it had, he wasn’t complaining.

“Son! That’s fantastic!”

“If you need me, though—”

“Absolutely not. Who’s the lucky date?”

“Her name’s Teagan. She’s on crew.”

His dad laughed, like the news just kept getting better. “A girl after your own heart. Can’t wait to meet her.”

“So, umm… would it be okay to use the truck?”

His dad frowned. “No. You may not.”

“Okay. No prob.” Maybe one of the team could give him a lift.

“Son?” His dad’s expression softened. “You can’t take a girl to a formal dance in that.”

Yeah. He kinda already knew that, but…

“Listen.” His dad clapped his arm around Cam’s shoulder and they headed to the shop. “I have a client who owes me a favor. Don’t worry about a thing. You’ll be taking Teagan to the dance in style.”

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JOSH

Britney parked Josh in front of the full-length mirror in the suite she'd hired at the Fall Formal venue. It wasn't until tomorrow and the venue was pretty much next door to Easton, but when Britney invested in something? She went all in. Especially when the spotlight was on her. The way she and Amber had been spreadsheeting everything, you'd think they were planning an actual coronation ceremony.

His input, as per, hadn't been required. That's what Perry was for.

Brit held one of the two suits she'd selected in front of him. "So, babe." Britney met his eyes in the mirror. "The designer thought you could wear either this one"—she squinted at his reflection, scrunched her nose, switched it out—"or this one. Both match my dress." She handed him the suits, inspected him again, then pointed at one. "I think you should wear this one."

They both looked the same to him, but whatever. It made her happy. He hung both on the rack and slipped the jacket she liked off the hanger while Britney checked the evening rundown Amber had sent her.

"Right, okay." Britney sat on the sofa and read aloud: "As King and Queen, we're at the head table so…" Her eyes flicked up from her screen, watched him check himself out from different angles. As ever, she'd chosen well. "I've put Perry's table near us. The crew will serve as our royal court."

He wasn't sure about that part, but having them within spitball distance would be cool. Sitting on a plinth with everyone staring at them was fun for only so long.

"Make sure they show up early, yeah?" she instructed. "We have photos —all of us—before the event."

Any later and Noah would have gravy or punch on his shirt, seeing as he was more likely to bring a book than a girl. Crabby, too. Not the girl part—girls loved adopting him, like he was a pet—he was just clutzy. Not that he was judging. Especially now that they were really pulling their weight on the team. But Brit would want the team to look picture perfect. So, by default, he guessed he *did* care?

"I'm listening," he assured her when he heard her give an impatient huff. "Photos. Dinner. Dancing. And then?"

"More photos during the dance. And then"—she shimmied her shoulders—"the King leads his Queen onto the floor for their solo slow dance."

Meaning every pair of Easton eyes would be on the two of them, witnessing, once again, their place as Easton Prep's Premiere Power Couple. "Sounds like you've got the whole day planned out."

"Well… *yeah,* babe." She was looking at him like she didn't understand how he might've thought otherwise. "It's a big deal."

It was a school dance with fancy outfits. His brain took him back to the pizza and karaoke fest at the boathouse. An epic night that'd taken approximately three minutes to organize. "C'mere." He held out his hand. Britney hesitated, consulted her iPad to see if she could spare a handful of seconds for her boyfriend. She found some. He pulled her to him, slipped his hands around her waist. "Hey. You know what I saw nearby when I drove here?" She shook her head. "Seven Acres Creamery. How 'bout we go grab some bourbon chocolate gelato?"

She walked her fingers up his chest, then laid her hands flat against it, grinning up at him. She never could resist bourbon chocolate.

"If we do that, Josh," she said, "I won't have time for my hair appointment. You know Alejandro hates being rushed."

"I know. I just thought we could be a little spontaneous."

She gave his chest a pat like the matter was already settled and scooped up her iPad. "Maybe we can. Later."

Someone knocked at the door. Britney jumped up again. "Oooh! That might be the jeweler."

It was DeeDee, Brit's mom. Still rocking her Jackie-O-as-a-senator vibes.

"Mom!" Brit didn't look happy. "I thought we were going to meet up when the dance started."

DeeDee pulled her daughter into a hug. “Hello there, my Fall Formal Queen.” She gave Josh the same treatment. “And her King.”

“Lovely to see you, Senator Garner. You got in from Beacon Hill okay?”

“Yes. I got out early for once. Thought I’d use the window of opportunity to bring my daughter out for a Night Before The Fall Formal mani-pedi and dinner.”

Britney threw Josh a look like, *Does* no one *understand the pressure I’m under?* “Sorry, Mom. I’m on a tight schedule. Maybe you can go with Baloo. See you tomorrow, okay?”

DeeDee did not look pleased as Brit shooed them both out of the suite. No one messed with Britney’s well-laid plans. No one.

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TEAGAN

The princess sheet Teagan had assured her mother she would never use again was doing a good job in its new role: a salon cape. “I still can’t believe you packed this.”

“Why?” her mom asked, teasing a lock of Teagan’s hair around the curling iron.

Because… like the duffel bag full of her dad’s stuff she’d found a couple of months ago on a hunt for the curling iron, it should’ve been left behind.

“I liked it when I was, like, eight years old, Mom. Nine, max.” It was thirteen, actually, but she was pretty sure her mom wasn’t going to fact-check her.

“I packed it, darling daughter, because it reminds me of the days when I wasn’t the bane of your existence.” She met Teagan’s eyes in the mirror. “Remember those days? Long, long ago?”

“Very fun— Ow! Careful!”

“Stop squirming.”

“You’re not the one who’s panicking about running out of time. I’m getting picked up any minute, and I don’t want to start my date in my princess bedsheet.”

“Yes, m’lady.” Her mother released a curl, curtsied, then wound another one into the iron. “So… this date… he’s a rower…?”

“You met Cam at the regatta.”

“Yes.” Her mom gave a couple of exaggerated nods. “He seemed… nice?”

“You don’t remember him, do you?”

“I do!” She released another curl, wound a final tress into the iron. “He was the one in the hat.”

“Mom. They were all in hats.”

The final curl fell into place. “And we’re done!” She didn’t let Teagan take off the princess sheet until they were in front of the mirror. “Ready for the big reveal?” Ella swept the sheet away and caught her breath. “Oh!”

“Oh? What does ‘oh’ mean in this context, Mother?”

“You look stunning, Teagan. Truly beautiful.” Mom put her arms around Teagan from behind, careful not to touch her hair. Smiling at her mom in a mirror wasn’t a normal thing, but it felt strangely natural. Like they were finally figuring out how mothers and daughters who liked each other behaved.

A car engine sounded outside the house, then went silent. This was it, her first public date with Cam Dillinger.

Her mom was sneaking a peek out the window. “Well, hello, shoulders.” She dropped the curtain. “You didn’t tell me you were dating Superman.”

Aaaand… the mother–daughter bonding had just crossed the boundary into embarrassing territory.

She heard Cam’s footsteps on the porch, but jumped when he knocked on the door even though, duh, obviously that was going to happen. Maybe she needed just a little more mother–daughter mojo. “Do I look okay?”

“You look perfect.”

Mom looked proud anyway. Which meant a lot.

She opened the door. Her mom had called it. Superman might not even rock that suit the way Cam was.

“Teagan.” He shook his head. “Wow.”

“You look nice, too.” Nice? He looked better than nice. He looked… gorgeous. “I’ll be right back. I have to grab my clutch.”

“Cam!” Ella gushed, ushering him in. “Can I get you anything? Water? Soda?” She gave him a wink. “I used to steal my mom’s wine coolers before a dance.”

“Umm.” He glanced at Teagan. “No coolers, thanks. Driving.”

“Right answer.” Ella beamed. “You passed the test.”

There hadn’t been a test. Her mom was a doofus.

Cam held out his arm to Teagan. “Ready?”

“Great!” Her mom grabbed her purse, too. “You two are still okay to give me a lift, right?”

Seriously, Mother? It was bad enough Ella had volunteered to chaperone

the dance.

"Kidding! I'll get there on my own."

"She's not kidding." Teagan grabbed Cam's hand and pulled him toward the door. "Go, go, go!" They laughed as they ran down the porch steps. Teagan came to a sudden halt when she saw their carriage.

"We're going in *this*?"

"Yup." Cam held open the door for her. "'Fraid so."

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JOSH

Fall Formal was familiar territory. Him and Brit, posing for the photographer. Being told they looked gorgeous. That they looked truly regal. “Regis, you mean,” Josh had joked, as expected. Everybody laughed. Also as expected.

He knew the drill. Brit had written the playbook.

“Yes, that’s good.” The photographer moved in. “Keep staring into each other’s eyes. Great… feel the love.”

Britney beamed up at him; he beamed back.

Was she feeling the love? Was he?

It *felt* like they were performing. Like they had dragged out last year’s script, dressed it up in new clothes, flashier bling. It was what people expected. No, this didn’t feel like love. It felt… like what he was *supposed* to do.

He looked up when Baloo barked out a laugh about something on his phone, stemming it when his mom shot him a sharp look.

“Phone down, Bronson,” she reprimanded him. “We’re here for your sister’s big night.”

“It’s kind of also my night,” he muttered, putting his phone away. Maybe he was back on track with his mystery man. Or had found a new one.

Britney signaled to the photographer that they were done now. “Mom, stop it. Leave Baloo alone.”

Senator Garner, who was famous for refusing to drop an issue if she hadn’t got the result she’d wanted, put her hands up. “Okay. Okay.”

Baloo was trying to slink away when the photographer caught his arm. “How about a family photo? If I could get you twins to stand on either side

of the senator here…”

Josh headed for the door.

“Babe? Where are you going?” Britney called.

“It’s a family photo.”

“Don’t be silly.” Senator Garner beckoned him back over. “You’re family.”

“True dat!” Baloo smiled, launching into a multistage dap he’d taught Josh a couple of summers back.

Josh felt uncomfortable as he posed with them. He’d often wished he belonged to a different family. One that actually loved each other. But the Garners were nearly as dysfunctional as the Regises.

“So fun,” the photographer said, snapping away. “Now, if we could have the Queen and her mother on their own.”

“Glad that’s over,” Baloo said, as he and Josh made a dash for it. He checked his phone on their way out front and grinned at it.

An enormous limo pulled up as they reached the entrance.

Perry practically flew out of it. “Hey, hey! The royal court has arrived!” Ryder and Amber got out behind him. Then the rest of the crew: Noah, Quaid, and Crabcatcher. Everybody admired everybody else’s outfits. As Perry adjusted Quaid’s tie knot, a really cool vintage car rolled up.

“Sick,” said Crabby approvingly.

It was proper old-school Hollywood. Tinted windows. Slick tires. The works.

The driver’s door opened and the boys went mad when Cam stepped out.

Next-level Cam. He looked as Hollywood as the car he’d rocked up in.

“I did that!” Perry shouted, pointing at Cam. “That was all me! I’m a genius!”

Cam looked shy rather than embarrassed, not used to being the center of attention.

“Who’s the lucky date?” Baloo asked.

Cam grinned, excited to show her off. He opened the passenger door and held out his hand.

When Teagan stepped out, Josh’s jaw dropped. Everyone else’s, too, judging by the shocked silence. Coxie didn’t just scrub up well. She looked off-the-charts amazing. The red dress, the hair, the shoes, all of it. But there

was something else he couldn’t put his finger on. The second her eyes met Cam’s, a lightbulb went on.

She was into him. Happy. Glowing, actually. Both of them were floating inside the same happy bubble he’d wafted around in when he and Brit had first got together. Like someone had changed the normal filter of his life to a magic one that made everything better.

“Ladies and gentlemen?”

Josh turned and groaned. Great. More photos.

“If the royal court would like to join me inside…”

Brit came out as everyone else filed in.

“You all right, babe?” He saw a flicker of worry in her eyes. Like he might not have been as successful at shaking off whatever the hell was going on with him as he’d thought.

He held out his arm for her. “Now that my queen is here? Couldn’t be better.”

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TEAGAN

Teagan was going to need a map to figure out her way around the fancy venue. The hotel was about as far away from a gym and some pushed-back bleachers as you could get.

Luckily, even though the guys were all dressed up, they were still the guys.

Here was one of them now. “Hey, Josh. Nice crown.”

He smirked at her. Like she’d said. The guys were still the guys.

“So… you and Cam… looks official.”

Whatever that meant. A dig, knowing him. “If you can’t say something nice?” She gave him a big toothy grin. “Shut the hell up.”

“Okay, fair. You look great. Both of you.”

She took it back. Some guys were different tonight. Josh Regis had just given her a sincere compliment.

“Thank you.”

Britney bustled up. “Josh?” She gave Teagan a look that made it clear she still wanted to kill her. “It’s time, babe.”

He tipped his head, which was wearing a crown. “Duty calls,” he said, morphing into the Josh Regis she was more familiar with.

Cam held up the dinner menu and poked something on his plate. “Help me out. Is this orange thing the compressed melon with micro basil?”

Teagan laughed. “How badly do you want a burger now?”

Cam looked shocked. “Instead of a compressed melon ball? No way.” He stabbed it and popped it in his mouth. “Mmm… so good. Full now!”

She snorted. “Cam Dillinger, if I didn’t know better, I’d say you were having fun at this fancy-pants affair.”

He leaned back in his seat, grinning, relaxed, happy. “You caught me.” He gestured to his suit. “You were right about this, too. Asking Perry. I never understood why he spent so much on clothes, but I gotta admit…” He tucked his thumbs under the lapels and ran his hands down them. “It’s pretty nice to wear something that feels like—”

“It’s showing you off?”

He scrunched his face up like it was awkward to admit, but he was going to do it anyway. “Yeah.”

“Well, just in case it needs saying,” Teagan said. “It’s definitely showing you off.”

They grinned at each other. It was nice. This was nice. It’d be better if her mom wasn’t here as one of the chaperones. Not that she was planning on going anywhere near alcohol. Vodka, she knew, was not her friend. And since vodka was friends with the other alcohols, she was glad to be here with someone who could resist their siren call.

“Is Juliet…”

Teagan saw what Cam was looking at. She was wearing nearly the same outfit as Perry. What were the odds… “Yup.”

“Oh shit. I shouldn’t laugh, but… oh shit.”

“I know, right?”

“What are you two laughing about?” Perry called from the other side of the table. There wasn’t a drama he didn’t want to be a part of.

“Nothing,” they both shouted.

“Inside joke,” Cam added, trying to keep Perry’s attention away from Juliet.

Amber saved them by demanding to know everything Perry could tell her about “hand styling.” Whatever that was.

“Phew.” Cam swiped his forehead. “That was close. Do he and Juliet hate each other? Or is it more like a fashion frenemies kind of thing?”

Teagan wasn’t sure. Neither of them had ever said anything nice about the other one, but their spiky comments weren’t venomous. They spatted the way she and Josh— Hmmm. No. That was not a path she wanted to go down. Whatever was or wasn’t going on between her and Josh was totally different. She knew that much. “I think it’s kind of like one is the House of Gucci and the other is Prada.”

“I’m going to take your word for that,” Cam said, laughing. “Either way,

if they go to war over this, I bet the bombs will be filled with glitter."

Teagan spat out the mouthful of soda she'd just taken. "Oh my god, could you warn me before saying things like that?" Laughing, she grabbed his napkin and dabbed at the tablecloth. "This is too much fun."

"Agreed." Cam grinned at her. He really did look happy. He pointed at her plate. "Are you going to finish that? I'm starving."

"All yours, Superman."

"What?"

"Nothing. If you eat all of the salad, I promise I'll find a way to get you a burger later."

"You are the perfect date, Teagan Tao," he said, stabbing a forkful of salad. "I'm glad you asked me out."

She was, too. More than glad, actually. She was happy.

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JOSH

Josh had finished his dessert in about two seconds. How on earth Britney was still picking at hers was beyond. Why was the food at these things always so small? Didn't matter. Sugar was never far away.

"Hey, Brit," he whispered.

She leaned in.

"Some of the guys want to do a doughnut run. You in?"

She recoiled as if he'd just suggested turning the event into a WME match. "There is no way powdered sugar is going near this dress. And we can't just *leave*. We're the King and Queen."

He knew. Wearing that crown had threatened to crush a vertebra. "I thought kings and queens got to make the rules. C'mon. No one's going to care if we're gone for twenty minutes. They'll probably think we're making out somewhere."

"I'll care." Britney turned her ice machine on, sending frosty vibes his way. "I don't want to miss any part of our night."

Meaning, if I'm staying, so are you. We're a couple.

Dance music started blaring from the speakers and the lights dimmed. Coach's daughter, Madison, tested out the mic. She was spinning discs for them tonight. "Hello, hello. And now for a little something to really start the evening's festivities."

Chairs were already being pushed back. Jackets draped on chairs. High heels kicked off.

Baloo whooped, "Yeah, baby! This is my JAM!" and ran onto the dance floor. Normally Josh would be running on with him, but he was still wanting a doughnut. What was *up* with him tonight?

"Let's talk about it later, babe." Britney rose, wiggled her fingers at him.

“C’mon. The dance floor is calling me.”

Another photo op, more like. He’d seen her signal to the photographer. Knew she expected him to play his part. So why did he feel so irritated as he led her onto the dance floor, made sure her “best side” was showing when he twirled her around?

Hopefully he could dance off whatever had gotten under his skin. If not, he didn’t want to be anywhere near Britney when she got the photographer’s proofs. There might be proof of something else even he wasn’t ready to acknowledge.

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CAM

If the night had ended about thirty seconds ago, Cam would've been quietly confident he and Teagan would be putting a third date on the calendar. They'd had fun being part of the royal court, but they'd also had fun just the two of them. He felt like they'd never run out of things to say to each other. Until now.

He'd been so pumped when Teagan had asked him to be her date, he got tunnel vision. Poured his energies into panicking about what to wear and had forgotten one very important thing: Formal dances involved dancing.

Everyone was heading out onto the floor. Even Noah had put down his book to throw some shapes. Teagan had stayed at the table with him, but he could tell she was itching to get out there with the rest of the crew.

She leaned close so he could hear her above the music. He tried to memorize the scent of her shampoo because chances were this was the last time he'd be close enough to smell it.

"I know a way you can really get the team behind you."

Great. He was up for it.

"Show us your moves," Teagan said, nodding at the dance floor.

Nope. They already had enough things to rib him about. He wasn't going to hand them more on a platter.

"Not happening."

She pulled back, confused by his abrupt mood change. *Idiot!* Why was he self-destructing his chances of convincing her he was boyfriend material? He knew why. If she saw him dance? It'd be game over.

"Okaaay. I guess we'll stay here, then. Like old people."

She clearly wanted an explanation. Deserved one. The truth was too embarrassing.

“Like *smart* people,” he said, giving his head a little tap as if she didn’t know where brains were kept. He obviously didn’t. “These are the best seats in the house. Look.”

Crabby and Baloo had started a dance battle nearby. The pair of them—tall and strong versus less tall but getting stronger every day—throwing a never-ending stream of moves at each other. He could tell Teagan was giving him the side-eye. Trying to figure out why his mood had changed.

Crabby and Baloo decided they had hit peak dancing and pointed at Josh and Ryder.

Josh went first, whipping out a smooth side shuffle like he was Fred Astaire.

Ryder’s robot hit some top comedy notes, whether or not he’d meant it to.

“At least they’re enthusiastic.” Teagan gave him a meaningful look.

Nope. “And that’s my cue to get some punch.”

She grabbed his hand before he could escape. “Nice try, Dillinger. It’s going to be your turn soon, whether you like it or not.”

“I’m not going out there.” He knew it was time to be honest. “I’m terrible.”

Teagan laughed, but not at him. Quaid and Noah were out there now, dancing like they were listening to entirely different songs. “You can’t be worse than Bert and Ernie.”

She had a point. Okay. Yeah, he could do this. But then Perry slid into the center of the group and started busting out moves like he was the featured dancer in a hip-hop video.

“Sorry, Teagan. I can’t follow that.”

“Hey.” She waited until he met her gaze. “Do you want to be stroke or not?”

He did. And she was right. He was the one creating barriers between himself and the team. If some bad dancing was what it took to show them he was a wolf who could lead the pack, so be it. He got up.

His first move? The freeze.

Didn’t involve moving.

Did involve a whole lot of *How do I get out of here?*

“Forget the crowd,” Teagan whispered, joining him in the circle. “Just look at me.”

She stepped back and did a goofy dance move, threw it to him. He caught it, built on it, threw it back.

Everyone cheered.

Well, what do you know? Putting yourself out there didn't always mean failure. Teagan's smile spurred him on. He actually did have a couple of moves. Rusty, but what the hell? He went for it.

Threw himself at the floor stupidly confident it wouldn't hit him in the face as he tried to pull off a classic: The Worm.

The crew went berserk. He'd done it! Thank god. His parents wouldn't have been able to afford the dentist bills if he'd faceplanted. When he got back up, Teagan gave him a high five. "Told you."

Yeah, she had. "You're very wise, sensei." He performed a half bow.

She laughed. "Remember that next time we have an erg session."

He'd remember this night forever. No doubt about it.

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TEAGAN

Teagan had seen Perry in a fit of pique before, but the way he was storming toward her now was next-level rage. And she was pretty sure she knew why. This had to be about Juliet. Or, more to the point, what she was wearing.

He gave an indignant shake of his head, stomping his foot like a high-strung racehorse. “Tell her to change. Now.”

“Who?” Playing dumb was the only way she’d survive his wrath. She and Cam. They could’ve warned Perry.

“Juliet!” Perry seethed. “She’s wearing my look!”

“You’re both making it work,” she said.

“I’m making it work *better*!”

“You know…” Teagan had to proceed with caution here, but felt Perry needed to hear this. “Juliet and I spend a fair amount of time together… and I’ve been watching her all night…”

“Which means you have had ample time to bring a pair of pinking shears to her ensemble.”

She cut to the chase. This was not the time for nuance. “Perry, has it ever occurred to you that maybe you have a thing for her?”

He bristled. “Impossible. We fight all the time. She is the Christian Dior to my Coco Chanel.”

Ha! She’d nailed that one (almost). But this wasn’t the time for self-congratulation. “In that case, maybe it means you’ve finally met your match?”

“What? No!” He threw a glance over to the punch bowl where Juliet was filling her glass, then whipped back to face Teagan. “Say more.”

“She likes the same things you do—” Teagan put up her hand so he would hear her out. This was big-picture advice, not dwelling on the detail.

“She likes them in a different way. Which is a good thing. If you two took the time to get to know each other, I’m pretty sure you’d find out you got each other in a way no one else does.”

Perry’s nostrils flared, as if breathing in this entirely new way of looking at Juliet needed more oxygen. “That is,” he began imperiously, “pretty sus.”

Teagan beamed. The more she thought about Perry and Juliet as a couple, the more she thought it was a great idea.

“Go ask her to dance. You know you want to.”

“Hey, guys?” Amber approached them, holding up a book of tickets. “Last chance to get tickets for the after-party.”

“After-party?” This was the first Teagan had heard of it.

“It’s a charity cruise for the EPFA.” She fanned out the tickets so the rest of the crew who had returned to their table could see. “Who’s up for a romantic moonlit trip through the Harbor Islands?”

Everyone from the sound of it.

“Tickets are two hundred and fifty each,” Amber said as if they were a bargain. “Who’s in?”

Ryder pulled out his wallet and handed her a card. “I’ll take two.” He winked at her. “I’ve got a hot date.”

“Anyone else?” Amber asked. “Noah? Cam?”

Noah held up his phone so he could tap it to Amber’s portable banking device. “I’ll get one.”

Oh, this was bad. She needed to figure out a way to save Cam from being put in a deeply awkward position.

His cheeks were already flushed when she turned to him. She knew it wasn’t because of the dancing. “I don’t really want to go. We’re having a good time here. It’s going to be freezing out there. I didn’t bring anything warm.”

Perry cut in, not even trying to disguise the fact he’d been listening to them. “You guys should come.” He held out his card to Amber. “I’ll take three.”

“Perry—that’s a lot of money,” Cam said. “Seven hundred and fifty bucks.”

Teagan clocked the conflict in Cam’s voice. They all did. Grateful for the save, uncomfortable accepting it.

“So what?” Perry shrugged. They all knew he could afford it. “It’s going

to a good cause.”

“Thanks, Perry,” Teagan said after he’d tapped his card.

The guys went back to their conversations, but Cam had yet to say a word. He had gone all weird again. Putting up guardrails after he’d seen firsthand that letting them down was worth it.

“That was cool, right? A team member having your back like that.”

“Do you know what the EPFA is?” Cam asked.

“No.”

“It’s the Easton Prep Financial Aid program. The one that covers my tuition. *I’m* the ‘good cause.’”

“Ohhh.” She got it, why Cam’s ego felt bruised. Why didn’t he see the flip side? Perry wouldn’t have offered to buy them tickets if he didn’t want them at the party. Maybe she should’ve insisted they find that burger he’d been talking about. Go to a Friendly’s.

No. The whole point was to be together with other people from school. They should do this. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah.” He didn’t meet her eye. “It’s fine.”

It clearly wasn’t.

Why couldn’t anything be easy?

One of her dad’s sayings surfaced. “If something comes too easy, Teags, feels like child’s play? It means you’re not growing. Bumps and bruises fade. Wisdom doesn’t.”

How a man could be so right and so wrong at the same time would remain a mystery.

Teagan needed to tease Cam out of his bad mood before the after-party. The crew table had mostly been abandoned. “What do you think? Should we hit the dance floor again?”

He looked out at the teeming dance floor, but she already knew the answer.

“Or we could just sit,” she said, to make it easier. “Cam… You know, the ticket thing doesn’t have to be a big deal.”

“Not to you,” he huffed. “You told me that I needed to show people who I am, so I did the worm.” He stretched his neck, frustrated. “What else am I supposed to show them? That I can’t afford a new uniform? That I have to

work shifts at the shop after school? Accept a ticket to a party that they paid for so I can have a free education?”

She had no idea what to say. Her heart ached for him.

“What about any of those things would make them want to follow me? They don’t want to know things like that, Teagan. No one does.”

“I do,” she said. She meant it, too. He’d been to her house. Seen the state it was in. Josh, too. He’d razzed her about it, but he hadn’t been cruel.

“I know,” Cam said, his frustration getting worse instead of lessening. “But I don’t want you to see all that.” He sighed. “No matter what I do… No matter how hard I row or how much I study or how many shifts I work —I’m always so far away from being the person I want to be.”

“It’s okay, Cam.” She reached out to give his arm a squeeze. “No one __”

He pulled away at her touch. What the— She was genuinely sympathetic. Scrabbling to find ways to show him the guys really didn’t care if he was rich or poor. What they cared about was knowing they could trust him. Sure, they wanted an eight seat who would lead them to victory, but they needed to know *who* they were rowing for. Keeping his life secret wasn’t helping his cause.

He scrubbed his hands against his scalp like he was trying to get his brain to reboot. He got up from the table. “It’s not okay, Teagan. I don’t think I can do this right now. I’m sorry. I really am. But I’ve got to go.”

She nodded on autopilot, not entirely sure what had just happened. Just sat there and watched him walk away.

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JOSH

“Look at the smolder on you in this one.” Britney held up her phone, leaning toward him, their crowns nearly touching.

As she cooed over photo after photo of the two of them looking like the happiest couple on earth, he genuinely understood why people sometimes said they felt like they were dying inside.

Literally and figuratively.

“Hey, guys!” Amber poked her head backstage. “Just a few minutes until we announce the King and Queen dance.”

Josh slumped into a chair.

“Josh?” said Britney.

“Regrouping. One more event and then we’re done.” Oh shit. Had he just—

Britney had her schoolmarm face on. “What is going *on* with you? It’s like you don’t want to be here.”

“I do,” he lied. Well, mostly lied. He’d enjoyed some parts. The dancing. Joking around with the guys.

Britney spun her index finger around. She wanted more. She deserved more. This really was a case of it’s not you… it’s a hundred percent me. She believed in what she did. This. He had, too. Once.

He tried to explain. “I guess I thought the night would be a little more for us as a couple, rather than putting on a show for everyone else.”

She shook her head, not understanding. “That’s what being Queen and King is about.”

He tried again. “When was the last time we had fun together? No agenda. No list of things to do.”

“I *am* having fun. Aren’t you?”

“Not really,” he admitted, already feeling a weight shift as he confirmed it. “No.”

It felt painful, watching her take onboard what he’d said, and what he hadn’t.

“I think we’ve been *acting* happy more than we’ve been happy for a long—”

“Stop.”

“Brit.” He took a step toward her. She took one back. “Don’t tell me you can’t see it.”

“No.” She held up her hand, then dropped it. “You’re breaking up with me? Here? *Now?*”

“I know. I know. I didn’t want to ruin your night, but I can’t pretend anymore. I’m sorry.”

Her body was radiating hurt and her eyes flashed with anger. “Is it Teagan?”

“No. Not at all.” He’d taken her advice not to use her as an excuse. He was doing this because it was the right thing to do. “It’s because this is over. Us.”

He’d never seen Brit like this before. Scared. Overwhelmed. Not formulating a way out of the problem at lightning-fast speed.

From beyond the curtains a microphone squawked. Everyone would have been gathered together in the main hall for this, their big moment.

“And now, if everyone could clear the floor,” Coach Hayden instructed, “it’s time for the King and Queen to dance.”

“Awesome,” Britney said sarcastically. “Isn’t this the perfect ending to the magazine article. Ditched and alone on the dance floor. Thanks.”

“Put your hands together,” Coach Hayden continued from beyond the curtain, “for this year’s reigning King and Queen of the Fall Formal!”

“Brit.” Josh held out his hand to her. “Our story doesn’t *have* to end like that. Can I take you out for one last dance?”

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TEAGAN

“How do they always look so perfect?” Juliet asked Teagan. “Do you think they have VR versions of themselves?”

“Pretty sure they’re real,” Teagan said. They did almost look too good to be true. Josh in his crown, Britney in hers, their cheeks glowing as cell phone lights captured the perfect moment. “I guess some couples are just meant to be.” And some weren’t.

Juliet took Teagan by the shoulders and gave her a little shake. “Look, if Cam can’t get over himself, that’s his problem to deal with.”

“Yeah, but he *left* me here. By myself. I must have done something.”

Juliet shook her head. “No. Sorry. That was all him. So pull that pouty lip in and stop trying to blame his insecurity on yourself.”

Teagan pushed her lip out farther, just to provoke her friend. Juliet had no patience for sulking.

“Teagan! He literally said he didn’t think he was good enough for you. Even though he knows you like him for who he is. We all do. He’s beating himself up for no reason. Sure, we tease him, but that’s what happens when you interact with other humans.”

Teagan huffed out a sigh. Juliet was right, but she still felt horrible. Watching Josh and Britney dance romantically wasn’t helping.

“Hey.” Juliet bumped shoulders with her. “Want to bail and watch *Saw* in my room?”

Before Teagan could reply, a familiar outfit stepped into her line of vision.

“Good evening, ladies.” Perry offered them a courtly bow that was mostly aimed at Juliet.

Interesting. Teagan looked from one friend to the other. It really was

uncanny that they'd chosen to make exactly the same fashion statement tonight. It must have been fate.

"Juliet?" Perry arched one of his perfectly shaped eyebrows, his voice coming out in a strangely formal staccato. Like someone—Teagan—was forcing him to say the words. "I have something to tell you. About your outfit."

Juliet shot Teagan a look like, *Oh boy, here we go.*

"You wore it best," Perry said. "I thought you should know."

Juliet looked stunned.

Teagan shoots… and she scores! She congratulated herself on her matchmaking abilities.

Now that Perry had survived his earth-shatteringly awkward admission, he held out his hand to Juliet. "Would you, perchance, like to dance?"

Juliet shot a look at Teagan, clearly worried it was a trap.

"Yes, Perry," Teagan answered for her in her sweetest voice. "Juliet would love to dance."

"Wonderful."

As Juliet took Perry's hand, she whispered to Teagan, "I'll kill you for this."

"You're welcome," Teagan said with a smile as she watched them dance together.

At least someone's night had taken an upswing.

She needed to get out of here. Now. There was only one place in the world that made her feel like herself. So as late as it was, that was where she would go.

The door to the boathouse opened and closed. Her all-too-brief alone time was over. Had Cam come looking for her?

"Hello?" she called into the dark clubhouse room. In the dim light, she saw Josh shouldering a tote bag.

"Hey," he said. "What are you doing here?"

"Ummm…" She could ask him the same thing, but he'd asked first. "My night turned out to be a bust."

"Oh. Sorry. Everything okay?"

No, obviously. "Turns out Cam's not sure he can 'do this' right now."

“That sucks. I’m sorry to hear that.”

So was she, but like Juliet had said, there wasn’t anything she could do about it. This was on Cam. “Why are you here?”

He flashed her a smile. “My night was also a bust.” He flexed his shoulders like he was debating whether or not to tell her why. “I broke up with Britney.”

“Oh, wow.” She hadn’t seen that coming. Not after seeing them waltz around the dance floor like Beauty and Beast. After the spell was broken and the Beast became the handsome prince, obviously. “Was that… You’re sure it was the right move?”

“It was.”

She could tell he’d done it for him. Not because of whatever it was that had been crackling between the two of them. So that was good. As far as bad situations went. “So.” She fell into their usual pattern, using humor to deflect the big feelings they were both clearly trying to figure out. Here. In the boathouse. Without anyone else around. “Does that mean she hates someone more than me now?”

Josh huffed a laugh. “I think you’re off the hook. Which makes me the most hated person on both of your lists.”

“Ha!” It wasn’t funny. She stopped laughing. “I don’t hate you, Josh.”

“I know.”

The energy in the room changed; his gaze softened.

“Why are you looking at me like that?”

He didn’t answer.

It took her a moment to realize there was less space between them now than there had been a second ago. How had that happened? Had she moved closer to him or had it been the other way around? She had no idea.

It didn’t feel like they were up close and personal for another verbal shoot-out. Or to shake hands over a future in the friend zone…

When they’d first met, they’d been like magnets turned the wrong way around. Two strong forces that repelled each other when they got close. Pushed each other away.

But now? It was like the magnets had flipped. Her North aligning with his South to create something new. An attraction.

Josh had told her he wanted to be more than friends. When his lips touched hers, she knew he hadn’t been lying.

It was a perfect first kiss. Soft, inquisitive, short.

He pulled back, checking to see if he'd read her right. That kissing her was okay.

It was more than okay.

She gave him the next kiss. After that it was kind of a dreamy blur. One hungry kiss after the other, as if they'd been lying in wait. It was perfect. Disappearing into a dream meant she didn't have to think about everything that had gone wrong. Only about the here and now. Like when she was out on the water, her true self, in the right place at the right time.

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CAM

It was the morning of the Head of the Harbor regatta, and Cam was driving Walt the Pickup. He parked up next to Coach Hayden's truck, which he and his daughter were unloading.

"Madison's earning her keep today," Coach called out to him, arms loaded with supplies for the race. "I've got a mountain of things to do before the visiting crews get here. Give her a hand?"

"You don't have to," Madison said. "I know you earn your keep at your house. You don't have to earn it at mine as well."

Cam held out his arms for her to load him up. "Helping a friend doesn't count."

She tugged a box out of the back of the truck and dumped it in his arms. It contained a Crock-Pot, soup cans, and individual snack packs of quick-energy foods. "Are you sure you trust me with the food?"

"Sure. Unless you can open those cans with your teeth?" Madison teased. She grabbed a couple of bags with blankets and other stuff and they headed toward the main staging site down by the water. "How're you feeling about today?"

He was feeling lots of things about today, but since he'd decided to show up with his rower's blinkers on, he could answer honestly. "I like our chances."

"So…" Madison gave him a quick glance. "What happened with you and Teagan? I didn't see you at the end of the dance. Did it go well?"

"No." His fault. Not hers. "It's not happening."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

He could tell she already knew the answer but, because she was a friend, asked anyway.

“Nope. I do not. It’s not going to work. It’s fine.”

“Why not?”

They’d reached the staging point so he ignored the question. Headed back to the truck with her for more gear. When he grabbed his tote from the truck, she did a double take at the For Sale sign in the back of the cab. “You’re selling Walt?”

He shook his head. Didn’t want to talk about that either.

Madison put her hand on his arm. “Cam. Is something going on?”

He closed his eyes and tried to picture a world where he could get away with lying to someone who was going to find out anyway. Couldn’t. Made himself tell the truth. “The shop’s in trouble. Dad had to lay off the other mechanics. I’ve been picking up the slack when I’m not in school or at practice, so… in answer to your earlier question… I don’t have time for a love life right now.”

He knew he wasn’t being his best self. Whoever that guy was. The one who’d felt like he’d been the real Fall Formal King when he’d seen Teagan? The one who’d laughed and joked with the rest of the crew after dusting off his dance moves? Or the one who knew his world wasn’t anything like the rest of the team’s? The only choice he had was to keep his head down, grades up, and work hard—at the shop, at school, and on the water. Being that guy was his only option.

“That sounds really hard.” Madison wasn’t pitying him. She wasn’t like that. Just saw someone hurting and wanted to help. “Can I give you a hug?”

“No. Sorry. It’ll make it worse. Here, let me get that.”

He put his bag down to help load up her arms with more gear. When the guys razzed him about stuff, there was something to fight back against. If he let someone in, let them comfort him like Teagan had wanted to last night? He was terrified he might lose it. Fall apart and not have a clue how to put himself back together again.

Once he’d gotten her loaded up, Madison tried one more time. “Are you sure there isn’t anything I can do?”

“I just need to get through this.” Today at the regatta there would be college scouts. If he rowed well enough, one of them might see something in him.

“Understoo— Ohhh, no!”

They’d both heard the crunch when she’d stepped backward, foot

accidentally connecting with his duffel bag. He didn’t have to open it to know that was the sound of his reflective sunglasses crunching. But he did it anyway.

Madison looked horrified.

He felt sick. One of the frames had broken in half. Well, that was three hundred dollars he’d have to conjure out of nowhere. If his heart hadn’t cracked into little tiny pieces, too, he’d laugh. It was almost funny. Almost.

“It’s okay, Madison. Let’s get this stuff down to the base.” He just wanted to get out on the water and forget about everything but rowing. Feel the burn of his muscles as he pulled his oar against the water. Hit that sweet spot when he and the rest of the team were moving as one, propelling the boat against a force a thousand times stronger than them, but doing it anyway.

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JOSH

The guys were in the erg room stretching out when Josh got to the boathouse.

Quaid was flat on his back getting Noah to press on his legs. “Harder, Noah. These hamstrings are still aching from my A-class dance moves.”

Josh caught Teagan’s eye. “Morning, Teagan.”

“Good morning, Josh.”

Their exchange was formal. Nothing to see here, folks. Nothing to see here.

Teagan poured smoothies from a huge pitcher. “C’mon, guys. Get your Eagle Juice.”

“What *is* this?” Quaid gulped half a glass down without waiting for the answer.

“It is Noah’s mystery recipe,” Teagan said.

Crabcatcher took a tentative sip of his smoothie, breathed a sigh of relief. “This is good, Noah.”

Josh dumped his bag and headed outside to check out the competition. To his surprise, he saw his father. “Dad? I thought you were with Mom and Grandad.”

“They’re finding a good spot to watch from. Your Aunt Karina’s with them, too.”

That explained his father’s annoyed expression. He and Aunt Karina were locked in the same kind of power play he and Ryder were. Always battling to be their father’s chosen one. Josh was sure it hadn’t been fun. Fighting a sibling for parental affection his whole life.

So why had he put Josh under the same pressure? Rowing in the same eight as Ryder. Jockeying to be stroke.

Coach still hadn’t told them who was sitting where today. Crabcatcher obviously knew where he’d be. Baloo and Teagan, too. But the rest of them? They’d have to wait and see.

“Son.” His dad steered him off the path, out of earshot of the parents and rowers heading down to the lake. “I have some hard news. Dad promoted Karina to President of Luxury Travel.”

Wait. What? “I thought that was supposed to be your job?”

Richard Regis had pretty much lived a golden life. Beating his sister at each professional turn. The fact his dad wasn’t completely losing the plot right now was a miracle. His dad flexed his neck like he was feeling the loss physically, then gave Josh a pointed look.

Oh shit. He knew that look. It was the one that meant, *Over to you, son.*

“I need a win here, Josh,” his dad said. “I spoke with Coach. You’re back in stroke.”

He felt a surge of elation that he knew wouldn’t—couldn’t—peak.

“If you win this race,” continued his father, “we’ll be back on top in Dad’s mind.”

“Right.”

Josh knew he should say something to his dad now. Talk to him the way a son was supposed to be able to talk to his father. Without fear of retribution.

But that’s not how the Regis family worked. The last thing he could say to his dad was that he didn’t want to row because it wasn’t fun anymore.

And if his dad knew what his request meant for him… how life-changing putting his all into this race could be… would he still ask him to do it? Josh was too scared to find out.

“Son? I’m counting on you. Both of our futures, your mother’s as well, they depend on your performance today.”

“Understood.” His dad headed off, leaving his future in the family business in Josh’s hands.

Pretty much the worst place it could possibly be.

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TEAGAN

Cam walked through the clubhouse carrying supplies while she was posting the day's plan on the board. Given the unexpected turn of events at the Formal… and what had happened afterward… Teagan should've just let him go past, but that wasn't really her style. She liked resolution.

He hadn't been giving her the silent treatment or anything. Earlier, he'd said "Good morning" and "The Crock-Pot's in the kitchen if Coach asks where it is," but that was it. No apology. No heartfelt revelations after a long, dark night of the soul. Nothing.

Like it or not, he wasn't getting into that boat without clearing the air.

He deposited another box of things from Coach's truck in the kitchen. When he came back out, she stopped him. "Anything you want to talk about?"

"No."

"Wow!" She waved invisible pom-poms. "I got a whole word out of you. More communicative than your texts." They'd never texted. Not their thing. Apparently joking around wasn't either. She took things down a notch. He did not look happy. "Cam… I know you had a hard time at the dance and I've been trying to give you space, but we've got to go out there as a team soon. You *can* talk to me, you know?"

"Yeah." He glanced at her, went back to rubbing a callus. "I know."

She peered up at him. "Are we still friends?"

His face tensed. "Of course we are. Thanks." Then he strode off to the changing room.

Not exactly the best heart-to-heart she'd had, but… it was a tiny step forward.

Perry sidled up to her, bumped shoulders. "Hey, gurrrl," he said. "You

and Cam didn’t come to the after-party and that little exchange I just witnessed was awfully formal. What’s up? Don’t want your budding romance on show for all to see? Trying to keep things profesh?”

Ummm. “No comment.”

“I’ll take that as a yes.” Perry bounced over to Noah, Quaid, and Crabcatcher, whose faces made it clear they were gossiping about her and Cam.

Luckily, Coach Hayden saved the day. And her dignity.

“Okay, crew! Huddle up.”

“Right. This is our last regatta before the Haverford Cup. If we place today, it’ll secure our spot and give us a shot at the podium. First time in ten years, Eagles.”

The team cheered, pumped for the challenge. “You’re feeling good,” Coach said. “And you should be. This race is yours for the taking.”

“Westvale’s toast!” Crabcatcher shouted. “No, wait. They’re *past* toast. They’re ash, they’re—”

“Tephra!” Noah supplied.

“What’s a tephra?” Quaid asked.

Teagan was kind of glad he had asked. She didn’t know either.

“It’s a material produced by a volcanic eruption,” Noah explained.

Ryder scratched his head. “Isn’t that just lava?”

“Getting off course here, guys,” Teagan said. “Coach?”

“Thank you, Coxie. Now, a hot streak is great, and you’ve definitely been enjoying one, but don’t think about the past today. Your job is today’s race. One clean drive after another? And you attack this thing. Yes?”

“Yes, Coach!”

“And Regis?”

Josh and Ryder said, “Yeah?” simultaneously.

Coach winced. “I meant Josh. I’m putting you in stroke today.”

Ryder muttered something under his breath Teagan couldn’t catch. She could guess, though. He was clearly fuming about Coach’s decision.

“Remember to take it out easy today,” said Coach. “This is another head race. A long haul. Do not try to run it like you’re in a sprint.”

Josh nodded. “Yes, Coach.”

“Don’t let the pressure get to you, Josh.” Ryder looked around at the guys like he was about to drop a good joke. But it sounded more like a flex.

“What pressure?”

“The pressure to win, like we did when *I* was stroke.”

“Okay, crew!” Coach clapped his hands, cutting things short before it turned into a fight. “I know you’re all tense, that you want to win. But egging one another with negative energy is not acceptable. Call in those aura points, okay? Manifest what works for you… as a team.” Then he walked out.

Teagan dropped the clipboard she’d been holding. “Umm… does anyone know who stole Coach and replaced him with my mother?”

It had been weird, but Coach had a point.

The guys started drifting off. Noah waved his hands, trying to stop them. “Everybody? Just a reminder about the party tonight.” He paused for impact. “It’s going to be both the bee’s knees *and* the cat’s meow!”

Silence. Poor Noah.

Baloo was texting as he shot out the door. Josh and Ryder had disappeared in separate directions. Quaid was giving Perry a piggyback into the changing room. Cam was digging around in his duffel bag and Crabcatcher, from the sounds of it, was starting a quick erg sesh.

“Thanks, guys,” Noah said to a room that was basically empty now.

“Bzzz bzzz,” said Teagan. It was a lame attempt to get a smile back on Noah’s face, but she had to try. Right? As team cox? “Meow?”

It didn’t work. “I’m going to go get changed,” sighed Noah.

“Good idea.”

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CAM

Cam put on his shoes, tried to focus. Knew Josh was boring holes in him with his eyes.

“Your glasses are broken.”

“Yeah.” Not much he could do about that, was there? “I taped them up.”

“It’s regulation that the whole team has to wear the same thing. Yours can’t be broken.”

Yup. He was aware.

“You don’t have a back-up pair?”

“Not all of us have an extra three hundred bucks sitting around, jackass.”

“Okay, okay.” Josh held his hands up, relenting. “But seriously. You can’t go out like that. We won’t match.”

“Well then, I guess we won’t match!” Cam shot back.

“Fine, okay. Cool your jets.” Josh shouldered his tote, headed for the changing room door. “I’ll tell the guys we’re all going without sunglasses today.”

For some stupid reason, this pissed Cam off even more. It was a reasonable solution to a problem outside his control. But the exchange—a spat fueled by prerace nerves—exploded in his brain, turned into something bigger.

The conversation was proof that what he’d said to Teagan last night was true. That no matter how hard he tried, how vulnerable he was in front of the crew, or how much he palled around with them doing stupid dances and playing pranks, his life would always be harder than theirs. Because, like it or not, life wasn’t fair.

He knew there were plenty of others far worse off than him. Life didn’t

really care who you were. Rich people got sick. Nice couples who should be blessed with children weren't. Wars, famines, earthquakes—indiscriminate. Kings, queens, lottery winners—random. And yet?

There were good, hardworking, honest people like his dad who worked their fingers to the bone all day, who beat themselves up at night out of frustration that the life they'd promised their families was always just out of reach. The Josh Regises of this world didn't get that. Didn't take the time to *see* it. To see *him*.

If he was in Josh's shoes? Money no object? He liked to think he'd at least have the grace to be grateful for it. To notice when people like Cam worked their ass off for something and didn't get it because they didn't have the right advantages in life.

"You think you deserve to be in stroke, don't you?" Cam said, as Josh headed to the door.

Josh turned, gave him a hard stare, and waited to see where this was going to go.

All the way to the cold hard truth. "You don't deserve it, Josh. You don't deserve to be in the eight seat."

"Ex*cuse* me?"

Cam crossed over to him, squaring up so they were eye to eye. "I have stronger technique. I'm faster than you. I'm. Just. Better."

Josh lit up one of those whiter-than-white smiles of his. The kind you half expected to make a "ting" noise, like in a toothpaste commercial. "Sorry, Cam. Coach picked me. I've been working my ass off." The smile dropped away. "I absolutely deserve to be in that seat."

"No. You don't." Cam had sat behind him in enough losing races to know he was right. "The only reason you're in that seat is because you were born lucky. Not because you deserve it. Maybe that's true of everything you have. They're yours because of your name, not because you deserve them."

His words landed hard. Josh's head snapped back like it had been punched.

Cam left the room, headed down to the lake. He and Josh would never be bosom buddies, but something told him he'd cut too close to the bone.

There'd been a flash of something in Josh's eyes when Cam'd laid into him. A bolt of terror. Like the one thing he'd been trying to keep hidden from the rest of the world wasn't a secret anymore. Because if Cam had

seen it? Other people could, too.

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TEAGAN

Right! She could do this. *They* could do this. They were a team. Off the water? They were a big hot mess of teenage angst and power moves, but they were almost on the water. So… time to forget about the other stuff.

"Crabby! You've got a good glow on. How's your cardio training been going?"

His grin was triumphant. "Haven't puked in two weeks!"

"Nice." It was a barometer. A gross one, but a barometer nonetheless.

"Right, everyone!" Coach Hayden called. "Count us in, Coxie."

Ten hands piled on top of each other. "Easton on three: One, two…"

"EASTON!"

"Crew?" Hayden instructed. "Go get your boat."

A few minutes later, Josh was inches away from her in the eight seat. Not so much as a hint of the vibe the two of them had been rocking a few hours ago. He was in the zone. Right where she needed him.

"Good to be back in the saddle?"

He nodded, pure focus. "Let's do this."

"Paddle up, boys!"

They started strong, working as a unit. This was good. This was how Easton was making its mark. Strong, solid— What the—

"My oar!" Josh stared at the handle he was holding, then the spot where the rest of his oar should've been. "It—it just snapped."

The race was over.

Five strokes in and they were done.

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JOSH

Numb was one way to describe how he was feeling. His body shook from too much cortisol flooding his system, telling him what he already knew: game over.

He'd had one thing to do today and had failed.

Bad heart.

Bad oar.

Not quite as lucky as Cam thought he was.

The guys looked shell-shocked. Out of their racing gear, they slumped around the boathouse in sweats, looking like their world had ended. His really had.

He'd tried calling his dad about a hundred times. Wouldn't pick up.

He was toast. Tephra.

"Okay, guys," Coach Hayden said, striding in. "I know this isn't how we wanted this to end, but sometimes it's just not your day. But look, the regatta's over. Tomorrow we start fresh."

"We should've had that race…" Josh started, hadn't realized he'd spoken out loud.

"It's not end of days yet, okay?" Coach reassured them. "We still have a chance at making the Haverford Cup. We just have to wait for the other teams' results to come in." The guys perked up a bit at this. Josh was glad there was someone in the room who could pull their plunging spirits out of the abyss. "You've all been working hard. Making strides throughout the season. So have a good time tonight. You've earned it." Coach gave them a warning look. "I don't want to know what you're planning—but if anyone needs bailing out? Don't call me!"

Half-hearted laughter echoed against the ceiling; then Coach was out of

there, leaving Josh to face the wolf pack.

“Man,” Quaid said, bummed versus angry. “If our oar didn’t break, we could’ve been on that podium.”

“It was a fluke,” Josh said, rubbing his head in dismay. “It happens.”

“You know what else happens?” Noah called from behind the changing room door. He burst through it with a flourish. “The AFTER-PARTY!”

The boys cheered, desperate to put their troubles behind them.

Perry pointed at the cape Noah was wearing. “Oh shit! Are we seeing Bad Bunny?”

“Indeed.” Noah gave them a mysterious smile. “We will be in the *proximity* of something very bad.”

Quaid jumped out of his seat. “Let’s get bad, baby!”

“We will,” Noah assured them. “Because tonight’s event…”

The guys leaned forward in anticipation.

“Is a murder mystery!”

They fell back with a chorus of groans. Not the night of raving they’d been hoping for.

Poor guy. This might be the first time Josh could relate to Noah. Putting everything you had into making people you cared about happy, only to disappoint at the first hurdle.

Noah, to his surprise, was undaunted. He put on a fake English accent and began to set the scene. “Our tale begins in an era marked by Greed and Rebellion. America’s moral compass, once steady, now spins recklessly out of control! Meaning… we’re going to the Roaring Twenties!”

He flung off his cloak to reveal a surprisingly dapper three-piece suit complete with a pocket watch. The guy had definitely been born in the wrong era.

“Now,” Noah continued, “we’ve all read *The Great Gatsby*.”

“We did?” Quaid asked.

Noah dropped character. “It was on last year’s curriculum.” He regrouped, began again. “*Most* of us have read *The Great Gatsby*, set in the prohibition era when all alcohol was forbidden.”

“Wait.” Perry went into a panic. “Is this a dry party?”

He received a classic Noah look. The kind that said, *You have the facts, catch up*. “Obviously.”

More groans. And still Noah plowed on. Props.

“The 1920s also gave birth to jazz and cabaret!”

Ryder groaned. “A friggin’ murder mystery.”

“A dry murder mystery,” Baloo reminded him.

Perry was in despair. “Why do you hate us, Noah?”

“Hey!” Teagan glared at them. “C’mon. Noah spent a lot of time planning this party. Go ahead, Noah.”

Noah cleared his throat, adjusted his tie, and put the bad English accent back on. “A heinous crime occurred in this opulent mansion. The murder of a reclusive dowager duchess. The weapon? An oyster shucker. The motive? Her priceless ruby necklace—stolen! You will find your characters and costumes in your changing room cubbies. Disperse!”

The guys pushed themselves up with absolutely no enthusiasm. Josh figured he might as well try his dad again.

Voicemail.

“Hey, Dad. Trying you again ’cause I haven’t heard back from the other messages I left. I know the race didn’t go the way we wanted. Needed,” he corrected. “Sorry I let you down.”

His dad probably wouldn’t even listen to the messages. Had probably disowned him. Maybe dressing up and pretending to be whatever character Noah had assigned him was a good thing. A few hours of being someone else. Unless, the way his life was going these days, he ended up being revealed as the baddie.

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TEAGAN

The fur stole smelled expensive. Like someone who could afford designer perfume. She laughed. Maybe Noah had raided Perry and Juliet's extensive wardrobes rather than the drama club costume store.

As the guys lumbered back into the main room, props and character backgrounds in hand, she gave them all a "play along and play nicely" glare. Noah always joined in on their extravaganzas. True, he often read the entire time, but this could be fun.

"Who in this dastardly rogues' gallery is responsible for the slaying of the innocent dowager?" Noah exclaimed once everyone was back in the room. Didn't get a response. "I've planted clues all around the mansion." He threw his arms out, indicating every part of the boathouse was included. "When you find one, you and your fellow suspects must gather to discuss. So, without further ado, announce yourselves!"

Ryder pulled a card out his envelope. "I'm Carl, a speakeasy steward with a dream of a better life." He held up the mop Noah had given him. "Wait? I'm a janitor?"

Perry opened his envelope. "I'm Eleanor Ramsheim, a wealthy flapper who's judgy and into hats? Way to typecast, Noah." He put on a beaded flapper cap, checked himself out in his phone camera, styling it out.

Crabby put on a baseball cap and showed them all his prop: a bat. "Baloo and I are Big Sluggers. Two mobster henchmen for one of Chicago's un-finest."

"Cool, bruh." Baloo gave him a fist bump. "The heavies."

Cam held up a newspaper and a newsboy bag. "Speedy Sinclair, newspaper boy."

Noah pointed to Teagan.

She flicked her stole around her neck as Noah said, “Meet Amelia Faye, silent film star. You’re with…” He pointed at Josh, who flipped open a leather case to reveal a badge. “Mr. Brandenburg, a federal agent. And last but not least…”

Quaid put on a ten-gallon. “How do,” he drawled. “I’m oil magnate Edward Harold.” He grinned mischievously. “Who is also a secret moonshine brewer!”

“What?” Noah scanned his notes. “No. That’s not on the card.”

Quaid pulled his duffel over. It clanked. He pulled out two full bottles shouting, “The speakeasy is open for business!”

Everyone cheered.

“Don’t forget about the clues,” reminded Noah as everyone started heading off.

Teagan and Josh—or rather Amelia Faye and Mr. Brandenburg—were searching the boathouse for a clue. Noah hadn’t chosen anywhere obvious to hide it.

As they looked inside the shells, Teagan turned around the next aisle only to see the one thing she wished had been hidden from sight. The broken oar.

Josh came up beside her, saw what she was looking at, let a nearby stool take his body weight. “Ugh. Bad break.”

Yup. She knelt down to examine just how bad.

If she couldn’t solve Noah’s mystery, maybe she could figure out why Josh’s oar snapped. Carbon fiber oars were tons lighter than wood ones and, more importantly, didn’t rot. The rigid composite material was designed to withstand the intense power transferred from the rower to the blade as it pushed against the water. Why not this one?

“Hey?” she called over her shoulder. “Did your dad call you back yet?”

“Nope.” He flexed his shoulders. “And I’m guessing he’s not going to.”

Poor guy. From what he’d told her, being a Regis seemed pretty awful. Her dad, when he’d been around, had pushed her hard when it came to rowing, but only because he knew she wanted to be better. But he’d never made her take on responsibilities that a kid shouldn’t have to worry about. To be fair, her mom hadn’t either. Whenever Ella was stressed about money,

she always made it clear it was her responsibility to sort it out, not Teagan's. Somehow she was doing it. Working hard at the Crab Shack and anything else she could to pay their bills.

"There was nothing you could've done, Josh. Don't beat yourself up. We'll get them next— Hey! Look at this." She held up the oar stump. "This didn't just break on its own. It was sawed through!"

When he saw it up close, the blood drained from his face.

"Who would even do this?"

Josh didn't answer, just stared at the oar, blinking in shocked disbelief.

The rest of the crew came running when she sounded the alarm. "See? It had to be sabotage." Teagan held up the oar piece that had clearly been sawed halfway through. The other part, unable to withstand the pressure, had snapped in the water, finishing the job.

The guys couldn't believe it either.

"It looks like we've stumbled upon a real-life mystery!" Noah said with a swirl of his cape.

Cam took the oar and examined it more closely. "Looks like it was cut with a rotary saw." He looked at the guys. "Easy enough to access. Every team has one."

They all got what he was saying. This wasn't someone messing around. This was a targeted attack.

"Why the hell would someone do this?" Josh asked.

"Isn't it obvious?" Ryder said. "It's probably some dick from Westvale who wanted to make sure we didn't get anywhere near the podium."

Baloo staggered back a step and looked pale, as if Ryder's theory had made him physically ill.

Teagan wasn't sure, though. "There's no way they could've done it. When we got the boats out of the shed—our locked shed—the oars were always in our sight before we hit the water. Someone must've cut it before… in the shed."

"How?" Perry asked. "You need a key card to get in."

"And we're the only ones who have key cards," Baloo said, color returning to his cheeks.

"So that means…" Teagan's eyes widened as she figured it out. "It was

one of us.”

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CAM

His conscience was clean, but Cam knew his reputation as the broody odd-man-out put him in the firing line. Then again, the number of side-eyes and whispered conversations that had taken place since they'd found the oar meant everyone was feeling the heat.

"Who the hell is behind this?" Ryder demanded when everyone was back in the room. "Show yourself, traitor."

No one leapt up to confess their sins.

"We busted our asses all season," Baloo despaired. "I can't believe one of you did this."

"How do we know it wasn't you?" Ryder shot back.

"Why would I do it?"

"Why would any of us do it?" Ryder asked.

"Guys," Teagan cut in. "Calm down. We can't let this break us apart. We're a team now, and we're still going to be a team when we figure this out." She looked over at Noah, who was standing by the whiteboard. He'd pinned every team member's photo on it. "Ready?"

Noah nodded. "We need to narrow our time frame. We were all in the boathouse between seven-thirty and eight-thirty, so the sabotage must have happened between eight-thirty and nine-thirty, after Coach's speech and before we all met up again for the race."

Teagan held a dry marker up. "So where was everyone this morning?"

"I was stretching with Noah outside," Quaid said.

"Crabby and I were taking selfies in the erg room," said Perry, nodding at Crabcatcher for confirmation. He got it.

"I was doing my prerace meditation," Ryder said.

Crabcatcher held up his hand, like he was in class. "Why are we

checking alibis? None of us wanted to lose this race—there's no motive!"

Noah nodded, back in detective mode. "On the surface there isn't. We need to look at the motive… *underneath*… the motive."

Perry made a strangled noise. "What are you even talking about?"

"All of us have our prerace superstitions, right?" Noah explained. "Our 'free speed' if you will."

Cam was curious where this was going. Free speed was kind of like the first few steps you took off a moving walkway when you had hit a good enough stride to keep it going without any effort.

"Crabby eats pasta," Noah said, tapping Crabcatcher's picture with a pointer he'd found somewhere. "Baloo does karaoke while he thinks no one's watching—"

"Irrelevant," Baloo whispered under his breath.

"And Josh always chooses the oar with the pink tape."

The snapped oar had pink tape on it.

"Maybe the question we should be asking ourselves isn't who would target the team," said Noah pensively, "but who would target Josh?"

"The hell?" Josh exploded. "Why would someone target me?"

Well, if he really wanted to know…

"Which one of you did this?" Josh demanded.

Cam knew he was innocent but prepared himself for eight sets of eyes to train themselves on him. To his surprise, everyone was looking at Ryder.

"Oh, come on!" Ryder protested. "It could have been Baloo. He's pissed at Josh for breaking up with his sister."

"True," Perry agreed semi-reluctantly. "You should've heard the rant he went on about Josh and Britney last night."

"You dumped her during the dance," Baloo bellowed at Josh, triggered by the reminder. "What is wrong with you, you psycho?"

Josh looked shocked. But didn't say anything.

"Look." Baloo turned to the rest of them. "I may be pissed, but it doesn't mean I did it." He turned to face Teagan. "What about you? You and Josh have been at each other's throats from the beginning."

"True." Teagan hadn't flinched. "We have a history."

She didn't deny it either.

Noah gave his hand a couple of taps with his pointer. "And then there's Perry's gripe…"

“What gripe?” Josh looked as bewildered as the rest of them.

“I told you that in confidence, Noah!” Perry protested.

“Time to go public, Perry.” Josh’s lip twitched, like he was only just managing to hold back his rage. Cam probably would’ve been the same if their roles were reversed. Finding out that one of your best friends hated you to the point they’d destroy the one thing you’d worked your ass off to achieve? Maybe this is what Cam had seen earlier in the changing room. Josh’s flicker of fear. Maybe he worried that the only reason people were nice to him was because he was a Regis, not because they actually liked him.

A problem Cam had never had to worry about, but from the way Josh was looking now? It wasn’t one he envied.

Perry’s eyes darted around the room. He sighed. Defeated. Pointed at his hair. “This is a one thousand one Ash Blonde.” He pointed at Josh’s hair. “That is *also* a one thousand one Ash Blonde.” He threw Josh a despairing look. “You stole my hair color! But I didn’t break the oar.”

“What about Cam?” Quaid asked. “You must be pissed about the whole stroke thing, too. Not just Ryder.”

“Thanks, man,” Cam said, shifting in his seat as a cold sweat broke out on his forehead. If Josh had told anyone about their fight this morning? He’d be the number one suspect. Even though he hadn’t been the one to cut the oar, he was burning up under the glare of suspicion. He held up his hands, protesting his innocence, then asked Quaid, “How do we know you don’t have a grudge? I’ve never seen you give Josh a piggyback.”

Quaid looked wounded. “Not for a lack of trying.” He threw a despairing look at Josh. “Why do you hate piggybacks, man?”

Crabcatcher raised his hand again. “I also have a reason to hate Josh!”

“Right,” Noah said, though you could tell there wasn’t a single person in this room who believed Crabcatcher was guilty.

Crabby wilted. “I was just feeling left out. Sorry. I mean, who could hate that jawline?”

“Apparently, all of you,” Josh muttered. He gave it a stroke, as if checking that it was still perfectly chiseled.

Noah cleared his throat. “I’m sorry, guys. Having assessed this flurry of accusations and denials, I’m calling it. Ryder’s been gunning for Josh all season. He swung first at the clambake. Got booted from stroke seat today.

His mom and grandad were both at the race today. He wanted to embarrass Josh."

Ryder looked pissed, but he stayed put, like someone who knew they were innocent. "Screw you, man. You seriously believe I'd tank the race because of a petty cousin drama?"

"But it isn't petty, is it?" Perry said. "One of you is going to be crowned king of Regis Airlines, and your grandfather is obsessed with crew."

Crabcatcher looked crushed. "I can't believe you'd stoop so low, Ryder."

"I didn't do it!"

Quaid snatched Ryder's bag from the floor. "Let's have a look, shall we?"

Ryder tried to grab it back. They tussled.

Ryder won the tussle. Held his bag to his chest, panting.

"If you're so innocent, Ryder, why be so secretive?" Quaid demanded.

"Fine," Ryder said, and threw his bag in the middle of the circle. "Go ahead. Search it."

Cam hadn't expected that.

Quaid dropped to his knees, dumped out the contents of Ryder's bag. Clothes. Sunglasses case. Deodorant.

"Happy now?" Ryder asked. "And for the record, I don't want Josh to lose. I want to beat him. In broad daylight, with everybody watching."

Ryder's mission statement registered as a muscle twitch on Josh's annoyingly perfect jawline.

"There's only one way we're going to find out the truth," Teagan said. "There's a security camera pointed at the front of the sheds. The footage goes to Coach's laptop. It'll show us who got in, who cut the oar. One of you computer whizzes needs to hack into it. Perry?"

"Me?" Perry squeaked. "I don't know how to hack a computer!"

"So YouTube it!"

"But there are so many ads!"

Teagan hard-stared him. It wasn't an option.

"Fine," he huffed.

"And the rest of you?" Teagan instructed. "Go look for the saw. Noah and I are going to process the evidence."

The team followed their cox's orders. Cam headed outside, hoping like hell the guys didn't extend their search beyond the boathouse. To his truck,

specifically. They knew he kept tools in there. Knew they had reason to believe he was the guilty party. Which is why keeping his head down as usual was the only way he might survive this.

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TEAGAN

“Hey.” Teagan found Josh in the kitchen, pulling open cupboard doors and searching through them like his life depended on it.

“No sign of a saw,” Josh said when he’d finished ransacking the last one. “But… I did find Noah’s murder weapon!” He presented her with the oyster shucker.

She didn’t take it. What was the point?

“Who do you think we’re going to see on the security camera footage?” She was worried. Really worried.

“Well.” Josh checked to make sure Noah couldn’t hear them from the open-plan kitchen. “You. Me.”

Yeah. Obviously. “But we didn’t do it. Who do you think did?”

He leaned against the counter, had a think. “Baloo? He’s madder than I thought.”

No. She didn’t believe it was Baloo.

“Could be Cam,” Josh said.

“Cam?” Rowing was everything to him. No. “Why do you think that?”

Josh put the shucker on the counter. “We kind of got into it this morning.”

Her heart sank. “About what?”

“His sunglasses were broken. I said he needed new ones, and he flipped out.”

Josh didn’t know the whole picture. She probably didn’t either, but she really couldn’t see it. “He’s been on edge lately, about a lot of stuff.” But she’d been shocked when he’d walked out on her at the dance, so… maybe? “I mean, it could make sense. Coach pulled Ryder but put you in stroke when it should’ve been Cam.”

Josh bristled. “You think Cam should be in stroke instead of me?”

Here she was again. Between a rock (Cam) and a hard place (Josh). “I didn’t mean it like that.”

“How did you mean it? And be honest.”

“Well, he deserves it.”

Josh looked pissed off. “What does he do that I don’t?”

“C’mon, Josh…” She waited for him to see it, but either he didn’t, or wanted to hear it from her. Fine. “Cam puts the team first. No ego, no personal agenda. He pulls for the boat.”

“And I don’t?”

She shrugged. She was calling it the way she saw it—from the cox’s seat. She saw things they didn’t.

“So you think I row for myself, not the team?”

She did.

“Is that how everyone sees me? You included?”

“I see you trying to prove you’re better.” Harsh, but also true.

He laughed humorlessly. “So you think I’m good enough to make out with, but not good enough for stroke?”

“That’s not what I’m saying.”

“I think it is.”

He didn’t storm off, exactly. He seemed more depressed than angry. Running after him wouldn’t help, telling him things neither of them would believe. Josh was a good rower. A great one, even. But whatever battle was playing out inside him right now probably wasn’t about his oar snapping. She used to think Josh didn’t care whether or not people liked him. But the version of him she knew now? That Josh cared. A lot. And he hadn’t deserved to have his oar cut.

Noah heaved a duffel bag out of the way. “Bunch of scofflaws. All of ’em.”

“‘Scofflaw’?” asked Teagan.

He tipped his head back in despair. “Does *no one* on this team have a vocabulary at their disposal?”

She winced in apology, working out the word’s meaning. “People who think they’re above the law?”

“Yes,” he said, sounding exasperated.

“Good word,” she said, then nudged the duffel with her toe. “Whose is this?”

“Quaid’s. He set up a speakeasy in the erg room, and the guys were partying instead of looking for the saw.”

“So you confiscated it?”

“These are the empties. I didn’t think they would recycle, so I’m doing it.” He flopped on the sofa. “Everyone hates my party.”

“No! Your party’s fun!”

“Oh, really? So given the choice between a night at Quaid’s bar or a night at my murder mystery…” He held out his hands. The choice was hers.

“I’d… do a murder mystery?”

“Liar.”

“It’s cool. Fun! It’s just… the wrong crowd.” Especially considering what it had led to.

“Great.” Noah threw up his hands in despair. “So now I can’t even read a room!”

“It’s not that, Noah.” Teagan sat down beside him. “It’s just… we’re not puzzle people, are we? The only thing all of us have in common is crew. If we weren’t in a boat together, we probably wouldn’t be friends.”

He leaned his head to the side to look at her. “You suck at pep talks.”

“But that’s what’s cool about teams. You get to meet loads of people with all sorts of different interests. People who wouldn’t be your people… *become* your people.” She gave his knee a pat. “Just give it time.”

It had taken her some time—and help from Cam—to work this out for herself.

“Thanks, Teagan.”

“You’re welcome. And we all need you today. You’re really good at this mystery stuff. If Perry can’t get into the security footage, we’ll need to figure this out ourselves. Meaning, it’s pretty much down to you.” She pulled him up off the sofa and back to the whiteboard. “Right. Where are we now?”

Noah grinned, back in the game. “So, Quaid and I were stretching outside this morning.” He took their mugshots off the board.

“Perry and Crabby were taking selfies,” Teagan continued, taking their mugshots off as well. Perry had sent them the selfies as proof. She started to take them down when Noah stopped her. “What? Do you see something?”

“It’s more what I don’t see that’s interesting.” He held out his phone.

“Explain.”

“Cam’s alibi was that he was stretching in the erg room before the race. Look. The selfies prove Perry and Crabby were there. But…”

“You can’t see Cam,” Teagan whispered, studying the photos.

“Which means…”

She’d been wrong. Josh might’ve been right. And even if he wasn’t… “Cam lied.”

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CAM

Cam had searched the boathouse's tool storage area about twenty times. Still no luck. Teagan came in, looking about as happy as he was. Miserable, basically.

"No sign of the saw."

"Okay. Umm… hey."

Uh-oh. She wasn't here about the saw.

"You know how you said you were stretching in the erg room earlier? Where Perry and Crabcatcher were taking selfies?"

"Yeah."

"Umm… they didn't see you."

"I was in the corner."

Teagan showed him some photos. He wasn't in them.

"Which corner?"

Her eyes were practically pleading with him to miraculously find evidence of himself in the photos. Holy shit. "You think *I* did it?" He expected this from the guys, but Teagan? Yeah, they weren't exactly in what you could call a good place, but this? Did she really think he was capable of sabotage?

"I don't know, Cam."

She sounded apologetic, like it pained her to be accusing him of sawing Josh's oar.

"You *have* been acting differently," she said. "You walked out on me at the dance. No one knows where you were during the sabotage. And you got in a fight with Josh. What am I supposed to think?"

"You could think I'm the Cam you know. The one who would never sabotage the team."

“The Cam I know wouldn’t pick a fight with Josh either.”

Every cell in his body felt like it was about to explode. He hated this. Hated keeping so much bottled up inside that he did stupid things that made him look guilty when all he was trying to do was get by. Do well at school. Get a shot at stroke on the team. Help his dad pay that huge bill that could shut down the business. Screw it. She said he should be more vulnerable. “You want to know what I was doing? I was selling my dad’s truck.” She rocked back, shocked. “To one of the Westvale rowers.”

“Why didn’t you just say that?”

“Because it’s no one’s business. And how did you know I got in a fight with Josh? We were the only people there.”

“He told me.”

“Right.” He got it. “You guys are pretty good friends now, huh?”

“We’re not that close…”

But…

“Close enough that he’s sharing.” He waited, but she didn’t deny it. His heart cracked in two. “You really think I’d do this to him?” Again, no answer. “You don’t know me at all.”

Her phone buzzed. She checked it, looked up at him, eyes wide. “Perry hacked into Coach’s laptop.”

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JOSH

Everyone was crowded around trying to see the laptop screen, eager to see what the security cameras would show them. Perry pressed play. Teagan appeared on the screen.

“Coxie doing her morning checks,” narrated Ryder.

They fast-forwarded a couple of minutes. There he was.

Quaid looked at Teagan. “You didn’t say Josh was there, too.”

She shrugged, like it was nothing. “He was grabbing gear.”

Everyone looked at him to check if it was true. “I needed tape and wrap.” A lie that would fly. He always needed tape and wrap before a race.

Perry fast-forwarded for what felt like ages. Twenty minutes later? Teagan left the boathouse. Two minutes later, Josh.

“That’s a long time to be getting gear,” Noah said.

Teagan, standing behind the rest of the guys like he was, shot him a guilty look. Yeah, this sucked. They were both hiding something—just not what everyone thought.

“Well,” Baloo said after a bit more scrolling with nothing to see. “I guess we’ve seen enough.”

“No.” Perry, the only one who’d seen all of the footage, stopped him. “There’s more.”

He stopped it on a frame where you could see Baloo standing outside the boat sheds.

Baloo sank back down into his chair.

A few minutes later, a guy wearing a dark jacket and carrying a Westvale gym bag appeared. The two of them disappeared into the shed together.

Josh was relieved he was off the hook, but this?

“Baloo?” Teagan was the only one brave enough to ask the question

everyone was thinking out loud. “What are you doing with a Westvale rower?”

Baloo looked at them, his kind, gentle features tight with fear. He looked like he was going to cry.

“And what are you doing with him in the boat storage?” Crabby asked.

“What do you think I was doing?” Baloo asked in a way that made it clear he hadn’t been the one who’d cut Josh’s oar.

Ryder got there first. “That guy you were texting? The one you sent the thirst trap selfies to? He’s from Westvale? You’re dating the enemy?”

Perry pulled their attention back to the video. About fifteen minutes later, Baloo walked out of the sheds by himself.

Three minutes after that? Westvale guy.

“He brought his bag,” Cam said. “He could’ve brought a saw in, cut the oar, then left.”

“I can’t believe he did this.” Baloo looked devastated. Everyone was shocked, but it was pretty clear Baloo hadn’t had anything to do with it, apart from falling for a guy on a team they all hated.

Everyone felt for him. They knew how much he’d liked that guy. How much courage it had taken to send a selfie let alone meet him in real life. As far as worst-case scenarios went? This was up there. Using Baloo, their gentle giant, to sabotage the rival team? What an asshole. The only good thing about this was the energy shift. They all felt it. They were a team again. Behind Baloo. Behind each other. They’d get to the bottom of this and if—*when*—they went to the Haverford Cup? The rulebook Westvale thought they didn’t need to follow was going to come crashing down on them. Hard.

Coach was informed. Teagan blocked the guy on Baloo’s phone. And a couple of guys went on a run to the school kitchen. Baloo had sat on the sofa throughout, still in shock.

“Hey, man.” Josh handed him the results of the kitchen raid. “The team wanted to give you this.” He held out a muffin. “Emotional support carbs.” Baloo didn’t take it. “It’s banana chocolate chunk. Your fave.”

“Leave me alone, Josh.”

He got it. Might not have a couple of months ago, but now? He

genuinely understood what it felt like to want something so bad you put everything on the line to get it, only for it to blow up in your face. “I know I’m not your favorite person right now, but I need to tell you something.”

Baloo turned his head, curious.

“I’m sorry.”

“For what? Britney?”

Yeah. And… other stuff. “I didn’t realize you were so mad. You have every right to be. You’ve always been a loyal friend to me, and, well, I’m really sorry this happened. You didn’t deserve it.” He wanted to go on. Tell him that he knew all about keeping secrets. Secrets that, if they came out, would change everything. But he couldn’t. There was too much at stake. And anyway, this was about Baloo, not him. “I know I can’t make any of this better. But I really wish I could.”

Baloo nodded, took a minute to absorb what Josh had said. “I still think you’re a piece of shit for dumping my sister.”

Josh set the muffin on the table in front of Baloo. Yeah. He knew.

“See?” he said, heading out to give Baloo some space. “We *do* agree on something.”

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TEAGAN

She found Cam outside Coach Hayden’s office. He looked up, gave her a half smile.

“Cam… I’m sorry I thought it was you.”

“I’m sorry you did, too.”

Yeah. Not her best move. She’d known in her gut that it couldn’t have been him, but with everything so topsy-turvy, she’d screwed up. Big time. “Are we okay?”

He looked at her like she’d just asked another question she should’ve known the answer to.

“I don’t know? Are we?”

At this point? She had no idea.

She waited a few minutes before going into the Great Room where the rest of the guys were going through the same exercise. Saying they couldn’t believe the team had doubted them. Getting an apology. Accepting it. So… not quite the same thing as her and Cam.

Suddenly, Noah launched out of the sofa and stood in front of the whiteboard holding his phone aloft. “There’s news afoot!”

Quaid dropped Perry from the piggyback he’d been giving him and joined the group.

“The rankings have come in after today’s race,” Noah announced. “We’re going to the Haverford Cup!”

Everyone went bananas. High fives. Backslaps. More piggybacks. Crabby even asked Baloo if he wanted to lift him up like a barbell, but Baloo said he’d take a rain check.

Perry tinged his pinky ring against a glass to get their attention. “Do you know what this calls for?” They didn’t. “A murder mystery! Noah, where

were we? What's the next clue?"

Noah's face split into the hugest smile any of them had ever seen. "Seriously?"

"Yeah," Quaid said. "Can't leave the dowager's murder unsolved."

"I'll give you a hint," Noah said, leading the guys off to another room. "The oyster shucker isn't the real murder weapon…"

Teagan's phone buzzed while she was tugging on her sweatshirt. Josh, asking her to meet in the boat store. No explanation. Like Cam, he probably deserved an apology. She'd figure out whether to give him one when she got there.

"I'm guessing you didn't text me so we could pick up on this morning's make-out session?" She gave him a light smile.

"No."

Shouldn't have bothered trying to lighten the mood.

"You know you're right about me," he said.

He had her attention again.

"I don't do what's best for the team."

"I didn't mean for it to come out so harsh."

"It's true, though," Josh said. "I'm selfish and I hurt people. Almost everyone on the team had a legitimate motive to get back at me."

"Everybody was just shocked. They all wanted someone to blame." Herself included. Teagan stepped closer. He looked like he needed a hug. Raising his hand, Josh stopped her.

"You shouldn't be with me."

"What? Because I said Cam should be in stroke?"

"No. Because I'm not a good person. You know that. From the first day you met me, you thought I was an asshole."

"I don't think that anymore." She didn't. Not at all. Conflicted? Difficult? Really, really annoying sometimes? Yes. But not an asshole. "It's different now."

"I'm not different," he said.

"What are you talking about? Can you just be honest with me, Josh?"

"You want honest?" He was talking fast now, almost desperate, like if he didn't say what he'd planned to say he might change his mind and that

would only make things worse. “We’re both on the rebound. Let’s just cut our losses.”

Teagan felt like she’d been slapped. “Wow. Okay. Thanks for the honesty.” She turned and walked out, calling over her shoulder, “Good to know how you really feel.”

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JOSH

Out on the boat dock, he could still hear the guys up in the boathouse laughing and horsing around, making Noah’s night as they tried to figure out whodunnit.

Like them, he was relieved the only mystery left to solve was a fictional one. He just wished he had a solution to his own conundrum. If you could call the decision his cardiologist wanted him to make a conundrum.

He ran back over the phone call he’d received that morning. His test results had come back. The news hadn’t been good.

He needed surgery. And until then? No physical activity.

And if he rowed for the team in the Haverford Cup?

Heart attack. Possible death.

When his dad had found him before the race, he’d prayed, harder than he’d ever prayed before, that it would be a pep talk. He should’ve known better. Regis men weren’t programmed that way. His grandfather, his dad, and now Josh—they were all like Teagan had said. Self-centered. They were manipulative, using people to get what they wanted. Something for themselves.

So he’d done what he had to do.

He dug into his tote and pulled out the pill bottle. Gave it a shake. Debated throwing it into the lake. Thought better of it.

If today had taught him anything, it was not to leave any evidence behind. He zipped up the bag, shouldered it, and headed back down the dock.

He’d never admit it, but Cam had been partly right today.

Josh *was* lucky.

Not as lucky as Cam thought, but today? Definitely.

Even if he knew deep down it was only a matter of time before his luck ran out.

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TEAGAN

Studying with Juliet was heaven. No drama. No mysteries to unravel. And super phew, no boys. Although… “Juliet? O reigning Style Queen of Easton Prep…”

“Yes, athletic one?” Juliet drawled from her current favorite study spot, a mountain of pillows fashioned into a chaise longue. “What wisdom can I offer you?”

“Your brooch. Is that… Perry’s?”

Juliet scoffed. Haughtily. “As if I’d be caught dead.”

Teagan performed a somber sign of the cross. “My condolences. When did you die?”

Juliet threw a pillow at her, then demanded it back.

“How’s it going with him?”

“Annoying,” Juliet said. What else could it be? They were talking about Perry. Then she smiled.

“So it’s going well, then. Cute.” Teagan shut her book. Her brain was too full to take in any more information.

“Can we talk about your love life?” She poked at Teagan’s bun.

No. They could not talk about her nonexistent love life. It was even messier than her bun.

Juliet gave the bun another wary poke. Teagan batted her hand away.

“What?” Juliet looked affronted. “This sad bun reeks of boy problems. Explain. Is it Cam?”

“It’s not him.”

“Oh?” Juliet smiled triumphantly. Now she would make Teagan supply her with one of her five required servings of gossip per day. Gossip, of course, being a superfood at Easton. “There’s someone else?”

Juliet could wrangle gossip out of a spy if she wanted to. “There *was* someone else. I hooked up with Josh.”

“Wow.” She clearly hadn’t seen that coming. “I cannot leave you unsupervised.”

“No need to worry. He’s firmly in the past tense.” Teagan gave a little sniff and fluffed her bun as proof. “I’m focusing on me now.” The clip holding her bun in place fell out.

“Yes.” Juliet held out a brush. “I can see that.”

Teagan’s shoulders slumped. It was too big an ask.

Juliet put the brush down, then took a breath like she was considering saying or doing something that was not her usual modus operandi: insulting people in a lofty tone. “Is this a hug situation?”

Sweet baby cheesus. Did she really look that bad? And also, no. She’d cry and Juliet would flee and then she wouldn’t have any friends left. She shook her head in thanks. “I wouldn’t do that to you.”

Juliet did it anyway, which was really, really nice of her. When it became awkward, about two seconds later, Juliet took hold of Teagan’s shoulders and held her at arm’s length. “Boys are so unnecessary.”

Yeah. They were.

Juliet released her and held out the brush. “Hygiene is.”

Boys, annoyingly, *were* necessary when you were coxing an eight boat full of them.

At least today she wasn’t in charge. Or out on the water, face-to-face with a boy she kept telling herself wasn’t remotely on her romance radar. Coach Hayden had called an erg session, but only Cam, Josh, Baloo, and Ryder were there. Coach told them to press out a 2K sprint, then left the room. No explanation about why the others weren’t there. No one bothered enough to ask.

The guys looked… intense.

Baloo hadn’t been the same since Oar-Gate. He was training hard, but not following the best fueling regime. She’d seen him shoving a couple of crumpled-up bags of potato chips into the trash when he thought no one was looking.

Ryder looked like a zombie version of himself. Rowing as if his undead

life depended upon it.

Josh was pressing out strokes in the all-hallowed zone: hitting a stroke time that took half as long as it took for the return slide. Return slides were hilariously called recovery time.

Not like this, they weren't. The effort it took to pull that hard, with exacting precision, was huge. He was sweating buckets. But doing well.

She'd seen him tossing back a pill from the same container she'd caught him with at his birthday, but when she'd asked him about it, he pulled a box of Tic Tacs out of his pocket. Didn't offer her one, though. As if he didn't care whether her breath was minty fresh.

Cam was in the zone, too. Shoulders strong, back straight, leg muscles nowhere near the dreaded shake, when you'd pushed beyond your limit and everything started quivering from the strain. He had a few streaks of oil on him, like he'd come straight from his dad's shop to training.

At least she wasn't the only one who wasn't making an effort with their appearance.

Coach Hayden came back in as one by one they finished their sprints, guzzled water and energy drinks, and panted.

"Good workout?" Coach asked.

He got a few grunts in reply.

"You're probably wondering why it's only the five of you today."

They all perked up. So there *was* a reason the others weren't here.

"The Norfolk Indoor Rowing Invitational is coming up," Coach said. "Only those with strong erg scores qualify. This year, as a bonus, a scout from the Junior National team will be attending the event."

They were hanging on to his every word.

"Cam, Josh, Ryder, Baloo?"

C'mon, Coach. Spit it out.

"You've made the cut."

The news sent Teagan rocketing off her erg straight into cheerleader mode. This was huge. *Mega*. A scout from the Junior National team could change these guys' lives if they saw in them what she did. That they could achieve more. Push harder. Do better. If only they knew how much people believed in them.

She knew her coxing and training sessions weren't the only reason the guys had improved so much, but as she met each of their hands for a well-

deserved high five, the sting of contact felt like a silent thank-you.

"Teagan?" Coach silenced the guys.

"Yup?"

"There's a girls' competition as well. You're going to be in it."

"No way!" she exclaimed.

Coach wasn't celebrating like the rest of them, but she could tell he was proud. Quietly confident. At least he wasn't trying to manifest aura points. That had been beyond weird.

When Coach put their times up on the leaderboard, the good vibes pretty much evaporated. Josh tried to give Ryder a compliment about his score—a personal best. Ryder took it the wrong way, or maybe everything out of Josh's mouth sounded like a taunt to him. Either way, he wasn't what you'd call gracious. "I guess it's just Cam I have to beat now," he said, then strutted off to take a shower.

Josh took the bait, shouting, "Enjoy this moment. It's not going to last!"

Ryder could really be stupid sometimes. Clearly beating Josh in public was not enough for him.

Not that she cared. If she'd taken note of Josh's workout, it was because she had to as the team's cox. It was her job. But outside that? She had as much interest in Josh Regis as she did in watching YouTube videos on crafting mosaics with her mother.

Coach Hayden cut Ryder's roistering short, handing him a clipboard. Doled out four more to the rest of them. "It's up to you to fill these out, all right? Do it now, so you don't forget. And remember, this is an individual competition, but you're still part of a team. We're all rooting for each other. It's a privilege to be invited. Proof you've worked hard." He gave them his no-nonsense stare, like he already knew if there was a way they could screw up this once-in-a-lifetime chance, they would. "Don't let that hard work go to waste."

Teagan sat down to fill out her form. There was no way she was going to mess up this opportunity. Not after turning down Gravenhurst.

Josh slid onto a chair next to her. "You were looking pretty good on the erg today."

"Yup."

Better than pretty good, thank you very much.

Typical Josh. Thinking he could use the same technique he'd used on Ryder to worm his way back into her good books. She was not one of his pawns anymore. She was Teagan Tao, single sculler. Ice queen.

She felt his eyes stay on her, but he eventually got the hint. Their one-time-only make-out session was covered in permafrost.

"Yeah, I guess I deserve that." He picked up his pen with a sigh. "How long am I gonna get the cold shoulder?"

She gave him a withering look she'd borrowed from Juliet's arsenal. "Life is long."

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CAM

“Cam, hold up!” Baloo pushed himself into a run, even though it was obvious he’d used up all his energy at practice. “You’re not trying to dodge me, are you?”

“No! No way.”

He could tell Baloo didn’t believe him. Ever since he’d found out the guy he’d been crushing on had fed him a pack of lies, he fact-checked everything.

“Just trying to get some more cardio in now that we’re going to Norfolk.” Sort of true. He just needed to get back to the shop ASAP. His dad was sprouting new worry lines by the minute.

“Cool,” Baloo said, reassured. “Umm, can I ask you something?”

As long as it isn’t for dating tips. “Sure.”

“I saw the competition list—not just us, everyone who’s going to be there.”

Cam saw what was coming.

“Logan’s going to be there.”

Or the Wicked Witch of Westvale, as Perry called him.

“I want to kick his ass,” said Baloo.

Cam loved his teammate’s fire. “But… he’s really good. He’s Westvale’s stroke, right?”

“Yeah, I know,” Baloo said. The tough love Cam had dealt him hadn’t tamped the flames of his fire; it had stoked them. “But *I’m* the hurt party here. Meaning, I deserve to beat him.”

“Ummm. Not so sure about your logic there, Baloo.”

Baloo pressed his hands together in supplication. “I’m begging you. I need to tap into whatever it is you’re doing to stay on top of the

leaderboard.”

Easy. He blocked everything else out and rowed. An admission he wasn’t going to make. It would only lead to a conversation he didn’t want to have eating up valuable time he couldn’t afford to lose.

“C’mon, Cam,” Baloo pleaded, misreading Cam’s hesitation. “Tell me what it takes to improve. Please?”

They were getting too close to the parking lot for comfort. Cam didn’t need to field questions about why he was riding an ancient ten-speed bike instead of driving his truck, so tried to think of the fastest way to put it. He’d give Baloo all the time in the world if he could, but the cars waiting to be repaired already had a claim on it. “Okay,” he said to Baloo.“He’s got you flustered. When you’re flustered? You’re messy. You come in hot and burn out. You start slow—can’t sync. If you want to crush this guy? Pretend he doesn’t exist.”

“Yeah, right,” Baloo said. “Not possible.”

Cam was about to suggest the trick where you imagined someone sitting in their underwear to make a situation less intimidating, then thought better of it. “Pretend he’s Josh.”

Baloo grinned. “Nice one. I can do that. Thanks, man. See you tomorrow.”

One more hour under the hood of this car, another cramming for school, then sleep. However much he could grab. He’d been working his ass off in the lead-up to tomorrow’s Rowing Invitational and needed every ounce of energy he could get.

“So? This is where you live.”

Cam knew the body attached to the familiar voice wouldn’t go away without acknowledgment.

“What do you want, Ryder?” Unless it was a million-dollar repair job, he wasn’t all that interested.

“Tomorrow’s Invitational,” Ryder said, eyes scanning the shop like he’d never seen grease or tools this close up before. Then his ice-blue eyes landed on Cam. “Looks like it’s between you and me.”

Yeah. He knew. You’d think his position on the leaderboard made this conversation unnecessary. But this was how the Regis kids rolled. Twisting

a situation to their advantage even if the writing was literally written on the wall. “Pretty sure it’s me.” He picked up his wrench, ducked back under the hood.

“Must take up a lot of time,” Ryder said casually. Too casually. “Pulling shifts here before and after school. Busting your gut at practice.”

Cam shot him a look, wished he hadn’t. Ryder was giving him an appraising look, as if trying to figure out who had more muscle mass.

“Those sneakers are getting pretty worn.”

A bit like Cam’s patience. Something Ryder, apparently, wasn’t done testing. “You help me? I’ll help you.”

Cam put the wrench down. Where was this going?

“I need the Junior Team scout looking at *me* tomorrow,” said Ryder. “What’s it going to take for you to make that happen?”

Cam stared at his teammate incredulously. “Hold up. Are you asking me to throw the race?”

Ryder dropped the casual act. “I’m asking you to name your price. What do you want?”

Cam wanted to throw him out of here, but his dad was in the office and the noise Ryder would make when he landed wouldn’t be pretty.

“An erg?” Ryder suggested. “A vacation?” He looked around for the truck, didn’t see it. “A car?”

“Get out.”

“I can go higher.”

Right. He needed Ryder to understand exactly what he thought about his offer. “You. Can’t. Buy. Me.”

Ryder’s jaw muscles started twitching and his hands balled into fists, but whatever he saw in Cam’s eyes forced him back a step. Then another. He made it to the edge of the workshop before he had the balls to speak again. “Everyone has a price, Dillinger.”

Then, like the creature of the night he clearly was, Ryder disappeared into the darkness.

His dad was on the phone when Cam headed to the office to see if he was ready to go. Whatever conversation he was having clearly wasn’t going well.

“No. No. Don’t say there’s nothing you can do because I know you could give me more time,” pleaded his dad. “I can get it, but I don’t have forty-eight thousand dollars sitting in my bank account to give you right now.”

Shit. Forty-eight *thousand*?

The guy talked for a bit. Cam slid off his coveralls watching his dad sprout more gray hairs.

“I’ve been banking with you guys for years,” his dad said. “Doesn’t that count for anything? Right. Nothing you can do. I heard you the first time.” He hung up the phone. Glared at it. “Jackasses.”

Cam flinched. His dad was not a swearer. He knew things were on a downward spiral but hadn’t realized how close the shop might be to hitting rock bottom.

He knocked on the doorframe, pulled a couple of coveralls from the laundry basket to bring home. “What’s going on, Dad?”

His dad blinked at him, readjusted his expression, but couldn’t keep the strain he was feeling hidden. “Nothing you need to worry about, son.”

They were past the point of pretending now. Ever since his dad had been forced to fire the other mechanics and add an invisible *& Son* to the business name.

“Forty-eight thousand dollars is going to take a while to put together,” he said, ignoring the flare of panic in his dad’s eyes. His gut was churning, so he knew the answer to the next question, but made himself ask it anyway. “Are we going to be okay?”

His dad gave Cam’s shoulder a couple of heavy claps. “All you need to worry about is that big race of yours tomorrow.”

Yeah, right. Like he could just forget about all of his dad’s hard work, and his, going up in flames. Or, more accurately, being repossessed by the bank.

“I want to help, Dad.”

“Just leave it, son.”

They stared at each other. Wide-eyed. His dad had never spoken to him like that before. Sharp. Angry. He must’ve seen the impact it had in Cam’s eyes because he softened, threw an arm around his shoulders, and steered them out the door. “Whatever happens with the bank, we’ll be okay. Let’s get you home now. Get you rested up so you can show that scout what

you’re made of.”

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TEAGAN

The early morning run had been a good call. Empty streets, a bright blue sky, and a crisp pace had helped burn some of the nerves about today's indoor competition.

Teagan jogged up the steps to the back door, brain making a list of the things she'd need to bring with her. She stopped short when the person who should've been in the kitchen wasn't.

"Coach Hayden?!" she gasped.

Coach Hayden froze, checked for other escape routes, couldn't find one.

"Teagan! Hello."

"What are you doing here? With your—" She threw her arm over her eyes. "With your shirt open?"

"I can explain—"

This was fifty shades of Not In My Backyard. She peeked to see if it was safe to look. Waited until he did up the top button. Which looked weird. But not as weird as finding him sneaking out of her house on a Saturday morning. She was going to be emotionally scarred for life.

He threw a panicked look up the stairs. The shower was running. He was going to have to man up and deal with this himself. "I think this is a conversation best had with your mom."

She clocked the duffel bag hanging from his shoulder. "Did you stay over? With me in the house? Has this happened before?" The questions were flying out of her—but she wasn't sure she wanted to know the answers.

"I should go," he said in lieu of answering, wisely taking the long route around the kitchen island to get to the door.

"This is so not okay!" wailed Teagan.

“Yeah.” Hayden stepped out the door, his face a mess of worry. “Therapy bill’s on me.” And off he went, leaving her with pictures she absolutely did not want to see in her brain. Especially today.

“MOOOOOOOOOM?!?!”

Juliet hadn’t appreciated the early morning SOS call for a ride to Norfolk, but when Teagan had outlined the State of Emergency that meant there was no way she or her mother would survive a half-hour car ride together, she’d accepted the mission. She dropped Teagan off at the rec center, then roared off in her orange Batmobile to thwart crimes against fashion with Perry.

Too bad she couldn’t make a citizen’s arrest for a crime of passion. Anyone else she wouldn’t care. But her *mom*? And *Coach*?

Teagan headed into the hall, hoping to avoid Coach before her race.

Hope, as her dad liked to say, was not a strategy.

He’d been right about that one.

Coach was at the registration desk. His daughter, Madison, was there, too.

She could bolt. Sneak in the back.

You can do this, Teagan, she told herself. *You can act perfectly normal in front of Coach Casanova.*

Ugh. She’d need to flush that unbidden moniker down the toilet, too.

“Nice to see you again, Coach Hayden. I love your shirt—and how it’s completely on.”

He grimaced at her. “Madison?” He gave his daughter’s back a pat. “I’ll let you handle this one. See you inside, Teagan.”

Teagan put out her hand. “Hi, I’m Teagan. I don’t think we’ve formally met. Our parents are dating.”

“Madison.” They shook hands. Madison started rifling through her pile of papers to find Teagan’s race number, casually adding, “I already knew that.”

“What? For how long?”

“Mmm.” She handed Teagan her registration tag. “A few weeks?”

“Weeks?”

Madison, who apparently did not get fazed by these kinds of things, ran her finger down a list, then smiled up at her. “So, you’re in the second race

on erg fourteen."

"Hang on." She took a beat, trying to process what she'd just heard. "WEEKS? What the hell? Why didn't they tell me?"

"Well…" Madison gave her a look. "Maybe they were worried about your reaction."

"It's a perfectly appropriate reaction. I saw your dad's abs!"

Madison shuddered. "Too far."

"Exactly," Teagan said.

"Listen." Madison was clearly drawing a line in the sand. "I'm not your enemy." She fixed Teagan with a no-nonsense look, then she held up her fingers, silently counted something off. The number of times Teagan had died inside, maybe?

"Some advice? There are five stages to parents dating again: Anger. Denial, then anger again. Then, you're *not* my mom. And finally, begrudging acceptance."

Teagan could live with that.

Madison leaned over, eyes brightening. Cam had arrived. "Hey, you," she said teasingly. "Feeling locked in? Ran up the stairs? Ate some raw eggs? Punched meat in the freezer?"

Cam laughed. "I'm cutting you off from the *Rocky* marathons."

They shared a laugh, like old friends.

Teagan tried to hide the sting of pain she felt, not knowing if she and Cam would ever share witty banter again.

"Excellent," Madison said, plucking his number out of her pile. "First race at erg ten. You've got this, Dillinger."

"Good luck out there, Cam," Teagan said.

"Thank you." He gave her a nod, shared a fist bump with Madison, then headed off without a second look.

"How long have you guys been friends?" asked Teagan.

"I was there for his bowl-cut phase."

She would've liked to see that. Not as much as she wanted to earn back his trust. "We used to be friends, but now he barely talks to me. You have any advice on how I could fix it?"

Madison looked sympathetic. "Look, he's going through his own thing. It's him. Going lone wolf instead of asking for help. He just needs time."

It made sense. She could be like that, too. But if there was any way to

speed up the clock, she wished she knew it.

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JOSH

Josh put his head on his steering wheel, waiting until his pounding heart slowed down. He unzipped his duffel, unearthed a bottle of pills, told himself a few lies, then forced himself out of the car and headed toward the rec center.

His dad had reclaimed his throne at Regis Airlines and had made it clear it was Josh's turn to stage his own coup: coming first on the leaderboard.

A few cars down, he stopped short, tucked himself behind an SUV.

Shit.

Baloo was talking to the Westvale guy he'd been dating. Or trying to date.

The Westvale guy looked mad at first, then confused. He couldn't see Baloo's face or hear what they were saying. Should he intervene? He ran over the last few weeks, a reminder that keeping his head down was probably the better option. Everything he'd tried to steer in a different direction lately had gone off course. Plus, Baloo was still, rightfully, angry about the Brit thing. He got it. Sort of. Sibling loyalty. Something that didn't extend to cousins.

Whatever they were talking about, it didn't look like they were reaching a peace accord. Baloo shot the Westvale guy a look of disgust over his shoulder as he went off.

Good. Okay. He had this. That was one hurdle down anyway.

The second hurdle popped up just inside the rec center.

Ryder and his mom, Karina, were in line at the check-in. True. He could've left them to it. Waited until they'd left. Avoided the inevitable conflict.

But Karina had made a real show of rubbing her dad's face in the fact

that she'd gotten his job—flipping the tables on their lifelong rivalry.

He might be a selfish jerk, but Richard Regis was still his dad. Still the guy Josh was busting a gut to please. Making it no surprise that he hadn't bowed out of the game, graciously conceding a game well played.

Nope. He'd gone underground, pulled a few strings, rubbed his hands together, and done what Richard Regis did best. Skulduggery.

Karina was pointing out the coach from Georgetown to Ryder as Josh got in line behind them. "Make sure you mention you're applying to his alma mater," she told her son.

"Obviously," Ryder said.

"Yeah, me, too," Josh cut in. "Who isn't applying to Georgetown? I can hear the call of the Potomac already."

Ryder scowled, then made a weird show of looking around for someone. "Where's your dad, Josh? Didn't want to see you lose again?"

Don't rise to it, Josh. Stay frosty. "He's overseas on business. Closing a deal. Something about transferring an underling to Rotterdam?"

As soon as he'd reclaimed his job, his dad had gotten Karina transferred to Rotterdam. Sounded cool. Living in Europe. But they all knew what it really was: a demotion.

Karina shot daggers at him while Ryder got his stuff and headed into the hall. "May the best man win," Josh called after them with a smile. It dropped away fast. Nothing about his life was giving him the feels these days.

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TEAGAN

One lap around the athletic center was enough to pull focus. She'd stretch out, do a warm-up, get in the zone—

"Teagan."

She glared at Coach Hayden.

"Teagan, listen." He'd read her body language—not interested—but plowed on anyway. "I know we're going to have to deal with what happened this morning at some point, but today? Here and now? I'm your coach. And you'll treat me like one."

"I'm pretty sure I'm the one who gets to decide that."

He shrugged out a fair enough. "Okay. But your coach has intel on your competition. Would you like to hear it?"

Obviously. But she was busy sending out Distinctly Unhappy vibes. Ha. They could glare this out. *Orrr* they could pick it up later when her chances of putting her rowing career back on track weren't dangling in the balance.

"Intel. Please," she added, because her mother, who had slept with him, had raised her to be polite. They would definitely be having words later.

"Good." He held up the notebook he put stats in. "No surprise, Gravenhurst are expected to take first and second positions. There's an up-and-comer from Claremont to watch for, but if you keep your pace on your third five hundred, you've got a shot at taking that top spot."

"Okay." Good. Yeah. She liked those odds. Had needed the intel. "Thank you."

"You're welcome."

"This doesn't make up for smashing my mom."

Hayden winced, like he'd smelled a skunk. "Hearing that is punishment enough."

Fair. She hadn't painted a pretty picture of what had, presumably, been a good date night. Now that she thought about it, her mom had been a lot happier lately. But there had to be ground rules. "No PDA, she's home by eleven, and I'm up at six, so if you're sneaking out, it better be earlier."

"Deal." He nodded, satisfied. No need for a handshake.

"One more thing, and this is really humiliating for me to ask so don't make a big thing about it, okay?"

"Go ahead."

"Do you know where she is? She's not answering her phone. She said she'd be here."

He shook his head. "Sorry. But I'm pretty sure if she does call… *when* she calls…" he amended, "you'll be the one whose phone rings."

Good answer. And a good coach. But the other stuff? *Bleurgh*.

Truce in place, she accepted Coach's invitation to sit with him and Ryder's mom to watch the guys' race.

She hunted her teammates out among the rows of ergs, with judges walking between them. Coach spotted them first. "Looks like Cam's already caught the scout's eye."

"Or Ryder," his mom interjected.

Yeah. Maybe. They were both good. But Coach's lack of response indicated there was something else they agreed on. Cam was the one to watch today.

She watched as he and Ryder exchanged a weird look Teagan couldn't interpret, but Cam's face transformed into his blinkered zone too soon for her to figure it out.

Uh-oh. Baloo was staring daggers at the Westvale guy. Snapchat wouldn't light up with their shirtless selfies anymore. Poor Baloo. He deserved so much better.

She spotted Josh strapping his feet on to the erg. He was in his own world from the looks of things. Eyes not lifting once to find a friendly face in the crowd. Which made her heart ache almost as much as it had when she'd caught that glimpse of "normal Cam" at check-in.

Madison jogged over and squished herself between Teagan and Coach—wise—just as the official moderating the event did a quick mic check.

The room fell silent. The tension was palpable.

"Rowers, pick up your handle."

Twenty handles whirred into position.

C’mon, Cam. You’ve got this.

“Sit ready,” called the moderator. “Attention! GO!”

It was hard to know where to focus. The leaderboard tracking the rowers’ progress, or the rowers themselves.

Ryder’s name flew to the top of the board straight away.

“Keep it up, Easton!” Coach Hayden called. A reminder that in less than ten minutes they’d be a team again.

“Go, Ryder!” Karina shouted.

Baloo, who was closest to them, was pushing hard. So was Logan. Not hard enough.

Teagan cupped her hands to her mouth. “GO, BALOO! FLY LIKE AN EAGLE!”

Coach Hayden shook his head. “He’s pushing too hard. He’ll burn out trying to keep that pace.”

He was right. She glanced at the leaderboard, watched Baloo’s name drop. Saw Josh’s name shoot past it, closing in on Cam and Ryder.

Josh’s face was tight, tense. Too tense. She’d seen him straining before, gritting his teeth, pushing through the pain to hold a pace, but this was different. He wasn’t reacting to the muscle burn in the way he normally did.

“Josh’s losing steam.”

Ryder saw it, too. Pushed harder, faster, like the two of them were in some weird Marvel film, and Ryder, who’d been forced to stand in his cousin’s shadow all his life, was literally draining Josh’s energy stores. He was rowing stronger than he ever had before. Behind Teagan, his mom was going wild. The leaderboard continued shuffling names.

Teagan shook her head, not believing what she was seeing.

Josh had fallen to tenth place. He wouldn’t be getting an invitation to the Junior National team. Not now. Maybe not ever.

Coach shook his head, bewildered. Caught Teagan’s eye and pointed at Ryder and Cam, who were pretty much rowing in sync. Solid. Strong. Steady. And fast. “It’s a two-man race now.”

Their names flipped back and forth on the leaderboard faster than an Olympic Ping-Pong volley.

Five hundred meters to go.

Ryder.

Cam.

Ryder.

Cam.

She felt sick with nerves. Forced herself to watch the rowers.

Cam was in his element. He could pull ahead. Keep himself in the number one position, get noticed, like he deserved. Everyone on the team trained hard, but Cam had done it fastidiously, noticing his faults, correcting them, pushing himself to another level, fine-tuning until he was ready to move to the next.

He glanced up, caught her eye. She willed him to know how much she wanted this for him. How much she believed in him. How deeply she cared for him.

His name passed Ryder's.

The two of them glanced at each other. Ryder looked pissed off, like Cam had laid down a royal flush after successfully bluffing at a high-stakes game of cards. Cam held his poker face…

And then, a falter.

Ryder's grin as he finished the last few meters was pure triumph. Like he'd pulled a five of a kind out of his hat—the only hand that could beat Cam's royal flush.

This race was meant to be played with a straight deck, not wild cards. There were judges and officials everywhere. The results had to stand up to the highest levels of scrutiny. No funny business. No preferential treatment. No cards slipped up sleeves.

Cam slid to a standstill, glanced up at the leaderboard, and dropped his head, as if seeing it had drained away any remaining energy. Teagan looked up at the board again, willing it to change. But no. Cam's final time was slower than Ryder's. Both of their times were slower than the personal bests Cam had been hitting for weeks.

He sat there, motionless, while the rest of the rowers finished their races.

What just happened, Cam?

He could've won this. Be talking to the scout who was leading Ryder away for a chat. She'd seen Ryder pull ahead with her very own eyes, but she couldn't shake the feeling that something was off.

Madison and Coach looked as confused as she felt. Coach was happy for Ryder, as an Eagle, but she could see he was disappointed for Cam. Had

wanted it to go another way.

Cam finally looked up, stared at Ryder and the scout for a minute, then unstrapped his feet and headed for the locker room.

She didn’t care if they weren’t really talking. She was going to squeeze the truth out of him.

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CAM

He’d heard Teagan calling his name from the locker room door, hadn’t answered. Knew she’d come in anyway. It was one of the things he liked about her. Seeing a barrier, deciding it wasn’t. It was also one of the things he didn’t like about her. Today anyway.

“Hey, Cam.”

Her voice was gentle. Kind. Not disappointed like it should’ve been. Would be if she knew the truth.

“What happened out there?”

He’d lost. Not just to Ryder. He’d lost his moral compass. His dignity. His pride that he did things the way his dad did: honestly.

She was waiting for an answer. He couldn’t give her one. Not the one she wanted anyway.

He shrugged. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Cam.” She wasn’t buying it. No surprise there. “You’ve been hitting under 6:20 for months. It was yours. And then you just…”

Handed it to Ryder?

“Quit,” she said.

He pulled his sweatshirt over his head. Didn’t look at her when his head poked through. “Guess I choked.”

“No, sorry,” she said. “You didn’t choke. Not when an invitation to the National tryouts was on the line. That’s Olympic track.”

Both of them knew how badly he wanted that. More than just about anything. Just about being the important part of that sentence.

“Did you throw the race?”

“Mind your own business,” he snapped, shocking both of them. Him for admitting it, her for getting it right. He pulled a bunch of stuff out of his bag

and shoved it back in again. It was stupid, but it gave him a reason not to look into her eyes and see what he already knew.

"*Cam!* " Teagan persisted. "A bad score will follow you for the rest of your career. Ryder's out there talking to the scout when the person they should be talking to is you. You get that, right?"

"Of course I do!" It was all he could do to keep himself together. Teagan rattling off things he already knew wasn't going to change anything.

"Then why?" She sounded so sad. Sadness ranking around the same level as disappointment in terms of things he hated making people feel. "Please, tell me why you did this."

He didn't have to tell, didn't want to. It wasn't like he could feel worse than he already did. "I did it because there are some things that are more important than this race."

"Like what?"

"My family. The shop's about to go under and I needed the money."

Teagan went quiet, absorbing what he'd said, then piecing together the pieces of the puzzle. "Someone paid you to throw the race, didn't they?"

He didn't bother to nod.

"Ryder. Wasn't it? Oh, Cam."

He could tell she didn't get it. She felt bad for him, but even knowing what she did now, couldn't understand why he'd done it.

"There had to be a better solution."

If there had been? He would've done it. He knew she wouldn't get it.

Rowing was the most important thing in the world to Teagan. The thing she prioritized above everything else, like it was a sacred act. The one thing she did in life that made her feel whole. Pure.

Up until now, she'd thought it was something they shared.

He knew she would have given Ryder the answer he had when he'd come to the shop. No way. But she wasn't standing where he was. Watching everything his dad had worked for teetering on the brink.

"It was forty-eight thousand dollars, Teagan. That's how much my dad owes. If not? He loses everything. How was I supposed to get that kind of money?"

She shook her head, his predicament finally beginning to register. "I don't know."

Not that easy, was it? Finding a solution to a problem like that. Standing

here watching her try to come up with an answer when it was too late wasn't an option. "So why don't you go focus on our own race, okay?"

He shouldered his bag and left, charged past groups of guys sharing times and war stories. He caught a glimpse of Baloo talking to someone from Westvale, but hurried past them, too.

The sprawling woodland beyond the rec center offered him somewhere to take some deep breaths and disappear for a while. Not that the fresh air would help. The only scent filling his nostrils right now was the stench of his own self-loathing.

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TEAGAN

“Madison!” Teagan jogged over to the registration desk, relieved to see an ally. Future stepsister?

Ugh, too soon. Her dad was still out there somewhere, wasn’t he?

“Hey. What’s up?”

“I need a favor.”

Madison held up her hands. “Our parents might be bedfellows, but I don’t think we’re there just yet.”

Like she’d thought. Too soon. But not for this. “It’s for Cam. You can’t ask why—just know that I wouldn’t be asking if it wasn’t important. You saw what happened with him…?”

Madison cricked her neck, concerned. “What can I do?”

“I need you to put me on the same erg Cam raced on.”

It wasn’t the best plan in the world. But kind of like Cam, it was the only one she had. After Madison fulfilled her part of it, Teagan headed to erg 10, adjusted her blister tape, pulled up one foot for a quad stretch. Did the other side. Dropped into a lunge beside the erg and slipped the strip of blister tape she’d just pulled off into the flywheel. The round disc that fed the steel chain attached to the rowing handle.

She strapped herself on to the erg, pushed out a couple gentle pulls, felt the tape connect as she’d hoped.

It was probably the stupidest thing she’d ever done. And that was saying something considering she was surrounded by top rowers from Gravenhurst. A team she would’ve been part of if Cam hadn’t opened her eyes to what it really meant to be part of one. He’d called it months ago when Quaid landed everyone in detention. Sometimes you did things you wouldn’t normally do, to prove to your team you were one of them, that you

had their back no matter what. At least this wouldn't be landing everyone in detention.

Aura points!

"All rowers—" came the announcement. "Pick up the handle."

She'd worried she'd feel sick right now. Maybe actually be sick. But every part of her was playing along. Shoulders at the ready. Back straight. Arms and legs itching to feel the burn of exertion.

"Sit ready…" the race official called. "Attention… GO!"

Her strokes were strong, recovery beats a touch longer. She'd caught a glimpse of Coach before the race but hadn't risked an actual look. Or at Madison, who had somehow convinced Cam to come and watch.

They were allies now.

She glanced at the leaderboard. Like Coach Hayden had said, she was riding the tails of the top two Gravenhurst rowers and the rower from Claremont. Her competitive streak kicked in, made her push harder, but she could feel more resistance in the cable with every pull.

Her heart was feeling it, the rest of her, too. Lungs, legs, and arms burning. She dug deep, then dug in. Had to push on even though she was beginning to hear the whine of ever-increasing tension coming from the flywheel as the tape dug in, gumming up what should be a smooth, steady cadence. She didn't bother looking at the leaderboard when the first Gravenhurst rower punched the air. Or the second.

Catch.

Drive.

Finish.

Recover.

Catch.

Drive.

Finish.

Recover.

And then it was over. She'd placed twelfth. She gave herself a minute to get her breath back, then put Phase Two of the plan into action.

Coach Hayden and a few of the racing officials were standing in a circle around the erg she'd ridden.

“What happened?” Cam asked.

She shook her head. “Something was wrong with the erg.” She didn’t chance a look at him. “It probably affected your race as well.”

Cam figured it out. “Teagan… what did you do?”

Note to self: Never play poker with Cam.

“Nothing.”

Coach jogged over. “Teagan, you were right. The judges determined there was an obstruction on the drive train. They’re taking the erg out of the rest of the heats.”

She ignored Cam’s look. And Madison’s. Kept her eyes on Coach’s face. Where they belonged.

“What about our scores?” Cam asked.

Coach Hayden shook his head. “You can’t race again today. You wouldn’t have the energy. But they’re going to strike the scores you had from the record.”

Cam’s reaction wasn’t exactly jubilant. But she could tell he wasn’t mad either. Madison shot her a grin from behind her dad. She was clearly a very wise girl. Hopefully they would be friends one day.

“I’m sorry, guys,” Coach Hayden said. “I know you wanted to impress the scout. But it is what it is. You’ll have a chance to re-row at a time set by the President of the Jury.”

“Okay.” It was more than she’d expected. A clean slate and a do-over. “Thanks, Coach.”

When Cam yanked her into a room, walls covered in Boy Scouts posters, he hadn’t done it to show his gratitude.

“What the hell, Teagan? You shouldn’t have done that.”

What? Saved his bacon? “You were about to throw away everything you worked for!”

“That was my choice! You shouldn’t have done this. Thrown away your chance to impress the scout.”

“That was my choice to make.”

He charged the wall and punched it, furious. “I told you to stay out of this.”

She was as pissed as he was now. She marched over and met him eye to

eye. “You said there are more important things than rowing. You were right. *You’re* more important.”

The air felt charged. Popping with heat and tension. It was hard to tell if it was fueled by love or rage. Probably both. He moved in closer, like he was going to snarl something right up in her face… or kiss her?

She dipped her eyes, then lifted them to his again, hoping it would be a kiss.

“You need to stay out of my mess,” he snarled, then left the room, taking the oxygen in it with him.

He’d walked out on her twice now. Why couldn’t he see that all she’d been trying to do was show him that she cared?

Juliet was wrong.

Boys weren’t unnecessary.

They should be outlawed.

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JOSH

All he had to do was make it to the car. He could do this. His heart was telling him otherwise, making him wish he'd dumped those stupid pills into the lake. It was too late now.

Two more steps. One. Two. See? Victory. Now to open the door.

"You're a goddam liar!" Josh's heart took another hit when he saw Baloo charging at him like a hurricane. "You lied to my *face*."

"Baloo! What are you talking about?" He knew. Could see it written all over the guy's face.

"The oar."

Just like the pills he shouldn't have taken, the lies he'd told had come back to bite him in the ass. He needed to sit down. He needed air.

"You cut the oar and let Logan take the hit for it."

He tried to open the car door, but Baloo's hand shot out to stop him.

No. No. He needed to sit down. His chest felt tight now. Too tight.

"Move," he said to Baloo. "I've got to get in there."

Baloo didn't budge.

His brain was starting to feel fuzzy. Air. That would fix it. He'd just breathe in some air.

"You watched me break up with him, Josh. You're heartless!"

"It's not what you think. I wanted to tell you." He had. He really had. If Baloo knew the whole picture, had any idea the pressure he was under—

"Hey!" Teagan ran up. "What's going on?"

Baloo was staring at Josh so intensely there were probably lasers coming out of his eyes. It would explain why his chest hurt so much.

"Baloo?" Teagan's voice was gentle, calm. "Come on. Give Josh some space."

Baloo took a couple steps back, but he wasn't any less angry. "You know what you did, Josh. And soon, everyone else will know it was you who sabotaged our race."

He stalked off.

Not good. Not good at all. Somehow he managed to get the car door open, his butt on the seat.

Teagan climbed into the passenger seat. "What is he talking about?"

"Teagan…" He lolled his head to the left so he was facing her. "Get out."

"No. Not until you tell me what's going on."

If Teagan wouldn't get out, she'd need to come with him. He knew he shouldn't be driving. But he also knew he needed to put as much space between him and Baloo and the disastrous race as possible. Josh turned on the ignition and sped out of the parking lot.

"What was Baloo talking about?" Teagan asked. "Did you cut the oar?"

"Why is everyone always on my case?" he snapped. Couldn't she see it was taking all the brain matter he had to keep the car in the right lane?

"Did you or didn't you?" she pressed. "Answer me."

"Everyone wants a piece of me," he heard himself saying. No matter how fast he drove, he couldn't get away from his real self. The one he buried on a daily basis and who had finally cracked under the strain. "Why does everyone need me to do something I can't do?"

"Josh." Teagan sounded worried. Scared even, but he had to drive out the Josh who could never make his dad happy, never please his grandfather, be friends with his cousin. Have fun with a girlfriend. "Nothing is ever enough!"

"Josh." Teagan was pleading with him. Her voice sounded far away. Like they had a bad phone connection even though she was sitting right next to him. "I don't think you're okay."

No. He was not okay. But Regis men never admitted to weakness.

"I'm fine," he said, like a good little Regis. "I have to be fine. I have to be fine. I have—" He heard Teagan scream and then… nothing.

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CAM

The weight Cam thought would've lifted by now only felt heavier now he was home.

He dropped his bag on the shop floor, sank into one of the office chairs, and tried to make sense of the day's events. He needed to get his head straight before he saw his parents.

A knock sounded on the office door.

Dad.

If hearts could sink and lift at the same time, his was trying to do it.

"You're home." His dad gave him an expectant look. "How'd it go?"

He shook his head, didn't bother to sugarcoat it. "Not great." He surprised himself when Teagan's version of events came out of his mouth. The public version anyway. "There was a problem with my erg and my time was scratched."

"Mmm…" His dad pulled up another chair. "Listen. I wanted to talk to you. I got a notice from the bank an hour ago."

Cam braced himself. This was it.

"It said a deposit of forty-eight thousand dollars went into the account. Do you know where it came from?"

"It was from a repair I did." When he'd thought this explanation up earlier, it had sounded believable enough. Out loud? Not so much.

"Son, if we had a forty-eight-thousand-dollar repair, I'd know about it. Cam… what have you done?"

A whole lot of things he wasn't proud about.

"Are you going to get in trouble for this?" his dad pressed.

"No. It's nothing like that. The money's for the family. We can save the shop."

“That’s not your job. You don’t have to save anything.”

“But I want to!”

“No, Cam!” His father shook his head. “I’m your father. That’s *my* job.”

Cam saw it now. The mistake he’d made when he’d blown up at Teagan. He’d hidden his shame in a mask of frustration and anger when all she’d been trying to do was help.

“Dad, I learned everything I know about how to take care of a family from you. That’s why I did it.” If his dad told him to return it today, he’d do it, but only if it meant the two of them would be good again. “Was I wrong?”

“No, son.” His dad’s frustration had ebbed away. And the shame. Cam could see he understood now that he’d done this out of love. “Cam, it’s just… I never wanted this to be your burden.”

“Is the money enough?”

“It’s enough, Cam. It’s enough.” He stood, gestured to Cam to do the same. He pulled him into a tight hug. The kind where you could feel the other person’s heartbeat. His dad’s was steady and true. Just as it had always been. When he released him, his dad was smiling, but all business. “And, son? Never do that again.”

It was too late to head out on the water, but after talking with his dad, Cam still felt restless so he did some work. Tinkering with a car that had a mystery knock or malfunction was his way of calming his mind. He puzzled over the fault, figured it out, realigned this part or that, ensuring every element of the vehicle worked in harmony… like a rowing team. Only made of metal, not attitude. So, no high-drama shouting matches.

As he lifted the car’s hood, he thought about everything that had happened today. His dad’s shop had been on the line. The only way he’d had to fix it would have destroyed his Olympic dream. Teagan had stepped in to fix it, the way he had with his dad. He needed to apologize, find a way to thank her for what she did. She’d risked her future for his, the same way he’d risked his for his dad.

They were both idiots. Idiots with big hearts and the best of intentions. But Teagan had come to his rescue in an emergency. It’s who she was. Someone who saw possibility where others only saw insurmountable brick

walls. And it was time to let her know how he really felt about her.

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TEAGAN

It took a minute to get her bearings. She was in Josh's car. Her head hurt. They weren't moving. Josh had been driving like a maniac— "Josh!" He was alive, groggy, and confused, face covered in sweat, but he was alive. Thank god.

"What happened? Where are we?" muttered Josh.

"You blacked out and we went off the road."

"What?" He was out of it. Staring at her like something was— She put her hand to her forehead. It felt sticky. Blood. Not much. She'd live. Josh, on the other hand, looked ashen.

"Are you okay?"

"Your head…"

"I hit it on the dash, but I'm fine." Her heart was racing and she was terrified, but he didn't need to know that. "Are you okay?"

"I'm so sorry, Teagan."

He was talking like he was drunk. But alcohol didn't explain whatever was going on here. "I think you need to go to a hospital." This was not a problem she could fix. If the car wasn't too damaged, she could drive them there. No. That was stupid. She was a nervous wreck. "I'm calling 911." She climbed out of the car. Josh got out, too.

"No." He stumbled toward her. "Wait."

"Josh, this is serious." She wasn't talking about the car. It wasn't great either. But it was the least of her worries.

"Oh shit." Josh had worked his way around to where they'd hit the tree. "It's really bad."

Not as bad as he was. He was spiraling. She'd never seen anyone like this before. Was this how her dad had felt when he realized the FBI was

onto him? Powerless to stop his life from being stripped away in front of his wife and daughter.

Josh stumbled again. She caught him, then lowered him to the ground. “Josh, we’ve gotta call someone. If you black out again—”

“No!” He crawled away from the car, propping himself up on the curb.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m thinking!”

They needed an ambulance. Now. “What is there to think about?”

His breathing was labored. Like it was taking all the energy he had to take in oxygen. All of a sudden, she got it. “You’re sick, aren’t you? Those pills I saw you taking at the party—” Her brain raced through the past few weeks, trying to understand what was happening now. When his hand clutched his heart again, everything fell into place. “The sabotage. Was it because of this? What’s happening?”

He nodded heavily. “I have a heart condition. It’s getting worse.”

“Are you going to have a heart attack? Do your parents know?”

His face filled with despair. “I can’t tell them. They can’t know that their son’s…” He choked on whatever he was going to say, like finishing the sentence would destroy the fraying threads that were barely holding him together.

“What?”

“Defective.”

No. There could not be a parent alive who would think like that. “They won’t think that. They’ll understand.”

He laughed. It sounded eerily similar to Juliet’s standard response whenever Teagan pushed back on something Juliet said about her parents who, to be fair, never showed up no matter how hard she tried to get their attention. A laugh that said, *Oh, Teagan. You’re so naive*.

“They only love me when I win,” Josh said, confirming she’d gotten it wrong. “When you fail in my family? The sun stops shining on you. When Ryder got stroke seat? Grandad gave him my internship. Now he’s going to make the National team and I’m”—he swung his head toward the car—“sitting next to my messed-up birthday present.” His voice sounded cold now, like he was bracing himself for a world of pain. “What do you think’s going to happen now?”

She didn’t know. Josh probably didn’t either, but he clearly thought he

could still turn this around.

“I know it’s dysfunctional, but please, Teagan. I still don’t want to let my dad down. I know I can make him proud of me if I have a bit more time.”

Meaning he wanted the smashed car, the pain in his heart, and probably a whole bunch of other things he’d kept secret to stay that way. Hidden.

“I get that.” She did. But a crumpled bumper was not the same thing as a heart defect. “You *have* to see a doctor *and* tell your parents. You could seriously injure yourself, Josh.”

Josh’s desperation to prove to his parents he was worth loving made Teagan feel so sad. The bar was so much lower with her mom. Ella loved Teagan simply because she existed.

“Josh? Doctor? Honest talk with your parents?”

“Yes. Yes,” Josh said. She wasn’t sure she believed him, but he seemed more himself now. His breath was coming more steadily and there was some color in his cheeks. He was more clear-eyed, too. Not unreachable the way he had been before the crash, like he’d splinter into a thousand pieces. “I just… You know Easton’s hosting the Haverford Cup. My grandad will be there with his buddies and… I want to show my family my best before I tell them.”

It wasn’t a great idea. Or even a good one.

She was still feeling the sting of truth from Cam’s anger. That she had involved herself in something only knowing part of the story. She didn’t want to make the same mistake again.

He did look much better, as if his emotions had played a larger role in the incident than anything physical. But still…

“Promise me you’ll go to the doctor…”

He crossed his heart. “I will.”

“I’m holding you to that, okay? Now, give me the keys.”

“Why?”

“I know how we might be able to buy you some time. And I’m driving.”

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CAM

Ha! Cam Dillinger, champion car mechanic, future engineer, does it again. Repair complete, he'd high-five himself if it was possible. He unplugged the diagnostics handheld from the car he'd been working on and locked it away with the rest of the expensive equipment. It wasn't crazy late, but bed was calling. It'd been a *long* day.

A pair of headlights flooded the forecourt with light as a car pulled in. *Ugh.* Seriously? The shop was obviously closed, apart from him being there. And the lights being on.

The engine sounded expensive.

Probably one of the seaside mansion people up for the weekend. Some of them couldn't get it through their heads that Eagle's Cove wasn't a 24/7 kind of place like Manhattan. Or that local business owners weren't their personal staff.

But even after Ryder's bank transfer, it wasn't as if the shop was rolling in it. The least he could do was book them in.

He shielded his eyes from the light, listening to the engine for clues as to why they were here. Nothing obvious. The driver killed the engine, the headlights.

He dropped his arm. Ah. Looked like someone drove their fancy car into something. Not a huge something, but—

"Teagan?"

She looked stressed but like she was handling it. The way she seemed to be able to handle anything life threw at her. "I need a favor."

The passenger door opened. Josh Regis climbed out of it. He looked like he'd been buried alive and dug back up again.

Definitely not the cocksure golden boy Cam was used to seeing.

Cam already knew he'd say yes—it was Teagan—but he'd need more information first.

"Right." He pulled a tarp over the car, shielding it from lookie-loos. "It's not as bad as it looks. It'll take a couple of days to fix." But before he did anything? Questions. "How did you get in a car accident? Why should I help you?" If it was only Teagan they were talking about, it'd be a no-brainer. He'd start working now. But he was getting those weird couple vibes from them again and even though he knew he'd screwed up his own chances with Teagan, he wasn't over the moon about seeing them together. Or particularly happy about aiding and abetting them in whatever it is they were up to. Which led to his third question. "And why do you want me to keep this secret?"

Teagan shot a look over her shoulder at Josh. He'd hung back when they'd pulled the car into the shop and was lurking at the entrance. Hadn't said a word. All of it was super weird.

"I can't tell you," Teagan said in a rush. "Not because I don't want to. It's because it's not my story to tell."

Which meant it was Josh's. He was looking at Teagan in an intense way that was making Cam uncomfortable. Cam lowered his voice. "Are you safe?"

"Yes."

He believed her. "Is he in trouble?"

"He will be if anyone finds out about this."

He didn't like this. Not if Josh was forcing her to beg a favor on his behalf. "Are *you* asking me for help… or *him*?"

"I am." Her answer was solid. "And I wouldn't be asking you if it wasn't important."

He gave his hair a scrub, not sure which way to go. If this really was a favor for Teagan…

"You don't owe me anything," Teagan said, reading his mind.

"I kind of do." Meaning he'd already made his decision. "I'll take care of it."

"Thank you."

"But if it happens again, don't come to me to bail out your shitty

boyfriend.”

“He’s not my boyfriend.” She looked surprised he’d even thought it.

“I’m not.” Josh stepped out of the shadows, looking more the guy Cam was used to seeing. Used to other people sorting out his problems. “I’m just a shitty friend.”

The declaration had a physical effect on Josh, stripped away the bravura and devil-may-care attitude. The guy he was looking at right now seemed genuine. Real. Vulnerable. Like he was carrying too many burdens and was close to getting crushed by the weight of them.

Something Cam could relate to. Still didn’t mean he liked the guy.

“Thank you.” Josh nodded at the car. “For doing this. Whatever it costs, I’ll cover it.”

“It’s a favor for Teagan,” Cam said. They weren’t suddenly besties now. That kind of trust had to be earned.

Josh nodded and stuck out his hand. “I won’t forget this.”

None of them would. But something told him Josh was being sincere. About fixing the car anyway. What happened in the future? Didn’t matter. This was the here and now. He shook his hand. At the end of the day, they were all on the same team.

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TEAGAN

Ice cream or a bath? Both?

Neither.

One look at the kitchen told her she'd aimed way too high.

Apparently, she wasn't the only one who'd had a busy day. Her mom and Juliet had, too.

"Ummm… I like the new decor." There were piles of serving bowls and platters and enormous pepper mills covering every surface.

Her mom and Juliet looked up from the kitchen island, faces streaked with food, and grinned.

"Why does it look like a Crate and Barrel warehouse in here?"

Juliet presented her with a silver-dollar-sized foodstuff. "Eat."

"What is it?"

Juliet's eyes narrowed, like it was obvious, but told her anyway. "Yukon Gold rosti with wild salmon caught and smoked by a Northern Territory Inuit tribe who donate their proceeds to education. Free-range, organic, grass-fed Lakenvelder crème fraiche"—she ran out of air, sucked in some more—"and dill. From the earth. Mother Earth."

Ella gave her a round of applause.

Did Teagan have a moral obligation to free her friend from her mother's clutches? Probably not. Juliet set fire to things to get people's attention but there wasn't a whiff of smoke in the air.

Teagan eyed the canapé Juliet was trying to airplane into her mouth.

Her mother translated. "Tiny hash browns with salmon and a bit of green stuff on top. Edible green stuff."

Juliet popped two into her mouth, giving a little groan of pleasure when she'd finished chewing.

“I’m guessing this isn’t for the Crab Shack.” Teagan took a bite of her canapé. It was good. Really good.

“We’re catering the Haverford Cup!” announced her mom.

“Seriously?” That was huge. “Congrats. How? Why? Tell me everything.”

Her mom shrugged like it was no big thing. “I was getting ready to come see your competition—”

“I wasn’t, but I was here,” Juliet said, like it was an important plot point.

“Then Richard Regis came over—”

“Josh’s dad? What the—”

“Yes, the one who fired me at Josh’s birthday party. Not a charming man. His poor wife.”

“Total douche,” Juliet added.

“A douche who offered me *double* my annual salary to do the party.” Teagan’s mom beamed.

“That’s amazing!”

“And good timing. Next month’s tuition is due soon and I was getting a leet-le bit worried.”

“Ella, no!” Juliet said despairingly. “Do not spend all your hard-earned money on Sporty Spice here. Buy something extravagant for yourself. Soz, Teagan. No offense.”

They grinned at each other. “None taken.” Teagan gave her mom a quick squeeze. “I’m really happy for you. What made Mr. Regis—”

“Get over himself and realize your mother is a party planning genius?” Juliet finished brightly.

“Yes. That.”

Her mom shrugged. “Apparently, *his* father, Viktor, loved what I did at Josh’s birthday party. Since the Haverford Cup only comes to Easton once every five years, he wanted the food to dazzle. We’ve been testing recipes all day. Look!” She held up a tiger prawn canapé with half a sugar snap pea on it. “It’s a boat!”

A sailboat. But yeah, it was a boat.

Teagan’s heart squeezed tight. Her mom might not know all the rowing lingo or get Teagan’s passion for the sport, but she showed her support in other ways.

“I gave him the evils so he won’t mess her around again,” Juliet said

through another mouthful of food.

"Juliet's great," Ella said. "Best business partner ever."

"Wait. *What?* "

"I work for your mom now." Juliet shrugged. No big deal.

Juliet was mega rich and did not need a job.

"You work *with* me, Juliet," her mom corrected. "And it's Ella to you. Still Mom to you." She booped Teagan on the nose. "I told you I'd manifest a good future for us in Eagle's Cove."

"You did, Mom," Teagan agreed. "Top aura farming." A wave of fatigue hit her. "Do you two mind if I take a bath—"

They weren't listening anymore. Too busy debating how to source gold-rimmed scallop shells.

Like she'd said before, thank god for Juliet. Her sister from another mister. And missus. But who cared about the details?

"Teagan, hey!" Josh jogged up to meet her on the lake path as she made her way to the boathouse the next morning. "I'm cleared to row. The doctors gave me a new prescription to stabilize my heart."

"Wow!" It was six a.m. on a Monday. "That was fast."

Then again, this was Josh. His family probably had private doctors on tap. But still, he'd placed tenth at the erg competition. Not even close to his usual time. "Are you sure you're ready? You know," she wanted to make sure he knew this, "you don't need to prove anything to your grandad." Or the guys. This was his health they were talking about.

"It's not just that," Josh said, stopping short of the boathouse. "This weekend's regatta? It's going to be my last one."

"What?"

"I can't keep rowing. Like I said, I'm clear for this one, but after that? I need to stop."

This was huge. Josh poured everything he had into rowing and not much else. Especially now that he and Britney had broken up. "Have you told Coach yet?"

"No. And I don't plan to. He'd pull me from the boat."

Maybe he should. This wasn't sitting right with Teagan.

"Listen," Josh said, seeing her waver. "For the last few months I've been

fighting my way back to stroke seat—and I finally have it. If I'm going out? I want to leave on top. I just need to keep this quiet for a few more days."

The team was pumped. The regatta tomorrow was going to be huge, and it was all hands on deck to make sure they were ready, as hosts and as a team.

"That practice was sick!" Perry crowed as the guys came out of the boat store.

"Yeah," Noah agreed. "Josh kept the ratio tight." He gave Josh an out-of-character fist bump. "Nice work."

Josh grinned. His pills must've done the trick because he really had been in great form.

Quaid marched alongside him, performing his version of a human airhorn sounding victory squawks.

"Looking real good there, boys!" Coach Hayden beckoned them all over. "Well done. Keep it up, Josh. You're earning your keep. You all brought your A-game today. Easton only hosts the Haverford Cup once every five years, and I couldn't be prouder."

The guys all exchanged looks. Coach didn't dole out praise lightly. Hadn't told them to temper their expectations once.

Crabcatcher leaned into Cam and Teagan. "Should I take a picture? To remember what Coach Hayden looks like when he's happy?"

"Yes," said Lana, the assistant coach. "It's rare. Enjoy it."

"Do you think we have a shot, Coach? At winning?" asked Crabcatcher.

"It's a brutal competition," Coach said, turning the jubilation they'd just shared into concentrated energy. "Claremont, Westvale, Vic City— The best of the best will be here. But…" His smile reappeared. "Who won the Head of the Laurence?"

"We did!" everyone replied.

He cupped his hand to his ear. "What's that? I didn't hear you."

"WE DID!"

"That's right. And was that a fluke?"

"NO!"

"No. You're right. It wasn't. You started the season a bunch of scrubs. And now look at you… The nine of you have got a real shot at medaling at the *Haverford Cup*!"

The team whooped and cheered. Charged and ready to do their best.

“Right!” Coach aimed his thumb at the boathouse. “Get changed. Eat. Rest up. And let’s kick ass on the water tomorrow!”

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JOSH

Josh held Teagan back just short of the clubhouse. He wanted to finish their conversation. “Do you think Coach is right? That we’ll take home medals?” He knew it was like asking how long a piece of string was, but he needed all the pep talks he could get. This week had burned through his energy stores, and more to the point, he hadn’t been entirely truthful. The pills weren’t from his cardiologist. It was a legit prescription, but from a doctor he’d paid handsomely to give it to him. One who would swear under oath he had no idea about Josh’s heart condition. Money really could buy you almost anything.

“There are only five boats in our heat,” Teagan said. “If we beat two of them, we’ll get bronze.”

“But all of them have taken home the cup before.” His dad was counting on him to bring it back to Easton.

She shrugged. “We’ll go out there and do our best. Okay?”

When they got into the boathouse, the crew were all lined up like a firing squad.

Perry took the floor. “Baloo says you have something to tell us.”

Shit. It *was* a firing squad. He glanced at Teagan. She wasn’t going to say anything. He had to do the talking.

“Well?” Perry prompted.

Josh nodded. He owed it to Baloo, to all of them, to tell the truth. “The oar that was sabotaged? It was me. I did it. I’m the reason we lost the Head of the Harbor regatta.”

There. He’d said it. By the looks on the guys’ faces, it’d landed about as well as he’d thought it would. Badly.

“Why would you make us lose?” Quaid asked, bewildered.

“Family pressure, clearly,” Noah said, surprising Josh with the astute observation. “Being a Regis comes at a price.”

Ryder didn’t agree. “Or…” he sneered. “Josh choked.”

He knew Teagan was looking at him. Wondering which way he’d go with this. She already knew what a dickhead he was, so what harm would confirming it do? “Yeah. You’re right. Our family was watching and I was scared I wouldn’t cut it as stroke. So I sabotaged my oar to get out of the race.”

Crabcatcher filled the silence that followed. “So, Baloo… does that mean your Westvale boyfriend…”

“Logan had nothing to do with it,” Josh said. “I let him take the blame because I was a coward. And I’m really, truly sorry for that.”

Baloo’s face made it clear Josh wouldn’t be getting a bear hug anytime soon.

Ryder was loving this. “So you got scared and bailed. Is that what we can expect tomorrow?”

“No.” He was solid on this.

Ryder wasn’t. “Why should we believe you? Guys, we need someone we can count on. All you have to do is tell Coach you want me back in stroke seat. I’ll take us to victory.”

“Look,” Josh cut in. “I know trusting me after what I did is a big ask, but I can get us to the podium.” He had to. Tomorrow was the last time he’d climb into a boat with these guys. Ever. And he would get them a medal, no matter the cost.

Perry wavered. “Josh, you definitely messed up. But our practice today was phenomenal.” He crossed the room and stood by Josh and Teagan, addressing the group. “I’m with him. He’s our best shot at medaling.”

Baloo shook his head. “Sorry. I can’t row for him.” He stood beside Ryder.

“Josh owned up to what he did.” Noah went to stand by Josh. “That has to count for something.”

Quaid looked torn. He didn’t cross the room. “Sorry, Noah. Ryder was stroke when we won.”

“*Teagan* won that race,” Crabcatcher said, his head turning back and forth between the two groups. He stayed where he was. “But it *was* the winning boat.”

Cam, as ever, had his neutral face on.

“Cam?” Teagan nudged him. “You’re the tiebreaker. Who gets your vote?”

All eyes fell on Cam. He took his time, stroked his chin, then held up his hands. “Neither of you.” He headed to the main door. “I’m not taking part in this vote, thanks.”

Noah was still reeling from Quaid’s decision. “You really picked Ryder?” he asked Quaid.

“*His* only crime is ambition,” said Quaid in his defense.

They both looked torn. Like they didn’t know how they were going to be friends anymore. Which was not at all what Josh wanted. Not that he wanted any of this.

He could understand why his teammates were conflicted. Ryder was a dick, but he worked hard. Ambitious, like him. Put in the hours. Didn’t have to fight his own body to build strength and stamina.

One more day, Josh. All you have to do is keep the eight seat and survive the regatta.

Baloo came over when the team hit the showers. “Didn’t think you had it in you to own it like that.”

“Me neither. And like I said, I’m really sorry. For what it’s worth, I DM’ed Logan and told him everything. I didn’t hear back.” Not a surprise. “But he knows the truth anyway.”

Baloo nodded. It was as close to a thank-you as Josh was going to get. “You’re still not getting my vote.”

“Fair.” Stung like hell, but he held out hope they’d find a way to be friends again. Get crushed in a bear hug. Maybe at their twentieth reunion. If he lived that long.

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TEAGAN

Eagle’s Cove’s main drag, what there was of it, was buzzing. Rowers and parents and supporters had filled the town’s eateries in advance of the competition.

Teagan’s mom and Juliet had taken all the food in the house to the catering tent at Easton Prep “just in case.” Good luck to them. But did they have to take her smoothie ingredients and the blender?

She parked her bike outside a cafe advertising a Haverford Smoothie Cup, but as she headed in she spotted someone sitting in a car with the window rolled down. They were slumped low, in a baseball cap and sunglasses, like they were trying not to be seen.

Wait a minute. She knew that cap. She knew those sunglasses. Was that —

“Dad?!”

“Hi, Teagan.”

Teagan stared at her father in complete shock. Everything she’d wanted to say to him over the past few months jammed in her throat. “You’re here,” she managed to croak. “Why?”

He smiled at her. “I wanted to see you row. I hear you’re a coxswain now.”

He what? How? And also… no. He couldn’t just turn up like this. Act like he’d cut a business trip short to see her big day.

“Get in the car.” Her dad sounded nervous now. Like it had suddenly dawned on him that he might have some explaining to do.

Ten minutes later, Teagan still wasn’t sure any of this was real. Or that she believed her dad’s story about his partner being the one who’d misappropriated the funds.

“After I found out the money was misspent,” he’d said, “I tried to make everything right. Turn the bad decisions I made into something that would make up for what I’ve put you and your mom through. But then the FBI got wind of it and I ran out of time.”

“Right,” she said in the same icy tone she used to use with her mom. “So you left.”

“I thought about you every day.”

“That doesn’t make it better, Dad. It just means that *every day*, you decided not to be with us.”

“I wasn’t just running away,” he protested. “I was trying to fix things.”

“How?”

He pulled a USB drive out of his pocket. “With this. It has the files of everything we did. Evidence I can use to make a deal.”

“With the FBI?” This was surreal. And scary. *And* infuriating. She felt like she was in an episode of *America’s Most Wanted*.

“No, not with the FBI. It wouldn’t help you and your mom if I did that. I’m working on a deal to sell this so I can set you two up properly.”

That sounded *way* more illegal than anything he may or may not have done with his business partner. “No. Do not do that. I don’t want it.”

Her dad grunted in frustration. “First your mother and now you, huh? You’re both so stubborn. I’m trying to help you.”

His words landed. Teagan stared at him in disbelief. “Wait. Have you seen Mom?” Her mom hadn’t said a word. Just talked about finger bowls and ice buckets as if the man they’d both been desperate to see hadn’t come back into their lives. “I can’t believe she knew you’d come here and didn’t tell me.”

“Hey. She didn’t want you to get hurt. Don’t be mad at her.”

She wasn’t. She was FURIOUS. Her phone beeped, reminding her that she was supposed to be halfway to Easton by now.

“I’ve gotta go.”

“Teagan,” her dad pleaded, looking desperate not to end the conversation like this. “If I’d stayed in LA, the FBI would’ve put me in prison for twenty years!”

“At least I would’ve known where you were!” she spat back. “I could’ve talked to you. Visited you.” What was the point? He wasn’t the father she remembered. Not even close. “There’s only ever been one person who’s

kept my dad away from me all this time: you.” And then, just like him, she bolted.

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CAM

The team was still in the exact same standoff they'd been in yesterday. Half the team with Ryder, the other half with Josh. Cam was refusing to get involved. He didn't want either of those dickheads to lead the team.

"We're not getting into the boat until there's a majority," Ryder said to Noah and Perry. "Do you seriously want to row for Josh?"

They did.

Teagan, who'd just arrived, threw up her hands. "Why are you still fighting about this? We have a genuine shot at medaling today, and I for one do not want to tank this opportunity because of some stupid team spat."

Ryder dug in. "Josh screwed the team, so the team gets to decide who they want to row for."

"Stroke seat is Coach's decision," Teagan reminded them.

"Except," Baloo cut in, "if we refuse to row for someone. If that's the case? There's nothing he can do."

True, thought Cam.

Idiotic, short-sighted, and really pig-headed. But still true.

Their coxswain took charge like she always did. From the determined look on Teagan's face, Cam could tell she was going to find a way to sort this out once and for all. "Fine," she said. "Let's get a decision. End this. Cam? In the kitchen."

"Wow," Quaid whispered in a dramatic voice. "She's mad."

"I like the fire," Noah said.

So did Cam.

He followed Teagan as she marched into the kitchen.

"What's going on with you?" Cam asked.

"Nothing."

He waited. He sensed there was something besides the rowing drama going on.

“A lot, actually. Family stuff.”

Ah, now that he could understand.

She looked at him imploringly. “This team is the only thing that makes sense in my life right now. I don’t need this bullshit. One name. Make the call. Who’s it going to be, Cam?”

She was right; they were practically seniors. They should be mature enough to sort this out like… like… mostly formed adults.

It was almost funny. Having to choose between the two people who had done everything short of literally using him as a ladder to come out on top.

“There are no good options,” he said, as tired of it all as she was.

She glared at him.

“You really want me to choose between the one who bribed me and the one who sabotaged us?”

“Yes,” she said, voice clipped. “I do. ’Cause guess what? If you want to be a leader, this is what leadership looks like. Sometimes all you have in front of you are two bad options and you have to make a decision.”

“Fine.” He knew what to do. Which call to make. “Let’s go back in.”

The guys all snapped to attention when he walked in. No point in building more tension. You could already cut it with a knife. “Josh.”

They all looked shocked. Especially Josh.

“Right?” Teagan gave everyone a hard stare. Including Ryder. “Are we good?”

“The crew has spoken,” Ryder said, then stormed off to channel his zen or whatever. He was a dick, but he was also a good rower. He’d do some meditation and have it together before the race.

Quaid looked at Noah. “Hey, buddy. Will you take me back?”

Noah opened his arms. “Come here, you big lug.”

At least someone was hugging it out. Josh would have to make do with a nod. Everyone apart from him and Teagan scattered, getting their minds in the zone. He headed out to do the same, but Coach came in and stopped him in his tracks. “Cam? Teagan? My office. Now.”

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JOSH

He’d won. He had secured the team’s vote. He could leave Ryder to take out his frustration on the oars. Or…

“Hey, cuz… win some, lose some.”

Ryder whipped around. Furious.

Nice one, Josh. Good way to offer an olive branch. Set it on fire.

“I want to win them all,” Ryder spat out.

He clearly hadn’t done his meditation yet. Not that Josh had given him the space for it. But enough was enough. “Look, do you really want to compete with me for the rest of our lives?”

“I didn’t make the rules.”

“Neither of us did.” He sat down, hoped Ryder would, too. Pressed on when he didn’t. “What if we decided to change the rulebook? Do whatever’s best for us individually, instead of what’s best for the family?”

Ryder barked a laugh. “Right. Like you’d ever give up stroke.”

He shouldn’t be stroke. He knew that. But he had to. For his dad. “If you had a heart attack tomorrow and died, do you think stroke seat would be the thing that mattered most to you?”

“It wouldn’t to you,” Ryder shot back, “since you’re the one sitting in it.”

Bad example. Josh studied his hands for a minute, trying to think of how to say what really needed to be said. To claw away this toxic mess. “We used to be friends.”

“If by friends, you mean you had me as a sidekick, yeah.”

That hurt. Hurt because it was true. Past tense. “You’re not a sidekick anymore. Listen, Ryder. What can I do to make things right?”

Ryder stopped banging stuff around and looked at him, like he was

trying to figure out if Josh actually meant it. He did. He hated this cousin-on-cousin war. He missed the days when they had fun together. Goofed around.

"You want to be friends?" Ryder asked.

He did. He really did.

"Give me stroke seat."

Josh wanted to. With every fiber of his being. But he just couldn't. He got up and walked out with Ryder shouting behind him, "You know you don't deserve it!"

Yeah. He knew.

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TEAGAN

They were so, *so* close to climbing in their boat. Coach's face said otherwise.

"The racing committee found that the tape at the erg competition was deliberately fed into the drive chain." He looked from one to the other. "Which one of you did it?"

Cam glanced at her, then admitted to it.

"No! No, Coach." Teagan wasn't going to let him take the fall. "It was me. I tampered with the erg. I used black blister tape. And I did it knowing it would disqualify our scores."

Coach clapped his hand to his forehead. "Why, Teagan? Why would you *do* that?"

"I can't answer that. And neither can Cam." She shot him a warning look. This was on her.

"Okay. Thank you for your honesty." Coach shook his head. "You're out of the boat."

She'd known it was coming but hadn't realized it would hurt this much.

"Coach, no!" Cam protested. "You can't."

He could. He did. "I'll have to pull up the junior cox. Cam, get the crew together."

"Wait." Josh had faced the music. She owed it to the crew to do the same. "Can I tell them?" Coach Hayden nodded, disappointed in her, the hopes they'd all had for the race. "I'm sorry, Coach."

"So am I."

The trophies lining the boathouse walls weren't helping. Visual reminders of the cup she and the team had wanted to win today. They still had a chance. But she'd made it harder for them. And after everything

they'd been through together? Training and fighting and calling truces so they could work as one unified team? She didn't know who she'd disappointed more. Coach, her team, or herself.

"Teagan, hey." Noah was the first one in. The rest of the guys soon appeared behind him. "What's going on?"

"I need to talk to you." They gathered around, quiet and worried. "Umm… I messed up. I violated one of the rules of the Rowing Committee and I need to withdraw from the boat."

"What?" Crabcatcher looked shell-shocked.

Perry shook his head, like he hadn't heard right. "You're not coxing?"

"No."

They weren't happy. She didn't blame them.

"There's going to be a cox from the junior team stepping in."

Murmurs of discord filled the room.

"I'm sorry I let you down." She was going to cry and that would only make things worse. "Thanks, guys." She turned to head out.

"I won't do it."

She turned back around. Cam.

"I won't row," he said, directly to her, but it was a declaration he wanted everyone to hear. "Not without you."

"Cam, don't. Please—"

He shrugged, like it was a done deal. "If she's out, I'm out."

Josh stepped forward. "I'm with him. It won't be the same boat without you, Teagan."

It was too big a sacrifice for the team to make.

Teagan glanced at Coach Hayden, expecting him to cut in. Tell the guys to buck up and get on with it. He looked like he hadn't seen it coming, but was impressed it had.

"I got you, Big T."

Baloooooooooo. Big, strong, mushy-hearted Baloo.

"I'd rather lose *with* you," Crabcatcher said, stepping forward, "than win *without* you."

Sweet, kind Crabby. He deserved a new nickname. He hadn't caught a crab in ages.

Quaid and Noah stepped forward together, Noah with arms spread wide. "O coxswain, my coxswain…"

He looked around, waiting for someone, anyone to get it.

"*Dead Poets Society*!" Quaid shouted.

They high-fived, then pulled their shoulders back, standing firm with their decision.

Perry came forward, too. Pretended he wasn't feeling as emotional as the rest of them. He flicked his hair dismissively. "The medals are ugly anyway."

He and Juliet really were perfect for each other. And they never let her down.

Ryder stood alone, behind the rest of the team, then joined them. "We both know I would never have come this far without you."

Her heart was melting. She was feeling all the feels. Highs and lows and everything in between because, as amazing as this was, it was still pointless.

Coach took a step in, looking concerned. "Just so I'm clear, you are all refusing to race without Teagan as your coxswain? After all of your hard work, knowing you're this close to the podium, you're willing to give it up?"

They were.

"All right, then," said Coach Hayden. "Teagan? You're up."

She did a double take. "What? I'm back in? But—"

"You deserve to be out there with your team. You faced your consequences. I'll face mine."

He meant Principal Cabrera, which was saying something. She scared everyone. He was putting his job on the line for her. "Thank you, Coach."

"Now, quit standing around." Coach clapped his hands, chivying them back into action. "You've got a race to win."

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CAM

It was now-or-never time. The calm before the starter horn.

Cam wouldn’t be sitting in the seat he’d hoped for, but as he and all the guys apart from Josh got into formation with Teagan at the front, he felt proud to be alongside them. Being in the boat was good enough for him. No matter the seat. He was part of a group who’d made a hard decision—the right one in their eyes—knowing the Rowing Committee might not agree. But it was their choice to make, and they’d done it. Proof they really did have one another’s backs. Even if it had been a battle to get here.

Josh joined them but walked past his position at the front of the boat, stopping when he got to Cam. “Hey. Got a sec?”

“Yeah. What’s up?”

“Switch seats with me.”

“What?” Now this day was just getting *really* weird. “Why?”

“Because. It should be you. You should lead the team. Be stroke.” Josh stepped aside, giving Cam space to move. “I’ll follow your lead. We’re a team, right?”

Yeah, but… He looked over at Coach, who didn’t look nearly as shocked as Cam felt. Then the team. They were with him. Up for following his lead. Ryder didn’t look thrilled. No surprise there. But Cam knew he’d do his best, no matter who was in that seat. Maybe more so because it wasn’t Josh.

“You sure?”

Josh nodded, already taking Cam’s old position.

He half expected an adrenaline rush to knock him sideways, but as he took his spot at the fore, Teagan just in front of him, he felt a calm settle in. A strong, solid sense of determination and purpose. The huge smile on her

face helped, too.

“Lead us out, Cam,” she instructed.

“With pleasure.” He turned to the team. “All right, Easton! Hands on!” As one, they took a step to the right, taking hold of the hull at their assigned spots. “Up to shoulders!” The boat felt light as air. Not one of them carrying any more or less than the other. Apart from Teagan, of course. Who was leading the parade.

“All right, Easton!” she ordered them. “Walk it forward!”

Win. Lose. It didn’t matter. For maybe the first time in his life, he knew he was exactly where he was meant to be. And he was going to be present for every single second of it.

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TEAGAN

Coxing a crew for a two-thousand-meter sprint required a completely different mindset than a head race. An entirely different set of tactics, start to finish.

Teagan had loved sprints when she'd raced on her own. Setting her oars into the water, shoulders at the ready, back strong, legs bent, heels dug in. Her entire body poised and powerful, ready for that first all-important drive when she channeled her adrenaline into the oars, pushing through the inertia until, in what felt like the blink of an eye and an eternity, her boat was soaring. That was the sweet spot. One kilometer in? A switch. Mind over matter. Ignoring the burn in her chest, legs, arms, focused on nothing but propelling the boat into the final sprint. When she begged her body to give her more, stroke after stroke, telling herself she could do it. She could win.

Teagan's role today, of course, didn't rely on her for any of that.

Cam would set the rhythm on her call, setting the pace for everyone behind him.

Josh would do the same. A buffer between the stroke and the engine room: Ryder, Baloo, and Quaid.

The bow pair, Noah and Crabby (they really did need to find a new nickname for him), had to streamline all that power, making quick, exacting adjustments with their blades to keep the boat tracking in a perfect straight line.

When it worked?

It was like riding a flying carpet.

There was no point in worrying about what happened when it didn't.

Steering, keeping an eye on the other boats, calling new stroke rates, hitting each phase of their plan while keeping the rowers' spirits up was all

she needed to think about now.

The two-minute warning sounded.

“Okay, guys, you’ve got this. We’re ready.”

Cam, in front of her, was pure focus and determination, even though he’d had about a minute to wrap his head around taking the lead seat.

“You ready to shine?” she asked him.

They grinned at each other. It was a rhetorical question. Of course he was ready.

She twisted around to watch for the flag drop. The rest of the crew would have their eyes trained on the shoulders in front of them. First sign of twitch? It was time to dig in.

The race official called Attention.

The flag fell.

“ROW!”

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JOSH

From the first pull, Josh knew he'd done the right thing. For once.

The pills the doctor had given him weren't a fix. They weren't even a Band-Aid. He'd seen the doctor's reluctance to hand them over, even though Josh had given him a fat envelope full of cash. Taking the pills had been as big a risk as rowing was. Another thing he'd been warned against by his legit cardiologist. He'd spelled it out for him bluntly: You push that heart of yours too hard? It could easily be your last day on earth.

Josh's heart was pounding, and they'd barely started rowing.

The right guy was in stroke for once, and even though it didn't mean Josh could slack off, enjoy the ride, releasing that extra layer of pressure meant less strain. He'd deal with the multi-generational pressure chamber watching onshore later. When he finished. Alive.

"Victoria City's out, guys," Teagan called. "Caught a crab. Long and strong! Long and strong!"

They were fourth of four boats. Last place. He shook it off. He just needed to keep his eyes on Cam's shoulders, match his stroke rate, and nothing else.

"We're at thirty-four." Teagan was tapping her cox box. Checking the stroke rate. Called a thirty-six to close that gap with Roxbury.

In other words: Row harder. Stronger.

He knew it was kind of stupid, but when the doctor told him he needed to listen to his heart, Josh sometimes put whatever it was telling him into words.

Slow down, idiot.

Take it easy, dude.

He was pushing hard. Feeling the strain. But his heart wasn't telling him

the usual stuff. It was saying: *Isn't this great? Being out on the water? Sun up above. Water sparkling like diamonds. Have fun, kid,* it was telling him. *Enjoy it.*

And just like that, he and the eight people with him were flying. A fluid stream of motion.

Eight oars sliced through the water, pushing them past Roxbury.

He could do this. He *would* do this. For his dad. And maybe a little bit for himself. He was sorry he and Ryder might never make their peace, but screw it. Who needed rulebooks when you could write your own?

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CAM

Teagan’s cox box was playing up. She kept tapping it, frowning, not seeing numbers when they needed to shift into the next pacing segment.

The guys had been matching him stroke for stroke, but something felt off. “They’re rushing the catch.”

She knew what he was asking. Did he need to speed up his slide into the next push to resynchronize?

Teagan shook her head. “Don’t. Trust the rhythm.”

He would. Because he trusted her.

He kept his pace, eyes trained on Teagan for the next call.

He slid in, knees bent…

“Now send it!”

The boat accelerated, just like she’d said.

“Yeah! We’re moving now!” cheered Teagan. “Halfway point… We’re in the pain cave, guys. Listen up. You’ve got a lot left in you. Dig deep. Dig deep!”

He was digging deep. And it hurt.

Behind him, Josh was grunting. Grimacing, too, probably. Teagan had them rowing at a brutal pace.

His muscles were screaming, but when they matched Westvale, then passed them? He honestly didn’t care anymore. They’d never catch up to Claremont. But beating Westvale? That was a much-needed charge of energy. Josh must’ve got the same second wind. He was matching Cam stroke for stroke as they flew toward the 250-meter marker.

“I can see the finish line now, guys,” yelled Teagan. “It’s the final sprint. Give it all the power because we are crossing that finish line in five… four… three… and that’s it! TAKE ME ACROSS THE LINE!”

He would and he did. All of them.

But the only one he had eyes for, as everyone whooped and shared high fives, was Teagan.

She could be a pain in the butt sometimes, but she had seen something in him he'd never been brave enough to share freely. That he believed in himself.

It felt too cocky. Didn't match the role he thought he was supposed to play as the financial aid kid, when the whole reason he'd gotten that scholarship in the first place was because he'd earned it. He was living proof that it was okay for a kid from a blue-collar family to have dreams and put everything into making them come true.

Yeah, it was scary, admitting who you were and who you wanted to be. Making mistakes along the way. Big ones sometimes. But if you didn't? No one would ever see that bright flame of belief buried deep inside you.

Fire needs oxygen to breathe, to grow. So did self-confidence. He was finally beginning to figure that out. And for that alone? The silver medal around his neck would always look gold to him.

Seeing the medal hanging around his own neck was almost as good as watching the rest of the crew with theirs. Baloo kept exclaiming over how heavy it was. Quaid bit his to test the metal, then went into a panic that he'd die of metal poisoning. Noah set him straight, assuring him that silver was hypoallergenic. Perry refashioned the ribbon his medal hung on into a choker. Crabby kept whispering to his that he loved it and would never let it go.

Even Ryder looked happier than he had at the beginning of the race, though he vowed to bring home gold next year. And Josh looked weirdly peaceful.

The second Teagan got her medal everyone swarmed around her. Quaid held her up in an arm press for the team photo. She screamed, but Cam could tell she was thrilled. Just like him.

Coach could barely talk he was so proud, but when the photos had been taken and everyone went off to find their family and get some food, he called Cam over. "I'd like a quick chat."

"Sure, Coach." Cam followed him out of the marquee to a quiet spot on the lawn. "What's up?"

"I owe you an apology," Coach said.

Errr. “For what?”

“I once told you that Easton kids wouldn’t row for townies like us. That was my baggage. I shouldn’t have dumped it on you. I was wrong. And I’ve never been happier to admit it. You killed it out there today, Cam.”

He held out his hand for a shake, but when their hands hit? Cam knew this was one of those moments Teagan had talked to him about. When you had to do what your gut was telling you to, even if it led you into unexplored territory. So he pulled Coach in for a hug, pretty sure he’d done the right thing.

“I’m so proud of you, Cam,” Coach said before it ended.

He was proud of himself, too. Both of them. Coach for putting Teagan back in cox and for giving him this moment, just the two of them. Small-town guys wanting a bit extra from life and getting it.

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JOSH

“Incoming,” Josh said, nudging Ryder.

Viktor, Richard, and Karina Regis were on approach. Josh’s mom was traveling. She’d actually told Josh she needed to go “exploring” when he’d found her packing a couple of weeks back. Finding herself, maybe? A life scurrying to meet his father’s ever-changing demands couldn’t be all roses and sunshine. He hoped she found what she was looking for.

“Boys.”

Josh straightened under his grandfather’s scrutiny.

“It’s nice to see Easton put an end to their losing streak.” His upper lip twitched, a tell. “Silver. Not the *worst*.”

And not the best. In other words, a failure.

A month ago? A week ago, even, Josh would’ve launched into a self-promotion campaign. Laying out his plans to reach the top, how he’d crush the competition next time, ensuring the Regis name was never linked to anything so humiliating again.

Today? He was all about the grain of salt.

Ryder stepped into the role Josh had relinquished: Chief Ass Kisser. “I’ve already booked to train in Florida over the winter season. I’ll be ready for next year.”

He got a nod of acknowledgment from their grandfather. “And you, Josh?”

“Nothing on the calendar. This was my last race.” He braced for the fallout.

“I beg your pardon?” Viktor spluttered. Regises didn’t just… *quit*. They conquered.

His dad was speechless, too.

Here goes nothing. “I have a heart condition. It’s called hypertrophic cardiomyopathy. It’s serious.”

His dad wasn’t giving anything away. His grandfather was a wall of stone.

“I wanted to carry on our family tradition,” Josh told them. He really did. He loved rowing. Giving it up was *painful*. “But I can’t…” He would die if he did. “I won’t be rowing anymore.”

The wall of stone shifted his stance, readjusting to the new Regis family landscape. “I’m sorry to hear that,” said Viktor. “I wish you better health.”

Nice to hear, but it was a cheap greeting-card sentiment at best.

“Unfortunately,” his grandad continued, “having such a serious condition is a risk and will affect our company’s plans…”

Meaning: You’re out.

“I understand,” Josh said. He looked at his dad. Would their barely existent relationship get the chop, too? His dad’s jaw twitched. Anger? Disgust? Which was it? Richard Regis didn’t like weaklings.

His father turned to Viktor. “I don’t think we heard you right, Dad.”

Josh stared. Huh? What was going on?

“I think what you meant to say is: ‘We love you, Josh, and we’re going to do whatever it takes to get you the best medical care in the world.’”

“Ex*cuse* me?” Viktor looked as shocked as Josh felt, but for entirely different reasons.

Josh couldn’t believe his dad had his back. Was supporting him. Knowing his father favored results over mollycoddling.

“Josh isn’t your heir,” his dad said, standing up to his father with a strength Josh had never seen before. “He’s my *son*.”

Josh’s fear drained away. His dad, for the first time ever, was putting him first.

Viktor’s posture shifted. “All right, then. I’ll leave you to your family time.” Josh’s grandfather turned to Ryder and his mom. They weren’t even trying to hide their gleeful smiles at the turn of events. “Ryder! I’d love to hear about your winter plans.”

Karina started gabbling away excitedly, leading her father away.

Good luck, Ryder. You’ll need it.

His cousin turned back. “Sorry, man.”

Maybe, Josh thought. Maybe not so much.

His dad was almost shaking with adrenaline as he watched his father walk away. “He didn’t like that.”

“Is it that bad?” Josh asked, meaning is that it? Are we out?

“Yes,” his dad said plainly. “But I don’t care.” He turned away from the others and gave his full attention to Josh. “I care about you. Are you okay? Can they treat it?”

“Yeah, with surgery. But the recovery’s rough.”

His dad nodded, looking him in the eye. “We can deal with rough, son.” He shook his head like he was debating something, then pulled Josh into a hug.

Josh swelled with happiness. His dad loved him. Was putting him first. Even if it meant stepping away from the Regis family to do it.

He hugged his dad back, tight. They’d survive this. He knew it in his heart.

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TEAGAN

“Hey, honey!” Her mom’s arms wrapped around Teagan from behind. She smelled like shrimp cocktail and sugar cookies. “Congratulations. Listen,” she said, lowering her voice. “I need to talk to you.”

Teagan tried to wriggle out of the hug, but her mom’s arms tightened. What the—

She didn’t want to talk to her mother. “You lied to me about Dad,” she hissed. “What else are you keeping from me?”

Her mom whirled her around, shot covert glances over her shoulders, then leaned in. “Your father’s here,” she whispered. “I’m hiding him from the FBI.”

“Mom!” Her volume control had lost control. And her brain. And her pounding heart. “You can’t be—”

“Shhh.” Her mom shook her head, exasperated. She took Teagan’s hand and pulled her closer to the marquee’s kitchen area. “This is why I don’t tell you things.”

Not the point they should be focusing on when her mother was aiding and abetting a fugitive. “What do we do? Are we going to get in trouble?” They were a family at the end of the day, outlaw dad or not.

“It’s okay, honey.” Her mom pulled her into a hug. “We’ll figure it out.”

“Teagan.”

Her head shot up.

“Dad?”

Her dad stepped out from a storage area. “You were incredible out there.”

Nice to hear, but… “Dad! You can’t be here!”

For once, her mom was on the same page. “David, you have to go.

Someone’s going to see you.”

Her dad shrugged. “Maybe it’s time they do.” He turned to Teagan. “I don’t want you to wonder where I am anymore. Either of you. I’m going to turn myself in.”

But that meant…

“Are you sure?” Twenty years in prison suddenly sounded a lot longer than it had when her dad had first mentioned it. It was longer than she’d been alive. Then again, she’d know where he was.

“I’m sure,” her dad said. “Listen, Teagan, don’t take this out on your mother, okay? She was trying to protect you from my mess.”

She winced, shot her mom an apologetic look. Her mom gave her hand a squeeze. She understood.

“Your mom’s made a great life for you here and did it with less than nothing. I always knew she was amazing, but I hadn’t realized how strong she was as well.”

He pulled her and her mom into a hug. Teagan realized he was kind of like her. Someone who made good decisions and bad decisions, then dealt with the fallout. This would be awful, but she’d hug him again soon.

“Catch-of-the-day ceviche?” Juliet held out a porcelain amuse-bouche spoon.

“You’re blocking my view,” Teagan said drily.

“Yeah,” Juliet said. “Kind of the point?”

“I want to see.”

Juliet shifted so Teagan could get a final glimpse of her dad heading off with two people wearing FBI jackets.

“I would’ve given you a heads-up, but you were off splashing around in the lake with the boys.”

Teagan snorted. Juliet always knew how to lift her spirits. They sat down on the hillside, Teagan’s head resting on Juliet’s shoulder. “What other intel did you gather while I was splashing around?”

“Ummm…”

“What?” prompted Teagan. Whatever it was, she could cope with it.

“Your mom and Coach?”

“Yeah…?”

“She pressed pause.”

“Oh?” It had been weird, yeah, but her mom had been happier than she’d been in a long time.

Juliet sighed. “Yeah, they’re living out their own version of *It’s Complicated*.”

“That had a happy ending, right?”

Juliet winced. “I think Coach Hayden’s neck-deep in the dreaded dark moment.”

“Why?”

“Principal Cabrera and he exchanged words. They weren’t congratulatory.”

Teagan’s heart sank. It had to be about her and Cam being on the boat.

“She fired him,” Juliet said.

Shit. Coach had said he’d face the consequences of his decision. He’d guessed what would happen and done it anyway. But still. Being friend-zoned and fired on the same day? Poor Coach. Kind of on a par with seeing your fugitive dad for the first time in months only to watch him turn himself in to the Feds.

“So!” Juliet gave Teagan’s knee a pat, then stood up. “That’s you all caught up. And if I catch you getting all angsty about having a dad behind bars and a mom… *behind* a bar…” She grinned. “See what I did there?”

“You should take your show on the road,” said Teagan dryly.

“Good idea. I might stand a better chance of seeing my parents…” Juliet shook her head vigorously. “No! No, no. Do not give me your sympathy. I’m the one doling out advice here.”

Teagan laughed. “I’m listening.”

“All I’m trying to say is, your parents might be traveling different paths than the rest of these weird-ass families, but at least you know they’ll do whatever it takes to see you.”

A lump rose in her throat. Juliet cleared hers. It was getting awkward.

“Why are you still here? Don’t you need to go find a towel or something? After all your splashing?” Juliet put her hand over her eyes, scanned the crowd. “I need Perry to brainstorm some design ideas for your dad’s jumpsuit. I’m not so sure orange will be his new—” She froze, mouth open, eyes wide.

Teagan turned and saw a pair of legs emerging from a Rolls Royce. She

looked back at Juliet. “Who is that?”

“That,” Juliet croaked, “is my mom.”

Teagan’s mom took a minute to absorb the news about Juliet. “Well, good,” she said. “I was going to talk to you about inviting her to stay for Christmas. Juliet puts on a brave front, but underneath? She’s obviously hurting.”

“She set fire to her car, Mom. She’s not hiding anything.”

Her mom gave her shoulders a little shake, not convinced.

“Do you want help with anything?” It had been a big day for her mom, too. Her husband appearing out of the blue and leaving with the Feds, breaking up with her boyfriend.

“No, honey. I’ll be fine.” Her mom’s eyes had a faraway look in them, but she didn’t look scared, more… determined. Like her dad said, she was stronger than either of them had thought. She gave Teagan a quick squeeze. “You go spend time with your friends.”

She wasn’t sure if anyone would be at the boathouse. If not? She could do with some thinking time on the dock.

“Hey!” Josh jogged up alongside her. “I heard about your dad. Are you okay?”

She answered truthfully. “No. But I think me and my mom will figure it out. How’d things go with your family?”

Josh’s eyebrows went up. “Surprisingly not terrible. Although, we may be poor soon. Poor for us,” he amended.

Teagan cackled. “Feel free to hit me up for tips on surviving a downfall.”

He smiled, then let it fade. “Listen. Umm, it’s been a hard time, and I just wanted to say, you’ve been there for me. Even when I was at my worst.”

“So, daily,” she joked.

He laughed. “Yeah, well, you’ve never seen me at my best. I’m working on it.”

“What? You’re building a better Josh?” teased Teagan.

“I am. And I’m hoping when you meet that guy, you’ll give him a second chance.”

She would. But she wouldn’t be making out with that guy. “Okay.”

He gave her a wink. “If I don’t die on the operating table.”

He wouldn’t. His eyes were bright with that determined look of his, but with a softer glow, like he had too much to live for. She’d see Josh V2 for sure.

She headed into the boat store and ran her finger along some droplets clinging to their scull.

“Coxie!”

She turned. “Hey, stroke seat,” she said, smiling. Cam had nailed it today. Just like she knew he would.

He sat on a stool with an *ooof*. “It’s been a day.”

She sat next to him. “It certainly has.”

He lifted up her medal. “I can’t say I imagined this when you hit me with your bike.”

“Hey!” She gave him a playful shove. “You hit me!”

He rebalanced, eyes on hers, then cupped her face between his hands. She hesitated for a second, then closed the gap between them and kissed him. She leaned into it, not wanting it to stop.

Cam.

They’d taken a few wrong turns before reaching this moment, but it had definitely been worth it. It was a perfect, perfect kiss.

They pulled apart, sharing shy grins. It felt like a beginning.

“Teagan!” called a woman’s voice. The assistant coach, Lana.

Moving apart, she and Cam stifled giggles.

“Teagan? Are you in here? I need to talk to you.”

“I’ll go,” murmured Cam. “One for the road?” He leaned in and gave her a firm, confident kiss. One that said this wouldn’t be the last one they shared.

Teagan came out from behind the boat rack. “Hey, Coach. What’s up?”

Lana quirked her head to the side, like she was listening for something. “Did you hear that?”

Could Lana hear the sound of her heart skipping a beat as she caught a glimpse of Cam sneaking out of the boathouse?

“It’s the sound of your wish coming true.”

“My wish?”

“Yup. Cabrera pulled me aside after the race today. Said a group of girls

are interested in putting together a team. Already have a wealthy donor behind them. Congrats, Teagan. Come spring? You'll be holding an oar again."

"No." Teagan couldn't believe what she was hearing.

Lana nodded yes.

"Seriously?" Another nod. "That's amazing! Thank you so much!"

"Don't thank me," Lana said. "Thank the Garner Foundation."

Garner…

Baloo Garner…

Senator DeeDee Garner…

And… walking through the boat-shed door with a Cheshire cat grin… *Britney* Garner. Queen Bee of Easton Prep.

"Hey, babe!" Britney's smile was bright as sunshine. And just like sunshine, it could burn you. "Can't wait to be crewmates." She pulled Teagan in for a hug, only to whisper, "Looks like you row for me now."

For a moment, Teagan felt nervous. Then she remembered something her dad had told her: to consider it a gift if another rower was gunning for her. If they thought Teagan was that much of a threat? It meant they knew she was better than them.

Teagan thought of everything she had been through over the past few months. She'd gotten through it with the help of her mom and her new friends. Her team. She glanced down at the medal on her chest. She was a winner. And nobody—not even Britney Garner—would ever take that away from her. With her team rooting for her, she could achieve anything she set her mind to.

Teagan felt a rush of excitement as she pictured herself slicing through the water, an oar in her hand. She'd come to love being a cox, but she loved rowing even more. It was who she was: Crew Girl.

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