

LOVE SCENE, TAKE TWO

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ALEX EVANSLEY

*Swoon*  
READS

SWOON READS NEW YORK

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For Sam

For Ana

For Ashley

For Zoe

And for everyone who read this story on a screen,  
long before it was ever a book.

# Teddy Sharpe (actor)

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**Theodore Maxwell Sharpe** (born September 3, 1997), or **Teddy Sharpe**, is an American actor and producer. He is best known for his costarring role on the hit MTV comedy-drama series *Testing Wyatt*. Sharpe made his film debut in 2016 in the independent film *Corduroy* and starred in the film *Bistro on 5th*, which debuted at Sundance Film Festival in early 2017 to mostly positive reviews.

Sharpe is known for his energetic improvisations and slapstick performances, and has recently been praised for his craft versatility for such a young actor. Although he is relatively new to acting by industry standards, he has been described as one of Young Hollywood's brightest (and most promising) rising stars.

## Filmography:

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### Television:

*Testing Wyatt* (2015–present) [*Recurring role*]

*Lies Your Ex-Girlfriend Tells You* (2016) [*Guest role*]

### Film:

*Corduroy* (2016)

*Bistro on 5th* (2017)

*Remember This Moment* (2018) [*Uncredited*]

*Parachutes* (2019) [*Rumored*]

## CHAPTER ONE

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There are few things in life of which Teddy Sharpe is absolutely certain, and he's absolutely certain this audition is going to be a train wreck.

At least, that's what's running through his head when he bursts through the front doors of one of LA's fanciest office buildings, scaring the receptionist and a security guard half to death along the way. Teddy's had to run into last-minute auditions before, yeah, but never one he learned about an hour ahead of time. Never one he's had to go into completely blind because he hasn't seen the script yet. And never one that could launch his acting career into the stratosphere. He's a little on edge.

"You said you're here for the *Parachutes* auditions?" the receptionist asks, pulling her hand away from the button that releases the lobby's turnstile to smooth her hair. She looks unnervingly like Jennifer Coolidge. "Call times for those auditions started at seven a.m. I'm sorry, I can't let you up if you missed—"

"I just got the call from the casting director an hour ago," Teddy rushes out, a little out of breath and holding up his phone. It doesn't help that he came straight here from an early morning shoot for his TV show. He's been awake since midnight

and probably looks as cracked out on caffeine as he sounds. “She said if I got here by nine, I could have the last slot of the day.”

The receptionist looks unconvinced. “That’s not how things are run—”

“I *know*,” Teddy cuts her off again, then tries to cushion it with a smile. He gives her both the casting director’s and the director’s names. “My booking agent’s been trying to schedule an audition time for me all week. We just confirmed it this morning.”

“Let me see if I have a note about it. Just a moment,” the receptionist says, typing something into her computer. Teddy checks the time on his phone, sees 8:56 a.m., and starts to panic all over again. He rubs a hand over his jaw and makes eye contact with the security guard sitting at the desk on the other end of the turnstile.

“I’m not seeing anything,” the receptionist says slowly.

“Is there any way you could call up there? Tell them that Teddy Sharpe is here? They know I’m coming,” Teddy tries one last time, subtly reaching around to unstick his T-shirt from his back. At least the *Testing Wyatt* stylist had dressed him in mostly black this morning. Teddy’s been stress sweating since his manager, Rita, picked him up from set and rushed him across LA to make it here on time.

“I’m sorry, sir, but auditions are still going on. I can’t call to interrupt. This is why we have the call times policy—”

But see, the thing is, Teddy knows about policy.

He also knows he’s been waiting for a shot like this for two years. So instead of listening to whatever boilerplate technicality she’s going to pitch next, Teddy backs up from the desk, gets a running start, and vaults over the lobby’s turnstile, earning himself a startled shriek from the receptionist as he sails by.

“Sorry!” Teddy yells over his shoulder. The security guard scrambles after him, sending an office phone clattering to the ground behind him, and Teddy definitely doesn’t have time to wait for the elevators now. His foot slips out from under him on the marble floor as he bolts right, barely catching himself before slamming into the concrete stairwell.

So here Teddy is, sleep deprived and soaked in sweat, taking the stairs two at a time to get to the most important audition of his career with the building’s security guard chasing after him. This is not the way he anticipated his day going.

The security guard is wheezing behind him in the stairwell, but Teddy’s got him by at least two floors now. His legs, however, might give out before he makes it to the eighth floor, and every time he grabs the railing to swing himself around on a landing, the palm of his hand keeps less and less traction to curb his momentum. Finally his hand slips and he almost goes face-first into a door with a large number six painted on it. Luckily his shoulder is there to break the impact.

The eighth-floor door comes into Teddy’s line of vision and he makes it up the last flight of stairs in three strides. He spills out into a long, carpeted hallway with a dozen doors on each side. His audition is supposed to be in the eighth-floor conference room, and Teddy checks the plaque next to each door as he sprints by. He comes to another hallway running perpendicular and makes a snap decision to go left, sucking wind and silently praying he made the right call. This hallway leads to several sitting areas and a couple of rooms with floor to ceiling windows.

“Excuse me, sir?” someone calls out. Teddy whips around.  
*Christ, it’s another receptionist.*



“Yes, hi, I’m uh—” He takes a deep breath in. “I’m Teddy Sharpe. I’m the last scheduled *Parachutes* audition today?”

The woman smiles warmly at him from behind her desk. “Great, they’re expecting you. The audition before yours just ended, so you can head straight in. The conference room is the last door at the end of that hallway,” she says, pointing to Teddy’s left.

“Awesome, thank you,” he says, like his lungs aren’t about to implode. Why the hell couldn’t it have been that easy eight flights of stairs ago?

Teddy checks his phone again as he breaks into a speed walk back down the hallway. With how fast everything happened in the past hour, he didn’t exactly have time to dwell on what this audition could mean for him, so of course now is when his brain chooses to fully register the gravity of the situation. Waves of nerves hit him hard the closer he gets to the conference room.

This is big.

No—this is *huge*. And Teddy is hyperaware of how unprepared he is when he knocks twice, then twists the doorknob after someone on the other side calls to come in.

There are three people sitting behind a table in the middle of the room, a camera operator set up next to them—which is standard. There’s also a small group of people sitting in the back corner—which is not standard. When Teddy walks over to the table to introduce himself and get his script, he’s unsure if he should introduce himself to the group in the back as well.

“There’s a red dash next to the monologue on page seventeen we’d like you to read,” the casting director tells him.

First rule of auditioning: Don't waste any time, under any circumstances.

Teddy walks to his blocking position in front of the camera.

"Awesome—thanks so much for scheduling me. I'm Teddy Sharpe, auditioning for the role of Jack O'Heinessey," he says, and *Oh, dear God, please let that be the way the name is pronounced*. No one corrects him, so he puts on his most charming smile, pretends like he has the slightest idea about the character he's auditioning for, and . . . points a thumb back over his shoulder and says, "I'm sorry, but just as a heads-up—a security guard might bust through that door in a second."

\* \* \*

"Seriously, this could be your *Hunger Games*, Ted," Rita says for the third time since picking him up from the audition. She's driving Teddy back to the *Testing Wyatt* set to pick up his car and has spent the majority of the trip giving him another run-down on how crucial this could be for his career. "How are you feeling about it? Do you think it went well?"

"Sure," Teddy lies. He sits up straighter in the passenger's seat of her fancy sports car and doesn't mention that the audition happened so fast, the only thing he remembers is *not* feeling good about it on his way out.

"Come on, Ted! You gotta give me more than that."

Teddy glances over. Rita's been his manager since before he landed his *Testing Wyatt* gig three years ago, back when her hair was dark brown instead of platinum blond and when Teddy never went into auditions unprepared. Rita's one of the main reasons Teddy is where he is right now, and even though he can't stand lying to her, he doesn't have the heart to tell her he blew

the audition she and his booking agent worked so hard to get him.

“No, I mean—you know how it goes,” Teddy skirts, rubbing his hands over his jeans. He still hasn’t stopped sweating. “They had me read a two-minute monologue, then I read a scene with one of the PAs. . . . Then they had me do some improv.”

“Oh, thank *God*—you always kill it with improv. Did they say anything before you left?”

“Not much.”

“Not even about scheduling a second round?”

Teddy shakes his head (further evidence the audition didn’t go well), then realizes what a shitty job he’s doing of putting up a front here. “Well, they mentioned something about the audition process being a little unorthodox because of preproduction conflicts, and that if I get the role, we should hear from them soon—what’s been going on with preproduction?”

“I haven’t heard much. Just that the script initially got held up getting green-lit and that the director is anxious to get the ball rolling to make up for time,” she tells him, turning into the *Testing Wyatt* set parking lot and pulling into the spot next to Teddy’s car. “I don’t think it’s anything to worry about, though. It happens a lot with book-to-film projects. Especially in YA.”

Teddy nods again. “I appreciate the lift today.”

“Of course.” She smiles and holds up her hands. “By the way, that receptionist thought you were on something when I came in to fill out paperwork during your audition. Did you jump over the turnstile to get to the elevators?”

“I didn’t have time to wait for the elevator,” Teddy says. “Had to take the stairs.”

Rita laughs. “That’s the commitment a manager likes to see.”

Teddy shoulders open the car door and steps out into the Los Angeles sun.

“Wait, wait, before I forget,” Rita says, reaching into the backseat and presenting him with a Barnes & Noble bag. “For your flight to Miami this afternoon. In case you’re in the mood for some light vacation reading.”

Teddy peeks inside and forces himself to smile at the hard-cover copy of *Parachutes* at the bottom.

## CHAPTER TWO

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The flight attendant is really starting to stress Teddy out.

He's not trying to be a dick here, but only so much can be expected of him given the circumstances. She already insisted on personally escorting him to his seat, and now she won't stop staring at the duffel bag resting across his legs. It hasn't left his lap since he sat down on this Boeing 747 death trap that's supposed to fly him from one end of the country to the other, and he's too busy trying to regulate his pulse to worry about moving it.

Flying. Teddy hates it.

"Are you sure you don't want me to stow your bag in the captain's closet, Mr. Sharpe?" the flight attendant asks, popping up in the aisle next to him.

"Oh, uh—" Teddy clamps both hands down on top of it. "I'll keep it with me, thanks."

"Is there anything I can get for you? A blanket? Or a pillow?" she rushes out, undeterred and borderline manic.

Teddy barely gets out a quick, "No, thank you" before she finally detonates, and it takes active effort for him to not recoil out of the blast radius.

"My daughter thinks you're just the cutest thing!" she gushes.

“She’s going to just *die* when she finds out you were on my flight tonight!”

Teddy tries to laugh it off, despite how uncomfortable he is. He knew it was only a matter of time before she said something—he saw the recognition flicker across her face when she scanned his boarding pass at the gate earlier.

“No way, that’s so sweet,” he says, sending her into another fit of adoration. He’s already a terrible flyer, and again, not to be a dick here, but there’s no way he can deal with this on top of everything else right now. Not when he’s still sleep deprived and wallowing in self-pity over on his botched audition this morning. “Actually, yeah,” he interrupts, “could I get a pillow?”

This appears to be a thrilling development. “Of course! Back in a second.” She winks at him and then she’s gone, and Teddy stares stoically at the tray table in front of him and tries to roll some of the tension out of his shoulders.

It’s not that he doesn’t appreciate the occasional attention he gets from people who recognize him. He knows it comes with the job. And he knows he’s going to have to get used to it if he lands this *Parachutes* role (big, massive, ginormous *if*). Still doesn’t mean he’s used to it now, though. Teddy loves talking to fans, but he’s always liked his space. Particularly when it comes to his personal life.

Speaking of which.

Teddy’s connecting flight to Miami is going to cut it close. Since he has no idea where his next gate is going to be, he pulls out his phone and uses it as an excuse to start a conversation with Chelsea. She filmed on location in North Carolina a few years ago. Maybe she remembers her way around the Charlotte airport. . . .

Yeah, Teddy knows it's a stretch, but, you know, desperate times, desperate measures.

Thu, Jul 20, 6:43 p.m.

Hey Chels. I'm landing in terminal E and I have like 15 min to get to my connecting flight in terminal B. . . . Are they close?

Your all the way across the airport. I'd run.

Teddy sighs and holds back an eye roll. He and Chelsea have a complicated relationship (if you can even call it that anymore). One more reason why he's glad he's not much of a tabloid target by industry standards. One second they're are on, the next they're off—Teddy can't keep up with it, and he sure as hell doesn't need *US Weekly* speculating on when "Teddy Sharpe and Chelsea Bordeaux finally call it quits."

Still, Teddy's looking forward to spending a long weekend in Miami with Chelsea. She planned this trip as an apology for canceling the last two trips they were supposed to go on because of her filming schedule. It's been more than a month since they last saw each other, and lately Teddy's caught himself wondering if Chelsea's as tired of keeping track of their time apart as he is. Assuming she's keeping track at all.

Thanks for the tip 😞 you'll be in Miami by tomorrow afternoon right?

Yep.

One word answers have become a recurring theme with her. Teddy doesn't respond out of respect for his dignity.

"I brought you an extra, just in case."

Teddy's head whips up from his phone.

The flight attendant is back. She winks at him again and hands him two pillows. "Is there anything else I can get you?"

"Any way I could get a bourbon on the rocks?" Teddy asks, because screw it. He could use a drink right now. It's a gamble, though. He still has a few weeks before he turns twenty-one, and the flight attendant knows who he is, obviously, but maybe it'll work in his favor. He surveys her reaction, and—nope, gets confirmation that's not the case as he watches the smile disappear from her face, the allusion of Teddy being the perfect boyfriend for her daughter shattering.

"You'll have to wait until takeoff. And I'll need to see some ID," she says, narrowing her eyes at him before walking away.

"Okay, thanks," he calls after her, satisfied to put her off a bit.

He's still alcohol-less, though. And conversation-less with his girlfriend. And—now that he's alone with his thoughts—helpless to the preflight anxiety creeping in.

He needs a distraction.

Teddy pushes his duffel bag into the empty window seat next to him and digs through it, looking for his copy of *Parachutes*. Since he has a five-hour flight ahead of him, maybe perusing through it to compare and pick apart his performance will double as enough masochistic entertainment to get him to cruising altitude. Or he can at least use it as a shield if that flight attendant comes back. He finds it toward the bottom of his bag, shoved under his toiletry kit.

Only the title and the author's name, M. B. Caldwell, are on the cover, with a faint silhouette of a deployed parachute in the



background. Nothing spectacular. But apparently whoever M. B. Caldwell is knew what they were doing when they wrote the series, because “spectacular” is the word everyone keeps using to describe the type of opportunity this is for Teddy’s acting career.

*This could be your Hunger Games, Ted.*

Teddy turns the book over and tries not to pout at all the praise written on the back.

If he were in the mood to be honest with himself, he’d acknowledge the real reason why he didn’t feel good about his audition today. Regardless of how overprepared or unprepared he could have been, Teddy stills finds the whole prospect of auditioning for “the next major YA film franchise” spectacularly terrifying, and it messed with his head this morning. It’s intimidating as hell to take on that kind of role and all the expectations attached to it. . . .

So much so, that Teddy can’t even psych himself up to crack the book open now. He just sits there with his copy of one of the most hyped books being adapted to film in 2019, running his fingers over the slightly raised letters spelling out “M. B. Caldwell” across the top, and telling himself that God, he really blew it today.

Eventually Teddy’s pulled out of his downward self-deprecation spiral when movement to his left snags his attention. There’s a pair of jean shorts in his peripheral vision, and when he turns his head he’s confronted with a spectacular view of whoever’s ass is in the aisle next to him. His eyes wander north, all the way up to a blond braid spilling out from underneath a baseball hat.

Teddy’s kind of a sucker for chicks in ball caps.

His gaze drops to the girl’s jean shorts again when she

moves to sit in the opposite window seat. He tries to steal a glance at her profile, being nowhere near discreet, but her head is down and covered by the bill of her hat. He's so busy trying to get a look at her face that he almost startles back into the window seat next him when that same flight attendant comes out of nowhere and blocks his view.

"Would you like me to stow your backpack in the captain's closet, ma'am?"

"No, thank you," Teddy hears the girl reply. "I'll keep this one with me."

Subtlety has never been one of Teddy's strong suits, so it should come as no surprise that he doesn't have a talent for eavesdropping, either. As soon as the flight attendant walks away, he finds himself staring directly across the aisle at the girl in the baseball hat—staring, and trying to rein in the initial shock that runs through him when their eyes meet, because it only takes a split second of accidental eye contact to realize that he's definitely seen this girl somewhere before.

Her eyes flicker away, and Teddy goes back to staring at his tray table.

One of the flight attendants comes on the intercom a few minutes later to do the usual preflight safety routine, but now Teddy's too distracted to listen. He meets new people pretty much every week thanks to his career choice, and he's never had a problem with putting a name to a face before. He's worried about coming across as rude, and he's not trying to get a reputation in Hollywood as an unfriendly asshole who ignores people on airplanes.

Teddy's still flipping through his mental Rolodex of people he might run into on a flight to North Carolina when the pilot announces to prepare for takeoff, effectively upstaging all

thoughts of jean shorts and baseball hats. You'd think with how much he flies that he'd eventually get used to it, but nope. Usually his anxiety level is already in the lower stratosphere by the time the plane pushes back from the Jetway.

Teddy thumbs through the M. B. Caldwell book in his lap without seeing anything on the inside and tries to ignore the way his stomach drops when the plane begins to pivot.

"Scuse me?"

Teddy barely registers it at first. Then she repeats it and he glances left.

The familiar chick in the baseball hat is looking at him again—pretty sure she just spoke to him, too, now that Teddy's brain has had a chance to kick-start.

"Yeah?" His voice cracks. The corner of her mouth quirks up as her eyes drop to his lap, and Teddy's brain has no idea what to do with that.

"Sorry to bother you"—she levels her gaze with his again—"but I was wondering if you like that book you're reading?"

There's a subtle drawl to her words—a slow curve of the vowels that rules out any chance Teddy might have met her before. He would've remembered that.

The girl blinks at him, and at last it occurs to him that she's talking about the book in his lap.

"Oh—" Teddy looks down to hide the embarrassed smile spreading across his face. "Haven't started it yet."

She gives a polite, noncommittal hum, and when Teddy looks over, she's digging through her backpack despite the plane creeping toward takeoff.

"Have you read it?" he asks, watching her pull out a thick manila folder.

She doesn't look up when she says, "I have, actually."

Teddy almost asks her how she liked it, stopping short when the plane starts taxiing up the runway. He closes his eyes and pushes his head back into his headrest instead.

God, takeoffs are the absolute *worst* thing about flying. Except the landing. And the turbulence. And the annoyingly small snack bags—

“Hey.”

Teddy’s eyes snap open and he looks across the aisle.

Baseball hat is staring at him and trying not to laugh.

“You all right over there?” she asks.

“I’m good,” he says, then blows out a breath that completely undercuts his attempt to not seem like the biggest pansy in first class today.

“Really? Because you kinda look like you’re about to throw up.”

Teddy gives and points a finger at the roof of the cabin. “Not the biggest fan of flying.”

“I can tell.”

“Is it that—” He lets out another shaky breath as the plane picks up speed. “Is it that obvious?”

“Little bit, not gonna lie,” she says, crinkling her nose.

He extends a hand to her. “I’m Teddy.”

“Aw, man.” She has to lean all the way across the seat next to her to return the handshake. “So you’re not actually Buzz Lightyear?”

Teddy freezes, because there’s only one explanation for why in God’s name a stranger would ask him that, and he doesn’t want to turn around to check for confirmation.

“You can totally see inside my duffel bag right now, can’t you,” he says.

Grinning, she slips her hand from his and says, “Little bit, not gonna lie.”

Sure enough, when Teddy forces himself to look, a pair of bright blue boxer briefs are hanging halfway out of his bag—the apparent aftermath of rummaging around for his M. B. Caldwell book. The folded over waistband is announcing to the entire plane:—UZZ LIGHTYEA—in bold white lettering.

Teddy's at a loss for how to explain his way out of this one, so he shoves his underwear back into his duffel and zips it up with as much dignity as he can pull together at a time like this. He's almost disappointed the full BUZZ LIGHTYEAR OF STAR COMMAND hadn't been visible. If the universe is so keen on embarrassing the shit out of him today, the least it can do is not do it halfway.

"Yeah," he says slowly, facing the aisle again and pointing a thumb over his shoulder. "I'll be honest—I have those in, like, six different colors."

She purses her lips when she looks up from her manila folder, holding back a smile. "I'm Bennett, by the way."

"Bennett?" Teddy repeats in surprise, then wishes he hadn't. She raises her eyebrows at him, waiting for him to continue, and honestly? He's got nothing. "I mean, I've never met a girl Bennett before. Well, I don't think I've met a guy Bennett, either, but I like it. It's—yeah. It's a cool name."

Bennett appears to be somewhere between trying to figure out the angle he's working and trying not to laugh at him. Again.

"It's short for Mary Bennett?" she offers. "I don't think I look like a Mary."

Teddy gives her a quick once-over before he realizes what he's doing, then attempts to play it off by letting his eyes dart around the cabin for a moment. "So, you're from the south then?"

"What?" she laughs.

“I just figured since your accent, and, like, the double name and everything . . .” His awkwardness knows no bounds, apparently. “That’s a southern thing, right?”

Bennett cocks an eyebrow. “Are you gonna ask why our tea is so sweet next? I can probably find you a *Buzzfeed* article or something that covers all this.”

Teddy holds up his hands, pleasantly surprised by the sarcasm. “Hey now, cut me some slack here. I was born in Pittsburgh and grew up in California.”

“Yeah? That’s cool,” Bennett says, looking around thoughtfully. Teddy wonders what the logo is on her hat. “But, yeah—I’m from North Carolina. I’ve lived in the same spot in North Carolina my entire life, actually. Kinda lame.”

“I don’t know, staying in the same place for a while sounds nice to me,” he says, scratching the back of his neck. He bounces around filming on location so much that it’s starting to feel like nowhere is home anymore.

She snorts. “I’m supposed to go to college there, too, though. Also kinda depressing.”

“Really? What school?”

“Davidson College. . . . It’s about thirty minutes north of Charlotte,” she says, like she isn’t expecting him to know where it is. (To her credit, he doesn’t.)

“Nice. Do you know what you’re gonna major in?”

“Negative.” She shakes her head absently for a second, then says, “Hey, so how’re you feeling about that audition this morning?”

Teddy stares at her.

“Whoa, how did you—” He stops midsentence as the pieces finally click together. “Hold on—I do know you. You were at my audition, weren’t you?”

A hint of a smile flickers across her face.

“You totally were!” Teddy remembers now. She was sitting (sans baseball hat) with the group in the back corner. How the hell could he forget that? Teddy knows he has a tendency for tunnel vision when he’s working, but he hadn’t realized he’d gotten that oblivious.

“Are you like an intern or a PA or something?” he asks, wondering why she didn’t say anything sooner.

She shakes her head. “The director really liked you, by the way.”

“Are you serious?” Teddy resists the impulse to lean forward, hope surging in his chest. “It felt like an absolute train wreck on my end.”

“Didn’t seem like it from ours,” she says, and Jesus, Teddy can’t sit still now.

“So, like, what’s the over-under on me getting the part?”

Bennett makes a face. “Come on, you know I’m not allowed to talk about it.”

“You come on!” Teddy says, only half-joking. “I’m dying over here. Not even a little hint?” He tries to give her his most charming smile, then worries he looks like a psychopath and stops.

“Sorry, Buzz,” Bennett says. “But the good news is, you handled that takeoff way better than I was expecting.”

“Wait, what—?” Teddy turns to look out the window. Sure enough, they’re already thousands of feet in the air, still ascending, but the worst is over for now.

“Holy . . .,” he breathes out, then glances back across the aisle and finds Bennett watching him again. There’s even a little grin at the corner of her mouth giving her away. “You sly dog,” he says, slightly dazed with what he thinks is gratitude, but can’t quite put the right word to it.

Bennett shrugs him off and turns back to the stack of papers in her lap. “It was the least I could do. You looked so nervous you were giving *me* anxiety.”

Teddy watches her lower her tray table and fan the stack of papers out in front of her, the bill of her hat covering her face again. He wants to say something to get her to look up, but of course, he draws a blank—the one time he could actually use his talent for talking in circles. Maybe if he wasn’t busy being so endeared, he’d be able to come up with something to say.

When the flight attendant appears after the captain turns off the seat belt sign, she asks Teddy if he wants to order a bourbon on the rocks now. Actually, *daring* him to order that bourbon on the rocks is a more accurate description. Teddy politely declines and settles for a soda. Bennett follows suit.

“So, random question,” Teddy says once they’re alone again, because he can’t help himself. Desperate times, desperate measures. “You don’t happen to know where Terminal E is in the Charlotte airport, do you?”



## CHAPTER THREE

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Teddy and Bennett talk for almost the entire the flight.

Well, mainly Teddy talks. It starts out with not-so-discreetly prying for information on *Parachutes* (homegirl is like Fort Knox over there with her manila folder and indestructible poker face), and it kinda evolves from there. Teddy talks, and Bennett works on whatever those papers are, occasionally asking questions or offering snarky commentary on something dumb he says. It's a solid four-and-a-half-hour distraction.

"Sorry to interrupt, but we're preparing to land," the flight attendant says to Bennett, wedging herself into Teddy's dramatic retelling of a Fourth of July fireworks debacle he was involved in last year. "May I take your trash for you?"

"Yes, please." Bennett smiles up at her. "Thank you."

She reaches for Teddy's trash without a word.

"You're mannerly," he says to Bennett once the flight attendant is out of earshot. "Your mama must've raised you right."

"Bless your heart." Bennett presses a hand to her chest, exaggerating her own accent. "No wonder you've got one of them picture shows on the tee-vee."

Teddy laughs, despite the unease that shows up whenever

someone mentions his acting career. He hasn't been in the game long enough to be too paranoid about people's intentions, but the thought that maybe he should've kept his guard up a little more around Bennett creeps into his head anyway. He steals another glance at her—at the way she's meticulously evening the edges of her papers on her tray table, pen between her teeth and eyebrows furrowed in concentration—and feels like a complete douche.

*"Ladies and gentlemen, if I could have your attention please,"* the pilot crackles over the intercom. *"We'll be making our way into the gate in about twenty minutes; however, I do have an announcement to make, as I've been informed there are several passengers on board trying to catch connecting flights."*

Teddy's stomach drops.

*"Flight 1123, nonstop to West Palm Beach, and Flight 1435, nonstop to Miami, have been delayed indefinitely due to inclement weather. We apologize for the inconvenience and will assist passengers in any way we can to help make other arrangements. On behalf of myself and the crew, thank you for flying with us tonight. Welcome to Charlotte."*

Teddy presses his head back against his seat, and the word is out of his mouth before he can stop it. "Shit."

"Sounds like that was your flight," he hears across the aisle.

Rolling his head to the left, he nods at Bennett, and instead of panicking about landing, Teddy spends the rest of the flight trying not to look as pissed off as he feels.

\* \* \*

"So, you got a game plan, Buzz?" Bennett asks on the way off the plane. Teddy's so distracted by his blossoming predicament

and those damn jean shorts and being called Buzz that he doesn't realize when the strap on his duffel bag gets caught on an armrest until he's suddenly yanked backward.

"Uh—" He flails around to untangle himself, thankful Bennett doesn't turn back at the sound he makes. The flight attendant from earlier definitely watches all this go down, though. Teddy ducks his head and turns his phone off airplane mode for something to do underneath the unimpressed glare he receives. It chimes immediately with a voice mail from Chelsea. He pauses just inside the Jetway and presses the phone to his ear.

*"Hey, Ted. I know you're on a flight right now, so this is kinda shitty, but I'm stuck in Vancouver for the weekend. Give me a call when you get this."*

"You've gotta be kidding me," he mutters, because of course this is happening. Today's just one shade of awesome layered over another. He scowls at his voice-mail screen for a moment, trying to decide whether to call Chelsea back or throw his phone off the Jetway. He decides to catch up with Bennett instead. He needs to regroup. Or something. And he figures talking with a local would be more productive than anything. Except when he looks up to find her, she's nowhere in sight.

Continuing up the Jetway, Teddy finds an information desk and heads over, pulling himself out of the scene looping through his head—one that involves buying a ticket to Vancouver, showing up to Chelsea's set, and demanding an MLA-formatted explanation on exactly what the hell her deal has been lately.

Since the plane arrived around nine p.m., Teddy definitely isn't in the mood to turn around and hop on a red-eye back to LA tonight. He toys with the idea of catching a flight to Pittsburgh to see his grandparents, then thinks better of it. There's really no way around being stuck in Charlotte at this point, and

Teddy knows this isn't the lady behind the help desk's fault, but he isn't doing a good job of hiding his impatience as she lists off tomorrow's flight options.

"I've got a nonstop to LA tomorrow afternoon at two p.m.—I think it's the best option we've got for you. I could get you out earlier in the morning, but with the connections, you'll be arriving back in LA around the same time," she says, typing on her computer. She kind of reminds Teddy of the receptionist from his audition, and it only adds to his current sense of gloom.

"Let's just do that, then," he sighs, getting out his wallet and handing over his credit card. He's been standing at the service desk for a few minutes now and keeps glancing around the line that's formed behind him to check if Bennett's still nearby.

"All right, sir. You're all set for a two p.m. flight to Los Angeles tomorrow."

"Thanks," Teddy says, fumbling with his card and wallet as he steps aside. He uses his foot to drag his duffel along with him, and spots a girl in a baseball hat emerging from the bathroom across the way. He tucks his credit card into his wallet and almost trips over the bag at his feet to follow after her.

Bennett smiles when he walks up.

"Glad to see you didn't fall off the Jetway," she says, and under normal circumstances Teddy would appreciate the reference. She studies his face and adds, "You good? You're looking a little stressed out again."

Teddy snorts. "Yeah, well. The rest of my weekend plans just fell through, and I'm kind of stranded in Charlotte for the night."

"Yikes—I'm sorry." She pauses for a second, messing with the tied off end of her braid. "I mean, do you need a ride or anything? I have my car here."

Teddy feels his eyebrows lift and grins. “Look at you, all over this southern hospitality shtick already. I’m impressed.”

She leaves the braid alone to readjust her backpack straps. “You should be. Even I’m impressed with how charitable I’m being.”

“This is about my Buzz Light year briefs, isn’t it?”

Bennett laughs. “Sure, we’ll go with that—”

The last half of her comment is drowned out by a chorus of squeals coming from somewhere to their left. They both turn.

There’s a group of teenage girls standing a few yards away, Starbucks drinks in hand and hearts in their eyes as they huddle together. One of them is even wearing a *Testing Wyatt* T-shirt.

“Sorry about this,” Teddy mutters to Bennett. Then he waves, prompting the girls to rush over in a fit of Frappuccino-fueled enthusiasm.

There are only four of them, but they’re all talking over one another about how much they love Teddy and his TV show. Teddy listens and grins and doles out hugs, and when the bold-est of the group, a tall girl with bright red hair, asks if they can get pictures, Teddy pushes his luggage aside and tells them that he doesn’t know how to work Instagram, but they’re welcome to tag him if they want.

“We love you so much,” the redhead gushes, clutching a hand over her heart like she’s sure it’s about to burst.

Honestly, Teddy loves meeting fans, but he still doesn’t understand why they get this way around him. He’s pretty much the most average looking guy ever—dark hair, brown eyes, a little on the skinny side. And it’d be one thing if he were an actual movie star, but all he’s done is a couple of indie movies and hold down a recurring (secondary) role on an MTV show. His acting résumé doesn’t merit this kind of attention. . . .

Teddy throws a glance at Bennett. She's standing off to the side, watching it all go down with a hint a humor in her eyes. Teddy feels bad for making her wait, so he asks, "Actually, do you guys mind if we do a group picture? I've got an Uber coming soon."

It's a fib, yeah, but hey—occupational necessity sometimes.

"I'll take it for y'all," Bennett volunteers cheerfully, moving around the group and holding out a hand. "Which phone do you want to use?"

The girls squeal again, pushing all their phones toward her, and Teddy gives her a good-natured headshake before smiling for the camera.

Bennett turns out to be quite the accommodating photographer, having the girls switch places so they each get a turn to stand next to Teddy. She takes pictures on all their phones, then tells them to do one last goofy one, and Teddy ends up with the redhead hooking an arm around his shoulders and pretending to give him a noogie. Bennett has to retake the picture because the first one "supposedly" turns out blurry.

"Who knew you were such a good photographer, Bennett?" Teddy says once they're crossing through the airport again.

They step onto a moving sidewalk and Bennett throws him a smirk over her shoulder. "Who knew you were such a big deal, Buzz?"

Both of their bags are on the carousel by the time they make it to baggage claim. Teddy glances at the exit doors while Bennett searches the front pockets of her backpack for something.

"Sorry—looking for my valet ticket," she says.

"Oh, you fancy, huh?"

"Obviously." She grins up at him. "But I also promised my dad I wouldn't walk through long-term parking by myself."

“Touché,” Teddy says, thinking about her offer from earlier. He doesn’t want her to think he was blowing her off when he fibbed about having an Uber coming, but he also doesn’t know how to bring it up again.

“So, cabs usually hang out here,” Bennett tells him as they stand outside of arrivals. “And if you put your airline into your Uber request they find you pretty quickly. Where are you headed tomorrow?”

Teddy hikes his duffel bag up on his shoulder. “Back to LA, if I can make it through the night here. Speaking of—where’s the closest hotel?”

“We’re at an airport,” Bennett says. “You could probably throw a rock and hit one from here.”

Teddy pushes her with his elbow. “Okay, smartass.” She steps sideways, grinning, looking like she might push back. But she doesn’t.

“I guess hotels depend on how much you want to spend on an Uber,” she says, then lists off a couple of places around Charlotte. Teddy nods along politely, watching multiple cabs whiz by. Before he can ask which one she recommends, Bennett readjusts her baseball hat and says, “Are you sure you don’t want a ride? I know it’s kinda weird, but yeah. Offer still stands.”

Teddy’s eyes cut back to hers. “Why would that be weird?”

She shrugs. “I mean, for all you know I could, like, run a Teddy Sharpe fan blog and want to take secret pictures of you to up my follower count.” Teddy bursts out laughing. Bennett shrugs again. “Didn’t know if it’d be weird or not for a complete stranger to offer you a ride.”

Teddy wonders what her definition of “complete stranger” is, considering they just spent the better portion of the past six hours together.

“Do you run a fan blog for me?” he asks.

Bennett snorts. “Yes.”

“You sure giving me a lift to a hotel isn’t out of your way?”

“I have to go toward the highway regardless. And I’m pretty sure there are, like, eight hotels on the way.” The guy working valet pulls up in a Jeep Cherokee. “Your call, Buzz,” Bennett says, walking to the trunk and popping the lift gate.

There’s a split-second hesitation; then Teddy replies with, “That’d be great, actually,” and finds himself in the passenger’s seat of Bennett’s Jeep, reflecting again on how this is not the way he anticipated his day going.

“It’s exceptionally clean in here,” Teddy comments when Bennett hops into the driver’s side. He watches her hesitate with her key fob, like it takes her a second to remember that it’s not actually a car key, and adds, “New car smell, too. Nice. Graduation gift?”

“Yeah, just got it,” she says, sounding a little distracted as they pull away from the curb. “Should you call ahead to some hotels?”

“Oh—yeah.” Teddy props his elbow up on the center console and opens the map app on his phone.

Bennett drives past the first two hotels he finds, claiming, “They’re for sketchballs.” She actually pulls into the parking lot of the third one, but it ends up being at full occupancy because of a convention in town for the weekend.

“There are so many good hotels uptown,” Bennett says when they’re back on the road. She’s been lobbying for wherever the hell *uptown* is for the past ten minutes. “We’re already past the highway, anyway.”

Teddy looks up from his phone and frowns. “Uptown sounds too far out of the way, so no. The next hotel looks promising.”



“Promising to give you hepatitis.”

“What do you think, *A, B, or C?*” he asks.

Bennett grins at the windshield. “Pick one.”

Teddy can’t decide if she’s being stubborn or if she’s really this concerned for his well-being. “Come on, Bennett,” he says, lightly tapping her arm with the back of his hand. “I appreciate it, but it’s not a big deal. Just drop me off somewhere and I’ll figure it out.”

Bennett stills for a second, and there’s a long pause before she says anything—long enough for Teddy to think she’s actually entertaining the idea of leaving him somewhere to fend for himself.

“You said you have to be back at the airport around noon tomorrow, right?” she asks.

“Yeah, but—”

“This is about to be so weird,” she mutters, pressing a hand to her forehead and glancing out the driver’s side window.

“What is?”

She hesitates before answering, “So, my older brother has to fly out tomorrow for some charity golf tournament he’s playing in down in Fort Myers. If you don’t mind getting there a little early, you could stay at our house tonight and ride with him to the airport tomorrow. . . .

“And before you think I’m some humongous creep,” she starts up again, talking ninety miles an hour and throwing nervous glances across the center console. “I’m only offering because I feel bad your weekend plans fell through and that you have no car and it would be so shitty to catch any of the hepatitises in the alphabet while stranded in Charlotte.”

It’s the longest monologue Teddy’s heard from her so far, and it takes him a second to register what she’s saying.

Bennett frowns at him when he doesn't respond, adding, "Hep-a-ti-tis. Hep-a-ti-tis-es—that doesn't sound right. The hell is the plural of hepatitis?"

Teddy starts cracking up.

Like, really cracking up—mouth hanging open, no sound coming out, having-to-clutch-his-stomach cracking up.

"Oh my God, this is hilarious," he says, then sees the expression on her face. "No, no—in a good way," he backpedals, still laughing. "I don't know how we got here, but that's really sweet of you to offer."

Bennett changes her grip on the steering wheel and checks her rearview.

"Yeah, well, I'm doing a great job of convincing you that I'm not some psycho stalker fangirl," she mumbles.

"But you are a fan of me, obviously," Teddy says.

"You know what, that was inappropriate; I shouldn't have said anything," she says, her face still flushed. "What's the next hotel on your list?"

A tiny shard of disappointment works its way into Teddy's stomach, and he has no idea why or where it's coming from. He and Bennett have only known each other for a few hours—maybe it is a little weird she's being this nice.

"Are you doing all this because I'm, like, kind of famous, or are you really this nice?" he asks, cringing as he says it.

Bennett doesn't even hesitate. "Because you're *kind of* famous."

Teddy's head snaps up. "Seriously?"

This time Bennett's the one to laugh. "Don't flatter yourself, superstar. I didn't even know who you were until a week ago."

"Hey, now—ouch." Her comment stings a little more than it should, but, ironically, it makes him feel better.

"See? I'm not that nice."

“Just to recap here,” Teddy begins counting off on his fingers, “You took pity on me and talked me through our flight, you were a great sport about taking pictures earlier, you’re currently chauffeuring me around on a hotel tour of Charlotte, and now you’re offering me a free place to stay so I don’t catch any of the hepatitises in the alphabet.” He pauses, enjoying how hard Bennett’s trying not to smile now. “I don’t know who you’ve been hanging out with, Bennett, but I’d say that’s pretty freaking nice.”

“I can’t help it—I just feel so bad for you. Its’ like the state of North Carolina is allergic to you,” she says dryly.

Teddy laughs, letting his gaze slip over to the driver’s side again. Bennett’s in profile against the passing streetlights outside, all pleased smirks and genuine intentions, and honestly? Screw it. Chelsea bailed on him, his plans fell through, and the last thing he wants to do is sit in some hepatitis-ridden hotel room watching *SportsCenter* all night.

“You’re killing me, Smalls,” he says, eyes shifting away from her ball cap to the approaching stoplight up ahead. “Have you reinvited me to stay at your house yet? Because if I do end up getting hepatitis, it’ll be on you,”

Bennett bites back another grin and puts her turn signal on. “Staying at my house is a ballsy move, Buzz,” she tells him as they drift into the left turn lane. “I could actually be a psycho stalker. Or a serial killer.”

“I think I’ll take my odds against you rather than a virus that attacks my liver.”

“A-plus famous last words,” Bennett says, then pulls a U-turn around the median.

## CHAPTER FOUR

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It doesn't sink in that Teddy's going through with this until Bennett pulls onto the highway, heading north. Maybe he's being paranoid, but it feels like the atmosphere changes between them—and it doesn't help that at first Bennett busies herself with her phone instead of talking.

"Just so you know, I give great lectures on texting and driving," Teddy says.

"I know, I'm sorry." Her eyes dart between her phone screen and the windshield for a few more seconds before she puts it down. She starts messing with the radio next, settling on a scratchy Led Zeppelin song.

Teddy points at the dash. "What's up with this station?"

"It sounds better the closer you get to the lake. It's all we listen to there, so I apologize in advance if you're not a fan."

"Lake?"

"Oh—yeah." She throws him a quick glance. "We kind of live on a lake."

Oh. *Casual*.

"Anything else I need to know before you take me home to meet the fam?" Teddy asks.

Bennett pretends to mull it over. “As long as you don’t mind dogs and you’re not a picky eater, you should be good.”

“How far away is your house from Charlotte?”

“Thirty minutes, tops.”

“And, uh—how many people are going to be there?” he asks, but what he means is, does she have a younger sibling who watches a lot of MTV? Are her parents into movies and might recognize him from his? Does he need to call up Rita for another PR lesson on how to deal with the masses?

“Just my mom and my dad, and my older brother, Tanner,” Bennett says. Teddy relaxes for a moment until she adds, “My aunt and uncle and cousins will be there tomorrow for dinner—actually, never mind. You’re leaving tomorrow.”

Teddy wonders what the rest of her family’s going to be like.

“Should I just call your mom and dad, *Mom* and *Dad* then?” he asks.

Bennett snorts. “And you call me a smartass. Mr. and Mrs. Caldwell. Or Tom and Libby. Whatever you’re comfortable with.”

“Bennett Caldwell,” Teddy says, trying it out.

She gives him a skeptical look. “Teddy Sharpe?”

“Correct. But do you know my *full* name?” he asks.

“Can’t say I do.”

“That at least proves you’re not a psycho stalker fangirl. Any respectable Teddy Sharpe stan would know that it’s Theodore Maxwell Sharpe.”

Bennett laughs. “Yikes. And I thought Mary Bennett Caldwell was a mouthful.”

Teddy’s about to fire off another crack about her running a fan blog when something occurs to him, and it’s like the world’s biggest light bulb turns on over his head.

“Hold on a second,” he mutters, his mouth barely keeping up with the jump his brain makes from Mary Bennett Caldwell to *M. B. Caldwell*. “What the—holy *FUCK*.”

“What?!” she startles, gripping the steering wheel with both hands and looking over at him like he’s nuts.

“You wrote the book the movie I just auditioned for is based on?” Teddy asks. “You’re the author of *Parachutes*?”

Bennett blushes, confirming the answer, and it certainly all makes sense now: Why she was sitting with the director during his audition, why she’s not allowed to talk about casting . . . Teddy’s been casually hanging out with the creator of the YA film franchise he just auditioned for, and this is just now occurring to him.

“Jesus,” Teddy says, rubbing a hand over his forehead. How *the hell* is this just now occurring to him? “How old are you?”

Bennett squirms a little in her seat. “Eighteen.”

“You’re a best-selling author. At eighteen.” Teddy gapes, then adds (mostly to himself), “That’s so freaking *cool*.”

Even in the artificial dashboard light, he can still see Bennett blushing when she mumbles, “Thank you,” and Teddy can’t figure out why she looks so embarrassed.

“I mean, maybe I should start a fan blog about you, Bennett. Holy shit,” he says.

Finally—*finally*—Bennett cracks a smile, and Teddy counts it as a monumental win for about three seconds until it dawns on him that Bennett’s known since before they even took off today that he auditioned for her movie without reading the books first.

\* \* \*

Teddy spends the rest of the car ride reeling over this *M. B. Caldwell* discovery, and it quickly becomes apparent that

Bennett's sticking to her You-Know-I-Can't-Talk-About-This policy, regardless of how many times Teddy tries to sweet talk his way into getting some answers. He has so many questions about the books and film adaptation that he can't keep his thoughts straight, but he also feels guilty that Bennett knows he hasn't read the series yet. The least he can do is rein in the peer pressure.

Once he and Bennett pull off the highway, they drive through a small town before getting onto some back roads that are more than a little terrifying. Teddy's used to being surrounded by traffic and city lights, so he gets a little restless as they cruise through the boonies and their lack of streetlamps. Particularly when they make another turn onto a dark road completely lined with trees. The moonlight and Bennett's high beams are the only sources of light for what looks like miles.

"Maybe you are a serial killer, Bennett," Teddy says, staring out the window. "You've definitely got the setting down."

Teddy's shoulders relax back into his seat when a well-lit neighborhood emerges up ahead, but the relief is short lived. His phone vibrates in his pocket just before they turn in, and his heart sinks when he sees Chelsea's name on the screen. A text message shows up a few seconds after it goes to voice mail.

**Thu, Jul 20, 10:14 p.m.**

Why are you ignoring my calls? I know you have your phone. And it rang so your clearly not on a flight.

Call me back ok?

Teddy doesn't have the energy for this now. He'll text her back later.

"Well," Bennett says quietly. "We're here."

Teddy shoves his phone back in his pocket and glances through the windshield. He hadn't realized they'd stopped moving—they're parked behind a couple of other cars toward the bottom of a roundabout driveway.

"Oh, wow," he says, letting his eyes adjust. "This is beautiful."

The Caldwell's house looks like it's straight out of one of those home and garden magazines Teddy's mom keeps around his parents' house. It's all white brick and dark shutters, with stairs on the right side leading up to what Teddy assumes is a back deck with a great view, seeing as the lake they live on comes right up into their backyard.

Bennett shoulders open her car door and hops out; Teddy follows, meeting her at the trunk to grab their bags. She has the liftgate open and is reaching for her rolling suitcase by the time he gets there, and regardless of the unsettled feeling lingering in his stomach over Chelsea, Teddy at least remembers his manners.

"Here, I'll get those," he says, reaching for her luggage. He accidentally bumps into her as he leans in, and he pretends not to notice the way she jumps and steps sideways to give him more room.

"Thanks," Bennett says to the driveway, hiding behind her hat.

"No problem." Teddy straightens up and sets both of their rolling bags on the ground.

"I can get mine," she offers. Teddy's still fumbling with both telescoping handles, but he manages to steer hers out of reach.

"Hey—what kind of houseguest would I be if I made you carry your own luggage?" he asks, wanting to pump some of



the easiness between them earlier into whatever's settled around them now. Bennett smiles but seems distracted, which in turn distracts Teddy.

She shuts the liftgate and locks her car, then falls into step next to him on their way up the driveway. They walk to the deck stairs off the side of the house instead of the front door.

"Just a heads up, my family might be surprised to see you," she says quietly. "You're probably going to get bombarded with questions."

Teddy glances over and shrugs. He can handle questions. Occupational hazard.

"Hello?" Bennett calls out when they reach the top of the steps. It takes more effort to carry both rolling bags up than Teddy cares to admit, and he tries to be nonchalant with how winded he is when he sets them down to catch his breath.

"She's here!" someone yells back from the other side of the porch—right as a ginormous animal comes barreling around the corner.

"Hey, Buddy!" Bennett drawls, intercepting what Teddy thinks is a dog. She grabs the wiggling mass of brown and black fur by the collar before he can get to Teddy and says, "This—is Buddy."

"Is that a dog or a horse?" Teddy asks. Buddy's head comes up to Teddy's hip.

"He's a Saint Bernard-German shepherd mix," Bennett explains, letting go of his collar. The dog surges forward and smushes his face in between Teddy's leg and his duffel bag.

"So, a horse."

Bennett laughs and grabs the handle of her rolling bag before Teddy can protest, so Teddy resolves himself to scratching Buddy behind the ears with his free hand while he follows

Bennett around a bend in the deck. They come to a covered porch area where a chorus of greetings ring out. Bennett's mom is sitting in one of the four rocking chairs lined up, while her dad and her brother stand at a high table in the corner.

"Hey, guys!" Bennett says happily. She points back to Teddy as she hugs her mom. "I brought a stowaway."

All eyes shift to Teddy.

"Yeah? Who's this?" someone asks.

"I'm Teddy," he says, putting on his best smile and waving. His duffel slips off his shoulder by accident and drops to the ground before he can catch it.

Bennett sets her own bags by the deck doors and moves toward the middle of the porch. "This is Teddy," she repeats, then gestures to the blond woman sitting in the rocking chair. "Teddy, this is my mom, Libby."

Mrs. Caldwell smiles warmly at him when they shake hands and says, "It's very nice to meet you, Teddy."

Bennett points across the deck to her brother. "That's Tanner."

"How's it goin', man?" Tanner asks. Teddy isn't sure if Tanner looks older or younger than he is, but he does look a lot like Bennett. Just with a darker shade of blond hair, and scruff.

After Teddy shakes Tanner's hand, he looks to his right to find Bennett pulling back from hugging her dad.

"Mr. Caldwell," Teddy says, stepping forward. "Thanks so much for having me."

He claps Teddy on the shoulder when they shake hands. "Of course—the more the merrier."

"Are y'all hungry?" Mrs. Caldwell asks. "We've got pizza, or I can make you something if you want?"

"Oh no. Pizza's great with me," Teddy says quickly. "Where

is it? I can grab it—” But Mrs. Caldwell is already up and crossing the deck and Bennett’s telling him to sit down. Teddy takes the rocking chair next to her and Buddy plops down on Teddy’s feet. Literally. On his feet.

It’s unsurprising that Bennett’s family is just as welcoming and hilarious as she is. Between heated up pizza and rapid-fire conversations, Teddy learns that Tanner is a year older than him and plays on his college’s golf team. That Mrs. Caldwell has a slightly thicker variation of Bennett’s accent, giving her a kind of *Steel Magnolias* vibe, and likes to brag about her kids as much as they’ll let her (which is not a lot, in Bennett’s case). And that Mr. Caldwell is definitely the person Bennett gets her sense of humor from—sarcasm and all. It’s pretty similar to Teddy’s own family dynamic, now that he’s thinking about it. Minus the accents.

“Your house is beautiful by the way, Mr. and Mrs. Caldwell,” Teddy says between his second and third slice of pizza. Mrs. Caldwell keeps putting them on his plate, so Teddy keeps eating them. “You don’t see a lot of houses like this out in California. I’m pumped to see what the lake looks like tomorrow.”

“We appreciate that, Teddy,” Mrs. Caldwell says. “Is that where you’re from, then?”

Teddy nods. “Originally from Pittsburgh. My family moved out to LA right before I started junior high.”

The cool thing about the Caldwells, Teddy finds, is that they ask plenty of questions, but only based on information Teddy volunteers first. He’s been at their house for an hour now and it’s sort of refreshing that he hasn’t been asked about his career yet. Granted, they probably don’t know who he is, but usually it’s the first thing out of people’s mouths when they meet him.

“The Braves got swept last week again. It’s going to be a

problem in October,” Mr. Caldwell says to Tanner at some point, and Teddy can’t be expected to not invite himself into a conversation about baseball.

“Oh no,” he says, “don’t tell me I’m surrounded by Atlanta fans here.”

Tanner comes back at him with, “Let me guess—Pirates fan?”

“*Die-hard* Pirates fan,” Teddy says. He joins them at the high table and they launch into baseball, which turns out to be a great conversation despite Teddy getting distracted half the time by Bennett.

She and her mom are in the middle of their own chat, and Teddy’s already heard *Parachutes* dropped at least twice. Now he’s trying to pick up bits and pieces of what they’re saying, which makes him a terrible person, yeah, but can you blame him?

The only problem is Bennett keeps making eye contact with him from across the porch like she knows he’s trying to listen. Every time it happens, Teddy ducks his head and looks away, and then has to find his way back into the baseball conversation without making it obvious that he’s only halfway paying attention.

“So, Teddy,” Tanner says after the second or third time Teddy misses a question because he’s looking over at Bennett. “How do you and Bennett know each other again?”

It’s an inevitable question. Teddy should have been more prepared.

“I, uh—auditioned for the *Parachutes* movie earlier today, actually,” he says, scratching the back of his neck. “We started talking on the flight to Charlotte, and when I found out my connecting flight got canceled, she helped me out a bit.”

There’s a pause, then Tanner’s eyes widen. “What?”

“What?” Teddy repeats, combing back through his sentence

and finding nothing that would make Tanner look this alarmed. What?

“Mary Bennett Caldwell,” Tanner calls out, leaning around Teddy to look at his sister. “What did he just say?”

“I didn’t hear him,” Bennett says, looking to Teddy. “What’d you say?”

But it appears Tanner already has the answer to whatever’s going on inside his head, because a massive smile breaks out across his face. “Your movie had auditions? Does that mean it’s, like, officially happening?”

Bennett hesitates, eyes darting between Teddy and Tanner. Then she gives her brother a rueful smile and says, “Surprise?”

Tanner jumps out of his chair and almost sends it toppling over. “WHAT?! Are you serious? This is fucking amazing, Bennett!”

“*Language,*” Mr. Caldwell snaps.

“When were auditions? Wait, *that’s* why you were in LA? You told me it was for a book signing!” Tanner says, practically talking over himself. “When were you going to tell us? Wait—why aren’t you guys freaking out about this, too?” Tanner glances back and forth between his parents, looking suddenly wounded. “Mom and Dad already knew? Not fair, Bennett—you promised you were gonna tell me first if it happened!”

Teddy’s stomach is in his throat the entire time Bennett gets bombarded with questions. He has no idea why she hadn’t told her brother yet, but he’s absolutely mortified he blew her cover.

“I didn’t want to say anything until a budget was set and first-round auditions were over,” Bennett calmly explains. “Didn’t want to jinx it.”

To his credit, Tanner gets over it pretty quickly and goes straight back to interrogation mode. Question after question,

and Teddy desperately tries to catch Bennett's eye to convey some kind of apology. When is it coming out? (In 2019, but they haven't set a date yet.) Are they doing movies for the whole series? (They need to get through this one first before they start thinking about that.) Does this mean she's moving to LA? (Nope.) Is Spielberg directing? (Again, nope.)

And when Bennett finally does take a second to glance Teddy's way, she throws him a subtle smirk and shakes her head at all the *I'm so sorry!*'s he mouths at her.

## CHAPTER FIVE

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Everyone decides to turn in around midnight (once Tanner calms down about Teddy's little revelation).

They all file through the deck doors and walk into a high-ceilinged, open living room that connects to the kitchen. A stone fireplace takes up most of the wall to the right, bracketed by shelves overflowing with books and picture frames. It's a trip to look at books under the same roof as someone who's actually written one—Teddy does a quick scan and spots *Parachutes* and its sequel on one of the top shelves.

There's a staircase leading down to the basement in the back corner and a hallway leading out of the kitchen opposite of it. Mrs. Caldwell says Teddy can sleep downstairs in the guest room before she and Mr. Caldwell wave good night. Tanner follows suit, rounding out of the kitchen and disappearing down the hallway.

"Thanks again for having me, Mr. and Mrs. Caldwell," Teddy calls after them.

"Your room's down here," Bennett says, moving past him toward the back staircase.

Teddy follows her down the steps, careful not to bang the feet of his rolling bag against the hardwoods along the way.

His brain takes this time to remind him again of what an asshole he is for blowing Bennett's cover in front of her brother. As soon as they get to the bottom of the steps and round the banister, Teddy can't hold it in anymore.

"Okay, holy shit—I'm so sorry, Bennett," he grovels. "I didn't mean to—"

Bennett turns around immediately, like she'd been expecting it, and holds up a hand. "It's fine, I promise. I was going to tell Tanner this weekend anyway."

"But—"

"Teddy."

"No, I—"

"Seriously, it's okay," she says. There's humor in her eyes, but mostly *shut up and stop apologizing*. "I'd tell you if I were mad."

Would she, though? The girl is mystifying.

"You're over here," she says, waving for him to follow her around a corner.

Teddy's definitely not done talking about this yet, and he's expecting to have at least a hallway's length of time to collect his thoughts. Instead he walks straight into a bedroom with lime green walls—a little lighter shade than what's used on film sets for special effects scenes, actually. Teddy can't help himself.

"Holy Chroma key," he laughs, looking around. "So, is this where *Parachutes* is gonna film special effects? Or is it gonna be more of a situational thing?"

"Movie jokes. You're funny," Bennett says, twirling the tied off end of her braid around her finger. "Cell service is bad down here—I can give you the Wi-Fi password if you want. Bathroom's down the hall."



Teddy crosses the room and drops his bags at the foot of the bed, then takes a seat on the duvet cover to test it out.

“Your family’s awesome, by the way,” he says, standing up again.

Bennett grins. “They’re a little ridiculous sometimes.”

“You promise you’re not mad at me for telling—okay, noted,” he says when she shoots him a dirty look. He puts up his hands in defense and switches gears. “Are you guys doing anything else this weekend? Do you have a boat?”

“We do. We’ll probably get out on the lake and float around. No concrete plans, though.”

“Sounds nice,” Teddy says, and he’s a little surprised by how much he means it.

“Yeah.” Bennett eyes the ceiling and takes a half step back toward the door. “Way nicer than LA, probably.”

“Probably,” he laughs, though there’s more truth behind it than he wants to let on. Teddy hates flying back to an empty apartment to begin with, and it’ll be even worse when he gets back and has to deal with Chelsea stuff. Maybe he’ll go see his parents, now that he has no concrete plans, either. Actually wait, no—his parents are on vacation in San Francisco this weekend. Damn it.

“All right, I think I’m gonna call it a night,” Bennett says, taking another step back.

The distance she keeps putting between them needles Teddy a bit. Probably because he’s already thinking about how lonely LA’s going to be when he gets back tomorrow.

“What time should I be up?” he asks.

Bennett shrugs. “Whenever you feel like it. My dad doesn’t work Fridays in the summer and my mom has the summers off in general. Fridays are usually laid back for us.”

Teddy perks up at an excuse to stall for time. “What do your parents do?”

“My dad’s a lawyer and my mom’s a teacher.” Bennett starts playing with the end of her braid again and rocks back into her heels. “My mom said something about cooking breakfast in the morning if that interests you.”

“Yeah, absolutely.”

“Cool. It’ll probably be around nine or so.”

A pause follows.

“Hey—um. Thanks again for inviting me, by the way.” Teddy scratches the side of his face, then rubs his nose. “I probably would’ve spent the night watching *SportsCenter* by myself in some hepatitis-ridden hotel room if it weren’t for you.”

Bennett laughs and looks down, the bill of her hat covering her face again. “No problem. I’m just glad you don’t think I’m some weirdo stalker for inviting you.”

“I mean . . . I do think that, but I wasn’t going to say anything.”

“Fair enough,” she says lightly. “Just do me a favor and don’t out me and my Teddy Sharpe fan blog to my family at breakfast tomorrow. They’re not ready to see that side of my life yet.”

Teddy’s jaw drops into an openmouthed grin.

“So, when are you gonna give me the URL to this fan blog? I’m pumped to see it.”

Bennett wrinkles her nose at him. “Sorry, Buzz. I like the fourth wall too much.”

Sounds about right.

“For the record,” Teddy says (which is oddly difficult to do with his smile going all goofy from the nickname), “those briefs you saw in my bag were a Christmas gift.”

She nods like she totally believes him. “Sure they were.”

“They were! From my younger sister.”

“This is gonna make an excellent blog post,” Bennett says. “A complete guide to Teddy Sharpe’s underwear preferences. Easily viral.”

“Easily viral?” Teddy puts his hands on his hips and turns around, pushing his ass out a little—which no doubt looks anything but viral in his khakis. Doesn’t stop him from cocking an eyebrow at Bennett over his shoulder and asking, “You think so?”

Bennett hums as she eyes him up and down with a less-than-impressed expression. “Maybe I’ll forgo the underwear piece for a critical analysis on why Buzz Lightyear is your childhood hero.”

“I can tell you exactly why and spare you the research,” Teddy says. “I was a clumsy kid—I took the whole ‘falling with style’ thing to heart.”

Bennett grins like this is the best news she’s heard all week. “Stop it. You did not.”

“My dad was the one who came up with it,” Teddy goes on, shocked he’s actually about to tell her this. “I was a clumsy kid and was pretty hard on myself about it—especially since all I wanted to do was play baseball, and I could barely make it around the bases without face-planting. *Toy Story* was my favorite movie growing up, so one day my dad was like, *Hey, Ted, you’re just falling with style!* It made me feel better.”

Teddy leaves out the part about how the whole “falling with style” epiphany had been a pivotal moment in his life, and that he still applies it to bad days on set and botched auditions and that one time he slipped in front of Emma Stone at a VMAs afterparty and took an entire champagne tower down with him. Luckily the glasses were plastic and Teddy’s suit was rented.

Bennett stares at him, her face unreadable.

“What,” Teddy asks.

“Nothing,” she says, shaking her head.

Now Teddy’s staring at her, trying to figure out what to do next. She looks amused at least. Apparently he thinks reaching out to poke her in the side is a good idea. Bennett jumps back before he can get there.

“Oh, man. You’re ticklish, aren’t you?” Teddy asks, walking toward her and trying to poke her again. “Or are you just this skittish around people?”

“What kind of—stop!” She laughs and shoves his hand away. “What the hell kind of question is that? Of course not.”

“You sure? Seems like you are,” Teddy says thoughtfully, taking a step forward for each one Bennett takes back. She tries to fake him out and bolt around him, but Teddy pokes her in the side twice before she can bat his hand away, getting a couple of squeals in response. “Come on, Caldwell, I thought you said you weren’t ticklish,” Teddy says, going after her again.

“Seriously, stop—!”

Teddy’s phone chimes with a new text message. They both freeze, glancing at its spot on the nightstand.

“Nice, I guess you do have service down here,” Bennett says.

“Guess so,” Teddy says slowly, straightening up a bit and still watching his phone.

Bennett straightens up, too, but she keeps her hands raised between them, ready to fight him off again. It’s a tiny bit adorable, even after Teddy’s phone all but dumped an ice-cold bucket of your-girlfriend-is-texting-you over his head.

“I’m not gonna tackle you, Caldwell. Chill,” Teddy jokes, walking past her just to prove a point. “I mean, I will if you want me to.”

She snorts and drops her hands to her hips. “Don’t flatter yourself, superstar.”

“Such delightful manners. Speaking of—how can I help with breakfast tomorrow? I make killer toaster waffles,” he says, wiggling his eyebrows.

Bennett laughs this time. “Don’t worry about it—my mom loves to cook. You’ll probably offend her if you ask to help.”

“You sure?” He grins as she rolls her eyes and turns to leave. “I’m great with butter-to-syrup ratios—”

“Good night, *Teddy*,” Bennett says, pulling the bedroom door shut behind her.

“Night,” Teddy calls. After she’s gone, he forgoes the new text on his phone from Chelsea, sets an alarm, and crawls into bed with his copy of *Parachutes*. He isn’t putting a lot of stock into landing this role, but he figures why not read the book anyway.

You know, just in case.