



*Breaking
Character*

LEE WINTER

Chapter 1

JOEY CARTER RAN WITH BRUISING pace to the main exit doors of Martina Hope Memorial Hospital and flung herself into chaos. Rain was cascading down, far colder than it had a right to be for LA. Dodging a rolling crash cart, followed by a gurney, she juggled the precious cargo in her arms.

“Dr. Carter!” someone shouted.

She didn’t react at first.

“Carter!” the person tried again. “Joey Carter?”

She spun toward the voice. “Y-yes?” Water pelted her face, splashing into her eyes as she angled toward the light, and the figure silhouetted within it. She blinked away the rain. Her blond ponytail felt like a sodden lump, and water had caught inside her collar. Her hands were too full to adjust her shirt.

A tall, handsome man with pinched features, wearing a white coat, shouted to her over the roar of the rain, his finger pointing wildly behind him. “Get those blood packs to Dr. Mendez, ASAP. He needs at least three units.”

“Who?” She gave him an uncertain look.

“Ah crap, that’s right. It’s your first week, isn’t it?” Without waiting, he added, “You know the chief?”

Her eyes widened at mention of the notorious Iris Hunt. She swallowed and gave a nervous nod.

“Okay, she’s over there, in front of that crashed ambulance. Dr. Mendez is inside, stabilizing a trapped patient with a severed femoral artery. The man’s lost a lot of blood.” He pointed at her bundle. “So get that to him fast!”

Joey flew off again, leaping over a puddle as she reached the impossible scene: three mangled ambulances had somehow collided.

She spied the hospital's chief of surgery immediately. Dr. Hunt was on her knees, under the glare of lights, compressing a wound on the man's stomach. Her beautiful brown hair, now soaked, fell just over a starched white collar. Her features, narrow and aloof, seemed even more distant in the bleakness of night. Hunt's intense gray eyes were fixed on her patient.

"Stay with me," she was saying in a commanding voice.

Joey ran in front of the pair, clutching her precious pile of O-neg blood packs. Her left foot hit a piece of gaffer tape on the ground. She fumbled, and her cargo bounced from her hands. Plastic blood packs cartwheeled away, skidding in every direction.

With a gasp, Joey turned, scrabbling to catch at least a few. As she twisted, her heel stomped hard on one pack. A gruesome arc of red shot up in a shower that exploded all over Hunt's face and chest.

Joey let out a pained moan. *Oh shit!* Could it get any worse? *Shit, shit, shit.*

Hunt's disbelieving gaze dropped to her own red-spattered chest, then shifted to outrage as she glared at Joey. "Just wonderful," she growled.

"Oh God! S-sorry... I..." She stopped, taking in the other woman's warning look. Hunt gave her the most minute of head shakes. *And* she was still applying compression to her patient. Joey's eyes flew wide at the realization of what that meant. "Chief Hunt... I'm so sorry. The blood packs were... it's the rain... they slipped."

"Obviously," she snarled. "Get it together. There's no room for clumsiness in this job." Hunt pressed a bit harder on the man's wound, causing him to groan. "What are you standing around for? Get that blood to Dr. Mendez immediately."

"Yeah...of-of course." Joey scooped up the remaining blood packs as fast as she could. It seemed to take far too long.

Red goop was dripping from Hunt's coat and hair and onto her patient. The condescension was dripping along with it when she added, "Sometime before Mendez's patient dies?"

Joey bolted off, around the rear of the crumpled ambulance, disappearing from camera view.

"CUT!"

The fire hoses raining on them stopped and the set broke into laughs. The Steadicam operator who'd been tracking her was almost on his knees, wheezing with laughter.

Geez. Had everyone been holding that back?

Summer Hayes was pretty sure she was feeling about the same degree of humiliation as her character, Joey Carter, a plucky second-year resident on the TV medical drama *Choosing Hope*. She was only supposed to drop the fake blood packs, not coat the imposing hospital chief in them. Stepping nervously back into view of the set, Summer was glad for the darkness that covered the blush creeping up her face.

The booming laugh of director Bob Ravitz filled the air—and normally, a surlier man had never existed.

“Christ,” Elizabeth Thornton, aka Chief Hunt, muttered as she made to rise from her bloodied puddle. She darted a cold look at Summer. “Was there any part of my skin you missed?” She glanced around and lifted her voice. “Can I have a towel please?” Her tone turned dry. “Or a fire hose?”

The extra sat up. “Um, hey, me too?” He waved at his gory shirt.

“I’m so sorry—” Summer inched forward.

An assistant ran toward them, holding a thick towel, but before Elizabeth could grab it, the director waved her back down. “Don’t move!” That earned him a dark glower. “Sorry, Ms. Thornton, but continuity on blood spatters is a bitch. We’ll need to do close-ups right now or nothing will match. So let’s all get it right the first time.” He looked at his director of photography. “Steve, set up. Let’s get this blocked *now*.”

“But—” Elizabeth waved at herself. “We’re keeping this? It wasn’t scripted. I look ridiculous.”

Summer was firmly of the view there was no way Elizabeth Thornton could ever look anything less than perfectly put together.

The comment earned her a long look from Ravitz. “Yes, we’re keeping it. It gives Iris Hunt more reason to hate the new girl, which was in the script anyway.” He glanced at Summer and smiled. “And the new girl *will* want Attila the Hunt all up in her face. Nothing makes fans love someone more than when a villain turns on them. Win-win. Right?” He snapped his fingers at his second assistant and muttered some technical notes.

Elizabeth looked murderous, and Summer wondered what that was about. Maybe she hated the nickname?

“What about me?” the extra asked. “Do I just lie here?”

Ravitz ignored him.

Summer glanced at the man. He was soaked to the skin, his shirt ripped open. His chest was red from where Chief Hunt had been applying compression. He shivered.

Elizabeth arched an eyebrow. “If I have to bleed all over you, you have to lie there and take it. Sorry.” The tiniest edges of her lips quirked up before she hissed to a lurking assistant director, “How about a hot water bottle for our drowned rat, hmm?”

The AD shrugged and disappeared. Summer wasn’t sure if that meant yes or fat chance.

The extra’s gaze was entirely on Summer. He gave her a sheepish grin. “I guess this is showbiz, huh?”

“Yeah,” Summer murmured as the lighting techs moved in closer to surround them. But her focus remained on the austere star of *Choosing Hope*.

This was the woman dubbed as “difficult” by the industry? Elizabeth Thornton was positively sedate compared with some of the asshole personalities Summer had worked with. And the woman actually seemed to care about the wellbeing of an extra, even if the man himself hadn’t noticed.

She glanced around. They were at the VA West Los Angeles Medical Center, using its glass and steel exterior to double as Martina Hope Memorial’s facade. Interior shots were done in the studio five miles away. It was a little weird out here at this time of night, devoid of the usual traffic and filled with an acre of cast and crew trailers.

The wind picked up, knocking over a lighting stand. Ravitz cursed. “Would someone secure that before it fuckin’ costs us an insurance claim?”

The continuity woman ... Jill? Jan? ... began taking photos of Elizabeth’s spattered face and shirt, before moving to the extra.

Then the first few drops of rain hit. The real stuff, not the hoses.

“Fuck!” one of the lighting techs grumbled. “D’ya think we’ll be stuck here till midnight again?”

Elizabeth slid her gaze to Summer, saying absolutely nothing as she stared.

“It was an accident,” Summer pleaded.

“It was just what the scene needed to really pop.” Ravitz turned and gave her an approving smile that bordered on something else. “You can’t script something like this. We got real lucky.”

“Oh yes,” Elizabeth murmured, “*that’s* the word I was searching for.” She smiled blandly and Ravitz nodded, grunted, and turned away.

Summer wondered at the man’s missing sarcasm detector.

The extra sneezed. “Shit. I’m frozen.”

“I’m *so* sorry,” Summer whispered to him and, by extension, the woman still kneeling over him in the dirt. Elizabeth’s knees had to be killing her.

Raif Benson, who played the rakishly handsome Dr. Mendez, sauntered over with a charming smile, looking clean, warm, and very dry under a large black umbrella.

Lucky bastard.

He sized up the scene with a smirk, then rocked on his heels, barely containing a laugh as he looked at Summer. “Welcome to TV, kid.”

Summer gritted her teeth into something approaching a smile, not bothering to correct him. It was no use. At twenty-eight she was only a few years his junior, but she’d always looked much younger than her age. It had kept her in teenage roles for far too long, and led to frequent condescension from colleagues. At least Joey Carter, aged twenty-three, was an adult role for once.

Out of the corner of her eye, she could see Elizabeth staring at her, and Summer tried very hard not to look at the only person she really wanted to like her on this whole damned show.

Elizabeth Thornton’s twisted parody of a smile was not friendly in the least.

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“I mean it!” Elizabeth hissed down the phone. She stalked around her trailer, feeling better for the warm shower, a thin blue robe clinging to her body. “Four hours under hoses, not to mention fake blood running into my eyes thanks to some empty-headed newbie screwing up her scene. If I have to do one more season of this mind-numbing drivel, I’ll implode.”

Despite representing some of the leading lights in Tinseltown, Rachel Cho wasn’t particularly good at diplomacy, but she was usually good at saying what Elizabeth *needed* to hear.

Elizabeth waited impatiently.

“Darling, I’m sure you weren’t hating on your show quite so much when they turned you into one of the highest-paid women on TV last season. And that ‘drivel’ got you the pretty mansion you adore so much. Plus, you went from an unemployed, anonymous Brit to a star whose name is on everyone’s lips.”

Elizabeth glowered. “As the most-hated villain in America. And we both know how that came about. So now they’ve turned me into the star of *Carrie* so Ravitz and that ego-stunted showrunner can get their kicks at seeing me humiliated. That’s not okay, Rachel.”

“I thought you said it was an accident?”

“Yes, but they kept it! As if they’d miss the chance of cutting me down to size, making me look like a bedraggled stray. The worst thing is, they’re still spreading those rumors that *I’m* the difficult one.”

“You know why. That’s how this place works. You don’t play ball, they remind you who’s boss.”

“Oh, I know. So I’ve had it. Find me something else. Something serious. Find something to stretch me in hiatus or I’ll walk off this putrid petri dish right now and I don’t care how much we have to pay to get me out of my contract.”

There was a soft sigh. “You can’t walk, Bess, or they’ll spin it as proof that you really are the British Bitch, and then see how much work you get around here. Look, just keep reminding yourself there’s only one season left. Now I’ve been talking to Delvine about some offers that have come up and we agree there’s one that seems right for you. And it fits with your schedule.”

That sparked Elizabeth’s interest. Her manager, Delvine Rothery, was one of the best at taking careers from middling to spectacular. “I’m listening.” She grabbed a towel off the back of the chair and ran it through her hair again, as if it might wipe from her brain that creepy sensation of blood trickling down her face.

“Ever heard of Jean-Claude Badour?”

“That weird French director?”

“Not weird, darling, *creative*. Artsy. After his last Palme d’Or he decided he’s done Europe now and wants to dip his toe into Hollywood. He

apparently has a remarkable script, according to the buzz. It's the hottest property in town; everyone wants in."

"He won a Palme d'Or? Wait, more than one?" Elizabeth couldn't picture it. But then, she'd only seen one of his shorts—something oddball about butterflies.

"He won Cannes' top prize for *Quand Pleurent les Clowns—When Clowns Cry*." Cho paused. "I highly recommend you take this one. It's going to elevate you far beyond TV. And, look, you should know he's asked for you specifically to star. He must want you very badly since he's lined up filming for your hiatus."

A sliver of distaste shot through Elizabeth. "Me? Please tell me he's not a fan of *Choosing Hope*? Is that why he wants me?"

"Don't be so cynical. He's French, not American. Of course he hates *Hope*. His actual quote was that you need 'freeing from rancid dribble'."

Elizabeth smiled. Well, he had some taste then.

"He followed your theater days in London. He adored *Shakespeare's Women* as well as *Lucifer's Curse* and *The Righteous Miss Hamilton*."

Elizabeth stared at her phone.

"Still there? Or are you in shock that someone appreciates you for your acting instead of your *sizzling* chemistry with Raif?"

Sizzling? More like manufactured. It was still a sore point what had happened with her character—more petty revenge from the showrunner.

"Hilarious," she growled. "Fine. I'll watch his sad little clown flick and let you know. When can I see the script?"

"Soon. I've asked; it's not quite ready yet. Filming starts in two months. It's about a reclusive writer in a mountain shack in the middle of nowhere who gets eight visitors. *Eight Little Pieces*, it's called. I'm sure there's some beautiful, artistic metaphor involved. Anyway he wants to do lunch with you and Delvine soon to hammer out the details."

"I haven't said yes yet."

Rachel laughed as though it was a foregone conclusion. She probably wasn't wrong.

Elizabeth said her goodbyes and hung up, feeling optimistic. Even so, she reminded herself, Badour had done a short film about sentient butterflies.

She glanced at her sodden, stained Chief Hunt outfit where it hung on a rail. The reminder of what had transpired this evening—for hours—souring her mood. Anything she signed on for outside of this show had to be an improvement on the dreck they'd been dishing up in recent seasons. *Three* ambulances all crashed into each other? Right outside the hospital's entrance? That made *so* much sense. Was she the only one who noticed this nonsense?

A knock sounded on her trailer door.

"Yes?" Tension flood back into her shoulders. Right about now was when the director would have reviewed the rushes and decided they needed reshoots. She wrenched open the door, pitying the minion with the job of passing along that news to the cast.

"Um, hi?" A twenty-something woman with damp blond hair stood before her. She wore jeans, a T-shirt, and a strained look. "It's Summer. Summer Hayes?"

Was she asking or telling? Elizabeth peered at the young woman, waiting for something more. There was nothing forthcoming. Her eye fell to the hands clutching a steaming paper cup. The girl gazed at her with wide, innocent, regretful eyes.

Recognition dawned. She did look slightly different with her hair out of its drenched ponytail.

"We meet again." Elizabeth arched her brow. "Here to douse me again? Round two? You know, usually it's the newbie who gets hazed, not the veteran."

That came out a little snippier than she'd intended. It was hardly this girl's fault how ageist this town could be. Thirty-seven years old and she was starting to feel the subtle shifts in attitude. It was grating on her. Back home, she'd be seen as just entering her prime. Here, it felt like they were almost ready to hand her her hat.

"No, you're safe this time," Summer said with a bright grin. "May I come in? I bear gifts. And an apology." She waggled the cup.

"I don't drink coffee, much less the American swill they serve on this set. So, if that's all?" She began shutting the door in Summer's face, too tired to go through the charade of civility.

"Actually, it's, um, tea. From England. I think you might like it." Elizabeth frowned. "You can't get what I like here."

“Oh, it’s possible.” Summer smiled, wide and radiant.

Elizabeth pursed her lips and held out a hand for the cup, willing to test Summer’s claim out of curiosity if nothing else.

Their fingers brushed as the cup exchanged custody, and Summer snatched her hand back as if bitten.

Great. Was her reputation so awful that new cast members believed she was Attila the Hunt off screen, too?

Then the tea’s heavenly scent reached her nose. *Oh...* there was no faking this aroma. It was utterly sinful. This wasn’t some random English tea the girl had plucked from the international aisle of Target.

It was *exactly* Elizabeth’s brand and variety—an organic guayusa cacao blend with hints of mint and cinnamon, and several other sweet-smelling, exotic spices. It was a special mix from the small tea and art cafe around the corner from Cambridge University. Only Blackie’s Tea House made and sold this blend. How on earth was it here? Or maybe her nose was deceiving her?

She drew the cup to her lips. Paused. And then sipped.

Her taste buds exploded. The wash of flavors flowed through the perfectly hot tea—none of that lukewarm, overly sweet milk water the Americans rightly sneered at. She could have wept at the rush that filled her. Forcing herself to lower the intoxicating drink, Elizabeth looked at her expectant colleague in astonishment. It had been years since she’d been home to taste this. The thought that she could have it here, somehow, on hand, was overwhelming.

“What *is* this? Where did you get it? I need the name of your local supplier.”

The woman tilted her head back and laughed. “You make me sound like a crack dealer.”

Elizabeth’s fingers tightened on the container and she sipped again. Which turned into a richly satisfying gulp.

“Will you tell me?” She arranged her features to encouraging. “Since this *is* your big apology?” She gave a smile then, a genuine one she rarely bestowed on strangers—but desperate times called for desperate measures.

It had anything but the desired effect. Summer’s gaze dropped to her feet as red crept up her neck and ears.

How...odd. And that didn’t seem like fear. More like...self-consciousness?

Summer looked up from under her lashes. “Um, my family lived in England for a few years. I found this odd little cafe one day, part art gallery, part tea house, and this was its signature blend. I loved it. Now I have my friends in London send it to me.” She shrugged. “I thought the odds were good you might like a taste of tea from home. Seems I was right.”

Elizabeth blinked. It had never occurred to her to get her friends to supply her tea. Even now it seemed rude to impose—a national crime for the English, she noted ruefully. After draining the cup with one last, gratified sigh, Elizabeth tossed it in the trash. “Well, apology accepted.”

She still felt out of sorts, and the beginning of a tiredness headache was threatening the edges of her temples. The young woman had given her a thoughtful gift and seemed genuine enough. Her eye fell to Summer’s generous chest, honeyed LA tan, and girlish, ever-widening smile. Jesus. She might be nice enough, but it was also clear exactly why she was hired. Ravitz had made no secret of it every time his eyes roamed over her.

Elizabeth’s mouth hardened. It might not be Summer Hayes’s fault, but she was everything that was wrong with this show and Hollywood as a whole. Style over substance. Looks over depth. This...smiling, bouncy, Central Casting girl-next-door stereotype was the least suitable person to be on *Choosing Hope*, given its original mission statement. Yet, here she stood: shallowness in human form.

“Well, thank you for the gift,” Elizabeth said, her voice a few degrees cooler. “But if you wouldn’t mind,” she looked pointedly at the doorway Summer was still standing in, “I haven’t had a chance to get dressed since tonight’s blood-spattered debacle.”

Summer wilted. “S-sorry,” she said again.

Elizabeth had a fierce urge to roll her eyes. The girl apparently had a limited vocabulary, too.

She left much as she’d arrived, with a youthful energy and big, soulful eyes.

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Summer threw down her bag when she arrived home, exhausted and miserable. It was close to midnight. Everyone on set had been bitching about the delays, and by the time she’d apologized to the gaffer and all the grips, she’d decided to just suck it up and accept that she’d have to work

extra hard to get back into people's good graces. Not a very auspicious start to her time on *Choosing Hope*.

She kicked off her boots and collapsed on the sofa. Staring at the walls of her Silver Lake bungalow seemed a much more manageable pastime than figuring her way to the shower, so she let her gaze slide over her framed black-and-white photos of LA's most architecturally interesting streets. She'd taken them all herself and loved nothing more than finding some undiscovered street with quirky-looking homes from yesteryear.

Footsteps approached. A flash of black hair appeared in her line of sight, followed by the light-brown face and penetrating gaze of Chloe Martin, a towering New Zealand actress she'd met eighteen months ago at a charity event where they'd immediately clicked. Summer loved Chloe's unassuming nature and lack of pretension. She had a wide, toothy grin and a passion for basketball. Chloe was in her *Footrot Flats* cartoon dog pajama bottoms and a tank top.

"Hey Smiley, wondered when you'd crawl in. Dyin' to know how your first week of work panned out." She sat on the wooden coffee table opposite.

Summer stared up at the ceiling and licked her lips. "Okay, let's see. The table read was fine. Everyone seemed friendly. Except Elizabeth Thornton, who didn't look up at me once, so it's no wonder she didn't recognize me later."

"Okay, then what? Why do you look like a constipated possum?"

"Today we shot this really intense trauma scene. Three ambulances crashed in the hospital parking lot..."

"Three! Choice, eh?" Chloe cackled. "That's out there as hell."

Summer shook her head at her friend's Kiwi-isms. "I don't think they care if it's stupid. The show keeps trying to top itself on being twisty."

"Good thing then." Chloe lowered herself to the floor, lying flat on a rug. She began bending her knees up and down and flapping her arms. Dead cockroaches, she called them. Something to keep an old sports injury in check.

"Right, then what?" Chloe asked between whooshing breaths. "Did you have to fall into some stud muffin's lap or something? Cos that show's getting crazy with all the bed-hopping."

“Way worse.” Summer screwed her eyes shut. “I was supposed to run past an emergency scene, drop a bunch of blood bags, and get my ear chewed off by Chief Hunt.”

“But...?”

“But I stepped on one and it exploded and shot fake blood all up into Thornton’s face. I don’t mean a little, either. It freaking coated her. It was in her hair, eyes, down her collar. It was so bad.”

“Holy fuck.”

“I know.” Summer opened her eyes and groaned.

Chloe burst out laughing. “Oh, mate. She’s so scary. That’s, um...well, *shit*.”

“Hey! I’m trying for denial here.” She frowned. “By the way, she’s not that bad...she can’t be. I screwed up so much, and she was snide but hardly ripped my head off.”

“Uh-huh. Except my agent’s heard she’s a bitch on wheels.”

Summer decided not to argue, but she wasn’t buying it. Someone as bad as Elizabeth was rumored to be would have skinned her alive.

“Hell of a first impression, hey?” Chloe added. “You must like her, though, the way you defend her.”

“How can I not? She’s brilliant. Even if she doesn’t seem too impressed with the show, when they call ‘Action’, she’s *on*. She gives it everything.”

“Old school pro. I respect that.”

“Me too.” Summer smiled.

Chloe stopped her dead cockroaches. “So while you were busy provoking your new co-star, I have news.”

Summer sat up. “Ooh! Your audition?”

“Yup. Got a call back on the shampoo ad. Only problem is, it’s bein’ shot in Outer Woop-Woop somewhere. Pays a treat but.”

“But what?”

“But nothing. I got the job.” She gave the thumbs up.

Oh right. Another Kiwi-ism. Summer leaned over and gave her a side-on hug. “Awesome.”

“Thanks! I might even be able to make rent this month.” She winked. “But can you tell your mum I won’t be here for Sunday lunch?”

“Sure.” Summer almost rolled her eyes. Come rain or shine, even when Summer was away, her mother always visited for “family” lunch on Sundays.

“Okay, so you down for a basketball training sesh tomorrow?” Chloe asked. “You’re by far our most popular stats keeper— given you’re our only one.”

Summer smiled. She was often roped into helping Chloe’s team on her rare days off work. Not helping in a “throwing the ball while staying upright” sense, of course. As tonight had proven yet again, Summer had exactly two left feet. “Can’t. I have to help this sweet, crazy woman.”

“Ah. Gotcha. Doing some hippie-la-la thing with your mum?”

She snorted. Suggesting that Skye Storm...her mother’s actual name... would be doing ‘some hippie-la-la thing’ was like suggesting cows moored. When Skye wasn’t exploring her spiritual side, blessing her crystals, or demonstrating sewing techniques in the vlogs Summer helped her make, she was creating stunning costumes for movies. She might be eccentric, but she was also extraordinary, which explained the respect that tinged Chloe’s voice.

“Yep. I’m producing Mom’s next vlog: *Natural Tie-dying: Heavenly Homemade Dyes*. Should be fun but messy.”

“That *is* your forte, right? Blood baths and dye baths.”

Summer winced at the reminder.

Chloe prodded her in the ribs. “Hey, I just remembered, there’s a new girl on the team. Really cute. Dying to meet you. She loves your TV stuff, especially *Teen Spy Camp*.”

Burying her face under a cushion, Summer said, “Another twenty-year-old groupie. Awesome.” A frightening thought struck. “At least tell me this one’s actually *in* her twenties?”

“Just barely.” Chloe gave an evil laugh. “You do attract the young ones.”

“Shit. I can’t help how young I look.”

Chloe just laughed harder. “Stop bitchin’, Smiley. You’ll be working in Hollywood way longer than everyone else. I mean, right now you are *easily* pulling off a role five years younger than you actually are.”

“That’s not as good as it sounds. Raif Benson called me ‘kid’. I get that all the time. Well, not from Thornton. She didn’t call me any name at all. Not even mine.”

“Because you’re dead to her!” Chloe chuckled. “And that’s a *good* thing, remember. They say she had some extra fired for looking her directly in the eyes.”

“*They* say a lot of things. Doesn’t make them true. It’s so easy to tear people down. But at the end of the day, they’ll still be jealous, and she’ll still have talent.” She closed her eyes, losing herself in the memory. “When I was a fifteen, my parents were working on this sci-fi trilogy in London. I’d sneak away from my tutor, catch the Tube, and see the matinees in the West End. The first play I ever saw was Elizabeth’s one-woman Shakespeare show. I saw it a dozen times before Dad finally noticed how much money I’d been spending.”

“You saw Thornton in London?” Chloe asked quietly. “I heard she was amazing back in the day.”

Amazing? That was one word for it.

On a small London stage, Elizabeth Thornton had padded out barefoot in a formless, mid-length white sheath, then sat on a wooden stool. It was the only thing on the stage. She was in her mid-twenties back then, but her bearing was tall, confident, and regal.

With the tone of her voice, the angling of her expressive, classically beautiful face, subtle shifts of the spotlight—highlighting her high cheek bones and full, curving lips—she became someone else.

There were no costume changes. No music. No props. Elizabeth was as naked as an actress could be while still covered.

Her voice was clear, strong, precise, as she twisted and curled herself into Beatrice, Desdemona, Juliet, Cordelia, Lady Macbeth, and more. Her anguish as she washed invisible blood from her hands was chilling.

She looked up, once, just to the left of her audience, and it seemed to Summer that their eyes met. Summer’s breath caught and held as she soaked in the details—ivory skin, paler under the white spotlight, brown hair pulled back from her face and turned black by the contrasting shadows.

Her heart bellowed in her ears as her gaze swallowed and pulled apart and reconstructed the elegant woman on stage. Making sense of her. Committing her to memory.

“Will my hands never be clean?” Lady Macbeth’s eyes pleaded. Her voice, commanding and desperate, seemed both whisper and shout.

Summer’s heart clenched at the aching tone. Her hands balled into fists. Elizabeth Thornton was the most beautiful human she’d ever seen—then or since.

“Yes, she was amazing.” Summer her eyes. “Seeing her act made me fall in love with acting.”

“So, this is a wicked coincidence you ending up on her show.”

“True. My sister’s mainly excited I’m a series regular again. And Autumn sees it as vitally important for my career to finally play an adult. But for me, getting to work with the best actress I’ve ever seen really added to the allure.”

“Oh, hon, be careful. You’ll get your heart broken.” Chloe shook her head slowly. “There is nothing worse than meeting your idol.”

“Sure there is.” Summer studied her fingers, and pulled a miserable face. “Making them think you’re an idiot. That’s way worse.”

“Ah. Right.” Sympathy edged Chloe’s eyes. “Well, as bad as you feel right now, just remember it’s beautiful that you once had a hero who showed you something you now care about so deeply. Sounds like an incredible experience. I envy you that.”

It was. It was a gift, a memory she’d never swap for anything. She could still see the elegant tilt of the head. The eyes, profound and emotional, staring right at her. Into her.

If only Summer hadn’t gone and ruined it all.

Chapter 2

AUTUMN HAYES LEANED OVER THE railing at Hollywood Mega Mall, taking position. “You ready?” she asked her sister, pushing her sunglasses onto the top of her head.

“Yep.” Summer took a deep breath. She could do this.

“Warmed up? Vocal cords? Know the words?”

“Check, check, check.” Summer wiggled her shoulders. “Where’s my mark?”

“Down there. Beside the trash can.”

Summer laughed. “Upscale show then.”

Autumn rolled her eyes. “For maximum effect, you have to be incognito until the big reveal.” She pointed to a man in a black jacket, walkie-talkie at his hip, roaming the mall floor. “That’s Doug. He’s aware of what’s about to happen. He’ll step in if things get out of hand, and he has more security on standby.”

“Okay.” Summer squinted at the enormous guard. “Though I hardly think a few teenagers will be much of a match against him.”

“Summer, the bulk of your Punky Power fan base is now in their early twenties and many still love you. That affection can get out of control in an instant. Remember Koreatown last year? No such thing as a simple meal. People text their friends and multiply out of nowhere. If we do this right, there’ll be two hundred excited, social-media-sharing fans thrilled to see you before it’s over. And try to angle your back to that poster as often as you can.” Autumn pointed at the colorful sign advertising *Just Like Spies*, the hottest new flick starring singing sensation Jemima Hart.

“Product placement? Seriously?” It seemed so tacky, but Summer could hardly take the high moral ground. She was here to take part in a flash mob

performing Jemima's hit song from the *Spies* film, after all. The new movie was a mega-hit, so it was a bit sneaky to use its success for their own ends, with only the most dubious spy connection, but Autumn was adamant that no one would care and everyone worked the angles in Hollywood.

"Actually no, it's not product placement. Look opposite."

Leaning over the railing, Summer looked down. Just behind a plastic palm tree, a camera was being set up discreetly. An overly hairsprayed woman in a navy pant suit was talking to the cameraman.

"Is that who I think it is?" Summer nodded toward the woman. "Katie Rivers?"

"Yes. I called in a favor. By the time you're done, not only will you be hashtagged to all the news sites..." she waggled her own camera, "but also featuring on *Celebrity Entertainment*. I've given Rivers full bio notes about your new role on *Choosing Hope*. From teen spy to junior surgeon. She loved it."

"Joey's not a surgeon, though."

"Semantics. Katie doesn't care. She loves 'whatever happened to child-star X' stories. Right. Get down there, stun the shoppers into a stupor, be your usual friendly self to fans, and remember your number one rule."

"Yeah, yeah." Summer groaned. "Don't fall over."

"Exactly. You'll be great."

* * *

On Sunday morning, Elizabeth found herself tucked up on the couch with the sad clown movie and one of her oldest friends, Alexandra Levitin. Alex was an indie film director, but they'd come up through Cambridge's Footlights theater club together.

"I can't believe Jean-Claude asked for you," Alex said as the opening credits flickered in the background. She ran her fingers through her cropped red hair. "That man is so big right now. Or about to be."

"Big ego, too, if his interviews are anything to go by. Oh, for God's..." Elizabeth pointed at an artsy special effect. "Weeping watercolor. The man's a genius," she drawled.

"Hush," Alex said. "He's a poet and you know it."

"That rhymes."

“Infidel. I think I liked you better in London. And not just because you were in my bed.”

Me too, Elizabeth wanted to say. She didn’t. It was a can of worms, their covert six-month fling, and she wasn’t planning to reopen it. Still, sometimes she missed the simplicity of being a no one. She could flirt furiously and make love with anyone she wanted. Not that she had back then, but the principle sounded good.

Now she dragged her male friends to red-carpet events to play coy, double-entendre games for the cameras with her. All so the insatiable Hollywood press could become breathless at the thought that Elizabeth Thornton might have found love. She’d have preferred to avoid the events altogether. Unfortunately, her laid-back manager and hard-nosed agent had been in lock-step agreement. Out-and-proud lesbians don’t get cast as leads. Neither do anti-social hermits.

Everything had seemed so clear back when she was young and treading the boards in London. She would become a great theater actress. She would take a string of beautiful lovers, be interesting and witty, have a full life. She had not planned on enduring humiliation on the set of a top-rated, B-grade medical drama. Nor on developing an almost reclusive existence, broken up only by shopping-list chats with her elderly housekeeper and occasional catch-ups with the same six British theater friends—including her ex-girlfriend, Alex.

She pursed her lips and reached for the popcorn.

* * *

By the end of the film, Elizabeth had to admit it was beautiful, if a little pretentious, as only French films could be.

“What did you think?” Alex asked, eyes shining.

“False advertising,” Elizabeth teased. “No clowns were involved in the making of that production.”

“Don’t be so literal. What’d you think? Really?”

“I think I’ll be doing lunch with Jean-Claude Badour.”

“Good. Hell, if I could make films half as well as him, I’d be delirious.” Alex glanced at the clock. “Speaking of lunch, when will the rest of the group be around? I’ve been missing everyone. And I have a desert shoot soon, so I’ll be away for a month.”

“Soon.” Elizabeth pressed *Exit* on Netflix and the TV shifted back to regular programming. She sighed at the upbeat, over-the-top frivolity of *Celebrity Entertainment*.

Which star has run off with his assistant for a Vegas wedding? We'll tell you next! But first! Hollywood Mega Mall patrons were treated to a flash mob yesterday, thrilling crowds when a group of seemingly ordinary shoppers suddenly burst into song. Their musical choice? The catchy Just Like Spies theme song. And fittingly, there was a famous TV spy singing along with them!

“Ugh, turn it off,” Alex complained. “Too much shallowness and I lose my will to live.”

Elizabeth didn't budge, eyes narrowing at the screen. “I believe that's my co-star. The idiot who drenched me in fake blood.” She pointed the remote at a young blond woman who'd stepped out from behind a pillar to add her voice to the chorus of singers.

“Her?” Alex squinted. “Huh. Looks sweet. Oh, *ouch*.” Summer had bumped into a singer attempting a few dance moves. “She's not very coordinated, is she?”

“No, she's not.” Elizabeth scowled.

“Aww, look. Good recovery.”

Summer laughed and, while still singing, grasped the hands of the woman she'd bumped into, twirled her around, and let go again without missing a beat of the song. The girl could think on her feet. When she could *stay* on her feet, of course.

Summer Hayes, who played Punky Power for three years in Teen Spy Camp, caused a riot with excited fans in line to see Just Like Spies.

The camera cut to the hundreds of fans surrounding Summer as she signed autographs on bare arms, posed for selfies, and joked around.

“Look at her, Bess.” Alex smirked. “See, *that's* how you interact with fans. Take note—not a scowl in sight.”

“I hardly think that's relevant, since my show's fans all hate me.” Elizabeth smiled smugly.

“Way to look on the bright side.”

“I am. I prefer my existence to *that*. Who’d want to be mobbed every time they shopped?”

“Price of fame.”

“No, it’s the price of playing the game. That’s all this is—it’s just a marketing stunt.”

Hayes will soon be seen as Joey Carter on the hit show Choosing Hope. From teen spy to junior surgeon! All the details are on our website. More after this break!”

“See?” Elizabeth felt a little deflated. But why shouldn’t her co-star promote herself? It was just that it all felt so...Hollywood. “And Summer’s character isn’t a damned surgeon, either.”

“*That’s* what you’re fixating on?” Alex laughed. Her look became speculative. “She’s good-looking, you know.”

“I hadn’t noticed.” Elizabeth folded her arms. “She’s a public menace.”
With good taste in tea.

“Boy, you sure are testy over a cute LA chick.”

Elizabeth just glared.

* * *

Brian Fox and Rowan Blagge rolled in first. Eternally wry Brian and his dapper, long-faced boyfriend were discussing the best neck-tie knots as they settled into their favorite armchairs. Elizabeth placed a platter of finger foods in front of them, wondering if they could find a duller topic.

“Windsor knot. Half Windsor in a pinch,” Rowan declared, reaching for the peanuts.

“Plattsburgh. Obviously,” Brian countered.

Amrit Patel wafted in a little later. Six-foot-four and gorgeous, he was most famous as the one-time international face of Cartier watches. Next came Grace Christie-Oberon, England’s national treasure and the queen of English historical dramas—with the BAFTA awards to prove it.

In the US, she’d been dubbed Gracie-O. And yet, despite her astonishing talent, Rowan’s sad-sack comedy routines were still more well-known here

than she was, and Elizabeth was vastly more successful than all her friends put together.

Grace had far too much class to ever say a word on that topic. Besides, her whole focus at this moment was very much on Amrit. She slid her elegant frame—adorned in a dropped-waist lace dress—onto the couch beside him and offered a sultry smile.

The final member of their group, Zara Ejogo, dashed in late, looking harried. She might have started out in drama at Cambridge like the rest of them, but her talent for creating costumes on the fly had seen her snatched up by Hollywood first.

“Finally,” Alex drawled, crunching on a carrot stick about as wide as she was. “I was beginning to fear Rowan would do his Montreal Comedy Festival monologue about living in a basement as we waited.”

Rowan gave her a long-suffering look. “I’m only pleased my pain is giving pleasure to others.”

Nudging him, Brian said, “What pain, love? You’re not living in your parents’ basement anymore.”

“Scarring lasts a lifetime.”

“Didn’t said basement have a spa in it, though?” Grace asked. “And wall-to-wall murals of beautiful rainforests?”

“Pain is not a contest,” Rowan said, lips ticking up. “I never said mine was the worst.”

Grace glanced at Elizabeth. “Bess, could you be a dear and fetch me a nice glass of white to wash down Rowan’s manly tears.”

Brian cleared his throat. “I have an announcement. I have a new movie role. *Alien Zombie Apocalypse*.”

“Do you play the scientist?” Amrit asked. “Or the villain? Or the villainous scientist who unleashed the plague on us all?”

They all laughed.

“At the risk of sounding typecast,” Brian said, injecting his most theatrical voice, “I am indeed the evil scientist who undoes society as we know it.”

“So a regular Tuesday for you, then.” Grace glanced at Elizabeth again. “Or fetch a tea if the wine’s too much trouble.”

Elizabeth paused. Grace sometimes forgot she wasn’t a national treasure in their little circle. She stood anyway, and glanced around. “Anyone else?”

A smattering of drink orders were called out.

“I’ll help.” Zara followed her to the kitchen.

As they prepared the drinks, they heard Alex in the background, regaling the rest about her new project, something to do with global warming. And quiver trees, whatever they were.

“This is a bonkers town, isn’t it?” Zara added sugar to one of the teas. “Yesterday I was working on a lizard outfit. But when I quote *King Lear*, everyone looks at me like *I’m* the nutter.”

“It’s what we signed up for.” Elizabeth stirred another tea vigorously. “More or less.”

“You know, I never really understood why you came here. The rest are obvious. Rowan got his comedy tour, so Brian went with his man. Amrit came for the adventure, and I presume, the pretty young men and women who fawn over him. Grace came because...” She glanced at Elizabeth and hesitated.

“Officially...the next big career step,” Elizabeth supplied.

“But we know why she’s really here.” Zara peeked out the archway at Amrit. “That must have been one hell of a fling if she’s still not over him.” She put down her spoon. “I know why I’m here, ‘Oscar winner for costume designs’, just wait! And Alex’s indie films were getting her noticed. But you?”

She studied Elizabeth, who shrugged. This again. Zara tried to find out the answer to that burning question at least once every six months, always asking in a slightly different way to try to lure a different answer out of her. Elizabeth had no intention of sharing the real reason.

“I missed my friends. London wasn’t the same without you all. One by one, you up and left until there was only me.”

“But your theater career was taking off.”

“It didn’t mean much with no friends to enjoy it with. Besides, the action’s in Hollywood, apparently.”

“But Bess, you always wanted to be on the stage. You could do Broadway. Why LA?”

“I like the weather. Very...sunny.” Elizabeth opened the fridge to get the milk.

“Sure you do.” She eyed Elizabeth’s pale complexion. “Sun worshipper that you are.”

Elizabeth shrugged. “There’s plenty of work here, too.”

“True. Unless you’re Grace. But maybe she’s too picky. She could have work if she lowered herself to do American TV.”

Elizabeth gave the fridge door a heavier slam than strictly necessary.

Zara’s face transformed into mortification. “Oh bollocks. Hon, you know I didn’t mean it like that. No offense.”

“None taken. It does feel like lowering myself these days. Do you remember the original premise of *Choosing Hope*? A teaching hospital which focuses on minorities? Real, gritty stories? Doctors from all walks of life overcoming the odds? It’s why the damned thing was called *Choosing Hope* in the first place. It was supposed to be about giving people hope, no matter where they’re from.”

“Well, that, and the hospital is *called* Martina Hope Memorial.”

Elizabeth poured milk into several of the cups. “My point is, the premise was different and interesting. I was proud of it. Chief Hunt was a mentor to these young doctors. And now...” Her face hardened. “*Attila the Hunt*. If that’s not bad enough, you should see the newest cast member—this entitled-looking blond girl who should be doing swimwear ads, not gritty dramas about medical students pulling themselves up by the boot straps.”

“Come on, your show went south long before they cast some entitled chick,” Zara said. “Are you really annoyed at her or is it that *Hope* is selling out? Because I caught a few eps last season and that show’s turned like week-old Chinese leftovers. Everything’s about who’s shagging who. And let’s not start on Hunt’s tragic love life.”

“Beginning of the end,” Elizabeth muttered, arranging the cups on a tray.

“True, but at least it got you this amazing house.” Zara nudged her.

Why did everyone keep reminding her of that? She glanced around. Her four-bedroom Los Feliz home was nestled in the hills and had impressive views, the most spectacular of which was from the pool deck that looked out toward Santa Monica Bay. Inside, the surfaces gleamed, from the honeyed hardwood floors to the polished granite countertops. It suited her tactile tastes. She loved to stroke smooth surfaces.

Elizabeth was well aware she was lucky to have this place, and her career. She was grateful for the opportunities Hollywood had afforded her.

It was just that she had a hard time letting go of what the show had been. A show she'd emotionally invested in. Now, it was obvious where it was going.

"Come on, let's forget about work and enjoy what it got you. The views up here still get me orgasmic." Zara strode off to the living room.

Elizabeth's guests turned to look at her as she entered after Zara. She headed for Grace first, giving her the wine.

"Thank you," she said, accepting it. "Now what's all this Alex tells us about you getting a Badour film? That sounds promising. More so, perhaps, than what you've been doing lately?" She smiled to take the sting out.

Elizabeth felt it anyway. She shouldn't. But looking like a failure in the eyes of your mentor cut deep. "It's more a lunch with the hope of a job," she said. "Although he did have me in mind. He saw me in *Shakespeare's Women*."

Grace's perfectly sculpted eyebrows shot up at that.

Elizabeth had pitched the idea of that show to her back in London, hoping Grace might come on board and champion it. Instead, she had frowned. "No props, no costumes? Theatrical suicide," she'd said. "I'm so sorry, Bess, I can't endorse it."

She'd disappeared to LA shortly afterwards, and Elizabeth had raised the funding herself and put the play on with a shoestring budget at a family friend's theater that just barely counted as the West End. It had drawn strong crowds and enough excellent reviews to be dubbed a critical hit, and even made a modest profit. That had been the first time Elizabeth had stepped out on her own. The play meant everything to her.

"Badour liked your little show? Well, for a Frenchman he has some redeeming qualities then." Grace's tone was amused.

A thrill shot through her. That meant Grace had liked it too? When had she seen it? Elizabeth's mind skidded back over the times, dates, days, desperate to remember.

"Anyone who appreciates the Bard is in my good books," Grace clarified.

Oh. Of course. Elizabeth's smile dimmed.

Alex shot her a sympathetic look.

Christ. Am I that transparent?

Elizabeth settled in her armchair, sipping her guayusa cacao tea. It was some generic version, not a patch on the exact variety she adored, but it was the best substitute she could find.

The tea only reminded her of Summer Hayes. So young. Eager to please. Beautiful. Little wonder Ravitz had his eye on her. Funniest thing, though, the girl seemed oblivious. How could any actress who looked like Summer be so unaware? She hadn't noticed the way the boom operator's eyes had slid over her, either. Or how the extra whose chest Elizabeth had been working on had smiled up at her appreciatively when they were re-setting for close-ups. The girl wasn't much of an observer then. Not to mention being too clumsy to function.

That felt churlish. Summer seemed nice enough. Maybe Elizabeth was becoming the bitch they all said she was? Her bad-substitute tea suddenly tasted bitter.

The room was silent. Had she missed a question? "I'm sorry, what?"

"Do you like Badour's movies?" Brian repeated. "Rowan and I saw *Quand Pleurent les Clowns* last year. Divine. It was like an unstable still life."

What did that even mean? "I did appreciate it for what it was," she said. "An ambitious film-maker showcasing his skills. I'm curious to know what Hollywood makes of him when they meet the man, not just his films."

"And what it makes of you," Grace noted. "They'll see you, not your on-screen villain for the first time, as well."

"Um..." Elizabeth frowned. "No, I'd still be playing a role. It's no different."

"It's very different." Grace leaned forward, giving her a close look. "It's a trademark of all Badour films. He reveals the actor as well as their character. It's why his films seem so real. I, for one, will be very intrigued by what he finds under your skin. You've been holding out on us for far too long."

Elizabeth blinked. "What do you mean?"

"You hold your cards so close, dear Bess. Soon we'll get to see all of you. Your secrets. What's behind the mask you always wear. I cannot wait. In fact, an unraveling would do you a world of good." She thrummed delicate fingers against the leather arm rest.

Blood rushed to Elizabeth's face. Her secrets? These were not for anyone's consumption. Certainly not for Grace to pick over. Or the wider cinema-viewing population.

Silence coated the room like ash. Alex's eyes had gone squinty, like she was trying to understand what Grace was getting at.

Brian slid his gaze between Elizabeth and Grace. “Um, Grace, dearest, no one’s expected to share anything they don’t want to, here or elsewhere. Besides, Bess’s a big girl. I’m sure she can handle a demanding Frenchman. She’ll be fine at drawing a line in the sand she’s most comfortable with.”

Thank God for Brian. Elizabeth exhaled. He’d been her first friend when she began her law course at Cambridge. He’d discovered her in the cafeteria one day, hunched over a textbook, and had amused her with an impromptu sketch: *Woman Eating Alone*. He’d invited her to see him and his friends in a play. That had been the start of everything.

Her shift from law to drama had felt like the most natural thing in the world. And then came Grace. A decade older, she’d entered their world as a guest lecturer and decided Elizabeth was a talent to be refined. That was the day Elizabeth’s small, safe world tilted on its axis.

Grace laughed suddenly. It was light and pretty, and a complete affectation—Elizabeth had heard her stage laugh often enough to know that. “Sorry, Bess, I was just playing. Ask someone to tell you their secrets and they’ll deny they have any. Intimate to someone you *know* their secrets and their horror is palpable.” Grace waved carelessly. “I’m sorry, though. I see that wasn’t the nicest joke.”

“No.” Amrit peered at her. “It wasn’t.”

Her expression shifted to one of actual regret. “Oh dear. I’ve put my foot in it, haven’t I? Can you forgive me?”

Elizabeth eyed her friend. Irritation rose up. But then memories flooded her, of all the times Grace had helped her, taught her tricks for remembering lines or projecting her voice, as well as tips for dealing with handsy producers or star-struck fans. She’d also given Elizabeth the biggest gift of all, when she’d first arrived in LA. Grace was the reason Rachel had agreed to represent her. She smiled. “Of course. Forgiven.”

“Excellent,” Grace said with a satisfied purr. “I know my sense of humor’s always been lousy. I hope you still like me anyway?”

What a fine performance of contrition. Even so, Elizabeth gave her the benefit of the doubt. “Always.” Lifting her tea, she tilted it in silent toast toward Grace.

Chapter 3

MAKE-UP DONE, SUMMER STIFLED A yawn while Sylvia, the set's hair stylist, fussed around her. Next to her sat Molly Garcia, who played a second-year medical intern on the run from her handsome, unhinged twin brother.

Fidgeting, Summer stared at her fingers. She had survived four hours with her mother and had the green fingertips to prove it. With any luck, she'd be able to keep her hands in her pockets for her upcoming scenes because Skye Storm's *Heavenly Homemade Dyes* vlog had been more demonic than anything else.

It was barely seven and she was dying for the tea steaming in her cup on the table three feet away. But that would require moving, and Sylvia was lethal with jerking her hair if she so much as twitched.

That tea was the liquid of the gods. She couldn't, of course, confess to Elizabeth exactly how she'd come by her habit. She pursed her lips at the thought.

"No duckface!" Jon, the make-up artist, leaned across and rapped Summer's knuckles with an eyebrow pencil, then resumed listening to Molly's story about some hot new club.

"Sorry." Summer's mind drifted. Her first scene required her to trail around with a group of other residents while the Head of Cardio, Dr. Mendez, explained various patients' conditions. He would ask the residents questions. She had to answer one. She'd been practicing her line.

Could there be a problem with the chordae tendineae, doctor?

It was something to do with a heart valve. She'd looked it up.

Could there be a problem with the chordae tendineae, doctor?

Could there...

“...heard she’s a bitch. Guess that’s where she got the nickname.”

Her brain suddenly tuned into Molly’s conversation. Unless there were two women on set nicknamed ‘bitch,’ it was a safe bet as to who she was insulting.

In the mirror, Summer caught Jon offering one of those neutral nods that sought more juicy gossip, rather than signaling agreement.

Sylvia frowned. “Well, don’t believe everything you hear,” she said. “Ms. Thornton is a total pro. It’s not her fault what they did to her character.”

“Pity our social media team, though.” Jon waved his eyebrow pencil. “Hunt and Thornton both get a ton of hate on the official fan forum board. Several hundred posts, easy.”

“A week?” Molly asked. “Holy fu—”

“A *day*.”

Summer’s lips pressed together, earning her another sharp look from Jon. How would *that* mess with a person’s head? It might explain Elizabeth’s bad mood.

“Perfect casting, if you ask me.” Molly grinned. “She has resting bitch face.”

“She does not!”

Everyone’s eyes darted to meet Summer’s in the mirror.

Jon snorted. “And here I was thinking you were a mute, darling.” He tapped her cheek. “A beautiful mute, of course.”

Molly eyed Summer too. She had an attractive face, a buzz cut, and olive skin and played a scared, butch, loner Haitian refugee. She was none of the above in reality, and especially loved dropping the name of her boyfriend into every conversation.

“Well, Rico says...”

Case in point.

“...that Elizabeth Thornton’s sour face would leave any man limp for life. Not that he has to worry about that with me around.” She smirked.

Ew. Also total BS. The men Elizabeth dated, all manscaped British hunks, were elegant, immaculately dressed, and refined, with names like Brian, Rowan, and, lately, Amrit. They seemed more than happy with Elizabeth’s company. And, unlike the infamous Rico, none of those men looked like they’d make tacky comments about any woman’s looks.

Sylvia sighed. “It’s a shame. Ms. Thornton is nothing like Chief Hunt.” She gave Molly a warning look. “She’s just reserved. British. And you’ve got to admit it was a mean thing they did to her character. That’d annoy anyone.”

“Good ratings, though.” Jon beamed. “My God, we hit top ten.”

“Oh come on,” Molly shrugged. “It’s just drama. The usual stupid TV crap. It went down with Hunt the way it does with everyone.”

“Not like this,” Sylvia said. “Everyone else on this show gets drama thrown at them but they get to stay likable. Hunt throwing Mendez’s engagement ring in his face when he proposed? After he’d just told her he’d finally found love for the first time since his wife died? That wasn’t *just drama*.” Sylvia touched up Summer’s hair then reached for the spray. “They wanted people hating her.”

“Why?” Summer asked.

Sylvia gave her a curious look and squirted gunk all over her hair as if readying it to survive cyclonic winds. “Ay-yi. Good question. No idea.”

“Maybe she pissed off someone upstairs?” Molly said. “Or all of them. Gah, she’s so uptight and boring, who cares? Moving on.” She pulled out her phone. “Jon, tell me which Instagram filter brings out my eyes best? I need to look put together and shit, but not too posed or plastic.”

Jon’s eyes lit up as he launched into an answer.

Sylvia murmured that Summer was done. She made to move her chair back, but was stopped by Sylvia’s hand on her arm.

“It’s good you see past the nonsense,” the hair stylist said under her breath. “Don’t get sucked into the rumors. It’s mostly bull. Especially about her.”

“I know.”

Sylvia’s eyes crinkled. “Well. I like you.” She released Summer’s arm. “And Ms. Thornton’s one class act. She has more talent in her pinkie than most of the rest of the cast. You could do well watching her.”

As if I could stop. Summer reached for her tea to avoid saying anything that would give away her unchecked admiration. *Damn. Lukewarm now.*

Sylvia gave an impatient cluck as she glanced at Jon and Molly, deep in conversation on the merits or otherwise of sepiia filters. She waved her comb. “We’re behind. Too much talk-talk-talk. Not enough work-work-work.”

Summer left them to it. She'd have loved to have picked apart Sylvia's words, but business came before curiosity.

Could there be a problem with the chordae tendineae, doctor?

* * *

"Could there be a problem with the tendineae chordae, doctor?" Summer asked.

Raif shook his head and began to reply.

"CUT!"

Crp. Summer blushed. "Sorry. Um, of course I know it's the *chordae tendineae*, and I'll..."

Ravitz was staring at her. "Not that! What the hell's on your fingers?"

Oh no! She'd pulled her hands out of her pocket on the second take. "Um, dye?" Her voice rose an octave. Summer offered an apologetic smile. "From a tie-dying incident gone bad?"

There was a silence. Then a masculine guffaw.

Well, at least Raif found it funny.

Then Molly, right beside her, lost it in a series of squeezed out snorts. Then Steve, Kaylah, Jeremiah, Malek, Tori, and... *Oh hell. There goes everyone.*

Summer rammed her hands back into her pockets, forming fists. Not funny at all.

Dread filled her when she saw that Elizabeth had just arrived, ready for her next scene with Raif.

Still Ravitz hadn't spoken. He simply stared at Summer. His gaze flicked to Elizabeth, and then his eyes positively gleamed.

"I could just put them back in my pocket again," Summer offered, cheeks aflame.

Elizabeth's eyes widened incredulously as she worked out what the issue was.

Okay, great. Now Summer was a laughing stock with *everyone*. Including the one person she really didn't want to appear a fool in front of.

Ravitz was now on his phone, having an intense exchange while waving in her general direction. She caught the name Hugo. The head writer?

She was *so* dead. Maybe literally. Was he working out with Hugo how to kill off Joey? She glared at the green stains on her fingertips. Death by gangrene? On this show, nothing was too crazy.

Ravitz crooked his finger at Elizabeth. She approached him and bent her head to listen.

Finally, she nodded and walked to the edge of the set, her mask firmly in place. This was Chief Hunt's detached expression, one part pure ice, nine parts derisive sneer. All parts intimidating.

"We're going to go again," Ravitz announced. "Ms. Hayes, leave your hands out of your pockets. Say your line—correctly this time—and then Mr. Benson," he turned to Raif, "before you answer, Chief Hunt will enter, interrupt, and say something about the fingers. Ms. Hayes, respond to her line *exactly* as you did to me. And Ms. Thornton will then reply, okay?"

"Um, sure? Why? I mean, could just..." Summer pointedly shoved her hands back in her pockets, appalled to be the cause of a rewrite, even just a short one.

"Because I said so. Any other questions?" His eyes dared her to challenge him again.

The set was silent, and behind her she felt her cast mates stiffen.

"No, I'm good," she said brightly. Far, far too brightly. *Christ. Take it down a notch.*

"Good girl," he nodded, then waved at the camera operator.

Summer winced.

"Positions, people," he called. He looked at Elizabeth, who was on her mark, then glanced around, and called, "Speed. Rolling, and...action."

"Could there be a problem with the *chordae tendineae*, doctor?" Summer asked. Relief flowed through her that at least she'd got that bit right. Her anxiety spiked, though, when Chief Hunt stepped into her field of vision, with a face like soured milk.

"Dr. Mendez," Hunt said, voice clipped, "I need a word about your last report. It's simply not acceptab..." Her gaze drifted to Summer's hands. "What is *that*?" she pointed.

"Um..." Summer actually withered a little under her sneering scrutiny, and hoped they'd chalk it up to brilliant acting. "Dye? From a tie-dyeing incident gone bad?"

Hunt's gaze turned challenging. "Be careful what you dip your fingers into around here, doctor." She looked bitterly at Mendez. "*Everything* can harm you."

So they're playing up Hunt's bad breakup again? Okay.

Summer found herself saying the first thing that entered her head. “That’s okay,” she smiled, aiming for unfazed with a hint of brazen, “I can take care of myself.”

“Somehow I doubt that,” Elizabeth said in an ad-lib of her own, suddenly taking Summer’s hand, flipping it over, and examining it, her arched eyebrow mocking.

In spite of all Summer’s experience and every ounce of acting skill she had, the only thing in her rapidly emptying mind was the feel of Elizabeth’s fingers around hers. She took a step closer, right inside Elizabeth’s space, then said words that bypassed her brain entirely. “You don’t know me, then. But you will.”

Summer had meant it to come out determined, strong, cocky. Instead she sounded wistful. Joey Carter, second-year resident, sounded like Summer’s former self, whispering to that ethereal woman on stage in London. Her line also sounded, well, a tiny, little bit like a come on, if you thought about it. She desperately hoped no one would read it that way. It was probably only in her head anyway.

Elizabeth—definitely not Hunt this time—started and inhaled sharply. She dropped Summer’s hand instantly. Her eyes darted to Raif. “We’ll talk about that report later, Dr. Mendez,” she snapped. “See me after rounds.” Then she pivoted on her heel and stalked out.

“CUT!”

Everyone was staring at Summer. There was no sound.

She wasn’t exactly sure where to look. Ravitz’s jaw was hanging open. Maybe he hadn’t expected the newbie to toss out a bunch of ad-libs? But if that was it, why hadn’t he stopped the scene sooner?

He gave her a slow smile. It reminded her of a snotty kid up to no good. “Thank you, Ms. Hayes. Most...ah...unexpected. Okay, people, let’s finish the scene. Mr. Benson, start with: *‘All right, back to business. No, Dr. Carter, it’s not the chordae tendineae.’* And then resume the scene as written.”

* * *

Sliding a bowl of salad and a water bottle across an empty table near craft services, Summer slumped into a chair. She dropped her head onto the chipped laminated surface and left it there. She was sooo tired and still in a world of stress over this morning.

“Long day,” said a voice near her. Next came the rattle of a tray landing opposite.

She lifted her head. Tori Farmer. The pleasantly rounded African-American actress played a Bronx-born doctor on the show. Funny thing was, her real accent was as broadly Texan as Summer had ever heard. It was kind of cute. Actually, so was she. Tori radiated energy, warmth, and charisma. And, boy, the camera loved her.

Summer attempted a friendly smile and sat up straighter. “I thought children’s TV was bad. The pace they set here is pretty full-on.”

“Yup.” Tori nodded. “You get used to it. I’ve been here a year and it’s like second nature now.” She bit into a cheeseburger that looked considerably more interesting than Summer’s salad. After swallowing, Tori said, “Saw you had an ad-lib today. Ravitz thinks the fact he allows them every now and then is a sign he’s in touch with his creative side.” She snorted.

“Ah, okay.” *So that’s what that was about?*

“It was an interesting scene though. Your take with Thornton.”

“Uh, yeah.” Summer scratched the label on her water bottle with her thumbnail.

“That was somethin’. I’ve never seen the British Bitch look shocked before. I actually think you knocked her out of character for a second. Amazing.” Tori beamed at her. “No one’s *ever* done that.”

Summer swallowed, unsure where Tori was going with this. “I just said the first thing that came to mind.”

“It was clever. We’ve all been talking about it.”

“You have?” Summer squeaked, then cleared her throat. “Any... conclusions?”

“That it was genius. By throwing down the gauntlet to the Chief, you just guaranteed yourself a ton more scenes with a lead.” Tori lifted her coffee and tilted it in salute. “I don’t think I’d have thought of something like that in a million years. Or if I did, I don’t think I’d have the nerve to try it.” She laughed. “I might be a tough Texas kid, but Hunt and Thornton both are scary as shit.”

Relief flooded Summer. Everyone thought her line had been a challenge? Some cynical play to get more scenes? Was that how Ravitz saw it too? No wonder he’d smirked.

Tori seemed to be waiting for some sort of response, so Summer gave her a half grin. “Well, it’ll be interesting to see what crazy stuff they hurl at us next.”

“Oh yep. This show’s certifiable. And don’t start me on the gobbledegook. Would it be too much for ‘internal bleeding’ to be just called that?”

“Ha. Tell me about it.” Summer’s expression faded when, out of the corner of her eye, she saw Elizabeth enter with one of the executive producers, and then line up to collect food from the craft services table. Her posture was painfully erect, yet her movements were graceful and languid.

“Cold fish, isn’t she?” Tori followed her gaze. “Doesn’t hang out with any of the other actors. Doesn’t go for drinks. Doesn’t make friends on set. And I’ll bet that’s a business lunch.” She pointed at the producer with her. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen her smile.”

I bet she has a gorgeous smile.

“Earth to Summer?”

“Hmm?” She turned back to Tori.

“You checked out.” Tori grabbed a fry and dunked it in ketchup.

“Sorry. What were you saying?”

“A bunch of us are going for drinks after work on Friday. Wanna come? Some of the guys asked for you specifically, if you know what I’m sayin’.” Tori’s eyes twinkled.

“Not this week, sorry,” she said with a polite smile. “I’m busy. Maybe next time.” She wasn’t busy. It was just easier this way. Spending time with cocky men who thought their looks and charms could overcome her lack of interest was exhausting. Maybe she’d go in a month when everyone had paired off.

“Sure.” Tori nodded. “Next time.”

Elizabeth and the producer headed their way, bearing trays of food. Well, if a small bowl of soup for Elizabeth counted as food. The man she was with was monologuing beside her.

Was Elizabeth even needed in that conversation?

She neared them, and Tori’s fingers tensed around her coffee cup, gaze suddenly fixed on the table. However, Elizabeth didn’t even falter, continuing past them to a distant, empty table.

“Oh thank God.” Tori clapped a hand over her heart. “For a minute there, I thought she was gonna chow down with us.”

“Would that have been so bad?” Summer asked, forking a lettuce leaf and inspecting it. It looked as sad close up as it did on her plate.

“You say that now, oh innocent one, but I heard she had an assistant fired for bringing her a coffee instead of a tea.” Tori shuddered. “I don’t know how the EP does it.” She tilted her head at Elizabeth’s lurching companion. “How does anyone talk to her?”

“No clue,” Summer murmured.

But I’d love to know.

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BREAKING CHARACTER

BY LEE WINTER

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