

LOVE Has NO Boundaries



Don't Read in the Closet Event 2013

DOUBLE EXPOSURE

Sam Kadence

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A high school boy helping out his aunt on a photo shoot is asked to fill in as a model but as a girl, not a boy. The session leads to a kiss with another boy from school and opens the door to many emotions, dreams, and self-discovery.

Love Has No Boundaries

An M/M Romance series

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By Sam Kadence

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love Has No Boundaries* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a free gift to you.

What Is Love Has No Boundaries?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what they do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love Has No Boundaries*.

Whether you are an avid M/M romance reader or new to the genre, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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By Sam Kadence

Photo Description

A beautiful young man looks outward through a tumble of messy, long, blond hair.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I'm a guy who doesn't care what he looks like. I wear glasses and prefer baggy sweatshirts and jeans. My hair, super long for a guy, is always tied up and stuffed inside a beanie or the hood of my sweatshirt. No one really pays much attention to me in school, and frankly, I don't mind. I'm not a loner or anything, although my friends and I aren't exactly the popular ones in school.

I don't really care about popularity or being in a relationship or being invited to parties and stuff like that. I'm happy getting good grades, hanging with my friends, and being with my family, even if they drive me crazy most of the time. I'm pretty close with my dad's sister, my Aunt Patricia, who's a fashion photographer. She pays me to be her errand boy on Saturdays, which is pretty cool.

This Saturday however, is a little different. My aunt shows up at the studio with a couple in business suits, followed by the model for the day's shoot. I only get a glimpse of his face, but I know it's Lucas.

Let me explain about Lucas: he's the most popular guy in my school. No, he's not a jock or anything, he's a model, since he was in fifth grade or somewhere around there. He's the guy everyone wants to be friends with, and the guy most of the girls in school want as a boyfriend. I'm not one of those people.

Anyway, everybody's in a rush now that the model has arrived, and I've got about a hundred things to do helping get ready for the shoot. Then it turns out

the female model is a no-show. The next thing I know, my aunt tows me into a dressing room and tells me she wants me to be the female model.

Honestly? I think she's crazy. For one thing, I'm clueless about clothes. For another, I'm pretty sure I don't look like a model. And I'm definitely not a girl.

Before I can tell her no, my aunt drags me into another room so the make-up artist and hair stylist can attack my face and my hair—and then my aunt is helping me get into a dress. A dress! I look ridiculous! And on top of all that, I have no idea how to model. I was never going to hear the end of this.

But when my aunt leads me over to Lucas, I'm almost positive he not only doesn't recognize me from school—no surprise there—he thinks I'm really a girl! And there's no time to say anything because I'm being put into position and the camera is clicking away. I am so awkward with him—the poses are a little too romantic for comfort. After a few poses I start feeling weird—my heart pumping harder than usual, my stomach in a knot—I'm pretty sure I might be getting sick.

Finally, my aunt announces that we're almost done. Finally! I suddenly feel Lucas' hand on my lower back, and turn toward him. He cups my face with his hand, looking at me with eyes that are so intense I have to swallow my spit. The weird feelings are back, even worse now. Lucas tilts his head and leans in slightly, closing his eyes. The last things I remember are a click from Aunt Patricia's camera and gasps from her direction...

Sincerely,

Leandro

Due to publishing requirements, this letter has been edited with permission from Leandro. The original full-length letter may be found [here](#).

Story Info

Genre: contemporary, young adult

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The last thing I remembered before blacking out was Lucas Hart's lips touching mine. Only seconds before he'd been staring at me, eyes such a pretty pale shade of blue, like a bright sunny day. His face just inches from mine several times before that moment, then, just suddenly, it happened.

Waking up on the couch in one of the studio dressing rooms gave me a minute to try to refocus my thoughts. How did I wind up here, dressed like a girl, a pretty-looking girl at that, fainting at the kiss of Lucas Hart, heartthrob and model? And why couldn't I stop thinking of his lips touching mine?

It all began less than twenty-four hours ago at my friend Jenny's house. I had readjusted the lens of my camera and snapped off another half-dozen shots. Jenny's hamster, Cherry, blinked at me with a semi-dazed look over the giant strawberry she was eating. The contrast of her soft white-gray fur against the bright red of the fruit was well worth the creature's irritated chatter. I pushed my glasses up my nose and raised the camera for another shot.

"Only you would think Cherry is art," Jenny grumbled from her place on the bed. She brushed her ginger hair out of her face and sighed. "Do you really have to work tomorrow?"

Stupid question, but I understood her frustration. Saturdays meant shopping, friends, and fun for most kids our ages. I would be working with my aunt Patty at her photo studio. No, she never let me touch her camera—mine was just a cheap knock-off, but I did get to watch her technique, examine her photographic eye on the world, help with lighting, and ask questions. All of those things were priceless. "It's a big shoot. You know how well she pays."

"Enough to buy a new lens. I know, I know. How many lenses does one sixteen-year-old boy need? I just want to hang with you on the weekend for once."

I put my camera away and tugged my messy, long, blond hair into a ponytail before fastening it with a rubber band. “We’re hanging right now, aren’t we? And since it’s Friday, it *is* technically the weekend.”

She glared at me hard enough that I had to check my clothes again. Was something stained? I didn’t pay much attention before changing out of my uniform after school and rushing over to her place, so all I had on was my normal faded blue jeans and a dark gray hoodie.

“What?” I finally asked.

“You’re taking pictures of my hamster.”

I sighed and threw myself down on the bed. Sometimes girls just made no sense. Since she was my best friend, Jenny often explained things in simple terms for me. Especially when something was bugging her. Today it seemed I’d have to pry it out of her. “Talk to me. You wanted me over right away. Something has been bothering you all day.”

“So you know Lucas, right?” she began, eyes darting away from meeting mine. Something she only did when she was really nervous.

“Yeah, duh.” Everyone knew Lucas Hart. Well maybe not everyone. Just everyone in our school. He was a model, had been since he was a kid, even starred in a few commercials. Now he mostly did fashion modeling for major retailers. No one was going to open an ad for Target and scream “OMG, it’s Lucas!” unless they were from our small Madison, Wisconsin high school. He wasn’t a jock. He wasn’t a brain. He was just pretty. And even though I was a guy, I could appreciate good angles when I saw them. That guy had “capture me” written all over him. Practically made me want to hide in his locker with a camera.

“He was talking to Katie.”

“Okay, and?” Katie was the school gossip, a cheerleader, and dating the football half-back. Cliché from her little mini-skirt covered butt—which couldn’t have met the school clothing standard for length—all the way to her bleach-blonde roots. But she was nice enough to most everyone. I’d taken a bunch of pictures of her in various clubs for the yearbook and the school

newspaper. She was photogenic, but the camera didn't love her nearly as much as it did Lucas.

"Katie broke up with Teddy last week."

"So you think she was hitting on Lucas." I put my hands beneath my head and got comfy. This was going to be a long, mostly one-sided discussion. Jenny, like every other girl in school, lusted after Lucas. I think it was more his status as a model than him. Sure he was nice enough, good-looking of course—he was a model, after all—but there were better-looking and more popular guys in school, and he never did seem to date anyone. He was the local celebrity. Unattainable, but wanted by all the girls. I didn't get it. One guy was as good as the next right?

I must have dozed off because I woke to Jenny smacking me hard enough in the stomach to knock the wind out of me. "Ouch!"

"I'm pouring out my heart to you and you're sleeping. You're such a guy."

"Uh, yeah, you're talking about boys. What else am I supposed to be?" Though frankly, I wasn't interested in girls either, just photography. I shook my head at her then glanced at the clock. Almost seven; I'd have to get home soon or Mom would insist on making something hot for dinner even though I'd already missed the meal. "Lucas doesn't date anyway. He says he's too busy working and keeping his grades up. He tells every girl who asks him the same thing. It's like his mantra or something. I get it. I don't date either. School's enough of a hassle without having a hanger-on demanding time. And don't tell me you wouldn't get mad if I suddenly started dating and saw you once a week or only at school."

"But I heard from a friend of Katie's that he was asking questions about me."

That couldn't be good. "Okay, so maybe you should talk to him."

"She said it was just about what classes I was in."

"Maybe he needs a study partner. You are one of the smartest girls in school."

“I don’t want to be smart. I want to be pretty.”

I laughed. “Did you really just say that?”

She sighed. “It doesn’t have to be Lucas, I guess. I just want a guy to look at me like I’m a girl.”

“You are a girl. How do guys not look at you like you’re a girl?” I glanced at her. She looked like a girl to me. Though I guess we were sort of similar in build—tall, slender, not curvy, long hair. She didn’t wear glasses like I did, but I guess that just meant people saw more of her face.

“Argh! You’re so dense sometimes, Tory.” Cherry began to run noisily on her wheel. Obviously the trauma from being photographed had worn off while I napped. Jenny paced the room, and I laughed to myself about pets mirroring their owners. “There’s a spring dance coming up. I’d like to go with someone other than you this time.”

“Hey!”

“You know what I mean.”

“I guess. I don’t know why you want to go to the dance anyway. It’s not like you can talk to anyone over the music and no one really knows how to dance. Everyone just sort of sways. The lighting isn’t even good enough to get reasonable pictures.” I dragged myself from the bed, stretching and letting my back pop a few times. “I need to get home before my mom starts freaking.”

“I really wanted to go dress shopping with you this weekend.”

’Cause I was *so* the guy to help with that. Those adventures usually meant me sitting on a bench for hours while she tried on every dress she could find, only to buy nothing, no matter what I said. “Call Shayla. She loves shopping.” And gossip. Put those two together and they were in their own world. No Tory needed. I grinned. “I’ll call you tomorrow after the shoot if it doesn’t run long. Maybe we can do dinner or something.”

“Okay. Night, Tor.”

The four-block walk home was quiet enough. Sounds of kids playing, an occasional car passing. Several of my neighbors waved. I put my hood up over

my head and shoved my hands in my pockets, camera bag dangling from my wrist.

Oddly enough, I looked forward to working the weekends. Always finished my homework during study hall so I could have evenings and weekends free, not to party or mess around with my friends, but to take pictures. Tomorrow's shoot was going to be a long one, eight in the morning until just after three in the afternoon if everything went according to schedule. As my aunt Patricia's assistant, it was my duty to keep everyone on schedule.

Her car was in the drive when I walked up. The sound of voices hit me before I even opened the door. My mom rambled about some new art project the museum was picking up, and my aunt loudly agreed. The two were alike enough to be sisters, but Patty was my dad's sister. "There he is," my mom cried as I walked in the door. "I was beginning to worry." She pulled out a chair and motioned to me to sit at the big island that separated our living room from the kitchen. "You missed dinner. And you need hot food. Growing boys always need hot food. Let me warm something up for you."

"Mom, I'm good with just a sandwich." But she was already digging out pots and pans in a loud clatter that had my dad wincing behind his newspaper. He sat in his recliner, pouring through each section of the paper like it held the wisdom of the world.

"How about pasta?" Mom asked. "I could whip up some Alfredo sauce..."

I threw a glance back at my dad, silently wishing for help, but knowing there was nothing I could do to stop her once she'd begun.

"Marisa!" My dad called out to her. All the noise stopped as she looked at him. "Just make the boy a sandwich." The paper went back in place as though it had never moved, and my mom began to put together a simple sandwich: meat, cheese, lettuce, tomato, mustard. Thank God. I was starving.

Patty giggled. She moved to the chair beside me and sat down, hand out. I sighed and gave her my camera. By the time my mom set my sandwich in front of me, Patty was critiquing my latest photographs while she flipped through them on the digital viewer.

“Great use of simple colors. Love this one.” She held up the camera to show me the picture of Cherry grasping the strawberry and looking over it with wide eyes. “You totally captured the moment.”

Instead of replying, I ate. She’d have more to say anyway, and I listened mostly, absorbing what I could, thinking of ideas to change or improve a technique for later. Tomorrow would be a lot about lighting at the studio. Different models were affected by false light in new and interesting ways. Patty always seemed to know right from looking at someone how they would absorb it, or if it would bounce off them in a certain way. I wasn’t there yet, but maybe with more studying I could be.

My little brother, James, walked into the room and immediately smacked me on the back of the head. “Torrance,” he grumbled as he passed. He was a freshman and I was a junior at the same private school, though we rarely saw each other.

“Jameson,” I mouthed back, rubbing my head.

“Don’t hit your brother,” Mom told him. But James said I daydreamed too much and we had a long standing tradition of a “love tap” to ensure I was awake. Usually I was just thinking about lighting and camera angles, but I suppose to most non-photographers that sounded a lot like daydreaming.

“Least I wasn’t named after a romance novel character,” he griped.

“No, you were named after cheap liquor,” I snarked back.

“Not cheap,” my dad grumbled. Mom had named me, Dad had named him. So neither of us was likely too far from the mark.

“Hey, Aunt P,” James said, and leaned over to give her a kiss on the cheek. “How’s my favorite aunt this evening? Photographing any hot girls I should know about?”

“I’m your only aunt, and even if I were, you’d be bored in just a half hour of playing fetch.” She gave him a quick hug. “I know Tory’s the only one of you bitten by the photobug.”

“Yeah. I don’t get it, but whatever.” He shrugged and stepped into the kitchen. “Mom, can I have a sandwich?”

“You sure, sweetie? I can make you something warm. Lasagna or pizza or—”

“Sandwich,” my dad said from his chair. Both James and I suppressed a smile.

Patty got up from her seat. “So tomorrow I’ll pick you up at seven. I know it’s early, but it will be a great shoot.”

“I’m looking forward to it,” I told her truthfully, and watched her wave goodbye to everyone as she left. I headed up to my room, plugged in my camera and got ready for bed. It was almost eight, early, but I had to be up at six to get to the shoot on time.

I spent a little while cleaning up pictures, adjusting contrast; then I added them to my Dropbox for storage and posted a few on Facebook and DeviantArt to gather reviews. I had hundreds of Facebook friends, mostly because they liked to comment on my pictures. I was pretty sure even Katie and Lucas were my friends, though I couldn’t recall ever seeing either of them post anything on my wall. Neither probably knew me by name as there was usually a camera between them and me.

There were no pictures of me on my Facebook page. Unlike most other kids, I didn’t stand in front of the bathroom mirror and snap a picture with my phone. My pictures of the world represented what I wanted everyone to see. If my art didn’t speak for itself, then what I looked like surely wouldn’t matter. My avatar of the moment was a picture of the neighbor’s kid catching a soap bubble, a play on color as most of it was in black and white, the bubble in blue.

Before I shut the computer down at quarter to ten, the Cherry Berry photo had more than a dozen comments. I signed off for the night, thanking everyone for their feedback, and hoped that soon I’d have more than hamster pictures to add to my portfolio. Sleep came quickly, with dreams of camera flashes and double-page magazine spreads.

The next morning slammed into me with the screeching of my alarm clock. Six was way too early for a Saturday. I rolled out of bed and hopped into the shower for a quick scrub, then yanked a comb through my hair and brushed my teeth before heading downstairs.

How was it already quarter to seven? Ahh!

Mom was rushing through the kitchen trying to pull together breakfast. Eggs, waffles, toast, bacon. Who had time for all that? I hopped into my shoes, pulled a hoodie over my T-shirt and began searching the cupboards for Pop-Tarts when I heard my aunt pull up.

“Torrance, sit down and eat a real breakfast,” my mom shouted at me.

“No time. Aunt Patty’s here. Sorry.” I raced to the car and we were on our way. At the studio, Aunt Patty just waved me off to get to work, no instruction needed. I cleaned the dressing rooms and stocked them with fresh, cold water bottles. The model assistant arrived with racks full of clothes. Anna and Rachel from make-up and hair showed up next, booting me from the dressing rooms so they could lay out their arsenal of tools.

Aunt Patty was fiddling with the lights when a guy in a suit walked in, followed by Lucas Hart. I admit to standing there a minute or two taking in the fact that Lucas looked as good as he did, his having just rolled out of bed. His hair was a bit of a mess, slightly damp, probably from a fast shower, and he was wearing just normal jeans and a T-shirt. He glanced up briefly, eyes flicking around the room. He had earbuds dangling from each ear, and paused only for Aunt Patty to point him in the direction of his dressing room, where he disappeared a minute later.

I wondered if he noticed me at all, standing in the corner, eyes probably looking huge through my black-framed glasses, hood pulled up over my hair. But he never turned my way. Someday I’d have the guts to actually ask if I could take his picture. Though why he’d let me snap a few for free when he could get paid for it, I couldn’t imagine, but a guy could hope.

Missy, the clothing coordinator, flagged me down for help in wardrobe. Twenty minutes of folding and hanging later, I returned to the studio to find

the man Lucas had come in with pacing and talking angrily on the phone. A sharply dressed older woman stood with Aunt Patty, shaking her head and wringing her hands.

The man stuffed his phone away in a huff and stomped over to Aunt Patty and the other woman, his face a mask of frustration. “The other agency double-booked your female model.”

“Are they sending another?” The woman asked.

“They don’t have anyone available to send.”

“This is a disaster. This goes to print in less than two weeks and online next week. This is an international release. We don’t have time to schedule another shoot. We waited this long just to get Lucas.” She paced away from them.

“Why don’t we start with Lucas, get some of his solo stuff finished, and maybe we can contact another agency?” My aunt offered a reasonable solution.

“Already did. It’s not like there are a lot of modeling agencies in Madison to choose from. Even if we got someone to drive over from the Twin Cities, they still wouldn’t be here until this afternoon and Lucas has another shoot across town today.” The man dry-washed his face.

Patty glanced at me, paused, and then a moment of something I couldn’t read flickered across her face. “Give me half an hour,” she said. She crossed the room with purposeful strides in my direction. I looked around hoping she was looking at someone else. Maybe Anna or Rachel, or even Missy, but there was no one other than me. Patty latched on to my arm with a tight grip and tugged me toward the second dressing room. “I need your help, Tor.”

It took a second for her words to sink in, but I had to ask if she meant what I thought she meant. “You want me to dress up as a girl?”

“You’re pretty enough. Slender. Young. Tall. Like a model normally is.”

“But Anna or Rachel—”

“Are twice Lucas’ age and would look very awkward in the new Sweethearts line for Moreland’s.” She opened the door to the dressing room. All three of the women stood there, waiting. None of them could have passed for under thirty.

My heart skipped a beat. “I’m not a girl.”

Rachel’s eyes got real wide. Missy said, “Oh. He does have the perfect figure for these clothes.”

“But—”

“Just this once, Tor. I promise. I’ll even make sure you get the same pay the missing model was supposed to get. Imagine how many camera supplies, lighting prompts, and background mattes you can buy.” Patty shoved me forward.

“You’re so evil. You better not tell anyone.”

She traced an X across her chest. “Cross my heart.” With that she left the room to deliver the good news to her clients.

“I’ve longed to get my hands on that unruly mane of yours for ages, Tory,” Rachel said, dragging me toward the chair in front of the big mirror.

“Hoodie off,” Missy commanded. She began flipping through the hung items until she found a crimson sweater-dress that looked far too clingy to hide that I was a boy.

“A dress?” my voice rose a couple of pitches. Rachel began to attack my hair, and Anna stripped me of my glasses then pulled out several tubes of some kind of cream. “Oh God.”

By the time they released me to the studio my knees shook like jelly. I hadn’t done more than glance in the mirror when finished, more out of fear that I’d look like a guy dressed like a girl, than anything else. Would the clients notice? And then standing there was Lucas, fitted purple jeans slung low on his hips, tight, black V-neck shirt under a cream-colored jacket. His dark hair had been straightened and combed down to frame his face. All those

nice angles highlighted, while I stood there pretending to be a girl and feeling like so much of a fraud.

He moved effortlessly with the flow of the camera and Aunt Patty's minor instructions. "Left, look back, over the shoulder, great."

I sucked in a deep breath and prayed to whatever cosmic powers might exist that I would survive this day without becoming the laughingstock of my town. Maybe if no one knew. Maybe if I could fool Lucas I could fool the camera.

"There she is!" my aunt exclaimed. "Sorry for the delay everyone. Tory's going to fill in for us, but we're going to start slow. This will be her first shoot." She stepped up to my side, touching my hair and briefly patting the curls. She whispered, "Just breathe, sweetie. You look good. You've watched a hundred shoots. Remember how those models act in front of the camera. Just follow Lucas' lead and try not to look like a deer in headlights."

"You mean like I do right now?" When had it gotten so hot in here?

She just smiled and nudged me toward Lucas. He smiled warmly at me and offered me a hand. I gulped and took it, allowing him to pull me into the center of the stage. "Relax," he whispered. "It's easier if you pretend the camera isn't there."

The heat of the lights was instant. The assistants appeared like Oompa-Loompas to adjust lights and fix hair and make-up. Rachel, Anna, and Missy stood on the sidelines watching and waiting. Lucas' manager and the woman from Moreland's stood behind Patty as the camera began to flash.

"Good. Tory, look over your shoulder. Lucas, hand on her hip," Patty said.

I had to bite my lip to keep from replying.

"Don't bite your lips, Tory."

"Think duck lips," Lucas whispered, faint smile on his face. "It sounds silly, but it's the sexy pout all the girls do."

I attempted it twice before he nodded and helped prod me into position for the next shot. It took two outfit changes and several touch ups before I began

to feel comfortable in the lights and with Lucas' touch. He often had his arm around my waist, over my shoulder, or hand in mine. Even kissed my fingers for one shot. The solo shots were easy. I didn't have to do much other than turn slowly to show off the clothes. Lucas started each set solo then we'd be on stage together, then me by myself. He would change while I was on my own and vice versa. Most sessions like this yielded thousands of pictures but only a handful would ever see print. Would anyone recognize me? Was it weird that I wanted them to?

Patty gave fewer directions until I moved for the camera and Lucas and I flowed together from pose to pose. He was definitely a pro, needing almost no instruction and knowing which way to turn to highlight the clothes without seeming unnatural.

He had no problem touching me; getting so close in some poses, it made my breath catch. Lucas even wrapped his arms around me from behind, leaning over my shoulder to smile at me close enough to kiss. My heart pounded in an odd mix of fear and excitement. I didn't even remember putting my hand on his cheek, but everyone loved it and began muttering. His skin warmed my palm and my cheeks.

The tenth and final wardrobe change had me standing in front of the full length mirror in the dressing room trying to calm my racing heart. Rachel styled up my hair, leaving small bits free to dangle around my neck. Anna applied smoky make-up to my eyes, which made the pale green of them stand out, framed in thick dark lashes I'd never known I had. Missy had chosen a denim skirt in dark blue, with a semi-sheer white sweater that fell low on my shoulders. She added a chunky bright blue necklace with multiple silver chains wrapped at different lengths. The shoes were white heels I was sure I'd fall in before I made it back to the studio, but Missy kept a tight grip on my wrist.

I looked good. I looked like a girl. Was that a bad thing? I felt pretty good, despite the minor queasiness and blood pounding through my ears that I associated with nervousness. Every time Lucas touched me my pulse raced and I struggled to breathe. Probably just his star power getting to me like it did everyone else in school.

And the studio felt like a sauna. Were the lights always this hot? I tugged on my top, careful not to move it the wrong way. No one commented on my lack of boobs, though I suppose that probably would have been rude if I *had* been a girl.

My last solo set flew by and then Lucas was there again. He yanked me into his arms, those clear blue eyes all smiles. We almost seemed to dance together through that last set. The final shot left us close enough to have our noses touch. We'd barely spoken the whole time, other than his occasional encouraging words and ever-present smile; we just co-existed, a perfect partnership.

"Just a little closer," I heard Patty call to us. Lucas put his arm around my waist and pulled me into a full body hug. "It's called the Sweetheart line for a reason. There we go. Tory, tilt up slightly toward Lucas and forward." Where had all the air in the room gone? Did Lucas feel this lightheaded from all the heat, too? The position put us just a breath away from a kiss and while the camera snapped I never thought that half a blink later Lucas would close that space and actually touch his lips to mine. I heard a loud gasp and the world went dark.

On the couch in my temporary dressing room, I wondered how I'd gone from what was probably my first kiss, to waking up alone. Did Lucas know I was a boy? Was everyone horrified?

The door opened and Lucas stepped inside, eyes searching, then widening when he saw I was awake. He crossed the room to the couch and handed me a bottle of water.

"I'm so sorry!" We both said at the same time.

He shook his head and looked away. "I should have realized you were nervous and weren't drinking. It can all be so overwhelming. Sometimes, 'cause I've done it so much, I just forget."

"I feel so stupid," I whispered, hoping he didn't think I sounded like a guy. Had I passed out from the lack of water? I hadn't eaten or drunk anything all day. What if I'd run into Lucas in the bathroom? God, I was so dumb. But I

suppose, better to pass out from dehydration than a kiss. “I’m sorry. I hope I didn’t ruin the shoot.” I tried to sit up but he held a hand out to stop me.

“Rest. Drink some water.” Lucas ran his hands through his hair. “I’m really sorry for the kiss. It was unprofessional of me. It just seemed so right at that moment.” A blush pinked his cheeks. “Most of the models I work with are so cold it’s hard to get in the groove with them. You and I have good chemistry. You should talk to my agent. He can set you up for a really good contract. Maybe we can work together again.”

I shook my head. “I’d rather be taking pictures than in them.”

Lucas sat down on the edge of the couch beside me. “Drink.” He gave me a look that demanded obedience, so I downed half the bottle. “Better. Drink at least two of these before you do anything strenuous. People don’t realize how much work it is—the lights, holding the pose, standing in awkward positions.”

No kidding. If I ever graduated to studio work from the live action I normally did, I’d be very nice to my models. “Thanks for being patient with me. I hope they have some pictures they can use.”

He nodded. “I’ve seen a handful of them on the computer. Mr. Clark, my agent, is negotiating with the modeling agency and the boutique owner right now. Your aunt wants to be sure you’re well compensated, so Mr. Clark is working on your behalf for now, too. You’ll have to bring home some papers to get signed. Releases so they can publish this stuff. But our agency takes good care of their models.”

I’d never even thought of that. It would really suck if my parents said they couldn’t print the pictures, and yet what if people recognized me? How upset would people be that I dressed like a girl? Or better yet, that I looked good dressed like a girl?

“Don’t look so scared. Trust me, no one really looks at the faces in these types of things. So no one is going to be chasing you down the street demanding an autograph.”

“Thank God.”

Lucas laughed, the sound warm and rich, but mellow, sort of like he always seemed to be. “So I was thinking as an apology for making you pass out, maybe we could do brunch tomorrow? My treat.” My heart hammered in my chest, and I’m sure he saw the war of emotion on my face because he continued. “If you don’t want to, that’s okay too. I guess I’d be pretty pissed if some guy just took liberties and kissed me out of the blue when I was just trying to help out.”

I let out a breath I didn’t know I was holding. “No. It’s okay. I’d love to. I just have never...” Been on a date with another guy, or anyone, ever, and this sounded like a date. Also never had anyone look at me the way Lucas did. Maybe that is what Jenny meant when she wanted someone to look at her like she was a girl. She just wanted someone to *see* her, girl or not.

He smiled, and it was way nicer than anything he gave the camera. This one curved his cheeks up far enough to show dimples. Wow. I blinked at him a few times feeling a bit blinded. No wonder the guy was a model. “Name your favorite place and I’ll meet you there at, say, ten thirty?”

“Nam Pi,” I said instantly, thinking of the Indian place with amazing breakfast that was on the main strip of downtown. Lots of shops and dining, good place for foot traffic in the late spring like it was now, but also some place that was likely busy enough where no one would pay any attention to us. Especially since I would have to dress as a girl again.

“Good choice. It’s one of my favorites. Tomorrow at ten thirty?” he confirmed.

“I’ll be there.” What was I doing?

“Water,” he reminded me. “See you tomorrow.”

And suddenly he was gone. Had I just made a date with Lucas Hart? Oh, crap, I had. And he thought I was a girl. Double crap. Shouldn’t I feel weird about going out with a guy? I gulped down the rest of the water and sat up. No. It felt right, or good at least, the idea that he might like me, ’cause I definitely, sorta liked him.

My aunt popped into the room a second later. “You okay? Should I call your parents?”

“I’m fine. Just dehydrated. Forgot to drink.”

“And eat. Your dad’s gonna kill me. And I’m sure your mom will never stop talking about how I mistreated you.”

Blah. I waved her away and stood up. The clothes were wrinkled, but everything was still in place. Make-up a little smeared, hair a mess. Guess I was no longer a star, and Lucas had still asked to see me again. “They thought I was a girl. Lucas thought I was a girl.”

“You make a very glamorous girl.”

I glared at her.

She held up her hands. “I just mean it worked. You look great. Not that you don’t look good as a boy.” She pulled a stack of papers out of her pocket. “Oh, and look at the money you’ve made.”

That was a lot of zeros. “Is that really three zeros or is there a period missing?”

“Sweetie, there is no period. They don’t pay in pennies here. This shoot will make them a couple million dollars. Mr. Clark is good. He negotiated a royalty for you as well. So each time your picture is used, you get more money. We just need to get your parents to sign the consent forms.”

For this kind of money I was pretty sure I could get my parents to sell me to the Ukraine if needed. “I can convince them.”

Patty’s smile brightened. “Good, because I get a referral bonus as well as royalty payments, and if Marisa and Charles let me, I’ll be your chaperone for the next one.”

“Next one? I’m totally not doing this again.”

“Pshaw!” Patty cried. “With this kind of money, you could pay your way through college. *And* you’ll be networking with some of the greatest

photographers available. There's no better way to learn technique. If I were at all model material, I would have gone that route myself."

She did have a point. I could think of a handful of models who had taken up the role of photographer, many very successful. But I didn't want to be branded as that guy who could always be a girl. "Did you tell Mr. Clark that I'm a guy?"

"The contract doesn't specify gender." Patty looked pleased. "We'll do some headshots tomorrow to begin circling them around. I was thinking maybe half and half. Do some as a boy and some as a girl to show them your versatility. Means more work, better money."

"I've got plans for tomorrow. Besides, I want to talk to Mom and Dad about this contract." My dad worked in contracts for a textbook publishing company. I know he'd tell me not to just sign on the dotted line and walk away with the money. "Can you give me a ride home?" I began to change back into my normal clothes and hoped I could get the make-up off my face. How did I explain that? Would the 'rents be upset? Would they even understand? I glanced in the mirror again, staring at my face. Yes, it was mine; in truth it didn't look much like me, but I liked it anyway. I really did look glamorous.

"Sure. Let me tell the girls I'm headed out."

She didn't push me about the contract during the short drive home, for which I was thankful. When she dropped me off, I hoped to talk to my dad right away. My mom was making dinner. Something with a half dozen pots that had her murmuring to herself about different food groups. James sat on the couch playing video games.

"Where's dad?" I asked him.

"Golfing with friends." He glanced up for a half a second, then again. "Are you wearing eyeliner?"

I couldn't get the stuff off. I had honestly hoped no one would notice until I could ask Jenny what to do. "One of the make-up girls at work was experimenting. No biggie." Only a half lie.

James shook his head. “You’re so weird.”

“Whatever.” I headed toward the door and dialed Jenny’s cell. Please let her answer.

She picked up on the second ring. “Hey, Tor, what’s up?”

“Can we hang, like right now?” I was sort of in semi-panic mode.

“Um, okay. Sure. Whatcha need?”

I stepped outside and headed down the walk before I answered with a breathy, “I need a dress.” There was a pause long enough that I had to pull the phone from my ear to check to be sure we were still connected.

“For your mom?” She finally asked.

“No. For me. Look, I’ll explain when I see you. Can you pick me up?” She was the only one of my friends with a driver’s license. “Please.”

“Okay. See you in ten.”

When she pulled up, I got in the car, wondering just how much I could tell her. “So you really need a dress?” Jenny looked me over. “You’re wearing eyeliner.”

“Oh God!” So sitting there in her car, parked at the end of my walkway, I had told her everything. And when I finished, she just stared at me. I glanced down at my clothes, back to my normal hoodie and jeans, nothing weird. Other than the eyeliner that I couldn’t see. “Say something!”

“You kissed Lucas Hart.”

“He kissed me,” I protested. Would she hate me now? She wanted him, right? All the girls wanted him.

“You really dressed as a girl?”

“I make a pretty hot girl.” Was I pouting? I was pretty sure I was pouting. She burst out laughing. “All right, princess. Let’s go find you a dress.”

It took three stores and very covert maneuvering in the dressing room to find the dress. Everything made my hips stick out, or my shoulders, which

made me feel like I looked like a boy, even when Jenny assured me I didn't. "You still look like a girl. I think it's the eyeliner. And the hair. I've never seen your hair have so much body and texture. I totally love it."

"Okay, but love on it later. I need something that says *girl*."

"Why not just show up as you and tell him the truth?"

I looked at her. "He'll be mad. Wouldn't you be mad if you got duped into kissing another girl who was pretending to be a guy?" There were some guys at school who I know would hit me if faced with the same situation.

"Not if I was into her."

"Not helping."

"Are you mad he kissed you?" She handed me a dress and pointed me back to the room. This one was white, with weird little holes in it that sort of resembled Swiss cheese. I examined it for a minute before she said, "This isn't fitted, so it won't accentuate anything you're trying to hide. Even those boy-hips of yours."

I felt myself blush from the neck on up. Was it my fault the bones stuck out? "No. Just surprised. I felt totally obvious. Like everyone should have known I'm a guy." Inside the room I stepped into the dress, frustrated that it zipped in back, but finally able to get the zipper most of the way up. I stared in the mirror a half a second before stepping out of the room.

"That's perfect," Jenny smiled.

I glanced down. It was sort of off-white, and the rows of holes—eyelets?—created a pattern that really did hide the fact that I had no boobs and was fairly straight-waisted. The sleeves were just a small cap over my shoulders, and the neck a rounded cut that emphasized my collarbones. The mirror reflected nice things. Jenny got up and stood behind me, pulling my hair up into an uncomplicated bun.

"A pop of color for the necklace; shoes, and you're all done. Have you thought about piercing your ears?" My look must have been answer enough because she said, "Never mind. Let me find some bling and shoes."

Shoes. Ugh. “No heels!” I turned to admire the dress in the mirror. It felt good, soft against my body, even made the warm tone of my skin stand out. It hit about mid-thigh, making my legs look long and tan. I wondered briefly if I had to shave. Girls did that, right? But my legs didn’t look hairy. They didn’t look like girl legs either, just sort of stickish. I’d always been like a stork. “Should I shave?” I asked just as Jenny returned with a pair of turquoise flats, a matching necklace and bracelet. “My legs, I mean.” I didn’t know if I’d ever get the facial stubble a lot of the guys went on about at school.

She glanced down then ran her hand up my leg which made me shiver and jump back. “Damn girl, warn a boy first before you go feeling him up!”

“You’re fine. Besides if Lucas is feeling up your legs you’ve got bigger problems.”

“I shouldn’t be doing this. Boys are total horny toads.” I put on the necklace and liked how the color brought out my eyes. Maybe I could pick up some liner and lipstick too. Whatever Anna did to my eyes at the studio really made my eyes pop, I wanted that look again.

“You’re not.”

“But I’m obviously different,” I motioned to the mirror.

“So maybe Lucas is too. Won’t know until you give it a chance.”

“What if everyone at school finds out?”

“What? That you make one hot chick?” She laughed. “All the girls will be jealous. And you’ll have every guy in school running your way.”

“To kick my ass.”

“Not with me standing behind you. And the army of friends you have: the photo club, the newspaper, the yearbook, the math and science geeks, the art club, all the kids you tutor, your little brother and all his friends. Be who you are, hon, because *you* are beautiful.”

I smiled at my friend, probably appreciating her fully for the first time in our young lives. “Thanks. Now stop making me tear up and show me how to apply make-up, please.”

She shoved me into the fitting room. “Get changed, I’ll go find some colors and we’ll talk over a manicure.”

“Man-i-cure?”

After Jenny dropped me off at home, I spent a couple hours in front of the mirror practicing all the things she taught me; from applying the make-up, to removal, cleansing and skin moisturizing. The entire outfit hung from the bedroom door where I could admire the fine pattern of the dress. It had been only twenty dollars, a steal really. The shoes had cost more, the jewelry only a few dollars. I had to put it on just one more time before I went to bed.

I adjusted the necklace and smoothed the skirt down one last time before debating if my hair should be up or down. Someone knocked on the door and it opened a second later. My heart hammered in my chest as my dad walked into the room. He blinked at me a moment or two.

“I can explain,” I began, but really I couldn’t.

He closed the door and stood there a minute looking thoughtful. He had the contract in his hands. Several expressions crossed his face, none of which I could read. “Patty told me.” He waved at the dress. “Never would have thought.”

I reached for the robe from the bathroom to cover up the dress and my shame, while not looking at my dad and feeling tears fill my eyes. “I’m sorry.”

Then my dad was suddenly in front of me pulling off the robe. “You look nice.”

“But I thought—” I searched his face for any sign of disgust or anger. There was none.

“Son, do you want to be a girl?”

“No, sir,” I answered quickly. “I just like how I feel in this. Pretty. Like people see me.”

He nodded. “You be you. What people see is up to them.”

“And if this is me? If I sometimes dress up like a girl?”

“Nothing shameful about being a girl or dressing like one.” He shook his head. “When you were little you always wanted the pretty dresses we passed in stores. Your mom bought one for you once and you wore it for a week straight.” He waved it away and held up the contract. Some of the pages had things marked in red, others crossed out. There was also a fax header on top, so he must have sent it to the agency and back. “This what you want to do?”

“It’ll be money for college, and I’ll get to learn more about photography. Mr. Clark said he could find a lot of work for me. I promise to keep my grades up. Patty said she would chaperone, but I’d like if you came some time.” Modeling meant I could dress in pretty things and people would write it off as me being eccentric because it was my job. The beads clinked and I realized I’d been playing with them. “Sorry.”

My dad shook his head. “I trust you. I’ll be there if you want me to be.”

“I have a date with a boy tomorrow,” I whispered. Better to lay it all on the line than dread a future discovery.

“You like him?”

“I don’t really know him yet. But I’d like to.”

He nodded then turned to leave.

“Dad?” He glanced back. “You’re really okay with this?”

“Just be you, Tory. It’s you I love, whatever, whoever, you might be.”

Tears blurred my vision again, but this time for different reasons. He left with the contract and I felt a bit more secure in the whirlwind the day had brought me. Tomorrow, another battle. I’d have to tell Lucas. Lying wasn’t right. Maybe after we’d had brunch I would tell him. Maybe.

The next morning brought a bigger case of nerves than stepping in front of the camera had yesterday. My mom knocked on my door at ten. I couldn’t stop my hands from shaking so the make-up was minimal. Mom stepped into the

room a second later. “Do you need help?” She asked quietly, more subdued than I think I’d ever seen her in my life.

I held up the liner. “I can’t do it. My hands won’t stop shaking.”

She smiled and stepped in close. “I always wanted a girl. Look up.” She applied the liner like a pro. “I remember when you were little. You always wanted sparkly barrettes in your hair and the pretty jeweled girl clothes. Your dad and I were always so afraid of how people would treat you, so we told you no.” She frowned. “I’m sorry for not letting you be you.”

“Mom—”

“No, it’s okay. I know I shouldn’t have let other people make me afraid. You’re beautiful the way you are.” She ran her fingers through my hair. “Maybe you’ll let me buy a dress or two for you? Patty sent your father and me some of the pictures. They’re beautiful. She has some great ideas for head shots for you. I’d like to be there.”

“I’d like that too. Thanks, Mom.”

She combed her fingers through my hair. “You always did like to wear it longer than a boy normally does. Loved to have it in pigtails when you were little. I think leave it down today. You trust this boy? He won’t try anything if you go someplace with him?”

“Mom—”

“I know. I just worry. Come on, I’ll give you a ride into town.”

“You better not follow me.” I warned her. She’d probably do just that, too, if I wasn’t careful.

“Patty says he kissed you but doesn’t know you’re a boy. What if he hurts you when he finds out? The world is full of angry, hateful people. I don’t want you to be hurt by someone so blinded to the world.”

“Mom. Stop. It’s okay. We’ll be in a public place. No worries. If things get weird, I’ll call. I promise.” I grabbed her hand and squeezed. “If I’m gonna be there on time, I need to get going. You ready?”

She nodded and led the way down the stairs. I was grateful my brother wasn't downstairs. I couldn't imagine explaining this to him yet. The ride was oddly silent but peaceful, since I was used to my mom always talking. Not many were out on a Sunday morning before church let out. She pulled up to the restaurant and let me out. "Do you need cash?"

"I have money." Money from working for my aunt that I rarely used for anything other than photo supplies; and now dresses, jewelry, shoes, and make-up. I held up my phone. "I'll call for a ride home, okay?"

She nodded and let me go. I turned to the restaurant wondering if I should go inside and wait or just hang around outside. It was pretty much ten thirty on the dot. Maybe he was stuck in traffic, or trying to find a place to park, though the streets were pretty clear; maybe he wouldn't even come. My heart sank a little.

"Tory?" A voice broke me out of my brooding. Lucas stood there, casual in blue jeans and a nice polo. His hair was brushed to the side today, more a normal mess than the styled look he'd had for the shoot. Those eyes were the same, though. Bright and clear as the sky above. I was sure my face turned three shades of red while I stood there staring at him. "You hungry?"

"Oh? Yeah. Sorry." I barreled toward the restaurant, but he beat me to the door and opened it for me. "Thanks," I whispered, as I walked in ahead of him feeling like maybe I should have been holding the door instead.

"Two?" the hostess asked. "Would you like menus or the buffet?"

"Buffet," both Lucas and I blurted out. We laughed. The hostess smiled and led us to a table. The buffet spread across six different counters, with soups, fish, eggs, meats and rice dishes. The rich smell of curry wafted through my nose.

"Heaven."

"Agreed," Lucas said. He glanced at the food then back at me. "So do you want to talk first, or eat and then talk?"

"Eat."

That dimpled smile reappeared. Neither of us sat, we just went to fill up our plates.

We talked over food. Not about anything important. I asked about how he got into modeling and he asked about my love for the camera. We talked about school. We didn't have any classes together, even though we were in the same grade. But I knew that. I saw him every day. I wondered if he was interested in Jenny. He'd been asking Katie about her after all.

"Everyone wants my attention. Like talking to me somehow makes them better. Like I'm better than everyone else, but I'm not," he said.

"Everyone looks up to you. You're kind of the local celebrity. The rest of us aren't in print or splashed across the Internet."

"You will be now."

Wow, and wasn't that a scary thought. "I'd never really planned for any of this to happen." And this had been sort of what I'd dreaded all morning. I took the check before he could and put cash inside for my own food.

"I told you I'd pay," he protested.

"It's okay. I make pretty good money working with my aunt. And my parents went over the contract that Mr. Clark drew up. Looks like I will be doing some modeling in the future."

He took out a twenty and shoved it in the bill folder. "I'm glad you reconsidered. You have great presence in front of the camera." Lucas reached out and grabbed my hand as he got up from the chair. "Want to walk for a bit?"

I nodded, swallowing a gulp as we headed for the door. I'd have to tell him soon. Couldn't let him get too close again. The strip was still fairly quiet; only a handful of people wandered now that it was just before noon. "Thanks for being so nice to me," I told him. "I see you at school a lot and you're nice to everyone. I guess I thought it was just an act, since you're famous and all."

He laughed, "I am not famous."

“But everyone at school knows you. And you’ve been in pictures all over the world, right?”

“Yeah, but no one knows me. It’s all low level mainstream stuff. Not like I’m actually making someone’s list of top male models. And I don’t plan on doing it forever, just long enough to pay for school, college, and then I plan on being an engineer.” He shoved his free hand in his pocket and wrapped his other one around my fingers. They were warm and his grip nice. “It all fades anyway. My mom modeled in her teens, but now she’s a receptionist.”

“That makes sense. An engineer, eh? Guess you’re pretty smart, then.”

“Nah. I do okay. Bs and all that. I’d like to think I’m just more focused than a lot of kids our age. Since it’s just my mom and me. My income helps support us both, paying for a good private school, and I have a pretty big nest egg to get me through college and into the real world.”

I’d never really thought about why he modeled before. Mostly assumed he did it ’cause his parents got him into it as a kid and he just liked the feeling of importance it gave him. “I have no idea what I want to do other than take pictures, so you’re way ahead of me.”

“Photojournalism is huge. Everyone wants to see the world, but not everyone can afford to go there. I think having a good eye is a gift. I could take a million photos, and they would never appear truly as I see them. You, on the other hand, can show the world what it’s missing.” He paused in front of a gallery that had huge photographs blown up into wall art. “Like these. People buy these every day to bring a part of the world home.”

I smiled thinking about it. Yeah, I could imagine maybe having a gallery someday, pictures in magazines or in the news. Not everything about taking photographs could be trained. Patty often told me that photography was ten percent skill, thirty percent perspiration, and sixty percent vision. Perception. That really came down to the root of it, didn’t it? I pulled on his hand, making him stop. “I need to tell you something, and I hope you don’t hate me.”

He looked at me, eyebrows raised, expression light. “You have a boyfriend?”

God, how could I tell him when he looked at me like that? So worried, yet hopeful. “I’m not what you think I am.”

“Huh?” He frowned. “What do I think you are?”

I tugged my hand out of his and stepped back just in case. “I’m not a girl.” The words rushed from my lips so fast I wondered if he could even understand them. He blinked a few times, so I said it again, only slower. “I’m not a girl. Aunt Patty asked me to fill in ’cause the model for yesterday was double-booked and she thought I could pass for a girl. And apparently I can.” I looked down at the dress and the shoes, still liking what I saw, but suddenly very uncomfortable. “I’m sorry. I wasn’t trying to fool you or anything. So I guess I understand if you don’t want to hang anymore.”

Lucas was silent so long I had to look back up. His expression was a mask of confusion, but thankfully no anger. “Why did you come here then?” he asked quietly.

“’Cause I think you’re nice, and you were worried about me, and I kind of thought, maybe we could be friends.” Sure I had hoped for more. Some resolution to these weird emotions warring inside me would be nice, but I could live without it.

“Friends?” He was frowning now.

I sighed inwardly. “I’m sorry. Don’t worry. I won’t tell anyone you thought I was a girl. I just wanted you to know. I won’t bug you at school or if I see you at a shoot or something. But thanks for being nice to me yesterday. I was pretty nervous.” Was this pain in my chest heartbreak? How could I feel that when I barely knew him? No, not heartbreak, the death of a dream. Silly, really. There would be others. And just ’cause Lucas had seen me for a while, didn’t mean that someday someone else wouldn’t too. I shook my head.

“See you around.” I turned and walked away. It was hard to not look back, and I was dialing my mom before I even got twenty yards from him. He didn’t call out or attempt to get my attention, which was good because tears were streaming down my cheeks.

My whole family actually spent the afternoon at the studio with Patty taking pictures. After she'd helped me remove the puffiness from my face from crying we'd done a few family-type portraits, and then the whole family took turns at playing model. Even my dad strutted his stuff, which had Patty dissolving into giggles more than once behind the camera.

It was fun, and a good way to get my mind off the troubles of the morning. No one asked how it went. I guess my tears must have explained it all. Only James commented, "I'd like to beat him up. Can I?"

I shook my head at him. It wasn't Lucas' fault. Part of growing up was discovering who I was and that discovery wasn't always going to be easy. I knew that. Taking photos as a boy helped a lot. I couldn't believe how Patty captured me looking so much like a celebrity. Calm, self-assured, even for the one in which she'd spliced together me-as-a-boy and me-as-a-girl. Half of my face normal, the other half glammed up. Same person, two different sides of a coin. That really was me.

Jenny even showed up to do some glam shots with me. We laughed and acted more like long lost sisters than best friends. Patty snapped a few photos of us helping each other apply make-up.

"He makes a better girl than I do," Jenny said looking at the photos on the computer screen. "Those cheekbones and lips just scream supermodel."

I hugged my bestie. "You and I make a good pair. We're both Cover Girls!" A second later the whole family was laughing, and everyone voted on which photos to use for my portfolio and which to take home. I wanted the one of me that was half and half to take home, so Patty emailed it to me. By the time I'd changed my profile picture of my Facebook page late that evening to show the dual sides of me, Lucas was only a minor pain in my memory. Tomorrow was Monday, and I'd have to face it all head on. Was I afraid? Hell yes, but as the saying went: A life lived in fear was a life half lived.

I didn't even glance at my Facebook page before heading to school the next morning. Dad drove James and me; let us out right at the front door and

told me to call if there was any trouble. Everyone expected something to happen. But three periods passed with not a word or an odd glance from anyone, really.

Trouble came at lunch. I entered the lunchroom like I always did, with Jenny and a dozen other girls at my side, headed for the table that always had a mix of students from jocks to geeks.

“Look, here come the ladies now.”

Richard, otherwise known as Rick the Dick because he was a dick to everyone, stepped into my path. “Here’s the princess now. Not so pretty without the make-up. School policy is that girls wear skirts. You should go change.”

“School policy is that bullying is not tolerated. So how about you take your meat-headed self off to where the rest of us aren’t bothered by the smell of rot going on inside that skull of yours,” I shot back.

A look of shock crossed his face and he raised a fist, but I was totally ready for it, lifting my camera to snap a dozen pictures and blind him with the flash. He blinked a half dozen times, vision probably filled with spots as I darted around him to the table, putting my back to the wall. A second later a large, bulky body sat down beside me, Teddy the half-back. I braced for more trouble.

“So you’re really going to model, too?” he asked.

I opened the lunch my mom had packed for me, happy to find my favorite sandwich. “Yeah. My first shoot paid four digits and I only worked for like five hours. Most kids our age don’t make that working all summer long.”

“Can anyone do it?”

I shrugged. How did they pick models? I guess they sort of had a body type they wanted. “I dunno. I guess you can call the agency and see if you’re a good fit. Until Saturday I wouldn’t have thought I was a good fit.”

Teddy was flipping through his phone. He was the typical jock, halfback because he was on the leaner side, but he had a decent face. He could probably make the camera work for him with the right light and clothes.

“You make a pretty girl.”

How to reply to that? “Thanks, I think.” I pulled a slip of paper out of my book bag and wrote the number of the agency for him. “Give the agency a call. I’m not sure how they normally pick models, but I’d think they’d probably want a sporty guy like you before a stick like me.”

He took the paper and programmed it into his phone. “Don’t let the Dick bug you. It’s cool. Hell, if I were that pretty I’d put on a dress too. Four digits! Wow.” Teddy got up and waved to some of his friends as he disappeared into the confines of the football team.

“Teddy has the hots for you,” Jenny teased.

“Don’t you start,” I told her. Then Lucas entered the lunchroom. He didn’t glance in my direction. Not that he would have noticed me anyway in my boy uniform with my hair pulled up under a beanie. He made his way to a table of popular kids who seemed to run in the same circles he did. Katie greeted him with a smile and kissed him on the cheek.

“You’re staring,” Jenny whispered.

I looked away and dug into my lunch, trying to think about anything else. Unattainable for sure. *Sigh*. “I’m sorry,” I told her. “He was probably into you originally anyway, and then got sidetracked with me. I feel pretty stupid.”

“That boy wouldn’t have a chance with me anyway.” Jenny smiled at me wickedly. “I like nice boys. ’Sides, when I cornered Katie she couldn’t even remember what he was asking her about. And she’s back with Teddy.”

That the prettiest girl in school was now unavailable again made me happy. Lucas deserved to find someone nice who suited him, but yeah, I was still a little heartbroken that it couldn’t be me. I listened with half an ear as Jenny chattered on about the latest gossip. Anything to get my mind off the guy who sat half a cafeteria away but still drew my gaze time and again.

The rest of the day passed pretty smoothly. James had appeared just before study hall to thank me for making him one of the most popular kids in school. Everyone wanted to know if I was going to be famous and move to France or something. No one seemed to care that I looked as good dressed as a girl as I did as a boy. When I got my free hour, I wanted to work on a new background set, so headed to the classroom all the photo geeks like me used. Studying simple pictures of inanimate objects always helped reset my brain and I cleared the camera for a new topic. Today, a study in aperture and focus. I could really use some focus.

I heard the door open quietly, but pushed it aside in my brain as one of the other guys coming in to set up. A minute later a shadow fell across my white background making me blink a few times, thinking maybe I was standing wrong. But no. Someone was standing behind me. A glance up and my heart skipped a beat. Lucas.

“Can we talk?” he asked.

“Are you planning to beat me up?”

He laughed and hopped up on the desk behind him. “Do I look like a guy who makes a lot of decisions with his fists?”

No, he looked like the guy I’d been hoping to get to know better. I set the camera down, shoved my glasses back up my nose, and leaned against the wall. “What can I do for you?”

“I’ve never been in here, but I hear a lot of the photo kids talking about it. A lot have asked to take pictures of me; no follow through though.”

“You get paid a lot to be photographed. Why would you do it for free?”

“Because to someone it’s art. Or learning an art. I’m not artistic at all. Just sort of hard logic, math, and science.”

I nodded like it made sense. “So why are you here? You want me to take pictures of you?”

“You said you wanted us to be friends.”

I waved away the comment. “You have lots of popular friends and don’t need me, I get it. Don’t worry about it.”

“What if I said I wanted to be more than friends?”

The words took a minute to sink in. “Come again?”

Lucas shook his head. “At the studio when we were in those shots together, I thought for the first time that maybe, just maybe, I might find someone worth being into. I’ve modeled with hundreds of girls—”

“But I’m not a girl.”

“—and none of them interested me at all. Then there you were, all wide pretty green eyes, easy smile, happy laugh, and I thought, okay. So I kissed you.” He shoved his hands in his pockets and glared at the floor. “Had a boyfriend once, for like a week. He was from another school and just wanted to tell everyone he was dating a model. A bit of a diva. So not my type. When I saw you at the studio, I thought, there’s that guy I see across the lunchroom every day. The one who is always snapping pictures of everyone while hiding behind his camera.”

The words took a minute to set in. “Wait, you knew I was a guy?”

He laughed, a sweet rich sound. “You don’t exactly have the sweet, high-pitched voice of the glamorous girl they made you up to be. But yeah, I saw you at the studio before you changed. First time I’d been to your aunt’s studio when you were there. Requested her a hundred times in hopes of seeing you.”

“I’m only allowed to work on the weekends,” I mumbled absently. “You saw me that day?”

“I’ve *seen* you for weeks. Since the beginning of the school year actually. Remember when you came into the science lab and took some pictures to be added to the school course catalog? I was there. I asked Katie about your friend Jenny, hoping that she’d give me details on you, but I don’t think you let many people see you.”

I kind of liked living under the radar. “You could find a girl that looks like me.” I pointed out and picked up my camera. The light of the day was fading

and soon I'd have to use the lamps, which were just never as good. "You're a good-looking guy. I'm sure there are a lot of green-eyed blonde girls out there. Real girls who don't have things hidden under their dresses that can get them beat up."

"I don't think you're understanding. I kissed you because you were you. Not because I thought you were a girl. Though I have to admit you do girl really well."

I looked at him, straightened the blue tie we had to wear every day and shrugged off the jacket to show the straight pants and tucked in button-up shirt. "I make a pretty good boy too." A little turn for him, and I was back to fiddling with my camera. "Just 'cause I like to dress up like a girl doesn't make me any less a boy."

"Thank God for that." He grabbed the camera from my hands and got into my personal space. "Is this something we can try, you and me?"

I sucked in a deep breath. "I don't think you know what you're asking."

"I don't care if you're dressed as a boy or a girl, Tory. I had fun with you at the studio and yesterday when we were talking, and then walking hand in hand, that was great. There was no pressure for me to be something or someone. For once I was just Lucas, having a good time with someone I found interesting, beautiful, handsome, attractive, whatever."

But he'd let me leave yesterday, without a word. Now he stood only inches away, close enough that either of us could close in for a kiss if we wanted that. Did I want that? I did. "I'm not hiding from anyone, Lucas. Or anything else. I like dressing in pretty things, and since I'm attracted to you, I guess that means I'm gay."

"That's okay with me. You left so quick yesterday I didn't know how to react. When you said you wanted to be friends it was like a fist to the gut. I don't want to be *just* friends with you, Tory."

"And if I want to walk down the hall holding your hand?"

He smiled. “Would you want that?” He closed the distance between us, arms going around my waist to pull me close. “You’re really hot with the glasses. Can you lose the beanie though? I seriously love your hair.”

I reached up and ripped it off, letting the mess fall where it may, then shoved it out of my face. Lucas had such pretty eyes. “So you want to do this? Like together?”

“Only if you do.”

I nodded, staring into those sky blue eyes wondering if I should go in for the kill or if he would. A second later he answered my unspoken wish by touching his lips to mine.

THE END

Author Bio

Sam Kadence has always dreamed about being someone else, somewhere else. With very little musical talent, Sam decided the only way to make those dreams come true was to try everything from cosplay at the local anime conventions to writing novels about pretending to run away to become a musician.

Sam has a Bachelor's Degree in Creative Writing, sells textbooks for a living, and enjoys taking photographs of Asian Ball Joint Dolls to tell more stories.

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