



HOLLY Weird



TERRI CLARK

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# ALY

It's not every day you get a chance to meet the celebrity whose pics plaster your locker and Facebook page. But a phone call from *EnterTEENment Magazine* had me poised to do just that. I, Aly King, was about to meet *the* Dakota Danvers. Never heard of him? What planet are you on? Think Jared Padalecki or Penn Badgley and you get the idea. *Hot* TV hunk, huge teen following. Dakota's mega-popular CW show is called *Paranormal PI*. The title's pretty self-explanatory, but basically he's this brooding, kick-butt, supernatural sleuth who rids the world of evil and fights to avenge his loved ones.

*Swoon. Thunk.*

Now I'd be meeting him. For real. And my life would never again be the same. I just *knew* it.

As I watched my best friend, Desi Moreno, screech up to It's a Grind coffeehouse in her black '71 Dodge Dart, AC/DC's "Back in Black" blaring so loud the windows of her car seemed to bow with the beat, I took a sip of my Triple Black Cherry Mocha and felt my insides tickle at the idea of telling her the news.

She would so fuh-reak.

Here's the thing about me and Des, we're total opposites, a true Gen Y odd couple. I'm all straight-laced, logic-centered, and show-me-the-facts, whereas she's multi-pierced, mystical, and rebellious. She laughs at my unwillingness to believe in anything intangible, and I tease her about her woo-woo ideology. She is yin, I am yang. Together we are taijitu, the balance of yin and yang. Without her, I never would've survived the last two years. She wasn't just my best friend; she was my other half, my family. In fact, I always teased her with that corny

“you complete me” line from the *Jerry Maguire* movie. So, of course, I’d texted her with a 911 page to meet me at our favorite java joint just as soon as I heard I’d won.

Sitting here now, under a cheerful yellow umbrella, I appreciated the endless cerulean of the Colorado sky. Its unblemished beauty was as bright as my mood, but I tried to hide that bliss as Desi sauntered over to my table wearing her fave peace-heart tee and raising one dark eyebrow.

“This is an emergency?” She sucked her blue gum between her teeth until it popped. “What? You went into severe caffeine withdrawal and needed me to ply you with a constant supply of mochas?”

“Sit down,” I said, and then bit my straw to tamp down my excitement. “I have something to tell you and you’re going to lose your mind.”

She twisted her mouth to one side, which gave me a good view of the teeny skull-and-crossbones piercing her right nostril. “Good lose your mind, or bad?” she asked.

“I think you should sit,” I repeated as I twisted the end of my ponytail, a nervous habit Des immediately cued into.

“Uh oh, that’s never good,” she said, pointing to my fingers. “Spill it, blondie. You’re scaring me and we both know that’s not easy.” She screeched her metal chair across the concrete to sit close to me. “Is it your dad? Is something wrong? Tell me he doesn’t want to move again. I thought we’d talked him outta that.” She covered her mouth in horror as if that were the worst thing she could imagine. “It’s almost summer. The summer before our senior year, Al. Next year we’re supposed to rule the school. There’s prom, our class trip, senior ditch day, and a bajillion other things we’ve been looking forward to forever. Tell me you are *not* leaving,” she demanded.

“I am,” I told her in all seriousness. You can’t imagine the absolute effort it took to keep a grave expression on my face when my tummy played Dance Dance Revolution. And, yeah, I felt a twinge of remorse playing her like that, but come ooo-on, how often can you spring this kind of news on your BFF? I just had to milk the moment. Especially since this was the best thing that had happened to me since *that day*.

“I’m going to California.” Dramatic pause for effect. “In July.”

“Not funny.” She scowled and pitched my crumpled straw wrapper at me. “April Fool’s was last week.”

“No joke.” I held her gaze until she could see I meant what I said.

“No, no, NO!” she protested, springing up. Her warm brown skin paled like the pigment had leached out. “If this is because of your dad’s job, we’ll just have to find him another one. I know things have been rough for him since your mom died, but your biggest support system is right here. You can’t—”

“Des!” I yanked her down into her seat.

“Aly, you can’t leave me,” she wailed as she slumped against the chair back. “We’ve been together since we were six. Shared the best times and the worst. Eleven years together is more than most marriages.”

Seeing tears start to well in her cocoa eyes, and noticing the concerned glances of the other bean addicts sitting on the patio, I felt guilt prickle my heart. “You’re right, Des, I can’t leave you. And I won’t. Not ever,” I vowed with genuine earnestness. “That’s why I’m taking you with.”

Her jaw slackened. “Huh?”

Finally, I unleashed the effervescent joy I’d kept contained. “I won,” I whispered excitedly. “I. Won.”

“Oookay,” she said, looking unnerved by my abnormal ebullience. “Whadja win?”

“Only just a once in a lifetime, miraculous, I-still-can’t-believe-it dream come true. I, my dear best friend, am taking you”—I pointed to her—“to L.A. during summer break. You’re looking at the Grand Prize winner of *EnterTEENment Magazine*’s Meet Dakota Danvers Contest. We’re talking an all-expense-paid trip, six sunny days and five balmy nights, to Cali *and* we get to do a photo shoot with Dakota himself.”

Her mouth fell open, but she neither squealed nor screamed. Not sure she believed me, I reached across the table and squeezed one of her be-ringed hands. “Des, I won. For real. We”—I shook my finger between her and me—“are going to meet *the* Dakota Danvers, live and in person.”

“Shut. Up!” she finally blurted.

This, I had expected. “It’s true. It’s true.” I yanked my Blackberry from my back pocket and showed her the caller ID. *EnterTEENment Magazine*. 213-555-

4267. “See?”

“Oh my,” she breathed in awed realization.

Then Desi did the last thing I ever expected ...

She fainted.

# Jameson

“I’m in,” I said with no small amount of triumph. Tilting back my chair, I laced my fingers behind my head and propped my boots on Michael’s scarred wooden desk. At least I think I glimpsed wood, or that particle-board crap, beneath the chaotic checkerboard of neon sticky notes and coffee-stained papers that lent the only color to his otherwise Colgate-white office.

“Really?” Michael nodded in approval before smoothing a hand over the DQ ice cream swirl of steel hair that ineffectually covered his receding hairline. “He didn’t have a problem with you being nineteen?”

“Naw, Dakota said he’d get me a fake ID so I could get into clubs and buy him booze. He liked that I had an inside connection and was impressed with my resumé and references. But I think it was the call from Megan Fox that cinched it.” I gave my immediate supervisor a searching look. “How did you impersonate her?”

Michael huffed on his nails and then buffed them on his white button-up shirt. “One of my many God-given talents. So, Danvers really doesn’t suspect a thing?”

“Are you kidding me? The dude’s a beefy pretty boy,” I spat before giving an over-exaggerated flex of my not-too-shabby biceps and a braces-perfected smile. “There’s no room in his brain for anything other than ego. I just gave that a good stroke.” I held up my hand to stop Michael before his smirk could slide into a smart-ass comment. “His *ego*, Mikey,” I said, calling him the nickname he loathed. “Nothing else. You know I don’t swing that way. He doesn’t either, but between feeding his self-love and having a personal recommendation, it was like offering a fresh-faced intern to David Letterman, too good to refuse.”

Michael snorted. “Dakota Danvers isn’t the only one with healthy self-confidence.”

“What can I say?” I shrugged off the slight. “I hate guys like him.”

“Need I remind you, you *are* a guy like him and that’s why you’re here in the first place?”

“I am not,” I argued, yanking my feet off the desk and leaning forward in outrage. “I’m ... ” What was I? Hot-headed. Cocky. Foolish. Hell, maybe I was like Dakota Danvers. Was that how people saw me?

“Doesn’t matter what you are, or what you *were*,” Michael said, clearly understanding where my thoughts had turned. “What matters is this is your last chance for redemption.”

I checked my flinch when he jabbed his finger at me to emphasize the point and just slouched in my chair like I didn’t care.

“You *can’t* screw up, Jameson. The boss is watching you closer than ever. You’ve already been given more leeway than most.” He gave me a knowing look. “Don’t you think it’s about time you succeed on your own merit and not by fast-talking your way out of a corner?”

“Yeah,” I said, tugging at the unfamiliar short and spiky hair on my head, knowing he was right. I’d recently been given an extreme makeover for my undercover assignment and I still wasn’t used to the new me. I also wasn’t used to not being able to talk my way outta trouble with a wink and wit. Guess it was time to try something new. “So now what?”

“This personal recommendation, this”—Michael sifted through scratch papers and stickies until he found his notation—“Francis Ferrari, who is he?”

“A good guy,” I said with sincerity. “He’s more Italian than the Leaning Tower of Pisa, has a sainted wife, Anna, five rugrats, and an epic heart. Plus, he’s totally legit. He might be Dakota’s driver, but he has no clue about Dakota’s true intentions. Or mine.”

“Great. So how’d you get him to recommend you?”

“Research, Mikey.” I nodded to the frozen mocha I’d brought him from The Coffee Bean and Tea Leaf. “A couple weeks ago, I found out where he gets his morning coffee and started hanging out there.”

“In other words, you did what you always do—”



“Talked my way in,” I finished, somewhere between smug and contrite due to my earlier reprimand.

Michael sat his short and scrawny self on the corner of his desk closest to me and, despite knowing he’d moved in to press an important point, I had to bite my lip to keep from laughing when a Post-It that said *Heaven Can Wait* stuck itself to his ass.

“Just be careful. You can’t blow your cover,” he told me. “This is your last chance. Our sources say something big is going down this summer. It’s your job to figure out what Danvers is up to and put a stop to it. Take. Him. Out. You do, and you get a second chance. You don’t, and ...”

Michael might’ve faltered in what he said, but I knew what “you don’t” meant. I sliced a finger across my neck. “Finito.”

Michael cleared his throat and, dropping his disconcerted gaze from mine, discovered the note stuck to his white Dockers. He plucked it off, read what it said, and gave a crude snort before saying, “Yes, well, I’m sure you’ll do fine. Just pay attention. Danvers can’t be too dim if he has the sense to make his front line look like the real deal with people like Francis.”

True enough. And also something I had not thought of. I needed to figure out if he had a hidden evil entourage.

Once again my geekoid supervisor waded through the papers on his desk until he found a large, padded white envelope, which he handed to me.

“Here’s everything you need—ID, money, credit cards, key to your apartment. As of this moment, you’re deep undercover.” He lowered his voice to a scary, unnatural baritone. “Deep.” I chuckled until he said in all seriousness, “You can’t come back here,” and then I winced. For all intents and purposes, I’d been grounded for bad behavior. I had to pull off this job if I didn’t want to get booted entirely.

I tore open the envelope and thumbed through the contents before pulling out two cell phones. “I know you say Hollywood’s all about connections and networking, but isn’t this a little ... much?”

Michael nodded to my left hand, where I held the newest, top-of-the-line iPhone loaded with every gadget, app, and feature imaginable. “Use that one in your personal life and for your PA job.” Then he pointed to the simplistic white

flip-phone in my right hand. “That one only connects to the big guy. Don’t call him, he’ll call you.”

I gulped and stared at the spartan cell like it was a two-headed, albino rat snake. Then my alarm snapped to reverence. A direct line! Damn, but that was cool, even if I couldn’t call him. I stood and tucked a phone in each of my front pockets.

“Guess this is it,” I said, crossing my arms over my chest and not daring to acknowledge my shredded nerves.

Michael gave me a kind smile. Or was it pitying? “You can do this, Jameson.”

*This* being, find out whatever super-secret evil plan the PowerThatBe thinks Dakota is up to, squash it before it can be unleashed, and take him out. No pressure there. I thought I’d schooled my features not to reveal my “yeah, right” doubts, but apparently Michael saw right through that. He chuckled without humor.

“Things will come together, Jameson. They always do.”

I sure hoped so, but I had to point out one thing that had been gnawing at me. “He doesn’t seem evil,” I said. Annoying? Yeah. Narcissistic? Hell, yeah. Nefarious? Hard to imagine.

“It’s a façade, Jameson, like so much in Hollywood. Don’t be fooled. Soon you’ll understand why they call L.A. ‘Hell-A.’ And you’ll know exactly why he needs to be eliminated.”

“I’ll take your word for it,” I said as I came to a fierce conclusion. Dakota might just be a meathead or he might be wicked, like Michael said, but it didn’t matter. What mattered was this:

It was me or him ...

... and I would be the last man standing.

# ALY

*Three months later*

“If you tell, I’ll sentence you to a slow and torturous death. I’ll make the rack en vogue again and I’ll be relentless with the crank. I’ll strap you to a—”

“Shut it, Des.” I gave her a playful shove against the wall as we walked down the exit ramp from our plane.

During the landing, we’d squealed and squirmed in our seats at the breathtaking view of the Pacific ocean and the kitschy-cool, UFO-shaped LAX airport, but just as soon as the flight attendant thanked us, on behalf of Linus the Lynx Kitty, for flying Frontier, Des had gone spazztastic.

“Des, I’ve sworn up and down, even made a blood oath”—I held up my left index finger with its black bandage—“against my will, I might add, that I would not tell Dakota you passed out.”

*However, I’d said nothing about not using it as blackmail material for the rest of our lives. Mwuhaha.*

Desi blasted out a noisy breath. “ ’Kay, I believe you. But I’m wiggin’ out. We’re steps away from meeting him, well, his handler, who handles him, and bo-o-oy would I like to handle him, and it’s just a matter of time before—”

I yanked her to the side of the tunnel and ignored the other passengers’ curious stares as they went by. By now I was used to getting raised brows from people who compared my Candies and Mudd look to Des’s Hot Topic and Fang fashion, and okay, her black hair with electric blue and cotton-candy pink streaks probably caught a gaze or two. Or maybe it was her industrial ear piercings or lip ring. Blocking out the rubberneckerers, I shook her by the shoulders. “Breathe,” I instructed her. I had to get her chill or her nervous nattering would boost my own

nerves like a NoDoz chased with an espresso.

At my shake, Des did an impressive bobblehead imitation before blinking into awareness. “Was I babbling again?”

“Like a brook.”

Before I could get Des calm and centered, the Wicked Witch of the Midwest swooped down upon us. Now I could feel *my* cool slipping. Missy was the icky brown crust on my Wonder Bread, the annoying hole in the toe of my rainbow-striped sock, the grody hair in my otherwise clean sink drain. Birth may have made us sisters, but polar opposite personalities made us incompatible. And wonder of wonders, there’s no embroidered Hallmark pillow that says that.

“What are you two doing?” Missy asked with peevish exasperation. Dressed in four-inch, gold-toned heels and oversized sunglasses, body-molding Rock & Republic capri jeans, and a low-cut top that drew people’s (men’s and women’s) attention to her chest before her face, Missy flung her perfectly bed-mussed blond hair behind her shoulders. (All the better to see her cleavage, my dear.)

I squeezed my eyes shut and tried to will her back onto a broom headed for home. The persistent gum-smacking in my ear told me she hadn’t poofed away.

That Missy had somehow convinced Dad she could be a “responsible chaperone” still boggled our minds. Yes, we needed someone “Twenty-one years or older” to accompany us—she qualified by a measly two months and two days—and sure, Dad didn’t always know the right thing to do since Mom could no longer guide him, but Missy as our guardian? It was ludicrous. She’d already told us we were on our own.

“I’m focusing on two things in L.A.,” she’d said on the plane, clicking them off on her acrylic nails. “My tan and getting discovered. Just keep your cells at the ready and stay out of trouble.”

How’s that for trustworthy? She must’ve delivered one heckuva speech to convince Dad she should be our escort. *Hmm*, I thought, maybe she really would be an *ac-tor* (she always put a ridiculously strong, self-important emphasis on the second syllable) one day. It certainly wouldn’t surprise me. Missy was such an attention whore, what else could she be? I just found it hard to imagine our mom had once been an actress. Granted, it was way back when, before she had us girls, but still ... I could never see her being like Missy. Whatever the reason

behind my sister's burning desire for stardom, I had to at least give her kudos for going after what she wanted.

When it came to knowing what I wanted ... I was struggling ... maybe even floundering. I was a bit like a newbie swimmer in the deep end without water wings. My only goal for this trip was to have some fun and live a little, something I really hadn't let myself do since Mom died. Getting that phone call from *EnterTEENment Magazine* had been the first time I'd truly gotten excited about ... well, anything. And it had felt good.

Mom's death had been so sudden and unexpected. "Tragic" was the word most often used. For me, it had been total devastation. My rock-solid, safe world had been shattered and I'd lost the one person I felt closest with. But, quite frankly, Mom would've kicked my boo-tay if she realized just how much I'd allowed myself to disconnect and fade away. Facing my senior year, and anticipating all the momentous occasions Des was constantly reminding me about, I'd come to the realization I had withered enough and needed to unfurl in the California sun.

"Give me a sec," I told Missy, intending to finish my "Dakota's just a regular person" pep talk with Des.

"Nuh uh." My sister grabbed me by the arm and started hauling me down the tunnel. "Get a move on," she ordered. "Hollywood awaits and she shouldn't hold her breath any longer for my arrival."

I snorted in disbelief and grabbed Des's hand. "Don't be nervous," I whispered to her as I tripped down the carpet. The thing of it is, I'm too klutzy to wear pumps, but Missy actually has the skills to be one of those stupid sudsy heroines who chases after the bad guy in a short skirt and lethal Manolo Blahniks.

Anyhow, when we stepped out of the tunnel, Missy did what any audacious wannabe would do—she made a scene. With practiced precision she lowered her glasses to the tip of her nose, licked her already glossed lips, and with a saucy smile trilled our arrival to everyone in the area.

"We're heeere!"

And damned if half the people in the area didn't do a double-take to see which starlet had made such a dramatic entry. Voices murmured, people squinted for a closer look, and a camera flashed.

"Un-freakin'-believable," Des muttered in my ear, her nerves temporarily

steadied by my sister's outrageous confidence. "If anyone asks her for an autograph, I'm cursing them."

"I'll hunt down the eye of newt for that spell myself," I offered.

While Missy simpered and vlogged, Des and I headed for the baggage area, looking first for traveling celebs, and second for our escort. For a moment we thought we saw Ashton Kutcher, hidden in a hoodie and mega sunglasses, but we couldn't be sure. Then all thoughts of star-gazing popped out of my head when I saw a burly, uniformed limo driver with a cardboard sign that read, *King*.

I elbowed Desi. "Look!"

"Mmm mmm. Honk the hottie horn."

I did a double-take at the driver and then cocked a questioning eyebrow at Des. "Hot? He looks like that guy from the *Sopranos*."

"Not him." Des rolled her eyes and twisted my head to the right, bringing the guy standing next to our chauffeur into my line of vision. "*Hiiim*."

Yo-ho-hell-o! Honk the hottie horn, indeed. My vision narrowed to a bubble of focus on his gorgeous stubbled face. Sound faded away to a buzzing hum and my cheeks grew prickly hot, while my tummy got swirly.

He had trim golden-brown hair, with sideburns and just a tease of spikes on top. If I had to guess, I'd say he was about nineteen, only two years older than me. A distressed leather jacket and scarred shit-kicker boots made him look effortlessly sexy. His chiseled cheekbones and piercing olive eyes made my hands tremble, but it was his voluptuous lips and adorable cleft chin that made my body turn to molten lava.

Suddenly his gaze caught mine. He tilted his head and gave me an appraising look. Still, I couldn't move. When his lips lifted in the barest of smiles, I heard myself give a soft sigh.

"Al. Al?" Des said. "Earth to Aly."

When I didn't answer, didn't even realize she'd spoken to me, she jumped in front of me, arms akimbo, eyes narrowed in disbelief. I craned to look over her shoulder.

"Whoa," I thought I heard her say before she grabbed me by the shoulders and shook.

"Breathe," she ordered, echoing my earlier instruction.

In a flash the world came rushing back into my awareness. Desi stood directly in front of me, a look of “I’ve so got ammunition on you now” amusement on her face, while screaming babies and people chattering in different languages on cell phones added a chaotic soundtrack to the scene. Strangely, I found myself sucking in air like I’d been holding my breath or something.

Des laughed. “Now that’s what I call luststruck.”

I felt myself pinken. “I don’t know what you ... you’re nuts ... I was just ... ”

*What was I just doing? Good Lord, what had just happened to me?*

She waggled her eyebrows suggestively and glanced over her shoulder to where he still stood. “I was gonna call dibs, but if the dude’s got that kind of effect on you, he’s all yours.”

My blush deepened and Des cracked up.

“I’m marking today, Tuesday, July 10th, on the calendar,” she marveled with a grin. “ ’Cause I’ve never seen you that way.”

“What way?” Missy interrupted. Once the mini-buzz she’d created had fizzled out like day-old soda, she’d sashayed her way over to us.

I gave Desi a warning look.

“Hot and bothered,” Des answered Missy with an impish grin, before qualifying her statement. “Must be the weather.”

Whew! My BFF might tease me mercilessly, but at least she wouldn’t front me to my sister. If Missy had witnessed my, er, guystraction (Des’s word), she would’ve done one of two things—embarrass me or (and this is much worse) steal his attention away.

“Ooh,” Missy purred, her attention thankfully diverted from me. “There’s our limo driver.” She tromped over to him with an air of entitlement that made me squirm in horror and tapped the big guy’s sign with her talon. Then she gave the hottie next to him a quick appreciative glance before ignoring him because he couldn’t give her what she wanted. “King,” she told the driver. “That’s me.”

He gave Missy a dubious look and in a gruff voice asked, “You’re Aly King?”

“No, she is.” She gave an imperious wave in my direction. “I’m Missy, her guardian.” Then she held her overnight case out to him.

He pushed it back in her direction, stepped past her two paces, and gently slid my messenger bag off my shoulder. “Welcome, Ms. King. Glad to have you

here.”

“I, uh, thanks.” I bit my tongue to keep from laughing, first at the knowing twinkle in his brown eyes and then at the open-mouthed shock distorting Missy’s face. Diss-missed. That had to be a first. This jowly faced man, who reminded me of a sweet Shar-Pei, now owned my heart.

And apparently Des’s. “You, I like,” she informed him with a Cheshire grin.

He gave her a wink. “What’s your name, little lady?”

“I’m sorry,” I said, ashamed I’d forgotten my manners. “This is Desi Moreno, my best friend.”

“Nice to meet you.” He engulfed Desi’s hand in his meaty paw. “I’m Francis. And the prima donna?” He jerked his head back in Missy’s direction.

“My sister,” I whispered apologetically, seeing her fuming face over his shoulder like a dark, ominous thundercloud. I felt torn between mortification at her diva-ness and worry for Francis, because Missy seemed to be percolating toward a dangerous eruption.

“She’s a soap star wannabe. She wants to be on the next *Desperate Housewives* or *Revenge*,” Desi explained. “Full of silicone and bratitude. Beware.”

“Duly warned,” he said, but still the man would not be cowed. Instead, he added further insult to injury by reaching for Desi’s backpack. Even better, he ignored Missy’s outraged huff. “She’s got the attitude right,” he said with a wry chuckle. “If you’re ready, we’ll go.”

“To meet Dakota?” Des squealed.

My own heart tripped at the idea, but I refused to act like a crazed fangirl. I didn’t want to be just another groupie to Dakota. I wanted to stand out, and I figured the best way to do that would be to be ... normal. Maybe he just wanted to be normal sometimes.

“Anxious to see him?” Francis asked with a mischievous smile.

Des wriggled like a four-year-old doing a pee pee dance, then caught herself and tried to play it cool. “No, I just, you know, wanna know what we’re doing.”

“Actually,” a gravelly new voice cut in, “we’re going to take you to your hotel first and then you’ll meet Dakota at a photo shoot.”

My gaze jerked from Des to the guy who’d been standing so quietly in the



background I'd somehow forgotten all about him. Now he resumed his spot next to Francis.

"This here's Jameson Dagon." Francis introduced the person who moments ago had rendered me luststruck. "He's Dakota's PA."

"Aren't you a little young to be Dakota's personal assistant?" I blurted out.

"I'm nineteen, but well connected," he said with a smile.

"Isn't a PA like a slave?" Des asked with an impish grin, referencing some dialogue from a *Paranormal PI* episode.

"Something like that," Jameson answered with a good-natured laugh.

Francis swiveled his head back and forth between the two of them. The puzzled look on his mug revealed his cluelessness about the inside joke. "Yeah, well, Jameson'll be looking after you."

*Lucky me.* Not only was I going to meet Dakota, I was going to have an equally handsome (maybe more so) squire.

Desi pinched my thigh and I knew the same thing was coursing through her mind.

"So, you're our escort, Jameson?" she asked, and I wondered if he caught the "now this is interesting" tone in her voice.

"That I am," he answered with a smile.

"Then escort me the hell out of here." Missy shoved into our circle, her face harsh with anger and her bag teetering on her shoulder.

*God, she's such a bitch.* In that moment I wished I could fold myself up like a contortionist and disappear into my Samsonite suitcase. Yet Jameson didn't even quail at Missy's rudeness.

"As you wish," he said with a solicitous nod. "May I take your bag?"

In a snap, Missy went from grumpy to gracious and her complexion smoothed back to photogenic perfection. "Yes, thank you. You, unlike him"—she sent a scathing look at Francis—"are a gentleman."

Francis ignored the obvious insult and asked me about our luggage. "One suitcase for each of you and three for her, got it. I'll meet you out front."

Before he'd even got out of ear shot, Missy started in. "That man is insufferable. I want a new limo driver."

My mouth was open to object, and I'm pretty sure Des was getting ready to

tell Missy to do something obscene and physically impossible, when Jameson smoothly cut in.

“Ms. King,” he said, with an awe-inspiring amount of patience, “Francis is a stand-up guy and has been on staff with Dakota for years. He won’t be going anywhere.”

She sniffed her distaste and waltzed ahead, allowing us to act as her trailing entourage.

Once again, I felt the need to apologize for her. “I’m sorry, she’s just ... ”

“No worries.” Jameson shrugged. “Working in Hollywood, I’ve run across her type before.”

“Snooty, spoiled, bratastic,” Des supplied.

“Maybe,” he said, too chivalrous to agree outright. “But I know there’s always more than meets the eye.”

“Speaking of eye,” Desi segued away from Missy. “I can’t wait to get my eye on Dakota. What’s he like? Really like? Is he as charismatic and suave as he appears?”

“Yeah.”

“A total chick magnet, huh?”

“Need you ask?”

“Right. Well, is he like the love ’em and leave ’em type?” she asked.

“They don’t call him a bad boy for nothing.”

“So, he’s a player.” Des looked crushed. “Of course he would be. It’s Hollywood. I bet girls throw themselves at him with nothin’ more than a thong and a smile.”

“It’s been known to happen.”

“Right,” she snorted. “At breakfast, lunch, and dinner.”

He startled us both with a robust laugh. “Don’t forget his bedtime snack.”

“Is he really that bad?” I asked, more than a little shocked by his implications. This was exactly what I’d feared about this trip. You always heard stories about fans finally meeting their heroes or crushes only to be disenchanted by the cruel reality of a star who was dismissive or mean. I didn’t want that to be the case with Dakota Danvers.

“Is he really that bad?” Jameson repeated, giving me an odd, dark look. “Let’s

just say the devil makes him do it.”

I frowned. “I’m sure your boss wouldn’t appreciate your dissing him,” I said in a haughty tone.

He stroked a hand down his chin and looked uncomfortable for a minute. “You’re right. I shouldn’t have said anything. I apologize.” Then he gave me and Desi a conspiratorial look. “Between us, Dakota is exactly as he appears on TV. He’s tall, dark, ‘charmed and dangerous’ as *People* magazine put it. No doubt you’ll find yourself even more enamored when you meet him in person. He tends to have that affect on people.” He centered his intense gaze on me. “Even when they think they’ll be immune.”

I gasped in outrage. *How dare he!* I didn’t care anymore how good-looking he was; the man was deplorable. “If you’re implying I’m going to be one of Dakota’s, uh, bedtime snacks, you can forget about it.”

“Naw, I didn’t mean that,” Jameson quickly assured me. “Just remember, there’s always more than meets the eye.”

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