

Jade C. Jamison



*Everything
But*

**Everything But
(Tangled Web)**
Goodreads sample

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High school English teacher Erin Lancaster is stuck with the unwelcome job of filling in for the injured cheerleading coach, but she wants to back out when she discovers she has to be auctioned as a date during the annual spring fundraiser. She's horrified to find her rock star crush Riley Schultz will be playing emcee for the event, but she's even more shocked when he also happens to be the highest bidder for her affections, and sparks fly when she discovers that maybe their attraction is mutual. Will one week together be enough for them to quell the flames, to enjoy everything but?

"All right, can I get a bid of twenty-five dollars for Winchester High's English maven Erin Lancaster?"

Erin started laughing, afraid she was becoming hysterical, giggling just like the cheerleaders had moments earlier. She knew it was because everything was heightened, what with being on display and all, but it seemed like *forever* before anyone made a bid. *Shit*. That would be the ultimate humiliation. Not even a twenty-five dollar bid. But finally Ron Gill's hand went in the air. And she wasn't sure what to think about that. Ron was nice enough but they'd butted heads quite a few times during faculty meetings. They had different ideas. They were supposed to agree on a Shakespeare play every year. Ron was supposed to have his students study it in Drama II and she had to dissect it with her seniors in Honors English, but it was almost as if Ron just wanted to pick a fight. If she said *Julius Caesar*, he'd insist upon *Macbeth*. If one of the history teachers jumped in and asked about *Henry V*, he'd dig in his heels and demand *Othello*. If she wanted to focus on a comedy that year, he'd demand drama. He was infuriating.

And then it hit her. He was like a boy in middle school, picking fights because...he *liked* her. Oh, God. Why hadn't she ever seen it before? And...he *was* a nice enough guy. But he really wasn't her type.

And, again, just whom did she think she was kidding? The last guy she'd fallen for, a *bad boy* at that, had crushed her so badly she'd sworn off men forever. So...let him bid. She'd enjoy dinner with him and then go home. She just hoped she could earn at least a little more than twenty-five bucks.

"Can we get fifty?" This question was followed again by a few moments' silence until she heard another voice booming in the back.

"Five-hundred."

Erin was certain she hadn't heard correctly. Her eyes scanned the crowd, unable to find the face that owned the voice.

John said into the microphone, "Was that *five-hundred*?"

She saw someone step forward. "Five-hundred."

Fuck. It was Riley Schultz. What the hell? She felt all her composure melt away. What was that she'd been thinking about him being an arrogant dick earlier? She looked down at him as he got closer to the stage and tried to smile, but instead she knew her mouth was just hanging open, in shock.

"Whoa, dude," John said into the microphone. He looked back out at the crowd. "Um...can I get five-fifty?"

And the rest was a blur. Riley Schultz won the bid, spending more money than anyone else had, and she had no idea what to say or do. But at least she'd finally managed to smile.

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*for Sorel,
the other pea in my pod*

Chapter One

ERIN LANCASTER WALKED down the tiled hall as quickly as her black pumps would allow without sliding and spectacularly landing on her ass, causing the papers held to her chest to fly everywhere. She'd come close once or twice on these polished floors and had since learned to walk with caution when wearing high heels.

She knew she had to stop the feeling of dread in the pit of her stomach, the one that was causing her to want to race down the hall. *It's only for a little while*, she told herself. But while she knew the next month or two were temporary, she couldn't help but feel mismatched for the job.

See, Erin was a high school English teacher. There wasn't anything fancy about it. She'd earned her bachelor's degree in secondary ed and English, one of her first loves. So she'd come back home and applied at her local high school for a job. The first year back, there were no openings and so she worked as a substitute while working nights at the movie theater, but she got a job a year later, one of a handful of English teachers at Winchester High School. She'd enjoyed the job itself and loved being back in her hometown with family and friends, and while she'd felt lately like something was missing from her life, it was *not* that her secret desire was to be a cheerleading coach.

Hell no.

In fact, when she'd been in high school herself, she'd despised those girls. Well, not all of them. But most of them seemed to be preoccupied with their looks and boys instead of their educations. They'd also been the nasty girls who'd laugh at other females not as fortunate in the looks department or play mean tricks on some of the more awkward young women in the school.

Erin tried to remind herself that maybe this would be her opportunity to make a positive impact on these impressionable souls. As she rounded the corner to the gym, her long blonde hair bobbing with every step, she took a deep breath, willing herself to believe that she could be a good influence on these young ladies.

"Oh, my God, Brenda. She was wearing *what*?"

"Seriously. She was wearing that stupid blue floral dress that looks like a pioneer apron."

"Better than that gunny sack she wears at least once every other week."

"God. Does she not own anything else?"

Or...*not*. Erin forced the breath into her lungs as she tried not to miss a beat. And there they were, all twelve of them huddled on the bleachers, oblivious to anyone who might be eavesdropping. Erin couldn't decide if she wanted to chide them for their cattiness or pretend she hadn't heard it.

Well, considering she'd only been doing this since Monday and had barely learned the girls' names, let alone their personalities, she decided she'd let it slide. For now. She wasn't going to let that shit go once they all felt more comfortable with each other.

"All right, ladies. Do you all have your gowns for Friday night?"

There was some mumbling, some hands raised in the air, but Erin realized that had been a stupid way to ask her question. "If you don't have a gown, raise your hand, please."

One of the girls, a sophomore who was a first-year cheerleader, raised her hand. "Miss Lancaster, I'm not sure what kind of gown to get."

Rainy, the loud blonde head cheerleader, swiveled on the bench and looked up at the young girl. “Haven’t you ever seen the auction?”

The young girl shook her head. “I didn’t go last year. There was no reason to.”

Brenda, Rainy’s dark-haired best friend, turned as well. “Think Prom or Homecoming, only not so formal.”

“Yeah...like you can wear something strappy. In fact, the sexier it is, the more money you can earn.”

Jesus. Erin fought to say nothing. It felt enough like slavery or prostitution as it was, this stupid auction tradition, but to hear Rainy describe it made it sound even worse...the more skin the girls bared, the more money they could “earn.” She made sure she didn’t shudder.

And whose bright idea had this stupid auction been anyway? It hadn’t been a tradition back when she’d gone to school...had it? But once a year near the beginning of May (just after prom), the cheerleaders held an event where they were “auctioned” out for dates. The “date” was a dinner hosted by the school, catered by a local restaurant, followed by a small dance, all in the very same gym where they were talking, and it all took place the night after the auction.

It was stupid.

But, Erin had to admit, when she’d found out how much money the auction made, she had to admit it wasn’t a bad idea. The girls used this fundraiser to pay for their annual summer camp. “Much better than a carwash,” Rainy had said on Monday when they were briefing Erin about her new job.

The girls started chattering again about shoes and jewelry and Erin couldn’t help but tune them out. Only two of these girls had been in her English classes, and Erin knew why. She’d been branded as a “hard” teacher, probably because she taught two honors classes, so she knew a lot of the cheerleaders had steered clear.

Damn Mrs. Carmichael. The woman—the French teacher—had been the cheerleading coach even back when Erin had attended school here. But last weekend she’d injured herself on a ski slope. The woman had said in the staff meeting earlier that week that she was going to go skiing one last time before the slopes were closed...just *had* to get in one more day. And Erin still wasn’t clear about how the woman had actually injured herself, only knew that she’d fucked up one of her legs so badly, she had a cast from the top of her thigh to the toes on her right leg. Mr. Becker, the principal, had told Erin that Mrs. Carmichael wasn’t even walking yet. So he’d asked Erin if she could finish out the spring and possibly spend some time with the cheerleaders over the summer to get them ready for camp.

Erin was reluctant, but Mr. Becker had always been good to her. She was certain he was the main reason why she’d gotten the job, and he did his best to make sure she had what she needed in the classroom. And while she hadn’t been a fan of Carmichael, the girls needed *someone*...and no one else seemed interested. Still, Erin considered turning him down, but he mentioned that she’d get a stipend on her checks for being the substitute cheer coach...for a month or so, maybe until August or September at the latest.

As the girls started bickering about which girl would be auctioned first, Erin took another deep breath, preparing to tell them to all quiet down. August or September wouldn’t be soon enough.

Chapter Two

GODDAMN. RILEY SCHULTZ couldn't remember the last time he'd stepped into the Winchester High School gymnasium, but he figured it had to have been sometime near the end of his senior year...so, twelve years ago, give or take, if he'd calculated it correctly. And he'd never *planned* to ever walk into his school again, but his life had taken some weird turns over the last few years, things he hadn't counted on.

He'd made sure to dress the part. They were expecting the big bad rock star, so that's what they'd get. He had on his black Ray-Bans, tight leather pants, and a red sleeveless t-shirt designed to expose the tattoos on his arms. He couldn't spike his reddish-brown hair the way he knew his fans would expect it to look because he'd been growing it out. It was just past his chin now and lots of girls had told him it was sexy, so he was keeping it longer and messy for now until he got sick of it. But he put on his trademark, the dog tags he'd worn ever since his first photo shoot. He'd even shaved off the two or three days' accumulation of facial hair, redefining the soul patch on his lower lip that seemed to drive the women wild.

But while he dressed the part, he didn't feel it. Not at all.

And he really didn't want to go through with the plan, either, but he'd promised. Besides, his new band's CD had several months before release. They'd just finished recording and now it was being mixed. Riley wanted no part of that bullshit. Their manager was putting together a touring schedule and, sometime this week, their new single would be on the radio. So, for now, he was in a lull and had time.

But why had he agreed to do *this*? Why? Because his mother had asked him, and he'd wanted to make her happy. She hadn't demanded it, had instead mentioned that the school was "doing" its annual cheerleader auction. Riley hadn't remembered them doing that that back when he'd gone to school, but then again he'd been too busy drinking, smoking weed, and sniffing out pussy to have participated in lame events like that. But she'd said the auction probably wasn't going to do as well as it had in the past because the coach had injured herself the week before. Apparently, she'd been the perfect emcee, and the school was convinced that her talents were what had led to the auction being a great fundraiser. The school had a substitute coach, but the poor girl had no clue what she was doing and had never participated in the auction before. Riley's mother was on the school board and suggested maybe her famous son, charismatic on stage, could lead the proceedings. And then she asked Riley if he'd do it...*after* she'd made the principal excited about the prospect.

Riley's career as a heavy metal vocalist had left his parents beyond disappointed, so when he'd first agreed to it, he thought it was nice that his mother could find something to appreciate about his career, even if she never would like his music.

But now he saw that it had just been a knee-jerk reaction to what he'd perceived as acceptance. After all, it wasn't like he was going to be *performing* at the auction.

Well, he *would* be, but it would be as an actor.

So he walked into the gym, looking for a man in a beige suit as his mother had advised. That person would be the theater guy, the one who'd set up the stage and lights. Riley spotted him and, as he closed the gap, he forced his brain to pull up the guy's name...Gill, Gall? He couldn't remember. Or maybe it started with a *D*. The guy saw him coming and smiled, starting to extend a hand in greeting when Riley heard to the left, "*Oh, my God! It's true! It's Riley*

Schultz. Oh, my God, I love Spawn!” Three girls ran up to him and he knew it was just the beginning of a swarm.

Nothing new. Riley had grown used to it. He’d learned to disguise himself when he needed to—baseball caps to hide the hair, long-sleeved shirts to cover the tattoos, no jewelry, and sunglasses would allow him to walk around unnoticed most times. But, of course, they’d been banking on his name tonight, so he hadn’t covered himself at all.

Riley knew how to charm the girls. He spent a couple of minutes chatting them up and signing autographs while more and more people started to gather around. The theater guy finally intervened. “All right, gang, break it up. You can talk to Mr. Schultz later.”

Riley almost laughed. *Mister*...if this guy only knew how anti-authority Riley was, he’d know Riley never wanted to have that sort of title. He much preferred *Metal God*.

Now, though, he wasn’t sure he even wanted that. He shook hands with the theater teacher, avoiding calling him by name, thereby announcing he’d forgotten. One of the kids on his tech crew called him Mr. Gill, so Riley wouldn’t have to worry anymore. Better yet, Mr. Gill insisted that Riley call him *Ron*. Basically, Riley would be reading off note cards to introduce each of the girls, but even beforehand, the co-captains of the football team were giving a PowerPoint presentation full of pictures of the cheerleading squad together, along with separate pictures of each young woman. Then Riley would take over, playing emcee-slash-auctioneer.

Gill was bending his ear, trying to impress Riley with his stage, lights, and sound setup, but Riley just kind of wished he was curled up on his mom’s couch, riding a high, watching DVDs. Hell, if he’d been smart, he would’ve smoked a bowl before attending this shindig. Too late now. Gill finally showed Riley where he could hang out next to the stage until it was his time to shine. Riley sat in a chair next to the platform and looked out over the audience. And then it hit him. It was in this same fuckin’ place he’d begun the path he was on now. He and four of his buddies had participated in a Battle of the Bands during his senior year in high school. Looking out over the audience now, he wondered why he hadn’t been freaked out. But then he remembered. Part of his calmness was thanks to his overwhelming confidence; part of it was because of several swigs from a bottle of Jack Daniel’s, his drink of choice back in the day.

He wasn’t freaked out now, just bored as shit.

But then he spotted *her*. A fucking gorgeous blonde sitting on the bleachers next to the cheerleaders. Was *she* the substitute cheerleading coach and, if so, could he spend his week at home getting to know her a little better?

Well, that was a stupid idea, but maybe they could hang a little.

Once he’d spotted her, he couldn’t take his eyes off her. She was wearing an ivory dress, but from where he was sitting, he couldn’t tell if it was long or short, demure or sexy. And her hair was pulled up and back with just a few wisps of hair flowing out here and there. She wore long, dangly silver earrings. What struck Riley, though, was how nervous and stressed she looked. Yeah...that had to be the coach. His mother had mentioned the stand-in coach was reluctant.

Maybe a little dose of Riley would make her feel better about the whole thing.

He almost laughed out loud at how the old Riley cockiness just never left him. He’d become quite a good actor, almost believing the character he portrayed. Yeah, there’d been no doubt he’d really been that way early on in his career, but life had changed him. He was no longer the cocky, arrogant, self-assured man he’d been ten years ago. In fact, if people knew how the real Riley was...well, they might not be fans anymore.

Thus, the act had to be maintained. He could only be real when he was by himself.

Fortunately, most girls dug the act. They liked the alpha male, confident vibe he threw off, even when they knew it meant he probably wouldn't end up with them. It was one of those qualities that had helped him lead his old band Spawn to superstardom. A confident frontman was worth his weight in gold.

God, he was glad he'd kept the sunglasses on. He couldn't take his eyes off her. Her dress had thin shoulder straps, so he could appreciate her lightly tanned shoulders and how the dress tried to show just a little cleavage, but from here he couldn't appreciate it as well as he knew he could close up. And her makeup wasn't overdone. It was obvious she cared about her appearance, but she looked natural.

Riley took a deep breath. Had to stop thinking that way. Of course, he couldn't expect a high school teacher to act like a groupie. No way could he get that fine piece of ass in his bed tonight. Wasn't happening. Had to stop getting himself worked up like that.

The PowerPoint was finally over and the jocks introduced Riley. He slipped on his rock star mask while he slid the Ray-Bans off, hanging them in the front of his t-shirt. Time for the show to begin.

Chapter Three

ERIN WAS UNCOMFORTABLE. No, it wasn't the dress. The dress, while a little too revealing, wasn't pulling or bunching. It wasn't too tight...a little snug and form-fitting, but it was just for one night, she reminded herself. So she could deal with the discomfort of putting herself on display. It was for a good cause.

At least that's what she kept telling herself. She could have kicked herself for not knowing up front what she'd been getting herself into. She'd had no idea the coach was auctioned too until earlier today. But now here she was, getting ready to be sold along with the cheerleaders under her supervision, wearing an old dress she'd worn to her parents' forty-year anniversary celebration last summer.

Dear God.

And if she felt like a bug under a microscope now, she knew it would only be worse once she had to actually stand onstage.

It felt like they'd been waiting forever, but she knew it had only been about ten minutes. Another five or so and they'd begin the proceedings. She heard and saw a commotion near one of the double doors leading into the gym. She was drawn to it and that's when she saw him. She knew it was him even though she could only see the top of his head.

It had to be Riley Schultz, former lead singer of the now-defunct band Spawn. She knew all about their history. In fact, she'd liked Spawn. They'd had a few hit singles, but being a metal fan, she'd bought all their albums. She knew they were a few years older than she—Winchester was proud of the local boys who became famous, and she knew she'd been in middle school about the time they were seniors in high school, so she'd never really known them. But she'd listened to their music and followed their careers. Between *Hit Parader* and *Wikipedia*, Erin knew that Riley had never been married, hadn't had any children (that he knew about anyway), and was now in a new band called something like Undue Influence that would be releasing a new single any day now, would begin touring midsummer, and would be releasing their first album late summer or early fall.

In fact, in high school, Erin had fantasized more than a little about Riley Schultz. Hey, it could happen, right?

But she'd outgrown her schoolgirl crush and had moved on. When she'd found out he would be hosting the auction tonight, she almost feigned illness. She had no idea how she would react around someone famous...*especially* someone she'd crushed on so long ago.

But she got over it. She was an adult, for God's sake, and had to go on with the show. They'd have the auction; she could get a little excited seeing a famous rock star up close; and then she could go on some stupid-ass date and get on with her life.

Oh, part of her was more than a *little* excited. Part of her felt like a fangirl. But Erin was no idiot. She knew rock stars never wound up with groupies (well, maybe for a quick lay), and if she threw herself at him, she'd never have a chance.

Who was she kidding? She didn't have a chance anyway. For all she knew, he had a serious girlfriend just waiting for him to finish this gig.

Well, it didn't matter. She was going to enjoy the view just the same. Riley emerged from amongst the throng of fans, guided by the theater teacher Ron Gill, and sat next to the stage, just as the co-captains of the football team made their way up to the microphone. Before the lights

dimmed, she got a good look at Riley. Again, thanks to *Wikipedia*, she knew he was around thirty, and in spite of the last few years of hard living (she knew about two stints in rehab for heroin addiction), he looked incredible. He was cut and he had a strong, chiseled jaw. His hair was a little mussed up, just adding to the rock star *I-don't-give-a-shit* look, and it was longer than he'd ever worn it before. It was kinda sexy. She wasn't sure, but she thought he was wearing his dog tag necklace and he had a couple of big rings on his fingers. But one of the things she liked the most about Riley, his sleeves of tattoos, was mostly on display, thanks to the short sleeves. God...he was fucking gorgeous.

And Erin decided she'd better look away before she started drooling.

She looked down at her hands, trying to compose herself, because she felt herself growing nervous. She'd gotten herself totally worked up, and deep down she knew someone like Riley Schultz wouldn't give her the time of day anyway. So she had to stop torturing herself. She focused on an inane conversation between Brenda and Rainy...something about how to apply smoky eye shadow. Once she felt like she had control of herself again, she focused on the PowerPoint and forced herself to keep her eyes away from Riley Schultz. It was the only way she could survive.

When the co-captains finished their sweet presentation that had put the cheerleaders up on some impossible pedestal, they introduced the former frontman of Spawn as the evening's emcee. And that's when he stood up and walked the few steps up to the platform to the loud roar of applause that greeted him. Erin knew the praise was due to two things—one was there were some true fans in the crowd, probably mostly teenagers; most of the parents who'd decided to attend had no clue who Riley was; but, second, she knew it was because—whether those people knew his music or not—they knew he was a local boy who'd gone on to become famous and had returned home.

The good news? She could look at him all she wanted now, and no one would ever know better. No one would ever know how ravenous her gaze really was, including the young ladies who surrounded her.

So what did Riley actually say? Well, she missed that. She heard his voice, all right...smooth baritone, a little raspy, very sexy, but the actual words? Missed 'em all. It didn't matter, though. She knew most of the words already, considering she and the cheerleaders had written them all earlier that week. She did catch Riley doing some ad lib, though...he was telling some jokes and warming up the crowd. Oh, yeah...no denying Riley was the kind of person meant for the stage. He had charisma and had won the entire group over in a matter of minutes.

He began reading the card for Michaela as the young lady in a wispy red dress walked down the bleachers to take her place onstage. *God, what a stupid place for the auction.* Erin had questioned why they were using the gym and not the auditorium, the perfect place for something like this. Ron Gill had explained during the last faculty meeting that the stage was already set for the "epic play" the following weekend. His students had worked hard on the set, had finally completed all but the final touches, and he didn't want to ask them to take it down. "Besides," he'd said, "I'm training my set kids on how to work with a traveling theater group. They need practice on setting up the temporary stage, the one we'll be using for the auction. Best yet, cheerleaders work in the gym. What better place to have the auction?"

Well, it was bullshit, but she wasn't their permanent coach and wasn't willing to fight for it. The girls didn't seem to mind.

Michaela was smiling, her teeth gleaming, her long black hair shining under the stage lights while she was under the scrutiny of the crowd. Still reading off the card, Riley said, “Michaela’s favorite things are soft, cute puppies, macaroni and cheese, and slumber parties with her best friends. Turn offs include bad breath, smoking, and bushy eyebrows.” Riley set the card on the podium in front of him and pulled the microphone off the stand. Erin felt her pulse pick up a little, just because she’d seen him do that move a dozen times in videos and at the two Spawn concerts she’d attended back in the day. Apparently, her subconscious wanted Riley to perform.

Instead, he walked close to Michaela and then said into the mike, “Anything else you’d like to add, Miss Michaela?”

The girl giggled and—even though Erin couldn’t quite tell, thanks to the stage lights—she was pretty sure Michaela blushed, her cheeks reflecting the red of her dress. Apparently, Riley close up was potent. Could Erin survive her own trip up there?

Michaela barely leaned toward the microphone, as though Riley might gobble her up if she got too close. But she didn’t look like she’d mind either. She said, “No...I think you got it.” Michaela was one of the shyest cheerleaders, if there was such a thing. The girl was fine performing cheers, dancing in front of large crowds, performing gymnastic feats under the gaze of hundreds of people, but Erin already knew you didn’t ask the girl to talk in front of people, even if it was a small class of twenty-five. So Riley had gotten out of her probably the only words the young lady would say up there on the platform.

No problem, though, because Riley was quite comfortable in the limelight. He said, “Let the bidding begin, folks. Now remember. You’re bidding for a date with this young woman. The date will be held in this very same place tomorrow evening.” He stepped over to the podium, grabbing another note card, glancing down at it for a moment. “You’ll be served a three-course Italian meal followed by an hour of dancing, and you’ll have the company of the beautiful young lady you bid on. Not only will a good time be had by all, but”—in a smooth motion, he placed the note card back on the podium, but he didn’t miss a beat—“you’re giving to a good cause. This fundraiser will allow this fine group of cheerleaders the chance to attend their annual summer camp, where they learn new things, grow in their camaraderie, and prepare for another year of keeping the student body pumped about sports...and we all know how important that is.” Riley looked again at Michaela. “Miss Michaela, you’re a senior, are you not?”

The girl blushed again and giggled, nodding her head.

“Well, are you still going to attend camp?”

She looked up at the ceiling and giggled again. Riley placed the microphone in front of her mouth. Michaela finally said, “Well, no, but this will help the girl who replaces me.”

“What a generous gesture,” Riley said, and Erin wasn’t sure if anyone else picked up on it, but she was pretty certain his words had been sarcastic as hell. Before she could contemplate it any further, he said, “The bidding will begin at twenty-five dollars, but, come on, folks. This lovely young lady’s company is definitely worth a little more than that.”

Too bad, Erin thought, he didn’t really mean it. She just hoped the rest of the pumped-up crowd couldn’t pick up on it.

Chapter Four

TRULY, THIS FUCKING auction had to be one of the stupidest things Riley had ever let himself get roped into doing. But he decided to have fun with it. He'd already gotten away with a couple of snarky comments, so he'd see just how much he could say before he either got disturbed looks from the girls he was auctioning or got a loud hiss or *boo* from the crowd. That would be his indication that he'd gone too far. Hell, he decided he'd even stop if one of the girls looked confused by something he'd say.

But so far...nothing. Everyone was having a genuinely good time. Everyone, that was, except for him. He felt like the soul was being sucked out of him. And time had been dragging.

Finally, though, he was auctioning off girl number twelve. The event had gone on forever. Some girls—apparently prime cuts of meat—actually “sold” for two hundred dollars. He had to admit they were the cuter ones, not that girls that young caught his eye anymore. Well, they *did*, but it made him feel like a dirty old man. Today, he could admit that they were cute without lusting after them. He'd been twenty-one the last time he'd been with a minor, and the threat of a lawsuit had scared the shit out of him. Fortunately, he'd had a good lawyer and enough money that he could settle out of court before the law got involved and pressed the issue.

He was okay with that. Young girls often expected way too much—*love*, for example, something Riley wasn't able to give for reasons far too many to divulge to the young lasses. At least most women over twenty-five understood that if they chose to sleep with a rock star, said rock star knew they were groupie whores and wouldn't even look at them the morning after if they'd even made it to that point.

“All right. We have a bid of seventy-five dollars for Miss Beth. Can I get one-hundred?”

The lights would have made it hard to see the hands in the audience, but the theater guy had been smart enough to leave *all* the lights on, so Riley didn't have to struggle to see the guys sticking their hands in the air. On the downside, though, it made it hard for him to keep his eyes off the blonde in the bleachers. He couldn't even pretend to casually glance over, because the people placing the bids were part of the audience seated in the fold-up chairs in front of the stage. The only time he could look over was when a new girl came up to be auctioned.

“Aw. Isn't that just too cute? Miss Beth, is that your parents bidding one-hundred dollars for you?” Riley felt like he might puke.

The redhead giggled. “Yeah. They love and support me.”

“Isn't that sweet, folks? Beth's parents love and support her. So which one of you wants to love and support her more?”

Oh, *fuck*. It had finally happened. That joke hit like a lead balloon. What was worse was Riley had thought this one to be closer to innocent than most of his other wisecracks. But no one was laughing. No one was even smiling, and little Miss Beth's bottom lip was beginning to curl up in a pout. “Excuse me, ladies and gentlemen, but I merely meant that in the most generous sense. Would anyone like to donate a higher amount to support the cause?”

A rich kid's hand finally flew up in the air and the good time recommenced. Riley might have damaged his chances with the cheer coach...but he had one more card up his sleeve.

* * *

Erin felt herself growing jittery, knowing she was going to be the next item of scrutiny. She kept telling herself it was all for a good cause. And all of the girls had made at least one-hundred

dollars, so she hoped she could make that much as well. She'd lost count, but she knew they'd already made over fifteen-hundred. Any amount she pulled in would be gravy.

But there was another reason she felt anxious as hell. She was going to be standing next to one of her old rock crushes. She was afraid she'd come off as a giggly teenager, not unlike the dozen girls he'd already dealt with.

No. Must. Remain. Poised.

She was inhaling slow, deep breaths in an attempt to keep her cool. All the people in the audience who already knew her would think any residual nerves were simply due to the fact that she wasn't comfortable with being thrown on a stage. No one ever had to know the truth.

And the rock star? Well...she'd likely never see him again, so why did she give such a shit?

After Beth was escorted off the stage, Erin took one last gulp of air. She didn't want to stand until she was called up, but she smoothed out the fabric of her dress that was resting on her thighs. When she looked back up to the stage, she saw Riley walking toward the edge. He crooked his finger at the co-captains and then walked off the stage. Erin wasn't quite sure what to think of that. Either he'd had enough, having bombed his last attempt at a joke, or he didn't know he had one more person to auction off and was bailing before being accosted by fans again.

Erin tried not to feel hurt. It wasn't personal. So much for standing next to one of her rock star crushes, though. So when John Corbin, a senior who'd never been in any of her classes, called her name ("Last but not least, Miss Lancaster!"), she stood up and walked toward the stage. Her smile wasn't real, because part of her felt like she was in shock, but at least the nerves had dissipated.

So she kept the frozen smile on her face and walked off the bleachers toward the stage. Part of her struggled with feeling embarrassed. Ah...not good enough to be announced by the famous guy. Personal or not, she comforted herself with the idea that the guy was a dick. That's what a lot of media had said about Riley Schultz anyway...that he was arrogant, conceited, and a bit of a control freak. She let her mind wander through its archives. She remembered that was at the heart of the Spawn breakup. Sure, part of it was the drugs. But she remembered there being some major conflict between Riley and his best friend from high school, J. C. Gibson, the lead guitarist. They both battled for ultimate artistic control of the band. J. C. wanted to go one way, Riley the other, and they wound up disbanding. They disagreed about the direction the band should go in. If Erin recalled correctly, Riley wanted to continue to cross over, drawing larger crowds, while still maintaining what he'd called "musical integrity." J. C. had called Riley a sellout and said he refused to pander to anyone. Erin thought they were both being stubborn, because the bottom line was they both loved the music. Surely, they could've found some common ground. Maybe there was more to the story than she knew—hell, maybe it *was* just the drugs. Today, J. C. had already recovered and was in a new band that was already working on a second CD but Riley was only now getting back on his feet.

Maybe that's what he deserved for being such a dick.

All right, her mental rant was over now and she finally made it up to the podium beside the two football players. The other player *had* been in her Sophomore Honors English class, and he held out his arm as if displaying merchandise. "Ms. Lancaster," he said, grinning.

She smiled, thinking she was glad she had these young men auctioning her off. She wouldn't have liked having a sarcastic asshole pimping her out anyway. John, the more vocal of the duo, spoke into the microphone. "Okay, I'm afraid we're not the showmen Riley Schultz was, but we'll take one for the team." At the mention of *team*, Erin heard and then saw a large

chunk of football players in the audience practically *roaring* their support. “All right, can I get a bid of twenty-five dollars for Winchester High’s English maven Erin Lancaster?”

Erin started laughing, afraid she was becoming hysterical, giggling just like the cheerleaders had moments earlier. She knew it was because everything was heightened, what with being on display and all, but it seemed like *forever* before anyone made a bid. *Shit*. That would be the ultimate humiliation. Not even a twenty-five dollar bid. But finally Ron Gill’s hand went in the air. And she wasn’t sure what to think about that. Ron was nice enough but they’d butted heads quite a few times during faculty meetings. They had different ideas. They were supposed to agree on a Shakespeare play every year. Ron was supposed to have his students study it in Drama II and she had to dissect it with her seniors in Honors English, but it was almost as if Ron just wanted to pick a fight. If she said *Julius Caesar*, he’d insist upon *Macbeth*. If one of the history teachers jumped in and asked about *Henry V*, he’d dig in his heels and demand *Othello*. If she wanted to focus on a comedy that year, he’d demand drama. He was infuriating.

And then it hit her. He was like a boy in middle school, picking fights because...he *liked* her. Oh, God. Why hadn’t she ever seen it before? And...he *was* a nice enough guy. But he really wasn’t her type.

And, again, just whom did she think she was kidding? The last guy she’d fallen for, a *bad boy* at that, had crushed her so badly she’d sworn off men forever. So...let him bid. She’d enjoy dinner with him and then go home. She just hoped she could earn at least a little more than twenty-five bucks.

“Can we get fifty?” This question was followed again by a few moments’ silence until she heard another voice booming in the back.

“Five-hundred.”

Erin was certain she hadn’t heard correctly. Her eyes scanned the crowd, unable to find the face that owned the voice.

John said into the microphone, “Was that *five-hundred*?”

She saw someone step forward. “Five-hundred.”

Fuck. It was Riley Schultz. What the hell? She felt all her composure melt away. What was that she’d been thinking about an arrogant dick earlier? She looked down at him as he got closer to the stage and tried to smile, but instead she knew her mouth was just hanging open, in shock.

“Whoa, dude,” John said into the microphone. He looked back out at the crowd. “Um...can I get five-fifty?”

And the rest was a blur. Riley Schultz won the bid, spending more money than anyone else had, and she had no idea what to say or do. But at least she’d finally managed to smile.

Chapter Five

SO IT HAD been an asshole move. Riley was good at that kind of shit. But he knew it would get that gorgeous blonde's attention. Erin Lancaster...that's what they'd said her name was. He'd decided the only way to really catch her eye would be to drop a wad of cash on her, more than any of her little cheerleader girls had pulled in. If it wouldn't have seemed decadent, he would've bid a thousand on her. As it was, it had worked.

He could see the expression on her face when she first walked up on the stage. That was a good sign. In a million years, he never would have guessed a high school English teacher would show the slightest interest in a guy like him, but he saw something there. She looked almost disappointed that he wasn't the one auctioning her off.

And that's when he knew he had a good plan.

Sure as shit, when he bid the five-hundred, her face lit up like a Christmas tree. He could tell she was trying to control herself, but apparently the Riley charm had no limits. High school English teachers, religious grandmothers, and teenage girls—they all loved him. She was shocked until she saw it was him and then her jaw literally fucking dropped. Classic.

He couldn't help it. The cocky rock star expression he'd seen himself wearing in dozens of magazines slid over his face as he continued walking closer. And, of course, no one overbid him. He'd made sure of that. And even if they had, he would've kept bidding till he'd won. Until he'd seen her expression and knew she was interested, he might've allowed himself to be overbid, but not now.

And he got lucky. The jocks closed the whole shindig, allowing him to hang close to the stage until she walked toward the edge. When she approached the stairs, he held out his hand. Her knees were almost at his eye level and he was glad her dress barely covered them with its wispy, uneven, flowing hem. She had nice legs.

She smiled and took his hand, allowing him to escort her to the floor. She said, "I suppose I should thank you on behalf of the cheerleading squad. That was a lot of money to spend on this auction."

He sneered. "Nothin' but a thing. Happy to help." He hated letting go of that tiny hand.

She acted uncomfortable, as though her car was sitting in the parking lot, ready to change into a pumpkin. "Do I call you Riley?"

He couldn't help the grin that crossed his face. It sounded nice coming out of her mouth. "That's my name." But he couldn't help the attitude, could he? "And...it's Erin, right?"

She nodded. "Yep." She started inching away from the stage. "So...I'll see you here tomorrow night, right?"

"I kinda thought maybe I could pick you up. Make it like a real date. Unless, of course, that's against the rules."

She laughed then, and Riley could see her letting go of some of the nervousness. "No rules, at least not for grownups."

He pretended to shudder. "That's a bad word in my business."

She raised her eyebrows. "Really?"

He cleared his throat. "Can I walk you out to your car and get your phone number, address...?"

She inhaled a deep breath. “Yeah...about that. Actually, I have a small meeting here once the crowd has filtered out. Last minute stuff.” She shook her head, closing her eyes and breathing in once more, as though she had to force out the garbage up there. God, that was cute. When she opened her green eyes, she said, “Oh, but I can give you my info right now if you want it.”

He squinted his left eye, throwing the cocky façade back up, his defense when his confidence waned. “You sure?”

Her cheeks turned a slight shade of pink, so slight he almost missed it. But she rattled off her address and phone number when he whipped out his cell phone. What more could he have asked for? Well, he would’ve liked a kiss on the cheek or a hug, but he supposed that was asking a little too much this early on. After all, she wasn’t one of his screaming, adoring fans...and maybe that was a good thing. So he said goodbye, holding her eye’s attention for a few seconds, and then braced himself for the throng of girls he knew were standing just outside the door. He grabbed the sunglasses from their resting place and slid them on his face, prepared to play rock star again.

* * *

Holy shit. That was all Erin could think as she watched Riley Schultz walk away from her out into the lobby area outside the gym. She’d been holding her hands together in front of her the whole time so they would stop shaking. Yeah, she’d thought he was a good-looking guy but there was no chance anything would come of it.

Hell, she couldn’t *let* anything come of it. She’d been in far too many damaging relationships over the last three years, and she knew a rock star—especially a cocksure guy like Riley Schultz—would probably make those heartaches a walk in the park.

But. How many women would be able to talk about going on a real date with a rock star? No one she knew, at any rate. For years from now, she was sure, kids would want to take her classes so they could meet the teacher who’d won money for the school by dating a heavy metal frontman.

No, now she knew she was just playing around in fantasyland. She managed to make it through the impromptu meeting afterward with Ron and the football coach, where they discussed last-minute details about the dinner. Gill gave Erin the final total—well over two-thousand earned. She was glad because she’d forgotten that they still had to pay for the actual food. Even though a local restaurant gave them a discount because it was for a good cause, the squad still had to pay for actual cost. And it was also tradition that a group of football players were the waiters, and for that gesture, the cheerleading squad had always given the football team a chunk of their earnings. She thought Ron had said they usually gave the team ten percent, but her brain was not fully functioning. She’d have to deal with the money stuff on Monday, when she could actually talk with the principal. For now, though, she felt overloaded and just wanted a warm bubble bath...and time to plan what the hell she should wear tomorrow night.

Ron told her he would shut off the lights and the football coach promised they’d be ready for everyone by seven the following night. Erin had never been to one of these auction dinners, so she had no idea what to expect. She only knew they wouldn’t be serving wine...and that was a damn shame.

So she started walking out of the gym. *Oh, shit.* Riley was *still* there, three or four girls around him. He was over to the side so she could *maybe* pretend she didn’t see him. That might seem bitchy, but she didn’t trust herself to not become like those teenage girls were...salivating,

giggling airheads. So what the hell should she do? She also didn't want to seem pathetic by *forcing* his attention away from his little fan club either.

So, pathetic or not, she fished her cell phone from out of her purse and decided to check for messages as she walked out. She wouldn't actually text anyone unless she did have a message, but she thought it might be enough to get her through the lobby and out the doors without the dilemma of *do-I-or-don't-I make eye contact?*

She was halfway through the lobby and fully done checking her zero messages when she heard Riley tell the girls, "Nice chatting with you, but if you'll excuse me..." And that's when Erin knew he was heading her way.

That made her nervous all over again. But at least her ploy had kept the moment from being awkward. She felt his presence beside her and she looked up, throwing the phone back in her purse. "Long time, no see."

"Can I walk you to your car?"

She couldn't help the smile that crossed her face. "If you really want to."

Riley dropped his voice as he pushed the door open for her. "Yeah, I do, but I also need an excuse to get away, if you catch my drift."

She nodded. Well, *that* didn't do much for her ego, but she couldn't fault him for honesty. "So...do you ever get used to that?"

"What? The girls?"

"Well, yeah, but also the attention."

"Yes and no." She started walking down the stairs in front of the school and he followed suit. "I mean...at first, it was cool. Crowds of people surrounding us, and, yeah, mostly girls. And I got more of the attention than the other guys, because I was the face for the band, if you know what I mean. But after a while, you realize you have no privacy anymore, and people don't respect your need for it. They figure you're famous; you deserve the attention you get. And sometimes I'm cool with that. It comes with the territory. But a lot of times it's unwanted. Sorry, but if I'm buying my niece an ice cream cone, I don't want someone with a camera snapping pictures of it, and I sure as hell don't want a bunch of girls screaming and pawing at me when I need to keep my eye on a four-year-old child who's trusting me to take care of her."

Erin nodded. "Understandable."

They continued walking across the parking lot. It was dark out, but there were plenty of lights in the parking lot to guide their way. It was a little cool out but not too chilly, and Erin knew hot days were just around the corner. This time of year it was pleasant, reminding her of one of the reasons she'd wanted to remain in Colorado. Cool, crisp air in the spring and fall, surrounded by the extreme weather that made her appreciate the in-between seasons even more. "But, hell. You didn't want to hear me whine about how my life sucks."

Erin laughed. "I asked."

Riley's head moved up and down slowly. "True. You did. But what about you, Ms. Erin Lancaster? What's your life like?"

She shook her head, glancing his way but afraid to get sucked in by those piercing brown eyes. She looked back in front of her. She saw her tame car just across the way, because there weren't many cars left in the lot. Her car was a small white sedan, very teacherly, and the only reason she'd ever bought it was because it was conservative. She needed a reliable car and she didn't need to blow money on something just because it was pretty or sporty, even if she wanted to deep down. "Oh, probably pretty much what you think it is. I teach a bunch of high school kids throughout the year and usually find a part-time job during the summers to keep myself

busy. I also do a little academic writing during my breaks, writing literary analysis for journals...just for the fun of it. But...uh...I do a little camping and go to concerts during the summer, and—”

“I thought so.”

“Thought what?”

“You acted like you recognized me.” They reached her car and stood beside it.

“You could *tell*?” She felt her face grow warm.

“Well...it was a guess. A good one, apparently.” She felt her lips twitch into a smile but she was afraid to say much more. Riley cleared his throat and she allowed herself to drown in his gaze. Oh, shit. That was dangerous, because now being the only thing in his eyesight made her feel captive. Her heartbeat kicked up a notch and she felt her mouth start to water. And the seconds dragged on and she started to feel more nervous. Part of her just wanted to kiss him, famous rock star or not. She’d seen his picture a thousand times, but it couldn’t do justice to the real Riley Schultz. He was magnetic and...*hot*. She felt her extremities begin to tingle as her brain tried to figure out something to say. She found that her back was almost pressed up against her car door and she saw him lean slightly forward. His eyes had taken on a dreamy, sleepy look and she thought he really *was* going to take her in a passionate embrace. She knew then that she wouldn’t have protested. But he said, his voice low, “So what am I supposed to wear to this thing tomorrow night?”

She swallowed, regaining her composure. “You know, I’m really not sure. I’ve never done this before. I’m just filling in for the real cheerleading coach, and so I’ve never been to one of these.” She took a deep breath. “If I had to guess, it’d be like a real date.”

He nodded and he looked pure rock star again, cocky and oh-so-self-sure. “So...like *this*?” He waved his hand in a semi-circular motion, indicating himself from head to toe.

Erin took the invitation and looked him over from top to bottom...not that she hadn’t done that already, but how could she resist? And where the hell had this boldness come from? But she did it just the same...took in his reddish-brown mussed-up hair and...*fuck*...he had a few cute little freckles on his cheeks that she’d never noticed from media pictures or CD covers. And his facial hair was gone, all but the sexy soul patch just underneath his lip that she’d love to feel brushing her chin. He had a noticeable Adam’s apple that was right about eye level and, sure enough, he was wearing his dog tags. She’d have to get a closer look at those tomorrow if he’d let her. She made a note to herself that it could be a conversation piece when they had a lull. He was wearing a plain black t-shirt but up close she could see the definition underneath...not that it mattered. She knew *exactly* what his torso looked like, having seen pictures of him shirtless at concerts, sweaty and... She gulped. She was getting distracted again. She forced her eyes to continue down farther. Faded Levi’s, not too snug but not baggy. Black sneakers. She couldn’t tell if they were Converse or something else, but she knew she’d better drag her eyes back up pretty quickly.

When she met his eyes again, his lips spread into a grin. *Shit*. He knew what she was thinking. He *had* to. But maybe she could play it off. “Well, uh...where *you* come from, that might be acceptable date attire, and, I suppose, the teens wouldn’t mind, but I’d guess you might want to be a *little* more conservative. Maybe a button-down shirt at least?”

He nodded. “Got it.” He moved his head forward a little again, and she felt her breath catch in her throat. She began to doubt she’d ever be able to breathe normally again. But he stopped, his lips close enough, his breath warm on her cheek, his arm braced on her car, and said, “What are *you* planning to wear on our date, Ms. Erin?”

She swallowed again, well aware of the powerful effect he was having on her. She didn't know if it was just part of his personality or if it was because he was the big, bad rock star. It didn't matter really. He was having that effect and analyzing *why* wouldn't change it. "Uh...I'm not sure yet. Like I said, this was kind of a last-minute thing for me."

"A dress?"

"Well, yeah, I *have* to wear a dress."

His lips turned up into a half-grin. "You don't *have* to, Erin. That's a societal expectation, and you forget...my job's all about rebelling against expectations. You wanna wear a bikini tomorrow night, I wouldn't object."

She wasn't quite sure how to take his statement, but she was pretty sure he was fucking with her, just like he had all the young women onstage tonight. Maybe he thought he was so clever, she'd never notice. Needless to say, the smoldering feelings she'd had just moments earlier iced up. "I'm sure you wouldn't, Mr. Schultz, but I can assure you I'll wear something date appropriate."

He raised his eyebrows, a look of amusement causing a twinkle in his eye. "*Mister?* Fuck...that's the second time I've been called that tonight. What the hell?"

Erin turned in the tight space between Riley and her car, but as she moved back to open the car door, she backed into Riley. "Apparently, I and others are trying to show you the respect we expect in return." She turned her head slightly to the right to catch his eye.

His left arm wrapped around her waist and held her up against his body. She could feel his strength and it made her feel instantly weak. The coldness she'd felt? Gone in a second, replaced by furious desire. But she couldn't let it show. She refused to play the helpless victim in his cat-and-mouse game. Still...he was proving to be irresistible. "Oh, I *respect* you." She felt his breath on her neck and then he said in her ear, "I just think maybe we could have a little fun together too."

She felt her nipples tighten and was relieved he wouldn't be able to see it. He couldn't know the effect he was having on her. She cleared her throat and prayed she sounded stronger than she felt. "If your idea of fun is seeing me in a bikini at something like this, I'm afraid you're going to be sorely disappointed." She pulled away, relieved he released her, and sat in her car seat. She took a deep breath. "There's a Hooters in Colorado Springs if that's more your cup of tea. Otherwise, see you tomorrow."

He smiled and shook his head. "It was just a joke, you know."

She arched her eyebrows and reached for the door handle. Before pulling it closed, she said, "I wasn't joking." She forced herself to start her car and not look back at the mysterious Riley Schultz before driving out of the parking lot.

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