

FORD

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My shoulders go limp as the final chord of my song rings out into the dark theater. From out of the black, rising applause swallows the chord, takes over the room. The house lights fade up a little, revealing the audience is actually on its feet. *This feels good.*

The audience's approval is like a ray of comic book energy hitting me in the chest, a supersizing beam causing me to grow gigantic right in front of everyone, like I could keep growing right through the roof of the theater, then stomp off through LA, an unstoppable hundred-foot-tall monster throwing buses and tearing through power lines, rampaging until the police, the Air Force, and maybe Will Smith are forced to team up and machine-gun me from the top of the Capitol Records building, the whole mess ending with Naomi Watts weeping over my giant dead body.

This feels really, really good is what I'm saying.

I look to my side because I need to share this with someone who isn't out there in the audience. I spot Magnolia. She feels so close to me. I've finished the song right next to where the other contestants are seated onstage. From her stool, she's clapping with a look that says, *All right, okay, not too shabby.* I walk the rest of the way to her,

scoop my hand behind her head, lift her up, and see the slightest surprise cross her face before I kiss her.

Kissing her feels better than really, really good.

Lance says something in the background on the sound system about me being a ladies' man. I barely hear him. The audience makes catcalls and whoops, but they seem so much farther off than they are.

When I pull away, Magnolia's kiss lingering there on my lips, her eyebrows are raised and her mouth is almost open like she's about to ask me a question.

Lance sidles up to us. "I really hate to interrupt you two, but we do still have a show to finish," he says into the mic. The audience laughs over the thumping music that has kicked in.

He escorts me over to the center of the stage, right in front of the judges. Oh yeah, the *judges*. What's wrong with me? How could I forget about the judges? Their four votes alone control 50 percent of my fate; America's call-in vote makes up the other half.

I look to the three strangers who will probably decide how the rest of life my plays out. There's Davey Dave, the DJ record producer, eyes hidden behind his trademark aviator sunglasses. Jazz Billingham, who's already made a fortune selling records even though she's only eleven. When she stares at you with these eyes that are just too old for her face, it's kind of unsettling. And, of course, there's never impressed, brutally honest Chris James. It's strange to see that famous silver pompadour of hair right sitting right in front of you after all the years you've watched him tear apart movies on his review show.

"How do you think you did?" a bored-looking Chris James asks me.

And I'm back to reality. My hundred-foot-tall feeling shrinks down to nothing under that gaze.

How *did* I do? I desperately try to replay the performance in my head.

Seconds before my entrance, my usual nervous energy started to build, ratcheting up and up until I almost couldn't stand it. So by the time Lance took the stage and introduced me, I felt just like a slingshot pulled all the way back.

Leander tells me that when I make an entrance, it's always like there's some kind of emergency. This time, I started singing almost before I hit the microphone. It took the show's backing band half a line to kick in with me, so my first bit was a cappella. I think it sounded okay, even though it's not how we'd rehearsed it.

Then I think I did something weird. I was chewing gum, wasn't I? I'd forgotten to get rid of my gum from before, so I turned my head and spit it halfway across the stage without missing a beat. Why the hell did I do that?

My brain works different onstage, fires off new kinds of messages. It tells my body to do bizarre stuff. Leander tells me I get all convoluted, like I'm having a seizure, and maybe I am, because when I'm performing I partly feel like someone else is controlling my body.

But now the other judges are talking to me. I've been answering them on autopilot, lost in my own head. I can't focus on their questions, I'm too busy interrogating myself: *Was I terrible? Did I look stupid? Do I look stupid now? Is Magnolia going to be pissed?*

"You might have chosen the wrong song, bro."

You choked.

"... intense emotion. But out of control."

You're going home.

"... natural talent, but no polish."

Who did you think you were fooling?

"I thought you were going to hurt yourself up there."

You don't belong here.

You don't belong here.

You don't belong here.

Then Chris James swoops back in once the other judges have finished giving their comments, and I hear him say, “I thought it was the best performance of the night.”

My head goes silent.

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Cameras line the pathway into the after-party. The club is in an old theater on Hollywood Boulevard, and it's packed. Every person I squeeze by smiles at me as though we know each other. It takes about fifteen of those smiles before I stop trying to figure out if we do.

This isn't like any party I've ever been to. I guess it's more of a press conference, except for the bass-heavy music and snacks floating around every five seconds. The food is always something simple combined with one weird ingredient. Like mini grilled cheeses except they have shrimp in them. A waiter who looks about my age offers me one of those from a tray after a reporter asks me to say, "America, could I be your next superstar?" into the camera.

"No, thanks," I say to the waiter. I'm thinking I could easily be him.

The lights on all the cameras make the rest of the club seem even darker by comparison, and I look around for Magnolia from where I'm pinned in this corner. One of the twins passes (not sure which one), and I bend close and ask if she's seen Magnolia so as not to make a whole production about it.

"She's back that way with her mom," the twin says.

Before I can search for her, Catherine takes me by the arm and

leads me to a corner where a bunch of entertainment reporters are doing interviews. I recognize most of them; they're famous for asking famous people questions. There are all kinds of famous, I guess. In person, they have the whitest teeth I've ever seen.

I just do interview after interview. The *Spotlight* camera guys, Skip and Hector, are filming the reporters filming us contestants, and almost all the questions I'm getting are about Magnolia. "Is this a new showmance?" "Is she a good kisser?" "What happens next?"

I don't know if there's a right way to answer any of this. I try to laugh it off.

I turn my head, looking for her bright, shiny top somewhere in the crowd, and then I realize that's not what she's wearing anymore. They changed all of us after the show. It's like my heart is seizing just a bit at every Magnolia-maybe girl I can make out between the lights in the dark. The next reporter steps in front of me and beams a gigantic smile in my direction. Finally I get a different question for the first time in an hour.

"Ford, is it going to be weird living in a mansion, considering the life that you came from?"

"Oh, man, it's crazy! It feels like I'm dreaming." As I answer, I realize that while part of me is just being honest, another part of me is listening in and working hard to be what the interviewers want me to be. I have to say, I don't fully know which of those parts is running this show.