

I took a deep breath, closed my eyes to center myself, then finally opened them. I focused entirely on the girl standing beside me, keeping my face deliberately cold.

"Please don't go. I love you, Cal," she begged as she stepped closer and reached for my hand.

At least she tried to.

I yanked my hand away and shot her a loathing glare.

"I don't. In fact, I fucking hate you," I almost spat. "I never loved you."

She stumbled back, horrified. "Then why did you say otherwise for the last year?" she yelled. "Was I just a toy for you to play with and discard? What about those long nights we spent in each other's arms? Or that time you took me to the beach? Was it all a farce?"

I turned away, carefully avoiding her gaze. "It might as well have been. It'll be better if you forget all about me and move on with your life. I already have."

For a moment, she said nothing.

I slowly turned back toward her, only to see her shaking with rage. I opened my mouth to speak, but she stunned me with her next move. She slapped me hard across the face.

"You are an asshole, Cal!"

Then she turned and ran in the opposite direction.

"And scene!"

As soon as I heard the command, I rubbed my stinging cheek.

The girl who had just slapped me came jogging back, her expression sheepish. "I hope I didn't hit you too hard?"

"Why did you have to hit me at all?" I asked, incredulous. "You do know most actors fake-slap, right?"

"I'm so sorry," she said quickly. "It was my first time slapping someone, and I didn't know how much force to use. I was so engrossed in the scene that before I realized it, I'd already hit you for real."

I sighed but let it go and turned toward our audience.

Mr. Pierce, our instructor, sat front and center. He studied me for a full minute, his gaze unreadable, as if he were weighing my worth. I felt like a little kid standing before him instead of the grown man I was, but I didn't let it show.

"Not bad, Caleb Grayson," Mr. Pierce finally said. "Maybe you'll fit in here with the rest after all." He smiled faintly before continuing. "One place you can improve is by internalizing some of that rage and hatred toward your partner. You're aiming for the movies, right? In that case, it doesn't need to come out so explosively. For a stage play, though, your performance was acceptable."

I nodded, accepting the critique. It was fair. Stage and screen acting differed in many ways, and the most obvious difference was how exaggerated emotions and expressions needed to be on stage.

"As for you, Susan, please don't go hitting your co-stars to begin with. That's an easy way to make sure no one works with you in the future."

I laughed at that as Susan's face colored.

"I said I was sorry!"

After critiquing us a bit more, mostly Susan, Mr. Pierce let us step down into the viewing area as the next pair of performers took the stage.

UCLA had one of the best theater programs in the US. The only real problem was getting admitted. I'd lucked out when, just as I applied, one of their students transferred out. I was called in for an impromptu audition, where I sang a theater song and performed a scene. I didn't think I did as well as I could have with proper preparation, but thanks to my real-world acting experience, I was given priority over the others and offered the spot immediately.

Ideally, I would've had to wait a few months for the new session to begin. Since I'd finished all my credit requirements for the year early, I was allowed to start participating ahead of schedule. I wouldn't receive any credits for attending this theater class, though. From the next academic year onward, assuming I continued my education at all, I planned to drop my major in international relations and focus primarily on theater.

By that point, I already knew more about international relations and geopolitics than most of my professors.

The same went for linguistics. I'd learned more than enough languages during my time as a diplomat to justify wasting time on it now.

"Dude, that was awesome," the guy sitting beside me said, giving me a high five. "I could never do what you just did. Can you show me your technique?"

Some guys are just born lucky. I've been busting my ass here to become a half-decent actor, and this guy walks in halfway through the term and nails his scene on the first try. He probably doesn't even realize what Mr. Pierce's 'not bad' really means. He hasn't said that to me in two years. And this chump gets it in two days. It's so unfair.

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. He wore such an easygoing smile that, if I hadn't heard his thoughts, I probably would've befriended him. The deceit in Hollywood was no different from what you'd find in the White House.

"I don't have a technique," I lied. "I just do what comes naturally to me."

Of course I had a technique. Every actor does. Diplomacy was acting at its core, just dressed up in suits and speeches. Still, I'd worked relentlessly over the last two weeks to sharpen my skills, and judging by the jealousy around me, the effort had paid off.

"We could practice together, if you'd like," he suggested.

"I'll think about it," I said, relenting. There was no point in making him hate me more than he already did.

"Justin, Meg, it's your turn now," Mr. Pierce called out.

The guy beside me, now identified as Justin, stood up.

As I watched him act on stage, I couldn't help thinking about how toxic Hollywood was. And I wasn't even actively auditioning for anything right now. Just being in the vicinity turned people nasty. I couldn't have asked for a better ability if I wanted to navigate these murky waters and come out on top.

(Break)

"I understand that Tanya's busy," I said slowly, enunciating each word. "But it's been two weeks since I've been trying to contact her. The least she could do is give me five minutes and tell me to my face that she's dropping me, because the last I checked, I'm still contracted to her."

My agent's assistant, Polly, gave me a tight smile, but that didn't stop her thoughts from leaking out.

The nerve of this guy to think Tanya has all the time in the world. She's managing thirty-five clients, most of them fairly well-known. Why would she give this loser even a minute of her day, let alone five?

"Why don't you leave a message with me?" she asked. "I'll take it to her personally and get back to you by tomorrow at the latest."

The problem was, I knew she didn't mean it. In any other situation, I would've looked for another agent, but I had a contract with Tanya and CAA, the agency where she worked and where I was standing right now. I didn't want to burn bridges with the biggest talent agency in Hollywood by firing them outright.

“Listen, Polly,” I said, lowering my voice. “I understand Tanya’s clientele has grown a lot since I took a break for a few years. So if not her, I wouldn’t mind working with a junior agent. Please help me out.”

Polly gave me an apologetic look. “I really can’t do anything, Caleb. I work exclusively with Tanya.” Then she lowered her voice and leaned forward. “Don’t tell anyone I said this, but you can get someone else on your own, either within CAA or outside. If you choose CAA, give me your updated résumé and headshots, and I’ll forward them to our talent acquisition department personally.”

“CAA doesn’t need to ‘acquire’ me,” I countered. “I’m already their talent.”

She shrugged carelessly. “That’s how things work around here. If you don’t land an audition for a year, you’re put on the back burner, so to speak. After two years, you’re removed from the flame entirely, contract or not. You’ll need to start from scratch.”

That was bullshit. I knew it. She knew it too. I wasn’t some commodity. I was a human being. Then again, to a talent agency, actors were commodities.

I turned to walk away, but something made me stop.

The door to Tanya’s cabin opened, and out walked Quentin Tarantino.

“I’ll make sure your next salary’s even better, Quentin,” Tanya said jovially to the future Oscar-winning writer-director.

I was momentarily speechless. Tarantino had made so many great movies over the course of his career that even now, I couldn’t decide which one was his best. He outdid himself every damn time.

Needless to say, I was a big fan.

Before I could do or say anything, my eyes locked with Tanya’s, and I almost stepped toward her on instinct.

Great. That’s exactly what I needed. This guy again. How thick can someone be? Doesn’t he get the hint that I’m not interested in representing him anymore? I have better clients now. Clients who are actually getting work.

I stopped mid-step. Anger surged through me, though I didn’t let it show on my face. Instead, I turned to Polly and said clearly, “Tell Tanya that since she clearly doesn’t have time for me, I’ll be looking for other agents.”

My voice was loud enough for the woman in question to hear me directly. Even Quentin Tarantino glanced in my direction with curiosity, though Tanya redirected his attention back to her within moments.

The nerve. As if he has the clout to fire me. I wouldn't even look at a worthless actor like him.

Outwardly, a polite smile was plastered on her face as she continued talking to Quentin Tarantino.

I ignored her and walked out. It was better to leave as quickly as possible before I caused a scene. Reputation was everything in Hollywood, and I didn't want to earn a bad one right from the start.

I stopped in front of the elevator and pressed the button to go down.

I hate these fucking talent agents. Every single one of them is cut from the same cloth. Vultures, all of them. This guy had the right idea, firing Tanya so brazenly. Must be well-connected.

I suppressed the urge to laugh and instead offered him my hand. "Hi, Mr. Tarantino. I'm a huge fan of [Reservoir Dogs]."

His eyes lit up immediately as he shook my hand. "Oh? You recognize me? I didn't think most people cared about directors."

"Maybe most laymen don't," I said, "but I'm an actor, so I pay attention to directors. I know your next film, [Pulp Fiction], is premiering at the [Cannes Film Festival] in competition for the Palme d'Or. I'm really looking forward to it. John Travolta was one of my favorite actors growing up, so it'll be amazing to see him work with you."

Tarantino puffed up with pride. "Thank you. [Pulp Fiction] will be my masterpiece. I already have a feeling about it."

He was undoubtedly a great director, but there was no denying he had a bit of an ego.

The elevator arrived just then, and we both stepped inside.

"If you're an actor, have I seen you in anything?" Tarantino asked, genuinely curious.

"I'm not that big yet," I said humbly. "I don't know if you've seen that show on HBO called [Dream On]. I had a recurring role on it."

He thought for a moment before his face lit up. "Of course. I remember you. You were much younger back then, if I'm remembering right."

"I was," I confirmed.

"So what are you doing now?" he asked eagerly.

"Looking for a job," I said honestly. "Tanya, as you just saw, didn't arrange a single meeting with me in the last two weeks despite repeated requests, and now she's actively avoiding me. So I fired her. I'd prefer an agent who actually gives time to their clients."

Quentin Tarantino nodded in agreement. "I get it. Before I directed [Reservoir Dogs], I tried my hand at acting. Now Tanya's been subtly pushing me to chase more roles instead of focusing on making movies."

Knowing how much of a cinephile he was, I decided to ask something that might actually help me.

"Hey, Quentin, since you're a filmmaker, you must've seen a lot of movies, right? Can you suggest a few I could watch to improve my acting? I've seen most of the classics, like [Citizen Kane], [A Streetcar Named Desire], [Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf], [Casablanca], and the like, but what else would you recommend?"

The moment I asked for movie recommendations, his eyes lit up like I'd just asked him the best question in the world.

"Why, of course I can!" he grinned. "It depends on the genre you're interested in. If romance is your thing, I'd recommend [Annie Hall]. It's the perfect movie, in my opinion."

"Of course. I've seen it a million times. It's great," I agreed.

He nodded enthusiastically. "If you prefer comedy, I'd recommend [It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World]..."

By then, we were already down in the lobby, but we were so absorbed in the conversation that neither of us had noticed how much time had passed. Love him or hate him, you couldn't deny that Quentin was incredibly knowledgeable when it came to movies.

Reading his thoughts, I could also tell he didn't have any ulterior motives. He was genuinely excited to help and to talk about films.

"Shit," Quentin said suddenly, glancing at the time. "I've got a meeting with Miramax about [Pulp Fiction]." He straightened up. "It was nice talking to you, Caleb. I've got a feeling you've got a very bright future ahead of you."

I grimaced. "Thanks. Though I still need to find a new agent first."

"Why?" he asked. "Just go to the Screen Actors Guild office and see what roles are available for your age range. Start auditioning for anything you can get, commercials, corporate films, whatever. It won't be easy, but nobody hands you a big role on a platter unless you're extremely well-connected. Trust me, no good agent's going to give you the time of day until you prove you're worth the effort. Hustle. Shake things up. Get roles on your own merit, then apply for an agent. That's what I did."

That was surprisingly solid advice. And from his thoughts, I knew he wasn't lying.

"Alright, I'll do that," I promised. "Thank you, Quentin."

"Don't mention it," he said, giving a casual wave before heading toward his car.

In the future, I'd find him to be quite egotistical, especially in interviews. Right now, though, he seemed pretty chill.

(Break)

"Uuhh!" I grunted with great effort as I lifted the barbell one last time before reracking it.

"Holy moly. That was out of this world, Cal!" Hugo, my brother-in-law, bumped fists with me excitedly. I had a feeling that if I hadn't been drenched in sweat, he might've hugged me too.

I nodded, lacking the strength to reply, and grabbed my water bottle, taking several deep gulps.

"How the heck did you do it?" he asked. "From never lifting weights to pushing a hundred pounds in just two weeks is insane. And that new diet of yours, protein for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Tell me honestly, are you taking something on the side to help you out?"

That was probably my Perfect Health ability, the one I'd been gifted upon my death. I'd started with ten pounds, but unlike most beginners, I never felt that initial soreness. In fact, I didn't even feel the need to take rest days. I could probably train for hours every day if I wanted to. The only reason I didn't was because my schedule was packed right now.

"Why are you censoring yourself?" I asked instead. "Miles isn't here."

He shrugged. "Habit. You'll get it when you have kids of your own. Now don't change the topic. What are you taking?"

"Nothing," I insisted. "Guess I just have a higher metabolism."

He looked at me skeptically. "That's not how metabolism works. I'm a doctor. I'd know."

"Then dig through those medical textbooks of yours and find an explanation," I said. "I can assure you I'm all natural. The only supplements I take are whey and creatine, and you take those too."

Judging by the twitch in his eye, I was tempted to read his thoughts, but I stopped myself. I'd made a decision not to snoop on family. That was a boundary I wouldn't cross again.

"So you're heading straight to the hospital from here?" I asked, changing the subject.

"Yeah," he nodded. "What about you? UCLA?"

"No," I shook my head. "I don't have classes until the afternoon. I've got some stuff to take care of at the SAG office. After that, I'll look into different living arrangements."

"Cal," he said, meeting my eyes, "you're family. Sure, we had our disagreements back then, but that happens. Aria and I meant it when we said you can stay with us as long as you want. And if you really want a new place, you can do it next academic session. It'll be hard to find a roommate when the college year ends in a month. Not to mention, having you around makes Aria really happy, especially with her second pregnancy."

"Thanks," I said sincerely, though I still resolved to keep looking for a place. Aria and Hugo were clearly overcompensating for how little we'd spoken over the past year.

I didn't want anyone's charity. I might not have a lot of money, but I still had some left in my trust fund from my time as a child actor. Now that I was an adult, I had full access to it. It helped that my parents had never taken a dime from my acting income and were still paying for my degree. Though I wasn't sure how long that would last once they found out about the new course I was pursuing.

"Come on," Hugo said, snapping me out of my thoughts. "Let's go. I'm getting late for my morning shift."

(Break)

"Hey," I said with a smile to the beautiful girl sitting at the reception desk. "I'm Caleb. I'm looking for some acting jobs. It's my first time here. Can you tell me where I should go to look for them?"

"Do you have your SAG card, Caleb?" she asked monotonously. It wasn't even noon yet, and she already sounded bored out of her mind.

"Yes," I said, smiling as I pulled it out. The card proudly displayed my name, Caleb Grayson.

I might've had the card, but the bitter truth was that I'd never actually used it. My TV job on [Dream On] had been covered under AFTRA, the union for television and radio artists. Eventually, AFTRA and the SAG would merge to form SAG-AFTRA, but for now, they were still separate. It hadn't been cheap either. I'd paid \$1500 to join SAG and \$1000 for AFTRA, not to mention the annual fees to continue my membership.

The entry requirements for SAG were notoriously strict, deliberately designed to make things difficult for small-time actors. Thankfully, there was an exception for AFTRA members. Since the two unions were sister organizations, they allowed each other's members to register with relative ease.

To this day, I didn't know why I was still paying the annual renewal fees when I hadn't even auditioned seriously in two years.

“Alright,” she said. “Just go down the corridor, and you’ll see the board with all our open casting calls.”

Poor guy’s gonna be disappointed when he actually sees the board.

I frowned but didn’t say anything as I followed her directions. Sure enough, a massive board stretched along the wall, covered with listings for open union casting calls.

A few other people were already scanning the postings, so I joined them quietly. The roles were neatly organized, females on the right and males on the left. Even among the male roles, everything was sorted by age range, starting with toddlers and going all the way up to seventy and beyond.

And true to the receptionist’s words, it was a disappointing sight. The more I read, the more I realized that every opportunity listed was for commercials, short films, or the occasional corporate video. There weren’t any speaking roles at all. Sure, there were casting calls for background artists in several mid- to big-budget films, but I had no intention of becoming an extra.

It was frustrating.

Standing there, I remembered having the same realization in my first life, back in the year I didn’t go to college. It had been so long ago that I’d almost forgotten about it.

This was why agents were indispensable when it came to securing real roles. In the pre-internet era, most casting directors contacted major agencies directly for significant parts. That was how talent management companies like Creative Artists Agency, International Creative Management, and others had been able to push their packaging services onto producers. They provided entire casts and crews from their client rosters, from directors and cinematographers to writers, sound specialists, and even background extras. The only exception was the lead acting roles.

Maybe dropping CAA hadn’t been the smartest move after all.

After browsing for a while longer, I finally settled on the only listing that seemed remotely doable for me. It was a TV commercial for a fast-food chain, looking for males in their late teens to early twenties. They hadn’t mentioned which chain it was, but I noted it down anyway.

I copied their contact information before stepping aside to give others a chance to look.

It would’ve been so convenient to have a cellphone right now. I could’ve called them immediately. Unfortunately, it would still take a few years for the technology to become practical and affordable. Right now, only those brick-sized phones existed, heavy enough to kill someone if you swung them hard enough. Not to mention the ridiculous operating costs. I still remembered the first phone I’d owned in my previous life.

I'm fucked. If things keep going like this, I won't be able to afford living in LA. Maybe I shouldn't have dropped out of Harvard. Fucking Ben. Why did I listen to him? What am I supposed to tell Mom and Dad when I go back?

I stopped mid-step the moment I heard that.

After some trial and error, I'd figured out that even when I wasn't actively listening, my mind-reading ability could still trigger if someone nearby was experiencing intense emotions or thoughts. That had to be what just happened here.

I looked around, trying to figure out who was having such depressive thoughts. After a few moments, I spotted a man a little older than me, sitting alone in a corner. His head was bowed, and a crumpled newspaper lay on the table in front of him.

I wasn't a goody-two-shoes who helped everyone out of the goodness of his heart, but this felt different. It was one thing to notice someone looking sad. It was another when the person was practically screaming inside my head.

I approached him cautiously and placed a hand on his shoulder.

"Hey, you alright, buddy?" I asked in a calm, soothing voice.

He looked up, and the moment he did, I recognized him.

"Hey, I know you. You're Matt Damon, right?"

He blinked in confusion. "You recognize me? Really?"

That's when I realized my mistake. It was still 1994. There was no way I should've recognized him so easily. I immediately focused my powers to read his thoughts.

He must've seen [School Ties]. But remembering my name? That's a first.

"Yeah," I said quickly. "I saw you in [School Ties]. You were great in it."

It was a smooth lie. I hadn't actually seen the film, so I had no idea what it was about or who else was in it.

Damon smiled bitterly.

At least someone thinks that. Critics tore my performance apart.

"Thank you," he said, ignoring his own thoughts. "Are you an actor too?"

"I am," I nodded. "Mostly TV so far. I'm trying to break into film now. You know how it goes."

"I do," he said with a small grin. "So what brings you here? TV commercials?"

I frowned and glanced down at the notes I'd scribbled earlier. "I didn't realize there'd be nothing but TV commercials here. I fired my agent recently and didn't know how else to look for roles, so I thought I'd check this place out. What about you?"

He picked up the crumpled newspaper, smoothed it out, and handed it to me. "Here. Backstage is what you want if you're trying to make it in Hollywood. It's a weekly publication, and it lists most open casting calls. I'm done with it, so you can have it."

I glanced through the paper, and sure enough, it was packed with listings for actors. I really needed more actor friends to remind me of things I'd taken for granted back when I was acting as a kid.

"Thanks," I said, then hesitated. "But are you okay? When I noticed you earlier, you didn't look very happy."

Matt Damon sighed. "What's there to be happy about? You know how it is being a struggling actor. I'm running out of money. I still haven't landed a meaningful role in any film. I had a massive argument with my best friend, someone I've known since childhood, and now I don't even know what I'm doing with my life. I'm beyond frustrated. The worst part is, I had it all. I was this close to finishing my bachelor's degree at Harvard, but I dropped out because that same friend told me to. And now the asshole's saying it's all my fault for leaving!"

Whoa. The guy had some serious baggage. He'd just unloaded his entire life story on a stranger he'd met less than five minutes ago.

By the time he finished, he was practically panting, all that pent-up emotion finally spilling out. A few people nearby shot us curious looks, but I ignored them. Helping out a future superstar felt more important.

"Feeling better?" I asked after a moment.

"Sorry," he said immediately. "I had a lot on my chest."

"It's fine. I don't mind," I replied. "I get the frustration. I'm debating whether to drop out of UCLA myself."

"Don't," he said firmly. "It's not worth it."

I hummed noncommittally. Now that I'd secured admission into the theater program, I didn't plan on dropping out unless a career-defining role came along. Small roles were fine, but they weren't worth risking my college life over. Besides, it was only two more years. I could power through that.

Then an idea struck me.

I looked at him. "What are you doing right now?"

He shrugged. "Trying to decide whether to stay here or go back home."

"Come with me to UCLA," I offered. "I've got some theater classes this afternoon. Since the term's almost over, the instructors are pretty relaxed. They'd probably let you sit in as an observer for a class or two. You could even share some of your acting experience. I'm sure everyone'd enjoy that."

He eyed me skeptically. "We just met."

"I'm not asking you to marry me," I said with a grin. "You just look like a decent guy having a terrible day. If I can help even a little, I'd like to. So what do you say?"

He thought it over for a few seconds, then nodded. "I've always wanted to see how top colleges handle theater classes." He stood up. "Alright. You convinced me. Let's go."

As we walked toward our cars, he suddenly stopped. "By the way, what's your name?"

I chuckled. "Caleb Grayson. But my friends call me Cal."