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The Actress and the Playwright

Ruthanna Kern

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Amanda

That man, the one with the furrowed brow and a cell phone to his ear speaking a mile a minute, was Elliott Wilden, and he was getting the news from his coworker at the toilet paper manufacturing company that his secretary, Jimmy, had contracted pneumonia. And that woman, she walked slower than the rest of the crowd with a slight limp on her left leg, her name was Michelle Conway, and she had broken her ankle while rollerblading with her two excitable nephews.

Amanda Caldwell sat on a park bench in the town center with her legs crossed, right over left, shivered, and watched the people walk by. There were so many different people with so many possible intriguing stories circling Amanda as she sipped a Chai Latte and observed the world. She jotted down the new people in her old fashioned, blue tattered notebook with the silver lace detailing where she kept her stories, then glanced back up at the bustling town.

Besides the people, Amanda could also see Pendaly Town Hall, the gray skies, and her breath. She could hardly say that her favorite thing about her new home was the Minnesota winters. In fact, she wouldn't say that at all. She definitely couldn't say her new school was her favorite either, no offense to Pendaly High. Amanda shivered again, only partly from the cold as her phone started playing "Defying Gravity."

Great. My "Stop daydreaming and walk to school already!" alarm, Amanda thought. Just perfect.

Savannah

Savannah Emory regretted having taken a pass on those crappy gloves she had found at GoodWill for 10 cents as she walked onto Pendaly High's property. When it was this cold, even crappy gloves were better than no gloves. Savannah bolted toward the school's front door, accidentally elbowing a few stragglers to get inside quicker. Who cared anyway? They were trying to be late to first period, why not help them out a bit? Savannah laughed and some of the kids gave her a funny look, that girl who had no friends to laugh with. But Savannah saw those looks and she laughed some more. She laughed all the way to geometry until Mrs. Peabody told her to stop.

Mrs. Peabody had been teaching at this school since Savannah's mother was born, and Savannah could hardly do the math to figure out her age, but she couldn't really do math that well anyway. That might have been a contributing factor in Mrs. Peabody's iron stare, and then Savannah wanted to laugh more, but she didn't. Savannah knew how to control her actions, all good actresses did, and Savannah had every intention of being a good actress.

"The Geometric Mean Altitude Theorem..." Mrs. Peabody began to lecture. Savannah had thought there was no way to make geometry more boring, but Mrs. Peabody had found one. Her voice was so monotonous that Savannah often felt tempted to give her an acting lesson on variety of tone and its positive effect on teenagers' interest levels.

"Who can tell me what this means?"

Nobody responded.

"Who can tell me what a mean is?"

Nothing.

"Altitude? Theorem? Do any of you even know what geometric means? It's November! Midterms are in a month! I won't guarantee that I will offer a make-up test after each and every one of you fail!" Mrs. Peabody looked as if she had never been this disappointed.

Savannah sighed. This was going to be a long class.

Amanda

Amanda pretended to be paying attention to biology. She wasn't. She was scribbling in the second section of her notebook. She wasn't making up stories for the people she saw anymore. Amanda was new to Pendaly High, but she already felt as though she understood her classmates. They were all so showy, so loud. Amanda couldn't make up stories about people she understood.

The second section of her beloved notebook was where Amanda wrote her play. She couldn't even remember why or how or even when she had started writing, it just sort of came to her. Maybe writing was Amanda's coping mechanism. Maybe making up stories about people helped her to forget about her own. Or something like that.

But Amanda never thought of it that way, because she loved writing and she poured all of her emotions, the ones she didn't feel comfortable expressing out loud, into her play. This play was Amanda's masterpiece, and sometimes she just started writing and couldn't stop.

“Miss Caldwell!” Amanda looked up at Mr. Harrison, the only teacher in all of America that still insisted on calling students by their last names. “What are you working on? Am I right to guess that it is not the science assignment?”

“Yes, Mr. Harrison,” Amanda admitted, somewhat meekly.

“Then, Miss Caldwell, I must request that you hand me that book of yours immediately.” Amanda stiffened. She looked at Mr. Harrison, her eyes pleading and beginning to water.

“Please sir, please. I can’t give this to you.” Amanda’s voice was beginning to break, weaken. “I just can’t!” Amanda loathed feeling weak, and she had no idea why she acting was so childish. She shouldn’t be this protective of an inanimate object, but Amanda couldn’t bring herself to hand the little book over.

“Ooooh, Amanda has a diary!” Vicky Jackson squealed. Her voice turned honey smooth as she suggested, “Mr. Harrison, you should read it aloud to all of us. I’m sure Amanda wouldn’t mind.”

“No! No, please, no,” Amanda whimpered.

“Who do you like, Amanda? Who? Does that book say? Can I borrow it for a second? I promise it will only be a second.” Then Amanda felt them, hands touching her arms, reaching to grab her most precious possession, one of the things she loved most in this world. She didn’t even remember her piercing scream. Or pushing Vicky off her. Or running out of the classroom with her notebook. Or slamming the door.

At this point it was just Amanda’s instinct to run when she felt threatened. She ran down the hallway without a clue where she was going, she just needed to get out of this school. She needed to go. There was something in her way; she couldn’t quite tell how far away it was through her tears. Amanda found out when she crashed, fell, and was helped to her feet by a somewhat tall, red-headed girl who, with true concern in her eyes asked Amanda,

“Are you okay?”

Savannah

Savannah hadn’t seen the girl coming; she was a rocket as she turned the corner and practically flew forward. Savannah had fallen over along with the girl, but she was quicker to recover. When Savannah reached to help this girl up, she could feel her hands trembling.

“Are you okay?” she questioned once more.

The girl didn't respond at first, she just wiped the tears from her eyes. She had long, dark brown hair that looked too thick for its hair tie. It was the type of hair that would be really fun to braid. The girl's eyes were also brown, a warm shade of brown that seemed inviting and was set to contrast against the rest of the girl's upset features. There was something magical about those eyes, and Savannah felt the need to stare at them, to explore. She was a kind person, Savannah was sure of it, and she wanted to know more about her. *Sorry Mrs. Peabody*, Savannah thought, *I might not be coming back from the bathroom any time soon.*

"Come on." Savannah led the girl to a window seat at the end of the hallway, and they both sat down on the specially designed Pendaly Penguins pillow.

The girl managed to stutter, "I am so sorry if I shocked you or hurt you or... I'm just sorry."

"There's absolutely nothing to be sorry about, I'm fine." Savannah felt her concern grow. This girl's voice was so scared, so weak. And Savannah detected something in her tone that made Savannah think she was ashamed. "And you haven't answered my question yet."

Amanda thought she saw the girl smile, but only for half a second. Still, half a second was a start. The girl answered, "I'm fine," her voice a bit more steady.

"I don't believe you."

"Alright, I'm not fine."

"Okay. Why?"

"A lot of reasons?"

"That's fair. I'm Savannah Emory. I'm a freshman. You must be one too, though I don't think we have any classes together because if we did, I would know your name. What is your name?" *It would have been impossible to forget this girl.*

"Amanda Caldwell and, yeah, I am a freshman. We don't have any classes together, but I think we have the same lunch."

"Lunch! Now I want lunch! Lunch is a truly delicious thing." Amanda looked like she was beginning to defrost, almost. "I definitely think lunch is the most important meal of the day, so take that 'Team Breakfast!'"

And that's what broke her, but in a good way. Savannah knew that Amanda wasn't broken like she was before, the painful kind. It was that

like the dam Amanda had built was falling down, and all of the water was rushing through as Amanda laughed, "I'm 'Team Lunch' too."

Savannah waited for a few seconds before asking, "So who are you?" Savannah was really curious about this girl. Savannah was curious about a lot of things, but Amanda somehow piqued her interest. Savannah decided that she would have to spend a considerable amount of time with Amanda, but only to make sure she was really fine, of course.

"I'm Amanda."

"I know that part."

"The rest is a pretty long story."

"Great. I love stories."

Amanda

Amanda wasn't quite sure why she liked Savannah. Normally people who talked as much and had as many emotions as this girl stressed Amanda out, but Savannah wasn't doing that to hide who she was, this was really her. Also, Amanda could tell that Savannah had read her. In one glance at a girl lying in the middle of a school hallway with blotchy eyes and tear stained cheeks, Savannah had seen what no one else in this school had bothered to look for in the last three months. She'd somehow known that Amanda wasn't that miserable shadow of a girl. She was so much more. She was a hurt person, but still a person. Amanda desperately wanted to know how Savannah had discovered that, and what she had been through to be able to recognize Amanda's multitudes of emotions on sight.

"Well?" Savannah tilted her head playfully. Her cherry-red hair was just past her shoulders, and it was as wavy as hair could get without being labelled "curly." Savannah's eyes were greener than Amanda had thought possible, but Amanda was already aware that Savannah was someone yet to be studied to understand completely.

"I guess we'll start at the beginning," began Amanda. "I was born in London—"

"Wow, that is really cool. Why don't you have an accent?"

"I said was born there, not that I grew up in England. My family moved to Virginia when I was six months old. I'm pretty sure that my mom's job made us move to America. She was a banker. My dad taught French to high schoolers. I had two sisters, Natasha who was five years older than me and Rosalie who was two years younger than her. We lived in Richmond until I was eight. Then, they all died. I moved

in with my grandfather in Philadelphia. He died this summer, so I moved to super-cold Pendaly, Minnesota, to live with my aunt. And now I am here.”

Amanda wasn't sure how Savannah would respond to this. She ran through what felt like a hundred possible reactions. Somehow, Savannah did the only thing Amanda didn't expect her to do, she reached forward and took Amanda's hand. She gently squeezed it, then spoke in a voice that was confident, but not too forceful. Her full lips formed a soothing response that was not mournful or mocking and was somehow exactly the sound that Amanda had always needed to hear: “That sounds pretty hard.”

Then Savannah wrapped her arms around Amanda and Amanda began to cry. Not the fierce tears that had been torn out of her earlier that day, but a softer, calmer cry. Amanda thought it was that last bit of sadness inside of her needing to seep out before she could be the real, happy Amanda again.

Savannah

At lunch that day, Savannah found Amanda sitting by herself in the farthest corner of the cafeteria which was closest to the large, panoramic window that showed the school's powder-dusted courtyard. It had snowed lightly the night before, about three inches. Savannah's mom always claimed, “Pendaly only stops for more than eight and a half feet of snow, we ain't no wimps!” Savannah didn't exactly agree with her mother's philosophy, but a few inches never hurt anyone.

Amanda wasn't looking out the window, though. She was writing ferociously in a small, sky blue, well-loved journal that she had been carrying the day before. “Whatcha working on?” Savannah smiled as she dropped into the seat next to her new friend and placed her spaghetti with meatballs on the table.

“My...” Amanda grunted that word out, trying not to break the trance that had her scribbling so productively, “play.”

“You're writing a play? Of course you are writing a play. That's so amazing! What's it about? You know, I'm an actress, or I want to be one. I'm mostly self-taught, but I was Angel Two in my church's Christmas pageant. And not to brag, but I think I did better than Angels One and Three. They were twins and they peed their pants right before opening night, so I went on as Angels One, Two and Three! I

had memorized their parts during rehearsals and, if I do say so myself, I did a wonderful job!”

Amanda chuckled, “How old were you again?”

“Six,” Savannah admitted and they both burst into laughter. *Well at least I'm not laughing alone anymore*, Savannah thought. She could not help the smile of pure happiness that appeared on her skin, and was glad to see that Amanda was glowing too.

“To answer your original question, my play is about an orphan who wants to be a Broadway dancer and actress. It’s about her struggles and how she overcomes them and becomes a star. I’ve been working on it for a few years now.”

“Really? That’s a lot of work. How long is your script?”

“Really. And it’s about an hour, I think. I’ve never actually shown it to anyone or even told anyone about it before. It’s sorta a one-woman show and I’m no actress, so I’ve always just thought of it as a writing project and nothing more than that.”

Amanda crossed out a few words, replacing them with more interesting ones, and Savannah studied her while she worked. Amanda was so focused, so intent on her script that Savannah didn’t want to break her out of something that brought her joy. So, she just ate her spaghetti and marveled at how a single hair tie was holding up that messy bun. Later she would have to ask Amanda what brand she bought. That strength was seriously impressive.

“Savie, what do you think of...” Amanda murmured, then trailed off, back into the depths of her mind.

“What did you just call me?”

“Oh! I’m sorry.” Amanda looked nervous, scared even.

But Savannah realized that having a friend was so new to Amanda that she was apprehensive to cross a line and offend, possibly lose, her.

“No, no, no. No more apologizing. I just like that name, Savie was it? My name is the absolute worst. There are hardly any cute nicknames! I know there is Anna or Annie, but my parents obviously don’t know how to name a kid because Anne is my middle name. I can’t be Savannah “Annie” Anne Emory, but I like Savie. It makes me sound like I’m tech or math savvy, which I’m not. You could ask Mrs. Peabody.”

“You have Mrs. Peabody too! I’m not a math girl, but I don’t normally hate it. She makes me feel like I do sometimes.”

“Oh my god, same. You know, she gave me detention for missing the second half of class. Outrageous, right? And as for math, I won’t say I like it. I’ll say I don’t not hate math!”

“Gotta love those double negatives, Savie. Actually, there are double negatives in math and English!”

“Yay! Words! Speaking of words,” Savannah laughed at her own pun. Amanda might have rolled her eyes. After she gathered herself, Savannah continued, “What should your designated nickname be?”

“My aunt calls me Amanda. My sisters called me Mandy when I was little.” Even though she was talking about a tragic part of her past, Savannah noticed that there wasn’t a note of sadness in Amanda’s words. She looked happy to remember that sweet pet name that had been hers and theirs, before things got complicated. Savannah didn’t know what had happened, but she didn’t push Amanda. She knew her friend would open up when she was ready.

“Mandy it is!” Savannah cried triumphantly, as if she were announcing that a contestant had just won a free car on a game show, while toasting with a fork full of spaghetti.

“And Mandy it will forever be!” Mandy continued, mimicking Savannah’s tone and actions.

With a more serious voice, Savannah declared, “So, Mandy, when can I read your play?”

Amanda

“Mandy, Mandy, Mandy, Mandy, Mandy, this is incredible!” Savie exclaimed as she joined Amanda at their lunch table for the third day in a row. Amanda had given her the script, with a lack of reluctance that kind of shocked Amanda. The last time someone had tried to take Amanda’s book, it hadn’t ended too well. When Amanda, escorted by Savie, had returned to Mr. Harrison’s classroom, he had given her detention. So Savie had given herself detention, even though she already had to serve Mrs. Peabody’s on Friday, and used the time to pester Amanda into letting her read the play. Savie was very persuasive.

“I mean, you’re a genius writer, I didn’t even know that was possible at fourteen. And this character, she’s like a perfect balance of funny, and emotional, and smart, and charismatic, but not too overpowering. Side note, can you tutor me in English? And the story is just so beautiful and motivating!”

“I thought I had done a good job, but thanks for confirming!” Amanda teased. Savie pretended to be offended that her opinion was unnecessary, but Amanda could tell that it was pretend, so she grinned and ate her salad.

“No, seriously, Mandy,” Savie’s voice had changed. It hadn’t sounded like empty praise before, but now it was definitely genuine. “You should stage this. You could direct it. I could be your assistant director and run around yelling at everyone who ignored your orders and—”

“Nope,” Amanda cut Savie off.

“Why not?” Savie looked a little hurt, “This is brilliant, you’re brilliant. Why wouldn’t you want to present it to the world. Or at least, the world of Pendaly? I’m not lying just to make you feel good, I swear.”

“That wasn’t what I was saying no about,” Amanda’s eyes were shining even as her friend’s became more confused.

“Then what? I don’t have to yell at people if you don’t want me to?”

“You won’t be yelling at anyone, because you are going to be the star.” The look that passed over Savie’s features was priceless, but not in the way Amanda had expected. Why was it that this girl was constantly surprising her? And why was Amanda not upset and scared every time Savie did something unexpected? Those were just two of the many questions that Amanda was unable to answer.

Savie looked raw for a second, then her emerald eyes glazed over into a stare of complete denial, “No.”

“Now I’m the one asking why not, Savie. You’d be—”

“No. I can’t possibly be this character. She is so much more complex than Angels One, Two, and Three. I have to face it, I’m not an actress. At least not yet.”

“Then my play will be your first major role. And I will not take no for an answer, Savie. I haven’t seen you act and I don’t need to, I already know that you are the perfect person for the role. You are probably the most charismatic person I’ve ever met, and I’ve known you for less than four days,” Amanda insisted.

There was something in Savie’s eyes that started to frighten Amanda, because Savie looked weak for the first time since Amanda had met her. She seemed vulnerable, and Amanda thought that she might have discovered Savie’s kryptonite. Amanda had always wanted her work to be respected and to be taken seriously as an artist, but her life had never revolved around that. Savie was different. Even with her limited ex-

perience, everything depended on her achieving this dream, exactly like the character in Amanda’s play. Amanda almost laughed. Savie had no idea how perfect she was for the role.

“You really think I’m good enough, Mandy? I’ve never been good enough before,” Savie whispered timidly, but there was hope in her words.

“I think you’re so much better than good enough.”

Savie started crying and laughing at the same time, more laughing than crying Amanda noticed, but still both. Then she grabbed Amanda in a hug that somehow managed to be a bear hug even though Savannah really wasn’t any bigger than Amanda. This girl and her constant surprises. Amanda would have laughed, if she could breathe.

“Now, how do we put on this play of mine?” Amanda smiled.

Savannah

“Well,” Savannah released Mandy, then wiped her eyes with the sleeves of her stretchy Christmas sweater. “Pendaly High doesn’t have a Drama Club anymore, so we couldn’t get them to sponsor us. We used to have one of the best in the state. They would put on the most elaborate plays and win awards for their musicals. When I was eight I came to their production of *Into the Woods*. Everyone was so talented and it was so magical, practically everyone in the audience was in tears when they sang “No One is Alone.” But then something changed. The mayor basically ran on an anti-arts campaign and he got elected, so they basically pulled the funding from all of our programs. We only have two art teachers in the entire school and Ms. Davis is out on maternity leave. They didn’t even bother hiring a long-term sub!”

“How is that legal? Are they trying to stunt the creative minds of Pendaly’s youth?” Mandy questioned, confused.

“Yes, exactly that.” Savannah nodded. She was going to figure this out because once she decided to do something, Savannah could hardly sleep until she figured it out. “We do have an auditorium from back when this school had a soul. Do you know any super rich people? Or any super persuasive people? Because we need some of both...”

Savannah knew she was becoming agitated, and Mandy, kind as she was, was trying to settle her, “Where do we start? What’s our first step?” Logic. One thing after another. That would be the only way to get this done. And Savannah really wanted to get this done. She didn’t just want it for herself so she could get a lead role, she was not that self-

ish. When her dad had left, Savannah had watched a lot of videos about dealing with loss, and she knew that Mandy had been through so much more loss than her. She felt that Mandy had written this semi-autobiographically. Savannah wasn't sure if someone could ever fully recover from all of that grief, but she thought that staging this show, sharing it with others, accomplishing something that was so important to her, might help Mandy to heal.

"I think that would be getting permission from the principal. He doesn't like me."

That statement seemed to take Mandy back a little. "Why wouldn't he like you?"

"You could ask him yourself when we go see him to discuss our play. Or you could not." Savannah gestured at the tall man in a black suit and a black tie who was stomping across the cafeteria. Mandy looked confused and raised an eyebrow at Savannah.

"Savannah Emory!" The man was still four tables away but his booming voice seemed to barrel towards Savannah at the speed of light. When he reached his target table he finished, "This is your official reminder that you have detention today."

"Thanks, Jennings. Where do I get to spend my Friday afternoon this time?"

"One of the old storage rooms in the basement. Enjoy your time with the mice." The man didn't smile.

"I sure will! And this is perfect timing, my friend and I were just wondering if we could see the principal. Do you know if he's free?"

"As a matter of fact, he is. I'm sure he'll be very glad to see you." The sarcasm was so obvious that Savannah could almost feel it. The man looked at Mandy's salad, then at the door, "Finish up."

Savannah leaned towards Mandy and whispered, "He meant finish up, fast."

Mandy chuckled, the man glowered, and Savannah smiled, but felt apprehensive. Together, the three of them walked out of the cafeteria, down the hallway to the administration's rooms, and entered the principal's uninviting office.

Amanda

Amanda looked at Savie. She glanced at Principal Branstoll, then back at her friend. It was some sort of stare off between wild animals, like those documentaries about alpha males in nature deciding who

could get the land. Amanda had never seen Savie defiant, but she instinctively knew Savie had two kinds: Principal Branstoll defiant and everyone else defiant. Amanda was very, very glad that she was not the recipient of that glare. She knew that was a position that she never wanted to be in with Savannah. Apparently, Principal Branstoll could only handle it to a point.

“Savannah.”

“Principal Branstoll.”

“Detention again? Your mother will be so disappointed.” His tone was gruff, he grunted out the words. He was sitting behind his desk, but Amanda could still tell that he was short. Really short. She wondered why she had never seen him before. She’d always thought that the man in the suit was the principal. *Oops*, Amanda thought.

“I’m sure she will. Now, my friend has a request to make.” Savie sounded like sugar. No. Honey. Her voice was smooth and sweet and far too much for the principal to stand.

“Does she now?” The principal leaned forward as if he was about to share a life-changing secret. “I’m assuming that she knows I might be tempted to not grant it because of her association with you.”

“Excuse me, sir, I’m sorry,” Amanda interrupted, “but that doesn’t seem entirely fair.”

“So you really do have no idea about Savannah’s past. Or her father. Interesting,” Principal Branstoll snarled. Savie stared at the ground.

Her father? Amanda thought, *What happened to her father?*

Apparently, both the Principal and Savie noticed Amanda’s puzzled reaction, because he glared at her instead of Savie and Savie looked even more mad at him because of it.

“Let me tell you a very interesting story, little girl.” The principal’s tone when he added that last part was meant to belittle Amanda, but she didn’t even blink. Savie, on the other hand, looked like she was going to lunge at the principal. Maybe that was why Jennings moved forward blocking the most direct path to his boss. Amanda hoped that Principal Branstoll wouldn’t anger Savie any further because she knew that Savie couldn’t be stopped if she was furious enough. Nothing would stop her if he hurt Amanda.

“Once upon a time,” Branstoll continued, speaking in a mocking tone that seemed to even annoy Jennings, “There were two happy families. In one, the father was a principal, and his wife was a stay-at-home

mother to the couple's only daughter. They lived very happily. Then, the second family moved next door and ruined their lives. This family also had one daughter, who was a few years older than the other girl, but much meaner and uglier. This father was a writer, and the mother was a drunken wreck who ran the convenience store on the corner, when she wasn't asleep in an alley, of course. Then, one day, the principal came home to find a note that his wife had written, explaining that she and their little girl had left. They had run off with the writer and both of them were hiring divorce lawyers for separations from their current spouses. The principal was very upset. The drunk mother drank some more. One year later, the newly-married couple had a baby boy and the writer's daughter started at the high school where the principal works. The end!"

The principal glowered. Savie grimaced. And Amanda couldn't hide her shock. The story was awful and Savie was very strong for surviving through those hard times. Amanda couldn't even imagine being in Savie's shoes. She was about to comment on the situation when Savie looked at her with wide eyes, a warning.

"So," Savie sounded stronger and smoother now. Amanda was taken aback by her confidence, and mentally congratulated herself for such a wise casting choice. Then she realized that Savie had remembered their purpose. "Amanda Caldwell would like to make a request."

Part of Amanda knew that when Savie had said, "I've never been good enough before," she hadn't been talking about acting. She was talking about her father, and her life. She had scars too, they were different from Amanda's, but they still ran deep. Amanda knew that Savie needed to be up on a stage and under a spotlight. She needed to be a star and be appreciated for it, for who she was, in order for those scars to fade away.

That's why Amanda mustered her best fake smile and began, "Yes, Principal Branstoll. I was wondering if I could put on a play I have written here. I would need use of your auditorium and some funding, but I assure you it will not be much. All I need is some time and I can put on a show like this school has never seen before."

"Will Savannah be involved?" The principal looked intrigued.

Savie shook her head, trying to stop Amanda from responding, "Yes she will." Amanda had thought that would make the principal immediately reject the proposal, but it had the opposite effect.

“All right. You can take whatever money or resources you need. Jennings will handle the funds, of course.” Jennings nodded as if it was his most solemn duty as the principal added, “Today is November 30th. You have three weeks, your opening night is December 21st.”

The principal beamed because he thought that putting Savannah Emory on that quick of a deadline would scare her, or make her rush and ruin the show. But Amanda smiled because he didn’t know Savie or that a little thing like time could never stop her from achieving her dreams. Amanda looked over at her friend, whose eyes were shining, and whispered, “We got this.”

Savannah

“The great thing about this show is that we don’t need that many other people!” Savannah announced as she strolled down the stairs to her assigned room. Mandy followed shortly behind. Savannah knew that Mandy was a better student than she was, and that the detention she got for running out of class after that meanie Vicky Jackson touched her was her first. Therefore, she did not fully understand the Pendaly High detention policy. But Savannah could recite it. After five detentions, a student punishment became cleaning the basement. With the mice, of course.

“Are you saying I should be proud of myself for not writing a show with a twenty person ensemble?” Mandy joked. Savannah stopped, turned and looked at her straight in the eyes.

“Yes. That was very forward-thinking of you.” Savannah complimented in a proper British accent that made Mandy try to hold in a laugh. She failed. She had reached the bottom of the stairwell so Savannah look at the little turquoise tag attached to the brass key and read, “Room B14.”

“Right there!” Mandy seemed happy that she had been the first to spot their destination as she pulled Savie down the corridor, then stepped aside so Savannah could unlock the door. “Open sesame!”

“You know that’s not really how it works, right?” Savannah giggled and inserted the key.

“I know,” Mandy confirmed, “but sometimes a girl likes to believe in magic.”

Savannah winced when she turned the key. It fit, but the sound of metal on metal rang out in a large screech as the door seemed to protest being opened. When Savannah pushed harder and gave it abso-

lutely no say in the matter, it submitted, but not without one final creak. The room that lay behind was beautiful, in a chaotic way. Savannah had always figured that the school couldn't just erase its theatre program. But she never thought that they had kept it all in an enormous room stacked nearly to the ceilings with treasures. Savannah walked forward as if in a trance. Like there was a magnet at the center of the room that way pulling her into the space, towards the legacy that had been abandoned, like her.

"This place. It is like a theatre graveyard," Mandy whispered in awe, "I've never really been one for graveyards but this is amazing."

"I can't believe it. How did I not know this was here? I was obsessed with the Pendaly High Theater Company, like really, really obsessed." Savannah's mouth hung open as she reached down to pick up a program, coated in dust. She pulled on the sleeve of her Penguins Pride sweatshirt to uncover the words beneath the years. It was for "Into the Woods," 2012.

"Do you think we could use this stuff?" Mandy asked, spinning slowly to fully absorb the atmosphere, while watching her feet to make sure she didn't trip.

"Branstoll did give us a chaperone and limit on money..." Savannah trailed off.

"But he never specified which resources we could use and which were off limits..." Mandy continued musing.

"So, technically, we can use anything we want from this room," Savannah smiled at Mandy and finished, "so let's get this place organized!"

An hour and a half later, Savannah and Mandy had made it so a person could move around the space at a normal speed without tripping over electrical cables, old sword props and a box of confetti simultaneously. They had also set up a few work tables in the middle of the room. One was for costumes, one for sets and props, and one for anything else that needed to be worked on. The girls sat at the third table in a couple of unique chairs that were from a musical that Savannah swore was on the tip of her tongue.

"Okay, so let's make a list of priorities," Mandy began their brainstorming session.

"You know the story best," Savannah admitted. "What do you think needs to happen first?"

“Probably costumes and lights. This show is basically just Britney explaining how hard it is to get a part in a Broadway show. The life of a struggling artist who keeps auditioning and auditioning but always gets cut. She is explaining all of this to the audience and there won’t be very many setting changes, because there aren’t any other characters to interact with, so sets shouldn’t be that high on the list. We could probably do with what is here already. Do you know anyone who can run a lighting booth?”

“There is one kid in my gym class, Emerson Blaine, who’s really good at lights. Next semester he is transferring to a performing arts school so he can train to be a professional lighting designer. I’ll try to convince him to help out.” Savannah took out her two-year-old phone with a faded rose colored case and typed a quick message to Emerson.

“The auditorium doesn’t have a sound board and I don’t think we’ll have enough money to buy a quality one, so you’ll have to be loud.”

“That’s fine. I’m naturally pretty loud, and the space isn’t that big, so we’ll survive.”

They went on like that, planning, thinking, and planning some more until it was almost six o’clock. At that point they had finished the list, taken Savannah’s measurements, and recruited Emerson to deal with the lights. They had written down what each scene needed, and had figured out a way to cross almost everything off that list from what they discovered in the piles of supplies. Savannah felt accomplished and joyful to be on the way to actually fulfilling her dream. She could tell that Mandy was excited too, by the way her friend’s eyes seemed to get warmer, almost amber, whenever she thought of a new idea. Mandy was happy, and she didn’t look at all like the broken girl Savannah had found in that hallway, just two days before.

The next two weeks and five days passed quickly, but Amanda and Savannah lost all sense of time. They spent all of class writing notes about changes that could be made to better their project and puzzling about the problems they faced until there was a clear solution in their minds. If they got detention for daydreaming and not paying attention in class, no problem, they could just go to their basement room. During their third week, they moved most of the stuff to the auditorium, chasing each other up and down the stairs, making it into a competition so they wouldn’t get bored of carrying boxes.

Principal Branstoll hadn't bothered to monitor them, and Jennings had taken a liking to them and their show, so Amanda and Savannah were free to do what they wished with the budget. It wasn't much, a couple hundred dollars, but the girls had gotten almost everything they needed from the storage room's treasure trove. So they spent their funds on smaller things: make up, programs, a fancy curtain that Amanda could pull open on Savannah at the beginning and close on her at the end.

They didn't talk much about their pasts, either one of them. They just enjoyed the present, the show and each other's company. The other kids at the school noticed that Amanda Caldwell and Savannah Emory were becoming best friends, but, for the most part, they didn't really care. And when Vicky Jackson played some pranks and teased Amanda at lunch, Savannah would jump to her defense and they would ignore her as she laughed at them. *Just wait till she sees our play, they would think, then we'll be the ones laughing!*

Amanda

December 20th was a Thursday. It was also the day before the performance, which meant that it was the dress rehearsal. Amanda was proud of her show and of the fact that she felt more excited than anxious. She should have been terrified that her writing and therefore, her life, was going to be so exposed. She should have felt the pain and the loss that this play was about weighing her down, dragging her back to the memories that still haunted her. But she didn't because, whenever it felt like the darkness was closing in, Amanda could look up at that stage and see Savie's shining eyes and sunny smile. The life and joy that seemed to radiate out of that girl was so real, and so special. Amanda's friends in the past had mostly been from when she was young, before the accident, but none of them had ever cared about her as much as Savie did now. So, Amanda felt safe.

"Great job, Savannah!" Emerson yelled, exiting the lighting booth and walking down the aisle as Savie took a quick bow. Jennings sat a few rows behind Amanda, trying to hide his snuffles.

Savie was bouncing as Amanda and Emerson joined her on stage and the three of them sat down, "So how was I? I'm so sorry about that part about halfway through where I messed up. I really hope it wasn't too obvious."

“Where did you mess up? It wasn’t on any of my cues,” Emerson wondered. Savie had learned her lines in four days, which was amazing because she had every single line in a sixty minute show.

Amanda added, “I didn’t notice either, Sav. And I have been staring at that script for two whole years!” She reached out to grab her star’s hand, trying to be encouraging.

“I said ‘it was hard’ instead of ‘it was difficult’.” Savie wasn’t kidding, she really felt the need to get all of this perfect, and Amanda sensed that she was doing it partially for Amanda.

“You were fantastic and utterly flawless.” Amanda squeezed Savie’s hand. “Now, let’s talk technical. Is there anything we need to fix, Emerson?”

“Not really. All the lights are working and, you,” he gestured at Savie, “project very well, so we’re good on sound. Overall, it was a good run. Now Amanda, what time should I be here?”

“I can’t believe I am saying this, but curtain is at seven tomorrow. It’s really tomorrow!” Amanda may have squealed, “So be here at six-thirty. I’ll buy some pizza for dinner. You’re the best team I could have ever asked for.”

“Aww, I’m gonna miss you two. Will you come if I send the dates for the shows I do the lighting design for once I transfer?”

“Definitely!”

“Of course!”

“Then I’ll see ya tomorrow!” Emerson got up, grabbed his bag and walked out of the auditorium, comforting Jennings who was still bawling. He waved to the girls as they left, then closed the doors.

Savie, who was still in her final costume of the show, sunk down to the ground, tugging Amanda down with her. As she lay on the stage where she would be performing in front of an audience the next day, Amanda thought that Savie looked worried. Maybe some of the self-doubt that Amanda had first seen when she had given Savie the role was escaping again.

“You know you were wonderful. You don’t want to admit it, but you know that’s true,” Amanda told her as they stared up at the colored lights that illuminated the stage.

Savie didn’t respond for another ten seconds or so, and when she did, she spoke quickly and anxiously, “Thank you. Not just for all the compliments, but also for letting me be Britney. You have no idea how much it means to me. I--”

“Savie, shhh. Let me talk for a bit. You’re my best friend. You’re my only friend. There’s absolutely nothing that I wouldn’t do for you. And it doesn’t hurt that you are the most talented person I’ve ever met. Those aren’t empty words, Sav, I swear.”

Tears formed in Savie’s eyes. They couldn’t run down her face because she was horizontal, but Amanda could see them in Savie’s emerald eyes. Then Savie turned onto her side to face Amanda, and the tear dropped to the polished wood stage.

“You’re the best thing that has ever happened to me, Mandy. I hope you know that. And I wanted to tell you that my mom is excited. Really excited for the first time I can recall. She remembers me as the Angels, and she wants to see me perform again because she knows how much I love it. So I--” Savie’s voice was breaking and more tears were falling, “so I told her that she had to be sober for a week to get to come. She was mad at first, but she agreed.” Savie’s words gave way to sobs.

Amanda had never really been the one to initiate contact before, but she reached forward and put her arms around Savie, stroked her hair, and let Savie cry. Amanda knew that, for the time being, one of them always had to be strong. Savie had been there when Amanda was weak, so she needed to return the favor.

Once Savie had composed herself she pushed away from Amanda a bit, but she was still closer than they had originally been when she spoke, “You never did tell me how your family died.”

Amanda thought that the statement was a bit random, but she was surprised when she didn’t feel upset or uncomfortable. She just told Savie the truth, her truth, “A car accident. I was still in an extra-safety car seat at eight, because my parents were super protective and a bit paranoid, but I guess it did save my life. Another car hit ours and Mama and Papa died due to the impact or something. Then the car crashed around a bit and my sisters were killed. Rosalie first, then Natasha. And I just sat there, safely buckled in, while everyone I loved was dying around me. I remember that when the police arrived on the scene, they pulled me out of the car, but I couldn’t leave. I fought as hard as I could against the hands that took me away from my family. I knew they were gone, but I still wanted to be with them.”

Amanda’s voice wasn’t stone cold like it had been when she had told the simplified version to Savie three weeks ago, but she wasn’t falling apart either. Amanda wasn’t stating facts. She was telling a story, a story that felt fully in her past when Savie reached for her again, and the

two of them gathered warmth and strength from each other. There was nothing they couldn't face, as long as Amanda and Savie were together.

Savannah

Emerson was in his place. The pizza had been eaten. Jennings was in the front row. Mandy had a walkie talkie for some reason and the crowd was starting to trickle into the auditorium. It was opening night. For this show, it was also closing night. *Double the pressure*, Savannah couldn't help but remember. This was their chance, and if she screwed it up, it would also be their *only* chance.

"I see my aunt!" Mandy was peeking through the newly-installed curtain, "and she's sitting with your mom, Sav. Your mom looks really good."

Now Savannah needed to see, so she joined Mandy at the spot where the two pieces of crimson fabric met and peered outside. Her mother was laughing with Mandy's aunt and she held a copy of the program. Savannah squinted and she thought she saw her mother scribble a star in the program with a ballpoint pen. Then the lights in the house flickered and Savannah stepped back.

Mandy whispered, "The producer is going to say a few words, then we'll start."

Savannah realized that the job of producer hadn't been delegated to her, Mandy or Emerson so she wondered, "Who's the--" Before she was cut off by a booming voice.

Principal Branstoll's voice. It boomed, "Welcome one and all to Pendaly High School! This is an original play written and directed by Amanda Caldwell, with technical assistance from Emerson Blaine. Please keep in mind folks, these students had just three weeks to put together this show. I am sure that if you were to ask the young artists, they would insist that none of this would be possible, if not for me. I am proud to say that I have supported these students through the roller coaster ride that this show has been, and I hope you loyal members of the Pendaly community enjoy the show. And now I present to you, Savannah Emory in *My Path to the Great White Way!*"

"Did he seriously just say that? I was hoping it would be something inspiring," Savannah gulped.

"Yes, he did, but you don't need to be inspired." They both knew that once Branstoll was off the stage, the show needed to start, so Man-

dy had about twenty seconds for her pep talk, “Just do what you do best.”

“Math?” Savannah cocked an eyebrow.

“Exactly!” Mandy stifled a laugh, then walked to the wings and Savannah felt the strength crash over her like a wave. She could do it. She could do anything for Mandy. Savannah watched her arrive next to the rope that controlled the curtains. She looked at Savannah, a question in her eyes. Savannah nodded. The curtains began to part and a single spotlight poured through them, landing in a perfect circle around where Savannah stood, but she didn’t blink or wince at the blinding light; she drew energy from its heat. She looked at all the faces in the audience and pulled warmth from their excitement and their joy. Then she turned to gaze at the person who mattered the most, smiled, and began to act.

The theater’s lights came alive again and so did the audience. Not a single person remained seated or quiet as Savie bowed, then curtsied, then bowed again. She dramatically threw an arm out, insisting that her admirers applaud Emerson as well. She gestured offstage, forcing Mandy to walk out and join her in the place they had stood together just an hour before. Mandy reached the center of the stage and joined Savie while the audience marveled at the fourteen-year-old who could already write such a poignant play. Mandy’s chestnut hair swayed back and forth as she acknowledged her eager fans, which reminded Savie of something she should have done long ago.

“Hey, Mandy!” she nearly yelled over the commotion.

“What?”

“Which brand of hair ties do you get?”

Mandy threw her head back and laughed, as if that was the most ridiculous question in the world, “Alas, Sav, I’m afraid I’ll never tell.”

Then, Mandy pulled Savie close and kissed her. The world kept going around the girls, but for those two, time stopped. They could have stayed that way forever, together, after just accomplishing the dream both of them had been striving towards for their entire lives.

But Savie pulled away for a second and exclaimed, “I wanted to be the one to do that first!”

“Well,” Mandy laughed, “tough luck.”

Savie kissed her this time, and breathed, “That’s not really how I’d describe this.”

Emerson glanced at his friends. “I knew it,” he whispered, yanked the rope, and left the stage. The velvet cloth moved slowly towards the center, drawn to its partner until they came together to, quite literally, close the curtain on Amanda Caldwell and Savannah Emory.

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sps 7·8

The literary magazine of the 7th and 8th grades
Somerville, Massachusetts
presents

More Healey Fiction

2020

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