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History Presentations and Contradictory Expectations

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Olivia

Even though he never studied for a single test and barely did his homework or made eye contact with anyone, I had a feeling this guy was smarter than all of us. It was the way he played the role of your classic underachieving bad boy a little too well. It was almost... calculated. Whenever our teacher called on him, he responded immediately, in such a stentorian voice you gawked to make sure it was really coming from this nonchalant teenager with bird's nest hair in a battered leather jacket, always slouched unceremoniously in his chair. What a wonder Jess Simmons was.

I never understood why he let everyone continuously underestimate him like that. I got the perfect opportunity to figure out what was really going on when we were paired together for a partner presentation in History.

"Hey! How are you?" I cheerfully asked, sliding into an empty seat right across from him.

"Fine. Let's get this over with," Jess declared.

Yikes. I wasn't going to question this abrupt behavior; I was probably lucky Jess even showed up to class today.

"Sure thing. So! The Civil War. We have to prepare—"

"Fourteen slides and a poster presentation board. I know." He rolled his eyes at me, as if he had a perfect track record for remembering these things.

"Riiiiiiight. So, how should we split this up?" I asked.

To my chagrin, I was completely ignored. Jess pulled out his busted laptop and got to work on the first few slides.

Quickly, I opened up my own file to work on my half. We worked in silence for twenty minutes until—

"Okay, I'm done!" Jess exclaimed.

"Sorry?" I asked. He must be bluffing. I was only on the third slide out of my seven.

"Yep. Done. I added blue borders and red backgrounds to match our U.S.A. theme. I even designed our title slide, while you were focused on the infographics," Jess said.

"Thank you? That's...this looks super solid. How'd you...?" I trailed off as my gaze met Jess' smirk. He totally knew he crushed the delivery on this one.

"Y'know...if you worked a bit smarter, instead of this whole 'harder' concept everyone seems to feed into, maybe you could be more like me, too," Jess quipped.

I could feel my ears changing color. This really didn't make any sense, especially if Jess didn't plagiarize anything, which I know he hadn't. I'd just checked. Twice. Right as I was about to retort, the bell rang.

"See ya, princess," he sarcastically drawled. "Chop chop on those slides, will ya?"

The next morning, I snoozed all of my alarms, and was in serious danger of earning my first tardy of the year. At this rate, I'd be no better than Jess. I frowned. I wasn't acting any better than everyone else in my class who pegged Jess as an underachieving slacker. After all, we were definitely going to be getting an A on this project. What more could I ask of him?

I looked in the shiny mirror attached to my white marble vanity. The accentuated dark circles under my eyes made me look like a Tim Burton movie character. My sallow complexion was a result of staying up late, trying to figure out how Jess' slides were as good as mine when I had spent several hours on them compared to his twenty minutes. I couldn't believe I was losing sleep over this. Was I really that vain? I shifted my gaze over to my assortment of pink lip glosses, different colored scrunchies, and hundreds of diamond bobby pins mocking me from my dresser. Hmph. Guess so.

I quickly glanced at my phone. 7:45. I was supposed to leave in...five minutes ago. I quickly swept my unkempt hair into a bun, grabbed my worn comfort sneakers, and hurried out the door.

Despite my best efforts, I got to class a minute after the bell rang. I had to face everybody's teasing grins alongside my teacher's glare. Even Jess smirked at me. As soon as I glanced at him, though, I noticed a gigantic reddish purple bruise on his left eye. In fact, his eye was swollen shut. I winced. I couldn't peel my eyes away from him, even as Mr. Clark was telling me off.

As I took a seat in front of his, I teased, "A tardy's much better than whatever kind of morning you've had."

That certainly wiped the smirk right off his face. "You don't know what you're talking about, Liv," he warned, "drop it." He pointedly turned his attention to the white board. I frowned. I had to take notes on Mr. Clark's instruction, but that didn't stop a part of me from wondering why he was acting so weird.

Jess

Liv walked into Calc looking like a straight up dumpster fire. What. A. Mess! Not even an ounce of her usual professionalism. Her normally pristine curls stuck out every which way, and her weak attempt to fix herself up was totally laughable. Her eyes were bloodshot, and her face held no trace of her usual bubblyness. Little Miss Diva's socks didn't even match today, for crying out loud. My smirk broke out into a full-on grin that would put the Cheshire Cat to shame, until the sudden muscle movement immediately caused me to wince. I gingerly brushed my fingers over my eyelid. A sharp throb blazed through me, and I couldn't help but grit my teeth in pain.

I was used to my foster father's harsh treatment, but usually that just meant being forced to dodge a couple still-lit cigarette butts or listen to his drunken lectures about my slipping grades and wasted potential. Today was different; he hadn't slept off his hangover yet. Just as I was about to leave the house with my backpack slung over my shoulder, he had stopped me at the door and shoved me back inside. He whipped out my Biology hardcover while incoherently shouting some words about books being useless if I wouldn't read them, and smacked me in the face with it. *Hard*. I stumbled back in agony. My left eyelid started throbbing, and I knew it was already sealing shut. I was so lucky to have quick reflexes. I had whipped my face to the side to take the hit somewhere other than right smack in the middle of my face. Definitely would've had to deal with a broken nose, otherwise. As I was pondering this, Liv strutted to her seat. Ugh, she always struts. Taking one look at her hair, though, I had to fight to contain my laughter once again.

"A tardy's much better than whatever kind of morning you've had," Prissy Princess pointed out. She didn't realize she was playing with fire.

"You don't know what you're talking about, Liv," I warned, "drop it." That seemed to shut her up for now, especially since King Clark had just started talking. I was going to have to think of something better for everyone else who asked; I'd already gotten way too many quizzical looks already.

Olivia

Jess and I sat down in third period to continue working on our project, so I thought I'd double check and see if I could get anything out of him, but it seemed he'd already read my mind. He got up and abandoned me, gracing the cheerleaders at the back table with his presence. A flare of annoyance shot through me until I realized those airheads were bound to ask what was up with our fallen soldier's poor eye.

I tried to make it seem as though I was walking around the room acquiring materials for our poster board. I tiptoed over to the supplies closet, so that if anyone asked why I was lingering, I could just say I was on my way to grab a trifold for our project—in perfect earshot of Jess.

"Aw, you poor thing...what happened to you?" Ashley asked, as she scooted closer to Jess and started reassuringly rubbing his arm.

Wow. *Way* unnecessary if you ask me, but I ignored my sudden irritation.

"Oh... Jordan and I were hangin' out after school yesterday and we wanted to see who had better aim with a BB gun. Guess he won," Jess chuckled.

"Oh no!!! You boys are *never* careful," Jessica frowned as she grabbed Jess' other arm.

I had to clamp my hand over my mouth to hold back a snort. A BB pellet to the eye? *How* was everyone just eating this up?

As I started to turn away, Jess called out accusingly. "Liv! What're you doing?" I quickly looked down to the trifold I was holding. Thank goodness I had remembered to grab it.

"Well, you see... some of us actually care about finishing our hundred point projects," I said with a pointed glare, as I gestured to the trifold. His jaw ticked, and he seemed to take the hint.

"Talk to you gals later." He winked at them, and they grinned back. Every single one of them, like some weird

domino effect. Gross. As he followed me to our table, he placed his hand on the small of my back, urging me to walk faster.

“Ugh, get your hands off of me!” I shrugged his hand away.

“Geez. *Somebody* woke up on the wrong side of the bed this morning,” he taunted.

“Okay, first of all, that doesn’t even make any sense! It’s a *bed*, not a road. THERE IS NO WRONG SIDE!” I shouted. In hindsight, I realized I may have gotten a little too worked up, seeing as the whole class was staring at me now.

“And second of all?” he asked with an amused expression, clearly fighting to break into laughter, judging by his twitching lips and dancing eyes.

“...And....second of all... you... didn’t seem to care about wasting time twenty minutes ago! So, don’t rush me now,” I answered sternly, trying to gain back some of the little dignity I had left.

“Oh, of course. Wouldn’t want to upset our al-mighty queen of the universe or anything,” Jess nonchalantly retorted.

“And what is *that* supposed to mean?!” I exclaimed.

“It means you always have to be the center of attention. It means your perfect little life is so freakin’ *simple* that you couldn’t possibly bear not having something go your way. It means you don’t even care about other people’s reasons for anything. You never consider anything but whatever’s going on inside of that pink plastic bubble you call your life,” Jess heatedly spat.

My hands started trembling in anger and I clenched my fists. “Well. You certainly answered that question awfully quickly,” I managed to remark through gritted teeth. I turned away, tears welling up in my eyes.

Jess

Liv whirled around with an incredulous gasp.

“And what is *that* supposed to mean?!” she exclaimed. Oh my Zeppelin, could she just drop the act *fome second*?! Everyone and their mother knows how annoying Liv’s constant desire for attention gets.

I was so lost in my whirlwind of conflicted thoughts, I barely registered what I said next. Liv’s eyes widened as she took in what I just said. She turned around and I thought she was walking away from me until I saw the back of her elbow shift ever so slightly to wipe her eye with her hoodie sleeve. Oh... she was crying. I felt a sudden pang in my chest.

“Liv, c’mon—”

“No! *You* don’t get to call me that, just like you don’t get to criticize all my life’s decisions without knowing me AT ALL!” She jerked her arm away to glance at her bedazzled gold watch. “So ya know what? . . . I’ll be stopping by your place today to work on the poster since your cheerleader escapades cost us our class period.”

WHAT? “Uh, No. Sorry, *Olivia*, but that isn’t happening. I’ve got too much... homework to do tonight,” I tried. She snorted. “Yeah, right. See ya at four.”

“No, really, you *can’t* come over—wait. You don’t have my address, anyway.”

Liv looked oddly deflated for a second. “We’ll finish it up some time at the library tomorrow, then,” she muttered.

I was relieved Liv wouldn’t ever be exposed to the completely dysfunctional atmosphere I was forced to call home. She might have been annoyed with me, but she had no idea what I had just saved her from. That was worth fifty thousand annoyed Liv’s.

I had just settled down with my homework assignments sprawled out in front of me across the dusty, unkempt countertop. I needed to start taking this stuff more seriously if I ever want to escape and get into a halfway decent college.

Ding, dong!

I tensed, then hesitantly paced over and opened the door.

“Liv! How—”

“Well, how’d *you* finish your slides so fast the other day? I figure that question deserves more of an answer than your current one,” Liv countered.

“Are we still on this? I had the same topic assigned to me last year through another project. All I had to do was alter those slides a little,” I said as I rolled my eyes.

Liv ignored my answer as she pushed past me, inviting herself in.

Heat spread like wildfire across my face. I knew this place was kind of a dump, but Liv’s nonchalant attitude eased my worries, since it seemed like she was already engrossed in laying out papers on our trifold.

SCREEEEEEEECH!

I stumbled back, startled. Liv’s head popped up as the invasive racket of burning rubber drilled our eardrums. I

warily eyed the door.

“What was that?” Liv had the audacity to ask.

The door squeaked open, and immediately slammed shut. Alcohol’s infamous odor started wafting through the house.

“Father,” I cautiously greeted.

“DON’T YOU “FATHER” ME, JESSE RAY SIMMONS!” he bellowed as he ripped off one shoe and chucked it at me with superhuman speed. He either hadn’t seen Liv, or merely didn’t care about her presence. Either way, the Hulk rage had begun.

Olivia

I may have been confused at how quickly this monster invaded Jess’ home, but that didn’t mean I was just going to sit there in silence as he assaulted Jess. I shoved Jess out of the way and blocked the heavy shoe with my wrist. I wasn’t captain of the Varsity Volleyball team for nothing.

Jess swiftly got back up on his feet, blushing something fierce. His dad—well, the guy that *might* be his dad—was now even more livid. He moved to lunge at me until Jess wedged himself in front of me.

“Not her! She didn’t do anything!” Jess cried out.

“C’mon, Jess. We’ve gotta go,” I whispered from behind him. I scanned the rest of the kitchen and spotted a side door. I grabbed Jess’ hand and decided to make a run for it. We sprinted to the door, shoved it open, and slammed it in his dad’s face.

“GO, GO, GO!” I shouted as I jumped into the driver’s seat of my car. Thank goodness I kept my keys in my pockets at all times.

Jess clumsily threw himself into the car as I was backed out of the driveway. I shifted the gear into reverse without checking a single mirror. I could see Jess’ dad emerging from the entrance with a golf club, which could easily decimate my windshield. We had to *move*.

As soon as the car was back into drive, I slammed my foot on the gas pedal. I glanced over at Jess for the first time since we fled the house. “Jess... um... where should we go?” I hesitantly asked. I may pride myself over being independent, but I’ve never had to report assault to CPS before. I wouldn’t know the first thing about it.

“Do we... have to go anywhere? I thought I’d just return once he kinda cools off,” Jess answered, averting his eyes.

I was so alarmed with that response that I nearly missed a stop sign, slamming the brakes.

“You’re kidding me, right? You aren’t going back there. You’re okay this time, maybe, but what if next time...?” I trailed off, not wanting to consider what could happen. I continued, “Look, I’m taking you home. My parents will know what to do.”

“But will they?” Jess asked, voicing my own concern.

“Well, they’ve never pelted me with heavy objects, so I figure it’s a safer bet than just abandoning you, leaving you to that psychopath’s mercy.”

Jess stared out the window, and suddenly I worried if I had just been too harsh.

“Look, I know he’s your father—”

“*No*, he absolutely *isn’t*,” Jess tersely declared.

“Okay, sorry, but . . . how’d it ever become like this?” I tried.

“Liv, you— you have to understand. He wasn’t always like that. He cared about us—”

“Us?”

“My foster mom and I.”

“What happened?”

“He got laid off. He started drinking, smoking, just doin’ all of these things he never would’ve done before. Mom wasn’t happy... she— she left us. She left *me*,” Jess whispered with a pained expression. I hadn’t ever heard Jess stutter before; this was serious.

I reached over to grab his hand with my right one, keeping my left on the wheel. “Hey. *I* won’t leave you. We’ll figure it out later tonight,” I said.

Jess confusedly looked up at me, and at first, I thought he was going to push my hand off, but he instead said, “Oh, crap! Your stuff. How are we going to finish the board now?”

I barked out a laugh. Jess sounded so ridiculous right now, until it all clicked into place. Jess’ words about not considering other people’s problems— this is what he meant. This project and my grade, compared to Jess’ literal wellbeing—they didn’t matter. At all. Why had it taken me so long to see that?

“Jess, *screw* the project. Let’s go get milkshakes,” I decided with a smile.

