

True Star - Excerpt

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90,000 words

## **Chapter One**

Alex Venable bit his bottom lip as the stage lights came up on thirteen-year-old Clara Layton. The night before, at their final dress rehearsal, Clara had complained of stomach problems and a slight chill. Alex had responded by saying that he didn't have time for this crap, and she needed to put on her big girl pants and suck it up like a professional.

It had not been his finest moment as the theater teacher at East Tennessee Middle School, though it was far from his worst.

"Come on, Clara," whispered Harper McKenzie, standing beside Alex in the lighting booth. She was wearing her prized headset, the only one with a windguard, signaling her status as the show's stage manager. "I know you can do it."

"Eyes on your call script, Harper," Alex said.

"Sorry, Mr. Venable."

Harper was a good kid, one of the more responsible ones. Alex counted on her to keep the other students in line when their focus started to wane. But she had a habit of becoming so invested in the performances that she would forget to call her cues in crucial moments. Alex had attempted to break this habit by throwing crayons at her head whenever he caught her taking her eyes off the script. It was working, too, until some little narc mentioned it to Assistant Principal Dave Belcher, who promptly confiscated all projectiles from the theater and gave Alex a thorough dressing down.

The pre-recorded track played the opening strains of "I Dreamed a Dream." Clara Layton lay upon the stage looking properly anguished as the downtrodden prostitute Fantine. Whether

that was the stomach bug or an actual attempt to act, Alex didn't know. Nor did he care. He was just happy to see some life on the stage.

"Standby lights seventeen," Harper said into her headset. "Lights seventeen ... go."

The stage lights slowly changed to a sepia color to better reflect the mood as bright-eyed, sweet-faced Clara launched into her torch song of loss, despair and broken dreams.

Alex took a moment to survey the audience. They seemed to be engaged in the performance. At least, no one was looking at their cell phone.

As he turned his attention back to Clara's performance, he saw something out of the corner of his eye. From the far right side of the auditorium, a vertical shaft of light appeared. Somebody had opened the side door.

"What the shit?" Alex grumbled.

Harper shot him a look. "Mr. Venable. You know you're not allowed to swear around us. Mr. Belcher said that one more—"

"Call script, Harper."

Alex quietly stepped out of the lighting booth and peered at the door. He could make out the silhouette of someone sliding into the auditorium, glancing around, then ducking low and cutting across the aisle.

"Goddamn latecomers," Alex mumbled under his breath. What happened to theater etiquette? To respect for the actors and the audience? To simple goddamn human decency?

He shook his head and turned back toward the booth, then stopped as the side door opened a second time and another silhouette appeared. Alex peered at the figure through the darkness. "What the hell is ..."

He stood bolt upright, his blood turning cold. In the last bit of light before the door closed, Alex could see the person was holding something.

It looked like a rifle.

He shot a glance to the other latecomer, who was crouched low on the other side of the auditorium, holding a similar object.

“*Gun!*” Alex shouted.

At first, only a handful of people reacted, turning in their seats and looking around the dark auditorium. Clara continued to belt out her solo.

Alex tore off running toward the side door, where the armed assailant was scanning the theater. “*GUN!*” he yelled again, louder this time.

Clara heard the shout and recognized her director’s voice. She stopped singing. Harper wasn’t as fast to react up in the lighting booth. The music kept playing and the house lights remained dark. Alex hoped they’d stay that way. It might be the only chance the people in the auditorium would have to get out of there alive.

If he could reach the gunman in time.

The audience stirred with the first sounds of panic. Parents rose from their seats, gathering children who had come to watch their brothers and sisters portray the wretches of Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables*.

Alex ran as fast as he could. More people stood and headed for the exits. Then a woman came face to face with the gunman. She let out a blood curdling scream.

The would-be assailant flinched and took a step back, clutching his rifle tighter. It gave Alex the precious extra second he needed. He leapt at the gunman, smashing him against the wall. He took a moment to regain his balance, then managed to grab hold of the rifle.

“Hey!” the gunman squealed, fighting for control of the weapon.

Alex pulled hard, drawing the gunman in, then flung his head forward and delivered a crushing head butt. White flashes of light filled Alex’s field of vision, but he held firm to the rifle, then gave it another hard yank, wresting it from the gunman’s hands.

The gunman sank to the ground. Alex Venable drew the weapon back and sent the butt of the rifle crashing into the gunman’s face. There was a loud crack, then the gunman went limp.

*“Everybody down!”* Alex shouted over the screaming. *“Down on the ground! Down on the ground!”*

The crowd dropped to the floor. Alex raised the rifle, kept low and headed for the other side of the auditorium. He didn’t know much about assault rifles, but he knew how to squeeze a trigger. He hoped that would be enough.

He was three quarters of the way across the auditorium when the music stopped and the house lights came on. More screams from the crowd. Alex could see the second gunman plastered against the wall, dressed in all black and wearing camouflage makeup. The rifle was in his right hand. But he wasn’t aiming it. He was holding it above his head.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa!” the gunman shouted. “Wait a second!”

Alex closed the distance, his rifle at the ready.

“Hold on, man! You don’t under—”

Alex adjusted his grip, holding the rifle by the barrel like a baseball bat. He swung. The butt of the rifle cracked against the gunman’s face, snapping his head violently to the right. His rifle fell to the ground.

More screaming.

Alex dropped his own rifle, pinned the gunman against the wall and drove his knee into the man's groin. Then he drew back his right hand and smashed it into the gunman's face. The gunman slid down the wall and lay on his side, curled up in the fetal position. Alex straddled the man and continued to pummel him until his hand went numb.

Alex stood up and stared down at the fallen attacker, taking deep, heaving breaths. Even under the makeup and blood, he could tell the guy was young. Probably a student.

The auditorium emptied as the crowd fled for safety. A few folks, sensing that the danger had passed, lingered behind.

"I think you got 'em, buddy," a man said. "You done messed these dudes up!"

Alex turned and saw a large man wearing a flannel shirt and a trucker hat. A little girl had her arms wrapped around the big man's leg, her face buried in his jeans.

"You saved the day, man!" the guy said. "Hey! This fella here is a hero!" The man began clapping his hands.

The remaining audience members looked around in uncertainty for a beat, then joined in the applause, slowly at first, then growing louder. Alex breathed a heavy sigh of relief.

The man in the flannel shirt removed the little girl from his leg, bent down and picked up one of the fallen rifles. "What the hell? This thing is plastic!"

The cheering died down.

Alex looked at the gun, then back up at the man. "What do you mean?"

"I mean this is a toy, dipshit. You couldn't tell when you was holdin' it?"

Alex snatched the gun from the man's hands. With the lights on and the crisis over, it was easy to see it was a toy, and not a particularly realistic one at that. But in the dark, with his adrenaline spiking and his heart pounding, Alex simply hadn't noticed.

The side door to the auditorium flung open. All heads turned as Assistant Principal Dave Belcher came charging in.

“What in the blazes is going on in—” Belcher stopped and looked down at the writhing body lying by the door. “Mason? Is that you?”

Mason Coffey, an eighth grader who’d just missed qualifying for the National Spelling Bee that year, looked up at the assistant principal with bleary eyes and let out a low moan.

“Venable!” Belcher roared, his eyes scanning the crowd. “Where are you?” Alex Venable walked across the auditorium. Belcher crossed his arms and glared. “You wanna tell me what’s going on?”

Alex squinted at Assistant Principal Belcher. “You wanna tell *me* what’s going on?”

“I’ve got a hundred parents running around the building, ruining tonight’s Laser Tag tournament! *That’s* what’s going on.”

“Tonight’s *what?*”

“Laser. Tag. Tournament. Did you not see the signs posted around the school?”

Alex continued to stare.

“Well, Mr. Venable? I’m waiting.”

The auditorium was silent, everyone’s focus on Alex Venable.

Alex’s voice began low, then grew in intensity. “Why, in the everloving embrace of all that is decent and holy, would you schedule a fucking Laser Tag tournament inside the fucking school on the *same fucking night* as the opening of *my ... fucking ... PLAY?!?*”

“Language, Mr. Venable!” Belcher said.

Before his brain even realized what his body was doing, Alex's fist flew through the air. It didn't stop until it made contact with Assistant Principal Dave Belcher's mouth, knocking out three of his teeth.