The background of the cover is a stylized illustration. A woman with long, wavy blonde hair, wearing a white and grey striped short-sleeved top, is shown in profile from the waist up, looking towards a man. The man has dark hair and is wearing a dark blue suit jacket over a light blue collared shirt. He is also shown in profile, looking back at the woman. They are standing outdoors at dusk or dawn, with a warm orange and pink sky. In the background, there are buildings with blue roofs and windows, and some greenery. The overall style is clean and modern, typical of contemporary romance book covers.

ASSISTING MY
Brother's BEST
FRIEND

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
JUDY CORRY

ASSISTING MY BROTHER'S BEST FRIEND

RICH AND FAMOUS SERIES



ASSISTING MY
Brother's BEST
FRIEND

JUDY CORRY

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Edited by Precy Larkins and Laura Walker

Illustration by Wastoki

Cover Design by Judy Corry

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For my son James

PLAYLIST

"Begin Again" by The Piano Guys version

"It's True" by Backstreet Boys

"Kiss Me Slowly" by Parachute

"Falling Slowly" by Celtic Thunder

"All I Ask of You" by Josh Groban and Kelly Clarkson

KATE

AND THE AWARD *for most likely to scare a creepy-looking holy man goes to me*, I mused, as I browsed the shelves of Rachel's Market for cough syrup. Usually, I had the creepers coming after me, but it seemed that my pajamas and four-days-unwashed blonde hair had finally done the trick. Every time I noticed the guy wearing baggy holy-man clothes, he immediately turned down another aisle as if he couldn't bear to look at me.

Apparently, he wasn't interested in girls who looked like death to join his cult.

My gaze swept across the shelf until it landed on the glorious dark blue liquid that would finally allow me to get some sleep. I was tempted to open the bottle right there and take a swig so its magical powers could start working and allow my stupid cold to disappear for the night. But I decided against it.

Someone would probably report me for stealing it, even if the store was almost empty at eleven-thirty at night.

The man peeked his head around the corner, his frizzy long hair hiding half his face. I looked away, not wanting to scare him with my wretched appearance again.

I dropped the cough syrup into my basket, atop a pile of cough drops, then walked to the end of the aisle to grab a gallon of chocolate milk.

Chocolate milk always made things better.

When I made it to the refrigerator section, Frizzy Guy was looking at the almond milk. Should I risk having him bolt away again? Did I really need my chocolate fix this late at night?

Yes. Chocolate would definitely solve all my problems.

So, I waited for the holy man to make his selection. Hopefully, he wouldn't get too scared when he discovered I'd crept up right behind him. Though scaring him might actually be fun.

I was just about to call out "Boo!" when he reached into the fridge. He pulled out a carton of unsweetened almond milk—of course he was above having sugar—and stepped back, knocking into my basket.

"Oh, sorry," he quickly said, turning to face me.

And when he looked at my face, his posture immediately stiffened.

Wow, I must look even worse than I thought. I'd startled him so badly that he was now frozen to his spot.

It was then that I took a moment to really study him.

He looked much taller and younger up close. And were those baggy clothes hiding a muscular physique? His tanned cheekbones were smooth, not wrinkly like I'd imagined they'd be.

And part of his beard was falling off?

What the—?

This may be L.A., but what in the world was going on with this guy? Was he some sort of psycho method actor?

My eyes met the man's deep blue ones. And recognition slowly washed over me. I could never forget those eyes; I'd lost myself in them so many times growing up. This holy man was not a stranger at all. It was my older brother Aiden's best friend.

His extremely good-looking best friend whom I hadn't seen in person since Aiden's funeral seven years ago.

"Drew?" I asked. "Is that you?" How had I not recognized him before?

A finger flew to his mouth. "Shhh. Don't say my name out loud." He glanced around to make sure no one had heard.

"What's going on? Why are you dressed like that?"

"It's my disguise," he whispered. "I didn't want anyone to know who I was."

"Well, it worked," I said.

Drew shrugged, lifting the part of his beard that was falling off and pushing it back against his chin. "I've been dodging a group of girls for the last ten minutes. I thought I might have seen you, but I wasn't quite sure. I mean, it's been a while, and I've never seen you so . . . um . . . so . . ."

"You've never seen me so gross?" I finished for him. Why did I have to run into him when I looked like death?

"That's not what I was going to say."

"Sure."

Drew's eyes wandered to the basket hanging on my arm. "Got a cold, I'm guessing."

I quickly covered my left hand with my right when I realized I'd forgotten to wear my fake wedding ring to the store. Even though we hadn't seen each other in years, I was pretty sure my mom had sent Drew a wedding announcement.

"No...I'm undercover, too." I laughed awkwardly but had to stop because I felt another coughing fit coming on. Once it passed, I said, "Okay, so maybe I have a cold."

"I thought so." He glanced around, and I couldn't tell if he was looking for his stalkers, or if he really just wanted to get away from me. But I needed to try to fix what happened between us. I hated the way we'd left things all those years ago. Aiden would want us to make things better.

"What's with the get-up anyway?" I asked. The Drew I knew from years ago would never dream of leaving the house without making sure each hair was in its perfect spot. Plus, didn't he have a housekeeper or personal

assistant to run his errands for him?

"It's the only way I can go out in public these days. Ever since I signed on to be the bachelor for *Finding Your Soulmate*, I haven't been able to go anywhere without having at least one girl freaking out on me. I really just wanted to grab a carton of milk without being mobbed."

Of course, I realized. Drew was the Billionaire Bachelor; it was a give in that he'd have flocks of girls stampeding after him everywhere he went.

"Did you just get back from filming then?" I asked, hoping he'd continue our conversation. "Here, let's go down that way. Sorority girls are probably less likely to be searching for you in there." I nodded toward the feminine hygiene aisle.

Drew made a face like it was the last place he wanted to go, but when a chorus of high-pitched squeals sounded from nearby, he rushed forward.

"We got back last month. Right before Thanksgiving," he said, answering my question.

"We? As in you and your fiancée?" I prodded.

He shook his head with a smile that said he knew I was trying to get him to slip up on his secret. "I meant, *we* as in me and the rest of production."

"They trained you well." I grinned. "Did you have to practice that with the producers before they allowed you back in public again?"

"That, and the fact that they could sue me if I spoiled the ending is helping me keep tight-lipped."

"Which would set you back so far," I joked. Even though we hadn't seen each other in person for years, it was hard to miss seeing him in the media. He had done very well for himself. What was a hundred-thousand-dollar lawsuit when you had billions of dollars to your name?

He shook his head and gave me a humble smile.

Maybe all the fame and money hadn't gone to his head like I'd assumed when I saw the promo for the show's season. "I guess I'm still not used to that. And even if I didn't mind being sued, I'd hate to spoil the show for you. I

remember how much you used to love watching it."

"How thoughtful of you." I smiled. "Can you say *anything* about your time as the bachelor?"

Drew pursed his lips as he was thinking . . . which looked ridiculous with his fake shaggy mustache poking out on the sides.

"I'll just say this, it was a lot harder to be the bachelor than I thought."

"Yeah." I almost snorted. "Dating twenty-five beautiful women is so hard. I bet all the guys who watch the show feel so bad for you."

"Yeah, yeah," he said self-consciously, tucking some loose strands from his frizzy wig behind his ears. At least it better be a wig. "Anyway, what have you been up to? I got your announcement. Sorry I wasn't able to make it to your wedding last summer."

I tightened my grip on my left hand and gave him the answer I'd given all of my old friends over the past few months.

"Things are great!" I pumped enthusiasm into my voice. "I'm working part-time for a newspaper and still working on my screenplays when I get the chance."

He didn't seem to notice I'd left out anything regarding Nolan.

Which was good.

I really didn't want to go into how I'd been too blind to see the warning signs before jumping into a marriage that only lasted a couple of months.

"Good for you." Drew's grin broadened. "That's awesome you're still writing screenplays. Have you tried getting one of them out there yet?"

I shrugged. I'd probably sound like such a failure to him. While he'd found more success than anyone ever dreamed of, I'd never even gotten anyone to take a look at my work. "I tried shopping one last year, but I didn't have any bites. I guess it helps if you actually have a connection in the business." Yet another thing I'd failed at.

My old roommate, Ivy Evans, had been friends with the famous actor, Justin Banks, in high school. But since Ivy hated him after he'd stood her up

on prom night, I didn't exactly feel comfortable trying to get Ivy to pass my screenplays along to Justin.

"I'm sure you'll sell one soon. I quite enjoyed those short films you used to drag me and Aiden into making with you."

My cheeks flushed when I thought about the things I used to talk Drew and Aiden into doing. I'd been such a nerd. "You're just being nice."

Drew grinned. "I totally liked being the sultan of the universe and having Aiden as my servant."

A somber smile lifted my lips at the memory of my older brother. Oh, how I miss him. "He really did hate that he was always the servant and you were the king, boss, or whatever."

"He always told me how he was going to help you get your big break someday, so he could watch someone else be the servant for a change." Drew's eyes met mine, the heartache behind the blue mirroring my own. "Aiden always bragged about how his sister won first place in the Coventry Film Festival her senior year. He couldn't wait to see it."

If only he'd had the chance.

"So how is married life treating you anyway?" Drew asked, changing the subject. "I still can't believe you're old enough to be married."

"DREW BURROWS!"

We turned our heads to see a group of college girls in matching pink shirts marching toward us.

Drew sighed. "Looks like I need a better disguise."

"Or a better housekeeper to save you the trip in the first place." I smiled.

This was my first time talking to an actual billionaire, but they all had housekeepers, right?

"Carmella has been sick, so sadly I have to be a big boy and stock the fridge for myself tonight." He smirked, which let me know he knew how ridiculous that sounded. His eyes darted to the girls waiting for him. "It was really good to see you again. I hope you get over your cold soon. Tell Nolan I

said hi."

Drew hadn't come to our wedding, yet he knew Nolan's name?

I shook my head.

Of course he did.

Nolan's family was rich. Rich people always knew other rich people.

I swallowed, not having it in me to tell him that Nolan was living with his college girlfriend now. "Yeah, I'll tell him."

I watched as Drew approached the group of girls. And since I was already in the aisle and had no shame left, I grabbed myself a box of tampons off the shelf. Having all my supplies in the basket now, I turned to escape out the aisle the opposite way just as Drew was asking the girls who the detective was and how he thought for sure no one would recognize him. Which was followed by a chorus of giggles.

Yeah, I thought, being "The Billionaire Bachelor" is so hard.

I drove home to the apartment Nolan and I had moved into when we'd gotten married—the apartment I wouldn't be able to afford once the year he'd pre-paid on was up.

I downed a dose of cough syrup and climbed in my empty bed, wishing, not for the first time, things had gone differently that spring night seven years before.

I SMILED at the memory of running into Kate as I sat in L.A.'s bumper-to-bumper traffic a few days later. I'd almost bolted when I realized I'd just bumped into her. The last time we'd seen each other was at Aiden's funeral, and I was sure her whole family hated me.

Hated that I had lived when Aiden had died. I had been shocked when Kate's wedding announcement came in the mail earlier that spring. Surprised that her family would even want to be in the same room as me.

Part of me regretted not going, or even responding to it. But I hated the thought of darkening what was supposed to be the happiest day in Kate's life with my presence. Her family didn't need any reminders from that bleak time of their lives.

I'd definitely done my best to strip it from my own mind. Keeping my hands and mind busy so I could hopefully get over the guilt I'd brought upon myself. But when Kate's announcement had come in the mail, I'd decided that if her family had been able to move on, maybe it was time for me to move on too.

Finding Your Soulmate had been after me for years. After my dating app, Meet Your Match, went viral, there had been a constant dialog going through the media about my relationship status.

Which, for the most part, was single.

I'd been so busy numbing my mind and heart with the coding, trying to keep my startup from crashing every night with all the new downloads, that there just wasn't time to date during the first few years. I barely even had time to sleep.

And then, when I'd pulled my head out of the cave I'd thrown myself into after Aiden's death, I'd come out to find that I'd done it too late. The only girl I'd ever really fallen for—the girl who had inspired the app idea in the first place—was getting married.

But thankfully, time healed all wounds, and my heart hadn't hurt too much when I'd run into her at the grocery store.

I looked at the ridiculous wig and facial hair sitting in the passenger seat of my black Lamborghini.

Why did I have to look like a hobo when seeing Kate for the first time in forever?

She'd looked like she was about to scream when she saw me. I couldn't blame her though; I did look pretty crazy.

I grabbed the disguise and headed into the studio, straight to Alexis Olley's office. She was the show's executive producer, and we had a lot to go over before my first promotional interviews started next week.

"Let's just jump right in," Alexis said when I sat in the black chair across from her mahogany desk. Alexis was a no-nonsense-type lady. She'd started *Finding Your Soulmate* ten years ago, and it had been in the number one time slot ever since. She was dynamite and didn't put up with anything but the best.

Which was why I had to come into the studio today. Things hadn't gone quite the way Alexis had wanted on the last day of filming, and she was dead set on salvaging the show in any way she could.

"Now that you've had the holidays to relax, it's time for us to save this season."

I gulped. I knew I'd made them unhappy, but I hadn't thought it was a

complete train wreck.

"What do I need to do?"

"I'm going to be blunt with you, Drew. Here at *Finding Your Soulmate*, we expect to watch people fall in love. We expect a happily ever after. And we did not get the happily ever after you agreed to. Now, the rest of the producers have met several times trying to come up with a way to save our ratings and guarantee viewers will keep coming back season after season. So, after much deliberation, we've decided that you will propose to Gwen on our live after-show."

"But what if we're not ready by then?"

"You better fake it. It's in your contract to have a proposal. And that's what we expect. Even if you have to pretend."

But could I pretend to get engaged?

I liked Gwen . . . most of the time. We had a lot of good times together.

But could I ask her to marry me in just two and a half months, especially when we only saw each other in person every other weekend?

"Do we have an understanding?" Alexis pressed.

I swallowed thickly. "Yes. I'll make it happen."

Alexis's face brightened, along with her tone. "Very good. Which brings us to our next step in operation 'save the show'." She pushed a sheet of paper across her desk. It was a bulleted list of what looked like possible questions an interviewer might ask me while I was on the promotional tour, and the answers that the studio approved of me saying.

"We've already discovered that acting is not a career you should go after—you know, if you somehow drain your savings accounts." She smiled at her own joke. "So you'll need to practice these until they roll off your tongue." Alexis looked over the rim of her glasses. "Let's just get started, all right?"

"Sure." I shifted in my chair and lifted the white paper so I could read it better.

"So Drew," Alexis said, jumping right into the character of her favorite

nighttime TV host of all time, Davey Denton. "What was this experience like?"

I studied the paper for a second before reading, "It was amazing. A once-in-a-lifetime experience."

Alexis tsked. "Could you possibly say that with less of a monotone and with a lot more enthusiasm? If we're going to sell viewers on watching another season of this show, we need to make it look like they won't be wasting their time. They want excitement, fun, and most of all, *romance*. Let them know they're in for the experience of a lifetime if they watch your season. You're the *Billionaire Bachelor*. Sell it like you sold your app."

No pressure there.

I cleared my throat and tried again. "It was amazing!" I emphasized the words. "A once-in-a-lifetime experience."

"That was better," Alexis allowed, scribbling a note onto her script. "Let's try it one more time."

I sat up straighter as she read the same question again, and this time, when I answered, I thought about the zip-lining date through the Amazon that I'd gone on with Gwen. She'd been scared to death of heights and screamed the whole way down. But the rush of adrenaline that had shot through me as we'd flown through the trees was something I'd never forget.

"It was amazing! A once-in-a-lifetime experience."

"Much better." Alexis clapped. "I almost believed you that time."

I slumped in my seat, picking up on the *almost* in her sentence.

I was going to ruin the show before it even started airing.

"Next question," Alexis said. "Who did you pick?"

I silently read the answer. (*Drew chuckles*) *You know I can't answer that. But I will say this: I'm really happy with the way things turned out.*

But was I?

"Do you see the answer?" Alexis looked at me expectantly.

"Yeah, sorry." And I said the words on the page.

Alexis drew in a breath and released it before speaking. "Are you even trying?" Frustration oozed in her voice.

I rubbed my cheek with my hand and shrugged. "You said yourself I was a crappy actor." I thought for a moment then said, "Here, I'll take this home with me and practice. We can try again later."

"Okay, make sure that you do." She nodded, rubbing her temples with her fingers. "Your first interview is only four days away and those interviews better go off without a hitch. I will not have my ratings take a dive because you can't answer a few questions."

My mouth went dry. I really was going to be the worst bachelor in all of *Finding Your Soulmate's* history. And any credibility my app and I had in helping other people find love would go down the drain with the show.

Dion, one of the other producers, knocked on Alexis's door. "Do you have a moment?"

"Sure, Drew and I were just about finished."

Dion stepped inside and shut the door behind him. "I just got some bad news."

Alexis leaned back in her chair. "What do you mean *bad news*?"

Dion cleared his throat and took the chair beside me. "Drew's handler just quit."

Alexis's eyes widened. "Colton quit?"

"Apparently, he has issues with our bachelor."

I shook my head. Of course Colton blamed it on me instead of owning up to the fact that he'd taken a job with *Finding Your Soulmate's* biggest competitor.

"What are we going to do?" Alexis asked. "We're already short-staffed as it is. Drew has a bunch of appearances. It's not like you or I can just drop everything and make sure he gets to his interviews."

Dion angled toward me. "Don't you have a personal assistant who can do all this for you?"

"Byron is busy handling my whole company right now." I shook my head. "But I'm a big boy. I can get myself to the airport."

"No!" Dion and Alexis said at the same time.

Dion pinched the bridge of his nose. "We've had bachelors try that before, and then they ended up being late for their interviews. That's not something we can afford to do, especially with the season we have ahead of us."

Alexis blew out a long, frustrated breath and looked to Dion. "Do you have anyone else in mind? We can't just hire anyone. We don't have time to do all our usual background checks and screenings. We need someone we can trust. Someone responsible who won't quit on us midway through the season. Preferably someone whom we know will get along with Drew. We don't have time to wait and see if they're a good match to work together."

Kate popped into my mind, but I tried to push the thought away. Working with me was probably the last thing she wanted to do. But before I knew it, I was saying, "I might know someone. I've known her since we were kids. She's driven and responsible, and I think she's looking for something full-time."

"One problem," Alexis said. "She's a *she*. I don't need another bachelor falling for his handler. Especially one who isn't quite engaged."

Yikes. Alexis really was going to hold that whole engagement thing over my head until I fixed it.

"She's married. If that helps anything."

"Married?" Alexis perked up, her expression relaxing for the first time since Dion walked in.

I nodded. "She got married this summer."

Why am I pushing forward with this?

Alexis smiled. "Good. Call her now. We need to get this spot filled as soon as possible. In fact, if she can come in today to sign a confidentiality contract, that would be ideal."

Wait, no.

I couldn't call Kate.

Not with our history.

The last thing I needed was her assistance in my engagement. That would be even more excruciating than knowing millions of fans were watching me try to find love on TV each week.

But from the look in Alexis's eyes, I knew I was going to do it anyway.

KATE

I WAS WRITING my review for the latest animated movie when my cellphone rang. I glanced at the screen, didn't recognize the number, but answered it anyway. I always hoped an agent might pull my screenplay from the slush pile and call to offer representation.

It hadn't happened in the two years I'd been trying, but I always hoped...

"Hello, this is Kate Dawson," I said in my most professional voice.

"Hey, Kate. It's Drew." He paused for a second. "Wait, isn't your last name Prosser now?"

I groaned inwardly. "I didn't take Nolan's last name."

And I really didn't want to have that conversation right now either.

"Oh...that's interesting. I never pegged you for the feminist sort."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Oh, not that being a feminist is bad. I mean, we should all be for equal rights for women," he hurried to say. "I just remember coming across your notebooks back in high school and seeing you had written Kate Burrows all over one of them."

I covered my mouth with my free hand and gasped. "You saw that?"

Drew chuckled. "It was adorable how you put a heart in place of the 'O' in my last name."

My cheeks burned. "That was a long time ago, Drew. I've grown up a lot

since then."

"I know."

There was awkward silence for a moment.

So I cleared my throat and said, "So what were you calling for?"

"I have a proposition for you," Drew said. "This might be going out on a limb, but my handler quit this morning and the show is desperate to hire someone quickly with everything happening next week. They want someone trustworthy. Someone I already know. And I remembered you saying something about only working part-time, and I figured you might be open for something more."

Really? He was offering me a job? In the very industry I was trying to break into?

"What's the job like? You said I'd be your handler? What's that?"

"Basically, you just make sure I get to my appointments for the show. We have a lot of promotional interviews coming up next Monday. And then you also have to help with a few other things. It really shouldn't be that hard."

"Can't your personal assistant do that for you?"

"He's already too busy handling all of my business affairs right now. We need someone who can just focus on the show."

Writing for the newspaper *was* getting pretty monotonous.

"When would I start?"

"Right now would be ideal, actually."

"Right now?" My voice came out too loud.

"Like I said, we're in a bind. I understand if you need to decline. It was a shot in the dark anyway."

"Wait. No . . ." I said, not believing this was actually happening. "I can do it. I'm almost done with my article anyway." I mentally calculated whether I could really do it or not. Things were pretty slow at the newspaper, and they could hire out my work easily enough if I couldn't give them the appropriate two-week notice.

"Really?" He sounded like he hadn't expected me to accept his offer.

"Is it just at the ANB studio on Alameda Avenue?"

"Yes, studio three. Where're you at? My driver can pick you up."

His driver?

Wow, a lot had changed in the last few years.

"That's okay. I'm not too far away. I can be there in an hour."

"You sure?"

"Yes. I'll be there."

"Great. See you then."

He hung up before I could process that I'd be seeing Drew again that day.

Here goes nothing. I tugged on my skirt before entering ANB's studio three.

When I walked into the office, a girl with the most beautiful light-brown skin and super curly black hair greeted me.

"How can I help you?" The girl peeked at me through thick rimmed glasses, the light color of her eyes catching me off guard.

I cleared my throat and clutched my résumé.

Drew hadn't said anything about me needing one, but I'd printed off one just in case. It was surprising how much I wanted this job, especially since I didn't really understand what it was. "Drew Burrows told me to meet him here."

The girl nodded and gestured to the chairs in the corner. "Take a seat and I'll go find him."

I sat on a black leather chair and tried hard not to fidget with my belongings. I was busy running through my answers to possible interview questions when Drew walked into the room wearing a dark blue suit that screamed designer brand. He smiled when he saw me, and my stomach did a little flip.

"I'm so glad you could make it." He walked toward me, and before I knew it, he was pulling me into a hug.

My breath caught in my throat at the unexpected gesture. I hadn't hugged Drew for, well, had I ever really hugged him before? Cuddled with? Yes, once. Kissed? Exactly once—and obviously that hadn't turned out well.

But I returned the embrace, noticing how good he smelled. His cologne was different from what he wore years earlier—probably a really expensive cologne. I'd never smelled anything so good.

"Thanks again for coming on such short notice," he said after stepping back. "I'll take you right to Dion's office, so he can go over everything with you."

"Dion Robins?" I followed behind him, not believing I was about to meet one of the producers whose name I'd read across my TV screen for years.

Drew glanced over his shoulder and gave me a half smile. "You've heard of him?"

"You could say that."

"Then you've probably heard of his reputation, too."

"Reputation?"

"I'll just say, I wasn't the only one looking for love while on the show. He's quite the ladies' man. So, if he tries flirting with you, just remind him that you're married, and he should back off."

I gulped.

Right.

Married.

I should probably tell him the truth.

As if noticing my apprehension, he said, "Not that he'll need reminding. You being happily married is actually a good selling point for you getting the job."

"Why?" I frowned.

Why would my marital status make any sort of a difference?

Did they think married people were more responsible?

He waved his hand. "Alexis seems sure any young female is bound to fall in love with me. My enigmatic charm or something like that." He shot me a look that told me he was kidding. "So once I explained that was never going to happen in your case, she was practically dialing your number for me."

So, telling him I'd had my marriage annulled a few months ago would probably not be the best idea right now.

Not if I wanted to get the job.

Though, why would it matter anyway?

Drew was a happily engaged man. And even if he was somehow in the market for a new girlfriend, he'd never look at me twice. He'd made that abundantly clear when he stopped talking to me after I practically threw myself at him in high school.

We reached a door with the name *Dion Robins* on it, and Drew knocked.

"Come in," a deep voice with a Spanish accent called from the other side.

Drew peeked his head in. "Kate Dawson is here to see you."

He opened the door the rest of the way so I could see the Hispanic middle-aged man sitting behind a big desk with a wall of windows behind it.

My pulse raced with nervous energy as Dion stood and held out his hand for me to shake.

I tentatively set my hand in his and tried to find my tongue. "I-it's nice to meet you, Mr. Robins."

"Pleasure to meet you, Kate."

"Well, now that you two have met, I'm going to get back to pickups," Drew said to Mr. Robins, and then turned his gaze back to me. "I'm sure I'll see you again soon. Just make sure you don't fail this interview."

Fail? Hadn't he made it sound like getting this job was a sure thing?

He must have noticed how pale I'd gone because he cracked a smile and winked. "I'll see you soon. You've totally got this."

I finally drew in a decent breath after he shut the door. Then I took a seat,

urging my heart rate to slow down so I could make it through this interview without passing out.

"Have you ever worked for a reality show like this before?" Mr. Robins asked after he sat back down across from me.

"No. This would be my first," I said.

Strike one.

"Have you worked in showbiz at all?"

"Not exactly."

Strike two.

Wow, I was going to totally bomb this interview in less than a minute.

"Can I see your résumé?"

I handed the paper across the desk, hoping he didn't notice my shaking hands. Then I waited quietly as he scanned my list of credentials that I hoped might be impressive enough to land me this job.

"This is all very good," he said. "How soon can you start?"

"Um . . ." Was he offering me the job? Already? "I can start whenever you need me."

Because I literally have nothing worthwhile going on in my life right now.

"Great. Then you're hired. I trust Drew's judgment more than my own." He chuckled. "And to be honest, we're in a tough spot and need someone as soon as possible."

"Wow, thank you so much, Mr. Robins." Talk about the most nerve-racking interview turning out to be the easiest interview ever.

"Call me Dion." He clasped his hands on his desk. "And don't thank me quite yet. There's a big non-disclosure agreement you'll need to sign before we can move forward. Our show depends on the discretion of our employees and I'll warn you up front, if you breach your contract, it will not be a happy thing for your bank account."

Well, since my bank account was basically empty it really couldn't get much worse.

Once I signed the thick contract, Dion went over my new responsibilities. It didn't sound like the job would be too hard. I'd basically act as an errand girl and make sure Drew had everything he needed.

"The main events you'll be traveling to will be either here in L.A. or in New York," he said. "And then there are weekend getaways that Drew and his final pick will have every other weekend. We'll need you around to do simple things on those weekends, like bringing them their meals and making sure they have all the things they need since they'll be on complete lockdown for secrecy purposes."

Talk about keeping everything on the down-low.

How was Drew supposed to enjoy his new engagement if he couldn't even go out and do normal things? Poor guy.

"I guess I should have made sure you were okay to travel and work weekends before you signed that contract, huh?"

"No, that's fine. My schedule is wide open." I didn't have anyone who needed me around anymore.

"Okay, good. Now for the top-secret information that you signed all those papers for."

My ears perked up, anticipation welling in my chest.

This was it. I was going to find out whom Drew had picked—the girl who'd finally stolen his much sought-after heart.

Dion pressed his lips together before continuing. "You said you've watched this show before, right?"

"Yes." I knew the drill well.

I'd always wondered how a person could get engaged to someone after only knowing them for a few months and spending so much time dating other people at the same time.

But season after season it worked, and there were even a few couples who

made it to the altar.

"We had something different happen this season," Dion said. "It started the same as any other time, and things seemed to be going smoothly. We thought for sure Drew would get down on one knee, as many had before him. But when the day came, he couldn't propose."

What? My heart pounded.

He wasn't engaged?

He wasn't off the market?

Growing up, he had always been the kindest and gentlest of Aiden's friends. How could sweet Drew not be able to find love when everything was in his favor?

"Is he at least dating one of the final women?" I asked once the shock had soaked in.

"Yes." Dion nodded. "Technically, they're boyfriend and girlfriend. But that won't satiate the fans when the season finale comes around. So, this brings us to another job of yours."

I bit my lip. What was he going to ask me to do? Did I *want* to do what he was about to ask me to do?

"We need you to help push Drew towards an engagement on the live after-show in just over ten weeks."

"Wait, what?" That was ridiculous. I couldn't make him get engaged. Not if he didn't want to.

"You're his friend. You know him better than me. I'm sure you'll be able to help him and Gwen along. He tells me you're happily married, so you should be a pro at this love thing."

My stomach curdled. I should have told Drew the truth at the store.

I looked down at the fake ring I'd worn for months in order to keep people from finding out about my failed marriage. If I told Dion I wasn't married because my ex-husband cheated on me, he'd probably take back the job offer. And I really wanted this job. I'd put my dreams on the back burner for too

long. It was time for me to finally go after what I wanted.

And if that meant pretending to be married for a short time, was that really such a bad thing? It wasn't like anything was going to happen between me and Drew. We'd had our chance years ago, and it had only taken one kiss for him to realize he wasn't really interested after all.

Just like one month of marriage had been enough for Nolan.

So, I pasted on my best smile and said, "I'll do my best to help. Drew deserves to finally get his happily ever after."

Just because I didn't get mine didn't mean it wasn't possible for Drew. He was a great guy and deserved to be happy after everything we'd gone through.

DREW

"OKAY, Drew. Just change into this shirt from your date with Tori and we'll call it a day." Oliver handed me a blue-and-red plaid button-up from the stack of clothes on a table.

I pulled off the gray V-neck I'd worn on another date for the show and put it on. I rolled my shoulders back, hoping to relieve some of the constant tension I had there.

I'd been doing pickups all afternoon and was so tired of saying the same lines over and over again until Oliver was content with them.

I still didn't know why I'd thought going on this show was a good idea. Sure, I'd finally taken the time to travel all over the world. But I'd never felt more like a failure in my life.

And it was all because I couldn't get down on one stupid knee and propose to Gwen. Why, after all these years, was I still unable to commit and just marry someone?

I deserved to find love, didn't I? I wasn't that bad of a person.

But it seemed like the ability to form a deep, personal connection with anybody had died right along with Aiden.

For some reason, I just didn't know how to let myself open up anymore.

And that fault had ruined a whole season of *Finding Your Soulmate* and also hurt Gwen. And I hated hurting her. She deserved to have a guy who

could tell her that he was in love with her.

I just wasn't that guy, yet.

The door to the studio's set opened and Dion stepped inside with Kate following close behind him. My heart thumped just at the sight of her. She was still gorgeous—somehow more beautiful than she'd been all those years ago when I'd fallen so hard for my best friend's little sister.

I shook those thoughts away. I shouldn't be thinking about her like that. She was a married woman now. And I was dating Gwen. I was supposed to be getting engaged to Gwen.

"I've brought Kate up to speed on everything," Dion said. Which meant she knew about my failure to propose. "And Alexis suggested we have her help you prepare for your upcoming interviews."

Why had I given Kate's name to Alexis? Having her see me fumble through a scripted conversation was about the last thing I needed right now. It was humiliating.

I was supposed to be *The Billionaire Bachelor*. Not this wannabe hack who failed at relationships and saying a few lines.

Dion left, and Kate took a chair against the wall.

"Oliver says I have one more pickup to do, and then I'll find my phone so we can schedule a time to get together." I finished buttoning my shirt, feeling uncomfortable being like that in front of a married woman I once had feelings for. "I think I might be in meetings all tomorrow morning."

"What's a pickup?" Kate pulled her phone from her purse.

"You know those private 'in the moment' interviews you see with the cast during each episode? Pickups are kind of like those, except filmed after production."

"Like fake interviews?" Kate gasped like she had no idea reality TV shows could do something like that.

I smiled at her innocence. "Not everything in reality TV is real."

"I know." She scrunched up her nose in the cute way I remembered. "But

I like to pretend that it is. So, what do you have to say in these anyway?"

I shrugged. "Basically whatever Oliver tells me to. Just because we filmed a ton of stuff doesn't mean they have everything they need for a good storyline for all the episodes to follow. And with the surprise ending . . ." I shook my head as the guilt resurfaced again. "Well, they need more than usual from me to make it work."

"What Drew's trying to say is—" Oliver interrupted, stepping out from behind the screen where he'd been re-watching the video feed from, "—we're trying to get him to come off as less sure of the women. Have him talk more about his fear that they're really only interested in him because of his money."

I rolled my eyes. "They're trying to help me save face and make it seem like I have a better reason for not proposing in the end."

"That makes sense." Kate looked thoughtful as she nodded. And it was strange. She didn't seem to be passing any judgment on me. I'd expected her to make some sort of joke about how I had twenty-five women and still didn't manage to fall in love.

But she didn't.

I inspected the image Oliver had pulled up from my date with Tori to make sure I'd only left the top button undone for that date. Everything checked out, so I went to finish off the day with the line: *Tori is great. We had instant chemistry and I'm excited to see where this journey takes us.*

And after about five attempts, Oliver signed it off and I changed back into the suit I'd worn to the studio.

Kate was still waiting patiently when I came out from the changing area. I took the seat beside her and brought my phone out.

"Do you have a set schedule?" I asked, curious what kind of a relationship they had. "Like, does Nolan expect you to be home at a certain time?"

Was she the type of wife who had dinner on the table by six o'clock every

day? Was Nolan the one to cook? Or did they take turns?

I had no idea. Back when we'd been close, she hadn't seemed the type to spend hours in the kitchen. But she also hadn't seemed the type not to take on her husband's last name. So, I probably didn't know her that well at all.

Not anymore anyway.

"I can meet whenever you need. My schedule is wide open." She looked down, and I couldn't keep my gaze from going right to the big rock on her left hand. "Nolan is out of town a lot." She shrugged as if it wasn't a big deal. But there was something there that made me question it.

Was something off in their marriage?

I pursed my lips. That was none of my business. So instead of being nosy, I scrolled through the calendar app on my phone. And just like I thought, my entire morning and half of the afternoon were booked solid. "I can meet at three. Will that work?"

Kate glanced at her own phone. "Yes. Would you like to meet here at the studio?"

I grimaced. "I've been here all week. Would you mind meeting at my house?"

"Your house?"

"Yeah...unless that's weird for you. I mean, my personal assistant and housekeeper should be around, so it's not like we'll be all alone."

I kicked myself internally. Of course that would be weird. She was a married woman. Married women didn't go over to other men's houses unless their husbands were with them.

At least, the type of married woman I assumed Kate was wouldn't do something like that.

She did seem to relax at my mention of my assistant Byron being there though. So maybe I hadn't freaked her out too much.

Kate cleared her throat and typed something into her phone. "Your house will be fine. Dion said to meet wherever you needed."

"Great. I'll just text you my address and the security code to get in." I tapped on the screen a few times. "I'll see you tomorrow, Kate."

And then I left before she could ask me what everyone at *Finding Your Soulmate* had been asking: why I'd gone on a dating show in the first place when I didn't want to get engaged.

I WAS CHECKING the text Drew had sent me when my navigation app said I'd arrived at his home. I didn't know what I'd expected, but I wasn't prepared for this. But the house number on the towering wrought-iron gates matched the address on my phone, so I pulled my Jetta next to the keypad and punched in the code.

A moment later, the gates swung wide open. I drove on the long asphalt drive that led to Drew's house. Palm trees and bushes lined the way, but soon, Drew's modern-style home—which was more like a mansion—came into view.

I knew Drew was rich, but I had no idea he lived in a place like this. My jaw dropped as I took it in.

It was so different from his mom's one-story home around the corner from my parents' house. In fact, just one of the huge windows in the front probably cost more than I made in a year.

I pulled my car forward on the stone driveway, and then climbed out, suddenly feeling way too underdressed to even be there. Drew had been wearing a suit the day before. Was there some sort of dress code required to enter? Should I hurry home and put on my old prom dress?

I shook my head. I was being ridiculous. Drew seemed down to earth so far. He wouldn't have let all that money go to his head.

At least I hoped not. It would be sad if the only reason he hadn't gotten engaged on the show was because none of the girls were fancy enough for him and his new billionaire lifestyle.

I smoothed my white blouse and took a breath before ringing the doorbell.

A few minutes later, a beautiful woman in her fifties opened the door.

"Hi, I'm here to meet with Mr. Burrows," I said, unsure if I was supposed to refer to him that way or not. He'd always just been Drew in the past.

"You must be Mrs. Dawson." The woman stepped aside to welcome me into the house.

I followed her in and the first thing I noticed was the freestanding staircase with decorative wrought-iron handrails that led to the floor above. The walls, ceilings, and tile flooring were a soothing creamy white that instantly made me feel at home.

The housekeeper led me past the staircase into a large living room with a giant sectional couch and chairs. A huge TV was mounted above a long open fireplace. I wanted to run my hands along everything and feel the richness of it all. It was like I'd walked into a whole different world, one I'd never been to before, but never wanted to leave.

And I could just feel that this was a peaceful place.

Drew's sanctuary from the outside world and all its chaos.

"Have a seat. Mr. Burrows is still in a meeting, but I'll let him know you're here."

I nodded and sank into the brown leather couch.

How much did a place like this even cost? I wondered as I looked around, craning my neck to see everything in my view. Fifteen million? Thirty?

Footsteps sounded behind me a few minutes later. I turned to find Drew, who wore another expensive suit that accentuated his toned, muscular physique perfectly.

I'd seen enough of the show's promos to know he'd look just as good on

the beach in swim shorts as he did in a suit. And I wasn't too proud to admit that I may have paused the screen for a moment to count out if he had a six pack or an eight pack.

Of course he had an eight pack. Drew was an overachiever, after all.

And I doubted that many women would be that disappointed if he never did get engaged to the girl he was currently dating. They'd probably be ecstatic that he wasn't completely off the market.

"Sorry to make you wait," he said, loosening his tie. "Those on my board of directors don't always see eye to eye."

"It's no problem." I swallowed, still having a hard time reconciling this new version of Drew with the one I'd known growing up. He'd always excelled in school and sports, and been wiser than his years, but it was hard to believe that a guy in his late twenties could have so much responsibility resting on his shoulders.

"I'm sure you have other places to be today, so should we get started?" Drew asked, undoing his tie the rest of the way so it hung loose around his neck.

I couldn't help but think the triangle of tanned skin above his shirt was sexy.

Yeah, he was definitely going to be eye candy on the screen for a lot of women this winter.

Get your mind back in the present, Kate, I chided myself when I realized I'd just been ogling him.

I cleared my throat and tried to act normal. "This house is amazing," I said. "Think I could get a tour before we start?"

"You want a tour?" he asked, an embarrassed look crossing his face.

I nodded. "I'd love to see where a big, fancy billionaire like yourself spends his days."

A slight smile formed on his lips. "Okay, sure," he said with a sigh. "I guess my legs could use a good stretch after sitting for the past few hours.

Where do you want to go first?"

"That way looks promising." I pointed to the left that looked like it led into a kitchen.

Drew led me into the kitchen, which was very sleek and modern. Windows lined the curved main wall, and the island curled around in the shape of a "C."

I ran my fingers along the white granite countertop, wanting to feel the luxury of it all. "Do you cook in here often?"

"Not too often." Drew shrugged, an almost embarrassed expression taking shape on his face. "I don't have the time these days, so Carmella takes good care of me."

"Is that the lady who let me in?"

He nodded. "She pretty much runs this whole house for me. Takes care of everything so I don't have to worry about it."

"Except for when she's sick and you have to buy your own milk." I winked.

"Can't have that happening again." Drew's cheeks glowed with pink, probably remembering how we'd both looked when we'd met in the store.

Not either of our best looks.

I followed Drew out of the kitchen to another sitting area that overlooked the backyard. My gaze caught on his broad shoulders and wanted to linger for a moment before I made them focus on the yard's landscape.

We walked through glass doors and onto a patio that dropped down to a huge infinity pool that had a view of the whole city.

I bet he had an amazing view of all the lights from L.A. at night.

"Do you have pool parties out here very often?" I asked. There were several lounge chairs on the sides, some even sitting in the shallow end of the pool.

"Not really. But my sister and her family do come to town every once in a while, and we have a good time."

Hmm. Interesting. If I had a place like this I'd have my friends over every weekend.

But maybe parties weren't Drew's scene. He had always been more of the homebody type than the life of the party. Which seemed to have suited him well.

At least he'd made a ton of money with his interest in coding.

I stepped across the stones in the shallow end of the pool. Drew held his hand out to help me step down, and when I placed my hand in his, his gentle touch sent shivers up my arm.

Wow . . .

Touching his skin was just as electric as it had been years ago.

Drew released my hand an instant later. After showing me the putting green, barbecue area, and fire pit, he pushed open another door to the house and waited for me to walk inside first.

"So now that I've signed that big confidentiality contract, can you tell me how your experience as the bachelor really went?" I asked as I stepped back into his home.

"I guess I can tell you everything now, huh?" He blew out a deep breath and gripped the handrail to a staircase before leading me upstairs. "It was pretty crazy and overwhelming. That first night with twenty-five women was so long. Of course, I was excited to see who I would meet—you know, find out if my future wife was in the room. And then I just had the hardest time remembering all their names and the conversations we had. I don't know if you know this, since you've only seen the show from the camera's viewpoint . . ."

"Yeah, poor old non-famous me." I fake pouted when we reached the top of the stairs.

"Anyway," he said, a crooked smile lifting his lips. "They actually have a producer right there next to me and the women, taking notes of our conversations so I'll remember them later. Then they'd give them to me so I

could study up before each date. There are just so many conversations that they tend to all blend together." He gestured for me to take the curved hall to the right. The wall had huge canvas paintings of lighthouses and nautical scenes.

"So would the producer, like, whisper the girl's name to you before she walked up?"

A guilty expression made its way across Drew's face. "I didn't need help with *all* of them."

"I would hope not." I laughed.

"Anyway, the guest rooms are in here, here, and here." He pointed to the doorways to the three rooms. "They're pretty typical, nothing too exciting."

I peeked my head inside. Each room was bigger than the living room in my apartment, and at least twice the size of my bedroom. There were queen-sized beds and large dressers for guests, but I could imagine his future children loving the space they'd have to run around and store all their toys.

His kids would probably be cute. I'd seen a photo of Gwen at the studio. She was a gorgeous blonde, with emerald-green eyes that almost caught you off guard with how bright they were. And her heart-shaped face endeared you to her immediately.

Drew had always gone for blondes, so Gwen would be perfect for him as far as I could tell. Their kids would hit the genetic jackpot with parents as attractive as they were.

Drew cleared his throat, breaking my thoughts away from his future family. "My room is down this way." He gestured back the way we'd come. We walked past the staircase, past a huge game room and another sitting area. Eventually, we came to a set of double doors.

Drew opened one of the large doors to reveal the room inside.

I just hovered in the doorway at first, taking in the luxury that he got to experience every day. Grayish-brown wood flooring lined the room. Off to one side was a small sitting area with a couch, coffee table, fireplace, and TV.

Farther back were more double doors that led to a balcony.

I looked the other way and saw a king-sized bed. Behind that was another door that I assumed led to the master bath and closet area.

"I promise to be a complete gentleman. You can walk inside and not have to worry about Nolan needing to beat me up afterward." He winked, and my heart banged in my chest. I knew I didn't have to worry about Drew making a pass at me. But it still seemed surreal to step into such a private area. He slept in here. He relaxed in here. Showered in here.

Maybe did other activities in here.

I cleared my throat and stepped inside the suite. Maybe talking about his girlfriend would remind my heart that it wasn't supposed to race when it thought about things like that. "So did you and Gwen hit it off right from the start? Or was it more of a slow burn?" I asked, hoping to come off sounding neutral about the whole thing.

"Um, I don't know." Drew scrubbed his hand through his hair. "It was different. She was beautiful, so I noticed that right off, but we didn't really click until later." He shrugged. "I actually almost sent her home that first night. I was pretty sure about twelve of the women when it came time to decide who to keep and who to let go, but I couldn't make up my mind about the last three."

"Really?" I asked, surprised he'd almost sent his final pick home.

He nodded. "This is where the producers came in handy. They'd taken the time to get to know me pretty well, and they'd had a chance to talk with the girls . . . probably more than I did. So when Dion named Gwen as a good choice, I followed his intuition."

Dion did seem to have a good read on people. "Thank goodness for Dion."

"I know, right? To think I could have sent her home that first night. That would have made this season even more of a mess."

I ran my fingers along his white comforter, unable to resist discovering if

it felt as soft as it looked. "So, what kept you from taking the final step that last day in Antigua?" What had kept Drew back from proposing? "You're still dating now, right?" I looked up through my lashes just in time to see him swallow and nod. "Then why not just do it then? It's what the show is all about, isn't it?"

A tortured look crossed Drew's face and I instantly regretted bringing it up. I was about to tell him it was none of my business when he said, "I don't know." He released a heavy sigh. "There was just something missing between us, and I couldn't tell her that I saw us being together forever. You know?" He paused. "And part of me still didn't trust that the girls were really there for me and not my money. Plus, I had vowed to myself that I wouldn't make any promises I couldn't keep. I didn't want to lead anyone on. And I only wanted to get engaged once."

I tried to keep my face neutral at his mention of wanting a one-time engagement. What would he think of me when he found out I'd not only gotten engaged to someone and not had it work out, but went all the way and gotten married?

He'd think I was some flimflam-y girl who jumped in and out of relationships at the drop of a hat.

Drew continued, "I knew my heart wasn't there yet, so I couldn't promise something I wasn't sure of myself. Hopefully I'll be ready ten weeks from now, because ready or not, I guess I'm gonna have to man up and do it. I just need to talk to Gwen about everything so she understands what's going on. I'd hate to lead her on just for the sake of saving the show."

I couldn't help but admire Drew for how sincere he was being about this whole thing. Most bachelors would be totally fine going through the motions even if the feelings weren't all the way there. But it was obvious that this was so real to Drew.

He did everything with the purest of intentions. And I was even more determined to make sure that he was happy when everything was said and

done. I'd do my job the best I could, but I'd also make sure Drew's heart didn't get hung out on the line.

I peeked inside the bathroom and closet before leaving. Just like I expected, they were gorgeous and had everything I'd ever dreamed of in a bathroom.

There was a huge soaking tub in the middle of the room, and a separate shower and toilet area. Double sinks so he wouldn't have to worry about his future wife's stuff cluttering up his side. And his closet . . . I literally gasped when I stepped inside. It had drawers and cupboards, and a washer and dryer. There was a big round cushioned seat in the middle that he could sit on to put on his shoes.

And even if he said he wasn't ready to get married yet, his closet told me otherwise. It was only half full. Less than halfway full, actually. He'd left plenty of space for his future bride to put her things.

And seeing how thoughtful Drew already was made my heart kind of hurt. I wasn't necessarily jealous of his future wife since I knew I'd never had a chance with Drew back when I'd wanted it, but I was jealous that while Drew had already put so much thought toward a future with his soon-to-be bride, Nolan hadn't even cared to have one with me.

Why had I not seen the signs earlier?

How had I let myself marry a guy who didn't really love me?

I sighed and switched off the light to the closet and went back into the bedroom and found Drew sitting on his bed.

He stood when he saw me. "Should we get started on those interview questions?"

"Yes," I said, realizing that seeing how amazing Drew's life was just reminded me of everything I was missing. "Alexis told me your last practice didn't go exactly as planned."

Drew groaned. "Yeah, you might be here for a while." His eyes darted behind me. "Actually, do you mind if I change into something more

comfortable real quick?"

He was going to change?

Like, right now?

My cheeks heated when an image of him without a shirt popped into my mind. And I bit my lip because my imagination was way too good at doing that. Like all the times I'd watched him playing basketball with Aiden in the driveway had burned that image into my permanent memory.

Only he was older now and had all those muscles I'd seen on my TV.

Get your mind out of the gutter, Kate, I chided myself when I started picturing what he'd look like doing pushups without a shirt.

I shook my head and hoped when I met his gaze that he couldn't tell what was going through my mind. "Go ahead and change." I swallowed. "I'll, uh, meet you downstairs."

Because I really needed to get out of his bedroom.

Drew couldn't act to save his life, I mused, as we prepped for his upcoming interviews.

But there was something so endearing about it that I couldn't help but smile at all his answers.

He was trying so hard.

But maybe that was the problem. It was like when he'd helped me with my films in middle school. Back then, I'd used all my free time to create extravagant screenplays, and then I'd coerced Aiden and Drew into recording them with me and my friends.

"Do you remember what we did when we were younger?" I asked once we'd made it through the list of questions one more time.

Drew looked confused. "Could you be more specific? I've known you since I was eleven . . . we did a lot of things together."

"I'm talking about when you helped me run lines for my films."

"Like when you let me use the script as more of a guideline for the scene?" Inspiration dawned on Drew's face.

"I was thinking you could use Alexis's answers as more of a guide, but use your own words so it doesn't sound so robotic. You don't talk like this—your way of speaking is much more relaxed and languid. Alexis is more up and down, and precise. It's no wonder this hasn't been working."

Drew's blue eyes lit up. "You're a genius, Kate." He sighed with relief. "I was on the verge of an aneurysm with these."

"Should we start from the top then?" I glanced down at the sheet in my lap, sat up straight, and spoke in my best talk-show-host voice. "What was this experience like?"

Drew sat up in his chair as well. "It was great. I feel so lucky that I got to have this amazing opportunity, and I can't tell you enough how glad I am that it's over."

I scrunched up my nose. "Maybe just leave off that last bit?"

He laughed and rubbed a hand over his face. "I guess you're right. They'd probably have a few questions about that, which Alexis would definitely not want me giving the answers to."

"Probably not." I smiled. "But other than that, that was much better. It sounded so much more like you."

Drew sighed. "Good. Let's just hope Alexis is okay with us deviating from the script."

"I'm pretty sure she'll see you've only made improvements. I mean, I should know that. You always made mine way better."

"I still can't believe you talked me into dressing up like some pansy and had me tromping around your backyard like a fairy godmother all those years ago."

"I was pretty persuasive, wasn't I?"

"I don't know if that was it exactly. You certainly never got Aiden to

make such a fool of himself."

"You were just way nicer to me than he was."

"Or maybe I understood that if we played with you for ten or twenty minutes, you'd leave us to our video games for the rest of the day." He raised an eyebrow.

"Whatever you say." I waved the words away. "But just think about it this way, if I hadn't been so annoying, you wouldn't have had any experience in TV or films. So, I should totally get all the credit for you being the star that you are."

Drew rolled his eyes and laughed. "I'm not a star. I just went on a lot of dates in the past few months."

"Well, the fact that your photo is now the wallpaper on all of my friends' phones tells me otherwise."

His face paled. "You're not serious about that, right?"

"The 'me having friends' part?" I asked, feigning ignorance.

"No, the wallpaper part."

"Okay, fine. So only half of my friends have your face greeting them every time they use their phone."

Drew raised an eyebrow.

"Fine. It's just me," I said, unable to resist teasing him in the way I'd always done in high school.

"You're relentless." Drew laughed. "How does Nolan put up with you?"

I looked down at the rug. "Oh, you know."

I tried to think of something more to say, but couldn't really think of anything, because Nolan *hadn't* put up with me. He'd found someone else instead.

And from the way Drew was studying me, I worried he might be figuring my secret out.

"YOU'RE GONNA DO GREAT, HONEY." Gwen's syrupy voice came through the phone as I sat in the green room at *Wake up with Clary* waiting for my time to go on air. "The fans can only fall more in love with you. I know I did."

My stomach twisted, and I tried not to feel guilty at her last words.

How could she say so freely that she loved me, when I still couldn't say the words back?

What was wrong with me?

Why were those three little words so hard to say?

I always told myself it was because those words meant so much more to me than they did to others . . . but what if I was wrong?

What if I was just a cold, hard-hearted person who couldn't feel that way about anyone? I barely even said it to my mom, and that wasn't until she said it first.

I was seriously messed up.

Instead of taking Gwen's bait, I changed the subject. "I'm excited to see you this weekend. Did you find someone to watch your dogs?"

"No. My mom refuses to take them again after what happened last time." I could just imagine the adorable way her brow furrowed when she said that. "Penelope was just nervous, thinking I was leaving her for months again. My

mom should care more about a dog than her carpet. It's not like the carpet is alive or anything," she whined.

"She did just get the carpet put in," I said. "Can you understand how she might be upset that Penelope had an accident in the corner?"

Gwen huffed. "It's not like she can't afford to get the carpet cleaned. It's really not that big of a deal."

It would have been a big deal to me. I couldn't stand having dogs in the house.

Sure, they were fine for other people to have, but I certainly didn't need all the trouble they caused. Which was why I didn't love the idea of Gwen's dogs taking over my house once we were engaged.

But it was something I'd have to deal with when the time came. If I got to the point of asking her to marry me, a loving wife would be more than worth putting up with yippy dogs chewing on my shoes.

There was a knock on the door. I looked over my shoulder to see Kate peeking her head in. She held up five fingers to indicate how much time I had until the stage crew came for me.

"Hey, Gwen. I gotta go." I nodded and gestured for Kate to come in. "I'll talk to you later."

"Good luck," Gwen said. "I wish I could be there with you."

"Me too. Just a few more months and I'll be showing you off to the whole world."

I hung up and set my phone on airplane mode, and then slipped it into the breast pocket of my sports coat. I stood and started buttoning my jacket.

"Are you nervous?" Kate asked.

"A little," I admitted. "I've done interviews like this before, but this is the first time I'll be discussing my personal life and not business. I just hope I can answer the questions without sounding like a robot."

"Want to run through them one more time?" Kate offered.

I shook my head. "If I don't have them down by now, it's never gonna

happen." I inspected my favorite Armani suit in the mirror. "How do I look?"

Kate stepped closer and gazed at my reflection. Heat rose up my neck as I tried not to feel nervous under her examination.

Why was I still so nervous around her?

"You look pretty good. There's just one thing." Her eyes seemed to linger on my neck for a moment. "Your tie is crooked."

"Oh, really?" I tore my gaze away from her to inspect my tie.

"Here, let me." She leaned in to readjust my tie, clearly much less unaffected by our close proximity than I was. Her fingers smoothed along my tie and I held my breath, afraid to breathe. "Right there, that's good."

She set her hands on her hips and continued to look me over. I watched as she bit her bottom lip, her blue eyes squinting in concentration. My heart raced as I remembered all the times she'd done that when we were younger. As I continued the trip down memory lane and began remembering how many times I'd wanted to kiss her when she was in high school and I was in college, an inkling that maybe it wasn't such a good idea to have her working with me so closely crossed my mind.

I was supposed to be getting engaged, not remembering all the times I'd fantasized about my best friend's little sister.

Aiden's *married* little sister.

Which made me wonder what Nolan thought about us working together.

"Did you pierce your ear without me knowing it?" Kate asked, breaking me away from my thoughts.

"What?" I touched my ear lobes to feel for what might have gotten stuck there.

"Kidding." Kate laughed. "I'm totally kidding."

"What am I going to do with you, girl?" I placed both hands on her shoulders, forcing myself to jump back into my role as her honorary big brother. "I'm about to go on live TV. Don't make me any more anxious than I already am."

“Just trying to help you lighten up.” She gave me the most innocent smile. “You were standing so stiffly.”

I sighed, feeling heavy with all the pressure I felt to fix everything.

I couldn't help but be nervous. The pressure the producers were putting on me was stifling. Everything was riding on my doing a good job. How could I not be anxious about that?

Kate must have seen the apprehension on my face because she touched my arm gently and said, “Hey.” She looked up, her eyes big and sympathetic. “You're going to do awesome. I haven't seen any of this season, but I know you. People have been dying to get a real, honest, hardworking guy to watch for a long time. They're tired of the fame-whores who go on these shows for all the wrong reasons. You started this because you're ready to find love and someone to share your wonderful life with.”

And because I knew I needed to move on from the girl I could never have.

But I'd just keep that last bit to myself.

Kate continued, “You're sincere, and the fans will fall in love with you. Just be yourself and you'll be great. So what if you didn't propose at the end? That's only the last five minutes of the season. You did everything else right. The finale is ten weeks away. Just take a deep breath. You've got this.”

And somehow, by the time she was done speaking, I did feel a lot better. I was still nervous, but not on the verge of an ulcer attack anymore.

“Now give me a hug before you go out there and give the crowd the eye candy they've been dying to ogle over.”

“Okay,” I said.

Then before I could think better of it, I pulled her into my arms for the hug I hadn't realized, until now, I'd been craving since the moment she came back into my life.

And when she relaxed against me, I couldn't help but wonder if she'd been craving this closeness too.

She was just the right height that her head fit perfectly against my chest.

And she smelled amazing.

She's also married. And you're getting engaged.

That reality check brought me back to the present.

I cleared my throat and stepped back, letting her go even though I really didn't want to. "Thanks for the pep talk."

She tucked some of her blonde hair behind her ear and gave me an encouraging smile. "It's all true. Gwen's a lucky girl."

But when I studied her eyes, there was something in them that made me wonder what she was thinking about.

What she thought about how our lives had gone after the night we'd never talked about.

But before I could wonder too much about that, a stagehand knocked and opened the door to tell me it was time to go.

Kate followed me out the door to watch me from backstage.

"Is there anything else I can do for you?" she asked as they checked my mic.

Just having her calming presence nearby was helpful enough, but I decided to switch things up and ask her opinion on something.

"What do you think of dogs?"

Kate screwed up her face in a confused look.

"It's kind of a really important thing for me to know about my handler." I gave her the most serious expression I could muster.

She shrugged. "I like them in theory, I suppose. I mean, they're good for other people to have . . . But to be honest, I'm more of a cat person."

And with that one answer, I couldn't help but wish I'd tried harder to fix things years ago. Because if I had, I might have been able to avoid this whole mess in the first place.

Because I probably would have been with her.

I HELD my phone up backstage to catch Drew's interview live for Alexis. Alexis didn't want to wait for it to air all the way in California, so she'd instructed me to video call the interview to her in real time.

But Alexis had nothing to worry about. Drew had charmed Clary Haskins with his smart wit and good looks from the moment he'd stepped on stage.

Drew was undeniably attractive. I'd always thought so. He had brilliant blue eyes and a strong, masculine jaw that rivaled a Greek god's. And his smile. It was disarming.

Even after all these years, I still felt like a little schoolgirl with a crush on my older brother's friend every time he smiled at me.

And I wasn't even interested in dating *anyone* at the moment. Imagine what it would be like for all the women in the audience who were.

"So how was it dating twenty-five women at the same time?" Clary asked Drew. "I have a hard-enough time telling my husband and my boyfriend apart." She covered her mouth and looked to the audience with an exaggerated embarrassed look. "Oops, I guess that's not a secret anymore."

"Now Clary..." Drew chided, playing along.

"Okay, fine. My husband is the one with the beard. But sometimes it gets confusing when we're all in the same house."

Drew laughed, and Clary blushed.

"In all seriousness though, how in the world did you remember all those girls' names?"

"It was actually quite difficult, but the producers have a few tricks that helped immensely."

In other words, they fed them to him.

But of course, he couldn't ruin the movie magic for all those ladies in the audience.

"Do you and your fiancée see each other often?" Clary asked innocently.

"Who said I had a fiancée?" Drew said, not missing a beat.

To someone who didn't know him well, it would appear like he'd maintained his unruffled exterior, but I noticed a slight crack in his façade.

We'd need to work on that question a bit more. His guilt over not getting engaged might be the thing to ruin it all.

"Come on, Drew, give Auntie Clary a hint. I promise I won't tell." She winked at the audience.

"Sorry. It's top secret." He did better that time. No truth shining through the cracks.

"Are you at least happy?"

Drew nodded. "Very happy. It was an experience I'll never forget, and I got to know a lot of really great women."

They continued to talk for a few minutes more with the audience hanging on to every word.

"Well, I can see I won't be getting any information out of you today," Clary said. "It was great to have you on the show." She turned to the audience. "Make sure you tune in tonight at eight, seven Central, to ANB for the two-hour premiere of *Finding Your Soulmate* to watch Drew on his incredible journey to find love."

She thanked Drew for coming, and then he walked offstage to the applause of hundreds of fans.

"That. Was. Awesome!" I threw my arms around him in a congratulatory

hug.

Then, realizing a supposedly married woman probably shouldn't be throwing her arms around a supposedly engaged man—especially not in front of a bunch of strangers—I stepped back awkwardly and cleared my throat. "Seriously, you did so great out there."

"Thank you," Drew said breathlessly. "It was actually fun. Talking with Clary was like talking to my grandma . . . the nice one, that is." His mouth quirked up in the half smile that always did funny things to my stomach. "Let's just hope the rest of the interviews go as well as this one."

Which reminded me that I still had Alexis on the phone.

Oops.

"Here." I held up the phone. "Alexis wants to talk to you."

Drew took the phone, and I went to talk to the stage manager to see if there was anything else they needed to do before rushing off to the next event.

"Are you excited to see Gwen again?" I asked Drew the next Friday as I drove him to the secret house he and Gwen would be staying at for the weekend. Dion was picking up Gwen at the airport. And within a few minutes, Drew would get to see his girlfriend, and I would be meeting the girl who had finally stolen Drew's heart.

The first impression I'd had of Gwen from watching Monday's episode hadn't been super awesome, so I hoped, for Drew's sake, that Gwen's second impression was much better.

"It'll be good to see her again," Drew said. "It's been hard to grow our relationship to the point it needs to get to when we only see each other every other weekend. FaceTiming and texting just isn't the same."

I nodded. "Then I hope this weekend is a good one. Do you guys have

anything fun planned?"

"You do realize we can't go anywhere, right?" Drew stared at me like I was missing a screw in my head. "Like, we'll be stuck in the house with nothing but each other and movies and whatever else is in the house to keep us entertained."

I shrugged. "You're a homebody. I thought it would be right up your alley."

Drew smiled and shook his head. "I'm a homebody when I choose to be, but when I'm forbidden to leave, it just kind of feels like jail." Then seeming to realize how that came out, he hurried to say, "Not that being alone with Gwen is a punishment. It would just be nice to go on a real date one of these days."

"I bet that after living in that huge house of yours, staying in a regular-sized house like us commoners probably gives you claustrophobia." I winked, unable to resist giving him a hard time about that. But when he scowled, I added, "I totally get it though. You want to broadcast your love to the world instead of keep it a secret."

"Something like that."

I had certainly done that. I'd wagged my huge engagement ring in everyone's faces and totally earned Nolan and me the title of the PDA couple among our friends.

What a huge piece of humble pie I'd been dished to teach me a lesson.

We arrived at the house a few minutes later, and I maneuvered the car into the garage.

"It's so nice not having to use a disguise this time," Drew said as I parked. "The last place we stayed at didn't have a garage, so I totally had to dress up like a crazy, homeless holy man." Then realization dawning on him, he said, "Oh, yeah. You saw that one, actually."

"You got your holy-man costume for this?" I raised my eyebrows. "I bet Gwen just loved that."

Drew lifted a shoulder. "She made me take it off as soon as I got in there."

My mouth dropped open as an image of Drew taking off his costume ran through my mind. "Talk about TMI," I said, feeling my cheeks flush. "I do not need to know about that."

"T-that's not what I meant." He cleared his throat and his face immediately turned beet red. "You remember that nickname they gave me in college?"

"You mean Saint Drew?" I thought back to how Aiden and Drew had talked about how their new college friends made fun of Drew for choosing to remain a virgin until he was married.

Was it possible that after all these years he was still a virgin?

Drew nodded, a flash of embarrassment crossing his face. "Saint Drew is still . . . saintly."

I arched my eyebrows. "I'm impressed." And despite how awkward it was, I couldn't help but ask, "How does Gwen feel about that?"

"She's not a fan, and totally tries to corrupt me," he said. "But I didn't make it twenty-eight years without having a strong will."

I could imagine that. I mean, with his looks and muscles, he probably had offers to be corrupted on a weekly, if not daily, basis.

I'd certainly daydreamed about it enough growing up.

But instead of telling him any of that I just cleared my throat and said, "Good for you, Drew. I think it's awesome that you're able to stick to your morals even though you've gotten a lot of crap about it through the years."

"It's not without difficulty. Believe me." He unbuckled his seat belt. "This whole show is set up for that to happen. Even these weekends. Dion certainly doesn't understand it. But I'm just thankful that at least I have Alexis to stick up for me. She makes sure each of the houses we stay at has two bedrooms, so I can lock Gwen out at night if I have to."

"Do you really have to lock your door to keep her from sneaking in?"

"Now that was a joke." Drew laughed, his eyes bright with humor as he opened his door to climb out. "She's been understanding. She even tells me it helps her feel special—that if we do get married in the end, she'd feel lucky that she was the only one to have that part of my life."

Gwen really was a lucky girl.

Drew put his bag over his shoulder and I followed him into the house. A tall blonde was just coming down the hall when we stepped into the kitchen.

Gwen in real life.

"Drew!" She squealed and threw her arms around his neck. "I missed you so much." She kissed him on the lips then grabbed his hand to pull him into the next room.

"H-h-h-hold on," he said, pulling her to a stop, his tall frame towering over her. "I don't think you've met Kate yet."

I slipped a smile on my face; happy Drew would still acknowledge my presence even when he had his gorgeous girlfriend tugging him into another room.

Gwen stopped, turned around, and forced a smile on her burgundy lips.

"Gwen, this is Kate, my handler, though better known as one of my good friends. Kate, this is Gwen."

"Nice to meet you, Gwen," I said. "Drew has told me so much about you."

Though, come to think about it, he'd only mentioned her in short spurts with all the craziness of the past week.

But I figured he'd appreciate it if I covered for him. Plus, Alexis had been insistent about the importance of keeping Gwen happy. A happy girlfriend for Drew meant Drew would be happy and therefore much more willing to follow through with his promises.

"Wish I could say the same for you," Gwen said, a sour expression on her face. "Drew told me he got a new handler, but apparently, it wasn't important enough to say any more than that."

I considered back-tracking and telling her that I'd only been saying what I'd said before to be nice. But decided not to be that petty.

Drew had warned me that Gwen didn't make the best first impression . . . but really? This was absurd.

Drew mouthed *I'm sorry* from behind Gwen.

So I unruffled my feathers and decided to do away with the niceties and just get down to business.

"What would you guys like me to bring you for dinner?" I asked.

Yes, it was kind of ridiculous that they couldn't order their own food, but apparently it was not above delivery guys to sell out for a much bigger payday than their tip would ever give them.

"Oh, I don't know," Gwen said, tucking her arm in the crook of Drew's. "What do you feel like eating, Drewy?"

Drewy?

I had heard a lot of horrible pet names before, but this one was just terrible. Drew was not a Drewy. No way. That was the name for someone's whipping boy.

But Drew didn't seem to mind the term of endearment. Could he possibly like it?

"I could go for a pizza." Drew shrugged.

"Oh, you know I can't eat pizza this late. Carbs are a big no-no after six. Don't you remember?" Then she pinched his side as if checking for fat. Gwen looked to me. "Tell Drew he can't eat pizza this late in the day, or it will stick to him. And we can't have our bachelor getting chubby. His fans want to see his ripped abs."

"I'm sure Drew is more than capable of deciding what he will or will not eat," I said, the annoyance level surging even higher.

Gwen scrunched her nose, clearly not liking being stood up to. She turned her attention back to Drew. "How about we get something from that place we ordered from last time? They had the most amazing soup and salad."

"Adrianna's?" Drew guessed.

"Yes, that's the place."

Kate wrote the restaurant name at the top of her pad and drew a line under it.

"What would you like to order?" I asked.

"I don't have the menu memorized." Gwen set a hand on her hip while the other reached out to me for something.

When I didn't understand what was going on, Drew cleared his throat and said, "I think she wants to use your phone."

Oh. Realization dawned on me. They weren't allowed to have their phones while on secret weekends—no contact with the outside world except for the cheap phone that only made calls, in case they accidentally made an insta-story of themselves for the world to get their hands on.

So. Many. Rules.

So much secrecy.

I unlocked my phone and handed it to Gwen. Gwen's fake nails clicked on the plastic of my case.

A few minutes later, Gwen and Drew had made their decisions and I jotted them down on the notepad I'd brought with me. I took my phone back and told them I'd be back soon.

After I pulled out of the driveway, I called Adrianna's to place their orders. Then, at a pizza place nearby, I ordered a small supreme pizza for myself and another medium pepperoni and tomato for Drew, which was his favorite.

No carbs after six, my eye. It was Friday night. Friday night had always been pizza night. And Drew and I would have pizza if we wanted to.

DREW

"YOU REALLY COULD HAVE BEEN a lot nicer to Kate," I said once I'd waved goodbye to her and shut the door to the garage.

"Oh, come on." Gwen rolled her eyes. "I was just giving her my order. I shouldn't be expected to be her best friend all of a sudden. She's our handler, for goodness' sake."

"She's also my friend." I took in a slow breath to calm my frustration. "And besides, you shouldn't treat anyone like that anyway."

I knew Gwen had grown up very privileged coming from a wealthy family, unlike me, but how could she treat someone like that?

"Just your friend? Are you sure that's the only reason you got her that job?" She narrowed her eyes and looked me over, as if she could see what was really inside my mind with some sort of X-ray vision.

"Of course we're just friends," I said. "Believe it or not, but I'm not the kind of guy to go after my best friend's married sister. Especially when I already have a girlfriend."

"Married? She didn't look married," Gwen spat.

I pinched the bridge of my nose, willing the headache this conversation was causing to stay at bay. I looked at Gwen, in what I hoped seemed a calm and serene manner. "She's married. I saw the wedding announcement with my own two eyes. Didn't you notice the huge diamond on her finger?"

Gwen crossed her arms. "I'm not in the habit of looking for women's rings to gauge whether they're available or not."

I stepped closer and set my arms on Gwen's shoulders. "The only girl I'm interested in dating right now is standing in front of me."

It took a moment, but eventually Gwen's anger seemed to melt and she folded herself into my arms, going soft. "I'm sorry I overreacted," she sobbed. "It's just so hard being away from you so much. And when I saw how pretty Kate was, I couldn't help but get jealous."

I pulled back and took Gwen's face in my hands. "Don't be jealous. There's absolutely nothing going on between Kate and me. Let's just enjoy this time we have together and forget about everything else for the weekend. Okay?"

She nodded, and I gave her a kiss on the forehead.

I may have noticed how beautiful Kate still was and had been just as attracted to her enigmatic personality as I'd always been.

But there was no sense in pining for a woman who'd promised herself to another man.

And even though I'd let my mind wander to the what-if's a few times over the past couple weeks, it didn't make me any less committed to making things work with Gwen.

Because even if she wasn't perfect, she was still a good fit for me. And dwelling on the past would never get me where I needed to be in my future.

Kate dropped off dinner twenty minutes later. Gwen greeted her much more kindly, if not totally sincerely, and when she walked back to the living room with her food, I saw a chance to apologize to Kate for my girlfriend's attitude earlier.

When we were alone in the kitchen, Kate spoke in a hushed tone. "I left a

pizza in the garage for you."

And I couldn't keep a grin from stretching across my cheeks. "You're the best." I pulled her into a side hug.

"I figured you deserved your pizza after the hectic week you've had." She shrugged as if it was nothing. "Nothing says good job like a pizza."

"Might it be pepperoni and tomato?"

Kate grinned proudly. "Of course!"

I felt warm at the thought of her remembering that tiny detail about me all these years later.

I checked behind me to make sure Gwen was still in the living room.

She was.

So I leaned closer and whispered, "I'm sorry about Gwen. She's always a little touchy when we haven't been together for a while."

"It's okay." Kate nodded. "Just don't let her know about the pizza thing. I'd rather not have her snitching to Alexis that I'm trying to ruin those abs of steel." She poked me in the stomach playfully, and then pinched my sides where she knew I was ticklish.

"You really are the worst." I gripped her hands to stop her.

I was suddenly unsettled at how her simple touch sent butterflies into flight in my stomach.

And I remembered that I wasn't supposed to react to her this way.

But then, she probably shouldn't be flirting with me either.

"Drewy?" Gwen's voice called.

I groaned inwardly at her nickname for me.

If I was going to propose to Gwen at the end of all this, I really needed to tell her how much I hated that nickname.

It was just bad. Even Saint Drew was better than Drewy.

"I better go," Kate said, looking toward where Gwen's voice had come from. And I found myself disappointed that she was already leaving.

"Do you and Nolan have fun plans for this weekend?" I asked, buying

myself a few more seconds with her.

"Oh, um." Kate scratched her neck. "Nothing too exciting. Probably just eating pizza and watching a movie."

"That's sounds nice," I said. Definitely better than staying cooped up in some stranger's house for the weekend.

Gwen and I were still getting used to being all alone after being surrounded by producers and cameramen for so much of our relationship.

I knew it was sad, but sometimes I liked Gwen's personality better when there were other people to joke around about it with.

When we were alone, things usually just got awkward.

But I would try not to think about that. We just needed more time together. That was all.

"Well, tell Nolan I said hi." I gripped the knob, readying to shut the door behind her. "I'll call you in the morning with our lunch requests."

"O-okay, that sounds good." Kate stepped back, bumping against the molding and dropping her phone in the process.

I dipped down, picked it up, and handed it to her. And when our hands touched, I didn't miss the heat that spread through my arm. Or the slight flush that rose to her cheeks.

"T-thanks," she said, taking the phone from me before stepping back into the garage to give us some space. "I-I'll see you tomorrow."

"See you then."

Why was I more excited at the prospect of seeing her for those few minutes tomorrow than I was about the evening I had ahead of me with Gwen?

I really needed to get myself together.

But still, I waited by the door to watch her leave, telling myself her sudden clumsiness had nothing to do with any reaction she might be having to me.

She seemed to have recovered though, and as the garage door lifted she

pointed to my pizza box.

"Thank you," I mouthed before stepping down to retrieve it.

And since I shouldn't have to keep my pizza eating a secret, I waltzed into the kitchen like the grown man that I was with the box of "forbidden" food in hand.

When Gwen saw the pizza, she hmphed and asked, "She got you a pizza?"

"She did," I said. "And if you're nice I'll even share."

"Fine." Gwen sighed. "This soup isn't as good as I thought it would be."

I held back my *I told you so* and opened the box on the coffee table. "Then I hope you like pepperoni and tomato."

"Not my favorite, but I'll eat it."

"You're gonna eat carbs after six for me?" I raised an eyebrow.

"Yes. I'll eat carbs for you. But if I hear any complaints about you being able to pinch more than an inch..."

"I'm not the one who cares about that."

"Which is why I love you." Gwen lifted a piece from the box and took a bite.

And as I took a bite of my own, I hoped she didn't notice that once again I didn't return the sentiment.

I'd get there someday, I promised myself.

That day was just not quite today.

"So how was your weekend?" Kate asked me after I put my duffel bag in the trunk and climbed in the company car she'd driven to the safe house Sunday evening. Dion had just taken Gwen back to the airport, so it was time for me to come back to reality again.

"It was fine," I said as Kate pulled onto the road.

Though honestly, I didn't know how to feel about the weekend with Gwen. Sure, the rest of the weekend went by more smoothly than the first hour, but it still wasn't as awesome as it should have been.

Something was missing in our relationship, and even though I kept trying to make everything work, we didn't have as big of a spark as we'd had during filming.

I also didn't love that Gwen was always so jealous. Yes, it was hard that we couldn't be together all the time. Couldn't go out in public. Couldn't even put each other's real names in our phones.

But I hated how threatened she felt when I had to spend time with another woman, like when I had to be with Kate because of work. I did understand some of it. Kate was beautiful and we did have a past. It was natural for some of our old chemistry to be visible to Gwen.

But nothing had happened in seven years. And nothing was going to happen now. I wasn't a cheater. I wasn't going to push the boundaries, and I was even planning to be more careful now after that brief moment in the garage.

But the extent that I still had to go to in reassuring Gwen every time I was around another woman was draining. I had foolishly thought that once I'd sent home the last girls from *Finding Your Soulmate*, things would be better.

The day when our relationship went public couldn't come quickly enough. Maybe then she wouldn't be so insecure.

"I'm glad it was at least fine," Kate said, bringing me back to our conversation. "Gwen seems really, um . . . confident?"

And I had to laugh at that. "She certainly didn't give the best first impression, I'm afraid."

Kate scrunched up her nose. "Yeah, not so much. But I'm sure she'll grow on me."

"It does tend to happen."

Why couldn't things be this easy and effortless with Gwen?

What was it about Kate that put me immediately at ease? Was it just because we'd known each other for so many years? Since we were kids? I wanted things to be easy now.

KATE

"WHAT ABOUT YOU? How was your weekend?" Drew asked as we turned a corner and drove onto Alameda Avenue.

I bit my lip. "It was okay, I guess."

"Did you and Nolan do anything fun besides your movie night?"

Ugh, this lying thing was getting messy.

Why hadn't I just told him the truth from the beginning?

"Umm . . ." I tried to think of how to word it correctly. *I actually lied to you. No. I've been divorced . . . technically annulled . . . for three months.* Not that either. *Nolan wasn't who I thought he was . . .* "I finished my last articles for the paper. So that was good." Yeah, I was a total chicken. "Then I worked a little on my latest screenplay."

Drew's blue eyes lit up. "That's cool. What's it about?"

And here we were at the part where I had to figure out how to explain the story in my head so it actually made sense and didn't sound completely stupid.

I always felt like an idiot trying to explain my work.

"Well," I said, my mind scrambling for a quick pitch. "It's about this guy and this girl."

"So a romance?"

"Um, kind of. Anyway, this girl gets kidnapped by this guy. She thinks

he's really bad at first, but then as he's holding her hostage, she starts to notice that he's actually treating her okay. Eventually, she realizes he's just working for someone else who's holding something bad over him. In the end they fall in love and find a way to escape." She shrugged. "Something like that."

Wow, that totally sounded like crap.

But Drew was kind enough to smile and say, "What? No all-powerful sultan in this one? I feel so cheated. I was hoping to audition for that role when it sold."

"Sorry. No sultan." A smile lifted my lips. "Though if you're serious about that acting thing, I'll totally throw a sultan in."

We arrived at the studio a few minutes later and I pulled up next to Drew's Lamborghini to drop him off.

"Thanks for the ride," Drew said as he unbuckled his seat belt. "It still feels weird having you drive me around instead of my driver, Marco, but I'm sure I'll get used to it."

It *was* weird driving Drew around. He'd always been the one to take Aiden and me to all the high school events my freshman year before they graduated.

"It is what it is."

He moved his hand to the door lever. "Well, I guess I'll see you tomorrow night again, so you can chauffeur me to all those lovely viewing parties."

"See you then."

Drew got in his car. I waited for him to drive out of the parking lot before heading out myself. I drove north on Buena Vista Street toward my parents' home. Ever since my split with Nolan, family dinners had been a lot harder. Yes, my family still supported and loved me, and was even glad I got out of that relationship as fast as I had, but I hated that my single status stood out so obviously whenever we were all together. My parents were still together, albeit not without their own set of problems. My older sister, Lana, was

married to a successful lawyer and raising their two adorable boys. And even my younger brother, Cason, had been dating a girl for six months.

How many times had I just wanted to go sit at the kid table with my nephews Decklan and Tayden?

So many times I'd wished Aiden was still around, so we could be the odd ducks together.

The front porch light lit the walk up to the Tuscan-style, two-story home. I had always loved our house growing up. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad to move back home when my lease was up. I could certainly use the savings it would afford me . . . even if moving back home wasn't the most appealing idea.

Inside teemed with activity. Tayden and Decklan were on the floor playing with my dad. Lana's husband, Jonas, was sitting in the recliner, talking to Cason and Cason's girlfriend Kerrie about the new boat he was planning to buy in the spring.

"Kate!" Tayden came running up to me, wrapping his chubby three-year-old arms around my leg. "You make it!"

I bent over to lift him into my arms. "And how have you been?" I hugged him tight before taking him to the loveseat to sit down.

"Guess what? I'm get to be a big brodder."

"What?" I looked to Jonas for confirmation.

"It's true." He chuckled. "We planned to tell everyone over dinner, but little Tayden here can't keep a secret."

"But I kept the secret real good, huh Dad?" Five-year-old Decklan chirped in, puffing up his chest with pride.

Jonas smiled and nodded. "You did a real good job, buddy."

Tayden put his warm, soft hands on my cheeks to turn my head back his direction. "And it might be a sister *or* a brodder." He said it like it was the most amazing coincidence in the whole world.

"That is so exciting." I smiled at the cuteness of childhood. Everything

was so magical to them. "What do you hope your mommy has?"

He shrugged. "Probably a girl. We already has two boys." Then he scooted off my lap and ran back to Grandpa without another word.

"So how is the new job working out?" My dad asked once everyone was seated around the table, their plates full of French dip sandwiches, mashed potatoes, and steamed carrots.

"It's good. Definitely keeps me busy, but it's nice working full-time."

"And how has it been working with a billionaire TV star?" my mom asked, tongue in cheek. "Has he made any ridiculous demands? Like, does the car have to be at exactly seventy-two degrees before he climbs in? What about the flowers in his dressing room? Are daisies allowed, or only fancy orchids or peonies?"

"Sorry to disappoint," I said, dipping my sandwich in the au jus sauce, "but Drew is still as down to earth and easy tempered as he always was."

"Wait! You guys actually know the bachelor Drew Burrows?" Kerrie sat up and put a hand on Cason's shoulder.

"His mom lives just down on Kenneth Drive." He pointed his thumb over his shoulder in the general direction of Drew's childhood house.

"Drew is a dear family friend. He and Aiden were tied at the hip their teenage years," Mom explained, her expression going soft.

A hush fell over the room, and Kerrie looked at her lap, visibly uncomfortable. "I see. Sorry, I didn't know."

"It's okay." Mom forced a smile. "We all love Drew like he's part of the family."

Cason patted Kerrie's knee, but she continued to stare at her plate.

"Since we're on the subject, are we going to celebrate Aiden's birthday next Sunday?" Lana asked. "The boys and I would be happy to make the dirt and worms."

Though not the typical birthday treat, chocolate pudding with gummy worms and crushed Oreos had always been Aiden's requested dessert—from

the time he was five and even into his adult years.

"Oh, yes," Dad agreed. "We should do that. That would be nice."

Mom nodded, her mouth pursed together as she breathed deeply. "Yes. We should, shouldn't we? We'll all be together anyway."

Dad pointed at me with his fork. "Why don't you invite Drew too? It would be nice to see him again."

I wiped the au jus sauce that had dripped on my chin and nodded while I chewed. If he came, he'd find out I'd been lying about still being married to Nolan. He'd never trust me again.

But I could tell, from the looks on my family members' faces, that they really wanted him there. Like having him come would almost be like having a part of Aiden back.

So I swallowed my food and said, "I'll invite him tomorrow."

I SHIFTED my weight as I waited outside the studio for Kate to arrive. My feelings vacillated every couple of minutes between anxiety and excitement about the viewing parties. The host of *Finding Your Soulmate*, Rodrigo Martinez, and I were supposed to pop in on a few viewing parties the fans had announced on the show's website. And tonight was the first night we'd be crashing the parties.

I loved my fans and how enthusiastic they were about my journey to find love. But I worried I'd end up being a disappointment in real life.

Kate drove up in her white Jetta and came out wearing a light pink blouse tucked into a gray pencil skirt. Her skirt had ridden up on her drive, and at the sight of her long, toned legs, I gulped.

Dang . . . She had amazing legs. And for the briefest moment, my fingers tingled as I imagined how it would feel to sit next to her during a board meeting and run my hand across her thigh under the table.

Don't think about that. I shut down the fantasy before it could get started and forced my gaze up to meet her eyes.

But that was almost as bad because her eyes had always been hypnotizing to me. Aqua blue—the same color as the ocean in Hawaii.

"I'm not late, am I?" she asked, tugging her skirt down and thankfully not seeming to be able to read the forbidden thoughts racing through my mind. "I

was with my mom and my nephews this morning, and then had to go home and shower before coming here."

"Did you end up staying the night after your dinner there yesterday?"

She tossed some of her golden blonde hair over her shoulder. "Yeah, I didn't feel like going home alone."

Home alone?

Why would she be going home alone?

"Where was Nolan?"

Her face went blank for a moment before she said, "H-he's out of town. I don't like staying home by myself." She chuckled somewhat awkwardly, and I couldn't ignore the feeling that there was something she wasn't telling me. "I'm kind of a big baby now, I guess."

I furrowed my brow as I studied her.

Something was off.

Her husband never seemed to be around, and Kate only said something about him if I brought up the subject first.

Most newly married women I knew couldn't stop bringing their husbands up in conversation.

Was there trouble in paradise?

"Actually, that reminds me," she hurried to say. "My family wanted me to invite you to lunch on Sunday. We'll be celebrating Aiden's birthday so they have a few things planned, but everyone would love to see you again and have you be a part of it."

My gut twisted.

Aiden's birthday.

He'd be turning twenty-eight if he hadn't died at twenty-one.

"So what should I tell them?" Kate asked, interrupting my thoughts.

I looked at Kate's upturned, hopeful face as she stood in front of me. Was it possible her family didn't hold anything against me after everything that had happened the night Aiden died?

"Yeah, I'll come," I finally said, even though the thought of celebrating my best friend's birthday without him made me feel hollow inside.

It had been seven years, but it felt like it was only yesterday when Aiden was speeding down the road, trying to get me as far away from Kate as he could after he caught us making out on his couch.

"Great! I'll text my mom." She pulled out her phone, not seeming to notice the knife of guilt that twisted in my stomach at the memory of that last night with Aiden. When she was done typing, she put her phone away and smiled. "Did Dion tell you which viewing parties we'll be crashing tonight?"

"Last I heard, they found two in Santa Monica that looked fun." I held the studio door open for Kate then followed her inside, hoping to escape the ghost that still haunted me.

And I almost felt normal again when Dion greeted us in the main office. Dion shook our hands before giving us the particulars of the night.

"So, what will everyone be seeing on *Finding Your Soulmate* tonight?" Kate asked twenty minutes later as we followed the SUV with the other people from the show. Kate had been nice enough to bend the rules and let me drive the company car.

I tried to remember back to the first week of filming. "Tonight, the audience will meet Ebony. We go on a date to the horse track. She ends up being way better than me on a horse, but she doesn't brag about it too much."

"Well, that's good, since we all know what a sore loser you are," Kate said with a smirk.

My mouth dropped open. "I'm not a sore loser."

"You totally are."

"Am not!"

She laughed. "Remember that time when I was totally wiping the floor with you in Monopoly? And the board game *somehow* got tipped over along with everything on it when we came back from our snack break?"

I shook my head and chuckled. I did remember. She had practically

danced on the table when she started winning, and all I had wanted to do was pull her on my lap and kiss her until winning that game was the last thing on her mind.

But Aiden had noticed the look in my eyes, and since Kate was bent on playing the game until it was over, Aiden had taken matters into his own hands.

"You know Aiden was the one who tipped the game over, right?" I said.

Surprise formed in her expression. "What? Why would he do that? He was already out of the game."

"He was ready to call it a night and take me home."

Her face scrunched up. "Why?"

"Because he knew I'd probably end up kissing you if we spent much more time together that night."

I pressed my lips together, surprised I'd just said that.

Kate gasped. "Why would he think that?"

I studied her face in the dim light. I might as well say it. It's not like anything would change. It was all in the past and we were friends now. I could be an adult about this.

I drew in a breath. "Because he'd been telling me for months that if I kissed you he'd kick my butt."

Kate was quiet, her mouth forming an "O" as she processed what I just said.

"I guess that makes sense," she said in a low voice. "I remember trying pretty hard to get you to kiss me that night."

I turned my gaze back at the road, suddenly feeling overheated. I swallowed hard. "It was only a matter of time before it happened, though."

I saw her nod out of the corner of my eye. She was probably remembering the same thing I was: the late-night movie.

Aiden sleeping on the floor in her family's basement.

Kate and me tangled up on the couch, kissing as if we were starving and

the only way to feed our hunger was to kiss each other like there was no tomorrow.

The car was silent for a while as we both got lost in our thoughts.

Why hadn't I just been able to wait a few more months?

Wait until Kate had graduated from high school and joined Aiden and me in college?

If I'd been more patient, if I had only ignored my feelings for a little while longer, maybe things would have been different.

Aiden might still be here with us, making fun of me for being on a reality TV show.

And Kate . . .

Well, maybe Kate wouldn't be married to someone else and I wouldn't have needed to go on a dating show in the first place.

After the silence had stretched on for a few minutes, Kate cleared her throat. "So what happens next on your date with Ebony? I totally cut you off before."

I blinked, trying to remember what I'd been talking about before I'd brought up old memories and the feelings that went with them.

"Let me guess," Kate spoke before I could. "You guys go to dinner, don't eat any of the food on your plates, and then she gets the first kiss of the season. It's magical, and you feel a connection you didn't think you could have so quickly?"

Wow, Kate really knew the show's formula by heart.

"You make it sound so cheap when you put it like that," I said. As if my whole journey to find love had been written by some screenwriter.

Kate laughed, not seeming to realize she'd hit a nerve. "I'm sure it was all very special. I've just been watching the show for, oh, about ten years."

"Well, I never watched it until I was on it. And I'll have you know that yes, maybe we did eat in our rooms before dinner—chewing isn't so great sounding in the microphones—but they at least never told me when exactly I

had to kiss a girl. In fact, I'll probably go down as the bachelor who kissed the least number of girls."

Why did I say that? I was practically handing out reasons for Kate to think I was a loser and thank the heavens that she'd dodged that bullet.

"The least? Really?" Kate arched an eyebrow. "How many did you kiss?" I might as well keep digging my grave.

I counted them off in my head, still not believing that had been my life for a few months.

I'd never imagined dating, let alone kissing multiple women on the same day. But that was what had happened. The show and all the candles and romantic dates just seemed to make it happen without me even trying.

"Seven. I kissed seven."

Kate leaned back in her seat. "Hmm, seven's not so bad. And that's a lucky number, so it probably means you're gonna end up really happy at the end of all this."

I sure hoped so.

But I really wasn't sure. Gwen was great and all, most of the time, but could we really work it out when we came from two completely different backgrounds and lived across the country from each other?

"Did you initiate all of those first kisses, or did some of the girls sneak them in on you?" Kate asked.

She certainly was nosy about this. But I guess when you put your love story out there for the world to see it kind of becomes an open book.

Since I wasn't about to reveal all the show's secrets, I shot her a smirk and said, "You'll just have to keep watching the show to find that out."

"Oh poop. You're no fun." She crossed her arms.

"Did you really just say, 'Oh poop'?" I raised my eyebrows. "Are we, like, five now?"

"No. I just—"

"Wait—" I couldn't believe it. All these years later . . . "Do you still have

that no-swearing bet going?"

Kate looked down and tugged on a loose thread in her skirt. "Well, it was still going when Aiden died, so I decided to just continue it. It helps me remember him, I guess."

Back when Aiden and I were in high school, we had started hanging out with a couple of guys who used profanity all the time, and it only took a few weeks before we started using it ourselves.

But perfect little Katie, who was probably eleven at the time, thought we were on the road to hell. So, to help save her brother's soul, she had talked us into joining her in a No Swearing Contest. The loser had to do the winner's chores for a month.

And so the replacement curse words were born. It had been pretty funny to watch Aiden, the captain of the basketball team, say things like *dang*, *oh my heck*, *poop*, and *fudge* when he got frustrated. But he was bound and determined to win. I eventually forgot about the contest, and yeah, swore here and there . . . but Aiden and Kate were still going strong clear until the accident.

I gave Kate's hand a quick squeeze, hoping to get her to look at me so she could see I was sincere. Her wedding ring poked my palm and took away any warm sensation I might have felt at touching her skin. "I think that's actually really cool. Maybe I should start on that bet again. My mom probably wouldn't mind."

She gasped. "What? Saint Drew has a potty mouth?"

I rolled my eyes. "Sorry to disappoint. I just can't live up to that nickname, I guess."

Kate laughed. "It's okay. I've been pretty close a few times myself."

Kate's phone rang. She answered it and spoke to someone for a minute before hanging up.

"We're supposed to stop at the gas station after the next stop light," she said. "Once it gets closer to showtime, we'll pop on over to the viewing

party."

DREW IS A STAR, I mused as I watched a twenty-something woman slip her phone number into Drew's shirt pocket as she talked to him.

Every single woman at this party was absolutely in love with him. It was hilarious to watch even the married women go gaga over him. I had thought I was a big fan of the show, but I had no idea what a super-fan was actually like until now.

"If it doesn't work out between you and your fiancée . . ." The brunette patted his chest where she hid her number and winked. "Don't hesitate to call me."

Drew smiled at the woman and thanked her but didn't really give away as to whether he would ever take her up on that offer or not. It was no surprise that Drew, the boy I'd watched grow into a man over the last seventeen years, was every woman's dream come true.

"How many numbers did you get?" I asked once we were outside and walking back to the company car.

I was determined to keep the conversation after the party much lighter than it had been on the way there. I didn't know if I could handle any more revelations.

Not only had Drew admitted wanting to kiss me back when I was still in high school, but he'd also said that Aiden knew and was giving him a hard

time because of it.

But if that was true, and he'd actually wanted to kiss me, why had he deserted me after we finally kissed? If he had really liked me, wouldn't that be worth sticking around for during the dark moments after Aiden's accident?

"I didn't keep track of all the numbers." Drew shook his head as if he still couldn't believe this was his life now.

"You should probably watch out for Darla." I forced a smile, pushing away the thoughts of the past. "I totally don't think she was trying to date you *for the right reasons*." I emphasized the last four words, which were practically the show's trademark.

Everyone was always talking about whether a certain contestant was really there to find love. Many of the girls were there for that reason, or at least they were open to the idea of finding it with the star. But then there were those who were clearly there to either promote themselves and their business, or to attempt to become famous.

"Thanks for the warning." Drew unlocked the car and opened the passenger door for me. My chest warmed at the gentlemanly gesture. No guy had done that for me in years.

Drew climbed in on his side a moment later and buckled in. "Have you had a chance to talk to Alexis about your screenplays?"

"Not yet." I sighed. "Don't you think I should wait until she knows me better?"

"Why wait? If she's interested, it's because of your writing, not because of how well she knows you. You might as well just take that jump."

"I just feel so awkward doing it. I'm totally no good at selling my own stuff." If I had to sell someone else's material, I could. But there was something so personal about my own screenplays that I was never able to give them the spotlight they deserved.

"Well, which one would you be shopping?"

I thought it over for a second but didn't know which one would suit

Alexis's taste.

"What kind of stuff does Alexis even like?" I asked.

Drew pulled onto the road to drive us back to Burbank. "Pretty much anything with romance, as you may have guessed, considering that she created this show. She also loves mystery and a little suspense. Do you have anything like that?"

I went through the list of screenplays I'd written that might be ready. There were only two . . . so it didn't take very long. *The Visitor* did have a healthy dose of mystery along with a love story. Maybe Alexis could read it.

"I might have one she could be interested in," I said.

"Well, then let's go talk to her about it tonight."

"Tonight?" My voice rose an octave. "I-I'm not ready tonight. I have to think of a good pitch. I need to make sure it's all formatted right. I'm not ready."

Drew chuckled. "I was kidding. She's not in this late. Sure, she's a workaholic, but she does go home to sleep now and again."

I pushed out the breath I'd been holding. "Give me a heart attack, why don't ya?"

"So you said you needed to work on your pitch." Drew glanced at me in the dimly lit vehicle. "Is that something you need help with? Because I'd be happy to work on it with you, if you want."

"Actually, that would be great." I smiled. "As long as you promise not to make fun of it. Despite your time on the show, I seem to remember you not loving chick flicks."

"Hey, give me some credit. I have matured a little over the past few years. I mean, how else do you think I learned all those smooth moves to wind up as the bachelor?"

"You studied chick flicks for that?" I couldn't believe what I was hearing. Saint Drew had turned into a ladies' man?

"Hey, don't knock it. My mom always told me a guy could learn a lot by

reading and watching what his female counterparts liked. I mean, girls are trained for romance and to expect all this lovey-dovey stuff. How's a guy supposed to know how to woo a girl if he doesn't study up on the art of romance?"

"You surprise me, Drew Burrows. And might I say, I've never been prouder."

"I'm glad I could finally impress you." He shot me a wink.

I laughed. "I think I like this new confident Casanova."

"So when do you want to go over it? You have Wednesday off, right?" he asked. Then, as if realizing something, he hurried to say, "Unless of course you'd rather work on it with Nolan. I don't want to overstep my bounds or anything here."

"Actually, he's not really very supportive of my writing." *Especially since he's living in Seattle with his girlfriend.* "He thinks movies are a waste of people's time and money."

"What?" Drew's shoulders went rigid, his jaw tense.

I shrugged. "It's really fine." I actually couldn't care less now. If things went my way, I'd never see him again.

I really needed to tell Drew about the divorce. He was going to find out from my family at the end of the week anyway.

But how does one go about telling their friend that they've only been pretending to be married for the last two weeks, wearing a fake ring and all?

I didn't know. And before I could think of a way to say it, we had arrived at the studio.

"Let me know when you want to get together on Wednesday," Drew said before climbing into his truck. "My schedule is pretty open after three.

"Okay. I'll text you."

Drew ended up being called in for business meetings all day Wednesday and had to reschedule our pitching hangout for another day. So I'd dug into my scripts myself and tried to make sense of them all.

It was amazing how many times I could go through something, and then still find ways to change it and make it better. I figured the only time one of my screenplays would seem fully finished would be when it was actually on the big screen.

On Sunday, Drew picked me up from my apartment, which was only a few blocks from his home, so we could head to my parents' house together.

"Are you ready for this next week?" I asked as I climbed in his Lamborghini. I'd never been in such an expensive car. It was so nice.

"I'm excited to get a break from interviews, pickups, or party crashing. I can actually focus on my business," Drew said. "Do you have a lot of work at the studio?"

"Alexis wanted me to help her with a few things, so it should be a full week for me."

"I still feel bad about ditching you on your pitch session. Did you get much done?"

"A little. But I definitely need to have someone go over it before I dare approach Alexis or any other producer with it."

"Well, let's schedule something after lunch," Drew said, parking at the curb in front of my parents' house.

As soon as we stepped through the door Tayden tackled me.

"Kate! Kate!" he said, hugging my knees. Then he pulled back and looked up at Drew with furrowed eyebrows. "Are you Kate's new boyfriend?"

"Oh, no. This is Drew." My stomach dropped and my face burned. "He was Uncle Aiden's best friend," I hurried to say. I didn't dare glance at Drew to see his reaction. Yeah, he was totally going to find out I'd been lying about Nolan this whole time.

"Well, then when is you going to get a new boyfriend? Mommy says you

spend the night at Gramma's because you is lonely."

My face burned even hotter. I wanted to clamp a hand over Tayden's mouth and run out the door with him before he could say even more.

I lifted my eyes to Drew's and saw a very confused expression stuck to his face. But before I could explain, my mom poked her head around the corner.

"Oh, good, you're here," Mom said. "Could you give us a hand, Kate?"

Thank you! I sighed my relief.

Mom's gaze went to Drew next. "And Drew, it's so nice to see you again. I'd come give you a hug, but I'm still covered in flour." She lifted her white-dusted hands to show them. "We're a little slow at getting the pizzas in the oven, but lunch should be ready in about twenty minutes. Just make yourself at home."

I dashed to the kitchen, glad for the escape from Drew and the answers I'd have to give him.

I managed to stay busy in the kitchen clear until lunch was ready, just overhearing snippets of Dad and Cason's conversation with Drew. Thankfully, they didn't seem to be mentioning my name. Was it possible Drew hadn't thought anything of Tayden's innocent assumptions?

Yeah, probably not.

I needed to come up with a good reason for lying to him for the past two weeks.

Once lunch was on the table, Drew sat in the guest-of-honor seat next to Mom. And I purposely sat on the opposite end of the table so he couldn't whisper questions in my ear. I also made sure to keep my left hand in my lap.

Earlier, I'd gone back and forth over whether to wear my fake wedding ring today but had decided against it since my family surely would have asked questions—Lana, for instance, noticed everything. And I knew that if Drew had connected any dots between what Tayden had said, he'd probably be looking at my hand for confirmation as well.

"We're so glad you could come, Drew," Mom said after everyone had settled in. "It's been way too long since you've been over here."

Drew scooted his chair closer to the table. "Yeah, it's been a crazy few years for me."

"I can imagine. Gallivanting around the old neighborhood isn't very convenient when you're building a huge business and flying around the world hoping to find love."

Everyone chuckled.

"And how did that go?" Dad asked, looking over the rim of his glasses as he grabbed a piece of barbecue chicken pizza from the middle of the table. "I assume you're engaged. At least that's how I'm told these shows work."

"That's certainly what the producers hope for," Drew said, giving nothing away.

Mom poked her salad with her fork. "What kind of answer is that? Can't you give us a little information on how everything turned out? We're practically family, you know. Just one little hint?"

"Mom!" I interrupted. "You already know he can't tell you. Don't pull the *practically family* card."

Mom grinned, showing her teeth. "I'm joking. Don't get yourself all worked up."

Drew cleared his throat. "Kate's right that I can't tell you exactly how the show ended, but I can say it was a great experience and I learned a lot."

Everyone continued to catch up for the next twenty minutes or so and I noticed Drew watching my hand as I ate.

He was looking for my ring.

KATE WAS BARELY LOOKING at me as we ate lunch. Could that possibly have anything to do with what her cute nephew had said when we'd walked through the door?

Why would Tayden assume I was her new boyfriend? Why would he assume she'd have a new boyfriend at all? She had just married Nolan last summer. They were still married, right? Didn't she say he was out of town?

Plus, I specifically remembered seeing that huge rock on her finger multiple times. Felt it dig into my hand when I'd touched it just last week.

I glanced at her across the table, hoping to catch a glimpse of her left hand, but it was still hiding from my view.

Was she doing that on purpose?

The lunch conversation drifted from the laid-back catching-up type of talk to memories of Aiden. And I could hardly believe it had been seven years since we'd hung out. Seven years since I'd stepped inside this house.

It was crazy how long it had been—and yet, it still didn't feel real that I wouldn't see Aiden again in this life.

I still remembered the day it hit me. Because of the condition of Aiden's body after the accident, there had been no viewing. No viewing meant no closure . . . not really. Was Aiden really, *really* dead? The truth wouldn't cement itself in my mind.

Because one day, we were hanging out—Aiden talking about how things were going with his new girlfriend, me complaining about my biology professor, and both of us going home for the weekend to hang out with family and friends in Burbank. And then the next day, my mom was telling me that Aiden had died the night before. He'd been hit by a drunk driver on his way home from dropping me off.

And even though I had gone home after the funeral, to the apartment that we had shared, I kept hoping and waiting for my friend to come through the door and tell me how he'd just been on the best date of his life.

But it never happened. Months passed, and I moved out of that apartment and started working on my app. And finally, when I was driving my truck home from the store one summer evening, it hit me. It finally hit me. Aiden really was *gone*. He hadn't just moved away, like most of our other high school friends. I wouldn't be seeing Aiden at our five-year high school reunion. I wouldn't go to another Dawson family barbecue and have Aiden suddenly show up with his wife and kids.

Aiden would never have those things. He never got the chance. I would get married and not have Aiden there as my best man. I'd tell my children stories from when I was in high school, and my kids would never actually get to meet the guy with whom I shared all of those memories. Aiden was really gone.

"I still remember the time he plotted to take over the world with all his little nine-year-old friends in the hut out back." Lana's voice cut into my thoughts.

Apparently, sharing memories of Aiden was something his family did every year when they celebrated his birthday. My turn was next, and I needed to think of something. But should I share a memory that was one of my favorites, or one that the family would cherish forever? I went through dozens of experiences we'd had together in my mind. When you're best friends for a decade, you go through a lot of things together. I thought of the

time we rigged the kitchen faucet to spray out instead of down on April Fool's Day. The time we accidentally set the fire alarm off in Chemistry. And the time we dressed up like girls for Halloween, and people had no idea Aiden was really a guy because he hit his growth spurt late in high school. All the campouts. The late nights.

So many good memories, yet still not enough.

And my biggest regret was that our last interaction hadn't been a good one.

Why did a stupid argument have to be the exclamation point at the end of our friendship?

If I'd just waited a little longer to kiss Kate, would my friend still be with us today?

"What about you, Drew? Do you have a memory you'd like to share? I'm sure you have all kinds of good ones we never heard of."

Like how I'm the reason he drove off so angrily that night?

I swallowed, my heart racing. I'd thought I could do this. I thought I could come back to Aiden's home and have dinner with his family.

But it wasn't right.

I shouldn't be the guest of honor on Aiden's birthday.

Aiden should be sitting at his family's table.

Not me.

I cleared my throat and scooted away from the table, feeling a panic attack start to hit.

"If you'll excuse me . . ." I didn't finish my sentence. Instead, I stood and rushed out the front door.

The January air was crisp when I stepped outside. I gripped the porch railing and leaned over it, urging my pounding heart to return to its normal rate.

What was I doing here?

Would it be such a terrible thing if I jumped in my car and never came

back—never faced Aiden's family again? I'd stayed away for seven years. I could do it again.

Except I didn't want that. Stepping inside the Dawsons' living room had been like coming home.

The door opened behind me.

"Is everything okay?" Kate asked in a quiet voice as she stepped timidly onto the porch.

I cleared my throat and pulled a smile onto my face. "Yeah, sorry about that. I, uh . . ." I looked around, trying to come up with something that would explain my strange behavior. But nothing came to me. "I just needed some air."

She nodded. "Today's a weird day."

I sighed. "Yes. It is."

"I guess this is probably the first time you've been here in a long time."

"Almost seven years."

"A lot has changed in that time." She sat down on the top step and patted the spot next to her. "Have a seat."

I hesitated, part of me still wanting to run away. But when I met her gaze, she was looking up at me with such a soft and gentle expression that I didn't have the heart to leave.

So I stepped down and sat beside her.

"Do you miss it?" Kate asked.

"Miss what?" I asked, confused.

"The way things used to be." She lifted a hand and gestured at the basketball hoop on the side of the driveway. "The neighborhood basketball games. The bonfires at the beach. The simple things that just made life great."

Growing up with the Dawsons as a sort of second family had been wonderful. My mom had worked a lot of nights. My dad hadn't been in the picture for years. So I'd spent most of my evenings with Aiden and his family.

I tugged on my pant legs. "Growing up with you guys is where some of my fondest memories come from."

"Mine too." Our eyes met, and a warm feeling bloomed in my chest. But I forced it away. I wasn't supposed to feel warm when I looked at Kate. We were in the here-and-now, and things were different.

"Remember how you and Aiden used to always try to pull all-nighters and he was barely able to stay up past midnight?" Kate asked.

"Yeah." I couldn't help but smile at the memory. "It was like someone pressed a magic button and he would immediately turn into a zombie once the clock struck twelve."

"Even *I* could stay up longer than him."

It was true. Kate would often force her company on us, begging to play against the winner of whatever video game we were playing. We only sometimes let her actually have a turn. Most of the time, she sat on the couch with us and ate all our candy.

I never really minded, though. At least I'd had someone to talk to when Aiden conked out on the floor. Kate had actually never made it through the night either. And once she'd fallen asleep around three in the morning, I'd just get bored and decide to go to bed as well, since staying up all night by yourself was boring.

"Did he ever tell you about our *Weekend of Shame*?" I raised an eyebrow.

"Weekend of Shame?" Kate's jaw dropped, astonishment covering her features.

I laughed. "It's not as bad as it sounds."

"It'd better not be."

"Aiden just thought he was hilarious when he decided we should call it that."

"So what happened on this shameful weekend of yours?" Kate arched an eyebrow.

I shrugged. "One weekend our sophomore year, my mom went out of

town, leaving me to fend for myself. So, Aiden and I came up with this great plan to ask if we could have a sleepover at my house. We were dying to get a moment of freedom. Your parents of course said yes, thinking my mom would be home."

"You naughty boys," Kate said with a smile.

"So naughty." I chuckled. "All we did was drive around town in my clunker car with the windows down, hoping we looked cool to any girls we might meet along the way."

"And did you?"

I snorted. "Sadly for us, no one seemed interested in a couple of gangly sixteen-year-olds." Yeah, we were about as far from high in demand as we could have been at that time. But we sure felt like studs back then. "Anyway, we totally lived things up that night. We went and toilet-papered Tansie Clemont's car since that's what you did back then when you liked a girl. Then we went back to my house to pull our first official all-nighter. Aiden promised he'd stay awake this time."

"Which we all know was a lie."

"He really tried this time, even going as far as taking a nap first. We had all our favorite energy drinks ready and everything, in case a moment of weakness found us. We started out strong, but around two a.m. I noticed Aiden was getting drowsy. So I came up with this awesome idea to wake us right up.

"We had this big closet under the stairs that my mom kept all our extra pillows and blankets in. I thought it would be a great idea to go in there and jump around for a while, fall in them . . . that kind of stuff." I shook my head and laughed at the memory. "It was surprisingly fun. But then, when we tried to get out of the closet, we couldn't get the door to open. It had somehow gotten jammed. That's when we started freaking out. My mom wasn't supposed to be home until Sunday night, so we had almost two whole days before anyone would even be in the house to hear us."

"I'm guessing since you're still alive, and since I've never heard this story before, you made it out okay."

"Great deduction, Sherlock." I grinned. "We did eventually kick the door open, but that surge of panic had really exhausted us. After that, we did a lap around the house and breathed in all the fresh air we could before going back to our video games."

"And let me guess, Aiden fell asleep fifteen minutes later?"

"I think he made it twenty." I winked. "But yes, eventually neither of us could keep our eyes open. And we weren't about to try the awesome jumping closet again, so we turned off the TV, grabbed our pillows and sleeping bags, and zonked out. Our *Weekend of Shame* ended with no all-nighter once again."

And we never had a full, honest-to-goodness all-nighter before Aiden was gone. Not even in college.

"Did Aiden really never tell anyone about that?" I asked.

"He never said a word." Kate shook her head, and I noticed that her eyes were moist.

Of all his siblings, Aiden had always been closest to Kate.

Yes, they fought all the time, and Kate sometimes drove her brother nuts, but they had loved each other so much. I felt the most sorry for her. That was why I knew I had to stay away after Aiden died. I didn't deserve to have her in my arms after everything that had happened.

"Thanks for sharing that with me." Kate wiped at her eye with her fingers. "It's been a long time since I've heard a new Aiden story."

It was then that I got a good look at her left hand. She seemed to notice my stare and immediately slid her hand between her knees.

But I'd already seen what I needed to see.

Her ring finger was naked.

My heart stuttered to a stop before running off like a racehorse. I watched as she squeezed her eyes shut, like she'd just been caught doing something

wrong.

I cleared my throat and sat up straighter. "Is there a reason why you're not wearing your wedding ring today, Kate? Is everything okay with you and Nolan?"

She bit her lip, but still wasn't looking at me. "Nolan and I—"

The door behind us opened. "Kate! Kate! Gramma said we can't eat dirt and worms until you and your friend comes inside."

Kate darted her gaze between the boy and me, as if she couldn't decide whom she was supposed to talk to at that moment.

"Kate?" I asked, urging her to answer my question.

"Please! I want dirt and worms!" Her little nephew jumped up and down, pouting his lip.

Kate looked back to me, but in the end, she stood up. She was taking her escape from the conversation. I wanted to snatch her hand back and force her to answer my question. But she was already inside before I could even move.

"WOULD you mind dropping by the cemetery before taking me home?" I asked once we got in Drew's car after my family's memorial activities were done.

It had been an emotional day for everyone. I had loved reliving the memories my family and Drew had of my brother. But while it had been therapeutic, it had also been hard. Aiden had been a ray of sunshine, everyone's friend, the wise but fun older brother. The day had ended with everyone writing a message to Aiden then attaching it to a balloon and sending it up into the sky. But there were some things I wanted to "tell" him. Things I also needed to tell Drew. Especially after his question about Nolan and me.

So we headed to the Valhalla Memorial Park Cemetery.

"Do you want me to wait in the car?" Drew asked as we drove down the road closest to Aiden's plot.

"No." I played with the hem of my skirt. "I'd appreciate the company."

I didn't want to say everything twice.

So we walked through the grass until we came to the white marble stone that marked Aiden's burial site.

Aiden John Dawson

January 21, 1990 — March 14, 2011
Son, Brother, Friend.

Not nearly enough years were lived between that dash.

That first year, I had come to this spot monthly whenever I needed to talk to my brother. Before he died, he'd always given me great advice, and he understood me better than anyone else. Even though we were three years apart, the age gap had seemed to disappear once I joined him in high school.

"Hey, Aiden," I said, looking down at the stone. "Sorry it's been a while since I've come here. I've kind of had a busy year. As you know, I got married to Nolan last summer." I rubbed my finger where my ring should have been.

"Are you sure you want me to hear all this?" Drew interrupted, his face showing how uncomfortable he felt.

"You need to hear this, too." I looked at him carefully. "Anyway, I ran into Drew at the store a few weeks ago. He was dressed like a maniac." That made Drew chuckle. "And he offered me this awesome job. I think he's trying to help fill in for my big brother." Drew put his arm around my shoulders and squeezed me against his side. "Anyway, he's actually a pretty big deal these days. As if being a super successful businessman wasn't enough, he's also a big reality TV star and has all kinds of women wishing they could marry him. So, he got me this job where I'm pretty much his slave and have to do everything he wants . . . but it's also going to help me get in with the people who can hopefully help me follow my dreams." I looked up at Drew with watery eyes and smiled before continuing with my story.

"But there's something I haven't told either of you . . . haven't really told anyone besides our family, actually." I paused and took a deep breath. "I've been lying to Drew about me and Nolan." Drew's arm tightened around me for a second. I didn't dare look at him to see his reaction. Instead, I tried to draw in a calming breath, but it didn't work. "We actually separated only one

month after getting married. Things were a lot different once we were married. Nolan had kept a lot of secrets from me, and he didn't treat me very well."

Tears bit at my eyes as I remembered that month of being a prisoner in my own home. How controlling Nolan had become. How I couldn't even talk to my mom and dad on the phone when he was around because he was always so paranoid about what I might tell them.

Then there was the Internet history he'd forgotten to clear.

"Anyway, Mom and Dad came and got me one day and brought me home. Then Dad had a good talk with Nolan, which sent him packing. He lives in Seattle now with an old girlfriend he'd been messing around with while we were together. We filed for an annulment and everything was taken care of by October."

Drew was completely silent as he listened, and when I finally dared to look up again, his eyes were damp and his face somber.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you," I whispered. "I felt terrible lying. I was just so embarrassed about the whole thing. I didn't know what to say. I didn't want anyone to know about it."

Drew pulled me into his chest and held me so tight I could barely breathe. "Don't feel sorry for one second," he spoke into my hair. "You have nothing to be ashamed of."

I nodded and leaned my head against his chest, soaking up all the strength I could from his strong arms.

After a long moment, where Drew just held me and rubbed my back, I said, "If I'd known I was going to get a big bear hug instead of a how-could-you-lie-to-me look, I would have told you weeks ago." I laughed, wiping the moisture from my eyes.

A low rumble echoed through his chest. "Anytime you need a hug just let me know. I'm pretty much a professional hugger these days."

"The bachelor usually is, consoling all those hormonal ladies he's dating."

I leaned against him a moment longer before finally peeling myself away. "And I really might take you up on that. I mean, how many girls get to brag about hugging *The Drew Burrows* whenever they want?"

Drew just shook his head and pulled me back toward his car. "I'm really not that big of a deal."

"Oh, but you are." I smiled, realizing just then that I was holding Drew's hand. Which brought up another thought. "I'm probably going to lose my job now, huh?"

Drew went still. "Why would you lose your job?"

"Didn't you say Alexis was against you spending much time alone with a single woman?"

"Oh..." That seemed to bring him to the present, because he let go of my hand. He sighed, and I kept my gaze down, afraid I'd see on his face that my fears were right.

But instead of telling me that he was going to call and tell Alexis the news now, he said, "Will being single keep you from fulfilling your duties as my handler?"

Would it be terrible if I admitted that part of me really didn't want to help him get engaged to Gwen? A part that was growing bigger every day?

Yeah, Alexis definitely wouldn't want to keep me on if she knew that.

So I went with something else. "I think being single actually makes it easier for me to fulfill it. My schedule is a lot more flexible than it would be otherwise."

That sounded convincing enough, right?

"Then let's just keep this between us for now," Drew said. "Alexis has enough to worry about already, and it's not like we're anything but friends, right?"

My heart sunk a little at the word *friends*, but I forced a smile on my lips and gave his arm a bump with my knuckles. "Yep. Just a couple of good friends from way back in the day."

DREW

MY HEART WAS STILL POUNDING when I dropped Kate off at her apartment.

The apartment where she lived all alone . . . because she was single.

I still couldn't wrap my mind around it.

What had gone wrong? She said Nolan hadn't treated her very well and that he had changed after they got married. But what did that mean? It could be a dozen different things.

Gwen had been different after the show, but it was more with how high-maintenance she was without me knowing—such as how she had to have a new pillowcase every day, and how she refused to eat leftovers. Definitely not things to get divorced over . . . even if they were annoying.

Another thing I couldn't wrap my mind around was the fact that Kate was still single after her divorce. She'd been dating one guy or another ever since she graduated high school—my social media stalking had told me that—it was hard to imagine her not being in a relationship anymore.

Was she okay? She had to be hurt, having gone through whatever it was that had caused the marriage to dissolve. I wished she had told me right from the start, so I wouldn't have accidentally rubbed salt in the wound every time I asked about Nolan.

I walked into my kitchen and found the container of food Carmella had

left for me. Even though I enjoyed my weekly pizza night, with an extra dose this afternoon in honor of Aiden, I usually tried to eat clean and keep with the nutrition plan my personal trainer had given me. During filming I'd been on beaches, in pools and hot tubs, and thankfully, it was a little less daunting since my trainer Kieran had helped me turn my average build into one with more definition.

If there wasn't something like millions of viewers talking about your abs or lack thereof for workout inspiration, I didn't know what was.

I checked the time as I sat down to my early dinner. I was supposed to call Gwen in forty minutes.

Yeah, we had to schedule our phone calls to make sure we'd be alone while talking and not have anyone figure out that Gwen was the girl I'd chosen.

Our phone calls had started out nightly once filming had ended. Then after our first couple of weekend getaways, the calls turned into every other night. Now it was normal for us to only call each other two or three times a week.

And sadly, we didn't even seem to miss the calls.

Which probably wasn't a good sign for our relationship.

At least it wasn't something that should happen when you were supposed to be head over heels, can't-wait-to-get-down-on-one-knee in love.

Our last weekend together had been fine, and we got along okay, but something just seemed to be missing. There wasn't the spark that I thought should be there.

And it wasn't just me who felt it. Gwen wasn't nearly as invested in me either. And when the time came for Dion to pick her up to go to the airport, she'd seemed almost excited to leave.

We really needed to fix that. But what were we supposed to do? We couldn't just go on a date anytime we wanted to. I couldn't just drop by her work with a bouquet of flowers. I couldn't even send her flowers, since

Alexis was so paranoid that someone would pick up on it and spoil the show's ending.

For a show that wanted people to find everlasting love, they certainly made it hard for them to stay in love . . . or in *like*, as it was in my case. I really didn't want to disappoint everyone, and I really didn't want Alexis to sue me for ruining her show. I did like Gwen most of the time, even though the fun, cool version of her from filming had seemed to disappear. I knew that girl was still in there somewhere—she couldn't have been faking it the whole ten weeks we were together . . . right?

"We need you to come in for more pickups this week. Today would be ideal if you have the time," Mallory, the story producer's assistant, told me Monday morning. I was in my home gym, finishing my Kieran-approved workout.

"Didn't you guys get what you wanted last time?" I asked.

"Oliver wasn't exactly happy with the way they came off."

In other words, you suck at acting, Drew.

I sighed. "I can push a few meetings around. When do you need me?"

"The earlier, the better. It might take a couple of hours, and we'd love to be done by three."

"Okay. I'll be there."

I finished my last few reps then hit the shower. Once dressed, I had my driver take me to the studio. If I was going to be hung up in there for a couple of hours, I needed to get some work done on the commute.

"We need you to wear this first," the head story producer, Oliver, said, pointing to the black V-neck shirt, gray jacket, and denim jeans I'd apparently worn on my date with Melanie in Holland.

I took the shirt and slipped it on, then pulled the jacket over it, not

bothering with the jeans beside them. The pickups only showed me from the chest up so the top half was all that mattered.

Oliver directed me to my chair in front of the green screen. "I know we just had you do these two weeks ago, but I didn't quite get what I wanted. So let's just start from the top." Oliver sat in his chair across from me, with his notepad in hand and his pencil tucked behind his ear. Next to him was the cameraman, Joe, who had spent a lot of time filming me kissing a bunch of girls.

"Okay, for this first one, I want you to remember back to Holland and your picnic by the windmill. It was a chilly day in late September. Melanie told you about how she had been raised by her grandparents since her parents lost custody of her and her brother." Oliver read from his notes. "So what I want you to say is: Melanie looked gorgeous today, and I was honored that she would tell me about her family. I feel like we got a lot closer on our date."

"Uh..." I started, trying to remember everything I was supposed to say. "Melanie looked gorgeous today on our date. I felt like we got a lot closer when she told me about her family." I knew the words sounded stiff coming off my lips. It usually took me a few tries to get them right, trying to use the tricks Kate had taught me.

"Cut," Oliver instructed Joe. Then he turned back to me with a half-smile. "That's one way to say it, I guess."

"Sorry, it was a lot to remember. Will it work?" Because from the line-up of outfits on the table, it looked like Oliver had plans to keep me busy for the rest of the day.

"Let's try it one more time just to make sure we get what we need. Try again when you're ready." Oliver gave Joe the signal to start recording.

My thoughts scattered for a moment before I pulled them back together. I tried to picture the date with Melanie. We had walked all over a small town in Holland, had a picnic in a field next to an iconic windmill. The date had been

great; Melanie was very down to earth and gorgeous with her long brown hair and cute knit hat. We had great chemistry, but I had a hard time fully being myself around her. She was such a well-bred Southern lady that I didn't know how to joke around with her. Which was why I'd had to let her go home a couple of weeks later.

I cleared my throat. "Melanie looked gorgeous today. My heart went out to her when she told me about her life growing up. I'm amazed at how well she turned out given the difficult childhood she had. I really appreciated her sharing her story with me. I felt like we got a lot closer today, and I can't wait to spend more time with her tonight," I finished, hoping I'd given Oliver enough to go on that time.

Oliver gave me a slow clap and I shook my head and smiled at the ridiculousness of the situation. Since when did a twenty-eight-year-old guy get a standing ovation for saying a few silly lines?

"That was amazing." Oliver smiled. "Just keep that going for another fifty of these, and we'll be in good shape."

"Fifty more?" Did they like *any* of the ones I'd done last time?

A guilty expression formed on Oliver's face. "Sorry. We decided to spin the story a little differently, focus on different aspects of your dates, so we do need a lot more."

My shoulders slumped.

Fifty more lines?

If I didn't get some magical acting skills quick I might not get to watch tonight's episode air live with the world again.

Oliver had me do a few more lines in my current outfit before having me change into a plaid button-up from my roller-skating date with Ella.

"How's it going?" a voice said from behind me as I was buttoning up my shirt.

It was Kate, wearing black rimmed glasses that I'd never seen before. How did I not know she wore glasses?

She seemed to take in the exposed part of my torso as I continued buttoning. Was it possible that her eyes had lingered on me for more than a curious second? That hadn't happened since she was in high school.

"It's going to be a long day," I finally managed to say once I'd found my tongue.

Was Kate still checking me out?

Because now I knew she wasn't married, I didn't have to feel as guilty about that thought as I would have just a day before.

"Still not a professional actor yet?" She smiled.

"Apparently not."

"Somehow, I kind of like that about you."

She stepped forward and helped me straighten the back of my collar. When her fingers grazed along my neck, I had to tell myself that she was just doing her job.

Even if the slightest touch sent chills racing across my shoulders, it didn't mean it did anything to her.

I willed the flush away from my cheeks when she looked up at me through her lashes, telling myself to get a grip.

Just because Kate also looks really good wearing glasses, it doesn't mean you need to care about it.

Though, with the white blouse and black skirt she wore and the way her hair was pulled back into a bun, she was giving off sexy librarian vibes.

Which might just be a look I was *very* much into.

And suddenly, before I could stop it, an image of her releasing her hair from her bun and shaking her head so her blonde hair fell in soft curls around her face passed through my mind.

Ugh. What was happening to me?

"Well, I guess I'll let you get back to your pickups," Kate said, breaking me from my daydreams before they could turn too steamy. "Alexis is probably wondering where I am with her coffee." She held up the cup in her

hand.

“Hey, wait,” I said, not wanting her to leave so quickly. I looked around to make sure no one was paying attention to us before saying in a low voice, “We never decided when to go over your pitches.”

“About that...” She grimaced.

Oh . . . maybe she didn’t want my help anymore.

I was just about to tell her to forget it when she said, “I don’t think I’m ready to talk to Alexis yet. I’m just getting to know her. I don’t want to ruin things too soon.”

“We could still work on them,” I offered, hoping she wasn’t just trying to let me down nicely. “Maybe once you have a pitch you’re comfortable with, you’ll realize how waiting forever to get your work out there is really doing a disservice to the whole film-loving community,” I said, giving her my most encouraging smile.

“A disservice?” Kate laughed and shook her head. “Okay, fine. I could get together tonight after work. Maybe you’re right. Maybe I’ll change my mind if I actually have something to work with.”

“Well, if I ever get done here, tonight will work for me . . . though I was hoping to watch the show when it actually airs.”

Her face lit up. “How about we do both? I’ve always wanted to watch someone watch himself on TV. It should be fun.”

I tried not to let myself think about how awkward that might be and told her that it would be great. Then she walked off, her black heels clicking all the way down the hall, and I went back to my chair. As I continued my pickups, I tried not to think too much about how my spirits had seemed to brighten right about the time Kate and I had made plans.

Yeah, that definitely wouldn’t be a good thing to think too much on.

"WAS THE PAPARAZZI FOLLOWING YOU?" I asked Drew when he showed up at my door in his holy-man disguise right at five-thirty.

He stepped inside and removed his wig and fake beard. "I don't think so, but I decided to wear this just in case." He shrugged out of the costume, his shirt slightly shifting to reveal a glimpse of his well-defined abs.

My cheeks heated at the sight of that sliver of skin. This was the second time I'd seen part of his torso today—which was probably a bad thing to keep seeing if I wanted to keep my wits about me.

Drew was dating Gwen, and I was supposed to push them to get engaged. Doing my job well would help me stay in Hollywood where I wanted to be. So, if I wanted to have my dreams of seeing my screenplays on the big screen someday, I needed to do my job.

And as nice as it would be, checking Drew out was not listed anywhere in my job description.

I took in a deep breath to help push away those thoughts, then led Drew to my tiny kitchen table. "Would you like something to drink?"

"I'll take some water."

I reached into the cupboard and filled up a tall glass of water for Drew.

"So what is this story about?" Drew asked, after draining half his glass. "Did you decide on which one you wanted to pitch first?"

I rubbed the back of my hand. "I was thinking of doing the one I started writing two years ago. For now, the working title is *The Visitor*."

"Oooh, sounds kind of alien-esque." Drew leaned closer and I found myself breathing in his intoxicating cologne.

Man, he smelled good.

"Let me guess," he continued, not seeming to notice how his close proximity had affected me. "A really hot alien spy lands in this girl's backyard, casts some sort of mind spell on her, and she invites him in. She takes care of him, tells him all the info he wants, and then he plans to fly away to tell his commander what he discovered. Only, he fell for her in the process. Then there's some sort of lovey-dovey montage, ending with a big kiss at the end." Drew stopped and leaned back with a smug smile on his face.

"As wonderful as that all sounds," I said. "Sadly, I didn't go with the alien, sci-fi angle."

"Darn it." Drew snapped his fingers.

"It's actually a story set back in the nineties, where this man shows up at a widow's house, beaten and bruised and all mysterious. She lives on a farm, and there are no other neighbors close by to help the guy, so she reluctantly invites him into her house—"

"See, I knew it was about a girl inviting a strange man into her house." Drew grinned proudly.

"Yes, good job. You paid attention to the title." I chuckled. "Do you want to hear the rest of my synopsis or not?"

"Yes, sorry. Go on." He made a show of clamping his mouth shut and locking it with a pretend key.

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. "So, she invites the guy into the house with her and her three young children, has him sit in the kitchen while she cleans him up, wondering how he came to be so beaten up. She tries asking him, but he won't give her a straight answer."

"Oh, so he's like a spy . . . kind of like I said," Drew interrupted again.

"Do you want to tell the rest of the story then?" I nudged his shoulder playfully. "Because I kind of feel like I'm a teacher being interrupted by a fourth grader."

"Sorry, Ms. Dawson."

I shot him a smirk. "So anyway, after she and the children have bandaged up the guy and let him rest, they come to find out that he's actually there to help them escape. He worked undercover for the CIA or something and knew that the area was about to come under attack. And just as he's telling them his story, their wheat catches on fire. It was a really dry year, and everything just bursts into flames and is getting closer to the house. The family scrambles to grab everything of value, but there's no time. The Visitor grabs the baby and the two-year-old, the widow carries the seven-year-old to the car, and then they drive off, leaving everything behind.

"They go into hiding somewhere and the guy helps them rebuild their life. As they work together, the man and the woman fall in love. Everything looks wonderful, until her presumably dead husband shows up. He's actually super evil and faked his death, and now he's coming back to torture them...he's the real visitor that they have to worry about."

"Wow, that sounds intense," Drew said.

I scrunched up my nose. "Too intense?"

"No," he hurried to say. "It's just, I thought you said it was a romance. This sounds like a thriller."

It had started out that way and had actually been more comedic in the first drafts, but in my revisions over the summer and fall, it had taken a twisted turn.

Possibly a turn related to the events of my life. Happy-go-lucky newlywed finds out she married a stranger who ends up treating her like trash.

"Do you think Alexis would even be interested in something like that?" I

asked.

"I think she'll love it." A huge grin stretched across Drew's face. "She told me a couple of months ago that she loves to get into more of the thriller angle on her side projects. *Finding Your Soulmate* is what she likes in her everyday life, but when she does a film she wants something completely new and edgy. You should totally do that one."

"Really? You're not just saying that to be nice?" I leaned closer, holding my breath.

Could someone that big really want something that had come from me? A nobody?

Drew nodded, his grin stretching wider. "You should approach her this week."

And I had the biggest urge to hug him right then.

I hadn't had anyone support my dreams for so long—my biggest cheerleader had been gone for seven years. But if billionaire Drew, who had a killer gut instinct when it came to successful business ventures, had faith in me, maybe I should have faith in myself too.

"I think I need to make one quick pass through it before I can do that. Maybe next week."

"I wouldn't wait too long. That story sounds awesome!"

I couldn't resist the impulse this time. I jumped up and threw my arms around his neck. "Thank you for believing in me."

He returned the embrace, and I blinked back happy tears.

Why couldn't I have married a guy like him the first time?

Were there any guys like him left in the world?

He kissed the top of my head and spoke into my hair, his warm breath sending tingles down my spine. "I've always believed in you, Kate, and I always will."

"Now for the non-scripted interview." I turned toward Drew on the couch when the first commercial break for *Finding Your Soulmate* began. I had made sure to leave some space between us on the couch, setting my phone and remote control in the middle so I wouldn't be tempted to scoot closer and see if it felt the same to cuddle with him as it had back when we were kids. "What did you really think of that one-on-one date with Nina? Was it really that awkward?"

Nina was a shy accountant, and though a date spent on a sailboat sounded romantic, on screen there were a lot of awkward silences . . . accompanied by chirping crickets.

Drew laughed. "It wasn't that bad. I don't know how they managed to get those crickets all the way out to sea," —he smiled at the ridiculousness of the added effects— "but we actually had a good time. Yes, Nina was more reserved, but the quiet moments really weren't that long or uncomfortable."

"So, do you give her a rose over dinner?" I asked, desperate for any spoilers he would give me. Because while I knew he ended up with Gwen in the end, I had no idea who his second, or third...or fifteenth choices were.

Drew clamped his lips together for show and shook his head.

"Come on, like I'm gonna tell anyone. Most of the people on Twitter already know, thanks to Twitter's live feed."

Speaking of Twitter... I grabbed my phone to check my app, typing #soulmate and #nina into the search bar.

Sure enough, there were a bunch of tweets that showed up. I scrolled through them quickly then looked up at Drew with a frown.

"You sent her home?"

Drew shrugged guiltily. "She was too quiet for me."

My jaw dropped. "You're complaining about someone being quiet, Mr. King of the Reserved?" Seriously, did he not know how hypocritical that was of him?

"I know, I know. I just prefer someone more outgoing."

So he liked Gwen because she was outspoken?

Weird.

Hopefully that's not what he meant.

I deleted #nina from my search to see what everyone was saying about the show. There were memes of Drew in his swim trunks, standing on the beach for one of his in-the-moment interviews. One of the captions read, "I don't always go on national television, but when I do, I make sure to bring my rock-hard abs." Another had that same image with a rose Photoshopped into his hand, saying, "Will you accept these abs?"

A giggle escaped out of me when I clicked on the next photo.

"What?" Drew asked, looking up from his own phone.

I held my screen up so he could see it. "Your abs have their own Twitter account."

Drew jumped across the cushion between us and grabbed my phone to look at it. His eyes bulged when he saw the closeup of his torso set as the profile pic, with the handle @DrewBurrowsAbs.

"This is ridiculous!" he said, as he scrolled down the page. "My grandma better not ever get on Twitter."

"You don't like the idea of fans just gazing at your abs all day?"

Drew scrunched his nose. "No. That's so weird."

He tossed my phone back to me, and I had to admit that he was kind of adorable when he was embarrassed.

Like, the way his cheeks had turned red was a super cute look on him.

But instead of telling him that I said, "You had to know people would do something like this. I mean, you are the bachelor on a hit show watched by millions of women."

"Yeah . . . no." He sunk back into the couch and draped his arm across his eyes for a moment. "Like, I knew a few people would recognize me here and there," he said, sitting up, "but really, when I signed on, I had no idea how big this thing was. I think you forget I didn't grow up watching this show."

"I did invite you and Aiden to watch it . . . so don't be mad at me for not trying to enlighten you."

The commercial break ended, and soon Drew and Nina were back on the screen, sitting at a table with food they didn't touch.

I watched Real-Life Drew. Since I already knew what was coming, I wanted to see how he reacted to watching himself. His jaw was tense, and his eyes focused like he was picking apart everything he did on the screen. When he lifted the rose from its silver platter, the signal that he was ready to tell Nina if she was invited to stay longer or not, Real-Life Drew sucked in a breath, as if bracing himself for a blow. On-Screen Drew seemed to do the same.

Real-Life Drew held his breath clear until Nina had tearfully let him walk her back to the SUV that would take her to the airport.

"How was it, sending people home like that?" I asked quietly, noticing an energy shift in the room.

"It was gut-wrenching. Every. Single. Time." His eyes were hollow when he looked at me. "Breaking up with amazing women who just weren't right for *me* was so hard. My stomach still gets all twisted up when I think about it."

"I could tell. All these months later and you still seem to be having a hard time watching the show."

He nodded. "Even though it happened months ago, I'm just getting my first view at all the things the ladies said to the cameras about me. I had no idea just how invested those women were before, so hearing it now is pretty sobering. And it only got harder each week."

"But they knew going in that there were twenty-four other ladies fighting for your heart, so it shouldn't be too surprising to them. Right?"

"Yeah, but they all thought it would be them in the end. It's that crazy."

I frowned, not understanding it. How could they all be so sure, when they saw him going on dates with these other women, having connections with all

of them?

Seeming to sense my confusion, Drew said, "I guess you can't really get it until you're there. But on this show, you're completely shut off from the rest of the world. They take your phone, there's no Internet, you're completely immersed in this new reality of finding love with the bachelor or bachelorette. All you do is talk with the other contestants about this person, or think about him or her, or have the producers and handlers and others on set tell you what a great connection you seem to have. It's crazy. In real life you have a job, friends, family—you name it—to occupy your mind. But on the show, everything is about finding love with that one person. So much about them is built up, it's crazy. And then when you only spend like seventy-two hours together, you're expected to know if they are your *soulmate*. Sadly, for everyone behind the scenes, it didn't work so well with me."

He blew out a low breath and I sensed frustration coming off him. "You shouldn't feel bad that you didn't propose to Gwen. You still have eight weeks to get to that place."

"But what if I don't want to?" he said, his voice low and husky.

I froze, his words and tone catching me off guard. And when he met my gaze with his gorgeous blue eyes, my stomach twisted in a knot so tight I could barely breathe.

Because there was something in his eyes that both scared and excited me. Like he was telling me to pay attention to his words because they might just be meant for me . . .

I swallowed the lump in my throat, suddenly speechless as I tried to process what he'd just said.

Was he trying to hint at something? Could he possibly have feelings for me?

But then I looked at the screen and realized what he'd said probably had nothing to do with me. It was, in fact, just a reaction to what Gwen was doing in this particular episode.

On camera, Gwen was throwing a literal hissy fit about how one of the girls had done something to frustrate her. I, who had been so focused on my conversation with Drew and my own pathetic daydreams, had missed what happened on-screen, which was Gwen in a group date with seven other girls. They'd been playing a game of soccer.

"Would what you just said have anything to do with what's happening on the screen?" I asked, pointing at the TV even though I wasn't quite sure I wanted him to tell me.

Drew glanced to the screen. After a beat, he sighed and said, "Um . . . yeah. A-along with what she did on last week's episode . . . and the week before that. I'm starting to wonder if I even know her at all."

AFTER LEAVING KATE'S HOUSE, I called Gwen to see what she had to say about this evening's episode. It was late in Michigan, but it was important for me to get things off my chest.

"Did you watch tonight's episode?" I asked as soon as Gwen picked up.

But without responding to my question she said, "Why didn't you tell me you kissed Melanie on your first date? I thought I was the first kiss of the season."

She sounded so put off that I almost felt guilty. But I said, "I never said you were my first kiss."

"Well, she didn't look like she was that good of a kisser anyway," Gwen huffed. "So you're forgiven. I should actually probably feel bad for you for having to endure that."

I rolled my eyes and bit back the retort that it had actually been one of my better first kisses. I didn't need to sink to her level.

"So what did you need to talk to me about, honey?" Her voice was more syrupy than usual.

How had I put up with that annoying tone for the last couple of months?

"Well, like you, I watched the show tonight," I said, just jumping in. "And I wanted to get your side before I made too many judgments on what I saw, since I know the editing department is really good at what they do. Is

there something we didn't see?"

"Oh. You're wondering why I threw Jacey's shorts in the garbage?" She laughed in her silly, cutesy way as she seemed to be trying to think of a good excuse for her rude behavior. "I was just playing a little prank on her. We did things like that all the time at the house."

"Really?" I didn't even try to hide the disbelief from my voice. "And did Jacey know it was just a good-natured prank?"

"Well, it turns out she doesn't have the sense of humor that I find to be very important. So no, it didn't turn out as I'd hoped."

Or you forgot that all the rooms had cameras in the corners that were turned on during the day.

"So the fact that she was trying to hurry and get ready for her hiking date with me didn't factor into your prank at all?"

Jacey had apologized to me about being late for our date because of a wardrobe mishap, but I never knew until now that Gwen had been the cause of it.

How many other things had she done that no one told me about?

I'd heard that on previous seasons of the show, women that tattled on the girl the bachelor had favored usually ended up regretting it. I just wished it had been different for me. I could have used some inside information before ending up with a girl who seemed to treat everyone like the show was truly just a competition.

"I know we're supposed to have a weekend getaway in a few days, but I think I actually need a break to clear my head," I said.

"What?" She nearly shouted. "We haven't seen each other for a week and a half. We don't need a break. We need more time together, if anything."

I sighed and pinched the bridge of my nose. Was that all it was? Was I getting frustrated over the smallest things because I wasn't around her enough to remember all the good?

"Okay. Sorry." I gave my head a shake. "You're probably right. This

whole long-distance relationship is hard for me."

"I know. It's rough for me, too," she said, her voice turning back into the soothing tone I loved. "But I'll see you this weekend and things will be great."

I hoped so . . . well, *most* of me hoped so.

I was still trying to forget about that other tiny part that didn't.

The next weekend with Gwen was not what I would consider a success. I called Kate as soon as it was deemed an appropriate time to call on a Sunday morning and asked her to pick me up.

Gwen and I were done.

So much for making Alexis happy and not breaching my contract.

Oh well. It would be worth it not to be tied down to a nutjob like Gwen.

I just wouldn't think about how I'd go down as the most hated bachelor in all of *Finding Your Soulmate's* history.

Was it too much to hope the viewers would be happy we broke up after seeing the way Gwen had acted when I wasn't around?

Maybe they'd sympathize with me?

But even if they didn't, I was glad to be free.

"What happened?" Kate asked, jumping out of the car once the safe house's garage door shut behind her. I had been sitting in the garage ever since I'd called her to come and pick me up. I couldn't be in that house with Gwen for one more minute.

"We broke up." I stood and shouldered my duffel bag.

"You what?" Her blue eyes widened.

"I broke up with Gwen."

"I heard what you said. I just . . . how could you do that and be so calm?"

I shrugged and walked toward the back of the car. "It's been inevitable

from the start. We're too different. We want different things. And we definitely have different goals."

The only thing Gwen seemed to care about when I broke up with her was that we wouldn't get our own show when this whole thing was over.

Doing another show was the last thing I wanted. I wanted less spotlight, not more.

Clearly, Gwen had been on the show for the wrong reasons. I wasn't even the real prize she'd been going after all along.

Well, she could do her own show if she wanted. There were twisted people who liked to watch girls slap baby sea otters and make fun of homeless people. Gwen would be perfect for a show like that.

"I'll tell Alexis everything so you don't have to," I said, shoving my bag in the backseat. "You won't get on her bad side because of this. You're just picking me up...you didn't cause the fight."

I climbed into the passenger's side, and Kate finally moved, getting into the car. "But it's my job to keep the happy couple, you know . . . happy. I'm so getting fired for this. So long moving up the ladder."

"You won't get fired. I'll handle this. I can take Alexis."

Kate cocked an eyebrow that told me she doubted my persuasive abilities.

"Really. I'll deal with Alexis. We'll figure something out. And I'll do you one even better and get you that pitch."

"Oh please, don't bring me into this." Alarm rose in her eyes. "I want no part of it."

"Trust me." I smiled. "You'll be fine."

"Okay." Kate pushed the button to open the garage door and turned on the engine. "You better not make me regret this."

"You won't."

Though even as I said it, the future headlines passed through my mind. *Drew Burrows, also known as Mr. My-Billionaire-Abs-Have-Their-Own-Twitter-Account, had twenty-five of the most eligible women in the nation,*

and he still sent them all home. At least he still has his ego to love him back.

Yeah, this was a disaster.

I'd been home for two hours before I realized I'd accidentally left my wallet in the bathroom. But instead of calling Kate and having her drive me back to the getaway house, I decided to break the rules and sneak myself over to grab it. I knew the garage code, so I'd be able to slip inside. Gwen would still be there, waiting for Dion to pick her up and take her back to the airport, but I could endure her death glare for a few minutes.

So, I climbed into my most inconspicuous vehicle from my garage—my old truck from college that I'd saved as a reminder of where I'd come from—then drove to the secret house.

Once safely tucked inside the garage, I stuck my head into the kitchen, happy that the coast was clear. Maybe I'd lucked out and Gwen was taking a nap before her flight. That would be a dream.

I tiptoed into the hall, breathing a sigh of relief that she wasn't in the living room either.

How did I get so lucky?

I grabbed my wallet from the bathroom counter, passing by Gwen's bedroom door. But just as I was walking by, a low voice came from inside.

A voice much too deep to be Gwen's.

What? I stopped and strained my ears to decipher what I'd heard.

"I don't care if you think he's boring, or if he broke up with you. Just think of the payday we'll get from the alimony after you're married for a couple of years. We could be set for life."

"I doubt he'll take me back. I think he's starting to figure out there was nothing between us from the beginning, and I'm having a hard time faking it when it's just us alone for a weekend. When I had everyone else around, it

was a lot easier to keep the charade going." Gwen's voice drifted through the door.

My legs went weak and I had to lean against the wall for support so I wouldn't collapse to the floor.

Everything had been fake?

She'd only been after me for my money?

"I'll figure something out," the man's voice responded. "I convinced Drew to choose you the first time, I can get him to take you back."

Dion?

Is that Dion?

My brain whizzed, piecing everything together. Dion and Gwen were having an affair? Had Dion put Gwen on the show to go after my money from the very beginning?

A wave of nausea flooded through me as I reflected back on filming and all the times Dion had told me what a great connection Gwen and I had. How she always said the nicest things about me when I wasn't around. How I seemed to light up in a different way when Gwen was by his side.

Had they all been lies?

Had I sent home a great girl that first night just to end up with the girl Dion had planted in the show to make himself richer?

"I'm gonna take a shower." Gwen's voice sounded closer than it had been a moment before.

Footsteps padded on the carpet inside the room, moving toward me. I panicked and darted down the hall as fast and as quietly as I could, my heart pounding like a jackhammer.

Only once I'd made it out of the garage and into my truck did I take a full breath of air.

Had anything between us ever been real? Had she meant any of those things she'd said to me while we were together?

Or were they all just lies to get her to stay a little longer?

It all made sense now. Gwen had simply been acting the whole time we were together. The side of her that I was now watching on TV each week was her true character.

How had I fallen for it so badly? And why had no one else seen it? Were they all in on it? Could I trust anyone at the studio?

I cancelled all my meetings the next morning and drove straight to the studio after my workout, chugging a protein shake the whole way. I needed to get this over with, so I could stop seeing images of the gossip magazines after everyone found out on the after-show.

Drew Burrows had twenty-five women to choose from, and he still couldn't find one to fall in love with him.

"I have to tell you something," I said once Alexis had me take a seat in her office. Her desk was usually described as organized chaos, but today it just looked like a mess.

She probably doesn't have time for this. I looked at the stack of papers again. *Yeah, this will be the last thing she wants to hear.*

"What's up?" She shut her laptop and leaned forward on her forearms. "How was your weekend with Gwen?"

"Well." I scratched behind my ear. I might as well just cut to the chase. "Gwen and I, um...we broke up. Or rather, *I* broke up with her." I braced myself for the explosion that was sure to happen.

Alexis closed her eyes and sucked in a deep breath before glaring at me. "And what reason do you have for throwing my ratings out the window?"

"She's not who I thought she was."

"No one is who they appear to be anymore." Alexis pointed to her nose. "You see this? It's not my real nose. But it makes me look good. Kind of like how a happy ending on this show makes me look good. I thought we had a

deal, Drew." She pounded her laptop with a fist.

I stood and shut the door in case anyone was eavesdropping. Then I lowered my voice to barely above a whisper. "She was only after my money. And she's been cheating on me the whole time."

"How could she be cheating on you the whole time?" Alexis echoed my lowered volume. "She wasn't dating anyone two months before the show. Dion verified that information."

"She's cheating with Dion."

Alexis was silent as she processed that. Then she spoke in a very calm and cool voice. Too calm and cool. "That's a heavy accusation. Do you have proof of this?"

"Not exactly. I went back to the house after leaving yesterday morning, and I overheard Dion and Gwen in her bedroom. They were worried about their alimony plans if she never got to marry and divorce me."

Alexis was silent for a moment and I could almost see the cogs turning in her brain as she focused on the stack of pink Post-it notes on her desk. After a few minutes, I began to sweat.

Was she thinking of a way to sue me for everything?

Then seeming to come to some sort of conclusion she sat up straighter and said, "I need you to get back with her."

"What? No!" I pulled my head back in shock. "I can't stand her."

Alexis held a finger to her lips. "It's not like that. We need proof of an affair. We can use this." Her eyes lit on fire. "Yes..." Her mind seemed to piece a few more puzzle pieces together. "Yes, this is actually really good. We're having the hardest time painting Gwen in a positive light. We can twist this, but it will take some time. Just leave it up to me. I know with your, um shall we say, lackluster acting skills it might be difficult . . . but I think I have a way to make this work."

"But I have to get back with her?"

"We need you guys to have another weekend together, so we can catch

her and Dion in action. Believe me, you'll like this. I'm guessing you're probably a little worried about everyone hating you once they find out you broke Gwen's heart . . . right? Since all we have right now is your word against hers."

I nodded.

"Well, if we can show them what was actually happening, then you're off the hook and you get everyone's sympathy. And I have justice for that rat producer of mine, and hopefully, ratings that will help us survive until next season."

"But does it have to be a full weekend? Can I fake an accident or something?"

"With your acting skills?" Alexis laughed. "No, I'll drop by with the excuse of you needing to do some last-minute pickups or something."

That would definitely be believable. I'd certainly done a ton of those already.

Alexis held up a finger. "But I can't have you breathing a word of this to *anybody*. No one can know. No friends or family. *No one*."

"What about Kate? She's my handler and sees everything."

"Not even Kate. I have big plans for this, and I will not let anything else go wrong this season. Is that something I can count on you for?"

I dropped my shoulders and sighed. "I can do it."

I STOOD at the window by my desk, my fingers touching the cool glass as I watched Drew walk to his car.

He'd just done it. He'd told Alexis.

Relief swept over me. I knew I should probably be worried about my job. But I was too happy to see that Drew was free from his relationship with that witch.

My phone beeped with a text.

Alexis: **Please order two dozen roses and have them sent to the address we have on file for Gwen.**

Sympathy roses to Gwen. Well, I could definitely do that. Though it might be hard not to tell the florist to write *good riddance* in the note.

I was just opening the company's address book when another message from Alexis popped on my screen.

Alexis: **Have the florist write a note saying something about asking for forgiveness and hoping she'll take him back.**

What? Had Drew changed his mind?

Before I could figure out my conflicted feelings on his change of heart, my phone beeped again.

Alexis: **Make sure not to give them Drew's name or say anything about the show. Just use the preloaded credit card I gave you.**

I sighed and grudgingly punched in the phone number for a florist near Gwen's home in Detroit, and made the order. The florist read off a few options for the message, joking that it was on her list called *Groveling*, and then I picked the one that sounded the most like Drew.

Then I pulled up Drew's name in my messages and shot him a quick text.

Me: I'm guessing the flowers mean you've changed your mind.

I wanted to put a frowny face emoji at the end of that sentence.

It took twenty minutes for Drew to respond.

Drew: Alexis helped me see the light.

"Can you take care of the happy couple this weekend?" Alexis asked me when I brought her lunch to her office. Mondays were always the craziest at the studio, with all the last-minute checks happening before the show aired. I wondered if Alexis even took time to go pee when she had a deadline to meet.

I still wondered how Alexis was able to convince Drew to get back with Gwen when he'd been so sure the day before.

What was Alexis holding over him?

How else could she have been able to convince stubborn Drew Burrows to get back with a woman whom all of America was starting to see as someone very wrong for him?

At least, I *assumed* everyone could see how wrong Gwen was for Drew. It was obvious to me, at least.

But since I needed to keep this job, I would do what Alexis asked of me. So I said, "Yes. I can help."

"You're a lifesaver." Alexis dug through the bagged lunch I'd brought her and pulled out a bacon cheeseburger. "I have to admit that I was a little worried about bringing someone unfamiliar into our studio family so late in

the game, but Drew was right. You really have been such a great help to us."

"Thank you." My cheeks glowed at the praise. I had no idea Alexis had even paid me that much attention. After all, I was kind of a nobody in the grand scheme of things.

"Which has had me thinking..." Alexis continued. "I was talking to Drew about what happened between him and Gwen this weekend, and as you probably guessed, I was able to convince him to get back with her." She looked behind me. "Actually, could you shut the door for a moment?"

Once I'd shut the door, Alexis motioned for me to sit down. Then Alexis scooted closer so we could have a more intimate conversation.

"I told Drew not to tell you—told Drew not to tell anyone—but I realized that I'm going to need help with this plan that we have."

My ears perked up immediately.

What was going on?

"Drew didn't change his mind about getting back with Gwen," she said. "He went back to the safe house yesterday for something and discovered Gwen and Dion having an affair."

"What?" I went still, not sure I'd heard her right. "They're having an affair?"

Alexis nodded. "So, I have a plan to catch them in the act. I could just fire Dion and sue them . . . but revenge is much more fun." A devious smile slipped onto her face. "I'm going to hide some cameras in the house and get some footage of their betrayal to share with our viewers . . . thus saving the show and Drew's sweet reputation at the same time."

"You're going to film them . . ." I let my words drift off and my stomach soured at the thought. "Isn't that illegal?"

"It's not illegal in your own home. And technically, I'll be the homeowner since my show is paying the rent this weekend. Plus, both of them have already signed a waiver that should still hold up in this instance."

My face must have registered my horror because Alexis waved her hands

quickly in front of her. "I'm not putting cameras in the bedroom. But I do plan to have them everywhere else. We'll be sure to catch their conversations, and probably enough kissing to convince our audience of foul play."

I nodded, still uneasy about this form of revenge. I hated the idea of people spying on private conversations.

But then I thought of Drew and how this was happening to him. He had invested so much of his life into this experience, and the whole thing had been ruined because of Gwen and Dion.

My heart ached for him. Drew had been cheated on, too.

How was he holding up?

When I'd found out about Nolan, I'd been so isolated from all my friends and family for so long that I didn't know who to turn to for support. And I got the feeling that Drew didn't have that many people in his life he could go to either.

I needed to make sure Drew was okay. He was a strong guy, but he also had a tender heart.

"What do you need me to do?" I asked.

Alexis's eyes brightened. "I need you to show up Sunday morning to tell Drew I have last-minute pickups that he has to do for the episode that will be airing the next day. That way, Drew doesn't have to suffer through the *entire* weekend with Gwen, and it should still give us a few hours to catch Dion and Gwen in the act."

"I think I can do that." I nodded.

"I'm actually looking forward to this whole thing." Alexis rubbed her hands together. "So much of my life is centered around the romance of the show—which I love by the way—but sometimes I need some excitement and danger in my life. This should be fun."

"I know what you mean," I said. "I'm the same with my writing. Usually I write romantic comedies because I love the thought of a happy ending and the feeling of falling in love, but sometimes I just need to write something far

out there."

"You're a writer?" Alexis asked, holding her Dr. Pepper to her lips. "What do you write?"

"Screenplays." I shifted in my seat, suddenly wishing I'd kept my mouth shut. "It's been a hobby of mine since I was a kid."

"Really?"

Was that an intrigued and impressed look, or was it something else?

"Yeah."

"So what is this *out there* story that you've written?"

Knowing this was my opportunity to shop my work, I fumbled through the pitch Drew and I had created the week before, stumbling when I got to the part about the crazy husband that came back from the dead.

Yeah...that is so out there.

But to my surprise, Alexis said, "I'm intrigued. Can I look at it?"

"Uh . . . sure. I can email it to you later if you want."

Was this actually happening?

Alexis nodded. "Can you send it this week? I'll be flying to Denver Friday for my niece's birthday, and I'd love to read it on the plane."

My tongue was heavy, and I was having a hard time moving it. "S-sure, I can do that."

My mind was not on my work the rest of the day. Instead, it was going through *The Visitor*, trying to figure out if I needed to make any last-minute changes before sending it off to Alexis. I dashed back and forth from office to office, running errands for the different producers—but though my body was there, my mind was dreaming.

Alexis asked to see my screenplay.

I could barely contain my excitement. When Oliver and one of the

cameramen passed me in the hall, I barely kept myself from blurting out my news to them.

As soon as I had a moment to myself, I whipped out my phone and texted Drew.

Me: Alexis wants to see *The Visitor*!!!

My phone beeped a moment later.

Drew: Yes!!! This deserves a celebration.

Me: What do you have in mind?

Drew: Since I know how much you love watching that weird romance show...something about finding your shoe's soul...or something like that, I was thinking we could order food from your favorite restaurant and make fun of that pretty-boy star from the comfort of my home theater. What do you think?

Drew was offering to buy me food. I was in!

Me: I'll be there. Though I may need help pushing send on the email before I can relax and watch that cool guy kiss a bunch of girls.

Drew: LOL. See you around 7.

DREW

I HAD Carmella order the food and set a nice table for Kate and me up in the theater room. Kate's first request from a producer was a big deal and deserved a world-class meal. If I didn't have to worry about paparazzi turning a dinner alone with an unfamiliar woman into some sort of tabloid story, I'd have taken her to the restaurant myself. But I didn't want to see her name dragged through the mud next to mine, so hopefully she'd understand the sentiment behind the gesture.

"It smells so good in here." Kate set her computer down on the couch before walking to the table to peek at the food. "I grabbed pineapple hamburgers for Alexis this afternoon, and the whole time she was eating I was just drooling on the inside."

I stepped beside her and nudged her with my elbow. "Well, at least you kept it on the inside."

"Har-har." Her eyes were bright, and I wondered not for the first time how Nolan could cheat on her.

We made up our plates and took them to the reclining sofa just as the show came on the big screen.

"Last week on Finding Your Soulmate, Drew took three ladies on one-on-one dates, two survived another week, but Nina was sent home in tears," the host, Rodrigo Martinez's voice sounded through the speakers. *"Ten women*

remain. Who will stay, who will go...find out tonight . . ."

"So, did you send the email yet?" I asked as Rodrigo continued telling the viewers about the exciting things happening in tonight's episode.

Kate ducked her head down. "Not yet. I . . ."

"Hand me your computer."

"What?" Anxiety sprouted on her face. I loved how expressive Kate had always been. She accused me of being a terrible actor, but I could always read exactly what she was thinking from the look on her face.

I set my plate on the side table and held a hand out, gesturing for her laptop. "Come on. We're doing this tonight."

When she didn't hand it to me, I scooted to the cushion right beside her and grabbed the computer. I opened the laptop to find myself immediately thwarted by the password prompt.

"What's your password?"

"Like I'm gonna tell you." She bit into her burger and took her time chewing it. "This is sooo good."

"Stop trying to distract me." I tried to give her my best stern face. "Let's send this off before I go on my first date in London."

"I'm still not sure it's ready. What if Alexis hates it?"

"You've already been through it about fifty times, right?"

She nodded as her eyes grew big, showing her nerves.

"Just send it. She'll love it."

Kate didn't say anything, but she reached for the laptop and typed in her password. The Internet browser was already opened up to the email that she'd drafted with the file attached.

She was ready for this next step. She just needed me to give her a nudge.

"You press the button." She shoved the laptop back on my lap.

I inspected the email to make sure it had everything it needed, centered the cursor on the send button, and then grabbed Kate's hand, feeling a spark of electricity at the touch. I ignored the feeling and pushed her finger on the

trackpad to send the email off.

"There you go." I clapped the laptop shut and set it on the floor, content that I'd done my job. That's exactly what Aiden would have done if he was here.

When I glanced back at Kate, she looked like she was about to hyperventilate.

"Breathe, Kate. You're going to be fine." I laughed and rubbed her knee.

"I can't believe you made me do that," she gasped, setting her palm to her chest.

I quirked my lips into a half grin. "You were going to do it anyway. Might as well not put off the inevitable." Content that she wasn't going into shock, I grabbed my plate and settled in to watch myself go on a date with a girl whose heart I'd seemingly broken.

Talk about a fun night.

And now with everything that happened with Gwen, I would have the hardest time watching all the girls on the show and not question whether any of them were even interested in me and not just my money.

Turns out finding love on TV was even harder than finding it in real life. Part of me wished I could go back in the past, before all the money, before all the fame, and take the time to find a girl who really loved me for who I was as a person.

A person I could give my whole self to and not worry about her having ulterior motives.

But I knew who I would choose if I could go back in time. I would have picked Kate.

And that was even worse, because there was no way she could possibly ever want me again after everything we'd been through. That road had been demolished before we could even take a few steps down it.

"Oh, by the way," Kate said, breaking me away from my thoughts. "Alexis told me about your plans for this weekend."

"She did?" But Alexis made me promise not to tell anyone. Maybe she was thinking it was a regular weekend getaway . . . not a covert operation in revenge. So to be safe I said, "Yeah, another happy couple's weekend."

A slow smile spread on Kate's face. "No, she told me the truth. About how you're just pretending to get together to catch Gwen and Dion in the act."

Which meant she also knew all about my failure to get someone to fall in love with me and not my money.

How pathetic did she think I was now?

"Alexis really told you?"

Kate nodded, her expression turning somber. "I'm sorry about what they did to you. I seriously wanted to punch Dion in the face when I saw him today."

"I wouldn't want you to hurt your fist on my account." I gave her a half smile, appreciating her sentiment.

"I could take him. I've been working out."

She flexed her skinny little arms, and if I looked really close I could see a tiny bump where her bicep was. I gave her arm a squeeze. "Wow. That's pretty intimidating."

Her mouth hung open and she smacked me playfully. "Sorry, not all of us have personal trainers who come to world-class gyms set up in their basements."

I shook my head and laughed. "I still have to do the work for these." And before I could think better of it, I was rolling my sleeves back and showing off what hard work really looked like.

I instantly regretted it once I met her gaze. Yes, I was happy with the results Kieren had helped me produce, but I hated that I'd just turned into the guy who flexed to try and get a girl's attention.

But Kate didn't seem to notice my embarrassment, because she was hiding a huge smile behind her hand.

Was it possible that she liked that I worked out now?

"If we were in a public place, I'd totally take a picture of me squeezing your bicep right now, and then post it online. Just imagine how all of social media would explode over that." She laughed.

I pushed my sleeves back down. "Why only if we were in public?" Not that I wanted her to squeeze my arms...not too badly anyway.

"Oh, probably because the gossip magazines would have a heyday over why I was spending time alone with you in your private theater, touching your arms."

"And that would be bad because of the show," I said, before she could say something about her not wanting people to think we were anything more than friends. Was it too much to hope that she'd ever see me like that again?

"Alexis would fire me. And I really need this job."

Right. I should have realized we were only spending so much time together because it was *her job*. Once she got that movie deal she was hoping for, she'd leave me behind in her glittery dust.

That's how relationships worked for me now. I was a means to an end. People only hung out with me if it was their job or if they were hoping to get something from me.

I didn't know why I'd thought Kate and I might be rekindling something from the past. How delusional was I now? First, I thought I could find lasting love on a reality show, and now I was pining for Kate all over again.

We watched the show for a few minutes. Gwen and I were on the screen, sitting in a carriage driving down the middle of London. We were cuddled together, and Gwen was laughing at something I had said.

My heart squeezed just looking at my huge smile after I'd kissed her hair. I'd been so happy that day. I'd thought I might have actually been on the right course to finding my future wife.

"It's sad." I swallowed the emotion that had risen in my throat. "Even knowing what I know now, and watching this, I still don't see any signs that

Gwen was lying to me back then. How is that possible?"

"You just see the best in people." Kate lifted a shoulder and gave me a soft, understanding look. "You aren't the type of guy to go around looking for everyone's faults." She touched my hand. "But you didn't propose to her for a reason. Maybe your subconscious knew something was wrong deep down."

I nodded, looking at her hand on mine for those few seconds before she removed it. And for the first time in this whole experience, I was proud instead of ashamed of myself for not being able to get down on one knee.

I bit my lip. "So, knowing what you know now, do you think it's too evil to go through with Alexis's plan? Should I tell her to call it off and just deal with the fallout the media's sure to bring because I didn't end up with anyone?"

She shrugged. "At first I wasn't sure, but with everything they did, Gwen and Dion totally deserve it. I mean, if I could have secretly leaked dirt about Nolan and everything he did to me, I would have. Any girl who tries to date him should know what he's really like. Plus, if I'd exposed him, I wouldn't have felt like I had to hide my divorce from everyone. People would have understood how necessary it was."

I hadn't realized until that moment how similar our situations were. Sure, mine was going to happen in front of millions of viewers, but at least I hadn't been married. Kate had gone through with everything, expecting a happily ever after, and all she was left with was an apartment she felt too lonely to stay at.

"Why didn't you tell everyone the truth then? Why let Nolan save face?" I wanted to ask her exactly what had happened, but for some reason, this didn't seem like the right moment.

She sighed and leaned back in her seat. "I'd like to pretend that it was because I'm a bigger person than him, and that I didn't need to sink to his level." She looked up at me, her eyes vulnerable and open. "But, honestly, I didn't tell anyone because I was too ashamed. I should have seen the signs.

And I shouldn't have been in such a hurry to marry someone, when I knew in the back of my mind that I deserved someone better."

She looked down at her hands, as if she'd just admitted something very sacred.

And I couldn't guess at what she meant even though I really wanted to.

I reached over and touched her chin, lifting it so our eyes met. She needed to see that I meant what I said next. "I'm so sorry you had to go through that. You deserve the world." I caressed her cheek with my thumb, feeling sparks ignite throughout my whole body.

I wanted to give her the world.

Her eyes pierced through me with questions that I didn't know if I wanted to answer. I gazed at her lips. It would be so easy to kiss her again.

To pick up where we'd left off so long ago.

But did I really dare go down that road? Our track record wasn't exactly the best. Bad things happened the last time I'd expressed how I felt about her.

Plus, wasn't she only spending so much time with me because it was her job?

So instead of pulling her into my arms and holding her close to me forever, I let my hand drop.

"So who do you send home this week?" She cleared her throat when the commercial break ended, her eyes turning to the screen as the spell we'd fallen under broke.

I forced a smile and tried not to get too mad at myself for not taking advantage of that moment.

"Just watch. You'll find out soon enough."

KATE

HAD DREW ALMOST KISSED ME? I wondered as I watched him and his date on the screen walk around London. From the way my heart had reacted, I certainly thought so.

It took the next five minutes for me to finally urge my pulse to a normal rate. And then, of course, every time I peeked a sideways glance at him sitting beside me it would skyrocket again.

This couldn't be good. I was supposed to be focusing on my career and my dreams. Not falling for the unobtainable guy from my past. I couldn't afford to risk another guy breaking my heart, especially not the one who'd broken it the first time.

Drew was just handing out his final roses on the TV when my phone started ringing.

When I saw my brother-in-law's name appear on the screen, I frowned. Jonas never called me.

"Hello?" I answered with a question in my voice.

"Kate! Thank goodness you answered." Jonas sounded out of breath. "We've been in an accident and we can't get ahold of your parents."

"What?" I sat up straight, my heart pounding in my temples.

An accident.

My vision blurred and memories of the last time I'd received a call like

this flashed through my mind.

"Is Lana okay? Are the boys okay?" I didn't even attempt to hide the panic in my voice. "Is the baby okay?"

In my peripheral vision, I noticed Drew go on high alert next to me.

Jonas's voice cut through the line again. "The boys are home with a babysitter. Lana and I are okay, but we have to take Lana to the hospital to make sure everything is okay with the baby."

I went limp with relief. This wasn't a repeat of last time. I hadn't lost another sibling. I drew in a deep breath, hoping it would calm me. "What do you need me to do?"

"Could you go to our house so the babysitter can go home? It might be a long night, and I need to focus on Lana. She's really worried about the baby."

"I'll head there now." I hung up and turned to Drew, my body shaking from the surge of anxiety. "I need to go." I stood and pushed my phone into my back pocket with a trembling hand.

Drew stood. "Wait, what's going on? You're shaking." He set his hands on my shoulders and studied me with concern etched in his eyes.

"Lana and Jonas were in an accident." I leaned into him, wrapping my arms around his torso. "I thought Jonas was calling to tell me Lana had died. It was like reliving the night of Aiden's crash all over again."

Drew's muscular chest rose and fell as he sucked in a breath. "I'm so sorry." He hugged me closer, rubbing my back. The motion had an amazingly calming effect. "Let me go with you. You're watching their boys, right?"

"Are you sure?" I didn't want to sound too hopeful, giving him a way out of his obligatory kind gesture, but I really could use his help. The boys were likely to be shaken up if their babysitter told them what was going on, which meant it would be harder than usual to get them to bed.

"I'm not exactly super busy tonight since my dinner guest is about to run out on me."

"Okay then." I stepped out of the hug so I could look at him. "Please

come."

"Want me to drive?"

"If you wouldn't mind, that would be great." I was so anxious I'd probably cause another accident.

"Not a problem. Follow me."

He led me out of the theater room, down a few halls to the other end of the house. He flicked on the light to the huge garage to reveal four different vehicles.

I held in a gasp. "How many cars do you need?" My gaze ran over the Lamborghini I'd seen him driving before, to the Cadillac Escalade, and then to another fancy sports car that I had no idea what it was, but boy was it hot!

"Is that your old truck from college?" I asked, pointing to the blue pickup in the back corner.

"It helps remind me of where I came from." He shrugged as he grabbed a set of keys from a hook on the wall. "It's also nice to drive around when I feel like blending in."

"That's really cool," I said, touched that he would be sentimental about his past.

"So, I'm thinking the Escalade might be the best option in case we need to transport your nephews anywhere, don't you think?" Drew twirled the key ring around his pointer finger.

"Probably. Though I wouldn't mind taking a ride in that thing sometime." I pointed to the flashy silver car parked in the center. It looked like it could go fast.

"The Aston Martin?" Drew grinned. "I think we can arrange that." He winked, and I almost forgot what we were doing.

Right. The boys!

About thirty minutes later, we finally made it to my sister's house. Drew paid the babysitter, and I helped my nephews get into their pajamas while Drew found their toothbrushes.

"But I don't want to brush my teeth. I'm tired," Decklan whined when I handed him his toothbrush.

"You need to do it, Decky. We don't want you to get cavities."

"I don't care about cavities." He crossed his arms. "I just wanna sleep."

"Hey, Decklan," Drew said, his voice much more enthusiastic than I had the energy for. *How did Lana and Jonas do this every night?* "Do you know the special tooth brushing song?"

"No."

"How about you just open your mouth, and I'll brush your teeth with the special song."

Decklan eyed me for reassurance that he could trust Drew not to do something weird.

I nodded my encouragement, hoping this would work so we could get the boys in bed soon. Just getting them in their pajamas had about used up all my energy.

Decklan slowly tipped his head back and opened his mouth wide.

Drew didn't hesitate to stick the toothbrush right in and get to work. He started singing to the tune of *Row, row, row your boat*, but with different words. "Brush, brush, brush your teeth, brush them till they're clean. Mom and Dad and Tayden and Kate want you to brush your teeth."

When Drew was done, Decklan was smiling and ready to climb into bed.

"I want a song." Tayden rubbed his eyes sleepily. "I want your friend to brush my teeth, too."

Drew smiled and took over toothbrushing duty, singing the same song but switching the names around. And I couldn't keep from smiling as Drew sang. It was too cute to see him be so sweet with the boys, even if he wasn't much of a singer.

It wasn't until after Drew had finished that he seemed to realize what he'd just done. He stood up tall, his cheeks redder than usual. "Uh, sorry you had to hear my singing."

"It was sweet," I said, hoping to reassure him. "And it worked, so if you have any other tricks in getting two boys to bed, feel free to impart your knowledge to me."

Drew rinsed and put away the toothbrushes. "My sister's kids could probably vouch for my bedtime storytelling ability...though I'm pretty sure this girl I know named Kate Dawson, who is a professional writer, could make up a story that would blow mine out of the water any day."

My cheeks heated. "I'm not a professional yet."

"Yet." He winked, and my knees went weak.

When I led Drew back to the boys' room on wobbly legs they were already settling in their race car beds.

"Can you tell us a story, Aunt Kate?" Decklan asked, his big brown eyes drooping with exhaustion.

"Sure." And so I launched into a story about two boys who went on a walk in the woods one day and ended up having the most wonderful adventures. "And when the boys made it home that night, safe and sound in their beds, they made sure to give their mom three squeezes so she would know how much they loved her."

And when I was finished, I stood from where I'd been sitting on the carpet against the wall. Drew had been sitting against the other wall the whole time, quietly listening to my story. I was just about to walk out the door when a tiny voice spoke in the dark room.

"Why'd they give three squeezes to their mommy?" Decklan asked, yawning.

How was he still awake? Tayden had zonked out almost as soon as he climbed in his bed.

I sat down on the edge of Decklan's bed. "Because three squeezes mean 'I love you.'" And to demonstrate, I squeezed his arm three times to show him, saying the words "I love you" with each squeeze.

It was something my mom had taught me when I was little.

Decklan reached for my hand and when he squeezed it three times, my heart filled with love for my sweet, often shy, nephew. I bent over to give Decklan a hug and a kiss on the forehead, saying, "I love you, Decklan. Sleep well."

Decklan smiled sleepily and snuggled deeper into his covers. "Night, night."

I found Drew waiting in the hall by the boys' door when I walked out.

"What do we do now?" Drew asked, leading me back to the living room. His eyes looked tired, but he seemed happy enough to keep me company even though it was so late.

I switched on the lamp by the recliner. "I guess we just hang out here. Or, actually, you can probably go home. I'm sure you have stuff early in the morning."

But Drew didn't move to leave. He just stood there in the dim light. "No, it's no problem. I'll stay and wait with you."

My insides warmed at the thought of him not being in a hurry to get back home.

Was it possible he liked spending time with me as much as I did with him? Because I was starting to crave it, and that was a precarious place to be, considering our past and my job.

I glanced around the room, looking for something to keep my hands occupied so my mind wouldn't dwell on the past and the what-might-have-beens if Aiden hadn't died that night. There were toys and books all over the living room, complimentary of those two rambunctious nephews of mine. I peeked into the kitchen to see the sink piled high with dirty dishes. Clearly Lana still wasn't feeling well; otherwise, the house would have been spotless.

"Would doing a little housework scare you away? I know you have a housekeeper and maids, but I'm sure coming home to a mess is about the last thing my sister needs right now."

"Hey." Drew shot me a fake offended look. "I'm not afraid to get my

hands dirty. In fact, I was tempted to start while you were putting the boys in their pajamas, but I realized I didn't know where anything went and I didn't want to make it worse, in case Lana alphabetized her children's books or something. I kind of remember her being anal retentive about things like that."

It was true. Drew had definitely witnessed his fair share of arguments between Lana and me when we were younger. Lana couldn't stand the mess I made in our room and had actually put a line of tape down the center to keep my clothes and things contained to my side.

We picked up the living room first, throwing the toys in the different bins I found tipped over in a corner beneath the window. As we tidied up, Drew filled me in on the rest of tonight's episode.

"Tonight's elimination was one of the longest ones we had all season because one of the girls, Haylee, fainted in the middle of it. They had to stop everything and wait for the ambulance to arrive...heightening the drama, of course."

"Of course." The show made the most of any dramatic moment they could.

"Meanwhile, I was just standing there sweating because Haylee was actually one of the girls I was planning to send home that night. Was I supposed to send her home still, even after she had fainted? It seemed like adding insult to injury. But in the end, I had to follow through. I couldn't let go of the other women yet."

I tossed a stuffed animal into a bin. "That's crazy."

"You know what's crazier? I found out later that she'd faked the whole thing just to get her last five minutes of fame since she knew I wasn't going to keep her."

"Some people." I shook my head, not believing the lengths some women would go through to get something they wanted. When the living room looked clean, we moved into the kitchen. "Do you want to rinse or stack in

the dishwasher?"

"I'll rinse."

"You sure? Rinsing other people's dirty dishes is gross." *How could he pick that one?*

He rolled his sleeves up to his elbows. "My mom always says that girls love a man with dishpan hands."

"Your mom is a smart woman." I gladly took the spot next to Drew and opened the dishwasher. Thankfully, it was empty.

"Do you think many other women were there for fame or your money?" I asked as I brought over the rest of the dirty dishes from the table.

Drew took them from me and set them on the counter since the sink was too full to add any more. "It was pretty obvious with quite a few, sadly. I think maybe half were hoping for a real connection with me while the rest were just there to have fun, or become famous." He sighed, and I felt bad for him. What was it like to be him? Never knowing why people wanted to get close. Always questioning if they just wanted something from him. "I'm still shocked I didn't pick up on any of that from Gwen. She had me fooled for months. I feel so stupid."

I put a hand on Drew's arm. "I totally understand. It happens to the best of us."

"Would you mind telling me more of what happened with Nolan?" Drew looked at me carefully as he handed me a plastic Batman plate. "Was it really just like night and day? One moment you thought everything was great, and then bam, you were married to a stranger?"

"I don't know." I paused, wondering if I could tell Drew the details of my private life—the details that only my family knew about.

I studied Drew, his tall frame and broad shoulders, able hands that washed the dishes for my sister. He was the kind of guy I should have married. The kind of guy who knew how to make a girl feel safe. A hardworking, honest man with good family values and a soft heart.

Why hadn't I realized I wanted his type, instead of the flashy and smooth-talking, sophisticated socialite that was Nolan Prosser?

"You don't have to tell me if you don't want to." Drew's eyes were apologetic, and he turned his gaze to the window above the sink.

"No, that's okay. I actually think I want to talk about it." I dropped the plate in the rack and sighed. "I guess in hindsight, there were signs that I should have noticed. Like, how when we were dating he slowly pulled me away from my friends." I shrugged. "I didn't mind at first. I mean, when you're dating, all you want to do is spend time with that person."

"Unless you're me after *Finding Your Soulmate*, that is," Drew joked.

"Which we'll just chalk up to your sixth sense." I grinned and took the cup he handed me. "Anyway, I should have noticed that whenever I had something planned with my friends, Nolan would suddenly have something come up or some big excuse to keep me back and spend more time with him. Just things like that eventually isolated me from everyone . . . and sadly, I didn't even realize I was being isolated."

I felt sick just thinking about that dark time in my life. I'd always thought I was such a strong and independent woman, and there I was, practically a hostage in my own home.

I shook away the memories, only to be assaulted with more. "Then there were the few times I asked to use his phone because I'd accidentally left mine at home, and he refused to let me dial the number myself. Like, he *never* let me touch his phone. He always dialed the number himself, pressed send, and then I had to hand it back as soon as I was done. I always thought he was just being sweet to dial the number for me, but now I know he was simply keeping me from seeing that he'd been messaging with a bunch of different girls."

"Was this just when you were married? Or back when you were engaged and dating?"

I looked down. "Pretty much the whole time we were together. I was *that*

delusional."

Drew shook his head. "You're not delusional, Kate. You just expected the guy you were with to be decent. That's not a bad requirement."

But I still felt stupid. Drew hadn't seen anything from Gwen because they'd spent such a small amount of time together.

I, on the other hand, had spent *years* with Nolan.

How blind could I be?

I took the bowl Drew handed me, needing to keep my hands busy again so I could finish my story. This next part made me feel the yuckiest inside. "Then there were times when he was away on business trips and his phone would just ring and ring, when I knew he wasn't in meetings. He always pretended that he forgot to take his phone off airplane mode, but now I'm sure he was just using his favorite affair service for the weekend."

"He had an affair service?" Shock and anger registered on Drew's face.

"I didn't even know those existed until I found out." And it had been so humiliating when I had to go to the doctor and get tested for STDs because of it.

Drew stopped his scrubbing and leaned his hands on the counter. "Do I have your permission to punch Nolan if I ever run into him?" he asked. There was something primal and protective in his eyes that made my stomach constrict.

I liked that he wanted to protect me.

But instead of saying that, I said, "Only if I get to slap him first."

"Did he ever hurt you?" The look in his blue eyes was intense when he asked that, like he might just come apart if I said Nolan had hurt me.

"He never physically abused me, no," I said to put his fears at ease. "But there was a lot of verbal and emotional abuse."

His jaw flexed, like he was fighting the urge to go out and find Nolan right now. But he seemed to calm down momentarily. After a moment, he dried his hands on the turquoise dish towel and turned toward me. "Is it okay

if I give you a hug? I kind of hate the thought of you going through that."

I nodded, unable to form a verbal response to his unexpected offer.

He stepped closer and pulled me against him. I sighed and relaxed against his chest, breathing in his clean scent.

How had he known I needed his arms around me before I even knew myself? It was like he always knew just what I needed.

He spoke into my hair. "I'm so thankful you got out of that marriage as quickly as you did. It couldn't have been easy."

I bit my lip and nodded. "Thanks for not judging me. Especially after I lied about it at first."

"You'll never have to worry about that with me," he whispered.

But could that really be true?

Could the guy who only wanted to get engaged once really not care that I was married and divorced within a few months of each other? I never would have believed it if I hadn't heard the sincerity in his voice with my own ears.

Even though I wanted to stay close to him forever, I pulled away and tucked some hair behind my ear.

"Enough about me." I cleared my throat, needing a lighthearted moment with him after the heavy one. "What are you going to do now that you're officially, if not secretly, single again? Gonna take another shot at a reality dating show?"

Drew laughed, like him going on a reality dating show was the most farfetched idea ever. "I'm actually hoping to be out of that world in a few months. If it didn't work for me once, I'm not going to try it again."

"What about that fancy dating app of yours? Think you'll give that a shot?" I arched an eyebrow.

"Um, nope."

"Afraid no one would swipe right?" I teased. Because there was about zero chance of that happening. He'd probably break the system with all the right swipes he'd receive.

"Not really my style, coincidentally enough."

"Weird." I smiled.

"I'm actually just hoping to get back to real life once this is all over with. And as for finding the future Mrs. Burrows . . ." He shrugged. "I'm hoping destiny will finally decide to help me out."

"YOU SURE YOU don't mind waiting for them to get back?" Kate asked me after we'd finished the dishes.

I was tired, but I couldn't bring myself to go home just yet. I didn't want the evening with Kate to end. "Have they texted you?"

Kate pulled her phone out of her back pocket. "They did." She unlocked the screen and read the text. "Jonas says the baby is looking fine so far. The doctors just want to monitor them for another hour or so."

I checked the time on my watch. "It's after midnight, but I'm okay to wait another hour." If I was tired the next day at work, it would be worth it.

"Wanna watch a movie then?"

"Sure."

Kate led me back into the living room and we both sank down onto the big couch. There was a huge ottoman pushed right against it, and I couldn't help but think it might be a nice spot to doze off on.

We picked the latest Justin Banks movie and got comfy, but it wasn't long before my eyelids got heavy. I shifted on the couch to get even more comfortable. Kate was just inches away, her legs stretched out on the ottoman. When she glanced at me, her eyes were sleepy too.

The movie was okay, but it was only a matter of minutes before I drifted off into a deep sleep.

"You got all the supplies?" Aiden opened the oak door to his parents' house, a huge smile on his permanently tanned face.

Of course he would wait until Spring Break of our last year of college to finally promise an actual all-nighter.

I held up the grocery sack filled with energy drinks. "No more pansy soda and hot chocolate. I got the hard stuff this time."

Aiden shook his head and led the way to the family room in the back of the house.

"Hey, Drew." Kate peeked her head around the corner when she heard us walking through the kitchen. "How much do you wanna bet Aiden conks out before dawn?"

I held up the grocery sack. "It's not gonna happen. I got the real deal this time, and I'll feed it to him with an IV if I have to."

Kate smiled and stepped beside me, and we continued to the family room together, arguing over whether it would really work this time. I tried to stand up for Aiden, but Kate did have a point. Nothing had seemed to work in the past. Why would this night be any different?

Aiden was already centering the gaming chairs in the middle of the room when we stepped inside.

"Gonna spy on another guys' night?" Aiden asked Kate as he plopped down in his chair.

"Believe it or not," Kate said, "I'm busy tonight. So no, I'm sorry I won't be able to cheer on your gaming." She ruffed up Aiden's blond hair before plopping herself down on the couch. "I'm just here for the peanut butter cups that I know Drew bought for me."

Was I really that predictable?

I hid the bag behind my back, though I knew it was pointless. Kate could charm me out of anything. All she had to do was look at me with those bright

blue eyes of hers, flutter her long eyelashes, and I would do anything she asked. Part of me wondered if she knew just how much control she had over me...she probably did.

Aiden certainly had noticed. And then lectured me about it.

Yes, I knew logically that I shouldn't notice Kate, who was still just a senior in high school...three years younger than I was. But I couldn't not notice her. She was gorgeous, and her outgoing, carefree personality was captivating to my more reserved self.

I was pretty sure she'd been flirting with me for months, and it was totally killing my self-control since she seemed to always get dressed up even more when I hung out at her family's house.

But I needed to keep that self-control, or Aiden would beat me up. At least, that's what he threatened whenever he caught me smiling stupidly at his sister.

It was so wrong. Wanting to make-out with my best friend's sister. So, so wrong.

But also, so tempting.

When Kate realized holding her hand out passively for the candy wasn't going to do the trick, she lifted herself off the couch and marched over to where I stood with the candy still behind my back.

"Come on, Drew." She looked up at me expectantly, her hand open in a 'gimme' gesture. "I know you always buy an extra when you come here."

And just like that, I was opening the bag for her and saying, "Fine, just take one though."

I was so helpless when it came to this girl.

Kate grabbed an orange-wrapped candy. "Thanks Drew, you're the best." And before I knew what was happening, she was kissing me on the cheek before she left the room.

I stood frozen in my place for a moment, heat snaking up my neck. Then I finally set the bag on the ground between Aiden and I, and took my seat, all

while trying not to notice the way Aiden scowled at the interaction.

Aiden pointed a long finger at me. "Remember, you touch her before she's graduated and I'll beat you up."

I gulped and grabbed the controller beside my chair. "Thanks for the reminder."

But really, if Aiden was that determined for me to avoid his sister, he should probably have a talk with her instead. She was the one being so gorgeous and amazing all the time, not me.

The hours of video games passed quickly, and the energy drinks seemed to be working because at one o'clock, Aiden was still going strong.

"Do you wanna take a break for a minute?" Aiden stood and stretched after another round of Halo.

"Sure." I stood as well, lifting my arms up and out and cracking my back. "What do you want to do?"

"Wanna run a few laps around the cul-de-sac? I don't know what's in those drinks you bought, but I feel like I could run a marathon."

Kate was just walking in the front door, her hair a lot curlier and her make-up a lot bolder than it had been earlier.

And yep, my heart started racing just at the sight of her in the short dress she was wearing.

Had she gone to a school dance and danced with a bunch of guys tonight?

Had any of them tried to kiss her?

Had she let them?

The thought of any of those things happening made me clench my jaw.

She's too young for you . . .

Too bad she didn't look too young for me right now. She looked just right.

So right that if Aiden wasn't standing right next to me right now, I might be tempted to cage her against the wall and break her brother's number one rule.

"Where have you been?" Aiden's voice brought me back from my less

than innocent thoughts. "Isn't it past your curfew?"

"I was at Sarah's big eighteenth birthday party." Kate set her purse on the knob at the end of the banister and started unzipping her jacket. "Mom said I could stay out, so don't even try to get me in trouble."

"I wasn't gonna tell, we're actually headed out now."

"What are you guys doing?" Kate looked to Aiden then to me. And when our eyes met, a bolt of electricity raced through my system.

I cleared my throat. "Aiden wanted to run a few laps around the neighborhood, but I ate way too much crap to be running anytime soon." I shrugged, my hands in my pockets. "I'll probably just watch him."

And probably open up my calendar app to count how many days are left until you graduate and I can finally ask you out.

Kate zipped her jacket back up. "I'll keep you company. We can make fun of Aiden's sloppy running together."

And I hated that I liked the idea of her joining us so much.

We all headed outside, and Kate and I sat on the curb while Aiden ran from one end of the cul-de-sac to the other.

"You do realize he's going to burn off all that energy, don't you?" Kate said as we watched her brother. Aiden had stopped jogging back and forth, and was now entertaining us with badly executed cartwheels and goofy leaps, finally ending his performance by skipping around the circle, his arms flailing out to the side like a dork.

I chuckled as I watched my friend and his antics. "That's okay. I rented Not A Lucky Charm from Redbox. He won't be able to fall asleep after watching the opening scene."

Kate grinned. "You are so mean."

"More like desperate. We've been attempting an all-nighter for ten years, and he still hasn't made it."

"Well, I'll come watch it too then. That way I get to witness this once-in-a-lifetime feat."

Why did the movie suddenly sound infinitely more exciting all of a sudden?

I cleared my throat and tried to appear unfazed by the idea of watching a movie with her. "Maybe we should film the amazing accomplishment, so we can be sure it actually happened."

"I'll have my phone ready." Kate smiled.

A few minutes later it started to sprinkle. Kate and I stood to go inside before the clouds started dumping on us. Aiden did a few jumping jacks before finally walking back to the house.

Kate offered to pop some popcorn in the microwave before joining Aiden and me on the couch. I sat in one corner, and Aiden—ever the chaperone—sat in the middle so Kate had no choice but to settle onto the other end.

But while the reviews had claimed the movie would keep viewers on the edge of their seats, and scared awake all night, it did not deliver. Aiden was soon on the floor, claiming he was just stretching out, but his snoring soon gave away that he had indeed fallen asleep.

"He's such a kid when it comes to sleep." Kate nudged Aiden with her foot, but he didn't stir one bit.

I smiled at Kate. "I know I should be annoyed that it's impossible for him to stay up past two, but it's kind of nice that even though everything else may change in life, Aiden will still turn into a zombie each night."

"We should warn his future wife before they have any kids. He'll be no help at night."

I laughed, imagining Aiden's future wife shaking him awake to grab the crying baby, and Aiden just turning over to his side unable to hear a thing.

Kate poked Aiden with her foot again, testing how deep in sleep he really was.

Still nothing.

With a satisfied smirk, she turned back to me and asked, "Are you comfortable? It's a little chilly tonight."

And because it was the right thing to say, I said, "I'm okay. Not that cold."

But almost as if Kate could read my thoughts and interpreted what I'd really wanted to say, she grabbed a big quilt from the stack of blankets in the corner of the room and sat next to me, draping it across our legs.

"That should be better." Her pink lips quirked up into a smile and her eyes sparkled with amusement.

She was doing it again.

I took in a deep breath to try and relax, but it was impossible for me to think when she was that close.

Did she have any idea how fast my heart was beating?

We continued to watch the movie, and I didn't even care anymore that it was ridiculous, or that there was still an hour left before the stupidity would end, because being so close to Kate was worth every second. I wanted to soak it all in since who knew when we'd get to sit this close again?

But since I was still very aware that her protective older brother was only a few feet away, I did my best to act the part of a gentleman and kept my hands prudently in my lap instead of attempting to hold her hand or put my arm around her.

"What do you think of the movie so far?" Kate whispered as the guy on the screen pulled his 'lucky' wristband onto his forearm.

I shrugged. "It's okay. Not the hit I'd hoped for, obviously." I nodded pointedly at Aiden.

"I actually think it's perfect." Kate leaned her head against my shoulder, and I tried not to have a heart attack.

What was it about this girl that made me so nervous and anxious? I was twenty-one, she was eighteen. I should have been the cool one, but my chest was full of bouncy balls banging around so fast and hard I didn't know how to catch my breath when she was around.

She reached for my hand where it sat on the quilt. And I knew I should

make an excuse to stand up or leave, but instead of doing the right thing, I slowly curled my fingers around hers. My thoughts ran a thousand miles a minute as I tried to concentrate on the movie. Aiden was going to ask me how it ended, and I was going to have to make something up because my mind was so focused on the way Kate was drawing lines all over the back of my hand and forearm.

She was insufferable.

She was gorgeous.

She was lifting my arm and tucking herself under it, cuddling up next to me and watching me with those eyes that seemed to always see through me.

"I just want to know what it's like to be close to you," she said. "I've always wondered how it would feel."

I swallowed hard. "And how is it?"

She leaned against me and turned her gaze back toward the movie. "It's nice. Don't you think?"

I shifted on the couch to make us more comfortable. Kate rested her head more fully against my chest and sighed contentedly.

"It is nice," I said softly.

We watched the movie like that for a while, and I couldn't help but wish the movie would go on forever. It was so hard to think of Kate as being too young for me, because in my arms right then she didn't feel too young. She felt like a grown woman.

A woman who had slowly snatched my heart through the years.

Aiden had always given me a hard time for being so willing to help Kate with her films, but I never minded. I was impressed with her ambition and talent. None of the other girls I'd dated seemed to know what they wanted to do with their lives, but this eighteen-year-old had been chasing after her dreams for years. She was smart and talented and beautiful. She had everything I'd ever looked for in a girlfriend . . . just not the right amount of years.

At least that's what Aiden thought.

Kate had been quiet for a while, her breathing slow. Had she fallen asleep?

I looked down to check, but her eyes were still open. She must have noticed me looking at her because she tilted her face up. And when our eyes met, I was hyper aware that her lips were only inches away from mine, her breath warm on my face.

I looked down at her soft lips which were slightly parted. Her gaze seemed to do the same.

Just the slight dip of my head and I could know, instead of simply wonder, what she tasted like.

She was just right there.

Her gaze lifted from my mouth to my eyes, and in a voice so quiet she murmured, "You want to know something else I've always wondered about?"

"What?" My chest was tight, and I could barely draw in a breath.

"I've always wondered what it would feel like to kiss Drew Burrows."

My whole body instantly went weak.

She lifted her head and moved her face so her nose brushed against mine. And my heart doubled its speed.

"Kiss me," she whispered, her face so vulnerable yet strong at the same time.

And I melted.

Molten lava seemed to pour out all over my body, and before I could stop myself, I was tilting my head down and kissing her. Kissing those soft lips that had taunted me one too many times.

I meant to only kiss her for a second, just to see if she tasted as good as I'd always imagined. But one kiss led to another, and another, until I could no longer tell where one kiss started and the other ended.

I WAS glad I'd woken from my dream just in time. I didn't want to relive what happened next. Kate's blonde hair tickled my nose, bringing me back to where I was. I was lying on Lana's sofa with Kate nestled against me. We must have fallen asleep.

I lifted my head to see if she was still sleeping. Her eyes were closed, her expression peaceful. It was a beautiful look, one without the worries or stresses of everyday life. How had we ended up spooning? We hadn't been that way when I'd fallen asleep. But I wasn't complaining. She felt so nice against me.

"See, I told you he was Kate's new boyfriend." A young voice came out of nowhere, startling me so badly I almost had a heart attack.

Standing just a couple feet away were two little boys in matching pajamas.

"H-how long have you guys been awake?" I whispered as I untangled myself from Kate and scooted to a sitting position on the next cushion.

"We just woke up," Tayden said. "Mommy and Daddy are still sleeping, but we wants breakfast."

How deeply had I slept? I hadn't even heard Jonas and Lana come home.
Had they seen Kate and me cuddling as we slept?

"What do you usually eat for breakfast?" I asked, deciding I might as well

make myself useful.

"Cereal," Decklan said.

Well, I could definitely manage pouring the boys a bowl of cereal. "Let's go into the kitchen and see what we can find."

I opened the pantry doors, searching for a cereal box. But there was none in sight.

"Where does your mom keep the cereal?" I turned back to the boys, who were standing at my heels.

Decklan shrugged. "They went to the store last night before the car crashed."

Which meant the cereal probably never made it home.

"Do you think your mom would mind if I went and bought some breakfast for everyone?"

The boys' eyes brightened. "Like McDonald's?"

I laughed. Of course they'd want McDonald's. That was like the happiest place on earth to everyone under the age of ten.

I hunkered down to be on the boys' eye level. "And what do you like to get from McDonald's?"

"Happy meals!" Tayden shouted and jumped, his face showing pure excitement.

"You can't have a happy meal for breakfast." Decklan crossed his arms.

"Pancakes?" Tayden said, more unsure about his answer this time around.

I couldn't help but smile. These boys were adorable. "Pancakes sound like a great choice." I turned my gaze to Decklan. "What about you?"

Decklan pushed out his lips and tapped his chin as he thought about it.

Tayden started wiggling in his spot, becoming impatient for his brother's answer. "Hurry up, Deckwan. I hungry."

"Okay, can I have pancakes, too?"

"Of course." Then smoothing my expression into a more serious one I asked, "Can you two do something for me though?"

Both boys nodded their heads vigorously.

"Can you look at books or play quietly in your room while I go out to get your breakfast? Your mommy and daddy and Aunt Kate are really tired, and we want to let them sleep while I go on my secret mission to find breakfast."

"A secret mission?" Decklan asked, his voice full of wonder and awe at the thought.

"Yes, a secret breakfast mission. We want to surprise them."

"I can read to Tayden in our room. I already know how to read."

"Perfect." I stood and ruffled the boys' hair. "Grab some books and go to your room. I'll be back soon."

The two scampered away, and when I turned around I found Kate sitting up on the couch quietly watching my exchange with the boys.

My cheeks heated. "Um, I guess I can take your order too, since you're awake."

She smiled back at me. Could she possibly like guys who made super-secret McDonald's runs for little boys?

I hoped it might earn me brownie points at least.

"I'd love a Sausage Egg McMuffin and orange juice," she said.

"Great," I said. "I'll be back soon." And before I could entertain any crazy thoughts of Kate and I having more mornings like this in the future, I headed out the door.

About twenty minutes later, I was back at the house carrying four bags with a variety of breakfast foods in them. I had no idea what Jonas and Lana would want, so I'd just grabbed a little of everything.

I dropped the food onto the kitchen table.

"Thanks for doing this." Kate joined me in the kitchen. "You didn't have to."

I shrugged. "It was fun. I love kids."

"And I'm pretty sure my nephews are going to love you after they see this." Kate smiled as she dug into a bag and pulled out her breakfast.

I handed her the orange juice, my fingers warming as they brushed hers in the exchange.

Our gazes locked for a moment before Kate checked the time on the clock. "I'm supposed to be at work in an hour. Would you mind taking me home to shower first?"

I swallowed, my face heating up.

Kate's eyes widened with shock. "I mean, so *I* can shower first. Not you and me. Not...together." She covered her eyes with her hand. "Ah, this is embarrassing."

I laughed, loving how flustered she was. "I do need a shower." I winked.

She smacked my arm. "Not funny."

I rubbed the spot where she'd hit me. "It kind of was, though. You should have seen how dark your cheeks got. Red is definitely your color."

She rolled her eyes. "Whatever."

I cleared my throat, having had my fun. "Showering aside, I can take you home. Do you think the boys will be fine?"

"I called my mom while you were gone. She should be here soon." The flush seemed to be leaving Kate's cheeks, which was too bad. The blush really did look beautiful on her.

We got the boys settled at the table with their pancakes and orange juice and once Kate's mom arrived, we left.

"Thank you so much for everything you did last night and this morning," Kate said when we pulled up to her apartment complex. "I can't believe we fell asleep."

My heart pulsed at her mention of falling asleep, which brought up the memory of the dream from last night and the way we'd been cuddled up with each other this morning. Did Kate even know we'd been spooning?

And if she did, what did she think of it?

I decided not to say anything about it, just in case it made her feel awkward. I'd been the one dreaming about that kiss after all, not her.

"We were understandably tired. But I'm glad I could be there for you guys. My sister moved to Arizona a few years ago, so I've missed being around little kids so much. They have a magic that you can't find around adults."

Kate unbuckled her seatbelt. "They're pretty fun. That Tayden though, he'll give you a run for your money."

After we said our goodbyes, I drove home, thinking about how differently my night had gone from what I'd expected.

Taking care of those little boys with Kate had almost been like living in a different kind of reality. It was the kind of night I'd been hoping to have soon, if everything had turned out the way I'd wanted in my dating life.

I was twenty-eight, almost twenty-nine. I had wanted to be married by this age. Yes, I knew I was still young and that so many people were much older before they wanted a wife and kids. But I was different. I'd wanted those things for a few years, actually.

I'd just never been able to move on from a certain little sister of Aiden's.

As I steered down the private drive to my home, my mind started formulating a plan for how to get Kate to see me differently.

For the past eighteen years, she'd only ever seen me as her older brother's best friend. It was finally time for me to stop holding back and worrying about what everyone would think. To stop being scared of what Aiden would say if he was around.

It was time for me to finally get what I wanted and live life more boldly.

Step one of my plan was to get Kate to be open to the idea of dating and falling in love again. If she wasn't ready to put herself out there, there was no way I'd convince her to go on a date with anyone, let alone me.

The next day, following step one of my plan, I sent flowers to Kate at work.

The flowers would appear to be from her secret admirer. I used one of the prepaid credit cards I'd gotten at the grocery store a while back, so no one could trace it back to me, since I was supposed to be engaged, as far as everyone out in the world was concerned.

I knew it was corny, but I hoped the flowers would help brighten her day at least. I had to go into the studio to meet with Alexis before she left on her quick trip to Colorado, so I made a point to walk past Kate's desk. Front and center were a dozen roses with a card leaning against the vase.

Who are the flowers from? I practiced saying in my head. I knew my acting skills were crap, so I'd actually been practicing this conversation all morning . . . hoping I'd come off as nonchalant.

I cleared my throat and approached her desk. "Are those your flowers?" I asked, cringing when I realized I hadn't even said my own practiced lines right. Did I even have a chance at making it through this conversation without blowing my cover?

Probably not.

I should just run away now.

"I guess so. They have my name on them anyway." Kate's grin was brilliant. "Are you surprised I got flowers?"

"Of course not. You probably always get them." Was that too obvious?

"Actually, not really," she said with a sigh.

"Who are they from?" I dared ask.

"I'm not sure," she said with a shrug. "Apparently, I have a secret admirer."

I raised my eyebrows, hoping to look surprised. "Really? I wonder who it could be."

"I have no idea." Then alarm suddenly clouded her expression. "I hope it's not someone creepy."

Oh no. Please don't go there.

"What does the card say? Does it sound creepy?"

I thought for sure the florist had it down right when she read it back to me.

Kate grabbed the card, opened it, and read, "*Kate, I hope these flowers bring a smile to your face as much as you bring a smile to mine.*"

"That doesn't sound creepy at all," I hurried to say before her mind could twist it into anything stalker-esque. The last thing I needed was for her to have anxiety over the flowers I sent her. "Do you have any idea of who your secret admirer might be?"

She pursed her lips in a thoughtful way and glanced around the room at the various people. "Do you think someone figured out I'm not really married? I still haven't told anyone. My family and co-workers are the only people who know I work here."

Oops. I hadn't thought about that.

And the fact that she didn't seem to think it was me wasn't a very reassuring thought either.

Who did she *want* the flowers to be from?

"You haven't been wearing your ring to work. So maybe they all know now and just didn't say anything."

She shrugged. "Well, if that's the case, I guess I won't have to worry about Alexis firing me for being a single girl working with her newly single bachelor."

Yeah, we probably shouldn't mention that to her right about now. Alexis would totally pick up on my feelings for Kate if she knew Kate was single and available to be on my radar.

I looked around the room to get the focus off me. "What about Oliver? When we were doing pickups the other day he commented on how nice you looked with glasses."

She blushed. "He did?"

Oh crap! I thought Oliver would be a good choice since he had about zero creep factor, but I hadn't considered the fact that Oliver was actually

really cool and would probably be someone Kate would like.

I searched for someone else in the room who might deflect her interest from Oliver. "Or it could be Joe. He's cool, and you've spent some time together, too."

She seemed to study Joe for a moment, looking thoughtful. "Joe's cool. But I think I remember him saying something about his girlfriend. I doubt it was him, at least I hope not. I'd hate to be the person on the other end of someone else's breakup."

Maybe sending flowers hadn't been such a great idea.

"Whoever it was though, it was nice." Kate set the card back against the vase and smiled. "I haven't gotten flowers since who knows when. I've been worried I might never get asked out again once everyone finds out that my marriage failed in just one month."

"That's simply not possible." I shook my head. "I'm pretty sure that if anyone ever hesitated asking you out, it was only because they worried they would never be good enough for you. Maybe that's why Anonymous Flower Guy decided to stay anonymous for now."

She gave a noncommittal shrug. "Maybe."

WAS Drew acting weird about the flowers? Or was my mind just reading into things?

He didn't seem quite his normal self at least. Could he possibly be jealous that someone had sent me flowers? The thought that he would care made my chest swell. Drew being jealous of something like that would kind of be a dream come true.

Though the anonymous flower guy probably wouldn't like it.

I checked the time on the wall. It was almost time for me to get Alexis her lunch.

I'd been avoiding Alexis all day, worried she might have already started reading my screenplay and hated it. But I couldn't avoid her any longer. So I gathered all my courage and messaged Alexis about what she wanted for lunch.

Then I cowered and waited, hoping Alexis wasn't about to respond with, *I'd love a club sandwich from the bistro next door, and also, I read your screenplay and you should never write anything ever again.*

Alexis didn't respond right away, so I tried to find something else to occupy my mind and convince my pulse to go back down to normal. I was in the middle of a breathing exercise when Dion stopped by my desk, wearing a light blue button-up with a plaid blue tie. I worked hard to keep my dislike

from showing on my face when I turned to him.

How could he sleep at night after having messed with Drew's life so much? It was wrong on so many levels. Drew had been serious about finding his future wife on the show, and Dion and Gwen had sabotaged him because of their greed.

So much for my calming technique. My blood was boiling just barely under the surface now.

"How can I help you?" I asked.

Dion pushed his phone in his back pocket. *He was probably texting Gwen about the dream house they were going to buy in the Bahamas.*

"I just found out from Alexis that she wants Drew and Gwen to have a weekend getaway this week, but I don't have time to book Gwen's flight. Could you get that taken care of?"

"Sure." I grabbed a pen and pad to jot down the information. "What airport does she usually fly out of?"

"Detroit Metropolitan."

I scribbled the name down.

"Okay, sounds good." I clicked the lid of my pen. "Is there anything else?"

Dion pulled his phone out of his pocket and glanced at the screen. "That should be it. Just pick a flight that lands in LAX sometime that afternoon. I can pick her up any time after two."

"Will do."

And I'll make sure to get her a seat right by the restroom.

This trip was about revenge after all.

He turned and left just as my computer pinged with a message.

Alexis: I'd like my usual from Chick-fil-A. But first I need to talk to you in my office.

My throat constricted when I read the message. What did Alexis need to talk about?

Please let it be about work and not about the email.

I told Alexis I'd be there in a minute, finished purchasing Gwen's plane ticket, and took some more deep breaths.

"Please shut the door," Alexis said when I stepped into her office.

I shut it with sweaty hands and took the chair closest to the door in case I needed to make a swift exit. Alexis finished typing a few notes on her laptop before talking.

Just do it quickly, I thought, mentally preparing myself for the blow.

"I have a secret mission for you," Alexis said in a low voice. "I thought I'd have time to run over to this week's safe house before Friday, but my schedule is packed."

I nodded, only just realizing Alexis hadn't called me in to talk about my screenplay after all.

"I grabbed a few hidden cameras out of the equipment area." She gestured to the different objects on the table: a Dodgers baseball cap, a smoke detector, and a plant.

"Those are cameras? They look like regular things you'd find in a house."

"That's the idea. The cameras are hidden in them." She picked up the plant and separated a few of the leaves to show the tiny camera lens secured inside. "Anyway, what I need you to do is to go over to the house today and put these in places where you think we'll be able to get the most footage that we need."

"But not in the bedroom, right?" I asked, just to make sure.

"Yes." She nodded. "I refuse to be that show and invade their privacy to that degree." She pulled a Ziploc bag with a few tiny electronic-type things out of her purse. "These are the bugs. Put one on the couch, another under the table, and the other wherever it looks like it would catch the most action."

I took the bag from Alexis, a nervous ball clenching in my stomach.

"Do you want me to do that now? Or would you like me to grab your lunch first?"

She waved her hand. "I'll just grab myself a salad today. Don't worry about me. In fact, just head over there now. Call me before you leave the house so I can check everything, and then you can take the rest of the day and tomorrow off since you'll need to work this weekend."

I gathered the rest of the things from Alexis's desk, putting them in the fabric shopping bag on the floor. "I'll get this done right away." Who knew detective work was in my job description?

I stood and said goodbye to Alexis. Before I was out the door, however, Alexis spoke.

"Oh, and I got your email. I downloaded it to my phone and I'm excited to go over it on Friday."

I turned back, suddenly flustered. "I-I hope you enjoy it."

"Me too. It sounds like it's right up my alley."

I guarded the bag Alexis had given me the whole way out of the studio, worried someone would see what was inside and figure out what I was up to.

I climbed into my car, setting the bag very carefully on the floor of the passenger side, and then called Drew.

"What's up?" Drew's voice came through my earpiece.

"I'm heading over to the safe house to hide all the hidden cameras and bugs. Can you tell me where a good place would be to put a baseball cap?"

Drew chuckled. "How about I just tag along and help you out?"

"You don't have to work today?"

"Nope. Taking those months off to film the show helped me learn to delegate a lot better. My schedule is free this afternoon."

"That would be awesome." I sighed with relief. "I'm way out of my element here."

"You mean you don't usually break into people's houses and place strange

objects around it to spy on them? I thought you were a part of the CIA."

"Remember how you already debunked that claim? Clearly this is my first time. Are you home?"

"Yeah, wanna pick me up on your way?"

"See you in fifteen minutes."

I grabbed my sandwich from my messenger bag and ate it on my way to Drew's, my navigation app angry at each wrong turn since I was deviating from the route to the new safe house. When I arrived, I punched in the code to his gate and drove in. He must have been watching from the window, because as soon as I pulled up, he came jogging out wearing a hoodie and sunglasses.

"Here, put these on." Drew handed me a pair of sunglasses and placed a baseball cap on my head.

"Is that really necessary?" I asked.

"Sadly, yes. The paparazzi somehow found out where I live, and they've been camping at my house all day. It's ridiculous."

And sure enough, when I drove back out the gates there was a middle-aged guy with curly gray hair and a beard hiding behind a bush in front of the house next door.

"Hurry, before he snaps a pic." Drew hunched over, as if trying to fold himself in half.

As we pulled onto the road, a silver car that had been parked outside Drew's place pulled in the lane right behind us.

"Is it just me, or is that car following us?" I asked, watching the vehicle in the rearview mirror.

Drew sat up and looked over his shoulder. "I'm pretty sure he followed me home from the studio today. If I'd been thinking, I wouldn't have gone home." He pinched his lips together and bobbed his head forward, muttering about how he should have driven his truck instead of the Lamborghini.

"I probably need to get him off our tail, don't I?"

"Yeah, it would definitely be a bad idea to tip him off to the safe house. That would ruin the show's entire ending if they saw Gwen showing up there."

I merged into the left lane and took the next left, making the navigation app mad again. But the silver car had no trouble following us so I took the next left as well.

Still, the car remained on our trail.

I grimaced, resisting the urge to slam on my brakes and have the guy rear-end us. Damaging his car would probably help get him off our tail, but I'd probably get fired for endangering Drew's life.

I took turn after turn, went this way and that, driving in circles and zig-zagging through all of Burbank. Then finally, after three quick rights and an even quicker left, followed by a little speeding, we lost the guy.

"Remind me to never pick you up at your house again," I said as we finally headed in the right direction.

"Remind me to never go home again."

Fifteen minutes later, we were hiding the cameras and bugs in the safe house. Drew put the plant up above the cupboards in the kitchen while I checked the app on my phone connected to the lens to make sure it was in the right place.

"Can you move it just a few inches to the right?" I asked. The image on the screen shifted until it caught the whole room. "Right there."

Drew stepped down from the chair he'd been using and scooted it back under the table. "Where do you think we should put the last bug?" he asked, pulling the tiny device out of the bag.

I chewed on my lip, looking around the house. We'd already planted one under the table, another under the arm of the leather sofa. "Let's put it in the hall by the bedroom. They'll probably be walking back there too." I hated the

thought of how Drew probably felt about this whole thing.

Drew hid the bug behind one of the art pieces in the hall, a painting of a couple walking hand in hand by a pond.

"Sorry you have to deal with this," I said as I watched him. "But I really appreciate you coming. It would have taken me forever to get everything set up and adjusted myself."

"No problem." He turned back to me with a smile, like he really didn't mind spending the afternoon bugging a house to catch his ex-girlfriend cheating on him.

"But it has to suck, right? Knowing what's going to happen here?"

Drew shrugged and leaned against the wall. "It's actually okay. I was shocked and hurt when I first found out. But things never would have worked out between me and Gwen. I'd been worried the whole time I'd never get there with her."

"'Get there'?" I looked up at him. "What do you mean by that?"

He stuck his thumbs in his belt loops and pushed the tips of his fingers in his front pockets. I loved how even though he was a fancy billionaire now, he looked just as good in blue jeans as he did in an expensive suit.

"I don't know. I just . . ." He sighed. "I wasn't anywhere close to being ready to get down on one knee. I couldn't even tell her that I loved her."

"You never told her that?" My eyes widened.

He'd been thinking about proposing when he couldn't even say those three words to Gwen?

Drew looked at the carpet before meeting my gaze. "I never felt it." He paused, seeming to debate whether to say what was on his mind. "I— Actually, I don't say those words very often."

He didn't?

"What exactly does that mean?" I couldn't help but ask. "Like, how many girls have you said that to?"

He scrubbed a hand over his face, clearly uncomfortable. I felt bad for

asking him such a personal question. I was just about to tell him it was none of my business when he sighed and said, "Only my mom . . . and that's usually when she says it first." He pushed himself off the wall and walked down the hall toward the living room.

Had I just embarrassed him with my questions?

Drew had never been the boisterous outspoken guy, but I had no idea he was this guarded with his affection.

Was Drew scared to tell people his true feelings? Could Drew be just as afraid of rejection as I was now?

I began to wonder if his shyness might have factored into what had happened between us—or rather, what *hadn't* happened—but I chased the thought away as I went after him.

"Hey," I said, touching his arm when I found him in the living room.

Drew turned and looked at my hand on his arm before gazing at me with those deep blue eyes of his—eyes that showed a vulnerability I'd never noticed before.

"Sorry I'm so nosy."

"It's fine. It's time I started being more open. Obviously, showing my feelings isn't my strong suit."

I let my hand drop. "There's something to be said about using a little caution though. I certainly could have used a bit more about this time last year."

"You live and you learn." He smiled, and I knew he understood that I was referring to my haphazard marriage to Nolan.

"Anyway," I said, pulling my phone out. "I'm going to call Alexis to see if there's anything else we need to do while we're here. I'm guessing she'll want to test the bugs remotely."

"Done already?" Alexis said after picking up the phone a moment later.

"Drew offered to help." I met Drew's eyes.

"That's actually perfect. I want to test everything out. Could you guys do

a few things for me?"

"Sure." Though I wondered what kinds of things Alexis had in mind.

"Let me get my computer up first to check out the cameras to see what we have to work with." The line went quiet for a moment before Alexis came back. "Okay, I can see you guys. Wave." Her voice was so bright and cheery. "Okay, I'm going to ask you guys to do a few things just so I can make sure I'm set up to catch what we need."

"Whatever you need," I spoke into my phone.

"We'll just run through a few possible scenarios between Dion and Gwen." Her voice soured on those names. "Are you guys open to doing that?"

What would she ask us to do? I glanced at Drew cautiously, worried about his reaction, but he didn't seem worried. Then I realized he probably couldn't even hear Alexis well enough to know what she was talking about.

"Put me on speaker so both of you can hear me," Alexis instructed.

I did as she asked.

Then Alexis had us go to the door that led to the garage. "Okay, so I'm just going to walk you through a scenario and see what the cameras and the bugs catch. Imagine you're Gwen and Dion." I scowled, but I nodded, knowing Alexis could see the gesture from the plant camera. "Now stop me if this makes you uncomfortable, Kate. I don't want your husband coming to yell at me later today."

I glanced up at Drew, wondering if I should come clean to Alexis.

"Just go along with it," Drew whispered.

I sighed and said, "Nolan will be fine. He knows I'm just doing my job."

"Okay, great," Alexis said. "Drew, I want you to lean back against the garage door like you've just arrived, and Kate, I want you to hug Drew as if you're super excited to see him since your last forbidden meeting."

My heart immediately raced, and I glanced at Drew to gauge his reaction. His eyes appeared reluctant, but he followed Alexis's instructions and leaned against the door, holding his arms out for me.

Was this really necessary? Or was Alexis actually testing us?

I better not be walking into some sort of trap.

"Come on, Kate," Alexis prodded when I didn't move. "I have a meeting in ten minutes. We don't have time to get all bashful."

My face burned, but I stepped forward into Drew's arms anyway, standing on tiptoes as I hugged him around the neck as if we were romantically involved. My stomach knotted when he closed his arms behind my waist.

Is this weird for him?

It had to be.

But it did feel nice.

Probably too nice.

"Okay, now I want you to say something to each other, so I can see if it comes through on the bugs," Alexis said.

"Hi," I said, leaning back with my arms still behind Drew's neck and awkwardly looking up into his eyes.

"Hi." He grinned.

"Keep talking, guys," Alexis instructed.

This had to be the weirdest thing a boss had ever asked me to do. But deciding to just go with it, I said the first thing that came to my mind.

"You smell really nice." And then I cringed internally since I now sounded like an idiot.

"Yeah?" he asked in a low voice.

And since he hadn't just said I was an idiot for saying that I said, "Yeah."

I inhaled again, enjoying his familiar scent. He wasn't wearing the expensive-smelling cologne today. He smelled like he had when we were younger.

"It reminds me of when you were in college. Isn't it weird how certain smells bring back memories?" I babbled on, hoping it would make the awkwardness dissipate. "Like right now, this reminds me of Christmas Break my senior year of high school, when I was making the finishing touches to

the screenplay I entered in the that silly high school writing contest."

"I remember that. Though I'm pretty sure I just made you mad every time you asked me to help."

"Frustrated . . . maybe." I smiled, interlocking my fingers behind Drew's neck. "But like I always said, you always made my guy characters sound way better. In fact, I think I may need your help with something, if you're not too busy sometime."

"What do you need?"

"I've been working on another screenplay."

"Imagine that." His eyes crinkled at the corners.

"I can't help myself." I lifted my shoulders. "But I'm having a hard time capturing the hero's voice. He sounds all wrong and I could use a man's input."

"I'd love to help," Drew said without hesitation. "Name the time and I'm there."

"Any time after work is good for me. I have no life outside of that, besides visiting Lana tonight."

"Well, working for this show is pretty exciting." He smiled, and I couldn't help but think that he really looked so good when he smiled. Was it possible that he just got better and better looking with age? "How about we get together tomorrow? They're giving you the day off, right?"

I nodded. "That'll be perfect."

"Okay, you guys can stop now. Let's move to the couch next." Alexis's voice came through my phone, startling me so much that I jumped away from Drew.

I had completely forgotten Alexis was listening to everything.

And I realized, too late, that I'd made it way too obvious that I didn't have a husband at home to help me with my screenplays.

I was so getting fired.

"IS THERE something going on between you and Kate?" Alexis asked me when she dropped by my home that evening. She had just marched right in as soon as Carmella opened the door, causing me to almost choke on my chicken.

I took a swig of water to wash my dinner down. "What do you mean?"

"Is Kate the real reason I won't have the finale I want?" She set her hands on her hips. "Are you and Kate having some sort of affair that you decided to pawn off on Dion and Gwen?"

I gulped. She must have noticed those same sparks I'd felt this afternoon while she was watching us through the hidden cameras. I should have been more careful, but I'd been too caught up with the fact that Kate was in my arms and smiling at me. It was something I'd wished would happen for years. And with how perfectly she fit in my arms, I couldn't help but feel she was meant to be there.

I'd been totally oblivious to the fact that Alexis would not be happy about it.

This wasn't good.

"Nothing's going on between Kate and me."

Could she sue me for never getting over a girl from my past? It's not like I knew about Kate's divorce when I went on the show. I'd been trying to move

on, to get over the girl I never should have wanted in the first place. It wasn't my fault the show hadn't worked for me or that Kate had magically ended up back in my life.

Back as a *possibility*.

A possibility that I very much want to become a reality.

I took a deep breath and faced Alexis. "It's true that I have feelings for Kate, but nothing has happened. I really did catch Gwen and Dion at the safe house last week."

"Okay, fine." Alexis sucked in a quick breath and released it loudly. "But that doesn't change the fact that you have feelings for a married woman. That doesn't exactly help your good-guy image."

I led Alexis to the living area and sat on the couch. I looked down at my hands, knowing I had to tell Kate's secret in order to save both of our reputations. "I recently found out that Kate isn't married anymore. Her husband cheated on her and they got divorced a few months ago."

"Doesn't help that she lied about it."

I shook my head. "It's my fault, really. Please don't get mad at Kate. She's had a hard-enough time as it is."

Alexis tapped her foot on the marble floor. "I don't know what to believe anymore. All I know is that I have a whole nation watching a season that's turning out to be even more of a train wreck than I thought."

I sighed and leaned into the couch. "I'm sorry. I didn't plan for this to happen. Yes, I've had feelings for Kate for years. But she got married. So, I said yes to the show because I needed to be over her and move on with my life—find my own soulmate." I ran a hand through my hair. "I didn't know until a couple of weeks ago that she was single again."

"And how does she feel about you?"

"I don't know. I never dared try too hard to figure that out. We have a complicated past."

She let out a loud breath. "Well, your complicated past is starting to

darken my show's future. If my ratings tank, ANB will drop the show. And that means a lot of people will be out of jobs. You don't want to see Oliver, or Joe, or me without jobs, do you? What about Derek? He has three little kids."

My stomach twisted. Alexis really knew how to pile on the guilt. Suddenly, me having feelings for Kate was putting people out of jobs?

"I know you're this billionaire and you don't have to worry about money . . . but a lot of people do. Just think about that before you act rashly."

I straightened and shook my head. "I think you're forgetting that I haven't actually done anything wrong here."

She pointed a finger. "You weren't emotionally available to get engaged to Gwen."

"Since she was all in it for the right reasons," I said sarcastically.

Alexis crossed her arms. "Fine. But you're still thinking about throwing caution to the wind and going after Kate, when we still need to lay the trap. If Dion catches any wind of you and Kate secretly having feelings for each other, all our plans are in jeopardy. He and Gwen will know something is up, and we won't have a way to catch them in their scam."

I pinched the bridge of my nose. "Okay. I get it. Dion and Gwen need to believe I'm in love with her."

"Yes. Which means . . ." She cocked an eyebrow.

"Which means, no pining after Kate where anyone can see."

"Exactly," she said, though she still didn't seem to like the idea of me pining after Kate in private either.

Alexis stood and got ready to leave. But just before she did, she turned back to me. "And just remember this, Kate also works for the show. And even though I try to keep personal feelings out of my business ventures, it might be hard to keep her on board or take an honest look at her screenplay if I'm worried about her presence tanking everything I hold dear."

I swallowed thickly. I'd never forgive myself if I took away Kate's chance at her dreams finally coming true. We'd already lost something dear to both

of us the last time I'd acted hastily.

"I understand. I'll try to keep my feelings to myself." I shrugged as if it was nothing at all. "I mean, I've waited seven years. What's a few weeks more?"

Alexis's phone buzzed. "Looks like I better get going. Chris needs me to pick up the kids from daycare."

After Alexis left, I stayed on the couch, remembering Gwen had texted me earlier and I still needed to respond.

I read her text.

I can't wait to see you this weekend.

More like you can't wait to see Dion in the in-betweens.

I bounced my phone in my hand, debating how to respond to her text. I really wasn't looking forward to this weekend at all. More like I was looking forward to it being over. Along with the next, and the next, until the season had finished airing and Alexis had gives me the go ahead to stop faking the relationship.

Not that Gwen would believe I still wanted her after spending time with me. After all, I'd never been very good at hiding my real feelings.

How did Alexis even expect this to work? She, of all people, knew I couldn't act to save my life.

At least texting didn't give away anything. So I sent Gwen exactly what she'd want to hear.

I'm excited for this weekend too. We need it.

Then I decided to go for a run on the treadmill to get my mind off everything.

I woke up the next morning anxious to see Kate again. My conversation with Alexis was still fresh on my mind, but that didn't keep my heart from

pounding like a jackhammer every time I thought about having Kate all to myself for the day. As I picked out my clothes, I tried not to remember the fact that she'd always told me I looked good in blue growing up, or that she'd liked my cologne from back in the day.

Instead, I concentrated on the innocent fact that I was just going to be helping an old friend with her screenplay. I wasn't doing anything wrong. What *would* be wrong would be to cancel on her last minute just because Alexis didn't want me to date her.

This wasn't a date. It was an act of service.

At least that's what I kept telling myself while I made sure every hair on my head was in the perfect spot.

"Sorry I'm so late," I said once Kate opened the door to her apartment. "I had to lose the paparazzi."

I took the hoodie off my head once she shut the door behind me—so much for making sure my hair was perfect. My pulse thrummed with adrenaline after the drive I'd had to take to keep my "service" off the radar of nosy people with cameras. I ran a hand through my hair, trying to give it some semblance of what it had been like before I'd had to hide under my hoodie.

"Did they follow you all the way?" she asked, seeming to take in my appearance.

I shook my head. "I lost them a few blocks over."

"Wow, they really want to catch you doing something. Do you think they know something is off between you and your final pick?"

"I don't know. Maybe someone from the show leaked some spoilers. There are websites that have week-by-week spoilers up already. Some even say that they know for sure who I picked in the end." I sighed. "I just can't wait for this whole thing to be over with, so I can slip back into my quiet life where no one cares who I may or may not be dating."

"Not a fame whore then?" Kate smiled and led the way into her dining

area.

"I'd like to think that I'm not." I took the chair at the table beside the seat where her laptop sat. "But who knows, maybe Freud would have something to say about that, since I did go on the show in the first place."

"What made you do it anyway?" Kate asked as she went to grab me a drink. "I never pegged you for the type to do something like this in the first place. In fact, I pretty much went into shock when I saw the announcement that you were the new Bachelor."

So she wanted to know the truth? I scratched the back of my head, not wanting to tell her that it was because of her, but also not wanting to lie. "I don't know. It was a lot of things, I guess. They'd been after me for years, so when I was still single at twenty-eight, I decided I might as well give it a shot."

Kate set a glass of water in front of me. "So after having gone through the whole experience, how do you feel about it? Do you wish you'd never done it?"

I thought about it. Yes, it seemed like a failure when I looked at how it had turned out, but I didn't really feel as bad about it as I probably should have. After all, if I hadn't gone on the show, I wouldn't have had a reason to reconnect with Kate, or a way to give her a job in the industry.

I drew in a deep breath and told her the truth. "If I had to do it all over again, I probably would."

"But why?" She scrunched up her face in disbelief. "Nothing turned out the way you wanted."

I nodded, forcing myself to keep eye contact. "Yes, but I also wouldn't have reconnected with you and your family. And that has been worth everything to me." I only added the family part because I knew Alexis would sue me if I revealed too much and Kate just happened to want me back. But if she did happen to share my feelings, there was no amount of court fees that would keep me from going after her.

I watched Kate for her reaction, my heart racing out of my chest. I hadn't revealed all my feelings, but it kind of felt like I had.

She was quiet for a moment, her eyes shifting back and forth between mine as if trying to decipher my true meaning. "I'm glad we reconnected, too. We've missed you all these years."

Encouraged by her words, I cleared my throat and said, "I wish I hadn't thrown myself so deeply into my work after Aiden died." I studied her eyes, needing to read exactly how she reacted to what I was confessing. "I missed out on so much."

So much time wasted. So many regrets where Kate was concerned. Where would we be now if I hadn't cut myself off from her? Would she have married me instead of Nolan?

She stared at the table for a moment before peering back up at me. "What made you leave us anyway? We felt like we lost two family members instead of one."

I shook my head, my throat growing thick. "I-it was my fault that he died. If I hadn't made Aiden so mad that night, he never would have gotten into that car in the first place."

Kate's eyes narrowed. "But it wasn't your fault, Drew."

I looked away. I couldn't watch her be so kind and forgiving of me. I didn't deserve it.

She scooted closer, leaning over so her face was inches from mine. "Look at me."

I couldn't.

She inched even closer and placed both of her hands on my cheeks, forcing my gaze to meet hers. "Listen to me carefully, because you need to hear this. It's not your fault that Aiden died that night. He was hit by a drunk driver who had no business being on the road. Yes, he had just driven you home, but you didn't give that driver the alcohol. You didn't set him behind the wheel and tell him to chase my brother off a cliff. It was an accident. A

terrible, horrific accident that stole my brother's life way too early." She sighed, and then pressed her lips together for a moment before continuing. "But it was not your fault."

"But if I hadn't kissed you . . ." Tears stung my eyes. I blinked them away. "If I'd done as he asked . . ."

She shook her head, her eyes growing softer. "That was Aiden's choice to get mad. And if that has anything to do with it, then it's just as much my fault as yours. I'm the one who cuddled up to you. I'm the one who practically begged you to kiss me. If anyone is guilty of making Aiden mad, it's me. I knew he'd told you to stay away from me. He'd told me himself plenty of times. But I still did it. It wasn't any of his business in the first place."

I sighed, my shoulders heavy with all the guilt I'd carried through the years.

"I never blamed you for Aiden's death. No one in my family did. It's time for you to stop blaming yourself, too."

I nodded, though my heart still didn't know if it could trust her to be so forgiving. But when I looked at her, I didn't see any doubt or forced kindness.

Maybe it really was possible that I'd been punishing myself for years when I hadn't needed to.

"Just think about what I said, okay? You deserve to move past this hurt and pain. I have. Yes, I miss my brother like crazy and think about him every day. But that's what loving someone will do for you. Aiden wouldn't want you to carry this guilt around. He'd want you to be happy."

"Okay," I said, feeling a little lighter after everything she'd said. "I'll try to remember that."

"Good." She took a few sips from her water before turning back to me with a smile. "Now, are you okay to move on to something a little less serious?"

"Yes, please."

Kate put her hands on her laptop. "Okay, but I have to warn you, this is a

super rough draft. Like, I haven't even finished a full draft. So, don't judge it too harshly."

"I'm sure it's great." I pushed one of her hands aside so I could see the screen. "What's this one about again?"

"It's about a girl who gets kidnapped by a guy and ends up falling for him. I think I told you about it before."

"Ah, yes." I nodded slowly. "You did always love the forbidden romance stories, didn't you?"

Kate bit her lip like she was trying to stop an embarrassed smile from taking shape on her face. "They're kind of a guilty pleasure of mine."

And I would have to agree with the merits of forbidden love. It was addicting. And I was pretty sure that would be the exact label Alexis would put on my growing feelings for Kate.

"Anyway, they fall in love, or at least they fall in *like*, and then they come up with a plan to escape from the real bad guy."

"So what part are we working on today?" *I certainly wouldn't mind working on a kissing scene...*

Kate shrugged, scrolling through her script. There were highlighted parts here and there.

"It's all kind of a mess right now." She stopped at a spot that had a lot of highlights and red font. I read the words before me.

TREVEN

(Taking Misty into his arms.)

I'm trying to keep you safe. You need to just trust me.

MISTY

(Trying to get away from Treven)

How can I trust you when you're the reason I'm here?

"Hey, that part looked interesting," I complained when Kate scrolled past the page before I could read any further.

"That was when they realized they have feelings for each other." She looked at me, her face flushed. "Wouldn't it be weird to work on that together?"

"You never seemed to mind my help with those kinds of scenes before." I gave her a half smile.

She scrunched her nose, probably remembering how flirtatious she'd been when we were younger. "That was years ago. I try not to be so out there anymore."

I shrugged, hoping I came off as indifferent. "Well, you can pick a different section if you want. It's your script . . . but just remember, I'm pretty much a professional at the love thing now . . . I mean, I did go on a dating show and ended up alone."

My self-deprecation seemed to work because she smiled. "Looks like I'm in good company then."

"You are. So let's figure this part out. It should be fun." At least, it should help me cut away at the barrier we had between us.

"If you're sure you don't mind." She inspected my face, as if guessing whether I was in earnest or not.

I hadn't been more earnest about something in a long time.

"Let's go for it."

"Okay." Kate scrolled back to the section. "I want this to be a super emotionally charged scene. When I watch movies, I go into them hoping to be moved. So, I want the viewers to feel the tension between these two characters, be worried about how they'll overcome their obstacles, and then cheer when they finally make it through."

"By make it through, you mean . . . ?" I asked, though I was pretty sure of the answer.

Her blush deepened. "They're supposed to kiss."

I loved how shy she was about saying that last word. Such a contrast to seven years earlier when she'd flat out told me to kiss her.

Yikes, my palms got sweaty just remembering it.

"So this is going to end in a kiss?" I arched an eyebrow.

"That's the plan anyway," she said.

"It's a good thing I brushed my teeth before coming over then, huh?"

Her jaw dropped, her eyes widening. "That's not what I meant!" She slapped my shoulder.

Okay, I'd been nervous to say that last line, but man, those ten seconds of courage had been worth it. Maybe I should try things like that more often.

When she continued to smack me, I locked my hands around her wrists to stop her from making my arm go numb. "I just wanted to see you blush. Stop trying to beat me up."

"And why would you want to see me blush? You like it when my face gets all tight and overheated-looking?"

"Yep. It's pretty much my favorite look of yours."

Kate rolled her eyes and turned back to her screen. "You're ridiculous."

"Yeah, well. You haven't seen anything yet."

WAS Drew openly flirting with me?

Like, on purpose?

The thought made my stomach flip-flop.

Maybe working on this scene was a good idea after our deep conversation. We had finally said something about the big elephant in the room. And though I hated the thought of Drew punishing himself for Aiden's death for so long, part of me was relieved he hadn't disappeared from my life because I was a bad kisser.

Even though things were still not completely solved between us, I hoped that we'd be closer to where I wanted us to go. Today's scene was likely to be super awkward, but when all was said and done, I wouldn't mind some good old-fashioned flirting with Drew. It would be like reliving high school . . . but only the good parts. I could be my old self again, free and unafraid of what love could do to you.

Drew scooted his chair closer. "So you're saying this guy wants to be a good guy, right?"

"Right." I nodded. I worked up the courage to say my next words. "I need to find a way to get this bad guy and the girl to actually kiss, because as you probably know, so much can be communicated in a kiss."

"Well," Drew said, scratching his chin as if thinking deeply. "If I was a

bad guy who wants to become a good guy but isn't quite there yet, I'd probably just grab the girl, trap her in a corner, and start making-out with her."

I gasped. "You wouldn't..."

"Well, I, Drew Burrows, wouldn't, but we're talking about Treven. You did say he was a bad guy, right?"

"Yeah but . . ." I swallowed, trying to get my voice to come out even and unaffected instead of on the verge of squeaking like it was. "You really think that's what he should do?"

I laughed. "We're just brainstorming here. Maybe Treven could pretend to get hurt or something, and then she'll bandage him up and they can have hot eye contact."

"Hot eye contact!" I smiled despite my nerves. "You're hilarious, Drew."

Drew grinned, his eyes glimmering with mirth. "Well, at least I have something going for me."

Oh, he had way more going for him than he could ever know about.

"So, what would you have them do in this scene?" Drew asked. "If you were this girl and Treven was holding you hostage, would you want him to just go for the gold?"

"What kind of gold are you talking about?"

Drew laughed. "Just a good wholesome peck on the cheek, of course."

I smiled again, enjoying this. Maybe I should ask for help every time I was working on a scene.

"Would you mind running through it with me so I can get the dialogue down?" I asked, twenty minutes later. We had figured out the main idea, but usually, acting it out with someone helped me figure out the rest much quicker.

"Of course." Drew's face lit up.

We went through the script a few times to reinforce the scene in our minds. My stomach bubbled with nerves as I thought about what we were about to do.

I set up my laptop to record, so I could just transcribe the dialogue we came up with later.

We stood across from each other, anxious anticipation running through my veins as I looked at Drew. We hadn't done this for years. Would I be able to relax and act naturally?

"It's been a while, huh?" Drew swiveled his wrists back and forth at his side.

He was nervous, too.

"Yeah," I breathed, then pushed a button on my computer. It beeped three short times before a long beep sounded to signal it was recording us.

Drew sucked in a shaky breath. "Okay, so you want Treven to just walk in the door to the basement where he's been keeping Misty?" He pretended to open the door, the movement seeming to help him relax into the exercise.

"He's gone." Drew jumped into character, stepping toward me and pretending to unlock my hands from an imaginary chain attached to an imaginary wall. "I'm sorry we have to keep you locked up like that."

I made my face turn to stone as I imagined what Misty would do in that scenario. "Are you really?" she spat the words. "If you were sorry, you wouldn't keep locking me back up."

Drew's shoulders slumped, and his hands moved to my right wrist, tracing along an imaginary line. "I'm sorry." His eyes had so much depth to them.

Had Drew finally learned to act?

"It's just that I—I can't let you go," he continued. "I've missed my dog all these years, and keeping you chained up reminds me of him." His lips curled up and he laughed.

What?

"Where did that dog line come from?" I attempted to jab him in the stomach.

"Sorry." Drew laughed again as he struggled to defend himself from my attack. "I couldn't think of what was supposed to happen next, so I improvised."

"You're terrible, you know that?"

"And I'm okay with that."

I went after him again, but he gripped my wrists and held my arms hostage. He pulled me to him, and my entire body became intoxicated with our close proximity. He was wearing his familiar cologne again, and part of me wanted to just go limp in his arms so I could have a reason to stay close for a little while longer.

But we had work to do. So I stood up straight and forced myself to stop running away with inappropriate thoughts, such as stepping closer and brushing my lips against his just to see if they were as soft as I remembered.

I cleared my throat and stopped the camera. "Let's try that again. This time, remember you're going to apologize and then grovel. The goal of this scene is to obtain forgiveness, and maybe move Treven and Misty closer to falling in love."

Drew nodded, becoming serious again before going back to his beginning pose behind an invisible door.

"And go." I pressed start and the camera began rolling again.

Drew repeated his opening lines, making it to the point in the scene where he was supposed to trace a line on my wrists.

"I'm sorry," he said, his eyes deep and brooding again. "If Ben finds out I've been unlocking you, he'll put another guard down here. And that guard wouldn't be nearly as nice as me."

"I feel so lucky," I said sarcastically, knowing Misty shouldn't give into Treven quite yet. "And why are you treating me differently than another guard would?"

Drew paused to think for a minute.

"Don't even think about telling me it's because I remind you of your childhood puppy," I whispered when I saw a smile try to sneak on his lips.

He burst out laughing. "Sorry, Kate." He clutched his stomach. "I really was going to try this time, but I'm pretty much the worst at this."

"Would it be better for me to figure this out on my own then?" I asked, hoping I wasn't just wasting his time with the exercise. I knew he was a busy guy.

Drew sobered right up. "No, no. I'll get it. Sorry."

"Is there something that could help you get in character?" I offered. "Maybe a costume or a prop?" Those had always been helpful in the past.

"Sure. I guess we could try that."

I looked around my small apartment. I didn't have much: no clothes for a guy, no chains or bars for him to pretend to lock me up with. I looked Drew over. He was wearing jeans and a blue T-shirt that really brought out his eyes. Maybe I could work with what he had?

I stepped closer to Drew, creating an image in my head. Treven was supposed to be a super-hot guard, and even Misty couldn't resist him. Which Misty hated since she was supposed to hate him.

"Hot bad guys wear tight shirts, right?" I walked into the kitchen and grabbed a few chip clips out of the junk drawer.

"I guess . . . Hey, what are you doing?" he asked when I pulled his shirt tight from the back and stuck a chip clip there to hold the fabric snugly.

I attached another clip. "You said you work better while in costume, so . . . since Treven would want to show off his toned physique, that's what you get to do."

And boy, was it toned.

I could wash my laundry on those washboard abs of his.

"I feel so violated." Drew sighed.

I paused, my stomach sinking. "Do you really?" I didn't want him to feel

uncomfortable.

He cracked a smile. "I'm just kidding. They did *much* worse to me when we filmed the promos for the show. At least you're letting me keep my shirt on."

"For now." I winked.

I rolled up his sleeves until they were just above the dip between his bicep and deltoid, and while I did it I couldn't help but wonder what it would be like to see him in person without his shirt on?

I'd probably faint. Those promos for the show already sent hot flashes through my body.

"You really think Treven would wear sleeves this short?" Drew frowned as he inspected his newly fitted shirt.

"Yep. Just like that." I stepped back, hoping to appear calm and unaffected by his good looks as my eyes moved up to his face. "I also think his hair might be slightly different. Come with me." I grabbed his hand, feeling warmth spike up my arm as I pulled him into the bathroom just down the hall.

"And what are we going to do in here?" Drew asked, looking around the small room at my curling iron, brushes, and makeup that I'd stacked haphazardly in a cart next to the vanity. "You're not going to put eyeliner on me, are you?"

"No, but if you think it would help, I'm not opposed to it. I just got a new glittery eyeliner that would really stand out against your dark lashes."

"As tempting as that is . . . I'll pass."

"Good choice." I had him sit down. "Are you okay if I change your hair?"

"You don't like it?" He peered up at me through his lashes, and I couldn't help but think how unfair it was for a guy to have such full and long lashes.

They were gorgeous.

"Your hair is great. Quite an improvement from the surfer-dude style you sported a few years ago."

"Hey, I'll have you know I had lots of women asking to touch my silky locks." His jaw jutted out.

"Whatever you say."

Then, as if realizing something, he said, "Wait. How did you know I had my hair longer? That was four years ago."

I bit my lip, realizing I'd been found out. "I, uh, ran across a photo of you online one day."

He raised his eyebrows and gave me a teasing look. "Did you stalk me online?"

My face heated. Why did he have to be so good at picking up on everything? "I didn't stalk you." *That much.*

He kept staring at me, like he could get me to confess anything if he just met me with that smoldering gaze for a few seconds.

And of course, it worked. He probably used that look in his business meetings all the time to get what he wanted.

"Fine. I looked you up once or twice."

"Why?"

Was there an exit from this conversation that didn't end with me looking like a fool?

"I was curious about what you were up to." I grabbed a comb from a drawer and started moving it through his dark hair, needing the distraction. His hair was so soft and silky.

He cleared his throat. "I guess if we're admitting things, I should probably tell you that I looked you up, too."

My hand stilled. He'd looked me up?

He'd thought about me?

I went back to combing his hair and said, "I hope it wasn't during my pixie-cut stage. I didn't have the right shape of face for it."

"I thought it looked good."

So he had seen it.

How many times did he look me up?

I wanted to ask but if I did I'd have to tell him how many times I'd gone to his profile. And since that was probably in the hundreds, I knew I shouldn't even go there or he'd really think I was a stalker. So I grabbed some hair wax and began styling his hair instead.

I wasn't used to doing a guy's hair, but I eventually found a style that would best embody Treven's character. When I'd dreamt Treven up a few months ago, he'd somehow ended up looking a lot like Drew. Maybe my subconscious had been trying to remind me of something.

We were quiet for the next few minutes as I worked on his hair. But even though we weren't talking, I felt his eyes on me, studying me. My neck prickled with heat under his scrutiny.

What did Drew Burrows see in me? Did he still see me as the annoying ten-year-old who bugged him and Aiden as they played their video games? Or as the domineering twelve-year-old who acted like a dictator when I was putting on a backyard production? Or as the hormonal teenager who had the hots for her brother's best friend?

I hoped it was none of those, hoped he noticed that I wasn't the same as I'd been back then. Maybe I wasn't exactly how I thought I'd be at twenty-five—not nearly as successful as the woman I'd daydreamed about becoming, that was for sure. But I hoped he saw me as a peer, an equal, now that we were finally in the same stage of life.

But could I really hope to be on the same level as Drew Burrows: America's Favorite Billionaire Bachelor?

Probably not. I certainly hadn't been enough for Nolan Prosser.

I swallowed the lump in my throat and swiped the thoughts away.

"Is everything okay?" Drew asked, his voice quiet with concern.

"Yeah." I nodded and pushed back the heartache threatening to spill out of my eyes. "My mind decided to ramble back through bad memories." I stepped back and gestured for him to take a look in the mirror.

"Thinking about Aiden?" Drew asked, still looking at me instead of at his hair.

I shook my head. "Nolan."

His eyes became wary. "Do you miss him?"

"No." I groaned. *Definitely not.* "I was just wondering why he went through with the wedding. Why go through with it when he wasn't even interested in being my husband?" I swiveled to face the mirror. Drew did the same, so we were facing each other's reflections.

"I wish I had an answer for that." Drew's reflection had a soft, sympathetic expression. "But all that comes to my mind is that he was really, really stupid."

A faint smile lifted my lips. "Yes, he was really stupid."

"I'd use a stronger adjective, but I know how you feel about profanity. So we'll leave it at stupid jerk."

"You could have called him a nincompoop."

Drew put his arm around my shoulder and pulled me into his side. I melted against him. "Yes, a really stupid nincompoop jerk with a big helping of twerp on top." He sighed and squeezed me tighter. Then he inspected his hair for the first time. "So, this is my bad-boy hairstyle then?"

"Yep, though I'm pretty sure you pull it off even better than Treven could."

"Since Treven is imaginary and all."

Yep, no part of Treven was based on Drew at all.

DREW

I FELT RIDICULOUS, but if Kate liked this look, I'd try to channel my inner bad boy. The bad boy that was locked away under so many layers, I didn't know if I'd be able to pull him out without seeming pathetic.

But Kate's eyes seemed to linger on my arms more than they had in the past . . . so maybe this getup would help me in the long run.

Feeling encouraged, I drew in a deep breath and stood with as much confidence as I could muster. Bad guys were usually über confident.

I ran through the scene in my mind, trying to embrace Treven's character. I really did want this to be helpful to Kate, so I'd do my best.

"He's gone." I pretended to open a door and walked through it before walking up to Kate and pretending to unlock imaginary chains from her wrists. "I'm sorry we have to keep you locked up like that."

Kate's face turned to stone. *Wow, she's really good at this.*

"Are you really?" Her voice was full of hatred. "Because if you were sorry, you wouldn't keep locking me up."

I slouched, hoping to put off a defeated vibe. "I'm sorry." I reached for one of her wrists and pretended like I was feeling along her chains. And when I looked into her eyes, something took over me. I felt light and confident, like for the first time in my life I could actually move through a scene without overthinking it.

Kate was a girl I'd kidnapped. She was scared. She'd been ripped away from her family and friends, held hostage by me. I had no right to think she could forgive me for this. But when I was with her, I wanted nothing more than to take her in my arms and make her feel safe again.

"I'm trying to keep you safe. You need to just trust me," I whispered.

Kate ripped her hands away and clenched them in fists at her sides. "How can I trust you when you're the reason I'm here in the first place?"

I scrubbed a hand over my face the way I imagined Treven would. "I know it started out wrong, but you don't know what he's holding over me. Maybe if you did, you'd understand that I want what's best for you. I just don't know how to stop."

"What are you talking about?" Kate asked. "If you wanted to get away from him, you could just leave."

I took her hands in mine again and ran my thumb along her knuckles—such soft, delicate fingers. "It's not that simple. Give me time and I'll get you out of here. I promise."

Kate's eyes shifted their focus from side to side, reading my eyes. I pushed as much warmth into them as I could.

"So what made you change your mind?" she finally said.

I slid my hands up her arms to rest on her shoulders. "*You* changed me. You changed everything." My gaze dipped down to her lips then back to her eyes.

This would probably be the time for Treven and Misty to kiss.

I slid a hand from her shoulders to rest behind her neck while the other traced the line of her cheekbone.

I swallowed. *Just follow through. Just go for it*, I told myself.

"Do you want me to finish the scene?" I asked, my heart pounding so hard in my chest.

Her lips parted, and she nodded before whispering, "You probably should . . . for research."

My stomach muscles tightened. But I nodded too, and said, "For research." Then I closed the distance between us and kissed her slowly and tentatively. At least, I tried to go slow, but the moment our lips touched, I was breathless and hungry for more. I worried she'd shy away from the kiss, but she didn't. Her lips parted, and she deepened it.

Every inch of my skin tingled as I pulled her closer to me. I smoothed my hands across her back, resisting the urge to press her firmly against me.

How many times had I dreamed of that stolen moment on the couch in her parents' basement? So many times. But even though I'd relived it over and over again, trying to forget while trying to remember at the same time, I was surprised at how much I had forgotten. The sensation I remembered was just a ghost of what it was like to kiss Kate now.

She slipped her hands slowly up the contours of my chest, before resting them behind my neck and pulling herself closer. I didn't know if she was still just doing research for the scene, but I didn't care. Even if this wasn't coming from a real place with real feelings, I'd take it. I'd kiss her as long as she'd let me.

"What would Treven and Misty do next?" I asked, breaking the kiss for a moment, my chest heaving as I tried to catch my breath.

She looked up into my eyes, and the blue reflected a desire I hadn't seen in them since I was in college. Was it possible she wanted this to be real as much as I did?

"You did say Treven would probably trap Misty in a corner and make-out with her, right?" Her breathing was as shallow as mine. "It might be a good idea to test that theory and see how it goes."

My insides surged at her suggestion. Before I could talk myself out of it, or break character, I walked Kate backwards until her back was against the wall and we were kissing again.

I COULDN'T STOP KISSING Drew. It was like I had turned into some hormonal teenager the moment our lips touched, and all I could do was run my fingers through his hair and beg him to never stop kissing me.

We were probably out of the camera's view, but I didn't care. I wasn't kissing him because I needed step-by-step footage to study afterward—all I needed to type in my screenplay was that my characters kissed against the wall.

I was kissing him because I wanted to. I'd been dying to do this again for seven years! His lips were softer than I remembered, and I may have thought twenty-one-year-old Drew was an expert kisser, but *this* Drew was on a whole different playing field. It was otherworldly, and the passion between us was off the charts. How had I ever thought I could love anyone else besides Drew? I knew, especially after this kiss, that it would be an impossibility. No other man could ever compete with him and the way his kisses made me tremble.

I just hoped it wasn't all an act for my screenplay.

It couldn't be, though, could it? Drew was a terrible actor. There was no way he could suddenly pull off the performance of a lifetime after years of messing up lines.

Drew's phone rang, a jazzy melody bringing us back to reality.

"Do you need to get that?" I mumbled against his lips.

He gave his head a quick shake. "That's Alexis's ringtone. She can wait. Treven and Misty were just getting started."

My heart soared at the thought that he didn't want to stop. I kissed him again, and his hands traced their way down my sides until they gripped my hips.

His phone rang again. And even though I didn't want to, I pulled my head back, separating our lip lock. "Alexis might have last-minute instructions before she gets on the plane," I said breathlessly.

Drew pinched his eyes shut briefly and sighed. "You're probably right."

While he was on the phone with Alexis, I willed my heart to go back to its normal pace. It felt like I'd just sprinted a marathon.

Drew had his back turned to me, so I combed my fingers through my hair, hoping to give myself some semblance of serenity. My acting skills were a little better than Drew's, so hopefully he'd buy it.

When he was done with his call, he slipped his phone back in his pocket and slowly turned back to me. He ran a hand through his hair, which I'd done a great job of restyling again during our make-out session. "Do you think that version of the scene will work?" he asked, suddenly bashful.

I wanted to say no, just so we could practice different scenarios all night. But since I still wasn't sure if he'd been acting or not, I stopped the video recorder on my laptop and said, "I think we got it."

Hopefully, my computer had captured enough of our kiss that I could re-watch it and decipher if the kiss had a chance of being real.

I COULDN'T STOP THINKING about that kiss. All through my meetings the next day, my mind wandered off and took me right back to the moment when Kate and I were tangled up against her wall.

I hadn't kissed anyone like that before.

It had seemed so honest and real, but I still wasn't sure. And I didn't want to possibly ruin the magic of it by asking Kate about where we stood after it.

I'd just wait and watch her for signals, and hope I can have her in my arms again soon.

Friday evening came too fast. I dreaded the thought of spending the weekend with Gwen after everything that had happened. But if we got the footage that we needed, this would hopefully be the last time I'd have to see her. And hopefully, Alexis would stop being so uptight about me having feelings for my handler.

Kate dropped me off at the safe house then called me once she was back at her apartment. The drive over had been interesting, the air charged with unspoken questions. But we'd made it through, and I promised myself that once this weekend was over, I'd find the courage to move things forward with Kate.

Lawsuit pending or not.

"Just walk around the house saying a few things." Kate's voice came

through the earpiece of the burner phone she'd left me with. Since Alexis had flown out to Denver the night before, she had put Kate in charge of watching the video feed from the privacy of her apartment.

I strolled around the house, trying to think of something to say. I wanted to keep things light for now, so I just picked a random thing off the top of my head. "This dude walked into my house today. I had no idea who he was, and he asked if he could sit on my couch and take a nap."

"What?" Kate sounded alarmed. "You let a stranger into your house? How did he get through the gate?"

I laughed. "You told me to start talking, so I did. You never said anything about not making stuff up."

A low growl sounded through the phone. "You're the worst."

I smiled. "Sorry. I couldn't help myself." She was way too gullible to resist.

"Okay. I need you to walk back to the bug we left in the hall."

I made my way to the painting of the couple by the pond.

"Now, run back and forth down the hall while saying whatever other weird things come to your mind."

I momentarily wondered why I'd need to run around the house before realizing I didn't want to think about it after all.

"My name is Drew Burrows, and I like to run around little houses, so I can catch my ex-girlfriend cheating on me," I said.

I stopped running.

"Did you get it?"

"Yeah, the bug in the hall is working great. Let me make sure everything matches up now. If you could just twirl your way back to the kitchen while singing *Mary Had a Little Lamb*, I think we'll be good."

I was about to do just as she said before I stopped. "Are you serious? Or just trying to make me look like a fool?"

Kate laughed. "I actually have everything I need. Though, it was pretty

entertaining to see you running down the hall."

"You mean you didn't really need that?"

"The running . . . no. That was just an added bonus."

I shook my head and scowled at the camera hiding in the plant. "And I thought *I* was bad."

"Sorry, not sorry." I could just imagine the wicked smile that was sure to be planted on her face.

"Okay, well, if that's all, I'm gonna go sit on the couch and try to regain some of my dignity. I'll call you with our dinner requests after Gwen gets here."

"You might as well just whisper them into one of the bugs."

"What?"

Then it hit me.

Kate would be watching everything this weekend.

It was going to be like filming *Finding Your Soulmate* all over again, except worse. Everything I said or did would have an audience: the girl I was falling for.

Talk about pressure.

"Don't worry. I'm not planning on spying on everything you do. I do have a life, you know."

I sighed. "Yeah, you just work on getting Treven and Misty together. No need to watch anything Alexis will be watching later anyway."

"Okay. I'll wait for your call."

"See you later."

I hung up, bracing myself for a weekend with Gwen.

I TRIED NOT to pay attention to what was going on between Drew and Gwen on their weekend getaway. Tried not to be jealous that Gwen got to spend so much time alone with him. But I couldn't help but overhear a few things here and there as they sounded through the laptop Alexis had given me.

Gwen seemed happy to forgive Drew for breaking up with her the week before, but she wasn't exactly nice to him. Quite a few times I heard Gwen making fun of Drew, commenting on how he ate his food, or nitpicking him about the way he said certain things, or bringing up things she'd seen on the episode from that week.

For someone trying to marry him for his money, she was doing a terrible job of being the doting girlfriend.

Maybe she has no people skills at all?

Or maybe that was part of her plan? Make him think he was chasing after her?

"Your date with Elana was interesting to watch," Gwen commented. "I had no idea you were so afraid of heights. I had to tell my friends, who were watching it with me, that you were way more macho in real life."

Gwen would say condescending stuff like that, but Drew just took it, never putting her in her place. It was sad. I wanted to run into the safe house

and give Gwen a piece of my mind.

But just when I was about to grab my bag and drive the few miles away, I reminded myself that Gwen would get what was coming her way.

And it would be on national TV.

When I picked up Drew early Sunday morning, I fed Gwen the story Alexis had given me about Drew doing more pickups. Drew made a show of being annoyed, his acting not very good—which was an encouraging thing for me when I thought about how he'd acted during our epic kiss. Thankfully, Gwen was too busy pretending to be sad about it to notice his bad acting.

"Thanks for coming over so early." Drew sighed once we had pulled onto the road. "I was about to blow the whole thing."

"No problem. Once I saw you from the hidden camera in the kitchen, I knew you were awake and figured I'd come rescue you. From the tidbits I heard, it didn't sound like the best weekend."

Drew's jaw flexed. "Did you hear much then?"

I shrugged as I turned a corner. "Not much, but enough to know what a witch Gwen is. I don't know how you didn't slap her . . . I totally wanted to. In fact, I would have slapped her this morning if I didn't have to worry about giving the hidden cameras away."

"Yeah, that's probably best."

"And by the way . . ." I took my eyes off the road for a second to glance at him. "All those things she was ragging on you for are ridiculous. You're way better than she could ever hope to deserve."

"Thanks." He smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes.

I was so going to smack that woman.

"So, what do you have planned for the rest of the day?" I asked, hoping he'd want to hang out.

Drew shrugged. "Nothing much. Probably just take it easy. I'm actually a little worried that Dion might check the office to make sure I'm really there."

"You think he'd do that?"

"Maybe. When you're sneaking around, you tend to be paranoid."

"Hmm." I thought about what he'd just said. Would we need to go in to the studio just in case?

As if reading my thoughts, he asked, "You don't happen to have keys to the studio, do you?"

"No." I shook my head and gripped the steering wheel. "Alexis trusts me . . . but not enough to hand over the keys." And we couldn't have anyone else unlock it for us since as far as the rest of the studio was concerned, Drew and Gwen were still a happy couple working toward an engagement.

"I guess you can just take me back home, then," Drew said.

"Where you'll sit and wonder what I'm seeing and overhearing from Dion and Gwen?"

"Well, I didn't want to just invite myself over to your house. I do try not to be a burden."

He was about the furthest thing from a burden. "Do you want to come over?" I asked. "I'm sure my parents would love to have you come for family dinner again. They all loved having you there two weeks ago."

It was crazy to think it had only been two weeks. It seemed like so much more time had passed since I'd told him the truth about Nolan and me.

"If I didn't have to hide from the world, I'd offer to take you to the fanciest restaurant in L.A. for dinner. But, since the paparazzi would be all over that, dinner with your family would be great."

I nodded and urged my blush to go away. Was that a hint that he wanted to take me on a date?

I couldn't care less about where he could take me—I'd be happy going on a simple walk around the block. I just wanted to be with him.

We arrived at my apartment. I parked in my spot behind the complex, and then called my mom to make sure she was okay with an extra dinner guest.

A few minutes later, we were inside my apartment watching the video feed from the safe house. Gwen was just sitting on the couch in the living

room. Alone. I realized then that I would still need to be Gwen's errand girl for lunch.

Was that why Dion wasn't there yet?

So I dialed the number for the burner phone and put a finger to my lips to remind Drew not to say a word and give us away. He mimed zipping his mouth shut and locking it with a key.

"Hello?" Gwen's voice cut through the line. I stepped away from Alexis's computer so there wouldn't be an echo.

"Hi, Gwen. This is Kate. In my hurry to get Drew to the studio, I realized that I forgot to take your lunch order. Is there anything I can get you?"

"Oh, good. I'm glad you called." Gwen's voice sounded more fake-happy than usual. "I think I'll just have Dion take me to the airport and see if I can catch an earlier flight. If Drew isn't going to be able to come back, there's no reason for me to stay."

I pursed my lips and furrowed my brow, trying to figure out what Gwen might be planning. Was she really thinking about just going to the airport? Because that would mess all our plans up.

"Are you sure you don't want me to bring you anything? It's all on the studio's bill, so feel free to order *whatever* you need." Gwen seemed to want a free ticket in life, so I hoped that dangling the carrot for free stuff would work.

"No, that's okay. I'll have Dion pick me up something on the way. Thank you though."

I tried to think of something more to offer, but the line went dead. Gwen had hung up.

"Well, that sucks." I shoved my phone into my pocket and returned to the kitchen to watch the video feed.

"What do you think she's going to do?" Drew asked when I joined him. He had sat at the table right in front of the screen.

I took the seat next to him. "I have no idea. I hope she was just trying to

keep me from coming back. Maybe Dion is already on his way?"

On the screen, Gwen was walking back down the hall to the bedroom. The screens were still, since we couldn't see into her room. The only thing that told us Gwen hadn't suddenly disappeared was the sound of shuffling coming from the bug in the hall nearby.

Not long after, Gwen was wheeling her suitcase behind her.

"She's leaving."

Drew scooted his chair closer to the screen, bumping against my knees in the process.

We watched as Gwen walked out through the door that led to the garage. We didn't even catch a single second of Dion on the video feed because the door had blocked him from the camera's view.

I pinched my eyes shut, as hope went out of me like a popped balloon. All that planning for nothing.

"Do you think Dion checked the studio?" Drew looked at me, our faces only inches away from each other. I hadn't realized we were sitting so close.

"Hopefully they just wanted to get out of the house." It would be really bad if they'd caught on to everything. I would have to go back through the video to see if Gwen had noticed one of the hidden cameras or bugs or something, tipping her off to our plans.

Drew sunk into his chair. "Too bad we didn't think to bug Dion's car."

I decided we might as well go to my parents' home early since we had nothing else to do. My mom always loved help with the meal.

"What can we help you with?" I asked when we found my parents sitting in the living room, my dad reading the newspaper, my mom with a book.

Mom looked up. "I was just going to start the dessert for tonight after finishing this chapter, but if you want to make it, that would be wonderful. I

wouldn't mind seeing if Mr. Bates is the real murderer." She lifted the mystery novel in her hands.

"You said it's the strawberry brownie trifle, right?" I asked, beginning to shrug out of my jacket. Drew surprised me by helping me slide it off the rest of the way. Then he placed it on a hanger in the coat closet and hung his black leather jacket beside mine. I couldn't keep a goofy grin from sneaking on my lips at the sweet gesture. That was what a boyfriend would do.

Mom's lips quirked up into a half smile, and I knew she had seen it as well. And it made me wonder what my mom would think if Drew and I ended up dating. Would she be happy about it?

Drew and I walked into the kitchen. "You don't really mind helping, do you?" I asked, looking over my shoulder at Drew. The smell of dinner cooking in the Crockpot filled the air.

Mmmm, Mom's famous white bean chili would be perfect on this cool February day.

"I rarely bake, so I don't know how much help I'll be," Drew said.

"It's only from a box, so I'm sure you'll do fine." I opened a drawer next to the oven and pulled out two aprons: a neon pink one and a black one. "Which one do you want?"

"Like you even have to ask." Drew laughed.

And then he grabbed the pink one from my hand.

"Seriously?" I eyed him curiously.

Drew smiled as he slung it over his head and tied the straps behind his back. "Real men wear pink, right?"

I bit my lip as I took in the ridiculous sight. Tall, masculine Drew wearing a pink apron was definitely something I'd never daydreamed about in high school. "I think pink is your color."

"It does seem to bring out my olive complexion."

"Definitely. Remind me to force Carmella to buy you a pink dress shirt for your next interview."

I grabbed the brownie box from the pantry and then a glass batter bowl from a cupboard.

"If you'll just grab the eggs from the fridge," I suggested when I noticed Drew just standing there watching me.

He shook his head as if he'd been in a daze, and then opened the fridge and bent over until he came out holding the carton of eggs. I tried not to notice how good his backside looked in his jeans.

"Have you ever heard of substituting applesauce for the oil and the eggs in some recipes?" I asked as Drew measured out the oil and poured it into the bowl.

Drew shook his head. "No, why would anyone do that? Eggs are a great source of protein and a little fat from olive oil can actually be a good thing. Plus, doesn't it lower the glycemic index?"

I laughed. "Okay, Mr. Nutrition."

"Sorry. Kieran had me read a couple of nutrition books for our training."

And what a great job you did during that training. I couldn't help but eye Drew's arms as we worked so closely together.

It only took a second for me to realize how awkwardly I was staring at Drew. I met his eyes, and felt myself blush, my cheeks getting all hot and tight.

"Anyway," I said, clearing my throat. "What I was trying to say was that if you ever want to substitute applesauce into the recipe, do it for either the oil or the eggs, but not both. I tried using applesauce for both the last time I made these, and I ended up with applesauce brownies...I could barely even taste the chocolate. Though, I guess that's one way to get me to follow the correct portion size since I definitely didn't want seconds."

Why did I say all that? I needed to learn how to stop rambling when I was nervous.

Drew laughed and winked. "Thanks for the heads-up."

I momentarily was caught up in the color of his eyes. Had they always

been that dark blue?

"Are you okay?" Drew asked. "You seem like you have something on your mind."

I shook my head. "Yeah, sorry. I didn't get enough sleep last night. I think my body's wishing for a nap." That was true enough—I really was tired, but it wasn't the reason why I was acting so weird.

I grabbed a wooden spoon out of a drawer and started mixing the ingredients together to give myself something to do. Drew was leaning back against the granite counter, watching me, and I suddenly wished I was wearing a cuter apron than the boxy black thing I had on.

And why hadn't I spent more time on my hair this morning? My plain ponytail did nothing for the harsh angles of my face.

"Did you finish writing that scene between Treven and Misty?" Drew asked.

And before I could stop them, images of Drew and me kissing like there was no tomorrow jumped into my mind. His hands in my hair. His body pressed up against mine in the corner.

Oh, how I wanted to do that again.

This time with it being real.

"Yeah, I finished it," I said.

"Did our recording help out much?" His eyes searched my face, as if trying to guess at my feelings.

"It helped a lot." I tucked some hair behind my ear.

And I would probably be watching it again tonight, reliving the moment over and over again and wishing that it was all real.

I grabbed the brownie pan from the drawer beneath the oven and hoped Drew couldn't read everything in my blush.

"Do you want to lick the spoon?" I held the brownie batter-covered spoon out to Drew after scraping it in the pan.

"Sure." Drew's fingers brushed mine in the exchange, causing a small

spark to warm my hand.

I busied myself with putting the brownies in the oven so I wouldn't have to think too much about how the way Drew licked the spoon mirrored the way he kissed.

Yeah, only middle schoolers thought about that kind of stuff anyway. I set the timer for twenty-eight minutes and put the batter bowl in the sink.

"Are you sure you don't want to taste it too?" Drew offered the spoon to me.

"No, that's okay."

"Too much like kissing me, huh?"

I pulled my head back. "What did you just say?"

Was there something mischievous in his smile? Was he teasing me about kissing now?

He lifted a shoulder. "I was just saying that sharing a spoon is pretty much the same as kissing." He licked the spoon slowly once again for effect. "Your loss." Then he dropped it into the sink behind him.

"You're ridiculous." I swatted him on the arm, hoping I came off as unaffected—in reality, a family of butterflies had taken flight in my stomach.

"Just trying to share. I seem to remember you having a fondness for brownies. Or is that just Misty when she's hanging out with Treven?"

Was he challenging me? Because if he was, I was so going to go with it.

"You have batter on your lip still." I stepped closer and touched the chocolate smudge on the dip of his lip with my finger, wiping it off. Then, deciding to go for the gold, I stuck my finger in my mouth and sucked the batter off.

Drew's eyes widened, his Adam's apple shifting. "How'd that taste?"

"Delicious."

"Good." His smile was back and he crossed his arms. "I was hoping the brownie batter would make me look tastier."

I stepped closer, so my face was a breath away from his. "You don't need

leftover brownie batter to make you taste better." I glanced at his mouth.

He licked his lips. "Do you have any lip balm I could use? I left mine at home."

I narrowed my eyes, wondering if he was getting at something. His lips didn't look chapped. But I retrieved my lip balm from my pocket anyway.

"Pumpkin spice?" Drew inspected me. "Does that mean your lips are spicier today?"

"Wouldn't you like to know." I fought the smile taking shape on my face, but it came anyway. "You know, using my lip balm is almost like kissing me."

Drew grinned as he spread a thin layer over his lips. "It's like you can read my mind. I was about to say the same thing." He held the tube out to me. "You know that the next time you use this, it will be like you're kissing me back."

It really was like I was back in high school, testing the limits and trying to figure out whether Drew wanted to kiss me.

And I *really* wanted to figure it out. So I took the lip balm from him and slowly swiped it across my lips, smacking them together. "Mmmm, you're a pretty good kisser." I winked, hoping against all odds that I could keep the blush away. I'd been so good at flirting like this with Drew back in high school, but man, I was out of practice.

Drew just laughed. "I'm pretty sure the real thing is just a bit better though, right?"

Heat sparked through my body and I blushed all the way from my head to my toes. I fumbled for a witty response, but my mind was a jumble and I couldn't form anything into a coherent sentence.

Drew stepped closer. He bent down to whisper in my ear, "Cat got your tongue?"

Chills raced up my neck.

He was so close; his cologne wafted to my nose, smelling better than

anyone had the right to.

I was about to say, *No, but I wouldn't mind if you did*, when footsteps sounded behind us.

I whipped my head around to find my mom. I instinctively smoothed my hair and stepped away from Drew, hoping my mom wouldn't notice how flustered I was. "H-hi, Mom. We just got the brownies in the oven."

Had my mom seen us standing close? Because I wouldn't be able to explain it, since I still wasn't allowed to even tell anyone that Drew was single.

My mom smiled. "Would you two mind carrying these boxes upstairs? Your dad can't lift much after his hernia surgery, and I'm just not up to going up and down the stairs so much today."

"Sure. Where would you like us to put them?" Drew asked.

"Oh, just set them on my bed. I can manage them from there," Mom said with the wave of a hand.

I didn't know whether to be grateful for the distraction or not, but I grabbed a box and led Drew up the gray carpeted staircase. I dropped one on the bed then told Drew I'd just meet him downstairs after a quick trip to the bathroom. But when I came out, I saw that Aiden's door had been opened. I peeked inside my older brother's room and found Drew standing with his back to me, looking at the collage of photos Aiden had stuck to his wall.

"It hasn't changed a bit since that night, has it?" Drew shoved his hands in his pockets and glanced back at me.

I went to stand beside him to look at the pictures.

"No." I sighed. "I don't know whether a psychologist would say it's healthy or not, but none of us can bring ourselves to box anything up." It would be like desecrating sacred ground.

Walking into this room was like walking into the past.

"Do you remember that night?" Drew pointed at a photo of the three of us at a bonfire on the beach.

It was the summer before Aiden died. Drew's hair was just shaggy enough that it curled around his ears, and he had a scruffy beard that had changed my opinion on facial hair.

My heart still beat like crazy every time I looked at that photo.

"That's the night Aiden tried jumping over the fire and ended up dropping his flip-flops in the flames."

"He was lucky only his flip-flops got burned."

"And lucky you were there to throw him in the ocean to stop him from trying it again."

"I don't recall him using the word *lucky* that night." Drew winked.

"Yeah, and you got stuck driving his little sister home, so she wouldn't be late for curfew."

Drew peeked at me and set his arm around my shoulders. "I'm pretty sure I felt pretty lucky that night as well."

"I always worried I was such a burden when you could have been flirting with all the other girls there."

Drew squeezed me closer to his side. "I didn't care about any other girls. I was too enchanted by you to see anyone else."

I went still.

"Really?"

Drew turned so we faced each other. "I almost kissed you that night, too." He pushed some hair that had come out of my ponytail behind my ear then slowly traced his fingers along my jaw. "I was just counting down the days until you graduated, so I could ask you out."

Nerve endings I'd forgotten about buzzed with electricity as his fingers traced a line down my neck. He moved closer, and all my thoughts fled as he leaned his forehead against mine, sending more tingles through me.

His hands found their way to my waist before moving up my sides, along the ridges of my ribcage. And when he gently smoothed his hands across my back, making the fabric of my shirt bunch beneath his touch, tremors of

pleasure raced down my spine.

When he breathed in a slow and shaky breath, I knew this was affecting him, too.

I was falling so hard for this wonderful man. Falling for him more every day.

I tilted my head back and looked up at him, hoping he'd close the distance between our lips.

"Is everything okay up there?" my mom's voice cut through the silence.

At the sudden sound of my mom's voice, Drew staggered backward, bumping into Aiden's desk.

What had almost happened? I wondered as I looked at Drew, noticing his eyes were blown wide like he too was just coming back from a daze.

"Kate?" Mom's voice called again. *"Are you up there?"*

"Yeah . . ." I cleared my throat. "We're up here."

"I guess we should go down?" Drew whispered.

"Yeah . . . I guess so."

I wiped my hands on my jeans as I led him out of Aiden's room, trying not to let my disappointment cripple me.

"Are the brownies done?" I forced a happy tone into my voice when I found my mom in the kitchen.

"The timer just went off. I can pull them out if you want."

Why didn't you just do that in the first place instead of ruining the moment Drew and I were having?

But instead of asking her that, I said, "I can do it. You go back to your book."

"Are you sure?" Mom eyed me, and then Drew, who was right behind me. If my mom noticed how frazzled we both were, she didn't say anything.

"Yes, go ahead," Drew said.

Mom took a step back toward the living room. And when Drew wasn't looking, Mom mouthed "sorry" to me.

So she had noticed something was going on.

After pulling out the brownies, Drew and I went to work hulling and slicing the strawberries. Though we didn't say anything about what had almost happened, we did stand close enough that our arms brushed against one another a few times as we worked.

And it was probably silly for such a slight touch to feel so electric, but I totally almost cut my finger off when Drew's shoulder grazed mine.

Yeah...I was lit up! Every atom in my body seemed to be buzzing right now.

Because something was happening between us.

Things were changing.

And with each stolen touch, the charge in my system went up.

I could only imagine that when we finally did kiss again, there might be an explosion.

The electricity stayed all through dinner. Drew's chair was right next to mine, and as we ate and chatted with my family, I noticed that his knee kept bumping against my leg.

I didn't know if he was doing it on purpose, because he'd move it away after only a second or two. But when it happened the third time, I decided to do a little test of my own and pressed my leg against his.

And kept it there.

I counted to five in my head, and when he still didn't move his leg away, I glanced at him to gauge what he might be thinking about this.

And when I studied his face, I found that the corner of his lip was quirked up slightly, like he was fighting a smile as he listened to my father talk about the cruise he and my mom were planning to take in March.

So maybe he liked bumping legs under the table?

Feeling encouraged, I decided to test the limits even more.

I knew from back in the day that the sides of his leg were super ticklish, so as he told my dad about a new project his company was working on, I

reached over and lightly ran my finger along his thigh.

His hamstring flexed immediately, as if he was fighting the sensation. So, of course, I did it again. And when his lips pressed together like he was trying to keep his reactions on the down-low and not tip my family off to what was going on beneath the table, I wondered what other ways I could have fun with him.

I slipped my hand onto his thigh and was just about to pinch the spot above his knee that had always been the most ticklish of all, when Drew suddenly covered my hand with his to hold it hostage.

And even though I'd only done this to have a little fun, when he ran his thumb over my knuckles, I never wanted him to let go.

Drew held my hand like that for a moment. But when my dad asked him about his plans for the future, Drew gently turned my hand over in his and intertwined his fingers with mine.

And when he gave my hand a gentle squeeze, I melted. Because I really wanted to read into this.

To dissect what was happening between us right now and theorize that he would only be holding my hand like this right now if he liked me back.

Like, could him holding my hand like this at the same time my dad brought up the future, possibly mean that Drew saw a future with me?

Was it possible I could be part of this amazing man's future?

I really, *really* hoped so.

"Well, here you are," I said as I pulled into the studio's parking lot where Drew had left his truck on Friday.

"Yeah, here we are," Drew echoed. The air had been just as charged on the drive as it had been at my parents' house. It was dark now, and the moon glowed full in the sky. "I guess I'll need to grab my bag out of the trunk." He

put his hand on the door handle but hesitated.

"Yeah, I guess so." I tried to keep my disappointment out of my voice. I'd really been hoping tonight would end with a kiss. But I popped the trunk with a push of a button.

Drew waited a moment longer before climbing out. He ducked his head back in my car. "Thanks for the ride. And for everything." He gave me a meaningful look before shutting the door and going to retrieve his bag from the back of my car.

I let out a disappointed sigh, hating the thought that I'd missed another chance. Would we ever have another day like this? Everything had been so perfect. My heart fissured at the thought that the perfect night wouldn't end as I'd hoped.

The trunk of my car shut with a thud, and Drew threw his duffel bag into the back of his truck.

I watched Drew as he just stood by his truck, his back to me and his hand resting on the handle.

Why was he just standing there?

I watched him carefully from the darkness of my car, my heart pounding as I thought of reasons why he wasn't already driving away.

Drew turned his head from side to side, as if checking the parking lot for something or someone. Then, he turned and walked back to talk to me.

"You still interested in taking a drive in the Aston Martin?" he asked, his face serious.

I didn't have to think about it. "Yes."

"Then follow me home. Just make sure no one is tailing you."

I gulped and nodded. "I'll meet you there."

I didn't drive straight to Drew's house. Instead, I took a few wrong turns, just to make sure the paparazzi weren't following me as Drew feared. But when I'd gone down a few random blocks and didn't see the same cars turning with me, I decided it was safe to drive the rest of the way to his house.

The garage was open, and Drew was waiting inside. I got out of my car, and Drew hit the button to close the door.

Confused, I watched the descending door before turning to Drew. "I thought we were going for a drive."

His eyes were dark and the way he looked at me made the knots in my stomach twist up so tight I didn't think they'd ever come undone. "That was just my excuse to get you away from prying eyes." He closed the distance between us in three long strides. "I didn't get to finish what I started in Aiden's room."

And before my mind could catch on to what was happening, Drew had one hand cradling my neck, the other wrapped around my waist. And then, he was kissing me.

My heart banged against my ribs as his lips coaxed mine into a long, deep exchange. Instantly, our kiss exploded with passion. Years of misunderstandings, unwanted separation, and regret detonated and began to burn out of control. We weren't acting like Treven and Misty this time. We were Kate and Drew. And we wanted this.

I let my fingers become lost in the softness of his hair. His knees seemed to buckle, and a moan escaped him as he pulled me against his Escalade. "You have no idea how good that feels," he mumbled against my lips.

"This?" I combed my fingers through his hair again.

"That." He moaned again, and I knew I had better be careful. At this late hour, the staff had already gone home, which meant we were alone. There would be no one there to stop us. With that realization, I forced my hands to travel away from his hair, and rubbed them along his strong, muscular shoulders, reveling in the way they felt.

Growing up, I'd always dreamed Drew Burrows would be the man I married, the one I'd give my entire self to. And I knew in this moment that I still wanted it to happen. I had never stopped wanting him, not really. I'd simply buried my dreams and covered them with other relationships for

years. But no one could ever have the hold on my heart that Drew did.

His hands were at my waist, gripping my shoulders then pulling the elastic from my hair and getting tangled in it. He gently kissed my cheek, and then trailed kisses down my neck.

"Run away with me, Kate," he whispered, before his lips found mine again. "We can take my private jet anywhere in the world, wherever you want to go, and get away from everything."

"What?" I asked, my mind so fuzzy I wasn't sure I'd heard him, right. "But I..." Another kiss. "What about the show?"

"I don't care about that anymore. I just want to be with you." He pulled away, caressing my cheek with his fingertips. "I want to hold your hand in public. Take you on a proper date. Give you the world . . ." His eyes were so sincere that my heart swelled in my chest. He wanted me, and not just in the way a guy wants a girl. He truly wanted *me*, even though he could have anyone else in the world. He leaned his forehead against mine. "Please say yes." His voice was low and husky, which caused a stirring sensation low in my belly.

"Yes," I whispered. I'd just have to take Dion and Gwen's secret footage to Alexis in the morning, and then I would run away with Drew.

ALEXIS: **You made the front page of Celebrity this morning. And it's not good.**

I pulled the browser up on my phone and typed in my name to see what Alexis was talking about. It only took a second for images and dozens of new stories from that morning to pop up.

SAINT DREW: COMFORTING OR CANOODLING, the headline read. Below it was an image of Kate and me embracing.

What? My eyebrows stitched together as I pressed on the link to see what the article was about.

Where had they gotten a photo of Kate and me hugging?

My question was answered as soon as the photo was enlarged. Trees and headstones were in the background. It was from Aiden's birthday memorial, when she'd told me about her divorce.

But I didn't do anything wrong then. It was an innocent hug.

I had still been committed to my relationship with Gwen at the time . . . as crazy as that sounded now after everything that had transpired.

I scrolled down to see if there were any other photos. I was greeted with an image of Kate and me driving somewhere in the company car. Kate was visible in the driver seat. There was another photo of us at the grocery store, me in my holy-man costume, her in her sweats. The caption to that one read,

MIDNIGHT RENDEZVOUS?

How had they gotten these photos?

Oh, that's right. People posted everything online these days. Those sorority girls had probably posted that pic to social media, and then the paparazzi had most likely supplied the rest.

My neck grew hot as I read the article from the beginning.

Finding Your Soulmate's bachelor, Drew Burrows, has been spotted several times over the last few weeks with a beautiful blonde woman—one he did not meet on the reality dating show this past fall. Who is this girl, many ask? None other than a childhood friend, Kate Dawson. The two have been seen together numerous times, seeming not to care who catches them together. An insider spoke to us and assured our sources that Drew and Kate seem to have a relationship much different from what you'd expect a celebrity and his childhood friend to have. There have been late nights away from the show, trips to the cemetery, and secret meetings at his house.

Didn't they know that she worked for the show?

I read on, not believing what I was reading.

A close friend told our source that Kate has been after fame and fortune for years. This recent attempt at Drew is only the last in a string of other attempts. Last summer she was married to socialite, Nolan Prosser, son of Armand Prosser, the founder of the outdoor sports empire, O.R.A. The insider told Celebrity it was a quick marriage and that once Kate discovered she was not named in Armand's will after his death, she had the marriage dissolved.

Could good guy Drew Burrows have fallen into her next trap?

My stomach twisted and curdled. This couldn't be true, could it? There was no way she was after me for my money.

But the tiny insecure voice in the back of my mind whispered that it might be true.

She *had* married a rich man before.

Maybe she had changed more in the past seven years than I thought and was just using her film experience to put on the show of a lifetime.

My heart told me she hadn't, but I'd been tricked before. I needed to talk to her. I needed to make sure she hadn't been pretending the whole time.

I texted my personal assistant and told him to cancel my flight and send the pilot home. I had been so excited to escape from the drama of real life, to fly away to a part of the world where I wouldn't be recognized.

But instead, here I was, in the biggest mess I'd ever been in.

I drove straight to the studio after throwing on jeans and a T-shirt. Alexis wanted to see me in her office, but I knew Kate had planned to take Alexis her computer before we jetted off. I needed to talk to her and make sure the gossip magazine was just doing its job: spreading rumors without an ounce of truth.

Kate wasn't at her desk when I arrived, so I went to Alexis's office. I knocked on the closed door and waited. A moment later, Alexis came out to see who it was before inviting me in.

Once inside, I was greeted with an image that broke my heart. Kate was sitting in one of the chairs, her eyes red with tears. She sniffed when I took the seat next to her but didn't look at me. Instead, she stared straight ahead of her, her expression stoic.

Had Alexis made good on her threat and fired Kate for secretly dating me? My mind whirled a hundred miles an hour as I tried to figure out all the

reasons for Kate's tears. *Or was she crying because her and Nolan's very private divorce had been splattered all over the Internet?*

Or was she just upset she'd been caught in her scheme to get my money?

"Thanks for coming so quickly," Alexis said to me as she resumed her seat, her face all business. "I've been going over everything with Kate, and we've decided on a plan of action from here on out."

"What do you mean?" I frowned.

"For the sake of the show, you and Kate will no longer be working together."

"You can't fire her!" I nearly shouted, my urge to protect Kate despite my doubts surprising me.

Alexis closed her eyes briefly. "I'm not firing her."

"Then what are you talking about?" I asked. I couldn't help but notice how quiet Kate was, sitting beside me but feeling worlds away. Was she quitting, giving up on her dreams because my fame and fortune had raked her name through the mud?

"Kate will be assisting me with other things now. I know none of those stories are true, Kate confirmed it, but I can't have you two spotted together anymore."

So Kate hadn't told Alexis about our kiss last night.

That was probably a good thing considering everything.

Alexis continued, "Normally, I wouldn't be worried about these kinds of stories since they're actually great for ratings. But since you're no longer with Gwen, this won't help us out at all. Everyone will feel cheated when we get to the finale and you aren't with Gwen."

I leaned back in my chair. Kate would still be working there.

"I also need to make the request that you two no longer see each other outside of work either." She looked more sternly at me. "I know you're *friends*, but until this all blows away and the season finale has aired, I can't take any more chances."

"We didn't do anything wrong," I insisted. I hadn't broken any laws by having feelings for Kate. Heck, I hadn't even kissed her until things were over with Gwen.

"When you're the Bachelor, everything besides a happily ever after is considered a criminal offense. Welcome to showbiz."

This is ridiculous! Frustration bubbled inside me, so thick and hot I thought I might explode. Why couldn't things just go my way for once? Was this another punishment for what happened the night Aiden died? Was I truly cursed to forever be on the outside of everything I'd ever wanted?

Bad things always seemed to happen when I finally thought I'd gotten Kate. Were we doomed to live like this forever?

"Are you going to have trouble following through with my request?" Alexis cocked an eyebrow.

Kate set her hands on the armrest of her chair, as if readying to stand. "No. It's fine. I'll just do my new job, and I promise not to interfere with Drew and your finale anymore."

I covered her hand with mine. Her skin was soft and warm. "None of this is your fault. You know that, right?" I dipped my gaze down to hers.

"That isn't what matters right now." She glanced down at my hand on hers. I squeezed it, and she gave me a tired smile. "Part of my job is to make you look good. I won't mess it up this time."

She stood and glanced back at Alexis. "If that's all, I'll get back to work now."

"Yes, thank you, Kate. I'll let Oliver know about the switch."

I got up to leave as well, figuring I was done.

"Actually, I still need to discuss a few things with you, Drew. It'll just be a few more minutes."

I released a long breath as I sunk back in my chair. "What else do you want?" What else would she say to ruin my day?

Alexis waited for Kate to shut the door. She said, "As you're aware, we

weren't able to get any footage of Gwen and Dion as we'd hoped. So, in light of everything that has happened, you're going to have to continue with the charade of dating Gwen." She clasped her hands together. "How did it go with her anyway? Did she seem happy to see you after what happened the weekend before?"

"Didn't you watch the footage? I'm sure you know as well as I did that Gwen wasn't buying any of it. More like playing along to earn her twenty minutes of fame when this is all over, since she knows she won't be getting my money."

"I did notice that."

"So, what do you want me to do?"

Alexis drew in a deep breath before looking me straight in the eyes. "I need you to call Gwen and smooth things over."

My heart plummeted. That was the last thing I wanted to do.

"She's not going to go for it this time."

Alexis shook her head. "I'd make a heavy wager that this is exactly what she would want."

But I didn't want to do this. I wanted to do just what the gossip magazines were saying. I wanted to date Kate. And I was so tired of everything else getting in the way of my desire.

But I also didn't want Kate to be dragged through the mud any more than she had already. She'd been through more than enough this past year. I didn't need to be responsible for any more hurt to come into her life.

"So, will you do it? Will you find a way to make things better and keep my show from tanking?" Alexis asked, staring at me above the rim of her glasses.

I blew out a long breath. "I'll do it."

Alexis left me alone in her office, so I could call Gwen.

The phone rang twice before Gwen's frustrated voice came through the line. "So you left me yesterday to sneak off with your mistress? What a great way to live up to your nickname, Saint Drew," she scoffed.

I breathed out my nose slowly, trying to remain calm, before deciding I might as well kick this thing in the butt. "Actually, we figured we'd give you some extra time alone with Dion."

There was a sharp intake of breath, and then a pause as Gwen tried to think of something to say.

But I was done playing games. "I know you and Dion are secretly dating. I came back to the safe house a week ago and heard you guys in the bedroom."

More silence.

You have the right to remain silent; anything you say can and will be used against you.

Though her silence spoke louder than any words would.

Finally, she said, "I knew something was up when you suddenly wanted to spend the weekend together again, yet you didn't even want to look at me at all. That's why I told Dion to check the studio after you left."

She hadn't necessarily admitted anything, but she definitely knew they'd been set up. I supposed I didn't have to feel too bad about telling Gwen I knew about her and Dion. But Alexis probably wouldn't take that as much of a consolation since my bad acting skills had ruined yet another plan of hers.

"So how long have you and Kate been planning this? Was it before we met or after?"

My eyebrows knit together.

She actually believed the tabloids?

"The tabloids are full of crap. Kate and I weren't secretly dating *in those photos.*" 'In those photos' being the operative words. What we'd done last night had seemed a lot like we were dating. "The only one who cheated here

is you."

"Okay. So you say there's nothing going on between you and Kate, but it's obvious that you want there to be."

I wasn't about to respond to that. Gwen wasn't saying anything about Dion and her. I wouldn't say anything about my hopes in regard to Kate, either.

"Anyway," Gwen continued. "I'm guessing you've already talked to Kate."

"Yes." Well, Alexis did it for me.

"And I'm guessing she's not happy about the magazines."

"Nope."

"So, what if we just pretended to be happily dating—" She gasped as if something spectacular had just dawned on her. "Or, we could even pretend to be engaged." Her voice grew more and more excited, her words spilling out. "Yeah, celebrity couples do it all the time. We could ask Alexis if we could get engaged on the after-show, and then pretend to date for a while. It would be awesome for the ratings, and then we could do a ton of paid interviews or meet and greets and get all kinds of promotional opportunities. This could be a really good way to make a lot of money."

"But unlike you, I was actually in this for love, not money."

"Whatever." She seemed to think for a moment. "I bet Alexis would be a lot happier to take on Kate's screenplay if you give her the ending she's wanted all along."

"How did you know about Kate's screenplay?"

"Dion told me."

I sighed and thought about it. Getting her screenplay on the big screen had been Kate's goal all along when she'd taken the job. Maybe a fake engagement would be a good idea, especially when both of us knew it was merely a business transaction. It would probably be the thing to keep Alexis most happy. And if Alexis was happy, she'd take a more honest look at Kate's

screenplay and be more likely to accept it. Or at least pass it along to someone who would.

The thought of lying to everyone made me feel icky. But I also didn't want to dash Kate's chance at finally accomplishing her dreams. That's what had started us on this whole process. And that's what would keep me going even when things weren't exactly the way I wanted.

"So, what do you think?" Gwen sounded way happier now than she had at the beginning of our conversation. Could I stand to be around her for a bunch of paid appearances if it helped make Kate and Alexis happy?

"It's something to think about," I admitted.

"It's a great idea. I'm actually surprised we didn't come up with it sooner."

"Well, until a few minutes ago, you did think your affair was a secret."

"Right..."

I rolled my eyes. But whatever. I was over it. I was over her. Maybe it would be manageable to try a fake engagement for a little while. There would be a lot of positives for a lot of people. Kate would still have her job. Alexis would get the ending she'd wanted all along. Gwen would get the fame she'd pined for from the beginning, and she'd still get her sleaze-bag boyfriend Dion. The viewers would be happy to see an engagement at the end of the season, even if they didn't think Gwen was the one for me. And as for me? Well, I would be fine. I didn't want to give Alexis a reason to turn down Kate's screenplay. And when everything was over in a couple of months, after we'd made enough appearances and slowly showed the public signs of trouble in love-land, I'd find a way to end the charade and then finally be out of the limelight.

There was just one little nagging voice in the back of my head that whispered about how it would all be a big lie, and that my integrity would be on the line. But it was just a small voice. I was sure I could ignore it for a few months.

I found Alexis in the conference room after nailing down a few more particulars with Gwen.

Alexis was bent over her laptop at the large Cherrywood table. I leaned against the door frame. "It's all set up. I talked to Gwen, and she's more than on board about continuing our *relationship*. She even suggested a fake engagement. She thought it would be the perfect idea for us to get engaged on the after-show."

Alexis's head popped up. "She did?"

"She was pretty easy to work with once I mentioned Dion."

"You told her?" Frustration flashed in Alexis's eyes. "I was thinking about trying to set another trap for them."

I waved my hand. "She already knew something was up. That's why they left so early yesterday."

Alexis leaned back in her gray chair. "Okay. So you're going to fulfill your contract with a proposal then?"

I still wasn't sure I wanted to do this, but I nodded and said, "I want you to know that the only reason I'm okay with doing any of this is because of Kate. I don't want to give you a reason to fire her or not take an honest look at her screenplay. I'll give you the finale you've been dreaming of. I'll help make the ratings the best they've ever been. Just promise me you'll help me make sure Kate is happy when all this is over with."

"Spoken like a true businessman."

"Does that mean you'll keep an open mind?"

She nodded. "I'll do you one even better. I'll see what I can do about getting the gossip magazines to forget all about Kate and her divorce. I'll smooth things over for her."

I smiled the first smile I'd had all morning. "Thank you, Alexis. I appreciate that."

"It's the least I can do for you sacrificing even more of your time to give me that proposal." Her eyes lit up. "In fact, what if we went back to the Caribbean and re-shot the whole engagement, pretending that it went that way from the start?"

I frowned. "How are we supposed to do that? We filmed that months ago."

"We still have the set pieces from that day in Antigua. We can arrange to get Gwen's dress back from the designer. I'm sure Siegfried will be more than happy to loan it out again for the show. It's great advertising, after all."

Alexis spouted one idea after another, her countenance brightening with each one, clearly excited at the prospect of having the dream proposal finale she'd been hoping for.

"If we get everything lined up, we could be in Antigua as early as next week." Alexis's eyes were bright behind her glasses.

"Next week?"

"You don't have any big plans for next week, do you?"

I'd cleared most of my schedule last night after Kate left, with hopes of leaving all of this behind.

"My schedule is clear." But could I really do this? It was suddenly becoming more and more real. I would be getting engaged in one week—albeit a fake engagement—but still. I rolled my shoulders back, rocked my neck from side to side to relieve the tension.

"Great. We'll make sure everything is perfect." Then she dismissed me, telling me she'd be in touch with the details once they were nailed down.

I left the conference room and went in search of Kate. I needed to make sure everything was okay between us. She'd been crying when I'd walked in on her and Alexis's meeting. She was probably worried I believed the tabloids. I may have doubted her for a moment, but now that I'd had time to think about it, I realized I knew her well enough to know she couldn't have done any of those things. I needed to make things right. It was all happening

because of me, anyway.

But when I made it to her desk, she wasn't there.

"Alexis told her to take a couple of days off." Oliver walked up behind me, sipping from his coffee mug.

"Was she upset when she left?"

"You could say that." Oliver nodded, blowing into the mug. "She looked like she'd been crying for a while."

Was there anything I could do to make this better? I couldn't just drive over to her place. There were probably paparazzi all over, waiting for the next incriminating photo.

I thanked Oliver and then went to my truck to go home. I'd just have to give her a call and hope it was good enough. Though all I really wanted to do was run to her, hold her in my arms, and tell her that everything would be okay. Things would blow over and everyone would eventually move on.

I just had to get through the fake proposal first.

MY PHONE STARTED BUZZING for about the twentieth time since arriving at my parents' house to hide out. I was about to shut it off when I saw Drew's name and photo on the screen.

"Hello?" I asked tentatively, not knowing what to expect from this call. Did he believe the gossip about me? Did he think I was only after him for his money, no better than Gwen?

"I'm glad you picked up." Drew sighed, relief evident in his voice as he spoke. "How are you doing? I feel terrible about what's happening right now."

"I'm fine," I lied. I was a mess.

It had been like a nightmare when I got to work this morning and Oliver had asked me if I'd seen the latest trending story on social media. How had they gotten those photos of us? I still couldn't believe that my face was plastered all over the Internet next to Drew's.

And who was the insider who'd told the reporter all those private details about my life? I couldn't think of anyone that would have said anything about my divorce, not that many people even knew about it. I'd only told my family and Drew.

Had Nolan said something? Or his new girlfriend? And that's when I realized I had no idea who Nolan had told about it, or what he might have

said. He'd probably told everyone outright lies about the situation to save face for himself.

What a disaster this was!

"How was your conversation with Gwen? When Alexis sent me home, she said something about you calling her."

"Gwen took it pretty well after I told her I knew about Dion."

"Of course." I waited for him to continue.

"I, uh . . ." My stomach shrunk when he hesitated. Something was up, but I had no clue what it could be. He and Gwen wouldn't get back together, would they? He cleared his throat and continued. "Gwen suggested we stage an engagement, and when I told Alexis about it, she was all over it. Alexis is hoping to film it in Antigua next week."

What?

"And how do you feel about that?" I held my breath, not sure I wanted to hear his answer.

"I can see why Gwen and Alexis are excited about the idea."

"Yes, but how do *you* feel about it?"

The line was quiet for a moment before Drew finally said, "I'm not thrilled about it. But I think it could be worth it in the end. I mean, it's not like I'll really be engaged, so I won't have to pretend in front of Gwen anymore. And I see it as a way to get the paparazzi off your back. I'm pretty sure they'll leave you alone after they find out nothing was going on between us."

Nothing was going on between us? A pang knifed at my heart.

I'd thought *something* might be going on.

At least, after that kiss last night and our plans to run away, I'd really hoped something was changing.

"Did I say something wrong?" Drew asked when I stayed quiet.

I swallowed and faked a happy tone. "Nope. I'm glad you've figured out a way to make everyone happy. I hope it all goes really well."

My phone started beeping with another call from a number I didn't recognize.

"Hey, my sister is calling me. I probably better answer it," I lied to get off the phone. I couldn't continue this conversation much longer before my voice would start breaking down. I already had more tears stinging at the back of my eyes, and a sob building in my throat.

"Okay," Drew said, sounding worried, and maybe a little confused. "Again, I'm really sorry about all this. Apparently, it's hazardous for anyone to be seen with me right now. I hope you have a better day."

"Mmm-hmm," I managed to say before hanging up. Then I put my phone in airplane mode. I couldn't handle any more people today.

Where did they get all these old photos from? Who would give these out? I wondered as I scrolled through another article about Drew's and my supposed affair the next day.

I had always hoped to see one of my stories make headlines—I'd just assumed it would be one I wrote, not one about me. But such was the life in Hollywood—you never really knew which story would sell.

But how had they found out so much about our past? Somehow, the celebrity gossip sites had found photos of us from years ago. One was a snapshot taken from Drew and Aiden's high school graduation. In the original photo, I had stood between the two boys with their arms around me. In the past, every time I'd looked at it, I would think, *the three musketeers*. But online, someone had completely cropped Aiden out of the photo, making it look like it was just Drew and me posing together.

How had they gotten that photo? The only people with a copy of that particular snapshot were Drew, Aiden, and myself. Maybe my parents too, but they would never sell them to a tabloid. Drew wouldn't have sold us out

either. And neither of us had put those up on social media. And of course, Aiden hadn't leaked them.

Then something occurred to me. I quickly did a search on my browser to look at Aiden's old social media accounts. Sure enough, after minutes of scrolling, I found all of our old photos that were now being viewed by the whole country.

It was amazing what kinds of stories could be fabricated from a few snapshots in time.

The current story on the screen questioned whether Drew and I had been in on the whole thing together from the start: Speculations about whether Drew had become the Bachelor just so I could get into the business; how we had been dating secretly for years; and how my marriage to Nolan had only been about the money.

Like I even ended up with any money. I scoffed. All I got out of that sham of a marriage was an apartment that Nolan had pre-paid for a year and a ring I had stored at the bottom of a drawer somewhere. It was ridiculous how many lies had been spread in the last few days.

When I took my phone off airplane mode for a few minutes earlier today, I had hoped to find a message or missed call from Drew. But there was nothing.

I tried not to feel depressed about it. Nothing could happen between us. We couldn't be seen together. It would ruin the show's new plans of a fake engagement. So I might as well get used to the distance now.

Alexis had texted me about the plans for next week, asking if I could come back in this afternoon and help arrange everything that needed to be put together for the re-shoot. But oh, how I hated the idea of setting everything up for Gwen and Drew to spend more time together. I'd seen their chemistry on plenty of the episodes, and even if they hadn't gotten along perfectly after filming, they still had sparks when they kissed. And they would probably be doing more kissing if they were fake-engaged.

The whole thing made me sick. Things had finally seemed like they might have a chance of working out between Drew and I. Drew had invited me to run away with him for a few days. He wouldn't have suggested that if he hadn't had feelings for me. Would he?

Except, he'll be doing just that with Gwen instead.

I wrapped my arms around myself, my stomach churning. This job was supposed to make my life better, not worse.

But once again, something was in the way of Drew and me getting together. Maybe the Universe was trying to tell us something.

At least this time, I hadn't left my heart out there to hang for too long—only a few well-timed pictures and fake headlines that I wished were actually true.

Because if they were, maybe all of this might have been worth it.

I SPENT the next few days dropping by radio shows and doing TV interviews as an attempt to smother the gossip about Kate and me. I missed not having Kate along for those. Her presence had always made them easier and less awkward. But, of course, we couldn't be together anymore, especially not in front of *Finding Your Soulmate* fans.

At least one good thing had come from this big mess. My motivation to help save Kate from further humiliation seemed to have finally made it easier for me to act.

Once I'd completed all my interviews, I locked myself up to avoid the paparazzi.

Alexis kept in contact with me over what I needed to do for next week's filming. Everything had been arranged for me to fly out in a few days. I'd opted to use my private jet instead of flying in the first class seat the studio offered to get me. The less people around me, the better. And in the meantime, I was to come up with the perfect swoon-worthy proposal and practice it enough until it sounded sincere and authentic.

I'd tried several times to write it, but days later, the sheet of paper lying on my dining room table was still blank.

I should probably just ask Oliver or one of the other writers to write it up for me. Their version was sure to be better than anything I could come up

with.

By Friday, I had to get out of my house. I had to see Kate before I left for Antigua. I needed to make sure everything was still fine between us. Things had been going in a great direction before the tabloids stuck their noses into our business.

So, instead of going to bed at eleven o'clock, I put on a hoodie and went for a run. If the paparazzi wanted to follow me, they'd have to do it on foot. And I was pretty sure that at this time of night they wouldn't care to report what Drew Burrows looked like when he went out for a jog.

KATE

I HAD JUST FINISHED BRUSHING my teeth and was about to check my front door one more time to make sure it was locked, when the knob jangled. Scared that someone was breaking into my house, I did the first thing that came to mind and started barking.

The noise stopped, and I breathed a sigh of relief to see that the deadbolt was locked and that my impulse had seemed to work.

But then there was a light knock.

Bark! Bark! I summoned my best imitation of a little dog.

"Kate!" called a voice from the other side of the door. "Stop pretending to be a dog and just open the door, will you?"

It took a moment for me to recognize the voice.

Drew?

I saw a hooded figure through the door's peephole. It looked enough like Drew, but I still asked, "Who is it?"

"It's me, Drew." He pulled the gray hood down for a second, revealing his dark hair and blue eyes.

I undid the deadbolt to let him in.

"You could have at least acted like an intimidating dog with a low bark, not some yippy little thing." He grinned, shutting the door behind him.

"Sorry, I was caught off guard." I turned on my heel to walk to the couch,

but he grabbed me by the hand and pulled me to him, wrapping me in an unexpected embrace.

"Sorry to scare you," he spoke into my hair. "I was going nuts at home and had to see you."

He did?

After the week we'd had, I had no idea where we stood, especially after watching him tell everyone about how having an affair with his childhood friend was the last thing he'd ever do.

And when he didn't try to even message or call me, I figured his denial must have been true. He'd never been that great of an actor before.

But I melted against his chest despite my worries, not strong enough to push him away. I could allow myself a hug, even if it didn't mean the same thing to him as it did to me. "I missed seeing you, too."

So much.

Then I pulled back and glanced around to make sure the curtains were drawn closed. The last thing we needed was for someone to spot us together in my house this late on a Friday night.

Thankfully, they were all shut.

"How did you get here? Did anyone follow you?"

Drew plopped himself on the couch, patting the seat next to him. "I went for a run, and I'm pretty sure no one was able to follow me since I cut through a few parking lots and backyards on my way over here."

I didn't immediately sit by him; still not sure I could pretend like nothing had happened on Monday.

"You ran all this way?" I asked instead. "You went through people's yards?"

"Only ones without fences. Thankfully, the only time I got barked at was when I got here."

My cheeks heated. Why had I done that? Of course no one would buy that as anything close to being real.

Oh well, it wasn't like that was the most humiliating thing to happen to me this week.

When he patted the cushion on the couch again, I tentatively sat down. "What did you plan to do once you got here?"

"I don't know. I just needed to make sure everything was okay. Are the paparazzi still bugging you?" he asked, concern etched in his eyes.

"They hung out here the first few days, but I didn't notice as many today. Maybe they realized they weren't going to catch anything exciting here after all. Too bad for them they didn't wait until tonight."

Oh crap, I just made it sound like I was expecting something exciting to happen between us.

I was about to explain myself and clear up the innuendo when Drew's eyes locked in on mine and he said, "Yeah, good thing."

And I wished so badly I could read his mind right then. But since I wasn't related to Edward Cullen, I said, "What do you want to do now that you're here?"

Drew took in my appearance, seeming to notice for the first time that I was wearing pajamas.

"You were just going to bed, weren't you?"

I looked down at my pink-and-gray checked pajamas. "I've actually had these on for hours, but yeah, I was about to go to bed."

Drew looked like he was about to stand, and while I knew he *should* go, I didn't want him to. So I placed a hand on his arm to stop him. "I'm really not that tired anymore. I just had no reason to stay up before you came over. Now I'm wide awake."

"Do you wanna watch a movie?" he suggested.

"What are you in the mood for?"

"Whatever you wanna watch . . . anything but *Finding Your Soulmate*, that is."

Yeah, I didn't feel like watching him kiss other girls anymore either.

"How about you pick one while I pop the popcorn?"

A few minutes later, I came back with a bowl of microwaved popcorn. I set the bowl between us.

"You can sit closer," Drew said.

"Are you sure?" Hadn't he been telling everyone all week that nothing was going on between us?

Drew looked confused. "I thought I made things pretty clear on Sunday night."

"I guess I got confused with everything that happened the next day."

"That didn't change anything for me."

I scratched at a spot on my pajama pants. "I just wasn't sure."

"Why?" Drew furrowed his brow as if trying to figure me out.

I cleared my throat. "I watched your interviews. You said yourself nothing was going on between us. And then when you didn't even try to contact me . . ." I shrugged. "I guess it just reminded me too much of what happened the last time I thought you might like me."

His Adam's apple shifted. "I'm not going to avoid you for seven years." After drawing in a deep breath, Drew lifted his gaze back to me, his eyes haunted. "Leaving you after Aiden's death has only been my biggest regret for the last seven years."

Then why was he doing it again? Leaving me behind all to save some stupid show.

He seemed to sense that I didn't believe him.

"You know that's why I went on *Finding Your Soulmate* in the first place, right?"

"What?"

"I'd turned them down for years, but when your wedding announcement showed up in my mailbox one day, I knew I needed to move on since you obviously had."

"But you never even tried to date me," I insisted, suddenly frustrated that

he'd let me go through with marrying Nolan without even trying to say anything to me. I could have avoided making the biggest mistake of my life if I thought for a second that Drew wanted me.

"Every time I got the nerve up to contact you, you'd just made a new relationship Facebook-official. I figured I was the furthest thing from your mind."

I had dated a lot, but if I'd known Drew was interested, I would have jumped at the chance to date him. He was Drew Burrows after all—the guy I'd daydreamed about my entire adolescence.

"Looks like we should have gotten braver years ago," I said. "I always thought I was just some bucket-list item to you."

"Bucket-list item?"

"You know, gotta check off kissing my best friend's sister. Guys have those kinds of things." Kind of like how I'd just been another notch in Nolan's belt.

Drew shook his head. "I already told you, Aiden threatened me pretty much every day that he would beat me up if I ever touched you."

"He never would have won." I grinned. "You were always so much bigger than him."

Drew winked. "I didn't want to embarrass him then."

We were quiet for a moment, thinking about the past that could have been if we hadn't made our own assumptions on so many things.

"So you never thought I was a bad kisser?" I asked hesitantly.

Drew chuckled. "Never."

"Did you ever think about it after that day?" I scooted closer to him.

Drew sat up and leaned forward as well. "All. The. Time."

Our eyes locked as if magnetized to each other, because we both leaned in. My insides melted when I saw Drew's gaze dip to my lips. I closed my eyes, touching my forehead against his, and waited. My breathing was shallow, but I slipped my hand along his shoulder.

And just when I felt Drew's breath on my face, the image of him down on one knee, getting engaged to Gwen, flashed through my mind.

"Stop. Wait, wait," I choked out. "We can't."

Drew went still beneath my hand. "We can't?"

It took all of my willpower to pull back. "You're getting engaged next week."

"It isn't a real engagement."

"I know." I looked down and ran a finger across Drew's chest, smoothing the fabric of his shirt as I remembered all the women Nolan had messaged and spent time alone with. I'd foolishly been oblivious to it all. I had blindly trusted him with my heart, and he'd tossed me aside once he'd gotten what he wanted.

All of that was done in secret. Could I handle *watching* Drew pretending to be engaged to another woman—a gorgeous woman whom he'd had feelings for at one time?

I knew the answer. I wasn't strong enough.

"I don't think I could handle kissing you, only to watch you ask someone to marry you a few days later. I just . . ." I sighed and gazed at him. "I can't do it after everything that happened with Nolan. Real or fake. I-I think it would break me."

Drew sunk back into the couch and released a defeated sigh.

"But if it makes you feel better," I added with a half-hearted smile, "I really, really want to kiss you."

"And so do I." His face showed a range of emotions from frustration, to defeat, to desire. "So badly."

I looked at my hands which were still on his chest. "I'm sorry."

"I understand." His fingers found mine, and they intertwined so perfectly. "Is this okay?"

I had always wanted to just sit and hold Drew Burrows's hand—to be able to hold it anytime I wanted. "Yeah. This is fine."

He let go of my hand and put his arm around my shoulder, pulling me into his side. "What about this?"

Oh, cuddling with Drew felt right, too. I knew I couldn't give this up either if he was offering. "This is okay, too."

"But no kissing?" He spoke into my hair. His low voice making my insides shudder.

I shook my head, not daring to lift my face to look at him. If I did, I knew I'd lose all my resolve and end up kissing him.

"Okay," he said softly. "I won't kiss you. Not until you ask me to."

"Thank you for understanding." I wrapped my arms around his torso and settled in closer.

"It's going to be really hard, though. But I guess I'll have to make do with cuddling and just reliving that kiss on Sunday for now." We were stretched out on the couch, and I rested my head on Drew's chest.

"Me too," I said with a sigh. I pushed *play* on the movie and tried to focus on just this moment and not on what things would be like for the next few weeks.

I WAS GETTING ENGAGED *in a few hours*. I thought as I paced back and forth across the carpet in my hotel room in Antigua.

Engaged.

To a woman I could barely stand to be around for more than an hour, let alone love.

Kate and I had come to some kind of understanding Friday night, though I wasn't exactly sure where we stood. Were we dating? Or were we just friends who liked each other and were waiting to date? Was that the plan? We certainly weren't friends with benefits . . . since there would be no kissing until the whole *Finding Your Soulmate* mess was over with. But boy, did I wish there was a least some kissing. It had taken all my self-control not to kiss her.

I pushed my fingers through my hair. Why had I agreed to the fake engagement plan anyway? Couldn't I have just told Gwen and Alexis no? Told them I never signed up for this? I had tried, but the process hadn't worked for me. None of those girls had been *the one*. None of them were Kate. Kate still had my heart after all these years. She would always have my heart.

But she also had dreams of her own, and I didn't want to ruin her shot. A huge part of me wanted to just pay for the whole production of one of her

movies myself.

But I knew she'd never go for that.

So instead, I was getting engaged *for* her. Not *to* her.

This was so messed up.

I'd always told myself I only wanted to get down on bended knee once, and here I was trying to figure out the perfect proposal for the wrong girl in order to help the right girl.

A knock sounded on my door, breaking me out of my trance.

I had texted Alexis a few minutes before, telling her that she should probably just have one of her writers think up the right words, since they still weren't coming to me. That was probably her coming to the rescue now.

I swung the door open. "Hey, Alexi—"

Not Alexis.

Kate.

"What are you doing here?" I managed to say after a beat. She looked beautiful in the afternoon sunlight, wearing a white T-shirt and jeans that hugged her curves just right.

"Alexis told me you needed help with something."

"She shouldn't have sent you." Why had she sent Kate? Alexis knew how I felt about her.

Pain reflected in Kate's eyes at my words, so I hurried to say, "It's not that. I just, uh, I'm having a hard time coming up with the perfect fake proposal, and I don't know—with the way I feel about you—it's just interesting that Alexis would send you to help me write it."

Kate nodded and walked in. "She did say you needed my writing skills. I should've known it would be for something like this."

Did she care? I couldn't get a read on what she thought of the situation.

I expected she wouldn't want to help me with this, but maybe she was fine?

"Okay," I said, heading back to the table and pulling out a chair for Kate.

"Let's get this started. I'm supposed to get dressed in an hour, so there isn't much time to get it done."

"What do you have so far?" Her face was all business, but there was something there that told me she might be dreading this just as much as I was.

I gestured at the blank sheet of paper. "So far I've got nothing."

Kate took the pen. "Do you mind?"

"No, no, please. Go ahead."

She put pen to paper and looked at me with those bright blue eyes of hers. "Well, if I was watching the show, I would want the proposal to be genuine..." She smirked at me, and I was relieved she could joke around on such a somber day. "But since that's not possible, we'll just have to dream up the most romantic proposal we can."

"Sounds good to me."

"Let's start with Gwen."

I scowled at her name. Kate seemed to notice.

"Well, it is her name, isn't it?"

"Yeah, but . . . I don't know. Let's just leave her name off. I think that's part of the problem. I can't come up with a proposal for Gwen because I don't want to propose to Gwen."

Kate crossed out Gwen's name and moved down a line. "So, should we just pretend you're writing this for someone else?"

"Sure," I said.

We worked through a bunch of proposals, using lines like "You make my life so much better," and "I can't imagine life without you."

But even though those lines sounded great for a proposal, I could never imagine myself saying them to Gwen. They'd have to reshoot it about a million times before the words could come out sounding genuine.

I slumped in my chair. "Maybe I should just keep it short and sweet. Just get down on one knee and blurt out, 'Will you marry me?' and call it good."

Kate leaned back. "It's up to you. I don't think Alexis will be content with that, but I'm out of ideas too, so maybe it's for the best."

"I wish it didn't have to be this way," I said, not trying to hide the longing in my voice any longer. I put a hand on her face, caressing her cheek and loving the way her skin flushed at my touch. "I wish—"

There was a knock on the door.

Joe peeked his head inside. "It's time to get in your suit. We'll be leaving in an hour."

ONE HOUR.

Just one hour and Drew would be getting engaged.

Even though I knew it wasn't real, I still hated the thought of watching it. Hated the thought that while promoting their fake engagement, he and Gwen might rediscover the small connection they had had on the show. Gwen had been his final pick for a reason. There couldn't be *nothing* between them.

Gwen was gorgeous. She had long silky hair, flawless skin, and legs that went on for days. Any guy would be tempted by such a woman.

Drew looked at me with regret in his eyes. Was he sad that he had to go through it, or was he sadder that I had to watch?

"Do you want me to leave?" I asked. We really hadn't gotten the proposal ironed out at all, but I didn't think I'd be much help if we tried any longer either. My heart just wasn't in it, and when my heart wasn't in something, the words didn't flow.

"No. Stay." Drew put a hand on my shoulder—I could feel the heat of it through my clothes. "I'll change in the bathroom then you can help me make sure my tie is on straight. You've always been so good at that."

I nodded and watched him disappear into the bathroom with his suit bag.

What was I doing? Why was I putting myself through this torture? I should have told Alexis I couldn't help this week. Should have faked an

illness. Broken a bone. Anything but watch the guy I was in love with propose to someone else.

Drew came out a few minutes later with his suit pants on. He was still working on the last few buttons on his dress shirt.

"Would you mind helping me with my hair? I'm thinking I may need that inspirational Treven hairstyle to pull off my mad acting skills today."

"You don't just want me to do it because the bad-boy look is totally hot on you?"

"Maybe I just want to impress a certain handler of mine. I think she likes my hair better that way." He finished buttoning the rest of his shirt up.

I led the way into the bathroom. As Drew sat in front of the mirror, I worked some wax onto his strands, my fingers carefully reshaping his hair to the way I'd done it before. I kept my focus on the task at hand, but I felt him watching me, making me self-conscious.

When I finished, he inspected his reflection. Our eyes met in the mirror, and our gazes locked for a long moment.

Why had I told him he couldn't kiss me until after this was all over with? What if that had been my only chance to kiss Drew—*really* kiss Drew—before he changed his mind?

"It looks good," I finally said.

He nodded, but he was studying my face, as if looking for something I was hiding. "Thank you."

"Do you already have your tie picked out?"

"Yeah. It's the same one I wore before."

Of course. Dumb question.

"I should probably put it on now, huh?"

It was a beautiful silvery-gold tie with dark and light blue stripes. It went perfectly with his tanned skin and blue eyes. I watched as he laid the tie below his collar. Watched his skillful hands work the tie into a full Windsor knot. Studied his fingers as they tweaked the knot just so until it was

perfectly even.

Why couldn't I just tell him not to go through with this? Why couldn't I tell him to just pick me now, instead of waiting and making the possibility disappear?

He had slipped from my fingers once before. Was history going to repeat itself?

"How does it look?" Drew turned toward me.

"It's just a little off center," I lied, smoothing over his collar and pulling the tie a fraction of an inch to the right, only to move it right back.

I was going to lose him. I was going to lose my second chance.

"Everything okay?" Drew asked.

I realized I'd been standing there dumbly gripping his tie, not wanting to let him go.

I shook my head and fought back tears. "It's fine. You look . . ." I examined him from head to toe. "You look amazing. Really, all the women across the United States are going to wish they were Gwen."

I certainly did.

He checked his reflection in the mirror, and then he pulled out a photo from the suit bag. It was a photo of himself from the original taping months earlier. He wore the exact same suit, same tie and everything. But my eyes stopped on his hair.

"We did something wrong," I said.

"What?"

"Your hair. You can't do the Treven style." I pointed at the picture, at his hair which was done in his usual messy pulled-forward-and-to-the-side style.

"Oh, I see." He made a face as though trying to solve a problem. "I'm going to have to get my hair wet and start all over."

It didn't seem like too big of an issue, he was a guy after all. It wouldn't take forever to dry his hair or anything.

But when he started taking off his tie and unbuttoning his shirt, my eyes

widened.

"What are you doing?"

He stopped at the last button and shrugged. "I don't want to get my shirt wet."

"Oh, right. I, uh . . ." I looked up to avoid gaping at his sculpted torso. "Okay. Yeah, just . . . uh . . . here, let me hold them for you."

He slipped out of his shirt and set them in my outstretched arms. Man, did he look good. Seeing him shirtless in real life was way more overwhelming than seeing him like that on TV. He was tanned and toned. He was a man with a Twitter account dedicated to his abs of steel. And I was the woman who wanted to own that account.

I swallowed the huge lump in my throat as I watched him bend his head under the tub faucet, his back and shoulder muscles flexing.

I had to look away to catch my breath. When he turned off the water, I handed him a towel so his wet hair wouldn't drip onto his nice navy-blue suit pants.

While he was drying himself off, his biceps caught my gaze with the movement and my whole body heated up.

And I didn't know if I'd ever wanted another human more than I wanted him right now.

I wanted to touch him and kiss him and beg him to cancel this whole charade. To stop this silly business of getting engaged to Gwen and just be with me instead.

Be with me now instead of a few months from now.

Drew turned back to the mirror when he was done toweling off his hair and began working on styling his hair as it was in the photo.

And when I caught myself staring at his abs again, I knew I needed to think of something to say before he could sense how badly I wanted to run my hands all over his naked torso.

So I said the first thing that came to my mind. "I'm sure Gwen will be

happy to hear that those Friday night pizzas haven't taken away the physique you had during filming."

Drew paused for a moment like I'd just caught him off guard. Then after glancing down at himself, he said, "Thanks?"

"Sorry, that was weird." I cringed, realizing how much more awkward my comment had made things. "I'm, uh, I guess I'm not used to being around you like this. Maybe I should go back into the other room."

"No, don't leave," Drew said, stopping for a second. "I'm almost done. I-I'll put my shirt back on in just a minute."

He finished his hair a minute or two later. Once he was finished, he checked the photo, and we both agreed that it looked almost the same.

At least, it was hard for us to tell the difference. If some fan noticed, they were watching the show for the wrong reasons.

I checked the time on my watch. *Only half an hour left until he has to leave.* Thirty more minutes.

I needed to tell him how I felt. I needed to just say the words.

But how did I even start that conversation?

"Are you ready for this?" I finally asked when he'd finished tying his tie.

"I guess." He shrugged. "I mean, I still haven't come up with what I'm going to say, so . . . that's probably going to be a problem."

"Wanna give it another try?"

"Sure," he swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbing against his collar. "Might as well try once more, at least."

So we both went back to the table, but this time, Drew picked up the pen.

"What would you want someone to say to you if you were getting engaged?" Drew asked, his gorgeous eyes boring into mine like he was searching my soul.

"I don't know." I shrugged.

But when he continued to stare at me, waiting for an answer, the words started spilling out.

"I guess I'd want the guy to start out by telling me how beautiful I am." I looked down at the table, feeling my cheeks warm. "Because, yeah, in my fantasy world, a guy would think I'm gorgeous."

"You are," he said, his voice husky and full of depth.

And when I met his gaze, Drew was looking at me in a way that made me think he might actually think I was beautiful.

I bit my lip, feeling self-conscious. But then with a sigh, I said, "And then I'd want him to tell me all the reasons he loves me, and not the generic things that could be true about anyone. The little details, the things that only he would know because he knew me so well."

Drew nodded, writing the words *little details* on the paper.

"What else?" He looked at me again, his gaze incredibly intense.

"I don't know." I tilted my head to the side, my face growing hot under his stare. "I guess I want the whole 'when I picture my future, I can't picture it without you in it.' You know, that kind of thing. Then I'd want him to say any other heartfelt things that came to mind, maybe talk about experiences that told him I was the one for him. And then he'd get down on one knee and ask me to marry him, and I'd say yes . . ." I met his gaze, my whole body flushing. "Well, if it was the right guy asking, of course."

Drew jotted down notes on everything that I had just said. But instead of writing down the actual proposal for Gwen, he ran a frustrated hand through his hair.

"I can't do it." He tossed the pen back on the table and stood. "I still can't think of anything to say. Maybe I shouldn't be doing this."

He gazed at me as if for reassurance, his eyes bobbing back and forth as he studied each of mine.

"Yes," I said, standing beside him. "Maybe you shouldn't."

Disbelief flashed on his face. "What?"

And instead of thinking too much, or telling myself not to do anything about my feelings—to be patient and good—I leaned in and gently pressed

my lips to Drew's.

I kissed him long and slow, as if the clock wasn't literally counting down the minutes until he asked someone else to marry him.

When I pulled away, Drew's eyes searched my face and he said, "But I thought you said not to—" He shook his head. "I thought we weren't going to —"

"Kiss me." I slid my hands up his chest and over his shoulders until they rested behind his neck. "Put your hands on me."

A flash of desire passed through his eyes at my words, and he must have been feeling the desperation of this moment as much as I was, because an instant later, Drew was gripping my waist and pressing me against the wall with his strong body.

His lips collided with mine in a long, passionate exchange, his mouth hot and demanding. And when his tongue gently flicked against mine, all rational thoughts disappeared, as did my inhibitions.

My hands traced their way down his back, feeling the muscles in his shoulders beneath the thin fabric of his shirt. He felt so good. So strong. So masculine. And I suddenly wanted to know what it would be like to have my hands directly on his skin.

I let my hands slip further down his back, and the Universe must have heard my silent desires, because when I smoothed my fingers along his sides, just above his belt, I found a place where his shirt had come untucked.

Jackpot.

I smoothed my fingers along the line of bare skin at his hip, wondering if I dared explore even more. His skin was warm under my fingers, and I slipped them under the hem of his shirt, forcing more of it to come untucked.

Would he stop me if I tried to take his shirt off completely?

Would he be okay with me pushing the limits just a little?

"Are you trying to undress me, Kate?" Drew asked, his voice low and seductive near my ear.

"N-no." My whole body flushed with heat, and I immediately forced my hands down so his shirt dropped back in place.

At least I wasn't trying to undress him completely...just the top half.

"Good." He mumbled, his breath hot against my neck. "Because I may be kissing you in a hotel suite, but I still plan to be true to my nickname."

"Saint Drew?" My voice squeaked.

Did he think I was trying to bring him to the dark side?

Because if he didn't want me to take his shirt off right now, he really shouldn't have taken it off so much while filming. He should know I only had so much willpower after being tempted for so long.

And really, he shouldn't be kissing my neck like this if he didn't want me to push things further.

But . . . oh . . . I closed my eyes and let my head fall back. *He was really good at this.*

"Have you never been tempted to ruin your good-boy reputation?" I asked breathlessly as his lips traveled along my jawline.

"Only every time I kiss you," he mumbled before capturing my lips with his again.

His hands slipped up my sides before moving to my back where they rubbed slow circles along my spine. My head became muddled again, and I forgot about why we were in Antigua. All I could think about was this moment. Him. Me. Alone in his room. Kissing each other the way I wanted to be kissed for the rest of my life.

"I want you to be mine, Kate," he mumbled before taking my bottom lip between his and gently sucking on it.

"I want you, too," I breathed.

Ask *me* to marry you. My mind screamed at him.

Choose *me*.

Pick *me*!

He lifted me from the ground and set me on the long dresser. A second

later, he was cradling my head in his hand and kissing me again.

"I should have been kissing you like this for the past seven years," he said breathlessly, leaning his forehead against mine.

"I know." I nodded and tried to catch my breath.

I want you to kiss me like this forever.

MAYBE KISSING Kate in my hotel suite wasn't the best idea. Because as I held her in my arms with her warm, soft body pressed against mine, all I could think about now was pushing the limits further.

In all my life I'd never been tempted to take that final step, to give away the one thing I only planned to give to one person.

Until now.

With Kate.

My every sense was filled with Kate Dawson. She smelled like warm vanilla. Her skin was softer and smoother than I ever imagined—like satin or silk. And the curves of her body fit perfectly against my edges.

So perfectly that my mind was having a hard time not thinking they'd fit even more perfectly together on the bed.

That king-sized bed right behind us that was definitely big enough for two.

It would be okay to lay down for just a minute, right?

My legs were getting tired from standing against this dresser, it would be okay to give them just a little bit of a break so I could continue kissing my high school best friend's little sister . . .

I imagined doing just that. Carrying her the few steps over to the bed and lying down beside her—possibly covering her body with mine, just to see

how it felt.

We could do that without letting things get out of hand.

We could both be adults and keep things PG-13, right?

But she's not as inexperienced as you. The voice of reason said in the back of my mind. *She's been married before. Lived with a man before.*

Which probably meant she wasn't used to having to stop.

I swore under my breath. *What was I doing?*

This wasn't me.

I wasn't the kind of guy to let my emotions rule over me.

But then again, I'd never felt these emotions before. My heart had never felt like it belonged to anyone but myself.

But in this moment, I knew that it did. It belonged to Kate.

I loved Kate.

And once those words were in my head, I wanted to say them.

I wanted to say them and then show her exactly how deeply I meant them.

She was it for me. The one.

And if I knew that now, why the heck would I continue down the path I'd been on?

Why not take this chance to finally go after what I truly wanted once and for all?

And it had taken me twenty-eight years to get it . . . but right here in this moment, I finally understood why people couldn't keep their love to themselves when they knew it was there.

I love you, Kate, I wanted to say, the words on the tip of my tongue, just waiting for me to let them loose.

I love you.

I want you.

I want to marry you and have beautiful babies with you.

Sharing my life with her was the only thing that mattered anymore. I could have all the money in the world, but it would be nothing if I didn't get

to spend the rest of my days loving this beautiful woman before me.

I WISHED I could read Drew's mind, to know what he was thinking. He had deepened our kiss so far that I didn't know if there was anywhere left for us to go but down the path I knew we'd regret in the morning.

He was getting engaged to someone else.

In just a few more minutes.

He was going to give away the proposal that should be mine.

"What are we doing?" I asked, my voice coming out shakier than I'd planned.

He sighed, his expression torn. When he opened his eyes, pain reflected in them.

"I don't know." He stepped back, giving us space. His chest heaved as if he was having a hard time catching his breath. "I know we need to stop."

I drew in a ragged breath and urged my heart to calm down. If it kept going at this rate, I was going to have a heart attack.

He brushed stray hairs away from my cheek and sighed. "I—" He pinched his eyes shut for a moment before opening them again. I'd never seen so much desire in them before.

"Did we almost . . .?" I couldn't say the words. It was too much like admitting we'd almost crossed the line into a territory we weren't meant to cross.

"We were close." He nodded. "At least . . . it felt like we were."

"But you said you were waiting until you're married."

"I know, that's been my plan." He looked down at bit his lip. "I—I just want you to know that I want it to be with you."

My heart didn't have a chance to slow down, because it was off to the races again. Was he saying he wanted to marry me?

Drew stared at me for a long moment, as if getting up the courage to say something. He looked down and linked our hands together then sighed again before meeting my gaze. "Tell me not to do it. Tell me not to propose."

My heart stopped. My whole body went still, and all I could think was, *I shouldn't have to tell you. You should pick me first.*

There was a knock on the door. Drew bolted away from me, nearly tripping over one of the chairs. I slid off the dresser and smoothed my hair as I watched Drew answer the door.

"It's time to go now." I heard Alexis's voice on the other side of the door. "Go ahead and get in the car with Oliver. I need to talk to Kate for just a moment."

My stomach twisted with dread.

Did Alexis know?

Who cares if she knows.

When Drew turned back to put on his suit coat, I rose to help him. I needed to tell him not to do it.

But Drew had his jacket on in a matter of seconds and was just about to walk out the door before he turned back and swept me into his arms.

"Everything will work out," he whispered in my ear. And then as he pulled away, his fingers trailed down my forearm until he took my hand in his, squeezing it three times.

Then he disappeared out the door.

Had Drew just done the three squeezes that meant *I love you*?

He knew about the gesture. He'd been there when I had told the story to

Decklan and Tayden.

Had he just told me that he loved me?

And now he was going off to propose to Gwen?

Desperation bubbled up in my throat, almost choking me. If I told him that I loved him, would it stop him from going through with the proposal?

Was I losing him because I'd been too scared to trust him?

I moved to run after Drew, to tell him that I loved him too. But instead of letting me walk past her, Alexis blocked the door.

"Is everything okay?" Alexis asked, seeming to take in my distress.

"I just," I started, covering my heart with my hand to keep it from exploding. "I need to talk to Drew again. There's something I have to tell him."

"You can tell him later." Alexis waved me away as if my request was trivial.

If I wait, he'll give away my proposal. "I just need one minute."

I pushed past Alexis and ran out the door, just in time to see Drew shut the door of a black SUV and drive away. Leaving me to watch the taillights.

I was too late.

My shoulders sagged and I fought back tears as I trudged back to the hotel room where Alexis was waiting for me.

"What's wrong, Kate?" Alexis asked.

I wiped at the tear that had trickled down my cheek. "I needed to tell Drew something."

"That you're in love with him?" Alexis crossed her arms.

I nodded, unable to speak from the sadness drowning me.

Alexis stepped forward, setting her hands on my shoulders. "It's just a fake proposal. It's not the end of the world, sweetie."

"But I love him." My breath hitched in my throat as more tears threatened to spill.

"I know." Alexis gave me an understanding smile.

"You do?"

"I'm not blind. Watching people fall in love is kind of my job." Alexis shrugged.

"Then why are you telling him to do this?"

She let her hands drop and took a seat on the chair Drew had occupied earlier. "Ratings. It's all about the ratings. Though, to be honest, I would much prefer to have a real proposal instead of a fake one. But such is life. Anyway, that's not what I wanted to talk to you about. I'm in here because I wanted to talk to you about your screenplay."

My heart stopped. "My screenplay?"

"Yes. I finished it. Sorry things were a little crazy these past few weeks."

I braced myself for the blow. Usually it wasn't a good sign if it took more than a couple of weeks for someone to read your screenplay from start to finish.

"I loved it!" Alexis said.

I did a double take of Alexis's smiling expression, not believing my ears had heard her right.

"You l-loved it?"

"It's exactly what I've been looking for." Alexis beamed. "I've already read through it three times. I just wanted to be sure of something before I talked to you."

Sure of what? That I would let Drew follow through with the fake proposal?

"I showed it to my colleague, Dana Prince," Alexis continued. "And she's really interested in it, too. We'd love to talk about it over lunch sometime soon. My schedule should free up once the season ends next month, and then I'd like to see what we can make happen for your screenplay."

My hands and fingers went numb about halfway through Alexis's speech. Was this really happening?

I sat on the bed before my knees gave out, already knowing my face had

gone pale.

Alexis smiled knowingly at me. "It really was great. You have a lot of talent."

I nodded, trying to loosen my tongue. But all I could think about was the fact that *The Dana Prince* wanted to be part of this. Dana Prince was like royalty when it came to directors.

I swallowed. "Yes, lunch would be great."

Alexis grinned, and somehow, I knew this wasn't the first time Alexis had surprised someone with this kind of news. "I'll talk to Dana when we get back to Burbank and we'll set something up."

I nodded dumbly, still in shock. Someone wanted my screenplay. Not just someone. Alexis Olley and Dana Prince wanted my screenplay!

"Anyway," Alexis said, adjusting her purse on her arm. "We have a proposal to watch. Let's go. It's almost sunset."

I TRIED to figure out how to get through the next hour as the SUV drove through the lush greenery of Antigua.

My mind was moving a million miles a minute, but instead of coming up with the perfect words for Gwen, all I could think of was Kate, our kiss, and how this might affect our relationship.

Would I even be able to propose to Gwen with Kate watching?

Probably not.

Heck . . . I hadn't even been able to do it the first time when Kate wasn't even here.

But once everyone had shown up at the set, it didn't seem like I needed to worry about Kate watching it after all. She was nowhere to be seen.

Had she stayed back at the hotel?

I made my way over to Alexis to find out.

"Where's Kate?" I asked, playing with my cuff links, attempting to look a lot calmer and collected than I felt.

"She decided to wait in the car for this one. I figured that, under the circumstances, I could let it slide this time." She gave me a look that said she knew exactly what was going on between us. I had practically just told Kate that I loved her and wanted to marry her. All that was left between us were the actual words coming out of my mouth.

"We better get this thing rolling then." I straightened and walked back to my spot on a wooden platform that the set crew had rebuilt that week.

Just get down on your knee and ask Gwen to marry you. Just get down on one knee and ask Gwen to marry you, I chanted in my head, as if it would make the road ahead of me easier.

I could see it all then. The magazines, the photo shoots, the interviews. All the things Gwen and I would have to go to once the show finished airing. There was no way I was going to be able to make it through everything. I wasn't that good of an actor. I wasn't that good of a liar. And I really, really didn't want to pretend anymore.

This wasn't me. I wasn't the kind of guy who was okay with lying to the world. If I was, I would have gotten engaged the first time we were here.

Gwen turned the corner and started walking toward me. The cameras followed her quietly as she walked down the wooden plank walkway, her heels clacking with every step. She looked just like she had months before. Beautiful. Her smile was brilliant. She even winked at me like she had the first time. Like we shared a secret. Everything was so surreal. It was like *déjà vu*, and I'd gone back in time to the exact moment when I'd let everyone down.

The moment when I couldn't propose to Gwen because I wasn't in love with her.

It was ironic that I was back here again, liking her even less but planning to propose anyway.

Gwen came to stand in front of me again, just like she had before. I smiled, reached for her hands, and cleared my throat to prepare for the words I needed to say.

I STARED AHEAD at the seat in front of me, trying to figure out how much longer they would be. If Drew was able to scrounge up some last-minute acting skills, it shouldn't be too much longer.

But since this was Drew, it could take another hour or two. Hopefully they wouldn't lose the sunlight before it was over. We were scheduled to be here for another two days, just in case they needed to reshoot tomorrow, but I really hoped Drew would just get it over with.

Rip off the bandage. And rip out my heart.

The van door slid open, startling me from my thoughts. It was Oliver, looking very outdoorsy in his T-shirt and shorts. He ducked his head inside. "Drew says he needs you."

"What do you mean, he needs me?" Heat prickled at my cheeks.

Oliver shrugged. "He's having a hard time getting the words out. He says he always does better when you're there. He said something about you two running lines before."

"Yeah, but . . ." The last thing I wanted to do was help Drew run *these* lines. He could get these out on his own. It was his deal after all. I wanted nothing more to do with it.

When I didn't move, Oliver cocked an eyebrow. "Alexis said something about your job requiring it . . ."

I squeezed my eyes shut. Was my job really worth it?

Maybe my job wasn't. But my screenplay was.

I sighed and slowly climbed out of the vehicle.

Oliver filled me in on the plan as we hurried to the set. "The plan is for you to stand on the platform with Drew. You'll stand in for Gwen and we'll just cut in a bunch of the old footage to make it look like he's really talking to Gwen. All we really need is to show his face as he says the words, get a shot of him down on one knee, and then we can get Gwen back in the shot for the hug and the kiss and the ring exchange."

I tried to numb myself from all my feelings. This was just a job I was paid to do. My feelings meant nothing in this situation. Drew was faking it just as much as I was. I could do this. I could trust him to stay true to his word to me, even if it was hard. I loved him. I would stick with him through this.

But when I saw Drew standing in the setting sun with the ocean glistening in the background, my heart went to my throat. Seeing him like that . . . it was torture. I almost turned back and fled—ran away from everyone so I wouldn't have to be a part of this. But Drew jogged up to me with a smile on his face.

"Thanks for coming." He was out of breath when he reached me. "I couldn't get the words out on my own."

He took my hand and led me down the wooden planks past Gwen, who had a sour expression on her face. He squeezed my hand as we walked. Just one squeeze this time, though.

Maybe I'd imagined the three squeezes the first time?

When we got where we were supposed to be, we turned so we were facing each other.

Him in his nice suit.

Me in my T-shirt and jeans.

That alone told me how different our lives were. How our paths were going in different directions. Drew was the billionaire star of a reality TV

show. And I was a divorced nobody he had a past with.

Drew took both of my hands in his and smiled. His eyes looked brilliant in the setting sun, the turquoise flecks bright and breathtaking.

"From the first time we met, I knew you were something special." He licked his lips and smiled at me, like he had a secret. "You were wild and spunky, and always the center of attention." He paused and swallowed like his throat was dry. "As we got older, none of that changed. You were still the same crazy girl I grew up with, but you were also brilliant and beautiful. I thought I had to keep my feelings a secret because of our situation, but as more time passed, I only wanted to be with you more."

What was going on? They weren't going to be able to use any of this for the show. It was all about us. No one would believe Drew and Gwen had grown up together.

"What are—" I tried to interrupt him and tell him he was doing it wrong, but he just kept talking.

"I lost you once and regretted it every single day. I can't go back in time and get those years back. But I can make things right today. Which is why we're here."

I furrowed my brow. Was he talking about him and Gwen breaking up a couple of weeks ago? Because no one besides the crew even knew about that.

And where was he getting the years from? They'd only met a few months ago.

"There are so many things I love about you," he continued. "I love the way your nose scrunches up when you laugh. I love the way you laugh at my jokes, even when they aren't funny. I love the way you tease me and make me stronger than I'd be on my own. I love your beautiful blue eyes and the way they make me lose my train of thought."

His eyes actually smiled at me when he said that. He was doing such a great job. It broke my heart that all these wonderful words would be edited to look like they were said to Gwen. I wanted them to be about me. I wanted

these words to be mine to keep forever.

"When I think about my future, I can't picture everything that it will be, but one thing is always a constant in my vision. You. You are always there. Always in my life. Always with me." He sighed and let go of one of my hands. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a black velvet box before lowering himself down on one knee. Inside was the most gorgeous diamond ring I had ever seen. The show had never bought such an exquisite ring before.

Drew's hand trembled as he held the box before me.

"Kate Avery Dawson," he said my name slowly, making my insides twist up in a million knots. "Will you make me the happiest man in the world and marry me?"

Wait. . . Had he accidentally used my name?

Was that some sort of Freudian slip, or was it just because he was looking at me instead of Gwen?

He waited, not seeming to realize he'd just messed up. I looked around at the producers and various crew members standing around us, waiting for one of them to correct him. But they all had big smiles on their faces like they were completely enchanted by Drew's fake proposal.

Maybe they hadn't noticed him misspeak?

But I had.

I bent over so my lips were next to his ear. "You accidentally said my name instead of Gwen's," I whispered.

"It wasn't an accident," he whispered back, shaking his head. "Will you marry me, Kate?"

I went still.

Wait. *What?*

Tears sprang to my eyes, and I felt faint as blood rushed through my head. Then when I looked at Drew and saw the sincerity in his eyes, I started trembling.

He really meant it.

"You're asking me to marry you?" I whispered.

"Nothing would make me happier." He nodded, his grin spreading wider.

I blinked back the tears threatening to slip out. "O-of course I'll marry you, Drew," I said when I finally found my voice.

His whole face lit up, his smile bigger than I'd ever seen it. Then he swooped me up into his arms and kissed me.

"I love you so much, Kate." Drew spoke against my ear as we embraced again, me clinging tight to him because I was sure I'd melt right into the ground if I didn't.

"I love you too, Drew," I whispered back, my voice hoarse and choked up with emotion. "You have no idea how much." Then I laughed as he picked me up, spinning me around several times before setting me down.

"Now let's make this official." Drew pulled the ring out of the box and slipped it on my finger. It fit *perfectly*.

"Is this something we're gonna have to give back to the show?" I asked as I admired the sparkly diamond on my ring finger.

"No, we had the jeweler rush over here once I realized I couldn't ever propose to anyone but you."

"What changed your mind anyway?" I asked. "When you left the hotel, I thought for sure you were going through with everything."

He shook his head. "While I was waiting here, I realized something: Aiden may not have wanted us to be together back when you were in high school, but that was because he knew how perfect we were for each other. I think he was worried that if I snatched you up before you even got to college, you'd give up on your dreams and put them on the back burner to support me. He wanted you to take the time to find out who you wanted to be, and then find the man you could be happy living with forever."

"It was always you, Drew."

"I know that now." He nodded. "And I think that even though we can't

hear him, Aiden is cheering us on from above. I think I've finally found a way to move past my guilt. And that is by being there for you, even when Aiden can't be."

"But being there for me like a husband, and not a brother, right?" I arched an eyebrow, so he'd know I was teasing.

"Oh, definitely like a husband." He wiggled his eyebrows, and I blushed, realizing we were still surrounded by lots of onlookers and cameras.

I stepped closer and lowered my voice. "So, is Alexis going to sue you for ruining her show?"

Drew shook his head. "No, she understands. And Gwen and Dion have even promised to be quiet and leave us alone, too."

"But what about your fans? They're going to hate me."

"No one could hate you, Kate. They're going to love you, almost as much as I do." He got a nervous look on his face, the first one he'd worn since I'd come out of the van.

"What is it?" I asked.

He took my hands in his. "Alexis does have one request."

I looked behind me to where Alexis was standing. Instead of scowling at me like I'd feared, she had a huge grin on her face.

I turned back to Drew. "And what's her request?"

Drew swallowed. "Since we have about five weeks before the season finale airs, Alexis was wondering if we'd mind filming our love story for the world to hear. And then, you can say no if you want to, but she was also hoping to film our wedding live."

"But I thought you wanted to be done with this whole *being in the spotlight* thing."

He grinned, like he was glad I'd said that. "I just told Alexis that I'd put that out there."

"You know you want us to do your wedding, right Kate?" Alexis called from behind me.

I shook my head and laughed. "I'll be happy to talk about how we fell in love. But no, our wedding will be just for us and those we love most."

Drew pulled me into his arms. "See, I knew I picked the right girl."

"Yes, you did." I melted into him. Then pulling back just a little I said, "Though, you do realize that we haven't even been on an actual date?"

Drew laughed, as if the thought had never even occurred to him. "We've been dating ever since you came back into my life. And before that, each time you talked me into doing one of your silly films, I fell more and more in love with you. And if that's not enough, we can date while we're planning the wedding and then for the rest of our lives."

EPILOGUE

DREW

ONE YEAR LATER

"ANY LAST GUESSES on what it will be?" I asked Kate as we followed the sonographer back to the ultrasound room at the hospital.

Kate rubbed her belly, which had finally started to show that she was pregnant. She'd been hiding her tummy for months, hating that people thought she was getting fat. But I loved seeing that life was growing inside of her. Our baby was a product of our love.

"I don't know. Yesterday I was thinking it was a girl. But today I'm leaning more towards a boy."

I grinned, feeling my eyes crinkle at the edges. "It's going to be a boy. I was thinking manly thoughts when he was conceived."

"You are so bad." Kate slapped my arm, but couldn't keep an adorable smile off her lips.

"Just saying." I shrugged. "I'm so amazing that I can control something like that."

She just rolled her eyes. "Yes, you're good at everything. I already know that."

"I only care that I'm good enough for you, Mrs. My-Screenplay-Is-Going-to-Be-a-Major-Blockbuster-Hit in a few months."

She laughed. "As long as we don't tell my old roommate, Ivy, about who is starring in the film, it might have a shot."

"You really think she could derail the whole movie just because she hates Justin Banks so much?"

"I'm just playing it safe for now." Kate shrugged. "Putting Justin further on her radar might just get her to revive her old gossip blog from college. And who knows what she might write about him and his acting skills once she gets going."

I squeezed her hand. "Your secret is safe with me. Though I doubt any bad press about the lead actor could ruin it. Your movie is going to be amazing."

"And this is why I married you." She smiled. "You're really good for my ego."

I was so proud of Kate for never giving up on her dreams. But I was even happier that she had never given up on me.

I was also thankful that even though I hadn't given America the finale they'd thought they were getting, I hadn't turned into the most hated man in all of *Finding Your Soulmate's* history.

In fact, my fans all cheered when they found out the news. Apparently, no one had liked Gwen, and they thought she and Dion deserved each other.

Except, even that hadn't worked out. Just two weeks after the finale aired, I heard Dion had cheated on Gwen and she was going on some other reality TV show in her race for stardom.

Kate and I followed the sonographer into a dimly lit room with a bed and a bunch of machinery.

The sonographer pointed to the bed. "Just lie down and we'll get started in a moment."

My heart pounded. I was so excited to see our little baby, I could barely

hold it in.

A little while later, we were watching a screen on the wall with the most beautiful black-and-white movie I'd ever seen. Our baby wiggled around as the sonographer snapped photos and took measurements.

"It looks like the baby is measuring right on for its gestation," the sonographer said as she moved the transducer probe along Kate's belly.

Kate turned her head to smile at me, and my chest lightened with relief that everything checked out so far.

"Do you want to know the baby's gender?"

"Yes," Kate answered for both of us.

I squeezed Kate's hand as anticipation filled me.

The screen on the wall shifted as the sonographer tried to get a good view.

"Is our baby being shy?" I joked after a minute.

Kate laughed. "Like father, like son."

"Like son?" My heart blipped and I sat up straighter to get a better look. "How do you know that?"

Kate pointed. "I've seen these before."

I squinted, as if it would help. I didn't know the first thing about ultrasounds.

And then the sonographer put a little arrow on the screen and typed out the word "boy."

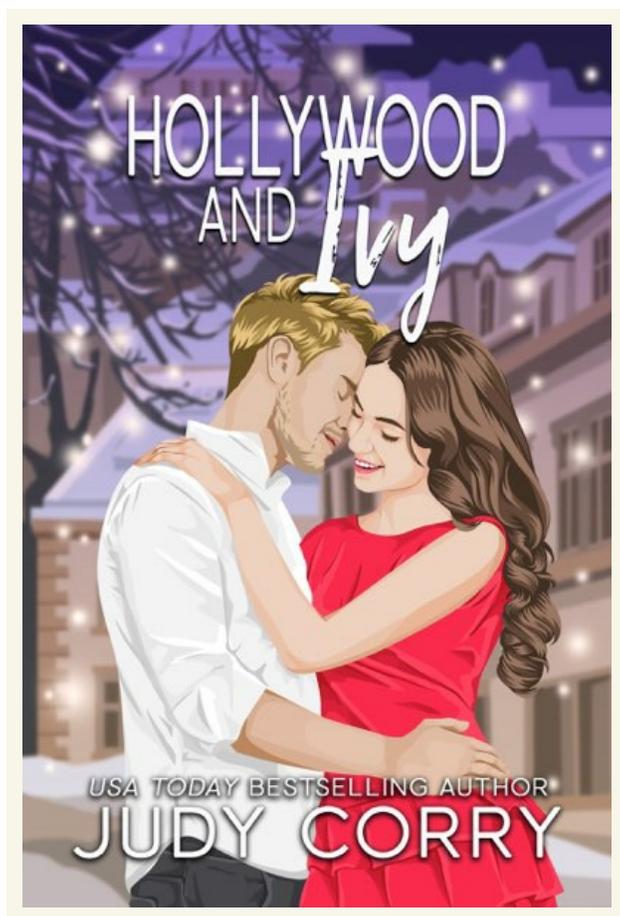
I grinned and leaned closer to Kate's ear. "See, I told you I was thinking manly thoughts."

Kate just smiled at me, the smile that made me want to give her the world. Her and our baby boy.

"Do you have any names picked out yet?" the sonographer asked as she wiped the goo from Kate's belly with a towel.

Kate and I both looked at each other before saying in unison, "Aiden."

Don't miss the next book in the series: Hollywood and Ivy



When my celebrity crush walks into the bed-and-breakfast where I work, it feels like a nightmare come true.

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EXCERPT FROM HOLLYWOOD AND IVY

“You about done with your lunch, Ivy?” my boss, Miss Hazel Burton, asked when she walked past me with a box of Christmas lights in her arms. “The tree will be ready to decorate in just a few minutes.”

“Yeah, I’ll be there soon.” I glanced away from the social media feed I’d been browsing at the table to where Hazel was setting the box on the floor near the artificial tree in the main living area of the Sutton Creek Inn.

It was the first of December and we’d been working all week to get the bed and breakfast Hazel owned ready for the holiday season.

We’d already set up the seaside-themed tree in the Cape Cod room this morning, and I’d finished decorating the tree in the Enchanted Forest room last night.

We just had the North Pole tree to set up in the reception area today and then we’d be done with tree decorating for the year.

“Is that your old roommate, Kate, and her new baby?” Hazel nodded toward my phone before pulling a string of lights from the box at her feet. .

“Yeah. Isn’t he so cute?” I held my phone up so she could see the screen better.

“He’s adorable.” The wrinkles at the corners of her eyes crinkled as she smiled.

He *was* adorable—the perfect mixture of Kate and her husband Drew.

I scrolled through the rest of the newborn photos Kate had posted and tried not to think about the twinge of jealousy that formed in my stomach as I thought about how lucky she was to have the perfect husband and baby while I was still single.

Not just single, but *utterly* single, as Hazel liked to tell our male patrons when she tried to set me up on dates with them. Hazel was the seventy-five-year-old grandmother figure in my life, and had therefore taken it upon her to try and be my matchmaker.

But either she wasn't very good at it, or I was just destined to grow old and live alone forever because despite her best efforts, none of those first dates ever turned into second dates.

After I finished scrolling through the photos, I noticed that Kate had also shared the new trailer for the movie that was coming out soon, based on a screenplay she'd written.

Yes, my awesome college roommate hadn't only married the famous "Billionaire Bachelor," Drew Burrows, but she was also becoming a famous screenwriter in her own right.

It was hard not to be jealous of her success when the gossip blog I'd created in college that had once thrived with all the juicy secrets celebrities didn't want us knowing about their lives, was now as stale as the package of potato chips sitting in the backseat of my car.

Sure, my life was much better now than it had been growing up in the foster care system. But I just thought things would be different when I turned twenty-six. I thought I'd at least have my life figured out by now, instead of twiddling my thumbs at Hazel's inn while I tried to figure out what the heck I wanted to do now that my gossip blog wasn't fulfilling me like it once had.

I turned on the sound for Kate's movie trailer and decided to focus on that instead of my failed dreams. On the screen was a man walking out of a foggy darkness. I could only see the bottom half of him at first. His black suit pants and jacket were tattered and dirty, like he'd just been in some sort of fight or

disaster. But even with the disheveled look, I knew he was hot and had the body of a male model. Kate always wrote her characters to be that way, at least.

The camera panned up to the man's torso. His dress shirt was ripped at just the right place for us to see that he must have a great upper body workout routine. But before I could drool too much over the actor's abs or the perfectly sculpted chest, it moved up to his face.

And that's when I choked on the sip of water I'd just swallowed.

Not because the guy was unattractive, but because for those few seconds, I had allowed myself to be attracted to *him*.

How had Kate let this happen?

How had she allowed the director to cast Justin Banks—the guy who had turned me into the laughing stock of my high school—as the lead in her movie?

There was an unwritten rule that you just did not work with people who were jerks to your friends.

Had she completely forgotten everything I'd told her about him?

I didn't care if he was one of the most famous actors in the business or that almost every movie he starred in turned into an international blockbuster.

"She must have shared the wrong movie trailer," I mumbled as I watched the character Justin played knock on the front door of a run-down house.

"Did you say something to me?" Hazel asked from behind me.

"No." I shook my head and held up my phone for her to see what I was watching. "I'm just mumbling about Kate's movie."

Hazel's gray eyebrows knit together, like she still didn't understand what I was talking about.

I sighed and paused the video. "You remember when I told you that Kate was having one of her screenplays turned into a movie?"

"Yes." Hazel nodded.

"Well, I thought she just wanted to be mysterious about who they had

cast for the lead. I didn't know she was actually just keeping it a secret because she knew how much I hate the actor."

"Oh." Hazel nodded slowly as understanding showed in her hazel-colored eyes. "I'm guessing that Justin is starring in another movie?"

Justin.

She said his name like they were old friends. Like he wasn't the guy who made me bawl my eyes out on the night that I should have been attending my senior prom.

Hazel must have seen my grimace because she said, "Do you think you'll ever forgive him for that? You graduated from high school so long ago. Don't you think it's time to move on? You know what they say..."

"That holding a grudge is like drinking poison and hoping the other person dies?" I finished for her.

She may have said that quote to me once or twice before.

"I just wonder if there's something we don't know about that night." She shrugged and finished untangling the strand of lights she was working on. "Justin always seemed like such a sweetheart to me."

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. "Yeah, well, I thought that too until he stood me up without any explanation and made me feel like an idiot."

All the girls at our small high school had told me I was crazy to drop hints about him taking me to the final dance of our senior year, but I hadn't listened to them. Justin had always been kind to me, unlike all the other guys who had made fun of me for being forty pounds overweight.

When he did ask me to the dance, I'd thought that my dreams of having a high school boyfriend could possibly come true.

But he ended up being just like every other guy at our school who made fun of the nerdy fat girl. He may not have said the insults out loud, but I'd gotten the message loud and clear when I was left to sit inside the front room of this very inn, wearing a fancy pink dress Hazel had helped me buy and watching the clock as the night of the prom turned into the morning after.

He hadn't even tried to make up excuses when I saw him at school the next week. He just let everyone tease me about how I was so dumb to believe I'd ever had a shot with him.

Well, if only Justin Banks could see me now.

It had taken a really strict diet and a lot of exercise, but I'd managed to lose most of the weight that summer after I graduated and was ready to start fresh when I moved to California. Sure, I had stretch marks here and there, but I looked pretty dang good, if I didn't say so myself.

I'd even grown out my black hair that had been in an unflattering pixie cut back then and learned how to apply makeup to help make me stand out more instead of blend into the background.

Not that Justin would be that impressed. He did work with and date some of the most beautiful women in the world.

Plus, in order to see my transformation, he'd have to actually come back to Sutton Creek. And he hadn't been back to Colorado since we'd graduated high school. He was out of here and off to California almost as soon as they'd handed him his diploma.

"Are you about ready to grab the last box of ornaments from the basement? Or would you like to finish your video first?" Hazel eyed my phone, which was still paused on the up close image of Justin standing on the front porch of a house.

"No. I'm good." I darkened the phone. "I'll go get the North Pole ornaments from the basement."

Justin didn't need to be on my screen for a moment longer.

Decorating the tree took two hours. Hazel focused on the lower half since she was barely over five feet and I took care of the upper half since I was five-foot-nine and more steady on the step stool than she was. But even though it

was the sixth tree I'd decorated this week, it was still enjoyable. And listening to the old Christmas music Hazel played on the record player made me feel like I was back in time when life was a lot more slower-paced and simple.

"Did the guy who reserved the whole place ever let you know what time we should expect him?" I asked Hazel, hooking a sparkly white bulb on a high branch.

When Hazel had told me about the odd reservation several months ago, I had been intrigued since we'd never had one person book the entire bed and breakfast before.

But when she'd told me that the reservation hadn't indicated any other guests, I'd been confused.

What kind of person needed five rooms for himself?

Did he plan to store his luggage in the Cape Cod room, take naps in the Island Paradise room, shower in the Safari room and then alternate nights sleeping in the Victorian and Enchanted Forest rooms?

I'd tried looking him up online, to see if he looked as high maintenance as I imagined. But there were way too many guys named Tyler Smith for me to get very far in figuring the mystery guest out.

"Do you think he's, like, a spy or something?" I asked, trying one of my theories out on Hazel. "Maybe he's planning to swear us to silence and make sure no one ever knows he came to Sutton Creek on a top-secret mission to save Christmas from being over-commercialized."

Hazel's peach-colored lips quirked up into a half-smile. "That would be something, now wouldn't it?"

But she said nothing else.

She had to be at least curious about this guy.

"Do you really not know anything about him?" I grabbed Santa's sleigh ornament out of the box. "I mean, for all we know, he could be some sort of serial killer and have reserved the whole place to insure that no other guests

are around to witness our murders.”

Hazel chuckled. “I think I’ll take my chances. I’m already seventy-five. I doubt anyone would see anything fun about killing an old woman.”

“She’s correct,” a deep voice said from behind us, startling the crap out of me. “I much prefer taking out my serial killer tendencies on people closer to my own age.”

I whipped my head around, my stomach jumping into my throat as I looked to see who had snuck into the inn without either of us noticing.

And in the next moment, I was gaping at the last person I ever imagined coming face to face with again.

I blinked my eyes a few times, not certain I wasn’t hallucinating. But when they focused again, they saw a guy with the same chiseled jawline, same golden-brown eyes and the same six-foot-four inch frame, according to IMDb, that I’d seen in Kate’s movie trailer at lunch.

It was indeed my biggest regret-turned-Hollywood royalty standing ten feet away.

Justin Banks.

What the heck was he doing at the Sutton Creek Inn?

Was he lost on his way to his next filming location?

Really, really lost?

Keep reading [Hollywood and Ivy](#) here.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Judy Corry is the Amazon Top 12 and USA Today Bestselling Author of Contemporary and YA Romance. She writes romance because she can't get enough of the feeling of falling in love. She's known for writing heart-pounding kisses, endearing characters, and hard-won happily ever afters.

She lives in Southern Utah with the boy who took her to Prom, their four awesome kids, and two dogs. She's addicted to love stories, dark chocolate and chai lattes.

