



*Soulmate,*   
**STAGE RIGHT**

LOVE SCENES, BOOK ONE

**BIXBY JONES**



*Sometimes, love comes when you least expect it...*

Dean took another drink, allowing him the courage to confide, “She’s so smart and she’s so funny and she’s so amazing, and Chelsie sees her twice a year. On her birthday and sometime in December—but never on Hanukkah or Christmas or New Year’s, because that’s not convenient, you know? That doesn’t fit into her *schedule*.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“I don’t understand how anybody can not want to be there. And it messes with her head. I know it does, because she gets so excited when Chelsie’s here, and then, when she leaves, it’s like...” Trailing off, he leaned deep into the chair. “She wants a mom so bad. And I mean, my sister’s really great with her and my mom helps out a lot, but it’s not the same. And I try really hard, but there’s stuff I just can’t...sorry. You didn’t come here to listen to this. You came here to listen to Stevie.” To divert attention from his reckless, humiliating over-share, he turned up the volume.

Abby cleared her throat, raising her voice to ensure he heard her over the song. “I came here to find a little girl’s lost kitten.”

“Oh, that’s right. You just stayed for Stevie.”

“No, I stayed for you.”

Their eyes met again, but this time, neither looked away. Heart racing, he kicked aside his makeshift footrest to lean toward her. She did him one better, vaulting halfway across the table to initiate a kiss that felt more like an electrocution. A series of jolts and aftershocks surged through him as the seconds ticked by, creating an all-over warmth that came to an abrupt, premature halt when she pulled back, red-faced and panting.

“I should go,” she informed, one hand placed over her chest as she struggled to catch her breath. “It’s getting late.”



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Cover designed by Get Covers

Edited by Kay Springsteen

Formatted by C.B. Everett

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ISBN: 979-8-757-81866-5

ASIN: B09MQ2SJ3S



# Advanced Praise

“*Soulmate, Stage Right* takes the romance genre and gives it a masterful twist! Fresh and new, Bixby Jones’ way with words is immersive and emotional. I never wanted to leave Dean and Abby’s world.”

-Cloud S. Riser, Author

“Bixby Jones’ *Soulmate, Stage Right* is a fun, touching story told with wit, savvy and compassion. The authenticity of her characters keeps you rooting for them throughout, and there’s a grin on every page. A must-read love story.”

-Matthew Mozingo, Author

“*Soulmate, Stage Right* checks off all the boxes for a sweet, Hallmark-esque romance novel. I was sucked in from the first page and fell in love with Abby and Dean. Not to mention Preslie! Jones has a talent for evoking emotion in her readers and connecting them to her characters’ struggles and triumphs.”

-B.N. Laux, Author

“*Soulmate, Stage Right* is a delight. The love story is heart-warming and real, exactly what I needed on chilly winter evenings. Bixby’s ability to ensnare the reader’s emotions will pull you into the fun, witty world she has created. Dean, Abby, and Preslie are vibrant, lively, and lovely characters who have you rooting for their happiness from the very start. A must read for anyone who enjoys a gentle feel-good romance.”

-Emily House, Writer



# Acknowledgements

Thank you to my wonderful betas: Val, Angelicka, Jennifer, Amanda and Paula, for their insight and enthusiasm. Thank you Brenda and Jose, for indulging my many, many questions about welders and their schedules. Special thanks go to my friends Jill and Eli, who were in my corner every step of the way—I'm so honored to have friends like you!

*This book is dedicated to my mother, Jude Toney, who taught me how to dream. I love you more today than I did yesterday, but not as much as I will tomorrow.*

To learn more about the author, visit her on the web at [www.bixbyjones.com](http://www.bixbyjones.com)



"Good, Billy. That was better, but I still don't know if you're there yet. You've got to really feel it. Remember, Drake is madly and passionately in love with Astrid, but he's afraid she might reject him if he tells her that." Abby Devlin took a seat on the corner of her desk, offering a smile of reassurance as she leaned toward her nervous student. "Okay, try this. This works for me every time. What's the one thing you love most in this world?"

"Oh, wow." Clearly, Billy Reed hadn't been prepared for such a question. The lanky, red-haired boy shifted from foot to foot for a second or two, one hand lifted to his chin. "In the entire world? I guess my phone."

Though his sheepish response was met with giggles from the class, Abby smiled and nodded. "Okay, here's what I want you to do. I want you to imagine that even though you love your phone, you're scared it might shock you when you pick it up. You're dying to reach for it, to use it, but you're worried that if you do, it's going to—"

The bell rang before she could finish, but perhaps that was just as well. The longer she went on, the more ridiculous she sounded. If he'd said anything other than *phone*, she could've made it work, but she had to remember she was dealing with teenagers here. They lived and died by their electronic devices. But then, so did she. She hated having to banish hers to a drawer for the day, but there were strict rules in place for a reason. Winthrop was hard to get into. Last she'd checked, the waitlist stood at more than a hundred carefully vetted hopefuls, whose well-to-do families were willing to

pay top dollar to ensure their child's future in the performing arts.

It wasn't the only school of its kind in the Houston area, but it was the oldest, most prestigious and most expensive by far. Those distinctions essentially placed Winthrop Academy in a class by itself, allowing it to play by its own rules. There was no such thing as "three strikes and you're out" here; a single misstep could get a student expelled. But they weren't the only ones expected to toe the line. Every school year, Abby had to sign a new pledge not to engage in harmful behaviors that could set a poor example for the student body, but since Winthrop never specified what *harmful behaviors* they meant, the faculty was flying blind. Some were of the firm opinion that as long as they did nothing illegal, they should be fine, but others, like Abby, took their cues from the student rulebook. If they weren't allowed to do it, it probably wasn't a good idea for her to do it, either—and that meant no gum, no sandals, no distracting jewelry or hair ornaments, and absolutely no cell phones. Damn it.

"Great job, everyone," she offered, as the students filed out of the room. "Make sure to study the next scene this weekend, because we're going to read it on Monday!"

As he often did, Billy Reed waited for his peers to spill into the halls before approaching her desk. Abby looked up at him and smiled. He was such a sweet boy, so unassuming and genuine, but his shyness and aversion to the spotlight made him an outcast and oddity in the halls of Winthrop.

"Miss Devlin?" he ventured, though she noticed he cast his eyes to the floor as he spoke. "Do you really think I'm getting better?"

"Absolutely. You have a lot of talent, Billy. I'm very proud of your progress."

"You really think so?"

"Of course I do! I wouldn't have picked you to read Drake if I didn't think you could do it. That's a big, big part, but you can do it. I know you can, and I want you to have that same confidence in yourself, okay?"

Billy smiled, lifting his head. "Okay, I'll try."

"Good! Now, make sure you study the next scene—it's a big one for Drake, and I can't wait to hear your take on it!"

"I will. Thanks, Miss Devlin!"

"You're welcome. Have a good weekend, Billy."

"You too."

Abby waited for him to leave and close the door before she settled behind her desk and opened the drawer. Her phone had been vibrating for the better part of thirty minutes, and it did not surprise her to find four missed calls and a slew of texts waiting when she reached for it. Wendy's was the one she saw first.

*OMG I can't believe it!!!!!!!!!!*

Goodness, how many exclamation points was that, ten? What in the world had she missed?

Below Wendy's cluster of messages were a few from Val, the latest of which explained that she had to work late and wouldn't be able to make it to rehearsal tonight, one from the cable company to pester her about upgrades, what looked like a couple of chain texts from Aunt Denise, and last but not least, a photo message from Mom.

*I love you and I hope you're having a good day*, it read, and when Abby swiped up, she was greeted by an adorable picture of Mabel's newest kittens, huddled together and napping on what appeared to be a soft, fuzzy robe.

Smiling, Abby responded with heart and kissy face emojis, shot a quick acknowledgement to Val, and then turned her attention to all five of Wendy's messages.

*ABBS!!!! OMG WHY DIDN'T YOU TELL ME THAT DALTON GILES IS AUDITIONING FOR ALEX??????*

*DALTON GILES!!!!*

*He's coming HERE and I look like hell and WHY DIDN'T YOU TELL ME?????*

A series of emojis followed, and Abby paused to count them. There were four mad faces, three crying ones and four of those weird ones that looked like they were sweating.

*Ray told me he doesn't even need to audition and I mean, why would he? He's DALTON FRIGGIN GILES!!!!!!*

*OMG I can't believe it!!!!!!!!!!*

Abby sat for a moment, chuckling at her friend's apparent case of hysteria, then typed a semi-serious reply: *Are you okay? You didn't faint or anything, did you?*

Wendy's response came in seconds: *I might when he gets here!!!! Omg I can't believe you didn't TELL ME!!!!!!*

*I didn't tell you because I didn't know. Who's Dalton Giles?*

It took less than a minute for Abby to regret having asked.

*THIS is Dalton Giles*, Wendy wrote, and she accompanied it with a photo that looked like it had originally come from a magazine. Despite her better judgment, Abby enlarged it.

He wore a white lab coat, but no shirt, of course, and there was a stethoscope slung around his neck. Tanned and dark-haired, he appeared to be of Latin or Italian extraction, though his bright blue eyes cast doubt on that composite. Were those contacts? They almost had to be. She'd never met anyone whose eyes were that vibrant.

Lifting the phone closer, her eyes slowly moved over every pixel of the image. His bone structure was damned near flawless, creating a symmetrical appearance that would've been perfect if not for the nose. She zoomed in to more carefully study his one discernible flaw. Wide and oddly crooked at the bridge, that nose left the distinct impression that it had been broken at one point, but somehow, that did not detract from his overall appeal. If anything, it made him more intriguing. A pretty boy with an edge, huh? Interesting.

He was so fit, too. Was there a single ounce of body fat on him? Because Abby couldn't detect any. You could almost play the xylophone on those abs, and goodness, he had an outie for a navel. She'd always been a sucker for those!

The longer she looked, the harder it became to deny. Dalton Giles was one beautiful specimen, and he seemed to know it, too—the glistening, dimpled grin he cast at the camera was a bit too smug for her taste. Then, how could it not be? She was staring at the embodiment of bronzed Hollywood perfection. This guy belonged in a museum or something. He was a living, breathing work of art. No wonder Wendy was so smitten.

Determined not to go gaga over a man she'd yet to even meet, Abby focused on the photo's caption instead. *The Doctor Is In!* it exclaimed, in bold, blue lettering. *All or Nothing's hunky Dr. Chisholm—Dalton Giles—opens up about Brandon and Sonya's budding love affair, life in Hallandale, and how a welder became a soap star.*

She blinked, processing that. Wait, a soap star? A real, actual soap star? Auditioning for Alex? What in the world?

Wendy sent a few more tantalizing images, but she paid them little mind, firing off a text to Ray instead. *What's this about a soap star auditioning for Alex?*

Three dots appeared, indicating Ray was typing a reply, but he clearly

thought better of it, opting for a phone call instead. Abby lifted the phone to her ear. “Ray, please tell me that Wendy’s on drugs or something.”

His reply was solemn. “Wendy’s not on drugs.”

“What is going on? Why would a soap star want to audition at the playhouse?”

“He’s not a soap star—not anymore. He lives in Houston now.”

“*Why?*” It seemed the most logical thing to ask. Houston was the last place any reasonably successful actor would want to live.

“I’m not sure. That’s probably a better question for him.”

“Did he get fired or something? Oh, my God, is *he* on drugs?”

“No, I don’t...think so,” Ray drawled. “He didn’t seem like it when we met. He’s a pretty nice guy. Seems normal. Not, like, stuck on himself or anything. I liked him.”

“You like everybody until they piss you off,” she pointed out, frowning.

He ignored her observation. “To be honest, I don’t know what happened, but I know he’s not on the show anymore. He lives down here now, and he was interested in what we do here, so he came by and sat down with us a couple of days ago. Gina really liked him.”

“Oh, I’m sure she did,” Abby cracked, her mind flashing back to the racy images Wendy had sent.

“She’s not the only one, you know. We were all pretty impressed with him wanting to do something like this—and I looked him up online. He’s got a pretty big following. Lots of people are crazy about him, even now. Go to *planetdalton.com*, and you’ll see.”

“Yeah, I’ll take your word on that. But Ray, you’re not just gonna *hand* him this part, are you?”

“We’re gonna give him an audition and see how he does, just like we do with everybody else.”

“But Wendy said—”

“All right,” Ray admitted, sighing. “Gina basically said that if he wants the part, it’s his, but we’re still giving him an audition to see how it goes.”

“And what if he’s terrible? He’s a soap star, for Pete’s sake! How good could he possibly...” Abby trailed off because the answer to her unfinished question was obvious: he was good enough to land a role on a television series. He was good enough to have fans and a following. He was good enough to have actually made a living as a real, legitimate actor—all feats

she'd yet to accomplish, though not for lack of trying.

Ray spoke up before she had the chance to scratch open any old wounds. "We're going to give him a chance. You should do the same."

After taking a beat to reset herself, Abby tried again. "But you can't give this part to just anybody. Alex is a really hard role. Steve is the only person I know that could have—"

"I know you wanted Steve. I wanted Steve, too. We all wanted Steve, but Steve's not here, and we've got three weeks to find somebody else, so if you've got any other suggestions, I'd love to hear them." Ray punctuated his sentence with a low snort—a clear indication that his patience was wearing thin.

Biting her lip, Abby fell silent. There wasn't much she could say to that one. Steve's abrupt decision to move to Austin had left McMillan in quite a bind, especially this close to the season opener. And sure, there were other talented actors in the company—actors who'd waited years for a meaty role like Alex to come along, but as much as she appreciated their talents, Abby had to admit, they could never pull it off. There was a certain amount of nuance and skill that went into playing such a complex character, and God bless them, they just weren't there yet...but Dr. Beefcake probably wasn't any closer, a realization that made her scowl.

"What time is he coming in?"

Ray's tone brightened. "You want to read with him?"

"Well, if he's going to be my leading man..." The words stuck stubbornly in the back of Abby's throat, and she took great care to spit them out.

"He's coming in at five-thirty."

She glanced down at her watch. It was four-thirty now, which left just enough time to go home, change and spruce herself up. After a long week in the classroom, she looked and felt like warmed-over death, but if she was going to share the stage with that guy, her days of showing up at the playhouse in sweats and a messy bun were over. Not that she wanted to primp for him or anything. She didn't know him, and if that cocky grin was any reflection of his demeanor, she wasn't sure she wanted to. But, at least for now, it didn't look like she had a choice in the matter.

"Okay, I'll be there," she resolved in her cheeriest voice.

"Good. He'll appreciate that. I appreciate it, too. You're a real pro, Abby. I know this isn't what you wanted, but you two will make it work. Just you

wait and see.”



Dean Altman consulted the thermometer in his dash as he navigated through the garage. It was 97 degrees—underground—a feat he never would’ve imagined possible had he not spent most of his life in the Houston area. At least he didn’t have to park on the third level this time. He had been such a sweaty, disgusting mess by the time he got to the theater on Wednesday it was a wonder they didn’t throw him right back out the door.

He bunched the parking ticket tight in his hand, determined not to lose it again, and pulled down the visor. “I saw things *you* wouldn’t believe. Things you *wouldn’t* believe. Things you wouldn’t *believe*—okay. Okay, that one, yeah. I saw things you wouldn’t *believe*, horrors no man should ever see and you’re gonna *stand there* and tell me—”

The sound of a text coming in derailed his train of thought, and he pulled his phone from the charger to read Mom’s latest message: *You there yet?*

*Yeah, just pulled in,* he replied. *Nervous as balls.*

*You’ll be fine! You got this!*

Dean wanted, more than anything, to believe that, but his heart hadn’t stopped pounding since he got downtown—and though it was indeed hotter than usual today, he wasn’t sure the humidity was to blame for his perspiration. For the next several seconds, he typed a long response explaining that, and expressing doubt that this was such a good idea after all but ultimately opted for a safer reply: *Thanks. How’s Pres?*

*Good! Excited for you!* Mom’s text came in with a photo of Preslie sitting on the couch, giving an enthusiastic thumbs-up to the camera. A twelve-second video followed in short order. He lifted the phone closer, tapping the screen to play it.

“What do you want to tell Daddy?” Mom asked, off-screen.

“Um...” Preslie appeared to deliberate for a moment before scooting off the couch and closer to the camera. “I want to tell him good luck, and I love him, and—and he’s gonna do great, because he’s really good, and he can do this!”

*I didn’t tell her to say that!* Mom’s next message insisted, though if he knew

her at all, that wasn't necessarily the case. *That was all from the heart. She loves you and she's so proud of you, and so am I. You can do this, baby!*

He consulted the clock with a sigh, turning off the engine. *Thanks. I'm about to head in. I'll let you know how it goes.*

Mom's next request came as little surprise: *Send me a selfie when you get there!*

*Oh, man, you're not gonna post it on Chattr again, are you?* The memory brought a frown to his face.

*Of course not!* Mom insisted, with a little fingers-crossed emoji he was certain she didn't mean to send. *I just want to show Preslie how spiffy her dad looks. I'll delete it as soon as she sees.*

Dean knew better than to believe that, but opted not to say so, shoving both the parking ticket and phone into his pocket as he got out of the car. "I saw things you wouldn't *believe*, horrors no man should ever see, and you're gonna stand there and tell me you're horrified by *me*? You don't recognize *me*? Well, I don't recognize you! I don't recognize anything about you, because the girl I knew would never do—the girl I love would never do..."

Ten paces from the car, he paused. Was it *the girl I knew* or *the girl I love*? Suddenly, he couldn't remember.

"Love," he decided aloud. "It has to be love. He's always telling her he loves her. The girl I *love* would never do something like this. The girl I love would've waited for me instead of—hey, how are you?" With a nod, he acknowledged the person passing from the opposite direction, but his attempt at a friendly greeting was met with little more than a strange look as the man shuffled past.

Right, okay, he looked crazy, and people didn't dig that sort of thing down here. It wasn't like LA, where he could jog thirty blocks and back, cycling through fifty-two pages of angst and complicated medical jargon, with nobody batting an eye. Here, people tended to give others a much wider berth if they saw them mumbling to themselves in public, and with good reason: there weren't a lot of actors in Houston, and until a couple of months ago, he'd kind of liked it that way.

It was 5:28 by the time Dean reached the door to McMillan Playhouse, leaving less than two minutes to get his nerves under control before walking inside. Snapping and sending the goofy selfie Mom requested provided a moment's worth of confidence, and so did replaying Preslie's video, but neither were enough to stop his knees from shaking as he approached the girl

at the desk.

“Hey, good afternoon,” he forced out, willing himself to sound normal and composed. “Dean Altman—uh, Dalton Giles, sorry. I’m here for an audition.”

The young, full-figured brunette shot out of her seat, thrusting a hand in his direction. “Oh, I *know* who you are, and I’m so excited to meet you! Welcome! My name is Wendy!”

Her boisterous greeting took him by surprise, but if nothing else, he was grateful that it provided a momentary distraction from how badly he wanted to bolt. After wiping a clammy hand on his jeans, he met her handshake with a smile. “Good to meet you, Wendy.”

She pumped his hand up and down with such gusto, he wasn’t sure he’d ever get it back. “The pleasure is all mine! I know you must hear this all the time, but I really loved your work on *All or Nothing!* I was Brandon’s biggest fan! I cried so hard when you died—and your funeral, oh, my gosh! I was a mess all week long!”

“Wow, thank you. That’s really nice. Thanks so much.”

“I can’t believe you’re here! I always, always wanted to meet you, but I could never get to the conventions—and then, when I finally did save the money to go to one, you weren’t there! You were in Vancouver doing a film! I was so sad! *But* you’re here now, and I can’t believe it, and I’m making a complete fool of myself. Sorry!” Red-faced, Wendy finally let go of his hand. “Well, let me just let Ray know you’re here.”

Without giving him a chance to respond to that, she darted through a door marked *Private—Staff Only*. Within thirty seconds, she’d returned, Ray Fontaine in tow.

Dean stepped forward, a hand outstretched. “Mr. Fontaine, hi. Good to see you again.”

Eschewing the formality of a handshake, McMillan’s managing director pulled him in for a quick embrace. “Ray, please! We’re not that fancy around here, you’ll see! Glad you could make it! We’re really excited about you joining us, Dalton.”

He was so thrown off by the warm reception that it took a moment for him to remember how much he despised that name. “Uh, D. You can call me D.”

Ray Fontaine cocked his head to the side. “D? Okay, sure. Well, come on

back, and I'll show you around."

The older man led the way through the door and a maze of corridors, explaining where each one led, though he would be hard pressed to remember any of it later. He was too focused on what he had to do—and how, exactly, he planned to do it after all this time.

"This is where the magic happens," Ray announced, leading him into a chaotic room loaded with individual stalls and mirrors, chairs, tables and vending machines. "Wardrobe's gonna be over that way, and over here is where the girls get themselves dolled up. And right through there is how you get to the stage, but Abby's not here yet, so take your time and brush up and get into character and whatever else you need to do. Nobody's in a hurry."

Wendy appeared at his side, though he hadn't noticed her following. She had what looked to be a script in her hand. "I've got it marked for you and highlighted already," she informed him, using the green sticky tab that jutted from the pages to flip it open. "Just in case, you know?"

"Oh, well...thanks, but..." Rather than jinx himself by admitting he'd spent the better part of two days memorizing his sides, he took the script with a nod. "Thank you."

With a good-natured pat to his bicep, Ray brushed past him and out of the room, but offered over his shoulder, "Don't be nervous. You're gonna do great."

Dean glanced down at the script, skimming over the lines. Okay, wow, so it was *the girl I knew*—where the hell did he get *love*? "Um, thanks. I appreciate that."

He'd expected that Wendy would follow Ray to wherever he planned to observe, but she continued to stand there, smiling at him. "Don't be nervous," she echoed. "You can do this. I mean, just look at all the crazy stuff you did on the show! If you could do that, this will be a breeze!"

Well, that was one way to look at it.

"Do you remember when Brandon got stuck with Sonya in the snowstorm and she'd just left Ryan and you finally admitted you loved each other? And the night you asked her to marry you, right before you got hit by that car?" The more Wendy said, the more animated she became—and it was impossible to miss how she shifted from *Brandon* to *you* when discussing his character's adventures. The likelihood was, if she went on long enough, she'd start calling him Brandon, too. It wouldn't be the first time.

“Oh, and how about when you found out your first wife wasn’t dead, and she showed up at your engagement party—remember that?” She paused, laughing. “Sorry, I don’t know why I asked. Of course you do! You were there!”

Dean forced himself to laugh with her, if only to quell some of his anxiety. “Yeah, that was crazy.”

“And then, that time there was an outbreak at the hospital, and you got exposed, remember? You just kept trying to work and help people—you were such a good guy! I’ll never know why they killed you off!”

“Just one of those things, I guess.” He considered his response for a moment. Simple, and to the point, even if it wasn’t exactly *true*. They killed him off because Dean refused to sign another contract, and though he gave his blessing, the network wouldn’t hear of a recast. Brandon was too iconic, they said—too popular, and so was Dalton Giles. Replacing him would’ve been a disaster.

Any other actor, especially a *daytime* actor, would’ve been over the moon to hear something like that, but if anything, it hastened his move out of LA. Dalton Giles and all his adoring fans were no more real to him than Brandon Chisholm. They were both interesting characters, sure, and it was fun to play them for a while, but real life had to come first now. *Preslie* had to come first now.

“Ryan’s back, did you know that?” Wendy chirped, recapturing his attention. “He’s not dead anymore.”

Dean glanced up at her. “Oh yeah? How’d that happen?”

“I’m not sure. They haven’t explained it yet, but he’s been lurking around Sonya a lot, so I think they’re going to put them back together. I never liked her with Ryan, though. He was too selfish, and he never loved her like you did. You were the love of her life and you’re Celia’s father, so if they put her back with anybody, it ought to be you—and yes, I *know* you’re dead, but Ryan was dead, too, and that didn’t stop him!”

Rather than entertain the thought, he closed the script, handing it back to her. “I think I got it, thanks.”

“My pleasure! Make yourself at home. Abby should be here soon—and don’t be nervous! You’ve got this!” Wendy stepped closer, leaning toward him. “I mean it. You’ve *got* this, so just go have some fun with it.”

Her insistent stare made it clear she knew something he didn’t, and that

reassurance couldn't have come at a better time. If he stood there stewing over things any longer, he might've found reason to leave.

The girl I knew would never do something like this—*knew*. The girl I knew would've waited for me instead of running around with that prick. Knew, knew, *knew*.

Okay, he could do this. He'd done it before, with much higher stakes, and he could do it again. It had been a while, yeah, but he didn't just forget how to act. He could do this.

Hopefully.



Despite having the day circled on the calendar—and looking forward to it all week—Abby somehow failed to take into account that today was *Friday* when she'd promised Ray she'd be at the playhouse by 5:30. Even traffic going into downtown was a nightmare, multiple snarls forcing her to forgo the trip home altogether. Left with little other option, she applied a fresh coat of makeup while stuck on I-45, generously slathering foundation over the freckles that had been the bane of her existence since childhood. She relined her eyes, too, with a dark brown pencil that was too dull to create the wing she'd been hoping for, but did give her a less girlish, more mature appearance...at least in her estimation.

Styling her hair was a bit more of a challenge. Flat ironed into oblivion, her dull, chestnut locks hung limp against her shoulders, and no amount of plumping or finger curling made any sort of difference. Could she wet it, maybe? She was bound to have a bottle of water rolling around in this car someplace...but knowing her luck, the second she found it, they'd start moving. Or she'd get a little too heavy-handed and douse herself. Or her hair would puff up like a Chia Pet once she finally exposed it to something other than 450-degree heat. Lifeless, lackluster hair was going to have to do.

She wanted to call Ray or Gina or Wendy or *someone* to let them know about the delay, but after a long day in the drawer without a charge, her battery died somewhere between Winthrop Academy and the traffic jam. Dang. She hoped this wouldn't be misconstrued, especially after her less-than-

enthusiastic reaction to the news. The last thing she wanted was to come across as some diva, or make it appear that she didn't want to meet or work with Dr. Sixpack—even if, deep down, she didn't.

Try as she might, Abby couldn't wrap her mind around it. Why would someone like him want to audition at their little two-bit playhouse, anyhow? Last time she'd checked, there were still soaps on the air, and one of them was bound to need a hulking, sexy beast to round out the cast. Looking like that, he could've gotten a job anywhere—even a teensy part like “hottie in the underwear ad” would've been better than some small-time gig like this. What a comedown. She shuddered to imagine how he could've possibly sunk so low.

Not that she considered McMillan *low*. It was anything but for an amateur. To people like her, Val, and Tony, it was as close to the big time as they were likely going to get. But a pro, who had the entire world at his fingertips? The whole idea was laughable. This place barely paid scale, for Pete's sake! Was he *that* desperate to revitalize his career, or was he just after a little experience?

Either way, Abby gave him two weeks. Live theater wasn't for everyone. It was hard work, especially for someone coming from a much easier medium. Granted, she'd never worked in television herself. The closest she'd come was that one gig as an extra on a cop show, but the experience had been maddening. The actors, if one could even call them that, were so ill-prepared. Take after take was blown, line after line flubbed, and rather than being humble, apologizing and getting it together, the “stars” of the show seemed to find it hilarious.

Well, that wasn't going to fly here, so if Dimples McHunkerson shared their same lax work ethic, he was in for a rather rude awakening. There weren't *cue cards* or *retakes* and absolutely no one was going to find his blown line and subsequent slew of obscenities cute or funny at McMillan. They might've been small by most standards, but their professionalism was unparalleled, even on a shoestring budget—and lazy, unprepared actors didn't stand a chance.

By the time Abby cleared the traffic and made it to the theater, it was ten after six. She hadn't expected many people to be there and was stunned to find half the company present when she walked in. She didn't see Ray, Gina or the man of the hour, but she took immediate notice of Val, and made a beeline for her, eyebrow cocked.

“I thought you had to work late.”

Val grinned, leaning toward her. “I did—until Wendy sent me those pictures!”

“Oh, good grief. Not you, too.”

“I have to say, he loses something when he’s wearing a shirt. I mean, I still wouldn’t kick him out of bed, but…” Val threw back her head in laughter.

“Good grief,” Abby said again, scanning the crowd. “So where is Studly McManmeat, anyway?”

Val seemed to find the pet name even funnier. “Oh, good one! I’m going to remember that! I’m not sure where he is. Ray and Gina took him off somewhere, probably to negotiate.”

“So, he’s got the part.” It was a statement, rather than a question.

“Oh, yeah—and he’s pretty good, I have to say. Since you weren’t here, I got to read with him, and he did great, considering.”

“Considering what?”

“Well, he was pretty nervous, and he messed up a couple of times, but he was really…um, I don’t know how to describe it. The emotion was, like, right there.” For emphasis, Val lifted her hands in front of her face. “You could feel it. I think if he hadn’t been so nervous, it would’ve been amazing, but it was still really, really good. Better than I expected, that’s for sure.”

Abby blinked, processing that. Such praise coming from Val was a rarity—she was notoriously tough on her fellow actors—yet she couldn’t help but wonder if Val would’ve been so forgiving if the actor in question hadn’t been a celebrity.

“And what did he mess up on?”

“Oh, that speech about how the girl he knew wouldn’t do something like this. He kept stumbling over that part, but other than that—”

Abby held up a hand to silence her. “Wait, how many times did he screw up?”

“Three, I think?” Val shrugged. “Something like that. I just felt awful for him, because he was so embarrassed, but when he got it, he really *got* it.”

The groan that escaped was involuntary. “Oh, brother.”

“He’s good, I promise—just a little green, and he’s got three weeks to get over that. Once he gets out there, I think he’s gonna do great.”

“For my sake, I hope you’re right, because I don’t wanna carry him for three straight months. I’ll throw my back out.”

“Hush! You’ll be fine,” Val dismissed, giggling. “You’ll be better than fine. You get to kiss Studly McManmeat.”

“Lucky me.”

“There are worse things, you know! You could be playing his *mother!* I’d switch roles with you in a heartbeat! Hell, if I were ten years younger, I’d be willing to fight you for it! But this is your baby. If you don’t play the lead, it’s just—oh, here they come.” Val gestured to something behind her.

Abby turned, just in time for Ray to approach with her new leading man. Though he was just as tall and well-built as she expected him to be, he somehow looked different in person—no less breathtaking, but a lot more...real. He was a bit older and heavier than he’d been in the picture. Not *fat*, but thicker and more distinguished, with subtle flecks of gray in his hair and the stubble that lined his strong, chiseled jaw. His eyes were a few tones lighter, and more subdued as well, all but confirming he had donned contacts for the shoot. Even the guy’s smile was different, though the trademark dimples remained; it was much more genuine and approachable than the one he’d flashed for the camera, and her pulse raced as he turned it in her direction.

“Abby! You’re here!” Ray greeted, moving in for a hug. “I was starting to think you weren’t going to make it!”

Suddenly red-faced, she took her eyes off Dr. Hotness to mutter into his shoulder. “So sorry. I got stuck in traffic.”

“Oh, no big deal!” Pulling from the embrace, he motioned her co-star forward. “Abby, this is Dalton. He’s gonna be playing Alex.”

“D, please,” he corrected, still smiling.

And just like that, his appeal was back to zero. *D?* Did he think he was a gangsta or something? “Very nice to meet you,” she managed. “Abby Devlin.”

“She’s playing Bernadette,” Ray informed.

“Oh, right on. Awesome. Good to meet you.” Hottie McStupidname offered a handshake that she took a while to meet. Did he just say *right on?*

His hand was much more coarse than she expected, his grip firm and slightly painful. She slid away as quick as she could. “I’m sorry that I wasn’t here to read with you. I got stuck in traffic.”

“It’s cool, no worries.”

“Well, I’ll let you two get acquainted,” Ray announced, beaming. “I need

to talk to Gina about a few things. D, come find me whenever you're done. We'll go get a drink."

"Sure, thanks," he agreed with a nod, though she couldn't help but notice he kept his eyes on her as he spoke.

Abby's mind raced, unsure what to say, so she blurted the very first thing to come to mind. "Val told me you were...very good."

For half a second, she swore she saw a twinge of color in his cheeks. "Oh, I don't know about that, but that was really nice of her to say." He nodded in her general direction. "So, thank you."

Invited to participate in their conversation, Val came closer. "It's nerves, sweetheart—and everyone's nervous at an audition. Don't be so hard on yourself. You know what you're doing. Just trust yourself. It's all right there." She reached out, fingertips resting on the center of his chest.

"So, Dalton." Abby stepped forward, willfully refusing to honor his ridiculous nickname. "I understand you were on a soap opera."

"For a little while, yeah."

"And you want to work with *us*?"

Val snapped her head toward her. "I think it's great he's here."

"Oh, I do, too," Abby was quick to affirm. "I'm just a little...*surprised* is all."

"So am I," he admitted, laughing. "I didn't think I'd ever do this again, but it looks like fun, so why not?"

"Again?" Interest piqued, she cocked her head to the side. "Have you worked in theater before?"

"Once. A long time ago—but I meant acting. I haven't acted in...well, years, but now's as good a time as any to get back on the horse, I guess."

"Well, ride 'em, cowboy!" Good Lord, was Val *flirting* with him? "We are *so* excited. It's been a while since we've had some fresh blood around here!"

"Right on." That appeared to be one of Dalton's favorite phrases. "That's great. I'm excited to be here. I think I can learn a lot from you guys."

"Well, if you want to learn from anyone..." Val began, glancing over at her.

Abby shot her a quick, desperate look, one that pleaded, *no. No, don't. Don't go there. Don't even mention it!*

"Abby teaches drama, so if you ever need any pointers, I'm sure she'd be glad to help."

“You do?” He seemed surprised to hear it, but still turned toward her with a smile. “Wow, that’s awesome. I’m sure I’ll take you up on that. It’s been years since I’ve done this, so I need all the help I can get.”

Cornered, Abby tried to squirm out of it with a little flattery. “I’m sure you’ll do just fine. You’re the most experienced of all of us. I mean, you were on *television*.”

“Three years ago,” he pointed out, with a self-deprecating chuckle. “That’s practically forever in this business.”

She looked up, intending to beg off again, but lost her nerve when their eyes met. There was something so striking about him, and it went far beyond his looks. Here he was, this celebrity heartthrob, standing humbled in her playhouse, willing to accept acting tips from someone who’d never realized even a tenth of his success. No matter how much she wanted to dislike him, *that* was downright endearing—if he wasn’t just playing along.

“Well, I’m not sure how much help I’d be, but if you ever need anything, I’ll try,” she resolved in a low voice.

Dalton nodded, as though he was actually glad to hear it. “Awesome. Thanks.”



**P**er a long-standing tradition that dated back to his first modeling gig, the first person Dean called when he got the part was Mom. She wasted little time conferencing his sister Margot in to share the moment, and it was tough to say which one was more excited. They lobbed question after question, the whole way home, about the process, the audition, the role, the production, his co-stars and how he felt about the whole thing—it was like being on *Soap Chat* all over again, but a lot more tolerable this time, because unlike the insipid, swooning hosts of *Soap Chat*, they were actually interested in his answers.

It was half-past eight by the time he got home, despite his earlier resolve that he wouldn’t stay a second longer at the playhouse than he had to. The people there were nice, and he was looking forward to working with all of them, but man, were they relentless. They were constantly finding more

people to introduce him to, more ways to fawn over him, more unwarranted, overly generous compliments to offer, and more places to invite him to. Ray and some of the backstage people asked if he wanted to join them for a drink at some bar in Midtown, while the cast (namely the mildly standoffish, but undeniably intriguing Abby Devlin) expressed interest in him sticking around to watch them rehearse. It was nice of them to offer, sure—and he was grateful that they wanted to include him, but he couldn't say no to either invitation fast enough. All he wanted to do this weekend was soak up as much normalcy and time with Pres as possible, because come Monday, everything was going to change.

They did six shows a week at McMillan: at 7 p.m. on Wednesdays and Sundays, at 8 p.m. on Fridays and Saturdays and at 2 p.m. for weekend matinees. They also rehearsed *every day*, including weekends, though the times for that could vary. That meant, at the very least, he was going to be spending a solid twenty-five hours a week at the theater, not including the drive there and back—and that was on top of his day job at the shipyard. Where, exactly, was Preslie supposed to fit into that? Where were *sleep* and *family* and *meals* and *down time* supposed to fit into a schedule like that?

The more Dean thought about it, the less appealing it sounded. He left that sort of thing behind for a reason, and though this paled in comparison to the 5:30 a.m. calls and sixteen-hour days that playing Brandon required, he'd foolishly assumed that community theater would be a lot less involved. They weren't changing the world or anything. It was the same show, with the same lines and the same movements, six times a week. Did they really need that much time to practice?

Mom threw open the door before he could unlock it, both of her arms outstretched. "Baby, I'm so proud of you! I knew you could do it!"

"Thanks. I'm sorry it took so long. I tried to get out of there as quick as I could, but..." Dean trailed off as he walked into her embrace. It was quiet—way too quiet, and his heart sank when he realized the reason. "She's asleep, isn't she?"

"Well, she got a little tired waiting, so I put her down—but if you want to go wake her up, I haven't told her anything yet, because I wanted her to hear it from you!"

And this was what he had to look forward to for the next three months. "No, it's cool. Let her sleep."

Mom pulled back, beaming at him. “I texted Grandma and Uncle Ernie. Margot said she was going to call Aunt Pat tomorrow to tell her—everyone is *so excited* for you! Did you call your dad?”

“No, but I need to.” Moving past her, Dean took a seat on the sofa. “Something tells me he’s not gonna be as excited as Uncle Ernie and Grandma, especially when he finds out how much time I’m gonna need off.”

“Sure he will! You know how proud of you he is—I mean, he doesn’t always *say* so, but he’s never been great at that sort of thing, anyway.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Dino, he wouldn’t have taped your show every day if he wasn’t proud of you. I couldn’t even get him to watch *NYC Med*. He called it a crying, sissy show, remember?”

He paused, grinning at the memory. “Oh, man, yeah.”

“The fact he couldn’t stomach that, but still watched you every day, should tell you that man is proud. He’s not the most *demonstrative*, I know, but he’s proud, and he’ll understand, and he’ll make it work. Trust me. Now, are you hungry? I bet you’re starved!”

“No, I’m fine. You don’t have to go to any trouble or anything. I’m good.”

“It’s no trouble!” Mom was already halfway to the kitchen. “I already made dinner, anyway—I just have to heat it up.”

Dean shifted on the sofa to watch her, shaking his head. “You really don’t have to keep cooking for us. I know my way around a stove, you know.”

“You know your way around a delivery app,” she corrected with a laugh. “And no offense, but I’d really rather my favorite granddaughter have something other than burgers and pizza for a change.”

“Hey, I cook sometimes. When I can.”

“I know you do, but for those times you can’t, it does my heart good to step in.” Mom came around the side of the couch, extending a can of beer toward him. “Oh, and before I forget, one of Kristen’s people sent you a message on Chattr. They’re having a fan event for her the week of Thanksgiving—I think it’s a video chat or something? It’s to celebrate her tenth anniversary on the show, and they wanted to know if you’d be interested—”

“Yeah, no.” Dean popped open his beer, a stern gaze cast in her direction. “And stop reading my Chattr messages.”

“Well, it’s not like you ever do!”

“Mom, we’ve been over this. You can’t message people on Chattr and sign my name to it. They call that *catfishing* now, and it’s kind of a big deal.”

She turned toward him, hands on her hips. “I know that, thank you—and believe me, I learned my lesson last time! All I do is read the messages now. Keep an eye on things, you know? I don’t reply to anyone unless you tell me to.”

“Well, don’t reply to that one. Kristen didn’t have *people* last time I checked, so who knows who that actually came from.”

“Couldn’t you contact Kristen and find out if it was for real?”

“Couldn’t Kristen contact me herself if she really wanted me to come?”

“Good point.”

Dean set his beer on the coffee table, pulling the phone from his pocket. He couldn’t even remember the last time he logged onto Chattr, or any of its equally vexing clones, but an invitation like that was bizarre and unexpected enough to warrant a peek. “Do you remember my Chattr password?” She ought to—she was the one who set it up.

“No, but if you open the app on my phone, you should already be logged in.” Mom shoved a plate into the microwave, then started toward him. “Wait. You’re not gonna lock me out of it, are you?”

“Tempting, but no. I just wanna see the message.”

“Okay, well, my phone should be over there next to you. The passcode’s Mason’s birthday—with the year.”

As expected, a glut of notifications awaited when he opened the app, so many that the system gave up on trying to count them and listed a vague “50+” as the total. After weeding through an overwhelming amount of new follows, replies, hearts and reposts on some photo Mom had slapped up there without his consent or knowledge this afternoon, he finally located the message in question, sandwiched between two creepy, if amusing, notes from fans who’d written to profess their undying love.

*Good evening, someone called “caseyshamblinPA” wrote. My name is Casey, and I’m Kristen Horner’s P.A. Sorry to reach out to you like this, but I didn’t have any other contact info. Kristen’s fan club is throwing a virtual event in November, honoring her tenth anniversary as Sonya, and they’re inviting all her leading men to take part. Right now, they’re looking at the week of Thanksgiving, but I know that’s a pretty busy time for people, so that’s subject to change once we hear from everyone. It’s just going to be virtual, a*

*real “come as you are” informal type of thing, and there will be fans there in the chatroom, but you’ll just be video chatting with Kristen, Jesse Foster, Mark LeBlanc, the host and some others we haven’t determined yet. You’ll have the opportunity to talk to Kristen and the others, as well as plug any new projects you’re working on and let people know what you’re doing now. I think it will be a lot of fun for everybody, and Kristen would love it if you could be there. The Branson story was always her favorite, and it’s still really popular with the fans, too. Let me know if you’d be interested and I can put you in touch with the right people. You can call me anytime, email or respond to me through here. I look forward to hearing from you. Thanks, Casey*

Below that was a phone number and email address, but Dean knew better than to take advantage of either. A lot of weird, crazy stuff, involving a lot of weird, crazy people, had happened over the course of his career, making him inherently distrustful of digital communication. Thus, the reply he sent was steeped in skepticism: *If this is legit, get Kristen to call me. My number’s still the same.*  
-D

Mom approached with his dinner, setting the plate on the coffee table as she settled beside him. “Did you read it? What do you think?”

“It doesn’t sound as sketchy as I thought it would, but I still don’t know. Even if it is legit, I don’t think I’d wanna do it. I never liked those things, anyhow. They’re so awkward, and I never knew what to say—not even when I was actually on the show. Now that I’m not, I have no idea what the hell there is to talk about.”

“Well, you could talk about the play,” she suggested, with a wide, gummy grin.

Reaching for the plate, Dean sighed. “Yeah, there’s that—if I even do the play.”

Her eyes widened. “If you do the play? Why on earth wouldn’t you?”

“I don’t know. They might fire me—or I might quit, because the more I think about this, the less I like it.”

“You are not going to quit! Not before you even start! Dino, come on! This is your chance to get back out there on your own terms! Isn’t that what you wanted?”

“Well, yeah, but I didn’t think it was gonna take up so much time. I told you they rehearse every day, right? Every single day, for two hours a day, and Pres is gonna *freak out*. You know that.”

“She’ll be fine! I already told you, I don’t mind coming over every night to

watch her. It's not like I have a whole lot else going on!"

"I know, and I appreciate that. It's just..." Unsure how to best end that sentence, he shoveled a forkful of Mom's famous potatoes into his mouth.

She leaned closer, catching his eyes. "Baby, you can't be with her every minute of every day. You know that."

"Maybe not," he conceded, swallowing, "but I'd still like to be the one to tuck her in."

Her expression softened as she nodded. "I know, and I'm sorry. I know how important that is for you, but she'll be fine. It's going to take some getting used to, but she will be fine—and besides, it's not forever. Just three months."

Reaching for his beer, Dean considered that. He'd always said that in another life, Mom could've worked in advertising. She had an amazing way of making things sound a whole lot better than they actually were, and this time was no exception. This play might have *just* been a three-month commitment—but he could already tell they were going to be the longest, most exhausting three months of his life.

What the hell had he gotten himself into?



*A* bby crawled home from the playhouse both frustrated and drained, but as tempting as it was to sleep until Monday, she had more pressing things on her mind—namely, Dalton Giles. It was crazy. She hadn't even known the man existed prior to this afternoon, and she'd only spent a total of fifteen minutes with him tonight, but she couldn't stop thinking about him. What was that guy's deal? Where had he come from? What happened to the cushy soap gig? What, exactly, was he looking to accomplish by taking this part? Why the hell did he fascinate her so much? The questions were endless.

After feeding her cat, Meryl, and changing out of her schoolmarm attire, she helped herself to a bowl of much-needed ice cream and settled on the couch with her laptop. Meryl wasted little time joining her there, curling up next to her while she scoured the internet for every shred of information she could find on her new co-star. Hundreds of thousands of results popped up when she entered his name into the search engine, and so did a helpful little box on the side, offset with a number of smoldering images. Lord have mercy, that was one delectable man!

*Dalton Giles is an American model, actor and television host, best known for his role of Dr. Brandon Chisholm on the ABN soap opera All or Nothing.*

Right, she knew that part. Next.

His IEDB page was a bit more revealing. He boasted seven credits as an actor, in roles such as “John the Hottie” on a 2013 episode of *Wanda and*

Wally, “Nash Dupree” on two episodes of *Texas Justice*, and “Edward West” in the television film *One Lover Wasn’t Enough*—and though the site did not specify, Abby was willing to bet, just from its title, that was one of those insufferable Lifestyle flicks.

*One Lover Wasn’t Enough* was his most recent credited work, back in 2017, and, from the looks of it, he’d all but fallen off the face of the earth since. Abby went back to the results page. There had to be a reason behind that—maybe she could find it on that site Ray mentioned. Oh, gosh, what was it? *planetdalton.com* or something?

Per the text on the home page, she could glean that Planet Dalton was a fan site, with no actual affiliation with its subject, but it claimed to be the “number one source” for everything about him. Thus, the site was divided into every imaginable section:

News—the most recent post being from late 2019, where someone calling herself “AmandaChisholm” speculated about a return to the soap that, to Abby’s knowledge, never materialized.

Credits—a blatant rehash of his IEDB page.

Photos—which Abby shamelessly bookmarked to return to at a later date.

All About Brandon—a long, detailed biography of his soap character, including a playlist of clips they’d entitled “The Best of Brandon”.

All About Dalton—bingo!

*Dalton Giles was born in Houston, Texas on September 14, 1986. He grew up in the city of Galveston. His parents’ names are Sid and Donna. He has a twin sister, Margot. His ethnic background consists of German, Dutch and Romanian, and like his on-screen wife Kristen Horner, he identifies as Jewish. Dalton ran track and cross-country in high school and also likes to surf. His favorite food is Italian. He is a self-professed cinephile, and some of his favorite films include The Godfather, The Nightmare Before Christmas and The Breakfast Club. Prior to moving to Los Angeles, he lived in Ohio for a year, working as a bartender and a welder.*

Gee, how informative. Abby felt like she knew him already.

*Dalton did not originally plan to go into the entertainment industry. While on vacation in Los Angeles, he was scouted for modeling. As a model, he was seen in ads for Harrington’s New York, Nautical cologne and Insyde, a clothing brand based out of San Diego. His highest profile modeling job came in 2010, when he was featured alongside Sabrina Dillon on a billboard for Torrent by EP, which was prominently displayed in Times Square. This led to roles in commercials for fast-food chain Bacon Brothers, Ensley’s*

*Beer and Washington Credit Union. Dalton also appeared in music videos for Robin Hazelton, Jennifer Grant and, most notably, as the love interest of Kat Miceli in the video for her ballad All Out of Tries.*

*In December 2014, Dalton joined the cast of All or Nothing in the contract role of Brandon Chisholm. It was his first regular series role. His casting was very well-received, and his character's pairing with Sonya Barrett (known as Branson on social media) quickly became a fan favorite. As a result, Dalton was named one of Infotainment Magazine's "Hottest Guys Alive" in 2015 and joined Hollywood Live later that year as guest correspondent and rotating weekend co-host. He made two films for the Lifestyle network—ha, Abby knew it!—Dying to Belong in 2016 and One Lover Wasn't Enough in 2017. In January 2018, Dalton announced his decision to leave All or Nothing. His last airdate was February 23.*

*Dalton was previously married to model Chelsie Crane, whom he met at a shoot in 2009. Their daughter, Preslie, was born in 2014. The couple has since divorced.*

That paragraph stopped Abby cold, though she could not for the life of her determine why. Seemed simple enough. He was once married to a model—not surprising, because look at him—and they had a kid. They weren't together anymore, sadly going the way of every beautiful Hollywood pair after a couple of years or so. None of that was earth-shattering information, but for some reason, it sparked something deep within her. Before she could stop herself, she'd typed *Chelsie Crane* into the search engine, bracing for the images that were bound to pop up. They didn't disappoint.

Buxom, blonde, and so bronzed, she practically glistened, Chelsie Crane looked exactly the way Abby'd thought she might. She wore way too much makeup. Her lips were enormous. Her teeth were straight and gorgeous, so white they could've blinded somebody. Her bosom was ample, her waist cinched tight to create a perfect hourglass shape. For heaven's sake, even that woman's *feet* were pretty!

Abby sighed, closing the tab. Of course Chelsie Crane was perfect. Of course she'd posed for *Playmate*—twice. Of course she'd been married to Dalton and given birth to his child. Of course someone like him wouldn't procreate with anything less than a goddess. Of course no actual human being stood a chance at gaining his attention! Of *course!*

After taking a moment to shake off her inexplicable anger at the notion and all the insecurities it dredged up, Abby continued on with her research. Ah, yes. Chattr. Maybe that would shed some light on what Dr. Sexypants had

been doing for the past three years.

To her surprise, the photo on his profile looked...normal. He wasn't posing or trying to be cute. He looked a lot more like the guy she'd met earlier than the one she had seen on the internet, approachable and almost endearing.

*Dad. Dreamer. Optimist. Sometimes, people pay me to pretend. Other times, people pretend to be me. FYI, this is my only Chattr account. If anyone messages you and says they're me, they're not. Look for the check mark and don't give anyone online your personal info,* instructed his "About Me" section—sage advice that explained why he'd chosen the obnoxious username of "realdaltongiles."

His account had over eighty-eight thousand followers, and nine thousand posts, dating back to 2014. Abby scrolled down. Oh, brother. This was gonna take a while.

Pinned to the top was an old post from March 2017, though if it held any special significance, she didn't recognize it right away. *D and Kristen are live right now,* it began, *and they're answering all of your Branson questions! Check it out!* Included was a link to a video on Streamline, which Abby also bookmarked for later viewing.

His most recent post was below that, from six hours prior: *BIG NEWS COMING! Can't wait to tell you all about it! Watch this space! -Team D.*

Oh, for Pete's sake, he had a *team*? Abby fought the overwhelming urge to roll her eyes, instead clicking on the image attached to the post. It was Dalton, with a goofy, open-mouthed grin on his face, mugging like an idiot in front of a door marked *McMillan Playhouse*.

She snapped her laptop closed, cheeks burning. She'd *known* he was up to something! He was trying to use her playhouse to springboard himself back into the spotlight. He was trying to use *her* play to get himself back on the soaps! That opportunistic jerk!



That photo, and the man it depicted, stayed on Abby's mind all weekend, with random currents of outrage springing up at the most inopportune times. It seemed he was all anyone at McMillan wanted to talk about—even

Steve called from Austin, to ask if the rumors were true. Abby had never pegged him for much of a soap fan, but when she confirmed that, sadly, it was, he spent the next half hour gushing about how *great* Dalton had been on the soap and how *amazing* it was that McMillan landed a *real star* like him.

Ray echoed much the same sentiment when he called on Sunday afternoon, and then followed that up with the bombshell that since they shared the bulk of the scenes, he wanted her to work with Dalton exclusively for the next week, to bring him up to speed. She tried to resist, pointing out that in the entire four years she'd been with McMillan, she'd never attended a single one-on-one rehearsal. This was an ensemble effort, after all.

He held his ground, insisting that the supporting players were fine with having the week off—they would be—and everyone agreed that, given how close opening night was, and how new Dalton was to this whole thing, he needed as much one-on-one time to get ready as possible. And when she still refused to budge, Ray brought out the big guns: a mix of flattery and threats.

“If anybody can get him where he needs to be in three weeks, it’s you,” he said. “You bring out the best in every single person you share the stage with, so now, we need you to bring out the best in him—and fast, because the first two weeks’ worth of shows are sold out. If he falls on his face out there, that’s gonna be bad for all of us.”

*Damn it.*

All day long on Monday, Abby cursed herself for agreeing, but deep down, she knew that Ray was right. Dalton’s failures would end up being her own by extension, and that meant that no matter how infuriating he might’ve been, she had to be professional about this. She had to help him. She had to make sure he didn’t *fail*, which might not have been such an arduous task if he’d shown even the slightest hint of consideration or appreciation for her time.

She had been sitting at the playhouse for half an hour—having floored it the whole way from work in order to make it by 5:30—and, of course, Chiseled McSexerton had yet to make an appearance. Abby’s fist clenched around her phone, so tight she was surprised she didn’t crack the screen. If he didn’t walk through that door in the next ten minutes, she was going to call Ray and tell him a thing or two about his new favorite person.

Her phone vibrated, and she looked down to find a text from a 513 number: *Hey, I’m grabbing some coffee because I’m about to collapse. Do you want*

*anything?*

Why, yes, random stranger, she most certainly did, but rather than admit it, she sent back a curt: *Wrong number.*

*Abby?*

She blinked as the message rolled in, struggling to recall who she might've known with a 513 number—where was that, anyway? *Sorry, I don't have your number saved. Who is this?*

A response came within half a second: *D.*

*Dalton?* Oh, for heaven's sake, who gave him her number?

Three dots appeared, then disappeared, then reappeared again before he finally spit it out. *Yeah. So, do you want anything? I'm at the speaker.*

Oh, she wanted something, all right. She wanted to chide him for stopping for coffee when he was already half an hour late. She wanted to ask what right he had to keep her waiting. She wanted to tell him to get it together, because, unlike everyone else around here, she wasn't impressed by him, and she would not excuse these sorts of stunts...but all she managed was a simple *No thank you.*

*K,* he sent back, with a little thumbs-up emoji. *Be there soon.*

Abby took note of the time as she slid the phone back into her bag. It was 6:04—and she was giving him ten more minutes, so she really hoped that when he said *soon*, he meant it.

Good grief, this was going to be a long week.



Simply put, rehearsal was a nightmare—a prolonged, ninety-minute nightmare that served to validate all Dean's reservations, and while he'd never been one to point a finger or pass the blame, it was impossible to discount how much of that was Abby Devlin's fault. She cornered him the second he got there, demanding, "Who do you think you are to keep me waiting?" and followed that with a snide reminder that, though she was not some "big shot celebrity" like him, her time was no less valuable.

Sincerely bewildered by the outburst, he tried to point out that, per the texts he exchanged with Ray this afternoon, he was actually fifteen minutes

*early*, but that seemed to make her angrier. Red-faced and practically seething, she'd excused herself to make a phone call—a very loud and emotional one, he was sure—but she seemed calmer when she returned, and even apologized for the misunderstanding. Though annoyed, Dean shrugged it off, in the hopes that by doing so, they could salvage the rest of the evening...but somehow, it just got worse from there.

Although she'd agreed to help him and that was why they were there in the first place, Abby seemed uninterested in the notes he'd taken on the script and his ideas for Alex's characterization. She had even less to say when it came to his delivery—no feedback or insight, just a steady stream of strange looks and obnoxious noises every time he read a line, as if to say, “*really*, dude? *That* is how you're going to play this?” The most he got out of her was a stern reminder that soaps and theater were very different, and that he didn't have to be so dramatic, because here, the subtext was more important. Finally, some useful, practical advice...except, by that point, Dean was so irritated that he shrugged that off, too.

They ran through three scenes, but he considered his best acting of the night when she suggested they embark on a fourth. It coincided with Preslie's pre-arranged phone call to tell him good night, and thinking quickly, he managed to convince Abby that a dire emergency had arisen at home, one that required his immediate attention.

He'd never expected her to buy it—after an evening of raised eyebrows and dismissive *tut, tut* noises, even he was doubting his abilities—but she didn't ask any questions. The odds were, she was just as ready to stick a fork in this fiasco as he was. She saw him to the door confirming that they would meet at *five-thirty* tomorrow and expressing subdued hope that everything would be okay.

Talking to Preslie helped him decompress a bit, and so did some loud, angry music after she got off the phone, but they did little to improve his overall mood. He didn't think such a thing was possible, but he felt even worse about this now than he did on Friday night and, after weighing his options all the way to the causeway, he called up Ray Fontaine. The phone rang twice before kicking over to voicemail. That meant that Ray saw and ignored his call, an exasperating slight that made his message ten times easier to deliver.

“Hey, it's D. Listen, I just left rehearsal with Abby and this is not gonna

work. I appreciate you guys giving me a chance, and I'm really sorry to do this to you, but I just don't think it's gonna work, so it's best we end it here, okay? Thanks."

The drive home took almost as long as rehearsal did, and the closer he got, the harder it was to stay awake. He wanted nothing more than to climb into bed and never speak of this disaster again, but of course, Mom was waiting with an arsenal of questions when he walked through the door.

"How'd it go? Do you like it? What did she think of your notes? How is she to work with? Tell me everything!"

"Um..." He staggered for the couch, unsure where to even start. "There's not a lot to tell. She doesn't like me, and I'm not too crazy about her, either, but it doesn't matter because I'm not doing this. I already called Ray and told him I'm not gonna do it."

She gaped, open-mouthed, at him for a moment before regaining her composure. "But you were so excited earlier. What happened?"

"Uh..." Again, he hesitated, leaning down to untie his boots. What was the easiest way to say it? If he came right out with, *she thinks I'm a terrible actor, and I think she's onto something because I could rehearse for a decade and still not be able to convince anybody that I'm in love with that woman*, Mom would likely lose her mind. "It's just not a good fit."

"Oh." She frowned, her disappointment clear. "I'm sorry, baby."

"It's fine," he dismissed, shrugging. "Pres in bed?"

"Yes, she fell asleep right after she talked to you. Are you hungry?"

Lying down, he reached for the remote. "No, I think I'm good, thanks."

"Are you sure? I've got something in the oven. It would already be done, but Preslie wanted tacos tonight, and she wouldn't take no for an answer, so I had to order them for her. You have her so spoiled, I swear."

He snickered at that, settling into the fetal position. "Don't talk to me about spoiled. You had to cook two separate meals every night for years, because we couldn't agree on anything. Hell, you're still cooking for me, at nine o'clock at night, when you should be home in bed."

"Bed? At nine? I'm not that old!" she admonished, turning toward the kitchen. "Preslie is going to be so excited to have you home tomorrow!"

Aimlessly, he flipped through an assortment of frivolous channels before landing on *Sportscentral*. Ah, the old standby. This stuff never failed to knock him out. "Yeah, I bet," he muttered into the cushion. That was at least one

good thing about this evening.

Mom didn't say anything else for a few minutes, allowing Dean's old friends Rick and Tom (and their dry commentary on the Mets) to lure him into a lazy, half-awake stupor. When she finally spoke again, it gave him a start.

"I'm sorry this didn't work out for you, baby, but don't worry. Something better will come along."

He shifted on the couch, readjusting the pillows. "I'm not worried."

"Good."

That was the last thing Dean remembered for the next several hours. Mom was gone when he woke up, and all the lights were off, but Rick and Tom of *Sportscentral* were still at it. Jeez, did they loop them all night or something? He sat up, massaging the crick out of his neck with one hand and fumbling for his phone with the other. What time was it? He was so stiff and groggy it felt like he'd been asleep a hundred years.

After scouring the coffee table and surrounding area, he finally found his phone in his pocket. It was 4:16 a.m.—and he had an entire screen of missed calls and texts.

Four were from Ray, all with corresponding voicemails. He'd sent a block of texts as well, the most recent from 10:30, reading, *Call me in the morning so we can talk about this*. Yeah, whatever.

To his surprise, Abby Devlin also called a few times, most recently at 10:17, but rather than leave any voicemails, she opted for a barrage of texts.

*Dalton*—why did she insist on calling him that?—*I just want to tell you I'm sorry about earlier. I shouldn't have acted the way I did, and I'm really sorry. I hope everything's okay*, read the first, from 9:48.

Ten minutes later, she sent another: *You're QUITTING? Are you kidding me?*

Then: *Why'd you even take the part if you were just going to quit three days later?*

A few minutes after that: *Answer the damn phone!*

And finally: *Ok, look, I'm sorry. I'm really sorry if this is about me and what happened tonight. I don't know if it is me or if you have your own little weird thing going on over there, but if it was me, I'm sorry. I won't do it again. Just don't quit. You can't do that. We need you.*

It gave Dean great satisfaction to delete every last one of her messages.

The last couple of texts were from Mom, promising she'd set the alarm

and locked up before leaving. He flicked off the television, intent on dragging himself upstairs to spend the last forty-five minutes before his alarm in comfort, but the phone in his hand vibrated before he could get very far.

Looking down, he steeled himself for another desperate message from Ray—or another irate one from Abby—but found a text from Margot instead: *Hey, are you up yet?*

*Barely*, he sent back. *How'd you know?*

*Wonder Twin powers, I guess*, she replied, with a purple heart emoji. *Up for a call?*

*Sure.*

The phone rang half a second later, and, desperate for some fresh air, he stepped onto the deck to answer. “Hey.”

“Hey. Mom told me about the play. I’m sorry.”

“It’s all right. Dumb idea, anyway.”

Margot sighed at that. “What happened?”

“It’s just not, um...” He paused, struggling to recall what he’d told Mom the night before. “It’s not a good fit, I don’t think. She really didn’t like me, and I could tell the whole time, she was just, like, judging me or something, and I don’t wanna deal with that.”

Too late, Dean realized he should’ve kept his mouth shut. “*Judging* you? Who does she think she is?”

“I didn’t mean judging like, um...*judging*. I meant it didn’t look like she thought I was very good—”

“Oh, like she could do better? Who is this woman, anyway? How many shows has *she* been on? None! That’s my bet! The *nerve!* I don’t blame you for quitting! Screw her! That place didn’t deserve you, anyway! You were doing them a favor by even showing up! That little two-bit, penny-ante, stupid little—”

“Hey, hey,” he interrupted, sinking into one of the plush patio chairs. “I think you’re more upset about this than I am.”

“You’re damned right I am!” Margot affirmed, with a snort of indignation. “Who the hell do they think they are? You are so much better than that stupid place, Dino—and they know it. Believe me, they know it!”

“Yeah, I think you’re right, because now they’re falling all over themselves trying to get me to change my mind.”

“Good! Let them! Maybe they’ll show that old battle-axe the door

instead!”

“Nah, I doubt that. I think she’s the one who wrote the play, so she’s not going anywhere.”

She was silent for a second. “Well, that sucks.”

“Pretty much, yeah. Ray wants me to call him this morning to talk about this, but I don’t know if there’s much to say. I mean, what can he do? He can’t *make* her like me.”

“Maybe he could make her respect you.”

“I don’t think anybody could do that,” he pointed out, with just a hint of regret.

“Well, if he doesn’t try, it’s his loss,” Margot resolved. “And your fans aren’t gonna let him forget it. They’re paying good money to come see you. *You*, not her—so if that man knows what’s good for him, he’ll put a muzzle on her.”

“Yeah, well, I’m not holding my breath.”



“*W*hat? You want me to do *what?*” Certain she’d misheard, Abby turned up the volume on her phone.

“I want you to apologize to him,” Ray repeated, his tone stern.

“I already did that! I texted him last night to apologize—both before and after he pulled his little diva stunt and shut the show down!”

“I want you to apologize to him properly. In person.”

“He’d have to show up before I could do that,” she cracked, taking a sip of coffee.

“That’s another thing—he thinks that rehearsing every day is excessive. He called it obsessive, actually, because it’s the very same show six times a week and he doesn’t think anyone should need that much time to practice.”

“Are you serious? And he knows this how?”

“Experience,” Ray replied, as though it should’ve been obvious. “From what I understand, soap operas are pretty fast-paced. They shoot an episode a day, so if you’re used to that, it probably would be excessive to go over the same ninety pages every day.”

“So, what, he wants to do it once a week now? Is that it?”

“He’s fine with every day this week, because he needs the time to get ready, but after that, he suggested twice a week might be better.”

Abby tried and failed to suppress a groan. “And let me guess—you’re going along with this. What’s next? His own private dressing room? A bowl of M&Ms with all the blue ones removed? How about top billing?”

Ray’s response felt like a dagger to the chest. “He’s already got top billing.”

“Oh, you’ve got to be kidding me! Steve and I always *shared* top billing!”

“Well, Steve’s fans weren’t packing the house. We’re booked solid, Abby—for weeks. They’re talking about maybe even adding some shows, because of the demand. That’s never happened before!”

“I know,” she murmured—and she knew the reason, too, even if she didn’t want to utter his name. “All right, so he wants an apology, and he wants twice a week rehearsals—what else? Does he want me to grovel around on my knees and buy him some chocolates, too? Maybe I could give him a massage.”

“That won’t be necessary, but I think he would like a little respect and professional courtesies, if that’s not too much to ask.”

“I already told him I was sorry about that!”

“And you’re going to tell him again tonight,” Ray informed. “At six-thirty.”

“*Six*-thirty? What happened to five-thirty?”

“Six-thirty works better for D.” And that was what mattered, wasn’t it?

Shoulders slumped, Abby sighed. “All right, fine. Six-thirty.”

“And don’t yell at him this time!”

“I won’t,” she promised, through clenched teeth, though she couldn’t recall actually yelling at him last night—sure, she might have been a little heated, but she’d been a long way from *yelling!*

“You’d best not.”



Left with little other option, Abby spent much of her free time between classes practicing the perfect apology. She could do this—she was an *actress*, for Pete’s sake, and she’d taken on much bigger stretches before. She’d played an elven princess once, with a posh English accent for good measure, and those things didn’t even exist, so there was no doubt in her mind she could do this.

Still, there was a big difference between acting and lying straight to a man’s face. She’d always tried to be as up-front and honest as possible, even when what she had to say got her into trouble. To that end, it would’ve been much more satisfying to denounce Dalton Giles as a self-serving, overly sensitive douche, and tell him exactly where to stick his six-thirty rehearsals and top billing...but if she fancied any sort of future with the playhouse, she had to be nice. Ray had made that abundantly clear.

Forget the fan site—McMillan was the new Planet Dalton. Everyone else was just along for the ride. Damn it, this was what she’d been afraid of when he sauntered in, but she never expected it to come to a head so soon. Given how disarmingly approachable he’d seemed on Friday night, she’d hoped he could at least wait a week before trying to throw his weight around. She should’ve known, just from his hammy, overwrought performance last night, that in order to conceal an ego of that magnitude, he’d need far more than two rehearsals a week. Pompous bastard.

Abby showed up at the playhouse thirty minutes early, and though she expected Dalton to waltz in at seven, surrounded by a swooning entourage, he arrived alone fifteen minutes later. Carrying an oversized (and no doubt overpriced) coffee, he was on the phone when he walked in, and, for some reason, seemed surprised to see her.

“Hey, baby, I gotta go,” he announced into the phone. “I’ll talk to you soon...Sure, you can text me...I may not see it right away, but...Okay, cool. Love you, too...I will, I promise...No, baby, I’ve really got to go...”

Abby pretended not to notice as he came closer, except she couldn’t help but watch him from the corner of her eye. How was it that the most infuriating guys were also always the hottest? Dalton wasn’t dressed to impress, but goodness, he still looked amazing. Wearing a black sleeveless t-shirt and cargo shorts that, along with his backwards baseball cap and canvas Vans, made it appear he’d come straight from the beach, he appeared flushed, a little sweaty and...nervous, oddly enough.

After telling her he loved her at least three more times and encouraging her to text as much as she wanted, with the promise he’d read it all later, Dalton finally bid adieu to whatever clingy human Barbie he was seeing these days. Drawing closer, he sucked in a quick, audible breath. It looked to Abby like he was gathering his nerve.

“Hey, sorry,” he greeted, shoving the phone into one of his pockets and retrieving a rolled-up script from another. “Ready to try this again?”

“Sure. But first...” She stood, taking in a deep breath of her own. *Showtime.* “Dalton, I want to tell you how sorry I am about last night. I am so ashamed of the way I acted, and I can’t apologize to you enough. The whole thing was a miscommunication on Ray’s part, and I never should have acted the way I did. I hope you can—”

“It’s cool,” he dismissed, with a nod. “No worries.”

Abby was silent for a second. Somehow, she’d expected him to make it harder than that. “I’m very, very sorry,” she tried again, head angled upward to ensure eye contact. “I promise, it won’t happen again.”

“Awesome. So, are we starting over or did you wanna pick up from that fourth scene?” He took a sip of his coffee, bouncing the script against his knee. “Actually, you know what? It might be better to start over, because I’ve been thinking about what you said—I am a little too dramatic, and I need to tone it down.”

In order to keep from busting into laughter, she forced her gaze to the floor. He meant his acting—and she knew that, but damn, what an ironic thing to say. “Okay, we can do that if you want.”

“You’ll let me know if I’m in the ballpark, right? You know the way this character is supposed to be played, so if I’m on the wrong track, I need you to tell me. Don’t just stare at me—I hate that. It drives me crazy. Just tell me. It’s not gonna hurt my feelings.”

She shot him a skeptical look, remembering how quick he was to tattle when he simply thought she’d raised her voice at him, but still managed a polite nod. “Okay, I will. But I don’t have any say-so over how you play this character. That’s up to the director, not me.”

“Well, you know what you had in mind when you wrote it—you did write it, didn’t you? Val told me you did.”

*Of course she did.*

“Yes, I wrote it, but—”

“Well, if you wrote it, you obviously know this guy better than I do,” he reasoned with a shrug. “So, I trust your judgment—but I can’t read your mind, so you’re gonna have to tell me if I’m screwing it up. Deal?”

Oh, *that* wouldn’t be a problem. “Deal.”

Given last night’s scenery-chewing spectacle, Abby expected more of the same from tonight, but it appeared he’d taken her advice to heart. This time around, his take on Alex was more subtle and down-to-earth, and it was a marked improvement, as much as she hated to give it to him. He had the perfect voice for theater, too—deep and resonant, and more emotive than any other actor in the company. He wouldn’t have a single issue projecting to the back to the theater...even if his continued reliance on the script was troubling. The same guy who called McMillan’s rehearsal schedule obsessive couldn’t go more than three sentences without checking his lines, and after two pages of distracting downward glances, she finally had enough.

“Dalton, you have to look at *me*.”

He did, eyes narrowing with obvious confusion. “Huh?”

“Look at me, not the script.”

“Right, but, uh...”

“You don’t know your lines yet,” she surmised, frowning.

“Well, it’s only been three days.”

“Says the guy who thinks we rehearse too much,” she muttered, arms

crossed.

He leaned toward her. “Sorry, what?”

Rather than repeat herself, Abby sighed. “All right, we’ll pick it up from ‘you’re what kept me alive.’”

Dalton watched her for half a second longer, then consulted the script again. “You’re what kept me alive out there. You were my *reason* to get back home, and now you don’t even want to see me?”

“‘Things change, Alex,’” she informed, in character. “‘People change. God knows you sure did.’”

“Yeah? Well, I’m not the only one, sweetheart.” He took another peek at the script, advancing toward her. “‘What’s his name? Do I know him? I bet I do. I know everybody around here, including you—or at least, I thought—’”

She held up a hand to stop him from going any farther. “‘Why aren’t you limping?’”

Dalton blinked at her, frustration building in his eyes. “‘What?’”

“‘You have shrapnel in your leg,’” Abby reminded, as calmly as possible. “‘You’re supposed to be limping.’”

“‘You want me to limp in rehearsal? When it’s just you and me here?’”

“‘Yes, because the whole point of this was to get a feel for the role, wasn’t it?’”

“‘Right,’” he agreed with a nod. “‘Got it. I’ll make sure to limp and I’ll try not to look at the script—anything else? Because I really don’t dig people interrupting me, so if you have any other ideas, you might as well tell me now so we can get through the rest of this scene.’”

His flippant suggestion brought heat to her cheeks. “‘You literally just said you wanted my input.’”

“‘Well, I sort of thought you would at least wait for me to get an entire line out of my mouth before you offered it.’”

The words spewed out before she could think of their ramifications. “‘Okay, fine. I won’t speak until I’m spoken to. I’ll just stand over here in the corner and wait for you to acknowledge me. Does that work better for you?’”

“‘Oh, for the love of...’” Letting out a long, exasperated sigh, he cast the script to the floor. “‘This is stupid, and I’m not putting up with three months of it, so we might as well get this out of the way right now. What is your problem? Do you just hate me or something?’”

The burning in Abby’s cheeks amped up by at least sixty-four degrees, and

she turned away in the hopes he wouldn't notice. "No, I don't hate you! Why would you think I hate you, Dalton?"

"The fact you keep calling me *Dalton*, for one."

"Well, what do you want me to call you? Mr. Giles?"

"What is so wrong with just calling me D?"

"Because that's not your name—and call me crazy, but if we are going to be stuck here, night after night, working together, I would appreciate being able to call you by your actual, legal name."

"All right, then—call me Dean."

Caught off-guard, she turned back toward him. "What?"

"If you want to call me by my actual, legal name, then call me Dean. Or Dino—that one's usually reserved for people who actually like me, but whatever. I'll take that, too. There are lots of things you could call me other than *Dalton* or D, actually. If you want to be formal, or if you're especially mad at me, there's also *Wesley Dean Altman*. There's even *Study McManmeat*, if you want to be obnoxious." He shot her a brief but piercing glare. Clearly, Val had told him about that, too. "I don't care. I'll answer to any or all of them—but I'm not gonna answer to Dalton. I don't even like that stupid name. My agent is the one who came up with it. I've hated it for years."

Abby lifted a hand to her face. Her cheeks felt like they were on fire. "I'm sorry. I didn't realize Dalton was a stage name." There was nothing about that on the sites she'd consulted, anyway. "And I don't have a problem with you, for the record. I'm not the one who went to Ray to complain."

"Oh, so *that's* what this is? You think I complained about you?"

"I know you complained about me. You told him I yelled at you."

"You're the one who told him that—remember when you ran out of here to call him? He told me all about it this morning, about how upset you were that you yelled at me for something that was his fault. So, no, Abby, I did not complain or tell him anything about you. I barely even mentioned your name."

She wasn't sure how much of that to believe, but she knew the longer their debate raged on, the more likely another phone call was to follow. More to the point, if she didn't let this go, he might quit again, and shut down the show she'd spent a year crafting. He could ruin her with a single phone call, and the odds were, he knew it.

Abby took a step back and exhaled. She knew what she had to do. "Okay,

then, I'm sorry. That was another misunderstanding, and I apologize. For everything. I really don't want to argue with you."

Sighing, he stooped to retrieve his script. "I don't want to argue with you, either—but the attitude's got to stop, okay? If you don't like me, whatever. That's cool. You don't have to like me. But if we're going to be *stuck*, as you put it, working together, night after night, the least we can do is try to make the best of it and get this right and give those people what they came here for. Fair enough?"

"More than fair," she agreed, nodding. "I'm sorry."

He reopened his script, flipping through the pages. "Okay, cool. So, do you wanna pick it up from 'what's his name?' I'll remember to limp this time."

Abby swallowed hard, choking back her anger, and a good amount of her pride, to produce a cheerful reply. "Okay, sure."



The next three days were something of a whirlwind. Wake up, take Pres to school, go to work, come home, take a thirty-minute nap (if he was lucky), pick up Pres from school, come home, take a shower, make the hour-plus drive to the theater, learn how to act all over again, come back home, collapse on the first available flat surface, study lines until his eyes crossed, fall asleep to the comforting drone of *Sportscentral*, lather, rinse, repeat. These days, Dean considered it a miracle if he could manage a solid five hours of sleep, and by Friday, found himself largely running on fumes. At least something good had come of this. It might have taken four days, seven and a half hours of rehearsal and more than a little patience on both sides, but he and Abby had finally worked through the entire play, including that kiss at the end, without bloodshed.

They were understanding each other a little better now, and while it was doubtful they'd ever actually be friends, they'd developed a professional working rapport, which was the most any actor could ask for. Her insights, now that she'd learned when and how to best offer them, were invaluable, and she was just so good at this. Confident. Convincing. She knew every one of her lines and slipped in and out of character without batting an eye. He

could watch her all day—her talent was mesmerizing, but a little unnerving at the same time. He had a long way to go before anyone, least of all Abby, could say the same about him.

But he was getting better—she kept telling him that, anyway, and as he'd learned earlier this week, it wasn't her style to sugarcoat. Now, he only needed help from the script on long scenes, he had all but perfected that limp, and through her guidance, he'd come to realize there were more effective ways to convey Alex's rage than simply yelling all the time.

Abby had a technique for everything—a toolbox, as she called it—and one of her favorite tricks was channeling every bit of her own frustrations into the character. She emphasized the importance of getting to know Alex, as though he were a real person, and figuring out the parallels between his own genuine exhaustion and nerves, and the character's head full of angst. It was excellent advice, and it brought some much-needed authenticity to his delivery, but *man*, Dean really wasn't used to digging that deep.

For lack of a better word, Brandon had been pretty vanilla. The quintessential good guy archetype. No hidden motives, no deep-seated demons, just a hero who was passionate about two things: Sonya Barrett and saving lives. Not that there wasn't a fair amount of angst involved—a lot of terrible things happened to Brandon over the course of three years, but he never seemed to internalize them or let them get him down. Through car accidents, not-so-dead first wives, malpractice trials, near-fatal drownings, airborne contagions, and finally, a bullet from his mother-in-law's gun, he had remained the same noble, honest, decent, safe, *easy* character he'd always been.

Kristen had said it best, in one of their social media fan chats back in the day: “D is basically Brandon without the medical degree.” He'd denied it at the time, viewing nothing particularly saintly or long-suffering about himself, but the more he thought about it now, the more it rang true. Brandon had been easy to play because he was essentially playing an exaggerated version of himself. That was why, no matter how crazy and far-fetched the storyline got, Dean never had to stop and think about how his character would react. He'd known because, by and large, Brandon's reactions had mirrored the ones that *he* would have.

Alex was a whole other story. PTSD didn't even scratch the surface with that guy. He had faced the horrors of war and had seen his buddies get blown to bits, then came home disabled to find the girl whose love had kept him

alive engaged to somebody else. Dude was pissed, with good reason, but that didn't make it any easier to tap into.

No wonder he was so damned tired. He hadn't worked this hard on a role since that time he'd played a serial killer—and that had been just a guest spot, but it was still so emotionally and mentally draining that it had taken days to fully shake off. He was probably gonna need therapy after three straight months of this play, but with any luck, the result would be something he could take pride in.

At least there was some good news. He could sleep as late as he wanted tomorrow, because Pres was spending the night with Margot and Ken, and they were taking her to temple with them in the morning. If he knew them at all, they'd be taking her to lunch after that, which meant he had until at least one to laze around, and he couldn't wait. He was so tired, he swore he was seeing things—like that text from Abby that explained she was running behind, then asked what kind of coffee he liked. Dean'd had to read it three times to verify that it did, in fact, say what he thought it said, but he was too confused by the question to answer it, and sent back a quick *Ok, cool* instead.

And then he waited. How long, he wasn't sure—his face hit the table pretty much the moment he sat down, and by the time he felt a hand on his shoulder, he was drooling on the cover of his script.

“Dean?”

“Yeah.” Bolting upright, he found Abby standing to his left, a cup of coffee in her hand, and an amused grin on her face.

“Did you fall asleep waiting for me?”

“Man, I got, like, three hours of sleep last night—”

“No judgment,” she assured, before he could finish his excuse. “I’ve done that myself a couple of times—but for future reference, there are much more comfortable spots. Gina has a couch in her office that’s amazing.”

He blinked at her, eyes narrow. Was this a dream or something? Abby had gotten progressively nicer over the past couple of nights, sure, but this teetered on *friendly*, and he wasn't sure what to make of it.

“You never told me what you wanted, so I just got plain old coffee,” she explained, extending the cup toward him. “It’s black. I hope that’s okay.”

He took it with a nod. “Yeah, that’s great. Thanks.”

“Sorry I was so late. They decided to have a faculty meeting this afternoon, and sprang it on us at the last possible minute, and then I had to

go get my cat from the groomer, and..." Mid-sentence, she stopped to take a breath, and when she continued, shades of the more reserved, succinct Abby he knew resurfaced. "It's been crazy, but that's no excuse. I'm sorry to keep you waiting."

"It's cool. No worries."

"So, did you have anything in particular you wanted to go over? I know we have a couple of notes about things we wanted to circle back to." She wasted little time settling into the seat across from him, and flipped through the script before glancing up. "Do you need a minute?"

"No, I'm good. I'm just..." Unsure how to best end that sentence, Dean reached for the coffee she'd been kind enough to bring.

"Yeah, I think I'll just give you a minute."

"I'm good, really."

"You're looking at me like you don't know who I am," she pointed out, giggling.

There was good reason for that: he didn't. He knew Abby Devlin, the brilliant, precise, mildly condescending actress and teacher he'd been working with all week...but the personable, considerate, engaging young woman sitting across from him was a stranger, and a rather attractive one at that. Disheveled, maybe. Raccoon-eyed, absolutely. But still so inexplicably attractive that he took another long sip of his coffee. Damn, that had to be the exhaustion talking.

"Go ahead and drink your coffee. I can wait. Goodness knows I kept you waiting long enough."

"What time is it?"

Her response was delivered with a surprising amount of remorse. "Half past seven. I'm so sorry. You didn't have anywhere you needed to be tonight, did you? We can make this quick if you did. I just have a couple of notes here—"

"No, I'm good. I don't have any plans or anything. I was just gonna go home and go to bed when we got done here."

"Crazy week, huh?"

"You could say that."

Abby returned her attention to the script, noting, "Next week should be easier for you, since we won't be rehearsing as much."

"Yeah, about that..."

Her head jerked up, the light catching her in such a way that he could see the actual face beneath her usual mask of makeup. He'd never been allowed such a glimpse and, thus, had never noticed her freckles before. Damn, he'd never been able to resist those. "You want to change it again, don't you?"

"Well, I was thinking about it on the way over here, and if there's anything this week's taught me, it's that I don't know nearly as much as I thought I did." He leaned in, allowing himself a better glimpse of her while establishing eye contact at the same time. "So, um, I was wrong—you know, about the rehearsals being excessive and stuff."

"Were you?" Her words remained emotionless, but he could tell from the way her eyes lit up that that gave her great pleasure.

"I mean, this is a lot, and I'm pretty out of practice—and terrible."

Her expression softened. "You are not terrible."

"Well, I'm not good," he countered, with a self-deprecating chuckle, "and I'm not too proud to admit it."

"So, you want to do this again next week?"

"Would you mind?"

"Of course not. I'm really enjoying this. It's a lot of fun to watch you get it."

"Spoken like a true teacher."

"Well, you know what they say: those who can, do. Those who can't, teach." She punctuated her sentence with a sigh.

"Yeah, but that never made any sense to me. How are you supposed to teach something you can't do?"

"Somehow, I'm managing." She glanced down at the script, removing the sticky tab from one page. "So, it looks like we wanted to come back to the scene where we're leaving the fair. That's the one you auditioned with, right?"

Dean cringed at the memory. "*The girl I knew*—those four words nearly killed me."

"But look at you now! You just said them—all four of them! That's progress." And just like that, Abby was back to her old self, complete with patronizing smile. "Do you want to go over this and then try the scene at the bar?"

"Yeah, sure. That's fine."

"The bar scene is really important—probably the most important one for you in the whole play. It's the first time Alex actually sees himself for what he

is now, and it's *devastating*. I want you to forget every single thing I've told you all week. That's the one scene where I really want you to be dramatic. Sell the hell out of it. I want to be able to feel it from over here. It's that important, because he is completely broken, and that's what's going to lead him back to Bernadette."

Laughing, he tightened his grip around the cup. "Right, but no pressure or anything."

"You can do it. You've got more than enough experience to draw from. Just think about the parallels between your life and his. Both of you are in very different places now than you were before, so you already know how he feels. That's step one. Step two is taking all that genuine emotion and channeling it into this—and I know it sounds horrible, but it's so worth it, and you'll feel so much better later. It's an amazing release."

He cocked his eyebrow across the table, but rather than say anything, opted to take another sip of his coffee. Was she trying to insinuate he needed a release or something? Because he didn't. Unlike Alex, who'd had a promising future ripped away in one split second, he'd chosen to change course. Nothing had been taken from him. He had given it up voluntarily, and had no reason to sob in a bar for everything that might've been—and the fact she thought he did was nothing less than insulting. "Right. I'll remember that."



The strangest thing happened that night at the theater: Dalton Giles and all his annoying celebrity mystique ceased to exist. For the first time, Abby could look at her co-star and see more than just the dimples and chiseled physique that were plastered across the internet. Tonight, she saw the guy in his Chattr picture, the actual person beneath the exterior. Tonight, she saw Dean Altman—and to her surprise, he was even more attractive than his hunky famous counterpart.

It was hard to put her finger on what changed. Maybe it was walking in to find him sleeping at the table. Maybe it was all the time she'd spent with him this week. Maybe it was the raw vulnerability he showed in rehearsal, creating an anguish so palpable in the bar scene that for a moment, she forgot he was acting. She couldn't say for sure, but by the end of the evening, she'd come away with a new respect for him. Yes, she was still irritated by how abruptly he'd been cast, and yes, she still sort of feared that somehow, he would end up sabotaging all the hard work she'd put into this production...but over the past few days, she'd realized that not only had she misjudged his character and intentions, she'd underestimated his talents as well.

Val was right, as much as Abby hated to give it to her. He was good. A little green, but good, and improving all the time. It was fascinating to watch him come into his own and gratifying to see someone else utilize her tricks. Abby had expected him to shrug off her advice—after all, he had far more

experience and success than she ever would—but he was so humble and eager to improve. He actively sought her feedback and took it to heart, making adjustments to his delivery without argument or complaint. He was the most receptive, least temperamental actor she'd ever worked with, and though she'd had some early doubts, she could now say with certainty that he was, indeed, the right choice to play this role.

By the time they ran through the fair and bar scenes, it was a quarter to nine. Abby intended to end the night there; to compliment him on a job well done and tell him not to worry about rehearsal this weekend, but something unexpected came out of her mouth as they walked through the parking garage: “Hey, I’m starving. Do you want to grab some dinner?”

It was an invitation she'd extended to Steve half a million times after rehearsal, but the moment it escaped her lips, she cringed. Crap, that was way too forward. He wasn't Steve. They weren't friends. He had much better things to do with his Friday night than stuff his face with a girl he barely knew. She needed to backpedal, quick, and then hightail it to the car before he had the chance to laugh in her face.

“That is, if you don't have plans,” she amended. “And you probably do, because it's Friday and you have a life, unlike me.”

Mid-stride, he stopped, glancing over at her. His expression was kind of hard to read, but for a second, Abby swore she saw amusement in his eyes. Humiliation spread across her cheeks like wildfire, and she sped up, but he spoke before she could get very far.

“I don't have plans—or a life. I was gonna go home and go to bed, remember? What's good around here? I don't hang out downtown, so I'm clueless.”

Ten paces ahead of him, she stopped in her tracks. Wait, was he...agreeing?

She turned around, forcing out a breath. “Well, that depends on what you like. There's a great Italian place around the corner. Steve and I used to go there all the time. It's nice and quiet, and the food is really good.”

“Right on. I'm always down for Italian.”

And just like that, Abby was having dinner with a soap star.

She thought things might be awkward between them—after all, they were very different people, and aside from the play, seemed to have little in common—but all over again, Dean spent the evening surpassing her

judgmental expectations. They talked about a wide range of topics, from life to work to what mattered most to them, and he revealed several surprising things about himself. For example, *Dr. Chiseled*, as she'd once heard Wendy call him, worked a regular seven to seven job as a welder down in San Leon...and he was raising a child on his own. It was hard to say which revelation stunned her more.

He had so much more depth than she ever gave him credit for. She'd sort of expected someone with his looks to be both vain and dim-witted, but he was refreshingly articulate and down to earth. His anecdotes were humble, charming and relatable, but Abby had to admit what impressed her the most was the attentive way he listened to hers. It was something she first noticed days ago, a rare ability to make someone feel that every word coming out of their mouth had meaning and value...but outside the confines of the playhouse, it was even more amazing. She couldn't write it off as self-serving necessity now, because she wasn't offering anything he could use. She was talking about her work at Winthrop, not giving notes on characterization, but still, he hung onto every word.

"That's so cool," he marveled, between bites of veal piccata. "Has anyone you've ever taught gone on to, you know, make it?"

"Make it as in get famous?"

"If you want to call it that, yeah."

"Not yet, but it'll happen. I have one, Billy, who is *so* good, but he doesn't know it yet. He's really self-conscious, like I used to be. I feel bad for him. The others kind of see him as this oddball, because he's not really...*extra*, like they are. You know how theater kids are."

"Yeah," he agreed, though she could tell from his expression that he did not.

"On the whole, though, I'm so impressed with them. They're *so* talented, and they're *so* serious—a whole lot more serious than I was at their age."

"So, was acting always your thing? Is that what you always wanted to do?"

"Oh, always! From as far back as I can remember. I used to put on shows for my mom and grandma when I was a kid—the whole production. I'd write the script and play all the parts and even sign autographs when I got done."

Smiling, he reached for his glass of Merlot. "That is *awesome*. I was never that focused on anything, least of all acting. I just kind of showed up, and things just kind of happened, and I got lucky. I got super lucky, and to this

day, I'm not sure why."

Abby reached for her glass as well, cocking an eyebrow at him. "You know exactly why."

He blinked for a second before returning his gaze to the food. "Oh. Yeah. Well, maybe. I don't know."

"They look for types," she noted, with a shrug. "I never really fit into them, so I never got a whole lot of work. You know how it goes. Not pretty enough to be the lead, but not ugly enough to be the lead's best friend. Too old to be the ingenue, too young to be the mother. Too *ethnic*—I heard that one a lot, because I have dark hair and dark eyes." She paused, using her fork to gesture across the table at him. "I got called *pudgy* once or twice, too. The worst part is, I was a size four when they said that. I'm an eight now, which I guess would translate into morbidly obese by their standards!"

She forced herself to laugh at the absurdity of it all, but he seemed to find no humor in the tale. "Wow. That's...wow. I can't believe anybody would say you were..." Rather than finish his sentence, he took another bite, and he politely waited until he'd swallowed to change track. "So, you actually...auditioned? Was this in LA?"

Abby made the conscious decision to ignore the surprise in his voice—and the negative spin her inner voice was trying to put on it. "New York. I moved there six years ago. Moved back four years ago. Hurray for me."

He winced at her self-deprecation, helping himself to more bread. "Yeah, I hear it's brutal out there."

"I think it's the same on both coasts, honestly. There's a certain standard of beauty in the industry—not that I have to tell you that. You worked with beautiful people day in and day out!"

"Yeah, and I still do." Dean looked up at her with such kind eyes that the negative voice within fell silent. "For what it's worth, I'm really sorry that didn't work out for you. I think you're...amazing. Way better than me, anyhow. I wish they could have given you a break."

"Oh, you know...it's okay. I'm over it now, but it was a pretty big setback then."

"Well, yeah. I mean, that was your dream."

"Yeah, but I still get to do it, just on a smaller scale. I get to help other people now, too, so I think it turned out okay." Eager to move past the sob story, Abby shifted gears. "Speaking of helping people, *you* are the best

student I've ever had—and I'm not just saying that because of the wine.”

He flashed a shy grin across the table. “Are you sure? It's pretty strong wine.”

“Yes, I'm sure! You're very good, and you just keep getting better.”

Leaning in, he pretended to inspect her glass. “Okay, now I know it's the wine, because you weren't saying that back on Monday.”

“I wasn't,” she acknowledged, with a solemn nod. “And I'm sorry about that. I'm really glad we could move past it—and I'm really glad you want to keep rehearsing with me next week. I was actually going to suggest it, but I thought you might freak out.”

“Freak out?” Dean chuckled at the very idea. “That's your territory, not mine.”

Abby gaped at him for a full five seconds before bursting into laughter. “Rude! But I guess you owe me one.”

“Oh, I owe you more than one.”

“Yeah.” She drew the word out as long as possible. “You kind of do—and I'm really sorry about the first couple of days. I was kind of a bitch, I know.”

“I wouldn't say *that*.”

“Of course you wouldn't, because you're a nicer person than I am.”

He snickered, shifting in his chair. “I wouldn't say that, either.”

“Are you kidding? I yelled at you for being fifteen minutes early, then showed up an entire hour late tonight and you're like, ‘it's cool, no worries.’ Do you ever actually get mad about anything?”

“Yeah, sometimes. I'm not Gandhi or anything—just a pretty live and let live kind of guy, I guess. There's no point in getting mad about something when...” His phone rang before he could finish his sentence, and he reached for it, pushing away from the table. “Hey, I gotta take this. I'll be right back. Don't let them take my food.”

“Okay,” she agreed, with a nod, then watched him rise from the table and move for the door. He lifted the phone to his ear, answering with an enthusiastic “hey, baby,” and she fought an overwhelming urge to roll her eyes.

Barbie. Of course.

Dean was outside for fifteen minutes, which left Abby ample opportunity to regret having invited him. Not that she didn't enjoy his company—she did,

a little too much, thanks to the wine. She just had no business sharing a meal with another woman's catch. Of course, this was innocent...except for him insinuating that she was beautiful. If that was, in fact, what he meant. At any rate, this was just an informal dinner between colleagues, but she'd seen firsthand how clingy Barbie was, so the odds were, she'd blow it out of proportion.

Abby envisioned an enraged, silicone-infused bimbo charging at her with a down-turned stiletto and fought to contain a shudder as he settled back into his chair. "She's not going to get jealous of you having dinner with me, is she?"

Dean seemed surprised she'd asked. "No, I don't think so. I didn't mention it, so we should be fine."

"Well, don't you think you should tell her?"

He met her serious question with a laugh—a loud, full-bodied laugh that brought heat back to her cheeks. "Do you want me to? I mean, I can call her back, but getting her off the phone is gonna be a whole thirty-minute ordeal, and I just got done with that, so I'm not in a big hurry to do it again."

"Well," she managed, spine stiffening. "Maybe you should. I wouldn't want her to get the wrong idea."

He found that even funnier. "Wait, wait," he finally said, when he'd recovered enough to speak. "Hold up. Who do you think I was on the phone with?"

"The same one you're always on the phone with. Bar—uh, your girlfriend." When he offered no confirmation, just more hearty laughter, she ran through other possibilities. "Fiancée? Wife? You're not *married*, are you?"

"Well, she did say she wanted to marry me once. That was a long time ago, though. She's pretty into that guy on Streamline now—you know, the one that reviews video games?" Dean reached for his wine, smiling into the glass. "That was my daughter."

Abby felt herself turn a thousand shades of red and averted her gaze down to the table. "Oh, my God, I'm sorry. I just thought...I'm sorry."

True to form, he offered a good-natured, "It's cool, no worries."

Determined to drown her embarrassment, she polished off her glass of Moscato, resolving that another ten would be in order. "I just assumed...she calls you *so much*. I just thought it must've been some clingy girlfriend or something!"

“That’s what it feels like sometimes!” he admitted, laughing. “She’s pretty attached to me. She’s got a lot of separation anxiety going on, but that’s kind of my fault. I didn’t work for almost two years, so it was just me and her all the time, and...she got pretty used to that, I guess.”

“I’m sure, yes.”

“She’s getting a little better, but she still has her moments. That’s kind of my fault, too. I give into her a lot. My mom says I’m spoiling her, but I just feel bad, you know? I can’t be there as much as I used to be, and...” Glancing up at her, he shrugged. “I guess it could be worse. She doesn’t hate me or anything, so I must be doing something right.”

“She won’t hate you. She couldn’t possibly. There’s nothing about you to hate.” She meant it.

For a moment, he appeared taken aback by the compliment. “That’s sweet,” he finally managed. “That’s really, really sweet. Thank you. Did you, um, want some more wine, or are you good? I think I’m gonna get some more wine. I think I need *all the wine*, because we made it through this week and we didn’t kill each other and now we’re sitting here like old friends having dinner! What the *hell*? Did you think this was gonna happen on Monday? Because I didn’t.”

“No, but I’m really glad it did.” Abby meant that, too.

He grinned across the table at her, and for the first time, she allowed herself to appreciate what a glorious sight that was. Everything about his smile was so warm and genuine—and those dimples made her heart skip a beat. “Me too.”



As planned, Dean dragged himself to bed as soon as he got home, but despite his earlier exhaustion, sleep proved so elusive that not even Rick and Tom, and their lifeless recap of today’s sports matchups, did much to help it along. He lay there for hours, cycling through the improbable events of the evening and the indications they left behind. Something had changed between himself and Abby tonight, that was for sure...it just wasn’t clear whether or not that was for the better.

On one hand, it was good to see her in a new light and get acquainted with the actual person behind that focused, rigid exterior. It was good she'd done the same with him, because knowing one another on a personal level would go a long way in enriching their respective portrayals. If there was anything he'd learned over the years, it was the importance of having trust in a co-star—and they'd established some tonight, which was awesome. But that wasn't all they'd done.

Toward the end of the night, there was also a fair bit of flirting on both sides, and it amped up a little more with every subsequent sip of wine. Innocent stuff, all in all—no physical contact, just a lot of playful innuendo—but still intense enough to give him pause. What a crazy week. He'd gone from disliking her, to respecting her talent, to finding her fascinating, to thinking she was hot in a matter of days, and it appeared Abby had undergone much the same transformation. *This* did not bode well for the coming weeks, especially if their opinions of one another changed again before the final curtain fell.

Workplace romances were never a good idea, especially between actors—he knew all too well how fragile they could be. Half the time, they were based on fantasy; falling in love not with the actual person, but with the character they portrayed. That was dangerous enough on its own, but the other half was even worse: when they fell in love based on proximity and convenience. *That* always ended up a shitshow, especially when they still had to pretend to be in love after the smoke cleared.

Not that he expected things to go that far. Come Monday, when alcohol was no longer involved, he was sure everything would be back to normal between them. It was a passing fancy; a fleeting spark they didn't even act on, and he was confident that they were both professional and mature enough to move past it. They'd moved past worse, hadn't they?

Dean didn't know what time he finally fell asleep, but when he did, he slept hard. He only woke up once, when some random LA number called, but that was just long enough to silence his phone and cast it to the floor. The next thing he registered was a loud, persistent beep coming from downstairs, followed by Margot shouting over it.

“Dino! What's the friggin' code to this thing?”

*Shit*, they were already here.

“Hold on, I'm coming,” he called, throwing back the covers with great

reluctance.

As expected, Preslie dive-bombed before he could make it all the way down the stairs, latching around his legs with such gusto that descending the rest of the way was a challenge. “Hey, Daddy!”

“Hey, baby.” To stabilize both of them, he reached for the railing, wrapping his other arm around her. “Did you have a good time?”

The alarm drowned out the first half of her sentence. All he caught was, “Did you see the picture? I love it!”

“Love what, baby?” After three failed attempts to safely make it to the third-to-last step, Dean turned his half-awake attention to Margot. “The code is 8-6-7-5-3-0-9.”

“Of course it is.” Turning to the keypad, she punched it in, which mercifully brought Alarmageddon to a stop. It took a few seconds for her to stop shouting, though. “Sorry, I didn’t think you’d still have the alarm set! Don’t you usually turn it off when you—oh, man, were you still asleep?”

“Well, yeah. I didn’t think you guys were gonna get here so early.”

Margot turned to face him, frowning. “Dino, it’s twelve-thirty.”

“Whoa, really?”

She stepped closer, brow furrowed with unmistakable concern. “What has that woman done to you?”

“You don’t wanna know.” He leaned down to kiss the top of Preslie’s head. “Hey, did you have fun? I missed you.”

“So much fun! I got to hold it, and it was so soft and cute and tiny and I want it!” With every word, Pres seemed to squeeze him tighter. “Can I have it, Daddy? Please?” The word *please* came out of her mouth eight more times—a new high score, if he wasn’t mistaken.

He turned an accusatory gaze to his sister, who noticeably looked away. “What’s she talking about?”

“I take it you didn’t see my messages.”

“Just woke up fifteen seconds ago, so no.”

Margot hesitated, biting down on her lip. “Okay, well, this is kind of my fault.”

“Yeah, I kind of figured that.”

Pres finally let go of him, bounding down the stairs toward her aunt. “Show him! Show him the picture!”

With a sigh, Margot pulled her phone out of her purse. “Okay, don’t kill

me, but I sort of let it slip that the neighbor's cat had kittens and we sort of went to meet them this morning.”

Looking down to meet Preslie's hopeful, expectant gaze, Dean exhaled. Great. He hadn't even had his first cup of coffee and he already had to break her heart. “Baby, we talked about this, remember? You can't have a kitten right now, because—”

Before he could finish his sentence, Pres and Margot both erupted in unison.

“But Daddy—”

“But Dino—”

“*Really*, you guys? Seriously?” He lifted a hand to his head. It was way too early to get tag-teamed like this—and they knew it.

Margot offered a reassuring nod in Preslie's direction as she came closer. “Before you say no, just look how cute it is,” she insisted, extending her phone toward him. “She really fell in love with it, and it's easy to see why.”

Dean gave the fuzzy orange kitten on the screen a passing glance, then settled a half-hearted glare on his sister. “Okay, so why don't you adopt it, and then she can come visit it whenever she wants.”

“Mason's too rough right now. I'm afraid he'd hurt it.”

“And I'm afraid she'd squeeze it to death.” To prove his point, he reached down to rub his aching thigh.

“I wouldn't!” Pres argued, bottom lip trembling.

“She was very gentle this morning. We talked about how to handle a kitten, and she was really sweet with it.” Margot paused, pointing at him. “And I already know the next thing you're going to say, so don't bother, because I've got a rebuttal for that, too.”

“You do not.” Shaking his head, he scoffed at that, though he wouldn't have been surprised if she did. Margot had proven several times that her so-called Wonder Twin powers weren't just some hyperbolic joke.

“I do too—and she's not too young. I had a kitten when I was her age, remember? And you had that...toad, or whatever that thing was.”

Despite himself, he smiled at the memory. “Frog. His name was Freckles.”

“Yeah, that thing.”

“Right, but who actually took care of them? Mom, right? Is she supposed to come over here and take care of the kitten, too? Because I'm not home

enough to do it. I'm barely home enough to take care of Pres."

Preslie reached for his hand, swinging it back and forth with all her might. "Daddy, *please?*" She sounded like she was about to cry.

"Kittens are super easy," Margot insisted. "All they need is food and water and a litter box. You can leave them alone all day long—they don't care. They're not like puppies." When that failed to move him, she leaned closer. "And for what it's worth, I think it would be nice for her to have a little friend here while you're gone. Maybe that way, she won't miss you so much."

Damn, that was a really sound argument, but rather than admit it, he sighed. "Just for this, I'm getting Mason an iguana."

Her face scrunched in obvious disdain, but she still offered a pleasant reply. "He'd love that, I'm sure."

Three hours, four cups of coffee and a trip to Bayou Vista later, there was a terrified orange kitten cowering under his sofa, and a hysterical little girl trying to pull it out. It didn't take her long to enlist help in the search and rescue mission, but if anything, seeing another, larger arm coming at him just freaked the little dude out more. Dean got down as low as he could, to appear less threatening, but even then, the kitten refused to budge. So much for Margot's little friend theory.

"He's too far back there, baby. He's all the way to the wall. I can't reach him."

Beside him on the floor, Pres burst into tears. "It's not fair! He liked me this morning! Why doesn't he like me anymore?"

"He still likes you. He just doesn't like this. It's all super new, and we're freaking him out, but once he gets used to us and this whole thing, I bet you guys are gonna be best friends."

"Really?"

"Absolutely! He just needs a little time, but he'll come around, I promise."

Despite the outward display of confidence, Dean still grabbed his phone off the coffee table. It was time to use a lifeline. Did he know any crazy cat ladies?

He didn't want to get Margot involved—she'd done quite enough already—but who else would know how to handle this? Mom had never been much of a cat person. Hannah was allergic. Sam and Dad were taking the boat out for the weekend, so she probably wouldn't answer. Liz...well, he didn't know about Liz, but the idea of her holding a cat just seemed wrong to him,

so she probably wouldn't be much help.

*Abby!* The revelation hit like a bolt from the heavens. Abby had a cat! She mentioned it last night! Maybe she would know how to coax that little guy out of there!

Comforting Pres with one hand, he typed a long message with the other, explaining the situation and asking her best advice on how to convince Pumpkin they weren't menacing giants that wanted to kill him or something...but before he could hit send, an unexpected phone call took over the screen. It was that same weird LA number that woke him up this morning. A telemarketer, no doubt, and he had no more desire to talk to them now than he did at nine—but in his haste to send the call to voicemail and get back to his text to Abby, he accidentally tapped on *answer*. Awesome. This day got better and better.

He lifted the phone to his ear, sighing. "Hello?"

"Dino?"

"Yeah." He drew the word out three seconds longer than necessary, struggling to place the voice. It sounded so familiar. Was that...

"Oh, my God, *hi!*" The caller punctuated her sentence with an unmistakable high-pitched squeal. *Kristen!* "How *are* you? Oh, my God, I'm so glad I caught you! I miss you so, so much—you don't even know!"

"Oh, wow." That was all Dean could manage for a second. "*Wow*. How are you? It's been forever."

"I *know!* I'm so sorry! My phone went nuts last year, and I lost all my contacts—stupid technology! Casey told me you wanted me to call you, and I legit panicked, because I couldn't find your number anywhere!" She paused to breathe, then forged on with her trademark infectious enthusiasm. "I sent you a message on Chattr, but I forgot you never look at that stuff! Thank God your mom saw it and sent me your number! Oh, my God, Dino, I miss you so much—especially your *Zen!* I have so much to tell you, you wouldn't believe! Oh, my God, can we Screentime? Let's Screentime! We have so much to catch up on—and you won't believe how big the girls are now! And I wanna see Preslie, too! Oh, my God, sweetness, I miss you so damned much!"



Despite her desperate need for downtime, Abby was on the go for most of the day on Saturday. She ran a week's worth of errands, dropped by to visit her friend Heather and the baby, went grocery shopping, and even attended a bridal shower before hitting the salon. It was one of her favorite indulgences, something she always took time for before stepping into a new role. The good thing about being a stage actress (and a small-time one at that) was that she wasn't married to any part or look. That meant she remained in control of her personal appearance and could change things up without guilt or wrath from producers and audiences. The freedom to interpret her characters her way was something she'd always enjoyed, even if there were times she took it a bit too far. She had an entire album of regrettable looks—things that might've worked for the part but were pretty difficult to pull off in real life, especially at a conservative institution like Winthrop. The less said about her days as a platinum blonde, the better.

Unlike some other parts she'd played in the past, Bernadette was a simple, small town kind of girl, so nothing extreme or ornate was required this time. Thus, Abby opted for a low-maintenance, shoulder-length ash brown bob, with a heavy dusting of blonde highlights around her face. It was a bold change, going from a longer and darker style, but not bold enough to be jarring. The odds were, she wouldn't be taken aback tomorrow morning when she looked in the mirror—and, as an added plus, nobody at work would have

reason to give her the side-eye on Monday.

After that and a manicure for good measure, she joined Mom, Steph, and Amber for lunch and fielded at least ten thousand questions about both the new look and the new play, but to her surprise, the hot new co-star didn't come up in conversation. Maybe that was a good thing. She wasn't sure if she was ready to think about him again yet. Last night had kind of done a number on her, and though she was positive it was because of the wine, by the time she left Rossi's, it felt like she was floating on air. She hadn't felt more giddy or alive since the night of her first date with Jarrod—the same night she'd come home and written in her journal, “I think I finally found the one.”

Except last night wasn't a date. It was just dinner with a colleague. It didn't matter that the conversation took on more playful, suggestive tones after that second glass of wine. It didn't matter that, despite her intention to pay her own way, Dean insisted on charging the entire eighty-dollar meal to his swanky platinum Amex. It didn't even matter that he made a point to walk her to her car and grinned at her the whole way there. It was not a date. Someone like him would never date someone like *her*—it was impossible.

Everything that happened between them could be explained away, and Abby spent the better part of the day doing just that. She'd started making cute little coy remarks and batting her eyelashes in large part because of the wine, and he had followed suit for the same reason. They were tipsy. Not drunk, but definitely feeling no pain, and she was certain that neither would've acted that way sober. Dean paid for the meal and walked her to her car because despite her initial impression to the contrary, he was a nice guy, and that was what nice people did. There was nothing romantic about it, in any way, and to try to speculate otherwise was both immature and foolish. Her best—only—option was to put it out of her mind. That was, in truth, the reason she kept so busy.

She didn't want to let herself go there. She didn't like the little tingles that came over her when she thought about his dimples, or something funny that he'd said, or the gallant way he'd helped her over the parking garage barricade. For Pete's sake, she wasn't a teenager anymore. She was a grown woman, and grown women didn't go to pieces over those things. She had to get a grip.

Desperate for further distraction, Abby spent much of the evening on Streamline. She cycled through several mindless videos, cooking and makeup tutorials mostly, before remembering the link she'd saved a week ago. If she'd

been thinking clearly, she might have talked herself out of it...but since she wasn't, she pulled up her bookmarks and clicked it. Though expected, her breath still caught when he appeared on her computer screen, seated beside a petite, bubbly blonde who seemed content to do most of the talking.

The blonde, identified as Kristen in the video's title and description, told a long, complicated story about how the last chat had to be postponed because of technical issues—she said her baby knocked the laptop off the counter—but stressed how excited they were to be back at it, and told everyone their questions were amazing. Abby expanded the window, which allowed her a peek at the preserved comments on the right-hand side. They rolled in so quickly they were hard to keep up with, a fact he mentioned on multiple occasions, but the ones she read were...interesting, to say the least.

One user with a vulgar screen name called Kristen fat and annoying and said nobody gave a damn about her or her stupid problems. Another took a slightly nicer approach, writing, *Kristen, shut up so Dalton can talk!* Yet another left Kristen out of the equation altogether, directing her message to Dean: *Dalton, I love you, and I want to have your babies!*

To Abby's surprise, he also had his share of haters. One person wrote: *I really like Brandon, but Dalton is kind of a douche. Who's with me?* Another suggested he didn't want to actually be there and didn't care about his fans, presumably because he didn't share Kristen's overblown enthusiasm at every single keystroke. Still another made snide references to some recent weight loss, his weary appearance and his subdued demeanor, asking rather pointedly if he had some sort of drug problem.

Fittingly, none of the nastier comments got a response, but they did answer several questions about the then-current storyline and made lots of references to lots of things and people Abby wasn't familiar with. After twenty minutes of confusion, she realized she'd have to watch the show to get it, and closed the chat video to head back to Planet Dalton. They had a whole playlist of clips there, if she wasn't mistaken, and with any luck, that could help her put things into context.

Over the next two-and-a-half hours, Abby ran through the site's entire "The Best of Brandon" playlist, then went back to Streamline to search for more. A week ago, she never would've imagined she'd spend her Saturday night dredging up five-year-old soap opera episodes, but the more she saw of him, the more she wanted to see. His presence on-screen was magnetic. He

was a *force*, who captured all of her attention, and far more compelling—and desirable—than she'd ever dreamt possible.

No wonder people like Wendy and those viewers in the chat wanted to marry Dean and bear his children. Dr. Brandon Chisholm was the stuff naughty dreams were made of. The perfect combination of hot and heroic, he fulfilled the innermost fantasies of every red-blooded woman in America. The way he looked at Kristen's character, with that spark in his eye, moved Abby to the point she felt weak in the knees, and she had to deliberately abstain from wishing that he would look at her the same way.

Thanks to diehard, tech-savvy fans, there were loads of *All or Nothing* episodes uploaded to Streamline, and by the time Monday rolled around, Abby had watched more of them than she'd ever care to admit. It wasn't the best show she'd ever seen, by a long shot—the stories were a bit contrived, and the acting was hit or miss a lot of the time, but that was okay, because she wasn't watching for riveting storylines or stellar performances. She was watching for him.

Not only did it give her some insight into his acting style, and help gauge his full potential, it also provided a safe, healthy outlet for all her mixed-up feelings. In the privacy of her own home, she could swoon over Brandon as much as she wanted. It wouldn't make him uncomfortable or compromise their professional relationship, because *Brandon wasn't real*. She could rewind him, pause him, replay him, and get it all out of her system so she could face Dean at the playhouse without making a slobbering fool of herself. And yes, she was well aware how ridiculous it was to focus all her carnal fantasies on a fictional character who would never return the sentiment, but it was a hell of a lot less risky than revealing them to her very real co-star...and bracing for his inevitable rejection.

Throughout the day on Monday, Abby inwardly stressed the importance of keeping them separate—fair-game Brandon and off-limits Dean—but her heart still skipped a beat when she retrieved her phone from the drawer at 5:15 and found she'd missed two calls from the latter. He didn't leave a message either time, but did send a concerning text half an hour ago: *Call me as soon as you see this!*

At once, she felt sick. This was about Friday, wasn't it? Given the unexpected turn things took at dinner, and how obvious she'd made her attraction, maybe he didn't think one-on-one rehearsals were such a good idea

anymore. Maybe he didn't think it was a good idea to work with her at all. Maybe he wanted to tell her he was quitting, again, and maybe he really meant it this time.

Abby's heart raced as she waited for him to pick up. Damn it, she knew inviting him to Rossi's had been a mistake! Why couldn't she have just kept her mouth shut? Why did she have to get that second glass of wine? What on earth would possess her to tell him, to his face, that now that she'd met him, she had reason to worry about climate change—because one look at him was enough to melt every last glacier in the arctic. That was almost as desperate and pathetic as *Dalton, I love you, and I want to have your babies!* Dear God, what the hell had she been thinking?

"Hey, one second." Dean sounded distant and distracted when he answered the phone, though that might've been due to the crying child Abby heard in the background. "I know, baby. It's okay. Just hold on one second for me, okay?" He said *hold on* three more times before clearing his throat. "Hey, sorry. You're not at the theater yet, are you?"

Swallowing hard, Abby willed her voice steady. "No, I was just about to leave work. Why, what's up?"

"Well, uh, we're kind of having a rough day—baby, just a minute. What? Okay, cool, but don't go down the stairs this time. Pres? Pres, I mean it. Don't go down the stairs." After a few seconds, he sighed. "Yeah, so, um, we're having a really rough day, and I don't think I'm gonna be able to make it tonight."

The excuse was genuine enough to make her release the breath she'd been holding. "Is everything okay?"

"Not really. Pres got a kitten on Saturday and, uh...now we can't find him."

"You can't find him? Did he run away?"

"I don't know. He's just gone. I'm tearing this place up and he's...*gone*, and her whole world's just collapsed and she just ran outside to look for him and—oh, shit, I think she went down the stairs. Hold on."

"Sure."

From her desk, Abby listened as he went to collect his daughter, delivering a serious, but extraordinarily patient lecture on the dangers of running down the stairs alone as he escorted her back inside. He sounded even more distant and distracted when he addressed her again. "Yeah, sorry.

It's crazy around here, so I don't think rehearsal's gonna happen."

"That's fine, I understand," she assured. "I really hope you find him! Did you put out food?"

"Out? As in outside? Should I?"

"Well, if he's out there, it might help. You might want to put his litter box out, too. Maybe he will recognize the—do you need help?" The question came out before Abby had the chance to think better of it and she immediately tried to backpedal. "Sorry, you probably don't need help. I'm sure you've got it all under control."

He laughed at that. "Yeah, it's about anything but under control right now. Um, I mean, if you don't mind, that would be great. Do you mind coming all the way down here?"

All the way down...where? She knew he worked in San Leon—did he live down there, too? "Well, I work in Friendswood, so I'm not that far."

"Wow, okay, that's awesome. Yeah, if you don't mind, I'd really appreciate it. I don't know the first thing about cats and I'm losing my mind right now and...thanks. I really owe you one."

"Don't be silly!" she choked out, grateful that he couldn't see the blush spreading across her cheeks. "I'm happy to help! Text me your address."

*4122 Azure Bay Blvd, Galveston, TX 77554*, he wrote, a few seconds later. *You are amazing. I really owe you one.*

He could say that again. Galveston was an entire world away from Friendswood—and for all intents and purposes, he didn't live anywhere near the *Galveston* she knew. He was ten miles west of the tourist traps and crowded public beaches, past the Seawall, heading more toward Jamaica Beach. Abby drove until she thought she was going to run out of island and finally turned onto his street at a quarter after six. Good grief! If it took this long to get there from *Friendswood*, she shuddered to imagine how arduous his daily downtown commute must've been!

Azure Bay ran three and a half miles from a bustling thoroughfare all the way to the beach, and, according to her GPS, Dean lived at the very end of it. She noticed that the farther she traveled, the bigger, and higher off the ground, the houses got, and tried to imagine what sort of sprawling mansion awaited her at the end. She was stunned, and a little disappointed, to find a quaint—dare she even say *small?*—two story cottage at the end of Azure Bay, hoisted fifteen feet in the air by several stilts. So much for *Lifestyles of the Rich*

*and Famous.*

She pulled her phone from its mounting on the dash, firing off a quick message: *I think I'm here. It's the house at the end, right? With the camper in the driveway?*

His response came within twenty seconds: *Yep, that's the one. I'll open the garage for you if you promise you won't judge me for the mess.*

The mess he referred to was a veritable playground of grown-up toys. He had surf boards, bikes, workout equipment, power tools, a drum set and even what appeared to be a covered motorcycle crammed in there, alongside his humongous Suburban. Maneuvering around the camper, she wondered if her car could even fit, but luckily, she squeezed inside with a little room to spare.

She was halfway up the mountain of wooden steps that led to Dean's front door when he came out to greet her. "Hey, thank you so much for coming all the way out here. I really..." Mid-sentence, he trailed off, eyes widening as she got closer. "Wow, you changed your hair. You look...nice."

Holy moly, so did he. His attire was casual—just long shorts and a black tank top—but effective. The little tingles came back as she smiled at his compliment, but she tried her best to shake them off. Forcing her gaze downward, past the dimples and the biceps, she focused on his shirt instead. *Mazel Tough*, it read, and there was a Star of David where the "O" should've been. Clever, and also a good reminder of the many, many differences between fair-game Brandon (the sexiest Catholic in Hallandale) and *off-limits Dean* (her Hebrew hottie of a co-star).

Abby got back to the matter at hand. "Did you find the kitten yet?"

He took a few seconds to follow her lead. "No, and we've looked everywhere. Pres is freaking out, and I'm kind of freaking out, too, because I've torn this place up. I mean it. I almost don't want to let you in, because it looks like a tornado's been through my house."

"Is there any possibility he got out?"

"That's the thing. I don't know. Pres is usually really good about not leaving doors open, and I'm usually really good about closing them if she does, but—"

As if on cue, a dark-haired little girl, with a red, tear-streaked face and two missing teeth, came out of the house to join them. She took one look at Abby and latched onto her dad, arms wrapped tight around his legs in an almost possessive fashion. "Who are you?"

Dean placed one arm around her, motioning in Abby's direction with the other. "Hey, remember when I told you I was calling in the search party? Well, here she is. This is Abby."

Grateful for another excuse not to stare at him, Abby leaned down to smile at her. "At your service!"

"She's really, really good at finding kittens," he informed. "Best in the business."

"Yup!" she heard herself affirm, though it wasn't exactly true. "My mom's a breeder, so I have lots and lots of experience in finding lost kittens! Do you want to show me a picture? That would really help."

Preslie thought about that for a second, before pulling Dean's phone out of his pocket. Abby noticed he did not object. "Let me find one."



As expected, Abby brought fresh perspective, and a whole lot of patience, to the Case of the Fugitive Feline. While Dean had torn through the house like a bull in a china shop—and encouraged Pres to do the same—she took a much more methodical approach, waving an open can of food in front of every possible hiding place. Within half an hour, she'd managed to not only locate Pumpkin, but also calmly coax him from his refuge behind the dryer, and make a new best friend in the process.

Then, while Preslie watched in awe from a few feet away, she put on a master class in how to gain a cat's trust, instilling such core tenets as: don't get in his face, don't make any sudden movements, always be gentle, speak softly and let him come to you. Whether or not Pres would actually heed any of these pointers, he had no idea, but she seemed super impressed by how well the kitten responded when Abby demonstrated her technique. Instead of fleeing in terror, Pumpkin settled into her lap and purred while she cooed about what a pretty baby he was.

Dean had never seen anything like it in his life. The same little orange puffball that scurried away every time it heard him coming couldn't seem to get enough of Abby. There was something undeniably maternal about her, and Pumpkin picked up on it right away—but he wasn't the only one. Pres,

who'd always taken her time warming to new people, especially when they dared threaten her status as the center of his attention, took to Abby with no trouble and spent the rest of the night following her around and soaking in all of her advice.

He figured that once the kitten was recovered, Abby would find a reason to leave, or at least suggest that they make a go of rehearsal in what remained of his living room, but she didn't do either of those things. Instead, she gamely stepped in to help him put things back in order, joined them for dinner on the deck, and even volunteered to braid Preslie's hair before she went to bed, so it would be wavy in the morning...and the craziest part about it was how normal all of it felt.

She didn't come across as the relative stranger she was, or another colleague who, under normal circumstances, wouldn't have been allowed within ten feet of his kid for another six months. She came across as someone he'd known for ages, who did this sort of thing all the time. It was insane and a little disconcerting, but strangely satisfying at the same time. Something about the effortless, sweet way she interacted with his daughter filled his heart with warmth and affection. He couldn't remember the last time Pres had taken so readily to anyone, and within a matter of hours, Dean found himself just as charmed, if not more so. He almost didn't want the night to end.

Thankfully, Abby didn't need much convincing to stick around while he put Preslie to bed. The view had sort of taken her hostage—it seemed to have that effect on people, though he was used to it by now. Grabbing a much-needed beer, he stepped outside to join her and wasn't surprised that, rather than find something inane to do on her phone to pass the time, she'd opted to just take it all in.

"It's so peaceful," she marveled, as he settled back into his chair.

"Yeah, it's nice. I sit out here and just...zone. It's pretty therapeutic after a long day."

"I bet."

He opened his beer, then caught her expectant stare and paused. "Sorry, did you want me to grab you one, too? I'm usually out here by myself, so I didn't think about it."

"No, that's fine. I'm not much of a beer person."

"Are you a music person?"

"Depends on the music."

He reached for his phone, flipping through the playlists he'd saved on Songspire. "I like the old stuff. There's Stevie, Queen, The Beatles, Aerosmith, Bowie, Genesis, The Carpenters—wow, forgot I had that one. There's also something called Hair Metal Mania here that sounds fun. I've got Motown, too. Like I said, old stuff."

"But no Elvis!" Abby made it sound as though she couldn't forgive such a grave oversight. "And here I thought you must've been a huge fan."

"Elvis? Why would you think—*ob*. Yeah, no. Never been a big Elvis fan—and she was named after me, by the way. I'm Wesley Dean and she's Preslie Jeanne." He paused, shrugging. "It was her mom's idea. I wanted to name her Charlotte. So, Stevie? I'm feeling Stevie right about now. He goes real well with the chill-out vibe."

She nodded. "Sure. Stevie works."

For the next song and a half, they sat in companionable silence, enjoying the moment. Then, in the middle of "Superstition", Abby abruptly shifted in her chair to face him. There was a smile on her face. "You know, you just keep on surprising me."

"Yeah? Is that a good thing?"

"Of course it is."

Dean couldn't help but laugh at that. "Something tells me I don't even want to know what you were expecting, but I'll still take it, so thanks."

"You really don't." Abby scooted closer, leaning across the table between them. "I was really, really wrong about you, and I'm sorry."

He moved a little closer, too. "Yeah, so was I."

Their eyes met for a couple of intense seconds, attraction practically crackling in the tiny space between them...but before either could get any closer, she turned away, casting her gaze to the water. "So, I saw the motorcycle in your garage. Do you ride often?"

Exhaling, he lifted the can of beer to his lips and guzzled down a fourth of it. He had to follow her lead. "Uh, no. Not anymore. I used to, but I wiped out pretty bad a couple of years ago. Dude side-swiped me when I was on my way to work."

Abby turned in his direction, both hands placed over her mouth. "Oh, my God!"

Dean let out another shaky breath, willing himself to focus on the story, not what just happened between them. "Yeah, it was crazy. I just went flying,

man! I don't know what that guy's deal was, but he ended up running over the bike—not me, thank God! I still smashed my arm up pretty good, though. I landed on it and it just kind of...pulverized. I had to have surgery and everything. It was gnarly.” He showed off the linear scar that ran the inner length of his right forearm. “There's plates and screws and all kinds of fun stuff in there. I've got so much metal in me I might as well be the Six Million Dollar Man—and that's about how much it cost, too.”

“Wow,” she managed, shaking her head. “That's horrible.”

“Yeah, it was nuts. You never think that's gonna happen to you, you know? And everybody just freaked out. My daughter, my mom, my sister, my stepmom, my grandma—they all just *freaked out*. Like, hysterical panic...but my dad was *pissed*. Once he found out it wasn't serious and I wasn't going to die or anything, he really let me have it. He was like, ‘What the hell were you thinking? You've got a kid! Get your shit together!’ And he was right, you know? I can't take stupid chances anymore, because if something happens to me...” Rather than finish his sentence, he took another drink.

“Absolutely,” she agreed with a solemn nod. “She would never, ever get over that. She's crazy about you.”

“Yeah, she is. She thinks you're pretty cool, too—and I'll have you know she doesn't get along that well with everybody.”

“Really?” Abby beamed with pride at that. “Well, I'm honored.”

Dean pulled Preslie's vacant chair closer, using it as a footrest. “You're really good with her—and the cat. You have this whole mommy vibe I wasn't expecting, but it's pretty cool.”

“Oh, I can't resist small, sweet little things like that. Babies, kittens, puppies—they're my weakness.” She paused, rocking back and forth in her seat. “I think it's the same in every woman, whether they want to admit it or not.”

“Not *every* woman,” he corrected with a sigh.

At once, her head snapped toward him. He could see the sympathy in her eyes. “I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said—”

“It's fine,” he dismissed, with a shrug. “I came to terms with it a long time ago, but I still don't quite...get it, you know?”

“Yeah.”

He took another drink, allowing him the courage to confide, “She's so smart and she's so funny and she's so amazing, and Chelsie sees her twice a

year. On her birthday and sometime in December—but never on Hanukkah or Christmas or New Year’s, because that’s not convenient, you know? That doesn’t fit into her *schedule*.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“I don’t understand how anybody can not want to be there. And it messes with her head. I know it does, because she gets so excited when Chelsie’s here, and then, when she leaves, it’s like...” Trailing off, Dean leaned deep into the chair. “She wants a mom so bad. And I mean, my sister’s really great with her and my mom helps out a lot, but it’s not the same. And I try really hard, but there’s stuff I just can’t...sorry. You didn’t come here to listen to this. You came here to listen to Stevie.” To divert attention from his reckless, humiliating over-share, he turned up the volume.

Abby cleared her throat, raising her voice to ensure he heard her over the song. “I came here to find a little girl’s lost kitten.”

“Oh, that’s right. You just stayed for Stevie.”

“No, I stayed for you.”

Their eyes met again, but this time, neither looked away. Heart racing, he kicked aside his makeshift footrest to lean toward her. She did him one better, vaulting halfway across the table to initiate a kiss that felt more like an electrocution. A series of jolts and aftershocks surged through him as the seconds ticked by, creating an all-over warmth that came to an abrupt, premature halt when she pulled back, red-faced and panting.

“I should go,” she informed, one hand placed over her chest as she struggled to catch her breath. “It’s getting late.”

He blinked at her, eyes narrow. What? Was he misreading this or something? “Right,” he forced out, nodding. “Yeah, okay. Right. Sure. Just, um...text me. Text me when you get home. I’ll probably be up for a while, so...”

That was as far as he got before she moved in for another kiss, this one powerful and unexpected enough to push him into the arm of his chair. Okay, so he wasn’t misreading this. She wanted him just as much as he wanted her—maybe even more, if her tongue’s roving ferocity was any sort of indication. He moved his hands upward, into her hair, while hers traveled first to his shoulders and then darted inside of his shirt.

“Oh, my God,” she whispered. “Oh, my God.”

The only response he could muster was a low, guttural grunt.

“Oh, my God!” She said it again, pulling away with both hands lifted into the air. It came out four more times. “We can’t do this. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

Reeling, he swallowed. “What?”

“We can’t do this,” she repeated, grabbing her phone from the table as she stood. “I’m sorry.”

“Whoa, wait a minute,” he attempted to dissuade, but she was already halfway to the patio door.

“I’m sorry. I don’t normally do this, I’m just...I’m really, really sorry, Dean.”

He jumped from his chair to follow. “Wait, wait. You don’t have to...”

Abby turned before he could finish his sentence. She looked like she was about to cry. “Yes, I do. We both know this is...”

She never elaborated, but then, she didn’t need to. He could already tell what she was going to say. “Right,” he managed, as evenly as possible. “Right, yeah.”

“I’m sorry,” she offered again, over her shoulder, then made a hasty escape before he could make any moves to walk her out.

Breathing heavily, he hunched over the arm of the sofa as the front door closed behind her. It felt like his entire being deflated at once, leaving little more than a wobbly, disoriented shell in its wake.

*What the hell just happened?*



W racked with regret and humiliation, Abby cried the entire way home. She was still crying when she walked through the door of her apartment, at a little after eleven, and found Meryl waiting there. She'd long believed that cats were incredibly perceptive creatures, and that one was no exception. After winding in and out of her legs for a while, and demanding an explanation as to what took her so long to get home, Meryl followed her to bed, snuggling up beside her while she struggled to reconcile how horribly tonight had gone wrong.

Though Dean had requested she text him when she got home, Abby was far too ashamed of herself to approach him and instead set her phone to “do not disturb.” The likelihood was he wouldn't want to hear from her, anyway. She'd done the one thing she'd always said she would never do to anyone, under any circumstances: she led him on. By letting lust get the better of her, and practically throwing herself at him, she made him think she wanted there to be more between them than just scripted lines and glances on a stage...and the worst part about it was, at the moment, she had herself believing it, too.

This was all fair-game Brandon's fault. Had she not devoted half her weekend to mooning over a fictional character—seriously, who did that?—she would not have made such a mess of her evening with the man who brought him to life. Brandon was just so perfect, so good, so *delectable*, and despite her desperate desire to keep them separate in her mind, she ended up

projecting all of his appeal onto off-limits Dean. As an actress, she knew better than just about anyone that it was all an illusion, but she still allowed herself to get caught up in it, to blur the lines between them and to make an utter fool of herself. How the hell could she have been so stupid?

After chastising herself well into the night, Abby awoke the next morning with a headache, and the fact that she hadn't missed any messages or calls while her phone was silenced—from Dean or anyone—just made her feel worse. She'd blown it. She'd taken every ounce of respect and trust he might've built in her and smashed it into jagged little pieces, all but ensuring that she'd never be able to look him in the eye again.

She was so ashamed of herself that she gave serious consideration to blowing off tonight's rehearsal. The only reason she went was because it was an official one, meaning half the company was going to be there. Val, Tony, and Gina, for sure, and probably a host of other interested parties, like Ray, Debbie, Jackson and maybe even Wendy, if she was still as hot after Dean as she'd been a week ago. Abby tried to look on the bright side—to tell herself that, in a room full of people, it would be much easier to focus on the work and not last night's regrettable passions. Deep down, though, she feared the opposite: the presence of an audience would make things even more awkward and tense between them, especially since they were going to have to act like nothing happened.

Per the group text Gina sent around at one, rehearsal was scheduled for 5:30, but Val and Wendy were already there when Abby showed up at ten after—and so was Nate, the set designer, though there was no discernable reason for him to be. Huddled up like old biddies at the salon, they all turned wide, expectant smiles toward her as she walked in. Not wishing to draw any more attention to herself than necessary, she offered a quiet hello, then darted backstage to get a Coke from the machine. It didn't surprise her one bit that the pack of horny jackals followed.

“So, don't keep us in suspense!” Val prodded behind her. “How was it?”

Abby scrounged through her bag, pretending to give her search for one more quarter the lion's share of her attention. “How was what?”

“Kissing Studly McManmeat!” Nate supplied, as though it should've been obvious.

Shades of embarrassment spread over Abby's cheeks, and then farther down, as she whirled to face them. Her first instinct was to deny it—or

demand how the hell they could've known—but before she could formulate a single syllable, she realized they meant the scene. Bernadette and Alex shared a beautiful, romantic moment at the end of the play, complete with a kiss that would be almost impossible to perform after last night's fiasco. Was it too late to cut that part?

Abby blurted the first thing to come to mind. "Um, minty."

Nate nodded his approval. "Considerate. I like that."

"Sure beats Tony kissing me after lunch at Rossi's!" Val scrunched her face at the memory. "I still haven't forgiven him for that!"

Sighing, Wendy clasped both hands over her heart like a love-sick teenager. "Oh, you are so lucky, Abbs!"

She returned her gaze to her purse. "All in a day's work, right?"

"And to think you didn't want to work with him!" Val chided, extending a quarter toward her. "How's he doing, by the way? Good, right? I told you—I could see it in him, even with all those nerves. He's got loads of potential."

Taking the quarter with a nod of gratitude, Abby turned back toward the machine. "Yeah, he's...um, very good."

"I did a little research," Val continued. "You should do the same when you have time—just don't watch the soap opera. It's dreadful. He was the only good thing about it."

"Oh, that is not true!" Wendy argued. "It's a great show!"

Val ignored her. "If you get the Lifestyle channel, they have one of his movies available on demand. I watched it the other night. It was surprisingly good, for one of those things. He plays a bastard really, really well. I forgot what it was called, though—something about a lover?"

"Oh, I've seen that one!" Nate chimed. "I don't remember what it's called either, but I know which one you're talking about! It's where the girl has all these boyfriends and she thinks none of them know about each other, but one of them is a psychopath who starts killing all the competition—"

"That's the one! It's really good. He plays this asshole married guy that's dating about fifty different girls, including the one the psycho's obsessed with, and I don't wanna give away the ending, but he gets what's coming to him." Val paused, giggling. "It's pure trash, but it's the kind of trash that's *fun*. You should watch it, Abby."

"Okay, sure, I'll look it up," she agreed, though she had no intention of doing so. After all, it was her obsession with watching his work that got her

into this mess.

The trio continued chattering for the next several minutes, and Abby pretended to be interested in whatever they were saying, but the truth was, she didn't hear a word. The closer five-thirty drew, the more her heart raced, and the more she feared what would happen when he walked through that door. It never once occurred to her that he might not show up until five-thirty, and then five-forty-five, came and went. Oh, no!

Never known for being the most patient director in town, Gina did not take this lying down. She made a huge production of calling him, then texting him, and then calling him again—and when none of those efforts yielded a response, she turned her attention to Abby. “Is he *always* this late?”

She squirmed in her seat, aware that every eye in the room was on her. “No, he’s usually, um, fifteen minutes early. He does know you changed the time, right? From six-thirty to five-thirty?”

“Well, I don’t see how he couldn’t, because he got the same text everyone else did!”

“Maybe he’s stuck in traffic.” Or maybe he didn’t want to face Abby any more than she wanted to face him.

“Why don’t you try calling him?” Gina suggested. “He’ll probably answer for you.”

Somehow, she doubted that. “Oh, well, um...”

“I’ll try him,” Ray volunteered, before she could think of a good excuse.

Gina nodded in his direction. “Good. If he won’t answer for you, then he won’t answer for anybody.”

As Ray walked out of the room, Val hopped into the chair next to Abby’s and leaned toward her. “Hey, don’t worry.”

“I’m not worried.”

“You look worried. Well, don’t. He’ll show up. He better—I got him a cake!”

Abby turned toward her, one eyebrow cocked. “Why in the world did you get him a cake?”

“It’s an old mating ritual. Dates back to the Mayans...” Mid-sentence, Val broke into laughter. “Your face! Oh, my God, your face right now!”

“Tell me you’re not serious.”

“Of course not. It’s his birthday—didn’t you know that?”

Come to think of it, she did. Preslie had mentioned it while she was

braiding her hair last night, but after everything else that had happened, it slipped her mind until now.

“Oh, right.”

“I saw it on Chattr this morning, so I ran to the store and got him a cake after work. Sure hope he likes chocolate. Oh, and look at this picture. It could not be more adorable!” With that, Val extended her phone toward her.

Abby debated whether or not to look, uncertain if she could handle another one of his sexy, smoldering poses. The photo in question, though, was of a much more innocent variety. A pair of preschool-aged children—one boy and one girl—with matching dimples and fast-food cardstock crowns, sat in front of a humongous, bear-shaped cake. The caption read: *Throwback to '91. I've spent the past 30 years trying to convince them to recreate this picture! Maybe this year? Happy birthday to two of the finest people in the world (who also happen to be my beautiful babies)! -Mama D*

“He lets his mom post on his Chattr—isn’t that the sweetest thing ever?” Val gushed. “And I never knew he was a twin, did you?”

Preslie had mentioned that, too, but since she was pretending last night never happened, Abby forced a lie past her lips. “No, I didn’t.”

Val’s mouth opened, but before she could say anything else, the birthday boy finally made his grand appearance. Every eye in the place turned toward him, including Abby’s, but he handled it with far more aplomb than she did, making a beeline for Gina. He was bearing one of his trademark oversized coffees. “I am *so sorry*. I won’t even give you an excuse because there isn’t one. I got a late start and I should’ve been here a whole lot sooner, and I’m sorry.”

Gina was unmoved at first. “I’ve been trying to reach you for the past fifteen minutes.”

“Ray told me. Sorry. I didn’t realize it was you, and I was already on the phone with my daughter, so I just let it go to voicemail. I’m so sorry.”

“She’s gonna melt,” Val whispered into her ear. “How could she not? Oh, my God, look at him. He’s almost painfully beautiful. Like, it almost hurts me to look at him.”

She wasn’t the only one. Abby had to consciously avert her gaze, especially when she noticed that, unlike every other rehearsal, Dean had taken great care to dress properly this time. There wasn’t a single inch of unnecessary flesh showing, which meant one of two things: either he had plans to go somewhere nice after this or, after last night, he’d developed a

sudden case of modesty. She didn't know him well enough to determine which, but she hoped, at least for Val, Nate, and Wendy's sake, that it wasn't the latter. There was no reason to punish them because she couldn't be trusted to contain herself.

As Val had predicted, Gina's exacting professional exterior gave way to something much more pliable after his apology. Her expression noticeably softened as she provided notes on the scenes she intended to cover tonight, and she seemed just as dazzled as Abby had been by his conscientious, attentive response to them.

Still lingering near her ear, Val couldn't pass up the opportunity to gloat. "See? I told you. Who could resist him? Though I will say, we've been talking about this—Nate and I—and we don't think anybody could really be that perfect. Nate is convinced something has to be wrong with him, and he thinks he's got it narrowed down. Either that guy's a complete freakin' sociopath or he snores. Which do you think?"

"I think you both have too much time on your hands."

"Well, what do you expect? We haven't worked in a week and a half! You've been hogging Studly all this time, and that's not fair. We wanna drool, too."

Abby knew that was a joke—a tasteless one, maybe, but a joke just the same. Still, she couldn't help but get a little defensive. "You act like I enjoyed it or something. It's not my fault he needed acting lessons! Maybe if you hadn't gone and told him I was a drama teacher, I wouldn't have had to—"

"Acting lessons, huh? That's what this was?" And there he was, standing five feet to the right of her. He waited a full ten seconds for her to respond, but she was too busy trying to convince herself not to make a break for it to say a word, which left him to nod. "Right. Cool. Guess it was. Val, good to see you again. How are you?"

Presumably to hide the fact she'd just been whispering about him, Val bolted upright in her chair. "Hi, sweetheart! Happy birthday!"

With that, she produced the cake she'd purchased and, of course, it wasn't just any old cake—it was an elaborate, decadent monstrosity that must've set her back a good thirty bucks. Dean seemed suitably impressed by the gesture, and thanked her quite sincerely, but Abby noticed his eyes kept wandering back to her, and that made her want to go straight through the floor.

This was going to be a long, long night.



Rehearsal couldn't have been any more uncomfortable if Gina had suggested they hold it underwater. Though he'd broken every traffic law on the books to make it on time, Dean had still ended up being half an hour late, which left him to contend not only with the embarrassment of being the last to arrive but also the guilt of making everyone else wait around for him. Strangely, though, they didn't seem to mind. Aside from Gina, no one even mentioned it. They were much more focused on other things, like trying to get as close to him as humanly possible.

Val was the worst offender, and he spent much of the evening awkwardly chuckling at her not-so-subtle advances and evading every attempt she made to touch him. She had a creepy Mrs. Robinson vibe, made especially bizarre by the fact she was only a decade older than him, and the less said about the acre of chocolate confection she bought him, the better.

How'd she even know it was his birthday? He intentionally didn't mention anything about it, because the last thing he wanted to give them was one more reason to make a fuss over him. Not that they needed one or anything—from the moment he walked in, he'd been subjected to the undivided, unnerving and wholly undeserved attention of every single person in attendance...except for the one who mattered the most.

Abby had not given him more than a passing glance all night, nor had she uttered a single word to him out of character. At first, he thought that might have been because of shame or something similar, but the longer the night went on, the more ridiculous her behavior became, and that conveyed something else entirely: she was pissed. So pissed, in fact, that she didn't even want to look at him on stage, and went to preposterous lengths to ensure she wouldn't have to. The author of the play, who knew her lines, his lines, and everyone else's lines, too, claimed not to remember them all of a sudden, and had to work off...the script. Seriously? Was she just trying to screw with him now? That was what it felt like.

What did she have to be so mad about, anyway? It wasn't as though he'd come into *her* home, made *her* feel something *she* hadn't felt in a long, long

time, made an aggressive move on *her* and then rejected *her* without so much as an explanation. If anyone had the right to be angry, it was him, but until that crack about acting lessons and the stunt with the script, he had been willing to give her the benefit of the doubt.

Last night was just...weird. To be honest, the whole thing kind of freaked him out too, so he understood her pulling away. He understood her leaving. He even understood her unspoken, but heavily implied, reservations about getting involved with a co-star she just met ten days ago. All of that—though frustrating—made perfect sense. It was the way she chose to handle things tonight that bothered him.

He'd seen toddlers conduct themselves with more maturity, but no matter how infuriating her latest mood swing might've been, Dean knew better than to retaliate. Not that he didn't want to. He was dying to snidely suggest, as she had a week ago, "look at me, not the script", but what would be the point if he did? All that would accomplish was making him look like a prick to their audience of enrapt strangers. None of those people knew what happened on his deck last night, and the last thing he wanted was for them to find out. Besides, somebody had to be the adult here and try to salvage whatever might've remained of their professional chemistry. It appeared Abby had all but given up on both, and that just left one option.

Unbelievable. And to think, he'd left a nice lunch with Margot and his parents—both of them—for this. His parents hadn't been in the same room since four Passovers ago, and it would probably be just as long before they got together again. And he'd ducked out before dessert, while Pres cried and begged him not to, just so he could come here and get gawked at, whispered about, antagonized and humiliated. Happy freakin' birthday!

Though tempted to eat his frustrations, and everyone else's within a thirty-two-mile radius, Dean had little use for the cake Val had bought him and left it in the corner for someone who might've actually cared. They kind of went nuts with it—by the time they got done carving it up, a little less than half remained. That was more than he'd hoped there would be, and since no one was willing to take it, that meant he was going to have to lug the damned thing home.

Not to sound ungrateful or anything. It was really nice that Val would do something like that, but he had to wonder if she had some sort of ulterior motive. She did whisper something about chocolate being an aphrodisiac,

which was all the more reason to throw it away—but, if anything, maybe half an acre of cake could help him get back into Preslie’s good graces. It was worth a try, anyway.

Given how obvious she’d made her new aversion to him, Dean expected Abby to make a break for it at the first opportunity, but after rehearsal, she stuck around, pulling Gina aside. He wasn’t sure he even wanted to know what she was saying, but it wouldn’t have surprised him a bit if it was along the lines of what he’d caught her saying to Val earlier. Classy.

He didn’t notice her watching him at first, because Wendy pounced while he was collecting the cake to reminisce (again) about four-year-old *All or Nothing* plotlines he couldn’t even remember anymore. By the time he looked up and saw Abby staring at him, she had finished her conference with Gina and moved on to Tony. The moment their eyes met, she looked away.

“...in the back seat of the car!”

That was the only part of Wendy’s sentence that he caught, but he still agreed with it. “Right, yeah.”

“And the car was on fire, remember? That was so exciting!”

What the hell was she talking about? “Yeah, for sure.”

“It’s not that exciting anymore. It’s kind of boring now. I don’t know who’s writing it, but everything just drags out forever. We’ve been waiting to find out who fathered Penelope’s baby for six months.”

“Yeah, I heard about that. Kristen’s not happy with the way they’re writing her these days. She’s pissed about the whole Ryan story, too. So is Jesse, because he’s getting a lot of heat on social media and...” Mid-sentence, he stopped, certain that sort of backstage information was going to overload Wendy’s fragile circuits.

She only nodded. “Oh, he is. The fans are furious, because the writing’s on the wall. They’re going to put Ryan back with Sonya, and it’s really a slap in the face to your memory—Brandon’s memory, sorry. What made your story work was Sonya was *miserable* with Ryan and Brandon showed her how good it could really be with the right person. That’s why everyone loved them so much, you know? Because that spoke to loads of people in terrible relationships and said, ‘Hey, there’s better out there.’ Brandon was better. He was her true love and now they’re just gonna forget all about that and throw her right back with Ryan? That’s messed up, and we’re not having it—but it sucks that Jesse’s taking all the flack. It’s not his fault. He probably wishes

he'd never come back now, huh?"

"Yeah, I haven't really talked to him, but I guess..." Again, Dean trailed off as Abby made her first tentative step toward them. "The fans are super pissed, and Kristen told me something about this petition they've started to bring Brandon back. They sent it to her on Chattr or something. And I'm like, 'Oh, that's cool. If they brought Ryan back, they can bring him back too, right?' And Kristen's like, 'No, they don't just want Brandon back. They want *you* back as Brandon.'" He might or might not have announced that for Abby's benefit.

Wendy's mouth dropped open, and it took her several seconds to recover. "So, what did you say?"

"No one's approached me, so I haven't said anything."

"But what *would* you say if they did?"

Abby cleared her throat, drawing nearer. Her face was almost as red as her blouse. "Hi."

Wendy turned toward her, smiling, but after one look at her expression, she took a giant step back. "Oh, you know, I just remembered! I need to talk to Gina about something before she leaves. Excuse me."

Her spur-of-the-moment, BS excuse, and subsequent escape, made Abby even redder, and she cleared her throat again. "Happy birthday."

Returning his attention to the cake, Dean kept his response as detached as possible. "Thanks."

"You were really...good tonight." Her words sounded forced, like someone was holding a gun to the back of her head. "You're always good, but you were really good tonight. I just wanted to, um...tell you."

"Yeah, I think those acting lessons are really starting to pay off, don't you?"

At once, Abby lowered her gaze to the floor. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that. I didn't mean it. It just came out, because I was so frustrated and—"

"It's cool," he dismissed, before she could go any further. "Always nice to know where somebody stands, you know?"

"Well, that's not where I stand. I shouldn't have said that, and I'm very sorry. I know—I have to apologize to you all the time, and I'm very sorry about that too, but I want...I want..."

She never finished her sentence, which forced him to take a stab at it. "Cake? You want some cake?" She was, after all, the only one besides him

who hadn't had any.

"I don't know what I want," she admitted, sighing.

"Yeah, I noticed."

Looking up at him, she squared her shoulders. "Can we just talk for a minute? In private? I really just want to...talk about this."

"Yeah, not tonight. I really need to get home and—"

"Just for a minute. Please."

"You had all night to talk to me, but you didn't. You held a script in front of your face so you wouldn't even have to look at me, but now you want to talk to me? Right now, when I'm trying to get out of here so I can go home to my kid and try to make it up to her for walking out of my own birthday dinner before I could even open up her present? Really? You really wanna talk right now?"

Her response was tinny and hoarse. "Please."

Inhaling, he nodded. "Okay, fine. Let's talk. I don't get you. I really don't. You like me, and then you don't like me, and then you like me again—oh, you really, *really* like me—and then you *hate* me, to the point you won't even look at me and go around trashing me to other people! Holy shit, *what?* Do you realize how insane that is? My daughter is more consistent and she's seven! What is going on with you? Do you just like leading people on or something? Do you have multiple personalities? I'm asking because I genuinely don't know. I don't know what the hell is wrong with you, so I need you to explain it to me. Are you...*well?* Do you need meds or something? Should I be worried about you? I don't know what I'm dealing with here, so I need you to tell me. What the hell is your deal?"

Every single one of his frustrations seemed to come out at once, leaving Dean so heated that he momentarily forgot about the six other people in this room—that is, until they all turned toward him, in varying degrees of dismay. *Son of a bitch!*

Reeling and clearly humiliated, she drew in one shaky breath, then another...and then she ran for the door. He wasted little time giving chase. "Abby, wait. I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry. I shouldn't have gone off like that. I'm sorry. You just...you keep blindsiding me and I don't know what to expect from you, and I want to—"

Ten paces ahead of him, she held up a hand. "Don't, okay? Don't."

So he didn't. He just stood there, watching her race for the parking

garage. It felt like someone had punched him in the stomach, and he was ten seconds away from losing his lunch all over the concrete.

Damn, he'd really done it this time.



For the first time in years, Abby stopped for a pack of cigarettes on the way home. She smoked two of them, back to back, before she even reached the apartment complex, and while she knew that eventually, she'd be upset with herself for falling off the wagon like this, it felt pretty damned good in the moment. This had been, without question, the most maddening twenty-four hours of her life, and if a little nicotine could help her hold on to what remained of her sanity, why not indulge? She needed all the help she could get.

Her phone had been blowing up since she left the playhouse, ringing and dinging and chirping in fifteen-second intervals, but she couldn't bring herself to look at any of the messages. She wasn't sure she needed to, to be honest, because she was certain she already knew what they said.

Val and Nate had likely tried to sound as caring and kind as possible, but peppered their messages with heavy inferences to some sort of scandal, in the hopes Abby would let some juicy info slip. Tony had probably started by asking if she was okay, then said something about how her humiliating exchange with Dean was the most exciting thing to happen at McMillan all year. Wendy had likely asked a million questions, none of which she had an answer for. Gina had probably said that she hoped that whatever "personal issues" they had would not continue to negatively impact the production and then threw more shade for reading from the script tonight. Ray had almost

certainly made the whole thing her fault, demanding to know what she'd done to make Dean say those things, and pointing out that in the entire ten days he'd known him, he'd never seen him so much as furrow a brow at anyone else.

And Dean? Well, Abby couldn't even begin to guess what he'd said...if he'd said anything at all. There wasn't much reason to; he'd already laid his cards out on the table, in the harshest, most impertinent way possible—and, as if that wasn't bad enough, he did so in front of the entire playhouse! She never thought she'd find herself agreeing with some yahoo on the internet, but that chick from his Streamline chat was right: he really was a douche...but damn it, she was still so freakin' attracted to him. What the hell was the matter with her? Did she just have a thing for assholes, because her track record would suggest that she did.

After another cigarette and a couple of glasses of wine, Abby finally summoned the courage to look at her phone and wasn't surprised to find a multitude of messages from everyone in attendance tonight. Val and Nate both sent texts expressing seemingly genuine concern. Gina left a stern voicemail saying that she had “just about had it” with this “unprofessional behavior.” Ray sent a text consisting entirely of question marks. Tony left a voicemail about how “appalling” tonight had been, but did not rush to blame anyone in particular, just expressing hope that things would get better with time. Wendy sent two straight lines of heart emojis, then followed up with a link to a video on Streamline. *This might make you feel better*, she wrote, with a little winking face.

The video's title made her laugh out loud: *AON: Brandon's Death (Part 14 of 14)*. It took him *fourteen segments* to die, which she could only hope meant there was a lot of writhing and pain involved. Not that she liked the idea of Brandon suffering—it was a lousy substitute for what she really wanted to see, but maybe if she kept drinking, by midnight, the lines between fair-game Brandon and off-limits Dean would have blurred enough for her to get a kick out of it. It was worth a try, anyway.

Speaking of *off-limits Dean*, Abby was surprised to find that he'd called four times between 8:15 and 9:45. He left a series of long voicemails, too—ranging from three to five minutes—but she deleted every one of them. Why bother to listen? It was just bound to be more cutting observations about her indecisive nature...and though they weren't exactly wrong, that still didn't

mean she wanted to hear them. She was well aware of how ridiculous she'd been acting, how crazy the rollercoaster of emotions had been, and how poorly she'd handled them over the past several days. There was no reason to point it out to her. She knew, and she felt bad enough about it already.

Still, he refused to let up. He called again at 10:30, and one last time while she was on the patio imbibing at 11:45. At just under a minute and a half, his most recent voicemail was the shortest. It also ended up being the only one she heard, even if she didn't plan on it. She'd been trying to delete it, but her impaired coordination caused her to press play instead. Then, once she heard how subdued, humble, and slurry his first few sentences were, she couldn't bring herself to turn it off.

"Okay, I give up. I'm going to bed. Call me when you want to talk about this—I guess I should say if you want to talk about this. It's kind of looking like you don't ever want to talk to me again, and I guess I deserve that. I messed up. Bad. I don't even know why I said that to you. I'm so confused about everything—about tonight and last night and everything. I don't know what the hell's going on anymore, so I'm just gonna leave it alone. If you still want to talk to me, call me. I don't care if it's three-thirty in the morning, you can still call me. And if you don't want to talk to me...well, I get that. I'm sorry. I'm really sorry. I can't say that enough. I mean, I guess I could, but it's not the same as actually saying it to you, and I don't know if you're even going to listen to this, so...okay, that's enough. I'm done. I won't bother you anymore. Call me if you want to. If not, well, I guess I'll see you on Friday. I've got stuff going on tomorrow and Thursday, so...Friday. If I don't get fired by then—and I might, because Ray and Gina are really mad at me. I guess I deserve that, too. I don't know. So, Friday. I'll see you Friday and, uh...that's it. I'm done. I really mean it this time. I need to go to bed. Goodnight. I'm sorry. I love you. Bye."

Wait, *what?*

Thinking she must've misheard, Abby replayed the message—twice, and she sobered up a little more with each subsequent listen. There was no doubt about it. Dean really had said what she'd thought he'd said...but whether he meant it was a whole other ball of wax.

Clearly, she wasn't the only one hitting the sauce tonight—from the way he sounded, she'd wager he was a good three drinks ahead of her, and that was bound to cloud a person's judgment. He probably didn't even realize he'd

said it. He probably forgot who he was talking to, and it just came out, and it would be long forgotten by tomorrow. Something told her she'd be wise to forget about it, too.

After one more smoke and carefully hiding the rest of the pack lest she be tempted to reach for it in the morning, Abby retired to bed at almost one. She'd all but decided to call in tomorrow—it had been almost a year since the last time she'd done so, and she had enough sick and personal days stored up to call in the whole rest of the month if she wanted. Why not take advantage of them? She needed some time to get her head back in order, especially given that once the play opened, rest and relaxation were going to be a thing of the past.

Reaching for her phone, she intended to verify that the alarm was still set, but ended up listening to his message one more time. Was it too late to call him back? Sure, he might've said he didn't care if she called him at 3:30 in the morning, but he also said he loved her, so the odds were, he didn't mean that, either. After a few seconds of inner debate, she took the easy way out, sending a text: *Hi. I got your messages. I know it's way too late to talk now, but call me when you wake up. I'm not going to work tomorrow, so I should be free all day.*

Her phone rang twenty seconds later.

Surprised, Abby gaped down at it, her hand trembling as it lingered over the “answer” button. She sucked in a quick, shallow breath, lifting the phone to her ear. “Hi.”

“Hey. Got your message.” Dean sounded even more subdued and humble than he had an hour ago—and a whole lot sleepier, too.

“Did I wake you? I'm sorry.”

“It's cool. I needed to wake up, anyway. I'm still on the deck.”

She forced herself to laugh at that. “Wild night, huh?”

“Wild *week*—and it's only Tuesday.”

For the next several seconds, Abby paused, gathering her thoughts. There was so much that she wanted to say to him, but she had no idea where to even start. “I, um...I got your messages. Sorry I didn't answer. I've been kind of avoiding my phone all night.”

“Yeah, I bet. Mine's been going crazy, too. All day long. I would throw it if I didn't think...” The rest of his sentence dissolved into mumbles she couldn't decode for the life of her.

“Do you want to talk about this tomorrow?”

“No. Pres isn’t going to school tomorrow and I’m not going to work, because I promised her we could hang out all day since she was so upset about me having to...” He trailed off, groaning. “Okay, I’m getting up. I gotta go inside. You go ahead and talk. I’m listening. I just don’t know what to say that I didn’t already say to your machine, but if you want me to say it all again, I will. I don’t really remember what all I said, but...I’ll try.”

Yeah, she kind of figured he didn’t. The odds were, he would not remember this, either—so she might as well fess up while she had the chance. “I like you. I like you a lot, and I want you to like me.”

“I do like you. I mean, I know I was a jackass tonight and I’m really sorry, but I do like you. I’ve always liked you, even when you didn’t like me.”

“No, Dean, I don’t mean...” Inhaling, Abby bit down hard on her lip. “I mean, I *like* you. I really, really like you and I tried to talk myself out of it and I tried to tell myself it was stupid and I tried to keep everything in a box, but it all just came out last night and then I panicked. I just freaked out, and that’s why I left.”

He was silent for ten of the most agonizing seconds of her life. “You left because you like me? See, this is what I mean. I don’t get you.”

“I don’t get it either!” Suddenly, she was on the verge of tears. “I haven’t felt like this about anybody in such a long time, and I barely even know you, but the more I see of you, the more I want to see and...I really just want you to like me, and I know you probably don’t. I looked Chelsie up on the internet, so I know your type and I know I’m not...oh, God, I should just shut up and let you go to bed, because I’m making this so much worse, aren’t I? I’m sorry.”

Dean took such a long time responding that Abby glanced at her screen to make sure the call was still connected. Finally, she heard him exhale. “Okay.”

Okay? That was all he had to say about it? What did that even mean? “Okay as in ‘shut up because you’re making this worse’ or okay as in—”

“Just okay. You kind of blindsided me with that one, and I’m not really sure what to say right now. I’m not really, um...I’m not really *sober*, and I don’t wanna say the wrong thing.”

Panic rose within her, gripping her entire being in a matter of seconds. Surely, what he meant to say was, *I’m too drunk to think of a delicate way to turn you down, but if you give me a minute, I’ll try to throw something together.*

“It’s okay,” she resolved, swallowing hard. “You don’t have to say anything. I just wanted to try and explain it to you, because I don’t want you to think—”

“I mean, I do like you,” he interrupted. “And I kind of thought you knew that already, because I don’t let just anybody in my house. I don’t let just anybody around my daughter, you know? I have to like you an awful lot to go there.”

“Right, but Dean, I don’t mean—”

“I know what you mean. And I’m telling you, I do like you. I didn’t at first, but that day we went to dinner, something just...changed, you know? And when I saw you with Pres, I just...I don’t know. It’s weird. It’s so weird, and I get what you’re saying—we don’t really know each other and it’s never a good idea to get involved with somebody you work with because it always ends up a shitshow. I mean, I understand that, but...um, yeah. I like you too. That’s what I’m trying to say. I like you too. A lot.”



According to the log on his phone, Dean had called Abby at 1:17 in the morning, and they’d talked for fifty-six minutes, though those last twenty-five were kind of a blur. After setting the alarm and fumbling up the stairs, his memories started to splinter. If he thought really hard, he could remember a few things, like collapsing face-down into bed with his shoes on while she regaled him with funny stories about living in New York, but for the most part, everything after 1:45 might as well have never happened.

He was still wearing shoes when he woke up, and the phone was still in bed with him, wedged uncomfortably between his shoulder and the mattress. Pres was in bed with him too, sprawled halfway on top of him with her head on his chest, though he had no memory of how she got there. How weird. She’d never slipped in undetected before. Most of the time, she woke him up to announce her arrival, but even when she didn’t, her crazy nocturnal kung-fu would give her away. He’d have had to be in a coma not to notice—or just really, really drunk, and if the way he felt this morning was any sort of indication, last night was the worst possible combination of both.

Right, so lesson learned: Crown Royal Black was no longer welcome in his house. As soon as he could get unpinned from Preslie, he was going to pour the rest of it down the sink...though on second thought, that might be too dignified an end. It deserved to go down the toilet instead, along with his illusions of being able to drink with the same gusto he had back in his twenties. He'd ask himself what the hell he'd been thinking, but that would imply he'd been thinking at all. Logical thought and planning ahead went straight out the window the second he set foot in that liquor store, creating a perfect storm of stupidity that was responsible for not just one long, groveling voicemail to Abby, but six.

Yep, *six* of them—and the more he drank, the more pathetic they became. The fact that she hadn't immediately blocked him and tried to secure some sort of emergency restraining order was proof positive she was a much nicer person than she gave herself credit for. Dean couldn't say he would've been as gracious in her shoes.

At least, though, something good had come of it. Nudged along by the half-gallon of liquid courage churning in his gut, they could finally get their feelings out on the table. Where to go from here was still kind of up in the air—unless, of course, it got buried somewhere in the void of “everything after 1:45.” He'd like to think he would remember something as consequential as that, but he'd also like to think he'd have better sense than to crawl to bed fully dressed and he didn't, so all bets were clearly off.

He'd only been awake a few minutes when his phone started vibrating, and the texts hadn't stopped rolling in since. Sam was the first to check in, then Dad, and both of them wanted to confirm he would be joining them on the boat this weekend. Next up was Margot, who wanted to ask if he still felt up for taking Mason to the trampoline place later—an idea that had sounded a lot more doable when he first suggested it at lunch yesterday, but one he knew better than to try and squirm out of.

She'd been super cool about stepping in whenever he needed a break from Pres, and he was long overdue to return the favor, so that left him with little choice. Time to don the Fun Uncle hat, along with the Dad Who is Trying Really Hard to Make Up for Something shades, because he was in for an afternoon of nonstop bouncing with not one, but two raucous children who couldn't go more than ten minutes without fighting. Good Lord. His stomach lurched just thinking about it.

Maybe he could sell them on something else, like the movies. That would be much more agreeable to his current condition—and so would a riveting game of Let's Lie as Still as We Possibly Can, For as Long as We Possibly Can. Something told him they wouldn't dig that, though. Too bad. It was one of his favorites.

Dean had no sooner resolved to take advantage of not being able to move, and rest up while he still had the chance, when his phone started vibrating again. Annoyed, he gave serious thought to shoving it off the bed, but was pretty relieved he didn't when he got a look at Abby's message: *Hi. I don't know if you're up yet, but I just wanted to see how you're doing. You're still alive over there, right?*

He couldn't help but smile as he replied. *Believe it or not, yes.*

*Good! I was hoping you would be! How are you feeling?*

For a second, he debated how honest to be. *I'm not doing too bad for someone who slept with his shoes on.*

*Oh wow. I'm not surprised to hear that, though. You were pretty blitzed. Toward the end, I couldn't understand you.*

*Yeah, I can't help you there. I don't remember it well enough to tell you what I was saying. Sorry.*

*Don't apologize! It was hilarious! You knocked out right in the middle of my story about auditioning for that medical show. You went from mumbling about how playing a doctor is a bitch because of all the medical terms you have to learn to just kind of grunting and then you got super quiet. I thought you were just listening to me, so I kept talking...and then, right when I was getting to the good part, I heard this weird noise and I said, 'omg what is that?' It was you! You were snoring! She punctuated her reply with a series of laughing emojis.*

*Yikes. Definitely not my proudest moment. I'm sorry.*

*No! Don't you dare apologize! I'm telling you, it was hilarious! I laughed so hard I'm amazed I didn't wake you up!*

*Yeah, no worries there. I don't think an air-raid siren could have woken me up last night. This one got in bed with me and I don't remember a damn thing about it. Best. Dad. Ever. After verifying the flash was off, Dean snapped a quick, bleary-eyed selfie to send with the message.*

*Oh, how adorable! Abby sent back with a heart. It's your lucky day! Not only do you get to wake up to that beauty, I'm going to do you a solid and not point out that you're still wearing the same thing you wore to rehearsal last night. Oh, and is noon okay for*

*lunch? If it's too much trouble, we don't have to go to Rossi's. I know that's kind of a drive and you probably don't feel up to it today. I don't mind coming down there if it's easier. Just let me know what you want to do.*

His eyes widened as he read her text, but before he could react any further, Pres lifted her head to look at him. “Why did you take a picture of me?”

Startled, he flinched, setting the phone aside. “Because you’re beautiful.” It was the same answer he’d given from the time she was old enough to ask, but thankfully, it still satisfied.

She edged closer. “Can we sleep some more? I don’t feel good.”

He reached down to check her for fever. “What’s wrong, baby?”

Preslie buried her face in his shirt, muffling her response. “I got sick last night.”

“Oh, no. I’m sorry. Why didn’t you wake me up?”

“I tried, but you wouldn’t get up. You were really tired.”

Hearing that made him feel a little sick himself. He wrapped both arms around her, pulling her as close as possible. “Oh, baby, I’m so sorry.”

“I know,” she assured sleepily. “It’s okay.”

The fact she could forgive such a colossal parenting fail made him feel even worse about it. He had no business sleeping it off while his baby was hunched over a toilet. She deserved so much better than that, especially given how much he’d been neglecting her lately in favor of all those stupid rehearsals. What the hell was the matter with him? He needed to get it together.

“I’m so sorry I didn’t get up with you, baby—but I’m here now. Go back to sleep, okay? I’ll be right here if you need me.”

She seemed relieved to hear it, crawling on top of him the rest of the way and unintentionally knocking his phone onto the floor, but perhaps that was just as well. He was too wracked with guilt to worry about texting right now, and focused instead on offering the best comfort he could; he rubbed her back and poorly warbled every eighties love song he could think of until her deep, heavy breaths let him know she’d fallen asleep.

Eventually, he ended up going back to sleep, too, but the second time around, his rest was a lot more fitful. Determined to atone for last night, he jolted awake every time Pres so much as twitched, only convincing himself it was okay to fully relax after an hour or so of light dozing. That was when the

dreams started, one after another after another. Weird, disjointed, trippy stuff, like buying a timeshare from the guy on *Bewitched*, and flying over Europe in a hot air balloon. He'd just gone into another involving Big Bird and that TV shrink Mom liked when he felt a forceful shove to his shoulder. "Daddy!"

"What? What is it, baby? Are you sick?" Jarred back into consciousness, he reached down, but Preslie was no longer on top of him. Now she was standing by the bed, gazing in his direction.

"Somebody's at the door." With that, she raced for the stairs with a vigor that made it clear she was feeling better.

Dean wished he could say the same. If anything, his headache seemed a little worse now, and the last thing he wanted to deal with was an unannounced guest. Who would come by this time of day, anyway?

Pres, waiting impatiently at the bottom of the stairs, turned to watch him as he came down. "It's some lady. I tried to look out the window, but I couldn't see her real good."

In hindsight, he should have made the connection. He should have remembered the strange text about lunch that he never got back to her about. He should have realized that meant they did discuss where to go from here—and it was to lunch, apparently. But since he didn't, he got the shock of his life when he swung open the door and found Abby smiling at him. She had a gift bag in her hand.

"Hi! Happy belated! Did you decide what you wanted to do for..." Her smile faded in a fraction of a second. "Oh, no. I woke you up, didn't I? I'm so sorry!"

"No. I mean, yeah, you did, but...but..." He trailed off, a bit too surprised and disoriented to properly end that sentence.

That left Pres to say it, as she sprinted to greet her. "Abby! You're back!"

"Hi, sweetheart! How's the kitty?"

"He's good! I did what you said, and he got in my lap last night! All by himself!"

"Aww, that's great!"

Inexplicably, Dean felt a little better as he listened to their exchange. This might not have been how he planned to start his day, but man...there were certainly worse things to wake up to than this. Smiling, he took the gift from her. "Hey, thanks. Come on in."



Abby couldn't believe she'd done this, and she was sure that if her mother knew about it, she would throw a conniption fit. Showing up on someone's doorstep—a *man's* doorstep, to be more precise—was an enormous breach of not just etiquette, but the laws of traditional courtship that had been drilled into her head from the time she was a child. Mom was a big believer in playing hard to get, never revealing your hand and basically treating men the same way you would a feral cat: you had to give them space and time to get used to you, because if you came on too strong, you would scare them away. The first move was unequivocally theirs to make. Anything else was not just desperate, but pathetic.

And for what it was worth, Dean had made the first move...kind of. He was the one that suggested they have lunch in the first place, though to be fair, within ten minutes of making that suggestion, he was snoring like a wounded walrus. She realized, especially when he didn't answer her text about it this morning, that there was a strong possibility he didn't remember, but the compulsion to be near him was so strong, she just couldn't talk herself out of it.

Her first stop on that long journey down I-45 was the mall. She couldn't bear the idea of showing up empty-handed...even if the prospect of buying a birthday gift for a man she barely knew broke her out in hives. The only thing she could say with certainty that he liked was old music, but he seemed to

have most of the good stuff already. Books were too generic. Tech was too expensive. Personal items were too personal. Clothing was just...yuck, who gave clothing, anyway? At a loss, she wandered from store to store for an hour, before remembering the wide array of *Lord of the Rings* collectables scattered around his living room. He seemed to have a particular fondness for those large-headed plastic figurines, so she picked up three she couldn't recall seeing in his collection, to the tune of sixty bucks—another thing Mom was best off not knowing about.

Halfway across the causeway, Abby's more rational side kicked in, and she started to have second thoughts. What if the lunch invitation wasn't the only thing he didn't remember? What if he asked her to leave or, worse, laughed in her face? What if she had wasted not just her time, but also her money, on what amounted to little more than a silly, immature crush? What if she was setting herself up for failure again, by falling too hard too soon, the same way she had with Jake all those years ago? What if, like Jake, Dean had no interest in an actual relationship, and was just looking for a quick, cheap thrill? What if he saw her as another potential notch on his bedpost—a bit of a comedown from the type of girl he normally snagged, but still a fun way to pass the time until something more attractive came along.

The possibilities were so disturbing that she gave serious thought to turning around, and likely would have if she hadn't driven an hour already, but she knew she'd come much too far to turn back. It was a gamble, yes...but it was one she had to take, because the odds were, she'd never forgive herself if she didn't.

To her relief, none of the worst-case scenarios played out. Though surprised, Dean still seemed happy to see her, even if he allowed Preslie to do most of the talking for the first half hour while he brewed, and practically inhaled, two cups of coffee in a row. Upon full caffeination, he turned his attention to the gifts, opening each one with gleeful, genuine appreciation, and promptly making room for them on the mantle. The only thing that didn't quite go as planned was lunch; citing his desperate need for a shower and some Tylenol, as well as Preslie's overnight illness, he asked for a rain check on their fancy lunch date, but insisted that didn't mean she had to leave. She was more than welcome to, as he put it, "hang out for as long as you want," provided she didn't have anywhere more important to be.

It was the most chill, low-key, yet enjoyable first date Abby had ever had,

though she tried to caution herself against regarding it as such. There was no physical contact, or even flirting—Preslie’s presence rightfully put the kibosh on that—but there were more than a few meaningful glances exchanged during breaks in conversation that let her know what she was feeling wasn’t one sided in the least. Dean also referenced several things they’d discussed last night, as though he was trying to subtly tell her that not only did he remember confessing his attraction to her, he’d meant it when he said that he was game to “see where this goes.” At least, that was what she got out of it.

His phone rang at one-thirty, when they were wrapping up an informal lunch of ramen noodle cups on the living room floor. It was his sister, following up on a prior engagement he’d apparently forgotten about. Abby saw a distinct bolt of panic come across his face as he listened and was prepared to leave when he shot to his feet with an apology and a promise to be there as soon as he could.

When he got off the phone, he turned to Preslie. “Baby, how are you feeling? You’re not sick anymore, are you?”

She appeared to consider that for a second. “No, I don’t think so.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yeah, I feel fine.”

“Awesome.” With that, he turned to Abby. “Hey, so, um...I’m really, really sorry to spring this on you.”

“Oh, it’s fine,” she assured, reaching for her purse. “I understand if you have—”

Dean spoke over the last half of her sentence. “How do you feel about trampolines?”

Surprised, she did little more than blink at him for a moment. “Trampolines?”

“Trampolines?” Preslie repeated, rubbing her hands together. “Are we gonna? Are we really gonna?”

“We sure are—as long as you don’t think you’re gonna get sick. Are you sure you can handle it, baby?”

She puffed out her little chest, nodding. “Sure I’m sure!”

Again, he turned to Abby. “So, that was Margot, and I sort of forgot that I told her I was going to take the kids to Jump Town today. I really don’t wanna run out on you, though, so...you feel like jumping on some trampolines? I mean, if not, that’s cool. I just wanted to give you the option,

because I know you came all the way out here and I don't want you to have to turn around and—”

Preslie took the liberty of answering for her. “Yes! Yes, yes, yes!”

Dean laughed at that. “Well, I know *you* want to go, but I was asking Abby.”

At once, the little girl leaned toward her, eyes insistent. “You do, right? I know you do! It's super fun!”

How could she say no to that? “Sure! I'd love to go jump on some trampolines.”

A broad smile broke over his face as he nodded. “Right on. So, uh, you mind hanging out with her for a minute? I've got to get a shower.”

“Can I show her my dolls?” Without waiting for a response, Preslie took hold of Abby's hand and led her to the stairs.

He laughed at that, too. “Go for it. I'll just be a minute.”

Preslie's doll collection was, in a word, overwhelming. There were baby dolls, fashion dolls, weird green alien dolls, porcelain dolls, and dolls Abby couldn't quite determine the classification for—but every last one of them had a name.

“This is Emma,” Preslie announced, holding up a brunette Barbie with fishnet stockings. “And that's Rosa. And this is Mary Anne. And this one is...um, I forget her name. Oh, but this one is my favorite! Are you ready? She's really, really pretty. This is Jennifer!” With that, she presented a buxom blonde Barbie with crazy hair and a slightly wrinkled evening gown.

Abby marveled as though she'd never seen such a wonder. “Oh, she's beautiful!”

“I know! She looks like my mommy, right?” Preslie looked up at her, head cocked to the side. “Do you know her?”

“Your mommy? No, honey, I'm afraid I don't.”

“I bet you do. Everybody does. Her name is *Chelsie Michelle Lieberman*.” The little girl emphasized each syllable carefully. “That's her real name, but she has another name, too, because she's famous. Her other name is *Chelsie Crane*—people change their names when they get famous, did you know that? My daddy did it, too. His famous name was *Dalton Giles*, but he doesn't like that name. He gets annoyed when people call him that.”

How well she remembered. “Yes, he told me.”

“Know how he was a *little* famous?” Preslie held her thumb and forefinger

a short distance apart to illustrate. “Well, my mommy’s really, really, *really* famous! Are you sure you don’t know her?”

“Well, I’ve never actually met her, but—”

“I bet if I showed you a picture of her, you’d know her.” And just like that, she was at a shelf, poking through books and photo albums before pulling one out with great flourish. “Like I said, she’s really famous. She’s busy all the time. She goes from California to New York to Las Vegas—she’s always somewhere.”

*But never here.*

Abby bit down hard so as not to say it. “Oh, wow. That sounds exciting.”

With careful concentration, Preslie flipped through the pages for a moment, before holding it up for her to see. “See, this is my mommy. You know her now, don’t you?”

The photo in question—Chelsie Crane wearing a white string bikini, with what appeared to be a cocktail in her hand—was hardly appropriate for such a young child’s eyes, but knowing it wasn’t her place to say so, Abby merely nodded. “Oh, of course. Yes.”

“I have lots of pictures of her.” In a blink, the album was thrust into Abby’s hands. “Here. You can look at them if you want.”

That was, possibly, the last thing she wanted to do, but since she couldn’t think of a delicate way to refuse, she took a seat on the floor. “Oh, that’s nice. Thank you.”

Preslie settled beside her and took the liberty of describing each photo. “That’s when my mommy was little. She kind of looked like me when I was little, right? Oh, and that’s her and my Aunt Kelsie—they’re twins, just like Daddy and Aunt Margot! They looked a lot alike when they were kids, huh? Now that they’re grown up, they don’t, but back then, they did! Oh, and this is another picture of her and Aunt Kelsie. She’s...” She hesitated for a moment, as though trying to remember, before pointing to the youngster on the left. “She’s that one. You can tell, because her eyes are bigger.”

“Oh, yes, I see.”

Preslie turned the page. “Oh, and look at this one! You know what this is? This is the day she met my daddy!” Her little fingertip pressed tight into the photo. “They were models, did you know that? That’s how they met, and this is a picture they took that day. It used to hang on the wall, a long time ago, but then Daddy put it in here for me.”

Though she hadn't intended to give the image more than a passing glance, Abby's heart picked up speed when she got a good look at it. It was typical modeling fare—beautiful couple canoodles for the camera, showcasing whatever it was they were trying to sell—and though the half of Dean's face that was visible was just as strikingly handsome as always, that wasn't what drew her attention.

Had Preslie not pointed it out to her, she never would have known that the young lady he was cozying up to was, in fact, Chelsie Crane. She looked so...*different*, like a real human being, instead of the silicone goddess Abby saw on the internet. Her hair was a rich dark brown color. There was a teensy bump on the bridge of her nose, mirroring the one on her daughter's. Her lips were standard issue. Her teeth were a little bit crooked. Her chest was significantly smaller, more in proportion to the rest of her tiny frame. *That* was who Dean met and subsequently fell in love with: the pretty, but imperfect, girl with delicate, unrefined features, and a healthy smattering of freckles across her cheeks and nose. Before unscrupulous surgeons got ahold of her, Chelsie actually looked a little like...

*Me.* The realization gave Abby a jolt.

Oblivious, Preslie continued to narrate for the next several pages, pointing out various trips her parents had taken, and the fact that they had two weddings—one in Las Vegas and the other in LA, because people got mad about not being invited to the first one. Abby pretended to give each detail her full attention, but she was far more interested in the evolution of Chelsie's face. She seemed to resemble herself less and less with every passing page, and the transformation was both fascinating and a little scary. This, she supposed, must've coincided with her rise to the sort of stardom that was obviously much more important to her than raising a child.

"So, yeah, that's my mommy," Preslie concluded, closing the album. "She's really, really pretty, right? I hope I look like her when I grow up."

Her sweet, if wistful, innocence stirred something deep inside, and Abby placed an arm around her. "Oh, honey, I'm sure you'll be beautiful. You already are."

Preslie leaned into her for a second, nestling her head against her chest, and then she leaped back to her feet. "So, do you want to see the rest of my dolls?"

Abby stood too, smiling. "You bet I do."



If Dean didn't know any better, he'd swear Abby had been taking kids to Jump Town all her life. None of the frenzy or the screaming or the fighting or the three separate waivers that had to be filled out for each person seemed to faze her a bit, and she had the time of her life out there. She actually seemed more disappointed than the kids when he finally had enough at half past four. Under normal circumstances, he probably could have stayed until closing, but he still hadn't fully recovered from last night—and neither had Pres, despite her assertions to the contrary.

The same little girl who, like the overgrown child who'd spawned her, could bounce for hours on end without breaking a sweat, couldn't handle more than twenty minutes at a time today. After multiple breaks, she finally admitted that she was feeling a little sick, but she still cried and protested when he suggested they try this again another day. Her idea of a compromise was asking if they could hang out in the foam pit instead—an attraction aimed at a much younger demographic, and one she'd never expressed much interest in before, but a far less wobbly and far more enjoyable experience for both of them.

This left Abby to keep up with Mason, which was a daunting task for a blood relative, much less a stranger he'd just met an hour ago. Still, she handled it with appreciable panache, offering patient responses to all eight billion of his questions and indulging his steadfast insistence that Spiderman could beat Superman in a fight. Dean really didn't know why he was surprised. Teachers were supposed to be good with kids—it was, after all, kind of a job requirement—but somehow, he never expected her to be *that* good. He thought she would balk at the mention of trampolines. He thought she'd be peeved when he added a second kid she didn't know to the mix. He thought she'd run screaming the whole way back to The Heights when faced with the prospect of tending to that strange, inquisitive, opinionated, mildly aggressive dynamo of a second kid. But she didn't, and that could only mean one of two things: that girl was either a masochist or a keeper. To be honest, he wasn't ruling either of them out.

Just after he dropped Mason off, the heat of the day gave way to an

unexpected thunderstorm that, coupled with rush hour traffic, turned what normally would've been a thirty-minute drive back home into an hour-long ordeal...and Pres wailed with terror the whole way there. Abby handled that pretty well, too, turning in her seat to offer the comfort he couldn't from behind the wheel and trying to distract her with silly stories. It might not have made much difference overall, but the fact that she cared enough to try went a long way in settling the “masochist or keeper” debate he'd been having with himself all afternoon.

In relationships, it had always been paramount that he find someone who wouldn't just be cool with Pres, but would also accept his life the way it was, because he was way too old and set in his ways to change it. Not that he'd done much dating—he'd had a total of three relationships in as many years, and none of them made it past the nine-month point. Logistics killed the first one...well, that and the sobering realization that they were both on the rebound and were ruining a solid, satisfying friendship with sex. The second fell victim to bad timing. It might've worked if he hadn't wrecked his bike, but once he did and they stopped seeing so much of each other, the fire went out pretty quick.

The third lasted the longest and seemed the most promising, but it also had the most traumatic ending. Despite months of insistence that she'd never seen the show and had no idea who Dalton Giles was, Maria had been fangirling it up online since 2015. That one had hurt. He'd liked her a lot. She was super cool, and got along really well with Pres, but once he found out that she didn't just know about his minuscule degree of celebrity, she had *lied* about knowing, he couldn't get it out of his head. It begged so many questions, like what else was she lying about? Had anything she'd said been true? Was she in this for him—Dean Altman—or did she just want the bragging rights of screwing Dalton Giles? What had she been saying about him on the internet?

Even today, the whole thing made him nauseous. It was hard enough to open yourself up and get to know someone when your face—and the whole rest of you, in various stages of undress—hadn't been beamed into thousands of homes every day. When it had, it was damned near impossible to let your guard down, because you never knew what to expect from anybody, even if they liked to think they knew what to expect from you.

It had been almost a year since his three-day panic attack over sharing

such intimate, sacred parts of himself and his life—his *real* life—with a fangirl, and in that time, Dean had all but given up on meeting anyone else. It was way more trouble than it was worth to get involved with somebody, and he didn't have the time for it, anyway. Until this whole play thing came along, he was working from seven to seven, and the whole rest of his time went to Pres, because she needed him way more than any grown woman ever could. It was a super chill, if monotonous, existence, but he convinced himself he liked it that way...and then he'd met her.

No woman had ever confounded him the way Abby did. Just figuring out where she was coming from could take all night, but now that the pendulum had swung back into a more favorable position, he'd have to be insane not to take advantage. Yeah, so the mood swings could be a bit frustrating, and there was still so much they didn't know about each other, but Abby checked off both his most important, non-negotiable boxes, and at this point, that was all he needed to know.

Not only was she cool with Pres, and apparently any other random child he could find to throw at her, but she seemed just as happy with cups of noodles on the floor as she did in fancier settings. This meant a whole lot more than she realized, and so did the other pluses in her column. They didn't live sixteen hundred miles away from each other, they weren't friends and neither one of them was on the rebound, so there was no danger of ruining a good thing. If she intended to bail when he was no longer at his best, she would have hung up on him last night, so it was safe to assume she wasn't the type. And the best part? After what he'd caught her saying to Val, he knew beyond the shadow of a doubt that she was no fan of Dalton Giles. He'd have to be crazy not to jump on this.

So, when he stopped at the convenience store to get Pres the slushie he'd promised for being so brave, he picked up a little something for himself, which he hoped to put to good use later. It might've been a bit presumptuous—especially given that he had no idea whether or not Abby was going to freak out and leave again—but he figured that it never hurt to be prepared, at any rate.

Dean had hoped the storm would pass as quick as it set in, but it only grew worse over the course of the evening. The power went out half an hour after they got home, and once that happened, any hope of keeping Pres calm went right out the window. Terrified, she huddled in his lap with her face

buried in his shoulder, and no fewer than four stuffed animals wedged between them. He tried everything he could think of to keep her distracted, from rocking her, to singing to her, to telling funny stories in goofy voices—and, as though she hadn't done enough to prove that she was not, in fact, a masochist, Abby gamely stepped in to help when he ran out of ideas.

She was the one who suggested the blanket fort—and, since there was safety in numbers, it wasn't long before all three of them were crammed inside. She even tracked down Pumpkin and lured him in there, too, which was further testament to the magic she exuded. Once the entire family had assembled, she pulled yet another rabbit out of her hat with an impressive, impromptu floor show.

Luckily for everyone involved, she was a much better singer than he was—and her repertoire of songs was far more appropriate for a seven-year-old's ears—but her charming renditions of classic showtunes were just the tip of the iceberg. She also showed off an arsenal of foreign accents, put on an unbelievable comedy routine, told story after story after pleasant, heartwarming story, and even staged a dance-off for the stuffed animals. In just over half an hour, Abby made the storm outside a distant memory, and it was hard to say whether he or Pres was more spellbound. Maybe him. Probably. No, definitely. Him.

It was a damn good thing that Pres hadn't let go of him once throughout the evening's entertainment, because if she had, he wasn't certain he would've been able to contain himself. After Monday's little tease, sharing such a dark, intimate space with Abby was enough to drive him wild all by itself, but when she went full on Barbra Streisand/Jerry Lewis/that storyteller lady from the library, all in the name of soothing his kid—holy *shit*, he'd never wanted anybody more.

Once the power was back on, and Pres was tucked away in bed, Dean worried Abby would find reason to leave, so he pulled out all the stops to keep her there. He made her coffee, asked her to retell the audition story he had checked out of last night, told a couple of his own and even pretended not to know about the two weeks' worth of shows the playhouse just added, so she would have the pleasure of breaking the news. By that time, it was almost nine, and much like when Pres was sobbing into his shoulder, he was completely out of ideas. It was pure happenstance that led him to glance toward the kitchen and notice the leftover cake from last night, but he was

pretty glad he did. She'd grown noticeably more fidgety and restless over the course of the night, and though that might've been because of the coffee, he still half-way expected her to spring for the door any second.

Thankfully, she agreed to join him for a little late-night decadence on the couch, and the fact that their proximity to one another grew more with every bite didn't appear to be lost on either of them. After a while, it was almost comical. Eat, turn, eat, shift, eat, scoot. At this rate, they'd be on top of each other by the time they finished their respective slices—damn, maybe chocolate really was an aphrodisiac.

"It's not bad," she noted, edging closer.

He followed suit. "Right? It's actually not. I was a little afraid of it at first, because Val kind of weirds me out—"

Abby erupted into hearty, robust laughter before he could finish his sentence. "Oh, she's harmless! She's got it really bad for you, but she's harmless. Nate is the one you have to look out for. I saw him spit in someone's coffee once."

"Nate? The set guy? *Wom*. I'm glad he barely talks to me, then. That's crazy! He actually spit in someone's coffee?"

"Yes, but I don't think he'd do that to you. I think he'd be way more likely to spit in someone else's coffee if they got too close to you. He's got it bad for you, too."

He snickered at that, taking another bite. "Name one person over there who doesn't have it bad for me."

She appeared to take the challenge seriously, thinking on it as she moved another inch closer. "Okay, you got me. I can't think of anybody except for maybe Tony."

The fact she didn't name herself brought a smile to his face, and he shifted more in her direction. "Yeah, that's kind of what I thought."

A brief silence fell over the room before she cleared her throat. "Well, it sounds like the rain stopped."

Until that moment, he honestly hadn't noticed. "I think it did. Finally. I've started hating thunderstorms just as much as Pres, because of what they do to her."

"I'd feel the same way. Poor baby."

"Yeah, it really freaks her out. She got traumatized by a storm really bad when she was little. I have no idea how she remembers this, but we were

camping with a buddy of mine, and it just started storming out of nowhere—and this was in So. Cal., and that never happens there, so it was crazy. One of the trees got struck by lightning and it was *so loud*. It sounded like a bomb went off, and I did the one thing you're never supposed to do: I flipped out in front of my kid." He paused, shaking his head at the memory. "We all did, and we pretty much scarred her for life. She's hated storms ever since."

"Poor baby," Abby said again, one hand placed over her heart. She took a moment to adjust, positioning herself just a teensy bit closer to him before speaking again. "I hate that for her. She gets so, so upset."

"Yeah, she's convinced she's going to get struck by lightning now—which, I mean, I guess that's kind of a valid fear, but she's a little obsessed with it. Every time it thunders, she flips out. The only time she feels safe is when she's with me. I guess, in her mind, I don't conduct electricity? I don't know."

"Of course you don't! You're Super Dad!"

"Well, I try, but *you*—you really showed me up tonight. You were so good with her. Really, really, really good with her." Dean emphasized each *really* carefully and genuinely. "I mean it. You were awesome."

"Well, thank you. I have lots of experience keeping kids occupied, believe me." She paused, shoulders slumping for a second or two. "I just hope I didn't overstep. I didn't even think about it. I just jumped in, and I know that wasn't my place, so I'm sorry—"

He refused to let her go any further. "Never apologize for being good to my kid. Ever. You were awesome. You were...*amazing*."

"I just don't want to cross any boundaries. I know she doesn't know me very well."

"She knows you well enough to know that you're amazing." Setting his plate aside, he paused for a beat. "And so do I."

She leaned in to close the tiny gap that remained between them. "Ditto."

Dean intended for the moment to be sweet and tender, like one of those cute romance movies on cable, but the moment his lips met hers, something decidedly more feral unfolded. All the desire he'd kept carefully restrained since Monday night came roaring back to the forefront—and to his relief, Abby didn't make a break for it this time. She gladly returned his interest with the same aggressive ferocity she'd displayed on the deck: she kissed him hard and deep, hands darting inside his shirt to explore every square inch of his

torso, then gradually venturing lower as the situation progressed. They were in the waistband of his shorts before long, fumbling with the button, then the zipper, and then slipping past the elastic of his boxers. He responded in kind, unhooking her bra through the cool, gauzy fabric of her blouse.

She reclined onto the couch, and pulled him down over her, a position that allowed her much easier access to his shaft. Every electrical impulse in his body went haywire as her hand enclosed around it, and it took conscious effort not to have a go at her right then and there. He tore himself away from her silky porcelain neck with great reluctance, raising up. "Wait, wait. Not here. If she comes down..."

"Oh, yes. Right. Of course."

Holding his shorts in place with one hand, Dean used the other to lead her toward the stairs. She locked her fingers into his, holding on so tight during the climb that he was surprised his hand didn't turn colors, but neither said another word until they were safely locked away from innocent eyes.

"We're gonna have to be...cool," he cautioned, taking hold of the package of condoms that had been burning a hole in his pocket all night. "She hears everything."

She nodded a quick agreement, then lunged at him with the brute force of a puma. Within seconds, the clothes went flying, passion hitting almost seismic levels as they inched across a threshold that would've been unimaginable just a week ago. Abby wasn't going anywhere tonight, or any other night, for that matter. This was it. She was his.



The room was pitch black and silent when Abby awoke, sweating profusely under a heavy, plush blanket. Instinctively, she groped for the nightstand to turn on her fan, but just as her hand poked out from under the covers, she remembered. There wasn't a fan, or even a nightstand, there. She wasn't at home in her bed. She was in Dean's home, in his bed...but strangely, he was no longer beside her.

Rolling over, she pushed the blanket to the vacant side of the mattress. Where had he gone? She would've heard him if he was in the adjoining bathroom, so that couldn't be it. Was he downstairs? With Preslie? Outside? Did he just not want to sleep beside her? Was this some subtle sign of regret?

Abby frowned, positioning her nude form as comfortably and modestly as possible. Damn it, she was overthinking things again. She had to stop that. The likelihood was there was a perfectly rational explanation for all of this. Maybe he woke up hungry and decided to have some more cake. Maybe Preslie got sick again and he was tending to her down the hall. Maybe he always woke up at this odd, incognizant time of morning, and didn't see fit to wake her, because he didn't owe her an explanation.

Whichever the case, it wasn't a slight, or anything that might've resembled one, and she needed to stop expecting the worst of him all the time. It wasn't as though he hadn't gone out of his way to prove himself. The brain dead, egotistical, talentless douche she'd envisioned when Wendy first sent her his

photo was a figment of her imagination, an amalgam of the worst parts of an industry she'd tried, and failed, to make a name in. It was her jealous, petty resentment of his successes that convinced her he'd look down on her failures, and it took a while for her to let down her defenses. He'd gotten through, though—he was pretty good at that. Among other things.

She had never, in her life, experienced passion quite like last night. All she could say was thank goodness Dean had the foresight to buy a six-pack of condoms, because they couldn't get enough of each other! They went three full, hearty rounds in total, in every imaginable position, with loads of steamy foreplay in between and if she was honest with herself, she most wanted him to come back to bed so they could kick-start round four.

The performance he gave in the bedroom was just as capable and conscientious as the one he gave on stage, but a hell of a lot more exciting. She'd never been with anyone more focused on pleasing her—all her other partners took a “me first” stance and were far more interested in their own gratification—but he took great care to meet her needs, and genuinely seemed to enjoy it, too. The climaxes that resulted were so intense that she'd had to bite into her lip to keep from screaming, and so satisfying that after round three, she was too depleted to move and collapsed on top of him. He was still rock hard at first and stayed that way deep inside of her until he fell asleep stroking her hair.

Despite her exhaustion, it took a while for her to follow suit. She just couldn't bring herself to disconnect from him, and continued to lie in his embrace long after gravity severed their most intimate tie. She knew that once she moved, the night would be over, so she stayed put for as long as possible, determined to commit the entire experience to memory, lest they never pass this way again.

Not that she wanted this to be a one night stand. She wanted, and expected, it to hold far more significance than that for the both of them...but it was hard to overcome years and years of conditioning that stated otherwise. Ever the fount of wisdom, Mom had always warned that girls had to be especially cautious with intimacy. Sex was not a first date thing, she'd said. It wasn't even a second or third date thing. You had to build up to it, with little bits ladled here and there, just enough to keep them interested, but not enough to overplay your hand. After all, guys tended to like a challenge. If you gave it up too soon, there was nothing left for them to strive for, and they

would move onto something else. It was the same reason no one climbed the same mountain twice. Once they'd been there and done that, the thrill was gone.

More than anything, she wanted Mom to be wrong about this one, because the idea of never spending another night with him was unbearable. It wasn't even about the sex itself—though that was, indeed, glorious—it was about the profound peace and fulfillment she found in his arms. He made her feel so safe. So comfortable. So wanted. So complete. So *loved*. She'd never experienced anything like it before with anyone, and up until that moment, she hadn't been certain it was possible. Dean thrived on making the impossible possible, though, and he'd been proving her wrong since the moment they met. A model who could actually act. A celebrity who didn't carry himself like one. A dad who gladly stepped up to raise his little girl when her mother jumped ship. A chiseled Adonis who wasn't stuck on himself, and managed to see something beautiful and desirable in *her*, of all people. He was almost too good to be true.

Abby stayed on top of him for more than an hour, listening to his heartbeat and the variety of strange, amusing noises he made in his sleep, until the warmth of their bodies pressed together became too uncomfortable and she retreated to the other side of the mattress. She couldn't remember the last time she'd slept so soundly, or had racier dreams, and considered it a shame she woke up alone. It would've been nice to lie with him for a little while longer, even if that was all it amounted to. That was gratifying enough on its own, and though it was tempting to blame the crazed, sex-fueled endorphins for the way it made her feel, she had a sinking suspicion it went much deeper than that. No matter how vehemently she tried to suppress, ignore, and convince herself it was all in her head, the truth of the matter was plain to see. She was falling for him. *Hard*.

Eventually, she was going to have to analyze this. Eventually, she'd need to take a long, hard look at the situation, and determine whether their sizzling attraction and growing fondness for one another were sustainable in the long run, because she didn't want any surprises down the road. Not now, though. Now she just wanted to sleep. With him, and with any luck, he'd see himself back to bed by the time she woke up again.

Abby was bundled on her side, in the middle of another kinky dream, when she felt a coarse hand on her shoulder. She smiled as she opened her

eyes, but that smile quickly faded when she found the sun was rising...and Dean, perched on the edge of the mattress, was already dressed to go to work. So much for more cuddle time.

“Morning, sunshine,” he greeted with that gorgeous dimpled grin. “I made you some coffee.”

“Coffee in bed?” she purred, stretching. “You’re gonna spoil me.”

“Hey, it’s the least I could do. I really hate waking you up, but it’s a little after six, and you’ll probably wanna go home and get changed before work.”

“Oh, I think I’m gonna call in again today.” Actually, there was no *thinking* about it. She was definitely calling in, because there was no way she could face a classroom full of young, impressionable minds when her own was so deeply entrenched in the gutter. Good grief, even in nondescript, unflattering coveralls, that man was sexy as hell!

He shook his head almost wistfully. “That sounds awesome.”

“Doesn’t it? You could call in, too, you know. And we could just make a day of it, right here.” The moment the suggestion passed her lips, Abby regretted it. Not only was that way too forward, even after last night, it was so damned *needy*, too. And *clingy*. And everything Mom and the editors of *Cosmopolitan* had spent years telling her *not* to be!

Dean answered before she could think of a way to backpedal. “Oh, man, I’d love to, but I can’t. My dad would kill me. He didn’t even want to let me take off yesterday. It wasn’t until he found out I wanted to stay home with Pres that he was okay with it. That’s the key to his heart, right there.”

She sat up, bunching the blanket around her chest to conceal both her raised nipples and the blush that had taken over her entire body. “As it should be.”

He waited for her to get situated before handing over a steaming mug of clarity. She received it with a nod. Cool. They had to be *cool* about this, just like he said last night. Of course, he’d meant that in a completely different context, but it was still solid advice.

The fact they slept together didn’t mean they were a couple. It didn’t mean they were in love. It didn’t even mean they were dating. It just meant they’d slept together—and even that was somewhat dubious, because as far as Abby knew, she’d spent most of the night alone. They had sex. Tons of ardent, electrifying, dynamic sex. And hell yes, she was dying for an encore (an entire lifetime of them, to be more precise), but now more than ever, she

had to keep her wits about her. She couldn't rush into anything—that was a great way to get her heart broken again, so she needed to take it slow this time. Slow and steady, because this wasn't a race. There was no need to go all gooey just yet. There'd be plenty of time for that later, when things were at a more serious point. When he'd proven that he wasn't like Jake, Kevin, Jarrod, or any of the other assholes she'd been involved with. When she knew for a fact that he wasn't just using her...

Her inner monologue ground to a halt when Dean leaned in to kiss her. It wasn't a long, gum commercial type of kiss, but it wasn't a quick one, either. It was just the right length, with just the right mix of passion and tenderness to remind her, once again, that she had to stop expecting the worst of him all the time.

"Mmm," he grunted, pulling back. There was a wide, satisfied smile on his face. "I've been wanting to do that since two in the morning."

"Two? You've been up since *two*?"

"Off and on, yeah."

"Oh, my goodness." She extended the coffee back in his direction. "Here. Take it. You need it way more than I do."

"I probably will later, but for right now, I'm good. I've already had, like, four of them, so I am *good*." To prove his point, he leaped off the bed with such vigor that she almost lost her grip on the coffee.

To avoid another mishap, she set the mug on the nightstand. "Do you always wake up that early?"

"When the power goes out, yeah. Pres can't sleep without her nightlights."

No wonder she woke up so hot. "Oh, no!"

"Yeah, she was freaking out, and I forgot I locked the door, so she was *really* freaking out because she couldn't get to me. I had to get up and find pants and I couldn't see anything and I almost fell over one of your shoes—it was a mess. If someone had been filming it, I'm pretty sure I'd be getting a check from *America's Stupidest Home Videos*, or whatever that show's called." He paused, chortling. "I'm surprised you slept through it, but you must've been pretty zonked out. You were snoring when I woke up."

Though mortified to hear that, Abby kept her response as light as possible. "Well, I guess that makes us even—you were snoring when I fell asleep."

He laughed even harder at that. “Man, I don’t know what you did to me last night, but I haven’t slept like that in years.”

“Oh, my God, me either.”

For a few seconds, neither spoke. All they did was stare at each other, eyes locked in a mutual expression of longing that went deeper than words. Dean was the first to look away. “Well, I need to go check on Pres, and you need to, uh...get dressed, I guess, so I’ll leave you to it. We usually head out around 6:45, so you have a little time if you want to, um...take a shower or whatever.”

“Sure,” she agreed with a nod. “Thanks.”

“You bet.”

He was halfway to the door when she remembered. “Oh, Dean, tonight. Are we rehearsing?”

“Oh, yeah, no. I can’t, sorry. My cousin’s getting married.”

Her eyebrows lifted in surprise. “On a Thursday?”

He turned back, shrugging. “Kind of a random day to do it, I know, but I think it’s the day they met. Margot knows way more about it than me, but I think I remember her telling me that. It’s got some sort of significance, but...yeah, I don’t know, but I blew off their rehearsal already, so I kind of have to go.”

“Oh, okay.” Abby did a terrible job masking her disappointment. “Well, have fun.”

“Oh, I will. If there’s anything my family knows how to do, it’s throw a party.”

“So, does that mean I should expect another late night drunkcall?”

He cast a shy smile to the floor. “Maybe. I’m gonna try to be good, though.”

*But you’re so much better when you’re bad.*

As much as she wanted to say it, she knew how unwise it would be, and stuck with a much safer reply. “Well, how about Friday? Is Friday okay?”

“Yeah, Friday’s great. I’m going fishing with my dad this weekend, though, so I have to get up at the crack of dawn on Saturday. He likes to get out there at six, but I don’t usually show up until about six-thirty. I don’t dig mornings, but...I mean, if you don’t mind waking up that early on a Saturday, then yeah, Friday’s great. Do you mind waking up that early on a Saturday?”

Her eyes narrowed, head cocked to the side. Obviously, they weren’t

talking about just rehearsal anymore. “No,” she croaked out. “No, I don’t mind at all.”

“Right on. I’ll be looking forward to it.”

“Me too.”

She’d never meant anything more.



Hannah’s wedding reception, like every Altman/Felder/Levitt reception in recent memory, was a raucous, expensive affair complete with a live (and very loud) band, a wide variety of catered cuisine, awkward reunions with relatives Dean only ever saw on such occasions and, of course, an open bar. Any other day, he might’ve considered it a boon, a perfect complement for all the other milestones he’d celebrated this week, but exhaustion significantly hampered the experience, turning what should’ve been an enjoyable occasion into something more closely resembling torture.

He would have left an hour ago if Pres hadn’t been having such a good time. She came alive at events like this, and relished the opportunity to charm a wider audience and romp, in formal wear, with all the cousins she hadn’t seen in months. Every time he looked up, she was somewhere else, with someone else, a fact that would’ve been concerning if the room hadn’t been full of intoxicated grandparents and a horde of former Marines, none of whom took kindly to inappropriate shenanigans. Still, he made sure to never lose sight of her for long, stealing glances between texts from his seat far away from the band.

The problem was, it wasn’t far enough. The parking lot probably wouldn’t have been far enough, because every single note they played felt like an icepick to the base of his skull—though at this point, Dean had to admit the icepick would’ve been preferable to their shrill, off-key rendering of “Dream On”. Was anyone actually enjoying this?

Margot wasn’t, at any rate. She made a face as she lumbered toward him, carrying her shoes in one hand and half a cocktail in the other. “They’re killing it—and I don’t mean that in a good way.”

“Yeah.” He drew the word out as long as humanly possible. “I feel like I’m hungover and I didn’t even drink last night, so this is a little...much.”

Casting her shoes to the floor, she helped herself to the chair beside him. “I bet.”

She said something else—a few more things, he was sure—but they got lost somewhere between the vocalist’s ear-splitting falsetto and Abby’s latest text, and though the bulk of his attention was occupied with tapping a reply, he still made a point to offer a vacant nod.

Margot’s expression had changed by the time he looked up. She was almost glaring at him now, eyes narrow with scrutiny. “Dino.”

“Sup?”

“Who is she?”

He took another quick inventory of the room in search of the stranger. “There are about five thousand *shes* in this room. I don’t know which one you mean. Who is who?”

“Oh, don’t you dare! I’m not blind, you know—and neither is anybody else. We all know you’ve been over here smiling at your phone all night long, and we’ve all got questions, but since everyone else is too drunk to ask: who is she? And before you deny it, you should know Mason already told me about your little date to Jump Town.”

Oh, *that* she.

Dean frowned, reaching for the Manhattan he’d been nursing all night. “Well, that sucks. I paid rather handsomely for his silence.”

She threw back her head in laughter. “Sucker! You oughtta know he tells Mama everything.”

“Hmm, well, yes. The apple really doesn’t fall all that far, does it?”

Her response was a defiant middle finger. So much for not being drunk. “Okay, out with it. Who is she? I want to know everything. Name, rank, serial number, everything.”

“Do we really have to do this right now?”

“Well, I’ll put it to you this way: you can either do this with me or you can do it with Mom—but I guarantee you, Mom’s gonna be ten times worse.”

Somehow, he didn’t doubt that. “I’d rather not do it with either of you.”

“And I would rather not see you get entangled with another garbage pail of a human being, so I’ve got questions. Who is she?”

Leaning back in his chair, he let out a loud, defeated sigh. “Okay, okay, okay. Her name is Abby.”

“And you know her how?”

“Um...work.”

The corners of Margot’s mouth turned sharply downward as she digested that. “And there’s strike one. How long have you known her?”

“Um...well...” Unwilling to admit it had been a total of two weeks tomorrow, Dean polished off his drink with a long, potent gulp.

“And strike two,” she announced, while he winced. “I won’t ask if she knows about Preslie. Obviously, she does—I’m pretty sure you didn’t leave her at home yesterday, anyway—but does she know you’re not just Fun Jump Town Dad? Does she know you’re All the Time Dad?”

“Yeah,” he managed, once his throat had stopped burning. “Yeah, of course.”

“And how does she feel about that?”

“Well, I mean, I haven’t really asked her, but they seem to get along fine.”

To his relief, she nodded her approval. “Okay, good. Does Preslie know?”

“Well, she doesn’t know I slept with her, but—”

“You *slept* with her!” Margot erupted, limbs heaving with surprise—at least, that was the only reasonable explanation he could figure for why half her drink ended up on the table and the rest splashed onto his suit. “I knew it. That stupid little grin on your face—I knew it! Ken gets that same look every time—oh, I just *knew* it!”

And, thanks to her flagrant lack of discretion, everyone else did, too. Awesome.

He shook his head, searching the immediate area for something to mop up the mess. “Do you think you could say that a little louder? They might not have heard you in the lobby.”

“Sorry.” She frowned again, retrieving a discarded cloth napkin from the next table. “But I’m pretty sure they can’t hear me over that shitty band, anyway—and even if they could, they’re all drunk. It’s not like they’re gonna remember this tomorrow.”

“Not helping.”

“I’m sorry. Here, I’ve got it.” She stood, blotting at his lapel and then the table, before snapping her head toward him. “Wait a minute. *Abby*? Oh, good Lord, no. Not the battle-axe. Please tell me you are not sleeping with the battle-axe!”

Jaw clenched, he took in a quick, shallow breath. “She’s not a battle-axe.”

“Are we talking about a different Abby, then? Not the battle-axe? Not the

nobody who was judging you and thought you sucked, right? Different Abby?” From the look on her face, Dean could tell Margot was willing him to say yes.

He shifted his gaze to the table. “Okay, so we got off to a rough start. It happens.”

“Rough start? Dino, you quit the play over her!”

“Well, yeah. I mean...kind of.”

“There was no *kind of* about it! Jeez Louise, *really?* What is wrong with you?”

“If I knew, I’d tell you.” He meant it.

She took in several breaths, nostrils flaring. “You know, when I said, ‘screw her,’ this is not what I had in mind! Good Lord...I need a cigarette after all of this. Come on.”

After taking a moment to verify Pres was safe in the capable company of Aunt Pat, he followed his sister outside. “I think I’ll pass, but if you wanted to blow some of that smoke in my face, that would be great.”

Margot pulled a pack of feminine slims from her clutch. “One’s not going to kill you. I might, but this won’t. Oh, my God, the battle-axe. I can’t believe you’re sleeping with the battle-axe.”

“I really wish you’d quit calling her that.”

“And I really wish you would quit jumping into relationships with chicks you barely know, but here we are.” She lit up, shaking the pack in his direction until he caved to the pressure.

“See, this is why I don’t tell you things.”

“Oh, like I wasn’t gonna find out about it, anyway! You tell on yourself—you always have. You could never play poker, you know.”

“Yeah, so you keep telling me.” Too tired to remain standing, Dean slid into a squat along the exterior wall of the hotel. “And I don’t jump into relationships with chicks I barely know, by the way.”

Gathering the hem of her dress in one hand, Margot took a similar position next to him. “Oh, yes, you friggin’ do. Remember Kim?”

“I’d known Kim for six months before we ever even kissed.”

“And then you moved to Cincinnati with her two months later. How’d that work out for you? Oh, and what about Courtney?”

“That doesn’t count,” he scoffed, flicking ashes onto the pavement. “That wasn’t a relationship. That was just sex.”

“Okay, well, then—and I hate going there, but—Chelsie.”

Yikes, she had him there. “Okay, *that* was a mistake.”

“You’re telling me! You went from ‘I met this amazing girl’ to ‘hey, guess what? I got married last night’ in six months—and you didn’t even tell anybody you were gonna do it! You just took off to Vegas and called everybody *after*—”

“You’re never gonna let that go, are you?”

“No, I’m not.” Margot’s voice faltered, just a bit. “That really hurt me, Dino. It hurt a lot of people—mainly you, because then you had to actually live with her all those years.”

“You know, the first few weren’t so bad. I mean, we fought a lot, but...” He paused, absently puffing on his cigarette. “It was okay until she booked *Playmate*. Once that happened, and things started taking off for her, everything went to hell, but before that...it was okay. Not perfect, but okay.”

“That girl was all wrong for you way before that happened, and you know it. She was the complete opposite of you! She always wanted to party and drink and get attention and—Dino, she did drugs!”

“No, she didn’t!”

“I literally saw her snorting coke when we were at that club in Venice Beach!”

“Oh, yeah, I forgot about that. Yeah, okay, that wasn’t cool, but she didn’t do it all the time. That was just some weird, freak, peer pressure sort of thing.”

Margot’s whole body seemed to stiffen as she shot him an incredulous glare. “Why are you still defending her? She left you for a *porn star*, for fuck’s—”

He spoke over her harsh, painful reminder. “Because she’s my daughter’s mom.”

“She might have given birth to your daughter, but she has never been her mom! She has no idea what that word even means!”

“Can we just not go there, okay?” Dean shifted his eyes to the pavement, shuddering in a heavy breath. “This isn’t about Chels, anyway, so I don’t know why it matters.”

“It matters because she hurt you.” She reached for his hand, squeezing it tight. “She nearly ruined you, and I don’t want to see anything like that ever happen to you or Preslie again. And I’m sorry if I’m dredging up bad

memories. That's the last thing I want to do. It's just...Dino, I worry about you so much. I worry about Preslie, too. She wants a mama more than anything, and she deserves one—a good one, and I want her to have that just as much as you do, but it has to be the right one. Anything else is going to break her heart all over again. Kristen did. Natalie did. *Maria*, that lying famehag—”

“I know,” he interrupted with a solemn nod.

“No, I don't think you do, because here you go again.”

“Oh, come on, that's not fair. It's been a whole year since *Maria*. You make it sound like I'm just hopping from chick to chick or something.”

“No, that's not what I mean at all. What I mean is, you move fast, and you know it. When you love, you love deep and hard and *fast*, and that's fine with the right person. The problem is, it's never the right person. Every last one of your relationships has gone from zero to sixty right away—and none of them have ever worked out, because you don't take your time to get to know them before jumping into something serious. I just don't want you to get hurt, and I don't want Pres to get hurt either, because the only thing I hate more than someone hurting you is someone hurting her.”

“I know, and I appreciate that, but I'm good. I've got this. Really.”

Margot stared at him for a moment, mouth open as though she intended to offer some snide retort, but she appeared to think better of it for once. Stubbing her cigarette out on the pavement, she wasted little time reaching for another. “Just be careful. I know that's not a word that's really in your vocabulary, but this time, promise me you'll think about this and you'll be careful and you won't rush into anything—because if that girl hurts you or Pres, I'm gonna kill her. You know that, right? I'm gonna friggin' kill her.”

“She's not gonna hurt us, I promise. She's cool. She wasn't at first, but she is now, and she's really great with Pres—you should see her. It's like...I don't even know how to describe it. There's something there that's really good, you know? It's really, really *good*. It didn't start off so great, I know. We weren't getting along the first couple of days—”

“That's an understatement.”

“Everything's cool now, though. We get each other.”

“As much as you can *get* a person after two weeks, you mean? Actually, not even two weeks, right? Jesus, Dino, I think you broke your own record with this one.”

He flicked his cigarette as far into the distance as it would go. “I know. It’s crazy, and I don’t understand it, either. If I did, I would tell you what the hell is going on, but I don’t. I don’t know. I just...I dig her. There’s something about her I’m just drawn to. I haven’t felt like that about somebody in...man, a while. And I don’t know what it is. I don’t know what changed. I’ve been up since two o’clock in the morning, and I’m way too tired to explain it to you, but—”

“You don’t have to explain it to me. You just have to be careful, okay? Please. I don’t have a good feeling about that girl, and the last thing you need is another Chelsie.”

“She’s not another Chelsie! She’s nothing like Chelsie! She’s really nice and chill and she’s not obsessed with fame or anything—just meet her. Can you at least meet her before you decide whether she’s a garbage pail of a human being or not?”

Margot appeared to take that as a challenge, eyes narrowing. “Oh, I’ll meet her. You can bet on *that*.”



The next three weeks felt more like three minutes. Dates and occasions zipped by in a veritable tornado, lost in the frenzy of preparing to open, then opening, then performing six shows a week. As a seasoned vet, Abby expected to handle the whirlwind a lot better than she had. It was Dean she was worried about—this was, after all, his first time, but aside from nervously fumbling through those first few live performances, he seemed to have adapted fairly well. She was the one tied in knots, plagued with intermittent insomnia and waiting for the other proverbial shoe to drop. Things were going entirely too well, and in her experience, that never lasted very long.

Of course, it was beyond gratifying to see the play's success, especially given how hard she'd had to push and lobby to even get it on McMillan's stage in the first place. When she presented the first draft to the creative department for consideration, she'd expected them to be hesitant—it was, after all, miles darker than the material they normally produced—but she never thought they'd reject it so soundly. Debbie, in particular, took great issue with the play's original ending, a gritty gut-punch that saw Alex's demons get the better of him just as Bernadette realized they were meant to be together. Love stories, she insisted, could never end in tragedy. Obviously, she'd never seen *Romeo and Juliet*. Or *West Side Story*. Or *Titanic*.

The rest of the creative department backed her up. Love stories on *their* stage could not end in tragedy, so if Abby wanted them to produce this play,

she had little choice but to rewrite it. What a maddening time. She barely slept at all that entire month. Between work and her performances in a different production, she was stretched so thin, it was a wonder she could string two words together, but after much soul-searching, she reworked the ending—and some of the other darker elements they'd objected to—into something much more generic and palatable for the public.

Still, she knew they weren't exactly thrilled with the finished product. The look on Debbie's face opening night said it all: a steely mix of horror and revulsion that only brightened when Dean came into view. She was mad about him, and with good reason. His fame was netting her, and everyone else involved, an unprecedented amount of cash. The soap press was all over this, and that increased level of interest had added another two weeks' worth of shows to the total. They were even going virtual for the first time—as in, tonight's show was being simulcast to a premium Streamline feed, to accommodate the *AON* fans who might not have been able to make the trip. Abby's understanding of how that worked was limited, at best, but from the way Ray made it sound, the virtual aspect of it meant there was no limit to how many tickets they could sell. They projected that one performance could out-gross their last two productions combined, and they had Dalton Giles to thank for it.

Suffice to say, he was all but considered royalty around the playhouse and though some (namely, Val) had expressed concern that might go straight to his head, he'd remained the same refreshingly modest, approachable person he'd been since the moment he walked through the door. He still paid careful attention to all of Gina's notes. He still actively sought Abby's advice on how to improve. He was still willing to do whatever he had to do to bring the best possible performance to that stage, and night after night, he knocked it out of the park.

Dean's commitment to the role was absolute and unflinching, and it even rivaled her own. Unlike his sweet, sexy turn as Brandon, he brought a disturbed, vulnerable and almost menacing aura to Alex in both the way he delivered his lines and the physical changes he'd made to better suit the part. In his words, there was nothing *pretty* about a troubled, disabled vet, so he'd stopped shaving and fussing with his hair weeks ago—and the fact he understood that and was willing to downplay his hallmark dimples and stunning good looks to create a realistic character just made him more

attractive in her eyes. Then, she'd always had a thing for rugged types.

Despite her initial doubts, his talent was staggering. Once he got past his nerves and learned to ignore the audience, he came alive, delivering such an engrossing performance that sometimes she felt a little self-conscious about the quality of her own. That only pushed her to be better, though, to dig deeper and step further out onto the ledge with him. It was an adrenaline rush every night, but one she'd soon found herself addicted to. This was the reason she'd become an actress: for the thrill of moments like that, when they were so keyed in that Abby and Dean no longer existed. They were Bernadette and Alex, kicking and screaming their way back to one another's arms.

Fortunately, their relationship off-stage was nowhere near as contemptuous. It was, in fact, just as chill and uncomplicated as his low-key life on the beach. Some nights, they went out after the show. Other nights, they didn't. Sometimes, between weekend performances, they went back to her apartment to hang out and watch a movie. Other times, they went their separate ways. Some nights, when they were off, he would meet her for dinner with Preslie in tow. Sometimes, she'd make the long drive down to Galveston to spend the night in his bed. Other times, she'd stay home, and they'd talk on the phone or on Screentime until one, or both, of them fell asleep. Some nights, they made vigorous, passionate love. Other nights, they just slept, cocooned in the safety of one another's embrace. But every time they were together—every single time—Abby came away from the experience with a smile on her face. She was enjoying the hell out of this, whatever it was, and Dean was, too.

With every passing day, they seemed to grow a little closer, and a bit more familiar with one another. *Dino* had passed Abby's lips more and more over the past few weeks, and though it initially felt strange and overly forward to address him as such, he seemed to really like it when she did. In turn, he'd taken to effortlessly calling her *love*, which felt so much more genuine and personal than the *babe* prior boyfriends had saddled her with. It evoked the same warm affection as that night on his deck, when she realized he'd added Lady Gaga to his rotation of Songspire playlists, not because he liked it—he didn't, she could tell from the grimace on his face—but because she did. It was a meaningful, admirable compromise, and her heart soared every time she thought about it.

But his devotion to Preslie was even sweeter. Having never had a father

of her own, Abby was always a little confused as to their actual role in the family—and when she tried asking a friend who came from a normal, two-parent household, she was met with little more than a quizzical stare. Now she had a much better idea. A father, at least, Dean as a father wore many hats: protector, playmate, alarm clock, chauffeur, maid, personal chef, finder of lost shoes, dolls and kittens, fount of inexhaustible patience and, of course, homework guru. He wasn't very good at fixing her hair, though. She'd taken over that duty on the mornings she was there, and treasured the one-on-one time in front of that mirror. Much like her daddy, Preslie was sweet natured and smart as a whip...and the tender vulnerability of her bear hugs never failed to stir Abby's heart.

As an added bonus, Preslie was also the only person in either of their immediate families to accept this burgeoning romance without quibble or complaint. Her mother had been the most vocal, followed closely by his sister, who'd added her rather unexpectedly on Friendzone and spent the next several nights peppering her with tough questions via chat. It must've been a twin thing. Abby had always heard that twins were uber close and protective of one another, so it stood to reason that Margot put her through her paces. She just wished it could've been in person, because it was beyond awkward to explain what was going on with Dean over text.

Not that it made much difference when she went over it verbally. Mom was still aghast, no matter how much she tried to play it down. Abby, in her estimation, had all but chucked the sacred tenets of courtship out the window in her "obstinate determination" to find a man. She tried to explain that she hadn't been looking for a man at all; she'd been perfectly happy single after her last disastrous relationship, but her attempt at reason fell on deaf ears. Mom had it in her head that if she continued to pursue this, she was going to end up heartbroken. It didn't matter how many times she tried to tell her that was impossible, because in order to get her heart broken, she would have to have invested it in the first place. They were just having fun, hanging out, getting to know each other. Neither had any real expectations at this point, and that was what made it so enjoyable. There was no pressure. They were just taking it one day at a time, a concept Mom couldn't seem to grasp for the life of her.

Thus, they didn't talk very much anymore. Every time they did, the conversation devolved into a fight, and Abby didn't have the energy for that

right now. There were too many other irons in the fire to waste her time on something that, in the end, meant very little, but if anything, her attempt to set some healthy boundaries had just strained relations with Mom further. Her texts got more dramatic and passive-aggressive, and she'd started to send them in six-minute intervals.

She usually started with a complaint like: *You're spending entirely too much time with that man! I'm starting to think you're obsessed with him!*

Then she'd go into some crazed hyperbole: *I've only seen you twice since this whole thing started! Every minute of every day is about HIM now! Are you ever even home anymore? This is starting to worry me! At this rate, you'll move in with him by the end of the month, and you barely even know this guy! Have you lost your mind?*

And, when none of that yielded a response, she would eventually move into guilt: *Well, I miss you. I hope you are doing well. I am so proud that your hard work has come together, and I wish you nothing but success. I just wish I could see more of you. I miss your pretty face, and I'm curious to meet that magnet of a man. I'd like to at least shake his hand before you run off and marry him or something, so please try to squeeze me in whenever you can spare a moment.*

Good grief. If Abby didn't know any better, she'd think Mom was jealous or something. After all, it had been quite a while since she'd had to compete for her attention—not that this was in any way a competition, and not that she was outright ignoring her mother or anything. Just keeping her distance for her own sanity and peace of mind. There was nothing wrong with that.

To avoid any unnecessary distractions, Abby left her phone in the car during the Saturday matinee. It took her hours to check it again, and it kind of felt freeing to forget it for a while. In that time, she was able to enjoy a late lunch with Dean and a bit of window shopping downtown. It was only when he checked in with Preslie that she remembered her phone, and was pleasantly surprised that Mom had not bothered to text her again. Perhaps she had gotten the message. It was either that or she'd paused to reload.

Whichever, she tucked her phone back into her bag and left it there when they went back to her apartment. While she busied herself with next week's lesson plans, Dean collapsed supine on her sofa and commandeered the remote. Two weeks ago, that might've seemed a bit presumptuous, but the fact he was now comfortable enough to help himself made her smile. The childlike excitement when he came across *The Mummy* on demand was downright adorable, as was his dismay when she admitted that she'd never

seen it before. He said that was inexcusable and called it “a classic”—a glowing endorsement made even more ironic by the fact he was snoring within ten minutes of the opening scene.

Abby couldn't help but laugh. Goodness. She'd never, in her life, known anyone who could fall asleep quite as fast as he could, and if she was honest with herself, she was a little jealous of that. She'd tossed and turned until three in the morning, and would've killed for a nap of her own, but alas, there was way too much to do to laze around. Those errands she'd been putting off all week would not run themselves, after all.

The movie was still on, and Dean was still snoring when she returned an hour later, with her dry cleaning and groceries for the week. It appeared Meryl had joined him on the couch in her absence, a development so unexpected that Abby had to bite her lip to keep from laughing out loud. How priceless! Leery of strangers, Meryl had avoided him like the plague until now—they'd both been convinced that she hated him!

Abby set the bags down by the door as quietly as possible and retrieved the phone from her purse. She had to get a picture of this—there was no way he'd ever believe it otherwise. Just as she opened the camera, however, a powerful, mind-boggling epiphany hit like an anvil from above: she was in love with that man.

She was in love with his patience. His compassion. His talent. His optimism. His charm. His integrity. His humor. His humility. His thoughtfulness. His warmth. His sincerity. His dimples. His strong, muscular arms. His deep, sexy voice. His kind, captivating eyes. She was in love with the attentive, conscientious way he listened to every single word she said, no matter how stupid or meaningless it might've been. The sweet, tender way he held Preslie when she was scared, upset, sick or simply overwhelmed. The humble, generous way he attributed all of his success on the stage to Abby's coaching, and the fact she'd created such a dynamic, intriguing character to begin with.

She was in love with that man—the one who threw pretzels to the seagulls when they joined him on the deck and thought their ability to catch them mid-air was the coolest thing he'd ever seen. The one who took great pride in admitting he used to play the drums, in full cosplay, for a Poison tribute band in Santa Monica. The one who got to see the world through his work as a model, but still chose to raise his daughter in the same beachside

community he'd grown up in. The one who expressed interest in mentoring her students, starting with Billy, and answering all the questions that he wished someone would've answered for him when he was first getting into the business. The one who passed out on her couch, ten minutes into the movie *he* wanted to watch, and slept so soundly that he failed to notice both her comings and goings and the seventeen-pound Himalayan cat stretched to full length across his chest.

It wasn't fair-game Brandon. It wasn't tortured Alex. It certainly wasn't the Adonic Dalton Giles. She wasn't in love with a fictional character or larger-than-life image. She was in love with an actual human being—the most beautiful one she'd ever known. She was in love with *Dino*, and that revelation brought tears to her eyes.

This wasn't some passing fancy or a casual fling. This was real. What they had was *real*.



Looking back on it, it probably hadn't been the best idea to take a nap. Not only did Dean wake up with a sore neck and stuffy nose, he was also in a complete fog afterwards, so dazed and useless that it took two cups of coffee to return to even a remedial level of functionality. If Abby had let him, he could've slept another sixteen hours, and that level of soul-crushing exhaustion could only mean one of two things: either he was coming down with something, or he was going to have to start going to bed earlier. *Man*, he really hoped it was the latter, because tonight was the worst possible night to get sick. He had to get it together, because in a little more than an hour, they were streaming live to an audience Ray estimated to be between five and seven thousand people. At that very moment, there were thousands of people scattered all over the country, gearing up to watch *him*—and the closer showtime drew, the more conscious he became of it.

The last time he felt this nervous, he was pacing outside a room full of stone-faced, high-powered network people, praying they'd be receptive to his imminent audition. Funny thing. He thought that once he'd powered through that, he could handle just about anything...and then he got to the studio. The

sheer volume of things he had to learn, virtually overnight, was intimidating enough to make him second guess his good fortune, and it took weeks to figure some of it out. Where to stand, which camera to look at and when, the importance of staying out of someone else's shot, how to interpret your own damned character and scene, because the director never had much to offer by way of notes or feedback unless you were doing something wrong, and, perhaps most importantly, remembering to listen for your name over the PA, because if they had to summon you twice, you would never hear the end of it.

All of that, on top of endless monologues, medical lingo he didn't understand the meaning of, but still had to say with authority, and trying to get comfortable being half naked on a wide open set more often than not. It was a wonder he'd made it at all, really—he swore he held his breath for the whole first thirteen weeks, prepared to find himself out of a job by the end of them. Still, as nerve-wracking as that might've been, the *AON* set had one major plus that McMillan's stage did not: a safety net.

If he stumbled over bilateral tension pneumothorax or thoracostomy with pleurodesis, he could get another crack at it. If he froze up and forgot what he was supposed to say, he could take a minute and refresh and try it again, and that was a luxury he never should've taken for granted. Now, the pressure was on—really on, and if he messed this up, it wasn't just the assembled audience who'd watch him make a fool of himself, it was thousands of people around the country, all of whom were paying fifty bucks a piece for the privilege.

By the time Abby came to check on him, Dean was on the verge of a panic attack. He almost didn't want to let her in, lest seeing him freak out make her think less of him or something, but just like that night a few weeks ago when the storm knocked out the power, she jumped in to help without hesitation. After locking the door, to keep the rest of the crew at bay, she spent the next half hour rubbing his shoulders, demonstrating several deep breathing techniques and even offering some generous praise that he wasn't entirely sure he believed, but still felt good to hear.

She went so far as to call him the best actor she'd ever worked with, and said that she believed in him, and so did everyone who'd be tuning in tonight—because they never would have shelled out that kind of money to watch if they didn't. He was certain she meant that to be encouraging, but if anything, the prospect of letting so many people down made him feel a little worse. Once she realized that, Abby changed track, advising him to ignore the

cameras and instead focus on her.

“Don’t look at them. Pretend they’re not there. You’re not supposed to be looking at them, anyway. You’re supposed to look at me. Remember, out there, it’s just you and me, having a conversation. Like every other night. It’s no different,” she reminded. “You can do this, I know you can. You’ve done it before, and you’ll do it again. I believe in you. I...love you.”

The weight her words carried was so powerful that in an instant, he’d forgotten all about his nerves. “You...what?”

Abby exhaled, leaning in to take his trembling hands in hers. “I love you—and it’s okay if you’re not ready to say that back to me. I don’t want to put any more pressure on you than there already is. I just want you to know, because it hit me today when I got home. Dino, I love you. You make me feel...gosh, I don’t even know how to explain it. I just...I’m in love with you.”

Stunned into silence, he flinched as though she’d just hit him with something—because in a way, she had. Not that it was weird or shocking to hear her say that. Conventional wisdom might’ve dictated that it was a bit soon to start throwing that word around, but it didn’t feel that way to him. It felt like a natural progression, something he’d sensed on the horizon for a while now but didn’t feel comfortable letting out.

Over the past three weeks, it had become fairly obvious that this was not one of *those* on-set entanglements. It would be laughable to suggest their attraction was based on convenience or proximity—they had to drive for more than an hour each way just to see each other! There was also no danger of confusing their true, authentic selves for the characters they played every night. Dean was convinced that you would be hard pressed to find any two actors who had less in common with their roles. Bernadette and Alex were a sad, quarrelsome pair, who seemed to hate each other just as fervidly as they claimed to love each other, and that was not the sort of relationship that any sane, stable person would ever want to emulate.

“You don’t have to say it,” she insisted again, squeezing his hand. “I don’t want you to feel forced into anything you’re not ready for.”

But he was ready. He’d been ready for a while now—even Pres had picked up on it, despite his best attempts to play it down. She’d cornered him about it the other morning on the way to school, asking, “You really like Abby, don’t you?”

Dean tried to be cagey at first, asking if *she* liked her, because that was more important, but after nonchalantly confirming that she did, Pres asked an even more pointed question: “Is she your girlfriend now?”

It was the first time he could ever recall that word coming out of her mouth. She’d never referred to Natalie or Kristen or Maria as such, just as his friends, and he wasn’t sure what helped her make the connection. Was he just more obvious now? Was she just more cognizant? Whichever the case, he was left with little choice but to admit it...sort of.

“She is if she wants to be,” he remembered saying—and from the looks of it, she did.

“I love you, too.” His words came out in half a breath, all smushed together, and they were followed by a gulp.

Abby’s eyes welled in response, threatening to mar the makeup she’d applied for the show, but before she could react any further, a knock came on the door. It was time.

Despite weeks of stern insistence that they keep things cool around here, lest they tip off the gossipy shrews they worked with, she made a point to lead him, by the hand, all the way to the curtain. That sudden, unexpected display of support and affection garnered a lot of attention backstage—the same sort of attention she said she wanted to avoid—but she paid their stares little mind, keeping her focus on him.

“You’re okay,” she assured. “You can do this. It’s just like any other night. You and me, having a conversation. You’re going to be just fine.”

And through some miracle, he was. He didn’t bolt or vomit when he caught sight of the cameras, though they threw him off a bit at first. It took a few minutes for him to start blocking them out, the same way he’d learned to block out the audience weeks ago, but once he did, everything fell into place. It wasn’t perfect, of course. There were a lot of things he probably could have done better—and would have, if his mind hadn’t kept wandering back to what just happened between himself and Abby—but it wasn’t as regrettable or embarrassing as it could’ve been, and for that, he was relieved.

So relieved, it would seem, that he momentarily forgot where they were when he grabbed her, swung her around in the air and kissed her like he’d never kissed anyone in his life. Backstage. In full view of Gina, Val, Tony and a horde of others whose names he’d be hard pressed to remember. If any of them reacted, he didn’t notice—then, at that moment, he didn’t care. The

only thing he cared about was her, and she seemed to share that singular focus.

“That was so good!” she enthused, leaning deep into his embrace with her arms and legs locked around him. “You kicked ass, Dino! I’m so proud of you!”

“I told you so!” Val crowed from behind them. There was a chuckle in her voice. “Pay up, sucker.”

At once conscious of their surroundings, and how many sets of eyes were on them, Dean set Abby down in a hurry. He expected she would be unnerved by the attention—especially Val’s extra-wide, Cheshire cat grin—but, if anything, she stood a little taller in the face of it. She turned her head sideways in Val’s direction, as though she were challenging her to say anything else about it. She didn’t.

After a few seconds of silence and a labored pleasantry or two, Abby turned on her heel and led the way back to the old storage closet that served as his makeshift dressing room. He followed with a smile on his face. “Wow, one day you’re gonna have to teach me how to do that.”

She slid off her heels at the door, changing back into the more practical slides she’d stashed by the couch. “Do what?”

“Silence an entire room with just one look.”

“It’s a gift,” she dismissed. “I come by it honestly—but really, the nerve of her.”

“Did that mean what I think it meant? Did she actually make a bet on whether or not we—”

“Of course she did, and it’s not the first time. That woman has no life, I swear.”

“Yeah, I kind of figured—but hey, look at it this way: at least I don’t have to worry about her flirting with me anymore. That’s one good thing, right?” With that, he moved in for a kiss that he’d hoped would both ease her mind and reinforce what they’d talked about earlier...but just as their lips met, a knock came on the door.

“Hey, D?” Tony, no doubt twenty bucks poorer than he’d been a few minutes ago, did not wait for an acknowledgement before walking in. “Is Abby with—oh, hey, there you are. Your mom’s here.”

A low expletive escaped her lips. “She’s...*what?*”

“Here,” a petite middle-aged woman affirmed as she strode into the

room. “Hi, sweetheart. You never answered me about coming tonight, so I figured...” Mid-sentence, she turned, angling to face him head-on. “Well, hello. You must be Dean. Jackie Devlin. It’s nice to finally put a face to the name. My daughter’s been going on about you for weeks. She’s taken quite a shine to you, you know.”

He met her handshake with a smile. “Yes ma’am, and I’ve taken quite a shine to your daughter.”

“So I hear.” A pale, diminutive woman with piercing green eyes and a shock of bright red hair, Jackie Devlin stared at him for an abnormally long time before finally letting go of his hand. “Weren’t you on *Hollywood Live*? Weekend guy, right? With Cassie O’Donnell. Dalton...*Miles*, is it?”

And...that was not what he expected her first question to be. “Giles—and yeah. Wow. I’m super impressed you remember that. That was a long time ago.”

“I don’t tend to forget faces like yours.”

The likelihood was, she meant that as a compliment—it sounded enough like one, anyhow...but the cold, detached inflection of her voice made him wonder. Still, he made sure to smile and nod. “Well, thank you. Would you like to, um, sit down? I can go get you a Coke or something if—”

“I’m fine, thank you,” she interrupted, taking hold of Abby’s hand as she moved toward the sofa. “So, Dean, tell me about yourself. My daughter tells me you had quite a career out in California. I remember seeing you on *Hollywood Live*, and Abby said you did a soap, too?”

“For a little while, yeah.”

The older woman pulled her daughter down beside her as she nodded. “Interesting. So, what brings you to this neck of the woods?”

“He’s from here,” Abby informed, with a slight falter in her voice.

“Really?” Jackie Devlin cocked an eyebrow in his direction as he came closer. “That’s funny. You don’t sound like it.”

Her observation was made all the more ironic by the fact that she didn’t sound much like the stereotypical Texan herself, but he still nodded. “Yes ma’am. I grew up in Galveston. Moved back about three years ago.”

“And your daughter lives with you.” It was a statement, rather than a question.

“Yes ma’am, she does.”

“But she’s not with you tonight.” Another statement.

“Uh, no. She’s with my mom.”

“And where’s her mother? I’m going to assume you’re divorced—as in, officially, legally divorced? None of this *separated* or *taking a break* business, right?”

Abby’s head snapped toward her, a glare of disapproval painted across her face, but before she could say anything, he forced out a reply. “Nope, none of that. We’ve been divorced for almost four years now.”

“And your ex-wife is...where, exactly?”

Dean stumbled closer, wedging his hands in his pockets as he debated the best possible response. Okay, so this line of questioning was getting really personal, really fast—and he thought *his* mom was going to go for the throat! “Wow, you know, that’s a really good question. I have no idea. I don’t really keep up with her.”

“What a shame. And I suppose you’re starting over now? Rebuilding? Getting back on the horse, or what have you?” There was a subtle, but unmistakably hostile, gleam in Jackie Devlin’s eyes as she waited for him to answer, and it told him that she wasn’t just referring to his career.

“Um, well...”

Before he could get any further, another knock came on the door—and not a damned moment too soon. That woman seemed to hate him just as much as her daughter had at first...and something told him she’d be a hell of a lot harder to win over.

Much like Tony, Wendy did not wait for an acknowledgment before opening the door, but she seemed a bit more apologetic about interrupting. “Excuse me, D? Hi. I’m so sorry to bother you, but there’s someone here who’d like to see you.”

Muttering a quick apology to Abby and her mother, he turned toward the door...just in time for Kristen, with her trademark high-pitched squeal, to bolt from behind Wendy and leap, full force, into his arms. “Dino, oh, my *God!* Are you surprised? You look surprised! Oh, my God, look at you! You look *amazing*, sweetness! I missed you *so* much—and I’m *so proud of you!* Oh, *honey*, it’s so good to see you!”



A couple of nights before, after Dean fell asleep watching *Sportscentral*, Abby breezed through six episodes of *All or Nothing* in an hour, fast-forwarding until she got to his scenes. Since she had to watch on Streamline, at the mercy of the site's poor indexing, none of those episodes happened to be in order, which meant she got the pleasure of watching Brandon endure all sorts of confusing tragedies. One episode stood out above the rest, though.

From June 2016, it focused on Brandon and Sonya's engagement party. Unbeknownst to Brandon, Sonya had discovered she was pregnant scant hours before, and she planned to tell him once they got a moment alone...but those plans went out the window when, at the last possible second, a slender, dark-haired woman in a bright red dress marched into the room.

"Get your hands off my husband!" she ordered in a heavy and laughably fake Hispanic accent.

It was like the needle came off the record. Everything stopped. Everyone froze.

"*Estella*," Brandon gasped, eyes wide. "No, it can't be!"

But it was. His heretofore unseen first wife had crawled from the grave, gotten herself a new dress and shown up at his engagement party.

Cut to a long, poignant shot of Sonya, newly pregnant, flabbergasted and now humiliated in front of everyone in Hallandale. It was some of the more effective acting that Abby had seen on the show thus far—she could almost

pinpoint the exact moment that Sonya's heart shattered into pieces.

And that was precisely how she felt when Sonya—err, *Kristen Horner*—ran straight into the arms of her man, on the same damned night that Abby had realized that she was actually in love with him.

Okay, maybe that was stretching it a little. It wasn't quite *that* serious, but she still experienced more than just a pang of jealousy when Kristen was hanging onto Dean like that. This was supposed to be their night, and the last thing she wanted to do was share his attention. Not when they'd just said that huge, game changing phrase. Not when she'd just introduced him to her mom, who was, incidentally, none-too-pleased with Kristen intruding on her interrogation.

In person, Kristen Horner was even tinier than she appeared on screen—five-two or three, maybe, but that might've been a little generous. In stark contrast to her glamorous character, she wasn't dressed to impress. She wore a simple, full-length checkered sundress, rectangular blue-framed glasses and aside from glimmering lip gloss, no discernible makeup. Her honey blonde hair was pulled tight into a short ponytail, a nondescript plastic headband keeping the bangs out of her face. She looked like a teacher or a mom or a flight attendant or anything other than the famous soap actress she was—and no matter how tempting it might've been, Abby found it impossible to begrudge someone so unassuming. Or so nice.

Every bit as warm and effervescent as she appeared in her social media chats, Kristen greeted Abby like a long-lost friend, and seemed genuinely delighted when Dean introduced her as his *girlfriend*. She squealed at the news, wrapping her in an embrace so tight that she lost her breath for a second, then spent the next five minutes gushing over her. She tossed cute terms of endearment like “sweetness” and “angel” into almost every sentence, creating such memorable compliments as: “Oh, sweetness, your hair is so pretty!” And: “Oh, my God, you gave me chills out there, angel!” Instead of coming across in a schmoozy Hollywood sort of way, though, they felt sweet. Heartfelt. Real.

It was both astonishing and gratifying to hear such praise from someone whose work she admired just as much, and Abby wished she could have said so, but she didn't want to freak either of them out by admitting she'd been secretly watching the show. That was a shame, too, because seeing Kristen as herself made her appreciate her talent all the more. She bore almost no

resemblance to the serious, often overwrought Sonya, who couldn't go more than three episodes without crying over something. She was bubbly and kind, and it wasn't hard to see why she got along with Dean so well. Neither one were stuck on themselves or their fame, and both radiated the same endearing approachability that could disarm a person and reset their expectations in twenty seconds flat.

Still, despite Kristen's non-threatening charm, Abby had to admit her heart sank a little when Dean invited her to have dinner with them...especially when she caught sight of the aghast disapproval painted across her mother's face. Heat engulfed her entire body in a flash, and she found herself willing Kristen to refuse, but of course, she didn't. And why would she? She didn't come all the way from California to settle for fifteen minutes of his time, and it would be cruel and ungrateful to brush her off so soon. Her timing might've been lousy, but her intentions were pure, and that was why, though she resented everything about it, Abby blithely agreed to the arrangement.

Mom, as expected, had plenty to say before she left, including, but not limited to, a stern warning to "watch that girl," because she didn't like how *familiar* she was with him. Abby wanted to assure her they were only friends, and that familiarity had come from years and years of working together, but the more she thought about it, the less she liked it herself. She had lots of friends, of both genders, some as close as family...but she'd never greeted any of them quite like *that*. And yes, she was certain it had been quite a while since they last saw each other, but goodness—that was a bit much, even by Hollywood standards.

"I don't trust her," Mom hissed, giving Kristen the stink eye from a few feet away. "Him either. Guys like that—they cheat."

"Guys like that? What is that supposed to mean?"

"Really? Look at him!" She gestured in his direction, eyes narrow with accusation.

Abby reached out to lower her hand, lest she attract any undue attention. "Oh, good grief! *That's* what you're basing this on?"

"I'm basing it on statistics. Facts. The law of averages. Someone who looks like that attracts attention everywhere he goes. Temptations happen. *Mistakes* happen—at least, that's what they call them. I call them *inevitableities*, but maybe I'm just jaded. I don't know. Just watch them. Don't let them out

of your sight, because I don't like this at all."

Abby wasn't exactly pleased with it herself, but she refused to let her mother's biases ruin the night. She'd always had a hang-up about attractive men. One must've really burned her at some point, because she was now content to regard them all as players and dogs; superficial pretty boys with massive egos and no concept of monogamy. It was easy for her to place Dean in that category because she didn't know him. They'd only spoken for two minutes before Kristen interrupted, and her uncomfortable questions comprised ninety seconds of that time. Of course she was going to base her opinion on his looks—she had little else to go on. Abby did, and she knew better than to take any of her judgmental platitudes to heart.

But that didn't mean she was going to take any chances. She wedged herself between them during the two-block walk to Rossi's, holding rather possessively to Dean's hand. She realized, fully, how obvious that was, but to their credit, no one said anything about it. They were too busy catching up on people Abby had never heard of.

Lily, whom she surmised must've been the baby Kristen referred to in her videos, had just started kindergarten a few weeks back. Clover—possibly her other child, though Abby could not imagine why anyone would saddle a child with such a ridiculous name—was almost nine now, and Nick (whoever that was) was teaching her to play guitar. They'd been getting along a lot better, she said, and Dean seemed glad to hear it.

He was also pretty happy to hear that old bastard Bob had finally retired, especially when Kristen added that on-set ulcers had been on a sharp decline ever since. Then, talk turned to Mindy—or *Mumma* Mindy, as they called her. Mumma Mindy wished more than anything that she could've come tonight, and sent her very deepest love, but she just couldn't get away. Her multiple personalities were back, and she'd just shot somebody else, so it looked like she was going to have her hands full for a while.

Ah, Octavia. Sonya's crazy mom. That had to be who they were talking about, because that was the only gun-wielding, multiple-personality-stricken character on the show that Abby could recall. According to the recap on Planet Dalton, Octavia was the one who'd killed Brandon when he tried to rescue Sonya from her murderous clutches, though she hadn't gotten to that episode yet. She wasn't sure she wanted to, to be honest. The more she watched, the more parallels she noticed between Brandon and Dean, and she

wasn't sure how watching him die would affect her.

Over dinner, Dean and Kristen talked shop for what felt like forever, regaling her with funny stories from the set, including a hilarious off-color anecdote about trying to creatively choreograph a love scene in the hot tub while she was, in their words, "eighteen months pregnant." They also spent a fair amount of time complaining about Bob, the single worst director, and human being on the planet, to hear them tell it.

Having nothing of value to add to the conversation, Abby consumed an entire basket of bread and did her best to sound interested, but she couldn't help but feel like a third wheel after a while. On their night. At their place. Good grief, why did she agree to this?

The later it got, the more congested Dean sounded, and the more Kristen's boisterous, lively manner grated on Abby's nerves. She was never more relieved than when he pulled his phone from his pocket and realized that his mom had been blowing it up for an hour, concerned that he hadn't made it home yet. Kristen was understanding, but undeniably disappointed when they had to leave, saying they'd have to get together again soon. She promised to call when she could and even asked Abby for all her social media handles so they could keep in touch that way.

Unable to craft a compelling enough excuse not to on the fly, she handed them over, but was sort of hoping Kristen would forget about it by the time she got back to LA. The last thing she wanted to do was trade Chattr hearts with that girl, nor did she want to get embroiled in yet another Friendzone chat about her motives or their relationship. Not that Kristen seemed the type to do that. She seemed more like the kind of flighty social media friend who'd send "hey, how are you" every three months, then ignore the reply. Abby could live with that.

After a few more funny stories on the way back to the garage, another intense, lengthy embrace, and some well-wishes, Kristen bid them goodnight and hopped into her rental car. It was almost midnight by that point and Dean was so stuffed up he could barely breathe out of his nose. It came as little surprise that he tossed her his keys and reclined the passenger's seat to an almost horizontal position. What surprised her, however, was the apology he offered for it between deep, ineffective snuffles.

"This...was not how I thought tonight was going to work out. Sorry, love."

She took her eyes off the road long enough to glance over at him. “For what? It’s not your fault you don’t feel good.”

He shifted in his seat, propping one foot against the glove box. “I meant Kristen.”

Oh. Right. Of course he did. “Don’t be sorry about that,” she dismissed, as jovially as possible. “It was nice meeting her. She’s very...sweet.”

“Yeah, she is. We had a lot of really good times. And some not-so-good ones, too.” Dean’s voice took on a quieter, more wistful quality as he turned his face to the window. “My whole last year in LA, we were *inseparable*, and then, things just...I don’t know.”

Abby chewed on that for a moment before offering a hoarse reply. “That happens sometimes. People grow apart when they don’t have that common ground there anymore. It’s happened to me before—but it was really nice of her to come all this way to see you.”

“Yeah, it was. Kind of weird, but nice.”

He was silent for the next several miles, and she thought he might’ve fallen asleep over there, but just as they were crossing the Loop, he glanced over at her. “Seeing her makes me think about stuff that I haven’t thought about in a while. It’s weird. It feels like so long ago, you know? It wasn’t, but it feels like it. It’s like a whole different life to me.”

“Do you ever...miss that life?” Her grip instinctively tightened around the wheel as she waited for his answer.

“I miss that paycheck, for sure,” he admitted, with a sigh. “And I miss traveling and meeting people—that part was cool. I don’t miss the hours, though. I don’t miss having to learn fifty pages every night. I really don’t miss my kid not knowing who the hell I am. That was...rough.”

She took time to chew on that, too. “That had to be awful. I can’t imagine.”

“Yeah, I’d come home and the nanny would leave and Pres would lose her mind. She would hold onto that woman and cry and that just *broke me*.” The pain in Dean’s voice was so palpable it gave her chills. “It was the worst feeling in the world. And who could blame her? I was working all the time and Chels was never around, even before she split, so there was a *stranger* raising my kid, you know? I couldn’t handle that. I was all she had and she barely even knew me, so...I did what I had to do.”

And there it was: an answer to the question she’d harbored since the night

they'd met. *That* was why he walked away from such a lucrative career. That was why he'd scaled down, moved back home and avoided the spotlight all this time—he'd done it for Preslie, and though she'd sort of suspected that was the case, hearing it confirmed made her respect him all the more.

"I can't imagine how hard that had to be for you," she acknowledged, with a solemn nod, "but you made the right choice."

"I know—and I'd do it again. I'd do it ten thousand times, because she means more to me than any of that ever will...but I wonder sometimes, you know? I wonder what would've happened if..." After a long, poignant pause, he returned the seat to its original position. "Okay, so, laying down's not the best idea when you can't breathe."

Abby took silent note of his not-so-subtle subject change and played along. "I'd imagine not. I'm sorry."

"This *sucks*." He drew the word out as long as possible, leaning sideways to rest his face against the window. "I thought it was the cat hair at first, but that wouldn't still be bothering me, would it?"

"No, I don't think so. I think you're getting sick."

"No, see, you're supposed to tell me it's the cat hair, because I can't get sick right now."

"Oh. Well, I guess it could be, but it's never bothered you this much before." She paused, sighing. "Sorry, I know it's crummy timing. But hopefully, it won't be that bad. Hopefully, you'll feel better in the morning."



**I**f, by some chance, there was some disembodied, all-knowing narrator who could summarize the past several days in a booming, authoritative fashion, Dean was positive it would start by saying: *But he didn't feel better in the morning. He felt progressively worse every day for the next week, by which point Preslie started to feel bad, too. The entire week was hell—and not just plain old surface-level hell, either. It was the eighth circle. The fifteenth. The thirtieth! How many circles did that place have, anyway?*

Despite his determination to push through it and get on with everything that needed to be done, Dean had to admit that the cold (or whatever it was)

had kicked his ass. He went from sniffing and snorting on Sunday to hacking up a lung on Monday—it was so bad that Dad took pity on him two hours into his shift and sent him home to die. He couldn't remember much about Tuesday. After getting Pres off to school and downing a potent dose of NyQuil, he was in a coma for most of the day. Abby came by at some point after work, and she was the one who took Pres to school in the morning, but beyond that, he couldn't recall a single other thing that happened. He wasn't even sure if he ate.

He did eat on Wednesday, though—Mom made sure of that. She showed up bright and early, just as he was about to dose himself up and crawl back to bed, and spent the whole rest of the morning cooking, cleaning, hovering and nagging as only she could. He had to be nicer to himself, she said. He had to stop pushing himself so hard. He wasn't a superhero or anything, and he had to accept that there was no way in hell he was fit to take the stage tonight. Abby said much the same thing when she called at lunch to check in, but he knew better than to try to get out of it. The show was sold out, after all, and canceling it on such short notice was not a good look for anyone involved. He had no choice but to soldier on the best he could...even if by the end of the night, he felt like he'd eaten a box of lightbulbs for dinner and washed them down with kerosene.

Dean's voice, much like his stamina and will to live, was completely gone by Thursday morning, but his convalescence came to a quick and jarring end when Pres woke up with a fever of her own. From that point on, everything became about her: making sure she took her medicine, trying to keep her as comfortable as possible and showering her with all the sick girl attention that any kid could ever want. By Friday, he was so deeply entrenched in Dad Mode that the thought of leaving her, even for just a few hours, was unbearable. So, he bundled her up and brought her with him to the theater. Pres didn't find that nearly as exciting as he'd hoped she would. Heavily plied with over-the-counter medication, she took in a tour of the grounds with her face halfway buried in his shoulder and offered disinterested grunts to everything but the couch in his dressing room.

Leaving her there was a lot harder than he'd thought it would be. Even after Wendy volunteered to look in on her throughout the evening, he still loitered by the door until the last possible second. If he could've gotten away with it, he probably would've done the whole show with her hanging onto his

back like a baby chimp, but according to Wendy, she was so out of it she didn't seem to notice he'd been gone.

Sadly, Pres was much more cognizant during the Saturday matinee. Wendy said she woke up an hour into the show and panicked when she realized she was alone. She tore out of the room screaming, and might've made it to the stage if she hadn't been diverted with the promise of a doughnut. Wendy tried to make it sound like she'd saved the day or something. She kept saying how close that was, and how awful it would've been if a hysterical child had interrupted the performance, but Dean didn't give a damn about that. What he cared about was how terrifying and traumatic that had to be for Pres—and how horribly he'd just let her down.

He'd promised not to leave her. He said it over and over again, because he didn't think she would ever know the difference. He thought, like last night, she'd sleep through the whole thing. But she hadn't. She'd woken up alone, in a weird place, surrounded by strangers, and he didn't even know about it, because no one wanted to interrupt the performance in order to tell him.

Abby followed him the whole way back to his dressing room, repeatedly stressing that it was okay—that Pres was okay, but he merely scoffed at her assurance. She didn't get it...then, how could she? She wasn't there. She didn't know how many times he'd been left holding the bag when Chelsie broke yet another promise. She hadn't seen how much it broke Preslie's heart when Chels bailed on taking her to Disney, or spending Mother's Day with her, or coming to see her sing in that holiday concert. She wasn't aware of the solemn vow he'd made to never promise her anything he couldn't deliver, because he couldn't stand the idea of letting her down like Chelsie had—and thus, she couldn't understand his guilt.

"She's okay," Abby tried again. "She got a little scared, but Wendy handled it."

"It's not Wendy's *job* to handle it," he hissed over his shoulder.

"No, it's not, but she did, because you couldn't. And she's okay now. It's okay."

"My kid was screaming for me, and nobody even told me about it!"

"What did you want Wendy to do, let her run out there? That would've scared her even more. Sometimes, you scare me and I know you're just acting. Do you really want her to see you as Alex?"

He didn't know why the hell she'd bothered to ask—she already knew the

answer to that. She also knew it was beside the point. “She needed me. My baby needed me!”

“But she’s okay. She got a little scared, but she’s okay.” Abby placed a hand on his shoulder just as he reached the door. “Dino? Wait. Hold on a minute. You need to calm down first. If you go in there upset, she won’t understand and she’ll think you’re mad at her. Just breathe for a second and calm down.”

“Don’t you dare tell me to calm down! What the hell do you even...” His ragged voice gave out halfway through that sentence, but perhaps that was just as well. He didn’t need to lash out at the wrong person, no matter how condescending her unsolicited advice had been. She meant well, and this wasn’t her fault, anyway. It was his. “Sorry,” he managed, clearing his throat. “I shouldn’t have said that. I’m sorry, love.”

She took a moment to rub his shoulder before sighing. “And that is what I mean. That is what you don’t want her to see. Now, come on. Let’s get a Coke and walk around for a minute and calm down. I know you’re upset—I would be, too, but she is *okay*. Dino? Listen to me. She’s okay. It’s okay.”

“It’s not okay!” he insisted, with as much emphasis as his scratchy voice could muster. “I broke my promise, and that’s never okay!”

“No, it’s not okay to break a promise,” she conceded, “but she’s going to understand. You have to work—that’s why you’re here. Those people paid a lot of money to come watch us work, and I know it’s hard, and I know you want to be with her around the clock until she feels better, but that’s just not feasible. I think even she knows that. She knows you can’t be in two places at once.”

“You don’t get it. I just pulled a Chelsie. She promises her the whole world, and it’s all just... words. But every time, Pres falls for it, and every time, I’m the one who has to... *God!*” Unable to contain his frustration, Dean lifted both hands to his face. “I always said I’d never do this, you know? I know better than to do this, but—”

“*No.*” Abby’s interruption was succinct but firm. “Don’t go there. It’s not the same thing. It’s not even close, and you know it.”

“It’s close enough.” Without giving her a chance to respond, he swung open the door and began what was sure to be a lengthy apology. “Baby, I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

Pres leaped off the couch in record time and ran for him, latching onto

his legs so fiercely that it was a wonder he didn't topple backward. Her face was red from crying. "Where did you go? You said you weren't gonna leave!"

He dropped to his knees, hugging her like he hadn't seen her in a month. "I know. I know I did, and I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, baby."

"I woke up, and you were gone and you p-promised you wouldn't leave me!" Preslie's forlorn reminder trembled with tears, and it hit him so hard that he got a little teary himself.

"He didn't want to leave you, sweetheart," Abby assured, before he could compose himself enough to offer an explanation. "But he had to. He had to go to work—we work here, remember? We had to go to work for a little while, but we're done now. We can get some lunch if you want. Are you hungry? Maybe we can get some ice cream, too. Ice cream always makes me feel better when I'm puny. What do you think?"

He didn't expect that to work—when Chels dropped the ball, it usually took way more than ice cream to make things right again—but Pres appeared to consider the proposal. Sniffing, she leaned around him to look at her. "With sprinkles?"

"Of course, with sprinkles! You can't have ice cream without sprinkles—it's just not done! And *then*, you wanna come over to my place and meet my kitty? She's super fuzzy, just like Pumpkin, but she's a different color. I think you'll really like her!"

Preslie switched a pleading gaze back to him. "I wanna meet the kitty! Can we go, Daddy? Please?"

And just like that, it was over. The crushing letdown Dean fully expected to scar her for life and shatter all the trust she'd ever established in him was at once a distant memory. Her tears dried like magic, and she was right back to her old self, complete with wide, persuasive smile.

"Yeah." His first attempt came out as little more than a dry croak, and it took a moment for him to try again. "Yeah, sure. If you want. Do you feel up to that, baby?"

Preslie's eyes narrowed, as though she couldn't believe he'd ask. "I'm always up to meet a kitty!"



So that was what they did. They went to lunch, indulged in cups of ice cream tinged sprinkles, and then went back to Abby's place to meet Meryl, who, thankfully, took to Pres a lot faster than she'd taken to Dean. They were BFFs in ten minutes, and though the dander probably didn't help Preslie's congestion, spending time with a calmer, more affectionate cat than the one she had at home worked wonders for her morale. She'd already started asking when they could come back for more cuddle time...and they hadn't even left yet.

The afternoon was low key and lazy for the most part. No one was feeling their best—not even Abby, who'd been sniffing off and on for most of the day. She tried to blame it on allergies and pretend everything was just fine, but Dean couldn't help but fear the worst. After all, she'd been up close and personal with his plague all week, in both personal and professional capacities, so it would stand to reason that eventually she'd come down with it, too. When he tried to warn her about that, though, she couldn't dismiss it fast enough. That was *silly*, she said. Impossible! She had the strongest immune system of anyone she'd ever met! She hadn't been sick in four years!

Too stubborn and prideful to admit she was under the weather, Abby instead made it clear in other ways. The same woman whose energy could've been bottled and sold to Olympic athletes retired to bed and put on a Barbra Streisand movie. Of course, she had an explanation for that, too. The couch was too small to accommodate all of them, and besides, what was better than snuggling into bed to watch a movie on a rainy afternoon?

It was almost a contest to see who could fall asleep the fastest. After nestling into his embrace, Abby pulled off a surprising upset victory—she dropped off pretty much the moment her head hit the pillow...or, more accurately, his shoulder. Sprawled halfway across him, Pres lasted through one more musical number before the medicine got the better of her, but once it did, she was out like a light. Trapped in the sweetest possible way, it took a lot longer than usual for Dean to get comfortable. He could only shift so much without disturbing anybody, but after about twenty minutes, he finally settled into just the right spot, at just the right angle to (hopefully) keep his nose from stopping up again.

It was dark outside when he jerked from a dream, so congested it was difficult to breathe. Pres and Abby were still flanked on either side of him,

and it sounded like they were competing again—this time, to see who could snore the loudest. After checking her for fever and verifying that, thankfully, she was much cooler to the touch than he was, he was ready to declare Pres the victor. Then, Abby started making the strangest, most pitiful noise he'd ever heard; a guttural burst on the inhale, and a high-pitched nose whistle on the exhale, it was as impressive as it was disconcerting. He turned his head toward her, a slow smile spreading across his face. And she liked to tease him about his snoring?

Dean reached out, brushing some sticky, sweat-coated hair out of her face. There was so much heat radiating off her he didn't need to check for fever—the searing heaviness of her forehead resting on his shoulder was proof enough that this sniffle was more than just a harmless allergy. Damn, he'd really hoped she wouldn't catch it, but if there was any saving grace at all, at least he was on the mend now. That meant he was well enough to dote on her and return the favor. Given this was all his fault, he owed her at least that much. He should've listened to Mom and tried to get out of the show. He should've insisted Abby stay home last week, because while her attempts to nurse him were heartwarming and appreciated (even if he couldn't exactly remember them), they sure as hell weren't worth catching her death. Would she have listened, though? Likely not.

Sniffing, he retrieved the phone from his pocket and groaned as he read the time and notifications. It was a little after six—and his agent was at it again. Rocky had been calling every single day for a week and leaving increasingly hostile voicemails when he couldn't get through. Dean was almost scared to listen to the latest one, especially since he already knew what it said. Rocky never called to make small talk or catch up. He only called when there was something to discuss, and his level of persistence this time around indicated that *something* was pretty big.

Awesome. The hounds of hell were back, with another shiny, expensive carrot to dangle in front of him. When were they going to get the damned message?

He sighed, maneuvering as carefully as possible to free up a little more space. He was gonna need it, and a good amount of patience, too.

Might as well get this over with.



"Hey, yeah, sorry. It's been crazy. I've been super sick."

Dean's voice sounded so muffled and hazy that at first Abby thought it was a dream. He hadn't moved—she could still feel him lying beside her, and if she focused hard enough, she could recognize the faint din of snoring in the distance. Maybe this was one of those weird lucid dreams. There was no other explanation she could figure for why it was so vivid.

"Yeah, sorry. It's been rough. I got sick, and then Pres got sick, and now my girlfriend's sick, and it's like, really?"

*My girlfriend.*

Dream or not, it still gave her a thrill to hear him say that. To be honest, she wasn't quite used to it yet. It had come out of his mouth a handful of times over the past few weeks, in the company of a few different people, and every time it did, she got a little jolt. He was talking about her. She was his girlfriend. He could've dated anyone, anywhere, but through some amazing twist of fate, he coupled up with *her*. Sometimes, she still had to pinch herself.

She'd never felt safer with anyone, or more free to be herself, whoever that might've been at the moment. Dean didn't think she was weird or crazy or neurotic, like some of the other guys she'd dated. He thought she was funny and talented and smart and beautiful—she knew, because he said so, eighty-three times a day, but even if he hadn't, his feelings would've come through loud and clear in all the things he did to make her smile.

They were little things, mainly, but over the past few weeks, they'd really

added up. He was more thoughtful than anyone else she'd ever dated and seemed to go out of his way to take care of her. Until he got sick, she could always count on him bringing her coffee in bed whenever she woke up at his house. He left sweet sticky notes on the mirror at the playhouse and tucked inside her lesson plans to remind her she was awesome and beautiful and he was thinking about her. He'd had a dozen cupcakes delivered to her job that time she told him she was having a rough day.

Even last week, flat on his back with a cold, he had still been trying to look out for her. Unlike every other man she'd ever met, he didn't use being sick as a handy excuse to turn into a sullen jerk—if anything, he seemed more concerned about her than himself, and between naps, he had made repeated apologies for not being better company. He was such an anomaly that sometimes she had to ask: was that man even real? He wasn't just some 3D hologram or something, right?

“Yeah, I heard about that. Kristen told me.”

Involuntarily, Abby tensed at the mention of her name. Although she'd tried to play it off, she was still stinging from that surprise visit last week, and the fact that Mom had been bugging her about it ever since did not help matters. In the name of research, Mom had done a bit of internet sleuthing, and some of the things she'd found were...disturbing, to say the least.

Of course, none of it was substantiated. It was all just gossip, and somewhat silly gossip at that. It amounted to little more than a bunch of Branson fans salivating over the possibility of a real-life romance, and pointing to subtle clues on social media to lend credence to their claims. Still, as dubious as it might've been, Mom was more than happy to follow them down the rabbit hole, and had spent the past several days sharing their findings and theories ad nauseam.

Unsurprisingly, Dean's social media accounts yielded little of interest. Even back then, his distaste for it in all its forms was apparent—he almost never posted, leaving his “team” (read: mother) to do it for him. Once in a blue moon, he made a few posts of his own, but they were mostly vague and inoffensive. Pictures from a hike or quick videos warning of yet another scammer/catfish trying to cozy up to his more gullible fans. In other words, his pages were clean and, in the gossip fans' estimation, rather boring.

Kristen, on the other hand, seemed addicted to the stuff. She couldn't go more than a few hours without updating her Chattr, or posting another photo

to Pictogram...and for a pretty solid swath of time, the vast majority of those posts involved him in some form or fashion. Mom had sent an overwhelming amount of evidence over the past week, and Abby had to admit, some of it was more damning than others.

Between the summer of 2017 and the winter of 2018 (coinciding with his last few months as Brandon), Kristen had posted several candid photos of him, some of which had cutesy captions like, *this guy*, accompanied by a string of heart emojis. She engaged her fans in a long Chattr thread asking for pointers on how to best knit “ugly Hanukkah sweaters” for herself, her unnamed boyfriend, and the girls. And, perhaps most troubling, in their last joint Streamline chat a few months later, they were both wearing—wouldn’t you know it—*ugly Hanukkah sweaters*.

Not that that meant anything, necessarily. He might not have been the boyfriend she referred to. That might’ve been the other guy, the one who was teaching her kid to play guitar, and Dean just so happened to...also have one lying around. Maybe that was their thing. Maybe they thought it would be extra festive and cute to match. Abby couldn’t say for sure, and she didn’t feel comfortable speculating, but that was okay, because Mom had done more than enough of that for the both of them—and she hadn’t shut up about it since.

“I heard it’s up to, like, twenty thousand, but I don’t know if I believe that or not. I seriously doubt there are that many...” Dean’s scratchy voice continued to waft in and out, gradually luring her back into consciousness, but she couldn’t definitively determine if any of what he was saying was real. It sounded so jumbled and strange to her ears, but perhaps that was because she couldn’t bring herself to fully focus on the one-sided conversation.

“No way! Seriously? How’d they get so many...Well, yeah, I know that, but I didn’t think they’d still...Right, no, it totally is. I mean, it is, but...It’s kind of stupid at this point, isn’t it? They’re just spinning their wheels. It’s nice and all, but it’s not like that’s gonna get me to change my mind...Why do you always think it’s about that? It’s not. I don’t care about that, it’s more...No, I’m serious. It’s not about that. If it was about that, I would have packed up a year ago when they made that last offer. Remember that? That was a *sick* amount of money, bro, and I’m still here, so it’s gonna take a whole lot more than that to...Seriously? Again? I don’t know how many times I have to say no before...”

With that, he cleared his throat, a noise so vivid and distinct that it convinced her this had to be taking place. He had to be talking to somebody, but who and what they were discussing remained a mystery. Try as she might, Abby couldn't put his words into context. Every time she thought she might've had a handle on it, he said something else that threw her off. The closest guess she could hazard was he was talking about the house or something—maybe someone wanting to buy his house?—but the longer he went on, the less likely that seemed.

Dean must've noticed her stirring, because in a flash, he'd maneuvered out from under her. When he spoke again, his voice was much softer than before. "Yeah, can we maybe talk about this on Monday? This isn't really a good time...No, I will, I've just been super...Seriously? All right, fine. Tell them no...I don't need to think about it, the answer is no. It's been no all this time, and that's not gonna...Nope, don't care. Still no. It doesn't matter how much money...Wait, what? Say that again...Okay, one more time, because I don't think...Good Lord, are you serious? They're offering me *how much?*"

She felt motion, like he'd just jumped out of bed or something, and noticed that he sounded fainter and farther away when he reacted. "Jesus! When did they...Wow. Yeah, that's a whole lot better than the last one, but how long are we talking about here? Because I'm not interested in...What? No. Wait. No. That doesn't sound right. This does not sound right to me, bro. You mean to tell me they're offering *that* kind of money for...What the...No, that can't be right! Are you sure that's what they said, because people who've been at this for thirty years don't make that kind of...Whoa."

At once aware of what he was talking about, Abby willed herself to listen harder. She willed herself to sit up and take notice, but the dose of Benadryl she'd taken after lunch had her so sedated, she couldn't snap out of it. That left her to lie there, caught in the blurry, transient place between wakefulness and dreams, while her worst fears took shape.

"But wait. Wait, hold on. How's that even gonna work? I'm dead, remember?" There was a brief pause before Dean scoffed, "Oh, come on! There's no way I'm not dead! I laid in a casket for a whole week while everybody came and cried over me—if that's not dead, then...Yeah, no, I *know* that, but that's stretching it even for them, isn't it? I mean, that's kind of...Now, wait, I didn't say that. I just said it was stretching it. And it is...I mean, I don't care. It doesn't really matter, but it's just weird, you know? I

don't know how they're gonna explain that, because any way you slice it, it's kind of...Right, no, I know it's not. I'm just...Okay, fine, whatever. That's not gonna matter, anyway, if we can't make this work. When do they want me? Because I've got that thing, remember?"

Heart thudding like a jackhammer, Abby tried her hardest to wake up. No matter how real this might've sounded, it had to be a dream—because it was playing out like her worst possible nightmares. Oh, God, this couldn't be happening. The very thing she'd been most terrified would happen could not actually be happening!

They hadn't even solidified what was going on between them yet—they were still in that sweet, giddy, incredibly fragile stage, where even the tiniest thing could blow them apart. If he took them up on this, that would be the end. If he went back to LA, back to that set, back to *Kristen* and her damned knitting needles, she would never see him again. There was no way she could compete with that life. There was no way she could compete with that girl. She was going to lose him. Forever.

Oh, God, Mom tried to warn her about this! She said that once the press started swarming and people started paying more attention, Dean would be back on television in no time. How could he not be? It was clear to everyone, even her, that he was wasting his talents on McMillan's stage. That *thing*, as he called it, was not the best he could do. There were bigger and better things out there for him, and he deserved them...but damn, she never expected them to come calling so soon.

His conversation droned on for what felt like an eternity, but the roar in Abby's head made it difficult to follow along. All she could make out were a few key phrases:

*I'm really, really sorry to do this to you, but it's not gonna work.*

*I feel awful. I'm so sorry.*

*I promise I wouldn't do this unless I had to, and I do.*

*I'm really sorry, Ray.*

No. *No*, she had to wake up. Antihistamine be damned, she had to wake up *right now*, because this wasn't happening. It just couldn't happen. Not yet.

Abby forced open her heavy eyelids to find him...sitting in bed beside her and using chopsticks to shovel what appeared to be Chinese takeout into his mouth. Preslie was sitting up, too, snuggled against him while they enjoyed dinner and an 80s cartoon she vaguely recalled from her childhood. The

volume was abnormally low, and every few seconds, another blurred line of closed captioning appeared on the screen, but neither seemed inconvenienced by that. Dean texted furiously between bites, brow furrowing a little more at every reply, but his screen was too far away to determine who he was talking to and what, if anything, it had to do with what she'd overheard.

She stretched and moved closer, her lazy left arm brushing against his thigh. At once, his head turned toward her. "Hey, love. Are you okay? Do you need anything?"

The only response she could muster was a low, gravelly moan, but perhaps that was just as well. She was too groggy and worn down to articulate what she really needed: some clarity on what the hell just happened. Then, there was a strong possibility that she wouldn't know what to do with it if she got some. She was firing on less than half her cylinders, and just keeping her eyes open was a fight at this point.

Without warning, Dean cupped a cool hand against her forehead. "It's okay," he assured, when she flinched. "You're okay. It's just me—and right on, you're not as warm as you were! That's awesome!"

She could hear Preslie react to that with a heartwarming chorus of whoops and cheers, but everything else seemed so...dulled. She didn't even notice him brushing the hair out of her face until he spoke. "You're okay. You wanna sleep some more? Go ahead and sleep. I'm right here."

*But for how long?*



*The last thing I want to see you do is stress yourself out about this. You're already sick and I don't want you to make yourself sicker by worrying. Just take your time and think about it. Remember: they're the ones courting you, not the other way around, and you don't have to give them an answer right away. Make them wait! It's a big decision, and you need to weigh all your options. I love you, and I'm behind you, whatever you choose—just make sure that it's the right choice for YOU and PRES-LIE, not anybody else!!!*

Dean read Margot's parting words again as he settled into bed. Sage advice, he had to admit...even if it wasn't necessarily what he wanted to hear. He'd sort of been hoping she'd take a more decisive approach, like she had

every other time he'd faced a dilemma. As much as he hated to think of it that way, there had never been a single question who the "leader" was between them. She wore that title with great pride and relish and had been bossing him around since they were babies. Per the family lore, he had barely said a word before he started school, because with her around, he never had to. She was more than happy to speak for both of them.

It took *years* and two cross-country moves for her to stop doing that. Long after the novelty had worn off and he'd established his own life, outside of her, she still tried to make all his decisions for him...which made it even more perplexing that she'd leave the ball in his court this time. Damn. If Margot didn't even want to touch this one, then he really was in trouble.

Mom and Dad weren't a lot of help, either. As with everything else, they were split on the issue, and each offered conflicting advice. She thought it was an awful idea, citing the "catastrophic" toll that a prolonged separation from Pres would take on his well-being. *You don't even like to leave her for four nights a week*, she'd written. *You'd lose your mind if you had to be away from her that long, and you know it. You would be miserable, and she would be, too.*

That was a really good point. He was just as attached to Preslie as she was to him, and the idea of leaving her for that long was inconceivable. He hadn't been away from home like that since she was little, and even then, it had killed him. Six weeks in Vancouver and another four in Toronto had just about done him in, and she had been too young to even notice he was gone. What was this going to do to him now that she was old enough to understand? He didn't even want to think about it.

Dad, of course, took a far less emotional stance with his text. *Why's this even a question? Take the damn money!*

Another good point—and, if Dean was honest with himself, one that validated his gut instinct when Rocky had first relayed the offer. There was a hell of a lot of money on the table, and given the current state of his bank account, he'd have to be crazy to turn it down. Was it worth it, though? Was it worth going back to the place he said he'd never go back to, and doing the very thing he said he'd never do? That, it would seem, was the two hundred thousand dollar question.

Between doting on Pres, keeping a watchful eye on Abby, and fielding a bevy of concerned messages about tonight's unexpected cancelation, he debated it for much of the evening. He swore he'd weighed every single

option at least three times, but was still left with more questions than answers. Damn, why'd this have to be so complicated? It sounded so simple on paper. Two hundred grand, for twenty episodes' worth of work and a free trip back to LA. There were a lot of worse positions to be in, he was sure, but man—this one really sucked.

It took an hour to get Pres to sleep, and even longer than that to follow suit. Try as he might, he could only nod off for a few minutes at a time. Something always disturbed him. Either his back would start hurting, or his nose would fill up, or he'd start coughing again, or Pres would roll over and smack him right in the face. And then he'd be up. Obsessing. Again.

The maddening up and down cycle continued until one, when Dean finally gave in and helped himself to the Benadryl in Abby's medicine cabinet. He'd never been a huge fan of that stuff, or the way it made him feel in the morning, but the number it had done on her was most impressive. She'd been in a largely impenetrable coma since they got here, and that sounded amazing right now.

Of course, it didn't quite work out that way. He'd no sooner gotten a taste of actual legitimate sleep when Abby started screaming for him with such fervid panic that his first thought was the house must've been on fire. "Dino! Oh, my God, *Dino!*"

He shot upright so fast he felt light-headed. "What? What's wrong, love? What's the matter?"

With a trembling hand, she held her phone out to him. "It's two in the morning!"

2:42, to be exact...but he failed to see why she deemed it worth waking him up to announce that. "Right. Okay. And?"

"The show!" she reminded. It sounded like she was on the verge of tears. "Oh, my God, we missed the show!"

Oh, yeah. She never woke up long enough for him to tell her about that. "I took care of it. No worries. It's cool."

"You took...*care* of...it?" Her question came out in an odd, disjointed manner. "What do you mean?"

"I mean..." Lowering himself back into the pillows, he took a full thirty seconds to complete that sentence. "...I took care of it. Today and tomorrow. We're good. All you have to worry about is feeling better."

"You canceled? You canceled a sold out show?"

“No, I canceled three of them.”

“What the...oh, my God! I don’t know whether to laugh or cry right now.” From the sound of it, tears were winning. “Why did you do that?”

“Well...I tried to wake you up, and that wasn’t happening, and...you were burning up, so I sort of made the executive decision that it wasn’t gonna work and...yeah.” It was the best explanation Dean could come up with, and he prayed it would suffice.

“Oh, my God,” she said again. “Ray’s going to be furious with me!”

“No, he’s not.”

“Oh, you don’t know Ray. He’s all hugs and high fives as long as you do what he wants, but the moment you step out of line—”

He rolled to face her, placing one hand on her thigh. “No, love, he’s not gonna be mad at you. He’s gonna be mad at me, because I told him I was the one with the fever.”

“You...” Her sentence ended there, and she was silent for the next twenty seconds. “Wow,” she finally managed. “How’d he take it?”

“He was pissed.”

“I bet. Oh, goodness. Wow. I’m sorry.”

“No worries. He can’t be too mad, right? I’m the *star*.” He meant that to be ironic, but she appeared to take it seriously.

“You are. And you took the bullet for me.”

Abby’s choice of words gave him pause and provided a solemn reminder of what he’d spent most of the night agonizing about. She had no way of knowing this, but Brandon had taken a bullet for the woman he loved too, right in the gut. And then, he bled to death over the course of the next three episodes. It was surprisingly brutal and gory for daytime—a fact Dean couldn’t help but interpret as a giant middle finger for leaving them in such a lurch—but the one good thing about it was it left no room for doubt.

Brandon was dead. Irrefutably dead, on the floor of the cabin, in not just a puddle, but an entire ocean of blood. No last-minute miracle. No mistaken identity. No going back. Dude was *dead*...and now, somehow, they wanted to bring him back. As a ghost, or an angel, or maybe just a guy with no blood volume whatsoever—Dean had no idea at this point, but he knew whatever they came up with was going to be crazy. He also knew he had to be even crazier to actually consider it.

It wouldn’t be wise to say so now, though. He needed to think about it

some more before he did that. He needed to rest some more, too. “No worries. Go to sleep, love.”

Whether or not she did, he wasn’t sure—that was the last thing he remembered until daylight, when the cat decided to use his thigh for a scratching post. Of all the damned things to wake up to...

“Meryl, no!” Abby sounded hoarse, and two registers lower than usual, but her reflexes seemed in no way impaired. She swooped in and grabbed the cat, moving it before it could do any more damage to his flesh. “Stop, leave him alone.”

“Thanks,” he muttered, into the pillow.

“Sorry,” she muttered back, taking a seat on the edge of the bed. “It’s the blanket. She thinks it’s hers.”

He kicked it off. “She can have it.”

She wasted no time pulling it back over him. “Don’t be silly. You shouldn’t have to freeze because she’s spoiled. There are other blankets.”

“If you say so.” With a low groan, Dean rolled onto his stomach. He felt like a truck had run him down, which was the precise reason he hated taking Benadryl in the first place, but he doubted he ever would’ve gotten to sleep last night without it. Turning his face away from the window—and all the caustic sunlight pouring in—he was surprised to find that Preslie was no longer beside him. His head jerked up in a hurry. “Where’s Pres?”

“On the patio with my tablet. She was getting a little bored.”

His eyes darted in that direction, and sure enough, there she was. He could see her through the glass, engrossed in what appeared to be some sort of maze game. “Watch her. She buys coins and extra lives without asking.”

“Good thing I don’t have any money on that account, then.” Abby tried to laugh, but the noise that resulted sounded a lot more like a wheeze. She paused to clear her throat. “I already made her breakfast—well, something like it, anyway. Okay, it was toast. I made toast. But she ate it. And it wasn’t burned, so yay me.”

He smiled, propping himself up on one elbow. “Unburned toast is her favorite. How’d you know?”

“Women’s intuition, I guess.” With that, she leaned in for a kiss, followed immediately by another, longer one. “You knocked out so fast last night that I didn’t get to do that, so I owed you one.”

“Benadryl, man,” he explained with a laugh. “That stuff’s hardcore.”

“Tell me about it. I took two of them yesterday, because one never works for me and...” She paused, shrugging. “Well, you saw what happened.”

“You feel any better, though?”

“Nah, still pretty crappy. You?”

“Same.”

It was her turn to glance toward the patio door. “Just a fair warning: Little Miss Sunshine feels better than both of us put together, so this is going to be a really fun day. She keeps asking when you’re going to get up, so we can do something already.”

“Oh, man. What time is it?” Dean reached for his phone before she could answer, eyes widening. “Oh, shit, it’s eleven.”

Abby’s gaze lowered at once. “Yeah, sorry. I didn’t have the heart to wake you—again. Sorry about last night, by the way. I sort of freaked out.”

“I’m used to that.”

“Rude.” She leaned in, resting her head against his bicep. “I still can’t believe you canceled the show. Nobody’s ever done anything like that for me before.”

Somehow, he found that hard to believe. “Really? Nobody?”

“Nope. Aside from my mom, you’re the only person who’s ever actually tried to take care of me.”

“Wow. What the hell kind of guys you been dating?”

She let out another half-laugh, half-wheeze. “Trust me, you don’t want to know.”



It took four days for Abby to feel somewhat better, but she had a long way to go before she was back to a hundred percent. She was still coughing and wheezing, still running intermittent fevers and still sniffing like crazy, but at least she didn't sound like Kermit the Frog anymore. Now, she sounded like that kid on *The Simpsons*, whose voice hadn't changed all the way. It was a toss-up which was worse.

Today marked the first time since Saturday that she hadn't succumbed to at least one bout of medicine-induced narcolepsy, and she was pretty proud of that. Not that staying awake all day was any sort of accomplishment, but if she'd learned anything from this miserable experience, it was to embrace even the smallest of victories. Like that truce she'd forged with her mother. Since she'd fallen ill, Mom had all but forgotten about her one-woman mission to find something—anything—wrong with Dean, and had instead gone into full-on caregiver mode.

It was like being a kid all over again. Mom dropped by every morning and often stayed until late in the day. She cooked, she coddled, she made tissue, medicine and popsicle runs. She even dragged her thirty-year-old humidifier out of storage and brought it over, in the hopes it would help Abby sleep better...and miraculously, the damned thing still worked.

For his part, Dean had been as attentive as someone who lived sixty miles away could be. Even though she told him she'd be fine and that he didn't

have to come all that way, he had still dropped by on Monday and Tuesday to check in and bring her dinner. Both nights he had Preslie with him, and both nights he seemed a little pensive and distracted, but Abby was grateful to have him there at all. She'd resigned herself to talking on the phone all week, so having his arms around her was a treat...even if he couldn't stay the night.

When Ray called on Wednesday to ask how she was feeling, she was honest: she was bundled on the couch, alternately freezing and burning up, and couldn't manage more than two sentences without her voice cracking. She made sure to mention that she'd be willing to suck it up and go on, if everyone else was okay with that, but he told her not to bother, because Val was sick now, too. From the way he'd made it sound, the earliest he was looking to reopen was next Wednesday, and while he definitely wasn't happy about it, he didn't have the epic meltdown she'd expected. Thank goodness.

Freed from the obligation of performing, Abby had gone to bed early and woke up this morning feeling almost refreshed. She was well enough to do laundry and chores today, and was even heating some soup when Dean called at 5:45. How odd. She didn't normally hear from him for another hour.

Turning the heat down, she stepped away from the stove to grab her phone. "Hey."

"Hey, love. You sound better."

"Don't humor me. I sound terrible," she corrected, with as much of a laugh as she could muster without making herself cough. "But I feel better."

"Right on. That's awesome. I just left the theater and I'm about to head your way. Do you want me to bring you anything?"

Abby took a moment to consider that before she realized how strange it was. "Why were you at the theater?"

"I had to talk to Ray."

"Oh, about rescheduling the shows?"

Dean hesitated for so long she had to check her screen to verify the call was still connected. "Something like that," he finally affirmed. "So, do you want anything? I can get you some coffee or some dinner or..."

"I'm fine, thanks. I'm actually making soup right now. Do you want me to make you some, too? Canned soup is my specialty, I have to say!"

"Oh, you don't have to cook for me. I'm good."

"I don't mind, really. And it won't take but a minute."

He laughed at that. "Man, you're starting to sound like my mom. I'm

good. Don't put yourself out—I probably can't eat right now, anyway. I feel like I'm gonna be sick.”

She leaned into the fridge, a frown spreading across her face as she processed that. “Oh, gosh. He's still mad, isn't he? I'm so sorry.”

“He was, um...a little heated, yeah. We'll talk about it when I get there. Should be about ten minutes if you're sure you don't want anything.”

“Nothing but you.” Even a month ago, Abby would've considered that sort of response both corny and cringe-worthy, but now, she was proud to say it.

Dean seemed just as proud to hear it. “Awesome. I'm on my way. I'll see you soon.”

“Can't wait.”

She'd no sooner set her phone down and gone to the pantry for another can of soup when the damned thing started vibrating again. It was Wendy texting this time—and goodness, was she riled up.

*OMG ABBS!!!! I AM SO MAD AT YOU RIGHT NOW!!!!* She added a string of red-faced emojis to illustrate her point.

She followed that with: *WHY DIDN'T YOU TELL ME??????*

And then: *SO FREAKIN MAD AT YOU!!!!*

Abby couldn't help but roll her eyes as she tapped a reply. *What are you mad at me about? What was I supposed to tell you?*

*That D was going to QUIT!!!!*

Her knees buckled on their own accord, and she had to reach for the counter to steady herself. *What are you talking about? He's not going to quit!*

Three dots appeared on the screen, then disappeared, a frustrating cycle that continued for a few minutes before a long message popped up. *He just did!!! He just left a pow-wow with Ray and Ray is FUMING, and so am I, because HOW COULD YOU NOT TELL ME HE WAS GOING BACK TO THE SHOW???? YOU KNOW I LOVE THAT SHOW!!! I wouldn't have told Ray, you know that! That's not my place! I wouldn't have put it on the internet either if that's what you were worried about! I would've just been excited right along with y'all! How awesome!!! I'm so happy for him!!!!*

The air grew thicker as the words set in and proved so heavy and oppressive that it brought on a full-bodied coughing spasm. Abby hacked until tears streamed down her cheeks, then sprinted to the toilet to expel a chunky mix of bile and slime that seared so deep she felt like she'd been

sipping on lava.

*Oh, my God...the dream.*

She'd spent most of the day Sunday on pins and needles, waiting for him to approach her about what she thought she'd overheard, but when he hadn't, she'd written it off as another crazy fever dream. It couldn't have possibly been real, because Dean simply would not do something like that. The man she knew would never willingly go back to that sort of grind. The man she loved valued normalcy and time with his daughter way too much to even consider it. At least, that was what she had told herself.

But she was wrong. She was wrong about his motives, and she was wrong about him, just like she'd been wrong about Jake. And Jarrod. And Kevin. And Paul. God, how the hell did she keep falling for this?

By the time Dean arrived to presumably break the news, Abby was little more than a raw, festering nerve. Livid and sobbing, she flung open the door so hard that it ricocheted off the wall. "Why the fuck didn't you tell me?"

His expression transformed from surprise to confusion to pain in a matter of seconds. "Oh, shit. Ray called you, didn't he? I told him not to involve you, because it's about me, not you, but...I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. This isn't how I wanted you to find out. I wanted you to hear it from me."

With that, he moved closer, as though he intended to take her in his arms, but she backed away before he could make contact. "*Why didn't you tell me?*" she demanded again, so loud that her voice cracked halfway through. "Were you ever going to tell me, or were you just going to disappear?"

"I was going to tell you when you felt better, and when I had a better idea of what I was going to do. I didn't want to bother you with it, because I kept going back and forth on everything and—I'm sorry. I'm really sorry."

Abby gave half a mind to slamming the door in his face, but thought better of it. She needed to say this, and he needed to hear it—whether he wanted to or not. "What do you mean, you're *sorry*? This is what you wanted, isn't it?"

His answer was firm and resolute. "No. I would never want to do this to you, ever."

"Oh, please! You probably had it planned all along! Didn't you, Dalton?"

He winced, like her words had somehow wounded him. "Jesus, no! I didn't plan this at all. I've been telling them no for the past three and a half years, and I was gonna tell them no again, but I can't pass up this kind of

money, love. I just can't."

"Sure you can't." Her eyes narrowed as she sized him up. "That's what it all comes down to with people like you, isn't it? Money. Prestige. Fame. Getting your name back out there. You know, I knew it. I had you pegged from the second you walked in!"

"What the hell is that supposed to mean? Look, I don't know what Ray told you—"

"I didn't mean any more to you than this play did, admit it!" The words hurt all the way to her core and evoked a fresh crop of stinging tears. "I was just a fun way to pass some time!"

Wide-eyed, Dean stared at her for ten full seconds before croaking out a denial. "No! Why would you—"

"Don't tell me no! Actions speak louder than words, Dalton!"

"All right, stop calling me that. Just calm down."

That was the last thing she intended to do. "I can't believe I thought this was real! I can't believe I thought you really loved me! I should've known this is just what you do!"

"What I do?" He turned his head to the side, like he didn't understand her or something. "What do you mean, 'what I do?'"

Abby glared at him, hands balling into fists at her side. "Why don't you ask Kristen? Don't think I don't know about that—I saw the sweaters and all the pics she posted of you repaving her driveway and showing her daughters the seashells and—"

"Whoa. Whoa." He said it four more times, holding up a hand. "Did you go creeping on someone else's social media for info about me? Because that's super freakin' weird. You could just ask me if you want to know something."

"All right, fine. I will. You had a thing with her, didn't you?"

"That has *nothing* to do with—"

She spoke over him, placing an intentional pause between each of the words. "You had a thing with Kristen, didn't you?" When he only offered a stony stare in response, she repeated herself. "*You had—*"

"*Yes!*" he affirmed, much louder and angrier than she expected. "Yes, okay? We had a relationship! I don't know what the hell that has to do with anything, or why it would matter to you, but yes. We did, okay?"

Somehow, hearing it confirmed upset her more. "Oh, my God—Mom was right! I'm not special! You sleep with all your leading ladies! I can't

believe I..." As much as she longed to finish that sentence, her tears rendered it impossible.

Dean stepped closer, his head angled downward to establish eye contact. "No. Your mom doesn't even know me, and she has no right to tell you that. Now, listen. Just listen to me. What happened with Kristen and me was a long time ago. We were both in a really bad spot, because Chels had just left me and Matt had just left her and we were...broken, okay? We were broken, and we just kind of held onto each other and stuff happened. It never should have happened, but it did."

"Oh, I'm sure," she scoffed, wiping at her tears.

"You act like I cheated on you or something! That was years ago! I don't see the problem! Are you jealous or something? I don't get it."

"Of course you don't get it, because you don't care! Why should you? You got what you wanted, and you got a fun little fling to go along with it, so everything's great in your world!"

For a second, he almost looked like he was going to laugh. "Oh, come on! Really?"

"You know the worst part of this? The worst part is, I knew this was what you were after all along, but once you went all *Brandon* on me, I lost sight—"

"Okay, stop. Listen. You're freaking out right now. Just calm down for a second and let me explain..." Mid-sentence, he paused, cocking an eyebrow in her direction. "Wait a minute. Did you just say I went all Brandon on you?"

"Well, what the hell else would you call it? You gave me those same looks and flashed those same dimples and worked that same magic, but none of it was real! None of it meant anything to you! You were just playing Brandon for me, and I guess I was just playing every housewife in America, because I fell for it! I fell in love with a *character*, oh my God!"

He sucked in a quick breath, one hand lifted to his mouth. "Wait. Are you saying you think I was...playing Brandon for you? You think this was just...acting?"

Abby lobbed a shaky finger at him. "I could see it. I didn't want to believe it at the time, but I could see it. There were all these little parallels, these little flashes of you on screen. I used to get excited when I saw them—how stupid is that? I'd say, 'oh, that's really Dino right there,' but was it? I don't know anymore, because I don't..." Her voice broke again, this time on a sob.

Dean's jaw ticked as he listened, and he took a giant step back. "I thought

you said you'd never seen the show.”

“Don't you dare try to turn this around on me!”

“You said you didn't watch soaps. You said you had no idea who I was. You said you had to look me up on the internet.” Though even for the most part, the words were imbued with palpable accusation. “You lied to me, and even worse than that, you lied to my *daughter*. Jesus Christ, you're a fangirl, aren't you?”

The allegation was so ridiculous that she had to bite down to stifle a laugh. “No, I'm not a fangirl! I had no idea who you were before—”

“*Wow!* You know, it's one thing to trick me, but you tricked my *kid!* That's low!”

“I didn't trick anybody! You are the one—”

“You had the balls to come into my house and fool her into thinking that you actually cared when all you wanted to do was cozy up to *Brandon!*” His interruption was so forceful that it silenced her immediately, and her breath caught when she looked up at him. In the entire time she'd known him, she'd never seen him angry. Peeved, yes. Miffed, a bit. But off-stage and out of character, she had never seen him enraged...until now. His extremities shook as he glared at her, eyes seeming to darken as they narrowed. When he finally spoke again, the words were little more than a growl. “She is seven years old, and she wants a mom more than anything, and you let her think...wow, that's fucked up! You are *one fucked up...*”

Without finishing his insult, he turned to go. Abby was left with little choice but to follow, shoeless and wearing only a long nightshirt. “Don't bring her into this! This isn't about Preslie, it's about you! I was in love with you, or at least, I thought—”

“You weren't in love with me, you were in love with Brandon—you just said so!” His reminder was delivered without a single glance back in her direction. “And, you know, I've gotta tell you—you're good. You are really, really good, because I never would have pegged you for a fangirl! You acted like you hated me!”

The jagged pavement stung her bare feet, but she made every effort to keep up with him. “Because I did hate you! I hated how you came in and took over and how everybody fell all over you!”

“Oh, like you weren't doing the same thing online with your little fan sites? Your little groups on Friendzone where you and all your buddies get

together to swoon over pictures of me without a shirt on—man, you must’ve been *really* disappointed that I’m not that jacked anymore! I almost want to apologize to you, but...yeah, no.” Dean let out a shaky breath as he rounded the corner. “All this for a fangirl. Again. Good Lord.”

“I’m not a *fangirl*, damn it! I never even saw that stupid show before I met you! The only reason I watched it was so I could see your range! I wanted to know what I was dealing with! I kept watching because—”

“Okay, you know what? We’re done,” he resolved, before she could finish. “We’re done here. I don’t even know what the hell this is, but...yeah, I’m not doing it. I’ve wasted enough time on you as it is.”

His words carried the same wallop as a punch to the stomach, but she refused to let it show. Swallowing a sob, she yelled after him, “I’ve wasted enough time on you too, so fine! You go right back to LA and back to Kristen and all your precious money!”

Dean did not need to be asked twice. He stalked the rest of the way to his Suburban and slammed the door without another word. Then he peeled out of the parking lot with such reckless fury that he almost hit somebody.

Abby’s breath hitched and quickened as she saw herself back inside. She was shaking all over. Dear God, they were done.



“Are we gonna go see Abby and Meryl tonight?”

Preslie’s question from the back seat was earnest and hopeful enough to make Dean squirm, and he was grateful she couldn’t see the grimace on his face as he debated the most delicate way to answer it. “Uh, no,” he finally choked out. “I don’t think so.”

She frowned at that, popping two more doughnut holes into her mouth. “Why not? I wanna see the kitty!”

Her muffled protest brought a surprising amount of relief. The cat. She was concerned about the cat, not Abby—and he could work with that. “Yeah, well, I don’t think Pumpkin really digs it when you do that. He’s kind of jealous, you know? He likes to have you all to himself, so I think it’s best we just stay home. You don’t wanna give him a complex or anything.”

She chewed on that, and her breakfast, for the next ten seconds. “Oh, okay. So, is Abby gonna come over, then?”

Damn it, he should’ve known that was going to be her next question.

“Um...well...actually...” Dean reached for his coffee. Man, was he gonna need it for this. “Yeah, so, Abby’s not gonna be, um, hanging out with us anymore.”

Preslie’s eyebrows lifted, and so did her voice—a full register, rendering it little more than a squeak. “Why not?”

Times like this made him wish he was a lot better at improv, or at least explaining things to children. He had no idea where to even start. Honesty was good. He didn’t want to give her any false hopes or anything, but he also didn’t want to tell her the full, uncensored truth. There was no sense in both of them being morose and seething for the whole rest of the month.

Tightening his grip around the wheel, he exhaled. “She’s, um, busy.”

“With what?”

“Work. And other stuff.”

“Oh.”

Satisfied with that response, Pres returned her attention to breakfast. Still, he consulted the mirror every few seconds to see if her expression had changed. She didn’t look dismayed or bummed out—she appeared more contemplative than anything, which likely meant there were twenty-eight more questions lumbering through her head right now.

He spoke up before she could ask any of them. “Hey, so, what are we doing this weekend? I don’t have to work anymore, so we can do whatever you want. Do you wanna go back to Jump Town?”

The diversion worked. “Not if Mason’s gonna go, too. He gets on my nerves and he never wants to do what I want to do. It’s no fun with him there.”

As always, her candor brought a smile to his face. “No, I don’t think we’ll take Mason this time.”

“Then yeah, okay. Can we go to the arcade, too?”

“If you want.”

“And bowling? We haven’t been bowling in forever!”

“Why not?” At this point, he’d be willing to take her to the moon if she wanted to go. He needed all the distractions he could get. He also needed to soak up as much time with her as possible before December 4 rolled around.

She didn't know about that yet, and he wasn't sure how to broach the subject. Mom said it had to be at the right moment, not on a school night, and definitely not in public, because there was bound to be a lot of crying involved. That, it would seem, was everyone's go-to reaction on the news. Even Mom had gotten a little misty when he told her about it, and he'd really been hoping she'd be more supportive than that. It was a tough decision, one he didn't make lightly...even if it might've looked that way to some.

When he got to the theater last night, he was still largely undecided. The clock was ticking—Rocky had made it clear they wanted an answer no later than today—but he was still on the fence about a lot of stuff. It had been his intention to talk to Ray about what sort of allowances they could make, then sit down with Abby to get her take on it and go from there. And...of course, that was not at all what happened.

Ray went nuts. Balls to the wall, raving like a madman *nuts*, in front of Gina and that guy delivering the water, who got the hell out of Dodge as fast as he could. Something told Dean he would've been wise to do the same, but he stayed to argue the point until it became clear that doing so was just adding fuel to the fire. Ray went from bitching about Saturday's cancelation and how inconvenient it had been to reminding him how "lucky" he was that they'd even taken a chance on some "washed up soap hunk" in the first place—and that wasn't even the worst part. The worst part was when he'd all but snarled, "I don't care what everyone else is telling you—you aren't special! You're not even very good! Get over yourself or get out, because we don't need this!"

It went without saying that Dean chose the latter option, and in the ultimate act of defiance, he called Rocky to accept the offer with Ray still ranting in the background. It felt pretty damned good in the moment, he had to admit, but the triumph didn't last long. Once he got to the car, the magnitude of what he'd done hit so hard he could've sworn he'd just taken a shot to the gut...and the night went downhill from there.

It was two in the morning by the time his eyes finally closed, but he wasn't sure what followed could actually be considered sleep. It felt more like a semi-conscious daze, a three-hour replay of the evening's most pivotal moments and an abundance of worry about where to go from here. This was going to be a long, long day.

"Did you break up?"

Preslie's question was so surprising that at first, he thought he must've

misheard her. Did she even know what that meant?

His eyes traveled back to the mirror. “What, baby?”

She repeated herself, her little brow furrowed with concern. “Did you break up with Abby? Is that why you’re so sad?”

Shit, was he sad? He’d been trying really hard not to be. “I’m not sad.”

Pres cocked her head to the side, as though trying to gauge the truth of that statement. “Are you sure? You look pretty sad.”

“I’m not sad, baby. I’m just tired.” It was, more or less, the truth. He was more exhausted than anything right now...and that exhaustion had helped to considerably dull the effects of last night’s crushing betrayal. A guy had to take his positives where he could get them, right?

Not that it didn’t still hurt—it did, and it probably would for the foreseeable future. Getting played again was never fun. Having to tell his mom about it was even less fun, especially when she added insult to injury by admitting she’d always had “reservations about that girl. She came on way too strong. I knew something was the matter with her!”

Dean wanted to ask why the hell she didn’t tell him then, but by that point, he was too shaken to say much of anything. He just listened, and bore down as hard as he could, so as not to lose it in her presence. He didn’t want to lose it at all, because after what she’d done, Abby didn’t deserve his tears. Once Mom left, though, and he found himself on the deck with just a stiff drink, a bunch of hungry seagulls and Karen Carpenter’s melancholy hits to keep him company, things sort of went sideways. Maybe he should’ve stuck to beer. And Bowie.

The pain was so intense it burned even worse than the liquid death left over from his birthday. It was a searing, all-over ache that intensified a little more with every sip, and once he finally gave into it, that was pretty much the end. He was a blubbering fool for the entire rest of the night—he cried on the deck, in the shower, while he was shaving off his scraggly Alex beard, and all the way to bed. He swore he’d even cried in his sleep, because when the alarm went off this morning, his pillow was abnormally wet...but he would not do it again today. He couldn’t.

No matter how unexpected Abby’s deception had been, and how deep the resulting wound ran, he had no choice but to cauterize that sucker and move on. He could be angry about it for the next hundred years—that was fine, but all this moping and crying had to stop. He had to get it together,

because it wasn't worth that. More to the point, *she* wasn't worth that, even if his heart would have him believe otherwise.

His heart, as he'd learned, could not be trusted. All of his more questionable decisions came from listening to it, like when he stuck with Chels through seven years of screaming matches, infidelity and periodic drug abuse. Like when he and Kristen made the leap from friends and co-stars to a sort of modern *Brady Bunch*, cohabitating with three kids between them until his eventual move back to Texas. Like when he gave Maria the benefit of the doubt until Margot sent him screenshots of sexually explicit and borderline obscene posts she'd made about him on a Friendzone fan site...three years before they ever even met. If his heart had its way, he would've walked into every wall he encountered, and plunged off a cliff at least eight times by now. It was best for everyone involved that he didn't give its advice any heed.

The whole rest of the way to school, Pres took it upon herself to offer ways to get over the blues, despite his adamant and repeated insistence that he was not sad in any way.

"Just in case you are," she specified, then rattled off such helpful hints as: eat every single thing in sight, make friends with a dog, and watch a funny movie. Absolutely none of those suggestions were doable at the moment, but Dean still smiled and nodded.

"That's excellent advice. If I'm ever sad, I'll remember that. Thank you."

"It's gonna be okay," she assured, with such heartfelt sincerity that it made him a little uncomfortable. "Dr. Stacey says sometimes when people break up, it's because they were supposed to, you know?"

He tried and failed to suppress a groan. "Don't tell me you've been watching Dr. Stacey again."

The last time she had done that, she'd fancied herself a therapist for the whole next week, and spouted esoteric buzzwords like "codependency" and "disassociation" completely out of context, and to all the wrong people...like Rabbi Greenbaum.

"Nana watches her. I think she's pretty boring, but sometimes, she has funny people on. There was one guy who thought he was Elvis. And another guy who thought he was also Elvis, and she made both Elvises talk to each other and they fought about who was the real Elvis and..." Mid-sentence, she broke off, giggling. "Neither one of them was Elvis because Elvis is dead!"

And this was what passed for entertainment these days. "Wow, that's

wild.”

“Dr. Stacey says that when people break up, it’s because the...I think she said it was the *galaxy* is pulling them in other ways, so they have to go that way and sometimes, they come back, but sometimes, it’s okay and they just go on and do something else. So, don’t be sad, Daddy. Just go where the galaxy says to go. It’ll be okay.”

For a lady who staged grudge matches between dueling Elvises, Dr. Stacey actually made a lot of sense with that one. Dean had long believed that everything happened for a reason, and that whatever was meant to be would ultimately be. Therefore, getting duped by the second fangirl in as many years might not have made much sense at the moment, but in another couple of decades, maybe it would. Maybe this whole excruciating experience was meant to free him up for other things; things that didn’t involve dating, feelings, or any such foolishness. Maybe it was some sort of sign from the galaxy (as Pres so adorably put it) that he needed to hang it up, once and for all, because relationships were clearly not his strong point.

If he wanted to be philosophical about this, there was probably a lot to learn from it; hard, painful lessons about what not to do in the future—and maybe one day, when it wasn’t so fresh and he wasn’t so tired, he might sit down and absorb them. For now, though, all he could say was this sucked. It really freakin’ sucked.

“Hey, have a good day. I love you.”

“I love you, too,” Pres chirped, as she unbuckled herself. “And don’t be sad! It’ll all be okay, you’ll see!”

Her optimism was sweet, but not the least bit infectious. Still, he knew better than to dispute it. “Sure it will.”



It took about a week for Abby to sufficiently recover from the effects of her cold, but bouncing back from Dean Altman—make that Dalton Giles—was a whole other matter. It felt like she'd endured a category five hurricane, which wasn't surprising when she thought about it. That man was essentially a force of nature. Powerful, savage and unstoppable, he took aim at everything in her life that mattered, and much like when Ike battered his beloved coastline, it was going to take time to clean up the mess.

The only difference was, after Ike, no one lay awake at night missing him. No one thought back to all the good times they had together prior to landfall. No one reread Ike's text messages, trying to figure out how the same hurricane who wrote such sweet, beautiful things could make such a sharp turn and decimate everything in its path. No one wondered if perhaps the course could've been altered with the right amount of...something, and no one spent two-and-a-half weeks trying to put their finger on what that *something* was.

No, Houstonians, and especially Galvestonians, were glad to see that sucker go. They were eager to rebuild. They didn't want to dwell on the loss of life, property and the all-important tourist revenue. They wanted to move forward and, at least according to her mother, the same could not be said for her.

She was wallowing way too much, Mom said, especially given their

relationship had barely spanned a month. This was what she'd warned about, of course. This was why she had always preached the evils of premature intimacy and throwing your pearls before swine, as though Abby'd had any choice in the matter. What she felt for Dean was almost supernatural. Not that she believed in past life connections, kismet, or any of that other romantic mumbo-jumbo. She just thought she knew a good thing when she saw it, but man, was she ever wrong.

The worst part about it was she'd been down this road so many times, but hadn't learned a single thing. She would have thought that given her vast experience with smooth-talking assholes, she would've seen straight through his charms, but no. She was supposed to know better, to sense this sort of thing coming from a mile away, but she didn't. And now, she got the pleasure of gluing her heart back together, for the tenth time, but somehow, that was so much harder this time around.

Even when Jarrod called off their engagement after the venue was booked and the guest list confirmed, she hadn't been this much of a mess. Of course, that hurt, and it was humiliating, but it didn't shock her the way this did. Jarrod had grown more and more distant, less and less involved, and she could almost see the writing on the wall. Dean, on the other hand, seemed to become more of a fixture in her life every day. They hadn't been together long in the grand scheme of things, but there was still an inexplicable connection between them, a sense of security and permanency she'd never felt with Jarrod or anybody else. She never, in a million years, imagined that it would end this soon...or at all, if she was honest with herself.

She thought he was it. *The one*. It might've been way too soon to start thinking about rings and dresses, but there had been no doubt in her mind that things would eventually head in that direction. It all just felt so right, so unforced, so magical...and none of it meant anything to him. She was just a cheap thrill to pass the time while he waited for his second chance to come along, a realization that hurt even worse than seeing her lifelong dream go up in flames.

Thrown into a flux by their star's abrupt departure, McMillan had yet to reopen. It took two weeks to even figure out how to proceed, and there were strong indications the play might get scrapped altogether, but at the last minute, they decided to recast and retool it instead. Abby was relieved to hear it, even if she had to admit she sort of wished they'd let it die. In some

respects, it already had. No one would ever bring the same dynamic energy to Alex's character that Dean did. It wouldn't matter if they resurrected Laurence Olivier and shoved him out there, it still wouldn't be the same. What they'd created together was special, and it couldn't be replicated by anyone else, least of all some plumbing apprentice named Tim.

Not that her new leading man was a bad actor—or person. So far, he'd proven both capable and pleasant in rehearsal. He knew his lines, he remembered to limp, and he claimed to understand the subtext, but he just wasn't...Dean. Tim didn't react in the moment, the same way he did. He didn't exhibit the same full-bodied, unspoken rage that defined Dean's portrayal of the character. He couldn't say those lines with near the conviction. He tried really hard, and he'd improved a lot with her coaching, but he just couldn't sell Alex's pain. She didn't *believe* it, and neither would anyone else. This was going to be a long two months.

At least, though, she had Thanksgiving to look forward to—and the time off work, even if she wasn't sure how to spend it. Prior to the breakup, she'd made plans to host a party, and was actually pretty excited about it. She'd been hoping that would give her inner circle a chance to get to know Dean better, and maybe come to love him just as much as she did, but now...she had no idea what she was going to do. Even returning text messages from her girlfriends was asking a lot at this point, so socializing with them and seeing the concern on their faces was not going to happen.

Spending the time alone was even less appealing. Without work or rehearsal to distract her, her mind was bound to go anywhere and the last thing she wanted to do was mar a holiday specifically designated to be thankful for one's blessings with weepy, angst-ridden regret. Maybe she could take a trip to somewhere she'd never been before, like...North Carolina. It was nice this time of year, wasn't it? Flights were probably exorbitant, and getting one at the last minute was going to be a challenge, but it would at least give her something to do other than count the days since she'd last seen him. Today marked thirty, by the way. One month.

One month since the man of her dreams drop-kicked her—and the theater—to reclaim the life he'd once said he'd never go back to. One month since he dismissed her, rather cruelly, as a fangirl, and implied that their time together had been a waste. One month since he sped out of the parking lot, and her life, never to be seen again. Sometimes, she wondered if that had

been as easy for him as he made it appear, but by the same token, she was pretty sure she already knew.

Word on the street was, he'd already moved back to LA. Val was the one who'd told her, and though Abby wasn't certain how she could've known, she had no reason to doubt it. What was left for him here? Anonymity? A teensy corner of the gulf? Fond memories of something that should've lasted a lot longer than it did? Hardly.

It pained her to think of that sweet little beach house sitting vacant and discarded—but the idea of anyone else living there hurt even worse. She shuddered to imagine some stranger taking advantage of that view, or falling in love on that deck. She couldn't picture some other little girl running up and down those stairs, chasing some other kitten, who showed no more interest in her than Pumpkin had in Preslie. Life had to go on, of course, and she was sure a place like that would have no trouble finding a new owner...but would they ever love it the way she did? Would they understand how special it was? Would they, too, spend some of the happiest times of their life there?

And...that was why she needed to get away. Romanticizing someone else's house was neither healthy nor sane, and she would not allow herself to do it all week long. What, exactly, was there to see in North Carolina? Any fun attractions? Abby sat up in bed long enough to retrieve her phone from the charger. This was going to require some research.

By the time Wendy called, an hour later, she'd deemed North Carolina unsuitable for her impromptu vacation and moved onto its more southerly cousin. Every picture she saw of Charleston just made her love it more, and from what she was reading, there didn't seem to be any shortage of fun old buildings for her to explore there. Flights were relatively reasonable, too, especially for such a last-minute trip. Lifting the phone to her ear, she smiled. "So, I think I'm spending Thanksgiving in Charleston."

"Charleston?" Wendy sounded just as confused as Abby thought she might.

"South Carolina." When her explanation was met with silence, she sighed. "It's been a while since my last adventure, okay? And what better time to get away than now?"

"Okay," Wendy drawled. "But does that mean you're not coming to Friendsgiving tomorrow? Because you were supposed to bring the desserts."

Oh, goodness. She forgot that she'd agreed to that. "Um, well..."

“It’s okay. You don’t have to come. I can get someone else to pick up something—or I can run and grab a few pies when I get off work.”

“Ray’s still got you working? I thought he was going to Pennsylvania this week.”

“He is, to meet Eric’s family, but there are still a few last-minute things to do around here. I got Tim’s page set up on the website, and I took D’s down. I’m going through his emails now. Would you believe he never checked them? There are over a thousand of them there, and they’re just taking up space on the server, so I’m forwarding them over to him and...” Mid-sentence, she stopped. “Sorry.”

“You don’t have to apologize for saying his name.”

“Well, I don’t want to make things any harder—”

“It’s okay,” Abby assured, though the tightness in her chest denoted otherwise. “And for the record, yes—I would believe he never checked his emails. He never checked his social media, either. He’s not into that whole thing.”

“Yeah, he told me. He said he forgot he even had an email on the site, and asked me to forward the messages over, but I don’t think he realized how many there were! His phone is probably going nuts right now!”

Surprised, she started sputtering. “Wait...you...talked to him?” Too late, she realized how desperate that sounded and cleared her throat. “Well, good. That’s good. How’s he doing?”

“Um, let’s talk about Charleston instead.”

Abby’s fingers tightened around the phone. “No, let’s talk about this. How is he? How’s the good life in LA been treating him?”

There was a long, poignant silence on the other end of the line. “Abbs...”

“What? Am I not allowed to ask? For Pete’s sake, it’s been a month! It’s not like I’m sitting around and crying about him anymore!” Technically, she was *lying* around and crying about him now, but Wendy did not need to know that.

“Are you sure you don’t want to tell me about Charleston?”

“Good grief, is it that bad? Just tell me already!”

“He’s not in LA yet,” Wendy informed, with a sigh. “He doesn’t leave until the fourth...and he asked about you, too.”

That revelation was enough to stop Abby’s heart. No wonder she hadn’t wanted to say anything. “He...did?”

“He wanted to know how you were doing, and how everything was going with Tim. He said to give Tim his number in case he ever had any questions, which I thought was...” She hesitated for what felt like an eternity. “Really nice of him.”

It was, but in some ways, expected. The man she had fallen in love with was just the type to extend help to his replacement...but the fact he had a replacement at all checked her back into reality. The man she fell in love with was no more real than the flawless saint he'd played on television. It was all a con, and the last thing she wanted to see was Tim—or worse, Wendy—getting sucked into it.

Thus, she took it upon herself to warn, “He doesn't mean it. He doesn't mean a damned thing he says. I found that out the hard way.”

Wendy was silent for the next several seconds. It was clear she did not know how to take that. “So, Charleston,” she finally announced. “That's random. What'd your mom say?”

Abby reset herself before acknowledging the subject change. “I haven't told her yet. I haven't even booked the flight. I need to figure out where I'm going to stay and what I'm going to do with Meryl first. You wouldn't want to cat sit for a couple of days, would you?”

“Um, yeah, I'll have to pass on that, thanks—but good luck, and have fun! And don't worry about Friendsgiving. I'll pick something up tonight.”

“Thanks.”

“Take care of yourself. You deserve that.”

Abby let out a slow breath. Yes, she did—and it was about time she started acting like it. “I will. Thanks.”



Dean had to admit, he was surprised life got back to normal as quickly as it did. Given how rough the breakup had been at first, he'd expected there to be more bumps in the road, but once he got back to the old routine, things evened out pretty fast. Of course, that might've had to do with how busy he kept himself. There wasn't much time for moping around when he was up at five in the morning, out the door by a quarter to seven, working twelve

straight hours in a shipyard that felt more like an inferno half the time, stumbling home at seven-thirty to cram in as much time with his kid as possible before exhaustion got the better of both of them, and collapsing into bed no later than ten.

Weekends allowed a bit more flexibility, but were no less jam-packed. Pres made sure of that, devising an itinerary of fun activities that sent them from one end of the city to the other. Over the past month, they'd gone to the Galleria, the Kemah Boardwalk, the San Jacinto Monument and more arcades, bowling alleys and playgrounds than he could count, and she had even more planned for this week, now that he was officially on vacation. She wanted to see The Alamo, on the way back from their weekend camping trip to the Hill Country, and he was going to surprise her with tickets to Sea World, too. She'd been wanting to go there for years.

Mom kind of gave him the side-eye when she heard about that, and muttered something about spoiling her again, but truly, it was the least he could do. Pres wasn't looking forward to the fourth any more than he was, and she had become even more clingy in anticipation. She didn't even want to walk into school now, and had taken to crying until he got out and physically escorted her to class. Then, she held onto him in the hallway until the teacher came to pry her off, just like she had back in kindergarten. It was horrifying to watch her regress like that, especially after the strides she'd made in independence over the past year, and that made Dean feel even worse for accepting the offer in the first place. What the hell was he thinking?

It was bad enough he had to leave his home, his comfort zone, and his baby to spend two weeks in a city he'd come to hate, but the fact those two weeks were in December made this trip especially egregious. He was going to miss the last two nights of Hanukkah—something Pres lamented every single chance she got—and possibly Chelsie's annual end of the year visit as well, but he wasn't sure on that one, because he couldn't get her to commit to a date. With any luck, she'd be willing to work with him and hold off until January, because the double whammy of her abrupt departure *and* his being all the way in Los Angeles was going to be more than Preslie's fragile constitution could take.

As it was, he was positive she was going to need counseling to get over this. She'd already begged him not to go—on her knees and everything—and that was, hands down, the hardest thing he'd ever had to witness. When he

reminded her, blinking back tears of his own, that he didn't have a choice in the matter, she changed tactics and begged to come with him instead. She promised to be extra good, and not make any trouble while he was working, and he wished he could've taken her up on it, but schools didn't take too kindly to that sort of thing. Besides, who was he going to leave her with? He couldn't very well take her to the studio with him. To hear Mindy tell it, the pace on that set was even crazier than it had been when he left. They were shooting two shows a day now, which left barely enough room for lunch, so even if he brought her with him, it wasn't like he'd actually get to spend any time with her.

Damn, this sucked, but there was no getting around it. They were going to have to spend two weeks apart, but at least he'd be home in time for her little holiday program at school. That was one saving grace, right? There were others, too. Like the money, and...well, mainly the money. That money meant not having to choose between paying off the mortgage and taking the entire summer off to spend with Pres. That money was going to allow him to do both—and that was what motivated him to pack.

For the most part, he was pretty impressed with himself. He wasn't due to leave for another week and a half, but he was already all set for when he did. He'd made all the necessary arrangements for Pres and Pumpkin in his absence. He'd lined up a few reunions with a few long-lost pals for when he got there. He'd been faithfully studying the scripts ever since they arrived four days ago and had spent the past couple of nights on *ScreenTime* with Mindy going over them. He had even taken the hard, but necessary, steps to get himself back in shape for the camera: squeezing in midday trips to the gym, running up and down the beach twice a day, and being a whole lot more careful about what he ate.

So far, he was down eleven pounds, and though every last one of them had been a battle, at least now he was prepared in case the powers that be told him to take his shirt off for some stupid reason. Not that he expected they would. These writers seemed a lot more sensible than the last crew. To be honest, Dean couldn't understand Kristen's beef with them, because what they came up with for him had surpassed all his expectations. Brandon wasn't some milquetoast spirit or ghost, come to console those he'd left behind. He was a snarky, quick-witted manifestation of Octavia's psychotic break; an imaginary friend, so to speak, who reminded her of the last person she'd

shot—and damn, was that going to be fun!

Not only would he get to work with Mumma Mindy, one of his favorite people in the world, he would also get to deliver such comedic gold as: “Well, if you want my medical opinion, you’re nuts...but hey, it could be worse, right? You could be me, lumbering around in that dust bowl you call an imagination.” And: “What’s the matter, cupcake? Straightjacket a little too tight? I’d help you, but the last time I tried that, you shot me, so I think I’ll stand over here and look like I give a damn instead.”

After a straight month of Alex, the seething cauldron of angst and instability, it was going to be nice to actually be funny for a change, but he couldn’t lie and say he didn’t sort of miss that guy. It took a long time for him to get comfortable in the part, to really get to know the character, but once he did, pretty awesome things had started happening...but that chapter in his life was over. They had a new guy now, and at least according to Wendy, he was doing pretty good. So was Abby, not that he expected any less.

Oh, sure, she might’ve put on a good show for everyone around her, and milked the drama of their breakup for all it was worth, but Dean was positive she would’ve moved on by now. What reason would she have to dwell on things? It wasn’t like she’d ever loved him, anyway—she loved Brandon, as sad and sick as that was.

The whole thing made his head hurt, so he did his best not to think about it. All it did was dredge up painful memories, and he’d been doing quite well to ignore those. Suffice to say, there was a reason he kept such a hectic schedule these days. Without a hundred different distractions to keep him occupied over the course of the day, he might’ve actually had a little time to think...to process...to feel, and that was out of the question.

He had to keep going, no matter how broken and demoralized he was on the inside, because anything less would have signaled defeat—and just like when Chels moved to Vegas with that prick Keith Cohen, he would sooner die than give Abby the satisfaction of knowing she’d gotten to him. As far as she need be concerned, he was having the time of his life, living it up as though she’d never existed. She didn’t deserve to know the truth: he was miserable. Perpetually busy, running on fumes and *miserable*.

At least last night was one of the easier ones. To make it up to Pres for having to take time out of their schedule to participate in Kristen’s awkward virtual fan event, they spent four hours at Jump Town, then another three

driving around in search of someone—anyone—who might’ve already had their Christmas lights up. An exhausting day, all in all, but at least it meant Dean had no trouble at all getting to sleep. It was staying that way that proved to be a problem. Pumpkin woke him up the first time, skidding and pouncing across the bed, until he finally gave in and lifted the blanket to allow him inside. A short time after that, Pres came in, too. She’d had another bad dream, but couldn’t tell him much more about it than she was alone.

Most of the time, she went right back to sleep after nestling into bed beside him, but last night, she must’ve cried for half an hour about how scary it was while he offered the best comfort he could: he held her close, whispered assurances and hummed lullabies until he couldn’t keep his eyes open any longer. Luckily, he didn’t wake up again until daylight, when Pres started poking him for some reason.

“Daddy!”

“Mmm,” he grunted without opening his eyes.

That, clearly, was not the response she’d been looking for. She poked him again, her tiny finger boring into his spine like a needle, and when that failed to rouse him, she resorted to shoving instead. “Daddy! Look!”

Forced into consciousness, he took a moment to stretch (and groan) before rolling toward her. “What, baby? What is it?”

Seated beside him, Pres used the remote in her hand to gesture toward the TV. “Look, it’s you!”

Confused, he turned a bleary gaze in that direction...and that was when his breath caught. It was him, all right. Well, him as Brandon, anyway—bound, bloody, and begging for his life on the pier. There was a gun pointed at the side of his head, and if memory served, he was about fifteen seconds away from getting pushed to his knees, kicked into the water and left to die.

“What the *fuck?*” The word shot out of Dean’s mouth before he could think better of it, and he snatched the remote, mashing down the power button. Dear Lord, what was she trying to do, scar herself for life? Her separation anxiety was bad enough as it was—she’d really never want to let go of him if she saw what happened after that!

Strangely, Pres seemed more bothered by the obscenity than watching someone hold a gun on her dad. “That’s not a nice word,” she reminded, arms crossed.

“Well, this is not a nice...” Too groggy to formulate a comeback, he

sighed. Patient. He had to be patient right now. “Why were you watching that? I told you—”

“I didn’t *mean* to. It just came on.”

“Really? It just came on? That’s the excuse you’re going with?”

Though he’d hoped his skepticism would convince her to fess up, she doubled down, grumbling into her chest, “But it did. I was gonna look for one of Sean’s video game reviews, but I saw the picture of you on the screen and I just wanted to see. I never got to watch you on TV before. I just wanted to see.”

“You can’t watch me on TV, though. I told you that. That’s not something you need to...” Mid-sentence, Dean paused, cocking an eyebrow at her. “What do you mean there was a picture of me on the screen?”

“Look, I’ll show you!” Pres took the remote, turning back on the television and navigating effortlessly to the Streamline home screen. “See? Right there!”

Sure enough, there he was, in the first three video thumbnails, all listed under the helpful heading *Suggested for You*. Dean blinked at the screen for a full ten seconds, trying to make the pieces fit. What the hell? Why would Streamline suggest he watch himself? He never had before—he was way too self-conscious for that sort of thing, but...

His head snapped toward her. “Pres, have you been watching me on Streamline?”

Her response was immediate. “No.”

“Are you sure? Because I can look at the history.”

She seemed insulted he’d even suggest such a thing. “No. I told you no. That was the first time, promise!”

Despite her firm insistence, he couldn’t help but notice that she was a bit reluctant to surrender the remote—and there was a good reason for that. The watch history was a veritable smorgasbord of things he hoped she’d never find, and the longer he scrolled through it, the redder his face got.

She’d seen *everything*, from all fourteen parts of Brandon’s violent, bloody demise, to three parts of his funeral, to full episodes of the soap in a non-sequential, zig-zagging sort of order, to clips and love scenes galore, to fan tribute videos, to archived social media chats he’d done with Kristen, to that beer commercial he did a decade ago, to one of his interviews on *Soap Chat*, to tons of footage from his days on *Hollywood Live*, to his turn as a rapist and

murderer on *Texas Justice*...and she had been watching for months.

Interspersed with other strange videos, like makeup tutorials and guided meditations, the trail stretched all the way back to September, when Pres took it upon herself to watch a helpful little primer put out by some channel called Planet Dalton. Entitled, “Who is Brandon Chisholm,” it ran for a mind-boggling forty-eight minutes, and fittingly, it was one of the first videos she’d watched. Right below that, on the same day, was another one of his social media chats with Kristen—and if the utterly miserable look on his face in the thumbnail was any indication, that was the one they had filmed on the same day Chels had filed for divorce.

“What the...” Consciously, Dean censored himself this time, though he couldn’t contain a glare as he glanced over at her. “Never watched it before, huh?”

“Wow. I didn’t know you made so many videos, Daddy!” Mouth agape, Pres appeared just as confounded as he was, and though she’d proven to be quite a capable little actress in the past, something about her reaction seemed...genuine.

“So, you mean you didn’t...” He trailed off, locking his eyes on the top right corner of the screen. Just above the menu, bolded white text captured all of his attention in a heartbeat: *Welcome Back, Abby!*

Wait...that was Abby’s sordid watch history he’d just spent ten minutes sifting through? Because that would explain the makeup and meditations, even if it cast doubt on most everything else. Why would Abby go to the trouble of watching all that stuff? Didn’t she see it when it aired the first time? And why would she start on September 11, a week after they met? And why the hell did she need to watch a forty-eight minute introduction to Brandon’s character if she was already in love with the guy?

Wait, no. None of that made sense. She would not need to waste her time watching that stuff unless she just forgot or something. It had been a few years, after all, and maybe she needed a refresher course. Then again...maybe she’d been telling the truth when she said she’d never seen the show before she met him. Maybe she really watched just to gauge his range. Maybe he was wrong about her. Maybe she wasn’t a fangirl after all.

But...no. That didn’t make sense, either. She had to be. She’d admitted she was in love with Brandon, not him, and only a fangirl would say something like that—but had that even been what she’d said? The whole

thing had happened so damned fast he couldn't really remember. Something about Brandon. Something about him playing Brandon to trick her, and that she fell in love with a character, not him...or something. Man, it was too early in the morning for all this.

Dean exited the Streamline app before Pres could get too close a glimpse of his extensive body of work, then groped behind her for his phone. He had to sort this out. As much as he didn't want to talk to her, and as much as it was likely going to hurt him to do so, he had to know, because this sort of thing had the potential to bug him for the rest of his life.

It was only a quarter after seven, which made it way too early for a phone call, so he took the easy way out and opted for a text. *Call me as soon as you can. We need to talk.*



Dean's message came in while Abby was passing through airport security, and that made it much easier to ignore. The entire purpose of this getaway was to forget about that man, and the pain his departure had left her in...and besides, she couldn't think of a single thing they "needed" to talk about, anyway. Hadn't they already said it all?

Though she couldn't lie and say she didn't suspect he'd try to contact her eventually. Once Wendy said he'd asked how she was doing, the writing was pretty much on the wall. She just didn't think it would be the very next day. She'd thought she had a little more time to prepare, fortify, and plot a solid defense. She had thought he'd be too busy with the upcoming holiday and that huge cross-country move to reach out to her, of all people. And, just like all her other hopeful, generous assumptions of that man, she had been dead wrong.

What the hell did he want, anyway? Was it closure? Jarrod had wanted closure so he could move on with Nikki—not that he really needed it, because he'd moved on months prior, when he first started seeing her behind Abby's back. Last she'd heard, they were expecting a child. Must be nice.

Was it forgiveness? Jake had wanted forgiveness, after a so-called religious experience, likely edged along by his twelve-step program. It had taken five years for him to approach her, and thirteen seconds for her to shut him down. What reason did she have to forgive him? He was, after all, the first to steal

her heart under false pretenses, and that set a dangerous precedent for the years to come.

Was it another chance? Paul and Kevin had both wanted second chances, only to screw up even worse when she extended them. Those were brutal, hard lessons, but it was safe to say she'd learned them now and was no longer in the business of welcoming wayward pups back into the kennel.

Maybe it was none of those. Maybe Dean just wanted to further insult her with his *fangirl* nonsense. And people thought she jumped to conclusions? He could've won Olympic gold for that leap! Not only was the idea laughably false, it was also one of the dirtiest, most dismissive things he ever could have said.

Would a fangirl drop everything and drive sixty miles to nurse him through a cold, exposing herself in the process? Would a fangirl go to the trouble of learning his preferences, stocking her fridge with things he liked, and making sure he was comfortable when he visited? Would a fangirl attempt to connect with his daughter, fixing her hair and imparting wisdom that should've come from her absentee mother? Would a *fangirl* take it upon herself to learn about Jewish customs and traditions, in order to relate to him better?

The answer should have been obvious, but since it wasn't: hell no, a fangirl would not do any of those things. His coven of followers, in particular, was too focused on other, more ridiculous activities, like ogling him, panting, fanning themselves...and launching cruel, unprovoked attacks on her. That had been going on for well over a month now, and it was all stupid Kristen's fault.

She made a *huge* deal about coming here over social media, and tagged Abby in every last one of her posts. Most of them were raving about Dean, with lots of heart-eyed emojis, of course, but there was one in which Kristen described her as his "amazingly talented girlfriend," and that was all those kooks needed to hear. She'd been bombarded with comments on both Chattr and Pictogram ever since, despite never confirming their relationship, posting any photos of (or with) him, or tagging him in anything. She'd lost count of how many people she'd blocked over the past several weeks, but it wasn't like that made a difference—no matter how many of them she vanquished to the ethers of cyberspace, there were always more waiting for their chance to take a shot.

*Stay the hell away from Dalton, you fugly skank*, was just one of the delightful comments she'd received—on a photo of her cat, no less—and believe it or not, that was actually one of the nicer ones. Abby had never experienced such unbridled hatred and loathing in her life. At this very moment, there were thirty complete strangers hurling insults about everything from her freckles to her weight to how flat they thought her chest was. They engaged one another in long, heated debates about whether she looked more like “a pointy-nosed witch who ate neighborhood children,” or “the fat farm’s answer to Mila Kunis.” They called her an ugly whore, a flabby bitch, a trashy slut, and sometimes, they actually spelled their slurs correctly. They said she would never be pretty enough for their precious Dalton, as if any of them could pass for supermodels. They were a vile, relentless, evil lot, and the fact that Dean would dare lump her in with them was something she could never forgive.

But...it didn't pay to think about that. She had much better things to do with her time, like explore a whole new city. Winsome and charming, Charleston proved to be the breath of fresh air that she needed. There was no shortage of things to see, and everyone she met brought a whole new meaning to southern hospitality. Greg and Maggie, proprietors of the B&B she'd checked into, had even invited her to share Thanksgiving with them, once they found out she'd be spending it alone. She didn't take them up on it, of course, but the fact they cared enough to offer touched her heart.

It felt nice to be free for a while. She'd been mired in misery for so long that she'd all but forgotten how to kick back and enjoy herself. She was actually sad to have to get back on the plane Sunday morning. Four and a half days wasn't long enough to experience everything Charleston had to offer, but unfortunately, a long list of real-world obligations beckoned. She had to go back to work, and back to the theater to begin the last week of rehearsal. The plan was to reopen on December 4—the same day Dino was making his move, ironically enough. Abby couldn't help but interpret that as some sort of sign. Life was going on, and she had no choice but to do the same.

It came as little surprise that Houston was much the same way she'd left it. Dreary and grey, the temperature was 63 degrees when she landed, and it started pouring before she could even get halfway home. As a result, she was half an hour late to her make-up lunch at Mom's house, and her long-overdue reunion with Meryl—and neither of them were thrilled about it. Obviously still sore over this impromptu vacation, Mom did little more than glare at her

for the first few minutes, before finally asking if she'd had a good time. Meryl took a lot longer to come around. She blatantly ignored all of Abby's attempts at affection, even hissing at her at one point. Good grief.

It took days for Meryl to forgive her, which just went to prove that cats were as perceptive and sensitive as any small child. Getting herded into a carrier and dropped off at Mom's, where four other cats and two litters of kittens awaited had to have been so traumatic for her, especially given it had never happened before. Since falling in love with that fluffy little diva three years ago, Abby had only taken one vacation: a road trip to Corpus, and that time, she took the kitty along. The idea of her poor baby getting dumped in a weird place, surrounded by other cats—some of whom she was related to, but likely didn't recognize—and with none of the comforts of home, or her designated person, had been gut-wrenching...and thinking of it shed new light on why Dino got so upset when Preslie woke up during the show that time. At the moment, she had a little difficulty relating to his urgency and guilt, but now it made much more sense. It wasn't the same, by a long shot, but Meryl held just as special a place in her heart as Preslie did in his, and if she felt like the worst cat mom ever, she couldn't imagine how he must've felt with a real, human child.

Not that Abby wanted to know how he felt. She held little interest in rationalizing anything he'd said or done. She'd done quite enough of that already, and it was past time to let it go—to let him go, because holding on was just going to drive her nuts in the end. It was over, and it had been for more than a month now. She had to move past it, the best way she could...because he obviously had.



Luckily, her full plate helped with that. The whole next week was devoted to nonstop rehearsal, and not just at the playhouse. Now that Winthrop's annual holiday production was scant weeks away, she was spending more and more time at work, trying to get the students ready. There were five skits to be performed that night, and since she was directing three of them, she'd taken to staying until almost seven most nights. Then she raced downtown to

the theater to rehearse until nine, or maybe ten, depending on how much ground needed to be covered. It was exhausting, but quite gratifying at the same time—and, as a bonus, it didn't allow her any time to reminisce about Dean.

Abby slept late on Saturday, then shared a quick brunch with Amber and Steph before heading down to McMillan for some last-minute rehearsal with Tim and Gina before tonight's grand reopening. It came as no surprise that they were already waiting for her there, nor that Tim wore the same pale, nervous look that he had all week long. What *was* surprising, though, was how scared he seemed. He was practically jumping out of his skin and that begged the question: what did Gina say to him this time?

She'd been gunning for him since the moment he walked through the door, nitpicking and complaining about everything from the way he stood, to his credentials and experience, to even his all-American, clean cut appearance. At first, Abby thought it was some bizarre motivational tactic—that Gina was trying to fire him up so he could more effectively tap into Alex's anger—but the longer it went on, the more mean-spirited it seemed. All her criticism had done was erode what little confidence he had, and with less than eight hours to go before they reopened, that was the last damned thing he needed!

It was her intention to explain that when she pulled Gina aside, and to remind her that Tim was doing the best he could with the shitshow he'd inherited, but, of course, that wasn't what came out of her mouth: "What the hell are you trying to do, run him off?"

If the gleam in Gina's eyes was any indication, that was exactly what she was trying to do. Still, she went through the motions of denying it. "No, I'm not trying to run him off! I'm trying to toughen him up! He needs to understand the stakes here. This isn't quoting Shakespeare and pretend jousting at the Ren Faire. This is serious business!"

"Don't you think he knows that? He is terrified of going out there—and you're only making it worse!"

"It's not my fault he's not up for the challenge. I told Ray not to go with him. I told him he wasn't ready—hell, I even told him to just let D have his two freakin' weeks, so we could avoid this megaton iceberg, but do you think that son of a bitch listens to me?"

Abby frowned at that. Gina and Ray had been at each other's throats for a month now, each seeming to blame the other for the way things had gone

down, and the last thing she wanted to do was insert herself into their dispute. “Look, maybe he isn’t exactly ready, but Dean wasn’t ready, either. We had to work with him. We had to—”

“He was a hell of a lot more ready than that clown!” Gina angrily gestured in Tim’s direction, eyes narrow with derision. “He knew what he was doing. He’d done it before. Nobody had to hold his hand or carry him up and down that stage—and Ray never should have just let him walk out of here!”

“Well, he did.” The reminder was just as blunt and harsh as Gina’s words to Tim had been, and there was a reason for that. Abby wanted to make it clear that there was nothing either of them could do about this, except just make the best of it...but unfortunately, her words appeared to have the opposite effect.

“Why he wasn’t fired for that, I will never, ever know! Do you know how much money we’ve lost? And for what? For two measly, stupid weeks? In December, when we’re already closed half the month, anyway? What sense does that make? He ruined this whole thing over two freakin’ weeks!”

That was the third time she’d said that, and it proved to be the charm. Abby cocked her head toward her. “What do you mean, two weeks?”

“I mean, our entire future is sunk, this play is going straight down the tubes, and my credibility as a director is kaput, because Ray was too damned stubborn to give D two weeks off to go film his stupid soap! This is his fault, not mine, so if you want to go lecture anybody, I suggest you start with him.” Her piece stated, Gina stalked toward the Coke machine.

An almost otherworldly force propelled Abby to follow. “Wait, what?”

“I told him, ‘just let him have it.’ I told him, ‘this will be a good thing for us.’ I told him, ‘think about all the publicity when he comes back.’ And you know what? That’s the last time I tell that man anything, because he has a head like a brick! Everything has to be his way, all the time, to hell with what I think! I don’t even know why I’m here. No one takes me seriously, anyway! What’s the point?”

Abby’s stomach lurched as she processed that. No, that couldn’t be right. That implied that Dean wanted to juggle both the soap and the play, and from the way Wendy made it sound, he’d stalked into the theater that day with the specific purpose of quitting in mind. She had to be missing something here.

“Wait, what actually happened when Dean came to talk to y’all? What did he say when he got here?”

“What, didn’t he tell you?”

“No, he didn’t. That’s why I’m asking.”

Gina turned to face her, expression softening. “He said there was an offer on the table, and he was thinking about taking it, but it was gonna mean he’d have to miss the first two weeks of December. He wanted to know if Ray could work with him on that, and of course, the first word out of that bastard’s mouth was no. He couldn’t shut him down fast enough, and basically told D he could quit if he didn’t like it—so he did. And I just sat there, with my mouth wide open, because I couldn’t believe he’d actually done that. I still can’t, a whole month later, but here we are.”

A cold sweat broke over Abby’s entire body in a flash. Why wouldn’t Wendy mention that? Had she just not heard that part?

No, she likely hadn’t. Her job was to make Ray’s coffee, balance his appointment schedule and maintain the theater’s website. She wasn’t privy to big decisions or private meetings...which made her the absolute worst source of information. Abby never should have listened to her. She should have listened to Dean. She should have let him explain—he’d kept asking her to just let him explain, but she was so angry that...

“Excuse me,” she managed, whipping the phone out of her bag. She had to talk to him. She had to find out if that was, in fact, what happened—because if it was...oh, *God*, she’d blown it!

Abby’s heart raced as she dialed the Cincinnati number she still had saved as “Dimples McHunkerson.” The phone didn’t even ring before kicking over to an automated voicemail greeting that denied her the privilege of even hearing his voice. Either he was otherwise occupied, or she’d taken so damned long to get back with him that the ship had permanently sailed. Whichever the case, she swallowed hard, leaving the calmest, least emotional message possible.

“Dino, it’s me. Abby. I just talked to Gina and...please call me back. I need to talk to you as soon as possible.”



**7** f forced to describe the day in just one word, Dean would have to go

with *crazy*. He'd gotten up at four in the morning, to check, recheck and ensure everything was in order for his 11:15 flight—and to squeeze in as much last-minute time with Pres as possible before Margot came to pick her up, because he knew she was going to lose her mind when that happened. As it was, she'd found reason to hang onto him for most of the evening, but even when she let go, she didn't allow him to wander very far during the night's Hanukkah festivities at Dad and Sam's house.

She'd been even more clingy when they got home, holding on for dear life as she begged and pleaded to stay up just a little while longer. It was almost eleven by the time she finally went to bed—after two stories, a snack of Sam's world-famous rugelach, and one and a half viewings of *Frosty the Snowman*...and she was up again by midnight. She'd had another bad dream, she said, her fifth in as many nights. It wasn't clear if that was actually the case, or if she'd just been looking for an excuse to spend the night in his bed, but either way, he didn't question it, dutifully humming her (and himself) back to sleep.

In the morning, they'd had breakfast on the deck, discussed the importance of being good while he was away, and watched *Frosty* one more time before Margot showed up and all hell broke loose. Pres had such an epic meltdown that Dean suffered one of his own on the way to the airport. His poor rideshare driver had no idea what the hell was going on—and neither did the unfortunate lady who sat next to him on the plane. He was so morose and miserable that she assumed he must've been on his way to a funeral, and went so far as to offer condolences. The only thing that could've made it more humiliating was getting recognized at one of his lowest moments, but lucky for him, he managed to hold on to his anonymity, and dignity, for the duration of the flight.

There were a total of five voicemails waiting when he touched down at LAX four hours later: two from Mom, checking to see if he'd landed yet, one from Margot, letting him know Pres had finally calmed down, one from Joel, asking if he was still down to meet at five...and one from Abby, but he didn't bother listening to hers. He was having a bad enough day as it was. The last thing he needed to do was upset himself even more by reopening that can of worms.

So, he didn't worry about it. He just focused on returning all the other calls on the way to the hotel, then ordered some Chinese and retreated to the

plush, comfy bed for two blissful hours of unconsciousness. Adrian woke him up at a quarter to five, with a courtesy call to let him know he was on his way, and from there, it was onto a lively night of pool, off-color conversation and way too many shots at The Genesis. Suffice to say, it was no coincidence that Dean chose tonight to hang out with two of the hardest drinking dudes he'd ever met. Joel and Adrian were beasts that no mere mortal could ever hope to compete with—and that was just the sort of distraction he needed right now.

It was nine-thirty when he stumbled back to his suite, but thanks to the minibar, the party didn't have to end there. They had all sorts of fun libations to choose from: mini bottles of vodka, a wide selection of ryes and the Bacardi that had been tempting him since he got here. Eschewing the formality of a glass, or a chair, he took a seat on the floor and swilled it out of the bottle, Jack Sparrow style, while a banal, corny Lifestyle Christmas movie played in the background.

He was supposed to be in one of those before Chelsie split. It was about some spoiled city chick whose holiday plans fell through, forcing her to spend Christmas in the middle of nowhere. He had been going to play the charming innkeeper, who helped her see the beauty in a life of simplicity, and all that other sentimental holiday crap, but of course, he'd had to drop out. With Chels gone, there was no one to leave Preslie with, and he couldn't very well take her with him to Vancouver—her nanny hadn't been able to get a passport in time.

Dean liked to tell himself that was just as well, and that the result would've been a lowly embarrassment, just like the other two films he did for them...but honestly, that still stung a little. It had been a huge chance, considering the network seemed to use the same six actors in every holiday movie—and the fact they'd even consider making a secular Jew their latest Christmas hunk was nothing short of an honor. But it had fallen apart, just like the whole rest of his life, when Chelsie walked out the door. Maybe he didn't need to be watching this.

The phone rang while he was fumbling for the remote, but by the time he crawled to the charger to retrieve it, it had stopped. Perhaps that was just as well, too. He didn't want to talk to anybody but Pres right now, and the odds were, she'd been in bed for hours. Curiosity won out before long, though, sending him back to the charger to investigate, and what he found was rather surprising. It wasn't some rando, or a family member checking in...it was

Abby again.

She left another voicemail, too; the notification popped up as he was crawling back to the TV, but for the life of him, he couldn't summon the coordination to play the damned thing. His shaky fingers tapped everything but: the calendar, the browser, some game Pres had downloaded and, most regrettably, the little camera icon next to her name. It took a moment for him to realize what he'd just done, but once he did, his stomach dropped. Oh, shit! He was calling her back! On Screentime!

A torrent of established and newly coined curse words shot out of his mouth as he tried to figure out how to hang up. Tapping the screen only made his own image larger—and holy hell, he looked awful. He was so hammered he was leaning over to one side, and that was the last thing Abby needed to see! She was supposed to think he was great, and happy, and having the time of his life!

“Motherfathershitballssonofa—”

She answered in the middle of his amalgam of obscenity...and *man*, did she look surprised. “Oh, wow. Hi.”

Dean did little more than gape at her for a few seconds, before making the conscious choice to sit up a little straighter. Sober. He had to look sober right now. “Hey. Sorry. I hit the wrong thing. I was trying to listen to your message, but I couldn't find the...thing. And then, I hit the other thing and...I don't know what I'm saying, sorry.”

Welp, so much for sober.

“It's okay,” she assured, though to be honest, she looked even more mortified than he did right now.

“How are you? How's everything going? How's the new guy?” The questions came out all smushed together, a long string of mumbles Abby didn't appear to understand at first.

She blinked at him for a moment before offering a low reply. “Tim? He's fine. Nervous, but fine.”

“Yeah? Good. When do you guys open back up?”

“Um, it was tonight actually.”

“Oh, right on. How'd it go?”

“Fine.”

“Great.”

Silence fell over the conversation, and Dean used the opportunity to

climb off the floor and onto the loveseat. Abby, meanwhile, sat in silence, stroking something just off-camera. Settling into the cushions, he muted the television and took another drink, only to realize far too late that this was a video call and she'd just witnessed him swig rum straight out of the bottle.

*Awesome.*

Her eyebrows lifted as she watched. "Rough day?"

"Rough week—but at least I don't have to wake up early tomorrow. I can sleep until noon if I want to, and I probably will, because I'm sure as hell not gonna get to do it next week."

She took a full ten seconds to respond to that. "I see. Well, maybe this isn't the best time to talk. Maybe we should—"

"No, it's cool," he dismissed, setting the bottle aside. "I'm actually glad you called. I've been needing to talk to you about something."

She didn't respond to that right away, either. "Yes, I need to talk to you, too."

"Awesome. So, um, I don't know how to put this and I'm not my most eloquent right now, so forgive me if I fuck it up and say the wrong thing, but—"

"Are you coming back?" she blurted before he could finish his sentence.

"Am I...what?"

"Are you coming back?" she repeated. "Because I thought—well, I *assumed* you were moving, but when I talked to Gina, she made it sound like you were just going to be gone a few weeks."

"Isn't that something you should've asked me a month ago?"

She put her head down, admitting into her chest, "Yes, it is. And I wish I had, but since I didn't—"

"Yeah, I'm coming back. I'd never live out here again. This is not my life anymore, and I don't want it to be Preslie's life, either. This hotel room's pretty sick, though. Check it out." He turned the phone outward to allow her a view of the suite, informing, "I can't remember the last time I stayed somewhere this nice. I mean, I could get used to this...but yeah, I'm coming back."

Abby bit down so hard on her lower lip that he felt compelled to wince on her behalf. "So, I was wrong. I was really, really wrong about you and about this and...Dino, I'm sorry. I'm so *sorry!*"

Her breathless apology, and the tears that went along with it, caught him

so off-guard that he had to take another drink to gather his thoughts. Even so, all he could manage in response was a half-whispered, *yeah, okay*, that she appeared to immediately misinterpret.

“I know—that’s rich coming from me, and I don’t expect you to ever forgive me. I know I really hurt you. I hurt myself, too, believe it or not, because I always do stupid stuff like this! I’ve been like this my whole life, and I hate it! I always assume the worst of everybody, and I always think...” She paused, fanning herself in what he presumed was an effort to ward off more tears. “It’s just, every guy I’ve ever dated has been such an asshole, and I always expect that eventually, it’s going to turn out that way, because it always has. But you were just so...different, and I know I blew it—”

“Whoa. Hold on. Wait a second.” Dean intentionally dropped the phone in his lap as he sank into the loveseat’s backrest. No matter how badly things ended between them, and how much anger he held toward her, he still couldn’t bear to watch her cry. “Slow down. I can’t understand you.”

Abby sniffled, taking in a series of rapid breaths. When she continued, she sounded a bit less frenzied, but the emotion in her voice remained. “I’ve never known anybody like you in my whole life, and I’m *so sorry* I blew it! I’m so sorry I’m like this! I wish I wasn’t! I wish I could be more like Kristen!”

“Why would you want to be like Kristen? What does she—”

“I was so jealous of her and those stupid Hanukkah sweaters, because I know I can’t compete with that! I will never know you the way she does. I can never offer you what she could. I mean, look at me! I can’t knit. I can’t cook. I’m not bubbly or cute. I’m not Jewish. I’m not successful. I’m not even a very nice person! I’m a mess, Dino, and you and Preslie deserve better than that, so...” With an audible sob, she broke off.

“So, wait. You mean...” That was the most he could squeak out. His head was spinning too fast to come up with anything else. What the hell? Why would she measure herself against a woman he’d only seen in person once since 2018? Why would anything that happened between him and Kristen even remotely matter? It wouldn’t—unless she was one of *those* Branson fans, whose inability to separate fantasy from reality had led her to genuinely believe that Kristen was the love of his life.

The revelation struck such a primal chord, he flinched. Good Lord, no wonder she was out of her mind! Who wouldn’t be, trying to compete with something like that? Brandon and Sonya’s love story had been intense, a

sweeping epic chock full of all the turbulence, temporary breakups, and regular brushes with death that every daytime couple had to endure. They were hardly models for what a good relationship was supposed to look like! In fact, to this day, Dean failed to see why their storyline appealed to so many people.

Brandon had basically stalked another man's wife until she finally left her husband to be with him. His whole "I will love you until the end of time" schtick was actually a little creepy when it was put into that context, but of course, the fans never saw it that way. They just saw the *chemistry*. And the sex; more wild, crazy sex than one could shake a stick at. Those two had gone at it like rabbits, in all the damndest places, like the same floor he'd eventually die on, and the hot tub, and even a dusty old barn, shackled together after her ex-husband went nuts and abducted them.

It was nothing but fantasy, and thank God for that. Thank God the average couple didn't have to deal with an undead first wife, or getting held hostage by a spurned ex, or nearly dying thirteen times between them on that bumpy road to the altar. Such improbable and often low-key hilarious calamities never happened in the real world...but that didn't mean that real life, or love, was any less unpredictable or messy. Given that she was an actress and all, he'd expected Abby to appreciate that and understand that in reality, Dean and Kristen's relationship had nothing in common with Brandon and Sonya's. It wasn't the sort of earth-moving, eternal insta-love only found on soaps or in romance novels. It was gut-wrenching, deep-seated regret.

He didn't like to go there about it, which was why it was so jarring to see her again. Her presence was an instant reminder of that time when two broken people fumbled in the dark for the closest potential source of comfort, moved way too fast, and ruined three years of friendship in the end. They weren't fond memories. They were painful, embarrassing mistakes, made worse by the fact their kids got to watch them make them, and he was willing to bet Kristen felt the same way. Why else would she conveniently lose his number and change her own at the same time? Stupid technology indeed.

Sighing, Dean reached for the bottle. *This* was not going to be fun.



Rocking in place, Abby took one deep breath after another and tried to ignore the dread building inside as she waited for Dean to respond. His phone was situated at an odd angle that didn't allow for a glimpse of his face. All she could see from her vantage point was his neck and the drawstrings of his navy blue hoodie, neither of which offered a clue what was running through his mind right now.

Whatever it was, though, it couldn't have been good, because she could see him pull the bottle toward him again. As if fighting some internal battle, he hesitated before his Adam's apple lunged with the swallowing of another mouthful. And then another. And then one more—for good measure, she supposed.

“Dino?”

“Mmm,” he grunted, liquor sloshing as he set the bottle aside.

“Please say something.”

“I'm trying to figure out what to say to that. Hold on. I don't know what the...give me a second.”

The more he said, the harder he became to understand, which made it painfully obvious that this was the worst possible time to discuss this. Goodness, talk about coming full circle. He was just as drunk—if not more—as on the night they first confessed their attraction to one another...but something told her that, unlike that fateful evening, she wouldn't be hanging

up with a smile on her face this time.

Abby waited for another full minute, compulsively stroking Meryl's fur until she was engulfed by a cloud of white dander. Finally, after yet another drink, he spoke. "So, um, okay. I never wanted you to be more like Kristen. Never. Not one time. I don't know why you thought I did, unless it was that whole Branson thing, but that wasn't...real. You do know that wasn't real, right?"

The insinuation that she didn't brought heat to her cheeks, and she sucked in another deep breath. "Of course I do, but that's not what I'm talking about. I'm talking about what I saw between the two of you—"

"Yeah, that wasn't real. Brandon and Sonya aren't real. You and me, we are real—I mean, were. We were real. Sorry, were."

A fresh crop of tears welled in her eyes, but determined to ignore them, Abby clenched her jaw. "I realize that."

"Then you should also realize that I never wanted you to be more like Kristen, because I never loved Kristen the way I love you. But you don't, and I don't get that. This whole thing is crazy, you know? Do you really think I care if you can't knit? I can't do that, either, so whatever. You don't have to be bubbly or nice or successful or whatever else you said—Jewish, right? Yeah, you don't have to be Jewish. You can be Christian, Hindu, Muslim, nothing...I mean, I don't care. That isn't important, okay? My mom would probably say something else, but *I'm* saying, it doesn't matter. What matters—make sure you listen to me—*what matters* is finding somebody who loves my kid and loves me. Not Brandon. Me, because I am not Brandon." Despite his obvious inebriation, Dean enunciated the reminder so carefully and forcefully, it almost hurt to listen. "I'm not even Dalton Giles. I'm just some putz who got lucky—"

"You're not some *putz*, you're my soulmate! You're my happy ending. You are my dream come true, and I blew the whole thing to kingdom come, and I hate myself for that! I hate that I hurt you! I hate that I didn't just listen to you! I hate that I got so caught up in the worst-case scenario and all my hang-ups and insecurities that I didn't..." The words gushed out before she could think better of them, and immediately, she clamped a hand over her mouth. Oh, God! What the hell was she saying?

He appeared to have the same question. Lifting the phone, he blinked at the screen in apparent disbelief for what felt like an eternity. "Did you just call

me—”

“Sorry,” she forced out, as evenly as possible. “It’s late. I should, um, let you go.”

“You called me your soulmate.” It wasn’t a question this time. “Holy shit.”

A low, rattling breath escaped her lips, but try as she might, she couldn’t formulate any other sounds. Was that a good “holy shit” or a bad one? She couldn’t say for sure, because his expression was hard to read. There were definite shades of surprise there, and maybe a bit of anger, too...but there was something else going on in his eyes that she couldn’t quite identify. Amusement? Embarrassment? Pity? The odds were, she didn’t want to know.

“Sorry,” she said again, fingertip hovering over the little red icon at the bottom of the screen. “I’m sorry to put you on the spot with this. I know it’s really late and you’re not at your best right now. I don’t think I am, either. Do you want to talk about this another time? Maybe tomorrow, or...the next day, if you’re not busy. Are you busy? I guess I should have asked that first—sorry. Again. I’m really...”

She trailed off, biting her lip to prevent any further slips of the tongue. Oh, for Pete’s sake, why hadn’t she just hung up when she’d had the chance? Why did she have to keep talking? Every single word she said was somehow making this worse!

Dean continued to stare at her for the next several seconds before sighing. “Am I your soulmate, or is Brandon your soulmate? Because I’m pretty sure you said you were in love with him.”

There was no accusation in his statement, just confusion—but that made it no less powerful. “I never, ever should have said that. I didn’t mean it. I was just so angry. I jumped to the wrong conclusion. I thought you were trying to use me—use us, to get back where you wanted to be. Like I said, I’ve dated so many assholes who would try to play the nice guy and make you think they’re something they’re not and...”

He went for the bottle again, grumbling into it. “Right.”

“I’m sorry. I wish I could take that back, because I was never in love with Brandon. I was in love with you—actually, there’s no *was* about it. I *am* in love with you, Dino! Even though I messed up, I’m still in love with you and...I’m sorry.”

After another long drink, he returned his gaze to her—and at last, the

ambiguous sentiment in his eyes became clear. It was pain, and it was so palpable it gave her chills. “I really want to believe...” His sentence ended there, and it took an excruciatingly long time for him to try again. “Okay, so, Streamline. What’s the deal with Streamline? Because you’re still signed in on my TV.”

Intense, churning nausea took hold at once, making Abby feel like she’d just gotten off a carnival ride. “Oh, goodness. Oh, my goodness. I am?”

“Yeah. And I sort of...looked through your watch history.”

Of course he did, and that was likely the reason he reached out to her in the first place. He didn’t want to reconcile. He wanted to know why the hell she’d thought it was a good idea to watch episodes of his show on his television—and while he had every right to know, she wasn’t sure she had the wherewithal to explain herself.

“Sorry,” he apologized, before she could string together a coherent reply. “I wasn’t trying to, like, look through your stuff or anything. It’s just...Pres was watching something because it was on the screen and...I’m really not explaining this right. Hold on. Um...so, I woke up, right? And she’s watching this dude hold a gun on me and he’s about to shove me in the water and I freaked out, because she doesn’t need to see that.”

“No, she definitely doesn’t. I’m so sorry.”

Dean forged on as though he hadn’t heard her apology. “I thought she’d been watching my stuff, so I looked at the history and...yeah. There it was. But I didn’t, like, intentionally look through your stuff or whatever. I want you to know that. I wouldn’t do that to you or anybody. I just...” Eyes closed, he leaned even further into the loveseat. “I don’t know. You talk. I can’t talk anymore. You talk.”

“I’m not sure what to say,” she murmured. “I didn’t realize I was still signed in. I’m so sorry she came across that. I feel horrible. I’m so...” There were a hundred different ways she could’ve ended that sentence—humiliated, horrified and ashamed, just to name a few—but she didn’t bother with any of them. She just cried. Hard.

With a muted thump, everything went dark on his end.

Her breath hitched, tears coming to an abrupt halt as she lifted the phone closer. What just happened? Did he hang up on her?

“I’m still here. I just dropped my phone,” he slurred, as though he could read her mind. “And...now I’m dizzy. Woo. Hold on. I need to lay down.”

Abby swallowed hard, trying to suck all the emotion back inside. “Are you okay?”

“No worries, I’m just...drunk. Keep talking. I’m gonna try to get the phone without falling off this thing, so you just...keep talking.” Rustling and cursing arose in the background, before she heard a whoop of triumph.

“Have you got it? Everything good?”

“Yep,” he affirmed, lifting the phone to look at her again. “But *now* I need to lay down, so hold on.”

“Dino? Maybe don’t sleep there. It doesn’t look very...comfortable.”

“No, it’s probably not.” The camera wobbled as he rose to his feet. “I keep forgetting I don’t have to go upstairs or anything. I told you this room’s sick, right? Check out the bed. It’s crazy. It’s like...I need this bed. I’m gonna see if they’ll sell me this damned bed, because I don’t ever wanna get out of it. Ever.”

With that, everything went dark again—though from the sound of it, Abby was willing to bet he’d just belly-flopped onto the bed of his dreams. A few seconds later, the familiar din of *Sportscentral* arose, bringing with it much needed light. She swallowed. “Do you want me to let you go so you can rest?”

“Just keep talking.”

Dang. She was kind of hoping he’d say yes. “I’m not sure what else to say. I know how bad this must look to you, but...it’s not what you think. I just wanted to see your range. That’s how it started. I wanted to know what I was dealing with and get a feel of your full potential. The more I watched, though, the more I wanted to see. I didn’t want to tell you about it, because I know how you are. I didn’t want to embarrass you, or myself, and I didn’t want you to freak out. I didn’t want you to think it was weird, and I know it probably looks even weirder to you now—”

“So, wait. Hold up. I just wanna know one thing.”

“Um, sure,” she agreed, voice faltering a bit as she swallowed the last of her tears.

“When you watched that stuff—on Streamline—that was the first time, right? You didn’t watch it...before?”

“Before I met you? No. I’ve never really been much of a soap person. No offense.”

“So, you’re really not...*shit*.” He drew the word out three beats longer than necessary. “I knew you were gonna say that. Can you still see me, love?”

Abby squinted at the screen, unable to make out much more than what might've been a shoulder. "Not really."

The camera angle shifted slightly upward, revealing half of his face. The other was buried in the pillow he was muttering into. "How about now?"

"Yes, I see you now."

"I see you, too. Awesome. So, listen, because I wanna tell you this to your face. I'm sorry. I'm really, really sorry, love. I shouldn't have just assumed the worst of you. I just...man, I don't even know. Maria fucked me up and...*man*."

"We don't have to talk about this right now. Why don't you get some rest?"

"I'm gonna, but I wanna tell you this before I pass out. I never wanted you to be like Kristen or Sonya or whoever. I didn't wanna use you or anybody else, either. I didn't plan this. I don't plan anything. I'm horrible at planning stuff, so this was not..." Dean lifted his head to make bleary eye contact with her through the screen. "Listen. If you don't hear anything else I say tonight, I need to make sure you hear this. I'd never hurt you, or use you, or trick you, or...whatever you thought I was trying to do. Not...ever. I *love* you."

Abby shuddered in a deep breath and held it there, braced for the inevitability that he would correct himself. He didn't mean *love* in the present tense—he couldn't. He had to have meant *loved*. But...he didn't backtrack, like he had a few minutes before. All he did was situate back into the pillows, allowing his heavy eyelids to close.

"It's getting pretty late," she noted, exhaling. "Do you want me to let you go?"

He shifted around for a bit, face sinking farther and farther out of sight. It looked like he might've been considering that. "Do you wanna go get a coffee with me? We should get coffee."

The invitation was so abrupt and unexpected that she couldn't help but laugh. "Right now? I think that might be a little hard to pull off."

"No, not now," he clarified, nestling a little deeper into the thick pillow. "Just sometime. After I get back. I mean...if you're cool with that."

Her response was immediate—and, in hindsight, perhaps a bit too eager. "Sure. Yes. Of course. When?"

"I don't know. Whenever."

“Okay, well, how about you let me know when you aren’t busy?”

“I’m always busy, but...I can make time for you if you can make time for me.” Dean’s voice was getting fainter, and decoding his grumbles required extra concentration, but Abby considered the effort well worth it. “Can you make time for me?”

“Of course I can. Just let me know where and when and I’ll be there.”

“Right on. I’ll call you, and we can get coffee. I’ll bring you some rugelach, too—have you ever had that? My stepmom makes it, and I have to hide it from Pres, because she’ll eat it all if I let her. It’s, like, her favorite thing in the world, and she’ll eat it until she gets sick. I told my mom...” There were more words after that, but they were too soft and garbled for her to decipher. They gave way to groans in short order, then sporadic grunts, and finally...silence. Was he asleep?

It certainly looked that way. Dean wasn’t grunting anymore, and aside from a few random twitches, he wasn’t stirring, either. Certain he was going to drop the phone again any second, Abby clicked off the lamp. She was about to hang up and head to bed herself when he jerked, quite literally, back into semi-consciousness; his eyes cracked open, and a lazy half smile spread across his face as he moved the camera closer. “Hey. I love you.”

And there it was again. *Love*, not *loved*. Present tense. That implied this wasn’t over. That implied there was still a chance. She broke down, again...but this time, they were tears of relief, and they proved so heavy that she had to take a few minutes to collect herself. “I love you, too,” she finally declared. “I never stopped. I never wi—”

Before she could get the full word out, the phone slipped from his hand, landing on the floor with a thud so jarring, she flinched. Abby waited, expecting more rustles, and a lot more curses to follow, but all she heard was *Sportscentral* and the faint rumble of snoring. Dean was asleep, all right...but she would likely be up worrying until next Thursday sometime.

He was going to remember this in the morning, right?



*OF YOU!!!! I know it's been hard, but you're doing it, and it's gonna be amazing, I just know it!!! Nine more days, baby!! You got this! WE LOVE YOU!!!!*

Mom's text, accompanied by two straight lines of heart emojis, came in a bit earlier than usual this morning—a whole three minutes before the alarm was set to go off, which might've been annoying if Dean hadn't already been up for two hours. He wished he could've blamed the time differential, or that it was such a long, arduous day on set that he crawled straight to bed after getting off the phone with Pres, but he had a sinking suspicion nerves were the real reason he'd jolted awake at two in the morning. He had twelve scenes on the call sheet today, amounting to seventy-eight pages in total...and he didn't know a single one of his lines yet.

Not that he hadn't had ample time to prepare. He'd gotten those scripts two weeks ago, a considerable luxury, given they'd never sent them out so far in advance in the past. Used to be, scripts went out once a week, with the unspoken understanding that actors shouldn't get too comfortable until blocking, because it was all subject to change. That meant that on a morning like this one, when he woke up in a panic because he was too tired to study last night, it was all good. He didn't have to be letter-perfect and ready to go the second he got to the studio, because they were just going to hand him thirty-six pages worth of revisions, anyway. And, well...he had found out the hard way that things didn't quite work that way anymore.

These days, instead of an entire packet of last-minute changes to nail down by lunchtime, there might've been one or two—lines, not pages, and forget about having four hours to get them straight. After blocking, they went straight into makeup, then hair, then they got dressed and got their asses in front of that camera. Given they were shooting two episodes a day now, it wasn't unusual for taping to start as early as ten...and finish as late as seven or eight, depending on how complicated the scenes were and how many angles were involved. Man, Mindy really wasn't kidding when she said the new EP had whipped that place into shape.

Of course, a lot of that had to do with her background. Eleanor Marley was a veteran soap actress herself, and a damned good one, at that. Dean remembered her from industry events as a force—tiny, but formidable, with a somewhat pretentious Mid-Atlantic accent that belied the more bawdy things that came out of her mouth after one too many glasses of champagne. She was practically daytime royalty, having carried *Matters of the Heart* on her back

for two decades until the show limped to a pitiful conclusion six years ago. Since then, she'd moved farther and farther behind the camera, and it wasn't hard to see why. She knew what she wanted, and she wasn't afraid to say so, for better or worse.

According to Mindy, Eleanor had made innumerable changes since taking over from Clyde eight months ago, but the jury was still out on whether or not they were good ones. The actors seemed to think she was a godsend, a real advocate who understood the medium from both sides and took good care of her talent. The network loved her, too, because she'd managed to cut production costs way down with all the new streamlining measures, and push the ratings way up with a number of clever casting stunts, himself included. The writers weren't too fond of her, though. Neither was the crew, or anybody else who ran afoul of her sharp tongue and exacting standards.

So far, she'd been nothing but nice to him, but he was certain he'd find himself on her bad side sooner rather than later if he didn't get his act together. There was no reason for this to trip him up. It wasn't even that hard—a bit more than he was used to cramming into one day, for sure, but still a hell of a lot easier than some of the stuff he got tasked with before. It was just conversation; seventy-eight pages of witty, rapid fire repartee with Mindy, and he should've been able to do that in his sleep.

There were no self-righteous, page-long monologues to deliver with a straight face. There were no five-syllable medical terms to write out phonetically and pray to God he wouldn't mangle. There was no careful analysis of what should've been going through Brandon's mind, or trying to align this crazy storyline with the established continuity of the character. There was no crying, screaming, or any combination of the two. There was no rolling around on the floor half naked with Kristen or anybody else. There were no crazy stunts, like jumping out windows with newborn babies, or running into burning buildings, or getting run over by a car, or drowned, or beaten within an inch of his life. He barely even had to move around! For the better part of two episodes, he got to sit on the floor, next to Mindy, and say delightful, mean-spirited things that Brandon never, ever would've said when he was alive. That was it.

Five years ago, Dean would've considered that to be second only to a coma on the Easiest Day Ever scale, and now he couldn't do it? What the hell was the matter with him? Was he just that out of practice? Did he just not

want to be here or something?

Well...no, actually. Of course he didn't want to be here. He wanted to be home with Pres, especially since Chelsie had decided to fly in this weekend against his wishes. Why she couldn't have waited one more friggin' week, he had no idea, but he knew this much for sure: next Monday was going to be a nightmare, and there was nothing he could do about it from here.

Margot had promised to supervise and keep the drama to an absolute minimum, and he knew that she would, but the fact of the matter was, she shouldn't have had to. It was his job to pick up the pieces after a direct hit from Hurricane Chels, his job to make it up to Preslie after her mom blew out of town just as quick as she got there, his job to try to reestablish some semblance of normal. And what was he doing instead? Laboring over eighty pages of bullshit.

The guilt was astronomical, no matter how many times Mom tried to remind him he was doing a good thing by securing a more stable financial future for the both of them. They could've been paying him a million dollars per episode, and it still wouldn't have been worth having to sit idly by while Chelsie screwed with Preslie's head yet again. Some things, like peace of mind and that of his child, didn't have a price.

To compensate for what was sure to be the most traumatic two weeks of Preslie's life thus far, he'd gone above and beyond to remain as present and available as his hectic schedule would allow. He woke up at four in the morning to be able to talk with her before school. He kept his phone in his pocket, even during taping, to ensure he wouldn't miss a single one of her texts. He had Mom send pictures of her homework so he could go over it with her. He called the second he got off work, and stayed on the phone until she went to bed, catching up on all the latest second-grade gossip and everything else he'd missed during the day. Simply put, Pres occupied every second he had to spare, and in that sense, it was like he never left. It was only when they had to hang up that the reality of the situation set in—and damn, was it brutal.

Pres didn't just cry, she *howled* like a wounded animal. She screamed. She begged him to come home, then switched to demanding when he didn't immediately oblige. She ran Mom ragged with fierce, lengthy tantrums after the fact. She was a mess, and so was everyone else in her general vicinity...which made him dread Monday all the more. Was it too late to

convince Chelsie to wait?

Yes, it likely was. She wasn't taking his calls anymore, not that she ever had in the first place. Over the years, it had become fairly obvious that she kept him blocked until she had something to say. The whole rest of the time, he got routed straight to a conveniently full voicemail, and none of his subsequent texts appeared to get through. Deep down, Dean knew it was a waste of time to try to talk sense into her, but he still felt he owed it to Pres to make the effort. Thus, while he waited for his third cup of coffee to brew, he composed yet another long message:

*You really need to stop blowing me off and call me so we can talk about this. I'm stuck in LA, and I really need you to work with me here. I don't ask you for much. I never have. But please, for G-d's sake, don't come in this weekend. She always loses it when you leave and it's gonna be even worse without me there, so please just call me so we can work out something else. I get back on the 18<sup>th</sup>, so any time after that would be fine. Just not this weekend. Please.*

His phone rang less than a minute later...but, of course, it wasn't her. It was Mom—or Pres, rather, right on schedule. Retrieving his coffee from the Keurig, he answered on the second ring. “Hey, baby.”

“It's me,” Mom corrected with a sigh. “She won't get out of bed this morning.”

Dean's heart leaped into his throat in approximately 2.3 seconds. “Why not? Is everything okay? She's not sick, is she?”

“No, I don't think so. I think she's just exhausted. It was hell getting her to sleep last night. She cried and cried and cried.”

Hearing that was akin to taking a shot to the gut, and he had to take a second to process it. “It's getting worse, isn't it? Damn it, I was afraid of this.”

“It's been rough, yes,” Mom conceded. “We all knew it would be, but she will be fine. She might not think so right now—and you might not, either, but I promise, she will.”

Try as he might, he found it impossible to share her optimism. “I'm just worried about this weekend, you know? That's gonna be—”

“Don't worry about that. You're borrowing trouble. We can handle it.”

“I'm still trying to reach out to Chels, but you know how that goes.” Settling onto the loveseat with his coffee and his script, he switched the call to speaker so he could look at the message he'd sent. It had yet to be marked as

delivered—of course. “Once she’s got it in her head to do something, that’s it. There’s no talking her out of it.”

“You give her way too much credit. You always have. She probably won’t even show up—she hasn’t the last three times, anyway.”

“No, I think she’s really coming this time. She didn’t tell Pres about it, she told me. Pres is the one she lies to.”

Mom muttered something under her breath that he didn’t quite catch—something caustic and cutting, no doubt—but when asked to repeat it, merely laughed. “Baby, I’m telling you, you’re borrowing trouble. We can *handle* Chelsie, believe me.”

“I’m not worried about you guys handling Chelsie. I’m worried about you guys handling what it’s gonna do to Pres when she—”

“Hey.” Her interruption was firm enough to silence him immediately. “Don’t do this to yourself, okay? Everything’s fine. We have it under control. Margot’s already got a really fun thing planned for Sunday night to get her mind off it, and—oh, goodness, it’s getting late. I need to try to get Preslie up again. Hold on for me, baby. One second.”

Dean had no sooner agreed, and reached for the script to cram in a few more pages, when the phone on his knee vibrated. He glanced down at the screen, halfway expecting a belligerent reply from Chels, and was pleasantly surprised to find a text from Abby instead: *Hi there. It’s been a few days since we talked, so I’m just checking in. How’s everything going?*

Fifteen seconds later, she sent another: *Oh, crap, what time is it there? I’m soooo sorry! I forgot you’re on the West Coast! I hope I didn’t just wake you up!*

He set the script aside to respond. *No worries. I’ve been up for a while now. This whole time thing is really throwing me off.*

*I bet, she sent back. It would throw me off, too. So, how’s it going? Are you still up for coffee when you get back?*

Huh? Coffee? That must’ve come up on Saturday night, though to be honest, Dean had no recollection of it. The latter portion of the evening was in fragments, and though they weren’t spotty enough to create any disconcerting gaps, there were still a few pieces missing...like how the hell he ended up talking to Abby over Screentime in the first place. And why, because he’d been fairly determined not to earlier in the day.

He didn’t regret it, though. They broke a lot of ground that night, and the fact they could sort out the misunderstandings that had derailed their

relationship was promising. Where to go from here was still kind of a question mark, but he guessed that was what the coffee date was for: to iron out that stuff. It was a great idea, really, and he was glad she'd reminded him of it. He just wished they could do it sooner...but maybe they could.

Maybe they didn't have to sit down in person, and have coffee. Maybe they could just talk on Screentime or on the phone or something. He had no idea what her schedule looked like these days, and his own was a veritable nightmare, but maybe they could squeeze it in on one of her off nights, after Pres went to bed. It didn't have to be a long, involved conversation like Saturday. They could just hang out, like they used to before everything went crazy. He missed that. More to the point, he missed *her*. He tried to deny it at first, to tell himself that he couldn't miss what he never had, because nothing they'd shared was legit, but now...

"Hello? Daddy?" Preslie's sleepy voice diverted his attention in an instant.

Later. He'd have to come back to this later. "Hey, baby! Good morning."

"Are you gonna come home *today*?"

It was the first thing she asked every single time they spoke, and though Dean had hoped to be somewhat desensitized to it by now, the question still shattered his heart into pieces. "No, not today. Soon, though. Just..." Backing out of Abby's message, he reopened Mom's to verify. "Nine more days."

And damn, they couldn't come soon enough.



When Abby was growing up, her mother started a sweet tradition, one she hoped to continue with her own children someday. On Black Friday, while the rest of the country was engaged in hand-to-hand combat over the last Tickle Me Elmo, Mom sat her down and had her list all her Christmas wishes. It didn't have to be the presents she wanted to receive. It could be something as simple as a trip to the Galleria ice rink (which made it onto a record number of wish lists over the years) or as abstract as peace on earth and goodwill toward men (as she'd adorably requested at age seven).

Then, once the list was complete, Mom, along with several other elves within their circle, set about making as many of those wishes come true as possible in the twelve days leading up to Christmas. Looking back on it, Abby'd had no idea how she'd pulled some of it off, but thank goodness she did. It brought so much extra magic and wonder to an already glorious season, and to this day, she still smiled when she thought about it. Every day was a new adventure, and she couldn't wait to go to sleep at night, because she knew something exciting would be waiting for her when she woke up.

She felt the same way all day long on Thursday. Filled with giddy anticipation, she couldn't wait for the bell to ring after each period, and the students to file out of the room so she could open the drawer and take a peek at her phone. She was positive that a sweet, wonderful response would be waiting when she did...but unlike all those magical mornings of her

childhood, disappointment followed every time. Dean did not respond to her text that day. Or the next. Or over the weekend, either.

At first, she forced herself to shrug it off, reasoning that he was busy with work, and would get back to her as soon as he could. The more time that elapsed, though, the harder that became to believe. How long would it really take to offer a simple *yes* or *no*? One second? Two, maybe? It wasn't like she was asking for a sonnet, or a haiku, or anything outlandish or extravagant. She just wanted to know if he was still up to meeting for coffee when he got back to town...and his silence had made the answer to that question painfully obvious.

Not that she wanted to go there. After last time, she was well aware of the danger of jumping to horrible conclusions, but come on. No one could be that busy! It went deeper than that, she was sure, and it pointed to one of two grim options: now that he'd had the chance to sober up, he either regretted the hell out of their Screentime chat on Saturday, or he didn't remember it at all. Abby couldn't say which was more painful—they both cut straight to the bone, because she'd actually been stupid enough to believe they got somewhere.

It might've been awkward at first, and painful, and embarrassing, but it almost had to be if they wanted to break down the wall. They couldn't pussyfoot around it and pretend it never happened. They had to face it head on, admit where they'd screwed up and try to build back from there—which was exactly what she thought they had done. Yes, Dean had been more than a little intoxicated on the call, and yes, she had been more than a little concerned he might forget some of the finer points of their conversation, but she deemed it an acceptable risk. To take that first shaky step, they had to be honest and vulnerable with each other. And as she'd learned on his birthday, nothing made him more honest and vulnerable than a good, stiff drink...or five.

She should have realized that, aside from the way they both ended, Saturday's conversation was nothing like the one they'd had that night. It wasn't as simple and, frankly, inconsequential as admitting they were attracted to one another. The stakes were higher than that now. It wasn't about like anymore; it was about love—real, true love, and that was something that could not be approached lightly...or drunk. Dean was in no condition to make such heartfelt declarations, and she was a damned fool to take them

seriously. It was all just words; drunken babble that he would never remember in the morning, and something she would've been wise to forget about herself.

Of course he didn't still love her! That ship sailed six weeks ago, and she was the one steering it out of the harbor. To quote one of Mom's tried-and-true relationship clichés, there was no point in climbing the same, tired mountain all over again when he already knew what waited at the top: a pulsing container of neuroses, insecurity and worst-case scenarios. No one in their right mind would want a second chance at that, no matter what he might've slurred back on Saturday—and to be honest, she couldn't say she blamed him.

For an actor, Dean was remarkably drama-free. He wasn't teeming with baggage, hang-ups, or bizarre undercurrents like everyone else in the industry. The guy was so grounded he was almost Zen-like, and that begged the question: why would someone who seemed to have it all together want to complicate their low-key existence with a moody tornado like her? Maybe if she'd asked herself that three months ago, she could've avoided this whole mess, because the answer was simple. They wouldn't.

Oh, sure, they might be tempted to roll the dice a few times, but once they started losing, they were bound to pack it up. Only a fool would continue to press their luck once it had been established that the odds were not in their favor—and there was nothing foolish about that man, despite her mother's near-constant claims to the contrary.

Now that the gag order had been lifted, so to speak, Mom had turned trashing Dean into something of a sport, and she seemed to take great pleasure in it, too. She denounced him as useless and weak; a mere silhouette of a man, devoid of both integrity and depth, though there was no way she could've made such a determination from the whole two minutes they'd spent in one another's company. She took hateful potshots at his career trajectory, and the road that led him to McMillan, despite having no knowledge or insight into the situation other than what could be found on internet message boards.

Mom even went so far as to criticize his looks—the very reason she'd appeared to distrust him in the first place—sniping that he was nowhere near as handsome as he liked to think he was, and that he wasn't aging very well, either. Say what now? Were they even talking about the same person? Because

the last time Abby had seen him, he looked amazing. Granted, *ScreenTime* didn't provide the most optimal view, but she could still say with certainty that the man had never looked better. Stubby and smoldering, he'd slimmed down a bit since they'd last seen one another, and the subtle flecks of gray in his hair were gone, effortlessly recreating the appeal that had made Dr. Brandon Chisholm the object of many a housewife's fantasy. But even before that, goodness...he was something, and for Mom to dare allege otherwise was both ridiculous and mean.

The same could be said for all the rest of her assumptions, too, and though Abby was certain they'd been designed to cheer her up somehow, they seemed to accomplish just the opposite. The problem wasn't Dean, or his looks, or his talent, or even his character. For Pete's sake, the problem was her! Her paranoia. Her pessimism. Her tendency to make a mountain out of a molehill. Her inability to ever let a single thing go, no matter how small or stupid it might've been. Her determination to win—and then win back—the love of someone so far out of her league she should've been arrested for trying. *That* was the problem, and as far as she could tell, there was only one way to fix it: backing away.

So she was leaving him alone. She hadn't called, texted, or checked his largely ghostwritten social media in more than a week. If he wanted to talk to her—which he clearly didn't, but if he *did*—he knew where to find her. Now that Winthrop's holiday production had come and gone and the semester was over, there were really only two places for her to be: either at home, watching sappy movies and petting her cat, or at the playhouse, trying to keep Gina from giving poor Tim an ulcer for Christmas.

Okay, that wasn't exactly true. There was also the coffee shop, where her mother insisted on dragging her every afternoon to discuss holiday plans, parties Abby had no interest in attending and...other matters.

"That man is checking you out." A devilish grin appeared on Mom's face as she leaned rather indiscreetly across the table.

To prevent her from knocking it over, Abby took hold of her peppermint mocha and tried to contain a sigh. "I'm wearing Santa Claus pajamas. Believe me, nobody's checking me out."

"Oh, yes, he is—and he's cute, too. Right over there. By the door." Mom gestured in the mystery man's direction. "In the khaki."

"Maybe he's interested in you. You should go talk to him."

“Don’t be silly! He’s been watching you since he got here.”

Yeah, that didn’t sound creepy at all.

“It won’t kill you to turn around and look at him, you know. Just a peek.”

“No thanks,” Abby muttered into her coffee. “My life’s already depressing enough. No need to add a coffee shop stalker to the mix.”

Mom set her tea on the table, her lips pressed into a tight, stern line.

“Okay, that’s enough. Stop pining over that man!”

“What? I’m not pining over anybody.”

“He never deserved you, anyway!”

“Oh, good grief.” The sigh she’d been struggling to suppress came out with half a groan attached for good measure. “Please, not this again.”

“Sitting here daydreaming about someone like that when a real human being is over there trying to get your attention—I just don’t understand it! You’re wasting your time, you know. It’s not like he’s thinking about you! He’s too busy cozing up to that little blonde hussy all over again! I told you that girl was trouble!”

“What?” That revelation brought heat to Abby’s cheeks, and she put her head down to hide it. “I mean, how do you know that?”

“I saw it on her Chattr. That girl posts a hundred and twenty times a day—I don’t understand that, either. Why would anybody think people want to see pictures of their food? It’s nonsense.”

It took all she had not to burst into tears. Kristen. No wonder he hadn’t gotten back to her. “I see.”

“And you’re still sitting there pining over him,” Mom surmised, frowning. “For goodness’ sake, stop this! It’s over. Let it go.”

Bearing down, she had to draw on years of training and experience to produce a convincing reply—but even then, she wasn’t sure it landed. “Oh, I have. I let it go a long time ago. I’m not pining or daydreaming about him or anyone else. I’m just sitting here, enjoying my coffee, thank you. Now, when’s Aunt Denise coming to town?”

It took a full fifteen seconds for her mother to reply. “Wednesday. I’m supposed to pick her up from the airport around three. Do you want to come?”

“I think I have rehearsal that day, but if not, then sure.”

“Surely, you can get out of *one* rehearsal. It’s almost Christmas! Oh, honey, it’ll be so much fun! We can go to the mall, and out to dinner—oh, there’s a

Christmas concert at the Methodist church that night, too! We should go to that!”

Abby shifted in her seat, fingers tightening around her coffee cup. Airport, mall, dinner, Methodist concert...that all seemed a bit overwhelming right now. She'd be way more comfortable staying home, watching *Love Actually* for the eighteenth time and sobbing her heart out, because once again, Mom was right. She was still pining over a man who, if Kristen's Chattr was to be trusted, wasn't even hers to pine over anymore. She knew better than to admit that, though, and pasted on her best attempt at a smile. “Sure. That sounds great.”



Dean's phone chimed about forty-five minutes into *Elf*, and though Pres looked a little peeved by that, he was grateful for the distraction. It had been five long days of trial, error and more bizarre animation and high-pitched Christmas carols than anyone should ever have to endure, but her exhaustive search had finally ended; she had found the one thing she loved even more than *Frosty the Snowman*. Of course, it also happened to be the one thing that grated so harshly against his already-fractured nerves that he took back every complaint he'd ever uttered about Jimmy Durante's gravelly voice—and of course, she wanted to watch it twice a freakin' day.

If he didn't know any better, he'd think this was some sort of punishment for having to leave. She still hadn't quite forgiven him for that, despite his bending over backwards to make it up to her. Twice-daily doses of Will Ferrell were just the tip of the iceberg. Braving both an inexplicable, full-bodied malaise and the rapidly plunging temperatures, he'd taken her to every holiday attraction within a hundred-mile radius. They did a little bit of everything: ice skating at Discovery Green, drive-thru lights spectaculars across the city, multiple photo ops with as many Santas as they could find, a ride on the Christmas Train in Alvin, and even a trip all the way to Spring to not only pick out, but chop down their very first Christmas tree. It was everything a Jewish kid, especially one who'd been jealous of her friends' trees and visits with Santa for years, could ever want out of the season. Yet, it still

wasn't enough, because every day, she came up with something else to guilt him into...and every day, it worked.

Dean had expected Mom to have something to say about that—and the fact that it looked like a fraternity of drunken, colorblind elves had projectile vomited all over said seven-foot tree—but even she had to acknowledge that after Chelsie's all-too-brief visit, Pres deserved all the spoiling she could get. She had been in town a total of sixteen hours, six of which were spent with her kid. The whole rest of the time, she was partying in Midtown, dry humping strangers and posting the exploits to Pictogram. It was, perhaps, the biggest letdown yet, made even more egregious by her insistence on making him the bad guy when he called her out on it!

Their back-and-forth debate/borderline screaming match lasted longer than the visit itself. It dragged on for days, off and on, until she ultimately blocked him again—but not before offering a screechy parting shot: “That is my daughter, and *nobody* is going to keep me from seeing her whenever the fuck I want! I don't answer to you or your crazy family anymore, so you best check yourself!”

Seriously? It was about answering to him now? Because he could've sworn it was about making more than just a token effort to be involved in Preslie's life—a point he would've made, had she allowed him the opportunity. But, in true Chelsie fashion, she didn't want to hear it. She would much rather air her grievances on social media, plaster photos of his kid far and wide without his consent, and spin the infuriatingly false narrative that she was the victim of some cruel conspiracy to keep “the other half of her heart” well on the other side of the country.

*Sweet one, I will NEVER stop fighting for you*, declared the post she'd made last Wednesday, and at least ten more like it had followed in the days since...but had she called Pres once during that time? Had she bothered to check in and make sure everything was okay? Had she expressed any regret for the turmoil her six-hour visit had caused? Of course not. That required caring about someone besides herself, and Chels had proven a long time ago that she wasn't capable of something crazy like that.

Jesus, no wonder he was so tired. Between contending with her drama and all its fallout, wrestling with the guilt of not being there to help Pres through the worst of it, and all those grueling fourteen-hour days on the set, his entire second week in LA was little more than a blur. It was a challenge to

even squeeze in time to eat most days, and forget about responding to anyone but Pres in a somewhat timely manner. It was a miserable frenzy, and he never wanted to do it again as long as he lived—but that didn't stop them from putting the bite on.

He'd already been approached about coming back to haunt Octavia during her trial, and he felt no guilt whatsoever for his staunch refusal. If anything, he was pretty proud of the fact that little two-week detour into madness marked the official end of his days in Hallandale...and Los Angeles, for that matter. From now on, it was back to the boring anonymity of welding at the shipyard, and maybe—if he could find someone willing to hire him after what had happened at McMillan—taking on the occasional stage role to keep things interesting. That was all anybody could want out of life, really. A job, a home, a kid, the opportunity to indulge creative pursuits on his own terms, and even a cat, for good measure. He had it all. The only thing missing was...*her*, and that was all his own fault.

At least, that had been Kristen's take on it. Having effortlessly stepped back into the BFF role she'd occupied before foolishness and desperation got the better of them all those years ago, she'd taken it upon herself to play devil's advocate. When told that he'd agreed to this return engagement without even talking to Abby first, her jaw dropped so wide he could see the fillings in her molars. She was genuinely aghast to hear it, demanding to know why not, because as both his co-star and his girlfriend, Abby should have been the first to know.

"You didn't tell me you were quitting, either, remember?" she'd reminded. "We *lived* together, and I found out about it three hours before Clyde did! No wonder she got so upset! I was pissed, too! That's a decision you were supposed to make together, and you screwed her over not just professionally, but personally as well!"

It was a cold, hard truth that Dean had honestly never considered, and the more he thought about it, the more guilty he felt. Quitting had, indeed, been a terrible thing to do, and not even giving Abby the courtesy of a warning was worse. He had a million excuses for not talking to her, mainly pertaining to her illness and his fears that she would freak out and try to discourage him, but none of them held up over time. He should have talked to her before he talked to Ray. He should have made it clear that his decision wasn't based on anything but necessity—his TV money was long, long gone, and he

legitimately couldn't afford to turn down their offer. He should have been more mindful of how that would affect her, not just as his girlfriend, but his co-star, and the writer of the play he'd single-handedly tanked. But...he wasn't.

The bottom line was, he'd never been the best communicator. It was something all of his exes had complained about at one point or another, and if he had to hazard a guess, he would say it dated back to his childhood, when Margot was content to do the talking for both of them. That had done way more harm than good, and sparked a trend of toxic passivity that he'd been trying for years to break out of. To his credit, he'd gotten a lot better. He could actually start a conversation now, without waiting for Margot or anybody else to open the floor. He could make small talk with the best of them. He could stand up for himself, and other people, if the need arose. That was progress, but he still had a long way to go. Bigger, more meaningful things still tripped him up, and almost always required some sort of push.

Abby didn't have that problem. She didn't stumble over her words or back down from a challenge. When something needed to be done, or said, she took the initiative. She was, after all, the one who had invited him to dinner after rehearsal. She was the one who'd asked if he needed help finding the cat, all but inviting herself over for the first time. She was the one who had initiated their first kiss that night on the deck. She was the first one to confess her attraction. She was the one who had driven sixty miles to his front door when he didn't get back with her about lunch. She was the one who said "I love you" first. In short, she made every last one of the moves he should have made. Not that he didn't want to, and not that he wouldn't have made them eventually. He just hadn't known how...but she had.

She always knew how, and that was what he needed: someone who wasn't silent, wasn't passive, wasn't afraid of saying the wrong thing or making a fool of herself. Dean wished he could be more like her, because two weeks removed from her early morning text about the coffee, he still hadn't gotten back to her about it. Not that he'd intended to blow her off. Things were just so crazy in LA that by the time it even occurred to him he'd never responded, a full five days had passed—and by that point, he wasn't sure she even wanted to do it anymore. Kristen called that a copout and in a way, it kind of was, but he still knew Abby well enough to know how she'd react to that.

She tended to ruminate, and he was willing to bet she'd taken the worst

possible meaning from his lapse in communication. She thought he'd ghosted her, or worse, that he didn't want to make a go of this. She was likely furious and devastated, and that meant that if he wanted to approach, he was going to have to come up with something a whole lot better than, *hey, sorry, I got distracted with Chelsie drama and trying to keep Pres from losing it, but I do still totally want to work this out if you do.* The only problem was, he had no idea what that *something* could be.

He'd never ridden a horse in his life, so it wasn't like he could just show up at her door on a white steed or something. He didn't own a boombox, either, but even if he did, he was certain her neighbors wouldn't appreciate him blasting Peter Gabriel outside the window. Kristen, who'd been bugging him about it all week, seemed adamant that such grand, sweeping gestures weren't necessary. *She doesn't want a huge, cinematic moment, she wants YOU,* read the text she'd sent an hour ago, but Dean still knew better than to show up empty-handed...if he showed up at all. He could think of a thousand reasons not to, the biggest being today was Christmas Eve. That might not have meant much in his house, but it was kind of a big deal to a goy, so there was a strong possibility she was doing something way more exciting than putting away last month's Hanukkah decorations while *Elf* droned on for the five hundredth straight time.

What if he drove all the way out there, with Pres in the back seat and his heart in his throat, only to find she wasn't even home? What if she was at her mom's house, or a party, or church—people went to church on Christmas Eve, right? It was an enormous gamble, and though Kristen's persistence had him about eighty-six percent convinced it would be worth it, that other fourteen refused to be denied.

Glancing down at his phone, he wasn't surprised to see she was still at it: *Are you just punishing her or something? I don't understand what's going on right now. You know what you need to do, so do it!*

Dean labored long and hard over his reply—perhaps a bit too long and hard, because it took fifteen minutes for him to send it. *It's not that simple. There are lots of variables. There's this whole Christmas thing, and I know she's pissed at me, so if I just showed up on Christmas, she'd probably slam the door in my face. If she was even home. And what if her mom's there? Her mom can't stand me, so G-d only knows what she's put in her head. I just think it would be better to try this another time. Maybe after the holiday.*

Kristen's indignant response rang in twenty seconds later. *What? No! You can't keep waiting around on this! You are going to lose her if you keep waiting for the "right moment." The right moment does not exist! Right now does, and that is what matters! If you love this girl (and I know you do, sweetness!!), YOU NEED TO DO SOMETHING NOW, before it's too late!!!*

The message might've been more than a little melodramatic, but he had to admit, it served its purpose. As he read it over, that little internal meter edged just past the ninety percent sold mark, and though the reservations that remained were strong and foreboding enough to make him nauseous, the truth of the matter was plain to see.

If he kept putting this off and waiting for the right moment, he might never work up the nerve. If he let another day pass without telling Abby that he loved her, and he missed her, and he wanted to make this work, he might never get the chance. If he continued to let her draw her own conclusions about where he stood and what this meant to him, he might just lose her forever—and that was a risk he couldn't afford to take.

He set his phone aside, fumbling for the remote. It was now or never. "Hey, baby? Go get dressed."

Thoroughly engrossed in her new favorite film, Pres looked pretty peeved by that, too. "Why? I thought you said we were just gonna stay home and watch movies tonight."

"Yeah, slight change of plans. You feel like going on an adventure with me?"



Abby was bundled in bed, watching *The Family Man*, when a timid, hesitant knock came on the door. It was so light that she didn't hear it at first, but when it rose again, she groaned. Oh, good grief, now what? Mom and Aunt Denise had already been by once today to spread their grating seasonal merriment, and they'd also roped her into joining them at the ballet at eight. Pausing the movie, she lifted the phone to her face. It was only 6:15. What, did they want to have dinner now, too? It wouldn't surprise her. They looked for any excuse to involve her in their annual Christmas revelry, and most of the time, she had to admit, she looked forward to that.

Not this year, though. This year, she just wasn't feeling it...or much of anything, really. After a long week of intermittent sobbing, sad movies, and wallowing in her own misery, she was more numb than anything else, but perhaps that was a good thing. Perhaps that was step one to healing. Then again, it could also be a sign that she was morphing into some sort of sociopath—which also wouldn't surprise her, because at least three of the pricks she'd dated had called her something along those lines.

All she wanted to do was sleep these days, and though it was, indeed, wonderful to see her again, she honestly couldn't wait for Aunt Denise to go back to Flagstaff. The one-two punch of her and Mom's combined energies was too overwhelming for words. Abby knew they meant well, but they were just so...much. They called constantly. They wanted to do something every single day. They offered loads of unsolicited advice, in stereo, about how a woman her age needed to focus more on her career and her own individual pursuit of happiness than on trying to find a man. They made some subtle and some not-so-subtle digs at Dean, and the aforementioned pricks, citing her track record as evidence that she needed a break from guys. They all but suggested she just join a convent, or adopt sixteen more cats and get it over with, and the worst part about it was, there were definite kernels of truth to what they were saying. That didn't make it any easier to hear, though.

Rolling out of bed, she trudged past her pitiful, sparsely-decorated tree and to the door as slowly as possible. She needed ample time to prepare for whatever silly holiday accessory they had in store this year. Ridiculous hats? How about sweaters? Maybe little jingle bell earrings? Whatever it was, tradition firmly dictated that on Christmas, they all had to match, which left her no choice but to put it on and act like she loved it. This entire night was going to be about acting, most likely. Acting like she enjoyed the evening's festivities, acting like she didn't want to go back to bed and sleep until the new year, acting like it didn't bother her that the one and only thing she wanted for Christmas was the one and only thing Mom and Aunt Denise couldn't give her. Goodness, this was going to be a long night.

Abby unhooked the latch, squaring her shoulders and straightening her posture to appear happier, and better able to withstand the intimidating onslaught of yuletide cheer that waited on the other side of that door. Forcing a smile, she unlocked the deadbolt and twisted the knob...and that was when she got the shock of her life.

It wasn't Mom and Aunt Denise standing there in gaudy Christmas garb. It was, rather, a tall, well-built man in a hoodie, jeans and a backwards baseball cap. He had dark hair, piercing blue eyes, a slightly crooked nose, several days' worth of gray-tinged stubble, and the sexiest dimples she'd ever seen. He also had a cup of coffee in each of his gloved hands. Beside him stood a little girl with similar features, and way more gaps in her smile than Abby remembered. Her red puffy coat and matching beret were a sharp ensemble that made her appear a lot more adult than she was—and as a bonus, it also helped conceal two of the most adorably lopsided pigtails in town. Between them, there was a bright green shopping bag that was almost bigger than the child wrangling it, and it brimmed with exquisitely wrapped gifts of all sizes.

And, just on the other side of the threshold, a disheveled, bare-faced, empty-handed woman, still clad in last night's reindeer pajamas, gaped at the pair as though she'd never seen them before—because she'd honestly thought she would never see them *again*. After two straight days of empty numbness, every last one of her repressed emotions came alive at once. She didn't know whether to laugh, scream or ugly cry, but one thing was for sure: she couldn't just keep staring at them like this.

"Hi," she choked out, on the end of a trembling breath. "What are you doing here?"

"We brought presents!" In her haste to greet Abby with one of her infamous bear hugs, Preslie jostled the bag aside and it toppled, gifts and all, to the ground. She looked at the mess, then up at her dad. "Oops. Sorry."

"No worries, baby. I got it." Dean stooped to retrieve them, setting down the cups in his hands. "So, um, yeah. We brought presents. And coffee, since, you know, I promised you coffee and all. Sorry it's a little late. I've been, uh..."

His sentence ended there, and though she was dying to hear how he planned to explain himself, she knew better than to push the issue in Preslie's company. Kneeling down to return the embrace, she directed her words to the child. "Hi, sweetheart! Oh, it's so good to see you again! How are you? You're getting so big!"

"I lost another tooth, did you see? That makes four!"

"Four! Wow! How exciting! What's the going rate on teeth these days?"

Situating the last of the gifts back into the bag, Dean took it upon himself

to answer that with a laugh. “Yeah, you don’t wanna know. I’m starting to think she’s knocking them loose on purpose now.”

Noticeably, Preslie did not dispute it. “Where’s your kitty? I wanna see the kitty!”

“Oh, well, she’s, um...” Abby hesitated for a full ten seconds before resolving that they’d come way too far and spent way too much money for her to leave them out in the cold. “Come in. She’s in my bed right now. She’ll be so happy to see you. She’s missed you a lot, you know.”

“I miss her, too! Pumpkin’s a lot nicer to me now, though. You should see him. He’s gotten really big. He’s *this long* now!” Holding her arms a good eight inches apart, Preslie wasted little time walking inside.

Rather than follow suit, Dean extended the bag toward her. “Merry Christmas.”

She took it, nodding. “Thank you. Happy Hanukkah.”

“That was a month ago, but thanks.”

Twinges of embarrassment coursed through her, but she did her best not to let them show. “Right, sorry. Well...um, come in. It’s cold.”

Retrieving the coffee, he finally stepped inside, but didn’t say anything for the first thirty seconds or so. Then, neither did she. There were a hundred things she wanted to say, and probably needed to while she had the chance, but she couldn’t bring herself to make a sound. All she could do was stare at him, mind racing with a potent mix of lust, embarrassment, anger, and joy.

He waited until Preslie had disappeared into the bedroom before venturing, “I’m really sorry I didn’t get back with you about the coffee. I wanted to, but everything just went so crazy. I was working so much, and Chels came in for, like, six hours and that really messed with Pres’ head, so I’ve been trying to make it up to her and...” He paused, clearing his throat. “And I forgot. I’m sorry. I just...forgot, and by the time I remembered, I guess I thought maybe too much time had passed. You know what I mean? I thought you wouldn’t want to see me now. I thought you were mad at me—and you probably are, but Kristen...”

And just like that, his heartfelt apology went off the rails. Just like that, Abby remembered the posts, the photos, the cutesy captions—not from four years ago, but just last week. Just like that, her blood ran cold. “What *about* Kristen?”

“Kristen was right,” he resolved, stepping forward. It almost looked like

there were tears in his eyes. “I’m gonna lose you if I don’t do something—and I already lost you once. If I had to go through that again, I don’t think I could...” He took another step, leaving him inches from her. “Listen, I really fucked up. I should have talked to you about taking the offer before I talked to Ray. I shouldn’t have just assumed the worst about you. I should have gotten back to you a whole lot sooner. You keep telling me how sorry you are, and how much you messed this up, but you know, you’re not the only one. I messed this up, too...and I’m sorry, love. I’m so sorry.”

Her initial response was a series of skeptical blinks. “Kristen said that?”

“Well, not all of it, but she’s the one who told me if I didn’t do something, I was gonna lose you, so...I’m doing something. Listen, I know I screwed up, and I know you’re super pissed at me. I get that. I deserve that...but I love you—we love you, and we miss you, and we want to make this work. Can we make this work, please?”

Abby searched his eyes for insincerity but found no trace of deception. So, he wasn’t back together with Kristen...which meant that all over again, she’d allowed her mind to mislead her. All over again, she’d allowed her *mother* to mislead her. Hadn’t she learned by now not to put stock in Mom’s antiquated platitudes and vitriolic spew?

“If you don’t want to, I understand. I blew it, I know.” He sighed, shaking his head. “I’m really, really bad at this, you know? I’m bad at saying the stuff that matters, but you make me want to do better. You make me want to...”

Too ashamed to face him anymore, she turned toward the kitchen. “You don’t need to do better, I do. I’m the one who’s assuming the worst of you all the time.”

“It wasn’t just you, love. I did that, too, and I’m sorry. About everything and...” He trailed off, and a long, poignant silence settled over the room. “Sorry, is this a bad time? I mean, I know it’s Christmas and all, so if you have plans, we can leave—”

“No. Goodness, no, don’t leave. I’m just...” Overcome by a mix of conflicting emotions, she rocked in place for a moment. “I just keep thinking about how wrong I was about you and—gosh, are you sure you want to try this again?”

“Hey.” In a blink, Dean moved in front of her. “I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t.”

“I know that, but I’m just such a freakin’ mess.”

“Hey.” He said it again, leaning down to her. “You’re not a mess, you’re my soulmate.” The callback to their ScreenTime conversation brought tears to her eyes, but he didn’t stop there. “You’re the piece I never knew was missing. You’re the kind of woman I want my daughter to be when she grows up. You are the smartest, funniest, bravest, most supportive, most talented, most beautiful woman I’ve ever met and I don’t ever want to lose you again. You’re...”

Instead of finishing his sentence, he leaned in closer, placing his lips over hers. The kiss was tender, amplifying everything he’d just said, and then some. Abby found it impossible to contain her emotion as she looked up at him. “Dino, I love you. I love you so, so much, and I don’t want to lose you again, either. I’ve waited my whole damned life for somebody like you, and I’m just so scared I’m gonna drive you away.”

“I’m not going anywhere, love.” Holy moly, there *were* tears in his eyes. “Never, ever again. You’re stuck with us now. Sure hope you like sand and kittens.”

She wrapped both arms around him, pulling him closer. “Sand and kittens? Hmm. Well, maybe if you added some Stevie to that, you’d have yourself a deal.”

Their lips met for another kiss, this one jubilant enough to send her heart soaring into the stratosphere. It felt like the spell had been broken, and both her mother’s hateful words and her inner negativity had been rendered powerless. She could actually breathe again, and soak in the moment; a new beginning in more ways than one.

“Yeah, I think...I think I can do that,” he managed, pulling back. “For you.”

“Daddy!” Without warning, Preslie came thundering out of the bedroom, Meryl in hot pursuit. “It’s snowing!”

Dean still had a smile on his face when he stepped out of Abby’s arms. “Is it snowing? Really?”

“Yes! Can we go look at it?”

In an unspoken answer to her question, he was already halfway to the door—and both his childlike exuberance and the exceedingly rare occurrence drove Abby straight to the closet for her coat.

“Wow, it really is snowing!” he marveled, hoisting Preslie onto his hip. “How cool is that?”

“It’s super cool!” the little girl affirmed, practically squealing with delight. “Do you think we can build a snowman?”

“Um, well, I don’t think it’s gonna snow that much, but...maybe.”

“Oh, my goodness, how pretty!” Stepping outside to join them, Abby smiled. “I can’t believe it’s actually snowing! They didn’t say anything about this on the weather, did they?”

“Yeah, I really don’t know. We’ve just been watching *Elf* for five days.” He pulled her close on his other side, muttering, “Remind me to hide that DVD,” into her ear.

“Got it,” she muttered back.

Seemingly oblivious to their conspiring, Preslie let out a long, contented sigh. “This is the best Christmas ever!”

He smiled at that, turning his head toward her. “You know what, baby? I think you’re right.”

And she was. It was the best Christmas of Abby’s life, anyway—though the likelihood was, with those two in the picture, that record would get shattered over and over again.

She couldn’t *wait*.



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## Prologue

"Hey, sorry. Traffic was insane. You wouldn't think there'd be that much this time of day, but..." Stepping forward, Dean Altman consciously wedged a hand into his left pocket and curled his fingers around the small box inside. Bringing it with him to a bustling park—where Pres no doubt expected him to romp and play with her until the next full moon—probably hadn't been the best idea, now that he thought about it...but he felt even less optimistic about leaving it in the car.

"Jesus, am I glad to see you!" His sister, Margot, who'd gamely stepped in to watch Preslie so he could break away, rushed toward him as fast as her rounded, seven-months-pregnant form could manage. "They have been driving me crazy today! Back and forth, all day long. In the car, at the movies, on the swings—Ken finally had to take Mason to go slide, just so they could get a break from each other!"

"Oh, shit, I'm sorry. She promised she was gonna try to get along with him better."

"Oh, she didn't start it this time, he did. He's been a little butthead lately. He wants to argue about..." She burst into laughter as she got closer, head cocked quizzically to one side. "Okay, who the hell are you, and what have you done with my brother? A *suit*? Really? It's a million degrees out!"

Yes, he'd noticed—and somehow, her sarcasm made it feel ten times hotter. He stepped backward, into the shade, to roll up his sleeves. "Yeah, I

was gonna go home and change, but I was already late enough. I knew you'd probably kill me if I took any—"

"Daddy!" Pres appeared out of nowhere and hugged his legs so tightly, one would think it had been months since he'd left her in Margot's care. "You're here!"

Dean placed an arm around her, leaning down to kiss the top of her head. "Hey, baby. Did you have fun at the movies?"

"Well...kind of. Mason ate *all* his popcorn, and then he wanted some of mine! And when I told him no, he started crying! Then, he wouldn't take his arm off my armrest, and when I told him to move, he elbowed me, so I elbowed him back and then..."

Preslie's long, dramatic recap of the afternoon's quarrels provided a welcome distraction, and though he pretended to be interested in every word, all he could think about was the look on Margot's face right now. Whether she wanted to admit it or not, that whole Wonder Twin thing worked both ways—though, to be fair, he was far more likely to attribute the phenomenon to established personality traits than any sort of telepathy.

At any rate, he could see the wheels turning in her head from here, and he really hoped that Pres' laundry list of complaints could distract her from all the questions she wanted to ask. It was bad enough he'd had to endure *one* interrogation already.

Not that he'd expected much less from Jackie Devlin. He knew going in that he was asking a lot from a woman who couldn't stand him, but he'd still been optimistic enough to hope she could at least go through the motions. She didn't have to leap across the table, with tears in her eyes, to embrace him or anything, but *man*, would it have killed her to try and look happy about it?

Knowing Abby's mom? Yes, it probably would have. She'd never had much use for him, despite the fact that Dean had gone well out of his way to try to win her over. It had been eight long, tense months of making nice, buying her lunch and even driving sixty miles (after a twelve-hour shift at the shipyard) to replace her busted toilet, but none of it had changed the woman's opinion of him. To her, he remained little more than some superficial Hollywood pretty boy, out to cheat on her daughter—or worse.

So, he couldn't really say he was surprised that, instead of extending the blessing he'd come for, she had spent the majority of this afternoon's lunch

date lobbing even *more* patronizing, uncomfortable questions. But that didn't make them any easier to answer.

*Oh, God, is she pregnant? She's pregnant, isn't she?*

What? Why would she even suggest that? Abby was not pregnant—at least, he didn't think so—but even if she was, it wasn't 1958 anymore. Insinuating that *that* was the reason he wanted to propose was outdated, judgmental and nothing short of insulting. And, of course, Jackie didn't stop there.

*This is just so sudden! Have you really thought about this?*

Yes, of course he had. It was all he'd thought about since they got back from that trip to Disney in June. Abby'd pulled out all the stops to make Preslie's post-birthday, post-Chelsie letdown, summer kick-off extravaganza special, and Dean kind of wished he could've proposed to her there—he'd wanted to, but as he often did, he'd needed a bit more time to bolster his nerve.

*How does your daughter feel about this?*

To be honest, he hadn't actually broached the subject with Pres yet—not because he didn't want to, but because keeping secrets had never been her strong suit, and he was worried that if she knew, she would end up spoiling the surprise. Still, he had no reason to suspect that she'd be anything less than overjoyed. She was crazy about Abby and vice versa.

*And what if those soap opera people call again? Have you thought about that?*

No, not really. Because he was pretty sure they wouldn't.

*But what if they do? What if they offer you even more money than last time? You'd almost have to take it, wouldn't you? You have a child—I don't see how you could refuse! And what's Abby supposed to do? Quit her job, and give up on all her own dreams to move across the country with you? If she's your wife, she's gonna have to!*

Whoa, whoa, whoa! Who said anything about *moving*? He wasn't moving anywhere—he'd just paid off his house! But even if he hadn't, it still wouldn't matter, because “those soap opera people” were not going to call! They hadn't since January, anyway, when he'd advised his agent in no uncertain terms that he would sooner die than ever return to that set, no matter how much money was involved.

If anything, his emphatic reassurance seemed to have the opposite effect. Jackie doubled down, continuing to flog the decomposed carcass of his acting career for so long that eventually, she started to repeat herself. By that point,

Dean had all but given up on ever getting her daughter's proverbial hand and was about to ask for the check when she finally relented...sort of.

"Well, I think it's way too soon," she'd informed, between sips of wine, "but it doesn't matter what I think, does it? You're both going to do whatever the hell you want to do, anyway, so I don't know why you're even asking."

To be honest, neither did he—but he did know that was as close to a blessing as he was ever going to get, so he picked up the tab and floored it back down to Galveston before she had the chance to change her mind. As Abby might say, *good grief*, but at least the hard part was over. It was all about putting the perfect proposal into motion now—and, with that little weekend camping trip coming up, he knew just the place to do it.

"Daddy, come swing with me!"

Preslie's request jolted Dean back to reality, and he smiled down at her. "I thought you'd never ask."

"Hey, wait. Hold on a second." Margot turned to the side, using her rounded abdomen to block the path. "I'm not letting you squirm out of this one. Where exactly did you go all dressed up like that?"

Well, so much for her getting distracted by Preslie's complaints.

"Uh, downtown. I had to pick up something and then, uh...I had lunch."

"With who, the friggin' queen?"

"How'd you guess? She sends her love, by the way." With that, he maneuvered around his sister and future niece to follow Pres to the swings.

It came as little surprise that Margot was close behind. "Okay, out with it. It had to be somebody super important for you to dress like that. Mom had to talk you out of wearing shorts and flip-flops to Hannah's wedding, remember?"

Dean shrugged, laughing. "Well, I mean, that's what I wore to my wedding, so..."

"Oh, you did? See, I wouldn't know, because no one ever saw fit to invite me or anything."

Yikes. She had to go *there*, didn't she? It had been more than a decade, but she'd still never forgiven his impromptu, ill-advised decision to elope with Chelsie. If she found out he was holding out on her again, the odds were, she would be furious—and given his much closer proximity, and the ever-fluctuating state of her emotions, this time, she'd probably do a whole lot worse than just rage text him for two hours.

Dean stopped, sighing. “Hey, baby? Go on ahead. I’ll be there in a minute.”

Pres turned back to frown at him, and it was clear she intended to complain, but before she could say a word, Margot came closer. She was wearing the same stern look Mom used to use to silence all their childhood protests. “You heard him, go. We’ll just be a minute.”

“Okay, so...” he began, once his daughter was safely out of earshot. “I had lunch with Abby’s mom.”

Margot’s nose crinkled in disdain. “I knew it! You’ve been chasing that woman around for months, and you really need to stop, because it doesn’t matter whether she likes you or not!”

“Um, actually...it kind of does.” Dean took a moment to brace himself for what was certain to be a tidal wave of disapproval then reached into his pocket.

His sister snatched the box from him and cracked it open. One glimpse at the pear-shaped diamond ring inside was all it took to render her speechless. “Wait...is that...”

“Yeah,” he affirmed, nodding. “It is.”

Shoving the box back in his direction, she swallowed hard. It took a few seconds for her to compose herself enough to speak. “Oh, my God. Dino...what the *fuck*? You haven’t even known that girl a year yet and you wanna get married? Are you nuts?”

“And...that’s exactly what I thought you’d say.”

“No kidding, genius! It’s what *any* reasonable person would say!”

“So I’m *un*-reasonable?” He shoved the ring back into his pocket, turning away.

“When it comes to this, yes!”

“Right. Cool. Good to know.”

“Oh, for cripes’ sake, what happened to just taking it slow this time? What happened to getting to know her before you jump into some big—”

“What happened to just being happy for me?” he muttered, over his shoulder.

Margot’s expression softened as she moved in front of him. “Hey. I am happy for you. Don’t ever think I’m not. I like the two of you together. I didn’t think I would, but I do. She’s really good for you, and she’s really good

for Pres, and I like her, okay? But I still don't understand why you want to do this right *now*. Jesus, at least live with her first!"

"Yeah, well, um..." Casting his eyes downward, Dean exhaled. Time for bombshell number two. "We're working on that. I mean, it's not official or anything. She still has her apartment because the lease doesn't expire for a few more months, but she's never there anymore. She's staying with me now. She even...brought her cat."

"And how long has *this* been going on?"

"Um...since we got back from Disney, so...June."

Margot blinked at him for what felt like an eternity, eyes glistening with tears. "*Wow*. Well, thanks for telling me, asshole."

"Sorry. I didn't mean to *not* tell you. It just never came up, you know?"

She held up a dismissive, and slightly trembling, hand. "Whatever. You had plenty of chances to tell me—we talk every single day, so you could have told me if you really wanted to. But you didn't, because you knew I was gonna lecture you. Admit it."

"Well, I mean..." There wasn't much he could say in his defense. She had him dead to rights with that one. "Sorry."

"It's okay. I get it—and for the record, I really don't want to lecture you. I don't want to go all 'Mom Jr.' over here, because I know you *hate* that. It's just...I know how impulsive you are, and I know that doesn't always work out for you, and I just—"

"I know," he interrupted, nodding. "I know I've made a lot of mistakes with this stuff, but this time's different. It just...fits, you know? We fit. It feels really right, and I don't see a point in wasting time if we already know this is where it's gonna end up, anyway. When you know, you know, right?"

Dean could tell, if only from the grimace on her face, that Margot was not pleased he'd cited Dad's somewhat dubious take on love and relationships, but she didn't dare dispute it. Instead, she wiped at her eyes and then pulled him in for a warm, if somewhat aggressive, embrace. "Oh, come here, you bastard! I'm happy for you—and Abby. I mean it. I really do like you two together, and I really, really want this to work out for you."

"It will. Don't worry."

"I'm gonna worry. You know that. Just...promise me something, okay? Promise me you will still take your time on this. No one said you had to get married tomorrow. Let me have this kid first. And then let me lose the thirty

pounds she put on me, so I don't look like the Goodyear blimp in all your pictures!"

Tension effectively broken, Dean laughed at that, pulling back. "I don't know what her timetable looks like, but, um...I'll see what I can do."

"You better." Margot paused, pointing at him. "And no Vegas this time. Do it right. Abby deserves that—and so do you."



Abby Devlin rocked impatiently in her seat, the heels of her sassy wedge sandals bouncing against the linoleum. They were a recent thrift store find, one she'd snatched up without a second thought...and now, it was painfully obvious why they'd been donated in the first place. Yes, they were cute, and yes, they complemented her summery, yet serious, ensemble quite well, but *goodness*, were they uncomfortable! She'd thought they would be fine with moderate use. It wasn't as though she was hiking or running a marathon in them or anything. All she'd done was walk out of the house, down the stairs, to the car, and then from the car to the coffee shop—a total of seventy paces, if she had to guess—and she already had two blisters to show for it. Not to mention, the faux-suede interior made her achy feet feel like they were on fire.

The whole rest of her was sweltering, too, come to think of it. It was so stuffy in here that she'd already been forced to take off her cardigan, and the more people that piled inside, the hotter it felt. She sighed, consulting her smartwatch for the tenth time in as many minutes. If Debbie didn't show up soon, she was probably going to melt.

Of course, she really should've known better than to expect that woman to be on time. Since her surprising, and frankly undeserved, promotion to McMillan's Creative Director, she had sort of made her own schedule. She showed up at the playhouse when, and if, she felt like it. She delegated all the more mundane, undesirable tasks to her newly appointed underlings. She

scheduled meetings with anxious playwrights, to pass judgment on their hard work, and then kept them waiting for thirty agonizing minutes. And counting.

To keep from fidgeting, Abby wrapped both hands around what remained of her caramel frappe but made sure to keep her eyes on the door. This was the stuff nightmares were made of, and though she was trying to focus on all the grounding techniques she'd learned in therapy, she still couldn't help but fear the worst. This was, after all, her second draft—her second attempt to win Debbie's elusive approval, and the fact that everyone *else* had seemingly loved her first provided a harsh reminder of what she was up against. Oh, brother.

Her most recent creation had started as an experiment; a self-challenge, so to speak. Inspired by the great Tennessee Williams plays she'd performed in college, Abby wanted to see if she could write something in that vein, and the end result did not disappoint. It was a tawdry, southern-fried romp centered on the powerful, yet dysfunctional, Marchand family of Covington, Louisiana.

Patriarch Wells was a former state senator, and a rather crooked one at that. His wife Audrey was an oft-neglected socialite with a lover on the side. Their three adult children all led messy, scandalous lives of their own, and proved to be the stars of the show. Eldest Kirby was a hotshot lawyer who followed his father's seedy example, both in his career and in the way he cheated on and verbally abused his wife. Daughter Adair was a former pageant queen whose highest aspiration in life was to marry well, just as her mother had done all those years ago. Youngest son Camden, the black sheep of the family, had recently returned from college with a new fiancée—a former call girl who'd once counted both Wells and Kirby amongst her clients.

Abby had never had more fun writing anything in her life. The words practically poured out of her, and she had been convinced when she submitted it to McMillan's Creative Department that they would have to be crazy to pass it up. But they did. *Debbie* did, rather, with a list of complaints so insulting that to this day, she had a hard time thinking back on them without wanting to punch a wall.

There were way, *way* too many characters, she'd said—an infuriating quibble, given that she'd said the very opposite about the play Abby fought to get on their stage last year. She'd also griped that the material was much too "campy," and claimed she couldn't tell if it was supposed to be a melodrama

or just a “really bad parody of one.” She didn’t like the setting, or the ending, or the fact that the characters rather liberally drank and smoked. She didn’t like anything about it, really, but did mention that with some retooling, McMillan might be willing to reconsider, and that was all Abby needed to hear.

For the second year in a row, she went home, raged for a couple of hours, downed half a bottle of wine, and then got back to work. She’d eliminated a number of the side characters, including Adair’s boyfriend and Audrey’s landscaping lover. She’d cut way down on the melodrama, changed the setting to the suburbs of Houston, and even reworked the ending to make the overall story arc one of female empowerment, but looking back on it, perhaps she shouldn’t have bothered. There was no guarantee that Debbie was going to like this toned-down version any better than she had the original. And if she didn’t, that would mean she’d taken a match to her proudest creation for no good reason at all.

Crap, she was doing it again. She was *catastrophizing*, as her therapist Brenda liked to put it. She was trying to predict what was going to happen once Debbie finally arrived. She was agonizing over conversations and events that hadn’t even happened yet. In other words, she was torturing herself, the same way she’d done all her life, but she couldn’t afford to do it anymore. She had to focus on the present instead—and the positives, like the fact she’d even made it this far.

It wasn’t easy finding time to write an entire three-act play while juggling a full-time job, a strenuous performance and rehearsal schedule, and a sizzling romance at the same time. It was even harder to reimagine her original concept and implement the changes requested, while still remaining true to her artistic vision. But she’d done it, and that counted for something, no matter what news Debbie bore today.

Glancing down at her phone, Abby sighed. She really wanted to text Dino right now, if only to pass some time, but she knew he wouldn’t answer if she did. He was taking Preslie to Fiesta Texas today—part of their annual end-of-summer tradition, to hear them tell it—and after that, they were headed up to the Hill Country for a weekend in the wild. She was joining them there later tonight, and honestly, she couldn’t wait. Far from the worries and demands of everyday life, it was just the sort of getaway she needed before reporting back to work on Monday. It could act as a celebration if Debbie gave the green

light, a consolation if she didn't, and a chance to center herself before starting a new school year either way. In short, it was going to be paradise.

Slurping down the last of her drink, Abby couldn't help but smile. Camping in the middle of nowhere was not exactly something she would've been excited about a year ago, but a lot had changed since then—for the better. In the months since her heartfelt Christmas Eve reconciliation with Dean, she'd embarked on a number of new experiences, such as getting into therapy, setting firm boundaries with her intrusive mother, and embracing a more active, outdoorsy sort of lifestyle. She'd joined a kickboxing class a couple of weeks back and was looking forward to hitting the hiking trails this weekend. If she ever got out of this damned coffee shop, anyway.

"Honey, I'm *so* sorry!" Debbie called, as she sprinted toward the table. "Rachel got called for jury duty, so I had my grandsons all day long. I am *beat!*"

Looking up, Abby forced herself to laugh. "Oh, wow. Are they a handful?"

"And then some! You know how boys are! I was going to take them to play, but it's just so damned hot outside, so we went to the mall instead. And then, I had to take them to swimming lessons, and you know you can't just leave them there, so I had to wait..." She droned on for several more seconds, offering excuse after elaborate excuse for the delay, before taking a seat. "Very sorry to keep you waiting, honey. I promise, it won't happen again."

"It's fine. No problem."

"Do you mind if I grab a coffee before we get down to business? I can get you another, if you'd like. What is that, a frappe?"

"Yes, um...caramel. But you don't have to."

"Nonsense!" Debbie was already halfway to the counter. "Least I can do!"

It took five minutes for her to work her way through the line, and another ten for the drinks to be prepared—Abby knew, because she'd checked her watch at least sixty-two times during the wait. Her stomach was doing somersaults by the time Debbie finally sat down, but she didn't let that stop her from gulping down a mouthful of frigid, frothy sweetness. Right now, she needed all the sugar she could get.

"Well, I have to tell you, I liked this draft a lot better than the first one," Debbie noted, after a long sip of coffee.

Forcing out a breath, Abby nodded. Okay, that was a promising start...but why did she sense a *but* coming? “Oh, good. I’m glad.”

“There are still too many characters, though. You have the parents, and the kids, and then all these other people coming and going all over the place. I couldn’t keep track of half of them, to be honest. Who is *Gretchen*? They keep talking about her, but I never could figure out who she was and how she fit into this.”

Searing heat settled over Abby’s cheeks, working its way down in waves. “The housekeeper. She had an affair with Wells. She’s Camden’s real mother. I’m sorry, I thought that was clear.”

It *should have* been clear, because it was explicitly stated during an argument between Wells and Audrey in the final act. The fact that Debbie had missed it could only mean one of two things: either she didn’t bother to read that far, or she just wasn’t paying attention. It was tough to say which was worse. Both options were equally disheartening.

“Oh. Right. Okay. But see...that’s another thing. You did cut down on a lot of the camp, and I appreciate that, but this really doesn’t read like much of a play. It reads more like a soap opera, to be honest. I got a lot of *Dallas* vibes when I was reading this. Are you old enough to remember *Dallas*?”

Abby’s fingers tightened around the plastic cup. “Sort of. My mom used to watch the reruns on cable.”

“Then you know what I’m talking about. The characters’ lives are all intertwined, and there’s not a lot of resolution in the end. It all feels very...unfinished, which isn’t a bad thing. It’s an amazing setup, and it could probably go on for another ten seasons if it were a television show. But...it’s not, and unfortunately, we are going to have to pass.”

“You’re passing. I rewrote it and you’re...” To prevent saying anything she might regret, Abby brought the straw to her lips.

Debbie frowned at her across the table. “I’m sorry. I know this isn’t what you wanted to hear. It’s really nothing personal. It’s just...business. If I can be frank with you, it really isn’t in the playhouse’s best interest to take on any more amateur works.”

“*Amateur*?” The very word caused Abby’s spine to stiffen.

“Original,” Debbie amended, not that it softened the blow. “We think it’s best to stick with the classics right now—the shows our audiences know and

love. The stuff they want to see. We have a lot of trust to reestablish with them, and we figure that's going to be the best way to do it."

"And who's 'we?'" In hindsight, she wasn't sure why she'd asked. The odds were, she didn't want to know.

Debbie hesitated. "Well, Ray, for one. And Jackson. And Shelly. But really, honey, it's nothing personal. This is just...business."

Rocking back and forth in her seat, Abby struggled to corral her racing thoughts. "Business. I see." That was the most she could manage.

"I'm really sorry. It's just...we lost so much money last time, and we can't afford to have that happen again. I'm sure you understand."

"Of course." She kept her response as emotionless as possible, given the circumstances.

Still, Debbie did not appear to be fooled. "Honey, please don't be upset. I promise, it's not a slight against you at all. You're a great writer! This play and the last one—they were great. It's not your fault things happened the way they did. That was more..." Her overplucked eyebrows lifted, presumably for dramatic effect. "...a certain soap star, whom I believe you are well acquainted with."

Abby's spine stiffened all over again. "It wasn't his fault, either."

"Oh, it most certainly was. He left us in a pretty big bind, and that boy that replaced him was just *terrible*." Debbie paused, shaking her head at the memory. "How's he doing, by the way?"

Reaching behind her for her cardigan, Abby shrugged. "Who, Tim? I wouldn't know. I haven't talked to him since—"

"Heavens no, not Tim! Dalton!"

"Dean," she corrected, dropping the phone into her bag. "His name is Dean. And he's fine."

"Oh, good! Are you two still..." Grinning, Debbie trailed off. It was clear she expected Abby to fill in the blank.

She did, albeit reluctantly. "Yes, we are."

"Wonderful! I'm glad to hear *something* good came of that disaster! Tell him I said hello, would you?"

"Of course." Abby rose from the table, pasting on a smile. "Thanks so much for your time, but I've really got to go. We're going camping this weekend, so I have—"

“Oh, how fun!” Debbie clasped both hands in front of her, as though she actually cared or something. “Have a wonderful time!”

Abby rushed for the door as quick as the torturous shoes would allow, but made sure to offer over her shoulder, “Thanks again. See you later.”

*Or never. Never would also be fine.*

She pulled off her sandals the moment she was outside, discarding them—and all of her hopes and dreams for this project—in the trash can on her way back to the car. As much as she’d tried to prepare herself for the possibility that Debbie might still say no, this felt like a punch in the stomach. She didn’t know whether to cry, scream, or possibly vomit, but one thing was for sure: she couldn’t do it here.

Back to the drawing board.

# Covington OR BUST



LOVE SCENES, BOOK TWO

*Coming soon!*



# About the Author

Bixby Jones was born and raised in Houston, Texas. She has been writing fiction since the age of ten, and while this is her first foray into romance, she has self-published a series of mystery novels under a different pen name.

In her spare time, Bixby enjoys reading, watching basketball, all things Christmas, and spending time with her family and her Siamese cat, Tom.

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