



PITY PACT

USA Today Bestselling Author
Whitney Dineen

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WHITNEY DINEEN

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, locales, and situations are the work of the author's overactive imagination and the voices in her head. Any resemblance to people living or dead, events, etc., is purely coincidental. And I don't mean maybe.

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Made in the United States. September 2023

Print ISBN: 9798875572395

E-book ASIN: B0CGKDX5WG

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CHAPTER ONE



PAIGE

I'm sweating bullets. Scratch that, I'm closer to sweating full cartridges of bullets. It wouldn't surprise me if the ATF showed up and arrested me for unlawful amounts of nervous sweat or something. I shift anxiously on the gold Chiavari chair, trying to talk myself out of running for the hills.

I was originally excited to be cast on the reality dating show, *Midwestern Matchmaker*. But as I wait in the country club conference room for my official welcome interview with the producers, my entire nervous system is screaming at me to flee.

My best friend Missy and I got hooked on the series a couple of months ago when we'd reached an all-time low in our dating lives. Like the rest of our generation, we grew up on people making a spectacle of themselves in hopes of finding love. As such, we decided that if something better didn't come along, we would audition to do the same. Happily for Missy, her "something better" showed up in the form of a gorgeous single dad who traded life in the big city for a more normal upbringing for his twelve-year-old daughter, like something straight out of a Hallmark movie. *And yes, I'm jealous.*

My "something better" was starting to look a lot like the grocery store freezer section where they keep the Ben and Jerry's. Cherry Garcia and I were getting hot and heavy there for a few months. And while I could see a lifelong relationship with him, he's going to have to be my side guy. I want

more.

“Paige Holland?” My sweat glands respond like an uncapped fire hydrant. It’s seriously gross.

“Here!” I gingerly stand up and smooth out the skirt of the nineteen-fifties-style vintage dress that I picked up for next to nothing at my favorite secondhand store, Love Me Again. Then I grab my purse and hurry toward the man in the silver suit who’s holding a clipboard. Upon closer inspection, I notice his shirt and tie are also silver. His shoes are gray suede. He looks like a robot.

Mr. Roboto turns around and starts walking toward a door on the side wall. “Follow me.”

We walk into a conference room with a large table in the middle. “This is Paige Holland,” he tells the assortment of people sipping coffee and nibbling on pastries.

Heads swivel in my direction, and I’m suddenly the focus of at least eight pairs of eyes, maybe ten. I can’t count right now to save my life.

The beautiful brunette woman sitting at the head of the table announces, “Paige, I’m so glad you could make it! I have very high hopes for you.”

Trina Rockwell is the host of *Midwestern Matchmaker*. She’s so gorgeous, I wouldn’t be surprised if all the male participants who come on the show didn’t fall in love with her at first sight. Tall, gloriously thick brown hair, and full of confidence turns out to be an intimidating combination for a petite blonde like me.

“Thanks for having me, Trina.” My voice cracks, making me wish the ground would open and swallow me whole.

Trina tells the table, “Paige is the seventh-grade math teacher right here in Elk Lake. Isn’t that great?” She’s so enthusiastic you’d think I was part of an expedition moving to Mars to breed the first generation of Earth Martians. Side note: My uncle Ben is convinced the Nazis bugged out to Mars after World War II and have been there ever since. I’ve often considered getting him a tinfoil hat for his birthday. Also, I make a mental note *not* to tell that story in a nervous rambling.

The mélange of grunts and grumbles that follows Trina’s excitement regarding my participation in the show suggests her audience isn’t quite as thrilled about me as she is.

Trina stands up and addresses me. “I won’t bother to introduce you to everyone now.” She waves her hand from one side of the table to the other

like she's professionally spokesmodeling the group. "But this is our production team. You'll see them around a lot once we start taping. They'll have suggestions for you along the way."

Shifting from one ballet flat to the other—I wasn't going to risk wearing heels and falling over—I mumble, "I thought *you* were doing the matching."

"Oh, I am. The team here will help by letting you know which side is your best, making sure you're standing in the light, and reminding you to speak up so the microphones can pick up everything you're saying. They're on hand so we can give postproduction the best scenes possible." Her smile is blindingly bright, like she couldn't imagine a more wonderful thing than being well-lit. *Um, hello, Trina, how about world peace, and no more starving children?*

But I don't say that. Instead, I go with the profound, "I see." Which I don't because I've never done anything like this before. The only time I've ever been on TV was when that tornado ripped through Elk Lake the spring I was in the second grade. Neither my mom nor I saw the camera on the corner of Main and Elm, but it was there. We found that out later in the evening when my parents were watching the local news. The NBC reporter's microphone picked up my scream, "But I have to pee now!!!" Needless to say, I was a local celebrity for the entire year following. FYI, fame is not all it's cracked up to be. Still, I'm glad it was in the days before viral videos, because I would have been destined to be a gif for sure.

I eye the empty chair at the table, hoping Trina will invite me to sit down before I fall down. I'm starting to get light-headed. But instead of picking up on my distress, she points to the corner of the room where there are several large lights facing the wall. As she walks in the direction of the mini set, she motions for me. "Let's get some footage of you for show teasers."

My feet feel like they've broken through the flooring and have started to sink toward the center of the Earth. "Excuse me?"

"It's no biggie. I just want to ask you a few questions and we may or may not use the recording during airing."

"I ... I ... I ..." I have forgotten how to speak English. I lift one foot like it's a cement block and gradually make my way toward her. Once I'm under the lights, I announce, "I would have worn something different if I had known I was going to be filmed." At the very least I would have brought a towel to soak up the bucket of sweat that's determined to exit my body.

"You look adorable," she exclaims. "Seriously, you're perfect for the part

you've been cast to play."

"What does that mean? I thought this was a reality program." Trina assures people at the beginning of every episode that *Midwestern Matchmaker* is a show for *real* people looking to fall in love with other *real* people.

"Oh, it is. It's just that we don't want everyone to be alike. That would be boring for the audience. We like to showcase different kinds of people to keep it fresh."

My mouth has gone as dry as the Sahara and I can barely ask, "Which character am *I*?"

Trina reaches out to me and pulls me into the light, as my brain screams in protest. I feel as panicky as if she were going to throw me into an active volcano. "You're my sweet small-town girl," she tells me. "Viewers generally root for you to fall in love with the white-collar professional from the city."

"Why is that?" I'm not looking for a city slicker.

She adjusts the purple velvet tie around my neckline. "Because it reminds them of the Cinderella story. You're a provincial girl living in obscurity and the professional guy is the prince who's going to take you away from your mundane life."

"But I love living in Elk Lake," I insist.

She throws jazz hands out in front of her to silence me. "Let's go, Chuck! We're ready to roll!"

I assume Chuck is the guy with the shaggy brown hair wearing the vintage Whitesnake T-shirt as he's the one behind the camera. "Just look straight ahead, Paige, and answer my questions," Trina tells me.

Even though I'm worked up about this typecasting information, I do as I'm told. The lights are so bright and hot, I start sweating in overdrive. I'm going to be a desiccated mummy if this keeps up.

"Bring a chair!" Trina shouts. The crew quickly sits me down and adjusts the lighting for my new lower location. I'm grateful because this way, if I faint, I'm less likely to seriously hurt myself. Once I'm settled, Trina asks, "Would you ever consider moving out of Elk Lake, Paige?"

"I would *never* leave Elk Lake." I sound surprisingly aggressive.

"Then let's hope whoever you match with wants to move here." She looks at her clipboard and continues. "Tell the viewers a little bit about yourself."

My mind wipes like a chalkboard after a good cleaning. “I, um. That is to say ... I ...” *Who am I again?*

“What do you do for a living?” she prompts.

“I’m the seventh-grade math teacher here in town. I teach at the same school I attended when I grew up here.” I glance over at the table and a couple of the people are yawning. Good times.

“What are your hobbies?”

“I love to watch romantic comedies, and I’m really into waterboarding.” In truth, I love to paddle board and I have no idea why I said waterboard. To clear things up, I add, “I don’t like to torture people.”

Well, it looks like no one’s tired anymore. Every eye in the room is once again on me.

“I meant to say, I like to paddle board, not waterboard.” Blank stares. “Paddle boarding is standing on a board and using paddles to move yourself around the lake. Waterboarding is, you know, tying someone down and putting a cloth over their face before pouring water on it to simulate drowning.” I watched a very informative television special on it which is the only reason I know so much about that particular form of torture.

A deep voice suddenly shouts, “Trina, can you please join us at the table?”

She puts one finger up in the air before telling me, “Give me a sec.”

As she scurries away, I wonder how much time will pass before she comes back with the news that I’m no longer going to be on the show. I focus on breathing deeply, as I hear a multitude of words being bandied about. “Is she kinky?” a female voice wants to know.

Before Trina can answer, a male voice says, “Kinky is handcuffs and whips, not waterboarding. My concern is that she’s unhinged.”

“She’s just nervous,” Trina tries to put them at ease. “She’s a small-town girl and not used to this kind of thing. Give her a break.”

Another male voice joins the fray. “I’m all for giving her a chance, but the minute she talks about waterboarding on the air, she’s off the show.”

Trina walks back to me, rolling her eyes. “Just to be clear, you’re *not* into intentionally harming people, right?”

My eyes bug out to the point I’m pretty sure they’re making a break for it. “No. I just said the wrong word. I’m totally normal.” Thinking about my behavior today, I add, “In relationships.”

“Good. Now, you like to watch rom-coms and *paddle board*. Anything

else?”

“I’m a pretty good baker,” I tell her. “One of my friends owns a bakery in town.” Thinking it might help her to feel better about me, I add, “Faith is married to Teddy Helms.”

“The actor?” Oh yeah, Trina’s excited.

“Yep. Teddy used to spend his summers here, and he recently came back to visit his grandfather. That’s when he met Faith.”

“That’s a great story! I wonder if we could talk Teddy into showing up for a scene or two.” She taps her chin with the tip of a pen like she’s urgently sending a Morse code that will win the war.

“I wouldn’t feel comfortable asking him,” I tell her honestly. While I’ve known Faith since kindergarten, I’m still a bit starstruck around her husband.

Trina waves her hand back and forth. “Forget that for now. I’m jumping ahead of myself. Tell us what kind of things you like to bake.”

“I make the best peanut butter cookies you’ve ever tasted.” While not a humble statement, it’s an accurate one. “They’ve won a blue ribbon in the county fair for four years running. They’re even better than Faith’s.”

She claps her hands with so much enthusiasm you’d think I’d just given birth to a litter of kittens. “You are the *perfect* small-town girl!”

Someone at the table calls out, “As long as she’s not wanted by the FBI.”

“Or Interpol ...” another helpful voice contributes.

Trina asks a few more questions that I forget as soon as I answer. I’m seriously starting to wonder if this show is for me. But then I remember I’ve had a grand total of six dates in the last two years. If I want to stay in Elk Lake, I’m going to need some help.

Trina eventually approaches me and takes my hands in hers. “I can’t wait to have you on the show, Paige. You’re a real prize.”

Feeling like a deer caught in the headlights of a truck convoy, I nod my head. I’m starting to realize what the repercussions could be for going on *Midwestern Matchmaker*. I could meet the man of my dreams and live happily ever after, or this experience could be a total failure.

Either way, I guess I’m about to find out.

CHAPTER TWO



TIM

“Pass me the salt, will you?” My dad’s eyes are glued to his newspaper as his hand shoots out in my direction.

Handing him the grinder, I ask, “Why don’t you read the news on your phone like normal people do?”

He lifts the paper to his nose and inhales deeply. “I like the smell of newsprint. It reminds me of my childhood.” I’m guessing my dad used to be a glue sniffer.

“The crew from *Midwestern Matchmaker* is setting up shop at the club today,” I tell him. “They’ll be shooting for the next five weeks.”

“Do you have everything under control, or do you need me to come in and lend a hand?” He sounds so hopeful. My family owns the country club and until very recently my dad was there six days a week making sure everything ran smoothly. He’s finally retired after years of my mom’s pleading, and he is not taking to it easily.

“I’ve got it,” I tell him. I was managing a country club in L.A. when I got the call to come home and take over the family business. I wasn’t caught unaware, as that had always been the plan. And being that my brief marriage had just ended, I was particularly eager to get out of Tinseltown.

My dad slumps into his chair dejectedly. “Well, if you ever need me, you know where I am.”

“I thought Mom was going to keep you busy traveling.”

“Our first trip is over Valentine’s Day.” He grumbles, “We’re going to Paris.”

I can’t help but tease, “To be guillotined?”

“Ha, ha, ha.” He chews and swallows a bite of toast before adding, “Don’t get me wrong. I like Paris and I love your mom, but I’m worried all this free time is going to be the end of me.”

“You’ll adapt,” I assure him. “You just need to remember what it’s like to have fun.”

My mom walks into the dining room in time to hear him say, “I thought going to work was fun.”

She rolls her eyes as she sits down opposite him. “You’re a royal pain in the butt, Greg. You’ve been telling me for years that you can’t wait to retire so we can spend all our time together and now that you’re finally done, all you can talk about is work.”

“I’m adjusting,” he mumbles.

“Not very well, which is why I’ve signed us up for pickleball lessons.”

His face screws up in disgust. “What in the heck is pickleball, and why would I want to play it?”

“It’s kind of like life-size ping pong,” I tell him. “It’s all the rage these days.”

The look on his face makes me laugh. It does not have the same effect on my mother. She jabs her pointer finger in his direction and declares, “Greggory Alan Ferris, if you don’t get on board with having fun with me, then you can go right back to work, and I’ll have all the fun by myself.” She pauses a beat before adding, “Or maybe with someone *else*.”

It doesn’t seem like my dad hears the implied threat because he’s still looking at me hopefully. “No coming into work,” I tell him plainly. “The only reason I came home is because it was time for me to take over.” It’s not that I don’t love my dad, but he’s a massive control freak and I do *not* want to work with him.

My mom, who can’t seem to help herself, tells me, “You also came home to meet a nice, normal girl.”

“I’m not interested in meeting anybody.” I bite into a croissant like I’m trying to kill it.

“Eva really did a number on you, didn’t she?” Great, my dad’s joined forces against me.

I pick up my napkin and wipe my mouth before dropping it on the table.

“You think? We weren’t even married for two years when she left.”

My mom tips her head to the side and practically dissects me with her eyes. “Yes, but you were starting to go out with some nice girls when you got home. What’s changed?”

I release the breath I’ve been holding. “I think I started dating too soon.”

She looks at me sadly. “You don’t still love Eva, do you?”

“Geez, Mom, I don’t know. I married her and thought we were going to have a life together. You don’t just fall out of love, you know.”

She reaches over and pats my hand. “I imagine not, dear, but the fact that she left you for some NBA player certainly says a lot about the quality of person she is.”

My dad puts his paper down. “Would it make more sense if she left him for a guy in the NHL?”

“Not at all,” my mom assures him. “I’m just saying that leaving a perfectly lovely man like our son for a sports figure she barely knows makes it clear Eva was nothing but a gold digger. She’s certainly not someone to pine after.”

I push my chair back in hopes of making my escape. “I’m *not* pining after her. I’m just sad my dream has been shattered.”

“You’re young,” my dad assures me. “You can fall in love and still see your dreams come to fruition.”

Standing up, I tell him, “I’m not ready for that, yet.”

“Take your time.”

Clearly my dad isn’t as worried as my mom, who admonishes, “You’re not getting any younger, and I would love some grandbabies to play with.”

“Then you’d better talk to Jonathon,” I tell her. “He’s four years older than me and he hasn’t had kids yet.”

“Jonathon’s gay,” my dad says like that has anything to do with becoming a parent.

“You do realize that gay people become parents,” my mom says.

“Well, sure. But Jonathan and Jacob are always traveling. I’m not sure they even *want* kids.” I love how my dad is sticking up for my brother and not me.

“I’m not married anymore,” I tell them both. “So, my timeline for starting a family has shifted. Why don’t you hit the pound for a dog if you need something to nurture?”

My mom’s blonde bob moves from side to side violently as she shakes

her head. “No pets. I want to travel, and I don’t want the responsibility of taking care of anybody or anything.”

And I don’t want to discuss dating, children, or my mother’s annoyance with my dad. “I’m off to work,” I tell them while making my exit.

My mom calls after me, “Will you be home for supper?”

I briefly turn toward her. “I’ve got a super busy day, so don’t count on me.” Relief flows through me as soon as I walk out of the room.

I should probably start looking for a house of my own, but I’ve been so busy at work, I haven’t gotten around to it. Plus, the only time I see my parents is for meals—meals I happily don’t always attend. Honestly, it would be the perfect arrangement if only they’d stop insinuating themselves into every aspect of my life.

As I park my car in the owner’s spot at the Elk Lake Country Club, I accept that my parents are only pushing me because they love me. And yes, I *did* start dating a lot when I came home, but I had only been divorced for a few months at the time. It wasn’t until Missy Corner told me she didn’t want to see me anymore that I realized I wasn’t even enjoying the dates I was going on. It was too much work trying to pretend I was happy, when in truth I felt like my insides were being ripped apart by a ravenous bear.

As I walk into the club, I’m nearly run over by a petite blonde. I reach my arms out in time to catch Paige Holland before we both go crashing to the ground. Paige and I were in school together from the time we were in kindergarten. We never ran in the same crowd, but I’ve started to get to know her as an adult through Missy. Missy and I have remained friends despite our brief dating history.

“Why are you in such a hurry?” I ask Paige, while simultaneously realizing it’s nice to have someone in my arms again. I lean down and sniff her hair. She smells like night blooming jasmine.

She looks decidedly shaken up as she steps back and says, “Hey, Tim. I’m ... um ... well ...” She inhales deeply before telling me, “I’ve just come from my welcome interview with the producers of *Midwestern Matchmaker*. I was so nervous my sweat glands responded like the little Dutch boy just pulled his finger out of the dike.”

While unsure of her reference, I assume things did not go well in Holland that day. “How could it not go well?” I ask. “I mean, they’ve already cast you, haven’t they?”

Her eyes shift from side to side. “I think I may have given them the impression that I’m into S & M.”

Unexpected laughter bursts out of me. “How did you do that?”

She lowers her gaze before mumbling, “I told them I was into waterboarding.”

“But you meant paddle boarding.”

Her head bounces up. “Exactly! But some doofus producer is afraid I’m going to be a liability.”

“You are the last person in the world that I would ever expect to be into S & M,” I assure her.

At first, she looks pleased by my comment, but she quickly seems to bristle. “Why? Because I’m a boring small-town girl? Because I’m not interesting?”

“Ah, no. Because I grew up with you and from memory you’ve always seemed like a nice, normal person.”

She still sounds angry, as she says, “I *am* a nice, normal person.”

“That’s what I said.”

“Whatever. I have to go.”

She tries to push past me, but I stop her. “You’ve got this, Paige. Don’t worry.”

Her whole body suddenly appears to drain of energy as her shoulders drop. I take a step toward her in case she faints. “I’m scared to death,” she finally admits.

“Dating is scary business.”

“It’s not dating I’m afraid of. It’s being on camera and discovering I don’t come off to the viewing audience as the strong, confident woman I think I am.”

“You are lovely and self-assured,” I tell her. “People are going to adore you and root for you to find your happily-ever-after. I promise.”

“Thanks, Tim. That means a lot.”

“And being that all filming is being done at the club, I’ll be on hand if you need me. I’ll even do some reconnaissance and let you know if I hear what people behind the scenes are saying about you.”

“I’m not sure I want to know ...” she starts to say before changing track.

“No, I should know. Tell me everything.”

“I’m on it.” I smile while adding, “And now I need to get in there and make sure the crew from *Midwestern Matchmaker* has everything they need. I’ll see you soon.”

“Thanks, Tim. You’re the best.”

I watch as Paige walks out the door toward the parking lot. She’s the kind of person I should have fallen for. But no, I had to move to Los Angeles—land of shallow wannabes—in hopes of finding something bigger and better. It turns out that doesn’t exist. What I got was my fill of women who are always on the lookout for the next best thing. Translation: famous men.

Truthfully, it’s not like the men are any different. Every bald, fat, single, fifty-year-old guy in L.A. thinks it’s his right to date as many twenty-year-old bikini models as he wants. The whole town has a skewed perspective of what’s normal. Had I only stayed in Elk Lake, I might have been lucky enough to wind up with a nice girl like Paige.

But I didn’t stay, and it’s time to face the truth. I’ve probably missed my opportunity to live the life I might have had. I no longer even want to date because I don’t want to risk heartbreak again.

CHAPTER THREE



PAIGE

“You’re going to do great,” Missy tells me while putting away wedding dresses from her last customer. She and her mom own the only bridal shop in Elk Lake.

“Easy for you to say,” I grumble. “You’ve already met your knight in shining armor.”

She closes her eyes and sighs loud enough to be heard down the street. “Jamie is everything I’ve ever wanted in a man. He’s perfect.”

I love my friend. I’m happy for my friend. Good things come to those who wait. I repeat my latest mantra in my head. “You deserve each other,” I tell her, hoping I sound supportive and not like I’m putting a curse on her.

Missy drops the dress she’s holding and walks toward the pink pincushion stool I’m sitting on. It’s near the platform where future brides stand so their friends can admire them in their wedding finery. “You’re going to find somebody wonderful on *Midwestern Matchmaker*. I just know it.” She scooches me over so she can sit next to me. In doing so, she causes my perch to topple over, which knocks us both onto the floor.

I immediately stretch out and assume my favorite yoga position, Dead Man’s Pose. “What are the chances of that happening?”

Lying next to me, Missy says, “You’re the one who’s watched every dating reality show in history. You know the stats on all the couples who’ve ever wound up together.”

“For every love match there are five thousand poor suckers who remain single ...” I sound like Winnie the Pooh’s buddy Eeyore.

I hate that downtrodden donkey.

“What has gotten into you? You’re not acting like my super optimistic and fabulously fun best friend.”

“I’m terrified, Missy,” I tell her. What I don’t say is that I’m afraid there’s no one left for me.

“Maybe so, but you’re also going to be the biggest catch on that entire show.” She reaches over and takes my hand. “You’re going to do great, Paige.”

“That’s what Tim said.”

She sits up. “When did you see him?”

“At the country club today after I met with the producers from the show.”

Her brow furrows. “How’s he doing? The last time I saw him, he looked like he was getting ready to take a long walk off a short pier.”

I tuck my hands behind my neck. “He seemed okay.” I also think he might have smelled my hair, but I leave that part out.

“I think he’s still mourning his marriage.”

“Of course he is. It must be a real blow to have your spouse leave you for someone else.” I hurriedly add, “And then to see her cheering in the stands at every televised Lakers game.”

Missy rolls over onto her knees before standing. “He’s probably given up watching basketball.”

“He offered to keep his ear to the ground for any intel that might help me succeed on the show,” I tell her.

“Tim’s a great guy.” She picks up the wedding dress she dropped. “Are you going to camp out on the floor, or do you want to get up and help me?”

“Do you have a blanket?” I ask hopefully, thinking that lying on the floor of Bride’s Paradise has been the best part of my day so far. I wouldn’t mind taking a little nap.

Missy nudges me with the tip of her shoe. “I’ll take you out for ice cream if you get up.”

“How many scoops?” I’m staying put if it’s only one.

“Three.” She knows how to get my attention.

As I maneuver to my feet, I ask, “What if I do something embarrassing and the whole world sees it?”

“First of all, the whole world won’t be watching, so you’re safe.” She’s

not going to let me talk myself out of this. “Also, what if you don’t meet the man of your dreams on the show, but he’s watching, and he reaches out to you afterward? How romantic would *that* be?”

After a long pause, I finally agree, “That would be pretty romantic.”

Missy grabs her purse from under the counter and walks to the door. She turns the open sign over. “My mom’s still in Europe, so I’m going to have to bring my ice cream back.”

“She’s *still* there? I thought she was coming back last week.” Missy’s mom never vacations, so we were all surprised when she announced she was going to Europe by herself.

My friend shrugs her shoulders. “She decided she might as well see as much as she can while she’s there, so she extended her trip.”

“What about Howard?”

“My dear stepfather doesn’t show any signs of missing her and if she’s staying longer, she’s clearly not missing him.”

I follow Missy through the door. “I thought your mom and Howard had a good marriage.”

Missy side-eyes me. “Only if you think constantly cooking, cleaning, and serving a grown man-child is a good marriage.”

“Yeah, but I thought that kind of thing was your mom’s bliss.”

Missy opens her mouth and sticks a finger inside like she’s pretending to gag herself. “I think she’s finally realized she deserves better.”

I shuffle toward her. “Maybe when you’re alone for long enough it’s easy to talk yourself into thinking something is better than nothing.”

Missy’s eyes narrow like she’s closely considering my comment. “That’s what you’re worried you’re going to do? Settle for someone who isn’t right for you?”

“Maybe.”

We walk down Main Street in silence for a few minutes, when my friend announces, “I won’t let you settle.”

“You’re not going to be there. And you’re not allowed to meet anyone until the season is done taping.”

“Well then, Tim won’t let you. I assume that as the owner of the club, he’ll be around.”

“I’m not sure how much they’re going to let outside people see.”

Missy opens the door to the ice cream parlor for me. It’s surprisingly empty for a Saturday afternoon. After we order—one scoop of mint chip for

Missy, and my selection of rum raisin, peanut butter chocolate, and bubble gum—we turn around to leave and run smack into Faith and Teddy.

“Hey, you two!” Faith looks more gorgeous than I’ve ever seen her. Clearly being in love is working its magic on her. While I’m trying to be happy for her—I have so many people to be happy for these days—I’m running out of reserves.

Missy hugs her before doing the same to Teddy. I merely offer a small wave. “What are you guys up to?” Missy wants to know.

“Feeding our baby lunch.” Faith runs her hand over her flat stomach.

“You’re pregnant?” Missy is *super* excited for them.

“We just found out.” There must be something to that old saying because Faith is seriously glowing.

“I’m so excited for you!” Missy nudges me sharply in the arm to join the conversation.

“So excited ...” I manage to choke out.

Faith’s tall, dark, and sexy movie star husband says, “We’re meeting Anna and Chris at the country club for supper tonight at seven. Why don’t you guys join us?” He’s quick to add, “Jamie too, of course.”

I start to say that I can’t make it when Missy interrupts. “That sounds like fun. All three of us will be there.”

As we walk out of the ice cream shop, I lose my cool and complain, “Why did you say I’d go? I’d rather beat my head into a wall than be the only single person in a group of happy couples.”

“The club has the best patty melt this side of the Mississippi,” she says matter-of-factly. “If you don’t feel like being social, you can sit quietly and eat until you pop.” *She knows this is one of my favorite pastimes and she’s using it against me.*

Instead of calling her on it, I tell her, “I can do that from the comfort of my own home.” *I’m going to need some cheese with my whine if I keep this up.*

Missy stops walking and turns to me. “Paige Holland, you are not going to hide away from your friends just because we’re in relationships. No, ma’am. You are going to come out and have a good time like you always do.” She barely comes up for air, before adding, “Quit overthinking everything. You’ve never needed a man to be happy before, and you don’t need one now. But if you do meet Mr. Wonderful on the show, then he’s going to be the winner for getting you.”

My response is to ram my ice cream cone into my mouth.

“Jamie and I will pick you up at six thirty.” She eyes me like she knows I’m going to be in my pajamas when they arrive because I will be. “And we’ll drag you out no matter what you’re wearing.”

“Fine. But I’ll have you know that if I have to sit at a table like a little kid with a group of grown-ups, I’m not paying for myself.”

“Jamie and I will be happy to pay for you.” The smile on her face confirms how much Missy loves to win a war.

Once we get back to Bride’s Paradise, I tell her, “I’d better go home and make sure I have something clean to wear.”

She points at me with her keys. “What’s wrong with the dress you have on? It’s adorable.”

“After my interview this morning, I never want to see it again. I might even burn it.” And seeing as I sweated like a whore in church, I definitely want to get a shower too. That’s when an alarming thought hits me—maybe that’s what Tim was smelling.

“Fine. Go home and find something cute, and we’ll see you in a couple of hours.” She unlocks the door, but before she opens it, she calls after me, “You’ve got this, Paige. I believe in you.”

I suppose I should take some comfort in the fact that both Tim and Missy have my back. Their pep talks remind me to be optimistic and positive. I’m no longer that girl in high school with the head gear and the scoliosis brace that compelled every adult in my life to promise the best was yet to come.

As I walk down the street to my house, I try to turn my mood around. I’m a professional, thirty-two-year-old woman with a good job and a cute house. So what if I’m still single? A lot of women don’t meet their husbands until they’re in their thirties.

Of course, they probably live in cities where there are a ton of single men. My choices in Elk Lake are pretty much limited to the postal worker with great legs and a love of women's tag team wrestling, or the kid who works the graveyard shift at the Quickie Mart. I think he’s over eighteen anyway.

Walking up the path to my house, I remind myself how lucky I am to have a roof over my head. And with the paycheck from *Midwestern Matchmaker*, I’ll be able to make some much-needed improvements.

Once I unlock the door and go inside, I look around and revel in the fact that I’ve managed to buy a house on my own. Even though it’s small, it’s charming and inviting. The fireplace is the focal point of the living room, and

when lit, it makes everything look dreamy. The light fixtures and hardwood floor are original, which I love. And while I don't own any new furniture, I've picked out the best Goodwill has to offer. *Yes, positive Paige is back!*

After kicking off my shoes, I pad across the floor and turn on the gas to light a fire. Once that task is accomplished, I sink into one of the loveseats and work on adding to my list of happy thoughts. Unfortunately, the green-eyed devil of jealousy overtakes me, and all I can think about are Faith and Anna's babies. While I should be delighted for my friends, that's a task easier said than done.

I do not want to be one of those maiden aunts who babysits so her married friends can go out for a childfree night. I don't want to be the fifth wheel at dinner parties who people are always trying to set up with random single men that cross their paths. I can just hear Missy now. "Yes, he's a bit short, but at five-five he's still taller than you." That comment is followed by even more depressing ones. "Bald men are said to be the most virile." "What's a little extra around the middle?" And my favorite, "Eleven fingers isn't *that* uncommon."

Crap.

I force myself off the couch to find something nice to wear. I'm going to flip the narrative on my own, even if it kills me.

Which it might.

CHAPTER FOUR



TIM

Working at the country club feels more like hanging out with extended family than actual work. I grew up here. I spent my summers playing tennis and chilling by the pool. When I was old enough, I worked at the snack bar and bussed tables in the dining room. Everything about this place is familiar and full of happy memories.

“Hey, Tim,” Terry Filipo, the club manager, greets me as I walk into the office.

“Hey, Terry. What’s up?”

He hangs up the telephone before saying, “The folks from *Midwestern Matchmaker* were hoping you’d stop by so they can run over their shooting schedule with you.”

“Are they still down in Conference Room B?” I ask while taking off my coat and hanging it on one of the hooks on the wall.

“Yup. I can go down if you don’t have the time,” he says eagerly.

Shaking my head, I tell him, “I’ve got it. It’s kind of exciting having something being filmed here, isn’t it?”

He nods his head. “With the pool, tennis court, *and* golf course closed for the season, it gives us something other than Christmas parties and baby showers to focus on.”

“And now that the holidays are over, all we have are baby showers.” Even though summer sports are the crux of our business, the dining room

stays pretty full year-round. That's largely due to the fact that we've added family game nights and murder mystery dinners to give people a destination.

Terry groans. "I'm so bored around here, I took a nap under my desk yesterday."

"Why didn't you just sleep on the couch?" I ask.

He shrugs. "I wouldn't want the boss to see me napping on duty."

As I'm the boss, I can't help but appreciate his sense of humor. "Good thinking. Plus, that way, the couch stays open for me."

I grab a pad of paper and a pen from my desk before making my way back to the elevator. Once I get out on the first floor, I realize how sparse everything looks now that the Christmas decorations are down. I know a lot of people love putting their decorations away and starting the New Year fresh, but I'm not one of them. If it were up to me, I'd keep the Christmas tree up year-round and just change the trimmings to fit the season. The only problem is that I love fresh trees, so by the time January rolls around, all that's left are bare branches and a pile of needles beneath.

I stop by the front desk and pour myself a cup of coffee before making my way into the conference room. Even though I've spent the last several years in L.A. and have become jaded by the movie industry, I still feel a thrill when I walk into the room and see camera lights.

Trina Rockwell, the show's host and one of the producers, catches my eye. Raising her hand in the air, she calls out, "Tim! Thank you for coming."

Trina is a stunning-looking woman, but there's something about her that's too polished. Like she's too pretty to be trusted. That's when I realize she reminds me of my ex-wife. *Shudder.*

"Trina, what can I do for you?" I ask while walking toward her.

By the time we reach each other, we're standing by the table. I pull out her chair before taking a seat next to her.

"I just wanted to fill you in on our shooting schedule." She hands me a printout of a calendar. "We'll be filming Monday through Saturday. Mondays through Thursdays will be concentrated on individual dates. Fridays and Saturdays will be group activities. We're planning to create a dining room in Conference Room A, so we'll have a completely quiet background, and we won't interfere with your members."

"Will you bring your own servers, or will you want to use ours?" I hope they use ours so I can get my team some extra hours. Tips aren't quite as abundant post-holidays.

“We’d like to use yours if that’s okay. They’d have to sign a waiver and we’ll pay them a fee of three hundred dollars per shift.”

That’s probably twice what they normally make, so I’m sure they’d be pleased. But I don’t tell Trina that. Instead, I ask, “Do they have to join the Screen Actors Guild?”

She shifts in her seat. “Um, no. The waiver states they’ll make a flat fee that will allow us to film them and show their likeness on television.”

I didn’t spend years in La La Land without learning a thing or two about the business, so I ask, “Unlimited usage?”

“Uh, yes.”

“And you think three hundred is enough?” I’m guessing my staff would do it for free for the chance to be on television, but there’s no harm in trying to score better pay for them.

Trina flips through some papers in front of her before saying, “I can go as high as five hundred, but if you want more than that, we’ll have to find our own people.”

“I think that’s fair,” I tell her while valiantly trying to hide my smile. “I’ll put it out there and make a list of interested parties.”

“Good.” She looks relieved. “Our crew will spend this week building various sets in the ballroom. We’ll keep half of it as-is for our mixers, but on the other half we’ll create different settings for one-on-one dates and conversations.”

“We don’t have any bookings for the ballroom until Valentine’s weekend,” I tell her.

She nods her head. “We’ll be out before then, and we’ll leave everything as we found it.”

I look at Trina closely. Even though I’m not interested in her on a personal level, I wonder what her marital status is. “Have you ever thought about being on the show yourself?”

Alarm is written all over her face. “Not for a second. Could you imagine the whole world watching as you tried to find love? That’s not for me.”

“Maybe, but the whole world doesn’t watch your show.”

“Fine, but could you imagine your parents watching while you try to find love?” Her body convulses like an electric shock just ran through it.

Meanwhile, a chill of dread runs up my spine. “That *would* be horrible.” I eye her closely before asking, “But if you don’t support what your show is doing, why are you working on it?”

She shrugs nonchalantly. “I don’t want to be a politician, but I vote. I don’t want to be a pilot, but I fly in airplanes.”

The corners of my mouth turn up into a grin. “You don’t want to date on air, but you’re happy to exploit singles who will do it for you.”

Offering a mischievous wink, she explains, “It’s not exploitation if they sign up for it. And believe me, we turn away a thousand people for every one we take. So nice try, but no one is being taken advantage of.”

“What do you pay the contestants who come on your show?”

“I’m not legally allowed to tell you that,” she says cagily. “We don’t even tell our singles how much it is until they’ve gone through enough interviews that we’re seriously considering casting them. We truly do want people who are looking for love and not just a paycheck.”

I pull out my phone and type a question into a search engine. “It says here that contestants on *Blind Love* make up to fifteen hundred dollars per episode.” Her face is deadpan, so I ask, “Does that sound accurate?”

“I’m not going to tell you, Tim. But I believe in our show and want to help people find love just as much as I hope to find it for myself someday.”

I can’t quite tell if she’s flirting with me or not, but I feel compelled to say, “I’m not looking. I’m just coming off an unexpected divorce.”

Her body tenses in a way that makes it clear she wasn’t making a play for me. *Yeah, that’s embarrassing.* “I’m so sorry.” She sounds like she’s consoling a member of her cast.

Thankfully she didn’t come right out and shoot me down, so I hurry to think of something else to say. “A friend of mine is going to be on your show this season.”

Trina looks surprised. “Really, who is it?”

“Paige Holland.”

Trina throws both hands across her heart and enthusiastically gushes, “I adore Paige! She’s so sweet and authentic. I’m hoping she’ll fall for the lawyer from Chicago. That would make for some great television.”

“Why?” I’m not sure why the thought bothers me, but it does. Probably because I left Elk Lake for something bigger and wound up getting punched in the fellas for my troubles. I’d hate to see the same thing happen to Paige.

“Not only is Fielden Marsh a wildly successful lawyer, but he’s gorgeous. He and Paige would look great together.”

“Fielden?”

She nods her head.

I'm not a name snob, but I hate the fad where people take ordinary words or names and simply add an "en" to the end to try to make them sound more pretentious.

She feels the need to tell me, "I think that's a perfectly lovely name."

"If Fielden can be a name, so can Fencen and Posten and Courten."

She laughs loudly before adding, "Drivin', rockin', rollin'."

"You see what I'm saying then?"

Trina pats my arm before standing up. "I do. But just so you know, I think you'd benefit from being on *Midwestern Matchmaker*. Too bad we're done casting."

Pushing my chair away from the table, I tell her, "Too bad, nothing. I wouldn't go on *Midwestern Matchmaker* if I needed a kidney transplant, and you offered me the perfect match in payment."

Her face contorts. "That's harsh." She suddenly sticks her hand out to shake mine. "Meanwhile, we're excited you're allowing us to film here. Your club is going to make a beautiful backdrop for season six."

"We're pretty excited too." I don't mention that's mostly because of the seventy-five thousand dollars they're paying us for the privilege. We're going to remodel the Player's Grill with the money from the proceeds. I take Trina's hand in mine and tell her, "You're going to have a great season."

Trina is nearly as tall as I am in her heels, so she looks me directly in the eye. "I'm good at bringing people together, Tim. Maybe I can keep an eye out for a companion for you."

My posture goes rigid. "I was serious when I said I was done with dating."

"You can't be done forever," she says almost scoldingly.

"Maybe not. But I promise you, you'll be long gone by the time I'm ready to get back in the game."

Her eyes narrow like she's trying to see inside my soul. "Whatever you say." She walks away, leaving me with the sense that she doesn't believe me.

I want to shout after her, "There isn't a woman alive who could tempt me into going on a date anytime soon."

And I mean it.

CHAPTER FIVE



PAIGE

After standing in my closet for a full twenty minutes, I finally decide to wear my light pink cashmere sweater dress for dinner tonight. It's form-fitting enough to show off my curves while making me feel like a million bucks. My love of ultra-feminine clothes comes from having to wear that stupid brace through most of high school. I wore over-sized clothes to camouflage it and wound up looking like a pint-sized linebacker as a result.

The only downside to this number is that it's dry clean only so if I spill on myself—which I regularly do when eating—it'll cost me ten bucks to have it cleaned. That's ten dollars that doesn't go to my house repair fund.

I'm using all the money I'm making on the show to get a new roof. That's something I should have technically done three years ago when both the warranty ran out and my bedroom ceiling sprung a leak. Unfortunately, roofs aren't cheap, so I've been patching and praying it doesn't give way before I can come up with the cash to replace it.

I hurry to get dressed before running a brush through my hair. Standing in front of the full-length mirror in my bedroom, I put on my lipstick before stepping back and taking in my reflection. I look good. Not great, not drop dead sexy, but if I had to rate myself, I'd say I was a solid seven. Maybe an eight if you're nearsighted and the lighting is dim enough.

I'm still in my room when I hear Missy call out, "It's time to go!" The sound of a voice when I thought I was home alone makes me jump.

“You almost scared me to death,” I call out to her as I walk downstairs.

“Why? I have a key.”

I gently remind her, “You have a key in case I need you to feed my cat.”

Missy’s eyes sparkle when she sees me enter the foyer, “Wow, girl, look at you. You’re a stunner!”

I smile at my gorgeous friend. For a redhead, she has a knack for wearing bold colors that tell the world she’s totally comfortable with who she is. Tonight, she’s in a hot pink cocktail dress with a matching satin wrap.

“You look amazing, as always,” I tell her. “No one will even notice me in my washed-out pale pink.” I shouldn’t have said the second bit out loud. Until recently, Missy was doing as poorly on the dating scene as I was. Even though I’m sometimes grumbly, I truly am delighted she’s found her match.

Missy crosses her arms and asks, “Where did that come from? That’s not my feisty girl who’s got the world by the tail. You know what an absolute snack you are in that dress.”

“You’re right,” I tell her, watching as she takes my coat off the hook by the front door. I slip my arms through before pulling it closed and tying the belt. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me lately. I’m just not feeling like myself.”

“You’re nervous about the show. But if you think about it, you’ve spent a good amount of time at the club, so you’ll have home court advantage.”

“That’s kind of a weird way to put it, but I guess you’re right.” Faith, Anna, and Missy’s boyfriend, Jamie, are all members of the country club and they invite me to tag along regularly—usually one couple at a time.

As we near Jamie’s SUV, he jumps out to open our doors for us. Missy gets into the passenger seat before he opens the back door for me. “You look lovely, Paige.” Which is the exact compliment I need right now.

In lieu of a proper response, I muster a wan smile and get into the backseat like the family dog. “Be gentle with her,” Missy tells him. “She’s in a mood.”

Jamie gets back into the car and slowly pulls out of my narrow driveway. “You ever hit one of these trees?” he asks. I have two giant pines, one on either side of the drive.

“Regularly,” I tell him. “Any ice whatsoever makes for an unpredictable entry and exit. You get used to it.”

“That’s got to be rough on your car.”

“I own a twelve-year-old American-made beast. It can take a licking.”

We drive to the club in silence, which is thoroughly pleasant. I'm not in the proper headspace to listen to the occupants of the front seat pledge their undying love to each other.

After we park and get out, Jamie takes Missy's arm in his before offering me his spare. "I figure this way, if one of us hits an icy patch, we can help save each other."

I feel the need to mention, "Or we can all go down together like a bunch of bowling pins."

"Paige ..." I hope Missy isn't going to chastise me for my mood again. "Have you found out if there are any guys from Elk Lake that are going to be on the show?" *Crisis averted.*

"Not yet." I put my foot down and skid a few inches before Jamie pulls me back to his side. "But if there is one, I can't imagine who it could be other than the guy from the post office or the kid from the convenience store."

Missy tells Jamie, "There aren't a ton of single men in town this time of year. Elk Lake is jam-packed with all kinds of folks in the summertime, but in the off season, we're primarily a bunch of families and retired people. It's like singletons don't thrive in the wild or something."

As soon as we walk into the club we run into Faith and Teddy. Faith smiles briefly before telling us, "Anna thinks she's having contractions, so they're going to stay home tonight."

"Oh, no," Missy says worriedly. "She's not due for another month, right?"

Faith announces, "If the contractions continue, the doctor is going to give her something to stop them. In the meantime, he's prescribed a small glass of sherry."

"I didn't think you were supposed to drink when you're pregnant," Missy says.

Teddy joins the conversation. "That's what I said."

I look up at him and before I can stop myself, I blurt out, "You do realize, my friends snagged the only two single men to hit Elk Lake in forever."

Teddy reaches out and takes Faith's hand. "You know Faith was my first kiss when I used to visit here as a kid, don't you?" He looks at her with such devotion, my heart clenches. "It's like she claimed me for her own all those years ago." Even though I'm not a diabetic, I suddenly feel the urge to check my blood sugar.

Faith and Missy both look like they're going to melt into a pile of mush,

so I hurry to interject, “Is it too much to ask that you all tone the lovey-dovey stuff down for the evening?”

“I’m not sure that’s possible.” Jamie winks at Missy like he can’t wait to get her alone.

“Somebody hand me a set of car keys,” I joke. “I’m going home.”

“You’re not leaving,” Faith says. “We’ll be good.”

After turning our outerwear in to coat check, we proceed down the hall to the Premier Club dining room. It’s just as fancy as the name suggests—like we’ll be eating on a *Masterpiece Theater* set. I’m pretty sure if you flipped open any issue of *Town and Country* you’d see the same gorgeous scene of navy walls, dark wood paneling and rich velvet curtains. It’s mega dreamy.

The host, Martin, bows at the waist when he sees us before greeting, “Mr. and Mrs. Helms, Mr. Riordan, Miss Corner, and Miss ...” His not remembering my name is the cherry on the sundae of my day.

“You can call me Wheely—you know, as in the *fifth wheel*.” I hope my smirk makes it look like I’m teasing and not complaining.

Martin tries to hide a smile. Before he can do as I suggested, Missy interjects, “This is Paige Holland, Martin. She’s a good friend of all of ours and you’ll be seeing her often.”

Martin tips his head in my direction. “Of course, Miss Holland. I should have remembered your name. My apologies.” He picks up menus before adding, “We have your table ready. Please follow me.”

He leads us to a large round table in the middle of the dining room. It’s located directly under a massive chandelier, and if I had to guess, I’d say it’s the best table in the house. Teddy and Jamie immediately pull out my friends’ chairs for them. As Martin reaches for mine, a voice behind me says, “I’ve got it, Martin.”

I turn around and come face to face with Tim. Instead of thanking him kindly, as basic manners would dictate, I ask, “What are you doing here?”

His eyebrows nearly rise to his hairline. “I work here, remember?”

My companions all start talking at the same time, and a cacophony of questions rings through the air. “Tim, how *are* you?” “We hardly see you anymore. Why is that?” And, “If you have time, why don’t you join us?” *Hurray, now they’re trying to match me up, so I don’t make their meal awkward.*

Tim doesn’t seem to be annoyed at being the focus of so much interest. Instead, he says, “I’ve been good. I haven’t been working nights for a while

now. And I'd love to join you. Let me just grab a bottle of wine, and I'll be right back."

Faith and Missy share a glance that suggests they might really think Tim and I are destined for romance, so I tell them, "Don't get any ideas. Tim Ferris is not interested in dating, and I'm not interested in being his rebound." I don't reminisce over the fact that Tim was Mr. Popular in high school and I was the girl trying to align her spine. Not exactly two people you'd pick for a love connection.

"Oh, I know he's not looking to date," Missy responds. She should, as she went out with Tim a few times before Jamie declared his interest. Jamie was as determined not to get into a relationship as Tim seemed to be to find one. Jamie thought he was protecting his daughter, and Tim thought that by dating multiple women at once, he was protecting his heart. But that's a whole other story in itself.

When Tim comes back to the table, he's carrying six glasses and a fancy bottle of Bordeaux. I recognize the label from the time we drank the same vintage to celebrate Missy and Jamie's finally getting together. Tim puts the bottle down before uncorking it and filling our glasses. Then he sits next to me.

He lifts his glass and toasts, "To friends!" As I take a sip, he whispers in my ear, "I got some tea for you from Trina today."

My wine immediately goes down the wrong way, and I start to cough. As my arms flail, I knock over my drink. All eyes at the table turn to me in concern, so I do my best to wave them off. When I'm finally able to speak, I gasp out, "I'm fine." *That is if you don't count the new burgundy-colored splatter on my dress.*

The waiter hurries over to assess the damage and wipe up as much of the mess as he can. After he leaves, presumably to either get more towels or retrieve a straitjacket for me, I turn to Tim and quietly ask, "Did she say how horrible I was today and how they're going to kick me off the show?"

He shakes his head. "Not at all. She said she hopes you'll match with some lawyer named Fielden."

"Oh, that." I roll my eyes. "She told me I'm the provincial Cinderella who everyone hopes will wind up with the prince. *He's* supposedly a lawyer from Chicago."

The rest of the table is not-so-subtly eavesdropping. I know this because Missy's mouth is wide open like she's trying to catch flies. "You can't leave

Elk Lake!”

“I’m not going to,” I assure her. But then I start to wonder what the chances are that my other half will be a man willing to relocate to a small tourist town. So, I add, “I mean, I don’t want to, but there are middle schools everywhere.” Maybe the thought of my jumping ship will spark fear in their hearts, and they’ll quit being so nauseatingly romantic around me.

Jamie puts his glass down. “Both Teddy and I moved here, so let’s stay hopeful that whoever Paige falls for will do the same.”

The waiter comes back to the table and announces, “If you’ll all step aside for a moment, we’ll change your linens.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Tim tells him. “Just cover the stain with a clean cloth and Paige and I will go sit at another table.”

“What? No!” Missy declares like I’m the best part of her evening.

Yes, freedom! Standing up, I tell her, “Let me know when you’re ready to go.” Then I follow Tim across the room to a table by the window.

After we order our meals, he asks me, “How much are they paying you to do the show?”

“I’m not supposed to tell you,” I answer. “I signed some jacked-up contract that practically says I agree to go to prison if I say a word to anyone about anything.”

“The contestants on *Blind Love* make fifteen hundred an episode,” he announces. “Do you make more than that or less?”

I shift my gaze from side to side to indicate I’ll make the same. And while it sounded like an exorbitant amount at the time—and it *will* allow me to make some much-needed home repairs—I’m no longer sure it’s enough to parade my social life in front of the free world. *If this afternoon was anything to go on, I’m not that great in front of the camera.*

Tim looks confused. “So are you going to tell me or not?”

“I did.” I lean in and whisper, “If it were higher, I would have looked up. Lower, I would have looked down.”

He still looks slightly perplexed. “But you looked side ...” And then the lightbulb finally goes on. “Oh, I get it. Side-to-side means you get the same amount. Nice. What are you going to do with the money?”

“What every self-made woman would do,” I tell him coyly.

“Go on vacation? Buy some new shoes? Throw a bang-up party at the club?”

I snort in response. “I’m not a member here, so I couldn’t throw a party if

I wanted.”

“You could join,” he decides.

I take a fortifying sip from my glass before saying, “Or I could get a new roof before my current one caves in on me.”

He nods his head slowly. “That sounds like a solid plan.”

I caution, “If you decide to buy a house, make sure you get one with at least a decade left on the roof warranty. Better yet, make a new roof a contingency for the sale.” I’m not sure why I’m telling him this. Tim would have no trouble affording a house’s upkeep.

“When I decide to buy, I’ll take you with me. That way you can make sure I make a smart choice.” He winks to let me know he’s kidding. Yet for some reason goosebumps pop up all over my arms. What I wouldn’t have given to have Tim Ferris talk to me like this in high school. My inner teenager practically jumps for joy.

Before I can join her in the present, I remind myself that Tim is a no-go. I’m not going to develop an interest in a man who’s still hung up on his ex-wife.

That would be the stupidest thing I could ever do.

CHAPTER SIX



TIM

Paige Holland is adorable. While I didn't know her well when we were kids, and I haven't seen much of her since, I always knew she was pretty. I just never realized how spunky she was.

As I signal the waiter to bring Paige a glass of wine and to preorder dessert for our friends, I confess, "Happy couples are the bane of my existence."

She looks up with a lopsided grin. "No kidding. It's not like I'm not happy for Missy and Faith. I'd just like to be happy for myself, too."

Sounding more than a little bitter, I offer, "There are no guarantees either way."

"Tell me about your ex-wife," Paige says while swirling her fork around her pasta.

"Talking about Eva gives me heartburn," I tell her plainly.

"So, her name is Eva ..."

I release my breath rapidly like it's machine gun fire. "Yes."

"And what does she do for a living?"

Our waiter arrives with the wine, which gives me a beat to consider how much I'm going to tell Paige about my ex. I pick up my glass and take a healthy swig before answering, "She was an aspiring actress before we got married."

"Has she landed anything big?"

“Holden Jenkins,” I grumble.

She arches one eyebrow. “I know about *him*. I was wondering if she’d gotten any big acting roles.”

“She doesn’t need to.” I angrily add, “She’s got the spotlight on her—which is the only reason she wanted to be an actress—and she has access to millions of dollars. Why in the world would she work?”

Paige considers my question before answering, “I can’t imagine not working. I love my job.”

“Even if some mega-rich guy offered you a life of leisure and unlimited Rodeo Drive shopping sprees?”

“What kind of life is that?” She sounds horrified. “I like being useful, and being a teacher allows me to make a difference in kids’ lives.”

“Yes,” I tell her. “But you’re a lovely human being. Eva is not.”

“Then why did you marry her?” She sounds confused.

“I didn’t realize what a gold digger she was. She used to work hard which made it seem like she was interested in more than my money.”

“Did she work after you were married?”

I shake my head. “Not outside of the home.”

Paige shrugs. “Was she a decent housekeeper? A great cook?” She’s trying hard to see what I saw in Eva.

“Ah, no. She hired a housekeeper, gardener, and dog walker. She claimed it was her profession to make sure everyone else was doing their jobs.”

Paige looks appalled. “What about meals?”

“We ate most of them at the country club. Or rather, I ate most of my meals there. Eva wasn’t big on eating.”

That information seems to fuel Paige’s need for a dinner roll with extra butter. After taking a giant bite—which she appears to enjoy enormously—she swallows it and says, “I can’t understand women like that to save my life. It’s one of the reasons I decided to go on *Midwestern Matchmaker*.”

“Because they support eating?”

“Because they don’t encourage you to change anything about yourself to be on the show. Last season there was a woman with a giant unibrow. I kid you not. It just went from the end of her left eye to the end of her right with no break in between. It was like a huge, fuzzy handlebar mustache above her glasses.”

“That had to be quite a look.”

“She asked Trina if she should wax it and Trina told her only if she

wanted to. She never advises her guests to make changes to appeal to a prospective mate. She says that being authentically yourself is the only way to make a lasting match.”

I slowly nod my head. “I don’t think Eva was pretending she was something other than what she was after we got married.”

“Maybe not but she had to have been beforehand. You know, to make you fall in love with her.”

The very thought sends a chill up my spine. No one wants to think they’ve fallen prey to a schemer. Changing the subject back to the dating show, I ask, “What happened to the woman with the eyebrow? Did she wax it?”

Paige shakes her head. “She left it.”

“Did she find love?” I want to know.

“Nope.”

“Maybe she should have waxed and then slowly let it regrow,” I suggest.

“That’s what I thought,” Paige agrees. “I mean, we all try to make a good first impression but if it appears like we’re not even trying ...”

Before she can finish her thought, I interrupt. “The next thing you know, your date will be beading their armpit hair at the dinner table.”

Paige tries to swallow the water in her mouth but she’s unsuccessful. She loses the battle and starts laughing, spitting water all over the table. Picking up her napkin, she blots up any moisture she can find. “You can’t take me anywhere tonight.”

“It was my fault,” I tell her chivalrously.

Paige lets her napkin drop. “It *was* your fault.” A slow smile takes over her face. “But that was a really funny thing to say.”

“What do *you* change about yourself before you start dating someone new?” I suddenly want to know. I can’t imagine she’d have to alter a thing.

She looks up at the ceiling like she’s putting together a list of a few thousand items, but settles on, “I don’t talk about school with men I just start seeing. I have it on good authority that teachers bore the socks off normal civilians when we yammer on about math tests, school politics, and the various kids we have in class.”

“I’ve never dated a teacher,” I tell her. “As we’re not on a date, why don’t you tell me about your job?”

She looks as surprised as if I’d just asked her to marry me. “I ... I don’t know. I mean, why would you care?”

“You said you like teaching. Tell me why.”

Her eyes suddenly sparkle with pure joy. “I’m a total math nerd. I love everything about numbers, and I love sharing that knowledge.”

“I hated math,” I confess. “Maybe you could tutor me.”

She passes right over the comment about tutoring and demands, “You hated math? How is that even possible? Math is amazing! It’s the universal language. Every country speaks math.”

“Yes, but you said it’s a *universal* language. Are you suggesting that aliens in galaxies far, far away use math?”

She throws her hands out in front of herself like she’s about to catch a basketball. “Of course, they do! *Everybody* uses math.”

“I’m not so sure about that,” I tell her. “I mean, what if their math is different from our math?”

She practically starts to vibrate with excitement. “Then I want to learn their math, and I hope they land in my backyard tonight so they can come in and teach me.”

I can’t imagine Eva, or any other woman for that matter, ever saying something so completely off the wall. “Paige, you are delightful, do you know that?”

Her gaze shifts downward as her cheeks flush prettily. “No one has ever told me that before. Thank you.”

“To think I could have had a friend like you for all these years had I stayed in Elk Lake. I hope to find someone refreshing like you when I’m ready to start dating again.” *Like in another ten years.*

She tips her head to the side and studies me. “Missy said you dated a lot when you two went out. Why did you stop?”

“I read a book,” I tell her. “It said that you should wait at least a year until after your divorce is final before dating again. The idea is so that you can properly mourn the dreams you had for your previous union. That’s when I realized I didn’t have any real feelings for the women I was going out with. All I ever thought about was Eva.”

Paige’s brow furrows. “And you knew you needed to mourn for her?”

“I didn’t need to mourn for *her*. I needed to mourn the person I thought she was. The couple I thought *we* were.”

She reaches across the table and takes my hands in hers. An unexpected jolt of electricity shoots through me. I give her hands a squeeze hoping the sensation will stop, but it doesn’t.

“I’m sorry, Tim. I can’t imagine how hard it must be to love someone and lose them like that.”

“Have you ever been cheated on?”

She nods her head slowly. “I don’t think you get to our age without having experienced that at least once. But at least I wasn’t married to the guy. I’d only dated him for a month when I found out.”

While I believe her, the look on her face suggests she’s had some other trauma befall her, but I don’t want to make her uncomfortable, so I don’t ask. Instead, I say, “That still couldn’t have been easy.”

She narrows her gaze like she’s trying to decide if she’s going to confess something. She finally says, “Missy and I went to the dog park and collected a lot of *samples*. Then we went to Rogan’s house and toilet papered his car before strategically placing the grossest of the specimens on it.”

Maybe Paige isn’t as sweet as she seems. Even so, I have to give her props for at least attempting to get even. “I should have done that with Eva.” I smile as I imagine what her reaction would have been.

“No laws were broken, and no permanent damage was done. Also, it felt great to get the last word.”

Paige and I are in deep conversation when her friends come over to our table. “You ready to leave?” Missy asks.

Startled, Paige looks up. “You’re going so soon?”

I intervene, “We haven’t quite finished yet. I’d be happy to take Paige home when we’re done.”

“I don’t want to put you out.” Paige seems shocked by my offer.

“It won’t be any trouble,” I tell her. “I’m done working for the night.”

Smiling up at her friends, Paige announces, “I’ll call you tomorrow.”

Teddy looks between us like he’s trying to figure out a particularly complicated puzzle. “You should join us again some time, Tim.”

I need to let Paige’s friends know that she and I won’t be dating, so I tell him, “Anytime you need a sixth wheel, I’m your man.”

“Thank you for the desserts and wine,” Jamie says. Bowing slightly at the waist, he adds, “Everything was as delicious as always. But Paige’s food wasn’t on the check. I’d like to pay for her.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll take care of hers,” I tell him.

And just like that, everyone stares at me like I’ve started negotiations for her marriage dowry. I want to remind them that friends are allowed to take each other to dinner, but I don’t want to sound like I’m protesting too much.

Because as much as I like Paige, there aren't enough goats in the world for me to consider that institution anytime soon.

CHAPTER SEVEN



PAIGE

My alarm goes off at five and it takes me a solid five minutes to figure out why. I was in one of those super-deep sleeps that left me feeling disoriented. Like I can't quite remember who I am.

But then like a runaway train, reality hits. It's January sixth and winter break—a blissful three weeks off—is officially over. Back to school means I'll not only be teaching full time, but I'll also be filming *Midwestern Matchmaker*.

I told my principal what I was doing and let her know I might have to use a personal day here and there, depending on the shooting schedule. Hallie said that wouldn't be a problem. She even suggested I bring one of my dates to school to meet the faculty. It turns out she's a huge fan of the show.

Rolling over onto my stomach, I begin the process of coaxing myself out of bed. Once my feet hit the floor, I raise my arms up over my head and stretch while yawning loudly. I eye my bed with longing, but ultimately decide nobody would appreciate me calling in sick the day after such a long break.

I run across my freezing cold bedroom floor to the bathroom. Once my feet hit the fuzzy bathmat, I sigh at the warmth before turning on the shower. After stepping in, I quickly wash my hair and body before sitting down and plugging the drain. I turn off the shower and fill the tub with the hottest water I can stand. I don't wake up this early because I have to. I do it so I can enjoy

a nice hot soak before walking out into negative twenty degrees, not including the wind chill factor.

Sighing, I lean back while the water creeps up my body. I think back to Saturday night and realize how much fun I had. And not with Faith and Missy and their significant others. That was not the shining part of my evening. That happened when Tim and I broke off on our own.

The whole time, I kept wondering what it would have been like to have dated him back in high school. I wondered what it would have been like to date *anyone* in high school. As far as physical impairments go, having scoliosis was not the biggest deal. Yes, I wore a brace, and yes, I felt socially stunted but at least I had use of all my limbs.

On the flipside, I had the self esteem of a slug which lasted long after having surgery to fix my back. Long after ... like into my twenties. You need to believe you're worthy of dating to accept the offer of a date. Even though I no longer have any physical deficiencies, and I've developed decent social confidence, the lack of available men is my current problem.

That's why I allowed myself to pretend Tim and I were on a date last night. I know he's not looking for love, but I still did my best to try to keep that knowledge from the forefront of my thoughts. And even though the most we'll ever be to each other is friends, I figured there wasn't any harm in indulging in a small fantasy.

We stayed at the club chatting until eleven before he drove me home. Tim drives a gorgeous little sports car that only seats two. It's much more suited to the balmy temperatures of L.A. than to a Wisconsin winter. He said he's been waiting to buy something more rugged until all the new models come out.

I can't imagine what it would be like to drive a brand-new car. The newest one I've ever had was eight years old, and I felt like I'd won the lottery when I drove off the lot in it. That's the car I still have, only now its undercarriage is rusted from all the salt that's spread on the roads to melt the ice. If I didn't need a new roof so badly, I'd put the show money into a newer used car, or I'd paint my house and maybe get new appliances ... My current kitchen setup is a color that hasn't been popular in my lifetime. Too bad things weren't built to last in a nice neutral stainless steel.

By the time I get out of the tub, I only have twenty minutes before I need to leave. I hurriedly blow dry my hair—not for any style, just to get the moisture out—then I get dressed and run downstairs and grab a bagel to go.

Once I'm sitting in the car, I crank the heat up and eat while the frost melts from my windows. I wonder what it's like to wake up in Los Angeles every morning—one beautiful day after another. Talk about being spoiled.

After I'm done eating, I put the car into reverse before lifting my foot off the brake and gently hitting the gas pedal. It doesn't move as quickly as expected, so I press harder. When the gear engages, I speed back and slam into one of the pine trees at the end of my drive.

While Tim's car would probably need some serious bodywork after such a collision, I know from experience that mine is probably just scratched. It truly is a tank.

Even though I only live three miles away from school, it takes me fourteen minutes to get there. It snowed overnight so everyone is being extra cautious. Once I arrive at Elk Lake Middle School—Go, Bears!—I jump out of the car in the parking lot and burst into a slippery jog toward the building. I'll no longer be able to get any work done before class, but I still want to get to my room before the first bell.

Six feet from the building, I hit a patch of ice that has me sliding right into the front door. I grasp for the handle when I hear an unfamiliar voice yell, "Stop fooling around, or you'll break something!" *Is he talking to me?*

Once I've steadied myself, I turn around and demand, "Excuse me?"

I see a guy about my age slowly approaching. He's average in height and looks okay, but he's clearly not very personable. When he gets close enough to see me, he seems truly chagrined while saying, "Sorry, I thought you were one of the kids."

"Because I'm vertically challenged?" I briefly wonder why I'm being so ungracious, but then I realize the bossy man reminds me of my childhood piano teacher. Mr. Harvey was not my biggest fan and he made sure his feelings were known.

This guy shrugs his shoulders like my size might indeed be the reason he mistook me for a student. Little does he know that no middle school girl alive would be caught dead in my double-stuffed lime green parka. I look like a sick tick about to pop.

I put my hands on my hips like I'm preparing to give him a tongue-lashing, but at the last minute, I change my mind. "I'm Paige Holland, the seventh-grade math teacher. Who are you?"

"Chip Baker. I'm the substitute eighth-grade science teacher. Mr. Marks is out on medical leave."

“Steve is sick? What’s wrong with him?”

“I don’t know. I just know that I’ll be here for at least the next two months.”

Holy smokes, if he’s gone for two months, it must be something serious. “Your name is Chip Baker?” I stifle a giggle as a smile plays around my mouth. It’s not as bad as if he were named Toilet Paper, but still... it’s not ideal.

He doesn’t bother answering my question, which makes me guess he doesn’t enjoy humor at his own expense. Instead, he asks, “Would you please excuse me? I need to get to my classroom.” His words are fine, but his tone suggests he’s ready for battle.

Instead of stepping aside, I block the door with my body so I can walk in before him. Then I stomp my boots on the mat before turning toward the office to find out what’s wrong with Steve. That’s when the bell rings. If I don’t get to my class before the kids, they’ll run wild. And while that’s something I expect after such a long break, I don’t need to make it worse by not being there.

Quickly changing directions, I wind up running smack into Chip. We both get knocked off balance, resulting in our crashing to the floor in an ungraceful heap.

“Would you watch where you’re going?” Chip is obviously not feeling chipper. He quickly scoots away from me and begins a physical comedy routine that would put the Marx Brothers to shame. I know this because my grandpa made me watch all their movies when I was a kid. Chip performs a graceless floor dance that leaves him with no chance of success. But even so, it’s highly entertaining to watch.

Meanwhile, I roll over so I’m on all fours before tucking my right foot under me and gradually assuming a standing position. Once I’m upright, Chipper reaches a hand in my direction. “Would you mind helping me?”

“I would, but I’m late for class.”

I’m about to tell him how to get up safely, but he interrupts me. “I’m only on the floor because of you! The least you could do is lend a hand.”

Instead of engaging in open warfare with Not-so-Chipper, I choose to simply turn around and go to my classroom.

My morning plugs along easily. It’s nice to see my kids again, particularly Jamie’s daughter, Sammy. She’s a real treat and both Missy and I love her like she’s a long-lost niece or, in Missy’s case, an impending

stepdaughter.

When the lunch bell rings, I grab my purse. I didn't have time to pack anything, so I'm going to attempt to cobble something semi-edible from the vending machine in the teachers' lounge. But before I reach my destination, I hear my name called over the loudspeaker. "Will Miss Holland and Mr. Baker please report to the front office? That's Miss Holland and Mr. Baker to the front office."

I turn to retrace my steps, wondering why in the heck I'm being called to the front office with Chipwreck. When I walk in, he's already standing at the desk.

"Chip-ahoy!" I greet obnoxiously, but he refuses to look at me.

The school secretary, Mrs. Snipes, announces, "Mrs. Grant will see you both now."

I roll my eyes while storming past my newfound nemesis. *Did he tattle on me? Is that why we're here? What a doofus.*

As I walk into Hallie's office, I smile brightly. "How were your holidays? I hope you and the kids got in all the sledding you were planning to do." The reason behind my jovial demeanor is twofold. I really do like Hallie, but I want to make it clear that Not-so-Chipper is the outsider.

Hallie stands up. "We had a fantastic break. How about you?"

"Really good until I walked into school this morning." I shoot Chip a pointed side-eye.

"Oh, no. What happened?" She looks between us with real concern.

What does she mean, what happened? Isn't that why I'm here? "I ... uh ... *Mr. Baker* and I sort of collided, and we fell."

"Are you both okay?"

Huh. So, Chip didn't rat me out after all. Then why in the world have we been called to the office? I guess there's only one way to find out. "We're fine." Before he can contradict me, I ask, "What did you want to see us about?"

She indicates the two chairs in front of her desk. Once we're sitting, she says, "I thought I should make a special effort to introduce you two."

"Why?" I'm pretty sure the horror in my voice is clear. Not-so-Chipper remains refreshingly silent.

Hallie performs a little shimmy of what appears to be excitement. "Chip is going to be on *Midwestern Matchmaker*, too! He's the second person representing Elk Lake. Isn't that exciting?"

This is not an instance where I feel the need to lie. “Not particularly.”

Not-so-Chipper, on the other hand, goes right for the jugular. “*You’re* the female participant from Elk Lake?” He sounds like he just found out his hamburger was made from old roadkill.

I give him my best death glare. “Yes, Mr. Baker. I am. But you can’t represent Elk Lake because as far as I know, you don’t live here.”

“Do you know every person in town?” he demands defiantly.

Crossing my arms across my chest, I boast, “Yes.”

Hallie doesn’t quite know what’s going on, but she’s clearly getting the impression we don’t like each other. She says, “Chip just moved here from Madison.”

“Why in the world would he do that?”

“To teach school,” he snarls.

I take the opportunity to ask Hallie, “What’s wrong with Steve?”

“Infection from surgery,” she practically whispers.

A sense of dread flows through me. “Is it cancer? What’s the prognosis? Is there anything I can do to help?”

Hallie grimaces. “Not cancer, luckily. It turns out Steve wanted to have a procedure done to ... um ... you know ... it was for Bethany.”

Not-so-Chipper reads my mind and asks, “A penile enhancement?!”

Hallie shakes her head. “Uh ... no.”

“Stronger chin?” I guess. Even though Steve has a weak chin, it’s nothing I would have ever thought he’d get surgery for.

“No ... he had ... rather ... he got some ... implants.”

“Boobs?” I know the world is changing and I’m down with it, but Steve and Bethany always seemed so traditional.

“What? No, not boobs.” Hallie looks at me like I’ve lost my mind.

“Then what kind of implants did he get? Pecks? Cheek bones? What?”

She shifts on her chair before answering, “He enhanced his posterior.”

I don’t mean to laugh but it appears stifling my reaction is beyond my control. When I can finally talk again, I ask, “He got a Brazilian butt? Why would he do that?”

“I don’t know if you noticed”—my boss leans in like she’s about to tell me a secret—“but Steve had a flat booty. Apparently, Bethany commented on it enough that he decided to buy himself some cushion as her Christmas gift.”

I’m totally and completely stunned. Steve is a Wisconsinite, not some wannabe swimsuit model. “So he got implants and now he has an infection?”

“It’s MRSA.” She grimaces. “He needs to stay in a completely sterile environment while it heals. Then he’s got to remove the implants to make sure none of the infection remains.”

This is the exact reason I’m never getting plastic surgery—shy of some horribly disfiguring accident, that is. So much can go wrong. I know this because I binge watched the show *Defaced* over break, and I’ve now seen enough botched nose jobs, boob implants, and tummy tucks to scare me straight.

I look to my left at Not-so-Chipper in horror that he’s Steven’s replacement. “That’s why you moved to Elk Lake.”

His face contorts in hostility. “I wasn’t going to commute that kind of distance.”

I suppose he has a point. “And you’ve decided to make the most of your time here and be a guest on *Midwestern Matchmaker*.” I say this like he just told me his hobby is killing baby minks.

“I was cast before I got this job.” I conclude in this moment that Chipwreck must be one of those oddballs who ruins perfectly good chocolate chip cookies by putting raisins in them. Heck, he probably uses prunes.

Before I can ask him why he’d commute for a TV show, but not school, Hallie interrupts. “Well, consider yourselves introduced.” To me, she says, “Paige, I was hoping you’d help Chip find substitutes when he needs them.”

Not in this lifetime. But instead of saying that, I offer, “I’ll see that he gets a printout of available names.”

“I already have one of those.” The man hisses like a snake which I’m guessing is an accurate comparison of his ability to charm.

“Super!” I stand up and smile at my boss. “Good to see you, Hallie. Please keep me posted on how Steve is doing.” Then I turn around and walk out of the office.

I’m not sure how it’s possible, but I’m now looking forward to being on TV less than I was after my spectacular interview with the producers.

CHAPTER EIGHT



TIM

The intercom in my office buzzes. “The host from the television show is here, Mr. Ferris. She’d like to speak with you.”

I glance up at the clock and see it’s only nine a.m. Why is Trina here so early? She hasn’t come in before lunch all week, and even then, she’s only around long enough to check the progress of the sets being built.

“Send her in, Elsie. And please stop calling me Mr. Ferris. It’s Tim.” Elsie Schnapp was my father’s secretary for thirty years before I inherited her. As such, it’s weird to have her call me “mister,” especially when she used to refer to me as “Little Timmy.”

I stand up as the door to my office opens. Trina strides in as elegantly as a runway model. She’s so beautiful, she might have even been a model before she switched to television. “Tim!” she greets excitedly before telling me, “The sets are done and we’re ready for our first mixer tomorrow night.”

“That’s great.” I point to a wingback chair in front of my desk before sitting down. As soon as she joins me, I tell her, “The kitchen has the final menu for appetizers and the bar has created a signature cocktail called the ‘Matchmaker.’ I’ll email you the details in case you want to make any changes.”

Trina barely shows any recognition that she’s heard me, so I ask, “Is there something else I can help you with?”

“We have a small problem.” Her face falls, suggesting her bubbly

demeanor was nothing more than a sham.

“What’s that?” I’m guessing she needs more linens or glassware or something.

“I just found out that one of our singles has been in a skiing accident, and he won’t be able to be on the show.”

“That’s too bad,” I tell her before asking, “But don’t you have backups? You know, the people you almost cast but didn’t for some reason.”

Her dark head tips from shoulder to shoulder. “We do, but no one was able to change their schedule at the last minute.”

“I guess you’ll just have to shoot without him then,” I conclude.

“We can’t do that.” Before I can ask her why, she explains, “Our whole formula revolves around us having eight couples.”

“Why can’t you just alter your formula?” *And why is she telling me this?* While I’m happy they’re renting the club, I’m not particularly interested in their day-to-day operations.

Trina sighs loudly as though irritated by my question. “Tim, our formula is a winner, and we never deviate from it. Our competitor, *Blind Love*, lost one of their couples early on last season because one of the women found out she was pregnant. The whole season tanked as a result. They were not renewed for another year.”

I still have no idea how this concerns me. “So, are you postponing shooting?” That wouldn’t work well for us because we get very busy with weddings the weekend before Valentine’s Day, and they keep going throughout the summer.

“We can’t postpone!” She says this like it would be akin to forfeiting the Super Bowl.

Resting my elbows on my desk, I teepee my hands under my chin. “Trina, I have no idea what you want me to do.”

“I need you to take Decker’s place.” She says this like I should have already known.

I’m rapidly losing the thread of this conversation. “Who’s Decker?”

“The guy who broke both of his legs skiing.”

Wait, what? She thinks I’m going to be on her show? Um, no. “I’m sorry, Trina, but I can’t do that.”

“Why? You’re single, aren’t you?”

“I am, but I’m not interested in going on a reality show to find love.”

She stands up abruptly and starts pacing the room. “Tim. If you don’t do

this then we might get canceled, too.”

I never would have imagined Trina was such a drama queen. Excitable, maybe. But until now, she'd always seemed level-headed. “I would feel bad for you if that happened,” I tell her for lack of anything else coming to mind. But honestly, I couldn't care less what the future holds for *Midwestern Matchmaker*.

“We could pay you two thousand dollars an episode,” she offers. “That's more than everyone else is getting.”

While I don't need the money, I ask, “How many episodes are you shooting?”

“Ten.” Before I can tell her again that I'm not interested, she ups the ante. “I'll give you four thousand per episode.”

Forty thousand dollars just to pretend to be looking for love? Again, I don't need it, but that's a lot of money for only a few weeks of work. Also, I happen to know that Eva loves *Midwestern Matchmaker*. Maybe I could make it look like I was having so much fun she'd regret leaving me.

Before taking the proper amount of time to evaluate the pros and cons of such an idea, I blurt out, “I'll do it.”

Trina jumps into the air and shakes her hands like she's a professional cheerleader. Then she runs over to me and wraps her arms around me. “You are the *best*, thank you!”

I'm unsuccessful disengaging from her bear hug, so I move my hands between us to push her away. “Yes, well, you made me a very tempting offer.” *Little does she know my capitulation had nothing to do with the money.*

She suddenly becomes very serious. “You can't tell anyone what you're making or there would be a revolt.” Picking up her purse, she grabs her phone and starts typing. “I'm sending your contract right now. You'll need to print it out and bring it to tomorrow night's mixer.”

My heart starts to beat faster, and my hands get clammy as the reality of what I've agreed to do hits me. “I still work here, so I'll need to know what my shooting schedule is ahead of time.”

She keeps typing for several moments before putting her phone down. “You'll need to be available for Friday and Saturday's mixers. We shoot from six to eleven, but you'll have to be here at four on both days for hair, makeup, and basic instructions.”

The only thing that keeps me from backing out is knowing this is my

chance to stick it to Eva—to show her how well I’m doing without her. And believe me, I’m going to ham it up like nobody’s business. “How about during the week?” I ask.

“We’ll need you on Monday and Tuesday afternoons. Those will be the days you go on individual dates and get to know all the female contestants.”

My head bobbles up and down. “I guess I’ll see you at four o’clock tomorrow.” I don’t remember which part of the body goes numb before you have a stroke, but if it’s your left wrist then I’m screwed. *Is that toast I smell?*

Instead of taking the hint to leave, Trina tells me, “Remember, everyone is nervous and sometimes people don’t come off as they really are. So don’t judge them on their first impressions. It could take three or four dates before you really know who you’re spending time with.”

As I’m not going on the show to find love, her advice doesn’t affect me. “Sure. Sounds great.” *Leave my office, please.*

She moves toward the door, which makes me wonder if she’s read my thoughts. But then she abruptly turns back around. “Oh, and you should know that sometimes more than one guy likes the same girl at the same time. If you find yourself in that situation, we strongly suggest you don’t confront him and engage in any on-air battles.” She pauses for a moment before adding, “And no off-air fights either. Just remember, love always wins.”

“Sure,” I tell her. *Again, not looking for love here.*

Trina’s expression softens. “I really appreciate this, Tim. You have no idea how much you’re saving my bacon.” It sounds like there might be more to her story than she’s letting on, but honestly, I’m not interested enough to inquire.

“Sure thing, Trina. See you tomorrow.” I’m going to be the most charming and sought after man that’s ever been on *Midwestern Matchmaker*. I’m going to make Eva regret ever leaving me, and when she comes begging for me to take her back, I’m going to slam the door right in her face.

Picking up my phone, I call Paige. Luckily, we swapped numbers after dinner last weekend. Her phone goes straight to voicemail which means she’s probably in class. After the message prompt, I tell her, “Paige, the eagle has landed. The pigeon is in flight. Call me as soon as you can.”

Bit by bit, the *Twilight Zone* atmosphere that’s recently taken over my office passes and cold reality hits me like a baseball bat to the side of the head.

What in the world have I just done?

CHAPTER NINE



PAIGE

The week flies by, and with each passing day I've gotten more and more nervous about tomorrow's mixer. Missy helped me shop for clothes, so even though I have some nice things to wear, I'm still worried about how I'm going to act.

I have never enjoyed being at gatherings without knowing anyone else there. Luckily, that's only happened a couple of times, but both were a total disaster. Prime example, a groomsman at my college roommate's wedding videoed me at the buffet table. He posted two whole minutes of me shoveling shrimp cocktail into my mouth like I was a starving castaway. If that wasn't bad enough, he tagged me on the post so everyone who followed me on social media could enjoy it as well.

I pick up my phone to pass the time playing Scrabble against the droid while eating my makeshift lunch of processed cheese spread and crackers. Once I type in my passcode, I see someone has left a voicemail for me. As no one under fifty calls people anymore, I'm guessing it's one of my parents.

After hitting the voicemail app, I'm surprised to discover the message is from Tim. I listen to what I'm guessing is his code for the end of the world before calling back. "Hey, Gramps, no one uses voicemail anymore."

He laughs. "I know, right? But I have something to tell you and I wanted to hear your reaction."

"You've decided to move to New York to be an underwear model." Not

that I've been looking, but if I had to guess, I'd say Tim would be great at it. As in, no need for a BBL for him. *Okay, fine. I looked, but only once.* Twice max.

"Been there, done that. I'll give you two more tries."

"And if I guess correctly?"

"Then I'll buy you lunch."

I look down at my meager vending machine offering and wish it could be lunch today. "You've got a deal." I hypothesize, "You've decided to become a dance instructor, and you're going to specialize in the Lambada."

"Wow, no. I'll give you a hint. It's nothing you'd ever guess I'd do. And by ever, I mean never."

I take a sip of my soda before telling him, "I'm pretty sure I never thought you'd take up the whole Lambada thing."

"Okay, fine. But this is something I've *told* you I would never do."

Being that Tim's and my interactions have been limited to the first grade when he told our whole class that I was a poo poo pants, to lunch on his first date with Missy—yes, I crashed it— and finally to our dinner last week, it doesn't take me long to make my third guess. "You're going on *Midwestern Matchmaker*?"

"How did you know?" he demands.

"You mean I'm right?" My first reaction is relief that I'll know someone else on the show. But then it hits me like Thor's hammer that I find Tim attractive. *Is it possible that something might happen between us?*

"One of the men who signed up to be on the show broke both of his legs. Trina said they had no other options and that I would be saving the season. While I don't really believe her, I figured I work here anyway, so why not help?"

I make a loud foghorn sound into the phone before accusing, "Liar. You told me you would never go on a reality show. You also made it clear that you aren't looking for love." *Take that, Mr. "Saving the Season."*

"It's true that I'm not interested in finding love, but I may have forgotten to mention that my ex-wife loves *Midwestern Matchmaker*."

I shift forward in my folding chair and almost topple the whole thing over while responding, "Oh. My. God. You're trying to make Eva jealous!"

"I'm not sure I'd say that. It's more like I want her to see how well I'm doing."

"That would be trying to make her jealous," I explain.

“Okay, fine. I’m trying to make her jealous. But I don’t want her back. I just want her to see what she’s missing out on.”

“Tim ...” I’m not sure if I should finish my thought.

“What?”

I decide a good friend would hit him with a dose of tough love. “She was married to you for almost two years. She *knows* what she’s missing.”

“Ouch.” He sounds deflated as he adds, “That’s cold.”

“I wasn’t trying to be mean. I was simply suggesting that sometimes the best revenge is moving on and having a happy life. By going on the show, you’re keeping your angst alive. I’m not sure that’s the healthiest thing to do.”

“I used to make her laugh, Paige. We traveled together. We dreamed together. We had a life plan.” In a quieter voice, he adds, “She only knew Holden Jenkins for a week before she left me for him.”

“She’s not worth trying to get even with, Tim. You need to focus on making a new life for yourself. It’s the only way to move on.”

“Says the woman who left dog poop on some guy’s car,” he mutters.

“A guy I only knew for a month,” I remind him.

“It was closure, Paige. You needed that after only four weeks. I was either dating or married to Eva for four years. Don’t I deserve the same?”

I don’t respond right away, but after several moments of silence, I agree with him. “You’re right. You deserve closure, and I’ll do anything I can to help you.”

“How about if I take you to dinner instead of lunch? We could meet at the club tonight and check out the sets ahead of time while discussing our plans for tomorrow night’s mixer.”

“I’m in,” I tell him. “But it’s a school night, so it’ll have to be early.”

“How about five?”

“See you there.” As I hang up the phone, I feel a sense of righteous indignation on behalf of my new friend. Tim did not deserve to be treated like Eva treated him, and while I hope he gets his revenge, I also hope it’s not achieved at some other woman’s expense.

There’s one outfit I’m a little uncertain about wearing on national television.

Standing in my closet, I pull out the strapless, black leather dress that Missy assured me would have all the men drooling. I bought it more to keep her off my back than with the intention of actually wearing it. That's why it's my only new purchase with the price tag still hanging off it.

After sucking in my gut enough to slide into it, I zip it up, and hide the tag in the back of the bodice. Then I pose in front of the mirror like a rock star getting ready to go on stage. While that might seem like a good thing, I have terrible stage fright and do my best to make sure I'm never the center of attention in a large group.

I flashback to my junior year talent show where I solved a particularly complicated calculus problem as my talent. I almost had a panic attack as the whiteboard was wheeled out onto the stage, but I calmed down once my brain started working on the equation. While I expected a thunderous applause once I'd finished, I was surprised to have only a few lone claps—thank you math team!—and several hecklers calling out things like, “What kind of talent is that?” and “Go home and learn to sing, brace girl!”

I take several slow breaths while trying to expunge the memory of my dorky past. Once I feel like myself again—my current self that is— I decide to wear the dress tonight to see what Tim's reaction is. If he thinks it looks tramy, I'll take it back to the store. If he thinks it's a winner, I might get up the nerve to wear it to one of the mixers.

Once I'm dressed, I slide into my furry boots. Then I put my highest heels—black Betty Boop knockoffs—into a bag that I'll carry with me. I reapply my lipstick—Luscious Mama— and grab my coat before going out into the frigid evening.

While the car warms up, I turn on an oldies station. Joan Jett's “I Love Rock n' Roll” blasts out of the speakers. I belt out the song at the top of my lungs, feeling courage fill every corner of my body. If Joan Jett can walk up to a total stranger and go home with him without even knowing his name, I can make small talk with some nice men. That's what I'm telling myself anyway.

Once I get to the club, I realize I'm way overdressed for a Thursday early bird meal. Tim spots me across the room and wolf whistles so loud that the other people in the lobby turn to look. Their stares make me feel like a sex worker at a PTA meeting.

I chastise Tim as soon as he arrives at my side. “Who whistles like that in a public setting? A country club, no less!”

He looks contrite. “It came out louder than I expected.” Then he eyes me up and down. “You really went all out.” He sounds uncertain at best.

“It’s not for you,” I assure him. “I just wanted to get your opinion on this dress. I was thinking about wearing it to one of the mixers.”

“It will certainly get you a lot of attention, if that’s your goal.” Somehow, he doesn’t sound pleased.

“Isn’t that the point of going on the show?”

“I suppose.” Again, not said with a positive intonation.

“Aren’t *you* going to try to look your best to show Eva what a dummy she is?”

He nods his head.

“Then you should get a dress just like mine.” That causes him to nearly double over with laughter. My body responds by sending prickles of awareness through my nervous system. I sternly, and internally, tell myself: *Don’t get ideas, Paige. This guy is still hung up on his ex-wife. He practically just told you that by confessing his reason for doing the show.*

“I don’t think *Midwestern Matchmaker* is quite the right venue for me to dress in drag. Maybe if I were on *Mr. or Mrs.*”

“I love that show!” I tell him enthusiastically. As he begins to lead the way toward the ballroom, I add, “Some of those men look better than *I* could ever hope to.”

“You look great, but you’re right, those guys really know what they’re doing.” Tim opens the grand double doors and walks through them. Then he flips some switches as a dozen or so chandeliers flicker on.

“Holy heck, would you look at this place?” The left half of the room has been left alone and looks like it always does, albeit snazzied up a bit. The right half has several small seating areas set up. I recognize from past seasons those will probably be backdrops for smaller groups.

“They did a nice job,” he agrees. Turning to me, he asks, “Do you want to see the conference room where they’ve built a dining room set?”

Disappointment washes over me. “We’re not going to film in the real dining room?” *I love the real dining room.*

“We still have members coming in to eat. I don’t think they’d appreciate being told they can’t talk because the cameras would pick up the noise.” I never thought of that.

“Fine, show me the conference room, but just so you know, I have horrible memories of that room.” In a word: *waterboarding.*

As Tim and I make our way out of the ballroom, I realize how comfortable I am with him. Not only is he turning into a good friend, but I really appreciate not being the only single person in my friend group. That's no thrill ride, let me tell you.

As we approach Conference Room A, a wave of nausea rolls over me. I wonder if I have some kind of post-traumatic stress from my last interview. But when Tim opens the door, I see the interior looks nothing like it did last Saturday. It now looks like a charmingly elegant dining room. Although nowhere near as nice as the real deal.

"So, this is where we're going to have our dinner dates?" I ask.

"That's what I've been told," he says. "I thought you might want to have supper here tonight to get used to it." The look of disgust that washes over my face alerts him that I'm not hot on that idea. "Or not."

"I like the Premier Club," I confess. "I feel like I'm eating supper in one of those fussy period pieces."

Looking uncertain, he asks, "And that's a good thing?"

"I'd much rather eat with the characters of *Pride and Prejudice* than the ones from *Die Hard*."

"And this room makes you feel like you're in *Die Hard*?"

I snort-laugh at the expression of confusion on his face. "No. But I still want to eat in the Premier Club."

He holds out his arm for me to take. "Do you also have a preference which table you'd like to sit at?"

"The one we ate at the other night was perfect."

While I follow Tim, I suddenly wonder what it would be like to be on a real date with him. I know I can't let thoughts like that flourish, so I quash them by reminding myself that he's not interested in anything but revenge.

Having said that, this handsome man is still my dinner date for this evening, and I plan on enjoying myself.

CHAPTER TEN



TIM

I nearly swallowed my tongue when Paige walked through the front door of the club. *What was she thinking wearing a dress like that in public?* I probably sound like my grandfather, but seriously, strapless black leather? At least she wasn't carrying a whip.

As we walk into the Premier Club dining room, I wave to the maître d'. "We'll be at table seven, Martin. Please send over a bottle of the Far Niente Cabernet." It suddenly occurs to me Paige may not want red wine so I turn to her and say, "If that's okay with you."

She arches one eyebrow which makes her look like a stern schoolteacher—in a black leather dress. "I will never say no to wine with an actual cork in it."

"I'll take note of that," I tell her as we walk to our table. Once we're there, I pull out her chair for her before taking the seat to her right.

"So yes or no on the dress?" she asks. "I don't want to wear it if it sends the wrong message."

Trying to buy myself some time, I ask, "What message are you afraid it might send?"

Paige doesn't answer right away because our server comes over to fill our water glasses. When he's gone, she says, "I'm worried it might make me look cheap."

I practically choke on my own spit while saying, "I'm guessing you're

not.”

Her face scrunches up in disgust. “Of course, I’m not.” After a beat, she asks, “Are you?”

I slowly put my napkin in my lap before answering, “No. Even though I went out on a lot of dates when I first moved home, I made it clear I wasn’t looking for a physical relationship until I was ready to be exclusive.”

“Smart thinking.” She takes another sip of her water.

“I have no intention of getting intimate with someone for a very long time. Once bitten, twice shy, you know?”

“I do,” she agrees. “My problem is that I can’t find any guys to go out with. Elk Lake isn’t exactly a hopping singles destination.”

“Which is why you’re going on *Midwestern Matchmaker*.”

“Yes. Although I’m starting to have some serious reservations.”

Martin comes over with our wine. As he opens it, I ask her, “Why is that?”

She pulls a face before leaning toward me and whispering, “This is not for public consumption, but I’m starting to feel like it’s something only a pathetic spinster would do.”

“Spinster?” I laugh. “What is this, nineteen hundred?”

“Ha ha.” She does not seem amused.

“When you watched the show before applying to be on it, did you look at the women that way?”

She shakes her head. “No.”

“So why would you think of yourself like that?”

Martin pours our champagne before asking, “Is there anything else, Mr. Ferris?” He must be at least fifteen years older than me, but thus far, I have not been successful in getting him to call me Tim.

“No, Martin, thank you.”

After he leaves, Paige declares, “I like you, Tim.” She hurries to add, “As a friend.” I don’t know why but that makes me bristle. “As such, I’m going to talk to you like I’d talk to Missy, Faith, or Anna.”

“Speaking of Anna,” I interrupt, “did she have her baby?”

“No. It was just Braxton Hicks contractions.” She seems to realize this isn’t a term I’m familiar with, so she explains, “False labor. The body does that to prepare women for the real deal.”

“You’d think it was enough that you had to do it once without the additional excitement.”

“Women really do get the raw end of this procreation deal,” she grumbles before going back to her original thought. “If I meet someone on this show, I might have to move for them. I want to get married and have a family, and it’s possible that will never happen here in Elk Lake.”

“Huh.” I don’t allow myself to question why I dislike the thought of her moving away so much.

“Don’t tell the girls.”

I take a sip of my wine before saying, “I would never gossip about you. In fact, I’m starting to think this is a kind of us-against-them scenario—not like we’re battling, but we’re clearly on different sides of coupledness. As such, I think we should be allies.”

“I like that idea. I’ve been feeling pretty sorry for myself lately, and even though my friends were single in the past, they seem to have forgotten what it’s like.”

“I’ve been feeling sorry for myself ever since Eva left,” I confess. “Like I’m a pathetic loser.”

“You shouldn’t say things like that.”

“You shouldn’t either.”

It’s not the twinkle in Paige’s eye that worries me, but the way she rubs her hands together like she’s come up with a devious plan. “I have an idea.” I can almost hear the mic drop.

“Okay ...” My palms suddenly become sweaty.

“I think we should form a pity pact,” she announces.

“What in the heck is a pity pact?”

“I propose to take on your sadness so you can free up your time to move on with your life, and you’ll do the same for me. You know, empathy on steroids.”

“I’m not sure that’ll work,” I tell her skeptically. “I mean, you don’t exactly know how I feel.”

“And you don’t know how *I* feel. But we both know what it’s like to feel awful about our situation, and neither of us seems able to move beyond our frustrations. Maybe if we swap our sadness, we can quit feeling sorry for ourselves long enough to get on with it.”

“In other words, we’ll put our real lives on the back burner by thinking only of the other one’s problems?”

“Yes.” Then she orders, “Tell me the feelings you wish you could get rid of.”

I think for a moment before responding. “I’ve already told you that I feel like a loser...” She nods her head, so I continue to itemize my angst. “I feel misplaced. When I married Eva, it was like I’d stepped into pure happiness. I found my person. I was whole, you know?”

“I’ve never felt like that,” she says barely above a whisper.

The expression on her face quite literally causes my throat to constrict with emotion. For the life of me, I can’t figure out why Paige hasn’t been proposed to ten times over. “What do you feel?”

Her gaze drops to the tabletop before she finally says, “I’m lonely. I haven’t dated a lot and I’m scared. I’m scared to open myself up.”

“Why haven’t you dated a lot? That makes no sense to me.” Before she can tell me how few single men live in Elk Lake, I add, “There are towns all around here with single people.”

Paige inhales deeply before asking, “Do you remember me from high school at all?”

“Sure,” I tell her. “You were cute but kind of standoffish.”

The volume of her voice rises considerably. “Standoffish? That’s how you saw me?”

Clearly that wasn’t the right thing to say. “You kind of stayed to yourself. You and Missy.”

“You must remember why that was.”

I have no idea, so I merely shrug my shoulders.

“Tim, I wore a body brace. I was a total misfit.”

Now that she mentions it, I remember some kids used to call her brace girl, but I thought that had to do with her wearing braces on her teeth. “Really?”

Paige’s posture wilts. “Was I so invisible to you that you didn’t even know I wore a body brace?”

“You weren’t invisible to me, Paige. We just weren’t in the same group. We didn’t hang out, so I didn’t really know what your life was like.”

“Because you were with the cool kids, and *I* was the loser.” A single tear slides down her cheek causing my heart to clench painfully.

“I didn’t think of myself as a cool kid. I was just me.”

Paige’s rigid posture collapses, and she appears to wilt in her chair. “And I was just me. The kid in a brace who could barely walk into school some mornings out of fear that you cool kids would taunt me in the hallways.”

That makes me bristle. “I never made fun of you, Paige.”

“But the girls in your group did and you didn’t stop them.” The look of hurt in her eyes nearly undoes me.

I try to remember things the way she does, but I can’t. “I’m sorry if I hurt you. I’m sorry that I didn’t come to your defense. The truth is that like most kids that age I was caught up in my own dramas and wasn’t really paying attention to those of others. Teenagers are selfish.”

She scoots her chair back under the table before saying, “I get that. And I’m not mad at you. I just always dreamed that some popular person would see me for who I was so that everyone else would give me a chance, too. Missy was the only one who ever stood up for me and I suppose that’s affected me in a lot of different ways.”

I look deeply into her beautiful blue eyes before saying, “We’re both pretty damaged.”

She tries to smile but the result is more of a smirk. “So, now that we both have a better idea of how the other feels, are you in? Will you agree to a pity pact?” I don’t quite nod my head and I don’t really shake it. It’s more of a circular kind of motion like I’m stretching for a yoga class. Paige takes the movement as an agreement and lifts her glass. “To us, and to closing an old chapter before starting a new one.”

I gently tap my glass against hers wishing I could somehow go back in time and make choices that might have made her life easier. “To having another friend who has our back.”

Her smile is so endearing I want to stand up and wrap her in my arms. But then she says, “I also think we should help each other find our perfect mate.”

“I’m not looking,” I remind her.

“Agreeing to a pity pact means you’re agreeing to try to move forward,” she says.

I’m not quite sure where she got that idea. All I was doing was agreeing to try to put some of my anger behind me. But what do I know? I’ve never heard of a pity pact before. Changing the subject, I ask, “What are you thinking about ordering?”

Ignoring my last question, she asks, “Are you going to help me find the perfect guy?”

“I will help in any way I can,” I tell her. “I’ll let you know if I hear people talking about you, and I’ll fill you in on any gossip that comes my way.”

“I’ll do the same for you,” she says.

“I’m going to have the filet with mushrooms and a baked potato,” I tell her, trying to get her off the topic of our social lives.

She quickly glances at the menu. “I’m going to have the chicken pot pie.”

“It’s wonderful,” I assure her. “You’ll definitely have enough left over for lunch tomorrow.”

“I won’t,” she says.

“You might. It’s big.”

Her eyes narrow like I’ve offended her. “Don’t let my petite frame fool you. I can really put it away.”

“Where in the world do you put it?”

“Don’t skinny shame me.”

I wink in response. “I would never. If anything, I was fat shaming the pot pie.”

Luckily, our waiter comes over and takes our order, giving the air a chance to clear. When he leaves, Paige tells me, “I’m sorry I’m in such a mood tonight. I’m just getting nervous with the first mixer coming up so soon.”

“Don’t be nervous,” I try to console her. “I’ve got your back.”

She pours more wine into her glass before topping off mine. “I found out there’s another guy from Elk Lake.” I raise my eyebrows to indicate she should tell me. “He’s a substitute eighth-grade science teacher, and he’s a real pain in the butt implants.”

I have no idea what the butt implant comment is all about, and she doesn’t tell me. Instead, she fills me in on what happened at school this morning with Chip. I can’t imagine he’s nearly as bad as she makes him out to be, but I’m enjoying her comedic reenactment, so I don’t come to his defense. “I look forward to meeting him.”

She jolts back in her seat. “Yuck, why?”

I decide to play along like I’m taking this matchmaking seriously. “He’s my competition, isn’t he?”

“He is in no way your competition. He’s a short, grumpy, know-it-all with a bad disposition and a stupid name.”

“And I’m what? A tall, handsome charmer?” I shrug my eyebrows hoping for confirmation.

She takes a sip of water like she’s buying herself time. Once the glass is back on the table, she says, “You are lovely.”

“That’s it? Lovely? There’s got to be something else to recommend me.”

I'm not even faking being annoyed.

"You're a very nice man."

"Nice? Come on, Paige, you're killing me here."

She clears her throat before adding, "You're easy on the eyes."

For the love of ... "Handsome?" I'm full-on begging for her to agree with me.

After several long moments, she does. "Fine, you're handsome."

I know I'm pushing my luck, but I'm curious to see how Paige will react, so I tell her, "I expect to be the source of many girl fights."

"I wouldn't take that bet."

"Excuse me?" I'm starting to think Paige is holding a grudge from our teenage years.

She exhales like she's blowing out birthday candles. "I'm trying to keep you from getting cocky. Women don't tend to go for that on these shows."

"I'm not trying to be cocky, just self-assured."

"I assure you it's obvious to everyone that you are. *I'm* the one who needs help in that department."

"You're a beautiful woman, Paige. You're smart, funny, and a delight to be with. Just be yourself and you'll have all the men eating out of your hands."

She shakes her head slowly. "Why did I ever agree to do this?"

"Because you're ready to find love," I remind her. "And your optimism is admirable."

"I'm not feeling that optimistic right now. I'm scared."

Once again, I want to hold Paige in my arms. And not just to offer comfort.

By the time our meal is over, I know one thing for sure. I'm going to have to watch myself around Paige Holland.

Once upon a time I might have considered her the perfect woman.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



PAIGE

On my way home from dinner, I wonder how many kids from high school weren't as awful as I remember them to be. Tim is right. People—particularly teenagers—are so wrapped up in their own dramas they rarely make time to think of others. I wish I'd had that insight as a kid, because maybe if I had, I'd have more confidence today.

Even though Tim and I agreed to a pity pact (note to self: there could be a Ted Talk here), I'm pretty sure he's still not serious about looking for love. It's too bad because he lives right here in Elk Lake, which means that if we hit it off romantically, I wouldn't have to leave my family and friends. I'm not sure why I've decided that I'm the one who would have to move. It's just there aren't that many occupations that translate to a small town, and there are schools where I can teach everywhere.

As soon as I walk through the front door, I climb the stairs to my bedroom. Thus begins the thrill ride of trying to take off my dress. Leather does not breathe and as such it causes some perspiration. The result makes it feel like it's been glued onto me. As soon as I'm unzipped, I fancy I can hear my skin cheer to have contact with the air again. Bit by painstaking bit I peel the cowhide off my body, and when I'm finally free, I celebrate by falling onto the bed and vowing never to wear leather again. Then I call Missy.

"Hey, you."

"Can you talk?" I ask.

“Of course.”

I stretch out and tell her, “You are never going to believe who's going to be a last-minute replacement on *Midwestern Matchmaker*.”

“Man or woman?” she wants to know.

“Man.”

“Do I know him?”

“Of course you do. How else would you be able to guess?”

“The only person I can think of is Tim Ferris, but there's no way he'd ever go on a dating show. He's not ready.”

“That's what I thought, but it's him.”

“What?!” I love that Missy is as surprised as I was.

“I know, right? I just had dinner with him, and he told me why he's doing it.”

“You just had dinner with him? Where? Why? How did that happen?”

I explain the circumstances of our outing which seems to disappoint her. “We're just friends,” I assure her. “And he only agreed to go on the show to try to make Eva jealous.”

“His ex-wife? Oh, Paige, that's horrible.” Missy appears to share my concern.

“I came up with some stupid idea that we should form a pity pact.”

“What's that?”

“It mostly means that we'll help each other out by sharing the load of sadness. That way we'll both be free to get on with our lives.”

“How in the world would that work?”

“How should I know? Didn't you hear me when I said I made it up? I'm just trying to get Tim to look at this show as a real opportunity for finding love instead of a revenge mission.”

“Poor guy,” Missy murmurs. “Eva really did a number on him.”

“They *were* married,” I remind her.

“I know. I just wish Tim would realize she was never good enough for him and open his heart to someone else. Otherwise, I'm afraid he's setting himself up for disaster.”

“I'll do my best to keep him from making a fool of himself,” I assure her. “I already told him that cocky guys never get the girl. And if he's going to succeed in making Eva jealous, he's going to have to get out there and flirt.”

“I feel sorry for any woman who falls for him,” Missy says.

“Me, too,” I agree. “But you never know, it's possible he might give her a

chance for real.” Before I can stop myself, I wonder if I might be that girl. Not only do we genuinely like each other, but I think there’s some mutual attraction there. I hope it’s mutual, anyway.

Shaking the image out of my head, I remind myself that Tim has made it clear that he’s not ready to fall in love again. And I am. I will not waste time being some guy’s rebound.

Missy brings me back to the topic at hand. “You should wear the black leather tomorrow night.”

“I wore it tonight,” I tell her.

“To supper with Tim?” She sounds surprised.

“I’m still on the fence about it and wanted to see what he thought of it.”

“And? What did he think?” she asks.

“I don’t think he liked it.”

“Is he blind?” I love that Missy is indignant on my behalf.

“When he saw me, he said it was an odd choice for an early bird dinner at the country club. I told him I wanted to get his opinion on it, and he changed the subject before giving it to me.”

“Well, that just proves he’s not ready to move on,” Missy says. “Any man with eyes in his head would flip for you in that dress.”

I roll over onto my back before pulling the covers up. “Let me see what the other women are wearing tomorrow night. I don’t want to be the one who stands out like a sore thumb.”

“You also don’t want to blend in and just be one of the crowd,” she tells me.

“You know how *Midwestern Matchmaker* works. Trina makes sure everyone gets some time in the sun.”

“I’m getting really excited for you, Paige. And who knows, maybe you’ll match with the other guy from Elk Lake, and you’ll stay here forever.”

I spend the next ten minutes telling Missy everything I know about Chip Baker. By the time I’m done, she’s snort-laughing. When she finally settles down, she says, “I think you protest too much. You know what they say about love and hate, don’t you?”

“That they’re two completely opposite emotions?” I growl.

“Nope. Love and hate are two sides of the same coin. There’s only a thin line between them.”

“I would rather move to Alaska and race in the Iditarod wearing only a bikini and a smile than wind up with a guy like Chip Baker.”

“Are you doing the running in this scenario, or are you sitting in the sled?”

“It wouldn’t matter,” I tell her. “That’s how much I hate this guy.”

“If you say so ...” She does not sound convinced.

I’m suddenly tired of talking about the whole thing. “I’ve got to go,” I tell her.

“But I have a thousand more questions for you.”

“I’m exhausted, and I have school in the morning. I’ll try to call on Saturday.”

“Paige, are you annoyed with me about something?” she asks, sounding confused.

Yes. How dare she suggest that I could fall for Chip Baker? But I don’t ask her that. Instead, I simply say, “I’m just tired. Talk to you later ...” Click.

Then on impulse, I call Tim.

“Hey, you,” he answers. “Did you get home okay, or did you decide to sign up for the witness relocation program?”

“I definitely would have done that had I witnessed a crime.” Note to self: Call the FBI and see if they take volunteers.

“So, you’re home,” he rightly assumes. “What can I do for you?”

I stumble slightly before answering, “You never told me what you thought about my dress.”

“Oh, but I did. I told you that it would get you a lot of attention.”

Turning off my bedroom lamp, I say, “I’d get a lot of attention if I wore my flannel pajamas, too.”

“Are you fishing for a compliment?”

“Not at all. I’m just trying to decide what kind of reaction I’d get if I show up in strapless black leather tomorrow night.”

His voice sounds gravelly as he responds, “The men will feel like they just won the lottery if you talk to them.”

Chills erupt all over my skin, and before I can help myself, I ask, “Is that how you felt?” Yes, I’m flirting, but I’m curious what his response will be.

After a long pause, he answers, “I felt protective and sure that if you wear that dress, I’m going to have to spend the night guarding my friend’s honor.”

His friend? Crap. “Well, then, as I want you to focus on your own love life, I won’t wear it.”

“Good.” He sounds relieved, which is not at all flattering.

“I’d better go,” I tell him. “I’ve got an early morning, and then we have

the mixer.”

“Sleep tight. Don’t let the bed bugs bite.”

I hated that saying when I was a kid. It made me think that once I fell asleep, my bed would start crawling with bugs. So, I retaliate. “Make sure there aren’t any monsters under your bed.”

“What?!” He sounds panicky. Monsters under the bed must have been his Achilles heel.

“Are you afraid of monsters?” I ask.

“Absolutely. Tell me you aren’t.”

“I’m more afraid of bed bugs.”

He chuckles. “Okay. How about, sweet dreams?”

“Much better.” Before he can hang up, I add, “Thanks for tonight. I had fun.”

“You ate that entire pot pie.” He sounds impressed. “We’re going to have to put your name up on the events board and let everyone know it’s possible.”

“I’m a woman of many talents,” I tell him proudly.

“I bet you are ...” Somehow, I don’t think he’s talking about my ability to eat huge quantities of food in one sitting. “Sleep tight, Paige.”

“Good night, Tim,” I whisper before hanging up. This man has me tied up in knots. But he’s told me repeatedly that he’s not looking for love, and I need to believe him. I will not be one of those women who thinks she can change a man. I’ve been there before and believe me, it’s a one-way ticket to Disappointment City.

Closing my eyes, I force all thoughts of him out of my head. Which is probably why I spend the rest of the night having nightmares about Chip Baker. In my dreams, he’s a real baker who chases me around the school demanding that I eat everything he makes. His specialties are frog muffins and beetle brownies. I feel so sick when I wake up, I briefly wonder if it was more than a dream.

“Eyes up here!” I ring the bell on my desk to get the attention of my last class of the day. “I need to leave twenty minutes early today. Mrs. Grant will be filling in for me.”

A series of groans fills the air, along with a loud, “No!!!”

“Yes,” I assure them. “And I’d better get a good report from her if you don’t want extra homework and a slew of random pop quizzes.” I catch Billy Brandt’s eye, and add, “And I don’t mean maybe.”

Billy, who is the most challenging student in the entire school, yells, “You can’t do that!”

I arch one eyebrow menacingly. “I can do anything I want, Billy.”

“You can’t hit kids, or you’d go to jail.” He never gives up.

As much as I’d like to tell him it might be worth it, I don’t want to lose my job, so I stay quiet.

As soon as Hallie walks into the room, I grab my purse and whisper to her, “Wish me luck.”

She winks in response before turning to my class. “I’d like you all to sit quietly and read your science books. I’ll be right here if you have any questions.”

I lean over to her and remind her, “This is math.”

Her eyes widen as she tells them, “In that case, you’re on your own.”

I walk out of my room before breaking into a trot toward the exit that will take me closest to the parking lot. I’m nearly at the door when I hear Not-so-Chipper call out. “Paige!” I ignore him, so he shouts louder, “PAIGE!!!” I’m sure the entire school heard that one.

I whip around and snap, “What?”

He hurries to my side. “My car won’t start.”

“And you want me to fix it?” *What an idiot.*

Jamming his hands into his coat pockets, he says, “No. I’m asking for a ride to the country club.”

Horror flows through me like a nasty bout of food poisoning. “In *my* car?”

“That might be easier than carrying me on your back and running.” *Sassy pants.*

I want to tell him there’s no way I’d ever let him into my car. But not only do I have to work with him through the rest of the school year, I also have to film a television show with him for the next month.

“Fine,” I tell him. “But no talking.”

“Why can’t I talk?”

“Because I like silence when I’m driving. You wouldn’t want me to get into an accident, would you?” He suddenly looks less interested in driving with me. Good.

We walk to my car in silence, but once we get there he demands, “*This is your car?*” He looks appalled, which I’m guessing is due to the multiple dents from my sliding into the trees at the end of my driveway.

Instead of using this as an opportunity to tell him what an unsafe driver I am, I tell him, “At least it works.” I pointedly add, “Unlike *some* people’s.” Put that in your pipe, Not-so-Chipper. “If it’s too beneath you to be seen in Bessie here, feel free to walk.”

Once we’re inside, I turn on the ignition and let the defroster do its job before putting the gear shift in reverse. As I pull out of the parking lot, Chip announces, “At least you’ve got a good heater in this thing.”

“That’s because my car was built at a time when quality mattered.”

He tries to stifle his laughter but he’s not successful. “It’s a true nod to function over style.”

I nearly pull over so I can push him out. But instead of resorting to violence, I remind my passenger, “No talking.” I know my car is a beater, but it works, so it is not high on my priority list to replace it. Not that I could if I wanted to.

Chip shifts nervously in his seat the rest of the way. As soon as I pull into the parking lot at the club, he asks, “Would you mind dropping me off up front?”

“Yes,” I tell him. There’s no way I’m letting him walk in first. God knows what he’d tell other people about me.

“You won’t drop me at the front?” He sounds surprised.

“Nope.”

“Why?” he demands.

I pull into a parking spot as far from the door as I can find. Once I turn the car off, I realize I’m punishing myself, too, but all I can think about is sticking it to Chip. Instead of answering him, I get out to retrieve my garment bag from the trunk.

By the time I’ve collected my stuff, I don’t see him anywhere. I trudge through the elements solo for a few minutes before he catches up with me. “Where were you?” I demand with hostility—which appears to be my go-to emotion with this guy.

“I ... uh ... had to take care of something.”

“Were you buying drugs?”

He clears his throat. “No, I was using the ... I was going to ...”

“Spain?” I joke.

“I had to use the bathroom.” He reminds me, “And you wouldn’t drop me at the front.”

I immediately feel bad. “Why didn’t you tell me you had to pee?”

“I don’t know, I guess because I assumed you’d be more considerate.” Oh yeah, he’s mad.

“Next time, just tell me.” I hurry to add, “Better yet, get your car fixed so there isn’t a next time.”

I hate walking into the club mad. I hate that Chip is part of this show. But mostly, I hate that I’m so nervous that I don’t even feel like myself anymore.

CHAPTER TWELVE



TIM

Work has been a whirlwind of activity today. While the production crew has kept my staff hopping to get ready for tonight, Trina has kept me busy filming promotional videos. After two hours, I started to wonder if I was slated to be the star of the show. But how could that be when I'm a last-minute replacement?

At ten minutes to four, she walks me into the room where hair and makeup are stationed. There are three women standing in front of a long table. Each has a stool and large lighted mirror positioned in front of it.

Trina sits me down on one stool before telling the makeup artist, "He won't require a lot of work. Just give him a little bronzer and touch up his hair." Then she turns to me. "While we really do let our singles make their own matches, I like to give everyone a hint as to who I see them with."

Terrific, she's about to tell me who she thinks my love connection will be. "Okay ..."

"With the last-minute switch up in cast, I've had to reconfigure things a little bit." She looks at the clipboard she's holding before saying, "I see you with a woman named Cami. She works at a catering company in Chicago."

"And because I work at a country club, you think that would make us a perfect match." It kind of makes sense. We'd always have a lot to talk about anyway.

Her head bobs up and down. "Also, Cami used to live in L.A., so you

have that in common.”

Cami could be the nicest and prettiest woman in the whole world, but that last bit of information guarantees I won't be interested in her. L.A. is a chapter of my life that's closed forever. I don't want to think about it, talk about it, or know anyone from there ever again. *Thank you, Eva.*

There's no sense ranting to Trina, though. I'll simply do my best to stay clear of Cami. “You aren't telling her you think I'd be her perfect match, too, are you?”

“Of course. But my opinion is solely based on your stats. If you don't have any chemistry, I'll watch your interactions with other people and re-advise you.”

Trina turns away from me and hands each of the stylists a list. She tells them, “I've made notes on who I think will need what. I'll be walking through periodically in case you have any questions.”

The door opens and at least a dozen people walk into the room. I don't know why, but I had imagined they'd keep the sexes apart, at least until the mixer. That doesn't seem to be the case.

Catching Paige's eye in the mirror, I offer a small wave. She immediately crosses the room in my direction. When she's right behind me, she says, “I feel like I'm going to hurl.”

“Yet, you look great,” I tell her, trying to instill confidence. The truth is, she looks like she didn't sleep well last night.

Trina welcomes Paige. Then she asks, “Do you two know each other?” She sounds surprised and not in a good way.

“We're old friends,” I tell her.

“Is that *all*?”

Paige and I share a look before I answer, “Yup.”

Paige adds, “We went to school together from kindergarten on.”

Trina's gaze shifts between us like she's looking for evidence of something more. “We don't like to match people who have a history. It's boring for the TV audience.”

“We've never been more than friends,” Paige assures her. I can tell she's thinking that we were never even that, but she doesn't share that information with Trina.

“But we *are* going to help each other,” I announce.

Trina looks concerned. “What does that mean, *help each other*?”

Paige fields this one. “We plan on sharing who we think the other should

spend time with.”

The show’s host suddenly looks excited. “You mean you’ll gather information for each other? What a great idea! This could be the season’s twist we’re always looking for.”

I don’t want to be a twist. Heck, I don’t want to be part of setting Paige up, but if the boss is happy then I suppose I should be, as well. “There’s another guy from Elk Lake,” I say. “He teaches at the same school Paige does.”

“What?!” Trina jerks upright like I just told her she’d cast a shape-shifting reptilian alien on the show. She frantically flips through some paperwork before asking, “Who is he?”

“Chip Baker,” Paige replies in a bored monotone.

Trina looks confused. “It says here that Chip is a teacher in Madison.”

Paige closes her eyes like she’s searching for inner peace and failing to find it. “He’s subbing in Elk Lake until the end of the school year.”

“Oh, dear.” Trina does not sound happy. “We never have three people from the same town, during the same season.”

“If it helps,” Paige assures her, “I couldn’t be less interested in Chip Baker.”

Trina’s expression shifts from annoyed to intrigued. “Why is that?”

“He’s the kind of guy who was probably a hall monitor in school. You know, full-on with a whistle and a yellow pad of tardy slips?”

Trina laughs. “That wasn’t the impression I got at all.”

“How did he strike you?” Paige wants to know.

“I thought he was cute and dedicated. The kind of man you’d want to take home to your mother.”

“My mother would disown me if I brought him home to meet her.”

Wheels appear to start turning in Trina’s head. “Your parents live in town, don’t they, Paige?”

Paige’s upper lip curls upward in a stiff smile. “They’re in Florida until May.”

Trina’s face falls slightly. But then she looks in the mirror and catches someone else’s eye. “I’ve got to go. You two plan your strategy. Let me know if you need anything.”

My makeup person taps me on the shoulder. “I’m done with you.” She smiles at Paige. “I can do you next.”

Once Paige and I switch places, I look around the room and ask her,

“Which one is Chip?”

“Just look for a troll,” she grumbles.

“I don’t see any trolls,” I tell her. “What color hair does he have?”

“Poop brown.” She looks into the mirror before adding, “He’s the guy still standing by the door.”

“The one in the green cardigan?”

She sticks out her tongue before answering, “Yeah. His car broke down at school and I had to drive him over here. It was horrible.”

“You’re a real drama queen,” I tell her. “I think he looks like a nice guy.”

“He’s short,” Paige says.

“So are you,” I tell her.

“I am not short!” *Oh yeah, she’s in a mood.*

“How tall are you? Five-two? Five-three?”

She whips around so fast the makeup artist winds up putting lipstick on her cheek. “I am five-three and a *half!*”

“So, a veritable giant,” I tease.

“I’m five-seven in heels.”

“Chip looks like he’s about five-seven,” I tell her.

“I bet he wears lifts,” she decides.

Before I can respond, Trina calls out, “Attention, please! Once you’re done with hair and makeup, please go to the rooms marked ‘Women’ and ‘Men’ across the hall and change into the clothes you’ve brought for the mixer. Don’t worry if your hair gets messed up. We’ll touch you all up before we start filming.”

“I guess I’d better go put on my good suit,” I tell Paige.

“See you later.” She sounds as excited as I am—which is to say, not at all.

“We’ve got this,” I assure her. Then I walk out of the room and head toward my office. There’s no way I’m going to change in a room full of strangers if I don’t have to.

While putting on my suit, I can’t help but wonder what Eva’s reaction will be to seeing me on the show. That’s when I realize that if I’m going to make her jealous, I’m going to need to be the life of the party—the kind of guy women

flock to.

The only problem is, I don't feel like that guy. I still feel like the poor sucker whose wife left him for a professional basketball player. *Why didn't I think this through?*

I suddenly need to talk to Paige and see if she can help me. I know she thought I agreed to really look for love after we made that stupid pity pact, but I am not going to. My only goal is to make Eva regret leaving me.

Picking up my phone, I call Paige.

She answers after only one ring, and she sounds out of breath. "What?"

"Are you running a marathon?"

"Haha. I've got fabric stuck in my zipper, and I'm struggling to get it out."

"Need some help?" I ask.

"I thought I'd ask one of the other women to help me, thank you."

"Okay, once you're free, could you please walk down the hall to my office?"

"Are you okay?" she wants to know.

"I'm not sure."

She sounds worried enough to say, "I'm on my way."

Moments later, Paige walks through the door. She's wearing a sleek black cocktail dress that makes her look like an old-school movie star. Her hair is pulled back into a low ponytail and her lipstick is bright red. The only word that comes to mind is, "Wow!"

She drops down into a half curtsy. "Thank you. You look terrific yourself." She walks over to me and turns around so I can see her zipper before telling me, "You have to pull it down to get the fabric out and then be really careful when you zip it back up."

It only takes me thirty seconds to fix her problem. "You're set," I tell her.

She turns around and narrows her gaze. "It would appear you've had some experience with women's clothing."

I'm not sure what she's accusing me of, so I assure her, "Only when women are wearing it."

"I didn't think *you* were wearing women's clothing." She turns around and sits down on the sofa against the wall. "Now, what's the crisis?"

Leaning against the edge of my desk, I tell her, "I still don't understand what our pity pact is all about. But you should know that I'm not hoping to meet anyone on the show, and that I'm still only doing it because I want to

make Eva jealous.”

She snorts. “I pretty much figured that was the case. And just so you know, I think that’s awful.” I don’t have a chance to defend myself before she adds, “Everyone else is searching for love, and you’re ruining someone’s chance.”

The back of my neck starts to prickle. “I feel bad about that.”

“So, what exactly do you expect me to do?”

“I was wondering if you might help make me look desirable. You know, hang on my every word? Look at me like I’m the ice cream to your cone?”
Maybe you won’t have to act...

She stands up and walks toward me like I’m in trouble. “I’m hoping to meet my soulmate, Tim. And if I do, I don’t want him to think I’m interested in you. Worse yet, I don’t want him to think I’m two-timing him.”

I hadn’t thought about that. “I totally understand. If you don’t want to act like you’re interested in me for yourself then maybe, you know, you could talk me up?”

“To the other women who are *also* here looking for love?” Yeah, she’s not going for it.

“Maybe you could just be nice to me then. Act like you *might* be interested.”

“You’re a real piece of work, Tim Ferris.” With her hands on her hips, she adds, “I don’t give a floating fig about Eva, and you shouldn’t either. If you want my help, you’re going to have to promise to give these women a chance. A *real* chance.”

“And if I do, you’ll help me?”

She turns her head slightly toward the wall, so she can give me a fierce side-eye. “Are you going to be open to something happening with one of the ladies on the show?”

I shrug. “I suppose. I mean, I’m sure stranger things have happened.”

“Fine,” she decides. “But if I think for one minute you aren’t serious then I’m going to out you as a fraud.”

Panic fills my extremities. “You can’t do that.”

“I can do anything I want. Don’t cross me.”

Great, I’m more nervous now than ever. What in the world was I doing asking Paige for help?

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



PAIGE

Once we're all standing in the ballroom, Trina separates the women from the men by sending the men to the other side of the room. When they've moved, she turns her attention to us. "I know what a nerve-wracking experience this must be for you all, but I want to assure you that I only have your best interests at heart."

My gaze travels across the group as she chats about the importance of speaking up and staying in the light. The other women are an interesting mix. Some of them are very attractive, others, traditionally less so. We're a pretty accurate cross section of humanity.

Trina reminds us, "Remember to be yourselves and don't pretend for the camera. Our goal is to find you real and lasting love. That won't happen if you're not being true to who you are." She smiles encouragingly. "Do you have any questions?"

A tall brunette wearing one of those prairie-style dresses asks, "Are we allowed to eat and drink or is that all for show?"

"You are definitely allowed to enjoy the food and beverages," Trina tells us. "Just not when there's a camera catching a moment between you and one of the men. And remember, don't chew and talk at the same time."

A quirky redhead sticks her hand up. She's wearing what appears to be a teal prom dress from the 1950s. "I hear some reality shows encourage you to drink a lot of alcohol so there's more tension."

Trina shakes her head. “Not us. You’re allowed one alcoholic beverage per hour, and you may not exceed three. Not only are you going to be driving later, but we want you to be seen in the best light. You’re here to find love, not drama.”

It’s a relief to hear her say that. While alcohol *can* give you courage, it can also make you say and do things you’d rather not advertise to the world. I cite the time I drank three beers in a row before deciding the limbo bar at my parents’ BBQ wasn’t *that* low. Not only did I make a fool of myself, but I threw my back out, resulting in four trips to the chiropractor. A history of scoliosis is nothing to mess with.

Trina says, “If there aren’t any more questions, why don’t you all get to know each other while I go talk to the men?”

A blonde woman, a little taller than me, comes over to me and announces, “I’m terrified.”

“Me too.” I reach my hand out to her. “Paige Holland. I’m a seventh-grade math teacher and live here in Elk Lake.”

She smiles sweetly while shaking my hand. “Cami Hall. I’m a caterer from Chicago.”

“That must be fun.”

“It’s back-breaking work, but I love it. There’s nothing like making someone’s big event the best night of their life.”

I try not to cringe as I say, “You must do a lot of weddings.”

She nods. “That’s our bread and butter, except for holiday parties, of course.”

“Do you mind doing them?” I’ll know she’s lying if she says she doesn’t. There’s no unattached woman alive who wants to watch a bunch of brides and grooms celebrate night after night.

Cami’s eyes briefly shift from side-to-side like she’s making sure there aren’t any cameras on her. Then she leans in and says, “It’s getting old.”

“I bet. I have a friend who owns a bridal boutique. She was getting ready to sell out to her mother when she met her boyfriend.”

“But she’s happy now?” she wants to know.

“Disgustingly so.”

“Good for her.” Cami shares, “Brides are the toughest customers to work for. They want the sun, the moon, and the stars, and all for a budget price.”

“Missy says the worst part of her job is when they buy a dress, but then have so many alterations made, it winds up looking nothing like the dress

they fell in love with. Inevitably they blame her.”

Cami rolls her big brown eyes. “The brides *are* bad, but the mothers-of-the-brides are the real nightmare. Not only do they want their daughters to have the best day of their lives, but a fair number of them use the reception to show off to all their friends and family. I have had to designate a person on my staff to stay near the MOB at all times just to keep her out of my way.” She adds, “Janine’s whole purpose is to make the MOB feel like she’s the most important person in the world.”

“The MOB ...” I laugh loudly. “It sounds like a fitting title for any annoying mother-of-the-bride.”

“What’s your mom going to be like when you get married?” she wants to know.

I don’t have to think hard before saying, “She’ll be a piece of cake. At this point, all she wants is for me to find a nice guy and give her grandkids.”

“That’s what they all say,” Cami grumbles.

“Seriously, my mom wants my reception to be in the backyard, and she’s even hinted we should make it a potluck.”

“Really?” Cami sounds equal parts horrified and delighted that such a person exists. “What do you want?”

“I’d settle for the courthouse and a reception at the Rib Barn if I could just find a guy.”

Before she can respond to that, another woman joins us. Her hair is teased so high it’s like she just escaped from Texas. She’s the redhead who asked about drinking. “Hey!” she practically shouts at us. “My name is Brittany!” She’s still yelling.

“I’m Paige, and this is Cami.”

“What?” she shouts again. I can’t help but wonder if she’s hard of hearing, so I flash her the only American Sign Language I remember from fifth grade. I’m either saying it’s nice to meet you, or I’ve declared war on her village. My teacher was a firm believer that we should be able to say a wide variety of things.

Looking at my hands, she demands, “What are you doing?” But before I can answer her, she tips her head to the side and presses her hand to her ear. Then in a much quieter voice, she says, “That’s better. I’ve had water stuck in my ear all day.”

“Why?” Cami asks.

“I’m taking an aquatic aerobics class, and I get water trapped in my ears

almost every time.”

I wish we had an indoor pool in town. I would love to swim in the winter. “Do you like it?” I ask.

Her brow scrunches up. “No, it’s annoying.”

“Not the water in your ear,” I explain. “The aerobics class.”

She nods her head in understanding. “It’s just me and a bunch of retired people, but my butt is firming up so I’m not complaining.” I briefly wonder if Steve had considered exercise before going to such extreme lengths to enhance his booty.

“What do you do for a living?” Cami asks Brittany.

“I’m a longshoreman from Chicago.”

“Really?” I don’t mean to sound so surprised, but not only have I never met a longshoreman, but I guess I always assumed they were men. Burly men with beards and pot bellies—a plethora of naked mermaid tattoos on their arms. Not petite redheads with impish smiles.

Before she can answer, Cami asks, “What do longshoremen do?”

Brittany picks a thread off her skirt while saying, “I unload boats that come into the docks.”

“By hand?” This woman must be a veritable superhero of strength.

She eyes me skeptically. “With a forklift.”

“Huh,” Cami interjects. “It’s amazing how many different kinds of jobs are out there that I know nothing about.” She smiles at Brittany. “That’s pretty cool.”

“Thanks.” Brittany doesn’t sound like she’s sure she believes Cami.

To bridge any divide that might be developing, I announce, “I drove a pickup truck once.” They both look at me like I’m an idiot, so I add, “It was a stick. It was hard.”

Cami’s face scrunches up in confusion before turning to Brittany. She says, “I rent a duplex in Wrigleyville. How about you?”

“I have a condo on Lake Shore Drive.”

Lake Shore Drive is a swanky address and before I can stop myself, I blurt out, “Being a longshoreman must be pretty lucrative.”

“It’s okay, but I don’t make enough money to buy a condo like mine. I’m lucky I can cover the HOA fees on my salary.” She lowers her voice and adds, “I inherited, but I’d rather not advertise that. I don’t want to meet a guy who only wants me for my real estate.”

“We won’t say a word,” I promise.

And just like that, I'm feeling better about being on this show. I've already met two nice women. If I can do that within ten minutes, surely there might be one man for me.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



TIM

Once the men move to the other side of the ballroom from the women, I decide to introduce myself to Chip Baker. Not only do we live in the same town, but I'd like to figure out why Paige hates him so much.

As I walk toward him, I realize he looks as nervous as I feel. "Hey, there. It's Chip, right?"

His head pops up. "Do I know you?"

"I'm Tim Ferris," I tell him. "My family owns the country club." As soon as the words are out of my mouth, I cringe. It sounds like I'm bragging.

"Really? So, you're working here?" he asks.

"I oversee things." He appears confused so I hurry to add, "But I'm also on the show."

He looks me up and down before saying, "All the women are going to fall for you for sure." He does not sound pleased.

"I highly doubt that. I'm sure there will be someone for everyone."

He doesn't appear to believe me, so I change the subject. "There's another person on the show from Elk Lake."

His eyes roll around like he's about to have a seizure. "I know. Her name is Paige Holland. Be careful, she's a real witch."

Figuring it's better to come clean from the start, I tell him, "Paige and I are friends. We were in the same graduating class."

Chip looks like he just swallowed his tongue. He coughs loudly before

saying, "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that. I really don't know Paige that well."

"It sounds like she's made an impression though."

"You could say that. I don't think she likes me."

"I wouldn't worry about it," I tell him. "Paige is very nice when she wants to be."

"Yeah, well, she doesn't want to be nice to me."

"If I were you," I tell him, "I wouldn't let her see that you're bothered by her. Just treat her like you'd treat your great aunt with gout."

Chip releases a bark of laughter. "I actually have a great aunt with gout. Aunt Elinor. She doesn't like me either."

"Okay then, treat Paige like you'd treat an elderly neighbor."

Chip's chin moves up and down. "I could do that, but I'm probably better off just staying away from her. I don't want to tempt her into throwing anything at me."

"I don't think she'd do that." I only say that to be comforting. The truth is, I can quite easily envision Paige beaming Chip in the head with a baguette.

"Are you nervous about being on the show?" he asks.

Now seems to be a good time to start pretending I'm an outgoing playboy. "Not at all. We're going to have a lot of fun, I'm sure of it." *Sell it, Tim.*

"Did Trina tell you who she thinks you might be a good match with?" He hurries to say, "I'm not asking who it is, I'm just wondering."

"She did, but I'm looking forward to making up my own mind."

Chip tugs at the neck of his sweater like it's started to choke him and he's trying to get some air. He traded his Mr. Rogers cardigan in for a more traditional pullover. "I've never been a great dater. I'm more of a serial monogamist."

"If you don't date, how do you meet the women who become your girlfriends?"

He gives up on his neckline in lieu of shifting his weight from foot-to-foot. As he picks up the speed he starts to look like he's doing some kind of weird polka. "Mostly through other people. Friends set me up, family members introduce me around ... Finding my own love interest is going to be a novel experience. How about you?"

I'm not sure if I'm going to tell people about Eva yet, so I say, "I'm a pretty proficient dater."

“I would be too if I looked like you. You have that kind of golden, California-surfer thing going on.”

“I’m a Wisconsinite through and through,” I assure him. “Born, raised, never planning on leaving.” *Maybe I won’t even cop to having lived in L.A.*

“I wouldn’t mind moving,” he says. “I kind of like the idea of living in Hawaii, but I could never afford to do that on a schoolteacher’s salary.”

“Yet they must have teachers there ...”

Shrugging one shoulder, he says, “They probably live in shacks on the beach. Although even that sounds appealing compared to another midwestern winter.”

California did have beautiful weather, but that’s not enough reason to live there. “I like winter sports,” I tell him.

“I wouldn’t mind learning how to surf,” he decides. “But first, I’d like to meet a nice woman who’s open to adventuring with me.”

Before I can agree that sounds like a good plan, a tall guy in a dark suit bumps into my shoulder. If I didn’t know better, I’d think he was trying to start something. With a glare, he tells me, “Watch where you’re going.”

“Excuse me?” I’m not looking for a fight, but I’m also not going to let some puffed up peacock run roughshod over me. “I was just standing here, man.”

He looks like he wants to punch me, but ultimately sticks his hand out. “Fielden Marsh. I’m an attorney in Chicago.”

A tidal wave of something nasty slams into me. *This is the guy Trina wants to set up with Paige?* Not on my watch. I shake his hand firmly like I’m trying to crack a nut. “Tim Ferris. I own the country club.” And while it’s true I own part of the club, I neglect to mention that my father owns the lion’s share.

Fielden seems to relax immediately. “I’m sorry I ran into you. I thought you were on the show.”

“Why would that make a difference?”

He leans in as though he’s about to confess a crime. “I thought it might be a good idea to intimidate the competition. You know, let them know who the alpha dog is.”

What a pig. Neglecting to set him straight, I stretch my arm out toward Chip. “Chip here is on the show.”

Fielden looks down at Chip in a way that you’d think he was a hobbit from *Lord of the Rings*. “I don’t think we’re going to attract the same kind of

women.”

This guy is really pissing me off. “Why is that?”

Fielden points between himself and Chip. “We’re in different leagues, man. He’s still in the minors and I’m in the pros.”

It’s time to share my feelings about professional ball players. “I’d rather play an honest game than be a professional man-whore.”

“Dude, what’s your problem?” he demands. “You’re not even on the show, so what do you care?”

“Did I forget to mention that in addition to owning the club, I’m also one of this season’s singles?”

His hands ball into fists like he’s ready to go hog wild on me. “Yeah, you did.”

Chip fearlessly steps between us. “I’m sure we like different kinds of women, Fielden. We shouldn’t be competition for each other.”

“You’re no competition for me at all.” Fielden straightens his jacket before telling me, “*You* stay out of my way.” Then he stalks off.

As soon as he’s out of earshot, Chip mumbles, “What a jerk.”

“That’s the guy Trina wants to set up with Paige.”

Chip makes a face like he just ate a slug. “I don’t particularly like Paige, but no one deserves to be stuck with a Neanderthal. That guy is a total caveman.”

“Will you help me keep them apart?” I ask.

Chip nods his head. “I’ll do whatever I can, but let’s hope Paige never finds out we’re interfering in her love life. She hates me enough as it is.”

“I’m not going to tell her.” And while I don’t know Paige that well yet, I’m pretty sure our intervention won’t be necessary. She’s smart enough not to fall for a Ken doll like Fielden. I smile at the thought of her opening up a can of whoop-ass on the big city lawyer.

While I was busy discovering my aversion to Fielden Marsh, Trina joined the men. She once again claps her hands to get our attention, and then spends the next few minutes going over the schedule and the rules for tonight. She concludes, “We’ll introduce the women first and we should be starting on the men in about an hour.”

“An hour?” I’m suddenly grateful I work here. It looks like this show might be a bunch of hurry up and wait. And that’s never been my strong suit.

Chip groans, “I’m starting to wonder what I’m doing here.” *Welcome to the club.*

But I don't say that. Instead, I smile in what I hope is an encouraging manner before saying, "I'll catch up with you later, Chip. I've got some work I need to do." On my way out the door, I walk past Fielden and make sure to send him a death glare. There is no way I'm going to let this ignoramus anywhere near Paige. The whole idea makes me sick.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



PAIGE

I don't have the opportunity to meet any of the other women before it's time to start filming our individual interviews. Once we leave the ballroom, Trina lines us up in a specific order. I'm the first one to go in.

Technicians walk around and busily hook up our microphones. They tuck the battery packs inside the back of our clothing, which means I have to unzip my dress for it to be secured to my bra. The tricky part is weaving the wire through my dress so the tiny mic is close to my mouth. After much finagling—which either makes me look like there's a herd of spiders crawling around under my dress, or I'm trying to perform a belly dance with a dislocated hip—I'm finally ready to go.

Trina declares, "I'll walk into the ballroom first. Wait for me to announce you before you come in, and then when we're done, exit through the same door where the men are."

I lean against the wall to keep from falling over. "Okay." I'm so terrified right now I'm not sure I'm going to be able to take one step, let alone walk across the ballroom. I envision myself getting halfway there before falling into a heap on the floor.

As I watch Trina get into position, I decide it's a good thing I don't have a job that involves being in front of a camera. I'm pretty sure if I did, I'd spend most of my time on the unemployment line.

Before I know it, a crew member signals that it's go time. *Holy heck, this*

is it. Trina is standing a good twenty yards from me, when she tells the camera, “Our first single lives right here in Elk Lake. She’s a seventh-grade math teacher, and her name is Paige Holland. Come on in, Paige!”

There are so many lights and people around, I feel like I’m walking onto a movie set. Somehow, I manage to put a smile on my face, even though it’s so frozen into place I probably look like a serial killer.

As soon as I get to Trina’s side, she puts her hand on my arm. “We’re so happy to have you on the show.”

“Thank you.” I stumble over my words as I tell her, “I ... I’m happy to be here.”

“So, you’re thirty-two and looking for love! That’s exciting, huh?”

“I guess so.” I laugh lightly like it’s fun to get called out on national television for being unable to find someone on my own.

“Well, you’ve come to the right place. In the next several weeks you’re going to get to know eight great guys. I’m optimistic one of them will be the perfect match for you.”

“That’s why I’m here.” *To throw myself at the feet of strangers and beg them to love me.*

“I understand you enjoy rom-com movies,” she says.

“I could watch them all day.”

She wants to know, “Which one is your favorite?”

My mind suddenly goes blank, and I can’t remember anything. I finally manage, “I love anything with Julia Roberts or Sandra Bullock.”

“Oh, so you’re into the *oldies*.” She says that like she’s accusing me of something unsavory. *Oh, so you’re the one who likes liver and onions.*

I wish I were sitting down, but as that isn’t an option, I slide my feet farther apart to help balance my center of gravity. “My mom got me hooked on them.”

“Well, hopefully, your leading man is right on the other side of that door.” She faces the camera again. “Our next single comes to us from the Windy City itself, please welcome ...” Keeping her hands beneath the camera’s focus, she motions for me to move on.

As I hurry across the room, I can’t help but think fifteen hundred dollars an episode is nowhere near enough to compensate me for the kind of anxiety I’m experiencing. It’s like being in high school all over again, albeit sans the brace.

Once I walk through the door on the opposite side of the room, I’m

surrounded by men. My eyes immediately scan for Tim, but he's nowhere in sight. That's when Chip approaches me. As though reading my mind, he says, "Tim said something about going to the dining room."

"Thank you." My tone is clipped at best.

"Paige," he starts to say, but quickly stops.

"What?"

He stammers before answering, "Would it be okay if we called a truce? I mean, it's clear we aren't a match, so what would it hurt if we were nice to each other?"

I weigh the odds of a ceasefire. Even though Chip made a terrible first impression, that shouldn't mean we have to be mortal enemies. On the other hand, he really does annoy me. I'm quiet for long enough that he practically begs, "Please."

"Fine," I decide. "So long as you know I'm not interested in you in a romantic sense."

He bristles slightly. "Which is fine, because I'm not interested in you, either."

Got it, Not-so-Chipper. "Are you trying to start a fight with me right now?"

"Why can you tell me you don't want to date me, but I can't tell you the same thing?"

"Because you yelled at me while I was running into school." *Yeah, that made no sense whatsoever.*

"You pulled me down on the floor and didn't help me up!" he yells back.

That's when we both notice the cameraman standing a few feet away. His lens is focused right on us.

"What are you doing?" I ask in horror. "You're not supposed to be filming us out here."

One of the production crew intervenes. "Your contract states we're allowed to film you everywhere you go during your scheduled filming times."

"Yeah, but ..." I've got no comeback for this.

Chip steps forward. "Remember our truce, Paige. There's no reason for us to fight." I want to punch him in the nose.

In my most insincere tone, I tell him, "You're right, Chip." Then I smile at the camera and add, "I'm nothing if not accommodating."

As soon as the cameraman walks away, Chip grumbles, "They're never

going to believe that.”

“Why not?”

“I’m sure they know when they’re getting played.”

Grr. I really hate this guy. “What if I meant it?”

“Did you?”

“Obviously not, Chip. I detest you.” So much for peace.

He rolls his eyes. “Then they’ll know it and if they use the footage, it will only be in order to make you look bad.”

Could he be right? Could I somehow be cast as the villain in editing? Every season reunion has the “mean girl” who begs the audience to believe her when she vows there was more to her scenes than was shown. OMG. I have to control how I come across or they might decide to ruin my life! “Chip ...” I start out haltingly before gaining traction. “I formally agree to a truce, and I apologize for the way I’ve been treating you. I have not been very nice to you.” I almost choke on that last bit.

He looks dubious. And rightly so. “You know the camera isn’t on us, don’t you?”

“This time, I mean it.”

He stretches his hand out with a good deal of trepidation—*smart man*. “Then I accept. Thank you.”

Thank goodness that’s over. “You said Tim is in the dining room?” He nods his head.

As I start to walk away, one of the producers—the one who thought I might be into S & M during my welcome interview—stops me. He demands, “Where are you going?”

“I need to talk to Tim. He’s in the dining room.”

Instead of answering me, the “suit” picks up a walkie-talkie. “I’m going to need someone to bring a copy of Miss Holland’s contract to her. She clearly didn’t read it.”

“I read it,” I tell him. “I don’t recall it saying anything about my not being able to walk into another room.”

The producer stares at me condescendingly. “It states clearly that you must always be available during filming. If you go into the dining room, and we need you, you’ll delay us.”

“What’s your name?” I ask heatedly.

“Dale.”

I’m starting to feel lightheaded, so I kick off my shoes. I read somewhere

the best way to regain your equilibrium is to remove any barrier between your feet and the ground—something about the earth’s magnetic field sucking out tension. Unfortunately, in my current situation, that’s a bad move. Dale is quite tall, and I’m now very short. But I persevere. “Look here, Dale.” I say his name like it’s a curse word. “I just shot my scene, and there are at least a dozen more people to go before this party starts. I promise I’ll be back before I’m missed.”

Dale looks behind me before replying, “Be that as it may, Miss Holland, I’m going to need you to stay put.”

“What if I had to use the bathroom, Dale? Would *that* be allowed?”

“Do you have to use the bathroom?”

“Yes.” What’s he going to do, follow me?

He extends his hand to the wall opposite the ballroom. “It’s right there.”

Of course it is. Before I can walk away, Dale makes a cutting motion across his neck. That’s when I turn to see him signal the camera guy who caught me ripping into Chip. Did he just film me yelling at Dale? What in the world is going on here? *Midwestern Matchmaker* has never shown behind-the-scenes footage in the past. At least I don’t think they have.

I suddenly want to cry. I hurry to the bathroom so I can regain my composure privately. I thought being on this show would be so much fun, but I’m only an hour into it and I’m seriously worried it might have been the worst decision of my life.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



TIM

Trina knew when I agreed to be on the show that I still had obligations at the club. In the back of my mind, I was hoping that would be a deal breaker for her, but she agreed to bend the rules for me. Right now, that's a good thing because if I had to be around that idiot Fielden Marsh for another second, I might have really lost it.

I spend the next hour walking through the dining room talking with guests. I know a lot of them from when I was growing up in Elk Lake, which honestly warms my heart. I sometimes wish I'd never left town. But I wanted to make it on my own, so when I took over for my dad, it would be a position I deserved. I didn't want to be handed the job just because my family owned the club.

By the time I rejoin the men, I'm the only one left to be interviewed. The sound guy hurries over to me and tucks the battery pack for my mic into the back of my pants and then he runs the wire up my back and clips it to my suit coat.

When Trina calls my name, I stride into the ballroom confidently. She tells the camera, "Our last bachelor is Tim Ferris. Tim wasn't originally scheduled to be on the show, but he agreed to be our knight in shining armor when our other bachelor broke both of his legs." She pauses to give the audience a moment to digest such a horror. Then she turns to me. "Tell us about yourself, Tim."

Smiling in what I hope is an engaging way, I tell her, “I’m an Elk Lake native, and my family owns the country club here, which is how you came to ask me to be on the show.”

“What is your ideal woman like, Tim?”

I wrack my brain for an answer to her question. Unfortunately, the only thing that comes to mind is what my ideal woman *isn’t* like. I finally say, “I like honest women who value their commitments.” I sound like I’m describing my ideal housekeeper.

“It sounds like there might be a story there ...” She waits for me to fill her in.

“We all have our stories, Trina. Not all of them are meant to be shared.”

She suddenly looks uncomfortable. “Obviously, our producers do background checks on everyone who applies to be on the show ...”

My eyebrows lift so high they’re probably at my hairline. In a bid to keep her from revealing my past, I interrupt, “Yes, but I didn’t apply to be on the show. I’m doing you a favor by filling in at the last minute.”

She reluctantly meets my gaze. “Yes, you are.”

Remembering that I never turned in my contract, I reach into my jacket pocket and pull it out. Then I wave it in the air. “I haven’t given you my contract yet ...” My threat is implied—talk about Eva and I’ll walk.

Trina calls out to the cameraman, “Stop taping, Hal.” She strides away from me toward the group of producers standing in a circle by the buffet table. There’s a lot of heated mumbling before she finally returns. “They’ve agreed not to bring up your ex unless you do so first. But then it’s fair game.”

I nod my head before handing her the contract. “I don’t know why, but I thought *Midwestern Matchmaker* was a classier show than some of the others ...”

“It’s supposed to be, but I’m only the host.”

“I thought you were a producer, too.” *I hate it when people lie to me.*

“I’m more of an honorary producer. ‘Producer’ is a title that’s easily handed out and it doesn’t always mean much. As such, I answer to a higher authority.”

“Those goons over there?” I ask. In unison, said goons turn and glare at me.

“Your mic is on,” she whispers. “They can hear everything you say until it’s shut off.”

“Excellent.” I tap the microphone on my lapel before announcing,

“You’re shooting in my club, and you need me to keep your precious eight-couple formula working. I’d think about that before you get on my bad side.”

The look on Trina’s face is one of pure shock. I’m guessing not many guests tell off the producers of the show. She motions toward her mic and presses the button. “The off-switch is here. You can hit it any time you want to be muted, but please don’t tell the others. I hate to admit it, but we get some of our best footage when people don’t know they’re live.”

“That’s slimy.”

She shrugs her shoulders nonchalantly, like that’s all you can expect from reality programming. Then she says, “I hated that they wanted me to bring up your ex-wife.”

“Yet you were going to do it.” While Trina has been likable up to this point, I now know I can’t trust her.

“I was just doing my job, Tim.”

Before I can suggest she look for better employment, one of the goon producers shouts, “Let’s finish this up!”

After asking me a few more inconsequential questions, Trina turns back to the camera and announces, “Now that we know everyone, it’s time to mingle!”

As the cameraman walks away, she adds, “As soon as hair and makeup touch everyone up, we’re going to start the mixer. We’ll watch you all for about twenty minutes, and then we’ll decide which potential couples to film tonight. Remember to have fun!”

Slowly but surely, everyone starts to interact. I scan the room and look for Paige. She’s huddled with two other women and doesn’t appear to be in a hurry to meet any of the men.

Walking over to her, I tease, “You’re clearly the prettiest woman here. What do you say we run off together and ditch all this nonsense?”

The other two women gasp like I’ve either said the most romantic thing they’ve ever heard, or I’ve offended them. Paige ruins the moment by telling them, “Don’t mind him. That’s just Tim.”

The redhead, with hair as high as an old school country western singer, croons, “Tim, who? And how do you know him?”

“Tim and I both grew up in Elk Lake,” she tells them.

“Tim Ferris?” the tall blonde wants to know.

“Have we met?” She’s very pretty but I don’t recognize her.

She shakes her head briefly. “Not yet. I’m Cami Hall. I’m a caterer from

Chicago.”

She’s the one Trina sees me with, which makes me realize Trina might actually be good at her job. Cami is certainly someone who would have gotten my attention had I been looking to date.

“You’re from L.A.,” I say, reminding myself that means trouble. *I know I’m painting everyone with Eva’s brush, but better safe than sorry.*

“Oh, my gosh, no.” She sounds disgusted. “I spent a few years there, but I’m not from there and I’m never going back.”

I’m suddenly intrigued to know how La La Land broke another poor soul. “Why’s that?”

“Catering is hard enough work with all its unreasonable expectations. But clients in L.A. really know how to push the limits of my sanity.”

“Did you work in the film industry?” I ask. The truth is, there are a lot of great people who live in Los Angeles, but from my experience they aren’t generally the ones making movies—or professional sports figures, for that matter.

Cami’s mouth falls into an upside-down smile. “I worked for a caterer in Beverly Hills.”

“Yikes,” I say. “Maybe you should have gotten a job in Pasadena or something.”

She chuckles. “Trina tells me you used to live in L.A., too. What did you do there?”

“I managed the Pacific West Country Club.”

Paige interrupts. “Tim came home when his dad retired.”

The redhead dreamily interjects, “I love it when people do that. In my opinion, families should stay together.” She takes a breath before sticking out her hand. “Brittany Barnes.”

I shake Brittany’s hand. “I love being back here with mine.”

Before I can say anything else, Chip joins us. “Hey, Tim, are you going to introduce me to your friends?”

“You know Paige ...” I start to say, but Chip merely grunts and turns to the other women. I lightly touch Cami’s arm. “Cami is a caterer in Chicago.” Then I turn to Brittany and add, “This is Brittany ... I’m sorry I don’t know anything else about you.”

Paige steps forward, nearly knocking into Chip. “Brittany is a longshoreman from Chicago.”

Chip glares at her. “Sure, she is. There’s no reason to lie to me, Paige.”

Brittany tips her head to the side before asking Paige, “You know him, too?”

“Unfortunately,” Paige mumbles.

Brittany doesn’t seem too concerned about Paige’s lack of enthusiasm. “How?”

“Chip is a substitute teacher at the school where I work.”

Brittany smiles at Chip before saying, “Brittany Barnes. I live in Chicago, and I really am a longshoreman.” Poor Chip looks like he’s going to cry.

It takes him a minute to find his voice. “I’m so sorry. I’ve just never heard of a female longshoreman.” He looks at the floor before meeting her gaze again. “Now I sound sexist.”

“No worries,” Brittany says. “It’s not like I haven’t heard it before.”

“I know, but ...”

Before they get deeper into their conversation, I lean in and whisper to Paige, “Can I talk to you for a minute?”

She nods her head before telling the group, “We’ll be right back.”

Once we’re by the window, I turn to make sure we’re not the focus of any of the cameras. I point to the button on my mic before moving it, while indicating that she should do the same. Then I tell her, “We need to be careful.”

“Why, are they always listening to us?” she asks nervously.

“Unless you turn your mic off.” Then I add, “They were going to tell everyone about Eva.”

Her eyes open wide. “What stopped them?”

“I did. I told them that not only are they using my club, but I saved their butts when the other guy broke his legs. I more than implied I would make trouble for them if they brought up my past.”

She looks impressed and nervous at the same time. “They filmed me yelling at Chip.”

“When was that?”

“After I taped my bit with Trina. I was looking for you, but you’d gone off to the dining room. They wouldn’t let me join you.”

“So you yelled at Chip?”

“I can’t seem to help myself,” she says. “Although I think we’ve come to a temporary truce.”

I warn her, “Paige, we need to be really careful if we don’t want to come off as total idiots.”

She nods her head. “I was informed they can film us anywhere and at any time if it’s during our call time.”

I point to my mic. “But they won’t know what you’re saying if you use the mute button.”

She winces. “Let’s hope we don’t forget.” As those words come out of her mouth, I say a silent prayer that we keep our heads about us.

The alternative could be a train wreck.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



PAIGE

I meet several men during the mixer, but I don't have a chance to talk to any of them for long. Halfway through the evening, Trina pulls me aside. "I'd like to film you and Fielden. I have a good feeling about you guys."

"He seems nice enough," I tell her. In truth, I only talked to him for a couple of minutes, and I thought he was a little arrogant. But maybe that was just his defense mechanism. We're all fish out of water here, and Trina warned us not to put too much stock on first impressions.

She points across the room. "They've just turned the lights on over by the loveseat in front of the window. Go sit down, and we'll be right over."

Even though I'm terrified to be going back in front of the camera, I'm relieved to be sitting this time. After hurrying across the room, I get busy finishing my champagne while I wait for Trina and Fielden.

When I finally see them heading in my direction, I take my time assessing Fielden. He's tall, with dark, wavy, brown hair, and he's confident in a way that makes him seem like he might be a little reserved. Yet there's a glimmer in his green eyes that suggests he might also be a lot of fun.

"We're here," Trina announces.

Fielden sits down next to me, but he doesn't say anything—which is awkward.

Trina tells us, "We'd like to capture the two of you getting to know each other, so just pretend we're not here."

I wait for Fielden to say something, but when he doesn't, I eventually speak up. "So, you're a lawyer ..."

"Yes, I am."

Crickets.

"In Chicago?"

He nods his head and I notice his face is flushed.

"Are you nervous?" I ask.

His posture relaxes slightly. "Very. How about you?"

"I never thought I'd do something like this," I confess. "I thought love was supposed to be easier."

"I always feel like women want to date me because I'm successful, and they're looking for a meal ticket."

I don't know who he's been dating, but that came off sounding derogatory toward my sex. "Maybe you're not going out with the right women. I mean, surely there are intelligent gals out there with their own incomes. Fellow lawyers, for instance?"

His head tips back and forth. "Lawyers work a lot. If I date another lawyer, we'd never see each other."

"So, you're looking for someone to reconfigure her life around your schedule?" No wonder he's only finding gold diggers. His expectations are unreasonable.

He cringes. "It sounds awful when you put it that way."

"Women have their own lives, Fielden. If you expect them to put your interests first, then you're going to have to compensate them in some way."

"What, do you think I should Venmo them or something?" Now he sounds offended.

"No. But relationships are give and take."

"So, what are you suggesting?" Fielden sounds like he's on the verge of being angry at me.

"I'm just saying that if you want to be with someone who is an equal in all ways—including financially—you're going to have to lower your expectations of how much time you can spend together. But if you want a woman to wait on you and live her life around yours, you might have to pay for things because she won't be able to make the kind of money you do while keeping her schedule open."

I can't tell what he's thinking but he's definitely thinking. "You know who I think I should date?"

“I can’t imagine.”

“A nice schoolteacher who works the same hours every day.”

He’s clearly making light of what I do, so I tell him, “I work hard, Fielden. It may seem like I only work from eight to four, but I have grading, planning, and meetings. All kinds of things happen after hours.”

He leans in and takes my hand. “I’m not saying you don’t work hard. I’m just saying you don’t work as hard as I do. I’m usually in the office by six and I never get home before seven.”

I pick up his hand like it’s a dead mouse and drop it back onto his lap. “What exactly do you think you’re offering a woman?”

“I take off two days a month,” he says, like it’s some kind of major accomplishment.

“And you’re going to beam her to Paris for those two days and treat her like a queen?” I am not going to give this loser a chance, because he does not deserve one.

“I can’t do that. I play basketball with my friends one afternoon a month and I have other commitments.”

“Again, Fielden, it doesn’t sound like you have a lot to offer a woman.”

“I’m on the partner track. That takes a lot of time.”

“And what does becoming a partner get you?”

“A lot more money.”

“Money you apparently aren’t willing to share.” I push myself toward the edge of the couch while telling him, “You might think you’re a catch, but it’s pretty clear to me why you’re still single.” As a parting shot, I add, “I think you might need to Venmo your dates, after all.”

Trina follows me as I walk away. When she catches up, she says, “You were kind of hard on him, weren’t you?”

“Excuse me?”

“Remember, it’s important to get to know someone without making them feel like they’re being attacked. You pretty much told Fielden the only way he’ll get a girlfriend is if he pays for one.”

I put both hands out in front of me with my palms up like I’m balancing cantaloupes. “He complained that all women wanted from him was his money, and then he proceeded to say that he can’t date women who have their own lives because they won’t be able to bend to his schedule.”

Trina shakes her dark head firmly. “He’s as nervous to be here as you are. I was serious when I told you it can take time to get to know a person.”

“I’m not going to date that guy,” I tell her firmly.

“You came on *Midwestern Matchmaker* because you’re looking for love. Take it from me, Paige. You might think you know everything, but if you did, you wouldn’t need this show.”

Obviously, I don’t know much about dating but Trina’s making it sound like I don’t have a right to my own opinion. “I thought I got to decide who I wanted to go out with.”

“You do.” Her voice softens. “But you have to trust that I may know things you don’t, and I’m telling you I have a good feeling about you and Fielden.”

“Unless he’s an ex-Eagle Scout who feeds homeless veterans every day while knitting sweaters for needy youth, I’m not interested.”

She arches one eyebrow in an intimidating way. “You promised to give people a chance. This show only works if our guests are open-minded. I’d like to shoot another segment with you two at tomorrow night’s mixer. I promise you won’t regret it.”

Oh, for the love of ... “Fine, Trina. I’ll give Fielden one more shot, but I am not making any promises.”

“That’s all I ask.” She offers me a big smile before turning and walking away.

Meanwhile, I head back into the mixer. Everyone seems to be deep in conversation with someone, so I decide this is a good time to hit the buffet and fortify myself.

I pile a plate high with meatballs, tempura shrimp, baked potato bites, and assorted charcuterie. Nothing is safe when I have the munchies.

I’m so focussed on my food, I hear Tim before I see him. “Save something for other people.”

I turn around and snort. “First come, first serve, buddy. If you were smart, you’d dig in here before I come back for seconds.”

Tim puts a few things on his plate. “Let’s go find a place to sit.” He hands me his plate. “I’ll go get us drinks, and I’ll join you.”

“I don’t get another drink for thirty minutes,” I tell him.

“Good thing you’re friends with the owner then.” He winks before walking away.

While carrying both of our plates across the room, I pass Chip and Brittany. Their heads are together and they’re laughing about something. I’m suddenly jealous of how comfortable they seem together. The fact that Chip

Baker can find his match before me really smarts.

Once I reach a pair of wingback chairs, I put Tim's and my plates on the small table situated between them. Then I sit down and scan the room, looking for some man to catch my interest. Unfortunately, my gaze goes straight to Fielden. I know I told Trina I'd give him another shot, but there's no way I'm ever going to like that guy. He reminds me too much of the jocks in high school. The guys who never gave me the time of day. Guys like Tim.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



TIM

Cami stops me while I'm on my way to talk to Paige. "Do you have time to talk?" She lowers her eyelids and looks up at me through her thick lashes. She's clearly flirting.

"I'd love to," I tell her. "But Paige is waiting for me."

"I'll come with you," she says enthusiastically. "Paige is super sweet, and I feel lucky to have found a friend so quickly."

"Until you both want the same guy," I tease.

One of her eyebrows shoots up in a question mark. "I thought you and Paige were only friends."

"We are," I assure her.

Cami shrugs coyly. "Then I think we're safe." Uh oh. She's declaring her interest in me, and while I find that flattering, it's equally nerve wracking. Paige warned me not to fool around with people's hearts, and I'm taking that seriously.

Yet even though I don't want to lead women on, I really do want Eva to see that I'm having a great time without her. One of the things I wanted to talk to Paige about was figuring out how to achieve my goals without hurting anyone.

Cami and I walk quietly until we reach our destination. After handing Paige a wine glass, I tell Cami, "Go ahead and sit down. I'll just grab another chair."

After securing my seat, I return to the ladies. “So, are we having fun yet?”

“I’d rather be tarred and feathered and paraded around the town square than be here right now.” Paige is nothing if not descriptive.

“I’m having a great time,” Cami interjects while batting her eyes at me.

I shift in my seat uncomfortably. “There seem to be some nice guys here. You should definitely talk to them.”

“I’m talking to one now.” She winks at me before turning to Paige. “How about you? Have you met anyone interesting?”

“Not really. Although, I did have my first one-on-one with Fielden.”

“Which one is he?” she asks while looking around.

I point across the room. “He’s the tall lawyer from Chicago.”

“He’s cute! How did it go?”

Paige’s face screws up in a look of disgust. “I don’t think we’re a fit.”

“I don’t like him either,” I tell her. “The guy bumped into me earlier tonight and said he liked his competition to know who the alpha male was.”

Paige looks less than impressed by that bit of news. “Gross.”

Surprisingly, Cami comes to his defense. “Come on, you guys. This is a really hard thing to do. Remember, we’re here to find love, not friends.” She stares at me like she has x-ray vision before adding, “I hope I’m lucky enough to do both.”

I’m not going to mosey into that minefield, so I don’t comment. Instead, I go with, “I never realized how cutthroat these shows are behind the scenes.”

Paige slides down into her chair in a pose of defeat. “And this is one of the nicer shows. Can you imagine what it’s like on the ones that encourage people to get drunk and sleep around?”

“Like *Sex Kitten!*” Cami declares excitedly. “Did you hear what happened to the couple who were supposed to get married last year?”

Paige nods her head while I shake mine. Paige explains, “They signed on to do a reality show about their wedding so the whole thing was televised. The guy started cheating and everything blew up when they were at the altar.”

Cami takes over. “When the minister asked if there were any objections, the maid of honor raised her hand and told the bride she was in love with the groom. She said she couldn’t live with herself if she didn’t tell him before he married—wait for it—her sister!”

“That’s disgusting.” I can’t imagine sitting around watching drivel like that.

“That’s why I came on *Midwestern Matchmaker*,” Cami says. “I want real love and not just some ‘wham, bam, thank you, ma’am’ ratings-boosting kind of thing.”

“Me too,” Paige agrees. Then she looks at me and decides to stir the pot. “Isn’t that why you came on, Tim?”

I shoot daggers at her before pressing the mute button on my microphone. I indicate they should do the same. Paige shows Cami where the button is, and once we’re all safely silenced, I answer Paige’s question. “You know full well why I agreed to come on this show.”

Cami looks between us like I’m about to spill some excellent tea, so I turn my attention to her. “I agreed to do *Midwestern Matchmaker* because my ex-wife watches, and I wanted her to know how well I was doing without her.”

“You were married?”

“I was. Eva left me for some guy in the NBA.”

She touches the tip of her nose before pointing at me with her other hand. “Holden Jenkins stole *your* wife?”

“You know the story, huh?” A wave of shame washes over me as I realize I should have kept my mouth shut.

Cami touches my arm. “My dad is a huge basketball fan,” she explains. “Also, there’s been a lot of press coverage about Holden’s new lady.”

“Eva should be in heaven then. She likes nothing more than to be the center of attention.” *How did I ever wind up married to a woman like that?*

I see the moment realization hits, and Cami’s face falls. “So, you’re not here to fall in love.”

Before I can answer, Paige says, “Tim and I made a pity pact. We agreed to feel sorry for each other to help ease our burdens so we’re more open to finding love.”

Cami appears to be as confused as I am about what a pity pact is. “I’ve never heard of that before,” she says.

“That’s because I invented it,” Paige says proudly. “Essentially, I’ve agreed to take possession of Tim’s baggage so he can be emotionally lighter and more open to finding someone.”

“And he holds yours,” Cami says.

“He would if I had any,” Paige says.

“You have to have baggage,” Cami and I declare at the same time.

Paige shrugs. “It’s hard to be burdened by problems like that when I rarely date.”

“And yet you still put dog poop all over some guy’s car,” I remind her. “That sounds like baggage to me.” I don’t mention her obvious issues regarding her past physical disability because that would just be mean.

Paige narrows her gaze in my direction. “Fine, Tim. You can hold the poop bag.”

Cami looks hopeful. “So you *are* interested in finding someone, Tim? Are you going to let Paige be mad for you so you can have some fun?”

I lift my right foot and rest it on my left knee. “I think that’s easier said than done.”

“Why?” she wants to know.

“Because you can’t just hand off your anger to another person. It’s something you have to go through on your own.”

“Do you still love your ex?” Cami wants to know.

I don’t have to think about my answer. “No. But I’m hurt, and I feel like a fool. I loved the person I thought Eva was, but it turns out that was just a part she was playing.”

“So why not be open to finding a love match here?” Cami asks. “Wouldn’t that be the ultimate revenge?”

Huh. She might be right. I’m going to have to think about that. “Maybe.”

Paige rolls her eyes. “Not maybe. The answer is yes. Happiness is always the best revenge.”

Even though Paige is right, I don’t want to get Cami’s hopes up. “Let’s leave it as maybe for now.”

“Happiness is a choice, Tim,” Paige announces like she’s taken on the role of my personal guru.

“Anger is also a choice,” Cami confirms.

I abruptly stand up. “Okay, ladies. I think we’re done for tonight. I hear you both loud and clear. If my motivation changes for being on this show, I’ll make sure to let you know. In the meantime, please keep my history to yourselves. I don’t need the whole world feeling sorry for me.”

“Eva is the villain, Tim,” Paige says. “If anything, people finding out about her would make her look bad, not you.”

“Paige,” I say in a warning tone. “People already know Eva left me for Holden. And so far, no one seems to care.”

“Only because they haven’t heard your side of it,” she says.

“What in the world could I say that wouldn’t make me look like a total loser?” I demand.

Cami says, “No one would think you’re a loser, Tim. From what I can tell, you’re a great guy who was married to a not-so-great woman.”

“On that note,” I tell them, “I really am done talking about this.” I turn to Cami and tell her, “I hope you meet someone nice on the show.”

Before I walk away, Paige demands, “What about me? Don’t you hope *I* meet someone nice, too?”

I stare at her long and hard before answering, “I hope you get the man you deserve.” I realize this may not sound like warm wishes for her future, but I’m so annoyed with Paige right now, I can’t come right out and wish her the best. Having said that, I hope to hell Fielden Marsh isn’t the man she winds up with.

That thought makes my blood run positively cold.

CHAPTER NINETEEN



PAIGE

Tim's parting shot plagues me the whole way home from the mixer. He hopes I get the guy I *deserve*? *Well, so do I, buddy, but just so you know, I deserve the best.* Why didn't I tell him that before he stormed away?

As soon as I walk through my front door, I take my coat off and climb the stairs to my room. Once I'm in my Winnie the Pooh onesie pajamas, I sprawl across my baby-pink furry duvet and call Missy.

Instead of easing into the conversation, she answers by excitedly asking, "How did it go? Did you have fun? Was the lawyer as fabulous as Trina said he was?"

"Hello to you, too," I say. It's a good thing I trust my friend so much because I immediately launch into the events of the evening—non-disclosure agreement be damned. In order to paint an accurate picture of the night, I jabber on for a half hour, spilling every detail I can think of.

When I finally come up for air, Missy surmises, "So you're mad at Tim, not interested in the lawyer, and you're on track to be the bad guy this season. Did anything *good* happen?"

"The buffet was outstanding," I tell her. "The tempura shrimp in particular."

"Shoot." She sounds as disappointed for me as I am for myself. "Don't give up hope. It was just the first mixer. I'm sure it will get better over time."

"Or worse." No sense in pretending that's not a possibility.

“Paige.” Her tone sounds stern before turning sympathetic. “I know you and I know why you don’t think you deserve a great guy, but I’m telling you right now the past is long gone. You’ve been a total smoke show for years and it’s time to embrace that. Quit being a negative Nelly.”

I hate when people pretend to know what it was like to be me. Unless they’ve walked a mile in my shoes—the ones with the raised right heel so my legs could be the same length while we waited for my spine to align— they have no idea. “You were a great friend, Missy, and you still are, but there’s no way you can know how insecure my past has made me.”

“I love you Paige and I know how you’ve suffered. All I’m saying is that you have to accept good things in your life in order to have them.” She doesn’t wait for me to respond before asking, “Did you meet any nice women?”

I decide to let go of the chip on my shoulder for a minute and tease, “While I have nothing against gay people, Missy, I don’t swing that way.”

“Smart aleck. You know what I meant. Those dating shows are reliant on each of the sexes having a confidante with whom to share their secrets. It keeps the pot stirring while we all wait to see if a romance is going to bloom.”

“I met two very nice women,” I tell her. “One is a caterer that Trina thinks should match with Tim. The other is a longshoreman who seemed pretty excited about Chip.”

“The substitute teacher at your school?”

“I know! Can you believe it?”

“Yes. I mean, I haven’t met the guy, but I know you’re famous for making snap judgments about people.”

“Excuse me? What are you talking about?” The very worst thing about a best friend is that she knows all your shortcomings.

“Please.” She huffs loudly in my ear. “You are always making comments like, ‘Look at that guy—I bet he owns a beat-up old El Camino.’ Or ‘That dude looks like he couldn’t add two and two together and come up with four every time.’”

I’m hurt by her assessment of my character. “We both talk like that. It’s what friends do.”

She hems and haws before saying, “Maybe so, but maybe that’s why we were both single for so long.”

“Because we have standards?” I am not enjoying this call in the least.

“Because we’re harder on people than we need to be.” She clearly knows I’m angry at her because she adds, “I just want you to stay open, that’s all.”

“Uh-huh.” I should just hang up before I say something I regret. But instead, I feel the need to throw a little sass. “I guess it’s easy to judge me now that you’re part of a happy couple.” My tone is positively dripping with annoyance.

“Paige ...” Missy clearly thinks she’s right and I’m wrong.

“What?”

“Please, don’t blow this opportunity because you’re afraid.”

“So I should date a stuck-up lawyer in hopes he’ll pick me?”

“I’m not saying you should date the lawyer. I’m only saying you should suspend judgment until you get to know him better. Also, interact with men who aren’t your normal type. Someone entirely unexpected might be in your future.”

“I’m not going to date Chip,” I assure her.

“According to you, he’s already found someone he’s interested in.”

I sigh loudly which acts as a release valve for some of my feistiness. “Can you imagine Chip coming out of this with his soulmate and me not finding mine? That would be horrible.”

“First of all, I don’t know Chip, so I can’t comment on that,” she says. “But I do know there’s someone for everyone, and that you have a history of being your own worst enemy.”

She’s not wrong. “It’s just hard. It’s not like I have tons of dating experience, so I don’t have that much practice.”

“And when you get nervous about something,” she says, “you historically build walls to protect yourself.”

I stretch out and pull the duvet over me, so I’m encased in it like a taco. Missy is right. I *am* my own worst enemy. It’s my biggest stumbling block. “Fine. You’ve made some valid points and I hear you.”

“We sound like a couple in marriage counseling,” she laughs.

Because it’s always helpful to whine about things you can’t change, I tell her, “I just wish you were on the show with me. You know, like we were planning.”

“If that were the case, that would mean Jamie wasn’t in my life.” She pauses to give me the opportunity to take my words back. Which is clearly what I must do.

“I wish you were cloned so one of you could be happily in love while the

other of you was on *Midwestern Matchmaker* with me as my wingman. Is that better?"

"Yes. But my situation is the perfect example that love can be right around the corner without you ever knowing it. It should make you feel optimistic and hopeful." *Ladies and gentlemen, my Pollyanna friend ...*

"I know you're right, Missy. I do. But being on this show makes me feel like I'm in second grade, and I've been called up to the board to solve a calculus problem." I find math metaphors comforting.

"You're a smart woman, and you're letting your fears get the best of you. You've got this, Paige Holland!"

"Give me a P!" I shout back at her like we're about to bust out a cheer.

"Remember"—she pauses for dramatic effect—"you have to ... be aggressive, be, be aggressive! B-E-A-G-G-R-E-S-S-I-V-E!!!"

I try to stifle the giggles that are building up in me, but I'm not successful. "I love you, Missy. You're the best friend a girl could ever hope to have."

"Even though I fell in love before you?"

"I know I haven't been acting like it, but I'm really happy for you. You deserve every good thing in this world, and I'd fight anyone who said differently."

"I feel the same way about you. I have no idea if you're going to find your other half on this show, Paige, but I do know that you owe it to yourself to give it a try. What are you doing tomorrow?"

"I'm sleeping in, then getting ready for tomorrow night's taping. Why?"

"Jamie, Sammy, and I are going sledding. I thought you might like to join us."

Missy and I have a very long history speeding down the snowy slopes of Elk Lake together. And while I love sledding, I'd rather spend the day resting up for tomorrow night. "Can I get a raincheck?" I ask.

"Of course."

"Thanks, Miss. I'm going to go to sleep now. I'll call you tomorrow night after the show."

"Love you. You're going to do great, Paige. I just know it."

I fall asleep within minutes of hanging up and have one of those heavenly nights that feel like it passes in the blink of an eye. I'm pretty sure I haven't experienced one of those since I was a kid.

As soon as my eyes pop open, I look at the clock and discover it's already

ten thirty. I hurry to get out of bed and change into some jeans and a sweater. Then instead of making coffee at home, I decide to drive into town and grab breakfast at the diner.

Saturday mornings are a busy time to try to get breakfast out, but I figure I'll have a better chance if I sit at the counter. Eating alone is one of the things I look forward to never doing again once I'm part of a couple.

As predicted, the diner is humming with business. When I walk in, I hear someone call out, "Paige, over here!" Cami and Brittany are sitting at a booth against the side wall.

I make my way over to them, and ask, "What are you ladies doing here?"

Cami narrows her eyes before stating the obvious. "Eating."

"No, I mean ..." And then the truth of their situation hits me. "You're staying in town, aren't you? It's too far to Chicago to commute."

"Only on Friday and Saturday nights," Brittany says. "We'll commute on the days we have individual dates. Trina says those should end much earlier." She scoots over and pats the bench next to her, signaling me to join them.

Smiling across the table at Cami, I say, "You must be missing a lot of work to do this show. Don't most of your events take place on the weekends?"

She nods her head. "They do, but we're not super busy right now. Everyone pretty much blew their entertainment budget over the holidays."

"What about you?" I ask Brittany. "Does your business ebb and flow with the seasons?"

She shakes her thick red hair. "As long as consumers are consuming, we're busy."

"And your boss is okay with you taking time off?"

Brittany glances at her lap before making eye contact. "My dad owns the company, and he's just happy I'm out there looking for someone." She inhales deeply before adding, "Please keep that information under your hats, along with my living situation."

"Absolutely," I tell her. "We all deserve to be judged on our own merits."

Brittany grunts before telling us, "I've dated men who thought they were signing up for a payday by going out with me. It's no fun."

"I can't even imagine," Cami commiserates.

"I was even engaged once," Brittany tells us. "I overheard him talking on the phone telling his brother that he only had to stay with me for five years before he could sue me for palimony."

The horror of what she must have felt hits me hard. “What did you do?”

“I told him he didn’t have to wait five years.”

Cami gasps, “You paid him?”

“No. But I told him I wouldn’t burn his things so long as he packed up and left that day.” It seems Brittany’s tired of talking about herself because she asks, “How about you two? Who’s the worst guy you’ve ever dated?”

“I dated a guy who cheated on me,” I tell them. “It’s rough.”

We both look at Cami to spill her secrets, so she admits, “I dated Alden Hanz for a year.”

This news causes both Brittany and me to sit upright. Alden Hanz is the lead singer for Jam Pudding. He’s been one of *People* magazine’s most beautiful people for probably ten years. “What happened?” I want to know.

“The Pumpernickel tour happened,” she says. “It seems that it’s understood in the rock community faithfulness is only expected when you’re not on tour. When you’re out on the road, you’re apparently allowed to behave like a total man whore.”

“I’m so sorry,” Brittany tells her. “How did you find out?”

“Alden called and asked me to overnight a prescription to him. I asked what was wrong, and he told me it was nothing to worry about. He had a refillable script for whenever he needed it.”

Brittany and I are both on the edge of our seats to hear more. After a beat, she adds, “The paperwork I got from the pharmacist said that it was for gonorrhea. Can you believe it? The guy got so many STDs he had a standing refill for antibiotics.”

“Ew,” I say before I can stop myself.

“I’d gotten pretty close with Leith Garritson’s wife—you know, the drummer?” We both nod our heads, so she continues, “I told her what happened, and her response was that at least he wouldn’t be bringing it home to me.”

Brittany adds her two cents. “Gross.”

“Alden was the reason I left L.A. He kept calling and wanting to get back together, but there’s no way. He wasn’t willing to be faithful, and I wasn’t willing to put up with his raunchy lifestyle.”

“So you thought you’d give the *Midwestern Matchmaker* a try, huh?” I ask.

“It can’t be any worse than what I’ve already been through,” she answers.

My takeaway from watching the show has been that the singles are

young, fun, and looking for love. But I'm afraid the truth is a different story. In reality we're just a bunch of damaged people hoping to find someone whose wound somehow fits with our own.

How depressing.

CHAPTER TWENTY



TIM

“So, how was your first mixer?” my mom asks over the breakfast table.

“Good.” I plan to keep answering her in one-word sentences until she realizes I don’t want to discuss the show with her.

“I’m surprised you agreed to go on a dating show,” my dad says. “But I’m happy you did. Think of the publicity for the club!” Leave it to my dad to be all about the business.

“Who cares about the club, Greg? Tim is going to meet the love of his life and I’m going to get grandbabies.” My mom claps her hands loud enough to make me jump in my chair.

Scooping more eggs onto my plate, I tell her, “I’m not going to fall in love.” *So much for one-word sentences.*

“Then why are you doing the show, dear?”

If I tell her the truth, she’ll accuse me of giving Eva too much control over my life. So I hem and haw for a minute before answering, “I’m just trying to get back into the swing of dating.”

My dad shoots me a questioning look. “You did almost nothing but date when you first came home.”

That’s true. Switching tracks, I tell him, “I’m doing it for the club. You know, all that great publicity.”

Someone less work-oriented would call me out on my BS answer, but not my dad. “I think I’ll stop in and check out filming one of these days.”

Perspiration beads at my hairline. “They have closed sets, Dad. You can’t just show up and watch.”

“Yes, but I own the place. Surely, they’d let me take a little peek.”

“I want to see, too!” My mom is as excited as if she’d been offered a private tour of Buckingham Palace.

“I don’t think they’ll let either of you in.” *Please let that be true.* “They want everyone to be surprised by the outcome when the show airs.” I tell them, “I’m not even allowed to tell you if I become part of a couple before then.” There’s nothing about that in the contract, but I figure I’ll say whatever I need to say to keep them from interfering.

“That can’t be legal.” This, from my mother.

“I agreed to their terms, Mom. You’re just going to have to wait until the show airs to find out how things go.”

My dad picks up his napkin before wiping his mouth. “What do you say we have lunch there sometime this week, Ellen?”

“I’d love to, dear.” My mom hasn’t wanted to step foot in the club since my dad retired, so I know it’s interest in my personal life that’s motivating her. *Fantastic.*

I move my chair away from the table. “I probably won’t be home until late, so don’t wait up.” Then I stand and push my chair back in before walking away.

“Have a good day!” my mom calls out after me.

In the distance, I overhear my dad tell her, “I’m going to have a nice chat with the producers of *Midwestern Matchmaker*. I bet they’ll let us watch.”

Those words feel like nails in my coffin.

Ten years in Los Angeles was ten years when my parents didn’t know every detail of my life. And while I missed them, I did not miss the third degree about every little thing.

Instead of trying to insinuate herself in my personal life, my mom helped my brother to find love. Jonathon was oddly not freaked out about all her personal questions involving his lifestyle. In fact, he treated my mom like a friend and let her help him filter through the masses until he found Jacob. *Now that’s a formula for a dating show.*

While I wait for my car to heat up, I reminisce about better times. I met Eva at the Coffee Bean she worked at on the West Side. It was packed that day, and she was harried beyond belief. An office building nearby had just called in a huge order and one of her co-workers was a no-show.

When she handed me the wrong order, I told her, “I had the cup of black coffee.”

She looked down at the scone and whipped cream covered drink in front of me and burst into tears. “That’s the fifth order I’ve gotten wrong this morning.”

I had tried to console her by offering, “If it will make your life easier, I’ll keep it.”

Wiping the tears from her face, she said, “That’s really nice, thanks.”

I hung around to drink my super sweet mocha until things slowed down. Then Eva came over to talk. One thing led to another, and before I knew it, I had her number.

Back then, Eva was a hard worker. Even though she was driven, she was plain fun to be around. I try to remember when that had changed, but I guess the increments were so gradual I didn’t see it happening in real time.

Pulling out of the driveway, I wonder what my life would have been like had I stayed in Elk Lake. In addition to being a heck of a lot quieter, I would have been surrounded by people I’d known since I was a kid.

Even so, I know me. I would have wondered what I was missing out on. That’s when it hits me. Maybe Eva and I are more alike than I’d realized. Not that I would have ever cheated on her, but maybe when she met Holden, she saw her chance at fame and thought it might be her last.

By the time she left me, it had been six years since Eva’s last acting job. The glamour of twirling through a Christmas scene in a Target commercial can only last you so long. So, while I don’t condone her behavior, maybe there’s a tiny part of me that better understands her motivation. Screwed up as it was.

As I park my car at the club, I feel the start of something that might be peace wash over me. Yes, my marriage ended. And while I was absolutely devastated, Eva has moved on. I’m starting to think it’s time I entertain the possibility of me doing the same. I’m not saying I’m actively looking for Miss Right, but maybe I should stop *not* looking.

I run into Terry as soon as I walk through the front door, and before I can say hello, he practically shouts, “Man, you are not going to believe what’s happening!”

The club manager is not one known for theatrics, so I quickly ask, “What’s wrong?”

“Bart’s kid got Norovirus and he gave it to the whole family, which

means we don't have a chef tonight."

I don't see that as the end of the world. "I'm sure Jenna can handle things. She's done so in the past."

"Jenna is still in Mexico," he reminds me.

"Oh." Having a chef and a sous chef out on a normal night might be doable, but on the same night we're responsible for feeding everyone from *Midwestern Matchmaker*? That's a different story entirely. "Let me find Trina and talk to her. Maybe we can streamline their menu for tonight."

Terry runs his hands through his hair like he's trying to rip half of it out. "Call me as soon as you know. In the meantime, I'll see if Candy can come in and help."

Terry's wife is hands down the worst cook I've ever met. The night they had me for dinner she made boxed mac and cheese and served it with boiled hotdogs. She can't even make Rice Krispies treats, and they only have three ingredients.

I know this because I nearly broke a tooth trying to get one down.

"Don't call Candy," I say, unable to keep the panic out of my voice. "I'm sure we'll work something out." Heck, *I'll* cook before letting her into the kitchen.

Pulling my phone out of my pocket, I call Trina. "Are you at the club yet?" I ask.

"I'm in Conference Room A. What's up?"

I lift my hand and cross my fingers for Terry's benefit before saying, "I'm on my way."

I hate having to tell Trina what's going on, but I also don't want to wind up in the weeds tonight. As I walk into the conference room, I'm once again surprised by how the crew has turned it into such a convincing restaurant set.

Trina stands up and waves when she sees me. As soon as I sit down with her, she flips through a packet of papers. "The supper buffet for tonight's mixer looks great. The only thing I'm wondering is if we can change out the ribs for something less messy. I'd hate to film a bunch of people wearing BBQ sauce."

"About that ..." I inhale a deep breath before telling her, "My chef and sous chef are both out tonight."

She tips her head to the side waiting for me to continue. "We're short staffed," I tell her.

"How does that affect us?" She doesn't sound worried, yet.

“I think we might have to alter the menu slightly,” I tell her.

Trina does not look pleased. “How?”

“It might be best to serve things that don’t have to be made at the last minute. That way we can work on them this afternoon and not hold anything up later.”

When she finally responds, she says, “What kinds of food do you suggest?”

“I’d have to check with the kitchen, but off the cuff I’m thinking maybe a pasta bake or jambalaya.”

Tapping her pen against the table, she excitedly declares, “I have an idea!” She picks up her phone and places a call. “Jake, can you get to the club right away?”

Whoever this Jake is, he must be on board because the next thing she says is, “Great!” Then she hangs up.

“Who’s Jake?” I ask.

“He’s one of the single guys on the show.”

“And you’re going to ask him to cook?”

“He’s a chef.”

I’m suddenly full of questions. *What kind of chef is he? Is he any good? What if Jake burns the kitchen down?* I finally realize Trina is offering a solution to my problem, so I tell her, “Why not?”

“Good. We like to spotlight people’s talents when we can. And what better way to do that than to have someone cook for us?”

“Having a camera crew in the kitchen during dinner service could be tricky,” I tell her.

She shrugs. “We won’t have a full crew, just one camera.”

“Okay. So, we’ll stick to the original menu?”

“Why don’t we let Jake decide. Maybe he can showcase one of his specialties.”

“I suppose that’s okay. As long as we have the ingredients on hand.” Standing up, I add, “Let me know when Jake gets here, and I’ll give you two a tour of the kitchen.”

“Will do.”

While I’m relieved there appears to be a solution to our problem, I’m also nervous. I do not like it when things don’t go according to plan.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



PAIGE

I'm having a nice breakfast with Cami and Brittany when my cell phone rings. Checking the number, I see that it's the one Trina gave me for emergency calls. "Hello?"

"Paige." Trina sounds excited. "What are you up to?" She sounds all girlfriendy, like she's about to ask me to go prom dress shopping with her. Little does she know I have no experience with such purchases.

So I tell her, "I'm eating pancakes."

"Any chance you can come into the club early today? Like maybe in an hour?"

"Why?"

"The chef is out sick tonight. As such, Jake—one of our singles—is cooking. And I got to thinking maybe you'd come in and make some of your gold ribbon peanut butter cookies for us."

"You want me to come in and bake cookies?"

"I was just telling Tim that we like to showcase our singles' talents whenever we can. I figure we'll show Jake cooking and you baking. What do you think?"

I don't recall meeting Jake last night, and I wonder which bachelor he is. I hope he's the tall blond with the longish hair. That guy was super cute. "Sure," I tell her. "I'll be there."

"Good. Bring your clothes for tonight." She reminds me, "We'll be

playing games, so no tight dresses or short skirts. Think comfort.”

After hanging up, I tell Cami and Brittany what’s up. Cami sounds hurt as she asks, “Why didn’t they call me? I’m *in* catering.”

Brittany says, “I thought you were a manager, not a cook.”

“I still know my way around the kitchen.”

“Do you want me to call Trina back and see if she wants you to come in too?” I’m secretly hoping she says no. If Jake is the cutie I think he might be, I don’t need competition for his attention.

“No, that’s okay.” I get the feeling Cami wants me to call anyway, but this is one of those times I’m going to look out for my own best interests.

“I’m off then. I’ll see you two later.” I practically sprint out the door before she can change her mind. I like Cami, but I have enough girlfriends. I’m doing this show to find love.

Hurrying home, I change my clothes before absentmindedly grabbing an outfit for tonight. Then I rush over to the club. I see Tim as soon as I walk in.

“What are you doing here?”

“I’m making peanut butter cookies.”

“Why?” It seems Trina didn’t run this by him.

I shrug my shoulders and tell him, “Because Trina asked me to.” Then I inquire, “Is Jake here yet?”

“Not that I know of ...”

Tim doesn’t get a chance to finish his sentence because we’re interrupted by someone saying, “Hey there, I’m Jake. Was someone looking for me?”

It turns out Jake *is* the Adonis I was hoping he’d be. “I was. I was looking for you.” I force my mouth closed so I don’t accidentally drool on his shoes.

“Lucky me,” he practically purrs. “Aren’t you one of the single ladies on the show? I saw you last night.”

“I am ... that’s me ... I was here ...” I sound like an idiot.

Tim insinuates himself between us. “I’m Tim. I own the club.”

“I thought you were one of the guys on the show.” Jake sounds confused.

“I am, but I wasn’t supposed to be. I’m filling in for someone.”

Jake nods his head causing his thick, shoulder-length blond hair to bounce around like he’s the star of a hair commercial. I barely resist the urge to reach out to see if it’s as soft as it looks. “Cool, man. Do you want to show me where the kitchen is?”

“You can show us both,” I say, while picking up speed to stay by Jake’s side.

When we walk through the swinging doors to the kitchen, we see Trina talking to the staff. She smiles brightly when she spots us. “Paige, Jake, welcome!”

“Woohoo ...” Tim grumbles under his breath.

I give him a sharp look before saying, “Hey, Trina. This is kind of exciting.” I look over at Jake as goosebumps pop up all over my arms. Missy was right. You never do know when Mr. Wonderful might show up.

Trina tells Tim, “We’ve got it from here, if you have other things to attend to.”

He doesn’t budge.

Then she asks Jake, “What kind of food do you specialize in?”

“Vegan pho.” He seems super enthusiastic about it too.

“What kind of ingredients do you need to make that?” she asks.

Jake takes a rubber band out of his pocket and uses it to pull his hair back. “Bean sprouts, tofu, rice noodles, cardamom pods, whole star anise, hoisin, sriracha, cilantro ...”

Trina’s gaze drifts over toward Tim. “Do you have any of those things on hand?”

I nearly laugh out loud at the look on Tim’s face. He answers, “While I love pho, this is a country club in Wisconsin, not a trendy restaurant on Sunset Boulevard.”

“So, no?” Trina guesses.

“No,” Tim tells her. “We have things like potatoes, roast beef, steak, pasta, chicken breast, king crab.”

“Can you cook non-vegan food?” Trina asks Jake.

“I could but I won’t. I don’t morally believe in eating animals.” I wonder if this could be a deal breaker for me and Jake. I suppose I could run out and eat meat on the sly if I had to. The question is whether I want to hide my food consumption like it’s a crime.

For some reason I decide to volunteer, “I make a great cheeseburger casserole.” *I’m sorry, Jake. I’m sorry, cows.* Meanwhile, Jake stares at me like I’ve just confessed to war crimes.

Trina looks excited. “Can you make enough to feed thirty or so?”

“No problem,” I tell her. “The last time I made it was for my parents’ fortieth anniversary and they had more than fifty people there.” And they loved it!

“What do you want me to make?” Jake sounds defeated.

Trina suggests, “Why don’t you check the refrigerator and see what kind of ingredients are on hand.”

I glance over at Tim who seems remarkably chuffed by the turn of events. Jake asks him, “Do you have any mushrooms?”

“Probably,” he says.

“Maybe I could do some lettuce wraps or something.” Poor Jake sounds crushed.

Trina looks less than thrilled with lettuce wraps. She asks, “Can you make bread, as well?”

Before he can answer, Tim wants to know, “Do vegans even eat yeast? I mean it’s alive, right?”

“Most vegans do eat yeast.” Jake explains, “Yeast is a fungus, not an animal.”

Yuck. Noting my expression, he adds, “Like mushrooms are fungus.”

“Interesting ...” I know mushrooms are fungus, but I don’t like thinking about it. Now I won’t be able to eat bread without thinking “fungus.”

Accepting his fate, Jake offers, “I could make garlic bread to go with Paige’s pasta dish.”

“Wonderful!” Trina seems happy that he’s contributing something else. She points between Jake and me. “While you two get everything set up, I’ll retrieve one of the cameramen to start taping.” To Tim, she adds, “That way we won’t interrupt your dinner service.”

Tim is not smiling when he walks out of the kitchen, but who cares? I’m about to get to know Jake a whole lot better, and *he’s* actually in the market for love. Unlike some people who only want to make their ex-wives jealous.

Once Jake and I put on aprons, we start collecting things for our recipes. In the walk-in refrigerator, I sidle up to him and ask, “Have you ever eaten meat?”

“I didn’t become a vegetarian until I went to college. I became a vegan after graduation.” I find this very refreshing. Not many people today are willing to invest the kind of time and dedication such a lifestyle requires. As such, it’s clear that Jake must be good at commitment.

“Would you ever date a non-vegan?” I ask while wondering if there are any vegan women on the show.

Jake grabs a head of cabbage and some carrots. “Sure, but I’d hope that the woman I wound up with would be willing to at least *try* being vegan.”

“How much time constitutes trying?” I’m pretty sure I could live without

bacon for a week.

Jake leads the way out of the refrigerator. “I’d hope she’d be willing to give it at least a year.”

A year of no pepperoni on my pizza? Who am I kidding? It would be a year of no pizza because I wouldn’t be allowed to have cheese. My heart starts to beat rapidly, and I wonder if I’m on the verge of a panic attack.

Jake doesn’t seem to notice my distress because he continues, “A vegan diet works wonders on the human body. I sleep better than I ever have, which results in my having more energy. My hair and nails are super strong, and my bowels move like nobody’s business.”

I’m not sure how I’m supposed to respond to the knowledge that Jake is a champion pooper. “Are you just anti-animal products or do you have other dietary restrictions?”

Trina comes back into the kitchen with the cameraman and a sound guy. While the sound guy sets up our microphones, Trina tells us, “Just carry on as you were. We’ll let you know if we need you to do anything differently.”

Once our mics are live, Jake tells me, “I don’t eat any white sugar or flour.”

“How do you make bread without white flour?” I ask. “Isn’t it super heavy that way?”

“It’s heavy but you don’t need as much to fill you up. Also, the fiber content really works, if you know what I mean.” *Great, he’s talking about poop again.*

Trina asks Jake to move over to a side station that has a cleaner background. While he’s being filmed making what I can only assume will be garlic bread that resembles hockey pucks, I plop five pounds of ground beef into the largest skillet I can find. Then I add five chopped onions, and twenty cloves of crushed garlic.

By the time the meat is cooked, it smells so good I’m ready to ask it to marry me. I glance over at Jake who looks nauseated by the intoxicating aroma permeating the atmosphere. *Is it me or is he less good looking than he was a few minutes ago?*

While I blot the fat from my meat, I watch Jake roll a questionable-looking mixture into tiny lettuce leaves. If that was my supper, I’d need two hundred of them to fill me up.

Trina leads the cameraman over to me while I’m pouring my macaroni noodles into a colander. “Okay, Paige, you’re on. Just tell us what you’re

doing while you're doing it."

For some reason, I'm not at all nervous as I channel my inner Rachael Ray. I gush about how wonderful everything smells while assembling my casserole. While I make a white sauce, I tell the camera, "You have to start out with a béchamel, so your cheese remains smooth and creamy."

I show them how to whisk flour into the melted butter and then add the hot milk. Once that's done, I slowly add the cheese until it's all melted. Then I begin to assemble the casserole. "The thing that makes my cheeseburger casserole the best is the crushed potato chips I add on top during the last ten minutes of baking. Because a cheeseburger is nothing without chips!" Watch out, I might be on the verge of coming up with cutesy names like Rachael does.

As I consider renaming my dish "cheeseburger casserolly," Jake walks out of the kitchen. He passes Tim coming in. Tim inhales deeply while looking positively enraptured. *That's my boy.* Meanwhile, I finish putting the final touch—two pounds of grated cheddar—on top of my *casserollies* and tell the camera, "If I'm not lucky enough to find love on this show, I want all the bachelors out there to know that I won't make you my cheeseburger casserole until we're engaged, so you'd better be ready to commit." I give the camera a sassy wink.

Trina calls out, "Cut!" Then she gushes, "You're a natural! You should have your own cooking show."

"Alas, math is my first love," I tell her. "I would never cheat on her just for the chance at stardom."

I glance over at Tim whose expression turns angry.

Shoot, I didn't mean to bring up cheating but the last person I was thinking about was his ex-wife. And as far as I'm concerned, it's time he let her go.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



TIM

This day is not turning out to be what I expected. I thought I'd come into the club, work on the Valentine's menu, check in with Terry about our flower delivery, and then maybe kick back in my office and play some video games until it was time for tonight's mixer. I did not expect Paige and Jake to be on some kind of cooking date.

I'm pacing nervously around the lobby when Terry approaches me. "If that cheeseburger casserole tastes as good as it smells, we should put it on the lunch menu."

"No."

"Why?"

"Because, Terry, country club women do not eat cheeseburger casserole. Can you see Mrs. Vanderhaven hunkering down to a piping hot bowl of fat and cholesterol?"

He shakes his head. "No, but Mr. Vanderhaven would." He's got a point. The men at the club seem far less concerned about health than their wives are.

I amend my answer to, "Maybe." Then I ask, "Did you need me for something?"

Terry hands me a sheet of paper. "I went ahead and printed out a sample menu for Valentine's dinner."

"I thought we were going to work on that together." I sound like planning

sustenance for couples in love is my life's greatest desire. Which it is not.

"We can always change it if you want." He gestures at me like he's waving away a foul smell. "You seemed to have a lot on your mind."

"How long have you been married, Terry?"

"Fourteen years and two months," he says proudly.

"Not that it's any of my business, but have there been any big bumps?"

"Candy has had three." I wait eagerly hoping he'll explain—and he does. "Terry Jr., Masie, and Clara."

"Hahaha."

"But you want to know if we've had any big fights," he guesses correctly.

"It's not my business and you don't have to tell me." *Please tell me.*

"Sure, we've fought." Terry pats me on the back. "No one has a smooth ride all the time. The thing with marriage is that you both ultimately have to want the same thing. That's what makes a good partnership."

I walk over to the sitting area and plop down on one of the love seats. Terry follows. "I agree with you. I'm just scared to give it another shot."

Sitting down next to me, he says, "You have a right to be. Eva really screwed you over. But you can't let her actions dictate your happiness. You've got to take your power back."

"I'm only doing this show to get even with her," I confess.

I expect him to tell me the same spiel Paige and Cami were preaching—a happy life is the best revenge. So I'm surprised when he says, "You deserve to have your revenge. And if showing Eva you're over her is what you need to do, you should go for it."

"By flirting with other women?"

"Unless you've decided you're into dudes." He laughs before adding, "That might be even better revenge."

I'm not sure how that would be true, and I don't bother to ask. "I don't want to lead anyone on."

"There are no guarantees for anyone who goes on a dating show."

"No, I guess not."

"And if you're truly open to meeting someone, then you're not using them."

"Even if it ultimately helps me get retribution on Eva."

He flashes double peace signs before saying, "That's what they call a double win. There's nothing wrong with that."

"Thanks, Ter. I really needed a guy's perspective." Lifting the menu, I tell

him, "I'll take a look at this and get back to you."

I stay on the couch after Terry leaves and think about what he said. I've pretty much decided that if the right woman comes along, I might be ready. But so far, the only person I find interesting enough to date is Paige. And there's no way she'd believe me if I told her that. She'd undoubtedly question a change in my motives.

Not to mention she seemed to be getting pretty cozy with Jake in the kitchen ...

At four o'clock I go to hair and makeup, but I don't see Paige. I ask Brittany, "Do you know where Paige is?"

"She's changing in the other room, but she's been gone for a long time," she tells me.

I pull my phone out of my pocket and call her. In lieu of a traditional greeting, she answers, "I'm so screwed."

"Um, hey there, it's Tim."

"I know who it is." Something is clearly wrong.

"Why are you screwed?"

"I must not have been paying attention when I packed my clothes for the show, because I put the wrong thing into my bag. Trina says there isn't time for me to go home and change."

"Why can't you wear what you wore when you were cooking?" I ask.

She grumbles, "I got so hot in that chef's coat, I took it off. My clothes are covered with grease splatters."

"Then wear the outfit you brought. How bad can it be?"

"Walk out into the hallway, Tim. And come alone."

I didn't peg Paige for such a diva, but I do as she says. Once I'm in the hall, I expect to find her wearing something slightly less than perfect, but that is not what I see. As soon as I spot her, I have to force my mouth shut to keep from gaping.

"Now do you see what the problem is?"

"How ... how ... how ..." I burst out laughing before I'm finally able to manage, "did you pack that instead of actual clothes?"

"I don't know!" she shouts. "I was in a hurry; it was on my bed ... I guess

I just picked it up without thinking.” She looks like she’s about to cry.

“You sleep in a Winnie the Pooh onesie?”

“In my defense, I sleep alone and it’s warm.”

“And Trina’s seen it?” I can’t imagine why she wouldn’t let Paige go home to change.

Paige nods her head. “She’s seen it. She thinks it’s funny and would make for some great TV.”

“Except you’re embarrassed,” I guess.

“I’m here to make a love connection, not to have the world laugh at me.” She snuffles before adding, “I called and left Missy a message. My only hope is that she’ll go to my house and bring me another outfit in time.”

“I’m sure she will.” I try to sound comforting, but I can’t keep the amusement out of my voice.

“Don’t make fun of me, Tim. I know I look ridiculous.”

She looks adorable. “You’ll look great in whatever you wear.”

She glares at me with such intensity I take a step backwards. Then she turns around and strides back through the door she came out of.

I like Paige more and more every time I see her. I’m half-tempted to ask her what she thinks about me, but I’m afraid my ego can’t take another bruising.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



PAIGE

I'm sitting on a small loveseat in the women's bathroom when Trina finds me. "Hey," she says while flipping through her clipboard. "The mixer starts in thirty, so I need you to go through hair and makeup."

"I can't go out like this." I stand up and point to my outfit before unnecessarily saying, "I'm still wearing a Winnie the Pooh onesie."

She shrugs. "What's your option?"

"You could have let me go home to get something else."

"I could have, but we're on a tight schedule and we need you here with everyone else. We couldn't have risked you being late."

"I had plenty of time when I first told you about the mix-up." I'm starting to get worked up again.

"It snowed this afternoon so you might have gotten stuck or gotten into an accident." I silently accept that either of those things could have happened. She adds, "Paige, it's my job to make sure things run smoothly."

"And you think my wearing a onesie on national television is the definition of running smoothly?" Quick, someone get this woman a dictionary.

She smiles at me kindly. "It shows that you're playful and have a sense of humor. Trust me, people will remember you with smiles on their faces."

I try to imagine what I'd think if someone else arrived as Pooh Bear. I reluctantly acknowledge that I'd probably appreciate their spirit. Inhaling

deeply, I concede, “Fine, I’ll go to hair and makeup.” I follow Trina out the door with a tiny bit more confidence.

The only people still in the makeup room are Brittany and Cami. Everyone else must already be in the ballroom. Brittany calls out, “Pooh Bear!”

Cami sees me and laughs. “Look at you!”

As soon as they reach my side, I tell them, “I put the wrong thing into my bag.”

“This is an accident?” Brittany sounds surprised.

I nod my head.

Cami says, “They said dress comfortably and you look like you took the memo to heart. You look great!” She points to her own outfit of skinny jeans and a T-shirt, while confiding, “My jeans are so tight I’m afraid when I take them off, I’m going to have permanent grooves etched into my body from the seams.”

“Which is why I go with stretch pants every time,” Brittany says. She’s wearing yoga pants and an oversize flannel shirt belted at the waist. It has an odd, pirate-like effect.

Deciding to get in on the fun, I tell them, “I’ve clearly gone for the ultimate comfort. Plus, this way I can hide some dinner rolls for late night snacking.” That’s when I remember Jake made bread without any white flour, and I shudder with revulsion.

“How was this afternoon with dreamy Jake?” Brittany wants to know.

“He’s a vegan,” I tell her like this explains the whole interaction.

“That’s cool,” Cami says. “I was a vegan for a month about five years ago.”

“Why did you give it up?” *Like I can’t guess the answer to that question.* Life without breakfast sausage is no life at all.

“Steak.”

Both Brittany and I easily accept her one-word answer. We all have our meat crutch—except for Jake, apparently.

“Would you ever try it again?” I ask, wondering if Jake might be the right guy for Cami. Being that Tim’s not looking for love, I’m afraid she’s going to have to cast a broader net. And while earlier in the day I viewed Cami as competition for Jake’s attention, I no longer think I’m willing to give up my omnivore status for a man.

“I didn’t mind being vegan,” Cami answers. “And I’ve heard they’ve

come up with delicious meat substitutes. Why do you ask?"

"Jake wants the woman he winds up with to give his lifestyle a try. For a year." I add the last bit like I'm pronouncing a death sentence.

"And you're not interested in him?" She sounds surprised.

"I like meat too much."

Cami cocks her head to the side as though considering the possibility of a life with a vegan pho chef. She finally decides, "I'll talk to him tonight and see if there are any sparks." After a beat, she adds, "I like Tim, but if he's truly not looking then I don't want to pin my hopes on him."

"It's good to have options," I tell her. While I hope Tim takes my advice and gives love another shot, in my heart of hearts I don't think he will.

"I don't need options," Brittany interjects with a dreamy expression on her face.

"You like Chip that much, huh?" I can't see it for the life of me, but there's no accounting for taste.

"I really do. He's smart, funny, and super cute." She looks off into the distance like she's envisioning a beautiful future together. She either met an alternate-universe Chip, or love really *is* blind.

Bringing the subject back to me, I ask, "So you both say yes to the Pooh?"

They nod their heads in agreement as I take a seat by the woman who did my makeup yesterday. She smiles at me in the mirror. "If I had to guess, I'd say you're going to be this season's favorite."

I don't bother questioning such a bold statement. Instead, I relish the thought that I'm no longer a contender for villain. "That would be nice," I tell her.

Trina comes into hair and makeup a short time later. "Brittany, Cami, we need you in the ballroom."

I stand up to join them, but she waves me back down. "We're going to mic you in here, and then give you a grand entrance. We want to get everyone's reaction on film."

Thirty minutes ago, I probably would have preferred to go to the mixer in my underwear. But now that I've been freshly bolstered by my new friends, I'm ready to make a splash.

Trina keeps me in the hair and makeup room for another twenty minutes. When we finally leave, she says, "I'll go in first. Once I'm inside, count to sixty before you make your grand entrance."

I start to question what I'm doing while whispering under my breath, "One-Mississippi, two-Mississippi ..."

By the time I hit fifty-nine-Mississippi, I'm ready to get it over with. I hear Trina loudly ask, "Where's Paige?" which is my cue to open the doors. Throwing my hands up into the air, I glide in on fleece feet.

"Hello!" Hamming it up for my audience, I tell them, "You guys clearly didn't get the memo we were supposed to dress comfortably tonight." The laughter that fills the room instantly puts me at ease.

I watch as cameras move toward me when a woman I have yet to meet approaches. She's very tall and she looks down at me with a glare. "What do you think you're up to?" She sounds mad.

"I ... um ... that is to say, I picked up the wrong thing on my bed before coming in tonight."

"Liar," she hisses. *What's going on here?*

"Excuse me? Why would I lie about that?"

"Because you're trying to hog all the men's attention for yourself."

"By wearing my pajamas?" If I were going to do that, I would have chosen something a whole lot sexier and more feminine than a chubby bear with a honey addiction.

I know the camera is catching all of this, so to diffuse the tension, I tell her, "I'm Paige. What's your name?"

"Isla," she spits.

"Look, Isla, I'm sorry if I've upset you, but I promise I'm no competition for you. You're gorgeous." She's not really, but I don't want to be front and center in some hair-pulling girl-fight. I'm pretty tough, but it looks like she'd take me for sure.

Isla weighs my words carefully before saying, "Thank you, but you still look ridiculous." While not exactly flattering, no blood gets shed, so I let it go.

After several more people approach me and compliment my humor, nerve, and sense of the absurd, Trina calls out, "Who's ready to play some games?"

The masses start a slow crawl in her direction. Everyone but Chip. He walks over to me and with seeming admiration says, "You're full of surprises, aren't you?"

"I really am," I tell him while trying to see what Brittany sees in him. I come up dry. Chip is just too much like my old piano teacher in looks and

attitude for me to see any good qualities.

“We’re going to form two teams,” Trina announces, “the women against the men!” She indicates where we should stand, and once we’re situated, she points across the room at two chairs sitting side-by-side. Each one has a large garbage bag next to it.

She continues, “You might remember this game from childhood. The person who goes first will run over and open the bag. Then they’ll pull out a balloon and put it on the chair and sit on it until it pops. That’s when they run back and tag the next person in line. The winning team will be the one who pops all their balloons first. Are you ready?”

A woman named Adele holds up her hand. “I’ve never seen *Midwestern Matchmaker* have games like this before.”

“We’re shaking things up a little this season, Adele. We thought it would be fun to take you all back to a time when life was less complicated.”

Adele looks highly uncertain. If I had to guess, I’d say she’s either a librarian or forensic accountant in her real life. It’s probably been a very long time since she’s played childish games like pop-the-balloon-with-your-butt. Since any of us has, really.

“What do we get if we win?” someone else wants to know.

“At the end of the season, the team with the most wins will each receive a five-thousand-dollar Visa gift card!” *Hello balloons, meet my fanny*. I could do a lot with a boost like that.

Brittany is the first one in line for the women’s team—I’m the last. Brittany is running against Fielden who looks very ill at ease. As soon as Trina calls ready ... set ... go! they take off.

Once they get to the garbage bags, they both struggle trying to open their knots. Brittany finally gives up and rips the bag open with her teeth while the women cheer her on. Pulling out the first balloon, she puts it on the chair and sits on it. But instead of popping it, she bounces around on it and keeps getting thrown off the chair.

She’s still struggling after Fielden has popped his balloon, so Cami calls out, “Use your earring.”

Brittany immediately pulls off her hoop and jabs the sharp end into the balloon. As she runs back to us, some guy shouts, “That’s cheating!”

Trina tells him, “All’s fair in love and war, Carl.”

The game continues among the screams of encouragement. When it’s nearly my turn, I look at my opponent from the men’s team—Tim—and

declare, “You’re going down, buddy!”

He yells back, “It’ll be a cold day in hell before I’m outrun by Pooh Bear!”

Tim’s teammate is faster than mine, so he gets a head start. When I finally get to go, I take three long strides, then slide on my furry bear paws all the way to the chair. Grabbing the last balloon, I put it down before practically jumping on it. I land harder than expected which causes the chair to break on impact. I’m left sitting on the floor with its ragged remains. *Well now, that’s embarrassing.*

Tim hurries over in shock. “Are you okay?”

“I must have had too much honey,” I joke lamely while standing up and brushing off the sting from my landing.

Trina asks, “Do you need help?”

“No.”

“Then the game is still on! Keep going!”

Grabbing my balloon, I put it on the floor before bursting it with the same intensity I used to demolish my chair. I’m on my way back to my team before Tim succeeds in his balloon-popping mission. We women celebrate by jumping up and down and shouting insults at the men. It’s like we’re seven all over again, and we’re having the time of our lives.

Once our celebration dies down, Trina announces that the buffet is open. “Our very own Paige made the casserole and cookies. Jake here,” she points to my co-chef, “was responsible for the lettuce wraps and the bread. So, eat up, and when you’re done, we have another old favorite party game for you!”

As everyone makes their way to supper, I wonder what the other game is. I don’t know why, but I suddenly envision a slew of teenage rom-coms where girls and boys are sitting in a circle in someone’s basement.

Holy heck, are we going to play spin the bottle?

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



TIM

Paige is clearly the star of the night, and I'm enjoying watching her shine. She's gone from embarrassment at being seen in her pajamas to totally owning her situation. I can't take my eyes off her.

I don't go through the buffet line until everyone else has their meals. While looking for an empty seat, I notice Paige is at a table with three men who are eagerly competing for her attention. Chip and Brittany are off in a corner together, outwardly already a couple. My gaze finally lands on Cami, who's eating with Jake and one other woman.

Walking over to them, I ask, "May I join you?"

"Tim." Cami smiles. "Of course, sit down." I take the chair next to her.

The other woman at the table says, "Hi there, my name is Adele."

"You've got some pretty big shoes to fill, huh?" I think I'm being funny, but Adele doesn't appear to agree.

She looks down at her feet. "They're only a seven-and-a-half."

"I meant the singer," I tell her. "Not your actual feet."

"Oh." If I had to guess, this Adele is not a social firecracker.

Jake says, "Thanks for letting me cook in your kitchen today, Tim."

I feel a little bit kinder toward him being that he's not sitting with Paige. "I'm sorry we didn't have the ingredients you needed to make your pho."

Cami lifts a lettuce wrap in front of her. "I think you did very well with what you had." Wait a second, is she flirting with Jake? What happened to

her flirting with *me*?

A myriad of thoughts crosses my mind like if Paige is being fought over by multiple men, and Cami is into Jake, then who am I going to make Eva jealous with? I wish I were over the idea of revenge, but my heart isn't listening to my brain.

Jake smiles at Cami. "I hope you like the bread, too."

"I'm sure it's wonderful." She gives him a long look. Meanwhile, I stare down at the bread on my plate and frown. The roll is so dense I could probably throw it across the room and break a window.

While Cami and Jake chat, Adele and I focus on our food. The cheeseburger casserole is so outstanding, I'm tempted to go back for seconds. Jake's lettuce rolls are fine, but nothing special, and I don't even bother with the bread.

When I spot the cameraman heading in our direction, I realize I'm about to look like a world-class dud on national television. I need to join the conversation and save face ASAP, so I ask my tablemates, "What are your favorite hobbies?"

The cameraman arrives in time to catch Jake's response. "I like to knit."

Adele perks up for the first time all night. "Me, too! I'm making my cat a cable knit sweater right now."

"Cable knit is tough." There's no irony in Jake's tone. There's also no judgment that her cat is the beneficiary of her skill.

"No, but it's way easier than the double-knit stitch," she tells him authoritatively. They share a look of understanding. Meanwhile, I feel like I'm having a fever dream.

Inserting myself into the conversation, I ask, "So, knitting, huh? That's an interesting hobby."

Adele immediately assumes I'm gender stereotyping and demands, "Why? Because he's a man?"

Before I can take my foot out of my mouth, Cami comes to my defense. "It's not a common hobby for men, is it?"

"Mean Joe Green was a knitter," Adele tells us. I'm more than a bit surprised she knows the names of vintage football players—or maybe she just knows knitters.

"I remember my grandfather mentioning that," I tell her. Then to Jake, I add, "I was in no way trying to suggest you weren't masculine."

"No worries, dude. I know it's not something you hear of a lot of men

doing.” He pantomimes like he’s knitting a scarf. “But it’s totally meditative. It’s a great way to unwind after a long night of cooking.”

The table goes dead quiet, and I realize this is going to be the most boring scene in the whole show if I don’t keep the conversation moving. “What about you, Adele? What do you like to do?”

Her eyes flicker left, then right, like she’s about to spill government secrets—*that the camera will surely catch*—before saying, “I practice tantric yoga.” As an afterthought, she adds, “In the nude.”

Cami and I are rendered speechless and our mouths hang open in shock. Who would have thought Adele was so progressive?

“Righteous!” Jake practically shouts before scooting his chair as close to Adele’s as he can without sitting on her lap. “I love tantra.”

“Really?” Adele’s eyes light up like the Christmas tree in Rockefeller Center.

Jake looks at her dinner plate. The lack of greasy smudges seems to prompt him to ask, “Didn’t you eat the cheeseburger casserole?”

Adele shutters with apparent revulsion. “I don’t eat meat.”

“Are you vegan?” he asks enthusiastically.

“For ten years.”

Cami and I share a look of perplexed understanding. Trina is setting up Jake and Adele? There’s no way under the sun I would have seen that coming. On the surface, Jake is a super-stud with a slightly air-headed aura, and Adele gives off vibes of being someone’s matron aunt from my grandmother’s era. I guess it just goes to show there really is a match out there for everyone.

While the camera focuses on Jake and Adele, I motion to Cami that we should beat it out of there. Once we’re away from the table, I whisper, “That was wild.”

“No kidding.” Thank goodness she’s as shocked as I am. I wouldn’t want her to think I was being unkind. “And here I thought maybe Jake and I might have had a connection.”

Trying not to sound hurt, I respond, “I thought Trina was setting *us* up.”

She stops walking and looks up at me intensely. “I didn’t think you were looking.”

I point to the mute button on my microphone while answering, “Of course I’m looking. Why else would I be on this show if not to meet the love of my life?”

She immediately lifts her hand to her mic and turns it off. “Sorry, I forgot.”

“No problem,” I tell her. “I just don’t want Eva to watch the show and feel sorry for me.”

“Is she still the only reason you’re here?”

I pause for a moment before confessing, “Not anymore.”

“Really?”

I nod my head. “I’ve been thinking a lot. I don’t want Eva back, and I truly am over her, so why shouldn’t I consider a new relationship?”

Cami looks skeptical. “So, if you and I get along, there might be a future for us?”

“Yes,” I tell her with meaning.

Before she can comment, Trina walks up to us. “There’s something wrong with your mics.” She glares at me in such a way that it’s obvious she knows I’ve turned mine off and told Cami how to do the same.

Feigning surprise, I ask, “How can that be?”

Cami adds, “Maybe they were never turned on.”

“Oh, they were turned on, all right. We’ve been able to hear you perfectly until you got up from the table.” She reaches over and flips both of our switches back on. There’s a look of warning in her eyes.

Neither Cami nor I say anything more until Trina is gone. We can’t continue our conversation about Eva because that would out me, and we can’t discuss how we turned our mics off to have a private chat.

Cami ultimately takes control of the situation and takes my arm. “Now that we know what Jake and Adele like to do in their free time, why don’t you tell me what *your* hobbies are.”

“I ... um ...” I’m not making the transition to on-camera Tim very quickly.

“While you think about it,” she says, “I’ll tell you what I like to do. I play competitive canasta.”

“Excuse me?”

“I was hooked as soon as my grandmother taught me when I was six.”

“Is there a competitive canasta league in Chicago?”

She laughs. “Not that I know of.”

“Then where do you play?” I suddenly feel like I must be the most boring person in the world. I don’t knit, I don’t perform tantric acts, and I don’t play old time-y card games.

“At my grandmother’s nursing home. There are eight of us and we play every Sunday afternoon. I’m the only person under eighty.”

“Maybe you could teach me sometime.”

She winks while giving my arm a slight squeeze. “Maybe. If you play *your* cards right.”

And just like that I realize Cami might be more than someone to help me make Eva jealous. She’s a lovely woman in her own right. And who knows, she might really be someone I could be with for the long term.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



PAIGE

My peanut butter cookies are a hit and they're going fast, so I go up to the buffet table to grab one before they're gone. Fielden catches up with me. "Hey." He sounds uncertain as to what my reaction to him might be. Smart man.

"Fielden, hello."

"I'm sorry about yesterday," he says. "I'm really nervous being on a show like this, and I'm afraid it's bringing out some unexpected behavior."

"Like acting like a total oaf?" I have no intention of making this easy for him.

"That bad, huh?" My bobbing head prompts him to add, "The last woman I dated was only into me for my credit card. She was fine that I wasn't around a lot." He sounds hurt, and rightly so if that's really the case.

I pick up a cookie and break it in half. Handing him a piece, I say, "Dating is hard, but you can't judge every woman by your last relationship."

He suddenly looks sheepish. "I guess I'm just afraid my perfect woman isn't out there."

"If the criteria you shared with me last night is what you really expect, she might not be."

Shifting from one foot to the other, he confesses, "I don't work as much as I claimed to. I only said that hoping you'd be disappointed with how busy I am."

“Because your last girlfriend didn’t care?”

“Yeah.” Fielden bites into his cookie and makes the appropriate yummy sounds. “This is really good.”

“County fair winner four years running,” I brag.

His expression morphs from sugar bliss to thoughtful. “I don’t think your job is easier than mine.”

“You’ve got that right,” I tell him. “You don’t know rough until you spend your days in front of twenty-eight seventh graders. Trying to keep them quiet long enough to learn math should be an Olympic sport.”

His face contorts in sympathy. “That must be murder.”

“Thirteen-year-olds are full of enough drama and hormones to re-sink the *Titanic*,” I tell him. “Seriously, I’d take one measly serial killer over that any day.”

Fielden smiles playfully. “I’m in corporate law. The slimiest characters I deal with are government officials and insider traders.”

“I’d take a killer over either of those.” I’m only semi-teasing.

“Lawmakers and billionaires are our biggest enemies. There’s too much temptation to use that kind of power for their own gain.”

I suddenly realize that Fielden might really be a good guy. “Is that why you went into corporate law? To control the power mongers?”

He stares at me with an intensity that makes me shiver. “Somebody has to keep an eye out for the little guy.”

After eating the rest of my cookie, I tell him, “I think you need to retire last night’s Fielden. This guy,” I run my pointer finger up and down in front of him, “is much more likable.”

Taking a step closer to me, he asks, “Would you be interested in having a one-on-one date with me this week? I understand if you say no, but I promise you’ve seen the last of the other guy.”

He looks at me so earnestly that I cave. “Okay.”

“Thank you, Paige. You won’t be sorry.”

My right eyebrow shoots up like a question mark. “Don’t make promises unless you can keep them,” I warn.

“I’m not ...”

Before he can finish his sentence, Trina calls out, “Who’s ready for the next game?” Her question is met by a roomful of cheers. Apparently, I’m not the only one who could use an extra five grand.

Fielden and I hurry to join our teams as Trina announces, “Once you’re in

line, you'll need to turn and face the other team." Then she walks over to Brittany and hands her an orange. She walks down the other line and gives one to Tim. "You're going to put the orange under your neck and then walk with it to the man or woman in front of you. You'll continue zig zag pattern until the fruit makes it all the way down the line.

"I don't understand," one of the men calls out. "We'll be playing with the opposition?"

"I'm hoping the game is secondary to finding out who you have chemistry with," Trina tells us. Once the orange is back with the man or woman who started with it, the game is over."

Dread fills every fiber of my being. I'm horrible at this game. So much so, I'm sure I'm going to lose this round for my team.

Trina continues to explain the rules. "If you drop the orange, do not pick it up. Someone will come in and put a new one under your chin. Now, who's ready for some fun?!"

Everybody—except me—shouts with excitement. Once Trina calls the start of the game, Tim puts his orange under his neck and shuffles in my direction. His posture is not unlike the hunchback of Notre Dame as he tries to keep his fruit in place.

When he reaches me, he jokes, "Wanna neck?"

"No thanks, Quasimodo." I'm *not* joking, but I know what I must do. I raise my chin to better facilitate Tim finagling his orange into my possession. As he bends low, I reach up on my tiptoes ... and ... the orange falls. Unfortunately, it doesn't hit the ground like you might expect. Instead, it drops right down my neckline, through my pant leg, and stops at the insole of my bear paw.

Tim calls out, "Another orange!" A crewmember runs one over, and once it's under Tim's chin, he tries again. And ... boom! It joins the first one.

Tim laughs. "You're really bad at this game, aren't you?"

"Shut up," I snarl. I'm liable to be housing a whole bushel of citrus in my jammies by the time this game is over.

Tim successfully passes the third orange to me, and now I'm off to neck with some guy named Carl. Luckily Carl is a lot shorter than Tim and I'm able to make the transfer with greater ease—only one orange added to my collection this time instead of two.

Once my first turn is over, I'm able to step back and watch everyone else. Oddly, they all seem to be enjoying themselves. Me, not so much. The teams

stay pretty neck and neck—pun intended—so I know I’m going to be under the gun when the orange comes back to me.

Carl passes to me this time—only two more oranges in my jammies—and I hobble out of line to make my way to Tim and my original location. It’s not as easy as you might expect with my leg full of fruit. By the time I reach him, he’s laughing so hard, I tell him, “Take all the time you want. Your team can’t win until you have this orange.”

That gets his attention, and he comes at me with intent. While he’s trying to take possession, he whispers in my ear, “I’m really a much better necker than this ...” My skin erupts in goosebumps, and I have to force myself to remember that nothing can happen between me and Tim. At least not while he’s trying to stick it to Eva.

I lose another three oranges trying to make the transfer before Trina shouts, “Brittany has the orange for her team! We have a winner!” Thank goodness this is over.

But instead of accepting defeat, Tim croons, “Come on, Paige, you can do it. Let me have your orange.” He has no right to flirt with me, so instead of taking his direction, I pick up the orange with my hand and peel it in front of him.

“Sorry, *friend*.” Then I turn and celebrate my team’s second win of the night.

The rest of the mixer moves along smoothly. I meet several other men, some of whom are pretty nice, but none of whom instill thoughts of romance. That’s when I realize that if things don’t pan out with Fielden, I probably won’t make a love match. I want to cry.

How can it be that the only men I find attractive are the lawyer who lives far away and the country club owner? Too bad the country club owner is just here to waste time.

I don’t feel like calling Missy when I get home. Even though my pajamas were a huge hit, she never brought me a change of clothes and I’m mad. I guess now that she’s part of a couple she doesn’t have time for her best friend. *Yes, I’m feeling sorry for myself.*

I removed all the oranges from my onesie before leaving the country club,

so as soon as I climb the stairs to my room, I crawl straight into bed. Once I'm snuggled under the duvet, I pick up my phone to see if my bestie has a good excuse for blowing me off. It turns out she does.

"Paige, I'm so sorry! I didn't get your message until late. We had a bit of a sledding accident and we had to take Sammy to the ER. Don't worry. She just has a concussion, but she won't be in school on Monday. She's really upset about it, too. She wanted me to tell you that she'll make up her test during lunch the day she gets back, which will probably be Tuesday."

I don't bother listening to the rest of the message. Instead, I speed dial my friend. As soon as I hear her voice, I ask, "How's Sammy?"

"She's resting but not sleeping. Even though the doctor said she only had to wait three hours, Jamie is so freaked out, he's making her stay up longer."

I reach behind my head and fluff my pillow. "Tell her not to worry about the test. She's such a great student, I'm sure she'll ace it."

"How was tonight?" Missy wants to know.

"Weird, fun, weird ..."

She giggles. "Start with the weird."

"I wore my Winnie the Pooh onesie the whole night."

"Are you serious?" She groans. "I'm so sorry I couldn't bring you something else."

I flick off the light and tell her, "As strange as it sounds, it was a good thing. It was a great ice breaker." I spend the next several minutes sharing that Fielden isn't the baddie I thought he was.

"Ha! I told you to give him a second chance."

"Missy," I say calmly, "in all the years you've known me, how many times have I enjoyed hearing you tell me that you were right, and I was wrong?"

She takes my subtle-as-a-sledge-hammer hint. "Sorry. But still, ha!"

"We're going to have a solo date on Tuesday."

"Fun. How's it going for Tim? Is he finally getting into the swing of things?"

"I'm not sure. He spent a lot of time with Cami. But Cami already knows he's only looking for revenge, so she might just be helping him out."

"Why would she ruin her chance at finding a true match just to help Tim?" she asks.

"She might think she can turn him."

And that right there is something I'm going to need to talk her out of.

Changing a man is about as likely as replacing a flat tire while treading water.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



TIM

Last night's mixer wasn't only fun, it was eye-opening. I worried less about showing Eva what she was missing and spent more time just enjoying myself—which is a feeling that's a long time coming.

The games were a particular hoot. I roll over in bed and stretch while reminiscing. As Paige has already pointed out, we weren't in the same group of friends growing up. As such, we didn't run into each other at birthday parties. That's probably why I never knew how spectacularly horrible she was at party games. Thank goodness we didn't play pin the tail on the donkey, or someone might have wound up with a serious injury.

Images of Paige breaking a chair and trying to retrieve an orange with her neck cause a funny fluttering feeling to roll through my chest. While I like Cami, I can't stop thinking about Paige. And Paige has been hurt enough. Even though I think I might be ready to move on, how will I know until I do so?

In addition to playing games, I got to know Chip better and we even made plans to have brunch today. I'm looking forward to hearing his insights about the show.

A brief knock on my door is followed by my mother striding into the room. "Darling, good morning," she says before machine-gun firing questions at me. "How are you? How did you sleep? How was last night? Did you meet any nice girls?"

Coming into my room before I'm even up is new behavior for my mom, so it catches me off guard. "Hi, Mom."

"It's almost eleven o'clock and I'm tired of waiting to find out how last night went."

"Eleven o'clock!" The last time I slept this late was when I was in college. "I've got to get going. I've made plans this morning."

"With one of the ladies from the show?" She's chomping at the bit for information.

"One of the men," I tell her.

"Oh, really?" Thoughts of my brother Jonathan are probably swirling in her head. Which means she is wondering if I'm gay, too. She finally asks, "Is he cute?"

Letting her off the hook, I tell her, "I'm not gay, Mom."

Sitting down on the side of my bed, she says, "Not that I would care if you were. But honestly with all the travelling they do, I don't think your brother and Jacob are going to get down to business and make me a grandmother. You might be my only hope." She pats my hand. "And that might be easier if you didn't need to find a surrogate. Now, who's this guy you're going out with today?"

"He's the new eighth-grade science teacher at the middle school."

"I thought Steve Marks had that job." You have to love life in a small town. Everybody knows everything.

I sit up in bed and scoot back so I'm leaning against my headboard. "Paige said he had some elective surgery that went horribly wrong."

Passing right over Steve's surgery, she asks, "Paige Holland? Where did you see her?" My mom has an almost predatory look in her eyes.

"I ran into her at the country club last week." No good can come from my telling her that we've seen each other more often than that.

"You should ask her out."

It's time to dash her hopes. "We're just friends, Mom. In fact, she's on the show too. We're going to help each other find someone."

She releases an impressive sigh. "I suppose that's good. I trust Paige's judgment over yours."

"Ouch."

"No, no, no, I just mean that ..." She seems to realize I know what she meant. "I'm sorry, that wasn't nice. All I meant is that sometimes women have better instincts. We're not all about the boobs and shiny hair."

“Mom!”

She stands up. “Oh, get over yourself. You men are so easily distracted by looks that you often miss the more important qualities.”

“Is that why you think I wound up with Eva?” I ask, still stinging from her assessment.

“Isn’t it?”

“Initially, maybe. But Eva had a lot of other good qualities.” I’m not so much standing up for her as I am for myself.

“Like faithfulness?”

“Okay. You win. I’m a shallow pig of a man with no sense. Are you happy now?”

She looks at me lovingly. “You are a wonderful man who deserves the best, but like the rest of your sex, you’re often waylaid by a pretty face. As such, I welcome Paige’s input in who you date next.”

Chip is waiting in the lobby as soon as I get to the country club. “I’m sorry I’m running a few minutes late,” I tell him.

He shakes my hand. “No worries, I just got here.”

After giving our coats to coat check, we walk into the dining room. “I would have suggested eating somewhere else, but we have the best Crab Benedict in the free world.” I lead the way to the table I reserved for us.

“That sounds delicious.”

Once we’re seated, I ask, “So, what do you think of Elk Lake?”

“Aside from the frigid temperatures, it’s nice.”

“I was in Los Angeles for over a decade,” I tell him. “I was so sick of beautiful weather it was starting to make me depressed.”

Chip laughs. “I guess the grass is always greener, huh?”

“Maybe. But I think I just missed home.”

The waitress comes over with menus. After telling us the specials, we both decide on the Crab Benedict. When she’s gone, Chip says, “So, tell me more about Paige. Is she as horrible to everyone else as she is to me?”

“She’s not horrible at all,” I tell him. “You just remind her of her grade school piano teacher, and she hated him.”

He takes a sip of his water. “He must have been a monster, given the way

she treats me.”

I laugh before asking, “How are things going with Brittany?”

His whole demeanor changes from wary to enthusiastic. “She’s wonderful. We both like the same kind of food, we have the same interests, and we both want to travel. She’s perfect for me.”

“Are you still going to date other women?”

“Why would I?”

Why indeed? I wish I had the courage to go with my gut. If I did, I’d ask Paige out. But she knows too much about me to say yes.

“You and Cami seemed to be having a good time last night,” Chip says.

“She’s lovely.” Then I confess, “But I think I might be interested in someone else.”

He looks surprised. “Who?”

“If I tell you, you have to promise not to tell her.”

“It’s not Brittany, is it?” His posture doesn’t relax until I shake my head.

“No, it’s not Brittany. It’s Paige.” The look of horror on his face causes me to snort.

“Why?”

“Because she’s funny and nice and sweet and ...”

“Paige Holland? The math teacher?”

I can’t blame him for being incredulous. Paige really isn’t nice to him. “That’s the one.” I take a sip of my freshly poured coffee before adding, “The problem is that she knows the only reason I came on this show was to make my ex-wife jealous. I don’t think she’d believe me if I told her I was interested in her. She’d think I was just using her.”

“If you want, I can talk to Brittany and see what she thinks,” Tim offers.

I consider his suggestion for a moment before asking, “Isn’t there some kind of girl code that would send her running straight to Paige?”

“Maybe?”

“I’ll let you know,” I tell him. “In the meantime, I’m going to have a one-on-one date with Cami and see how that goes.”

“What day are you scheduled to shoot?” he asks.

“Tuesday. Luckily that gives me a couple days off.”

“I can’t wait to see Brittany again,” Chip says like a kid in love for the first time.

That’s when it hits me that I feel the same way about Paige. The question is, do I have the courage to let her know?

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



PAIGE

My first thought when I wake up is how much I'm looking forward to brunch at the country club with Missy, Jamie, and Sammy. It's been a nice perk since my bestie got herself a boyfriend. Missy and I used to meet at the diner most Sundays, but we've been promoted.

Pulling off my eye mask—darn the streetlights right outside my window—I stretch everything that can be stretched. After my fingers, toes and spine have reached optimal alignment, I throw the covers off and jump out of bed. Grabbing my phone, I trot downstairs to put on a pot of coffee. While I wait for it to brew, I check my messages. The only one is from Missy.

Bestie: Brunch is just you and me this morning. Jamie woke Sammy up every three hours during the night to make sure she was doing okay with her concussion. The two of them are exhausted and are going to stay home. See you at noon!

Having spent my last two nights at the country club, you'd think I'd be sick to death of it. But luckily, we'll be eating in the Premier Club dining room, instead of the ballroom or Conference Room A, and I'd walk over hot coals for their cinnamon roll pancakes.

I take a mug of coffee back upstairs where I hurry to get dressed—wool pants and a fuzzy, red cowl-neck sweater. Instead of bothering with a full face of makeup, I simply swipe on some lipstick before running a brush

through my hair. Then I head back downstairs, grab my parka, and I'm on my way.

We got more snow last night, so even though I'm super excited to spend some time with my friend, I drive slowly. Missy and I don't see each other very often now that Jamie is in the picture. And as much as I like him, I miss my girl time. It used to be Missy and me against the world, but now it's just me and that makes me sad.

While I try to be upbeat and happy around her, the truth is, the green-eyed monster has taken over and it's not very pretty.

After pulling into the parking lot, I snag a recently vacated spot near the front. Then I practically sprint through the snow to get inside. A waft of cinnamon hits me as soon as I walk through the front door, and I have to work hard to suppress the drool that starts to pool in my mouth. *Classy, I know.*

Missy is standing in the corridor outside the dining room, and she jumps up when she sees me. "Good morning!"

I wrap my arms around her and hug her tightly. "It's technically afternoon." I release her while adding, "I've missed you!"

"I've missed you, too."

I step back until I'm at arm's length. "Liar. You love spending time with Jamie." As an afterthought, I force myself to say, "And I'm happy for you."

She leads the way into the dining room. "I do love my life, but that doesn't mean I don't miss our time together."

The hostess smiles when she sees us. "Just the two of you today?" She's used to seeing our party of four.

Missy nods. "Just us."

We're seated at the same table that Tim and I sat at twice. At this point, I'm thinking they should just engrave a plaque and make it my personal spot. Speak of the devil, as soon as we sit down, I make eye contact with Tim. He and Chip are sitting a few tables away. I mumble to Missy, "Incoming. You're about to meet Chip."

Missy practically gives herself whiplash spinning around to catch a glimpse of my nemesis. She spots Tim and waves but doesn't have time to comment on Chip before they're upon us.

"Good morning, ladies," Tim says while tipping his head in a conciliatory manner. Call me old-fashioned, but I find good manners to be darn sexy.

"Tim," Missy says enthusiastically while standing up to give him a hug.

Then she turns to Chip. “And you must be Chip Baker.”

Chip smiles easily. “I am.”

“I’m Melissa Corner. I’m Paige’s best friend.”

His smile fades ever so slightly. “Ah, so I’m guessing you’ve heard about me.”

Missy appears to be torn between the easy path—saying she doesn’t know who Chip is, and the truth—I’ve told her he’s an evil toad bent on world destruction. She finally settles on, “You look a lot like our old piano teacher.”

“So I’ve heard.” Then he teases, “He must have beat you guys with ping pong paddles when you played the wrong note.”

Missy and I both scowl. “He used to slam his hands down on the keys and make us start over,” I volunteer. “Even though we knew it was coming, it was always startling.”

Tim changes the subject. “Do you mind if we join you?”

I want to say no but Missy beams at him. “Please do.”

Once they’re settled, the waitress comes over and takes Missy’s and my order. Then she looks at Tim. “Did you want to order anything else?”

“Just a cup of coffee.” Chip gets the same.

“So ...” Missy rubs her hands together. “Tell me about *Midwestern Matchmaker*.”

“It’s interesting,” Tim answers. “Not at all what I thought it would be like.” Before she can ask why that is, he volunteers, “It’s hard to act natural while cameras are watching everything that you do.”

“How about you, Chip?” Missy asks. “I hear you’ve already met someone.”

His eyes glaze over with infatuation. “Brittany. She’s amazing.” That’s when I realize Chip is a decent-looking guy when he’s not being annoying.

“She really is fabulous,” I tell Missy. “So is Cami,” I add as an afterthought. I’m fishing to see how Tim will respond.

He smiles benignly while saying, “Yes, she is.” His gaze narrows as he stares at me intently. “I have a date with her on Tuesday night.”

“I have a date with Fielden on the same night.” Take that!

“You seemed very popular at last night’s mixer.” He doesn’t sound very happy about it.

“It was my outfit. Everyone loves Winnie the Pooh.”

“They certainly appeared to. I barely had time to talk to you.”

Remembering Tim's and my only interactions—the two times he passed me an orange—causes my face to flush hot. “We may not have talked much, but we sure did neck.”

Missy practically drops her juice. “What?”

“We played games last night,” Chip tells her. “They're referencing the pass-the-orange game.”

“Oh, no!” Missy laughs. “Paige is terrible at those games.”

She's not wrong, but I still feel the need to stand up for myself. “That's because they're stupid.”

“Do you remember the time you hit Mrs. Franco with the piñata stick?” she asks.

“In my defense,” I demand, “who blindfolds a seven-year-old before spinning them around and handing them a baseball bat?”

Tim bursts out laughing. “I would have paid money to see that.”

“It seems you've always been a little bit spirited Paige...” Chip offers.

“Very funny,” I grumble. Then I tell Missy, “Yet my team won, so I guess I didn't do that poorly.”

“They won in spite of you, huh?” Missy giggles.

Once our food arrives, I announce, “Well, it sure was nice of you guys to join us.” Hint, hint, hint. When they don't leave right away, I add, “I guess I'll catch you later in the week.”

Chip finally taps Tim on the arm. “I think she's trying to get rid of us.”

Tim looks at me with feigned surprise. “Surely not.”

“Don't let the door smack you where the good Lord cracked you,” I tell him.

Tim stands up slowly. “I'll be upstairs for a while if you want to come up and chat about last night.”

I stare at him, wondering if I should share my feelings about other men with him. Tim hates Fielden and as Fielden appears to be my only shot at a love match here, I don't want him ruining that for me. On the other hand, I want to hear more about his upcoming date with Cami.

“We'll see,” I finally say.

Before they leave, Chip tells Missy, “It was nice to meet you.” Then he turns to me. “We still have a truce, right?”

“Yes, Chip, we still have a truce.” I suddenly feel bad about being such a jerk to him.

As the men walk away, I dig into my pancakes and groan in pleasure.

After several bites, I tell Missy, “While I’m delighted you’ve found love, I’m even happier that love has been responsible for my finding these pancakes.”

She cocks her head to the side and stares at me like she can see through me. “What are the chances Fielden would move to Elk Lake if you wound up together?”

“Probably zero.” I stab at another giant bite of heaven. “He’s a corporate lawyer.”

“I don’t want you moving to Chicago.”

Shrugging my shoulders, I tell her, “I don’t want to move either, but what if it’s my only shot?”

“What about Tim?” she wants to know.

That’s the question. What *about* Tim? Regardless of what he says, I’m pretty sure he’s still hung up on his ex-wife. As such, dating him feels like a setup for failure. “You dated Tim, so you know he’s not really looking.”

“That was months ago, before I met Jamie,” she says. “Surely he’s ready by now.”

“The only reason he agreed to come on the show was to make Eva jealous.”

“Do you remember my first engagement?” Missy was engaged twice. First to a cheater and then to a guy who died. Talk about tragedy. I nod my head, so she continues, “That was five years ago, and I still dream about getting revenge.”

“Really? I didn’t know that.”

“I’m not exactly proud of it,” she says before adding, “Tim was *married* to Eva, so his need for closure is a lot bigger than mine was.”

“I do like him,” I confess. “I just don’t trust his motives.”

“He’s a great guy,” Paige tells me. “And I think he was probably a great husband.”

I feel the need to point out, “But he didn’t ask *me* out. He asked Cami.”

“Probably because he doesn’t think he stands a chance with you.”

“Why would he think that? He knows I’m serious about finding someone.” The insecure part of me thinks that maybe he remembers more of my teenage years than he’s letting on. I mean, who wants to date the girl who wore a body brace? Talk about ruining his cool image.

Missy exhales loudly. “People tend to guard their hearts when they think the risk of heartbreak is too great.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I think Tim might be afraid you could break his heart.”

“What about the risk of him breaking *my* heart?” I want to know.

She takes a sip of her coffee before answering, “I think you two need to confront your feelings and then decide if you think a future together is worth the risks.”

The thing is, Tim and I are friends, and while we like each other, I’m not sure he has deeper feelings for me. Also, at this point it might be just as easy for me to fall in love with Fielden as it would be for me to fall for Tim. And that way, I’d still get to keep Tim as a friend.

That’s what I’m telling myself anyway.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



TIM

I waited in my office for two hours on Sunday, hoping Paige would show up after brunch. She didn't. Her lack of interest makes it clear she doesn't share the feelings I'm starting to have for her. Which in turn makes me reluctant to endanger our friendship by telling her what's been going on in my mind. Having said that, I don't want to be her friend if it means having to watch her date a butthead like Fielden.

Paige is at the forefront of my thoughts for the next two days. I've been tempted to text her multiple times to see how she's doing, but I talk myself out of it every time. I figure it's just as easy for her to contact me as it is for me to contact her. Also, the way I see it, the ball is in her court.

By the time Tuesday afternoon rolls around, I'm in my office, staring out into space—which I've been doing a lot this week. Trina knocks on the door before walking in and announcing, "We have a small problem."

I motion toward one of the chairs in front of my desk for her to sit, but she chooses not to. "We've scheduled your date with Cami at the same time we booked another couple."

"Do you want me and Cami to reschedule?" I ask.

She shakes her head. "Cami and Fielden both had to come in from Chicago for tonight's taping. I'd feel bad if either of them had to make an unnecessary trip."

Fielden? "You scheduled my date and Paige's at the same time?" I briefly

remember Paige saying something about her date being on Tuesday, but I must have blocked it.

“That’s what I just said.”

An idea pops into my head. “Why don’t we go on a double date then?”

“We’ve never done double dates before.”

I remind her, “I thought you said you were trying to shake things up this season.”

Trina’s eyes roll up like she’s looking at a thought bubble over her head. After a few seconds, she decides, “Yes, let’s do that.”

“Maybe don’t tell the others until right before shooting starts,” I suggest. I don’t want to give Paige the opportunity to beg off.

“Good thinking,” Trina agrees. Then she turns to the door. “Go through hair and makeup and meet us outside of Conference Room A at five.”

After she’s gone, I start to think of all the things that might go wrong tonight. There are so many, I give up and push all the impending disasters into the back of my mind. The good news is Paige and I will be on the same date, so hopefully I can show her how wildly inappropriate Fielden is for her.

And maybe, just maybe, how appropriate *I* am for her.

At four-thirty, I leave my office and head to hair and makeup. Paige and Cami are already there.

Paige tells Cami, “I wonder why we’re here at the same time.”

My date smiles at me in the mirror while answering her. “I have no idea.”

They both turn their attention to me when I join them at the makeup table. “Hey, Tim.” Cami smiles brightly. She really is lovely.

Paige skips the pleasantries. “Do you know what’s going on with our dates tonight?”

“I do,” I tell her. *So much for surprising them on set.* “They’ve double-booked us so we’re going to go on a double date.” Her expression immediately falls.

“I don’t think they’ve ever done that before,” Cami says.

Luckily, Trina comes into the room and saves me from further interrogation. “Hello, everyone. How are you all today?” she asks excitedly.

“Kind of bummed,” Paige tells her. “What’s this about a double date?”

Trina glances at me before answering, “I see Tim’s told you about his idea.” Two sets of eyes bore into my head. I’m in trouble now.

“It wasn’t so much my idea ...” I start to tell them before explaining, “as it was a solution to a scheduling problem.”

“This way neither Cami nor Fielden made a trip in vain,” Trina tells them.

“We could have gone one after the other,” Paige says.

“We only have the crew for four hours tonight,” Trina tells her. “And that would be cutting it close.”

“Why can’t we both have our dates at the same time but at different tables?” Paige asks while looking at me like she’s ready to punch me.

“Because we only have one camera tonight, and we want to make sure we give you all equal time.” No one comments on that.

While silence would probably be the best option, I feel compelled to announce, “I think it’ll be fun.”

Cami shrugs her shoulders. “I’m game if you all are.” Then she takes her turn at the makeup table.

I hate to admit it, but I’m more excited about this double date than I was for Cami and me to go out alone. Cami seems equally unbothered by the change.

“Why don’t Fielden and I take off and do something else while you two have your date?” Paige suggests.

“Our contracts state we can only socialize while we’re here for filming,” I remind her.

“Fine.” She stomps her foot like she’s getting ready to throw a tantrum. “Way to ruin the night, Tim.”

“I didn’t ruin the night, I saved it.” *How in the world am I the bad guy here?*

Rolling her eyes, she demands, “How do you figure?”

“If we didn’t have a double date, then one couple wouldn’t have had a date. This way we can still get to know each other better.”

“I already know you.”

“And I know you. Now we can get to know Cami and Fielden better.” I say Fielden’s name like I’m referencing the bubonic plague.

“But you hate Fielden ...” she reminds me unnecessarily.

I really do. “What’s not to hate? He’s boorish and rude.”

“Not to me.”

“He told Chip that the two of them were in different leagues. He said that Chip was in the minors, and he was in the pros.”

Paige comes to his defense. “He was just nervous. He apologized to me for the impression he made when we first met. I think he was sincere.”

I really don’t want to fight with her about this, but at the same time, I

want to make sure Fielden treats her well. *Okay, not really.* I hope Fielden shows his true colors so Paige will consider me. “Well, it’s too late now,” I tell her. “We’re going on a double date, so I suggest you make the best of it.”

As I sit down next to Cami at the makeup table, I once again worry how tonight is going to pan out. A recipe for fun does not include a mad Paige, an indifferent Cami, or Fielden right across the table. Lucky me, I have all three.

This is bound to be reality TV gold!

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



PAIGE

The last couple of days away from *Midwestern Matchmaker* have been a breath of fresh air. There's been no stress, no camera crews, and a reprieve from worrying about men. As much as I'm hoping Fielden and I are a match, I'm equally concerned that if we are, I'll eventually have to move away from Elk Lake.

I know how pathetic that sounds, but I like to think my life is going to turn out to be Hallmark-movie perfect. You know, if anyone moves, it will be the big city person looking for a quieter, more authentic life. And even though Elk Lake isn't Vermont, and my family doesn't own a Christmas tree farm, we still have a lot to offer.

As I change into my dress for tonight, I realize I'm not as angry at Tim as I made him think I was. It's not like *he* double booked our dates. Also, having two couples might take the pressure off a little. The main problem is that Tim dislikes Fielden so much I'm afraid he's going to make things awkward.

Not to mention the fact that I find Tim attractive and am actively trying to ignore my feelings for him. All the while watching him date someone else—someone I like and respect.

Yeah, this is going to be a good time.

At five o'clock, the four of us meet in front of Conference Room A. That's where I fill Fielden in on the double date. He doesn't have time to

react before Trina walks over to us and announces, “We’re going to take Cami and Tim in first, and then we’ll bring in Paige and Fielden.”

“See you soon,” I tell Cami.

As they walk away, Fielden declares, “I don’t like this. I don’t want to share you.”

“That’s sweet.” Then after a beat, I tell him, “Tim told me about how you guys first met.”

He looks slightly chagrined. “I think I already explained that my nerves sometimes get the best of me.”

“Which I totally get. But tonight might go smoother if you apologize to him.”

Fielden’s shoulders square. “I’d rather not do that on camera.”

“But if they got your first meeting on camera and use it, apologizing will make the audience like you more.” Look at me, playing all the angles like a pro.

“I don’t care what the audience thinks of me,” he says. “I only care what *you* think.” While his words are charming, his delivery is a little slick for my taste.

“Think about it,” I tell him. “No one wants to go on national television and then be the target of negative social media posts.”

A whole spectrum of emotions crosses his face. They seem to range from irritation to acknowledgement that it’s possible I might be predicting his future. He finally says, “Let’s see how things go.” It’s a good thing Fielden doesn’t seem to have the same aversion that Tim does, or tonight could be a disaster.

Several minutes later, Trina comes out of the conference room. She informs Fielden and me, “We’re going to play this date off as an accidental meeting. The two of you will walk in and when you see Cami and Tim, you’ll decide to eat together.”

I’m no actress, so I’m not sure I’ll be able to be convincing. I decide to just follow everyone else’s lead.

As the hostess takes us into the fake dining room, she says, “It’s a pleasure having you join us tonight.” Then she walks by Tim and Cami. We’re almost past their table when Cami calls out, “Paige, over here!”

I turn as though I didn’t previously see her. “Oh, my gosh, Cami! How are you?” She stands up and we hug like long-lost sorority sisters.

Tim stays seated and Fielden is as immobile as if someone surgically

implanted a steel pole up his backside. “Why don’t you join us?” Cami asks. Although her delivery isn’t as smooth as that. It’s more like, ‘Why? Don’t. You. Join us?’ Apparently, Cami is no actress either. Though her delivery does bear a striking resemblance to William Shatner in those old Star Trek episodes, and it seemed to work for him.

“We’d love to!” I practically shout. While Fielden pulls out my chair, I ask Cami, “Do you know Fielden?”

She smiles at him. “We met briefly during the first mixer. How are you, Fielden?” *How? Areyou. Fielden?*

“Good, thanks.” He doesn’t say anything else as he sits down on the chair next to both me and Cami.

This exchange is so painfully awkward, I can’t imagine what it’s going to look like on television. That realization helps force me to sound more natural when I ask, “Fielden, have you met Tim?” Hoping to break the ice a bit, I tell him, “Tim and I both grew up in Elk Lake.”

Fielden doesn’t make eye contact with Tim, while answering, “How interesting.”

“We met the night of the first mixer.” Tim’s tone implies he’s itching for a fight.

At this point, nobody says anything for several long moments, which results in Trina coming over to the table.

She leans down so she’s at eye level with us. “Look, you guys, I realize this isn’t your normal double date, what with cameras around, but watching you all is as riveting as waiting for a pot of water to boil. Can you please do something to increase the energy?”

We release an assortment of grunts and groans like she’s just asked us to bathe in a pool of hot lava. Which honestly might be more fun than what’s happening here.

Once Trina’s gone, Tim tells Fielden, “I think you’re an arrogant SOB.” *Terrific.*

Fielden pushes against the table and scoots his chair back like he’s about to jump to his feet and engage in battle. “What did you just say?”

“I didn’t like the way you belittled Chip Baker that first night,” Tim tells him.

Fielden appears to be weighing his dislike of Tim against his public image when he finally leans back in his chair. “I wasn’t really myself the other night.”

Instead of accepting this for what it is—a poor excuse for an apology—Tim asks, “Who were you? Peter Parker?”

A blood vessel in Fielden’s forehead starts to visibly throb. “I said I was sorry.”

Tim responds, “No, you said you weren’t yourself.”

Fielden clears his throat loudly. Then as insincerely as humanly possible, he says, “I’m sorry.”

“It isn’t me you owe the apology to.”

Before the two men come to blows, Cami asks, “So, Fielden, what do you do for a living?” Her delivery is slightly less stilted, which I attribute to her very real desire to change the subject.

“I’m a corporate lawyer in Chicago,” he says stiffly.

He doesn’t ask her what she does in return, so I tell him, “Cami is a caterer in Chicago!” I say this with the same amount of enthusiasm as if she were an Olympic pole vaulter.

My date doesn’t seem to care. Instead, he turns to me. “Thank you for agreeing to go out with me tonight.”

“Um, you’re welcome.” I watch as the cameraman walks around the table to get close ups of everyone’s faces.

Once he steps back, Tim stands up. “I’ll go pick out a nice bottle of wine for us. Would you ladies like red or white?” Looks like Fielden isn’t getting any.

Personally, I’d like a shot of tequila or two. *Or twelve.* But instead of saying that, I go with, “I’m sure whatever you choose will be great.”

After he walks away, I turn to Fielden. “This is pretty stressful.”

“That guy is a jerk, and I don’t like him.”

“What did he do to you?” Cami wants to know.

Either Fielden has totally lost his mind or he’s auditioning for reality show villain of the year, because he answers, “I don’t like the way he looks at Paige. It’s like she’s a cheesecake and he just left a Weight Watchers meeting.”

I would have noticed if that was true because, let’s face it, I would love that. “No, he doesn’t.”

Cami gives her two cents. “I don’t think Tim looks at Paige as anything other than a friend.”

“Then you’re both blind,” Fielden says snarkily.

I need to talk to Fielden alone before Tim gets back and he starts the

mother of all fights, so I ask, “Fielden, can I speak with you privately for a minute?”

Cami takes the hint and stands up. “I’ll just go powder my nose.”

After she leaves, I tell my date, “I swear that Tim and I are only friends, and he has no feelings for me whatsoever.”

“I think you’re wrong.”

“We’re going to have to agree to disagree on this one. But please, don’t pick a fight with him. I want tonight to go smoothly.”

“So do I,” he says like I’ve been hallucinating the underlying tension at the table. He eventually adds, “I won’t say a word to him.”

“Thank you.” And while I feel a small amount of relief, I can’t help but wonder if there’s any truth to Fielden’s assumption that Tim likes me as more than a friend.

CHAPTER THIRTY



TIM

Once I get to the wine cellar, I take several deep breaths to regain my composure. I do not like Fielden Marsh. I particularly don't like how he won't accept responsibility for his bad behavior.

I take my time choosing a nice Viognier before going back to the conference room. When I finally get there, I open the bottle, while telling my dinner companions about the grapefruit and grassy notes they'll taste in the wine. I fill their glasses before sitting down.

That's when I notice Fielden has moved his chair so close to Paige's that their arms are touching. *Ew. Note to self: You are here with Cami. Ignore the interlopers.*

"So, Cami," I say, "tell me about catering."

She gestures around the room. "I'd think you'd know all about that."

"To an extent, but all our events take place here. You must throw parties all over the city."

"We do," she says before itemizing a list of locations. While she talks, I find my gaze drifting over to Paige and Fielden. I don't hear anything else until she says, "And that's why we enjoy serving canapés on a tightrope so much."

Holy heck, I must have missed an incredible story for that to be the punchline. "I'm sorry ... what?"

Cami laughs. "I was just trying to get your attention."

What do I say to that? *Sorry, I was busy wondering what Paige could possibly see in her date?* Instead, I go with, “I think canapés on a tightrope could be your thing. Every socialite in Chicago would want to hire you.”

“The insurance premiums would kill our profit margin,” she counters. Then she whispers to me, “I’m going to get up to use the restroom. Would you follow me?”

I have no idea why she wants me to do that, but instead of questioning her here, I reply, “I’ll be thirty seconds behind you.”

As Cami excuses herself from the table, I get up to pull out her chair. From my new vantage point, I notice Fielden is running his fingertips up and down Paige’s arm. If that isn’t bad enough, their heads are so close together they practically look like conjoined twins. Neither of them pays any attention to Cami’s departure.

Sitting back down, I do a fast count to thirty before standing up to join my date. I don’t bother saying anything to our tablemates.

I spot Cami as soon as I walk out the door. She’s standing next to the wall, talking to Walker Sinclair. He left town right after college, so it’s been many years since I’ve seen him. Even so, the Sinclair family have been members here ever since my grandparents started the club.

Walking in their direction, I greet, “Walker, I haven’t seen you in ages.” Cami motions for me to turn off my mic. I do so before asking, “How do you and Cami know each other?”

“Cami has catered some parties for my company.”

“I told Walker what we’re doing,” Cami says quietly.

He gently knocks his fist into my shoulder. “I would have never pegged you for a reality show guy.”

The accusation fills me with embarrassment. “They needed a last-minute replacement to fill in, and being that they were filming here ...”

Cami interrupts. “I already told him the truth, Tim.” Panic pours through me as she confesses, “I told him about Eva.”

Why in the world would she do that? Even though I don’t want to have this discussion in front of him, I can’t help but ask, “Why?”

Walker interjects, “My wife and I are in the process of getting divorced. Cami knew that I’d understand what you’re going through.”

“She told you all of that in the minute since she came out here?” How is that even possible?

“We took the same train to Elk Lake today,” Cami says. She’s not quite

making eye contact with me, which I hope means she feels bad for sharing my personal information with someone else.

“We had two hours to catch up.” Walker looks at Cami like she’s the catnip to his tabby.

Cami smiles at him in a way she has yet to look at me, and I immediately sense something is going on. “Are you two ... Have you ... Is there ...?” Look at me, I’m positively the king of articulation.

“Not yet,” Walker says. Then he turns his attention to Cami. “But I would like to ask you out, if that’s okay.”

Wait, he’s asking her out in front of me? While we’re on a date?

Cami smiles at him. “I would really like that, Walker.”

I cough loudly. “Excuse me, but aren’t we on a date right now?”

Cami has the courtesy to flush with what I hope is a hefty dose of shame. “We are, but we both know you’re not really into it.”

“How do you know that? We haven’t even gotten our food yet.” Like food has anything to do with romantic chemistry.

“Tim,” Cami says, “I don’t believe for one minute you’re on this show to find love. You can’t go from only wanting revenge to not caring about it just like that.” She snaps her fingers sharply for effect.

“Yes, but ... maybe ...”

“I have a proposition for you,” she says before glancing at Walker. “I’m game to do everything I can do to help you show Eva what she’s missing ...”

“But ...” Of course, there’s a but. It might even have two t’s. *Butt*.

“But I won’t be serious about you.”

“Because you’ll be going out with Walker.”

Her eyelashes flutter rapid fire while looking at the aforementioned. “Because my interest lies elsewhere.”

“And this is okay with you, Walker?” Why not let him weigh in on my future, too? Heck, maybe I should take to the streets and ask total strangers.

“I don’t have any problem with Cami helping a friend,” he says. “Also, I shouldn’t publicly start dating anyone until my divorce is finalized.” He shares, “Even though Maggie cheated on me, I’m the one with the money, so she’s trying to make claims that I was unfaithful first.” His gaze focuses on Cami. “Which I was not. I take wedding vows very seriously.”

It’s official. This is the worst date I’ve ever been on. While I wasn’t one hundred percent committed to dating Cami—because my mind was on Paige (who appears to be smitten with Fielden)—I truly thought something could

develop between us. Now I find out neither Cami nor Paige is interested in dating me, and I'm stuck on this stupid show for another three weeks.

With all the chips stacked against me, I might as well at least get something out of it and prove to Eva that I'm over her. Of course, the only way that's going to work is if no one suspects Cami and I are just pretending. "You can't tell anyone on the show you aren't into me," I tell her.

"I wouldn't."

"Not even Paige or Brittany."

She nods her head slower, indicating that she probably wanted to tell them. "I understand. Our pact will be between the two of us alone."

Walker feels the need to add, "Between the three of us, really."

"Okay," I finally agree. "I'll accept your offer of help." As an afterthought, I add, "Thank you."

Cami performs a shimmy of excitement. "This is going to be fun."

Fun is not what I would call it, but then again, I don't appear to be getting much of a say here. Forces bigger than me have taken over, and I'm just a passenger on this crazy ride. It's like getting on a roller coaster and not finding out it goes upside down until you are, in fact, upside down.

Cami and I say goodbye to Walker and then turn our mics on before walking back into the conference room. She grabs my hand and pulls me toward our table. "Hey, you two, we're back." She sounds so natural and normal, you'd think she just popped out into the hall for an acting lesson.

Paige looks up and smiles. "I didn't even know you'd left until a few seconds ago."

"You must be having a great time," Cami replies. After we sit down, she runs her hand up my arm and flirtatiously purrs, "We're having a good time, too, aren't we, Tim?"

"Yes ... sure ... loads of fun."

Paige does not look very pleased to hear this, which makes me mad. Does she think she's the only one allowed to find love? I scoot my chair closer to my date and ask, "Why don't we split a couple of things for supper?"

"Eating off of each other's plates is so romantic." Cami's weird stammer is clearly a thing of the past. She lowers her gaze and then looks up at me in such a way that if I didn't know she was acting, I'd really think she had a thing for me.

"Why don't we share, too?" Paige asks Fielden a bit aggressively.

"I want the steak," he tells her.

“I’ll have the sea bass.”

“I don’t like fish.”

Paige’s jaw clenches to the point that it appears locked. “You can decide on both entrees, then. I’ll be happy with anything.”

If I thought this date was bad before—and I did—it’s now positively excruciating. Not only do I know with certainty there’s no hope for Cami and me, I also know there’s no hope with Paige either. Everything I say or do seems to make her mad. It’s getting so bad, I’m not sure we’re even friends anymore.

What in the world is going on?

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE



PAIGE

I've been on some bad dates in my life, but this one really takes the cake. Instead of trying to get to know me better—which is how the evening started—Fielden totally closed down. Not only does he start giving me one-word answers to my questions, but after our food arrives, he eats with the concentration of a Buddhist monk at prayer time. It's like the whole world outside his head has ceased to exist.

Once our dinner dishes are cleared, Tim asks, "Who's up for dessert?"

"Yum!" Cami says enthusiastically.

There is no way I'm going to sit here for another half hour, even if it means being rewarded with sugary treats. "I'm tired," I announce. "I think I'm going to call it an early night."

Fielden clearly doesn't want dessert either, as he stands up abruptly. I barely have time to say goodnight to our tablemates before he pulls me away. Once we're in the lobby, he declares, "That was painful."

"Which parts?" I'm truly curious because for me, the whole night was excruciating.

"Sharing you with the other two," he answers. While that sounds sweet, Cami and Tim were so into each other that Fielden and I could have tap danced on the table in our birthday suits and they would have been none the wiser.

"Cami and Tim barely noticed us."

Instead of agreeing, he asks, “Would you like to go out again, just me and you?”

I’m pretty sure I wouldn’t but before I can tell him that, Tim and Cami exit the conference room. They’re arm-in-arm and seem to be having a grand old time. *What happened to dessert?* When they hug, I answer Fielden. “Sure. We can try it again.” My tone encompasses the same amount of excitement I use when scheduling a septic cleaning.

“Excellent.” Fielden smiles somewhat endearingly. Although after tonight, I’m pretty sure I won’t be developing feelings for him. “So, I guess I’ll see you at the next mixer on Friday.” I turn my head as he leans in to kiss me, so his lips land on my cheek.

“Goodnight.” I collect my coat and bag from the coat check and beat it out of there as fast as humanly possible. As soon as I get into my car, the full impact of the evening hits me.

Picking up my phone, I call Missy.

“How did it go?” she asks excitedly.

“I’ve never been on such a bad date.”

“Have you forgotten about the guy who took you to that expensive restaurant and then claimed to have forgotten his wallet when the check came?”

“Nope.”

She tries again. “What about the one who hit on your mom?” That occurred the night I introduced Bill—a guy I’d only seen twice—to my parents. He took one look at my mom and asked her if she’d like to have lunch sometime. Just the two of them.

“Tonight was worse,” I say.

“Oh, Paige.” She sounds so disappointed I feel tears prickle at the back of my eyes.

“I know ...” I pause to gain my composure. “Fielden’s actions were all over the map—into me one minute and the next it was like I didn’t even exist.”

“What was that all about?” she demands angrily.

“Nerves, I guess. I’m starting to see why Trina told us we needed to give people several chances before deciding against them. Having said that, Fielden’s made such a negative impact on me, I’m not sure I could ever see myself being attracted to him.”

Missy’s tone mellows. “It can’t be easy having cameras and a crew watch

everything you do.”

“No ...”

When I don’t finish answering, she asks, “That’s the most difficult part, right?”

“It’s not easy,” I tell her. “But I think the worst part is the pressure you feel to find someone.”

“But that’s why you’re on the show.”

“I know. But there’s no small talk for the sake of small talk. You’re judging everyone as a possible mate and they’re doing the same.”

She releases a groan of understanding. “And when you meet someone organically, there’s always an out.”

“Exactly. If you’re not vibing, you can tell them about your boyfriend and pretend any previous flirtation was imagined.”

“It really is a jungle out there, isn’t it?”

I kick the heat up to high hoping the car will defrost faster. “It’s more like getting pushed off a cliff and trying to figure out how to fly before splatting on the ground below.”

“Gross.”

“You’re so lucky you found Jamie,” I tell her. “Does he have a brother?”

“A married one,” she says.

“Friends?”

“Married ones.”

“Are there no single men left?” I ask dramatically. *I’m ready for my close-up, Mr. DeMille.*

“You’re on a show full of them,” she says. “You just need to wrap your head around what you’re doing and give the process a shot.”

I exhale my pent-up breath. “Yeah.” Then remembering I forgot to tell her the worst part, I announce, “Tim and Cami were with us.”

“What? Why?”

“The show messed up and double-booked us, so they put us on a double date.”

“How did tonight go for Tim?”

“He and Cami will probably be planning their wedding by the end of filming.”

“Really?” It’s nice to know someone else is as surprised by Tim’s attitude change regarding dating as I am.

I say, “I know you thought he wasn’t ready to date—heck, I thought that,

too, especially when he copped to only going on the show to make Eva jealous. But he suddenly seems all-in with Cami.”

Missy says, “Good for him. You should take a page out of his book.”

I don’t want to take a page out of his book as much as I’d like to pick up his book and hit him over the head with it. If I had known he was serious about something more than revenge, I would have made a play for him myself.

“Paige, are you still there?”

“Yep. Still here, just thinking.”

Before either of us can say anything else, another call comes in. Looking at the screen, I tell Missy, “It’s Tim.”

“Go talk to him and call me back. I want the tea on what’s going on with him and Cami.”

“If you don’t hear from me tonight, I’ll talk to you tomorrow,” I tell her.

Then, instead of taking Tim’s call, I turn my phone off and drive home. I don’t want to know how well things are going for him. I don’t want to talk about Fielden. All I want to do right now is crawl into bed and sleep for a week. *Where’s an anesthesiologist when you need one?*

By the time I walk into my house, I’m dragging like it’s three o’clock in the morning, but it’s only eight p.m. I climb the stairs with such effort you’d think I was ascending Mount Everest carrying a mule instead of the mule carrying me. As soon as I get to my room, I take off my dress and crawl into bed.

Being a grown-up is hard. And while parents always warn their kids about trying to grow up too quickly, it’s too bad none of them listen. The first big milestone is thirteen—yay, you’re a teenager! Then sixteen when you learn to drive. Eighteen makes you an adult—and in my case it means you finally get to take your back brace off. Then twenty-one rolls around and you’re finally allowed to drink alcohol. After twenty-one it’s all about graduating from college and getting your first real job—no more “fry captain” for you.

In your twenties you traverse the crazy world of adult dating. The expectation is that it will lead to love, marriage, and a family of your own. But the hard truth is that the longer it takes you to find your person, the more likely it is you never will. Enter thirty-two and still single ...

Being single didn’t feel so horrible before Missy and Jamie got together. Missy and I had each other to eat out with, watch movies with, complain

about how pathetic our love lives were, and dream about the futures we hoped to have someday.

Burrowing under the covers, I realize that single life has not been one wild, carefree adventure like those old episodes of *Sex and the City* led me to believe it would be. But I'm no glamorous city lady who lets anyone and everyone into her bed. I'm a small-town math teacher. I love pizza with extra cheese, not sushi. I'd rather go to bed early than stay out clubbing all night. I like wearing comfortable clothes and have thrown out every pair of Spanx I was stupid enough to buy.

Fluffing my pillow under my head, I release a ragged breath. I can only imagine the kind of guys who would respond if that were my online dating profile.

I console myself that I only have three weeks before filming ends. Surely, I can get through six more mixers and three more individual dates. Heck, I don't even have to go on solo dates if I don't want to.

Feeling slightly better, I roll over and go to sleep. If I keep my head down and don't cause any trouble, maybe nothing bad will happen.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO



TIM

Paige didn't answer my call last night after she left the country club, and she didn't answer my text this morning. She's either lost her phone or she's ignoring me. When I still haven't heard from her by five, I take matters into my own hands. I order two lobster tails from the kitchen and drive over to her house.

Her car is in the driveway so I'm a little perplexed when she doesn't answer the door. After ringing the bell three times, I resort to calling her. When she doesn't answer my call, I finally text her that if she doesn't open the door immediately, I'm going to call the fire department to break it down. I'm not sure that's really a thing, but it does the trick.

Moments later, Paige flings the door open and demands, "What is your problem?"

Walking inside, I tell her, "I was getting worried about you."

"Why?"

"Because you weren't answering my texts and calls. You could have been dead for all I knew."

"Tim." She sounds every ounce like a teacher about to rip a student a new one. "I am not required to answer your texts and calls."

Walking into her living room, I put down the bags of food I brought. "We're friends. Don't friends talk?"

"I left the club late last night and I worked today. I haven't had a chance

to call you back.”

“You left the club at eight,” I remind her. Which is early, not late.

“I go to bed at eight thirty.”

Instead of picking a fight, I tell her, “I brought lobster tail, roasted asparagus, and crème brûlée. I don’t suppose you can rustle up a couple of beers?” I already know Paige’s love language is food, but it’s still amusing how quickly she hustles off to the kitchen.

By the time she comes back, I’m sitting on one of her loveseats and pulling out to-go containers. Handing me a beer and silverware, she begrudgingly says, “It was nice of you to bring supper.”

“You’re welcome.”

She sits down next to me. “Why did you really come?”

“I didn’t get a chance to talk to you last night, and I wondered how your date went.”

“I’m not surprised you didn’t notice for yourself ...” she mutters.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means you were so engrossed in Cami, you barely looked up.” *Is she jealous?*

“Cami’s great,” I tell her. Too bad she’s not interested in dating me. “How did it go with Fielden?” I do my best to keep the loathing out of my voice.

“It was nice. He’s wonderful, actually.” *There’s no way she can mean that.*

Handing her a foil pan of lobster with drawn butter, I ask, “Are you going to see him again?”

“Of course. Are you going to see Cami?”

While taking my first bite, I try to decide if I’m going to perpetuate the hoax Cami and I are playing on people or if I’m going to tell Paige the truth. My gut says to come clean, but I don’t want her to feel sorry for me. I already feel like such a loser because of Eva.

I finally tell her, “Definitely. Thank you for encouraging me to give this show a real chance.”

Paige pushes her food away and then takes a giant swig of beer. “So glad I could help.”

“Why are you in such a bad mood?” I ask her.

“I’m not in a bad mood.” *Liar.*

Maybe she’s hangry. “Okay ...” I nudge her lobster closer to her, and she

starts to eat again.

When she's done with her food, she starts eyeing mine. "Please help me finish," I tell her. "I had a big lunch, and I don't have any room left."

I have no idea where Paige puts all the food, but she digs into my supper like she hasn't eaten in a week. When there's only one bite left, she looks up as though offering it to me. "Go ahead," I tell her.

I'm hoping that when she's done her mood will be better, but she still has a sour look on her face. "Paige," I say. "You can tell me if something's wrong."

"What could possibly be wrong?" Yeah, she's not selling it.

I suggest, "Maybe things aren't going as well with Fielden as you're letting on." I sound pretty darn hopeful.

Her eyes bug out. "What? No! Fielden is a great guy. Did you know that he likes to paddle board, too?"

"Are you sure he didn't say waterboard?" I ask before I can stop myself.

She scowls at me. "Fielden is very athletic."

We sit quietly for several long minutes before I tell her, "I miss you."

"Why?" She sounds mad again.

"Because you're my friend, and I like spending time with you. Even though we've seen each other three times this week, I feel like I've hardly had a chance to talk to you."

"You've been busy looking for love." She sounds accusatory.

"Isn't that what you wanted me to do?" There's no pleasing this woman.

Paige stands up. "Yes. Good job." Then she walks to her front door, signaling that it's time for me to go.

"Are you going somewhere?" I tease her.

She spins around and puts her hands on her hips like she's preparing to go to battle. "You're a regular comedian tonight, aren't you?"

I lean back on the sofa. "It's only six. Why don't we play a game or something?"

Paige meanders back into the living room. Then she surprises me by declaring, "Maybe you can be my new Missy."

"What does that mean?"

"Missy was my rock. We ate together, watched movies, played games ..."

"But not as much anymore now that Jamie is in the picture, huh?" She shakes her head sadly, so I tell her, "I can be your new Missy."

“I don’t want you to tell me about Cami, and I don’t want to talk about Fielden.”

I’m relieved not to hear about Fielden, but why wouldn’t she want to hear about Cami? “Don’t friends talk about everything?” I ask.

She sits on the loveseat across from mine. “Being on this show is a lot harder than I thought it would be. When we’re not shooting, I don’t want to think about it.”

I’m not sure if that’s the real reason or not, but I tell her, “Fine by me. Now, what game do you want to play?”

“How about if we watch a movie? I haven’t seen the one where Sandra Bullock plays a romance writer.”

“I’m in,” I tell her, relieved she no longer seems upset with me.

Paige moves over to my sofa. Putting her feet on my lap, she announces, “Missy used to rub my feet.”

“Really?”

“No, but my feet hurt and you’re here, so I figured I’d put you to good use.”

Paige is a hoot. One minute she’s mad at me for no apparent reason, and the next she’s demanding spa treatments. While I start her massage, she picks up the remote and pulls up the movie.

We spend the next two hours in companionable silence. I miss being able to sit side-by-side with someone without feeling the need to fill the air with sound. That level of comfort is a rare gift. To be honest, Eva and I didn’t have a lot of moments like that. My ex-wife was a talker and a planner. She liked to be in constant motion.

Paige appears to be the complete opposite. Not only does she eat like a racehorse in training—which was something Eva never did—but she also likes living in our small town. Eva was always looking for more. Paige seems perfectly content with what she already has.

As the movie progresses, I get more and more angry that we’re on *Midwestern Matchmaker*. Without this show, Paige would have never met Fielden, and I wouldn’t be pretending to be dating Cami.

Without reality programming, we have may have organically would up together.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE



PAIGE

After Tim left last night, I replayed the evening in my head. Not only did the man bring me the most delicious supper, but he rubbed my feet *and* watched a rom-com with me. The more I get to know him, the more I like him. And the more I like him, the more I wish he liked me in the same way.

But he made it clear he only wants to be my new Missy.

I take my lunch bag out from under my desk and pull out its contents. I've decided to eat in my classroom instead of going to the teacher's lounge. Everyone is excited about *Midwestern Matchmaker*, and they ask endless questions about how it's going. *Who do you like? Who do you hate? Have you kissed anyone?*

As I take the first bite of my tuna fish sandwich there's a knock on my door. I look up and see Chip standing there. "Mind if I come in?" he asks.

"I guess not," I say with a mouth full of food.

He walks in and sits at one of the students' desks in the front row before opening the brown paper sack he's carrying. He doesn't say a word as he digs into his lunch.

Long moments later, I finally ask, "Did you want something?"

"Just a quiet place to eat. I have a study group using my room."

I unsuccessfully try to stifle the giggle brewing inside me. "And you figured I'd never talk to you, so why not come here, huh?"

"Something like that."

“Have I really been that awful?” I ask. The look on his face is all the answer I need. “I’m really sorry,” I tell him. “I was so nervous about this show when we met that I was acting like a real jerk.”

“Not to mention, I look like your old piano teacher,” he reminds me.

“He really *was* mean.”

After a few more bites of his burrito, Chip asks, “So, how’s the show going for you?”

“Great.” Talk about an exaggeration. In reality, it’s only slightly better than being waterboarded.

“And you like Fielden, huh?”

No, but I’m not going to tell Chip that. “I’m trying to stay open,” I tell him. “I’m sorry he made such a bad first impression on you. That wasn’t cool.”

Chip shrugs. “I’m used to guys like that thinking they’re better than everyone.” That statement hits me hard as I realize that Chip probably didn’t fare much better in high school than I did.

As such, there’s no use acting like I don’t know what he’s talking about. “Fielden really is your typical alpha male, isn’t he?” Male posturing has been a thing since the dawn of time.

Chip looks up from his sandwich with incredulity written across his face. “Is that your type?”

“It’s never been before,” I tell him. “The problem is that I haven’t done that well with men I thought were my type, so I’m trying something new. What about Brittany?” I ask. “Is she your normal type?”

A slow smile takes over his face. “Brittany is completely different. The women I’ve gone out with in the past have been kind of passive and shy.” Waving his hands in the air like an old Sicilian woman, he says, “Brittany’s loud and in your face. She knows who she is, and she really embraces it.”

“I like her a lot,” I tell him. “Truthfully, I don’t think you could find a better woman.”

He gives me the side eye. “Because I’m a dorky eighth-grade science teacher?”

“You’re no more a dorky eighth-grade science teacher than I’m a dorky seventh-grade math teacher,” I tell him.

With a thoughtful look on his face, he decides, “You really are honoring our truce, aren’t you?”

I put my sandwich down before getting up and moving to the desk next to

his. After sitting down, I tell him, “We don’t need a truce. I made snap judgments about you, and I truly am sorry. I’d like to be your friend if you’re interested.”

He tips his head to the side. “That would be nice. Weird, but nice.”

Using our new friendship status to gather dirt, I ask, “What do you think about Tim and Cami? Do you think they’re a good couple?”

“I guess.”

“You don’t sound convinced.”

“I’ve been so focused on Brittany I haven’t really thought about anyone else.” Why do I get the feeling he isn’t telling the whole truth?

I feel the need to ask, “Did Tim talk about her at brunch on Sunday?”

Chip’s eyes shift from side-to-side like he’s about to tell me something good. But he only says, “He likes her.”

“And ...”

“What more is there to say?”

Come on, Chip, don’t make me regret our friendship so soon. There’s no way they ate an entire meal together without talking more about the show. “Did he mention anyone else?”

“Just you.”

Chip’s pronouncement has me sitting on the edge of my seat. “Really? What did he say about me?”

He crumples his lunch sack and throws it basketball-style into my waste can. “You know, just that you’re a good friend.” *Super*. Nodding my head, I stand back up and return to my desk. Clearly, Chip isn’t going to give me anything good.

The rest of the afternoon drags on like the last week of Lent. By the end of the day, I’m so sad about going home to an empty house, I think about calling Missy. But the truth is, Missy isn’t the person I want to see. I hold my phone closely while weighing the pros and cons of calling Tim.

I finally decide that if he could show up at my house unannounced and spend three hours with me, surely I can contact him. I don’t let myself think for too long before texting.

If you don’t get back to me immediately, I’m going to call the fire department and have them chop your door down.

I wait patiently for five minutes but when there’s no response, I call him and leave a message. “I wondered if you wanted to go bowling tonight or

something. Call me back.”

The whole way home, I tell myself how stupid I was to call Tim. What I need to do is forget him, and not be available when *he* wants to get together. I need to put him out of my mind or risk falling for him even harder. As I turn onto my street, I decide that I won't answer if he texts or calls back. Unfortunately, I've never been known for bionic discipline.

My phone rings once I reach the foot of my driveway. I hurry to put the gear shift into park. Then I enthusiastically answer, “Hey, Tim!”

“Word on the street is you're looking for a bowling partner.”

“I'm not sold on bowling. I just don't feel like being home.”

“How do you feel about fried cheese curds and cold beer?”

“Do elephants like peanuts? You know I was born and raised in Wisconsin, don't you?”

He laughs. “Yeah, me, too. Want to meet at Sudz in a half hour?”

“Oooh, and we could play darts! I'm in.”

“See you soon.”

As soon as I hang up, I run into the house to change out of my teaching clothes. I opt for a pair of loose jeans (I love fried cheese curds and don't want to be uncomfortable) and a light pink cashmere sweater. Then I put on some makeup, brush my hair, and I'm back out the door.

Tim is already at the pub when I get there. He's standing at the bar talking to the bartender, who was also in our graduating high school class. I join them and say, “Hey, Dwayne. I see you'll serve just about anyone, huh?”

Dwayne laughs as Tim turns around and teases, “Clearly, if you're here.”

Dwayne pours me a beer and slides it across the bar. “First one's on me for helping Maisy do so well in math this year. She loves your class, which is astounding as she's always claimed to hate numbers.”

I take the beer gratefully. “Well, I love your daughter almost as much as I love math, so we're a good fit.”

Tim leads the way across the room to a bar table near the dart boards. After we sit down, he says, “That's the kind of thing I missed the most when I lived in L.A.”

“What, math?” I joke. “Free beer?”

“No. The bond between people you've known your whole life. I haven't been here since I moved home, and Dwayne just smiled at me, and told me I was a slacker for not visiting sooner.”

“I get that some people feel the need to move away from their hometown

after school, but I'm glad I wasn't one of them. I've loved every minute of living here." Even though my childhood wasn't the easiest—I cite the dreaded back brace—I've always loved the energy of the town itself. Not to mention, I'd love for my kids to grow up in the same place their grandparents live—at least for half the year, anyway.

His expression becomes thoughtful. "But you'd be willing to leave if you found the right guy?"

"If I fell in love and my partner couldn't work in a small town, then I'd have to consider relocating."

He doesn't mention Fielden or Chicago. Instead, he asks, "If your guy got a job in Alaska, would you go?"

"Would you?" I counter.

"If I fell in love with a guy who lived in Alaska, there would be bigger questions at play than where we lived."

I love our easy banter. After taking a sip of my beer, I screw up my courage, and tell him, "I'd like to fall in love with someone who wants to spend the rest of his days in Elk Lake, but so far that doesn't seem to be an option." I stare at him intently like I'm trying to psychically inquire if he could be that guy.

When he doesn't say anything, I ask, "If things work out for you and Cami, would you move to Chicago?"

"I can't see why I'd have to," he says. "I mean, if we wind up together, she could be the catering manager at the country club."

"Isn't that job already taken?" *Who cares if it's taken?* The point is he's already thinking about the logistics of a future with another woman.

"Mavis Hinkle has the job, but she's ready to turn snowbird and spend half of the year in Florida."

"Cami's a lucky girl then," I say gloomily. "But what if she doesn't want to leave Chicago?"

He shrugs. "I don't know. I guess those are things we'll have to decide if matters progress. What about you and Fielden? Are you prepared to live in the Windy City?"

"I like Chicago..." I answer, sounding less than thrilled. *But that pizza ...*

"It's not Elk Lake."

"Nope. It's not."

"Maybe..." he starts to say but stops.

"Maybe what?"

“Maybe if things don’t work out with Cami and Fielden, we could get married and have some born-and-raised-in-Elk-Lake babies and live happily ever after.”

I gaze into his eyes, trying to decide if he’s serious. Because if he is, I’m going to suggest he dump Cami and give me a shot. But then he ruins my big moment by laughing. *Shoot, he was just joking.*

Standing up, Tim says, “Come on, show me what a hot shot dart player you are.”

I’m ready to beat the pants off him for getting my hopes up. “I say we place a wager.”

“What do you want if you win?” The look he gives me makes me shiver from the tips of my toes all the way to the hair follicles on top of my head.

“I want an undisclosed boon,” I tell him. “As in, I’ll make up my mind at a later date. What do you want if you win?”

He thinks for a minute before saying, “I don’t want to decide right now either.” I don’t know why, but that makes me nervous.

“Should we put a dollar amount cap on it?” I ask. “I have a roof to repair and can’t afford to break the bank on a bet.”

“Not so sure of yourself anymore, are you?”

“Oh, I’m sure,” I tell him. “Fine, the sky’s the limit.” *Please, let me be on target tonight.*

“I’ll take you off the hook,” he says. “The thing I’m thinking about won’t cost you a cent.” *What in the world is he thinking about?*

“Okay ...”

“That isn’t to say you’ll necessarily like it ...”

“Would Cami like it?” I ask.

“Possibly,” he says. I’m not any clearer on what he’s talking about.

“It doesn’t matter,” I tell him. “Because I’m going to win.” Then I lead the way over to the dart board closest to the wall and proceed to play the worst game of my life.

When the score is tallied, Tim declares, “I think you might have overstated your abilities a little bit.”

I stamp my foot like I do when I’m frustrated. “I did not. I’m just distracted tonight.”

“Distracted by what?” He wants to know. “Your charming date?”

OMG, are we flirting? “I didn’t realize we were on a date,” I tell him. “I thought we were just friends.”

“Friends can date, can’t they?”

“I ... um ...”

He continues, “Isn’t that what we’re doing on the show? Dating people and trying to figure out if we have a future with them.”

“Yeah, but what about Cami and Fielden?” I couldn’t give a rat’s ass about Fielden. What I really want to know is, what about Cami?

“I imagine they’ll probably go on dates with other people too, don’t you think? I mean, that’s what the show’s all about.”

I suddenly feel woozy like I’m going to crumple to the ground. Tim notices because he reaches out and takes my arm. “Are you okay?”

“Yes. No. I’m confused,” I tell him. “Are you really suggesting we go on a date?”

“Why do you sound so surprised?”

“I don’t know, because I didn’t think you were looking, but then you met Cami and you got all serious. I’m not sure what’s going on with you.”

“Why don’t we go out on a real date and find out?” he asks.

“On the show or privately?”

“Let’s do it on the show,” he says. “That way, if things work, we’ll have the footage of our real first date to show our grandkids.”

I’m so confused right now I can barely think. Even though my gut says Tim is being sincere, the idea of dating him on *Midwestern Matchmaker* bothers me. I don’t want to be one of a bunch of women fighting for his attention on national television. That’s when it hits me. Does Tim really like me, or is he trying to choreograph more interest in himself so he can get even with Eva?

My head starts to spin like it does when I go on a Ferris wheel. Ha, get it? *Ferris wheel? Tim Ferris?* I finally tell him, “I’m okay with dating you on the show.”

On the surface, a future with Tim is everything I could ever want. But if I find out he’s using me, I’ll make a fool of him, the likes of which would make his ex-wife’s betrayal look like child’s play.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR



TIM

I can't believe I got up the courage to ask Paige out on a real date last night. I was so worried she'd already fallen for Fielden that I almost didn't. But the night I went over to her house, the chemistry between us was undeniable. Then she called and asked if I wanted to go out last night. I felt like I owed it to the possibility of "us" to give it a shot.

I've been watching the clock all day waiting for the cast to arrive for tonight's mixer. At four on the nose, I head down to hair and makeup. One of the sound guys meets me at the door. "I need to put on your mic," he says.

"I thought you did that right before we started filming."

"We normally do, but I'm down a man tonight so I need to hook you up early." I let him do his job and as soon as he walks away, I click the volume off. Then I walk into the room.

Cami is the first person I see. "Paige and I went out last night."

Her eyes pop wide open. "And? What happened?"

"I asked her out on a real date."

She claps her hands enthusiastically. "That's so exciting! What about Fielden?"

"I don't know, and I don't care. All I know is that I have real feelings for Paige, and I needed to let her know I was interested in more than friendship."

She gestures at the air between us. "Are we still dating?"

"I've been thinking about that," I tell her. "I'm afraid if we break it off

right away, Paige might think I'm flighty and not take me seriously. So, maybe we should pretend we're still interested in each other."

"I can do that ..." Cami says. "But I hate it because I really like Paige and I don't want her to think we're in competition."

"Things go so quickly on reality shows, we can probably lose interest in each other by next week and then we'll be in the clear."

She nods her head. "Okay, but what about Eva? Do you still want to make her jealous?"

"Honestly, I couldn't care less what she thinks." Even though I'd already decided this, hearing the truth spoken out loud still startles me. Revenge has been my sole motive to keep breathing since leaving L.A. But ever since I've gotten to know Paige, I've nearly stopped thinking about my ex-wife. Even when Cami suggested helping me make Eva jealous, I only agreed because I didn't think Paige was an option.

"Good for you," Cami says.

I ask, "How are things going between you and Walker?"

Her eyes lose focus like she's lost in a fantasy. "He's amazing. Did you know that he spends every Sunday at a homeless shelter serving meals?"

"He's a good guy," I confirm as I watch Paige walk into the room.

She smiles when she sees me, but then she notices who I'm talking to, and her energy falters. I motion her toward us. As soon as she arrives, I say, "I was just telling Cami about what a great dart player you are."

Her eyes flicker toward Cami's. "Elk Lake champion for three years running." She must be joking.

"It sounds like you had a great time," Cami says brightly.

"Yeah ..." Paige seems confused by Cami's easy acceptance of me going out with another woman.

Cami's gaze darts between us. "Well, I guess I should go change. See you two later."

After she leaves, Paige says, "She doesn't seem upset about our going out last night."

I remind her, "When you introduced us, you told her we were friends. She probably thinks it was just a friendly game of darts."

"But it *was* more, right?" She looks up at me hopefully.

"Isn't that what we decided to investigate?" I ask her.

Her head bobs up and down.

"Good. Now come on, let's go get beautiful for the cameras."

Paige and I sit side-by-side through hair and makeup, but we don't talk. It's not tense or weird, instead it's that peaceful kind of silence we seem to do so well. Somehow, she's ready before me and excuses herself to go get dressed.

While I'm being brushed with a bronzer, I realize that as much as I dislike being on this show, it's propelled me into being ready to date again. It's forced me to stop thinking about Eva enough that I've finally blown through the last stages of grief—namely depression and anger.

An hour and a half later, I'm ready for the mixer and standing in the ballroom. When Paige walks in, my breath catches in my throat. She's wearing the strapless black leather dress she had on the first night we ate together at the club, and she's simply stunning. I can't help but feel proud that a woman like that would agree to go out with a guy like me. It's not just that she's beautiful, but she's grounded and smart. She readily enjoys the simple things in life. In other words, she's completely untainted by city living.

While Paige walks toward me, Trina gets everyone's attention and announces, "I'm sure you've noticed we're doing things a little differently this season. I wanted to let you know there are a few more surprises coming your way."

"I don't like surprises," the guy named Carl calls out.

"I get that," Trina says. "But if you read your contracts carefully, it states that you agree to any possible social scenario *Midwestern Matchmaker* might come up with." For some reason, that announcement makes the hair on my arms stand at attention.

Trina hurries to assure everyone, "Don't worry. The goal is still to help you find your future partner."

"Then why are you changing things?" Adele wants to know.

Trina smiles. "Because you're all doing such a great job interacting this season, the show might be a little boring for the viewers."

"So you're going to try to enhance the drama," I accuse. *What happened to Midwestern Matchmaker priding themselves on being a nice wholesome program?*

"You might say that, Tim. And we're going to start tonight."

The inside of the ballroom gets so quiet you could hear a mouse burp. But while some people seem kind of pumped, it's obvious most are also scared.

"I'll tell you more about that later," Trina says. "For now, enjoy the

mixer!” It’s like she just called for the start of the *Hunger Games* except nobody is running to gather supplies. Instead, we’re standing as still as marble statues, afraid to move.

May the odds ever be in our favor.

Cami, looking beautiful in a form-fitting red dress, walks over to me. “What do you think that’s all about?”

“I have no idea, but it doesn’t sound good.”

Paige finally arrives at my side. “I don’t like this at all.”

Before either Cami or I can agree with her, the ballroom door opens and a whole slew of new people walk in. People we’ve never seen before.

Once again, Trina gets everyone’s attention before facing the camera and saying, “Many of you have already seemed to pair off, and while we love to see that, we also want to make sure you’re not just settling because you don’t feel there are enough options for you.”

Silence.

“As such,” she continues, “we’ve brought in some of the other singles who applied to be on the show for tonight’s mixer. If any of you decide you’re interested in one of them, we’ll invite them to join us for the rest of the filming and then ask one of the original cast members to leave.”

“Can they do that?” Cami wants to know.

“I’m sure they’ve worded the contract in such a way they can,” I tell her, all the while wondering how to get myself kicked off the show. That would seriously be my best-case scenario.

“Okay, everyone,” Trina booms. “Get going and meet some new singles!”

The original cast looks nervous as the new people begin to infiltrate their already established groups.

A tall and amazingly good-looking guy joins me, Cami, and Paige. He eyes both ladies with interest before saying, “Hey there, my name’s Decker.”

Decker? Why does that name sound familiar? That’s when it hits me: he’s the guy whose place I took. “You seem to have recovered from your skiing accident pretty quickly,” I tell him.

With a confused look on his face—that only seems to make him more handsome—he asks, “What are you talking about?”

“Trina asked me to be on the show because an original cast member named Decker broke both of his legs skiing.”

“Uh, no. I was told I was on the show, but then they called me at the last minute and said their first choice had become available. They offered me this

mid-season placement instead.”

Paige, Cami, and I stare at him like he just announced he’d come from a far-off galaxy to claim Earth for his own kind. I finally manage, “It looks like we’ve both been lied to.”

Decker shrugs. “Guess so.” Then he smiles at Cami and Paige. “How are you two ladies doing tonight?”

While he tries to schmooze them, I excuse myself to find Trina. I know without a shadow of a doubt that I’m being used, and I’m going to find out why.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE



PAIGE

I couldn't wait to see Tim after our beer and dart date last night. I thought things with Cami might be weird, but she doesn't appear to see me as any competition at all. I guess Tim's right, and she assumes we're just friends. That makes me feel horrible, and I vow to somehow make things right. I never want her to feel like she's being duped.

But in the meantime, it looks like things are getting interesting on *Midwestern Matchmaker*. Ever since Tim stormed off, Cami and I have been talking to this new guy.

"So," Decker says, "which one of you ladies has yet to find her match?"

Before we can answer, Fielden comes over and puts his arm around me. "Hey babe, I've missed you." First of all, I hate being called "babe." Additionally, he's staring right at Decker, not at me.

Full of irritation, I ask him, "Are you and Decker an item?"

Looking down at me with a startled expression on his face, he says, "What? No. I was talking to you."

"Then you should look at me."

"Sorry, babe. I just didn't like seeing this new guy trying to pick up my girl."

Gross. "I'm not your girl," I tell Fielden. I would never have applied to be on this show had I known they were going to resort to the below board tactics.

He looks surprised. “Sure you are. We’ve been on one date and are planning to go on another.”

“Yes, we went on one date, which was enough for me to know we aren’t a match.”

I initially feel bad for being brusque, but Fielden bounces back so quickly, I want to punch him. He shrugs and says, “That’s fine. I’ve got my eye on one of the new girls.” Then he hightails it off in hot pursuit of her.

“I thought you and Fielden were a thing,” Cami says.

“It was the most awkward date I’ve ever been on in my life,” I tell her honestly.

Cami seems genuinely confused and appears to be on the verge of saying something to me, but Decker interrupts her.

He sidles closer to me. “Looks like you and I were meant to be.”

I stare up at his gorgeously chiseled face and dark wavy hair. Instead of disabusing him of that notion, I ask, “What do you do for a living, Decker?”

“I’m a model and actor.” Why am I not surprised? He smiles and flashes the whitest teeth I’ve ever seen. Seriously, they probably glow in the dark.

“I bet you’re hoping to jump start your career by being on this show,” I tell him.

His face curls up into a sneer. “Jump start? Hardly. I’m already in every Sunday circular in the newspaper.”

I don’t know how to tell him that nobody under sixty even reads a real newspaper anymore, so I ask, “What was your last acting job?”

“I was the guy running in the park in that tampon commercial,” he says proudly.

“Trust me, Decker,” I tell him. “I’m not your type.”

“Sure, you are. You’re blonde and beautiful. How could that not be my type?”

Hands up, who doesn’t love a guy who won’t take no for an answer? “I’m never moving out of Elk Lake,” I tell him. “So, unless you’re interested in giving up your glamorous life, then you should really look elsewhere.”

He immediately shifts his attention to Cami. “How about you? Are you interested?” He’s as confident as if he was a world class sprinter on his way to a fire sale.

“No, thank you,” Cami tells him. “I’ve already met a very nice man.”

Darn it, she’s talking about Tim. Once again, I feel the need to tell her I’ve thrown my hat into the ring, but I should really talk to Tim about it first.

After Decker walks away eager to find someone who will fall for his cheesy lines, I tell Cami, “This isn’t turning out to be the show I thought it would be.”

She glances around the room. “If I had to guess, I’d say everyone else is thinking the same thing.” She adds, “There’s a reason we all applied to be on *Midwestern Matchmaker* and not *Bachelor Bums* or *Sex Kittens*.”

“I wonder why they’re changing things?”

She says, “Their ratings have probably slipped, and they’ve decided to pander to the masses.”

In the distance, I see Tim talking to Trina. It appears he’s giving her a piece of his mind. His hands are flailing in the air to the point where he looks like he’s about to burst a gasket. Trina doesn’t seem comfortable, but her military-like stance would indicate she’s sticking to her guns.

Cami and I are still talking when Tim comes back to us. “She set me up,” he declares heatedly.

“What? How?” I want to know.

“She found out who I am, or rather who my ex is, and decided to put me on the show for dramatic effect.”

“But you said they agreed not to mention Eva unless you did so first,” I remind him.

“Right, but they didn’t agree to that until the show started filming. Thank goodness I’ve made sure to always have my mic on mute every time I’ve mentioned her.”

“So they can’t bring her up ...” I confirm.

Cami interrupts, “Unless they’re going to blindside you.”

“No way,” Tim says. “I’ve already told them I’ve had my lawyer look at the contract and if they do anything to break it, I’ll sue them for all they’re worth.”

“It’s just so underhanded,” I say disappointedly.

“It’s slimy,” Cami agrees. “But now you have more men to choose from. That’s a good thing, right?”

I notice how she says that *I* have more men to choose from and doesn’t include herself in the mix. She thinks she has Tim, and even though I like her, that makes me angry. So I tell her, “We *all* have more people to choose from.”

Cami looks at Tim like they’re sharing some secret before saying, “Not me. I’m already spoken for.”

Her confidence is infuriating. How dare she think Tim is already hers? “Be careful,” I warn her. “Nothing is done until it’s done.” While not my most profound sentence, I still get my point across.

Cami seems taken aback. “I know what I want, Paige, and I’m hopeful the person I want feels the same way.”

While she has every right to her feelings, especially as she doesn’t know that Tim has asked me out for real, her self-assuredness still smarts. I’m about to pull Tim off to the side and tell him that we need to set Cami straight when Trina claps her hands. *Again*. I’m going to have hand-clapping PTSD by the time we’re done filming.

“Can I have everyone’s attention, please!” Every eye in the room turns to look at her. “We’re going to have a little competition.”

“What now, Red Rover?” someone calls out.

“It’s a dancing competition,” Trina tells us before explaining, “Each couple must include one member of the original cast and one of our new guests.”

“Well, I’m out,” I announce while turning away.

“I’ll come with you,” Cami says.

Tim is right behind us. We station ourselves by the wall next to the buffet and watch as new couples begin to form on the designated dance floor. There’s an aura of stilted excitement in the air.

The music ranges from nineteen forties swing dancing all the way to the Macarena. All the singles not dancing—except for the three of us—stand on the sidelines and cheer on the participants. Meanwhile, I have a strange sensation the floor is going to open up and we’re all going to be floating in outer space. *Who needs drugs when you’ve got* *Midwestern Matchmaker*?

Eight songs later, Carl, from the original cast, and Linnie, from the new group, are crowned the winners. Trina declares, “You’ve each won a thousand-dollar Visa gift card!” Cheers resonate from the crowd.

“What are they going to do next?” Tim wonders, “Tie us together for a three-legged race?”

Cami laughs. “My money’s on mud wrestling.”

“Why not just go straight to tackle football and be done with it?” I joke. “That way they could wean down the group by breaking real bones.”

“I don’t know what’s coming next,” Tim says, “but I can guarantee we won’t like it.”

And while I hope to God his words aren’t prophetic, I have a strong sense

they probably are.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX



TIM

Trina bald-faced lied to me last night when she said the producers told her Decker had been injured. There's no way she didn't know the truth, and her betrayal fuels an anger in me the likes of which I haven't felt since Eva left.

My parents are still eating when I walk into the dining room. As I sit down, I irritably ask, "Why don't we eat in the kitchen like normal people?"

My mom gasps audibly. "What bug crawled up *your* butt today?"

Instead of telling her, I say, "It would be easier to eat at the kitchen table."

"It's very civilized to eat in the dining room," she says like she's channeling Maggie Smith from *Downton Abbey*. This has been her line ever since she watched the first season.

Changing the subject, my dad wants to know, "How was the mixer last night?"

"Horrible," I grumble. "They're switching things up a lot."

My parents share a curious look before my dad asks, "Like what?"

"I don't know—games, stupid competitions. It's almost like it's a different show entirely."

"I think it sounds like fun," my mom decides. "I've watched *Midwestern Matchmaker* before and while it's cute, it's always been a little dull."

"Why have *you* watched it?" I want to know. "It doesn't seem like your kind of thing at all." I cite her *Masterpiece Theater* addiction.

“I tuned in the first time after Eva left,” my mom confesses. “I so enjoyed helping Jonathon and Jacob get together, I thought I might learn something to help you find your next wife.”

Of course she did. “Mom, please stop interfering. I promise I’ll find somebody on my own, and she will be a much better fit than Eva ever was.” I’m obviously thinking about Paige, and while my mom will do backflips if things work out between the two of us, it’s still early days. That’s the reason I don’t tell her anything.

“I’m going into the club today,” my dad announces.

“Why?” I’d rather he do anything else ... fly to the moon, climb an active volcano, organize my sock drawer ...

“I want to see how everything’s going.”

“I’ll come with you,” my mom says enthusiastically.

A premonition of doom washes over me. I’m already on the outs with Trina, along with everyone else from *Midwestern Matchmaker*. The last thing I need is for my parents to get involved and make things even more uncomfortable. “I don’t think either of you should go in today.” *Or ever*, at least until the show is done filming.

My dad puts another spoonful of scrambled eggs on his plate. “It’s a good thing you’re not my boss then.” The implication is clear. He has seniority over me, so he’ll do whatever he wants to do. My mother looks equally determined.

“Do whatever you want,” I tell them. I proceed to eat the rest of the meal without poking the bear, or bears, in this case. It’s not bad enough I’m in a fictitious love triangle with Cami and Paige, but the show producers are clearly playing games with us, and now my parents want in on the action, too.

When I’m done, I pick up my plate and leave the room. My dad calls after me, “See you later, son.”

Apparently, feeling the need to rub it in, my mom adds, “We can’t wait!”

I consider my options during my commute to the club. I could quit the show and face the consequences—a.k.a. lawyers; I could come out and tell Paige that Cami and I are only pretending to be into each other to make Eva jealous, which might make her so angry that she walks away—darn that pity pact; or I could gas up the car and leave town.

Pulling into the club parking lot, I try to decide where my first destination should be. I’m thinking Florida or Costa Rica. As I walk into the building, I visualize my toes sinking into tropical sand. Then I run into Terry.

“Hey man, what’s up?” I ask him.

“I just got a call from your dad,” he says haltingly.

“Oh yeah, he and my mom are coming in today.”

“He told you?”

Taking off my coat, I say, “What’s the big deal?” Other than going completely against my wishes, that is.

“I thought you’d be mad.”

“I’m not happy,” I tell him. “But he’s the majority shareholder here, so what can I do?”

Terry runs his hands through his thinning hair. “I guess I thought you’d be ticked your parents were going to be on the show.”

A stabbing pain shoots through my chest. “WHAT?”

“Trina is going to interview them.”

“Oh, no she’s not,” I say before asking, “How do you even know that?”

“Trina asked me for your parents’ number early this morning, so I gave it to her.” He looks sheepish while adding, “I followed her and listened to her end of the call.”

Heat pours through my veins like acid. “What exactly did she say?”

“She told your parents she had some questions for them.”

My heart rate decreases slightly. “Why do you assume she wants them on the show? Maybe they’re club-related queries.”

While walking toward the elevator, Terry clarifies, “She told them they’d have hair and makeup here. I assumed that meant they would be in front of the camera.”

That is rather clear. “Did she say anything about interviewing any of the other parents?”

“Not that I heard.”

“Thanks for the heads up, Terry.” I turn around and hurry to reception. “Please let me know the minute my parents get here,” I tell the front desk attendant. He responds with a thumbs up.

I could walk out the front door now and still get as far as Kentucky by nightfall. But if I did that, I’d miss seeing Paige. Picking up my phone, I call her.

She answers, “You do realize you make more phone calls than both of my parents combined.”

Skipping the small talk, I say, “I just found out Trina is interviewing my parents for the show.”

“Seriously?”

“Are they talking to yours?” I ask her.

“My folks are in Florida.”

“I’m sure they have affiliates there.”

“Why in the world would they want to talk to my parents?” she asks. “I’m nothing special.”

“Maybe they’re talking to everyone’s parents,” I say hopefully. Because if that’s the case then it would mean they aren’t just gunning for me.

“I can call them and get back to you,” she offers.

“I would appreciate that.”

After we hang up, I head toward the ballroom hoping to find Trina. She’s not there or anywhere else I look. If I had to guess, I’d say she’s in hiding.

I’m nervously wasting the morning in my office when the front desk calls. “Your parents just walked in, sir.”

I run out the door so quickly, you’d think I’d just learned there was a bomb under my chair. Instead of waiting for the elevator, I dash down the stairs to the first floor. Once I’m in the lobby, I ask Frank which way they went. He points to the conference room where hair and makeup is stationed.

I’m met at the door by one of the producers from the show who tells me, “I’m sorry, you can’t go in there. They’re filming.”

“Yes, I know. They’re filming my parents and I want to know why.” I eye the door, and speculate if I could kick it in.

“You’ll find out everything in good time,” she tells me with what appears to be a sinister smile on her face.

“What’s your name?” I ask.

“Marva.”

“Look, Marva,” I tell her. “I need my dad. There’s an emergency in the kitchen.”

“Should we call the fire department?” she asks.

“It’s not that kind of emergency.” She crosses her arms and stares at me, waiting to hear what the crisis is.

“It’s just that ... well ... the fish has arrived and it’s scrod, not red fish.” *Seriously, Tim, that’s the best you can come up with?*

“That doesn’t sound too urgent,” Marva says. “I’ll tell your dad when he’s done.”

Instead of leaving, I find a chair and station it right outside the door. I’m going to sit here and wait for my parents until I can confront them and Trina

about what's going on.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN



PAIGE

I couldn't get a hold of my parents, so I left messages on both of their phones before heading to Bride's Paradise to hang out with Missy. They might call me back today or it could be a week. Neither one of them checks their messages regularly when they're in Florida.

"Things are getting really weird on the show," I tell Missy while helping her hang up veils.

"How so?"

"Remember how I told you about the games last week ..." She nods her head, so I continue, "Well, last night they brought in a whole bunch of new singles to mix it up a bit."

"That sounds fun."

"Except that tonight they're going to start replacing some of the existing cast with the new people."

She stops what she's doing and turns around to look at me. "Does that mean you wouldn't get paid?"

"I looked at the contract this morning," I tell her. "It states that we're to be available for five weeks of shooting, but if something happens and we leave the show, we'll only get paid for the episodes we filmed. I take that to mean if they get rid of us, they won't legally have to pay us."

"Shoot, you need all the money you can get for your roof," she says.

"Yes, I do."

“What are you going to do?”

“What can I do? I guess I’m just going to keep showing up and hope for the best.”

“How are things going with Fielden?” she asks. I haven’t filled her in on the new developments in my love life—exit Fielden, enter Tim—so I take a few minutes and do that.

“I love the idea of you and Tim!” she says enthusiastically.

“You don’t think he’s still hung up on Eva? Because I’m worried.”

Missy sits down on a pincushion stool. “I thought he was over Eva when he started dating Cami. And speaking of Cami, is she still in the picture?”

I sit cross-legged on the floor next to her. “Yeah, she is. I hate feeling like I’m in competition with her.”

“It’s a dating show,” Missy says. “That’s kind of how it goes. Someone is liable to have their heart broken.”

“It just feels bad.” I hurry to add, “It’ll feel worse if Tim and Cami wind up together and I’m left hanging.”

“You have to trust that the best thing will happen.” Missy has always had a penchant for trusting in destiny.

“I’m not sure if you know this about me,” I tell her. “But I’m not prone to believe everything will always work out. Especially as it pertains to my life.”

“You’ve certainly been a lot more optimistic in the past than you are now,” she reminds me. “I know you’re scared, but come on, this is the adventure of a lifetime. And if you and Tim become an item, you’ll never have to leave Elk Lake. It’s a win for all of us.”

“But what if Tim winds up with Cami and I don’t find anybody? Then I get to sit back and watch how happy they are. What about that?”

Missy bends down and takes my hands in hers. “You were my cheerleader before I found Jamie. Back then, I was the one who didn’t believe I could have a happy ending, but you kept assuring me I’d have one.”

“Yeah, but Jamie wasn’t dating a bunch of other women ...”

“Because he didn’t want to date anyone,” she reminds me. “I was head over heels for him, and he positively refused to give me a chance. Until he did. I don’t want you giving up before the game is over.”

“I don’t want love to be a game,” I moan.

“Then you shouldn’t have gone on a dating show.” My lip curls like she just insulted my cat. She hurries to add, “You’re on it now so you might as well make the best of it. And I have a feeling you won’t be sorry.”

I continue to hang out with Missy until three o'clock. Then I go home to get my dress for tonight's mixer. I have no idea how they're going to decide who will leave the show, but I don't want it to be me because that will mean that Tim and Cami will have more time together.

In hopes of chatting privately with Tim, I arrive at the club a full thirty minutes ahead of schedule. I hate to admit this while he's also dating someone else, but the man calms me. To make matters worse, not only can I see a future with him, but I'm starting to think he might be the one.

I've walked through the front doors of the club so many times in recent days, it's starting to feel commonplace. What's not normal is the scene that greets me. Tim and his parents are engaged in what appears to be a boisterous exchange.

Tim yells, "Why didn't you tell me? Why the secrecy?"

"Because you would have thrown a fit." His mother gestures around him, before adding, "Much like you're doing now."

His dad wants in on the action. "Really, Timothy. Is this any way to behave at work?"

"Are you kidding me right now?" Tim demands. But instead of waiting for them to answer, he spins around and addresses Trina who's standing against the wall. "Nothing like this was in our contract."

She smiles confidently. "The contract states clearly that we're allowed to contact your friends and family."

She's right. I saw that and thought it would be fun if they interviewed Missy. She would have loved that.

Tim doesn't seem to remember that part. "Trina, I will not tolerate being made a fool of. Do you understand?"

His mom interjects, "Why in the world would your father and I make a fool of you? What a horrible thing to imply."

Tim faces her, looking mildly contrite, before answering, "I don't think you'd make a fool of me, but these television people are vultures. They will edit whatever you say to fit the story they've created for me."

"Tim," Trina interrupts, "while I will agree that things have gone differently this season, I have assured you, and will do so again, that my only interest is in helping singles find their love match. And that includes you."

"Maybe so, Trina. But as you've said yourself, *you* don't have any real power on the show." Then he asks his dad, "What did you say in there about me?"

The look on Mr. Ferris' face more than indicates he's not pleased with his son. "I suppose you'll find out in good time." He motions for his wife to join him. "Your mother and I are going to have a late lunch with friends at the Premier Club. I hope this doesn't upset your day further."

As Tim's parents walk away, I hurry to join him. "That was quite a scene."

He looks relieved to see me. "Paige, hi." Running his hands through his hair, he says, "I have no idea what's going on tonight, but I'm tempted to call in sick."

"You can't do that!" I practically yell. If Tim doesn't show up, then I'll be on my own like a bucket of chum during *Shark Week*.

But instead of agreeing to attend tonight's mixer, he turns to Trina and says, "I'm not feeling well. I think I've caught a bug."

Her eyes narrow as her jaw clenches. "You're not going to want to miss tonight's mixer, Tim."

"Really? I guess I'll just have to get back to you on that. I wouldn't want anyone else to get sick." As an afterthought, he adds, "I think there's something in the contract about quarantining myself in case of illness."

He takes my hand and pulls me toward the elevator. When we're far enough away not to be overheard, he asks, "Can you believe the gall of that woman?"

While I should just let him carry on until he's gotten everything out of his system, I feel compelled to say, "Maybe it's not as bad as you think it is."

"Did the show talk to your parents?" he asks.

"I don't know, they haven't called me back."

"Would you mind if they did?"

"Not particularly. I mean, I like my parents, and I know they want what's best for me. I can't imagine they'd set out to embarrass me." Before he can comment, I tell him, "As I'm sure *your* parents would never embarrass you."

"Not purposefully, no." He sounds resigned.

"Then why are you so mad?"

The doors to the elevator open, and once we're inside, he says, "I hate feeling like I have no control. I felt like that when my wife announced she was leaving me, and I vowed to never feel like that again."

"Then why did you agree to come on *Midwestern Matchmaker*?"

"You know why," he says. "I initially did it so Eva would know that I've moved on and that I'm no longer a pathetic excuse for a man."

“Tim ...” I squeeze his hand. “You’re not pathetic.”

Instead of agreeing, he pushes the button to stop the elevator, and says, “But my reasons for doing the show have changed.” He looks down at me with serious emotion written across his face. “And a lot of that is because of you.”

“Because of our pity pact?” I venture.

“No, Paige.” He runs his fingers gently across my cheek, leaving a tingling trail of yearning behind. “Because of *you*.” His eyes smolder with intent as his gaze devours mine. It’s like he can see my very soul, rendering me helpless as he pulls me into his orbit. I couldn’t look away if my life depended on it.

My stomach drops like I’ve just fallen from a fifty-story building as Tim leans toward me. His lips ever-so-gently meet mine causing an inferno of desire to grow. This is the exact sensation I hoped his kiss would invoke. It’s the very one I feared. *Does Tim kiss Cami like this? Is he kissing anyone else?*

My lack of experience with the male species is due to my innate insecurity. An insecurity that has been my cross to bear much as the body brace was that I wore. And yet, I know that it’s time to shed my fears. The only way to find true love is to be willing to take a risk—even though there are no guarantees things will work out the way I want them to.

After long minutes—maybe hours, I can’t tell—Tim lifts his head. I sigh, “That was nice.” *Nice? That’s the best I’ve got?* Kissing Tim was phenomenal, outstanding, exhilarating, and potentially life changing.

His voice is gravelly and full of promise. “That was lovely.” A new wave of chills runs through me. Tim Ferris just kissed me, and it was every bit as thrilling as I used to dream of it being when we were in high school. *Yes, I dreamed about him.*

Tim starts the elevator again. When the doors open, I realize we’ve been here for a while. Once we step out, I try to get our conversation back on track. “So, to recap, you don’t care about revenge anymore, and you’re seriously trying to find love.”

“Yes.”

As we walk into his office, I sit down on the couch and confess, “I was worried the only reason you wanted to date me on the show was to pit me and Cami against each other to make Eva jealous.”

He sits down next to me. “I don’t care what my ex thinks anymore. Your

opinion is all that matters right now.” As much as I want to ask him about Cami’s opinion, I don’t want to ruin the current mood.

“You’re going to come to the mixer tonight, right?” I ask him.

There’s a long pause before he answers, “I don’t know yet.”

“Please, Tim. I don’t want to be stuck out there by myself.”

“You’ll have Cami, Brittany, and Chip. And who knows, you might meet other people.” He gives me a nervous look like he’s talking about other men. Which of course I should want to do, being that this is a dating show, but the truth is I’m not interested. If Tim is as serious about me as I am about him, then I’m ready to jump on board.

My phone alarm rings, alerting me that it’s time for hair and makeup, so I tell him, “I’m going to head down and get ready. You coming?”

“No. I want to make Trina sweat for a while. I’ll be down later.”

Standing up, I tell him, “Okay, I’ll see you at the mixer then.” I give him my sternest look, hoping to intimidate him into showing.

Trina warned us that something was going to happen tonight, and as much as I hope it’s just another stupid game, I know at the very minimum they’re going to send one or more of the original cast members home. And now that Tim has kissed me, there’s no way I want to leave.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT



TIM

I've kissed more than my fair share of women. Heck, I've been dating since high school and barely took a break between girlfriends. In other words, there's been a lot of kissing. But no one, and I mean no one, has ever made me feel quite like Paige. Her touch was tentative and naïve, but it was also beseeching and demanding. I felt how much she wanted me, and I'm left humbled by the experience.

I replay the last few minutes repeatedly and realize that I can't leave Paige on her own tonight. I want to spend every moment that I can with her, even if it means putting up with the ridiculous machinations of a reality show.

After she leaves my office, I think about what she asked me. Why *am* I so worked up about *Midwestern Matchmaker* talking to my parents? I was practically unhinged when I saw them come out of the conference room, and that is not okay.

The ending of my marriage has damaged me in ways I don't know how to recover from. I don't care about Eva anymore. She's in the past. But her abandonment has left me feeling fragile.

Regardless of how progressive our society has become, men are still taught to believe that in order to be a real man, they must be emotionally strong, have a good job, and be able to take care of their family's needs. They're never instructed what to do when their spouse leaves them for

someone else.

I briefly consider the benefits of requiring emotional health classes for all children who attend school. Because let's face it, that's something they'll need a heck of a lot more than knowing how to diagram molecules or conjugate French verbs.

Grabbing my clothes for tonight, I make a side stop at the men's locker room and take a hot shower. It's not so much that I'm hoping to wash away the stress as I want to refresh my attitude. I'm on *Midwestern Matchmaker* to move on with my life, and I've done that.

Yes, they have a hidden agenda, but I made sure they couldn't act on it. Therefore, there's no reason I can't be like every other person on the show. With renewed acceptance and, dare I say *enthusiasm*, I leave the locker room and walk headfirst into tonight's mixer.

"Hello, singles!" Trina greets us. I'm once again standing with Paige and Cami. "We have a special guest for you tonight, but that's coming later. Right now, we're going to have you mingle while we take you off to interview you about why you think we should keep you on *Midwestern Matchmaker*. I'm sorry to tell you this, but tonight, two of you are going to leave us."

Her announcement is met with groans. Everyone but me applied to this show to find love. To kick them off early is truly reprehensible. Having said that, *pick me!* I want out so badly I can taste it.

Trina comes over to our group and touches my arm. "Tim, we'd like to interview you first."

I'd like to talk to her too. After following her across the ballroom to where a camera is set up, I sit down on one of the chairs. Trina sits next to me.

The cameraman calls out, "In three, two ..." then he forms his finger into a pretend gun and shoots it. *Death by reality dating ...*

"Tim," Trina says with what sounds like real concern, "you're getting a little agitated being on the show, aren't you?"

"You could say that." My jaw is so tight I wonder if this is what tetanus feels like.

“And that’s because your ex-wife left you, right?”

Oh no, she didn’t. Through gritted teeth, I tell her, “I believe there were terms to the contract I signed with *Midwestern Matchmaker* and one of those terms was that you couldn’t bring up my ex-wife.”

“Ah,” she says. “But those terms only applied if you didn’t bring up Eva first.”

“I didn’t.”

She opens a manilla envelope, that I’m just now realizing she’s holding, and rifles through the papers. “I have a whole bunch of transcripts here where you’re clearly talking about your ex.”

I grab the papers out of her hand and look through them. “My mic was turned off when I said all of these things.”

“The mute feature on your audio was cut the first time we caught you turning it off.”

“You can’t do that,” I hiss.

“It’s states clearly in your contract that we’re allowed to use all audio from the time you walk into hair and makeup until the end of the evening.”

I push out of my chair into a warrior stance—lookout, villagers, I’m on the warpath. “I’m not going to stay here for this ...” I realize I’m giving them the kind of drama they’re so obviously craving, but I can’t seem to help myself.

Trina doesn’t move or try to stop me. Instead, she says, “Will you look who’s coming through the ballroom doors ...”

And just like that, Eva walks back into my life.

I snap around, wondering whose neck to wring first. “You brought Eva here?”

“We did. You made it rather obvious that your failure to move forward has to do with your inability to let go of your past. We thought the best way for you to let go was to confront the person responsible.”

“Right. You want me to think you did this for me, when everyone knows this was done for the show’s ratings.” Even though I’m a hundred percent sure they will cut this footage, I turn to the camera and say, “This is a warning to all you singles who think you can find love on reality television. All you’re going to find are people who want to make a buck at your expense.”

“Now, Tim,” Trina says, “that’s hardly fair. You haven’t even heard what Eva has to say.”

“And I’m not going to,” I tell her as I turn to make a beeline for the exit my ex is not currently near.

“Then I guess you won’t have a chance to hear what Eva tells everyone about you ...” That stops me cold.

“How low can you people go?” I demand heatedly. “I mean, what if this was you?”

“I’ve had my own fair share of dating failures, Tim.” She’s not raising her voice in the slightest, which leads me to believe I’m going to be portrayed as a lunatic.

“You told me yourself, you’d never go on a reality show to find love,” I remind her. “You said it was because you’d be embarrassed to have your family and friends see you like that.”

It looks like I’ve finally cracked her shell. “How I meet people is none of your concern, Tim.”

“Because you know that all these reality shows want is to make you look like a fool.”

Her body goes rigid. “Why don’t you come with me and talk to Eva. Let’s help you gain the closure you need so you can move on.”

And in one crazy instant, I think to myself, why not? Why shouldn’t I let Eva show the world what a low-down poor excuse for a human she is? The only reason I’m on this show is because of her, so if I’m going to be made a fool of, why shouldn’t she share my fate?

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE



PAIGE

Who in the world is the new woman walking into the ballroom? She must be someone special because all the cameras, except for the one pointed at Tim, turn in her direction. Staring at her, I realize she looks kind of familiar, but for the life of me, I can't figure out why. I don't generally hang out with highly polished and glamorous people, and this chick looks like she just walked off the pages of *Vogue* magazine.

Trina glides back across the ballroom with Tim trailing behind her. "We have a guest!" she announces with so much excitement, you'd think Jesus was here to bless the bread and wine.

On impossibly long legs and stilettos high enough to impress any of *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills*, the new woman glides toward the host. "Trina ..." she croons.

"Thank you for coming tonight, Eva."

Holy hell! Eva? As in Tim's ex, Eva?

"I wouldn't have missed it for the world." She turns toward the camera closest to her and offers the most blindingly fake smile I've ever seen. No wonder her acting career never took off.

Meanwhile, Tim is standing next to Trina as stiff as a toy soldier awaiting his execution.

Eva walks toward him and when she arrives, croons, "Tim, it's so good to see you again. How have you been?"

His expression morphs from shock to pure loathing. It's clear he's trying to decide his best course of action because he doesn't respond for several seconds. When he finally breaks his silence, all he says is, "Eva."

"Daaaarling ..." She sounds like she's a long-lost Gabor sister in those old-time movies. "I was crushed when I heard what a hard time you're still having with our breakup." I want to punch this woman right in the face.

Tim cocks his head to the side before replying, "I'm not sure what you're talking about, Eva."

Striving for a look of innocence and failing, she says, "Trina told me you've been unable to move on because you're still in love with me."

"I never said love, Eva." Oh goody, Trina's decided to enter the fray. "I said that Tim wasn't emotionally free of you." *Potatoes, potahtoes, am I right?*

"I know it was hard on Tim when I left." Eva bats her eyes like she's holding back tears. "But I had no choice. He and I got married too soon and when Holden showed up, I knew I *had* to go to him." Her lashes flutter like a llama with conjunctivitis.

"Do you have anything to say to that, Tim?" Trina wants to know.

Tim glares at his ex. "You only knew Holden for a week before you left me. We'd been together for four years."

Eva looks at Tim with pity before dropping a bomb. "Tim, I knew Holden before I'd ever met you."

The look of horror on his face says it all. He's about to lose it—spectacularly.

I feel compelled to do something to save him from this humiliation, but I don't know what. Without thinking, I step forward and declare, "Which makes *you* the villain, not Tim!" I sound like I'm playing a live-action game of Clue. *It was the butler in the pantry with a butter knife!*

Eva turns her head and sneers at me condescendingly. "Who are you?"

"I'm Paige Holland." When that doesn't seem like a self-explanatory enough declaration, I add, "I'm an old friend of Tim's."

"Then why haven't I ever heard of you?" she wants to know.

"Why didn't Tim know about Holden?" I retaliate.

"Are you saying you and Tim were having an affair while he was married to me?" That's not what I was saying, but it does make me wonder if Eva had been cheating on Tim throughout their marriage.

Before I can accuse her of that, Tim steps forward and takes my hand.

“Paige, please stop trying to help.”

Part of me knows I should listen to him, but I don't. Instead, I spin around and yell—yell— “No, Tim! This bimbo is not going to come in here and act like the wounded party. She's the one who cheated, she's the homewrecker ...” Talk about giving *Midwestern Matchmaker* their money's worth, I'm full-on guaranteeing they'll be picked up for another ten seasons if they can keep delivering the level of drama I'm offering.

“Timothy ...” Eva says, “I want to know if you were cheating on me?”

“So would I,” Trina feels the need to add.

Tim exhales loudly. “Paige and I went to school together. That's all. We didn't become friends until I moved home.”

While true, that kind of hurts. I just told the world we were old friends and he relegated me to mere acquaintance status. But then he squeezes my hand and adds, “But we're very good friends now.” Aaaaand I melt.

“I think you're lying,” Eva tells him.

“I can see why a liar might tend to believe the worst in people,” he retorts.

Eva spins toward Trina. “You said he was a hot mess. You said the only reason he came on this show was to get even with me!”

Before I know what I'm doing, I rush at Eva with the intention of ripping every last hair out of her head. Tim pulls me back in the nick of time, and reminds me, “This is going to be televised, Paige.”

“Not if I can help it!” I tell him. And this is where I totally lose my mind. I turn to the camera and lift the hem of my dress before proceeding to whip the whole thing over my head.

Tim sounds panicky as he inquires, “What are you doing?”

“I'm making it impossible for them to use this footage!”

Trina calmly asks, “Paige, have you ever watched television? They show people in their underwear all the time.”

Crap, she's right. Well, there's no hope for it. I reach around and unhook my bra. Before I can come to my senses, I release the girls. I'm so full of adrenaline and righteousness that mortification doesn't hit right away, but I'm sure that's coming.

Tim takes my dress and wraps it around me while grumbling, “You've guaranteed they're going to show this now.”

“They can't show boobs!” I shout.

“Maybe not,” he says. “But they can put a black bar across your chest.”

My body goes as still as though I were playing that old game statue-maker. He's right. Why didn't I think of that? Holy cow, I've just made myself a national—probably international—laughingstock. This footage will go viral, and I'll lose my teaching job.

I take tiny steps backward, hoping to get far enough away that the cameras won't be able to see me. *You know, like Antarctica.* When I bump into a table, I do the only sensible thing, and that is to rip off the tablecloth to better cover myself.

Once I'm wrapped up like a frolicking fairy at a picnic, I realize I have nothing else to lose. "Tim is no cheater!" I'm going to seriously have to look into moving to another country after tonight. Somewhere where they haven't heard of the wonders of television.

Trina turns to Cami and says, "Cami, would you please join us?"

Cami looks between me and the door like she's plotting a hasty retreat. "We have all of your audio clips," Trina tells her. "Even the ones where you thought you were on mute."

That's enough to propel Cami a couple of baby steps forward. When she's between Tim and Trina, she snarls, "I can't believe you're doing this to us."

"We always record our cast," Trina tells her. "That's nothing new."

"Well, you've never made it look so seedy before."

Trina ignores that comment and says, "Please tell us the real reason you and Tim partnered up on this show."

Cami hems and haws for a minute before her head drops until she's not making eye contact with anyone. "Tim wanted to make Eva jealous and show her that he'd moved on in his life."

Tim swore to me that he was serious about looking for love. But if all he's ever done is pretend with Cami, then that means ... "So you and Tim weren't really dating?"

"We weren't," Cami tells me. "In fact, I've become involved with someone who isn't on the show."

Even though I want to know all the details, the bottom line is that Tim lied to me. "Is this true, Tim? Is that the only reason you asked me out, too?" I might have to get plastic surgery and completely change my identity now, but even that isn't enough to curtail my outrage. "That's why you wanted to have our first date on television, isn't it? Because it was all a hoax to you!"

"No, Paige ..."

But I don't let him finish. "I told you before we started filming that I was doing this show because I was sick of being alone. The only reason I didn't let you know I liked you before taping began was because I didn't want you to break my heart, and look at you ..." My eyes fill with hot tears. "You're breaking my heart anyway."

Turning toward Trina, I tell her, "I know you're getting rid of two of the original cast members tonight, but now you only have to get rid of one. Sue me, if you want, but I'm done." And then with as much dignity as I can possibly muster while wearing a tablecloth, I stride out of the ballroom with my head held high.

CHAPTER FORTY



TIM

Of all the things I've ever imagined going wrong in my life—including, but not limited to, failing tests in school, losing a job, or mechanical failure resulting in an airplane crash—I never thought I'd be party to a scene like this while being filmed for television.

I'm not mad at Cami, because let's face it, *Midwestern Matchmaker* would use the audio of our conversations to back up their claims no matter what. I'm not even mad at Eva because she's doing what she does best—chasing the spotlight. I truly am angry with Trina because she was responsible for my being on this show. But the person my fury is aimed at is myself.

I agreed to be part of *Midwestern Matchmaker* for petty reasons. I signed a contract without seeking legal counsel first. But above all, I hurt a person I've grown to care for deeply. Paige made a fool of herself for me, and she ran out of here thinking I'd lied to her. I will never forgive myself for that.

Turning to Eva, I calmly tell her, "I don't think you're fundamentally a bad person. I think you were simply drawn to what you've always been drawn to."

"What's that?" She sounds equal parts grateful I'm not making a bigger scene and curious as to what I think her motivations were.

"Attention," I tell her. "You never wanted to act because you loved acting. You wanted to do it so that people would admire you. Being married

to me was never going to get you the kind of adoration you were after. Being with Holden might.”

“I love him!” Eva says heatedly looking between cameras as though trying to decide which one is capturing her best angle.

“Good,” I tell her. “It’s important to love somebody other than yourself.” I turn to Trina and tell her, “I’m your second person off the show tonight. If you have a problem with that, take it up with my lawyers.” Then I walk out the same door Paige went through.

I wouldn’t say I feel good about how tonight went, but if I can get Paige to hear me out then maybe, just maybe, I can get my life back on track. I hurry out to the parking lot, hoping to find her, but she’s already gone. Picking up my phone, I text her.

Paige, I’m sorry. It’s true that Cami and I were only pretending to be a couple, but that’s because I didn’t think I stood a chance with you. I’ve just left the club. Can we please talk?

When I don’t hear back from her, I leave a voicemail message. “Paige, I’m sorry. Please hear me out.”

Sitting in my car, I wait for her to get back to me. After thirty minutes, I finally back out of my parking spot. As though on automatic pilot, I drive by her house. I don’t want to ambush her, but I need to tell her how much she means to me. I need to explain that when I told her I was open to love, I was talking about her and nobody else.

Paige’s car isn’t in her driveway. Being that there aren’t any tire tracks in the freshly fallen snow, I’m guessing she hasn’t come and gone. I’m not sure what to do right now. I finally decide to go home to make another much needed apology.

My parents are sitting in the living room when I walk through the door. It’s clear neither of them is going to make the first comment, so I open with, “I’ve been a little unhinged lately. I’m sorry about the way I yelled at you earlier today.”

My mom looks at me with an expression full of hurt. “We love you, Tim. We would never do anything to embarrass you.”

I walk toward her. “I know, Mom. I’ve been struggling a lot since Eva left, and I think I finally just broke.”

“I understand that, dear, but even so, there was no reason for you to make the scene you made today.”

“I know.” Then I drop the bomb. “They ambushed me with Eva on the

show tonight.”

“Really?” This from my dad. “That’s kind of surprising, isn’t it?” Yet, somehow I’m not sure he’s that surprised.

I sit next to him on the sofa and tell him, “I suppose I should have seen it coming. I mean, why else would they go to such lengths to get me on the show?”

“There’s no saying why people do what they do,” my mom says nervously.

“What did Eva say?” My dad wants to know.

“She pretended she felt sorry for me that I couldn’t get past our breakup. It was one big pity party, and I was the star.”

“Shouldn’t you still be at the club?” my mom wants to know.

“I walked out of the show,” I tell her. “Let them sue me if they want, but if they do, I assure you, I’ll talk to every news outlet on the planet and let them know the kind of show *Midwestern Matchmaker* is.”

“I can’t say that I’m not a little disappointed. I was so hopeful you were ready to get out there again.”

My dad adds, “Not because we need you to be married, but because we want you to be happy.”

“I can be happy without a woman,” I lie. I can’t ever imagine being happy without Paige in my life. I don’t know if we could go the distance, but right now I’d sure as heck like to find out.

“Of course you can, dear.” *How is it that my mom can sound so patronizing while agreeing with me?*

“Mom?” I stare her right in the eye. “I need to be happy with myself before I can be happy with someone else.” I don’t bother to mention that I’m already pretty chill with the man I am. I just don’t need any more pressure from her.

“Didn’t you mention you’d already met someone on the show?” my dad asks.

“I don’t think so.”

“Huh, I thought you did.” It’s possible I told him and forgot, but I’m guessing he’s either fishing, or Trina told them about Cami.

“So you’re off the show for good?” my mom asks.

“I will never go back.”

“Do you want me to cover for you at the club for a while?” my dad asks hopefully. Leave it to him to see this as an opportunity to go back to work.

“I’m good, Dad. I might as well be there in case I hear anything about what the show has planned for me. You know, lawsuit or hanging at dawn.” Standing up, I tell my parents, “I had no right to treat you how I did this afternoon and I’m very sorry.”

“We know, dear,” my mom says.

“If I were you, I wouldn’t let me off the hook so easily,” I tell her.

“But you’re not me. And when ... if ... you have children of your own someday, you’ll know firsthand there isn’t anything you wouldn’t do for them. Even listen to them berate you.”

“I really was horrible ...” I start to say.

My dad interrupts me. “Nowhere near as bad as you were when you were in high school.”

That surprises me. I don’t have any recollection that I was anything but great.

My mom explains, “When kids are full of hormones, they’re like land mines ready to go off.”

“I know Jonathan was full of drama ...” I’m hoping to divert their memories away from me.

“Jonathan was a doll.” My mom winks at me before adding, “We love you, Tim. We believe in you and stand by you. We will always have your back. But have no doubt, you have always been the dramatic one.”

I decide to ignore that last bit, and ask, “Will you tell me what you said when Trina interviewed you?”

“No,” my dad answers. “That will take the fun out of it when you watch it on TV.”

“I’m not sure I’m going to watch the show.” I’m not kidding, either. I don’t think I can bear to see how they’re going to portray me—you know, a pathetic loser who ruins every relationship he’s part of?

“Oh, you’re going to watch,” my mom announces. Then she inexplicably adds, “And I think you might be surprised by what you see.”

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE



PAIGE

I go straight from the country club to Missy's apartment. Being that it's a weekend night, I expect she's out with Jamie. But either way, I have a place to go where no one can find me.

I find a parking spot down the block and then I trudge through the snow. I'm freezing even though I have a coat on, over the tablecloth I'm still wearing. Pulling my keys out of my purse, I open the downstairs door to Missy's apartment, then I climb the stairs.

Opening her front door, I'm surprised to find my friend standing in her kitchen holding a butcher's knife. Alarmed, she asks, "What are you doing here?"

I motion for her to put the knife down. "I come in peace."

"You scared me to death." She turns back toward the counter and uses the knife to cut a pizza situated on a cutting board.

"I'm sorry," I tell her. "I didn't think you'd be home."

"If you didn't think I'd be home, why are you here?" Her face contorts into a look of horror as I take my coat off and she gets a load of what I'm wearing. "What happened to you?"

"I quit the show," I tell her. "I don't care if my roof falls in on me. I could not stay on *Midwestern Matchmaker* and still have a modicum of respect for myself." I walk down her small hallway to the bathroom and take her robe off the back of the door. Once I put it on, I come back out.

Missy carries the pizza into her living room and orders, “Start at the beginning.”

Which I do. I inform her Tim is a lying sack of poo, and that he was never looking for love. I share that I hope he falls into a pit of hungry crocodiles. Then I tell her about Eva.

“She was there tonight?” she asks, frozen in shock with a slice of pizza halfway to her mouth.

“Oh, she was there.” I explain how I ripped off my dress hoping to keep them from airing the fight. “I’m sure to be a planet-wide laughingstock.”

“That’s not great, but it can’t have been *that* bad.” I love how she’s trying to comfort me.

“Maybe not, but then I took off my bra.”

“You what?!” She puts the pizza down.

“I don’t know what came over me,” I tell her. “I just felt the need to protect Tim. Tim the horrible. Tim the liar ...”

“Are you sure he’s not really interested in you?”

“How can you even ask me that?” I demand. “You dated him. You *know* he isn’t capable of commitment.”

“I know he wasn’t when I dated him.” Missy kicks up her stocking-clad feet onto the coffee table. “But I thought he’d changed.”

Shaking my head, I tell her, “Doesn’t look like it. At least not according to what Cami said.”

“So she’s not into Tim?” Missy asks.

“She started dating someone who isn’t on the show.”

“I guess not. What else did Eva have to say?”

I shrug while reaching out for Missy’s beer. After taking a sip, I tell her, “I left before it got more interesting.”

“And you really think that Tim still loves her?”

“Don’t you?” I ask.

“I can’t imagine how he possibly could, but love *is* complicated.”

I put one finger in the air and declare, “He went on the show to make her jealous.” Lifting another finger, I add, “He partnered with Cami to do just that.” Third finger. “He asked me out on a date, and he wanted it to be *televised*. All of that adds up to him using me.”

Missy exhales. “Yeah, it’s not looking good for him.”

“I just can’t believe I fell for it.” I roll my eyes before adding, “I know I’m not interested in Fielden, but there might have been another guy I could

have liked. So not only was Tim insincere about how he felt about me, but he also ruined my chances of meeting another guy.”

“Why not go back on and see if there isn’t someone else?” she wants to know.

“No way,” I tell her. “I made such a spectacle of myself I can never see those people again.” Not to mention, my heart is truly bruised, and it may be quite a while before I trust another man.

“So you’re just going to walk away?” she asks.

“That’s my plan.”

“And if Tim tries to get a hold of you?”

“I won’t be taking his calls,” I tell her.

“And if he shows up at your house?”

“I’ll call the cops.” I probably won’t, but if Tim knows what’s good for him, he won’t tempt me. Then it hits me. “Why aren’t you out with Jamie tonight?”

“He’s taking Sammy to Chicago to see her mom. He’s going to spend the night and come back in the morning.”

“I’m surprised how well things are going with Beth,” I say. “I mean, it can’t be easy on them that she was AWOL for so many years and now she wants to be a part of Sammy’s life again.”

Missy pulls an afghan off the back of the couch and wraps herself up in it. “Beth has had a hard time of it. I used to want to hate her, but I’ve come to realize she did the best she could. That’s all any of us can do.”

“I just don’t see how they could have forgiven her.”

“You don’t forgive people for them,” Missy says. “You do it for yourself, so you don’t have to live in a cesspool of anger.” She sends me a meaningful look.

“You’d better not be telling me to forgive Tim right now,” I say heatedly. I’ve got myself a good, long grudge to keep and I plan on doing just that.

“I’m not telling you to do anything, Paige. All I’m saying is that sometimes things aren’t what they seem. Sometimes you think you have all the answers, when in truth you didn’t even know what the questions were.”

I raise my hands in the air and then bend down so my fingertips touch the coffee table. “Oh, wise one,” I joke. “I am so lucky you have all the answers to impart to me.”

She wings a throw pillow at me. “Smart aleck. All I’m saying is that you shouldn’t make snap judgments when you don’t have all the facts.”

“Good thing I have all the facts then,” I tell her. Even as I say this, I’m aware that might not be true. Good thing I’m smart enough not to cop to it out loud.

“So you’re going to ignore Tim and pretend you never meant anything to each other?”

“I never did mean anything to him, Missy. What I’m going to do is pretend he never meant anything to me until I’m over him.” Leaning my head against the back of the couch, I add, “And if you were a good friend, you’d help me.”

“If I were a good friend?” Oh yeah, she’s mad. “I’m your best friend, idiot. As such, I’m always there for you. Always. But what I want you to remember is that you do not know everything, and I will not sit back and watch if I think you’re about to make a big mistake.”

“Is that a threat?” *How dare she threaten me right now.*

“No, Paige, that’s a *promise.*”

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO



TIM

I don't know what to expect walking into work the day after being part of the television spectacle of the century, but I don't expect it to be easy. Which is why I shouldn't be surprised that Trina is waiting for me in the lobby when I get there.

"Tim," she says, sounding sterner than I've ever heard her.

"What can I do for you, Trina?"

She glances to her left where two other producers are standing. Their arms are crossed authoritatively. "I need to speak with you."

"Sure." I mean, what more do I have to lose? It's a done deal that I'm going to be on the wrong end of a lawsuit, so I might as well hear the woman out in hopes of garnering some idea of how screwed I am.

I follow Trina past the producers, toward Conference Room A. I'm surprised when she doesn't stop there. Instead, she strides purposefully down a long hall, turning at the entrance to the pro shop. She looks around to make sure we haven't been followed before leading the way out the door into below-zero temperatures.

As the hairs in my nose freeze like mini icicles, I finally ask, "Where are we going?"

"I need to talk to you privately." She scurries up the path that leads to the parking lot. When we get to a black Mercedes SUV, she unlocks the doors and motions for me to get in. Once we're seated, she starts the car and pulls

out.

“Are you kidnapping me?” In all the scenarios I played over in my head, this was not even close to being one of them.

“No. But we can’t be at the country club for what I have to say.”

“Because it’s been booby trapped with tripwires and landmines?” I’m clearly joking but she’s being so secretive my imagination has immediately gone to the absurd.

“I’m not going to say anything else until we get to where we’re going.”

“Which is where?”

“A small motel on the outskirts of town.”

Shifting my gaze so I’m staring at the side of her head, I ask, “Why?”

She clearly senses my discomfort because she says, “Don’t get your panties in a bunch. We’re only going there to talk.”

Don’t get my panties in a bunch? That’s not something anyone has ever said to me in the past, and for some reason it makes me laugh. “Trina, you’re acting like we’re in some kind of spy thriller and the KGB is chasing us.”

“The entertainment industry and the KGB are probably more alike than you think.” She turns left into the Bunk House Inn parking lot before getting out of the car. I follow her to a room only two doors down.

Once we’re inside the shockingly avocado green room, she announces, “I didn’t have any part in setting you up, but I’m still responsible.”

“Go on.”

“When *Midwestern Matchmaker* signed on to film the show at the country club, I briefly crossed paths with your parents.” The tiny hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. “Your mother mentioned it was too bad there wasn’t room for you on the show.”

I interrupt by guessing, “And then she told you all about me and Eva.”

“Yes,” she confirms. “It was clear how much she loves you and how worried she’s been for you. I don’t think she was trying to get you on the show this season. But I think she was putting out feelers for next season.”

I start pacing from one end of the small room to the other. “And you couldn’t resist such a titillating story, so you bounced Decker. Is that it?”

She sits down at the small table, so I don’t run her over. “I could resist, but it turns out the executive producer couldn’t.”

“So you were just the lackey doing what you were told.”

She nods her head once. “Pretty much. Having said that, I know it’s my fault for sharing what your mother told me.”

I stop moving as the truth of the situation hits me. “My mom set me up for the biggest embarrassment of my life.”

“She had no idea what was in store for you,” Trina says. “She thought you’d be like every other guest on the show.”

As if I couldn’t already guess, I ask, “Why have you gone so far out of your way to make me look bad?”

“We weren’t trying to make you look bad, but I can see why you might think that. We were only trying to amp up the drama to build ratings. We went into this season knowing that if something spectacular didn’t happen, our show wouldn’t be picked up.”

I drop down into the chair across from her. “So, you decided to sacrifice me at the altar of ratings.”

Her voice is so low that if I wasn’t watching her lips move, I might not have known what she said. “Yes.”

Resting my elbows on the dinged brown table, I tell her, “I’m sure you’ll be on the air for years to come after last night’s fiasco.”

“Maybe, but I told the producers that if this is the way they plan on going forward, I won’t be renewing my contract.”

That’s surprising but I’m not sure I believe her. “Why?”

She blinks while taking a deep breath. On the exhale, she says, “When I pitched this show, I wanted it to be like *The Great British Bake Off* of dating shows.”

“I don’t know what that means,” I tell her. “What do baking British people have to do with matchmaking in America?”

“Reality cooking shows have become so overly dramatized and hostile that they have little to do with the actual craft of cooking. The hosts are mean and aggressive, and they do whatever they can to push the drama.” She pauses before explaining, “*The Great British Bake Off* is the exception. Even when the judges are telling you that your creation is a disaster, they always soften their comments with kindness. You could feed them an astroturf cookie and they’d tell you what a lovely color green it is before saying it was inedible. Do you see what I’m saying?” she asks.

“That’s the kind of reputation *Midwestern Matchmaker* has had,” I tell her. “So if you’ve been so successful, why change it now?”

“Because it’s getting harder and harder to please viewers with a nice, sweet show. They want to see some figurative bloodshed.”

“That’s not saying a lot for your viewers,” I tell her.

“Unfortunately, that’s the world we live in.”

Gesturing around her dingy motel room, I ask, “So why are we here?”

Trina stands up and looks out the window facing the parking lot before answering. “The producers know there’s no show without me, but they aren’t just going to let me have my way without some bargaining.”

“What does that have to do with me?”

“I’m going to offer to let them produce the show they’ve been wanting to do with me for three years already, *if* they let me have final say on what footage gets used on this season.”

“Why haven’t you done the show they wanted to do with you before now?” I ask her.

“Because I’m the target.”

“What does that mean?”

“I’m the one they’re going to set up.”

“But you told me you never wanted to look for love on television.”

“That’s because I don’t.”

“So why would you do that just to keep my story from airing?”
Something doesn’t seem right.

“Your story is going to air, Tim. That’s not something I can keep from happening. All I’m trying to keep them from showing is the footage from last night with Eva. I’m also hoping they won’t use the audio from where you thought your sound was off.”

“How will you explain that I’m no longer on the show then?” I ask.
“Won’t my abrupt departure be questioned?”

“Not if you had to leave for a medical reason. We could always say you got pneumonia and were bed-bound.”

I pace across the room again before saying, “This seems too good to be true. There has to be something you want from me.”

“There is,” she says. *Let the second shoe drop.* “I want to assure the producers that you and Paige will come in for a final interview to give closure to your segments.”

I think about that for a minute before saying, “I can only answer that for myself, but if I do, you have to agree you won’t sue me.”

“Of course. But you would have to sign another non-disclosure agreement stating that you won’t talk about what happened on the show that really caused you to leave.”

“I’d do that,” I tell her. “Your problem is going to be getting Paige to

agree. She's not currently taking my calls." And while I can see why she's mad at me, I'm hoping she'll be willing to hear my side of things sooner or later.

"I have a plan," Trina says evasively. "I just needed to get you on board before I move forward."

"I'm on board," I tell her before adding, "And Trina, thank you. I have to say that I haven't always liked you, but right now I appreciate you trying to help us out."

"I never wanted to be part of a seedy dating show, Tim. I believe in *Midwestern Matchmaker* the way I wrote it. Finding love should be an exciting time without fabricated drama. I have to stand up for the integrity of my concept."

"It sounds like you'll have quite a price to pay for that," I say, referencing the dating show they're going to do with Trina as the star.

"I'm not looking forward to it, that's for sure," she says. "But it's not always easy doing the right thing."

I'm not sure how things are going to work out for me, but I do know one thing: if Trina can interview me and Paige at the same time, I'll have my opportunity to tell Paige how I truly feel about her. And I won't quit talking until she believes me.

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE



PAIGE

I spent all day Sunday hiding out at Missy’s apartment, and only went home late last night to sleep. Even then, I was worried that Tim would be there. I’m currently sitting in my classroom a full hour before school starts. That’s how serious I am about avoiding him.

According to Mrs. Hale, my eighty-year-old neighbor who has nothing to do but stare out the window, a fancy sports car drove by my house twelve times between Saturday and Sunday night. Tim is the only person I know with a vehicle that could be described like that.

Chip surprises me by walking into my room. “Hey, Paige.”

“Chip. Why are you here so early?”

“I’m grading papers. You wouldn’t believe how many kids wrote ‘record label’ when I asked them what an amoeba was.” At my blank expression, he explains, “You know, because Amoeba is a record label?”

“The middle school sense of humor leaves a lot to be desired.” I screw up the courage to ask, “How did the rest of the mixer go after I left?”

Sitting down at a desk in front of me, he says, “No one could talk about anything but Eva. She stayed for the whole night chatting people up.” I appreciate his discretion at not mentioning the epic scene I created.

“Why would she stay?” I want to know.

“She probably just wanted to keep embarrassing Tim.”

I don’t want to ask this question, but I can’t help myself. “What did Tim

make of that?”

“Nothing. He left right after you did.”

“So Eva stayed on her own? What a weirdo.”

“It was obvious to everyone that the only reason she was there was for her own moment in the spotlight.”

“I can’t imagine how she could think she’d be the sympathetic one being that she’s the one who left.” I want to ask if he knows how Tim’s doing, but I don’t. Even so, I hope he’s miserable.

I was really starting to think we were going to mean something to each other. I can’t believe I fell for it when he said he wanted to date me for real, which just goes to show how stupid I was. Outside of a contrived rom-com, “brave girl” could never be slated for a happy ending.

Chip interrupts my pity party. “Trina finally asked her to stop talking to people because she was distracting everyone from why they were there.”

“How did she take that?” I want to know.

“I have no idea. Brittany and I were so disgusted by the whole thing, we hid out in a corner.”

“How’s Brittany doing? I really like her, and I’m sad we haven’t had an opportunity to get to know each other better.”

“She was wondering if you’d be interested in having supper with us tonight,” he says.

“Isn’t she back in Chicago until the next taping?”

“She decided to stay in town.” In a quieter voice, he adds, “We’ve been spending time together off the show.”

“Breaking the rules, are you?” I tease. And why shouldn’t they? The way *Midwestern Matchmaker* is going, they’ll be off the air in no time. I can’t imagine their fans putting up with all the outrageous changes they’ve made. Having said that, they’re liable to get a lot more viewers after this season airs—especially after they broadcast my split personality.

“So yes, to having dinner with us?” he asks.

“Why not? Where should I meet you and when?”

“I thought we could go straight from our faculty meeting after school,” he says. “I know it’ll be early but I’m not a real night owl.”

“I go to bed super early on school nights, too, so that’s perfect.”

“I’ll drive,” he says.

“Are you embarrassed to be seen in my car, Chip?” I tease.

He laughs. “No, but I owe you one.”

“Fine by me,” I tell him.

After he leaves, I get back to feeling sorry for myself. In fact, I’m so invested in the process I barely teach my kids anything all day. I pretty much just let them run wild.

The faculty meeting goes smoothly. It’s just a lot of talking about how to get the kids to stop toilet papering the bathroom walls and grumbling about the new initiative to raise the state grade requirements—because it’s not hard enough to teach these hellions everything they’re already slated to learn.

When the meeting is over, Chip and I walk out of the school together. “Where are we eating?” I ask as we near his car.

“It’s a surprise.”

“There are only so many restaurants in town and none of them are what I’d call surprising.”

“You’ll see,” he says with a smile that makes me a little nervous.

When we get to Chip’s brand-new SUV, I tease him about what a junker it is. After we get inside, he says, “In order for this to be a proper surprise, you need to close your eyes.”

“No.”

“Please? I promised Brittany I wouldn’t tell you where we’re going, and she’ll be mad if you see ahead of time.”

I can’t believe he’s serious. I also can’t believe he thinks there’s a place in town that’s worth this amount of excitement. Closing my eyes, I tell him, “You’d better be driving me to Chicago.”

“While that would be fun, we’d never get to bed on time.”

I lean my head against the headrest as he pulls out of the parking lot. I’m so weary from the past few days, I’m not even tempted to open my eyes. In fact, I start to doze off. I jolt awake to find there’s a scarf wrapped around my face. *How did I sleep through that?*

“What’s going on, Chip?” I demand.

A freezing cold blast of air blows through the car when he opens the door. “I’m coming around to get you. I’m going to lead you.”

“Oh, for Pete’s sake ...” But I suppose like my grandmother used to say, if I’m in for a penny, why not a pound? When Chip reaches my side, he takes my hand and puts it on his arm. “Be careful, it’s a little icy.”

Holding onto him, I let him slowly lead me to wherever the heck it is we’re going. Moments later, he opens a door and we walk inside a building. The faint aroma of patty melts immediately alerts me to where we are. He’s

brought me to the country club! Why would he do that? I pull against his arm. “No way, Chip. I’m out of here!”

Pulling the scarf off my face, I turn to leave. But then I see the group of people standing in front of me. Tim, Trina, Cami, Brittany, and of course, Chip. “Paige,” Trina says. “We’re glad you came.”

“I wouldn’t have if I had known where I was being taken.” I glare at Chip who shows the good sense to look contrite.

Trina steps forward, “Let me explain why you’re here and if you want to leave after that, I won’t stop you.”

“There is nothing you can say to me that will make me want to stay,” I warn her.

“Just hear me out, okay?”

I take a step toward her while doing my best not to look at any of her conspirators, especially Tim. It’s clear they’re all in this together. As such, they’re all on my list. “Fine. Why am I here?”

“Let’s go into the ballroom,” she says.

I follow her like I’m being led through a swamp full of live alligators—extremely cautiously. When we get to our destination, I notice there’s a camera crew set up across the room. “What are they doing here?” I demand.

Trina motions for everyone else to go sit down. Once they walk away, she tells me, “I’ve gotten the producers to agree not to air last night’s footage in exchange for you and Tim coming in for an exit interview.”

If that’s true, then I won’t lose my job for public indecency. “How did you do that?”

“I told them I wouldn’t be their host anymore if they continued to play dirty pool. I also stipulated that they needed to let both of you off the show without penalty. In exchange for that, all you have to do is sit down and talk to me.”

“I want to be paid for the full season,” I suddenly demand. I know that’s pushing it, but my roof still needs fixing, and this is the only leverage I’ve got.

Trina nods. “Okay. But you have to answer *all* of my questions, and you have to listen to Tim.” I’d rather this deal was contingent on dental surgery or a minor amputation—*like my baby toe*. As it’s not, I agree, “Fine.”

Trina leads me out of the room to hair and makeup where they rush me through faster than they ever have before. When we get back into the ballroom, she signals Tim to join us. He and I sit on a loveseat in front of the

camera with me doing my best not to make eye contact with him. Trina sits on a chair adjacent to us.

While our mics are being put on, she says, “We’re going to pretend this interview was shot at the end of the season.” Then she tells me, “The two of you left the show early because of illness.” Before I can comment, she looks at the camera and says, “Let’s do this.”

Smiling at us, she continues, “Paige, Tim, thank you both for coming in to talk to us. We were all sad when you had to leave early due to sickness.” She asks, “How are you both feeling now?”

Tim answers first. “I’ve been feeling great, thanks for asking.”

I mumble, “I’m okay.”

“Tim,” Trina says, “it looked like you and Cami were making a love connection before you left. Is that true?”

I turn and stare at him. Keeping his eyes focused on the camera, he answers, “That’s how Cami and I wanted it to look but that wasn’t the case.”

Wait, what?

He continues, “I’ve been married before, and my ex-wife left me for an NBA player.” I can’t believe he’s telling everyone this. “Eva loves *Midwestern Matchmaker*, so when you asked me to be one of your singles, I thought it would be the perfect opportunity to show her what she was missing.”

“And Cami agreed to pretend the two of you were dating?” Trina asks.

“She knew that I liked someone else, but unfortunately, I didn’t think that woman would give me the time of day.”

“Who was that woman?” Trina prompts.

Tim’s head slowly turns until his eyes meet mine. “That woman is Paige Holland.” As I try to swallow the lump of emotion that’s developed in my throat, he continues, “Paige and I have known each other most of our lives. She knows why I came on the show, so I was afraid she wouldn’t believe me when I told her how I felt about her.”

While there’s no music playing, I can almost hear a dramatic crescendo build. “What does Paige mean to you, Tim?” Trina asks.

He inhales deeply while staring at me like he’s sending me a psychic message. “Paige is that kind of woman you dream about.” He hurries to add, “And not just because she’s beautiful, either. Paige is smart, funny, and down-to-earth. She’s comfortable with who she is, and she never tries to pretend she’s someone else. Paige is the complete opposite of my ex-wife.”

“Tim,” I start to say but I stop. My thoughts are swirling around my brain like they’re in a blender and I can’t seem to formulate a proper answer.

Thank goodness Trina comes to the rescue. “It sounds like someone has a bit of a crush on you, Paige.”

That’s exactly what it sounds like, and I’m having a hard time believing it. Although if it weren’t true, what are Tim and I doing here? I finally manage, “When I found out that Cami and Tim were faking their relationship, I assumed Tim was faking interest in me, too. You know, to make his ex jealous.”

“That’s a completely reasonable assumption,” Tim says. “But it’s not true. I like *you*, Paige. I want to date *you*, and no one else. So much so that I don’t care if the world knows my wife left me. I don’t care what anyone thinks of me, except for you.”

Tim went to such great lengths to make sure people never learned about Eva, I realize there’s no way he’s lying to me right now. Even so, a wave of fear washes over me while I try to decide how to respond. That’s when I hear Missy’s voice in my head telling me to go for it.

I finally look at Tim and confess, “I like you, too. But I’m scared.”

He reaches over and takes my hand. “There are no guarantees in life, Paige, and that’s always scary. But I already think of you as a good friend, and I can’t imagine starting a relationship on a better foundation than that.”

For some reason I feel the need to say, “We’ve only kissed once.”

“Is that a challenge?” he wants to know.

Is it? “Maybe ...”

He scoots closer to me and says, “Come here.”

“I’m not going to kiss you on television.” I sound like a schoolmarm straight out of the Old West. You know, if they’d had televisions and there were dating shows.

Tim leans closer to me. “You are an extraordinary woman, Paige Holland, and I like you.” He leans in even closer and says, “And I want to kiss you for the world to see.”

Tim draws me in like we’re opposite ends of a magnet. Slowly but surely, he claims my lips with his own, causing tingles to start at the tips of my toes. They don’t stop until they reach the base of my neck.

I no longer care that the whole world is watching. All I care about is the man who just bared his soul to me. Tim and I have been on an emotional journey the likes of which I’ve never experienced before.

While we continue to explore our amazing chemistry, I hear Trina say, “And that’s what love is all about, folks. You never know when it’s going to hit, and there aren’t any guarantees, but even so, these two make you want to give it a shot, don’t they?”

EPILOGUE



PAIGE/ SIX MONTHS LATER

After connecting his phone to the television, Tim sidles up to me on the couch. “Even though it won’t be aired, I’m glad Trina sent us my parents’ interview.”

“They never told you what they talked about?” I’ve gotten to know Tim’s parents well in the last several months, and they talk about nearly everything. He shrugs his shoulders. “It’s a mystery.”

We stop talking when the image of his parents pops up on the screen.

Trina looks a bit uncomfortable, and I can only imagine it’s because Tim was nearly banging down the door while the interview was taking place. She smiles at her guests and says, “Ellen, Gregg, thank you for joining us.”

Tim’s mom smiles back. “We’re happy to be here.”

“First of all,” Trina says, “we’ve all enjoyed your country club so much. Thank you for letting us shoot here.”

Tim’s dad looks into the camera and like he’s filming a television commercial, announces, “The Elk Lake Country Club is the perfect location for a wedding or holiday party. Give us a call and let’s see if we can help you set something up!”

Tim nudges my knee. “Thank goodness my dad likes traveling with my mom so much or I’d have to put up with this on a daily basis.”

Back on the screen, Trina laughs before saying, “I’d like to talk to you a bit about Tim’s ex-wife.”

Ellen announces, “Eva is a tramp. She’s one of those wannabe Hollywood types that’s willing to use and abuse everyone who gets in her way.”

“Did you ever like her?” Trina asks.

“No,” his parents answer at the same time.

“It must have been hard for you to see them together then.”

Ellen tips her head from side to side. “It was what it was, but neither Gregg nor I ever thought it would last.”

Shifting in her seat, Trina asks, “What kind of girl did you see your son with?”

“This might sound odd,” Ellen says. “But when Tim was in high school, there was a girl in his class that I was always drawn to. I used to think that she and Tim would be a good match.”

I glare at my boyfriend and demand, “Which one of your many girlfriends do you think she’s going to say?”

He looks nervous. “I have no idea.”

Trina wants to know, “What was it about this girl that caught your attention?”

Ellen exhales loudly. “She wasn’t like all the other girls. She was quiet and reserved, but there was a strength about her that impressed me.”

I have no idea who Ellen is talking about, so I’m glad when Trina asks, “Do you know what happened to her?”

Tim’s mom answers, “She grew up, got even stronger, and now she teaches school right here in Elk Lake.” The hair on my arms stands at attention. She can’t be talking about me, but I’m the only teacher I know of who grew up here.

Tim reaches over and takes my hand as Trina wonders, “Is her name Paige Holland, by chance?”

“Yes.” Ellen surprises me again by announcing, “Paige used to wear a back brace during her teenage years. I grew up wearing a body brace myself—scoliosis,” she explains. “I know how hard that can be on a young girl, so I know it couldn’t have been easy on Paige.”

“You know Paige is one of our singles this season, don’t you?” Trina asks.

Ellen nods her head. “Tim told me.” After a beat, she adds, “I’d like to make a prediction. I think that Tim and Paige are finally going to become a couple.”

“Really?” Trina sounds surprised. “As of now, I don’t think Tim and

Paige are anything but friends. In fact, your son seems to be interested in a woman named Cami. She's a caterer from Chicago."

Ellen shakes her head. "My money is on Miss Holland. As soon as Tim told me she was one of the singles, I knew she would be the one he wound up with."

Trina turns to the camera. "There you have it, folks. Now all we can do is wait and see what happens next!"

As the video ends, I tell Tim, "I never knew your mom had scoliosis."

"Neither did I..." He appears lost in thought, as he adds, "But I do remember her saying nice things about you."

"Really?" This surprises me so much. Wearing a brace made me feel both invisible and like I had a spotlight on me. It was a strange dichotomy.

"She used to comment on how tall you carried yourself."

"I didn't have a choice," I tell him. "After all, I was bound to a supportive cage that ran the length of my spine."

"And yet my mom always saw something special in you..." Tim says.

"She knew what it was like to be me."

Tim pulls me closer and wraps his arms around me. "I wish I'd found you in high school. Think of all the wasted years."

"They weren't wasted," I tell him. "You just had to find out what you didn't want so you were ready for me."

"Promise me you aren't going anywhere."

"I'm not going anywhere. I promise." I've finally found my home in Tim's arms and there is nothing in this world that will ever get me to leave his side.

Tim calls out, "Come and get your popcorn!" Chip and Walker follow the sound of Tim's voice to the kitchen.

"I can't believe it's showtime," Brittany says nervously.

"I'm a little scared to see how I'm going to look on TV," Cami adds.

I announce, "We should be doing shots."

None of us knew that when we showed up for the first *Midwestern Matchmaker* mixer all those months ago, that three couples would have made connections and stayed friends. Even though Walker wasn't on the show, we

consider him an honorary cast member as he and Cami only got together because of it.

Tim's doorbell rings and I get up to answer it. We're expecting Missy, Jamie, and Sammy, so I'm surprised when I see Trina standing there. "Hey," I say haltingly. Even though she went to bat for us at the end of our season, I'm still a little irked that she put us through so much.

Tim walks into the entry hall and greets, "Trina! I'm glad you came."

"I see you didn't tell anyone I was coming." She eyes me nervously.

"I thought it might be more exciting if I didn't," he smiles mischievously.

"I was hoping you'd give them a heads-up about why I'm here."

Tim turns and leads the way into the living room while answering, "I could never articulate it as well as you." I have no idea what's going on, but I'm getting a little worried. *Did Midwestern Matchmaker renege on the deal they made with us? Are they showing my crazy after all?*

Everyone stands up and greets Trina when she walks into the room. "Trina!" they call out as one. They seem as surprised to see her as I am.

"What are you doing here?" Cami wants to know.

"How have you been?" Chip asks.

Once the pleasantries are over, Trina motions for everyone to sit back down. Then she stands in front of us like she's about to perform a musical number for a school talent show. "I need your help."

We all sit in quiet expectation wondering what kind of help she's after. She finally says, "As you know, *Midwestern Matchmaker* got canceled."

"That's too bad," I say. *Yeah, I'm not selling it.*

She continues, "And as you know, the only way I could get the producers not to share the footage of that mixer was to agree to let them do a show with me as the single they're setting up."

I have always been a firm believer in karma, and just knowing that Trina is about to experience a little bit of what she's been dishing out all these years brings me real delight.

"You'll do great!" Brittany encourages her.

"I don't want to do it at all," Trina says. "And there's only one way out."

"Which is?" I ask.

"If I get married before filming starts, they won't have a show."

We all stare at her like she has six eyes. "When does the filming start?" Cami asks.

"Nine months," she answers. "We already filmed a pilot and they're

shopping it around for a network.”

“How are we supposed to help you?” I ask.

Trina inhales deeply. “I need you guys to set me up with the love of my life before filming starts.”

“You want to meet a guy and marry him within nine months? That’s crazy!” *Thank you, Tim, for being the voice of reason.*

“Wouldn’t it just be easier to go through with the show?” Walker wants to know.

She shakes her head. “I can’t do it.”

“Because ...” I prompt her.

“I just can’t, Paige.”

There’s something more going on here, but I don’t think Trina is going to tell us what it is. So I remind her, “With the exception of Cami and Walker, we’re all based in Elk Lake.” Brittany moved here two months ago to be with Chip, and while she can’t work as a longshoreman here, she’s thinking about some kind of store she might like to open.

“I’m prepared to move to Elk Lake if you’ll agree to help me,” she says. “Will you?”

“Why would you come here though? Why not look for someone in Chicago or some other area with more single men?”

“I want to meet someone normal.” Gesturing at us, she adds, “And you’ve all done pretty well for yourselves.”

We’re all shell-shocked by her request before Tim answers, “We’ll help. We probably won’t be able to find you a guy from here, but the town is already filling up with summer guests. There’s got to be someone who would love to marry you.”

I stare at Tim like he’s lost his mind. “Most of the people who summer here are already married.”

“Teddy and Jamie weren’t,” Tim reminds me.

“No, but I promise they were probably the only two in the last ten years.” I’m exaggerating but still, her chances aren’t great.

“Please ...” Trina begs. “I don’t care how bad the odds are. I’ll do anything to get out of doing this show.”

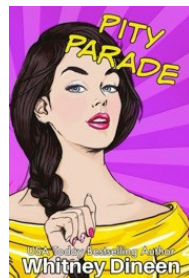
I’m not sure how to go about setting someone up. I mean, I’ve lived here my whole life, and I couldn’t find anyone until Tim. Having said that, I do have this summer off, and it might be kind of a fun challenge. I tell her, “I’m in.”

“Really, Paige? Thank you!”

And just like that, I have some summer plans. I bet I can even talk Missy into helping me. Anna is busy with her new baby and Faith is currently pregnant and still working full time at the bakery. But even so, I’m willing to bet we can stir up something interesting.

Snuggling into Tim’s side, we start to watch our season of the *Midwestern Matchmaker*. I try to concentrate but I’m not successful. I’m too busy plotting how we’re going to find Trina a husband.

COMING SOON: PITY PARADE



Trina Rockwell here. You know, your favorite TV host from *Midwestern Matchmaker*?

I have a secret: I am, without a doubt, the unluckiest dater in the history of the entire world. I'm not even embellishing. I've inadvertently dated a mobster, a dead-beat dad, and a guy who puts salt on watermelon. *What's next, pineapple on pizza?*

As my past relationships read like the who's who of court jesters, it's no wonder I've refused my producers' desire to spotlight me as one of the singles on a new show they're putting together.

The problem is that *Midwestern Matchmaker* just got canceled and unless I agree to their terms, I'm out of a job.

In order to keep doing what I love doing—matching midwestern singles—I either need to suck it up and parade my dating life on national television or I need to get married—STAT.

Guess which one I'm putting my money on?

[Pre-order your copy today!](#)

AVAILABLE NOW: THE EVENT

While you're waiting for Pity Parade, check out my Creek Water series.

"Picture Sweet Home Alabama meets Hope Floats with a touch of something totally unexpected. Hollywood needs to pay attention to this one!!"

-USA Today Bestselling Author, Diana Orgain

Emmie Frothingham here. There's a reason I left my hometown of Creek Water, Missouri, as soon as humanly possible. That reason is small-minded, judgmental people who wouldn't know the truth if it was coughed up on them like an errant furball.

After graduating from college, I got my dream job in New York City where I was head buyer at Silver Spoons--a high-end kitchenware boutique. My life was ideal, until the night of the event. I speak of my company's annual awards ball at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Nerves, plus too much tequila, resulted in a scene that pretty much ended my big-city career. My wild night is the reason I had to move home to Creek Water. I will now be directly in the sights of the gossipy country club harpies who drove me away in the first place. Good times.

But who knows--now that I'm grown up, maybe I can make peace with my past. I might even have a second chance with Josh.

All I know is I'm going to do my best to get my life together and stop caring

what my critics have to say about me.

Wish me luck.

[Continue for an excerpt, then grab your copy today!](#)

CHAPTER ONE

In my esteemed, but obviously biased opinion, Creek Water, Missouri, population 14,012, is the armpit of the world. Scratch that, it's a ripe pustulant boil on the butt of the Northern Hemisphere. If it weren't my hometown, and I weren't desperate for employment, I'd have never considered moving back. Ever.

I just got off the phone with my Uncle Jed—the *Beverly Hillbillies* reference is not lost on me—and he's offered to make me manager of a new commercial venture he and my other uncle Jesse (yes, like *Full House*) are starting up in the old warehouse district. The revitalization of Creek Water continues as my former peers have discovered that it's cheaper to live at home and not go out into the real world like I did. Problem is, I got myself into a tiny bit of trouble in the real world.

I was driven in my formative years to prove that I could make something of myself without any backing from the illustrious Frothingham family, of which I am one. I was sick to death of people thinking everything was handed to me on a silver platter just because of my last name. So, I worked hard to get excellent grades in school, and I earned myself a scholarship to college. After graduation, I moved to New York City, determined to leave my small-town, small-minded roots behind. Things were going great too, until *The Event*.

I worked as head buyer for Silver Spoons Enterprises in Manhattan, an exclusive gourmet/kitchenware boutique chain on the Eastern Seaboard. I was stationed at our flagship location on East Seventy-Third Street.

The Event was the corporate dinner dance at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where all the bigwigs gathered to pat each other on the back and recognize top-performing employees. I thought I was a shoo-in for the Demitasse Award, honoring the most creative contribution to the company during that fiscal year. I was personally responsible for the whole "Linens for Dinner" campaign, which promoted the idea that both urban and suburban millennials only use cloth napkins to dine, thus not only cutting back our carbon footprint by lessening paper waste, but also adding a touch of elegance to our lives. We sold more linens that year than in the previous ten years combined. It was *that* successful.

So there I sat in my way too expensive dress—I splurged because I knew

how important it was to make a good impression on the executives *and* because it was the perfect little number to accept my honor in—when Jameson Diamante announced the nominees for the Demitasse.

There were only three of us—me with my linen campaign, Juliet Smithers from the Southampton store for her “Drink More Wine!” crusade, and Allison Conrad from Atlanta for her “Pretty Please, Y’all” call to reinstate formal invitations on engraved card stock.

Why don’t we just kill the planet, Allison, with all the trees we’re going to murder for your cause?

I was poised on the edge of my seat ready to throw my hands across my heart and gasp something along the lines of, “What? Me? My word, I’m so surprised!” I’d imagined how I’d get up and show off my six-hundred-dollar understated elegance to the whole room.

Jameson announced, “This year’s decision was not an easy one to make, with all three ladies greatly contributing to our brand, but in the end, we chose the contender who was responsible for the most innovative campaign.”

Here’s where the chain of events gets a wee bit cloudy. I could have sworn he’d called my name, so I stood up as planned, but my good friend and table-mate Lexi says that isn’t what happened at all. Apparently, old Jameson had called out Allison’s name, and she and I both went up to accept the award. How deforesting the planet is innovative, I do not know. I did hear through the corporate grapevine that Allison had gone to Jameson’s hotel room with him before the ceremony like a Kardashian auditioning her new sugar daddy. But I digress. Back to *The Event*.

I grabbed the silver spoon out my fellow nominee’s hand and proceeded to give my speech. All of it. Which for some reason I was allowed to do. It was a beautiful speech. I thanked my mother for her graciousness and manners, and I thanked my grandmother for teaching me how to fold dinner napkins into swans. I was about to thank Silver Spoons for having the wisdom to hire me, when Allison grabbed the Demitasse out of my hand. I may have chosen that moment to snatch it back and hit her over the head with it—obviously not very hard as she never pressed assault charges, thank God.

It’s all conjecture really. All I can say for certain is that I hastily fled the ceremony, trotting down all eight hundred thousand stairs of the Met in four-inch heels, in a cloud of disgrace and disappointment. I took a cab to a nearby bar, where I proceeded to drink my body weight in tequila before waking up in an unknown apartment in Brooklyn.

Tequila and I have a sordid past. One incident of over consumption resulted in my belting out my karaoke version of “I Will Always Love You”—the Dolly Parton version, not Whitney Houston’s—so poorly I’m sure ears bled; another found me French kissing a giant stuffed frog before throwing up on it; and the last time, before the Brooklyn incident, was when I urinated in my sorority sister’s shoe because I was so drunk I couldn’t find the bathroom. Now I can add “indiscriminate behavior” to the list.

Let me just say, I’m not loose by anyone’s estimation. I believe in using linens at every meal, for Pete’s sake! But the truth is, I spent the night with a stranger and if he wasn’t Armie Hammer from that movie *Hotel Mumbai*, because that’s who I thought he looked like, then I have no idea who he was. To make matters worse, we apparently didn’t use any protection. I soon discovered that I, Emmaline Anne Frothingham, of Creek Water, Missouri, was going to become a mother at the tender age of twenty-eight.

CHAPTER TWO

The reason I'm so bitter about my roots is because when I was eight years old my daddy, Reed Frothingham, died, and the whole town of Creek Water—with the exception of our family—acted like Mama and I were leeching off my uncles for our survival. Which is simply not the truth. We were left a decent-sized inheritance, not huge as most of the family money was spent during my grandparents' generation—we have the sterling-silver snail tongs to prove it—and my uncles didn't start making good investments until after I'd become a half-orphan. It is by surname alone that we aren't considered nouveau riche.

Mama and I had enough money to keep our house and pay our bills, but she had to go back to work so we could have the extras. She kept the books for the uncles and, in that way, managed to stay part of the family business, which, as I mentioned earlier, has become revitalizing Creek Water. Mama didn't invest any of our money because she worried that risking it might send us to the poor house. My uncles didn't have a good track record at the time.

I *needed* that scholarship to Duke as there simply was not enough money to pay for that caliber of education any other way. Yet, no one acknowledged my hard work, and instead, treated me as though I was using money I wasn't entitled to. Every time Mama and I did something extra, like go shopping in St. Louis, some busybody would inevitably say, "Your uncles are so good to y'all!"—completely negating our ability to take care of ourselves. The uncles tried to set them straight, to no avail.

This is why I was determined to get out and make something big out of my life. I was going to prove once and for all that I was more than a charity case.

Of course, that was before I'd accepted the gift of a stranger's swimmers and decided to bring new life into this world. I continued working at Silver Spoons through most of my pregnancy. I worried that after *The Event* they might try to find a way to let me go. But if I was pregnant, they couldn't do so without fear of a lawsuit. I told my boss about my situation as soon as I found out. I realize that was a little manipulative on my part, but Gloria Gaynor and I, we're survivors.

When I told Lexi, her response was, "Emmie, how in the world are you going to have this baby? You can't raise a child alone in New York City."

My response was simple, “I made my bed, now I’ll have to lie in it.” But to tell you the truth, I was nowhere near the martyr I made myself out to be. When I lay with my feet in the stirrups at the doctor’s office and heard a heartbeat coming from inside my body, one that wasn’t my own, it was *insta-love*. I don’t judge what other women do or do not do with their reproductive systems, but mine was making a person, and I wanted to know everything about who she would become. (I just knew she was a girl.)

“You need to go back to that apartment and let that man know he’s going to be a father. He’ll have to pay you child support,” Lexi said very practically.

I probably should have, and maybe even would have, had I taken note of his address. The truth is, I was still drunk when I woke up and all I could think to do was hightail it out of there before I had a witness to my walk of shame. I had absolutely no idea how to find the father, so I decided to forget he existed.

After going to my doctor to make sure I was disease-free—I’ll never put myself in *that* situation again—I settled down and tried to enjoy my pregnancy. In my eighth month, Silver Spoons decided to cut my position, claiming they couldn’t afford a senior buyer and two junior buyers, so they offered me six months’ severance to go away. I probably could have sued them for wrongful termination, but I was fat and tired and all I wanted to do was lie on my couch and watch classic romantic comedies until my baby was born. So, that’s exactly what I did. Thank goodness too, as Faye came twenty-six days early. Frothingham babies historically like to show up to the party ahead of schedule.

CHAPTER THREE

“Who’s the prettiest baby in the whole world?” I hear my mama, Gracie, ask in her soft Southern drawl. She’s making duck faces at Faye, while I unpack my daughter’s things in the spare room. One thing is for certain, Mama loves my precious girl, and doesn’t seem the least bit concerned about her lack of a daddy.

I’d always dreamed of naming a daughter Faye after my maternal grandma. I certainly didn’t think my last name would still be Frothingham, though. The alliteration alone would have turned me off the idea. But, being a single mother in my hometown, I cannot realistically expect to have any more children. I’m pretty sure they spray painted a scarlet letter on my backside when Faye and I crossed the city limit line, or more accurately, when we crossed the tracks to the right side of town, where the Frothinghams live.

Mama carries the baby around while saying, “This here girl is as sweet as shoo-fly pie. I could just eat her up.”

“Are you sure you don’t mind watching her while I go meet with the uncles?” I ask.

“I might never let you pry her out of my arms!” She snuggles her giggling five-month-old bundle. “Isn’t dat right, little missy?”

Faye squeals in delight. I love this tiny person so much I’d cut off my foot and sell it for groceries if I had to. Luckily, I don’t have to. What I do have to do is go meet with my uncles about the job they used to lure me home. While I’m grateful for their kindness, I feel like I’m taking a giant step into the past by considering it.

Once they found out about Faye, they said, “Emmie, get back here where you belong! We can’t let you raise a Frothingham in that big city all alone.” As much as I expected the citizens of Creek Water would judge my indiscretion, I knew my family would be nothing but supportive. I am more thankful than I can say.

I truly did think of staying in New York City, but the thought of handing off my baby to a total stranger to raise while I worked hellishly long hours to support us did not seem appealing in the least. Not to mention the fact that I saw Armie Hammer lookalikes everywhere I went and couldn’t help but wonder each and every time if he was Faye’s daddy.

Don’t worry, I googled the actor’s whereabouts on the night of the

conception and discovered he was nowhere near Brooklyn. More's the pity. So, I lived out the length of my severance and then gave notice on my apartment before shipping my worldly possessions home.

Uncle Jed's wife, Auntie Lee, is the first to greet me when I walk through the door of Frothingham Brothers. She's sitting at the reception desk addressing notecards when she looks up to see who's invaded her space. "Emmie!" She jumps up and dances around me like I'm a maypole and she's vying for queen. "Look at you. Welcome home, honey." She hugs me so hard she nearly pops the stuffing out of me. Then she holds me at arm's length and declares, "Will you just look at those boobies?"

I'm still breastfeeding Faye, so my regular B-cup has jumped to a D. You'd think I was a walking sideshow the way she's ogling me. Uncomfortable, I tug up the already modest neckline on my sweater dress and say, "Hey, Auntie Lee." I give her a kiss on the cheek. "I'm here to see Uncle Jed and Uncle Jesse."

"Honey, they're waiting for you in the big office. They're just finishin' up a meeting with the contractor. You might as well go on in."

I steel myself for this step back in time and wish there were a way to stop my racing heart. I tentatively knock on the door and Uncle Jesse booms, "Get in here."

It sounds like he's expecting someone else, but I open the door anyway. My uncles nearly tackle me to the ground when they rush me and give me great big hugs. I'm not sure who's saying what, but there's a lot of "Girl, look at you!" and "Finally, our Emmie's home!" and excited sentiments like that. It's nice to be the recipient of such a warm welcome. Their support combined with my postpartum hormones brings tears to my eyes.

But before I can start blubbering, Uncle Jed pulls back and says, "You remember Zachary Grant, dontcha?"

I turn to see a tall, shockingly gorgeous man with sparkling green eyes get up off the sofa and walk over to greet me. My god, Armie Hammer lookalikes are everywhere. Ever since the night Faye was conceived, I've been bombarded by them.

Zach's metamorphosis is so astonishing I would have never guessed he was the same boy I knew in high school. Of course, a lot can happen to someone in a decade and apparently has in his case. Gone is the gangly teenager with braces and acne. He's been replaced by a virtual movie star.

That Mother Nature sure is a wonder.

Zach lets his gaze stray to my bosom before meeting my eyes and saying, “Hey, Emmie.” He smiles shyly, almost expectantly.

I flash back to the time he asked me to the spring dance at the club his senior year in high school. I was a sophomore. I said no because, well, it was at the club. Mama and I weren’t members at the time, and I didn’t want to draw any more attention to myself. The less those nasty gossips saw of me and Mama, the better. Unfortunately, I never explained that to Zach.

“Hi there, Zach,” I say back.

I feel like he’s waiting for something more, like maybe an apology for turning him down without an explanation. I know I hurt him because he went out of his way to never speak to me again. Seriously, he’d be walking down the hall at school, lay eyes on me, and turn around and go the other direction just to avoid me.

I segue into wondering if apologizing after all this time would even be appropriate. He’d probably think I was pretty stuck on myself to think he even remembered.

Uncle Jed explains, “Emmie and Faye have just moved back home and Emmie’s going to work on the new project with us. Isn’t that exciting?”

Zach clears his throat and attempts to nod, but looks more like a bird pecking at some crumbs. “Ah, yes? I guess.” He’s not selling his enthusiasm in the least. Then he asks, “Who’s Faye?”

“My little girl,” I answer, squaring my shoulders, ready to do battle, even if it is only for a judgmental lift of the eyebrows.

I might as well have said my pet giraffe considering how surprised he looks by this news. “You’re married?”

Uncle Jesse quickly says, “No, our little Emmie lost her fiancé to friendly fire in the Middle East.”

Say what? I look at him in complete shock. My daddy’s brother just puts his arm around me and continues to say, “It’s been what, a year now since Armand died? We’re all still so shaken up by it.”

I can’t seem to force any words out of my mouth. First of all, apparently my whole family knows about my infatuation with Armie Hammer. I only ever told my mama, but it seems the news has traveled. And secondly, my what?

Uncle Jed reads my mind or my expression and pipes in, “Your auntie Lee has gone ahead and told folks about him, honey. There’s no shame in

having a precious baby with your fiancé. It's not your fault he died before the wedding."

My head starts whirring like the spin-cycle on a washing machine. So *that's how they're playing it*. I should have known they wouldn't want a Frothingham bringing a bastard child home without an acceptable explanation. As mad as I am, I decide to perpetuate the lie, at least temporarily, until I decide how to play this long-term. Plus, I need the job.

I smile at Zach as though I'm forcing it through thick layers of sadness. "It was such a tragedy."

"How long were you two together?" he asks.

I answer, "Three years," at the same time Uncle Jed says, "Two years, if you can believe," while Uncle Jesse contributes, "Just a year, but still it's so hard."

For crying out loud, if we're going lie, we should get our stories straight first. I try to make sense of this farce by saying, "We had our first date three years ago, got engaged two years ago, and he's been gone for a year." *God rest his soul*.

Zach looks at us in the same way I imagine he'd look at the Three Stooges after one of their ridiculous skits. Then he says, "I guess I'll see you all at the warehouse tomorrow morning." I swear he shoots me a dirty look on his way out the door.

As soon as he leaves, I turn on my uncles and demand, "What the heck was that all about?"

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

USA Today Bestseller Whitney Dineen is a rock star in her own head. While delusional about her singing abilities, there's been a plethora of validation that she's a fairly decent author (AMAZING!!!).

After winning many writing awards and selling nearly a kabillion books (math may not be her forte, either), she's decided to let the voices in her head say whatever they want (sorry, Mom). She also won a fourth-place ribbon in a fifth-grade swim meet in backstroke. So, there's that.

Whitney loves to play with her kids (a.k.a. dazzle them with her amazing flossing abilities), bake stuff, eat stuff, and write books for people who "get" her. She thinks french fries are the perfect food and Mrs. Roper is her spirit animal.

Join her [newsletter](#) for news of her latest releases, sales, and recommendations. If you consider yourself a superfan, join her [private reader group](#), where you will be offered the chance to read her books before they're released.